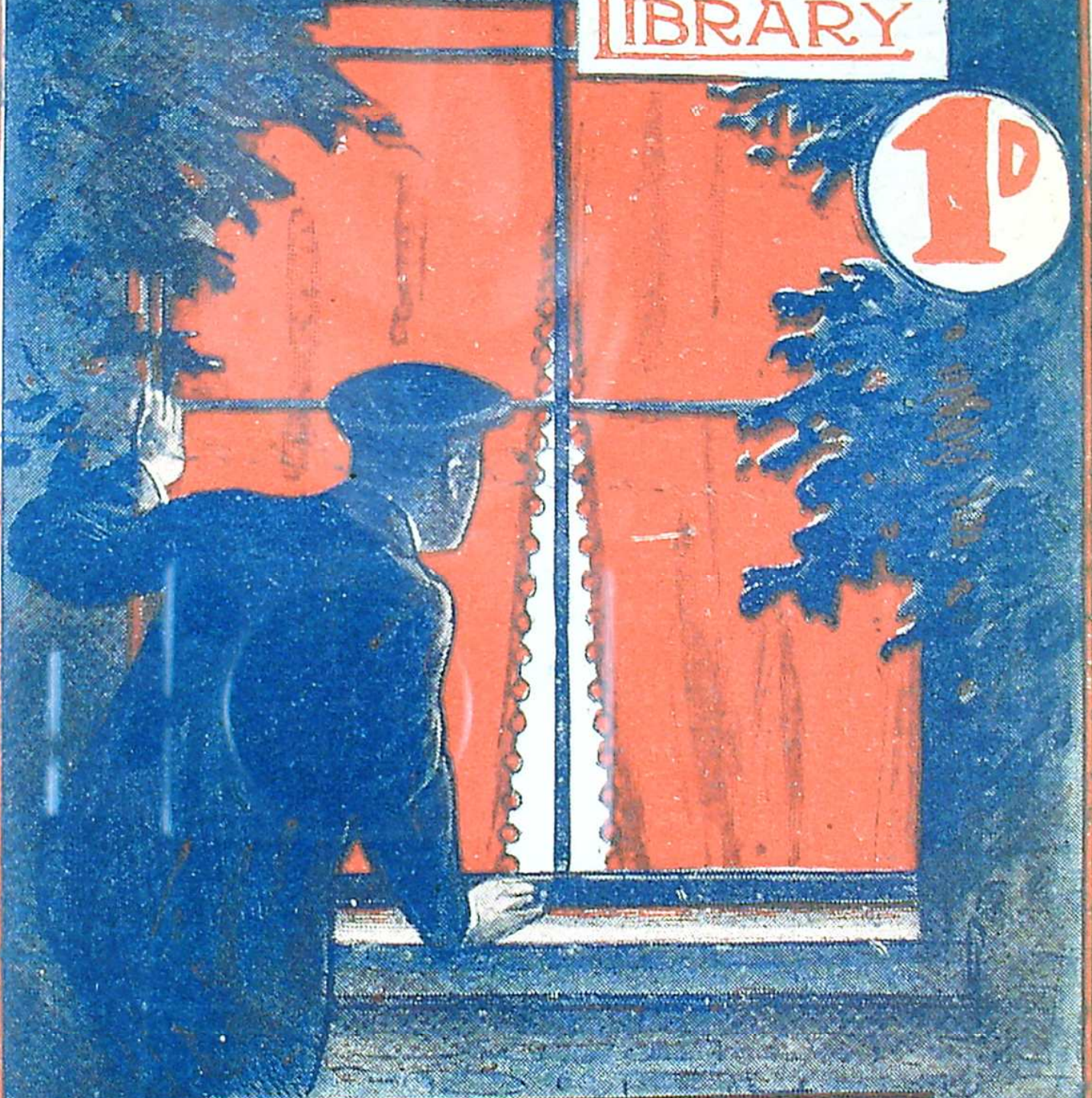


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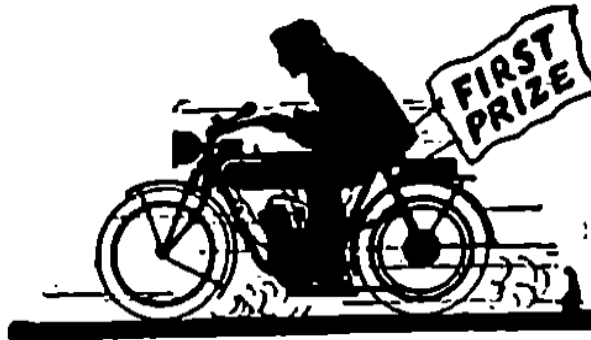
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OR THE
MYSTERY OF ROOM 124

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THE JUDGE:

The Decision of the EDITOR of the "NELSON LEE LIBRARY" must be accepted as ABSOLUTELY FINAL.

STOLEN PROPERTY ;

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF ROOM 124.

A Story of how Nelson Lee, the Famous Detective, with the help of his Young Assistant, Nipper, frustrated a Knavish Plot, and brought the Plotters to Justice.

CHAPTER I.

Rejected by the Doctor—Accepted by His Sweetheart.

"HURRAY—hurray—hurray!"

Loud were the cheers and many were the wavings of hats and handkerchiefs as a body of men, between two and three hundred strong, swung round the corner of the Embankment, with a military band playing an inspiring march at their head.

They marched like soldiers—they were soldiers—but as yet they were dressed in their ordinary civilian attire. For they were part of the previous day's batch of newly-enlisted men; some of the very latest recruits in response to Lord Kitchener's call for another three hundred thousand men.

They were on their way to Charing Cross, from where they would travel to their training camp, and as the martial strains of the band filled their ears and inspired their souls, every face looked eager and firm-set, and every eye alight with the light of a fine patriotism and splendid courage.

Nor were they alone in their desire to "do their bit" for King and country. Round the recruiting office, at New Scotland Yard, surged a crowd of men. Many were quite youngsters, others were in the prime of physical manhood, while others yet again were older. But whatever their varying ages, all were filled with the same noble aspirations to fight for their Motherland, and avenge the weak and persecuted among the smaller nations.

An inspiring spectacle—as fine a sight as could be seen, that of these gallant fellows, needing no compulsion, but offering of their own free and untrammelled wills, their strength, their obedience, and their very lives, if need be, in the cause of honour and civilisation.

Among them was a tall, well-set-up young fellow, waiting his turn for admission to the recruiting office.

Tom Payne his name was, and presently his turn came. The sergeant smiled as he saw him.

"No need to worry about your height, my lad," said he, as Tom stepped on to the platform of the height recorder. "Close on six feet, and chest measurement in proportion by the look of you."

It proved to be so when Tom presently had the tape put round him.

"Big enough for the Guards," chirruped the sergeant cheerfully. "You'll pass the doctor with flying colours."

"I hope so," said Tom, a little moodily.

"Any doubt about it?" asked the sergeant quickly. "You look as fit as a fiddle."

"Oh, I'm well enough in myself," Tom said, with a slight flush of his face. "Only, when I tried to enlist three months ago, the doctor chucked me. A few weeks before that I'd had a kick from a horse that somehow put my knee out. I walked with a bit of a limp then, and I suppose that gave me away."

"Oh, well, cheer up, sonny! You've no limp now, and you'll go through all right. It'll puzzle the doctor to find any flaw in you, I'll wager."

But it didn't. British Army doctors are clever men, and rigidly scrupulous about the men they pass.

"Sound as a bell," said the doctor before whom Tom Payne presently appeared. "Sound as a bell as to heart and lungs. Strong on your legs?"

"I believe so, sir," replied Tom, with just a shadow of inward fear.

"Ought to be. You're quite free from varicose veins, and—Hullo, what's this?"

The doctor stooped, and examined critically a very slight protuberance at the back of the left knee.

"You've had an accident some time?"

"Yes, sir; a horse kicked me some months ago. But I'm all right now," replied Tom, his heart beginning to beat with apprehension.

"Sure about that?" The doctor stooped, and chopped at the side of the injured knee with the edge of his open hand.

Tom winced, and half toppled over as the leg gave.

"There, you see, my lad!" said the doctor. "Your leg isn't quite as strong as you supposed. Pity—pity!"

"But you won't turn me back for that, sir?" pleaded Tom.

"I fear I must. I'm sorry—very sorry—for apart from this, your physique is excellent. But a long, forced march would find out your weak spot for certain, and you'd be like a lump of lumber."

"Can't you stretch a point, sir?"

"Impossible! You may be all right in a few months' time, but at present—no, I can't pass you."

Tom went out into the street in a mood of the utmost dejection. For the second time he had been refused. In addition to that he was out of work. He had lost his berth owing to a slackness of business soon after the outbreak of war. Since then he had applied for job after job, not caring in what capacity, so long as he could earn an honest living.

But employers had looked askance at one of his physique and age, and disbelieving that he had tried to enlist and been refused, had declined to employ him.

And now, still out of work, he had been rejected a second time. No wonder that he should feel down in the mouth.

Suddenly down the street came a newsboy shouting:

"Italy declares war! Speshul!"

Tom bought a paper and read the momentous news. Under the official intimation that Italy had joined the Allies, he also read another paragraph that awakened his deepest interest.

It told of how, owing to this latest development, many hotels and restaurants would be depleted of their staff of Italian waiters.

"Here's a chance!" cried Tom to himself. "I'd have preferred to be a soldier, but if I can't serve my King and country, I can at least help to serve customers at some restaurant. It won't be the first time I've waited at table, so here's for a shot at it."

He knew of an agency where waiters and the like were registered, and thither he at once made his way.

"Want a job as a waiter, do you?" said the clerk in charge. "Well, you've come at the right time. Go along to Mr. Warricombe, the manager of the Hotel Magnificent. He's in want of waiters."

He was, as Tom soon discovered. But he looked a little doubtful as he eyed the applicant up and down.

"I say, young fellow," Mr. Warricombe said, "I like the look of you. But don't you think you ought to be in the Army?"

"I only wish I could be, sir; but the doctor has just rejected me."

"Good heavens! Whatever for? You look as strong and fit as a race-horse."

Tom explained, and Mr. Warricombe nodded his head.

"Oh, well, in that case, I shall have no objection to giving you a trial, providing your references are satisfactory. Tell me who they are and I'll 'phone through."

That part of the business took only a few minutes. At the end of that time Mr. Warricombe put down the receiver.

"All right," he said, with a smile. "Your reference is perfectly satisfactory, and I'm willing to take you on."

Tom presently walked out of a side door of the great hotel with a smile on his face, and made his way across Whitehall. He had had his share of trouble lately, but now, on this bright June evening, all his dejection had vanished.

He stepped down Whitehall towards Westminster Bridge like one walking on air. A glance at Big Ben showed it to be a quarter to eight, and he boarded a tram for Clapham in the hurried manner of a man with an appointment to keep. He alighted in the Clapham Road, and at once made towards a confectioner's shop.

Outside the door, which had just been closed, stood a girl of pretty face and dainty figure, buttoning her gloves, and glancing expectantly at each tram as it approached.

"Ah, here I am, Nelly!" said Tom, taking her little hand and pressing it. "Sorry I'm a bit late. Hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"Only a minute or two, Tom," replied Nelly Wade, with a smile that showed her white and even teeth. "We've only just closed up. But, Tom, you look as if you've had some luck at last. Have you?"

"Well, I've had bad luck in one way. I tried to enlist again, as I told you I should. But my knee is still a bit rocky. The doctor twigged it, and turned me down. Still, it's no use worrying, and after all I've had some splendid luck in another way. I've been seeing the manager of the Hotel Magnificent. He's taken me on as a waiter. I'm to have my board and lodging, and what with wages and tips, I shall make at least a couple of pounds a week."

A happy smile came into the girl's face.

"Oh, Tom, how glad I am! I know how it has worried you not being able to enlist, and being out of work as well. How glad I am at this news."

"Isn't it splendid! I say, Nelly, we shall be able now to—to—"

"Sha'n't we, darling?"

"Able to what, Tom?" she asked, with a blush as she met his eager, smiling eyes.

"Oh, you know, dear! But if you don't, come for a walk on the common and I'll tell you."

Into the details of what they talked about during their walk on Clapham Common we need not enter.

It is sufficient to say that Tom, confident now in his ability to support a home for two, asked Nelly to be his wife, and that she, with deep, true love shining in her eyes, gave him the answer he had so long hoped for.

Before they parted, it was arranged that she should presently give notice at the confectioner's shop where she was employed, and that at the end of a month they should become man and wife.

CHAPTER II.

A Robbery and an Arrest.

THIS month was nearly up. It was the eve of their wedding. Soon, in two or three hours, Tom Payne would be free to go and meet the girl who was to be his on the morrow. But as yet duty held him at his place at the Hotel Magnificent.

It was the luncheon hour, and the great dining-room was crowded with well-dressed people, among whom waiters quickly moved, attending to their wants.

But Tom was not among these. To-day he had been told off to attend on a private lunching party in a special room on the first floor.

Suddenly, as he moved along the corridor towards the kitchen lift, there came to him a medley of sounds from the floor above—a loud, dismayed cry, followed by the violent ringing of a bell.

Full of wonder as to what could be the matter, he rushed upstairs. Reaching a corridor there, a door was suddenly thrown open. A gentleman, one of the guests at the hotel, stood there, looking blankly at an empty bag he held in his hand.

"Do you know anything about this?" he demanded fiercely.

"About what, sir?" asked the mystified Tom.

"This robbery! I had several hundred pounds' worth of jewellery in this bag, and now it has disappeared. It has been stolen! Who is the thief?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," answered Tom, flushing at the half-implicated accusation. "But here's Mr. Warricombe, the manager."

And at that moment the latter, as well as several servants and guests, who had been startled by the cry and the loud ringing of the bell, appeared on the scene. Quickly the bare facts were stated to the manager by Mr. Isidore Bretz, which was the name of the guest from whom the jewellery had been stolen.

"One of your servants must be the thief!" Mr. Bretz asserted with impulsive wrath.

"Hardly likely I think, sir," said Mr. Warricombe warmly. "I have full faith in the honesty of my staff. Besides that, your room was locked until you yourself entered it just now. No servant could enter it without getting the key from the office below."

"I saw that man lurking about the corridor below an hour or more ago!" thundered Mr. Bretz, pointing at Tom Payne. "What was he doing?"

Tom flushed again with indignation, but kept his temper.

"I was preparing a table for a luncheon party on the first floor, sir," he said warmly. "I certainly never came near this room until I heard you call out."

"You were very soon on the spot when I did raise the alarm."

Tom was about to retort, but Mr. Warricombe stopped him.

"In order to satisfy this gentleman of your innocence, Payne, you will have no objection to being searched?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Very well," said the manager, turning to another attendant. "Close all the doors, and send for the police at once."

Scotland Yard was no great distance off, and the police were on the scene in a few minutes. Amid considerable excitement of the assembled crowd, Tom Payne was promptly searched, but none of the missing jewellery was found on him.

Isidore Bretz seemed far from satisfied, but Mr. Warricombe was quite convinced of Tom's innocence, and told him so presently when they were alone.

"I'm sorry you should have been suspected, Payne," he said. "But you must allow for Mr. Bretz's state of excitement. He only said what he did because you happened to be first on the scene after he had discovered his loss. No doubt he'll apologise to you when he's calmer. In any case, I'm convinced you know nothing about the theft, so don't worry, but forget it."

"Thank you very much, sir. It's my turn off this afternoon, and I want to go over to Clapham."

"To meet that little girl you're to marry to-morrow—eh, Payne?" smiled the manager. "Well, don't let this unfortunate affair make the slightest difference to your arrangements."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I may say, Payne. Don't go telling your sweetheart anything about the business. If she heard you had been accused of this theft, it would only cause her needless distress, and on the very eve of your wedding that would be a thousand pities."

Tom paid heed to this advice, and when an hour or two later he met Nelly again, he observed the strictest silence in regard to the robbery.

Hand in hand they walked across Clapham Common, not far from the lodgings where, from to-morrow, they were to take up their abode.

Thinking of the happy life which was to be theirs, they presently sat down upon a seat.

"Dear little sweetheart," said the young fellow, bending down and kissing her tenderly. "Dear little wife that is to be!"

She returned his embrace, and so they remained for a few minutes, talking tender whispers.

Suddenly she released herself from him in some embarrassment.

"Tom, there's somebody behind there!" she whispered hurriedly, and pointed to a cluster of shrubs in front of which they were sitting.

"There can't be anybody, dear. Who is likely to be there? It must be your fancy."

