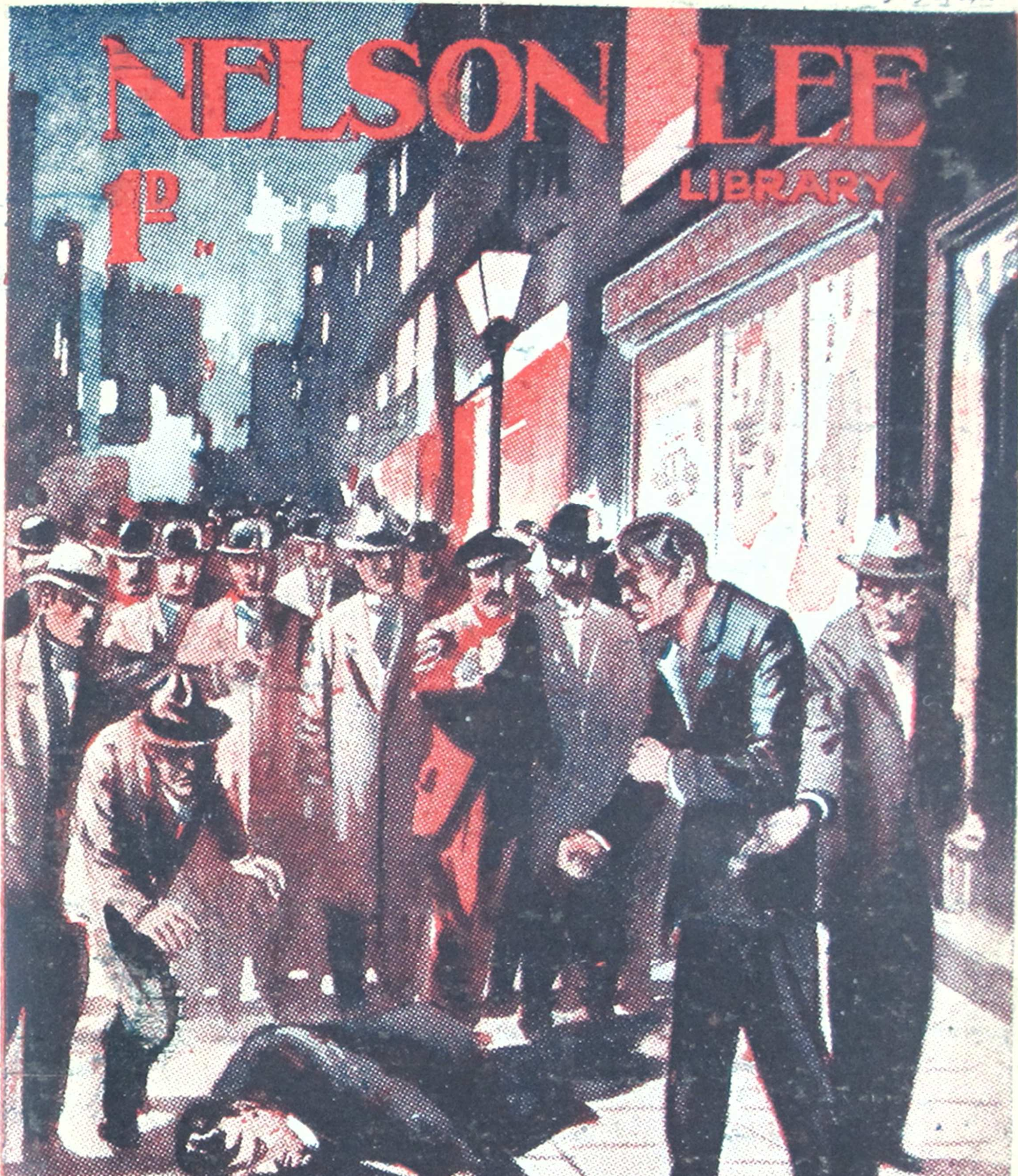


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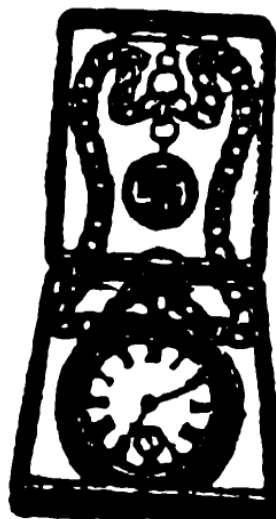
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CHAPTER I.

The Glove Contest.

AS Nelson Lee and the ever-famous Nipper were passing the doors of the Sun Boxing Hall, above which several arc lamps sent out a blaze of light, they had literally to force their way through the crowd which was eagerly fighting and clamouring for admission.

"Where are you shoving?" growled a burly artisan. "Why can't you wait your turn? It ain't no good your trying to push a way in here."

Nelson Lee smiled blandly.

"I am not trying to get in—I'm trying to get out," said he, and he continued to make progress, whilst Nipper wriggled in and out among the mob with the ease and slipperiness of an eel.

At last they were able to breathe more freely, but found that a little way along, the pavement was blocked by a quene which extended from a door through which the people were trying to crush, half-way across the road.

Nelson Lee surveyed the situation quickly, critically.

"I'm afraid, Nipper," he remarked, "that we shall never be able to manage it. We can't get through."

"Let's fight our way through," said the boy eagerly. "There's nothing I love half as much as a scrummage. You ought to have seen me play forward for the first team at school. Collegers versus Oppidans wasn't in it. And I think I could hold my own against these duffers. Come on, guv!"

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Nipper," he cried, "it seems to me to be easier to get in than get out. Let's go and see Bray v. Maddox. From what I can hear it's going to be a clinking good fight. Are you fond of boxing?"

Nipper aimed an imaginary blow at an imaginary opponent, and caught a workman who was hurrying past a smash on the jaw, which nearly toppled him over.

"Fond of it? I love it," he cried.

The workman showed fight.

"Come on," he roared. "I'll murder yer. I'll teach yer to fight me."

He was a broad-shouldered, stalwart fellow, and his face fairly flamed. Nipper was half his size.

Nelson Lee saw that the man was fully capable of carrying his threat into execution.

And so he stepped up to the offended man of toil, and linked arms with him.

"Steady," he cried. "It was an accident. The boy apologises. Are you going in to see the big fight? Very well; then come in with us. I'll pay."

Lee's manner, his tone of command, his personality overwhelmed the startled working man. After a brief argument, and a hasty apology on the part of the offending Nipper, the three made their way to the main entrance hall, where the famous detective paid £1 10s. for three ten shilling seats, and after a rare tussle with the eager and excited lovers of the boxing game who were pouring into the main hall, managed to pass the barrier, to give up their tickets, and to gain the places which had been reserved for them.

These happened to be stationed by the ringside, and while they were waiting for the proceedings to start the detective and his youthful companion were enabled to make a close and critical study of the audience which already packed the hall almost to its very doors.

They were a mixed lot. The galleries and the pens, called the pit, were crowded with men of the working class.

Eager, smiling, hot in debating the merits of the various boxers they were to see perform that night, and no mean judges either, they kept up a running fire of comment and good-natured chaff while waiting for the proceedings to begin.

Near the ringside the company was decidedly mixed.

Here better-class tradesmen rubbed shoulders with their employees, and soldiers sat next to dandies in evening dress from the West End clubs.

Old boxers, men who had failed in the ring, but hung on to it still, obtaining a livelihood they themselves alone knew how, betting men, sharps, boxers' managers, boxers' agents, journalists, artists made up a heterogenous whole.

Nelson Lee scanned the faces of the men around him, and saw many a crook who had been through the hands of the police, or would make acquaintance with them soon, among those who were seated near him.

He pointed out one or two of them to Nipper, whose eyes flashed with interest as he gazed at the men the great detective indicated.

"Do you see that well-dressed man over there, Nipper?" said Lee. "He is sitting next to the grey-haired man with the beard, near the angle of the ring platform. Have you got him? Yes. Well, he's a rascal named Wale. I've often wanted to lay my hands on him. He was concerned in that disgraceful case at Nottingham—the Mobley case, you remember. Rose Mobley was swindled out of £3,000 under a promise of marriage by a scoundrel who was never clearly identified. I had almost conclusive proof that Wale was the man, but the authorities refused to act. The evidence was too circumstantial, they declared, and the girl wavered when called upon to identify him. He got off, but he was lucky. The next time I have a chance of getting hold of the villain I shall make no mistake, I promise you."

Nipper studied Wale's face critically.

It was an evil, nasty face.

The man was well dressed, and his hair was as black as jet. Furtive brown eyes and a crooked nose marred the impression of good looks one received at a first glance at him.

He wore his clothes with distinction, and seemed completely at his ease, though Nipper guessed there must be a weight of anxiety weighing upon his criminal mind.

Nipper stored the face of the man within the cells of his memory, to be produced at some future time—if necessary.

Then the boxing began, and for the next two hours they were interested solely in the movements of the boxers who entered the ring, contest succeeding contest without a moment's pause, and all the lads trying as hard as they knew how to catch the eye of the referee.

Nelson Lee was more than commonly interested. He saw all the good qualities as well as the defects which go to make up our complex human character revealed by the boxers who fought in the ring that night.

Some kept their tempers under the most trying circumstances, and generally managed to issue with honour from the fight.

Others, though possessing every physical advantage, were quick to lose their mental balance, and such, as a rule, were on the losing side of the fence when the contest was over.

Lee could not help admiring the dour stolidity and pluck of some of the men. And his admiration for boxing as a sport, which brings out the very best there is in a man, and helps to form character, was increased by this fresh experience.

However, before the time for the big fight came round, he began to fidget like the rest.

The atmosphere of the boxing-hall was stifling. The tobacco smoke, which hung in a blue fog, was suffocating.

It was with a feeling of relief that he saw some of the fanlights being opened, and heard the whirring of the electric fans which were turned on to clear the air before the big event took place.

The M.C. entered the ring, and after requesting the audience to refrain from smoking so as to give the boxers a chance, began to hold forth on the merits of the two boxers who were about to appear before one of the most critical audiences to be found in any boxing hall outside the National Sporting Club.

His harangue being ended, the M.C. turned and glanced at the door, through which the boxers were to come.

It opened and the men appeared.

A burly, fair-haired giant led the way.

He was naked to the waist, wore a silken wrap, which hung loosely from his shoulders, a pair of dark blue knickers cut short above the knees, ring boots of black leather, with the socks turned down over the tops.

His hands were protected by light woollen bandages.

It was Maddox.

"Bravo, Jim!" roared the welcoming audience, and Maddox smiled serenely and waved his hands.

He entered the ring, closely followed by his seconds, and then a cheer announced the coming of George Bray.

Nelson Lee eyed the second boxer critically.

He saw a stalwart, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, and sun-tanned man, rather short in the arms and legs, but remarkably powerful in build, come striding through the cheering crowd.

Bray was dark-haired, inclined to be swarthy, and had an ugly, ill-tempered face.

There was something closely allied to weakness in the discontented droop of the boxer's lips.

His face was set. He hardly acknowledged the greeting of his friends, who called him George, and wished him luck.

He entered the ring after the manner of a criminal being led to execution, flopped into his chair, and sat there as if he had no liking for the job in hand, what time his rival was chatting easily with his seconds in the opposite corner.

"Who is the favourite?" asked Nelson Lee of his neighbour.

"Bray, of course," replied the stranger in a tone of deep surprise. "It's 3 to 1 on. He'll knock Maddox into a cocked hat. I don't suppose Jim will last three rounds. He's a terror is George Bray, and this is his most important fight."

Nelson Lee eyed Bray in surprise, and began to wonder whether his instinctive judgment of a man had led him astray for once. But no, as he compared the men, he could not believe that Bray would prove the winner.

Maddox looked so confident. Bray appeared to be beaten before they had even started.

"Well," said the detective, "you may be right. I know nothing about the form of the men, but if I were going to bet, I know which one I should choose."

"Bah," said the stranger, "Maddox don't stand an earthly. Bray's already beaten him twice. He's got the Indian sign on him."

"Oh, when did they meet last?" asked Lee.

"Oh, two years ago—Bray won in five rounds."

"Did he knock Maddox out?"

"No, Jim funked it, and chucked up the sponge. He's got a yellow streak as broad as the Atlantic, has Jim."

Again Nelson Lee looked at Maddox. Could this smiling, self-complacent man really be a coward, he wondered? It seemed scarcely conceivable to him. It was not a coward's face, every line in it betokened resolution.

"Well," said the detective, "you know more about it than I do, of course, but my opinion is that Maddox will win."

The men had shaken hands by this time, and they were now sent back to their corners by the referee, who addressed a few remarks to them.

Then, amidst a thrill of excitement, the seconds were ordered out of the ring, and the gong clashed.

As the echo of the brazen note reverberated through the hall the boxers leapt towards each other.

George Bray opened proceedings by hooking the left at the jaw, and bringing the right across.

There was plenty of power behind the blows, but the work was clumsily done, and Maddox coolly drove his left home on the mark, and then jabbed Bray on the chin.

They leapt apart, Bray crouching low, Maddox standing erect, with the left foot advanced and his gloved hands held nicely.

Bray made as if to strike, but Maddox led with a beautifully-timed left that landed on the jaw.

Again Bray made play, and blows were swiftly exchanged, Bray appearing to get the better of some in-fighting.

Suddenly Bray retreated, with a scared expression on his face, lowered his head, and raised his left arm to protect himself. He stared up at Maddox as if he were afraid.

Maddox's lips were curved in a supremely contemptuous smile.

He stepped lightly forward, drove his left hard home through Bray's guard and then, before the astounded audience had realised Bray's danger, Maddox swung a right-handed upper-cut home with all his force.

Bray had lowered his head, and the blow landed with additional effect.

Maddox had put the weight of his body behind it. Bray was hit clean off his feet, and landed on his back, his head and shoulders through the ropes, his body and legs within the ring.

And there he lay without movement, while the referee solemnly counted out the vanishing seconds.

If Bray's partisans expected the burly fellow to recover and resume the

fight, they were doomed to grievous disappointment, for there he lay spread-eagled upon the resined canvas, without even moving an eyelid, and the fair-haired Maddox going back to his corner, leant against the ropes with a smile of satisfaction on his face.

