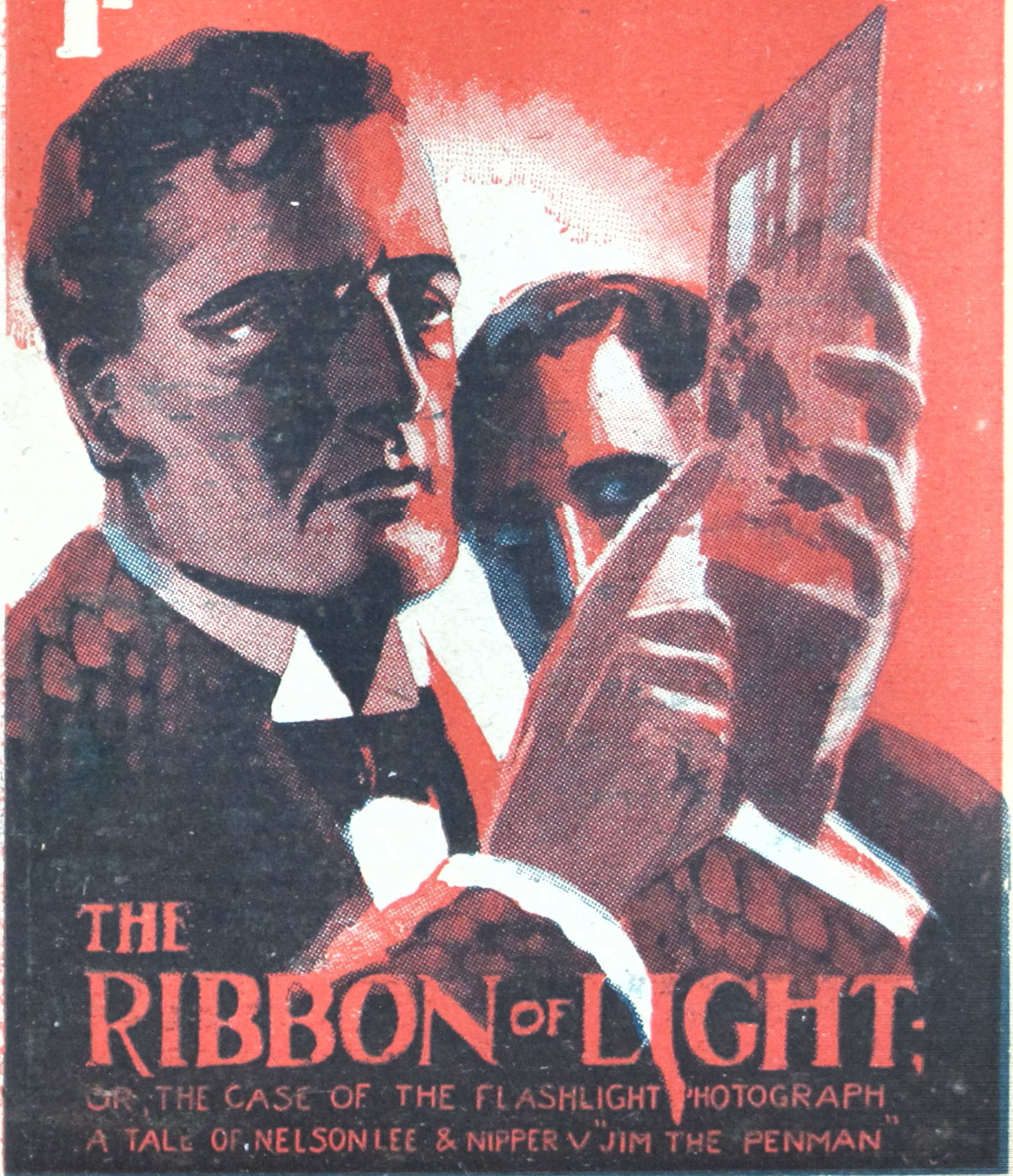


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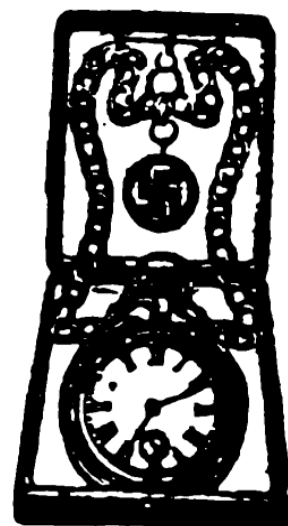
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THE RIBBON OF LIGHT

Or, THE CASE OF THE
FLASHLIGHT PHOTOGRAPH.

An Amazing Tale of Nelson Lee and "Jim The Penman."

By the Author of "The Great Will Forgery," "The Mystery of the Moor," "The Forged Marriage Lines," "The Mystery of the Mail Van," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Nipper's Errand and What Came of It.

"WELL, upon my soul!"

It was Nelson Lee, the celebrated crime investigator, who uttered the words. He had just entered his consulting-room, and stood in the doorway, gazing within.

Lee was rather hot, for the day was brilliantly sunny and the temperature high.

"What on earth are you up to, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee, striding into the room and closing the door. "When I left I gave you some cuttings to paste, and I return to find you engaged in some weird occupation which is certainly neither connected with paste nor cuttings!"

Nipper, the detective's young assistant, looked round with a rather red face and grinned cheerfully.

"You wait, guv'nor!" he observed. "You'll see something in a minute!"

"I can see quite a lot as it is, you young rascal!"

Indeed, Nelson Lee was rather puzzled as to the nature of Nipper's occupation. A large sheet of brown paper had been spread upon the window table, and on this stood something which appeared to be a circular tin of large dimensions with a handle at one end, and the whole thing mounted on a sort of cheap iron rest. Nipper was twirling the tin round vigorously by means of the handle, and a rattling and swishing noise came from the interior of the contrivance. Rather to Nelson Lee's surprise, he observed that the surface of the circular tin appeared to be covered with frost.

The detective frowned.

"What's the meaning of this, young 'un?" he asked severely. "What do you think you are having a game at?"

"Hold on a minute, sir!"

Nipper lifted the tin from its stand, up-ended it, and prised open a lid.

"There you are!" he announced triumphantly. "Doesn't that make your mouth water, gov'nor?"

"What the——"

"Ice-cream, sir," said Nipper, with relish. "You look as if you could do with a bit, too."

"Ice-cream!" roared Nelson Lee. "Upon my word, Nipper, what will you be up to next? Things reach a limit, I think, when you turn our respectable consulting-room into an ice-cream manufactory!"

He paused.

"It looks quite excellent," he added slowly. "Let us have a taste, Nipper!"

The lad grinned, and promptly ladled out a huge spoonful of really splendid ice-cream. Nipper knew that his master was not in the least angry, for there was a twinkle of amusement in the detective's eyes.

"So jolly hot to-day, 'sir, that I thought it would be rather a good wheeze," remarked Nipper, as he consumed his own liberal portion. "This machine is one of those new-fangled arrangements—a kind of double tin, with the ice outside and the cream in the middle. It only takes five minutes to make, and I needed cooling down badly."

Nelson Lee ceased eating suddenly.

"I presume you didn't make this concoction yourself?" he inquired.

"Don't worry, gov'nor! Mrs. Jones made it, and fetched it up with a couple of penn'orth of ice. Ripping, isn't it?"

"Just for the sake of the compliment, my lad, I will agree that it certainly is ripping," was Lee's reply. "But this sort of thing won't do! I've got more important work for you than making and consuming ice-cream!"

Five minutes later, all trace of Nipper's handiwork was removed, and the lad announced that he felt fit for anything. The day was certainly tremendously hot, so Nelson Lee could not very well be cross with his young assistant for getting up to such a trick in working hours. Besides, the ice-cream had been rather acceptable.

Just at present the detective was engaged upon a somewhat unimportant burglary case. A certain West End jeweller had appealed to the great detective to recover a fairly large amount of jewellery which had been stolen a few days before, and the detective, having nothing else on hand at the moment, had accepted the commission. This morning he believed he was practically at the end of the case, for he had good reason to suppose that the jewellery was located. The capture of the thief was merely a matter for the police.

"From what I have been able to learn this morning, Nipper, I am convinced that the stolen property, or a large proportion of it, is now on the premises of Mr. Marks Lewin, a highly respectable pawnbroker, of Islington."

"Don't you know for certain, gov'nor?"

"Not for absolute certain. For that reason, you are to bustle off straight away to Islington to pay Mr. Lewin a visit," replied Lee. "You know the exact nature of the stolen property, Nipper, and all you have to do is to identify it. The journey won't take you long, and after you have reported to me we will communicate with our client."

Nipper was soon supplied with full instructions, and he placed his straw-hat on the back of his head and sallied out. Lee, left to himself, opened a few letters which had come during his absence, and glanced over them. As they were of no importance, he laid them aside, and picked up the morning's newspaper.

The famous detective believed in the principle of work first and pleasure afterwards.

He had started out very early that morning, and had been very busy ever since.

As usual, the newspaper was mainly filled with war reports, and Lee was some time in conning over them. There was no home news of much importance except for a fairly serious motor-car accident in Regent Street.

It was really the report of an inquest on Mr. Anson Ramsdale, a millionaire City merchant. He had met with a tragic death. While being driven up Regent Street in his own huge car, his chauffeur had suddenly fainted. The car had swerved, and had dashed with great force into the front of an on-coming motor-bus. The resulting smash had been of exceptional violence. Both vehicles had been travelling fairly fast, and Mr. Ramsdale met with instant death. The unconscious chauffeur had, curiously enough, escaped with a broken leg and a fractured head. His recovery was hoped for.

"H'm! Rather a bad business!" thought Nelson Lee. "Totally unavoidable, too, so far as I can see. In my opinion, chauffeurs should be absolutely sound in health, or accidents of this nature are always probable."

The detective laid the paper aside and turned his thoughts to other subjects. He was not aware just then that the name of Mr. Anson Ramsdale was to figure somewhat largely in an affair which had not even yet come under his notice.

The detective had settled himself down to a certain task when Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, entered the consulting-room, after tapping.

"There's a messenger-boy here, sir," was the worthy lady's announcement.

A minute later, a cheeky-looking District Messenger entered, cap in hand. He handed Lee a note which the detective instantly saw had come from Nipper.

"Where was this handed in?" Lee asked.

"Hampstead," replied the boy. "Some young fellow entered the office and said the message had to be taken at once. I came over by tube, sir."

"I see! Wait a moment!"

Nelson Lee opened the letter, read the contents, and then nodded his head.

"All right," he said. "You can go, my lad."

The District Messenger departed, wealthier to the extent of a shilling, and Lee re-read the note from Nipper. It was short, but exceedingly interesting:

"Have hit the trail of Swanker Jerry. Shadowed him to 253, Scarbrooke Road, Hampstead. Am watching house now. If possible, please come at once, sir. We'll nab him fair and square. Don't think he'll shift for an hour or so. Am sending this by errand-boy, then District Messenger.—
NIPPER."

Nelson Lee nodded to himself approvingly.

"The youngster hasn't done so badly," he murmured. "I suppose he got on our friend's track by chance. Anyhow, I shall certainly hurry to Hampstead at once."

The gentleman referred to as "Swanker Jerry" was the jewel-thief responsible for the West End robbery, and he owed his nickname to the fact that he usually affected a flashy style of dress and a "Piccadilly Johnny" manner. His full name was Jeremiah Conelly, and he was considered to be one of the smartest cracksmen of the day. It was known for a fact that he had been responsible for many burglaries during the past year, and the police had never once been able to lay hands on him.

Nipper's message, therefore, was exceptionally pleasing. Nelson Lee had undertaken to recover the stolen property, but if he caught the thief as well it would be a feather in his cap.

Nipper had displayed great cuteness. Having tracked his man down, he had taken his stand outside the house and had dispatched a note by a passing errand-boy, the latter having instructions to take it to the nearest District Messenger office. The fact that it had been delivered so promptly clearly showed that there was no delay en route.

Lee did not waste his time by hanging about tube stations, travelling down elevators, etc. The tube trains go quickly enough themselves, but when travelling underground there is a considerable wastage of time in traversing long passages, climbing stairs, ascending lifts, and changing at junctions.

Lee chartered a taxi in Gray's Inn Road two minutes after he had started walking towards Holborn. He instructed the driver to make for Scarbrooke Road, Hampstead, with all the speed he was capable of. The man took Nelson Lee literally—perhaps the promise of a large tip fired him with enthusiasm—and the journey was somewhat exciting. At least, it would have been exciting to any ordinary individual; but to Nelson Lee, who had experienced many hair-raising motor-rides, there was nothing particularly startling about it.

Scarbrooke Road, at all events, was reached in safety. Lee dismissed the taxi at the corner, and the man drove his vehicle off, feeling that there were still a few "real gents" left in the world. But, of course, the cabby's idea of a real gent. centred wholly upon the dimensions of his tip.

Scarbrooke Road was very quiet and old-fashioned, and when Lee commenced walking down it the only persons in sight were a postman, a milkman laboriously pushing his cart, and two little children playing in the distance.

The houses were neither large nor handsome. They were, in fact, ugly and in wretched repair. Many, indeed, had apparently been empty for some years. A short strip of garden fronted each house, and this for the most part neglected.

"H'm! I am not very much impressed," thought Nelson Lee. "However, the aspect of Scarbrooke Road is of little importance to me. No. 253 is the sole extent of my concern."

The taxi-cab had set the detective down at the high-number end of the road, so it was only necessary for him to walk a short distance in order to reach the house mentioned in Nipper's brief note. This, Lee at once saw, was empty.

He paused before reaching a spot exactly opposite. There was no sign whatever of Nipper, although the lad had said that he would remain on the watch. If he had actually been keeping his eye on the house he would surely have witnessed his approach. The fact that he had not shown himself seemed to point to the further fact that something had occurred during the time that had elapsed since the sending of the message.

Possibly Swanker Jerry had taken his departure, and Nipper had, therefore, followed. If this was really the case, Lee knew that the lad would have left a private mark on the pavement—a plan which the pair always adopted under such circumstances. By so doing, nothing was left in doubt.

The invariable sign was a cross within a circle, blue-pencilled on the pavement. Thus, although practically unnoticeable, was nevertheless quite detectable when searched for. That mark meant that Nipper had left, and did not know what his destination would be.

There were several other varieties of secret signs, used as a code between

Nelson Lee and Nipper, each having a different meaning. But the detective, on searching the pavement thoroughly immediately in front of the house, found nothing whatever.

