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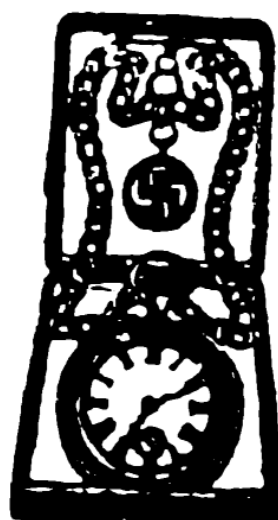
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# THE PLAGUE SHIP!

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

By the Author of "*The Mystery of the Moor*," "*The Mystery of the Mail Van*,"  
"*The Ribbon of Light*," "*The Lost Explorer*," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### The Professor's Startling Discovery.

PROFESSOR ALEXANDER COLLINGWOOD, the eminent scientist and poison specialist, paced up and down his laboratory with slow, short strides. One hand was behind his back, and the fingers were twitching nervously. The fingers of the other hand pulled at his grizzled moustache, and now and again he came to a halt and remained stationary for several moments.

It was obvious that Professor Collingwood was in no easy frame of mind. On the contrary, he was decidedly perturbed, and his restlessness would not allow him to remain seated; he found it impossible to settle down to a definite task. The professor was an old man—close upon seventy, tall, thin, and with bent shoulders. But he was vigorous and hale, and still full of brisk vitality. He carried his years with wonderful ease, and had led a most active life, during which he had scarcely had a day's illness. For a man of his years, he was singularly fit, and never felt healthier than now.

But although he was extremely well in body, his mind was not settled. He had been worrying for several days, and this morning his troubles seemed to accumulate and bear him down.

Undoubtedly the professor had much to worry him.

Hitherto he had possessed one of the fairest names in the realms of medical science; he had been looked upon as the zenith of honour and integrity. Lesser men of science regarded him with the highest respect and admiration—at least, they had done so.

Now, in a measure, things had changed.

Professor Collingwood's name had been somewhat besmirched of recent weeks. Yet, truth to tell, the famous scientist had done absolutely nothing which could be regarded as dishonourable and questionable.

The truth was that he had been victimised and duped by a plausible scoundrel who had perpetrated one of the most amazing frauds of the century. Innocently enough, the professor had lent his name to the fraud, and, consequently, he was now suffering. There are always plenty of evil-

mindful people who are ready to believe the worst. Thus, although Professor Collingwood was guiltless as the day, he was suffering from many unsavoury suspicions.

His friends, of course, knew him to be innocent; the whole country, in fact, believed that the professor had no hand whatever in the fraudulent enterprise. But there were some—a minority, certainly—who openly expressed the opinion that Collingwood had been aware of the fraud. But these doubting Thomases caused the professor grave anxiety and worry.

Not long before, the whole world had been talking of the daring and extraordinary exploit of the man who had tricked Professor Collingwood so completely. The man had been none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe, the master-forgery, known to the police as Jim the Penman.

Sutcliffe had attempted many gigantic frauds in his time, but most of them had been frustrated owing to the keen efforts of Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist. But this affair—this latest enterprise—had been more or less a success.

Jim the Penman had duped not only the professor but the whole country. He had engineered an astonishing bluff. Many years before the professor's brother, a well-known explorer, had taken an expedition out to a remote quarter of the world. And, largely owing to clever forgery, Jim the Penman had succeeded in establishing himself in the identity of Mr. Arthur Collingwood, the lost explorer. That gentleman, of course, had undoubtedly perished, together with his expedition.

But Sutcliffe, with the audacity of a de Rougement, had bluffed the whole country into believing that he was actually the man. Professor Collingwood himself never had a suspicion of the surprising truth.

Jim the Penman had given lectures, had advertised himself as extensively as possible, and had promoted a company for the exploitation of the new country he claimed to have found. The enterprise was an entire success, and huge sums of money rolled in. Jim the Penman succeeded in persuading the professor to act as co-trustee with him of the funds.

Nelson Lee had discovered, after clever investigation, that the whole thing was a fraud and that the impostor was none other than his old enemy, Jim the Penman. At the crucial moment, the famous detective had been foully struck down by one of the forger's confederates, with the result that he was unconscious in hospital for some little time.

And, during that period, Jim succeeded in "skipping" with a sum something like £150,000 in cash and untraceable securities. Nelson Lee, therefore, had been in no way to blame for what had occurred. Just as he was about to expose the fraud he had been rendered incapable of action.

The master forger had by no means completed his campaign, but he very wisely disappeared with as much money as he could lay hands on.

And Professor Collingwood, having been co-trustee, was called upon to explain. The scientists had been quite overcome by the magnitude of the crime, and the police were absolutely satisfied that he was completely above suspicion.

Over a week had passed since Sutcliffe had escaped, and, with his usual ingenuity, he had succeeded in eluding the police so effectively that there was practically no prospect of his being brought to book.

People who had lost large sums of money unjustly blamed Professor Collingwood for not having known that the supposed explorer was an impostor. The poor professor was called a fool and similar uncomplimentary epithets. But the majority of the victims sympathised with the professor exceedingly.

And there were other worries. On the previous day Collingwood had discovered, to his dismay, that several valuable formulas were missing from his desk in the library. These formulas were private, and consisted of

scientific research matter. It was practically certain that Jim the Penman had stolen them for possible use in the future.

It was morning now, and the professor's postbag had contained several exceptionally bitter letters. One or two or them—anonymous, of course—had been insulting, libellous, and defamatory.

Being a man of high principle, Collingwood was pained and grieved at the attitude of these unjust people. Without breakfast he had entered his laboratory in order to seek quietness and solitude. And in the laboratory he had remained, and the hour was now close upon noon.

"I can bear this position no longer!" muttered the old scientist, almost fiercely, as he paced the broad apartment. "What have I done to deserve such base insults? I, above all people, was duped and deluded the most. I contributed the largest sum of any to the infamous company. Financially, I am the biggest loser of all. Yet some dastardly people believe that I was a party to this wretched fraud!"

The professor was in a painful state of mind. He was endeavouring to think out some way in which he could finally set all doubts at rest. Many men would have been content to let matters rest; it was only the few, after all, who defamed him.

But the professor was sensitive to a degree, and he scarcely knew which way to turn. And, as it chanced, he was to make another startling discovery almost immediately, an appalling discovery which left him aghast.

In order to obtain some medicinal tablets he produced a key from his pocket and unlocked a heavy cabinet which stood at the further end of the laboratory. The professor, in fact, was suffering from a sick headache, and he was seeking a remedy.

The cabinet was very stoutly built, and the lock was of great strength and security. This was necessary, for the cabinet contained the most deadly assortment of drugs and disease bacilli. The various bottles were arranged on shelves. The topmost shelf contained terrible and little-known poisons; the shelf under that the baccilli, and the shelf level with the professor's chest, numerous harmless drugs and medicinal substances.

Collingwood was selecting a certain bottle when he gazed upon the higher shelf. For a moment he noticed nothing; but then, with a low exclamation, he pulled a chair towards him, stood upon it, and made a thorough examination.

When he got down he was somewhat unsteady, and his breath was husky and forced. Every atom of colour had vanished from his cheeks, and his eyes seemed larger than usual, and fixed in expression.

"Great Heaven!" he muttered, in a terrible voice. "Is it possible? The phial was there—it has always stood there! And now it is missing!"

For some reason Professor Collingwood seemed to be almost overcome. As though he could not believe his senses, he again mounted the chair, and again searched. But the result was the same.

"What can it mean?" he gasped hoarsely. "Oh, it is too terrible for contemplation! I—I—must be dreaming! It must be— Oh, what has happened to my brain? I must think—I must think!"

He sank into the chair dazedly, and passed a hand over his clammy brow. He remained still for fully five minutes, staring before him as though in a trance. Then, abruptly, he started to his feet.

There was a fixed purpose in his eyes, and a light of dawning hope.

Obviously, he had come to a decision.

Briskly now, he relocked the cabinet, placed the key in his pocket, and left the laboratory. He passed through the library to the big lounge hall, selected a hat from the great stand, and went out of the house.

The professor found himself in Belgrave Square, and, as it happened, he at once spotted a taxi-cab crawling past, empty. He hailed the vehicle, and was soon bowling eastwards.

The taxi turned into Oxford Street, and sped along until Holborn was reached. It turned down Gray's Inn Road and pulled up sharply and neatly. Professor Collingwood alighted, handed the cabby a half-sovereign currency note, and did not trouble to wait for the considerable amount of change. To tell the truth, he never gave the latter a single thought. His mind was so full that if he had handed the cabby a fiver he would have acted precisely the same.

He mounted a few short steps, and urgently rang the electric bell of a certain house. When the door was answered he walked straight in, pushing past a comfortably-built lady who stood there.

"Mr. Lee!" said the professor huskily, "Is Mr. Lee in? Tell me——"

"Yes, sir; Mr. Lee is in at present," answered the landlady. "If you will give me your card, sir——"

"My card, woman!" snapped the professor testily. "Stuff—nonsense! I will go straight up. The first floor, isn't it? Thank you—thank you."

Mrs. Jones was well accustomed to strange visitors, and she did not trouble to reply. She watched the professor mount the stairs, and then she retired to her own quarters. Meanwhile, Professor Collingwood burst into Nelson Lee's consulting-room without the preliminary of knocking.

He closed the door after him, and stood panting heavily. It was not with exertion, but with acute mental distress and excitement.

Nelson Lee, at the moment, was seated at his desk, gazing down upon some papers. By the famous detective's side stood Nipper, his smart young assistant. Both looked up with surprised expressions, and with instant recognition.

"Dear me! This is an unexpected pleasure, Professor Collingwood," exclaimed Nelson Lee, pushing his chair back and rising. "I really wondered who—— But, good gracious, is anything the matter?" he added quickly. "My dear sir——"

The professor gripped Lee's hand tightly.

"I have made a dreadful discovery, Mr. Lee!" he said in hoarse tones. "Perhaps you will laugh at me—perhaps you will fail to realise the true horror of it. But I know! Heaven above, I know!"

Nelson Lee acted promptly.

He placed a chair handy, and gently and firmly forced the professor into it. Then he seated himself opposite, deliberately chose a cigar from the box on the table, nipped the end off, and lit the cigar.

"Tell me all about it, professor," he suggested gently.

The detective's calmness had had effect, and Collingwood seemed more composed. But he was still in a state of acute mental excitement.

"That man—that infernal Sutcliffe—has stolen something from my laboratory cabinet which may bring death and destruction to hundreds of innocent people!" was the professor's amazing statement. "It may infect London—the entire nation!"

"Perhaps you will be a little more definite?" said Lee quietly.

"I will, Mr. Lee—I will! You shall hear the truth at once," replied Collingwood huskily. "A certain sealed phial is missing from the cabinet; a small phial, but it contains something so deadly, so appallingly horrible——"

"What does it contain?" interjected the detective.

"The bacillus of the most dread disease known to medical science," said the professor. "The active microbe of the plague!"

## CHAPTER II.

## The Sol'ving of the Cryptic Cipher.

NELSON LEE removed the cigar from his lips, and shot a keen glance at Nipper, who was standing with open mouth and staring eyes. Professor Collingwood's statement was certainly startling to a degree.

"The active microbe of the plague," repeated Nelson Lee slowly. "I do not think you will find me laughing at you, professor. What you have said is indeed appalling. But are you quite positive——"

"How can I be anything but positive?" interrupted Collingwood. "There is only one man who had had free access to my laboratory, and that man was my supposed brother—the impudent scoundrel known as Jim the Penman. The phial is missing, and there is only one conclusion to come to."

He bent forward.

"And this bacillus," he added, "is the most virulent form known—*pestis fulminaris*. One drop of the contents of that phial is sufficient to infect an army with the Black Death! Once infected, recovery is almost impossible—it is absolutely fatal in from twelve to twenty-four hours."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips grimly.

"And this deadly phial of concentrated death is in the hands of Jim the Penman!" he said thoughtfully. "It is in the hands of a man who is known to be merciless, relentless, and fiendishly callous! Upon my soul, the situation is serious."

"It is so serious that I am nearly mad with worry," groaned the professor.

"I think you said that the phial was sealed?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly sealed. Until the bottle is uncorked or broken there is no danger," replied the professor. "But I am aghast to think what might happen with the bacillus in the hands of such a man! That small phial, dropped in a London street, would be sufficient to cause a horrible epidemic against which the Plague of London, of 1665, would pale into insignificance. Seventy thousand people died at that time, but I venture to say that something like a million would perish if once the dreaded disease took a firm hold. Modern science, you may say, would combat the plague successfully."

"Probably it would," remarked Nelson Lee. "But a disease such as that, professor, must be kept in check at the very outset. Once it took a firm hold, however, I believe, with you, that all the science of the world would not prevent a most appalling national disaster. The plague is practically unknown in these days—in England, at least—but I tremble to think what will occur if Jim the Penman puts the stolen bacillus to a drastic use."

Professor Collingwood mopped his clammy brow.

"Mr. Lee, I want you to recover that sealed phial," he said earnestly. "I want you to work your very hardest on the case. For the man himself I care nothing—it is the work of the police to bring him to book. But that bacillus! For Heaven's sake bring it back to me intact!"

Nelson Lee gently removed the ash from his cigar.

"Curiously enough, when you so dramatically entered, professor, I was even then looking into a clue which might possibly result in Jim the Penman's detection," he exclaimed. "After what you have told me I am more than ever determined to lay the infamous rascal by the heels—together with his confederates. I have every reason to thirst for vengeance, as you are well aware," added the detective smilingly. "It was only by a miracle that my life was saved, and then by an antidote which you provided. You saved my life, Professor Collingwood, and I will willingly——"

"Tut, tut," snapped the professor. "Absurd! I didn't save your life, Mr. Lee. I merely provided an antidote to a deadly poison; your amazing constitution pulled you through with really astonishing promptitude. By the way, I hope you are now feeling quite your old self?"

The famous detective smiled.

"I assure you, my dear sir, that I never felt better," he replied. "There is a strong possibility that I may be able to get on Jim the Penman's track at once. But I don't know; I am not sure. If you care to remain here while I go into the matter again I shall be quite delighted. To tell the truth, it was you, yourself, who provided me with the clue I now possess."

The professor looked somewhat surprised.

"Ah," he exclaimed, light dawning upon him. "You are, of course, referring to that curious jumble of figures which we discovered in my library after Sutcliffe had made his dramatic departure?"

