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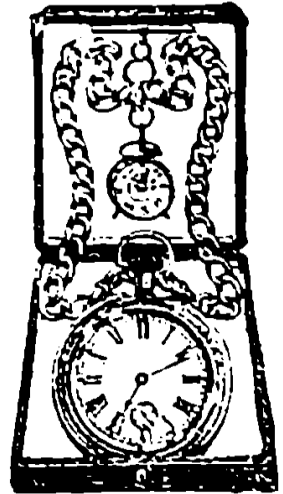
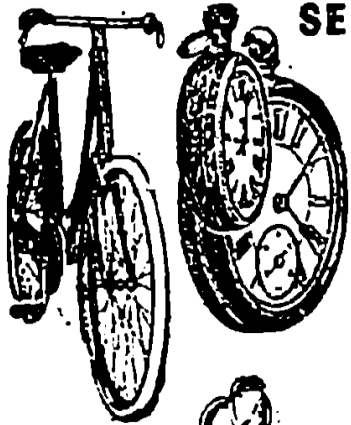
THE TERROR OF TROONE TOWERS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TWENTY FATHOMS DEEP"

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THE TERROR OF TROONE TOWERS.

A Story of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

By the Author of "Twenty Fathoms Deep."

CHAPTER I.

A Weird Inheritance.

SIR RICHARD TROONE threw the end of his cigarette away, and paused to turn the collar of his overcoat up. Then he resumed his walk along the deserted, lonely road.

"Jove, it's mighty cold for the beginning of November," he murmured. "Almost wish I'd ordered the trap to meet me. These moorland winds cut clean through a chap!"

Sir Richard looked about him with interest. Not that there was much to look upon. The road was bare and stony, and on both sides stretched undulating moor—bleak and drab in its newly-donned winter coat. Not a house, scarcely a tree, was to be seen. Right ahead, somewhere in the misty distance, Troone Towers lifted its old walls to the clouded sky—Troone Towers, the ancestral, moorland home of a fine, noble family.

Yet, in spite of its lack of interest, Sir Richard gazed over the dull landscape with a certain amount of pride. All this land—every stick and stone—was his. As far as the eye could see, he was the owner of it all. And this was but the poorest specimen of his property. Far away, on the other side of the old mansion, were rich woods, noble parks, and magnificent farm-lands.

As he walked, Sir Richard found himself thinking over the sudden change in his fortunes; a change which had only come about a month since. At the time he had been at Oxford, an undergraduate—for Sir Richard was only a youngster of twenty-two. He remembered the day that had brought the news of his grandfather's death.

Old Sir Robert Troone had died suddenly, unexpectedly. He had been a hale and hearty old man, and had laughed at the prospect of death. Yet he had been taken off abruptly, like the snuffing out of a candle, from heart failure.

And he had made no will. The vast property, and nearly half a million sterling, had become Dick Troone's, as the only direct heir. Dick was the last of the old family; his father was dead, and he had no brothers.

The young man's plans were all altered. He had thought that his grandfather would live years longer; but Fate had decided otherwise. And Sir Dick had now come into his own. This was his first visit to the Towers for three years. But what a difference between this visit and his last. Then he had been a boy, a nobody. Now he was the baronet, the squire, the owner of all he could see.

He had, of course, been present at the funeral, but that had been a solemn, sad occasion; and he had returned to Oxford to arrange for his departure. For a week he had been staying at his large London house; but it wasn't home. This was home, out here on the wide moors, and Sir Dick was determined to make vast and drastic alterations before many weeks had passed.

For the old baronet had been eccentric and somewhat miserly. He had taken no trouble to keep up the glory of the house. Things had been neglected, allowed to go to rack and ruin, and Sir Dick meant to alter it all. He had a vast fortune, and he intended to live as a man of wealth should.

A mere whim, he had elected to walk from the station—a distance of five miles—to the Towers. Somehow, he didn't feel like being jogged along in a slow trap. Very soon he would have motor-cars, and then distances would be as nothing.

"I'm not going to be extravagant," he told himself, as he paused to light a fresh cigarette, "but I'm going to make thundering big alterations. Five miles from a station, and only a rotten trap! Jove! the old boy was out of date, and no mistake! I believe there are only about three servants at the Towers. Well, I shall have a busy time for a week or so. Things are going to hum jolly soon!"

Presently, as he reached the top of a rise, he paused again, and stared into the distance. He could see the grey old towers and turrets of his new home. And Sir Dick felt his heart beating fast within him with the pride of ownership.

"You're dull," he murmured, "and you're old, and you're surrounded by vast tracts of bare, dreary land. But you're the best spot on this earth, all the same. My ancestral home, I salute you!"

And Sir Dick walked on, faster now, anxious to be within the walls of his ancient mansion. Descending to hard fact, he was aware that he was tremendously hungry. The crisp, cold air had put a keen edge on his appetite, and he wondered what sort of a meal old Jenks, the butler, would have in readiness for him. No matter how indifferent it might be, Sir Dick knew he would enjoy a feed of any sort just then.

"The lodge-gates at last!" he murmured, as a pair of magnificent wrought-iron gates came into view. They were dingy and rust-covered, and the little lodge bordering the drive was dilapidated and deserted.

"H'm!" continued Sir Dick, halting and surveying the spectacle. "This is a pretty disgraceful state of affairs. It's amazing to me that old Sir Robert could sleep comfortably with everything in this rotten condition. More like a pauper's place than a wealthy country squire's! Well, the decorators and builders will soon alter things."

He pushed open a small side gate, and passed through into the drive. The latter was bordered by magnificent old trees, now stark and bare. The brown and rotten leaves which had fallen during the autumn lay scattered over the ground, and gave the place an air of neglect and desolation, which was almost painful to see. Indeed, it seemed as though the place had not been attended to—except in a superficial manner—for years past.

Sir Dick trudged along, almost angry to find affairs in such a deplorable state; but he consoled himself by the reflection that very shortly a whole army of workmen, of all varieties, would be busy in, round, and about the Towers. It irritated him to think that any alteration should be necessary.

"I don't like to think hard of the old chap now that he's dead," he muttered, "but, with all his money, he oughtn't to have let the old place go to rack and ruin like this. I suppose I'd better make excuses for him—he was a queer, eccentric old stick, anyway."

Presently he emerged from the drive, and the big, straggling building of Troone Towers stood before him. The house itself seemed in good repair, but the terraces were moss-grown, the lawns were like meadows, and the hedges had not been clipped for years. Somehow, as Sir Dick stood surveying the scene, he felt a kind of chill go through him. In the light of that dull evening, and in its forlorn condition, the place looked dreary and unutterably lonesome. It was not exactly a pleasant sensation to have upon arriving in his new home—the home of his forefathers.

The young man shook himself.

“Jove! it’s a bit different to Oxford!” he exclaimed aloud. “Everything was life and gaiety there. A month of this place in its present state would drive me off my head with melancholy. But by Christmas there’ll be a tremendous difference, or my name’s not what it is.”

Sir Dick continued his way to the huge, massive front-door, which stood at the top of a flight of imposing marble stairs. As he mounted the latter, the great door opened wide, and Jenks, the old butler, stood in the open portal.

“Welcome to the Towers, Sir Richard!” he exclaimed, in a quaintly solemn manner.

“Thanks, Jenks!” said the young baronet briskly. “I can’t say I’m mightily impressed. My grandfather wasn’t very particular about appearances.”

The old butler shook his head as Sir Richard stamped into the great hall, and wiped his feet.

“No, sir; things haven’t been very bright down here of late years. Sir Robert—Heaven rest his soul!—was a man of simple tastes and habits, and he didn’t go much for style. No doubt you’ll make alterations, sir?” he added respectfully.

“You bet your sweet life I will,” replied Sir Richard boyishly. “There are going to be heap big alterations. But what about some grub?” he added. “I can’t possibly wait until dinner-time, Jenks!”

“Tea is already prepared, sir,” replied the butler. “I thought that you might be rather hungry, sir, so I gave orders for a meat tea.”

“Good man!” said Sir Dick approvingly.

He went upstairs for a wash, and then tackled the meal with a will. During tea his trunks and baggage arrived from the station. Sir Dick found that the household consisted merely of himself, Jenks, a housekeeper, and two maidservants.

“Four servants for a house like this!” murmured the young baronet. “A nice hole I should be in if a party of friends suddenly swooped down on me. But as I haven’t got any friends in this quarter of the world it doesn’t matter.”

Nevertheless, Sir Dick was quite sure that he would have friends and acquaintances enough before he had lived at Troone long. A full complement of servants, too, would make the house lively, and rob it of its present eerie air of desolation.

After tea Sir Dick adjourned to the huge old library—a massive, lofty apartment, with rich oaken beams overhead, and with walls lined with old book-cases packed with volumes. It was dark now, and a large oil-lamp shed a rather dim light only in the centre of the room, leaving the corners in shadow.

“Enough to give a fellow the creeps,” murmured Sir Richard, lighting a cigarette. “An electric light installation will be one of the very first innovations. And what the deuce is the matter with old Jenks? When he came in here a moment ago to draw the blinds he looked jolly uneasy. It

struck me as though he was in a bit of a funk. I'm not surprised. This old house is enough to set anybody's nerves on edge!"

He had been reading a novel in the train, and settled down in one of the large armchairs for a quiet read, while he enjoyed his cigarette. Unpacking, he decided, could be left until the morrow. Sir Dick was not nervous, but he did not care for the idea of unpacking in these old rooms upstairs by dim lamplight.

But he didn't feel very much like reading, and smoked his cigarette, with the novel lying on his lap. There seemed to be a feeling of restraint in the atmosphere—a feeling of mystery. The prospect of dinner in solitary state was not alluring. He wished, now, that he had invited one or two of his friends at Oxford to spend a month with him at Troone. Indeed, he half-resolved to wire them in the morning.

Then, as he lit up another cigarette, the musical hum of a motor-car struck his ears above the bluster of the wind. A few moments later a bell pealed distantly in the servants quarters.

"Hallo, a visitor!" said Sir Dick, rising to his feet. "I wasn't expecting anybody to-night."

The library door opened, and Jenks faced his young master:

"Mr. Norman Tatton, sir," he announced.

Sir Dick puckered his forehead, for the name was unfamiliar to him. The next moment an alert little man walked briskly into the library. He was clean-shaven, and seemed to exude cheerfulness.

"Pardon my intrusion, Sir Richard," exclaimed the new-comer breezily. "I'm not exactly sure whether I'm welcome, so soon after your arrival; but I could not resist the temptation to pop round and introduce myself. My name is Norman Tatton, as your worthy butler just announced, and my only excuse for calling is that I am your nearest neighbour."

Sir Richard held out his hand and shook Tatton's warmly.

"My dear chap, I'm delighted to see you!" he exclaimed. "I was just wondering how the deuce I should spend the rest of the evening. You'll stay to dinner, of course?"

"Well, I didn't mean to impose on your hospitality——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sir Dick. "Your company, Mr. Tatton, is extremely welcome. Sit down. Have a cigarette? Make yourself at home."

To tell the truth, the young baronet was extremely pleased at this unexpected visit. He soon learned that Tatton occupied Oakhurst—a fairly big house, some two miles across the moor. Oakhurst was, in fact, the nearest house to Troone Towers, and Mr. Tatton had been in residence for some years.

He proved to be a very genial, companionable man, and Sir Dick very soon forgot his former loneliness. He was glad that he had such an entertaining, cheery neighbour so close at hand. Dinner was a complete success—except that the cooking and the variety of the dishes was not quite as the young man would have liked. But that was merely a matter of arrangement. Things would be quite different when the new staff of servants were installed.

After dinner the two men adjourned to the library again, and seated themselves comfortably before the fireplace, in which a log-fire blazed cheerfully. Very soon cigars were alight, and host and guest settled themselves for a chat. Tatton was looking rather thoughtful, as though he had something on his mind. The rest of the great building was silent and still; only the wind outside moaned rather mournfully round the towers and turrets.

"I like this part of the country, you know," said the visitor, lying back in his easy-chair, and blowing cigar-smoke towards the ceiling. "It's quiet, with plenty of solitude."

"Well, there's no accounting for tastes," Sir Dick remarked. "Personally I'm not a great lover of solitude, and I'm going to make some thumping big alterations at Troone, without any delay. The place is too weird and ghostly for me."

Tatton looked up quickly.

"Do you believe in ghosts and spirit manifestations?" he asked. "Have you ever had any experiences in such things?"

"No; and I don't suppose anybody else has, either," said Sir Dick lightly. "I think a chap who believes in ghosts is more or less a crank; and spiritualists are nothing more than charlatans and frauds."

Tatton laughed.

"That's rather unfortunate," he said drily. "I happen to be a bit of a spiritualist myself. Don't apologise. You haven't offended me in any way. Perhaps a word of explanation will banish that curt frown from your brow. I'm not one of those spiritualists—one of those frauds, as you call them—who practise spiritualism for profit. I've simply made a study of all things occult, and do it merely as a hobby. To tell you the honest truth, Sir Richard," he added, turning and facing his host gravely, "I've come here to-night to give you a word of warning."

The young baronet stared.

"I don't quite understand," he said slowly. "What have you to warn me against?"

"An elemental," replied Tatton quietly.

"A—a which?"

"An elemental," repeated the other. "Now, please don't laugh or scoff at what I am going to say, for I am speaking seriously and sincerely. I'm absolutely convinced that Troone Towers is haunted by some horror, which I'm not in a position to name, for I don't exactly know what form it takes."

"But, my good chap, what on earth is an elemental?" asked Sir Dick blankly.

"It is a term the psychics use," replied Tatton. "An elemental is a disembodied spirit, which is capable of materialising; it can wreak material damage. Elementals can assume their hideous bones and flesh, and strangle or squeeze the life out of a human being as well as if they were living brutes."

"Rot!" said Sir Richard sharply.

"You may think so now," continued Tatton evenly; "but perhaps, before long, you will have some actual experience. It is a curious fact that only psychics are effected by elementals. I do not attempt to explain it, but these things, almost always hostile, only seem to have power over the human minority who can see them. Now you, Sir Richard, I am quite sure, are something of a psychic, although the influence is not fully developed. Your grandfather was one, and I am convinced that his death was very much hastened by the accursed elemental which haunts this place."

"But I've seen nothing—heard nothing——"

"There has hardly been sufficient time," interrupted Tatton. "You told me yourself that you had a kind of weird sensation, and I am quite sure that when this terrible phantom becomes active, you will be in grave danger. Months ago, when I first visited Troone, I was positive, even as I was walking up the drive, that there was some super-physical power, or influence, connected with this house. If one is not psychic, everything seems normal. But to me—in which the psychic power is highly developed—it is very different. As soon as I entered the house, I noticed an aura of horror which struck a chill to my very marrow. And, let me tell you, old Jenks is well aware of the facts. But it is a taboo subject. Nobody cares to

talk about it. I, however, for your own good, have come here to-night to put you on your guard. The Terror of Troone Towers is a very ghastly danger."

Sir Richard's cigarette had gone out between his fingers, and he sat looking at Tatton in a curious manner. He did not doubt his visitor's sincerity; the man spoke with absolute conviction.

"You amaze me, Mr. Tatton," he said slowly. "I've never taken the trouble to think of such things as ghosts, and I find it hard to believe what you have told me. But, taking the fact for granted, why is this elemental thing saddled upon the Towers?"

"I think I have an explanation," replied Mr. Tatton. "I naturally took a great interest in the matter, and looked up the early history of Troone. I found that ages ago there was a village, or a settlement, here of an early race of human beings. I believe that there are old burial places where the neolithic man had his dwellings and graves. At some period some relics, or fossils, were dug up, and this elemental is earth-bound, because those bones were removed. The only way in which to rid Troone Towers of the Terror is to find those fossils, to find the burial place, and to replace them."

Sir Dick took a deep breath.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I feel compelled to speak strongly on the subject. I think the whole yarn is sheer piffle! I don't doubt your sincerity, but it's too much to expect a sane man to swallow all that tom-foolery!"

Tatton sighed.

"I thought you would take it like that," he said. "It's a pity—a great pity. You will find to your cost that elementals and spirit manifestations are by no means the inventions of quack spiritualists. They are real dangers——"

"I can't believe it!" Sir Dick interjected gruffly.

He shook himself, and shivered a little. Tatton's ghostly talk had got on his nerves. The man was genial enough in himself, but these absurd yarns were rather too much for the healthy young baronet. The wind moaned outside, and the fire had sunk low.

"Hang it all, let's light some fresh cigarettes, and I'll tell you some cheerful yarns of Oxford!" said Sir Dick, shifting himself in his chair.

