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TRACKED TO THE TRENCHES;

A TALE OF NELSON LEE & NIPPER
V. JIM THE PENMAN. BY THE AUTHOR
OF "A MID-ATLANTIC MYSTERY" ETC. ETC.

1^D

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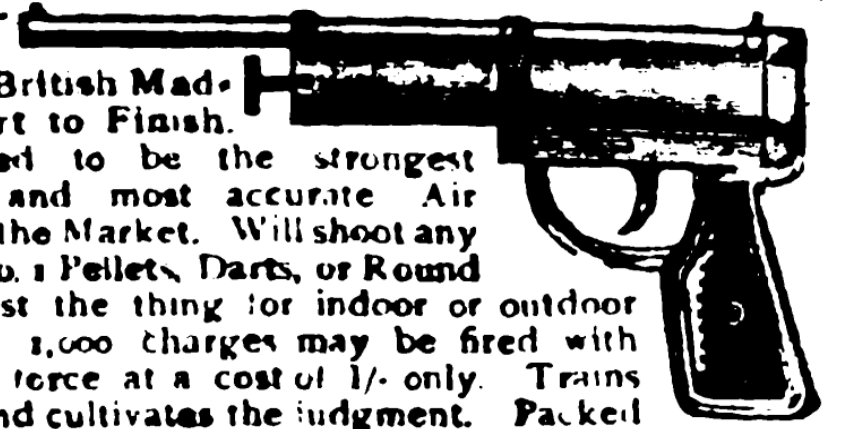
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TRACKED TO THE TRENCHES;

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

*By the Author of "The Secret of the
Martello Tower," "The Caves of
Silence," "A Mid-Atlantic Mystery,"
etc.*

CHAPTER I.

The Man from the Sea—Captain Dunstan's Discovery.

THUD—thud—thud!

The engines of the old tramp steamer *Balmos* thudded away with rhythmic regularity. A long vista of grey, calm water stretched out in every direction. It was just dawn, and the *Balmos* was steadily plodding along her course in the South Atlantic.

She was a small boat, and not exactly handsome. She was bound from Buenos Aires to Marseilles with a cargo of grain. The *Balmos* was a British vessel, her port of registration being Swansea. At Marseilles she would unship her cargo, and then take on board a fresh lot of stuff and proceed to British shores.

She was slow and sure. Any attempt at speed, in fact, would have strained her rotten plates and would have probably sent her to the bottom. She wallowed along leisurely, and had to risk the chance of being spotted by a German submarine. If one of those murderous gentry appeared she would be doomed, for it would be hopeless to attempt to escape.

But there was not much fear of encountering a hostile submarine in the South Atlantic. When she nosed her way into the Mediterranean, perhaps, she would be in peril; but her skipper was an optimistic man, and never worried.

"'Tain't no good worryin'," declared Captain Joseph Dunstan. "Like as not I'll never get torpedoed. Them slab-sided Germans wouldn't take much notice of an old tank like the *Balmos* anyways! The pigs would reckon she ain't worth wastin' a torpedo over."

And certainly the *Balmos* was an unlovely sight, with her rusted plates, slovenly gear, and discoloured paintwork. Nevertheless, she was capable of carrying a fair cargo, and although she was slow, she generally managed to make her port.

She had experienced good weather this voyage, and had made good time. The dawn was grey and chill, but there was no prospect of a break in the fine spell. The skipper himself appeared on deck just as the sun was struggling up over the horizon, and he mounted to the bridge.

Captain Dunstan was an elderly man, short and stumpy, with grizzled hair and beard and a face the colour of mahogany. He was a heavy drinker, but he seldom got drunk; and his owners had always found him to be a trustworthy, capable shipmaster.

"Mornin', Bainbridge," he exclaimed gruffly. "If this weather lasts we shall make Marseilles in record time. Reckon we'll cop some narsty breezes further north, though. What's your opinion?"

"Shouldn't be surprised, sir," replied Mr. Bainbridge, the second mate, who was on duty. "The old tub's makin' fair headway, and she'll certainly break all records if the weather'll allow her to."

The skipper grunted, and lit his pipe.

"I ain't sure—— Hallo! What the thunder——"

He broke off, made a dash to the chart-house, and grabbed a telescope. The second mate eyed him in astonishment as he levelled the telescope across the bridge rail away to the starboard bow.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked Mr. Bainbridge.

"I ain't sure," said the skipper. "I thought I saw something—— Yes, by hokey! There's a man in the water over to stabbord, Bainbridge! He's wavin', or seems to be. Shift the wheel a couple of points, and slow down to half speed."

The second mate jerked the engine-room telegraph, and twirled the wheel. The old tramp swung round slightly, and her engines thudded more quietly. By this time Bainbridge had seen for himself the object which had attracted the captain's attention. At first it appeared to be a tiny scrap of wreckage on the surface of the water; but then the second mate caught sight of a weakly waving arm.

Even as he watched, however, the arm dropped, and there was no further movement. The *Balmos* was stopped altogether a few moments later, and there was considerable excitement of a mild character among the "crowd" for'rard. And even old MacGordon, the chief engineer, stuck his head on deck to see what the commotion was about.

"Wha's the meanin' of stoppin' in mid-ocean?" he demanded of Mr. Briggs, the first mate, who had just come on deck. "I'll hae ye know—— Hoots, mon, look awa' yonder!" added Mac wonderingly. "It's a pair soul strugglin' in the watter. I'm thinkin' he's a survivor from a wec shippie that's been sunk by them murderin' Germans!"

"We'll soon see, Mac," added Mr. Briggs briskly.

In a few minutes a small boat was lowered, and very soon it returned. A limp form was carried on deck—the form of a man, around the chest of whom a cork lifebelt was strapped. He was totally unconscious, and, indeed, it was a question whether life was still within the chilled frame.

He was taken below at once, and the *Balmos* proceeded on her course.

The old tramp carried no doctor, but Mr. Briggs, the mate, was well acquainted with all methods of first aid, and he personally attended the unknown man from the sea.

After an hour the mate appeared on deck.

"Dead, I reckon?" asked the skipper. "The pore feller didn't seem to have much life in him, anyways. If he is dead I'll be thunderin' wild. I don't like funerals aboard my ship——"

"No, sir, he's not dead," said Mr. Briggs, smiling a little. "Another five or six hours in the water, though, would have been the finish of him. With luck he'll pull through. He seems to be a strong, well-knit sort of chap."

"D'ye know who he is?"

"Not the least idea, sir," was the reply. "He's quite unconscious."

That hand-wave of his must have been the last straw. It's a wonder he had enough strength to lift his arm at all. I judge he's been in the water since yesterday."

The skipper grunted, and expectorated overside.

"Well, you've got charge of the fellow, Mr. Briggs," he said. "See that he don't die. I ain't superstitious, but I don't like men dyin' aboard my ship. It was just after my second mate died that the old Handcroft foundered off the Horn, five year ago."

And Dunstan, who wasn't superstitious, shook his head sadly at the recollection.

Briggs, a fairly young man, laughed lightly.

"Don't you worry, sir," he said. "I don't think this chap will peg out. He's simply weak with exposure and thirst and exhaustion. Give him time, and he'll pull round all right. By the time we fetch Gibraltar he'll be well on his legs."

An hour or two later the mate went below again. One of the crew had been detailed to look after the stranger, and his task was an easy one. For the unconscious man was no trouble at present. Briggs eyed him critically as he stood beside the bunk in which the man lay.

He was well built and tall, and seemed to be wiry and strong. But at present his face was chalky white, and there was every sign of acute fever developing. This was only natural, considering the ordeal he had lately passed through. How long the man had been in the water was a question—but he was obviously in a bad way. His breathing was fairly regular, and there was certainly no prospect of an immediate collapse.

Briggs turned to the "nurse," who was a burly deckhand.

"What about the fellow's clothes, Minns?" he asked. "Are they dry yet?"

"I dunno, sir," replied Minns. "I took 'em to be dried an hour ago. I'll go and see if they be ready yet."

The man left the cabin, and presently returned with a bundle on his arm. They were the clothes of the unconscious man in the bunk. Briggs thought it likely that there would be something in the pockets to reveal their owner's identity.

But this supposition was wrong. There was nothing in the pockets which gave any clue. A pipe and a tobacco pouch, a knife, a watch and chain, and a pocket-book, were the chief items.

The pocket-book, Briggs found, contained nothing but a wad of Bank of England notes and a number of red and black currency notes—to the value altogether of seventy pounds. But there was no card and no letters. The notes were sodden with sea-water, but none the worse for that. Dried, they would be quite all right.

"H'm!" said the mate. "Nothing much here, except money. We shall have to wait until the man recovers his wits—if he ever does."

Briggs took the money and gave it into Captain Dunstan's care. After that there was nothing to be done except wait for returning consciousness on the stranger's part. And this, as it turned out, was to be a long wait.

The Balmos thudded methodically on her way northward, and towards evening there were signs of a change in the patient's condition. By night-time he was in a high fever and was tossing about restlessly. Briggs, being something of a doctor, took his medicine-case and went below.

An hour later he entered the skipper's cabin, looking rather thoughtful.

"He's a queer fish, that fellow!" he remarked, as he sat down and lit

a pipe. "Been talkin a whole heap, cap'n. In a high old fever, and likely to be for some time yet."

"He's conscious then?" asked the captain.

"No. Oh, no."

"But you said he'd been talkin'—"

"Delirious," said Briggs shortly. "Ravin', in fact, sir. Fair ravin'. You never heard such nonsense in all your life. Says he's Jim the Penman—that forger fellow who's been causin' such a commotion lately in the old country. Sutcliffe, the chap's name is—the forger, I mean. Well, this chap below says that he's Sutcliffe!"

"Ravin's the right word!" remarked Captain Dunstan. "I've heard tell of that forger many a time. He's the card that Nelson Lee, the detective, has been after time and again. That Lee's a smart feller, Briggs. Met him once, two or three years ago. A real gent, too."

The mate nodded.

"One of the best," he agreed. "But that's nothing to do with this business, sir. If I were you I'd go below and listen to the poor chap for a bit. He keeps sayin' that he's Jim the Penman, and that he's successful at last—that he's brought off the biggest coup for years. I reckon he must have been readin' Sutcliffe's record just before he fell into the sea."

"I suppose it ain't possible that the feller is really Jim the Penman?" said the skipper thoughtfully. "I shouldn't think so, Briggs—should you? Sutcliffe wouldn't be down in these latitudes—he sticks to London mostly."

Briggs puffed at his pipe for a moment in silence.

"No, I don't reckon he's the man," he replied at length. "Just ravin', sir—that's all. Delirious people do get those wild notions into their heads, you know. They ain't responsible for what they say. Why, I knew a chap who swore blind that he was the Prince of Wales. He was in delirium, of course."

Presently the skipper made his way to the patient's cabin, and he found Minns, the deckhand, rather scared. The unconscious man was quiet for a moment, but he was tossing restlessly in his bunk and groaning a little.

"Thank goodness you've come, sir," said Minns in relief. "I'm fair worried to death with this bloke. He ain't 'arf a handful. Keeps chucking the blankets off him and staring at me as though he'd like to do me in! I'll be a whole heap pleased when somebody else takes my job."

"You won't come to no harm, my man," growled Dunstan. "This fellow won't hurt you—he's as weak as a rat, anyway. What's he been sayin' since Mr. Briggs left?"

"Wot ain't he been sayin'!" exclaimed Minns. "I never heard such nonsense afore, sir. 'Talkin' about pirates and sinking ships wi' shell fire, as though he were the skipper of a German submarine."

"A pirate, eh?" remarked the skipper. "That's something new, ain't it? He was a forger not long ago—"

The patient suddenly uttered a hoarse cry and whirled the blankets on to the floor in one movement. He raised himself on his elbow and stared at Dunstan fixedly with feverish, glassy eyes. The captain shifted uncomfortably.

"I've foiled him this time!" exclaimed the stranger in a hoarse whisper. "I've beaten him—I've beaten them all! They can't get the better of Jim the Penman! I've sunk the ship and I've got the silver—I've got the platinum! I'm rich—rich! And I've tricked Lee all along the line!"

All this was uttered in short, disjointed sentences. Some of the words were hardly audible, while others were shouted with a dreadful frenzy.

The exposure had brought on a dangerous fever, and Captain Dunstan shook his head grimly.

"He won't live, Minns!" he muttered. "I've seen men in that state before. By morning he'll be as dead as a kippered herring. But I reckon I'll send Mr. Briggs down here at once. He's more capable of dealing with the case than I am."

Very worried, the skipper went on deck, and found Briggs talking with Bainbridge, the second mate.

"Worse!" growled Dunstan gloomily. "There'll be a death aboard this craft after all. I'll stake my reputation we'll run into a storm before twenty-four hours have passed. We'll have filthy weather after that feller's dead, you mark my words!"

"Nonsense, sir," laughed Briggs.

"It ain't nonsense. And I ain't superstitious," said Dunstan miserably. "But things happen that way, Mr. Briggs—they always happen that way. If that man dies during the night we'll run into a hurricane to-morrow!"

"Well, you needn't worry, sir," exclaimed the mate. "I'm not exactly a Harley Street physician, but if my opinion's worth anything, I'll say the patient below won't die on this craft. He's in a rotten fever, I'll admit, but he's as strong as a horse—wiry and muscular. He'd take some killing, that chap."

"You save his life, Briggs, and I'll see if I can't get you a master's ticket after this trip," said the skipper gruffly. "By the way, was there any ship's name on that lifebelt?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Briggs. "At least, I couldn't see anything. I reckon there was a name at one time, but it must have got washed off. We don't know who the man is or where he came from."

Very soon after the patient took a turn for the worse. The fever became more acute, and for several hours Briggs remained by the sick man's side, wondering whether the latter would live or die.

But with the coming of daylight the fever reached its worst form and then abated.

By noon the stranger was out of danger, and Briggs managed to force some food down his throat. The delirium had left him, and he lay quiet and peaceful, breathing evenly. But he was not yet conscious, and was very weak and emaciated.