But it wasn't. Almost before the words were out of his mouth, two broad-shouldered men pushed their way forward. The foremost bent over the seat and touched the young fellow on the shoulder.

"You are Thomas Payne, I think?"

"Yes, that's my name," replied the astonished Tom.

"You are employed as a waiter at the Hotel Magnificent?"

"Yes."

"Then you must consider yourself my prisoner. I am Detective-Inspector Burnwood of Scotland Yard. I arrest you on the charge of robbery!"

"Robbery!" gasped Tom, while Nelly went white as a ghost. "What robbery?" He had almost forgotten the affair at the hotel for the moment.

"The robbery of valuable jewels belonging to Mr. Isidore Bretz, a guest at the hotel where you are employed."

Tom tottered back a step, his face all working with excitement.

"But I was searched at the time," he protested. "And nothing was found on me."

"That may be," replied Inspector Burnwood. "But something else was discovered after you had left the hotel."

"I—I am innocent!" Tom protested. "I know nothing at all about it!"

"That'll be for the court to decide," said Inspector Burnwood grimly:

"You must come with me to the police-station."

"I suppose I must if you say so." He turned to his sweetheart with a brave smile. "Good-bye, Nelly, for the present. Have no fear. I shall be able to clear myself of this awful charge, and——"

He said no more, for, shaken and shocked by the dramatic turn events had taken, Nelly Wade had thrown out her arms, and with a helpless cry had fallen to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER III.

Nelson Lee v. Inspector Burnwood.

THE dramatic arrest of Tom Payne had happened at four o'clock in the afternoon, the young waiter having had a half-day off.

Three hours later, at seven o'clock almost to the tick, the telephone bell rang in Nelson Lee's chambers in Gray's Inn Road.

"Answer it, Nipper," said the famous detective.

His young assistant was into the next room at once. Three minutes later he was back in some excitement.

"It's Mr. Warricombe, the manager of the Hotel Magnificent. There's been a jewel robbery—or, rather, several. The police are on the job, and have already arrested a young waiter. But Mr. Warricombe seems desperately anxious about the affair, and asks if you could take up the case."

"Why—if the police have it already in hand?"

"Don't exactly know, sir, except that he says he believes Tom Payne—that's the young waiter's name—may be innocent, and if that is so, he'd like you to clear him."

"Why, of course I should, my boy, if that's the case," said Nelson Lee, growing interested at once, as he always was in a threatened miscarriage of justice.

"And besides that," said Nipper, "there seems to be a bit of romance about it, too. Tom Payne was to have been married to-morrow to a young lady named Miss Nelly Wade."

"Good gracious me, and now he's been arrested instead! Queer idea for a man to commit a robbery on the eve of his wedding. Doesn't sound very probable. That settles it, my lad. We'll most certainly look into the matter. I'll go on to the Hotel Magnificent at once. You can come with me if you like."

Nipper nodded approval, and in a minute they had started.

"This is more than kind of you, Mr. Lee," was the young hotel manager's greeting when a few minutes later the detective was shown into his private office, leaving Nipper to await him outside. "I know what a busy man you are."

"Never too busy to help clear an innocent man, I hope," answered Lee.

"And I gather you believe Tom Payne to be innocent."

"I do," said Mr. Warricombe emphatically. "He's only been here a month, but in that time he's proved himself to be absolutely reliable and trustworthy in every way. Besides that, he was to have been married, and

it seems to me almost impossible that he should have risked his liberty by committing a series of thefts just now."

"That struck me when I got your message. I may say it largely influenced me in taking up the case."

"It influenced me, too," said the manager, with deepening colour. "For the fact is, I am engaged myself. I put myself in the young fellow's place, and imagine what a blow it must be to him and to the poor young girl he's engaged to."

Nelson Lee watched his kindling eye with approval. He knew David Warricombe to be a keen young man of business, and it was pleasing to see that commerce had not altogether smothered his better feelings.

"You speak of a series of thefts. Will you please describe them?"

The manager complied. He related how jewellery amounting in value to over two thousand pounds, had been abstracted from three different rooms. The bulk of this had belonged to two American ladies, friends occupying adjoining rooms on the first floor, while a smaller part of it, amounting in value to a hundred and fifty pounds, had been taken from a room on the second floor, occupied by a Mr. Isidore Bretz.

"Isidore Bretz. Sounds German, doesn't it?"

"Mr. Bretz is an American. He is a Chicago financier. For years past he has been largely interested in hotel properties all over the world. He is a considerable shareholder in many of the biggest in the States, and of one at Monte Carlo. He was also one of the chief shareholders in an hotel at Ostend."

"Really. Any interest in this place?"

"Not financial. But he has frequently stayed here while in London."

"May I see the rooms from which the jewellery was stolen?"

"Certainly. As a matter of fact, the occupants have all cleared out of the place. Mr. Bretz has gone to stay at the Embankment Hotel. Theft like these do no end of damage to an hotel. That is why I am so anxious to get the whole matter cleared up. Come with me, Mr. Lee. I'll show you the rooms."

Obtaining the keys from the office, he led the way to the first floor.

"These are the two rooms which were occupied by the ladies—Nos. 61 and 62. Room No. 124, which was occupied by Mr. Bretz, is immediately overhead."

"Oh, indeed," said Lee, with sudden thoughtfulness. "I wonder if you'll leave me while I examine the rooms? I like to work alone."

"Certainly; here are the three keys. But I very much doubt if you'll find anything in the way of a clue. Inspector Burnwood has searched all the rooms thoroughly."

"So Burnwood has the job in hand. Capable officer, very capable officer. Still, I'd like to go over the ground again."

"Then I'll leave you to it."

He turned along the corridor and descended the great staircase to his own office. He was undoubtedly very anxious about the matter. As he had said, robberies of this kind did incalculable damage to a big hotel, wealthy guests fighting shy of a place where they were likely to lose their valuables. Apart from that, he had really got to like the young waiter who had been arrested on suspicion, and was sincerely desirous of clearing him if he were really innocent. Hence his request to Nelson Lee for an inquiry independent of the police.

Some little time passed ere the detective once more entered the private office.

"Any discoveries, Mr. Lee?"

"Let me ask you a question," replied the detective evasively. "On what ground has Tom Payne been arrested?"

"A diamond ring was found in the pocket of a waistcoat belonging to him. He had been previously searched, but nothing was found on him, and he was allowed to leave the hotel. Later the waistcoat was found hanging up in the room occupied by him since he has worked here. He had cleared out everything else to his new lodgings, but seems to have forgotten the waistcoat. When Inspector Burnwood—who arrived on the scene after Payne had gone—searched the garment, he found the diamond ring. It was recognized by Isidoro Bretz as his property."

"And Burnwood arrested Tom Payne on that ground alone?"

"Yes, there was no other definite evidence against him."

"To enter the rooms he would have had to procure the keys from the office. Would that be easy?"

"It would be very difficult. A clerk is always on duty day and night. It would be almost impossible for a waiter to obtain the keys unless the clerk were acting in collusion."

"And you have found no evidence of collusion?"

"None at all, although Inspector Burnwood questioned the clerks most closely. But have you discovered any sort of clue, Mr. Lee?"

Again the question was evaded. If Lee had anything in his mind, as seemed probable, he was evidently disinclined to discuss it just yet. All he said was:

"I want you to help me, Mr. Warricombe. I want you to reserve room No. 124 for me to-night."

"The room Mr. Bretz had. You propose to sleep here to-night?"

"I propose staying here the night, anyway," smiled Lee. "Whether I sleep or not is another question. Another thing I want you to do is not to let rooms 61 and 62 to anybody."

"Very good. I don't see your object, Mr. Lee, but I am sure you have one—a very good one. The rooms shall be left unlet. Anything more you wish me to know?"

"I want to see Miss Nelly Wade. Where can she be found?"

"They were to have taken up their abode at 53, Colvilo Road, Clapham, but whether Miss Wade will go there now or not I can't say. I understood from Tom Payne that all his things had been sent on there."

"Then I shall try my luck at that address."

But before going to Clapham, he called at the police-station where Tom Payne had been taken, pending his appearance before the magistrate the next morning.

He wished very much to see the prisoner, and without much difficulty obtained permission to do so.

Tom was in a state of deep distress; that was plain to see at a glance. He had been told of the discovery of the ring in the pocket of his waistcoat, but protested hotly that he had not the smallest notion of how it had got there.

But if he was troubled about himself and the possible fate that awaited him, his distress was increased a hundredfold on account of the girl he loved.

"I'm innocent, sir—I swear I'm innocent," he told Lee. "And it'll be terrible if I am sent to prison. But I wouldn't so much mind that on my own account. It's for Nelly's sake I feel it most. She's the sweetest and dearest girl in all the world, and this will be a terrible blow to her."

The young fellow's earnest manner touched the detective. There was no shrewder judge of character in London than Nelson Lee, and he very quickly

made up his mind that Tom Payne was innocent of the crime charged against him. Also, his pity was keenly aroused on behalf of Nelly Wade.

"Cheer up, my friend!" were his parting words, after asking several more questions. "The evidence against you is a little bit awkward, but it's far from conclusive. I believe in your innocence for one, and so does Mr. Warricombe. More than that, I am going to do all I can to track down the man who is really guilty. Good-bye!"

There were tears of gratitude in Tom Payne's eyes as he took the detective's outstretched hand.

"Good-bye, sir!" he murmured. "I hope and pray you may be successful, not so much for my own sake, as for my dear little sweetheart's."

"If that young fellow isn't innocent," said Lee to Nipper, as he rejoined him into his waiting cab, "I'll eat my hat. Now we're going to see Nelly Wade."

But on arriving at Colville Road—where they dismissed their cab—and knocking at No. 53, Lee was destined to get a great surprise.

The door was opened by Inspector Burnwood. Both gave a start as they recognised one another.

"You here, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes, I've been retained by Mr. Warricombe, the manager of the Hotel Magnificent. He thinks the man you have arrested is innocent."

"Innocent!" Burnwood's lips curled in derision. "Well, I like that. Mean to say you share that idea?"

"I do. I am going to try and clear Tom Payne."

"You'll have your work cut out," said Burnwood dryly.

"Well, well," said Lee good-humouredly, for he knew Burnwood's jealous and irritable temper of old. "We shall see. I've called for a talk with Miss Nelly Wade."

Burnwood laughed aloud.

"You're a bit late. I'm afraid you're not likely to get that talk with Nelly Wade just yet."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this: that Nelly Wade has been acting hand-in-glove with Payne. She's as deep in this business as he is. She's been here, but she's gone."

"Gone—for good?"

"Until we track her down. Nelly Wade has bolted with the stolen property."

CHAPTER IV.

The Woman in the Thick Veil.

NELSON LEE was not an easy man to astonish, but this was a facer for him.

"Bolted with the stolen property!" he repeated incredulously.

"That's it. Scooted with the swag. It was evidently contained in a small brown bag which Payne had brought here. I arrested Payne at four o'clock. Shortly after five Nelly Wade presented herself here and took the brown bag away with her."

"Quickish work, wasn't it? I understood she fainted at the moment of Tom Payne's arrest."

"So she did, but no doubt she very soon came to. We had our prisoner to look after, and so, when a lady came up and said she knew Nelly Wade quiet well and would see her safely home, we left her in her charge. Tom Payne protested a bit, but we couldn't pay any attention to that."

"Who was the lady who volunteered her services?"

"Miss Polson—she gave us her name. She said she lodged next door to Nelly Wade."

"And did she see her home?"

"No, she didn't; Nelly Wade arrived here alone. Polson had some shopping to do and left her when she found she was quite well enough to return here alone."

"H'm! I suppose it was all right?"

"Oh, no doubt of it! I've been in next door and spoken with Miss Polson. She says that Nelly Wade was in a desperate hurry to get back here as soon as she had recovered consciousness."

"Well, this is a strange development—very strange."

"But no more strange than true, my friend. Nelly Wade told Mrs. Grey, the landlady here, that she was going back to her old lodgings in Fitzwell Street. But I've been round there, and nothing has been seen of her there; nor at the shop where she was formerly employed. She's gone clean away, and you can depend upon it, she's been acting in collusion with Tom Payne all along."

Lee had been thinking hard the last minute.

"How do you know the brown bag contained the stolen jewellery?" he asked.

"Isn't it a thousand to one on it?" said the inspector irritably. "Why should she take that particular bag away, and leave all the other luggage behind, unless it contained something specially valuable. I've no doubt about it myself, and the thing to do now is to find the absconding girl."

Inspector Burnwood went off presently; but Nelson Lee remained behind. After his interview with Tom Payne, he couldn't bring himself to believe in his guilt. He had never seen Nelly Wade to judge of her character. Still, it was plain that if Tom himself were innocent, she must be innocent also.

His strong imagination was at work, and it suggested several possibilities to him. Nor was he relying on imagination only. His examination of the rooms at the hotel had certainly revealed something to his trained mind, in support of the theory of Tom's innocence. It was evidence of a negative sort, to be sure, but it was most valuable, all the same. It was because he had determined to follow it up that he had made arrangements to stay at the hotel that night.

In the meantime, he sought an interview with Mrs. Grey, the landlady of No. 53.

"You are quite sure it was Miss Wade who came here?" he asked.

"Who else could it be, sir? Who else would know that the bag was here? Besides, I recognised her blue coat and skirt, and the pretty cream blouse underneath."

"Why lay emphasis on her dress? Didn't you recognise her features? You had seen her before?"

"Yes, sir. She's been here twice before with Mr. Payne. But she'd got a thick veil on when she came this evening, so I couldn't see her face."

"Wore a thick veil, did she?" said Lee ruminatingly. "But her voice was that the same?"

"As far as I could remember, sir, though she spoke a bit harsh. But then she had a cold—she told me so."

"Wore a thick veil, and had a cold!" Leo repeated the words to himself. They seemed to make him thoughtful.

"I believe there is a Miss Polson living next door," he said. "Do you know her?"

"Not to speak to, sir. She's only been lodging there the last four days."

"Really. Yet she seemed to recognise Nelly Wade at once, when she saw her fainting on the common. Rather strange, wasn't it?"

"It struck me so, sir. I suppose she must have seen Miss Wade come here yesterday with Mr. Payne."

"When did Mr. Payne engage these rooms?"

"A week ago, sir."

"And Miss Polson took rooms next door four days ago? What sort of lady is she?"

"Oh, very genteel, sir—most genteel. Very superior, I should say."

"Young?"

"About twenty-seven, I should think, sir. But there she is. You can see for yourself, sir. She's going out to post, I suppose. She wouldn't be going anywhere else so late as this."

A door in the next house had banged, and Mrs. Grey, standing near the window of her best parlour, had seen a lady issue forth under the light of the lamp immediately in front of the house.

"So that is Miss Polson," said Lee, looking, too. "Well, Mrs. Grey, I've asked you all I want to for the present, so I'll be going. Good-night!"

He and Nipper were out in the road in a moment, hurrying in the same direction as Miss Polson had taken.

"She isn't going to the post, sir," said Nipper. "She's past the pillar-box already. Going to follow her?"

"I certainly am."

"Suspicious of her, sir?"

"The whole business is suspicious, and the plot thickening. Miss Polson took rooms in Colville Road three days after Tom Payne. Then, after only having lived there four days, during which she can hardly have seen Nelly Wade more than twice at most, she happens to be on the spot when she fainted, immediately recognises her and takes charge of her. It seems very singular to me."

"She's getting a taxi on the rank there," said Nipper suddenly.

"So she is. We must get another. It must be something very curious that takes her out at this time of night."

Progress was somewhat slow through the darkened streets, and it was not difficult for the detective's cab to keep in the wake of the other. By devious ways they had reached the Wandsworth Road. In a few minutes they had passed Vauxhall, and were crossing Westminster Bridge.

The first cab turned up Whitehall and along the Strand, the second following a little distance behind.

Suddenly the first cab turned in at a courtyard.

"She has stopped at the Embankment Hotel, sir," said Nipper.

"Yes," said Lee, with a catch of his breath: "the very place where Isidore Bretz is staying!"

They also turned in at the courtyard, just in time to see Miss Polson disappear through the great doors of the hotel.

"I wonder if she's gone to see Bretz by any chance?" whispered Lee, as they drew up. "I'd give something to know. But it's not easy to find out. If I make inquiries, it will put Bretz on his guard."

"You suspect Bretz, then, sir?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. But it's curious if she has come here to see him. How can we get to know?"

"I see a way, sir," said Nipper suddenly, and leapt out of the halted cab, leaving Nelson Lee inside. "You won't be wanted, thank you. We shall be driving off again in a minute or two," he added to the uniformed attendant who had advanced.

