

NO. 51.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL,—1^D.

*Week ending
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1^D



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**SEXTON
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**AND THE CURIOUS CASE
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By the Author of "The Lightning Clue," "The Great Will Forgery," "The Forged Marriage Lines," "The Forged War Orders," etc., etc.

THE PROLOGUE

The Lonely Miser of Low Moor Grange

FROM horizon to horizon the rugged, undulating moor stretched away in vast wastes of solitude.

Nowhere upon that grim expanse was a sign of life to be seen save, perhaps, an occasional bird or two, or a group of rabbits gambolling outside their burrows.

The September sun was sinking in the sky, and the hush of the dying day had descended upon the moor.

On every hand could be seen signs of the waning year, and there was a certain melancholy sadness in the scene impossible to describe.

Winding and hedgeless, a road stretched away across the moor and was swallowed up in the dim distance by the gathering haze. A cold autumn wind swept along the desolate plain, mottled with gnarled and craggy hillocks. There seemed to be something almost sinister in the gloom of the moor—something unutterably lonesome.

Not a single house, not even a cottage. The rough-surfaced moorland road was bare of any pedestrian, or even a vehicle. It seemed as though this expanse of Yorkshire was shunned and deserted by mankind.

But wait.

Away in the shadowy distance a speck appeared, a speck which moved with aggravating slowness along the barren road. The little object very soon resolved itself into a low-built motor-car, and it was travelling at quite a respectable speed, as a matter of fact.

Two figures were in the car—which was a two-seater. The bigger of the two sat behind the steering wheel. The other, quite a lad, was taking considerable interest in the surroundings, and passing varied remarks at the same time.

The motor-car was the property of Mr. Nelson Lee, and it was the great

detective himself who was lolling comfortably in the driver's seat. The lad was Nipper, the criminologist's young assistant.

"Ripping place, this, guv'nor," Nipper remarked. "Simply ripping!"

"I hardly think——"

"To keep away from, I mean," went on Nipper calmly. "Put some more speed on, sir, and let's get to civilisation again."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The moor is lonely, my lad, but there is something wonderfully grand about it," he exclaimed, waving his hand round in a wide sweep. "One can breathe here with absolute freedom. There is air—there is space——"

"So there is in Trafalgar Square," interjected Nipper. "And there are motor-buses and taxis, too. Just think of being stranded at this spot! Miles and miles from anywhere, and—— I say, guv'nor!" he added, "is this car likely to break down?"

"I see you are alarmed at the possibilities," laughed Lee. "No, youngster, this car is in fine fettle. We shall soon be at our destination—another hour, at the most."

"And then we shall have tea," Nipper remarked comfortably.

Lee sighed.

"I am afraid you are too prosaic and matter-of-fact to appreciate the beauties of this lonely grandeur, Nipper," he said. "Just look at those gorse-covered hills, tinged with the fading light of the evening sun——"

"My hat!" grinned Nipper, "you're getting quite poetical, sir!"

"You young sweep! All you think of is modern luxury—and your stomach!" growled Lee. "You can't understand the solemn beauty of the barren moor. Yet there is beauty here, undoubtedly. There is something inexpressibly mournful about this great waste of rugged-country——"

"Hallo!" Nipper interjected, pointing. "There's a house, guv'nor!"

The car had just topped a rise on the bleak road, and ahead was a deep hollow, which extended a considerable distance to the left of the road. Nelson Lee, following the direction of Nipper's pointing finger, nodded.

"Yes," he remarked, "that is the residence of Mr. Peter Gerrard."

"How the dickens do you know who lives there?" Nipper asked curiously.

"My dear boy, we are on a visit to my old friend, Mr. Ransome, who lives about eighteen miles farther on, in a more civilised region than this," Lee answered. "The last time I was down here, a year ago, Mr. Ransome and I ventured on a long walk, and we came very near to this spot. My friend gave me all particulars concerning this very lonely house, and I was greatly interested."

The detective throttled down a little, and the motor-car glided along at a much slower pace.

The house they were both looking at was away to the left, right at the foot of the hollow, and about half a mile from the road itself.

The building nestled there surrounded by a few stunted trees, which were now almost devoid of leaves. A narrow track, grass and weed covered, led from the road to the house, and it could easily be seen that the lane was little used.

"Ugh!" shivered Nipper. "I shouldn't like to live there, guv'nor!"

"No, I am afraid life would be somewhat dull," Lee remarked, slowing the car still more. "The very house has a sinister look about it."

The building was, indeed, forbidding in aspect. It was of dull grey stone, with a slate roof, and high, gaunt, brick chimneys. It was fairly large, but straggling, with two storeys. The windows were small, and, even at this distance, Nipper could see that iron bars covered the glass of each window.

There was one small outhouse, and this was windowless, and as drab and grim as the house itself.

"Like a blessed prison," Nipper said, in a subdued voice.

"The only house for miles, my lad," exclaimed Nelson Lee, taking this opportunity to light a cigarette. "Four miles back we passed a few isolated cottages, and the next dwelling-place we shall come upon is about five and a half miles further on. Low Moor Grange is indeed isolated from civilisation."

"Low Moor Grange?" repeated Nipper. "A jolly appropriate name, that, sir."

Lee pulled at his cigarette thoughtfully, and gazed at the lonely house with interest. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and opened the throttle somewhat. The car glided forward with renewed speed down the long incline.

"We are getting quite depressed, youngster," said the detective briskly. "That will never do, will it? We are on a holiday, and we don't want to arrive at Mr. Ransome's house with long faces. The story of old Peter Gerrard, however, is apt to make one a trifle melancholy. It is a sad story."

"I'm not surprised to hear that, gov'nor. No man in his right senses would choose a spot like this to live in. Who is Peter Gerrard, anyhow?"

Lee did not answer for a few moments, and then he went on:

"I don't suppose you remember it, lad, but three years ago the London newspapers were very busily making the most of a particularly sordid murder story. I won't enter into details, for, to tell the truth, I don't exactly call to mind the precise facts of the affair. But a wealthy gentleman was brutally murdered by a young fellow named Robert Gerrard——"

"Oh!" said Nipper, beginning to understand.

"The case was quite simple and straightforward," Lee continued. "The murderer was tried and sentenced to death. He undoubtedly deserved his fate, for there was not a single redeeming feature in his favour. The murder was cold-blooded and deliberate, and altogether repulsive. The condemned man, as you have doubtless guessed, was the son of old Peter Gerrard, of Low Moor Grange."

"Poor old chap!" said Nipper. "No wonder he lives on his own!"

"After it was all over, Mr. Gerrard gave up his business in London," said Nelson Lee, throwing his cigarette away. "It was a terrible—an appalling—shock for the old man. He was respected and honoured by all, in spite of one or two eccentricities. And his grief was so great that he changed in character entirely. He became bitter and silent, and shunned his fellow-men. The disgrace was too much for the proud old fellow, and he sought seclusion and isolation."

"Was he well-to-do, sir?"

"I am coming to that. Mr. Gerrard sold his business, and bought this old house on the moor. Accompanied only by an old servant he came down here to live the life of a recluse. The hollow sham of our modern society was too much for the poor man, Nipper; he was shunned and avoided. And so he took his leave of civilisation and its cruel sneers, and came to the peacefulness of the barren moor. And—replying to your question—he was very rich indeed. He was supposed to be immensely wealthy."

"Supposed?" asked Nipper curiously.

"I used the expression because there was a certain amount of mystery connected with the old man's fortune," replied Lee. "When he came to the moor here, he brought with him everything he possessed in the world—he left nothing in London. There was not even a penny standing to his credit in the bank to which he had belonged. He withdrew every farthing."

“Did he have a big balance?”

“Rumour says that he took a small fortune from the bank—all in cash,” Lee answered. “In addition, he realised many valuable bonds and securities. In fact, everything he possessed he turned into hard cash. And he brought all his worldly possessions to Low Moor Grange with him. Mr. Ransome informed me that Gerrard had no less than fifty thousand pounds—in cash—in his house.”

“Phew!” gasped Nipper.

“But that, of course, is mere idle rumour,” Lee hastened to say. “Possibly the sum is greatly below that figure. But it is an undoubted fact that old Gerrard has a secret store-room, and that it contains a vast sum in ready money. For that reason the house is made like a prison—iron bars to every window, and huge bolts and locks to every door. The shock of his son’s terrible crime converted Gerrard into a recluse and a miser. He spends money rarely, and visits a town scarcely once in a year. By what I hear one would think he was poor, for he is very meagre in his requirements, and lives quite simply.”

“Yet he’s got tons of money in the house,” said Nipper. “What’s the good of all that money to him if he doesn’t use it?”

“It is no good at all—but Gerrard is a miser,” Lee replied. “A miser of the moor! By Jove, the story is a queer one, Nipper.”

“What a haul for an enterprising burglar, sir!”

Lee smiled grimly.

“I don’t think a burglar would succeed in breaking into Low Moor Grange,” he exclaimed. “And, even supposing a burglar did do so, there is the old man to consider. A recluse—a miser! I should pity the burglar, Nipper!”

“Yes, I expect he’d have a warm time, sir.” The lad turned to his master. “But I was going to ask you; what about Mrs. Gerrard——”

“There is no Mrs. Gerrard,” was Lee’s interjection. “The old man’s wife died many years ago. He is quite alone in the world, and his only companion is the aged manservant I referred to. Visitors at the Grange are rare; indeed, I do not think a soul has called at the house since Gerrard’s occupation. I doubt if the door would be opened if a visitor did call!”

“He must be quite a hospitable old merchant!” said Nipper.

“Think of his broken life, lad,” Nelson Lee exclaimed quietly. “His son a murderer, and sent to the gallows! Can we wonder at old Gerrard’s actions? The poor man has come to this deserted waste to live his life alone. And, naturally enough, he has brought all he had with him. It is only in the nature of things that he should become a miser and a man to be feared. The moorland folk for many miles round regard him with something akin to terror.”

Nipper half turned, and gazed back along the uneven road. The sun was low now, and the golden light flooded the great moor. Right away into the mist stretched the huge swelling plain, unbroken and seemingly interminable. Rough and wild it was, but there was something beautiful in the vastness of it all—something strangely peaceful in those russet and olive slopes.

The deep hollow was hidden now, and Low Moor Grange was no longer to be seen. Nipper turned back again, and sighed. It seemed to him as though he and his master were alone upon earth. But they were in a modern motor-car, and they were speeding towards civilisation—and a good tea.

What must it seem like to the old recluse, in his isolated moorland home, with only an old servant for company? What must it be like to live upon

the moor week after week—month after month—with never a visitor? Nipper felt glad that he and Lee were speeding away from the grim spot.

But to-day, strangely enough, Low Moor Grange was to have a visitor!

Soon after Nelson Lee's car had disappeared into the gathering mists a solitary figure topped a rise on the moor, and stood there for a few moments gazing down into the hollow—gazing upon the lonely old house.

The figure was that of a man—a youngish man. He was fairly well dressed, but he was hot and perspiring and exceedingly dusty. His boots, his clothes, his skin—all were coated with the drab dust of the moorland road.

“By George!” he muttered huskily. “What a trudge—what an infernal trudge! Thank goodness I've arrived at last!”

He started off again, direct across the moor, deserting the road now. It was quicker to make a bee-line for the old house. From where he had stood it was about a mile to the Grange, and he covered the distance at a brisk walk. His footsteps, flagging a short while before, were now firm enough. The sight of his destination had acted as a tonic to his tired and weary feet.

The stunted trees which surrounded the building were larger than they appeared to be from the road. They grew all round the house, just within a high, ill-kept hedge. Set in this hedge was a heavy wooden gate.

The stranger grasped the gate and pushed it. But it did not swing open—and for excellent reason. A heavy, modern lock was fitted, and the gate was securely locked. This was a sure sign that visitors were neither expected nor invited.

“H'm! The old boy isn't very cordial to the weary wayfarer!” muttered the visitor, as he looked about him.

There was a rusty bell-knob set in one of the gate-posts, but he did not notice this—mainly because the hedge partly covered the post. The high hedge extended unbrokenly on both sides, and behind it, dimly to be seen, were closely-set barbed wires. To break through the hedge was impossible.

The top of the gate was high, and set with long iron spikes. But the visitor was active and agile, and without going to the trouble of finding any other means of entrance he clambered up the gate and succeeded in scrambling over without sustaining a more serious injury than a scratched finger and a torn coat.

He walked up the weed-covered path to the front door. Everything had been allowed to go to rack and ruin, and the garden had not been attended to for years. Grass and weeds grew in profusion. The ground was littered and smothered with brown, rotting leaves.

The house itself was very substantially built. The man who had put it up had evidently been very well acquainted with the furious gales which frequently swept the moor during the harsh winters. But, by all appearances, no painting had been done for years. The big front door was blistered and of no particular colour; the weather had long since turned the paint's original colour to a nondescript drab.

The stranger seized the rusty knocker and performed a brisk tattoo upon the door. Then he waited, leaning against one of the door posts. After a minute he heard soft footsteps within, and then the grating rattle of heavy bolts being shot back. With a creak the door opened, as though protesting against its rest being disturbed.

A wizened, crinkled face appeared in the crack of the door; a heavy chain prevented the portal being widely opened. The crinkled face was brown and worn, and a pair of strangely suspicious eyes looked out into the evening light.

“Hallo, Jakes!” exclaimed the stranger coolly.

The man behind the door uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Sakes alive! If it ain't Master Vincent!" he exclaimed in a wheezy voice in which amazement was plainly apparent. "Goodness me, I never expected to see ye down on the moor, Master Vincent!"

"Well, don't stand there, Jakes!" said the visitor testily. "Open the confounded door and let me in!"

"I dunno what the master will say——"

"Don't be a fool, Jakes!" interjected the other. "Open the door!"

After a short pause the door closed to allow the chain to be removed, and it was then opened wide. Vincent Gerrard stepped into the hall, and stood looking at Jakes, the old manservant, for a moment in silence. Then he said:

"I'm tired, Jakes. I'm tired and hungry. Where's my father?"

"Well, well, if this ain't queer," murmured the old servant, as though speaking to himself. "Fancy you a-comin' down to the moor, Master Vincent. I'm sure I don't know what the master will say. He ain't in the best of tempers to-day——"

The young man, with an impatient gesture, interjected:

"Hang you, Jakes, you're the same gabbler as ever! Don't stand there staring at me! I'm tired, I tell you; I've walked miles and miles to this infernal place. Tell my father that I am here."

"I need no telling—I can see for myself!"