The weather had roughened a little, and the Balmos was jogging along as leisurely as before, but with a little more difficulty. For the time being the patient was forgotten. And it was, indeed, not until three days later that he recovered consciousness fully. And even then he did not seem to be quite able to talk. He lay in his bunk sleeping most of the time.

It was the after-effects of the fever; the man merely wished to lay and recover his strength. He did not want to talk, and he did not wish to be questioned. And it was not until the Mediterranean was reached that the stranger was strong enough to leave his bunk.

He seemed to gather strength amazingly once the turn had been taken. Very possibly the warm weather and the sunny atmosphere had a lot to do with his recovery. The old Balmos was on her last lap, so to speak, and the weather was glorious.

"Well, mister, you've had a long spell of it," said Captain Dunstan one morning, when the stranger appeared on deck. "How d'ye feel now? You're lookin' a heap better. By hokey! I'd never have believed you'd pick up so quickly."

"I'm a wiry brute," said the other, with a faint smile. "I have to

thank you for a lot, Captain Dunstan. Minns, my attendant, has been telling me things. I have to thank Mr. Briggs, too. He saved my life, I believe."

"We're curious to know——"

"Yes, I daresay you are, captain," said the stranger, sinking into a deck chair which had been placed ready. "There's not much to tell. My name is Thomas Martin, and I am a mining engineer by profession."

He explained that he had been outward bound for Rio, and that he could only offer one explanation for his presence in the sea. There had been no wreck and no accident. Martin, however, sometimes walked in his sleep, and he must have left his cabin in his sleep, wearing the life-belt.

"I remember nothing except that I was in the water," he explained. "Of course I jumped overboard, and nobody saw me. The contact with the water woke me up, and I saw the ship gliding away into the night. By James, it was a terrible realisation, captain! My ship disappeared, and I was left alone in the sea!"

"Didn't you yell?" asked the skipper curiously.

"I attempted to; but I was choked with sea-water, and I could hardly make a sound," replied Mr. Martin. "By the time my throat was clear the ship had passed out of earshot. Thank Heaven you found me!"

It was a simple, straightforward story—and in every way possible. Neither the captain nor his mates doubted Martin's explanation. They did not tell him of his delirious delusions, and he knew nothing of them. Martin did not know that he had proclaimed himself to be Jim the Penman, the infamous forger.

The following day he had gained strength amazingly. And he presented Captain Dunstan with twenty pounds, and Briggs with twenty pounds. Minns could scarcely believe his eyes when Martin handed him five black currency notes.

"He's a gent—a real gent!" said Minns to the crowd for'rard. "Five pun, he give me—five pun, mates. I'm right glad 'e recovered hisself. Gents like 'im ain't too plentiful."

During a chat with the skipper—who was now very respectful—Mr. Martin made a rather curious request. He asked Dunstan to keep his rescue quiet. The patient stated no reason, but merely asked the skipper to say nothing of his rescue from the sea—that is, to make no report.

Dunstan, remembering the twenty pounds, at once agreed. He wouldn't mention a word regarding the rescue, he promised. After all, it was no concern of his. Privately the skipper and his mates were a little curious, but Martin had made it worth their while to keep their tongues still. For Bainbridge, too, had benefited—he was the richer by ten pounds.

Two days later the patient was a patient no longer. The warm sea air and the glorious weather of the Mediterranean had wrought a marvellous change in Martin. By the time Marseilles was reached he was practically himself. A little weak, perhaps, but healthy and recovered.

He went ashore the very instant the *Balmos* lowered her anchor, and the old tramp's after guard were too busy with their own affairs to interest themselves in Thomas Martin's movements.

He left the ship—and vanished.

The *Balmos* entered dock during the morning, and it was not until evening that Captain Dunstan found any leisure time. Then he went across to another steamer close by, the skipper of which was a friend of his.

And an astonishing discovery followed.

Captain Dunstan learned—absolutely, positively—that his late passenger

had told him a string of lies, and that he was actually none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe himself!

The rescued man had not been raving in his delirium—he was, as a matter of fact, Jim the Penman himself—in the flesh!

CHAPTER II.

The Skipper's Wire—Nelson Lee and Nipper Start South.

IT was rather a stunning shock for Captain Dunstan, more especially when he learned the inner facts. The skipper was in a fine rage when he discovered the real truth of the whole affair.

His friend, Captain Leighton, commenced by merely mentioning the affair of the steam-yacht Ringdove. Dunstan, who knew nothing of the Ringdove, inquired what had happened to the vessel—and the revelation had followed.

For the facts were dramatic. Dunstan had heard none of them, for the simple reason that he had been en route from Buenos Aires to Marseilles at the time of the exciting events. But, briefly, they were as follows.

Jim the Penman, the notorious forger, had planned an extraordinarily daring scheme. By means of several forged letters he had seized the steam-yacht Ringdove; belonging to Sir Arthur Barrimore, and had managed to get away into the open Atlantic with his prize. Here he had held up the steamship Pannelo, bound from South America to England with a big consignment of valuable mineral.

Sutcliffe, acting the part of a modern pirate, had transferred the Pannelo's valuable cargo to his own vessel, and had then sunk his victim. But retribution had soon followed. For Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, had taken up the case, and had chased the master-criminal in a British submarine. Just at the moment of success Jim the Penman had been bowled out. He had been made a prisoner—but had flung himself out of a porthole, seemingly to death.

At the time Nelson Lee had been rather dubious. Possibly Sutcliffe had committed suicide; but suicide was not exactly in keeping with Jim the Penman's character. Just at about the time of Jim's disappearance a big liner had passed the Ringdove, and Lee surmised that Jim had been picked up by this vessel.

Later inquiry, however, had shown that Jim had not been picked up. And the police, at least, had taken it for granted that the forger was no more. Nelson Lee was not completely convinced. As a matter of fact, Sutcliffe had attempted to attract attention on board the passing liner, and had failed. He had, therefore, drifted about throughout the night, and had been practically done for. By a pure stroke of chance the Balmos had sighted him, and had taken him aboard in the last stage of exhaustion. So Jim's escape was a narrow one. But he had escaped; and he was now ashore—a free man. He was at large once more.

Captain Dunstan was furious mainly for one reason. He was well acquainted with the skipper of the Pannelo, the vessel which Jim the Penman had looted and sunk. The two captains, in fact, were staunch friends. And it angered Dunstan to think that his colleague had been victimised and outraged by a mere landlubber—a rascally forger, who was wanted by the police for a dozen different crimes.

If Dunstan had known of this beforehand he would have thrown Sutcliffe's twenty pounds in his face, and would have clapped the "patient"

in irons. But it was too late now; Jim had disappeared, and it was certain that he would make himself scarce.

There was only one point which pleased the skipper. Jim the Penman would naturally suppose that Dunstan would not connect "Mr. Thomas Martin" with the missing forger. For Jim did not know that he had revealed his identity in his delirium. And it was more than probable—almost certain, in fact—that the forger would remain in the South of France until he had regained his old health and strength. He would be safe there, and would remain until he had recuperated, and until he had made fresh plans for his own safety.

"The blamed scoundrel!" ejaculated Captain Dunstan hotly. "And to think that he told me who he really was—told me in his feverish ravin's! I thought it was only the tommy-rot of a delirious man. I believed his yarn about bein' a minin' engineer and about walkin' in his sleep. By hokey! If I could lay hands on him——"

"Not much chance of that," interrupted the other skipper. "Seems to me you let the chap go too quickly, Dunstan. It was he who sunk the Pannelo, and who was copped by that detective chap, Lee——"

Dunstan slapped his thigh.

"Lee!" he roared. "That's the man! That's the man who ought to know of this affair, Leighton! See here. Sutcliffe ain't suspicious—he thinks he's safe, and that I don't know nothing of his real identity. What's he likely to do? Why, in all probability he'll remain in Marseilles—or he might shift along to Toulon—it ain't far. Jim the Penman won't venture to return to England, and he'll reckon he'll be safe down in this quarter of the globe."

"I can't see what you're drivin' at——"

"Why, the hound will hang round these parts for weeks," said Dunstan. "That will give Mr. Nelson Lee a chance to get here. That twenty pounds Sutcliffe gave me will be used for a good purpose. Knowin' who give it to me I couldn't use a farthin' of it for my own use——"

"That's a bit thick, Dunstan," protested Captain Leighton. "Money's money ——"

"I wouldn't spend that twenty quid for my own personal use if I was starvin'!" declared Dunstan stoutly. "It was given to me by the man who sunk the Pannelo—old Bill Palmer's ship. D'ye think I'd use the rotten, stinkin' money? I ain't particular as a rule, Leighton, but I draw the line somewhere."

The skipper of the Balmos was very staunch to his own profession, and it aroused all the anger within him to think that a scoundrelly landsman had sunk the ship which was commanded by one of his best friends. It happened that Dunstan was fairly well off, or perhaps he would have overcome his scruples regarding the twenty pounds. As it was, he was firmly determined to spurn it.

"If you ain't wantin' the money——" hinted Captain Leighton.

"Oh, I'll use it," was Dunstan's quick interjection—"I'll use it. I met this Mr. Nelson Lee once, an' he's a real gent. I'll use that twenty pounds to send a mile-long telegram to Mr. Lee, tellin' him that Sutcliffe, the forger, is down here, and advising him to hurry here at once to pick up the trail. Mr. Lee'll be pleased to get that information, and, like as not, he'll reward me a heap better than twenty quid."

So, after all, there was a certain method in Dunstan's plan. He told himself that in all probability he would profit over the speculation. But, to do the skipper justice, he was fully prepared to sacrifice the money if Jim the Penman's arrest would follow. And it was certain that Nelson Lee, in

London, would be keenly pleased to receive positive news of the supposedly dead forger. If the detective started for the South of France immediately he would arrive in Marseilles before the *Balmos* was ready to sail again, so Dunstan would be able to tell Lee all the exact details.

Thus it came about that one crisp, wintry afternoon a cablegram was delivered at Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road, London—the afternoon of the night following Captain Dunstan's decision. All was mild and sunny down in Marseilles, but London was cold and frosty.

Nelson Lee had been back some little time. He was not fully satisfied that Jim the Penman was dead, but he had to be contented. He had been unable to trace the forger, and had decided to await events. As he had told Nipper, his young assistant, time alone would show whether Sutcliffe had met his death or not.

And time did show.

For that cablegram contained very positive information. Dunstan had not spared expense, and had stated practically all the facts. The outstanding one, however, was that Douglas James Sutcliffe was somewhere in Marseilles, and that he was off his guard. Dunstan made it quite clear that it was almost a certainty that Jim the Penman would remain at the South of France for at least a couple of weeks.

And, after all, this was no idle supposition. Sutcliffe was still weak, and it would be impossible to find a better place to recuperate than the South of France at that particular time of the year. Moreover, there are other reasons why Jim should lie low in Marseilles or in some neighbouring town. He would be fairly safe there from the long arm of the British law. All the odds were in favour of Jim remaining near Marseilles until he had recovered completely, and until he had made fresh plans for his own safety.

Nelson Lee fully appreciated Captain Dunstan's shrewd reasoning, and agreed with it. The celebrated criminologist, in fact, was full of enthusiasm, and determined to act promptly and effectively.

"The skipper's facts are conclusive, Nipper," said Lee, as he and the lad sat discussing the affair in the consulting-room. "They fit in perfectly with the case as we know it. Jim the Penman disappeared from the Ring-dove on the night of his downfall, and we could not trace him. Dunstan's information, however, makes it quite clear that Sutcliffe remained in the water all night, and was picked up—practically at his last gasp—by the *Balmos* the following morning.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Nipper blankly. "And we concluded that he had gone to the bottom of the Atlantic. The chap's got as many lives as a giddy cat, gov'nor. He seems to have had a narrow squeak, though."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Very narrow," he agreed. "Brain fever and delirium. He will certainly need a week or two at Toulon or Nice or Monte Carlo in order to pull himself together. We shall find him in one or another of the coast resorts."

"Then—then we're going——" began Nipper, with sparkling eyes.

"Exactly, young 'un. We're going south at once," said Nelson Lee crisply. "That is the order of the day. All our other arrangements must go by the board. There's a distinct chance of collaring Jim the Penman red-handed, and it would be foolish to ignore it. We start for Marseilles tomorrow morning, first thing!"

"But he may have hooked it——"

"Probably; but, as Captain Dunstan intimates, Jim won't have hooked it far," said Nelson Lee. "I am convinced of that. Once on the spot we shall be able to pick up the trail fairly easily."

"Hadn't you better inform the French police, sir?"

"I think not," was Nelson Lee's reply. "With all due respect to the French police organisation, I should hardly like to risk losing our quarry by giving him warning that his hiding-place is known. Sutcliffe has an amazing faculty of scenting danger from afar, and we stand much more chance of nabbing him if we allow him to imagine he is quite safe. If the French police took a hand in the game Jim would take fright, and would slip away. No, my lad; let him think that he is unsuspected—let him believe that the world takes it for granted that he is dead. At present he is quite off his guard, and he must remain so."

"Yes, I suppose we'd better keep mum, guv'nor," said Nipper.

It was not possible, however, to keep perfectly mum. To leave England it was necessary to obtain passports, for with the country at war it was not a simple matter to travel to France, and Lee found it necessary to explain his object in wishing to leave England so suddenly.

But the detective applied personally in the highest official quarter, and the passports were granted without delay. That evening was a busy one for both Nelson Lee and Nipper. The detective had many little matters to settle, and Nipper had his hands full, packing.

The lad was highly delighted with the prospect. A trip to the South of France was always welcome; but this particular trip was spiced by the knowledge that they were on the track of their old enemy, Jim the Penman.

The boat train left the London terminus at eleven-thirty in the forenoon, and the great detective and his assistant arrived well before time. They secured a first-class compartment, and then strolled up and down the platform, chatting.

Until Marseilles was reached there was nothing to worry about—there was nothing to be done. And Nelson Lee believed in the system of avoiding idle conjecture. It was his plan to dismiss all thoughts of a case until he arrived upon the scene.

