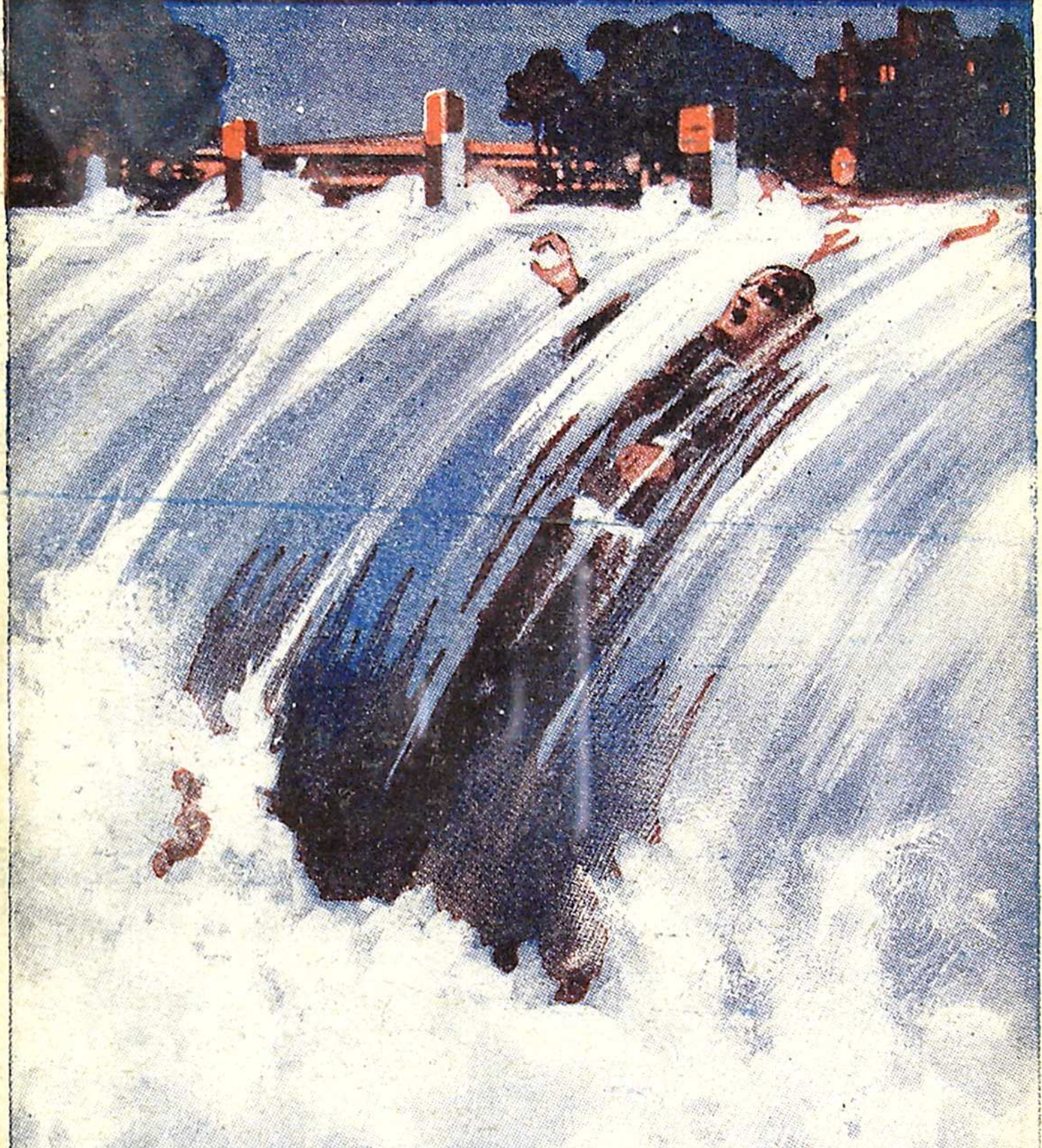


NOT GUILTY, OR THE DETECTIVES TRIUMPH

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE MYSTERY OF LIMEHOUSE REACH.



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NOT GUILTY ;

or,

THE DETECTIVE'S TRIUMPH.

By the Author of "The Mystery of Limehouse Reach," etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Wager.

"**B**AI JO-OVE! Now here you are, Shandy. Here's the very man for you. Prove your boast now, if you dare. Come on!"

Nelson Lee, who was in the midst of sighting his cue for the thinnest of losing hazards off the red into the top pocket, never turned a hair, though it sounded as if a whole school treat were coming pouring into the club billiard-room behind him. He went on coolly addressing the ball just the same. He even laughed as he delivered the shot.

"Hallo noisy Boysey!" he said dryly. "No need to ask if that's you. Where's 'what man,' and what's all the boasting about?"

The finest of fine hazards ran sweetly into the pocket just as if the most perfect silence had reigned on the stroke.

"Bai Jo-ove!" exclaimed the culprit, screwing his monocle into his eye to watch the shot. "Bai Jo-ove!" he gasped again admiringly. "Topping good smite, old chappie. Afraid I'd put you off. Doooid sorry. But it's Shand here, you've got to blame, really, with his silly-naz talk!"

"Hallo, Shand!" nodded Nelson Lee, next to another of the invaders.

Captain Nick Shand was a "blood about town" like Boysey, his bosom friend. He was dressed, too, as the latter was, in the very latest of fin-de-siècle fashion, but with this difference; that there was nothing foppish about him.

He had been an officer in a crack cavalry corps until he had strained his heart at polo and had been compelled to leave the service. He still retained all the air and swing of a dashing soldier, and he was handsome enough to have earned his ten pounds a week any day, merely to walk on to the stage of a Gaiety review and "look pretty," as Boysey would have put it.

Captain Nick was a gentleman, too. He was down on his friend like a thousand of bricks for speaking on the stroke and putting Nelson Lee off.

"Put him off!" expostulated Boysey. "It would take more than a blessed Zeppelin, perching on the blessed lamp shade and dropping bombs down Lee's neck to put him off his game. Would it, old chappie?" he appealed to Nelson Lee.

"Besides," he added, "with all your faults, Shand, as I say again, for gassing on against the police——"

"Against the police," laughed Nelson Lee promptly. "What has Shand got to say against my friends the police I'd like to know?"

"Why, we were talking about that big burglary at Niptons, don't cher know," explained Mr. Valentine Boysey. "But here I say," he broke off apologetically, "I oughtn't to be chattering like this. If it don't spoil your game, it will your partner's."

However, as it happened, the 250 up which Nelson Lee was engaged in was just finished. A couple of run-through cannons and a slashing potting of the red had seen the prince of crime investigators run out an easy winner by sixty or more.

"So go ahead!" he urged. "What about the burglary at Lord Niptons? The police haven't found out who did it yet, have they?"

"No. That's just it. Shand here is willing to back they never will. Says Scotland Yard from top to bottom is a rotten gang of muddlers. Boasts, what is more, that any man of brains, given time to think out his plans, could commit any crime from burglary to murder, and do it so that no one on earth could trace it to him—not even you."

"Oh, come, come!" protested Captain Shand laughingly. "I never said that. I never brought Nelson Lee's name into it at all. I couldn't be so personal——"

"Oh, yes you could!" persisted Boysey, who meant to pin him to his boast as was plain. "We know just what you said, so it's no use twying to slide out of it. You meant it, anyway. You said all detectives, and Nelson Lee here is one of 'em. So own up."

Captain Nick Shand smiled for a minute.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly, "I was talking about Scotland Yard really. Our friend here is a different proposition. But when it comes to that, I reckon I'll still stand to my guns."

"You will? Hooray!" cheered Boysey.

"Yes. I still hold that the whole of crime detection is based on the making of mistakes by the criminal."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Nelson Lee promptly. "That is so."

"And if the criminal makes no mistakes—if he lays his plans so carefully that he leaves not one trace behind to incriminate him, then even such an acknowledged genius as our friend Lee, is helpless."

"Quite right," assented Nelson Lee again. "Absolutely right. Fortunately though for our civilisation, it seems ordained that no criminal ever should commit a crime without leaving some small trace behind by which he could ultimately be brought to justice."

"Then what about the hundred and one murders that are never solved?" demanded Captain Nick promptly. "What about the thousand and one robberies and crimes of all sorts?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"That depends on the detectives," he said. "Whether they have the luck or the brains, as you might put it, to drop on to that clue in time—before it is obliterated. But such a clue is always there for some quick eye to see."

"Rubbish! Not necessarily!" scoffed the other. "That's just my point, in fact. And as I was saying to these chaps—and I'll say it again, I'll back myself here, now and any day, to plot a crime and commit it—a real crime, too, with not less than six months penalty attached to it. And I'll undertake to do it all with such care that I don't mind what detective is put on to the case, he'll never trace it to me."

"Ho, ho, hark at the swanker! A wager! A wager!" cried Boysey, who was an inveterate gambler, and, indeed, was only nursing the whole thing

up to this. "A wager! Take him on, Lee. Take on the beggar and show him. Give it a name, Shandy!"

"Oh, well," drawled Captain Nick, "I'll make it a thousand if you like!"

"And Nelson Lee is to be the sleuth who is put on your trail?"

"All right. If he chooses."

"And you'll undertake to commit a real, juicy murder——"

"Not a murder!" protested the captain promptly.

"Well, a burglary with violence, shall we put it?"

"No, nor even that. A burglary without violence if you like," said the captain.

"Very well. And within what time. We must have a limit, you know, so as to declare the stakes."

"All right. A month, say, for me; and three for the other side to bowl me out."

"And what if they do? No sugaring, you know; you'll have to go before the beak for it."

"Why, of course. I'll go before the beak, and, if he likes to give me time, why, I must do it, that's all."

"And lose your thousand besides. Well, you are a winner, I must say!" exclaimed Boysey, who loved a sportsman. And Captain Nick was always that.

"I! Not I," laughed Nelson Lee. "I'm not going to be party to any such folly. My profession is to prevent crime, not to promote it."

"So there you are, Lee, old chappie," he went on to the detective. "It's all fixed up. Shand undertakes to commit a burglary within one month from date which you won't be able to accuse him of in three——"

"Oh, but that's tommy wot!" retorted the fop, disappointed. For Transom's was known for its sporting wagers, and this promised to be one of the most sensational for years.

However, there was another member present it happened ready to jump into the breach rather than the bet should fall to the ground.

"I'll take Nick on," he cut in; making everyone swing round in astonishment.

For it was Guy Baldrick who spoke, and he was Captain Nick's own cousin. He seemed a funny one therefore to be challenging his own kith to commit a crime, however harmless its motive, which nevertheless might end in Captain Nick going actually to prison.

So thought the captain obviously, from the little flash of contempt he turned on the other. But he was a gentleman. In a second it was gone, and he was smiling again.

But he did not like Guy and never could. For one thing the latter would not let him. They were rivals.

Old General Shand, lord of three broad manors in Berkshire alone, was their uncle, and they were his heirs. In the right of succession there was not a pin to choose between them actually. But like everybody else the old fellow favoured dashing Captain Nick the most.

It was he who was down in the general's will for the lion's share. Guy Baldrick, sour, sallow and cynical, had paid the penalty for his sourness and cynicism. He was not forgotten, but where he would have a thousand his luckier cousin would have ten.

This stuck in his gullet, as he let everyone see. So, perhaps after all it was not so surprising that he leapt in now to clinch his cousin to a foolish boast which must end in unsavory scandal if nothing worse.

"Perhaps that is just what has made him do it," thought Nelson Lee. "Thinks when the general hears of it, he'll cut his cousin down by half, if he does not strike him out of his will altogether."

For the general was one of the stiff, old-fashioned sort who believed in gentlemen being gentlemen always. He would be furious if he heard that his favourite nephew was masquerading as a burglar, even for a wager.

"But if young Baldrick thinks he's going to make mischief that way, I'll make it my business that the general hears also that the man who egged his cousin on to the silly bet, was himself," the detective decided.

Meantime, thanks to Boysey, the wager was made, and there was no going back. For an even thousand pounds, Captain Nick Shand had let himself in to commit a crime in cold blood.

Whose house he was to burgle, he need not state, of course; but there must not be the remotest chance of collusion, nor mercy shown by the plundered persons in hunting down the perpetrator of the theft.

"And you, Nelson Lee, will take on the job of trying to fasten the crime on to him, won't you?" appealed Guy Baldrick, with a satisfied, sneaking grin.

"I! Not I," retorted the detective promptly. "I'll have nothing to do with it, as I've told you already. I think the whole scheme a piece of childish folly!"

"Oh, rubbish!" laughed the other. "Still, don't join in the joke if you don't like to," he added sneeringly. "I'll stand by Scotland Yard."

With that he turned on his heel and left the room.

"Shand, you're a fool!" was the detective's verdict. "You've let yourself be landed into something this day which will cost you more than your lost wager, mark my words. Take my advice and back out of it while you can."

"Back out of it!" echoed the captain, with a look of scorn as if Nelson Lee had asked him to turn and run in a fight. "Not much. If you think that possible, you don't know me. The only thing I regret is that it's you who've backed out of the challenge. For I'd have liked to have you up against me. There would have been the satisfaction then of knowing that I had beaten the best."

The prince of crime investigators acknowledged the compliment with a dry smile and a bow. He little thought—nor did Captain Nick—that before many hours were out Nelson Lee would be eating his words, and throwing himself into the battle of wits with such furious keenness as he had rarely shown in any case before.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Guy Baldrick.

CAPTAIN NICK lost no time. Truth to tell, in his heart he knew that Nelson Lee's warning was sound. He had been a fool.

For one thing, with bad luck on the turf and at cards, he was in a tight corner financially. He had not a thousand shillings even just then to pay away, supposing he lost. Nor could he raise another fiver for the moment out of the moneylenders.

"Yes, begad; I've been a fool!" he decided ruefully, thinking not so much of this last piece of folly as his whole career. He was in debt up to his eyes.

Only one thing could save him, and that he loathed himself for ever thinking of. When his uncle died and he came into his share of the fortune, he would be able to start again with a clean slate.

"Ye stars!" he groaned. "And yet there it is. My only hope is a dead man's shoes. Look at it which way you will, I am reduced to that."

"Hallo, Perkins! That you? I did not hear you come in." He broke off, as he suddenly became aware that his valet was in the adjoining dressing-room, laying out his clothes. He did not realise, even then, how he had been speaking his thoughts aloud.

But had he done so, he would not have been perturbed; Perkins was the very model of manservants. For all Captain Nick bothered, he might know every secret of his master's life. If so he kept mum as an oyster.

Perkins came forward.

"There are letters for you, sir—one marked urgent," he said gravely. "I put them on the mantelpiece. I don't think you saw them."

Captain Nick had not. He took the first, glanced at it, and a deep, despairing frown shot across his dark, handsome face.

"Bannister again; curse him!" he ground out between his clenched teeth as his man retired. "Deuce seize the vampire! Can't he see that I'm squeezed absolutely dry for the moment? You can't get blood out of a stone—and I'm pebbled if ever a poor devil was! Yet no; more threats only. A thousand on account by Friday he wants now," he groaned, reading the moneylender's peremptory note inside. "By Friday, eh? And a thousand! Bah! He might as well dun me for the Bank of England!"

Yet he knew Bannister. Bannister would have his pound of flesh or he would put him in the courts. And what would his uncle, the general, say to that?

He tore the letter in little pieces and flung them in the grate. He took up the other letter then.

"Great Scott! Why, this is from uncle!" he gasped angrily. "But nothing to do with Bannister, surely! The hound has dared to go dunning him for my debts!"

Captain Nick was furious at the notion. Yet when he opened the letter, sure enough the moneylender had had the cheek to write to the general, too, threatening him with a public scandal unless his scapegrace nephew repaid the loan now due.

The old boy's wrath was just what Captain Nick expected. He blamed Bannister for his impudence, but he blamed his nephew still more for putting it in the shark's power to insult them in such fashion.

"The fact is," the letter ran on, "I have been hearing too many stories of your wanton extravagance and foolhardy behaviour of late. Unless you mend your ways, I shall mend them for you, altering my will so that someone else, and not you, gets the lion's share. Indeed, on second thoughts," the general continued, "I have decided to send for my lawyer and alter my will at once. You will, perhaps, realise then that I am in earnest, and that it depends on you reforming your manner of living whether the codicil is ever cancelled."

Captain Nick shand read on to the end. Then he whistled loud and long.

"Phew! That's rather a smack in the eye!" he exclaimed bitterly. "He has actually altered his will, has he? That means, I suppose, that Cousin Guy is shoved in my place, until I've been good boy enough for him to change us round again."

"Well, I don't know," he ran on. "If Guy had been a decent sort I might not have grudged him. But since I know that if I am a waster, he is a ten times bigger one, I can't say I like it. I'll have to run down and see the old fellow. That'll be the best way."

And then, before he realised what he was doing, he had torn up his uncle's letter, too, like the moneylender's.

"Dash it! I didn't mean to do that," he said repentantly. But since it was done he tossed the pieces also into the wastepaper-basket.

Perkins returned then to say that his room was ready when he chose to dress.

"Oh, I sha'n't dress to-night," he answered, to the valet's astonishment. For it sounded as if the skies must be falling when Dandy Captain Dick refused to change into evening clothes.

"I mean, I am not going out," he added vaguely; "or, rather—yes, I am," he corrected himself.

