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The SHERIFF of BLAZING GULCH

NELSON LEE IN A NEW RÔLE.

Being Another Remarkable Episode from the Pages of "NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK." Set Down by NIPPER, and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Manor House Mystery," "The Clue of the Twisted Ring," etc.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH MR. NELSON LEE AND I ARE DISCOVERED IN AN EXPRESS RAILROAD CAR, AND TELLS OF THE LURID EXPLOITS OF ONE "SILVER MASK" AND HIS MERRY MEN. THE GENTLEMEN IN QUESTION MAKE THEIR APPEARANCE, TO OUR MILD CONSTERNATION.

LOS ANGELES, California, in the United States of America, is a very fine city, and I wouldn't hurt the feelings of the proud inhabitants by saying otherwise. All the same, I was mightily glad to be speeding eastwards, bound for New York—and, incidentally, England, Home, and Beauty.

I, myself, known to fame and everybody in general as Nipper, and Mr. Nelson Lee, my respected guv'nor, were off home after a somewhat tedious sojourn in America. I don't mean tedious in the sense that I was fed-up with the States.

Not a bit of it.

I'd enjoyed myself no end, to tell the truth. No, it was tedious in the professional sense. We had come on the track of a forger-johnny—a man who was anxiously sought after by the British police. Nelson Lee had undertaken to hunt the fellow down, and it had been "some" hunt.

We went from New York to Chicago, from Chicago to Omaha, from Omaha to Salt Lake City, from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, from San Francisco to Los Angeles. And at Los Angeles we made the pleasing discovery that our quarry had been run over by an automobile, and killed outright, as he was leaving the railroad depot!

This was rather a dismal ending to our hunt, and the guv'nor had been rather wild. Still, I don't suppose the forger had been anxious for death—he hadn't known that we were so close upon his track—and his career was cut short now, at all events.

There was nothing left for Lee and I but to return to London.

And so, after a short stay in the motion picture city, we boarded an eastward-bound express, and settled down for the tremendous run to New York, right across the continent.

The guv'nor wasn't really upset. Our chase hadn't been a failure, and we had, perhaps, been saved from a whole heap of further trouble. I rather enjoyed the trip, and had taken a great interest in the various States we passed through.

It was now getting on towards the evening of a particularly hot day—for it was summer-time—and we were glad of the cooling breeze. We had been out of Los Angeles for some time, and were now passing through a particularly wild and rugged State.

Our car was a splendid one, but it wasn't filled by any means. There were plenty of empty seats. Of course, it was a huge thing, and one could see from one end to the other—very different from the British compartment-carriages. I rather liked the American style, and don't mind admitting it.

Nelson Lee was sitting opposite to me, and for some little time he had been engaged in chatting with a gentleman we had met in Los Angeles, and who, it happened, was travelling several hundred miles in our direction. He was

a gentleman of about fifty, and he was bluff and hearty and stout. He was a State high official of some sort, and his name was Mr. Kenway Stone.

I hadn't been listening much to the conversation; it had been running on politics, and I loathe politics. Then Nelson Lee mentioned the errand which had brought us out to America, and, talking of forgers, they discussed the adventures which the gov'nor and I had had with Douglas James Sutcliffe, known to the world as "Jim The Penman." Mr. Stone was greatly interested in Lee's stories of the master-forgery, and nodded thoughtfully when the great British detective had done.

"I guess you can show us points when it comes to forgers, Mr. Lee," he said, pulling at his cigar. "We haven't got a man to equal Sutcliffe out in the States—which is a real good thing for the States! But when it comes to criminals of a different type—why, I reckon you haven't got a look in."

"A different type?" asked the gov'nor.

"Sure. I don't hunker to boast any regarding our crooks," smiled Mr. Stone. "But I'm referring to criminals of a rough-and-ready type, Train-robbers, cattle-rustlers, and those scum. We breed 'em out here, you know—at least, in the West. And there's one particular man my State would give fifty thousand dollars for, dead or alive."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" I struck in, interested now. "I say, that's a goodish amount to place on a man's head, isn't it, sir?"

"I guess we'd be a heap glad to see that head, youngster," said Mr. Stone grimly. "A—heap—glad!" he repeated between puffs.

"Who's head is it?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, he calls himself 'Silver Mask.' You've heard of him, I guess?"

"Never."

"Say, you astonish me!" declared Mr. Kenway Stone. "Never heard of Silver Mask? But I was forgetting. You're only out here on a rush trip, of course. You haven't read of Silver Mask's exploits. Say, Mr. Lee, they read like a dime novel!"

"It all depends upon what type of dime novel you are referring to," smiled Lee.

"Well, it's the lurid variety, you can

take my word for that," said Mr. Stone. "Out here, in this State, there's not a kid who hasn't heard of Silver Mask. Yet he's only been operating for about three months."

"Fame has come to him quickly."

"And small wonder! If you'd care to hear a few details, I'll just tell you what kind of a skunk this Silver Mask is," said Mr. Stone. "I guess his identity is kept a stiff secret, for there's not a blamed soul who knows who he really is. Y'see, when he's at work, he wears a mask which covers the better part of his face, and it's made of bright metal—silver, as likely as not. Anyway, he's called Silver Mask. And, believe me, that man is an unholy terror!"

"What's he done?" I asked.

"He's tried his hand at most things in the criminal line, and I guess he's a dandy success at 'em all," replied Mr. Stone. "Of course, he doesn't operate alone. He's got a gang with him, and the crowd has been raising tarnation in this State. They have robbed trains more times than I can count on my two hands. They've looted banks, and they've caused more cattle to disappear than a whole crowd of butchers could have done in a year!"

"Can't you hunt the fellow down?"

"Say, isn't that what we've been trying to do for two months?" asked the other mildly. "But you don't seem to get me, Mr. Lee. The Silver Mask, ain't just an ordinary crook. He's cute—so cute that he don't allow his own men to know his actual identity. He's terrorised the whole State, from border to border, and generally creates merry havoc."

Nelson Lee lighted a cigarette.

"When you say that Silver Mask has robbed trains, I presume you mean freight trains?" he asked.

"Freight trains! Gee!" ejaculated Mr. Stone. "You most certainly haven't got me, Mr. Lee. Freights! Why, Silver Mask wouldn't make himself look mean by laying hands on a freight! No, sir! Silver Mask holds up passenger trains, and he does it so thoroughly that the railroad people in these parts are fair quaking in their shoes."

"I thought train holds-up were things of the past," I said interestedly.

"They're not!" replied our companion. "Silver Mask has brought the game to a fine art, and he's never been

tripped yet. We've got men all round, but they can't surprise Silver Mask. He's certainly a cool card."

Mr. Stone tossed his cigar-end out of the window.

"The galling part of it is," he went on, "we know, pretty nearly, where his headquarters are situated. We know the locality, and we've got our eyes on certain men who are suspected of being members of his gang. But we can't trip 'em nowhow, and the job's getting kind of wearisome. And there's no hope of any man turning State evidence, because Silver Mask keeps his identity to himself. If that wasn't so, I guess there'd be a whole crowd of traitors after that fifty thousand dollars. Oh, yes, Silver Mask's sure cute!"

"You say that you know the locality——"

"Sure. It's a one-horse township way along close by the alkali lands," replied Mr. Stone. "Blazing Gulch is how that township's called, and you can take my word for it that Blazing Gulch is a tough city."

"Sounds pretty warm, anyhow," I grinned.

"Warm! Say, sonny, the firebox of this locomotive is below freezing-point compared to Blazing Gulch," said Mr. Stone grimly. "Silver Mask and his gang are located around the Gulch, and the township lives in mortal terror week in and week out. There ain't five men who dare carry a gun!"

"Why not?" asked Nelson Lee interestedly.

"Well—it's unhealthy," said the other. "That's what it is, Mr. Lee—darned unhealthy. If a man carries a gun in Blazing Gulch he runs the risk of having daylight let through his carcass. There was one fool lawyer fellow who swore that he'd carry what he chose in his own pockets—he wasn't worrying any about the things people were saying. He was new to Blazing Gulch, you see. Well, two days later, that lawyer was found at the rear of the railroad depot with enough holes in him to——"

"Killed, do you mean?" I asked, startled.

"You can bet he didn't breathe again, anyway," said Mr. Stone. "That's Blazing Gulch, Mr. Lee. The townsfolk are provided with a little entertainment now and again, when Silver Mask

and his gang swoop down on the city and proceed to paint it red. Things generally happen those times. As for sheriffs—well, Blazing Gulch ain't got a sheriff at present."

Mr. Stone leaned back and accepted the cigarette which Nelson Lee offered him. He seemed to be enjoying his own voice hugely; he knew that he had impressed us, and was consequently in a good humour.

"The sheriff's job does not seem to be a particularly attractive one, eh?" asked the gov'nor.

"Attractive! Say, you're wrong there, Mr. Lee," exclaimed our traveling companion, with a smile. "The sheriff's carcass is a whole heap attractive—for gun bullets!"

Lee smiled, in turn.

"I was expecting you to say something like that, Mr. Stone," he said calmly. "I gather that the sheriff's job is so dangerous, in fact, that nobody can be found who cares to take the risk——"

"That's sure how it is," interrupted the other. "That post is about the most all-fired job in this State. Say, if any man is on the look-out for sudden death the best thing he can do is to become sheriff of Blazing Gulch."

"I suppose the last sheriff was murdered?"

"That's never been rightly found out, Mr. Lee," replied Stone. "The sheriff just disappeared—that, and nothing more. He went out one day on a sure cinch—that's how he spoke before he left—and Blazing Gulch never saw him from that time."

"I expect he hooked it," I put in doubtfully.

"Not on your life, young 'un. That man rode out of the Gulch with the intention of rounding up one of Silver Mask's gang. What happened to him nobody knows, but a sheriff of that kind was no sort of use for a township like the Gulch. Of course, there were deputies, but they ain't much go without the leader."

"Yet it's rather curious that the gang cannot be suppressed," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Of course, Mr. Stone, I am accustomed to British ways, and British law. I have a fair amount of experience in the Western States, but I freely confess that I do not understand your ways so thoroughly as a native

Westerner. But it seems to me there must be something wrong with your administration——”

“No, I guess you’re dead off the track there, Mr. Lee,” interjected Stone quickly. “There’s nothing wrong with the way we do things in this State! Two Blazing Gulch sheriffs have been killed. The one before that died a natural death—of lead-poisoning! Say, there were eight distinct bullets in that man’s hide!”

I chuckled—perhaps rather heartlessly.

“I’m not surprised that nobody wants to take the job on, Mr. Stone!” I exclaimed. “But it’s my opinion that the sheriffs had themselves to blame as much as anybody. They weren’t strong enough. Why, the gov’nor—Mr. Lee—has been up against all sorts of crooks, and he’s never been converted into cold meat yet! What’s wanted for Blazing Gulch is a man with tons of strength. I mean a man who makes it clear to everybody in general that he’s not going to be trifled with.”

“Mr. Lee hasn’t been round Blazing Gulch,” said Mr. Stone grimly. “I’m not saying you wouldn’t make a real dandy sheriff, Mr. Lee. All the same, I don’t think you’d be a success, if you’ll pardon my frankness. I guess you’d be dead inside of two days. They wouldn’t cotton to you any. They’d say that you were a darned tenderfoot, and raise trouble all around.”

I became rather wild, and plainly showed Mr. Kenway Stone that I wasn’t in such a good temper as I had been a minute before.

“Mr. Lee wouldn’t be mistaken for a tenderfoot!” I growled. “I’ll bet anything you like that he’d show points to any old sheriff in your obsolete old State! He’d teach your chaps a few tricks——”

“Nipper—Nipper!” remonstrated the gov’nor gently. “You mustn’t give an exhibition of temper.”

“Well, Mr. Stone shouldn’t run you down——”

“Say, I’m real sorry if my words sounded that way,” put in Mr. Stone concernedly. “Why, I wouldn’t run Mr. Lee down for anything. Don’t make any mistake on that point, Nipper!”

I grinned, and everything was all right again.

“The story reminds me of the old

lawless days of the West,” remarked the gov’nor quietly. “I thought this sort of thing was quite dead, even out here, Mr. Stone. I believe that it is only a flash in the pan. Silver Mask’s career will be short and sharp—although decidedly lurid while it lasts.”

“I wish I could think the same as you, Mr. Lee,” said the other rather seriously. “There’s no doubt that you’re right about the lurid character of the outlaw’s career. I guess it’s sure highly coloured. And the scoundrel’s so cute that he seems to smell trouble when it’s a mile off. And we don’t know who he is—that’s the stumbling-block we’re up against.”

“Haven’t you sent militia out there?”

“Say, it hasn’t reached that stage yet, although it might later on,” returned our companion. “I’m not exactly sure how militia would be welcomed—as likely as not by a shower of lead. The folk of Blazing Gulch have got strong ideas regarding their own township, and they’d look upon it as an insult if we sent soldiers along.”

“But I thought you said the inhabitants were terrorised?” asked Lee mildly. “They would surely welcome——”

Mr. Stone nodded.

“Most of the townfolk would be real glad,” he agreed. “But I am referring to the toughs—and, believe me, there are a whole heap of choice characters out in Blazing Gulch. They don’t want no militia hanging around. And it’s more than they’ll do to tolerate just one sheriff.”

Mr. Stone went into other details, and convinced us that if there was any place we were well advised to steer clear of, that place was Blazing Gulch. I suppose it’s the “cussedness” of things, but I felt tremendously eager to see that rough-and-ready township. Mr. Stone’s warning had only aroused my curiosity and interest.

I little knew then how things were going to turn out!

Our train was now slowing down for a short stop, and when it proceeded again darkness had fallen, and the night was calm and still.