"Precisely," agreed Lee. "It was a cipher message, sealed in an envelope, and addressed to Birmingham Central Post-Office, to be called for. It was, undoubtedly, secret instructions to one of Jim the Penman's confederates."

"You are determined, then, to get on the scoundrel's track?"

"Yes, if it is humanly possible," was the detective's reply. "It may interest you to know, professor, that quite a number of excited clients have beseeched me to capture Sutcliffe, and to recover the large fortune he has succeeded in annexing. I am determined to go to great lengths in order to achieve my object. If I succeed my reward, I believe, will be well worth the taking. I have had many handsome offers from our astute friend's victims. Now, of course, my determination is even greater; in a way that tiny phial of bacillus is a great deal more important than all the money put together."

"But we'll get both the bacillus and the spondulicks, if we can, gov'nor," put in Nipper firmly.

Nelson Lee turned once more to his desk and picked up a plain sheet of notepaper which reposed upon the blotting pad. That which was written upon it was undoubtedly quite unintelligible, for there were only two or three definite words written—and these were beyond comprehension.

Lee handed the paper to the professor, and this is what the latter saw:

KEY—AS ARRANGED—'10.

880—6—292—OUTSIDE—119—120—121—254—102—237—238—  
163—442—309—410—399—82—4—284—127—175—176—177—  
178—FINISHING—16.

Collingwood raised his bushy grey eyebrows.

"I am afraid you will be able to make neither tale nor head of this jumble," Mr. Lee remarked. "The only words to be seen are 'outside' and 'finishing.' There is certainly no sense in those. But I can't quite understand the exact nature of this cipher."

Nelson Lee leaned back and puffed at his cigar.

"There are many ciphers, some of them intricate to a degree," he answered thoughtfully. "This one—this form of cipher—is childishly simple. Yet, at the same time, it is the most difficult of all to unravel."

"Surely that is rather contradictory?"

"It may appear so; but let me explain," went on the great detective. "The vast majority of ciphers can be unravelled by very careful scrutiny and laborious work. But this one, simple as it is, is utterly unreadable without the key. Failing to possess the key, the cipher will always remain what it is at the present moment—a mere collection of unmeaning figures."

"The key?" repeated Collingwood. "What do you mean by the key?"



"Well, I will just give you an example," was Nelson Lee's reply. "We will suppose, for instance, that I wish to convey a hidden message to you. Beforehand, therefore, we mutually agree upon a key-book—not a word, you understand, but a book. For example, we will say Dicken's *Oliver Twist*. Just we two know that *Oliver Twist* is to be used in the cipher."

"I understand so far."

"Well, wishing to convey a short message to you, I pick up the volume of *Oliver Twist*, and turn to any page—the page, for preference, which contains the majority of words which I wish to use. We will say that I choose page thirty-six. Now, perhaps the tenth word on page thirty-six of *Oliver Twist* is 'come'; the fifty-second word 'to,' the twenty-first word 'me,' the ninetieth word 'to-morrow,' and so on. Do you understand, professor? It is quite simple, but one of the most difficult ciphers to unravel."

Professor Collingwood nodded.

"I understand perfectly," he replied. "As you say, without being aware of the key-book, it is practically a hopeless task to attempt to read the cipher. But there are so many additions of *Oliver Twist*, are there not?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I was merely giving a random example," he replied. "Actually we should have to agree upon which edition would be used; or, better still, a well-known reference-book would be preferable, where every edition is the same."

The professor glanced at the cipher again.

"I am afraid the task is quite beyond you, Mr. Lee," he said, shaking his head. "The words at the top are, 'Key as arranged.' Only Sutcliffe and his confederates know what that key is. Guess work is surely impracticable——"

"Quite," said Nelson Lee. "A thousand guesses might not hit upon the correct solution. But let us look into this more carefully. It is quite obvious, is it not, that Jim the Penman wrote this cipher while staying at your house?"

"I think we can take that for granted."

"Accordingly, the key-book is one in your own library," continued Nelson Lee. "It is, moreover, a certain book of reference six years of age."

"I don't quite see——"

"Did you not observe the reminder which Jim gives his confederate?" asked the detective keenly. "After writing, 'Key as arranged,' he puts the figure '10.' For what reason? Surely because he fears that his associate may forget the certain edition of the publication used? Jim knew that the book itself would not be forgotten, but the year of issue was rather doubtful."

"The '10' therefore stands for the year 1910?"

"I think we may safely assume that to be correct," replied Nelson Lee. "We have now narrowed down the inquiry to this: The key-book we want is contained in your library, and it is a reference work six years old—a 'Blue Book,' or a 'Who's Who' for the year 1910, probably. Do you possess such volumes, professor?"

The professor stroked his chin.

"There are the yearly editions of many reference books upon my shelves complete for the last ten years," he replied; "scientific annuals, and various other volumes."

"But why are you so sure it is a book of reference?"

"For several reasons. Firstly, there is the '10,' which practically proves the thing. Then, as you will observe, the first figures on the sheet are '880.' Since it is scarcely possible that there are 880 words on a page

it is fairly certain that the figures represent the number of the page, and only bulky works of reference contain pages numbering up to a thousand. There is also another point to consider. Jim would naturally choose a book which is easily obtainable anywhere. It can be seen in the reference department of any public library."

"I understand perfectly," said the professor, nodding.

"When you arrived, Professor Collingwood, I was about to make certain experiments," proceeded Nelson Lee. "Nipper, rout out the 1910 edition of the 'Blue Book' to start with. We will see where it leads us."

Lee took the book and turned over the thin pages.

"Ah, here we are, page 880," he remarked. "H'm! This doesn't look very promising. It is merely a portion of the alphabetical directory of distinguished people. Still, we will apply a test. Now, the first number of the cipher is 6, and the sixth word on page 880 is Wilbraham, part of an address in Wilbraham Place. That doesn't seem to lead us very far. The next number is 292, and the corresponding word is Madame. There is no sense in Wilbraham Madam, is there? We will therefore dispense with the 'Blue Book,' and try something else."

The next reference-book tested was "Whittaker's Peerage" for 1910. Nelson Lee took the volume, glanced into it, and then smiled.

"We will dismiss 'Whittaker' at once," he remarked. "The numbering goes no further than 812. Suppose we next try some scientific annuals?"

The famous detective's library was fairly complete, and the next half-hour was spent in fruitless investigation. But Nelson Lee was quite sure that if he persevered he would certainly hit upon the correct key. He only chose books which Professor Collingwood possessed, and after a while the "Literary Year Book" for 1910 was given a trial. If that failed there were many others, equally likely, to follow.

Already there were several sheets of paper, covered with figures, before Nelson Lee, and he now drew a clean sheet before him and turned to page 880 of the "Literary Year Book."

As he did so a sudden gleam entered his eyes.

"By James, this seems the most likely volume as yet!" he exclaimed. "This certain page is one of those detailing literary societies, and the page is very full. Moreover, I have caught sight of a gentleman named Mr. Sidney Lee—the President of the Elizabethan Literary Society. His surname, however, is the same as my own, and that is significant. Count the words, Nipper. Now, then, No. 6."

"No. 6 is 'will,' gov'nor," said Nipper promptly.

The lad was a few moments in arriving at the next word, for he had to count over halfway down the page.

"'Be,'" he announced. "Two-ninety-two is 'be,' sir."

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed afresh.

"I believe we have hit upon the key," he exclaimed with keen satisfaction. "You observe that the next word in sequence is 'outside,' written fully. No doubt the word 'outside' does not occur on the page. So we get 'will be outside.' That reads sense, at all events. And the next three sets of figures run in sequence—'119-120-121.' What are they, Nipper?"

The lad was excited now, and he soon found the required words.

"'Theatre Royal, Cambridge,' gov'nor," he ejaculated eagerly. "My hat! This is the key right enough! 'Will be outside Theatre Royal, Cambridge——' What's next?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, the cipher is solved," he said crisply. "Do not be in a hurry, Nipper. Come, we will decode the whole message, and see what we can learn from it."

## CHAPTER III.

## Preparing for the Capture—In Cambridge.

"UPON my soul, this is exceedingly interesting," exclaimed Professor Collingwood, now quite composed and calm. "Your methods are instructive and valuable, Mr. Lee. This curious cipher——"

"Here we are, gov'nor!" ejaculated Nipper suddenly.

The lad had been counting the words on page 880 of the "Literary Year Book," selecting the words which corresponded with the numbers of the cipher. And now he placed the following message before his master:

"Will be outside Theatre Royal, Cambridge, 26 August, 8 Mornington recognition by means of French manner and figure objects to discuss methods of finishing Lee."

"I can't quite make out that bit, sir," said Nipper. "'26 August, 8 Mornington.' That doesn't read sense, does it?"

Nelson Lee picked up the year-book.

"'8 Mornington Avenue Mansions,'" he read. "Surely, Nipper, you can understand Jim's meaning? It is perfectly clear. He says he will be outside the Theatre Royal, Cambridge, on August 26th. He further wished to denote the hour of his appointment, but, naturally, could not find the exact words. Accordingly, he chose the nearest approach to them—'8 Mornington.' Leave off the last syllable, 'ton,' and we get '8 Morning.'"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Nipper. "Of course, that's it, sir."

Lee copied out the message again, and he and Nipper and the professor read it. The wording now ran:

"Will be outside Theatre Royal, Cambridge, August 26th, 8 morning. Recognition by means of French manner and figure. Objects to discuss methods of finishing Lee."

"Good gracious! It is amazingly clear," said Collingwood. "And the significance of the message, Mr. Lee! The object of the meeting is to discuss how you will be finished—in other words, murdered!"

"Precisely!" remarked Nelson Lee calmly. "You see, Jim the Penman fears me, and he has already decided to put me out of the way before I can harm him. He probably believes that I shall get on his track, and intends to be on the safe side."

"My stars!" shouted Nipper excitedly.

"What's the matter, young 'un?"

"To-day is the twenty-fifth?" said the lad. "This meeting is arranged for to-morrow morning, gov'nor!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite so; I knew that already," he said evenly. "Did you think you were telling me news, Nipper? Surely I know to-day's date? According to this message, Jim the Penman will be outside the theatre in Cambridge at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. And he will be carefully disguised as a Frenchman. He will be unrecognisable even to his confederate, and so he has stated that he will be known by his French manner and figure. If he had had more words to choose from he would doubtless have been more explicit. But I think the message is perfectly clear."

"Astonishingly so," said the professor. "Upon my soul, Mr. Lee, I should never have believed that such a complete message could have been made up from chance words on a page of the 'Literary Year Book.' I am

feeling relieved; I have hopes that you will be successful in recovering that deadly phial."

"And the merry little quids," added Nipper eagerly.

"I will do my best, professor," said Nelson Lee. "From now onwards I shall regard you as my client, and I am working on your behalf. As soon as possible I will report to you what progress I have made."

Shortly afterwards Professor Collingwood took his departure, and Nipper courteously accompanied him to the door and whistled for a taxi. When the lad returned to his master's consulting-room he was wearing a worried expression.

"I've thought of something, guv'nor," he said quickly.

"Well, what is it?"

"This cipher message is no good to us at all! Jim knows jolly well that he dropped it in the professor's library—he knows, anyhow, that he lost it. Well, he'll naturally alter the meeting-place——"

"Why naturally?"

"Because he'll be afraid of being collared, sir!"

Nelson Lee crossed his legs and faced his young assistant.

"You seem to forget, Nipper, that the message was in cipher," he remarked comfortably, lighting a fresh cigar. "The cipher, moreover, was one which was unreadable except to his own confederate. Jim will never dream that the message has been read."

"But while he's writing another message he might as well arrange for another meeting-place," said Nipper shrewdly.

"Why? Really, Nipper, I fail to see it," was Lee's reply. "I dare say that cipher letter took Jim a considerable time to plan out—and, if I know the man at all, he has kept a copy of it himself. Why should he go to the trouble of making up a fresh message altogether? In all probability he simply rewrote the letter and posted it."

Nelson Lee picked up the piece of notepaper.

"There is nothing whatever on this to reveal anything," he went on. "When Jim found that he had lost it he realised that no harm was done. The loss merely entailed a little trouble, and I am fairly sure the message was copied out again, precisely the same as this, and posted. The meeting will take place to-morrow."

"We shall be there, of course, sir?"

"You may be sure I shall take steps to have Sutcliffe nabbed, if it is humanly possible," Nelson Lee replied. "But he is an extremely slippery gentleman, and seems to possess a faculty of scenting danger from afar. Jim the Penman is about the hardest nut we've ever had to crack, young 'un; but we'll crack him in the end. I don't say to-morrow, or next week, or next month; but I'll nail the smooth-tongued scoundrel in the long run."

"If we're lucky, guv'nor, we'll nail him to-morrow morning."

"I am sceptical," said Lee, shaking his head. "But with regard to the confederate—who goes by the name of Thornton—I am more hopeful. And if we get Thornton, he may supply us with some information. Mind you, Nipper, I am by no means certain that we shall achieve any result at all to-morrow; but it is a chance we dare not disregard. It would be the height of folly to let the thing slide."

Nipper seemed thoughtful.

"What about that phial of the professor's sir?" he asked. "Do you think Jim pinched that horrible plague bacillus stuff?"

"I do. And, moreover, I believe he 'pinched' it, as you say, for a definite purpose. Surely you can see my line of reasoning, my lad? This

cipher message says that the meeting is to discuss my finish. Well, how does that strike you?"

Nipper stared.

"Great Scott!" he whispered. "Do—do you think— Oh, guv'nor, it's too horrible! Even Jim wouldn't try to kill you by such awful means!"

"You must remember, Nipper, that Sutcliffe has every reason to hate me with all the intensity of his soul," said Nelson Lee. "How many times have I frustrated his schemes? Always—always I have stood in his path. And this latest affair of his was only a partial success, and would have been an utter failure if I had not been foully struck down. Oh, yes, Jim would delight in torturing me."

"My hat! I shall feel safer when the professor's got that rotten bacillus back again!" exclaimed Nipper fervently.

"Well, we start upon this new case with a fair prospect of success," was the detective's remark. "We have been commissioned by Professor Collingwood to recover the stolen plague bacillus, and we must put every effort forward in order to win through. Our own safety, perhaps, depends upon the success or failure of our plans."

After luncheon Nelson Lee went round to Scotland Yard.