He little imagined, however, that his journey through France was to be fraught with considerable danger; neither he nor Nipper had any suspicion of impending danger as they strolled up and down the platform.

Yet somebody was taking quite a large amount of interest in Nelson Lee and Nipper. On the same platform a tall man with a sharply-cut, grizzled beard was pacing up and down with short, easy strides. He appeared to be indifferent to his surroundings; yet his eyes were upon Lee and Nipper continually, and he was inwardly uneasy and alarmed.

"They are bound for France!" he murmured into his beard. "They are bound for Marseilles! What can it mean? I don't like the look of it; there's a reason for this journey of Lee's. The hound has got on the track!"

For, to be quite frank, this bearded stranger was none other than Mr. Robert Channing. The name itself may not imply much, but Mr. Channing was one of Douglas James Sutcliffe's most trusted confederates!

Jim the Penman had many confederates—many secret workers. And Channing was one of the select few who generally worked intimately with the forger, one of the select few who shared Jim's confidences.

He was now engaged upon a special mission.

Two days previously—on the day the Balmos had reached port—he had received a long cablegram, carefully worded. Channing had known, the very instant he saw that cipher, that Jim the Penman was alive.

He was elated, and eagerly perused the wire. It was merely an order to journey to a certain large hotel in Toulon—near Marseilles—where Sutcliffe would be staying. Channing was to bring every available penny he could

with him. Jim had a certain amount of reserve money, and Channing was to bring this along.

With considerable skill Channing had engineered a quick departure; he had obtained a passport by clever manipulation and by the use of ready-money. Being over the military age-limit Channing could have obtained a passport fairly easily in the ordinary course, but he had speeded matters up, and he was sure that he would have no trouble with the French authorities.

He was, therefore, able to leave England by the Channel boat on this particular day. It was not a coincidence that he was travelling by the same train as Nelson Lee and Nipper; it was merely a natural consequence of the previous events. Channing had believed that everything was perfectly in order—that Jim was safe and that he was believed to be dead.

And then——

Nelson Lee and Nipper had appeared on the departure platform! Within two minutes Channing learned that they were bound for France—for Marseilles. A glance at their bags and a word with a railway official told Channing this.

It was a shock—a stunning shock. This could be no coincidence! Nelson Lee had somehow learned that Jim the Penman had escaped, that he was in Marseilles. Accordingly, Lee was travelling to the South of France to arrest the forger!

Robert Channing set his teeth fiercely.

“The advantage is with me!” he told himself. “Lee has no suspicion of my identity; he does not know that I am bound for Marseilles also. I will wait and watch, and sooner or later my chance will come!”

For Channing, in that minute, had come to a definite decision—a decision which his chief, Jim the Penman, would uphold later on. Nelson Lee and Nipper would not reach their destination!

By hook or by crook Channing determined to prevent his enemies arriving at Marseilles. The odds were on his side, and he was resolved to take full advantage of the opportunity which Fate had placed in his hands.

CHAPTER III.

Colonel Symington Makes a Friend—The Tale of the Bresrona Oil-Fields.

MONSIEUR JACQUES HENRI BOUCHARD strolled out on to the wide terrace of the Alpha Hotel, at Toulon, and paused to take in a breath of the pure, cool breeze which blew in from the waters of the Mediterranean.

The morning was perfect, and the sea was dazzlingly blue. Monsieur Bouchard laughed softly to himself, and lit a cigarette. He was a tall, slim man of perhaps fifty-five, with grey hair and a sallow complexion; he was bent and somewhat bow-legged.

“Ye gods! What a game!” he murmured in English, as he strolled away into the hotel grounds. “I believe I am enjoying it, in spite of all the setbacks. I’ll come out on top yet, sooner or later!”

Monsieur thoughtfully puffed at his cigarette.

“Channing ought to be here to-morrow,” he went on musingly. “Yes, certainly not later than to-morrow. I don’t suppose he will have any trouble with the military or naval people. This war makes a difference, though—especially in such a seaport as this.”

He gazed over the harbour, and noted the French battleships which were

lying there. The great naval port was looking its best that morning, and M. Bouchard was capable of appreciating the scene.

It will have been guessed, by this time, that the "Monsieur Jacques Henri Bouchard" is merely another name for Mr. Douglas Sutcliffe. Such was the case. Jim the Penman was not skulking in hiding; he was staying at one of the best hotels in the town, and went about openly and freely, with all the assurance in the world.

He had arrived at the Alpha two days before, presumably from Paris, and not a soul suspected that he was anything but the elderly, rich Frenchman he affected to be. There were quite a number of visitors staying at the Alpha, and already "M. Bouchard" was on excellent terms with them.

Jim the Penman was, and always had been, a firm believer in bluff—bluff of the most audacious and daring nature. Half his great coups had been brought off by a display of cool cheek.

He was practically penniless, except for a few pounds, and he was playing a game of bluff until Robert Channing arrived with fresh funds. Moreover, by assuming the name and character of a rich Frenchman there was little fear of Jim the Penman being spotted as his real self. Who, indeed, would suspect him of being the audacious scoundrel who had been caught red-handed in mid-Atlantic?

He could speak French perfectly, and his amazing talent of penmanship had made his imposture fairly easy. It had been a simple matter to forge the necessary credentials. His preparations had been made in Marseilles, before going on to Toulon. Jim had to be extremely careful; but he had succeeded in hoodwinking the French authorities.

And the more friendly Sutcliffe became with the other visitors at the hotel, the stronger was his position. He therefore made himself as agreeable as possible, and had already become quite chatty with a certain Colonel Symington—a British Army officer who had been wounded on the Somme front, and who was now convalescent. Probably he had a special permit from the French naval people to stay in Toulon.

The colonel was a bluff, hearty man, and easy to get on with. He liked to talk, and had taken a distinct liking to the M. Bouchard—mainly because that "Frenchman" could speak English like a native—which was not to be wondered at!—and because he always listened with keen attention to the colonel's conversation.

And it suited Jim's book to be on good terms with his fellow-guests. The game of bluff was rather pleasing, and Jim was beginning to enjoy himself. As events were to turn out, however, he was soon to learn an item of information which would make his mind run in its old evil channels.

He happened to be chatting with Colonel Symington during the forenoon of that day; the pair were sitting on a rustic seat in the hotel grounds, smoking their cigars and enjoying the mild air and the warm sunshine.

"Yes, m'sieur," the colonel was saying, "stocks and shares are queer things to meddle with—doocedly queer things. I've found 'em so. I've brought the subject up because I want to tell you of a little incident."

Monsieur Bouchard puffed easily at his cigarette.

"Stocks and shares?" he remarked musingly. "Ah, I have not had much to do with them, colonel. But, as you say, they are curious things to handle. A man is rich one day and poor the next, eh? Is that not so?"

"Exactly—exactly!" agreed the colonel. "That's precisely what I am going to prove to you, my dear Bouchard. I don't know whether you've ever heard of my nephew, eh? Captain Brentley, of the London Guards?"

Jim the Penman shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in the approved French style.

"I regret, m'sieur," he replied, "I have not."

"Smart officer—good man all round!" exclaimed Symington proudly. "He won the D.S.O. at Combles, you know. Well, it's with regard to Brentley that I'm going to speak. He invested practically all his money in a certain number of shares which were issued by an oil company. Perhaps I'd better explain things as I go along, and tell you what the oil company is, and where it is situated."

Sutcliffe nodded. As a matter of fact he was rather bored by the colonel's seemingly idle talk. There did not seem to be much interest in the conversation. But Jim the Penman did not know, during that early stage of the conversation, that much of great interest was to follow—especially to himself. For the forger was quick to perceive that there was a chance here for him to exercise his own curious talent.

The colonel paused to light a cigar, and regarded Jim in silence for a moment as he sat twisting the ends of his iron-grey moustache.

"These oil fields," he went on, "they're Italian, and fairly extensive. I believe, although I've never seen them—situated at Bresrona, in the extreme north of Italy. Some years ago——"

Jim, the Penman nodded.

"Ah, yes, I have remembrance, m'sieur le colonel," he exclaimed. "I know something of the Bresrona Oil Fields. There was a boom in the Bresrona Company a year or two ago, so far as I can remember. The oil fields were said to be some of the richest in the world."

"Exactly."

"And then there came a surprise," went on Jim. "That is right, is it not? The wells failed suddenly a month or two back——"

"Failed absolutely—failed utterly!" growled the colonel. "That's what I was going to tell you, Bouchard, only you seem to know it already. Ha! But you don't know the rest, do you? You don't know the finish of the yarn, by George! I'll surprise you here, my dear fellow."

"I am intensely curious," said Jim, trying not to yawn.

"Yes, the Bresrona Oil Fields failed," went on Colonel Symington. "That was a month or two back. Shares in the company which were quite valuable suddenly became worthless. Fortunes were lost in a day; that's the way with these infernal shares. Personally, I don't believe in having too many shares of the same stock. Safer to invest your money in various quarters."

The colonel tapped the ash from his cigar.

"Well, to get on with my story, my nephew, Captain Brentley, didn't follow my system of investing his money in many quarters. He was infatuated with the oil business, and planked down every penny he had for the purpose of buying the Bresrona shares," went on the colonel. "As you will realise, he was ruined when the crash came—absolutely ruined. At the time he was in the trenches, and didn't know of the oil failure for some little time. When he did he was rather cut up."

"I am not surprised," remarked Sutcliffe, who was still intensely bored. "It is not exactly pleasant to learn that one is suddenly ruined, colonel. I am sorry for Captain Brentley——"

"Wait a moment!" interjected the colonel crisply. "I haven't done yet. You'll find that there is no necessity for condolence. Brentley is in the trenches at present—might be wounded for all I know, by George! It's not probable, though. He's on a portion of front that's fairly quiet at present. And I happen to know that he's got all his oil shares with him—it was a fad of his to carry the things about in his dispatch-box. They were worthless,

but he always had an idea that he might be able to sell them to some greenhorn for a few pounds. More of a joke than anything else, I believe."

The colonel bent forward.

"My nephew would give much to know a certain item of information which has come privately to my ear this very morning," he went on. "Brentley would sell those shares to any man who offered him fifty pounds for them. And it wouldn't be a swindle, although one might think so. The shares, although seemingly worthless at present, might become valuable later on. The company is still in existence, and nothing has been wound up."

"Fifty pounds is not a large sum," remarked Sutcliffe languidly.

"A dooced small sum, considering the value which would be received," was Symington's remark. "And now for the bombshell," he added genially. "Now for the surprise, my dear Bouchard!"

"Ciel! I pray you to be careful in 'springing it,' as you say——"

"I don't think you'll be affected," laughed the other. "It's Brentley who would receive a shock. He thinks those shares of his are not worth ten cents. Yet, as a matter of fact, they are far more valuable than they were in the time of the biggest Bresrona oil boom!"

Jim was interested at last.

"Then a change has occurred?" he asked.

"A change!" echoed the colonel. "A revolution, m'sieur! Sudden developments have taken place, and it has been found that the oil fields, instead of being exhausted, are more valuable than they ever were hitherto. In consequence the value of the shares has increased to an almost incredible extent."

Jim the Penman tossed his cigarette-end away.

"Mon Dieu! The situation is curious," he remarked. "So, I understand, Captain Brentley, in the trenches, is willing to sell his shares for a mere song—as you put it, eh?—and they are worth a fortune——"

"A fortune! A treble fortune!" insisted the colonel. "A treble fortune, sir! Why, I will willingly wager that my nephew's shares are worth nothing less than a cool hundred thousand! Think of it, by George! He's in the trenches under the impression that he is ruined, and he's really richer than he ever dreamed of in his wildest moments."

Jim the Penman had become suddenly very keen.

"But Brentley knows of his good fortune by this time, surely?" he asked. "The good news will have reached him——"

"No, and I don't suppose it will reach him until the end of the week," said the colonel, with a chuckle. "What a surprise for him! You see, I obtained the information from a private source; it is not yet generally known that the Bresrona Oil Fields have recovered themselves."

"Perhaps your informant was unreliable——"

"Oh, no! Get that idea out of your head at once!" said Symington. "This is absolute fact that I am telling you—not rumour. I loathe rumours, and would not repeat one for any amount of money. But this is news, Bouchard. The Bresrona shares have suddenly become doubly as valuable as they were during the original boom. I suppose the facts will be public property in about three day's time. Brentley won't know anything about it until then——"

"But you will tell him, surely?" asked the forger. "Eh, m'sieur?"

"I? Why should I tell him? Let him find out for himself—that's the best way. It will come all the more pleasant," said the colonel. "Besides, you don't know my nephew. A fine chap, Bouchard, but a man who won't believe things unless they're official. If I wired him that he's a rich man

he would laugh at it, and say that I was an old fool for believing rumours. And it would be just like his pig-headedness to give his shares away to show how clever he was!"

M. Bouchard laughed.

"That would be a pity." He smiled. "M'sieur le capitain would be annoyed later, I imagine. As you say, it will be better to tell him nothing. He will find out for himself—at the end of the week, you say?"

"Not before," said Symington.

"And to-day is Tuesday," went on the pseudo Frenchman musingly. "It is a quaint situation, colonel. Your nephew is in the trenches with documents in his possession which he believes to be of no value. Yet they are worth—how much?—one hundred thousand of your English sovereigns. Mon Dieu! It is indeed quaint!"

Jim the Penman's eyes gleamed strangely; but his face was turned away from the colonel, and the latter did not see that sudden light of exultant satisfaction. For the disguised forger had conceived a wild, daring plan. Within the last few minutes, even while Symington had been speaking, Sutcliffe had formulated his idea.

After a further talk of several minutes, the pair rose from the rustic seat, and strolled round the hotel grounds. Colonel Symington was still communicative, and his talk was of the utmost interest to his companion—though "M. Bouchard" affected to be only casually interested.

The information which the colonel had supplied to Jim was merely that which one gentleman would ordinarily confide to another. Never for a second did Symington guess that his companion would scheme to make scoundrelly use of the knowledge.

Why, indeed, should the colonel be suspicious? He believed Jim the Penman to be a rich Frenchman of unimpeachable character. And he had related the story of the Bresrona Oil Fields merely because he thought it too good to keep to himself.