This seemed to argue that Nipper was still close at hand. Nelson Lee looked at No. 253 closely. The gate was partially open, and the path, leading to the door, had long since become green with weeds and——"

Lee's thoughts came to a sudden standstill.

He stood perfectly motionless, close against the gate. He was sure he had heard a subdued, smothered exclamation, apparently coming from the direction of the house. He listened intently.

And then, clearly, but in tones of alarm and anger, he heard Nipper's voice.

"Help!" came the cry. "Oh, you brute! Help—— Oh!"

The voice ceased abruptly, and Nelson Lee came to a brisk decision. He pushed the gate open and strode up the path. He could see, now, that there was an area door at the foot of some stone steps—for the house had a basement. Without hesitation, the detective descended the steps, and gazed at the area door.

It was open to the extent of two inches.

Exactly what had happened was unknown to Nelson Lee. But he gathered that Nipper had ventured within the house and had fallen foul of Swanker Jerry. If this was actually the case, it was undoubtedly an opportune moment for the detective to make his presence known.

Drawing his revolver from his pocket, he pushed the door open and strode quickly and decisively into the dim passage.

And then something occurred which Nelson Lee had neither suspected nor anticipated. He was taken completely by surprise and at a perilous disadvantage.

CHAPTER II.

Jim the Penman's Terrible Scheme.

THE surprise was dramatically sudden.

As Nelson Lee took two or three cautious steps along the dark passage he abruptly became aware of a slight movement on either side of him. He twirled round, instinctively knowing that danger was near. But he was just one second too late.

Before he could even see what was amiss, a thick sack descended over his head, accurately and in muffling folds.

"Got him!" muttered a voice, hoarse with excitement and satisfaction. "I didn't think he would be such easy game as this, Joe! Lend a hand, or the brute'll wriggle——"

The voice ceased abruptly with a curse; for Nelson Lee was struggling with all his strength. He was simply furious with himself for having walked so neatly into the trap. For it was a trap, and a well-laid one, too. And his struggles were of no avail. The sack was pulled right down over his arms, and the two men who had attacked him rapidly slipped a rope-noose over the sack, and bound his arms cruelly to his sides.

In this position he was not only incapable of action, but to shout was quite useless. He could have raised his voice had he chosen, but his common-sense told him that he would be wasting his breath. The muffling folds of the sack would convert the lustiest yell into a smothered cry, which would carry practically no distance.

Realising that his position was, for the moment, very helpless, Lee became

icily cold. And in that state of mind he knew that he was in no way to blame for what had occurred.

There had been no evidence of any sort to show that a trap had been prepared; and, cautious as the detective naturally was, there were certain times when it was impossible to avoid a misadventure such as this. No man could accuse the famous detective of being reckless or of displaying a lack of precaution. The fact that he had fallen a victim to some unknown enemy was simply and purely a matter of exceedingly clever preparation on the part of that enemy.

"I have no idea who you are, my friends," exclaimed Lee coolly, from within the folds of his sack: "But you must really allow me to congratulate you upon the neatness with which you tricked me. I rather pride myself——"

"I guess your pride has had a bit of a fall, Mr. Detective Lee!" was the interjection from one of the two assailants. "I didn't mimic your brat's voice so badly, did I?"

Lee started.

"By James! You don't mean to say——"

"I don't mean to say any more at all just now," observed the unseen stranger curtly. "But you can take it from me that Nipper's nowhere near this house, and never has been. You'd better shut up now, because you won't get any more answers."

Lee felt himself propelled forward. He was forced to walk blindly, for the sack was made of thick felt material and utterly impenetrable. Already the perspiration was standing on his brow because of the lack of ventilation. He was suffering great discomfort, but there was no fear of an untimely collapse owing to suffocation.

He had much to think about as he felt himself walking down a long passage. So Nipper had not been in Scarbrooke Road at all! It was a bit of a shock, and the whole aspect was now at Islington, at the establishment of the worthy Mr. Marks Lewin. The note, too, purporting to come from Nipper——

The note!

As he walked, Nelson Lee caught his breath in sharply. He was fairly certain by this time that Nipper's letter was a forgery. But it was a forgery so cleverly executed that even the great detective, alert as he was for any suspicion of a trick, had detected nothing suspicious. The penmanship, in fact, was so perfect, that it was quite impossible to detect any falseness.

And Nelson Lee knew that there was only one man in the whole length and breadth of the British Isles who could accomplish such a forgery. That man was Douglas James Sutcliffe—better known to the police and public as Jim the Penman, the most amazingly clever forger of the age.

"Can it be possible?" Lee asked himself grimly. "Jim the Penman owes me many a grudge, and he is capable of the most astounding plots. But I didn't think that he would plot to entrap me just for the fun of the thing. Usually Sutcliffe has a big end in view when he gets up to mischief."

A few minutes later, Nelson Lee was in such a position that he had no time for pondering and musing. His sole thoughts were centred upon what was actually happening at the moment. The detective had a magnificent sense of direction, and he judged that he had been taken to the back of the house, and that he had been forced to descend a flight of stairs into a cellar. He was now standing upon a stone floor, and there was a certain chilliness in the atmosphere which instantly struck his hands.

There was nothing very surprising in his being taken to the cellar; but

there was something exceedingly surprising in that which took place next. Lee could feel a stout rope being tied under his arm pits. Without warning, he was lifted off his feet, and felt his legs dangling in space. Then, to his mild astonishment, he was conscious of being steadily dropped, in a series of jerks, into unknown space.

This adventure was undoubtedly a singular one. Having reached the cellar, he was now being treated to still another descent—this one very much deeper. He seemed to be dropping at the end of the rope for a tremendous time, and his arms and shoulders ached with the chafing of the rope. Now and again his body swung against a rough, cold wall. He needed no telling that he was being lowered down an extremely deep well.

When the fact first impressed itself upon his mind, he set his teeth together and told himself that he had not many minutes to live. These scoundrels had trapped him, and they were doing away with him with drastic promptitude. If not to actually kill him, why on earth was he being lowered down a well? The question was unanswerable in any other way. There could be but one answer—he was descending to death.

But just when Lee was beginning to wonder whether the well had no bottom, he felt his feet strike what appeared to be a pile of rough brick-work. He staggered, bumped against a wall, and remained still.

He heard no sound, but two hands touched him, and removed the rope by which he had been lowered. The cord which bound him was, of course, still tight.

The first thing which struck Nelson Lee was the fact that he was not destined to die yet awhile. Apparently this well was something of a novelty, since it obviously contained no water; and it was a further surprise to find that a man was waiting at the bottom of the shaft to welcome him.

This latter individual was uncommunicative, for he said no word. He merely placed himself behind Lee and gently pushed his prisoner onward. The detective had not far to walk. After about ten yards he was pulled to a halt—ten yards down a steep brick-strewn path. Lee felt his back against a hard wall, and while he stood there a rope was passed round his ankles, brought up, and then bound round his wrists. The cord round his arms was then released, and the felt sack suddenly lifted off.

Nelson Lee took a deep breath of chill, damp air; but it did not give him much relief. He knew instantly that the atmosphere was far from being pure.

After the pitchy blackness of the sack, the scene appeared to him to be brilliantly light. Yet, as a matter of fact, the only illumination was that provided by a powerful electric torch which was wedged into a wall opposite, and which cast its beams fully upon him.

To Lee's astonishment, he saw, at his feet, the rusted metals of a railway track. And, between them, was a third rail. On the instant, it flashed across Lee's mind where he was. He was standing in a section of an underground tube railway.

But it was extraordinary, nevertheless. This railway was disused and deserted—and no such thing as an abandoned tube railway existed beneath London. What could be the meaning?

Quite suddenly, a dawning light darted into the detective's brain. Scarbrooke Road was in Hampstead, and just under a year ago a serious disaster had occurred on a section of the tube railway at Hampstead. The detective recalled the facts of the affair at once.

For some reason, which the contractors could explain better than Lee, the tunnel had collapsed in two places—the second collapse had occurred immediately after the first, and was undoubtedly due to the same cause.

But a clear space of fifty yards was left perfectly intact, blocked up by huge masses of masonry at both ends. Undoubtedly the detective was now standing in this portion. The railway contractors had not rebuilt the tunnel where it had caved in.

There was some serious disadvantage in so doing, probably. At all events a new section of tunnel had been carried just alongside the old one, joining up with the original tunnel at both ends. The disused portion had been practically in its original state, deserted and untouched.

It was only a month or two since the reconstruction had been complete, and, in due course, this old section of tunnel would be filled in. The collapse had occurred almost directly beneath No. 253, Scarbrooke Road. And the caving-in of the tunnel had involved the collapse of the well shaft at its base. The well itself had long since been dry, and it was quite possible to descend the well and enter the tube tunnel in perfect safety.

The place was truly a surprising one for Lee to find himself in; but, at the same time, it struck him that there was probably no more ideal spot to imprison a man in the whole of London.

As he looked about him a roaring rumble sounded in his ears, and the very ground seemed to quiver. A tube train was passing in the new tunnel, alongside.

A man stepped into the beam of light from the electric torch. He was tall well-dressed, and he smoked a cigar with ease.

Lee recognised him on the instant as his old enemy, Douglas James Sutcliffe.

"Upon my soul, you engineered this little surprise quite cleverly," observed Nelson Lee calmly. "How on earth did you manage to get into such a place as this, Jim?"

Jim the Penman waved his hand.

"I will not remark upon your coolness, my dear Lee," he said. "I know you of old, and I really admire your astounding nerve. I don't think any other man possesses such a wonderfully clear head as you do."

"With the possible exception of yourself," Lee remarked.

Jim the Penman laughed softly.

"Well, after this little exchange of compliments, suppose we get to business?" he said pleasantly. "Surprising, Lee, isn't it, that we should be talking so composedly under these most dramatic of circumstances?"

"Considering that all the odds are in your favour, I see nothing surprising in the fact that you are composed," Lee replied. "As for myself, it is my habit to keep my head clear in a time of peril. Panic, Sutcliffe, is fatal."

The forger nodded.

"In this case a clear head is fatal, too!" he said grimly.

Nelson Lee did not answer. As a matter of fact, the great detective was wondering to himself whether there was any chance of his overpowering his enemy. With exceptional luck it might be possible.

Lee had made a discovery.

The cord which bound his wrists was somewhat loose! Jim had been so confident of himself that he had not troubled to tie the rope with extra care. At first it had been cruelly tight, but Lee had been working his wrists continually, and he felt that the cords were loosening.

But even if he succeeded in wriggling his hands free, what better off would he be?

His ankles were still as tight as ever, and the slightest movement of his body would topple him over. Still, to get his hands free was something gained, and there was no telling what it might lead to.

To wait was to lessen the prospect of success. At this particular moment Jim the Penman was smug and self-satisfied in his triumph. He was off his guard, enjoying the taunts which he uttered.

Nelson Lee was an expert in such a crisis as this. On many an occasion he had slipped ropes from his wrists when they had apparently been tied with cruel tightness. It was knack more than anything else, and Lee possessed that knack to a marked degree. Even as Jim opened his mouth to speak again his prisoner felt the rope slip from his wrists.

Everything depended upon swiftness of action.

In a flash Nelson Lee's right hand went to his hip-pocket, and his fingers closed over the butt of his revolver—or, at least, they should have done! The movement had been entirely instinctive, and Lee was shocked to discover that his revolver was not there. He remembered on the instant, that it had been taken from him by Jim's confederates.

In a moment the forger flung himself forward.

"By James! You clever brute!" ejaculated Sutcliffe hoarsely. "So you managed to get your hands free, after all! Well, it won't help you in the least!"

Lee had been busy with his hands, for he realised that one little action might make all the difference between life and death. As Jim came forward the detective's fist shot out.

But the odds were all against the prisoner. Unable to move his feet, how could he hope to gain the advantage? Jim dodged neatly, grabbed both Lee's arms at the same second, and twisted them backwards with cruel force. Three minutes later the detective was bound as before—but with much greater security.

He stood in the glare of the electric torch, his face flushed, but still calm, his fists clenched behind him. Well, he had made his attempt, and it had failed. He had never really expected to gain anything; the chance had been too slim.

"Quite an exciting little incident!" exclaimed Jim the Penman grimly. "And now I suppose we might as well continue where we left off. There is much for us to talk about, my dear Lee."

The detective nodded his head.

"A fluke, Jim," he said coolly—"a mere fluke!"

"What do you mean?"

"If my revolver had been in my hip-pocket I could have dropped you on the instant," replied Lee. "I should have had no compunction in so doing, for I fully realise that this is a matter of life or death."

"Exactly. And now, perhaps, we had better get straight to business."

"The 'business,' I presume, is of a somewhat grim character?" suggested the detective. "The thoroughness with which you have conducted this affair leads me to believe that you have some deep game afoot."

Sutcliffe nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "A very deep game, my dear Lee. A game which will finally remove you from my path, and which will place a really large amount of ready cash in my pocket. Between you and me, I need cash—and this time I mean to have it."

The forger moved closer, and when he spoke again his voice had lost its suaveness, and was vibrating with passion.

"You won't wreck my plans this time, you cur!" he snarled, giving way to an outburst, and delivering a stinging slap on Lee's cheek. "You've foiled me several times before, but I've got you now! I've got you absolutely at my mercy, and I mean to make you pay for all the mischief you have done me in the past."

"A very natural state of mind," said Nelson Lee imperturbably. "I have more than once had proof that you can be diabolical in your cruelty and fiendish in your cunning. I expect no mercy at your hands."

Jim the Penman stood back, and chuckled.

"I gave way to temper," he said. "Your perfect composure, however, has brought me back to reason. It is only fools who give way to fury. You have realised, of course, that you were decoyed here? That note from Nipper was really a piece of my work; I saw in a newspaper that you were engaged on the West End robbery case, and by careful watching and judicious inquiry I knew that you had not nabbed the excellent Mr. Jerry Conolly. I waited my opportunity, and caused my note to be delivered at a time when you would most probably take the bait. That my judgment was accurate is obvious, for you are here, a prisoner. Nipper will be along presently, I believe."

Lee's eyes flashed.

"So you mean to drag that young lad into this murderous business?" he asked hotly.

"Why not? I might as well make a clean sweep of the pair of you while I am about it," replied the forger. "Nipper is a clever youngster, and he could cause me quite a large amount of bother. Much better to settle him at the same time as yourself."

Jim uttered the words with the utmost coolness. Yet Nelson Lee was well aware that the forger's intentions were murderous in the extreme.

"Perhaps Nipper will not take the bait."