He sought out Detective-inspector Morley, an extremely capable officer of the C.I.D., with whom Lee was well acquainted. The inspector was in his office, and he was pleased to see his unofficial colleague.

"Hallo, Lee!" he exclaimed heartily. "Got over that poisoning affair?"

"Quite," Lee replied. "I was in hospital for a day or two, but I'm a tough sort of beggar, Morley. It takes a good lot to polish me off."

Detective-inspector Morley grinned and nodded.

"You look well enough," he observed. "Well, anything fresh?"

"Yes; there's a possibility that we may nab Jim to-morrow morning."

"What!"

Morley stared, and became intensely interested as Nelson Lee told him of the cipher message and its significance. The inspector had been busy on the case of the great fraud for the past week, and he had been extremely despondent at his lack of success. The police of the entire country had been on the look-out for the master-forgers, but nothing had resulted.

"By George, there's a possibility!" said Morley animatedly, when he had heard all. "If Jim and his confederate keep the appointment we may, with luck, collar the pair of them."

"With luck," emphasised Lee—"with exceptional luck, Morley."

"Well, we should be blockheads if we didn't follow the thing up," said the inspector. "It may be a fiasco; but we can't afford to miss the chance. What do you propose, Lee?"

"That we travel to Cambridge—you, Nipper, and myself—by an early train to-morrow, and then ambush the enemy," replied Lee. "Being absolutely a surprise affair, there'll be no necessity for numbers of police; they'd only give the show away, anyhow. You, Morley, will be armed with the necessary warrants, and the arrests will be made quietly and quickly."

"You don't consider, then, that we require a force of local police?"

"No. I suggest that the Cambridge police know nothing of the matter until we have either arrested our men, or have found that the meeting place has been altered," Nelson Lee replied. "Jim simply smells danger, and the fewer there are of us the better. We'll meet, Morley, at Liverpool Street, in the morning."

Accordingly, an arrangement was come to, after consulting a time-table, and Nelson Lee took his departure.

The following morning the detective and Nipper started out bright and

early for Liverpool Street. They had no breakfast, but there was a restaurant-car on the Cambridge train, and it had been arranged that they should take breakfast with Morley en route.

The morning was delightful. For late August the weather had been exceptionally warm, and at this early hour the air was clear and cool, and there was every promise of another "scorcher," as Nipper put it.

Had they only known it, Nelson Lee and Nipper were to find the day a "scorcher" indeed—but in another sense.

They found Detective-inspector Morley in the big booking office at Liverpool Street, and he was armed, as arranged, with warrants for the arrest of Sutcliffe and his confederate, Thornton.

In the train, which was an express to Cambridge, the trio demolished an hearty breakfast, and then felt fit for anything. They were pulled into Cambridge at seven-fifteen, and so had good time for their preparations. These were simple. Arriving opposite the Theatre Royal, they found the street almost bare, for the hour was still early. It was not yet seven-thirty.

The plan was straightforward. If Jim the Penman appeared, Morley was to quickly arrest him and to take him straight to the police-station. And Nelson Lee and Nipper were to give their attention to the confederate.

If the latter put in an appearance first he was, of course, to be arrested first, and if both appeared together, a double arrest was to take place. It all depended upon how matters went.

Nelson Lee had allotted the task of arresting Jim to the inspector because he feared that if he and Nipper took on the task, the forger would be so furious at the sight of his bitterest enemies that he would create considerable trouble. And Morley, in any case, would be capable of "nabbing" his man.

It was easy to take up positions. The hour being early, no particular notice was taken of the three strangers. No shops were open, and only one or two people were about. Nelson Lee and Nipper retired into an alley, from where they could see the whole street, and yet remained concealed themselves.

Detective-inspector Morley found a suitable vantage point about thirty yards further down, almost opposite the theatre. He was partially in view, so he leaned against the wall, and pretended to peruse the morning paper.

The paper concealed his features, and a small hole torn in the sheet enabled him to gaze fully out into the street whenever he wished. It was a well-known dodge, but an effective one.

The minutes sped by, and every person who passed was subjected to a quick scrutiny. A quarter-to-eight chimed out musically in the distance, and Nelson Lee compared his watch with the unseen chimes.

"They are a minute fast here, Nipper," he remarked smilingly. "It wants a minute to the quarter-to yet. Well, we have a quarter of an hour before us, and some little time after that. Both our men may be a little late."

"Jim's a methodical chap, sir," said Nipper. "If he's coming, he'll be on hand prompt to time."

"Yes, I suppose so——"

Nelson Lee paused, and gazed far up the street, projecting his head beyond the alley wall slightly. Then he turned to his young companion with a smile of anticipation. Nipper looked eager inquiry.

"By James, young 'un, I believe friend Sutcliffe is within sight!" exclaimed Lee. "No, don't look! If I am right you will soon see him."

Detective-inspector Morley, too, had spotted the stranger, who was walking slowly along the other side of the road, approaching the theatre. He came nearer, and at last halted exactly facing the main doors of the building.

The meeting-place had not been altered.

Jim the Penman had come!

## CHAPTER IV.

### Events Take an Extraordinary Turn.

**D**ETECTIVE-INSPECTOR MORLEY had always been well known for briskness of action. And he certainly lost no time on this present occasion.

He was quite satisfied that the man opposite was Jim the Penman. Indeed, there was no reason to have a second's doubt. There could be no such coincidence as a real Frenchman appearing at that particular spot, at that particular time.

The inspector strolled carelessly across the road, still apparently engrossed in his paper. He held it in his left hand, but his right hand was feeling in his pocket as he crossed the road.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, keenly watching, were greatly interested. They were strongly tempted to assist Morley, but Lee was sure that the Yard man was quite capable of dealing with Sutcliffe alone. If the forger proved too big a handful, it would then be time to render assistance.

Morley reached the opposite pavement, deliberately paused a moment, and then walked on again. He had seen that the man of French appearance was about to light a cigarette, and the inspector thought it would be an opportune time for the arrest, when the stranger was actually lighting the cigarette.

It all happened in ten seconds.

Morley suddenly dropped his paper, simultaneously producing a pair of handcuffs. There was one flash of bright steel, two sharp clicks, and a furious curse. A struggle was scarcely possible, under the circumstances. The bracelets had been snapped on almost in one motion.

"Neat," murmured Nelson Lee, approvingly. "By Jove, splendid!"

"Took him absolutely by surprise, gov'nor!" was Nipper's satisfied comment.

Over the road, Inspector Morley was chuckling to himself with great satisfaction. His prisoner seemed almost dazed by the sudden shock of the arrest, and he stared at his captor dully and seemingly without comprehension.

"Sorry I startled you, my dear Jim," said Morley pleasantly. "But, you see, I have a warrant for your arrest, on charges of forgery and fraud, and, knowing what a slippery customer you are, I didn't feel inclined to give you much rope. It's up to you to come quietly to the station!"

"Hang you," snarled the other, panting hard. "How in Heaven's name did you know?"

"Well, we won't go into details here," said the inspector grimly. "Now, come on, be sensible. There are several people coming in this direction, and you don't want to cause trouble, do you? It won't do any good, I assure you."

As Morley was speaking he scrutinised his prisoner. But the disguise was so perfect that he saw no resemblance to Jim the Penman whatever. The moustache and beard seemed absolutely genuine.

It was plain that Morley had made no mistake. The arrest had been so

abrupt and so unexpected that the supposed Frenchman had not even been able to keep up his character. The words he had uttered were the purest English; he had been surprised completely out of himself, and now he seemed dumbfounded.

In response to a tug from Morley the disguised Sutcliffe walked quietly away, and Nelson Lee and Nipper watched the pair disappear down the street in the direction of the police-station.

"That's number one," said Lee quietly. "The most important one of the two, into the bargain. It's practically certain that the fellow Thornton will turn up. But it still wants five minutes to eight o'clock. Jim was early."

"I told you he would be punctual, sir."

But when eight o'clock chimed out there was no sign of any other suspicious individual. Lee did not know how Thornton would be dressed or disguised, but the fact that the man would be loitering about the theatre would be sufficient proof of his identity.

At five minutes past eight a man with a thick beard came briskly along the street, puffing contentedly at a briar. When he came opposite the theatre he paused and stood gazing at the posters with apparent interest.

"That's our man, guv'nor," said Nipper eagerly.

But Nelson Lee hung back.

"Don't be too sure, young 'un," Lee replied. "Surely it is not uncommon for a townsman to have a look at the theatrical lithographs? We must wait five or ten minutes before we act. Ah, what did I say?"

The bearded man had proceeded on his way, and he presently paused outside a tobacconist's shop, and stood chatting and laughing with a stout individual who appeared in the doorway. It was quite apparent that the bearded man was a citizen of Cambridge, and, probably, an innocent countryman.

He remained talking for several minutes, during which several people who passed along the pavement nodded to him familiarly.

"Oh, no go," grunted Nipper. "He's not cur chap, sir."

This was only too plain, and another fact was plainer still. Thornton did not put in an appearance at all. The quarter hour chimed out, and still Nelson Lee and Nipper kept watch. They had not allowed a single individual to pass along without having been subjected to a close scrutiny.

And, by now, the street was becoming fairly busy. Lee was rather inclined to be somewhat disappointed.

"The man should have come," he exclaimed. "The only explanation I can think of, Nipper, is that, unseen by us, Thornton himself witnessed Jim's arrest. Consequently he has skipped away as fast as his legs will carry him."

"That's rotten, guv'nor," was Nipper's plain remark. "What shall we do?"

"We will not wait a moment after half-past eight has struck," declared the detective. "If, by that time, Thornton does not oblige us by walking into the trap, we will proceed straight to the police-station and gather up the threads. I believe Jim the Penman will be pleased to see me," he added grimly.

By half-past eight it was quite plain that Thornton had not appeared, and did not intend to appear. But, after all, he was only the minor game, and it was not of such importance as if Jim had slipped away.

Lee and Nipper left their coign of vantage and walked briskly away to the police-station. When they arrived they entered the charge-room, and half expected to see Morley there. But the only occupant was the local police inspector.



Nelson Lee quickly introduced himself.

Mr. Morley, I presume, is somewhere within?" he went on. "I waited behind, hoping to obtain another prisoner——"

"One moment, Mr. Lee," interjected the local inspector, whose name was Gunning. "I think there has been a little misunderstanding. When Mr. Morley arrived here he was under the impression that his prisoner was Jim the Penman, the notorious forger——"

"Under the impression?" repeated Lee sharply.

"Yes, that is what I said. The man is no more Jim the Penman than I am," said Inspector Gunning calmly, taking pleasure in "letting down" such a celebrated person as Mr. Nelson Lee. "You have been tricked!"

Nelson Lee nodded easily.

"I half expected as much," he remarked composedly. "So the prisoner is not Sutcliffe? Well, well, that is very awkward and very disappointing."

The local inspector was rather chagrined at the lack of effect his statement had caused. He had expected Nelson Lee to start back in amazement and fury, but in reality the detective had apparently been quite prepared for the news.

Yet, to tell the truth, it had cost Lee quite an effort to conceal his real feelings. He was surprised—very surprised—but he did not feel like singing small before this country police official.

Nipper, however, could not keep his composure so easily. He burst into a roar.

"Not Jim the Penman! Well, of all the rotten frosts——"

"Hush, Nipper!" exclaimed Lee, pressing the lad's arm. "Your making an uproar will not bring Sutcliffe to us, will it? We must accept the situation and face the matter. I have an idea that everything is not as it appears."

"But—but—— Oh, lor'," gasped Nipper, "this is the limit!"

Nelson Lee turned to Inspector Gunning.

"Where is Mr. Morley, inspector?" he asked.

"He went out, Mr. Lee," explained the other. "If you would care to interview the prisoner I will have you taken to him at once. His disguise was removed, and he bears not the slightest resemblance to Sutcliffe, the forger. And, far from being furious at his arrest, he appears to take it as a joke."

Nelson Lee shot a swift glance at Nipper.

"There's something deep in this," he told himself grimly. "Jim's been up to some game or other. Upon my soul, the man's audacity is amazing, and his resource a thing to marvel at!"

The inspector declared that Morley had been almost raving when he found that his prisoner was a mere nobody. The latter had been searched, and a certain paper had been found upon him. Gunning did not know what it was, for the high and mighty Yard man had not shown it to him.

"But it was a clue, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, with a wise nod of his head. "Oh, it was a clue, right enough! Mr. Morley was so struck by it that he went off at once in order to follow it up."

"Alone?" demanded Lee sharply.

"No; he was accompanied by Sergeant Bates and Constable Houlder."

"Do you know where they went to?"

"No, Mr. Lee."

"Surely you have some idea?"

"Well, I think they've gone to some house on the outskirts of the town," replied the inspector. "Mr. Morley said something to that effect."

But he was in such an almighty hurry that I didn't have time to talk with him."

"What a nuisance!" growled Nelson Lee. "Things seem to be getting into a confusion. Our prisoner has turned out to be a man of no importance, and Mr. Morley has gone off somewhere without leaving me advice as to his movements. You know, of course, how they went?"

"By road, of course," said Inspector Gunning mildly.

"By road! How do you suppose I should think they went?" demanded Lee, who was beginning to become somewhat impatient? Did they go on foot, or in a trap, or——"

"Oh, they went by motor-car," said Gunning. "There's a garage close by, and Mr. Morley ordered one at once. I think, from what I could gather, that my London colleague believes in making a capture. I dare say he'll be back before long."

Nelson Lee turned away and spoke for a few moments with Nipper. He had already seen that the worthy inspector was a somewhat sleepy individual; probably smart enough for his position, but far below the average of the astute C.I.D. men. Lee was not at all surprised that Morley had rushed off without consulting the local man.

"It's pretty obvious, Nipper," said Lee, in a low voice, "that Morley found something of importance on the prisoner—a letter, this officer says. Well, there's no telling; perhaps we shall meet with some success even yet. I'm more inclined to think, however, that Morley has been trioked."

"Trioked, gov'nor?"

"It looks very much like it. If he had gone off alone I should have been uneasy," went on Lee. "But as he is accompanied by a sergeant and a constable, I don't think he'll come to much harm. Even Jim wouldn't tackle the three of them."

"Suppose we have a look at the prisoner, sir?" suggested Nipper. "This old fried-face of an inspector here may be all wrong," he added disrespectfully. "I vote we have a look for ourselves."