The hotel was fairly busy at the moment. People had just arrived for supper after the theatres, and cabs were coming in quickly.

Amid the bustle, Nipper stepped up to one of the hotel-page-boys.

"Hallo, matey!" he said. "Would you like to earn a sovereign?"

"Would I not!" answered the page. "But who are you kiddin'?"

"Ain't kiddin'. I'm proposin' a deal. My guv'nor's waitin' yonder in a cab. Come along and see him, and the golden quid is yours."

The page-boy hesitated a second; but the sight of the glinting coin broke down his hesitation. He hurried along with Nipper to Lee's cab.

"In you get," whispered Nipper. "It's all right."

"Why, what's the meaning of this?" asked Lee, as the page-boy got in beside him.

"It's all right, sir," replied Nipper, with an elaborate wink. "The bonny, blue-eyed, and be-buttoned young baronet here is going to earn a sovereign for the loan of his coat and trousers for two or three minutes."

The boy protested, beginning to get frightened; but Nelson Lee, seeing the idea Nipper had in mind, quickly reassured him.

"It's all right," he said. "We're not going to steal your clothes; only borrow them for a little while. Off with them—quick, and I'll make it two pounds! You can wear my young friend's things till he comes back."

In three minutes the exchange was effected in the cab. Out of it stepped Nipper, looking in his borrowed livery as spick and span a page-boy as ever entered the portals of the Embankment Hotel.

"Now then, matey, just one question," he said. "Mr. Isidore Bretz is staying here?"

"Yes. Got a suite of rooms on first-floor. His sittin'-room is number 86."

"Right-ho!" And Nipper disappeared in a moment.

Disguised as he was in the hotel livery, it was easy for him to pass unnoticed through the crowded vestibule, and up the grand stairway.

Ten minutes passed—ten minutes of anxious waiting for Lee. Then Nipper returned.

There was that on his face which showed he had learnt something of importance; but he said nothing until he and the page-boy had once again changed clothes.

"Well, did you see her?" asked Lee, the moment the boy had gone.

"Yes. She was with him—with Bretz. In his sitting-room. Who do you think she is? She's Isidore Bretz' niece."

"Good heavens! How do you know that?"

"She called him uncle. I heard her, several times."

"Could you hear what they talked about?"

"I could hear, but could only make out a word here and there. They talked mostly in a foreign language—German, I think. I'm afraid I haven't found out very much after all, sir."

"On the contrary, you have made a most important discovery. Miss Polson his niece! He, a rich man, living at an expensive hotel, while she takes humble lodgings at Clapham."

"It is queer, sir. What can be the meaning of it?"

"I should say the meaning is clear. She has been set to spy on Tom Payne and Nelly Wade during the past few days."

"For what purpose?"

"To get them accused of this jewel robbery. I should imagine. Nipper, this case is growing interesting. There's a deep plot afoot, of which the police have not the slightest inkling."

"And you have, sir?"

"I have a theory, at any rate. I believe these robberies to have been

the work of a gang, of which Isidoro Bretz is the head. Tom Payne is innocent—I am convinced."

"But what do you make of Nelly Wade's returning for that bag?"

"I don't believe Nelly Wade did return. I believe the poor girl was taken somewhere by Miss Polson, and made a prisoner."

"But Mrs. Grey said——"

"She wasn't at all sure. She only judged by the clothes. No doubt they were Nelly Wade's clothes, but they could have been worn by somebody else—a confederate of the gang. You heard what Mrs. Grey said—that the girl wore a veil, and said she had a cold. Both are suspicious circumstances, resorted to for purposes of disguising face and voice."

"But if the bag of jewels was in Tom Payne's rooms, doesn't it rather——"

"If my theory is correct, the bag did not contain the jewels. It has been taken away merely as a blind—to confirm the police in their false belief in Tom's guilt. Nelly Wade has been kidnapped for the same purpose."

"Lor', what a cunning lot they are!"

"Yes; but we must outwit them. But I'm afraid Bretz will be on his guard now. I suspect that Miss Polson saw us arrive at Colville Road, and has come here to warn her uncle that we are on the trail."

"My word! But that would account for his excited state. I could see him through the half-opened door, fair prancing up and down the room, and throwing his hands about. But what are you going to do, sir? Try and find Nelly Wade?"

"We must certainly try and rescue the poor girl. The best way to do that will be for you to shadow Miss Polson. Wait here till she comes out, and follow her. If she returns to Colville Road, come back and report to me at the Hotel Magnificent. Knock three times on the door of No. 124. If I don't answer your knock, wait a few minutes, and knock again when you hear me moving about. I'm going now. You'll wait and follow Miss Polson."

CHAPTER V.

The Mystery of Room No. 124.

NELSON LEE made once more for the police-station. He wanted to be quite clear on one little point, and was at once conducted to Tom Payne's cell.

"Just one question, my friend," he said. "Apart from her fainting, what was the condition of Miss Wade's health this afternoon?"

"Her health, sir? Why, she was perfectly well before Inspector Burnwood arrived on the scene."

"Was she suffering from a cold that made her voice hoarse?"

"Why, no, sir, I'm sure she wasn't! She was quite well—hadn't a cold of any sort. But, why do you ask, sir? Has anything happened?"

Nelson Lee briefly recounted what had happened. Tom's eyes blazed with honest indignation.

"It's infamous for them to try and drag Nelly into it," he said. "Well, they're welcome to any jewellery they're likely to find in that little brown bag of mine. All it contained was a few collars. You're right in thinking somebody impersonated her, sir—but who could it be?"

Lee answered vaguely. He had not mentioned his suspicions of Bretz to Tom as yet.

"And where can poor Nelly be, sir?" went on Tom. "Oh, if ever I lay hands on the scoundrel who's worked this business, I'll——"

He left the police-station after a little more talk, and made for the Hotel Magnificent. Leaving instructions that on Nipper's arrival he was to be allowed upstairs at once, he made for room 124.

Switching on the light, he promptly locked and bolted the door on the inside. Then, with a deliberation that showed he had some set purpose in view, he started to carry it out.

Opening a portmanteau he had had sent up, he took out a complete suit of blue overalls, such as are worn by engineers. Then, placing an electric-torch in his pocket, he advanced to the fireplace.

At the time of his earlier visit to the room, he had made certain examinations which now enabled him to proceed without delay.

Removing the fire-screen, he dropped on to his knees and inserted his hand behind the register. There, after a little fumbling, a round knob met his touch.

At this he tugged, and instantly a surprising thing happened. Half of the iron frame of the front of the fireplace became released as from some inner grappling hooks, and lifted a little.

Shifting his grip from the knob to another lever-like projection which his electric-torch revealed, Nelson Lee slowly turned it. The effect was to raise the front of the fireplace, inch by inch, until it disappeared, like a safety-curtain at a theatre, beneath the projecting section of the mantel-piece overhead.

An open space now stood revealed, and into this Nelson Lee carefully crept. Another flash of his torch, and a perpendicular shaft, some two feet square, was disclosed.

Its depth was indeterminable from there, but the detective was going to discover it. Since his earlier examination of the room he had made special provision for that purpose, in the form of a long rope ladder.

This he at once hitched on to two hooks which were firmly fixed at the head of the shaft, and at once began his descent. Three or four minutes, and his feet touched bottom.

His light showed that he now stood upon a platform some three or four feet square. Floor and walls were covered with thick layers of brown dust. Not soot, for the shaft by which he had descended was not the chimney, but another upright passage built close alongside it.

Flashing his torch around, his eyes presently fell upon another knob and lever, like to those he had found on the floor above.

He tugged at the knob, and again was the front of a fireplace released. Then, turning the circular lever, this second sheet of iron disappeared in a similar manner to the other.

Crawling out, Nelson Lee stood within another bedroom, with a door in the middle leading to a second room beyond.

Crossing the first room, he took a key from his pocket, and, unlocking the door giving on to the corridor, glanced at its outer side.

No. 61 was painted on it, and the figures 62 on the door a little further along.

"The rooms occupied by the two ladies from whom the jewellery was stolen!" exclaimed Lee, as he locked the door again behind him. "So here's a way by which the room could be entered without coming in at the door at all. Easy to reach these rooms from No. 124 on the floor above. That room was occupied by Isidore Bretz. He's the thief, unless I'm very much mistaken, and not Tom Payne at all!"

A few minutes later, and the detective, having readjusted the fireplaces and ascended his rope ladder, stood once more in the bedroom above.

He had just removed his overalls, and washed away all traces of his descent of the shaft, when a sudden noise made him catch his breath and listen.

The noise came from the corridor, and sounded like a scuffling of steps, followed by a groaning cry and a fall!

Nelson Lee sprang to the door, opened it, and looked out. Only one dim light showed in the corridor, but it was sufficient. On the floor close to the wall some dozen yards away, lay a still form!

Lee ran forward, and dropped to his knees beside it. One glance was sufficient.

"Nipper, my dear lad, what has happened?"

But Nipper made no reply. His chin was sunk on his chest, his face was white, his eyes closed, his consciousness gone!

Full of wonder and anxiety, the detective gathered him up in his arms, carried him to the bedroom close by, and laid him on the bed.

Ten minutes passed; then Nipper opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked faintly. Then, recognising his master standing near him with a flask in his hand, he added: "Ah, it's you, sir. That's a good job. How did I come here?"

"I found you insensible in the corridor outside a few minutes ago."

"Ah, I remember now! I'd just returned, and was coming along to this room, when I heard a footstep behind me. Before I could turn something was clapped over my nose and mouth, and down I dropped."

"Any notion of who it was?"

"Not the faintest, sir."

"I must try and find out."

Lee hurried away, and was absent some ten minutes.

"I can find out nothing," he said. "The night porter is perfectly certain nobody entered the hotel after you. The attack must have been made by somebody staying here."

"Who could it be, sir?"

"That's difficult to say out of over three hundred guests who are staying here. No doubt he meant to do you serious injury, but dashed away when he heard my door opening. As it is, you're not much hurt—thank goodness!"

"But what can it mean, sir?"

"It means that there is a deep plot afoot. It means that, while you've been shadowing Miss Polson, somebody has been on the look-out for you—perhaps for me as well. You followed Miss Polson?"

"I did, sir. She came out very soon after you left me. She drove straight to Colville Road."

"No clue yet, then, to Nelly Wade's whereabouts?"

"None at all."

"Well, we must have patience. There are several puzzling things awaiting solution now."

CHAPTER VI.

"The Benefit of the Doubt."

BOW-STREET POLICE-COURT was crowded, preparatory to the hearing of the charge against Tom Payne.

Nelson Lee was there, with a look of deep gravity on his face. Inspector Burnwood, on the other hand, wore an expression of self-satisfaction. He rubbed his hands as he came towards Lee.

"I hear you stayed behind at Colville Road last night," he said with some sarcasm in his tone. "You haven't found the missing jewellery yet?"

"Not yet."

"I don't think you're likely to either," said Burnwood dryly, "unless he tells us what he's done with it."

He jerked a thumb in the direction of Tom Payne, who had just been conducted into the dock.

"You seem to have made up your mind that he's guilty!" said Lee.

"Not a doubt of it—not a doubt!"

"I've considerable doubts myself!"

"So you said last night, Mr. Lee," grinned the inspector. "Well, you'll see all in good time. I can tell you the evidence is pretty strong. Part of the missing jewellery was found in the pocket of a waistcoat belonging to him. And then there's the fact of his girl having bolted with the rest."

Lee remained silent a moment. For the present he did not wish to discuss his theory regarding the disappearance of Nelly Wade.

"Will Mr. Bretz give his evidence to-day? I rather want to see him."

"Then you'll have the chance. What's more, you'll hear evidence from him which alone will be sufficient to get the prisoner Payne committed for trial. But why are you so anxious to see Mr. Bretz?"

Before Nelson Lee could answer, an officer of the court called silence, and Sir Thomas Wilburton, the magistrate, took his seat.

"Now you'll soon see!" whispered Inspector Burnwood to Lee.

The case against the prisoner proceeded, several witnesses being called. Standing there in the dock, Tom Payne showed evident signs of the suffering he was enduring.

Only one witness remained to be called, and that was Isidore Bretz.

As, on his name being called, the Chicagoan entered the witness-box from the corridor outside, Nelson Lee looked at him with an intent gaze. Bretz was a tall man, of massive proportions, and with dark, flashing eyes. He was immaculately attired, and, with his strong face ornamented by a heavy moustache and a small, spoon-shaped dab of hair just below his nether lip, bore an imposing presence that might have belonged to an ambassador.

For one instant he caught Nelson Lee's intent look, and returned his gaze unflinchingly. Then his evidence began.

His voice was deep and strong, but his manner was bland and suave. As he spoke of his losses, and of the ring which had been found in Tom Payne's pocket, he showed no sign of animosity against the young waiter. Rather did his manner betoken sorrow at his having fallen into temptation.

"I would willingly withdraw my part of the prosecution," he said, "and should be quite ready, under all the circumstances, to give the prisoner another chance. He is young, and"—Isidore Bretz's voice shook a little with feeling—"he was, I understand, to have been married on the day following his arrest. For those reasons, I would most willingly have cut my losses and withdrawn from the prosecution. But others are concerned, and in deference to them, and in compliance with public duty, I have given my evidence."

A subdued murmur of approval passed through the packed court. His pity for the prisoner marked him out as a most kind-hearted man, and won for him considerable admiration.

But not from Nelson Lee. Deep student of character as he was, he was not to be deceived by those soft words.

"Hypocrite!" was his inward comment. "His pity is all pretence. He's playing a deep game. Why?"

Without attempting to answer his own question, he leant towards Mr.

Lucas, the solicitor retained to defend the prisoner, next to whom he was sitting, and whispered something to him.

The solicitor rose to ask a few questions in cross-examination.

"You are an old patron of the Hotel Magnificent, I believe, Mr. Brettz?"

"Yes. I have stayed there off and on during the past twenty-five years."

"Almost since the hotel was first built?"

"That is so," answered the Chicagoan with the slightest twitch of his mouth.

"Thank you. That is all I wish to ask."

Laidore Brettz stepped down from the box.

Inspector Burnwood immediately rose.

"That completes the evidence against the prisoner, sir," he said, "and I ask for his committal for trial."

The magistrate's eyes had been fixed on a blue sheet of foolscap paper on his desk for some minutes past. Anyone who had been close enough might have seen that the sheet was filled with writing—the writing of Nelson Lee.

Clearly the contents had aroused the magistrate's deepest interest, for his gaze remained on the sheet for some seconds more.

Suddenly his lips compressed, and his hand clenched like one who had made up his mind to some bold line of conduct. He raised his eyes swiftly and fixed them on Inspector Burnwood.

"You ask me to commit the prisoner for trial," he said. "I have to inform you that I cannot bring myself to such a course. I should not be justified in subjecting the prisoner to further imprisonment on the evidence you have placed before me. I admit that the finding of part of the stolen property seems, at first sight, strong presumptive evidence of his guilt. But it is not so strong as it seems. As the prisoner's solicitor has suggested, the ring might have been placed in the prisoner's pocket by somebody else. As to the disappearance of Nelly Wade, the young lady to whom the prisoner is engaged, the reason for that is problematical, and I should not feel justified in treating that as evidence against the prisoner.

"For the prisoner to have committed these robberies, it would have been necessary for him to obtain the keys of the three different rooms. He must either have done that surreptitiously, and run a tremendous risk of being discovered, or he must have worked in collusion with some one in the office. In support of either of these theories, you have produced not one jot or tittle of evidence.

"Again, the prisoner had no sort of right to be on the first or second floors of the hotel, and had he been there, he must have been observed by the chambermaids and other people constantly moving about on those floors. Yet you have brought forward not a single person to say he was seen there.

"In the absence of such proof, I feel bound to give the prisoner the benefit of the doubt. Instead of committing him for trial, I shall take the unusual course of binding him over to come up for judgment if called upon. Thomas Payne, you are free to go!"

A murmur of surprise swept through the court at the magistrate's unexpected decision, while Inspector Burnwood positively gasped in amazement. He looked across to where Nelson Lee had been sitting, but the detective had already disappeared.

The magistrate also rose to retire to his room, pending the next case. As he did so, the blue sheet of foolscap fluttered from his hand, and was carried by the wind right to Inspector Burnwood's feet.

Burnwood stooped to pick it up. He started as he saw that it was covered with Nelson Lee's writing, a word or two of which caught his eye as he handed it back to the magistrate.

