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THE MONK OF MONTRESSOR;

A TALE OF NELSON LEE & NIPPER V. JIM THE PENMAN,
BY THE AUTHOR OF "TRACKED TO THE TRENCHES," ETC.

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THE MONK OF MONTRESSOR

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

By the Author of "*The Affair of the Nabob's Jewels*," "*Tracked to the Trenches*," etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Singular Narrative of Mr. Robert Crosby.

MR. NELSON LEE, the celebrated criminologist, entered his consulting-room and looked round with a sigh of satisfaction.

The apartment was certainly cosy. Outside the afternoon was raw and chill, and a keen east wind was blowing gustily. Here, however, there was a very different picture.

The consulting-room was delightfully warm, and a cheerful fire blazed merrily in the grate. A comfortable, untidy litter of papers scattered the desk, and the rest of the room was in a similar state of wonderful disorder. It was this untidiness, indeed, which gave the apartment such a homely, cosy appearance.

"Jove! I'm glad to get in!" murmured Nelson Lee, rubbing his chilled hands. "I wonder what has become of Nipper? The young rascal ought to be sorting out those papers I gave him; he can't have got through the whole formidable pile."

The great detective had been out for several hours, and the work he had been engaged upon had kept him busy the whole time, without a single break. And as it had been a thankless, fruitless task, Lee was glad to get back to Gray's Inn Road. He had feared, at the outset, that his time would be wasted, and so he was not vastly upset.

Lighting a cigar, he moved across the room with the intention of throwing himself into the huge easy chair which was placed before the fire. And then, as he stood over the chair—the back of which had been towards him—he suddenly chuckled.

"And this is the way Nipper works!" he murmured. "Bless my soul!"

For Nipper, Lee's youthful assistant, was sprawled full length in the big chair, fast asleep! There was a look of complete contentment upon Nipper's face, and even while Nelson Lee watched, the lad smiled in his slumbers.

"A splendid way in which to spend the afternoon," Lee told himself. "But it won't do. While I trudge the streets, chilled to the marrow, this lazy young rascal snoozes before the fire!"

Nelson Lee was about to shake the lad, when he again chuckled. His eye had caught a soda-water syphon which rested upon a side table. Catching hold of it, Lee levelled the nozzle.

S-i-z-z-z-z-z.

Just one spurt—not more. But it was quite sufficient. The soda-water smothered Nipper's face beautifully, and the trickles ran down his nose and over his waistcoat. Lee did not believe in practical jokes as a rule; but now he decided that Nipper thoroughly deserved a lesson. Sleeping while upon duty was a serious offence.

Nipper jerked himself out of the chair with a gasp.

"Whoa!" What the—— Great Scott, I'm drenched!" yelled the lad. "The water-main's busted—— Why, what the thunder——"

Nipper caught sight of his master through the wetness, and saw the syphon in Lee's hands. And Nipper's expression became very wrathful.

"Well, that's a dirty trick, guv'nor!" he gasped.

"Not at all—merely a trifle damp," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "I assure you, Nipper, the soda-water was quite clean.

Nipper glared.

"I'm soaked to the skin!" he exclaimed. "Fine old game, isn't it? Coming in here and firing off that rotten thing at me. Half emptied it, too! Just as I was dreaming," Nipper added warmly. "A fine dream it was; I was in an Indian temple, or a Chinese opium-den, or something like that, and an old Johnny in a long gown was chucking quids into my lap—quids, in these hard times, when we don't see one in a blue moon! Then you come along and wake me up——"

"High time, too, I should imagine," interrupted Lee, gently but firmly pushing Nipper aside, and occupying the easy chair himself. "You have no right to dream of quids, as you call them—or to dream at all, come to that. I left you at work. Have you finished those papers?"

Nipper snorted.

"Finished 'em!" he echoed. "What do you take me for, guv'nor?"

"A lazy young sweep," replied Lee promptly.

"Well, those papers were enough to make a saint lazy," declared Nipper. "You gave me enough to fill my time for a month, and I got fed up. Fed up to the neck, guv'nor. I only sat in that chair for a minute or two——"

There was a tap at the door.

And in response to Lee's "come in," the comfortable figure of Mrs. Jones appeared. Mrs. Jones was the landlady, and she carried a white card in her hand.

"A gent to see you, sir," she said apologetically.

Mrs. Jones knew that Nelson Lee had only just come in, after a hard morning's work, and she scarcely liked announcing that a visitor was waiting. Lee, with a sigh of resignation, took the card.

"Mr. Robert Crosby," he read. "H'm, I seem to recollect the name, somehow. What type of gentleman is Mr. Crosby, Mrs. Jones?"

"A fine, elderly, staid old gent, sir," replied the landlady.

"Very well. Show Mr. Crosby up," said Lee. "I'm tired, but there is no rest for the wicked, I understand."

Mrs. Jones backed out of the consulting-room, and in a few moments returned to usher the visitor in. Nipper, by this time, had transferred some of the soda-water to his ruffled hair, and had managed to make it lie down flat. Whether soda-water was good for the hair was a matter which did not concern Nipper in the least. He had to make himself tidy somehow.

Mr. Robert Crosby proved to be a tall, erect man of about fifty, with slightly grey hair at the temples. He had a splendid figure, and it was obvious that he had, at one time, been a perfect example of manhood. But the years had told, and his face was lined and wrinkled. He wore glasses, and was clean-shaven except for slight side-whiskers.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed warmly, shaking the detective's

hand. "You don't know me, do you? Yet I fancy you have heard my name? Ah, this is Master Nipper, I suppose. Good afternoon, young man."

Mr. Robert Crosby seated himself, and accepted a cigar from Lee.

"I remember your name, certainly, Mr. Crosby," remarked the detective. "But you must forgive me for failing to recollect where and when I met you last. I have a good memory for faces, I believe, but I cannot quite——"

The visitor smiled.

"You have never met me before, Mr. Lee," he interrupted. "I am the confidential secretary of Sir Henry Montessor, of Montessor Castle, Yorkshire. You once paid Sir Henry a visit, you may remember, several years ago."

Nelson Lee nodded at once.

"Of course—of course," he exclaimed. "That is it, Mr. Crosby. And you, if I remember aright, were in Scotland, on a brief holiday?"

"Exactly. Sir Henry afterwards told me of your visit, and I always regretted that I had missed the opportunity of meeting such a distinguished gentleman as yourself. I am more than glad to do so now."

Lee had no difficulty in placing the visitor now. He well remembered that visit to Montessor Castle, some years before. It had been a delightful holiday. The castle was practically a relic of the old feudal days, and stood upon a bare stretch of moorland in one of the wildest corners of Yorkshire. A bleak spot, but a delightful one in early autumn.

Nelson Lee brought to mind many glorious days spent upon the moors. Sir Henry Montessor was elderly, and somewhat eccentric, Lee remembered. But the baronet was open-hearted and generous to a degree. The moorland folk for miles around had excellent cause to bless his name, and he was well liked and esteemed by all.

That Sir Henry's generous character had not changed was obvious from the fact that his name had many times appeared in subscription lists for various war and Red Cross funds. And his donations were always magnificent.

He was a widower, Nelson Lee recollected. Sir Henry had been a widower for nearly ten years, and ever since then he had been something of a recluse. All the same, visitors at the castle were fairly frequent, and Sir Henry was always open-handed and cordial.

Unless things were changed since Lee's visit, Sir Henry Montessor lived quite alone in the castle except for Mr. Crosby, his confidential secretary and companion. Many servants were kept, and the old place was always excellently preserved and in splendid trim.

"I understand, then, smiled Nelson Lee, "that this visit is merely an informal one, Mr. Crosby? I am delighted to meet you——"

"I regret to say that I wish to consult you in a professional capacity," put in the visitor, a worried look appearing upon his lined face. "Perhaps you will laugh at me, Mr. Lee, and will send me off comforted. But I have come to you because I have an uneasy fear that all is not right at Montessor."

"Let me hear your story, Mr. Crosby," said Lee quietly.

"It is a strange one, in some ways, and yet in others it is singularly common-place," replied Mr. Crosby. "It all depends how you look at the thing, Mr. Lee. Remembering Sir Henry's love for his gold, it is little short of extraordinary."

"Perhaps you will tell me everything from the beginning?"

"Yes, of course. I was afraid I should commence at the wrong end," said the other, smiling slightly. "Well, Mr. Lee, nearly a week ago the first incident took place. Just at dusk Sir Henry started off on his usual evening walk. My employer is hale and hearty, you know, and almost always went

for a two-mile walk just before dinner. In winter time, of course, he made the hour earlier, for he dislikes the darkness when walking. Well, Sir Henry failed to return by dinner-time, and I became somewhat anxious."

"Was he often late?"

"Never—never before, Mr. Lee. Sir Henry's habits are surprisingly regular and characteristic. I might say throughout the whole year—excepting, of course, the time when visitors are at the castle—Sir Henry and I dine together, and afterwards play chess for an hour or so. Well, as I said, he failed to return on that particular evening, and I wondered what could have delayed him. I questioned several servants, but none could give me information. And when the hour of ten struck I became really concerned."

"That was natural," said Lee gravely. "And after that?"

"I set out with a party of servants—four men and a youth—and we scoured the moors, fearing that Sir Henry had met with an accident," continued Mr. Crosby. "The moor is very lonely, as, of, course, you know. The village is three miles away, and there are no houses round Montessor for miles. The road, too, is little used, for it is not a big highway—merely a moor road connecting one or two scattered villages and hamlets."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, I well remember all that, Mr. Crosby," he replied.

"Our search was without result, and we returned to the castle greatly worried. To be brief, Mr. Lee, the night passed, and still there was no change. Needless to say, I did not sleep, and the next morning I set off to make inquiries in the village.

"I did not even hint that Sir Henry was missing; for I knew what consternation would be caused," continued the visitor. "As you will probably guess, my efforts were of no avail. And the anxiety and concern among the servants was astonishing. All, from the butler to the scullery-maid, were gravely troubled. I warned them, however, to keep their tongues still, for I did not want an alarm to be given needlessly. Tales spread rapidly, even on the moors, and no good purpose would have been served by circulating alarming rumours."

"You were wise, Mr. Crosby," commented Lee.

"I am sure of that," replied the other. "The wisdom of the procedure, indeed, was apparent the next morning, for I received a letter which had been posted here in London. The letter was from Sir Henry himself."

"Ah! You surprise me somewhat," Lee exclaimed. "I had begun to fear that Sir Henry was still missing."

"Oh, no. The affair is not so serious as that," replied Mr. Crosby, with a smile. "I hope I have not been too doleful in the telling of my story. And, as I said, perhaps you will laugh at my singular fears. However, I must tell you what followed—and, particularly, the instructions which were contained in Sir Henry's letter."

"From where was it sent?"

"London—just London," was the reply. "Sir Henry gave no address whatever—and that surprised me considerably. The mystery of my employer's disappearance, however, was cleared up. It seems that while out for his walk he encountered a big motor-car, which was on its way to the castle. The motor-car was driven by a great friend of Sir Henry's."

"Can you give me the name?"

"No; Sir Henry did not state it," replied Mr. Crosby. "He merely said that he had met the car and that his friend persuaded him to enter it and accompany him to London. That, in itself, was astonishing, for Sir Henry hates London. However, from the general tone of his letter I could see that

something of an extremely unusual nature had occurred. And, to be quite frank, Mr. Lee, I felt just a little hurt."

"Why? For what reason?"

"Because Sir Henry has not taken me into his full confidence," was the other's answer. "He has left me quite in the dark—although, to be fair, I must add that he has promised to acquaint me with the full facts in the near future. I can only assume that my employer has suffered some terrible financial downfall—the friend who took him to London, evidently, acquainted him with the alarming news."

"Why do you think Sir Henry has suffered financially?"

"Because of the instructions contained in his letter. It seems that he has arranged for the sale of his wonderful collection of gold ornaments and plate," said the visitor, in pained tones. "Sir Henry has concluded a deal with Mr. Samuel J. Hearn, of Chicago—an American millionaire of some repute, I believe. Mr. Hearn has purchased—or will purchase—the entire priceless collection."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"That is indeed surprising," he admitted. "You have interested me now, Mr. Crosby. The financial pressure must be exceedingly acute for Sir Henry to dispose of his unexampled collection of gold."

"Indeed, indeed, it must."

Nelson Lee had a very vivid recollection of the extraordinary amount of gold which Montessor Castle contained. Nipper, who had not been there, had often heard his master refer to it, and he, too, was greatly interested in Mr. Crosby's story.

Sir Henry was far from being a miser; on the contrary, he spent thousands and thousands a year on charity, pure and simple. Not even his worst enemy—if he had one at all, which was doubtful—would have described Sir Henry Montessor as a mean man.

But the baronet had one peculiar mania.

This was for collecting gold articles—articles of any description so long as they were made of pure gold. The Montessor Gold was renowned. Lee remembered that almost every ornament and tray in the castle was composed of heavy, solid gold. Sir Henry's mania even went to the length of having the candelabra in the great dining-room made of the precious metal. For years past the baronet had made a habit of purchasing any and every gold ornament and trinket which came to his notice.

Not one article, however, was trashy. Sir Henry detested trash as much as he loved the genuine article. The older the gold, the better he liked it. And there were many articles in Montessor Castle which dated back for hundreds of years. Some, indeed, were almost priceless. The whole collection, just for the metal alone, must have been worth two or three hundred thousand pounds sterling.

And Sir Henry had decided to sell it!

"I was utterly astounded, Mr. Lee," declared the visitor. "The Montessor Gold is the collection of a lifetime—I may say, the darling of Sir Henry's heart. His old gold is dearest in the world to him. Often enough he told me that he would die sooner than part with a single article."