A little later he parted with "monsieur," and went indoors. Jim the Penman remained out in the grounds, pacing thoughtfully up and down. And, although he was engrossed in his new plans, he did not once forget his character. His walk, his stoop, the very manner in which he carried himself, was thoroughly in keeping with his disguise. Jim the Penman was a perfect artist.

"A hundred thousand!" he murmured, again and again. "By James, it is a tempting bait. The question is, can the thing be worked? Nerve and cool, unadulterated cheek—they're the two chief qualities required to bring the coup off successfully, and I think I'm proficient in both."

Jim the Penman was badly in need of money; he had lost practically everything in the Ringdove affair. As though provided for his especial benefit, here was a chance to retrieve his fallen fortunes.

But the risks would be tremendous.

The chances of failure would be staggering.

Nevertheless, Jim was in a tight corner. It was quite on the cards that Channing would not be able to get through France from England. And in those circumstances Jim himself would be stranded.

Something had to be done—that was certain. And this wild, hare-brained plan of Sutcliffe's appealed to his sporting instinct—for in many respects Jim was a good deal of a sportsman. It appealed to his sense of humour. And when he turned his steps in the direction of the hotel he chuckled inwardly.

"Ye gods!" he muttered. "What a wheeze! I'll do it—I'll chance my

luck! If I remain here I shall probably be bowled out, so hang the odds! There's a chance of gaining a tidy fortune with comparatively little trouble—and I'm on!"

And M. Jacques Henri Bouchard proceeded to get busy.

CHAPTER IV.

Somewhere in France—Channing's Ruse—Nipper's Find.

NIPPER grunted discontentedly.

"Another stop!" he exclaimed. "Is this a train, gov'nor, or an imitation snail? Talk about the good old South-Eastern! Their trains are lightning expresses compared to this rotten——"

"Come, Nipper," interjected Nelson Lee. "You must make allowances. It is war-time, and the French railways are disorganised in certain districts. Military traffic comes before anything else. Soon or later we shall arrive at Marseilles."

"About next Christmas, I reckon!" growled Nipper.

Upon the whole, the lad had a certain amount of cause to grumble. He and his master were——well, somewhere in France——somewhere between Paris and Marseilles. And they had been "somewhere between Paris and Marseilles" for more hours than Nipper cared to count.

And now the train was about to come to another stop. It was not a good train by any means, and in peace-time would have been a disgrace to any railway. But, as Nelson Lee said, it was necessary to make allowances.

Perhaps troop-trains were on the move somewhere; or some other war-traffic might be causing delay. At all events, this particular train which Nelson Lee and Nipper were travelling by was trying its best to create a record for slowness. It was not by any means a fair example of a French train, even in war-time, but Lee and Nipper were journeying to Marseilles in it, and the latter simply could not bear the agony in silence.

The journey from London had been devoid of interest; it had, in fact, been extremely tedious from the very start. The authorities had given no trouble, and the pair were now on the last lap. By morning at least Lee hoped to enter the great French port.

For it was late evening now, and intensely dark. The detective and Nipper had the compartment to themselves, and Nipper tried to look out of one of the windows into the blackness. There were no stars visible, and a haze hung over the countryside.

"Blessed if I can see whether it's a station or just another stop," said Nipper, straining his eyes. "I wonder—— Oh, yes, it's a station, gov'nor. Some little tin-pot place, I suppose. No chance of getting some hot coffee!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You must be patient, young 'un," he said. "In about an hour, I think, we are due to arrive at a fairly large town. Probably we shall not get there until two hours have expired. By making superhuman efforts you may possibly manage to keep life within your body until then——when we will certainly be able to procure refreshment of a liquid and solid nature!"

"All very well for you to make fun, gov'nor!" exclaimed Nipper gloomily. "I haven't eaten anything for hours—I'm starving. And I'm cold and thirsty. I want to stretch my legs——"

"Good gracious! You are making up quite a formidable list!" chuckled

the great detective. "However, I happen to know your character, my lad. Your bark is far worse than your bite!"

"That's the same as calling me a dog, ain't it, sir?"

"Hardly——"

Lee was interrupted by the carriage door suddenly opening. A cold blast of air drove into the carriage, for the night was raw and chill. The train had stopped at a small country station, which was badly lighted and dreary.

A few snatches of conversation—in French, of course—came to the ears of Lee and Nipper as they turned their eyes towards the opened door. A man clambered up into the compartment, and took his seat close by the door. Lee and Nipper were facing one another against the opposite door.

They looked at the newcomer casually and uninterestedly. The carriage was not well illuminated. This particular train—which was not of the ordinary service—seemed to be particularly lacking in comfort.

The stranger was rather tall and black-bearded. He was a typical Frenchman of the lower middle class, but seemed in no mood for conversation. He merely glanced inquisitively at Lee and Nipper, and then settled down into his seat.

The detective, for his part, did not give the man a moment's thought. There was no particular reason why he should. He had just as much right to the compartment as anybody else.

But the stranger was in reality an old friend—or, to be more exact, an old enemy.

He was Mr. Robert Channing, Jim the Penman's right-hand man.

Channing had been close on Nelson Lee's track the whole way from Charing Cross. Once, in Paris, he had lost sight of his quarry, owing to a slight delay caused by some zealous official. But Channing had managed to pick up the trail once more. This was fairly simple, for he knew which train Lee and Nipper were taking south. But up till now Channing had been idle.

He had made his plans cleverly.

Channing did not possess the subtle cunning of Jim the Penman. He relied, rather, upon brute force and direct methods. In his character of a Frenchman he had awaited his opportunity.

By entering the compartment after dark at a small wayside station it would naturally be supposed by Lee and Nipper that the newcomer was merely an ordinary traveller. They would not guess that he had journeyed with them all the way from Paris.

As a matter of fact, Channing had been awaiting his opportunity for quite a long while. Only since the last stop had Lee and Nipper been alone; previous to that other passengers had occupied the compartment. Channing knew this, and he had promptly entered now, telling himself that his chance had come.

To his great satisfaction the train moved on again without the situation altering. The scoundrel was alone with his intended victims.

True, they were two to one against him. But he undoubtedly had the advantage. He had sinister designs regarding his fellow-passengers, while they were utterly unsuspecting and off their guard.

In this Nelson Lee was by no means lacking in caution. He had not the slightest idea that Channing was on the track: the man had given no inkling. He was a clever criminal, and had set about his task grimly and determinedly.

He knew that the famous detective and his assistant were on their way

to Marseilles with the intention of apprehending Jim the Penman. True enough, Channing himself was on the way to Toulon, where Jim was located. But he was convinced that Lee would get on the track in a very short time.

Therefore it was a matter of the most vital importance that the detective should be dealt with drastically and effectively before the journey's end was reached.

And Channing had conceived a daring plan.

He had learned from his distinguished chief one valuable lesson. To surprise an enemy is to gain the advantage at once. And Channing had resolved to take Nelson Lee absolutely by surprise. By acting promptly and murderously he relied upon achieving his purpose with comparatively little trouble.

But the moment for action had not yet arrived.

The train gained speed, and really bucked up wonderfully well. Nipper was quite pleased, and remarked to his master that some grub would be coming along sooner than he expected. Outside the darkness was intense, and a fine drizzle had commenced to fall.

Lee and Nipper settled down to reading, and their silent companion lay buried in his corner, apparently oblivious to everything.

But presently he made a move.

The train seemed to be travelling extremely quickly. As a matter of fact, the train was only going at quite a moderate speed. Had the travellers been in an English train they would have said that it was making bad time.

But before leaving the last station the rate of progress had been a mere crawl. This being so, the present burst of speed seemed to be quite fast by comparison. The coach was an old one—badly sprung, and with inferior wheels.

The noise caused was rather deafening, and this added to the impression that the speed of the train was great. Had it been daylight it would have been quite simple to know that the speed was only moderate. But being pitch dark, the only way of judging was by sound.

And Channing miscalculated.

He told himself that the train was rushing along at fully fifty miles per hour. This was precisely suited to the purpose he had in mind. Accordingly he became active. He would not have done so had he known the precise state of affairs. The train was certainly not making more than twenty-five miles per hour.

Nelson Lee looked up carelessly as the French stranger made a move—for the first time. He rose from his seat, lowered the window, and leaned out into the darkness. There was nothing particularly astonishing in this, and Lee continued his reading without a thought.

But Channing had a deadly object in mind.

His body concealed the door—and the handle. And, unobserved by his companions, he turned the handle down, and held the door closed with his fingers. One push would send it flying open.

Channing uttered an abrupt exclamation.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried. "See, m'sieurs! Am I dreaming, or— Look—look! Ma foi! It is terrible!"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet. He was, in truth, somewhat alarmed by the supposed Frenchman's tone. And this was exactly what Channing desired. Lee crossed the compartment and stood beside Channing.

"What is wrong, m'sieur?" he asked in French.

The other pointed excitedly out of the window into the dark sky.

"See!" he cried wildly. "A Zeppelin——"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nipper from the other end. "A Zeppelin! A Zeppelin down in this part of the country?"

Channing's moment had come!

He stepped aside from the carriage door, still pointing out with his finger, and allowed Lee to occupy the position he had just vacated.

The detective was in no way to blame for what occurred afterwards. Indeed, Channing's move was a smart one. The cleverest detective in existence would never have suspected a trap.

But it was a trap from which there was no escape!

Nelson Lee naturally leaned against the door in order to lean out into the darkness. And even as he did so he felt the door move slightly. It was unfastened!

In that one second Lee knew that he had been tricked—that he was in a position of dire peril. But it was too late for him to act, for Channing acted first. The detective attempted to fling himself backwards, realising what was to follow.

But the attempt was frustrated at the start. The whole incident happened in less than five short seconds. As Nelson Lee stiffened himself he felt two hands placed firmly upon his back.

A violent shove sent him lurching forward against the door. With a cry he clutched at the woodwork. But his fingers could gain no grip, and the next second he went hurtling out into the blackness of the night!

Nelson Lee had been flung from the train—flung on to the permanent way!

"To your death!" snarled out Channing, almost insane with triumph. "You have gone to your death, hang you!"

"You—you scoundrel!" panted Nipper huskily.

The lad was almost dazed. The thing had occurred all in a moment, it seemed. Nipper, behind his master and the stranger, had been unable to move a finger to protect Nelson Lee. Channing had performed his deadly work so swiftly that Nipper could only stagger back and gasp with horror.

His master had been hurled to what seemed certain death!

"And now for you, my young friend!" grated out Channing. "Your master is dealt with, and you will be easy prey! You will follow very quickly. He fell into the trap nicely, didn't he? I was afraid that you would be first, but fortune favoured me. Ah! no you don't——"

Channing broke off with a furious oath.

For Nipper had suddenly jerked his hand round to his hip-pocket. The lad was carrying a small revolver, and after the first shock he had recovered his wits with commendable promptitude.

Nipper was now grim and cold and determined. He believed his master to be dead—to be crushed and mangled on the line. But that dreadful thought did not unnerve him. On the contrary, he was spurred to an effort which he would otherwise have found impossible.

Who this man was he did not know; but he was certainly no Frenchman. In those wild, fleeting seconds Nipper believed his companion to be a maniac—a man who had suddenly taken leave of his senses. Curiously enough, it did not strike the lad that he was face to face with an enemy—that this attack was directly concerned with the object of the journey to Marseilles.

Nipper was not allowed to draw his revolver. He had no time. In a flash Channing was upon him, and the scoundrel fully intended to hurl Nipper out of the train after his master. It was a terrible plan, but one

which seemed likely to be very effective. But Channing had underrated his opponent.

When Lee had plunged into the darkness Channing had been ready to cry aloud with triumph and joy. Nipper was a youth—he would be easy to overpower! But Nipper was remarkably strong, and as tough as leather.

Moreover, at the present moment he was mad with fury and horror. It was not so much that he realised his own peril, but the fact that he wished to avenge his master. For his own safety Nipper did not care a jot.

As Channing flung himself forward Nipper made no attempt to back. Instead, he met the other's charge, and the next second the pair were struggling with a fury which was little short of appalling.

"You young brat!" snarled Channing. "You would resist, eh? I—Ugggh!"

The man uttered a gurgling gasp as Nipper's fist crashed with fearful force upon his mouth. That blow shook Channing considerably, and it removed quite a considerable proportion of the skin from Nipper's knuckles.

But it made the scoundrel realise that Nipper was a tougher nut to crack than he had supposed. The pair swayed to and fro, locked together. And then, with a sudden wrench, Nipper freed himself and flung himself backwards. His nose was streaming red, and he was looking fit for anything.

"Come on!" he panted hoarsely. "You haven't flung me out yet!"

Channing wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, and then renewed the conflict. He exerted every ounce of his strength, and Nipper knew that before so very long he would be forced to go under. Plucky as he was, he was no match for this madly infuriated scoundrel.

And as Channing flung himself to the attack again, Nipper caught sight of the alarm signal. And the lad, although hoping that he would be able to get the better of Channing—a hope which was almost forlorn—told himself that it would be an act of wisdom on his part to stop the train.

His attacker guessed his object.

"No, you brat!" he muttered hoarsely. "You won't touch that—"

Again Channing's words were choked. Nipper knew how to use his fists—knew how to defend himself against ordinary attack. But this affair was not a fight—it was a terrible tussle for life itself.

Nipper's fists crashed again and again into his opponent's face. Channing's two eyes were already red and swollen—in a very short time they would be black. His nose was bleeding, and his lips were torn. The scoundrel had not bargained for such punishment. He had not anticipated such a show of resistance from a mere youth.

