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OF THE
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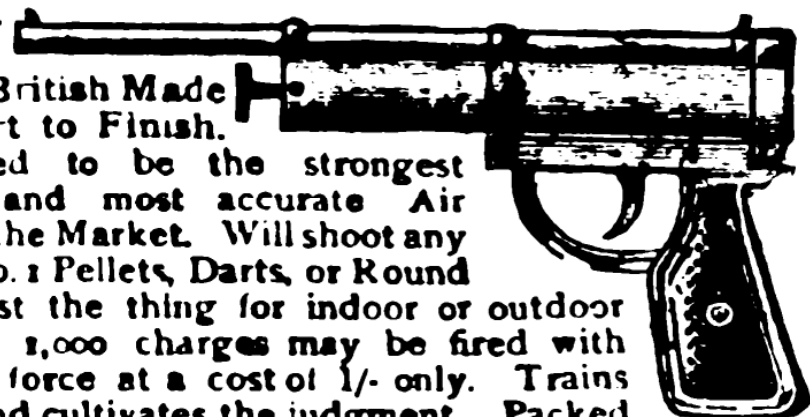
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CHAPTER I.

THE REMARKABLE INCIDENT OF THE
SLATE-GREY LIMOUSINE.

NIPPER grunted.

Considering the lad's somewhat extraordinary position, this was not very surprising. Lucid articulation was scarcely possible under the circumstances, and so Nipper grunted. It was very necessary to express his feelings in some way or other.

For Nelson Lee's young assistant was lying upon his back, in a most contorted attitude; upon a dusty road. Towering above him was the bulk of a powerful motor-cycle and side-car. In short, something had gone wrong, and Nipper was investigating. And, as usually happens, the trouble was in an extremely awkward place.

It was pitchy dark, and Nipper was struggling valiantly with a spanner in one hand and an electric torch in the other.

The road was not precisely dry, and this did not add to Nipper's comfort.

"Bust the rotten thing!" growled Nipper, sitting up with difficulty. "I believe the makers of this bicycle shoved the gear-box down here for the express purpose of causing as much trouble as possible."

"Haven't you finished yet, young 'un?"

It was a quiet voice from the side-car—a rather sleepy voice, as a matter of fact. Cosily tucked away amid the luxurious cushions of the car, and well wrapped in rugs, sat Nelson Lee himself. The wait had been a somewhat lengthy one, and the famous detective—being very comfortable—was on the point of dosing off.

Nipper positively snorted. A grunt was really insufficient to express his feelings.

He scrambled to his feet and stood by the side-car.

"Yes, you look right enough, guv'nor!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "You lay there snoozing, and calmly ask me if I've done! We sha'n't be away from this spot for hours—perhaps not till morning! The rotten gear-box has jiggered up!"

"That sounds rather cheering, my lad."

"A fat lot you care!" said Nipper dismally.

"My dear Nipper, you invited me out for this run, and I am in your hands completely," said Lee comfortably. "This comes of purchasing a motor-cycle of an unfamiliar make. Perhaps you had better admit defeat, and push the whole contraption into the nearest town."

"With you in the side-car!" roared Nipper.

"Why not?"

"Well, I could name about a dozen reasons why not!" replied Nipper, in forced tones. "The main reason is that you're too thundering fat and heavy for me to shove. You'll have to get out and walk, guv'nor. Besides," the lad added, "I expect I shall be able to fix things up before long."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I was waiting for that, young 'un," he said amusedly. "I'm sure you'll locate the trouble very soon. If I can be of any assistance——"

"You sit where you are, guv'nor," interjected Nipper gruffly. "I'm not going to be beaten by a fat-headed gear-box, anyhow. I'll find out what's wrong in a few minutes—you see if I don't."

"I understood that we should not get away from this place for hours," remarked Lee languidly. "Your statements are somewhat conflicting, Nipper. I've got an

idea, however, that you have already discovered the trouble. How long do you think it will take you to effect repairs?"

Nipper was now grovelling on the ground again.

"About ten minutes, guv'nor," he panted. "It's only a little job, after all—not so much as I thought."

Lee chuckled again, and settled himself to wait. Meanwhile, Nipper was busy with his spanner, and certain weird sounds from below told Lee that the youngster was struggling manfully to get the machine in running order again.

The famous detective had offered to lend a hand at the outset, but Nipper had declared that he would soon be able to set things to rights.

The motor-cycle was a brand-new one, and this trip had been undertaken just for the sake of proving what a "goer" the machine was. Unfortunately, something had worked loose, and this rather lengthy delay was the consequence.

Nipper had purchased the side-car combination, and it had been delivered to him that evening. Full of enthusiasm, the lad had persuaded his master to accompany him on a trial trip.

And so the pair had run out to Colchester and back, particularly because Lee had wished to visit a client in the Essex town. The detective saw no reason why Nipper's trial should not be made to serve some useful purpose. For, after all, the motor-cycle had not been purchased for pleasure purposes. Nipper wanted a reliable mount on which he could dash off at any minute of the day or night with the positive assurance that he would reach his destination.

This breakdown on the initial trip was, therefore, scarcely promising. But Nipper was quite sure that the trouble was merely a matter of adjustment—and the lad was right.

The outfit was a splendid one in every way, the cycle being a British-made machine of sterling quality. Nelson Lee had been delayed slightly in Colchester, and the journey back was not attempted until the evening was well advanced. And now, midway between Brentwood and Romford, the travellers were stuck. And the hour was after midnight—nearly one o'clock, as a matter of fact.

At last Nipper gave a triumphant grunt, and rose to his feet. The surface of the road was dusty for the most part, but here and there little "pot-holes" were filled with moisture. Nipper's appearance, therefore, was not improved; but as he

was wearing very serviceable overalls, a little mud did not worry him.

"Right as rain, now, guv'nor!" he declared, stowing the electric torch away, and pulling on his gauntlets. "I'll bet she'll start up at the first kick. It wasn't so serious as I thought. Jolly awkward place to get at, though."

The lad's words proved to be true, for upon kicking down the starting pedal, the engine hummed with a musical roar. It was a four-cylinder power unit, and ran very sweetly.

Nipper slipped in the clutch, and in a few moments the side-car combination was gliding smoothly and swiftly through the night. It was necessary, however, to drive with a certain amount of caution, for, in compliance with the lighting regulations, the headlamp was dimmed to such an extent that it was of no practical use.

It was close upon two o'clock when Stratford was passed, and when nearing Bow a few spots of rain drove into Nipper's face. He put on speed, slightly, for he was anxious to get home.

But a remarkable incident was destined to occur almost at once—an incident which had elements of drama in it.

"Sha'n't be long now, guv'nor!" bawled Nipper, turning his head. "We'll mop through Whitechapel——"

"Look out, young 'un!" warned Lee, sharply.

But the words were really unnecessary, for Nipper was an expert motor-cyclist, and even as Lee spoke he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a closed motor swerve out of a side turning and take its place ahead, also travelling towards London.

"Silly juggins!" growled Nipper. He had been forced to throttle down, and apply the brake for a moment, for the automobile had swung into the main road swiftly, and without even a blast from its horn.

The car was slate-grey in colour, and was of the limousine type—totally closed in.

"I'll show that fool of a driver what speed is!" ejaculated Nipper, jerking the throttle lever. "We'll get ahead of him, guv'nor!"

The wide road was practically deserted; indeed, no other vehicle was in sight save the limousine just ahead. The powerful motor-cycle forged onwards, and soon drew level with the motor-car. Nelson Lee looked at it idly as he was slowly whirled past—for both vehicles were now travelling at a fair speed.

And then something occurred which had the effect of rousing the detective

considerably. Truth to tell, he had been inclined to dose, for the side-car was sprung splendidly, and the cushions were delightfully soft.

"Well, upon my soul!" ejaculated Lee abruptly.

During the first idle glance he had noticed that the tonneau blinds were all drawn. Two or three slits of light, however, made it clear that the rear of the car was occupied. And, quite suddenly, the door blind was jerked wildly aside. It moved to and fro for a second and was then torn completely down. Nelson Lee caught a glimpse of two men—three, perhaps—engaged in a mad struggle within the car.

The motor-cycle was gaining rapidly, however, and Lee was only able to catch that one glimpse.

"Hold on, Nipper!" shouted Lee urgently.

Nipper, whose attentions was devoted to his driving, had seen nothing of the struggle within the car. But he knew by his master's tone that there was serious need for slowing down. Without question and without hesitation the lad closed the throttle and jammed on the foot brake.

The result was not to Nelson Lee's liking.

For, naturally, the side-car dropped behind at once, while the limousine forged ahead. As events turned out, however, it was lucky that Nipper had so promptly obeyed Lee's injunction.

For while the detective was gazing ahead at the closed motor-car the door burst open with a distinct snap.

A man's form plunged out, crashed to the road, and lay perfectly still—full in the path of the now moderately moving motor-cycle.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper.

In that second he proved his prowess, and displayed great presence of mind. With singular adroitness he brought his machine round, tipping up the side-car in the process. But the fallen man was avoided, and the machine came to a standstill just beyond.

"Phew! Narrow shave, that!" panted Nipper. "I thought we were going to butt into that poor chap."

Nelson Lee was looking ahead. He had expected the motor-car to stop, but this did not happen. The detective had caught a glimpse of a white, startled face gazing from the car. Then the door closed with a slam, and the vehicle continued on its course with increased speed.

"By James! That's curious!" muttered Nelson Lee, leaping from the side-car. "I'm afraid this poor fellow is gravely injured."

As it happened, the road was particularly dark just here, and nobody seemed to be about. At all events, Lee and Nipper had the place to themselves, and they both hurried back and bent over the man who was lying upon the road just between the tramway tracks.

He appeared to be well dressed, but his collar and tie were torn out of place, and blood was streaming from a gash upon his forehead. Nelson Lee made a rapid examination, and found that nothing serious was the matter.

"Bruised and dazed—that's all, Nipper," exclaimed the detective crisply.

"We'll put him in the side-car."

"Hospital, gov'nor?"

"No. He is not so badly injured as to necessitate driving to a hospital," declared Lee. "We'll take him home with us and bring him round. To be honest, I am somewhat curious regarding the remarkable incident we witnessed."

"I didn't see anything, sir."

"This man appeared to be struggling with two others in the car," said the detective, as he and Nipper carried the limp form towards the side-car. "Obviously he got the worst of the tussle, for he was flung from the car. It's rather surprising that he was not gravely injured. I fully expected to find several bones broken."

"Matter of luck," said Nipper. "He just happened to fall in the right way."

They placed the man in the side-car, and Lee bound his handkerchief round the stranger's bleeding temple. He was already showing signs of recovery, for his eyes were partially opened and he was muttering something to himself.

As Lee had said, the stranger was only dazed, and would rapidly come round; the blow in the side-car would probably have excellent effect, for the wind was keen.

"Off you go, Nipper!" said Lee briskly. "I'll sit on the carrier for the remainder of the journey."

The carrier of the cycle was a large, roomy one, and formed an excellent seat in an emergency. Nipper started up, and very soon the trio were speeding onwards. The slate-grey limousine had, of course, completely disappeared. Just when the Pavilion Theatre was being passed the injured man sat up in the side-car and looked about him in aston-

ishment. The cold, rushing air had revived him completely.

"Why, what——"

"Don't worry yourself, my dear sir," interjected Lee, bending over. "You fell out of a motor-car and we picked you up."

The stranger felt his bandaged head.

"Yes, I—I remember," he muttered.

"I want to go to—— Where are you taking me to?" he added, with clearer intelligence. "Not to hospital? I'm all right. Only bruised, I think."

"If you wish to be driven home we will oblige, of course," said Nelson Lee.

"But I thought it would be better if you had a short rest. My name is Nelson Lee, and I live in Gray's Inn Road. You are heartily welcome to remain in my rooms until you feel fit enough to be taken home."

The other stared at the detective wonderingly.

"Nelson Lee!" he repeated. "The—— the detective?"

Lee nodded.

"Well, that's curious—deucedly curious!" exclaimed the other huskily.

"I—I'll come with you, Mr. Lee, although I'm feeling heaps better already. It's an amazing thing that you should have picked me up."

"Perhaps we had better leave talking until we arrive?" suggested Leo gently.

"Once we get home I'll soon patch you up, for I'm a bit of a doctor in my own way."

The stranger smiled as he held his head.

"I don't think it will be necessary for you to patch me up, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "I am a medical man by profession, as it happens."

He seemed to experience a wave of pain at that moment, for he leaned back among the cushions with his hands held tightly to his head. And no further word was uttered until Gray's Inn Road was reached.

Nelson Lee and Nipper assisted their companion to alight, and then found that he was really quite capable of walking alone. For a few moments he stamped about on the pavement, and at last impulsively thrust out his hand.

"It's dirty, but I hope you'll take it, Mr. Lee," he said simply.

The detective did so with a smile, and the pair exchanged a warm grip. Obviously the stranger was a well-educated and refined man.

"I'll leave the jigger down here, guv'nor," said Nipper, as Lee opened the

door. "It won't come to any harm, and we may want it before long."

Up in the consulting room the detective switched on the electric lights, and then took stock of the man who had been picked up in the East End.

He was tallish and quite good-looking, and was certainly not above thirty years of age. In addition to his injured temple there was an ugly graze on his chin, and his left eye was swelling and turning purple.

His clothes were torn and ruffled, and smothered with grime. Yet, in spite of these disadvantages, the stranger nevertheless presented a distinguished appearance. His sorry state could not disguise the very obvious gentility of the man.

"My name is Dr. Felix Mellborne, and I am deeply indebted to you, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the stranger heartily. "I'm afraid I'm causing you an infernal amount of trouble——"

"Not in the least, my dear sir," interrupted Leo quickly. "I think it's I who should apologise for the cheerless state of this apartment. You see, Nipper and myself have been out all the evening, and there is, consequently, no fire. However, the room is quite warm and the night is fairly mild. I'll soon have some water heated in order to bathe your injuries."

Dr. Mellborne laughed.

"I'm feeling wonderfully better, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "That blow in your side-car did me a world of good. And you must not think of troubling yourself to bother with bandages or anything of that nature."