The air was humidly close, in fact, and a dim haze hung over the ground. After we had dined, Mr. Stone and the

gub'nor settled down to read and I chose a bright magazine, and became interested, too.

Mr. Stone was due to leave us somewhere about midnight, when the train would pull into his city. We were traveling through very rough country. For miles and miles the railroad track ran across districts as bleak and barren as the desert. Very soon, however, we came to a line of hills, and roared through deep cuttings and tunnels.

There were long gradients, and it was while we were labouring up one of these that something quite remarkable happened. Happening to glance out of the open window beside me, I saw that we were travelling at only a slow speed, and were in a shallow cutting. On this side, at least, there was a sandy track running beside the metals.

And there, to my amazement, I saw two mounted men riding hard, and keeping pace with us! And, to my further astonishment, I saw that the men were masked! Just for a moment I thought that I was dreaming.

"Gub'nor!" I exclaimed quickly.

But before he could attend to me we all heard a rattling volley of revolver shots. And at the same second the brakes grated upon the wheels beneath us, and the train began bumping to a standstill.

Mr. Stone dropped his paper in his startled astonishment.

One glance out of the window was sufficient for him. He turned to us with eyes that were staring with alarm and dismay.

"Silver Mask's gang!" he gasped. "It's a hold-up!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"So I imagine," he observed calmly. "Rather remarkable, isn't it, Mr. Stone? I did not expect to receive first-hand evidence of your story so soon as this. The next half-hour promises to be rather interesting."

The train jolted to a stop, everybody in our car startled and agitated. I think I was quite alarmed, and certainly excited. A hold-up! It was about the last thing in the world I had expected; for I had an idea that Mr. Kenway Stone's yarn was three-parts "hot air."

I waited, with my heart thumping rapidly, for the next move.

I didn't have to wait long!

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH SILVER MASK INTRODUCES HIMSELF WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF PICTURESQUE LANGUAGE—AND IN WHICH THE GUB'NOR PROVES TO ALL AND SUNDRY THAT HE IS A BETTER MAN THAN ANY OLD TRAIN-ROBBER!

EVEN as I turned my head towards the end of the car I heard several rapid shots. These were followed by shouts and curses. The train crew were evidently offering resistance.

The door I was gazing at burst open, and the black conductor staggered in, his eyes rolling with fright.

"Yoh folks in hyar had best sit tight and say nuffin'!" he gasped. "If yoh so much as blink an eyelid yoh'll be daid, shure! Guess it's blazin' Silv'r Mask an' his gang. If dere's any man hyar wid a gun he'd best——"

The conductor stopped abruptly as a click sounded behind him.

"Say, you black skum, if you ain't lookin' fer drill-holes in that blacke car-case of yours you'd best shift—an' shift right now!" exclaimed a drawling, well-modulated voice. "I ain't figgerin' to make a mess in this yere car, but if any fool galoot fancies he's quick on the draw, there'll be a dandy bunch of lead flyin' around afore you—— Say, quit that, you dogone trash!"

Those last few words were curt, and had a snap in them. Looking round, I saw a tall figure framed in the doorway. It was that of a man dressed in rough riding costume, with clinking spurs on his heels. A red scarf adorned his neck, and his hat was of the common slouch variety.

But his face was covered almost completely by a tightly-fitting mask. The thing glittered in the electric-light, and seemed to be made of silver. We were faced by Silver Mask himself!

And, what was more, the outlaw made a liberal display of a huge revolver, which glittered even more than the mask. With a quick glance round, I saw that another man—in a black mask this time—was at the other end of the long coach. He, also, flourished a gun. We were covered, back and front!

Nelson Lee stood quite still, but he didn't seem very interested. He just stood by my side, with his hands in full view of Silver Mask. It wasn't safe to

have one's hands in one's pockets—under such circumstances!

Mr. Kenway Stone was pale, and greatly alarmed. I remembered that he had told the gov'nor that he carried a roll of dollars in his wallet to the value of five thousand dollars. He was just bidding them good-bye, I suppose.

A man on the other side of the car had edged his hand towards his hip-pocket. But, before he could do anything further, Silver Mask's gun was pointed directly at him, and the train-robber uttered a curt command.

"Quit that game, I say!" he snapped. "Guess you ain't lookin' fer them linen fixin's of yours to be messed up, are you? There'll be a heap of trouble if you don't keep your hands wher' I can see 'em. I guess you won't like that trouble any. An' don't think you ken play any tricks if I shift my eyes around somewhere else. You're covered behind—"

"You—you infernal scoundrel!" roared the passenger furiously.

"Say, compliments don't hurt my hide none," said Silver Mask imperturbably. "You'd best all git busy—the hull darned crowd of you—and empty your pockets on to the floor. If any leddy or gent keeps so much as a plate-glass ring, or a nickel stickpin back there'll be—shootin'. An' I guess Silver Mask don't shoot fer nothin'. Get me?"

We all "got" him right enough; his words, although picturesque, were painfully lucid. We just had to fling all our money and valuables on to the floor—and leave them there for these audacious burglars to pick up. It was awfully rotten, of course. But I remembered, with satisfaction, that I only had about five dollars on me. The gov'nor, though, was carrying a large sum.

It was a curious scene, that hold-up.

Our coach wasn't full of passengers by any means, but there were a good few on board—mostly business men. I think there were three ladies, and they seemed to be on the point of fainting.

The men acted in various ways. Some tumbled over themselves in their efforts to turn out their pockets with the greatest speed; others glared at one another, and obeyed Silver Mask's command with a bad grace. I expect the last-named gentry possessed the most money and valuables.

It would have been idiotic, of course,

to refuse to comply with the order. At the first show of resistance those two revolvers would have been loosed off, and wholesale massacre would have been the result.

For these men, although their manners were pleasant, were as grim as death itself; they didn't care a brass button whether they killed people or not. If any passenger was fool enough to ask for lead—well, he got it. He got it in chunks, so to speak. And, as likely as not, other people got some of the lead, too. And lead, when it is projected from a whacking great revolver in the shape of a bullet, is a thing to steer clear of.

Therefore, it was the best policy to knuckle under. Nobody was anxious to see bloodshed. And nobody was particularly anxious to shed blood.

Nelson Lee, to my astonishment, now seemed to be almost nervous.

He was shivering perceptibly, and cast frightened glances at Silver Mask. His lower lip was shaking, and his breath sounded hoarse and strained, in the comparative silence which reigned in the car.

"Great Scott!" I muttered. "What's wrong with the gov'nor?"

I stared at him open-mouthed, and caught his eye. Just for a fraction of a second I saw Lee's left eyelid droop. He had winked at me! I caught my breath in with a gulp.

He was up to some game or other—but what?

I felt like giving a terrific whoop of delight. The gov'nor was going to make some move—some move, of course, to defeat the train-robbers! In that moment all my anger faded away. I knew—I absolutely knew—that Nelson Lee meant to turn the tables.

Whether he would succeed or not was another matter. Taking my cue, I put on an air of nervousness, although I didn't do it too suddenly. These men were "fly," and it would have been a fine thing if I'd given the show away by rotten acting. But I pride myself that I can do the acting stunt fairly decently.

Mr. Stone was quite calm, although pale. He certainly wasn't suffering from nerves, and he gave Nelson Lee a contemptuous glance. The great detective seemed to be really in a blue funk, and it was little wonder that Mr. Stone expressed contempt in his eyes.

Nelson Lee, the famous British criminologist, showing the white feather! And not only showing it, but literally waving it about before everybody's eyes. For Lee was now so nervous that he could hardly stand.

At least, he appeared to be. It was about the finest piece of acting I'd seen for months.

A pile of stuff was mounting higher and higher on the floor of the coach—bank-rolls, wallets, purses, watches and chains, bracelets, rings, tie-pins, and all manner of valuable articles.

Silver Mask stood quite motionless, watching with a pair of darkly flashing eyes, which displayed great humour and contempt. His gaze rested upon Nelson Lee, and a soft chuckle came from his lips.

"Say, you with the dude suit, an' fixin's," he exclaimed suddenly.

The gov'nor looked at the outlaw fearfully.

"Did—did you ad-address me, you—you ruffian?" he stammered.

"Wall, I guess you're the only guy in this lay-out who'd answer that description," said Silver Mask easily. "I figger that's a real nasty complaint you're sufferin' from—cold feet. Guess you'd best take things as they come, an' don't worry any. I ain't no use for cattle of your calibre. Say, there ain't enough sand in your hull carcass to fill one o' them fancy egg-boilin' fakes. Such truck as you don't need ter live on this yere airth, an' you'll sure be booked fer tarnation 'less you get busy. I ain't no time to waste on white-livered hogs. Do you get me?"

"L—I—I—"

"Cool! I'll need to wake you up some, I guess," exclaimed Silver Mask curtly. "Quit that blamed 'I—I—I' stunt an' get busy—quit it right now."

I saw Mr. Stone glare at Nelson Lee. "Pull yourself together, for Heaven's sake, Mr. Lee!" muttered the State official roughly. "I guess you're showing up badly—"

"Say, not so much lip, ther'!" snapped the outlaw.

Mr. Stone ceased speaking, and Nelson Lee lifted one of his quaking hands and thrust it into his inner coat-pocket. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that there were mounted men on the permanent-way, outside. They were watching, and keeping guard. This hold-up was no small affair.

Nelson Lee withdrew his hand, and then threw down a well-stuffed pocket-book. His teeth were chattering, but I was the only person among the whole crowd who could fully appreciate the position at its true worth.

Everybody else had done—they'd skinned their pockets, I mean. And I took in the whole scene. All the passengers were looking at Lee with open scorn; even the frightened nigger conductor wore an expression of disgust.

Silver Mask uttered a curse, and allowed his gun to drop a trifle.

"Say, you pig, look lively."

He didn't get any further. Nelson Lee had dived into his other breast pocket, and now he withdrew his hand. That which happened next was so abrupt—so amazingly unexpected that I gasped aloud.

I saw a small automatic in the gov'nor's hand—I just caught a flash of it in the electric-light. Apparently without taking any aim he fired. There was a loud report, followed by a snarling oath.

Lee's hand swept round with the speed of lightning.

Crack!

Again the automatic spoke, and again it seemed as though the gov'nor had taken no aim. Yet, as the smoke wafted away, I saw that both Silver Mask and his mate were disarmed! Their guns lay on the floor!

It was the finest exhibition of cool marksmanship I had ever witnessed. Both Nelson Lee's shots had been dead true; he had struck both the outlaws' guns! And now the pair were cursing and wringing their hands. Their revolvers had been knocked out of their grip, and their fingers were nearly smashed from the jarring shock.

"Cover that other fellow, Nipper!" roared Lee.

In a second my own automatic was out, and I showed the muzzle of it to the snarling ruffian at the other end of the car.

There was an outcry from the darkness outside.

"Duck!" shouted Nelson Lee sharply. "Everybody in this car duck!"

At the same second the gov'nor crouched down. Stone and all the other passengers didn't wait to ask questions—they just bobbed down. And, almost on the second, a shattering volley of shots swept through the great coach, from end

to end. The windows were smashed and starred in a dozen places.

Of course, the mounted men outside had fired those shots; and Lee's prompt warning had saved anybody from injury. There wasn't a soul scratched. And then, in the comparative silence which followed, I heard the gov'nor's voice:

"You're covered, Silver Mask," said Nelson Lee coolly. "You didn't think I was play-acting, did you? You're not quite so smart as——"

Crack!

It was my revolver which spoke. The desperado I was covering had most unwisely attempted to reach his revolver, which was lying about five feet from him. I suppose he observed my youth, and thought I wasn't worth troubling about. That was silly of him. Of course, I had to shoot—that was the only way to convince him of his mistake. The bullet touched his arm—as I had intended—only it touched it rather severely. The bullet, in fact, went clean through the fleshy part. The fellow uttered a howl, and slunk back, his arm hanging limp.

"Better keep still," I said curtly.

"That's right, Nipper," came the gov'nor's voice. "Mr. Stone, will you oblige me by securing Silver Mask's hands behind him—he won't hurt you."

"Say! You're a live man?" gasped Mr. Stone.

He strode forward, but, like an ass, he walked between Nelson Lee and Silver Mask. It was the silliest thing he could have done. For, on the second the outlaw took advantage of the circumstance.

"Guess we'll meet agen, Mister Dude!" he shouted savagely.

In a flash he had twirled round, and the gov'nor couldn't fire without boring a hole through Mr. Stone. Of course, the State official ought to have steered clear of the line of fire; but he was excited and agitated.

We heard an order yelled out, and then the sound of galloping hoofs. The man I was looking after acted desperately. He flung himself sideways, and just missed the bullet I sent after him. Then he dashed out of the train.

I was half-expecting another volley from outside, and I wondered there hadn't been shots before. But Silver Mask's gang were apparently afraid of hitting their leader.

Nelson Lee muttered an exclamation

of anger and dashed for the door. When he reached the open I was just behind him. We saw nothing but the darkness. The train-robbers had galloped away.

There was a series of excited shouts, and members of the train crew came running along.

"Say, what's happened, anyway?" gasped one man.

About ten voices answered him, and, naturally, he couldn't understand a thing. But the excitement was so general that everybody was rather incoherent. The only man who was really dead-calm was Nelson Lee.

"It's an infernal pity we couldn't capture the scoundrel, Nipper," he said to me. "I had him completely helpless. I must admit, however, that he was extremely smart. He took advantage——"

"Just a bit too smart for you, Mr. Lee," exclaimed Kenway Stone heartily. "But I guess you did a whole lot of good. There ain't a dollar missing. We're real obliged to you. But Silver Mask put one over on you all right."

"Look here, Mr. Stone, that's jolly cool of you!" I struck in hotly. "Mr. Lee had Silver Mask at his mercy. It was your fault that the rotter escaped."