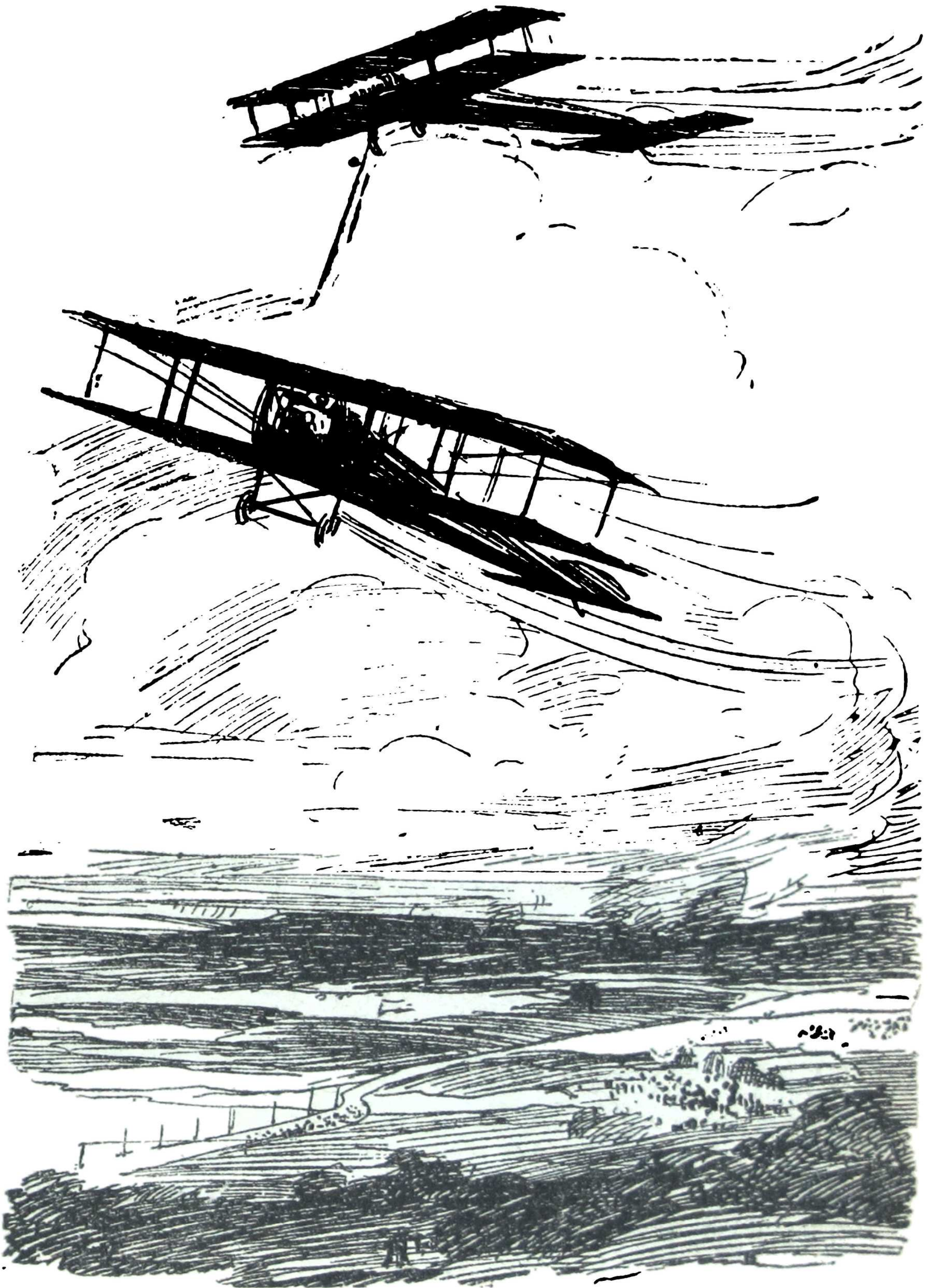
But Nipper himself was not scathless—far from it. One of his eyes would be black before long, and he was bruised about the arms and body cruelly. He was full of fight, however, and resisted Channing's onslaughts with a will.

But it could not last.

The fierceness of the tussle was altogether too much for Nipper. It was man against boy, and such odds were not exactly even. Nipper was full of pluck and determination; he was infuriated to such a degree that he felt ready to tackle a dozen men.

But the fight was telling on him.

The carriage-door still swung open, and Nipper's back was towards it. Inch by inch he felt himself being forced back. He knew only too well what the result of a backwards fall would be.



Lee and Nipper were surprised to see Jim the Penman take a sudden dive earthwards, as if to ram their machine. —(See page 38).

"I'm—not—done—yet!" the lad panted hotly.

This was no ordinary fight. Channing had hacked cruelly at Nipper's shins several times. And now Nipper returned the compliment—only in a different manner. He hooked his boot round Channing's leg and wrenched with all his might.

The man had been gathering himself for a great final effort—an effort which would have sent Nipper flying out of the carriage. And that sudden, unexpected move of Nipper's—which was quite a fair move—completely defeated Channing. He uttered a foul oath as he felt the tug, and attempted to save himself.

But it was impossible. He lost his balance, and crashed down full length upon the floor. At the same time his head came into violent contact with the other door—the fastened door.

Nipper made a dive for the alarm signal, and pulled it vigorously.

Then, twisting round quickly, he saw that Channing was still on the floor. He lay half dazed by the blow he had sustained, and Nipper stood over him with clenched fists and heaving chest.

"You hound!" panted the lad. "By Heaven, you shall pay for what you've done!"

Channing staggered up—only to be forced down again.

"I've finished Lee, anyhow!" he muttered thickly. "I've finished Lee! That's the chief thing, you whelp! And I'll finish you too!"

The effect of the blow soon wore off, and Channing was doubly acute. He could tell that the train was slowing down—he could feel the brakes grating on the wheels. In less than a minute the train would be at a standstill, and he would be captured.

The thought was a terrible one.

With a sudden spring the man was on his feet. Nipper was flung back against the cushioned seat, taken by surprise. But this time Channing was not renewing the attack. He thought only of his own safety.

He reached the door, and jumped—jumped recklessly, regardless of the train's speed. The train, however, was almost stopped, and Channing alighted on his feet in loose gravel and staggered over.

His face buried itself in the gravel, and the stones cut and scratched him in a score of places. His hands were torn cruelly. But he was on his feet in a moment, and lurched away into the darkness of the night.

Nipper, in the compartment, sank down upon the cushions, exhausted. Mechanically he dabbed his nose with his handkerchief, and closed his eyes. His head was throbbing terribly, and he felt that nothing in the world mattered.

He was found in this condition by two of the French officials, who were excited and curious. With many gesticulations they demanded to know what had occurred.

Nipper, whose French was excellent, explained.

"A madman was here," he said, holding his head between his hands. "A madman flung my friend out of the window—about a mile back. Heaven alone knows what has happened to Mr. Lee! Oh, if he is killed——"

"Ciel! What is the boy talking of?" exclaimed one of the Frenchmen. "A madman? A man flung on to the line a mile back? I think the boy himself must be mad——"

"No! I tell you that my friend, Mr. Lee, was thrown out of this carriage a good way up the line," persisted Nipper, recovering himself rapidly. "What are you going to do? Somebody has got to go back and search."

After a good deal of talking and delay it was decided to back the train for about a mile. The officials were convinced of Nipper's sincerity, and it was obviously impossible to leave Nelson Lee upon the line—probably badly injured—to die of exposure.

The track was very bare and deserted in this part of the country, and there was no other train that night. So the affair would only cause a delay. And, under the circumstances, delay was unavoidable.

The train was soon on the move, and two or three men hung on the foot-boards, with lanterns flashing upon the grassland which bordered the track. Nipper was anxiously scanning every inch of ground as the train slowly backed. And the windows were lined with other passengers, who were naturally curious.

Nipper did not bother himself about Channing. It had been discovered that the unknown "madman" had made off, for he was nowhere to be found. Probably enough he was making his way across the fields away from the railway line, and to go in chase of him in the darkness was quite impossible.

And Nipper was thinking only of his master.

What had happened to Nelson Lee? Had the detective been killed by that fall from the train? Or would he be found, maimed and unconscious? It was an anxious time for Nipper.

But at last the expected shout came from the rear of the train—which, naturally, was now the forepart. A red light showed, and the brakes were jammed on. The train lurched to a standstill, and Nipper jumped off. The lights from two lanterns were flashing upon something—something dark—which lay in the grass close beside the track.

It was the unconscious form of Nelson Lee!

In a moment Nipper was beside his master, kneeling down and examining him. And when he looked up his face was radiant with relief and thankfulness. He had felt the detective all over, but no bones were broken.

"Only stunned!" he exclaimed fervently. "By Heaven, what an escape!"

But the escape was not so miraculous as Nipper supposed. For he, like Channing, had believed the train to be travelling at a much greater speed than it actually was. Lee had fallen face downwards into the grass, and his head, by an unfortunate chance, had struck a boulder which lay almost hidden. As a result he was not killed, as Channing had anticipated, but merely stunned.

With tender care the detective was carried back to the compartment from which he had been flung. The kindly French officials were very concerned, and a doctor chanced to be travelling on the train. He at once did all that was in his power, and before long Lee shifted and showed signs of returning consciousness.

And after the train had been travelling for twenty minutes, Lee was sitting up and gazing round him with a blank expression which soon changed into one of realisation. He seemed most astonished, however, at the sight of Nipper's face. This was indeed a picture. The lad had suffered badly.

His left eye was nearly closed up, and was showing ominous signs of becoming black. His nose was swollen, and his lower lip was cut and puffed. In addition to these little injuries two long scratches ran right down the lad's right cheek. And the only satisfaction Nipper had was the knowledge that his own facial disfigurement was nothing compared to that of Channing. The latter had been punished far more severely.

"Good gracious, young 'un!" exclaimed Lee huskily. "What on earth has happened? Have I been dreaming? I thought I fell out of a train—"

"So you did, guv'nor."

"Dear me! I am somewhat dazed," said Lee, passing a hand over his eyes. "And, to tell the truth, my lad, I scarcely recognise you. Have you been tumbling out of the train as well, or have you been fighting?"

Nipper very soon explained exactly what had occurred. The doctor—an agreeable, fussy little Frenchman—insisted upon adding various details which were mainly imagined, for the little man had been fast asleep at the time of the fight. Lee, however, listened mainly to Nipper.

The detective was rather grave.

"Yes, the fellow was evidently a madman, my lad," he exclaimed, with a significant glance at Nipper. "Probably he will be captured by the morning. I am feeling decidedly groggy, but I suppose I must be thankful at having escaped so lightly."

Nipper rubbed his nose very tenderly.

"You must be made of rubber, gov'nor," he said. "Considering that the train was going at full speed it's a marvellous thing you weren't brained."

The French doctor nodded emphatically. Lee and Nipper, out of politeness for their companion, were speaking in French, and he, of course, took part in the conversation.

"Ah, yes!" he exclaimed. "Your escape, m'sieur, was one of remarkable providence. The train was travelling fast—very fast——"

"Pardon, m'sieur, but you are mistaken," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "And you, too, Nipper, are also under a wrong impression. The train was not travelling at any speed. I realised that even as I was falling into the darkness. I doubt if the speed was greater than twenty-five miles per hour, in fact. We gained a wrong impression by the fact that the noise of the wheels is rather considerable."

The doctor nodded rather doubtfully. He was inclined to believe his own view. He did not wish to argue, however, and impressed upon the detective that he should rest and say as little as possible. Lee, accordingly, lay back among the cushions and closed his eyes.

It had been an exciting adventure, but, fortunately, no serious harm had resulted. In point of fact, Lee was rather pleased, as events had turned out. For he now knew that his enemies were on the alert. To the doctor he had assumed that his attacker had been a madman; but privately he knew very different. The great criminologist could see, moreover, that Nipper was anxious to tell him something, but did not wish to do so in the hearing of a third party.

By the time the big station was reached both Lee and Nipper were feeling very much better. This stop was a junction, and there was a wait of two hours. So Lee and Nipper repaired to the refreshment buffet, and were soon sitting down to a cold but hearty meal—with hot coffee.

They were sitting quite to themselves, and then Nipper explained the full details of the attack. Lee listened thoughtfully, occasionally rubbing his head where it was bruised.

"Undoubtedly the fellow was on our track, Nipper," he exclaimed slowly. "In all probability he got on our trail in Paris, or possibly he crossed over with us. That, however, is of no consequence."

"Why not, sir?"

"Well, we are chiefly concerned with the one fact," replied Lee. "The fact that this man was on the same train. He was one of Jim the Penman's emissaries, and made a bold but unsuccessful attempt to get rid of us."

"It's a funny thing he didn't shoot us," remarked Nipper, as he sipped his coffee. "It would have been quite easy, wouldn't it?"

"I am not so sure of that. Shooting people in a railway carriage is a

tricky business, my boy," said the detective. "Even at such close range he might have missed. And to have missed would have been fatal—for him. He adopted a ruse which was both clever and effective, or, at least, it would have been effective if everything had gone smoothly."

Nipper nodded.

"I don't suppose he cared much whether he killed us or not, eh?" he remarked. "The main idea was to chuck us out of the train and cause us such bodily injury that we should be laid up for weeks to come. Anyhow, the attempt failed, thank goodness! My hat! What a sight I shall be to-morrow!" added Nipper, catching a glimpse of his face in a mirror.

The lad fumbled in his pocket for his handkerchief, and then uttered a short exclamation.

"Oh, there's something I forgot, gov'nor," he said. "Just before the railway guards found me, half dazed in the carriage, I picked up this slip of paper. I suppose it must have fallen out of that rotter's pocket during the struggle."

"Is it rather a wonder the fellow's pockets were not emptied altogether—yours included," said Lee drily. "That is, to judge from your description of the fight. But what is this slip of paper? Anything important?"

"Have a squint, gov'nor."

Lee took the slip from Nipper's hand. It was small, with rough edges, and bore dirty marks on both sides of it—plainly showing that it had been trampled on again and again during the fight.

It bore a name and address in pencil, but nothing else. The writing was faint, owing to the rough treatment the paper had received, but the name and address was quite distinguishable—"M. Jacques Henri Bouchard, Alpha Hotel, Toulon."

Nelson Lee puckered his forehead thoughtfully.

"H'm! M'sieur Bouchard, Alpha Hotel, Toulon," he repeated. "Now, I wonder if this is a clue or not? On the face of it it does not appear to be one, but——"

Lee suddenly paused.