"But I shall trouble——"

"Please don't," went on the young doctor. "I feel that I am imposing upon you in a most unwarrantable fashion."

Nelson Lee laughed shortly.

"To tell you the truth, Dr. Mellborne," he said, "I am acting with a selfish motive. My curiosity was aroused by what I saw within the motor-car, and I was hoping perhaps, that you would explain matters."

The doctor nodded at once.

"That's my exact intention," he declared.

"Good!"

"As soon as you told me your name, Mr. Lee, I realised that I could not have fallen into better hands," continued Mellborne. "For it was my intention to go straight to the nearest police-station and lay information."

"Oh, then my suspicions were justified?" asked the detective. "I had an

idea that something was very seriously amiss."

"And you were correct—absolutely correct," said Mellborne grimly. "I feel that it will be my best course to relate my amazing experience to you. I am sure you will be interested."

"I have an idea that I shall," said Nelson Lee. "Let me hasten to say, however, that I have not the slightest wish to inquire into any private or personal affair. You must not——"

"Hold on, Mr. Lee," was the doctor's interruption. "There is nothing of a private nature in that which I am going to tell you. On the contrary, it is my desire to make the whole thing as public as possible."

Nipper had been busying himself, and in a few minutes he invited Dr. Mellborne to accompany him to the bathroom.

Here there was hot water, and in a short time the injured man was being carefully attended to. His cuts and grazes were gently bathed, and then treated by Lee himself. The detective knew precisely what to do, and his skilful hands made light work of the task.

The young doctor's injuries were extremely painful, but in no way serious. He was badly bruised about the legs, and his left ankle was slightly ricked. In addition, his right arm was grazed and raw.

By the time Lee had done, Mellborne's appearance was vastly changed. At last the visitor was seated in a big armchair in the consulting-room, looking clean and fresh. His pains and aches were eased wonderfully, and he declared that his head was as clear as a bell.

This, perhaps, was a slight exaggeration, but there was no doubt at all that the famous criminologist's treatment was decidedly beneficial. Mellborne looked at Lee almost wonderingly.

"You are a brick, Mr. Lee!" he declared enthusiastically. "I dare say I shall feel these bruises more to-morrow, but I am as comfortable as possible now. 'Pon my soul, you would make an excellent doctor!"

Nelson Lee smiled, and passed his cigar-case to the visitor.

The pair lit up, and then Mellborne settled himself back in his chair. Lee and Nipper occupied seats in close proximity, and waited. They believed that they were going to hear a surprising story.

"Now, Mr. Lee, how are we going to start?" asked Mellborne. "Shall I go straight ahead, or will you question me?"

"Go straight ahead, by all means."

"As you like. I will tell the yarn in my own words, and tell you everything as it occurred, in its proper sequence," said the doctor. "I think that will be the best way."

"One moment. How long will the narrative take to tell?"

"Oh, about half an hour, perhaps."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Very well, then," he said quietly.

"You had better tell the story in your own words, doctor, and take your time. There is no immediate hurry. Nipper and I will sit and listen without an interruption until the end. If we have any questions to ask, we will wait until you have finished."

"Splendid!" said Dr. Felix Mellborne.

The trio were now comfortably settled down, and Nelson Lee and Nipper fully believed that they were going to listen to a remarkable narrative of events. And they were certainly not wrong in that belief.

The doctor took a few puffs at his cigar, found that it was burning evenly, and then commenced speaking in quiet, well-modulated tones.

CHAPTER II.

(*Dr. Felix Mellborne's story in his own words.*)

THE SINGULAR AFFAIR OF THE TWO STRANGERS.

I SUPPOSE my practice in the East End would be considered rather a good one by most people (began the doctor).

It is a curious practice, in its way, and I think I am well liked by my patients.

It is no part of my story, however, to dwell upon personal matters. My surgery is situated in Blythmor Street, just this side of Bow.

At about half-past twelve—perhaps a few minutes later—I was preparing to retire for the night. My day's work had been rather tiring, and I was glad of the prospect of getting into bed.

But, as it proved, I was to be disappointed.

I was actually at the door of my surgery, with my hand on the electric-light switch, when there came to my ears the sound of a motor-car coming to a sudden halt outside my door.

"Confound it!" I muttered irritably. "Surely I am not going to be bothered now?"

A doctor gets rather callous, and the thought of being whisked away somewhere, just when I was longing for my bed, was annoying. All the same, I waited a few moments in order to see what would happen.

My night-bell rang loudly and for a considerable time, as though the person at the pull-push was extremely agitated. Realising that there was no escape for me, so to speak, I at once went out into the hall, switched on the light, and unbolted the front door.

I found myself confronted by two men. They at once stepped across the threshold and walked right into my surgery. I, of course, followed, and faced them. They were both pale, and there was alarm and anxiety in their eyes.

"Are you Dr. Mellborne?" demanded one of them.

"Yes," I replied. "I am afraid I cannot help you unless your case is very urgent. I will willingly accompany you if I am satisfied—"

"You have got to come with us, doctor!" said the man fiercely. "A terrible accident has happened. My name is Henry Smith, and my brother has been burnt about the right arm and side owing to a—*a* paraffin lamp exploding."

"How far away?" I asked sharply.

"Not far; we'll take you there in a few minutes."

I hesitated. Frankly, I did not care for the appearance of the two strangers. They were well-dressed enough, and they both appeared to be gentlemen. But Henry Smith was very foreign-looking, and he spoke, moreover, with a slight accent. I could not exactly determine his true nationality, although I suspected him of being an Italian. His companion, who stood silently by, was shorter and quite fair. Both were pale and agitated.

It was evident that the accident they referred to was very serious. Therefore, I did not hesitate for long. I decided that in common humanity it was incumbent upon me to lend them my aid.

"Your brother is burned?" I asked.

"Very seriously?"

"Yes, yes! It is terrible!"

"How long ago did the accident happen?"

"About twenty minutes!" replied Smith. "But you must come, Dr. Mellborne—you must come now. Now, do you understand? There is not a second to lose. Poor Peter is in frightful agony."

"Look here," I said. "I had better ring up the London Hospital—it is only

a short distance away. They will send an ambulance, and your brother will be taken to hospital. The case appears to be too serious—"

"No, no, no!" He rapped out the words in sharp staccato tones. "No, doctor! He does not want to go to hospital. It is not serious enough for that. When his burns have been treated he will get better."

I did not waste further time, but immediately placed the necessary things in my bag, and bundled into my overcoat and hat. The strangers were obviously pleased to see that they had gained their object, and I caught them jabbering together in low tones; jabbering in some foreign lingo. Italian, I believe.

"I'm ready, gentlemen," I announced briskly.

They at once left the surgery, and I followed on their heels. We entered the motor-car, and I took my seat between them. The car at once jerked forward, and was soon speeding away.

I noticed that there was a small light—an electric light—in the roof of the car, which was a rather old limousine. The blinds were drawn tightly, so that it was impossible for me to see which direction was being taken.

For some little time we sat silent. I wondered what the end of the adventure would be. The car was now travelling at a good speed, and seemed settled to its stride. Mr. Smith's "few minutes" seemed to be lengthening unduly, and I turned to him with an inquiring glance.

"Not much further, surely?" I asked.

"No. Oh, no!" he replied hastily.

"Only—only just a few yards, doctor. We shall soon be there."

I nodded, and lay back again. A little while later I bent forward and put out my hand to shift the blind over the window of the door. It was annoying to be rushing through the night without knowing my direction.

But both my companions uttered sudden exclamations.

"You must not touch the blind!" said Smith angrily.

"And why not?" I demanded with some heat. "It is stuffy in here, and I want to know where we are going."

"You will know in a few minutes," he answered.

He gave his friend a rather grim look—a look which I did not exactly like. And I was becoming suspicious and angry. I did not care for the aspect of things very much. There was an air of mystery about

the whole business which was decidedly unpalatable.

"We are nearly there now," said Smith, before I could make any further remark. "We are just near Bethnal Green."

This, I knew, was a deliberate lie. The very way in which the man spoke the words told me that he was fabricating; and I am sure, from my natural sense of direction, that we were making towards West Ham or Stratford—quite the opposite direction to that which he named.

What was the meaning of this extraordinary secrecy?

"Look here, Mr. Smith," I said firmly. "I consented to come with you because I seriously believed your case to be an urgent one. But I did not consent to treatment of this sort. I demand to know where I am being taken."

"To Bethnal Green," he replied.

"I don't believe you!" said I sharply. "Confound you! I'm going to shift that blind! I am not going to be hemmed in like a prisoner being taken to gaol! And there is another point, my friend. Are there no doctors in Bethnal Green—taking it for granted that we are bound for that place?"

"We preferred to come to you," he answered grimly. "You will be wise to sit still and quiet, Dr. Mellborne——"

"I shall do no such thing!" I snapped, losing my temper completely.

To tell the truth, I was not only angry, but alarmed. This affair was getting on my nerves. To be scooped up in the limousine, unaware of my direction, and positively certain that something was gravely wrong, was more than my temper could stand.

I leaned forward, intending to wrench the blind down bodily, and, if necessary, open the door and shout to the driver to stop. But at that very moment the car slowed down, and, with a jerk, came to a standstill.

"Ah!" exclaimed Smith, with relief. "We are there!"

At that second the light snapped out, and we were in total darkness. I felt something pressed forcibly against my left side—something which seemed to be about the size and shape of a thick lead pencil.

"All pretence is now dropped, Dr. Mellborne," said Smith, in quiet tones. "This is no ordinary case, as I led you to suppose. Please take careful note of my words. You must do exactly as you are ordered, and ask no questions whatever."

I was too surprised to be angry then.

"What in the name of all that's amazing do you mean?" I asked blankly.

"I mean that your own safety lies in your following out my orders," he said, with a harsh note in his voice. "If you submit quietly you will come to no harm, and will be taken back to your own surgery and paid well for your trouble."

"Suppose I refuse to carry out your orders?" I snapped.

"You will not refuse——"

"I think I shall!" I cried furiously. "You infernal scoundrel——"

"One moment!" His voice was harsher than before. "If possible I wish to avoid any unpleasantness or violence. But I warn you that you will be extremely foolish to pit your strength against ours."

He jammed the lead pencil further into my side.

"And it may interest you to learn that this is the barrel of a revolver, and that my finger is on the trigger," he went on grimly. "Any sudden movement on your part will have unfortunate results. Be sensible, Dr. Mellborne, and give me your word that you will not attempt any tricks."

I had a notion that he was lying about the revolver. Perhaps the thing sticking into my side was only a lead pencil, as I had first supposed—or even a tobacco-pipe. But there was a doubt about the matter which made me pause.

"This is beyond a joke," I began heatedly.

"You will find nothing whatever humorous in the situation, I assure you," Smith declared drily. "Come, doctor, be sensible. We are wasting precious time. My finger is beginning to ache, too."

"I refuse to obey your orders!" I curtly replied.

I thought, perhaps, that a little bluff would unsettle the scoundrels—for scoundrels they obviously were. I was to find, however, that bluff was of no avail. Smith uttered a curse, and said something sharply to his companion.

Next second a sack, or some thing of that nature, was thrust forcibly over my head. Before I could raise my hands it was over my shoulders, and I was nearly stifled by the dust which filled my nostrils and throat.

Coughing violently, I felt myself pushed out of the car, both my arms fiercely held. It was impossible for me to struggle or to make any attempt to shout. That dust had evidently been placed in the sack for the special purpose of choking and blinding me.

The sack still over my head, I

was pushed forcibly through a doorway, and then along a straight passage. Here I was fogged, for I was turned first to the right and then to the left. Finally, I went down some stone steps, and I heard a heavy door slam behind me.

Another short walk and then another door was closed.

"Off with the sack," said Smith's voice curtly.

And off it came. I had partially recovered by now, for the dust was in no way injurious. Blinking round, I saw that I was in a fairly small apartment, lit with electric light. Smith was facing me, his revolver now held openly in his hand. There was no longer any need for concealment. And the thing certainly was a revolver—and of a particularly business-looking type.

The room was evidently a cellar, for the floor was of stone flags, and the walls of brick. All except one wall, that is. This was merely a matchboard partition. There was a door in it, and this way closed. The match lining did not quite reach to the ceiling, and I observed that there was a light in the room beyond.

I was amazed and startled, as well as being furious.

"You shall pay dearly for this treatment!" I exclaimed hoarsely.

"There is your patient, doctor," said Smith, pointing.

I turned and saw, upon a rough couch, the figure of a short, stoutish man. He was well-dressed like the others, and was quite conscious. But there was an expression of pitiful agony in his eyes, which instantly made me forget the singular treatment I had received.

All my professional instincts came to the fore.

"My bag!" I said sharply. "You fools, you have left it in the car——"

"It is here!" It was the other man who spoke; the man who had been silent so far. And his accent was quite pronounced. Smith spoke splendid English and it was difficult to detect a flaw in his speech.

For the next twenty minutes I was busy—wholly taken up with my work. For the injured man was indeed burned dreadfully about the left arm. His side was merely scorched.

I was rather puzzled regarding the man's injury, and while I was binding up the arm, after having applied soothing ointment, I turned my head.

Smith was standing against the door which led into the apartment behind the

partition. The revolver was still in his hand, and there was an expression of grimness in his eyes which plainly told me that he meant business.

"How did you say this man's burns were caused?" I inquired.

He hesitated for a second.

"A paraffin lamp exploded in this other apartment," he replied, jerking his head towards the partition. "Fortunately, we got the fire under control at once."

"That's right—that's right," exclaimed the injured man, looking at me fixedly. "It was a lamp that did it. It exploded in my hand."

I could not help smiling.

"Why are you not frank with me?" I asked, with a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

"Surely you do not expect me to believe such an obviously false story? To begin with, these burns are far more serious than any which could have been caused by paraffin oil. And I perceive an electric light in this adjoining apartment. No, my friends, that yarn won't do."

"It's the truth, at all events," exclaimed Smith doggedly.

