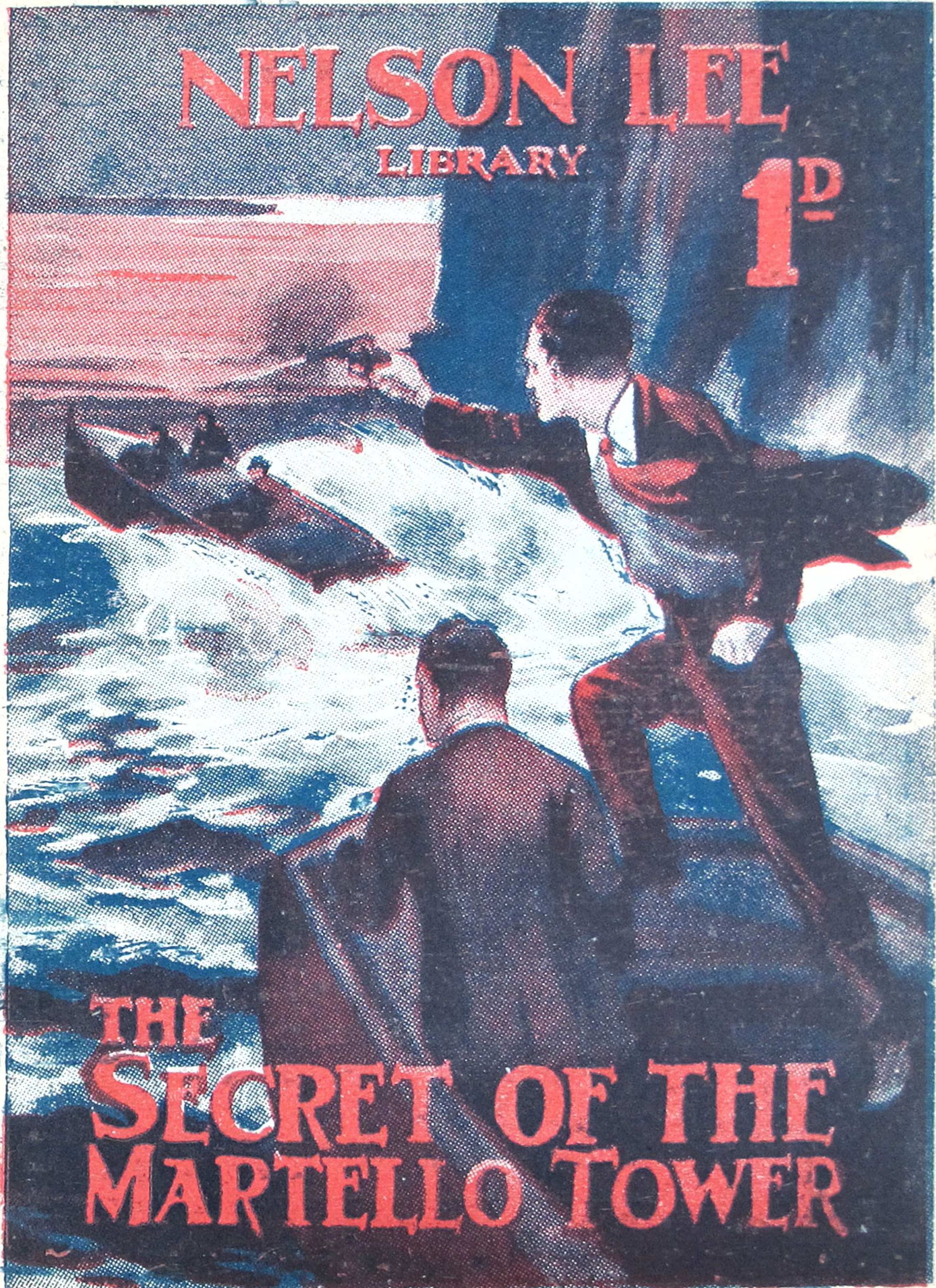


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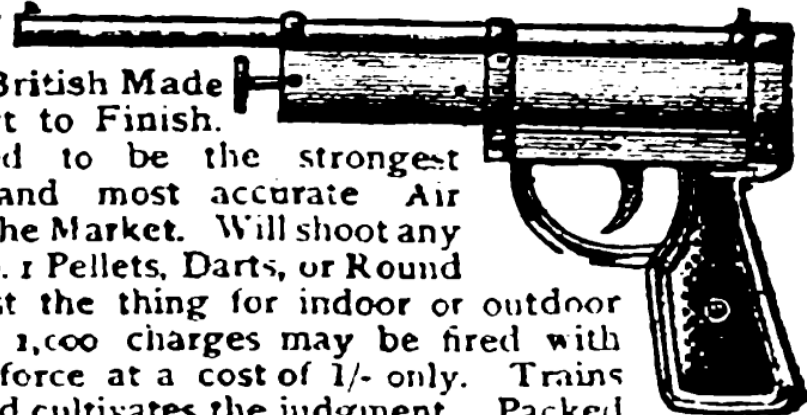
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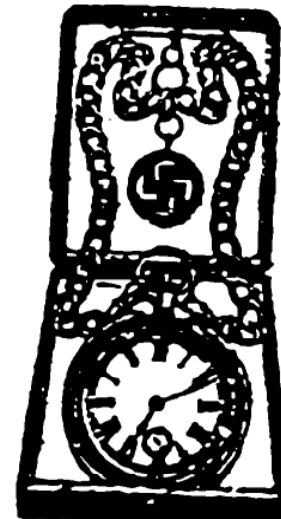
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CHAPTER I.

An Important Parcel and What It Contained.

"PEPPER, please, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper were at breakfast, and the famous detective carefully passed the salt in response to Nipper's request. The lad jerked it back and grinned.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" he asked. "That stuff's no good to me. That letter you're reading must be jolly interesting."

Lee laid the letter down, and smiled as he passed Nipper the whole cruet, to select exactly what he required.

"Sorry, Nipper," was Lee's remark. "No, this letter is not particularly interesting, but I am rather puzzled. It is from my old friend, Lord Aylesworth, and I can't quite make out what he is driving at."

"Can I have a squint, sir?"

"You can read the letter if you wish," said Nelson Lee. "But I should not advise you to squint, young 'un. Squinting is injurious to the eyesight."

Nipper grinned again, and picked up the letter, which had arrived by the morning's post from the Earl of Aylesworth, an elderly peer, who had been acquainted with Nelson Lee for many years, and who was quite a close friend. Lee had not heard from Aylesworth for some little time, and this communication now was, as the detective had said, somewhat puzzling.

It ran:

"My Dear Lee,—I am coming up to see you to-morrow afternoon. Shall arrive about three o'clock, or thereabouts. To tell you the truth, I have a rather important matter to lay before you, and I want your advice, and possibly your help. By parcel post I am sending you a little piece of model mechanism—very intricate and delicate—which I want you to take charge of. I won't go into details now, because I am anxious to put nothing into writing.

"This will strike you as being somewhat mysterious, but I have an excellent reason for acting in this manner. It is also important that you should receive the parcel by post, and not from my own hands. I suppose it will arrive with this letter, or very shortly afterwards.

"Until three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, yours very sincerely,

"AYLESWORTH."

Nipper passed the letter back, and scratched the side of his nose thoughtfully—not because his nasal organ itched, but because the action assisted Nipper to think more clearly. It was one of the youngster's little habits.

"This is a jolly queer epistle, gov'nor," he observed. "What the dickens can this 'little piece of model mechanism' be? His lordship will be up this afternoon, won't he? And what about the parcel—it hasn't arrived yet."

"Probably it will turn up during the morning," was Lee's reply. "We shall then, perhaps, be better able to understand. Aylesworth is a clear-headed man, however, and it is evident that he has something very important to lay before me. As it happens, we are rather slack this week, and so I shall give his lordship my sole attention."

Lee perused his other correspondence, and then transferred his attention to the morning papers. Nipper went on with his breakfast, wondering idly what the expected parcel would contain.

It was about ten-thirty, however, when the postman arrived again. He came just when scrubbing operations were in progress. It was Mrs. Jones's day for cleaning the hall, and the maidservant had the front door wide open, and was scrubbing the linoleum diligently.

Beside her, just inside the door, stood her pail of somewhat murky water, with a large slab of yellow soap in close proximity. The postman stood upon the step, and produced a small, square, well-wrapped parcel, and held it in his hand.

"Nice morning, miss," he remarked cheerfully.

The servant-girl looked up.

"Oh, it's you," she said, sitting back on her heels and brushing away her hair with the back of her hand. "Anything for me this morning, postman?"

"Not likely," replied the postman, with a grin. "This here's for Mr. Lee. You seem to be pretty busy, miss."

"Always am," said the girl shortly.

"That's a likely tale," scoffed the postman. "What about evenings? Don't you have any time of an evening, once a week?"

The servant-girl sniffed.

"What if I do?" she asked. "I ain't likely to waste any of my time on the likes of you. Ain't you got anything better to do than to prop that door-post up, talking to me? You'll never get all them parcels delivered at this rate."

The postman relieved the door-post of his weight, and thrust his hand forward in order to give the girl the parcel. But at that moment a rather startling incident occurred. It was quite trivial in itself, but far-reaching in its consequences.

It happened that Mrs. Jones possessed a cat. It was quite a peaceful animal, and at the moment of the postman's arrival it had been contentedly squatting close against the pavement, eyeing the passing traffic with lazy interest.

But as the postman stood upright a dog of no particular breed, but of formidable proportions, suddenly caught sight of the cat from the other

side of the road. The mongrel gave a joyful yelp, and made a bee-line for his natural enemy.

He streaked across the road, missing a taxi and a motor-bus by inches, and as he arrived upon the pavement Mrs. Jones's cat suddenly became aware of the impending peril.

Cats can move quickly as a rule, but Mrs. Jones's cat was quite a youngster, and it was possessed of unusual agility. He moved much more quickly than the ordinary run of cats.

The animal sighted danger when it was almost too late, for the mongrel was coming at full speed, in a kind of reckless charge. The cat thought—if it had time to think at all—that this was no occasion for a counter-attack. Obviously the best move was to retreat—and retreat hurriedly.

Accordingly the cat whisked round, its fur all standing out straight, and dived in one huge bound up the steps and between the postman's feet, for the latter was standing with his legs slightly apart.

“What the thunder——”

The postman was unable to get further. The mongrel, chagrined at seeing his quarry disappear so promptly, lost his head, and followed hot on the track. There was no time to deviate from his course, and so he took the same route.

At the precise moment he dashed between the postman's feet, however, the man altered his position—which was fatal.

The dog got caught, and twisted round suddenly, throwing the postman off his balance, and sending him flying forward. The whole thing had happened in the space of ten seconds, and it was certainly extremely comical.

At least, it was comical from the point of view of those who witnessed the incident. The postman himself and the housemaid failed to appreciate the humour of the situation altogether.

This was scarcely to be wondered at, for the postman lauded fairly and squarely upon the girl, and the pair rolled over in a tangle upon the soaking wet linoleum. The girl was the first to sit up, and she found the postman's parcel bag in her lap and one of his hands in her hair.

“Take your hands off!” cried the housemaid indignantly.

“By gum, I'll teach that dog!” roared the postman, scrambling to his feet, wet, dishevelled, and curious. “Get out, you confounded mongrel!”

The dog was still in the hall, and the postman's bellow alarmed him considerably. He slunk out with his tail between his legs, and would have made his exit much less gracefully but for a further disastrous incident.

The postman took a running kick at the dog, and, naturally enough, he stepped fully upon the cake of soap. The consequence of that act was disastrous. Soap is slippery, especially when it lays upon wet linoleum, but this cake seemed to be possessed of a certain wicked design.

At all events, it skidded across the floor at express speed, taking the postman's foot with it. It was a matter of sheer impossibility for the rest of the man's anatomy to follow so quickly. The result, accordingly, was delightfully humorous from the housemaid's point of view.

The postman described a superb semi-circle, his other leg and two arms waving like mill-sails. Then he collapsed suddenly, and sat with a horrid squelch full upon the housemaid's washing flannel—which, of course, was full of dirty water.

“Oh, lawks!” giggled the girl. “Oh, my! Now you've done it!”

The postman was rather too full for words, for he had brought the back of his head a considerable crack against the solid wall. The dog by this time had completely vanished, and the cat was safe in the back regions of the house.

Mrs. Jones, having heard the considerable commotion, came out with a frown, which changed to an expression of surprised alarm when she saw the postman lying on his back on the wet floor, and the housemaid kneeling beside him, laughing uproariously.

"Jane!" rapped out Mrs. Jones severely. "What does this mean?"

"Oh, mum, you would have laughed——"

"Indeed, I should not have laughed," exclaimed the landlady tartly. "What is this postman doing in the hall—and in that extremely undignified position, too? You had better explain at once, Jane!"

The servant-girl did so, and by the time she had completed her rather long-winded story the postman was upon his feet, rubbing his head and murmuring certain words beneath his breath—which, perhaps, was just as well.

"All on account of that cat o' yours!" he growled savagely. "If it hadn't been for that cat none o' this would have happened, and——"

"That will do, postman!" snapped Mrs. Jones.

"Oh, will it?" said the postman nastily. "What about my head? What about my uniform?"

"From what I understand you have only your own indolence to thank for the whole incident," said Mrs. Jones coldly. "If you had delivered your parcel at once, nothing would have happened. I strongly object to my maids being delayed in their work by postmen and tradespeople. Where is the parcel, by the way?"

The postman looked round him sullenly.

"It was jerked out of my hand," he replied. "You don't expect I kept hold of it while all this was going on, do you? It must be on the floor somewhere. It can't be far off, anyhow."

They all three looked round, but the little square parcel was nowhere to be seen. It had certainly been in the postman's hand at the moment of his fall, and it could not be far off now. Yet it was nowhere to be seen.

"Queer, I must say," commented the man. "It could not have been jerked outside, could it? Besides, I remember dropping it, and hearing a splash——"

The housemaid gave a gasp, and plunged her hand into the pail of water, which had escaped throughout the excitement without being upset.

"Why, it's in 'ere, right at the very bottom!" cried the girl. "Oh, what will Mr. Lee say? It must have been soaking for nigh on five minutes! Just look at it, mum!"

Mrs. Jones was looking at it, and frowning heavily. And as the girl shook the parcel a swishing of water told that the latter had penetrated right through the wrappings. The contents of the parcel were fairly heavy, in spite of its smallness.

"You'll be reported for this!" said Mrs. Jones, glaring at the postman—which, perhaps, was rather unkind. "There's no tellin' what's in this parcel for Mr. Lee, and this water's ruined it. Oh, what a pity—what a pity!"

The landlady snatched the parcel out of Jane's hand, and hastened upstairs with it. The postman meanwhile beat a strategic retreat, and soundly slapped the faces of several small boys who had collected on the pavement, and who were grinning loudly.

Mrs. Jones burst into Nelson Lee's consulting-room, and found the detective about to open the door himself. Nipper was leaning out of the window, chuckling. He had just witnessed the discomfiture of the small urchins on the pavement.