Nelson Lee, in fact, had been about to adopt Nipper's suggestion before the latter spoke, and in a few minutes the pair were escorted to one of the cells. Here they were cheerily and impudently greeted by the man whom Detective-inspector Morley had taken prisoner.

"Nelson Lee—eh?" he chuckled. "I thought you'd be hanging round about somewhere! You'd better——"

And then, for some reason, the prisoner closed up like an oyster and said nothing more. One glance, however, was sufficient to show that he was not the master-forgery. He possessed Jim's figure, and was about the same height; but the facial resemblance was nil.

Nelson Lee did not know the man, and he took the liberty of testing his hair and eyebrows. They were the man's own; the disguise he had worn had already been removed. Lee put one or two questions, but the fellow kept stubbornly silent.

The detective and Nipper left the cell, had a few more words with the inspector, and then sallied outside in order to see what was going on. Lee expected Morley to be back at any moment, and he was anxious to see the Yard man.

But as they were descending the police-station steps Nipper suddenly pointed. A big limousine was gliding up, and the head of a constable was projecting through the window of the door.

"Here's Mr. Morley, sir," cried Nipper, running forward.

Nelson Lee followed, but in a moment he saw that the now stationary

limousine contained nobody but the sergeant, a constable, and the chauffeur. Detective-inspector Morley was not there.

"You're Mr. Lee, sir, ain't you?" asked the sergeant, whose face was flushed with excitement.

"Yes. But where is Mr. Morley?"

"He gave orders for us to drive straight here to fetch you!" panted the sergeant. "There's trouble afoot! Mr. Morley's been collared——"

"Tell me all about it while we're in the car!" interjected Lee crisply. "This is so much waste of time. In you hop, Nipper!"

Nipper promptly jumped into the limousine, and Nelson Lee followed. The door closed with a snap, and the vehicle started forward with such a jerk that both Lee and Nipper were thrown off their feet.

And even as Lee had stepped into the car something seemed to tell him that all was not right. Yet there had been no time to draw back. Before the thought had actually taken shape the limousine jerked forward and Nelson Lee was sent sprawling.

"On 'em," muttered the sergeant harshly.

And the next moment, before the astonished pair could recover themselves, they were dealt with drastically and effectively.

Nipper received a blow on his forehead from a leaded-cane which laid him out for fully five minutes, at least. And the pseudo police-officers gave their full attention to their chief captive—who would certainly have caused tremendous trouble if he had been left alone for a second longer.

Even as it was, Nelson Lee was attempting to rise to his feet. His mind was perfectly clear, and he was simply wild with fury at having been tricked. He could feel that the closed motor-car was bowling along at excessive speed, and both the side-window blinds were carefully drawn.

Lee had many thoughts in his mind, but not one was allowed to develop. Both his captors were powerful men, and in a moment Lee's arms were pinioned behind him, and he felt something cold against his nostrils.

Then a singularly pungent vapour was forced right up his nose, scarcely an atom of it escaping. For one second Nelson Lee experienced the most delightful of sensations; he seemed to be floating in air, and everything was peaceful.

Then, like the snapping of a cord, consciousness left him.

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## CHAPTER V.

### What Happened Aboard the Nemesis.

**E**XACTLY how long Nelson Lee remained unconscious he had absolutely no means of telling. But when he found himself capable of connected thought again he lay in perfect darkness, and it seemed to him as though the very ground upon which he lay was trembling perceptibly—very slightly, but nevertheless capable of being felt.

The very first thing which Lee became aware of was his shoulder being gently shaken. Previous to that, he had been, for some time, in a condition between insensibility and consciousness. It seemed as though things were happening around him, but he was quite incapable of forming any opinion of their nature.

And then, quite suddenly, he realised that his shoulder was being shaken. Nelson Lee opened his eyes and saw nothing. Everything was pitch black. But he heard a voice, low and anxious, close beside him.

"Wake up, gov'nor! Ain't you all right yet? You've been fidgeting

about and making all sorts of queer noises for ten minutes past. Wake up, sir!"

Nelson Lee knew, in a second, that it was Nipper who was talking to him.

With an effort he lifted himself upon his elbow and attained a sitting position. He heard, as he did so, an audible exclamation of thankfulness from Nipper. The sound of the lad's voice cleared the detective's brain wonderfully, and memories began to flood into his mind. Curiously enough, the first thing which struck him was that his head was clearing quickly, and that he was suffering no pain whatever. He had been drugged—he knew that. But usually when a man is drugged a violent throbbing of the head and a feeling of nauseous sickness assails him upon recovering consciousness. None of these discomforts affected Nelson Lee, and he wondered. The drug which had been used must have been both singularly powerful and free from after-effects.

"Don't worry yourself, Nipper," muttered Lee thickly. "Upon my word, my voice sounds curious, doesn't it? I'm all right, youngster. How are you feeling?"

Nipper was obviously in a better frame of mind.

"Oh, I've been bright and chirpy for half an hour past, guv'nor," he replied. "You'll be all right before long. My voice was just like that when I woke up. I—I thought you—you——"

"Well, I am not!" ejaculated Lee promptly, becoming more alive every second. "We have got into a queer hole, haven't we, my lad? I don't know whether it is my eyes or whether it is actually so. But I am bothered if I can see a sign of you!"

Nipper chuckled in spite of himself.

"You'd have funny kind of eyes if you could see me," he observed. "We're in pitch darkness—absolute darkness, as black as the inside of a coalmine."

"But, my good Nipper, where are we?"

"In a ship, sir."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lee, aghast. "In a ship! That accounts for the queer throbbing. We're under way, too!"

"True enough, sir. But what ship it is, and where we're bound for, is more than I can tell. But it's certain we have been landed in a pretty tight fix now. Jim the Penman collared us this time, and no blessed mistake!"

"Jim the Penman!" breathed Lee huskily. "We were tricked about as naturally as it could be done in Cambridge. Do you know, Nipper, I had a fleeting suspicion as we entered that limousine that we were walking head-first into danger?"

"Well, for myself, guv'nor, I never suspected a thing," replied Nipper comfortingly. "Why should I? The trap was laid so carefully that we didn't have a second's warning. I have been thinking it all out, sir, and we've got nothing whatever to blame ourselves with. I've got an idea that I know exactly how Jim worked it."

"Well, let me hear your theory," said Lee, reaching out and grasping Nipper affectionately. "What do you make of it, young 'un?"

"Well, it was a terrifically smart stratagem, to start with," said Nipper. "As to the exact details, I don't know, but I reckon Jim worked the wheeze this way, sir. He relied upon the quickness with which it was done. When the motor-car drove up, with the sergeant and the constable, we naturally thought them to be the two the inspector had told us of. And we hopped into the car without a suspicion when the sergeant said that Morley was in peril."

"It was natural that we should do so."

"Of course, sir. We knew that Mr. Morley had gone off somewhere in a motor-car with a couple of local police officers," said Nipper, shrewdly, "so, when the car came up, with those two officers, why should we suspect a trap? It was all so jolly straightforward that we simply fell into it, feet first."

"Jim is an amazing rogue," commented Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "He is never at a loss for an expedient, and there is no limit to his resource. I realise, now, that we were tricked from the very beginning."

"Do you think that cipher letter was a deliberate bluff, guv'nor?"

"I am not sure. In some ways I seem to think it was—and yet I am doubtful. Perhaps we shall learn later on," said the detective. "For the present, I am curious to know exactly where we are, and where we are bound for."

"That's a puzzle," said Nipper. "I came to my senses first, and even then we were under steam, and apparently at sea. Just before you came to, guv'nor, I looked at my watch——"

"How?"

"With my electric torch, sir. They haven't taken anything from our pockets, except our revolvers," Nipper replied disgustedly. "Just the very articles we wanted, too! The time is just about ten o'clock now."

Nelson Lee whistled softly into the blackness.

"And we were rendered insensible soon after nine this morning," he remarked. "I presume it is night-time now. It is hardly probable that we have been unconscious the twenty-four hours."

"I know I'm fearfully hungry," grumbled Nipper.

"I feel an empty void myself, I must admit. Presuming it is now ten o'clock at night, Jim had the whole day before him," went on Lee. "We were probably taken in the limousine straight to a sea-port, and smuggled on board this vessel. That would be quite easy, even in daylight. But why are we here? I am afraid, Nipper, that our position is desperate."

Nipper grunted gloomily.

"I've been thinking that, sir," he said. "Desperate isn't the word. We are absolutely at the mercy of Jim the Penman. He's got us fairly in his power. I'll bet a fiver to a brass collar-stud that he's aboard. And, sure enough, he means to make a clean sweep this time. He's taking us to sea so that he can do what he likes without interference. I don't reckon we shall want any more grub in this world!"

"Come, come, youngster, you are pessimistic," said Nelson Lee, lightly, although his tone was forced. "It's not like you to look upon the dark side——"

The detective paused, and gazed upwards into the darkness.

A sudden noise had attracted his attention. Immediately above, it seemed, there was a steel hatch, and this was being unbattened. Within a few minutes a streak of light appeared, and then the hatch was half removed.

Nelson Lee and Nipper saw the stars of the night sky above them now; but they were almost at once blotted out by a bright ship's lamp which was brought to the edge of the hatch, and flashed downwards.

"I thought I heard voices," remarked a cool voice. "Good-evening, Mr. Nelson Lee—good-evening, Nipper. You are both quite lively, I observe. I am sorry to put you to this inconvenience, but the necessity was very urgent. It is hardly possible to put you up in the ship's state-room."

There was something mocking in the voice, in spite of its suave politeness. With the very first words, both the captives recognised the smooth tones

of Douglas James Sutcliffe. The speaker was Jim the Penman, the master-forgery.

"Nothing to say, eh?" he went on. "Well, I have a good deal, and I beg of you to listen patiently."

"You scoundrelly——"

"Hush, Nipper," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "Abuse will do no good whatever."

"My hide is fairly thick," agreed Jim the Penman, from above.

Looking up, Lee and Nipper could easily see the forger's face, brightly illuminated by the lamp-light. Jim wore no disguise now, and his good-looking face was wreathed into a genial smile. He seemed to be one of the most good-natured of men.

Yet, in reality, black murder was in his heart—murder of the most diabolical kind. And the prisoners were not deceived; they knew they could expect no mercy from this man.

On previous occasions he had proved to them that he could be fiendish and cruel to a degree; and it was certain he would display even greater cunning now. Never before had he got his enemies so completely in his power.

And the fact that he used no harsh words; that he remained perfectly cool and genial, made him a hundred-fold more grim. There seemed to be something almost inhuman in the face which gazed down upon Nelson Lee and Nipper.

Yet Jim the Penman was a singularly clever man—highly educated, at home in the most exclusive society, and possessing a natural charm of manner which captivated everybody. It was one of nature's queerest tricks that he should be such a villainous scoundrel at heart.

In one respect, Sutcliffe was unique. There have been cases where men have possessed extraordinary faculties for certain things, such as memorising dates, figures, and whole pages of writing. One man actually possessed the power of perusing a newspaper sheet from top to bottom, and then repeating the whole text of the columns, word for word!

Jim had a somewhat similar "kink" in his brain; but his was connected with handwriting. It was possible for him to copy any and every variety of handwriting, absolutely exactly, without a flaw, after seeing a specimen for a few minutes only. He required no previous practice. He could sit down and execute a forgery of the most intricate description straight off.

At penmanship Sutcliffe had no equal, and his forgeries had been so numerous that the police had lost count of them. Indeed, the police did not know, very often, which were forgeries and which were not. Jim's work was so perfect that Scotland Yard's handwriting experts could never detect a single flaw.

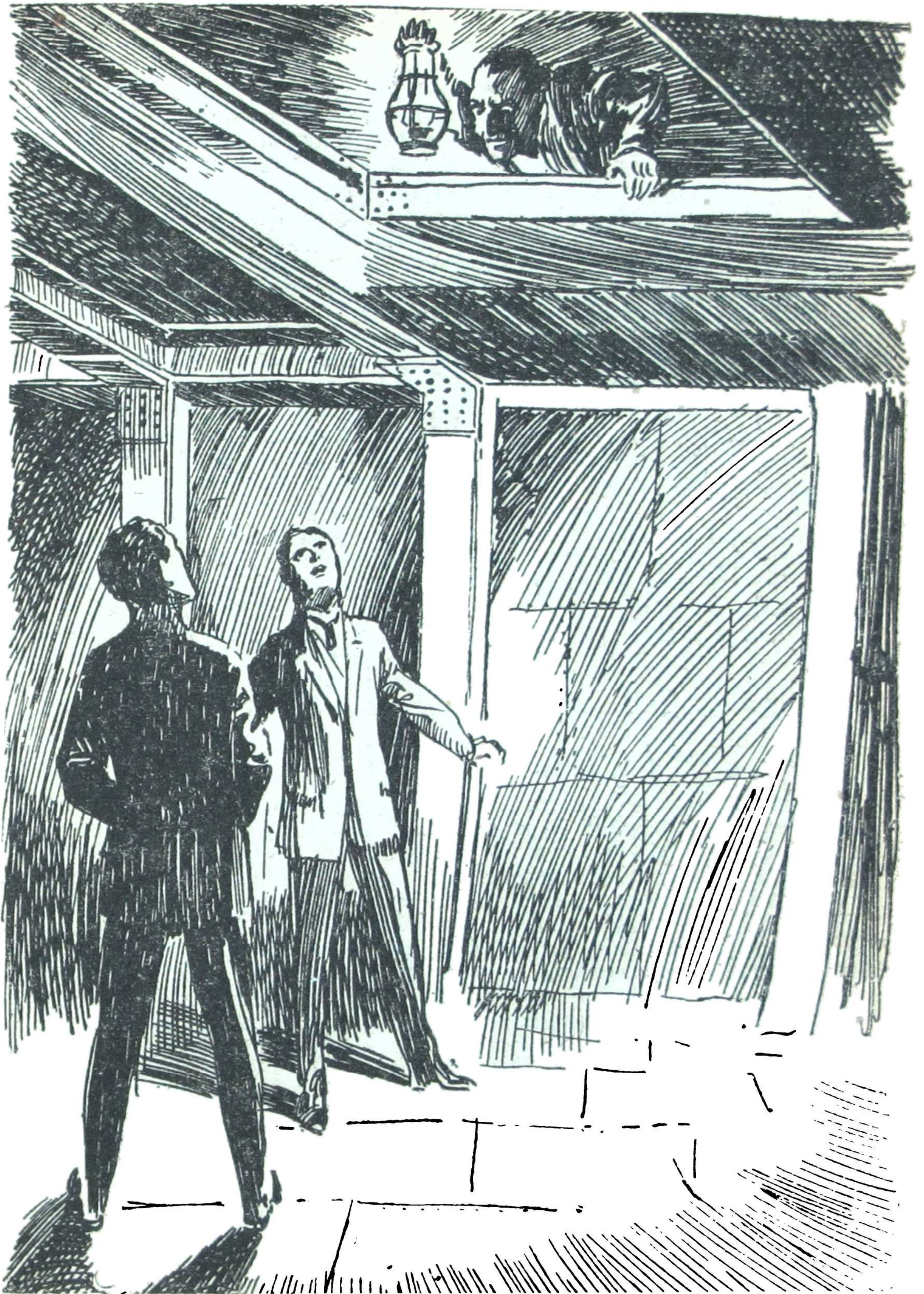
And this man—this clever, well-educated gentleman—was now standing over the hatch of a ship's hold, gloating over the helplessness of his entrapped victims. No discredit reflected upon Nelson Lee for being in the position. He had not blundered; fate had played into Jim the Penman's hands with amazing neatness. It was a well-worn saying among the police that Jim had "the devil's own luck."