"Lee's writing!" he muttered, half aloud, as the magistrate withdrew. "Hang the fellow! He's written to the magistrate, and queered my pitch!" He scowled at the now vacant benches, for the court had quickly emptied; but a slight cough made him turn, to behold Mr. Isidore Bretz.

"Queer sort of decision, Mr. Inspector?"

"You're right, sir!" said Burnwood incautiously. "It's all Nelson Lee's doing."

Isidore Bretz drew in his breath suddenly, but spoke calmly:

"Nelson Lee? A well-known private detective, I believe. The man who sat over there during the hearing?"

"Yes," rasped Burnwood. "This isn't the first time he's poked his nose into police business! He's too fond of meddling!"

"Why has he meddled in this case, do you think?"

"Oh, he's got some bee in his bonnet! He told me beforehand that he thought Payne would get off. It's pretty plain he suspects somebody else."

"Who does he suspect?"

"Ask me another, sir!" said Burnwood sarcastically. "I haven't the faintest idea! But Nelson Lee is queer enough at times to suspect his own grandmother, if he had one."

Isidore Bretz smiled and went out. But the smile disappeared as he reached the street and gave place to a frown. A tall, pale, clean-shaven, well-dressed young man, who had been in court with him, came up.

"Well, Cronlin? Well, where's that fellow, Nelson Lee?"

"He hasn't come out yet?"

"But he's not in the court."

"No. He disappeared, but he didn't come into the street. It's my belief he's gone to the magistrate's room."

"More than likely, for I've just learnt that he has been in communication with him. It was through him, indeed, that the prisoner got off."

"Was it, though? Then he must know something. What does he know?"

"It's impossible to say." Bretz's strong brows gathered. "But one thing I do know, Cronlin—Nelson Lee is a dangerous man. He must be kept in sight. Wait here till he comes out, follow him, and report to me."

They parted, Cronlin remaining behind. He had not long to wait for Nelson Lee.

The detective was at that moment taking his leave of Sir Thomas Wilburton.

"Well, good-bye, Mr. Lee," the magistrate was saying. "I've done a rather daring thing in letting Thomas Payne go, and I don't mind confessing that I did it solely on account of what you wrote to me. But I've known you a great many years, and I feel I can fully trust you to fulfil your promise."

"I'm sure of it, Sir Thomas," answered Lee. "As I wrote, I am absolutely certain Tom Payne is innocent. I am equally confident that in a little while I shall bring the really guilty parties to justice."

CHAPTER VII.

The Slippers with the Felt Soles.

It was well that Sir Thomas Wilburton had such deep faith in Nelson Lee's judgment and skill, else he might soon have regretted the bold step he had taken in discharging Tom Payne, for ten days went by without the detective being able to penetrate further into the heart of the mystery he was bent on solving.

His suspicions of Isidore Bretz were strong, yet for the life of him he could not translate those suspicions into proof. He felt quite certain—and had good reasons for so feeling—that Bretz was a villain, yet, do what he might, he could not nail him.

He could come upon no trace of the missing jewellery, nor, in spite of a careful shadowing of Miss Polson, could he discover whither Nelly Wade had been decoyed.

"They're on their guard, Nipper," he said one evening. "They know that we're after them. That was plain to me from the moment of that attack on you in the corridor. As a consequence, they're acting very warily, so that we sha'n't get any sort of a handle against them. The worst of it is, I hear Bretz is going back to the States. If he does, he may give us the slip, after all."

"That'll be bad for Tom Payne, sir. There'll always be a cloud over him until the right man is hunted down."

"That's a thing which is worrying me considerably," said Lee. "Of course, it was fortunate for Tom that he was set free. But lots of people still think him guilty, and consequently he's had a rough time. The benefit of the doubt which the magistrate gave him is a doubtful sort of benefit, after all. He's got his liberty, but that is all. I've tried hard to get him a job, but nobody will employ him. Mr. Warricombe would have taken him on again, but the hotel directors have forbidden him to. They all think Tom stole the jewellery, and are angry against Sir Thomas Wilburton for having discharged him. They are angry with me, too, for it's somehow got out about my writing to the magistrate."

"I saw Tom Payne to-day, sir. He's very much down in the dumps. It's no joke to have his sweetheart disappear, and to be out of work into the bargain. He tried to 'list again, he told me, but the doctors are still suspicious of that knee of his, and won't pass him. He'll be on the rocks very soon if he can't get a job of some sort."

"It's very distressing. I've tried to get him work, but people have only laughed at me and shrugged their shoulders. One man as good as told me I was a fool to believe in his innocence. I wish I knew how I could help him. There's the street-door bell. A visitor for us, I expect."

It was, for after a brief interval the housekeeper entered with a card bearing the inscription:

"MRS. EZRA CAIRD."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lee. "This is the American lady who's taken that great house in Park Lane. She's immensely wealthy, according to all accounts, and is going to entertain on a very lavish scale during the London season. Wonder what she wants? I'd better see her."

Mrs. Ezra Caird was shown in. She was a young widow, not more than thirty, and a lady of such dazzling beauty as is rarely seen.

"You are Mr. Nelson Lee," she said, in a charming voice, rendered the more piquant by the slight American intonation, and letting her large, liquid, velvety eyes rest on the detective in a bewitching smile.

"That is my name, madam," he answered. "And you are Mrs. Ezra Caird, formerly of Boston, according to the papers?"

"And now of Park Lane, in your own big city," she replied. "I have taken the house of Lord Rexworthy for the season. It's probable you've seen that in the papers, too, Mr. Lee. Your newspaper men are not quite so bothersome as they are on our side, but they're sufficiently ready with their pens and cameras, all the same. It's difficult, I find, to think a thought nowadays without finding it all in black and white when you open a

newspaper." And she gave another of her fascinating smiles. "But I've called on you, Mr. Lee, to see if you can help me."

"I am sure anything I can do, madam—"

"Now, that's what I call real nice. You have had a long and close acquaintance with crime and criminals, Mr. Lee?"

"I have, indeed, madam."

"Well, now, I am interested in criminals myself. I am very sorry for them always. I believe that many men and women become criminals not through inclination, but through pure misfortune. I have tried in a small way to do something to give such people a second chance in life. You may possibly have heard of the existence in N'York City of the 'Prison Door Mercy League.'"

"An institution something akin to our 'Prisoners' Aid Society,' I presume?" said Lee politely. "Such societies do a great deal of good."

"I was one of the founders of the 'Prison Door Mercy League,'" pursued the lady. "I have myself met people on their discharge from prison, and endeavoured to give them another start in life. I have hopes, later on, of doing similar work on this side. I cannot, however, undertake that just at present. But I have explained all this in order to make clear why I have called. I believe you are interested in a young man named Tom Payne?"

"Why, yes, I am."

"So I understood from Mr. Hailsham-Fowles. Mr. Hailsham-Fowles appears to be a mutual acquaintance."

"I have known him for some years. When last I went to see him, it was to ask him if he could find some sort of employment for the young man you mention."

"He told me so. Tom Payne, I understand, was a waiter at some big hotel or other, and was charged with the theft of some jewellery?"

"Most unjustly charged, madam, in my opinion. But he was discharged by the magistrate."

"But many people still believe him to be guilty?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Among them Mr. Hailsham-Fowles. He told me so. He told me that he should be afraid to take the young man into his employment. Now, I am not afraid. I am quite willing to take him into my household as a footman."

"Do you really mean that, madam?"

"Certainly. The magistrate gave him the benefit of the doubt, and I am ready to give him the benefit of the doubt also. I have made several inquiries about him, and I cannot think he is altogether bad. That is why I am willing to give him a fresh start in life. Will he accept it?"

"I am quite sure he will be delighted. I will write to him at once, and ask him to call on you to-morrow, if you like."

"Pray do so," she said, and again smiled exquisitely.

"What a lovely lady, sir!" exclaimed Nipper, when she had gone.

"Yes, a very beautiful woman," said Lee. "Did you notice her ears?"

Nipper burst out into a laugh.

"Well, if you ain't a caution, sir, to ask such a question as that!"

"But did you?"

"Can't say I did. I noticed her lovely eyes—could hardly keep my own off 'em, so to speak. And her beautiful lips and lovely complexion. But I can't say as I paid particular attention to her ears. I suppose it's on account of their bein' a sort of side ornament. Where her ears very beautiful, sir?"

"They were more attractive to me than anything else in her face." was Lee's meditative reply.

"Jolly good of her to offer Tom Payne this job," Nipper said.

But Nelson Lee made no reply. He had lapsed into a deep silence, out of which Nipper could only disturb him at his peril.

Suddenly, as if moved by an impulse, he jumped to his feet, seized his hat, and, without a word, dashed out of the room.

The amazed Nipper, looking out of the window into the road below, saw him hail a taxi, get in, and drive swiftly away.

"The gov'nor's like a volcano," he muttered. "Wonder what's in his mind now to make him rush away like that."

It was noising midnight ere Lee returned. Nipper was awaiting him, and looked up eagerly for an explanation. He got one of a sort.

"I've been to see Tom Payne," the detective said. "I've told him of Mrs. Ezra Caird's offer, and he's going to call on her to-morrow."

"He's pleased enough, I'll bet, sir?"

"Yes, he's relieved and grateful at the chance of a job again. But he's terribly cut up about Nelly Wade. The worry he's gone through about her has made him look ten years older. We must try and find her, my boy; we must try harder than ever to find her."

"I'm ready to start on the job to-morrow."

"No, I've something else for you to do to-morrow."

"What's that, sir?"

"I want you, my boy," said Lee quietly, and with his eyes fixed contemplatively on the ceiling—"I want you to commit a burglary!"

"What!" cried Nipper, jumping up in amazement.

"Oh, a small affair, but important," said Lee, calm as ever. "I have reason to think that Mr. Isidore Bretz has in his possession a pair of soft slippers. Their soles are made of felt. They are nearly new, and of American make. The heels are level with the rest of the sole, and they are sewed to the uppers by a double row of stitches—the rows being more than half an inch apart."

"My word, gov'nor, but you must have looked at 'em pretty close."

"I have never to my knowledge set eyes on them."

"Then how in the world—"

"Don't ask questions, Nipper, but listen to what I have to say," said Lee, never once removing his eyes from the ceiling. "I am not even sure that Isidore Bretz possesses such a pair of slippers, but I think he does. If he does, I want you to get hold of them. He's still staying at the Embankment Hotel."

"But how in the world am I to get to his rooms?"

"As you did before—in the guise of a pageboy. Only this time you will be officially recognised by the hotel authorities. I've seen Mr. Warricombe. He's a personal friend of the manager of the Embankment Hotel, and he's arranged with him that you're to start as a pageboy there to-morrow. As soon as you get hold of the slippers I have described, your service there will be over. You understand?"

"Yes, sir, and I promise to do my best."

"That's right. You will need to be very cautious. Isidore Bretz is a dangerous man. If he should happen to find you in his rooms under suspicious circumstances, it might prove awkward for you. You will have to be very careful."

"Trust me for that, sir."

CHAPTER VIII.

Nipper Commits a Burglary which has Strange Results.

READY as ever to carry out his employer's orders, Nipper still entered upon his job the next morning with mingled feelings.

It was altogether a ticklish business on which he had embarked, and required the greatest discretion. But though he recognised the risks of his job, he did not shrink from it.

All through the morning and afternoon he watched and waited for an opportunity to search Isidore Bretz's rooms. But the Chicagoan might have realised some plan against him was afoot, so closely did he stick indoors. He was rarely out of his apartments for more than a few minutes at a time.

It was not until evening that a chance offered. This was just after Bretz had dressed for dinner and descended to one of the big dining-rooms on the ground-floor.

This was Nipper's opportunity. He at once went up to the first floor, and, unlocking the door of No. 86 with a duplicate key, he entered. He was now in Bretz's sitting-room, the apartment in which the interview with Miss Polson had taken place.

Nipper did not linger here, but passed through the door giving on to the bedroom. Here were a large wardrobe and a capacious chest of drawers.

Quickly Nipper searched them. There were suits of clothes and pairs of boots in plenty—slippers, also, of various hues and makes, but none of the sort which Nelson Lee had described.

"But they must be about somewhere, for I'm sure the guv'nor is right. He never makes a mistake when it comes to deduction. Ha!"

The last exclamation was provoked by the sight of something in a little room beyond. This was a combined bath and dressing-room.

At one end of it was a tapestry screen, and behind the screen were several trunks and portmanteaux.

With feverish energy Nipper began his search of them, only to meet with further disappointment. For all the trunks were unlocked, and quite empty.

Nipper was about to turn away when his eyes fell on a small kit-bag which he had not before seen. It was right in the corner, close to the window, which, on this warm night, had been left wide open.

Eagerly he pounced upon it and tried to open it. It was locked. He lifted it up. It was light enough to be empty like the others; yet, as he shook it, something moved inside with a soft, sliding sound.

"Sounds like the very things I'm after!" he exclaimed to himself. "I must manage to open it somehow."

He placed the kit-bag on the floor again, and, dropping to his knees, drew a bunch of keys from his pocket. Key after key he tried to the number of eight without success. Then at last one fitted. Open came the bag, and there at the bottom lay the very things he was looking for.

A pair of slippers made of felt!

For the life of him he could not restrain a glad cry. But the cry stifled itself in his throat at the sound of a footstep behind him.

He sprang to his feet to behold, to his horror, Isidore Bretz, with a wicked scowl upon his face, and a revolver in his hand.

"You young thief!" he cried with an oath. "What's this game you're up to, eh? Show me what you've just stuffed away under your coat, or I'll blow your brains out!"

But now that he had got possession of the slippers, Nipper had no intention of yielding them up if he could help it.

Defiant of Bretz's threat, and defiant of the menacing revolver, he stooped, seized the kit-bag and hurled it with all his force straight at the Chicagoan's head.

It caught him full upon the chin and neck, and sent him reeling back a couple of paces to the floor. But to escape even now by the door was impossible, for Bretz lay between him and the door. Still, to hesitate was to be lost, and Nipper did not hesitate.

In a second he had sprung on to the window-sill, and in another, he was sliding down the rain-pipe which ran alongside it to the ground, at the side of the hotel which was skirted by a narrow lane.

It was rapidly growing dusk, and his chance of escape seemed hopeful. His hopes, however, were to be immediately dashed. For as he reached the ground, he felt himself gripped firmly by the collar. He turned his head to find himself in the hands of a policeman!

"Look here, me young rip, what's the meaning o' this?" demanded the officer.

"It's all right, constable," panted Nipper. "Let me go, for Heaven's sake!"

"Let you go. Not likely. You've got to come along with me to the hotel where you work. You've been up to summat or other, or you wouldn't be slidin' out of the winder like that. Come back with me and face the music."

"I tell you it's all right," whispered Nipper in hoarse excitement. "I've been on detective business. You know Mr. Nelson Lee?"

"Should reckon I do, but what are you to do with him?"

"My name's Nipper. I'm his assistant."

"How am I to know that?" said the constable, impressed somewhat by the boy's obvious truthfulness. "You must come back to the hotel and establish your identity."

"No, don't take me back there. There's somebody there I don't want to meet. It would put him on his guard, you understand. I've got a pair of slippers here that belongs to a certain man staying at the hotel. Mr. Nelson Lee sent me there on purpose to get hold of them. If I go back and the man sees them, it'll spoil everything."

"But I can't let you go on your mere word."

"Then take me along to Bow Street, and telephone to Mr. Nelson Lee. You'll soon find out that I'm speaking the truth."

"Well," said the policeman thoughtfully. "That might do, but—"

"Quick," whispered Nipper, "quick, or it'll be too late! Look, they are coming."

And sure enough at the top of the lane appeared two or three men in evening-dress, one of whom Nipper recognised as Isidore Bretz.

"All right," said the constable. "Come this way, through this passage."

They were out of sight of the searchers in an instant, and making for the Strand. Five minutes later, and they were at Bow Street.

Here Nipper gave as full an explanation of his recent movements as he deemed prudent, but without mentioning the name of Isidore Bretz. Meanwhile, an officer of the station had telephoned for Nelson Lee, who quickly arrived in a taxi-cab.

"Ah, glad to see you, Mr. Lee," said the inspector in charge. "Here's a youngster been caught sliding down a waterpipe from the Embankment Hotel. He admits having purloined a pair of slippers belonging to one of the guests, but claims that he did so at your bidding."

"It's quite true," said Lee with a smile. "He's my assistant. The slippers are an important bit of evidence in a case I've got in hand."

"Oh, then it is all right. Who do the slippers belong to? The youngster won't tell us that."

