

NO. 54.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

Week ending
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THE MYSTERY OF THE MAIL VAN

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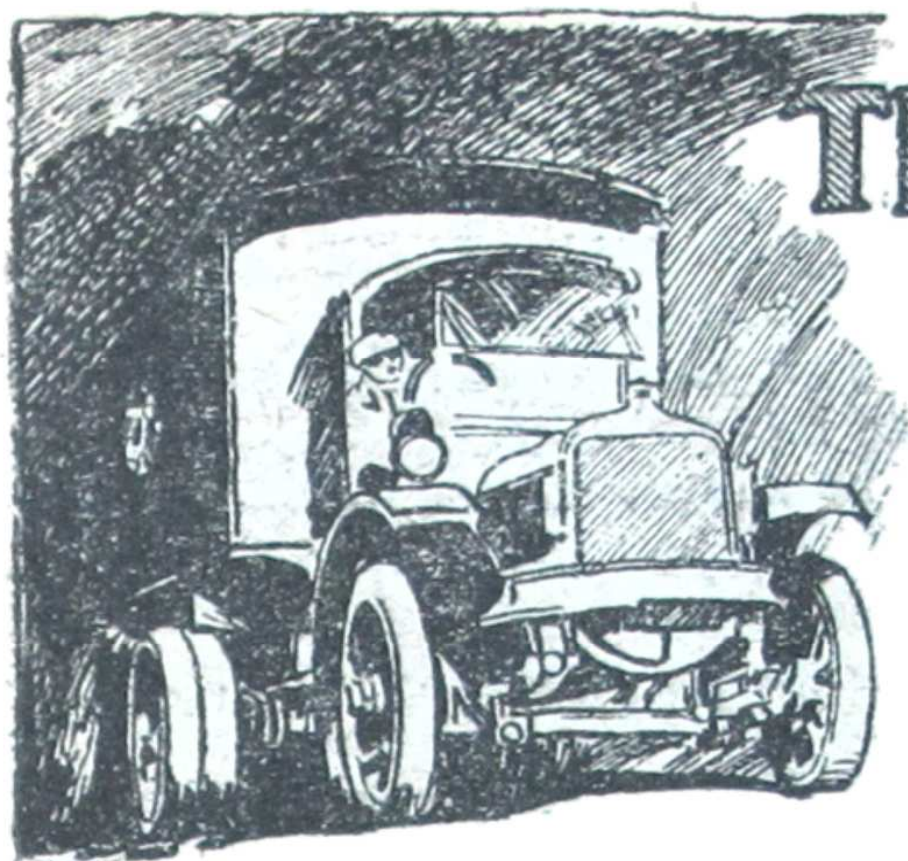
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THE MYSTERY OF THE MAIL VAN

OR,

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A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER v. "JIM THE PENMAN."

By the Author of "The Lightning Cluz," "The Great Will Forgery," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Matter of Precaution.

SUPERINTENDENT READING, of the Southampton Police, leaned back in his chair and neatly knocked the ash from his cigarette into an ash-tray which stood upon his desk.

"So it's just a flying visit, Mr. Lee?" he exclaimed pleasantly. "You've nabbed your man, and now you're off to London again?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"There is really no reason why I should remain," was his remark. "I have handed my prisoner into your safe keeping, and my task is ended. It now remains for me to return to town and to collect my fee!" he added smilingly.

The famous criminologist had been in Southampton since the previous morning. He had lately been investigating a daring robbery at the West End residence of a well-known peer, and had finally tracked his man to Southampton. As the burglar had been about to leave England on an outgoing liner, carrying with him his ill-gotten spoils, Nelson Lee had quietly arrested him.

The case had been a fairly simple one, and the great detective had experienced no overwhelming difficulties. And, having handed his prisoner over to the police, he intended returning to London without delay.

Nipper, Lee's smart young assistant, was also in Southampton, but the young rascal had been taking things easy. The trip had been entirely to his liking, and while Nelson Lee was chatting with the superintendent, Nipper was enjoying himself in a little motor-boat. For his part, he considered an early return to town a really rotten idea!

"I was going to say, Mr. Lee, that——"

Superintendent Reading broke off and sat forward in his chair.

"Excuse me!" he added.

The telephone-bell had rung, and Reading picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear. He listened for a few seconds, and then unconsciously nodded.

"Yes, this is the central police-station," he said. "I beg your— Yes, I am the superintendent. Oh, yes, I understand! At the present moment I am engaged with Mr. Nelson Lee——"

Reading broke off again, but finally said:

"I will do my best to persuade Mr. Lee. If possible, I will bring him round with me, Mr. Hudson. Yes; at once! Good-bye!"

The superintendent hung the receiver up, and then twisted round in his swivel-chair. Nelson Lee was regarding him interestedly.

"And what am I to be persuaded to do?" he asked, with a smile.

"Nothing much!" was the answer. "I have just been speaking with Mr. James Hudson, the manager of the Southampton branch of the London and Southern Bank, Limited. He wishes me to go round to the bank at once on important business, or to send a competent officer."

"He did not state the nature of the business?"

"No. Over the 'phone that was impossible," answered the superintendent. "By Mr. Hudson's tone, I imagine that there is something seriously wrong. Will you come with me? I told the manager I would do my best——"

"I suppose I may as well go," smiled Nelson Lee. "Unless the matter is of exceptional interest or importance, however, I shall not mix myself into the case."

"Oh, well, let's see what is amiss!"

Reading rose to his feet, and a few minutes later he and Nelson Lee emerged from the police-station into the hot June sunshine. It was a perfect morning, and Lee almost wished that he was with Nipper out on the water.

The great detective's keen eyes were always alert. Even when he was pleasure-going, he always noticed things which escaped most men. And now, although there was no reason why he should suspect it, he had an idea that he and the superintendent were being watched.

A rather well-dressed man on the opposite side of the road was gazing into a mirror which was fitted in the window of a large tailor's shop, and he was watching Lee and Reading closely, although his back was towards them. The superintendent certainly had no knowledge of the stranger's attentions.

Lee, however, glanced back after a couple of hundred yards had been covered, and he saw that the well-dressed man was sauntering along on the opposite pavement. Possibly there was nothing whatever in the incident, but Lee was interested.

When the bank was reached, there was no sign of the stranger; but it was possible that he had dodged into a doorway when Nelson Lee glanced round. In any case, the matter was of no consequence, and so Lee dismissed it from his mind.

The manager of the London and Southern Bank, Limited, was a small, elderly man, with a pair of keen eyes, which, however, were evidently not perfect, notwithstanding their keenness, for he wore a neat rimless pince-nez. He greeted his visitors warmly, and ushered them into his private sanctum.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, shaking the detective's hand. "I have never been honoured by meeting you before, but your many famous exploits are world-renowned——"

"Come, come!" smiled Lee deprecatingly. "You are an adept at flattery, Mr. Hudson. I happened to be in Superintendent Reading's office when you rang up, and he persuaded me to accompany him. I trust nothing is seriously wrong here?"

The manager took the hint that it would be as well to get to business,

and, as a matter of fact, he was looking somewhat worried. When all three were seated, he turned to his two visitors with a grave face.

"There is nothing wrong," he said, "but a grave responsibility has been thrust upon me, and I have asked you to come because I should like your assistance and co-operation. In short, gold to the value of half a million sterling is to be transferred from the Purple Star liner Chatworth this evening, and it is essential that a strong force of police should guard the bullion during the transfer."

The superintendent nodded.

"An easy matter!" he exclaimed. "But this is rather a sudden decision, is it not? The Chatworth is even now flying the Blue Peter. She sails at night fall."

"It is the suddenness of the matter which has rather disconcerted me," assented the manager. "You see, the full responsibility rests upon me, and— Well, I am naturally anxious. Five hundred thousand in bullion is a large amount!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and bent forward.

"Am I to understand that you require my services for this matter?" he asked. "Surely it is essentially a police affair!"

"I know. I am fully aware of that, Mr. Lee," was the manager's interjection. "But, learning that you were in Southampton, and knowing your reputation, I was optimistic enough to hope that you would consent to— to stand by, as it were. This is no ordinary transfer of bullion. It is quite a 'rush' affair. And I wish to take every possible precaution against an attempt at robbery. If you will undertake to stand on guard while the bullion is being removed from the Chatworth, I shall be infinitely more settled in mind."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Since you put it that way, Mr. Hudson, I readily consent, of course," he said. "But I do not think there is any cause for you to worry. After all, there is not much risk attached to a transfer of bullion."

Lee, in fact, was rather amused at Mr. Hudson's request, but he could easily understand the worthy manager's concern. This matter had been sprung upon him suddenly, and the responsibility had become somewhat magnified in his mind. So far as the detective could see, there was nothing whatever to be nervous about.

"I'll attend to everything, Mr. Hudson," said Superintendent Reading. "I'll have a force of men on the spot, and I'll guarantee you won't lose so much as a farthing's-worth of bullion. But where is the gold to be taken to? And why is it to be removed from the Chatworth practically at sailing time?"

"The bullion is to be taken to our head office in London," replied the manager. "An hour ago Mr. Adams, Sir Robert Meade's private secretary, arrived from London with a special letter from his employer. Sir Robert Meade, as you probably know, is the governor of the London and Southern Bank."

Mr. Hudson reached over his desk, and picked up a stiff sheet of parchment-bond paper. Nelson Lee and the superintendent read the letter in turn.

It was fairly long, and the handwriting was small and curiously distinctive. The paper was die-stamped with Sir Robert's private address, and the words "Immediate and Urgent" were written in the left-hand top corner.

The letter ran:

"Dear Sir,—Kindly attend to these instructions promptly and with precision. The liner Chatworth contains £500,000 of the bank's gold in her

bullion-room, as, of course, you are fully aware. It has come to my knowledge, through a channel which I cannot divulge, that the Chatworth is to be attacked by a German submarine in the Mediterranean. This is not merely a rumour. I have positive assurance that the liner is to be sent to the bottom. The attempt may fail, but I do not intend to run the risk of losing the bullion by allowing it to be sent to the ocean bed by Germany.

"This secret information only came into my hands yesterday, and I at once interviewed the chairman of the Purple Star Line. This gentleman, however, refused to credit my statement, and intends to disregard my warning. The Chatworth is thoroughly armed, and it will sail as advertised. Had I been in a position to be perfectly frank, I have no doubt that the chairman would have ordered the sailing to be cancelled; but, unfortunately, it was impossible for me to reveal the identity of my informant.

"There is time, however, to have the bullion removed from the vessel, and I have already sent written authority to the captain of the Chatworth to deliver the consignment of gold to you or your agents. The postmaster-general has agreed to co-operate with me in the transfer, and one of the largest motor mail vans will be on the quay at six-thirty this evening. The bullion is to be placed on this van, and I shall rely upon you to see that the transfer is accomplished with safety and expedition.

"Once the mail van has departed with its cargo, you, of course, will have done your part. I have taken this precaution—the precaution of having the gold brought to London in a Post Office vehicle—because it is impossible to be too cautious. No suspicion of the real truth is to leak out on any account, and I must impress upon you the necessity for the utmost discretion. I do not imagine, however, that anyone will suspect that bullion is being taken from the Chatworth and placed on to a mail van.

"Immediately on receipt of this letter I should advise you to get in communication with the Southampton police, and arrange for a strong force to be on the quay and on the liner at the time of the removal. You need not trouble yourself about the fate of the bullion after it has left Southampton. I have been in touch with Scotland Yard, and six of the C.I.D.'s best detectives will be in charge of the mail van, attired as post-office officials.

"I think I have made everything perfectly clear to you. So far as I can see, there can be no possible hitch. Do not attempt to communicate with me or the head office, for it is necessary to be extremely cautious—and a leakage at this stage might lead to an attempt at robbery. You have your instructions—carry them out.—Yours very truly,

"ROBERT MEADE."

Nelson Lee, who perused the letter last, handed it back to Mr. Hudson, and remarked with a smile:

"Sir Robert has not stinted himself regarding details of the plan. He has put the whole thing very clearly, and I do not see any possible chance of a miscarriage. I should like to know, however, from whence he obtained his information regarding the torpedoing of the Chatworth."

Mr. Hudson stroked his chin.

"I am afraid I cannot tell you, Mr. Lee," he replied. "It must be obvious to you, however, that Sir Robert could not give that information without placing his informant in a position of great peril. Knowing the threat to be well-founded he is naturally removing the gold from the Chatworth."

"Well, all this is really beside the point," Reading remarked. "Our

business is to guard the bullion as it is being removed. Rather a smart idea to take it to London in a motor mail van."

"I have already interviewed the postmaster," said Mr. Hudson. "He left only a few minutes before you were announced. The postmaster, too, received an urgent letter this morning; but his was from the postmaster-general, informing him of the plan. You see, nothing has been allowed to leak out. Not a word of the plan has been telegraphed or telephoned. All the instructions have been brought by special messengers—who can be implicitly trusted—and in absolute secret."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Sir Robert evidently is a man who believes in doing things thoroughly," he said. "I do not think I have ever heard of a more complete plan. Every possibility of a hitch has been precluded.

"Regarding your fee, Mr. Lee——"

The detective shook his head, and interrupted:

"Please don't talk of fees. This is only a trivial affair, after all, and I shall be only too pleased to oblige you, Mr. Hudson, by placing my services at your disposal for the short time necessary this evening."

"That is very kind of you," said the manager.

"Not at all," Nelson Lee replied. "Nipper—my young assistant—will no doubt be highly delighted at the change in my plans. He was talking of venturing on an evening trip along the coast in a motor-boat, but I upset him a little by sternly saying that we left for London this afternoon. The young rascal will be able to take his trip, after all."

"But the bank will certainly compensate you for the inconvenience——"

"Really, Mr. Hudson, I am consenting to your request in a friendly spirit, and cannot accept a monetary reward," was Lee's quiet remark. "I do not profess to be a philanthropist, and I should be the last man to refuse a well-earned fee. But in this little matter—— Well, it is really not worthy of a fee."

But Nelson Lee was to find that the "little matter" would very soon become a big matter, and before he finally concluded the case of the gold bullion he was destined to earn quite a comfortable and respectable fee.