The interruption came from the end of the dim hall—now almost dark owing to the fading light of the autumn day. Vincent Gerrard turned, and strode forward eagerly. Old Jakes stood back, still muttering to himself.

"Into this room, Vincent!" exclaimed Peter Gerrard harshly.

A door was flung open, and the visitor entered the room somewhat nervously. The invitation had been none too cordial. He found himself in a dingy apartment, meagre and low-ceilinged. But the furniture was good, although it was dull and dusty. The door closed softly, and Vincent saw the old miser facing him.

Peter Gerrard was terribly changed; Vincent was almost shocked at the vast alteration in his father's appearance. He was a tall, slim man, but his height was greatly reduced by the fact that he stooped to such an extent that it almost seemed as though he had a hump. His face was clean-shaven and lined and almost dead-white—a striking contrast to Old Jakes's brown visage. At this present moment Gerrard's eyes were gleaming angrily, and his mouth had a harsh twist about it.

"Why have you come here?" he demanded. "Did I not forbid you to——"

"Hang it all, father, don't growl at me like this!" protested Vincent. "I haven't been two minutes in the place, and I've had the very devil of a walk across the moor. I'm tired, and I don't feel up to——"

"Why have you come?" repeated the old man relentlessly.

"Because I couldn't stand it any longer!" answered the other hotly. "Everybody's against me. The name of Gerrard is polluted!"

"And why—why?" was the miser's swift retort. "Because of Robert's horrible crime! Because a son of mine was led away by evil companions and—— Bah! I have no wish to discuss the dreadful matter with you, Vincent. You should not have come here."

"I couldn't stand London any longer," the young man said bitterly. "I've tried—Heaven knows I've tried! But everybody's against me. No matter where I turn—no matter what name I assume—they find out that I am the brother of—— Oh, you know, father! I can't keep a job a

month, and I've been struggling on until I'm dead sick of it all. I want to go away—right away!"

Old Peter Gerrard curled his lips angrily.

"You should have written!" he snapped. "I would have sent you money. I expressly forbade you to come here. I told you that if ever you did come you would not be admitted. That old fool of a Jakes——"

"But you couldn't bar me from your house!" Vincent protested. "For nearly three years I've been away from you, father, and when I do come you growl and rave at me as though I were to blame for—for everything!"

The miser strode forward and placed his face close against his son's.

"And you were to blame!" he exclaimed harshly. "You were to blame! No, don't speak—don't interrupt. I say that you were the cause of the whole ghastly trouble. You were younger than Robert—a year his junior—but he was quiet and steady, while you were gay, evil-living, and for ever seeking the company of bad companions. Gradually you brought Robert under your influence, until at last circumstances led up to the final crash. Robert was a good boy, and would never have committed his vile crime but for your bad influence. He performed the awful deed, but you were mainly responsible, Vincent. I hold you to blame!"

"Oh, but, father——"

"Be silent!" interjected the old man sharply. "Whatever you say will make no difference. Holding the view I do, this house is forbidden you. I warned you never to come, and you have disregarded that warning. You will go at once, Vincent—at once! Not another minute shall you remain!"

Vincent panted huskily, and with great alarm.

"But I have walked miles and miles——"

"I care not!"

"I am hungry and tired——"

"I have already told you my decision!" said Peter Gerrard grimly.

"But, father, I want money!" pleaded the young man. "Let me go away—let me go to some foreign country. I won't bother you any more if you give me sufficient money to pay my passage. I will stay here to-night, and start in the morning——"

"You will not stay here to-night!" rapped out the miser. "You will not stay here another five minutes! Wait in this room—I will return in a moment."

He opened the door, and passed out. Vincent was breathing quickly with alarm and fear. His father's harsh decree was disconcerting. He knew well enough that he would not be allowed to remain in the house, and he almost funk'd the long, weary trudge back across the moor to the town. And he was hungry, thirsty, and tired. The old man was cruelly relentless.

In the midst of Vincent's thoughts the door opened again, and Peter Gerrard reappeared. He held out a handful of crisp banknotes to his son.

"Forty pounds," he said shortly. "You can get out of England with that. Now go! And the next time you wish to communicate with me, write. I will never allow you to set foot inside this house again. Go!"

"But cannot I have something to eat and drink——"

"By Heaven, boy, you will try my patience too far!" snarled the old man fiercely. "I have nothing more to say to you!"

He pointed to the door with a quivering finger, and Vincent, after a second's hesitation, stuffed the notes into his pocket, set his lips tightly, and walked steadily out into the hall—and so out of the house.

CHAPTER I.

Jim the Penman Meets an Interesting Acquaintance.

CLANG! Clang!

It was late at night, and the surface car hummed uptown along almost deserted roads, and at a speed which was not exactly conducive to public safety. The bell jerked and two people got out. In the momentary silence a raucous shout came from a newsboy in the street, disposing of a late edition, and informing everybody within hearing that several German battleships had been sunk, and an unlimited number of British—to say nothing of a serious French rebuff on the Champagne front.

“Oh, the war—hang the war!” grunted a man to himself—a man who was lounging within the street car in a corner seat. “Always the infernal war! I thought when I left England I should be quit of it for a while. But here, in America, if there isn’t any news they set to and manufacture it!”

The man was tall, very well-dressed, and wore a stiff moustache. His name was Mr. John Thomas Darrell—at least, that was his name in Baltimore. In England his names had been many; among others, Bernard Lyle, Geoffrey Brandon, and Douglas James Sutcliffe. The latter was his real name, although he had dropped it long since.

To the police, however, he was known as Jim the Penman.

Jim was at present in the United States—in the city of Baltimore. He had found Great Britain a little too hot for him. Or, to be more exact, he had found the attentions of Nelson Lee somewhat too affectionate. The famous British detective had taken so much interest in the notorious forger’s movements, that Jim the Penman had been frustrated in several extensive schemes.

Sutcliffe had attempted to leave England on a previous occasion, but had failed, and had become mixed in a grim affair with a German spy. In that matter Jim had shown up in a light which had been unexpected; he had agreed to help the Hun scoundrel, and had then realised the enormity of his crime before it was too late. He had shown that he was not a traitor to his country—whatever else he might be. Nelson Lee had respected Sutcliffe for his loyalty, but the great detective was still keenly determined to bring the audacious forger to justice.

Jim the Penman, however, had disappeared after his extraordinary exploit with the German spy. As a matter of fact, he succeeded in shipping aboard a dirty tramp steamer, bound from Cardiff to Richmond, Virginia. And, having worked his way across, Jim proceeded to Baltimore, assumed the name of John T. Darrell, and boldly rented an excellent apartment. He was not without funds, and decided to rest on his oars a while until he could find scope for his peculiar talents.

On this particular night he had visited a theatre, and was now on his way home. The newsboy’s yell regarding the war struck an unpleasant chord, and Jim frowned to himself. The war had been responsible for his having to toil like a navvy in order to escape from England.

He glanced at his watch, and then peered out of the window upon the brilliantly illuminated streets. He was nearing the point where he would leave the surface car. He saw that only one other passenger kept him company. This was a lean, hollow-eyed man on the opposite seat, also in the corner.

Jim eyed the other man curiously as the latter leaned forward and coughed in a most painful way. The cough sounded hollow and wheezy, and was continuous for several moments. Then the stranger leaned back, almost exhausted, with white face and quivering lips.

"Poor brute!" muttered Jim to himself. "He's not long for this world!"

He rose to his feet as he saw that the car was nearing the spot at which he wished to alight. The other man, too, rose to his feet, and clutched swayingly at the strap which hung above his head.

At this second the conductor pulled the bell, and with a sudden grinding of brakes the long car pulled up. It was an unusually sudden stoppage, and Jim nearly lost his balance. The lean, hollow-eyed man was pitched forward before he could grasp the strap, and he crashed to the floor with terrible force.

"Heavens!" said Jim the Penman angrily.

He glared round through the glass door at the driver, and then hastily stepped forward and bent over the fallen man. Jim was a curious mixture. At times he could be as callous as a heathen Chinese; he had once planned a diabolical death for Nelson Lee and Nipper, and had been quite unmoved. Yet now, as he saw this utter stranger fall to the floor of the surface car, he bent down with undoubted concern in his eyes.

"Come on, old man!" he said softly. "Are you hurt much?"

There was something pitiful in the fallen man's obvious weakness. Perhaps it was this that awoke in Jim a humane feeling. His own enemies were strong men, and to kill them was only the fortune of war. But this poor fellow was so utterly incapable that he simply commanded sympathy.

"I—I went giddy!" muttered the stranger thickly. "Confound this tram!"

"Give me your arm," said Jim. "That's right! Now, up we come!"

He assisted the poor fellow to his feet, and the pair of them walked slowly to the exit, and alighted. The conductor, smiling sympathetically, jerked the bell, and the surface car whizzed on its way, leaving Sutcliffe and his unknown companion standing on the side-walk beneath a glaring electric arc.

"You don't look up to the mark," said Jim the Penman. "You'd better let me take you round to my place—it's only a couple of minutes' walk away. A nip of brandy will do you a heap of good, old chap."

The other clung to Jim's arm heavily, and seemed to experience a difficulty in breathing. His face was even a paler shade now, and his eyes looked dull and listless. He was evidently in a bad way.

"That tram!" he muttered. "Confound the tram for pulling up so——"

His voice tailed off weakly, and Sutcliffe waited for no more. He couldn't very well leave the man in the street in that uncertain condition. And there was not a soul in sight—not even a police-officer. The whole street was bare; a long, brightly lighted avenue stretching into the dim distance, where the electric arcs merged into one brilliant blur.

Jim gripped the other's arm more securely, and marched him off without further ado. The walk was only a short one, for in a few minutes the forger turned into a big, modern building, and mounted to the third floor. Here he opened the front door of his self-contained apartment, and led his companion inside.

The man did not protest, although he was evidently grateful. A few moments later he was seated in a big chair, and Jim forced him to gulp down a strong dose of neat brandy. The fiery spirit worked wonders, for a spot of colour entered the man's cheeks, and he sat forward and looked round him with interest.

He saw that the room was well furnished. Jim the Penman was sitting opposite to him, out of the glare of the electric pendant. The door was closed, and the pair were quite alone.

"You're awfully kind to me!" faltered the stranger. "I—I don't seem to remember much what happened. I was in a tram, and— Oh, yes! I fell over, didn't I? By Jove, that fall gave me a nasty jar!"

And he pressed his side, and made a grimace of agony.

"H'm! You seem to be hurt, my friend," said Jim the Penman, regarding his friend curiously. "You're a Britisher, of course? No American uses the word 'tram' when referring to a street car."

"Yes, I'm British," said the other weakly. "Perhaps you've heard of my name; it's notorious enough, or was five years ago. Gerrard—Gerrard's my name."

Jim pursed his lips.

"Not a very common name," he said thoughtfully. "Gerrard! Wasn't there a murderer named Gerrard? I don't wish to offend you——"

"You won't offend me," interjected the hollow-eyed man. "Yes, there was a murderer named Gerrard; he was my brother, Robert. My name is Vincent Gerrard. I've been knocking about the States for nearly three years, and I'm tired. I'm sick to death of it all! I'm not sorry the end's coming!"

"Dear me! You mustn't talk in that strain!" laughed Jim. "A mere fall in a surface car won't kill you."

Vincent Gerrard sipped his brandy and smiled wanly.

"You don't understand," he said. "That fall was nothing. I was doomed long before that; the doctor told me I might peg out any minute. Perhaps I sha'n't last another hour. I—I feel rather groggy, I guess. It was an accident weeks ago," he added, as though in explanation.

"An accident?"

"Yes. In New York," said Vincent dully. "On Broadway, as a matter of fact. I was fool enough to have an argument with a whacking great motor-car. It was a pretty little mix-up. The automobile won. I'm all anyhow inside." And he laid a hand upon his chest.

"That's bad!" exclaimed Jim quietly. "Very bad, Mr. Gerrard. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry for me—I'm not a bit sorry for myself," Vincent answered, with a look of restfulness in his dull eyes. "I reckon it's best, considering everything. That accident injured my heart, and the hospital doctor told me as I might drop any minute. Cheerful, wasn't it? But I don't mind. I'm fed up with the world. That fall in the tram finished me, I believe. I feel rotten!"

Jim the Penman bent over, and refilled Vincent's glass. The sick man took another gulp of the spirit, and became almost alert again.

"Splendid stuff—brandy," he ran on, shifting his position. "Ugh! That was a twister! I'll be glad when it's over—mighty glad. There's no fun in living as I've lived. Always hard up, always without a cent in my pocket. Guess I'm glad the end's in sight. There are queer things in this life, aren't there? Here am I, penniless, and my father in England is simply wallowing in cash! Cash, I said! Not in the bank, mind you, but all in his own house. Tens of thousands of pounds! And every dollar of it in gold and notes!"

Douglas Sutcliffe sat up with a jerk. He looked at Vincent Gerrard keenly, for the thought struck him that the man was raving. But he soon saw that Vincent was quite calm, and was certainly speaking the same truth.

"Tens of thousands—in cash?" he repeated. "I don't understand!"

Vincent laughed thickly.

"It wants a bit of understanding, doesn't it?" he said. "It's the truth,

though—absolute gospel truth. My father, old Peter Gerrard, is a miser. The shock did it, you know, and he's a harsh old miser. Oh, it's straight enough! There are letters in my pocket to prove it. Only a month ago I got a letter from him refusing to send me a farthing; and he actually said in that letter that he had piles of gold round him at the moment of writing! Piles of gold on his writing-table, gloating over it like old Gaspard in 'Les Cloches de Cornville.' And he wouldn't send me a farthing!"

"That was galling," said the forger quietly.

"Oh, I'm used to it!" was Vincent's reply. "My father's changed altogether these last three years. He's as bitter as gall. In spite of the fact that he's got tons of money all round him he literally gloats over my poverty."

"Where does your father live?" asked Jim the Penman.

"In Yorkshire—right on the moor," was Vincent's dull answer. "Low Moor Grange is the name of the house, and it stands quite alone, miles from anywhere. The nearest village is called Arnham, five miles away."

"Your father must live a lonely life," Jim remarked. "But perhaps he has a host of servants and——"

Vincent shook his head.

"There is only one servant—an old man named Jakes," he said. "My father and Jakes live absolutely alone upon the moor. And in the house there is cash enough to buy half the county! Queer state of affairs, isn't it?"

"Very queer," agreed Jim. "But I suppose your father has adequate provision for protecting his money? No doubt he has a big safe——"

"I don't know whether there's a safe in the house or not, but I know that my father keeps everything in one certain room. I've never been inside it—in fact, I've only been in the house for a few minutes. But in that one locked room there is enough wealth for a king's ransom."