"And you won't mind if I don't tell you either," said Nelson Lee. "I promise you, inspector, you shall know all about it later on."

"Very well then, I won't ask you. But what are we to do if the man to whom the slippers belongs comes and reports his loss?"

"I don't think he will somehow," said Lee, who had been examining the slippers. "No, I feel pretty well sure he won't."

"Then the trotter cases you wanted, sir?" asked Nipper, as, presently, they made their way back to Gray's Inn.

"They are," said Lee in a satisfied tone. "You've done excellently, my boy, excellently. How did you manage it? And why had you to escape by the window?"

Nipper explained, and Lee looked grave.

"So Bretz saw you? Did he recognise you?"

"Couldn't say, sir. He had a good look at me anyway."

"Well, whether he recognised you or not, he'll be on his guard now when he misses his slippers."

"Are they so important then?"

"Most important. I am going to compare them with certain footprints to-night. If they fit, I shall report to the police to-morrow morning, and get them to apply for a warrant for Isidore Bretz's arrest."

Duly that night Lee made the test he referred to, the precise nature of which will presently be seen. It satisfied him so completely that next day he went to the police at Bow Street, and again saw the inspector he had seen overnight.

"I have come to tell you, inspector, that the name of the man from whom the slippers were stolen is Isidore Bretz."

"The wealthy American."

"Yes, I want you to apply to Sir Thomas Wilburton for a warrant for his arrest."

"So! On what charge?"

"The recent thefts of jewellery from the Hotel Magnificent."

"The case where Tom Payne the waiter got off. Why Mr. Bretz was one of the prosecutors!"

"I know; but he's the thief all the same."

"Good heavens! This is surprising. What's your evidence, Mr. Lee?"

"I'll keep it back till he's arrested, if you don't mind. But I shall prove the case up to the hilt. You'll find Sir Thomas will grant the warrant readily enough. He knows something of the circumstances already."

"Then I'll go to him at once."

Within an hour the warrant was granted. Armed with this, and accompanied by Nelson Lee and another police-officer, Inspector Ryles at once made for the Embankment Hotel. They met the manager in the vestibule.

"I wish to see Mr. Isidore Bretz," said Inspector Ryles.

"Mr. Bretz. I'm afraid you're too late. He's gone!"

"Gone!"

"Yes, he left suddenly last night."

"At what time?" asked Lee.

"Immediately after dinner. Something seems to have happened in his room. What it was I don't precisely know. But I know that almost immediately after he packed his traps in a hurry, and went off in a state of the greatest excitement."

"You don't know where he's gone?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"We're done!" exclaimed Inspector Ryles. "He's slipped through our fingers."

"Yes, for the time being," said Lee. "But we'll nab him yet."

"Hope so," said Ryles. "But look here, Mr. Lee, isn't it about time you let me know what evidence you've got? I don't doubt but that your case is pretty complete, but you don't want to keep me in the dark any longer."

"Come along with me to the Hotel Magnificent," smiled Lee, "and you shall see for yourself."

"I'm particularly curious about the slipper trick."

"That's just what I'm going to make clear to you."

A few minutes brought them to the other hotel. Nelson Lee procured the key from the manager, and accompanied by Ryles, made for the second floor.

"This was the room occupied by Isidore Bretz on the night of the robbery," Lee explained. "Now I'm going to show you something a little curious."

He manipulated the lever behind the register of the stove. Ryles looked amazed as he beheld the space behind. Then, as he beheld the shaft, he stared as if he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Come on," said Lee, as he adjusted the rope ladder: "there's more to see yet."

In a state of abject astonishment, the inspector followed him down.

"Now please look at those footprints," said Lee, as they reached the little platform on the floor below, which was thickly covered with the accumulated dust of years. "And now compare these with them."

He drew out the felt slippers from a big inner pocket.

"They fit exactly!" gasped Ryles. "What's more, the double row of stitches on the sole precisely correspond."

"Well, then, you see now why I suspect Bretz of the robbery?"

"I should think I do. But what's the meaning of this secret shaft? And how came you to suspect its existence?"

"From the fact that I was once engaged in a hotel case at Monte Carlo, which contained a similar secret shaft. There was a theft of a large sum of money, and it was proved that the thief had entered the room from which it was stolen by this secret way. It afterwards transpired that the architect who built that hotel, an American-German named Ludvic, was, in addition to being an architect, a member of an international gang of thieves, and that he had purposely built in the secret shaft to expedite certain robberies the gang duly organised."

"But what made you think there might be a similar shaft here?"

"Because I discovered that Ludvic was the architect of this hotel also."

"Good heavens! How could Bretz have got to know of it?"

"That I can't say for certain. My guess is that he belonged to the same gang as Ludvic, and so got to know. Anyway he did know."

"My word, yes; and used his knowledge to good effect. This'll be an eye-opener for Inspector Burnwood. He still believes Tom Payne guilty, but he won't after this."

"I'll go along to the Yard and see him," said Lee.

"No use to-day. He's gone down to Maidstone to give evidence at the assizes there, but he'll be back to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX.

A Ride Through the Dark Night.

NELSON LEE arrived back at his chambers to find Nipper eager for news.

"No go," the detective said. "Bretz has scooted!"

"My word! That's as good as confessing he's guilty."

"Yes; it shows that directly he missed those slippers, he realised that the game was as good as up."

"You'll try and find him?"

"Of course, though it won't be easy. If Miss Polson is still at Colvile Road, our best chance will be through her. You must go over to Clapham at once, Nipper, and see. Wait until you see her, and follow her if she goes out. Take some money with you, and some grub as well. You may have a long wait."

Nipper was off in a very few minutes. Reaching Colvile Road, he took up a position that commanded a view of the house where Miss Polson lodged, but where he himself was hidden from view.

He had not long to wait before discovering that she was still living there, for within half an hour she emerged from the door. She made in the direction of Clapham Junction, and Nipper, following her, thought she was going off by train. But she was only out to do some shopping, and was back again at Colvile Road within a couple of hours.

Nipper resumed his vigil, and the hours went by without anything happening. At about five o'clock in the afternoon, however, a telegraph-boy arrived in the road, and rang the bell at the house Nipper was watching.

"Wonder if it's a wire for Miss Polson," he muttered. "I must find out."

He promptly waylaid the messenger as he came away from the door.

"Was that a message for Mr. Hilton?" he asked, inventing a name for the occasion.

"No, it was for a lady—a Miss Polson."

"Oh, thank you!" replied the Nipper, and went away satisfied.

"Wonder if the message was from Bretz by any chance?" he murmured.

"No means of finding that out. I can only wait."

He waited on for another three hours without catching sight of Miss Polson again. It was past eight o'clock, and was beginning to get dusk, when an upper window of the house he was watching opened, and Miss Polson, fully-dressed, as if for a journey, looked out and gazed anxiously along the road.

"Expecting somebody," was Nipper's inward comment. "Strikes me I sha'n't have to wait long now."

He was right. Within two or three minutes, a motor brougham, driven by a thick-set man with a ginger moustache, pulled up outside the house.

There was no need for him to ring, for the door was immediately opened by Miss Polson.

"You're late, Gyper," Nipper heard her say.

"Couldn't help it; I got delayed," the chauffeur replied. "Got your luggage ready?"

"Yes, it's all packed. Come upstairs."

The man followed her in, to return a minute or two afterwards with a large trunk. This he placed on the railed top of the brougham. Returning to the house, he reappeared again with a couple of bags, which he placed alongside the trunk, covering the whole up with a waterproof sheet.

Then he glanced at his watch.

"Time we were off," he muttered. "What's she hanging about for now. I must hurry her up."

For the third time he entered the house. Nipper, standing close to the offside of the brougham, saw him walk through the narrow hall and go up the stairs.

He had watched the preparations with some anxiety. If Miss Polson went off in this car as she was about to do, he might lose sight of her for good. If only there had been a taxi about he could have followed her, but in that road there was nothing of the sort in sight.

"I must follow her," he exclaimed to himself. "There's only one way, and that's risky. Still, I must chance it."

In a moment he was swarming up to the top of the brougham and crawling beneath the covering sheet among the luggage. He had just wedged himself in between the trunk and the two bags, when both Cyper and Miss Polson came out.

She took her place inside, while he mounted to the driver's seat. In five seconds they were off.

As he crouched there on the top, Nipper's feelings were a bit mixed. He had certainly hit on a means of finding out where they were going, but it would go hard with him if he were discovered hiding there.

"Never mind, I must stick it now."

He was glad of the approaching darkness. In the daytime he would have been precluded from peeping under the sheet for fear of being observed by some passer-by. As it was, he could watch the way they were going without any great risk.

The brougham passed along the Clapham Road and Kennington Park Road, into Newington Butts, and along the Borough High Street.

"Looks as if she's making for London Bridge Station," he thought.

But, no, she wasn't. The car went straight over the bridge, and through the City to Aldgate.

Still it showed no sign of pulling up, but continued on its way due east. Whitechapel High Street, and Mile End Road were passed, and still the car sped on through Bow and Stratford.

"Where can she be going?" wondered Nipper, as, swinging round the left-hand road at Maryland Point, the car swept onwards towards Leytonstone. "Looks as if we're making for Epping Forest."

They were, and far into the heart of the forest. Snarebrook and Chigwell wore both left behind, and still they went on, with no suggestion yet that they had come to the end of their journey.

So far Nipper knew the road pretty well. He had frequently motored along it with Nelson Lee, and so was able to keep his bearings.

But presently he lost them, as, some distance along the Ongar Road, the car took a cross turning. It had become quite dark by now, and was rendered still darker by the arching trees beneath which they were travelling.

Of houses hereabouts there were few; of lights none. As he peeped from under the tarpaulin, the car lamps mowed down the darkness as a scythe does grass.

Again the car turned, and again. The roads were narrower now, and more remote from main highways. From his hiding-place Nipper could see that they were now travelling along a lane deep-sunk between two high banks, crowned with thick hedges, and dotted here and there with trees. A lonesome, weird place at such an hour and under such conditions.

Presently the car arrived at a junction of two roads, before which was a triangular patch of green with a finger-post in the middle of it. Beyond the green was a lodge, thickly covered with ivy, and beside the lodge was a pair of great gates, rusty and overgrown with green mould.

At the approach of the car, the gates were swung open by the man living in the lodge. It passed through, wormed its way along a winding drive for about seventy yards, and then pulled up before a long, low-built, flat-roofed house, thickly embowered in untended trees, and clothed with ivy for almost its whole length.

Their destination at last!

Nipper's heart beat fast as he realised that they had come to the end of their journey, and heard the chauffeur alight to open the door for Miss Polson.

For his next act would probably be to haul down the luggage from the roof of the car, and then discovery was certain. But Nipper wasn't going to be spotted if he could help it.

While Gyper fumbled at the door on the nearside, Nipper dragged himself from under the sheet, and dropped into the road on the off-side. The talk between Miss Polson and Gyper served to muffle whatever noise he made, and in a moment he had dived amid the dense shrubs a few yards away.

Breathing easier now, he watched Miss Polson disappear into the house, and then saw Gyper drive off with the luggage to a side door.

With the coast clear, he had a chance of taking stock of the house in front of him. It was all in darkness, save for one room on an upper floor.

An overwhelming desire to see inside that room filled him, and he only waited a very few minutes ere he advanced close up to the wall.

Grasping a thick and tough old ivy stem, he swung himself up hand over hand, until he was almost abreast of the lighted window. He paused a moment then, for he heard voices—feminine voices—one stern and harsh, the other soft and tearful and pleading.

The very first words that he heard made his heart leap, and in a moment he had taken his courage in both hands, and drawn himself up level with the window.

It was open a few inches at the bottom, and the blind, blown back by the night breeze, enabled him to see into the room.

The sight which met his eyes was one that almost made him cry out aloud.

For, lying fully-dressed on a couch, was a pale but beautiful girl, with her wrists bound behind her back. One glance, and he recognised her as Nelly Wade!

Near to her, sitting in an armchair, was a gaunt and grim-faced woman of about forty, clearly her gaoler.

Deep pity surged up from Nipper's heart at the sight. One look was sufficient to show how much Nelly Wade had suffered from her detention in this lonely old house. Her face, though beautiful still, was drawn and lined with anguish; her eyelids were swollen with much weeping. She was sobbing softly to herself even now.

But the grim-faced woman—Mrs. Bradcott her name was—was speaking, and Nipper stifled his own emotions in order to hear what she was saying.

"Ye'd best stow that snivellin', my wench!" she said harshly. "I can hear somebody coming upstairs. Ha, here she is!"

As she spoke a door opened, and a woman, heavily veiled, but whom Nipper instantly recognised as Miss Polson, entered the room.

"So you've got the pretty bird still safe, Mrs. Bradcott," was her greeting. "Has she come to her senses yet?"

"Not she. It's snivel, snivel, snivel all the livelong day—and night, too, for that matter. Ye'd better talk to her yourself."

Miss Polson swung round on Nelly angrily.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded.

"Oh, how long am I to be kept in this dreadful place?" sobbed the girl.

"Just as long as you remain obstinate. Do what we ask, and you will be set free at once."

"What is it I am to do—what is it?"

"Write a confession that it was Tom Payne who stole that jewellery from the Hotel Magnificent, and that you took it away afterwards."

"But it isn't true. You have asked me to do that before, and I can't—I can't!"

"You'd better if you wish to save your own skin," said Miss Polson grimly. "You have been told already, that you will be provided with your fare to America, so that you can get clear away."

"But why should I leave England when I am innocent? Why should I be torn away from Tom, who is innocent also? If I write what you say, it will convict him, and he will be sent to prison. I can't—I can't!"

"Then you must take the consequences," said Miss Polson fiercely. "Listen, girl. In three days' time we are all going from this place. Unless by that time you agree to write that confession, you will be left here alone to starve! Do you understand, girl, left here to die slowly of starvation?"

"Oh, you could not be so cruel—you could not!"

"You will see. Think over what I have said very carefully. I will come to you again to-morrow to see if you have made up your mind. If you still refuse to do our bidding, then beware!"

Nipper had listened to the foregoing conversation with his heart in his mouth. As Miss Polson quitted the room, and Mrs. Bradcott locked the door behind her, he debated quickly with himself what he must do.

That Nelly Wade was in direst peril was plain. But to attempt to rescue her single-handed would be hopeless. There were at least two men on the premises—Gyver and the lodgekeeper—and there might be more. Any attempt on his part to get Nelly Wade out of their villainous clutches would meet with inevitable disaster.

One thing alone was to be done. He must return to London and inform Nelson Lee. There was time. The villains here would not resort to extremes yet. Miss Polson had said they would remain there for three days.

"I'll go back to London at once and tell the gov'nor. There'll be time then to return here, rescue Nelly Wade, and take these villains red-handed."

Quickly he descended the ivy and gained the drive. Running along this he dodged unseen through the lodge-gate, and emerged on to the strip of green where the signpost stood.

Going close to it, he struck a match and read the inscription:

"To Winghurst, 2 miles. To Traphill, 5 miles."

"I'll go to Winghurst," Nipper exclaimed to himself. "There's a station there I know, and with luck I shall be able to catch the mail-train for London."

He managed it with a few minutes to spare. By the time he reached London it was past one o'clock in the morning. He hurried at once to Gray's Inn Road, and let himself into the chambers with his latchkey.

But Nelson Lee was nowhere to be seen. He was not in the sitting-room, nor in his bed-room, nor in his study.

"Where can he be?" muttered Nipper, and then he heard a tap at the door. The housekeeper came in.

"Where's Mr. Lee?" asked Nipper.

"Just what I've come to tell you, Mr. Nipper. The master's gone out, and won't be back until to-morrow morning."

"Where's he gone to?"

"That's more than I can say. But he seemed to have something very important on hand."

"Did anything particular happen yesterday then—any callers?"

"Several. But the master wouldn't see any a one of them except Tom Payne."

"Tom Payne called, then?"

"Yes, in the afternoon, and remained with the master for a full hour. At five o'clock they went out together, and since then I've seen nothing at all of the master."

Nipper sat down. He was tired, but as yet he was in no mood for sleep. He was too disappointed at finding his master away at a time when he had so much of importance to tell him. Still, it couldn't be helped. There was nothing for it than to wait till the morning.

Some supper had been prepared for him, and he sat down to it. While he ate, he read—the previous day's paper.

And then his eye fell upon a paragraph round which was a blue pencil mark, evidently made by Nelson Lee. The paragraph was to the effect that Mrs. Ezra Caird, formerly of Boston, was that night giving a grand ball at her new house in Park Lane, and that it was to be attended by many of the most prominent and wealthy Americans in London.