Nelson Lee looked up into Sutcliffe's face, and the detective nodded.

"Well, Jim," he said calmly, "I don't expect mercy, of course. But I take it as a compliment to my ability that you should go to such trouble to make me a prisoner. I have been a thorn in your side, I will admit, and, even yet, I may be permitted to bring you to justice."

Jim the Penman chuckled amusedly.

"To borrow an expression from a sensational novel," he remarked, "you will not see the light of another day. I have had you in my power



**" Good-evening, Mr. Nelson Lee—Good-evening, Nipper. You are both quite lively, I observe," remarked Jim the Penman.—(See p. 19.)**

before, Lee, but never so completely as this. And I fancy you will regret the day you ever crossed swords with me before long. But I was going to tell you how I tricked you."

"That will be quite interesting," said Lee smoothly.

"Jove, you're a cool fellow," said Sutcliffe admiringly. "I recognise pluck and courage, my dear fellow, and I really admire you. It is a great pity you are a detective. You would make a perfect criminal."

"Thank you; but one is sufficient in this country."

"Ah, a compliment!" cried Jim, leaning on the edge of the hatch, and bending over the void. "Now, as to that cipher letter. I found that I had lost it, and I figured that it had dropped from my pocket in Professor Collingwood's library. It was only natural to suppose, therefore, that it would fall into your hands."

"It was not purposely dropped to entrap me?" asked Lee interestedly.

"Oh, no," was Jim's reply. "I really intended sending the letter to Thornton, my chief assistant. But when I realised that it was in your hands, I guessed that you would hit upon the solution to the cipher."

"Why should you guess that? There was no clue to the key-book."

"No direct clue, perhaps. But you are a clever man, Lee, and I am clever myself, perhaps I am even cleverer than you are. I am inclined to believe so," said Jim, with delightful frankness. "Well, I altered my arrangements. I thought it would be far more suited to my purpose if I trapped you instead of you trapping me. Therefore, assuming that you had read the cipher message, I laid my plans. One of my paid associates made himself up to represent a Frenchman, and deliberately waited outside the Theatre Royal, Cambridge, to be arrested. You were not aware, perhaps, that I was on the watch as early as seven o'clock this morning? I saw you appear, with Nipper and that excellent Scotland Yard man, Inspector Morley. I saw my man arrested, and I saw him taken off by Morley."

The forger leaned further over, easily and comfortably.

"But that was all wrong," he went on. "My plans were somewhat upset. I had been expecting you to make the arrest. On my confederate I had had 'planted' a faked message which, I hoped, would lure you away. Instead of doing that, it lured Inspector Morley away—and I didn't care a rap for old Morley. He's quite a harmless old buffer. I saw, therefore, that I should have to make fresh plans—quick!"

"Where did you get the police uniforms from?" asked Nelson Lee.

"My dear fellow, they belonged to the real police," Jim answered. "Morley and his two underlings were made prisoners in a farmhouse, a ruinous, deserted place, just outside the town. And my friend, Thornton and Channing, quickly dressed themselves up, and then set out in the car to get hold of you."

"That was very thoughtful of them."

"I knew you were not acquainted with the Cambridge police, and so I reckoned that, by acting swiftly, I should succeed in my object," went on the forger. "You would not know, in a moment, whether the men were genuine or whether they were impostors. I, myself, drove the car, attired as the chauffeur. I reasoned that you would be at the police-station, and so the limousine was placed round a convenient corner—with my man concealed within—and I watched you."

"By jingo, you're a marvel!" ejaculated Nipper involuntarily.

"Yes, I believe I am," agreed Sutcliffe, with perfect smoothness. "Well, my scheme succeeded. I saw you both emerge from the police-station, and I at once drove up, and my men acted their parts well. Before you could have time to suspect you were in the car, insensible. After that, of course,



it was merely a quiet run to the coast, where you were both placed on this ship—which was in readiness.”

“And where are we now?” asked Nelson Lee.

“Somewhere out in the North Sea,” was the reply. “There, I am afraid, you will remain, my dear Lee. You have certainly seen the last of Britain. Later on, I shall return for a further conversation, and then I shall have something of interest to tell you.”

Somehow, Jim’s last words contained a hidden threat, and he said no more. The conversation had been an extraordinary one. Captor and captives had discussed the whole amazing affair as though it were quite an everyday occurrence.

Violent words would have served no purpose; and, truth to tell, Lee had been quite interested in Jim’s explanation. The great detective realised that, under the circumstances, he would be foolish to blame himself.

After the hatch above had been securely replaced, Nelson Lee and Nipper, with their electric torches, examined their prison. The bright lights revealed nothing beyond what they had guessed.

They were in one of the holds of the vessel. The sides were of iron, and there was no door of any description—not even a grating or a crack. The only exit was by means of the hatch; and that was high above, completely out of reach.

The hold was filthy, and quite empty. It was a terrible situation, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper felt strangely subdued. They both instinctively knew that Jim the Penman was preparing a ghastly death for them.

But what could it be? What did Sutcliffe intend doing to encompass their death?

If they had only known.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### The Plague Ship.

**T**HE *Nemesis* was an old boat.

To tell the truth, she was almost too old to be safe. It was only in calm seas that she could really be regarded as secure. She had always a tendency to be top-heavy, and men and officers who had sailed in her had often declared that one day she would turn turtle.

For years the *Nemesis* had been engaged in coasting voyages up and down the East Coast. She was quite an insignificant steamer, one of those ugly little dirty tramps which can sometimes be seen labouring along painfully and smokily.

Her owners, a rather disreputable firm, had at last decided to condemn her as unfit for active use. She was insured for as large a sum as possible, and if she went down the insurance would cover every loss.

Therefore, her owners had been quite willing to accept the offer of an unknown gentleman who had approached them. This gentleman—one of Jim the Penman’s accomplices—had paid the owners a large sum of money in cash to charter the boat for two days.

There had been many difficulties to overcome, but Sutcliffe had engineered everything splendidly. The *Nemesis* had been taken out of port undermanned and under-officered. In fact, Jim himself was the skipper, and the crew consisted of four men, in Jim’s pay. The weather being glorious, a skilled navigator was not necessary. And the cruise was only to last a few hours longer, according to Jim’s plan.

In tow, astern, was a neat little motor-launch, and this craft would be used later on. The forger’s scheme was deadly, and he was willing to risk

much to effect his purpose. Nelson Lee and Nipper had always been in his way—well, he was going to rid himself of them at last.

There would be no half-measures; it was to be absolutely certain.

The whole trip was being undertaken for the special purpose of killing Nelson Lee and Nipper. Perhaps it was a strange way of getting to work. A knife thrust here, and a well-aimed bullet there, would have settled Jim's enemies definitely and finally.

But Jim the Penman was no ordinary man—and that was just it.

He took a satanic delight in this affair, and there was a plan in his mind which was utterly too horrible to be named. It was too ghastly for him to confide in his confederates. He, alone, knew what was about to occur.

And he took a ghoulish pleasure in systematically carrying out his scheme. If there had been any danger to himself he would, perhaps, have hesitated. But he had safeguarded himself thoroughly, and he knew that this interlude would have no effect upon his own safety.

Just before midnight, when the *Nemesis* was grinding along at a snail's pace, Jim sat in the dirty little cabin with his two assistants, Thornton and Channing. Both these men had worked with the forger before, and they were brutal ruffians; well-mannered, perhaps, but cruel and cunning.

"Look here, Jim, we're getting somewhere near the middle of the North Sea now," exclaimed Channing, as he poured himself out a stiff glass of neat whisky. "What's the game? You haven't told us anything, bar that Lee and Nipper are going to catch it hot and strong."

"Is everything all right on deck and below?" asked Jim.

"Yes, for the time being."

"Well, we sha'n't remain about this craft for long, now," proceeded the forger. "At the first light of dawn her engines will be stopped, and she will be abandoned. The *Nemesis* will be left at the mercy of the tide—and Lee and Nipper will remain prisoners in the hold."

Channing looked doubtful.

"Is that good enough, Jim?" he asked. "They may be rescued——"

"My dear man, the old tub will turn turtle within the hour," exclaimed Jim. "If I am a judge of the weather I reckon the sea is getting up a bit; and this steamer, left at the mercy of wind and tide, will not be long in taking the last plunge."

"But I'm inclined to share Channing's view, Jim," said Thornton.

"You've gone to a whole heap of trouble to get hold of Nelson Lee and his brat. We might as well make short work of 'em——"

Jim the Penman frowned.

"See here! Who's in command here?" he snapped. "You'll do as I tell you—understand? I know what I am about, and I've told you my decision. At dawn we shall all desert the *Nemesis*, and the prisoners will be left exactly as they are. I give you my solemn word they won't escape certain death!"

There was something final in Sutcliffe's words; something sinister and grim. The two men felt a kind of shiver descend their spines, and after a few minutes they left the cabin, and ascended to the deck.

Jim, as soon as they had gone, chuckled cruelly, and remained staring unseeingly before him at the opposite wall of the cabin. His naturally good-looking face was transfigured into that of a demon; his eyes were alight with baleful fire; his lips thin and bloodless. His very teeth revealed themselves in a kind of demonical snarl.

"May as well make short work of them," he muttered, repeating Thorn-

ton's words. "By Heaven, if they only knew! My hour has come at last, and Nelson Lee will not escape—his fate will be one which will avenge me for all the harm he has done in the past."

For Jim was going to make sure, positively sure, of his victims!

Yet he would not even take Thornton and Channing into his confidence. He had not told them all; the actual method by which he intended making away with the prisoners remained a secret within his own breast.

As a matter of fact, Jim the Penman feared to speak. He knew that his confederates were desperate scoundrels; he knew they would probably stick at nothing. But they would be so horror-struck by Jim's plan that they would probably attempt to force him to abandon it.

The forger instinctively felt that it would be wiser to say nothing to a soul. Even Nelson Lee and Nipper should be unaware of the ghastly peril which assailed them. Only Jim would know—only Jim himself.

The plan, in fact, was fiendish and diabolical.

It seemed scarcely possible that a human being could have conceived such an appalling murder-plot. Sutcliffe's character was astounding, but never before, surely, had he abandoned himself so completely to sheer devilry.

From a leather portmanteau he produced a curious-looking contrivance. It seemed to be a clockwork affair of some sort, and it was obviously an apparatus for the timing of something.

Did Jim the Penman intend to blow the ship to smithereens?

This was not probable; for, if that had been his intention, he would certainly have taken his confederates into his confidence.

What, then, could the apparatus be?

It was something which Jim had constructed himself. At any given time the thing could be set to act. The clockwork arrangement actuated a small but heavy hammer arrangement. Right beneath this hammer was a small bottle, placed so that the glass would instantly smash, upon the weight being released. The whole affair was mounted on a metal base, and there was a concave slot right beneath the bottle, with a small hole drilled through. Thus the contents of the bottle would run directly out in a short, steady stream.

And it was Jim the Penman's intention to place the apparatus upon the level portion of the hatch which formed the entrance to Nelson Lee's prison. In the hatch a small hole had been drilled, and there were little clamps in readiness to receive the clockwork. These clamps were so placed that when they were fitted into their correct slots, the hole in the metal base of the apparatus and the hole in the hatch would be precisely opposite to one another.

It was clear, therefore, that when the ingenious contrivance released the hammer and smashed the bottle, the liquid thus freed would run straight through and drop in a tiny stream right upon the heads of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

But what could be the meaning of it?

Was it Jim's intention to pour poison upon his victims?

But that was quite impossible. The bottle itself was merely a small phial, and could contain, at the most, a mere dribble of liquid. And, more likely than not, the poison would fall upon the floor of the hold, and would not even touch the prisoners.

No, it was something else—something a million times more deadly.

It was so inconceivably horrible that it was amazing that even Jim the Penman could resort to such a devilish measure. But the forger himself knew full well what a terrible thing he contemplated doing; and he

also knew that if he told his confederates there would be trouble. Probably enough, they would attempt to forcibly restrain him from perpetrating the deed. They were villainous enough in most respects, but— This was too utterly loathsome for words.

For the truth was this:

Within that sealed phial was contained the *pestis fulminaris*—the active microbe of plague which had been stolen from Professor Collingwood's laboratory.

By some method of his own the professor had succeeded in preserving the bacillus perfectly within the sealed bottle. When released, the microbes of the deadly plague would develop rapidly, and Nelson Lee and Nipper—

But what of the others? With the germ of such a deadly infectious disease abroad, surely they would all be contaminated? Surely the very ship itself would become stricken with the plague from bow to stern?

Undoubtedly this was a fact. But Jim the Penman cared not one jot for that, for the microbes would not be released until a full twenty minutes after he and his companions had abandoned the *Nemesis* to her fate.

By setting the clockwork, the master-forgery could cause the hammer to be released at any specific time. And, just before going overside, he intended setting the clever mechanism.