"It is indeed hard that you should be penniless over here while your father has got so much idle money in Yorkshire," said Jim quietly. "But perhaps you are mistaken, Mr. Gerrard——"

Vincent took another sip of brandy and bent forward.

"Why should I tell you all this?" he asked huskily. "I don't exactly know, but I feel like talking to anybody just now. It's true, and you can prove my words if you look at some of the letters I've got in my pocket. That old moorland house in Yorkshire is like a bank!"

"But surely there are rumours concerning your father's miserly habits circulating about the moor?" Sutcliffe asked. "What a splendid haul for a burglar, or a gang of burglars! Why, three armed men could overpower your father and his servant, and clear off with every penny of the loot without a soul being the wiser."

Vincent uttered a low chuckle; and then pressed a hand to his side, for the chuckle had given him a painful twinge.

"I'm going!" he muttered. "It's no good trying to deceive myself. That fall just put the finishing touch on me. But you were talking about burglars? I don't think it would be possible for anybody to break into Low Moor Grange. The house is like a prison. Every window is heavily barred, and the doors are all bolted top and bottom, and fitted with extra locks. Father has made ample preparations for the reception of gentlemen of the jemmy. If an attempt at burglary was made, I'm pretty sure the thieves would come off second best."

"I don't suppose the house is left empty often, eh?"

"Never," Vincent replied weakly. "My father is a recluse, and does

not stir out of the house—or, at least from the grounds—once in six months. Jake sometimes goes to one of the big towns, but I don't think my father has left Low Moor Grange once since he went there. I dare say the loneliness is mainly the cause of his change of character—for at one time he was one of the most generous men in the world."

Vincent Gerrard's voice had been getting weaker, and the last words he uttered were very faint and almost inaudible. He lay back in his chair, and attempted to carry the glass of brandy to his lips. But a wave of weakness seized him, and the glass crashed to the floor.

Jim the Penman leapt to his feet and crossed over. But when he bent over Gerrard's sprawling form he found that the unfortunate man was unconscious. Indeed, by all appearances, Vincent was rapidly dying.

For a full minute Jim the Penman stood perfectly still, thinking—thinking deeply. There was a curious light in his eyes, and it was apparent that he had been struck by some startling idea.

"What an opportunity!" he murmured to himself. "What a chance to exercise my own peculiar talents! It's a big game, but worth risking. By James, I'll take the chance!"

With nimble fingers he went through the unconscious man's pockets. Then, without delay, he crossed to the telephone and rang up the nearest hospital. An ambulance was at once despatched, and with commendable promptitude Vincent Gerrard was removed to hospital.

After the dying man had been taken away Jim paced his rooms with glittering eyes. He had been reading the letters he had taken from Vincent's pockets, and he knew that the man's story was no hallucination of a disordered brain. The facts were exactly as Gerrard had stated. Well, the chance was too good to be thrown away, and Jim the Penman had a great scheme simmering in his cunning brain. By forgery he intended luring old Peter Gerrard away from England; and the coast would thus be left clear for his own operations—and these would not be ordinary burgling operations. Jim's scheme was far cleverer than that.

During the small hours of the morning, while he was still thinking deeply, the hospital authorities rang him up and imparted the sad information that Vincent Gerrard had passed away. As he himself had said, he had been suffering from a severe heart trouble, and it was a great wonder that he had lived so long.

"Dead!" muttered the forger, as he slowly walked away from the telephone. "Well, it is all the better for my purpose, for it is now impossible for Vincent to communicate with his father, and thus confuse things. The coast is clear for my own plan of action!"

Exactly what that plan of action was will be recorded in due course. But Jim the Penman was not the man to embark upon a scheme which did not possess at least a sporting chance of success.

CHAPTER II.

A Storm on the Moor—Refused Admittance.

"**W**HAT a night, guv'nor! By Jimmy, what an absolute howler!" Nipper bawled the words out at the top of his voice. He was sitting quite 'close to Nelson Lee, but it was very necessary for him to use all the power of his lungs.

The night was, indeed, a "howler." Nelson Lee and Nipper were in a powerful racing motor-car, and the latter was struggling along a bleak, deserted road on the very bosom of the moor,

The wind had risen during the last hour until it was now a furious gale, sweeping across the moor with a fury which was almost unprecedented. There was rain in the air, too, and it drove into the faces of the two travellers with stinging, biting force.

It was not late in the evening, but the darkness was like something solid. On every hand stretched the great barren heath, but nothing of it was to be seen. The motor-car was enclosed on all sides by impenetrable walls of blackness.

Complying with the regulations, it was only possible to have very subdued lights upon the car, and these were utterly inadequate, and really worse than useless. Not being able to use the big headlamps, Lee had not fitted them before starting, and so the only lights were a couple of small electric side-lamps—the glasses of which had been considerably dimmed.

“Regulations or no regulations I should switch the headlights on with their full power if they were fitted!” roared Nelson Lee. “These infernal things are hopeless—we can’t see a yard ahead. What a pity it is we didn’t start out better equipped, Nipper.”

Nipper grunted.

“How the thunder were we to know this weather would spring up?” he growled. “I say, gov’nor, how much further do we have to go?”

“I am sure I don’t know, young ‘un,” Lee replied. “I have completely lost my bearings in this darkness, but I have a shrewd idea we are not so very far distant from that old house in the hollow—Low Moor Grange, as it is called. We are therefore about eighteen miles from our destination.”

The famous detective and his young assistant were again on a visit to their Yorkshire friend, Mr. Ransome. Curiously enough, this was the first time Nelson Lee had travelled to Yorkshire for over two years, and now, feeling a little run down, he had decided to accept a recent invitation and spend a week up North. There being no railway at Mr. Ransome’s abode, Lee had naturally travelled by motor-car, as he had done on previous occasions.

Eighteen miles did not sound far, when one was travelling in a fast racing motor-car. And, indeed, the distance was not far. Ordinarily, it could be accomplished in about half an hour, or a little over.

But to-night speed was impossible.

There were no hedges to the road, the moor stretching out on either hand. Lee, at the steering wheel, found his task terribly difficult and nerve-racking. His eyes ached with peering ahead, and his hands were numb and feelingless with cold.

More than once the car almost left the road, and it was only by travelling very slowly that progress was possible.

“Remember the last time we were on this road, gov’nor?” shouted Nipper, into his master’s ear. “That was one September afternoon, two or three years ago. My hat, what a difference! Everything was calm and peaceful then.”

“When we started out the weather was quite passable,” Lee said. “This storm has sprung up since we encountered the moor—and it is my opinion the fury of the elements will increase. We are in for a rough time, Nipper.”

The youngster nodded, and exclaimed:

“It strikes me pretty forcibly that the elements couldn’t very well be rougher! I was just wondering whether this was May or January, sir. Nearly summer-time, and we plunge into the midst of—this!”

The month was indeed May. But on the moor everything is bleak and chill. The summer is short, and often cold. This sudden storm, however, was certainly unusual, and it seemed to be growing in violence.

The gale whistled across the vast moor with shrieking force, and now

and again gusts struck the motor-car with such tremendous fierceness that it almost seemed as though the vehicle would be overturned.

As a matter of fact, the wayfarers were just over a mile distant from the hollow in which Low Moor Grange was situated. And the motor-car crawled onwards cautiously and steadily through the inky darkness.

Every moment, now, the storm was gaining in fury. At the top of the rise before descending the hill into the hollow it seemed as though pandemonium were let loose. The storm became a veritable cyclone. The gale boomed and roared like a million demons.

Rain commenced to fall in a pelting deluge. It soaked Nelson Lee and Nipper, and stung their faces viciously. At that period the unhappy pair would have given much to find shelter.

But what shelter was there here?

"Oh, we're having a ripping time, guv'nor!" bawled Nipper, with chattering teeth. "If this goes on much longer our car will turn itself into a giddy aeroplane, and will start flying across the moor a hundred feet up!"

"Stick tight, Nipper!" came Nelson Lee's roaring reply. "We are just about to descend a long, straight hill. I know the road well now. We are nearly opposite to that old house, and the road is quite straight for a considerable distance."

The detective had, in fact, found his bearings. The stump of an old tree by the roadside had given him the clue. This stump, he knew of old, occupied a solitary position on the brow of the hill, and there were no other trees for miles, except a couple of stunted oaks which grew beside the road at the foot of the hollow—and quite near the narrow lane which led to Low Moor Grange.

Lee opened the throttle a trifle, and the car bounded forward at quite a respectable speed. It plunged down the hill blindly; but the road was perfectly straight, and Lee was anxious to reach the shelter of Mr. Ransome's home.

But even now the car was only travelling at a moderate pace—certainly no more than twenty miles an hour.

Nipper crouched down, pulling a rug completely over him. It was Lee who had to do the steering and driving, so Nipper saw no reason why he should expose himself to the elements.

"I expect the storm is at its height now, Nipper," Nelson Lee remarked, the words almost blowing back between his own lips as he uttered them. "This is not the time of the year for continuous gales, and——"

Crash!

It all happened in one breathless moment.

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper had been prepared for anything in the nature of a smash. But without warning the car came to a sudden stop—a dead stop, as though it had plunged into a brick wall. Lee was flung forward on to the steering wheel with considerable violence, and, as he afterwards explained, he suffered from a pain in the region of the "tummy." It was fortunate he was very well wrapped and padded, otherwise he might have been injured.

Nipper came off worse than his master. The lad, being smothered in his rug, received not even a second's warning of what was coming. Moreover, he was shifting his position at the precise moment of the impact. Consequently, Nipper was jerked forward like a stone from a catapult, and he took a graceful header over the car's bonnet, and sprawled helplessly amid the debris.

Nelson Lee uttered a loud gasp, and for a few moments found it difficult to regain his breath—for he had been badly winded. Then, with a muttered exclamation, he scrambled out of his seat and leapt to the ground.

He could see nothing.

The force of the collision had jerked out the electric lights, and everything was utterly black on every side. The wind howled, and the rain pelted. Never in his life before had the great detective felt so utterly helpless.

"Nipper!" he shouted anxiously.

As though from a great distance a faint voice floated to his ears.

"My stars! I'm nearly done in!" ejaculated Nipper, in painful tones. "For goodness' sake give me a hand out, gov'nor!"

Nelson Lee groped round to the front of the car. The next second he went sprawling, and found himself floundering amid a great profusion of lashing branches.

He picked himself up, and immediately understood the cause of the accident.

One of the oak trees had blown down across the road, and the motor-car had crashed into it with full force. The result was not at all detrimental to the fallen tree, but undoubtedly so to the automobile.

"Confound it!" ejaculated Lee. "I've never felt so incapable—Nipper! Where are you, youngster?"

"Here, sir. Oh, my knee!" gasped Nipper. "I'm jolly well hurt, gov'nor! Did we bash into the side of a house, or what? I can't see a blessed thing!"

Lee was almost overbalanced by the force of the gale, and he could hear, above the fierce roar of the elements, a tremendous swishing and lashing—caused by the branches of the fallen tree whipping about in the wind.

The rain tore down pitilessly. The hurricane was increasing in intensity, if anything.

Somewhere close to the detective he felt, rather than saw, some movements going on. The next moment a hand grasped Lee's coat, and Nipper dragged himself to his feet beside his master.

"Are you hurt, lad?" asked Lee anxiously.

"Well, a chap can't get pitched out of a motor-car head-first without getting hurt!" ejaculated Nipper painfully. "It's my knee, sir! I caught it a terrific whack against the radiator-cap."

"This darkness is terrible——" began Lee, and then he broke off, and went on: "By James, what a dunderhead I am! I have an electric torch in my pocket all the time. We will soon investigate, Nipper!"

A couple of seconds later a bright gleam of light shot out from Nelson Lee's torch, and slashed through the inky darkness with extraordinary brilliance. The light was not so specially powerful, but the intense darkness seemed to be tenfold brighter than it actually was.

"Ah, that's better!" was Lee's exclamation. "Most important of all, my boy, is your knee. Let's have a look at you."

For the moment the detective did not consider what possible damage had been wrought to the car. He himself had only been winded, but he knew that Nipper had been thrown headlong out of the car at the time of the collision.

The brilliant light gleamed full upon Nipper's left knee. His trousers were torn and gashed just below the knee, and the detective bent down to make a close examination.

"Dear me!" murmured Lee concernedly. "This is rather bad, Nipper. Your knee is nastily grazed, and there will be an ugly bruise there before long."

"There's an ugly bruise now!" groaned Nipper. "But I expect it'll be black and blue in about an hour. Thank goodness it's not worse!"

"Are you all right everywhere else?"

"Yes, gov'nor, except for a scratched hand. But that's nothing."

"Can you walk, my boy?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Nipper replied. "I'll try—I can't say more. But this bruise is giving me what-ho, I can tell you! How the merry dickens did it happen? It looks as if we bashed into a giddy plantation!"

The pair had been talking in shouts, for the hurricane was so violent and noisy that ordinary conversation was impossible. Lee whipped out a clean handkerchief, bade Nipper hold the torch, and then the detective performed first-aid services.

He rolled the leg of Nipper's trousers up, and carefully bound the handkerchief round the injured knee—first of all assuring himself that there was no dirt in the wound. The latter was not deep—indeed, it was merely a graze—but the blow had been a severe one, and it was doubtful if Nipper would be able to walk after the expiration of a few more minutes.

Having performed first-aid, Nelson Lee then transferred his attention to the car itself. He flashed the light about, and what he saw did not make him at all cheerful. Further progress in the automobile was impossible.

Right in front of the car the lashing branches of the fallen tree rose up several feet. The car had struck the thick, solid trunk, and Lee saw at once that the steering was completely wrecked. Moreover, the offside front wheel was smashed beyond hope, and the tyre burst.

"I am afraid we are in a difficult position, Nipper," Lee said gravely. "Upon my word, this is most exasperating. We are miles and miles from the nearest village, our car is quite useless, and you are crocked!"

"Ripping!" was Nipper's cheerful comment, although it was uttered in a decidedly dismal tone. "We're in a lovely fix, gov'nor. I'm jolly certain I can't walk five or six miles; and I don't much care for the prospect of staying out here on the moor, soaked to the skin, and——"

Lee waved his hand deprecatingly.

"That will never do!" he interjected. "You can't remain on the moor, Nipper, in that condition. We must think of some plan. There are dry clothes in our suit cases—complete outfits, in fact—but if we don them we should only get soaked afresh."