"By James!" he exclaimed softly.

"What's up, sir?"

Nipper looked at his master curiously, for Lee's eyes were gleaming with a strange, subdued light, as though he had been struck by an inspiration. And such, indeed, was the case.

"I wonder—I wonder!" he went on tensely. "Just think of the situation, Nipper. Consider all the facts. That man who attacked us was certainly one of Jim the Penman's confederates."

"That's true enough, gov'nor."

"He, no doubt, received a telegraphic message from Sutcliffe, giving him certain instructions," proceeded Lee. "Well, what do we gather from that? Jim himself is in the South of France—at Marseilles, we believed. But Toulon is very near Marseilles and——"

"You—you mean——"

"I mean, young 'un, that this name and address is very probably of the utmost importance to us," said Lee quietly. "It was written on this slip of paper so that our attacker should not forget it. There was nothing unwise in doing that, for a name and address, under ordinary circumstances, is hardly evidence. But these are not ordinary circumstances. In fact, I have formed the opinion that Jim the Penman is staying at the Hotel Alpha, in Toulon, in the guise of a Frenchman!"

"By gum!" said Nipper. "Then this affair may turn out to be all for the best, after all."

"Time will show," said Lee tensely. "We are nearly at the end of our journey now, Nipper. To-morrow we shall be in Toulon, for I intend to follow up this clue the very first thing."

CHAPTER V.

In the Night—The Forged Army Papers—Off to the Trenches.

THE Alpha Hotel was enshrouded in darkness.

The hour was close upon 1 a.m., and the night was exceedingly dark and still. The atmosphere was mild and clear, but thick clouds hung overhead and obliterated the stars.

The Alpha was a good hotel, and was provided with balconies on the first two floors—balconies which ran round the entire building. Thus it was an easy matter for anyone so inclined to leave his bedroom by means of the window, proceed along the balcony, and enter any other window—provided it was open.

The hour of one struck musically from a tiny clock within one of the rooms on the first floor. The apartment was in total darkness, but the window was wide open, although the curtains were drawn. But suddenly they parted, and a dim figure stepped silently out on to the balcony.

"Now for it!" murmured the figure. "It's a risky game, but the odds are worth it. Ten to one I succeed. And if I don't—well, I'm not going to be pessimistic. It's one of the best games I've ever played!"

Jim the Penman—for the black figure was that of the forger—chuckled quietly to himself and stood for a few moments looking out over the sleeping town. He had formulated his plans to the last detail.

And now time for action had come.

Jim loved an adventure of this sort. It appealed strongly to his curious nature. Anything daring and out of the common was agreeable to him. Perhaps he would not have been quite so confident had he known that even at that moment Nelson Lee and Nipper were on their way to the South of France, hot upon his track. For this adventure he was just embarking upon was occurring on the same night as that which had seen the defeat of Robert Channing.

Jim the Penman had mapped out his campaign cleverly.

He had obtained further valuable information from Colonel Symington—information which was of the utmost value to him. Needless to say, the colonel was quite unaware of the fact that his talk was to lead to amazing villainy.

The bluff British soldier had fallen an easy victim to Sutcliffe's wiles. He had been pumped again and again, and had been totally unaware of the fact. "M. Bouchard" had played with poor Symington as though he had been putty in his hands.

This reflected no discredit upon the colonel. Jim the Penman was the most amazing rogue out of prison. He possessed the faculty of making comparative strangers confide their inmost secrets to his care. Not that Colonel Symington entrusted any secrets with his supposedly French friend.

He had merely been conversational, and had incidentally shown "Bouchard" a number of papers and documents. These were Army

papers, permits, etc. They were of utterly no use to Monsieur Jacques Henri Bouchard—but they were of the utmost value to Jim the Penman.

He had gained ideas from them—ideas which had simplified his task to a large extent. For it was Sutcliffe's intention to travel north to the British lines on the Somme. Here he would boldly proceed through the territory occupied by the British Expeditionary Forces to the front-line trenches, where Captain Brentley was at his post of duty.

Having got hold of his man, Jim would get from him the presumably worthless shares of the Bresrona Oil Company. Then he would take his departure, proceed to England, and at once realise on the shares—according to Colonel Symington—to the extent of nearly a hundred thousand pounds.

It was a rosy scheme—but could it be accomplished?

On the face of it—no. Such a plan was utterly and absolutely impossible. But when one probed down deep into the facts and chances, it would be understood that Jim's scheme was not only possible, but decidedly promising.

For, first and foremost, he was the world's most skilful forger. And he had mapped out his plan of action from beginning to end with extraordinary care. He had forged a number of papers which—he was convinced—would pass him through France and through the British lines without a moment's question.

Getting his ideas from Colonel Symington's papers, Jim had set to work, and had forged passes and permits—all of them presumably signed by a famous high official, whose word was absolute law.

And there were other documents, too. Jim had not left a stone unturned. He anticipated difficulties and setbacks, and he was prepared for anything. There was nothing like being prepared well in advance.

Sutcliffe also relied to a large extent upon his coolness and nerve. He possessed any amount of pure, unadulterated cheek, and in a tight corner Jim the Penman was at his best. His head was clearest, and his nerve as firm as steel.

So, all things considered, his plan did not seem so wild. It was, to tell the truth, quite feasible and likely to succeed. Unknown to Jim, however, Nelson Lee was hot on the track—and that was going to make all the difference!

The forger had decided not to wait for Channing's arrival. He had heard nothing from his confederate, and certainly did not expect him for another two days at least. But this new affair which had arisen made it imperative that Jim should waste no time—that he should journey to the battlefield as quickly as possible. Channing, when he arrived, would have to use his own judgment as to his next move.

Sutcliffe had already arranged with the manager of the Alpha that he should leave the hotel on the following morning. Jim had had just sufficient money to settle up his account at the hotel—with enough over to see him through to London. It was the forger's intention to leave Toulon in the guise of Jacques Henri Bouchard. But when he arrived at Paris he would be changed into quite a different character—an officer of the British Army.

Disguised as a British officer on a special mission—which was fully accounted for in his forged papers—he would travel to the battle front, and there find Captain Brentley. Jim the Penman did not give a moment's thought to the fact that he might get killed while in the front line trenches. To tell the truth, he was rather pleased at the prospect of danger. It appealed strongly to his bold, adventurous nature.

So far as Jim could see detection was scarcely possible. A prolonged visit, no doubt, would have brought suspicions sooner or later. But his visit to the Front would be a flying one, and by the time the imposture was exposed he would have vanished with his booty.

And it was with the intention of gaining something essential to the success of his mission that he had now left his room at the Alpha Hotel in the middle of the night. It was his last night in Toulon, and from that moment he was ready to go straight ahead with his scheme.

The forger stood upon the balcony for some few moments. Then he moved along with a tread as soft as a cat's until he came to a steep iron ladder, which led to the balcony of the second floor.

At the foot of this ladder he paused for a moment or two. But everything was quiet and still. The guests and staff of the hotel were all in bed, with the exception of the night porter below.

Sutcliffe could not have chosen a better night for his purpose. He was not visible at a distance of ten feet, and anybody below could not see that dim shadow which passed along the balcony.

He slowly mounted the ladder—slowly, because he did not wish to make the slightest creak. And when he arrived upon the upper balcony—the iron ladder by which he had reached it was really the fire escape—he moved along until he came to the fourth window from the end.

This was the window of Colonel Symington's bedroom. And, as Jim knew beforehand, it was open both top and bottom. Without making the slightest sound the marauder opened the window and passed within. Just inside the curtains he stood stock still and listened. A regular soft snore struck his ears, and he knew that the colonel was fast asleep. And Symington was a very heavy sleeper—which suited Jim's purpose admirably.

Switching on a tiny electric torch, he crossed the bedroom, taking care to keep the light away from the bed itself. The door of the colonel's dressing-room was, Jim saw, standing ajar. He passed into this apartment, and was soon bending over a large travelling-trunk.

Exactly ten minutes later Jim the Penman emerged on to the balcony. And as he descended the iron ladder again he pressed a soft bundle to his side, and chuckled. His mission had been entirely successful.

"Point number one!" he murmured. "So far so good!"

For Sutcliffe had just stolen from Colonel Symington's trunk a complete suit of khaki—complete even to the leather belt, etc., and cap. It was the colonel's spare suit—one he had had made especially before coming to the South of France. Probably he would be decidedly annoyed at its loss, and considerably puzzled. But that was his worry—Jim had gained his object.

And the following morning Monsieur Henri Jacques Bouchard bade the colonel a cordial farewell and left the hotel. Jim had half expected to hear lamentations from Symington regarding his missing suit. Apparently, however, the colonel had not yet discovered his loss.

The pseudo-Frenchman arrived at the station and commenced his journey to Paris. He experienced no difficulty in getting away, and told himself he would experience no difficulty in any of his future encounters with officials.

It was exceedingly lucky for Jim the Penman that he took his departure from Toulon that morning—and it was exceedingly disconcerting for Nelson Lee. For, by a curious chance, the famous detective and his assistant arrived in the great French naval port precisely two hours after Sutcliffe had taken his leave.

Lee, of course, knew nothing of this so far. He did not know by what a narrow margin he had missed his quarry. But just that short space of time was to make a great deal of difference to Lee's immediate movements—and it was to lead to startling adventures which were at present unthought of.

By mid-day M. Bouchard had disappeared from the face of France. And in his place had appeared a tall, upright, stern-looking colonel of the British Army. The transformation was remarkable, and Jim had performed it while travelling along on a long run. He had taken very good care to select a compartment to himself.

And Nelson Lee, in Toulon, at once took advantage of the information he had gained from the slip of paper dropped by Channing.

Nipper's face was showing distinct signs of wear, but the lad was quite cheerful and contented. The journey was at an end—and that was something to be thankful for. The pair had been practically three days getting to Toulon.

At the Alpha Hotel Nelson Lee interviewed the manager, a small, podgy little Frenchman, with the most exquisite manners and a beaming smile, which made guests comfortable at the very commencement of their stay.

M. Hanaud, the manager, was very attentive when Lee explained his object. He spoke almost perfect English—which was not to be surprised at. For in peace-time many British tourists stayed at the hotel. In war-time, however, British tourists were forbidden—and tourists of other nationalities as well.

The manager was amazed when he learned that Nelson Lee suspected Bouchard of being none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe, the notorious forger.

"You are mistaken, M'sieur Lee," he exclaimed in English. "I am quite sure you are mistaken. M'sieur Bouchard was a real Frenchman—I am convinced of that."

"It is obvious that you are unacquainted with Jim the Penman's character and record," said Lee quietly. "I have not the slightest doubt that Sutcliffe could impersonate a Frenchman with perfect ease. Can you tell me when M. Bouchard arrived?"

The manager supplied the information, and Lee was struck by the coincidence. For he had already judged that Jim the Penman would have arrived at the hotel on that very day. That point, at least, was very significant. And then M. Hanaud gave his visitor a piece of information which was not very welcome.

"If I could see Bouchard for myself," began Lee, "I could easily——"

"Ah, I regret!" exclaimed the manager. "M'sieur Bouchard left the hotel this morning. He has, I believe, departed for Paris by the morning train. I am sorry, m'sieur, but it makes very little difference. Bouchard was not your man."

Nelson Lee looked at Nipper grimly.

"My assistant and I have good reason to believe the opposite," replied Lee. "Perhaps you can supply me with a few details regarding Bouchard's habits and movements? It is a great pity he has left the hotel, M'sieur Hanaud. It will be a great deal of added trouble for me, and possibly failure in my enterprise."

"That will be a great pity—a very great pity," exclaimed the manager. "I regret also that I can give you very few details regarding Bouchard's habits. I scarcely had ten words with him myself. But there is one gentleman here, a British officer, who, I believe, was rather intimate with my

late guest. If you will wait here a few moments, M'sieur Lee, I will bring Colonel Symington to you."

When the colonel came he was very cordial, and was delighted to meet the famous British detective. But it was plain to see that he had been fuming over something very recently. And at the very first opportunity—even before he answered any of Lee's questions regarding Bouchard—he explained the cause.

"It's infernally mysterious, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the colonel heatedly. "I am angry—very angry. By George, I have never heard of such a thing in all my career. My uniform—my spare uniform, sir—has been stolen under my very nose! Has been stolen from my trunk in my dressing-room."

"That is very annoying," remarked Lee gently.

"Annoying!" fumed the colonel. "By gad, sir, it's unheard of! A complete uniform—brand new, and made by my own London tailor. Who in Heaven's name could have stolen that suit in this hotel? Of what use would a British officer's khaki suit be to anybody in Toulon?"

Nipper suddenly started.

"Bouchard left this morning, gov'nor!" he exclaimed shrewdly. "And Colonel Symington has only just missed his suit. That's a bit queer, isn't it?"

Nelson Lee nodded sharply.

"You are keen, Nipper!" he exclaimed crisply. "That may be a direct clue. The loss of your suit, Colonel Symington," he added, "may be quickly explained if you will be good enough to answer a few questions I am going to put to you."

And, without further delay, Lee put his questions. He sought information regarding Bouchard's character, and Colonel Symington supplied them with the utmost willingness. Lee was very acute now.

Before he had arrived at the Alpha he had suspected the mysterious Bouchard of being none other than Jim the Penman. What he had now learned only strengthened that belief; and the strange loss of Colonel Symington's uniform was significant in the extreme.

And the further facts which the colonel supplied clinched matters decidedly. After Lee had conversed with the colonel for half an hour the famous detective had come to one definite conclusion.

He was quite sure that Jim the Penman had started off for the British battle front with the set intention of securing from Captain Brentley the now valuable shares of the Bresrona Oil Company.

Symington had told Lee of the change in his nephew's fortunes—had told Lee precisely what he had previously told M. Bouchard. And the detective deduced the truth. There was not a single doubt left in his mind. He guessed that Jim the Penman had pumped the colonel dry of information, and a few questions put to Symington quite settled this point.

A little later on, while Lee and Nipper were lunching in a private room at the hotel, Nipper broke a long silence—for his master had been thoughtful for some considerable time.