"You had excellent reason to be astounded, Mr. Crosby."

"And I am uneasy, too. Somehow, Mr. Lee, I am dreadfully uneasy," said the other with great gravity. "I cannot bring myself to believe that Sir Henry has taken such an amazing step. Yet the instructions in his letter were precise and incapable of misconstruction. I, of course, am but a paid servant after all, and I have carried out Sir Henry's commands."

"What were those commands, exactly?"

"The letter is here—you can read it if you choose," replied Mr. Crosby. "I feel that I am betraying my employer by relating all this private business to you, Mr. Lee, but I am comforted by the positive knowledge that you will treat the matter as being very strictly confidential."

"You may place your trust in me, Mr. Crosby," said Lee quietly.

"I do—heartily. Well, my instructions, in brief, were to pack the gold articles in stout wooden cases in readiness for immediate departure. Mr. Samuel J. Hearn, of Chicago, has purchased the collection, and will be ready to receive it almost immediately. Further instructions, Sir Henry added, would follow."

Mr. Crosby handed to Lee the letter he had received—the letter which had caused such consternation. Nelson Lee well remembered Sir Henry Montessor's extremely characteristic handwriting, and he read the epistle with interest.

The contents were exactly as the secretary had stated. Underlying the instructions Lee thought he could detect a trace of pain and regret; indicating the wrench it had been for the baronet to pen such an order.

"The further instructions have not yet arrived, I presume?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, they came yesterday morning," was the answer. "I have, of course, obeyed Sir Henry's injunctions, and the gold is already packed in stout cases, and ready for immediate removal. Good gracious me! The castle seems bare and drab with all its superb ornaments removed."

Mr. Crosby looked inexpressibly sad.

"I feel it very greatly," he went on. "Very greatly, Mr. Lee. Sir Henry's financial position must be extremely acute—and that fact, too, worries me. The second letter from my employer states that Mr. Samuel J. Hearn will arrive at the castle on Thursday afternoon of this week. That is, the day after to-morrow, since to-day is Tuesday. Mr. Hearn will be armed with all the necessary documents, and I am to hand the gold over into his keeping."

"A responsible undertaking, Mr. Crosby."

"I feel that the responsibility is too great," said the other. "It is for that reason that I have approached you, Mr. Lee. You are a friend of Sir Henry's—at least you know him well. And I am anxious for you to take the burden from my shoulders. Mr. Hearn will, it seems, prove his ownership of the gold, but I am uneasy. There is no other word, Mr. Lee. I am strangely uneasy."

Nelson Lee was thoughtful.

"The second letter was also unaddressed?" he asked.

"Yes—it is here," replied Mr. Crosby. "Please read it, Mr. Lee. Sir Henry hints that there is a very strong reason for his seemingly strange conduct. He has a private reason—an excellent reason—for remaining in London, at an unknown address. He tells me that I shall understand fully later; that I shall appreciate his actions. Nevertheless, I am worried very deeply."

Nelson Lee read the second letter through.

"Yes, it is remarkable that Sir Henry should remain in town during the transaction," commented the detective. "One would think that he would prefer to be at Montessor at such a time. And yet, upon due consideration, is there not one obvious explanation of Sir Henry's conduct?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Lee?"

"Well, Sir Henry loves his gold as though it were flesh and blood," said Lee. "He feels that if he has to part with it, it is better to do so from afar, as it were. He wants the gold to go from Montessor while he is absent. He will not feel the wrench so much, then."

"That is certainly a likely explanation," said Mr. Crosby. "I had not thought of it, Mr. Lee.: Perhaps I have been worrying myself needlessly. I fully believe that Sir Henry will return to the castle on Friday—the day following the removal of the collection. He will then explain the full facts to me."

"But what did you want me to do?" asked the detective.

The visitor smiled slightly.

"I had hoped that you would lift the load of responsibility from my shoulders," he replied. "That may sound rather weak, but I freely admit that my anxiety has been so great that I do not care for the task which has been allotted to me. I feel that I am utterly alone. It has given me great relief to confide in you, and to listen to your advice."

"I am afraid my advice has not been very extensive," smiled Nelson Lee. "I take it, then, that you want me to journey to Montessor with you, and be on the spot when Mr. Hearn arrives?"

"Exactly—exactly."

"To see that everything is straight and above-board?"

"That is my suggestion, Mr. Lee."

"Well, I am interested, Mr. Crosby—greatly interested," said Nelson Lee, rising to his feet. "A trip to Yorkshire, too, would be rather welcome. I have been hard at work for weeks, and a change would do me good, I believe. What do you say to the idea, Nipper?"

"Oh, topping, guv'nor," exclaimed Nipper. "We'll go, of course!"

"After that there is nothing more to be said," laughed Lee. "When do you think of returning, Mr. Crosby?"

The visitor hesitated.

"I was thinking of taking the night mail," he replied. "That would get us to Montessor in time for breakfast. But if you object——"

"Not at all. The night mail will suit me admirably," Lee interjected. "We shall then have a clear day upon the moors before Mr. Hearn arrives. The pure moorland air will blow the cobwebs from our brains, and make them clear once more. It is possible, even, that I may remain at Montessor until Sir Henry's return."

Mr. Robert Crosby's eyes sparkled.

"That would be splendid," he exclaimed. "Let me thank you most heartily, Mr. Lee, for your patience in listening to me, and for your kindness in consenting to accompany me back to Yorkshire. I only hope that my fears are groundless."

Nelson Lee was to find, however, that his visit to Montessor Castle was to be fraught with perils and dangers of which he had not the faintest inkling.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee Investigates—And Comes to a Startling Conclusion.

THE village of Stoke Bevan was a sleepy little place lying in a hollow on the edge of the moor. It boasted a railway station, and was the nearest village to Montessor Castle.

Nelson Lee and Nipper and Mr. Crosby arrived at Stoke Bevan by the early morning train, having travelled throughout the night from London. During the journey all three had slept soundly, and were now comparatively fresh. At least, Lee and Nipper were.

Sleeping in a railway carriage was not very restful for Mr. Crosby; but the famous detective and his assistant had trained themselves to sleep

peacefully almost anywhere, under any circumstances. And they commenced the three-mile walk to the castle feeling thoroughly refreshed.

"I should have told you," remarked Mr. Crosby, as they walked. "Under ordinary circumstances I would have ordered the trap or the brougham to fetch us from the station, but that is impracticable at present."

"I prefer the walk, I assure you," said Lee. "Jove! This air is delightful, my dear sir. It will be still better once we get out upon the moor. I will be quite frank, Mr. Crosby, and admit that I have come mainly for the change."

Mr. Crosby smiled.

"Then I am glad you needed a change" he observed drily. "Otherwise, perhaps, you would have sent me away from your rooms alone. But I was talking about walking to Montessor. I should have ordered the brougham, only an accident occurred on the Montessor road some days ago."

"Do accidents occur down in this sleepy place, then?" asked Nipper.

"Well, to be frank, I believe this is the only accident within several years," said the other. "It was rather a serious affair, in its way, although, fortunately, nobody was injured. About a mile from here, right upon the moor, the road suddenly takes a steep dip, and there are high embankments on either side. At the bottom of the dip there is a sharp turn."

"Sounds a ripping spot for an accident, sir," remarked Nipper.

"The place is rather treacherous, and I wonder there have been no other mishaps," said Mr. Crosby. "At the bottom of the dip, moreover, the road is so narrow that only one vehicle can traverse it at a time. Some days ago a heavy traction-engine got out of control, and plunged down the steep gully. Finding it impossible to turn the bend, the driver leapt from the engine—and so saved his life. For the heavy engine overturned, and completely blocked the road."

"So that no other traffic could pass?" asked Lee.

"Not even a handcart," was the reply. "You see, the steep embankments on either side added to the trouble. The engine filled the whole space, and a traction-engine is not easily removed, once it overturns. In London, of course, such an obstruction would have been removed within twenty-four hours; but we are somewhat leisurely up here."

"And the road's been closed for days?" asked Nipper, in surprise. "How did the traffic get round, sir?"

"Well, there is very little traffic on this quiet moorland road, Nipper. No car or trap could come to the castle, of course, and vehicles bound for other villages were forced to make a wide detour. We have suffered a little inconvenience, but nothing to speak of. By this evening, I believe, the remains of the engine will have been cleared away."

Rising gently out of the village, the road soon became level, and right away into the hazy distance stretched the rugged, undulating moors. They seemed to have a bare, forbidding aspect in the grey morning light; but the breeze which blew into the faces of the pedestrians was fresh and invigorating.

Lee could see for himself that the road was little used, for here and there patches of grass were visible, and the surface was rough and ill-kept. About a mile further on Mr. Crosby pointed ahead.

"There is the dip," he said.

It was reached in a few minutes, and the sounds of picks and other implements told the trio that the workmen were busy on the overturned traction-engine. Up till now the road had been level with the moor, but here it dipped sharply, as Mr. Crosby had said.

A horse-and-trap or a motor-car could not have made a detour by travers-

ing the moor itself, for the surface of the latter, just here, was too jagged and rough for any wheeled vehicle to pass over. Nothing short of a "tank," in fact, could have negotiated the obstacles.

At the foot of the steep little descent seven or eight labourers were at work, with a pair of engineers. As Mr. Crosby had hinted, the remains of the engine would probably be cleared by the evening.

Once past the spot the road led downwards for a while, curving, the moor being invisible owing to the banks on either side. But very shortly a rise was topped, and then Mr. Crosby raised his umbrella.

"Montressor Castle," he said.

The old pile was now not much over a mile ahead, and distinctly visible. The only human dwelling-place within sight, the castle seemed far more imposing than it actually was. Yet there was no denying that Montressor was a stately, magnificent building. Nipper could not help remarking that if they were all dressed in the clothes of the Middle Ages, they would believe themselves to be living in a by-gone age. The only modern addition which would spoil the illusion was the long line of telegraph posts along the road.

Montressor had the appearance of an old feudal castle; but this effect was only to be gained at a distance. Actually, the baronet's dwelling was modernised in every way, and was a superb country mansion, replete with every luxury and convenience. The whole castle, in fact, was illuminated by electric-light; the plant being installed in a separate little building in the back regions.

Near the castle a bare plantation lay in a hollow, the trees now naked and cold-looking. And away beyond that stretched a perfectly flat surface of moorland, with a kind of rugged lump rising from the centre.

"There seems to be a ruin there," remarked Nipper, nodding.

"Oh, yes. That is the old monastery," replied Mr. Crosby. "An aged ruin, indeed. History had no record of the Montressor Monastery, Nipper. Its origin is enshrouded in the dim mysteries of the past. Possibly you remember the place, Mr. Lee?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite well," he said. "The ruin is surrounded by a bog, is it not? And the bog stretches for a full mile across its widest part, I believe. The ruin lies exactly in the centre, and is, of course, inaccessible."

"A bog?" repeated Nipper. "Not a real one, sir?"

Mr. Crosby looked grim.

"The Montressor Mire, as it is sometimes called, is one of the most treacherous stretches of quagmire in the kingdom," he exclaimed. "Many poor folk have lost their way upon the moors, and have plunged to their deaths in its foul embrace. It is said that once the mire grips a man he can never free himself."

"That's pleasant, anyway," remarked Nipper. "I sha'n't go for a walk in that direction. But how the dickens did the old monks reach their blessed monastery if the place is surrounded by all that boggy stuff?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Needless to say, young 'un, the bog was not there at the time the monastery flourished," he said. "The mire itself has been known for centuries, but during the regime of the monks the quagmire could not have been formed. Possibly an upheaval of a volcanic nature caused the quagmire to come into being. At all events, it has been there for ages past."

"I'd like to explore the ruins, gov'nor."

"You may do so with pleasure—if you can reach them," was Lee's reply. "But as you don't happen to possess wings, my boy, I don't quite see how,

you will accomplish the journey across the bog. Walking is impossible, for the mire is so treacherous that a dozen steps cannot be taken. The only time when the ruins are accessible is during a hard frost. The bog then becomes frozen over, of course, and walking is quite an easy matter."

"Let's hope it freezes, then," remarked Nipper.

"Even during frosts the moor folk would not venture near the Montessor Mire," said Mr. Crosby, shaking his head. "They fear the place as though it were a plague-spot."

"How is that?" inquired Lee.

"They are superstitious up here, upon the moor, Mr. Lee," replied the other. "I am referring now to the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets which are dotted about in various directions. There is a legend to the effect that a shadowy monk is seen occasionally, flitting across the deadly surface of the mire—luring victims to death."

"Sounds like a bit from a melodrama," remarked Nipper.

"I must admit that you are right, Nipper," smiled Mr. Crosby. "The fact, however, cannot be denied. Several servants at the castle would not venture near the mire for quite a large amount of money. The story is, of course, merely a picturesque fable. I do not believe for a moment that anybody has ever seen the Monk of Montessor—as the ghost is called."

The trio were now near the massive lodge-gates, from which a well-kept drive led up to the castle. From afar Montessor seemed to be a bare, bleak place. But, near at hand, everything was trim and modern—that is, Sir Henry had kept pace with the times, and had allowed nothing to fall into decay.

The lodge itself was a neat little building, and the gravel-drive, although short, was quite pretty. Bushes grew on either side, and above, at the summit of a little rise, stood the castle.

Just before turning in at the gates Nelson Lee turned to Mr. Crosby. The detective had been gazing upon the surface of the road for some little time—casually, of course, as he walked.

"I want you to tell me one thing, Mr. Crosby," said Lee. "When did the accident to that traction-engine occur?"

"Dear me! What a curious question!"

"Why so?"

"Surely that accident had nothing to do with the affair on which I approached you?" asked the secretary.

"I am not sure. The matter requires careful thought."