And he received an inkling of what was to follow almost at once.

He and the superintendent remained in Mr. Hudson's office for some little time longer, arranging the details, and then the pair left. Lee, to tell the truth, was rather bored. The affair was obviously a police matter, and there was really no necessity for him to mix himself up in it. But he had given his word, and he would abide by it. As they emerged into the bright sunshine, Lee slightly ahead, he paused in order to light a cigarette. This was just outside the bank, in the massive porch. On either side of the detective were imposing marble pillars.

And from round the left-hand pillar he heard a few low-voiced words:

"Yes, this evening. It will be dead easy, my dear chap."

"But it's a big game. Five hundred thou. in bullion——"

"Shut up, you infernal fool!"

The low voices ceased abruptly, and Nelson Lee carelessly threw his match away without even turning his head. He and Superintendent Reading strolled away as though nothing had occurred. The famous detective had not turned a hair, and he displayed absolutely no sign of emotion.

But in that one instant all his lethargy left him like a cloak. Instead of being bored, he was intensely interested. It was driven home to him, with something of a shock, that there was very just cause for Mr. Hudson's nervousness!

CHAPTER II.

The Old Barn, and What Happened There.

NELSON LEE, although outwardly as unconcerned as ever, was inwardly as astonished to a point of considerable excitement. That is to say, all his keen detective instincts were excited.

Those few words he had by pure chance overheard were full of significant meaning. The phrases which were impressed upon his brain were "It will be dead easy," and "Five hundred thou. in bullion." It was evident to Lee, in a flash, that the well-preserved secret concerning the transfer of the gold was not a secret at all. Moreover, the first phrase was tantamount to a declaration that an attempt was to be made to gain possession of the bullion.

Before Nelson Lee and the superintendent had taken three strides, the detective had come to a decision. He made a simple excuse to Reading, and entered a tobacconist's shop—telling the police officer that he would join him later.

Lee was out of the shop in ten seconds, and he at once crossed the road. As he was doing so he saw, out of the corner of his eye, two men strolling away from the left-hand pillar of the bank's porch. They were both attired in white flannel trousers, white shoes, sporting coats, and straw hats. They were, apparently, two very respectable gentlemen on a holiday.

"By James! I hardly know what to think!" Lee muttered under his breath. "My ears did not deceive me. I heard the words distinctly, although they were uttered in a low tone which would have escaped most men's ears."

The detective was determined to keep the strangers under observation. They had not even seen him, for the pillar had prevented their noticing him leaving the bank. And now they were sauntering away, talking quietly, oblivious of everything except their own conversation.

But the shock of the thing was startling.

Those two strangers knew that bullion was to be removed from the Chatworth that evening! How did they know? How could they possibly have got wind of the bank's arrangements? Sir Robert Meade had purposely sent his instructions down to Southampton by his private secretary—a man to be absolutely trusted—in order to preclude all possibility of a leakage. A special messenger, too—and again a high-placed and trustworthy post-office official—had delivered the postmaster-general's sealed letter to the Southampton postmaster. Treachery from this direction was out of the question, for both messengers were above suspicion.

There was a chance that a spy had seen Nelson Lee and the superintendent entering the bank, and had managed to get round to the back, under the window of Mr. Hudson's private sanctum. Lee remembered that the window had been wide open.

But the fact remained, the secret was no secret at all.

And having accidentally got on the track, Nelson Lee was determined to ferret out the thing to the bottom. Everything was in his favour. The two strangers were unaware of the detective's attentions, and it was obvious from their deep conversation that they were discussing something of vital importance.

After walking some way the pair entered Queen's Park, and seated themselves on a comfortable bench. But the bench was quite in the open, or Nelson Lee would have been tempted to steal up with the intention of overhearing their conversation.

Lee sat down on another park seat, and waited and watched

Twenty minutes had elapsed before he saw any sign of movement. Then one of the strangers glanced at his watch, and instantly jumped to his feet. He said something to his companion, and they both walked out of the park with brisk footsteps.

Nelson Lee followed, a considerable distance behind.

The walk this time was destined to be a fairly long one. Right through the town the two men went, until at last the houses began to thin, and hedges bordered the road instead of garden-railings.

But Lee was an expert shadower; probably he had no equal at the game, with the possible exception of Nipper. And he took care to remain unseen, but to see all himself.

His quarries turned into a narrow country lane, and proceeded along this for a full mile. It was evident now that they had lingered too long in the park, for they were hurrying, and one of them occasionally glanced at his watch.

"Probably they have arranged to meet somebody," thought Nelson Lee.

Quite abruptly the men disappeared; and, parting the bushes of the hedge, the detective saw them crossing a meadow to a tumble-down old barn building which stood quite alone some little distance away.

"A rendezvous!" muttered Lee grimly. "This is getting decidedly interesting. A meeting-place far from the town, and standing utterly alone. Without a doubt, there is something fishy about this business."

The detective's keen brain was instantly busy, trying to devise a scheme whereby he would be enabled to be a witness of the meeting. He felt sure that facts of a very startling nature would be revealed if he could only overhear them.

Allowing his gaze to search about, the detective was struck by something which caused him keen satisfaction. The meadow was bordered on the upper side by a high thick hedge, and this hedge came round and joined forces with the hedge through which Lee was now looking.

He saw that it would be possible for him to creep round, by making a detour, and to arrive at the rear of the barn without giving any signs of his presence. The men he had shadowed had, of course, crossed the meadow boldly—for there was nothing suspicious in a couple of gentlemen holiday-makers strolling casually into an old barn. But for those significant words which Lee had chanced to overhear he would certainly have been far from interested in their movements.

But for the detective to cross the meadow was impossible. He would be in full view from the barn the whole time. By travelling round, however, on the rear side of the hedge, much was possible. Lee could see that the old building was standing within a few yards of the spot he would ultimately arrive at.

Without wasting more time Lee retraced his steps for a few yards, and then broke through the hedge and found himself in an adjoining field. He soon covered the distance, and at last arrived exactly opposite the barn.

Slightly parting the bushes, he could now see that the old building was ramshackle and disused. There were no windows or doors at the rear—upon which he was gazing. But there was something else which was eminently satisfactory.

The roof of the old place had a very shallow slope, and it would be an easy matter for a man to walk upon the tiles. Right in the centre of the roof a gaping hole was to be seen. The building was low, so Lee was quite certain that from the hole it would be possible to look right down into the interior. There was, he was convinced, no left to bar the view.

Nelson Lee was single-handed and beyond reach of assistance. If he fell

into the hands of these men he would receive no mercy. But the detective was well accustomed to taking heavy risks, and he did not hesitate now.

Noiselessly he wormed through the hedge, and then stepped forward through the masses of stinging nettles and weeds which grew in profusion at the rear of the barn. A low addition, jutting out, had been added to the main building at some remote period, and the roof of this was only six feet from the ground.

By climbing upon this roof it was a perfectly simple matter to walk upwards and thus gain the roof of the main building.

Nelson Lee did not act rashly. The slightest sound, he knew, would alarm the men within the barn. Accordingly his progress across the roof was singularly slow. But it was the safest in the end. He finally arrived at the jagged hole without having given the slightest hint of his presence.

Near the hole one of the old tiles was out of place, and through a little slit Lee could gaze straight down upon the floor of the building and yet remain unseen himself. The voice of the two men below, too, reached his ears with perfect distinctness.

Lee looked down fully upon their heads. They were standing near the door, and one of them removed his watch again and uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Nash is late!" he exclaimed testily. "What the deuce is the use of making an arrangement and then playing about with us like this? There's no time to be lost, anyhow. If we're going to pull this thing off, we shall have to get busy with our plans."

The other man nodded.

"I'm not satisfied that we can do the trick, Norman," he said. "We mustn't forget the precautions that are being taken——"

"Precautions!" snapped the other. "What precautions? So far as I can see, the thing will be one of the easiest jobs——"

"Hold on! I think I can hear Nash's car."

Nelson Lee saw the two plotters walk to the door of the barn. He, too, had heard the sound of a motor-car, but, being on the rear slope of the roof, he could, of course, see nothing.

But after three or four minutes had elapsed a tall, bearded man in a motoring dustcoat entered the barn and shook hands with the two strangers who had been waiting for him.

"I'm late, boys, eh?" smiled the new-comer. "Never mind! We've got plenty of time for a jaw! Infernal back tyre punctured and delayed me. Well, how does the wind blow? What have you found out?"

"We've found out," was the deliberate reply of the man named Norman, "that the bullion is to be transferred from the Chatworth this evening and placed upon a heavy motor mail van. The van will then proceed to London, guarded by about half a dozen Scotland Yard detectives dressed up in postal uniform."

The new-comer smiled.

"Really, if this affair is carried out properly, it will be child's play," he remarked. "If we can't deal with half a dozen Scotland Yard 'tecs, it's a pity. Well, I've come here to learn the details, so go ahead!"

Nelson Lee listened in great astonishment as the three men below discussed the plans which he and the superintendent had talked over with Mr. Hudson. How these gentlemanly scoundrels had obtained their information was an amazing puzzle. But Nelson Lee had ample evidence that their knowledge was correct in every detail.

The detective was highly elated at having surprised the plot even while it was being hatched.

"We've got to deal with the Yard men. That's our task!" went on the

motorist. "While the bullion is being removed from the liner, we shall be miles away. The transfer will be effected in perfect safety and without a hitch. It would be madness to attempt anything on the quay. Our time will come when the motor-van is on its way to London."

"Will the others be there to help?"

"The whole crowd is working with us," replied Nash coolly. "I've spent a considerable time this morning in my car going over the road between Winchester and Guildford. As you know, I set out for the purpose of locating a good spot for the hold-up."

"Did you find one?"

"I've fixed upon a place that's absolutely ideal!" was the comfortable reply. "It's two miles north of the village of Pendyke. There's not a house anywhere near, and there's a very steep hill, leading downwards into a gloomy hollow. This hollow is the place I've fixed on."

"Sounds all right!" remarked one of the others.

"My dear man, it would be impossible to find a better spot for the work in the whole of the kingdom! High trees grow on either side of the road, and we can all conceal ourselves effectively, and yet be ready to spring out at the exact right moment!"

"What time shall we meet?"

Nash considered, and thoughtfully lit a cigarette.

"Well, by all that I can gather, and by what you tell me, the mail van will pass the spot between half-past ten and eleven. Accordingly we shall be there in force by ten o'clock at the latest."

"It will be risky, won't it, going in a body——"

"My good Norman, don't make such an idiotic remark as that!" protested Nash. "To go there in a body would be fatal, for we should at once attract unwelcome attention. We have got to travel to different points as soon as possible, and meet at the hollow at ten o'clock to-night, each one of us coming from a totally different direction. Every precaution must be taken!"

"How are we to know where this hollow is?"

"As I have said, it is about two miles the other side of Pendyke," was the answer. "At the brow of the hill which leads down to the hollow a clump of poplars grows just beside the road. They are the only poplar-trees for miles, and so there cannot be any mistake. From the other direction, there is an equally excellent landmark in an old windmill which has for years been in ruins."

Nelson Lee listened keenly, but without outward emotion. He was in a position of considerable danger. He knew that. He had now discovered that a daring attempt was to be made upon the bullion van that night, and, from what he had heard, it seemed to him that the gold robbers would succeed in their nefarious purpose unless steps were taken to frustrate the plot.

For some considerable time the three men remained in the barn, talking earnestly, but with an air of matter-of-factness which certainly caused the detective some surprise. As he lay on the roof, it was impressed upon him that these men were no amateurs at the game. They were hardened criminals, and they had a gang behind them who would possibly prove to be fairly numerous.

The detective was cramped and aching, but he did not shift in order to ease his position. Had he done so he might have loosened a tile, and then he would not have received mercy. Half a million was at stake, and these well-dressed men, smooth-tongued though they were, would have no hesitation in dealing drastically with the eavesdropper.

But at last their conversation ended, and they departed, leaving the barn in utter silence. It had served their purpose; at least, they thought so; and

Nelson Lee, clambering swiftly up the roof, saw the trio stepping into a big motor-car which stood in the lane; and as he watched, the automobile started forward, and was soon lost to view in a cloud of dust.

Two minutes later Nelson Lee was on the ground. He hastened away with all speed, his mind filled with grim thoughts. The point which puzzled him more than anything else was this: how had these men obtained their information?

It was mysterious, but, after all, of secondary importance. The main point was to frustrate the bullion-robbers' plans, and even as Nelson Lee walked towards the town, he was busily turning over alternative schemes in his mind.

CHAPTER III.

An Amazing Development.

"GOOD gracious, Lee! I am at a loss for words!" ejaculated Superintendent Reading amazedly. "Are you absolutely positive of this?"

Nelson Lee waved his hand impatiently.

"I have told you everything," he replied. "I got on the track by sheer chance, because I overheard half a dozen words which were incautiously spoken. At half-past ten to-night a desperate attempt will be made to stop the mail-van a short distance beyond the village of Pendyke."

The superintendent was greatly perturbed.

"And we had been telling ourselves that the whole thing was a mere formality!" he growled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, our part in the affair remains the same," Lee went on. "But, as I intimated before, there is no necessity for Mr. Hudson to worry. There will be no attempt to effect a robbery at the docks. Such a thing would be impossible. These scoundrels mean to try their luck while the van is en route for London."

"But the Yard detectives——"

"Will probably be very excellent officers," Lee interjected. "But, my dear superintendent, half a dozen Scotland Yard chaps can't cope with a desperate body of armed men, who will, moreover, take the mail-van crew completely by surprise. Sir Robert Meade intended this matter to be strictly and absolutely secret. Had none of the facts leaked out, the accomplishment of the journey would have been a matter of time; but, in some other unaccountable way, the secret has come to the knowledge of these scoundrels, and they mean to take full advantage of their knowledge and risk all on a desperate attack."

Reading mopped his brow.

"Thank goodness you were smart enough to ferret out the scheme!" he exclaimed. "We can at least protect the bullion, even though we lose the would-be robbers. I shall advise Mr. Hudson at once to alter his plans——"

But Nelson Lee interjected sharply:

"That would be worse than useless! There is a distinct possibility that Mr. Hudson has a traitor in the camp. How otherwise could the secret have leaked out? And any alteration in the plan will be duly reported to the robbers, who will, in turn, alter their plans also."