He knew that he had won, and won without being even marked.

At last the fatal "out" was spoken, and Maddox was declared the winner.

Then the audience rose to their feet and burst into shrieks of wild condemnation and cries of derision.

Bray had suffered complete eclipse. He had disgraced himself for all time by his supine display. He, the man who had been hailed by some boxing enthusiasts as the future champion of the world.

He had lost in a little over one minute. It had been the most disappointing fight ever seen in the ring at the Sun Boxing Hall.

And Bray was properly out, too. It took several minutes to bring him round.

When at last he retired with the hoots of the crowd ringing in his ears, he staggered as he walked, and his chin had sunk almost on to his chest. He looked utterly broken and demoralised.

"I don't think Bray will ever aspire to a world's championship after the wretched display he put up to-night, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee as he rose, and prepared to leave the hall.

CHAPTER II.

Derelict.

IT was some time before Nelson Lee set eyes on George Bray again.

Then one evening, as he was strolling from the south towards the west, his way taking him past the famous Sun Boxing Hall, he caught sight of the once famous bruiser lounging against the wall, with his hands set in his pockets and his legs crossed.

Nelson Lee took in the man's appearance at a glance.

Bray's trousers were frayed, his boots were worn out and shabby. His shirt had been patched. His coat was greasy. He wore a puncher cap pulled down to screen his face. In place of a collar, he wore a neckerchief tied about his throat.

But it was his face more than his clothes that gave proof of his complete degeneration.

His chin was unshaven; his eyes were dull. His complexion was of a brick-dust colour and blotchy. His shoulders were bent.

As Nelson Lee stopped and stared at him, Bray raised his head somewhat unsteadily.

"Here! Who're you staring at?" he growled. "You'll know me again, won't yer? If you don't clear off sharp, toff, I'll put it acrost yer!"

Nelson Lee knew in a moment that Bray was the worse for drink. He stepped towards the fellow.

"How are things with you, Bray?" he asked.

The boxer, who was about to pour a string of revilings on Lee's devoted head, started and stared on hearing himself addressed by name by a perfect stranger.

"Who are you?" he growled.

"A friend," answered Lee. "I'm sorry to see you in low water, Bray. How is it? Haven't you been boxing lately?"

"Been boxing? No," was the surly reply. "They don't want me now! There was a time—and it ain't long ago—when every bloomin' promoter in England was running after George Bray. But ever since I got that unlucky punch from Jim Maddox, I've been down and out. They won't give me a chance! I can't get a job anyhow! Look at me! Look at me togs! Coming champion of the world, they called me not so long ago; and now I'm down and out!"

"Bray," said Lee sternly, "you've been drinking! Perhaps drink has had something to do with it. Drink's no good for a fighting man, remember."

"Don't preach at me!" snarled Bray savagely, clenching his fist, and making as if to strike the detective. "I've had enough of that sort of thing from the missus."

"I'm talking as a friend," remarked the detective. "I don't like to see a young man like you playing the loafer. I saw you fight Maddox, Bray. It occurred to me that you'd taken some drink then. You seemed to be dazed."

"I took a little drop to keep my spirits up," owned Bray, "and Maddox crossed that right before I was ready."

Then he seemed to abandon his defiant, aggressive attitude and commenced to whimper.

"It's all very well for you to talk, mister," he went on; "but when a chap's got to live from hand to mouth like I have now, a drop o' drink is the only bit of comfort he's got. It's only that and bacca which saves a man. I'm dead out of luck, I am! My missus is ill; the kiddie's ill. The doctor's allus in the house, and sometimes there ain't enough grub to go round. Your pals won't bring you food, you know, though they'll buy you plenty of drink. I'm up against it. I've got mixed up with a bad lot. The promoters have put the bar up against me, and 'Eaven knows what I'm going to do now. I'm broke to the wide-ho!"

Nelson Lee felt genuinely sorry for the boxer.

Bray was a figure to excite sympathy and pity then. He looked ill—worn-out. It was easy to see that, unless he pulled himself up sharp and short, that his fighting days were over.

Lee felt in his pocket, drew out a handful of silver, and pressed it into the broken-down boxer's palm.

"Well," said he, "take that! It may be of some help to you. And take my advice—leave the drink alone. Never mind about boxing just now! I dare say you'll be able to get a job as a ring attendant or outside employee at one or other of the boxing halls. You might even get a permanent job at the club if you behave yourself. But you've got to master yourself first, Bray. Try it! It can do no harm. Now, good-bye—and good luck! And I hope you'll have better news next time we meet."

Bray's greedy palm closed round the coins, and he seemed to recover his spirits in a moment.

"Heaven bless you, mister!" he cried. "I hadn't even got a stiver when you came along! Might I ask your name, sir?"

"My name is Nelson Lee," said the detective, with a nod and a smile.

"Nelson Lee—Nelson Lee!" repeated Bray, in a puzzled tone. "The name seems familiar to me somehow. I wonder where I've heard it before?"

Then he smiled broadly.

"I know!" he cried. "You're the famous 'tec! Well, bruise me if I thought you thief-catchers were such good sorts. I shall know who to appeal to, Mr. Lee, if ever I should stand in need of a pal."

"That's right!" answered Lee. "If you ever want me, you know where to find me. I live in Gray's Inn Road. Well, good-bye, Bray! Make some

good resolutions, and stand by them. You'll soon find yourself back in the old form if you do."

Bray's face expanded. The surly expression which seemed to have become perpetually engraved on his forbidding dial vanished. In a moment he appeared to become years younger. He straightened himself up, squared his shoulders, and was almost himself again.

"I'll do it, sir!" he said, in a tone which carried conviction with it. "I'll do it, and when you see me battling my way towards the world's championship again, and beating better men even than I used to beat, you'll know that it was you who put me on the right road, Mr. Lee. I swear you'll never have cause to regret having befriended a chap who was right down on his uppers. That I promise you."

Then Nelson Lee left him. The detective walked briskly along the broad thoroughfare, with the dust blowing into his face as he trudged upon his way.

When he reached the corner, he suddenly paused. Opposite him, on the other side of the street, there was a large and garish public-house, the Magpie, a palace of crystal glass and polished mahogany.

Lee waited, making a mental bet with himself that Bray would not be able to pass the house of call, even though he professed to have a sick wife and baby at home, and had been, according to his account, so sadly in want of a meal.

He waited.

Presently Bray shuffled along. He arrived outside the Magpie and strode on with bowed head, not daring to look at the place.

"I've lost!" thought Lee.

A second later, however, the boxer paused. He hesitated. Then he looked at the public-house. A brief mental struggle then apparently ended in the collapse of his good resolutions.

The irresistible attraction of the place, in the bar of which Bray knew he would find many pals and associates, drew him onward. He pushed open the door of the saloon bar and entered.

Nelson Lee crossed the road, and peeped in at the door.

There stood Bray, with one hand on the bar counter, his beaming face turned towards a half-dozen greedy pals, who were licking their lips in anticipation of the treat in store.

"Come on, mates!" said George Bray cheerfully. "I've had a bit of luck! Give it a name! It's my shout! But I can't stay long, for I want to take a bit o' brass home to the missus."

The drinks were called for and brought, and Bray paid.

Nelson Lee walked on in disgust.

"It's no good trying to help a man of that stamp!" he thought. "He's lost!"

CHAPTER III

The Tempter.

GEORGE BRAY did not go home that afternoon. He remained in the bar of the Magpie, drinking and playing at "heads and tails" until every penny he'd got had gone.

He ate nothing, though he hadn't tasted food since the early morning, and then his breakfast had consisted of a crust and a glass of water.

With his heart weighed down, he went back to his stand outside the boxing-hall, where he knew he would come across a few pals, of whom he might be able to borrow a bit.

His brain was in a whirl. He felt that the whole world was against him. He blamed everything and everybody save himself for the position in which he found himself.

He was dogged by bad luck, he reckoned, and he cursed the fate that had ever made him a professional boxer.

To such a state of mental unreasonableness had he degenerated into that he even blamed Nelson Lee for not giving him more.

"He's got it!" he muttered. "It wouldn't have hurt him to have given me a quid! Stingy hound!"

And so there he stood, waiting for something to turn up. George Bray was almost at the end of his tether.

He remained leaning against the wall, the bricks of which he had polished with the cloth which covered his broad back, for an hour or more, when of a sudden he became aware that two men had stopped and were staring at him.

"That's George Bray!" he heard one of them say. "He's the man! I dare say he'd be glad to help you, mister, and he could do with a bit of luck."

Bray started, stared at them, and saw that the speaker was an old and disreputable boxer named Clinch.

The other man was a stranger to him. He was a dark-haired, well-dressed, and not bad-looking man, with a crooked nose and a pair of piercing eyes, whose glance seemed to go right through one.

The stranger gave a coin to Clinch, who spat upon it for luck, and then made a bee-line for the Magpie.

The swell stepped up to Bray.

"Mr. Bray, I think?" said he.

"Yes. Mister George Bray," returned Bray, thickly. "What d'yer want?"

"You have been recommended to me as a man who might be willing to do me a service," said the stranger.

"Oh, certainly!" jeered Bray. "I'll do anything you like, mister, as long as you pay me decently for it."

"Oh, I will pay you well! But you must do what I want."

"What's that?"

"I'll explain—but not here. You look tired and hungry. Would you like something to eat?"

"Not half!" said Bray, brightening up.

"Then come along!"

The stranger hailed a taxi, gave an order to the driver, and told Bray to get in. The boxer obeyed, and they were driven up West at a fine speed. More directions were given to the driver, who eventually pulled up outside a cheap restaurant in the neighbourhood of Soho.

There, before he said another word, the stranger ordered food for both, and added to it a bottle of champagne. The food and the wine gave life to the sinking Bray.

After Bray had eaten to repletion, and cigars had been lit, the stranger at last began to talk.

"My name's Wale," said he—"John Wale. I am on the look-out for a strong, healthy, determined boxer, who will be willing to do what I want if I pay him well for his services."

"You're a toff, Mr. Wale!" said Bray. "I'm your man!"

"Very well, then! This is what I want you to do. I have an enemy. He is a man I would have trusted with my very life, but he served me as dirty a trick as one man could possibly serve another. We entered into business together, and while he found the brains I found the capital. The scoundrel pretended to fall in with my view. He led me to believe that he was doing

his very best for both of us, but in the end he bolted with the money and the goods, and, to cap it all, wrote me an insulting letter, which I have kept to remind me of my wrongs, should I ever be inclined to look leniently upon his offence. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir. You played the part of mug, and your pal played the confidence trick on yer. That's it, isn't it?"

John Wale showed his teeth in a ghastly and vindictive smile.

"That sums up the situation in a nutshell, Bray!" he cried. "I was robbed of nearly £2,000. The man who did it is a bully and a brute. I know where to find him, but I fully realise that I haven't the physical strength necessary to give him the hiding he deserves, and I want you to thrash him for me. If you're willing to take the job on, I'll give you £1 a day while we are searching for him, and another fiver after you have given him the hiding he deserves."

George Bray's eyes dilated. His face beamed. £1 a day, and £5 for giving a man a hiding!

Why, it was a small fortune to him these hard times!

Still, he hesitated. Though he had fallen pretty low, he hadn't got down to the bed-rock bottom. Some shadow of self-respect remained, and he felt as if he would like to have further particulars before he committed himself.

"Look here, sir!" he said. "I don't much fancy the job. After all, I don't know you, and I don't know your pal. And I sort of feel that I couldn't knock a man about who'd never done me any harm. I've got a wife and kiddy who look upon me as a sort of 'ero. What would my missus think if she heard that I'd developed into a paid bully? I'm down on me luck, and the missus and the little one are starving. The money you offer me is very tempting. But there; I can't do it!"

Wale showed his gums; a sneer curved his cruel lips.

"Oh, very well!" he cried. "I must get somebody else to do this job. It's a pity, though, for I like you, Bray. I feel as if I'd like to help you. And I think I could, too, if only you were amenable to reason."

He sat back in his chair and turned the conversation into another channel. He began to talk about boxing. He showed an uncanny knowledge of ring matters, and he soon proved to Bray that he had the latter's record pat.

He sympathised with Bray's misfortunes. He told George that he was good enough to become a world's champion.

"What you want is a backer with plenty of money," he said. "I thought of taking you up, and training you. And I had a tour in the States in my mind's eye. There's plenty of money to be made there; but, however, it's off!"

He questioned the boxer about his wife, and his home. He soon discovered that the workhouse was staring them in the face, and he realised with an inward chuckle, that Bray was in such a hopeless position, that he would never be able to extricate himself without outside help.

He paid the bill, and in doing so flashed a pocket-book full of bank-notes.

"Look," said he. "Some of this might have been yours, if you'd been the man I hoped you were."

Bray snapped his teeth. His resolution began to waver.

"How much did you say you'd pay me if I did what you wanted, sir?" he asked.

"A pound a day, and five pounds after you'd thrashed the scoundrel who robbed me."

"Is he a big man?"

"Not only big, but dangerous—and a fighter, too. You wouldn't have matters all your own way."

"Would he stand up to me, do you think?"

John Wale laughed.

"He's the sort of brute who'd fight till he dropped."

Again George Bray hesitated.

The wine he'd drunk, and the liqueur he had taken with his coffee, had made his head buzz.

He looked around the comfortable restaurant, and then contrasted it with his home, and thought of his starving wife.

Wale knew that he'd got him. He pushed a sovereign across the table.

"Don't be a fool, boy," said he. "Take the money. Go and buy some food for your wife. It's your first day's pay. We'll search for the scoundrel who robbed me to-morrow. I'd send him to prison if it wasn't for the fact that he's married to an old pal o' mine. I don't want to hurt her through him, but I'd dearly love to see him get the thrashing he deserves."

George Bray seized the money.

"All right, sir," he muttered, feeling a skunk even while he consented. "I'll do it."

"Shake hands on the bargain, Bray. You're a splendid fellow!"

Bray's hand met that of the swell.

"Waiter, bring some more champagne," said Wale, rapping his knuckles upon the table top.

The wine was brought. The bumpers were filled.