"Let me see," mused Mr. Crosby. "To-day is Wednesday. Why, yes. The engine overturned during the early morning of the day following Sir Henry's departure for London in his friend's motor-car."

Nelson Lee looked at the other keenly.

"You are sure of that?" he asked.

"Quite sure."

"And there has been no vehicular traffic upon the road since?"

"None whatever."

The trio walked up the drive, and approached the house.

"Tell me, Mr. Crosby," asked Nelson Lee, "is this road much used by motor-cars?"

Mr. Crosby smiled.

"There is scarcely a motor-car passes the castle once in a month," he replied. "I suppose the only automobiles which do use the road, in fact, are those which are bound for the castle. And in winter-time they are very scarce. Sir Henry's visitors mostly come in the summer and autumn."

Lee nodded abstractedly, and Nipper gave his master a keen look. The lad knew that Lee had a definite object in asking these questions, and Nipper was somewhat curious.

The walk from the station had given them all splendid appetites, and they were ready for a substantial breakfast. Nipper, to tell the truth, was ravenous. He decided to make great inroads into the provisions once he became seated at the breakfast-table.

Mr. Crosby opened the massive door, and admitted the guests into the huge, lofty hall. Nipper was much struck by the splendour of the place, and he even forgot his hunger for a moment. Nipper had been in many famous British mansions, but Montressor Castle wanted some beating, he decided.

But "looking round" could wait until after breakfast. Waring, the butler, had prepared a sumptuous meal, and it was obvious to Lee that Mr. Crosby was a power in the castle. Indeed, he was regarded by all the household as a kind of second master. If Sir Henry was away, Mr. Crosby's orders were supreme. Being the baronet's confidential secretary and companion, he naturally had many privileges, and long years of service had made his position very secure.

It had been decided that Lee and Nipper should be shown round the historic pile soon after breakfast. But Nelson Lee had business to attend to first. The detective had been thoughtful during the meal, and as soon as it was over, he displayed a surprising interest in the weather conditions which had prevailed at Montressor during the past week.

"I want you to think very carefully, Mr. Crosby," he said. "Perhaps you will consider my questions idle; but very shortly you will understand my reasons. Can you tell me what the weather was like on the evening of Sir Henry's departure for London?"

Mr. Crosby puckered his brow.

"I should remember that," he said. "I was out searching the moors for several hours. The weather was moist and damp, Mr. Lee, with a trace of mist in the air. I thought, indeed, that there would be rain."

"But there was none?"

"No."

"Had there been rain the previous day?"

"Ah, now you are taxing my memory," smiled Mr. Crosby. "I cannot say for certain, Mr. Lee, but I believe we had a shower or two. And I certainly recollect that a heavy downpour occurred two or three days previous to that."

"And since? What has the weather been like since Sir Henry's visit to London?" asked Lee.

"Do you mean the weather generally?"

"Yes."

"Well, there has been no rain, but the air has been damp, upon the whole," was the reply. "I can speak positively upon the point."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"And there has been absolutely no traffic upon the road since Sir Henry's departure," he murmured. "That traction engine accident may prove useful to us, after all."

"Really, Mr. Lee, I cannot quite understand——"

"Just consider the facts, my dear sir," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "And you, too, Nipper, use your wits. When the car came along this road—the car which carried off Sir Henry to London—the surface of the road was moist and damp."

"Obviously," said Mr. Crosby, "since there has been rain the previous day."

"And the road being in that condition it will be clear to you that the motor-car must have made very deep and distinct tracks upon the sandy surface," continued Lee. "That, I take it, you will understand?"

"Well, I think I do," said Mr. Crosby. "I have not had experience of tracking and that sort of thing, you know. Nipper will be better able to appreciate your argument than I, Mr. Lee."

Nipper's eyes were gleaming.

"What an ass!" he exclaimed. "I never thought of the motor-car tracks, guv'nor! But what's the idea? Don't you think there was a car——"

"I think absolutely nothing at present," interjected Lee crisply. "I am merely searching for definite evidence, Nipper. You must remember that nobody saw that motor-car; we have only Sir Henry's written word to show us that the car passed along the road. If we find the tracks of the tyres we shall know that everything is correct."

Mr. Crosby looked very doubtful.

"But many days have passed," he objected. "You do not mean to suggest, Mr. Lee, that the tracks made by that car nearly a week ago would be visible to-day?"

"I do."

"But surely that is somewhat optimistic on your part?"

"I do not think so," said the great detective shrewdly. "Remember the traction engine accident, Mr. Crosby. Remember, also, that the road is sandy, and excellently suited to taking tracks. Piece these facts together, and we have something which is quite interesting. We know that no traffic has passed over the road during the last week—since, in fact, Sir Henry's departure. Moreover, no rain has fallen, and so it should be quite a simple matter for us to discover marks upon the road, which will immediately tell us the truth."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Crosby. "I am afraid you are getting rather out of my depth, Mr. Lee. But I see your argument, nevertheless. The thing which surprises me most is why you should express any doubt as to the truth of Sir Henry's statement. He would not tell me that he travelled to London by car if he did not do so?"

"At all events," exclaimed Lee, "we will just make certain. It so happens that we are in a position to do so, and there is no reason why we should not. Come, Nipper, we will just walk down to the road and satisfy ourselves upon this interesting point."

In another two or three minutes the great detective and Nipper were striding down the drive, and Nipper could plainly see that Lee was somewhat tense in his attitude. Apparently the detective had formed a theory in his own mind of which he had not yet spoken.

Very thoroughly the pair went over the sandy surface of the road for a considerable distance.

The minutes passed slowly, and without comment from either of the pair. But Lee's eyes were gleaming strangely, and Nipper, too, was feeling "funny inside," as he expressed it.

For, search as they would, they could find not the slightest indication of a motor-car having passed over the road. Other tracks were there clearly and distinctly, showing that nothing had obliterated them. If a motor-car had passed over that road the marks of it would positively have been apparent.

Both Lee and Nipper were very expert in the art of discerning tracks

upon a much-used road. But this road was very little used, and the marks of the automobile tyres should have stood out boldly and clearly.

The fact that they were not there led to only one conclusion.

In spite of Sir Henry Montessor's statement in his letter, no motor-car had passed over the moor on that fateful evening, nearly a week ago!

CHAPTER III.

The First Brush With the Enemy.

NIPPER was the first to speak.

"Well, gov'nor, this beats me hollow!" he exclaimed, standing in the centre of the road, and looking at the famous detective with a rather blank expression upon his face. "There are no tracks at all! It looks as if that yarn about a motor-car was all bunkum!"

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"My questions to Mr. Crosby were not so very objectless, after all," he remarked. "You see, Nipper, as we walked along this road before breakfast I noticed that no tracks of a motor-car were visible. I did not examine the road, as you know, but that one glance set me thinking. Now, of course, we know for a positive fact that my theory is correct."

Nipper scratched his head, and looked over the desolate expanse of moor which stretched out to the misty horizon.

"It's queer, gov'nor," said the lad. "I can't make anything of it. Sir Henry Montessor wouldn't say that he was picked up by a motor-car if it wasn't the case, would he?"

"The whole thing requires deep thought," was Lee's reply. "Come, young 'un, we will return to the castle and tell Mr. Crosby of our interesting discovery. I have an idea that he will be considerably astonished."

Mr. Crosby was not only astonished, but positively amazed. In Sir Henry's spacious and roomy library the detective told the secretary of the result of the little examination.

"But I can't credit your statement, Mr. Lee," protested the other. "I—I find myself incapable of thinking clear. Do you really tell me, positively, that no motor-car travelled upon this road?"

"Not for some little time, at all events," replied Nelson Lee. "It is certain that no automobile crossed the moor on the night of Sir Henry's departure. We know well enough that he left the castle—but beyond that we are in the dark. Certainly there is one thing he did not do—and that was to travel to London by motor-car."

Mr. Crosby looked incredulous.

"Then you suggest that Sir Henry's letter to me contained a deliberate falsehood?" he asked huskily. "My dear Mr. Lee, I really cannot accept that——"

"I wish you would believe me implicitly, Mr. Crosby," interjected Lee. "I am not inexperienced in these matters—I am not voicing idle conjecture. What I have told you is an absolute fact—proved conclusively to the hilt. In spite of what Sir Henry Montessor told you in his letter, he did not meet a motor-car while out for his evening walk. His story is obviously false."

Mr. Crosby nodded slowly.

"I must apologise, Mr. Lee," he said. "Of course, I do not doubt your word for a moment. But, if Sir Henry did not travel by car, how did he get to London? By train? Assuredly not. The railway people would have

told me at once that my employer had left Stoke Bevan—for they would have known."

"I am greatly pleased that you should have brought this matter to my notice," Nelson Lee observed. "You told me, Mr. Crosby, that you were uneasy, and I fully believe that you have every reason to be somewhat alarmed. I am convinced that foul play is afoot."

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Crosby.

"I have no wish, however, to alarm you," went on the detective. "What actually happened is at present a mystery. But one explanation has suggested itself to me—an explanation which I do not feel disposed at the moment to discuss. It is only a theory, and I always keep theories to myself until I have a certain amount of proof at least."

Mr. Crosby paced up and down the library with agitated footsteps.

"This puts a different complexion on the whole matter," he exclaimed, removing his pincenez, and polishing them absently. "A different complexion altogether, Mr. Lee. I had assumed that Sir Henry Montessor is now in London—that everything is precisely as his letters stated. But your discovery alters everything. And you even go so far as to suggest foul play? Upon my soul! I am becoming thoroughly agitated!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I trust you will not allow yourself to develop nerves," he said smoothly. "At present there is no necessity for undue alarm. Now, my dear sir, I want you to let me see Sir Henry's letters once more. I have already read them, but I should like to examine them more thoroughly."

"Certainly—certainly!"

Very soon Lee was seated at the desk poring over the two epistles which Mr. Robert Crosby had received from his employer. The detective used a powerful magnifying lens, and went over each word of both letters with elaborate care. He even compared the letters with several other samples of the baronet's handwriting.

Nipper was looking on with considerable interest, and Mr. Crosby with a puzzled expression upon his lined face. The old secretary was gravely troubled, and he hardly knew what to think of the strange events. Finally, Nelson Lee took his lens away, leaned back, and absently lit a cigarette.

"Perfect!" he murmured. "Identical in every respect. H'm! I am afraid these letters have advanced matters no further upon the road of investigation, Mr. Crosby. But we must not despair. I am becoming quite keen."

"A startling thought has entered my head, Mr. Lee," said the old gentleman hesitatingly. "Why have you been comparing those two communications with other examples of Sir Henry's handwriting? Surely you do not for one moment suspect that they are false? In Heaven's name, you do not believe——"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet and faced the secretary.

"I have suggested nothing, Mr. Crosby," he interjected evenly. "But since you have put your thoughts into words, there will be no harm in my stating that I do suspect forgery. That is the plain truth. Either Sir Henry Montessor has deliberately written you a palpable untruth—or he is not responsible for those two letters at all."

Mr. Crosby almost staggered.

"But it is impossible!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Impossible, Mr. Lee! No man on this earth is capable of forging such a characteristic handwriting as that of Sir Henry Montessor."

"There is one man, at least, who is clever enough to perform the seemingly impossible task," replied Lee grimly. "But, my dear sir, you have

made me say more than I intended to already. I simply ask you not to worry yourself, but to leave matters entirely in my hands. The very instant I have anything of importance to report, you may be sure I shall enlighten you."

Nipper's eyes were gleaming strangely, and his face was flushed somewhat. When, ten minutes later, he and his master went for a stroll alone in the grounds, Nipper found it impossible to contain himself any longer.

"Forgeries, eh?" he exclaimed eagerly. "Directly you said that, guv'nor. I froze on to an idea in a second. Jim the Penman! He is the chap who is at work here!"

Nelson Lee set his teeth grimly.

"You are shrewd, my lad," he said with an approving nod. "To tell you the truth, I have a vague suspicion at the back of my mind that our old friend, Douglas James Sutcliffe, is active. But, remember, it is only the very faintest of suspicions. We have not one iota of evidence. Those two letters are perfect in every detail. If they are false, then they are the most amazing examples of forgery I have ever examined."

"But Jim is capable of doing it, sir," said Nipper, quickly.

"He is the only forger in the world who could execute the task so faultlessly," Lee agreed. "That is why my mind at once reverted to our excellent friend. But Jim the Penman, you must remember, went to his death in an old backwater of the River Bure, in Norfolk. At least, everything went to prove that."

Nipper shook his head sagely.

"But it wasn't proved, was it, guv'nor?" he asked. "In that affair of old Monn the Miser, Jim seemed to go to his death in an old burning wherry in that backwater. But we do not know for certain—and his body wasn't recovered. It's my belief he managed to escape. You know what a slippery beggar Jim is."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"The most amazing criminal we have ever crossed swords with, Nipper," he assented. "In some ways the most interesting character who has ever crossed my path. Thoroughly bad in most respects, Sutcliffe nevertheless displayed, upon certain occasions, very excellent traits. A relentless criminal to his finger-tips, but still possessed more than one commendable characteristic."

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper were likely to forget the adventures they had passed through while hunting down the world's master forger—Douglas James Sutcliffe, known generally as Jim the Penman. Sutcliffe had engineered some of the most astounding forgeries in history, and practically all of them had been frustrated solely owing to the activities of Nelson Lee and Nipper. The great detective had made himself a thorn in Jim the Penman's side time after time. Often enough, just when success seemed certain, Lee had come in at the last moment and had deprived the forger of victory.

This present affair was just in Jim the Penman's line.

With the famous Montressor gold as a prize, Sutcliffe would have undertaken many risks. He was daring, bold, and did not know what fear meant. On many occasions he had gained his ends by sheer bluff. Audacity had always been Jim the Penman's strong point, and "cool cheek" had more than once landed him out of a seemingly hopeless predicament.