He leaned towards the table and reached for the cigarette-box. At the same moment his eyes rested on the big oaken door. And he remained still, his hands outstretched, his eyes staring fixedly.

Inch by inch the door was slowly opening, noiselessly, as though without human touch. Then, like a shadow at first, a hand came round the doorway, and waved silently up and down. It was a huge hand, hairy, gnarled, and knotted, and it appeared to float in space, without any supporting arm. And, simultaneously, a cold, rank smell stole through the room, like the smell of a horrible animal, but with the chill of an iceberg.

"Look!" gasped Sir Dick huskily. "Look!"

Tatton twisted round quickly. Then he shrank back into his chair.

"Good heavens!" he panted. "The Terror!"

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery of the West Wing.

FOR a moment—but only a moment—Sir Richard Troone seemed frozen to his chair. The sight of that horrible hand sent a chill feeling of dread right down his spine. It was so unearthly, so mysterious and terrible. Then, with a great shout, he leapt to his feet and dashed round the table.

"Ghost or no ghost, I'm going to find out what the infernal thing is!" he roared. "Come, Tatton——"

"Keep back!" gasped Tatton, with horror in his voice. "You don't know what you're doing, Sir Richard. If that unearthly brute touches you——"

But Sir Dick paid no attention. After all, Norman Tatton was a spiritualist, and was probably superstitious to the bone. Sir Dick, however, was made of stern stuff, and even so ghastly a spectre did not rob him of his self-control. In three strides he had reached the door. With a great heave he wrenched it open, and stood peering into the dim passage without.

It was empty!

Not a sign of any living being was visible, and there was no sound of retreating footsteps, no tell-tale creaking of loose boards. At the turn of the passage a rather small lamp hung, and shed a subdued light just round about.

"By Janos!" ejaculated Sir Dick.

He stepped forward sharply and traversed the whole passage. There was absolutely nothing to be seen except the dim old walls. A couple of windows, he noticed, were securely fastened, so it was quite obvious that the ghost had not made his exit in that manner. In a sub-conscious way Sir Dick fully believed that the hand had belonged to something human. He could not bring himself to be convinced that it was, as Tatton had stated, a disembodied spirit—an elemental.

Walking further he turned the corner, and found himself in the great hall.

"Nothing—nothing at all!" he murmured. "Hang it, I can't believe—— No, it's too utterly preposterous! I expect that hand belonged to some farm-labourer, who was about to enter the library, and as I was rather nervy at the time I imagined things."

But, even as Sir Dick thought, he knew quite well that the explanation he had just given was out of the question. He had arrived at the door in less than two seconds, and no human being could possibly have got out of sight in that time. The front door, he saw, was bolted on the inside, and the spectre could not have gone upstairs, because he could hear the housekeeper and the maids busy on the upper floor—probably preparing his bedroom.

With a decidedly uneasy feeling he walked back to the library, glancing over his shoulder now and again, in spite of his mental resolve not to do so.

When he arrived at the library door he paused, rather startled by the spectacle before him. Tatton was crouching on the floor just near the doorway, and he was rocking to and fro, and muttering unintelligible words to himself. Sir Dick strode into the library, rather surprised to see his visitor in such a state of blue funk.

But Tatton was not in a funk, as it turned out. When Sir Dick shook his shoulder he looked up with a dreamy expression in his eyes, and then scrambled to his feet. Apparently he had been in a trance.

"I have seen!" he murmured huskily. "Sir Richard Troone, you are in terrible danger!"

"What the deuce do you mean?" growled Sir Dick.

Tatton shook himself and laid a hand on his companion's shoulder.

"I am a psychic, and I have seen," he said quietly. "I warn you, Sir Richard, to go away from this place as though it were accursed. Even though it will look cowardly, I urge you to go——"

Sir Dick grunted.

"You can urge till doomsday," he interjected curtly. "You might as well save your breath, Mr. Tatton. If there is danger here, I am going to

face it. This is my home, and I am hanged if I am going to be driven out of it by a ghost! I am here, and I am going to stick here—and, what's more, I'm going to ferret out the truth of this confounded Terror! If you want my plain, unvarnished opinion, I believe there is some infernally queer work of some sort going on—and disembodied spirits aren't responsible for it, either!"

Tatton looked up, rather taken aback.

"Good heavens, aren't you convinced even now of the truth of what I have been telling you?" he asked. "It is amazing to me that people nowadays scoff at these things so lightly. How can I drive home the fact to you that an awful danger hangs over your head, so long as you live under this roof?"

"What about yourself?" asked Sir Richard curiously. "You're a dashed lot more of a psychic than I am, Mr. Tatton. Don't you share my danger?"

"Perhaps I am in even greater danger than you are," replied the other gravely. "And for that reason I must beg of you to excuse me if I depart somewhat hurriedly. I am upset—inwardly upset—by this manifestation which has just occurred. The whole atmosphere is charged with peril. I shall feel far safer out on the moor. And I should advise you, too, to go for a long walk, and allow the elemental to settle down. If you knew all that I know——"

"I am rather glad I don't," interrupted Sir Dick. "Ignorance is bliss, you know; and although I'm not exactly in a blissful state at the moment, I am certainly lamentably ignorant on all things occult. If I were as learned as you, I might take your advice and flee. As it is, I shall stay and face matters."

Tatton shook his head.

"You're brave—very brave," he said dubiously. "I hope with all my heart nothing amiss will occur."

The young baronet chuckled heartily. Indeed, he had hard work to prevent himself laughing outright. Tatton's face was so utterly lugubrious as to be quite comical. He was evidently in deadly earnest.

While the two men had a last whisky-and-soda, orders were given for Tatton's car to be brought round, and very shortly afterwards the little spiritualist took his departure. Sir Dick stood at the top of the steps and listened to the hum of the motor-car as it spun down the drive. Then, the wind being decidedly bitter, he turned, went indoors, and slammed the great door.

"Queer chap, Tatten," he told himself. "Still, he is an entertaining beggar, although he is a bit cranky."

The hour was still early—barely ten-thirty, in fact—but Sir Richard determined to go to bed at once. It was not that he dreaded going to bed at the witching hour of midnight, but merely because he was sleepy and tired.

He thought about having a few words with Jenks with regard to Tatton's story of the Terror, but decided to leave matters until the morning. Ghosts and spirits were more easily discussed in broad daylight.

As Sir Dick went upstairs to his room, he could not help being a little worried about that mysterious hand. He half convinced himself that the whole thing had been sheer imagination. Anyhow, he was not going to be worried about it just then.

His bedroom was situated in the west wing, and was, indeed, the best bedroom of the vast number of bedrooms at Troone. It was befitting that the owner of the Towers should sleep there.

"No light!" grumbled Sir Dick to Jenks, who had preceded his master to draw the blinds. "Every blessed room is as dark and dismal as a

churchyard. Jove! I'll have the whole place blazing with illumination before I've done."

"Light does give one confidence, sir," agreed Jenks. "The old place won't seem half so lonesome once we get electricity here."

The butler bade his young master good-night, and respectfully took his departure. Sir Dick rapidly undressed, and then turned out the lamp and jumped into bed. It was a splendid bed, and he sank right down into it, snug and cosy.

"This is not so dusty, anyway!" he mumbled into the pillow. "I'll bet I'll sleep like a top until the morning."

But somehow he didn't drop off to sleep so soon as he thought he would. He could not help thinking of the story which Norman Tatton had told him. And, somehow, the tale of the elemental didn't seem so preposterous now as it had done before the cosy fire in the library. The recollection of that horrible hand, too, troubled him, and he found himself turning over in bed and straining his ears to listen. Outside the wind moaned dismally, and some creeper was tapping and shuffling weirdly against the window-panes. Sir Dick knew what it was, but it nevertheless sounded decidedly creepy.

Unaccountable creakings were to be heard, too, but these were sounds which always made themselves apparent in old houses. Had Sir Richard had some friends with him, he would scarcely have given such matters a single thought. But he was alone. The west wing was utterly deserted save for himself. The servants' quarters were far away on the other side of the great building, out of earshot and practically isolated.

"Oh, hang it all," he growled at last, "you're getting nervy, Dick, my son! Pull yourself together, and don't be an ass!"

With a strong effort of will he settled himself for sleep, and presently dropped off into an uneasy slumber. As a rule, he slept with healthy soundness, but to-night he only seemed to doze. Perhaps it was the suddenness in the change of his life which had affected him so much. Previous to this everything had been a gay whirl—although by this it must not be understood that Sir Richard had been loose and fast during his life at Oxford. He had, on the contrary, led a moderate and clean existence. But compared to life at Troone it had been gay and cheerful. Here everything was subdued and mournful.

How long he slept he did not know, but it must have been some little time. For when he suddenly awoke he found that the room was no longer dark. A weak moonbeam streamed in through the window, and formed a patch on the carpet close beside the bed—Sir Dick had raised the blinds just before turning out the lamp.

Why he had awakened he did not know, but he instantly sat up in bed, and caught his breath in sharply. He had a creepy feeling within him that he wasn't alone—that some other presence was in the room with him. The air was cold and chill, and he shivered, a feeling of unknown, intangible horror creeping over him. And even as he prepared to lie down in bed again, that same awful rank smell, which had preceded the appearance of the hand in the library, stole through the bedroom.

It caught in Sir Dick's throat and filled his nostrils.

"Good heavens!" he whispered hoarsely. "What's coming over me? Bah, my nerves are like raw shreds!"

He paused, and clutched at the bedclothes. Something had moved in the far corner of the room.

Had his eyes tricked him, or had he actually seen a dim, shadowy outline? He sat rigid, unable to move a limb. It seemed as though unseen hands had grasped him and were holding him as in a vice. His throat was dry.

and he felt his breath coming and going in sharp, short puffs. He closed his eyes for a few moments, to try and regain his self-control. In a measure, he succeeded, for in a few seconds he fell back on to the pillow and breathed freely. Then, with an effort, he opened his eyes again, hardly daring to conjecture what he would see.

He stared up, and there bending right over him, within a yard, was some huge shadowy object; and now, ten times stronger, that awful animal smell entered his nostrils. Sir Dick's heart seemed to cease beating for a few moments. He felt the perspiration wet, cold, and clammy on his forehead.

What was this thing? It made no sound, it did not touch him, but simply hovered there, menacing, ghastly, and terrible.

Something seemed to snap in the young baronet's brain, and he found himself possessed of the power to use his voice, to use his limbs. He reared out an imprecation, and sprang up.

"By heavens, if you've got life in you, I'll find out what you are!" he shouted fiercely.

Like a shadow the Terror faded away from the bedside, and for one second Sir Dick saw a huge knotted hand in the moonlight. Of the face of this awful thing he saw nothing, for it passed out of the moonbeam into the black shadows beyond. Sir Dick leapt from the bed, reached the mantelpiece in two strides, and groped for the box of wax vestas he knew to be there.

Scratch!

A light flared out, and he held it aloft, quivering and shaking. After the darkness the illumination from that single match was brilliant and penetrating, and Sir Dick swiftly swept his gaze round the whole room.

But he was alone—absolutely alone!

With shaking fingers, he lit the lamp, and then carried it round with him while he searched. But the search proved fruitless. He looked under the bed, behind the furniture, and, in fact, in every possible place, and every impossible place where the dreadful thing might be hiding.

"Gone!" he muttered. "By George, what can it mean? Escape from the window was impossible, and the door is locked on the inside."

He stood there in his pyjamas, cold, shivering, and deathly pale. His nerves were shaken to the very utmost, and he felt weak and faint. He sniffed the air sharply, but there was no remaining trace of that uncanny smell. With the disappearance of the Terror so had the rank odour disappeared.

Could it possibly have been nothing more than imagination—a kind of ghostly nightmare?

"No, it was no nightmare," Sir Dick whispered to himself. "Whether living or spectral, some terrible thing was in this room with me—something which brought a whiff of the grave with it. And yet it escaped into thin air; there is no panelling in this room, there are no secret passages at Troone. What a mystery!"

He turned the lamp up to its highest, and then raked out half a dozen candles, which he found in the dressing-table drawer. With these all burning in different parts of the room, the apartment was well-lighted and brilliant. Sir Richard's confidence seemed to be restored somewhat, and he donned his slippers and dressing-gown.

Further sleep was out of the question. He could no more have slept after that awful experience than have emulated the Terror's example and vanish into thin air.

During the remaining hours of darkness he sat up and smoked—smoked furiously and continuously to restore the calm to his shaken nerves. He tried to read, but found it absolutely impossible. So he sat smoking and

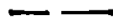
thinking, and the more he thought the more he became convinced that something intangible and villainous was at work round and about him. Even after such an adventure, he could not bring himself to believe in Tatton's story of an elemental. This was the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages.

Sir Dick was a strong-minded young man, and he immediately resolved upon a plan. Ghost or no ghost, he would seek expert advice, and there was one man, he resolved, who would prove invaluable. That man was Nelson Lee, the famous detective. If Nelson Lee came down and his inquiries and investigations were of no avail, then—but not until then—would Sir Richard Troone be convinced that what he had to fight against was not of this world.

When daylight came he waited until the sun's rays were streaming in strong and full through the window. Then he extinguished the lights and went to bed again. This time he slept like a top until Jenks knocked on the door and announced that breakfast would be prepared in half an hour.

And in half an hour Sir Richard duly sat down to the meal, knowing full well that his appetite was a mere thread of its former self, and that his usually healthy face was haggard and drawn. His first night at Troone Towers seemed to have aged him ten years. But a telegram had already been dispatched to Nelson Lee, and there was nothing to do now but await the answer.

Whether the celebrated detective would be sufficiently interested in the case to come down was a point which caused Sir Dick grave doubt and anxiety.



CHAPTER III.

The Slate-Grey Racing Car.

NELSON LEE and Nipper were at breakfast in their rooms in Gray's Inn Road when Sir Richard Troone's telegram arrived. The detective read it through, and then propped it in front of the cruet before him. Nipper looked at his master inquiringly as he chewed a mouthful of eggs and bacon.

"Anything important, sir?" he asked diffidently.

"I don't know, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "Have a look at the wire yourself, and see what you make of it. It is certainly an urgent communication."

He tossed the pink form across, and Nipper read it:

"Mr. Nelson Lee, Gray's Inn Road, London.—Want your assistance most urgently. Unaccountable mystery. Am in great peril. Can you come to-day? You are at liberty to fix any fee you care to name. Please wire definite statement.—RICHARD TROONE, Troone Towers, High Thirtle, Yorks."

Nipper handed the telegram back to his master.

"Who's Thomas Troone, sir?" he asked. "Ever heard of him?"

"My dear Nipper, what has happened to your memory?" replied Nelson Lee. "It is only about a month ago that old Sir Robert Troone died and left his grandson, an Oxford undergraduate, his entire estates and fortune, in addition to the baronetcy. I wonder what this 'great peril' is the youngster refers to?"

"Seems rather interesting, sir," said Nipper. "Unaccountable mysteries are in our line. Besides, you can fix your own fee——"

"Tut-tut. I'm not a poor man, young 'un, and fees are of no interest to me if the case is commonplace," interjected the detective curtly. "I fancy, however, that Sir Richard's appeal is based on something very much out of the ordinary. His telegram is poignant with anxiety. No man, however rich, tells another man to name his own fee unless he is greatly disturbed in mind."

"Will you look into the case, sir?"

"Let me think, Nipper," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "I have nothing very pressing on hand. There is the affair of the earl's diamonds, but that can wait. I am not particularly interested in Mrs. Benyon's lost son, either. I fancy the police will be of more assistance to her than we can be. Yes, we will travel down to Yorkshire, if only for the sake of a whiff of moorland breeze."

"Good!" said Nipper heartily.

And a wire was at once dispatched to Sir Richard informing him that Nelson Lee and Nipper were leaving King's Cross by the 11-37 train, and would arrive at Troone somewhere about teatime.

After breakfast Nelson Lee instructed Nipper to reach down a reference-book from a top shelf in the bookcase. It was marked "T." The detective turned over the pages until he came to "Troone." The book was one of his own compiling, and was filled with out-of-the-way information which could not be found elsewhere.

"Ah, here we are, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, running his finger down the page. "Troone Towers, four and a half miles north of High Thirtle village and station, Yorkshire. The ancient home of the Troones, one of the oldest and most highly respected families in the county. Present baronet, Sir Robert Troone—we shall have to bring this up-to-date, Nipper. Sir Robert during his lifetime, has allowed the mansion to get into a sad state of neglect, although financial trouble is by no means the cause. The Towers is widely reputed to be haunted—"

"Oh, crikey!" said Nipper. "Are we going to search for spooks?"

