

NO. 66.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

Week ending
Sept. 9, 1910.

THE
NELSON LEE
LIBRARY

1^D

A detailed illustration of a windmill on the deck of a ship. The windmill is dark-colored with four sails, one of which is partially open. The ship's deck is visible in the foreground, and the background shows the ship's hull with horizontal stripes in red, white, and blue. The overall style is that of a classic pulp magazine cover.

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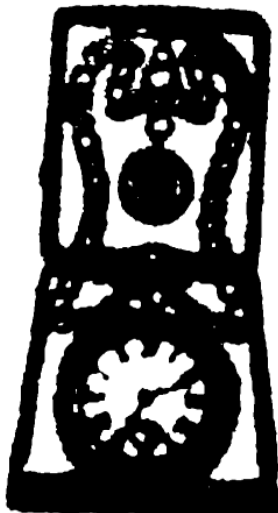
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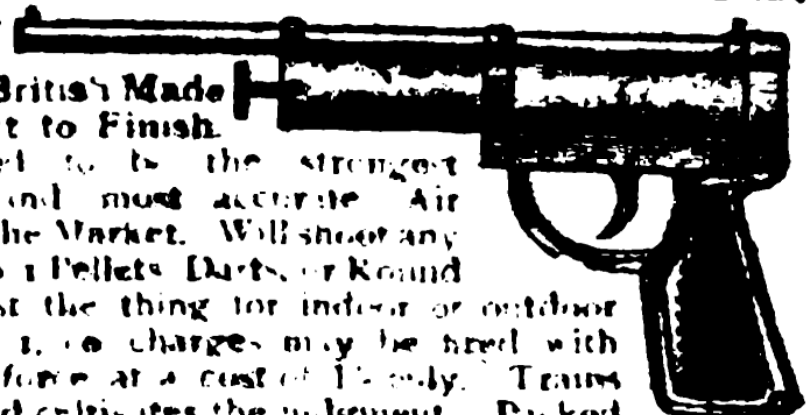
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CHAPTER I.

The Singular Incident in Edgecott Cutting.

"**W**E'RE makin' a good run to-night, Tom. I reckon we'll pull the old train into Paddington right on schedule."

Dave Openshaw, driver of the 10.20 express from Bristol to London, glanced at the pressure-gauge, and then took a swig from his can of tea. Tom Mason, his mate, turned his head and nodded.

"Yes, we're goin' fine," he remarked shortly.

The 10.20 express was roaring along at just upon sixty miles an hour at some point between Swindon and Reading. The night was as black as pitch, but beautifully calm. There was no moon, and overhead high, fine-weather clouds obscured the stars.

Engine No. 4831 was in fine fettle, and she was pulling magnificently. As it happened, the train was rather longer than usual, and Openshaw had been afraid that he would be a little behind time.

But, as he judged, he would pull into Reading—the next stop—absolutely upon time. Presently Tom Mason opened the fire-box and shovelled on a fresh supply of coal. The lurid glare cast flickering shafts up into the heavens, and the fireman straightened his back and chuckled.

"We make a good mark for them Zepp'lins, Dave," he remarked cheerfully. "Not that I figure there's any of 'em about to-night."

Dave Openshaw spat contemptuously out of the cab into the night.

"Don't talk to me of Zepp'lins!" he said with great disdain. "I don't reckon them murder things'll trouble us again, mate. And if they do come, we'll give 'em a taste of something they don't bargain for! Old England ain't so sleepy as them Huns thought she was—leastways, she's woke up durin' these last months!"

Mason closed the fire-box, and the driver leaned over the door of the cab, and gazed ahead. The train had just roared through a dark and silent country station, and an extra long stretch of open country was ahead.

It was one of the best stretches on the line, from a driver's point of view—one on which time was often made up. But on this journey, being well within schedule, the express could take it fairly leisurely.

The huge, powerful express locomotive thundered over the metals with a comfortable roar, and Dave Openshaw glanced back at the long train the engine was pulling. All the window blinds were down, and not much light was allowed to penetrate into the night.

The driver turned and looked ahead again. Then he suddenly started, and ejaculated a smothered exclamation. Tom Mason heard it, and looked round.

"Anything wrong?" he asked curiously.

Openshaw's rugged old face wore a look of surprise and slight annoyance.

"Red light against us!" he snapped. "What in thunder's the matter. We shall have to stop, of course."

The fireman gazed through one of the large circular windows in front of the cab, and nodded at once.

"Something's wrong by the look of it, Dave," he remarked. "That's a lantern being waved by somebody on the track. Mebbe some cattle strayed on to the permanent way. Darned nuisance, I call it!"

It was certainly annoying. The express was running sweetly and smoothly, and many minutes would be necessarily lost in stopping and re-starting. And perhaps the explanation was merely that a couple of old cows had innocently wandered across the track. But even then the red light was hardly accounted for. It was not probable that a cattle man was present at that hour of the night.

It was a bright red light, still some distance along the track, and it was being waved steadily to and fro. Obviously there was danger of some nature ahead, and Openshaw would be a madman to disregard the red signal.

He closed the throttle rather savagely, and applied the brakes. The old driver was a man who disliked anything out of the usual routine, and to be pulled up like this on one of the best stretches of the whole line, just as No. 4831 was going her best, made him decidedly cross.

The brakes grated harshly, and at last the express came to a standstill only a few yards from the red light, the locomotive hissing impatiently. She had a big head of steam, and the safety valve was roaring with intensity.

The driver jumped down beside the track, and saw that the front guard had left his van, and was just alongside.

"What's the trouble, Openshaw?" queried the guard.

"Don't know yet," was the reply. "Some foolery, I expect!"

The pair walked forward, and peered past the red light to the man who held it. The engine-driver was just about to speak when the unseen man set his lamp down, and uttered a husky sigh.

"My sakes! An' I tho't I wasn't goin' to pull you up!" exclaimed a wheezy, aged voice. "It's bin a near shave, an' that's a fact!"

Openshaw picked up the lamp and flashed the red light upon the speaker. He seemed to be an old countryman, roughly dressed, and shaking perceptibly with excitement. His grizzled beard was all dishevelled and untidy, as though he had been nervously pulling at it.

"What's the trouble?" demanded the engine-driver sharply. "Don't you know this is the London express? What in thunder's name do you mean by pulling me up? There's nothing wrong that I can see!"

"My name's old Bill Higgins——"

"Confound your name!" rapped Openshaw angrily. "Why did you pull me up?"

"There's danger ahead, master—terrible danger!" wheezed the old man nervously. "I tho't I wasn't going to pull the old train up in time. There'd ha' bin a most fearful smash if I hadn't shown that red light!"

"Why, is there an obstruction?" asked the guard.

"I dunno so much about an obstruction," replied the strange old man. "But just ahead—no more than three hundred yards—the track is all

cut up and torn to bits! The express would ha' dashed itself to fire kindlin' if I hadn't stopped ye!"

The guard looked a bit scared.

"Seems to me we have had a narrow squeak, Openshaw," he remarked. "This old man would not invent a yarn like that, would he? You'd better go along and see what has really happened."

The driver grunted. He was certainly impressed by what he had heard; if, indeed, the line was torn up as the old man had stated, then the ten-twenty express had had a very narrow escape from disaster.

Openshaw returned to his engine, and sent the fireman down with a lantern to go ahead and investigate. The guard elected to accompany him. The old man, Bill Higgins, led the way, mumbling to himself that he had saved the express and scores of lives.

Engine No. 4831 seemed decidedly annoyed at the stop, for she was roaring and hissing with impatience. The long train was fairly quiet, only one or two passengers being curious enough to lower the windows and look out. And even these people could see nothing or hear nothing—except the hiss of the steam from the engine safety-valve. The rear guard remained in his van, for, so far as he knew, the train would start again in a moment or two. And, in any case, it was his duty to remain at the rear.

The fireman and the front guard, carrying their lamps, followed the old countryman up the permanent way. Probably they would find that the old fellow had greatly exaggerated the danger; but his state of nervousness clearly proved that something really serious was amiss.

After fully four hundred yards had been covered, and the engine headlights looked mere spots in the distance, Tom Mason swore savagely.

"What's the idea of this?" he demanded. "You didn't say we had to go all— Why, by gosh! Where is the old chap?"

Mason and the guard had been striding over the sleepers, side by side, and their aged informant had fallen to the rear. But now, when the fireman turned, he made the remarkable discovery that he and the guard were alone. The grey-bearded old countryman had vanished in a most uncanny manner; he had disappeared completely, and he left no sign or trace.

"By ginger, there's something fishy about this business, Mason!" growled the guard. "I'll tell you what—I don't believe there's anything amiss with the track at all! It's just sheer imagination. I'll bet that old fogey escaped from a blamed lunatic asylum."

"Like as not!" growled the fireman. "Anyhow, it don't look very healthy his sheering off like this. I reckon it's not all straightforward, anyhow. We had better go along for another hundred yards and then get back to the train. We shall be ten minutes over-due in Reading as it is!"

The pair relapsed into silence, and hastened along the permanent way for another two hundred yards, in order to make positively sure. But the track was untouched and perfect. It was only too apparent that the old countryman had deliberately lied.

But why had he stopped the train? What earthly reason could he have had for playing such a trick? When Dave Openshaw was informed he was simply furious, and curtly ordered the fireman to jump up into the locomotive's cab.

"We have wasted enough time here already," he snapped. "Mebbe that old fool was doing it just on purpose to make me late. Jealousy's a queer thing, and there are one or two drivers who ain't so smart as I am, and this old jossler may have been set here on purpose."

But Tom Mason shook his head.

"Don't get thinking things like that, Dave," he exclaimed. "None of

our chaps would do a dirty trick like that. I believe the old man was wrong in the top storey!"

"Right away!" came a voice from the night.

The guard had leapt into his van, and Openshaw jerked the throttle. The huge locomotive puffed laboriously, and restarted on its journey after an unnecessary delay of fully ten minutes.

But, partly owing to the heavy roar of steam from the safety valve, neither the driver nor the fireman nor the front guard heard any shouts which came wildly from the rear of the express.

Being pitch dark, it was impossible to see. There were shouts, however—and they were uttered by the other guard at the rear.

For an astounding thing happened.

The guard, after leaning out of his window for some little time, had returned to his comfortable seat and lay back with closed eyes. There was no need for him to worry himself over any stoppage, so he might as well be taking things easy. But as he sat there he heard the engine give a short, sharp whistle, and then came the long, steady puffs of steam as it got in motion.

For a moment the guard had noticed nothing. Then in a dull kind of way he realised that his van was not moving. The van was still stationary, and it was only too obvious that the express was moving away. The guard leapt to his feet, flung the door open, and gazed ahead.

His own van and the express was separated by full ten yards—and the distance was increasing every second!

The guard was nearly overcome by amazement, but he kept his head sufficiently to let out a terrific roar of dismay and alarm. He yelled at the top of his voice, but all to no purpose. The train increased its speed rapidly, and in a few moments the guard could see nothing of it. Only the steady throbbing of his engine reached his ears.

But the whole thing seemed like some singular dream.

The guard's van had been left behind! It was the most astonishing thing that had ever happened in the course of the man's experience. He was so amazed that he simply leaned out of the window of his van and gazed ahead into the darkness.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he gasped. "I reckon I must be dreaming! How in the name of wonder did this van get uncoupled? It could not have uncoupled itself, that's a certain fact. By Joseph! Somebody's been playing old Harry to-night!"

But a further surprise was awaiting the guard when he knew that he was quite alone, for his van was merely an ordinary six-wheeled coach, containing luggage in the front portion of it, and the guard's compartment at the rear. Here also were two mailbags, which had been picked up at Bath.

The guard, therefore, having been left stranded on the track in his own van, realised that he was quite alone, that there was no way in which he could carry information regarding the amazing accident—for it was certainly impossible for him to leave the spot. At Reading, of course, the van would be missed, and then relief would be sent without delay.

The guard fetched his lamp over, and opened the door, with the intention of getting out in order to examine the couplings. He was positive, of course, that somebody must have tampered with the train while it was stopped. But he had heard no noise, and had been utterly unaware of what was going on—and the guard felt rather scared. The whole thing

was so unusual and so extraordinary that he could not clearly gather his wits.

Then with the door open, he prepared himself to leap out on to the permanent way. All signs of the express had died away in the distance, and this solitary van was left deserted and alone. The spot itself was, perhaps, the most lonely of the whole stretch.

The guard knew, instinctively, if not by sight, that he was right in the middle of a long straight section known as the Edgecott cutting. The embankments on either side were steep and grassy, and their summits were right high in the sky line. No houses or cottages were situated anywhere near the cutting, and there was no signal cabin within four miles.

And the van, with its solitary occupant, lay at the bottom of the cutting, forlorn and silent. The guard felt unutterably lonely, and just a little nervous. The whole thing was so strange that he could not collect his wits in order to think clearly.

And then, as he was about to leap down, he received a further shock.

Into the radius of his lamp, which he flashed down upon the track, two figures stepped noiselessly and mysteriously from the surrounding darkness. If they had been the figures of ordinary men the guard would probably have been startled. But they were nothing of the sort.

Their appearance was weird in the extreme, for it was impossible to detect their features, or to see how they were clothed. For both the figures wore long black cloaks, which reached to their feet, and concealed their figures very effectively. And over their heads they wore strange looking black hoods, two tiny holes in each revealing their eyes.

One of them stepped forward, and the guard noticed, with a slight shiver, that a large revolver was projecting from a hole in the cloak.

"Well, my friend," exclaimed a calm, even voice, in somewhat muffled tones, "I think we planned this little affair very neatly, don't you? What is your name?"

"Reeves!" gasped the guard, with staring eyes.

"Well, my good Reeves, step back into the van, and allow us to enter," continued the stranger. "I am afraid that my friend and I are going to inconvenience you somewhat, but if you do as we order without question you will come to no harm."

Reeves was really incapable of replying. Never, in the whole course of his experience as a railway guard, had he encountered anything so strange as this. He told himself that he certainly must be dreaming—that the whole incident must be merely a nightmare.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew that it was not so. Everything was so horribly real. Then, quite abruptly, a flash of dawning intelligence burst upon his brain. He started violently, and his cheeks paled.

"The mails!" he panted. "By Joseph! I am beginning to understand now——"

"Perhaps that is just as well," interjected the imperturbable voice of the man on the track. "But, whether you understand or not, is really of no consequence."