Nipper shivered.

"What a night!" he said, with chattering teeth. "It's like December, sir. What can we do? We can't walk to Mr. Ransome's—we can't even walk to the village. And there's no house of any sort for miles and miles. We're right out on the barren moor, with a wrecked motor-car, and me with a squiffy knee. My hat, it's just the kind of fix one dreams of in a nightmare!"

Lee walked round the car, buffeted by the wind and pelted by the rain. He flashed his light about in a vague kind of way, from side to side, illuminating the edges of the road. He knew very well that there was practically no chance of them being picked up by other travellers; for this moorland road was not a main highway, and was very little used, even in the daytime. After dark to expect assistance was out of the question.

But suddenly the detective started, walked rapidly ahead, and flashed his light down a weed-covered lane which branched off a hundred yards ahead. He retraced his steps to the car, where Nipper was squatting on the front seat, nursing his injured knee. He was a very forlorn figure sitting there, soaked to the skin, and with his face rather pale.

"Come, Nipper, there is a chance for us!" Nelson Lee said briskly. "We are not so far from human habitation after all. The lonely moorland house of Mr. Peter Gerrard is within half a mile of this very spot."

Nipper looked up eagerly.

"By gum! Why didn't we think of that before?" he exclaimed. "But I say, sir, Mr. Gerrard's an old miser, isn't he? Perhaps he won't let us stay the night in his house."

"He cannot refuse us admittance on such a wild night as this, my lad," the detective replied. "The harshest man in the world would unbend under such conditions. Besides, it is very probable that Mr. Gerrard possesses a horse and trap, or a small car of his own. In that case we can impose upon his generosity and finish our journey to Mr. Ransome's. Surely this moorland recluse will allow us to change our clothes, and wait in his house until the storm has passed."

"He'll be a rotter if he refuses!"

Nipper descended from the seat, and after walking a few paces he found that it was possible for him to walk with his left leg stiff, without much pain. But it was decidedly awkward, and a prolonged journey would not be practicable.

Nelson Lee assisted his young companion a great deal, allowing Nipper to lean heavily upon his arm. And thus they walked down the grass-covered lane, Lee flashing his light ahead every now and again, in order to show the way.

If anything, the hurricane was even now more intense than before.

The wind came thundering over the moor in great bellowing gusts, sometimes threatening to sweep the unfortunate wayfarers off their feet. The rain was not descending so heavily, but there seemed no prospect of the weather improving. Nelson Lee could not remember a wilder night. Terrible enough in any ordinary country district of England, it was trebly so on this vast, unprotected waste.

Before long the high gate of Low Moor Grange was reached. But for the intense fury of the gale Lee and Nipper may have experienced a great set-back at this point. But the gate lay half across the lane, torn from its hinges, and partially wrecked. Thanks to the wind, it was possible for the pair to walk straight into the grounds of the old house.

They felt their hopes rising as they struggled to the front door. Not a single light gleamed from any window, but this was in no way surprising. The two lonely occupants of the house were probably in the rear quarters.

"We'll soon be in a better fix, Nipper," Nelson Lee said cheerfully.

Both he and the lad had brought their suit-cases with them, intending to change into dry things as soon as they gained admittance.

Lee grasped the heavy old knocker and performed a thunderous rat-tat upon the massive door. Several minutes passed, and nothing happened. Looking somewhat grim, now, Lee hammered again—this time with such force that the great door shivered and shook beneath his onslaught.

"Wish they'd hurry up!" grunted Nipper. "It's raining like fury again!"

The rain, indeed, was driving round the angle of the house in blinding sheets. The wind, too, was whistling and shrieking like a thousand gnomes, and it almost seemed that the sturdy building would collapse at any moment.

And then there was a sound of bolts being shot.

Lee and Nipper stiffened expectantly, and then they saw the door open about four inches, and Lee also saw that a heavy chain prevented it being opened further. The wizened face of old Jakes was silhouetted against a dim background of flickering light.

"Who is it?" wheezed the old man nervously.

"If you will unfasten the door, and let us enter, we will explain," Lee

replied. "We are two unfortunate wayfarers, and we are seeking shelter."

"You cannot stay here!" Jakes interjected sharply. "Go away!"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"You cannot know what you are saying!" he exclaimed. "You cannot send us away in this storm! My young friend is injured——"

"You cannot stay here! You must go—you must go!"

Jakes reiterated the last three words almost in a tone of fear and alarm. At the same moment he closed the door with a bang, and as Nelson Lee and Nipper stood there, utterly dumbfounded, they heard the bolts reshot into position, and the heavy key turned in the lock!

CHAPTER III.

The Miser's Fury.

NELSON LEE gritted his teeth angrily.

"By heavens! What can be the meaning of this, Nipper?" he exclaimed. "We are not only refused admittance, but we are not even allowed a hearing. I am not the man to stand such treatment!"

Without waiting for Nipper to reply, Lee seized the heavy knocker, and crashed it down upon the door with all the force he was capable of. The door shook from top to bottom, and Lee kept up the furious hammering for a considerable time.

As he took his hand away from the knocker, he and Nipper again heard the bolts being drawn back, and for a second time the face of old Jakes appeared in the slit of the door.

"The master will be furious!" he cried, in a quavering voice. "I'd let ye in if I may, but I daren't do it. Go away while ye're safe! It's a terrible night, sir, and I'm right sorry——"

"Your master will not be angry," Lee interjected. "Come, my friend, open the door and let us in. You are not savages in this house, are you? We have had an accident on the road, and this lad is injured."

"Poor boy—poor boy!" Jakes said, with real pain in his voice. "I'd like to let ye in, sir, but the master——"

"My name is Nelson Lee!" the detective put in. "Perhaps you have heard of me? I will willingly pay for any service you render. Come, come, remove this chain and let us in before I lose my temper."

Jakes hesitated.

"It's the master I'm afeared of!" he said nervously. "But may be he'll let the pair of you stay for a little while. It's an awful night. But I'm sure I don't know what he'll say. I shall have to go and ask him——"

"Nonsense!" Lee cut in curtly. "Waste no further time, and remove this chain. I will be responsible to your master—have no fear of that!"

The old manservant was evidently uncertain how to act. Personally, he was anxious to let the strangers in, but he was very much afraid of the old miser's fury. Peter Gerrard had never once admitted a stranger into the house. But Nelson Lee's grim tones were compelling, and at last Jakes unfastened the door.

The wind roared in with such violence that the door was blown back, and it almost knocked the old man down. He held it with difficulty, and Nelson Lee and Nipper stepped into the hall.

The detective closed the door with a bang, and then turned and faced Jakes. The hall was very poorly lighted; a single candle burned on a shelf at the far end. A more dismal scene could hardly be imagined. There

seemed something sinister about this grim old house so far from other habitations.

"Now you can inform your master——"

A door opened at the rear of the hall, and a strange figure appeared.

"What is this—what is this!" the new-comer screamed furiously. "You have admitted strangers, Jakes? You fool—you fool! Turn them out—turn them out at once!"

Nelson Lee stepped forward.

"My dear sir——"

"How dare you enter this house?" raved Peter Gerrard, almost foaming at the mouth with rage. "You will leave this house, sir—you will leave this house without a second's delay!"

The miser stood there, quite close to the candle, which was flickering violently in the draught. It was a strange scene. The old man, with his bent back, looked like an old vulture. His face was paler than usual, and his eyes gleamed almost with the light of insanity. He was, indeed, nearly beside himself with terrible fury.

He walked forward with a firm step, his finger pointing quiveringly at the door.

"Go!" he cried shrilly. "No stranger has crossed this threshold until to-night! And no stranger shall remain within these walls——"

But Nelson Lee was getting angry, too.

"I am an intruder," he interrupted, "but your attitude has put you entirely in the wrong, Mr. Gerrard. This lad with me is suffering from an injury of the knee, and he cannot walk any great distance. On such a night as this no man with a spark of humanity——"

"I have no spark of humanity!" the miser cut in, with a cruel and mirthless laugh. "If I ever possessed any humane feelings, they have long since died. This is my house, and I am master of it. You will go, sir. You will go at once!"

Lee choked back the hot words which rose to his lips, and forced himself to be calm.

"I am tempted to become furious as you are yourself, Mr. Gerrard," he said quietly. "I cannot be aware of your reasons, of course, for this extraordinary attitude. But you will, at least, allow me to tell you of our predicament. My motor-car collided with a fallen tree, and is wrecked. My young companion has seriously hurt his knee, and it requires bathing and bandaging. Moreover, we are soaked to the skin and would like the use of a room for a short while in order to change our things—we have dry outfits with us."

"Your troubles are no concern of mine——"

"But, upon my soul, you cannot persist in this singular attitude!" Lee went on quickly. "If there were another house—or even a cottage—I would not demean myself by asking your indulgence. But there is no other human habitation for miles; nothing but bleak, deserted moor. In the name of civilisation you cannot send us forth now that we are indeed within your walls."

The miser again pointed to the door.

"I have nothing more to say!" he snarled. "You will go!"

"My name is Nelson Lee——"

"What!" screamed Gerrard. "What! Nelson Lee, the detective? By all the powers I—I—— You infernal fool, Jakes, to admit this prying spy into the house! Throw them out this very instant!"

Jakes was trembling visibly, and he looked uncertainly at Nelson Lee's stalwart form, and the broad, squared shoulders. Jakes was an old man,

and he had quite enough sense to know that any attempt to remove Nelson Lee forcibly would be doomed to failure.

"Can't we let the gentlemen stay, sir?" he faltered. "It's a terror of a night, and the lad will most likely collapse."

But old Peter Gerrard was almost beside himself with ungovernable rage. He took three rapid strides forward, gripped the old servant with cruel force and swung him aside. Jakes staggered back, unprepared for the onslaught, and sprawled headlong upon the hard stone floor. The fall was a severe one for such an aged man, and he lay upon the floor moaning slightly.

"Oh, you brute!" cried Nipper, with clenched fists. "You confounded brute!"

Nelson Lee did not utter a word. But he stepped forward, taking no heed of the miser, and bent over old Jakes.

"Come, let me help you!" he said kindly. "I am sorry for this, Jakes—deeply sorry. I feel that I am to blame for what has occurred."

"It's all right, sir," muttered the old servant. "The master's never used me like this before, but he's mighty angry. It's not your fault, sir, and I am more than sorry that you can't stay. My old heart fairly weeps for that poor laddie!"

"Never mind, Jakes, never mind!" was Lee's soft rejoinder. "You did your best for us. You know my name, and if ever you're in need of help, do not forget me. I am quite convinced that you would have done your utmost for our comfort to-night, had you had your own way."

"He's cruel, sir—terribly cruel!" muttered Jakes.

There were tears in the old man's eyes, and Nelson Lee stepped aside and gazed at Peter Gerrard with scorn and contempt. The anger had left Nelson Lee now, and he felt that he would rather breathe the free air of the moor than remain another minute in the company of this inhuman miser. Obviously the old man's fury was born of a fear that these two strangers were after his hidden hoard of wealth. Probably, too, there was a great fear behind his anger, for he and Jakes were old men, and could not possibly hold their own against the strangers.

"We will go," Lee said quietly. "Come along, Nipper."

Nipper glared at Peter Gerrard.

"But aren't you going to give this brute the length of your tongue, sir?" he asked blankly. "Of all the callous, brutal rotters——"

"Hush, my lad," was Lee's interjection. "Abuse will not mend matters. There is a great deal I should like to say to Mr. Gerrard, but I do not intend to lower myself by entering into a coarse slanging match. It is better that we should go without further trouble. Indeed, I feel that I cannot trust myself to remain!"

"Oh, it's awful!" panted Nipper. "But you're right, guv'nor. I'm blessed if I'd stay in this wicked house for a hundred quid! I—I'm feeling choked!"

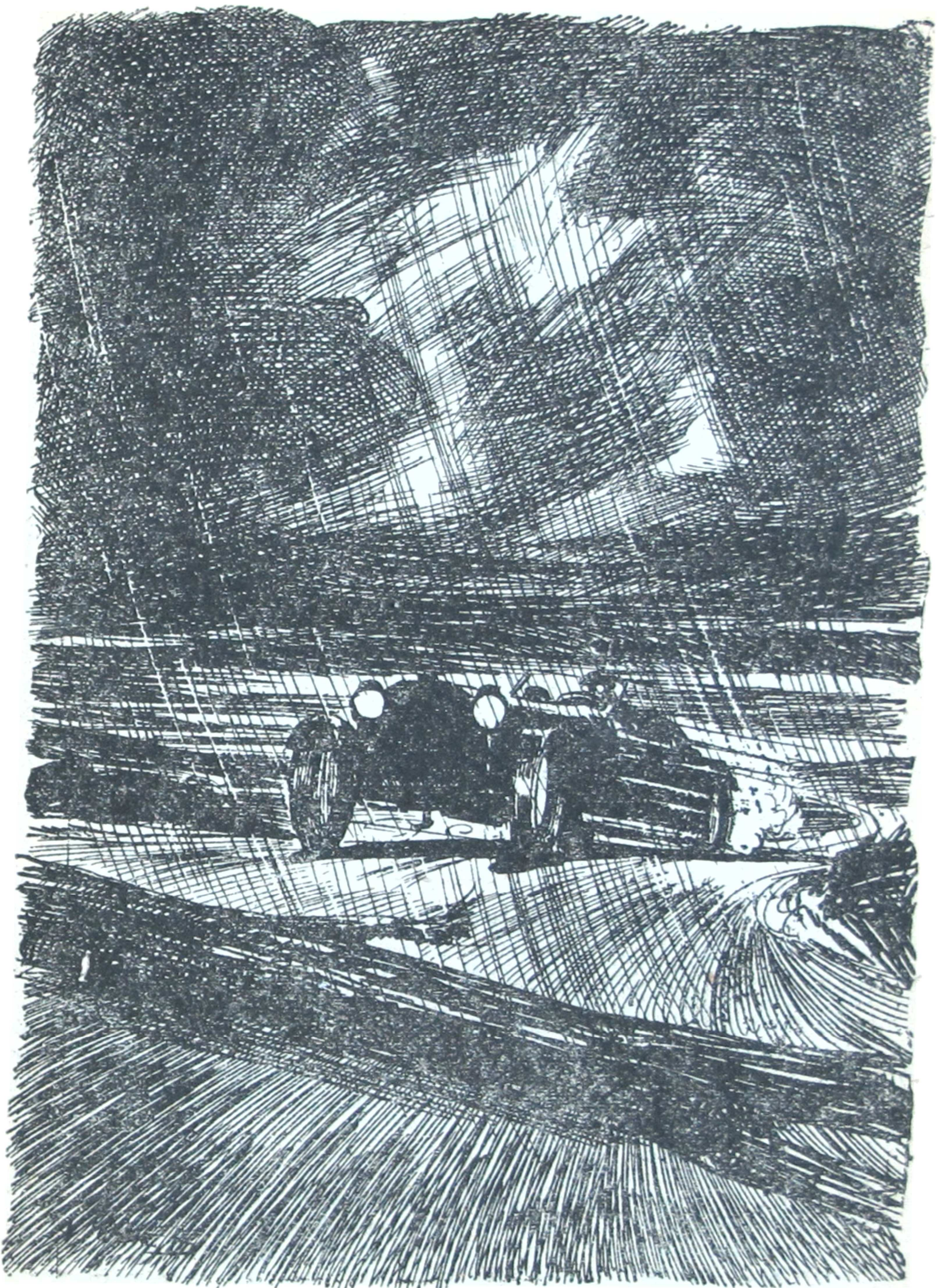
The miser stood looking on, breathing heavily, and saying nothing. But now he strode forward and opened the heavy door.