"My good Lee, Nipper will have no more chance than you, yourself," said Jim the Penman. "I am expecting him to arrive at any minute. I might as well mention that we are perfectly alone here, and that if you shouted with all the strength of your lungs you would not bring assistance. I have chosen my spot with great care."

He paused, and smiled.

"But perhaps I am taking credit where I deserve none," he continued. "This place was made known to me really by chance. I heard of the dried well, and the entrance thereby into this tunnel, through the medium of a business friend of mine. Upon examination I was struck by the fact that no finer spot could be chosen for my revenge upon you. Accordingly, I took steps to decoy you here, and to——"

Jim paused again, and turned. A slight sound had come from the darkness behind. He turned, and was absent a full minute, Nelson Lee meanwhile remaining perfectly still, pondering bitterly over the hopeless position.

When the forger re-appeared, he pushed before him a slight figure, with the head enveloped in a felt sack, similar to the one Lee had worn. One glance was sufficient to tell the detective that the new-comer was Nipper.

The lad was treated exactly the same as his master. His descent of the well-shaft had filled him with wonder and misgiving, and when the sack was removed from his head he stared round blinkingly, and in utter bewilderment.

"Why, what the—— Where the dickens have I got—— Guv'nor!"

Nipper uttered the last word huskily, and with amazement.

"Guv'nor!" he repeated breathlessly. "You here, too? Well, I'm blowed!"

"A little surprise, eh?" laughed Jim the Penman.

Nipper gazed at the forger scornfully.

"Oh, I knew you were at the bottom of this rotten affair!" he exclaimed, with a biting contempt which caused Nelson Lee to smile involuntarily. "Directly I found myself collared by your two ruffians I guessed that the

guv'nor's letter was a forgery, and I knew that you had written it. It couldn't have been done by anyone else."

"I am flattered," Jim exclaimed softly.

"I was tricked, sir," went on Nipper, turning his head towards his master. "I was tricked properly. When I got home, after identifying that stuff at old Lewin's——"

"You accomplished your mission, then?"

"Of course, guv'nor. When I got back to Gray's Inn Road I found a note there waiting for me," said Nipper. "It was from you—or seemed to be. How the blue thunder was I to guess that it was a rotten decoy? The note told me to follow you the very instant I arrived to No. 253, Scarbrooke Road, Hampstead. Of course, I came here at top speed, following your instructions, and as soon as I showed my nose inside the lower front door I was collared by two awful scoundrels, and a rotten sack thing was flopped over my brain-box!"

"Very unfortunate, but unavoidable," said Lee. "You are in no way to blame for what has happened, Nipper, so don't condemn yourself. I fell into the trap myself with equal precipitousness."

A chuckle came from Jim the Penman.

"Gee! It is quite amusing," he said. "At least, from my point of view. From yours it may be decidedly the opposite. I have a great scheme on hand—a scheme whereby I shall kill two birds with one stone."

He paused and glanced at his watch.

"By that I do not mean to imply that you are the two birds whom I mean to kill; the expression was merely a general one. But by imprisoning you here I shall clear you both from my path and further my own new scheme at the same time. It will be apparent to you, Lee, that I have spent much time on my preparations. The result, I venture to predict, will amply reward me."

There was something almost fascinating in this smooth-tongued criminal. He was so totally different from every other scoundrel Lee had ever set his wits against. In some respects the detective admired his enemy, while in others he loathed and detested him. Jim the Penman was a strange mixture indeed.

He refused to vouchsafe any information as to what his great scheme was, and at once set about a rather surprising task. He pulled from the shadows a leather valise, and, opening this, revealed a set of the most perfect and expensive make-up materials. Then, setting a mirror up in a convenient spot, he divested himself of his collar and tie, and commenced operations upon his face.

As he proceeded he glanced continuously at Nelson Lee, and it suddenly struck the detective that the forger was actually disguising himself so that he would resemble his enemy.

After a full hour's labour Jim was satisfied. He was Nelson Lee to the life. Only a man of extraordinary ability could have accomplished such a difficult task of make-up, and even Jim was not perfectly with the result.

"There is something about your nose, my dear Lee, which is extremely difficult to copy," he remarked. "However, I do not think the matter is of much importance. Even your excellent landlady would accept me without a word. The voice is not of so much importance, but I think I can manage it."

He spoke a few sentences in an imitation of Lee's distinctive tones. The result was not absolutely perfect—that would have been an impossibility—but it was remarkably near the mark.

He felt in Lee's waistcoat-pocket, and drew forth the latter's card-case.

This he transferred to his own person, and then glanced at his watch again.

"The time is now ten minutes to two," he remarked. "I reckoned to be finished by two o'clock, so I am just within schedule. I dare say you will declare that my method for disposing of you borders on the melodramatic. Well, as a matter of fact, it is melodramatic, but that touch is just what I like. In the past you have wrecked every scheme I adopted, and I have stored up a fierce hatred for you. Well, now I am going to be revenged in a fitting manner. The pair of you are to die, and you will die in such a way that you will have ample time to think over your fate beforehand."

The forger then proceeded to outline the nature of his plan for the destruction of his enemies. Jim gave ample evidence of his amazing character, of his devilish cunning. He was to be avenged for all the blows which Nelson Lee had delivered at his previous schemes.

"You won't spoil this one!" Jim the Penman snarled, his face convulsed with fury once more. "I am showing my real character now, eh? Yes, I am. I have dropped the mask of cool carelessness, and intend you to realise the awful nature of your danger."

He paused, and pointed to the rusted rails of the disused track.

"You see those metals?" he went on passionately. "Not the ordinary rails, but the centre and side rails, which were made to conduct the electricity. You see them? Well, I am going to bind you both to those live rails."

"I fail to see how that will affect our health," observed Nelson Lee composedly. "The live rails, as you call them, are both dead. They are harmless, for the current no longer——"

Jim laughed softly. His face was in deep shadow, for he had his back to the electric torch; but his two helpless victims knew full well that a cruel grin marred his lips, and rendered them totally unlike those of Nelson Lee. But just now Jim was giving way to his cruel passion.

"Harmless!" he echoed. "Yes, they are harmless at the present time. But I will tell you something. I have made certain electrical connections at the left extremity of this section of the tunnel. You will understand by that that I have been busy for some time. I have made my preparations to the last detail."

He pointed into the darkness.

"By an arrangement of my own—I pride myself that I am something of an electrician—I have made a particular connection which will result in one thing. At three o'clock precisely, when the 'change-over' takes place at the power-station, these rails will cease to be dead. They will become very much alive!"

"Good heavens, you don't mean——"

"Ah, that has startled you!" chuckled Jim. "And it is no idle threat. I will not go into details regarding how I accomplished my object, for that is of no importance. But when the 'change-over' happens, the current will flash into the rails, and the pair of you will instantly be electrocuted."

"You—you fiend!" choked Nipper.

"I am flattered," replied Jim suavely. "I was aware that my scheme was unusual, and it has the advantage that you will both lie there, helpless in the darkness, waiting for the inevitable end."

The cleverness of the plot was undeniable, and it must have entailed a great amount of careful preparation, and Lee knew full well that Jim would not leave his enemies in such a position unless he knew for an absolute fact that escape or rescue was impossible.

Nipper was dealt with first. He was laid across the rails and his feet

firmly lashed to one of them. Then his wrists were unfastened, and each tied separately to the metal opposite. There was no possible chance of him escaping the electric current, for it would flash through his body instantly.

Nelson Lee was treated in a precisely similar fashion. Jim took good care to bind the detective's feet to the rail first. Then his arms were stretched out wide, and each wrist was cruelly bound to the metal. The pair of them spread-eagled thus, it was impossible to even move an inch.

Jim the Penman said no more except to remark that the time was just two o'clock. He then picked up the electric torch, and disappeared through the opening which led to the bottom of the well-shaft.

But the forger had taken one other precaution before leaving his victims to their fate. He had cut two thick gags out of one of the felt sacks, and these were now bound tightly over the mouths of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

In truth, their position was terrible in the extreme. They were bound, gagged, and had just one hour to live!

What prospect was there of escape?

CHAPTER III.

The Limit of Cool Cheek.

TWO-FIFTEEN was just chiming out when Nelson Lee turned the corner at the end of Scarbrooke Road.

At least, to all intents and purposes the tall gentleman was Nelson Lee. In reality he was Jim the Penman, and he was in the best of tempers. His plans had worked with delightful smoothness, and there was every prospect of unqualified success.

His enemies, in any case, were dealt with in such a manner that they would never trouble him again; but his plotting did not merely consist of having his revenge out of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

There was a much deeper game afoot.

Jim chartered a taxi as soon as he sighted one, and ordered the driver to take him to the offices of Messrs. Robbins & Hanley, solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Court. The journey was soon accomplished, and the forger found himself in the outer office of the well-known firm.

A clerk politely inquired his business.

"I wish to see either Mr. Robbins or Mr. Hanley."

"Mr. Robbins is in, sir, but Mr. Hanley is away," replied the clerk. "If you'll give me your card and state your business, I will see if Mr. Robbins is disengaged."

Jim the Penman produced Nelson Lee's card-case.

"My business is quite private," he said smoothly, handing the slip of pasteboard across. "I may also add that the matter is urgent."

"Very good, sir!"

The clerk disappeared through a doorway and left the supposed Mr. Nelson Lee easily tapping a cigarette upon his thumb-nail. The cigarette was just alight, and Jim had taken stock of his somewhat dingy surroundings when the clerk returned.

"This way, sir, please."

The forger smiled quietly to himself, and followed the young man down a passage, and was ushered into a large, airy private office. There was every indication of solid comfort and established prosperity. The firm of Robbins & Hanley was one of the most famous in London.

An elderly gentleman rose as the visitor entered, and took a step forward, with outstretched hand. He was short and somewhat stout, but Jim could see at once that he had a keen face and sharp, alert eyes. Mr.

Robbins was really the junior partner, but it was he who practically conducted the business.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed, in a rich, hearty voice. "I have not had an opportunity of meeting you since that Bramstone Will affair, seven years ago."

The two men shook hands, and Jim felt an inward glow of satisfaction. Mr. Robbins had not seen Nelson Lee for seven years. Jim had been prepared for circumstances much less satisfactory. There was no possibility of his disguise being penetrated.

"I have not called in a professional capacity, Mr. Robbins," he exclaimed easily. "At least, not on behalf of a client. I am here solely upon a business matter of my own."

"I shall be delighted to help you in any way, Mr. Lee."

The forger could see that his companion was regarding him with interest, but without a trace of suspicion. The disguise was so cleverly executed that in the strongest daylight it was almost impossible to detect a flaw. In the comparative dimness of this office Jim was as safe as houses. Moreover, although the solicitor knew Lee well, it was so long since the pair had met that any possibility of detection was practically obviated.

And, although Jim was not aware of the fact, Mr. Robbins admired the famous detective to a large degree and was honoured by his presence. Nelson Lee had once performed an invaluable service for the solicitor, and he had never forgotten it. He knew the detective to be the soul of honour and a gentleman to his finger-tips.

Therefore Jim the Penman's plot seemed likely to pan out even better than he himself had anticipated.

"You have, I think, sole charge of the late Mr. Anson Ramsdale's affairs?" said the forger, producing a leather wallet.

Mr. Robbins nodded at once.

"That is so," was his reply. "A sad affair, Mr. Lee. Mr. Ramsdale was just at the height of his prosperity, and in splendid health. Fate is indeed unkind to some of us. That accident shocked me immeasurably."

"Yes, it was a terrible business," said Jim gravely. "I cannot say that Ramsdale was a friend of mine, but I knew him rather well, and we had more than one business transaction. Perhaps he mentioned my name to you occasionally?"

The other slowly shook his head.

"No. I do not think Mr. Ramsdale ever spoke of you," he replied.

"Well, I must admit that our business was absolutely private and confidential," the supposed Nelson Lee went on. "But for his untimely death, I should not be here now. We should have settled matters quite between ourselves."

Jim produced a folded paper from the leather wallet.

"Of course, you are aware that Mr. Ramsdale's position was very different a year ago from what it was at the time of his death a few days since?" he asked. "To tell the truth, he was actually pressed for ready money."

The solicitor nodded. It was, indeed, well known to him that Ramsdale had prospered amazingly during the year which had just passed. He had entered upon several huge war contracts, and had made money like water.

"Mr. Ramsdale was referred to in the newspapers as a millionaire," said Mr. Robbins. "That was an exaggeration, but he was undoubtedly getting on the way to it. A year ago his position was different, but I did not think he was pressed for money."

Jim the Penman bent forward.

"It was quite a temporary matter, I believe," he said. "In any case exactly a year ago to-day I lent him the sum of twenty thousand pounds."

"Indeed? That was a large amount!"

"Perhaps! It was lying idle, however, so I let him have it," was Jim's careless remark. "In return, he handed me this promissory note, and had he been alive to-day he would have honoured it personally. Owing to his untimely death, however, it remains for me to approach you."

"Of course! Of course! His affairs are entirely in my hands."

The solicitor took the folded sheet of paper, adjusted his pince-nez, and glanced over it. The note was quite formal, and was a promise to pay Mr. Nelson Lee the sum of twenty thousand pounds in spot cash on a given date. That date was this very day.

"H'm!" murmured Mr. Robbins. "I see! This is quite surprising!"

He re-read the wording, and nodded to himself. Never for a second did he suspect that he was gazing upon a clever forgery. He was well acquainted with the late Mr. Ramsdale's distinctive handwriting, and this document was quite characteristic in every respect. Both the handwriting and the signature were absolutely identical with the dead man's own.

The thing was in perfect order.

How was it possible for Mr. Robbins to suspect trickery? The business between the late Mr. Ramsdale and Nelson Lee was essentially private, and it was not at all surprising that nothing had ever been said regarding it.

Moreover, the very fact that the great detective had produced the promissory note rendered suspicion out of the question. Nelson Lee was a famous man, and for him to claim money which was not rightfully his was not to be thought of. Mr. Robbins accepted the whole thing without hesitation.

Under the circumstances, he could have done nothing else.

Jim the Penman had planned his coup with consummate cleverness. Nelson Lee's name alone was enough to prove that everything was in order; and by disguising himself as the detective, and personally presenting the promissory note, he rendered the prospect of failure infinitesimal.

The authenticity of the document was never in doubt.

Jim the Penman had not been given his name for nothing. In fact, he had adopted the name himself, knowing that his penmanship was absolutely perfect. The man was a living wonder in that one respect. He was a remarkable criminal all round, but with the pen he could almost perform miracles.