"Most old houses have the reputation of being haunted, my boy," went on Nelson Lee. "Now, what else does it say? At least three of Sir Robert Troone's ancestors met with mysterious and unaccountable deaths, and the moorland folk, many years back, talked of a curse hanging over the house of Troone. Of late years, however, this has been more or less forgotten."

"Is that all?"

"That's all, Nipper," replied the detective. "Sir Robert Troone himself died very unexpectedly and suddenly. H'm! Perhaps the new baronet has been looking up the family records, and is getting uervy. Still, we'll pay him a visit and hear his story before theorising."

Nelson Lee replaced the book on its shelf, and was very thoughtful while he and Nipper prepared for their journey. Nipper was more or less in high glee. The prospect of a visit to the Yorkshire moors was decidedly alluring, for he and Nelson Lee had not been out of the smoke and grime of London for some weeks. But Nelson Lee himself was wondering if the visit to Troone Towers would be for nought, or whether this journey north would be the start of a difficult and adventurous case.

It would all depend on the story which Sir Richard had to tell. Just before Nelson Lee and Nipper started for King's Cross another wire came from Sir Richard, stating that a trap would meet the train at High Thirtle.

The journey to Yorkshire was uneventful, and when Nelson Lee and Nipper stepped out of the train at High Thirtle dusk was gathering quickly. The clouds were thick overhead, and a stiff wind cut along the little platform.

"By gum, sir, it's cold up in this part of the world," said Nipper, stamping his feet.

"Winter is near, my boy, and this is a bleak district," replied Nelson Lee. "Ah, that is our trap, I suppose, standing beyond those railings."

They passed out into the station, followed by curious looks from the ticket-collector and a rural postman. High Thirtle was a tiny station, and travellers seldom alighted there. Nelson Lee walked up to the rather dingy trap.

"Are you from the Towers, my man?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You're Mr. Lee, I suppose, sir?"

"Quite right."

"Sir Richard told me to apologise, sir," went on the groom. "He's sorry he couldn't send anything better than this trap to meet you. He's ordered a big motor-car, but it won't be delivered for a week or two."

"That's all right," said Nelson Lee. "A trap may be slow, but it's sure. I don't think we shall have any serious accidents on the way, to judge by the horse's looks."

The detective spoke lightly, and the groom grinned, but neither of them dreamed how near to tragedy that drive to Troone Towers was to be.

There was room for the three of them on the front seat, and the luggage was tossed in behind. Then the groom whipped up the horse, and the journey to Troone started. Very soon High Thirtle was left behind, and the bleak, open moors stretched out on either hand.

The wind soughed across the vast wastes, and seemed to hit the trap and its occupants bodily. It was bitter, and Nelson Lee and Nipper drew their overcoats closer about them, and wished they had provided themselves with woollen mufflers.

In the dim twilight, the moors looked unutterably lonely, and cast a depression over the new arrivals. Neither of them spoke much, and the groom seemed stolid, and the only sounds he made were mysterious exclamations to the horse.

The lamps of the trap had already been lit, but they were old and dirty, and the light they cast was weak and flickery. The horse jugged along with rhythmic gait, and the miles were slowly covered.

A motor-cyclist, begoggled and muffled, passed the trap slowly, and looked right up into the faces of the occupants—although Nelson Lee had difficulty in seeing this, for the cycle's headlamp shone dazzlingly in his eyes.

"A resident?" asked the detective.

"Dunno, sir," replied the groom. "There ain't any motor-bikes about here that I know of. Must be a tourist."

A few minutes later there was a sudden hum, and a motor-cycle simply roared past the trap from the direction of High Thirtle. In less than a minute its red tail-lamp had disappeared into the misty air.

"Queer," said the groom. "Two on 'em! An' I ain't seen them things on this road for weeks and weeks! Mebbe it was the same chap goin' back."

"Probably," said Nelson Lee shortly.

"Wish I was on one," growled Nipper. "This trap is like a blessed tortoise!"

"We're within a mile o' Troone now, sir," said the driver. "See"—and he pointed with his whip—"that light away there is the Towers."

The light disappeared shortly afterwards behind a high rise, and all was blackness round the slowly-moving trap. Ten minutes passed, and then Nelson Lee bent forward slightly and looked ahead.

"What is it, gov'nor?" asked Nipper.

"A motor-car coming, I think," replied the detective. "Yes, we can see the lights now. By Jove, it's moving at a decent rate, Nipper!"

"More than we are!" grunted Nipper.

A moment later the approaching car entered upon a straight stretch of

road which led directly to the trap. It was simply shooting along, dead in the centre of the road, and no warning blast of the horn was given. The car came on relentlessly, and the road was so narrow that there was scarcely room for the trap to draw to the side.

Just at this point the road was bordered by hedgeless banks, and it was absolutely impossible for the trap to mount the obstacle. The groom reined in the horse with a startled oath.

"Darned fool!" he growled. "He'll be into us!"

Nelson Lee realised that the man spoke only too truly. For two vehicles to pass it was almost imperative that both should be travelling at a walking pace. Yet the motor-car was roaring onwards like a juggernaut.

"My goodness!" ejaculated Nipper, in a startled voice. "There's going to be a smash!"

"The car must be driven by a madman!" roared Nelson Lee. "Jump! To the near side! Jump for your lives!"

Nipper simply jerked himself out of the stationary trap, and landed on the other side of the bank on the moor. Nelson Lee came flying after him, and landed a yard off. At the same second the groom thudded on to the road, and dashed for the horse's head. Evidently it was his intention to attempt to drag the trap aside.

But there was no time!

The whole thing happened in a second. Nelson Lee and Nipper had only just landed, and were picking themselves up when there was a mighty crash. Everything was confusion. The groom yelled with pain and fury, the horse snorted, terrified, and the air seemed filled with flying debris.

The trap literally crumpled to pieces, for the huge motor-car had struck it on the off-side against the step. The shafts tore away, and the horse, frightened almost out of its life, dashed away into the darkness. The groom received a fearful blow on the chest and fell backwards on to the grass and lay still.

Nelson Lee and Nipper watched with fast-beating hearts. The detective caught one glimpse of the car as it flashed past—for it did not decrease its speed in the least. It was a racing-car, dull, slate-grey, with stream-lined body. The driver crouched at the wheel, low down and almost hidden. To see his face was impossible.

The front of the car smashed forcibly into the trap, and the latter fell, shattered to pieces. The blow was so violent that had the occupants of the trap not leapt for their lives, they would probably have been instantly killed. In any case, they would all have been seriously injured. They had escaped by a hair's-breadth—by the fraction of a second.

The car roared on, and disappeared into the gloom.

"The infernal scoundrel!" rapped out Nelson Lee furiously.

"My hat! We should have been mangled if we hadn't jumped!" gasped Nipper excitedly. "Just look at the trap, sir—fancy us being in the midst of those splinters and broken planks. Why, at the very least, our legs would have been mangled to pulp!"

Nelson Lee gritted his teeth.

"But the diabolical deliberateness of it, Nipper!" he said hotly. "The man made no attempt to slow down, or to even draw aside!"

Nipper gasped.

"Do you think it was done on purpose, sir?"

"I don't know, young 'un," replied the detective. "Possibly he was simply a super-road-hog, and thought he could rush past in safety. Finding he couldn't, and that his car wasn't put out of action, he drove on to escape the consequences. He knows very well that we can't tell the

police to have him stopped. Out on this bleak moor we are powerless to bring him to justice!"

"Gum! it was a narrow escape!" said Nipper. "Hallo, the groom is knocked out!"

In the excitement of the moment they had not noticed the man lying on the grass. Now, however, Nelson Lee produced an electric-torch, and they bent over the injured groom. He was not unconscious—and, in fact, was not badly hurt. But his ribs were bruised severely and he was utterly winded.

"I'll be able to get home, sir," he gasped, staggering to his feet painfully. "By gosh, I wish I knew who that blessed villain was! Chaps like him ought to be locked up!"

The horse had apparently bolted for home, for there was no sign or sound of it. The remains of the trap were dragged clear of the road, and then the trio commenced walking towards Troone; a distance of a mile, perhaps less. Nelson Lee took the groom's arm, and assisted the man along.

But the detective talked little, and did not pay much attention to Nipper's indignant exclamations. Nelson Lee was thinking. Could that accident have been intentional? Had the motorist deliberately engineered the smash?

But why should he?

What earthly reason was there for such a thing?

Nelson Lee remembered the motor-cyclist, and a shrewd thought struck him. Possibly the motor-cyclist had rode past the trap so slowly in order to see who it contained. Finding that Nelson Lee and Nipper were aboard, he turned and rushed ahead to inform the motorist; who immediately set out with the intention of wrecking the trap. This theory was, of course, taking it for granted that the smash had been intentional. Remembering how absolutely deliberate the affair had been, it was hardly possible to put it down as an accident, or an error of judgment.

"If it were indeed an attempt on my life, then I must prepare myself for a fight with an unusually daring and murderous foe," he told himself grimly. "Is it possible that this accident is in any way connected with Sir Richard Troone's 'great peril?' I wonder—I wonder."

And it was, certainly, a grave and puzzling point for Nelson Lee to wonder at.

CHAPTER IV.

The Carved Dagger—Another Mystery

"WELL, it's an absolute mystery to me, Mr. Lee," said Sir Dick, in a puzzled voice. "I can't think of any explanation; at least, I can't imagine who would deliberately attempt to kill you. The affair was certainly not connected with the business which has brought you down to Troone."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm not so sure of that," he replied. "Do you know of anybody—anybody, mind you, whether he's a peer or a duke—who owns a motor-car round about here?"

The young baronet laughed.

"There are no peers nor dukes on the moor here," he replied. "And, as a matter of fact, the only motor-car I know of belongs to Mr. Norman Tatton."

"And who is Mr. Norman Tatton?"

"Oh, a spiritualist crank who lives at Oakhurst, a mile or two away--my nearest neighbour, in fact," replied Sir Dick. "But don't go suspecting poor Tatton of horrible villainy. His car is a little two-seater Humber."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully, and dismissed Tatton from his mind. He and Nipper and the groom had only just arrived at the Towers. Sir Dick had been rather anxious, for he had expected them long before.

The baronet didn't care a farthing for the loss of the trap, but he was a little worried about the danger Nelson Lee and his young assistant had been subjected to. The groom, too, had been packed off to bed, with a promise of liberal compensation for his injuries.

In the library Sir Dick related his story to Nelson Lee and Nipper, and the pair listened with great attention. Sir Dick told how the spectral hand had appeared the previous evening, and how he had awakened in the middle of the night to find the ghastly elemental in his bed-room.

"I know quite well that ghost-hunting isn't in your line, Mr. Lee," he went on. "But I've got a kind of feeling that there's something more in this than meets the eye. I simply can't reconcile myself to the yarn that Mr. Tatton told me. In plain truth, I believe there is some dastardly villainy at work here."

"Do you suggest any motive?"

"None whatever. I've racked my brain for one, but I'm not much good at that sort of thing. I hope you don't think I've brought you down here under false pretences. I want you to thoroughly investigate the matter, and if you can't find any solution, then I shall have to believe that there really are such things as ghosts."

Nelson Lee lit a cigar thoughtfully.

"There are queerer things happen than either you or I can understand," he said. "There are many ancient houses in this country which are haunted. I must admit, however, that I have investigated more than one case of haunting which has had a natural explanation. Has anything happened to-day?"

Sir Dick hesitated.

"Well, I suppose I'd better tell you," he said slowly. "But it's so utterly strange that I'm afraid of being disbelieved and laughed at. Although yesterday I scoffed at spirit manifestations, I must admit that my views are being badly shaken. Mind you, I'm still of my original opinion--but, hang it all, how can a man laugh at spirits when things are chucked at him by unseen hands?"

"What happened, then?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"It was about an hour before you arrived," went on Sir Dick, pulling jerkily at his cigarette. "I was crossing the hall to go to the front door

"One moment. Was the hall lighted?"

"No. I was a bit wild, in fact, because Jenks hadn't seen to it," said Sir Richard. "I came downstairs and walked across the hall. You know it is a lofty, big apartment, and as soon as I reached the centre I thought I heard a ghastly kind of cackle."

"Do you mean laughter?"

"Well, it was faint and far away, and seemed hollow. Nevertheless, it sent a cold feeling down my back. Next moment, as I paused to listen, a sword which I knew had been hanging on the wall a moment before, came hurtling out of the shadows and just missed me by inches. It fell to the floor with a clatter, and I spun round to see who the deuce had had the nerve to throw it. But there was nobody there--I had the hall absolutely to myself."

"I expect you felt cheerful," remarked Nipper.

Sir Dick smiled nervously.

"I didn't have time to feel any emotion at all," he replied. "While I was picking up the sword, a metal-framed picture sang through the air and brushed past my sleeve. I tell you, Mr. Lee, I was thoroughly startled. But I didn't lose my nerve. I dashed across the hall to the dark corner from whence the things had come. But it was deserted, except for an old book-case."

"Did you look inside the book-case?"

"Of course. But it was dusty and simply filled with books," replied Sir Dick. "There wasn't an inch of room for even a terrier to hide."

"I'll have a look at that book-case later on," said Nelson Lee. "But pray continue. Did this cheerful elemental give any other display of his uncanny powers?"

No--although I've got a notion I heard another cackle of ghostly laughter. I'm not sure of that, however. It may have been my imagination. Mr. Lee," said Sir Richard gravely. "I want you to ferret out the secret of this house. I'll pay you any sum you care to name—I'm a rich man—if you clear up this horrible mystery."

"I'll do my best," replied Nelson Lee simply.

"That means the mystery will be cleared up," said Nipper confidently. But his master shook his head.

"I'm not so sure of that," he exclaimed. "I've never tackled a case exactly similar to this one before. It has elements of unfathomable mystery in it which offer no explanation. However, I'm hardly in a position to form any opinion yet, for I have had no personal experience. The only ray of hope which I can see lies in the fact that my life was attempted on the way here."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I have an idea that the trap 'accident,' and your affairs are closely connected, Sir Richard," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "Even the most obstinate believer in the occult would not credit an elemental driving a racing motor-car! If that affair was deliberate—and I'm convinced it was—then it proves that my presence at Troone is feared. And why? Because my fame as a detective has spread even to the moors of Yorkshire, and your enemy believes that I might discover something which will expose the whole show."

"How do you propose to start your investigations?"

"I don't propose to start them at all just yet," replied the famous detective. "I'm hungry, Sir Richard, and I believe Nipper is on the verge of starvation—to judge from his own observations as we were walking here."

Nipper grinned.

"I'm a bit peckish," he admitted modestly. "Do we get a feed soon?"

Sir Richard jumped to his feet.

"Confound my forgetfulness!" he exclaimed, glancing at his watch. "It's within five minutes of the dinner hour now, and you haven't washed or dressed yet. If you'll follow me, gentlemen, I'll lead you to your room."

They followed Sir Dick out into the great hall, which was now dimly illuminated by lamp-light. It was a large lamp, but in that huge apartment it seemed to shed no light worth calling a light.

As they were about to mount the stairs, Sir Dick paused and pointed to a quaintly-carved dagger which hung from a nail on the wall, on the opposite side of the hall to the staircase.

"That's a deadly-looking weapon," he remarked. "Jenks told me this evening, in an awed voice, that more than once it has been hurled with terrific force about the room. Of course, I didn't swallow the yarn."

"Why not?" asked Nelson Lee. "Don't forget your own experience—and while pictures and sheathed swords might miss you, a sharply-pointed dagger may do terrible injury. If I were you I should remove that dagger and lock it up."

"But, dash it all, the thing hasn't got life of its own!" protested Sir Dick. "It can't unhook itself, and——"

"No, but it can be unhooked," said Nelson Lee significantly.

They went upstairs, Sir Richard promising to take the dagger down when they descended for dinner. Nelson Lee and Nipper did not take long over preparations, for they only had a wash and brush-up. The detective did not think it necessary to get into evening-dress, for he didn't believe in ceremony when there was work to be done.

"Ready, Nipper?" he asked.

Nipper grunted.

"Am I ready?" he exclaimed disgustedly. "Here I've been waiting five minutes while you've been brushing your hair, sir, and you ask me if I'm ready! I hope there's something tasty for dinner!"

They descended the stairs together, Nelson Lee leading the way. The old house was very quiet, but outside the wind was moaning dismally, and now and again the windows rattled as the fierce gusts assailed them.

As Nelson Lee was nearing the bottom of the great staircase, he suddenly paused with a tense expression on his face. He held up his hand for Nipper to be silent.