Jim the Penman sat in the cabin gloating over the coming doom of his enemies. The man undoubtedly possessed a trait in his character which almost seemed inhuman and uncanny. Often enough he had performed the most kindly actions. On one occasion he had actually saved the lives of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

And yet now, his heart full of black fury, he was preparing for them the vilest death man could conceive. Vengeance! Jim the Penman wanted vengeance—and he fully intended his fierce desire to be satisfied. Never again should Nelson Lee interfere in any of his clever forgery schemes. It was Nelson Lee who had been the stumbling block always. Well, now that would all be ended.

The forger calmly and coolly examined the apparatus with minute care. He found that it was in perfect order, and that there could be no possibility of its going wrong. It was so constructed that failure to act was practically an impossibility. Once set, it would perform its deadly work.

And, straight away, Jim took the contrivance in his hands and mounted the companion. All was dark on deck, and he could see that Thornton and Channing were upon the bridge.

The *Nemesis* was a very small steamer, and she looked absurdly tiny to Jim as he walked for'ard to the hatch. Arriving there, he bent down in the darkness, and quickly clamped the clockwork apparatus to the metal surface of the hatch.

He had intended having a further conversation with Nelson Lee and Nipper. But now he decided to forego that pleasure. It would be better to leave the hatch battened down—to leave the prisoners in a state of anxious uncertainty.

It was only the work of a few minutes to accomplish his object. He did not wind the clockwork yet, and so nothing would happen. Knowing full well the ghastly nature of the thing, Jim had no intention of taking even a remote risk. Not until he was about to leave the ship would he take the final step.

He rose to his feet with a sigh of grim satisfaction, and then walked aft again. He mounted the bridge amidships, and was soon laughing and chatting with the two men who were already there.

The *Nemesis* was proceeding slowly, under half steam. For the boat was

exceedingly under-manned, and it was not possible to control her perfectly. This drawback, however, was of no consequence. The sea was wonderfully calm, and scarcely a breath of wind stirred. The old tramp would have blundered along safely enough even if there had been no experienced men aboard—and Jim the Penman knew quite a lot about navigation.

The wheel had been lashed for some time, for it was not really necessary to steer for any given point. The *Nemesis* was simply making for the open sea, and it mattered little exactly where she strayed. By dawn she would be a thing accursed—a ship of plague.

It was some little time later that Jim the Penman gave some precise orders. He found that the *Nemesis* was now well out in the North Sea, and the lights of no other ship were within sight.

The *Nemesis* came slowly to a stop, and the motor-launch, which had been towing astern, was got ready for departure. It was a big launch, powerful, reliable, and seaworthy. Even if a sudden storm arose, there was no fear of the launch becoming swamped.

Her engines were started, and the final preparations were at last made.

Jim stood upon the gangway and saw his companions overside. He was the last on board—with the exception of the ill-fated captives.

“I reckon there’s nothing more to do now!” exclaimed Sutcliffe shortly. “Hold on, though; I’ll have a last look in the cabin.”

Jim walked away into the darkness along the deck. But he did not go to the cabin. He went to the forward hatch and bent over it for a full minute. The faint noise which the clockwork made as it was wound did not carry two yards. A moment later Jim had set a little catch, and he rose to his feet with a low murmur of satisfaction.

“That’s neat!” he told himself. “By Jove, it’s infernally neat! It’s about the only way I could use this stuff without infecting myself! In less than twenty minutes my excellent friends below will be suffering from the same pleasant complaint that was abroad in London in the year 1665!”

And with the utmost callousness Douglas James Sutcliffe chuckled afresh and walked briskly along the deck to the gangway. He descended, and stepped into the launch; then he gave the order to let go.

The boat’s powerful engine roared for a second, and then the launch sped away from the *Nemesis*’s side. The distance which separated the two vessels was rapidly increased, and Jim the Penman stood on the tiny deck of the launch and gazed astern.

The old tramp steamer lay motionless upon the quiet sea, heaving slightly as a swell passed beneath her. Her mast lights and port and starboard lights were all burning brightly, otherwise she lay in total darkness.

Within half an hour the *Nemesis* would become a place of plague! She would become a vessel of horror and ghastliness.

And Nelson Lee and Nipper were imprisoned within the for’ard hold—and there was absolutely no means of escape!

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## CHAPTER VII.

### The Sea Murderers—*Nemesis*!

**N**IPPER listened carefully.

“No, gov’nor. I’m blessed if I can hear a sound. It strikes me as if Jim and all his rotten crew have cleared off and left us to our fate.”

Five minutes had elapsed since the motor-launch had put off from the *Nemesis*, and Nelson Lee and Nipper, imprisoned in the hold, had been

listening intently. They had noticed the difference at once when the engines had been stopped, and various far-away sounds seemed to indicate that a boat was being put off.

"I do not pretend to know what has happened, Nipper," Nelson Lee said quietly. "But you may be sure that our position is in no way improved. Judging by the time, it should be very near to dawn. Jim told us that he would return, but I fancy he will not keep his promise."

"Have you got any idea of what's afoot, guv'nor?"

"Well," admitted Lee slowly, "I have a suspicion."

"What is it, sir?"

"Not being certain, I scarcely like to voice——"

"Oh, rats, guv'nor!" interjected Nipper promptly. "I've got a suspicion, too. Let's hear yours first."

Nelson Lee was silent for a moment.

"It must be obvious to you, my boy, that Jim has not put us in this ship for the mere fun of the thing," he then said. "It is pretty certain that something of a dastardly nature is afoot. And the fact that the vessel has stopped and that there are no sounds of life aboard is very significant—very suggestive."

"Of what, sir?"

"Why have our enemies left the ship? Surely the most obvious explanation is that they have scuttled her—probably in the aft hold?"

"Scuttled her!" ejaculated Nipper. "I don't think that's it, sir. We should have heard the roar of the water before now. My hat, what an idea, though! We should be drowned like rats in a trap. But my suspicion was different, guv'nor."

"Let me hear yours, then."

"Don't you think it's probable that the horrible brute has cleared off and has left an infernal machine on board?" suggested Nipper shrewdly. "A bomb, timed to go off in a quarter of an hour, say. I tell you, sir, I've been expecting to hear a glorious bust-up every second."

Nelson Lee gripped his young companion's arm.

"It is something of that nature, undoubtedly," he said in a perfectly steady voice. "Everything points to base treachery. We have been left aboard this ship to die, and it would be better if we settled our minds to the fact that escape or rescue is highly improbable."

Nipper caught his breath in a little.

"We're together, anyhow," he murmured huskily. "That's one thing, sir. If we go under, we'll go under side by side, won't we?"

"My brave lad!" muttered Lee.

"Nothing to worry over that I can see," went on Nipper, with a calmness that could only be forced. "What's the good of worrying now? The best thing we can do is to have a squint round and see if there is any possibility of escape. That's better than sitting still, anyhow. By gum, wouldn't I like to have five minutes with Jim the Penman alone!"

"I'm very much afraid you wouldn't like it at all!" remarked Nelson Lee. "You're scarcely a match for Sutcliffe, Nipper, but I dare say you'd give a good account of yourself. But this is idle talk. We will adopt your suggestion and have a 'squint' round."

Lee had absolutely no hope of discovering any means of escape. But the activity would, at least, prevent their minds from dwelling too much upon the grim uncertainty of their position. Their electric torches revealed only dirty iron walls, a still dirtier floor, and a hatch quite beyond reach, and, if it could be reached, what could be done? The hatch was battened down from the outside, and no amount of energy from within would shift it.

Over ten minutes had elapsed since they had last heard sounds of life above. A quarter of an hour, in fact, had passed by since Jim had stepped overside. Fifteen minutes! And the clockwork arrangement was to release the deadly hammer at the expiration of twenty!

There were scarcely more than five minutes of safety left. One tiny drop of the phial's contents dropped into the hold would be the end, the absolute end, of Nelson Lee and Nipper. Once infected, no power on earth would be able to save them from a horrible death, and from hours of terrible agony beforehand.

The time was getting shorter and shorter. But the prisoners were quite ignorant of the issues. They knew nothing of Jim's preparations, and would learn all too soon when they first felt the dread signs of the disease overpowering them.

"It looks to me, sir——"

Nipper paused suddenly. Even as he was speaking a loud boom had sounded quite close at hand—the boom of a gun! It was sharp and decisive, and instantly both Lee and Nipper knew that the gun was not on board the *Nemesis*.

What was happening?

But before the prisoners could take breath a fearful crash sounded aft, and a quiver ran right through the old tramp from stem to stern. At the same second both Nelson Lee and Nipper caught in their breath with amazement.

"A shell!" gasped Nipper. "We're—we're being shelled, gov'nor! So that's the wheeze! They've put off on to another ship and are going to sink this old tub by shell-fire."

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Surely that cannot be the truth, Nipper?" he exclaimed. "Good gracious, Jim's audacity is something to marvel at, but even he would not risk his liberty by opening fire with a gun in the North Sea. Why, the sound might be heard by one of our warships, and Jim would be captured in no time. No, Nipper, he wouldn't take such a risk as that."

"Then who's shelling us, sir?" panted Nipper excitedly.

Before his master could reply another report sounded, and then it seemed to Lee and his assistant as though their end had come. The shell struck the *Nemesis* just upon the water-line on the starboard bow. Her plates were rusty and rotten, and not over thick at the best of times. The shell simply tore the plates to shreds.

This happened just outside the hold in which Lee and Nipper were imprisoned. But the force of the shell explosion caused a huge sheet of metal, forming a portion of one side of the hold, to crumple up and break every bolt-head completely off. A great gap was caused.

Nipper and his master were flung down with painful force, but they were not much hurt. The explosion had expended its force upon the metal plate, otherwise things might have been very different. And Nipper, flashing his light across the hold as he staggered to his feet, let out a yell of excitement.

The sound of roaring water was clearly audible, and it was apparent that the ship was doomed—that she would, in fact, sink with very little delay. But Nipper's excitement was not in consequence of that knowledge being forced upon him. It was because he saw, clearly enough, the gap caused by the explosion.

The metal plate had laid open a way of escape for the two prisoners. By climbing up and scrambling through the jagged hole they would, from that position, be able to leap clean into the sea.

And Nelson Lee himself knew full well that Nipper's hopes were capable

of being realised. It was possible, of course, that they would only escape one death to plunge into another. But they were both very expert swimmers, and upon the open water they stood at least a sporting chance of being picked up. It was August weather, and the sea was delightfully warm; no ill-effects would accompany a long immersion.

But what was the cause of this sudden change?

It was certainly no work of Jim's, and the forger was not even aware of what was occurring. For by the time the first shell was fired the motor-launch was hull down on the horizon, with the wind dead ahead. Thus the report had not reached those on board the launch.

The murderers of the sea, in fact, were at work!

The foul assassins who had made a practice of attacking harmless and unarmed merchant ships without previous warning; the assassins who were responsible for the loss of hundreds of innocent lives aboard the *Lusitania*, and many other noble ships.

The *Nemesis* had met the fate which had overtaken many another craft. She was being attacked by a German submarine!

That was the exact truth of it.

Jim the Penman had had not the slightest idea that such a thing as this would occur. Yet there was really nothing surprising in it. The old tramp steamer was in the North Sea, where German submarines operate whenever they have the opportunity. And the *Nemesis*, lying there motionless, was too tempting a bait for the captain of the Hun murder-craft to miss.

The German submarine had been prowling about during the night; and now, at dawn, it had chanced upon its prey. The object of submarines is primarily for the purpose of defence in naval war—defence and offence. But the submarine was never created for the purpose of attacking unarmed merchantmen. That phase of war had been originated by the Germans.

And, as Fate would have it, on this occasion the sea murderers were actually saving life, and not taking it! The situation was curious in the extreme. The submarine's commander, while gloating over his crime, was actually setting at liberty the imprisoned captives of the *Nemesis*.

But no credit was due to the Germans for their part in the affair. They intended to kill and to destroy. They were assassins at heart, even if chance led their shell-fire to do good instead of harm.

And more—another fatality was averted by the sudden advent of the German U boat. The third shell which came screaming across the stretch of water struck the deck of the *Nemesis* just for'ard of the bridge. Providence surely had a hand in the direction of that shell! The bridge itself crumpled up, and the for'ard hatch, upon which was clamped Jim the Penman's deadly contrivance, was blown bodily off.

The hatch flew through the air and descended into the water with a dull splash. And the sudden shock loosened the clamps which held the apparatus, and the latter plunged to the ocean bed, carrying with it the dread phial of plague bacillus! The bottle, being entirely enclosed, had remained unbroken, and, still sealed, it went to its last resting-place.

Jim the Penman's plot had failed!

And the shell explosion which blew off the hatch had expended its force principally upon the surface of the deck.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, in the hold itself, were startled by the sudden crash above them. Several splinters of wood and metal came down, but they were not touched.

"Phew! This is getting exciting!" panted Nipper.

Nelson Lee made no reply. The detective, in fact, was too busily engaged. He was in the act of scrambling up to the way of exit which now lay open.



He helped Nipper up, and then the pair, after scrambling through the ragged gap, found that they could, by taking a long dive, plunge directly into the sea.

For several seconds they stood side by side, gazing out into the open. The daylight was now fairly strong, and they could see distinctly.

"By James!" muttered Lee. "Look at that, Nipper!"

The lad needed no telling. Upon the surface of the sea, quite near by, floated a strange-looking craft. The released prisoners knew, in a moment, what that craft was.

"My stars! A German submarine!" gasped Nipper.

Even as he spoke both he and his master saw a sudden puff of smoke upon the submarine's deck, followed instantly by a sharp report. Still another shell screamed across the intervening water, and it hit the old tramp steamer upon the stern and blew a hole in her plates large enough for a horse to walk through.

But Nelson Lee and Nipper had already dived. They plunged into the sea and swam away from the doomed vessel's side. It was obvious to them that the *Nemesis* could not remain afloat for more than five minutes at the most.

Both Lee and Nipper came to the surface side by side, and as their ears became clear of water they distinctly heard a chorus of harsh, guttural laughs, and then many jeering remarks, in broken English, were hung at them.

"The fiends!" panted Nipper huskily. "I shouldn't be surprised if they blow us to bits next, gov'nor! They've saved our lives, I expect; but they did it unknowingly. They're dirty murderers just the same!"

"I don't think they'll waste another shell on us, young 'un," remarked the detective. "They'll leave us to drown, and sheer off. See, our late prison is already on the point of taking her last plunge."

The *Nemesis*, in fact, had settled rapidly, and was now listing at an alarming angle. It was quite obvious that she would sink before many more minutes had passed.