It had suddenly occurred to him—why not go down to Elleswood, his uncle's place in Berkshire, and see the old chap to-night? That would not give his own courage time to cool.

"You can lay me out a suit of tweeds," he told Perkins. "And pack my handbag, too. On second thoughts, I may go out of town for a couple of days perhaps——"

He realised his behaviour was rather vague. But even now he was not sure that he might not change his mind. It would be time enough to tell his valet definitely what his plans were when he got to the station. He could easily 'phone from there.

His thoughts flew back to the wager he had landed himself in for. It was on the tip of his tongue to take Perkins into his confidence and tell him what an ass he had been. But he refrained, and went to dress instead. Five minutes later he emerged attired in tweeds and travelling-cap.

But even then he only wandered restlessly round. Until at last, catching sight of the clock, he realised that if he meant to catch his train he had better hasten. So, taking his bag, he hurried out of the flat.

"Well, if that doesn't take the biscuit," declared the astonished Perkins, as the outer door closed with a thump and a taxi whistle blew. "It must be those letters that upset him. One of them looked like the fist of that moneylending shark, Bannister—a fellow that's brought more misery into the world among young swells than any other ten men put together.

"Ha, I thought so!" he went on, picking up the scraps of torn paper, one by one, and piecing them together. "That's Bannister, right enough. And looks like one of his 'finals,' too. A thousand by Friday, he's asking. Well, he can go on whistling for it, 'cause the gov'nor won't pay. He can't!"

The other letter, he knew already, was from Captain Nick's uncle—the general. Under ordinary circumstances Perkins would no more have thought of reading his master's correspondence than of trying to fly out of the window; for he was really a trustworthy fellow.

But somehow his sympathy and real anxiety at seeing the captain so perturbed made him forget his scruples. He began to piece out this letter, too. A very few moments showed him the tenor and tone of the missive.

"Phew!" he whistled, in dismay. "The old chap is going to cut him out of his will, is he? That'll be where the master's gone now, I guess—down to Elleswood to try and square him up."

However, it was just at that moment that the door-bell rang again. Perkins hastily swept up the fragments of the two letters into his hand and went out to answer it. It was Captain Nick's cousin—Mr. Guy Baldrick.

"Your master in?"

"No, sir! He has just gone out."

"Oh! Where?" demanded Guy, as if surprised.

"I could not say, sir."

"Was he dressed?" demanded Guy Baldrick.

"No, sir."

"Not dressed!" Guy's eyebrows went up. It must be urgent business indeed to keep such a dandy as Captain Nick out of dress-clothes at this hour of evening.

Then Guy Baldrick remembered himself.

"Perkins," he said.

"Yes, sir," answered the valet, without moving a muscle.

"I want you to do something for me. But first, there's a fiver for yourself. Take it; that's a present remember."

Perkins took it as if he had no choice but to obey, since Mr. Guy was his master's friend. He did not pocket it, though, the other noticed.

"I've got a bet on with Captain Shaud," Guy continued. "It's a little sporting wager, and I have no right, I suppose, to be approaching you about it, really. But you'll keep mum—eh? I mean, I want you to just keep me primed up with all your master's movements—when he goes out and where he's been. Follow me?"

Perkins had long ago begun to look indignant.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, as if unable to believe his ears.

"I say I've got a bet on with your master," repeated Guy Baldrick. "Whether I win it depends on my keeping absolute touch with all his movements these next two months. So what I am really offering to do is to take you into partnership. You help me to win and—"

"Here, what in thunder are you doing?" he broke off, with a sudden explosion of rage. For it looked as if Perkins's answer to all this was to tear the bribe up.

"That, sir, is a question I might very well ask you, I think," was the valet's cutting retort.

"You seem to think, sir, because I am only a servant, that I don't know what honour is, nor my duty to my master. But I do. There, sir"—he finished ripping the five-pound note across—"that is what I think of your offer, and you—"

But Guy Baldrick had recovered himself by this time. Five-pound notes did not grow on thistles where he came from. He clutched the valet's wrist.

"You impertinent hound!" he spluttered. "You dare to destroy that! Give it me at once! Do you hear?"

Tearing at the servant's knuckles, he forced the fingers open so that not merely the bits of the banknote fluttered to the floor, but the fragments of torn letters besides.

"Why, hallo!" exulted Guy, recognising his uncle's handwriting instantly. "So, you mealy-mouthed humbug, with all your quack about honour and duty to your master, this is what you've been up to, is it? Reading his letters behind his back? So you're that sort, are you—eh?"

And then a thought suddenly struck him. His cousin Nick had gone out—left town hurriedly, by the sound of it. Was it something in this letter that had prompted his departure?

And the other letter was from Bannister, the moneylender, he recognised. For he knew his fist only too well himself. But Captain Nick, he knew, was very much in the vampire's grip. He must find out what these letters were before he left.

So, ordering Perkins out of the room, he sat down to do what the valet had done—piece the fragments together until the letters were complete. Like Perkins, too, he whistled after he had read them; then he wrinkled his brows and lifted his cunning eyes, pursing his lips into a satanic smile.

The next, instant, though, all in a flash the smile had vanished. The brows drew down into a vengeful scowl. He knew what this meant. His cousin had gone straight off to coax his uncle to relent. If successful, he would be reinstated in the old boy's will as heir to the bulk of his estates. Guy, on the other hand, would be relegated, as before, to the mere leavings.

And so he sat, alternately glowering at the letters then at the ceiling, tugging at his apology for a moustache. Then he glanced sharply at his watch.

By-and-by he got up, and Perkins could hear him pacing up and down the room. Suddenly the door was thrown open. Guy appeared.

"Perkins," he called sharply. "there is no need, after what I know, to ask you whether you have read these letters of Captain Shand's. You have, and so have I. They are serious. I must see him the moment he returns, as I have no doubt I shall be able to help him in both matters. Do you understand?"

"Understand what, sir?" inquired the valet frigidly.

"That you must ring me up to-night when your master comes back. I shall be out until one o'clock to-night unfortunately, but give me a call on the 'phone then, even if Captain Shand is still away. I shall be anxious to hear. Is that quite clear?"

Perkins bowed. Guy had already swept the bits of paper into an envelope which he put into his pocket. He made no concealment about it. He picked up his hat and cane, and a moment later was out in the street and hurrying to his own less pretentious quarters in a side street at the back of Mayfair.

CHAPTER III.

What Nipper Heard.

NIPPER was "shaking a loose leg," as he called it, that night, as it happened. He had run across Bert Rivers, a young telephone clerk of the Central Western Exchange, who had to go on relief night duty at twelve.

Young Rivers was the witness who had been able to furnish such important evidence in the case of the Fiji Bank forgeries. Therefore, Nipper and he foregathered as old brothers in arms.

After a "hall," and a snack of supper together, Nipper had drifted back with Rivers to the telephone exchange. To accept an invitation to "squat inside," just suited Nipper's mood. As Nelson Lee's famous assistant he was promptly made welcome. Thus they sat yarning until just on one o'clock.

Calls had been amazingly few. Therefore, when suddenly a tiny red electric lamp lit up on the huge switchboard just by Nipper's nose, he gave quite a jump of surprise.

"That's all right," laughed Rivers, as, of course, Nipper knew it was. Someone was only calling up the exchange to be put through.

"Hyde Park, 77761," repeated the clerk after the inquirer, and promptly rang up this number in his turn.

"Ar 'y' there—ar 'y' there? Is that Hyde Park, 77761? Ar 'y' there? Is that Hyde Park, 77— Ob, all right then! Be civil about it! Hold the line, please."

Rivers slammed in another peg, slightly flustered, as Nipper could see. He remained with the receiver glued to his ear, in fact, as if to overhear the conversation that was passing. Nipper watched him.

"Only the beggar was a bit ratty," explained his friend. "Woken up out of his beauty sleep, I expect. But he isn't going to sauco me like that, and I shall tell him so quick."

"Oh! Snapped your nose off, did he?" inquired Nipper. But the other did not reply. By-and-by he began to grin. The conversation between Hyde Park, 77761 and his ringer-up was evidently rather sulphurous.

"Just cock your ear to that," chuckled Rivers, giving the receiver over to his guest. "If you ask me, the gentleman has been dining not wisely but too well."

And so Nipper decided, too.

"And I say you are impudent, and I shall report you to your master." one indignant voice was threatening.

"Begging your pardon, I am nothing of the sort," came the prompt retort. "You asked me to ring you up at one o'clock and report—"

"That's quite enough of that," cut in the other voice. "I don't want to hear any more. You can ring off! I say, you can ring off! Do you hear me, you insolent owl?"

As a matter of fact, the other had already rung off; but No. 77761 still kept on. The clerk apprised him of the fact himself at last, but without much effect.

"Ring off yourself," he commanded at last, losing patience. "What's the good of your chattering there all to yourself, sir. Can you hear me?"

However, the voice still grumbled on. At last, though, there was silence; but the red light still burned, showing that the speaker had not hung up his receiver, but left it off the hook.

"Gone to sleep, I reckon," decided Nipper, who had been listening with the observation receiver all this time. "Probably his instrument is beside his bed. Drunk or dotty, that's what he is."

In vain the clerk rang up Hyde Park, 77761 to tell him to "ring off." The light still burned on defiantly. It quite got on Nipper's nerves. He picked up his receiver once or twice to see if there was any further sound from the mysterious number.

Guy Baldrick was the name of the subscriber they saw in the directory. At last, suddenly Nipper heard the voice commencing again.

But this time it was wideawake enough. The speaker seemed to be giving instructions to somebody.

"Is that you, B.?" it asked suddenly. "Just note what I say carefully. Have big business on, I believe. So hang up telephone receiver first in case exchange is listening by any chance—"

"Dash!" exclaimed Nipper, scenting some mystery here. He glared at the electric bulb, expecting to see the red light promptly extinguished. But nothing happened. It still burned. Moreover, the voice continued, asking, after a pause:

"Have you done it?"

There was no answer. But the speaker seemed satisfied. He resumed:

"I've gone to L—on the seven-forty-five— Brr-rr-rr!"

To Nipper's disgust the red incandescent bulb had gone out, and the voice was cut off. All was silence.

"Well, what's wrong with you? Have you been hearing a ghost?" demanded his friend, the clerk, laughing, seeing the look of comical wonder and disgust on Nipper's face.

The latter thought a minute, and then he answered, "No." After all, what he had overheard was no business of theirs. So he turned the subject to something else.

Nevertheless, the incident still stuck in his thoughts. He resolved to stroll round past No. 7a, Vernon Street, where this Mr. Guy Baldrick lived, and see what sort of a place it was; also the address of the man who had rung him up.

Captain Nicholas Shand, he saw, was his name; though the manner of speech suggested more a valet than his master.

Nipper took his leave then. It was already twenty past one o'clock, anyway. Five minutes walk brought him to Vernon Street.

A man passed him just as he reached the corner. He was some belated swell, to judge by his dress-tie and crush-hat, but instinctively Nipper ran his eye over him as he passed. For that is a detective's trade.

The man's hand was partially covering his face, though, pulling at a cigarette, so he got no clear view of what he was like.

However, your trained 'tec does not need to see a man's face only to be able to recognise him again. If he is a trained observer one shrewd glance at a suspect's ear will often give him a point to stick in his memory worth all the other features put together.

Nipper, though, had no reason to suspect this chance wayfarer of anything. He was merely a gentleman strolling homewards from a late night at his club, no doubt. Nipper just noted mechanically what he could about him and passed on, that was all.

A few paces brought him to No. 7a, but the house was in darkness. He walked round past Captain Shand's block of chambers next. But here, also, not a light was to be seen.

So Nipper went home then, little dreaming that he had been listening to the second chapter in an affair in which his chief was already more than interested.

Still less did he realise that he had gleaned that night the most important clue of all in a mystery which was yet to shake London smart society to its foundations.

In fact, Nipper had clean forgotten all about the matter until next morning, when, on presenting himself to his boss, he found Nelson Lee looking white and even scared.

"Why, gov'nor," gasped his assistant, "what's wrong? Nothing serious happened, has there? You look quite ill."

"Do I?" answered the prince of crime investigators, after a pause. "Well, perhaps I do, and with reason. Look at that which has just been sent down by the Yard."

Nipper read the slip of blue paper. His chief, though not of the regular police force, had this compliment paid to him; that in event of any serious crime happening, likely to need all hands to bring the criminal to book, he was one of those on the list to receive official information at the earliest moment possible.

And to-day the form contained these few brief lines:

"Berkshire Constabulary notify murder and burglary committed at Elleswood Hall; owner, General Shand, found dead—head wounds. Safe rilled of £2,000 cash, part in notes. Approximate estimated hour of crime, 1-a.m. Any information or theory gratefully received."

The deputy sub-commissioner signed it. Nelson Lee had had it an hour. He knew Elleswood, knew that the murdered man was uncle to Captain Nick Shand, principal in that foolhardy wager of yesterday at Transom's Club. He knew the terms of that bet—that the captain was to commit, at some place unknown, within a month, a burglary which would never be traced to him. Yet so far he had not apprised Scotland Yard of these facts.

Why not? The precious minutes were flying; a word now might save five thousand miles in subsequent chase.

Nelson Lee knew all this. Yet still he sat silent and pale, torn with doubts.

He liked Captain Nick. He was absolutely certain that beyond being a born gambler who would take on any mad challenge in the name of sport, he had not an ounce of real vice in him.

Yet what did all this horrible business point to? Nelson Lee knew. There was no blinding oneself to the obvious truth.

Captain Nick was head over ears in debt, as he never took the trouble to disguise. Moneylenders were pressing him hard. Yesterday was Michaelmas Day in the country calendar, when every landlord would be seated at receipt of rent from his farmer tenants. There would be a big sum of money there in the Elleswood safe, most of it in cash or notes, waiting to be banked next day.

Now, what of the captain? Hard pressed by creditors, with the added crazy impulse of this wager he had landed himself in for, what more likely than that he resolved to make his uncle the victim of his fatuous boast?

The rest was as easy to read.

In trying to secure the safe keys from under the old general's pillow perhaps, the latter had awakened. There would be a struggle, for with the terms of his wager before him, Captain Nick's instinct would be to try and get away unrecognised.

But the general, being a fiery old fellow, would hang on tooth and nail: thus a blow would have to be struck to break his grip, and that blow, by the look of it, had proved fatal.

All this was pure surmise, of course. Nelson Lee was merely reconstructing the crime on the strength of what he knew.

No wonder, then, he looked ill and haggard. For if it was this mad-brained wager that had cost the veteran his life—and might even send his nephew to the gallows—then he had been present at the hatching of it and might have done more than he did, really, to stop it.

He told Nipper this after he had explained his fears. Nipper was thunderstruck. And then this name Shand began to stick in his brain.

"Where on earth did I hear that? Only last night, too!" he said, cudgelling his brains to think. At last he had got it.

"Why, of course!" he cried.

"Of course—what?" demanded his chief. "If you have really got any light to throw on this miserable affair, for Heaven's sake——"

"It was at the Central Western Telephone Exchange. I was in there yarning with that chap Rivers of the Fiji Bank forgery case, you remember. A call came through from this very man's address—Captain Shand—to someone of the name of Baldrick——"

"Yes, yes; that's his cousin," struck in Nelson Lee, his eyes aglow with hope. "Do you mean it was the captain himself who was speaking?"

"No. I shouldn't say it was. More like his valet, if you ask me," replied Nipper, while his chief uttered a groan of despair. For this would mean that Captain Nick was not at home—and at the hour of one in the morning, too; just when the crime was judged to have been committed.

"I must call round and make sure," he told Nipper. "You stay here. If the Yard rings up don't tell them anything that I have told you. Say I have gone out to make certain investigations, and will let them know how I get on. Understand?"

Nipper did, but he knew also the risks his chief was running. If he knew so much about the business already, surely he ought to tell the police straight away. For had not they asked his help?

Still, that was his chief's business. And, besides, before Nipper could say anything, Nelson Lee was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

The First Clue.

A TAXI soon deposited him at the captain's block of chambers. Perkins opened the door. Nelson Lee eyed him.

"Well, he seems to have heard nothing yet," he decided. Then, aloud, he inquired:

"Your master in?"

"No, sir. He is away, I believe."

"You believe?"

"I mean he may be back to-day or to-morrow. He seemed rather doubtful when he left last night."

Nelson Lee's heart fell. So Captain Nick had really gone out of town. Nor had he told his man where to. He was in tweeds, with a small handbag. It really looked as if the worst suspicions were being confirmed.

"Now, look here, Perkins," said Nelson Lee, who had seen the valet often before. "You haven't heard the dreadful news apparently. But General Shand, your master's uncle, has been murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Yes, and his house at Elleswood burgled into the bargain."

"My stars, you don't say that, sir!" cried Perkins, aghast. "Burgled!" he repeated. Nelson Lee's keen eyes were watching him.

"Captain Shand entered into a very foolish wager yesterday," he continued.

"I know, sir. At least, rather, I gathered so," stammered Perkins. "Mr. Baldrick—his cousin—called last evening, just after master had gone."

"Oh! And what did he want?"

The valet described Guy's efforts to bribe him.

"The dishonourable blackguard!" grieved Nelson Lee contemptuously.

"And then you rang him up at one a.m.—eh?"

Perkins looked startled. He had not said anything about that yet.