"You—you scoundrels!" roared the guard furiously. "You're train robbers, that's what you are! You're after the mails and I'll——"

Before he could speak further the two hooded figures leapt upwards and boarded the coach. There was a short, sharp struggle, and then Reeves fell to the floor with a dull thud.

He lay still—deathly still—and uttered no sound.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee Investigates—And is Surprised.

"SHE'S late, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and glanced at his watch under one of the subdued platform lamps of Reading Station.

"Yes, five minutes overdue already, Nipper," replied the great detective. "Rather strange, too, for the Great Western trains are usually very punctual. And the weather is certainly splendid for railway traffic."

Reading station was somewhat deserted. Overhead, the stars were hidden by high clouds, but there was no sign of rain. The wind was merely a light breeze, and by no means cold. The early September night was mild and pleasant.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had taken tickets for Paddington. They had arrived in Reading during the evening, on a matter that was of no special importance. They had dined with a friend of Lee's, and had stayed until late, refusing an invitation to stay the night. Lee had decided to return to London by the night train.

For some little time the famous criminologist and his clever young assistant had been promenading the station platform, chatting with the station-master. The latter gentleman was acquainted with Nelson Lee, and respected him highly. He had gone off now to attend to certain duties.

And the express was already six minutes late.

"She's signalled, sir," remarked Nipper, a few moments later.

Nelson Lee paused to light a cigar, and as soon as he had got it drawing freely, the headlights of the express locomotive came into view. The train drew up in the station, and came smoothly to a standstill.

On the footplate of engine No. 4831 Dave Openshaw glanced at his big watch.

"Seven and a half minutes behind schedule," he grunted. "Not so bad, Tom, considerin' that fool stoppage. I dessay we'll make up before we get to Paddington, after all. Leastways, I'm goin' to try."

He descended from his cab on to the platform, oil-can in hand, and he noticed that the front guard had gone along the platform, probably in order to report the incident in Edgcott cutting.

The driver heard a shout from the rear of the train, but he did not pay much attention to it. But Nelson Lee and Nipper, who were about to enter a first-class smoker, paused, and looked down the platform.

A porter, whom they had seen earlier standing beside some mail bags talking with a man in post office uniform, was running up with a scared expression on his face. But there was a look of amazement and alarm there, too.

"There ain't no rear guard's van on the train!" he shouted breathlessly.

The stationmaster hurried forward.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

"There's something amiss, sir!" gasped the porter. "The rear van ain't here—it's been uncoupled, or broken loose!"

"Nonsense!" said the stationmaster. "There must be some reason——"

"But the rear lights ain't fixed either, sir," persisted the porter. "The van must have come uncoupled, and got left behind!"

The stationmaster walked hurriedly to the rear of the train, accompanied by the excited porter. Nelson Lee and Nipper, feeling somewhat interested, strolled after them at a more leisurely gait.

"What's wrong, guv'nor?" asked Nipper curiously.

"You know as much as I do, my lad," was Nelson Lee's reply.

When they arrived at the back of the train they found the stationmaster rubbing his head perplexedly, and obviously alarmed. He stepped forward at once as soon as he saw Nelson Lee on the spot.

"There's something badly wrong here, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed worriedly. "I suppose you heard? The guard's van is missing altogether—guard, luggage, mails and all!"

Nelson Lee could scarcely help smiling.

"But surely the coach could not have come uncoupled of its own accord?" he asked. "I imagine the driver will be able to throw some light on the affair. The express was late, you know."

At that moment, the front guard came up, and when he saw what was wrong he simply stared and gaped. Then, in quick, excited sentences, he told of the singular stoppage in EdgECott cutting. Nelson Lee listened intently, and his lips set themselves rather grimly.

"H'm! I am afraid the matter is serious," he remarked.

"What do you mean, Mr. Lee?" asked the worried stationmaster.

"Well, an obvious explanation suggests itself at once," Lee went on. "It would be possible, would it not, to disconnect the rear van while the train was standing still in the cutting—to disconnect it, I mean, without the guard knowing of it?"

"Yes, I think so," replied the stationmaster. "Not anticipating any such thing, he would not be on the alert for any unusual sound."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"Well, what can we deduce from the facts?" he asked. "A strange old man stops the train, and then deliberately keeps the guard and the engine-driver talking for two or three minutes—wasting time, obviously."

"By ginger! So he was!" exclaimed the guard savagely.

"Then the stranger causes further delay by taking the stoker and guard up the line for a considerable distance," continued Nelson Lee. "Without their being aware of the fact until too late he disappears, and they can find nothing wrong."

Nipper nodded excitedly.

"That's right, giv'nor," he chimed in. "And while all that was going on in front, some rotter detached the guard's van behind! Of course, the train started off again, and the last coach was left standing on the rails!"

"Exactly!"

"Then—then it is probably standing there now!" said the stationmaster blankly.

"Well, it couldn't be shifted, could it?" asked Lee.

The railway official hurried off, and there was subdued excitement for some little time. Dave Openshaw was dismayed when he learned the startling news, and resigned himself to the fact that he would pull into Paddington at any old time. There was no telling when he would leave Reading now.

For it was apparent that some particularly clever villainy was afoot. The stopping of the express had been nothing but a plot. And it was generally accepted as a fact that the object was robbery.

Nelson Lee learned that the van contained much valuable property, in addition to the two bags of mails; and they, alone, were undoubtedly valuable. At Bath three heavy cases had been placed in the van, and these consisted of jewellery. A big wholesale firm of jewellers had dispatched a consignment of stuff to a London branch—and the value of the consignment was fully £20,000.

"Evidently a well-planned affair," observed Nelson Lee, as he and Nipper hung about the platform. "That consignment of jewellery was a tempting bait; and it seems that the plotters have brought off the coup."

Nipper nodded.

"Why, they've had time to shift the stuff and get clear away," he said. "There'll be no tracing 'em now—unless you get on the job, guv'nor," he added cheerfully. "Do you think the railway will ask you to investigate?"

"Possibly. I am certainly interested," was the detective's reply.

The audacity of the plot was astonishing. Yet, when Lee pondered over the affair, he realised that it had been simplicity itself. The train-robbers had got wind of the consignment of jewellery, and had laid their plans accordingly.

In all probability a fast motor-car had been standing on a quiet road within easy distance of the cutting. The cases had been merely shifted out of the coach, up the embankment, and on to the car.

The latter had then made tracks with all speed. There was not a single difficult point in the whole business. The guard himself might have been in the plot, or he might have been knocked on the head—which was more probable.

Very soon the stationmaster came bustling along the platform, having been in telegraphic communication with London. He had also been busy with the telephone.

He informed Lee that a special train was to be dispatched at once to the scene of the robbery.

"I mentioned that you were in Reading, Mr. Lee," he said, "and I have received instructions to ask you to accompany the special. If there has been a big robbery, as we suspect, the company would like you to look into the matter straight away."

Nelson Lee looked at Nipper, and the lad nodded at once.

"We'll go, guv'nor!" he said eagerly. "What do you say?"

"Well, I am certainly inclined that way," smiled Lee. "Yes, Mr. Marshall, I will do as you request. When does the special train start, and who is going with it?"

"Inspector Dawkin, of the Reading police, is hastening here even at this moment," replied the stationmaster. "He will come along with us, and — Ah, here he is."

The inspector was a big, square man, inclined to be pompous, but quite genial. He knew Nelson Lee well, and acknowledged the detective's undoubted ability.

The special train consisted of a small engine and one coach. This was already being prepared, and in a few minutes it came alongside the platform, and the party entered one of the first-class compartments.

The express had been sent on, with a fresh guard's van added, a few minutes before. And traffic was somewhat disorganised, for if that coach was still standing in the EdgECott cutting—as it certainly must be—traffic was impossible.

Nipper was in his element. He loved anything unexpected and unusual. Nothing pleased the young rascal better than rushing off somewhere on a sudden case which had cropped up unexpectedly.

The special train travelled quickly, for it was necessary to lose no time. The railway officials were upset and startled, for an affair of this nature had never before occurred.

"I expect the company will be willing to pay you a handsome fee if you succeed in recovering those cases of stolen jewellery, Mr. Lee," said the stationmaster. "Of course, the police may get on the track first, but in any case you will be amply rewarded——"

"Really, Mr. Marshall, this is scarcely a time to be discussing fees," smiled Nelson Lee. "I fancy, however, that the case may be rather too

deep for the police. It has been so obviously well-planned that it goes without saying that the problem will be a difficult one to solve."

Inspector Dawkin shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Problems may be your speciality, Mr. Lee," he remarked heavily, "but the police aren't quite asleep, you know. I suppose the company will have to pay heavily if that jewellery can't be recovered?" he added, turning to Mr. Marshall.

The stationmaster nodded gloomily.

"Yes, the stuff was sent at the company's risk, of course," he explained. "The owners weren't likely to risk twenty thousand themselves. That's why I'm sure the railway will be ready to pay a large figure for the return of the stuff."

The special rattled along at a good speed. The line was clear all the way, and in due course the Edgocott cutting was entered. The engine-driver throttled down here, and he and his fireman kept a sharp lookout ahead. The night was very dark, and especially so between the high embankments.

"By goosh, the darned coach is there right enough!" exclaimed the fireman suddenly.

Not far ahead a dull black patch was clearly visible on the up-line, and it could be nothing but the solitary guard's van which had been uncoupled from the 10.20 express.

Two or three other trains had been due to pass the spot since the time of the strange incident, but these had been stopped by telegraph in time to avert complications and a possible disaster.

The driver of the special brought his engine to a standstill absolutely on a level with the standing coach, and the party at once jumped on to the permanent way and made their way past the front of the locomotive.

"Nobody here now," remarked the inspector. "I wonder what's happened to the guard. I shouldn't be surprised if he was in the plot. That would account for his making no outcry when this coach was detached.

They passed round to the other side of the motionless railway van and at once saw that the door stood wide open. Everything was silent and still.

"Birds have flown, of course," said Nelson Lee shortly. "We could hardly expect to catch them, after all this delay."

The detective jumped lightly upwards, and Nipper would have followed, but Inspector Dawkin pushed forward. But in less than half a minute all four were standing within the van, and the stationmaster flashed his lanterns about.

But this was really unnecessary, for Lee had already pressed the switch of his electric torch, the light of which made Mr. Marshall's lamp seem insignificant. There was an outcry at once.

For, at the end of the van, lay the huddled-up form of John Reeves, the guard. But Nelson Lee knew at once that the man was probably unharmed, for he was tightly bound and gagged. Dead men do not need binding and gagging.

"We'll soon have you in a better fix, my friend," said Lee crisply. "Come, Nipper, make yourself useful."

The detective soon ripped the ropes off, and the gag followed. Reeves sat up, looking decidedly dazed, and an ugly bruise showed upon his forehead, partially hidden by his hair.

"They've been gone over half-an-hour!" he panted huskily.

"I'm not surprised to hear that," said Nelson Lee. "Take a drop of this, my man, and then try to tell us exactly what happened."

"This" was brandy, and Reeves needed no second invitation to sample

it. He would have complied equally as readily if he had been perfectly all right. But under the present conditions the spirit rapidly cleared his brain.

"I haven't got much to tell, gentlemen," he exclaimed as he sat up. "After that stoppage—which is a mystery to me even now—I was amazed to find my van left behind. Who the thunder uncoupled it is more than I can imagine."

"Surely you heard something?" said the stationmaster sharply.

"Not a sound—on my oath, sir," declared the guard earnestly.

"Well, it's strange," said the inspector. "But it was quite possible with these patent couplings which are used nowadays. They are a special pattern, I believe. But why didn't you stop the train again?"

Reeves looked somewhat hurt.

"Why, bless your life, sir, I yelled with all the strength of my lungs," he exclaimed. "I couldn't do more than that, could I? And, of course, the train had gone fifty or sixty yards before I realised what was happening."

"That was only natural," commented Lee. "Well, and after that?"

In a rather awed tone Reeves related how he had been confronted by the two strange, hooded men. His listeners were struck by the story, but in no way surprised. Naturally enough, the train robbers had taken every precaution against recognition.

"What could I do?" asked the guard weakly. "There were two against me, and one of the beggars had a shooter. They came in here and punched me on the jaw before I knew what their game was. I just remember going down, twisting as I went. By Joseph! I caught my head a fearful smash against an iron bolt in the floor, and I went to sleep beautifully."

"Which was, perhaps, very fortunate for you," remarked Nelson Lee drily. "The train robbers were desperate men, that is obvious, and they would probably have dealt with you drastically if you had not stunned yourself by chance. Finding that you were incapable, they merely bound and gagged you and let you lie here. By the way, did you see anything of them when you came to your senses?"

"Not a thing, sir. Everything was as quiet as the grave, and I own I was in a pretty funk," said the guard candidly. "I was expecting the goods train that usually follows us to crash into this old van at any minute."

"Well, I'm afraid we cannot rely upon you——"

It was the inspector who had been speaking, and he was suddenly interrupted by a deep gasp from Nipper. The lad was staring round him in genuine amazement.

"What's wrong, young 'un?" asked Lee quickly.

"Well, by the look of it, nothing's wrong at all!" exclaimed Nipper. "Don't you see, sir? Everything's in order—nothing's touched! There are the mail bags, and those three cases of jewellery, and everything else."

Nelson Lee looked round him in blank astonishment. The others, too, had also turned their attention from the injured guard to the contents of the van.

It was extraordinary.

Nipper had spoken truly. Everything seemed to be intact. The two sealed mail-bags were lying against the side of the coach, and near them were many other articles of luggage. Up one corner were three iron-bound cases, and a glance at the labels told Lee that they were consignments of jewellery.

A closer examination proved that they had been untouched. For the thought had crossed the detective's mind that the cases had been opened and then repacked with a worthless substitute of equal weight. But that

dodge, of course, would have been objectless. Moreover, it was certain that all three boxes had not been handled.

"Well, upon my soul, this is certainly surprising," said the detective in astonishment. "What have you got to say, inspector?"

Inspector Dawkin scratched his ear.

"It's beyond me," he admitted frankly. "What's the idea of it? Look here, Reeves, you were in charge of this van—is there anything missing? You ought to know better than us. Make a close inspection."

The guard was upon his feet now, and he went round the van thoroughly. When he had finished, he wore a look of wondering mystification.

"Everything is exactly the same as when the express left Bath," he declared. "There ain't even a speck of dust missing!"

"And the mail-bags are still sealed and intact," put in the Reading stationmaster. "Well, this is a very pleasant surprise. But, so far as I can see, it makes the affair much more of a mystery than ever. Why in the name of all that's strange did those men stop the train and then clear off without doing anything? They uncoupled this van for no purpose whatever."