"That's true enough!" admitted the superintendent.

"We must say nothing—nothing at all," Lee proceeded. "Those men have not the slightest idea that I overheard their conversation, and they imagine that everything is going swimmingly. Let them continue to

imagine so. This is what I propose. Whether you approve or not is for you to say, Reading; but I give you the suggestion for what it is worth."

"Let's have it!" growled the superintendent.

"Well, I suggest an ambush," was Nelson Lee's reply. "You've got plenty of men, and I will undertake to take charge of a large body and journey with them to this dark hollow between the clump of poplars and the ruined windmill. You, Reading, will remain in Southampton, as originally planned, and will guard the bullion as it is being transferred from the ship to the mail-van."

"You mean we are to let the van depart without warning those in charge of it?"

"Oh, no! Just before the van starts you had better tell the Scotland Yard men of the surprise which has been planned for them, and by the time the mail-van arrives at the hollow the business will be over."

"What business?"

"I and the men under my charge will be at the spot as soon as night falls," went on the detective quietly. "The rogues are to meet singly, from different directions. As they appear, they will be made prisoners; and if by chance a whole body of them come at once, I shall be able to deal with them effectively. I do not suppose there will be a dozen all told."

Nelson Lee's scheme was undoubtedly the best one to adopt, and Reading unhesitatingly agreed. The plot would be frustrated, and the bullion robbers caught red-handed. No other plan, in fact, could be so thoroughly effective.

Lee decided to say nothing whatever to Mr. Hudson—not even in confidence. There was no reason why the worthy manager should be unnecessarily worried.

It was well past noon by now, and the detective returned to his hotel for luncheon, having been absent several hours longer than he intended. He found Nipper waiting for him, and the lad had nearly got through his meal.

"Where the dickens have you been, guv'nor?" was the lad's greeting. "I've been waiting here——"

"We don't return to London to-day, Nipper," Lee interjected.

"By gum, that's ripping! I shall be able to go for another spin in that motor-boat!" exclaimed Nipper. "Upon my word, guv'nor, you do have flashes of intelligence now and again! It was a rotten suggestion of yours that we should return to town to-day!"

"None of your cheek, young 'un!" said Lee sternly. "I shall have a flash of something else before long! But seriously, Nipper, there's grim work to be done!"

And the detective, while he ate his lunch, put his young assistant in possession of the facts. Nipper listened in considerable astonishment. When Lee had finished, the lad puckered his brow into a thoughtful frown.

"I'm between two fires," he admitted. "I should like to go with you, guv'nor, and help to cop those giddy bullion robbers, but I should like to take a trip down the coast."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Do the latter, by all means!" he said. "Your abilities, my lad, are invariably of the finest quality, but in a case of this sort I do not think you will be necessary. The police are taking the matter in hand, and I have volunteered to take charge of the posse which will ambush our friends the thieves."

Upon the whole, Nipper was perfectly satisfied. The thing was simple and straightforward enough, and there was really no need for him to worry his head.

Accordingly, the young detective sallied out immediately after tea and went down to the docks. In a very short time he was skimming across Southampton Water, alone in his little motor-boat, quite contented, and enjoying himself hugely. The evening was glorious, and the sea almost glassy in its smoothness.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was making his final plans in Superintendent Reading's private office. The detective suited himself to the new conditions at once, and he personally chose the men he would take with him upon the expedition. At his suggestion, all the police officers were armed with revolvers, for in a matter of this sort one could never tell what the end would be, and it was only fair to the police that they should have the means of defending themselves in case of urgent necessity.

Nelson Lee took great precautions. He knew only too well that the projected bullion robbery was being planned carefully and thoroughly. Therefore it was quite possible that a watch was being kept on the police headquarters.

The detective had no intention of giving the enemy the tip as to what was going to happen.

The police, accordingly, in charge of an inspector named Evans, left the station by means of an enclosed back-yard. This was the yard of the police-station, and here the constables scrambled over the wall, and when they emerged into the street, they did so in twos and threes, to all appearances quite commonplace holiday-makers, for they had discarded their uniforms, and now wore ordinary clothing.

The police collected in two batches, at two different parts of the town. At these places they boarded motor chars-a-bancs, and left Southampton in the guise of two pleasure parties, as though out for an evening's run. If it happened that any spy was on the watch, he would certainly have to be very alert to detect the ruse. It was, after all, only a precautionary measure. Nelson Lee had no fear of any hitch.

The plan worked admirably. Nelson Lee himself journeyed to the point beyond the village of Pendyke quite independently of the police. He rode a motor-cycle, and when he reached the hollow in the dusk of the summer's day, he found the spot utterly deserted.

The road was lined on either side by thick trees. The road, indeed, passed straight through a fair-sized wood. The trees did not merely line the road; they extended back for some distance.

"This is excellent!" murmured Lee to himself. "I can conceal my men without the slightest difficulty. No doubt this is an ideal spot for a hold-up, but it is a still better spot for an ambush!"

Out in the open it was by no means dark, but down at the foot of the hollow the shadows were deep. Lee concealed his bicycle in a dry ditch, and covered it with fallen leaves.

Very soon the first char-a-banc arrived and disgorged its cargo of police. The whole incident scarcely occupied a minute. The men immediately plunged into the trees, and the heavy vehicle continued on its way. Every police-officer already had instructions, and he knew precisely what to do. So there was no confusion of any sort.

While Nelson Lee was talking with Inspector Evans, the second char-a-banc arrived, and a few minutes later every constable was in his allotted place and quiet as a mouse, perfectly hidden, and ready for instant action.

A more complete ambush could not have been possible.

Nelson Lee and the inspector were lying side by side, completely concealed, and yet able to see the road in both directions.

"This gang intends to prepare a huge surprise for the mail van." chuckled

Inspector Evans grimly. "They'll be fairly shocked, I should imagine, when they find that a surprise is waiting for them."

"I think we shall nip the game in the bud," was Lee's quite rejoinder.

Very soon afterwards darkness descended completely, and it was almost impossible to distinguish the road. There was no moon, and a few fleecy clouds partially hid the stars. When the hour approached ten o'clock, all talking was strictly forbidden. Not even a whisper was allowed.

The would-be bullion robbers were due to arrive at ten; at least, they were to start collecting at that time. But the silence remained unbroken save for a quiet rustling in the leaves overhead, and when Nelson Lee glanced at his watch, he saw by the luminous dial that the time was just after the quarter-past.

"From ten to half-past," thought the great detective—"that was the period arranged. No doubt our friends will make an appearance very shortly now."

The minutes dragged slowly, but after some little time Inspector Evans gave the detective a soft nudge. But Lee was already on the alert and listening intently.

He could distinctly hear sounds of footsteps in the distance, and presently the figures of two men loomed up in the dimness. The watchers had grown well accustomed to the darkness by this time, and could see fairly distinctly.

There were two men approaching, and two red glows appeared from the tops of their pipes.

In a few moments they were opposite, and Nelson Lee smiled grimly to himself. From the nature of their conversation and the distinct dialect in which they spoke, the detective knew them to be merely a couple of worthy farm labourers on the way home from the Pendyke Arms to an outlying farmhouse.

Their footsteps soon died away after they had trudged to the top of the opposite hill, and dead, utter silence reigned once more. There was no sign whatever of any of the gold thieves approaching.

Nelson Lee was somewhat uneasy.

Had the scoundrels changed their plans? But this was hardly likely, for it was impossible for them to have got wind of the police ambush. The detective wondered if the thieves were already in the wood, having approached from the rear. It would be a distinctly curious situation if the robbers and the police were hidden among the trees, both parties unconscious of the others' presence.

But this possibility was too far-fetched. Lee was forced to admit that he was more than ill-at-ease. Nash and his followers had not turned up according to the prearranged programme. Why? What was the meaning of their non-appearance?

"Twenty to eleven!" whispered Nelson Lee, glancing at his watch again and placing his mouth against the inspector's ear. "What's wrong, Evans?"

"Hanged if I know! It's nearly time the mail van was due!"

Minute after minute passed, and each minute seemed to be ten. When Nelson Lee looked at his watch again, eleven o'clock had passed. And by this time there was another excellent reason for grave uneasiness.

The mail van, due to pass the spot between ten-thirty and eleven, had not made its appearance! Not only was there no sign of the bullion robbers, but the bullion itself had apparently gone astray.

Superintendent Reading had assured Lee positively that the motor-van would be dispatched from the quay precisely at the appointed time, and Nelson Lee was sure that there had been no hitch. He did not see how anything could possibly have gone wrong at the Southampton end.

It seemed all too certain that some delay had come about en route. It was possible that the gang had altered their plans, and had chosen a different spot for their attack on the mail van. If so, this police ambush was simply a farce, and by this time the robbery would have been committed!

The great detective was filled with doubts and misgivings, and he turned over conjecture after conjecture in his mind. It was now a quarter-past eleven, and the mail van was long overdue.

After a further fifteen minutes had elapsed—at half-past eleven exactly—Nelson Lee could stand the uncertainty no longer. The road was as quiet as the grave, and during the last hour only a couple of private motor-cars had passed.

"I am going!" murmured Lee to the inspector. "It is intolerable lying here, knowing that something is seriously wrong and in absolute ignorance of the facts!"

Inspector Evans nodded.

"It looks to me as if the robbery has taken place at some other spot!" he said grimly. "I don't know that it's any use our remaining here——"

"I should advise you to stay until midnight, Evans," Lee interjected. "I'll hurry back to Southampton on my motor-cycle, and learn what has been happening."

Accordingly, without delaying, Nelson Lee uncovered his motor-bike and was soon away, leaving the police still on guard. The detective more than half-expected to come across the mail van, overturned and wrecked, at almost any point of the road.

His feelings were by no means pleasant. He felt that he had been made a fool of. He had been waiting in a perfectly deserted spot while the actual robbery had taken place somewhere else. Lee was not optimistic enough to hope that no robbery had taken place.

But he covered mile after mile swiftly, and met neither vehicle nor pedestrian. He entered Winchester without having seen the slightest sign of the mail van. A constable was on point duty in the centre of the town, and Lee at once stopped.

"Oh, it's you, sir!" exclaimed the constable interestedly. "Our chief here was informed of the plan, and I suppose by this time you've nabbed ——"

"We've nabbed nothing!" Lee broke in. "We haven't even sighted our men, and the mail van has not passed. Have you seen anything of it?"

The policeman stared.

"Why, of course, sir!" he replied. "The mail van came through here, full speed ahead, at about twenty-past ten. She was lumbering a bit, bein' heavily loaded——"

"Good gracious! Are you positive of this? The mail van passed through Winchester at twenty-past ten! We have seen utterly no sign of it at P'endyke!"

"That's rum, Mr. Lee!" said the constable, putting his head sideways.

Nelson Lee was greatly perturbed. Everything had evidently gone all right as far as Winchester. But what had happened to the mail van after the vehicle had passed this constable? It had certainly not proceeded along the main road to London. But why had there been an alteration?

It was a worrying problem.

And Nelson Lee did not waste time in idle conjecture. He mounted his motor-cycle again and rode at full speed for Southampton. He covered the distance in just over twenty minutes, and hurried straight into Superintendent Reading's office at the police-station. He knew that Reading would be on duty.

"Hallo, Lee!" was the greeting the detective received as he entered the room. "By George, you look dusty! Well, I suppose everything went off swimmingly, and you nabbed the whole crowd, eh? Trust you to do things properly!"

"My dear Reading, please allow me to speak!" Nelson Lee ejaculated. "Everything has not gone off swimmingly! We haven't captured a single man, and apparently the mail-van itself has gone astray. At least, we have seen nothing of it!"

The superintendent twisted round in his chair.

"Seen nothing of it!" he echoed amazedly. "Why, I instructed the driver to— Besides, what's this about not having nabbed anybody? Get away with you, Lee! None of your jokes——"

"Pretty fine joke!" snapped Nelson Lee curtly. "Don't go into hysterics, man! Something is infernally wrong, and we've got to find out the truth. Did the mail-van leave at the correct time?"

The superintendent swallowed hard.

"Not joking!" he said hoarsely. "Good heavens! Yes, of course the van left at the correct time. I saw it off myself, with all the bullion on board, and guarded by six Yard men in Post Office uniforms. The stuff was transferred from the Chatworth to the van without the least suspicion of trouble. It was baby's work."

"Well, we waited in the hollow until eleven-thirty," Lee said, "and we didn't see a ghost of a thief. By that time, too, the bullion was long overdue, so I thought it best to come along and make inquiries."

"But I'm hanged if I can understand——"

"The van passed through Winchester—I know that for a fact—and although the road is as straight as a die from Winchester to Pendyke, the van certainly did not pass through the hollow. You had better ring up Guildford and make inquiries."

The superintendent, thoroughly alarmed, lost no time in taking Nelson Lee's advice. But it was soon learned that the bullion van had certainly not made its appearance at Guildford.

For half an hour both Nelson Lee and his companion rang up every town within a radius of fifty miles. And during the next hour there were many calls to be answered. The net result of it all was decidedly disconcerting.

Inspector Evans and his men had returned by this time, and there was considerable commotion in the police-station. Men were despatched in all directions, but to no purpose.

Mail-van, bullion, driver, and six Scotland Yard detectives had vanished into thin air!

After passing through Winchester there was utterly no trace of the mail-van to be found. And the fact that the planned robbery had not taken place told Nelson Lee that something was very radically wrong.

"We must inform Sir Robert Meade without any further delay," the detective exclaimed, when he and Reading were alone after several messengers had been despatched. "It's no good denying the fact, superintendent, there's been a deucedly clever robbery here, and so far we're completely in the cold. Sir Robert must be told of the disaster at once."

Reading glanced at the clock.

"But look at the time, Lee!" he protested. "Sir Robert Meade will be in bed and fast asleep at this hour——"

"Undoubtedly. But he will certainly have a telephone in his house—and telephones have bells!" said the detective grimly. "If we can't get any reply we shall have to wait until morning. But we'll have a shot at it."