Nelson Lee and Nipper passed out calmly, the lad limping with agony, for his knee was causing him intense pain. Old Jakes watched, with his face bearing a look of great pity that he made no attempt to disguise.

"It's a shame!" he muttered helplessly. "On such a night—oh, it's a shame!"

The door slammed to, and as Nelson Lee and Nipper paused upon the step they heard the bolts shot once more. For a few moments the detective and his assistant were too deeply moved to speak.

But one fact struck them at once.



Will the car be wrecked ?

Read about Nelson Lee's perilous ride through the storm (page 14).

During their short stay in the house a change had come about in the weather conditions. The gale was still raging with as much fury as before, whistling and bellowing round the house in terrific gusts.

But the rain had ceased, and the darkness was not so pitchy.

Lee, glancing overhead, saw masses of dark clouds scudding across the sky; and here and there glimpses of stars could be seen. Apparently, the worst of the storm was over, and the sky was clearing.

"Perhaps our position is not so bad, after all, Nipper," the detective said. "I only hope the rain will hold off. How is your knee?"

"Aching like the deuce, guv'nor."

"You don't feel up to walking five or six miles?"

"I couldn't do it, sir," said Nipper. "Might as well ask me to fly."

"Well, we must make the best of a bad job," Lee went on. "As for Mr. Peter Gerrard—well, we will not discuss the gentleman, Nipper. There is something queer about this house; something which I do not like at all."

Giving the lad his arm, Lee walked down the path to the wrecked gate. Nipper clung heavily to the detective, and the pair made fairly good progress back to the road. The darkness was not so inky now, and it was just possible to make out the tops of the surrounding hillocks and rises against the sky-line.

Having arrived at the scene of the accident, the unfortunate pair held a short discussion as to what they should do. There was really only one decision to come to. It was impossible to walk to civilisation, with Nipper in his present condition; and, even if it were possible, they would only arrive at a few cottages, inhabited by moorland peasants, and it would probably be difficult to find shelter.

So they made the best of a bad job, as Nelson Lee had advised, and changed the wettest of their garments—their coats and vests. Then they rolled themselves in rugs—fortunately there were plenty of rugs in the car—and calmly went to sleep in the body of the automobile. Had it still been raining this plan would have been impracticable, but the cessation of the downpour had improved the position considerably.

When daylight came Lee would trudge to the village of Arnham and would hire a trap or dogcart, and come back for Nipper. Then they would both journey to Mr. Ransome's place, sixteen miles distant.

And, meanwhile, about the time Nelson Lee and Nipper were rolling themselves in their rugs, Mr. Peter Gerrard was sitting in a small room at the rear of Low Moor Grange, reading something by the light of a big, bright oil-lamp. The latter was shaded, and cast its light down upon the table.

After a time the old man leaned back in his chair, and remained thoughtful for some little time. Then he touched a bell which lay upon the table, and waited. In a minute Jakes entered the room, and stood close to the table, nervous and uneasy. Since the disconcerting incident in the hall Jakes had not spoken to his master.

"I am sorry, Jakes," exclaimed Gerrard slowly. "I am very sorry I lost my temper so thoroughly. I am calm now, and I realise that I acted very brutally. I hope my rough action did not hurt you."

"No, sir," said Jakes. "I'm a bit sore, sir—but it's not much."

"I was simply mad with fury," was the miser's next remark. "Cannot you understand, Jakes? It was impossible for those two to remain in this house—utterly impossible. You ought to know that as well as I."

"But that lad was badly hurt, sir——"

"Tut-tut! We cannot be too soft-hearted, Jakes. The boy will come to no harm. I was forced to be harsh—it was the only way. It was foolish

of you to admit the pair. Cannot you realise the danger of admitting strangers into the house?"

Jakes nodded slowly.

"Yes, you are right, sir," he said. "It was—risky."

"They have gone now, and I have no fear of them returning. And even if they do return there is no possible means of entry. I was about to call you, Jakes, when the trouble started. I have something to tell you. I am going away."

"You're going away, sir?" asked the old servant in astonishment.

"Yes, I am going to America."

"Sakes alive!" gasped Jakes. "Whatever for, sir?"

For answer Gerrard handed to Jakes the letter he had been reading, and bade him read it. The manservant produced a pair of spectacles, adjusted them upon his nose, and bent down against the lamp with wondering surprise in his eyes.

The letter was in a clear, but rather shaky handwriting, and ran as follows:

1253, Chilton Avenue,
Baltimore, U.S.A.

Dear Father,—I am dying. I have written the truth thus baldly because I believe your heart-strings will be touched, and you will grant my wish—the last wish of your dying son.

"Some time ago I met with an accident on Broadway, New York, and I was taken to the hospital suffering from a severe internal injury. I was discharged, and the doctors told me that I had not long to live. Now—as I am writing—I am in bed at the above address in Baltimore. The doctor who is attending me, and who is enclosing a letter with this, tells me that I have three weeks longer to live—three weeks and no longer.

"Oh, father, I have been a bad son, but I want to see you. I long to grip your hand and to look into your eyes before I go into the Great Beyond. Please—please do not refuse this wish of mine. There is ample time for you to come; the doctor has promised to inquire about the boat, etc. I shall die happily if I have you by my side.

"And there is something else, father. I have a secret to tell you—a secret I can confide to no other soul on earth. While I have been in America I have made a discovery—a great discovery which would have made me a millionaire. I dare not tell a single soul here; indeed, I do not wish to. Since I am doomed, it is my greatest desire that you should reap the benefit of my discovery. If you come I will tell you of this amazing secret, but if you do not come I shall carry it to the grave with me. But you must come, father—you must!

"I am very weak; I am dying. I leave it to your conscience and your great kindness of heart to grant me this request. Please come to me, father. I am miserable and lonely. To have you with me at the last will make the end happy and peaceful for me.

"Your unhappy son, VINCENT."

Old Jakes had tears in his eyes when he handed the letter back.

"Master Vincent dying!" he exclaimed. "Oh, this is awful, sir! No—no wonder you were upset to-night. What will you do—what will you do?"

"I shall go, Jakes," replied Peter Gerrard gravely. "I cannot let the poor boy die out there without a friend or relative by his side. The doctor he refers to has given me precise information about a boat, and there is a fast liner leaving Liverpool to-morrow afternoon. I shall go by that ship. It will arrive in the United States in time for me to have a couple of days

with poor Vincent before the end. Poor boy—poor, poor boy! I have been harsh with him of late years, but I never expected this, Jakes.”

“But—but what about——”

“You are thinking of this house, and all that it contains?” interrupted Gerrard. “You will remain here, Jakes. You will remain in the house until I return. You must never stir a yard from the grounds, and not a soul must be admitted under any consideration. You understand, Jakes—not a soul!”

“You’re thinking of to-night’s affair, sir.”

“Yes, partly. How do we know that that man was Mr. Nelson Lee? I dare say he was, but it is impossible to tell. I am sure, Jakes, that Lee did not enter the house for any motive other than that which he named. But burglars and other people adopt all manner of ruses in order to accomplish their object. You must guard the house with the utmost care, Jakes.”

“I will, sir—I will.”

The old miser looked at the letter again. It was more than probable that his curiosity had been aroused by that paragraph referring to a marvellous discovery which would have made Vincent a millionaire had he lived. Perhaps it was not merely kindness of heart which prompted Gerrard to comply with his dying son’s request.

The old man would have received a great shock had he known of two positive facts—one, that Vincent Gerrard, his son, was already dead; and, two, that the paragraph concerning a “discovery” had been added to the letter for the especial purpose of appealing to his miserly instincts.

The letter, moreover, was a daring forgery from first line to last.

It formed the first step in Jim the Penman’s latest audacious scheme.

— — —

CHAPTER IV.

Peter Gerrard Number Two.

OLD Peter Gerrard was in Liverpool.

He had started out early from Low Moor Grange, and had walked to the nearest railway-station. The time was now only just after noon, and he was walking out of one of Liverpool’s big stations.

The liner, he knew, did not leave until late in the afternoon, so he had plenty of time at his disposal.

This was the first time the old man had been away from the moor for years, and he was really enjoying the change. His errand was a sad one—at least, he thought it was. He did not know that he was embarking on a fool’s errand.

He cut a distinctive figure as he slowly walked out of the station through the huge booking-office. He was attired in old-fashioned clothes, and he carried a much-used old gladstone-bag with him. With his bent back and his curiously white face he was distinguishable from all the other passengers.

Standing against one of the windows of the booking-office was a tall, grey-bearded man. He was watching the passengers as they emerged from the platform, and his eyes glinted a trifle as they rested upon Gerrard. He transferred his attention to a small photograph he held in his hand, and then nodded to himself and smiled.

“Yes, he’s my man!” he murmured.

For this grey-bearded, well-dressed stranger was none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe. His plan was working well, and he was in high good humour. Jim the Penman had travelled to England by the same boat that had brought the mail. He had been in Liverpool two days, and all to-day

he had been watching this station. It was the only station which Gerrard would use—coming from Yorkshire—and Jim had been confident of spotting his man before the departure of the liner for America.

"The old man has caught the bait," he murmured with satisfaction. "He is here in good time."

Jim was not working at random—his plans were all cut and dried.

Just as Gerrard was about to leave the booking-office Sutcliffe stepped up to him and touched his arm. The old man turned a sharp eye upon the other.

"Well, sir——" he began.

"You are Mr. Peter Gerrard, are you not?" asked Jim smoothly.

The miser looked surprised.

"That is my name," he replied. "May I inquire how you know my name——"

"I have been watching for you, and hoping that I should not miss you," Jim went on, in the same even tones. "I am glad that we have met. I have news for you, Mr. Gerrard—news concerning your son, Vincent."

"Oh, indeed! News of Vincent! Good gracious, you don't mean——"

"My news is excellent," Jim hastened to say. "I am glad to say that — But we cannot talk in this public place, my dear sir. Will you step into my apartments at the King's Hotel, across the way? We can talk freely there."

Without waiting for Gerrard to reply, Jim commenced walking slowly across the station approach to a big hotel some little distance away. The old man accompanied him without hesitation. This stranger had news of Vincent—therefore, Gerrard was very anxious to hear what he had to say.

Jim led the way up the wide stairs of the hotel, and let himself into a private room by means of a key. Old Gerrard followed, and took a seat at Jim's invitation. The forger sat opposite, and, without speaking, poured out two glasses of wine.

"You have had a long journey, Mr. Gerrard," he said. "Please drink."

To tell the truth, the old man was feeling somewhat parched, and he took several big sips of the wine.

"Now, sir," he said, setting the glass down, "if you will be good enough, I should like to hear your news. Dear me! I am feeling strangely heavy. I—I don't seem able——"

The words jumbled themselves together, and Peter Gerrard fell back in his chair, helpless and insensible.

Jim the Penman jumped to his feet.

"Excellent!" he murmured briskly. "The thing worked to perfection. I've never had a plan run so beautifully before. He followed me like a lamb, and took the wine without a murmur. Oh, this is dead easy, Jim, my boy!"

The old man had certainly played right into the forger's hands. He had followed Jim without a suspicion, and he had taken the wine without a suspicion. Yet the wineglass had contained a strong dose of harmless, odourless drug. The action of the drug was rapid, and although Gerrard had taken only half the wine he was already unconscious, and would remain so for at least an hour.

During that hour Jim the Penman was very busy.

To begin with, he locked the door securely; then he unfastened a large travelling "grip," and propped Gerrard upright in his chair. For fully five minutes Jim studied the old man's face with great intentness, then he nodded.

"It can be done," he told himself. "It'll be stiff work, but it's possible."

Then he set to work on an astonishing task.

He proceeded to make-up in an exact representation of his victim. He had everything in his bag for the purpose, and he was soon hard at work. Gradually he perfected the disguise, and after half an hour Jim the Penman was the absolute double of Peter Gerrard.

"Not so bad," he muttered critically, as he surveyed himself in the mirror. "Still, I must attend to the finishing touches. By Jove, Gerrard," he went on, addressing the unconscious form of his companion, "you didn't expect anything of this sort, did you? You swallowed that forged letter whole, so to speak, and before dark you'll be crossing the Atlantic on a mug's errand. When you arrive in Baltimore you'll find that your dear son pegged out long ago."

Jim was proud of that forged letter. It was half truth and half false; but it had had the desired effect. Once old Gerrard was in America it wouldn't matter a toss if he found out that he had been tricked.

For fifteen minutes longer the forger persevered. He was a clever man—clever in many ways. He could use make-up materials with a skill equal to that of Nelson Lee himself—and that is saying much. He was an excellent actor, also, and he had no fears about this impersonation. Peter Gerrard was a striking man, both in appearance and voice, and it would be easy to affect his voice and manner.

At last the make-up was complete. Then, bending his back, Jim the Penman walked across the room. The effect was amazing. He was Peter Gerrard to the life, and was the exact double of the still form in the chair.

The forger didn't waste any further time.

He rapidly, but carefully, packed his travelling-bag, and then washed out the glass which had contained the drugged wine, and half filled the glass with pure wine. He had no intention of leaving a scrap of evidence for Gerrard's benefit.

Then, with a final look round, he donned a long rainproof and left the room. He walked away perfectly upright, and with his face hidden in the collar of his coat. It would never do to have two Peter Gerrards leaving the hotel!

Twelve minutes after he had left, the old miser stirred uneasily in his chair in the now deserted room. After a few moments he opened his eyes and looked about him dazedly.