Inspector Dawkin grunted.

"Looks to me like some fool's practical joke," he exclaimed. "There's nothing else for it. It's certain, at any rate, that the chaps weren't disturbed and took to sudden flight. They had this cutting to themselves for close upon an hour."

Nelson Lee and Nipper were silent. But the great detective was not inclined to share the police inspector's view. No practical joker had been at work here. There was some other solution to the puzzle.

What could it be?

Who were the mysterious men, hooded and cloaked, who had held up the express? What had their object been in uncoupling the rear guard's van, in binding and gagging the guard, and in disappearing without having achieved any definite object?

There was not a single clue which would lead to the identity of the strangers, and it was certain that no clue would be forthcoming.

Why had they gone to all that trouble—for nothing?

CHAPTER III.

Nelson Lee Accepts a Commission and Comes to a Startling Conclusion.

GRAY'S INN ROAD was just about as noisy as usual, but the day was warm and sunny, and both the windows of Nelson Lee's consulting-room were wide open. The hour was about two-thirty in the afternoon of the day following the curious adventure in the Edgecott cutting.

Lee and Nipper had arrived home in the early morning, and had consequently slept late. They were now taking an easy day, although, later on, Nelson Lee intended to busy himself.

The affair of the 10.20 express was still fresh, and it was as much of a puzzle as ever. Nipper had been sitting silent for some time, and at last he rose to his feet and rubbed his hair the wrong way.

"Well, it's beyond me, guv'nor," he admitted. "I'm blessed if I can make head or tail of it. Why the dickens was that express stopped in the cutting last night? Why was that guard's van uncoupled?"

Nelson Lee looked round.

"My dear Nipper, the riddle is somewhat complex," he replied. "From the information we have received to-day we know that our first conclusions were quite correct. And the mystery, instead of being explained, is only the more puzzling."

A telephone message shortly before, in fact, had informed the detective that all three cases of jewellery had been found to be perfectly intact, and that nothing whatsoever was missing from the mail-bags. Whatever the object of the stoppage had been, it had not been robbery.

And yet there was no other motive possible—except, of course, a practical joke. And Lee would not consider that possibility for a moment. Practical jokers do not practise such methods.

Nipper was inclined to discuss the matter further, but before he could do so Mrs. Jones, the landlady, entered, and announced that a gentleman was waiting below. She brought his card across and laid it upon Nelson Lee's desk.

The detective read the inscription: "Lord Freshberry."

He then instructed Mrs. Jones to show his lordship up at once, and gave Nipper a few details regarding the visitor while the landlady was absent.

"I wonder what his lordship can want with me?" said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Freshberry is an elderly peer of the old school, Nipper. Not one of these newly created noblemen, who have obtained their title because they happen to be rich. He is one of the genuine aristocracy, and a fine name the family has. His country seat, I believe, is situated somewhere near Bath."

"Yes, I've heard of him, 'guv'nor," remarked Nipper. "Perhaps his family plate has been pinched and he wants you to recover it."

The visitor was ushered in a moment later. He was tall and distinguished-looking, and bore himself and his years wonderfully well. It was easy to see that he was of noble stock. At the present moment Lord Freshberry's clean-shaven face wore a worried expression.

"I think this is the first time I have personally met you, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed quietly as he took the seat which Nelson Lee indicated. "But of course I have often heard of your wonderful achievements, and never thought that I should come to you myself for aid."

"I shall be pleased to lend you what assistance I am capable of," said the detective. "If you have anything private to discuss, you may speak freely before this lad, my lord. He is my assistant, and absolutely trustworthy."

Nipper felt rather pleased with himself, and showed it.

"Well, I don't think my business is of a confidential nature," said Lord Freshberry. "But it is, nevertheless, important. I want your advice, Mr. Lee, and, possibly, your help. Of the latter I am not quite sure."

He paused, and was silent for a moment or two."

"Perhaps you have heard of Mr. Ronald Causton, the diamond merchant?" he asked.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I have had occasion to approach Mr. Causton more than once," he replied. "To tell the truth, we are well acquainted, and I know Mr. Causton to be an honourable gentleman and an expert in diamonds of every variety."

Lord Freshberry nodded.

"I have always found Mr. Causton to be a trustworthy business man," he agreed. "Well, Mr. Lee, for some little time Mr. Causton has had charge of the well-known Freshberry jewels. Perhaps they are not unknown to you?"

"I can hardly imagine anyone who has not heard of the Freshberry jewels at some time or other," replied Lee, smilingly. "Unless I am mis-

taken, my lord, they are worth every penny of two hundred thousand pounds."

"Perhaps not quite so much as that," was his lordship's remark. "But you are not far wrong, Mr. Lee. When I said that Mr. Causton has had charge of my family heirlooms, I was, perhaps, a little inaccurate. In reality the diamond merchant has been resetting certain diamonds and rubies, valued at just over seventy thousand—really the most valuable gems of the collection."

"I judge, from your remarks, that the work has been completed?"

"Exactly. Yesterday, Mr. Lee, I wrote to Mr. Causton from Bath, giving him certain instructions," continued the peer. "I and my son came up to town this morning, and I arranged with Mr. Causton to deliver the jewels, in a locked cash-box, to my son."

"Do you mean that your son went to Hatton Garden?"

"No. I did not think there was any necessity for that," replied Lord Freshberry. "My son, the Hon. Claude Atherley, was meeting some friends at the Hotel Cecil, and so I considered it would be convenient for the jewels to be delivered to him there."

"Quite naturally."

"In my letter of instructions to Mr. Causton, I mentioned that the hour of one-thirty would be most convenient. Accordingly, Claude expected the messenger to arrive with the cash-box at that time. As he did not arrive, however, and as my boy became anxious—for the instructions were most definite—he thought it wise to go to Hatton Garden at once. When he arrived he was astonished to find that Mr. Causton's messenger had gone off to Richmond."

"For what reason?"

"Well, evidently there was a misunderstanding," said the peer, looking worried. "The diamond merchant positively declared that I had mentioned Richmond in my letter. That, of course, was absurd, for I had done nothing of the kind."

"I understand, then, that when the Hon. Claude Atherley arrived at Hatton Garden, the diamonds were even then on their way to Richmond?" inquired Nelson Lee.

"That is so. And the hour of the appointment, Mr. Causton said, was not one-thirty, as I directed, but one o'clock. My letter had been taken by the messenger—the diamond merchant's private secretary—and Mr. Causton requested Claude to call again this afternoon. Possibly everything will turn out all right, but I am strangely perturbed. I cannot possibly understand the discrepancy between the hour and the meeting-place. I know that I am right regarding one-thirty at the Hotel Cecil, and Mr. Causton is equally certain that he is right concerning Richmond and one o'clock."

Nelson Lee leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin.

"Apparently there is a mix-up," he smiled. "But are you positive—"

"Of the time and the meeting-place? I would swear to it!"

"Because Mr. Causton is a man of precise habits," said Nelson Lee. "I can hardly imagine such a flagrant mistake. What part of Richmond was the messenger sent to?"

"I am not quite sure. I only know that he had to go to a private house, and deliver the cash-box."

"And what do you want me to do?" asked Lee.

"I want you to come round with me to Hatton Garden at once," replied his lordship. "Somehow, I've got an idea that there is something very wrong. Mind you, I cast no doubts upon Mr. Causton's honour. But I

cannot possibly believe that he could have misunderstood my instructions in such an extraordinary manner. Mr. Causton told me that his secretary would certainly bring the jewels back with him when he found that Claude was not there to meet him—for I had stated most positively that the jewels were to be delivered to no one but my son in person."

"Well, that was clear enough, at all events," was Lee's remark. "But if you wish it, my lord, I will certainly go with you to Hatton Garden. I believe you are alarming yourself unnecessarily; but no harm will be done."

To tell the truth, Nelson Lee was more than a little puzzled. Lord Freshberry's story was a strange one, and there scarcely seemed sufficient reason for him to approach the detective. But it was singular that, after giving such precise instructions as he had done, that Mr. Causton should have sent the jewels to Richmond. Without a doubt there was something amiss.

And the best way to arrive at the truth of the thing was to visit Mr. Ronald Causton. Privately, Lee had an idea that Lord Freshberry's handwriting was rather illegible, and that the diamond merchant had merely read the instructions wrong.

After a few words with Nipper, Nelson Lee was ready, and he and the old peer left the consulting-room, and descended to the street. Here his lordship's big motor-car was waiting, and the pair were soon gliding round to Hatton Garden.

Mr. Causton's premises were by no means elaborate, but he was one of the best-known men in the diamond trade. The visitors were informed that Mr. Causton was anxious to see them, and they were taken at once to his private office.

The diamond merchant was a smallish man, elderly, and with a pair of extremely alert eyes. As the pair entered he came forward quickly, and it was obvious that he was upset.

"Why, Mr. Lee, I didn't expect to see you," he exclaimed. "But I am glad you have come—very glad. I am afraid, Lord Freshberry, that something is badly wrong, and I must prepare you for a shock."

The peer started a little.

"Good heavens, Causton, you don't mean——"

"Yes, I am afraid so," said the diamond merchant gravely.

Nothing definite has been said, but the conversation was significant enough, in any case. Lee noticed that another visitor was with Mr. Causton. This was the Hon. Claude Atherley, Lord Freshberry's son. The latter had referred to him as "my boy," but the Hon. Claude was close upon forty years of age, and was a tall, sunburnt gentleman, who had evidently done much travelling.

"The jewels are gone, pater!" he exclaimed huskily. "There's something infernally queer about this whole business, and we'd better straighten it out at once. But there's no getting over that one fact. The jewels have been delivered over to some scoundrel in Richmond!"

"But they had no right to be!" exclaimed Lord Freshberry, angrily. "What is the meaning of this, Mr. Causton? I hold you responsible——"

"My lord—my lord!" protested the diamond merchant gently. "I think, when you have heard all, you will not blame me for what has occurred. As your son has said, there is something very queer about the whole business, and it is splendid to see Mr. Nelson Lee here."

The famous detective smiled.

"Well, suppose we straighten things out?" he suggested. "To begin with, Mr. Causton, will you tell me exactly what has happened?"

They were all seated now, and Mr. Causton leaned forward.

"I will tell you everything I know," he said quietly. "To commence with, I received a letter of instructions from Lord Freshberry this morning. There is a disagreement regarding those instructions, but we will go into that later. Never doubting for a moment that anything was wrong, I must confess I took very little notice of Lord Freshberry's letter, but handed it straight over to my private secretary to be dealt with."

"The gentleman is to be trusted, of course?" asked Lee.

"My dear sir, Marriott has served me for ten years, and I think I can trust him," said Mr. Causton with a smile. "Yes, my private secretary is absolutely above suspicion—I wish you to understand that straight away. Well, as I said, upon receiving Lord Freshberry's letter this morning, I merely glanced at it, and handed it over to Marriott to attend to. His lordship has, of course, told you all about the diamonds I have been re-setting for him. The instructions told me to send them by trusted messenger to an address in Richmond—pardon me, my lord—I repeat, to an address in Richmond, and to there deliver them over to a special emissary. To be brief, Marriott fulfilled the instructions, and the diamonds have already been delivered. That, so far as I am concerned, is all I know."

"But I told you to send the jewels to the Hotel Cecil!" burst out Lord Freshberry furiously. "What is this nonsense, Mr. Causton? Richmond—Richmond! What on earth are you talking about?"

For answer the diamond merchant reached over his desk and picked up a sheet of vellum notepaper which bore the Freshberry crest. Without a word Mr. Causton handed it over to his lordship.

The peer looked at it sharply, and then his eyes seemed to grow larger, and a look of incredible amazement overspread his features.

"What—what is this?" he stammered. "Upon my soul! Am I dreaming? Richmond is certainly mentioned in this letter, and it is written by myself! But I have no recollection——"

"It's your writing, pater," put in the Hon. Claude gently.

"Indeed, it is! But this is stupefying, my boy!" panted Lord Freshberry. "Just look at this, Mr. Lee. I am beginning to think that I must have been off my head when I wrote this letter. I have absolutely no recollection of penning these instructions. I can only remember that I had decided to have the jewels sent to the Hotel Cecil, and that they were to be delivered to my son in person."

Nelson Lee took the piece of vellum notepaper and glanced over it. The letter was short, and written in a clear, well-defined handwriting—quite different to what Lee had expected:

"My dear Mr. Causton,—With regard to the jewels, I shall be obliged if you will send them by a trustworthy messenger, locked in the special cash-box I provided, to No. 86, Markswell Road, Richmond. Your messenger is to deliver them at one o'clock precisely to a Mr. John Truscott—an intimate friend of mine. So that there shall be no mistake, Mr. Truscott will turn back the lapel of his coat, and reveal a small Red Cross badge. I have instructed him to do this merely as a matter of precaution.—Yours very truly,
FRESHBERRY."

Nelson Lee handed the note back.

"These instructions are very definite, at least," he remarked. "There was certainly no cause for you to be suspicious, Mr. Causton. I fail to see how there could be any mistake."

The peer passed a hand over his brow.

"But I know nobody named John Truscott," he protested. "And I have

never heard of Markswell Road, Richmond. By heavens! There can be only one explanation—this letter is a forgery!”

“A forgery!” repeated the diamond merchant, with a start.

“Yes, sir, a base forgery!” roared Lord Freshberry. “That’s what it is! You’ve been tricked, sir—we’ve all been tricked!”

CHAPTER IV.

The Boy With the Catapult.

As he uttered the words, Lord Freshberry started to his feet and glared round at his companions with sudden excitement. His remarkable statement had certainly taken them by surprise, and they looked at him in blank astonishment. At least, Mr. Causton and the Hon. Claude did. Nelson Lee merely nodded his head in agreement.

“Exactly!” he exclaimed. “Curiously enough, Lord Freshberry, I was about to make a similar suggestion myself. This letter is undoubtedly a forgery. But please don’t lose control of yourself. Let us get at the truth of the matter calmly.”

“But I will swear that that letter was written by Lord Freshberry!” protested the diamond merchant. “I have received communications from him for many years, and I would know the handwriting among thousands!”

“One moment, please,” Nelson Lee proceeded. “Now, my lord, we will assume that this letter is forged—that it is false altogether, and has been substituted for the original. What instructions did the original contain?”