"Wal, gee! Say that again, young 'un!" gasped Mr. Stone.

"Certainly, if you like!" I retorted. "It was your fault that Silver Mask escaped. You walked right between him and Mr. Lee's revolver. Mr. Lee couldn't shoot without injuring you. Silver Mask saw that—and hopped it."

Mr. Kenway Stone uttered an oath.

"Say, you're right, boy—you're sure right!" he cried. "Why, it was my doing, after all! It never struck me like that at the time. I guess my brains must have got loose just then!"

The man's chagrin and disappointment almost overwhelmed him. He was really and truly penitent. And my indignation subsided. I was glad I had pointed out to him that the gov'nor hadn't been beaten by the rotten old train-robber, all the same.

There was a scene of tremendous enthusiasm.

We found that the desperadoes had fled precipitately, without having secured so much as a "plate-glass ring" or a "nickel stick-pin." The engineer and his mate had been held at bay while others of the gang attended to the train. It had been Silver Mask's intention to systematically rob the train from end to end

and our coach, as it happened, had been the first.

Mounted men had waited on both sides of the train, keeping the other members of the train-crow in view. But for Nelson Lee's extraordinary exhibition of fancy shooting, the brutes would have looted everybody and everything.

Undoubtedly, the passengers owed the gov'nor a tremendous debt of gratitude.

Those who had gazed upon Lee with contempt scarcely realised, at first, that the great detective had been bluffing. When they did realise that important fact, they just went off their heads.

Men and women crowded round and wanted to shake his hand; cheers went up from scores of excited throats, and there was a general scene of excitement and enthusiasm. Nelson Lee was the most popular man among the whole collection.

By the time the train went on again the gov'nor's arm must have ached enormously. I was as pleased as Punch. By sheer skill, Nelson Lee had "kiboshed" Silver Mask's game, and the notorious outlaw had been forced to flee. It was the first check he had received in his career of crime.

"I guess I've seen a pile of fancy shootin' around a bunch of Western cities," said one man, a drummer--in plain English, a commercial traveller. "I've seen badmen handle guns like they was weaned on 'em. But, say, them two shots was just about the cutest thing ever! Mr. Lee, I'm proud to have met you—I guess you're sure some marksman. Yes, sir! You're the goods from the word go!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"'Badmen' are not the only people who can shoot," he said easily.

"Say, Silver Mask'll be feelin' kinder small an' mean," went on the drummer, with a delighted grin. "He'll be twistin' himself inside out, he'll be that riled. I'm real glad I shipped aboard this 'limited'!"

The commercial Johnny had had a "dandy bunch" of dollars in his wallet, so he told us, so it was a good thing for him that Nelson Lee had turned the tables. He was overflowing with admiration, and would have fastened himself on us if the gov'nor hadn't shown quite plainly that he didn't want to discuss the subject. So the drummer took himself off, and sang Lee's praises to other passengers who hadn't been fortunate enough to travel in this particular coach.

Nelson Lee disliked "hero worship."

He'd done the trick, and that was enough. Nothing displeased him more than flattery. And so, once the train was speeding triumphantly onwards again, we found ourselves in our old places.

"That spot where the hold-up occurred," said Mr. Stone, "was fairly close to Blazing Gulch, I reckon. Within thirty miles, anyway. Say, Mr. Lee, you'll have to let me admire your shooting. Why, sir, you can handle a gun better than any man I've met. Those two shots were real dandies."

Lee chuckled.

"I didn't see the fun of emptying my pockets at the command of an infernal outlaw," he replied. "At the same time, I am interested in Silver Mask. He behaved with singular coolness and—"

"Oh, he's cool," interjected Mr. Stone. "He's surely the cleverest crook we've had around this State for a decade. I don't reckon he'll end his career yet awhile—unless he happens to strike a dose of lead-poisoning by accident. He's got a smart gang, too."

"It's curious you can't locate his headquarters," said Lee thoughtfully.

"They're right around Blazing Gulch, as I said."

"Yes—but where? And who is Silver Mask?"

"Ah, now you've got me in a clinch—fair jammed," replied Mr. Stone. "Nobody knows who Silver Mask is, and I guess his headquarters are located somewhere in the foot-hills, beyond Blazing Gulch. I dare say he's got a fine pile of loot cached around those hills. I'd give a deal to know that Silver Mask was safe away in the penitentiary. But I don't reckon he'll be captured alive."

"There's a sum of fifty thousand dollars for the man who rounds him up, I understand?"

"Sure, it's a dandy figure, Mr. Lee."

"It is, indeed."

"Say, you're not thinking of making a bid for that reward, are you?" asked Mr. Stone seriously. "You're the finest shot I've had the pleasure to meet—I'll admit that freely, I guess—but this affair to-night was just luck—"

"Luck!" I echoed indignantly, glaring at Mr. Stone.

"Yep, that's how I said. It was luck—and good shooting," replied the State official. "Silver Mask won't allow another incident of that sort to happen. You can stake your life. He'll be dead cautious in future. It was smart work, Mr. Lee—I don't reckon any other man

could have done it—but you're not capable of rounding up a desperado of Silver Mask's calibre."

Nelson Lee lit a cigarette.

"I'm not capable, eh?" he asked smilingly.

"Say, I don't mean to offend——"

"I know that, Mr. Stone," said the gov'nor smoothly. "You have a perfect right to your opinion. My opinion, however, is different. I've got an idea—a foolish idea, perhaps—that I am as good a man as Silver Mask——"

"A better man, gov'nor!" I protested.

"Well, that's not been proved yet, Nipper," said Lee. "This affair to-night may have been a fluke. But I'm quite interested in Silver Mask. I should like to cross swords with him again."

"Take my advice, and don't!" said Mr. Stone. "You'll fail, Mr. Lee."

I didn't like Stone's repeated statements that the gov'nor wasn't equal to the task of hounding down the confounded outlaw. I don't think Lee liked them, either. Although Stone didn't mean it that way, it was something of a slight.

"Look here, Mr. Stone," said the detective quietly. "I have a fancy to see Blazing Gulch. In a way, I feel that it is up to me to make good my words. I don't want you to suspect me of loafing. I understand a new sheriff is wanted——"

"Say, you're not thinking——"

"I am ready to accept that post, Mr. Stone," went on Nelson Lee grimly. "If you and your superiors are willing, I will undertake the duties of sheriff at Blazing Gulch—for one month exactly. And, during that month, I undertake to unmask the outlaw."

"I guess you're—joking?" asked Stone.

"No, I am deadly serious."

"You'll become Sheriff of Blazing Gulch?"

"Yes—for one month."

"Gee! You won't last a week——"

"That remains to be seen, of course," said Lee quietly. "I am ready to undertake the work—and Nipper will accompany me as my assistant. What do you say, Mr. Stone? Will you try me out? Having been introduced to Silver Mask, I am really interested."

"I didn't expect hot air from a man like you——"

"Have I expended 'hot air,' Mr. Stone?"

"You said you'll round up Silver Mask within the month——"

"That wasn't 'hot air.' I meant it."

"Well, you're a real live wire!" declared Mr. Kenway Stone admiringly. "Say, Mr. Lee, I don't like the idea of sending you to certain death—but I guess it's your own funeral. You've asked for it. I accept your offer. My superiors will endorse my decision, I know."

"Then—then we shall go to Blazing Gulch?" I asked eagerly.

"That's how Mr. Lee says. It's up to him, I guess."

Nelson Lee yawned.

"We'll leave the train at your city, Mr. Stone," he said lazily. "To-morrow all the arrangements can be made. Wake me up when we draw into the station, won't you? I'll snatch a few moments' nap, if you'll excuse me."

I couldn't help grinning. The gov'nor hadn't done this for effect; it was just his way. The thing was settled—so there was nothing more to say.

Mr. Stone looked at Nelson Lee very hard as he closed his eyes. Then Mr. Stone looked at me, and I suddenly became grave. He couldn't quite make the detective out. He believed that Lee was bragging—that his offer was so much gas.

But I knew otherwise.

The gov'nor had decided to provide Mr. Stone with concrete evidence that he wasn't quite a mug. The incident of the hold-up had whetted Nelson Lee's appetite, and he wanted to get to closer grips with Silver Mask.

As for little me—well, the whole thing met with my firmest approval. I saw some exciting times ahead. Exactly how exciting those times were to prove remained to be seen. At all events, we were destined to make tracks for Blazing Gulch—and that was highly satisfactory.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH WE ARRIVE IN BLAZING GULCH AND CAUSE GENERAL COMMENT AMONG THE NATIVES—NELSON LEE, ALIAS SPIKE LANGTON, IS CALLED UPON TO DEAL WITH A PLEASANT GENTLEMAN NAMED BRIMSTONE JOE, AND BRIMSTONE JOE FINDS IT HIGHLY NECESSARY TO INTERVIEW DOC O'HAGAN.

BLAZING GULCH was living right up to its name when Spike Langton and Kid Lewin stepped out of the caboose of a clanking freight train which had pulled up at the spot on

the track which was honoured by the name of "depot."

The air quivered with heat, and the sun blazed down relentlessly. The solitary railroad agent, in shirt-sleeves and straw hat, hurried towards the freight from the log-built "office."

Spike Langton—in other words, Nelson Lee—turned to Kid Lewin.

"Say, Kid, I'm not particularly struck with Blazing Gulch, anyway," he said easily, tossing away the end of a rolled cigarette.

"Guess it's a one-hoss lay-out," replied Kid Lewin, with disgust.

I happened to be Kid Lewin, and I rather fancied myself in my get-up. If old Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard, had seen us at that particular time, he'd have had a few fits, just to relieve the strain.

The gov'nor and I, in fact, were got up for the occasion.

In the big city we had settled everything—or rather, Lee had. Mr. Stone's colleagues and superiors had dubiously agreed to give Lee a trial. A sheriff had to be appointed for Blazing Gulch, and this Britisher might as well fill the bill. I was thrown in as makeweight, so to speak. That's how the officials regarded the thing.

We had boarded a rotten old freight train, which was scheduled to "make" Blazing Gulch at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon. As a matter of fact, we didn't pull up at our destination until three o'clock—just a trifle of four hours late. This wasn't at all bad, considering the nature of the branch-line, and the diabolical condition of the railroad track.

We had travelled in the caboose—in other words, the guard's van. The brakeman had been genial, but he hadn't relieved the jolting of the caboose "any." By the time Blazing Gulch was reached I was showing every sign of seasickness.

That railroad was surely the limit. It was only a single-track line, and about ten trains a week passed through the Gulch. These were mostly freights, and ramshackle old freights at that. The metals were laid abominably, and the train had been jolting and swaying for hours.

I was glad enough to step upon solid ground again, even though the sun beat down glaringly upon my head. There wasn't an inch of shade anywhere. The whole scene was just baking and scorching.

Blazing Gulch itself lay a mile to the southward, in a little valley. Here, next to the railroad, the landscape was bare and parched, with scarcely a sign of greenstuff in any direction.

The badly laid track stretched away in a perfectly straight line, right into the quivering heat haze. The semaphore was down, and the freight didn't actually stop at all. For as soon as the gov'nor and I had hopped off with our "grips," the train continued its laboured course.

The railroad agent approached us, eyeing us curiously. He was a wizened-up man, with a dull expression. Probably his routine work made him dull; it was the same for him, week in and week out. It must have been a dog's life.

"I'm figgerin' you're the noo sheriff?" he said abruptly.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Sure," he agreed. "Spike Langton's my name. This is Kid Lewin, my deputy."

"Guess I'm glad to meet you, sheriff," said the agent. "Mebbe you're thinkin' this yere place is dull? Say, I ain't envyin' you none. The Gulch is jest—blazes. You'll find a hull pile o' trouble hanging around the Gulch. Guess you ain't come at the best of times, neither. Ther's some of the boys in town, I hear."

"I'm ready for them," said the gov'nor quietly.

"Yep, I dessay you are. But I calc'late they're readier fer you, sheriff," said the agent, with a grim smile. "Brimstone Joe's around the Gulch—and One-Gun Hanks, an' Snakes Wilson, an' the rest o' the dogone bunch. Say, you'll be welcomed with open arms, sheriff. Them blame coyotes is jest achin' to sot eyes on you."

It was plain that the railroad agent was taking a kind of delight in giving us these tit-bits of information. He'd sized the gov'nor up as being a "Noo York dude" probably.

For Nelson Lee was not attired like the usual run of sheriffs.

His neatly cut riding-breeches were obviously town made, and there were no "guns" at his hips. He wore a soft shirt and a wide-brimmed hat, but they were too well-fitting and neat to satisfy the eye of a rough-and-ready Westerner.

The gov'nor hadn't attempted to disguise himself in the least. And his clean-shaven face seemed too clear-skinned and fresh for the job he'd taken in hand. He was certainly the most gentlemanly

sheriff Blazing Gulch had ever had, or was ever likely to have. Compared to the burly, rough inhabitants of the Gulch, Lee would seem almost insignificant. He was sure to cause widespread comment.

And I looked something like a music-hall comedian, I daresay. My clothes were very much the same as Nelson Lee's, only not so neat. And I'd stained my dial somewhat, in order to tone down my youthful beauty. With a few lines here and there, and a stumpy bit of a moustache, I looked fully twenty-five. But, being small, Lee had decided to give me the name of "Kid." I didn't mind; it was all in the day's work.

The railroad agent was openly genial, but I could see that he was contemptuous of us. He sized us up as a couple of guys.

"I guess you're walkin' to the Gulch?" he suggested.

"Yes, if there ain't no other means," replied Lee, in an easy drawl. "But I was expectin' one of my deputies along—Ed Taylor, I guess. I s'pose you ain't seen him around this dust heap you call a depot?"