"Here's success to you, Bray," said Wale. "Go straight, and I'll make a boxing champion of you as sure as you sit there."

The masterful personality of the man overwhelmed the boxer, who smiled hopefully.

Fifteen minutes later they rose and left the restaurant.

As they neared the door, a man who had been watching them for the last half an hour lowered the newspaper which screened his face and gazed after them.

After the door had swung to, he turned to a boy who was seated opposite to him and said:

"Nipper, my lad, did you see who that was?"

"Yes, guv'nor. The swell was John Wale——"

"And his companion was Bray, the boxer. Now I wonder what sort of mischief those two were plotting together?"

"They were up to no good, I'll be bound," grinned Nipper. "And what a dial that chap Wale's got! I've seen a few villains on the movies, but never one who could hold a candle to him."

"You're right," answered Lee gravely. "That man would commit any crime, Nipper, and it shall be my duty to find out where he lives and what his little game is. He's got Bray in the toils for some reason or other. I wonder"—thoughtfully—"what use he intends to make of a heavy-weight boxer?"

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Nelson Lee and Nipper began their investigations the following day. Time was hanging heavily on their hands at the moment, and they found it interesting to ferret out the truth about Bray.

These were some of the facts the investigation brought to light:

That George Bray was married to one of the sweetest and prettiest little women in the world. That Mrs. Bray was an invalid. The rough life she'd been forced to lead, owing to the hand-to-mouth existence led by her

husband, had weighed her down with domestic cares and responsibilities which had proved too much for her.

Her child, a little girl, was ailing also.

That the home was wretched in the extreme, and that they were always having the brokers in.

That George Bray, instead of dealing firmly with the situation, had sought refuge in the public-house.

That his reputation as a boxer had suffered so badly over the contest with Maddox, which he was accused—unjustly, Nelson Lee believed—of selling, that no promoter would have anything to do with him.

In a word, the situation in which the boxer found himself was a desperate one.

Lee and Nipper were not so successful in dealing with John Wale. Yet they discovered that he was a frequent visitor to the brasseries of the London cafés, and hung about the environs of Soho.

His associates were generally men of the most questionable character.

He lived by his wits, and tried to victimise every unsuspecting man or woman he came across.

Nipper unearthed the interesting and significant fact that John Wale and George Bray spent the evenings walking about the back streets of Soho.

“Nipper,” said Lee, when he had satisfied himself that the pair really did mean mischief, “this adventure will end in burglary, if nothing worse. I should like to save that fellow Bray if I can, but I mean to put the darbies on the rascal Wale’s wrists. And you have got to help me do it.”

Nipper laughed.

“All serene, sir,” he cried—“all serene! This is going to prove some mystery, and your very humble means to be the one to unravel it.”

CHAPTER IV.

A Sinister Purchase.

ONE evening, after a thunderstorm, which had washed the dust of London down the gutters, John Wale, and George Bray, the latter quite smart in a new suit of clothes, were walking slowly through the back streets of the West End, when, to avoid the drizzle, they stopped outside a pawnbroker’s shop.

The window was full of the usual collection of odds-and-ends, most of which were of little value, and a portion of the shop front was devoted to the display of what were declared to be “unredeemed pledges.”

It was this window which attracted the attention of both the men.

Wale’s sinister face wore a cruel smile. His cunning, dark eyes glowed. If ever man looked like a human snake here was the one.

“George,” he said, “do you know, every time we start looking for Jim Robertson I feel a cold shiver run right down my spine. I’m afraid of the fellow, even though I’ve got you with me now. I have an idea that when we do meet face to face, he’ll kill me——”

George Bray stared. He was looking far stronger and better in health than he’d done a week ago. Regular food and less drink had made all the difference in him. And the easy job of walking the streets with John Wale, who proved himself to be a wonderfully interesting companion, with merely

the prospect of a bit of a fight at the end of their search for the wanted man just suited him to a nicety.

His shoulders had gone back, he walked with his head erect, and there was a gleam of resolution in his eyes, which showed that he was far from being "all in" yet.

George Bray, in a word, might very well find himself, if only he got a real chance.

His only regret at this time was the lack of resolution shown by Wale, which occasionally found a vent in such expression of fear as that he had just uttered.

"Why, sir," cried the boxer, "you don't mean to say it's as bad as that, do yer?"

"I do. Robertson is bad all through. He robbed me as he has robbed others. And I don't think he would stop short of murder if his own safety were involved."

Bray laughed.

"So much the better, sir," said he. "The only thing I haven't liked about this job is the prospect of having to punch a man who won't show fight. But if he's the sort of chap you say he is, maybe we'll have a rare rough-and-tumble, and then I shall be able to give him a tanning with a clear conscience."

"Yes," observed Wale, "that's all very well for you, Bray. You're a fighting-man, and can take good care of yourself. But I'm not so strong as you are. Supposing one night, after we'd parted company, I were to meet Robertson face to face, and he were to set on me? I shouldn't be able to defend myself then. And he might be armed. He might shoot. I tell you, Bray, I'm afraid of my life where that villain is concerned." As he spoke Wale looked swiftly up and down the street. He seemed to be positively scared.

Bray pulled at his unshaven chin, and looked reflectively at his employer.

"Why not notify the police, have the villain arrested, and let the law punish him?" said he.

Wale shook his head and showed his teeth.

"No," he cried; "that would be a poor sort of revenge. I want to feel that I have had a hand in punishing him. I want you to deal with him, Bray."

"Then," said Bray, "there's one thing you ought to do, and that's buy a revolver. If you were armed, you could safely go anywhere. Then if you met this chap Robertson, and he were to bully you, you'd be able to hold him up single-handed."

Wale's eyes gleamed cunningly, and he averted his face in order to conceal the smile of triumph which flickered round the corners of his mouth from his dupe. He'd been working up to this.

"You mean I ought to carry firearms?" said he. "Well, that's not at all a bad idea, Bray." So saying he turned and looked into the window of the pawnbroker's shop. "There are several likely weapons here," he remarked. "Supposing we buy one now?"

"That's what I should do, sir," said George Bray emphatically.

"But I'm no judge of a revolver."

"I am," growled Bray.

"Then perhaps you'd be good enough to select one for me?"

"Give me the brass, sir, and I'll buy you as neat a revolver as is to be found in London. They've got some top-notchers here."

Wale handed Bray five pounds, and a moment later Bray had entered the shop.

The swell stayed outside. Indeed he appeared to be anxious to take no part in the transaction, for, lighting a fresh cigar, he strolled along the street, and though he walked up and down took good care not to come near the pawnbroker's shop again while Bray was conducting negotiations.

Once indeed Bray came out to consult with him. He had to walk a hundred yards to find Wale.

"Won't you come along and make your selection, sir," said he. "I've got several of the very best set aside for you to look at. But I should like you to choose."

Wale spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear fellow," said he, "I tell you I don't know a good revolver when I see one. Therefore, I'd be glad if you'd carry the whole transaction through for me, buy the cartridges, pay the cash, and—er—if there's any change you can keep it."

Bray's face relaxed into a broad smile. He'd just been bargaining with the pawnbroker, and he saw a way of making at least a sovereign for himself, and at the same time securing a revolver for Wale which would answer all requirements.

And so back he went to the pawnbroker's shop, and there concluded the bargain.

He came back to Wale a quarter of an hour later, and handed him the weapon—a Colt revolver.

"There you are, sir," said he. "She's a little beauty, and will kill stone dead every time you get near a vital spot. Now you've got to get the cartridges. We shall have to go to Mortimer's for them. Come along with me. I know the way."

George Bray was full of enthusiasm, and eager to carry the bit of business through. He was pleasing his patron, and at the same time making a bit for himself. He did not suspect a trap for a moment. There was no reason why he should. He hadn't discovered Wale's true character—yet.

And so they went to Mortimer's, and there the cartridges were purchased. Afterwards, in the entrance to a narrow court, which was deserted at the time, Bray showed Wale how to load the revolver, how to aim with it, how to fire it, and, that done, filled the magazine with the ball cartridges.

When that was done and Wale had slipped the deadly weapon into his pocket, Bray said, with a laugh:

"There, sir! I don't think you need be afraid of any man now. If Robertson attempts any of his tricks on you, you can shoot him stone dead, and plead justification, though I don't hold with the use of firearms myself, preferring the naked fists all the time."

Wale glanced at his companion, and a cruel smile curved his thin lips. He nodded, but made no comment. He was thinking to himself what fools most men are, and congratulating himself with the ease in which he had tricked Bray into buying the revolver.

Then as they traversed the streets of Soho side by side he expressed the opinion that they were sure to meet Robertson that night.

However, they drew blank as before.

Still George Bray didn't mind. He had made money out of buying the revolver for Wale, and he had earned his pound besides.

"And long may the hunt last," he thought. "I hope this chap Jim Robertson will keep out of the way till Doomsday."

CHAPTER V.

The Fatal Shot.

"WELL, Nipper," said Nelson Lee cheerfully, as he threw down the evening newspaper and turned in his comfortable armchair. "What's the latest? Have you learnt any news?"

Nipper grinned.

"Yes, gov'nor," said he. "I've watched Wale and George Bray the last three days. They're after somebody. They prowl the streets of Soho, and round Tottenham Court Road, on the look-out all the time for somebody."

Lee nodded.

"Have you any opinions on the subject, Nipper?" he asked.

The boy sat himself astride the end of the table and swung his legs.

"Why, yes, I have," he said. "It's my belief that John Wale has engaged this chap Bray to act the part of a bully. Wale's got it in for somebody, and is employing Bray to act as a punching machine."

"Yes--very good, Nipper. That's my idea. I thought at first they might be planning robbery or burglary, but I don't think Bray would lend himself to that sort of game yet. Go on."

"It's a rum thing, gov'nor," said Nipper, "but you know the fence, Dick Murphy's place——"

"Yes. In Wellman Court——"

"Well, they're always haunting the spot. Twice, while he's kept Bray waiting, I've seen John Wale go to the door and knock. The man they want is evidently in the habit of visiting Dick's place. So that I expect he's a bit of a wrong 'un, too."

Nelson Lee stretched himself and yawned.

"How often do Bray and Wale meet, Nipper?" he asked.

"Every day, sir. I saw 'em in Frith Street on my way back here, though I took jolly good care they didn't see me."

"Well done, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee. "That's the style! Now I think, as I've nothing to do to-night, that I'll come West with you. We'll patrol Soho together, and see if we can find a trace of Bray and Wale. I've got nothing else on hand, Nipper, having finished with the Sanderson Frauds. And we might do worse than have a bit of dinner at the Rendezvous."

Nipper was hungry. His eyes dilated.

"That'll suit me down to the ground, gov'nor," he grinned.

"All right, then; hurry up and change your clothes, and we'll make a start."

"What sort of a get-up this time?" asked Nipper.

"Oh, try and make yourself look like the son of a journeyman tailor," smiled Lee. "I shall doss-up like a Jew snip. There are heaps of them about in that neighbourhood, though they're nearly all honest folk, my boy—a very different class to Dick Murphy, John Wale, and that crowd. I feel as if I shall not be able to rest until I have got that villain safely in my hands."

Ten minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper left the house in Gray's Inn Road, and walked briskly in the direction of the West End.

And what a change there was in the appearance of the two, to be sure! Nelson Lee's disguise consisted merely of a change of clothing, of a cap drawn down over the forehead and worn sideways, a neckerchief wound round the throat as protection, instead of a collar.

His clothes were shabby and his boots unpolished. He had brushed his hair in a different way than that he usually favoured, and his chin and upper lip were slightly darkened to give the impression of an unshaven man.

It was artistically and neatly done. The disguise would have passed muster anywhere. There was no ridiculous colouring of the face, or attempt at theatrical disguise, such as would have betrayed the man in a moment.

And Nipper's appearance was also changed entirely by similar natural and artistic means.

Nipper, as he slouched along, hands in pockets, shoulders bent, cap turned over his right eye, and everything complete down to the wooden cane which drooped from the corner of the mouth, looked as if he might just have come from Poland. Thus arrayed they trudged along, and in due course of time reached the battle-ground.

"Now, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, his eyes flashing, "for dinner and John Wale."

Before entering the Rendezvous Café, however, they made a round of places where they were most likely to meet Wale and Bray.

They found neither of them, and so they hurried back to the cafe and had their dinner, though Nelson Lee took care not to eat too much.

He wanted to leave himself in perfect condition for a scrap, for he had fully made up his mind for trouble.

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That night John Wale and George Bray arrived in the neighbourhood of Soho at a later hour than that they usually chose for their visit.

There was a reason for this. Wale had paid a visit to Dick Murphy, the fence, and had learnt from him that the man he was looking for, Jim Robertson, never stirred abroad until after dark.

It was therefore useless to waste time in daylight searching.

Bray and Wale came westward after dark. And as the fates willed it, their venture on this occasion ended in success.

For a couple of hours they haunted the streets of Soho, and at the end of what we may term every round, they came back to Wellman Court and lurked about within sight of Murphy's abode.

Foreigners of almost every nationality passed them by. Poles, Germans, Italians, Swiss, Russians, Swedes, Danes, Greeks, Portuguese, and the like—industrious and hard-working people for the most part—passed eternally up and down the streets.

Wale paid no attention to them, and frowned at Bray when the latter chose to make fun of their jargon.

"Shut up!" he growled. "Keep your eyes open for the man I want! I have shown you his portrait. But it is necessary for you to be on the qui vive all the same."

Bray thereupon braced himself up, and gazed at every man who passed them with a critical, searching glance.

Once or twice he looked at a man and a boy who were leaning against the wall of a house in Wellman Court, smoking and quarrelling, it seemed.

But he didn't bother himself about them, for they were apparently foreigners, too.

Little did he, or Wale, who occasionally scrutinised the two as well, dream that the man was Nelson Lee and the boy the famous Nipper, both disguised.

Nor did they imagine for a moment that as they were watching for Jim Robertson, so were they in turn being watched.

Wale might not have remained there a single moment had he guessed the truth.

After waiting within sight of Murphy's abode for half an hour or more, John Wale, uttering a sudden imprecation, pulled out a cigar.

"Curse the luck!" he growled. "We shall never come across the man I want, Bray! Let's go home!"