"I suppose it is useless to argue with you," said I. "In my opinion, this man's arm was seared with something in the nature of molten metal. I have had experience of such cases before. Ah! I don't think I am far wrong!"

I added the words as all three men exchanged swift, almost alarmed glances. It was clear that molten metal was the cause of the burns.

"The story is good enough for you," growled Smith fiercely. "If you are wise, Dr. Mellborne, you will refrain from asking questions. You have come to no harm, and will be taken back to your surgery as soon as you have finished with my brother. If we are forced to use violence——"

"You have used violence already," I interjected curtly. "I am not here of my own free will, I assure you. And I shall consider it my duty to inform the police of what has occurred."

Smith laughed harshly.

"You are at liberty to tell the police what you choose," he said. "They will be able to discover nothing. You have finished, I see. What is your opinion regarding my brother's condition?"

"He is badly burned," I replied, "and hospital is the best place for him. I, at least, will not be answerable for his recovery. It is essential that a doctor should attend him constantly until his burns have——"

"I am making arrangements for his

treatment after to-night," interjected the other. "Will he be all right until morning?"

"Oh, yes,"

"You have made me feel easy, doctor," put in the injured man gratefully. "I was in terrible agony until you came. This business may strike you as peculiar, but, believe me, there is nothing wrong. It was necessary that you should be left in ignorance of your destination. I have given instructions for you to be paid double fees for your trouble."

I had finished, and commenced re-packing my bag. In the process I lingered somewhat, in order to obtain a space for careful thought. What could be the meaning of this remarkable affair?

Who was Smith?

The name was false, of course, and this **underground apartment was a kind of secret chamber**, I was sure. An intense curiosity filled me. I knew well enough that these men were determined, and that the inner apartment contained something of such a nature that it was necessary to mount guard over the door.

Smith was standing there, revolver in hand, and he had not shifted from his position once. What was beyond that door? My curiosity was keenly aroused, and I felt that it would be tame to leave the place without having first obtained a glimpse of the other room.

Perhaps it was foolhardy on my part, but I loathed the thought of being utterly at the mercy of these unknown scoundrels. I wanted to know why they had adopted such extraordinary means of gaining my attendance.

It was clear to me why they had not taken the injured man to a doctor near by, instead of fetching me, as they had done. In the first place, the fellow had probably been unconscious, and to shift him was dangerous. And in the second place, to take him to a local medico would have been risky; inquiries would have been made that would have been awkward to answer. And Smith had said that arrangements were being made to attend his brother on the morrow. I suspected that the patient was as much Smith's brother as I was.

"You have finished?"

The words brought me out of my reverie. And in that second I decided to make a bold stroke. I badly wanted to see beyond that confounded door. That it was unlocked was obvious. If it had been secured Smith would not have been on guard.

I bent over the patient, and suddenly uttered a cry of horror.

"Great heavens!" I gasped. "The man is dying! Look here—look here!"

My words were startling, and the tone in which they were uttered was simply thrilling with alarm and horror. At least, I believe so. I did my best, and my two guardians were totally hoodwinked.

They both stepped forward and bent over their injured companion. And in that second I acted. I did not consider the consequences, but just took the bull by the horns, so to speak.

As the men strode forward I took two swift steps to the rear. This brought me to the partition door, and in a second my fingers were on the handle. I turned it, and the door opened.

There was a bellow of fury from Smith, and he and his companion came charging across at me. But I managed to gain one clear glimpse of the contents of that inner apartment.

It was larger than the other room, and there were three big electric lights hanging from the ceiling. All were illuminated. I saw. In all probability one switch turned on the lights of the two divisions of the cellar.

Upon one side stood a large gas furnace, and several crucibles were lying about on benches. One of these latter, too, was piled with a mass of twisted metal, which seemed to be scores of gold settings belonging to jewellery. Two or three stout wooden cases were piled against one wall.

"You spying hound!" snarled Smith furiously.

I was gripped from behind. But I managed to see one other thing in the room. Upon the floor, in front of the furnace, lay a great splash of yellow metal—set hard, of course. And there were blobs and particles of it in almost every corner of the stone floor.

It looked for all the world like a mass of thick gold paint. But I knew that it was really gold itself. And the mystery was a mystery no longer. The injured man had clearly upset a crucible of molten gold, burning himself seriously as a result. And his companion had at once set about procuring a doctor—myself. The gold had been left on the floor, where it was now cold and set.

I understand why Smith had been anxious to keep me out of the inner room, and why it was essential for me to be unaware of my exact location. These men were criminals, and it would have been a disaster had I known all the facts.

Accordingly, they had taken great precautions.

My rashness, however, was to cost me dear. If I had submitted quietly I suppose I should have been quietly escorted back to the motor-car, and driven home to my surgery.

As it was, I received a painful blow upon the back of my head—delivered, I believe, by the butt of Smith's revolver. I staggered dizzily, but I was not stunned. Before I could even turn the sack was again pulled over my head. This time the clinking dust was not nearly so thick, and I was not much inconvenienced.

My hands were gripped behind me, and I was forced towards the door. As I moved the sack shifted a trifle, and a tiny parting in the strands came opposite my eyes. It was not a hole, and from the exterior was apparently invisible. But I could see the yellow light of the electric-lamp clearly. All objects, however, were indistinguishable and blurred. So my position was in no way improved.

"If you make the least outcry you will be killed!" muttered a fierce voice near my ear. "Make no mistake about that, Dr. Mellborne!"

I did not believe the threat, but I guessed that any further activity on my part would certainly result in something of a painful nature. In my unfortunate position I was incapable of making a fight for it.

The door was unlocked, and I felt myself pushed along the passage, up the stone steps, and then round two or three corners. Finally, the outer door of the house was reached, and a sudden change in the atmosphere told me that we were in the open air.

All had been black until this second, but now, through the slight parting in the strands of the sack, I saw a blurry light. It was in one spot, and apparently on the opposite side of the street.

I knew what the light was at once—an ordinary street-lamp. But this told me nothing at all, for the shaded light was similar to thousands of others in London, and would be useless as a landmark.

For a second we paused, and I heard low voices.

Then, as I stood stationery, I saw something which nearly made me cry out with satisfaction. I had focussed the hole in the sack, as it were, in a line with the street-lamp opposite, the only familiar object visible to me. Anything normally visible was nothing but a blur.

The lamp, however, stood out like a

beacon compared to all else—as was only natural. One spot of light amid surrounding darkness is always very noticeable, even if the light is only dim.

It was only for a bare second that I stood still, and during that brief space the street-lamp was quite clear to me. And upon it was boldly written the words "Willmead Road."

This was a discovery, indeed!

Now that all London street-lamps are dimmed, many of them have been provided with glass plates upon which the name of the road is placed, for the benefit of pedestrians and others. It was therefore not at all remarkable that this particular lamp should have been one of this type.

Obviously, my captors had no idea that I had seen the name of the road. The next moment I was pushed forward, and found myself once more in the limousine. The vehicle started off, and, after proceeding for a considerable distance, the sack was removed from my head.

It would be unnecessary to say that I was furious. I'm a bit hotheaded by nature, and it wasn't in me to quietly sit there and submit. So the very instant I found myself free, I leapt up in the car with the intention of opening a door and leaping out.

I thought the rogues would be off their guard, but I was mistaken. Before I had half turned the handle they had gripped me, and the next second a lively tussle was in progress. Smith and his companion went for me furiously.

But I got my back against the door, and the blind was torn down in the excitement. Disaster came unexpectedly. Both men lunged at me at the same instant, and my back crashed against the door. Only partially secured, the catch gave way, and I was precipitated headlong into the road.

Falling backwards, I sustained a few nasty injuries, and lay upon the road, half stunned and wholly dazed (concluded Dr. Felix Mellborne). That's the yarn, Mr. Lee; you know all the rest.

CHAPTER III.

THE FINDING OF THE MONTRESSOR GOLD.

NELSON LEE lay back in his chair for some seconds after Dr. Felix Mellborne had concluded his singular story. The doctor had finished his cigar, and now helped himself to another.

"What do you think of the yarn, Mr. Lee?" he asked curiously. "I have done my best to relate it in clear language, and to omit no details. You live a life of perils, and perhaps you will think that I have exaggerated——"

"Not at all," interjected Lee quickly. "My dear doctor, your adventure was most astounding, and you have related it in a masterly manner. Indeed, I can find no questions to ask you, for you have supplied all the information which is available. Upon the whole, you have escaped very luckily."

"Rather," agreed Nipper. "My hat! What a ripping adventure, sir! That was jolly smart of you to spot the name of the street."

Dr. Mellborne smiled.

"No, it was not smart, Nipper," he said. "I just saw the name—that's all. The knowledge may possibly come in handy."

"I am very glad that you told me of this affair," remarked Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "I shall act upon your information without delay, doctor. The police, I have not the slightest doubt, will be very pleased to get hold of the mysterious 'Mr. Smith' and his companions. They are evidently crooks of a desperate character."

"Burglars, do you mean?"

Lee shook his head.

"I do not think they are burglars," he replied. "What you saw in that inner cellar was evidently the loot from many big burglaries; but these men, I suspect, are receiving agents. The stuff probably came into their hands by stages; it may have changed hands five or six times before they got hold of it. A 'fence'—as a receiver of stolen property is sometimes called—is a cautious bird, and he does not keep stuff on his hands for long."

"What are you going to do?" asked the doctor eagerly.

"Do you feel up to journeying to Stratford?"

"To Stratford?"

"Yes."

"Why should we go to Stratford, Mr. Lee?"

"Because Willsmead Road is situated in that district," smiled Lee.

"How do you know that?" asked Mellborne in surprise. "I did not know where the road was. It might be in West Ham or Silvertown or Homerton——"

"It might be," agreed Nelson Lee. "But you see, it isn't. I flatter myself that I know London and Greater London as intimately as any man living. And I know that Willsmead Road is a somewhat quiet

thoroughfare, well off the main road, in the neighbourhood of Stratford. It was marvellously fortunate that you noticed the name of the road on that street lamp, Dr. Mellborne. I want you to point out the lamp, although your presence is not at all necessary. I thought, perhaps, that you would care to be in at the death, as it were."

"By Jove! I should be delighted!" declared the young doctor. "If needs be, I'll take a hand in a fight. I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle again, after your splendid treatment. You'd make a first-class medical man, Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I am afraid the life would be somewhat hum-drum," he said drily. "Your experience of to-night, however, was exciting enough. Now, tell me, doctor. Are you sure the two strangers did not know that you spotted the name of the street?"

"How could they know? They thought that I was completely blinded by the sack, and think so still," replied Mellborne. "After I fell from the car I expect they went home by a roundabout route. They will be in no fear of my laying information, for they believe that I'm in entire ignorance of the locality in which their cellar is situated. They think that I can tell nothing."

"Therefore, they are probably congratulating themselves at the present moment," said Lee easily. "That is extremely satisfactory. From their point of view, everything is in order. Your services were obtained, and they paid nothing for them. And you fell from the car when the journey home was almost completed. Indeed, it is possible that they think you were killed by the fall."

"They'll have reason to believe very differently if I can catch hold of them!" declared the doctor grimly. "But, of course, I leave the affair entirely in your hands, Mr. Lee. You give your orders, and I'll obey them."

The detective had already decided upon which course he should pursue. In a way, this business was no direct concern of his, but whenever he could do the official police a good turn, he was always ready and willing to help.

For this was, of course, purely a police concern. From what Dr. Mellborne had said, it was pretty clear that the cellar in Willsmead Road was simply a place for the boiling down of gold, the results of famous robberies. Once melted, the precious metal was presumably formed into ingots, and then disposed of by devious channels.

With as little delay as possible, Lee and Nipper got their coats and hats on, and Mellborne followed their example. He found that it was a rather painful job to walk, owing to his ricked ankle, but he made no complaint. He was eagerly excited, and would not have missed accompanying the detective for worlds.

Nipper's motor-cycle was still waiting below—nobody had run off with it—and the lad soon had the engine popping round merrily. With the three on board, the side-car combination shot away down Gray's Inn Road, turned up Holborn, and eventually came to a standstill at New Scotland Yard. It was now early morning, but, of course, still quite dark.

As Lee had anticipated, he found Detective-Inspector Morley, of the Criminal Investigation Department, on duty. Lee and his companions were shown straight up into the inspector's office, and the latter eyed them wonderingly. He was an old acquaintance of Nelson Lee's, and the pair were on excellent terms.

"Hallo, early birds!" exclaimed Morley cheerily. "What's the meaning of this, Lee? Seems to be something on the move."

"You're not far wrong, Morley," was Lee's reply. "This gentleman is Dr. Felix Mellborne, and he has supplied me with some information which I intend to pass on to you. It's something you'll welcome."

The inspector eyed Dr. Mellborne inquiringly.

"You seem to have been in the wars, my dear sir," he exclaimed. "Now, what's this information I'm to hear? If you have brought it, Lee, I reckon it will be something worth listening to."

Very quickly Nelson Lee gave his official colleague a brief outline of Mellborne's story. The inspector listened with growing interest, and by the time Lee had finished, his eyes were gleaming with keen satisfaction.

"By Jove! This is welcome news, indeed!" he declared. "We've suspected that the stuff was round that quarter for weeks past, but we've never been able to locate the place. I dare say we shall find the spoils from the Regent Street robbery in this den. There's the Bayswater affair, too; we've never been able to find out where the swag went to. We'll act at once, Lee."

"I thought you'd be interested," said Lee smiling.

"Why man, I'm simply too grateful for words!" cried the inspector. "If this coup comes off successfully, it will be a feather in my cap."

"Thanks to the gov'nor!" murmured Nipper.

Detective-Inspector Morley grinned.

"I suppose you thought I didn't hear that, Nipper?" he said. "My ears are fairly acute, even in my old age. And what you say is quite correct—thanks to your gov'nor. And it won't be the first time that Mr. Lee has given me a good tip, either."

Morley at once busied himself, and within a short time a big motor-car was ready, and six plain-clothes men were picked to accompany the party. The house in Willsmead Road was to be raided, and the inspector meant to make a success of the job. Lee and Nipper and Mellborne, of course, intended to be to the fore.