"Ah, but I am Nelson Lee," the detective reminded him. "Somehow, I get to hear of these things sometimes. But you did ring him up at his chambers, and Mr. Guy answered. So he was not out of town, too, that is plain."

The valet agreed that this was so.

"But look here, sir, there's no one suggesting that Captain Shand had anything to do with this terrible affair, is there?" he blurted anxiously.

"You've not come here to try and prove that?"

"On the contrary, I am trying to help your master prove he did not," was Nelson Lee's direct answer. "I must find him, wherever he is. You know nothing of his movements; you swear to that? Very well, he may be at Elleswood itself, perhaps. I will go on there at once."

And go Nelson Lee did. He lost so little time about it, that he did not even apprise Nipper of his sudden plans. He jumped into a cab, and caught a train, and in two hours was in sight of the dead general's mansion, one of the finest examples of Jacobean architecture in the Home Counties.

It was a house of lamentation, needless to say. The dead veteran was a crusty old warrior, but his tenantry revered him. Pity the dastard who had done him to death, if the farmers could have caught him then.

Luckily, though, no one seemed to have any breath of suspicion yet that Captain Nick might be implicated in the outrage. For he was as popular as the dead general himself.

However, if Nelson Lee hoped to find young Captain Shaud in charge, he was bitterly disappointed. It was Guy Baldrick who came forward to meet him after he had sent in his card.

"Oh, so you've come, have you?" began Guy, with an unmistakable sneer. "Well, what do you think you're going to do? Not help in unravelling the murder; you can take that from me, here and now."

"Oh!" quoth Nelson Lee quietly. "And why not?"

"Why, you jolly well refused to come in on that wager of Nick's, and you can jolly well stop out, for good and all. Is that plain enough for you?"

"Wager of Nick's! You can harp on that here, with death in the house!" retorted Nelson Lee cuttingly. "I should have thought if you had any real regard for your dead uncle you would have been only too glad to see anyone who could help you in avenging him. You astonish me!"

Guy Baldrick coloured. He saw he had made a mistake.

"Besides, as you must see," continued Nelson Lee, "with that accursed wager hanging over him, and the fact that your cousin left town last night and has not been heard of since, tongues will soon be at work hinting that he did the crime."

Guy stared at him for a long minute.

"Oh, fudge!" he scoffed, though it was as if it were in afterthought only. "Who for a moment could ever dream that my cousin had anything to do with the affair? Besides," he broke off, flashing out again, "who has been telling you all this about his being away last night? That precious valet of his, I suppose?"

"Yes. I called and asked him."

"And did he tell you how I had caught him piecing together two letters that his master had torn up, so that he could read them?"

"No. He didn't tell me that," answered Nelson Lee.

"Well, it's a fact, nevertheless," laughed Guy. "One from that ghoul, Bannister, the moneylender, threatening Nick with a showing up if he did not weigh out a thousand of the money he owed him, by to-morrow——"

Nelson Lee started.

"The other from our uncle, telling him that if he couldn't mend his ways, he would mend them for him. He warned him, in fact, that he was altering his will at once, giving Nick only a small share of his property. It depended on himself then whether he turned over a new leaf and got himself reinstated or not. But what are you looking so funny about all of a sudden?" demanded Guy Baldrick, as if only then noticing the look of dismay in Nelson Lee's face.

For if things looked black against Captain Nick before, they were three times blacker now after this.

"You think that what I've told you makes it only look worse for my cousin, is that it?" suggested Guy. "What utter bosh!" he laughed. "Of course Nick was nowhere near the place. Why, he hasn't shown up at all yet, proving that he can know nothing about it."

This was innocent, of course, and rang false, as a less keen ear than Nelson Lee's could have told. The detective knew well what bilious hate Guy Baldrick always bore to his more favoured cousin.

"And you? When did you get the news?" he inquired of him.

"I didn't get it. I caught the 7.38 down from town this morning, as I intended doing, knowing that my uncle always needed help with his rent accounts the day after quarter-day. It was only when I arrived that I found what had happened."

Nelson Lee remembered Nipper's story. That and what Guy Baldrick told him now, seemed to tally.

However, Guy had already begun to lead the way out of the room.

"Now you're here, I suppose you'll want to see all there is to be seen," he said callously. "I'll show you the window by which the ruffian broke in. He evidently knew that yesterday was rent day, and that there would be a lot of hard cash in the safe. He chose his time well."

"And you think your uncle was awakened and closed with him?"

"Not a doubt of it. His dead body was found on the threshold of his bedroom. The thief had been trying to sneak the safe key from under the old chap's pillow."

This was just as Nelson Lee had surmised when he first heard of the tragedy. Guy Baldrick took him round to the French window which had been forced. The county police were already guarding the scene.

Inspector Tamson, though, of Scotland Yard, had arrived, and he took Nelson Lee into his confidence at once as to the clues he had been able to collect.

"There ought to have been more," he told him ruefully. "But, as usual, these heavy-hoofed country policemen have been tramping round everywhere, instead of keeping right away from the spot."

"Still, here is a find," he added, handing a tobacco pouch to Lee for his inspection. "Mr. Baldrick found that close beside the general's body on the bedroom floor, and says it belongs to no one in the house."

Nelson Lee had taken the thing as if it were poisoned.

He was thunderstruck, for he knew the pouch well. It was Captain Nick's own, as Guy might have recognised.

And it was found in the room within a few feet of his uncle's murdered body. Verily this seemed to clinch the captain's guilt.

Fortunately, the inspector's attention had been diverted for the moment by one of his subordinates. When he turned to Nelson Lee again, the latter had regained his self-control.

"You think this pouch can only belong to the man who did the crime?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly! Don't you? I regard it as a most important clue, and, what's more, an easy one to follow up. For you see the maker's name on the monogram plate—Casbery's, Bond Street. They are a swell firm, and quite likely they'll know who they sold it to."

"Quite likely!" agreed Nelson Lee, thinking that with this clue against him it would not be many hours now before Captain Nick was wearing the darbies on his wrists.

He went down to inspect the rifled safe then. But he had already seen enough. His next move was to get back to town, he decided, and try to get word with the suspect before the warrant was issued and the law had him in its clutch.

Circumstances might appear all against him. They did without a doubt. Yet Nelson Lee knew his man. Gambler he might be, but Captain Nick was a gentleman to his finger-tips. Nothing could make the detective believe—first, that he could strike an old man such a cruel blow, and secondly, had he done it by any chance, that he could still have gone on rifling the safe, like any footpad.

"I'll never believe that of him until I hear it from his own lips," Nelson Lee told himself doggedly. "As for the pouch, if I recognised it, then surely his own cousin should, for he must have seen it a thousand times before. That being so, how does he come to hand it over to the police so innocently? That seems a funny thing to me!"

So Nelson Lee caught the next train back to London, determined to get track of Captain Nick by hook or crook.

However, Paddington Station was not to see him again quite so soon, it happened. For chancing to look out of the window across at the far platform at Reading Station, who should he see but Captain Nick himself, hanging about furtively, with the peak of his cap pulled down low over his eyes?

"My stars! Why, there is the man!" gasped Nelson Lee, and in two shakes was out of the train and across the footbridge.

"Hallo, Shand!"

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee Gets a Slick.

THE detective had come up close to the other's elbow before he was aware of it. Captain Nick turned with a guilty start, blank horror in his eye.

"What are you doing down here?" inquired Nelson Lee as casually as he could. "Going to your poor uncle's place at Elleswood, I suppose? You will have heard the terrible news?"

Captain Nick said nothing for a second or two, but still stood staring as if to try to collect his scattered wits.

"Yes, I am going," he said at last. "The news is terrible indeed! I only chanced to hear it a couple of hours ago. You are coming down, too, I suppose?"

"No, I have already been," answered Nelson Lee. "Scotland Yard has the case in hand. So far they have hit on one important clue—a tobacco-pouch, which they say must have been left by the murderer."

"Indeed! That's good news!" was Captain Nick's heartfelt response.

"Is it?" answered the detective dryly. "I am not so sure; for the pouch is your own, Shand."

"What!"

The captain was genuinely aghast; the detective was convinced of that.

"Perhaps we had better get into the waiting-room, where it is quiet, before we talk any more," he suggested, taking the other's arm.

Captain Nick promptly wrenched himself free with quick pride.

"One minute!" he said. "I know what this means—you are arresting me, is that it, Lee? You think it was I who murdered my uncle?"

"Not I, my dear chap!" answered Lee. "I don't think anything of the sort—at least, I don't want to!" he added. "But circumstances are looking pretty black against you, I'll not disguise. There is that accursed wager, for one thing!" he reminded him. "I wish to Heaven you had taken my advice and never touched it at all! Then you had two letters arrive, your man tells me—one demanding immediate payment of a thousand pounds, the other from your uncle, intimating that he was cutting you out of his will——"

"Perkins told you that, the prying sneak!" exploded Captain Nick furiously.

"Oh, come—come!" urged Nelson Lee. "Don't let us waste time over trifles! Perhaps it was as well he did read the letters, for your cousin has got them now."

"The deuce—he has!" gasped Captain Nick.

"Yes; and another suspicious fact against you besides. You were out of town last night, without telling your man where you were going or when you would be home."

"That is so," answered the other, after a moment's hesitation. "And since you've been so frank with me, I'll tell you something more. I took train last night to Elleswood, to see my uncle there."

"You did?"

"Yes, but I never got there. Oh, yes, I swear it!" added the wretched man quickly. "I turned back when actually within sight of the house. And that is the naked, absolute truth, though the world may laugh at it for a pack of lies!"

"I turned back," he ran on. "It struck me that my uncle would think it a curriish thing for me to come whining to him just because he had altered his will. I had been a fool, so why should I not pay the penalty? So I decided to chuck it and to walk eight miles to Pendlesham Junction, catching the up mail-train there and returning home."

"You mean you missed it?"

"I did; by five minutes or so. My watch must have been wrong," answered the captain, with a groan. "I saw the lights go into the station and out, so I turned aside into a stack-yard, and fell asleep in some hay."

Nelson Lee was unable to suppress a whistle of dismay, for he could see how all this only contributed to the tale of circumstantial evidence instead of refuting it. He wanted to know when Captain Nick first got news of his uncle's murder.

"Through overhearing some farm-labourers talking about it on their way to work. The police had been scouring the country even then."

"And instead of going back to Elleswood, you fuked it—was that it?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"Yes, unluckily I did. I can see my fatal blunder now," confessed the other. "But at the time I could only think how suspicious my whole movements must seem under the circumstances. A blind idea seized me to get back to London unseen and start afresh to come down to Elleswood, just as if I had only heard the news in town. And now I suppose you don't believe one word of what I am telling you," Captain Nick broke off wretchedly, tears in his eyes. "You're setting it all down as rank, miserable lies, just."

Nelson Lee looked hard at him for a minute, then held out his hand. That was his answer.

"But look here," he added, "I can't say what Scotland Yard will think about it. You'll have to be prepared for the worst. I shall go on there now to look up some information which may be useful. Meantime, you must pass me your word of honour, as an officer and a gentleman, that you will go straight to that hotel yonder and stop there absolutely until I come back. Is that a bargain?"

"Of course; and I appreciate it the more since it shows how much you must really trust me. I'll go now and never move over the doorstep. Good-bye, and many thanks again!"

Nelson Lee watched him leave the station and cross to the hotel in question. Captain Nick turned to wave his hand, then vanished.

"He's all right," the detective told himself. "He's got himself into a most infernal mess, but I'll swear he no more committed that murder than I did! What's more, I'll stake my head I find him there, true to his promise, when I come back!"

Another London-bound train was just drawing up then across the line. Nelson Lee made a dash to catch it.

"Hallo! I'm very sorry!" he apologised, as he nearly knocked another passenger head over heels while racing for the stairs.

Ho thought he must have caught the fellow in the mouth with his elbow by the way he was keeping his hand pressed to his lips. Then he realised that it was merely a cigarette the other was holding, so he could not be much hurt after all. As every second was precious therefore, he apologised again hurriedly and fled up the stairs and away.

He tumbled into the train, and in fifty minutes was back at his rooms in Gray's Inn Road again. Nipper was there. His chief kept no secrets from him, so he related all that had happened, down to his encounter with Captain Nick on the platform at Reading.

"And you mean you let him go again?" exclaimed Nipper, amazed. "That was a risky thing to do, surely!"

"Not after he had passed me his word."

"A man's word isn't going to stand long between him and bolting for his life when he sees the hangman's rope dangling over his head," was Nipper's verdict.

"Not the average man," agreed his boss. "But I know Captain Nick. He'll abide by his bond, though ten thousand hangmen were after him. I'll find him there at the hotel when I want him, you mark my word!"

However, for once Nelson Lee's estimate of human character was out by a mile. Within an hour a message came through from Scotland Yard which showed that the police had not been long in hitting off the one and only scent. A warrant was already out for Captain Nick's arrest.

"Do you know anything of his whereabouts?" was the Yard's demand, and Nelson Lee, after a moment's thought, answered:

"Yes. I have seen him this morning. You will find him at the Wivenhoe Arms, a public-house hotel just outside Reading Station. He passed me his word that he would wait there in case he was wanted for this affair."

"Passed you his word! Then you suspected he might have committed the murder, and yet let him go on a flimsy promise like that?" came back the indignant reply.

"It is no flimsy promise," Nelson Lee was retorting, when to his anger he was cut off. So evidently the Yard thought with Nipper, that Nelson Lee had been a confiding fool, to say the least of it.

"All right, we shall see!" said the detective confidently.

However, his assistant was right and he was wrong, as it turned out. Within another half-hour a furious 'phone message came through from the Reading police:

"Captain Nick was gone—bolted! And where to, not a soul could say."

CHAPTER VI.

Mr. Guy Baldrick Seeks Trouble—and Finds It.

"CALL yourself a detective! Why you're an ass and a fool! An ass and a fool, I say! Do you hear me?"

Guy Baldrick had no need to ask that question. In his rage he was raising his voice so that it might have been heard two streets away.

The scene was still at Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road. Some three hours had elapsed since the shattering news came through that Captain Nick Shand had broken his bond and fled.

For there was no other interpretation to be put upon his disappearance. The town of Heading, to say nothing of the hotel, had been searched high and low without result.

Now Detective-inspector Transom, of Scotland Yard, had come on to Nelson Lee to hear from his own lips how he had come to meet the suspect, and more amazing still how, knowing what he did against him, he had said nothing to the police but merely taken his promise that he would not run away.

With the inspector had come Guy Baldrick, so red-hot with fury that he looked almost like knocking Nelson Lee down.

"I'll go further," he spluttered. "I believe all this about my cousin making his promise is absolute bunkum! Far more likely that, as his friend, you deliberately warned him that the police would be after him—gave him the tip to bolt, in fact—What! Help! Ah, would you—"

His valiant defiance ended in a helpless screech.

For Nelson Lee had stood enough of this sort of thing. Never in all his career had he been addressed in such a fashion before, and by a scallywag, too, as he knew Guy to be.

So casting dignity to the winds he simply made one grab at the mouthing waster, and, catching him by the collar, shook him like a rat.

He shook him in fact until collar and shirt-front even ripped in his hand, so that he recoiled one way with half-a-yard of his victim's linen and cravat in his hand, while Guy plunged the other, shooting under the writing-table.

There Nipper, who was as incensed as his chief, "accidentally" overturned a half-gallon bottle of best "blue black" on top of him, so that he was drenched in an inky cascade.

"You insolent dog!" hissed Nelson Lee. "How dare you make such insinuations against me, you—you hanger-on round betting clubs—you cheater at bridge!"

"What!"

If his quarry had only had a revolver, the detective verily believed he would have shot him dead. Inspector Transom thought it time to interfere, and throw oil on the troubled waters where Nipper had just thrown ink.

"Now come—come, gentlemen!" said the Scotland Yard officer. "To say the least of it, we're doing no good, blackguarding each other like this. Just steady yourself now, Mr. Baldrick, please!"

"Me!" yelled the other. "I like that. You can say what you like and so can that beauty there, but I know what I think about it all, and I don't care who hears me—"

"Nor do I," cut in Nelson Lee promptly. "You can shriek it from the house-tops, but not here, I'll take jolly good care of that! So dry up—"

"Oh, yes; dry up, indeed! You'd like that, wouldn't you, now your miserable pal has escaped?"

Only the swift interposition of the inspector's bulky form beneath them saved Guy from receiving the thrashing of his life.

Nipper had never seen his chief so absolutely furious before. It made even him tremble. But the inspector got him smoothed down at last.

For one thing, Guy was babbling on again, and now was Nelson Lee's time to listen. He was spluttering about the tobacco-pouch which had been picked up close to the murdered man's body.

"You knew it was Nick's, just as I did!" spluttered Guy. "I saw you recognised it the moment I showed it to you."

"You showed it me?" quote Nelson Lee promptly. "That's a lie! It was Transom here, not you. What's more," he added, "you had already

told the police you did not know to whom it belonged. So come, what is the meaning of that?"

Guy Baldrick saw that he had blundered, but he was as ready to wriggle as an eel.

"Well, of course, I told them that!" he protested. "Do you think I was going to give away my own cousin so long as there was one shred of hope that he had nothing to do with the crime?"

"And yet now you are behaving like a madman because he is not here, handcuffed and on his way to the gallows!" laughed Nelson Lee. "You waster—take care!" he thundered suddenly, clenching his teeth with a snap and hardening his face like a mask, so that Guy positively jumped with alarm.