He half turned as he spoke, when the sound of a door being opened brought him round again.

"Guv'nor," said Bray excitedly, "somebody's coming out of Murphy's!"

Wale's eyes flashed fire. He looked, and he laughed.

"By George," he muttered, "so there is! And he's a big, powerful fellow, too—not unlike Robertson in build! He's coming this way. Great Scotland Yard! I believe he's our man at last, Bray! Stand by, and the moment I give the word, set about him!"

Bray stiffened himself up, and threw his cigarette away.

The man came on.

He was about to pass them when John Wale, after making a sign to the boxer, stepped deliberately in front of him.

"So, Jim Robertson," he said, with a sinister smile, and an ominous ring in his voice, "we meet at last, do we? I've been searching Soho for you for days."

"And now that you've found me, what the devil do you want?" asked the man Robertson, giving Wale look for look.

He did not appear to be in the least afraid, not even when he noticed the powerful build of Wale's companion, Bray.

"You robbed me, you dog!" snarled Wale. "Robbed me of my fair share of the proceeds of that last job, Jim Robertson! You tricked and fooled me to the top of your bent, and now you're going to pay for it!"

"Indeed!" said Robertson, indulging in a contemptuous smile. "And what do you propose to do?"

"You'll soon find out!" laughed John Wale, his face flaming with triumph. "I'm going to settle accounts with you, you traitor, in full!"

Robertson laughed again. He pushed his way forward.

"Now, clear out of my path, Wale," said he, "or I'll wring that ugly neck of yours just as I'd wring a weasel's! You accuse me of robbing you. It's a lie! You had your fair share of the profits of the little bit of business we transacted together! You won't get another farthing from me, and I don't care that for your threats"—snapping his fingers. "It would take a better man than you to intimate Jim Robertson!"

There was no mistaking the tone of utter contempt in the ring of Robertson's voice.

John Wale's face went as white as a sheet, and his lips quivered with rage as he heard.

The long pent-up hatred and resentment which he had nursed against the man burst forth in all its fury.

He turned to George Bray.

"Now's your time. Remember what I've engaged you for," said he.

The time had come for Bray to earn the money he had received from his unscrupulous employer.

Bray was in most respects a conscientious man. He had prided himself in happier days, before his wife's unfortunate illness and ill fortune had dragged him down, upon his strict observance of his plighted word.

George Bray had implicitly believed all that Wale had told him with regard to Robertson's rascality, and now, when he at last set eyes on the man, he knew that he had to deal with a cunning and unscrupulous villain.

Robertson looked what he was—a rogue, a thief, and a liar.

And it gladdened Bray's heart to see that he was an immensely powerful man, one who would be able to give him a good stand-up fight.

He therefore made no bones about attacking him.

He stepped up to Robertson.

"Look here!" he cried. "I've heard a good deal about you, Jim Robertson. If you want a fight, you can have one—quick, and now!"

Bray's pugnacious face set as he spoke, and he made as if to strike Robertson.

The latter looked him coolly up and down.

"Oh! And who are you?" he sneered.

"I'm George Bray, the fighting man."

"I see. You're acting as Wale's paid bully, are you? Well, I'm not to be intimidated by a rascal like you. Stand out of the way!"

George Bray made no reply, but, acting upon a sign from Wale, struck out at Robertson.

The latter was prepared.

Up went his right arm to ward off the attack, and the boxer's blow was set aside.

Then, before Bray could realise what was happening, Robertson let him have it with left and right, and the boxer went staggering backward, his brain reeling from the effects of two of the hardest punches he had ever received in his life.

He regained his balance with an effort, and then, with set teeth and grim smile, shaped up for the fight.

In a moment a crowd had gathered round. It seemed to come from nowhere, yet in a moment the men were surrounded, and the onlookers, in a variety of languages, urged them on to fight.

Bray attacked Robertson savagely now, for he was angry at having been hurt by him.

Robertson, for his part, seemed quite willing to make a battle of it, and they exchanged heavy blows until each was bruised and bleeding from the effect of the other's fists.

Bray soon lost all sense of his surroundings. He had but one aim in view—to beat the man who was proving himself such a redoubtable opponent.

A pace behind Bray stood John Wale, his face alive with passion, his rasping voice urging the hired bully to redoubled efforts.

"I haven't paid you to play the fool!" he growled. "Go in and finish him!"

Bray slung the right hard home on the jaw, but was heavily countered for his pains, and he drew back, panting for breath, eyeing his opponent with a wondering stare the while.

"I'm doing my best, ain't I?" he growled. "Why didn't you tell me he was a boxing champion? Perhaps you'd like to have a go?"

Wale made no answer, but his fingers feverishly clutched the revolver which rested in his right-hand coat pocket.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had meanwhile joined the crowd who were watching the sight.

Nelson Lee was just about to interfere when Nipper caught him by the arm.

"Don't spoil it, boss!" said he. "They appear to be very well matched, and it's getting quite interesting. Let 'em have another round or two."

Nelson Lee was about to answer when Robertson savagely hurled himself at Bray. So fierce was his attack that it took the professional pugilist all his time to keep him at bay. The thud of the blows they exchanged echoed dully above the cries of the onlookers.

Presently Robertson got home a terrific upper-cut, which knocked Bray clean off his feet.

"So much for your hired bully, Wale!" he sneered, through his teeth, his chest heaving from his exertions. "Now, perhaps, you'll have a try!"

As he spoke, George Bray regained his feet. With an angry roar, he hurled himself at his opponent.

Nelson Lee thrust the crowd aside.

"By your leave!" said he. "I'm going to stop this fight!"

Before he could carry his intention into execution, however, a dramatic change came over the scene.

Robertson got home some heavy body blows, and Bray reeled backwards. He seemed to hesitate a moment, and then—bang! The report of a revolver-shot rang crisply on the night air.

Nelson Lee saw the spurt of flame. It seemed to come from Bray's right side, as if he were holding his hand low down and shooting from the hip. And the bullet, aimed at point-blank range, went straight home to its mark.

Uttering a sharp, low exclamation of pain, Robertson threw up his arms, reeled backwards, and then plunged forward on to his face. And there he lay, at Bray's feet, while the latter, standing like a man stricken dumb, stared blankly down at him.

The crowd pressed forward. Everybody seemed to be speaking at once.

John Wale gave one triumphant glance at the prostrate Robertson, then, wriggling his way through the crowd, walked away from the scene of the tragedy as fast as his nervous footsteps could carry him.

Nelson Lee hurled the crowd back.

"Come on, Nipper!" said he, and the next moment he was stooping over the prostrate form of Robertson.

"Has he hurt you?" asked the detective quickly.

Robertson's glazing eyes stared up into the detective's face.

"I'm done for!" he muttered. "That villain has finished me! I'm dying!"

Then a wondering expression flashed across his paling face.

"You're Nelson Lee!" he muttered, struggling up. "You once jokingly said that you'd land me with a life sentence in the end, Mr. Lee. But you won't get the chance now. I'm done for—but—I ask you to see that justice is done! Punish—the—murderer——"

He was rapidly growing weaker, and never spoke again. A few seconds later and he utterly collapsed. And while the volunteers were ringing at the door-bell of a local doctor's, the erring rascal's soul took flight to the vast and unexplored unknown.

Bray meanwhile had stood staring blankly at the injured man. When he at length realised that the thief was dead, a shudder ran through him.

"Dead!" he muttered, staring vacantly round at the sea of faces which were turned towards him. "Dead! Then who shot him?"

"You did, you scoundrel!" said a working-man, grasping at Bray's arm. "But we've got you, and you shall pay for it!"

"Stand back!" roared George Bray, galvanised into new life by the touch of the man's hand. "Stand back! I never hurt him! It was a fair fight! Don't let any man try to stop me!"

They answered with angry cries and pressed closely round him. Bray struck out left and right like a madman, hurling the crowd back. Then Nelson Lee and Nipper got hold of him.

He tried to shake them off. Nelson Lee's fingers, however, were like iron, and he knew how to hold the powerful boxer in such a way as to prevent his doing any mischief.

"I am a detective," he said sternly, "and I warn you that resistance is useless, Bray."

The boxer started. He looked into the speaker's face, and recognised him in spite of his disguise. When he realised that he had to deal with the

kindly hearted detective who had tried to bring him back into the right path, Bray groaned.

"Let me go, Mr. Lee!" he pleaded. "I didn't shoot him! I only hit him I didn't do it!"

Then the police came pushing their way through the crowd. They seized the now unresisting and broken-hearted boxer.

"Looks like murder, sir!" said one of the constables to Nelson Lee.

He then rapidly ran the rule over Bray, and, to the astonishment of the bystanders, drew a Colt's revolver from Bray's right-hand pocket.

"Just as well I took the trouble, Mr. Lee," said the policeman, with a grim smile, "or he might have drilled a hole through some of us too before we got him to the station."

"Let me look at that revolver!" said the detective sharply.

The constable handed it to Nelson Lee, and the latter, as he laid his right hand upon the weapon, found that it was still hot from the explosion. Lee looked solemnly at Nipper.

"I'd never have believed that he'd have stooped to murder," he growled.

"Nor I, sir," answered Nipper. "It's all come out of his association with that fellow John Wale."

Bray, who appeared to be stunned by the discovery of the revolver, now began to make a desperate fight for freedom.

"I never killed him!" he shouted. "I never fired that shot! It ain't my revolver! Who put it in my pocket? Let me go! Let me go, you blood-hounds! I got paid a pound a day for this job, but I only used my fists! Let me go! I've got a sick wife and baby at home! Let me go, I say!"

He fought and struggled like a madman—fought until they almost tore the clothes from his back in order to prevent his getting away.

An ambulance was sent for. They held Bray firmly until it arrived, and then strapped him down upon the thing and clasped the handcuffs on his wrists.

And so they bore him away.

The body of the unfortunate Jim Robertson, who was pronounced to be dead by the doctor the moment he arrived, was removed to the mortuary. And so John Wale's revenge ended in cool, cold-blooded murder, and the unfortunate paid hireling who had helped him to the consummation of his cruel revenge was removed to gaol to answer for the crime. And everyone believed that he was guilty.

That night, after dinner, when Nelson Lee had filled and lit his pipe and was warming himself before a blazing fire, he looked suddenly round at Nipper.

"What do you think of the tragedy?" he asked.

"It seemed to me, sir——" Nipper began, but Nelson Lee cut him short.

"Don't say 'seemed,' " he remarked. "You were there. You saw what happened. Try and describe it."

"Well," said Nipper eagerly, "there was a regular mix up, and Robertson was, if anything, having the better of it. The crowd were urging them on. We were nearly through the crowd when Robertson hit Bray with a series of hard punches. Then Bray fired——"

"Ah, yes! Bray fired! How?"

"From low down, sir—as if he'd just whipped the revolver out of his pocket and fired upwards without taking aim."

"The flash came from close in by his side, didn't it, Nipper?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the smoking weapon was found in his right-hand pocket. Did you happen to notice what became of Wale at the time?"

"Yes, sir. He was standing close to Bray."

"Right close, or some distance away?"

"A pace or two, sir."

"Out of arm's-length, for instance?"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"H'm! That will do, Nipper. John Wale made a lightning disappearance after the tragedy, I noticed. It was as well for him, perhaps, for his complicity in the affair would have earned him a very heavy sentence. Nipper, I have made up my mind on one thing."

"Yes?"

"It is that if George Bray suffers for this crime, Wale, who employed him to attack Robertson, shall suffer, too."

"Bravo!"

"And so, Nipper, it shall be your duty and mine to hunt the villain down."

Nipper's face fairly glowed.

Nelson Lee pressed the tobacco down in the bowl of his pipe, relit it, and puffed moodily away as he looked into the glowing embers of the fire.

"We will begin the man hunt to-morrow," said he.

CHAPTER VI.

Found Guilty.

"GENTLEMEN of the jury, do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

The words rang ominously in deep, sonorous tones, through the vaulted trial chamber of the Old Bailey.

There was a thrill of excitement. The public held their breath.

There in the dock stood George Bray. Behind him were two stalwart constables.

Bray's hands were nervously clutching the dock rail.

He stood with shoulders squared and head set back. His eyes, which had been roaming restlessly round the court, now settled upon the twelve good men and true who had filed into the jury-box after an absence of forty minutes—forty minutes which were the most agonising periods of time that the unhappy prisoner had ever experienced.

He had been taken from the dock while the jury were considering their verdict. Now he stood there, with every nerve braced up to face the final ordeal.

Would those twelve men, whom he had never injured, condemn him to the degradation of a convict's life, or would they send him out into the light of day a free man?