"What is it, sir?" whispered the lad.

"I heard a sound—a sound as of distant laughter," replied Nelson Lee sharply. "It was exactly as Sir Richard described—ghostly and weird——"

"My hat! there it is again, sir!" gasped Nipper huskily.

They both heard it this time—a grim but faint peal of phantom laughter. From whence it came it was impossible to say; it seemed to be in the very air about them. Then, as they listened, it died away into a low moaning wail.

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Could it have been the wind, Nipper?" he asked grimly. "Wind plays queer tricks now and again, you know. By Jove, I'm getting tremendously interested!"

He walked down the last few stairs slowly, and as he placed his foot on the bottom stair he paused to again listen.

Whizz! Thud!

Something shot past Nelson Lee's head, so closely that it almost grazed the skin of his cheek. It was so swift, so unexpected, that he saw absolutely nothing. The following second there was a dull thud, and he gazed across the hall with a start. There, still quivering, was the carved dagger, plunged a good inch into a thick wooden upright!

"Good heavens!" gasped Nelson Lee.

He sprang down, crossed the hall, and wrenched the dagger out of the woodwork. Nipper was beside him, and the lad was looking pale.

"It might have killed you, sir!" he said hoarsely.

"One thing, and one alone, saved my life, Nipper," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Had I not paused to listen that dagger would certainly have penetrated my skull to the brain. As it was, it merely brushed my cheek, and has done no damage whatever. By Jove, it seems as though the butler's story was perfectly true!"

Nipper looked bewildered.

"But how did it get here, sir?" he asked blankly. "It was hanging on the wall five feet from where it struck. It was flung from an entirely

opposite direction. A dagger's not a boomerang—it can't make circles in the air!"

"It's mysterious, my lad," said the detective—"deadly mysterious!"

He went to the foot of the staircase, but there was nothing to be seen there. Nelson Lee was absolutely thunderstruck. The incident was so bizarre and uncanny that he felt a queer qualm strike his heart. It seemed absolutely impossible that the dagger could have been flung by human agency.

To have struck where it did it must have come from the wall within two feet of the place where Nelson Lee had been standing at the moment. And how could it possibly have gained such terrible velocity? Besides, it was quite impossible for the dagger to have been flung by a human hand from that wall, for it was bare, devoid of panelling, and absolutely solid brickwork. It almost seemed as though Nelson Lee would have to believe that the thing had unhooked itself from the wall and had whizzed round the hall, propelled by some unseen power.

"I say, sir, it's a bit uncanny!" said Nipper, in a low voice.

"It's amazing—inexplicable!"

Sir Dick appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Hallo, what's the trouble?" he asked curiously.

"Why, the guv'nor's nearly been killed!" replied Nipper excitedly.

"Your wild elemental has got its knife into us now, or, rather, it nearly had a dagger into Mr. Lee!"

"What the deuce do you mean?"

Sir Dick came down, and was told of the startling occurrence. He listened with a grave face, and then stared blankly at the wall near the foot of the staircase.

"But it's ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "How could the dagger have shot past you from this direction—how could it have plunged into that oaken support? Nobody could have flung it from this wall, within a yard of your face."

"Any sane man would say the same thing," replied Nelson Lee quietly.

"The fact remains that the thing happened exactly as I described it. If you had related it to me, Sir Richard, I should have had serious doubts as to your sanity."

"Well, I've no doubts as to yours, Mr. Lee," replied Sir Dick. "It's a tall yarn, I'll admit, but you're not the man to imagine things. And, by Jove, after my experience of this evening, I'd have believed you if you'd told me that the grandfather's clock had waltzed round the hall!"

Carrying the dagger with him, Nelson Lee passed on into the dining-room, accompanied by his two companions. They found the room lit cheerily by an immense number of candles, and a stray lamp or two. Sir Dick placed the dagger in a bureau and locked it up.

They were rather quiet over dinner, for the incident had disturbed their peace of mind to a considerable extent. Much as they wanted to believe the manifestations were due to human agency, the affair of the dagger was certainly a staggering problem. Even Nelson Lee began to have a glimmering of doubt. He almost began to think it possible that the elemental was, indeed, a spirit being from another world.

Dinner over—and a splendid dinner into the bargain—Nelson Lee and Nipper felt fit for anything. Sir Dick proposed adjourning to the library for a smoke round the fire. But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'll certainly have a smoke," he said, "but there are one or two investigations I wish to make. It is my intention to thoroughly examine

the hall, and your bedroom, Sir Richard. If there are any secret doorways or openings I believe I can find them. If there are none, then I shall be nearly ready to admit myself beaten, and to acknowledge that there are such things as elementals and disembodied spirits!"

And, accompanied by Sir Dick, who insisted on having a hand in the affair, Nelson Lee and Nipper set off on their tour of inspection.

CHAPTER V.

The Cry in the Night—A Clue at Last.

NIPPER gave a grunt of dissatisfaction.

"Nix!" he exclaimed—"absolutely nix! We've been searching and probing for two solid hours, and we haven't discovered a blessed thing! Guv'nor, we shall have to crawl away and hide our diminished heads!"

Nelson Lee set his teeth.

"Not yet, my lad," he said grimly. "The fact that we have been unsuccessful makes me all the more determined to press my inquiries to the bitter end. I don't admit myself beaten, in spite of what I said previously, and I sha'n't admit it until I have satisfied myself, beyond all doubt, that human agency is not the cause of these mysterious manifestations."

The detective was rather gloomy and disappointed. He and his young assistant and Sir Richard were sitting in the library. They had failed in their efforts. The hall had been searched and examined, but the bookcase told them nothing. Nelson Lee had had all the books out, but no secret opening or panel had been discovered. Behind the case, which was built-in, was nothing but solid brickwork.

The wall against the stairs was the same. Where that dagger had come from, or how it had been flung, was a startling mystery. There was absolutely nothing to account for it.

And Sir Dick's bedroom, upstairs, was barren of any secret doorway. Nelson Lee again drew a blank. He almost thought, reviewing Sir Dick's story, that the young man had imagined the happenings of the previous night. He knew how easy it was for a man in a state of "nerves" to see weird shapes in a dimly moon-lit room.

One thing was certain, the detective thought, if Sir Richard locked himself in his room it was quite impossible for anything human to reach him. The windows were high, and there were no ledges along the brickwork outside.

"In the morning," said Nelson Lee, "I will make an even more thorough investigation. It has been rather difficult working by lamplight. For the present I think we had better all go off to bed. There is really no reason why we should sit up and talk about spooks. We have all got strong nerves, I think, but even the strongest-willed men are apt to become jumpy and imaginative on a wild, blustery night in a haunted house."

Accordingly, after a little more talk, the trio went off to their respective rooms. Sir Dick had got plenty of light in his bedroom now, and Nelson Lee's presence in the house gave him much confidence. He was even inclined to be jocular as he bade the detective good-night outside his door.

"I don't think anything untoward will happen to-night, Mr. Lee," he said cheerfully. "If, in the morning, you find I'm not present at the

breakfast table, and my room is empty, you'll know that the Terror has carted me off up the chimney. Or I might possibly have dematerialised and slipped through one of the cracks of the floor!"

With that he went into his room and turned the key in the lock. Nelson Lee and Nipper went off to their own apartment further along the corridor in the west wing. They shared the same room in case of sudden emergency, and were very soon in their respective beds. Nipper dropped off to sleep without any delay, in spite of the ghostly atmosphere, which showed what a healthy young beggar he was.

Troone Towers was silent and still. The wind outside had died down somewhat, but it still sighed rather mournfully round the turrets and gables of the old house. Nelson Lee did not drop off to sleep so quickly as his young companion. He had much to think about, and as he lay in bed he reviewed the case right from the very beginning. The point that worried him most was the utter lack of motive.

He did not doubt for a moment that Sir Richard Troone's life was being attempted, and in spite of his failure to make any discovery so far, he was still hopeful that the morrow would bring forth something satisfactory.

He lay in bed thinking for nearly two hours, and then, having tired himself out, he turned over and prepared himself for sleep. But sleep was not to come to him yet. Before the sun shone again the dreadful Terror of Troone was to make known its sinister presence.

Quite suddenly and without any apparent cause Nelson Lee jerked himself upright in bed. His keen, acute ears had heard something which was different to the other innumerable sounds of the old mansion.

For perhaps a full minute he remained tense and alert, straining his ears for a repetition of the sound he fancied he had heard. But only the wind blustered against the window-panes, only a strange assortment of minute creaks assailed his ears. These he knew to be commonplace sounds in any big house at dead of night.

And then, clear and distinct, a gasping cry sounded in the night. A second later it was repeated, but now it was loud and long, and rose to a wild shout for help. Nipper, trained to be a light sleeper, sat up in bed, fully awake in a moment. In the dimness he saw that his master was sitting up also.

"Was that you, guv'nor?" he asked sleepily.

Before Nelson Lee could reply, even as he was leaping from the bed in fact, the cry was repeated a third time, but now it was weaker and hoarser.

"Sir Richard!" rapped out Nelson Lee crisply. "Quick, Nipper!"

"What's happening, sir?"

"That is what we are going to find out, young 'un!"

They dashed to the door, sped along the passage, and paused outside Sir Dick's room. There was no sound coming from within now. Nelson Lee tried the handle, but the door was still locked. He thumped upon it urgently.

"Sir Richard," he shouted, "are you all right?"

There was no reply.

Nipper's face was pale, and he shivered a little.

"Good heavens, he doesn't answer, sir!" he stammered hoarsely. "Do—do you think——"

"Quiet, my lad—quiet!"

They stood listening, and now, faintly, to Nelson Lee's ears came the sound of hoarse, strained breathing. The detective sighed with relief.

"Thank goodness, it may not be serious!" he exclaimed. "We must break in without a second's loss of time, however!"

Again he shouted, but with the same result.

So he placed his shoulder against the lock and pressed with all his strength. The lock was not very strong, but it resisted the pressure. Nelson Lee stepped back and then charged. He thudded against the door and it crashed open. The room inside was dark and silent.

The pair entered and closed the door behind them. Nelson Lee fumbled in the pocket of his pyjama-coat and produced a box of matches. In a few seconds three or four candles were alight, and they looked hastily round the room.

On the floor, on the far side of the bed, lay Sir Richard Troone, silent and motionless. A moment's examination told Nelson Lee that the young baronet was only in a swoon.

"Rush to our room, Nipper, and fetch my brandy-flask!"

Nipper darted off, and while he was gone Nelson Lee examined Sir Dick for signs of violence. He found them right enough, for upon the baronet's throat were some ugly dark bruises, as though the life had nearly been strangled out of him.

"A near shave!" muttered Nelson Lee grimly. "A terribly near shave! Our prompt intervention probably saved his life. But who has done this thing? Who, in Heaven's name, gained access to this room with the door closed and locked?"

Nipper returned before Nelson Lee could think further, and five minutes later Sir Dick was sitting in an easy-chair, gasping painfully, and looking round him with wild eyes.

"Has it gone?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's all right," said Nelson Lee, in a gentle voice. "You're perfectly safe now, Sir Richard. Don't try to speak yet, but just sit here and recover your breath."

"Oh, it's you, Lee!" said Sir Richard weakly. "Did you see it?"

"See what?" asked Nipper eagerly.

But Nelson Lee would not let the injured man speak. Another dose of brandy and some cold water to his head very soon put Sir Dick on his feet again. But he was pale and haggard, and there was a frightened look in his eyes.

"Mr. Lee," he said quietly, "I've got no further doubts. The thing which attacked me in bed half an hour ago was a horror unnameable—a supernatural phantom from the very pit itself!"

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't know myself properly," said Sir Dick. "When I got into bed I left a couple of large candles burning, as it seemed to make me more comfortable. I'm not a kid, but— Well, you understand. I must have dropped off to sleep at once, for I remember no more until I suddenly awoke with the absolute conviction that something was moving about the room. And in my nostrils was that same ghastly dank smell which accompanied the elemental's visits on the two previous occasions."

"The candles—what of them?"

"They were both extinguished. The only light was the weak rays of the moon streaming in at the window. I saw and realised all this in a second. There was no time to see anything else, for the Terror was over me—on the very bed itself!"

"Good heavens!" whispered Nipper. "Did—did you land out?"

"I had no chance to defend myself," went on Sir Richard. "Two hairy horrible hands gripped my throat, and I screamed with alarm and fury. Again and again I tried to wrench that terrible hold from my throat, but all in vain. Heavens, how I struggled! And above me was a face—I could just see it in the dim light. It was a face which will be imprinted on my memory for ever!"

"Was it human?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Human!" repeated Sir Dick. "I tell you it was infernal! I can't describe it, except that there was a dog-like expression about it. Not a sound did it utter—not even a breath left its ghastly lips as it exerted its strength. Mr. Lee, the thing was not of this world!"

"That we will discover later. Is that all you remember?"

"Nearly. Just as my senses were leaving me I heard you and Nipper dashing along the passage. I tried to yell, but it was no good. I just remember the thing flinging me down, and I staggered off the bed and collapsed in a heap. That's where you found me, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anything of—of the Terror?"

"Nothing—the room was empty save for yourself."

"Great Scott!" said Sir Richard. "And the door was locked! There was utterly no means of escape for a human being—you know yourself that there is no secret entrance to this room."

"We have discovered none, at any rate."

"There is none! The thing was as Tatton described to me—an elemental," exclaimed Sir Dick. "Not simply a ghost, but a disembodied spirit capable of assuming its bones and flesh and strangling——"

"Rot!" interjected Nipper impulsively.

"That's what I said, youngster," went on the baronet. "I know better now. The Towers is haunted by this awful spirit, and it is unfriendly—it is attempting to kill me, and will kill you, too, when it has completed the one job!"

"Nonsense!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "You're upset, Sir Richard. Go to bed again now, in another room. We'll have a thorough investigation tomorrow."

"It is useless, Mr. Lee. I am afraid your services will be of no use to me. This murderous enemy of mine cannot be combated by you. You will have to name your fee in the morning."

"Tut-tut, this is no time to talk about my throwing up the sponge," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Come, Sir Richard, we will put you to bed in another room."

At first Sir Dick protested strongly, but at last he was prevailed upon to take the good advice. As Nelson Lee pointed out it was not likely that another attack would be made that night. Once the baronet was in bed Nelson Lee and Nipper returned to Sir Dick's original room for the purpose of making an examination.

Hardly had the detective stepped across the threshold than he uttered a sudden exclamation, stepped forward quickly, and remained perfectly still for several seconds. Then, without a word, he twisted round and simply dashed out into the passage.

With gleaming eyes he burst into Sir Richard's new bed-room, which was brightly lighted. Sir Dick looked at him from the bed, rather startled.

"Anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Tell me," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Were you scratched at all? Was your neck penetrated by the Terror's claws? In short, have you been bleeding?"

Sir Dick stared.

"Not that I'm aware of," he replied. "No, I know I haven't been bleeding. You can have a squint, if you like, to make sure. But what's the game?"

In two minutes Nelson Lee was satisfied that although Sir Dick was bruised his skin had not been penetrated at any point. With his eyes still gleaming, the detective hastily left the room, leaving Sir Dick with his

curiosity unsatisfied. When he got back to Nipper the lad looked at his master in surprise.

"What made you dash out so quickly, sir?" he asked.

"Something of the utmost importance, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee exultantly. "At last I have got a clue—at last I have proof-positive that we are fighting against human flesh and blood, and not against spirits! When Sir Dick told his story a little while ago, I was almost ready to share his opinion. But my doubts are now cast to the four winds. I have a clue at last."

Nipper simply quivered with excitement.

"What's the clue, sir?" he asked breathlessly. "Good old guv'nor, I thought you wouldn't be whacked!"

Nelson Lee strode across the room and pointed to the floor.

"Do you see them, Nipper?" he asked tensely. "Bloodstains! At least half a dozen distinct spots of blood! And Sir Richard is not scratched. Does not that convey anything to your shrewd mind?"

Nipper gasped.

"You—you mean——"

"I mean that no ghost or elemental that was ever heard of possessed human blood!" replied Nelson Lee grimly. "The thing that we have to fight against is a real man—or animal, at least. Some dastardly villainy is at work here. And I'm going to bring this case to a successful conclusion or retire from professional business."

"Thank goodness, sir!" exclaimed Nipper excitedly. "So long as I know we're not up against spooks I'm ready for anything. But what about that affair of the dagger?"

"Clever trickery, my boy—it must be so."

"And how did the Terror get out of this room while the door was locked?"

"By secret exit."

"But there isn't one!"