"Ed Taylor ain't hin——"

The agent paused, as a sound of galloping hoofs sounded on the quivering air. We looked round, and then saw a horseman coming along the dusty road.

"Guess that'll be Ed, sure," said the agent. "He's got a couple of empty plugs with him. Them plugs'll be fer you fellers, I notion. Say, ken you ride a hoss?" he added, grinning.

By "plugs" the agent meant horses, I gathered. And our general appearance had made him sceptical as to whether we could ride. This was not quite complimentary, but the gov'nor didn't mind a bit. And I grinned. Could Nelson Lee ride a "hoss"!

The newcomer proved to be Mr. Ed. Taylor, a bootmaker by trade, and a deputy-sheriff. He was a huge man, dressed in a rough shirt which hadn't seen a laundry for months, and frowsy sheepskin "chapps" adorned his lanky legs. A red handkerchief was tied about his shirt-collar, and his slouch hat was brown with age.

He had a good-humoured face, and there were reminders of many fights there; his nose wasn't quite true, and a couple of scars on his left cheek told their

own story. The colour of his skin was mahogany brown, although at present it was streaked with perspiration and dust.

The two "plugs" he had brought were splendid animals, and I eyed them with approval. I don't think he eyed us with approval. As he stepped to the ground he gazed at us with wonder, and then turned his eyes upon the railroad agent.

"Say, Shaky, who in tarnation——"

"Guess this is the noo sheriff, Ed," grinned the agent.

"Waal, mighty gee!" ejaculated Ed Taylor. "I tho't we was gettin' a real live man this trip—not a god-durned Fourth of July guy! I 'lows I am a heap surprised." He turned to us. "Howdy, sheriff," he added, spitting into the dust, and shifting his plug of tobacco into his other cheek. "I was put wise that you'd arrive to-day."

"I guess you ain't struck by my looks?" asked Nelson Lee easily.

"Say, that's sure straight talk," said Ed. "I ain't struck none, sheriff!" Nelson Lee laughed.

"Well, don't judge by appearances," he went on. "I may not be up to your expectations, but I guess I'm going to make things hum around this township. Get me? I ain't going to put up with no nonsense. I'm right here to locate Silver Mask—and I guess that guy is sure booked for penitentiary—or a hotter place!"

"Say, you're talkin' kinder—big!" exclaimed Ed, starting.

"That's a heap better than talking small, I guess," replied the gov'nor smoothly. "I've brought Kid Lewin along—he's right here. Kid's a real live wire."

"He looks it," said the other bluntly.

I grinned joyfully. We were going to surprise the natives, unless I was mistaken. Ed Taylor was not in the least impressed, and it was certain that the other inhabitants of Blazing Gulch would be equally lacking in appreciation. Nothing could have been better, from my point of view.

For, when the gov'nor really got busy, as he certainly would do—he would soon have Blazing Gulch agape. And, having set us down as a pair of "boobs," the worthy—or unworthy—townspeople would be all the more astonished when they realised that the "noo" sheriff was as smart as they make 'em.

Ed Taylor shifted his chewing tobacco again.

"Say, them plugs is sure "fresh," he remarked. "I 'lows they're two pieces of lively hoss-flesh. Do you figger you ken manage 'em? I guess, sheriff—"

"Quit guesssing," interjected Nelson Lee curtly. "Let's get going."

Ed stared for a moment, but there was no mistaking the gov'nor's tone. In less than a minute we were all three mounted, and we cantered out of the "station" on to the rough trail which led to the valley. I saw the railroad agent, Shakey, looking after us with a derisive grin on his face.

It was clear that Ed was determined to show us a thing or two in the horsemanship line. He set the pace, and galloped over the trail at full speed. He probably expected us to be miles behind very soon.

But that's where Ed made a mistake. The ground was rough, and a poor rider could have travelled at no speed at all. But it so happened that the gov'nor and I were expert horsemen. I'm not boasting—it's just a fact. - I pride myself that I can ride a gee-gee with the best man. And as for Nelson Lee—well, he's a lot cleverer than I am, as everybody knows.

We simply shot away, hot on the trail of the cloud of dust which marked Ed Taylor's progress. That dust wasn't pleasant, and so we decided to get ahead of it. Neck and neck we rode, and our mounts knew well enough that we were in earnest. Trust a horse to know whether its rider is its master or not.

Hard as Ed was riding, we rode harder. We gained on him rapidly, handling our "plugs" with ease and assurance. Lee forged ahead a trifle, and I gave my steed a gentle dig with the spur. He simply flew.

We were just on the brow of a hill. It descended sharply, and the surface of the road was rough and treacherous. A fall would certainly have been fatal. But we weren't thinking of falls. Besides, we knew how to ride.

Down the hill we plunged, full speed ahead. I was wildly excited, and enjoyed the ride hugely. Of course, we were risking our lives, but there wasn't time to consider chances. Ed Taylor was ahead; and before we reached Blazing Gulch he had to be behind. That was the long and the short of it. It was a matter of prestige. The new sheriff had to prove his quality.

The wind whistled past my ears, and my mount kept up a gorgeous loping stride which never faltered once. I just held him in sufficiently to keep him from getting out of control.

But now Nelson Lee was ahead, and I saw him disappear into a cloud of dust ahead. Next minute I was in that cloud, and thundered along blindly and with never a check. Then, through the choking dust, I saw Ed Taylor. He had pulled aside, and allowed me to roar past.

A hundred yards further on I caught sight of the gov'nor. He was trotting serenely now, and there was nothing to tell of the wild ride except the perspiring condition of our "plugs." Their flanks were streaked with sweat, and they were quivering with the reaction.

But they were fine horses. A minute before they had been galloping with necks outstretched, ears flattened, and with mouths beginning to gape. And before I could speak to the gov'nor, the deputy-sheriff came up with us.

His eyes were bulging, and there was an expression of amazement and genuine admiration in them.

"Say!" he gasped. "I 'lows I'm sure crazed to tarnation!"

"What's the trouble, Ed?" asked Lee, with a chuckle.

"Guess I sized you up kinder wrong!" went on Ed. "I sure tho't you was a blame boob. Say, sheriff, if this fist o' mine ain't too dirty, I'd be a hull heap pleased if you'd—shake!"

He held out his paw—which was, indeed, grimy—and Nelson Lee took it warmly.

"We'll get on together, Ed," he exclaimed genially.

"And this feller, too!" went on Ed, reaching over to me. "Why, gee! I 'lows you ken ride them dogone plugs ter blazes. I allus had a kinder sneakin' idea that I was a hossman. Say, pard, I'm feelin' fizzled up. I ain't no more use on a hoss than a squalin' baby! You've sure opened my winders some!"

Ed's "winders" were still staring with astonishment, and his whole attitude had changed. That ride of ours had been more eloquent than hours of talk. And I was feeling "good." We had made a splendid beginning, at all events. In the distance ahead I could see the white boards of several houses. We were already on the outskirts of Blazing Gulch. Our new friend rode with us.

still giving us glances which told of his astonishment. From that moment, I knew, Ed Taylor was our firm friend.

The township was sweltering with the afternoon heat as we rode in. The straggling main street was almost deserted, and the whole place looked strangely peaceful and quiet.

I couldn't very well picture the lurid incidents Mr. Kenway Stone had spoken of. Blazing Gulch, in fact, was only blazing in the sense that it was thundering hot. As for any appearance of lawlessness, the township was quite the opposite. It was simply a dull, squabbling Western village.

"This place don't look as though it wanted tamin'," I remarked.

"Say, Kwi, it don't do to go by looks when it comes to Blazing Gulch," said Ed grimly. "Ther' never was a more peaceable spot than this yere township by daylight. After sundown, when the boys get round, I guess you'll have a hull pile o' trouble. This ain't a healthy lay out for sheriffs. Believe me, it ain't."

"I guess the boys'll have to be taught," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"Well, I 'low you'll larn 'em a heap if you ken use your gun as handy as you ken handle that darned plug," exclaimed Ed. "Holy Markinaw! The boys'll let fit ter bust when they set eyes on your fancy fiv'n's! I ain't let on any. They'll hev' to find out for their selves that you ain't such a mug as you seem. Say, stop right here, sheriff. Guess this is the office."

We dismounted outside the little building which was the sheriff's office. We tethered our horses, and entered the office. It was a mean enough little place, and did not impress me in the least.

Just behind it, I found, there was a rough shack which was to serve as our abode for the period of our sojourn in Blazing Gulch. I got busy in the shack while the gov'nor went into things with Ed Taylor.

It was two hours before Nelson Lee strolled in, and then he was looking easy and contented. Ed hovered in the background, a smile of joy on his face. That jaw with the gov'nor had opened his "winders" even wider, and he "sure allowed that the new sheriff was some highflyer!"

He had discovered, in fact, that the

gov'nor was a man of coolness and resource; that he had come to Blazing Gulch to do things; and that those things were going to be done. And, quite suddenly, Ed had come to the conclusion that "Spike Langton" was absolutely the goods.

Of course, not a soul knew that we were Britshers. Not that this would have been any reason for hostility. In fact, Britshers were rather doted on out there, I believe. At the same time, there would have been trouble if Blazing Gulch learned that its sheriff was an Englishman. Even so it was, there would probably be trouble.

It was growing dusk when Lee appeared, and I had been making discoveries. A certain lady named Mrs. Mike Donagan had been engaged to "do the chores"—in other words, to see about the housework. She was a buxom lady, with a voluble tongue and a broad smile.

By dint of persistent flattery I got on the right side of her, and we were fast friends. At first she had been somewhat high-handed, but when I had gambled with her she was as meek as a lamb. She would have done anything for me. You see, I knew just how to manage her.

The gov'nor, Ed Taylor, and I sat down to a hearty meal, and before we had finished we found it necessary to light the smelly oil-lamp with which the "dining-room" was provided. I'd better explain that the dining-room, drawing-room, and bedroom were all one apartment. We just called it what we liked at different times of the day. This saved a lot of trouble.

"Guess you'll be gettin' along down, sheriff?" suggested Ed, laying back and lighting a cigarette he had just deftly rolled. "The boys'll be real disappointed if you don't show up. Say, let me give you a word of advice."

"Fire right ahead," said the gov'nor.

"Waal, ther's an all-fired hobo around the Gulch known as Brimstone Joe," said Ed seriously. "Guess he's a holy terror. Him an' Snakes Wilson an' One Gun Hanks are about the only feliers who carry guns around their car-kies. Say, they're jest walkin' arsenah! An' they'll shoot fer nothin'—they'll make rings around you feet afore you ken say your prayers. I 'low you're a heap handy with your paws,

sheriff, but ef I wus you I'd treat them fellers with respect!"

"In other words, you are afraid of them?" asked Lee quietly.

Ed Taylor nodded.

"That's surely the truth," he agreed. "I ain't a fool, y'see. I ain't hankering after doses o' lead. They'd shoot you as they'd shoot a coyote. And, say, I notion they're members of Silver Mask's gang. Everybody around the Gulch figgers that way. But the blame seem can't be touched. They ain't never bin actu'ly caught at the game. But they're 'badmen' all right, sheriff."

"I reckon this township needs clearin' up some," I said grimly.

Ed nodded again.

"Sure. It's that mused up with wickedness that the hull atmosphere is kinder smelly," he declared. "An' I guess that Silver Mask an' his gang are the cause of the doggone smell. Say, that man's a sure puzzle. He's right around this yere township, but nobody don't know him. He's clever; guess there ain't a cleverer crook in the States."

"He's got to be roped in, Ed," said the gov'nor quietly.

"Gee! That's mighty cool talk, anyway," exclaimed our companion. "Silver Mask ain't the man to allow himself to be roped in. Say, it wouldn't faze me any if he an' his gang got around this same week an' shot up the Gulch. That's just his notion of humour, I guess."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Well, let's get along," he said. "The Karson saloon, you told me, Ed?"

"Sure. The Karson is about the toughest saloon in town," agreed Ed. "It's the swagger saloon of Blazin' Gulch, I figger. You'll find all the boys along. They're fair bustin' to see you, sheriff. You're comin'?"

"Right now," replied Lee.

"That's fine. Say, the boys 'ud cuss me to blazes for a fust-class hog if I got around without you. You're on abow to-night, sheriff. I guess you'd best be on your guard. That saloon is sure a dandy place for flyin' lead."

Ed spoke seriously, and there was a look of concern on his rough, scarred face. He stretched his lanky limbs, and sighed as he felt the leather strap which kept his breeches in position.

"It's fair orazin' to go around without a gun," he said regretfully.

"Why don't you carry one, then?"

"Say, I'm kinder fond of this yere airth, sheriff," replied Ed. "I ain't got any dandy notions of joinin' angels an' any fancy truck above the clouds. When I hit the one-way trail I guess I shall quit this world sudden—and I'll sure take a downward course. Yep, that's true enough. An' Blazin' Gulch is hotter'n I ken stand most times. I ain't hankering for a hotter place. But, say, I'd get there quicker'n I could spit out a used-up chew of 'bacca if I carried a gun around. Guns ain't healthy things to carry in this township."

"Perhaps others will find that out—soon," said the gov'nor sweetly.

I didn't join in the conversation much. To tell the truth, I thought it better not to do so. My "American" was rather shaky, and I didn't want to give the game away by saying something wrong. So I left the chin-wagging to the gov'nor. Besides, there wasn't much chance of talking, in any case.

We passed outside, and found that Blazing Gulch was in darkness. Overhead the stars shone with great brilliance, and a cool breeze was blowing down the valley. Lights here and there marked the roughly-constructed houses, and a lurid glare from a spot in the centre of the main street marked the Karson Saloon.