"I was just about to inquire what the commotion was about, Mrs. Jones," remarked Nelson Lee. "Certain sounds have been floating upstairs."

"Oh, sir, it was the postman," panted Mrs. Jones. "He fell, and dropped this parcel into Jane's pail of water. It's just come for you, sir, an' I'm afraid it's very wet. I do hope nothing's harmed."

Nelson Lee took the parcel, and pursed his lips as he read the sodden label.

"From Aylesworth!" he murmured. "Dear me, this is most unfortunate. I am afraid, Mrs. Jones, the contents of this parcel will be quite ruined. However—we will see. You need not wait—I will let you know later if everything is all right."

Mrs. Jones retired, rather flustered, and closed the door after her. Nipper came across, and looked at Lee's frowning face questioningly. He had only heard his master's last few words.

"Anything wrong, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Nipper, I believe something is very wrong indeed," was Nelson Lee's response. "The Earl of Aylesworth's parcel has arrived, but it seems there has been an accident with it—owing to some infernal skylarking, I expect, between the postman and the housemaid."

"Oh, the parcel's soaking, guv'nor," ejaculated Nipper. "What about that delicate piece of mechanism? Dirty water, won't do that any good, will it?"

Lee did not answer, but slipped through the strings which bound the parcel. The detective was seated at his desk now, and the little parcel was lying before him upon a newspaper. He carefully laid back the sodden brown paper, and a small deal box was revealed.

The box was well made, and was fitted with a hinged lid and a small brass catch. The whole thing was dripping with grimy water, and Lee gingerly lifted the brass catch, and the action was accompanied by a slight snap from within.

Nelson Lee lifted the wooden lid, and his eyebrows rose in astonishment. For a full twenty seconds he said nothing, but stared intently down into the wooden box. And when he looked up at Nipper again there was an expression in his eyes which the lad could not understand. Lee had paled a trifle, and his lips were set in a grim line.

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper tensely.

Nelson Lee took a deep breath.

"We have to thank the postman and the housemaid for being alive at this moment, Nipper," said the great criminologist gravely. "But for the accident to this parcel we should now be blown to atoms!"

Nipper stared.

"What the dickens do you mean, guv'nor?" he asked breathlessly.

"I mean that this thing—this wooden box—is nothing more nor less than a deadly infernal machine, capable of blowing us and the whole house into kingdom come!" replied Nelson Lee in a perfectly even voice.

CHAPTER II.

The Strange Beginning of a New Case.

NIPPER stood looking at his master for several tense seconds before he made any comment. And then he suddenly broke into a grin, and playfully tapped his master on the shoulder.

"You do it jolly well, guv'nor," he remarked. "What's the idea? Are you trying to test my nerves?"

"Not at all, Nipper; I merely stated a fact."

"Get away, sir——"

"I see no reason why I should get away," said Nelson Lee calmly. "No, Nipper, I am not joking, although you have every reason to suspect that I am. This box is, indeed, a deadly bomb."

Nipper was convinced at last.

"But it's from Lord Aylesworth!" he burst out. "Great Scott! You don't mean to say that Lord Aylesworth sent such a thing as that through the post?"

"You don't seem to grasp the significance of what I said," was the detective's reply. "If this parcel had not been soaked with water, the fuse would have ignited upon my releasing the brass catch. - In short, this ghastly machine was sent to me so that I should be instantly killed."

Nipper breathed hard.

"Then—then Lord Aylesworth tried to murder you, gov'nor!" he exclaimed huskily.

"No, no, young 'un. I know Aylesworth better than that. He hasn't enough villainy in his whole composition to cause the death of a mouse. There is one obvious conclusion I came to on the very instant," said the detective. "The writing on the label of this parcel was forged—and it follows, naturally, that the letter I received this morning was forged also. The writing is absolutely identical; but it is a forgery. It must be!"

"My stars!" gasped Nipper. "Jim the Penman!"

"Precisely," said Lee quietly. "Jim the Penman! Our old friend, Mr. Douglas James Sutcliffe, better known to the police and public as Jim the Penman, has made a very neat attempt to blow me into mincemeat. And, by Jingo, he would have succeeded!"

Nipper sank limply into a chair, and was silent for three or four moments. The thing was a little too much for him to realise all at once. The narrowness of the escape was too breathless for the lad to grasp.

Nelson Lee's duel of wits with Jim the Penman had been proceeding for quite a long time, and in every round of the game the famous detective had come out top dog. On many occasions Nelson Lee had come to grips with the master forger, and not once had Sutcliffe succeeded in his evil designs.

At the end of the latest encounter, when Jim had attempted to steal the Freshberry diamonds by means of forgery, the master criminal had sent Lee a note by special messenger declaring that he would "finish" his enemy before a week had elapsed.

That week had gone by, and several weeks in addition, and nothing had happened. Now, it seemed, Jim the Penman had made a belated attempt to carry out his threat. And the neatness of the plot could not be denied.

Nelson Lee did not doubt for a second that Jim the Penman was the author of the attempted murder. And the forger had evidently gone to a considerable amount of trouble to achieve his end. If it had not been for the grim nature of the whole thing, there would have been something humorous in the manner in which it had been rendered futile.

"You will understand the singular subtlety with which Jim the Penman laid his plans," said Nelson Lee. "By sending me the forged letter first, stating that a parcel was following, he prepared me for its receipt. He thought, of course, that I should be suspicious of a small parcel, which obviously contained some kind of mechanism. Accordingly he informed me, in the Aylesworth letter, that the parcel would contain a certain piece of mechanism."

"My hat, it was clever, gov'nor!" said Nipper, half admiringly.

"Undoubtedly, I accepted that letter from Aylesworth without a thought,

and opened the parcel just as innocently. And Jim was cunning enough to forge the handwriting of a man who is well known to me."

Nelson Lee paused, and bent over the little box again.

"Why—why didn't it go off, guv'nor?" asked Nipper huskily.

"Well, there is no mystery about that," was the detective's reply. "You and I, Nipper, owe our lives at this present moment to one of those queer little tricks of fate which are constantly occurring. Owing to sheer mischance the postman dropped this parcel into a pail of water. It is really amazing, young 'un, that providence should have come to our aid at such an opportune time."

"The water, of course, ruined the explosive, sir?"

"I am not so sure of that," replied Nelson Lee. "But the fuse at least has been rendered harmless. Come and look here, my lad."

Nipper bent over the table and looked down into the sodden box. There was some curious-looking mechanism, and it had been packed into the box and jammed tight. The whole thing was wet and soaking, for the water had penetrated right through.

"You see this little catch?" proceeded Nelson Lee. "Well, Nipper, according to Jim the Penman's gentle intentions, the raising of this catch should have ignited the fuse. The latter is extremely short, and the explosion would have occurred barely two seconds later. You can imagine what the result of such an explosion would have been. You and I would have been blown into nothingness, this house would have been partially demolished, and half the windows in Gray's Inn Road would have been smashed."

"Phew!" exclaimed Nipper breathlessly.

"So you see what a narrow escape we have had," said the detective calmly. "Now, I intend to adjourn to the laboratory, and to take this infernal machine to pieces. My dear lad, you need not be alarmed. I have handled high explosives before, and I shall not make a mistake. You had better come along and help——"

The consulting-room door opened, and Mrs. Jones appeared.

"I do hope nothing has been harmed, sir," exclaimed the landlady concernedly.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Do not worry yourself, Mrs. Jones," he replied. "As it happens, it was extremely lucky that this parcel was given a bath before it was brought up to me. But what is that card you hold in your hand?"

"There's a gentleman wanting to see you, sir."

Lee took the slip of pasteboard from the landlady, and, glancing at it, read the name, "Duncan Templeton," and the address, neatly inscribed in the corner, "Oak Lawn, Rothmore, Chelmsford."

"The gentleman says that his business is very urgent, and that he particularly wants to see you, sir," added Mrs. Jones.

"The majority of my visitors say that their business is extremely urgent," remarked Lee with a smile. "However, show Mr. Templeton up."

In a few minutes the visitor was ushered into the consulting-room. He was an elderly man, inclined to be stout, but his face was lined and creased and clean-shaven. The deep bronze colour of it plainly told that he had spent many years of his life in a hot climate, and his keen eyes hinted at a genial temper and a generous humour.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, glad you've found time to see me," Mr. Templeton exclaimed briskly, as he shook the detective's hand with much force. "You're a busy man—and I sha'n't keep you long. But I'm anxious to obtain your help and advice. Costly, perhaps, but when one comes to an expert, he is prepared to foot the bill."

The visitor took the seat which Lee indicated, and then continued, with scarcely a pause.

"I live in my own house in the country, Mr. Lee, and I retired from business some two years ago," said Mr. Templeton. "As you can probably see, I spent most of my time abroad—I had one of the biggest businesses in Calcutta. Well, I'll just tell you what I want you to do. There's an old martello tower about three and a half miles along the coast south of Clacton, in Essex. I want you to guard that tower while certain operations are proceeding."

"I am afraid I cannot quite follow," said Lee quietly.

Mr. Duncan Templeton shifted his position.

"Well, it's this way," he proceeded. "Several years ago, while I was travelling on business from Calcutta to Bombay, I met an old Englishman who gave me a piece of parchment. You see, I'm not going into full details now. On this parchment was a rough drawing of a martello tower and some words to the effect that twelve cases of gold specie were buried beneath the tower. This gold amounts to about thirty thousand pounds, and I'm curious to see if the parchment is genuine or a fake."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"In all probability a fake," he observed. "There are many martello towers along our coasts, but I don't think there is gold buried beneath any of them. Your acquaintance in India was probably bluffing you. Did he ask any money for the parchment?"

"Yes, I gave him twenty pounds for it."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am afraid you won't see your money back," he remarked. "However, let us go into this matter more closely. To begin with, why do you think it necessary that I should go down to this tower and keep guard over it?"

"Because I am about to have searching operations instituted, and I knew that I couldn't come to a better man than you," replied Mr. Templeton promptly. "In a matter such as this, I want somebody I can trust. And you are that man, Mr. Lee. Moreover, I have another reason. I have got an idea that my plans are known."

"To whom?"

"Well, I don't know exactly; but it's some scoundrel or other," was the visitor's reply. "Just have a look at the parchment yourself, Mr. Lee, and tell me what you think of it. If you can convince me that it is a fake and a fraud, I won't trouble you any further. But, to be perfectly straightforward, I am sure that it is absolutely genuine."

He produced a piece of tattered yellow parchment from his pocket-book, and laid it upon the great detective's desk. The design upon the parchment was faded, but fairly clear.

Nelson Lee examined it for several minutes in silence, Nipper bending over his shoulder interestedly. Mr. Templeton looked on, and he was now quite concerned, and anxious to hear the detective's opinion.

"H'm! This rough map is certainly genuine enough in appearance," commented Nelson Lee. "But can you tell me no further details, Mr. Templeton? Why was this gold buried beneath the tower? And who is the Mr. Josiah Helmson mentioned here?"

"I have been unable to find out," replied the visitor. "I set to work weeks ago, and made the most careful inquiries; but nobody in Hampstead knows anything of a man named Helmson. But that, of course, is hardly to be wondered at. Just consider the age of this document."

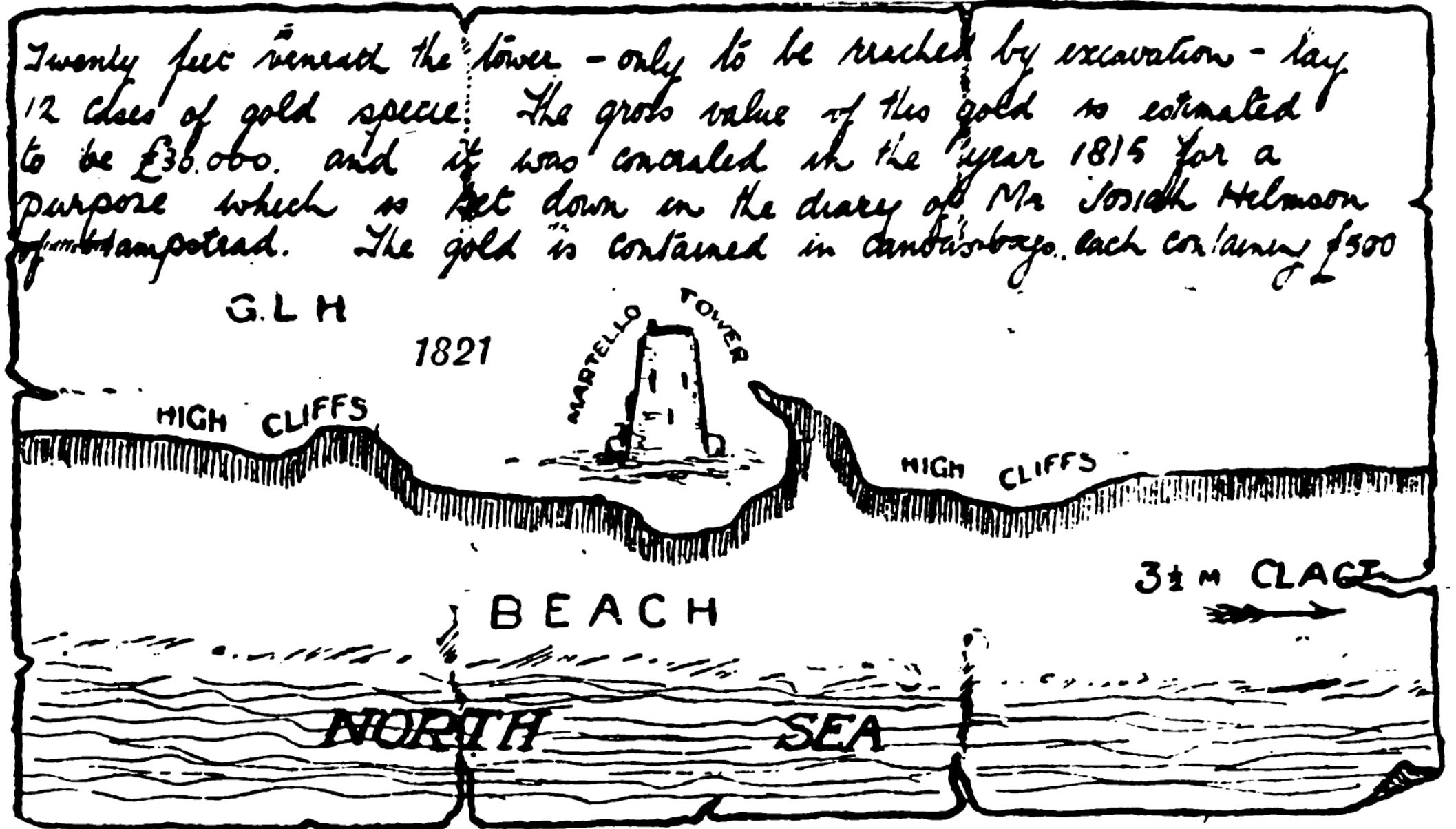
"What was the name of the man who sold you the parchment?"