“That the jewels were to be sent to the Hotel Cecil at half-past one, and that they were to be delivered to nobody but my son,” replied the peer quickly. “There was no mention of any such theatrical by-play as turning back the lapel—”

“Of course not,” interjected the detective calmly. “That element was merely introduced because the recipient of the diamonds was an absolute stranger. It was necessary to take such a precautionary measure, considering the value of the parcel.”

The letter was re-examined by all, and both Lord Freshberry and his son declared that the handwriting was absolutely perfect in every detail. Although it could be nothing else but a forgery, it seemed quite impossible that it could be so.

“No man on earth could do it!” declared the Hon. Claude flatly.

“You are wrong, my dear sir—there is one man,” was Nelson Lee’s quiet reply. “There is one man—and only one, I believe—to whom such a forgery would be merely child’s play. You have undoubtedly heard of the individual I mean. His name is Douglas James Sutcliffe, and is very badly wanted by the police. The name he usually goes by is Jim the Penman!”

“Jim the Penman!” gasped his lordship. “That—that scoundrel! And do you think it possible that he has had the audacity—”

“Jim the Penman is the most audacious rogue that I have ever come across,” said Nelson Lee smoothly. “For cool cheek and superb confidence I have never encountered Jim’s equal. And as for thinking it possible that he could perpetrate this crime, I do not think anything about it—I absolutely know! I have seen much of Sutcliffe’s work, and I know a master hand when I see one.”

“Good gracious!” muttered his lordship. “What does it all mean, Mr. Lee? Cannot you make matters plain?”

“One fact is, at least, all too plain,” said the great detective. “One of the cleverest rogues on this earth has succeeded in getting away with

diamonds and rubies valued at seventy thousand pounds. And further light is already beginning to dawn upon me."

"I wish I could see a little more clearly," said Mr. Causton. "Under the circumstances, I don't hold myself to blame, for I really do not see how I could possibly know that a substitution had taken place."

"You are quite right, Mr. Causton—you are quite right!" said Lord Freshberry. "It seems that we have all been victimised. Nobody at all is to blame, and we must now do our best to recover the jewels. I urge you, Mr. Lee, to do your very best for me. But how, in the name of all that's wonderful, was this infernal letter substituted for the one I wrote myself?"

"I will tell you," replied Lee. "I had, perhaps, better say that my theory is merely guesswork; but there can be no other explanation. The fact that your country seat is at Bath is nearly as good as proof. You have doubtless read, in the afternoon editions of the newspapers, that an unaccountable stoppage occurred to one of the Great Western railway trains between Swindon and Reading?"

Mr. Causton nodded.

Nelson Lee at once told his companions that he had been present in the Edgectott cutting during the night, and that he had personally examined the guard's van which had been detached from the train. Lee explained that the police were sorely puzzled, because nothing in the van had been touched.

"I was more than a little puzzled myself," admitted the detective. "But now I am beginning to understand. Of course, the coach was uncoupled for one purpose. Jim the Penman was probably present himself, and his object was to open the mail-bag, to remove your letter, and to substitute this forgery in its place. I realise now why he touched nothing else. With such a tempting bait as those jewels it would have been paltry to interfere in any other direction."

"But mail-bags are tied and sealed," said the Hon. Claude Atherley.

"To such a man as Jim the Penman that was merely a detail," replied Lee, with a smile. "After all, it is quite a simple matter to provide oneself with a duplicate seal, and the other slight necessities. And it was all in Jim's line—forgery. He would have had no difficulty in finding the letter, for he was obviously supplied with certain information, and merely had to look for a letter with a crest on the flap, and addressed to Mr. Causton."

"But how on earth could he have known of my plans," asked the peer bluntly.

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"That, of course, I cannot say," he replied. "But Sutcliffe has confederates—men who seem to be gentlemen. An unwary word here or there, spoken by your son or yourself, may have provided the direct tip. Or, probably enough, you have a spy within your household. Jim the Penman is up to all such dodges. But, after all, that side of the question is of no importance. Jim the Penman obtained the information he needed, and the fact remains that he has achieved his object. The jewels are in his possession, and, frankly, I am rather doubtful as to whether they will ever be seen again."

Lord Freshberry faced the detective squarely.

"Mr. Lee, I will pay you any fee you choose to name, if only you will recover those jewels," he said earnestly. "Some of them are heirlooms of the Freshberry family, and it would be an absolute disaster if they were lost. I will pay you——"

"I will do my very utmost," Lee said simply. "I cannot say more than that. Apart from the fact that I accept this commission on your behalf, I take a considerable interest in Jim the Penman myself. It has been my

privilege to frustrate nearly every scheme he has formulated, but I have never yet succeeded in getting him clapped into prison. Twice he has been in the hands of the police—only by my efforts—but on both occasions he slipped out. Jim the Penman is the most slippery customer I have ever crossed swords with. And, in spite of his undoubted villainy, I cannot help admiring him. He is infernally clever, and his audacity is something to marvel at. But one day I shall get him—and I hope that day is now approaching.”

Shortly afterwards Nelson Lee took his departure and went straight home to Gray's Inn Road. When he had started out from his rooms he had had no idea that this singular development would take place.

In a way, the detective was rather pleased. The Edgecott cutting affair was, at least, explained—for Lee had no doubt about the matter—and he was plunged right into a case which would certainly be excellent from a financial point of view. Nelson Lee had a liking for substantial fees as much as anybody else, and he did not hesitate to say so.

Moreover, he was provided with another opportunity of getting on Jim the Penman's trail. That forgery could have been committed by no other man on earth. Lee was certain that the man he was after was Douglas James Sutcliffe.

Nipper was hugely interested at the news, and not a little excited. But when his master had done, he shook his head rather gloomily.

“I'm blest if I see any daylight, guv'nor!” he remarked. “How the dickens can we get on Jim's track? Of course, it's easy to understand why the rotter didn't touch anything else in that guard's van. Besides, I don't suppose he knew that those three cases contained jewellery.”

“My dear Nipper, that jewellery was trumpery stuff compared with the prize which Jim now has in his possession,” said Lee. “Every one of these diamonds and rubies can be removed from their settings and sold separately without any risk whatever. If we fail to get on Jim's track at once, we shall never get him at all. But no time has been lost, for it is only a few hours since the jewels were delivered over to him. By setting to work at once we have a chance of being successful.”

“Where do we start?”

“At Richmond, and we are going off this very minute,” said Lee swiftly. “If we draw a blank there we will set to work in some other direction. But I am very hopeful of success.”

Accordingly, Nelson Lee and Nipper were soon seated in a taxi bowling out towards Richmond. The detective knew very well that if his investigations had been delayed until the next day, his chances of success would have been very slim. As it was, however, he would be on Jim's track while it was still hot.

Richmond was reached in due course, and Markswell Road proved to be a very respectable thoroughfare, with excellent houses on either side. Before leaving Hatton Garden, Nelson Lee had had a short chat with Marriott, the private secretary, who had briefly related what had occurred at the intervals. Mr. John Prescott had proved to be a distinguished-looking gentleman of about forty, and he had at once complied with the conditions necessary for the delivery of the jewels. Marriott had handed the cash-box over without the suspicion of a doubt.

No. 86 was a large double-fronted house, and Nelson Lee was by no means surprised to see a card bearing the word “Apartments” stuck in one of the front windows. He had expected something of the sort.

In answer to his ring the door was opened by a smart maidservant, who

ushered the visitor into a reception-room. Very shortly afterwards a tall, slim lady, of uncertain years, entered, and she was obviously perturbed.

"I have read of you often, Mr. Lee, of course!" she exclaimed. "But I cannot imagine why you have called upon me."

The detective at once explained that he had been commissioned to discover the whereabouts of Mr. John Truscott, and had come for information. This proved to be very meagre.

The lady declared that Mr. Truscott had called the previous day, and had paid in advance for the very room in which they now stood, for a week. He said that he merely wanted it to study in, as he was in Richmond for the purpose of examining local architecture.

Nelson Lee smiled grimly as he listened. He did not think that studying architecture was one of Jim the Penman's strong points. The lady further declared that Mr. Truscott had received a visitor at about one o'clock, who had stayed only a few minutes. Truscott himself had taken his departure less than half-an-hour later.

"That's done it," remarked Nipper grimly. "I don't reckon we shall spot the beggar, gov'nor!"

"Can you tell me exactly what Mr. Truscott's personal appearance is like?" asked Mr. Lee of the landlady. "Was there any distinctive mark or peculiarity which you could name?"

"He was tall, and dressed in a brown tweed suit," was the reply. "He was clean-shaven, Mr. Lee, and somewhat dark. His nose seemed to be usually large—the nostrils were distended."

"A simple trick of disguise," nodded the detective. "Yet it alters one's appearance to a surprising extent."

"But surely Mr. Truscott is not a criminal——"

"He is about the cleverest criminal in England to-day," was Lee's grim reply. "I may as well tell you that you will never see him again, and that you were wise to insist upon payment in advance."

The landlady looked rather scared.

"I saw him leave the house just before half-past-one!" she exclaimed. "As it happened, I was at one of the front bedroom windows. He went down the street towards the main road, and a rather unfortunate incident occurred. But I don't suppose I had better waste your time telling you of that, Mr. Lee."

"It may be of importance. Please do so."

"Well, in one of the houses on the other side of the road there is a little boy who has been annoying several people about here with a small catapult," said the landlady. "He was playing about with the toy just as Mr. Truscott left, and I don't suppose for a minute that the young rascal meant any harm. But he released a stone, and it struck Mr. Truscott just beneath the left eye. It was accidental, I'm sure, and as soon as the boy saw what he had done he hid in some bushes."

"Very naturally," said Lee drily. "But I don't suppose Truscott was hurt, was he?"

"I think he was. I saw him pause, and clap his hand to his eye," was the answer. "And there was quite a large spot of blood upon the white handkerchief when he removed it. It all happened just outside the gate, so I saw it distinctly. I expect the stone was a sharp flint, and that boy ought to be horsewhipped. Indeed, I have already decided to tell his parents——"

"Of course, that is only right," said Lee. "But, under the circumstances, I am highly gratified to learn that the incident occurred. It may be of the greatest value to me in tracing this man. Truscott received a slight cut, then, just beneath his left eye? What did he do afterwards?"

"He simply paused for a few moments, and then walked on, holding his handkerchief to his eye."

Lee could elicit no further information, but he was highly satisfied with what he had learned. The affair of the boy with the catapult would probably prove to be of first importance—and, indeed, it did.

Lee and Nipper, upon leaving 86, Markswell Road, at once instituted close inquiries. They were looking for a man in a brown suit, and with his left eye in an injured condition. Under the circumstances, he was not difficult to trace.

A policeman vouched the information that he had seen Truscott just after half-past one in a thoroughfare some little distance from Markswell Road. Walking there, Nelson Lee at once spotted a news vendor who had a stall just in the entrance of a lane. This man remembered seeing Truscott, with a handkerchief to his eye, walking briskly along. He had crossed the road, and made for the entrance of a big hotel.

To Nelson Lee's keen satisfaction the commissionaire promptly said that such a gentleman as the detective described had entered the hotel at about twenty minutes to two. Lee could scarcely believe his good fortune.

So far, Jim's trail had been superbly easy to follow—mainly because of the boy with a catapult. Very often it is seemingly trivial incidents which lead to big issues.

But at the hotel Nelson Lee completely lost sight of his man. He was not at all surprised at this. He had expected to draw a blank, and so he was not discouraged. The commissionaire said that Truscott had entered the building, but had not come out again.

"Oh, yes, he came out again right enough, Nipper," remarked Lee as they entered the hotel. "If our man was Jim himself—and I firmly believe he was—he would not hang about a minute longer than he could help. But the eye helped us, and will help us further. Jim was injured, slightly, no doubt, but in leaving the hotel in another disguise, he would necessarily have to conceal that injury."

The detective's shrewd reasoning was very thorough, and he did not give up hope when the clerk informed him that nobody with an injured eye had passed out of the hotel during the afternoon. He remembered Truscott entering right enough, but he had certainly not left."

"A bandage is not necessary to conceal such a slight injury," said Lee, after he had made matters a little clearer. "Now, my dear fellow, I want you to think very carefully. How many visitors have you on your books at the present time?"

"Roughly, about twenty," replied the clerk.

"And how many of them engaged rooms yesterday or the day before?"

The clerk did not trust his memory, and so he consulted the hotel books. He then declared that three had come two days previously, and two more the day before.

The other visitors were all of a week's standing, or over.

"Can you describe those who came yesterday?" asked Lee keenly.

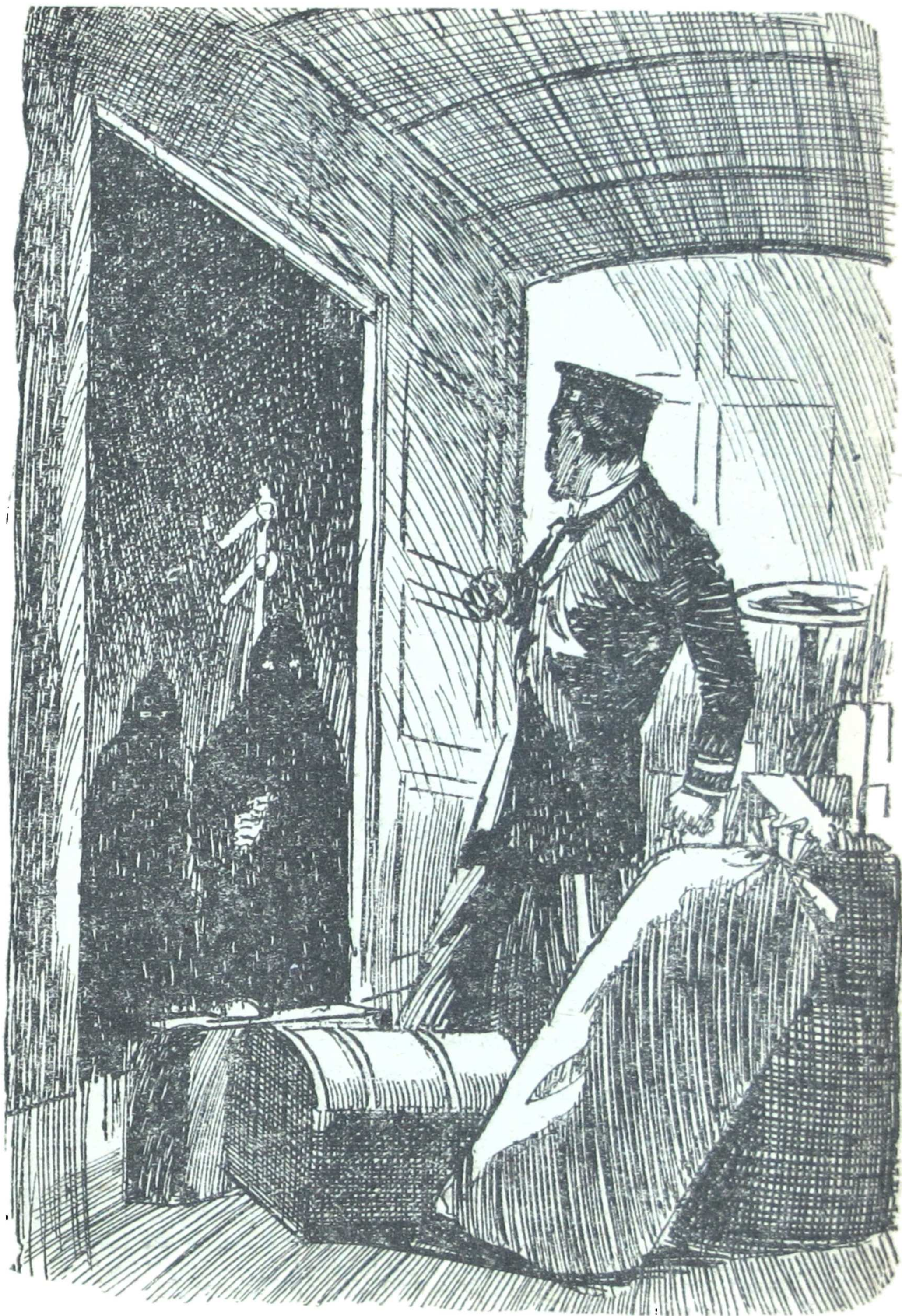
"One was an elderly lady——"

"Whom we can, of course, dismiss. And the other?"