Lee himself put a trunk call through to London, and in a surprisingly short time got a reply. It was Sir Robert Meade's butler who answered the 'phone, and he was at once ordered to fetch his master.

The governor of the London and Southern Bank was some little time in coming, but when he did so the tone of his voice plainly told that he was both sleepy and decidedly out of temper.

"Well?" Lee heard him snap. "Who the deuce is it? What's the idea of getting me out of bed——"

"I am speaking from the Southampton police-station, and my name is Nelson Lee," said the detective, in a clear voice. "Can you hear me, Sir Robert?"

"Of course. I have heard of you, Mr. Lee, and I believe you're a detective, or something of that sort. But what in the name of——"

"Please be a little patient," Nelson Lee said gently. "There is grave trouble here. In accordance with your instructions the consignment of bullion was removed from the Chatworth——Eh? What!"

There was something in Lee's tone which caused Reading to stare at him in some surprise. But the superintendent fairly jumped the next second. He saw Nelson Lee's hand tremble a trifle.

"Good heavens!" roared the detective, in a bellowing voice.

"What's wrong, man?" demanded Reading, starting to his feet.

He picked up a second receiver with which the instrument was fitted, and placed it to his ear. He was just in time to hear Sir Robert saying something in excited tones.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Lee!" the baronet was saying. "What in the name of wonder are you talking about? I sent no letter to our Southampton branch! I gave no order for the removal of the bullion. It should have sailed in the Chatworth!"

"But you sent precise instructions to Mr. Hudson——"

"I sent no instructions of any sort!" came Sir Robert's angry tones. "What muddling is this? If that bullion has been interfered with——"

"My dear sir, the bullion has been stolen!" Nelson Lee said, now deadly calm. "I am just beginning to realise that this case is of more gigantic proportions than I ever dreamed of!"

And, in cold, clear tones, Lee lost no time in informing the baronet of what had occurred. From the many ejaculations which interjected the detective's narrative, the two men at the 'phone judged that Sir Robert was not only startled but positively dumbfounded.

"Those are the facts of the case," Nelson Lee concluded. "At the present moment the police are doing their utmost to locate the mail-van. It is now only too evident, after hearing your information, that the mail-van was merely a part of the plot. The bullion was stolen actually at the Chatworth's side, on the quay!"

"I—I am stunned," came the baronet's husky tones. "This is a terrible disaster. I will not say who is to blame, for it is impossible for me to know all the facts over the telephone. But I will order my car at once, and motor down to Southampton with all speed."

After a few more words Nelson Lee hung up the receiver. Then he turned to the superintendent with a curious little smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Well, Reading, what do you think of it?" he asked calmly.

"I'm a bit mixed," confessed the superintendent. "I can't quite get the hang of things, Lee. It seems that that letter Mr. Hudson showed us was nothing but a forgery——"

"Of course it was a forgery. The whole thing is a forgery!" Lee replied. "We are surrounded by forgeries. The thing is simply breathless in its

audacity. Can't you grasp the inner meaning of it all, superintendent? If that letter of Sir Robert's was a forgery, it stands to reason that the letter from the postmaster-general was also a forgery! We've simply been fooled all along the line. Don't you remember the instructions in that letter? No communication was to be made with the head office, or with anybody. Of course not! If Mr. Hudson had communicated with the head office the whole plot would have been exposed. By James, it's amazingly clever!"

"But—but the Scotland Yard detectives!" asked Reading, in painful bewilderment. "I spoke with the men, and——"

"Ring up Scotland Yard at once!" Lee advised sharply.

Reading was soon in communication with the famous police institution in London. And a few short questions brought him the answer that the Yard knew absolutely nothing whatever of the bullion or the mail-van or the six detectives.

"Merely part of the trick, my dear Reading," said Nelson Lee, calmly lighting a cigar. "By Jove, I must say I admire the man who planned this coup. Just think of the absolute daring of it!"

The superintendent swore fluently.

"What's the good of thinking of that?" he growled. "The bullion's gone, and we shall be the laughing-stock of the whole country! I'm hanged if I can realise the full meaning of it, even now!"

Nelson Lee halted in front of his companion.

"Then let me make matters clear," he said quietly. "The note from Sir Robert Meade was a forgery in order to have the bullion transferred on to the mail-van. The instructions to the postmaster were forgeries, so that the arrival of the mail-van would be in perfect order, and would give rise to no questions. The postmaster and Mr. Hudson conferred with one another, and found everything cut and dried. Not a single suspicion was aroused. And the astounding plan actually included the help of the regular police force! You, my dear fellow, assisted in the robbery of five hundred thousand pounds in bullion! You saw it stolen before your eyes, and you saw it taken away. It's the most complete thing I've ever heard of for cool cheek!"

Reading simply gasped.

"But who did it?" he raved frantically. "Who in thunder could have forged those letters so accurately as to create no suspicion?"

Nelson Lee looked very grim.

"I have been thinking of that point," was his quiet reply. "There is only one man in the whole of Great Britain—or in the world, come to that—capable of such extraordinary penmanship."

"By glory, you mean——"

"I mean Jim the Penman," replied Nelson Lee softly. "Douglas James Sutcliffe, the cleverest forger in existence! I'll stake my reputation that this robbery was engineered and carried out by Jim the Penman!"

CHAPTER IV.

Nipper Witnesses Some Astonishing Happenings.

"RIPPING! Absolutely ripping!"

Nipper made that ecstatic remark quite loudly, and addressed it to the open air. He couldn't very well address it to anything else—unless it was the sea, or the small motor-boat in which he was sitting.

Nipper was enjoying himself hugely.

The motor-boat was quite a small one, and fitted with an engine which was not at all remarkable for its power or efficiency. But this evening it was certainly in splendid tune, and the boat was cutting across the water at a fairly respectable speed.

Nipper had started out with the intention of going for quite a short run. The fact that his master was helping the police in a little affair on shore did not worry Nipper in the least. After all, he had told himself, collaring a few highway robbers wasn't much of a game, anyhow.

He was glad that he had elected to go on his motor-boat trip. It was miles better than lying amongst damp grass on a lonely road for the sake of seeing the police capture a few wretched criminals. Nipper thought—as, indeed, his master had thought—that the affair was merely a trivial matter. He had not the slightest suspicion that Nelson Lee's old enemy, Jim the Penman, was largely involved in the plot. Still less did Nipper suspect that the coup was the biggest the clever forger had ever engineered.

The young detective was bent on pleasure; and he was making the most of his time. He had skimmed down Southampton Water until Cowes lay directly ahead. Then, following the Solent, with the Isle of Wight on one hand and the shores of Hampshire on the other, he had passed out into the open sea, with the Needles on his left.

Bournemouth had been the outside limit of his trip. But the evening so glorious, the sea so delightfully calm, that he had headed his boat more to seaward with the intention of catching a sight of Swanage. He had started early, and so had plenty of time at his disposal. The sky was cloudless, and dusk seemed reluctant to fall.

Nipper knew that he had to get back, but he rather misjudged the time. The thought struck him that he might not be able to make Southampton before dark, but it would be quite easy for him to run into Bournemouth, or some other seaside town.

Somehow the lad felt rather reckless. He had plenty of petrol on board, so he saw no reason why he shouldn't have a really long trip while he was about it. But he had kept on his course, and was now almost out of sight of land, skimming along parallel with the shore. He rather liked getting out of sight of land and then turning shorewards again.

The little boat was going magnificently. He had had it out earlier in the day, but the engine had then been rather troublesome. Now, however, it was running beautifully, and Nipper gave himself completely up to the delicious enjoyment of the trip. He knew very well that he would be probably kept hard at work in London for some time to come.

He imagined himself to be just opposite Durlston Head, but, as a matter of fact, he was in quite a different neighbourhood. Lolling back in the boat, he had allowed himself to glide on without taking count of time or distance.

"By gum, it's glorious!" he told himself. "I'll bet the guv'nor wishes he was with me! It's rotten, but I suppose I shall have to be turning back before long."

He sat forward and glanced round. Then he grinned cheerfully. On every hand he could see nothing but the sea, with one or two ships far away on the horizon, out in the Channel.

"I shall be in a pretty fix if a storm comes up!" Nipper thought.

But he knew quite well that a storm was about the most unlikely thing in the world. The weather was settled, and apparently intended remaining so for two or three days. But now, as he noticed that dusk was gathering, he steered the boat round in a neat circle and made for home again. He hadn't lost his bearings in the least, although he was a good deal out regarding his precise position.

"I don't suppose I shall be able to make Southampton, but that doesn't matter a jot," he told himself. "I expect the gov'nor will give me a good old jawing for remaining so long on the bosom of the deep, but this trip is worth a dozen jawings!"

He settled himself down for the homeward run. He knew by guesswork and his keen sense of direction which way to steer, but a small compass in front of him prevented him making any mistake.

"I hope we shall be delayed from going back to London again," he thought. "I'd just love to hire this boat again to-morrow——"

Snap!

"What the merry thunder——"

Nipper broke off in dismay. Following the sharp snap, a terrific grinding noise had sounded. The motor raced with a terrific roar, and the boat quivered and shook so much that Nipper could scarcely sit still.

He hadn't the least idea what had happened, but he at once bent forward and stopped the engine. There was nothing wrong with that, at all events. A very short investigation soon satisfied Nipper that something was very seriously amiss.

In fact, the propeller shaft had snapped!

"Well, this is a go!" exclaimed Nipper blankly. "Busted like a giddy carrot! How the dickens can I get home without a propeller? If I run the engine for a thousand years, it won't shift me an inch!"

He knew well enough, indeed, that to run the engine would very soon jolt the boat to pieces. This was no mishap which he could set to rights. It was a real disaster, and there was utterly no way in which he could effect a repair.

With the propeller shaft broken, the boat was as helpless as a log of wood.

Nipper didn't feel much alarm. After convincing himself that he could do nothing, he squatted down and thought deeply.

Not that thinking helped him much. There was nothing for him to do except sit where he was and wait for a ship to come along and pick him up. He might have to wait half an hour, or he might have to wait half the night. It depended largely upon luck.

Although Nipper was in no way alarmed, he was decidedly incensed. He glared at the engine as though the thing had done him a personal injury. The engine, however, was quite innocent of wrongdoing. The propeller shaft was the culprit.

"Of all the rotten luck!" growled Nipper savagely. "Just when I was off home after the most pleasant trip I've ever had! Something like this was sure to happen, of course!"

The prospect before him was by no means alluring. He had been looking forward to a huge supper, for his trip had provided him with an appetite of generous proportions. There was some slight consolation in the knowledge that he had a packet of sandwiches and a couple of bottles of mineral water in the locker. If the worse came to the worst, and he had to remain afloat for many hours, he was at least provided with a supper—somewhat frugal, but nevertheless a supper.

Now that it was too late, he was quite angry with himself for having ventured out so far. If he had stuck close to the coast, he could easily have made signals to someone on shore, and rescue would have followed promptly. As it was, he could do nothing at all but still still, and watch the steamers in the far distance.

There was no fear of his being run down, for, after all, he was not very far out, and was right off the track of shipping.

Moreover—although Nipper didn't know it—he was slowly drifting nearer and nearer to the shore with every minute that passed. Hours were destined

to go by before he would be able to step on Mother Earth, but his position was no more than uncomfortable and exasperating.

There was certainly no danger.

The time seemed to pass dreadfully slowly, but darkness descended in earnest, and with the rapid approach of night Nipper realised that it would be as well for him to light his lamps. After all, he wasn't exactly sure of his position, and the prospect of being cut in two by a lumbering old tramp steamer wasn't precisely pleasant.

The lad discovered, however, that there were no lamps in the boat. He had never given it a thought. Fully intending to be back before dark, this was only natural. But now that he required lamps, he realised that it is always better to come out well prepared for any emergency.

The young detective was a decided optimist, and he accepted the situation philosophically. There was no sense in making the worst of it and pulling a long face. He might as well accept his misfortune cheerfully as gloomily.

There were a couple of magazines in the locker, and he amused himself with these until the light grew too dim for him to read further. Complete darkness descended upon the water very rapidly now.

An hour later Nipper awoke from a short doze, to find pitchy blackness all round him. He was cramped and rather chilly, and there was a most unpleasant feeling of emptiness beneath his waistcoat.

"Oh, rats!" he muttered. "I suppose I might as well eat that grub! No sense in letting it get stale in the locker, anyhow!"

While he munched the sandwiches, he looked round him with interest; but the night was extremely dark, and he could not even see the distinction between sky and sea. On every hand nothing but pitch darkness greeted his eyes.

"Not even a blessed steamer!" Nipper muttered disgustedly. "Seems to me I'm booked for a night of it! My hat, the-guv'nor will be tearing his hair over this!"

The lad couldn't help grinning as the thought struck him. Nelson Lee would probably imagine that his young assistant had met with a fearful disaster, and had gone to the bottom. And Nipper was picturing to himself the expression on Lee's face when he turned up safe and sound.

But at present there seemed no prospect of Nipper turning up at all—at least, not until the morrow.

In one way the situation was quite ludicrous. The lad was within twenty minutes' run of the shore, and yet he was as helpless as though he had been in mid-Channel.

After he had demolished the greater proportion of the sandwiches, washing them down with a bottle of lemonade, he felt decidedly better. Glancing at the sky, he saw that the stars were blotted out by fleecy, fine-weather clouds. The sea was beautifully calm, and no sounds broke the stillness except the soft lap and gurgle of the water around the boat.

Try as he would he could not see any sign of the coast or any sign of the skyline. It seemed to him as though he were utterly alone on the open face of the ocean. It was galling to know that, but for that broken propeller shaft, he could be ashore in next to no time.

The tide, however, was causing the boat to drift nearer and nearer to land. But for the darkness, Nipper would have been able to see the cliffs quite distinctly, and had he been opposite a town or a village, he would certainly have seen the lights of houses.

But the coast at this point was singularly bare and deserted. There was not even a cottage near the sea for several miles, and so Nipper had no knowledge of his actual position.