"Take care what?" he blurted, with a whining note of fear.

"What I say!" rapped the detective, fixing him with eyes like red-hot augers, which seemed to go clean through the other and out the other side of him.

"Come, come!" protested the inspector once more, seeing nothing in all this but a mere unseemly wrangle, without profit or sense.

But Guy Baldrick did. His weak mouth gaped, and he shrank away a pace. Whatever was in Nelson Lee's mind, however, he was content not to follow up his advantage further. He turned from his enemy with a shrug of contempt.

"You are in charge of this case, Transom," he said, "but rest assured that I shall be having a finger in it, too! This fool has levelled a charge against me which I shall hurl back in his teeth if it costs me every penny I have in the world! I shall track Captain Shand down if it takes me a year, and hand him over to stand his trial! And then we shall see what we shall see!" he finished with another meaning glare at Guy.

There was such unmistakable menace behind his words, in fact, that Guy felt compelled to bluster again. But Nelson Lee was down his throat like a flash.

"Not another word, you hound!" he thundered. "Get out of my house, or, by George, I'll throw you out! Go on!"

The other saw that the detective meant it, and, catching up his hat, promptly skedaddled for the door, looking the weirdest scarecrow imaginable, covered with ink as he was, and with his collar and shirt-front torn away.

Inspector Transom laughed. He had to.

"But I say, Lee," he added, "it was unfortunate, to say the least of it——"

He got no farther, for the prince of crime investigators was eyeing him, too, with a glare there was no misreading. The inspector promptly swallowed the rest of the sentence then, and, after a few clumsy attempts to turn the subject, also picked up his hat and departed.

"Nipper," exclaimed his chief, when the door had slammed, "you were right. I was an ass! But, by Jupiter, I'm going to retrieve my blunder, and in a way that'll make Mr. Baldrick sorry he ever came within a thousand miles of me to-day!"

Nipper could quite imagine it. Never had he seen his beloved guv'nor in such a tearing rage in all the years they had been together.

Nelson Lee went out, then. He hailed a taxi, and drove straight to Captain Nick's chambers. As he half expected, he found them in charge of the police and Perkius gone. It was the valet he particularly wanted, too.

Still, he was not far away, as it happened. He must have been watching from the corner of the street, for, as Nelson Lee turned to walk into Park Lane, there Perkins appeared at his side.

"Good-evening, sir!" he said, saluting eagerly. "I hope you won't mind this liberty, but it's news of my master that I want, and those brutes of police won't give it to me! They say he's bolted, but I know that's a lie!"

"It isn't, I'm afraid, Perkins," Nelson Lee told him. "He has bolted—or, at any rate, he has vanished. And what's more, after passing me his solemn word that he would remain where I left him in case the police should decide on his arrest!"

"But he never bolted!" protested the valet. "The captain would see himself dead before he did that! If he has vanished, it's because there's been foul play. I'll swear to that!"

"Ah, you think so, too—do you?" said Nelson Lee, eyeing him shrewdly. "Well, there you and I agree. I don't believe Captain Shand would ever turn tail—even from the hangman—after giving his word as an officer and a gentleman! But he's gone, and I'm going to find him!"

"By the way, I suppose the police are shadowing you too—are they? I thought so!"

He laughed, casting a quick glance round, and spotting, sure enough, a plain-clothes officer just tucking himself out of sight behind a pillar-box.

From the savage glare the constable darted at him, he could see how annoyed he was at being caught, but in this case Nelson Lee felt that Scotland Yard and he were foes.

He could see that they thought him guilty of a stupid error of judgment, to say the least of it. Like Guy Baldrick, they might even be accusing him in their own minds of something worse.

The knowledge steeled Nelson Lee to the effort of his life. He never remembered starting on a case with such rabid keenness before. He would have fought half London if they had tried to stop him.

"So I tell you that, Perkins!" he finished. "I'm going to run down your master, and you've got to help me. I don't believe for one second that he had anything to do with this crime. He swore to me he did not, and I'll take his word before all the world. But our only way to help him is to arrest him—rescue him, if you like—since, like me, you believe his disappearance is due to foul play."

"I'm sure of it!" reiterated the valet. "Haven't I served him now these five years, and do you think I don't know an out-and-out thoroughbred when I see him? He had his debts, of course; but who hasn't, I'd like to know? Yes, they'll sling them up against him, I suppose—particularly that letter last night that Mr. Baldrick pinched from one moneylender, demanding a thousand pounds, or he'd shove him in the courts."

"Yes. I heard about that—from Mr. Guy," said Nelson Lee drily. "He said he had caught you reading it."

"Well, and he read it, too, sir," retorted the valet in self-defence. "And that other letter also that came from General Shand, threatening to cut the master out of his will—you ought to have seen the grin on Mr. Guy's face when he saw that! I was watching him through the keyhole."

"He was flattering himself that the general would promote him in the captain's place, you think?" suggested Nelson Lee. "Well, perhaps he has. The will had not been opened when I left Elleswood. But it all combines to make things about as black as they can be for the man we want to help."

CHAPTER VI.

Another Telephone Message—The Man Behind the Door.

"**B**UT that's not the way to look at it!" he went on quickly, hearing Perkins's groan of despair. "We have the captain's solemn word that, though he did go down to Elleswood last night, and even arrived within sight of the house, he changed his mind about interceding with his uncle, and turned back to come home again. For a man of his spirit, that is possible. What is not possible, I still maintain, is that, after giving me his parole to remain at that Reading hotel, he bolted. I'll never believe that!"

"We've got to prove it, though," he ran on. "We think that he must have been decoyed. If so, by whom? It could not be by Mr. Guy himself, therefore he must have some confederate who may even have been shadowing your master all along by Guy's orders."

"Now, who could that be?" demanded Nelson Lee. "Do you know any one, any of Mr. Guy's friends—he has plenty of shady ones—who would be likely to take on such a job?"

Perkins screwed up his brows, but could hit on no one.

"Unless—— Half a moment, sir!" He broke off suddenly. "There is one man who, if people knew half as much as I know about him, would not be allowed to show his face so much as he does in the light of the day! And he's a friend of Mr. Guy's, too!"

"Oh, and who's that?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"Bereker, he calls himself," answered the valet. "But, when I knew him first, he was plain 'Sporty Flynch,' and that'll tell you more than a whole volume the kind of card he is."

"A betting man?" suggested Lee.

"Yes, all that and worse. Card-sharper, blackmailer—anything dirty in that line is all in a day's work with him. How he has managed to keep out of the clutches of the police so long, luck only knows."

"Well come! That's interesting," agreed Nelson Lee. "And he's a friend of Mr. Guy's, you say. You have seen them together. What is he like to look at?"

Perkins described him. There was nothing about the description, however, to mark him out from a hundred other spongers and hangers-on, who glean a shady living round the West-End clubs, until Perkins added one item to his catalogue.

This Mr. Bereker—alias "Sporty Flynch"—in earlier days had been badly worsted in a taproom scrap, when some irate victim had hit him across the mouth with a bottle. The result was such a disfiguration of that feature that, though Sporty grew the heaviest of cavalry moustaches to conceal it, he was still self-conscious enough to take other measures to mask it from the public gaze.

"And that's why, if you were to meet him now, sir, for the first time," finished Perkins, "he'd have his hand to his mouth, smoking a cigarette. It's got to be a trick of his, though it's done so natural you'd never notice it——"

"Wouldn't I? One minute, though! Don't you be too sure!" cut in Nelson Lee promptly, his memory flashing back to the man he had collided with and nearly capsized at Reading Station.

And now, when he came to con over Perkins's description again, it was the very fellow. Nelson Lee was convinced of it. Moreover, his presence there fitted in exactly with their theory that Guy Baldrick had been keeping his luckless cousin shadowed, and that it was through his agency that

Captain Nick had been decoyed away out of the hotel, leaving the world to believe that he had bolted.

"By Jove, yes!" gasped Nelson Lee delightedly. "I'll go down to Reading again at once! I'll very soon find out whether he came nosing round the hotel or not after I had gone! But first I must get back to my rooms. And you had better come, too, Perkins. Come on! There's a taxi passing now."

They hailed the cab and jumped in.

"Nipper, I'm on to a clue, I believe!" he announced eagerly as he came bursting in on his assistant.

"Oh, and what's that?"

His chief told him. Nipper gave a jump when he heard about the man who could still hold a cigarette to his lips though nearly knocked spinning on his back.

"Geewhilikins!" he exclaimed. "Why, I saw a man like that, too, now I come to think of it! It was last night, as I turned into the street where Mr. Baldrick's flat is."

Nipper described him. Perkins's face lit up at once. It was Sporty Flynn to a tee!

"Then that clinches still another nail in our argument," decided Nelson Lee. "He must have just left Guy. And yet there were no lights in the house, you say, when you reached it a second later! H'm!"

The detective was tapping his chin and pursing up his lips, as was his habit when nonplussed. Suddenly he jumped up.

"Perhaps I may not go down to Reading to-night, after all," he announced. "I've an idea I should just like to see the inside of these chambers of Mr. Guy's first."

"What, break into them?" demanded Nipper in astonishment.

However, his chief made no answer, but busied himself for a few moments at a drawer, where Nipper knew he kept a store of pick-locks, skeleton-keys, and other burglarious tools, in case of emergencies. Five minutes later he was out of the house and away. Perkins and Nipper were to await his orders.

"I shall probably telephone," was all Nelson Lee said.

Breaking into a gentleman's private rooms to ransack them was a ticklish business, particularly since Nelson Lee held no warrant whatever, and indeed had nothing to do with the case officially. But the detective did not care a snuff about that. Guy was safely out of town, he knew, and that was enough for him.

No. 7a Vernon Street, Piccadilly, turned out to be an old house, let off partly as offices. It had a public staircase, the door of which was still open when Nelson Lee arrived.

To coolly jemmy a man's door while strangers might come up or down the stairs to challenge him, was out of the question, of course. He must wait until all the business people had departed.

Meantime, Nelson Lee was not idle. He had to devise some way of gaining entrance quietly to the building without ringing up the housekeeper. Still, that was easy enough.

He slipped a fine gimlet up his cuff, and stepped into the doorway, as if to look for the name of some firm on the tablet at the foot of the stairs.

Actually he was driving a hole with quick twists of the gimlet through the door panel, where the handle hid it from view. Through the hole he threaded a scrap of fine strong twine.

The lock, he had seen, was a common spring latchlock of the pull-back variety. Hitching the end of the twine to the handle, all he had to do

now was to tug on the protruding end of string, and the door would open instantly.

He had next to wait for the last of the clerks to leave, when the house-keeper had closed the door for the night. Three minutes later, when the sound of scrubbing was heard again from the good woman's quarters in the basement, Nelson Lee stepped up to the door and appeared to press the bell. A brief pause, and then any passer-by would have thought that the call had been answered, and that Nelson Lee was being ushered inside. In he went, at any rate, and the door gently closed.

Tiptoeing his way upstairs, Nelson Lee came to Guy's door on the topmost flight. Out came the skeleton keys then. There was no lock invented that he would not undertake to pick the secret out of, if you only gave him time. And it happened this was one of the ordinary Brahma pattern.

In another two minutes Nelson Lee was inside, with the door safely shut again. A muffled electric torch cast a soft glimmer round Guy's sitting-room. It was by no means a luxurious apartment, the detective noticed: more like an office, in fact. An ugly American roll-top desk assisted in the resemblance, as also the telephone; and still more so, a second bulky instrument beside it, which set the detective blinking with astonishment when his eyes lit on it.

"Why, what in thunder can a man like him want with a thing like that?" he wondered. "That's only for the busiest of City men, and Guy Baldrick was never that, that ever I heard."

A polished oak box, on the floor in the corner, next attracted his attention. He crossed to it, lifted the lid, and inspected the contents. These were essential parts of the instrument which had just excited his astonishment. He drew one or two out, fingering them carefully, and looking back to the instrument again as if he had an experiment he would dearly love to try, yet did not dare.

Then his eyes lit on something else tucked away between some books on a shelf. He crossed over and took this down, examining it closely. Again his eyes turned longingly to the machine by the telephone.

At that second, though he was unaware of it, a strange thing happened. The tiny shaft of light filtering through the keyhole from the lamp on the stairs outside was suddenly darkened.

An eye was peering through watching him. Contrary to Nelson Lee's calculations, Guy Baldrick had returned to town.

This was him crouching on the landing outside, shaking in every limb, and his heart thumping like a steam-hammer. Admitting himself by his own latchkey, he had come softly up the stairs, and was just about to open the door, when he overheard the detective prowling about inside.

A glance through the keyhole happened to reveal the intruder's face in the full beam of the electric torch. Instantly Guy had fallen back in consternation, that sinister threat of Nelson Lee's clanging in his ears: "Take care, you waster—take care!"

And now here was his enemy ransacking his chambers like a thief in the night. He ought to rush in and challenge him, of course, yet he didn't. He only watched, terrified.

At last, though, he did seem to pull himself together. His latchkey was in his shaking fingers. But for one thing Nelson Lee must have heard it as it was fumbled into the lock.

That one thing, though, was a human voice, which suddenly broke on the stillness of the silent house. Nor was it Nelson Lee's: but Guy Baldrick's own.

Yet the latter was still there on his side of the door, with lips bloodless and compressed, while the voice came echoing through from the other.

So overcome with terror was Guy, apparently, that he went reeling away, to clutch at the iron balustrade for support. For a full three minutes he stood thus petrified, listening to the phantom echoes of his own voice droning on.

At last they ceased. The spell which held him seemed to shatter and disperse. Again he rallied his quaking limbs. It was to his hip pocket that his hand groped this time. He drew out a revolver.

Touch of the evil-looking weapon seemed to give him fresh pluck. He was a man again. Hate and vengeance shone in his dark, close-set eyes. He took a stride back to the door again, to dash it open and burst in.

Yet once more a voice was to forestall him, and send him shrinking back. It was preceded by the sharp tinkle of a bell. A call had come over the 'phone, and, never thinking for the moment what he was doing, Nelson Lee had taken down the receiver and was answering it.

"Hallo! Well! Who is it?"

He realised his rashness instantly a moment later, when a voice replied with an equally sturdy "Hallo!"

And then, as if sudden suspicion had seized the speaker, he demanded quickly:

"Who's that? Who's talking. Who is it?"

Nelson Lee, though, was equal to the occasion as ever. He had seen the housekeeper, so he pitched his voice as near to hers as he imagined it might be.

"It's me!" Guy heard him answer in a thin, peevish squeak. "What d'you want? Mister Baldrick ain't 'ere to-day. I'm only cleaning out 'is rooms."

There was silence for a moment. Guy would have given his soul to know who it was who was talking into the detective's ear so confidently, and what he was saying.

Nelson Lee knew, of course.

"Oh, so that's you, Mrs. Tibbald, is it?" came back the voice, more easily. "Well, I'm Mr. Beroker—Mr. Baldrick's friend, you remember; that called on him two nights ago."

"Oh, indeed, sir!" squeaked back the detective, adding silently under his breath: "So this is you, Sporty Flynch, is it? Very well; good business! Go ahead, and let's hear what you've got to tell me."

"Mr. Baldrick is not back yet from the country, you say?" continued the voice over the wire. "Well, I hardly expected he would be, really. But when he does come in, I want you to give him a message."

"Very good, sir!" answered the supposed housekeeper, with a char-woman's sniff. "And what might that be, if you please?"

"Why, that I am down at V's, tell him. V's—that's all. He'll understand. Tell him everything is all right, so far, and if he wants me to send word to the Posthorn. Do you hear?—Posthorn. It's the name of a hotel. Thanks. Good-night!"

The speaker rang off. Nelson Lee hooked up the receiver again, and stood for a minute, a broad smile slowly spreading over his thin, ascetic features. Then, still all unconscious that a human eye was again watching his every move through the keyhole, he turned next to a Bradshaw timetable, which lay on the desktop.

Two minutes later the telephone-bell was "tringing" again, but this time it was he who was calling up the exchange.

"Give me West Central, double O seventeen nought four," he commanded. It was his own telephone number at his rooms in Gray's Inn Road. By-and-by Nipper's voice answered.

"Hallo, Nipper; is that you? It's Nelson Lee speaking. I'm here at Baldrick's chambers. And I've struck oil, too, I think."

"You have! Good egg! What way?" demanded Nipper.

"Ah, that must keep," was the disappointing reply. "But I'm going down to Reading to-night—do you hear?—or, not to Reading exactly, but Sonnington-on-Thames, which is about six miles above it. Do you know it?"

"Rather! But why Sonnington?"

"Because—well, I've got reasons. But you are to follow on to Reading and bring Perkins with you. Catch, not the eight-seventeen train, because I'm going by that myself, but the ten o'clock, which will be soon enough. Sleep at the Wivenhoe Arms, both of you, and be ready to come the moment you get a wire from me. If Inspector Transom is there, attach yourself to him. You can tell him I'm at Sonnington, and on to something good. Good-bye! No time for more. Am just off to get a cab."

Nelson Lee gave his assistant no time to answer, but hooked up the receiver. Next, picking up the mysterious article he had taken from the bookcase, he carefully wrapped it, first in his silk handkerchief, then in a thick covering of newspaper. Slipping it into his hip-pocket, he turned to the door.

And then—and only then—he saw that he had an eavesdropper watching him all this time.