Nothing of note happened on the journey, and at last Willsmead Road was reached. It was a quiet thoroughfare, some distance away from the main road, and the houses were old-fashioned and roomy. A motor-car pulling up before one of them would cause no comment, and so it had been safe for the two strangers to work their trick upon Dr. Mellborne. The darkness of the night had rendered their task extremely simple, and practically barren of risk.

At the end of Willsmead Road Nipper brought his motor-cycle to a stop, and the police-car, behind, followed suit. Inspector Morley then gave orders to his men in low, crisp tones, and very shortly everything was in readiness for the raid.

Mellborne led the way down the quiet street, and after a while he pointed to a lamp-post on the opposite side.

"That's the fellow!" he said eagerly.

The words "Willsmead Road" were clearly visible upon the opaque glass, and, immediately opposite, there was a low doorway, set in a high wall, which opened directly upon the pavement. It was evidently a side door leading to the back premises of an adjoining house, which, it could be seen, was occupied. At least, there were curtains at the windows, and the short strip of front garden was fairly tidy.

"That's the door through which I was forced," said Mellborne in a low voice. "You see, it was quite an easy matter to get me across this short strip of pavement without being seen, even if there had been anybody to see."

"H'm! Looks quite all right," murmured Morley. "But we mustn't be rash. There may be another lamp-post further on with the name of the street written upon it, and another doorway opposite, too. We should look fine fools if we raided the wrong place!"

It was soon found, however, that Willsmead Road was only short, and there was no other street lamp with the name of the thoroughfare indicated upon it. Therefore there could be no mistake.

As it turned out, the raid was almost devoid of excitement.

The side door was skillfully opened by Nelson Lee. It was provided with a lock of the Yale type, but of inferior quality. Lee experienced very little difficulty with the lock, for he was a past master in the art of house-breaking. Indeed, Inspector Morley humorously suggested that if business got bad with Lee, the detective would probably take to burglary as a sideline!

Although Lee was so skilful at the art, however, he always used his skill for the benefit of his fellows. This was certainly fortunate, for if the famous criminologist had adopted crime as a profession he would have had every thing his own way.

Beyond the door was a low, covered-in passage, and then a kind of lobby. This was unfurnished save for a carpet upon the floor. After a quick survey of the place a door was discovered, which was also fitted with a patent lock. For such a lock to be placed upon the door of an inside room was, in itself, suggestive.

And Lee tackled this lot also.

Within five minutes the door swung open, and the light from the detective's torch revealed a flight of stone steps leading downwards. Dr. Mellborne gripped Lee's arm tightly.

"We're right!" he murmured softly.

With no further attempt at secrecy, Nelson Lee and Inspector Morley pelted down the stairs. A short passage lay in front, and at the end of this a door. A streak of light showed beneath, and before Lee could reach it the door swung open.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," exclaimed Lee calmly, to the man who stood in the doorway. "No, my friend, there's no chance of escape—the house is surrounded. And this may possibly interest you!"

The detective allowed the man to closely examine the barrel of his Smith and Wesson automatic. The task did not appear to be a welcome one, for the fellow staggered back and mockly put up his hands.

"You're on the wrong scent!" he gasped. "I'm—I'm only a paid man."

"We know all about that," said Inspector Morley grimly. "You're caught

fairly, and if you fight it'll be the worse for you."

There did not seem to be much fight in the man, and he allowed himself to be handcuffed without resistance. Meanwhile Lee, Morley, and two of the plain-clothes men had entered the inner portion of the cellar.

And here they found "Smith" and his companion. The pair were utterly trapped, for there was no further exit from the place. They had been waiting quietly for the inevitable, knowing full well that the game was up.

"I thought so!" snarled Smith furiously, as he caught sight of Dr. Mellborne. "I thought you were the cause of this raid. By Heaven! You'll pay dearly for this——"

"Now then—now then!" said Morley abruptly. "No threats! You two will receive a long stretch, you mark my words. This seems to be a comfortable little nest, too!"

The trap was entirely successful, for the criminals had had no suspicions of a raid. They were therefore caught quite un-awares, and did not even have any weapon handy to put up a fight.

The injured man was still lying upon the couch, where Dr. Mellborne had left him, and within half an hour he had been placed upon an ambulance and conveyed to the police infirmary. By that time, too, "Smith" and his two fellow criminals were safely under lock and key.

Smith proved to be a rough-wanted criminal, well-known to the police. He had been under observation for some time, but the police had not been able to gather evidence against him. His "brother" was even more urgently wanted, and Detective-Inspector Morley was in high good humour at the capture.

The spoils, too, were well worth picking up. For in the cellar the results of many big robberies were discovered—that is, a slight portion. For the many valuable articles of jewellery were stripped of their precious stones. Only the gold settings remained. So, in one way, the result of the raid was not so satisfactory as it seemed.

But Nelson Lee made a discovery which filled him with keen delight.

Piled against one wall of the cellar were some massive wooden packing cases. Upon being opened they proved to contain the famous Montessor gold, in its entirety; not a single article was missing.

And the discovery made Lee think very carefully.

He well remembered the affair up at Montessor Castle, in Yorkshire, when the gold had been stolen. Lee himself had played an active part in that particular case, and it was through no fault of his that the criminal had escaped with his booty.

The criminal had been none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe, the master forger—known generally as Jim the Penman. Nelson Lee had had many tussles with Jim the Penman, and in every case the detective had emerged victorious. On this last occasion, however, Sutcliffe had succeeded, by a fluke, in escaping with Sir Henry Montessor's celebrated collection of antique gold.

Even for its intrinsic value, the gold was worth a small fortune—that is, judging it from a rich man's standpoint. Some people would have called it a very vast fortune—but not Jim the Penman.

Lee shrewdly suspected that the forger would soon be after much bigger game—that he had planned the Montessor affair merely to obtain capital with which to perpetrate an even greater crime.

Jim the Penman had made some bold bids in his time, and had nearly succeeded in his object more than once. It was obvious that he had disposed of the Montessor gold, and that it had changed hands several times since.

There was no chance of getting on Jim's track, of course, but Lee was keenly satisfied, nevertheless. Sir Henry Montessor would be overjoyed when he learned the news, and Lee privately determined to inform the baronet that he was indebted to Dr. Mellborne for the return of his property.

But for the doctor's smartness the gold would have been melted up probably the next day. And then, of course, the famous collection would have been lost for ever. It was certain that Mellborne would be richly rewarded for the part he had played in the affair.

In the later hours of the morning Nelson Lee saw Detective-Inspector Morley again. The Scotland Yard official was highly pleased with himself, and he thanked Lee cordially for giving him the tip.

"No chance of nabbing Jim the Penman, of course," said the inspector. "In any case, we may be sure that Sutcliffe has safeguarded himself. By Jove, Lee, I wish we could lay the scoundrel by the heels!"

Nelson Lee laughed quietly.

"All in good time, my dear fellow," he

exclaimed, "all in good time. You may be sure that Jim the Penman will soon show his teeth again. He is in possession of a large amount of ready cash, and in all probability Jim is even now planning some fresh coup."

Nelson Lee did not guess precisely how soon he was to again cross swords with the world-famous criminal.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT NELSON LEE DISCOVERED AT NO. 15, ROYLE CHAMBERS.

THE next evening Nelson Lee was rather annoyed.

In several evening newspapers his name appeared in large type in connection with the affair at Stratford. An enterprising news agency reporter had gathered the facts, and many of Nelson Lee's tussles with Jim the Penman were revived.

The report concluded by saying that the famous detective would probably get on Sutcliffe's track again before so very long.

Nelson Lee disliked publicity, but he knew that it was useless protesting now that the reports were published. He had had no wish for his name to appear in connection with the Stratford business—for, after all, the real credit belonged to Dr. Mellborne.

The detective soon forgot his annoyance, however, and his time was fully occupied in gathering up the threads of a case upon which he had been working some little time. Two days passed, and then, one evening, a very distinguished visitor was announced.

This was none other than Mr. Earle Mackinson, a much noted American gentleman, who had been staying in England for several weeks.

Mr. Mackinson was rather worried when he stepped into Lee's consulting room. His kindly eyes were full of concern as he gravely took his seat opposite to the detective.

He was somewhat stout in build, and his age was, perhaps, between fifty and sixty. There was a very splendid appearance about the American, and Lee knew that his appearance did not belie his character.

For Mr. Earle Mackinson had interested himself wholeheartedly in many charitable schemes since his arrival in England. He was rich, and devoted considerable sums of money to the organisation of war funds,

Indeed, Mr. Mackinson had assisted the British Red Cross wonderfully during the past weeks, and his name had appeared in the papers on many occasions. As a matter of fact, Mr. Mackinson was on intimate terms with several Ministers of State. His work in connection with the war brought him almost daily into close touch with men in the highest of high positions.

"I have come to you, Mr. Lee, because I feel that you can help me," he commenced in grave musical tones. "I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, but your reputation is, of course, very well known."

"In what way can I help you, Mr. Mackinson?" asked Lee. "You may be sure that I have taken a very great interest in all your doings in this country. And, please let me say how I appreciate your goodness in applying yourself to the charitable work which has been your sole task——"

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Mackinson protestingly. "I don't want you to recapitulate my own doings, Mr. Lee. They are, after all, very unimportant. My real reason for coming to you is because I saw your name, some few days ago, in the newspapers. And you were mentioned in connection with some cases of forgery. There is a noted criminal, I understand, with a somewhat quaint name——"

"Jim the Penman, you mean, I imagine?" smiled Lee.

"Exactly—exactly. Jim the Penman was the name I was endeavouring to call to mind," replied the other, gently polishing his eye-glasses. "Well, Mr. Lee, I may be foolishly wrong, of course, but I have got an idea that this forger has chosen me as one of his victims. At all events, I am anxious for you to look into a rather strange affair which occurred no more than a couple of hours ago. I had intended going to the police, but then I remembered that you had interested yourself in laying this rogue by the heels. If I can be of any slight service to you in that laudable mission, I gladly give you the benefit of my knowledge."

Nelson Lee was greatly interested.

"If you can put me on the track of Jim the Penman, I shall indeed be indebted to you, Mr. Mackinson," he said grimly. "I am more than anxious to learn of this affair you refer to."

"You shall learn of it at once," was the American's reply. "Since my arrival in England, Mr. Lee, I have occupied a furnished flat at the Royle Chambers, some

little way behind Piccadilly. I detest hotels cordially, and never would stay in one. I prefer to have my own servants about me, and to feel that my domain, small as it is, is exclusive to me. I have three servants—a cook, a maid, and a valet. It is necessary for me to go into these domestic matters in order that you should clearly understand what follows."

"Pray continue," said Lee.

"I wish you to examine this letter, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the American, taking out a well-filled pocket-book. "I suppose you have seen in the newspapers that I am somewhat intimately acquainted with Mr. Marriss, of the Treasury? He is a very high official there, as, of course, you know. Just over two hours ago I received this letter, purporting to come from Mr. Marriss, requesting me to attend the Treasury without delay."

Lee took the letter, and scanned it with interest. It was written upon official paper by Mr. Marriss himself. Marriss' name, of course, was a famous one, and Lee suspected that he was getting on the track of some big fraud. The note was very short, and urgent in its tone.

"It is very amazing," continued Mr. Mackinson. "This handwriting is identical with Mr. Marriss' in every particular. Very naturally, I hurried to the Treasury at once. But upon my arrival I was amazed to find that Mr. Marriss was in total ignorance of the letter and its contents. He positively declares that he did not pen the words, and was as equally astounded as myself. The thing is a deliberate forgery, executed with almost unbelievable cleverness."

"That smacks of Jim the Penman, at least," commented Lee.

"So I imagine. Believing that something was really wrong, I returned to my chambers with as little loss of time as possible. I arrived back at just about six o'clock, scarcely more than an hour ago," continued Mr. Mackinson. "But my further examination I found the flat completely deserted. My servants had all vanished, and the place was totally empty."

"They were decoyed away, of course," remarked Lee shrewdly. "In all probability another forgery. If Jim the Penman is connected with this affair you may be sure he was thorough."

The American nodded gravely.

"For some little time I was almost incapable of action," he declared. "Why should this have happened to me? I was at a complete loss, Mr. Lee. And upon

the table of one of the rear apartments—the kitchen, I believe—I found a letter—in my own handwriting !”

“ Ah, my surmise was correct, then ? ”

“ Absolutely. Upon that discovery I knew positively that the forger who had penned the letters was not only clever, but extraordinarily cute. My three servants are now on their way to Richmond—or perhaps, they are now returning—at least, that is where they were sent.”

“ Leaving your flat totally deserted,” said Leo grimly. “ Rather a neat trick, Mr. Mackinson, and one which you could not possibly suspect beforehand. Naturally, the dodge was not worked for nothing.”

“ Upon opening my dispatch-case,” declared Mr. Mackinson, “ I discovered that it had been rifled. Even now I hardly dare think of the seriousness of my loss. Many highly important documents are missing—documents, I may say, of national importance. They have gone. Mr. Lee, and there is utterly no clue left. That is all.”

“ You have not informed the police ? ”

“ No. I came straight to you.”

“ And what do you wish me to do, Mr. Mackinson ? ” inquired Leo.

“ Well, I thought that perhaps you would care to visit my flat and make an investigation alone,” said the other, adjusting his glasses. “ If there are any clues left, Mr. Lee, I believe that you will be able to discover them. The police, in all probability, would disturb the whole flat, and thus ruin your chance.”

“ You acted with great wisdom, Mr. Mackinson,” said Leo heartily. “ If I fail, then, of course, we must inform Scotland Yard without delay. It will be as well for us to hurry to your rooms with as little loss of time as possible. I will bring my young assistant with me, for he may be wanted.”

“ As you wish, of course,” said the American. “ I am deeply grateful to you, Mr. Lee, for complying with my wishes so promptly.”

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

“ I am afraid I am acting from a selfish motive,” he replied. “ I am convinced that Jim the Penman is responsible, and it is my keenest desire to get on the forger's track.”