This was the "swell" meeting-place of the Gulch. There were other saloons, but they were mostly patronised by the lesser lights of the township. The Karson was "the" place. I don't mean that it was high-class. Not a bit like it. The saloon, by what I had heard, was a veritable sink of iniquity. All the toughest characters congregated there, and more often than not there were free fights.

So our visit there promised to be exciting. It was really "up" to Nelson Lee to show himself. As the new sheriff it was necessary for him to make himself acquainted with the inhabitants of the Gulch—and the best way of doing that was to get around the saloon. Most of the inhabitants were there—the inhabitants who mattered, at all events.

The drinking-palace was run by "Pyzen" Karson, and, by all accounts, he was the biggest scoundrel in the place. I expect he had earned the nickname of "Pyzen" from the fact that his rye whisky was more like poison than anything else.

Nelson Lee led the way into the saloon. He pushed back the swing doors, and strode through, Ed and I just behind. We were hit by a babel of coarse voices, and the clinking of glasses.

"Say, boys!" roared Ed Taylor. "Let me interdooce Spike Langton, our noo sheriff! Guess he's some wise guy!"

This was rather a doubtful introduction, but everybody in the saloon turned and looked at us. There were four or five men lounging against the bar, while two other groups were seated at tables, engaged in the delightful game of "draw" poker. Pyzen Karson was leaning over his bar, wiping his fingers on a dirty cloth.

It was a curious scene.

The men were roughly dressed for the most part—in coarse shirts and sheepskin or plain leather chapps. From the waists of three, at least, there hung enormous revolvers. Other men were attired in ordinary garb, although the tailoring and fit of the clothing came far short of the mark.

The silence was broken by one of the men at the bar.

"Gee! If that blame galoot is the noo sheriff I guess we're sure doomed in this all-fired township," said the man sarcastically. "Say, Ed! What's the game, anyway? We ain't hankerin' after havin' a Noo York dry-goods clerk for sheriff!"

"You're lettin' loose a hull pile o' hot air, Snakes," said Ed calmly. "I reckon Sheriff Langton is jest the boy for this city. Ho won't faze us none. And, say, this other dude is Kid Lewin."

All the men were grinning now, and a good few chuckles sounded. I dare say we did seem rather extraordinary. Our "dudes" were obviously town made, and Nelson Lee's face was fresh and clean. He was evidently a gentleman, and very far removed from the rough, huge men who had previously held the position of sheriff. The gov'nor looked very mild and harmless.

"I guess I'm pleased to meet everybody in this saloon," he said easily, and in a smooth, well-modulated voice. "I've got a feeling right inside me that we shall get on well together."

Snakes Wilson roared with coarse laughter.

"Say, isn't he a peach?" he exclaimed. "Talks like a college student! I guess we'll hev' this guy around for about five blamed hours. Say, sheriff, you've made a mistake, ain't you? You was booked for a dry-nursin' home—"

"Strikes me you're a sight too talkative, Snakes," put in the saloon-keeper, from behind his bar. "If you ain't thunderin' keerful the sheriff'll hev' the bracelets around your wrists, and you'll find yourself in the lock-up—"

He was interrupted by a roar of laughter. I knew that we were being made fun of, and I wondered what the gov'nor would do. Before he could say anything, though, a huge ruffian of a man detached himself from the bar, further along, and lounged across to where Nelson Lee was standing. He came to a stop under one of the swinging oil-lamps which adorned the ceiling.

"Say, Brimstone—" began Ed.

"You shut your lip," exclaimed the man, who was evidently the terrible Brimstone Joe. "I'm goin' to hev' a few words with the sheriff, I guess."

He looked the gov'nor up and down carefully, to the huge delight of other men in the saloon. The survey was thorough, as though Brimstone had been examining some curious zoological specimen.

"Say, what do you call yourself, anyway?" he asked at last.

Nelson Lee half turned, and leaned against the bar. He took absolutely no notice of the towering figure of Brimstone Joe.

"Guess you can push across something wet, Pyzen," said Lee calmly. "Serve the boys with what they like. It's up to me this trip—"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

My heart leaped into my mouth. Three revolver shots rang out, and I was quite startled for a second. Then I saw that Brimstone had one of his guns in his fist. And those three shots had bored through the floor within six inches of Nelson Lee's feet.

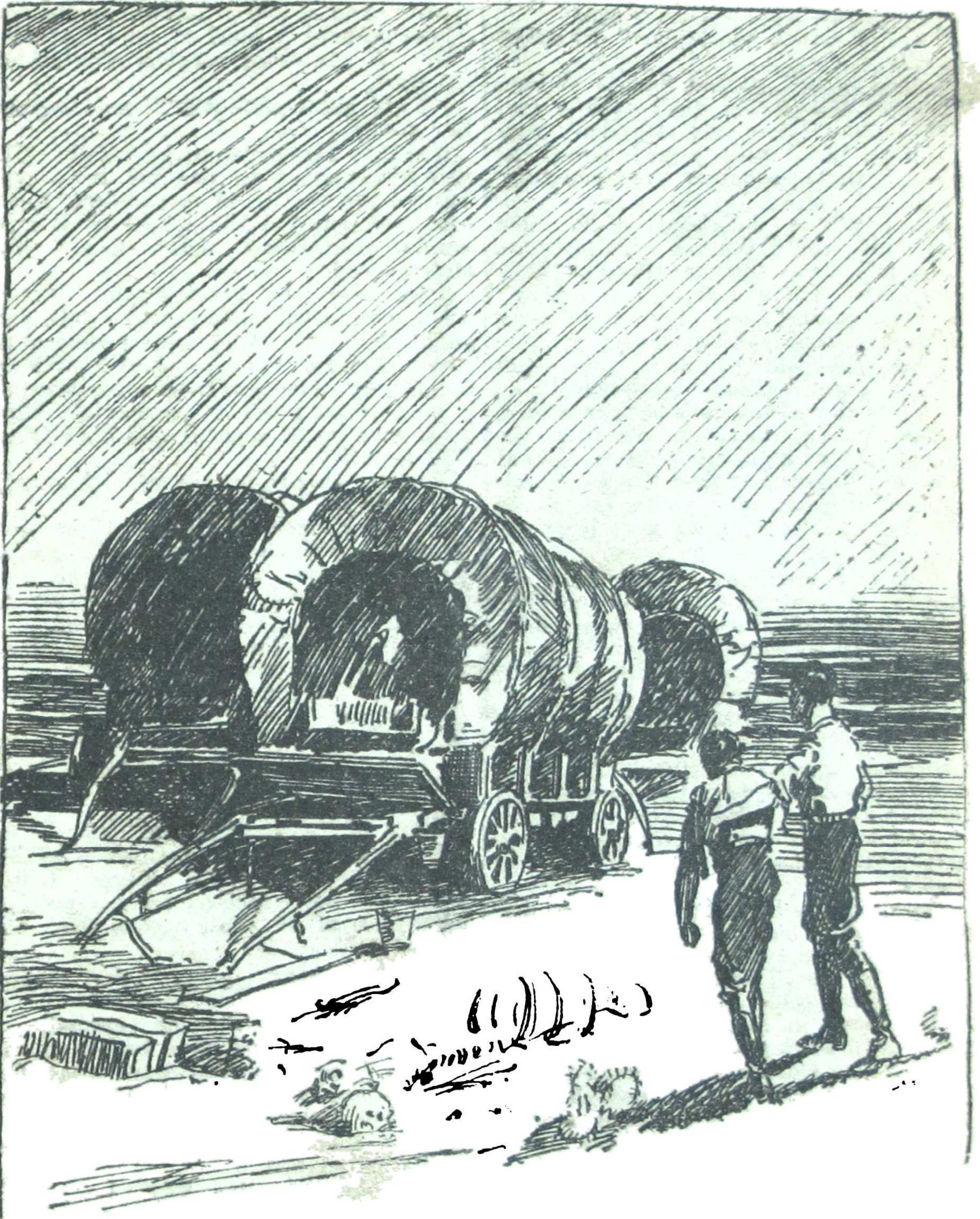
The ruffian's coarse face was alight with mischief, and he apparently expected Lee to hurriedly back away. The gov'nor didn't turn a hair. He just glanced at his feet, smiled, and then went on talking.

"It's up to me, Pyzen," he said. "I guess the boys'll drink with me, eh?"

"Sure!" said the saloon-keeper promptly.

Brimstone's evil grin vanished. A few chuckles which came from various quarters sent him into a rage. Those chuckles were directed against him—not against the sheriff! And that wasn't what Brimstone wanted at all. Things seemed to be going wrong.

Again he fired—this time with both



LOST IN THE DESERT!

We ran the last few yards and then saw—Skeletons!

revolvers, for he carried two. The bullets spattered even closer to Lee's feet. One, indeed, touched the sole of his boot. He emptied the glass Karson had just pushed across, and turned his head.

"Feelin' fresh, ain't you?" he asked casually.

"Waal, gee!" gasped Snakes Wilson. "I guess the sheriff ain't such a gori darned boob, after all! He don't care for them lead pills none! Guess he reckons them shooters 're pop-guns, sure!"

There was a delighted laugh from everybody, and I flushed with pleasure. The gov'nor was showing these blighters something! He was as cool as ice, and lounged against the bar as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Say, I'll make you shift, you son, of a hog!" snarled Brimstone savagely.

He had shoved his guns back into their bolsters. And, without warning, he lunged out with all his strength. That blow was directed against the detective's ear; and if it had gone home, Lee would have been put to sleep for a week.

But the blow didn't go home!

In fact, I can't say exactly what did happen. The whole thing was over in a flash. I just saw the gov'nor move aside, and then his right got into play. Nobody saw the punch, it was so quick. But the next second Brimstone Joe was flat on his back, roaring curses in a dazed voice.

He was up instantly, his face set into a snarling expression of fury. The other men in the saloon were just gaping with amazement. Even Ed Taylor rubbed his tousled hair as though he were dreaming. Nelson Lee was yawning in a tired manner.

The sheriff had knocked Brimstone Joe down with one blow!

"You blame swi——"

"Guess you'll be safer without—these!" interjected Lee curtly.

Brimstone, in fact, had been on the point of jerking out his revolvers. Several men had started forward to grip him; but they were not needed. The gov'nor, alert and grim in a second, grabbed the guns and jammed the muzzle of one against Brimstone's dirty shirt.

"Kinder fancy yourself, don't you?" drawled Lee smoothly.

Brimstone's eyes bulged with terror. He was completely awed now, and he knew that those guns were fitted with hair-triggers. His grimy face went almost grey, and his yellow teeth showed in a snarling grin of fury.

"You've got me, sheriff!" he muttered. "Say, you'll pay for this——"

He was interrupted by another revolver shot. It was one of his own guns which spoke. And a burly ruffian across the saloon uttered a howl of pain and surprise. A glittering revolver crashed to the floor.

"That game ain't safe!" said Nelson Lee coolly.

One-Gun Hanks swore frightfully. He had been about to use his revolver—against the sheriff, of course—but Lee's eyes had detected the move. And now Hanks' right-hand index finger was blown away.

That was the turning-point. Every other man in the saloon gave a yell, and swept round us. They were yelling with sheer delight and enthusiasm. Five minutes ago they had been ready enough to ridicule the gov'nor "to death." Now their eyes were opened, and they were wild with joy.

The new sheriff, in fact, was immensely popular from that minute.

The rough men surged round him, and Brimstone was hustled away in a miniature tidal wave. But he fought his way back, and shook his fist furiously in Nelson Lee's smiling face.

"Sure," said the sheriff. "I guess it needs soap and water——"

A yell of laughter went up, and Brimstone cursed.

"You're dead smart with a gun!" he shouted. "But I guess I'd knock your babby's teeth through the back of your head——"

"Try it!" suggested Lee.

At the same moment he peeled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. Brimstone had not expected such a prompt acceptance of his challenge as this; but he was quite ready.

"Blaziu' gee!" gasped the others. "It's a fight!"

Tremendous excitement ensued. I found myself pushed back, and it was as much as I could do to see what was going on. Ed Taylor was just beside me, and he turned a startled face to mine.

"Say, Kid, the sheriff's sure finished now!" he gasped.

"Not on your life, Ed!" I retorted. "I guess Brimstone'll strike a cyclone in less'n two minutes!"

I spoke confidently, but I was just a weeny bit anxious. I had plenty of faith in the gov'nor, but Brimstone Joe was a huge man, towering right over Lee's head—and the gov'nor wasn't a midget,

either! Brimstone was all muscle, too, and could have felled an ox with one blow.

But an ox is a passive sort of animal, usually, and that's where the difference came in. Nelson Lee would have been felled right enough—if he'd let Brimstone do the felling.

He didn't. In fact, he didn't allow Brimstone to do anything much. The gov'nor and I had always made an extra special speciality, as it were, of boxing and self-defence. We were both hot stuff when it came to fisticuffs. But, of course, Nelson Lee was miles above my form.

I don't think a better amateur boxer existed; in fact, he could have knocked out a few champions—so-called champions—if he'd had the mind. And he had always made a point of keeping himself—and me—in top form.

Brimstone Joe, on the other hand, knew as much about science as a bad-tempered mule. His idea of fighting consisted of rushing at his opponent and smashing him with a couple of elephant-like blows, kicking at the same time.

He soon found that this game didn't pan out at all well with the new sheriff of Blazing Gulch. I don't suppose scientific boxing had been seen in that one-horse township before; and the rough-and-ready inhabitants were startled.

Nelson Lee and Brimstone faced one another, and everybody in the excited throng which surrounded them noticed the great difference in the two men. Joe was simply mad with rage and swank. He had an idea that Lee wouldn't last a minute, and Brimstone was consequently cock-sure. He spat on the floor to express his disgust, and gave expression to several lurid oaths.

Nelson Lee did not seem at all perturbed. He stood there, as cool as ice, waiting for the word to start. His languid ease delighted the spectators as much as it infuriated Brimstone. Blazing Gulch was beginning to realise that the sheriff was a surprise-packet.