"My dear Nipper, two and two always make four," said Nelson Lee evenly. "If the door was locked, and escape by the windows was impossible, it stands to reason that our cheerful friend with the dog-like face must have gained entrance and made his exit through some doorway of which we are in ignorance. Flesh and blood can't fade through brick walls even if elementals can."

"What do you propose doing, sir?"

"I propose that after a brief examination of this room we take ourselves off to Sir Richard's bedside and take turns at sitting up and guarding him until daylight," replied Nelson Lee. "We now know that his life is in danger, and so it is up to us to protect him."

And this plan was accordingly carried out. After examining the bloodstains, Nelson Lee and Nipper repaired to Sir Dick's bedside. They found him asleep, and Nipper took the first turn to join him in slumberland.

And thus the night passed.

CHAPTER VI.

An Attack in the Dark.

SIR RICHARD was quite well enough in the morning to come down to breakfast. As a matter of fact, he declared that there was very little the matter with him. His neck was bruised and sore, but the horror of the night had passed now, and the sleep had done him a world of good. He sat down to breakfast with his neck muffled up; but otherwise he was quite all right.

Nelson Lee had already told him of the discovery of the bloodstains and of their significance. Sir Dick was bound to admit that the detective was right in positively assuming that no super-physical was connected with the case. It was clearly an affair of clever cunning and diabolical plotting.

But who was at the bottom of it all?

"The question of motive worries me more than a little," said Nelson Lee, as they partook of breakfast. "I have not fully questioned on the subject, Sir Richard. Do you know of anybody who has a grudge against you, or anybody who would benefit by your death? Think carefully, and take your time."

Sir Richard laughed.

"There's no need for me to think carefully, Mr. Lee," he replied. "I know positively that I haven't an enemy in the world. And certainly nobody would benefit by my existence suddenly being brought to an unfortunate termination."

"What about your fortune?" asked Nipper keenly.

"Oh, nobody would benefit in that way."

"I fail to understand," said Nelson Lee. "I thought that your fortune was fairly large."

"So it is," replied Sir Richard—"close upon half a million, in fact. I'm a thundering rich man, I suppose. You have an idea, perhaps, that the next of kin is casting envious eyes on my pile?"

"Well, it is worth casting an envious eye upon."

"No doubt. But, you see, the next of kin, a rather distant relative of mine, is the Rev. Peter Tirland. He is a parson in Sussex of a most religious variety, and is about seventy-three years of age. In addition, his own private fortune is, I've heard, even greater than my own. So, you see, the next of kin theory is disposed of. It is absolutely out of the question to imagine that the Rev. Peter would engineer all this villainous trickery."

Nelson Lee was rather disappointed.

"You are quite sure of this?" he asked. "There is no doubt, I suppose, that this aged parson is really the next of kin?"

"My dear chap, you can consult my lawyers if you like."

Nelson Lee was silent. He was sure that somebody unknown was anxious to get Sir Richard Troone out of the way. But who? Since the man who would benefit by his death was a respectable old gentleman—who, moreover, was nearly a millionaire himself—it was out of the question to suspect him of having a hand in the game. Revenge, too, would have to be shelved as an impossible theory. Since Sir Dick had no enemies there could be no idea of vengeance.

And Sir Richard had made no will, so a possible legatee was not responsible. It was a strange mystery, and Nelson Lee resolved to get to work after breakfast in another direction. He advised his client to remain indoors by the fire, and Sir Richard agreed, for he was not feeling exactly bright. It was not pleasant to know that somebody absolutely unknown and unseen was trying to do him to death. But Nelson Lee's presence at Troone was a great comfort, and gave the young baronet a feeling of security.

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were rather disappointed with their work that day. When dusk came they had to acknowledge to themselves that it had been a blank day.

Nelson Lee, eager in the knowledge that he had gained the previous night, did his utmost to find the secret entrance to the bedroom. But, try as he would, he could discover nothing. By engaging a gang of house-breakers and literally pulling the room to pieces he would almost certainly be successful—and he was even prepared to go to that length if all other means failed.

While they were having tea in the wonderful old drawing-room there was a peal at the bell, and shortly afterwards Jenks came to announce Mr. Norman Tatton. The little spiritualist came in smiling, and was introduced to Nelson Lee and Nipper. The detective watched him keenly. He didn't actually suspect Tatton of anything—for he had utterly no cause to do so—but he was naturally interested in him.

"Hallo! Anything wrong, Sir Richard?" asked Tatton, as he sat down. "That bandaged throat suggests a chill."

"Quite wrong," said Sir Dick. "The real cause is very different. Our friend, the elemental, paid me a visit last night and nearly succeeded in strangling the life out of me. I was just rescued in time by Mr. Lee."

While Jenks had gone to usher the visitor in Nelson Lee had suggested telling Tatton what had occurred, but warned Sir Dick to mention nothing of the bloodstains. It would be better to let Tatton imagine they fully believed the elemental to be a spirit being, and not human.

Tatton's eyes widened, and he faced Sir Dick excitedly.

"You say the elemental attacked you?" he ejaculated. "Good gracious, it is a wonder you are alive to tell the tale! Pray tell me what occurred. No doubt Sir Richard has told you, Mr. Lee, that I am a student of the occult, and extremely interested in this case of haunting?"

"Quite so," said Nelson Lee. "Do you think there is grave danger?"

"The danger is far more terrible than I can describe," said Tatton solemnly. "I warned Sir Richard when I first met him. Indeed, we both saw the elemental that night, and I knew that further manifestations would occur."

Tatton was told how the elemental had entered Sir Dick's room, and how he had caught a glimpse of its dog-like face in the dim moonlight. Tatton was so intensely interested that he forgot to partake of tea.

"I think you will agree with me now, Sir Richard, that the haunting of Troone is not merely an old wives' tale, as you first supposed?" he remarked eagerly. "You have had actual experience—you have, in fact, been near to death's door. I am learned in all these matters, and I tell you solemnly that there is awful danger in this house. Danger for you, too, Mr. Lee. Speaking as a psychic, I strongly advise you to go back to London while you are still alive."

"But the elemental has made no attack upon me, Mr. Tatton," said Nelson Lee.

"The dagger——"

Tatton paused suddenly, with hesitation. Nelson Lee's clean-shaven face became keen, and his eyes flashed for a second. Then he leaned forward.

"Well, Mr. Tatton, what of the dagger?" he asked evenly. "We have mentioned nothing about that affair so far. It is curious that you already know of it."

Tatton laughed, and sipped his tea.

"Curious!" he repeated. "Indeed, why? Jenks had a few words with me while I was out in the hall, and told me what had occurred. I thought it impolite, however, to continue the subject until I had heard your own version. Servants are so apt to exaggerate."

"I don't think Jenks is a fellow of that sort," said Sir Dick. "That dagger mystery is a regular startler. The weapon unhooked itself from the wall and whizzed round the apartment, finally missing Mr. Lee by a hair's-breadth and imbedding itself in the woodwork. It was a near shave."

"Yet there was nothing unusual in it," remarked Tatton. "Elementals are capable of hurling the heaviest objects across the room. Even as we sit here a further manifestation may occur."

"Do you suggest any method of laying this horror?" asked Nelson Lee.

"There is one way, certainly."

"And what is that?"

"The only way possible," replied Tatton. "Elementals are queer things. They are spirits which are earth-bound owing to— Well, there are scores of reasons. In this particular case I think some fossils were dug up in the grounds at some remote period, and this elemental is the outcome. The thing will be restless and will haunt the Towers until those fossils are found and replaced in their original grave. Until that is done Sir Richard will be in constant danger, and, speaking frankly, I should not be surprised to hear of his death any day!"

"You're mighty cheerful," growled Sir Dick.

"I am speaking straight out—it is the best way," said Tatton. "Your life—every life in this house—is in constant peril. I wish with all my heart I could take a more cheerful view. But I have studied these things, and I know."

"A fat lot—I don't think!" murmured Nipper, under his breath.

After tea Sir Dick chatted with the visitor, and Nelson Lee drew Nipper aside.

"I don't exactly suspect Tatton," said the detective quickly, "but it is as well to satisfy ourselves as to his innocence. He is a resident here, and has been one for some time, so I can't see how he can be implicated. However, I mean to apply a test."

"How, sir?"

"I will tell you. I spoke to Jenks a few moments ago, and I find the butler did mention the affair of the dagger—so there is nothing in that. Tatton came here in his little Humber, and I find there is a small seat behind, conveniently hidden by the folds of the hood. I intend to slip into that seat unseen when Tatton leaves, and follow him to his house. I shall then watch his movements until I am satisfied either one way or the other."

"Suppose he spots you?"

"Not much danger of that, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "The night is extremely dark, and I shall leap off the car before he stops at Oakhurst. Don't tell Sir Dick my plans, but just wait for my return."

"I suppose there's nothing for me to do, sir?" said Nipper gloomily.

"Nothing at all, I'm afraid. You must be patient, my lad."

Tatton did not stop to dinner, but very soon afterwards prepared for departure. He shook hands with Nelson Lee, and then Nipper engaged Tatton's attention while the detective slipped out and packed himself in the little seat at the rear of the waiting motor-car. When Tatton started up the engine and jumped in he did not even glance behind.

The ride to Oakhurst was devoid of incidents, and as the car slowly turned in at the gates of Tatton's house Nelson Lee slipped from his place of concealment—for the folds of the hood had effectually hidden him—and plunged into the shrubs.

He watched Tatton put the car up in his little garage, and then the spiritualist went into the house and closed the door with a bang. The building was a fairly large one, and was in almost total darkness. Nelson Lee knew that Tatton was a bachelor, and that his household was fairly small.

The night was inky-dark, and Nelson Lee had little fear of being seen. As it turned out, his project was barren of result. He managed to creep up close to the house and to get a peep into the only lighted room there was. But Tatton's movements were quite innocent in every respect.

For at least half an hour the detective stood watching through a chink between the blind, but Tatton was merely engaged in some spiritualistic nonsense which made Nelson Lee smile. He was evidently holding a seance

all on his own, and doing his utmost to make the spirits communicate with him.

At last Nelson Lee gave it up and commenced to walk briskly along the narrow road towards Troone

"I may as well dismiss Tatton from my calculations," he told himself, as he paused to light his pipe. "The man is certainly nothing more than a harmless crank. From henceforth I shall not trouble myself with his movements in any way."

Nelson Lee strode on, his thoughts now running in a different channel. The problem he was up against at Troone was a worrying one, and he had much to think over. The sky overhead was clouded and the wind had a threat of rain in it. On all sides the moor stretched out bleakly and grimly. The unutterable loneliness almost made the detective wish for the noise and bustle of London once again. But he would not return to the metropolis until he had wrenched the mystery of Troone Towers from its grim old walls.

He became aware that three figures had suddenly appeared in the road before him. Probably they had emerged from a footpath, he thought. He soon grew close to them and was about to pass when one stepped forward and asked for the loan of a match.

"Certainly," said Nelson Lee readily.

A light flared out, and played for a second on the detective's strong face. The next moment something happened which Nelson Lee was entirely unprepared for. It was so unexpected and so sudden that he had no time whatever to even put up a fight.

With one accord the three strangers flung themselves at him and bore him to the ground. Too late Nelson Lee attempted to get free. He was so astounded that he was almost breathless for a moment.

"You scoundrels!" he gasped. "What is the meaning of this? Highway robbery——"

"No, Mr. Nelson Lee, it is not our intention to rob you," said one of the men grimly. "You had better give in quietly——"

"Confound you!" roared Nelson Lee furiously, struggling with all his great strength, and nearly succeeding in getting free. "I don't know who you are, or what your object might be, but I'm not such an easy customer to tackle as you may suppose!"

And he proved his words a second later, for in spite of the great odds he struggled to his feet and commenced lunging out with terrific force. But, in spite of his plucky resistance, three against one was too unequal. Nelson Lee realised at once that there was something really serious in this affair, for the men had spoken his name, and therefore knew who he was.

"Curse you!" snarled one of them.

Something hard crashed upon Nelson Lee's skull, and he fell to the ground without another punch left in him. The blow was not serious, but it had a stunning effect which did not wear off for some considerable time.

When at last Nelson Lee came to himself he was in total darkness and chilled to the marrow. He felt cold, damp stone beneath him, and with an effort staggered to his feet.

"By Jove, what the deuce has happened?" he mumbled dully. "My head's confoundedly sore—— Ah, yes, I was fighting with three blackguards out on the moor."

He stamped his feet, and a hollow sound struck on his ears, as though he were in some confined apartment. In a few moments full possession of his senses returned to him, and he fumbled in his pockets for some matches. Finding them, he took the box out and struck one of the vestas.

Holding it aloft he gazed round him.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated in dismay.

For the light showed him that he was in a small, stone dungeon, the walls of which simply reeked with slime and damp. A huge iron door, rusty, but strong enough to resist the attacks of a battering-ram, was the only means of exit.

Air was admitted through a strong iron grating on the opposite side of the dungeon near the roof, beyond Nelson Lee's reach. The bars were as thick as his arm, and he knew that escape was impossible.

He was a prisoner! He had been flung into an unknown dungeon in utter darkness and without the least knowledge as to where he was or who was responsible for this dastardly outrage.

His shadowing of Norman Tatton had certainly resulted in a development which he had never even dreamed of!

CHAPTER VII.

Nipper Gets Busy—The Rescue of Nelson Lee—Trapped.

DINNER was served at Troone without Nelson Lee being present. Sir Richard and Nipper had their meal in solitary state. Nipper informed the young baronet that Nelson Lee was absent on business, following up a line of inquiry, and that he would be back later on. Nevertheless, although Nipper had spoken lightly when dinner was over the lad began to get a little anxious.

A couple of hours were spent in the billiard-room, and after that Sir Dick adjourned to the library before the fire and buried himself in a novel, leaving Nipper to look after himself. Sir Dick was feeling safe now, for he had good protection, and the fear of ghosts had left him.

By this time Nipper was quite in a stew about Nelson Lee's absence. The lad could think of no reason for his master being absent so long.

"But it's no good worrying," he told himself. "The gov'nor's up to some wheeze or other, I suppose. I'd better fish out something to read and squat down with Sir Richard, in the library."

Nipper had already examined the books in the library, but they were old and musty, and failed to interest him. But he had seen some modern volumes in the bookcase in the hall, and so he went out and opened the big glass doors.

There was more light in the hall to-night, by Sir Dick's orders, and Nipper stood before the bookcase for some time examining the volumes. But they didn't interest him in the least; and at last, quite fed-up, he picked up one of the books and threw it impatiently upon the others. But it fell to the floor, and as Nipper was bending down to pick it up he slipped on the tiles and his shoulder caught a portion of the bookcase with a thud which hurt him considerably.

"Oh, crikey!" he groaned. "Bust the rotten books! There's nothing

He paused, utterly startled, and stared at the shelves before him, almost unable to believe his eyes. Very slowly the whole interior of the bookcase, books and all, was moving backwards!

"What the—— Great jumping kangarcos!" he gasped. "Why, it must be the secret doorway which the gov'nor couldn't find! And I've discovered it by a sheer accident! Talk about the irony of fate!"

He was still staring before him. With no more noise than a soft low rumble the interior of the bookcase continued its little excursion. Then, suddenly, it stopped, and Nipper saw what had happened.

The whole thing was cunningly contrived. It was impossible to find any doorway inside the bookcase for the simple reason that the whole thing moved together. It was a marvellous piece of engineering. The shelves had shifted back about two feet, and there, in the floor, was a gaping opening.

Bending down, Nipper saw that a perpendicular ladder led downwards into a dark abyss. His first impulse was to rush to the library and tell Sir Dick of his discovery. His second impulse was to wait until Nelson Lee returned before saying anything or before acting. But then, as he calmed down a little, he determined on quite another course.

"I won't say a word to Sir Richard," he murmured excitedly, "but go on an exploration tour of my own! I've got a revolver and an electric torch, and I think I can look after myself all right. By gum, what a surprise for the gov'nor when he comes back."

Nipper was greatly excited, and more than a little elated. Where Nelson Lee himself had failed, he, Nipper, had succeeded. But Nipper had to admit that he had succeeded more by accident than design.

Fishing out his electric torch, he stepped into the opening of the bookcase, taking care not to drop into the dark hole, and closed the doors. He realised, as he did so, how easy it would be for anyone to fling things from the bookcase and then slip down the hole and cause the shelves to slide into their original position. When the doors were opened anybody would swear that no human being had been near the spot. The glass doors closed upon him; Nipper flashed the bright light from his torch down into the cavity. He saw a wooden ladder leading downwards, and without any further ado, he grasped the rungs and swung himself into the unknown.