"Robert Martin," was the answer. "He told me that he was a sailor,

and that he had been in India for many years. The parchment had fallen into his hands by chance, for he had found it among the papers in the sea-chest of a dead ship's-captain. It was sealed in an envelope, and concealed between the leaves of a pocket-book."

"You have only this man Martin's word for that?"

"That is all, but I am sure he was truthful," said Mr. Templeton.



"Well, it is possible, of course. Under certain circumstances, I can imagine the gold being buried beneath a martello tower," observed Nelson Lee. "But I am very much afraid that it has been recovered long since. However, I understand you are going to have a search instituted?"

"Just to satisfy my curiosity," smiled Mr. Templeton.

"As you said a few minutes ago, this tower is three-and-a-half miles from Clacton," went on the detective. "That is fairly obvious, for half of the word 'Clacton' is plainly to be seen. The 'on' has been worn away by constant folding."

"Exactly! And I am reminded that I wish to tell you something further," said the visitor. "Before doing so, however, I will mention that there stands a martello tower nearly four miles south of Clacton. I suppose the writer of this document made a trivial mistake. And now for the other thing. I am rather puzzled, and can only conclude that I read the wording wrong."

Mr. Templeton paused and bent forward.

"This parchment, Mr. Lee, had reposed in a locked drawer of my writing-table for months past," he went on. "I last looked at it two months ago—that is, until about three weeks since. Then, when I took it out to show to a friend, I received a surprise."

"In what way?"

"Well, I could have sworn that, instead of the words 'North Sea' upon the lower part of the parchment were the words 'English Channel.' I had it firmly fixed in my mind that the tower was situated on the south coast," said Mr. Templeton. "Yet, when I looked at the parchment three weeks ago, I saw plainly enough that the tower was on the east coast, three and a half miles below Clacton."

Nelson Lee shook his head slowly.

"This is somewhat unsatisfactory, my dear sir," he exclaimed. "I really cannot understand how it is possible for you to have made such a mistake. The words 'North Sea' are very clearly written, and under no circumstances could they be mistaken for 'English Channel.' Why should you have gained such a wrong impression?"

"I have no idea at all."

"Is your memory good?"

Mr. Templeton shook his head.

"No; I am sorry to say it is notoriously bad," he replied.

"Notoriously?"

"Well, I mean to imply that it is generally known among my friends and servants that my memory can scarcely be relied upon," said the visitor. "Under the circumstances, perhaps, I must accept the parchment as it now stands. At all events, the words could not have altered themselves, could they?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Hardly!" he replied. "Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Yes; just one little thing. About four weeks ago an incident occurred at my house near Chelmsford which was never cleared up," said Mr. Templeton. "One night a housemaid came to my bedroom door, and frantically called to me that there were burglars in my library."

"And were there?"

"I don't think so. I hurried into a dressing-gown, and went downstairs; but there was nothing to be seen," was the reply. "I found the French windows ajar, however, so it is possible that there was somebody. A tramp, perhaps."

"Why were the French windows open?" asked Lee. "Were they not locked when you retired for the night?"

"I forget whether I closed them or not," replied Mr. Templeton. "Anyhow, there was no sign of a burglar, so I closed the windows and went back to bed. But the incident worried me, for this parchment was in the library, and I had a suspicion that somebody was after it."

"Had you ever told anybody of the existence of the parchment?"

"I had mentioned the matter to several friends on different occasions," replied Mr. Templeton. "You see until recently I had never really decided to make any definite inquiries. I am a very rich man, and I am not at all in need of money. Even if this legend is true, and I recover the treasure-trove, I should certainly devote my share of it to charity. It is more a matter of curiosity than anything else that I have now decided to have a search instituted."

"Did you always treat this parchment as a strict secret?" asked Lee.

"Not exactly. I often mentioned it to friends and acquaintances, merely in the course of ordinary conversation. It has been a habit of mine for some little time to relate the story of the parchment after dinner at parties and such-like."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"And you want me to mount guard over the tower while the searching operations are proceeding?" he asked. "I scarcely think my presence is necessary, but I will consider the matter. When do you propose to commence work?"

"Not until next week."

"Very well! I will write you, Mr. Templeton, and let you know my plans in the course of a few days," said Nelson Lee. "Frankly, I believe you have wasted your time in coming to me; but it is, of course, your own affair. If you really require by aid, I shall be pleased to do just what you want."

A few minutes later, Mr. Duncan Templeton took his departure, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were left alone in the consulting-room. Nipper was looking rather impatient, and Nelson Lee somewhat amused.

"Our excellent friend is up to a queer game," he remarked. "To tell you the truth, Nipper, I believe it is a fool's game. But if he is prepared to pay my fee, there is really no reason why I should not humour him. As likely as not, there is not an ounce of gold beneath any martello tower in the British Isles."

Nipper sniffed.

"Of course not, guv'nor," he replied. "And what was all that tommy-rot about the North Sea and the English Channel? Any man in a sane mind couldn't make a mistake like that. And the mention of Clacton proves that the East Coast is the right locality."

"The whole of Mr. Templeton's story, in fact, was rather unsatisfactory," went on the great detective. "He admits that he has a bad memory, and that explains much. And now, my dear Nipper, we will essay the task we were about to commence when our late visitor arrived."

Lee picked up the deadly bomb which Jim the Penman had sent, and he and Nipper adjourned to the laboratory. Merely a superficial examination told Lee that the thing was practically harmless now that it had received a thorough soaking.

It was well made, and the mechanism of the bomb was jammed tightly into its wooden casing. In its journey through the post, the parcel had been in no danger of suddenly exploding. Only the firing of the fuse could have brought about that effect.

Lee removed two wooden wedges, and the explosives were loosened somewhat. It was essential that every care should be taken, and so the detective did not hurry himself. Nipper was looking on very interestedly, and after Lee had removed the explosive, the lad saw that there was a light steel holder left within the box. This was also jammed in tightly, so that there could be no shifting.

From the very look of it, it could be seen that the steel work had been made to exactly fit the wooden box. It was equally obvious, however, that it did not exactly fit into position with the tightness that was necessary, and so wedges had been used.

Nipper pulled at the steel holder, and after a little pressure a piece of stiff, folded paper was partially released. Nipper grasped it, and pulled it out. He unfolded it idly, while Lee was examining the explosives.

"Yes, young 'un, there is enough deadliness here to kill everybody in this house," remarked the detective. "Jim the Penman did not mean to make any mistake——"

"Great Scott!"

Nelson Lee looked round, at the sudden exclamation. He found Nipper staring before him at something he held in his hand.

"What is the matter, my lad?"

"Why, just look at this, guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper, in a strange voice. "I just took it from this bomb-holder. It's a small, irregular piece of parchment paper, and it is exactly the same colour, texture, and thickness as the parchment of Mr. Templeton's queer old document!"

CHAPTER III. ¶

An Amazing Development.

NELSON LEE came across to Nipper, and stood against him for a moment in silence. The lad's tense words had been spoken with absolute seriousness, and Lee was struck by their purport.

"Let me have a look, Nipper," said the detective quietly. "You tell me that you have found a piece of parchment inside this infernal machine precisely similar to Mr. Templeton's parchment. Of course, it is a mere coincidence, and the two papers cannot possibly be identical."

"But they are, guv'nor—they are!" insisted Nipper.

Lee made no further comment at the moment, but he took a little piece of thick, yellowish paper from Nipper's hand and looked at it closely. It was bare of any writing, and had been folded many times in order to form a wedge.

After Nelson Lee had closely examined it for a full minute, he turned his attention to the old parchment which Mr. Templeton had left. Nipper watched eagerly, but his master's face was inscrutable and expressionless.

"H'm! It is curious, Nipper—very curious!" remarked Lee softly.

And he opened a drawer of his laboratory bench, and took out a powerful magnifying-glass. Through this, he again made a close examination of the two parchments. He looked at them from every aspect. He gazed at the surface fully and slantingly, and then gave attention to the rough, torn edges. Then he quietly laid his magnifying-glass down, and turned to Nipper.

"Well, sir?" asked the lad quickly.

"I hardly know what to say, my boy," replied Nelson Lee. "But you were right—absolutely right! This little piece of folded parchment is precisely the same as the other. It was manufactured in the same mills, and probably came from the same sheet. But it is an astounding discovery. What possible connection can there be between Mr. Duncan Templeton's parchment and Jim the Penman?"

"It's almost uncanny, guv'nor."

Nelson Lee was very interested, and there was now an expression of keen determination in his eyes. The time was not yet noon, and the morning sun was shining in the windows brightly and warmly. The September day was quite summerlike.

Nelson Lee went into the consulting-room, and paced up and down the apartment for a few minutes, lighting a cigar and puffing at it thoughtfully. Then he seemed to make up his mind upon a certain point, and he crossed to the telephone.

"We may as well make certain, Nipper," he observed.

And he rang up the Earl of Aylesworth's London address. Lee did not know whether the peer was in town or not. The postmark on both the letter and the parcel had been that of Aylesworth's country address, and so Nelson Lee had taken it for granted that his lordship was in the country. In the new light of events, however, it would be as well to make certain of things.

Lee was soon talking to Lord Aylesworth himself, and the latter declared that he had sent no communication whatever, and that he was, in fact, off on a trip to Scotland. He had no intention of calling upon the detective.

"Well, that's one question settled," said Lee, as he hung up the telephone receiver. "And now for another little matter."

Lee wedged the cigar into the corner of his mouth, and walked across to one of the large bookcases which lined the consulting-room. Opening the massive glass doors, he searched among the many volumes for some moments in silence. Then he thrust his hand forward, and took out a red leather-bound book.

"I might, of course, be able to learn what I want from the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica,' but I think this will serve my purpose the better," said the detective. "This is a little volume called 'Martello Towers of England: Their Origin and History.' I think it will help us quite a lot, Nipper."

Nelson Lee dropped into a big easy-chair and crossed his legs. Then, puffing gently at his cigar, he dipped into the volume and became greatly

interested. Nipper, meanwhile, was equally interested in Jim the Penman's bomb, but the lad took care to handle the explosive with the greatest caution.

He was intently examining the outer casing when Nelson Lee uttered a soft ejaculation and rose to his feet.

"By James, this is most singular!" he exclaimed keenly. "Upon my word, Nipper, I am beginning to suspect that there is something deeper behind this affair than we first supposed. Moreover, there is more than an inkling that the affairs of Mr. Duncan Templeton and the arrival of Sutcliffe's bomb are connected."

"What have you discovered, sir?"

"I have been looking up the martello towers on the east coast," replied Lee. "There is only one which can possibly be the tower mentioned by Templeton. It is three and three-quarter miles south of Clacton-on-Sea. There are others in the vicinity, of course, but this tower corresponds exactly to our late visitor's description—that is, it is the correct distance from Clacton, and can be the only one described in the parchment. But there is a strange discrepancy, Nipper."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I will tell you," proceeded Nelson Lee, picking up the old, faded parchment. Here it is written down, Nipper, that the twelve cases of gold specie were buried beneath the tower in the year 1815. That being so, it is necessary—is it not?—that the tower should have been in existence at the time."

Nipper stared.

"What are you getting at, guv'nor?" he asked. "Of course, the tower must have been in existence. How the dickens could the gold have been buried beneath it before it was built?"

"It is not possible, is it?" pursued the detective smoothly. "Well, young 'un, I find in this volume, which can be thoroughly relied upon, that this particular martello tower was not constructed before the year 1817—two years after the treasure had been hidden beneath it! That is rather curious, is it not? In other words, there is something very wrong, for it is now clear that at the time of this burial of gold there was no tower at all!"

"Well, I'm blessed! What can it mean, sir?"

"It can mean but one thing; or, rather, one of two things. The parchment is either a fake from beginning to end, or it has been tampered with. Perhaps the date has been altered, or the situation of the tower itself."

Lee re-examined the parchment with the aid of his lens, but as he put it down he shook his head.

"No; there has been nothing altered here," he said at last. "I really do not know what to think, Nipper. And there is the curious incident of the supposed burglar which Mr. Templeton mentioned. Did somebody break into his house and interfere with this old document? It is quite possible. And again, our client mentions something about an alteration respecting the English Channel and the North Sea. Yet no alteration has been made on the parchment, and it can scarcely be——"

The detective paused abruptly, and slapped his thigh with great force.

"By James, Nipper, what a dolt I am!" he cried.

"Glad you say so yourself, guv'nor!" Nipper remarked cheerfully.

"Is it not probable that this old parchment is a forgery from beginning to end?" went on Lee tensely. "You understand, my boy? What if this document is a dead copy of the original, with the words 'North Sea' substituted for 'English Channel'? That would make all the difference in the world. And such a forgery is not only possible, but comparatively easy. Plain parchment of a great age can be obtained without much difficulty, and the writing itself can be made to appear old and faded. What if this docu-

ment is a fake—prepared especially to send Mr. Templeton off on a wrong track!”

“But he wouldn't be diddled like that, sir!”

“I am not so sure. Our visitor admitted that he has an exceptionally bad memory, and in every other particular the parchment would, of course, be precisely the same. After having allowed the document to lie in his drawer for two months, what would he do when he found, upon looking at it, that one item was different to what he had supposed. He would never dream that there had been a substitution. Such a thought would never enter his head. The very audacity of it ensured success. He would immediately conclude that he had previously obtained a wrong impression, and that his memory was at fault.”

“But why should it be done, gov'nor?” asked Nipper breathlessly.

“Surely that is obvious!” was Lee's reply. “It has been done to put Templeton on a wrong track—to send him off to the east coast. Meanwhile, the man who forged this fake has been spending his time for the past month down at the south coast, excavating beneath the actual treasure tower. If there is any truth in the thing—if the sum of thirty thousand pounds in gold is really buried—it is worth risking much for. Just consider the facts, my lad. Templeton, finding nothing under the tower on the east coast, would abandon everything, and conclude that he had been bluffed. No inquiries would be made, and the scoundrel would have his own time in which to get away with his booty.”

“And do—do you think Jim the Penman is mixed up——”

“There is every reason for us to believe that Douglas James Sutcliffe has been busy,” interjected Lee grimly. “This scrap of parchment, Nipper, exactly similar to the big sheet, was contained in a bomb which we know was sent to us by Jim the Penman.”

“But he was a silly ass to use an incriminating piece of evidence!”

“How do you make that out? Jim was positive that this bomb would explode, and that we should be killed instantly. And in the explosion this scrap of parchment would be blown to powder. There was really nothing rash in using a scrap of the parchment for a wedge. But wait one moment! I wish to consult a map.”

Nelson Lee was keenly interested now, and his eyes were shining with inward excitement. Otherwise, the detective was as calm as ever. But there was a distinct chance that he was on the track of his old enemy, and Lee would give much to be able to lay Jim the Penman by the heels.