Lee fully realised that his suspicion might prove to be quite groundless. There was no direct evidence which connected Jim the Penman with the curious happenings at Montressor Castle. The detective found it impossible to piece the facts together. There was nothing to build upon; there was no line of reasoning which could be followed.

Many suggestions presented themselves to Lee's mind. If the letters were forgeries, then it would seem as though Sir Henry himself had either been killed or was being kept a prisoner. But since he had obviously not departed from Montessor by motor-car, was it not feasible to suppose that the baronet was still in the neighbourhood?

Either he had been murdered and his remains were buried somewhere near by, or some hiding-place had been discovered in which Sir Henry was incarcerated. Jim the Penman was fully capable of murder—if a certain definite object could be achieved thereby. Up till the present Sutcliffe had never committed the blackest crime of all—but he would have no compunction if a fortune lay within his reach.

And the Montessor gold was a magnificent fortune.

Nelson Lee believed—or suspected—that Sutcliffe had got Sir Henry out of the way and had persuaded Mr. Crosby to pack the Montessor gold by means of forged letters. Once the gold had been spirited away from the castle, the rest would have been easy. A melting-pot would convert the whole valuable collection into so much solid metal. Jim the Penman would be able to dispose of that metal to the very best advantage.

But, all said and done, it was only a bare hypothesis. There were no facts to substantiate the detective's theory. Whether those facts would be forthcoming was a matter which concerned Lee considerably.

There was nothing to show that any criminal had been at work. So far the whole affair was singular—but not in the least sinister. It might be an amazingly audacious plot to obtain possession of the Montessor gold.

On the other hand, there might be nothing in Lee's suspicions whatever. Time alone would prove the truth. And it so happened that many hours were not destined to pass before Lee and Nipper received positive evidence of enemy activity. And even then they were to get no further regarding the identity of that enemy. But it was something of the very highest importance to obtain proof that foul play was afoot.

It happened in the evening, after a cosy afternoon tea in the big drawing-room. Mr. Crosby had proved himself to be an excellent host, and the absence of ladies proved no great drawback. Lee, in fact, was glad to be comparatively alone.

The day, so far, had passed uneventfully and fruitlessly. It was growing dusk now, and a chill mist was spreading over the moor. The detective went for a quiet ramble alone, in order to ponder over the whole case. Nipper would have liked to have accompanied his master, but the lad knew better than to make such a suggestion. When Lee was thinking he preferred to be quite alone. Nevertheless, Nipper was not to be done. He sallied out on his own, intending to go for a ramble in the direction of the much-feared Montessor Mire. Nipper started out some little time after his master, and his footsteps led him in quite a different direction to that which Lee took.

But, before long, Nelson Lee found himself idly roaming across the moor towards the dreadful bog. The detective had had no intention of roaming to that spot. He was thinking deeply, and walked aimlessly across the undulating moor. Quite suddenly he came to a halt and realised precisely where he was. Almost at his feet a cliff descended steeply for about twenty feet—quite a short cliff, but one which it would have been difficult to climb once one had fallen. It was not absolutely sheer, but nearly so.

And below stretched the bog.

The mist over the quagmire was thicker than the haze which covered the moors, and the ruins of the monastery were scarcely visible; they seemed ghostly and far away in the strange half-light of the dying day. Indeed,

the whole surface of the moor and the bog was strangely desolate and chill. Looking round, Nelson Lee seemed to be utterly alone in the whole world.

Even the castle was concealed by trees, and but for that one spot, the whole landscape was bare and drab in the extreme.

At this particular point the bog came right to the very foot of the cliff—almost as though it were a sea. But there was scarcely any visible difference in the surface of the bog and that of the surrounding country. The surface was dead flat, of course, but covered with coarse grass. Only here and there a gleam of water showed where a stray pool had formed itself upon the marshy mass.

Nelson Lee stood upon the edge of the cliff, gazing out before him absently. And he was just about to turn away and make off in another direction, which would ultimately bring him back to the castle, when he heard a faint sound behind him. The evening was very still, so Lee knew that the sound could not have been caused by any natural element. A human being was close by—probably Nipper. Lee turned, and then clicked his teeth together with a curious sound.

Right before him, within four feet, stood the Monk of Montessor!

At least, so it seemed to Lee at that tense second. A figure was there—grey and shadowy in the misty light; a figure in a long, flowing gown, and with a cowl which completely hid the features. On the very instant Lee thought of the monk—the monk of the old moor folks' fable.

Just for one breathless second the pair stood perfectly still. Then, without uttering a sound, and without the slightest warning of his intention, the cowed figure sprang forward.

It had all happened instantaneously. Nelson Lee had no time to gather himself together for an attack. His back was towards the cliff edge, and he was at a total disadvantage. That spring forward brought the mysterious monk forward with tremendous force, and Lee received a heavy blow upon the chest.

The detective flung up his hands in an instinctive effort to save himself—but he had no time. Lee had not displayed the least sign of fear or astonishment—indeed, he had no time to do either.

Before he could fully grasp the situation the monk's fists thudded upon his chest.

Nelson Lee staggered back.

He knew, even as he did so, that a dreadful fate awaited him. But he was utterly incapable of saving himself. With a half-choking cry, he felt nothing but thin air beneath his feet, and then he plunged down.

The next second Lee struck the surface of the bog. He fell feet foremost—which only made matters worse. Had he fallen flat he would not have sunken into the treacherous quagmire. But, as it was, he plunged in to his knees, and then fell backwards.

Struggling into an upright position, the detective cast a swift glance upwards.

The sky-line above the cliff-top was clear and bare; the Monk of Montessor had disappeared as mysteriously as he had come.

And he had committed his foul work.

Even at that moment Nelson Lee knew that he was helpless. He knew that he was caught in the deadly embrace of the foul quagmire. The fall had not hurt him in the least, but when he attempted to frantically pull his left leg from the bog he found that it was held as tightly as though a giant were beneath the surface holding him fast. And as he wrenched his right foot plunged even deeper.

Nelson Lee stood perfectly still, his heart beating rapidly, his face pale and set. He was under no false impression as to the terrible nature of his position. He could feel himself sinking slowly, but surely, into the foul mire. Near as he was to the face of the cliff, his position was utterly helpless.

He had come out alone, and nobody knew which direction he had taken. In less than twenty minutes, it was certain, he would be drawn beneath the surface—and then death would follow at once. His absence would cause no comment, for he had intimated that he would be out for at least an hour.

“Great Heaven!” exclaimed the detective aloud. “I am helpless—helpless! And my disappearance will remain a mystery for ever.”

In spite of his own appalling peril, Lee found time to conceive another thought. Was it possible that Sir Henry Montessor had suffered this awful fate? While out for his evening walk the baronet had, possibly, strolled to this spot, and had been thrust over the cliff to certain death.

“The foul scoundrel!” muttered Lee, desperately. “That figure was no ghost—no spirit from another world. It was human, and there was black murder in the man’s heart even as he stood before me.”

It was obvious to the detective, indeed, that the cowed figure had crept up noiselessly behind him—noiselessly until the last moment. And then the sound of his approach had come too late. Lee had had no opportunity to defend himself against a sudden and unexpected attack. Having committed his awful work, the monk had disappeared into the shadowy mists.

And Nelson Lee was alone!

He was left to die a horrible death in solitude and silence.

Once only did Lee make a frantic effort to free himself from the clutch of the bog. And that effort hastened his descent so much that he desisted. If he had lost his wits and had become frantic he would have been beneath the surface in less than five minutes.

Breathing huskily, the detective remained perfectly still. His fate was sealed—of that there was not the slightest shadow of doubt. He knew—as the monk had known—that to cry for help would be a waste of breath. There was nobody to hear. The castle grounds were too far distant for Lee’s voice to carry. And, even so, help could not have arrived in time.

But dying miserably in the Montessor Mire was not to be the celebrated criminologist’s fate. Had he only known it, help was near at hand even at that awful moment.

And it was Nipper who came unwittingly to the rescue—unwittingly, because at the time the lad had not the slightest suspicion that his master was in peril. Providence surely took a hand in the events of that fateful evening.

Nipper, sallying out some little time after his master, stepped out briskly in the direction of the bog; he had come out for the especial purpose of taking a close view of the mire. Nelson Lee had drifted to the spot quite by accident. Thus, by a purely natural coincidence, the pair were fairly close together at the time of the monk’s attack.

Yet Nipper saw nothing of that startling incident.

Reaching the top of the rise, the lad glanced ahead. And there, silhouetted against the drap evening sky, he saw the figure of his master—quite still and obviously deep in thought. Nipper grinned slightly to himself. Lee was about five hundred yards ahead, and a deep gulley intervened between the pair.

“I’ll give the guv’nor a giddy surprise!” chuckled Nipper. “He’s no

right to go out on his own like this. I am going to make him discuss the whole thing with me. Two heads are better than one, any old day!"

Nipper plunged into the gully. And within a few seconds Lee was out of sight—for, of course, as Nipper descended, the opposite side of the gully concealed the detective's form. Nipper intended going straight ahead—that is, up the further side of the gully. But he found, upon close examination, that to ascend the steep side was impossible, or, at all events, if not impossible, an exceedingly difficult task. And Nipper saw no reason why he should tear his hands—and, incidentally, his trousers—in essaying the feat.

So he turned aside, walked along the bottom of the gully for some little distance, and then reached the opposite hillock by making a detour. And when he arrived there he saw that Nelson Lee was no longer visible. Some five minutes had elapsed, and Nipper uttered a grunt of disgust. He assumed, of course, that Lee had walked off in the meantime.

"Where the dickens has the gov'nor got to?" the lad muttered. "He can't have flown away— Oh, I expect there's another drop just there and he's gone down to have a squint at the bog."

He hurried forward, and in another minute was upon the edge of the cliff. Then the lad was startled to hear a sudden desperate hail.

"Nipper! Thank Heaven!"

Nipper looked ahead in astonishment. Some further twenty yards along the edge of the cliff was the spot upon which Lee had been standing. But now the detective was below—and Nipper could see at a glance that his master was waist-deep in the treacherous mire!

"Great stars!" gasped Nipper, pantingly.

He pelted along the top of the cliff, and arrived immediately over the spot. There, just below him, was Nelson Lee.

"Great Scott! How the dickens did you manage to fall in, gov'nor?" asked Nipper, in amazement. "I'll jump down there——"

"No, no!" Lee shouted sharply. "I am caught in the bog, Nipper, and I am sinking steadily. If you jump down you will share a similar fate. Run and fetch help quickly, or I shall perish before your eyes!"

In a sudden flood of understanding Nipper realised the awful, appalling nature of Lee's peril. For, as the lad watched, his master sank visibly.

"Did you fall in, gov'nor?" panted Nipper.

"For Heaven's sake don't waste a second with such idle questions!" rapped out Lee. "I am helpless, lad. You must fetch ropes——"

Nelson Lee paused, a kind of choking sound coming into his throat. For, for no seeming reason, he had been suddenly sucked down a clear six inches, and he realised the impossible nature of the task Nipper had before him.

There was no time for the lad to fetch ropes. He could, of course, rush to the castle, but by the time he returned Lee would have been sucked under to his death.

"I'll run like the wind!" shouted Nipper, hoarsely. "Oh, gov'nor, keep yourself above the surface until I get back!"

"I am afraid it is impossible, my boy!" Nelson Lee exclaimed quietly. "You have not sufficient time to do the double journey. At all events, say good-bye to me now. And go—go. Don't wait here to see me die——"

Nipper clenched his fists convulsively. His face had turned an ashen grey, and he could scarcely control the gulps which rose in his throat. For he, too, realised the ghastly truth. There was no time for him to fetch help! His master would perish miserably within the next five minutes!

And Nipper was stunned—stunned and appalled.

CHAPTER IV.

Nipper Effect's a Smart Rescue—And Mr. Samuel J. Hearn Receives a Shock.

WITHIN five minutes!

Nipper shuddered, and looked round despairingly.

Nelson Lee was just below—almost within reach! And yet he would perish before help could possibly come to him. Nipper's first impulse had been to jump down beside his master; his second impulse to rush off to Montessor Castle, in the frantic hope of being able to bring ropes in time.

But now the lad was disillusioned.

To perform the double journey would take, at the very least, a full fifteen minutes, and that was allowing for no delays caused by the hunting for ropes. Twenty minutes was the shortest possible amount of time in which Nipper could accomplish the journey.

And twenty minutes was a quarter of an hour too long!

"Oh! What can I do?" choked Nipper. "The poor old guv'nor—"

Suddenly the lad clenched his teeth. To stand there and watch Nelson Lee sink below the surface was impossible—unthinkable. He must go away—anywhere, so long as he did not witness that awful, stunning tragedy.

The feeling of helplessness which possessed Nipper nearly made the poor lad frantic. Yet he did not become panic-stricken. Even now, when hope seemed utterly dead, he could not fully realise that Nelson Lee was doomed.

The precious seconds were speeding away.

And Nipper, gazing round with eyes that were blurred and misty, saw that no other human being was in sight. No help was at hand. There was nothing—nothing! Not even a tree from which he could tear branches; not even a fence from which he could wrench wood. Anything would have done to support Lee until ropes could be fetched.

But there was nothing but the desolate, bleak moor. On every side stretched the vast waste, drab and dismal. The mists had increased somewhat, and the whole scene was inexpressibly lonely and grim.

And then, abruptly, a gulp rose in Nipper's throat.

And without a pause he commenced running—running as he had never run in his life before. He had seen something quite near by—something which filled him with wild, frantic hope.

A brilliant idea had come to the despairing lad.

Quite close by, as he well knew, the moorland road lay in a slight hollow. He could not see the road, but something which was placed alongside—a telegraph post!