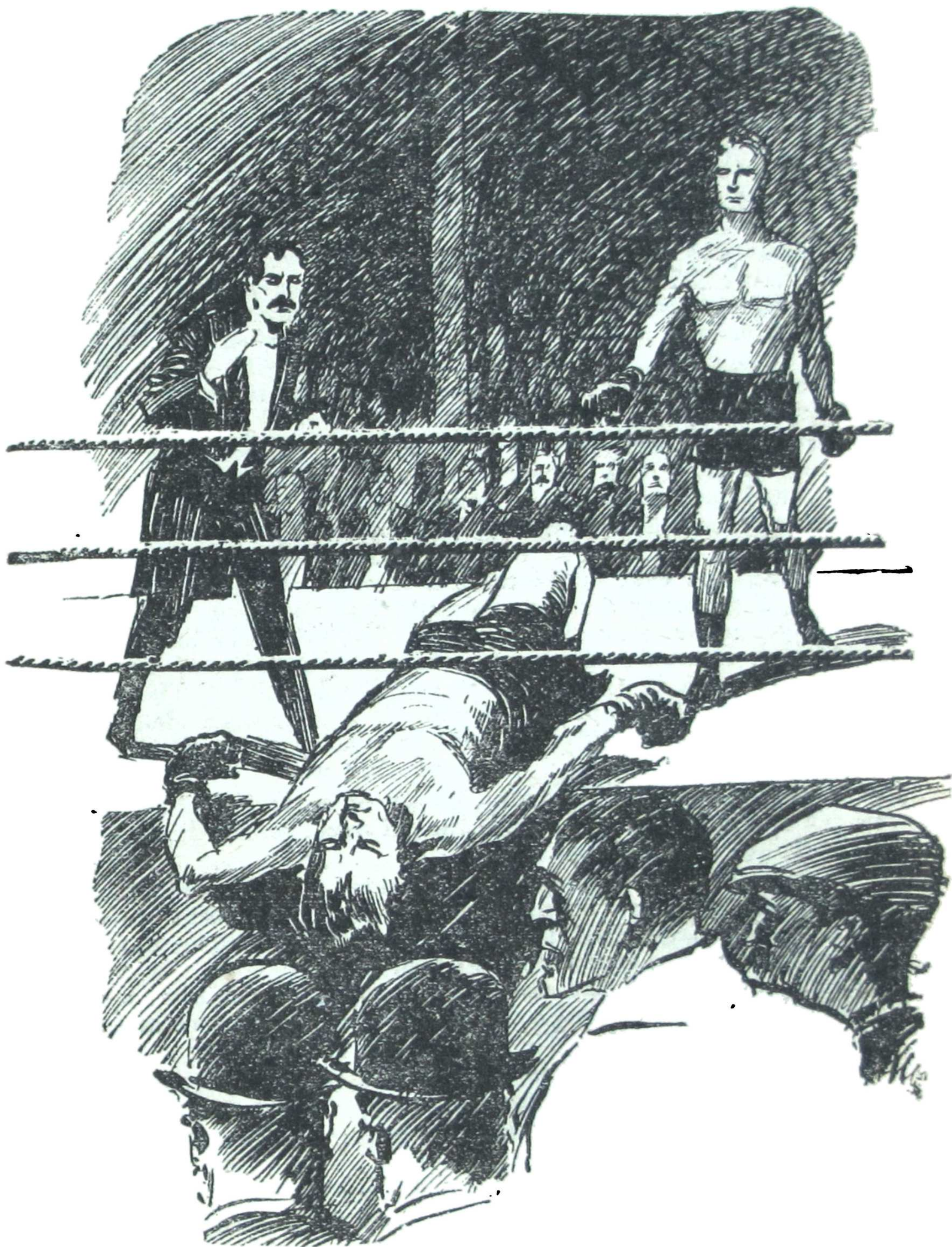
His hands seemed to be clutching at the unfortunate boxer's heart as he waited for the verdict.

"My lord," answered the foreman of the jury, and Bray started as he heard his voice, and licked his parched lips to moisten them, "we find the prisoner 'Guilty.'"

At the words, a woman who had been clutching nervously at her hands, rose in her seat, and stretched out her arms towards the dock.

"George, George!" she wailed, and then, with a sobbing cry, she fell backwards into the arms that were stretched out to receive her.

"It's my wife!" screamed the distracted prisoner, and he tried to climb over the dock rail.



Bray had lowered his head, and the blow landed with additional effect. Maddox had put the weight of his body behind it. Bray was hit clean off his feet, and landed on his back, his head and shoulders through the ropes, his body and legs within the ring.—(See page 4)

The police were on him in a moment. They seized him and held him fast. "Don't be a fool!" said the sergeant, who at once entered the dock. "Take it quietly. After all you ought to consider yourself lucky that the charge was reduced from one of murder to manslaughter."

A murmur ran agitatedly round the court.

"Silence!" droned the usher.

The judge stared sternly round him from the bench.

"Order in court!" he rasped, and his voice had a magical effect. The din was silenced in a moment.

"Prisoner at the bar," he said, eyeing Bray fixedly. "Have you anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon you?"

"Yes. I have!" screamed the boxer in a hoarse voice, his eyes rolling, his lips flecked with foam. "I'm innocent. I swear before Heaven I'm innocent. I never did it. It's true Mr. John Wale hired me to give Jim Robertson a hiding. And it's true that I agreed to do it, and I did. But I never shot him—the revolver didn't belong to me—Mr. Wale had it all the time! It's not fair. Set me free. I've got a wife, and a little kiddy to look after, my lord. Don't send me to prison. I haven't done any harm—I swear I haven't——"

"That will do," interrupted the judge coldly. "George Bray, you have been given a fair trial, and the jury have come to the only possible verdict. Had they found you innocent it would have been a travesty of justice. Indeed, you may consider yourself a lucky man that you had not to face the capital charge. That you shot the man Robertson in the heat of passion, I firmly believe, and that is the most that can be urged in mitigation of your offence. I am sorry for you, inasmuch, as you seem to have been led away by the counsel of an evil companion. Yet you were to blame yourself and in no small measure. That you must have anticipated having to use the revolver is shown in the fact that you purchased it. The pawnbroker of whom you bought it has identified you. You have been identified by the man who sold you the cartridges. And for what purpose does a man want a loaded revolver, unless it be to shoot another with it?"

"You have been very justly found guilty of a most serious charge, and the least sentence I can pass on you is that of penal servitude for ten years."

Bray burst into a mad laugh.

"You're not fit to be a judge!" he shouted. "I bought the revolver for John Wale, I tell yer. He urged me to do it. I bought the cartridges for him, too; and from that moment never saw the weapon again. I'm innocent, and yet you're sending me to gaol——"

He got no further, for the police had pounced upon him, and he was bundled headlong away, to vanish down the steps out of sight, and a murmur of relief ran round the court.

During the trial of George Bray, which had proved to be a very painful one, scenes in court had added their sad note to the proceedings.

Twice George Bray had broken down on seeing his wife there, and several times Mrs. Bray had fainted.

Everyone, even the stoical officials of the court, were glad when it was all over, and the unhappy prisoner had been dragged away to his doom.

Poor George Bray. He was being severely punished for his sins. Any wrong that he had even done man or woman during his short and unhappy life had been atoned for a thousandfold.

After his arrest, and before his first appearance in a magisterial court, he had fondly believed that his explanation would result in his release. But from the first everything was against him.

The charge of murder first preferred against him was reduced to manslaughter, and on this charge he had been committed for trial and found guilty, as we have seen.

The evidence against him had been of a damning and overwhelming character. He had agreed to assault Jim Robertson, a man whom he had never met, and had taken payment from John Wale for the work—this on his own admission.

He had purchased the revolver with which the fatal bullet had been fired. He had purchased the cartridges, and there was nothing to show that the weapon had ever left his possession.

John Wale had disappeared. The police had failed to find any trace of his whereabouts. Nelson Lee and Nipper had likewise failed.

And so poor George Bray was condemned to ten years penal servitude, and left the dock as near a madman as makes no difference.

He was a man without hope, without friends, without religion or belief in anything under Heaven.

For quite a while he was untractable. Then, while he was seated, handcuffed in a cell awaiting his removal to the prison van, the dark cloud which obscured his mind was suddenly illuminated by a ray of hope which came like a living star, and made him think that perhaps a faint chance of liberty remained to him.

Just before the police had dragged him out of the dock, his roaming eyes had rested upon the face of Nelson Lee, the only man who had said one word in his favour throughout the trial.

Lee had spoken well of Bray. He had informed the judge that Bray's character had been without a blemish up to the time of his defeat in the ring at the hands of Maddox.

He had told of the boxer's home troubles, and he had dwelt upon the infamous character of John Wale.

He described the fight between Robertson and Bray, so far as he had seen it, and he had declared that the fatal shot might well have been fired by another person.

If what Bray had said was correct, the revolver might have been placed, smoking hot, into his pocket by Wale.

This evidence, which was pure surmise, was overruled. It did not save Bray. But, as he recalled it, it gave the broken-down boxer a gleam of hope now.

He begged that Nelson Lee might be sent for. However, in spite of his pleadings, no steps were taken to bring him in touch with the famous detective, and, at last, handcuffed, dejected, broken in spirit and heart, Bray walked out into the yard, and was thrust into the Black Maria which, in due course, conveyed him to the gaol.

It was not until a week had elapsed that Nelson Lee received a letter from him. In this Bray begged him to come and see him.

The detective went. The interview took place in the gaol prior to Bray's departure for the prison where he was to serve the first portion of his sentence. And then Nelson Lee was subjected to one of the most heart-rending appeals for help that he had ever listened to.

"I'm innocent, Mr. Lee," he declared, his eyes roaming madly around the confined space in which the interview took place. "I never fired that shot. It's my firm belief now that Wale meant to kill that chap Robertson all the time. He tricked me into buying the revolver. He fooled me into purchasing the cartridges, and he took advantage of the rumpus to shoot under my arm. I tell you I was flabbergasted when the police found that revolver in my pocket; and if you have any pity in your heart for a broken-

down old boxer, help me to clear myself now. I wouldn't mind doing a month for knocking Robertson about, though he hit me a sight harder than I hit him, but to go to gaol for shooting him, to be found guilty of a crime I never committed, goes against the grain."

Nelson Lee had long before this made up his mind that Bray was innocent of the actual killing. As he studied the grey and drawn face of the wretched man now, he felt more than ever convinced of his innocence.

"Did Wale keep the revolver after you gave it him?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I handed it over to him with the ball cartridges on the day of the purchase. He got me to go to his lodgings, and there, out in the yard, I showed him how to use the weapon—fool that I was; for I know now that he was more of an expert at handling the weapon than I can ever hope to be. It was all a part of his game. But from that day until the night of the shooting of Robertson I never saw the revolver again. Wale told me that he'd got it on his person, for protection, he said. But I had only his word for it."

"And how do you say he shot the man Robertson, Bray?"

"From right under my arm, sir. The flash nearly blinded me, and the report made me start. The crowd pushed against us. I never felt him put the revolver into my pocket. Some of the bystanders seized me instantly, and, as you know, the police came up along o' you and Nipper, and I never had a chance. But he did a mizzle. Trust him"—bitterly—"for that!"

"Bray!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "You are paying the price most men have to pay who make a pal of a villain like that. If only you had turned his proposal down, and come to me for help, you would never have got yourself into this mess. Why did you consent to act as a paid bully? Why didn't you turn honest, give up the drink, and play the game?"

Bray groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"It was easy money, sir," he murmured, "and I thought of the wife, and my little one. Besides, it seemed a fine thing to pal up with a toff. I see how wrong it is now, but I never guessed it would end like this!" Then he rose erect. "If I remain in gaol, I shall go mad, or try to fight my way out," said he. "I can't bear it. What'll become of the missus? What'll become of my little girl? It ain't fair—it ain't just! I'll escape from Dartmoor, or they shall shoot me stone dead. No prison walls shall keep me, that I swear."

"Steady, Bray," said Nelson Lee, "steady. Now, listen to me. I honestly believe that you are innocent. I firmly believe that Wale killed Jim Robertson. And I mean to find the man and make him own up; but it may take time—do you hear?—time!"

Bray stared blankly at the detective. Time? Would he have to bear the indignity and disgrace of a convict's garb for ever, then?

Nelson Lee read what was passing in the fellow's mind.

"I want you to obey orders, and to be exemplary in your conduct, Bray," he said. "So that, when the order comes for your release"—how the convict's face lit up at the words—"you will be able to step forth into the sunshine with a clear conscience and without a single black mark against you. This much I know—that Jim Robertson, a scoundrel, with many aliases, was a bad man. His record was worse than Wale's, I believe. He was an even more dangerous character. He was a forger and a thief. He will not be missed, and Wale saved the police some trouble by killing him. When I have laid the other rascal by the heels, the public will have reason to be grateful to me. You can safely leave your case in my hands, and I will set you free, if it is humanly possible to do so, as sure as my name is Nelson Lee."

"And what about the missus?" groaned Bray, clutching at the ray of hope which the detective held out to him, as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

"Don't you worry about them. I mean to make it my business to see that they are both provided for. I shall go and see Mrs. Bray to-morrow, and will get her honest work to do, if I can. And the baby shall be well looked after, too."

Tears rolled from Bray's eyes, and guttered down his cheeks.

His great muscular chest heaved to his sobbing. It was pitiable to see the giant cry.

"Bless you, sir, for all your kindness," he murmured brokenly.

"That's all right. Now, give me your promise, Bray. I want you to pledge your word of honour that you will obey orders, and behave yourself while you remain in prison."

All the badness seemed to have gone out of the man. He became humble and resigned.

"I promise, sir," said he. "Hard though it may be for me to keep my word."

"That's right. Now, cheer up. Try and look at things on the bright side. You won't be able to get any drink in prison, Bray, and drink has been your ruin."

"Ay, I've been a bad lot, sir. I lost my head a bit, I think, when things looked their brightest. I'm going to turn over a new leaf now."

"Time's up," said the warder, opening the door, and coming into the cell, after having kept watch upon the prison during the whole of the interview through the grating. "I must ask you to leave now, Mr. Lee."

The detective gave Bray his hand. The convict clutched it convulsively.

"Things look pretty black now, Bray," said Nelson Lee, with a bright smile. "But I hope to see you a free man before long."

And then he left the poor wretch, and a few minutes later had passed beyond the precincts of the gaol.

CHAPTER VII.

A Visit to Murphy, the Fence.

"MR. MURPHY!"

"What's the matter now?" snarled the fence, looking up from a close inspection of some stolen diamonds which he had purchased at a low price that very day, none too pleased at the interruption caused by the entrance of his helpmate, satellite, and doorkeeper, Erasmus Brown, an evil-faced looking man of thirty.

Brown's manner betrayed alarm. He looked agitatedly over his shoulder at the door through which he had come.

"Put them 'shiners' away, sir!" he hissed. "Mr. Nelson Lee, the 'tec, is in the house, and he's brought that precious boy of his with him."

In a flash the fence thrust the diamonds into an inner pocket of his coat and leapt to his feet.

"You've let 'em in, you traitor!" he cried. "I could wring that ugly neck of yours. Haven't I told you never to open the door save on the chain, and——"

"I did, sir. S'help me bob, I did! But he'd got some tool or other in 'is 'and, which cut through the chain as if it were butter, and I was knocked over against the wall in a tick. I recognised 'im in a minute, and, finding that I couldn't keep 'im out of the 'ouse, I 'ad to do the polite. It was

clever of me to keep him downstairs while I came up 'ere to tell you the news, I reckon."

Dick Murphy's eyes glinted with an evil light. He bared his teeth in a frozen smile.