By some strange twist of nature he was capable of looking at handwriting for the first time in his life, and of copying it accurately at the first attempt. And this particular document had been given especial care. The cleverest experts of Scotland Yard, armed with their lenses and tools, could not have detected the fraud.

How Jim had obtained specimens of Mr. Anson Ramsdale's signature and handwriting the forger knew best himself—but it was, after all, a very minor matter. There were a score of ways in which he could have obtained one of Ramsdale's letters.

Mr. Robbins looked up at "Nelson Lee" after a few moments.

"I quite understand," he exclaimed. "Naturally enough, you wish this money to be repaid to you. It is due, I observe, to-day."

"That is why I am here," smiled the visitor.

"Exactly—exactly. Had Mr. Ramsdale been alive you would, I presume, have presented this promissory note to him personally?"

"Naturally."

"But as he is unfortunately dead you have, of course, come to me." said

Mr. Robbins. "That is quite clear. Well, well, Mr. Lee, what are your wishes?"

Jim the Penman tossed his cigarette-end into the fireplace.

"The money is due to-day," he answered, "and I want it to-day. That is very simple, is it not?"

"Quite simple. H'm! Let me see." And the solicitor pulled out his heavy gold watch and consulted it. The time was just twenty minutes to the hour of three. Jim, who noticed the time, could not help thinking of Nelson Lee and Nipper, tied to the live rails, awaiting death. Somehow, the idea seemed to please him, and he smiled comfortably to himself.

The situation was quite novel. In twenty minutes Nelson Lee would be dead; and yet he was presumably in the respectable office of Mr. Robbins.

"I will write you a cheque——"

"If you will pardon me, Mr. Robbins, I should prefer you to let me have cash," interjected Jim smoothly. "It happens that I am in need of several large sums for various objects, and it will save me drawing on my own account. I shall also have a fair amount left over for certain expenses of my own."

The solicitor seemed mildly surprised.

"Cash?" he repeated. "H'm! Yes, that can be arranged, Mr. Lee. I will write an open cheque now, and we will walk round to the bank—it is only five minutes' walk away. Our business account happens to be capable of sustaining the blow," he added smilingly, "although it is not always we have such a large balance."

Jim the Penman judged that Mr. Robbins was merely using a discreet expression. The firm was very rich, and twenty thousand pounds was actually a small sum in comparison with some transactions. Besides, the money could be drawn from Mr. Anson Ramsdale's own account. Jim did not care a jot where the money came from, so long as he got it into his own hands.

Five minutes later, he and Mr. Robbins walked together to a famous bank. Here, the manager was interviewed, and the business explained. The manager had never met Nelson Lee, and he was pleased to do so.

The detective's name acted like magic. Jim had deliberately chosen Lee's personality as the least likely one to excite suspicion. Certainly, his judgment was good, for there was never a moment's thought that anything was wrong.

Jim received the named sum in absolute cash—not in banknotes. Every pound of it was paid in one-pound currency notes. Twenty one-thousand pound bundles occupied a remarkably small space, and the forger easily packed them into his handbag.

His acting, during all this transaction, was perfect. He signed a receipt without a moment's hesitation, and the signature was Nelson Lee's own without a single flaw. He affected an easy, careless manner, which compelled his two companions to accept the situation without a thought of possible fraud.

The whole thing was so obviously above-board that there was no room for doubt. Had anybody else asked for spot-cash Mr. Robbins would probably have demurred. But Nelson Lee—— Well, of course, everything was quite all right.

It was just here that Jim the Penman's subtle cleverness was apparent—or would be apparent when the truth became known. When that time did arrive the twenty thousand pounds would have vanished for ever.

It was all accomplished so quickly and so smoothly, that the transaction was completed well within the hour, and "Nelson Lee" had bade his

companions good-day. He parted with Mr. Robbins close against the latter's office, and at once entered a taxi. The solicitor walked to his office smoking an excellent cigar which Jim had offered him.

"A charming man," he murmured. "A really delightful man. He's And rich, too, I should judge. Twenty thousand is a large sum to lend with nothing but a promissory note as security."

Yet there seemed nothing exceptionally singular about the affair. The very fact that it was Nelson Lee who was the recipient of the money made Mr. Robbins's mind perfectly easy.

But that "very fact" was no fact at all! It was not Nelson Lee who had received the money, but Jim the Penman. And by this time he was well away, and was confident of covering his tracks completely before the truth leaked out.

As an example of cool, unadulterated cheek, the coup would have been hard to beat. And, because of its breathless audacity, it had succeeded. It had succeeded without a single hitch, and the perpetrator of the fraud had vanished into London's millions.

CHAPTER IV.

The Ribbon of Light.

PITCH, utter darkness.

The position in which Nelson Lee and Nipper had been placed was, apparently, one of the most appalling that could possibly be conceived. Jim the Penman had laid his plans so carefully, and with such forethought, that any chance of deliverance seemed to be as remote as the poles.

The small section of abandoned tunnel was dark as the interior of an Egyptian pyramid. But there the resemblance ended. An Egyptian pyramid is a place of deadly, awful silence. But here there was never a moment of silence.

Continuously, the faint-subdued roar of the tube traffic came to the ears of the bound and helpless pair. While, every few minutes, a more pronounced roar marked the progress of a train in the tube which ran alongside.

The position of Nelson Lee and Nipper was rendered all the more awful by the fact that it was impossible for them to converse. Jim had gagged them very effectively, and they could not possibly work the gags loose.

They lay close beside one another. But they might as well have been a hundred miles apart for all they saw or heard of one another. And as for hoping to get their hands free, they neither of them attempted such an impossible task.

Their arms were tied at the wrist. They could move their hands up and down fairly easily, but they knew that they would tear their flesh to ribbons before loosening the ropes. And even then the result would not be achieved. There was no sense in suffering unnecessary agony before the end came.

It was not as though their hands were close together. If that had actually been the case they might have used their fingers to advantage.

They were spread-eagled, their hands being wide apart, each wrist secured separately. It will be understood that any attempt to free themselves would only result in useless pain and dismal failure.

And the minutes ticked away remorselessly.

Already the time was nearing the half-hour. It seemed to them as though three o'clock must be very close at hand. Poor Nipper in fact was fully

expecting the dreadful end at any second. It seemed impossible that only twenty-five minutes could have elapsed since Jim the Penman had taken his departure.

The horror of the position was almost unnameable. It was their fate to lie there, utterly helpless, and to await a death which would be swift, sure and terrible.

Pondering over the incidents of the day, Lee felt practically sure that the forger's two confederates had taken their departure very soon after Jim himself—perhaps with him. This place was utterly inaccessible save for the entrance by means of the well-shaft.

But Lee remembered that he and Nipper had only been able to see a very small portion of the deserted tunnel, owing to the rays of the electric torch being strictly confined to one spot.

Both ends of the tube had remained in deep gloom; it was therefore impossible for the detective to know what lay there. There might be an exit of some sort, or there might not. In any case, it mattered little, for it was certain that no one would come to the aid of the doomed pair.

Nipper's thoughts were of a similar nature. The lad felt glad, in a way, that he could not speak. He felt that he would have given way to wild utterances, and he had no wish to make matters worse. Since there was no escape it was the lad's greatest wish to have the end come quickly. He did not doubt that Jim the Penman had spoken the truth. By some electrical contrivance the forger had connected these dead rails to some cables which were connected with the power-house. These cables were equally lifeless at the present moment, but when a certain operation was performed at the power-station, the electricity would surge through the cables and charge the rusted rails with life. In one second both Nelson Lee and Nipper would be electrocuted.

No escape was possible. Probably enough, Jim's handiwork would result in a serious "earth," or other drastic complications. But that was of no account; Nelson Lee and Nipper would be dead, so it did not matter a jot to Jim what havoc was caused.

In spite of the fact that it was chilly in the tunnel, Nipper felt almost suffocated. He was perspiring profusely—but not with fear. The brave lad scarcely knew what fear meant. But the tension was terrible, and it was impossible for him to centre his thoughts upon any one subject.

Nelson Lee, however, was thinking deeply.

He had something very important to ponder over. There was one faint chance that outside attention might be attracted; but it was so faint that Lee had no hope.

But the situation was so desperate that even the faintest of chances assumed quite respectable proportions. Although the darkness was pitchy Nelson Lee possessed the means of converting the blackness into blinding brilliance.

In his right hand he gripped a small object.

Nipper knew nothing of it, for his master had had no opportunity of telling him. And Lee had taken no action so far because he was waiting—waiting for a chance to put the one faint hope to the test.

When the detective had managed to break free he had not been altogether unsuccessful. He had, indeed, been promptly rebound—but not before a certain thing had happened.

Without Sutcliffe being the least aware of it, the detective had taken from his waistcoat pocket a small object, and his fingers had closed over it even as Jim grabbed his wrists.

The object was, in itself, a very simple contrivance—merely a coil of

magnesium ribbon contained in a little holder. By pulling a kind of trigger a length of the ribbon was released and set alight.

The result would be a blinding glare—for magnesium ribbon is very commonly used for the taking of flashlight photographs. It was for this purpose, indeed, that Nelson Lee carried it. In another pocket reposed a tiny folding camera. On many an occasion the detective had taken flashlight photographs which had resulted in the capture and detection of a wanted criminal.

Lee's idea, at the moment, had been to light the magnesium and fling it in Jim's face, thus gaining a few seconds. It would then have been possible for him to take Jim at a disadvantage, and, perhaps, overpower him.

But the forger had been just a second too prompt, and Lee had been unable to make use of the desperate expedient. But he had retained his grip on the magnesium holder, and had closed his fingers over it so that it was unseen.

Never for a moment did Lee believe that it would be of any use.

But it was something—something.

At first, after Jim had gone, Nelson Lee had remained still, and had completely forgotten the little object which he held mechanically in his hand. And when he did think of it, his thoughts were bitter. Of what use was it? A brilliant flash of light for a few seconds, and then darkness again. The end would be just the same.

But as the minutes sped past, Lee's thoughts again reverted to the magnesium ribbon. He remembered that almost opposite to where he was lying, he had observed a circular hole in the ironwork. It was black, and had apparently been used at one time to accommodate electric cables.

And it seemed to Lee that the sound of the passing tube trains was much more distinct from that one particular quarter. This seemed to point to the fact that the abandoned section of tunnel and the new tunnel were connected. This circular hole probably communicated with the new tube.

Still thinking on the same subject, it struck Nelson Lee that Jim had taken very particular care not to cast his light in any direction save one. Was that just chance, or was there a definite reason for it?

One definite reason could be, that if the light were moved, certain rays would be observable from the adjoining tunnel—which, naturally enough, was in darkness. And if such rays were seen, inquiry would undoubtedly be made as to the cause.

It was only an idea—mere conjecture. Possibly there was no foundation for the theory; but, on the other hand, there was an equal possibility that the two tunnels were, indeed, connected by the little cable-hole.

And it followed, as a natural consequence, that Jim had certainly refrained from casting his light in that direction because he feared the rays would be observed.

And then Nelson Lee almost laughed to himself.

Surely Jim could have blocked the hole up!

But an explanation presented itself in the thought that there were other spaces through which a light could be observed, and it was impossible for Jim to block them all up.

Nelson Lee was rather startled by the turn his musings had taken. If Jim had thought there was a prospect of his electric light being seen, what might not be the result of a sudden flare of the magnesium ribbon?

The flashlight was ten thousand-fold more intense than the comparatively weak light of the electric torch. Accordingly, if the latter would possibly

reveal the presence of somebody in the abandoned tunnel, what would the former cause?

In a moment, Nelson Lee could imagine himself standing in the adjoining tunnel, perhaps a hundred yards away—perhaps two hundred yards away. The sudden lighting of the magnesium would send a tiny shaft into the traffic tunnel, as clearly defined by a miniature searchlight. There was no doubt about that whatever. If, indeed, the cable outlet did communicate with the new tube, then the burning of the flashlight would certainly be observable.

But there was always the awkward supposition—and a very likely one—that there would be nobody in the other tunnel to see the sudden glare.

But it was a chance!

It was certainly a faint thread of hope. For all he knew a station was close by. He was not acquainted very thoroughly with this locality of Hampstead, so he could not know for certain. But at all events, even if the experiment failed, no harm would be done. The position would only remain as before.

It just happened that he held the magnesium ribbon in his hand, so he might as well use it on the bare off-chance of good resulting.

“Somehow, I have a feeling within me that this insignificant object is to be the means of our deliverance,” thought Lee tensely. “Heaven would never permit such a cruel wrong as this to occur. I have always placed my trust in Providence, and never once has it betrayed me!”

The detective would have given much to have been able to tell Nipper what was passing in his mind. But this was denied him; and now that hope was alive within his breast, his keen wits attained an extra acuteness. Every second was of value; one single moment might mean just the difference between life and death. If rescue did come, it could not be immediate. Delay was certain, and there was scarcely another twenty minutes of grace.

Lee gripped the little flashlight contrivance steadily, and suddenly pulled the miniature trigger arrangement. A slight click followed, and the next second it seemed to the detective as though he was almost blinded.