"Well, I think you can dismiss him as well," replied the clerk. "He's out at the present moment, but I expect he'll soon be back. He is an eccentric old man with a bent back, and pure white hair."

"Promising—very promising!" murmured Lee. "Well, you say he is eccentric. How so?"

"In many ways, Mr. Lee. He is extremely faddy in all his requirements, and everything has to be just so. Then he refuses to eat at any table with



Two figures stepped noiselessly and mysteriously from the surrounding darkness.—(See page 5.)

anybody else; there are a dozen little things that I could name that point to his eccentricities. He left the hotel an hour or two ago."

"How long after the man with the injured eye had come in?"

"About half-an-hour, I reckon," replied the clerk. "But, Mr. Lee, you can't really imagine that the two were connected? Why, old Mr. Grell is a foot shorter than that fellow you call Truscott, and when he went out he certainly had no injury to the left eye."

"Are you positively sure of that?" demanded Lee sharply.

"Well, nearly sure," admitted the clerk. "He was wearing big spectacles, but I don't think they concealed his eyes very effectively."

"Were they spectacles with thick rims?"

"Why, yes, I believe they were, now I come to think of it."

"Did you ever see the old man wearing them before?"

The clerk started.

"By George! you're jolly keen, Mr. Lee," he said admiringly. "I should never have looked at things in this light if you hadn't pointed it out. Old Mr. Grell didn't wear glasses yesterday or this morning at all! He only had them on this afternoon!"

Two minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were outside the hotel on the pavement.

"Our investigation is going wonderfully well," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "When we discover the whereabouts of Mr. Grell, we shall lay hands on Jim the Penman. And now, while the scent is still hot, we will press on!"

CHAPTER V.

The Old Hermit in Myrtle Cottage.

WITHIN twenty minutes of leaving the hotel much had been accomplished—much that was eminently satisfactory.

While Nelson Lee was making inquiries in one direction, Nipper visited the only opticians in the neighbourhood, and learned that a man answering to Truscott's description had purchased a pair of large, blued-steel rimmed spectacles some time between one and two that day.

That was quite good enough for Nipper, and he hastened back to his master. After all, when it came to it, Jim the Penman did not seem to be so extraordinary clever at smothering his trail. But Nelson Lee had been very astute in his inquiries, and it was not the master-forger's fault that the detective was so close behind him.

Rather to Lee's surprise he found that Jim, in the identity of the eccentric old gentleman, had made little or no attempt to conceal his movements. After leaving the hotel he walked to a cab-rank and had been driven to Richmond station. Here he had booked a ticket for a small country station ten miles away; and Nelson Lee and Nipper followed by a train that was leaving shortly afterwards.

"A blind, I have no doubt," remarked Lee, as they were in the train. "When we arrive at the village of Luxthorpe I have no hope of learning that the excellent Mr. Grell has been seen. A quick change of clothing and disguise between two stations was more Jim's mark. But we may be able to trace him in his new disguise."

When Luxthorpe was reached, however, both Nelson Lee and Nipper received something like a shock.

"An old man with a white beard, and with a bent back, sir?" said the station porter, in answer to a query from Lee. "Why, I figure you're meaning old Mr. Grell, of Myrtle Cottage?"

"Dear me! Yes, I do mean Mr. Grell," said the detective, recovering his composure. "Did he travel down from Richmond by an afternoon train?"

"That's right, sir!"

"Apparently he is well known in this village?"

"Mr. Grell? Why, lor bless your life, sir, I should say he is!" said the porter. "Been here over a twelve month, he has. Lives up at Myrtle Cottage, all by hisself. A hermit, they call him, or something o' that nature. Queer old stick, but not so stingy with 'is tips as some!"

Nelson Lee took the gentle hint, and handed the man a shilling before passing out of the quiet station into the village street. Myrtle Cottage, he had learned, was a full mile beyond the village, and stood quite alone near a disused windmill.

Nipper was decidedly melancholy.

"Might as well get back to town, guv'nor," he grunted. "No good staying down here, is it? Just as we thought we were on the right scent, too. Of all the rotten luck! Of course, this Mr. Grell is as genuine as I am—he has been here over a year, and is well known in the village. He can't be Jim the Penman!"

Nelson Lee strode along, and thoughtfully lit a cigar.

"No, he is certainly not Jim the Penman, Nipper," he agreed slowly. "But now that we are down here it would be foolish to return to London without interviewing the old fellow. He may at least be able to give us some useful information. Besides, you seem to have forgotten that Jim, while in the personality of Truscott, purchased the steel-rimmed spectacles. Those spectacles were on this old man's nose when he left the hotel at Richmond. There is something deeper in this than meets the eye, young 'un!"

Nipper became almost cheerful again.

"You think he might be a confederate, guv'nor?" he suggested keenly.

"I think we shall be well advised to pay quite a lot of attention to Mr. Grell, of Myrtle Cottage," was the great detective's calm reply. "We are not only after Jim the Penman—we are out to recover jewels to the value of seventy thousand pounds. And that, as you will admit, is a large order. If we can nail Sutcliffe, too, so much the better."

"But we're not certain that Jim is connected——"

"Come, come, Nipper. If you are not certain, I am," said Nelson Lee, blowing a puff of blue smoke into the clear evening air. "I can recognise friend Jim's handiwork when I see it; and this affair is Sutcliffe's type of crime through and through. Follow it up in your mind through the different aspects. First, the amazingly audacious stoppage of the London express last night; next the delightfully cool appropriation of the Freshberry jewels. Owing to his superb planning, they were handed to Jim without a suspicion. Then the well-planned disappearance, greatly upset by that little boy with the catapult. We have to thank that youngster for quite a lot. But for that chance shot, we should probably have been unable to trace our man."

"But this old hermit has been here for months and months——"

"Jim the Penman is deep," interrupted Nelson Lee. "This old man Grell is probably Sutcliffe himself. Could he not have paid periodical visits here, disguised as the old man? He is a hermit, and lives alone; everything fits into such a supposition. By coming down here for a few days every now and again, Jim would create a perfect identity for himself, Nipper. You don't seem to grasp the significance of the thing."

"My stars! It's astounding, sir!"

"Very possibly. But we expect astounding things from Jim the Pen-

man," said Lee easily. "Upon my word, my lad, I am becoming more and more convinced that Grell is actually the master-forgery. And we are right on to him, and he suspects nothing. We shall probably take him utterly by surprise."

"We shall have to be cautious— Oh!" gasped Nipper painfully. "Oh! Oh, rats!"

Nelson Lee came to a halt. Nipper was sitting in the road, very quiet here, hugging his right ankle. And, judging by the expression upon the lad's face, he was in considerable agony.

"What is wrong?" asked the detective concernedly.

Nipper nodded to a rough stone which lay in the road.

"That rotten brick!" he growled. "I trod on it sideways, and my ankle doubled up, sir. Oh, lor'! I've ricked it properly. I don't believe I can walk any more!"

It was extremely unfortunate. Nipper had certainly ricked his ankle badly, and when he rose to his feet he hobbled about in great pain. For a moment he declared that he would 'stick it,' and would go on with his master; but the agony was really too much for him.

"I can't do it, sir," he gasped. "Just when we were expecting some excitement, too! I reckon I shall just be able to manage to hobble back to the village chemist's. It's only a short distance back. He'll attend to me."

Lee offered to help the lad back; but Nipper was an obstinate young bouncer, and he refused his master's proffered aid. He declared that he would get some embrocation, and would then go to the village hotel.

The detective promised to return before dark.

"For the present I simply mean to have a look round," he said. "If we do act, Nipper, we shall act after night has fallen. But I will have a look at Myrtle Cottage, and find out the lie of the land. Are you sure you can manage alone?"

Nipper declared that he could, and he started hobbling back along the lane. It was rather hard lines, but he was consoled by the knowledge that Lee did not mean to act until later. By that time, probably, Nipper would be in a better fix.

The lad was really in agony. He was as brave as a young lion, and scarcely ever complained at personal discomfort. But he knew better than to attempt the mile walk to Myrtle Cottage, and back. He would have difficulty, indeed, in reaching the chemist's.

Lee went on alone, and his thoughts were busy as he stepped lightly along the dusty lane. How was this adventure going to end? It was a puzzling question, and Nelson Lee knew very well that luck would probably play a big part in the game.

But Jim the Penman was here, in this village—or just outside, in the open country. And there was every prospect of success. Somehow, the detective had an instinctive feeling that grave peril was ahead.

If he had only known what that peril was to be!

He walked on. The lane grew narrower, and the hedges were high and dusty. There had been no rain for some time, and in consequence everything was dry and chippy. A few dead leaves were scattered over the lane, brown and withered.

Nelson Lee was very busy in mind as he walked. He was certainly convinced that Mr. Grell, described as an old hermit, was Jim the Penman himself. The more he thought of the matter the stronger his conviction became.

And, so far as he could judge, he would catch the forger totally un-

awares. For Jim would never anticipate such a quick chase as this. He would at least consider himself safe until the night.

"And his plan, I believe, is simple, but clever," thought Nelson Lee. "He will leave somebody else—one of his confederates—at Myrtle Cottage in the guise of the old hermit. Thus the trail would be completely snapped and broken, and it might even be impossible to follow it further. By acting first, however, I think I shall win the game."

Lee did not intend to tackle Jim alone, or with only the aid of Nipper. From past experience he knew only too well that the forger was cruel and cunning, and he would not hesitate to kill his enemies if he had a good chance.

No, Lee had no intention of being rash.

After having looked out the lie of the land, he would return to the village, and telephone to the police in the nearest big town. Then, accompanied by Nipper—if the lad was able to walk—and several constables, Myrtle Cottage would be raided. It would be done completely by surprise, and Jim would be taken prisoner, together with any confederates of his who happened to be present at the moment.

In the extremely unlikely event of things being different, Lee was ready and willing to take the risk of being made to look absurd. But he did not think he would be blundering; for the fact he had elicited pointed directly to Mr. Grell as the man he was tracking.

Very soon now Lee saw ahead of him, upon the top of a rise, a gaunt old windmill. He knew that he was near his destination now, for the porter had said that Myrtle Cottage was close to the windmill.

The latter was a large one, but had been in disuse for several years. The sails all seemed to be in good condition, but they were not set, and no amount of wind would turn them as they stood. Several windows were smashed, and the place altogether looked dismal and forbidding.

But when Lee turned a bend in the lane he saw Myrtle Cottage before him. It was a small place, creeper-covered and dainty in every respect. A prettier little cottage could scarcely be imagined. Lee saw all this in one glance—and he saw something else, too.

When he turned the corner he had no idea that his destination was so near, otherwise, perhaps, he would have gone cautiously. He had thought that the cottage was on the top of the rise near the mill. Mr. Grell's habitation, however, was considerably lower than the mill, and tucked in a little fold of the lane.

And as Lee came into view of it, he saw that the old hermit himself was peacefully leaning on the gate, smoking his pipe. And he was looking straight at the oncoming detective. But his gaze seemed to be quite disinterested and casual.

Lee did not alter his gait in the least. But he bit his lip with vexation. He had not intended the owner of Myrtle Cottage to see him. And here, all in a minute, the thing had happened. For, if the man was, indeed, Jim the Penman himself, what would be the result of the meeting? If Nelson Lee returned to the village, as he had mentally planned, the forger would have ample time in which to get clear away. Nelson Lee was undisguised, and must have been recognised at once.

The situation was tense, and there was only one thing to be done. Nelson Lee decided to act drastically. Since it was now impossible to raid the cottage by surprise, the only thing to do was to take Jim by surprise now.

The detective would act with precision and dramatic swiftness. He could ask questions afterwards! Surprise is always the one element which defeats a man, and Nelson Lee himself well knew the value of an unexpected attack.

He walked on without a single falter, until he came opposite to the old hermit, leaning at the gate. Mr. Grell removed the pipe from his mouth, and nodded genially.

"Fine evening, sir," he remarked. "There's a feel of rain in the air, but I don't think we'll get it——"

He ceased speaking with a gurgling gasp, for at that second Nelson Lee flew at him with amazing abruptness. In one moment the old man's hat was jerked off, and Lee was wrenching at the false beard and wig.

"Now, my dear Jim, you had better knuckle under——"

Nelson Lee paused abruptly, and a gasp of dawning amazement left his lips. He had blundered! He had made a terrible mistake!—even as he tugged at the old man's hair and beard he knew that both were genuine! They were not false beard and wig at all, but actually the old man's own hair!

CHAPTER VI.

The Revolving Mill Sail.

NELSON LEE released the old man, as though he had suddenly become red hot, and he fell back a pace, and laid hold of the railings. Mr. Grell himself was gasping painfully, and his cheeks were wet with tears.