"Why, what—— Dear me! Where am I? What has happened? Good gracious!"

Gerrard was decidedly bewildered, and he passed a hand over his brow as he uttered the surprised ejaculations. Then, all in a moment, memory came back to him in a flood. Curiously enough, he felt no ill-effect of the drug, and thought that he had merely been sleeping. The drug was one which Jim had brought from America, and was very little known.

"I came here with a stranger!" muttered the old man fiercely. "Upon my soul, I am quite alone! Can it be possible——"

He started as the thought struck him that robbery might have been the motive for the stranger's behaviour. He hastily felt for his purse and his note-case. Both were safe, and his watch was still on its chain.

"No, I have not been robbed," Gerrard murmured, rising to his feet, and glancing at his watch. "Dear me! I must have been in this room an hour or more! Confound it! I hate anything mysterious. What can the fellow have wanted with me?"

He looked round him, but the apartment was a very ordinary hotel bed-sitting-room. After a few moments he went to the door and roughly questioned a buttons who was in the passage at the moment.

The boy could supply no information beyond the fact that a tall gentleman

had hired the room—paying in advance—during the morning. He had not been seen going out, and nobody knew when he would be back.

More than a little worried, but quite helpless, old Peter Gerrard left the hotel and made his way to the shipping office. What news had the stranger been about to impart? The very fact that he knew Gerrard at sight, and that he referred to Vincent so glibly, proved that he was acquainted with the old man's affairs.

But at the shipping office Gerrard's doubts were set at rest.

He booked a saloon berth, and gave his name. The clerk at once handed him a note, saying it had been left shortly before by a tall gentleman. Gerrard opened the note with interest and wonder.

The words were few and really consisted of an apology for having been forced to leave so abruptly. The writer went on to say that Gerrard had suddenly had a kind of fainting fit, and that in the midst of it a messenger had arrived which necessitated the instant departure of his companion. The latter gentleman would be very pleased to see Mr. Gerrard on the boat, when he would be able to explain matters.

"H'm! I must ask the fellow what he means," muttered the old man. "A fainting fit? I? Good gracious! What can it mean? I've never fainted in all my life."

But all the evidence certainly pointed in that way, and Gerrard could find no other explanation. Once on the boat, however, he would question the unknown stranger, and get details.

In due course he went aboard, and descended straight to his cabin. He hated bustle of any kind, and particularly the noisy bustle of a big liner leaving dock. It was fairly late in the day when the great steamer warped out of dock, and the weather was moderate—very different from the storm of the previous day.

A great crowd of people were standing on the quay, waving handkerchiefs and hands. Among them, but right in the background, and partly behind a pile of boxes, stood a tall, muffled-up figure. He, too, was gazing after the departing liner.

The man was Jim the Penman—now transformed into Mr. Peter Gerrard No. 2.

Gerrard was on the boat, and yet Gerrard was on the quay! The original had taken his departure, and had left an evil-minded substitute in his place. It was an amazing situation.

"Splendid!" murmured the clever rogue. "All is now plain sailing. For three weeks, at the very least, the old man is safely away from England, and I shall have ample opportunity to perform my task. When Peter Gerrard returns he will find that his vast secret hoard of wealth has been transferred to a spot where it will never be found! It is all perfectly simple."

The plot was an astounding one.

By sheer forgery Jim the Penman had made Peter Gerrard sail to the United States. And during the miser's enforced absence, his double would bring about drastic changes at the old moorland house.

The audacity of the thing was almost startling, and there seemed every prospect of the amazing scheme succeeding.

CHAPTER V.

Old Jakes Seeks the Aid of Nelson Lee.

JIM the Penman stayed in Liverpool that night.

He had two excellent reasons for doing so. He did not wish to arrive at Low Moor Grange late at night; and it was necessary for him to

practise all Peter Gerrard's mannerisms—as far as he knew them—before presenting himself before Jakes.

Jakes, the forger knew, was an old manservant, and he didn't trouble himself at all about the man. He had absolute confidence in his own powers, and was quite sure that he could deceive Jakes. If anything occurred which made Jakes a danger—well, Jakes could easily be silenced.

The following morning Jim set out for Yorkshire. He left the train at a country station—the nearest to the Grange—and hired a trap. He had no intention of walking the six miles to the old house.

The moor was looking wonderful this morning. The sun was shining gloriously, and there was no return of the terrible weather which had resulted in the wrecking of Nelson Lee's motor-car.

The bloom of spring was upon the moor, and the heavy rain had made everything fresh and bright. The road, muddy the previous day, had dried now, and the trap bowled along at a splendid pace. The driver, an old Yorkshireman, looked curiously at the supposed Peter Gerrard now and again. But Jim had paid him well—and, after all, Gerrard was a man to be pitied. His story was a very sad one. All Yorkshire knew why he had elected to live upon the moor, a recluse.

At last the trap arrived at the foot of the hollow, where the little turning branched off leading to the lonely house. There was now no sign of the accident two nights previously, except for the fallen oak-tree, which had been shifted clear of the road. Jim the Penman stopped the trap as it was about to turn down the lane, and ordered the driver to return—saying that he would walk the rest of the way.

He slowly traversed the lane, and when he arrived at the gate of the Grange he looked round and saw that there was no other living being within sight upon the moor. The trap had topped the rise, and had disappeared over the brow of the hill.

“Now for it!” murmured Jim coolly. “I don't think I shall have much trouble. There's only an old fool of a manservant to deal with. An easier case of impersonation would be impossible to imagine!”

He pushed the gate, but found that it was locked. There were obvious signs of recent repair about the woodwork, but the gate was as strong as ever. Jakes had been busy all the previous day making good the damage which had been wrought by the storm.

“This won't do—this won't do!” Jim muttered.

He saw the bell-knob, and gave it a violent pull. There was a jangling of wire near the ground, and the distant peal of a bell. After waiting a few minutes, Jim the Penman saw a lean old figure coming round the side of the house, and peering in a nervous manner towards the gates.

“Hurry up, Jakes!” exclaimed Jim harshly, in Gerrard's exact tones. “Do you want to keep me waiting here all day?”

Old Jakes stood rooted to the spot.

“The master!” he gasped in amazement.

“Open the gate, you old idiot!” rapped out Jim.

Jakes ran forward, fumbling in his pocket. His brown, wrinkled, old face was alight with astonishment and relief. He turned a key in the lock, and the gate swung open.

“Sakes alive, sir, I didn't expect ye'd be back this soon!” ejaculated the old servant. “Did ye miss the boat, or——”

“It was not necessary for me to travel to America,” Jim interjected curtly.

“But poor Master Vincent, sir——”

“I really do not see why I should explain things to you, Jakes, but I

suppose I'd better satisfy your curiosity," Sutcliffe said. "Before going aboard the ship I received a cablegram from America, saying that Vincent had passed the crisis, and that there is no danger. He will be well within a month."

Jakes's face was alight with gladness.

"That's mighty good hearing, sir!" he exclaimed. "I'm right pleased that the poor laddie isn't going to leave us so soon in life."

Jim did not answer. Although he gave no sign, he was watching Jakes very closely. The old servant had given his supposed master several straight looks, but there was nothing suspicious in his bearing. Obviously, he accepted the substitute without dreaming of the deception.

To the forger's satisfaction Jakes turned and made his way towards the house. Jim followed, and was glad that he was not forced to take the lead. Jakes went round the side of the house, and entered by a rear door.

"To the library, Jakes!" ordered the disguised forger curtly.

"The—the library, sir?"

"Confound you, man, are you getting deaf?"

"But—but I don't quite understand," faltered Jakes. "The library? There ain't such a room——"

Jim the Penman bit his lip.

"You know well enough what I mean," he said sharply, annoyed with himself for making the slip. "Go to my room, Jakes; I will follow."

Jakes gave his master a curious look, and then moved forward along a dim passage. In a moment he opened the door of the little room which Peter Gerrard always used as a study. Jim passed in, and handed his hat and coat to the manservant.

"While I was in Liverpool I had a complete new set of clothes," he said shortly. "Hang them up, Jakes. Oh, I was going to speak to you, wasn't I? I've forgotten what it was, so you may go."

Jakes left the room, and Jim sat down in a chair and breathed rather forcedly.

"I'm afraid it's not going to be such an easy job!" he murmured. "There are many slips to be made, and I must act with extreme caution. So far Jakes suspects nothing, and I hope to give him no cause for suspicions."

For some little time Jim sat thinking over his scheme. Everything had gone smoothly so far; he was installed in Peter Gerrard's place, and it was now only a matter of time before his final object would be accomplished.

While Jim was still thinking there came a slight tap at the door, and Jakes appeared.

"I was going to ask you about——"

Jim interjected:

"Don't bother me now! Go away, Jakes!"

"Very well, sir!"

"But wait. What have you done with my cigars?" the forger went on. "I suppose you have stowed them away, thinking I should be absent. Bring them to me at once."

Jakes looked very astonished.

"I don't know what's the matter with you to-day, sir," he said. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but you don't seem quite the same."

"Don't talk nonsense! Bring me my cigars!"

"But—but you don't smoke cigars!" blurted out Jakes helplessly.

Jim started, and cursed himself under his breath. He waved his hand to the door imperiously, and Jakes took his departure with a very queer look

in his old eyes. As soon as the door closed Jim murmured a furious oath and got to his feet.

"Another slip!" he growled. "Hang it all, I'm making a proper mess of it! So old Gerrard didn't smoke—eh? Then what the deuce is the meaning of this?"

Jim glared down into the fender. There, in full sight, were three cigar stumps. From this silent piece of evidence Jim had naturally concluded that the old miser had smoked.

"What can it mean?" Jim muttered. "Of course, Jakes took advantage of my absence to loll in my room and smoke cigars. But how was I to think of that?"

This second slip was far more serious than the first, and the two combined had probably given Jakes much food for thought. That queer look in the manservant's eyes had not escaped Jim's attention, and he realised that he would have to be extra cautious.

It was more than possible that he would blunder fatally unless he exercised every care. After some little time Jim came to a decision—a decision which, as it happened, was to make the old servant more suspicious than ever.

He went to the door, opened it, and called Jakes. It was some few minutes before the old man appeared. He came downstairs slowly.

"What on earth have you been doing upstairs at this time of the day?" growled Jim.

"It's just time for lunch, sir——"

"Upstairs?" demanded Jim sarcastically.

"I was——"

"Oh, never mind!" the forger interjected. "If I am snappy, Jakes, it is because I am not very well to-day. The journey has not agreed with me. I am going to bed at once."

"I'm sorry if you ain't well, sir," said Jakes concernedly. "I thought you didn't look quite the same when you first came in."

"I feel that I am going to have a fairly bad spell," went on Jim the Penman. "I shall probably remain in bed for two or three days, and have a complete rest. You and I are quite alone in the house, Jakes, and so there is no reason why I should not take things easy."

Jakes regarded his master almost with a look of fear.

"I hope you'll soon be better, sir," he said, in a curious voice.

"I will come upstairs in a few minutes, Jakes. Meanwhile, go and open my window and air the room somewhat."

"Can—can I go in your bedroom, sir?" Jakes asked.

"Of course you can!"

"Bless me, if you ain't changed!" muttered the old servant. "Before you went away you never let me go in your bedrom—never let me set foot inside it, even if you were with me!"

Jim controlled himself with an effort. His task was certainly proving more difficult than he had anticipated. It was not such an easy task to impersonate Peter Gerrard after all! But it was necessary that Jakes should go upstairs first, for Jim had not the slightest idea of where his bedroom was situated. He had undertaken this task, relying on his own cool nerve and audacious courage to carry him through. But there were signs that everything was not going placidly.

"You can go into my bedroom now, Jakes," said Jim shortly.

"But the key, sir—you've got the key!"

"Confound it! I left the ~~key~~ in my other clothes, and they are in Liverpool," said the forger promptly, coping with the difficulties to the

best of his ability. "Well, Jakes, I must go to bed. Go and fetch the hammer. I will soon open the door!"

In a state of considerable bewilderment Jakes left the hall, and soon returned with a heavy hammer. The pair then made their way upstairs, and Jakes halted before a thick door in a dark corridor.

Jim was in no mood for half measures, and he was not long in smashing the lock. A few thunderous blows shivered one of the door panels, and after that it was fairly easy to gain admittance.

Once the door had been forced it was patched up roughly, and then Jim the Penman undressed and was soon between the sheets. He was feeling completely irritated at the course events had taken. But if matters got no worse he was pretty sure that he could bluff things out satisfactorily.

It was his plan to affect illness for two or three days. He had three weeks at his disposal, so there was no particular hurry. He might as well take things calmly, and get to know things without appearing to make inquiries. While in bed he would worm all sorts of information out of Jakes.

But, downstairs, the old manservant was standing in his own little den in the rear of the house looking thoughtfully out across the bleak moor, and stroking the head of a magnificent collie dog at his side.

"I'm worried, Jess—mortal worried!" old Jakes said, looking down at the dog. "There's something queer about the master. I don't believe he is the master—he's somebody else who looks just like him! But that can't be—that ain't possible! Still, I know there's something wrong!"

He looked down at the dog intently.

"I believe you know everything ain't right, Jess!" he went on. "The master's been doing all sorts of rum things. First he mentions a library, and then he asks for cigars—and he just hates smoking! Then he says I was to go into his bedroom, without even his being there! Oh, I don't know what to do, old girl. Suppose he ain't the master? Suppose he's some spy——"

But Jakes, although shrewd, was not broad-minded enough to admit such a theory to be possible. The thought entered his head, but he dismissed it. At the same time he felt extremely helpless. He wanted somebody with him who would advise him, and be near at hand in case there really was something seriously wrong.

Jakes was really greatly alarmed. He had excellent cause for his fear, and was wondering perplexedly what he should do.

Suddenly a thought struck him.

"Why shouldn't I ask Mr. Lee to help me?" Jakes muttered, with a determined look in his eyes. "Mr. Nelson Lee! He's staying at the house of a Mr. Ransome not far away, as the postman told me when he passed yesterday—while they were clearing away that wrecked motor-car. But Mr. Lee's a detective!"

For some reason that thought seemed to deter Jakes. But after he had thought for some little time further a grim look entered his eyes.

"I've heard a lot about Mr. Lee!" he went on, still muttering. "He ain't a police detective, and if I tell him things in confidence he won't betray me. Besides, there ain't another soul I know who I can ask. Mr. Lee told me to write to him if I wanted help. I'll do it, Jess—I'll do it! I've got a terrible fear that there's something awfully wrong here; the master's so different that I'm real frightened!"