For where there had been pitch darkness in the passage, was now suddenly a tiny point of light, which he knew was the keyhole. His quick ears, too, detected the faint shuffling of feet outside.

CHAPTER VII.

On the Trail of Sporty Flynch.

"**H**UM!" thought Lee, startled, but cool nevertheless. "Now who is that, I wonder? Not the housekeeper, or she would be whooping blue murder long ago. I suppose it isn't Mr. Guy come back, by any chance? That would be rotten luck, if you like."

He never moved, but just waited. A few seconds later he seemed to hear the soft thud of a door, and then the click of a latch stealthily closed. He knew which one it must be. It was a door on the landing, directly at the head of the staircase.

"And a fine place for an ambush, too," he decided, "supposing anybody wanted to spring cut and down a chap. By-the-by——" He broke off suddenly, smitten by a notion.

Quietly his hand stole to his hip-pocket again. He drew out the parcel he had so carefully made, unrolled it, and taking out the article it contained, he crossed to the oak box in the corner again.

Here were a score or so of similar articles, identical in size and shape, arranged in neat compartments. To exchange one of these and substitute the original one to its place was the work only of an instant. Then wrapping up the second, he thrust it into his pocket, and returned to the front door again.

"Now, I wonder what surprise this beggar—whoever he is—thinks he has got in store for me," he thought. "Is it really Guy Baldrick, and has he been quietly listening to all I've been up to? Because, if so, I shouldn't wonder if he means to break my neck for me. Certainly he had better try it, if he's wise. However, we shall soon see," Nelson Lee decided coolly; and thereupon opened the door and stepped out.

As he anticipated not a soul was to be seen. But there was the door of the cupboard, or whatever it was, commanding the stairhead. And a man was skulking inside it, he was convinced.

Still, it was not his game to betray that he was on his guard. He crossed to the stair, and without turning his eyes even, began to descend.

It was about as severe a test of nerve as ever even he had experienced. For if the man in the cupboard was Guy Baldrick, then Nelson Lee knew enough now to hang him.

And Guy must know that, too, else why was he skulking there like a thief, when he should have come out, and barred the detective's path, demanding what he meant by this cheeky intrusion.

Down—down! Step by step Nelson Lee descended, expecting every instant to feel a man's feet striking between his shoulder-blades, hurling him to his death. For the stairs were of stone; lofty and steep.

Nothing happened, though. To Nelson Lee's amazement, there was not even a sound. Before he scarcely realised it, he was safely at the front door again. A moment later he was out in the street.

An empty taxi was passing, it happened. The detective boarded it with a spring. "Paddington," he commanded; and away it flew.

Again and again through that ride he peered back to see whether his eavesdropper was trying to follow him. But he had gained a smart start and the traffic was thick.

The 8-17 was already drawn up at the platform when Nelson Lee arrived. He took his seat, still watching for sign of Guy. For the latter must have overheard his instructions to Nipper, of course. Better had he waited and phoned from some call-box outside.

Still no sign of Guy, and the train was beginning to move. Two or three belated passengers were making a dash for the footboard at the furthest end, but whether one of these was Baldrick the detective could not distinguish. Still time and Sonnington station should show.

But when at last, late that autumn night, Nelson Lee stepped out at his destination, he was the only passenger to leave the train. So Guy must have remained in his ransacked rooms after all, without giving chase.

Sonnington on a summer's day is about as pretty a spot as you will find on the Upper Thames. And prettiest of all is the view of the old Post-horn Inn embowered in clematis, nestling beside the quaint high-arched bridge, with trim-kept lawns running down to the river's edge.

And even now, though it was autumn and the mist and the breeze struck chill to the marrow, the old inn made a pretty picture with the big yellow moon sinking low behind its twisted chimneys, splashing the river with pools of liquid gold.

Snug, too, the lighted windows looked, and cheerier still the crackling fire in the bar-parlour, as Nelson Lee peeped into it.

He was not quite the same Nelson Lee though who had boarded the train at Paddington. The miniature box of make-up stains and pigments which never left the detective's inside pocket, had worked a transformation as complete as it was wonderful. The barmaid saw only a hollow-eyed and ill-looking man, who looked as if he had one foot in the grave already.

He was on his way to spend the week-end with friends in a houseboat, too, which was about the worst place for him the girl decided.

Nelson Lee had already arranged for the hire of a neat, little motor-boat. It was at the landing-stage now. He wanted some biscuits and cheese before he set out.

So he sat reading a paper and munching his frugal supper, but with ears and eyes on the alert. For all that, he was not quite sharp enough to detect a man who stealthily pushed the outer door open a fraction of an inch and remained eyeing him through the crack.

It was Guy Baldrick. He had come down on the 8-17 after all, but had slipped out at Reading; the station before. Thence he had come across by car.

With him was a second figure, still less discernible in the darkness. His hand held to his lips, which were nibbling nervously at an unlit cigarette, left little doubt as to his identity.

"The dog! Can't you see him?" gritted Guy in a hoarse whisper to his companion behind him. "He's painted his blackguard face, but that's Nelson Lee right enough. And now we'll decoy the mongrel to his death. I'll go on ahead. I know where to lay hands on all I need. Give me a good half hour say, and then—you know what I told you!"

Sporty Flyuch, otherwise "Mr. Bereker," as he chose to call himself now, nodded assent. Nevertheless, he looked by no means so eager for his task as Guy.

The latter was all fierce energy and savage hate. Unless this meddler, who had probed his secret guilt, was silenced for ever and quickly, he was doomed he knew.

"Yes, curse him! But wait," he promised himself hoarsely. "Half an hour's start and then I'll settle his hash for him, or my name's not Baldrick. Come on, Bereker!" he hissed, and led the way back to the boat-raft beside the inn-lawn, where Nelson Lee's little motor-craft lay rocking.

Near it was a second miniature launch, also petrol driven. It was the one Sporty Flyuch had just come gliding up in, to find Guy awaiting him.

But it was not his own craft that Sporty boarded now but the detective's. He had a loose end of half untwisted tow line in his hand. Leaning over the stern, he groped for the propeller. Then round and round the shaft of this he twisted the unravelled hemp. A treble knot to finish off with and he scuttled back to shore again.

By this time Guy had vanished, hurrying along the tow-path downstream. Here, less than a mile below, was Sonnington Weir, another beauty spot, much sought out by picnickers on a summer's day.

To-night, though, with dank mists rising and a flooded river roaring through the weir stakes, like thunder into the swirling pool beneath, it was hardly a spot to chose to loll in.

For Sonnington Weir, for all its beauty, had a sinister record. More lives had been lost there, it was said, than at any other point of the river, excepting, perhaps, Waterloo Bridge, London's Bridge of Sighs.

Even in summertime the stream approaching it was swift. Craft making for the narrow cutting branching down to Sonnington Lock, were warned by large notice boards to hug the near-bank carefully, or they might find themselves swept on to the piles and capsized.

In the dark, and particularly with a rain-swollen stream as was running to-night, this warning was doubly necessary.

Still, there were not many pleasure-seekers likely to be abroad at this hour. The river season was dead, in fact. Here and there in an old house-boat up and down, a few Spartans lingered.

One such craft, as Nelson Lee heard, was moored in the reach of the old river just below Sonnington weir-pool. "A Mr. Bereker hired it," the barmaid told him. He was a keen fisherman and lived alone.

So Nelson Lee had managed to pick up some information about his quarry while he sat munching his biscuits and cheese.

"I should think a man must get pretty fed up with his own company on a tub like that," he suggested to the girl. "I suppose he toddles up here pretty often of an evening?"

"Oh, yes! Well, not every night," answered the barmaid. "I rather think, though, he's expecting a friend down to stop with him, so he may look in. But here he is, just coming in by the other door," she suddenly broke off.

The girl went out. Nelson Lee, glancing through, could see a man's figure in the passage. He recognised him at once as the man he had nearly bowled over on Reading platform.

So this was Bereker, alias Sporty Flynnch, and he lived alone on a house-boat in the reach of the old river below Sonnington Weir.

"And a very snug out-of-the-way spot, too, at this time of the year," Nelson Lee reflected. "For the river makes a good two-mile loop there; all deuced hard-pulling up-stream. And when you've got to the weir you're stopped. You can only turn round and go all the way back."

Quite likely at this season not one boat a month would bother to make the passage. So if Sporty Flynnch lived there, and it was Sporty who had decoyed Captain Nick away, as the detective believed, what was more likely than that the latter was being held prisoner on this same lone house-boat the barmaid had described?

Still, there was Sporty chaffing the girl boisterously, and now Nelson Lee had got his eagle eye on him, he did not mean to let him escape until he had himself tracked him to his lair.

Sporty came in, nibbling, as usual, at an unlit cigarette. He eyed the detective boldly and wished him a neighbourly "good evening." His pal he had been expecting had not turned up it seemed, so he was just going to have one short drink and then get back.

Nelson Lee took this as his own cue to retire and get ready for the coming chase. He went down to the raft, boarded his motor-boat, and pushed off. The engine seemed to run fairly well and he headed up-stream.

Time enough to turn and run down when Sporty had got his own craft under weigh and was making for Sonnington Lock.

For to get to his house-boat below the weir, he would have to go through the lock and all the way back round the two mile loop of the old river again.

In a few minutes Nelson Lee saw his quarry appear on the hotel landing-place. The detective was waiting for him under the willows with engine stopped. He saw his quarry board his launch and an instant later the steady thrum of the motor told that he was off.

Nelson Lee gave him a fifty yard start, and then set his own engine going again. But this time something had gone amiss with it.

"Confound the rotten thing! It's stopped—got fouled up somewhere!" he growled savagely ducking down to overhaul the motor and see where the jam had occurred.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Arch-villain.

MEANTIME, of course, his quarry was slipping away into the darkness at a rattling pace. Nelson Lee could have kicked the bottom out of his craft in his fury.

Yet, fumble as he would, he could find nothing wrong with the motor

itself. It occurred to him then to see if it was the propeller that had got fouled. A quick dip of the hand solved the whole mystery. A lump of rope, either by accident or design, as was more likely, had got entangled round the propeller shaft, effectually crippling it.

"By gosh! Then that means I've been spotted in spite of my disguise!" raged the detective. "Sporty has done this, you bet, to get the start of me. He knows I am on his tracks, and now he has nipped off, top-speed, to collect the captain and snake him away to some fresh hiding place."

It was bitter luck. Still, the only thing was to hack away at the obstacle until the propeller was cleared. Nor did this take as long as he feared. At the most Sporty had only got five minutes start of him, after all.

Now, with throttle open, Nelson Lee sent his little craft forging forward at top speed.

Sonnington Weir was half a mile only from the Posthorn Inn. Racing round the bend, he suddenly drew into the full roar of it. A ghostly rank of posts, with slender bridge above, spanned the swollen stream.

Through these and the lifted weir-plates the torrent rushed to plunge with a din like thunder into the surging pool below.

The boat was flying like a hunted thing, swept on by the flooded stream. Nelson Lee, though, was an old hand at the game. He knew the Rio of the lock-cutting, dark as it was, and the dangerous cross-current which swept across the mouth of it.

With a swing of the tiller he kept his craft well in to the near bank, as the notice-boards directed. His thoughts, in fact, were all on the fugitive ahead.

Of him there was no sign, of course. But the detective hoped to overhaul him before he could get through the lock.

Now his craft was in the very thick of the tussle. He could feel how the treacherous current was tearing all it knew to sweep him away broadside, and hurl him over the weir. But the motor throbbed defiantly, and Nelson Lee only smiled.

And then, all in a flash, something happened; he knew not what exactly. But it seemed as if the boat had struck something full tilt.

Yet there was no shock, as from a sunken tree. Only the stem of the boat seemed to be caught by a giant hand and flung aside. Worse still, it was held aside ruthlessly, so that, do what he could, Nelson Lee found himself hurtling at express train speed, straight for the weir stakes.

He switched off his motor, of course, but of what use was that with all his own momentum and a current like a mill-race whirling him on to destruction and even death.

For the detective was no fool. He knew what he was in for. He would be lucky if his brains were not dashed out in the collision alone, with the sturdy piles.

Still, there was no use yelling. It had to come. Five yards would see the end now. He could imagine the shapely mahogany hull splintering like matchwood under him, and himself flung into the raging whirlpool beyond.

"Now for it! My stars!"

Crash! Splinter! Thud! The motor-boat had rammed the piles full tilt, swinging broadside and crumpling under him like an eggshell. In rushed the torrent. Nelson Lee was flung in a heap.

However, even now the catalogue of his catastrophes was not complete. For out of the darkness, from the footbridge overhead, something came whizzing down, striking his shoulder with sickening force as he floundered.

More than that, a second mysterious body followed instantly out of the murk; and this time it was a man who had jumped blindly into the ship-wrecked craft.

Nelson Lee thought, naturally, it was some bold fellow come to rescue him. He tried to cry out his thanks, but that deadly blow on his shoulder had knocked half the life out of him.

Nor was it a second before he realised that the man who gripped him was not friend but foe.

"You dog! What are you doing to me?" blurted out Nelson Lee in fury, and striving vainly to get a glimpse at the ruffian's face.

With savage haste the fellow was wrenching at his pocket—the same pocket, too, where the detective had slipped the mysterious article he had confiscated from Guy Baldrick's rooms.

Now, in a flash, it burst upon Nelson Lee what the game was. If this was not Guy himself bent on murdering him, then it was a confederate quite as merciless.

For having at last possessed himself of the prize he was after, he snatched up a lump of wood and struck the detective over the head again and again.

However, he had his own skin to think about. The vast weight of water, crushing and grinding the broken hull to splinters, had at last completed its work.

Nelson Lee's assailant had just time to make a spring to clutch the weir-bridge again when the wreck parted. The detective only remembered that headlong plunge down through the stakes into the roaring maelstrom beneath.

He struck out to make a fight for it, but the first movement of his injured arm brought such blinding agony that he must have fainted, for he knew no more.

How long he remained rolling senseless like a log in that turmoil of waters, he could not tell; nor how he ever came to get free of the whirlpool's grip at last, and drift to calmer shallows.

Fainting as he was he must still have struggled. At any rate, when his senses did at last come creeping slowly back to him, he was aground, though still in a foot of swiftly-running water.

In fact already the current had begun to take hold of him again as if determined not to be robbed of its victim. In vain he clutched at the treacherous gravel to keep himself from drifting to what he knew must be certain death.

For the agony of his shoulder was intense. He could not swim even to save his life.

At least that was how he felt. But when, in spite of all he could do, he found himself back in deep water and sinking, despair lent him strength.

"Help! Help!" he shouted, forgetting for the moment the man who had already made such a furious attack upon his life. Yet to have seen even him again would have been preferable to dying like a dog in the dark. "Help! Rescue! Man overboard here!" he kept shouting, fighting on feebly all the time. His strength though was leaving him fast. Twice already he had sunk, and the third time he knew must be the last. "Rescue! Great heavens, can nobody hear me?" he groaned.

And then as if in answer to his prayer his sound arm struck against something hard. He clutched it. It was a chain.

The mooring chain of a craft, which now for the first time he discerned towering over him. It must be the houseboat the girl had told him about—Sporty's houseboat. It would be just about this very spot according to her description.

Nelson Lee shouted no longer, but just hung on, trying to collect wits and strength. The water was as cold as ice. His limbs were numb. Even now he knew death had him by the heels to drag him down.

"Thank Heaven there is still the moon!" he thought; he would not die altogether in the dark.

He glanced up at the houseboat. No light showed in the curtained windows. It was a mean-looking craft after all, sadly in need of paint. And deserted, too, or surely anyone aboard it must have heard his cries for rescue.

"And yet I don't know," decided Nelson Lee. "Who would be aboard it but one man, and they're hardly likely to leave him loose while they're away."

He was thinking of Captain Nick, of course! For if his surmise was correct and the captain had been kidnapped, this houseboat should be his prison.

The old sleuthhound spirit was roused. Nelson Lee found himself hauling himself along the mooring chain and clutching at the houseboat itself, regardless of the agony the effort cost him. Then round the gunwale he began to pull himself, peering up at each window for any sign of life on board.

"Shand—Captain Shand!" he ventured to call in a guarded voice. But no answer.

He was wondering whether by any herculean effort he could manage to drag himself on to the boat's deck, when suddenly something appeared at the cabin porthole just above his head—something which nearly made him loose his grip involuntarily and fall back into the flood.

It was a human face! More than that, it was Captain Nick's—this he would swear! And it appeared to look straight down into his, and then as swiftly it vanished.

"Nick! Shand! For mercy's sake, what are you doing here? I am Nelson Lee—your friend! Help me, can't you! My arm's broken!"

However, he saw no more. Nor was there sound of anyone moving on board. The man he was moving heaven and earth to save from the gallows had seen him there, clinging for dear life—had looked straight down into his eyes, and yet had deserted him.

"My stars, am I mad or dreaming—or what?" gasped Nelson Lee. "Shand, you coward!"

His lips opened to cry once more, but no sound came. Instead, he turned his head in startled dismay.

For from quite close at hand, though only now audible above the sullen roaring of the weir, sounded the throbbing note of a motor-boat's engine.

It was Sporty's craft that had passed down through the dock and round the bend below, and up the loop of the old river to where his houseboat was anchored.

He had collected a passenger en route what was more.