"It's amazing, gov'nor!" exclaimed the lad. "I'm blessed if I can believe it. Is it possible that Jim the Penman is now on his way to the British lines disguised as a British Army officer?"

"It is not only possible, my lad, but certain," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "And there is only one course for us to pursue. We must renew the chase without any loss of time. There is a train northward this afternoon. We shall take it."

And they did. Once more the famous detective and his assistant took the trail. But this time they were supplied with definite, positive information, and their destination was now—the trenches!

CHAPTER VI.

At the Front—Jim the Penman's Bravery—Face to Face.

COLONEL DUNCAN METCALFE tossed his cigar-end away. "Plenty of mud about this part," he remarked pleasantly. "Mud! Why, this is nothing to the beautiful soup nearer the lines, sir," replied Second-lieutenant Doyle, deftly twisting the steering-wheel and clearing a huge "pot-hole" in the road by a bare inch. "You haven't been to the Front this winter, have you, sir?"

"No; I'm on special work at home," replied the colonel easily.

He was seated in a powerful two-seater motor-car, and the young officer at the wheel was conveying him along one of the main roads in northern France. Somewhere ahead—and not far ahead, either—the guns were roaring.

Colonel Metcalfe had arrived at the British western front.

It is scarcely necessary to mention that the colonel's real name was Douglas James Sutcliffe. The amazing criminal had slipped into his new identity with ease and freedom, and he was a typical British Army officer to the life.

His short career in khaki had been entirely successful so far. Not a hitch had occurred anywhere; he had passed through the lines safely and with never a question. His forged papers were executed with such astonishing accuracy and cleverness that they constituted a free passport right through the British lines.

And now he was practically at his journey's end. Within an hour, at most, he would be with Captain Brentley. Jim was greatly interested in everything he saw, for this was his first glimpse of the war—the actual war at the battle front.

But he affected to be languidly indifferent. In his character as Colonel Metcalfe it was necessary to be familiar with all such scenes as those he was continually coming across. Jim realised that he would have to be very careful. Exposure here would be serious—very serious indeed.

Lieutenant Doyle was a fresh young fellow of twenty. He had seen six months' service at the Front, but he was as cool and as unconcerned as though war was merely playing a pleasant sort of game.

"We'll be under fire before long, sir," he remarked easily. "Last time I came along this road I had a ripping time. Shell hit the ground forty yards behind my car. I was knocked silly for about a couple of hours, I should say. That was a decent sort of shell, sir."

Jim the Penman smiled.

"And your car?" he asked.

"Oh, busted up!" replied the lieutenant. "Fairly knocked on its beam ends. The wonder was that I wasn't sent sky-high. Still, these little things will happen, sir. Hallo, there's something happening above. Looks like a scrap!"

He turned his gaze skywards carelessly for a moment, and then lowered it to the road again. Sutcliffe looked into the sky, too. Two aeroplanes

were discernible, high in the heavens. They were flying practically at the same speed, one above the other.

Jim did not need telling that one was a German machine and the other a British. The enemy aircraft had evidently ventured over our lines, and he was now being engaged by one of the gallant officers of the R.F.C.

"Ye gods! Got him!" exclaimed Jim suddenly.

For one of the aeroplanes—the larger of the two—had suddenly heeled over. It dropped slowly for about a hundred feet, and then nose-dived like a stone. A sudden flash of flame, and a trailing cloud of smoke, and the ill-fated machine had disappeared behind a clump of trees.

"Set him afire, too," remarked Doyle. "Who was it, sir? One of ours?"

"The enemy, I think," replied Colonel Metcalfe. "Yes, our machine is soaring away, evidently looking for further excitement."

It was just an incident, but Jim the Penman was strangely impressed. The lieutenant was quite accustomed to air duels, however, and did not trouble to look upwards again. But Sutcliffe realised that he was now very near to the fighting-line, and something within him seemed to be stirring.

And as the journey proceeded he became more and more interested. The roar of the guns had become loud now, and presently the din was deafening. Men in muddy khaki were everywhere, and all were cheerful and unconcerned.

Lumbering transport lorries passed continually, driven by grimy-looking individuals in greasy, oily khaki, and generally with cigarettes stuck in the corners of their mouths.

At last Sutcliffe descended from the motor-car. He was now very close to the fighting-line. Now and again a dull crash and a cloud marked the spot where a German shell had exploded. And as he ploughed his way through a sea of horrible mud a shell shrieked overhead and burst with a thunderous report close by. The concussion was appalling, and Jim was nearly sent on his face into the mud. He laughed lightly. He was enjoying himself.

Presently he was in conversation with the officer commanding the sector of trenches which he wished to visit. Captain Brentley, it proved, was on duty in the front line, and would not come to the rear until the following day. Jim promptly elected to visit the front line at once.

"A bit risky," said the O.C. "The enemy seems to be rather active this morning. His artillery is busy, anyhow. Shouldn't be surprised if he sent forward some infantry before long."

"If that happens while I'm in the trenches, all the better," laughed "Colonel Metcalfe," lighting a fresh cigar. "I am rather anxious to have a chat with Brentley as soon as possible."

And so Jim soon afterwards found himself picking his way down a muddy, churned-up communication trench. He was in the thick of it now, with a vengeance, he told himself. The adventure appealed to him, and he was not in the slightest degree nervous. It was his first taste of actual warfare, but he felt keenly interested.

Captain Brentley was discovered in a dug-out just behind the front line. He was cleaning his revolver, as it happened, and looked up with some surprise when Jim the Penman appeared. The captain was not expecting a visitor.

He had, naturally, never heard of Colonel Duncan Metcalfe. But he shook hands cordially, and accepted one of the colonel's excellent cigars. The din from the artillery was almost deafening, and the constant explosion of shells—some near by and some afar—made conversation somewhat difficult.

"They're getting busy over there," remarked Brentley, nodding towards

the German lines. "Attack coming. I suppose. We've been expecting it for some days. When it does come there'll be some stiff work to do."

Brentley was a pleasant, good-natured man, and he listened attentively when Jim the Penman explained his errand. Sutcliffe had made no elaborate story up. He merely said that he had heard that Brentley had some shares to sell.

"I'm speculating a bit," explained the colonel. "Those oil shares of yours, Brentley, are worth about twopence-ha'penny, I suppose. But I'm keen on taking a chance. I want to do a deal with you."

He went into details, using Colonel Symington's name to further his purpose. He also handed Brentley a letter from his uncle—a letter which introduced "Metcalf," and which contained certain advice.

The letter, of course, was a forgery—Jim had executed it in a very short time. But it was good enough for the captain. Brentley laughed good-naturedly, and said that he'd sell his oil shares to anyone for a hundred pounds.

"It's a swindle, I warn you, sir," he added. "They're not worth a cent."

The deal was settled, however. The supposed letter from Symington had allayed any suspicions which Brentley might have had. But why should he suspect such a distinguished officer as Colonel Metcalf? The shares were handed over to Jim, who received them with the laughing remark that he was afraid he had backed a loser.

As Symington had said, Brentley carried the documents in his dispatch-case, and usually had the latter in his dug-out when he was on duty in the trenches. In return for the shares he received a cheque on a famous Paris bank. Brentley would have been surprised if he had known that it was worth nothing whatever. Jim the Penman had not even paid good money for his valuable haul.

And then a curious trick of fate revealed itself.

Before Jim the Penman could leave the trenches a sudden general activity made itself apparent. Captain Brentley dashed off somewhere, without a word, and the forger found himself looking out of the dug-out upon a strange scene.

The harsh rattle of machine-guns sounded on every side, intermixed with the sharp, clear reports of the rifles.

"By James, it's that German attack they were speaking of!" muttered Jim keenly. And he was right.

The enemy had launched a powerful attack against this very sector of British front. Sutcliffe found himself in the very thick of the hottest fighting. The various roars and reports were confusing in the extreme; but Jim was aware of one thing. He felt within him a mad desire to dash out into the fray.

He wanted to take part in the battle! He was anxious to do something—to kill Germans!

All said and done, Sutcliffe was a Britisher. A scoundrel, maybe—a cold-blooded, callous criminal; but he was, first and foremost, a Britisher! And, now that he was in the battle itself, he forgot all else.

He forgot his object in coming to the trenches; he forgot his triumph in securing the valuable shares; he forgot the fact that grave and terrible dangers lurked in every inch of the exposed trenches. He wanted to be in action!

All that was good in Sutcliffe came to the top just then.

He was seized with the spirit of battle, and in a moment he was out in

the trench, awaiting an opportunity to make himself useful. His revolver was in his fist, his finger on the trigger.

The German attack was a strong one. Dense masses of grey came on over "no man's land." The Germans fell in scores under the deadly fire of the machine guns and rifles, and the artillery was doing its share of destruction.

But the grey lines came on relentlessly. These enemy troops at least were displaying dogged courage. By sheer force of numbers they pressed on nearer and nearer to the British trenches.

And then Jim heard the signals given.

The British infantry swarmed over the parapets like ants, many of them falling even before they reached the top. The explosions of hand grenades sounded everywhere, and the din was terrible and ghastly.

Captain Brentley was within sight of Jim. He had dashed forward, leading his men. The enemy were being met fairly and squarely, and already many hand-to-hand conflicts were in progress. The shouts of the Tommies sounded loudly as they dashed into the thick of the fray.

Then, just close to the spot where Jim the Penman was standing, a young lieutenant was hit and mortally wounded. He fell, and the men he was leading wavered and seemed on the point of retreat. It was only momentary, and the men would probably have recovered themselves within a few seconds.

But Jim the Penman did not allow them that amount of time. It was the moment for which he had been awaiting.

He dashed forward, and was over the parapet in a twinkling.

"Come on, men!" he roared in a great voice. "We'll do our share! Let the Germans taste cold steel for once. Get to close quarters!"

Jim had no idea as to how troops should be addressed, but he certainly encouraged the men he had taken it upon himself to lead. They rallied wonderfully, and swarmed towards the advancing enemy with a rousing cheer.

A grenade exploded quite near to Sutcliffe, and he felt a stinging pain in his left arm. Things seemed to whistle and hiss past his ears, but he cared not a jot. He was in his element now. His blood was up, and he was showing what he was made of.

The strong defence was weakening the fierceness of the German attack. The enemy infantry who were at close quarters wavered at several points, and it was certain at least that they would not gain their objective. They had been sent out to capture the British first and second line trenches; but they had no chance.

At several places hot engagements were taking place. Hand-to-hand struggles were occurring here and there. At one particular place a number of Germans succeeded in reaching the British trenches. But they were hurled out again with terrible loss. The survivors of that local attack were only too willing to surrender.

Jim the Penman felt the blood racing wildly through his veins. Again and again his revolver spat fire. His aim was certain, and three burly Prussians fell dead. Then Jim clicked his teeth sharply.

Captain Brentley was near by. Somehow or other Jim had got near to the man he had deliberately swindled. And Brentley was momentarily stunned by a fragment of shell. He stood swaying slightly, dazed.

Two Germans were upon him, their bayonets ready to strike him down. Jim steadied his aim, and then pulled the trigger twice in quick succession. Both Germans rolled over, and the foremost of them staggered violently

against Brentley. Another second, and the captain would have been bayoneted.

He looked round, still partly dazed. And he saw that the man who had saved his life was "Colonel Metcalfe." The captain was astonished to see the colonel out there, in the thick of the fight. And as he was about to speak a shell screamed down and exploded with a terrific report.

Jim instinctively flung himself down flat. And when the shock had spent itself, he rose and saw that Brentley was lying still upon the ground, huddled up in an unnatural attitude. In a few moments Jim was by the fallen officer's side.

Brentley was injured—his leg was shattered, and he was stunned.

And a fresh wave of German troops were coming forward. Brentley's men were scattered and broken—a large proportion were casualties. Their other officers had fallen, and they were leaderless.

And Jim the Penman—the forger, the criminal—stepped into the breach.

Once again he flung himself forward. He yelled and waved, and encouraged the men to make a further tremendous effort. The effect of his leadership was instantaneous. The troops pulled themselves together, sent up a cheer, and went forward to meet the enemy.

And that dash forward turned the scale. There was a deadly battle at close quarters, but the Germans were beaten and demoralised. The enemy has a great and profound dislike of cold steel.

Sutcliffe had snatched up a rifle, and he was using the bayonet with deadly effect. He alone accounted for several Germans, and his example fired his men to extra efforts. The enemy attack wavered, broke, and went to pieces.

And, behind, a couple of officers, who were watching the fighting through binoculars, saw everything. They saw Jim the Penman's original dash; they saw him rally his men again and again, fearless for his own safety; they saw him save Captain Brentley's life and afterwards demolish the German attack. Jim's bravery and devotion to duty were apparent to all. Utterly regardless of his own safety, he had urged his men to do great things, and they had responded nobly.

"Who is that man?" asked one of the officers. "I have never seen him before."

"Neither have I," replied the other. "But he has covered himself with glory. He ought to get the V.C. for his work this morning. I have never before seen such an exhibition of fearless courage and leadership. But for his efforts I firmly believe the enemy would have broken through at this point."

"By Jove! He's hit!" exclaimed the other officer. "What infernal luck!"

Jim the Penman was hit—but not fatally. A bomb had exploded near by, and a fragment of shell gashed his forehead and partially stunned him. But the forger managed to stagger to his feet. And then, dazed and injured though he was, he walked back and picked up the mutilated form of Captain Brentley.

Jim came staggering in, his face streaming with blood. His work was done; the Germans were on the run everywhere. Their powerful attack had utterly failed at every point. And Douglas James Sutcliffe had contributed largely to that defeat. And to crown his gallant conduct he was bringing in an injured man under heavy fire while he was suffering keenly from wounds himself.

Two hours later Jim was in a field hospital, behind the lines.

His injury was not serious, although he was dazed and weak. The

forger's constitution, however, was of iron. And by the next morning he had recovered—recovered, that is, sufficiently to walk about with a heavy bandage round his head.

He was anxious to get away. He knew that he had acted with bravery, and he knew that he had attracted attention. So, before any awkward complications arose, he wished to get away to England.