The silence and loneliness had the effect of making him drowsy, and he



Nipper's eyes were fixed in a fascinating stare upon the burning fuse. Nearer and nearer crept the terrible spark to the box containing the explosive. Was there no means of extinguishing that spark?

raked out an old blanket which had been stuffed away somewhere in the stern. With this wrapped round him, he lay back and dozed off.

Exactly how long he slept, he did not know; but he certainly did sleep in a fitful, restless kind of fashion. The far-away sound of a steamship's siren, hoarse and mournful, caused him to open his eyes.

The water was lapping gently against the sides of the boat, and the sound had a restful note about it. But Nipper, lying on his back, didn't concern himself with the gurgle of the sea.

He was looking straight at the sky, and he at once noticed a great difference. The clouds had cleared, and the sky was bespangled with bright stars. Nipper judged the hour to be about midnight, but he didn't go to the trouble of looking at his watch. It didn't really matter to him what the time was.

He sat up and looked round. The sea was bare and deserted save for a tiny blur of light in one direction, marking the spot where a large steamer was passing, almost hull-down.

But Nipper now saw that the starlight made a great alteration. For he could see the skyline distinctly, and, turning his head in the other direction, he was rather astonished to observe a long line of high cliffs.

He roused himself in earnest. No lights were visible, but the cliffs were clearly to be seen. Almost opposite him the cliffs were broken, and a small gap was formed, probably leading down to the beach.

"I sha'n't spend the rest of my life in this rotten boat, anyhow!" thought the lad. "I seem to have drifted a good way, and I'm drifting all the while. At this rate, I shall run ashore in the early morning. I'm not more than a mile out."

Nipper wondered if he should attempt to swim to the beach, but he at once dismissed the thought. There was no object to be gained by getting himself soaked to the skin, and then finding himself in a lonely spot, unable to seek shelter. He was far better in the boat, dry and fairly comfortable.

He looked at the line of cliffs mechanically, and fell to pondering how long it would be before the boat drifted ashore. Then he suddenly bent forward and stared hard into the darkness.

"Jolly queer!" he muttered perplexedly.

He thought he had seen a sign of movement almost opposite the gap in the cliffs. He continued to look, and before another minute had passed by he was convinced that his eyes had not deceived him.

Something was moving, but he couldn't see exactly what the something was.

He remembered that there was a pair of night-glasses in the locker, and he quickly fished them out. With these to his eyes, he slowly swept the coast-line. After a fruitless search of a minute's duration, he remained perfectly still.

Through the glasses he could dimly see the moving object which had first caught his attention. Faintly he could now distinguish it as a small rowing-boat and it was coming out from the shore almost directly towards him.

But the boat had no lights, and was merely a dull blur upon the water. He continued to watch, and mentally decided to give a lusty yell in a few moments. Then it seemed to him as though the boat had come to a stop.

He saw movements aboard, and then a couple of blurry figures heaved a large object—seemingly a box—overboard into the sea. Another box followed, and another after that. Then one of the dim figures cast out what appeared to be a line, with a heavy weight at the bottom of it.

"Seems to be something to mark the spot," muttered Nipper. "There's a float at the top, I believe. Well, this is jolly funny, I must say. What the dickens can the beggars be up to?"

At first he thought that the boat might contain some innocent fishermen. But what were fishermen doing in the middle of the night, heaving heavy boxes overboard, and then marking the spot where they had sunk?

The lad's intention of shouting for assistance was abandoned now. In some unaccountable way, he had an idea that this incident he was a witness to was something "queer." The strange boat pulled back to the shore now, and he lost sight of it in the blackness against the cliffs.

After a short interval Nipper was surprised to see the boat coming out again. He had drifted nearer now, and—by the aid of the glasses—he could see much more distinctly. He was quite sure that the men in this mysterious boat were totally unconscious of his presence. His tiny craft was low in the water, and probably invisible to those in the other boat.

"Well, I'm bothered!"

Nipper murmured the words as he saw the first performance being repeated. Several other boxes were being deliberately dropped overside into the sea. Its cargo got rid of, the boat returned to the shore.

A third time it came out, and a third batch of cases were delivered to the doubtful care of the ocean. Nipper, by this time, was not only wide-awake and curious, but he was filled with a strange excitement.

He could see the rowing-boat distinctly now, without the aid of the glasses; and as it again returned to the shore he wondered if it would come out again. It did. For a fourth time a consignment of boxes were cast over the boat's side.

But this time, instead of returning to the gap, the boat set off in the direction of a high cliff somewhat to the left. And Nipper realised that his own boat was gradually drifting straight towards this very same cliff.

What could be the meaning of this singular midnight adventure?

CHAPTER V.

Jim the Penman Takes No Chances.

NEARER and nearer!

Possibly it was on account of the close proximity of the shore, but it seemed to Nipper that he was drifting at a much faster pace towards the cliffs.

Quite clearly he could see the strange boat close against the cliff-face. He took care to crouch low, and to make no sound. For by this time all the youngster's detective instincts were on the alert, and he was anxious to find out what was afoot.

Nipper's curiosity was at fever heat. He was not a curious lad by nature, except when it came to a matter of crime and criminals. And somehow he could not help feeling that the incident he had witnessed was something of a fishy nature.

A fair amount of time had passed since the boat with its two occupants—he could see there were two now—reached the cliff. They remained in the boat, busy with something or other, for fully twenty minutes. Meanwhile, of course, Nipper's little craft was drifting nearer and nearer on the tide.

Before long, indeed, the lad felt pretty sure that he would be noticed. But he lay low and made no sound. He wondered what the two men were doing, but was even more surprised a few minutes later.

For the pair scrambled out of the boat on to a rocky ledge which ran along the cliff several feet above the surface of the calm water. Then the two men completely disappeared. They seemed to vanish into a black crevice.

"Must be a cave!" thought Nipper interestedly.

As he watched he caught a faint glimmer of subdued light, and knew that his surmise was correct. The mysterious men had certainly entered a cavity in the cliff, and the light was probably made by an electric torch, carefully shaded—for the glimmer was very dim, and would have been invisible half a mile out to sea.

The helpless motor-boat was very close now, but it was drifting straight towards a point of the cliff which would bring Nipper fairly fifty yards to the left of the now deserted rowing-boat.

Obviously, the water was quite deep. As a matter of fact this particular portion of the coast was noted for the depth of the sea immediately under the cliffs. Even at low tide the sea was so deep that no trace of the bottom could be seen. It was, at least, several fathoms deep, and the actual base of the cliff could only be reached by submarine operations—not that such operations had ever been attempted. There was no reason why they should be, for the coast here was exceptionally lonely.

Nipper was exceedingly impatient now. Completely at the mercy of the tide, he was being carried beyond the cave opening. And in a very short time the bow of his boat scraped sharply against the rough rocks of the cliff. As he had foreseen he was some little distance to the left of the other boat.

Had the two men been still in the open they would undoubtedly have been attracted by that scraping jar. They would, too, have seen the boat quite clearly. But they were both within the little cave, and so they were totally unconscious of Nipper's presence.

The lad did not pause to consider the quaint laws of chance which had plunged him into this extraordinary adventure. If he had only known it, the affair was even more amazing than he could possibly have imagined.

His thoughts were concerned in securing the boat and finding a foothold on the cliffs. He uncoiled the painter, and had no difficulty in finding a jagged piece of rock to which he could secure it.

Gazing upwards, he could see the cliff towering above him, the upper edge actually overhanging. To climb to the top was a sheer impossibility.

But the tides of countless years had worn the cliff hollow near the surface of the sea. The tide was not at its highest, and Nipper could plainly see that a narrow ledge ran right along the cliff about six feet above the water. At high tide this was covered, for it was slimy and green with seaweed.

But Nipper was quite decided in mind. The ledge, he saw, led straight towards the cave opening, and, without hesitation, he determined to venture along it for the purpose of seeing what game the strangers were up to.

It was ticklish work, but Nipper was nimble, and as sure-footed as a mountain mule. Nelson Lee had sometimes declared that Nipper resembled a mule in other respects.

At last the lad arrived at his objective. The ledge widened here, and the entrance to the cave was some little distance back. He crept forward on tiptoe, and projected his head round a jutting piece of rock. He distinctly heard voices, but now it was possible for him to distinguish the words.

For the moment, however, he took no notice of what was being said. His whole thoughts were occupied in what he saw. The cave was deep but extremely narrow, the two walls of it being only about six feet apart. The rocks of which the walls were composed seemed to be loose and some-

what unsafe, and Nipper had noticed that a crack extended right up the cliff face outside.

The two men had their backs towards him. One of them was holding an electric torch and directing its light towards the back of the cave, and in the direction of the floor

The other man was crouching down, busy with something. It needed only a brief look for Nipper to understand what was being done. A heavy charge of explosive was being prepared for setting! The man was even now making sure that the fuse was in perfect order!

"Well, I'm blowed!" murmured Nipper in amazement.

But this surprise was as nothing to the one which followed immediately afterwards. The man on the floor had made a remark which Nipper did not catch, and his companion laughed shortly, and exclaimed:

"The explosion will scarcely be heard, my dear Nash. And even if it is heard in the far distance nobody will suspect the real cause. It will be universally taken for granted that the noise was created by the huge fall of cliff which will undoubtedly follow."

Nipper gasped.

Indeed, it is a wonder he did not betray himself, for the sharp sound he made was quite involuntary. It was not the words which filled him with amazement—although they were surprising enough—but the voice.

It was the voice!

"Great Scott! What can it mean?" thought Nipper rapidly. "I'll bet a thousand quid to a safety-pin that this chap here is Jim the Penman! What the thunder can it mean? Jim the Penman here—in a little cave on the south coast, setting a dynamite charge!"

There was good reason for Nipper's positive conviction. He had met the clever forger on many occasions, and knew Jim the Penman's smooth, easy voice almost as well as he knew Nelson Lee's.

And in a few minutes he received verification of his suspicions.

"I reckon this'll do the job pretty thoroughly, Jim," said the man who had been called Nash. "After the mail-van's been chucked over the edge of the cliff into the sea, this explosive will bring thousands of tons of rock down, and the van will be buried beyond any possible chance of discovery."

Jim the Penman chuckled.

"That is the object of the plan," he exclaimed softly. "Not only will the mail-van be at the bottom of the sea, but it will be totally buried into the bargain. It is not my habit to take chances, Nash, and I always do things thoroughly."

Nash chuckled in turn.

"This coup is being done thoroughly, anyhow," he remarked. "You know, you're a bit of a marvel, Jim. I don't think any other man in the world could have carried the thing through with such astounding coolness. There, I reckon I've done now!"

He rose to his feet, and the two men stood looking down upon Nash's handiwork. Nipper was panting somewhat heavily. Full realisation had dawned upon him, and the lad was left almost devoid of breath.

His thoughts were jumbled and confused for a few seconds.

The mail-van!

Nipper remembered, at once, that Nelson Lee had referred to a mail-van when telling him of the bullion robbery plot. Sharp as a needle, Nipper instantly connected the bullion robbery with this affair.

"Those boxes I saw chucked into the sea!" he muttered tensely. "I thought the chaps were dotty at the time, but now I know different. What were those heavy cases? Bullion—gold—as sure as I'm alive! And they

were dropped to the bottom of the sea so as to be safe from discovery. The stolen mail-van is to be completely demolished, so as to leave no trace!"

Nipper's shrewd guess left him quivering with excitement. And the robbery had been planned and executed by Douglas James Sutcliffe. The fact that the gold had been dropped into the sea, and that Jim the Penman was here, was proof positive that Nelson Lee's scheme to capture the thieves had miscarried.

"By Jupiter, I've dropped on something, and no mistake!" thought Nipper.

His surmise, to be perfectly frank, was the exact truth. Jim the Penman had planned the robbery with singular cunning and skill. He had allowed no detail to escape his attention.

He had been certain that the bullion would be handed over to the man in charge of the mail-van without a suspicion of the truth occurring to the police or to the bank officials. His amazingly clever forgeries had prepared everything in advance—the letter to Mr. Hudson—the instructions to the postmaster—and the authority to the captain of the *Chatworth* to deliver the bullion. Not a single slip had been made.

And after the mail-van had left Southampton, laden with its precious consignment, all trace of it had been covered up by extremely clever devices. The van was an exact replica of one of the heaviest and most powerful of the Royal Mail Service vehicles.

After the van had passed through Winchester it had turned off, and taken a carefully prepared route. But in a quiet spot a huge tarpaulin, bearing the name of an alleged furniture removing firm, had been drawn completely over the bright red paintwork. A cleverly made contrivance had also been fitted over the engine bonnet, thus altering the design completely.

Anybody viewing the vehicle after the transformation would never have connected it with the missing mail-van. But the trip could never have been accomplished in broad daylight, and before dawn the van would have to vanish completely off the face of the earth.

The loss was a mere trifle. Half a million sterling had been gained, and so the destruction of a mere motor-vehicle was an insignificant sacrifice.

And Jim the Penman had decided upon a plan which few men would have conceived. The van, relieved of its cargo, was to be pushed over the edge of the cliff above. It would plunge into deep water; but even this was not sufficient to satisfy the clever rogue. A heavy fall of cliff would make absolutely certain of the job. And by exploding a fairly heavy charge of dynamite right in the cave the end would be achieved. A huge proportion of the cliff would crumble down, and the van would be buried beyond all chance of discovery. The explosion would be so muffled that nobody would suspect what had actually happened. If by chance it was heard, the noise would be attributed to the rumbling roar of the landslide.

But there were no houses in this vicinity; the country was quite deserted on either hand. By morning Jim the Penman and his confederates would be right out of the neighbourhood, and would lie low until the sensation of the robbery had died down. The police would never think of looking for the missing bullion in a bare, bleak spot like this, and so comparatively close to the scene of the robbery.

Nipper's thoughts, after a short time, became clear and acute. He knew that by a strange chance he had come across one of the most amazing crimes that had ever been committed. His drifting motor-boat had brought him slap-bang upon the scene of the bullion's hiding-place.

But the lad's position was by no means secure. As he crouched round the

rock, gazing at the rear view of Jim the Penman, he wondered rapidly how he should act. And it seemed to him that he would be unable to do anything, except quietly return to his boat and hope to escape unseen. If the worst came to the worse he could plunge into the water and swim ashore.