For Lee had pulled at his hair and beard to such good purpose that the tears had been forced out of his eyes involuntarily. He now rubbed his hair, and tenderly smoothed his beard into shape.

For two or three moments neither spoke. Mr. Grell, to tell the truth, was in too much pain, and Nelson Lee was trying to collect his scattered wits.

Not for a very long time had the famous crime investigator been so utterly and completely surprised. He had been so positive that the beard and the wig were false that when they refused to come he had merely thought that they were very tightly fixed.

But, bending his face close, Lee had seen that the hair was not false, but real. Its roots were actually in Mr. Grell's skin.

And Lee was not only chagrined and deeply disappointed, but he was furious. He was furious with himself for having blundered so badly. Yet, in reality, Nelson Lee had not blundered at all—he had merely put his theory to the test. The fact that it was proved to be wrong reflected no discredit upon himself.

But Mr. Grell was inclined to be resentful.

"Are ye mad?" he gasped painfully. "Oh, what did ye think you were doing? I reckon you must have escaped from some loony-house——"

"My dear sir, please let me hasten to apologise," exclaimed Nelson Lee breathlessly. "If you'll allow me to explain, I will prove that my intentions were not those of a madman."

"My beard ain't grown for pullin'!" growled the old hermit angrily. "If so be I was younger, you wouldn't be standing there, and so I tell ye! You'd be lyin' flat on your back——"

"You have every cause to be highly incensed——"

"I dunno nothin' about incense, or such beaten truck!" grunted Mr. Grell savagely. "It's no good you sayin' you ain't balmy, because I've met fellows like you before. If you don't clear off mighty quick——"

"Please let me explain," persisted Lee.

"I don't want none o' your explanations," cut in the old man. "A man what pulls my hair and beard like you've been apullin' of it ain't goin' to

stop talkin' to me, an' so I tell ye straight! How do I know that you won't git another fit o' them jim-jams, an' fly at me again?"

Nelson Lee could scarcely help smiling, in spite of himself. The old man was evidently extremely angry—and this was scarcely surprising. The thorough manner in which Nelson Lee had tugged at his hair and beard must have been agonising in the extreme.

"I wish you to understand that my intentions were not those of a maniac, but quite the opposite!" exclaimed the detective quickly. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Grell, I was foolish enough to mistake you for a criminal——"

"That's done it!" roared Mr. Grell angrily. "A criminal, am I? I'll have ye know I ain't never been mistook for such like in all my days. I've sailed the seas, an' I've knocked about the world more than a good bit, an' I ain't never been called a criminal to my face afore!"

And, without a word, the old hermit turned on his heel and stumped towards the cottage door, rubbing his head tenderly, for his scalp was still tingling.

But Nelson Lee was not at all pleased with the way things were going. Since Mr. Grell was indeed genuine, it was not to Lee's liking that the old man should be an enemy. He would probably be able to give some useful information.

The detective hurried forward, and arrived at the cottage door just as its owner was entering. And then Nelson Lee received a still further surprise. Without the slightest warning, Mr. Grell took a quick step backwards so that he was, for a moment, behind the detective.

Lee felt two hands upon the small of his back, and he was suddenly shoved with great violence. Being totally unprepared for the attack, he was not able to guard against it. And he blundered into the front room of the cottage, and fell sprawling over a low stool which was placed immediately in front of the doorway.

Even as he fell the detective realised that he had been deliberately trapped. Mr. Grell had been acting superbly. But it had been acting, and nothing else; and the stool was in that position so that the detective should deliberately fall.

"By James!" gasped Lee furiously.

He was on his feet in a second, and he found himself closely examining a small circular orifice with a blued steel rim. The detective needed no second glance to show him that the orifice was the barrel of a big revolver.

Behind it, smiling quite genially, was Jim the Penman.

"Rather neat, eh, Lee?" smiled the forger, with beautiful sang-froid. "We meet again, and I think you will agree that I am top dog."

Nelson Lee pulled his waistcoat down and straightened his tie. He had no intention of being outdone by his sworn enemy, and he coolly produced his cigar-case, selected a weed, and lit it with a hand that was as steady as a rock.

"Not so bad," said Jim critically. "I really don't believe I could do it better myself, Lee. Do you know, we two are very evenly matched, and I always enjoy these little encounters. But I intend this meeting to be our last."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I fancy you mentioned something of that nature once or twice before," he suggested evenly. "Yet, lo and behold, I am still alive and kicking! You may be a slippery customer, Sutcliffe, but you will admit that I have a wonderful propensity for getting out of dangers when hope seems dead?"

"By Jove, that's true!" admitted Jim the Penman, a frown flitting across his brow for a moment. "But I have realised lately that your good fortune

has been due to my own carelessness. For example, when I left you and Nipper upon that steamer in the middle of the North Sea, I should have remembered that there are such things as German submarines. One of those gentry came along and conveniently plugged your ship so that you could escape. I have resolved, Lee, that when I try again I shall not leave anything to chance. I intend to stand by and see the last of you with my open eyes."

"That will be quite pleasant," said Lee imperturbably.

But, although the words were spoken calmly, although Jim spoke with no more emotion than if he had been discussing the weather, there was a deadly menace hidden in his tone.

Lee was not allowed any opportunity of breaking away, for Mr. Grell came up behind him and passed a rope round his wrists, and from there down to his ankles. Lee's hands were behind him, and, the rope being tight, he was forced to assume an attitude which bent his spine backwards a trifle. In addition to being cramped and uncomfortable, this method of binding rendered Lee as helpless as a trussed chicken.

"Now I can relieve the tension," said Jim the Penman, putting his revolver away. "And perhaps, Lee, you would be interested to hear a few details? I'm always anxious to be obliging, you know."

The forger was wearing no disguise at all, and he was as neat and tidy as though he had just stepped from a band-box. Mr. Grell came round, and stood looking at Lee with a smile upon his wrinkled old face.

"Did you brown nicely, didn't I?" he asked, chuckling. "I got you to the door afore you knew where you was."

"Let me do the talking, Grell," interrupted Jim smoothly. "Frankly, Lee, I had no idea that you would come along; I did not think that you were clever enough to get on my track so quickly. The police, I know, would never have located me. But, having traced me here, I do not intend you to do any further damage."

"Another murder threat, I presume?" asked Nelson Lee.

"You can take it how you like. Of course, you followed me from the hotel in Richmond? For your satisfaction, Lee, I will explain that my old friend Mr. Grell has been living in this cottage for over a year. Yesterday I visited him, and went to Richmond in his identity, and put up at a hotel there. From that hotel I emerged in another personality and received the jewels which you are now after, and which are within three feet of you at the present moment."

"I admit that I was taken aback when I found that this old man Grell was genuine," said Lee. "Until that moment I was positive that I was on the right track. And I am by no means as upset as you seem to think I ought to be. I am gratified to find that my theory was quite correct."

Jim the Penman nodded.

"But, in making that discovery, you have placed yourself in my power," he replied. "Do you know, Lee, I half hoped that you would trace me, although I was sure that you would not. But I had a sneaking wish to meet you face to face again. You have interfered with my concerns so many times that my only safety lies in your death. And this evening I shall certainly make no mistake."

"You were always very good at talking, my dear chap," smiled Lee. "But, somehow, your actions have never fulfilled your boasts. For example, you have attempted many huge frauds, and nearly all of them have petered out miserably. The same applies to your plots against my life. You're a

very clever rogue, Sutcliffe, but you lack that final touch which is so necessary to success."

There was something taunting in Lee's words, and the forger lost his magnificent composure for a moment.

"And why?" he snarled harshly. "Why have I always met with disaster? Because of you—because of your infernal interference—because of your uncanny cleverness. But when I have done with you, Lee, I can snap my fingers at the rest. And, as I stated before, this time I am going to see your lifeless body before I feel satisfied."

He suddenly reverted to his former bantering tone, and the change was remarkable. His voice was now smooth and even.

"What do you think of the scheme, Lee?" he asked genially. "Don't you think I've planned it well? The stoppage of the London express in the Edgemoor cutting was rather neat, eh? I have several faithful allies who are always ready to help me. It was through one of those friends that I learned that Lord Freshberry was arranging to have the jewels sent to the Hotel Cecil this morning. A clever spy can learn quite a lot of useful information—and my spies are always on the alert. I have got the jewels, and I have got you. I think I have every reason to feel pleased with myself. But how did you pick up my trail?"

Lee did not reply, but he glanced at a small scar, and an inflamed bruise, just beneath Jim the Penman's left eye.

"Oh, I understand!" exclaimed the forger quickly. "So that gave you the tip, did it? But for that scratch I don't believe you would have tracked me. I don't believe you would have guessed that Mr. Truscott and Grell were connected. And I am quite in the dark regarding how I obtained the injury."

Nelson Lee did not feel himself called upon to explain. Indeed, he was given little opportunity, for the old hermit, who had been outside, now came in and reported that the road was clear in all directions, and that not a soul was in sight.

Lee was quickly carried out and placed in a deep wheelbarrow which was standing upon the garden path. He had been gagged, and a large piece of rough sacking was now thrown completely over him. Then Jim picked up the handles of the barrow, and the journey started.

Where he was being taken to the detective had no idea, but he guessed that there was some grim object behind all this.

It was almost dusk now, and a mist was rising from the ground. The breeze was fairly strong, and came in steady gusts. But it was a warm breeze, and under the sacking, wearing the gag, Nelson Lee felt almost stifled.

The wheelbarrow rattled over the rough stones. The detective guessed that the lane must be very deserted indeed, for Jim was not a man to take risks, and he would certainly not wish to be seen engaged in his present occupation, although, as a matter of fact, if any strangers had passed they would have guessed nothing, for Lee's shape was quite concealed by the folds of the rough sacking.

Very soon Lee heard a gate creak open, and then the barrow went forward once more along soft ground—probably a footpath. The distance, altogether, was very short, for the whole journey did not occupy five minutes.

Then Lee was left just as he was for five minutes further. From sundry exclamations and breathless gasps he gathered that Jim the Penman and his confederate were exerting themselves strenuously over something or other. Their task seemed a laborious one, but at last it was over.

"Phew! I didn't think we should be able to do it at first, Grell," panted the forger's voice. "But this is splendid. We'll get the business over without delay—and watch until the end."

The sacking was jerked from the barrow, and Lee was bodily lifted out. He could see now that Jim the Penman's face wore a different expression. His lips were set in a thin, straight line, and his eyes were as cold as ice. In some way he seemed to be the very embodiment of fiendish cruelty.

He spoke no word, but he and Grell lifted their victim, and proceeded to do an extraordinary thing.

Nelson Lee could see that he had been carried to the old deserted windmill, and he was now right beneath the huge sails.

One of the latter was within a yard of him, and its extremity came within five feet of the ground. It was necessary, therefore, when the sails were in motion, to stand clear of the four huge revolving arms.

One glance told Nelson Lee what his fate was to be. And, in spite of himself, the famous detective shuddered. Jim the Penman had undoubtedly hit upon a scheme which would be successful this time!

Yet, at the same time, Lee could not help realising that his enemy was going to a great amount of needless trouble in order to satisfy his own desire for a theatrical effect.

It would have been simple to put a bullet through the detective's brain—simple and sure. The method Jim was enjoying would be just as sure, but not nearly so simple. It had entailed a great amount of trouble. But the forger did not mind that in the least.

He was of a curious disposition, and one of his traits was a devilish cruelty unequalled even by a murderous Chinese. Sutcliffe took a ghoulish delight in witnessing his victim's torture. To his mind, it was a pity to kill Nelson Lee painlessly by merely putting a bullet through his brain. It was far better that the detective should undergo intense mental agony for some little time beforehand.

And this present death-plan was singularly horrible. Lee found himself being bound feet upmost on to the mill sail. His head and shoulders projected over the extremity of the sail, and he was tied so cruelly that he could not shift an inch.

"I think you'll do now," said Jim the Penman, speaking for the first time—and his voice was vibrating with intense hatred and satanic delight. "So that you shall be prepared, Lee, I will tell you what fate is in store for you."

He stepped back and glanced up at the old windmill.

"There is a good stiff breeze blowing," he remarked, and when these sails are properly set they will carry you round beautifully. But you will not remember more than one revolution—but that, I fancy, will be sufficient. As you pass the ground your head will come in contact with this boulder, and—well, there is no stopping these sails once they get started. At least, not by a human head. And your head, my dear Lee, will suffer accordingly!"

If Jim had been snarling with fury Nelson Lee would have laughed contemptuously and defied him. But the scoundrel was absolutely calm, and his whole attitude was so unnatural and so fiendish that Nelson Lee was only capable of setting his lips tightly and closing his eyes.

He had seen what preparations had been made.

A huge piece of solid rock had been rolled right beneath the sail, and it was now within six inches of Lee's head. He saw, in a moment, what would

nappen. He would be swung round with the sail in a huge circle, and would come down with tremendous force. His head, therefore, would come into violent contact with the great stone. Lee did not care to think further. He knew well enough that there could be no escape. His brains would be dashed out, and death would be instantaneous.

And, as Jim had said, he was going to make sure—he was going to watch until the tragedy was over! On this occasion, at least, Jim the Penman had the trump card.

With his eyes closed, the detective heard everything being got ready. The blood had rushed to his head, for he was completely upside down, and in the most agonising position.

Then, suddenly, Nelson Lee heard a creak and he felt himself in motion!

He opened his eyes, and saw Jim the Penman and the old hermit standing side by side watching. Sutcliffe had the face of a devil, but his old companion was trembling visibly and his eyes were expressive of horror and fear. But he knew better than to oppose his employer.

It was deep dusk now, and the wind, if anything, had strengthened. Lee felt himself being carried upwards slowly and with a graceful motion. Very soon he was horizontal with the ground and felt the tension relax from his overcharged head.

He saw everything with amazing vividness. The whole scene was stamped upon his mind like an image upon a photographic negative. His two murderers were standing still, perfectly still, watching, waiting.

And the mill sails turned slowly and relentlessly.

And then a stiffer gust of wind came along, and the great clumsy sails caught it, and increased their speed perceptibly. Higher went Nelson Lee, and at last the sail to which he was bound reached the perpendicular.

Lee was now upright, and on a high altitude. He could see the country for miles round him, dimly and darkly in the gathering shadows. It was his last look upon the world, he told himself. How could rescue possibly come now? Nothing would be able to stop those sails in time, now that they had fairly got into their stride.

“May Heaven punish that foul villain!” prayed Nelson Lee fervently.