A few wires were carried across the moor to the distant villages far beyond the castle. Nipper reached the road in a few seconds, and, without the slightest hesitation, he commenced scrambling up the rough telegraph post. Other posts lined the road, gaunt and bare.

It was a difficult climb, but Nipper accomplished it with amazing alacrity. Under ordinary circumstances he could easily have mounted the rough post, but now, when Nelson Lee's life hung by a thread, Nipper's muscles were strengthened and his movements correspondingly quickened.

He swarmed up the post like a monkey. Reaching the top, he gripped one of the cross-pieces and pulled himself into a more comfortable position. His legs were fastened round the post, so that he could use his hands. From his waistcoat pocket he produced a small pair of nippers, and in less than a breath one of the telegraph wires had been severed!

Nipper simply slithered down the post, careless of splinters. He raced down the road to the next post, reached up, and cut the wire again—he cut as long a length as possible. As the posts were a considerable distance



NIPPER TO THE RESCUE!
Inch by inch the detective was freed from the mire.—(See p. 22.)

apart, Nipper had a piece of wire which was fully long enough for his purpose.

Ropes were unobtainable—and so Nipper had cut down the telegraph wire!

It was a desperate expedient, but quite permissible under the circumstances. Nelson Lee's life was in the balance; even now Nipper might be too late. But he was doing his best; and more than that no man could have done.

Telegraphic communication would be cut, of course, but that was a trivial matter compared to the saving of a human life. Indeed, Nipper had displayed the most astonishing shrewdness and quick-wittedness. The idea had come to him like a flash of hope from Heaven, and he had acted upon it instantaneously.

But would he be in time?

Like a hare he raced back to the cliff, trailing the length of stout wire behind him. He reached the spot, gasping for breath and streaming with perspiration. And a glorious light entered his eyes as he saw that Nelson Lee was still visible. True, the detective was now in the deadly mire right to his armpits, and his arms were stretched over the treacherous surface, in a vain endeavour to stay his descent. Already, however, Lee had finally given up hope.

The sight of Nipper on the top of the cliff again caused the detective real pain. He had thought that his last dreadful moments would be spent alone. But Lee was amazed when he heard Nipper's cheerful hail.

"Never say die, gov'nor!" roared the lad. "I'll have you out of that rotten soup in a couple of ticks! You can use your arms. can't you?"

"What have you done, Nipper?" called up Lee, his heart leaping.

"Pinched Government property!" was Nipper's cool reply. "Cut down a giddy telegraph wire! Now, look out, sir! Mind I don't land this stone on your head!"

As he spoke, the lad threw down a fairly large stone. It fell close beside Nelson Lee, and the detective was able to grasp it. Then he saw that Nipper had fastened the stone to the wire. This was necessary, as otherwise he could never have got the wire into his master's hand.

Lee knew at once that the wire was strong enough to serve its purpose. But could Nipper stand the strain? Could the lad pull him out of the mire? At all events, danger was now past. For, even if Nipper found the task too heavy for him, Lee could hang on to the wire while Nipper hurried for help.

"Thank Heaven!" said Lee, fervently.

It was a long job, but Nipper persevered. Flinging off his coat, he set to work with a will. He had found a piece of wood, about a foot long, and had fastened the wire securely to this. Then, pulling at the chunk of wood—which gave him a good grip—he steadily tugged. Lee, at the other end, held on to the big stone. It would have been impossible to hold the wire, for it would have cut deeply into his flesh.

Inch by inch the detective was freed from the mire. It almost seemed as though the deadly bog was reluctant to lose its victim, for every now and again the foul quagmire would send forth a curious sucking sound as Lee's limbs were freed from its ghastly embrace.

Nipper did not pull too violently for fear of breaking the wire, strong as it was. And at last, with a panting gasp of relief, Nelson Lee was free. He slithered along the surface of the awful bog, and gained a secure foothold on the solid ground at the foot of the cliff.

Here the detective paused to exercise his limbs, for he was chilled and cramped. The ascent of the cliff itself was simple after all. The wire would

not have been able to stand the strain of the detective's full weight, neither could Nipper have stood the strain.

But the cliff-face was slightly sloping, and Lee was able to use one hand and his feet. So, aiding Nipper in this way, the detective at last stood upon the safe ground at the top. He presented a sorry spectacle, mud-begrimed and hot with his exertions. Nipper, too, was perspiring freely.

"Oh, gov'nor!" said the lad. "You're safe! I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought, Nipper," interjected Lee, quietly. "The danger has passed. Owing to your extraordinary smartness my life has been saved. My boy, I shall never be able to repay you——"

"Rats!" said Nipper, who was nearly jumping for joy. "You've done the same for me many a time. I saw the telegraph wires, and then got a brain-wave. It was the only way to save you. But how the dickens did you fall in, gov'nor?" added the lad curiously.

Nelson Lee looked grim.

"I was deliberately hurled over the cliff!" he said. "A strange figure, attired as a monk, stole up silently behind me, and took me unawares. The fellow was obviously impersonating the mythical Monk of Montressor!"

"Great Scott!"

"You may well be surprised—— But look!" added Lee, suddenly. "Good gracious, Nipper, do you see? Over the bog, lad—among the ruins!"

Lee pointed, and Nipper turned.

Then he uttered a gasp of sheer amazement. The ruins of the old monastery were enshrouded in mist, and barely visible. But the faint outlines of the crumbling masonry could just be seen. And there, distinct to Nipper's keen eyesight, he saw a dim figure moving about with a curiously eerie and ghost-like movement. Even at that distance Nipper recognised the gown and cowl of the Monk of Montressor!

But what could it mean?

Was the figure human—or supernatural? There was utterly no means of getting to the ruins. The foul quagmire surrounded the monastery on all sides. Nothing short of an aeroplane or a balloon would have landed a human being in the centre of the treacherous morass.

It was amazing, and both Lee and Nipper felt a curious sensation of uneasiness as they watched. But when the figure disappeared, the detective turned to Nipper and took a deep breath.

"That was no spirit, young 'un!" he said quietly.

"But—but it must have been, sir!" exclaimed the lad. "A man couldn't have crossed the bog, and—and——"

"That figure we saw was the man who tried to murder me," went on the detective. "I am convinced of that. This mystery is deepening, and we know for certain that our unknown enemy is relentless and powerful. Mr. Crosby was wise in coming to me for help. I may be able to prove that Sir Henry Montressor—— But it is an ill time to discuss the affair, Nipper. I must change out of these clothes, or I shall be in bed for a week!"

Both Lee and Nipper were silent as they walked to the castle. They had much food for thought. The detective's escape from a horrible death had been a narrow one; and both he and his young assistant were feeling somewhat subdued. The reaction made them thoughtful and grave.

Who was the man who had impersonated the Monk of Montressor?

That the figure had been a man, Lee well knew. It was almost certain that the detective had been observed, and the unknown scoundrel had crept up, intending to fling Lee to his death. That he had not been successful in his dastardly object was no fault of his. Nipper had rescued Lee by sheer quickwittedness and physical effort.

And it proved beyond doubt that there was an enemy on the spot; a ruthless criminal who would stick at nothing. Finding Lee on the scene, he had evidently taken prompt measures to secure the detective's disappearance.

It was dark when the castle was reached, and by that time Nelson Lee had come to a decision. He would not tell Mr. Crosby of what had happened; the secretary would only be needlessly alarmed and agitated. Once, for a fleeting moment, Lee had wondered if Mr. Crosby had anything to do with the mysterious happenings; if he was playing a double game. But the detective had dismissed the theory as preposterous. Mr. Robert Crosby was genuine to his finger tips; a rather simple, good-natured old gentleman, who would not harm a fly.

As it happened, Lee was able to reach his bedroom without being observed. He had been prepared to say that he had fallen into the edge of the mire, but that was not necessary. When the detective came down, attired in other clothes, he was practically himself again. His startling adventure had not affected his nerves in the least.

With regard to the cut telegraph wire, Lee decided to explain the matter, later on, to the local police. For the present, the authorities would have to puzzle over the seemingly mysterious affair.

Nothing of consequence occurred that night or the next morning. At breakfast, however, Mr. Crosby produced a letter which had been delivered by the early post.

"It is from Sir Henry," he explained. "Merely a reiteration of the former instructions, Mr. Lee. Mr. Samuel J. Hearn will arrive during the afternoon, and will bring positive proofs of his ownership of the gold. I am to hand the cases over to him, and obtain a receipt."

Nelson Lee nodded grimly.

"We will deal with Mr. Hearn when the gentleman arrives," he said, with a curiously stern note in his voice. "I wish you to leave everything in my hands, Mr. Crosby. It is most important that I should be able to act freely."

"I would not dream of opposing you, Mr. Lee," said the other earnestly. "You have taken the load of responsibility from my shoulders, and I should be foolish, indeed, to attempt any interference."

Mr. Crosby regarded Nelson Lee curiously.

"Will you allow the gold to be taken away?" he added.

"I have the whole morning before me," was Lee's quiet reply. "The matter requires careful thought, Mr. Crosby. In any case, you may rely upon my acting solely in the best interests of yourself and Sir Henry Montessor."

Shortly after breakfast Lee and Nipper had a look at the cases in which the famous Montessor gold was packed. The cases were small, but made of stout wood, and securely bolted together.

Lee remained indoors throughout the morning—and Nipper had had strict instructions to do likewise. There were such things as powerful air-guns, and a shot across the moors, from a sheltering hillock, would not be welcome. Nelson Lee was quite sure that the unknown enemy was on the alert, and he intended giving him no opportunity to display his cunning and devilry.

It was fairly late in the afternoon when the hum of a motor-car sounded upon the drive. Nipper walked to one of the huge windows of the library and saw a powerful landaulette motor-car gliding towards the castle. The vehicle came to a halt, and a man descended from it. He stood for a few moments talking to the chauffeur, and then mounted the steps. Nipper could see that the man was dressed perfectly. He was distinguished looking and

somewhat under middle age, and there was a certain something about his walk and bearing which seemed to indicate power and authority.

In less than two minutes the visitor was ushered into the library by Waring. As he came into the room he looked from Mr. Crosby to Nelson Lee, and the detective thought he saw a shade of annoyance pass over the visitor's face. But when he spoke his words were smooth and exceedingly pleasant.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he exclaimed. "I believe I am speaking to Mr. Robert Crosby——"

"I am Mr. Crosby," said the secretary, moving forward and taking the visitor's hand. "This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee, of London. He has kindly consented to transact the business which has brought you to Montessor Castle, Mr. Hearn. I trust Sir Henry is well."

"Sure," agreed Mr. Samuel J. Hearn. "Sir Henry Montessor is in perfect health, Mr. Crosby, and will be returning to the castle almost at once. Then I have no doubt he will explain certain little things to you which at present seem somewhat puzzling. However, I am here on business. Suppose we get to work?"

For some reason Mr. Hearn had studiously ignored Nelson Lee, and his remarks were addressed to Mr. Crosby. But now Lee strolled forward and faced the American millionaire. Hearn was grey-headed, and wore a neatly trimmed moustache.

"As Mr. Crosby has just explained, you will kindly transact your business with me, Mr. Hearn," said the detective easily. "I understand that you have purchased from Sir Henry Montessor the famous gold-plate and ornaments which have been collected through the course of a lifetime."

"You've hit it, Mr. Lee," replied Hearn calmly. "That gold is my property—to the last speck of dust. I guess I am going to make my home out in Illinois fairly glitter. Say, there'll be a rush of sightseers when they learn that the Montessor gold is on view. But you are waiting, I believe?"

Mr. Hearn produced a bulky pocket-book, and from this he took various documents. These he presented to Nelson Lee, and for several minutes the latter, with Mr. Crosby, examined them very closely and with great interest.

Lee was somewhat surprised. Everything was in perfect order to the last detail. It was quite obvious that the Montessor gold was now the sole and absolute property of Mr. Samuel J. Hearn. The detective could find no fault with any single document. There was a signed and witnessed receipt for a very large sum of money which clearly proclaimed Mr. Hearn's ownership. Could it be possible that the whole sheaf of papers were all forgeries?

Such an assumption seemed altogether too ridiculous for contemplation. And, indeed, under ordinary circumstances, Nelson Lee would have been perfectly satisfied, and would have accepted the situation without question; he would have concluded that Sir Henry Montessor had private reasons for acting somewhat strangely.

But the foul attempt upon his life the previous evening put Nelson Lee firmly upon his guard. The detective was positively convinced that a deep plot was being engineered. The object of that plot was, of course, to obtain possession of the priceless gold. Once it had been removed from the castle there was little doubt that it would disappear completely. And afterwards—too late—the truth would come out.

And Nelson Lee did not quite see why the door should be locked after the horse had been taken from the stable. In spite of the genuineness of Mr. Hearn's credentials, Lee was determined to adopt a firm attitude. If he had blundered he would be perfectly willing to apologise profusely for his mistake; he was prepared to answer for the consequences.

"I have brought my biggest car, Mr. Lee, said the millionaire calmly. "I guess she will take the load, eh? Rather risky, perhaps, travelling through the country with so much wealth aboard the auto, but I am not a man to be trifled with——"

"I am quite sure of that, Mr. Hearn," interjected Nelson Lee blandly. "But I do not think you will have to run the risk of having your gold stolen while on your return journey to London. For, to be perfectly frank, the gold will remain precisely where it is!"

"I guess I don't quite get you, Mr. Lee," said Hearn slowly.

"Surely my words were plain enough? I don't intend to let the Montessor gold leave the castle to-day," replied Lee. "These documents are perfectly in order, Mr. Hearn, but I don't feel justified——"

The American went white with fury.

"You don't feel justified!" he thundered. "What in all that's infernal has it got to do with you? You are an outsider—I don't do business with you! I came here to see Mr. Crosby!"