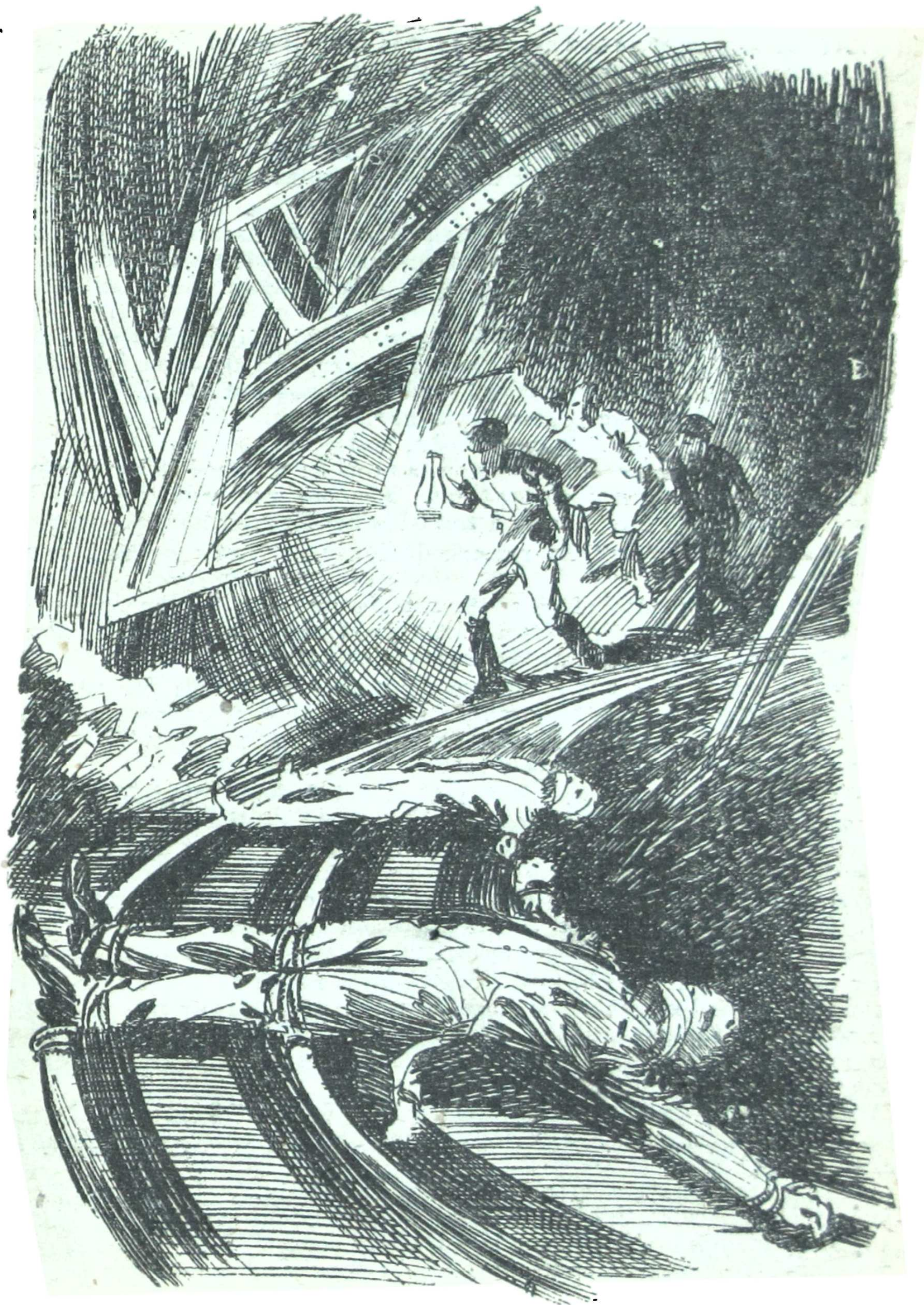
Subconsciously, he heard a muffled, startled cry from Nipper. The lad was, indeed, utterly taken aback. The abrupt flaring of the magnesium ribbon, without precious warning, almost frightened him. For a second he thought that electricity was the cause, and that the moment of death had arrived.

The light was simply overpowering, and the previous darkness made it seem a hundred-fold more intense. The section of tunnel was lit up in every cranny and corner. Lee knew well enough that the ribbon would only burn for about six seconds, for only a certain portion of it had been released.

And, during the first moment, an idea flashed through his brain. Hesitation would have meant that the idea could not be carried out, and so he acted instantly.

With a jerk of his wrist, he flung the flashlight across the tunnel, straight for the small circular opening near the floor. His aim was true, and the thing actually entered the hole to a depth of two inches, and remained burning. Although tightly bound, Lee was easily able to work his wrist, and so had accomplished the feat without difficulty. The fact that the magnesium holder had sped true was quite as much a matter of luck as of accurate aim.

As suddenly as the glare had broken out, so it snapped off. Darkness plunged down again, and everything was as before.



All three saw something which caused them to cry out aloud, and hurry forward at a run.
Two still and silent forms were lashed to the metals!—(See page 22.)

Well, the expedient had been put to the test.

Would it bring forth any result?

Had Nelson Lee only known it, rescue was even then on the way. In the adjoining tunnel, and some little distance away, a couple of electricians had been at work. There was nothing unusual in this, for the new section of tunnel was not yet finished.

It was open to traffic, and had been for some time, but there were still minor matters to attend to. And these two electricians were in one of the refuge recesses, completing a job.

One of them was gazing up the dark tube at the rear-light of a train which had just roared past. A green signal in the distance turned red, and the man was about to turn to his work again, when his attention was arrested.

Quite a way up the tunnel a bright beam of white light shot out from a spot near to the ground. It was distinct and clear, and the electrician stared in wonderment. He could not make the phenomenon out at all.

"What the thunder's that light, Joe?" he asked abruptly.

"Light?" said the other. "What light, mate?"

He saw, even as he asked the question, and as he watched it became much brighter, and then suddenly snapped out. The two men continued watching for some seconds, and then Joe rose from his bending position.

"That's mighty queer," he remarked slowly. "Let's go and have a look."

It was several minutes before another train was due, so the pair walked briskly up the track, the light from a lantern gleaming on the polished rails. They halted, and gazed down at the metal-work near the ground.

"Here we are," said one. "Came from this cable-slot, for sure. By gosh, there must be something amiss in the old disused section, mate! That's where the light came from. There's something wrong."

"Seems like it. There oughtn't to be a light in there."

Both the men were of the opinion that some electrical defect was the cause of the sudden beam of light, and defects of that sort, in a tube railway system, sometimes lead to grave disasters. This matter wanted looking into without delay.

The electricians hastened up the tunnel for a considerable distance until they came to the spot where the new section had been joined on to the original tube. Here one wall was open, and a black gap was revealed.

Piles of brickwork were heaped about, and a rough path led into a mass of debris which had not yet been cleared away. The railway was in working order again, but there was still a large amount of work to be done. The two electricians came face to face with another man—a platelayer—who was waiting for them.

"What's wrong in the old tunnel?" he asked. "I saw a gleam of brilliant light a minute ago, comin' from between these here chunks of brickwork——"

"We're going to have a look now," said Joe shortly.

He led the way with the lantern, somewhat anxious, and picked his path through the masses of broken metal-work and concrete. In a few moments he was faced by a wall of iron—part of the wrecked tube—which formed a kind of door to the abandoned section. Squeezing past this, he found himself in the old tunnel.

The others were close on his heels, and all three saw something which caused them to cry out aloud, and hurry forward at a run.

Two still and silent forms were lashed to the metals!

CHAPTER V.

Hot on the Track.

"I HAD given up hope completely," said Lee in a husky voice. "It is no fault of Sutcliffe's that Nipper and I are alive to tell the tale. The scoundrel came near to accomplishing his devilish object."

The great detective was talking to an inspector of the North London and Suburban Tube Railway, in a little office on the platform of the nearest station to the scene of the adventure.

"You saved your own life, Mr. Lee," said the railway inspector. "That light of yours did the trick. Without that not a soul would have known of your presence in the old piece of tunnel. It was a real smart dodge."

"Smart!" said Nipper, rubbing his wrists. "Why, it was a giddy miracle! I thought the end had come when I saw that glare. I can't quite believe, even now, that we're safe and sound."

Only a short time had elapsed since the rescue. It had been quite simple, once the helpless prisoners were discovered. Their bonds had been cut, and the gags removed. They had known, of course, several minutes beforehand that deliverance was at hand, but they had been unable to guide their rescuers.

Lee had instantly warned the electricians that some devilry was afoot. The time had been ten minutes to three at the time of discovery, and the electricians had had time in which to make a hasty examination.

At the opposite end of the tunnel they had found Jim the Penman's handiwork; and it was an easy matter to disconnect the wires, and render the scheme harmless. Much damage would have been done had those wires remained in position, and the railway officials were as grateful to Nelson Lee as he was to them.

It was strange indeed that the doomed pair's lives should have been saved by the mere burning of a strip of magnesium ribbon.

The detective's reasoning had been correct. Jim had certainly kept the light of his torch fixed in one position to prevent the rays penetrating to the new tube. He knew that nobody would disturb him so long as his presence was unsuspected. And once he had gone the place was left in total darkness.

As the inspector had said, but for that flashlight there would have been no deliverance. Ten minutes longer, and the deadly current would have entered the rails. Jim had been absolutely certain of success—with good reason.

He could not possibly have guessed that Lee would be able to display a light—and a light of blinding brilliance. He thought that his victims would lie across the rails in utter darkness, and would perish as he had planned.

The detective knew that he and Nipper were alive owing to the promptness with which the two electricians had investigated. And the men were delighted to receive a five-pound note apiece. The third man was similarly rewarded.

After a dose of brandy each, Lee and Nipper took their leave of the railway inspector, and ascended the lift to the street. After their dreadful experience they badly wanted to see the open sky.

When they did see it, it seemed even more beautiful than it actually was. The afternoon was perfect. The sun shone down from a heaven of rich blue, with a few white, fleecy clouds. The heat was considerable, and the Hampstead air quivered, and the inhabitants grumbled about the hot weather.

Lee and Nipper taxied back to Gray's Inn Road, and thought it the most delightful ride they had ever experienced.

When, at about four-fifteen, they were back in their own rooms, they were both feeling fit and practically none the worse for their adventure.

They had been very near to death—but it was no new experience. It was only the horrible nature of their intended fate which had somewhat unnerved them.

The drive from Hampstead, however, had worked wonders.

“Now, Nipper,” said Lee, as he lit a cigar, “we’ve got to face the facts. Jim the Penman, after leaving us to our pleasant thoughts, took his departure in my identity. At present we don’t know what his game is, but I think we shall soon be enlightened. He didn’t dream that we should be after him so promptly.”

Nipper looked grim.

“By gum, we’ll make him pay, guv’nor!” he said warmly. “We’ll make him jolly well sit up for this afternoon’s work!”

“Undoubtedly we shall—if we can lay hands on him. But Jim is a slippery customer, and he has a nasty habit of disappearing and leaving no trace. Already wanted for forgery, the new charge of attempted murder will be against him. But what has he been up to, young ’un? What is he up to even now?”

“It’s queer, sir. He hadn’t been here, anyhow.”

“No, although I half expected he would visit these rooms,” replied Lee thoughtfully. “He is using my name and my identity for some scoundrelly purpose, and we have got to get busy at once. I have high hopes of catching Jim off his guard.”

The detective, being so soon at liberty, had a great advantage over his enemy. Jim was totally unaware that Lee had escaped, and so he was taking things easy. He fully believed that by this time Lee and Nipper had perished, and so he told himself—he had nothing to fear.

For a full hour Nelson Lee was busy with the telephone, but he met with no success. He could find no trace of Jim’s movements. The forger, disguised as Lee, had certainly sallied out on some audacious errand, and it was pretty obvious that he had intended visiting some bank or some huge business house.

It was while the detective was pacing his consulting-room, racking his brain for some explanation, that the telephone bell rang. He thought that one of his inquiries might have materialised, and he was quickly at the instrument.

“Yes, I am Nelson Lee. I beg your pardon? Oh——”

“I can’t quite understand what is wrong, Mr. Lee,” came a voice over the wires. “I am the manager of the Law Courts branch of the Bank of Great Britain. I understand you have been making inquiries concerning your own movements this afternoon? That is surely an extraordinary——”

“Quite so; but I have an excellent reason,” Lee said quickly. “Was I with you this afternoon?”

“Yes, of course. You received payment for a cheque for twenty thousand pounds.”

Nelson Lee’s jaw set grimly, and his eyes gleamed.

“Can you tell me the exact time of my visit to the bank?” he inquired.

“It was at about a quarter to three—perhaps a little later.”

“Was I accompanied by anyone?”

“Really, I am at a loss,” came the surprised manager’s tones. “Surely you know well enough that Mr. Robbins was with you.”

“Who is Mr. Robbins?”

“Is this a joke, Mr. Lee?” was the rather sour counter-question. “I have been put to considerable trouble——”

“My dear sir, I will explain in good time. Please tell me if you mean Mr. Robbins of the firm of Robbins and Hauley?”

"Yes, that is so."

"Thank you. Can you be in Mr. Robbins's office in fifteen minutes' time?"

"Certainly," came the reply. "But——"

"Please be there. I will explain everything."

Nelson Lee hung up the receiver and turned to Nipper, who had been listening to the one-sided conversation eagerly.

"Well, gov'nor?"

"We're on the track, young 'un," said Lee crisply. "Get your hat on; we're going round to Lincoln's Inn Court. Jim has got away with a neat little twenty thou., and I want to learn how he engineered the coup. If we are spry we may have the gentleman by the heels yet."

"Good business!" said Nipper heartily.

In less than ten minutes the pair were set down outside the offices of Messrs. Robbins and Hanley, and at the expiration of another they were ushered into Mr. Robbins's private sanctum. The solicitor was there himself, in conversation with Mr. Whitelaw, the bank manager.

"I am afraid I am going to give you an unpleasant surprise, gentlemen," said Nelson Lee, with brisk directness. "The man who was here just before three, and who departed with twenty thousand pounds, was an impostor."

The solicitor turned pale.

"But—but you yourself came here, Mr. Lee!" he ejaculated. "I—I——"

"Between the hours of two and three I and Nipper were imprisoned in a deserted section of the Underground Tube Railway at Hampstead," went on Lee calmly. "The man who impersonated me was James Sutcliffe, the notorious forger."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Whitelaw, aghast.

"You will understand now why I have been making inquiries concerning movements which were apparently my own," continued the detective. "Jim the Penman worked a clever dodge, and I am afraid you gentlemen are the victims."

"But—but the man—— You visited me yourself, Mr. Lee!" gasped the solicitor.

"No, the man was Sutcliffe!"

"And the—the promissory note——"

"A promissory note—eh?" echoed Lee. "That was a forgery."

It was some minutes before Mr. Robbins and the bank manager could grasp the true state of affairs. When they did—when they were fully satisfied that Nelson Lee was deadly serious—they were grave and startled.

The solicitor lost no time in explaining exactly what had occurred. Lee listened intently, and Nipper made some rapid notes.

"I am scarcely able to think clearly," said Mr. Robbins hoarsely. "And that man was an impostor? Upon my soul! I don't know what to say, Mr. Lee! He went off with twenty thousand pounds in his bag!"

"A neat haul," commented Lee grimly. "And you must admit, gentlemen, that Sutcliffe tricked you very cleverly. The man is an amazing criminal. I have ruined more than one of his little schemes, and I hope to ruin this."

The detective could scarcely help smiling at the solicitor's startled consternation. And he admired, in a way, Jim the Penman's audacity and daring. The man was undoubtedly a cruel murderer, but he was extraordinarily smart.

"The whole thing is amazing!" ejaculated Mr. Robbins. "Shocking! Good gracious, the firm will be compelled to make good that money! I implore you, Mr. Lee, to do your utmost to recover the stolen——"

"My dear sir, it is my intention to get on Sutcliffe's trail without the loss of a minute," was Lee's rapid interruption. "The police are already on the look-out for him, and I have high hopes of an early arrest."