"I guess you'd better say your prayers, you dogone hobo!" snarled Brimstone, with an evil grin. "Say, you'll strike sudden death that quick that you won't know what's hit you. You're sure booked fer tarnation!"

"Get goin'," yelled one of the men. "Say, you ain't done much yet, Joe!"

"You'd best clear outer the way, behind ther'," snapped Brimstone.

"When I hit this blame fool he'll sure turn hisself into one o' them noo-fangled batterin'-rams. He'll make a hole in the side of this all-fired saloon that'll let enuff wind in to sail an ocean-goin' ship! Gee! This trash ain't got a dawg's chance——"

"Quit that hot air stunt!" growled Snakes Wilson. "We're waitin'. Say, it's up to you to make hog-swill o' this rampin' tenderfoot!"

Nelson Lee was smiling all the time. Some of the onlookers fully believed that the sheriff was going to be smashed to pulp; but others, more astute, easily read the signs. Lee was a "dark horse."

The general language which floated around was altogether too picturesque for me to set down verbatim. I'm doing my level best to give a choice selection of the expressions which fell from the lips of these rough men, but I know they are very far short of the mark. Why, if I put it all down, word for word, the author-chap who edits this note-book of mine would fling the whole thing into the fire! And the loss of this valuable manuscript isn't to be thought of!

"Say, you'd best git goin', boys!" said Pyzen Karson, who had appointed himself timekeeper; although, as a matter of fact, rounds weren't thought of. The combatants were to peg away until one was whacked. That was the idea.

Brimstone Joe gave a hoarse laugh and hurled himself forward. His great fists were whirling like steam-hammers, and he was obviously expecting to knock the gov'nor into the middle of next week.

But something went wrong with the works. "Spike Langton" guarded himself against those wild blows with perfect ease. For a full minute he allowed Brimstone to whirl away at the thin air. The gov'nor was standing his ground, and played with his opponent amusedly.

Brimstone soon realised that he was wasting energy, and he swore. At the same time one of his rough boots was thrust out with appalling force. If it had met Lee's shin, a broken leg would have been the result.

I saw the gov'nor snap his teeth. He was in earnest now, and he proceeded to treat us all to the 'cutest exhibition of boxing I'd seen for many a long day. He tapped Brimstone here, and he tapped him there. There were no gloves in this fight, of course; it was just bare knuckles.

Then, suddenly, Nelson Lee appeared to falter. Brimstone uttered a roar and

drove his fist at the sheriff's face with all his massive strength. Lee didn't back away; he came forward to meet his opponent. But Brimstone's fist never reached its mark.

There was a sickening crash, and the ruffian went down flat on his back as neatly as a pole-axed bull. It was a clean knock-out. Nelson Lee had delivered a left-hand upper-cut which must have strained Brimstone's neck rather badly.

The fight had been sharp and short—but it was decisive.

Brimstone Joe, the most-feared "tough" in the township, was beaten!

Nelson Lee wasn't even scratched; only one of Brimstone's blows had reached him, and that had done no harm. The gov'nor laughed softly, and looked down at the fallen man.

"Say, I'm waitin' to be converted into a battering-ram, Brimstone!" he said coolly.

But Joe was insensible; that upper-cut had put him to sleep.

"That's sure the most dandy fight I've seen in this yere city!" shouted Ed Taylor enthusiastically. "Say, boys, ain't the sheriff real goods? Ain't he jest the smartest guy ever? I guess Brimstone'll need ter hev' a long an' earnest interview with Doc O'Hagan! He'll sure need physic for a hull month!"

"I reckon One-Gun's with Doc O'Hagan right now!" grinned Karson. "Say, that finger of his needs fixin' some. Doc'll hev' two swell patients on his hands to-night! Sheriff, I guess I take off'n my hat ter you!"

Karson wasn't wearing a hat, but that was only a detail. The other yelled themselves hoarse, and then crowded round the bar and loudly drank the new sheriff's health. There was no hostility now; these rough Western men were absolutely on Nelson Lee's side. I was as proud as anything, and had a hard job to keep myself from slapping the gov'nor on the back.

Then somebody suggested carrying Brimstone around to the doctor's. This idea was hailed with enthusiasm, and the whole bunch, together with a crowd of newcomers, rushed the unconscious ruffian out of the saloon, and carried him down the main street. They speculated on Brimstone's feelings when he awoke to find himself at the doctor's!

Nelson Lee and I were left alone in the saloon, except for a few men who had not troubled to accompany the revellers.

And then I noticed a man dressed in quiet black clothing sitting at one of the card-tables.

As the yells of the crowd subsided, he rose to his feet and came across to us. He took Nelson Lee's hand and shook it warmly.

"I'm pleased to meet you, sheriff," he said cordially. "I guess you're the very man we need in this township. My name's Foss—James Quinton Foss. If you don't think it a liberty, I'd like a few words with you."

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH WE HEAR MORE OF SILVER MASK, AND HAVE THE DOUBTFUL PLEASURE OF MEETING THAT GENIAL GENTLEMAN AGAIN—WE GO TO SLEEP FOR A WHILE, AND AWAKE TO FIND OURSELVES IN A TERRIBLE PREDICAMENT—BUT THE GUV'NOR'S AMAZING RESOURCE COMES TO OUR RESCUE, AND WE START ON AN EXCITING JOURNEY.

MR. JAMES QUINTON FOSS spoke in a refined voice which was pleasing to hear, after the coarse talk of the other men.

"I came in while the fight was in progress," he went on. "Brimstone Joe needed that lesson—badly. The affair will have an immense moral effect in Blazing Gulch."

"I hope so, Mr. Foss," said the gov'nor quietly. "I guess I'm right here to clean things up—and to get hold of Silver Mask. I believe Brimstone is one of Silver Mask's men."

"Most people believe that—but it has never been proved," said the other. "I guess I'm glad, sheriff. If you round up Silver Mask you'll do me about the greatest service possible. The day I know that the outlaw is captured I'll have great pleasure in handing you ten thousand dollars!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Foss," he said. "You seem to be—interested?"

"Well, I think I have excellent cause to be interested," said the stranger. "In one way or another Silver Mask costs me about five thousand dollars a month! Another year of him, and I guess I'd be ruined."

There was something grave in his tone, and in the expression of his eye. Both Lee and I looked at Mr. Foss curiously. Who was he? I thought. Obviously a

well-to-do man. The next moment he made things clear.

"You've been victimised by the desperado, I gather?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Right, and left, sheriff," replied Mr. Foss quietly. "I happen to own the Foss Ranch, six miles up the valley. Guess my ranchlands cover several hundred square miles of territory around this district. It will be a splendid day's work when Silver Mask is shot out of hand. I have suffered terribly from his villainies. I don't care to think how many head of cattle I've lost since Silver Mask commenced operating. My stocks are diminishing daily—and I guess if things go on much longer I'll be forced to sell out."

"Say, don't you worry any, Mr. Foss," smiled the gov'nor. "Within a month from to-day I'll have Silver Mask in my noose."

Mr. Foss shook his head smilingly.

"I'd like to believe that," he said. "But I guess I can't."

"Well, I'm not going to talk a heap; but I've just made up my mind," said Nelson Lee. "Silver Mask and me are going to get busy, I guess. Blazing Gulch ain't big enough to hold the two of us. And it won't be me that'll go under."

"I wish you good luck, sheriff—but I'm believing that statement when I see Silver Mask in penitentiary, or dead," replied Mr. Foss. "You see, I've been told those sort of things before. I'm not saying that you don't mean what you tell me. I guess you're sincere enough. But Silver Mask's a clever man—a cunning, astute criminal—and you'll have to be mighty careful. I guess I'm real nervous this very minute."

"Nervous of what?"

"My ranch is lonesome, and I don't feel comfortable in leaving it for long," replied the other. "I dropped into the Gulch on business to-night, but I guess I'm going right back. You'll visit me, probably?"

"If I have reason to go out that way—certainly," said the gov'nor.

"Good. I'll be right glad to welcome you, sheriff."

A minute later the rancher left us, and we heard him mount his horse and ride away.

The saloon-keeper leaned across his bar, and shifted a long cheroot from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Say, sheriff, that man's bin hard hit," he confided to us. "I'll allow he ken afford a pile, but Silv'r Mask ain't let him have no rest these last weeks. If things don't stop Mr. Foss won't hev' a blamed steer left in his corrals. It's bin crool, I guess. That all-fired rustler needs stringin' up."

"Foss'll pay those dollars," said Lee calmly.

"Gee! You're a cool 'un," said Karson. "You've sure opened the eyes of the folk around here. They're fair crazed about you. But I'd be real glad to see Silv'r Mask's cold carcass—if only for Mr. Foss's sake. He's a good man in James Quinton Foss; one of the best, I figger. He's wealthy, and more'n one family in this yere township owes him a heap. It 'ud be a real calamity if he was to hit the trail away from the valley."

As the saloon-keeper finished speaking we heard a murmur of voices far away. The "boys" were returning. In a minute they streamed into the saloon. Their attitude was remarkably changed. They treated the sheriff with real respect, and allowed that he was a man with a capital "M."

It was half an hour before the gov'nor and I could get away. When we did do, we took a vision of cheerful faces away with us. All the boys had bid us a hearty good-night, and there was no doubt that the bulk of Blazing Gulch was mightily pleased with its new sheriff.

We passed along the dark street without speaking, and entered our little shack. Lee flung himself into a chair and lit a decent cigarette—one of his own special brand. The light from the oil-lamp shone upon his clean-cut, resolute features, and I saw a grim smile there.

"Well, Nipper?" he asked lazily.

I took a deep breath.

"Scott! It's a pleasure to be able to talk good English again, gov'nor," I said with relish. "This has been a queer day, and no mistake! But you're a wonder, sir. I could have hugged you in that saloon!"

"I'm glad you didn't," chuckled Nelson Lee. "Upon the whole, young 'un, I think we may consider that our first day in Blazing Gulch has been entirely successful. There's plenty of work ahead, but we've got the township with us—and that's half the battle."

"You simply took the idiots by surprise," I said. "They were prepared to make things nasty for you. But we shall have to look out for that scoundrel, Brimstone Joe. He'll be loosing off a few shots at us——"

"Brimstone's subdued, unless I'm mistaken," interjected the gov'nor, yawning. "By Jove, I'm tired, Nipper! This is slightly different to Gray's Inn Road, eh? We never expected to be in this quaint position——"

He paused abruptly as a bell rang.

"That's the telephone, Nipper," he went on. "Just see who it is. I'm hanged if I feel like turning out again now. It may be Ed."

I went across to the telephone, which stood upon a rough side-table. Blazing Gulch considered itself a go-ahead place, and there were several 'phones in the town. But then, of course, telephones are as common as flies in the United States.

"Hallo?" I called. "Say, what's the matter, anyway? This is the sheriff's office——"

"Is that you, sheriff?" came an agitated voice.

"I guess I'm Kid Lewin, his assistant."

"I'm James Q. Foss, and I want the sheriff to come right along to my ranch!" said the voice anxiously; and I recognised Mr. Foss's tones now. "That brute of a Silver Mask has been around to-night——"

"Say, hold on," I shouted. "I'll fetch Spike!"

I turned to the gov'nor quickly.

"It's Foss!" I went on. "Silver Mask's been up to something!"

The detective was at the 'phono in a moment, eager and alert. He listened intently for several minutes, then snapped the receiver down—after promising that he would be "right along."

"What is it, gov'nor?" I asked eagerly.

"Rather serious news, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "While Mr. Foss was in the Gulch his ranch-house was ransacked by Silver Mask's gang, and he's been robbed of a considerable sum. In addition, two of his men have been murdered——"

"Great Scott!"

"That's not all, young 'un," went on the gov'nor crisply. "Foss's ranch-house is now burning like a tinder-box—deliberately set on fire, of course. And Foss declares that one of Silver Mask's

men has been captured. He arrived home just in time to prevent that ruffian being lynched by the angry 'hands.' It's up to us to ride out, and take things in hand."

"My stars! Here's a go!" I gasped.

"No rest for us yet awhile, I'm afraid," went on Lee. "This dastardly outrage was timed, of course, to synchronise with my arrival in the Gulch. It's a kind of hint to me that Silver Mask doesn't care a jot for me. By James! It would be rather curious if we got on the track straight away—owing to the outlaw's excessive zeal."

By a piece of good luck we ran into Ed Taylor just outside, as we were hurrying to fetch our horses. He heard the news with mouth agape. He had been about to bid us good-night.

"Gee! The Foss Ranch in flames!" he ejaculated. "Say, this is just about the limit, sheriff! What'll you be thinking of doing?"

"Kid an' me are going right along," said Lee sharply.

"But, say, you ain't bin over that trail——"

"No. I guess you're comin' along, too," interjected the gov'nor decisively. "This may lead to a whole heap, Ed. We've got to get busy. Silver Mask ain't going to have the laugh on me the first day. We've got to ride like blazes. Get me? See that the plugs are saddled up right slick! Ther's not a moment to lose."

Ed gasped for a moment; but there was no mistaking Lee's tone. Being a deputy-sheriff, Taylor was under the gov'nor's orders, and he just had to obey them. Besides this, he was tremendously eager to "get busy."

Within ten minutes we were off, and we rode out of the Gulch at a hard gallop. The stars were shining for all they were worth, and the trail was clearly visible. Ed rode just ahead, for he knew the district like a book.

"Guess we'd better keep our eyes skinned," shouted Lee, as we rode. "Silver Mask may be expectin' us—and we must be prepared for an ambush. It's not likely—but be on your guard."

"I get you, sheriff," yelled Ed Taylor, who had heard the warning.