But, as it happened, Nipper was not to be allowed to make his own plans. As he watched something occurred which the lad was by no means prepared for. Jim suddenly swung round and looked round towards the exit of the cave. At the same second he switched off his electric torch.

Nipper drew his head back sharply, and then kicked himself for being such a young idiot. But he had acted instinctively. Had he remained perfectly still Jim would certainly have taken his head for a jutting piece of rock. But rocks don't move themselves, and the forger knew at once that a stranger was present.

From the interior of the cave the sky was almost clearly outlined. Jim saw the movement of Nipper's head clearly, and the forger uttered a sharp, furious exclamation.

Then he dashed forward swiftly. Nipper at the same time turned, intending to plunge straight into the sea.

But his foot slipped on the treacherous seaweed, and he fell sprawling. Before he could rise, Jim the Penman was upon him, pinning him down. Nipper fought gamely, but Nash came to his chief's assistance, and within two minutes Nipper was carted bodily into the cave and thrown down upon the floor. The bright electric light flashed fully upon his flushed face.

"Heavens—Nipper!" snarled Jim the Penman harshly.

The forger's fury was terrible. A second before he had been calm and cool, telling himself that everything had gone off perfectly. But now he was filled with doubts and misgivings. Nipper was here—Nipper had probably seen all!

"You infernal young hound!" was Jim's grating utterance. "Quick, Nash! Bring that rope over, and bind him!"

Nipper was very soon roped up—roughly, but securely. Then Jim straightened up, and ordered his companion to hurry outside and make investigations. Nash did so, and Jim and Nipper were left alone.

The young detective was alarmed and furious, but he knew that he had not been to blame for his capture. Fate had thrust this adventure upon him, but it wasn't likely that Fate would stand by him in a time of peril. And Nipper affected a defiant attitude, and accepted the situation with apparent calmness.

"Bit of a shock for you—eh?" he said coolly. "You thought that you had tricked the gov'nor——"

"You young cub!" interjected Jim roughly. "I don't know how you got here, but I think it must be just a matter of chance. I know that you started out in a motor-boat from Southampton, while your confounded master went on his fool's errand to Pandyke. How did you know that I was in this cave?"

Nipper did not answer for a moment. And when he was ready to do so Nash re-entered the cave and explained that a motor-boat with a broken propeller-shaft was moored just along the cliffs.

"It's queer!" remarked Jim, with a frown. "The youngster evidently came across us quite by accident. He must have been alone, for there isn't an inch of room for a rabbit to hide on that ledge, and besides, we know that Nipper started out alone."

The forger's anger was subsiding as he realised that there was no cause for alarm. A grim frown was still on his brow, however, and the glitter in his eyes told Nipper that he need expect no mercy.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nash furiously.

"There is only one thing to be done," was Jim's reply. "Nipper is an old enemy of mine, and I'm not at all sorry to settle old scores with him. Moreover, he has seen altogether more than is healthy for us. By a strange coincidence he drifted to this spot, but I shall take good care he doesn't leave it!"

Nipper clenched his teeth.

"Pretty manly sort of game, isn't it?" he asked cuttingly. "Two hulking great men against a boy! I reckon you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sutcliffe! I always gave you credit for being a little better than a blackguard!"

"My dear Nipper, you are at liberty to relieve your feelings by violent speech as much as you please," said Jim the Penman suavely. "I feel sorry for you—I do really! You have blundered along here just when an explosion is to take place. I am very much afraid that we shall be unable to remove you from this cave before the actual bust-up. The result will be regrettable from your point of view, but quite satisfactory from mine!"

Nipper turned pale in spite of himself. The forger's tone was soft and silky, and it seemed impossible that he was telling Nipper that the lad was about to be murdered. Yet in plain words that was Jim's meaning.

And Sutcliffe wasted no further time.

He was quite satisfied that once Nipper was out of the way his scheme would follow its original course unchecked. Nipper had made an appearance, and if he were allowed to go free the whole game would be up. Therefore, Nipper must vanish.

It was the lad's life or the loss of half a million. And Jim the Penman did not take one minute in deciding.

The lad was carried a little further into the cave, and laid down across the floor, which sloped steeply towards the rear. The charge of explosive was placed within six feet of him, and then Nash stood on guard while Jim the Penman went off, after delivering a brisk order.

Nipper's companion was not a talkative man. He stood there calmly smoking, and the minutes steadily passed. After a full half-hour had slipped by, Nash suddenly stepped forward to the cave entrance and stood looking out upon the sea.

Nipper watched the little patch of star-spangled sky with difficulty, for his bonds would not allow him much movement. He had a wild idea of wriggling towards the fuse and biting it through, so that after burning nearly its whole length it would splutter out.

But this idea was, indeed, a wild one. It was utterly impossible to put it into execution. Nipper was forced to resign himself to the inevitable. He was boiling with inward rage, but took care to show no sign of it lest Nash should think he were a coward.

As he looked past his captor out into the night he saw the sky blotted out for a second. A tremendous splash followed, and Nipper needed no telling what had happened.

The fake mail-van had been sent over the cliff-edge, and was even now slowly settling to the sea bed. What was the loss of a five hundred pound vehicle compared to the gaining of half a million? The sacrifice was absolutely necessary.

Jim the Penman was not long in returning. For Nipper to live was impossible, for there was no telling how much he had seen. Probably the forger felt a little compunction in his steely heart.

At all events, he made no attempt to taunt his victim. He entered the

cave without a word, quickly ignited the fuse, and then left. He ignored Nipper completely, and sharply ordered Nash to jump into the boat.

The fuse was a long one, but it spluttered and hissed with ominous rapidity. Nipper was quivering with the intensity of the moment, but even now the lad was not afraid. If death was to overtake him, it would at least be swift and merciful.

He heard the boat rowing rapidly away, and then he thought of his own position. His eyes were fixed in a fascinating stare upon the burning fuse. Nearer and nearer crept the terrible spark to the box containing the explosive. Was there no means of extinguishing that spark?

Nipper simply had to wait—wait for the appalling end!

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee Explains Things, and Makes a Promise.

SOUTHAMPTON Police-station was in a state very far removed from its customary quietness. In fact, the establishment was in something of a turmoil. Superintendent Reading had not had a wink of sleep the whole night through. It was morning now, but he was still awake and active.

Reading had never been so worried in the whole course of his career. The bullion had disappeared, and the utmost efforts of the police had proved useless. After the false mail-van had passed through Winchester it seemed as though the heavy vehicle had been swallowed up by the very earth itself.

No trace of it could be found. *

Certainly word had come in from various quarters that mail-vans had been seen speeding through the night, but every one of these were regular and quite respectable vehicles engaged in postal duties.

Telephones and telegraphs had been busy without intermission, but all to no purpose. And not only had the mail-van disappeared, together with its attendants, but the gang who were to have robbed the van were nowhere to be found.

It was obvious that the whole thing was a put-up job, and that it had been planned with minute care, probably days in advance.

Superintendent Reading hastened round to the London and Southern Bank as soon as he learned that Sir Robert Meade had arrived. Nelson Lee was already with Mr. Hudson in the latter's office, although the hour was still fairly early.

When Reading arrived he found Lee and Mr. Hudson suffering from a terrific fire of furious words from the bank's governor. Sir Robert was not only angry, but furious almost to a point of apoplexy.

The superintendent was somewhat taken aback, and made an attempt to protest. But his appearance was the signal for an outburst of even greater violence. And Reading, looking helplessly at Nelson Lee, saw the latter indulge in a slight wink.

Reading took his cue, and made no attempt to stay Sir Robert's words. Lee's idea was to let the baronet exhaust himself, and then talk business afterwards. It was really impossible, and a painful waste of breath, to attempt to argue with Sir Robert in his present mood.

As Lee had expected, the baronet very soon worked his anger off, and then he flopped into a chair, mopped his brow, and glared round him.

"Five hundred thousand!" he concluded fiercely. "And you allowed it to be stolen right under your very noses, begad! Dunderheads! Imbeciles! The whole job-lot of you aren't worth a halfpenny!"

"But, my dear Sir Robert, I cannot see that the police are to blame!" protested Mr. Hudson. "How were they to know? I had your written authority——"

Sir Robert nearly exploded.

"My written fiddlesticks!" he roared. "I didn't send you a word, and you ought to have had sense enough to know a forgery when you saw it——"

"An ordinary forgery, no doubt," Mr. Hudson interjected. "But you, sir, have seen the letter, and you must admit that the handwriting was in every respect identical with your own. Moreover, everything pointed to the communication being genuine. The postmaster had received instructions, and the Chatworth's skipper was provided with your own authority to deliver the gold. How could there possibly have been any cause for suspicions arising?"

"Mr. Hudson has put the thing very clearly," said Nelson Lee. "In common fairness, Sir Robert, you really must acknowledge that neither the police nor Mr. Hudson nor the postmaster had any reason to doubt the authenticity of their instructions. In Mr. Hudson's case his orders were brought by your own private secretary, Mr. Adams, thus proving beyond question, apparently, that everything was in order. And in the case of the postmaster, the letter was delivered to him by a thoroughly reliable G.P.O. official. Why should they suspect treachery? What possible reason had they to suspect treachery? None whatever. The whole thing was so obviously open and above board that the robbery was assured of success. In spite of myself, I really admire the way in which the scheme was planned and carried out."

Sir Robert was calmer now, and somewhat confused by the intricacies which were being revealed.

"But my secretary is as honest as the day——" he began.

"I do not question Mr. Adams's honesty in the slightest," Lee resumed quietly. "I have already talked with him, and have learned how he was duped. He lives some little distance from your own residence, Sir Robert, and yesterday morning a District Messenger-boy delivered a sealed package to him. It was, to all intents and purposes, an urgent message from you, ordering him to depart immediately from Southampton—without consulting you—to deliver a second sealed letter, which was enclosed, into Mr. Hudson's hands. Naturally enough, Mr. Adams started straight away, and fulfilled his mission. The same plan was adopted with regard to the official who brought the letter to the postmaster. There is evidence at every turn to show that the plot was planned with a wealth of detail which only a master-mind could map out."

The superintendent frowned thoughtfully.

"But who were those men you followed, Lee?" he asked. "Surely that business was not necessary for the success of the plot? I can't quite get the hang of things. It seems to me that the facts don't tally. If the bullion was stolen actually on the quay—as it certainly was—why was there a plot to rob the bullion-van on the road? Is it possible that there were two gangs at work?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Oh, no," he replied; "it all fits together, as I will explain. That highway-robbery plan was merely a clever subterfuge. It is not often I am so hopelessly tricked, but I undoubtedly was on this occasion—and I don't blame myself. At that time I had no suspicion of such an astounding series of forgeries."

"But who tricked you, Mr. Lee?" Sir Robert inquired.

"Jim the Penman—or, to give him his real name, Douglas Sutcliffe."

"But we are not certain that Sutcliffe is connected with this affair," Reading interposed.

"We have no proof, if that is what you mean," was Nelson Lee's reply. "But I know, as well as I know that you are standing there, that the author of these forgeries was none other than Jim the Penman. My dear superintendent, there isn't another forger in existence who could have perpetrated them! They are absolutely masterpieces of penmanship. Even Sir Robert himself cannot detect the fraud."

"I am bound to admit," said the baronet, "that the similarity is amazingly accurate. And, under the circumstances, I begin to realise that nobody is particularly to blame for the loss of the bullion. Begad, it is a terrible affair!"

And Sir Robert mopped his brow afresh.

"You were saying, Mr. Lee——" hinted Reading.

"Ah, yes. About the highway robbery plot," Nelson Lee said. "Well, in the past I have had ample evidence that Jim the Penman fears me. For the police he has nothing but contempt. No, don't look offended, Reading. I am only stating that which I know to be absolute fact. Jim has had very good cause to steer clear of me, for I have made it my business on several occasions to hunt him remorselessly. The fact that he is still at large is in no way my fault."

"He is as slippery as an eel!" growled the superintendent.

"Quite so—and as difficult to catch," Lee went on quietly. "Well, it happened that I was in Southampton on quite a minor matter. Jim the Penman obviously saw that I was in the town, and he immediately became uneasy. I don't think he suspected that I was here in connection with his plot, but he decided to make a move which would effectively clear me out of the way, and leave the coast clear for his own plans. Moreover, to drag me into his plot probably appealed to his rather curious sense of humour. In addition to making fools of the police, he wanted to make a fool of me—and he certainly succeeded," added the detective ruefully.

"But how——"

"Please listen. I am just telling you of my suspicions. I was deliberately tricked. Those two men I overheard outside the bank were confederates of Sutcliffe's, and they spoke the words especially for my benefit—they fully intended me to overhear what they said! They performed their work with such cleverness, however, that I never suspected at the time that it was all a put-up job."

"They caught you napping, Lee," said Reading, not without a certain relish.

"Oh, no!" Lee replied quickly. "They certainly did not catch me napping. I was very wide awake, and I don't think anybody will accuse me of being dull-witted. How in the name of goodness was I to suspect such a subterfuge? Remember, I knew nothing of the forgeries then. I thought the whole thing was genuine. Well, I followed the men, as they intended I should, and they led me to an old barn just out in the country."

"What for?" asked Sir Robert.

"For the especial purpose of allowing me to overhear their conversation," replied the detective grimly. "Upon my soul, it is all as clear as daylight now. That barn was chosen deliberately, because the scoundrels reckoned that I would find my way round to the hole in the roof, at the rear. They relied upon my taking advantage of the barn's obvious good points. It was a deep scheme, and I don't think anybody but Sutcliffe would have conceived it. A great deal depended upon how I would act, and Jim calculated with astonishing accuracy. He laid his plans in anticipation of how I should behave, and I naturally fell in with the arrangement with beautiful precision. I ask you, gentlemen, how was I to ever dream of such intricate plotting? If I had really blundered, I should be the first to admit my

failure. But, frankly, I do not for one moment admit that I was to blame. At the time I thought that I had stumbled across a fairly ordinary robbery plot. You all know the result of that interesting little episode, and you all know why it was done."