He rose and went over to a cupboard. From this he produced a huge volume. A portion of it contained a sectional map of England and Wales. Lee turned to a map of Sussex and Kent, and closely looked at the names of the villages along the coastline.

“Ah!” he exclaimed suddenly. “What is this? What is this, Nipper?”

“Looks like a map, sir,” replied Nipper promptly.

“Pray be serious, young 'un. There is a coast village in Sussex here which fits in very nicely with my theory. It is a village situated on a lonely stretch of coast, where there are high cliffs, and the marks of martello towers are here.”

Nipper bent over, and looked at the spot where Lee was pointing.

“Clactersea!” exclaimed Nipper keenly.

“Thus, you see, there was no necessity for Jim the Penman to make any alteration in the substitute with the word ‘Clact,’” said Lee. “Those five letters were the only ones remaining, for the others had been worn away by constant folding of the parchment. We will now consider the forgery. By placing ‘North Sea’ on the parchment, it would instantly be taken for granted that Clacton was meant, and that the tower was situated a short way

from that well-known east coast watering-place. And it happens that there are some martello towers in that vicinity."

"Pretty smart, sir!"

"I do not deny it. Now we will assume that there is another parchment—the original," continued the detective. "The original is precisely the same as the forgery, except in one particular. On the original it states that the sea is the English Channel. Mr. Templeton noticed the change, but naturally concluded that he had made a mistake. There was no reason why he should suspect that anything was wrong. Not one man in ten thousand would believe that an old parchment like this could be forged."

"But Jim the Penman is capable of almost anything in which a pen is concerned. Now the original states that the line of cliffs is facing the English Channel, and that the martello tower is three and a half miles from a place beginning with 'Clac.' Mind you, it does not say the tower lies to the south—for in this case it would be west. Well, in Sussex there is a small village named Clactersea, and a martello tower is situated exactly three and a half miles to the west of it. What is the obvious conclusion, Nipper?"

Nipper's eyes sparkled.

"Why, that Jim the Penman has been down on the south coast waiting for a month past," he exclaimed quickly. "And by this time he's probably walked off with the loot, leaving no trace behind him."

"Exactly. But the gold, you remember, is twenty feet beneath the tower," said Lee. "It takes a long while to excavate solid ground for twenty feet—especially when it has to be done in secret. There is a chance that we may surprise our old friend, and spoil his little game at the last moment."

"But I wonder how he got to know about the parchment, sir?"

"There is no necessity for you to wonder on that point, young 'un. Mr. Templeton told us that he had often referred to the parchment in the hearing of friends and acquaintances. If not by direct means, the facts could have reached Jim's ears by indirect means. And he thought it worth while to go to a considerable amount of trouble to search for the gold. That being so, I think it is more than likely that the tale was true—and that Jim was convinced of it. He would not go to all this trouble unless he was pretty sure of himself."

"Yes, and it looks to me as if he hasn't finished the job yet," said Nipper shrewdly. "He sent this bomb so as to cause your death—and my death—before we could frustrate his little game. He might even have known that Mr. Templeton had decided to consult you."

"That, I imagine, is the true reason, why this infernal machine was sent," agreed Nelson Lee. "A spy of Jim's probably learned of Templeton's intentions, and gave Jim the tip. The forger, therefore, thought it a wise plan to settle with me before Templeton arrived. And, upon my soul, he was within an ace of succeeding. It was Jim, no doubt, who broke into Templeton's house that night—for the purpose of effecting the substitution of parchments."

Nipper chuckled gleefully.

"Talk about fate!" he exclaimed. "I reckon Jim the Penman's luck is dead out this week, sir. He sent this bomb especially to kill us, so that we couldn't get on his track, and it's worked exactly the other way. If it hadn't been for the bomb we should never have connected Jim with the affair at all. In fact, we shouldn't have suspected anything was wrong."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Merely a matter of careful reasoning, young 'un," he replied quietly. "Even now we know nothing definitely. Strictly speaking, my theory is

pure conjecture. Therefore, I intend to know something for certain as soon as I can. We have no proof that the conclusions we have come to are the right ones. We can only satisfy ourselves by paying a visit to Clacton and having a look at this particular martello tower ourselves."

Nelson Lee was quite right in saying that his theory was nothing but conjecture. Solely by a shrewd course of reasoning the great criminologist had come to a definite conclusion.

Neither he nor Nipper doubted for a moment that the conclusion was a correct one. But it was essential that concrete proof should be obtained. Even if Jim had escaped it might be possible to get upon his track.

But Lee was very hopeful of surprising the master forger at his work. This particular forgery of Jim's was different to any other fraud he had attempted. But there was a chance that it would bring him in a considerable fortune in solid gold—and that was just what Jim liked best of all.

The detective consulted a time-table, and informed Nipper that they would both travel to the south coast in the early afternoon. It was necessary now to waste no time; delay would probably be fatal.

Lee gave Mrs. Jones some orders regarding an early luncheon, and then he and Nipper retired to the laboratory. By elaborate tests Lee satisfied himself that the two parchments were precisely the same. Moreover, he applied other tests, and discovered something which gave him intense satisfaction.

By the use of chemicals and scientific apparatus Nelson Lee proved that the writing upon the parchment, although seemingly aged and faded, was comparatively fresh. The parchment itself was really of great age; but, as the detective had said, Jim could easily have obtained a piece of blank parchment.

Having, by sheer deduction, arrived at a definite point, it now remained to put the theory to the test.

And after a substantial luncheon Nelson Lee and Nipper taxied to Victoria Station, and boarded a train for the south coast. They would arrive well before dark, and would have ample time to make an investigation.

What was to be the result of that journey?

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper had the slightest conception of the exciting events which were to accompany their brief, but strenuous, stay upon the Sussex shore.

CHAPTER IV.

The Strange Old Man of the Ruined Tower.

IN the train Nelson Lee explained to Nipper how the singular course of events had come about.

Obviously Jim the Penman had constructed the deadly bomb in some secret retreat of his in London. At this place he had also prepared the faked parchment document. Finding the steel lining of the bomb a trifle loose, Jim had picked up a piece of paper in order to wedge it firmly into the wooden box.

Probably by sheer chance he had used a scrap of the parchment. There was nothing strange in that; in fact, it was quite what might be expected. Jim had used it, being certain that it could never be turned to account.

It had never entered the forger's cunning brain that the bomb would fail to take effect. It was a wonderfully constructed instrument of death, and, but for the incident of the housemaid and the pail, it would have succeeded.

In using the scrap of parchment Jim had done so fully believing that it would be blown to nothingness.

There was no railway station at Clactersea, for it was just a small fishing village tucked in a hollow of the cliffs. The nearest station was that of Rockhaven, and that was three miles on the other side of the tower--that is, six and a half miles from Clactersea itself.

Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived at the little station of Rockhaven in the evening. As a precaution, both the detective and his assistant were carefully disguised, for it was quite on the cards that Jim would have a spy always on the watch.

The station, however, was almost deserted. Rockhaven was a village two miles from the sea, and it was even smaller and quieter than Clactersea. Lee and Nipper took to the country road, and made off along a footpath to the cliff edge.

Arriving here, the vast expanse of the English Channel stretched out before them, calm and a little hazy.

The cliffs were high, and mainly composed of chalk and soft sandstone. In this particular part the coast was deserted mile after mile, the cliffs stretching away, rugged and bare, into the dim distance.

Nelson Lee had already made certain inquiries in different quarters, and he had learned that the martello tower he was bound for was situated right on the summit of a high cliff, miles from a house or cottage, and in a ruinous state. The tower had, in fact, been ruined for many years past, and had been left alone and neglected.

A more ideal spot for Jim the Penman to work in could scarcely be imagined, and Lee could easily guess why the forger had decided to attempt the coup. Unsuspected and unknown to a soul, Jim had probably been working at the tower for weeks.

There was no footpath along the cliff top, but Lee and Nipper had no difficulty in making rapid progress, for the downs stretched right to the cliff edge, and the grass was soft and pleasant to walk upon.

"Possibly we have come on a fool's errand, but, under the circumstances, we should have been foolish if we had disregarded such an opportunity," remarked Nelson Lee. "And we are, of course, working in Mr. Templeton's behalf."

"It's Jim I'm thinking of, sir," said Nipper. "If we can only nab that slippery rotter, you won't care tuppence whether you get a fee or not."

"We will talk about fees later on, my lad," Nelson Lee replied. "We haven't even sighted Jim the Penman yet, and we might even be on a wrong track."

"No fear!" declared Nipper. "We're on Jim's trail all right. I say, guv'nor, there's a tower of some sort ahead now."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, a martello tower," he said. "Not the one we are making for, however. Down on this coast there are many of them. They were built about a hundred years ago for the purpose of coast defence. Of course, they are utterly useless nowadays, for one twelve-inch shell would demolish half a dozen towers, if they were placed in line. Some of the towers are inhabited, and others ruinous and deserted."

The one just ahead, and which they presently passed, was inhabited, for the little windows had curtains behind them, and a lazy trail of smoke was issuing from a small chimney set in the solid roof.

After that the walk was lonely and quite pleasant. Another tower was passed before long, and this was empty and dilapidated. But when at last

Nelson Lee and Nipper came in sight of their destination, they saw a great difference.

This particular martello tower had suffered considerably from a terrible storm many years before. It was now nothing less than a ruin, roofless, with portions of its walls demolished and gaping jaggedly. There was no inhabited building within two or three miles of it, and the cliffs were high and sheer.

It was a grim old tower, and had been a dreary, ugly scar upon the cliff top for years. But time had wrought changes, and ivy had grown over the scarred walls, until now the old ruined tower was picturesque and almost beautiful.

"Seems deserted enough," murmured Nipper, as they drew near.

"Well, I hardly expected to find Jim the Penman sitting in full view, waiting for our approach," remarked Nelson Lee drily. "I have half a mind to wait until darkness before entering the tower. But if anybody is on the watch above we have been seen by this time, so we may as well go on."

They entered the tower quietly by means of the ivy-grown doorway, and saw that the interior was rather small and quite bare. Little piles of broken masonry lay about, but there was no sign whatever of anybody having inhabited the place recently.

The floor was solid earth, and everything was silent and still.

"By gum, gov'nor, I believe we're on the wrong track after all," murmured Nipper despondently. "It's easy to see nobody has been here for weeks, and certainly there has been no digging or anything of that sort done."

Nelson Lee looked round closely.

"We cannot be sure of that," he replied. "If Jim has really been here, he would have done his excavating carefully, leaving no trace. Our best course will be to conceal ourselves and to keep watch. We may have to wait hours—but, if so, I know that you will be quite prepared."

It was easy to find a place of concealment, for, in a kind of alcove, caused by the fallen brickwork, creepers had grown, forming a natural bower. Behind this there was ample room for the pair to conceal themselves.

As it happened, the wait was not to prove so very long. Both had a suspicion that they had come here for nothing. But they were determined to wait all through the night, if necessary, in order to satisfy themselves.

Before it was dark, however, the watchers grew rigid as they heard heavy footsteps approaching. From their position it was possible to see the doorway, and as they both looked they beheld a strange figure.

An old man entered the doorway. He was bent, rugged, and seemed to be dressed in rough, seafaring attire. A greasy, old peaked cap reposed upon his hoary head, and an unkempt beard adorned his bronzed chin. His face was lined with toil and age, and his back was bent until it almost seemed as though he was deformed.

Nipper had been expecting to see Jim the Penman in disguise, but he was quite sure that this man could not be the master forger. Jim was amazingly clever at disguises, but it seemed impossible that he could change his identity so completely as this.

Nelson Lee, however, was not so certain. He had seen Sutcliffe's disguises before, and he knew that the man was a past master at the art. But, of course, it was quite on the cards that this old fellow had nothing whatever to do with Jim the Penman; or, again, he might be an accomplice.

He walked slowly and deliberately over to the natural bower which concealed Lee and Nipper. For the moment the pair thought that their pre-

sence was about to be revealed, but the strange old man turned and walked round a pile of stonework which occupied the centre of the tower. He paused before a solid stone slab, which lay loosely upon the ground. But it was not so innocent as it looked.

For, when the old fellow lifted it, a dark cavity was revealed. The stranger lowered himself down until his head disappeared from view. Then an arm came up and shifted the slab until it was in position again.

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated Nipper breathlessly.

"Hush, lad! Not so loud," said Nelson Lee, in soft tones. "But you now see the wisdom of waiting and watching. We are in time, Nipper—Jim the Penman has not yet completed his work. By James, if luck is with us we shall capture the man yet!"

Nelson Lee did not attempt to conceal his keen satisfaction. And, without delay, he decided upon a course of action. He turned to his young assistant, and placed his mouth close to the lad's ear.

"You remain here, Nipper," he ordered. "It is essential that I should make that investigation at once. I am going to follow our hoary old friend, and see what lies below."

"But it'll be risky——"

"No doubt. But in a matter of this sort I am prepared to take risks." said Lee grimly. "You remain here, and if I do not return after fifteen minutes, follow—and have your revolver handy."

Nipper did not exactly like the plan, but he knew better than to object. The lad always obeyed his master when it came to action, and he was quite ready to face danger and peril at the shortest notice.

Lee stepped from the cover of creepers, and softly walked across to the stone slab. His revolver was handy, but he did not think it necessary to hold it in his hand. Instead he gripped an electric torch, and gently lifted the stonework.

One glance below told him that a rough flight of steps led downwards into inky blackness. The shaft was scarcely large enough to admit his body, but he knew that he would be able to descend. The steps were small and rough, and had obviously been hewn very recently.

Lee commenced the descent, and closed the stone slab over his head. He remained still for a full minute, but everything was deathly silent. According to the directions on the parchment, the gold was twenty feet below the surface. Jim the Penman had done his work well, and had removed all trace of what had been going on.

Lee guessed—correctly—that Jim had worked during the night, and had removed all sign of his labours before daylight came again. This had gone on for the last two or three weeks, the excavated earth probably being shot over the cliff into the sea.

* If Jim was alone now Nelson Lee was quite sure that he would be able to get the better of the scoundrel. For he would take Jim quite by surprise, and would have him down and helpless before he realised what was happening.

Nelson Lee did not switch his light on, but felt his way down cautiously and carefully. The shaft, he found, led downwards in a semicircle, and the steps were difficult to negotiate. And then, quite suddenly, something happened which the detective had half feared, and had been prepared to meet:

But he had certainly not anticipated such drastic methods. Two hands shot out of the darkness as though from nowhere, gripped Lee by the coat, and pulled him forward until he fell sprawling upon the ground.

The next instant he was upon his chest, and a hard knee was pressing into

the small of his back. Lee struggled furiously, but he was in very confined quarters, and could do nothing to save himself.

"Quite a pleasant meeting, my dear Lee!" murmured a well-known voice. "My dear fellow, it's no use struggling. Your wrists are already bound, and you can kick as long as you like."

The detective's wrists were, indeed, bound, and before long his ankles were secured, too. Then a bright light flashed upon him, and he saw that he was lying in a low, earthy tunnel, the roof of which was scarcely four feet from the floor.