"My dear sir—my dear sir!" protested the secretary nervously.

"Don't alarm yourself, Mr. Crosby," went on Nelson Lee with perfect composure. "Mr. Hearn is naturally somewhat disappointed. He assumed that he would only have to deal with you, and this surprise is not welcome to him. I am sorry for this unpleasantness, Mr. Hearn," added the detective, "but I am quite settled in mind. It is impossible for me to allow you to take the Montessor gold away!"

Mr. Hearn was absolutely mad with anger. For a moment, indeed, it almost seemed as though he were about to fling himself upon the detective. But he controlled himself with an effort and then turned towards the door. With his fingers upon the handle he turned.

"I shall be back very shortly!" he exclaimed in a quivering voice. "There are means of forcing such obstinate cattle as yourself, Mr. Lee! I have the law on my side—and you will live to regret this high-handed action!"

The millionaire swept out of the room and slammed the door. And Nelson Lee, with his eyes gleaming strangely, turned swiftly to Nipper.

"The bicycle is ready, young 'un?" he rapped out in crisp tones. "Be off at once, and do your best to shadow the car. It may be impossible, but one never knows."

Mr. Crosby stared wonderingly, and Nipper acted instantly upon his master's instruction. In less than five minutes he was out upon the moor, mounted on an excellent bicycle which was the property of one of the coachmen. Ahead of him, in the gathering dusk, Mr. Samuel J. Hearn's big motor-car glided smoothly along. It was travelling only moderately, and so Nipper was able to keep it in sight.

The lad, himself, was probably invisible, for it was now nearly dark and more than a little misty. Nipper did not hope to achieve any definite object, but he was quite willing to keep up the chase until he lost his quarry. But, suddenly, the lad leapt from his bicycle and crouched down in the grass beside the road. For he had seen something which aroused his curiosity very considerably. The big car ahead had momentarily halted, and Mr. Hearn had stepped out. Then with scarcely a pause, the car continued its journey. If Nipper had not been looking ahead at the precise moment he would not have noticed the incident. But the lad was on the alert, he saw Hearn dimly in the dusk moving across the moor towards a curiously form clump of rocks which marred the smooth grassland. The millionaire disappeared behind the rocks, and Nipper hastened forward with

stealthy, rapid footsteps. Peering round, he beheld something which filled him with amazement.

Mr. Samuel J. Hearn was talking with a strange cowled figure—he was talking with the Monk of Montessor!

And even as Nipper watched the pair disappeared through a narrow crevice amid the rocks, and their voices trailed away into the silence. Nipper was left alone upon the bare, bleak moor.

What had become of the two men?

CHAPTER V.

The Secret of the Montessor Mire.

THE first suggestion which entered Nipper's head was that Hearn and the mysterious monk had made their way into a narrow cavern, there to have a private talk. For Nipper was quite positive that the two men were closely associated in some criminal undertaking. The fact that Hearn had come to this spot conclusively proved that here was a mystery.

Nipper was excited and eager, and he crept forward with very great caution and feeling that he was on the verge of some discovery. At all events, he very soon discovered that his first impression was wrong.

The place was no cavern, but merely a narrow crevice between the broken rocks. At first sight, when Nipper looked in, he saw nothing and heard nothing. It seemed as though there was not enough space for one man to hide, let alone two.

Then, when Nipper had switched his electric light on he saw that a very narrow cleft appeared near the floor. Obviously, both men had disappeared into this cleft, startling as it seemed. Thoroughly aroused now, Nipper followed without hesitation—he was right on the scent and grimly determined to acquit himself well.

Almost at once he found that the crevice was really the opening of a deep natural tunnel, which apparently led right down through the darkness into the very bowels of the earth. This, in itself, was an amazing discovery. Nipper saw a steep rocky tunnel leading right downwards. The air was somewhat foul, but breathable. After he had crept along—or rather down—for some little way he switched off his light and came to a halt. Faintly in the distance ahead he could hear the voices of the two men he was tracking.

Nipper realised that his position was somewhat perilous; if he was discovered there would be practically no chance for him. He would be entirely at the mercy of his enemies. But this did not deter the lad from pressing onward with all speed.

He switched his light off now and felt his way forward until, at last, turning a bend, he saw a subdued gleam of light ahead. Then he made out the dim forms of Hearn and the monk. The latter was leading the way, showing a powerful electric torch before him.

The descent continued for some distance, and then level ground was reached. The tunnel, Nipper could see, was not a natural one now. It had been artificially made—probably hundreds of years ago. Nipper remembered that Montessor Castle dated back almost to the feudal times, and the presence of a subterranean passage in the district was by no means extraordinary. The tunnel was narrow and the rough walls were streaming with moisture. Nipper, indeed, soon found his shoulders wringing with

dampness, and wondered how the immaculate Mr. Hearn was faring. The lad was comparatively close behind the two men, but he was quite sure that he would not be heard or seen. And, in any case, he was armed if it came to a fight.

The floor of the tunnel had been somewhat soft and moist all along, but after a while it became extremely boggy, and Nipper could see the pair ahead traversing a certain spot with swift, quick strides, and he heard the monk utter several words.

“Very treacherous just here—walk swiftly. The bog is not impassable, but if we were standing still we should soon become caught in its grip.”

Nipper soon found this out for himself. For about twenty or more feet the floor of the tunnel became spongy and muddy. It was obvious to Nipper that he was passing right beneath the Montessor Mire! This was certainly an astounding discovery. In one place, at all events, the bog could not be so very deep, otherwise the tunnel could not have been made. But the treacherous ooze had found its way in somehow, and for a certain distance the flooring of the tunnel was a veritable bog itself. To remain stationary for any little time would be fatal; indeed, Nipper found that it was only just possible to get across the danger zone in safety.

The lad remembered the incident which had occurred the previous night, and it was a simple matter for him to deduce a fairly obvious fact. But for that incident he would have wondered where he was going, but he knew well enough what his destination would be.

The incident which Nipper remembered was the sight of the monk amid the shadowy ruins of the old monastery. Nelson Lee had declared that the figure was that of a human being. Therefore Nipper easily guessed that he was now travelling beneath the mire, and that he would ultimately find himself beneath the monastery.

‘This proved to be actually the case.

For when the tunnel came to an end a flight of slimy stone steps were mounted. Nipper passed up these with extreme caution and then through a low stone archway. Beyond was a short, narrow passage, with a dim light showing still further on.

Creeping along this passage with every nerve alert, Nipper fumbled for his revolver and gripped it tightly. Then he pressed on, and at length came to the end of the passage. Bending down low he took a swift glance round the corner, and saw that a small dungeon lay before him. It was empty, but a low doorway apparently led into still another dungeon, for here the light was stronger, and Nipper heard voices.

It was risky, but he stepped lightly across the dungeon and stood against the further doorway, listening intently

“Of course,” he heard a voice exclaim. “You know where you are, Channing. These are the dungeons of the old monastery, and Sir Henry is quite safe and comfortable. Don’t develop an attack of nerves, man—I haven’t killed the old chap.”

Nipper took a deep, deep breath. For he recognised that voice on the instant.

It was the voice of Jim the Penman!

The Monk of Montessor was none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe, the master-forged. Nelson Lee had been right in his surmise, and Nipper was feeling strangely elated. Just those few words had told him volumes.

Those letters to Mr. Crosby, seemingly from Sir Henry Montessor, were daring forgeries. And the object of the fraud was, of course, to obtain

possession of the valuable Montressor gold. Jim the Penman was playing a deep game, and he had come within an ace of succeeding.

"Samuel J. Hearn," was, it seemed, a confederate of Jim's, who had often assisted the forger. Robert Channing was his name, and on more than one occasion he had crossed swords with Nelson Lee himself. Channing was a clever rogue, and an able assistant for Jim the Penman. He had certainly acted the part of the American millionaire with consummate skill. If Mr. Crosby had not informed Lee of the facts the gold would most positively have been stolen. But it so happened that Mr. Crosby was not so simple-minded as Sutcliffe had assumed. And, in consequence, the scoundrels had to deal with Nelson Lee instead of the staid old secretary.

That fact, probably, had spoilt the game.

"You need not fear that I shall develop nerves, Jim," said the pseudo-American millionaire. "But I am wild—thundering wild. It seems that Nelson Lee is going to mess up everything again. Curse the fellow! He has been a thorn in your side for months!"

Nipper heard Jim the Penman utter an angry oath.

"I thought I'd finished him yesterday!" exclaimed the forger. "By heavens! Lee possesses as many lives as a cat, Channing. But I'd swear he never extricated himself from the bog unassisted. Nipper, I suppose, came to his rescue. That lad is well nigh as dangerous—as clever—as his master!"

"Very complimentary, I'm sure!" murmured Nipper to himself.

"I'll finish with the pair of them before long!" went on Jim fiercely. "Now, Channing, tell me what has happened. Why didn't you fetch the gold as I arranged in the letters?"

It was Channing's turn to swear.

"How in the thunder could I take it away if Lee wouldn't allow me to remove it from the castle," he exclaimed savagely. "Lee positively informed me that he would not allow the gold to go."

"But didn't you show him positive proof that you were the owner?"

"I showed him your forgeries, if that's what you mean," growled Channing. "Lee didn't seem to doubt them, but he must have done so. Anyhow, the game's up, Jim."

"Not yet!" was Sutcliffe's harsh reply. "If we can only get Lee out of the way, we shall easily be able to deal with that old fool of a Crosby. The whole hitch occurred unexpectedly. I never dreamed that Crosby would go to Nelson Lee."

There was a slight pause, and then Channing spoke again.

"I don't often criticise you, Jim," Nipper heard him say. "But it strikes me that you landed yourself in the cart this journey. You made a bad mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you ought to have let Lee alone."

"You are referring, I suppose, to that affair of last night?" Jim asked. "I suppose, in one way, you are correct, Channing. If I had remained inactive Lee would have had no cause for suspicion. But having been nearly killed he naturally deduced things—and refused to hand over the gold in consequence."

"That's exactly how I've figured it out," was Channing's remark. "I am a bit surprised, Jim. Why didn't you finish Lee off thoroughly?"

Again Sutcliffe swore.

"Don't you call it thoroughly to hurl him into this filthy bog?" he demanded. "There wasn't another soul near, and even now I haven't the slightest inkling as to how the brute escaped!"

"Did you see him fall in—with your own eyes?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, I must admit I am puzzled myself," said Channing. "But if you caught him unawares surely it would have been better to stick a knife in his back and throw him into the bog afterwards. It sounds pretty horrible, but we understand one another, Jim, and we both owe Nelson Lee a heavy grudge."

Sutcliffe laughed bitterly.

"It's easy enough to offer suggestion," he exclaimed. "I dealt with Lee effectively—as I thought. I was positively certain that he was dead. Well, he is alive, and I take my hat off to him. He deserves to be alive. If things were not so desperate with me I should be inclined to give Nelson Lee best. But I simply must get that gold, Channing."

"More forgery?"

"Yes. There are ways and means of doing things, and I believe I could even trick such an astute fellow as Lee," replied Jim the Penman grimly. "You are sure, Channing, that nobody saw you leave the motor-car?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure—it was nearly dark, anyhow."

Nipper was quivering with excitement. He, at least, had seen Mr. "Samuel J. Hearn" leave the landaulette, and Nipper was astonished at the discoveries he had made.

The whole mystery was now cleared.

Sir Henry Montessor, it seemed, was in one of these old monastery dungeons, a secure prisoner, and it was obviously Jim the Penman's object to keep Sir Henry there until the precious gold had been stolen. When the time arrived the baronet would probably be released—but not until it was too late to recover his lost property.

Nipper guessed that Jim the Penman had planned the coup carefully and thoroughly beforehand. In all probability the forged letters had been prepared well in advance, and Channing, of course, had posted them in London. Without a confederate Sutcliffe would have been helpless.

It was easy to assume, too, that Sir Henry had been attacked by the forger during that fateful evening stroll, a week ago. Probably Sutcliffe had persuaded the baronet to accompany him to the rock crevice. And, once there, Sir Henry had been easily dealt with.

How Jim the Penman had known of the tunnel in the mire remained a mystery, but that was not of much importance. Jim might have known it for some time—had probably learnt of it by accident—and had made very careful plans for the daring scheme.

By means of his wonderful skill with the pen Sutcliffe had forged the letters very easily. There had been no necessity for him to force Sir Henry to write them—if that, indeed, had been possible. It was more than likely that Sir Henry would have refused point blank to pen a letter which would deprive him of his treasures. Even at the point of a revolver he would have refused. But Jim had forged the letters with ease, and the rest had been really simple. By making Mr. Crosby think that the orders were those of his employer there had been no reason why the plot should not succeed in every detail. But the old man's suspicions had been aroused, and the advent of Nelson Lee had finally rendered the whole scheme problematical. Sutcliffe was undertaking considerable risk and great personal inconvenience. It could not have been pleasant for him to spend his days and nights in such a noisome shelter as the old monastery dungeons.

But, for the sake of the booty to follow, Jim the Penman had suffered discomfort.

It was little wonder that he was now furious and almost mad with chagrin. He had taken it for granted that Channing would obtain the gold without question. And Sutcliffe realised that he had made another blunder. To avert suspicion he had delayed the coming of Mr. Samuel J. Hearn until to-day. Channing could easily have arrived on the morning of the previous day. But Jim had thought it a wise move to avoid hastening matters.

The forger, in fact, had been so positively certain of success that he had taken it for granted that nothing would upset the scheme.

And now, all in a flash, the blow had fallen.