"Among others who will be present," the paragraph concluded, "is Princess Borletta of Eastria. Before marrying the Crown Prince, she lived in America, the land of her birth. It was there that she first became acquainted with Mrs. Ezra Caird, in whose house she is staying while in London. The princess is famous for her collection of jewels, her pearl necklace being perhaps the finest in the world."

"Mrs. Ezra Caird," murmured Nipper sleepily. "Why, that's the kind lady who took Tom Payne into her service. I s'pose that's why the gov'nor marked it."

But Nelson Lee's interest in the announcement went much deeper than that, as will presently be seen.

CHAPTER X.

Attacked in the Shrubbery.

NIPPER went to bed and promptly fell asleep. He slept till five o'clock in the morning, when he found himself suddenly awakened.

Nelson Lee was standing over him with his hand on his shoulder.

"Wake up, my lad," he said, "there's important business afoot."

"I should think there is, sir," said Nipper, tumbling out of bed, "though how you know it puzzles me."

"What are you talking about, Nipper?"

"I'm talking about Nelly Wade. I've found her."

"You have?" exclaimed the detective, his eyes lighting up. "Good lad! And where is she?"

"A prisoner in a lonely house down in Essex." And while he hurriedly dressed, he gave his employer a full account of all that had happened on the previous night.

"Nipper, you've done splendidly," said Lee. "But the poor girl's a prisoner?"

"Yes, I couldn't rescue her singlehanded. It would have been madness to try. But you'll come down and fetch her away, sir?"

"In good time, my boy—in good time."

"You mean you won't come at once, sir!" exclaimed the surprised Nipper.

"That's impossible. As I told you, I have highly important business in hand. Something that won't wait."

"But this poor girl——"

"She is quite safe for the time being. You have just told me that the villains will do nothing desperate just yet. It is impossible for me to leave London for a few hours, but that is no reason why you shouldn't. Catch the first train you can down to Winghurst, and make for the house where Nelly Wade is. Watch outside till I arrive a few hours later with help."

They talked a little more, then Nipper was off, leaving Lee to go about the other business he had referred to.

He caught an early train, and after a somewhat slow journey arrived at Winghurst. From there he walked the two miles to Beechwood House, which was the name of the place where Nelly Wade was a prisoner.

He longed for another sight of the girl to see that she was safe, but to try to obtain this in the daylight was to run a needless risk.

Accordingly, he took up his position in the densest part of the shrubbery, in such a place as commanded a view of the main entrance to the house.

Twice he saw Gyper emerge and return, but caught no sight of anybody else for some time. Well concealed by the shrubs as he was, there was very little chance of his being seen by anybody in the ordinary way.

But something was presently to happen. As he lay at full stretch beneath the laurels he suddenly became aware of a quick, snuffing sound. Turning his head, he caught sight of a wire-haired fox terrier, with neck on the stretch, his sharp muzzle thrust through the leaves, and his nostrils all on the quiver.

"Oh, lor'," groaned Nipper. "If he barks, it's all up with me."

The terrier did bark, promptly and loudly.

"Quiet, old boy—quiet!" hissed Nipper.

But the terrier only barked the more fiercely.

"I shall have to bolt for it or I shall be spotted," muttered Nipper.

But he was too late. Even as he turned, a heavy footstep crunched along the gravel drive, and the next moment the lodgekeeper came into view.

"What is it, Spot? Who is it?" he asked, and blundered through the shrubs. "Ha! So I've caught you, me young shaver, have I? What are you doing here—oh?" And, having spotted Nipper, he made a grab at his collar.

Nipper wasn't to be taken as easily as that, though. As the man grabbed at him, his right fist shot out, and catching his adversary on the ribs, toppled him over, with all the wind knocked out of him.

Realising now that his only chance lay in flight, Nipper started to run. He ran fast and gained the drive. But the terrier ran faster.

Provoked by the assault on his master, he was after Nipper in a moment, and in three seconds had fastened his teeth into Nipper's trousers. He did not bite into the flesh, but held tenaciously on to the cloth, so as effectually to hamper the boy in his running.

Frantically Nipper tried to shake him off, but in vain. Worse than that, the hoarse growls of the dog and the general sounds of a struggle had reached the ears of people inside the house.

Out of the door came two men running. One was Gyper, while the other, as Nipper recognised in an instant, was Isidore Bretz!

They came up just at the very moment that Nipper had succeeded in shaking the terrier off.

Again he started to run, but Gyper was too quick for him. In three strides he was on him, gripping him by the collar, and taking him off his feet with a jerk.

"Thunder!" gasped Isidore Bretz. "It's Nelson Lee's kid."

With face all torn with passion, he bent down, and with a short, heavy

life-preserver which he had snatched from his pocket, dealt Nipper such a blow as knocked all the sense out of him.

"You've outed him," said Cyper somewhat angrily. "Was there any need for that?"

"Need," hissed the other. "It was the only thing to do. He's Nelson Lee's kid, and therefore most dangerous. How came he to track us here?"

"I know no more than you," answered the chauffeur.

"It's cursed bad luck, but it may not matter since he's here alone."

"What are you going to do with him?"

Bretz's eyes glinted darkly.

"There's only one thing to do," he said. "He must be put out of our way."

"You'll kill him?"

"Yes, if necessary. Lend a hand. We must carry him into the house."

CHAPTER XI.

Nelson Lee Turns the Tables.

THE party at Mrs. Ezra Caird's house in Park Lane had been a magnificent success. But on account of the troublous times it had finished comparatively early. By twelve o'clock most of the guests had departed, while those staying in the house had retired to their rooms.

Among these latter was Princess Borletta. The strikingly beautiful American brunette, who some three years before, had become the wife of the Crown Prince of Eastria.

During the ball she had attracted much attention, not only by her loveliness, but through the wondrous jewels with which she was bedecked.

Many of these were Royal heirlooms, and included a most beautiful necklace of exquisite black pearls, whose value was well nigh priceless.

On retiring to her room, the princess, having divested herself of these costly adornments, herself locked them up in the casket standing on a table in her dressing-room. Then, having disrobed with the assistance of her maid, she retired to rest in the apartment adjoining.

Fatigued by the excitements of the night, she slept quite soundly till past nine o'clock the next morning. Being awakened then by her maid, she presently passed into her dressing-room.

No sooner did her eyes light upon the table than she gave a sudden cry.

"Juliette, Juliette! My casket. Where is it?"

"I have not seen it, your Highness," answered the maid.

"But I placed it here on the table last night with my own hands," cried the princess agitatedly.

"I saw it then, your Highness, but I have not seen it since."

"Oh, my jewels, my necklace!" came from Princess Borletta in a wailing cry. "Where are they—where are they? Help me to search for them, Juliette!"

Mistress and maid searched frantically everywhere, in every nook and corner of the dressing-room and bedchamber. But no trace of casket or gems could be found.

A few minutes later and all the house was in an uproar. The jewels belonging to Princess Borletta were missing. They must have been stolen—no other supposition could explain their mysterious disappearance, and that was sufficient to throw every inmate of the great house into the most profound excitement.

Mrs. Ezra Caird's agitation was awful. That such a thing should have happened in her house was almost too terrible to bear.

"The police!" she cried. "They must be fetched! No stone must be left unturned! Telephone to Scotland Yard immediately! And let no one leave the house until they arrive!"

Her orders were obeyed, and a very few minutes later Inspector Burnwood—who was a specialist in jewel robberies—arrived on the scene, accompanied by three other officers.

Having interrogated the princess and Juliette, her maid, and having carefully examined the room from which the gems had been stolen, he returned with Mrs. Ezra Caird and the princess to the big banqueting-room.

"Summon all the servants, madam, if you please," he said. "They must all be questioned."

At once was issued the necessary summons. Into the room trooped the servants, both men and maids.

"Are they all here?" asked the inspector.

"No," replied Mrs. Ezra Caird, running her eye along the double line. "One I see is missing—Thomas Payne."

"Thomas Payne!" cried Inspector Burnwood, jumping round as if stung. "Who is he?"

"One of my footmen."

"Why, I know a man of that name myself! He was lately employed at the Hotel Magnificent, but was discharged for being concerned in a theft of jewels there. He was charged with the crime, but, failing absolute proof against him, the magistrate set him free. Is it possible that he is the same man?"

"He is the same," answered Mrs. Ezra Caird, in tones of deepest distress. "I believed him to be innocent of the other crime, and gave him another chance, purely out of charity."

"And now he alone is missing from this house. What does that mean? What can it mean, except one thing?—that he is guilty. Please show me his room. We must search it at once."

To the top of the house they went. Tom Payne's room was at the end of the servants' corridor. The door was unlocked, and they entered.

At once the search was begun. Drawers and boxes were searched in vain. Suddenly Inspector Burnwood's eye fell upon the carpet. He dropped to his knees and rolled back the corner.

"Look, this board is loose!" he exclaimed; and tugged at it.

Up it came, to disclose an object beneath—an oblong box of rarely-carved wood and gold chasing.

"My casket!" cried the princess, going forward with eager, outstretched hands.

"But unlocked and empty, your Highness. See!"

"Oh!" came in a moan from Princess Borletta, while Mrs. Ezra Caird gasped out:

"Someone has taken the gems away! Who can it be?"

"Who else can it be except Tom Payne?" said Inspector Burnwood, as he led the way downstairs again.

"Why, there the villain is!" cried Mrs. Ezra Caird, pointing towards the door of the inner hall.

There, sure enough, stood the footman, in his ordinary clothes, and with pale, set face.

Instantly Inspector Burnwood and another officer pounced on him.

"Thomas Payne," cried Burnwood, as the handcuffs clicked upon the footman's wrists, "I arrest you on the charge of stealing a valuable necklace and other gems belonging to Princess Borletta of Eastria."

"I am innocent!" came from the footman's lips.

"Innocent!" stormed Mrs. Ezra Caird. "How dare you say that, when the casket has been found in your room? Oh, what a base, ungrateful fellow you are to commit this wicked crime, after all my kindness to you!"

"I am innocent—I swear it!" protested Tom.

"That will be for the magistrate to settle," said Burnwood. "You are my prisoner, and must come with me!"

He moved towards the inner hall door, but at that moment it opened.

"Stop!" came in an authoritative voice, and all looked up to behold Nelson Lee.

"You!" exclaimed Mrs. Ezra Caird going white, perhaps with anger. "What right have you in my house? How dare you intrude after foisting a thief on me as a servant."

"Thomas Payne was engaged by you quite voluntarily, madam," was Lee's steady reply.

"But you recommended him. You vouched for his honesty."

"And vouch for it still. Tom Payne is as innocent of this robbery as he was of the other."

"But the casket has been found in his room!" cried Burnwood.

"Very possibly. But he is innocent, all the same. I stake my reputation on that, inspector."

"Tom Payne innocent!" gasped the amazed Burnwood, impressed by Lee's positiveness. "Then, if he isn't the thief, who is?"

"The thief stands there!" cried Nelson Lee, pointing. "The jewels were stolen by Mrs. Ezra Caird. I call upon you to arrest her!"

Astonishment thrilled everybody in the room. Mrs. Ezra Caird went deadly pale.

"This is monstrous!" she panted. "The most monstrous insult I have ever had to bear!"

Burnwood turned on Nelson Lee.

"This is madness, Mr. Lee!" he said, with some heat. "I tell you Tom Payne is guilty!"

"And I swear he is innocent!"

"You swear it! How can you speak so surely?"

"Because Tom Payne was not in this house last night. He was three miles away, and can prove a perfect alibi."

Mrs. Ezra Caird laughed mockingly.

"So that is your line, is it? Thomas Payne was here last night. He was seen by dozens of people."

"They were mistaken," answered Lee. "The man they thought to be Payne was myself. I took his place."

"You impersonated him?" gasped Burnwood.

"Yes. In height and build we resemble each other. A careful make-up and powdered hair did the rest."

"It is a lie—an infamous lie!" came from Mrs. Ezra Caird's agitated lips. "Thomas Payne was here last night!"

"No, he was not!"

The words were spoken by a new-comer who had just entered from the outer hall—a tall, well-dressed gentleman.

"Sir Thomas Wilburton!" exclaimed Inspector Burnwood, recognising the Bow Street magistrate.

"Yes, inspector. I have come here at Mr. Nelson Lee's request to prove Tom Payne's alibi. He spent all last evening and all last night, till an hour or so ago, in fact, at my house."

"Is that sufficient, inspector?" asked Lee.

"Certainly!"

"Then arrest Mrs. Ezra Caird. I have absolute proof that she is the thief!"

"It is a lie—a gross lie!" stormed the hostess. "Borletta—Borletta"—she turned pleadingly towards her most distinguished guest—"you do not believe this foul and wicked slander?"

"Mr. Nelson Lee has made a serious charge," said the princess coldly. "I should like to know if he can substantiate it?"

"Does Mrs. Ezra Caird wish me to say what I know?" asked Lee.

"Yes, I do!" said the hostess defiantly. "This is a vile plot to ruin me!"

"We shall see. Let me recount what happened last night, and in the early hours of this morning. As I have already said, I took Tom Payne's place here. I did that because for some time past I had anticipated something of this sort occurring."

"I thought it probable that a robbery of this kind would be attempted, and accordingly I watched closely." He turned towards the princess. "Your Highness retired to rest at midnight, leaving your necklace and other jewels in the casket in your dressing-room. I took up my place behind a large cabinet in the corridor, determined to watch your door all night.

"I had not very long to wait. Within an hour of your retiring, at one o'clock almost exactly, I saw the figure of a woman moving stealthily along the corridor. With a duplicate key she let herself into your dressing-room, and in less than a minute emerged, carrying something in her hands. That something was the jewel-casket, and the woman who carried it was Mrs. Ezra Caird!"

Scarcely had the words left his lips, than there came a sudden, fierce cry from the hostess. At the same moment she leapt forward towards the man who had unmasked her.

In her hand was a gleaming stiletto, and in another second she would have plunged it into the detective's breast.

But startled by her sudden action, Inspector Burnwood was ready. In an instant he had gripped the woman by the wrists, and wrenched the weapon from her hold. A moment later, and she was being led away in safe custody by two of the police officers.

"And the jewels?" asked the princess, when the profound excitement caused by the last action had died down. "Do you know what this woman did with them?"

"She carried them downstairs, and locked them up in a safe. Then she made her way upstairs, turned back the carpet of Tom Payne's room, and placed the empty casket beneath a board in the floor which had previously been loosened for the purpose."

"Where Inspector Burnwood found it," said the princess. "But the jewels are gone?"

"No," said Nelson Lee, drawing a parcel from his pocket. "The jewels are here. I took the liberty of picking the lock of the safe where they had been placed, and here they are, safe and intact, the necklace and all the rest."

CHAPTER XII.

Lee's Foresight and Deductions.

"WELL, Mr. Lee," said Inspector Burnwood, when presently the two found themselves alone, "this has been an unexpected turn-out, and I must confess I don't understand it a little bit. You've brought off a brilliant coup, but how you've done it puzzles me altogether."

"Yet it's been the simplest thing in the world," said Lee. "I anticipated the robbery, so what was easier than to watch for the thief?"

"Oh, quite so! But how on earth did you know the robbery was coming off?"

"I did so directly Mrs. Ezra Caird called on me to inquire about Tom Payne. She then posed as a philanthropist, but certain things I noticed told me that she was something very different."

"You took her for a wrong 'un. Yet it certainly looked like an act of charity when she took Tom Payne into her service."

"It was something very different. She took him into her employ in order that when this robbery came off, the guilt should fall on him. After the charge against him at the Hotel Magnificent, what more likely than that he should be suspected?"

"Well, of course. I took it for granted he was the thief directly I heard he was employed in the place. And when I found the empty casket hidden in his room, I felt absolutely sure of it. But you haven't told me yet how you came to know beforehand that Princess Borletta's jewels would be stolen. Why, when you first suspected Mrs. Ezra Caird, you didn't even know that the princess would come to stay in the house."

"That's true. But I knew that a robbery of some sort was in contemplation, and I resolved from the very first to keep a careful watch on the household. From time to time I saw Tom Payne, and got from him the names of people staying in the house, and those who were expected."

"When the other day he informed me that Princess Borletta had arrived on a visit, my suspicions were instantly concentrated on that fact. I knew that the princess possessed a priceless collection of jewels, and I guessed that she would wear many of them, including the pearl necklace, at the ball."