He could easily understand what had occurred. Jim the Penman had been waiting for him at the foot of the steps, and had pulled him down as he set foot upon the level ground. Out in the open Lee would never have been caught, for he would have instantly exerted all his strength.

Strength, however, was useless in a place such as this. The detective had lacked freedom of movement, and had been quite unable to prevent Jim gaining the upper hand.

And it had all come about because Lee had been under the impression that he was going to take Sutcliffe by surprise. As a matter of fact, exactly the opposite had occurred. The forger had been prepared, and it was he who had sprung the surprise.

Nelson Lee found himself dragged roughly forward in the darkness, for the light had been extinguished again almost immediately. He was dragged along for about ten feet, and then released.

"You can sit up now, Lee," said the voice. "We are now in my swell reception-room, and I shall do my best to entertain you royally during your visit."

There was a note of sneering triumph in the words, and Nelson Lee felt inwardly furious at the turn of events. But he was by no means alarmed. Nipper was above, waiting, and he would very soon be down to look for his master.

The light was again switched on. It came from a powerful electric lamp this time, and the detective took a look round him before bestowing any glance upon his captor. He was in a small excavation of the solid earth, no bigger than eight foot square. The height of the place was about five feet, and the roof was held in position by long beams of wood and solid upright supports.

The air was cold, damp, and far from pure. Up one corner a pile of something was concealed by sacking; Lee guessed that the gold was there, ready to be taken away at the right moment.

Up the opposite corner the ground seemed to be rough and disturbed, and several pieces of wood had been driven into the ground, so as to form a kind of low fence, barring the corner off.

"How did you manage it, Lee?"

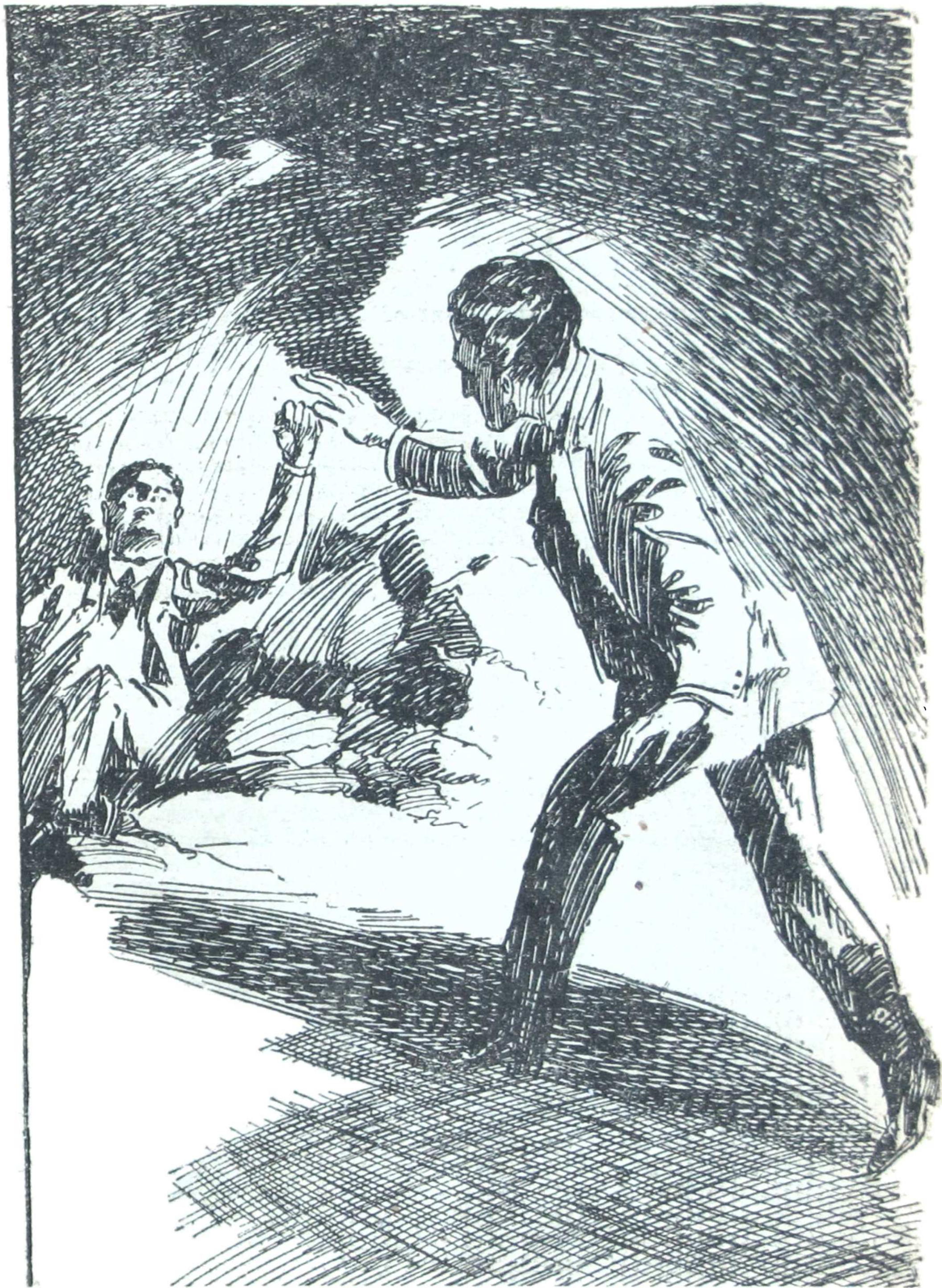
The detective looked round, and saw the hoary-headed old man regarding him with a cruel smile. He was standing almost upright now—as upright as the roof would allow him—and the expression upon his face was unmistakable. In spite of the astonishingly clever disguise, Nelson Lee recognised Jim the Penman.

"How did I manage what?" asked the detective calmly.

"Well, I thought I had made excellent preparation for your sudden decease," replied Sutcliffe. "That bomb I sent to you took me a long while to make, and I feel rather hurt that it should have failed to explode."

"How did you know it didn't?"

"One of my men was in Gray's Inn Road this morning, my dear Lee," replied Jim the Penman smoothly. "He was at a safe distance, waiting for



Something heavy descended upon the scoundrel's head with tremendous force. The knife fell to the floor with a thud, and Jim the Penman rolled quietly over. He was stunned and rendered helpless.—(See p. 24.)

the little explosion to take place. But nothing occurred, and he later reported to me by telegram that you had left Victoria for the south coast. That was good enough."

"I do not feel inclined to satisfy your curiosity, Sutcliffe," said Nelson Lee. "Your infernal machine did not explode, and Mr. Durcan Templeton was able to tell me his story. You feared, of course, that I should soon be on your track?"

"Exactly. But I did not anticipate that you would be so quick about it," said Jim the Penman harshly. "How on earth do you manage these things, Lee? No matter what I do—no matter where I go—you're after me like a bloodhound on a fresh scent. By Heaven, there'll be an end to it to-day!"

"I believe you have made a statement of that nature previously," said Lee mockingly.

Jim the Penman's face became set into cruel lines.

"I am going to waste no time on this present occasion," he snarled. "You know all about this affair, of course? Well, I have found that the parchment was genuine. The gold is over in that corner—do you see? It is all there—dull golden coins to the value of thirty thousand. To-night it is going away, and you shall not live to frustrate my designs!"

Nelson Lee did not reply, but he remained perfectly calm.

"You are thinking of Nipper, eh?" went on Jim sneeringly. "Ah, that has touched you? You fondly imagined that I knew nothing about Nipper's presence, didn't you? There is no rescue for you, Lee. I have got the pair of you trapped!"

Nelson Lee set his teeth.

"You scoundrel!" he muttered. "Nipper will——"

"Nipper will be down here within five minutes," interjected Jim the Penman. "There is no exit from this place, except by the way you came, so I can safely leave you down here. I am now going to bring your young friend to your side."

The light went out, and Lee heard the forger stumbling along the low passage to the steps. Jim was in deadly earnest, and he meant to make no mistake. He rapidly mounted the rough steps, and thrust open the stone slab noiselessly.

It was now deep dusk, and the shadows were dim. The forger rose to his feet, and concealed a heavy piece of wood behind his back. He intended dealing drastically with Nipper!

Cautiously Jim the Penman crossed to the little natural bower of creepers. He thrust the vegetation aside, and brought his weapon down blindly and forcibly. The piece of wood swished through the air, and struck the ground.

Nipper was not there!

Jim snarled out a furious curse, and searched carefully. But Master Nipper had vanished completely. And a search of the ruined martello tower was barren of result. Nipper, for some unknown reason, had taken his departure.

Where had he gone?

CHAPTER V.

The Cleft In the Cliff.

JIM THE PENMAN made up his mind quickly.

Since Nipper was nowhere to be found, it would be foolish to waste time now in searching for him. The forger knew that Nelson Lee was a clever man, and, if left to himself for long, he would probably find some

means of freeing himself from his bonds. It would be better to finish with him at once.

Nipper could not be far off, and by the time Jim had dealt with Leo the lad would be back. At all events, Sutcliffe returned to the cavity, the stone covering of which was still thrust back.

It had been a long, tedious job excavating the earth, but Jim and his confederates had persevered, and had at last achieved their object. Of course, by digging straight away they would have been able to get at the gold in less than a third of the time. But it had been essential that there should be no outward sign of their activity.

And so, working through each night, they had been compelled at dawn to cover up all traces of their handiwork. The coast was deserted, but a chance holiday-maker, seeing anything unusual, would probably have talked about it. And Jim was a very cautious scoundrel.

He knew that he had plenty of time at his disposal, and so he did the job thoroughly. It was galling to him to find Nelson Lee and Nipper here—on the very night he had arranged for the removal of his booty.

And inwardly Jim the Penman was infuriated almost to a point of madness. He kept his composure with difficulty, and had no intention whatever of allowing Nelson Lee to escape him.

Time after time the great detective had ruined his schemes. The forger seemed to be cursed to fail just when he was on the point of achieving success. And it was Nelson Lee who brought about his downfall on every occasion. It was always Nelson Lee!

The forger descended into the cavern-like excavation, and switched on the light. Nelson Lee was still lying as before, and he raised his eyebrows now as he saw that Jim was alone and obviously savage.

“Well, you don't seem to have got Nipper,” observed the detective drily.

Jim the Penman twirled round.

“Nipper is dead!” he snarled. “You understand, Lee? I finished Nipper up there. And now I am going to finish you!”

“Very melodramatic, and I suppose I ought to shiver with fright,” said Lee, with perfect composure. “It must be galling to you, Jim, to see me lying here so calm.”

“By thunder, I'll——”

Jim choked as he glared at the detective. It was not often that the forger lost his superb temper; but he had done so now, and he was literally shaking with furious hatred.

Nelson Lee did not believe for a moment that Nipper had been killed. For one thing, Jim's words had a hollow sound about them, proving what he said to be an empty statement. Moreover, the forger, even enraged as he was, would never have been fool enough to do anything criminal in the open.

And now Lee watched his companion interestedly. Lee was undoubtedly alarmed; that was only natural. But he had nerves of steel, and had not the slightest fear. He had an idea that Jim meant all he said, and that he would show no mercy.

And that which the forger was doing now made the bound detective set his teeth grimly, for it seemed as though his last hope of rescue had gone. Close against one of the rough walls lay a strong but hurriedly made door. It was of unplanned deal, and the two thick cross-pieces to which the boards were nailed projected a couple of inches on either side.

Jim the Penman carried the thing across to the tunnel entrance, and fitted it up close against the rough wall. On either side of the cavity were wooden

blocks thrust into the solid earth. So, by placing the door on these blocks, the projecting cross-pieces fell into notches which were provided. Thus an absolutely impassable door was made.

It would be necessary, at least, to bring a battering-ram in order to beat the woodwork down. Rescue from outside was impossible. Nipper, although he had not been found, would be unable to come to the aid of his master.

Lee was rather puzzled, in spite of the seriousness of the situation. Why had Jim gone to the trouble of constructing that door? There was certainly no other exit, so what was the good of it? If he were trapped, the door would only delay capture for a comparatively short while.

But Lee was not permitted to give the matter much thought.

Jim bent over him, and displayed before his eyes a long knife. It was a deadly weapon, and as keen as a razor.

"This time I am going in for no fancy business!" exclaimed the master forger harshly. "There is nothing more certain than the knife. The knife never fails! On other occasions, Lee, I have given way to my somewhat theatrical fancy. Oh, I know I have a certain love for the melodramatic! But time is short now, and I mean to make certain of you!"

"I must admit I don't quite care for the look of that knife," said Nelson Lee coolly. "Good-bye, Jim! It remains for our excellent police to nab you, after all!"

Sutcliffe stared, almost calmed.

"By Jove, what a nerve you have!" he growled. "But you've got to go, Lee; there's no help for it."

The scoundrel was deadly determined. He himself had no nerve, and to murder Nelson Lee in cold blood would not affect his conscience in the least. On other occasions, Jim had proved that he could be as callous as a torturing Chinaman.

As he finished speaking, he lifted his right hand, and the dagger flashed in the electric light. For one tense second, it remained poised, and Jim the Penman gathered his strength to strike home one terrible blow.

Crash!

The blow fell—but it wasn't the blow that Sutcliffe had intended!

Something heavy descended upon the scoundrel's head with tremendous force. The knife fell to the floor with a thud, and Jim the Penman rolled quietly over. He was stunned and rendered helpless.

But what had happened?

Nipper stood over the unconscious forger, gently swinging a heavy piece of wood, and ready to deliver another blow if it should be necessary. The lad was flushed with excitement.

"You judged your time to a nicety, my lad," remarked Nelson Lee evenly. "I was afraid that you would act too soon, and place yourself in the rogue's power. You could not have struck your blow at a better moment."

"He's laid out, gov'nor!" said Nipper excitedly. "What's the programme now?"

"Unbind me as fast as you can, and we will then render Jim so helpless that he won't be able to move an inch. We've had some excitement, young 'un," said Nelson Lee, "but I think the honours are with us!"

"Rather, sir!"

Nipper's clasp-knife was out in a moment, and his master was soon standing upright, stretching himself and restoring circulation. Jim lay still and silent. Nipper had certainly delivered an effective blow.

Apparently Nelson Lee had escaped death by the merest fluke. This, however, was not the case. He had been saved solely owing to Nipper's ingenuity and smartness.

But how did it come about that the lad was within the earthy apartment? Jim had closed the door, so that entry was impossible. The simple fact was that Nipper had been within the place all the time!

While he had been up above, he had been very uneasy about his master. Somehow he had an idea that Nelson Lee was running into danger. Consequently he had remained absolutely upon the alert, and had been as keen as a needle. A slight sound had warned him that someone was coming up the tunnel steps.

He naturally expected that it would be his master; but Nipper was a very cautious lad, and it was very seldom he acted rashly. He remained perfectly still, and saw Jim the Penman quietly creep out of the hall and go forward. The weapon in his hand showed plainly enough what his intentions were.