And the commander of the German submarine, seeing that he had completed his work, made ready to disappear without delay. He had seen, at once, that a torpedo would be wasted upon such a small craft as the *Nemesis*. Three or four well-aimed shells had been quite sufficient to seal her doom.

Still jeering at their helpless victims the Hun murderers took their departure. The submarine glided slowly away, still upon the surface, the Germans on deck laughing and joking among themselves and pointing scornfully at the doomed vessel.

"Well, I don't reckon I'm sorry," grunted Nipper, as he floated beside his master. "There wouldn't be much fun in being taken prisoner, anyhow. And we do stand a chance of being picked up by a passing steamer."

"It all depends, my lad," said Lee. "I believe we are right off the usual routes——"

"Hallo! Here we go!" ejaculated Nipper suddenly.

Lee twisted himself round in the water just in time. As he looked, the *Nemesis* attained an almost perpendicular position in the water, and then slid to her watery grave with a swish and a roaring of water.

A fairly powerful whirlpool was formed over the spot, but both the swimmers were too far off to be affected. All sorts of wreckage floated upon the surface—loose articles which had strewn the decks.

As it happened, a large grating floated quite near to Nelson Lee and Nipper, and they were soon astride it and fairly comfortable. If necessary,

they would be able to cling to that beam for forty-eight hours. And surely they would be rescued before the expiration of that time?

And then they became aware of something else. Nipper was the first to notice it. A kind of black smudge appeared upon the horizon, and grew larger and larger with every second that passed.

The German submarine was still within view, quite distinct, and no more than a half a mile distant.

The smudge presently resolved itself into a low, black, wicked-looking ship. Nipper gave a whoop as he recognised her outline.

"A destroyer!" he shouted. "A British destroyer, gov'nor! By gum, I hope they have a smack at this German rotter!"

Nipper's hope was fulfilled very rapidly. The Germans were apparently off their guard, for they were certainly caught napping. Perhaps they were celebrating their recent triumph. At all events, the submarine still remained on the surface, and the British destroyer spotted her.

"Ah, they're aware of the danger now," exclaimed Lee quickly.

And this was obvious. The Germans were making ready, with frantic haste, to submerge. The German colours were hauled down, and everything was made trim for immediate submersion.

But the end came with appalling swiftness.

A terrific boom suddenly sounded from the on-coming destroyer, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper heard the whining scream of a shell. It was a miss, and struck the water thirty yards beyond the submarine.

Almost immediately, however, a second projectile sped upon its way. This one struck the submarine's conning tower with terrible force and exploded. It was a direct hit, and the result, although not immediately fatal, was absolutely assured.

The conning tower simply disappeared, together with the whole upper part of the submarine's deck. The crash was fearful, and anybody with half an eye, as Nipper declared, could see that there was only one thing to be done.

To submerge the boat was impossible, but there was no immediate prospect of the vessel sinking. She could, moreover, use her torpedo tubes, and did so! For one of the deadly engines of destruction left the submarine and sped towards her foe.

But the torpedo was seen, and the British commander, in any case, had been keenly on the look-out for such an attack. He meant to make short work of the enemy, and with the dash and daring which characterises most of our destroyer commanders, he plunged into the fray.

By an easy manœuvre the torpedo was avoided, and Nelson Lee and Nipper watched breathlessly. They were not aware that anything was happening, but they could see that the British vessel was having the best of it.

It was a grand sight to see the destroyer swirling round. She was travelling at full speed, thick, inky smoke belching from her funnels in dense clouds. Two great waves, topped by a smother of white, arose on either side of her bows, and the wake she created was simply a broad line of white foam.

The destroyer was one of the largest and newest in the British Navy, and her commander was a young man who had already distinguished himself in the great Jutland battle. What happened now was swift and deadly.

The disabled submarine, although still dangerous at a distance, was utterly helpless at close proximity. Nelson Lee and Nipper watched with bated breath. Suddenly the destroyer seemed to pause for a fraction of

a second; she seemed to stagger and then rush onwards again, having scarcely felt the shock.

But the German submarine had been rammed!

The two watchers distinctly heard the half-smothered crash, but that was all. They heard nothing else and saw nothing else. Probably the destroyer's prow was bent and damaged; but she was a large vessel and easily stood the shock.

A rousing cheer went up from the bluejackets on her deck as the result of the short but exciting action was made clear to them. It was quick work—ghastly work—but one more German murder craft had been wiped off the seas.

The destroyer came round in a big curve, slowing down at the same time. She was returning to pick up survivors, should there be any. And, as it happened, the great majority of the German submarine's crew came to the surface, fighting for life. Many had plunged to the bottom, but those who came up were rescued and taken on board the destroyer.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were sighted, and they, too, were rescued. And during the run to port Lee explained to the commander—a fresh, breezy young fellow—that he and Nipper had been imprisoned on board the *Nemesis* when she had been shelled.

The great detective did not go into full details for that was not necessary; but he gave the naval officer some inkling of what had occurred, and declared that he was extremely anxious to get on the track of Jim the Peuman without a moment's delay.

At a certain well-known seaport Nelson Lee and Nipper were put ashore, and as they stepped upon dry land once more Nelson Lee remarked to Nipper that the day had been fairly exciting so far; the hour was even now only just about breakfast-time.

Both Lee and his assistant were famished, and they lost no time in seeking breakfast—events had been too brisk on board the destroyer to think of feeding—and, while they breakfasted, Nelson Lee remarked that he had an idea within him that other exciting happenings were to occur before the day had passed.

And the famous detective was not far wrong!

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### Some Investigations—And What They Led To.

**T**HE task which now confronted Nelson Lee was a somewhat difficult one. The only concrete fact he had to go upon was that a boat—presumably a motor-launch—had left the doomed *Nemesis*. And since the boat would not roam upon the open sea, it was only natural to conclude that it would land its occupants at some point along the East Coast.

The detective was fairly certain that it was a powerful motor-launch; and he had every reason for coming to this conclusion. He knew Jim too well to suppose that the forger would trust himself in a small ship's boat upon the open sea. Jim had intended something drastic to befall the *Nemesis*, and had naturally prepared a means of getting himself and his confederate ashore.

Moreover, both Nelson Lee and Nipper remembered hearing a subdued throbbing noise soon after the engines of the *Nemesis* had been stopped. Now, when they came to think of the occurrence clearly, they realised

that that throbbing could only have been caused by a powerful petrol motor. Nelson Lee believed, even now, that Nipper's suggestion had been probably right. An infernal machine of some sort had been placed in the bowels of the ship, and, but for the prompt sinking of the vessel by the German submarine, the infernal machine would have destroyed the *Nemesis* a little later.

The immediate necessity, therefore, was to find out where an unknown motor-boat had put in, and what had become of its occupants. Knowing—at least, thinking—that his victims had been killed, Jim the Penman would see no reason for secrecy. It was more than likely he had boldly entered a well known port, without fear of being questioned.

Indeed, it was quite possible that the motor-launch had not yet returned; for the destroyer, naturally, had been vastly quicker. Therefore it was on the cards that Nelson Lee and Nipper had reached the shore before their enemies. And the detective set to work without a moment's delay.

His inquiries were many and varied. He set the telegraphs humming and the telephones ringing. Both he and Nipper were at work, in addition to numerous other people whom Lee had instructed.

And the result of all these inquiries led merely to one certain fact. The only motor-launch which had come inshore from the open sea since early morning was one at Thirtleport harbour, on the Yorkshire coast. No other boat of any description had been known to come in.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were not far from Thirtleport, and they at once started off in a powerful motor-car—which the detective had hired—and arrived at Thirtleport some time before noon.

Here they learned from the harbour-master that the motor-launch could not possibly be the one for which they were searching. Lee informed the good gentleman that it had contained the notorious forger, Sutcliffe, and his confederates, and the harbour-master smiled and shook his head.

"You are on the wrong track, Mr. Lee," he declared. "This boat can be fully accounted for. It came from the Fang Rock Lighthouse, which lies round the shoulder, some little distance from the shore.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I have heard of the Fang Rock," he said. "It is a very lonely lighthouse, is it not?"

"In the winter-time, during spells of rough weather," replied the other, "it is often weeks and weeks before relief can be sent to the lighthouse. But now, of course, it is easily approached at almost any time."

"And this motor-launch came in from the Fang Rock?"

"Yes; I saw it myself."

"Do you know when it went out to the lighthouse?"

"Yes; two days ago," replied the harbour-master. "Some friends of the keeper, I believe, have been visiting, and they stayed a couple of nights. The weather, you see, has been very favourable."

Nelson Lee was thoughtful, and he looked absently at Nipper. The latter was somewhat downcast, for he had hoped that his master was on the right track. Now, however, it seemed as though Lee had drawn a blank.

After a little further conversation with the harbour-master, the detective left, and he and Nipper made their way to another gentleman. This was the responsible officer, appointed by the Trinity House, who controlled the affairs of the Fang Rock Lighthouse. Trinity House, of course, undertakes all business connected with lighthouses and lightships round the English coasts; but the gentleman Nelson Lee went to interview was the officer in charge locally.

"I have come to you, Mr. Ransome, in order to make a few inquiries

concerning the Fang Rock," said the detective, getting to the point without delay. "I learn that a motor-boat, containing three or four men, went out to the rock two days ago, and returned this morning.

Mr. Ransome, a big, bluff gentleman, nodded.

"That is so, Mr. Lee," he answered readily. "Some friends of Marston, the keeper, have been visiting him. There are two keepers on the lighthouse—Marston, the head, and Joncliff, his assistant."

"Is it usual for visitors to stay two days on the lighthouse?" asked Lee keenly.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it is quite unusual," was the reply. "I was somewhat surprised. Lighthouse keepers don't, as a rule, entertain visitors at all. But it really was no concern of mine. The party had full written authority from London—from Trinity House itself."

And so, it seemed, the inquiry fell to the ground.

Everything was explained, and there remained nothing but to set to work in another direction. Probably any other man would have abandoned the investigation at once; but Nelson Lee was suspicious.

He was, in fact, decidedly uneasy. While he and Nipper stood looking at Mr. Ransome, the detective did some quick thinking. It struck him, with much force, that a lighthouse would provide Jim the Penman with a really substantial haven of refuge. The police were searching for him everywhere. What finer hiding-place could he choose than a lonely lighthouse? There were many drawbacks to such a supposition; but Nelson Lee was determined to inquire further.

"Can you tell me when the head-keeper entered upon his duties there?" he asked.

"As it happens, he is a new man," was the answer. "He only came ten days ago."

Lee's eyes flashed.

"By James, that is significant," he exclaimed tensely. "Ten days ago!"

In a second, an explanation flooded into the detective's brain. On the face of it, there was no possibility of any ordinary man obtaining such a post as lighthouse-keeper. But Jim the Penman was different—quite different! He was an amazing forger, and his audacity was without limit.

Could he not have forged his authority? Could he not have brought papers with him, supposedly from Trinity House, which this agent here would never suspect? And, moreover, could he not have forged the authority for the visitors to go to the Fang Rock? At all events, a close investigation was advisable.

"Why did the former head-keeper leave?" asked the detective suddenly.

"I am at a loss to understand it," Mr. Ransome replied. "Marston brought papers which instructed me to have him placed in entire control of the lighthouse without an hour's delay. Coleman, the former keeper, was dismissed summarily."

Nelson Lee was becoming keener every second.

"It fits in perfectly!" he muttered, and then, aloud, "Have you communicated with headquarters since the arrival of Marston?"

"No. I was given full instructions, and was told not to communicate with Trinity House."

"Ah, that is excellent," exclaimed Lee. "You were told not to communicate with Trinity House! Can you begin to guess things, Nipper? I am already sure that we are on the right track."

"But——"

"Now, Mr. Ransome, I want you to help me," said Lee briskly. "Will you please show me all the documents you have referred to? I want you to let me see these written instructions from Trinity House. I have an idea they are forgeries!"

"Forgeries!" gasped the other aghast.

"By gum," roared Nipper excitedly, "I see what you mean now, guv'nor! Oh, crikey, it ain't possible, is it, sir?"

"Anything is possible to Jim the Penman!" replied Nelson Lee grimly. "Anything, that is, connected with handwriting and written documents. What Mr. Ransome has told us is very significant—very suggestive. Jim is hiding from the police. Where could he conceal himself better than in this lighthouse? He is there, presumably, at the instigation of the Trinity House authorities, and but for our inquiries would probably have remained there for weeks. I gather that he only wants to remain on the rock until he has completed new arrangements."

"But the under-keeper, Joncliff——" began Mr. Ransome.

"He is probably in Jim the Penman's pay," said Lee quickly.

Very soon Nelson Lee was examining the various papers and documents which Mr. Ransome handed to him. They were apparently in perfect order, and there was no reason why the Trinity House agent should communicate with headquarters regarding them. They were obviously all correct. Mr. Ransome, in fact, was instructed expressly not to communicate with Trinity House.

Nelson Lee, however, was under no such restriction. He got busy on the job without a moment's delay. The telegraphs were soon buzzing again, and in due course several lengthy wires arrived in answer.

They were grim corroboration of the detective's suspicions.

Trinity House knew of no change recently in the control of the Fang Rock lighthouse. The present keeper, it was stated, was James Coleman, and the underkeeper, Robert Joncliff.

There had been no authority given to any man which would permit him to visit the lighthouse—much less to a party.

It was perfectly clear that the whole collection of documents were forgeries. Mr. Ransome was in no way to blame. The forgeries had been so absolutely perfect that he had guessed nothing. For years he had received similar instructions from Trinity House—instructions signed by certain men. And these recent documents had been, apparently, in absolute order.

Ransome himself was in a fine state. The revelation was a terrible one to him, and he feared the consequences. Nelson Lee, however, assured him that he would come to no harm.

The famous detective was as keen as a razor now, and glowing with excitement and anticipation. Yet, outwardly, he was as cool as ice. He guessed, rightly, that Robert Joncliff, the under-keeper, was in Jim the Penman's power. And Jim, in working this scheme, knew that Joncliff would be perfectly able to control the Fang Rock light without difficulty. Jim himself knew very little about lighthouses, but the situation was saved by his having a hold on the under-keeper.

As a matter of fact, Sutcliffe had perfected his plan months before. He had a number of "refuges" always available. And this lighthouse was one of them. He had an understanding with Joncliff, and the latter was not in a position to betray him.