Within a few minutes Lee and Nipper were ready. Outside a motor-car was waiting, and the trio were quickly conveyed to Royle Chambers. The flat occupied by Mr. Earle Mackinson was on the first floor, and one of the most expensive in the whole block. The American's servants had not

returned, and Leo was rather glad of this, he preferred to make his investigation uninterruptedly.

As a commencement the detective closely examined the room which Mr. Mackinson had been in the habit of using as a study. It was here, within the top drawer of the desk, that the dispatch case had been lying.

Search as Lee would, however, he could find absolutely nothing which would serve as a clue. Everything was in its proper place, and there was not a speck of dust upon any article to leave a tell-tale finger mark. It seemed as though Lee's visit was to be barren of result.

And it was Nipper, indeed, who hit upon something which was to prove of the most singular importance.

The lad had been carefully scanning the fireplace. This was large and roomy, and as the day was mild, only a few red-hot cinders roposed in the centre. The sides, therefore, were bare and comparatively cool. And Nipper noticed a burnt scrap of paper lying in the grate.

Under ordinary circumstances Nipper would have noticed nothing unusual. Indeed, from an upright position, the scrap of burnt paper closely resembled a flat piece of coal.

But it happened that Nipper was upon his knees on the hearthrug. He stared at the paper ash for a moment, and then bent right over, so that his face was in danger of being scorched. Then, with a sudden eagerness, he turned.

“ I say, guv'nor,” he exclaimed, “ have a squint at this ! ”

Nelson Lee, who was over by the door, quickly crossed to the fireplace. He knew that tone of Nipper's well. It generally meant that the lad had discovered something of importance.

“ What is it, young 'un ? ” asked the detective.

“ There's a scrap of burnt paper in the fireplace, sir, and it seems to be in one whole piece. There's writing on it, I believe.”

“ Perhaps Mr. Mackinson threw it there.”

“ I don't think so, Mr. Lee,” put in the American. “ I may have done so, of course, but I think not. You see, there is a waste-basket beside my desk, and I always throw waste-paper there. I detest paper burning in the fireplace.”

Mr. Mackinson came nearer, and peered down at the grate through his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

“ Surely that black ash will tell you



The sack still over my head, I was pushed forcibly through a doorway. — (See p. 7.)

nothing?" he asked in surprise. "Why, the paper is burnt completely."

"But the paper was not screwed up before being burnt," said Nelson Lee shrewdly. "The ash is therefore whole, as Nipper said. And many kinds of ink remain visible after the paper upon which it is written has become utterly carbonized. We will have a look at this; it may be interesting."

"Dear me! How extraordinary!" murmured Mr. Mackinson.

The old gentleman could not understand the matter, but he looked on with great interest. Nelson Lee took from his pocket a small pair of nippers, and with great care he gingerly lifted the burnt scrap of paper from the grate, and succeeded in placing it upon the table, still whole.

"Yes, there's writing!" ejaculated Nipper eagerly. "Plainly, too!"

Lee was perfectly cool. He realised that in all probability this discovery would prove to be of no importance. True, Jim the Penman might have thrown the paper into the fire; but Lee knew how cautious the master-forgery was on all occasions. But even if Jim had burnt the paper and watched it blaze up, *he might not have noticed that the ash remained whole.* The cleverest criminal would have taken it for granted that, once burned to a cinder, the paper was destroyed.

But the paper was not destroyed!

The material itself was completely black, but the ink-strokes were faintly visible upon the surface, grey and indistinct. In becoming carbonized things had been reversed, as it were. Originally the paper had been white and the ink black. Now the paper was black and the ink whitish.

With the naked eye Nelson Lee could read nothing, for the writing had been very small. The detective took out his magnifying lens, and bent closely over the black ash.

Then, suddenly, he uttered an exclamation.

"What is it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"This find of yours, Nipper, is of the most astounding importance!" declared Lee evenly. "By the aid of this glass I can read every word clearly and distinctly. Mr. Mackinson, the man who entered your chambers was Douglas Sutcliffe, the notorious forger—as you suspected."

"The impudent rascal!" said Mr. Mackinson heatedly. "But how do you know that, Mr. Lee? You are not asking

me to believe that you have discovered that fact from this paper-ash?"

"Listen," was the detective's reply. "I will read the words aloud: 'Be at cottage mile beyond H. Aero, eight three O. Will wait. CHAN.' That is how the message reads, Mr. Mackinson."

The American philanthropist looked bewildered.

"I confess that I am at a loss," he said wonderingly.

"Chan!" ejaculated Nipper. "Why, that must mean Channing, guv'nor! Channing! He's Jim the Penman's most intimate confederate!"

Lee nodded.

"Exactly," he replied calmly. "It is clear to me that Sutcliffe received this note in some place where it was impossible to destroy it. He therefore carried it here, and seized the opportunity to burn the paper."

"Good gracious! I am completely puzzled," said Mr. Mackinson, his kindly eyes looking painfully distressed. "What does 'H. Aero' mean—and 'eight three O'? Perhaps you are puzzled yourself, Mr. Lee?"

"Not in the least," replied the detective. "H. Aero, very obviously means the Hendon Aerodrome—London's most prominent flying centre, Mr. Mackinson. And eight three O, is, of course, a short way of putting the hour of eight thirty."

"Upon my soul!"

"By pokers!" gasped Nipper suddenly. "It's half-past seven now, guv'nor! It looks as though Channing is to meet Jim the Penman at this lonely cottage at half-past eight. Jim will probably take the documents he pinched from here to Channing, for the confederate to dispose of!"

Nelson Lee nodded approvingly.

"Very shrewd reasoning, Nipper," he said quickly. "It means that if we get to the cottage at once we shall forestall Sutcliffe and capture Channing. Having done so, we shall be ready to deal with the forger when he arrives. There is a possibility, Mr. Mackinson, that your documents will be recovered immediately."

"I pray that you are right, Mr. Lee!" said the American fervently.

"Half-past seven," murmured the detective. "We can get a motor-car at the garage, just in Piccadilly, and run out to Hendon within the half-hour. By James! There's no time to lose. Owing to your extreme promptness, Mr. Mackinson, we may succeed in giving Jim the Penman the surprise of his life! Come, Nipper, we must go!"

"I'm game for anything, gov'nor!" said Nipper eagerly.

"And I, too, Mr. Lee!" declared Mr. Mackinson. "Shall I be in the way if I accompany you on this trip? I will not interfere——"

"As you choose, of course," interjected Lee. "The main thing is to get to the cottage in the shortest amount of time possible."

Within ten minutes the trio were off. They had hired a fast racing motor-car, and the suburbs were "mopped up" in next to no time, as Nipper expressed it. Through Cricklewood at full speed, and then on past the Welsh Harp, and so through Hendon itself. The car sped past Collindale Avenue—which leads to the famous aerodrome—and then Lee began to slacken somewhat.

The exact position of the cottage was rather uncertain. After passing Collindale Avenue, however, Nelson Lee took careful note of the cyclometer. And when nearly a mile had been covered, he dropped to a walking-pace.

"The cottage must be somewhere near here," he exclaimed, peering in all directions.

The night was fine, but somewhat cloudy. Somewhere behind the clouds a bright moon was shining, and it was possible to see fairly well. The road was bare at this particular spot.

"What is that over there?" asked Mr. Mackinson tentatively, as though he was half afraid of interfering. He pointed, and through some trees Nelson Lee saw a small house standing quite to itself. It was standing back from the road quite a good distance, and was reached by means of a small lane.

"Your eyes are keen, Mr. Mackinson," said the detective. "This house seems to be the only one in the immediate neighbourhood, at all events. It will be as well perhaps, to investigate."

He stopped the car, and they all alighted.

Then they walked down the little lane until they came opposite to the front gate of the cottage. It was, in reality, more than a cottage, but it had an old-fashioned appearance, and was, indeed, an aged place, in a state of considerable disrepair. From one of the front windows a crack of light showed.

"Looks likely, gov'nor!" murmured Nipper.

Lee nodded. He determined to act boldly, and opened the gate without hesitation. With his two companions at his heels, he passed down the garden path, and knocked

loudly upon the door, which was set in a rustic porch.

The detective had his hand on his revolver, and he was prepared for any emergency. Almost before he expected it, there was a sound of bolts being shot, and then a face appeared round the door.

"You fool, Jim!" ejaculated a startled voice. "No need to hammer—— Good heavens! It's—it's——"

The man had no time to utter further words, for Nelson Lee had stepped forward, and the fellow was tightly in his grasp. Both Lee and Nipper had seen that the inmate of the cottage was Robert Channing—Jim the Penman's right-hand man!

The burnt note had been perfectly correct.

"Rather a surprise, my friend, eh?" suggested Lee coolly, pushing the man back into the darkness of the little hall.

"And I believe this is rather a surprise, Mr. Nelson Lee!" exclaimed a soft voice right behind the detective's ear. "A neater trap was never set! And you have walked into it beautifully!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper spun round, their hearts beating quickly. They found themselves staring into the steady barrel of a revolver, and the weapon was in the grasp of Mr. Earle Mackinson!

CHAPTER V.

FORGERY WHOLESALE.

FOR one tense second it would have been possible to hear a pin drop. Then the tension was broken by a sneering laugh from Robert Channing. The man had wrenched himself free, and he, too, was now holding a revolver.

"Talk about neat!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "The hounds have been collared as neatly as a couple of rabbits in a net!"

There was a chuckle from Mr. Mackinson.

"Please keep quite still, my dear Lee," he said pleasantly. "This shooter of mine is silent, and at close quarters quite deadly. If you make an attempt to move a single limb, I shall shoot on the second—and that would be unfortunate. For I am anxious to have a little chat with you."

"Jim the Penman!" gasped Nipper faintly.

"Precisely!" said the other. "Mackinson was merely an identity invented for the purpose of hoodwinking you. I have often thought that I should have made a name for myself on the stage. Perhaps I shall turn actor one day—who knows?"

The words were uttered in a cool, smooth voice, a voice which Lee and Nipper knew well. The musical tones of Mr. Earle Mackinson had disappeared, and the "American" stood revealed as Douglas James Sutcliffe himself."

"It was clever of you, Jim—infernally clever!" said Nelson Lee simply.

In spite of the sudden fury which filled the detective's breast, he nevertheless felt a profound admiration for this man, this amazing criminal who had deceived him so utterly and completely.

Earle Mackinson was Jim the Penman!

The knowledge came to Nelson Lee and Nipper with sudden force. Never before had the pair been so thoroughly surprised. They had not had the faintest suspicion against the supposed American.

Yet the whole thing—from start to finish—was a well-laid trap.

The visit of Mr. Mackinson to Lee, the burnt paper in the fireplace, the story of the stolen documents—all were mere inventions. And the detective and his assistant had walked into the snare without a single suspicion.

Certainly, neither were to blame. Jim had planned the thing so completely that this result had been almost inevitable. He had acted with consummate skill; his speech, refined and polished, had contained just that delightful touch of American accent which is characteristic of the true American gentleman.

Over-acting would have ruined the whole plot, for Lee would have seen through the ruse. But Jim the Penman was an artist to his finger-tips, and he knew exactly how far to go. He had played many parts in the past; but this, surely, was his master-effort.

But how could it be possible? Lee and Nipper asked themselves. In those few fleeting seconds the entrapped pair were almost too thunderstruck for connected, lucid thought.

Earle Mackinson was a well-known New York gentleman; he had been interesting himself in splendid work during his stay in London, and he was on intimate terms with several high members of the Government. Nelson Lee guessed at once that Jim the Penman had decoyed the real Mr. Mackinson out of the way, and was now impersonating him. That was the only explanation.

"Perhaps you will care to walk into the front room, Mr. Lee?" suggested the forger smoothly. "I am afraid it is rather chilling in aspect, but there are several

chairs. Channing, my dear fellow, attend to the visitors."

Nipper, who had been feeling like a high-pressure boiler, exploded at last.

"You—you thundering rotter!" he panted furiously. "Let's make a fight for it, guv'nor! Let's show this hound that——"

"No, Nipper!" interjected Lee sharply. "Do as Jim bids you. He has got the upper hand, and it would be fatal to attempt any violence. When I am beaten, I am strong enough to admit the fact."

"Well said, Lee—well said!" smiled Jim the Penman. "I have excellent reason to hate you, but you are a sportsman, by Jove! You play the game right through, if ever a man did!"

They all passed into the front sitting-room, Nipper breathing very hard. The lad was more impulsive than his master, and would have risked a battle royal. But Lee knew that a fight was impossible. At the first sign of activity, Jim would have "dropped" both his captives. The forger was capable of murder.

The sitting-room was practically unfurnished, and only a few rickety kitchen chairs stood about. On the mantelshelf stood a small oil-lamp. Without offering resistance, Lee and Nipper were bound. Their wrists were roughly tied behind them, and their ankles were secured to the legs of the chairs. Escape, of course, was impossible—at least while Jim and Channing were about. And Lee knew that the forger would not go and leave his prisoners so carelessly secured.

Although the detective's thoughts were bitter in the extreme, he displayed no sign of discomfiture. When he had been tricked so neatly as this, he frankly admitted that the enemy had scored a point, and made no attempt to find excuses for himself.

Channing had been performing the work of binding the prisoners, and he now stood aside, smiling gloatingly. He did not think it necessary to remain suavely polite, like his chief.

"Now, Channing, you had better see about the car," said Jim. "It's just outside in the road. Shift it out of the way, and place it in the meadow we arranged. Then come back here. By that time I shall have concluded my interesting chat with our excellent friends."

"Why not finish the business right away, Jim?" growled Channing.

"Why not? Because I choose not!" said Sutcliffe curtly.

Channing walked out of the room, and the next moment the front door closed.

Then Jim the Penman seated himself upon one of the chairs, and lit a cigarette. For a few moments he regarded Leo and Nipper musingly.

"Our last meeting was almost as dramatic as this, Lee," he said, blowing out a cloud of blue smoke. "Do you remember? I pitched you into the Montessor Mine, up in Yorkshire. Nipper, however, like the good lad he is, hauled you out in the nick of time. It is really surprising how you manage to scrape out of seemingly hopeless predicaments."