Nipper was greatly alarmed. He feared that ill had befallen his master, and he decided, on the spur of the moment, to act. And while Jim was engaged in bringing his club down upon thin air, Nipper silently dropped into the cavity and descended the steep steps. He had found his master as Jim had left him, and had been about to cut the bonds when Jim was heard returning.

At the first impulse, Nipper thought of holding up the scoundrel with his revolver; but he saw that he could conceal himself beneath the sagging which covered the cases of gold specie. That corner lay in deep shadow when the light was burning.

Nipper was very wise in acting thus.

If he had attempted to face Jim, he would almost certainly have found himself outmatched. And so he had decided to wait his opportunity, and catch the forger unawares. It was by far the safest way, and in a terrible emergency such as this he could not afford to take even the slightest risk.

Thus, when Jim placed the barrier in position, Nipper was already within the excavation, only awaiting his opportunity to strike. Lee had known quite well that he was in no real danger from Jim the Penman's knife.

And now the situation was entirely satisfactory.

Jim the Penman was "downed," and it only remained to bind him so securely that he could not escape. Then Nelson Lee would remain on guard while Nipper hastened away for the police.

"Here's some rope, guv'nor," said Nipper.

He had caught sight of some thick twine over in the corner, which seemed to be divided off. Nipper stepped across the little wooden barrier, which was about a foot high, and leaned over for the coil of twine. The rope with which Lee had been bound was cut and useless.

And then Nipper received a most astounding surprise.

The very ground beneath him seemed to shake and quiver, and he felt himself falling. The lad flung his hands up, and clutched at the air.

"Hi, guv'nor!" he gasped. "Help!"

Nelson Lee was near by, and he at once stepped across to Nipper's aid. The detective noticed at the same moment that there was a kind of slit in the dark earth of the floor.

And then, before his eyes, Nipper plunged down and disappeared from view!

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, in alarm.

A wide cavity had appeared in the floor, and Nipper had disappeared into it; and before Nelson Lee could regain the solid earth, he felt the ground crumbling beneath him.

And he, too, felt himself plunging down into blackness and space!

CHAPTER VI.

The Transfer of the Stolen Gold.

WHAT had happened was startling and dramatic. But there was really nothing particularly perilous about it. Nipper felt himself drop sheer for about ten feet. Then he struck a soft, sandy substance, and felt himself slithering downwards, half-buried in soil.

Before he could get the sand out of his eyes and mouth, he heard a commotion above him, and the next second Nelson Lee's head butted forcibly into the lad's chest.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Nipper thickly.

Nelson Lee was unable to say anything at the moment, for his mouth was full of grit. He spat it out forcibly, and it was some moments before he was able to speak.

"Upon my soul, Nipper!" he spluttered. "Where have we got to?"

"Ask me another, sir!"

Nipper still had his electric-torch in his pocket, and it struck him that it would be a good idea to have some light on the subject. He accordingly pressed the switch, and found himself looking down a long, steep slope. Right down below he could see masses of seaweed, and the faint sound of breaking waves reached his ears.

"My stars!" he exclaimed. "We're in a cave, guv'nor!"

"So I observe! Confound it all, young 'un, this is a great misfortune!" said Nelson Lee. "We cannot possibly get up to that excavation again, and the only exit is that which we see below us!"

"Well, we can get round, sir. I don't suppose Jim will come to his senses for at least half an hour——"

"But you seem to forget that the cliffs here are absolutely sheer," interrupted Lee grimly. "There is no way up to the cliff tops for miles on either side. We are both good swimmers, but we could not attempt such a task as that. The situation is very awkward. Jim is above us, and we are unable to reach him, and, so far as we can see, the only exit is by means of this cave mouth."

It was indeed galling. But at the same time the incident was not in the least extraordinary. In burrowing down Jim had discovered that a cleft existed in the cliff—a cleft which extended from a cave almost to the summit.

He had discovered the weak spot before any fall had taken place, and had consequently marked it off so that he should not unwittingly step into the danger zone.

Lee and Nipper, being unaware of the peril, had blindly stepped upon the weak ground, and had consequently fallen through. The detective had been somewhat puzzled as to why the air was so pure, but he knew now that a draught circulated through from the cave mouth.

"The best thing we can do now is to make our way down and see exactly where we are," remarked Lee. "Beforehand, however, cast your light upwards and see if there is any chance of our regaining our starting-point."

Nipper did so, and it was at once clear that nothing could be done. High above their heads a jagged hole showed with a bright light beyond. But there was no way up to it, for the faces of the cleft were sheer and smooth.

"Are you hurt, sir?" asked Nipper concernedly.

"Bruised a trifle, but nothing that matters," replied Lee. "I am thinking of this stroke of ill-luck, my boy. Here we are, imprisoned here, and Jim the Penman is above us unconscious and helpless."

"He won't be unconscious long," said Nipper grimly. "And what's

going to happen then? Why, he'll flash his light down on us and start taking pot-shots with his revolver. There's not an inch of cover here."

"That is very true. We had better make our way down while we are still safe. This misfortune is annoying, Nipper, but we must accept the situation calmly. I might be mistaken."

"About what, sir?"

"Well, replied Lee, "it may be possible to climb the cliff."

And so, without further delay, the pair commenced the descent. It was fairly easy, for the slope was not very steep, and there was plenty of foothold. When they reached the bottom they found themselves knee-deep in spongy seaweed. Plunging through this they arrived at the cave mouth.

This was much smaller than they had anticipated. In was, in fact, little more than a slit two feet high. And the waves were breaking into it continually, half choking it up every other second.

"It seems that we are only just in time," was Nelson Lee's remark. "The tide is coming in, and before long the floor of the cave will be flooded and the mouth completely submerged. Then, indeed, we should be trapped."

The detective spoke truly.

At high-water the sea covered the cave completely over, and it was only when the tide was low that it was possible to get either in or out. At this particular time the tide was coming in rapidly, and before long the narrow slit would be completely submerged.

"Shall I have a squint outside, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

Without waiting for his master to reply he plunged forward and crawled on his hands and knees through the slit until he arrived upon a narrow, slippery ledge. The waves broke over him constantly, but he was still able to see.

High above him the cliff rose absolutely sheer. To climb it was quite impossible, and the ledge upon which he knelt dwindled away to nothing on either side. There was nothing for it but to plunge into the sea.

This was quite calm, and Nipper's heart gave a jump as he saw something directly ahead. He bobbed back quickly, soaked to the skin, and with streams of salt water running out of his hair down his face. Nelson Lee flashed the light of his electric torch upon him, and he could scarcely help chuckling.

"There's no way up the cliff, gov'nor," spluttered Nipper. "Yes, you'll chuckle in a minute, when you get a dose! The only way is to dive into the giddy sea."

"Well, I suppose we had better take the chance," said the detective. "We are both excellent swimmers, and even if we cannot find a landing-place we can, at least, rest ourselves upon some ledge or other. But I'm very much afraid that we have lost Jim——"

"Hold on, gov'nor!" broke in Nipper excitedly. "I've got something else to tell you. Just off the shore—within half a mile—there's an old fishing-trawler sitting there as calm as you like, absolutely becalmed. We can both swim a couple of miles, if necessary——"

"By James, that's good hearing!" interrupted Nelson Lee tensely. "We can swim to that trawler, Nipper, and get the skipper to lend us a boat. We might catch Jim the Penman yet!"

In another minute Nipper had scrambled through the cave opening and plunged into the calm sea. The detective followed, and the pair were soon striking out with powerful strokes.

As Nipper had said, directly ahead two lights, one a little lower than the other, showed that an old fishing-boat was close inshore and practically

stationary. The night was calm, but a breeze seemed to be springing up even as Nelson Lee and Nipper swam.

The month being September, the water was not at all cold, and although the pair were hampered by their clothing, they were quite capable of swimming the distance without casting anything off.

Once Nipper glanced back, and he could see the cliffs all along the shore rising sheer and bare right from the sea itself. They had followed the only course possible, for to reach the dry land at this spot was out of the question.

They swam quickly, and arrived within hailing distance of the fishing-boat in a very short time. Lee himself let out a lusty shout, and it was at once answered by a growling rumble from one of the fishermen aboard the boat.

A breeze had indeed sprung up, and the crew were in the act of setting the sails. But upon hearing Lee's hail they paused, and waited for the swimmers to come alongside.

"Well, bust my mains'l!" ejaculated the skipper, as Nelson Lee and Nipper came over the side. "What's this 'ere? Who in thunder are you two fellers, swimmin' about at this time o' night?"

"If you'll give me your name, captain——"

"My name's Bob Halford," said the bluff old man who had spoken.

"These are nice goings on, ain't they?"

"My young friend and myself were on a ledge at the foot of the cliff," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "My name is Nelson Lee——"

"I dunno nothing about your name, sir, an' I ain't sure that I cares," said Bob Halford bluntly. "But my boat ain't a passenger ship, and you'll 'ave ter stow yourselves away——"

"Hold on a moment," interrupted Lee. "I see you have a small boat aboard. If you could see your way clear to let us have that——"

"Not likely," growled the old salt. "Like as not I'd never see the boat agin."

"I am quite prepared to pay you your own price," said the detective gently. "My currency notes may be a trifle wet, but they are none the worse for that. Name your price, skipper, and I'll pay it."

The old fellow brightened up at once, and he named a price which was certainly exorbitant, for the boat was old and not particularly seaworthy. However, it was no time to pick and choose, or to haggle. Nelson Lee paid over the required sum without a murmur.

The small rowing-boat was put over the side, and Nelson Lee and Nipper lowered themselves into it and pushed off, Lee taking the oars.

The trawler set sail, and took advantage of the now fairly brisk breeze. In a few minutes she was rolling away, and the pair could hear the crew throatily discussing the late deal.

"That was quick, anyhow, sir," remarked Nipper, with a grin. "But what a bit of luck! We've got this boat—although I can't see what we're going to do with it. Still, we're alive and well, in spite of being wet."

"The sea water won't do us any harm, young 'un," said Lee; "and I obtained this boat for a particular reason. If we remained on that trawler it would be yours before we reached the shore. And by that time Sutcliffe would be gone, and the gold into the bargain."

"Well, we're no better off here, are we?"

"Infinitely so. We can keep watch."

"Keep watch, guv'nor? I don't quite catch on."

"Well, let me assist your wits, Nipper," said Nelson Lee calmly. "Do you think it is likely that Jim the Penman will attempt to take that specie away by land? Is it not far more probable that he has arranged for a boat

of some sort to be under the cliff at some hour during the night? This particular spot is absolutely deserted and desolate, and nobody would observe what was going on under the cliff. Moreover, by taking that course Jim would be almost certain of success. Let us just review the facts as they stand."

"Can't say they seem very promising, guv'nor."

"I don't know. I am extremely optimistic," was Nelson Lee's comment. "This is the position. We came upon Jim unawares——"

"No, we didn't, sir. He was warned that we were coming."

"I am aware of that. But he was not warned until the last moment, and the plans he had already made for to-night will, I expect, hold good. Well, young 'un, Jim succeeded in trapping me, but you very neatly turned the tables. The scoundrel was rendered unconscious, and we were preparing to deliver him up to the police when we unfortunately fell through the flooring into that cave. Jim the Penman is left in the excavation with the cases of gold, and by this time, I have no doubt, he has recovered his wits and is already aware of what has occurred."

Nipper bent forward in the little boat.

"I say, guv'nor, Jim will probably think that we've both been killed," he suggested shrewdly. "He doesn't know exactly how deep the drop is, and he's not likely to investigate for himself. He'll take a squint down, see all the loose earth, and think that we are buried beneath it."

"By James, there is something in what you say," agreed Nelson Lee. "As likely as not Sutcliffe will conclude that we have perished. He will know, of course, that we did not leave the excavation by means of the shaft, because the door is still in position, and he will happily tell himself that we unconsciously went to our doom. Meanwhile, we are here, alive and well—if a little wet—and ready to act when the time comes."

Upon the whole, Nelson Lee was satisfied with the way things were going. The fall through the excavation had been unfortunate, but it had been a pure mishap. There was more than a chance that Jim the Penman would be captured yet.

Under the circumstances, the course which Nelson Lee was taking was the only one open to him. To have remained in the cave would have been useless, for the tide would have imprisoned them there for several hours. To climb the cliff was impossible, and if they had remained on the fishing trawler they would have been taken miles out of their way, and much time would have been lost.

Here, in this little boat, they were, at least, practically on the spot: and Lee was convinced, if Jim the Penman did act, he would make a move from seaward. Indeed, there was more than a probability that the master-forgers' plans were already cut and dried.

Lee and Nipper were certainly at a disadvantage in the little boat, but they had the satisfaction of knowing that the martello tower was under their observation, and that Jim the Penman could not escape by means of the sea without their instantly spotting him.

They did not trouble themselves much about their wet clothes. It was a chilly business sitting in the open boat, but they were hardened to every sort of difficulty, and even if they contracted severe colds they would come to no real harm.

The night was very dark, and they were sure that they could not be seen, for they were a mere spot upon the surface. The ruined martello tower stood out clearly against the skyline, and the high cliffs were grim and deserted.

At Lee's suggestion, they both took an oar, and rowed round in a fairly

small radius, keeping the tower within sight all the time. This kept them occupied, and gave them plenty of exercise.

The hours passed slowly and draggingly. There was no sign of any move from the cliff-top; no sign, at all events, that they could see. Probably enough, Jim was active, but the night was very dark. It was certain that by this time the forger had completely recovered from the effects of Nipper's drastic blow.

"One o'clock, Nipper!" exclaimed Lee, glancing at the luminous dial of his watch. "Unless something happens before long, I shall begin to think —"

"My stars, what's that, guv'nor?"

Nipper held his oar out of the water and listened intently. In the comparative silence both he and his master heard a distinct throbbing coming along the wind from the east. It seemed to come in waves, sometimes nearly dying out.

"Perhaps it's a Zeppelin, sir!" breathed Nipper excitedly.

"Nonsense! Zeppelins make a very different noise to that, my lad," said Nelson Lee. "I believe the sound is made by a motor-boat, and it's getting nearer every second. Upon my soul, I wonder if——"

Lee paused and looked eastward. Then he pointed with a steady finger, and Nipper saw a tiny, dark object, low in the water, coming rapidly along the coast. It was indeed, a powerful motor-boat, and it was travelling full speed, without lights.

"You observe, my lad?" murmured Nelson Lee calmly. "It is a motor-boat, and she carries no lights. She is, moreover, making for this spot, and the time has just gone one. I'll wager that she has come by Jim the Penman's orders, and that her arrival is all part of a prearranged plan."

The detective took the oars, and rowed the boat quietly for some little distance. Then he shipped the oars, and both he and Nipper crouched low, so that they would not be seen. The boat itself, with the background of dark cliffs, was quite invisible.

And in a very few minutes a powerful motor-launch, low in the water, swept past with her engine stopped, her own momentum carrying her towards the cliffs easily and swiftly. Lee and Nipper, watching, lost sight of her almost as soon as she went under the cliff.