"At once I resolved to adopt the plan I afterwards carried out. I resolved to impersonate Tom Payne. It wasn't difficult. Plush livery and powdered hair helped me a lot, and a few touches of make-up did the rest. I took care not to come into too close contact with Mrs. Ezra Caird, and few others present were likely to discover that I was not the man I pretended to be."

"Well, I must admit I did Tom Payne an injustice in this case."

"And in the other, too, inspector," said Lee, with a smile.

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that!" said Burnwood doggedly.

"Then you can't have seen Inspector Ryles, of Bow Street."

"What's Ryles got to do with it?"

"Simply this—that he went with me yesterday to execute a warrant for the arrest of Isidore Bretz, but when we got to the Embankment Hotel, Bretz had hooked it. The case against him is complete." And Lee recounted the slipper-print incident.

"You're giving me some surprises to-day, Mr. Lee. I shall have to go and have a look at that secret shaft some time."

"I've one or two other small surprises, I think. Who do you think Miss Polson is?"

"I don't know that she's anybody except Miss Polson."

"She's Isidore Bretz's niece."

"Well, I'm blowed!"

"And who do you think Mrs. Ezra Caird is?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't seem to know anything!"

"She's Miss Polson's sister, and consequently Bretz's niece also."

"Why, they're not the least bit alike!" protested Burnwood.

"Except about the ears, which are almost identical. And you know that ears are the most tell-tale features of all. Miss Polson has very long lobes

to her ears, with a tiny dint such as I had never seen in any other person. When I caught sight of the same peculiarity in Mrs. Ezra Caird, I jumped to the right conclusion at once—that they were sisters. It was that that made me suspect Mrs. Caird from the very first."

"Then, if they are Bretz's nieces, it means——"

"That they are all in the swim together, and that both these robberies were a dead plant. The whole thing was a cunning scheme—the plot against Tom Payno and the decoying away of Nelly Wade."

Burnwood looked flabbergasted.

"Poor girl! I wonder where she is?" he said.

"Nipper has found her. She's a prisoner in a house down in Essex. Miss Polson is down there, too. I'm going down to rescue her. You'll come as well?"

"Rather! It's the least I can do to try and make amends."

"Then bring another four reliable men with you, and we'll go down in a big car together. Nipper is down there on the watch, and will be anxiously expecting me."

CHAPTER XIII.

Nipper in Desperate Plight.

NIPPER was indeed awaiting Lee's arrival anxiously, for he was in the most desperate straits.

Coming to himself after the savage attack made upon him by Isidore Bretz, it was to find himself alone in an upper chamber of the house, with his ankles bound, his wrists tied behind him, and with a gag of coarse cloth drawn tightly across his mouth.

The room in which he was was bare of any sort of furniture save for a three-legged stool, and he had been laid in his trussed-up state on the bare floor.

Opposite to him was a window, so tall as to reach almost from the ceiling to within a couple of feet of the floor. Through this the afternoon sun streamed.

His head ached horribly, but this did not prevent his immediate thinking of the need for action. With his limbs bound as they were, there seemed little he could do, yet he knew that he must do something.

The men in whose power he was were desperate scoundrels, capable of going any length to save themselves, and in their desperation they would not hesitate to deal drastically with him if they deemed it fit.

What could he do, then? How could he first free himself from his bonds, and thus make possible a chance of escape?

Glancing carefully about him, he suddenly saw that one of the lower panes of the window was broken. There was an irregular hole in the middle, nearly a foot in diameter.

Instantly an idea came into his resourceful brain. He wriggled and rolled across the room until he was immediately under the window.

Then, carefully balancing himself on his feet—no easy task with those cords about his ankles, he rose erect. Looking out of the window, he could command a view of the shrubbery where he had previously hidden and a part of the drive.

Nobody was about. The whole place was deserted. Here was his chance. Edging carefully round, so that his back was to the window, he managed to thrust his bound wrists through the hole until the cord binding them rested on the jagged edge of the thick, broken glass.

Then, very carefully at first, but in a more assured way after a few seconds, he began rubbing the cord backwards and forwards over the rough ridge.

It acted as effectively as a saw. The cord began to ravel. Then one strand gave way with a soft snap; then another, and another. Continuing his sawing movement, he presently found that he had cut right through the cord.

Withdrawing his hands, the rope fell from them, leaving them free. The removal of his stifling gag was the work of a moment. Then, with his face close to the broken pane, he took in half a dozen deep breaths, and, dropping down into a sitting posture, got to work to complete his release.

His knife, he found, had been taken from him, but within three minutes he contrived to undo the knots of his ankle-bonds.

He stood erect, full of thankfulness and hope now that he had rid himself of his bonds. But he was a prisoner still—a prisoner in the hands of relentless enemies, and he must not rest until his escape was complete.

He moved to the window again, meaning to look out in search of some rain-pipe or other means of reaching the ground. None was within reach, nor did the ivy, by means of which he had climbed up to Nelly Wade's window, extend so far along the wall as this.

His heart sank a little, but there was no time for moody reflection, for at that moment footsteps made themselves heard from the corridor outside.

Heavy footsteps—of two men, at least—coming his way! Were they coming in to him? If so—

His momentary fears were quelled. The footsteps had halted some few yards away. He heard a key grating in a lock, and the opening of a door a few yards along the passage.

Almost immediately after, the deep voice of Isidore Bretz became clearly audible from the next room. Nipper moved to the wall, and placed his ear close against it.

At the very first words, his heart gave a leap as he realised that the next room was occupied by Nelly Wade and her gaoler, and that it was that room which Bretz and his companion had entered.

"Now, my girl," were Bretz's first words, "I've come to give you your last chance! Are you ready now to write the confession that Tom Payne stole those jewels from the hotel?"

"I cannot—oh, I cannot!" was the girl's piteous answer. "It would not be true. Mr. Payne is innocent, and it would be too cruel, too horribly wicked, for me to say he was guilty!"

"Stow that gush!" exclaimed Bretz sternly. "You've got to do it, or take the consequences! Listen to me, now—and remember that I mean every word that I say! You see this revolver? It is fully loaded. I will count ten. If by the end of that time you consent to do what I say, your life shall be spared. If, on the other hand, you still refuse, I will shoot you dead where you stand! Now, then!"

The blood of Nipper, listening there on the other side of the wall, boiled fiercely within his veins as he heard the diabolical threat. It turned to ice as he heard the villain beginning to count:

"One—two—three—"

Heavens! Could he do nothing? Was he to remain mute while cold-blooded murder was done?

"Four—five—six—"

"Oh, merciful Heaven!" came from Nipper's distracted brain.

"Seven—eight—nine—"

"Help! Help! Help! Murder! Murder!"

Clear and piercing came the last words from Nipper. They came into the

next room like a thunderclap, causing Bretz to start and drop the revolver he was pointing straight at Nelly Wade's heart.

"Curse it!" he yelled. "It's that fellow in the next room! He must have got rid of his gag somehow. Go to him, Cronlin, and shut his mouth. You have a revolver—use it, if necessary!"

Nipper heard the words, knew that for him they held a terrible meaning, yet his heart did not quail. He had saved Nelly Wade for the moment, and that was something to be thankful for. If he must pay the penalty of his interruption by his own death—why, then, let death come!

But he would die fighting! He moved across the room, picked up the heavy three-legged stool, raised it above his head, and stood close behind the door, waiting.

A key turned in the lock, and the door opened. In came Cronlin, with a revolver in his hand, murder in his eye, and savage bluster on his tongue.

"Now, then, you young cur——" he was beginning, but said no more, for a moment after Nipper had brought the stool down with a heavy crash full upon his head.

Down went Cronlin with a groan, and with all the consciousness knocked out of him.

But Nipper's peril was not over. It was only intensifying. At the sound of Cronlin's fall, Isidore Bretz came running along the corridor, revolver in hand.

Before Nipper could close the door, the Chicagoan had him covered. His finger was on the trigger, and it looked as if another second would seal the boy's doom. But something happened. From outside, along the drive, and rapidly approaching the house, came the whir of a motor-car.

Lowering his arm and brushing past Nipper, Bretz dashed to the window and looked out.

Instantly his face went deadly pale. With a hoarse cry, and with a wild look as though he had forgotten Nipper's existence, he dashed past him again and along the corridor.

Nipper jumped to the window, and looked down at the panting motor-car, which had just drawn up at the door below, and then his heart felt as if it must burst with joy.

"The gov'nor has come! Thank Heaven—oh, thank Heaven!"

He raced into the next room, to find Nelly Wade alone, and in an almost fainting condition.

"Keep up your courage, Miss Wade," he said. "I'm your friend, and help is at hand. The police are downstairs. Wait here half a mo', and I'll fetch 'em."

He hurried down the stairs, calling out as he went.

"Ah, you're there, my boy—and safe, I see!" cried Nelson Lee, and came up the stairs three steps at a time, followed by Inspector Burnwood and two other police officers and a lady dressed as a hospital nurse.

"This way, sir! Nelly Wade's up here! She's unhurt, but terribly scared."

"Yes, she looks ill," said Lee, hurrying into the room. "Nurse, I thought there might possibly be work for you, and there is. Please see to her."

The nurse dropped to her knees beside Nelly, ready with restoratives, which she had brought with her.

"Now for the villains!" cried Lee. "Where are they?"

"One's here, sir!" said Nipper, leading the way into the next room. "I outed him with that stool. Had to do it to stop him puttin' a bullet into me just now."

"But where's Bretz?"

"Somewhere about, sir. He was here a minute ago, but dashed away when he saw you coming along the drive."

"Then we must find him! We must search the house!" cried Lee.

"See to that fellow!" ordered Burnwood to one of his men, "and handcuff him when he comes to. The rest must help search for the others."

They went down the stairs after Lee, Nipper among the others. As they reached the entrance hall, a sudden whir of wheels made them all rush to the door. They were just in time to see a motor-car, with Gyper at the wheel and Isidore Bretz beside him, disappearing round the curve of the drive.

"After them!" cried Lee. "They mustn't escape us now! After them—at once!"

He and Burnwood and Nipper, with two other officers, leapt into the big car waiting at the door. In a few seconds, they were speeding along the drive in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Tragedy of the Level Crossing.

THE chase was not destined to be a long one, but was to be very desperate. Barely had it proceeded a couple of miles than the powerful car in which Lee and the police officers were came in sight of the smaller car they were pursuing, barely two hundred yards in front of them.

"We are gaining on them rapidly," said Burnwood. "We shall be up with them in a very few minutes."

That seemed to be very probable, for, in spite of Gyper's frantic efforts to get every ounce out of the car he was driving, it was plain to see that those in pursuit were going much the faster.

The space dividing them dwindled down to a hundred yards—to seventy—sixty-five.

"Down! Duck your heads!" roared Lee suddenly, and not a moment too soon, for almost with the words a bullet whizzed harmlessly a few inches over their heads.

It came from a long-barrelled, automatic pistol, fired by Isidore Bretz, whose face was now turned towards them as he leant over the back of his car.

The first shot was instantly followed by a second, and this time the bullet reached its billet. The police chauffeur, with a moan of pain, suddenly released his hold of the wheel and fell sideways.

"Look to him! He's shot in the shoulder, poor chap!" cried Lee, and himself leapt to the wheel just in time to prevent the swerving car from charging right into the hedge.

Bang! Bang! Two bullets, both aimed deliberately at Lee himself, but, this time falling short.

The swerve of the pursuing car had enabled the pursued to draw further ahead, out of range. More than that, the necessity of lifting the injured police-officer into the rear of the car made it imperative to slow up, and by the time this was done Bretz and his companion had increased their lead to a quarter of a mile.

"We've had bad luck so far," said Lee. "But we mustn't let them escape us!" And he put the car to its best speed.

In the other car something dramatic was going forward. Bretz had emptied his pistol, and had turned to reload it in preparation for a second attack.

Suddenly, as he fumbled in his pocket, his face went white.

"Ten thousand curses!" he hissed. "I've forgotten the cartridges!"

"A good job, too," answered Gyper. "You've done mischief enough already. You've pluggod one man—perhaps killed him. If you have, this is going to be a hanging job!"

"All the more reason why we must get away! Faster—faster!"

But, to his amazement and terror, Gyper suddenly jammed on the brakes and pulled up dead.

"Look—look!" he cried. "We've done! There's a level crossing ahead. A train's signalled, and the gates are closing. We're trapped!"

"On—on, before they close! Make a dash for it!"

"Yes, I'll do that, but a different sort of dash from what you mean. I'm off!" And Gyper, with no more ado, jumped into the road, crunched through the hedge, and dashed away across the fields.

The swift whir of wheels made Bretz turn his head. There was the pursuing car bearing swiftly down upon him.

Blind terror seized him, overwhelmed him—froze up his faculties, save the one instinct of self-preservation.

He slid into the driving-seat, and was off in a moment at full speed. In those seconds of mad panic he forgot the level crossing, forgot the now closed gates, remained oblivious of the express train that was now swiftly approaching.

Like a frenzied bull he went forward in the car. Wild shouts warned him of his fearful peril, but he heeded them not. A mental blindness and deafness held him in their grip.

Mighty the crash with which he smote the gates, half breaking through them, and horrible the jerk that sent him flying out of the car, to plunge headlong across the metals, where he lay battered and bleeding and helpless.

A brave railwayman was there ready to do heroic things, but too late! Before he could step on to the permanent way, the express was over the spot with a roar.

Fifty yards behind, the other car had pulled up, its occupants appalled for the moment by Isidore Bretz's mad dash.

Nelson Lee covered his eyes for a second. Then he spoke:

"He has escaped earthly justice, after all," he said solemnly. "Isidore Bretz has passed beyond our reach. He will be tried before a Higher Tribunal."

It was true. When, a few minutes after, the railway line was searched, the body of Isidore Bretz was found there, cut in half.

Gyper, the chauffeur, had been seen to alight, and within a very little while pursuers were off in search of him. He was quickly found.

He had run barely a hundred yards. From a point along the railway line he had witnessed his companion's wild attempt to escape, had seen the oncoming train, and the tragedy that had resulted. The dreadful sight had crushed him utterly. He had sunk down to the ground, his hands covering his face. And thus presently did the police find him.

He was taken to the nearest town, and there locked up. For some little time he could not speak, but presently it was possible to elicit some information from him.

It had been Bretz's intention to go back to London, he said. Miss Polson had already gone there, and it was Bretz's idea to join forces not only with her, but with Mrs. Ezra Caird, and then take the first ship to America.

Of the American woman's arrest he had heard no word, nor of the recovery

of the stolen jewellery. He had assumed that the robbery had been a complete success, that Tom Payne would be arrested for it, and that they would be free to divide the spoil.

Great was Gyper's amazement when he heard that the whole plot had been foiled by Nelson Lee.

"You've been too clever for us," was his doleful remark to the detective. "It's the first time that Isidore Bretz was ever beaten, and he always swore he never would be beaten. But you've been one too many for us, and I, for one, give you best."

It was from the utterly vanquished and disconsolate Gyper that further information was presently to be received. This information not only brought about the arrest of the minor participants in the plot, but also resulted in the recovery of the jewellery which had been stolen from the Hotel Magnificent.

CHAPTER XV.

Final Disclosures.

WHEN, in due course, the prisoners came up for trial, the full account of the part Nelson Lee had played in their undoing was given for the first time.

And rarely in the annals of crime and its detection were the judge and jury, to say nothing of the general public, more impressed with a detective's skill than they were with Nelson Lee's and Nipper's in this particular case.

The theory which Lee had held from the very beginning of his investigations was verified with almost uncanny completeness.

It was proved that Bretz had for years belonged to the highly organised Continental gang of rogues of which Ludvic, the architect, had formerly been a guiding spirit.

The story of the secret shaft at the Hotel Magnificent aroused the keenest interest. Interest grew to sensation when out of the mouths of one of the accused it was discovered that the architect had deliberately introduced secret plans for such shafts, not only in London and at Monte Carlo, but in other hotels in Europe and America which he had been employed in building.

He had done so for the explicit purpose of making robberies easy by the other members of the gang.

The existence of such shafts had, of course, been kept a profound secret from the owners of the various hotels and those responsible for their management. To ensure this, only special workmen, all in league with the gang, had been employed in their construction.

Other revelations made at the trial showed that Mrs. Ezra Caird and Miss Polson were sisters, and that both were nieces of the dead Bretz.

Formerly, when the husband of Mrs. Ezra Caird had been alive, she had been a wealthy woman, and had been able to move in high society. But with her husband's death came comparative poverty, and in order to maintain her old position the woman had been persuaded, not with any great difficulty, to throw in her lot with him and with her sister, and help him in his many nefarious plans. In this connection, her acquaintance with many of the wealthiest people in America had proved a very profitable asset.