"Perhaps I shall scrape out of this," suggested Leo quietly.

Jim the Penman shook his head.

"I think not," he replied. "Mind you, Leo, I am not sure. It is never wise to be sure. But I am practically certain, nevertheless. If my plans go wrong in this instance, then I shall feel inclined to give up the game and admit that I am a sheer duffer."

"What have you done with Mr. Mackinson, you brute?" growled Nipper fiercely.

Sutcliffe stared for a moment.

"What have I done with——" He broke off, and burst into a genuine laugh. "Why, my good Nipper, I am Mr. Earle Mackinson! Did you think I was merely impersonating the gentleman? There is no other Mackinson but myself."

"You've been playing the part for weeks?" gasped Nipper. "Do you mean to say that you came over from the States and——and—— Rot! You're lying, as usual!"

Jim chuckled.

"You seem to have a poor opinion of me, Nipper," he exclaimed. "Nevertheless, I assure you that I am the only Mr. Mackinson in England—at least, so far as I know. But I will just briefly relate my adventures, and then perhaps you will realise that I am in real earnest this time."

"Upon my soul, Jim, you are an astonishing fellow," exclaimed Nelson Lee with genuine frankness. "I sometimes wish you had chosen a different mode of life. I am sure we should have been good friends. As it is, we are bitter enemies. I am anxious to lay you by the heels, and you are determined to kill me. I wonder who will succeed in the end?"

"I have ceased to wonder, my dear Leo," replied Jim. "I ceased to wonder the very instant you crossed the threshold of the door. But, although we are bitter enemies, as you say, we may as well dispense with melodramatic by-play. I enjoy chatting with you, because you

appreciate all I say. And, to be quite open, I rather like your expression of admiration."

The forger chuckled, and then proceeded:

"I understand that the Montessor gold has been recovered? I am glad, Leo, honestly glad. It was an infernal shame to melt that splendid stuff up. But it was necessary for me to steal it, because I wanted money. Well, I got money—quite a large amount. And with fresh capital I felt a new man. For weeks I had been skulking about like a tramp, and I breathed freely again when I arrived in New York with my pockets well lined. It was a bit of a job obtaining a passport to the States, but, as you know, I am somewhat clever with the pen."

"You forged a passport?"

"We need not go into that," said Jim the Penman easily. "I wish to discuss the affairs of the present. At this very moment my plans are cut and dried, and everything is progressing smoothly. I am going the 'whole hog' this time, Leo; it is neck or nothing with me."

"Let's hope it's nothing!" grinned Nipper.

"Another cheerful remark from our young friend," observed Sutcliffe with a smile. "Really, Nipper, these interjections of yours are annoying. I do not want to gag you—yet. But to resume, I am going in for wholesale forgery, Leo; forgery to right and left of me—forgery everywhere."

"That is nothing new, surely?" suggested Leo.

"Well, I suppose not. But I have never before played such a daring game," answered the forger. "It is the most astounding series of forgeries that have ever been perpetrated in the world's history. That sounds rather boastful, doesn't it? When I'm through, I think you will admit that my statement was justifiable."

"In New York I commenced my 'publicity campaign,' as I will call it. I spent a large amount of money, and by sheer bluff made the newspaper people believe that I was a well-established American gentleman. The papers talked about me, got my name well before the public, and in next to no time I was almost famous. Things are done swiftly in New York."

"Reports of my doings were cabled to London, and I then sailed for England myself, with the avowed intention of throwing myself wholeheartedly into the cause of the Allies. And, honestly, I enjoyed the work. For, criminal though I

am—and not ashamed to admit it—I still possess a certain love for my native land. When I got to London I interviewed many well-known people."

"How did you get in touch with them?"

"Cheek for the most part—sheer audacity," was Jim's reply. "Audacity, my dear Lee, has been my strong point. I have cheek enough for anything. And a man who has sufficient nerve can do wonders. You have read of common men who have posed as soldiers—V.C.'s—and who have succeeded in hoodwinking whole towns. Well, I am a well-educated man, a clever man, and when I start in the audacity line I don't let grass grow under my feet.

"I spent money like water; all the proceeds of the Montessor gold plate have trickled swiftly away. At the present moment I have scarcely a couple of hundred pounds in my possession. But it was done with a purpose. It was a sprat to catch a mackerel, to quote an old saying—I am aiming for a high stake, and I shall win."

Suteliffe paused to light another cigarette.

"I was already noted when I arrived in London," he continued, "and my doings were reported in all the papers—I saw to that. I threw myself into schemes for the good of the British fighting cause, and, having a few good ideas, I soon became something of a power. All this was accomplished very rapidly, and all because of my audacious method of getting to work. You have been reading my name in the papers for weeks past, yet you suspected nothing.

"I have become intimate with several Ministers of State. Cheek and bluff carried me right on—triumphantly. I was successful wherever I went. Lords and dukes congratulated me, and high Government officials commended me. I have never been so popular in all my career.

"And the result? The result will be apparent to-morrow, Lee. For by that time, I shall have cast off the cloak, and will have disappeared. At the present moment I am honoured and respected by the Prime Minister himself. Perhaps you will think that this is all bluff now, that I am lying to you?"

"No. I believe every word you have uttered," said Nelson Lee quietly.

And the detective spoke the truth. He knew what an amazing criminal Jim the Penman was, and this recapitulation of his doings was not in the least astonishing.

Suteliffe was singularly clever, and he knew it.

"At last," went on the forger, "my chance came. I had been playing the game for all it was worth, and had become quite intimate with Mr. Hector Marris of the Treasury. Mr. Marris, as you know, is a famous politician, and an equally famous member of the present Government. He and I have dined together, supped together, exchanged confidences even. He believes me to be a kind-hearted old gentleman, as I now appear to be. This disguise, by the way, took me a whole week to adopt. The gray hair is my own, carefully prepared, and I have not used a single smear of grease-paint. The method I adopted is my own invention, and if I had more time at my disposal, I would describe it exactly, not that it would ever be of use to you, my dear Lee."

Jim the Penman chuckled meaningly.

"But I was talking of Marris," he resumed. "After several weeks the opportunity for which I had been waiting came. Through my intimacy with Mr. Marris, I learned that the British Government is sending to America a consignment of bullion to the value of a million sterling. Gold again! Yes, but in chunks this time, Lee—in chunks. The amount I secured for the Montessor collection was a mere thimbleful by comparison.

"This million pounds is payment for munitions for war—a mere trifle when one remembers the general expenditure of this war. People talk in millions these days, where, before the war, they would have talked in thousands. Well, this trifle—this million—is being sent from the Bank of Great Britain this very night. It is being conveyed by train to Liverpool, and thence across the Atlantic by armed liner—at least, that was the Government's arrangement."

"And you, I presume, have improved upon it?" suggested Lee drily.

"Considerably. The official plan was to send the stuff from the London terminus by the seven-thirty train to Liverpool," replied Suteliffe. "I won't bother you with exact details, because time is growing short. When near Liverpool the bullion-car is to be uncoupled, and left upon a siding. Here it will be secretly unloaded, and the cases of gold taken to the waiting ship. By seven-thirty, I mean to-morrow morning. All these arrangements were to have come into operation early to-morrow.

"I, however, saw no reason why the

gold should not be sent off during the night," went on Jim the Penman coolly. "I have been engaged upon several elaborate forgeries, and their effect is being felt at this very minute. Every high official who could possibly spoil my schemes has been decoyed out of London. By forged letters I have got rid of the whole bunch, got rid of them for the night. There is no necessity for me to go into exact details; they are intricate and confusing. I almost became muddled myself, to tell the truth. But now everything is as clear as daylight, and I am just giving you the outline.

"I have forged letters to the Governor of the Bank of Great Britain, and to the general manager of the London and Northern Railway Company. Both these letters purport to come from the Treasury, and in them I have altered the Government's plan. Impossible, you say? My good Lee, the thing is done. Audacity will accomplish anything. The Bank of Great Britain will send the bullion to the terminus *six hours in advance of the originally fixed time!* And it will leave London by the one-thirty night mail. I shall also travel by the train so as to be on the spot for the final stage of the game.

"You see, I have been cunning. I have not altered the careful arrangements for the transfer of the gold from the Bank's vaults, I have merely altered the times. Everything will go as originally arranged, but six hours beforehand. At Liverpool, however, the authorities have been told nothing, I have sent them no forged letter. They believe that nothing has been changed.

"Therefore, when the bullion-car arrives it will be at my mercy. I shall be fully armed with absolute authority to remove the gold, and it will be removed without the delay of a second. It will then disappear—it will disappear completely and utterly. My plans are all cut and dried, and not a single hitch can occur. The most astounding feature of this coup is its simplicity."

"I should like to hear fuller details," said Nelson Lee, who was really interested in this amazing man's still more amazing scheme. "How do you propose——"

Jim the Penman rose to his feet.

"I am sorry, Lee," he interjected. "I hear my trusted Channing returning, and there is other business to attend to. I am making a bid for a million, and I shall be successful. The only uneasy thought I had was in connection with yourself. That is a high compliment, Lee. I feared your intervention, I dreaded your activity. I

am paying a high tribute to your cleverness by placing you securely out of danger. For to-night, Lee, you will end your career with painful abruptness."

The forger stopped closer, and there was now a grim note in his voice.

"With you out of the way I shall fear nothing!" he exclaimed tensely. "It is you who have always thwarted me. You shall not do so on this occasion. I decided to entrap you at the right time, and prepared a few snares for you. You were deceived from the first, Lee.

"You remember that burnt scrap of paper in the firegrate at Royle Chambers? I placed that there deliberately—on purpose for you to find. Rather, neat, eh? It was smart of Nipper to spot it so quickly. If you had both missed seeing it, I should have pointed it out myself. You may recollect, too, that it was I who drew your attention to this cottage? By James, Lee, I was chuckling to myself all the while! You were running your head right into the noose, and you suspected nothing!"

Jim the Penman turned as Channing entered the room.

"Time's getting on, Jim," said the man. "Everything is prepared. How much longer are you going to jaw?"

"I have finished, my dear fellow," was Sutcliffe's reply. "If you will lend me a hand, we will escort our visitors to their new home—which, I am afraid, will prove to be a cold and a watery one."

Nelson Lee and Nipper exchanged grim glances.

They knew that their position was desperate in the extreme. Jim the Penman had finished his suave, gloating words of triumph, and now could come the event for which the prisoners had been waiting.

Jim had brought them here with one definite object in view, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper knew what that object was.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PLAN THAT MISCARRIED—JIM THE PENMAN'S LAST CARD—CONCLUSION.

NELSON LEE fully understood the the terrible danger.

He understood, moreover, Jim the Penman's attitude in fully describing the astounding plot he had engineered with such cleverness. Jim was sure that Lee would never be able to make use of that information.

It was essentially the forger's character to relate to his enemy the schemes which

had been evolved. Sutcliffe had a weakness for gloating over a fallen foe, but he did so in a calm, cool way which was utterly incongruous. There was nothing of the criminal about him, he seemed to be a gentleman in every respect.

And Jim the Penman did not possess a conscience.

A man who is about to commit murder—a man who is about to kill two of his fellows—does not talk about it. Even in cold blood, a murderer perpetrates his crime silently. But Jim the Penman took a keen delight in describing to his victims exactly how they were to perish. There was a “kink” in his brain somewhere which was hard to explain.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, completely in Sutcliffe's power, found themselves in the low-roofed scullery of the old house. They were free except for the rough ropes which secured their wrists.

“Observe,” said Jim the Penman, with the air of a lecturer. “This pump here is somewhat old-fashioned, but it is in full working order. And these pumps, as you may be aware, draw their water from a well.”

“Oh, cut this rot!” growled Channing. “It's getting on my nerves, Jim. Why the thunder don't you finish the job?”

“All in good time,” said Jim composedly. “You are suffering from nerves, Channing, and that is a bad sign. Our friends here are more calm than you. Yet they are shortly destined to bid us a long farewell—”

“I'm anxious enough to settle with the hounds!” snarled Channing. “They've done me enough harm in the past! But why don't you throw them down the well and have done with it? All this jaw—”

“That's enough!” interjected Sutcliffe sharply.

He bent over a portion of the stone flooring, and for a second Lee and Nipper were by themselves. The lad nudged his master, and gave him a meaning look. Nipper, to tell the truth, was almost sobbing with fury and impotence.

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

He knew what Nipper meant, but to make a dash for liberty would only bring swift disaster. And Lee believed in the maxim that while there was life there was hope. And to make any attempt to escape in the present circumstances would be sheer suicide.

Nipper clenched his fists, but gave no further sign. To have fallen into Jim the Penman's hand was galling enough, but to suffer this treatment—knowing that

death was to follow—was almost beyond human endurance. But Nipper held himself in check manfully.

He saw that Sutcliffe had raised a large heavy slab of stone, and this was now propped against the wall. A dark cavity lay revealed in the stone flooring of the scullery.

“Now, Mr. Lee, only a few words more, and then we must part,” exclaimed Jim, as though he were talking to a friend in a city office. “This flagstone is used to cover a deep well, the well from which this pump draws its water. The sides of the well are smooth and slimy, and there is not sufficient hold for a fly. The water is just over ten feet deep—”

“You murderous rotter!” burst out Nipper.

“My good Nipper, you are previous!” said Jim the Penman gently. “Wait until I have finished before you make any comment. The water, I say, is over ten feet deep, therefore death will come fairly rapidly. The supply pipe, up which the water is pumped, is rather curiously placed. It is set into one of the walls, and is quite flush with the brickwork. To grip it is impossible. To anybody unfortunate enough to be precipitated into the water, death will come, I should judge, in about ten minutes at the most.”

“You are giving us full details,” said Nelson Lee in a steady voice.

Sutcliffe regarded the detective in genuine admiration.

“Jove! What a nerve!” he exclaimed. “You are wonderful, Lee. There is a breaking point, however, and I am trying to reach it. I want to see you smash up; I want to see you grovel at my feet for mercy. That would be entertaining.”