Nipper knew that his mission would very likely be extremely perilous. But he was a plucky young beggar, and once he was fairly on the trail, he didn't think of risks. Possible danger to himself didn't enter into his calculations.

It would be a fine thing if he could tell Nelson Lee that he had discovered the lair of the Terror when the detective returned. The ladder was not very long, and presently Nipper found himself standing on cold, slimy brickwork. Before him stretched a low, narrow passage, with moisture glistening in beads on the walls. Without hesitation he started walking along, flashing the light in front of him.

Every now and again he paused to listen, but everything was deathly silent. Only the sound of his own heart beating reached his ears.

He examined the floor curiously as he walked, and very soon discovered what he was looking for. In a certain spot the moisture was more apparent than elsewhere, and a little mud had collected. Quite distinctly in this Nipper could see recent footmarks. And, moreover, close against them he saw the end of a recently-smoked cigarette.

"That's all the proof I need," murmured the lad. "There are no ghosts at Troone Towers except very solid ones! By jingo, this case is getting jolly interesting. I wonder who the dickens is responsible for the murderous game?"

Very soon the passage came to an end, and two other passages stretched out to right and left. It was just like the letter T, and Nipper chose the left-hand passage at random. It did not go far, but ended up in another ladder leading upwards. Nipper immediately started climbing. The ladder was firmly fixed into the brickwork and was old and rotted. But there was still sufficient strength in it to bear his weight, and he soon discovered that it was a much longer ladder than the other.

"This is the way up to Sir Richard's bed-room, I'll bet a quid!" he

murmured shrewdly. "As near as I can judge down here I am just about under the west wing of the house."

He was not at the top yet, for he had been climbing cautiously. He did not wish to make a sound, for he might come face to face, at any moment, with an unseen enemy. And an encounter on that rotten ladder did not strike Nipper as being very welcome.

But there was no sign of another soul; he had the place absolutely to himself.

The space in which he crawled had grown narrower now, and there was barely room for him to squeeze his way up. For a big man the task would be quite difficult. At last the ladder ended, and solid bricks were above his head and all round him. With his feet on a rung of the ladder, Nipper leaned against the opposite wall and scratched his head.

"This is a puzzle!" he murmured. "Where the dickens is the opening?"

He flashed the light round him. The bricks here were dry and dusty, but there was no sign whatever of any secret catch. As he looked more closely, however, he saw that one brick seemed rather loose. Pulling at this, he soon had it out, and in the little cavity he saw a large iron knob.

"What-ho! Now we're all right!" he exclaimed softly.

He pulled at the knob, and a sound followed as though some bolts had been shot. At the same moment the brickwork above his head came down and gave him a crack that almost knocked him off the ladder. He dodged quickly, and the lad saw that the brickwork was in reality a massive trap-door, nearly a foot in thickness.

He ascended higher and looked about him. At first it seemed to be a continuation of the chimney-like passage, but on one side he saw a little door, and knew at once that he was in Sir Richard's bed-room.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he murmured. "No wonder the guv'nor couldn't find the opening. We looked in this cupboard, too!"

He understood at once why Nelson Lee had not been successful. The flooring of the cupboard—a foot thick, and absolutely solid—was nothing more than a trap-door. But absolutely no sign of it could be seen from above, because the edges of it were underneath the skirting on all sides. When the flooring was in position, no man on earth could have detected any trickery about it. No amount of sounding had any result. The only sure method of discovering the secret from above would be with the aid of a pickaxe.

Sir Richard Troone's ancestors, who had been responsible for the building of these secret ways, had employed original methods. Sliding panels had obviously been too common-place.

Nipper did not attempt to climb up and enter the bed-room. The very fact that he had discovered the entrance was quite sufficient for him. He pushed the knob back and crouched clear. The massive trapdoor raised itself and thudded softly into position; and Nipper heard the bolts slide into position, thus making the cupboard floor quite solid and immovable.

"Nipper, my son, you deserve a pat on the giddy back," the lad told himself. "Won't the guv'nor be mighty pleased when I tell him what I've discovered. I reckon I'll get back now and have a squint up that other passage."

With this object in view, he descended the long ladder to the dark passage below. In a few moments he reached the apex of the T, and now took the right-hand tunnel. This tunnel was wider and loftier, and curved round almost in a semi-circle for a time. Then it came straight again, and Nipper wondered how long it would be before he made any fresh discovery.

As he walked, he flashed his light ahead. Similar to before, he kept

pausing to listen. But everything was dead, utter silence. Then came a change, for as he stood perfectly still this time, he fancied he heard the sound of a footfall.

Ahead of him, low down in the brickwork, he saw some massive iron bars, and approached them cautiously, with his light now extinguished. He came to a halt exactly opposite the grating and bent down.

"Well," growled a voice, "who are you, and what do you want? You've made me a prisoner here and now you've come to taunt me, I suppose?"

Nipper uttered a gasp of sheer stupefied amazement.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated. "The guv'nor!"

A joyous cry came from behind the bars.

"Nipper! My dear lad, is that you?"

Nipper flashed his light on again, and, peering down, he looked straight in the face of Nelson Lee! Nipper had never been more amazed in all his life. For a few seconds he was too flabbergasted to speak. Nelson Lee, a prisoner in a dungeon! How had he got there? What had happened to him? Who was responsible for it?

Thought after thought chased themselves through Nipper's fermented brain.

"Guv'nor!" he gasped blankly. "I—I— Is it really you, sir?"

"I am astounded, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "How in the world did you find me?"

"I hadn't the slightest idea you were here, sir," replied Nipper, kneeling down with his face close to the bars. "How the thunder did you get yourself into this hole? I wondered why you didn't turn up to dinner."

"We will exchange yarns later on, my lad," replied Nelson Lee crisply.

"The great question is how am I to escape from this impregnable prison?"

"We can't bust these bars down, anyhow," said Nipper promptly. "They're as thick as my fist, and the only thing I can think of is a hack-saw—and I don't suppose there is anything of that kind at Troone."

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"What a situation!" he said bitterly. "Here we are, face to face, and you can do nothing to help me!"

Nipper flashed the light about, and then a low whistle escaped his lips. He burst into a chuckle of amusement, and grinned.

"I fail to see anything humorous in the situation!" rapped out Nelson Lee irritably. "You don't seem to realise, Nipper, that my position is desperate."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't help grinning," replied Nipper. "I've been talking about hack-saws, and busting down the bars, and yet I can get you out of this dungeon in a jiffy the whole time!"

Nelson Lee's heart gave a jump.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, this grating, although it seems a terrible barrier from inside there, is really quite a simple arrangement," replied Nipper. "You're a helpless prisoner, but I can jolly soon set you free. The grating is simply secured by two terrific bolts!"

"By Jove! That's good hearing!"

Without wasting another minute Nipper wrenched at the bolts. As he had said, there were two of them, one on either side. They were of huge proportions, and the man who had made them intended them to be strong. At first they would not budge, for they were almost rusted into their sockets. But after a certain amount of persuasion, Nipper succeeded in drawing them, and he lifted the heavy solid metal grating with some difficulty. It was hinged at the top, and weighed almost half-a-hundred-weight.

Two minutes later Nelson Lee had scrambled up into the passage, and he shook Nipper's hand with fervour.

"How you've done it, I don't know," he said quietly. "But you're a wonder, young 'un! You were the last chap on this earth I expected to see."

They exchanged stories, Nelson Lee telling his first. It was a simple narrative, for the detective did not know much. He had been attacked by three unknown men, and had awakened to find himself in that dank dungeon absolutely alone. Nobody had been near him, and he had heard no sound until Nipper appeared on the scene.

"I don't know who the scoundrels are, Nipper," concluded Nelson Lee grimly; "but as sure as I'm alive, I'll bring them to justice! There is some infernal plot at work here, and the murder of Sir Richard Troone is the chief object of that plot. They wish to kill him in such a manner that the old curse of the Troone's will be held responsible. Well, let's have your yarn."

"To begin with, sir, I've discovered the secret entrance in the hall and the secret way out of Sir Richard's bedroom."

Nelson Lee clapped Nipper on the back.

"Good lad!" he exclaimed calmly. "How on earth did you manage it?"

Nipper rapidly explained, and the pair stood discussing the situation for some little time. Then Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Half-past ten," he said. "The hour is getting rather late. Nevertheless, before returning to the house we will have a cautious scout round. We've both got revolvers, so I think we can take care of ourselves if it comes to a fight."

"There seems nobody about to fight, sir," replied Nipper. "I don't think we've ever had such a queer case as this to work on before. We don't know who Sir Richard's enemies are, and he doesn't know himself. We've never seen a sign of 'em, and yet we know jolly well they are close handy somewhere, skulking in the dark."

"We'll see them before long, my boy, never fear."

"Oh, I don't fear, sir—in fact, I should be glad to see their ugly phizzes!"

Nelson Lee in advance, they crept further down the passage. In a few seconds they came to a large cellar-like apartment. The light was flashed round, and they saw a lantern and several candle-ends lying on some old wood blocks.

"Signs of habitation, sir," said Nipper softly. "There are some steps over there. I suppose they lead to another passage, with the door of that dungeon in it, perhaps. Suppose we explore?"

"Yes, we might as well——"

Nelson Lee paused, and snapped out the light.

"Hallo, what's up?" asked Nipper.

"Ss-s-ssh!" breathed the detective. "Don't you hear voices?"

They both listened. Yes, there were certainly voices to be heard, and they were growing louder and louder. The explorers hastily backed into the passage they had just emerged from, and crouched there.

The voices came nearer, and the words echoed strangely to Nelson Lee's ears.

"That's right, Sam," somebody was saying. "The boss says the Terror has got to appear before Sir Richard to-night just after one—while he's in bed and asleep. Nelson Lee's safely out of the way, and that kid won't be any trouble."

"D'you think the job'll be done to-night?" asked another voice.

"Sure! Even if Sir Richard takes it into his head to stay up, the

end'll be just the same. He can't do anything against the Terror by himself. Lee won't be there to chip in, and that brat, Nipper, will join his master before morning. The pair of them will never see another day's sunshine. These dungeons will never give up their secrets!"

Nipper nudged his master.

"Cheerful, ain't they, sir?" he breathed.

"Murderous, you mean!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Come, Nipper, we will get back!"

"Why? We might hear——"

"I want to hear no more," interjected the detective. "These men will probably discover my absence at any moment, and we must not risk being captured again. It would mean Sir Richard's death and probably our own."

They were still in darkness, but a faint glimmer appeared in the distance. The men who were talking had evidently come along the passage, and had halted in one of the dungeons which were situated there.

Softly and swiftly Nelson Lee and Nipper retraced their steps, and then the lad led the way down the tunnel which ended in the bookcase entrance to the hall. But a startling surprise awaited them.

The sliding door was closed!

Nipper had climbed up the ladder, but he rapidly descended.

"The door's shut, sir!" he said, in a startled voice. "I left it open!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely positive!"

"Then somebody has been here since you passed down," said Nelson Lee sharply. "That means that our enemies know of your presence here."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It means that if we can't enter the Towers by this doorway we shall have to get in by the cupboard in Sir Richard's bedroom," went on Nelson Lee. "And we shall probably find our way blocked, since somebody has been prowling about."

"Well, I'm ready for a scrap, sir, anyway!" said Nipper promptly.

He mounted the ladder again, but it was absolutely impossible to open the door. Nelson Lee made an attempt, but he, too, met with failure. Both the detective and Nipper were rather startled by the turn events had taken. Nipper had fondly imagined that his presence in the secret passages had been undetected. But this could not be the case—unless the sliding bookcase had gone back into position of its own accord.

Anyhow, neither of them could open it, and so they swiftly hurried along until they came to the two right-angle passages. They were just about to turn into the left-hand one, leading to the other ladder, when Nelson Lee uttered a startled cry.

The next second an amazing thing happened.

Nipper, who was behind, suddenly saw his master throw up his hands and disappear into space!

What had been solid brick floor a moment before was now a yawning black opening. Nipper vainly tried to stop himself in time to avoid following Nelson Lee. But the thing happened so swiftly and unexpectedly that he had no time to draw back.

He slipped on the sliding floor, tripped, and then plunged into space. His hands clutched at the brickwork, and held for just a fraction of a second. Then, with a despairing cry, he dropped feet foremost into the unknown depths.

CHAPTER V.II.

The Bricked-up Well—A Terrible Adventure.

WHEN Nelson Lee felt himself dropping into the black void he truly thought his last hour had come.

But the fall was not nearly so bad as he thought it would be in that one fleeting second. In fact the drop was only about eight feet, and Nelson Lee landed on a stone floor with a shock that shook every bone in his body. Instinctively he rolled clear, for he did not want Nipper to crash down on his head.

Nipper came down sure enough, and he escaped as lightly as his master. He picked himself up painfully.

"Oh, lor'!" he exclaimed. "What's happened, sir? I'm bruised and grazed, and shaken up to a jelly! There wasn't any hole in the floor when we came along the passage before."

Nelson Lee gritted his teeth.

"We're trapped, young 'un—that's what's happened!" he said furiously. "What a fool I was not to be more cautious! This may be our own deaths and the murder of Sir Richard! Bah, I'm an imbecile!"

As he finished speaking Nipper flashed on his electric torch, which he had been holding the whole time. Its rays disclosed the fact that they were in a dungeon similar to the one which had imprisoned Nelson Lee previously.

Looking up, Nipper saw that the ceiling seemed to be composed of solid stone blocks. The hole through which they had fallen had already been filled in. Obviously it was another cunningly contrived trap. Troone Towers, indeed, seemed to be honeycombed beneath its foundations with tunnels, passages, and dungeons.

Before either of the prisoners could make any comment there was a sound of footfalls and voices, and a few moments later the great stone door of the dungeon swung open and three men entered. Two were carrying lanterns, but the third—and foremost—had a revolver in his right hand.

But both Nelson Lee and Nipper started back with exclamations of amazement. They stared at the man with the revolver as though they could not believe their eyes.

It was Norman Tatton!

Nelson Lee had had, originally, a certain suspicion with regard to Tatton, but as his investigations had proved fruitless he had dismissed Tatton from his mind as a possible conspirator in the affairs of Sir Richard Troone.

"Good evening, Mr. Lee!" said Tatton smoothly.

"You—you murderous fraud!" roared Nipper angrily. "The gov'nor suspected you all along, too!"

"For that reason I took steps to have him put out of the way," replied Tatton calmly. "I knew that you were aboard my car the whole time, Lee, you bungler! I admit that I made the discovery by accident, and I'm very glad that I did. You placed yourself completely in my hands. And Nipper's tour of exploration hasn't panned out so successfully after all."

"But what is your motive?" demanded Nelson Lee furiously.

"I do not think I am called upon to explain my affairs to you," sneered Tatton. "Before I proceed further I intend to have you both bound hand and foot, then I sha'n't be compelled to keep such an alert eye upon you. If you make any attempt to struggle or get away I shall use this revolver. I don't want to fire a shot, but shall not hesitate a second if it is necessary."

Nelson Lee made a sign to Nipper not to do anything rash, for there was something in Tatton's tone which was grim and menacing. They

suffered themselves to be bound, and then they were propped against the wall like a couple of coal-sacks.

Tatton stowed his revolver away, and calmly lit a cigar. The other two men, big, burly ruffians, stood by and watched amusedly.

"And so you thought I was merely a harmless spiritualist—eh?" said Tatton easily. "I am vain enough to believe that I acted my part rather well. Sir Richard has complete faith in me—or would have had if you had not appeared upon the scene. I admit, Lee, that you are rather a smart chap, and as soon as I learned that you were coming, I guessed that the elemental yara wouldn't hold water for long."

"I suppose it was you who tried to murder the gov'nor and I in the trap?" asked Nipper.

"No, I did not try to murder you," replied Tatton. "It was merely my intention to injure the pair of you so that you would be crooked and unable to undertake Sir Richard's case. But I did not do it myself; it was a friend of mine who undertook that little job. I gave him warning of your approach, for I scouted for you by motor-cycle. By sheer luck you escaped! But there'll be no luck now—no escape! Nipper's exploration in the old passages was rather fortunate, for it has now placed you both in my power."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Nelson Lee quietly. "Keep us prisoners?"

Tatton swore impatiently.

"Prisoners?" he snarled. "No; I mean to take no risks with you! You and your brat are as slippery as eels, so I am going to make quick work of the pair of you."

"In short, you mean murder?"

Tatton did not like the word.