"The cur who attacked me from the weir-bridge," thought the detective instantly; and as promptly he began to sidle his way back along the gunwale again until the houseboat's overhanging stem hid him from view.

Two minutes later Sporty was alongside. His passenger was the first to leap out. It was Guy Baldrick!

Nelson Lee watched amazed. So if that was Guy he had overheard eaves-dropping at the keyhole while he was burgling his chambers, then he had followed him to Sonnington after all.

Yet it was Guy without a doubt. His first words confirmed this.

"So this is your tub—eh?" he said, with a sneer, to Sporty. "Well, it's in a lonely enough spot, and that's the main thing, I suppose." He peered out across the swinging, foam-sleeked waters to where the weirpool chopped and tossed. "Ugh!" he shuddered. "How you can stick such a hole beats me! I'd cut my throat, I believe, if I had to remain here a night, with

that infernal weir booming away like Niagara Falls! Gosh, but I don't know how I ever had the pluck to jump down into that boat as I did, even though I knew it was my one chance to dodge the cursed gallows!"

This was frank, and doubly frank, seeing that there was Nelson Lee clinging on not ten feet from him, listening to him.

So the villain who had tried to beat out his brains first with a rock, then rob and leave him to drown, was Mr. Guy! Quite probably it was some diabolical contrivance of his also that had caught Nelson Lee's boat by the stem and diverted it to disaster.

"You beautiful blackguard!" muttered the detective under his breath. "Well, I'll get you ten years for that, if nothing else! By Jove, I will!" he vowed.

However, Sporty Flynch had unlocked the cabin door and ushered his confederate inside. And none too soon for Guy's shattered nerves. All the way over, it seemed, he had been shaking with terror in case the corpse of the man he had sent to his death should rise out of the swirling depths and lift sightless, accusing eyes to his.

He fairly floundered into the cabin in his haste. Then and only then did he seem to recall that the murder of his enemy, Nelson Lee, was not his only mission that night.

CHAPTER IX.

What Happened in the Houseboat.

"WHERE is the other fool? Where do you keep him?" he blurted, trying to pull himself together.

"The fool is in there," answered his companion, a tinge of contempt in his tone, opening a stateroom door as he spoke.

"Why, you mean, you haven't even locked him in?" demanded Guy furiously, noticing how easily it yielded to his touch.

"Locked him in! Of course I locked him in!" retorted Sporty. "And what if I didn't, anyway? No one is likely to come prowling up here at this hour of night, and as for him getting up and walking about, I haven't seen him lift a finger even, the way I keep him doped. See?"

He held up a tiny silver morphia-syringe as he spoke. Undissolved tablets of the drug lay ready on the table.

"You can trust me, I reckon," he laughed. "He isn't the first jay I've kept quiet for a week, or even two. As soon as I got him to have that drink at the hotel last night, I knew I had got him set. He followed me out like a lamb, and there he is!"

He pointed to the bunk, on which a man's figure lay stretched. One would have thought him a corpse but for his laboured breathing. Guy crossed over and peered down into his cousin's face with a grin of hate.

For a moment or two he said nothing. Then suddenly he straightened up.

"Now, look here, Bereker—or Flynch, or whatever you call yourself! I've come to talk bedrock business with you. I've told you about that prying hound Nelson Lee, and how he thought he had done me and how I did him, back there under that cursed bridge. Well, he's out of it!" he ran on. "What's more, all he managed to worm out about me and the murder of my uncle has gone with him."

"You are really sure of that?" insisted the other.

"Absolutely! Don't I tell you!" snapped Guy. "Until the moment he came checkily bursting into my place he had not one jot of evidence

to connect me with the crime, only his own confounded suspicions. After rummaging my rooms, though, and finding what I told you— By the way, where is that infernal thing?"

He broke of, nervously grabbing at his pockets, fearful lest the parcel might have been lost. But it was there in its wrappings still. Guy opened it, handling it as if it were poison.

"The sooner this is out of the way, the better," he said, shaking again with fright. "Have you got a fireplace on this wretched hulk? Ah, so that's it, is it? And now a match?"

Sporty provided him with a vesta. The thing was stuffed back into the grate of the little bogey-stove. A flame was applied to it; there was a flash and a roar which brought a crimson plume to the top of the chimney above the upperdeck. In three minutes the blaze had burnt itself out.

Nelson Lee saw the reflection, and, strange though it sounds, he only smiled.

"That's right! Now I feel safer," continued Guy. "If he had produced that against me at the Old Bailey, where should I have been—eh? On my way to the condemned cell myself, and that's a fact! But it's gone, and so is the hound who stole it! And now I can breathe afresh—certain that no one else can prove one line against me now, if they try till crack of doom."

"Well, that's all right; I'm very glad to hear it!" was Sporty's comment to this.

"Meaning you think they may be able to after all?" demanded Guy, with fury born of the terror consuming him. "But how? How, I ask you? Go on, don't stop now you've started, you white-livered coward!"

"Ho, ho, I like that!" laughed Sporty dangerously. "And, anyway, I never started. It was you yourself. But still, if you want to know what I think about it——"

"Yes—go on."

For answer Sporty pointed to the insensible figure on the bunk beside them.

"There's the man who may beat you yet," he said darkly. "You think your scheme mighty clever and complete. Well, so it is! But you can't keep your cousin here doped like this all your life. Your notion is to let the police find him, when, of course, the fact that he has been hiding, as they'll think, will be another big point in proof of his guilt. But don't forget," Sporty continued sagely, "that the moment the police get him the morphia dope stops. Your cousin's wits will clear then, and he'll defend himself tooth and nail!"

"You mean," struck in Guy quickly, "that if you were me you would stop his mouth for him, here and now? Is that it?"

"I? Not I!" protested Sporty promptly. "There's been killing enough, and a dashed sight too much already for my taste! So I tell you straight, Mr. Guy! When you first started me on this job, there was no talk but of breaking into your uncle's house and helping ourselves to a thousand or two of hard cash—rents from his quarter-day. It was you who suddenly switched off from that and hatched the notion of outing the old man altogether, so you could succeed to his estates."

"Well, and haven't I offered to pay you a thumping share of those?" burst out Guy. "And all you've got to do is to keep your mouth shut for it. You didn't kill my uncle, nor Nelson Lee either, did you? Well, your neck's safe, isn't it? So what are you grumbling about?"

"I'm not grumbling," said the other. "At least, I shall begin to grumble if you talk of putting your cousin's light out, too, with the rest. I say there's been killing enough!"

"And I say there hasn't!" flared out Guy. "You've put the notion into my head, and it's your own fault. As you say, the moment the morphia is out of him he'll begin to blab. And so long as he is left to blab, my neck isn't safe. So I am going to stop his mouth for him, here and now!"

He took a stride as if to carry out his threat there and then. But Sporty grabbed him by the arm.

"You mad fool!" he hissed. "Not here on my houseboat, where I am known to everyone in the place—not here, you don't! I say you are a fool, and mad! Aren't your hands red enough with blood already?"

"Ay, red enough to hang me, anyway!" Guy reminded him promptly. "So what do I care for one life more or less? Besides, you haven't heard me out. There can be no earthly danger to either of us."

"No danger?"

"No, you coward! My cousin will be found dead by his own hand. He will have committed suicide. There will lie his confession on the table beside him, admitting that he murdered the general and that the game is up."

Sporty fell back, overwhelmed for the moment by the diabolical cunning of the scheme. If Captain Nick were found in such circumstances, with a bullet through his head, of course the world would say at once that he had committed suicide to cheat the hangman. Guy would then succeed to all his uncle's money without a doubt.

"Well," challenged Guy, seeing how his words had struck home.

"Oh, don't ask me!" jerked Sporty. "This is your funeral; you can do as you dashed well like! But you take your cousin out of this first, I'll see to that!"

Guy reflected a moment.

"Oh, very well!" he sneered. "Why not? What about that reed-cutter's hut, or whatever it is, down there where you picked me up on the bank? That will do even better than this, I reckon, because they needn't come bothering you at all then. Besides the hut would be the very place where he would likely hide. We'll take him along there."

"You can; I won't!" answered Sporty doggedly.

"Well, you'll jolly well have to drive the boat, anyway!" answered Guy. "You can lie off then and wait for me, since you're such a chicken-hearted coward! First though, you can get me paper and ink," he commanded, turning to the main cabin again.

"To fake his confession on, you mean?" demanded Sporty. "You'll get no paper out of me for that job. Ink perhaps, but nothing else."

"Well, my stars, if you aren't the limit!" hissed Guy, in his rage. However, he had a notebook of his own, it happened. With a contemptuous flourish he ripped out a page and set himself down to write.

Sporty watched him with a sneering smile. The easy confidence with which the other began to forge his cousin's handwriting, without even a line of any sort to guide him, was proof positive that this was not his first attempt at simulating Captain Nick's rather sprawling fist.

Nor was it, as Sporty well knew. More cheques had been cashed by the captain's bankers these last twelve months than ever the captain had drawn himself.

Still, Sporty had had his share of the ill-gotten gains, so it behoved him ill to start sneering now.

In a few minutes only the scrawl was complete. It was a simple confession. The only thing that seemed to bother the forger at all was the position of the two dots dividing the initials from the signature.

"Hang it, now, if I haven't forgotten how those go again!" growled Guy, gnawing the pen till the cedar-wood holder was almost bitten through. "L

it above the 'N' and below the 'E' that he puts his beastly fullstops, or the other way about? I know I made that mistake before. Surely you can remember?"

However, his confederate was as much at a loss as himself. So Guy had to chance it. Anyway, since the bank people had never spotted the error, he need not bother now, surely.

Meantime, during all this the recumbent figure on the bed never stirred, but snored stentorously on. Nor had Nelson Lee dared move, though his limbs were growing more and more numbed, and the agony of his damaged shoulder beyond endurance almost.

Most of the conversation between the two villains he had been able to overhear, but not all. He had seen Guy settle himself down to write, and even knew that it was some forgery of his cousin's hand that he was executing; but he had not gathered why. But he had been able to catch what Sporty had protested about there being "too much killing already."

Partly the roaring of the weir drowned their voices; partly the detective's brain was growing light with all the suffering he had endured.

Therefore, when suddenly he realised that the precious pair were out on the deck again, lugging some heavy burden between them, he scarcely knew what it was all about, or that anything mattered now that he was himself so near death.

For that was how he felt. Nelson Lee was about at his last gasp. If these brutes did not go, and quickly, he would have to shriek, and then let them club him over the head if they would.

However, when he opened his eyes again the little motor skiff was already off and away, vanishing towards the far bank. The detective knew it was now or never. He could not stand this icy water another minute. Putting forth all the last remaining dregs of his strength into one mighty effort, he wrenched his body out on to the houseboat's gunwale.

Another excruciating struggle sent him rolling like a drowned rat on to the after-deck, and here he very promptly fainted.

Not for many minutes, though. Something roused him—it sounded like a shot. Yes, it was a shot. And there was another and another—and shouting, too.

Nelson Lee dragged himself on to his elbow to listen. There seemed to be boats pulling like mad across the river. Someone was crying, too, for help.

"Quick! It's Shand—Captain Shand! Hold him, or he'll kill himself! I've got the revolver! Quick!" came the shouts.

And it was Guy's voice, of all people's. A strange ending, surely, to his coldblooded plot to shoot his cousin dead, and then leave the corpse to be discovered, pistol in his lifeless hand and the fatal confession of guilt by his side.

CHAPTER X

A Dastardly Plan.

ALL this was not mere lightheartedness on Nelson Lee's part. There were actually both shots and shouts and boats, too, sprinting to the rescue.

And in the leading skiff, pulling stroke-oar as if rowing the finish of the Varsity Boat Race, was Nipper. Perkins filled the thwart behind him, and if the valet had only rowed less like a windmill, and kept the ends of his

sculls out of Nipper's ribs, they would have won in a canter without a doubt.

As it was, the second boat, propelled by two burly bobbies of the Reading police, crept up and up so that the noses of the rival craft ran bump into the bank together.

Steering this latter was Inspector Transom, of Scotland Yard, to whom Nelson Lee had instructed his assistant to attach himself supposing there was any active business afoot. This Nipper had duly done.

There was active business on hand, as he found out the instant he arrived at the hotel where Perkins and he were to have stopped the night.

A clue as to the whereabouts of the missing Captain Shand had come at last. An expedition was even then starting out to arrest him. There was every reason to believe that the suspect was in hiding somewhere not a mile below Sonnington Lock.

This was all the news, but it had decided Inspector Transom to make a careful search on both banks of the river without delay.

So off they started on their six mile pull against stream. A fourth police-officer coxed Nipper's craft. They had already boarded three deserted house-boats and a couple of bungalows below Sonnington Lock, and had been heading up the old river to see what they could find there, when suddenly the sound of a revolver shot cracked clear on the night.

It came from the direction of a dark object, which might be a hut, on the further bank.

Before the search-party had time to recover from their surprise, lo and behold, a whole salvo of pistol-shots followed, and next shouts—the same cries for aid which had roused Nelson Lee's numbed senses.

"It's Shand! Here, help! Hold him! He'll kill himself!" appealed the shouter jerkily, as if he were having all his work cut out to hang on.

And so, indeed, he had. He was Guy Baldrick, of course. Sporty and he had ferried their intended victim across from the house-boat and lugged him, still senseless, up the bank.

The reed-cutter's hut was unlocked. Guy kicked open the door and bundled his cousin inside. So deep was the latter in the grip of morphia that he no more than groaned as he pitched to earth like a sack.

Guy had the forged confession ready. He put it down at Captain Nick's side. Then he drew out a revolver.

Now this was the captain's own. Guy had found it in its drawer in his cousin's rooms that fatal night when he had called to try and bribe Perkins over to his side.

His present scheme was simplicity itself. There lay the captain like a log, a hunted fugitive from the police.

That it was he who had murdered his uncle, General Shand, and rifled his safe, seemed proven beyond a doubt.

To begin with, there was that mad wager of his to commit a burglary which no one could trace to him. It was meant innocently enough, no doubt, but it had been the beginning of the tragedy, nevertheless.

On top of it had come the moneylender's letter demanding payment of a thousand pounds almost by return of post, and threatening public exposure and disgrace if the money was not forthcoming.

Next, to drive the unhappy captain to still deeper desperation, came his uncle's own letter telling him that he was sick and tired of his extravagance and folly, and that for the time being, at any rate, he was cutting him out of his will.

That night the general had been found dead, with a fractured skull, and his safe ransacked. The money stolen would just have satisfied the money-lender's demands and a little over.

Captain Nick had confessed that he had been within sight of the house an hour or less before the estimated time of the tragedy. His version, however, was that he had changed his mind about interceding with his uncle and had turned back Londonwards again.

He had tramped eight miles to catch an early morning express on another line, by his account, but had lost it and slept in a stackyard.

This was hardly convincing, of course, and less still when, after giving his word of honour to Nelson Lee to remain at a certain place in case he was wanted, he had straightway bolted.

Who could believe a man innocent after all that? Certainly not Scotland Yard. They meant to run the fugitive down if the chase took them to the end of the world.

Hence this last most cunning stroke of all of Guy's, standing now over his victim to administer the coup-de-grace.

The captain was to be discovered dead with a bullet through his head, fired by his own hand. Beside him a written confession would declare that he alone was responsible for his uncle's murder.

The inquest over, and the dead all buried, Guy would then step quietly into the whole of the general's big fortune and live happily ever after.

All that was needed was a steady aim. Guy steeled his shaking nerves for the shot. He thrust the revolver muzzle close to his cousin's temple. An instant later the fatal shot would have rung out. But a shattering surprise awaited him. The captain, for all the heavy dope injected into his veins, suddenly jerked back to life, as it were, and rolled over. Guy in terror stumbled back.

His cousin, aware of his presence, glared at him red-eyed.

"You!" he blurted. "What are you doing here? Where am I?" And he started to clamber to his feet.

But his enemy had rallied his scattered wits again. He saw how all his boasted plan was to be foiled. With a snarl he hurled himself on his victim to thrust him back to earth again. Then, with the revolver muzzle almost pressed to Captain Nick's temple, he fired.

That was the shot which Sporty in the boat below the bank was waiting for. He reckoned that the fell deed was successfully accomplished. But not so.

The bullet ploughed deep along the captain's scalp, but it no more than stung him to life and strength again. Hurling Guy aside, he blundered on to his feet and then closed with him.

"You murdering hound! What do you mean? What did you do that for—to kill me, eh?" he panted, clawing at his assailant's wrist that held the pistol and wrenching it round till bone and sinew cracked.

"Drop it—drop it!" he roared. "You dog! You have been doing something to me, I know. And now you actually try to murder me. By Jupiter, but——"

He had possessed himself of the pistol at last. The drug had maddened him; his brain was on fire. Reckless of everything except revenge, he shot and shot again. But his aim was wild and his bullets went wide.

It was then that Guy's craven yells were heard calling for help. Yet even now, with death staring him in the eyes, his criminal cunning had not deserted him.

In a flash he had seen a way to wriggle out of his danger, and still turn the tables on his victim.

"Quick, it's Shand. He'll kill himself. Help!" he was shouting. And then the door was filled with jostling figures, and Nipper and Inspector Transom charged to his aid.

In a trice Captain Nick was overpowered.

"Hallo, Mr. Baldrick!" said the inspector, breathing hard. "You seem to have discovered your cousin's whereabouts before us, then? Tell us what has happened."