He commenced the downward swing. He seemed to be falling quickly now, and he longed for the moment when the end would come. He was thankful that it would be swift and sudden.

Down he went—down to certain death!

The detective closed his eyes and waited quietly and with a brave heart. Only a few more seconds, now, and then—

A tremendous jarring crunch sounded upon the evening air; a crashing of metal as though something had jammed.

And, with a suddenness which wrenched Nelson Lee's bonds terribly, the mill sails came to an abrupt stop.

The impossible had happened—the sails were stopped!

And then Nelson Lee saw something which made his heart beat furiously, and which made the blood surge through his veins with triumphant joy. On the first floor of the mill was an open doorway. And there, framed in it, stood Nipper!

“Now, you two!” roared the lad with a fury which Nelson Lee had not thought him capable of. “Stand just as you are, and put your hands up. This revolver of mine has a nasty habit of going off if I get too excited!”

CHAPTER VII.

The Adventure of the Two Trains—Success—Conclusion.

JIM THE PENMAN smothered a violent oath.

In that one tense second he saw that once again he had been frustrated. And it was due solely to the fact that he had sought after a theatrical effect in causing the death of his enemy. But never for a moment had he dreamed that such a dramatic denouement as this would come about.

He could tell by Nipper's voice that the lad was in deadly earnest, and that he would be wise to raise his hands. But Jim the Penman was feeling rash at that moment, and he only thought of getting away.

The diamonds, too, were in the cottage, and a mad fury took possession of him as he thought that he may be thwarted. It was impossible, of course, to remain here. He had a momentary thought of whipping out his own revolver, and firing at Nipper, but he thought better of the hasty idea.

Nipper, for one thing, was grimly determined—the sight of his master's predicament had turned his heart to stone for a moment. And he was in deep shadow, and provided a very poor mark. Jim, on the other hand, was in the open, and Nipper probably had him covered. At the first sign of movement he would fire.

A sudden light darted into Jim's eyes, and he took a sudden swift leap to the left. Even as he did so Nipper's revolver spat out a spurt of flame, and a bullet ripped up the ground on the spot where Jim had been standing.

Nipper knew that he was dealing with a desperate man, and he was perfectly justified in pulling the trigger.

Some bushes were just behind, and before the lad could fire again Jim had reached the welcome cover and was dashing away. For one instant Nipper thought of following, but then he decided that a chase would probably end in disaster to himself. He knew full well, that he, alone, was no match for the master-forged.

Old Grell was still standing like a statue, his arms half raised.

The old man had been fairly unstrung at the prospect of Nelson Lee's doom, for, to give him his due, he was no murderer. He was in Jim's power, and had been paid well, and it would have gone hard with him if he had refused to do Sutcliffe's bidding.

"You're Grell, I suppose?" said Nipper in a hard voice. "Well, shift that stone out of the way, and be quick about it—understand?"

The old man did understand, and he picked up a long piece of timber and wedged the end of it beneath the great boulder. With this leverage he managed to roll the stone over, and the space was left clear. If the jammed machinery gave way now, Nelson Lee was safe.

Nipper then ordered Grell to come up, and the old man did so without hesitation. He was, to tell the truth, greatly relieved at the turn of events, and he was shivering from head to foot. He found Nipper waiting for him with a revolver.

"Don't use that thing, young master!" muttered Grell. "It wasn't me that done this thing! Jim's a cruel brute, and it was more than I dared do to argue with him. I'm right glad Mr. Lee is safe. My sakes! I'm right glad, so I am!"

The words were uttered so fervently that Nipper believed the old man. And he soon found that Grell was only too willing to render assistance. Nipper went to the open doorway and looked out.

"Sha'n't be a minute, gov'nor!" called the lad. "You've been having a fine old time, but you'll soon be on terra-firma again!"

The machinery was soon freed, and the sails swung round, Nelson Lee's weight causing him to remain in the lowest position. The sails themselves were now open, and the wind, of course, had no effect.

Nipper and old Grell mounted on the boulder, which had been shifted just out of danger, and Lee's bonds were soon cut through. Owing to his inverted position he fell off the sail in a most undignified manner; but his fall was broken by his rescuers, and within a minute the detective was on his feet, panting heavily, bruised and sore, but calm in mind.

"Good lad, Nipper!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Are you all right, guv'nor?" Nipper asked anxiously.

"If you mean, am I capable of hurrying after Sutcliffe, yes!" was the detective's grim reply. "By James! What a fiend that man is! We must lose no time, Nipper—"

"Listen!" muttered the lad quickly.

They all stood motionless, and the distinct sound of a motor-car engine came to their ears. Nelson Lee grabbed hold of Grell tightly.

"What car is that?" he demanded.

"Jim's! That's Jim's car," murmured the old man. "He kep' it in an old shed not far from my cottage—"

"Good heavens, then he will get clear away!" roared Nelson Lee furiously.

"Hold on, sir," Nipper exclaimed. "We might collar him yet. I've got a motor-bike just down the road—"

"You are a magician, young 'un," cried Lee exultantly. "Quick—lead me to it. We must follow without a second's loss of time!"

"But what of this old scoundrel?" was Nipper's breathless inquiry.

"We must leave him here—we must abandon him. Jim has got possession of the diamonds, and it would be foolish to risk losing them just for the sake of retaining this prisoner. Grell is, after all, only a paid tool."

Nipper started hobbling off with a kind of hopping run—for his ankle was still paining him more than a little. Nelson Lee assisted him, and old Grell was left standing in blank amazement at the sudden turn of events. And he, then and there, resolved to finish with Jim altogether and to disappear. The old fellow was not a scoundrel.

Nelson Lee was still filled with wonder at Nipper's opportune appearance, and he intended getting an explanation from the lad later on.

Nipper's motor-cycle was some little distance beyond Myrtle Cottage, concealed behind the hedge. By the time it was ready all sounds of Jim's motor-car had died away; but the forger could not be very far distant.

Lee hopped into the motor-cycle saddle, and Nipper took his seat on the carrier, and the pair started off at a roar, and were soon tearing down the country lane at an appalling speed.

The detective was glad that there were no branch roads, for Jim would probably have dodged off if he could. But the lane led straight to Luxthorpe, and then on to the main road three miles beyond the village.

Jim had probably made for the main road.

Nelson Lee was a superb motor-cyclist, and he sent the machine whizzing along at a great speed. The fire of the chase was in his veins, and he took risks which he would never have ventured under ordinary circumstances. And the great detective was very grim.

The forger had tried to kill him—had attempted to murder him in the most diabolical way. And Lee was inwardly furious. The scoundrel should pay for that crime, and he should be made to give up his ill-gotten gains.

Lee was so close behind the master-forger that he was certain of catching up with him before long. Jim, of course, knew nothing about Nipper's motor-cycle, and so he had probably fled more sedately. At any rate, it

was certain he was not travelling at the break-neck speed which Nelson Lee and Nipper were attaining.

Nipper's advent on the scene had made all the difference in the world. And even if the lad had been five minutes later, his master would have been cruelly done to death.

But how had Nipper got wind of the danger?

How was it that he was there—and with a motor-cycle?

The explanation was not so very singular. In fact, Nipper's appearance on the scene was only to be expected; and the fact that he had arrived at the right moment was more a matter of providential luck than anything else.

Nelson Lee, even as he had been bound to the windmill sail, had wondered if Nipper would appear on the scene. When the sail had commenced revolving, however, the detective had given up hope.

But what had happened was really a natural course of events.

Nipper, after ricking his ankle, had hobbled back to the village street, and had entered the chemist's shop. Here a kindly old gentleman—the chemist—had attended to him, and had made him much easier.

But his ankle, although massaged and bandaged, had swollen, and it was painful to Nipper. He realised that it was impossible for him to follow his master, so he went across to a seat in the centre of the village square, and sat there, waiting.

Inactivity, however, always irritated Nipper—especially when he knew that Nelson Lee was “up and doing.” Nipper wanted to be “up and doing,” too. But his common-sense told him that he would be more of a hindrance than a help; for by the time he arrived at Myrtle Cottage he would be almost incapable of walking at all.

So he sat on the seat beneath a big oak tree, and nursed his ankle.

Opposite to him he saw, in the dusk, a small cycle shop. The owner of the shop, a young man in blue overalls, was working outside, repairing a small motor-car—for the place was a garage, too.

Nipper sat for quite a long time idly watching the repair going on. Then, with a sudden shout, he jumped to his feet, and called himself several uncomplimentary names.

Just inside the shop, in full view, stood a powerful motor-cycle. It was evidently in going order, for a short while before the young man in overalls had roared up the street on it.

And Nipper had been looking at it all this time!

“Why, you thundering idiot!” muttered the lad to himself. “I've been grumbling because I can't follow the guv'nor—because I can't walk—and there's that motor-bike there the whole time! My hat! I'll be on the way within five minutes!”

And he was!

Nipper found it rather difficult at first to get the man to lend him the machine on hire. But, as it happened, Nipper had quite a large sum of money on him, and twenty pounds' security, planked into the shopkeeper's hand, was good enough. The bike, although thoroughly reliable, was not worth more than that sum.

Nipper shot off joyously, and as soon as he had come within sight of Myrtle Cottage his natural sense of caution had asserted itself. Dismounting, he had concealed the machine, and had crept forward. Sounds from the windmill, however, told him that something was going on there.

Creeping up, he found Nelson Lee already bound to the sail.

The lad did not know exactly what was about to happen—but he understood his master's peril. He could, of course, have held Jim the Penman

and Grell up with his revolver then and there—but even as he was thinking of doing so, the sail slowly began to revolve.

Nipper thought more quickly than he had ever thought in his life. Revolver-shooting would do no good at all. The only way to save his master from a dreadful death was to stop the machinery. Forgetting all about his ankle, he sped round the mill and clambered through a broken window, unseen and unheard.

He simply flew up a ladder, and picked up the first thing his eyes met—an iron crowbar.

It was absolutely a matter of seconds, and Nipper simply lurched forward and jammed the crowbar at random into the midst of the revolving gear. A horrible grinding followed, and everything came to a standstill. One glance outside told him that Nelson Lee was safe—and then Nipper revealed his hand.

So the lad's seemingly astounding advent was quite ordinary, after all.

And now, owing to the fact that he was on a motor-cycle, it was possible for Nelson Lee to hurry after Jim the Penman without any delay. There was more than a likelihood that the great criminal would be captured.

Events had turned out all for the best.

Lee was in a very determined state of mind. First and foremost, he determined to recover Lord Freshberry's jewels. And he badly wanted to bring Jim the Penman to book. The man was a danger to the community, and a rogue of the first water.

Luxthorpe was reached very soon, and the village was now almost in total darkness; at least, so it seemed, for there were many high trees. In the open, however, there was still a little daylight left.

Lee was just about to cut straight across the village street, meaning to make for the main road, when Nipper gave a yell. A small motor-car was standing outside the railway-station, three hundred yards away—and a train was even at that moment steaming in!

With a giddy swerve which nearly caused Nipper to topple over backwards, Lee brought the bicycle round, and they roared up to the station like a charging bull. They fell from the machine rather than jumped, and simply blundered headlong into the booking-office.

There was no time to ask questions, or to make inquiries of any sort. The train was even then slowly steaming out.

Lee dashed on to the platform, and, from the front part of the train, a bearded man was gazing out of a carriage window, and looking back. In spite of the hurried disguise Lee knew in a second that the man was Jim the Penman.

"In you get, Nipper!" roared Nelson Lee.

He wrenched open the door of an empty compartment, and hopped neatly in. The train was now going at quite a respectable speed, and the solitary porter on the platform stood looking on with his mouth wide open in horror and amazement.

But Nipper, notwithstanding his ankle, gave a leap, and clung on to the footboard. He was hauled into the compartment by Nelson Lee, and the door closed with a bang. Lee flopped on to the cushions, and Nipper collapsed on the top of him!

"Oh, my giddy boots! Talk about excitement!" panted Nipper. "Ain't we having a fine old time, gov'nor? It was a near shave, and no mistake!"

"But we're on board the train, Nipper!" said Lee exultantly. "Jim can't escape us now!"

"What about that motor-bike——"

"Confound the thing!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "A detail like that can wait! Jim, of course, realised that he would be safer in a train than upon the open road. He didn't know that I was so close behind him!" added the detective grimly.

"Do you think the rotter will jump out, sir?"

"By James! We cannot be too careful," replied his master, with a start. "He knows that we are on this train, and he will be desperate. Ah, an idea, Nipper! You post yourself at that window, and I will remain at this. Keep your eye along the train, and report to me at once if you see any sign of activity from our quarry."

A moment later the pair were stationed at both windows. They could see clearly ahead, and would be able to observe any move on Jim's part were he to attempt anything of the sort.

But the minutes sped by, and there was no sign. It was quite a long stretch to the next station. Very soon another double track of rails came into view. Lee could see this by the fact that a train was travelling at about the same speed as his own.

At a point further on the two sets of lines converged, and ran parallel—but did not join up. The two sets of tracks were quite separate and distinct. In a few moments the two trains were running quite close together, and within another fifteen seconds they were absolutely alongside, and running at almost precisely the same speed.

This happens often enough on many railways, and there was nothing singular in the occurrence. For the first minute the other train was going a little faster, but then the two settled down to a steady run side by side. In all probability one would draw ahead after another minute.

Nelson Lee was looking out keenly now, for a sudden suspicion had entered his head.

And, sure enough, his suspicion was correct. He had reckoned that Jim would take advantage of the sudden opportunity, and Lee was not at fault in his reasoning. As the detective watched, he saw one of the carriage doors open towards the front of the train, and Jim the Penman stood upon the footboard.

"Excellent!" muttered Lee intensely.

He whipped his revolver from his hip pocket, and held it in readiness. Sutcliffe was so intent upon his purpose that he did not even see the detective. His intention was to get from one train on to the other.

This feat, although sounding difficult, was in reality almost as simple as stepping from a railway carriage on to a platform. The trains were quite close together, and at the moment running at the same speed.

Nelson Lee muttered an exclamation as something caught his eye. In Jim's hand he held a small leather handbag. Lee needed no telling what that bag contained!

The detective made up his mind promptly, and without a second's hesitation. He levelled his revolver, and pulled the trigger. The report sounded deafening in the confined space between the trains, and a bellow of pain came from forward.

Lee cried out in delight.

His bullet had either hit Jim upon the wrist, or had merely grazed his hand. At all events, the leather bag swung through the air, and fell on to the permanent way. And the forger whipped his own revolver out and blazed away at random with mad fury.