After that we rode in silence. Our horses seemed to know that the matter was urgent, and they needed no urging. We pelted along that rough trail at a

fine rate. But we were never destined to reach the Foss Ranch!

Ed was riding in front of us, as I said, and he kept up the pace well. Quite suddenly, above the whistle of the wind, I heard two sharp cracks, as though somebody had a whip. But, at the same second, I saw a couple of red flashes in the darkness ahead.

"Silver Mask's lot!" I roared.

Even as I spoke Ed Taylor crashed to earth. His horse was shot from under him, and the splendid animal, stone dead, collapsed as it galloped. Ed was flung upon the hard road with terrific force, and was instantly stunned. This was a serious handicap, for Ed would have been useful in a scrap.

The ambush was neat. Nelson Lee had half-expected something of the sort, and had been, in a measure, prepared. All the same, now that the attack had come, the gov'nor was rather startled.

He pulled his horse up sharply, meaning to take cover behind some rocks which lay all around, and defy the enemy. Ed had fallen a hundred yards ahead of us, so, by acting promptly, we stood a splendid chance of holding our own.

But luck went against us that trip.

As Nelson Lee pulled his horse up the animal swung round abruptly, broadside on, so to speak. This was disastrous, for I was riding close alongside. In an instant my own "plug" had collided with the gov'nor's.

I pitched out of the saddle, and hit the road with a nasty jar. Then, as I was in the act of rising, one of the lashing hoofs caught me an awful swipe across the head. That's all I remember. I just went into a peaceful slumber.

When I awoke the first sensation I became aware of was a sense of extraordinary heat. Half-hazily, I thought I was lying before a tremendous fire, and my skin was scorching. Then a hand touched my forehead.

I opened my eyes, but closed them quickly. A glare of sunlight shone directly upon my face, and nearly blinded me for the moment. With an effort, I struggled up, and opened my eyes again.

"Phew!" I gasped. "I'm thirsty! Where's something wet?"

"Keep quiet, Nipper—don't exert yourself," came the gov'nor's quiet voice. "You've had a hard knock—"

"Oh, yes, that affair on the Foss

trail," I said, memory flooding back. "Why, that must have been hours and hours ago. It's broad daylight now!"

I stared round wonderingly.

Nelson Lee was sitting close against me, and I saw two ugly bruises on his head; one on the left side of his forehead, and the other against his ear. They were nasty bruises, and the gov'nor was obviously in pain.

"What the dickens has happened?" I asked pantingly. "I—I say, sir, chuck over your water-bottle. I can't find mine, somehow."

The glare of the sun was appalling.

"Can't we get out of this heat?" I went on. "There's bound to be plenty of shade somewhere—"

I came to a stop suddenly. While speaking I had been gazing round, shading my eyes with both hands. And, as far as I could see in any direction, there was nothing but a bare, barren, arid waste. Not a tree, not a building. And the sun beat down relentlessly and scorchingly. A hot wind was blowing rather strongly, and the breath of it felt like the blast from a furnace.

"Where the thunder are we?" I gasped.

"Surely you don't need to ask that, Nipper?" said Nelson Lee, in a hard voice. "We are right out upon the alkali desert—one of the many deserts which cover thousands of square miles in this country. We have neither water nor food. We have no compass and—"

"No water!" I panted, in horror.

"Not a drop. Silver Mask has exacted a terrible revenge.

And then I realised the full truth. Silver Mask had brought us out to this bare spot during the night—while we had been unconscious! We had been left upon the alkali desert, to wander hopelessly round until we dropped of exhaustion and thirst! Thirst!

The worst death a man can die! I had experienced something of the same sort of thing once before, in Northern Africa, and the terrible adventure lived in my memory like a nightmare.

We were left upon the desert, with no means of direction, and with only the knowledge that death would surely come! In spite of the heat, I shuddered, and turned a pale, scared face to the gov'nor.

"What—what happened—last night, sir?" I asked.

"Ed Taylor, as you know, had his horse shot from under him," replied

Nelson Lee quietly. "Then you were pitched to the ground, and received a kick which effectually put you out of the fight."

"Yes, it was a decent kick, wasn't it?" I said, tenderly feeling my head.

"I did my best to fight Silver Mask's gang," went on the gov'nor, "but the odds were appalling. Curiously enough, the ruffians made no attempt to kill me—to shoot. They swarmed round my horse and dragged me to the ground."

"Didn't you do any damage?"

"I think two men, at least, are now suffering from severe bullet-wounds," replied Lee grimly. "But they got me down, at last, and Silver Mask laughed in my face as I was held. He recognized me as the man who had foiled him in the train hold-up."

"Oh, I get the hang of this now!" I said slowly.

"Silver Mask told me that he was going to make me pay for that affair—that shooting was too easy for me," said Lee. "So, Nipper, we are now upon this desert. I make a sudden attempt to get free, and actually gripped Silver Mask's right ear. I believe I jugged the flesh rather severely. But the next moment two of the gang brought their revolver-butts down upon my head. The bruises are infernally painful, I may add."

"They look a bit squiffy," I remarked, with a faint grin.

"We were brought here, of course, on horseback," went on the gov'nor, rising to his feet. "Phew! This heat is almost overpowering! I came to myself about half an hour ago, and found you beside me. I would have given a fortune for some water at that moment—just to give you, young 'un. You looked bad."

"No badder than I feel!" I growled. "But, I say, can't we follow the trail of Silver Mask's horsemen?"

"There's not a sign of a trail anywhere," answered the great detective, shaking his head. "There's nothing, Nipper. We might wander for hours and hours, only to find ourselves back in this same spot. The sun is a guide, of course, but by setting out upon a deliberate course we might penetrate deeper and deeper into the desert. No, my lad, we had better realize, right at once, that there's very little hope of getting back to civilization."

I didn't answer; I felt too appalled for speech just then. Rising to my feet, I swayed for a bit, and my head ached hor-

ribly. The hot wind was even worse than the sun. In every direction there was nothing but the glare—the terrible, blinding glare—of the sun on the desert.

My throat felt like a red-hot chimney, and already I felt almost mad with thirst. The gov'nor was the same, I knew, but he said nothing. Then, as though by common consent, we started walking.

We walked slowly, and aimlessly. What difference did it make which direction we took? There was about one chance in ten thousand of striking civilization. We might even be only ten miles from Blazing Gulch—but we didn't know.

I don't think I shall ever forget that walk. Both of us were groggy, and faint from want of food and water. The grub part didn't matter much; it was the lack of wetness which caused us the awful torture.

We didn't talk much; just now and again I would make some remark, and the gov'nor would reply. Talking was painful. It was painful to breathe, in fact. At last I swayed a bit, and halted.

"Let's rest, gov'nor!" I croaked.

"Not yet, lad," said Nelson Lee. "Rest now would mean—death. Don't give up yet awhile. Our only chance is to keep on the move. It is a slim chance, I know; but—"

"All right, sir," I muttered. "I'm game!"

I pulled myself together, and we walked on again. If we had had some goal in view—some definite object—I believe I should have bucked up wonderfully. But the knowledge that we were just walking aimlessly seemed to take every ounce of energy out of me.

I was suffering dreadful torture, but I tried not to show it. The gov'nor was pretty bad, too, and I didn't want to worry him. And if we were like this now, what should we be like by sundown? How should we feel on the morrow—

But, of course, there wouldn't be any morrow!

My thoughts were bitter as we trudged doggedly through that glaring sunlight, with the hot wind stifling us, and robbing us of all energy. A dull kind of mist floated before my eyes, and I just kept up the pace in a mechanical kind of way.

After our splendid beginning in Blazing Gulch we were to die out on this scorching desert! All the gov'nor's promises regarding Silver Mask would be regarded as idle boasting—

Quite suddenly, Nelson Lee stopped.

"Can you see anything, Nipper?" he asked hoarsely.

The hoarseness of his voice wasn't caused by excitement or surprise; but because of the dryness of his throat. Lee was perfectly calm. He pointed away to the left of us, and I saw—something.

But what was it, At first, it seemed like a white patch; then I saw something flapping in the wind.

"What is it, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, it looks suspiciously like a canvas-covered wagon," replied the gov'nor. "But it is quite stationary, Nipper, and there is no sign of life. But still—"

He didn't finish, and we both commenced hurrying forward. Just in that second my spirits were tremendously lightened, and my step was more springy. I walked forward with real energy.

I had thought that the white thing was quite near; but the further we walked the further away it seemed. We seemed to be plodding across the hot, crusted alkali surface for hours. But, at last, the "something" took shape, and we found that we were approaching three huge "trek" wagons.

They were horseless, and deserted, but their canvas coverings, although bleached as white as milk by the sun, seemed to be in splendid condition. We ran the last few yards, and then saw—skeletons!

White bones lay before each wagon—the skeletons of horses. Round about there were other skeletons, two being within one of the derelict vehicles; but these were human skeletons. For a few minutes the gov'nor and I stared about us, forgetting our own plight. I felt awed and strangely sad.

Ropes lay round in confusion, and all sorts of things could be seen scattered in the wagons. We needed no telling that we were gazing upon a grim tragedy of perhaps a year ago—perhaps even more.

A party of settlers, or prospectors, probably, had attempted to cross the trackless desert. They had run short of water; their horses had fallen from heat and exhaustion; and ultimately—

But the story needs no telling; it was terribly obvious. The spectacle was a silent tragedy of the desert. When I looked up at Nelson Lee I had a kind of choking lump in my throat. I wasn't thinking of myself, or of him. I was picturing the dreadful fate of the poor creatures whose bones we gazed upon.

"Oh, what a terrible—"

I paused suddenly, for I saw a look of deep concentration upon Nelson Lee's face—a look which seemed to send my heart pumping at a tremendous rate. He turned to me, still in deep thought.

"There are hundreds of square feet of canvas here," he said musingly. "It seems in fairly good condition, too. This wood, too, is light and strong! Ropes are everywhere—"

He broke off, and hastily turned over a box which lay half-open near the rear of the first wagon. From the box there fell a number of rusted tools—hammers, pincers, pliers, and all manner of things.

"By James!" said Lee, taking a deep breath. "This wind is strong—"

"What are you getting at?" I asked huskily.

"An idea has struck me, Nipper—a desperate idea, I will admit," replied the gov'nor quickly. "If I could only get up about a hundred feet from the earth I could see twenty miles in every direction; I could see the way to safety—"

I stared in horror.

"Have — have you gone mad, gov'nor?" I panted. "How can you get up to a hundred feet? You're—you're talking of impossibilities!"

"My dear lad, we are in a ghastly predicament," said Lee quietly. "Unless we act desperately—and act at once—we shall die just as these poor people here died. But there is a chance—a faint chance."

He pointed to the canvas coverings of the derelict wagons.

"There are the materials for the manufacture of several large kites," he went on calmly. "How does that strike you, Nipper? Kites, my lad. The wind is high, and there are ropes galore. These tools here—"

"Kites!" I roared, my voice cracking in my excitement.

"Exactly. I know something of man-lifting kites," said the gov'nor. "Some months ago, as you are aware, we spent a week with an army officer in England who has made a speciality of large kites for years past. Of course, we can only knock the things together roughly; but I have the principle of the design in my head—"

He didn't get any further. I just yelled as vigorously as I could, and hurt my throat terrifically. But that didn't matter a jot. In less than two minutes we were at work. Everything else was forgotten.

I won't attempt to describe the toil of the hours which followed; the exhausting toil in the blazing sunshine. But, thank goodness, we were able to work a part of the time in the shade of one of the wagons.

Towards evening, when we were well-nigh dropping, we had the satisfaction of seeing four huge, ungainly looking kites resting upon the desert. They weren't models of fine workmanship—but they were strong, and wonderfully designed. Ropes were attached to them, and everything was in order.

The wind, instead of dropping as we had feared, became much stronger—until, indeed, it was almost a gale. It roared across the hot wastes in bellowing gusts. Lee had faked up an arrangement so that the kites could be held in check by one of the heavy wagons. And, after five unsuccessful tries, we succeeded in getting the ungainly things into the air.

They strained at the ropes, and hovered about thirty feet above our heads. The lifting-power of those four kites seemed to be enormous, and Nelson Lee looked at me with perspiring face and doubtful eyes.

"You'd better come up with me, Nipper," he panted. "If they won't lift the two of us you'll have to cut yourself free."

I was too exhausted to make any comment; not physically exhausted, let me add. A thundering good drink would have made me as fresh as paint. And the prospect of sighting civilisation bucked me up, and made me forget my gnawing agony.

In two minutes everything was ready.

We clung to the ropes, fixing our feet into special loops. Then Nelson Lee, with one slash, cut the great kites free. Just at that very moment an extra heavy gust of wind roared along.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

For we were jerked off the ground as though by a giant hand, and lifted high into the air. Up we rose, swiftly and giddily. The guv'nor had never expected this; he had thought that, if we got up at all, we should mount very gradually.

It was simply a burst through space. Then, with a crack, the rope snapped—the rope which was to have held us to the ground! The kites were free, and we were being swept along with the gale, mounting higher and higher, utterly unable to do a thing to stay our headlong progress!

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH WE FIND WATER AT LAST; SO MUCH WATER, IN FACT, THAT I COME DANGEROUSLY NEAR TO SUDDEN DECEASE—DISCOVERIES ARE MADE, AND THE GUV'NOR AND I HIT THE TRAIL GOOD AND PROPER—AND SILVER MASK, SOLELY OWING TO HIS OWN FOLLY, HITS A DIFFERENT SORT OF TRAIL.

EVERY second Nelson Lee and I expected to be dashed with shattering force to the ground. We gave up hope when we knew that the rope had broken, and just clung on to our precarious perches, waiting for the end.

But the end didn't come.