"Why, yes. I did chance to get on to his tracks," admitted Guy. "It was up at Sonnington that I heard to-night from my friend Bereker that he had seen a figure skulking about this shed at dusk."

"Mr. Bereker owns the house-boat yonder," he explained. "So that is how he came to see him. He suggested we might steal up quietly and just see who the man was. I did, and, peering through a crack in the boards, saw it was my cousin here—Captain Shaud. He was writing something on a bit of paper."

"And that's a lie!" protested the captain. "All that this hound is telling you is lies, I say. I know nothing of how I got here, or what has happened to me since goodness knows when."

However, the inspector had already picked up the trampled sheet of paper which Guy had indicated, and was reading it. He looked at Captain Nick first, then at Guy.

"Go on, sir," he commanded, folding the paper with a satisfied smile.

"Why, that is all I know about it," continued Guy, as if anxious to spare his wretched cousin all he could.

"But a shot was fired—several, in fact," the officer reminded him.

"Yes," admitted Guy, with seeming reluctance. "The fact is, when I appeared at the door, my wretched cousin looked up, and the instant he recognised me clapped a pistol to his head to take his own miserable life. That was the first shot, and, see, there is the wound on his temple left by the bullet. The rest went off somehow when I was struggling to get possession of the weapon."

This was too much for poor Captain Nick. With face contorted with disgust and fury at such treachery, he was about to sling himself at the liar's throat.

The two constables were watching for this, though. At a sign from their superior they jumped between. There was a brief desperate struggle, then the double click of handcuff-locks snapping on their prisoner's wrists.

"Into the boat with him!" commanded the inspector, and then turned to Nipper, who had been only a silent spectator of the amazing drama.

Not so Perkins. Again and again he had lifted up his voice to come to his master's rescue.

"That's a lie!" he would protest wildly to almost every word Guy said. "A lie, I say! Do you think my master would do a dirty thing like that? Much more likely it was you who tried to shoot him first. Yes; that makes you sit up, doesn't it? I believe you did."

"Oh, shut up, Perkins!" commanded Nipper, who knew there was no profit in this sort of talk. Nor did Captain Nick offer any word in his own defence, though with all that drug still poisoning his veins this was scarcely to be wondered at.

The police did not know how he had been doped, though. Nor did Nipper. Even to the latter, knowing well how his chief believed in the prisoner, his silence went far to confirm Guy's lying tale.

They conducted the captain down to where Mr. Bereker had his motor-boat.

"Why, great thunder! Where have I seen you before?" gasped the suspect promptly at sight of him. "Somewhere, I know, and at my cost, too."

"Me! Rubbish! I've never set eyes on you before," answered the other, flushing.

"Then you're the image of some evil specter that has been haunting me while I have been lying asleep, or stupefied, or drunk, all this time!" retorted the captain doggedly. "Which is it? What have you fiends been doing with me? How did I get here?"

"Now look here, Captain Shand," struck in the inspector, seeing that the man undoubtedly was dazed, but putting it down to the scalp wound left by the bullet. "I advise you to keep your mouth shut now; it's the safest plan. For I warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. Wait until you have seen your lawyer first, and, meantime, keep a tight tongue in your head. You had better."

His prisoner reeled, as if his legs were giving way under him. But he was safe in the boat by this time. Guy cunningly asked the officer whether he wanted to look at Bereker's house-boat where this witness lived, now they were so near.

But the inspector decided to get on to Sonnington as quickly as possible. And so down-stream the motor-boat was headed and round through the lock until it landed them all at the boat-raft of the Posthorn Inu again.

So far Nipper had not recalled Nelson Lee's name in the affair, though he had given Inspector Transom his chief's message, of course. Since his boss had not shown up, he thought it wiser to wait in silence, which he did.

This friend of Guy's was undoubtedly the same man he had seen in Vernon Street that night outside Guy Baldrick's chambers. And Perkins recognised him, too. Possibly Nelson Lee was even now shadowing them, waiting to spring some bombshell on them all. They might find him at the hotel.

But still no sign of his chief anywhere. A doctor was called to tend the prisoner's hurts. Meantime, Nipper got a quiet word with the barmaid, giving a description of his boss, and asking whether she had seen anyone like him near the place that evening.

But, of course, she had not. Nelson Lee had been disguised. But she told Nipper about the customer who had looked so pale and ill, who was going on to spend a couple of days with friends in a house-boat further up the river.

Nipper wondered if this was his chief after all. Perhaps, by ill luck, he had stumbled on a wrong scent, going up-stream instead of down.

So when Inspector Transom announced his intention of conveying his prisoner to Reading at once, Nipper and Perkins resolved to bide where they were.

"You mean you'll wait for Mr. Nelson Lee?" suggested the officer, with a scarcely concealed smile of triumph, that he had successfully wiped the eye of the prince of crime investigators this journey.

"Why, you don't mean that he is here, too, somewhere?" asked Guy with well simulated astonishment.

"So this young man says. He expected to find him here at the hotel," answered the Scotland Yard officer.

"Well, now, if I had only known that!" exclaimed Guy, with real regret as it sounded. "Why, we would have given anything to have had him with us when we started out on our hunt. Wouldn't we, Bereker? I wonder, since he was here, he did not let me know. For we're old friends, of course, Lee and I."

"Friends, eh?" he laughed in his sleeve the next instant. "Yes, by thunder, 'friends' is right! You'll never see your cursed master alive again, you young sweep, so don't you think it. He's caught up somewhere at the bottom of Sonnington weir-pool, I hope, and there may he rot until the Day of Judgment! That's all I say!"

With that out they went, leaving Nipper and Perkins to grow more bewildered and dismayed as hour after hour crept away and still there was no sign of the man they sought.

"Perhaps he has gone on to Reading. It was there, after all, that he told us to wait," recollected Nipper.

So next morning they caught the first train to "Biscuit" Town, only to be told that there had been no sign of the detective there either.

After waiting another day cooling their heels and afraid to shift again, Nipper decided to return to town in case his chief had heard of Captain Shand's arrest and gone straight on home.

But still no luck. In fact, Nelson Lee seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth altogether.

CHAPTER XI.

The Trial—Nelson Lee's Dramatic Appearance.

THREE weeks had passed and still no sign of the great detective anywhere.

Poor Nipper, half out of his mind with grief and anxiety, almost forgot the Elleswood murder case altogether, though day by day the papers were full of references to it—the police-court hearing, and now the coming trial of Captain Shand at the Old Bailey.

"Oh, he did it right enough!" was the popular verdict given before the accused man had offered his defence even. For on the advice of his counsel, Captain Nick had said little or nothing before the magistrate, except to return an emphatic denial of the whole charge.

However, the day had come round now when silence would no longer serve him. The court was crowded. Nipper was there, of course, but filled far more with the hope of seeing his beloved boss appear like a ghost at the eleventh hour than any thought of helping to save the captain's neck for him.

The case was called. A flutter ran through the thronged court as the prisoner mounted into the dock and stood facing the judge.

The case had shaken smart society to its foundations, and in revenge smart society had turned out in its legions to gape and stare at a poor wretch who had once been one of its popular pets.

Statesmen, dowagers, professional beauties, celebrities of every rank marked how terrible had been the ravages of fear and a guilty conscience, as they regarded it, on the once handsome face.

Captain Nick watched them all with quiet scorn. He knew what they were thinking. He knew how terrible were the odds against him. But he was innocent. If they really hanged him, he would die game.

The trial commenced.

"Not guilty!" rang out the prisoner's plea in clear, steady tones.

Then counsel for the prosecution opened his case.

The unlucky wager, the two letters, the prisoner's vague directions to his valet, and his subsequent precipitate departure, his encounter with Nelson Lee next day—

"By the way, forgive my interrupting," interposed the judge. "But is Mr. Nelson Lee here in court to-day? I ask because I have heard rumours that he has not been seen since the arrest of the accused. I trust they are without foundation."

Counsel looked grave.

"I regret to say, my lord, that they are far from being without

foundation," counsel assured him. "Mr. Nelson Lee has most mysteriously disappeared, but I had intended to try and do without his evidence, to leave out his name as far as possible altogether, in fact. I mean," he broke off, turning to the jury, yet still hesitating. "Well, perhaps, I had better say no more," he concluded. And everyone knew exactly what lay behind those words.

For this was the latest suspicion directed against the wretched prisoner in the dock; that not Guy Baldrick, but Nelson Lee had been the first to happen upon the wanted man, and that the latter had straightway done the detective to death, sinking his body perhaps in the river close by.

It might have been Guy's diabolical cunning that had given the start to this cruel lie. That was a small matter. The rumour had flown forth. Even Nipper believed it.

Counsel's opening speech was resumed. From first to last—to the final scene when his cousin, having appeared at the reed-cutter's hut, the captain fired five shots in attempt to murder him, after vain attempt at suicide. It was generally agreed that a more condemning indictment had never been presented against any criminal in the whole history of Old Bailey.

The case gathered strength, too, as witness after witness was called. Perkins was there, and a piteous figure the poor fellow presented, too, as word by word his evidence was dragged from him condemning the master he loved.

"That's all right, Perkins," said Captain Nick, kindly, from the dock, as at last the valet broke down altogether. "Tell the truth, that's all I ask. There is a higher Judge above Who is listening to all this. He knows which are facts and which are lies, before ever a mouth is opened."

He looked across at Guy as he spoke. His cousin seemed to shrink, as if to hide himself from those steady, accusing eyes. In a moment he had pulled himself together, flashing back an answering snarl.

"And now, my lud, that closes the case for the Crown," announced counsel at last amid a sigh of pent-up excitement. He sat down, and Captain Nick's counsel arose.

Mr. Tobias Kettle, K.C., was his name. He was a dry, shrivelled-up, little man, with a rasping voice, and an eye that could bore one through like a red-hot gimlet when he chose.

He realised full well that if he won this case and got the prisoner off it would be about the biggest achievement of his career. Like Nipper, he would have given his head to have had Nelson Lee here at his elbow. For he knew the prince of crime investigators of old.

Still, he was not dismayed. He waded gaily in.

"Call Mr. Guy Baldrick!" he commanded, with a defiant hitch of his wig and rumpling of his tattered silk gown. Guy faced him jauntily.

"And now, sir, on the 18th—the night of the murder, where were you?"

"And what hour!" demanded Guy coolly.

"At one o'clock!" snapped Mr. Kettle.

"I was at my rooms in Vernon Street, as I have said already," replied Guy in injured tones.

"I don't want to know what you have said already!" retorted the peppery little K.C. "I am asking you to say it again, and keep on saying it as often as I think it necessary for the establishing of my case. Do you understand that?"

Guy did. So counsel went on. He wanted to know when Perkins, the valet, rang him up, exactly what words he had used in answering.

"Again I have already told the court!" expostulated Guy foolishly.

"And you will tell us again!" thundered the little lawyer. "Out with them. Is there anything you regret about them that you hesitate

to repeat them. Will you admit that your utterance was rather thick, and your meaning not very coherent? Is that it?"

Guy flushed.

"Where had you been dining that night, may I ask? Where, and with whom?" rapped Mr. Kettle.

Guy had not had occasion to mention this before. Nor was he quite prepared for the question now. But he fumbled out some sort of an answer. He had been dining alone at a small restaurant in Soho—the Cafe Montcalm, he thought, but he was not sure.

Mr. Kettle was on this like a terrier after a rat. The witness was not sure, he reminded the jury. And now he returned to his demand for the exact words Guy had used in replying to Perkins.

"You were abusive?" he suggested.

"Oh, no!" denied Guy.

"But I say, 'Oh, yes!'" insisted Mr. Kettle. "And I have two witnesses to prove my point, beside the valet, remember."

This was rather a staggerer for Guy. He had not thought of the possibility of the telephone clerk still keeping his ear to his end of the wire. And who was this other, moreover?

Still, what did it matter, after all. It might have been serious if one man had been there to profit by all this. But he wasn't, and for excellent reasons that only he could rightly appreciate.

Guy was thinking of Nelson Lee, drowned and dead in the weir-pool. The thought almost made him chuckle.

Therefore, he repeated his remarks to Perkins as near as he could remember them. And, since he had already heard Perkins's version of them, they were near enough to the original for all practical purposes.

"And now," began Mr. Kettle again. "Having treated Captain Shand's servant to all that rambling rigmarole—the best excuse for which is that you were half asleep at the time; now, I say, I want to know how it was that you were able to talk so briskly within five minutes of the last telling someone you had 'big business' on hand, and to hang up the telephone receiver in case the exchange might be eavesdropping, and overhearing what you said?"

"What made you so wideawake all of a sudden, eh?" rapped the counsel, marking, with satisfaction, the startled look dart into the witnesses face. "To whom was it you made this remark?"

As a matter of fact, Mr. Kettle had not the remotest notion what he was likely to get at by all this, himself.

No one was suggesting that Mr. Guy had committed the murder. In fact, he posed as a very honourable young man, who indeed had done all he could to shield his guilty cousin.

However, having discomfited his witness, as was plain, he proceeded to fluster him still more if he could. He dragged an answer out of him.

"It was a friend who came in," faltered Guy.

"Friend! What friend?" demanded the lawyer, like the crack of a whip.

Guy stammered and stuttered.

"My friend, Mr. Bereker," he blurted, while the "friend" in question, who was in the well of the court, promptly sat up as if he had been kicked.

All this was taken in like a flash by Mr. Kettle's eagle eye. He wanted to know what this business was between Mr. Bereker and himself.

But here the judge interposed. He did not really see what it had to do with the case. And no more did Mr. Kettle, really, when it came to that. So he bowed, and let Guy slink out of the witness-box like a crushed worm.

Then Nipper was called. Back returned counsel to this question of the exact words Mr. Guy had used in addressing Perkins when he rang him up.

Nipper's trained memory recalled the dialogue almost word for word. Ho it was, it appeared, who had furnished this snatch of a subsequent conversation between Mr. Guy and his friend.

"But again I hardly see what all this has to do with the case, Mr. Kettle," remonstrated the judge testily. "I mean we must confine ourselves strictly to the point, otherwise we may be here for a month before we're through. I—I—I——"

At first the general impression was that his "ludship" by this "I—I—I—ing" was working up for a mighty sneeze. But when they saw how he was staring towards the back of the court with eyes nearly bulging out of his head, people began to follow his gaze, and gape, too.

"Bless my soul, what's this?" squeaked his lordship, flinging down his pen with a bang. "Usher! Stop that lady! What is she doing tearing off her clothes in a court of law. She must be a lun——"

However, he got no further—there was no need. For it was not a lady at all, but a man, as it turned out. Off had come hat and wig just as the wearer stepped out of the flowing skirt in which he had been sitting disguised as some ringleted old dowager.

But the most staggering surprise of all came when suddenly it dawned upon everyone that this tall figure regarding them quietly, was none other than Nelson Lee, whom they had been mourning for dead. Nay, more; whom Captain Nick, in all but words, was accused of adding to his tale of victims.

"Great Susan, it's the chief!" yelled Nipper, fairly bowling over the man next him in his rush to get round to greet his beloved master. "My hat, but you've given us a fright! Where in thunder have you been all this time?"

"Silence! Silence in court!" bellowed the usher, cutting short this unseemly demonstration.

"Mr. Lee!" gasped the judge, still unable to believe his eyes.

"At your ludship's service," answered Nelson Lee, with a graceful bow. "I ask your pardon for offending the dignity of the court in this strange fashion. But I deemed it advisable."

"Advisable! How, sir?"

"With your permission I will proceed to show you, if Mr. Kettle will only be good enough to put me in the witness-box."

"Certainly! Delighted!" consented the counsel, his keen eyes on Guy Baldrick, who looked as if he were ready to drop through the floor during all this. Never was there such a picture of abject terror and consternation as he presented.

Yet only for a moment. He had recollected something evidently. Bravado came to his rescue. He curled his lips to a set sneer of defiance as the detective mounted to the witness stand.

However, before he permitted the examination to begin, Nelson Lee had still a surprise in store. At a sign from him, and an apologetic bow to the judge, two court assistants appeared bearing two desk telephones apiece, with long lengths of flex trailing behind.

One telephone was put for use of his lordship, a second for the foreman of the jury, the third and fourth for the counsel for the prosecution and defence respectively.

You could have heard a pin drop during all these preliminaries.

"Now, sir," said Nelson Lee to Mr. Kettle, "I am ready. The evidence I can offer concerns this very point you have been insisting upon. Mr.

Baldrick's conversation over the 'phone with Captain Shand's valet at one a.m. on the night of the murder. Mr. Baldrick's contention, I believe, is that he was in London then at his own rooms," he added, turning to Guy.

"Contention!" gasped the latter. "I absolutely swear it!"

"And I absolutely swear that you were not!" was the detective's answer. It fell like the blow of a fist between his quarry's eyes.

"Pray go on," said Nelson Lee. Then, turning to counsel again: "Or, with your lordship's permission, may I arrive at my own facts in my own way?"

"Not by cross-examining my witness," protested the counsel for the Crown, promptly coming to Guy's rescue.

"Certainly not," smiled Nelson Lee drily. "I should not think of attempting anything so presumptuous. All I am asking is for his lordship, and you, gentlemen, to participate in a little experiment. Kindly place the telephone instruments to your ears, will you? And you, me lud, will you be good enough to ring up Exchange—Hyde Park, 77761. That is your telephone number, I believe, Mr. Baldrick, is it not?" he inquired sweetly.