He was now on the second train, and the driver of the other, hearing the

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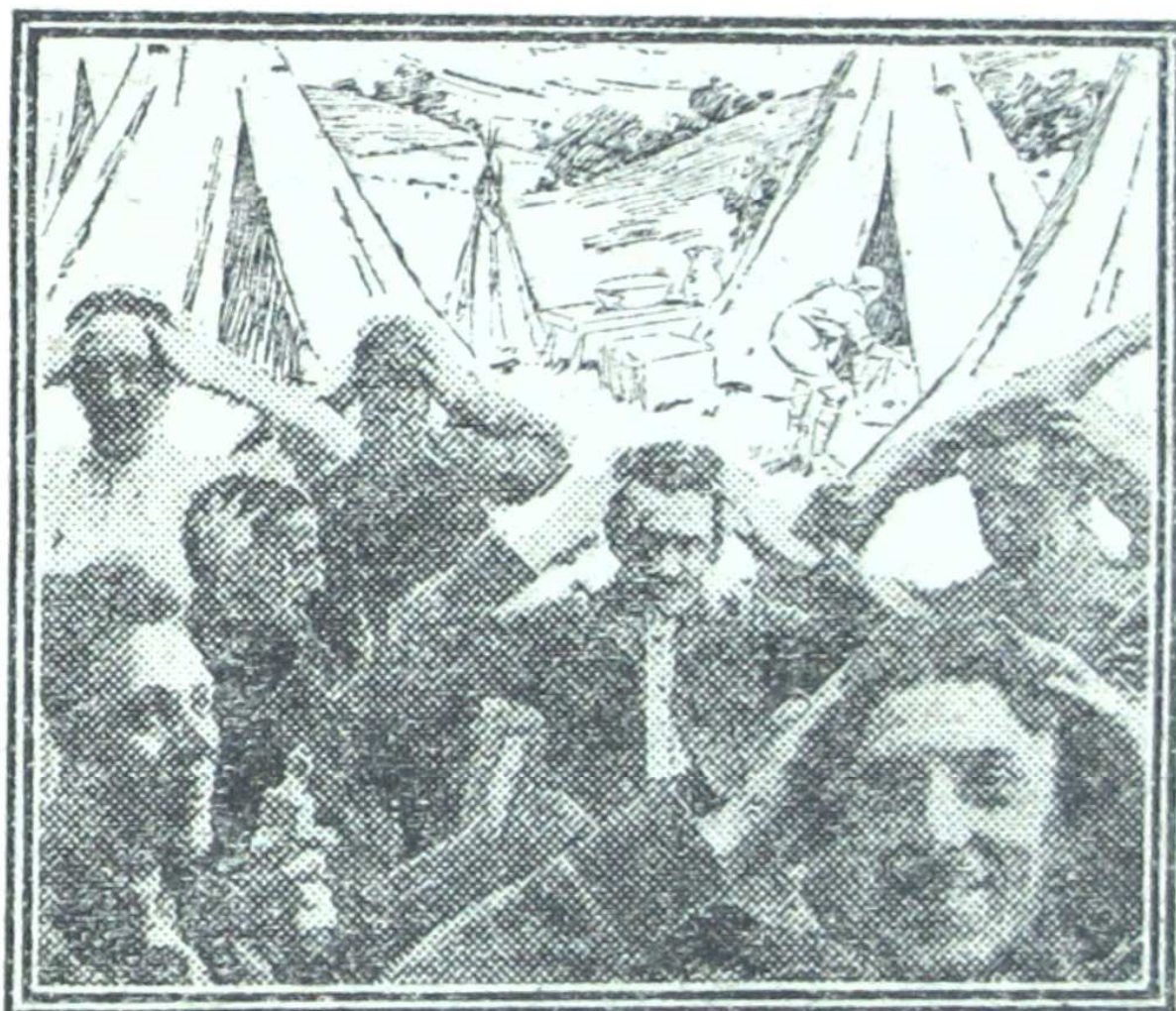
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shots, applied his brakes. The result caused Nelson Lee to frown furiously. His own train stopped, and the other, carrying Jim, tore away into the night.

Jim the Penman eluded capture again as Nelson Lee had expected.

How he slipped away remained a mystery, but no trace of him could be discovered. The bag had, indeed, contained the Freshberry jewels, and Lord Freshberry was nearly mad with joy when Nelson Lee took them to him that same evening.

The case was certainly a triumph for the great detective.

He had tracked Jim the Penman relentlessly, and had pressed him to the very last. And in the end Jim had been forced to abandon his booty. The fact that he had escaped himself did not reflect in the least upon Nelson Lee.

And the following day a note arrived by District Messenger at Gray's Inn Road. It was from Sutcliffe himself! The forger declared, in few words, that he would "finish" his enemy before a week was out!

Nelson Lee read the note, showed it to Nipper, and then calmly burnt it. He could very well understand Jim the Penman's state of mind!

THE END.

Next Week's Long Complete Story is entitled:

"THE CROOK"

An exciting Story of Nelson Lee and Nipper; by the clever Author of "The Black Wolf," "Yvonne," and many other grand stories.



Make a Point of Ordering Well in Advance!

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the Southern Seas

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this Story to-day!

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.

They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless. Until one day Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and, to his great delight and astonishment, finds it to be coated with gold. It is one of the stones for which the party is searching!

The chums determine to follow the tracks made by the animals, for by so doing Alec thinks they may find their way back to the camp.

(Now read on.)

Saved by a Serpent.

"EXACTLY!" said Clive. "I want them to show us the way. If you had fired and frightened 'em they'd have scampered off, and our chance gone. The way lies through one of those dark caverns or galleries such as we have seen, and we should never find our way in the darkness unless we can so manage as to get them to put us on the right track. There's another point—you called them monkeys, but they're really apes, and that again makes the thing more hopeful for us. Monkeys might come in through some small passage we couldn't even crawl through, whereas these apes must require a passageway rather more roomy—eh?"

"Your logic is as convincing as it is timely, oh, wise one," Alec rejoined. "It seems to me, Clive, that you've missed your vocation. You should have been a senior wrangler or something of that kind.

"I suppose," he went on, "the idea is to climb the rocks, drive the apes away, and, as they are pretty sure to make for the exit they know of, follow them. Is that the plan?"

"That's the ticket!" Clive confirmed. "We will take these pebbles with us to show the doctor—and won't he be jolly pleased to see 'em? We ought to find some more up there where those johnnies are; they threw them down from there, you know," said Clive thoughtfully. "As to the boat, we'll have to abandon it for the present."

"Yes; we shall have to come again with a party in the motor-boat, with searchlights and all that, through the tunnel, and then tow it back. I don't see what else is to be done."

They looked inside the boat for one or two things they wished to take with them, threw all the fish they had caught into the lake, pulled the boat further up on the shore, and started to climb the rocks.

They had slung their rifles at their backs, as they could not well carry

them and climb too, but kept their revolvers handy. "Apes are ugly-tempered beasts sometimes," Clive reminded his chum, "and they might show fight."

And that is just what these did—unfortunately for the adventurers' prospects of finding a way out by their aid. No sooner did the creatures realise that these strangers intended to invade their ground, than they made a vicious rush to prevent them. Headed by an old grey-headed ape with long tusks and savage-looking red eyes, they came clambering down with a deafening chorus of howls and screams of rage to meet and eject the intruders.

The leader came leaping down, caught hold of Alec, and the two rolled together on to the sand below.

Fortunately, the fierce beast lost its hold in the fall, and the two were separated. Alec rolled over on the sand too dazed and bruised to get up at once, and the ape was making a rush at him again, when Clive fired and knocked it over.

Then darting forward, revolver in hand, he stood over his prostrate friend, facing the threatening crowd of jabbering brutes and keeping them at bay.

The position of the two young adventurers seemed to be a desperate one. Alec was lying on the sand hors de combat; what amount of injury he had received in his fall down the rocks or from his savage assailant Clive did not know and dared not try to ascertain just then.

All that was certain was that Alec could do nothing to defend himself against the crowd of fierce malignant foes who were threatening the pair, and Clive was left alone to face them and do what he could to save his own life and that of his friend.

Had Alec only been unhurt they might have been able to make a rush to the boat and get her afloat. And once afloat they could have laughed at this horde of jabbering enemies; but as things were that was out of the question.

Dr. Campbell had related to them how he and his party had once been in what must have been a similar position to this, out in South America, and how that they had barely escaped with their lives from a swarm of ferocious apes, though his party had numbered half a dozen, all well armed. What then could one, standing alone, hope to do, especially as he could not even turn and run; for that would be to abandon his friend to the blind rage of these brutes—it would mean leaving him to be torn to pieces.

For a few moments there was a pause. The report of the pistol had called forth such a thunderous din in the shape of echoes that the creatures were astonished into temporary inactivity—as well they might be. The sound had reverberated in the great dome overhead, and had been magnified and multiplied till it had resembled the discharge of artillery. It had been flung back from rock to rock, with a roar like thunder, and this had kept the attention of the apes engaged, as their blinking red eyes had, as it were, tried to follow the sound, now in one direction, then in another.

But now that the racket was dying down into low mutterings, they were beginning to recover from their momentary scare and to fix their gaze upon Clive.

And what was he to do? He knew he had but a few seconds' grace in which to make up his mind. He could fire another shot and take off their attention again and yet again, perhaps; but each time, as they found they were not hurt, the scare would be less.

And the doctor had told how that when he and his companions had fired at the apes and had wounded some, their cries of pain had only exasperated their fellows and made matters worse. Remembering that now, Clive

wisely decided not to shoot any more of them until at least he was compelled to. The one he had shot at had been knocked outright; and that no doubt in the circumstances was fortunate, for if he had been merely wounded, there was little doubt his groan would have infuriated the rest.

And now came a strange and unexpected development. As the last mutterings of the echoes died away, and while Clive, watching his foes, was making up his mind that there was nothing for it but to sell his life as dearly as possible, there came a strange loud hissing sound.

The apes, with their quick hearing, had evidently heard it before he had, for they were now all gazing in one direction with unmistakable signs of alarm.

Gradually their looks of diabolical fiendish rage turned to fright. Then as the hissing became more audible they suddenly turned, and with one accord rushed back up the rocks, screaming and shrieking in ungovernable fear.

In another moment Guy found himself standing alone so far as they were concerned; and now that he was relieved of his anxiety on their account, he looked quietly and cautiously round in search of the cause of their sudden panic.

It did not take him long to discover it, for there, some forty yards away, he saw protruding from a cavity in the rock, a head and fore part of an enormous serpent.

It was swaying its head to and fro hissing venomously, its bright cruel greenish eyes fixed on Clive who, as soon as he had detected it, stood and stared back as though fascinated.

Slowly, very slowly and deliberately, as though in no hurry, being quite sure of its prey, it crawled nearer and nearer; its huge folds coming gradually into view as they emerged from the cavity.

The reptile ceased its hissing and laid its head flat on the sand for a space, but watching its intended victim with unwinking vigilance, and Clive went cold all over as the thought came to him that it was preparing for a spring.

Knowing with what lightening quickness these seemingly sluggish creatures dart upon their prey when once they make their spring, he again gave himself up for lost. For though he held his revolver in his hand, he knew that it was a thousand to one against his being able to stop the monster in its attack. And here again he was in the position that he could not turn and flee without sealing the doom of his chum.

Alec all this time had been lying like one dead or stunned—Clive could not tell which, but he guessed and hoped that he was only unconscious. And now the great snake advanced and then halted, laid its head on the sands, and glared at him with those horrible eyes.

Clive felt for a minute as though his senses were reeling. He grew dizzy, the whole place seemed to be spinning round, the very ground he was standing on appeared to be going up and down.

With a great effort he recovered himself. Was this a case of fascination, he wondered? It certainly was not fear—for, strange to say, at that time he felt no fear at all, only the queer sense of giddiness.

But it was borne in on him that to give way meant death—an awful, horrible death both for himself and for his friend lying helpless at his feet, and he called up all his resources to his aid, and fixing his gaze he watched the reptile steadfastly, the while he quickly but silently unslung his rifle.

He would trust to his revolver here. The rifle carried a soft nosed bullet

(Continued overleaf.)

which, if he could but hit the creature's head with it, would have far more effect than a pistol bullet.

Never shifting his glance, but returning the grisly reptile's fixed gaze in its own fashion, he got the rifle in his hands, and kneeling down, took careful aim at its head, which just then was lying motionless on the sand.

There was a flash and a report, and once more the air was filled with sounds as though a thunderstorm had broken loose just overhead.

That he had hit his mark Clive knew at once by the serpent's sudden contortions. He did not, however, trust to a single shot, but continued to pour in bullet after bullet. He knew that it was necessary in the case of a reptile of the size he guessed this must be. For he had not seen even yet its full length. He had not, indeed, seen the half of it, because only a portion had crawled out of its den.

And he now realised that this was a very important point. Indeed, he guessed that very likely it was the means of saving his own and his friend's life.

For the snake was so large that, writhing and struggling as it was from the pain of its wounds, it could not get its full length into the open. The great coils that were rolling and twisting about inside the cave jammed themselves as it were and so held the monster back. But for this Clive felt certain the beast would have darted at him.

Realising this in a flash, Clive saw the instant necessity of getting away before his enemy could free itself. Without a second's delay, therefore, he picked Alec up in his arms and carried him as well as he could to the boat and laid him in it.

Throwing all his strength into the effort, he pushed the craft down into the water, jumped in, and pushing off, seized the sculls and rowed as hard as he could.

Then, panting and nearly exhausted with these exertions, he paused and looked at the snake.

Then he saw how well advised he had been in acting as he had. The serpent had wriggled itself out into the open and had struggled forward to the very place where Alec had been lying.

He could now see its real proportions, and the sight made him more thankful than ever that the idea of getting away had come to him in time. For though he felt sure he had hit the reptile in the head and very likely blinded it and it was probable the wound would prove mortal, yet the creature was evidently not going to die just yet. And one blow from that ponderous lashing tail would have meant death even apart altogether from the danger of being crushed in its awful coils.

Feeling now that they were fairly safe from this frightful enemy, Clive devoted himself to Alec. Pulling a flask from his pocket he poured some of the cordial it contained down his throat, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing him revive.

Presently Alec sat up, and then Clive anxiously examined him to see what his injuries might be; and very thankful he was when he found that in spite of all he was only bruised and scratched.

Wetting his handkerchief he washed and bathed the injured places, and had the satisfaction of seeing the young fellow gradually return to something like his ordinary self.

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