"I mean that both of you will disappear for ever," he replied grimly. "Not a soul on this earth knows where you are, and you will simply vanish. Nobody but yourselves knows of these underground dungeons, and so no search can be made. There will be no clue to your disappearance. If I let you live you will be a constant peril to me, and that does not fall in with my plans at all. I regret having to resort to this measure—regret it more than I can say; but circumstances make it absolutely necessary."

"You callous rogue!" exclaimed Nelson Lee hotly.

"No, I'm not callous," said Tatton, with a nervous frown. "This night's work will prey upon my nerves for months to come. But it's got to be. It is not my own choice. Things have gone so far now that I cannot back out. I would gladly let you live if you gave me your word of honour to leave me absolutely alone for the future. But I know it is useless making such a request."

"Quite useless," said Nelson Lee curtly.

"Before I leave you, I should like you to know that the old baronet, Sir Richard's grandfather, was not murdered," went on Tatton. "The elemental appeared before him one night, and it proved too much for his heart."

"Then it was murder," cried Nipper—"black murder!"

"I know it is useless trying to argue with you," said Nelson Lee calmly, "and so I will save my breath. But will you tell me why you wish Sir Richard dead? What is your motive? You will not benefit by his death."

Tatton consulted his watch.

"I do not intend to waste time with you any longer," he said harshly. "Your curiosity will have to remain unsatisfied."

He made a sign to the men, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were grasped. Tatton and one of the men carried the detective, and the other fellow carried

Nipper. They passed out of the dungeon, proceeding along a similar passage to the others for some time, and then halted. They had come to the end of the tunnel.

Before them was a large circular void, reaching upwards and downwards. The walls were simply oozing with moisture, and the whole aspect of the place was repulsive and sinister. A stagnant smell came up from below—a smell of dead water.

"This," explained Tatton, "is a well—an old well, which has not been used for generations. There is plenty of water at the bottom of it, as you will soon find out for yourselves. Close upon ninety years ago, a member of the Troone family drowned himself in it, and the master of the house, horrified at the occurrence, immediately had it bricked up. The spot where it used to have its opening is somewhere in the rear courtyard, but there is now no sign of it, and nobody knows of its existence, except we here. I mean to be absolutely safe, and so the pair of you will unfortunately have to disappear for ever. The mystery of your deaths will always remain a mystery."

Nelson Lee and Nipper looked at one another with pale faces.

They knew that only a miracle could save them now.

"You—you dastardly scoundrel!" panted Nipper sobbingly. "You're not going to throw us down here. You daren't! Oh, it's too horrible!"

"Be calm, lad," said Nelson Lee gently. "Don't plead for mercy to this villain."

"But it's awful, sir——"

"Be brave, my boy—be brave."

Nipper bit his lip, and then held his head up.

"Right-ho! I'm ready, guv'nor!" he said, with an effort at coolness, which made Nelson Lee's heart jump. It was a crying shame that this lad should be done to death in such a heartless, cold-blooded manner. But even now, Nelson Lee did not give up hope. He had been in many tight holes before, and Fate had decided in his favour.

Tatton did not speak further. To do the man justice, he really was in a pitiable state of nervousness at the crime he was about to commit. But the ends he had in view, in his opinion, justified the step he was taking. When all had been said in his favour he was nothing less than a heartless villain.

Before Nipper's eyes, to which tears had sprung, Nelson Lee was held over the black void and then dropped. For ages, it seemed to Nipper, there was utter silence, and then came the sound of a dull splash from far below.

Nipper clenched his teeth firmly to save himself from crying out. He wanted to yell with fury—he wanted to burst out into a torrent of condemnation. But he held his breath and kept silent. If he had to die, he would die like a Briton.

He, too, was held out and then dropped. Even as he fell, he heard Tatton give a gasping sob. The full enormity of his vile crime must have struck the man at that second with all its awful force.

Then Nipper felt himself dropping down—down!

He wondered if he would strike Nelson Lee when he reached the bottom. But he hadn't got much time to wonder more for he plunged into the icy stagnant water, and sank like a stone to the bottom, a distance of perhaps eight feet. Holding his breath he endeavoured to turn, in order to rise to the surface. But, somehow, his head seemed to be wedged in a space which appeared to lead out of the well-wall. Nipper's lungs seemed to be bursting, but at last, by struggling, he freed himself and rose to the surface.

He took in a great gulp of breath.

"Are you here, guv'nor?" he gasped.

"Yes, I'm here, my lad," said Nelson Lee's voice out of the darkness "We're doomed. There's no doubt about it this time."

Nelson Lee was only keeping to the surface by making spasmodic movements, which he could not keep up for many moments longer. Nipper was following his example.

Both of them were bound with ropes. They could not use their arms or legs. What hope was there for them? How was it possible for them to live more than a few minutes?

"We're done, sir!" sobbed Nipper.

And then something seemed to strike the lad. He could see, on looking up, that Tatten and his men had gone. Scoundrels though they were, they had no hearts to stand by and watch their victim's death struggle.

Nipper's brain was extra acute just then. With the prospect of death before him he grasped at the smallest straw. And a wild idea had entered his brain—had he guessed rightly?

"There's a chance—a chance in a million, sir!" he gasped. "When I plunged into the water I felt a kind of aperture at the bottom of the well. It might be a submerged tunnel leading to safety."

Nelson Lee smiled pityingly in the darkness.

"No, Nipper, don't build up hopes," he said gently. "Hope is dead for us. There is absolutely no——"

"I'm going to try, anyway," declared Nipper firmly. "If I don't come up again, you'll know I've failed—and it won't make any difference, will it?"

"If you're going to try, I'll try, too, young 'un," said Nelson Lee, humouring the lad's faint hope. "After you have dived, I will follow a few seconds later."

There was no time for further talk, for both of them were now nearly exhausted.

With a sobbing "Good-bye, gov'nor!" Nipper plunged into the black water once more. Bound as he was, his task was terribly difficult. But he was desperate, and with death staring him in the face he was able to exert himself to an almost superhuman extent.

With an effort he found himself at the bottom of the well. And then, feeling with his very finger-nails, with hands bound though they were—the ropes were fairly loose—he at last found the opening into which his head had protruded previously.

With almost bursting lungs he forced himself forward, realising at the same moment that he was probably going to his death. His head bumped against hard rock, but he still struggled forward up a narrow kind of tunnel.

Then, like a cork, he suddenly rose to the surface again—but not in the well!

Where he was Nipper had not the slightest idea. He only knew that he was breathing again, and that the tunnel he had come up must have sloped upwards considerably. For he found to his intense delight and amazement that while his mouth was just above water, the tips of his feet were touching bottom!

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed fervently. "But the gov'nor! Will he find his way through?"

Nipper experienced several anxious seconds. Then, even as he was about to plunge downwards again, in search of the detective, there was a sudden disturbance of the water, and Nelson Lee came up beside him. With a terrific splutter the detective expelled from his mouth a quantity of water, which had entered.

"We're safe, sir!" shouted Nipper, feeling almost mad with excitement. "We're safe! I thought there was something of this sort when I first felt my head in a tunnel entrance."

"Heaven above, Nipper, I feel as though I have come back from the dead!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "With death absolutely staring in our faces, we are still alive, and still very much kicking."

"And the water's shallow here, sir," said Nipper quickly.

"The tunnel we have come up sloped a good deal," replied Nelson Lee. "The level of the water is, of course, the same, and so we have simply, as a natural consequence, come out into the air again, with our feet touching bottom. The slope appears to be fairly gradual, in a sense, and if we had the use of our feet, I've no doubt we should be able to walk up, with some difficulty, into a dry part of the tunnel."

"That's it, sir!"

They were both nearly exhausted, and so for several minutes they remained silent, regaining their breath and strength. Looked at calmly, the method by which they had escaped was fairly simple. The narrow tunnel, leading up from the bottom of the well, probably had a slope of forty-five degrees. And so, by diving and plunging into it a man would very soon come to the surface, and be absolutely safe. Even a man in possession of the free use of his limbs would have found it rather a strenuous task. But to have accomplished it bound with ropes was a little short of miraculous.

Having recovered their strength, Nelson Lee and Nipper found themselves chilled to the marrow.

"We must try and release ourselves from our bonds," said Nelson Lee. "My boy, the thought which entered your head—the idea of escaping by the means we have done—must have been Heaven sent. I scoffed at the idea, and even now I can scarcely believe that I am still breathing."

Nipper only gave a gasp in reply.

"What is the matter?" demanded Nelson Lee sharply.

"I've just got one of my hands free, that's all," said Nipper calmly. "Just give me two minutes, and everything will be O.K.!"

"By Jove, you're doing wonders to-night, youngster!"

The ropes had not been tied very tightly, for, knowing the fate which awaited their victims, the men had been careless. About ten minutes later Nipper had freed himself from the ropes which bound his other hand, and the ropes which bound his feet. After that it was short work. He whipped out his pocket-knife, and hacked through Nelson Lee's bonds. The two of them then staggered up the sloping tunnel, and found themselves in the dry.

"Wish we had a light, sir," said Nipper.

His wish was soon granted, for Nelson Lee carried a small electric torch in one of his hip-pockets—Nipper's had been left in the dungeon. The little ray of light ripped through the darkness.

It was then seen that the detective and Nipper were in a rock cavern, which widened out considerably above the level of the water. Right before them the tunnel stretched—rough, and smothered with boulders.

"Where the dickens are we?" asked Nipper.

"I don't know, but I think I can guess," replied Nelson Lee. "That well was probably built hundreds of years ago—possibly in the old feudal days. And the tunnel was made so as to provide means of escape for possible fugitives. The old Troones cunningly built it so that when they plunged into the well, apparently to their death, they were in reality escaping from the Towers by a secret exit of their own. It was a marvellous thing that you happened to discover the secret at such a desperate minute."

Although wet and cold, the pair were so thankful and elated at their safety, that they scarcely had time to consider any personal inconvenience. Besides, Nelson Lee was keen to be on the track again. There was more than a possibility that he would even yet be in time to save Sir Richard, and bring Tatton and his accomplices to justice.

Stumbling up the tunnel, they made their way along until at last they felt a breath of keen night air fan their cheeks. Excited now, they pressed on, and were suddenly confronted by a tiny opening in the rocks, which only left just sufficient room for Nelson Lee to squeeze through. But once through they found themselves in a big cave, the entrance of which was simply choked with bushes.

Scratched and torn, they at last emerged under the stars, safe and free!

CHAPTER IX.

In the Nick of Time—Conclusion.

“WELL I'm blown!” exclaimed Nipper. “We're in the grounds, close against the old mere. Say, the Towers is only just behind the plantation.”

Nelson Lee looked, and nodded his head.

“You're right, my boy,” he replied. “But we have not a minute to lose. My watch has stopped owing to the water getting at the works, but I should imagine the time to be near midnight—perhaps later. And now that we are out of the way—so Tatton thinks—the scoundrel will probably attempt Sir Richard's life earlier than he first planned, if things are favourable.”

“We must hurry then, sir,” said Nipper eagerly.

They set off briskly for the house. Under ordinary circumstances they would have been practically done up after their terrible adventure. But the fever of the hunt was upon them now. There was work to be done, and probably a life to be saved.

It was a wild night—a night in keeping with the dreadful work which was going on. The wind howled across the moors, and the clouds scudded fitfully across the sky. It was cold and chill, but Nelson Lee and Nipper were both too excited in mind to heed their chilled flesh. And, under those conditions, they would probably feel no ill-effects whatever from their wetting.

Once near the Towers, Nelson Lee became cautious. Only one window was illuminated, and that was the window of the library. The blind was up, and a subdued light stole out into the blackness. Carefully the pair crept near to the window, and peered in. The library seemed vacant at first glance, for the light was very low, and the fire had died down to a mere spark. Probably the lamp was going out from want of oil, for it shed only a glimmer.

“Nobody there, sir,” whispered Nipper.

“You're mistaken, for Sir Richard is fast asleep in the armchair before the fireplace,” murmured Nelson Lee. “In all probability he grew weary with waiting for us and dosed off while reading his novel.”

Nipper suddenly gripped his master's arm impulsively.

“Suppose he's—he's dead, sir?” he whispered hoarsely.

The detective started.

“By heavens, I hadn't thought of that, young 'un!” he said gravely.

“Have we arrived too late? Have our lives been spared all to no purpose?”

“He's terribly still, sir!”

“We will go in and see for ourselves,” said Nelson Lee quickly. “The window is unfastened, so we will push it up and enter——”

The words suddenly froze on Nelson Lee's lips. Nipper, at the same second, uttered a startled gasp, which was almost a sob. For something had silently and stealthily entered the library from the hall—something which came like

a shadow, and which caused the hearts of Nelson Lee and Nipper to almost cease beating.

It was the Terror of Troone!

"The elemental, sir!" panted Nipper huskily. "Oh, what is it? Oh—oh!"

And, really, Nipper was not to be blamed for being so startled. The awful thing which was even then slowly crossing the library floor was a horror almost beyond description. In that dim light the Terror looked exactly what it purported to be—a disembodied spirit from another world.

It was of giant proportions, dull grey in colour, covered with coarse matted hair. But the face was the worst of all. Something like a dog's, but with a human expression about it, the very sight of it caused a creepy, shivery feeling to run down the watchers' necks. The eyes were like living coals, and the thing's hair, in matted tufts, covered its forehead and hung over its shoulders.

And the very attitude of it was enough to frighten many a strong man. Seen in the moonlight, approaching one's bedside, the awful spectacle was enough to send many people crazy with fear. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper could both understand why Sir Dick had been so absolutely prostrated after his encounter the night before.

"It can't be human, sir!" gasped Nipper. "It can't be! The thing looks like a demon—like a devil from the lower depths!"

"Don't let your nerves master you, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "Fortunately we know that trickery and murder is afoot. This thing we see before us is no unnameable monster. In all probability it is a man like myself."

"Look, sir—look!"

Nipper pointed with a quivering finger through the window-pane.

The Terror was standing over the armchair now, right over the sleeping form of Sir Dick. Finding that he had not gone to bed, Tatton had probably sent his murderous "elemental" to do its ghastly work in the library. The result would be the same, in any case.

Nelson Lee snapped his teeth.

"Red-handed!" he exclaimed tensely. "We shall catch the thing at its diabolical work, and our case will be complete. Thank Heaven we have arrived in time!"

With a swift movement he reached forward and slowly raised the window-sash. It rose silently, and even as Nelson Lee and Nipper scrambled through into the great apartment there arose a wild cry from the armchair. Sir Dick had awakened to find the Terror's claws round his throat!

But help was at hand.

With a mighty roar Nelson Lee dashed across the library, Nipper hard at his heels. Even in the tense excitement of the moment it required an effort for the detective to lay hands on that weird grey form. But neither he nor Nipper hesitated for a moment. They simply flung themselves at the awful creature.

With a strange cry it spun round, utterly taken by surprise. At close quarters Nelson Lee and the lad almost fell back with the terrible odour which arose. But they had no time to think of anything like that just then.

"Now, you fiend!" roared Nelson Lee. "We'll see what you are!"

The thing gave a startled gasp and fell back.

"Nelson Lee!" came a muffled voice. "Great heavens, I thought you were dead!"

The sudden appearance of the detective seemed to take all the fight out of the creature, for it suddenly collapsed upon the floor and lay staring up in

terror. With a terrific wrench Nelson Lee tore at the matted hair, and, with a tearing sound, something large came off in his hand. It was a mask! Gazing down, he looked into the face of one of the men who had helped to bind him before he and Nipper were thrown into the well.

"Now, you scoundrel!" said Nelson Lee coolly. "You've been caught red-handed at your foul work. This will probably mean penal servitude for life!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped Nipper. "It's a man—as you said, guv'nor!"

Sir Dick passed a hand over his brow.

"Good heavens! what's it all mean?" he asked dazedly. "I—I thought I was done for, Lee! Thank the powers you've caught the vile thing!"

Lights were rapidly procured, and in the full brilliance the Terror looked a very different object. The man was covered in a tight-fitting skin, perfectly made, which fitted him like a glove. The mask was a masterpiece of manufacture, and looked life-like even in Nelson Lee's hand. A cold, rank smell permeated the room, and this was explained by the fact that the horrible dress was smothered with some evil-smelling chemical, which, although harmless, almost made one sick. The "elemental" itself was probably quite accustomed to the smell from constant usage.

With hands bound the man sat on one of the chairs, frightened out of his life, and whimpering for mercy.

"Tatton's the real murderer, sir," he exclaimed hoarsely. "I'm a bad lot, I know, but Tatton's got me in his power, and I either had to do this for him or go to prison!"

"Well, your sentence will probably be lighter if you will now assist me in bringing the chief instigator of the crime to justice," said Nelson Lee sharply. "Where is Tatton now?"