"I trust your hopes will be realised," said Mr. Whitelaw.

Having gleaned all the facts of Jim's audacious coup, Nelson Lee immediately took steps to get on the forger's track. The most obvious line of inquiry was the taxi-cab which Jim had entered upon taking his leave of Mr. Robbins.

"You see, Nipper," said Lee, as he and the lad walked out of Lincoln's Inn Court, "we have all the advantage. Jim is under the impression that we are dead, and he probably took no pains to cover his tracks. He might even now be using my identity still; he certainly did use it when he drove away from here. When we have found where he drove to in that taxi, we shall be hot upon his heels."

"But we don't know which taxi——"

"We can find out," the detective said promptly. "I understand from Mr. Robbins that the driver knew the supposed identity of his fare. Our task ought to be simple."

Within fifteen minutes a dozen District Messenger boys were dispatched to all the taxi-cab ranks in the neighbourhood, with definite instructions. If one of them happened to come across the much-wanted taxi-driver, the latter was to be sent post-haste to Gray's Inn Road.

The detective and his young assistant went straight home. As a matter of fact, they were ravenously hungry, for they had tasted no food since breakfast. As Lee remarked, they might as well be feeding while the messengers were scouring the cab-ranks.

Mrs. Jones, the landlady, had an excellent tea in readiness—a meat tea, with plenty of substantial food. Nelson Lee and Nipper "tucked" into it with a will, and they had scarcely finished when they heard a motor-car come to a standstill in the street below.

Nipper stuck his head out of the open window.

"By gum, it's an empty taxi, sir!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Success already!"

"Let us hope so, young 'un."

"Two minutes later a short, thick-set cabby was ushered into the consulting-room. Lee left the tea-table in the adjoining room, and joined his visitor.

"I reckon I'm the man you want, sir," said the cab-driver. "Ted Clarke's my name, sir. I drove you west this afternoon."

"Ah! Where did you pick me up?"

The man stared.

"That's a rum question——"

"My good fellow, the man you picked up was a scoundrel impersonating me," said Nelson Lee. "No, I am perfectly sober; you needn't stare."

"Beg pardon, Mr. Lee," stammered the cabby. "Well, this is the limit! But it ain't for me to ask questions; I reckon I'm here to answer 'em."

"Precisely! Where did you pick your fare up?"

"Just outside Lincoln's Inn Court, sir."

"He looked exactly like me, and wore a light grey lounge suit and a straw hat?"

"That's right, sir."

"Where did you drive him to?"

"Straight to the Hotel Astor, sir, in Piccadilly," replied Mr. Ted Clarke promptly.

CHAPTER VI.

A Startling Surprise.

NELSON LEE was perfectly satisfied with the information supplied by the taxi-cab driver. Clarke made it quite clear that Jim the Penman had driven to the Hotel Astor, and had then dismissed the cab.

Further inquiry, therefore, had to be made at the hotel.

But Lee was on the track. The forger, confident of positive victory, had driven boldly to the Astor, and had entered the hotel. It now remained to be learned whether he was still there, or whether he had muddied his trail.

Tea being over, and Clarke having been dismissed with a handsome tip, Nelson Lee and Nipper at once drove to the Hotel Astor, in Piccadilly. The commissioner remembered perfectly Sutcliffe entering, for he was well acquainted with Nelson Lee by sight. The commissioner was an ex-policeman, and had once assisted Lee in a case, years ago.

"Bless me, this is queer, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, as the detective confronted him. "I could have sworn you were in the hotel!"

"You saw me enter, then?" asked Lee smoothly.

"Why, yes, sir; this afternoon! I bade you good-day. I didn't see you come out, sir," said the commissioner.

The detective spoke to the big man quietly for a few moments, and the ex-policeman listened with a surprised look on his face.

"Like that, is it, sir?" he asked. "Well, well! A bloke dressed up like you? You can take it from me he hasn't come out. He's still in the building. I've been on duty every minute."

"We will make inquiries inside," said the detective.

The inquiries were entirely satisfactory. The clerk declared that the gentleman had engaged a room in the name of Mr. Nelson Lee, and had gone straight upstairs. The clerk did not think he had come down.

Lee had a few words with the manager, and the pair, with Nipper accompanying them, went up in the lift to Room 146. A tap on the door brought no response, and a heavy thump was equally futile.

After a few minutes the manager produced a master-key, and opened the door. One glance was sufficient to show that the room was empty.

"The bird has flown," said Lee regretfully. "I suspected as much. Jim's visit to this hotel was merely a blind. He entered this room, removed his disguise, and left the building in a totally different character."

"Oh, that's rotten!" said Nipper blankly.

"We must press our inquiries vigorously," continued Lee. "This set-back was only to be expected. I didn't entertain hopes that we should catch our man so easily. Jim is deep, and he's not the fellow to make blunders."

The manager was somewhat surprised at it all, but he was quite willing to allow the detective to remain in the apartment for some little time in order to investigate. Lee and Nipper were left alone in Room 146, and they commenced a thorough search with as little delay as possible.

"I thought we'd got the rotter, sir," grumbled Nipper.

"I was hardly so optimistic as that, my lad," was his master's response. "As soon as the commissioner told me that Jim had entered this hotel and had not emerged, I was positive of the truth. I guessed at once that Jim had donned a fresh disguise. But we still have the advantage over him."

"How, gov'nor?"

"He has no suspicion as yet that we are still alive—or, at least, he had none while he was in occupation of this room," replied the detective. "He thought himself to be perfectly safe, and knew that he would not be tracked. But fate had ordained otherwise, and placed us in a superior position."

It was impossible to conjecture what disguise Jim the Penman had used in leaving the hotel. It was a vast building, and scores of people entered and left almost every minute. In another personality Jim had boldly walked out, and had once again been swallowed up in the millions of London.

Nelson Lee and Nipper found Room 146 to be quite bare and formal. It was furnished fairly comfortably, for it was a rather expensive apartment—a bed-sitting-room. There were no cupboards or dressing-rooms attached.

"This looks very suggestive, Nipper—very suggestive, indeed," remarked Lee suddenly. "In fact, I may say that it is singularly significant."

"What have you found, guv'nor?"

Nipper found his master gazing down upon the polished woodwork of the dressing-table. At first the lad could see nothing, but then he noticed a very light film of powdery substance upon one small portion of the polished wood.

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Well, I think there is no great mystery regarding his character," replied Nelson Lee. "Unless I am mistaken this is a specimen of face powder."

"Face powder!" echoed Nipper. "That's what women and girls use, isn't it?"

"I believe a fairly large portion of the female community is addicted to the habit of using powder," was the detective's smooth reply. "But what is powder doing in this room, Nipper? Obviously, it wasn't there before Jim the Penman entered, for if it had been it would certainly have become brushed away. And what is the inference?"

"I can't quite follow, sir."

"My dear Nipper, I admit the clue is a very fragile one, but it is quite feasible, nevertheless. Jim the Penman left this room disguised as a woman."

"By jingo!"

As Nelson Lee had said, the clue was certainly a frail one, and it would not do to rely upon it too thoroughly. But it happened that the detective's theory was to receive confirmation almost at once.

"We have a nasty, jagged rock up against us," Lee was saying, as he lit a cigar. "I don't see how Jim could have disguised himself as a woman, for I have remembered that he carried nothing but a small handbag, which was full of currency notes. A lady's costume occupies a certain amount of space."

At that moment the door opened and the manager appeared, accompanied by a boy in uniform. The latter at once nodded in Nelson Lee's direction.

"Yes, that's the gentleman, sir," he said promptly.

"What is it?" Lee inquired.

"I believe this lad may be able to help you. It appears that he was sent on an errand by the man you are tracking, soon after he booked the room," was the manager's reply. "The boy brought back a parcel with him."

The great detective's eyes glittered with inward excitement.

"Dear me! This is most excellent!" he exclaimed crisply. "This boy is the one person I wish to see above all others. Tell me, my lad, exactly

what happened. To save confusion, we will assume that it was I whom you saw earlier in the day. What order did I give you?"

"Why, sir, don't you remember? You rang for me and told me to take a note to Swan and Edgar's, at the Circus," replied the uniformed boy.

"I see. I sent you to Piccadilly Circus, to the well-known establishment of Messrs. Swan and Edgar?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do there?"

"I handed in a note, sir, waited, and brought back a parcel."

The boy could give no other information of value, and Nelson Lee at once descended to the lounge and rang up Swan & Edgar's. Piccadilly Circus was only a short distance away, but there was really no necessity for a personal visit.

In a few minutes he learned that a complete outfit of ladies outer-clothing had been sent back by the boy—costume and hat, etc. The whole had been enclosed in a travelling valise.

Nelson Lee was exceedingly satisfied when he hung the receiver up. He turned to Nipper with a light in his eyes which told the lad that the trail was hot, and there was every prospect of immediate success.

"The costume which Jim wore, Nipper, was of a light-brown colour with a decided check," he said briskly. "The hat was a small toque affair, with a single feather on one side. With these details it ought to be easy enough for us to follow the scent."

The commissioner remembered the tall lady who had emerged from the hotel at about four-fifteen.

"That's the lady, sir," said the man, as Lee gave a description. "I remember her distinctly, because she gave me half-a-crown, just for carrying her valise across the pavement."

"When one has twenty thousand pounds in cash, half-crowns are looked upon as mere trifles," smiled Lee. "Yes, McDonald, this lady we are discussing was none other than the criminal I am after. Can you tell me where she went to upon leaving here?"

The commissioner looked thoughtful.

"Well, so many people leave by taxi, sir," he replied. "But I believe she went to Raltani's tea-rooms at the top of Regent Street. Either there or to Charing Cross Station. There were two ladies left at that minute, and I can't rightly recollect which is which."

Nelson Lee and Nipper were soon in a taxi themselves, bowling along to the Oxford Circus end of Regent Street. The detective had decided to try Raltani's tea-rooms as a beginning, for it was nearer than Charing Cross Station.

"The odds are that we are on the wrong track," said Lee, as he pulled at his cigar. "But it would be foolish for us to go to Charing Cross without having first made an inquiry at the tea-rooms. I am afraid it is more than likely that Jim has skipped off by the evening boat-train for the continent."

But when Raltani's was reached, Lee and Nipper received a pleasant surprise. Yes, the lady in the brown costume and toque had taken tea there explained the head waiter. She had been gone nearly an hour.

At first the waiter refused to give any further information, saying that it was not the habit of the restaurant to answer questions regarding its customers. But a large tip put a different complexion on matters.

"Well, I don't know what you're after, sir," said the waiter, who was an Englishman, "but the lady you have described has been a patron of this restaurant for three or four weeks past."

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Nipper. "But—but——"

"This is interesting," said Lee smoothly. "So the lady has been known to you for several weeks? You could doubtless tell me her name, then?"

"She is the Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor," was the waiter's surprising reply. "I think she is the wife of one of our Government officials in the Colonies. She is staying at the Hotel Dominique, in Trafalgar Square."

When Lee and Nipper once again took up the chase they were both very thoughtful. Nipper had half a suspicion that his master had swerved off on to a false trail. The Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor must have worn a similar costume, by a strange coincidence, to the one which Jim the Penman donned.

But Nelson Lee was of a different opinion. He knew Sutcliffe to be very, very deep. Nothing had been heard of the forger for some time past. It was quite on the cards that he had been boldly flaunting the police in the guise of a rich, fashionable lady. At all events, the matter had to be followed up closely.

At the Hotel Dominique, Nelson Lee interviewed the manager. By this time he was getting quite accustomed to explanations. On this occasion, however, he was forced to be extra explicit. If he had made a mistake it would be rather unfortunate, so he had to go carefully.

He learned that the Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor had been staying at the hotel for five weeks, that she never entertained visitors, and that she spent most of her time out. There was not a single suspicion against her, and it seemed incredible to the manager that she could possibly be a man in disguise. At that very time she was out, having taken a taxi, a few minutes before, to one of the leading West End theatres.

On the face of it, it seemed as though Nelson Lee had indeed got off the track. But he impressed upon the manager the extreme importance of the case, and at last he was gratified to learn that the manager would allow him to make a brief search of the lady's suite of rooms. There was nobody in them at present, and not a soul would ever know of the search if everything was proved to be in order.

But Nelson Lee's suspicions soon received ample justification. After five minutes' search in the Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor's suite he discovered enough evidence to warrant an immediate arrest.

Jim the Penman was tripped at last.

A number of cigarette ends in the fireplace were not necessarily proof that the lady was really a man. But it certainly was a step in the right direction—especially as there were several cigar ends also. The most ultra-modern woman does not smoke cigars. And in the bedroom the final proof was forthcoming. A new valise contained a suit of man's clothing, which Lee instantly recognised. There were several other positive indications that the occupier of the rooms was none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe.

But a systematic search failed to bring to light any single written document. Jim had taken care to leave nothing in writing which would incriminate him. The large sum in currency notes, too, was not to be found.

But the fact that he had got his man caused Nelson Lee intense satisfaction. He could see everything clearly, exactly as it had occurred. Under ordinary circumstances Jim's trail would have been smothered very effectively.

But, owing to the fact that Nelson Lee and Nipper had escaped death, the whole aspect of the thing was altered. Jim had reckoned to be back in his established identity of the Hon. Mrs. William-Trevor long before the death of the detective had become known. It was quite certain that he would be

able to deduce absolute alibis in case of necessity. And who, in any case, would suspect a fashionable society lady who had been living at the Hotel Dominique for five weeks? Jim's exposure had only been brought about by the keen thoroughness of Nelson Lee's investigations.

The detective hurried at once to Scotland Yard, and interviewed Detective-inspector Morley, a man whom he knew to be a very keen C.I.D. officer. Morley was delighted to hear Lee's news, and, armed with a warrant, he left Scotland Yard with his unofficial colleague and drove straight to a famous West End theatre. Nipper went also, just to see the "fun."

The detective did not beat about the bush. In the name of the law he demanded that he and the inspector should be taken at once to the private box occupied by the Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor. The theatre manager was rather startled, and said that under no circumstances could he allow a disturbance to occur during the performance—which has just commenced.

But Lee, knowing Jim the Penman's singular propensity for scenting danger, and for slipping away, would not hear of the manager's suggestion that the "lady" should be requested to step to the front of the house.

Finally, and under pressure, the manager escorted his unwelcome visitors to one of the theatre's most expensive boxes. Nelson Lee was looking very grim, for it had struck him very forcibly that his enemy was, indeed, a callous scoundrel. Having murdered two people—as he thought—and having committed an audacious robbery, he was now calmly taking his pleasure in the box of a West End theatre! The utter audacity of the man was really amazing.