But fate was against him.

For as he left the hospital and emerged into the open air, he came face to face with—Nelson Lee and Nipper!

CHAPTER VII.

Daring to the Last—The Duel in the Air—Lee's Decision.

JIM THE PENMAN stood stock still.

He was not often taken by surprise, but he was ready to admit that he was surprised now. Nelson Lee was about the last man Jim had expected to meet out at the Front.

The detective had tracked his quarry to the trenches. Lee and Nipper had only arrived early that morning, and they had been directed to the hospital. And almost the first man they had met was Sutcliffe himself.

The forger's disguise was good, but Lee was well supplied with information. "Colonel Metcalfe's" description had been given to him, and he knew at once that he was facing his man.

Lee had heard nothing of Sutcliffe's gallantry during the action of yesterday, however. And the detective was somewhat surprised to see the bandage round his head. Lee supposed that the forger had been struck by a fragment of shell.

"Mr. Sutcliffe, I believe?" said Nelson Lee quietly.

Jim the Penman did not reply. His brain was whirling; for once his coolness seemed to desert him. Quite close by a fast scouting aeroplane had just descended; and it was now standing within a hundred yards, its propeller lazily turning. The pilot had jumped out, and was walking towards a group of hangars.

Sutcliffe's eyes gleamed.

"Precisely, Mr. Nelson Lee," he exclaimed. "But please allow me——"

He broke off abruptly, and threw himself forward. The movement was so sudden and unexpected that Lee was not prepared. Jim's fist crashed upon the detective's jaw, and Lee went down like a ninepin.

Then, like a hare, Sutcliffe ran for it. He had acted on the spur of the moment; he had acted with the rashness of desperation. Capture was imminent, and capture was not to be thought of for a moment.

Jim had been telling himself that he would get away safely. He had gained his object—the oil shares were in his possession—and there was nothing left for him to do but make his way to England and then disappear.

But then, even as Jim was leaving the hospital, he came face to face with Nelson Lee—the man who had wrecked almost every scheme he formulated. It was the irony of fate. Jim had no time to be furious; he only had time to decide upon a reckless, daring move.

As Lee fell Nipper was struck by his master's falling body. The pair sprawled upon the ground. And when they scrambled to their feet—Lee white with anger—they saw Sutcliffe racing like a madman towards the stationary aeroplane.

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"Nelson Lee Library," 13/1/17.

"He's going to pinch that machine, sir!" roared Nipper excitedly.

"By James! The man has an amazing nerve!" rapped out Lee. "After him, young 'un!"

But luck favoured Jim the Penman now. He reached the aeroplane, scrambled into the pilot's seat, and opened the throttle wide. The engine gave a terrific splutter and then roared with defiance—so it seemed to Lee. The machine moved forward, gathering speed quickly.

Men in khaki were running from the hangars, and many shouts went up. Nelson Lee clenched his teeth with vexation as he saw the aeroplane give a kind of jump, and then rise swiftly into the air. Jim the Penman had flown an aeroplane before; but it was more by luck than anything else that he managed to get this machine off the ground so neatly.

"Quick, Nipper!" shouted Lee. "We must follow!"

There were several other machines standing near by, and Nelson Lee rushed towards them at express speed. In a few hurried sentences he explained the situation to an amazed officer, and less than a minute later the detective and Nipper were seated in a second machine. Both this and the one taken by Sutcliffe were armed with Lewis machine guns.

Nelson Lee was a skilful pilot—he had flown on many an occasion. And he handled this aeroplane with a master hand. Jim was now soaring aloft, but he must have been aware that the chase had already been taken up.

"What are you going to do, gov'nor?" roared Nipper from the observer's seat.

"Follow Jim!" shouted back Lee. "If we lose him now he will give us the slip altogether."

Higher and higher soared the two aeroplanes, but Sutcliffe did not seem inclined to make off. He was rising in wide circles. Suddenly, however, Lee and Nipper were surprised to see him swoop down—down towards his pursuers. For a moment Lee thought that Sutcliffe had lost control of his machine.

But the other 'plane steadied itself and flew along smoothly. Nipper gazed down once or twice, and was fascinated by what he saw. Right away stretched the grim battle area. Roads were thronged with motor transports, gun-limbers, supply columns, and regiments on the march. A little group of white-roofed huts marked the field hospital which Jim the Penman had just left.

But the most easily distinguished landmarks were the trenches—winding, turning lines of grey and white, serried across the surface of the earth. Little puffs of smoke indicated the places where shells were exploding.

Nipper's attention was attracted upwards again, however. Jim the Penman had turned his machine, and was rushing towards his enemy. He drew almost level, and then the machine gun at the nose of his aeroplane spat red.

"He's firing, sir!" yelled Nipper.

Several bullets flashed past the wings, one ripping the fabric; but no harm was done. Jim was past now, and Nipper, twisting round, saw that the forger was wheeling. He was not attempting to escape—he was bent on destroying his pursuers!

"Give him the same, Nipper!" roared Nelson Lee. "If he is out for a fight I won't disappoint him! We must defend ourselves, anyhow!"

Nipper bent over the Lewis gun, and in a few minutes he was all ready for the fray. Lee swung the aeroplane round in a sharp, banked curve, bringing the hostile craft ahead—for, in very truth, this was to be a duel in the air.

Again the two machines passed one another—Lee and Nipper slightly

higher than Jim the Penman. Nipper turned the machine gun upon the other aeroplane, but his shots had no effect. Jim fired too, but his shots were equally ineffectual.

Once more the two 'planes wheeled, rising higher all the while—each machine trying to gain the upper hand. Lee's 'plane climbed gradually, until at last he was above the enemy. And then the moment arrived when the detective's machine almost hovered over the other.

Zipp—zipp—zipp!

The machine gun spat fire and bullets. Nipper worked quickly, and his aim was excellent. A shout came from the lad as the enemy staggered. But he recovered himself, and then began to climb again.

"That got him, gov'nor!" bellowed Nipper.

Nelson Lee opened out fully, and the fast aeroplane rushed forward. Nipper manipulating the Lewis gun in the prow. Everything seemed like a mad dream. Danger was forgotten in that wild rush through the air. The wind whistled, and the engine roared a terrific song.

Jim the Penman was ahead now—just ahead, and slightly lower. Lee dipped the nose of his machine, and swooped down. And the machine gun again spurted forth its deadly breath.

The lower aeroplane staggered once more—staggered drunkenly, and then the propeller perceptibly slowed down. The machine lurched, side slipped, and nose-dived giddily for a couple of hundred feet.

"He's done!" shouted Nelson Lee.

But Jim, although winged—Nipper's fire had damaged the engine—managed to remain control of his machine. And after that first dreadful dive he commenced a long, steady volplane to the ground.

Sutcliffe was beaten!

But Nelson Lee reached the ground first, and when Jim alighted he was captured neatly and without any trouble. The forger was subdued and quiet as he scrambled out of the damaged aeroplane.

"You've had your bit of excitement, Jim, so I should advise you to submit quietly," said Nelson Lee curtly. "To begin with, hand over those oil shares you obtained from Captain Brentley."

To Lee's surprise Sutcliffe did so at once.

"You've beaten me, Lee," said the forger wearily. "I ought to be furious, but I don't feel up to it. My head is bleeding again—the excitement was too much for me. I will do exactly as you order——"

At that moment a fast motor-car came up. Both the aeroplanes had alighted on a bare meadow, several miles from the hospital—miles towards the rear. And a main road ran near by. The motor-car stopped, and two officers jumped out.

"Hallo, what's this?" exclaimed one of the officers. "I thought there was an accident. "Why, it is Colonel Metcalfe!" he added cordially. "This is the first opportunity I have had of meeting you, colonel. I con-

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gratulate you on your performance of yesterday. You deserve the V.C., sir!"

"Why, what has the colonel done?" asked Nelson Lee curiously.

The officers in the car evidently had not seen the duel in the air, and they knew nothing of "Metcalfe's" real identity. Lee did not think it necessary to tell them the facts at the moment.

But they, for their part, told all the facts—how Jim had acted with conspicuous bravery; how he had rallied the troops at a vital moment, and how he had saved a situation which might well have been disastrous. It was a glowing tale of bravery and courage, and Nelson Lee listened quietly.

"I think the colonel is rather fagged," said the detective, with a queer tone in his voice which both Jim and Nipper noted at once. "Ah! There is a little ruined cottage over there. Perhaps you will lean on my arm, colonel?"

Jim the Penman said nothing; but his eyes were gleaming. He half suspected Lee's intentions. The two officers went back to their car, rather curious to know the reason for the two aeroplanes being there. But, knowing nothing of the "colonel's" real identity, they were not suspicious. And Lee at that moment did not want to disclose the truth. The great detective was greatly struck by the tale of Jim's bravery and devotion to duty—duty which had been entirely self-imposed. And the forger had acted like a sportsman; he had fought his enemy in the air, had lost, and had admitted defeat quietly and without fuss.

The cottage was reached, and all three entered. Then Nelson Lee looked straight into Sutcliffe's eyes.

"Your head is troubling you, I believe, Sutcliffe," he said evenly. "Nipper and I will fetch some water for you to bathe the reopened wound. We shall not be long."

"By James! You're a sportsman, Lee!" muttered Jim the Penman fervently.

Nelson Lee and Nipper left the cottage without another word. And when they returned the bird had flown; there was no sign of Douglas James Sutcliffe. Lee looked at Nipper with a twinkle in his keen grey eyes.

"H'm! Jim seems to have given us the slip, young 'un," said the detective drily. "I hardly credited him with such courage and heroism. He's proved himself to be a true Britisher, at all events. And we have succeeded in our object—for Captain Brentley's precious shares are safe in my pocket."

"And, after all, gov'nor," said Nipper, "you didn't have a warrant for Jim's arrest, did you?"

Sutcliffe managed to get clear away—how and by what means Nelson Lee never discovered.

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You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with **CLIVE LOWTHER**, an old chum, **Dr. Campbell**, 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. 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 coated with gold—one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named **OLTRA**, and an Irishman—one **PETE STORBIN**, who warn the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—**PEDRO DIEGO**, and his gang. . . . By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition. And that same day a fight takes place, but the treasure hunters are victorious.

While searching among the caverns for a boat which had, unavoidably, been abandoned by the chums, **Dr. Campbell** and his party are attacked by a gigantic octopus.

A Desperate Fight.

THE terrible creature was quite close to the boat, and was partly above the surface of the water. Two of its uninjured arms were out of sight. As a matter of fact, they were—as the doctor afterwards discovered—striving to obtain a hold on the bottom of the lake; but providentially, although the bottom was rocky, there was so much sand and mud lying on it as to prevent the suckers from getting a good grip. Hence they kept slipping, and as they slipped the boat pulled the squid out into deeper water.

But as the doctor realised this he also saw that there was a new danger threatening them. The depth of water increasing so gradually gave the squid more chance of getting a good hold somewhere as it moved along, and if this should happen before the depth was too great for its reach, then it was quite possible it might be able to drag her clean under water by a direct vertical pull.

Therefore it was important that they should do all they could to disable their enemy further before that chance came. It would not do to sit still and rest from their exertions and trust to their foe becoming exhausted or tired of the struggle. And if this meant running some risk by exposing themselves, it must be faced in order to avert a worse disaster.

Meantime, Alec and Clive had been peering at the monster through the observation slits, and the result had been almost to unnerve them.

(Continued overleaf.)

The great mass looked so horrible, so repulsive, its great saucer-like eyes were fixed on the boat—seemed to them to be fixed on them in particular, in fact—with that dreadful, unwinking stare, so fiendish and devilish in its deadly, venomous hatred and rage—that they felt as though some mesmeric influence were numbing their senses.

And now, added to all the rest, they became aware of a sickly smell, a horrible effluvium, so nauseating, so disgusting, that they recoiled in dismay.

The doctor's voice fell upon their ears again, and its sharp, staccato tones awoke them to a sense of the necessity for a great effort to throw off these feelings.

"Come, come, lads," cried the leader—and now his tones were no longer low and subdued, but loud and ringing and rousing. "Stir yourselves, if you don't want to make a meal for yonder beauty. Read, wake your men up! I want them to empty more cartridges into the thing before it has time to recover itself."

"Ay, ay, sir!" Read sang out, and he followed up the words by some expletives addressed to his companions in a lower tone. For his men, like Clive and Alec, had been under the spell cast by the almost supernatural hideousness of their frightful enemy, and by the effects of the loathsome odour it emitted.

The doctor set them all an example by boldly jumping on to a thwart and leaning over, firing at what he thought the most vulnerable points—places he had been unable to aim at through the orifices.

But he very nearly paid for his pluck and temerity with his life. Like a flash a long, whip-like tentacle swept up, and, twisting round his body, bound his arms, rifle and all, to it, rendering him helpless even to hold on.

Another moment and he would have been dragged overboard, but Grove below gripped him round the legs, while Clive and Alec, leaping on the thwarts on either side of him, slashed away with their axes to such good purpose that he was freed, and sank back into Ben's arms for the moment almost unconscious.

But Clive and Alec were not to be allowed to brave the creature's wrath without reprisal. Another arm swept up, and though they dodged back in time to escape its first dart, it followed them down into the boat, twisting and turning this way and that, seeking and searching for them, first in one direction, then in another. Not only that, but another arm followed, and the second one laid hold of Grove.

Brave, full of fight though the man was, a veteran in experience of the sea and its inhabitants, he could not repress a cry of horror as the awful slimy, shining thing closed round him. The suckers took hold on him, the hooks pierced in places even through his clothes.

A desperate fight followed. The other sailors rushed to aid with their cutlasses, and slashed and hacked their utmost. Clive and Alec swung their axes aloft, and brought them down again and again. Ben Grove was freed, and one of the two tentacles had been cut fairly in two, when the remaining one caught Clive and began to haul him up out of the boat.

Then the struggle began afresh. Headed by Alec with his axe, the sailors attacked the thick, tough, strong arm with the fierceness of wild despair, for it was pulling the boat over as well as dragging its prey out of it.

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