"Yes, I have still another card to play, Channing," Jim the Penman exclaimed grimly. "Come with me to the other dungeon, and I'll show you——"

Nipper heard footsteps, and he did not take the trouble to listen to the remainder of Sutcliffe's sentence. The lad turned quickly and made for the short tunnel, which led to the flight of stone steps. But Nipper had miscalculated. Before he reached the passage Jim the Penman strode into the dungeon. The forger caught just a slight glimpse of Nipper's form as it disappeared into the blackness. The forger recognised the lad's figure in a moment.

"Nipper!" roared Jim furiously. "Quick, Channing, the torch—the torch, man!"

Sutcliffe was boiling with rage. Matters were even worse than he had feared. Nipper had not only discovered the secret of the mire, but he had also overheard the conversation which had just taken place!

With a snarl, Jim the Penman snatched the torch from Channing's hands, and then ran swiftly along the short passage-way. He was only a couple of seconds behind Nipper. When he reached the top of the steps he saw the lad near the bottom, pelting for all he was worth.

Nipper was startled; he had not been prepared for discovery at that moment. But he was quite ready to make a bold bid for liberty. His own torch was in his hands, and he was able to run more swiftly than Jim, owing to his slim figure.

But as he ran he could hear the forger panting behind him. And then Jim acted decisively.

He realised that Nipper was gaining—that the lad would reach the opening long before he himself could do so. And, with a curse, Sutcliffe tore out his revolver and fired.

The sudden concussion sounded like the roar of a cannon in that confined space. Nipper, it happened, was just entering the stretch of tunnel which was boggy and treacherous.

The lad heard the revolver-shot, and then the swift passage of the bullet passed his ears. He distinctly heard the whine as it sped past him. But that which followed was intensely more startling than anything that had yet occurred.

For, so it seemed, the very tunnel itself was collapsing.

The bullet had missed Nipper, but had hit a projecting rock in the roof of the tunnel twenty yards beyond the lad. The sudden shock dislodged the piece of stone, and the very next second the whole roof gave in like a house of cards!

There was a thunderous, appalling roar. Clouds of dust came along the tunnel in choking, blinding whirls. And then there was silence—utter, complete silence.

For fully six feet the tunnel had caved in completely; from floor to roof the space was blocked by great chunks of solid rock!

Nipper had staggered back at the first intimation of disaster, and was only grazed by one or two pieces of flying debris. But one terrible thought came to his mind in a flash.

With the tunnel blocked he was incapable of reaching solid ground again. This was the only way in which the moor could be reached. The other exit of the tunnel simply led to the monastery—and that was surrounded by impassable morasses!

Nipper, Jim the Penman, Channing, and Sir Henry Montessor were all trapped!

CHAPTER VI.

Nipper's Awful Peril—And What It Led To.

NELSON LEE was sure that he had acted rightly in refusing to allow the Montessor gold to be removed from the castle. But Mr. Crosby was somewhat dubious. He looked at Lee uneasily as soon as Mr. Samuel J. Hearn had taken his departure—with Nipper in close attendance.

"Are you quite sure that we have acted wisely, Mr. Lee?" asked Mr. Crosby hesitatingly. "Mr. Hearn has right on his side, you know. His documents are in perfect order, and the gold is certainly his property. I am afraid we shall be prosecuted for refusing to deliver up——"

Nelson Lee strode across the room.

"My dear sir," he said briskly, "leave everything to me. I have an idea that Mr. Samuel J. Hearn is a myth—a mere name. I will discuss the matter at length in a few minutes. An idea has just entered my head, and I wish to carry it out."

The detective left the library, and hurried up the imposing staircase. Arriving on the wide landing, he then ascended a small, winding stairway, which led to the square tower which surmounted the stately pile of Montessor Castle.

The top of the tower was flat, and offered a splendid view over the moors in all directions. The road could be seen distinctly, like a pale ribbon crossing an expanse of drab. And, quite close by, the Montessor Mire was marked by the jutting monastery ruins in the centre.

Nelson Lee had seen a pair of binoculars in the library, and the notion had come to him that it would be as well to see if Nipper was following Hearn's car, according to instructions. Lee trusted the lad implicitly, but he was rather anxious.

The moors were looking dim and misty when the detective arrived at the top of the tower. The air was chill, and a frost seemed likely. It was deep dusk, and the moor road was scarcely visible.

But, adjusting the binoculars, Lee applied them to his eyes, and at once the road sprang into clearness. Lee swept the glasses to and fro, and the next moment located Hearn's big car proceeding sedately along.

Behind, some little distance to the rear, came Nipper on the coachman's bicycle. The lad was riding hard, and keeping up with the car fairly well. But Nelson Lee did not think that Nipper would be able to continue the chase beyond the village of Stoke Bevan. But even that would be enough.

Then, suddenly, Nelson Lee received a surprise.

He saw the car stop for a moment, and Mr. Samuel J. Hearn alighted. At once the landaulette proceeded on its way, and Hearn struck off across the moor towards a clump of projecting rocks. Lee's eyes gleamed behind the glasses. He saw Nipper following his quarry, and then the pair disappeared among the rocks.

"H'm! This looks curious!" murmured Lee. "Hearn has not visited those rocks just for the sake of admiring them. It is a meeting-place, I am certain. And who is the other party? The mysterious monk, surely?"

It was an obvious conclusion, and the inference was clear. Hearn and the monk were associates, and there was something extremely "fishy" going on. Nipper, anyhow, was hot on the track. And Nelson Lee meant to follow the lad's example without delay.

Hurrying down, he went straight to the library, and found Mr. Crosby pacing up and down nervously, the fire-light flickering on his lined, troubled face. He turned eagerly as Lee entered.

"What are your intentions, Mr. Lee?" he asked. "I—I feel in a terrible fog. Without you I believe I should despair. Why is Sir Henry not here? Why has he left me with this load of responsibility——"

Lee chuckled grimly.

"I have an idea that Sir Henry could not help himself," he replied. "Please calm yourself, Mr. Crosby. I am going out now, and may not be back for some little time. Do not worry in the least. All will come right."

The detective donned his overcoat and hat, and then made sure that his revolver was in good trim. A minute later he was striding down the drive. The air was sharp, and a keen frost had already set in. Overhead the stars were beginning to glitter brightly, but on the moors there was a mist.

Nelson Lee followed the road for some distance, and then struck off across the moor itself. It was now quite dark, and Lee was forced to go cautiously. At last he arrived at the clump of rocks.

Very carefully Lee passed among them. And after a full five minutes' search he was satisfied that neither Hearn nor Nipper was there. What had become of them? Lee believed that there was some secret opening or other—probably a cave. He was certain, at all events, that the pair had not left the spot.

With great caution Lee commenced a close examination. To do this he found it necessary to use his own electric-torch. Neither he nor Nipper ever travelled without these handy little instruments. More than once an electric-torch had proved to be a god-send in a time of peril.

Lee experienced a difficulty which Nipper had not had to contend with. The lad had seen Hearn enter the crevice among the rocks; Lee was obliged to closely investigate until he found the place for himself.

Thus many minutes were wasted; but Lee did not fail.

He found the narrow opening at last. Twice he had passed the place and had not given it a thought. Unless he had known that something of the sort was there he would never have found it at all.

Lee whistled slightly to himself once he was within the steeply-descending tunnel. He had not suspected this. And he, too, at once remembered the monk among the ruins of the monastery. This tunnel led right beneath the bog!

Cautiously hurrying downwards, the detective at last found himself upon the level. And before him the passage led straight into the dimness—wet-walled and damp-floored. The air was unpleasant, and by no means pure.

But somewhere ahead, in the mysterious tunnel, Nipper had followed Hearn. Lee began to become somewhat anxious for the lad's safety. And before he had proceeded much further a startling thing happened.

Right in the distance ahead a weird point of light appeared, flitting about strangely. Lee at once knew that it was a torch, carried by a running man—or boy. For the detective guessed that Nipper was the runner.

Lee paused, watching.

Then, abruptly, a shot rang out, and reverberated along the tunnel like a roll of terrible thunder. This was followed by a curious crackling, crumbling sound. And the next moment Nipper's light was blotted out completely. Lee had already extinguished his own torch, and he was left in total darkness.

He was about to hasten forward when he felt a curious choking sensation. Switching his light on, he saw that he was enveloped in a mass of thick dust. He instantly knew what had occurred. A portion of the tunnel had caved in! And, in spite of the dampness of the surface, the rock above was evidently dry.

It was a considerable time before the dust cleared. With smarting eyes Nelson Lee walked forward, but he soon found his way barred by a mass of rock, which filled the tunnel from floor to roof. The rock was in large chunks—not a solid body. This being so, there were crevices left open, through which sounds could travel easily. Further progress was impossible; but Lee could hear what was going on beyond the obstruction.

The awful thought had struck him that Nipper had been caught by the falling rock—that the lad had been crushed to death. But this fear, at least, proved to be an idle one.

For almost at once Lee heard Nipper's voice.

"Yes, you've got me, you rotter!" the lad was saying defiantly, his voice sounding faint and far away. "But the guv'nor will have something to say before long, Jim the Penman! You'll cop it in the neck, my pippin! The tunnel's blocked, and you can't escape. We're all in the same cart!"

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"Nipper is caught!" he told himself. "And I was right—this affair is the work of Sutcliffe! By James, and he has been trapped by his own recklessness! He fired at Nipper, and dislodged the rock! He is trapped completely!"

Lee felt a wave of triumph surge through him; but his feelings changed when he heard Jim the Penman's harsh, angry tones. The forger's usually smooth, silky tones were now hardened and steely.

"Yesterday I attempted to kill your master!" said Sutcliffe. "To-day I am going to kill you! This will be no attempt, Nipper—you will die the same death that I planned for Lee!"

"You dirty murderer!" panted Nipper.

Lee felt frantic. He was helpless; he could hear the dreadful threat, but could do nothing to assist Nipper. For several minutes there was no further conversation, but the sound of movement told Lee that something was going on beyond the mass of rock. And then Jim the Penman spoke again.

"There you are, my lad—trussed up like a fowl!" he said pantingly. "I don't think you will be able to free yourself. Just a few feet ahead the flooring of the tunnel is boggy, and as treacherous as the mire itself. You will be in that bog in a moment, and you will be left to sink into it and die!"

"You rotten——"

"No compliments!" rapped out Jim. "I failed with Nelson Lee, but you are pretty near as dangerous. You shall suffer the fate which was mapped out for Lee. I may be trapped; but it will be some consolation to know that you have been settled with. You may cry for mercy as much as you like——"

Lee heard Nipper's angry snort.

"I'm likely to cry for mercy!" the lad exclaimed angrily. "I'm not a coward, anyhow! But you'll swing for this, Jim the Penman—don't forget that! You'll have the hangman's noose slung round your neck——"

"Enough of that, hang you!" snarled Jim the Penman furiously.

"No, it's you'll who'll be hanged!" said Nipper.

Nelson Lee gripped his teeth together. Nipper was acting bravely, for he must have known that his position was appalling. The tunnel floor, seemingly, was a bog just beyond the obstruction, Lee thought. And Nipper was to be cast into it!

But for the accident of the revolver-shot Lee would have been able to capture Jim with comparative ease. It was dreadfully galling and alarming. And, after Lee had waited a further five minutes, he listened carefully.

There was no further sound.

Jim the Penman had evidently gone—and Nipper was left to his fate!

"Nipper!" called Nelson Lee loudly.

There was a sudden gasp from beyond the intervening rock.

"Oh, gov'nor, is that you?" called Nipper's anxious voice. "Oh, crumbs! I never thought you'd be on hand!"

"I have heard what passed between you and Sutcliffe!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Has the scoundrel gone, young 'un?"

"Yes, sir. I'm up to my knees in mud, and sinking gradually."

"I know, my poor lad. Is the danger great?"

"I'm bound terribly, gov'nor—the ropes cut into me like wires," replied Nipper courageously. "This bog isn't so soft as that on the surface, but I'm sinking right enough. I reckon I shall be gone in about a couple of hours."

Nelson Lee laughed lightly.

"Have no fear, Nipper," he called out. "I'll have you free in no time. Just trust in me, and you'll be all right."

"Oh, gov'nor. You're a good 'un!"

But Lee, although he spoke cheerily, was terribly alarmed. His face was ashen grey with apprehension—apprehension for his young assistant's safety.

Nipper was slowly sinking, and would be gone, perhaps, in two hours. How could he remove that mass of rock in such a short amount of time? The detective knew that there was not a second to waste. There was no other way of reaching the poor lad, for to cross the mire was impossible. The only means of rescue was by forcing a way through the obstruction. And that would be a risky enough proceeding in itself—for there might be a further collapse, and even the rescuers might be involved.

There was only one slight consolation for Nelson Lee.

Jim the Penman and his confederate were trapped. They were absolute

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

prisoners, and would have to surrender as soon as the tunnel was cleared. So, in rescuing Nipper, Lee would be accomplishing a double object.

But the detective was thinking solely of Nipper now.

All his thoughts were centred upon saving the lad's life. Nipper's life was in the balance. All else seemed of no importance.

With all speed Nelson Lee hastened up the tunnel, and at last arrived in the open air. Without pausing for breath he raced to the castle, and burst in upon Mr. Crosby as the latter was preparing for dinner.

"I want men!" rapped out Lee. "Men, and shovels, and picks! There is work to be done, Mr. Crosby!"

"Good gracious!" gasped the old gentleman.

He was shocked and amazed when Lee rapidly told his story. And without delay two brawny outdoor menservants were ready with picks and shovels and spades. For safety's sake Lee decided to work by electric light—for Sir Henry had several self-contained electric lamps about the castle. They were used for going about the grounds after dark.

The party was back in the tunnel within half an hour. Mr. Crosby, excited and agitated, accompanied the workers, and watched while they set to with a will. The picks hammered away, and the rocks were steadily removed. Nipper, on the other side, informed Lee that he was sinking, but still safe and cheerful.