“Oh, gov'nor,” panted Nipper, “let's—let's do something! I—I shall go mad, standing here, with this vile scoundrel jeering at us and taunting us!”

“The end will soon be here, Nipper,” said Jim the Penman. “I am becoming somewhat tired myself. Let me add, however, that shouting will be of no avail, for with this slab in position, not a sound penetrates even to this scullery. You are both going to be placed in a tomb—a tomb which will bring death quickly and certainly. This time, Lee, I am making no mistake.”

The detective did not answer.

“Cowed at last, eh?” said Jim, with a harsh exclamation. “I thought your nerves would become affected, sooner or later. But there is just one thing more, Lee. I am making assurance doubly sure

by setting fire to this house. Immediately after you and Nipper take your departure, Channing and I will set this building on fire in three different quarters. Thus, while you are struggling for life in the well, a fire will rage overhead. I think you will admit that your chances of living are extremely slim."

Nipper stood staring before him dully. The brave lad was resolved to show no sign of fear. Jim the Penman would have welcomed such a sign, and Nipper knew that if he made another outburst, Jim would assume that he was afraid.

And Lee, standing by Nipper's side, marvelled at the youngster's self-control. At that moment the famous detective realised the full worth of Nipper; he realised what a splendid lad he was.

The position was hopeless, of course. There could be no possible escape. Jim the Penman's precautions to ensure his victim's death were altogether too thorough to admit of any escape.

There was not the faintest loophole.

Death was to come—swift and horrible.

"We will shift, Channing!" said Jim the Penman suddenly.

The words were evidently an arranged signal. For they were scarcely out of Jim's mouth before he and Channing acted. The pair sprang forward at the same second, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were hurled towards the yawning black mouth of the well. It was all over in a flash.

Jim probably feared that there would be trouble if he attempted to lower his victim deliberately. And so, to make positively sure, this ruse had been adopted. And Jim was not far wrong; for Nelson Lee, realising that the death-trap was hopeless, had been swiftly turning over in his mind a plan for making a sudden dash. Both he and Nipper would be probably shot down, but that would be better than—

Lee's thoughts were not allowed to go further.

He was flung forward violently, and he crashed against Nipper. The pair hung for a moment on the brink of the inky chasm, and then they both fell—fell like stones, feet foremost, down into the depths.

Down—down—down!

Seven minutes had elapsed since that dreadful plunge.

Down in the depths of the well Nelson Lee and Nipper were rapidly becoming exhausted. Jim the Penman had made no false statement. The water was ten feet deep, at least, and there was utterly no

means of gaining a grip upon the slimy, smooth walls.

The water, too, was icy cold, and the limbs of the unfortunate pair were fast becoming so numbed that movement was difficult and painful.

At first they had attempted to obtain a grip; but there was nothing, not even a crack in the brickwork in which to insert a finger. Their wrists were bound, too, and there was nothing to do but "tread water" until exhaustion made further efforts impossible.

The well was circular, and large. It was not possible to wedge themselves in such a way as to obtain a rest. And, even if it had been practicable? What then? How would the position have been bettered?

Lee had had heard the stone slab dropped into position, and now everything was utterly blank. And, except for the movement of the water, there was a complete, overpowering silence.

But overhead the old house was blazing fiercely in two corners.

Nelson Lee was sure that Jim the Penman had uttered no idle threat, and remaining above the surface was only prolonging the agony. But instinct kept Lee and Nipper on the move; they would not sink until they were forced to by exhaustion, at least.

And, meanwhile, Sutcliffe and Channing had vanished.

Their foul work was accomplished, and it was now necessary for them to make themselves scarce. Jim the Penman was more than satisfied, for the prisoners had no chance of freedom—they were doomed.

But the master-forgery had blundered, and he had blundered in such a way that it was impossible for him to have been aware of the fact. His sole thoughts were centred upon making the deaths of his victims absolutely certain. And it looked as though he had succeeded.

But Jim the Penman's "thorough" methods were the cause of the singular train of events which followed. The forger had over-reached himself.

By setting fire to the cottage he had actually opened the way for his victims to be rescued. And the happenings of the next twenty minutes were purely natural happenings, such as would occur in normal circumstances.

A short distance down the road there were three or four cottages, occupied by families of the labouring class. And it chanced that the fire at the empty house was seen almost a minute after Jim the Penman and Channing had decamped.

One of the cottagers had been visiting his neighbour. And it was while the two were saying good-night on the step that they observed the ruddy glare away down the road. They saw, to their consternation, that the house in the trees was on fire!

Quickly rousing three other men, the pair got their boots and coats on, and then the little party hastened to the spot. They found the old cottage burning rather fiercely in two portions, but the fire was not yet powerful. The building was damp, and the flames did not spread rapidly.

"Run an' fetch pails, mate!" said one of the men quickly. "You'll find plenty on 'em round about. There'll be water here, for sure. If we git this fire out afore much damage is done, I reckon we'll be rewarded handsome by the owner."

While two of the men fetched pails, the others went round the house. In the rear quarters the kitchen was blazing, but the scullery was comparatively safe to enter. The fire had burned itself out, for the walls were of stone, and the floor of a similar material. There was very little to catch alight.

In a surprisingly short space of time the labourers were busily engaged in fighting the flames. And, in executing this praiseworthy task, the men were unconsciously saving the lives of two human beings.

For, having secured the pails, the two men took their stand beside the pump which was situated against the scullery door. And these men bent their back to the work, and pumped continuously, without a single pause. The pails were filled by the others, and carried to the flames.

The water was being drawn continuously from the well.

And, as a consequence the level of the water was rapidly lowered! Considering that the water was pouring from the pump continuously, in order to keep the fire pails supplied, this was not a matter of surprise.

The spring which supplied the well could not keep pace with the constant pumping. In short, the well was gradually being pumped dry.

And Nelson Lee and Nipper, in that terrible death-trap, were amazed to suddenly feel the bottom of the well beneath their feet. They had known nothing of what had been passing, except the obvious fact, that the pump above was being used strenuously.

"Can—can you feel, Nipper?" gasped Lee amazedly.

"We're on the bottom, sir!" was Nipper's reply, with a sob of relief accom-

panying it. "Oh, and I was just done—I was just on the point of giving in!"

This was true enough.

The pair had held out by sheer strength of will. They were numbed and chilled, but the knowledge that something was happening above cheered them up wonderfully. They little guessed that Jim the Penman's "thorough" methods were the means of the whole plot being wrecked at the outset.

For, by starting the fire, Sutcliffe had provided a reason for drawing unlimited supplies of water from the well.

If he had been content, and had made no attempt to burn the house down, he would have been entirely successful in his vile plot. But Jim had thought to be absolutely positive of the thing—with the result that his victims were rescued from their awful predicament.

And the labourers succeeded in getting the better of the fire. Owing to their prompt and valiant efforts, the flames were extinguished before they had obtained a firm hold. Jim the Penman had not reckoned on this; he had positively taken it for granted that the fire would spread so quickly that to save the house would be impossible.

It was an untold relief for Nelson Lee and Nipper, below upon the bottom of the well shaft. To their astonishment the level of the water was lowered until it only reached their waists.

Yet their position seemed scarcely improved. Shouting was useless, for their voices would never be heard, and to climb the sides was an impossibility. If Lee had only possessed his revolver, he would have fired it at once, hoping that the report would be heard by those above.

For by this time Lee had shrewdly guessed what was taking place. There could be only one explanation of all this constant pumping.

And it was certain, of course, that those above were not Sutcliffe and Channing. That precious pair had probably decamped, and other men were endeavouring to stamp out the flames. Lee was convinced that Jim the Penman's plans had somehow miscarried.

The famous detective and Nipper were filled with hope now. Somehow they believed that they were to escape, after all. But then, just when their spirits were rising, Nipper noticed that the level of the water was rising again!

The reason for this was clear. Those at the pump were not working so strenuously, and the water was not being drawn

up in such volumes as it had been to start with.

And, like an inspiration, Nelson Lee suddenly conceived a brilliant idea.

The result of this was apparent above some two minutes later. A pail of water was being removed from the sink by one of the men when he suddenly paused and looked into the bucket. Floating upon the surface of the water was a small object. In short, nothing more nor less than a closely-folded one-pound Treasury note. It was of the new type, printed in colours, and thus easily distinguishable at a glance.

The man set his bucket down, picked the note out of the water, and unfolded it. Scrawled right across the surface of the note were the words: "Help—open well!"

It was some moments before the meaning of the words was grasped. But then, with as little delay as possible, the huge flag-stone was lifted.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were saved.

And their escape from certain death was due to two causes. One, the unexpected lowering of the water level, brought about by the continuous pumping, and two, owing to Lee's brilliant idea.

The detective had worked an arm free, and had taken from his pocket the soaked Treasury note. This he had placed at the lower extremity of the supply pipe—with the result that it had been drawn up and deposited in one of the buckets!

It was a most astounding expedient, but it had been successful.

And Jim the Penman's career of crime was abruptly cut short.

His murderous plot had failed, and Nelson Lee, by sheer physical effort, succeeded in laying the forger by the heels at last.

The odds had seemed all in Jim's favour, but he had once more made the fatal mistake of being too confident. That had been one of Jim's failings all along, and it now brought about his complete downfall.

For fully two hours after Lee and Nipper had been hauled to the surface, they were unable to stir. They were numbed and chilled to the very marrow. A doctor would have told them that they ought to remain in bed for several days. But both Lee and Nipper were hardy and wiry; they could stand things which ordinary men were incapable of bearing.

And on this occasion, too, Nelson Lee knew full well that time was vastly important. Indeed, the detective wanted

to rush off at once, but this was physically impossible. He and Nipper found themselves in one of the neighbouring cottages. Here they were wrapped in blankets, and placed before a roaring fire.

The effect of this treatment was very soon apparent, for the warmth penetrated to their bones. And when at last they were able to use their limbs freely, the famous detective decided to adopt a daring plan.

Above all else it was necessary to nab the forger. And it would be a splendid piece of work, too, if Lee could prove to Sutcliffe that he was again to be foiled at the moment of victory.

By this time the train carrying the bullion was already fairly on its way to Liverpool. Telegraphing would be quite useless, for Sutcliffe's forged authority would claim first attention; and, even if suspicions were aroused, Sutcliffe's cleverness would see him through.

There was one way—and one way only—of foiling Jim the Penman's scheme. And that was to arrive in Liverpool in time to capture the master criminal red-handed. But how was it possible? No train would be able to convey the detective there in the time.

But Lee was quite near to Hendon Aerodrome, and he knew that his own fast monoplane was in its hangar, tuned up and ready for instant flight.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

Possibly illness would follow, but that could not be helped. This was an emergency of the highest importance; unless Jim the Penman was captured now the forger would probably elude discovery altogether.

Consequently, in the moonlight, Lee and Nipper started out from Hendon on their fast monoplane. It was Lee's own machine, and he knew that it could travel at something like a hundred and twenty miles an hour with the engine running all out. That cross-country journey north was one which would be long remembered by both Lee and Nipper. They were neither in a fit state for such an exposed trip, but they had taken care to wrap themselves up with excessive caution, and, although influenza might result, they were prepared and willing to stay a week in bed if they could only succeed in capturing the man who had so recently attempted to murder them.

That which took place near Liverpool was dramatic, but very short. The end of the affair came with astonishing abruptness, and Douglas James Sutcliffe's

ambitious scheme fell about his ears like a house of cards.

It was full daylight by the time Liverpool came in sight. Lee had steered by compass nearly all the way, but now—and for some time past—he recognised many landmarks below. The aeroplane was flying somewhat erratically, for a stiff wind was blowing, and several of the control wires had become stretched with the long journey. The engine was in perfect tune, but Lee was obliged to remain keenly on the alert, for the controls were tricky.

And at last, by following the railway, they saw below them the bullion car standing upon a siding. And through his glasses Nipper saw that it was being unloaded.

“Just in time, guv'nor!” roared Nipper.

Nelson Lee commenced a long volplane towards a meadow which adjoined the railway. Since the bullion car was only just being unloaded, it was morally certain that Jim the Penman was on hand. Therefore he would be taken completely off his guard.

It was difficult work landing upon the rough surface of the meadow; but Lee was wonderfully skilful, and he brought his machine down without straining a stay.

And it was then that the dramatic incident occurred.

For while Nelson Lee and Nipper hurried across the meadow to the railway line, Jim the Penman made a bolt for liberty. Through binoculars the forger had seen the aeroplane descend, and had recognised his enemies!

Absolutely mad with fury, Jim had dashed away, careless of which direction he took. Again Nelson Lee had scored—again!

It was almost uncanny.

In spite of the wholesale forgery, Sutcliffe was defeated in the end. He was not allowed to get away with his booty.

And as he ran wildly and madly, he saw Nelson Lee's aeroplane standing unpro-

ected and alone. In a second Sutcliffe was running for the machine, and he scrambled in and started off with such promptness that it was obvious he was well acquainted with that type of aeroplane.

Lee and Nipper became aware of the criminal's trick just too late. They saw the machine rising from the ground and speeding away with the engine roaring a defiant tune.

Higher and higher the aeroplane rose, rocking considerably in the wind. And then, at a height of a hundred feet, Jim the Penman attempted to turn. Disaster followed swiftly and dramatically.

Owing to the slackened wires the machine was difficult to control, and Sutcliffe had attempted to turn while he was still flying low.

“Great Heaven!” muttered Lee, catching his breath in.

The monoplane dipped, hovered for a second, and then side-slipped to the ground with a sickening lurch. It fell to the ground like a stone, and lay a crumpled mass of wreckage.

And when Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived at the spot they found Jim the Penman torn and bleeding amid the ruins.

The forger had played his last card, and had lost!

But he was not dead.

His injuries proved to be extremely grave, but when he arrived at hospital the doctors declared that he would be able to stand his trial in about three months' time.

The bullion, of course, was saved, and the whole gigantic fraud exposed.

Douglas James Sutcliffe was finished—he was smashed up—a physical wreck.

And when he recovered he would be sent straight into penal servitude. That, of course, was positively certain.

But there was one big query which Nelson Lee asked himself.

Would Jim the Penman remain in penal servitude?