The master-criminal had forged the documents with ease, and had obtained the post of lighthouse keeper; and there, on the rock, he would have remained, probably, until the trouble had blown over. The incident of the motor-boat, and the supposed visitors, was undoubtedly to assist Jim in leaving the lighthouse for a couple of days.

The forger had wished to trap Nelson Lee, and by adopting such a scheme he had been able to leave Fang Rock for forty-eight hours without a soul being the wiser. And, but for the fact of Nelson Lee having escaped death, his plans would never have failed. As soon as the motor-launch had arrived at the lighthouse he had set off in it, with his confederates, to another port. Here he had landed, and had at once travelled to Cambridge, and the rest was obvious. The arrangements regarding the chartering of the *Nemesis* had been accomplished previously.

But now, unknown to Jim the Penman, everything had gone wrong. Nelson Lee had, by sheer forced investigation, hit upon the right trail. And the forger would be taken completely by surprise.

“Not a sound,” murmured Nelson Lee, “remember, men, everything depends upon absolute silence being maintained.”

The scene was a curious one.

A large motor-launch—the very vessel, in fact, which had been used by Jim the Penman and his confederates—was floating quietly against the lee side of the Fang Rock. Towering over the boat the great pile of the lighthouse ascended into the black summer night sky.

At regular intervals a steady beam of blinding light flashed out across the quiet sea. Overhead, the stars were brilliant, and scarcely a breath of wind stirred. In the winter the rock was hardly ever approachable, but now the water was as quiet as a lake. Only tiny wavelets broke on the rock, causing a musical murmur.

Nelson Lee stepped ashore, and was followed by Nipper and a force of police—twelve strong. Another man—a civilian—was left in charge of the launch. With perfect quietness the party crossed the weed-covered rocks until they came to a flight of hewn steps which led up to the door of the lighthouse.

This, of course, was locked. But Nelson Lee was provided with a duplicate key, and within a minute the door swung open, and darkness yawned in front. A beam from the detective's electric torch revealed a flight of steps leading up into the interior of the tower.

In single file the surprise party mounted the stone steps, Nipper immediately behind his master.

It was a long climb, and necessarily a tedious one. For there was no necessity to hurry, and it was essential that silence should be maintained. This was to be a surprise attack. Lee had no intention of allowing Jim the Penman to escape him.

At last the light-room was reached. Nelson Lee burst open the door abruptly and strode in. Nipper followed, and the police crowded in with drawn truncheons. The scene was a curious one.

Two men were there, staring at the intruders aghast. Both were bearded, and Nelson Lee failed to recognise either. But one—the taller of the two—was glaring at Lee and Nipper as though he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes. And the detective knew, instinctively, that the man was Douglas James Sutcliffe.

Both the lighthouse-keepers were in their shirt-sleeves, and seemed, outwardly, very ordinary men. But their behaviour, now, gave them away completely. They had been taken off their guard, and surprised into showing their true colours.

Jim the Penman was simply mad with fury.

“Nelson Lee!” he snarled. “By Heaven, you must be superhuman. I left you on that ship with the plague bacillus——”

“You scoundrel!” cried Nelson Lee angrily. “So that was your scheme! Well——”

But the detective got no further.

Jim made a break for a door close handy, and the next second he was through. Lee and Nipper followed on the second, and were in time to catch the forger as he reached a strong railing. He was, in fact, on the narrow balcony which surrounded the great light.

Nelson Lee, without hesitation, grabbed at his enemy, and Nipper, unable to assist in the cramped space, watched with bated breath. Within the light-room the police were arresting Joncliff. It was an easy task, considering the overpowering numbers; and the under-keeper, in any case, was completely limp with terror.

Jim and Nelson Lee struggled desperately. For some reason the forger seemed anxious to break away. Why? What could he do here? He was completely trapped, anyhow. But he fought with abandoned desperation.

As it turned out, it was a short tussle.

Suddenly Jim the Penman wrenched himself away. As he did so he delivered a terrible blow upon Nelson Lee's chest, and the detective staggered back. Then an amazing thing happened.

Sutcliffe flung himself backwards clean over the rail!

Lee and Nipper had a second's vision of his falling body, and then it was swallowed up in the darkness!

A tense moment followed, and then came a sound of a splash far below. Nelson Lee, although in pain, leaned over the rail and gazed down. He could just see that on this side of the lighthouse the sea lapped against the very walls. On the other side the rock extended for twenty yards.

Jim had plunged into the sea!

"Come, Nipper!" exclaimed Nelson Lee hoarsely.

Together they raced down the steep stairs, followed by three policemen.

But again, owing to his amazing faculty for quick action, Jim the Penman escaped!

It was almost unbelievable—but it was a fact.

When Nelson Lee arrived on the rock below he heard a faint cry for assistance. A man was struggling in the water, and it proved to be the man who had been left in charge of the launch!

His story was simple, but dramatic. A man had fallen into the sea from the balcony, and he had at once gone to his assistance. But the fellow, the very instant he had been dragged on board, had pitched his rescuer into the sea, and had disappeared into the night in the launch!

Obviously, this desperate plan had been in Jim's mind when he made a break for the balcony. He had escaped, and there was no means of following! The situation was not only galling but absolutely comic. Any outsider would have roared at the neatness of the trick.

But Nelson Lee did not feel like laughing.

He freely admitted that, never for a second, had he anticipated such a denouement. No man on earth would have guessed that Jim would adopt such a desperate measure. Moreover, Lee had been under the impression that the rocks completely surrounded the lighthouse.

But Sutcliffe escaped, completely. As it was impossible to follow he had plenty of time ahead of him, and many hours of darkness. When daylight did come the launch was found on a lonely stretch of shore on the Lincolnshire coast. And there was no trace whatever of Jim the Penman.

On the whole, however, Nelson Lee was fairly satisfied with the result. He considered that he had brought the case to a successful conclusion. For, in the lighthouse he discovered much.



Carefully hidden, the detective found the bulk of the money and securities which had been stolen by Jim the Penman in the colossal "Lost Explorer" exploit—and it was to recover this money that Nelson Lee had set out to accomplish.

Jim had relied upon being undisturbed—that was evident. And he had had no time to place his ill-gotten gains in a place of further safety. Altogether, Lee recovered over £115,000 in notes and securities, the property of hundreds of subscribers all over the kingdom. This money, of course, would be distributed in the right quarters. In addition, Lee found the valuable formulas which Professor Alexander Collingwood had expressed so much anxiety about.

Jim the Penman had merely succeeded in getting away with a sum something like £15,000, a large amount, no doubt, but very small compared with the money which Nelson Lee had recovered.

The following day, at home in Gray's Inn Road, Nelson Lee related the adventures which he and Nipper had passed through, to Professor Collingwood and Detective-inspector Morley.

They were vastly interested, and considered that the great detective had been entirely successful. The fate of the bacillus fulminaris was apparent from those few unguarded words of Sutcliffe's, and the professor was intensely relieved.

And the knowledge that Jim the Penman had attempted such an inhuman plan—such a devilish plan, made Nelson Lee more than ever determined to bring the master-forgery to justice.

THE END.

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ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

The island reached, the party begin to explore, and meet with a half-starved man named MIGUEL, whom they befriend. That same night, however, Alec sees the stranger prowling about the camp, evidently bent on some evil errand, and follows him to a distant camp, where he evidently has made an appointment, for there are others present to meet him. Unfortunately, Alec is discovered, and shots are fired at him. He escapes, but discovers that he is lost! A search party, headed by DR. CAMPBELL finds him, and he tells his story. On the return journey the doctor falls and injures his ankle. He is laid up for some days, and meanwhile Alec and Clive spend a few hours in a boat fishing. They find their bait continually being carried off by some creature which they determine to capture. Suddenly there comes a jerk, and the line runs out at terrific speed. Before anything can be done the lads find themselves being towed along at a tremendous pace. They race up a narrow creek between high cliffs: and then suddenly enter a dark tunnel. Somehow they escape being dashed to pieces, and at length they see a glimmer of light.

(Now read on.)

## The Subterranean Lake.

IT was not, however, a very bright light that they could see. It was not the fresh, clear light of an open space beneath the sky, but a subdued, rather dull light such as one is accustomed to in a church. And this was accounted for when, a few minutes later, they came out upon the still, spreading waters of a broad lake, lying under a vast dome of rock and illuminated only by some indirect light which entered through crevices high up in the roof.

Now, no sooner had they swung out on to this sheet of water than the pull upon the boat ceased. She slowed down and the line became loose.

In an instant Alec sprang forward, caught up an axe which was slung under a thwart, and, exerting all his strength, rained mighty blows upon the line where it went over the gunwale.

After a short, stubborn resistance, it parted. One end disappeared with a sulky "plop!" into the water, while the other sprang up and seemed to try to hit the striker in revenge for being cut through.

Alec threw a badly-notched axe on the bottom of the boat, sat down on a thwart, pulled out a handkerchief, and mopped his face.

"Heaven be thanked for that!" he breathed fervently. "We've had a pretty experience? I never expected to come out alive!"

"You're right, old chap!" Clive agreed. "It was an awful voyage, wasn't it? And now to think that after going through so much for the sake of that brute of a big fish, or whatever it was, we have lost it, after all!"

"Lost it!" Alec repeated, with an ironical laugh. "I was never so glad to

get rid of a 'catch'—if you can call it so. The question is, who was it that was caught—we, or that brute?"

"H'm! Well, if you put it that way, I suppose it was our noble selves who were in the position of captives. However, we've got free; and now the next question is, where the dickens have we come to? What sort of a place is this? What's it called in the local guide-books, I wonder? And which is the nearest way out? I think they should put up signposts in a place like this, so that peaceful tourists might be able to find their way about, don't you?"

Alec grunted. He did not feel just then in the humour for banter.

"The question of how to get out is too serious to joke about," he grumbled. "We can't go back through that awful tunnel—it gives me the horrors to think of it! We'd better set to and look about for some other way out while what passes for daylight in this rum place lasts. We don't want to stay here all night, you know."

"You're right there," Clive agreed, with a shiver. "Well, how are we to set to work? Shall we pull the boat on to the sand over yonder, get out, and then climb up the sides and see if we can find an outlet somewhere above where the light filters through?"

"Y-yes; that might be as good a plan as any," returned Alec, rather doubtfully however. "We'll get out of the boat and look about, anyway."

They followed out this programme as well as they could. All round the margin of the lake—which was, roughly speaking, circular in shape—there was a wide margin of clean, dry sand. Then there were rocky ledges and terraces, rising one behind the other, almost like rows of benches and seats in a stupendous amphitheatre, but, of course, more varied in their arrangement.

The two chums, leaving their boat pulled well up on the shore in case the water should rise, strolled round the place looking curiously about them and chatting again over their lost "catch."

It was rather disappointing, as Clive had said, that they should have had to make up their mind to lose it, should have "booked it" after they had "hooked it" so securely. And they discussed with interest the question of its identity, in the end inclining to the idea that it must have been a particularly big specimen of the conger eel.

"Perhaps it lives here," Clive suggested. "This is its den, and it comes to our fishing-ground to feed. That might account for its stopping and sulking when it had got back home. What a strange place to make its home in!"

"I say, the doctor would like to come here, I guess," said Alec, suddenly showing more interest in their surroundings. "I think he would find some of these plants worth studying. You see, they are growing under queer conditions of light and so on. Hallo! What's that?"

Something had risen suddenly in the middle of the lake and disappeared again with a great swirl before they had had time to see exactly what it was. But while they were looking at the disturbed water, and the wavelets which were driving on to the sandy margin, the cause of the flurry rose again, and this time they caught a fairly good view of it.

"A conger eel! A monster conger!" exclaimed Alec. "Then we were right in our guess!"

"Two of 'em!" cried Clive. "And they're fighting like Kilkenny cats! Jupiter, what a scrimmage! Don't they throw the water about? And, great Scott, what a din!"

It was even as Clive had said. There were two gigantic congiers now in

(Continued overleaf.)

the water fighting together, biting, splashing, and barking! Yes, barking—for congers can bark in a very realistic manner.

But here it was like the barking of a whole troop of dogs of the most frenzied, ferocious description. For, as it turned out, the roof and sides of this place sent back every sound multiplied a dozen or a hundred times. Hence the sounds of the combat, the splashes and swirls, the breaking of the waves thrown up on the shore, the hissing, snorting, and barking of the antagonists were all echoed back from side to side, from floor to roof, and from roof back to the floor.

The result was an indescribable din such as can only be imagined.

The titanic struggle continued for some time, sometimes on the surface, sometimes altogether beneath it, and the water around became tinged with blood. But it ended at last seemingly in one of the two turning tail and "bolting," pursued by the other, for they both disappeared, leaving only a blood-red track and the dancing wavelets to show where they had been.

"I say," Alec exclaimed, when the place was quiet again, "what a fight! How interested the doctor would have been to see it. He'll be jolly sorry he missed it!"

"Yes, but it's a good thing it didn't happen while we were in the boat. Where should we have been? What awful teeth the beggars have got! They wouldn't have thought much of snapping us up if we had been overturned near them."

"It strikes me that, after all, our eel doesn't live here," Alec went on reflectively. "I think it is the other one which lives here. Ours was a trespasser. It rushed in here recklessly under the stress of finding itself hooked and being unable to get free. The one that lives here found out its presence and set about it, and I believe in the end it chased away the intruder."

Clive nodded.

"Very likely," he agreed. "But now about finding a way out. We'd better climb up the side, perhaps, and see what there is up above. Maybe there are some fissures or holes we could creep through."

Now, as they mounted from ledge to ledge, they were puzzled more than once by stones which came tumbling down from above them.

Once Clive, who was below, thought Alec, above, had purposely thrown a pebble at him. But when accused of it, Alec laughed at the idea, and at once bursts of mocking laughter seemed to come from all sides.

This occurred again and again. They laughed aloud to try it, and their voices were flung back in a chorus of "Ho, ho, ho's," mocking or jovial according to their own tones.

"It's only the echoes," Clive said at last; "and yet I could almost have sworn that I heard other voices joining in."

"Why, that's funny, but I fancied so, too," returned Alec, looking very puzzled. "Still, of course, it couldn't be anything else."

As the two went further round, they came upon numerous caves, some of large size; but most of them either terminated abruptly within a short distance or else narrowed down to so small a passage that there was no room even to crawl.

*(Another thrilling instalment of this grand sea yarn next week.)*