Guy swallowed a mighty gulp, and admitted it was. So the judge, looking as if he were not-sure whether he ought to consent to do anything of the sort, rang up.

"Now listen carefully, gentlemen," Nelson Lee cautioned them. "You have all heard the identical conversation with Perkins the valet, confirmed by four witnesses, including Mr. Baldrick himself. Mr. Baldrick," he went on scathingly, "was there in his rooms when he first uttered it—at least, so he has sworn on his solemn oath!"

"And so I was, curse you!" Guy almost screamed at him, to the scandal of the court. "I was there!"

"Well, you are not there now, but here," Nelson Lee reminded him coolly. "And yet, all the same, I am going to show the court that it is possible for you to have left your voice behind to answer for you. More than that, it is the identical voice, as I shall prove, that answered for you that night; when, in spite of your solemn oaths, you had really left town and gone down to Elleswood, where your uncle was murdered."

If Guy Baldrick was flabbergasted before, he was utterly bowled out now. In fact, Nelson Lee quite thought he was going to faint.

However, at that moment the judge's voice was heard calling the court to silence. The exchange was answering.

"Put me on to Hyde Park, treble seven six one, please," he commanded.

There was a minute's pause, and then the faces of the four chosen officials, each with his ear to a separate instrument, were a study. So was Guy's. For he realised now how completely Nelson Lee had out-manceuvred him.

Not merely had he managed to save himself from what seemed death inevitable at Sonnington Weir, but that thing which Guy had risked his own miserable life to snatch from his pocket, was not the thing he had wanted after all.

Nelson Lee must have been aware all along that he was being watched when he broke into Guy's rooms. Being aware of it, he had had the cunning to put back the article he had first pocketed, substituting another in its place. Thus, if he were waylaid—as Guy had waylaid him—and an attempt made to wrest it from him, the spurious article only would be lost, while the precious genuine one would be safe in the case amidst its fellows.

"Well, my lord," inquired Nelson Lee coolly, when, by all their expression, he saw that the voice over the 'phone had ceased. "You are wondering what to make of it all? I will tell you.

"That voice you heard just then you will have recognised as Mr. Baldrick's. But he is here before you. How then can he have answered you now, and promptly and naturally, the instant the exchange clerk put you through?"

"Nothing is simpler," continued the detective. "For in Mr. Baldrick's rooms, if you go there, as I trust you will, you will find an instrument called a dictaphone. It is an instrument, as you know, for the convenience of busy men who wish to dictate letters and suchlike at odd hours of day or night, when their secretaries cannot be present to take them down. It is an adaptation of the phonograph, in fact.

"The speaker places a wax cylinder on the machine, and dictates what he has to say, into it. The secretary then takes the record, reverses the process, listens to the message it contains, and types it down.

"But the cunning in the present instance lies in this. Mr. Baldrick had ordered Captain Shand's valet to ring him up at one o'clock in the morning. My contention is that this was a mere ruse by which to set up a false alibi. Mr. Baldrick's voice answered sure enough, but he himself was not there. He was at Elleswood, his uncle's house, as I shall prove——"

"My stars! The man lies! He lies in his throat, the villain! Stop him! I refuse to listen longer!"

It was Guy, who had risen hysterically, shaking with terror and fury, and looking as if he would make one mad rush at the witness stand and choke his accuser to death.

However, there were police in plenty to intervene and hold him back.

"Go on!" commanded the judge, in cold, level tones.

But Nelson Lee's terrible indictment was all but concluded. He related how, seeing dictaphone and telephone set suspiciously close together on Guy's desk, it had flashed upon him that it would be possible to so adjust the two instruments that when the telephone call-bell rang, the dictaphone would be set in motion, and the recorded voice would make answer. Proof of this they had witnessed for themselves, just now.

"But wait—listen!" Nelson Lee commanded. "You should be hearing now those mysterious added words telling a confederate that Mr. Baldrick was on to 'big business.' Ah, I see you are hearing them now!" he broke off, as the judge raised a warning hand.

And such was the case.

"Is that you, B?" the phantom voice was saying. "Just note what I say carefully. Have big business on, I believe. So hang up the telephone receiver first, in case the Exchange is listening."

Now came a pause. The court had heard this part of the mysterious message from Nipper's lips, of course. More was to follow, however.

"Have you done it?" inquired the voice again cautiously. "Very well. I've gone down to Elleswood on the 7.45 train. But no one is to know, mind you, but what I am spending the night here in my rooms. That is the yarn I mean to pitch. Why, you will be able to guess for yourself when you read the news to-morrow. But play up to it. If you don't, and let me down, you'll not get a sou out of the bargain, while I—well, you will see for yourself, as I say. Good-night, and remember that I spent the night here in town. You must back up this lie through thick and thin!"

However, Guy Baldrick could stand this no longer.

"It's all lies! I never said what you are listening to now. I was in town. Nelson Lee has faked this record, to hang me merely!" he shouted, foaming at the lips. "I was at home all night. I—I——"

But the hand of Fate had fallen on his lying lips and silenced them for ever. He fell to the floor with a crash, in a fit. It was already late then, and the hearing of the court had to be adjourned.

The judge, though, with the counsel and jury, went straight then to Guy Buldrick's rooms, and there saw the instruments as Nelson Lee had described.

Nor was this the only evidence the detective had gleaned by which he proved beyond a shadow of doubt that it was Guy and not Captain Nick who had gone down to Elleswood that fatal night and foully murdered their uncle. And all to thrust the blame on to his innocent cousin so that he should be swept out of his path and the estates should all be his.

Every yard of Guy's journey Nelson Lee had managed to trace, during these weeks when even Nipper had supposed him dead. He had evidence ten times over sufficient to hang his man. And this without reference to the dastardly attack upon his own life at Sonnington Weir.

However, the miserable murderer was destined to cheat the hangman after all. Stricken with paralysis, and demented into the bargain, he was sent to Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, there to drag on until death claimed him, as it did.

Mr. Bereker, alias Sporty Flynn, was sent to penal servitude for ten years for his share of the plot.

Meantime, Captain Nick had been released, of course, free of the smallest stigma, though thanks only to Nelson Lee.

"For without you I should have been hanged, as sure as Fate. I know it! I could feel it all the time!" he told his deliverer. "I was helpless in such a tangle of lies as surely never a man was left to struggle in in all the history of the world!"

"Hum!" was Nelson Lee's cool response to this. "Well, that is rather a tall order to think that perhaps. Still, it was a pretty close shave, I'll allow!"

THE END.

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HUGH ARNOLD, a young English lad, goes out to the far North with an expedition. He is joined by an Irish sailor—MIKE O'GRADY, and also VAL RUXTON.

The latter and Hugh become fast friends, but one day Val hints that Hugh joined the expedition under a false name, and says that Amaki, a neighbouring Eskimo, has been asking for tidings of a certain explorer whose name is well known in the scientific world. For some reason, Hugh turns pale.

The camp is raided by a neighbouring party, but Hugh and Ruxton, with two sailors, put up a stiff fight.

The more the unfortunate wight struggled and kicked, the more obstinately they held on to his legs. The more he tried to shout and explain matters, the more they forced his mouth down into the snow and choked his utterance.

How he managed to escape being suffocated was something of a marvel. Ruxton, however, afterwards declared that it was due to his sultry language, which eventually thawed the snow round his head and so enabled him to make his voice heard.

Anyway, he somehow got free, bounded up like a jack-in-the-box, and began hitting out all round, sending his zealous rescuers spinning, and letting fly such a string of oaths as left them in no further doubt as to who it was they had so perseveringly kept buried in the snow.

Suddenly, his flow of ornamental language was cut short by a well-aimed missile from above, which caught him full in the mouth. It was nothing more nor less than a snowball, and it was thrown by Hugh, who, inspired by a sense of humour, thus contemptuously showed his opinion of the swearer.

The defenders had been watching the proceedings with great interest, almost shaking with laughter the while. Then Hugh had suddenly bent down, rolled up a good handful of snow, and flung it at the raving ringleader.

In an instant the other defenders caught at the idea, and, joining in the fun, they bombarded the enemy with snowballs as fast as they could make them.

Now, though this had been done without premeditation on Hugh's part, in what Mike would have characterised as a fit of pure "divilment," it turned out to be a really clever bit of strategy.

For here, below, were a dozen men in reckless mood, their passions inflamed by drink, and their cupidity excited by the knowledge that just above them were all sorts of good things—tobacco, doubtless, for one thing, to say,

nothing of plenty of drink—freshly brought out from England. There were only four men to defend all those desirable luxuries, and yet those four had the impudence and audacity to insult the twelve by snowballing them as though they had been but a parcel of schoolboys!

So exasperated did the twelve feel at this unexpected treatment, that they threw all discretion to the winds. Instead of taking counsel together and forming some definite plan of attack, they simply turned and rushed blindly, madly up the slope.

The slope formed the only direct way of reaching the terrace at that part, but it was not a good way, for it consisted of hard frozen snow, with impassable drifts of loose soft snow on each side of it. There was only room on the slope for three or four men abreast, and it was certainly none too favourable ground for the excited rush of an angry crowd, such as those who now charged up its slippery surface.

On they came, a disorderly mob, three or four deep, the back rows helping to push the front ones on and prevent them from sliding back. Struggling to keep their feet, and half-blinded by the snowballs with which the defenders continued to pelt them, they nevertheless managed to scramble to the top, or very near it.

Several of the men had drawn their knives, and the shining blades glittered with a cold gleam in the moonlight. Hugh noted this, and his face grew stern as he pointed them out to Ruxton.

"You see those beggars, Val," he said. "We'll go for those cowardly brutes first! You take the right hand men, and I will deal with the others to the left."

Just as the leaders of the assailants had all but reached the top, they received an extra instalment of the snowy fusillade, and ere they could clear it from their eyes the defenders made their rush.

Whirling their formidable clubs in the air, they brought them down, first on the arms and hands that carried the knives, then upon the heads and the shoulders of their owners.

Blow followed blow, crash upon crash. So fierce and determined was the counter-attack that the front rank recoiled upon the next. Two men slipped and fell, causing others to trip over them.

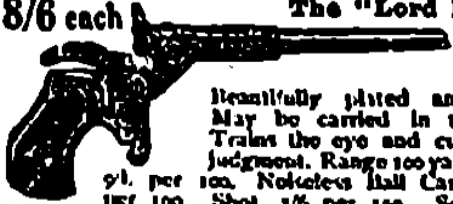
Then, judicious prods with the heavy clubs, driven home with all the strength and weight of the men behind them, sent the reeling "corner men" toppling off into the drifts at the sides, where they sank out of sight as others had done before them.

The defenders paused, and once more could not refrain from laughing, as they saw the predicament their foes were in. The rear ranks were still on their feet, and they were brandishing various weapons, cursing, swearing, and threatening all kinds of horrible things. But between them and the defenders was a tangled group of fallen warriors, likewise swearing and spluttering, striving vainly to recover their footing on the treacherous slope, and meantime blocking the way against their own infuriated friends.

"If we'd only got something to shove down on 'em," cried Hugh laughingly, "we could——"

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At that moment, as he was casting his eyes around for a likely means of carrying out an idea that had occurred to him, one of the enemy—it was the ring-leader himself—recovered his feet and darted upon him, knife in hand.

A warning shout made him turn only just in time. A hand, bearing a naked blade, had already been raised aloft, and in another second would have fallen, when Hugh seized the wrist and closed with the ruffian. Then followed a short but strenuous wrestling bout. The leader of the raiders, exasperated by his previous failures and all that had happened since, had worked himself up into a state of almost maniacal fury.

He was a great hulking ruffian, as big as Hugh himself, and doubtless, he expected to easily master him.

But in this he was mistaken. His brute strength was no match for the hardy young Britisher. The struggle was a desperate one while it lasted, but it was soon over. With a mighty effort Hugh threw him from him, and hurled him off the terrace, and once more he vanished from sight in the soft bed of snow below.

Panting, but still smiling, Hugh then turned to the sailors.

"Mike!" he cried. "Bring one of those sledges over here. The first one will do. And be darnation quick about it! Lend a hand, Bob, sharp!"

Scarcely sooner said than done. Both sailors ran for the nearest of the sledges which were lying on one side, and rushed it across the snow to where their leaders stood.

"Good business!" exclaimed Ruxton, catching Hugh's idea at once. "Swing her round, lads! Broadside! So! That's the ticket!"

"Now, boys! All together!"

The heavy sledge was swung round so that it lay across the top of the slope. Then, all four, putting their backs into the work, pushed it over sideways in such a manner that it went hurtling down, broadside on, driving before it, with irresistible force, all in its way.

Downwards it swept, and downwards, in front of it, like shavings before a broom, went the assailants, those who had so far kept their feet striving vainly to resist its descent.

They might as well have tried to stop an avalanche. A second or two later they were all lying at the foot of the slope, plunging about, kicking, fighting one with another, with the sledge almost on top of them.

The defenders had been very near to sliding down too, for they had pushed at the sledge with such energy that it almost carried them with it, and they had only let go just in time to draw back.

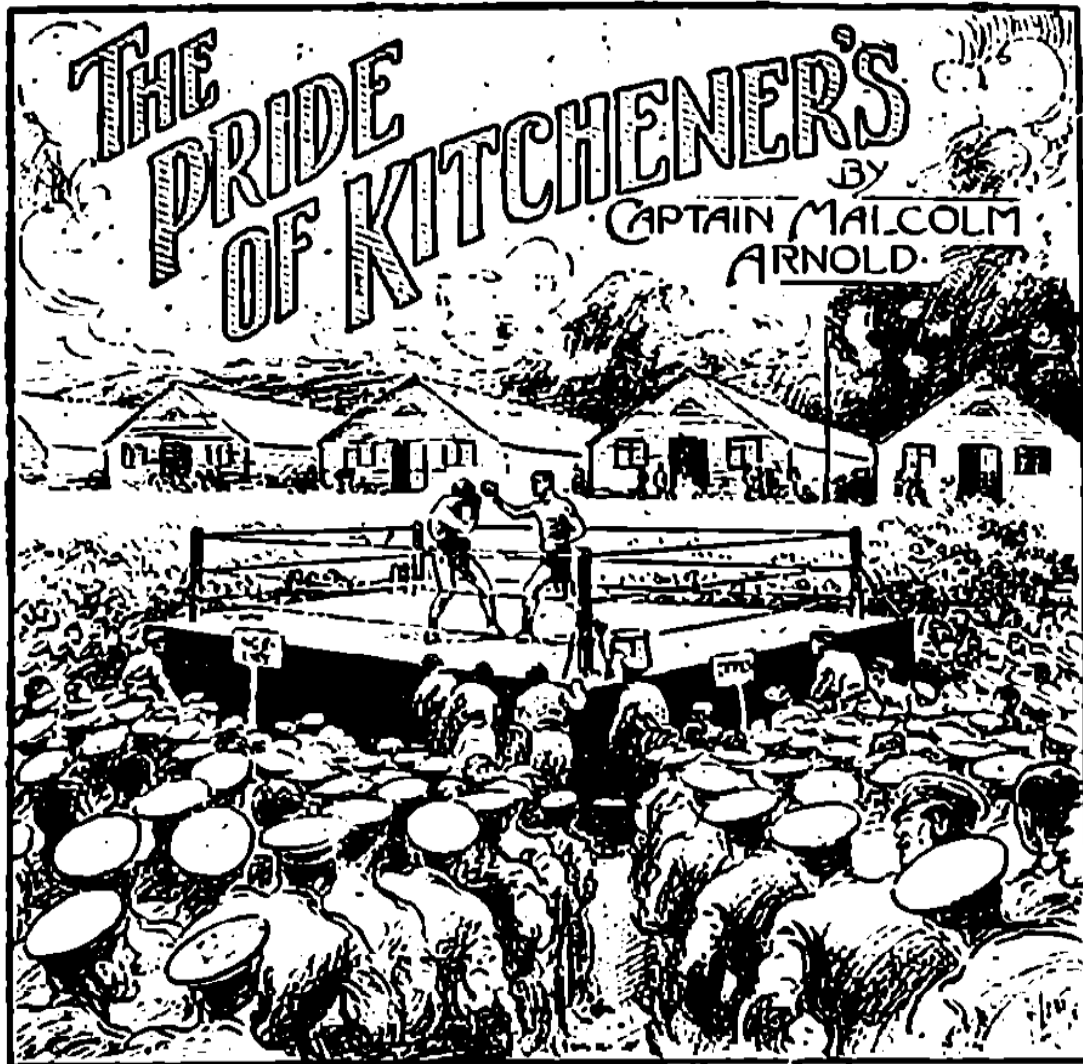
But the marauders were not vanquished even yet, and this time they recovered themselves more quickly than one would have expected.

The last experience had a distinctly sobering effect, and some of them promptly set to work to pick up their fellows and prepare for another assault.

Their leader was once more dug out, and this time was set on his legs at the first attempt. Raging and furious, he pointed to another slope further along, where there was greater width, and the ascent to the terrace was more gradual.

"H'm! They're going to have another try," said Ruxton, "and it looks as if there's a little more method in their madness. They're warming up to their work and getting the drink out of their brains a bit. We shall have a harder task this time. They'll be able to come on all at once."

(Another Stirring Instalment of this Magnificent Yarn will appear on Wednesday Next.)



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