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

Stories from **NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK—No. 3.**

Entitled:

“The Clue of the Twisted Ring.”

Be Sure to Tell Your Friends About It!

Short Complete Cricket Story.**156, NOT OUT!****BY A FAVOURITE AUTHOR.****CHAPTER I.****THE FIGHT.**

THE end of the summer term had been reached, and the last match of the Westborough School programme was about to be played, the principal event of the season, the annual encounter with Orford College.

Only one place in the Eleven remained to be filled up, and the mind of the captain was greatly exercised as to the selection he should make. And yet, if cricket ability alone was to be considered, there could be no doubt either in his mind or in those of the boys he consulted.

Walter Gray was by far the best player of those who had not yet won their colours. Indeed, there was no getting away from the fact that he was a better batsman and field than several of the boys who had already gained that distinction, and, under ordinary circumstances, he would have been given a place in the Eleven much earlier in the season. But the circumstances in his case were not ordinary.

Silent and reserved—even sullen, as it appeared to most of his schoolfellows—Walter was not popular at Westborough. The son of a poor curate, he had obtained a scholarship on entering the school, and it was owing to this fact alone that his father had been enabled to keep him there.

Now, most of the boys at Westborough were the sons of wealthy parents, and in their eyes it was almost a crime for a lad to return at the beginning of a term without a liberal supply of pocket-money, and with clothes that had been obviously repaired and outgrown, instead of the new suits which were considered the proper thing.

Walter, in fact, was poor, and that fact isolated him, the isolation being emphasised by his pride. He felt the inability to share in the other lads' pursuits and

hobbies keenly, and, to hide his mortification, had to pretend an indifference he was very far from feeling.

He affected to despise sports in which he was too poor to take a part, and, though the attractions of cricket were too strong for him to altogether resist, he felt a sting every time he took up one of the club practice-bats to play an innings, for which every other lad was equipped with his own implements, most of the boys having bags of their own, also pads and gloves.

The captain of the Eleven, Charles Rogers by name, was not a bad fellow at heart, but he could not help feeling that it was beneath the dignity of Westborough that a boy should play in its "foreign matches" who had not a single thing of his own, and who had to take his flannels in a small and ancient handbag.

It is a fact that schoolboys are apt to be very snobbish in these matters—a fact which arises more from thoughtlessness than anything else.

And if Walter had not been so proud, doubtless there were several boys who would gladly have lent, or even given him, the things he required. But he would rather not play at all than be beholden to anyone; and so it came about that his skill was handicapped, and, successful as he was as a rule when he did take part in a game, he had not the same chance of doing himself justice as his colleagues.

Still, the match with Orford College was now at hand, and a decision as to the eleventh place had to be come to. After Walter Gray, the next best player was a boy named Oates, whose friends openly averred that his selection was certain, for they declared it was impossible for Walter to be given his colours.

But, after all, the main thing was to win the match, and Rogers and his advisers knew well that they would be throwing a chance away if they did not

take Walter to Orford, for it was there that the match was to be played, it being decided on the ground of each school alternately.

Walter's own feelings in the matter were mixed. He longed to play, and felt keenly the injustice of being debarred from the game by no fault of his own. But the fact of his selection being left to the last moment, even if he were to be chosen at all, incensed his proud spirit, for he knew well for what reason to attribute the passing over his head of inferior players.

When, therefore, a couple of days before the match, Rogers approached him in the school quadrangle, he was inclined to be rather distant in his manner and curt in his language. Still, his heart thrilled with pride as the captain said:

"Gray, you may wear your colours against Orford, if you like."

"Thanks!" he replied briefly.

"And I say," went on Rogers, "if you haven't got any things—a bag and all that, you know—I wish you'd use mine. There's plenty of room!"

"You're very kind," answered Walter, "but I dare say I can manage."

"Oh, there's no need to manage!" said Rogers. "Don't be so beastly haughty, Gray! Surely there's no harm sharing a fellow's bag?"

Walter had not meant to be haughty—did not, in fact, altogether realise that he was so. But the words came home to him, and as the captain spoke in a genial and friendly fashion, he accepted the offer, by which he was spared the indignity of taking, and the others of seeing him take, the shabby little black bag to Orford.

Oates and his friends were both surprised and indignant at the turn events had taken, and abused Rogers soundly behind his back.

The day after Walter had received his colours, and as he was passing through the quadrangle on his way to the practice-nets, where he was to have half an hour's batting at the professionals' net, he saw a group of boys standing in the corner, close to whom he would have to pass. They were Oates and his particular chums—Langley, Greig, and Robinson.

As a rule, he would have taken no notice of them, neither would they have troubled about him; but, as it happened, they were discussing what they considered

Oates's bad treatment, and they did not think it necessary to cease as Walter approached them.

"Nice thing a chap like that going over to Orford!" he heard Robinson say. "What'll they think of us when they see his beastly little black bag?"

His face aflame with indignation, Walter Gray strode up to the speaker.

"Were you referring to me?" he asked.

"That's my business!" retorted Robinson. "If you choose to listen——"

"I was not listening," said Walter; "but I heard what you said, and I ask you again if you were referring to me?"

"Since you are so inquisitive, I was!" answered Robinson.

"Then take that, you cad!" cried Walter, dashing forward and planting a heavy blow with his fist on the other's chest.

Robinson was a big and strong boy, and no coward. The blow Walter dealt him was sufficiently hard to make him reel backwards, but he recovered himself in a moment, and at once set about returning it with interest. The three other lads encouraged him by their cries, and Walter, with no one to support him by a word, found himself forthwith engaged in a fight, on the issue of which, he felt, much depended.

The contestants were evenly matched, and both had some little knowledge of that useful accomplishment, boxing. Both, too, had their blood up, and there was no love lost between them.

For two or three minutes they struck at each other, and then, when both had been more or less disfigured by the blows they had received, Oates raised the cry of "Cave!" as one of the masters, accompanied by Rogers and two other Eleven fellows, turned into the quadrangle.

The battle ceased immediately, and the master, a Mr. Wilson, rushed up in great anger.

"What's all this?" he said. "Fighting in the quadrangle! You, Gray, above all fellows!"

For Gray had deservedly the reputation with the masters of being a quiet, studious lad.

"And you have just been given your colours, too!" went on Mr. Wilson. "How can you possibly go to Orford with that hideous black eye?"

Walter's eye was not black yet, but

there was every prospect of its turning so, Robinson having landed a heavy right-handed blow on it early in the struggle.

"You will have to fill his place, Rogers," said the master.

But Rogers rather suspected the cause of the fracas, and did not feel disposed to let Oates benefit by the conduct of his friends.

"Perhaps, sir," he said, "if he looks after it at once it won't show so badly."

"I hope not, I'm sure," said Mr. Wilson. "However, nothing could be more disgraceful than for two of the biggest boys, who should set a good example to the school, to be fighting and brawling right under the chapel walls. You will each, Gray and Robinson, do me a hundred lines by to-morrow morning."

And with that he passed on, leaving the boys together.

Rogers at once demanded what the row had been about, and soon got at the truth. When he had done so, he took Walter's side completely, and vowed he would thrash Robinson himself if the black eye did prevent Walter playing.

The latter he sent off to the house-keeper at once for raw beefsteak for the damaged eye, and told him to come for his batting practice later on. Gray had simply to carry out orders, and an hour later presented himself at the professionals' net, where Rogers and the rest decided that the eye would probably not be sufficiently bad to prevent Walter's playing.

Still, the last choice looked in the glass on the following morning with great anxiety, for though he did not himself see why a black eye need prevent his representing his school on the cricket-field, he knew Mr. Wilson, and perhaps others, would raise an objection. However, the

raw beefsteak and other remedies suggested by Rogers had been fairly effectual, and there was nothing beyond a slight discoloration.

CHAPTER II.

HOW WALTER SCORED A CENTURY.

So in due time Walter Gray took his place in the railway carriage reserved for the Eleven, and half an hour later was driving with the rest from Orford Station to the college cricket ground, a pale blue ribbon—the badge of distinction—round his straw hat, and hope and excitement in his heart.

It was a beautiful day, and the wicket was in splendid condition. The Orford College captain, therefore, having won the toss, did not hesitate to take first innings.

Runs from the start came fast, and play had scarcely lasted half an hour when, amid the cheers of the home schoolboys and their friends, the fifty went up on the board without a wicket having fallen. The Westborough boys, who had trained over en masse to see the contest, were correspondingly glum and cast down.

Despite changes of bowling—Walter, among the rest, having a trial with the ball—the score mounted rapidly, and the total had reached ninety-six without loss when the Orford captain, who had gone in first, caught well hold of a half-volley, and sent it hard and fast in the direction of the pavilion. It was a splendid hit, and the Orford boys cheered, thinking it would bring the hundred up; but they reckoned without their host—or, rather, without Walter Gray—who was fielding close to the boundary on the left of the pavilion rails.

Running at top speed, he shot out his right hand as the ball was skimming past him and brought off a magnificent catch, just as matters were beginning to look very serious for his side.

It was the Westborough boys' turn to cheer now, which they did lustily; while Rogers ran up and congratulated Walter heartily on his feat.



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"Beat catch of the season, by Jove!" he said enthusiastically.

And Walter felt that, even if he should fail with the bat later on, he had at least justified his selection.

After that wickets fell faster; the Westborough bowlers got their length, and seven men were out before one hundred and fifty were on the board. Then, however, ensued another long stand; and the later men, giving some trouble, the Orford College total reached two hundred and forty-nine before the last man was disposed of.

This score was generally thought good enough to win, especially as, to get them by seven o'clock, the runs, even if got at all, would have to be made very quickly.

From the start things went badly with them. Two of the best men were quickly disposed of, and Rogers, just as he looked like getting well set, was unfortunately run out. Three wickets went down for less than twenty runs. Then two boys, Griffiths and Pearson, made a bit of a stand, and doubled the score; but at forty-one both were dismissed, and another promptly retired for a derogatory "duck's egg."

It was now Walter's turn to go to the wicket, the telegraph showing forty-eight runs with six wickets down—the match, apparently, as good as over.

More especially did this seem the case as the next three wickets fell in rapid succession, the total, with only one wicket to go down, being only sixty, so that one hundred and ninety were still required when little Jackson, one of the bowlers, sallied forth to join Walter, whose score was then seven.

Jackson was a dogged and plucky player, with some little defensive powers, but all the Westborough boys had given up the game as lost by the time his turn had come to bat. They cheered him a little as he safely played the first over he received, without attempting to score from it, but there was no excitement, no keenness. The success of Orford seemed assured.

Walter Gray, however, meant showing himself worthy of his colours before the game was over. His eye was now fairly in, and he at once commenced hitting freely. Seventy, eighty, ninety appeared on the board as the result of his efforts,

and when, with a splendid hit over the fence for six, he sent up the hundred the Westborough cheers were long and loud.

"If only he had been put in earlier!" was the universal remark.

But Rogers had had other claims than his to consider, and, of course, could not have foreseen the turn events were to take.

"It all depends on Jackson," said one Westborough boy to another. "If only he can stick in! At least we shall make a decent show then."

The thought of winning, as yet, had not entered into the head of the boldest of them.

But Jackson did keep up his end doggedly, making an occasional single or couple to boot; while as for Walter, he made absolutely light of all the bowling opposed to him.

He was using a bat Rogers had lent him—a very different implement to the old practice blades that had been his lot hitherto—and more than once as he stood in the wickets he felt glad that he had swallowed his pride and consented to the loan. But for that he could never have felt the glorious thrill he experienced in driving the ball clean out of the ground, which he did thrice in the course of his long innings.

The excitement grew and grew with the score, and the Orford boys began at last to feel and display some anxiety. At first they had looked with tolerant eyes on the stand made by Gray and Jackson, considering that it could not affect the result.

But when first one hundred and fifty and then two hundred were telegraphed—Walter having reached his "century" a little before amid tremendous applause—they began to realise that the position was serious, and to consult their watches to see whether "time" was likely to befriend them, in the event of their bowlers' continued failure.

With two hundred and ten on the board, the college clock struck a quarter to seven, and Walter and Jackson had to fight now, not only to keep up their wickets, but to get the forty runs still required in double quick time.

Walter Gray's star was in the ascendant, and everything "came off" for him and his partner. That is to say, Walter continued to get nearly all the bowling,

a short and rather dangerous run being occasionally necessary to bring about this result.

The score had mounted to two hundred and forty-two when the umpires called "last over!" and Jackson was to receive the ball. It was felt that he could not score the eight runs himself—if he only could get a single, Walter might perhaps manage to hit them off.

The excitement was intense, wild shouts alternating with a deadly silence.

The Orford College fast bowler had gone on again, after a long rest, and he sent the first ball down to little Jackson at a terrific pace. The small Westborough batsman was within an ace of being bowled.

The next ball he steered into the slips, where it was smartly fielded and returned, no run being possible.

The fourth ball rose smartly, and the batsman was struck by it on the shoulder. Thence it glanced towards leg.

"Run!" yelled Walter.

Little Jackson, though badly bruised, made a dash. It was the only chance, and he just got in in time. Another fraction of a second and he would have been run out and the match lost.

It was Walter's turn. Two balls and seven runs wanted! It was no time for

half-measures. Instinctively he knew the bowler would pitch short, and was already moving out of his ground before the ball was delivered.

It was short, but Walter got to it, and drove it straight to the boundary—a clinking fourer.

One more ball, and three runs wanted! The excitement was unbearable as the bowler took his position.

Down it came, a good length, if ever so slightly on the off side—a ball that nothing could have been done with by a batsman whose eye was not thoroughly in. But Walter, with a neat turn of the wrist, brought the middle of his bat well on to it, and another boundary resulted. The clock struck seven as the umpires removed the bails.

The great match of the season was over, and had been won for Westborough by the last man chosen!

And when Walter Gray returned to school next term he had two bats of his own; the one he had used, which Rogers, again overcoming his pride, insisted on his accepting; the other, embellished with a silver plate, recording his great innings of one hundred and fifty-six, not out, and that famous stand for the last wicket on the Orford College playing-fields!

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