The old manservant was not long in carrying out his plan. Curiously enough, he was well aware of the fact that he was half-inclined to abandon it even now. And so he wasted no time; he did not want to draw back,

and if the message was sent it would be too late for him to do so. And yet, the whole time, his innate sense of precaution told him that it was unwise to bring Nelson Lee upon the scene.

He badly wanted advice, but was afraid to receive it. And so he settled the matter promptly by dispatching the message to Nelson Lee. He did not write much—merely a few words; and this he rolled up into a small space and tied it to the collar of the collie dog.

“Now, Jess!” he said, leading the dog to the back door. “Away you go, old girl!”

The animal needed no second bidding. With a joyful bark she pelted off to the bottom of the garden, slipped through a small hole beneath the fence, and was soon bounding across the moor.

“Well, I’ve done it!” muttered Jakes, quite alarmed with himself. “But I had to! There’s something about the master I don’t like—he ain’t himself at all!”

It was usual for Jakes to send any messages to the neighbouring village by means of the intelligent dog. The animal had been trained carefully, and she never made mistakes. Her destination was always the village post-office; for Jakes had an arrangement with the post-master.

On this occasion the dog accomplished the journey, and the message was taken from her collar. There was a brief request to the post-master asking him to despatch a telegram—the words of which were given—to Nelson Lee. And in due course the wire was delivered to the great detective.

It was brief, but to the point. Jakes urgently requested Lee to visit the Grange at once—but to come secretly, after dark, and to throw a stone at the rear window to signal his arrival.

That night while Jim the Penman was lying in bed reading, and having no suspicion of what was going on, Jakes sat in his little den, almost hoping that Lee would take no notice of his appeal.

But, suddenly, there was a chink against the windowpane, and Jakes leapt to his feet and hurried to the door. Three minutes later he re-entered, and behind him were Nelson Lee and Nipper.

“Not a sound, sir,” whispered Jakes fearfully. “I don’t know as I’ve done right in asking you to come, but I’m terribly worried.”

“I hope nothing is seriously amiss,” said Nelson Lee, looking round him curiously. “You need not be afraid of Nipper, Jakes. The lad is to be trusted—and I am glad to tell you that his knee is very much better.”

Both the detective and Nipper, in fact, were greatly interested. From the first they had been attracted to Low Moor Grange by the strange, mysterious atmosphere which seemed to surround it. And now, apparently, they were about to be enlightened.

CHAPTER VI.

A Night of Surprises.

JAKES ceased speaking.

“And that is all?” Nelson Lee inquired.

“Yes, I think so, sir,” replied the manservant, who had just related exactly what had occurred. “I’ve told you everything. The master ain’t himself! He’s changed, but yet, he’s not changed. I don’t know what to think, Mr. Lee!”

“From what you have told me,” the detective said, “Mr. Gerrard has acted exactly as a man would act who knew nothing whatever of your master’s habits. He had acted, in fact, as though he were an impostor!”

Jakes looked uneasy.

"But no man could impersonate the master——"

"I am afraid you are not so well acquainted with crime as I am, my dear Jakes," was Lee's quiet remark. "I do not think there is a finer subject for impersonation than Mr. Gerrard. His very appearance lends itself to such an object. I consider the facts as being more than significant. There is something extremely sinister about the whole affair."

"You think——"

"I think that your theory is not only possible, but probable. You tell me that your master has made nothing but mistakes ever since he returned: He came, moreover, in totally different clothes and his manner was decidedly more harsh than usual."

"His manner was harsh enough the other night!" Nipper remarked.

"You mustn't judge the master by that, young sir," said Jakes hastily. "Mr. Gerrard was mortally upset that night, and he didn't know what he was doing, properly. As a rule he's kindhearted, and always ready to laugh and joke with me. And yet now, when he's got good news, too, he's as snappy as a bear."

Nelson Lee nodded quietly.

"Let us continue our line of reason," he said. "I have said that it would be quite possible for a clever scoundrel to come here in Mr. Gerrard's shoes. I think the theory is perfectly justified. Everything is in its favour. The strange clothes, the unwitting blunders—everything points to the man upstairs being an impostor. And let us think of another aspect of the case."

"What do you mean, gov'nor?" asked Nipper.

"My meaning, I should imagine, is obvious. It is common knowledge that this house is supposed to contain a vast amount of wealth—all in cash. I don't know whether that is the case, Jakes, and I don't intend to press you for information. It is no concern of mine. I am merely stating the possibilities. Some plausible scoundrel learns that Mr. Gerrard is leaving for America. What does he do? He makes himself up to exactly resemble Mr. Gerrard, and after the latter has departed on the liner he boldly presents himself at this house."

"Marvellous, sir!" gasped Jakes. "I believe you're right, Mr. Lee!"

"It is equally well-known that for a burglar to break into the house it is practically impossible," went on the detective evenly. "Does that not strengthen our line of deduction? This impostor has adopted this plan, because it is the only way in which he can gain admittance to the house. The fact that he has gone to bed when he is obviously in perfect health is another strong link in the chain."

"The way you put it, sir, makes it as clear as daylight," murmured Jakes. "I am sure you're right——"

"Ah, we must not be too sure," warned Lee. "We must test our theory before we go any further. I may be quite wrong. The man upstairs may be Mr. Gerrard himself. We do not know, Jakes—we must investigate."

"Investigate, sir?" Jakes repeated.

"I intend to take a peep into Mr. Gerrard's window at once," Nelson Lee said. "If the man is indeed playing a clever game—if he is an impostor—he will be quite unprepared. He knows absolutely nothing of my presence. He thinks that he is alone in the house with an old manservant who has not enough sense to see through the trickery. But you, Jakes, have acted with commendable common sense."

"I hope I've done right," the old fellow muttered fervently.

Jim the Penman was, indeed, completely off his guard. Lee had stated the facts accurately. The forger supposed that he and Jakes were the sole

occupants of the house, and that if the old man proved to be any trouble he could soon deal with him. No doubt Jim would have settled Jakes without compunction if the necessity had arisen. But now there were two others to be dealt with—two others whom Jim the Penman feared more than any in the world!

And it was while reading in bed, complacently telling himself that there was no reason why he should worry, that Nelson Lee made an amazing discovery. At Jakes' suggestion Lee and Nipper carried beneath the bedroom window a short ladder.

Nelson Lee mounted this without a sound, and peeped cautiously into the lighted room. The blind was three parts down, and there was a lace border at the bottom of it. From the interior of the room it seemed as though the blind was completely drawn. But it was an easy matter for Nelson Lee to look through the lacework, without the slightest fear of his face being seen.

He remained on the ladder, watching, minute after minute.

The minutes lengthened until half an hour had passed. And still Nelson Lee clung to the ladder. Still he watched.

The half-hour drew into an hour. By this time the detective was aching from his cramped position, but he persevered. All this time he had seen nothing of a suspicious nature.

But at last his patience was rewarded.

Jim the Penman stepped out of bed for some reason, and Lee instantly drew his breath in with a sharp hiss. The supposed Peter Gerrard was perfectly upright! And yet the old miser himself was bent almost to a point of deformity! In that one second Lee knew that his theory was correct. The man was indeed an impostor.

And then came another amazing surprise. The man within the room glanced at the door and smiled sardonically to himself. Then he raised his hands and removed the perfectly fitting wig from his head, revealing his own dark hair.

Lee bent forward.

"By James!" he muttered between his teeth. "Can it be possible! This is simply astounding! That man is Jim the Penman!"

With the wig removed Lee could see the shape of Jim's head. Moreover, the detective had a wonderful ability for seeing through disguises, and looking at the real face beneath. But this disguise was so wonderfully clever that he had been unable to adopt his usual methods until the wig was removed.

Without delay Lee quietly descended the ladder, removed it, and then returned to the rear of the house. Both Nipper and Jakes were waiting for him with anxiety clearly written across their faces.

"Well, gov'nor?" breathed Nipper eagerly.

"It is well, young 'un," Lee replied grimly, with a note of intense satisfaction in his voice. "Owing to Jakes' prompt action we shall expose the fraud without delay. The man upstairs is, as we believed, a rank impostor.

"Sakes alive!" gasped the old servant.

"And not only that, Jakes, but he is a man I have been after for some considerable time. He is an astounding criminal—a forger of the most extraordinary ability——"

"Not—not Jim the Penman?" gasped Nipper.

"Jim the Penman!" replied Lee grimly. "For the present we will not act. He is sublimely convinced that his position here is perfectly safe. Let him remain of that opinion until we discover his real game."

Jakes seemed about to speak, and then he hesitated. Finally he said:

"There's something I'm going to tell you, Mr. Lee——"

But the old servant was interrupted in a dramatic fashion. Without warning a bellowing yell of alarm and surprise rang out from a far quarter of the house. The trio stood rooted to the spot, and Jakes commenced trembling violently.

"It's the master!" he gasped. "I—I mean this man who's here in place of the master. He must have got caught in the trap!"

Jakes rushed to the door, but Lee overtook him.

"Don't show a sign that you know the truth!" warned the detective. "Leave everything to me. I and Nipper will follow behind you and surprise the scoundrel. If you act incautiously you will probably pay dearly for your folly!"

Whether Jakes understood or not was a question, for he was shaking with an excitement which Nelson Lee could scarcely understand. The detective had an idea that Jakes had been holding something back, but he was not sure of this.

The old servant hastened along the passage, and hurried upstairs with all the speed his aged legs were capable of. He had snatched up a candle, and he cut a curious figure as he mounted the stairs surrounded in the halo of flickering light.

Lee and Nipper followed close behind.

Jakes proceeded along the corridor at the top, and then mounted a few more stairs into another passage. Here he paused and gazed before him. He beheld an extraordinary spectacle.

Jim the Penman was standing in the centre of the passage, but on either side of him were great wooden bars descending from the ceiling to the floor. He was wrenching at the bars and swearing furiously.

"The burglar trap!" exclaimed old Jakes, remembering Lee's advice. "Why, bless me, sir, fancy you falling into the trap you made yourself! It's mighty queer, sir. You know you gave me orders to set the trap every night!"

"I forgot—I forgot!" rasped out Sutcliffe in Gerrard's voice. "The infernal thing took me quite by surprise. Release me at once, Jakes—do you hear, you old fool!"

Jakes hesitated, uncertain how to act. Nelson Lee was not there, but he and Nipper were just round the bend, watching intently, and with growing surprise.

Jakes moved forward, and opened a cupboard in the side of the wall. Something banged and the heavy wooden bars folded upwards, and came to rest in little slots fixed near the ceiling. Jim the Penman hobbled along the passage to the old servant's side.

"What the thunder do you mean by setting the trap to-night?" he grated harshly. "I could have attended to it——"

"But you ordered me to——"

"Never mind what I ordered!" snapped Sutcliffe. "Am I to be debarred from one of my own rooms?"

Jim had turned, and had his back towards the open end of the passage. The other end contained a single door—the door of the mysterious room, which was popularly supposed to contain the miser's vast hoard. And the fact that this burglar trap was built in the passage at this particular point proved beyond question that the room contained something of vital value and importance. Nelson Lee and Nipper were as equally certain of that point as Jim the Penman was himself.

The forger had sallied out with the object of investigating the secret room. And he had been taken utterly by surprise when he felt the boards beneath his feet give way slightly, and then to see the wooden bars crash

down on both sides, imprisoning him as though in a cage. At that moment Jim had realised fully how carefully Peter Gerrard had safeguarded his hoard.

Jakes stood by the impostor, scarcely knowing what to do. He felt like flinging himself at the scoundrel, but knew that such a proceeding would be decidedly bad for him. Even now Jim was inclined to strike the old servant to the floor.

Sutcliffe was facing the door at the end of the passage, and as he opened his mouth to speak a startling thing occurred. Jakes was in front of him; and yet a hand was softly but firmly laid upon his shoulder!

Jim spun round with a startled oath.

"I'm afraid you have made a blunder this time, Mr. Sutcliffe!" exclaimed a calm voice, and a brilliant beam of light flashed into Jim's face from Lee's electric torch. For a moment the forger was dazzled, but he had recognised that voice.

"Nelson Lee!" he panted amazedly.

"Exactly!" the detective exclaimed. "Your little game is neatly nipped in the bud, Jim—squashed before you had properly felt your way. And you have Jakes to thank—not me."

For a second time it seemed as though Jim the Penman would show fight, but he uttered a short, bitter laugh, and let his hands drop to his sides.

"I'm beaten," he said coolly. "By George, Lee, you always seem to be hanging about just when I get started on a fresh game. Some day I'll make you pay for this; some day I'll get even with you!"

The words, uttered calmly as they were, sounded a hundred times more menacing than they would have done had they been spoken in fury. There was something sinister and terrible in Jim's icy coolness.

Lee reached forward, and tore Sutcliffe's wig off. The rest of his disguise followed, and Jim stood revealed. But, except for the deadly glint in his eyes, he was perfectly composed. The forger had an astonishing faculty for remaining cool under most desperate circumstances.

He knew quite well that escape for him was impossible. Many men would have fought wildly and furiously in their mad passion. But Jim the Penman saw no fun in exerting himself to no purpose. If there had been the slightest chance of gaining his freedom he would have fought like a tiger.

"Some rope, Jakes," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Come, Lee, that's a bit rough, isn't it?" asked Jim protestingly.

"Very possibly. But when one is dealing with a desperate criminal one needs to be careful," was Lee's reply. "Among your other abilities, Jim, you seem to have a really singular faculty for slipping out of tight corners."

"Perhaps I shall slip out of this," said Jim grimly.

"Not if I can prevent you."

Very soon a length of stout rope was procured, and Jim the Penman was rapidly bound hand and foot. While Nelson Lee was knotting the ropes, Nipper went down the passage to find a temporary prison for the forger.

"There's an empty room just along here, sir," reported Nipper. "It's only got one door, and there's a heavy lock fitted to it. And the window is barred with iron rods an inch in diameter."

"That sounds quite satisfactory."

Jim was transferred to the empty room. It was small, and, as Nipper had said, the window was heavily barred, and the door fitted with a strong lock. Leaving the prisoner lying on the floor, Lee and Nipper retired, and the key was turned in the lock.

"Where is Jakes?" asked Lee abruptly.

"Blessed if I know, sir. He went off somewhere."

The pair had walked forward until they were standing at the end of the

corridor which led to the secret room. Everything was pitchy dark here, but a slight movement sounded down the passage.