Lee himself opened the box door, and in one moment he and the inspector and Nipper were within. A tall lady looked round quickly, and with a shade of annoyance on her face. Neither of the trio who had entered saw the faintest resemblance in that face to Jim the Penman. Morley, in fact, began to feel somewhat confused, and was horrified at thought that perhaps a mistake had been made.

But the next instant he changed his mind.

The forger betrayed himself beyond all hope. The sudden apparition of Nelson Lee and Nipper in the box, when he had thought them dead, was too much even for his iron mask of facile self-control. His eyes started forward, and his lips set in a thin straight line. That look was enough for Nelson Lee. A revolver was in his hand in a second—he meant to take no chances!

"Take your prisoner, Morley!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "The game's up, Jim the Penman. You're a clever rogue, but you're beaten this time!"

As Lee spoke, he reached forward and jerked the wig from the "lady's" head. A close crop of hair was revealed, and it was possible to recognise the forger. For fully two seconds he sat as though turned to stone; then he uttered a short laugh and quickly stepped back into the shadow.

"I don't think we have been observed by the rest of the house," he remarked, with the utmost coolness. "Upon my word, Lee, you have as many lives as a cat. Am I to congratulate you upon your capture. I was totally off my guard!"

"I arrest you, Douglas James Sutcliffe, on a charge of——"

"Oh, cut that," smiled Jim composedly. "Wait until we get to Bow Street before you trot out that formal gibberish. I'll go quietly—I know when I'm beaten."

The whole incident had been so quiet that the bulk of the audience had no idea what had been occurring. The manager was exceedingly gratified, and was greatly pleased when he had got rid of his unwelcome visitors. In

the morning, of course, the newspapers would report the affair—but there had been no scene.

Jim the Penman went quietly enough. Although he affected to be careless and easy, Nelson Lee knew quite well that the prisoner was terribly unsafe. He had been anticipating many days of luxury, and fresh schemes were already in the course of evolution.

And now he had been arrested like the meanest pickpocket.

It was a great blow to the clever criminal. And his hatred for Nelson Lee was ten times intensified, although he took care to show nothing outwardly. That Lee had escaped was sufficiently astounding, but that he had succeeded in tracking his man so promptly was a stunning shock.

Instead of Lee being dead, Jim the Penman himself was arrested!

Before leaving the box he had been allowed to replace his wig, and nobody guessed what was actually occurring while they walked into the street, and into the taxi. Nelson Lee did not think it necessary to have the prisoner handcuffed; for he would have sense enough to know that with Detective-inspector Morley and Nelson Lee on either side of him he would have no chance to escape.

Bow Street police-station was reached, and Jim the Penman was marched into the charge-room. And then, before a word had been spoken, a terrible thing happened. As Jim walked forward, he placed a handkerchief to his nose in an unconcerned manner. Then he jerked his hand quickly and flung the handkerchief down.

“Look out!” roared Lee. “Sutcliffe is up to something——”

Jim the Penman uttered a strange, hoarse laugh.

“I’ve tricked you, Lee!” he gasped. “You thought you’d got me, eh? I’ve—I’ve tricked——”

The words seemed to be strangled in his throat, his face worked convulsively, and the whites of his eyes showed in the most ghastly manner. Then, with a last sobbing breath, Jim the Penman crashed to the floor. Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Inspector Morley stood perfectly still, as though rooted to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

The Flashlight Photograph.

THE divisional-surgeon rose to his feet with a grave face.

“The man must have died almost instantaneously,” he exclaimed.

“I can’t determine the cause of death, but it was some powerful poison.”

Nelson Lee nodded.

“It is a terrible pity,” was his serious rejoinder. “I never thought that Jim the Penman would be fool enough to take his own life; I thought he had more pluck than to get out of his troubles in that way.”

“How did he take the poison, sir?” asked Nipper, in an awed voice.

“It is fairly obvious that he had a little capsule concealed within the folds of his handkerchief,” replied the detective. “He placed it there, I expect, during the taxi-drive from the theatre. It was then a simple matter to slip it into his mouth and swallow it.”

They were standing in an ante-room, and against the opposite wall, upon a couch, lay all that remained of Jim the Penman—lifeless tissue. His evil spirit had departed this world for ever.

Nelson Lee was disappointed and angry. He had not wished for a finish such as this, and he was inclined to blame himself for not having been more

on the alert. But, under the circumstances, it was impossible for Lee to have been prepared for Jim's drastic move.

Well, he was dead now, and so the whole episode was at an end.

During the next hour, Sutcliffe's body was removed to the mortuary, to await a post-mortem examination which had been decided upon. He had killed himself by means of some unrecognisable poison, and it was necessary that the actual nature of it should be discovered.

During the remainder of the evening Lee was busy. But he found utterly no trace of the twenty thousand pounds which Jim had obtained by fraud from Messrs. Robbins and Hanley. In due course, probably, it would be traced.

"Jim's first thoughts were to conceal the money he had stolen," explained Lee, as he and Nipper walked along Gray's Inn Road on their way home. "It is probably securely placed in a safe deposit, or in one of Jim's secret retreats. He had sense enough not to keep it with him."

"Well, he's gone, guv'nor," said Nipper practically. "He won't be able to lure us into any more traps."

The detective was thoughtful. He was just about to insert his latch-key into the lock when he suddenly turned to Nipper.

"By the way, before we go indoors, there is one other little matter that needs attending to; in my preoccupation it quite slipped out of my mind. We must return to Bow Street at once."

"What for, sir?"

"It struck me a short time ago that we do not possess a single photograph of Sutcliffe," said Nelson Lee. "I intended calling at the mortuary on the way home, but the matter slipped my memory. However, the hour is not very late."

It was, indeed, fairly early for the detective. He was tired after the day's exciting events, and had spent several hours since the dramatic scene at Bow Street police-station. But he turned now, and he and Nipper looked out for a taxi.

"But I don't quite understand, guv'nor," said Nipper. "How can you get a photograph?"

"By taking a snapshot, young 'un."

"Of Jim's dead body?"

"Well, I can't very well take a photograph of Jim alive now, can I?" asked Nelson Lee. "Yes, Nipper, that is what I intend to do. So far as I know, there is no existing photograph of Sutcliffe in his own personality. We must have one for my case-record book; there is not a criminal entered in that book without an accompanying photograph. And Sutcliffe is one of the most important rogues we have brought to justice for a very long while. A snapshot is absolutely necessary."

"Oh, yes; of course, sir."

"It will be quite simple to obtain permission to visit the mortuary. The snap itself will only take a few moments. A flashlight, and we shall have the photo. It will be somewhat grim to use a strip of magnesium ribbon on Jim; we escaped death by its help, and we shall take a likeness of his dead face by its help."

"Queer how things work about, isn't it, sir?"

"Fate is very extraordinary, my boy," replied Lee gravely.

As the detective had anticipated, it was an easy matter to obtain permission to visit the mortuary. Accompanied by a police-sergeant, Lee and Nipper went to the gruesome dead-house, and their work there was soon accomplished.

The dead forger's body was placed in a sitting position for a few moments,

and Nelson Lee set the camera. Nipper ignited a strip of magnesium, and the brilliant glare of light blazed out. A slight click, and the photograph was taken.

The detective had attempted to raise the dead man's eyelids. But they were set as firmly as though frozen, and no effort of Lee's could shift them. So the snapshot was taken with Jim's eyes closed. There was nothing else for it.

Having finished, Lee and Nipper returned home.

They found a welcome supper awaiting them, and they demolished it with vigour. After the meal was cleared away, Lee smoked a cigar and glanced over the evening paper. Then he took the little pocket camera out, and laid it on the table.

"I suppose we had better develop this film straight away," he remarked.

"Oh, blow! I feel like bed," yawned Nipper.

"My dear lad, don't let me keep you up," Lee hastened to say. "There is no necessity for you to accompany me to the dark-room. I am quite capable of developing a photograph myself."

Nipper grinned, and went with his master to the dark-room, all the same. The lad was anxious to see the result.

The red lamp cast a dim glow over the bench, and Nipper watched Lee as the latter removed the sensitive film from the camera and placed it into the small dish of developer. For some moments there was silence. Then Nelson Lee murmured:

"Ah! The image is appearing, Nipper."

"Do you think it'll be a good negative, sir?"

"I can't tell just yet."

When the developing had proceeded far enough, Nelson Lee quickly gave the negative a rinse and placed it into a bath of fixing-solution. It remained in here for the required amount of time, and was then finished, except for washing and drying.

"We will leave it in running water," remarked Lee. "Just before I turn in I will take it out and set it to dry. In the morning we will take a couple of prints."

"I haven't seen it properly yet, sir."

"Neither have I. But I think it is a good photograph."

"Let's have a look now, sir."

Nelson Lee smiled, and lifted the slide of the red-lamp. The little room at once became brightly illuminated. The negative being fixed, it could come to no harm by being exposed to the white light.

The detective picked the negative up, and held it close to the light. He and Nipper examined it with care. It was a head-and-shoulder snapshot, and had come out remarkably clearly.

Jim the Penman's features were recognisable, even with everything the opposite to what they ought to be. In a negative, of course, a white collar appears black, and a head of dark hair, almost white.

"Splendid!" murmured Lee. "The definition is perfect, and——"

He ceased speaking abruptly and drew his breath in with a sharp hiss.

"What's up, sir?" asked Nipper.

"By James!" ejaculated Nelson Lee tensely. "See, young 'un—see!"

Nipper squinted at the negative afresh.

"See what, guv'nor?" he asked. "I'm blessed if I can——"

"His eyes!" shouted the detective excitedly. "Look at his eyes!"

Nipper had not taken particular notice of the dead man's eyes, but he looked very carefully now. And he saw, with something of a shock, that they were wide open! In the print it would be apparent in a second, and

it was clear, enough in the negative. Jim the Penman's eyes were wide open.

"Why, that's rummy! His eyes were closed when you took the snap!" said Nipper.

Nelson Lee laid the film in the water again.

"Let me think, my lad—let me think! I can't fully grasp the real meaning of this astounding discovery!" he murmured. "Don't you remember how I tried in vain to open Jim's eyes?"

"Of course, sir! They wouldn't budge at all."

"And yet, in this photograph, we find the eyelids fully raised!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "What can be the meaning of the phenomenon? A camera never lies, Nipper—a camera always tells the truth. At the second of the exposure, Sutcliffe's eyes were wide open."

"But we didn't see——"

"My dear lad, a camera is capable of recording things which the human eye cannot possibly see. Besides, we were momentarily blinded by the glare from the flashlight, and it is only natural that we should have seen nothing. If we had watched carefully for Jim's eyelids to raise themselves, we should probably have seen the action. But we were not watching either carefully or carelessly, and so it escaped our attention. The camera, however, has recorded it on this negative."

"Well, what does it mean?" asked Nipper. "It's nothing much, is it? I expect the dead muscles were affected by the sudden light——"

Nelson Lee waved his hand.

"Dead muscles!" he snapped. "How on earth could dead muscles be affected? Be sensible, Nipper, please!"

He suddenly faced his young assistant, and grasped his arm.

"Jim the Penman," he said deliberately, "is alive!"

"Great Scott!"

"There can be no other explanation of this remarkable photograph," Lee went on in a tense voice. "The camera has revealed the secret—has given us a warning—and we had better act upon it immediately."

Nipper simply stared in amazement.

"But—but Jim is dead!" he stuttered. "The doctor said so! We saw——"

"Never mind what we saw! Never mind what the doctor said!" interrupted the detective. "The camera is more reliable than all the other proof put together. The doctor was mistaken—must have been mistaken. By Heaven, I am beginning to think it is all a trick!"

"A—a trick?" Nipper was beginning to feel a bit faint.

"Yes, a trick!" roared Nelson Lee, striding into the consulting-room, and kicking his slippers off. "What other explanation is possible? Once again Sutcliffe has managed to dupe the police. He did not take poison at all, but some unknown drug which produced temporary suspension of animation."

"But that's not possible, sir!" protested Nipper.

"Not possible! I'll have you know, Nipper, that almost anything is possible in these days of advanced science. Moreover, I have myself experienced more than one case of suspended animation. But hurry—get your boots on!"

Nelson Lee was absolutely startled. He made no attempt to hide his feelings, and was ready for the street in a very few minutes.

"Come along, Nipper—hurry yourself!" he exclaimed impatiently. "At this very minute Sutcliffe may be escaping from the mortuary. It is not

a prison, you know, and an active man could make his escape in a very few minutes."

"Oh, you must be wrong, sir. Jim's dead."

"I am firmly convinced that Jim is alive. How else can that photograph be explained? He was unconscious, yes—but not dead. The sudden light affected his slumbering nerves in some unaccountable way, and caused his eyelids to raise themselves. Did I not remark upon the curious rigidity of his muscles?"

"Yes, you did, sir."

"Well, I was puzzled even then, but I never suspected anything of this nature," Lee went on. "I have seen many dead men—dead from various causes—the knife, from drowning, or natural causes, or poison. And never before, in a poisoning case, have I seen that strange rigidity. I tell you, Nipper, that Sutcliffe has worked some dodge—and if we are quick we may spoil it yet."

Nipper was soon ready, and the pair prepared to depart.

"Think of the facts," Lee proceeded. "Are they not significant? Jim took the supposed poison the very instant he stepped into the police-station. Why? Simply because he knew that he would be removed to the mortuary, and that he would then be able to escape when he awoke."

"It begins to look fishy, sir."

"Fishy! And the photograph, Nipper! We can't get over that!" the detective exclaimed sharply. "There is a decided chance that we may be in time to prevent his escape. He reckoned on having the whole night before him. But, owing to the photograph clue, we shall be at the mortuary very soon after midnight."

Two minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were off. They espied a taxi as soon as they reached Holborn, and they were soon bowling towards the mortuary, Lee bending forward, his expression tense, a grave, uneasy sense of doubt within him.

CHAPTER VIII.

What Happened After Midnight—Conclusion.

JIM THE PENMAN lie perfectly still upon his bench in the mortuary. He was, indeed, so far as human eye could detect, a corpse. Darkness surrounded him, and there was a dank, unpleasant odour in the place which denoted its character at once.

It was a place of the dead.

Sutcliffe's body was the only one which lay within the little building on this particular night. And it rested upon the bench, perfectly still, and as cold as the stonework itself.

It was after midnight and a half-moon shone down from the clear summer sky. A few straggling rays percolated through the bars of the window, and touched the corner of the bench. The moonlight shone on Jim's face and showed it to be bloodless and ghastly.