"I believe you're working hand and glove with my enemies against me," said he. "Well, I know how to punish traitors——"

He was suddenly interrupted by the opening of the door, and Nelson Lee strode into the den.

"Don't blame your man, Murphy," he said serenely. "He did his best. I meant coming in, and here I am. No power on earth would have kept me out to-night. Nipper!"

"Yes, sir!" said Lee's precocious helpmate, showing his grinning face at the door.

"Go downstairs with Brown, and keep your eye on him. If he attempts to leave the house, blow your police whistle and hand him over to the men who are watching the house. Understand?"

Nipper nodded and smiled.

"All serene, sir," he cried. "Now, then, Brown, come along downstairs."

Brown hesitated. Nelson Lee turned his piercing eyes on him.

"Do what the boy tells you," he said, "unless you wish to spend the night in a cell."

Brown turned his appealing eyes on his master's face. Dicky Murphy's smile was a sight to see.

"You'd better do what the gentleman says, Erasmus," he snarled.

Thereupon Brown turned upon his heels, and a moment later the echo of their footsteps could be heard descending the stairs.

Nelson Lee closed the door, drew a chair up to the table, pulled out a revolver, and laid it in front of him, but out of Murphy's reach.

The fence watched these significant preliminaries with a shiver of dread.

"What the blazes do you want of me now, Mr. Lee?" he asked, his shrivelled face puckering up into a hundred frowns, his evil eyes roaming about the room as if in search of some means of escape.

"I want you to supply me with a little information, Dicky," said the detective, with an ingratiating smile. "Keep your seat, and don't move until I give you leave."

"Anything to oblige a toff—anything to oblige," muttered the fence, stirring uneasily. "But I haven't done any wrong, Mr. Lee, if that's what you mean to infer by your visit here to-night. I'm an honest trader, I am——"

"You're an unmitigated rascal, and you glory in your infamy, Dicky," returned the detective. "But we'll say no more about that. I am not here to trace stolen property, and I shall not annoy you any further—unless you render it imperative. But I shall expect you to give me certain information you are in possession of. I want you to clearly understand that."

The fence became more composed as he listened. As long as Nelson Lee did not intend to do him any personal injury, he was satisfied.

"All right, sir," he said. "I'll do what you want if it lies within my power."

"Very well, then. A little while ago Jim Robertson, the forger, was shot dead near this house. He'd been on a visit to you—— Oh, don't deny it; I know it. And if you drive me further with your denials I shall make it my business to find out what he wanted with you."

Murphy, who had opened his lips to protest, sunk sullenly back in his chair.

"Robertson was shot by a man named John Wale. George Bray, the boxer, was arrested in connection with the crime, found guilty of manslaughter, and has been sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. But he was an innocent man——"

"I tell you that John Wale shot Robertson," said the detective sternly. "You have had dealings with both men, and I am in a position to prove it. I will prove it if you force my hand, and that will mean gaol for you, my worthy receiver. Now, I want you to tell me all you know about Jim Robertson and John Wale."

"I know nothing," said Dicky Murphy eagerly. "If they ever worked together or had a quarrel it's news to me. I——"

"Murphy," said Nelson Lee, lighting a cigarette, "don't lie! Wale and Robertson had some intimate association with each other. I have discovered both men came to visit you about a month before the murder. They came here several times. Why?"

Murphy hesitated.

Nelson Lee rose and opened the door.

"Nipper!" shouted Lee.

"Yes, sir!"

"Open the door and call in the police. I'm going to give Murphy into custody, and search the house."

"No, no, no!" shrieked the fence. "You're a real gentleman, Mr. Lee, and I'll do what you want."

"All right, Nipper; wait until I call again," said Lee cheerfully, and then he went back to his chair. "I'm glad you're amenable to reason, Murphy," he cried. "Now proceed."

"Jim Robertson and—er—Wale came to me to ask my advice as to the—er—value of—er—certain—er—gems which they'd bought, and——"

"Which they'd stolen, and which you bought, I suppose," corrected the detective. "Well?"

"I—er—believe, Mr. Lee, that the stones were afterwards sold for a considerable sum. Whether they shared the proceeds, I can't say, but I know that Wale had got an idea into his head that Robertson had swindled him. Robertson told me on the night he was shot that he was afraid Wale meant to do him an injury. That's all I know, and it's the honest, sober truth."

"If Robertson were still alive I might insist on further information concerning him," observed Nelson Lee. "But he's dead, and we'll let him pass. But Wale is alive, and I intend to clap the handcuffs on him before I'm done. I'm going to arrest him in order to release an innocent man, Murphy, and you being full of the milk of human kindness are going to help me. Now I want to know something more about this fellow Wale. He was connected with that Mobley case, in which he robbed a poor girl of three thousand pounds. You must tell me more about him."

Dicky Murphy was quick to see that Nelson Lee's information with regard to the career of John Wale was not of a very extensive nature.

And he therefore protested loudly that he had never met the man until James Robertson, the forger, had brought him to his den.

In vain did Nelson Lee cross-examine him, threaten him, and coax him. He would say no more. At last, despairing of further success, Nelson Lee rose, and thrust the revolver back into his pocket.

"Dicky," he said, "you are a clever rogue, and you know just how far to go. But if the time ever arrives for me to deal seriously with you, I sha'n't spare you, for you are holding the truth back to-night."

"I'm not. Upon my word of honour, I'm not!" protested Dicky. "I

believe that Robertson and Wale worked together on some job. What that job was I can't say."

"What other aliases has Wale adopted during his career of crime?" demanded the detective.

"None that I know of," cried the fence. "If he'd used any, I'd tell yer, I would indeed."

"Have you any idea where the scoundrel is?"

"No, Mr. Lee; but I believe he went to France a week or two ago."

"That means," thought the detective, "that Wale is still in London. This rascal is trying to put me off the scent."

And then, fully aware that he could hope to learn nothing more from the rascal, he left him with another word of warning.

Downstairs he found Nipper, and when they got outside Nelson Lee said, looking hard at the lad:

"Well, my lad, and have you learnt anything of value?"

"Nothing," answered Nipper, in disgust. "He was as close as an old Jew. Said he'd never seen or heard of John Wale, and swore he didn't know that James Robertson had ever been inside the house."

"H'm!" mused Nelson Lee. "That means, then, that all traces of their dealings with Robertson and Wale have been obliterated. I had hoped for better things from the visit, Nipper. However, I have learned something, and we'll try our luck in other waters now. This is only the beginning."

And they trudged on together in the direction of home.

CHAPTER VIII.

Corker Smith.

THE morning after the visit to Dicky Murphy's, Nelson Lee, after thinking over the situation for a while, wrote out an advertisement which he sent by hand, Nipper taking it, to various newspaper offices in Fleet Street.

The advertisement, which was duly published, read as follows:

HANDSOME REWARD OFFERED

to anyone who will give information as to the whereabouts of JOHN WALE, suspected of complicity in the Rose Mobley swindle.—Apply Nelson Lee, Gray's Inn Road, E.C. (Applicants are assured of immunity from arrest.)

"Nipper," said Nelson Lee, as he pulled away at his pipe, "John Wale is just the type of man to have made many enemies. And the class with which he mixes are very keen on revenge. We'll see what this brings forth."

Nelson Lee did not stir out that day, and in order to occupy his time, for he was a man who could never remain idle, he busied himself with his photography.

The morning passed without any applicant showing up. The afternoon waned, and evening came, and still no answer had come to the advertisement.

The seven o'clock post, however, brought with it a letter which, on being opened, was found to contain a scurrilous message, scrawled on a sheet of notepaper by an obviously disguised hand.

Nelson Lee read the abusive message with a smile on his lips.

"I am here consigned to everlasting torment, Nipper, in language which I will not repeat, for it might shock your ears," said he, with twinkling eyes. "And our friend, John Wale, wrote it, I'll wager my life. Further

proof, my boy, that the man we want is in town. How the fool has betrayed himself in his eagerness to get in a hit at me."

The postmark, although it betrayed the suburb in which the letter had been posted, was no help, for it was more than likely that the scoundrel had travelled from one end of London to another before slipping the letter into the pillar-box.

After dinner Nelson Lee proposed a game of chess, and he and Nipper were in the midst of a most exciting game when Mrs. Jones, the landlady, came into the room.

"Oh, Mr. Lee," she said, "here's a young man called in answer to the advertisement."

The detective sprang eagerly to his feet.

"Show him up!" he cried, sweeping the chess men aside, much to Nipper's chagrin, for the boy imagined that two moves more and he would call check-mate.

"He's a nasty-looking young man, sir," warned the landlady, "and I don't know that it's safe to——"

Nelson Lee rubbed his hands.

"Show him up!" he repeated. "You need not be afraid on my account, Mrs. Jones."

The good woman retired, and a minute later could be heard apologising for the darkness of the staircase, and begging the young man to go up in front of her.

Then the door opened, and in came a lanky, flashily dressed youth, with a sallow face—as mean a looking rascal as one could ever expect to meet. He held his right hand down by his side.

Nelson Lee, who stood beside the door, seized the hand in a moment and wrenched the fingers open.

"Thanks!" he cried, as the chagrined youth leapt back, with a cry of rage. "I'll keep this little toy until you depart, my friend. We don't allow any shooting here! This is not a shooting gallery."

He then opened the revolver, and allowed the cartridges the magazine contained to drop into the palm of his hand.

"H'm! They are not blanks," he said.

The visitor grinned.

"I—er—only brought it for self-protection," he blurted out.

"You are quite safe here," said Nelson Lee. "No matter what crime you might have committed, I should consider it a point of honour to let you go. You have come in reply to my advertisement, I believe?"

"Are you Mr. Nelson Lee?"

"I am."

The visitor looked hesitatingly round.

"Sit down! Make yourself at home," said Lee. "Close the door, Nipper, and keep guard there. Now we're comfortable! What is your name, my friend?"

"Corker, sir."

"Corker what?"

"Corker Smith."

"H'm! Well, I want information concerning John Wale," said the detective. "Can you supply it?"

"Maybe I can; maybe I can't. What about the reward?"

"You shall have that in due course, my friend," said Nelson Lee. "First of all, let me tell you why I want to discover the whereabouts of John Wale."

And then, while the youth listened, he repeated the story of George Bray

and his connection with the murder of James Robertson. He told the youth of his conviction that Wale had fired the fatal shot.

"I don't suppose," he said, "that you have done many good deeds in your life. Here's a chance to do one now. If you can help me in apprehending John Wale, you will assist in setting free an innocent man, and it will be worth the doing, surely?"

Corker Smith's narrow forehead contracted.

"I've seen George Bray fight," he muttered, "and I've won a quid or two over him in my time. I'd like to set him free, and I owe Wale a grudge—curse him! But I don't feel inclined to help if I am to get nothing out of it!"

"Smith," said Nelson Lee eagerly, "if you help me in this, and I get a fast hold of Wale; if Bray is liberated, I'll give you £50 on the day he comes out of prison!"

"I'm broke to the wide, sir! I haven't got a bean!"

"Very well, then, if it's as bad as you say, I'm willing to help you now. But you have got to help me first!"

Corker thought it over, chewing at his underlip as he sat in his chair. He stared vacantly at Nelson Lee, and evidently the masterful personality of the man appealed to him, for he suddenly cried:

"All right, guv'nor! I'll tell all I know. 'Ere goes!"

He cleared his throat, asked for a "fag," lit the cigarette, and then began:

"It was like this, Mr. Lee, with regard to the quarrel between Jim Robertson and John Wale. They worked together in the Bond Street jewel robbery——"

"Not that big theft of diamonds at Rapelle's!" exclaimed Lee, excitedly.

"Yus; that's the very job they done. Neat, wasn't it? They got in through the premises next door, dropped through the skylight, melted the lock of the safe door, and got the blamed thing open as neat as you please."

"You have got the details pat," said Lee, eyeing the Corker closely. "Had you a hand in that game? Come! I won't give you away!"

"I kep' watch outside. And what do you think they gave me for my trouble?"

"I don't know, Corker."

"Not even a stiver! And I risked gaol to 'elp em—the skunks! Well, the swag was carried off by Robertson. We were alarmed, you see, nearing the end of the job, and bolted. Robertson, he was a grand hand at getting a decent price for the sparklers out of the fences, you see. Wale told him to sell the stuff. He did. Jim Robertson sold the bulk to Dicky Murphy, the fence in Wellmann Court, and got £1,000 for it. I 'eard."

"All right, Dicky Murphy!" murmured the detective. "I shall remember that against you! Go on, Corker!"

"He got £1,000 for the diamonds," Corker continued, "and he only gave Jack Wale £150. He said that was half the swag——"

"And Wale swore he'd be revenged. That's the way of it, eh?"

"Yes. He told me that he meant to kill Jim Robertson in revenge for the way he'd been tricked. I didn't think he meant it seriously at the time, but when I heard that Jim had been shot, I said to myself at once: 'Jack Wale's done it!'"

"Then why didn't you appear in court at Bray's trial, and try to save the poor fellow?" asked Nelson Lee indignantly.

"Because—well, the police ain't any friends of mine. I'm wanted on one or two minor counts, you see, Mr. Lee, such as watch-snatchin', and I dursn't show me face."

"Very well! Now, can you tell me what has become of Wale? Where is the scoundrel hiding? He's in London, of course—but where?"

"He's up the West End every night, Mr. Lee," said Corker, "but he's so disguised that his own mother wouldn't know him. He visits the continental cafes, looking out for mugs all the time, and he's acting the fine gentleman, he is—cusis 'im!"

"What do you know of his career, Corker? Can you enlighten me regarding it?"

"I know that he's done a lot of things he ought to 'ave bin sent to gaol for years ago, Mister Lee," said Corker Smith earnestly, "and 'is aliases—my word he's used enough names to fill a book! Jack Wale—alias John Clecky, alias Charlie Mead, alias George Drew, alias Robert Courtney—is red-hot stuff!"

"Clecky—Courtney—Drew!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, in surprise. "Are you quite sure of this, Corker? Is Wale the same man?"

"Sure!"

Nelson Lee set his teeth.

"Then," he cried, "that makes me all the more determined to lay my hands on him! Corker, tell me which cafe he generally frequents."

"He's rather fond of the Cafe Republique, sir."