"Hallo, is that you, Jakes?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir. I've just been making this trap secure, so that you or the laddie won't fall into it," came Jakes' voice. "My candle blew out——"

"That's all right," said Nipper promptly. "How's this?"

He switched on his electric torch without warning, and the vivid stream of light cut through the blackness full upon the door of the mysterious room. Jakes was half-way between the door and the spot where Lee and Nipper were standing.

"Great Scott!" yelled Nipper excitedly.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked Lee, who had received Nipper's shout in his ear.

But the lad was staring straight ahead. He was staring right past Jakes, to the door at the end of the passage. Lee followed the young detective's gaze, but saw nothing but the closed door.

"I do not see anything——"

"There was a face there!" shouted Nipper incredulously. "A bearded face, with gleaming eyes! I saw it as plain as a pikestaff!"

And the lad dashed forward like a deer. Lee hardly knew what to believe, and Jakes made a vain attempt to stop Nipper's rush. But the lad reached the door, gripped the handle, and turned it.

There came to his ears a sound of heavy panting from the other side, and the rattle of a key in the lock. Nipper exerted all his strength and forced open the door before the key could be turned.

Nelson Lee heard a great roar of amazement from Nipper, and the detective hurried forward. Jakes grasped his arm.

"It's all out now, sir," said the old man piteously. "Oh, an' I tried to keep the secret! What will the master say—what will the master say?"

And Jakes wrung his hands with despair.

"Dear me! What is the matter?" asked Lee. "Have you another surprise for me, Jakes? Whatever I see, my friend, I will hold my tongue. I give you my word on that."

"Thank you, sir—thank you!" panted the old manservant.

A moment later Lee was in the secret room itself. He found Nipper standing before a startled man, with the electric light playing full upon the latter. He was not very old—rather youngish, in fact. He had a big beard, and his eyes were sunken and bright with excitement.

"Don't take me away!" he cried, in terror. "Don't take me away!"

But his terror was born of alarm, and not because he was a coward. He crouched back, and Nelson Lee gave vent to a shout of surprise.

"By James!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know who this man is, Nipper?"

"No, gov'nor," gasped Nipper. "Who is he?"

"Robert Gerrard—the murderer!" was Lee's stunning announcement.

Nelson Lee's statement was quite true.

The stranger was indeed Robert Gerrard. The man was almost beside himself for some time, but he cooled down at last, and then he told his story. Secrecy was no longer possible, and so the plain truth was told. The mystery of the moor was explained, and it proved to be a pathetic tale.

After he had been sentenced to death, about six years previously, he had been reprieved by order of the Home Secretary, as the evidence against him, strong as it had been, was purely circumstantial.

On his way to prison—there to commence his term of twenty years penal servitude—he had escaped from his guards, owing to a startling but slight

accident to the train. After running a considerable distance in the darkness he had stumbled across the dead body of a man—the latter's death had been connected with the train accident. Acting upon a wild impulse, Robert Gerrard had changed clothes with the dead man—a gruesome task enough—and had then placed the body in such a position that an oncoming train would render it unrecognisable.

"I can't go into details, Mr. Lee," said Robert, with a shudder. "I tremble even now when I think of that awful night. It was only my desperate need which gave me courage for the terrible work. As you doubtless know, the poor chap I changed clothes with was mistaken for me. When he was picked up he was— Oh, I can't tell you everything! But he was wearing my clothes, and the clothes were the only means of identification. It was thought that I had been killed."

"Yes," said Nelson Lee; "I remember now."

Gerrard went on to explain how he had skulked about for some time, and how he had finally gone to his father. Old Peter Gerrard had always staunchly believed his son innocent of the murder, and he was overjoyed to see his son. He had sheltered the supposedly dead convict, and had taken him to this moorland house. And here Robert had remained, a prisoner, but with his father always by his side.

Lee understood, now, why he and Nipper had been refused admittance. Of course, it had been impossible for the old "miser" to allow anybody to stay in the house which contained such a dreadful secret.

And there was Vincent, the younger son. Old Peter Gerrard had always blamed Vincent for what had occurred, for it had been Vincent who had led Robert into evil companionship; it had been Vincent who had caused suspicion to rest on his brother. Therefore the old man had naturally refused his younger son admittance on that September afternoon three years ago.

Jim the Penman, of course, had known nothing of the real secret of the house for the simple reason that Vincent did not know it himself; and he could not, therefore, have told Sutcliffe. Vincent had fully believed that there was a vast hoard of wealth in the old house. In absolute truth, Peter Gerrard had withdrawn all his money from various quarters, and had banked it in Yorkshire in old Jakes's name. So the moorland house never had contained a great store of money. In the old man's bedroom, however, a fairly big sum of cash was always kept, and Gerrard had forbidden Jakes to enter the apartment. It was a sidelight on Gerrard's strange character that he banked his fortune in Jakes's name, but would not allow the servant to enter a room which contained only a comparatively small amount in cash.

Jakes himself related how his suspicions had been aroused by the fact that Jim the Penman had apparently known nothing of Robert's presence in the house. This ignorance on the forger's part had been the real cause for Jakes calling in Nelson Lee.

When Jim had told Jakes that the pair of them were alone in the building, the manservant had practically guessed the truth.

It was Robert, of course, who had smoked the cigars in the old man's room.

"I am innocent of the crime for which I was sentenced, Mr. Lee!" Robert concluded earnestly, and with truth in his eyes. "I swear that before Heaven! Oh, don't you believe me?"

"You were tried by a jury," said Lee quietly.

"But they were wrong—they were wrong!" cried Robert. "Oh, you are not going to have me taken away?"

"No, I shall not do that!" put in Nelson Lee. "You have lived here so long, that I see no reason why I should interfere now. I give you my word of honour that I shall breathe no word of this discovery to the authorities. Nipper found out the truth by accident, and it is no concern of mine. Your secret is safe!"

Robert Gerrard fell to his knees at Lee's feet.

"Thank you for that, Mr. Lee!" he muttered chokingly. "I am innocent, and I——"

Words failed to come to his lips, and he sobbed with relief and gratitude

When Nelson Lee went to the room containing Jim the Penman he found it empty!

The forger had escaped yet again!

In some miraculous way Jim had freed himself from his bonds. Having got free, Jim had looked round for a way of exit. He had found this in the wide, old-fashioned chimney. To his astonishment, he found steps inside the chimney, and these led to an attic above. While Lee and the others were talking, Jim the Penman had quietly slipped out, and succeeded in getting clear away.

The room, Nelson Lee heard, had been prepared by old Peter Gerrard. There were steps inside the chimney so that Robert, in the event of a sudden surprise by the police, could enter the room, get into the chimney, and escape by means of the attic and a skylight. It was unfortunate that Lee should have placed the forger in that particular apartment; but the detective had been in ignorance of the room's peculiar secret.

And then came a final surprise.

It came out that the police authorities had received a full confession from the Baltimore police—a confession written by Vincent Gerrard. It was Vincent who had committed the murder! The wretched man, finding himself dying, had placed the confession in the hands of a Baltimore lawyer, with instructions to hand it to the police on learning of his death.

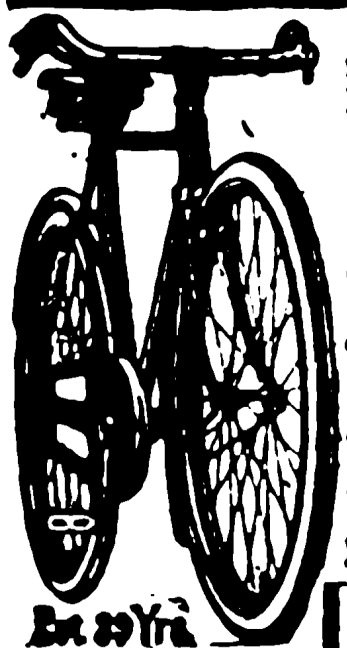
The startling surprise was the talk of all the London papers, and Robert Gerrard was able to reveal the fact that he was still alive. And his father, returning from his fruitless errand in America, gave up the old moorland house, and returned to the society of friends and relations in London.

On the whole, the case ended satisfactorily for everybody.

But Nelson Lee was not contented. Jim the Penman had given him the slip again, and the task of capturing the astounding forger would have to be started all over again. But the great detective swore that he would not rest until he had got even with his surprising enemy.

THE END.

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THE man snatched the sjambok free with an oath, and made a heavy cut at Hal. The boy dodged it, and struck the holder under the chin with all his force.

"Silence, you whelp!" roared the big Boer, striding up. "I have given you your freedom from the lash! Let that suffice, or I will have you beaten to death! Leave me to settle with that weasel there! To your work, Piet!"

"I say you shall not!" shouted Hal, beside himself with excitement.

He struck out furiously again, and then, breaking away from his enraged captors, he snatched up a heavy oaken stool and laid about him like a madman. The Boer with the sjambok went over backwards, stunned by a crushing blow from the stool, nearly upsetting the leader as he fell.

Ben twisted and fought wildly in his bonds, trying to get free of the rope that bound his arms, and yelling encouragement to Hal. The man who was looking after Ben left him and joined the attack; but the boy's weapon seemed to be weaving a cobweb in the air before him, so furiously did he wield it, and they fell back a pace. Then with all his force Hal hurled the oak stool through the window.

It crashed through pane and casement, hurtling into the street with a terrific noise, and Hal shouted at the top of his voice:

"Help! Britishers to the rescue!"

He hardly knew why he did it. His weapon was gone. Some wild impulse had seized him, and through his brain shot the thought of Grant's warning and his parting words:

"Laddies, I shall be keepin' my eye on you!"

And his heart leaped, for the shout had hardly left his lip when a deep-voiced hail answered from the street.

"Ben ahoy! Hal! Hal Forsyth!"

Roaring like an angry bull, the big Boer snatched up the easel of the blackboard, upsetting the whole concern, and aimed a fearful blow at the boy. Hal leaped aside actively as a cat, and the easel struck the floor with a force that made the room shake.

The Boer who had been felled by the stool lay prone upon the floor, and Hal leaped over him. The leader following, stumbled over the prostrate man, and the boy escaped for the moment.

The half-stripped prisoner tied to the cross-bar danced with excitement where he stood, looking over his bare shoulder with a flushed face, and as the second Boer rushed at Hal he thrust out a leg adroitly and tripped the man up.

Then, with a kick and a crash, the door burst open, and the Bonnie Jean's crew poured into the room.

"To me! To me!" roared West, flinging himself upon Hal's attackers. "Leave the boy an' stand to me! If ye're for fightin', here's for ye!"

He grasped one of the Boers and tore him from his hold. He flung him down: and the leader, jumping up, tried to catch West by the throat.

Big and powerful as he was, the Boer was a baby in the hands of the mighty North Sea smacksman. West flung the man from him, and put up his fists.

"Come on, ye Dutch kidnappers!" he cried. "Ye've fought wi' boys long enough; now try the taste of a man!"

The big Boer, purple with rage, glared at the fisherman for a moment. Then, putting down his great bullet-head, he butted at West with the whole weight of his body. It was a blow that would have staved in the sides of a Dogger-boat.

But it never got home. Before the Boer's head touched him, West's brawny hands closed on the neck with a sharp, double smack, his body twisted nimbly aside, and he hurled the Boer down by that same grip, filling the air with whirling legs and arms.

"Ha!" said West, as the man struck the ground, "rope, by the powers!" He darted forward, and picked up a bight of rope that had been used for binding the half-breed's arms, and, kneeling on the Boer's chest, he slipped a bowline round his wrists and drew it tight.

When he rose to his feet the other two were already bound by Grant and Lloyd. The one whom Hal had stunned with the stool was just waking up. All three looked dazed and sullen.

"Cut loose the boy! Why, sink me if it isn't Ben!" cried West. "What does all this mean. Answer up, boy!"

"I'll leave Hal to tell the tale," said Ben, as Grant cut his arms free. "It's he who has won the honours this day. But oh, dad, turn loose one o' those swabs, and let me take my hands to him!"

Hal raised himself from the floor, Grant helping him. He was a little bruised, but otherwise unhurt.

"Yes, yes!" cried Hal. "But cut loose that poor beggar, Simon, at the cross-bar! Cut him loose, Angus."

They freed Neil's son from his lashings; he was half fainting now that the strain was over. The three prisoners, stolid as Red Indians, said no word. The tables were turned on them, and they waited the penalty.

Then Hal told the story of the kidnapping. In a few words he put the whole matter before the crew of the Jean, West's face growing harder and grimmer as he listened. Hal repeated the insult that the Boer had ordered him to write. But not a word did he say, as yet, of Haggart Neil's betrayal.

"And I refused," he said quietly, "and then Simon——"

"Stop!" cried Ben. "He's not giving you it straight, dad! You haven't heard that they flogged him! He hasn't told of the knife they put into him, nor what he really wrote on the blackboard! Look here!"

"Never mind that, Ben," said Hal hastily, for he hated being made a fuss of. "It's my shout now."

"Not a bit of it, dad!" returned Ben. "See!" And he turned the blackboard against the wall, and showed the proud motto on its face.

"Well done, my lad!" said West quietly. "Well done!"

And a deep mutter of approval came from Lloyd and Grant. The tall Boer looked pale.

(Continued *overleaf*.)

"It's nothing," said Hal; "and then the leader of them let me go. But he wanted to make this poor beggar here do the same thing instead, and started to flog him, and I said he shouldn't; so they all went for me, and I hove the stool through the window. They got me down, and I was in a pretty bad way; and then you came in."

There was a deep pause. The faces of the Jean's crew were stern and set. Joe West turned to the prisoners.

"Have ye aught to say?" he said quietly.

The men were silent.

"So," said West, with stinging contempt, "have ye no word to say of this brave deed? Two boys an' a half-breed, lured out of reach by a crimp's trick, an' bullied by three patriots! Three noble defenders! I would ask ye why ye did not seek me instead, but the colour o' your cheeks is answer enough. No; 'twas the boys you wanted—they was safer."

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Every drop of blood left the tall Beer's cheeks at the words. He longed to challenge the big smacksman to set him loose and make his words good; but he hesitated. He had had a bitter taste of the sailor's strength already.

"What's your word, lads?" cried West, turning to his companions. "Shall we hand them over to the law, or lash them fast to their own cross-bar, an' deal 'em deep-sea justice?"

"The last," growled Lloyd and Grant. "They have earned it fair; let them have it!"

"Wait!" said Hal. "Captain, it's I who have suffered in this affair, and I claim my right. It was the big fellow there who dealt with me. Cut his hands loose and let me deal wi' him!"

(To be concluded next week.)