"I may be dense, Mr. Lee," said Sir Robert, "but I certainly cannot follow you. Why was it done?"

Nelson Lee paused to light a cigarette.

"Jim the Penman did not like the idea of my being on the spot at the time of the bullion transfer," he replied, throwing a match into the fireplace. "He thought, possibly, that I should guess things, that I should suspect the 'Scotland Yard detectives' of being frauds. Accordingly, the plan I have outlined was adopted in order to get me out of the way until midnight. The scheme had the added advantage of distracting attention from the actual robbery, and of also clearing most of the police out of Southampton. With a strong force of police and myself kicking our heels at Pandyke the coast was practically clear for the real theft. Jim probably knew that he would have no difficulty in hoodwinking the excellent superintendent who was in charge of the operations on the quay," added Lee drily, with a smile at Reading.

The superintendent coughed.

"It's an infernally bad business!" he growled crossly. "It's bad for Sir Robert, it's bad for the bank, and it's bad for the Force!"

"I am not at all surprised," went on Lee. "Jim the Penman is an astonishing rogue, and this affair is exactly in his line. Of course, the coincidence of my happening to overhear the plot was no coincidence at all. It was all arranged. And we now have to face the consequences. The bullion has vanished, and we may be sure that the rest of Jim's scheme is as thorough as the opening chapter. If the gold is to be recovered, we shall have to gather all our wits about us."

Mr. Hudson shifted restlessly.

"But where can the bullion have got to?" he asked. "Half-a-million sterling cannot be concealed as though it were a diamond necklace! Think of the bulk! Surely it will be the easiest of matters to trace that mail-van?"

Reading shrugged his shoulders.

"We have been trying to trace it since midnight," he answered quietly. "I have no doubt at all that we shall ultimately discover the vehicle—probably before mid-day. But all this loss of time is fatal. When we do find the van the gold will have been safely hidden away—we may be sure of that. Frankly, Sir Robert, I am not very optimistic regarding the discovery of the bullion."

The baronet rose to his feet.

"I wish to engage your services, Mr. Lee," he said, turning to the detective. "I want you to put your best efforts forward, and work your hardest. I need not dwell upon the effect this loss will have on the business of my bank. We shall be almost crippled if that bullion is not recovered."

"I will get to work right away, Sir Robert," said Lee promptly. "Indeed, even if you had not sought my services, I should have acted precisely the same. But my object is a different one from yours. I am more than anxious to lay hands on the man who is responsible for this daring theft. I have several old scores to wipe off with Mr. Douglas James Sutcliffe, and I want to get to grips with him!"

Nelson Lee did not wait any longer. Leaving Sir Robert Meade discussing the robbery with Mr. Hudson and Superintendent Reading, the detective left the bank. He was looking very thoughtful, and his jaw had a grim twist about it.

And the first person he saw out in the street was—Nipper.

CHAPTER VII.

What Nipper Had to Tell.

NELSON LEE had not been to his hotel since the previous evening. He therefore supposed that Nipper had come back from his evening trip, and had been quietly sleeping through all the excitement. Lee himself had been far too busy to think of sleep.

There was nothing surprising in his meeting outside the bank building. But Nelson Lee was certainly surprised at his young assistant's appearance. Nipper was in a shocking state.

His clothes were torn and dirty, his boots were smothered in grime, and his face looked as though he had been putting in a night's work in the stoke-hold of a steamer. In addition to these little details, Nipper's face was torn in several places, and there were one or two smears of blood on his cheeks, although these were partially hidden beneath the coating of dust and dirt.

Altogether, the youngster looked as though he had been "through the mill"—a crushing mill, to judge by the results. But, in spite of these cheerful drawbacks, he was as cool as ever.

"Hallo, gov'nor!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I was just looking for you."

Nelson Lee came to a halt.

"I think you had better look for a bath of hot water and a scrub-brush!" he said sternly. "What in Heaven's name have you been doing with yourself, young 'un? You are in a disgraceful condition!"

"These little things will happen, sir," Nipper remarked cheerfully. "I reckon you ought to be glad to see me in one whole piece. If it hadn't been for a miracle I should now be like that cinema-picture advertised over the road—in six parts! In fact, I might have been in six hundred!"

Lee stared.

"Are you mad, Nipper?" he asked sharply. "What's wrong with you, lad? Where have you been? What's the meaning of all this? How on earth did you——"

"Whoa! Hold on, gov'nor!" interjected Nipper. "I can't answer all those questions at once. I went to the hotel, and then to the police-station. The inspector told me you were at the bank, so here I am. I've just come back, sir."

"Just come back?"

"From my motor-boat trip," explained Nipper.

"And is it usual for people to return from motor-boat trips looking as though they had been under a steam-roller?" inquired Nelson Lee grimly.

"You had better come along with me to the hotel, Nipper. I have an idea that you have an explanation for me. I am worried enough——"

Nipper chuckled as he fell into pace beside his master.

"No need to worry, gov'nor," he said coolly. "Of course, the bullion's gone, isn't it? That highway robbery business was a trick—I figured that out all right. But it's all serene, sir!"

Nelson Lee turned his head swiftly.

"What have you been up to?" he asked, his heart beating a little quicker.

"I'll explain at the hotel, sir. But you needn't worry—the bullion's all right," said Nipper cheerfully. "I know where it is. I've located it."

"By James!"

Nelson Lee uttered the exclamation in a low voice, and grasped his companion's arm tightly. Nipper had spoken with exasperating coolness. Truth to tell, the young rascal was enjoying himself; he loved to give his master surprises.

"Knocked you all of a heap—eh, guv'nor?" he asked. "You thought I was sleeping in my cot like a good little boy? Well, I wasn't! And Jim the Penman will find that we're one too many for him still again!"

Lee halted, and faced the lad.

"Nipper, I don't know what you've done, but you're bubbling over with some amazing story, I'm positive," he said quietly. "You young sweep! You've been up to something on your own, and you've taken a rise out of me! Where I have failed, you have succeeded."

The detective said no more, but he hurried on to the hotel at an increased pace, Nipper keeping step with his master, and presenting an extremely ludicrous spectacle beside the immaculately clothed detective. But little details like that were of no account. The fact that Nipper was in the highest of good humours told Lee that he had made some important discoveries. And the further fact that he had mentioned Jim the Penman's name was proof positive that the outlook was decidedly the reverse of hopeless.

The pair entered the hotel, and went straight to their rooms. Lee closed the door, looked at his young assistant for a moment, and then waved his hand.

"Go and scrape some of that grime off!" he said sternly.

"Oh, rats!" Nipper replied. "I've been like this for hours, so I suppose I can remain the same for a few minutes longer. By gum, guv'nor, I've been having a terrific time!"

"Obviously!" Lee remarked, gazing at Nipper's torn clothes.

"I stumbled across it absolutely by accident——"

"Ah, a genuine coincidence this time!" said the detective. "My own 'accidental' affair was a put-up job. I trust you were more successful. But I won't interrupt, Nipper; get on with the yarn."

Nipper sat down rather wearily.

"It was certainly a coincidence, sir," he said. "But, when I come to think of it, there was nothing surprising in my happening to spot the game. But if the rotten propeller-shaft hadn't busted——"

"My dear lad, let's hear the story from the start."

Nipper checked himself, and then recounted his adventures right from the moment he had started out from Southampton Water. He was boiling over with excitement, but he bottled it up until he was actually in the middle of his story.

Then he let himself go, as it were. In a breathless voice he told Nelson Lee how he had drifted nearer and nearer to the shore in the darkness, how he had seen a strange rowing-boat coming out from the gap in the cliffs; and how the boat had repeatedly dropped a cargo of heavy cases overside into the water.

Lee's eyes glittered as he listened. He needed no telling what those heavy cases actually were. Nipper explained that his boat had drifted right to the base of the cliff, and that he had ventured to the cave entrance.

Lee clenched his teeth when he heard of the encounter with Jim the Penman, and when Nipper told how the forger had planned to encompass the youngster's destruction. The idea of causing a fall of cliff in order to bury the sunken mail-van struck Lee as not only being original, but singularly thorough. It was, however, only in keeping with the rest of the plot. It was characteristic of Jim that he should leave no stone unturned to ensure absolute triumph.

"Jim's a queer chap, sir," Nipper went on. "I can't quite make him out, you know. Sometimes he seems to be quite a decent sort of fellow,

and yet at others he's nothing better than a fiend. He was a fiend last night."

"I am amazed that you are here, young 'un."

"You'll be still more amazed when you hear what happened, guv'nor," observed Nipper. "I was bound up pretty tightly, and if I had had time I could have got free. But Jim's companion kept guard over me while the mail-van was being chucked over the cliff. I heard it go with a flop into the water, and after that the excitement started. Jim the Penman came back, and paid me a farewell visit. He didn't say a word, though, but simply bent down and put a match to the fuse. Then he and Nash rowed away like a couple of 'Varsity blues—leaving me in about as pretty a pickle as ever I've been in!"

"It was an appalling position, my lad."

"But I'm not a chap to give up the ghost so easily," pursued Nipper. "You see, sir, the fuse was a pretty long one, so I had two or three minutes' grace. I reckon Jim had put a long fuse there so that he and Nash would have plenty of time to get away. I knew it was no good trying to extinguish it, and so I did some quick thinking."

Nipper paused breathlessly.

"Of course I thought I was booked," he said quietly. "I didn't dream for a second that I should escape—and I really can't understand how I did! But I mentioned before, guv'nor, that the cave was narrow but tremendously deep. The floor, too, sloped rather steeply downwards towards the rear.

"I thought I might as well be as far from that explosive as possible; there's no sense in asking to be converted into mincemeat. I rolled down the slope—all bound up, of course—and at last I got right down to the very end, quite a long way from the explosive.

"When I got there I seemed to roll into space, and then came down a fearful cropper on the hard rock," Nipper went on. "Right at the very end there was a kind of deep cavity, and I fell bang into it before I knew where I was. At the same second the explosion occurred. By gum, guv'nor, it was awful!"

"But why weren't you killed?" asked Lee incredulously.

"I'm blessed if I know," was Nipper's frank reply. "By all the laws of Nature I ought to have been completely smashed up. But, somehow, the force of the explosion went upwards and outwards. Anyhow, I just remember a shower of rock splinters smothering me, and grazing my face, and then I went kind of silly. The roar of the explosion was simply terrible, and I heard, in a dazed kind of way, great masses of rock falling and tumbling.

"When I began to recover I felt almost choked. The dust was as thick as a sand-storm in Egypt. At first I thought I was dead," went on Nipper candidly. "I did, really, guv'nor! I simply couldn't believe that I'd escaped. I staggered to my feet, and found that except for scratches and bruises and a general sore-all-over feeling, I was all right. Of course, if I hadn't dropped into that cavity I should have been killed on the spot. I must have been laying there for three or four hours after I came to myself. Anyhow, I remember flopping down and lying perfectly still for a tremendous time. I didn't seem to have enough energy to move, or to care what happened to me."

"But surely the cliff was completely demolished?" asked Lee.

"I suppose it was, sir, up towards the front. But the spot where I was lying had escaped," replied Nipper. "Explosions are queer things. The entrance was completely blocked up, but a crack had appeared in the rocks not far from where I was lying. I found this out by using my electric

torch which, of course, being with me, was undamaged. I was fearfully groggy at first, but when I saw that crack I began to hope for the best. Well, to cut it short, my bonds had burst, and I managed to slip through a narrow crevice, and at last found myself in a low cavern. Here, to my huge joy, I saw daylight. The explosion, you see, had cracked the cliff, and I was able to reach the open air."

"I can understand perfectly," said Nelson Lee, placing his hands upon the lad's shoulders. "Thank Heaven, you have been spared, my dear boy. You have had an awful experience—but it was of inestimable value."

"That's the yarn, sir," concluded Nipper. "It was broad daylight, and the original perpendicular cliff was simply a mass of broken rocks, for quite a distance. I scrambled to the top and looked about me. There wasn't a soul to be seen, and everything was bleak and bare in the light of the early morning. Jim and his pal must have cleared off, being quite positive that I was dead. I trudged a long way to the nearest station, and had to wait a couple of hours for a train."

Nipper looked down at his ruined clothing.

"And now I'm going to have a change, and a wash and brush up," he added. "After that, gov'nor, what's the plan of action?"

Nelson Lee looked grim.

"Breakfast!" he said crisply. "And immediately after the meal you and I will motor to the very interesting scene you have described, and we will make a few quiet investigations."

CHAPTER VIII.

An Unexpected Denouement—Conclusion.

"**P**HEW! It's pretty warm, gov'nor!" The remark was Nipper's, and the lad wiped his heated brow as he spoke. He and Nelson Lee were standing in the centre of the gap which cut between the high cliffs, having just walked down from the quiet road some little distance away.

Before them the waters of the English Channel stretched, blue and extremely inviting. The June sun blazed down from a cloudless sky, and the air was alive with insects, and quivering with August-like heat.

"H'm! This is certainly the most unlikely spot where one would expect to find half a million in bullion," remarked Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "I can quite understand, however, what Jim the Penman's plan is."

Lee waved his hand round expressively.

"You see, Nipper, this is a most desolate spot," he went on. "I do not think there is a house for miles, and nobody would dream of coming here except for a very specific reason. The police would never have suspected this place as being the hiding-place of the stolen gold—indeed, I should never have thought of it myself. Jim's plan is to lie low for several weeks, and then to bring a small ship to the spot, and to send divers down to recover the bullion. It is all perfectly simple and easy. The gold is hidden beneath the sea, and the fact that there has been a landslide close by will occasion no suspicion."

"It shows what a deep 'un Jim is," remarked Nipper. "Actually attracting attention to the place where the gold is concealed! He knew jolly well that nobody would think of looking for it here. He thought he'd blown me to bits, and knew that my death would be put down to an accident. I'd gone out boating, and when I didn't return everybody would

think that I'd been drowned. The fact that I'm still alive has upset his apple cart a bit."

They walked down the little strip of beach to the water's edge. From here it was possible to see the mass of cliff which had been demolished by the explosion. To all intents and purposes there had merely been a landslide—such as often occur on the south coast.