"Will he be there to-night?"

"It's almost certain."

"How should I know him?"

"Ah, that's the point, Mister Lee! Sometimes he adopts one disguise, sometimes another. But he did me, even as Jim Robertson did him; and as he's sent Bray to quod, blowed if I don't 'elp to lay 'im by the 'eels. And if you'll take me with yer when you go to the cafe, sir, I'll point 'im out to you. Only, 'e's as slippery as an eel, and you'll 'ave to be smart in catching 'im. The moment he sees I'm with you, 'e'll do a bolt."

"What time does he usually choose for his visit to the Cafe Republique, Corker?"

"He's generally there at eleven, and stays till chucking-out time—unless he finds a victim, sir."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Ah, good!" he cried. "I believe in striking while the iron's hot. Nipper!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Telephone for a taxi, and we'll all go there—at once!"

"Disguised, sir?"

"Bah, no! We won't bother about disguises. We'll go as we are. I mean to arrest the scoundrel on sight. Corker, you shall never have reason to regret having helped Bray in this ugly business. And you shall have your reward, I promise you. I'll pay you £10 on account to-night."

He went to his desk, opened a drawer, drew out a cash-box, which he unlocked, and then handed Corker Smith two five-pound bank-notes.

Corker vowed that he was ready to follow Nelson Lee to the world's end if necessary.

"I was in two minds about answering that ad., Mister Lee," he cried; "but wanting to git a bit of me own back on Jack Wale made me do it, and I ain't sorry. I'm feelin' 'appier in my mind than I've been for many a long day!"

"A good deed brings with it its own reward," murmured the detective, with a dry smile.

A few minutes later the cab was at the door. They entered it, and were driven westward as fast as the driver could take them.

CHAPTER IX

In Disguise.

THE Cafe Republique may justly be considered the most cosmopolitan of all the London cafes.

There all classes meet, culled from all the nations of the world. From early morning till late at night the place does a roaring trade, but it is seen at its best and brightest in the hours before midnight.

When Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Corker entered it, there was hardly a vacant seat to be seen.

By arrangement, Nelson Lee and Nipper remained outside in the hall while Corker went in to have a look around.

He was gone a minute or two, perhaps, and came back with his sallow cheeks aflame with excitement.

"Mr. Lee," he cried, "you couldn't 'ave come at a better time! 'E's there. 'E's got a pal or two with 'im, so I should be on me guard if I were you."

"I shall not be caught napping, Corker," said Nelson Lee, with a dry smile. "Lead the way!"

Corker hurried back into the cafe. Nelson Lee and Nipper trod closely on their heels.

Just as they entered the crowded place, some patrons of the brasserie left the table at which they had been seated, leaving it free for them to take.

They sat down.

"Now, Corker," said Nelson Lee, "which is my man?"

"Do you see that woman in the blue silk dress, Mr. Lee?"

"The one sitting near that column? Yes."

"Well, at the next table, half turned away from us, is a man with grey hair—a good-looking, well-dressed swell with a beard. See him? 'E's raising 'is glass to 'is lips now. He's John Wale!"

Nelson Lee emitted a low whistle of surprise.

"I can hardly believe it!" he said. "Are you sure, Corker?"

"I'll answer for the truth of my statement with my life, sir."

Nipper and Nelson Lee looked at the man in astonishment. Anyone less like the John Wale they had known could not have been imagined. The disguise—if disguise it were—was perfect.

Nelson Lee, who knew how amazingly difficult it was to get a false beard to look like the real thing, was lost in admiration of the consummate art of the wily scoundrel who wore it. And the hair, too! It did not look in the least like a wig.

The detective concluded that he must be wearing his own hair, which he had treated in such a manner as to make it appear to be grey. And yet the treatment was such that nobody could detect the sham.

Nelson Lee felt in his pocket, and got his handcuffs ready.

"Nipper," he said, "I am more than ever convinced of the necessity for laying this villain by the heels. Such a clever rascal as he appears to be is an everlasting menace to society!"

"Especially when he doesn't even stop at killing, gov'nor!" muttered Nipper.

Corker was excitedly drumming his finger-tips on the marble top of the table.

"Mr. Lee," he muttered, "I beg of you not to let 'im slip through your fingers, now you've got your chance! If you do, he'll do me in as he did in Jimmy Robertson. When I think of that I feel quite scared."

"Don't be alarmed," said Nelson Lee, "I shall make no mistake. Nipper,

be prepared to stand by. I'm going to arrest the scoundrel now. I have a warrant."

So saying, he rose from his seat.

But even as he did so, John Wale, the swindler, thief, and murderer, as if warned by a subtle instinct that an enemy was near, turned his eyes towards them.

As he recognised Corker he started. He saw Nelson Lee moving towards him, and with a low cry leapt to his feet, overturning his glass of champagne as he did so.

Making a hurried excuse to his companions, he hurried towards the door at the other end of the brasserie.

Nelson Lee quickened his pace. But he was dogged with bad luck. Either by accident or design, some of the patrons of the cafe got in his way. He pushed his way past them, and followed his man, who had gained a clear lead.

Nipper, meanwhile, had wriggled his way among the tables like an eel. As Wale passed through the door leading into the street, Nipper was only a stride or so behind.

The boy sprang across the intervening space, and banging open the door, jumped into the street.

His haste proved his undoing. John Wale had stood his ground on reaching the pavement.

As Nipper in his eagerness sprang across the threshold, the villain struck out at him. In his right hand he held some weapon or other, and the hard metal surface of this, landing on the point, knocked Nipper's senses flying.

He fell to the pavement with a thud, and lay there blinking up at the stars, incapable of movement.

John Wale, as quick as lightning, leapt into a waiting taxi.

"Oxford Street," said he. "I'll give you a sovereign if you get me there quickly!"

The driver of the cab asked no questions. He started his motor, leapt into his seat, and hurried off.

Nelson Lee was just in time to see the cab moving off. He called to the driver to stop. A mocking laugh was his only answer.

The detective looked up and down the street. There was no other taxi in sight. However, at that instant a private touring-car drew up at the entrance to the cafe.

Nelson Lee, picking poor Nipper up, deposited him inside the vehicle, to the astonishment and anger of its outraged occupants.

"Gentlemen," said the detective sharply, "in the name of the law, I ask you to help me in arresting a felon."

The driver of the car stared at him.

"I am Nelson Lee!" cried Lee, pointing after the tail-light of the vanishing cab. "I want you to follow that taxi. Don't argue or protest, or it will be too late!"

"Jump in!" said the owner of the car, and the next moment they were flashing along the street at an ever increasing speed, and Nelson Lee knew that they would have a big advantage over the taxi.

They were just in time to see the cab vanish in the direction of Regent Street. They followed.

On turning into the broad thoroughfare they could see it flashing at breakneck speed up the incline in the direction of Oxford Circus.

Luckily it was the only cab in sight. They followed it, gaining slowly on it, slowly but surely.

The chase led them into Oxford Street, and across it. Nelson's Lee's

keen eyes read the number on the name plate of the cab. In order that he might not trust to his memory he wrote it down on his cuff. It was just as well, as events proved, for they lost the chase entirely at the Circus, for there they were held up by a stream of cross traffic, and when they were at last able to proceed the taxi and its occupant had disappeared from sight.

As the touring-car sped upon its way it soon became evident that they would fail in their pursuit, and after speeding to Tottenham Court Road and back again, Nelson Lee thanked the owner of the car for the help he had given and said that he would not require his services any longer.

By that time Nipper had recovered, and after the car had been driven away the detective and his helpmate walked ruefully along, wondering what they could do to make up for their failure.

"I feel I'm to blame, sir," said Nipper ruefully, feeling a lump on his jaw as big as a hen's egg. "I ought to have been on my guard, seeing what sort of a scoundrel John Wale is. He landed that knock-out before I had even time to raise my arm."

"It's a pity, Nipper," remarked the detective, with flashing eyes, "and I'm sorry for you. But don't forget that if that taxi-driver had only done his duty we should have had Wale safely into our hands. The fellow must have witnessed the assault. Yet he took the fare."

Lee looked around him with a frown.

He was feeling bitterly mortified at his failure. To be held up as they had been at Oxford Circus was maddening. The driver of the taxi had just managed to speed past the policeman on duty there, and it was probably the sight of the cab speeding at a breakneck pace that had caused the bobby to stand right in the way of the touring-car, and to beckon the cross traffic on in spite of all Nelson Lee's protests.

Sometimes policemen can be too officious, thought Lee, with a rueful frown on his face.

And then, as he heard a warning toot, toot from a motor-horn, he saw a taxi turn out of one of the side-streets and curve across the road.

In a moment Nelson Lee had leapt from the pavement and barred the way.

Why he did so, he could never have explained. All he knew was that a subtle instinct told him that this was the vehicle and driver he was in search of.

"Stop!" he cried, holding up his arm.

The man cursed him, sounded the horn again, and continued on his way.

Nelson Lee would have been run down had he not deftly sprang out of the way. Then as the driver, with a laugh, increased his speed, the detective, with a spring, leapt upon the footboard and grasped him by the arm.

"Stop your cab instantly!" he cried, in a tone of command. "I am a detective, and if you refuse I shall take steps to see that you are severely punished!"

The man answered with an oath of defiance. He shook Lee's hand off, but the detective, not to be denied, caught hold of him again, and the rascal, realising that it would be madness to proceed, ran the vehicle in to the side of the kerb, and pulled it up there.

Meanwhile, Nipper had sprang up behind, the hood of the cab being down. He joined the "guy'nor" the moment the cab had come to a standstill.

"Look 'ere!" blustered the driver. "I want to know the meaning of this! You've no right to interfere with me!"

"Nipper," said Nelson Lee, "what's the number of the cab?"

"ALX 93552," answered Nipper, with a broad grin.

"The very one we want!" ejaculated the detective. "Fetch a policeman." The cab-driver scowled.

"'Ere, what for?" he asked, his voice trembling with a note of fear. His bluster vanished.

"What did you do with that man you picked up outside the Cafe Republique?" asked Lee sternly.

"I never picked up any man outside the Cafe Republique! I ain't been near the place for weeks!"

"That's a lie, for we chased you from there!" answered Lee sternly. "I took a note of your number as we drove along. Here it is on my cuff. Now, listen to me, my friend. Either you will help me to trace and arrest the man you have assisted to escape the clutches of the law; or I shall take you to the station, and make you answerable."

"For what?"

"You saw that man assault my boy here. Yet you took him as a passenger, and refused to pull up when called upon to stop."

"It's a lie, and I want to know who you are, mister, and by what right you've interfered with me!"

"My name is Nelson Lee——" the detective began; but he got no farther, for the taxi-driver interrupted him with an ejaculation of dismayed surprise.

"All right, Mr. Lee," he cried; "I'm done! I never dreamt it was you, or I'd have helped yer, blow me if I wouldn't! And what was that cove I drove from the Republican Cafe, sir?"

"He was a man named Wale. I want him for shooting Jim Robertson in that Wellman Court affair."

The cab-driver emitted a whistle of surprise.

"Do yer, now!" he growled. "Well, to tell yer the 'onest, Mr. Lee, if I'd have knowed who he was, I wouldn't have drove him for twice what he gave. He offered me a quid to drive 'im to Oxford Street, and I imagined he was a toff dodging 'is creditors. Now that you show me it's a serious case, I'll 'elp yer. I drove the toff to a street round there"—jerking his thumb over his shoulder—"and before I came back here, I waited and watched 'im enter a 'ouse there. I drove back to make sure of the number in case of accidents, and I can take you straight to the place if you've a mind to go."

Nelson Lee's eyes sparkled with satisfaction.

"Evidently, then," he said, "you can repair the wrong you have done. That's as it should be. Jump in, Nipper! Driver, take us to the house as quickly as you can."

The driver obeyed. He swung the cab round, and off they sped.

Within two minutes the man stopped. He did not drive up to the house in which John Wale had sought refuge, but pulled up within a hundred yards of the place.

Walking the rest of the distance with Nelson Lee and Nipper, he pointed the building out to them.

"That's the show," he cried—"number nineteen. It's a lodging-house, as far as I can make out, sir. After the toff had gone in, I saw a light appear in the second floor window. That one up there, where you see it burning now. I reckon he's still there."

"All right," said Nelson Lee, pulling out a notebook. "Now I want you to give me your name and address, and the name of your yard. Is the cab your own? Yes? Your private address? Ah, that's all right! Now"—with an air of satisfaction—"I shall know where to find you if I want you! Driver, you can go."

The driver—Berkins his name was—seemed only too pleased to get away. Perhaps he had not expected to escape so lightly.

At any rate, within a couple of minutes he had vanished, cab and all, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were left on the watch outside the house in which, so they were informed, John Wale had taken refuge.

Nelson Lee made a quick survey of the surroundings. His first care, while leaving Nipper on guard, was to make absolutely sure that there was no other means of exit from the house than by the area door, or that which opened straight into the street.

He was soon satisfied as to these points.

“Nipper,” he cried, “we have caught the fellow like a rat in a trap, and if he has not already bolted, we shall take him, as sure as he’s alive!”

Nelson Lee’s next proceeding was to secure the services of the police.

A sergeant and two constables were added to the force, and together they approached the house. They stopped at the door for a moment to discuss the best way of apprehending the rascal Wale, when the door opened and a shabby-looking individual, who bore little resemblance to the smartly-attired swell of the Cafe Republique, stepped out into the street.

He moved nervously. He was whistling the opening bars of a popular refrain. But no sooner did he set eyes on the uniforms of the police than he stopped his whistling with a jerk and leapt backwards, as if anxious to get inside the house again.

Too late! Nelson Lee had leapt between him and the threshold.

He searched the fellow’s face with his piercing eyes, and he knew in a moment that the man was John Wale. He had got rid of his moustache, and he had changed his clothes. But it was Wale right enough.

“John Wale,” trumpeted Nelson Lee, “the game’s up! You are my prisoner!”

The fellow stood there, crouching like a panther at bay. His fierce eyes searched the detective’s face. His right hand sought his side.

Nelson Lee motioned to the police to seize their man. They moved briskly forward, but ere they could lay hands on him the villain had whipped out a revolver and fired at once, aiming at Nelson Lee’s head.