"The motor-boat is still there, Nipper," murmured Lee. "It is waiting right beneath the martello tower, and the dark background makes it impossible for us to see the vessel. You can guess, of course, why she has come?"

"Why, to take away the gold and Jim the Penman!" replied Nipper promptly.

"Exactly! The sea is calm, and I judge that the gold will be lowered from the cliff-top by means of a stout line. After the last one has been sent down, Sutcliffe himself will follow. A confederate, probably, will remain on the cliff to remove all traces."

"And what shall we do, guv'nor?"

"For the present we can do nothing but sit here and watch," was Nelson Lee's reply.

As a matter of fact, the detective was somewhat worried. He scarcely knew how to act, for if once the motor-boat got a start, it would disappear before his eyes, and he might never learn of its destination.

Many schemes flashed through Lee's brains. He concluded finally that it would be best to wait until the motor-boat showed signs of departing, and then row up quickly, and take the scoundrels by surprise. There would probably be no more than Jim the Penman and one other man, and the very unexpectedness of the attack would give Lee and Nipper the advantage. It would be risky, but there was no other way.

The minutes passed until thirty had sped by. During this half-hour, nothing had been seen or heard by Lee, and he began to wonder if the motor-boat was still there. Then, at twenty minutes to two, the soft beat of the little vessel's engine vibrated on the night air.

"Now, Nipper," muttered Nelson Lee, "put your back into it!"

They commenced rowing vigorously, their faces set grimly, their senses alert and on the stretch. But quite suddenly the beat of the motor-boat's engine ceased, and Lee at once eased up.

He was aware, at the same time, of a low, insistent hum seemingly from the air above. Looking up, the detective was surprised to see a black spot moving swiftly across the sky high above.

The spot was a seaplane—a tractor biplane-type machine.

"One of our patrolling scouts, Nipper," murmured Lee. "On fine nights our seaplanes regularly patrol the shores on this coast. Jim the Penman is cautious. He is waiting for the machine to get out of sight before proceeding."

"Hadn't we better take advantage of the stop to row up close, sir?"

"Perhaps it would be as well," Lee replied.

And they bent to their work again. At the same moment, however, they distinctly heard the motor-boat restarting. Lee's plan was to cut the vessel off as it made out to sea.

But when he looked round, he made a dismaying discovery.

Instead of putting straight out from the cliff, the motor-boat was speeding away parallel with the shore, and directly away from the little dinghy. It was utterly impossible for Nelson Lee to carry out his plan.

Jim the Penman was escaping.

CHAPTER VII.

Nelson Lee Causes a Delay—With Satisfactory Results.

NELSON LEE muttered a savage exclamation.

"What a dunderhead I am!" he exclaimed sharply. "I ought to have been prepared for such a move as that. It is hopeless for us to cut the motor-boat off, Nipper. We might as well try to race an Atlantic liner!"

Nipper grunted in disgust.

"Then Jim will escape!" he exclaimed. "My hat, that motor-boat's speeding away for all it's worth! But why the dickens is it cutting down the coast instead of making for the open sea?"

"There is less chance of being observed while under the cliff," was the detective's reply. "Jim probably thinks that it will be safer if he does not let the boat be seen until he arrives farther down coast."

While Nelson Lee was speaking he was busy. Nipper saw nothing, but he was suddenly startled by a sharp report and a spurt of red fire.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "What the dickens——"

He was interrupted by another report, and then another and another. Nelson Lee, in fact, knew that there was only one chance of causing Jim the Penman's defeat. If he could only cause the motor-boat to come to a standstill, it might still be possible to lay the scoundrel by the heels.

Once Jim got clear away, however, Lee knew well enough that it **would** be good-bye to him until he became active in some other piece of roguery.

Crack!

Again and again the revolver spoke. Nelson Lee, in fact, emptied every chamber, and then curtly demanded Nipper to hand over his own revolver.

The detective's aim was as steady as a rock, and he was one of the **finest** marksmen who ever breathed.

He paused just before using Nipper's revolver. In the interval between two of his first shots both he and Nipper had heard alarmed exclamations coming from the motor-boat. If Lee had waited another minute, the little vessel would have been out of range. But he had caught it just before it was too late.

In the silence now which immediately followed the detective's last shot, he and Nipper heard a sudden, choking crunch, and then the steady beat of the petrol-engine ceased abruptly. A volley of furious imprecations followed, and Lee lowered the revolver.

"I don't think any more shots are necessary, Nipper," he said smoothly.

"By gum, sir, you've winged her!" breathed Nipper.

"I hope so, at all events. That stoppage did not have a healthy sound, my lad," went on Lee. "Now I'm not sure what we had better do."

Nipper, however, was quite sure. He bobbed down quickly, and grabbed hold of his master's sleeve, for a red spurt of fire ahead and a noise like the crack of a whip told him that the enemy were cleared for action, so to speak, and opening fire.

Three shots were fired, and all came very near to the boat. But it was a poor mark, and, possibly enough, was invisible from the disabled motor-launch. The battle did not promise to be a long one.

"I don't think Jim will fire again," Lee murmured, after a few seconds. "He knows that he is wasting shots, and the more reports the greater the danger. His chief wish is to avoid publicity."

They crouched in the boat and listened. Distinctly to their ears came the sound of Jim's voice, raised in fury. Then came some knocking, as of a spanner on metal work.

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I don't think my shots touched anything human," he remarked. "It seems to me, Nipper, that the last bullet penetrated a certain vital part of the engine. In all probability, I hit an inlet or an exhaust valve, and caused it to jam."

"Let's hope so!" said Nipper coolly. "But what better off are we, sir?"

"Well, I will admit that our position is not vastly improved," said Lee.

"We can't very well approach the boat, can we?"

"Why not?"

"I still have a certain amount of respect for my own skin," was the reply. "And yours, my dear Nipper, is of some little value. If we approach the launch now, we shall certainly be potted long before we arrive alongside. A surprise attack is impossible. And so, during this delay, we must think of some new plan."

"I've got it, sir!" said Nipper eagerly.

"Give it an airing, then!" was Lee's prompt order. "If you have a plan, let me hear it."

"Well, gov'nor, since it's impossible for us to approach in the boat, we must approach without the boat. We simply can't let Jim escape now, can we? That would be altogether too galling for words!"

"It would certainly be unfortunate."

"My wheeze is to slip out of the boat and swim," said Nipper calmly. "How's that, sir? You can carry my revolver in your giddy teeth, like a pirate of the good old days, and when we bob our heads over the side of the motor-boat, Jim and the chap with him will be so hugely surprised that they won't have any fight left in them."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Lee grimly. "Douglas James Sutcliffe is a slippery customer, and just the kind of man to fight to the very last. But your suggestion, as it happens, is precisely the same as the plan I already had in mind. To tell the truth, it is the only way left open to us. We must

swim to the motor-boat, and trust to luck and our own skill. If we make no mistake we'll overpower the pair of them before they can do any damage."

"Suppose there are three in the boat, guv'nor?"

"In that case we shall have our hands very full," said Lee evenly.

The task which they were about to essay was undoubtedly a strenuous one. There was more than a chance that it would fail, and that they themselves would be the losers. But events had turned out so curiously that there was nothing else for it. It was either taking this risk or letting Jim the Penman get clear away.

But, often enough, carefully conceived schemes are destined to fail owing to fresh circumstances arising. And this scheme of Nipper's, although hurriedly conceived, failed for that very reason.

Fresh circumstances did arise—and much excitement followed.

Before Lee and Nipper could slip over the side into the water they heard attempts being made to start the motor-boat's engine. And then, while they listened tensely, the motor commenced popping away regularly and speedily.

"They've got it going!" muttered Nipper between his teeth.

There was no doubt about that, and Nelson Lee needed no telling. Moreover, the motor-boat was now further away than before, having drifted with the tide. Nelson Lee stood up, and vainly endeavoured to find his mark. He was quite prepared to expend another six shots if necessary.

But he could only see a dark blur upon the surface of the water quite a long way away. The motor-boat had started straight off, and was already so far away that to fire at it would be useless. It was not yet out of range, but Lee knew well enough that he was done.

"Confound it!" muttered the detective savagely. "I had no idea they would get going again so quickly. We ought to have started on the swim the very instant the motor-boat stopped. But can you see the vessel, young 'un?"

Nipper nodded.

"Yes, that little black spot, sir," he replied. "See, they're making out to sea now, and will probably come right round and go off in the opposite direction. What a rotten frost! Jim's on that boat, and all that gold with him!"

Nelson Lee did not reply, and the two sat listening to the quiet throb of the motor-boat's engine. It seemed to change its note before long, and become more of a hum. And the sound vibrated on the air strangely.

"That's queer," Nipper remarked. "That old engine sounds like the motor of an aeroplane now!"

Nelson Lee started and looked up quickly. For several seconds he searched the sky in all directions, and then pointed rapidly to the southwest. There, speeding across the heavens, he saw a black, indistinct spot.

"Why, it's that seaplane, sir!" burst out Nipper excitedly.

"Exactly!" rapped Lee, his voice quivering with suppressed emotion. "It is the seaplane we saw earlier. In all probability the machine is on its way home, and in a few seconds it will be directly overhead. By James, Nipper, we've a chance yet!"

"A—a chance?" gasped Nipper.

"I am going to signal to the pilot of that seaplane!" exclaimed Nelson Lee crisply. "You say it is too dark, young 'un? But I happen to possess an electric torch, and I am well acquainted with the Morse code. We will try our luck, at all events."

"Hurray!" roared Nipper excitedly.

It was indeed a tense moment. Lee pressed the switch of his electric torch,

and commenced signalling. He used long flashes for the dash and short flashes for the dot of the Morse code.

"Come down at once!" Lee signalled.

There was not time for the detective to flash more than those few words. But the pilot evidently saw the bright flashes below him at once, for, before Lee had signalled the last word, both he and Nipper heard the powerful seaplane's engine splutter and then cease altogether.

"He's understood!" panted Nipper breathlessly. "Oh, ripping!"

The seaplane came down in a wide spiral volplane. The pilot made the descent very cautiously, and even then strained his machine severely when he hit the water. For the darkness was intense, and he could not see the surface.

Consequently, he flattened out a moment before he should have done, and the machine performed a "pancake" from about a height of ten feet—that is, it dropped squarely on to the water with a huge splash, and strained the floats and every joint of the fuselage.

"My hat, that was nearly a smash!" said Nipper critically.

"Considering the darkness, the pilot brought his machine down with wonderful skill," said Nelson Lee. "Now, I suppose, he will be righteously angry with us for bringing him down."

They rowed quickly towards the stationary seaplane, and as they came nearer they saw that it contained two army officers—both lieutenants. The pilot was making several uncomplimentary remarks, and he had climbed out of his seat, and was standing on one of the main floats, examining the joints.

"I hope you're not damaged?" sang out Lee.

"I'm wet!" growled the pilot crossly. "Who, in the name of all that's infernal, are you? And what was the meaning of that message——"

"I have every reason to believe that you will be highly incensed with me," said Nelson Lee, holding on to one of the floats of the gently rocking seaplane. "But I am very badly in need of help, and I must crave your indulgence. My name is Nelson Lee——"

"The detective, do you mean?"

"That is my profession."

"Well, hang it all, that's confoundedly queer!" called out the observer, who was still in his seat, and obscured in the gloom. "You once did a very neat job for my father, Mr. Lee, and, although I didn't have the pleasure of meeting you, I've heard quite a lot regarding your ability. This is a queer enough place to meet, but I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Within two minutes Nelson Lee learned that the pilot was Lieutenant Rodney Hayes, R.N.A.S., and the observer Lieutenant Jimmy Handscomb, R.N.A.S. Both were young fellows of good families, and they proved to be splendid chaps.

Lee rapidly told them what had occurred, and why he had signalled for the seaplane to descend. They understood at once, and were only too willing to hurry off in chase of the fugitive motor-boat.

The latter could not have gone far, and they would almost certainly be able to pick it up once they were high overhead, and on the look-out for it.

Nelson Lee and Nipper scrambled on board the seaplane, the engine was started, and within two minutes the vessel was soaring away, in spite of its heavy load, in pursuit of Jim the Penman and his ill-gotten gains.

Events had brisked up, as Nipper put it, and it was extremely probable that much more excitement was to come.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Stairway in the Cliff—Success—Conclusion.

"THERE she is!"

It was Nipper who uttered the words, and he roared them out with the full power of his lungs. This was quite necessary, for the seaplane's engine was making a most infernal din.

They had been flying quite a considerable time, and had scouted round in wide circles, and had covered a great distance. And at last, thirty miles from the starting-point, the motor-boat was spotted at the mouth of a wide, lonely bay.

"Yes, that's your quarry all right," shouted Lieutenant Handscomb, putting aside a pair of night glasses. "It's a powerful motor-boat, and the thing's moving like a streak. Nothing but a motor-boat would cause such a wake as that."

It was the wake, in fact, which Nipper had seen at first. The motor-boat itself was quite invisible. It was a dark vessel, and against the dark sea it could not be observed. But the little vessel's propeller was causing a wide wake of frothy foam. And this—pure white upon the leaden sea—showed as clear as though it were broad daylight.

Lieutenant Hayes made no attempt to descend. He circled above, and his observer and passengers kept their eye upon the motor-boat. Having caught their quarry, they were a little undecided as to how they should act.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Lee," roared Handscomb, with his mouth close against the detective's ear. "We'll treat these merchants properly. I've a pretty good gun on this machine—a quick-firer—and we'll blow the bounders out of the sea if they try any tricks!"

"Yes, that's the wheeze," shouted Nipper. "But even Jim the Penman won't attempt to bandy words with an armed seaplane of the Royal Naval Air Service! He'll knuckle under as soon as he finds a quick-firer trained on him!"

The pilot accordingly switched off his engine, and commenced a gliding descent. The seaplane had been badly strained in its previous "landing," and Hayes had not attempted to let the engine out fully. This time he intended to be more careful in alighting upon the water.

But, as soon as the descent commenced, both Lee and Nipper noticed that the motor-boat was heading into the bay, and was making straight for the beach. Indeed, long before the seaplane had descended a thousand feet, the boat was grounded upon the shingle and at a standstill.

Lee himself was rather puzzled. Until a few minutes before it had looked as though Jim the Penman was heading straight along the coast. Now, quite suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he had turned into the bay, and had landed. But the cliffs here were as high and sheer as they had been at the starting-point, and the bay was completely shut in by the high tide.

A mere narrow strip of white beach could be seen at the very foot of the cliffs. On either side, however, the sea made it impossible for anyone to walk along the shore. Only that one narrow strip of beach was accessible.

It seemed as though Jim had become aware of the seaplane, and had run ashore in a panic, deciding that it would be better to get on to dry land and run for it. And he had discovered, too late, that the bay was a trap, with no escape.