But beneath that pile of jagged rocks the missing mail-van lay, crushed and wrecked, hidden for all time. The vehicle had disappeared beyond all hope of recovery. Jim the Penman had gone to great lengths to achieve his object.

Nelson Lee tossed his cigarette-end into the lazy waves.

"Well, there is certainly nothing here," he observed. "Our friends the enemy have made themselves scarce, being fully confident of ultimate success. The bullion is safe enough—we have recovered that, to all intents and purposes. But I am anxious to nab Jim——"

"Hallo!" interjected Nipper suddenly. "What's that, sir?"

"What's what?"

"Didn't you hear something?"

"I only heard you interrupting me in the middle of a sentence," Lee replied severely. "As I was saying——"

The detective paused. He, too, had heard what he took to be a faint cry. It seemed to come from the cliffs over to the left, where they sloped back in irregular, jagged lines, towards the downs behind.

Lee commenced walking up the beach, Nipper following. They reached a pile of rough rocks which stuck out of the beach, and mounted them in order to continue on their way. And from the top of them they could see, close against the cliffs, and far above high water-mark, a little, low cottage.

"Ah, what this?" Lee exclaimed. "A fisherman's cottage. I didn't think there was any habitation here, Nipper."

As the detective finished speaking a curious cry came distinctly from the cottage. It was hoarse and decidedly urgent, and sounded uncommonly like an appeal for help. Lee ran forward at once.

The cottage was only a tiny place, and looked as though it had been uninhabited for months. One window was boarded up, and the rough walls were cracked and weather-beaten by countless winter storms.

Nelson Lee lifted the latch, and entered, Nipper close behind him. The cottage was scarcely more than a hut, for it merely consisted of one room. And in the centre of this, bound securely to a heavy oak chair, was an old, grey-bearded fisherman, dressed in rough blue trousers, high boots, and a rather dilapidated jersey.

"Thank the Lord o' mercy ye heard me, sir!" he said huskily.

The old fisherman's bronzed face was alight with thankfulness, and Nelson Lee at once crossed to his side. He saw that the ropes were tied cruelly, and that they cut deeply into the flesh of the old fellow's arms.

"Good gracious! How did you get into this plight?" he asked quickly.

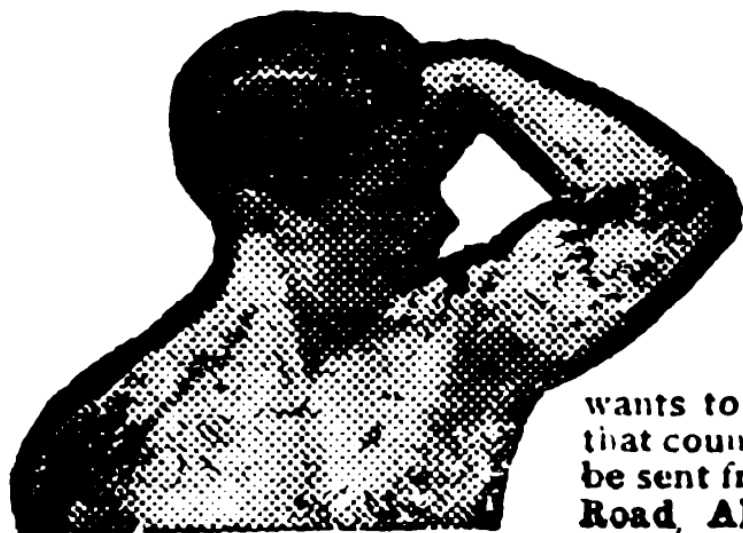
The bound man frowned angrily.

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"It's all along o' them furriners what was here last night!" he said hoarsely. "My name's Jem Handley, sir—Old Jem, as I'm mostly called. Yes, sir, it's all along o' them durned furriners!"

"Foreigners!" echoed Nipper.

"That's what they was, young master," replied the fisherman, as Lee commenced untying the knots. "Leastways, I calls 'em furriners. The dirty scum! Come here, they did, when I was abed, and made me get up to launch my old boat. Then they tied me to this here chair, an' left me. The slab-sided lubbers! Thankee, sir—thankee. Bust my jibs'l, but them ropes cut fair deep!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Nipper. "So Jim left this old chap here——"

The released man interrupted Nipper by knocking against him as he staggered to his feet. He lurched towards the door, and then turned with his back to it. Nelson Lee had been about to question him, but the detective paused.

Somehow, the old fisherman seemed different. There was a lurking smile about his bearded lips. And the next second Lee found himself gazing down the barrel of a large calibre revolver!

"Hands up—the pair of you!" exclaimed a clear, crisp voice.

"Jim the Penman!" roared Nipper furiously.

"Precisely!" was the cool answer. "I thought you would recognise my gentle tones. Up with your hands, I tell you!"

Nelson Lee clenched his fists, and his eyes blazed with fury and self-condemnation. But he raised his hands, and Nipper followed his example. There was no arguing with that grim-looking revolver.

The old fisherman chuckled mirthlessly.

"Rather a smart trick—eh?" he exclaimed. "I don't blame you, Lee—I don't blame you at all. I took four hours over this disguise, and I'll defy the smartest man in the world to see through it; and I'll be fair and say that I believe you to be the smartest man I've ever come across."

"You infernally ingenious rogue!" Nelson Lee said tensely.

He was completely taken by surprise. He prided himself that he could detect almost any disguise. But so cleverly was Jim made up that to detect the real man was utterly impossible. Like everything else the forger did, he had performed his task with astonishing thoroughness. It was only the voice which revealed his true identity—and that had been, up till a moment ago, totally altered.

"Now, Nipper, take your guv'nor's revolver out and lay it on the table," ordered Jim. "If you carry a weapon, lay it on the table also. And don't forget one thing. We're miles from anywhere, and a revolver shot wouldn't carry any distance. If you try any tricks I give you my word I will fire point-blank!"

Nipper looked at his master helplessly, and Lee nodded. The detective knew that Jim the Penman was in deadly earnest, and he had a very excellent reason for letting the forger have everything his own way.

"Do as Sutcliffe says, Nipper," he exclaimed quietly.

Nipper seemed to swallow something, and obeyed. Then, still following Jim's instructions, he picked up the rope and bound Nelson Lee securely to the chair. After that operation the forger lowered his revolver, gripped Nipper, and rapidly tied him to a smaller chair which stood close by. Nipper resisted at first, but a heavy crack on the head warned him to submit quietly.

Finally, the two prisoners were heavily gagged.

Jim the Penman stood back, and contemplated his handiwork.

"How you escaped death, you young cub, I don't know," he said harshly.

"I thought you were human, but you seem to have as many lives as a cat! By James, the fact that you escaped with your life from that explosion will cost you dear—both of you!"

Sutcliffe was filled with grave doubts and fears. He was furious, too, but he had himself well under control. The very moment he had seen Nelson Lee and Nipper he knew that his game was ruined. And he was determined to show his prisoners no mercy. It seemed as though Nelson Lee was the curse of his life. Every scheme he attempted the great detective always managed to wreck before the ultimate triumph came. This time Jim thought he had succeeded. And the fact that he had failed filled him with a devilish cruelty which was almost appalling.

He had adopted this disguise for a very specific reason. He wished to be constantly guarding his ill-gotten gains, until the time came for it to be removed. And now, on the first morning after the robbery, he had seen Nelson Lee and Nipper there! Instantly, he had known—by the fact of Nipper being alive—that the coveted half-million in bullion was lost to him.

But, ever-ingenuous, he had bound himself to the chair, with the intention of getting his enemies into his power. By a piece of superb acting he had trapped Lee and Nipper, and now he allowed his fury to reveal itself.

"You hound!" he snarled, glaring at Nelson Lee. "You may have beaten me, but there is no escape for you. We are alone here, and I am going to make sure of the pair of you now—now! Do you hear? I am going to put a bullet through your brain, as you sit there, helpless at my mercy! And I am going to put a bullet through Nipper's brain, too! See, the revolver is loaded—I am not talking idle words!"

He lifted the weapon, and pulled the trigger. A loud report followed, and a bullet cut through the roof.

"Yes, it is loaded!" hissed Jim the Penman, converted into a living demon. "I'm not going to leave matters to chance this time. You'll die here, now! You'll die as you sit. By thunder, you may have foiled me in the past, but you won't play any tricks again! This is the end for the pair of you!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper could say nothing, for they were tightly gagged. They shuddered involuntarily. Never had they seen Jim so utterly abandoned to demoniacal fury. And not for a second did they doubt that the end had, indeed, come.

Then, quite suddenly, the cottage door opened.

Jim the Penman spun round, the revolver behind him. Standing in the doorway was Superintendent Reading! And behind him were a pair of police officers! The surprise was complete and overwhelming.

But the forger proved himself to be equal to the occasion. In spite of the utter surprise—in spite of his terrible fury of a moment before—he behaved with truly extraordinary presence of mind. The manner in which he coped with the situation was nothing less than amazing.

"Lord sakes, ye give me a rare start, master!" he exclaimed, in broad dialect. "But I'm main glad ye came. Bust my bulwarks, but I was wonderin' what I'd do next, so I was!"

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"Good heavens, what is this?" gasped the superintendent.

Lee, guessing Jim's startling intention, made frantic efforts to speak, but the gag prevented him. He saw Jim slip the revolver into his pocket, and then the forger scratched his head.

"Lee! Nipper!" exclaimed Reading. "Great Scott——"

"I been fishin', an' I just come back," went on Jim, acting magnificently. "Been out since sunrise, I have. And when I came indoors I see these two gents tied up to my chairs. My! I got a fright, master!"

"Jelks—Melrose!" ordered the superintendent sharply. "Come here and unfasten Mr. Lee and Nipper. All-right, old 'un, we'll hear your yarn later."

The two police officers stepped forward, and Jim hobbled towards the door. Nelson Lee, who knew what was coming, let out a terrific yell as Melrose removed the gag. But it was just too late.

Jim the Penman was already outside, and he slammed the door with a terrific crash. The key turned in the lock as Reading spun round, startled.

"Stop him!" roared Nelson Lee frantically. "Stop him!"

"Why, what——"

"That man is Douglas Sutcliffe—Jim the Penman!" bellowed Lee.

The superintendent nearly choked, and tugged at the door. But it refused to budge, and he dashed to the window. He was just in time to see Jim pelting at top speed up the beach towards the road—towards the two motor-cars which had brought the two parties.

By absolute, unadulterated audacity, Jim the Penman had escaped! Taking advantage of the fact that Nelson Lee and Nipper were gagged, and unable to reveal the truth, Sutcliffe had been allowed the opportunity of gaining the door.

It was his freedom he valued more than anything else, and he had slipped away before Superintendent Reading could guess the startling truth. Under the circumstances, Reading was in no way to blame, but it was nevertheless galling in the extreme. Jim had been absolutely surrounded—and yet he had escaped!

Nelson Lee had informed the superintendent of his intentions before leaving Southampton, and Reading had promised to follow to the gap as soon as he had reported to Sir Robert Meade. Lee had, accordingly, been hopeful of making a capture. The great detective knew, however, that he and Nipper had escaped sudden death only by a minute. Had Reading been a single minute later in his arrival, those two fatal shots would have been fired.

And Jim the Penman had vanished. Foiled of his original purpose, he had adopted an amazing trick, and managed to get out of the cottage. Once in the open, he was off in Nelson Lee's motor-car before pursuit was even possible.

Some time during the afternoon the motor-car was discovered in a little country lane, abandoned and deserted. But Douglas James Sutcliffe and his confederates had disappeared, and all the efforts of the police were futile.

Jim's cleverly laid plot had failed, but he was still at large. The sunken bullion was easily raised from its shallow resting-place, and Nelson Lee received a handsome fee from the grateful bank governor.

But the detective knew that he had not seen the last of his audacious enemy. He had an idea that he would have many more encounters with Jim the Penman before the scoundrelly forger was finally laid by the heels.

THE AFFAIR OF THE ROPER DIAMONDS.

The first story of a thrilling new series, dealing with the adventures of NELSON LEE and Dr. MORTIMER CRANE, criminal.

CHAPTER I.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD.—Seldom, in the annals of crime, has there arisen a more sinister, more cunning or more daring criminal, than the man who, on occasion, called himself Dr. Mortimer Crane.

Dr. Mortimer Crane, the brilliant brain and nerve specialist of Harley Street, to whom the jaded and nerve-sapped flocked from all parts of the globe. I say sinister, because his exploits were of the sombre-cunning; because the crimes which he conceived and carried out were almost fiendishly clever-daring; because, once he had laid his plans and provided for the covering of his tracks, he stopped at nothing; not even murder—if it meant a swifter achievement of his purpose.

From the time when the weird tale of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was presented to the world, there have arisen many cases of dual personality, some genuine and some assumed; and at New Scotland Yard, in the archives of the C.I.D., one may come upon many records of criminals having assumed such an existence.

But in treating of the criminal career of Dr. Mortimer Crane, we must go much deeper into the cunning of the human brain—we must treat of a man who moved about the orbit of the Metropolis under

four separate and distinct personalities—and, stranger than all, stamped those four distinct and separate individualities upon his fellows.

It is little wonder that he baffled the police. It is still less wonder that very soon after the effects of his depredations upon society became evident, that Nelson Lee, the great criminologist, should have been called in to endeavour, by the unique and scientific methods which he employed, to run the criminal to earth.

It was no time for the meddling of the amateur detective. It was a time when the very finest points of the Science of Modern Criminology must be pitted against the scientific attainments of one of the most brilliant brains of the age.

Why this great specialist, who had the world at his feet, so to speak—whose income ran into thousands, should have chosen to lead a life of secrecy and crime, can never be explained—except in one way: that in his nature there was that "kink" which caused a decadence of mind and a blunting of the moral outlook.

At any rate, he did exist; and there are many who can tell you strange things about him. It remained for Nelson Lee to apply the only science that would probe the mystery which he set for solution.

Now go straight to your newsagent and order a copy of next week's "NELSON LEE LIBRARY," wherein you will find a splendid long complete story, of which the above is the author's foreword. Tell your friends about it!—The EDITOR.