The sergeant uttered a cry of horror.

“Seize him!” he shouted.

Lee escaped as by a miracle. Only his quick wit and admirable nerve served to save him from the hands of his would-be murderer.

Luckily he anticipated the shooting, and ducked even as Wale fired.

Then with a smashing punch he sent the rascal staggering.

Nipper completed Wale’s discomfiture. Darting in, he tripped the scoundrel up, and down he crashed upon his face on the pavement, the revolver falling from his fingers, and clattering along over the stones.

Then the police leaped upon him, seized him, dragged him up, and there he was safe held, for they knew how to deal with a dangerous prisoner, did these gallant members of the Metropolitan Police.

Wale, his face stained with blood, breathing defiance and cursing like a trooper, had his wrists drawn together, and so Nelson Lee clapped the hand-cuffs upon him.

“I think, my friend,” said he, with a grim smile, “that your career of infamy is at an end. You sent poor George Bray to prison, but you will have to set him free.”

“You must be mad!” snarled the prisoner, showing his teeth in a snarl. “On what charge have I been arrested?”

“For complicity in the manslaughter—or murder—of James Robertson,” answered Nelson Lee sternly. “Call a cab there, Nipper, and let’s get him

to the lock-up as soon as we can. It's not safe to lounge about here with such an important capture."

Nipper called the cab; they got into it, and were driven away, John Wale cursing and threatening every inch of the way.

The arrest of John Wale, the man of many crimes, and almost as many aliases caused a great sensation

The newspapers, which were pining for news at the time, made the most of the event.

The astuteness shown by Nelson Lee in capturing the scoundrel was freely commented upon. And the story of the detective's narrow escape from death was not the least thrilling of the incidents connected with the arrest.

The following day Wale was brought before the magistrate.

Formal evidence of arrest was given, and a remand was ordered. At the second hearing the police had almost completed the case against him, and Wale's legal representative was in court.

Finger prints were produced to show that Wale had already passed through the hands of the police, though it was under the name of Clark, the charge on that occasion being one of house-breaking.

He protested his innocence. He swore that he had had nothing to do with Bray beyond his having offered to back the boxer in a ring contest the moment Bray had succeeded in finding a suitable opponent.

But George Bray, boxer and convict, had been brought to London from gaol, and in a voice shaking with emotion, he told how he had been tricked by the prisoner.

"I never fired the shot that killed Jim Robertson," he said. Pointing at the grinning Wale: "There stands the villain who murdered him—that scoundrel in the dock."

John Wale was committed for trial, and in due course appeared to answer for his crime at the Old Bailey.

Once again the sensational evidence connecting George Bray with the tragedy was heard. The story of the buying of the revolver and cartridges was repeated by the unfortunate convict.

Wale denied every word of it.

"He's got no witnesses," he sneered. "The man's a convicted felon and a liar. You can't believe a word he says."

But John Wale, though he elected to go into the witness-box and give evidence on his own behalf, could not wipe out one damning fact.

George Bray had never seen Robertson until Wale had pointed the fellow out to him. He had no reason to bear the dead man any animosity.

On the other hand, John Wale had hated Jim Robertson. He had sworn to injure him. If, as was presumed, Bray had fired the fatal shot in the heat of anger, Wale had most certainly employed Bray to thrash Robertson—Bray had admitted that much—and he was primarily responsible for the deed.

In view of his bad record and his attempt to shoot Nelson Lee he was sent to penal servitude for ten years, and was dragged from the dock cursing the detective who had been his undoing, swearing that if ever he came out he would do for him.

"Exit John Wale," said Nelson Lee, with a faint smile; "and I'm not sorry to see the back of him. That man is bad enough to commit any crime. But I think our prison walls will be strong enough to hold him."

CHAPTER X.

The Atonement.

NELSON LEE had been cruelly disappointed in connection with the arrest of John Wale, in that it had not led to Bray's being set at liberty.

George Bray's protestations of innocence were not enough. Nelson Lee's belief in Bray's innocence was nothing more than a belief, and could not be admitted as evidence.

Wale made no attempt to clear his victim. Indeed, he only implicated him the more. Wale was sent to penal servitude, but George Bray, the innocent man, was not set free on that account.

When Nelson Lee interviewed the unfortunate convict before they took him back to his prison, Bray broke down.

"My poor wife," he sobbed, "my unlucky child. What is to come of them?"

"Mrs. Bray is doing regular work now. She is content to wait until you have served your time, if need be, Bray," Nelson Lee assured him.

"And if, when you do come out, you turn over a new leaf, and go straight, she'll forgive you for ever having got yourself into this mess."

"Does she care for me still?" demanded the convict in a hoarse voice. "Shall I ever find her when I do come out?"

"To be sure you will," said Lee.

The convict laughed.

"To think," he cried, setting his teeth and clenching his fists, "that I should have been made a cat's-paw and a dupe by such a scoundrel as John Wale. I know it was wrong of me ever to have entered into that compact with him. But if I sinned I have atoned a hundred times over. Well, I only pray that I may meet him when I get back to gaol, and, if I do—well, wild horses sha'n't hold me back from him."

"If you do meet him, Bray," said Nelson Lee, "take my advice and shun the scoundrel. Have nothing to do with him. He's done you enough harm already. Don't let him do more."

Bray merely smiled. But the gleam in his dark eyes was not good to see.

George Bray went back to the lonely gaol on the moor, and worked there with the rest of the convicts, alternately sullen and hopeful.

Bray had always been his own master. Indeed, his lack of discipline had in a sense been his undoing.

Often the loneliness of the place, with its armed warders, appalled him. The dreary monotony of the work under strict supervision, the Sundays spent in cell and chapel, the close companionship of vile men, made him long for freedom.

He wanted to defy authority and make a bolt for it, and on those occasions when he went out to work in the fields, he would gaze wistfully over the moor, and long for one of those enveloping mists which he had heard so frequently rolled down over the waste, and made possible a dash for freedom.

George Bray's yearning to see his wife and baby became at times almost overmastering.

He had then to hold himself in hand indeed, or he would have uttered a shout of defiance, and have bolted, even with a hundred rifles or carbines levelled at him.

Nor was he the only convict in the prison who felt like that about things. One day Bray received a shock. A fresh batch of prisoners had arrived

at the gaol. George Bray first realised this when he turned out for a tramp around the prison yard.

There were two or three of them, and the convict's burning eyes searched their faces. He was seeking for the one man he hated in all the world—John Wale. And he found him at last.

Wale was there, and a hoarse cry rattled in the convict's throat, to be choked back with the utmost difficulty.

By a wonderful effort he managed to control himself, though his fingers were itching to clutch the rascal by the throat.

After that Bray schooled himself so that he was able to meet Wale, who pretended never to see him, without betraying the least emotion.

He was longing for the day when they would meet in the open.

A month passed before that day came, and John Wale marched out of the great stone gateway with his shovel on his shoulder with the rest, the warders, armed, going with them.

Soon they were at work in the fields, and then Bray began to edge his way gradually towards the spot where Wale was busy performing his allotted task.

It was a pleasant afternoon, and the warders were all more than usually amiable. Not that they were lax; far from it.

Had any convict chosen to make a dash for liberty, he would speedily have discovered to his cost that they were not sleeping.

Still Bray was allowed to wander towards Wale without let or hindrance until he was within a yard or so of him.

Then, with a roar, Bray hurled his implement on to the ground and leapt at his enemy.

"At last, John Wale," he cried, "I've got a chance of settling accounts with you."

Wale, with a start, drew himself erect. Recognising Bray, he raised his spade above his head.

"Stand back, you fool, or I'll brain you," he cried.

But Bray hurled the spade aside, and struck Wale savagely in the face. He then leapt in close, and seized him by the throat. His iron fingers crushed the fellow's windpipe, and whilst Wale struggled madly to free himself, he uttered low, gurgling moans, which were intended for a call for help.

The warders leapt forward. But the other convicts barred their way. Bray's story was well known to most of them, and they were one with George in the latter's desire for revenge.

It is impossible to say who struck the first blow, but one of the warders was felled, and then arose a shout for liberty.

Bray, with a laugh of delight, struck his enemy in the face, and hurled him more dead than alive on to the red earth.

Then with a roar of defiance he made a dash for freedom.

The convicts were on the run everywhere. After them sped the warders, holding their rifles in readiness, but reluctant to shoot unless it were absolutely imperative.

Wale, feeling at his throat, came back from the land of dreams.

A convict came springing past him.

"Get up, mate, and make a bolt for it," he shouted, "or you'll never get another chance."

Wale rose, and after casting a swift glance round him, started off at a rare pace, his strength rapidly returning to him as he thought of the possibilities that offered.

Bray, one of the biggest and strongest of the convicts, and one of the most determined too—for he was labouring under a sense of injustice—

soon outdistanced the rest, but found himself headed off by a swift-footed and nimble warder, who presently barred the way in front of him, and levelled his rifle at the runaway.

"Its no good, Bray," he cried. "You can't escape, man. But, for Heaven's sake, don't force me to shoot you down. I shall have to if you persist in trying to get away. I must do my duty."

"Stand out of the way," roared Bray. "I'm an innocent man. No convict's cage can hold me."

He crept nearer.

"Don't be a fool," said the warder. "You've only got a short sentence. Think of your wife and kiddy. Go back to the gaol like a good fellow."

Then all of a moment George Bray's brain seemed to clear, and he realised that with armed men all around him, with the moor stretching in front of him, and keen scented dogs to run him down, even if he got away now escape would be quite impossible.

"All right," he cried, as he threw his hands up. "I'm done."

At that moment a man sped past him. It was a convict.

It was John Wale; and from behind came the thud, thud of running feet. Bray turned. Two warders were coming in hot chase. They commanded Wale to stop.

So did the warder who had brought George Bray to a stand.

But Wale, who was nimble, and fleet-footed and desperate, paid no heed. He only sped the faster.

"Stay, or I fire," shouted one of the warders, coming to a stand.

Again there came no answer.

The next moment the warder's rifle spoke.

Crack! The bullet sped upon its death-dealing mission, and John Wale, staggering in his tracks, threw up his arms, and fell headlong.

And as he lay motionless on the brown soil the warders rushed towards him.

George Bray's heart gave a leap. He looked backwards towards the prison. The convicts were being mustered together. Reinforcements were coming from the prison. Order had already been restored.

The fate of John Wale served as a deterrent to the rest.

George Bray, heaving a deep sigh, walked slowly back across the field, and after him came the warders, bearing the limp and lifeless form of the convict they had shot down.

As Bray cast a glance at the bloodstained and ghastly face of his enemy his heart swelled.

"He's dead," he thought, "and I shall have to work my sentence out. He'll never clear me now."

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However, the convict John Wale was not dead.

He had been shot through the body, and had injured his head in falling.

But he was not dead.

He was borne to the infirmary, and the doctor was speedily in attendance. He stanching the wound, and dressed it.

Then with a grace face, he said:

"This fellow is dying. The wound is mortal. He cannot live more than a few hours."

Indeed, he never expected Wale to recover consciousness again.

However, this Wale did, and he soon proved by the same questions he asked that he had all his wits about him.

"Doctor," he said, after a pause, "am I dying?"

The doctor hesitated.

"Yes," said he.

The convict's face whitened. He winced, and closed his eyes.

"How long have I got?" he asked presently.

"Not long."

"Is there a parson in the prison?"

"Yes."

"Send him to me; and—and—I'd like to see George Bray."

"Why?"

"Because I sent him to prison. He's an innocent man. He never shot Jim Robertson. I killed him, and slipped the revolver into Bray's pocket, to put the blame on him. But I'd like to clear him before I die. I would have shown him no mercy if I'd lived, but as I've got to go—I—I think I'd like to give him back his freedom."

The prison governor was communicated with, the facts were placed before him, and the chaplain and George Bray were brought into the presence of the dying man.

And there, while a warder wrote down John Wale's dying confession, the latter owned up to the truth.

His brain seemed to be remarkably alert, seeing how quickly his strength was leaving him, and when the statement had been completed he asked that it might be read over to him.

"I want to see whether I have omitted anything," he explained.

The statement was read whilst George Bray stood stolidly by, listening with a frown upon his face.

When the dying convict had assured himself that it was as he wished, he penned his signature at the bottom, and to this were added those of the witnesses.

Then he turned and looked vacantly at Bray.

"Are you there, George," he murmured.

"Yes," answered Bray, hoarsely.

"I treated you badly. I saw you were easy to fool, and I meant to kill Robertson from the first. I don't regret that. He was a liar and a rogue, and deserved his fate. But I ruined your life, boy—can you forgive me for that?"

George Bray could not resist the appeal of his dying enemy.

"Yes," he replied. "I forgive you."

A faint smile flickered about Wale's lips.

"Thanks," he cried. "I didn't mean to clear you. I don't know what made me do it." And then he resigned himself to the hands of the chaplain.

Within ten minutes he was dead.

And Bray, going back to his cell, felt too dazed and bewildered to be able to appreciate that he was as good as free. In the face of Wale's confession his freedom was merely a question of time.

When George Bray left the prison, and was driven across the moor en route for the nearest station, the sun was shining, and a brisk breeze was sweeping the waste.

Bray was light-hearted and happy for the first time for years. He looked

(Continued overleaf.)

at life from a broader standpoint than ever he had done before, and he knew how small and mean-spirited he had been in the past.

He vowed that he would leave the drink alone, that he would work hard and redeem the past in a future which should be devoted to making his wife and little one happy.

And when on reaching the station he found Mrs. Bray and his baby waiting for him, and with them Nelson Lee and Nipper, he very nearly broke down. It was almost too much for him.

After the first emotions of the meeting had passed away he turned to Nelson Lee, and grasped the detective's outstretched hand.

"God bless you for all you've done for me, sir," he said. "I'll try and repay it some day if I can."

"Don't mention it, Bray," answered Lee. "But make up your mind to go straight now that you've got the chance."

Bray's face beamed; his eyes flashed. He drew in his breath in a deep sigh.

"With Heaven's help, and the missus, sir, I will," said he.

THE END.

The Editor regrets that, owing to lack of space, the instalment of our new Serial Story must be held over till next week.

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