It was too dark to see things distinctly, although in the east the first grey glimmer of dawn was breaking. The seaplane came down in a smart glide,

and this time it made a perfect "landing." And the very instant the machine was upon the surface of the sea, the pilot opened up the engine and skimmed across the bay to the shore.

A fair amount of time had been lost in the descent, and it was now quite a respectable distance to the beach. However, the seaplane covered the distance rapidly, and ran lightly ashore within twenty feet of the stationary motor-boat.

"Deserted!" muttered Lee grimly.

Now that they were close the darkness did not seem nearly so intense, and they could see round them fairly distinctly. Nelson Lee and Nipper scrambled down, splashed through the tiny breaking waves, and ran to the motor-boat.

It was quite empty, both of human and other cargo. Jim the Penman had taken full advantage of the several minutes which had been at his disposal. But it was obviously impossible for the forger and his companion to have gone far in such a brief space of time.

Nelson Lee looked round him quickly, and with a grim expression. He more than half expected to hear the report of a revolver and the drone of a bullet past his ear. For he had an idea that Jim the Penman was lying in ambush.

But no report came, and only the faint night breeze rustled past the detective's ears.

"Well, this is infernally curious," remarked Lieutenant Handscomb, who had also sprung ashore. "We're mighty glad to oblige you, Mr. Lee, but we don't seem to have done much good, do we? Your man's given you the slip."

"Sutcliffe cannot be far off," replied Lee, gazing round. "Ah, what is that dark hole at the base of the cliff? It looks suspiciously like a cave. Are you coming, lieutenant? There will probably be danger——"

"By Jove, just what I want!" laughed Handscomb. "Not much excitement in barging about the upper air in this old 'bus!"

Lee, Nipper, and Lieutenant Handscomb hurried up the shingle straight towards the dark opening Lee had already seen. Close inspection, however, showed it to be, not the entrance to a cave, but a square gateway built in the cliff.

It was of solid stonework, cemented into the rocks, and a huge iron gate was closed, locked, and heavily bolted.

"Phew!" ejaculated Nipper. "What the dickens is this?"

"Oh, I think I can tell you," said the lieutenant. "I was down this way about a month ago—I didn't recognise the spot at first in the dark. This is the lower end of a private stairway, cut in the rock, and leading up to some new modern houses which are built on the top of the cliff. It's a kind of tunnel leading right up through the cliff to the top. There's one very much like it just close to Broadstairs."

"Hush!" urged Nelson Lee sharply.

They all remained silent, and in the stillness they distinctly heard the sounds of laboured footsteps ascending the stone stairway, and, by the sound, Lee judged that heavy weights were being carried.

"The gold!" exclaimed the detective angrily. "Upon my word, I am experiencing the most abominable luck to-night! We can actually hear the quarry, and yet we are barred from giving chase. Of course, Jim the Penman quickly removed the gold into this stairway and then locked the gate."

"But it's amazing that he should hit upon such a convenient place, isn't it?" asked Handscomb.

"My dear fellow, Sutcliffe had everything arranged previously," Lee said. "He did not come into this bay by chance; it was all prearranged. This was his set destination. But I doubt if his confederate intended abandoning the motor-boat. That was done on the spur of the moment."

"How are we to get up the cliff?" asked Nipper frantically. "Oh, lor', we can't let the rotters escape under our very noses!"

Nelson Lee turned quickly to the lieutenant.

"You say you know this locality slightly?" he asked. "How can we reach the top?"

"Only by this stairway, and that's barred," replied Handscomb. "Tide's up now, and you can't get out of this bay."

"But the motor-boat——"

"Nearest landing-place is a mile away," interjected the lieutenant.

Lee flashed his light through the bars of the gate, but only a small flight of stone steps were revealed, for a corner occurred fifteen feet up, and the electric torch showed that a blacksmith would be required to break the gate down.

"We must use the seaplane, if you will oblige us," said Lee crisply. "I don't ask you to land us; but we can, at least, take observations."

The two naval men were quite willing; in fact, they were hugely enjoying the adventure. All four climbed into the machine, and it was soon soaring up into the dawn. The darkness had given place to a drab, grey half-light.

Two hundred feet above the level of the top of the cliff, and Lieutenant Hayes brought the seaplane round and flew right along the cliff edge. Nelson Lee and Nipper were on the watch, and they instantly saw something which gave them keen satisfaction.

A big touring motor-car was just on the point of starting off. It had been standing against an iron-railed enclosure which marked the top of the stairway. And two men were in it, both looking up. There was not enough light to see their features, but there could be no mistake.

They were Jim the Penman and his confederate of the motor-boat, and the car contained the stolen gold specie! The car, in all probability, had been placed there earlier in readiness. Everything had been planned to perfection, and the forger would certainly have succeeded in his daring plans but for Nelson Lee's activity. Now, it seemed, Jim was desperately near to capture.

For Nelson Lee was right overhead, watching triumphantly, intensely satisfied in the knowledge that Jim the Penman's chance of escape was very slim. The night had been exciting, but the dawn had brought a climax.

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Yet, amazingly enough, although Nelson Lee was successful in his main enterprise—the recovery of the stolen gold—Sutcliffe once more slipped through the detective's fingers. In the art of eluding capture, Jim the Penman certainly had no equal.

The forger had evidently realised that the seaplane was after him, and he acted madly—he behaved rashly and foolishly. Perhaps panic seized him, for he sent the powerful motor-car along at a terrible speed.

And five minutes after the start disaster overtook him. The naval seaplane followed the plunging automobile, and those in the machine saw all. The car roared round a bend at full speed, and found, too late, that a level-crossing was right ahead. A train, moreover, was approaching rapidly.

There was no time to pull up, although Jim averted a tragedy by prompt action. He swerved into the railings close against the gates, and the motor-car overturned with a crash into a wide ditch.

Fortunately, there was a small lake—little bigger than a pond, in fact—adjoining a farm close by, and Lieutenant Hayes at once shut off his engine and glided down. At the moment, and in the excitement, he did not realise that to rise from the pond again would be impossible.

He only just succeeded in landing. The powerful aeroplane swept down, and only by superb airmanship was an accident averted. The machine touched the water, sped along, and came to a jarring stop on the sloping mud which bordered the lake.

Lee and Nipper raced back the half-mile to the level crossing, and found that the train was still there. Excitement prevailed, and an old Scotsman, grey and wrinkled, told the detective what had occurred.

One man had been found beneath the wrecked car, and he was unconscious with concussion and a broken leg. Lee very soon found that the fellow was Jim the Penman's confederate. Of the forger himself there had been no trace. The engine-driver and guards were positive in declaring that only one man—the injured one—had been found near the overturned automobile.

Later, after the train had gone, carrying with it the injured criminal, Nelson Lee found the gold specie intact among the wreckage of the car. At least, he had succeeded in his chief object. He had defeated the forger's scheme, and had recovered the stolen gold.

Mr. Duncan Templeton was delighted when he heard the news, and he handed Nelson Lee a handsome cheque for all the trouble the detective had taken. From a financial point of view the case had been a complete success.

The original parchment was never found, for it was upon Jim the Penman's person. And Lee saw to it that the two Naval Air Service lieutenants were commended for their conduct in the affair.

But the great detective would have been enraged could he have known of one fact. He had actually talked with Jim the Penman just after the accident! He and Nipper had been face to face with the master-criminal!

The old Scotsman, in fact, had been Douglas James Sutcliffe. He had sustained no injury in the accident, and he had at once, with rare presence of mind, concealed himself behind the hedge. He had already been disguised with consummate cleverness—in readiness for his motor journey—and had calmly mixed with the number of passengers who poured from the train.

And even Nelson Lee was deceived. The light was poor, but Jim's disguise was an absolute masterpiece—not only in his face and figure, but in his altered voice and his wonderful acting.

The forger's inborn audacity had led him to adopt the ruse, and, inwardly furious though he was, he played his part to perfection. And he was carried away with the train—carried away to safety and obscurity. His chagrin and anger knew no bounds, and he swore to get even with Nelson Lee at the first opportunity.

For once again the celebrated crime investigator had frustrated Jim the Penman's carefully laid schemes, and the master-forger's escape had been brought about solely by his own cleverness, and not through any fault of Nelson Lee's.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY!

“BLUE DIAMONDS!”

**A Magnificent Story of Nelson Lee and Nipper in
London and Labrador.**

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 finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching! On their way back to the camp the chums spy two white men—strangers both—in chase of some blacks, at whom they are shooting. Alec and Clive follow and arrive at a strange camp, where they find numbers of black prisoners bound together in couples. The chums first bind and gag their gaoler, then make off towards their own camp with the unhappy blacks. That same night, while the party is camping, Alec is startled to see the blacks suddenly leave their resting places and dart into the thicket, to return almost immediately with several strange companions, among whom is one strange looking individual. (Now read on.)

A Demon in Human Form.

HE seemed to be a white man, and in figure was tall and powerfully-built. He walked with a swaggering gait which suggested, as Alec put it, that he "thought a good deal of himself." Beside him was a fine-looking, muscular black who carried himself also with something of a swagger, though it was softened in his case by a natural native grace, and even dignity, which the white man could not boast.

These two carried rifles in their hands, and were followed by two more similarly armed. Finally, there was quite a little crowd of natives, some of them carrying bows and arrows—a dozen, probably, in all, besides those who had gone down the hill to meet the new-comers.

For that was the explanation of the seeming defect of the natives whom the two young explorers had rescued from the filibusters with so much subsequent trouble to themselves.

"I think I begin to understand," said Alec. "Our blacks have met here with a party of their own people come to look for them, I suppose. That tall black looks as if he might be a chief; but as to that other big chap, I can't think who or what he can be. If we'd come across him at home, in England, I should say he'd escaped from some lunatic asylum, or perhaps a travelling circus. Did you ever see such a get-up?"

It was not surprising that Alec should speak thus; the appearance of this stranger was sufficiently **bizarre** to astonish anybody. His attire was a comical mixture of the usual native dress, beaded and curiously ornamented with some pieces of ancient armour, seemingly of brass. On his head was

a brass helmet, much battered, but shiny withal, and surmounted by an imposing plume of feathers. In addition, he wore a breastplate, also of brass and also much battered, and shoulder-pieces of the same metal, with a tunic and long cloak of native beadwork. Attached to his belt was a heavy sword without a scabbard. Finally, round his neck was a necklace of bones, which rattled as he moved.

The new-comers had left the thicket and begun to ascend the slope of the hill before the two defenders had thought of challenging them, so surprised had they felt at their appearance.

Now Clive sprang up, and, holding his rifle at the ready, called out to them.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he cried.

A sonorous, somewhat hoarse, but not unpleasant voice replied, with an unmistakable Irish brogue:

"We're frinds come t' help yez."

This was so unexpected that Clive almost dropped his rifle in his astonishment. However, he recovered himself and called out again:

"But we don't know you. We can't let you come into our camp till we are certain we can trust you."

"Arrah, ye can be aisy now," was the answer. "And ye must be quick; there's no toime to lose. Sure, we know ye've trated our black frinds here loike the gintlemen ye are, an' me mather wants t' thank ye. An' he'll help yo against the spalpeens as is comin' along. But ye must be quick; ye've no toime t' lose. It's not far away the pirates are at this moment."

Clive glanced at Alec.

"Shall we trust him, and let them come up, do you think?" he said.

Alec, in spite of the seriousness of their position, was nearly bursting with laughter. The strange Irishman carried himself with such a swagger, and talked in such inflated tones, that to Alec the effect was irresistibly comical.

"Oh, yes; I suppose we'd better let 'em come up," he replied to Clive's question. "I'm dying to hear who this chap really is masquerading in that brasswork and sporting those great feathers in his headpiece. Is he a survival—a ghost—of some knight of old, or is he a 'super' from some local native theatre?"

"You must be serious and receive him properly, Alec," said Clive, who had much ado to keep from laughing himself. "We're in an awkward position, remember, and we shall want all the help we can get. If these people are to be trusted, and will really help us, it will be a very good thing for us."

He signed to the helmeted gentleman that he and his friends were free to come in, and they marched up the slope, leapt lightly over the logs, and then stood looking at the two young fellows, who regarded them in turn with becoming gravity.

"It's not a bad notion ye have av arrangin' for ye defince," said the Irishman, looking round with a critical eye. "But there's wan thing ye've

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

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The Editor's Decision is Final.

forgotten. Ye planted no scouts t' give ye notice whin the spalpeens be comin' near. They could creep up under cover an' shoot ye down afore ye had any idea the divils was near."

"That is true," said Clive. "But, you see, we don't know the language of these blacks, and can't tell them what we want them to do, or else——"

"Ay, ay; I understand. But we must see t' that first. Arrah, now, Oi'll arrange it for yez."

He turned and addressed a few words in an unknown tongue to some of the blacks. Half a dozen responded at once, and after a few more words, evidently orders, sharply spoken, presently leaped over the logs and down the hill, spreading out as they went in different directions.

"There, that's all roight," said the Irishman. "Now ye can talk at yer aise. Divil a wan av the galoots can get near us now wi'out our being warned."

"Well, now, gintlemen," went on this strange individual, "ye'll be affther wantin' t' know who we are an' whoy I be here. This is me mather. Oltra is his name, an' it's King av Kamak he is—which is an oiland not very fur away."

As he said this the speaker indicated the tall, muscular native whom the two friends had already singled out as probably a chief. They bowed. The Irishman turned to his "mather" and said something which might have been "Bow, ye beggar!"—Alec afterwards declared it sounded like it—but was probably something more polite, spoken in the native language.

"Yes, gintlemen, this is King Oltra, an' Oi'm his Prime Minister an' the gineral av his ar-my—phwat he's got av thim—an' his private adviser gin'r'ally. An' me name, gintlemen, is Storbin—Pete Storbin."

"Pete Storbin," Clive repeated gravely. "Mine is Clive Lowther, and my chum here is Alec Mackay. We're here with a scientific expedition brought out by Dr. Cammell."

"A scientific expedition," the Irishman repeated, looking shrewdly at Clive. "Phwat ye call it? Now, Oi heard as it's a treasure-hunt ye've come upon, an' Oi was goin' t' warn ye——"

"Eh? Treasure-hunt?" exclaimed Clive. "You have heard? How could you hear anything about us in a place like this?"

"Oi'll tell ye that by-an'-by, when we've toime. Oi'll tell ye first how it is we be here. D'ye know Pedro Diego?"

"Pedro Diego! Is that the name of a man?"

"It is the name av a fiend, sorr! Ye can't call him a man! He's phwat we calls in these parts a blackbirder, slave-hunter, filibuster—phwat ye plaze. He's an I. D. D. (illicit-diamond-dealer); a pearl thief, a spalpeen wi'out a character an' wi'out a soul; a demon in human form. That's Pedro Diego. An' he's got his eye on you."

"On me!" exclaimed Clive, a little startled. "Oh, you mean on our expedition?"

"That's roight. I suppose, thin, ye don't know as he's got a place on the other side of the island?"

"Got a place—the other side? What place?" Clive queried, rather puzzled.

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