"In the dungeon below, waiting for me to return."

"After you had completed your murderous work, I suppose," said the detective. "Well, you are going to lead me straight to your principal. I've got a revolver here and I'll shoot you like the viper you are at the first sign of treachery."

The man staggered to his feet.

"I'll be straight, sir!" he said eagerly. "Just give me a chance and I won't play the double game. I know I'm finished, now, so I'll give in without any fuss. It's up to you to collar Tatton while the trail's hot."

A few minutes later the man was descending the ladder from the hall into the underground passage between Nelson Lee and Nipper, both armed. Nelson Lee went first, and Nipper behind, Sir Richard bringing up the rear, his face flushed with excitement.

Cautiously the party crept along the passage until they came to the dungeon where Tatton and his other accomplice was waiting. The scoundrels were taken utterly by surprise, and put up no fight whatever. Indeed, Tatton was so terrified to see Nelson Lee alive that he surrendered, simply shivering with fear.

.

The Terror of Troone Towers was no more.

The mystery, so entangled at first, proved to be extremely simple when the explanation came. It was the motive which had puzzled Nelson Lee the most. That motive was now supplied, and it proved to be a very strong one.

Norman Tatton, finding that he was a prisoner in the hands of justice, confessed everything. It was the best thing for him to do under the circum-

stances, for he was not the actual criminal—although it was he who engineered the vile plot.

His confession made everything clear. Long years before Sir Dick's uncle had fled to Australia in absolute disgrace under another name. He was an absolute rogue, scapegrace of the Troone family, and disowned by his father. In Australia he had married—under his false name—and there had been a son. He had been dead for several years now, as also had his wife. But before dying he had told his son that he was, in reality, a Troone. The son, Rupert Troone, was a man after his father's heart, a black-souled rogue. All his life he had lived in Australia, a common man, earning his living by many shady devices. Upon his father making his startling revelation, Rupert Troone had made exhaustive inquiries, and learned that nothing stood between him and the Troone fortune but the old baronet and the young Oxford undergraduate. Although the old baronet was his grandfather, it mattered nothing, for the Troones were as strangers to him. Five years before Rupert had started making plans. He had become acquainted with Norman Tatton, a clever scoundrel with money, and together the pair had made arrangements.

Tatton had come to England, and had established himself near the Towers as a student of the occult, and a man of means. Everybody had grown to like him and respect him. He had been a constant visitor of the old baronet's.

The scheme was clever and ingenious, for Tatton himself would never have been suspected but for Nelson Lee's intervention. The whole plot would have succeeded.

Rupert Troone would not have appeared in the case at all. He was, in fact, in Australia even while Nelson Lee was making his investigations. It was Tatton's plan to wire Rupert as soon as the path had been cleared, and then Rupert would have cabled to solicitors in London that he was the heir to the Troone fortune.

Rupert would have followed it up by taking the first boat for England, and would have brought absolute proofs with him—proofs which had been given to him by his dying father—to show that he was the direct heir. He would have arrived in England a stranger in a strange land. Who could possibly have suspected him of being the prime mover in the murders of the old baronet and Sir Richard?

Tatton had realised the danger of Nelson Lee being on the spot, and had had no compunction in doing him to death.

One flaw had spoiled the whole game. Tatton had been unaware of that secret way out of the well.

The Australian authorities were cabled to, and Rupert was instantly arrested and sent to England to stand his trial.

There was one point which Tatton cleared up that had puzzled Nelson Lee not a little—and that was the mystery of the carved dagger. It turned out that in the flooring of the hall, against the bottom stair, was a huge steel arm, operated by a spring. At the end of the arm was a socket, and the dagger had been thrust into this, and the spring released by a secret catch from within the old bookcase. Upon the spring being released the polished flooring slid back with the rapidity of lightning, and the steel arm sprang out like a catapult, hurling the dagger with fearful force. The spring acted two ways, and instantly dragged the arm back into position, and allowed the flooring to assume its ordinary shape.

It was a wonderful contrivance, and, it turned out, had been there for long years. Who had built it remained a mystery. Tatton had really discovered the secret of the passages beneath the Towers by accident a year before. He had found a tunnel leading into the bowels of the earth from

the middle of the plantation. Great possibilities had instantly presented themselves—and the “elemental” scheme had been the outcome.

Thanks to the efforts of Nelson Lee and Nipper the whole scheme had fallen to the ground, and Rupert Troone, Tatton, and the other accomplices were given long terms of imprisonment.

Sometime later Nelson Lee and Nipper were invited to a house-party at Troone, and there was a vast difference in the old place. The Terror had vanished for ever, and Sir Richard had had all the opening of the secret passages destroyed and bricked up.

He wished the remembrance of that awful experience in early November to be banished for ever.

In parenthesis, Nelson Lee's banking account was considerably swelled after those exciting days in Yorkshire, and Nipper almost declared that the money was the hardest-earned that had ever come into the coffers at Gray's Inn Road.

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. They are beaten off, and a trap is laid for them.

A Great Find!

"Well, we'll fight 'em, all the same," said Hugh, through his set teeth. "And if I get my hands again upon that treacherous, murderous scoundrel who tried to knife me, I won't let him off so easily."

"We must try another way, I'm thinking," returned Ruxton, thoughtfully. He looked across at the tents. "It's those stores they're really after, you know—not us. If——"

"Why! Surely," exclaimed Hugh, in astonishment, "you don't propose to surrender——"

Ruxton smiled; then, stepping up close, whispered a few words in the other's ear.

Hugh stared, looked at the tents, and laughed.

"Think it could be done?" he asked.

"We can but try it. I think it will work all right. I thought of it before, and I've already prepared the way a bit."

Hugh laughed again.

"Right-oh! I'm game to try it," he said.

Ruxton gave some instructions in a low tone to the two sailors, and then they all set to work to move the other sledges to the top of the slope. There they arranged them in such a manner as to form an obstacle to any further attack at that place, and then turned to watch their adversaries, who were already moving in a small crowd to the spot they had selected for the next attack. But they were not all going that way. Three were seen limping off in the opposite direction—i.e., back to their own camp.

"Those three chaps have had enough of it," Hugh observed. "Three the less for us to deal with, at any rate. Come, that only leaves about two to one. I think we ought to be able to manage that, eh?"

"Oh, they're likely to keep us on the move all night at this rate," said

Ruxton testily. "For my part, I want to get some sleep before Grimstock turns up here in the morning. I think you'll find my plan's the best."

They left one man—Mike—in charge of the sledges, with instructions to keep out of sight and only show himself in case of any flank movement. Then they strolled along the terrace to the place where they expected the next attack would be made.

They had not long to wait. The enemy came up at a run, determined to rush the position and sweep aside all resistance this time, and the conditions were so much more favourable that they certainly looked like succeeding.

It even seemed as though the three defenders thought so, too, and had decided to give up the contest; for instead of boldly meeting the rush, as had been expected, they suddenly turned tail and ran off!

With a great roar of derision and triumph the raiders swept on after them, and followed so close that the fugitives were hard put to it to escape. In their panic they tried to hide by diving in amongst the tents, and the pursuers darted in after them.

They were not quite quick enough to catch them, but they found something else which, after all, was what they had really come for. These were the packages they had so coveted; what was more, some of them were ready opened for them, and what was still more, it was seen that two of them, at least, were filled with tobacco.

What a find! What a windfall! Here was treasure indeed! As to the miserable, cowardly runaways, who was going to trouble to chase them while this treasure remained awaiting the first comer?

In a trice the two open cases were set upon by the leaders. A moment later their followers, realising what was afoot, swarmed in amongst them, and began jostling, pushing, wrestling, each fiercely determined that he was not going to be done out of his share.

Suddenly a whistle was heard, and simultaneously the six tents tumbled over like so many houses of cards, burying the struggling crowd under their ample folds.

Trouble With Grimstock—The Skipper and his Men—Ruxton's Forebodings.

AS Hugh came out on the terrace he was set upon by a couple of the raiders, who, perhaps more wary than the others, and suspecting some kind of trap, had remained in front of the tents.

While he was engaged in a bout of fisticuffs with these two, Mike came running up to his aid from the sledges near which he had been concealed, but Hugh would have none of it.

"Leave 'em to me, Mike," he called out, "and get some rope ready to tie 'em up with."

As he spoke, one of the intruders went down under a sledge-hammer blow which rolled him over like a rabbit. The other one thereupon rushed in, and the two closed.

Mike would have liked well enough to stand aside and watch the play, for the man on the ground lay quiet enough. But in obedience to orders, he promptly produced a piece of cord, and knelt grinning beside the fallen foe.

"Sure, ye're a nice spalpeen t' come thavin' round here, kapin' honest men out av their beds loike this," he remarked, as he deftly slipped his rope round the man's body and tied his arms to his sides. "Lie theer till ye're ready t' listen t' raison."

He finished his work, and was in the act of rising to his feet to see how things were progressing with his leader, when he was bowled over and laid

flat, and his head bumped on the frozen ground, by a heavy body which came hurtling through the air right on top of him.

He struggled out from under it, and found that it was Hugh's antagonist, whom that muscular young Britisher had picked up and flung down, very much as though he had been a bale of cloth.

"Faith, an' it's a bit careless, ye are, Misther Hugh, as t' wheer ye throw yer lavins," said Mike, as he rubbed his head.

"Hallo! I forgot you were there, Mike! Hurry up with some more rope for that chap. I must go and help the others. Come to us as soon as you're finished." And with that Hugh darted off to the place where Ruxton and Bob were busy among the fallen tents.

Here was a wild scene of flapping canvas, which was bobbing up and down in great waves, reminding one of the imitation sea they sometimes have at the theatre. From the midst of it, too, proceeded a hoarse roaring which was not unlike the sound of imitation breakers.

At intervals a head or a leg would wriggle from out the jumble, only, however, to be pounced upon as soon as it appeared, and to have a noose slipped over it by one or other of the watchful victors.

Two figures were already lying on one side, trussed up like fowls. Two more were being operated on as Hugh joined them.

He glanced about and made a rapid calculation.

"Good! I see you've accounted for four—and two are six," said he. "So there must be three more underneath the wreck."

"Only three, sir?" quoth Bob. "Ratlines an' lobsterstays! They be makin' noise enuff fur a baker's dozen."

Plenty of short coils of rope had been provided by the foresight of the planners of the coup, after they had loosened all the outside guys of the tents, and opened some of the packages of tobacco by way of baiting the trap. It had been Ruxton's idea. It had occurred to him when he had gone to get the pistols, and he had begun the good work then, thinking the scheme might come in handy if they failed in repulsing the first rush. The final arrangements had been completed in the interval between the two last attacks.

Mike came to the assistance of the binders, and helped to drag out and secure the last of the prisoners. It was not all accomplished; of course, without some scuffles, and the captors received some fierce kicks, and even one or two slashes from the knives with which the trapped ruffians were trying to cut their way out. But hampered as the latter were by the folds of stout canvas which had fallen on them—in some cases two or three deep—they could not make much of a fight.

In due time they were all bound, and then they were carried out and laid on the terrace in a row. There they were left while the victors proceeded to re-erect the tents.

This finished, they held a council.

"What's to be done with 'em now?" asked Hugh. "We can't leave 'em lying here all night. They'd freeze to death."

"We must put the beggars into sleeping bags, I suppose," said Ruxton.

"But how? Where are they to come from? We've only got what we'll want ourselves, and——"

"We'll have to go down to their camp and fetch their own for 'em," Ruxton advised. "There can only be five or six of the gentry, at the outside, left there now, and we know that three of 'em are hors de combat. I don't suppose they'll show fight again. But whether they do or not, we'll have to get the bags all the same. They're a lot of rotters, but as you say, we can't let any of 'em freeze to death."

"Right-ho! That's a good idea. We'll leave Mike here, in charge, to see

that none of 'em wriggles free. Three of us'll be enough to deal with their pals."

They had first, however, to clear away the barricade at the top of the slope, and had just begun to shift the sledges, when Hugh cast a glance in the direction of the camp they were about to visit.

"Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "There's something going on down there! Why, there's a sledge—and—yes, I do believe it's Grimstock's sledge with the ponies! Must have just arrived!"

The other two stared incredulously. But when they looked at No. 3 camp, there, sure enough, they saw a sledge drawn by ponies, and a group of people standing about as if newly arrived.

"I fancy I can see Grimstock himself," Ruxton muttered. "Now what does this mean? He must have come across from the ship pretty quietly for us to know nothing about it."

"We've been otherwise engaged," Hugh reminded him.

"Yes; but still, it's funny we shouldn't have seen him crossing the ice. And what brings him here at all at this time of night?"

"You can ask him that when we get there—if you care to," Hugh returned tersely. "Come on! Let's get down and see what's going on."

They set out forthwith, and as they drew near the camp, the man they had been speaking of—the actual leader of the expedition—came forward to meet them.

A somewhat curious character, or, rather, mixture of characters, was Mr. Bernard Grimstock. That he was an experienced traveller and explorer, and that he had some repute in scientific circles, was certain. It was known that this was the fourth expedition in search of the elusive North Pole, in which he had been engaged, and it was also known that he had made journeys into other previously unexplored regions, portions of the Congo territory, and other parts of Africa, among them. He had read papers before learned societies, and had lectured to geographical associations, both in England and abroad, and he had made something of a name for himself as an authority in such matters.

Also, it was generally allowed that he was bold and determined, and personally well-fitted for such work. Of commanding physique, indomitable will, hard as nails, well able to bear privation and exposure, he had survived hardships and dangers that had killed off many of his companions and followers in the expeditions in which he had taken part.

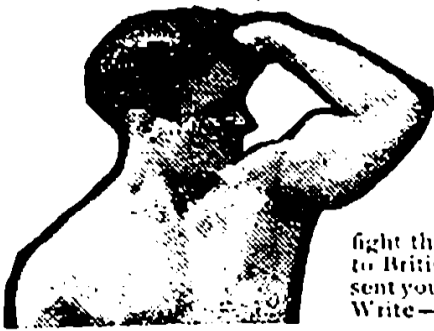
Yet, with all this in his favour, it cannot exactly be said that he was held in general esteem. Rumours and whispers had been heard as to certain dubious occurrences in which he had been mixed up, and in which, it was hinted, he had played a part that would not be to his credit had the true facts gained publicity.

From one ill-fated Arctic journey he had come back almost the only survivor, and his account of the disasters that had overtaken his companions was not everywhere received without suspicion.

As to the rest, it was admitted that he was a capable leader, if somewhat of a martinet, and that he had that kind of talent which seems to be the special gift of such men—the faculty of choosing people to serve under him who possessed just those qualifications best suited to his purpose.

As he looked at the three who were now approaching, his face was hard-set and lowering, and there was a flash in his keen eyes as his glance fell upon his two lieutenants, Hugh and Ruxton.

(To be continued.)



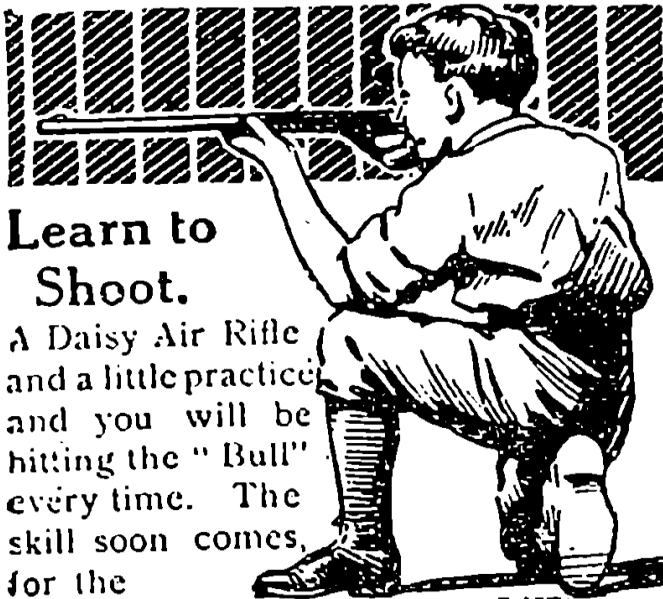
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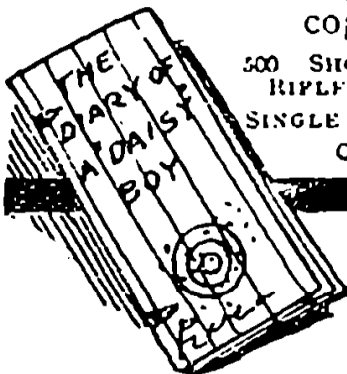
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