Hour after hour the rescue party worked. All count of time was lost. The tunnel was thick with dust and splinters of rock, and the perspiration streamed from the workers. Nelson Lee was doing as much as the two other men put together, and the detective still seemed fresh.

Every minute of the time he was thinking of poor Nipper.

Would the obstruction be removed in time? Already the two hours had passed, and others as well. Nipper had, fortunately, miscalculated. He was still alive, although now he had sunk to his armpits.

It was a fight against time—with a human life in the balance!

Lee thought of nothing else. Jim the Penman might have been a thousand miles away for all Nelson Lee cared.

It was for Nipper's life that the party were toiling, not the arrest of the master forger. That was insignificant compared to the greater object. And at one time it seemed as though the work would be in vain.

The hours passed heedlessly.

Mr. Crosby, in the rear, watched with terrible anxiety. He knew that many of the castle servants were outside, in the night, awaiting the news. It was a time of tense excitement for everybody.

At last Nipper called out that he was going. He had sunk to his chin almost, and before another half-hour had passed he would be gone. Nelson Lee, with clenched teeth and almost crying with impotence, begged the men to redouble their efforts.

And then came sudden deliverance.

It was as though Providence had stepped in at the last moment. As the men were working there was a sudden rumble. Lee thought that another fall was coming, and roared out to the others to spring back.

They did so. But there was no fresh fall, only a collapse of the pile of rock which obstructed the passage. When Lee flashed his light ahead he gave a gasp of heartfelt relief.

There was a clear way through!

The work had been successful—the rescue party was in time.

Twenty minutes later Nipper was safe and sound. He was chilled, however, and Lee packed him straight off to the castle. Then, feeling in the

mood for grim trouble, the detective explored the rest of the passage—helped by the two trusty men. Lee intended capturing Jim the Penman at once.

But he was doomed to disappointment.

To the detective's amazement there was no sign of Sutcliffe and "Hearn" among the monastery ruins. And as Nelson Lee stood upon the edge of the quagmire, in the early morning light—for it was already dawn—he realised the startling truth.

"Fool!" he muttered to himself angrily. "Blunderer!"

For Nelson Lee remembered that a frost had set in the previous evening. The frost had become extremely sharp, and had continued throughout the night. And the surface of the mire had become sufficiently hardened to allow the fugitives to make their way across the treacherous morass!

It was galling—it was absolutely the limit, as Nipper said afterwards. But Nelson Lee was not to blame in any way. His thoughts had been filled with Nipper's dire peril. He had worked solely to save the lad's life. How could he think of frost and the weather conditions in such a time of stress?

Sir Henry Montessor was found in one of the dungeons—ill and pale, but in no way seriously harmed. Jim the Penman had not ill-treated his prisoner. But the baronet was weakened, and he had to be assisted to the castle.

And there followed the most stunning discovery of all!

The Montessor Gold had vanished!

Jim the Penman and Channing, escaping while Nelson Lee and Mr. Crosby were in the tunnel—and most of the servants at the rock entrance—had entered the castle, and had managed to get the cases of gold into the motor-car, which had been waiting within half a mile, in a hollow.

Nelson Lee could not help admiring the forger's amazing astuteness. Jim had proved himself resourceful and clever, and he almost deserved the prize. Sir Henry was nearly frantic when he heard all, and he begged of Nelson Lee to recover the precious treasures.

Nelson Lee had been successful all along, and now, solely owing to a fluke, Jim the Penman had won the day. It was a terrible disappointment. But Nelson Lee swore that he would hound Sutcliffe down, and recover the gold.

But time was destined to pass before the famous detective succeeded.

Then he would find himself involved in a fresh case altogether, a case which would prove amazing and startling. And Jim the Penman would meet his master; the forger would commit his last crime. Incidentally, Nelson Lee would keep his promise to Sir Henry Montessor, and the famous gold would be recovered.

But that would happen in the future—in the near future, as it proved.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

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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 threw 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 warns 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. This points to the necessity of a stronghold, and the very day following its completion, Pedro Diego attacks, but is beaten off.

(Now read on.)

A Lucky Tumble.

HERE on the top of the mountain everything was very different from what was the case below. Rocks there were, but they were not the bare, sombre, forbidding rocks such as they found so much of below.

Instead, they were clothed with verdure, growing everywhere with tropical luxuriance. Streams of beautiful clear water, cascades of falling water dancing and sparkling in the sunlight, masses of gorgeous flowers—these and other natural beauties made the place seem a veritable fairyland after the sort of country they had been living in during the past weeks.

"We are now, I think we may assume," the doctor remarked, addressing himself more particularly to Ben Grove, "on the island as your unfortunate friend knew it and described it to you. Let us, then, for a moment recall what he told you. He said he had discovered a wonderful gold cave, where some curious kind of water had, by the dripping of ages probably, covered everything in it with a coating of pure gold. He showed you some pebbles, shells, and so on, which you kept, and which we now know were coated with pure gold, so that seemed to show that his story about the cave might be true enough.

"Also, since our arrival here we ourselves have actually found pebbles similarly coated, which is additional corroboration of his statements. Very well! Now, as to that gold cave. He said he had discovered it alone, unaided, the chief difficulty being, I understood, that it lay in a place difficult of access.

"Since then the place, as he said it existed, seems to have been raised

higher out of the sea in such a manner as to make it still more difficult of access. But we have overcome that difficulty, and here we are on the high ground, and if what he said is true, and it exists to-day as it existed then, we ought to be able to find it without much difficulty. I suggest we separate and go different ways, assembling again here, say, in a few hours' time. But if any one of us should make any discovery or require help from the others, let him fire two shots quickly, and the others are then to hasten in the direction of the sound."

Alec glanced at Clive, and each knew what was in the other's mind.

"Does it matter, sir, if we two go together?" Alec asked. "I think if there is any wonderful golden cave to be discovered, and we should happen on it, it would be more pleasing if we both made the find together."

The doctor smiled.

"By all means—by all means," he answered. "I wish you luck! I hope you'll be the two to find it first, and I'm sure Ben Grove won't mind."

Grove laughed.

"Not me, sir!" he declared stoutly. "I'd be as glad as if I found it meself—ay, an' gladder!"

"Thus, then, it was arranged, and the two young fellows set off one way, while the doctor and Grove went in other directions.

Wherever the two friends wandered, they were struck with the beauty of the place. The flowers exhaled most delicious perfumes, butterflies of wonderful colouring flitted from blossom to blossom, and here and there they came across delicious wild fruits.

"Hang it!" exclaimed Alec. "To think we have been wasting our time

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mooning about in that gloomy region below while all the time there was this beautiful place waiting ready to receive us up here!"

"Well, it's all through those blanked freebooters, Clive. We couldn't do anything in the exploring line in comfort so long as they were likely to attack us at any moment."

They came to a place where they had extensive views of the rest of the island. In the centre the great crater rose, and from its top smoke was issuing.

It was the first time they had either of them had a view of a volcano, and seeing it as they now did, so near and from a nearly equal height, it was a grand, awe-inspiring scene.

Alec and Clive sat side by side on a ledge or terrace of rock on the top of the mountain, taking a rest.

They had been hunting around for two or three hours without meeting with anything in the way of encouragement in their search, and now they were hot and tired.

From where they were sitting, they had an extensive view over a large part of the island below, with the sea on one side in the distance. Also, they could now see more than they had been able to see before of the volcano—the smoking mountain which rose, grim and frowning, in the centre of the island, shutting out all view of the landscape upon the other side of it.

The doctor and Ben Grove were each wandering about, as the two chums had been doing, but in different directions; and as nothing had been heard from them, it was pretty certain that they had fared no better in their quest than the young fellows themselves.

For it had been arranged that the first to make any "find" of any importance should fire two shots as a signal to the others, who would thereupon make their way towards the sound, to assist in following up whatever discovery had been made.

Alec puffed away at his pipe in rather pessimistic mood. He seemed to have had an idea that they had only to get to the top of the heretofore inaccessible precipices and they would very quickly find the golden grotto they had heard so much about, or, at least, come upon the source of the "water of gold"—the wondrous stream which covered everything upon which it flowed with the precious metal.

"It's very provoking!" grumbled Alec. "We seem not an atom nearer to finding what we are looking for up here than down below!"

"Well, there's no particular hurry, you know," returned Clive good-humouredly. "It's a charming place up here, and we are enjoying ourselves—at least, I know I am. It's a regular paradise after the sort of thing we were condemned to down below. Here you have luxuriant vegetation in place of bare rock, streams of pure, crystal water dancing and sparkling in the sunlight, the music of cascades and waterfalls, luscious fruits to be had for the picking, sweet, refreshing breezes—everything charming, delightful, fairy-like——"

How long Clive might have gone on in this strain it is difficult to say, but just as he had got so far he caught his chum's eyes turned upon him with such a whimsical expression in them that he stopped dead short.

"Great Scott!" breathed Alec, taking a long breath. "What a fine flow of adjectives, to be sure! So poetical, too! What a spring poet you would make! I should cultivate that gift, if I were you. I had no idea that you had it in you! But there's one thing you forgot to enumerate."

"What's that?" Clive asked, half sulkily, half laughing.

"Why, that fine, big, smoking mountain over yonder! We have never before had such a good view of it as we get from here. To tell the truth,

though, I don't think it improves on acquaintance. The more clearly you can see it, the more ugly, repellent, sinister, sombre, baleful——"

Here he stopped short in his turn as Clive burst out laughing.

"My stars, Alec," the latter said, "you yourself seem to have a pretty good stock of adjectives stored up somewhere in that head of yours! But don't let us trouble about that silly old volcano! So long as it doesn't interfere with us more than it has so far——"

"That's just it!" Alec pointed out. "How do we know it won't? Volcanoes are very treacherous, uncertain affairs—never to be trusted, you know."

"Well, it's been well-behaved lately anyway, and it seems to me to be getting quieter."

"Don't you count too much upon that," Alec commented. "It's sometimes a bad sign, and it may be so here; and I fancy the doctor thinks so, too."

"The doctor?" exclaimed Clive, in surprise.

Alec nodded his head.

"Yes. I have an idea somehow that he is a bit doubtful or uneasy. I've noticed him consulting his stock of scientific contraptions—you know what I mean—a good deal just lately, and he's had two or three secret conferences with the captain."

"That may be only about Diego, or the position of the ship," Clive suggested, but a little doubtfully.

"Maybe. Anyhow, he's said nothing so far. I expect, therefore, that he doesn't feel very much troubled about it really, so we can put it on one side for the present. And now I suppose we ought to resume our Herculean labours of searching for this gold we've come up here to look for. Which direction shall we go in next?"

As he had been speaking he had risen to his feet, and Clive rose, too.

Alec had only taken one quick glance when he seized hold of his chum and forced him down.

"Down! Down! Down you go, man!" he hissed in a hoarse whisper; and just as they sank down a couple of bullets whistled close overhead.

There followed the sound of two shots. But they scarcely heard them, for Alec, in his sudden excitement and his eagerness to get his friend out of the line of fire, had acted so roughly that they both lost their footing and rolled off the ledge.

Down they bumped on to a narrower ledge just below, and off that again into a tangle of long grass and little bushes.

And here a fresh development awaited them. They came to earth, it is true, with a thud; but the earth itself seemed to give way, and they plunged clean through it—down, down, amid a lot of vegetation and soil, small bushes and clattering stones and rocks, down into almost total darkness, only stopping when they came to the floor of a cavern below.

This floor, fortunately for them, was covered with a bed of fine, soft sand, which broke their fall considerably.

Still, they were pretty well bruised and shaken, and dazed as well, when, after a space, they pulled themselves together, sat up, and looked round.

It was little they could see, however. The place seemed as dark as pitch. They were still in a cloud of dust, which had not yet subsided, and the only thing really visible was a sort of rift pretty high up overhead. Even this did not give them a clear view of the sky. What light there was had to filter, as it were, through a network of boughs and grass and other green-stuff.

(Continued overleaf.)

There were mutual inquiries, and then an idea occurred to Alec. He produced from his pocket a small electric torch, turned it on, and looked about. By good luck the fall had not injured the lamp, and its rays shot out first in one direction and then in another as he turned it from side to side.

"Wh-what was it happened to us?" asked Clive, a little shakily. "And where are we?"

"As to where we are, one can only say that we've tumbled into some underground hole or cave. We must have fallen clean through the roof, which, of course, must have been pretty thin. As to what happened—well, all I know is that, as I looked round, I saw the sun glinting on the barrels of two rifles pointed straight at us! I had only half a second in which to make up my mind. I'm afraid I was a bit rough! I knocked you over, didn't I?"

"Why, yes!" Clive replied, rubbing himself in two or three places. "Your method was certainly a bit drastic; but I expect, from what you say, that it saved my life. So I'm not grumbling. I can only thank you. But who on earth was it fired at us?"

"Can't say!" Alec answered laconically. "Couldn't see. No time to look."

"Well," said Clive musingly, "they were enemies, of course. And the question arises; who the deuce could they be, and how did they get up here? We had to make use of our aeroplane to get here, but they certainly had nothing of that sort to help them. So how did they do it?"

"You must ask me another, old chap! I give it up for the time being. Now, what about our belongings? Where are our rifles?"

He turned the light about, but it only revealed one rifle, which Alec picked up and examined.

"Here's mine," he muttered, "but I'm afraid it's had a nasty jar, and I'm rather doubtful whether it's what one may term usable. But as to yours—well, I can't see it anywhere!"

They both got on their feet and searched around, but were soon convinced that the missing weapon was certainly not there.

"I remember that I had laid it aside," said Clive regretfully, "so I suppose it's up top there still. Well, now, as to getting out! What's the position as to that?"

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

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