Surely, he was really dead.

But a watcher, had there been one, would have noticed a slight movement a moment later—a tiny movement which was almost invisible.

One of the dead man's eyelids quivered!

A full minute passed, and then there was no longer doubt about the thing. Both Jim's eyes were wide open and he stared unseeingly at the roof. Then, quite suddenly, he raised his head.

This movement was followed by another, for the "corpse" attained a

sitting posture. Jim the Penman sat there, on the bench, for a considerable time. Finally, he lurched off, and walked up and down on the stone floor.

After ten minutes had elapsed, his circulation was restored.

It was a gradual process. At first he had been dazed, and quite incapable of speech or thought. Then, as he moved about, life returned, and the power of brain activity. He was very much alive!

“By George!” muttered the forger, realising where he was. “The dead-house! Well, this is more than I hoped for, Jim, old son! I thought I was booked, for sure!”

He looked about him. And as he became capable of connected thought, he felt a strange elation within him. Whether it was the after effect of the drug, or whether it was the natural joy of being still alive, he did not know.

But he was undoubtedly cheerful.

He chuckled again and again, and was inclined to think that he was on the verge of somewhat hysterical laughter. But he held himself in check, and sat on the edge of the bench and reviewed the situation.

By this time he was absolutely himself.

“It was a desperate wheeze!” he muttered. “But it worked! I’ve foiled ’em again, and I’ve got the twenty thou’ safe and sound, too. In an hour I shall be miles from this infernal hole, and the papers will be full of my exploits to-morrow.”

He chuckled again and moved across to the window.

The drug he had taken had done him no real harm. He, himself, did not know what the little capsule had actually contained. It had been given to him by a clever chemist—a criminal—during his recent visit to America. Jim had been told that the drug produced an effect, exactly corresponding with death, for a period of four hours. After that life returns gradually.

Sutcliffe had not cared to test the drug just for the fun of the thing. He had suspected that actual death would probably result. But he had kept the thing always handy in case of a dire emergency.

Well, it had been tested now—and it had acted marvellously.

All other means of escape being exhausted, he had swallowed the drug-pellet on the spur of the moment. And now he found himself in the mortuary, quite alone, with freedom before him.

He did not waste much time, for the sooner he made himself scarce the better. He would have been even more hurried if he had been aware that Nelson Lee was even then hastening to the mortuary.

Jim was quite confident of making a safe “get-away.” He had plenty of confidence in his own cleverness and his own powers, and he knew that once clear of the district he would disappear gracefully from public—and police—gaze. Already he had several daring schemes simmering in his active brain.

Douglas James Sutcliffe was an extraordinary individual.

The fact that his identity as “the Hon. Mrs. Williams-Trevor” was of no further use did not worry him. In any case, he had been about to abandon the female disguise. It had served his purpose, and that was enough.

Nelson Lee was still alive; that was something that Jim cursed his luck about. But there would be plenty of opportunities in the future to get even with the famous detective. To tell the truth, Jim had a certain admiration for his great enemy, and almost looked forward to another battle of wits.

The thought of Nelson Lee made an idea come into his head, and he chuckled afresh. His light-heartedness, he told himself, was due to two

reasons. One, the after-effect of the drug, and two, his natural elation at finding freedom before him.

He felt in his pockets, and drew forth a piece of blank paper, and a pencil. He was still fully dressed, for the strange rigidity of his limbs had made it impossible to remove any of his clothing.

“Not this time! I think the laugh is on my side. Kindly inform Mr. Nelson Lee that I am looking forward keenly to another meeting. The next time I’ll make no mistake!”

“JIM THE PENMAN, deceased.”

Sutcliffe laughed softly to himself as he wrote the last word. He left the note lying on the bare bench. Then he calmly lighted a cigarette, taking care to shade the light, and looked about him for a means of exit.

There was a small window at the rear of the mortuary—the whole building was only a small place—and this window was covered by two iron bars. A brief examination showed Jim that the bars were merely secured to the frame by ordinary screws, through iron plates.

He pulled out a pocket-knife and opened a screw-driver blade. It was not a toy affair, but a really serviceable knife of large dimensions. And the screw-driver shifted the screws without much difficulty.

Five minutes later the bar was out, and Jim prepared to depart. A mortuary is not like a prison—at least, this particular one was not. Dead men don’t escape, and people don’t try to break into a dead-house. So the forger’s escape was neither remarkable nor out of the ordinary.

He drew himself up, slipped through the opening, and disappeared into the night.

“I think you will find that you are mistaken, Mr. Lee. I will stake my life that the man was dead.”

“We shall soon see, inspector,” said Nelson Lee. “The mortuary is in sight.”

The dead-house was situated at the rear of a long yard, only accessible from the road by means of a locked gate. At the end of the yard the little building stood surrounded by bushes and trees.

The moonlight made the grim mortuary seem even more unsavoury than it really was. Nelson Lee had his electric torch in his hand, and he was anxious to make an examination without delay.

His only companions were Nipper and the inspector. The time was now close upon one o’clock, for Lee had been somewhat delayed. It was not an easy matter to convince the police that there was possibly something wrong in the mortuary.

Morley grated the key in the lock, and turned it. Then he stood aside for Nelson Lee to enter. The detective flashed his light straight upon the bench, and a cry of anger and amazement left his lips.

“Too late!” he shouted. “By Heaven! Jim the Penman has beaten us!”

The inspector staggered.

“What,” he gasped; “why, I—I——”

He stood just inside the building, staring round him with open mouth, and almost speechless with stupefied astonishment.

“Then—then you were right, Lee,” panted Detective-inspector Morley. “By thunder, I thought your theory was all moonshine!”

Lee clenched his fists.

“It seems that the only contents of this mortuary is moonshine,” he said

with grim humour. "Our 'dead' prisoner has certainly escaped. Hallo, what is this?"

He picked up the piece of paper from the bench, and all three read the words. It was some moments before anyone spoke.

"By the appearance of this," observed Lee, "Jim was in perfect health before he took his departure. Every letter as steady as a rock—every stroke of the pen perfect. The man is a living wonder!"

The inspector swore softly and choicely.

"I'll give that doctor a rating for this night's work," he said angrily. "The infernal fool! Doesn't he know a dead man from a living——"

"Hold on, Morley," interjected Nelson Lee. "The worthy doctor is in no way to blame. I examined Jim myself, and I was positive that death had occurred. The first doubt entered my mind when I observed the phenomenon in the photograph. No blame can attach itself to anyone. It is simply a misfortune."

"More like a miracle!" growled Morley. "When dead men come to life, and write notes and escape from mortuaries, it's about time to wake up, I'm thinking."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, it is no use crying over spilt milk," he remarked. "We may as well resign ourselves to the fact that Sutcliffe has given us the slip once more. Nobody is in fault, and we have to thank science for the loss of our prisoner."

"I'm not so sure that science is any great help nowadays," said the inspector heavily. "Science has often been applied to the detection of crime; but just as often it is used for the furtherance of it! We'll have the police-net out before morning, and with luck we'll collar the brute yet!"

.

But the police-net was cast out too late. Jim the Penman had already disappeared as though into thin air. And with him the £20,000 disappeared also. The forger succeeded in getting clear away, and no trace was discovered.

Sooner or later he would make his appearance again, with some new scheme in mind, some daring enterprise which would eclipse all his other exploits. And Nelson Lee was inclined to think that it would be sooner rather than later.

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CLIVE LOWTHER, in an expedition to the far South. Ben agrees. They set sail, and, after a time, sight the island.

Whilst exploring the island, the party comes across a half-starved man, whose name, the stranger tells them, is

MIGUEL. He tells the comrades his story. Miguel has been left to die by a rascally "blackbirder" because he refused to take part in the pirate's "expeditions."

(Continue this grand story from this point.)

Alec's Adventure.

THE man seemed to be very grateful for his timely rescue, as well as overjoyed at the chance of getting away from the island.

The two chums felt sorry for him, and received his fervent protestations of gratitude with their usual good-natured feeling toward anybody in distress. Ben Grove alone seemed a bit cool in his attitude towards the stranger, a circumstance which Clive noticed and which caused him surprise.

He mentioned it to Alec, as the two hurried on ahead of the others, anxious to get back to the camping-place, for Alec wanted a change of clothes.

"Did you notice how standoffish Ben is with that poor castaway?" he said. "He seems quite sour over it. One would almost think he is sorry we saved the poor beggar. It isn't like Ben, you know. He always seems so good-hearted, so ready to help anyone in trouble, no matter whom. I wonder what makes him so crusty?"

"No idea—unless it is that the man is what sailors call a dago," Alec answered. "Many very worthy English sailors are like that. Sailors have their likes and dislikes, and amongst some there is a strong prejudice, I believe, very often, against Portuguese in particular."

The fact was that shrewd old Ben Groves, like the Scotsman, "had his doots"; though, if he had been pressed for reasons, he might have found some difficulty in giving tangible grounds for them.

Ben was an old stager, experienced in the ways of sailors, and somehow this man, judged by his standard, did not "ring true." It was not altogether that he was a dago—though, as Alec had surmised, that had a good deal to do with it—but Ben doubted the truth of the man's story.

Later on, when he was alone with the two young fellows in their tent, and they questioned him about it, he blurted this out:

"Ye heered him say he'd bin heer a month," he reminded them, "an' durin' that time, he says, he's 'ad precious little t' eat—bin half starved accordin' t' his account. Now, do he look half starved?"

Alec laughed.

“Oh, well, that may be a little bit of exaggeration just to excite our sympathy,” he suggested. “The poor chap wants to get away. He wants us to take him with us when we leave the island, and to feed him meanwhile and treat him well. We’re more likely to do that, I suppose he thinks, if we feel sorry for him.”

But this did not remove Ben’s doubts. He did not argue the matter further, but contented himself with shaking his head.

As to the doctor, he did not trouble himself with these doubts; or, if he did, he said nothing about them. He was evidently glad to meet with someone who knew something about the island, and he took the man in hand and began questioning him with a view to getting as much information from him as possible.

Afterwards, when he had finished with him and all arrangements had been made for the night, he called the two chums into his tent for a conference. He told them all the man had said, and spent some time comparing his statements with Ben’s recollections of the place, trying thus to settle upon some plan to guide their future proceedings.

The rough map which the madman whom Ben had taken off the island had made was brought out and carefully inspected. On it was marked the spot where the “gold pebbles” had been found.

“But where is that place now?” Dr. Campbell asked. “That is what’s going to bother us. Everything is altered. The whole configuration of the island is different. The place we want seems to have been lifted up, as it were. It is no longer down near the shore. That seems to be pretty certain. We shall have to look for it on the upper part.

“For all we know it may have been covered up in some way, and may want a lot of finding. There’s our difficulty. And we can’t even begin our search of the high ground until we have made ourselves acquainted with the lower part. There is the safety of the yacht to be considered. We must find out the best and safest place for her to be in while we are away elsewhere on our search.”

And then, it being by that time late at night, the conference broke up, and Alec and Clive went off to their tent.

Though they both “turned in” dead tired, one of the two—Alec—found it very difficult to get any rest.

The occurrences of the day—their actual arrival at the long-talked-of island, the adventure with the stranger, and sundry other smaller matters—seemed all to be passing and repassing in a jumble through his mind at once in a series of confused dreams.

From these he woke up so many times that, at last, he gave up the attempt to get any sleep, and, rising quietly, he put on his clothes and boots. Then, after a glance at Clive, who was slumbering soundly, he stepped softly to the entrance.

He found that it was light enough to see fairly well. Indeed, there was a moon somewhere behind the clouds which, he judged, would shortly appear in the clear space he could see down towards the horizon. Then it would shine across the sea and shore, and Alec took a fancy to a stroll along the strand to see what the place looked like by moonlight.

Apart from this, it would not be very long before the dawn. So of what use was it to think of lying down again?

Thinking thus, the young fellow stood awhile at the door of the tent looking out, at one time over the sea or the shore, then at the silent, ghostly forms of the other tents. Everyone but himself seemed to be asleep; indeed, from somewhere near at hand he could bear some very unmistakable snores.

(Continued overleaf.)

He was about to step out from the shadow of the tent where he had been standing, when his attention was drawn to the further end of the encampment. There he distinctly saw a figure rise up, as though from the ground, and creep away, in stealthy, furtive fashion, in an inland direction.

Alec could not see who it was. He could not form any idea. The clouds over the moon had become temporarily darker, and the figure seemed but a shadow itself, as it moved noiselessly over the stony ground.

Who could this be who was thus leaving the camp in the darkness? What legitimate object could anyone have in view, taking all the circumstances into account?

Alec asked himself these and other questions, and failed to find a satisfactory answer to them. The only persons who might be supposed to be at liberty to act in this way were the doctor, Clive, Grove, and himself. Clive was asleep in the tent behind him, the doctor's tent was at the other end of the camping-ground from that where the mysterious form had appeared. Besides, though Alec had not been able to see the figure clearly enough to recognise it or give a guess as to whom it could be, he felt pretty certain it had not been either the doctor or Ben Grove.

At once Alec made up his mind to follow this mysterious individual and find out what his object was. If it turned out to be innocent, so much the better, and no harm would be done. While, if there were anything sinister afoot, he would do his best to find it out and frustrate it. Having thus decided, he crept out of the camp in the wake of the one he had seen, taking every precaution to avoid being seen or heard himself.

The task proved longer and more difficult than he expected. The route lay through a rocky ravine covered with boulders, and full of pools and hollows. Cliffs, rising precipitously on each side, made the track so obscure that it was very trying work to pick one's way. While the man he was following seemed to have no trouble, for he went ahead with confidence.

This fact alone was suspicious. If the man knew his way so well, he could hardly be one of the doctor's party. Who, then, could he be save the stranger whom he, Alec, had rescued?

Alec recalled Ben Grove's confessed distrust of the man, and was fain to admit that he had probably been more correct in his judgment than he himself had been.

On either side was a grim, shadowy tract of unknown extent, of which all he knew was that it must be very swampy.

As he went along, uncanny sounds came now and then to his ears. Strange noises, as of the slow movements of some heavy, bulky creature; loud snorts and sterterous breathing broke the brooding silence.

Then he would be startled by a sudden hissing close at hand, or a muffled splash, as of some monstrous form plunging into unknown depths.

Then all at once, as it were, it came home to him that he had lost his man.

He listened and listened, and waited patiently, straining his ears, intent upon picking up some sound which would guide him as to the fellow's present whereabouts.

(This Splendid Story will be continued in Next Week's Issue of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.)