In all their robberies, it was part of their method to select carefully beforehand somebody on whom suspicion would fall, and it was to this cruel system that Tom Payne had fallen a victim.

The ring found in his waistcoat-pocket had been placed there by Brettz himself, who had concluded that it would be sufficient to bring about his conviction.

When it failed to do this, and Brettz discovered that Nelson Lee was on his track, he at once cast about for a plan to frustrate him.

He hit on the bold course of sending Mrs. Ezra Caird, in the guise of a philanthropic lady, to Nelson Lee himself, with the offer to take him into her service, and so enable him to redeem his character.

Brettz had calculated that this would have a favourable result to him in a double sense.

It would enable his niece to bring off the second robbery, and, by fixing the guilt of that on Tom Payne, would revive all suspicions against him on account of the first robbery. As a consequence, it would effectually remove all suspicions against himself.

But Nelson Lee, even as Gyper had said, had proved one too many for them. Suspecting a further plot against Tom Payne, he had, as we know, impersonated the footman on the night of the ball. As a further safeguard to Tom, he had confided in Sir Thomas Wilburton, and, so that Tom's alibi should be indisputable, had got permission from the magistrate for him to spend the night at his house.

Nelly Wade, now happily quite recovered from the shock to which she had been subjected, gave evidence in regard to her kidnapping.

But it was out of the mouth of Miss Polson that the full facts became known. For the purposes of her uncle's schemes she had taken lodgings in Colvile Road, in order to watch Nelly and Tom Payne. On the eve of their intended wedding she had followed them to Clapham Common.

Seeing Nelly faint had given her an opportunity she was prompt to seize. Offering to take charge of Nelly, and get her back home, she had, instead, chartered a cab and driven Nelly to the house of another confederate in the neighbourhood. There she had removed Nelly's clothes, had herself donned them, and in that guise had gone to Colvile Road for the bag.

The bag contained nothing of value. It had merely been removed in order that the police should jump to the conclusion that the jewels were inside, and so be strengthened in their suspicions against Tom Payne and his fiancée.

The result of all this evidence was to enable the jury to make up their minds in a very few minutes. Without retiring from the box, they brought in a verdict against all the prisoners of "Guilty."

"A verdict in which I heartily concur," said the judge, and forthwith proceeded to pass sharp sentences against them all.

"I take this opportunity to add," said his lordship, "that every shred of suspicion against Mr. Payne and Miss Wade is now removed. It has been their lot to suffer unjustly, and I am very sorry that this has been so. The police acted wrongly, but they cannot be blamed. It is very fortunate that Mr. Nelson Lee was at hand to fathom out the mystery and to fix the guilt on the right shoulders.

"I understand that Mr. Payne and Miss Wade are shortly to be married. I should like to express the hope that when they become husband and wife they will be able to forget the misery of the past, and to find compensation in the many years of happiness which I am sure await them in the future."

Tom, who was in court, was the recipient of hearty congratulations from many people. Inspector Burnwood apologised handsomely, and asked to be allowed to be present at his wedding, while Mr. Warricombe came forward with an offer to reinstate him in his old position.

Tom eagerly accepted, and forthwith entered on his duties at the great

hotel. But he wasn't to keep that position long. Something very much better was to turn up.

The glad news was conveyed to him on his wedding-day. The ceremony had taken place, and the wedding party had returned from church to the house where they intended to live.

Not only Inspector Burnwood was present, but Nelson Lee. It was the latter who was destined to revolutionise Tom's fortunes.

Rising to his feet he said:

"I am not going to make a speech. All my most hearty congratulations have been given to bride and bridegroom long ago. What I wish to say now is this—the bridegroom was wrongfully accused of two robberies. All the stolen property has been recovered and restored to the rightful owners. As a little mark of their gratitude, and as a token of their sorrow for the sufferings the bride and bridegroom have gone through, they have subscribed for a little wedding present. That present I have now the happiness to hand to Tom Payne."

He passed a folded slip to the wondering Tom, which he unfolded out.

"Look, Nelly!" he cried out joyfully. "Oh, look! A cheque for five hundred pounds!"

"Oh, Tom dear," said Nelly, with tears of gratitude shining in her pretty eyes, "how shall we ever be grateful enough for such kindness?"

"And what ever shall we do with all this money, Mr. Lee?" asked Tom.

"If you take my advice, you'll do what the subscribers hope you will," said Lee. "Start a little business on your own account—a little restaurant. You're qualified to manage that, and your pretty little partner is qualified to help you. With so many foreign restaurants closing up, there's no reason why you shouldn't do very well."

"That's a splendid idea, Mr. Lee, and we'll do it."

They did it very promptly, and they succeeded from the very start.

To-day, after only a few months, Tom is a waiter himself no longer. He manages his own business with the help of Nelly, and they employ half a dozen waitresses as well.

"Mr. Lee," remarked Inspector Burnwood one night about a month after the wedding, "I saw the Princess Borletta to-day, and happened to mention how grateful Tom Payne was for the very handsome present she and others had subscribed. To my amazement, she told me that she knew nothing about it. Can you explain that?"

"Well," said Lee, colouring a little and speaking hesitatingly, "I could explain it, but——"

"You don't intend to—eh? Well, there's no need. I know what it all means. That five hundred pounds was your fee!"

"No, it wasn't," laughed Lee quietly. "It was only half of it. Don't say anything to Tom Payne about it, inspector; but it struck me the money would do him more good than it would me. I've quite enough already for my modest means, and so——"

"Mr. Lee," said Burnwood, gripping his hand, "you're a good sort—a jolly good sort!"

THE END.

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Melby, one of the other boys, takes a violent dislike to Dick Clare, and is especially jealous because the Headmaster takes special notice of the new boy.

The Comrades' Peril.

"NOW, tread softly on the stairs," whispered Tom. "Some of the beastly things creak, and Foster is keen on hearing. Vance will probably be in bed by now."

The stairs did not creak sufficiently to catch the master's ears, and the pair got out by a window, but they had to pass the lodge.

There was a light in Vance's room, and as he had not drawn the blind the chums could see into the room quite distinctly.

"What's the mummy up to?" murmured Tom. "Why, he's toasting a bloater's head.. Surely he's not going to eat its eyes and teeth. It is a bloater's head. You can see its body on the table."

"P'r'aps he thinks the smell of frizzled bloater is pleasing to Foster when he's studying," suggested Dick. "We are a bit early yet. The tide won't be in. Let's watch him."

They did, and Vance's movements became mystifying. He kept sniffing at the bloater, then grinning.

"Think he's drunk?" inquired Dick.

"Well, I don't suppose he's absolutely sober, seeing that it was his night off," answered Tom; "but he seems to be fairly steady on his pins. He's taking dainty care to cook his savoury morsel correctly."

Vance brought the head to the table and placed it on a plate, then he went to the cupboard.

"Going for pepper to make it more tasty," said Tom. "Hope he will find the eyes enjoyable. Oh, I understand now!"

Vance produced a rat gin, and the chums grinned as they watched, for the porter was rather reckless in his movements, and by no means skilful.

Suddenly he uttered a yell and leapt into the air. The gin had gone down on his fingers, and when he had extricated them he kicked a chair across the room and shook his fists at the trap; then he sucked his fingers, while the chums were so convulsed that they nearly gave themselves away.

"It's made him angry," mumbled Dick: "but it's a rotten silly thing to do to kick a chair, and I believe he has hurt his toes as well as his fingers. Still, he's persevering, for he's going to set the trap again. I suppose some old rat has annoyed him."

Vance was luckier this time, because more cautious, and having set the

trap he placed it on the floor between the fireplace and the door; then he mixed himself a glass of grog, possibly to relieve the pain in his fingers.

Dick and Tom were about to go when the door was opened, and Melby entered the room dressed in his pyjamas and with bare feet. They could hear the porter's voice quite distinctly now.

"Clear out of my room, you varmint. I'll report you first thing to-morrow morning."

"But look here, Vance, I've come to tell you— Wah-woohoo! Oh, murder! Wowrow!"

"He's planked his bare trilby in the trap!" cried Tom. "Ha, ha, ha! I'm sorry for him, but——"

"Can't you be silently sorry, Tom?" inquired Dick. "If you guffaw like that someone will be bound to hear you."

"Haw, haw, haw!" howled Vance. "Why ain't you more careful?"

"Take it off!" shrieked Melby, as he went dancing about on one foot with the gin dangling from the other one.

"It's for you to take it off, pervided you don't like it," said Vance.

"I don't jolly well see how he could like it," said Dick, as Melby took the porter's advice. "My eyes! Here comes Foster! This is getting serious and exciting."

"What is the matter, boy?" demanded the master.

"Oh, hang it!" yelled Melby, seating himself in Vance's easy-chair and nursing his foot. "That beast has cut my toes off and is laughing at it. He's set a trap for me."

"I set it for another rat," said Vance. "One comes through that hole every night and disturbs me, and I wanted to catch it, sir. This 'ere boy comes down and puts his toes deliberate into my trap, jest to give me the trouble of setting it again. He's only done it to aggravate me."

"Doesn't sound likely, either," murmured Dick. "I s'ay, Tom, you really mustn't laugh. Foster isn't best pleased, and it would only annoy him more to catch us—so it would us."

"Don't talk such nonsense," exclaimed Mr. Foster, when he began to realise what had happened. "You cannot suppose that any boy would put his bare foot in a rat-trap to aggravate you."

"I don't know, sir," said Vance; "but it looks suspicious. He must have seen the trap there, and——"

"Nonsense! Are you much hurt, Melby?"

"Hoo! Of course I am! How do you suppose I'm going to kick my toes into a rat-trap without hurting myself. Oh, I'm lamed for life."

"You will be wise not to address me in that manner, boy," said Mr. Foster, very sternly.

"Well, I don't care. During my agony I'd address my own father, or any other rotter, like it. Do you suppose I'm going to be polite when my toes are crushed to death? If I die I'll come back and haunt Vance. I'll appear to the beast as a snake, and make him think he's got delirium tremblums before his time."

"Go to bed at once! To-morrow you will come to my study before breakfast."

"I can't walk."

"Carry him upstairs, Vance."

"If he does, I'll bite his ear," snarled Melby, limping from the room.

"It's all right, old chap," said Dick.

"For Melby?" inquired Tom. "My impression is he will find it all wrong to-morrow morning. Fancy talking to a master like that. Still, Foster will make allowances for him under the cires. Come on! I don't supposo Melby will get into anything like the row we shall if we are caught."

"It's our duty to stop signalling, and we have reason to believe that is what's the matter with it."

"Shall you tell the doctor that?" inquired Tom, laughing.

"Well, I hope we won't get caught, but if we are I shall point out that signalling must be stopped."

"And suppose he says you are not the proper party to stop it in the dead of night?"

"Well, we will admit that we wanted the excitement of the adventure, and that we thought we could stop it as well as the village constable, or any other joker. You see, it all depends on whether we succeed. If we succeed in catching some dangerous spy, we sha'n't get into a row. If we fail, and get caught ourselves instead, we shall. Come on! The tide will be about right for us."

Bill had left a rowing boat on the shelving beach, just beyond the reach of high tide. It was quite a light boat, and very small, so that the chums had no great difficulty in getting it into the sea, which was calm.

Both of them were good rowers, and each one took an oar, then they rowed out to the island.

The night was dark, but the youngsters looked in vain for any signalling. On that side of the island the shore was not very steep, but on the further side there were rocky cliffs, almost vertical in many places. The chums rowed to that side, keeping close to the base of the cliffs, and gazing upwards in the hope of seeing lights.

"Can't quite see what we are going to do even if there is signalling," observed Tom.

"Try to catch the signaller, naturally."

"Right-ho! But suppose there are half a dozen of them."

"Then the chances are they will catch us; but that's not a bit likely. I want to take the fellow prisoner. Think of the fame it would bring to No. 7 Study."

"We will have a jolly good try," said Tom. "I know a place where there is a narrow opening in the cliffs. If we row up it we can land. You can only do it when the tide is up, because there are so many rocks; but we shall probably be able to work it now without bashing holes in the bottom of our boat. There is the gully."

It was a narrow opening in the cliffs, which at that part towered fifty feet or more above the level of the sea. The darkness in the narrow channel was intense. Dick sculled the boat at the stern, while Tom kept her off the sides with a boat-hook, for the channel was so narrow that the oars would have touched the sheer cliffs on either side, nor was there sufficient room to turn the boat.

It was only when looking upwards that the lads could see any light at all, and even then it was very faint, for the heavens were almost black, and only a narrow belt was exposed to their view.

"Are we far from the end?" inquired Dick.

"Don't think so," answered Tom; "but it seems a lot longer than in the daylight, and this lapping black water is giving me a creepy feeling. Hope it won't transform me into a sea-slug. My eyes!"

Tom's exclamation was caused by a bright light being suddenly flashed upon them; then there was a heavy plunge in the water.

A large piece of rock had been hurled from the summit of the cliff, and it fell so close to the boat that the chums were drenched with spray.

"We are like Melby's foot—in a trap," said Tom.

"Do you think it will be possible to gain the end of the channel?" inquired Dick; and as he spoke there was a second plunge.

"Yes. But I don't think it would ever be possible to gain the other

end again," answered Tom. "Those scoundrels mean to sink us if they can and I think they can, with a little perseverance. At any rate, we can't do ourselves any good or them any harm by landing, now that they have seen us, and as the chances of our landing before they sink us are remote, I believe our proper plan is to retreat."

"Punt her back, then!" exclaimed Dick. "If we get out of it we can give the coastguard warning, so we shall have done some good, even though we've failed to capture them."

It was exciting work, for the miscreants above appeared to be determined the boat should never get out. They flung several pieces of rock down the height, but no shots were fired, while only occasionally the light was flashed upon the boat.

One of the missiles grazed its stern, while all came very close, but the chums got the boat out without mishap, and now they were safe.

"Look here, Tom," exclaimed Dick, "it's almost certain they will have a boat somewhere on the shore, and if we could only find it they wouldn't be able to leave the island before we had put the coastguard on the scent. Suppose we have a search."

Tom was quite ready, and as they rowed along the shore they presently sighted a dark object drawn up on the rocks.

Landing at the spot they found that it was a fairly large boat, in which there was a sail, and a quantity of provisions.

"We will chuck those in the sea," exclaimed Dick, sending one of the small cases into deep water, while the remainder were soon disposed of in a similar manner. There was no time to be lost, for it was almost certain the foe would descend to the spot to make sure that the boat had not been interfered with.

Indeed, just as they had flung the last case into the water the light was again flashed on them from the summit of the cliff, and now a shot was fired.

Dick seized the boat-hook and smashed it through the side of the boat, while Tom worked with the top of an oar, and in a few moments they had so smashed the boat that it would certainly never float again.

"Come on, old chap!" exclaimed Tom. "We have done all we can, and don't want to be shot for our pains. In with you."

Both sprang into the boat, then shoved her off, and rowed swiftly away from the island, thence to the mainland.

"I wish we could have brought a prisoner in," grumbled Dick. "It's rotten luck."

"Might have been worse, with those bullets flying around," said Tom.

"Well, that's true," assented Dick. "And our luck in the channel was rather rocky. But, don't you see, we have got to make No. 7 famous for something. My wheeze of palatial furniture didn't seem to impress the big chaps. In fact, I saw Hal smile sarcastically. We never shall make it famous for learning, while Melby is no good."

"No, he's more likely to make it infamous by sneaking and spreading the report that you are blackmailing that bully Gowl."

"If we had captured a German spy we would have gained a lot of prestige."

"It would have been the most famous study in the college," declared Tom. "Even as it is, we shall make it a bit famous if we get caught going in; but it will be gaining fame at great cost, and it will prove shockingly painful to us. Each time we gracefully recline in your sumptuous easy-chairs we shall wish they were softer. Your system of blurring out the truth—and the whole truth—won't save us from a licking."

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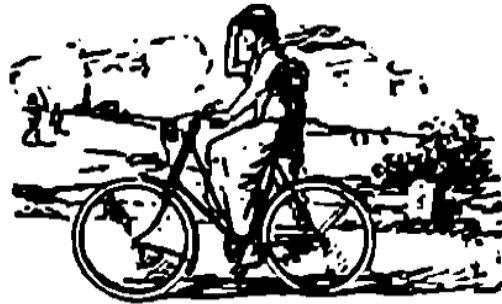
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