At least, we didn't crash to the ground. We had thought that the kites, being free, would collapse and lose their buoyancy. When that happened, of course, we should just drop like stones.

Gazing down—rather fearfully, I own—I saw the desert three hundred feet below. And it seemed to be shifting along at express speed. But it was the kites that were shifting, and we were being hauled along underneath them, like a tail, swaying and twisting and whirling.

The gale was strong, and the kites, being of effective design, easily bore the combined weight of the guv'nor and me. The kites—four of 'em, remember—were huge things, and tremendously strong.

After about two minutes I began to feel safer.

"I—I thought we were going to be busted up, sir!" I panted.

"I am amazed, Nipper!" came Nelson Lee's voice, from above me. "But this cannot last; we shall certainly drop before long. The gale is very powerful just now, and when it lessens we shall sink—"

As he spoke I felt a sickening sensation in my tummy. Looking down again, I saw the earth rushing up towards me! This was the end—we were falling—falling—

Then there was a terrific jerk, and the old kites creaked and groaned. One piece of canvas broke adrift, and flapped noisily. But we went onwards again, soaring a few feet higher once more.

Of all the nightmare rides, that ride was about the limit. I couldn't very well see how there was any hope for us. Because, of course, we should certainly come down some time or other. And then we should come down with a wallop.

Or we might slowly descend, and be dragged along the ground. If so, the result would be the same. We should be killed—

These cheerful thoughts were interrupted by something I saw at that moment. Right away, ahead of us, I spotted green trees and grass-land, with a vision of a river here and there. The evening sun was gleaming on its swiftly running waters.

"Do you see, gov'nor?" I bellowed hoarsely.

"Heaven grant that we reach it, Nipper!" said Lee.

All my pessimistic thoughts were dismissed, and I was filled with a wild desire to yell at the top of my voice. Water was in sight! No matter how far off—no matter how uncertain our chances of reaching it—no matter how great our danger! Water was in sight!

That thought, and that thought alone, filled my brain-box.

We had been whirled along madly, and were still being whirled along. Yet I could not help noticing that we were getting nearer and nearer to the earth all the time. Slowly, we were descending. But the wind was strong still, and must have been travelling at fully forty miles an hour. And we, naturally, being fixed to the kites, were travelling at the same speed.

I reckoned that we had travelled about two hundred miles. In cold reality, I suppose we'd covered about twelve. But it seemed like two hundred at the time. Lee's scheme had answered well—a sight too well, in fact!

The idea had been to go up beneath the kite and spot the right way to safety. Instead of that we had been carried there, helplessly and swiftly. This was quite satisfactory—but should we be dashed to pieces in the end? That was an ugly thought, and I looked up at the kites rather anxiously. They were badly strained, and were losing their "lift" perceptibly.

If one suddenly collapsed—

But I won't waste time on "ifs." One didn't collapse, and the fact that I'm showing all this down in my note-book shows that we didn't do the dying stunt—as Ed would have put it.

All the same we came jolly near disaster.

The character of the alkali desert was now changing; coarse patches of grass grew here and there, and there were

clumps of bushes. And, at last, the desert was left behind altogether, and we found ourselves being carried over high trees. Once, indeed, we were hauled through the top-most leaves of a high tree.

But the kites were nearly at the last gasp. The wind, now that we were over broken country, was losing its power. I was beginning to speculate as to the advisability of letting go while we were over a clump of trees, when I saw something blue beneath me. It was water! We were over the river.

"Let go, gov'nor!" I shouted huskily. "It's our only chance!"

"Wait—wait, young 'un!"

Then I saw why Lee had told me to wait. We were being swept along, right over the river, in the dead-centre. And, a little way ahead there were some high waterfalls. Right below us the waters were churned into creamy foam.

The crest of the waterfall would only be about twenty feet below us—perhaps less. So the plunge downwards would be fairly safe. Besides, the water up there was comparatively calm.

And then, as we passed over the break of the fall, I saw something which startled me considerably. The water was clear and pure, and quite transparent where it commenced its steep fall to the rocks below. In that brief second I looked right down through the water—and saw, to my amazement, the dim figures of two men! They were moving—they were alive!

Then the kites carried me over, and I saw no more. After that I had no time for speculation or wonderment. I waited until we had been carried about two hundred yards, then I slipped my feet from the noose, and let go.

The drop was only about fifteen feet now, and I plunged down like a stone. Splash. In I went, and that ducking was about the most gorgeous I'd ever experienced. As I bobbed to the surface I gulped down glorious draughts of the delicious water.

And I saw the kites staggering drunkenly. The jerk had upset them, and the wind now refused to catch their surfaces again. They came down with a rush, and crashed upon the rocky bank of the gully with a sickening thud. The gov'nor was flung into the water close against the bank.

"Thank goodness!" I spluttered fervently.

Then I struck out for the bank. We had been amazingly lucky to escape so lightly. In fact, we hadn't come to any harm at all. But, just then, I made an uncomfortable discovery.

The current was too strong for me! I used my most powerful stroke, but I instinctively knew that I should be carried over the waterfall before I could reach the bank! In addition, the banks were steep and rocky, and it was impossible for me to haul myself out, even if I reached it!

I saw Nelson Lee scramble out by means of the wrecked kites. He hauled himself up by the ropes and the tangle of canvas and woodwork; then he turned towards me. I flung up my hand as a distress signal—why, I don't know. He couldn't help me.

As I vainly struggled with the current I saw him racing along the bank, doing something with a length of rope as he ran. Then, with a gulp, I remembered that we had passed over a primitive rope-bridge, which spanned the river near the edge of the fall.

I was within fifty yards of it, and would, of course, pass right underneath. It would be about six feet over my head, and quite out of reach. The good old gov'nor had seen my peril—had realised the impossibility of my fighting the current—and was rushing to save me.

Twisting round in the water, I saw him get to the bridge. He came across it carefully, for it was only a frail thing, and it swayed and shook as he proceeded. But he raced me by about five seconds, and stood ready.

As I was carried beneath he flung the rope; it came spinning with deadly accuracy, and I grabbed. If I missed it would be all up with me—I knew that. Even now I was not saved. That second was terribly tense.

The rope hit the back of my hand, slithered down, and I gripped it. Then my fingers slipped, and the rope ran through my hand rapidly. I clutched again, with a frantic gasp. And this time I gained a firm hold. With both hands I held on—held on like grim death.

I was saved! But only by about an inch of rope; for if I hadn't tightened my grip at that precise second—well,

those rocks down below the fall were rather unpleasant-looking chaps, and I don't care to think of what would have happened if I had missed that rope!

The spot was rugged and deserted, and after we had found a nook among the rocks we peeled off our clothes and dried them in the evening sunlight. We were too utterly tired to talk much—but I mentioned to Lee what I had seen beneath the water of the fall.

To my surprise, I found that he'd seen those two figures. So I had not been mistaken! What could it mean? We didn't trouble to speculate then, but struggled into our clothes as soon as they were dry, and went to sleep.

The evening was quite hot, so we shouldn't come to any harm. Besides, we couldn't have walked a mile if we'd tried. Our thirst was quenched, and we didn't worry about our hunger. We were just exhausted to the last degree. Nothing in the world seemed to matter.

We must have slept nearly twenty-four hours! This wasn't surprising, considering what we'd been through. When I awoke I found Nelson Lee shaking my shoulder. I sat up, blinking, and found the sun shining gloriously. The gov'nor was looking bright and fresh.

"Why, it's morning!" I said, yawning.

"Morning! My good Nipper, the hour must be something like five o'clock in the afternoon!" said Lee severely. "My watch has struck work, so I can't be sure. Do you realise that we've slept the clock round twice!"

"Well, we needed it," I said, stretching myself. "I say, I'm starving!"

"That's not surprising, for we haven't tasted food since I don't know when," replied the gov'nor cheerfully. "However, we'll chase around and find some now. I'm curious to know where we are, too."

"That kite-flight of ours seems like some awful dream, sir!" I said. "I can hardly believe it really happened! I don't think I thanked you for lugging me out of the river, did I. I was so bally tired—"

"Go and wash, and don't jubber so much, young 'un," grinned Lee.

To tell the truth, we were both as

fresh as paint. That long sleep had put us in fine working order again. And now the thing we wanted more than anything else was—grub. Any old grub; we didn't care what it was so long as it was eatable. We were just like hollow drums.

As we walked among the rocks my mind went back to the strange incident of the waterfall, and I asked the gov'nor what he thought of it. Had we really seen a couple of living men—beneath the water? It seemed impossible.

"No, it's not impossible, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, for I had expressed the thought aloud. "In fact, I strongly suspect that we accidentally hit upon the very secret we were most anxious to discover. It looks to me as though Silver Mask's secret retreat is beneath this waterfall!"

"Get away!" I gasped, amazedly, and rather disrespectfully.

"It would be the irony of fate if we hit the trail of Silver Mask this trip," went on the gov'nor. "He tried to kill us—kill us in a devilish fashion. And we escaped. If we have, indeed, discovered the outlaw's secret—then he will have nobody but himself to thank for his downfall."

But we didn't make any attempt to investigate then. We just walked on, and presently struck a rough track. This led us on to a still wider roadway, and we strode along it in fine style, hoping to sight a human being or a human habitation.

We saw nothing until we came to a rough board. Upon it was painted, in time-worn letters: "Foss Ranch," and a pointing hand.

"Dear me!" said the gov'nor. "So we are near Mr. James Quinton Foss's place! This is interesting, young 'un. We can't be so very far from Blazing Gulch itself. Our best plan will be to follow this trail."



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Soon after we sighted the ranch-house. It was intact, and had evidently not been on fire. But, of course, we knew that Silver Mask had 'phoned us that night, for the especial purpose of trapping us.

"We didn't attempt to approach the ranch; we just kept straight on, making for the Gulch. And we sighted the first house of the township just as darkness was falling. Several women and lots of children saw us, and there was something like a sensation.

Then, by a piece of curious luck, we sighted a horseman coming along. He turned out to be none other than the redoubtable Ed Taylor—with his head in a bandage. He pulled his plug up at the sight of us, and leapt to the ground.

Then he simply stared with bulging eyes.

"Holy Mackinaw!" he gasped. "I guess I'm seein' things, sure!"

"You weren't hurt much, then, Ed?" asked "the sheriff" calmly.

"Hurt! Say, sheriff, I wus more rattled than hurt, I guess!" said Ed. "Gee! But it's good to see you! I sure figgered you'd hit the long trail. That all-fired cuss of a Silver Mask allowed that you wus booked for fiery regions. Say, I'm the most amazed feller in this yere city!"

"Guess you ain't got horse-sense," said the gov'nor. "It takes more'n a crook like Silver Mask to best Kid Lewin an' me. There's been a real dandy racket, but we ain't cold meat this trip."

"I'm plum surprised!" declared Ed blankly. "I sure tho't you wus dead! Guess I've told all the boys es you'd folered the other sheriffs of this dogone city. Say, they'll be a hull heap rattled with me when you get around the saloon. But ther'll be some dandy shoutin'—"

"Say, what happened on the Foss trail?" I struck in.

"Waal, I guess I don't rightly know," replied the other. "When I saw things agin I reckon my head was sure eingin' like a blamed kettle what's doin' its best ter bile, an' near bustin' in the attempt. Say, Kid, you an' the sheriff wus sure gone, and Silver Mask and two of his cussed 'badmen' were around. They allowed that I wusn't worth shootin', so they let me go. But I guess—"

Exactly what Ed guessed we never knew; for, as we stood talking there,

we heard the rattle of hoofs behind us. Looking round, we saw that Mr. Foss was approaching. He was dressed the same as before, except that a bandage covered his right ear.

"Good heavens!" I heard the gov'nor mutter.

And then a most astounding thing occurred. Mr. James Quinton Foss rode up, and made as if to pass. He nodded easily to Ed Taylor, who gracefully removed his hat by way of salute.

Then the rancher's eyes rested upon the gov'nor and me. I was looking straight at him, and I saw his face go deadly white. A gasp came from his lips, and he pulled his horse up with a jerk.

"The sheriff!" he panted, as though dazed.

Nelson Lee acted in a flash.

He ran forward, as though to pull Mr. Foss from the saddle.

"You'd best give in quietly, Silver Mask!" rasped out the gov'nor curtly. "Say, you've been playin' a heap clever game, but I guess you're——"

Mr. Foss uttered a snarl, and jerked out a heavy gun. Before he could pull the trigger, however, Lee knocked the weapon out of his hand. Foss snarled out a furious oath, jerked his horse completely round, and galloped away like the wind. He disappeared in a smother of dust.

"Confound!" roared Nelson Lee irritably.

Ed Taylor looked dazed.

"Say, what's the game?" he asked, in a weak voice. "I'm kinder mused up some! Silver Mask! Rancher Foss——"

"Foss is Silver Mask!" rapped out the gov'nor. "Didn't you see his ear, Kid?" he went on, turning to me. "I suspected the truth the instant I saw him; and his actions now prove that I was right. James C. Foss is Silver Mask!"

"Great Scott!" I yelled.

"The scoundrel has overreached himself!" went on Lee rapidly. "In his efforts to get rid of us he has sealed his own doom. Say, Ed, get busy! Round up some of the boys, and have a dozen good horses ready. We're goin' after Silver Mask right now—and we've got to round him up to-night!"

Ed Taylor took a deep breath.

"Gee! I guess I get you, sheriff!" he gasped.

He didn't waste a second in further talk; his ready brain had grasped the full significance of the incident which had just occurred. And he leapt into the saddle, wrenched his horse round, and tore off into Blazing Gulch—to prepare the boys for the "rounding-up" expedition.

As for me, I was too flabbergasted to say anything. Mr. Foss was Silver Mask! Of course, it was Foss, after all, who had rung up that night! It was Foss who had taken us out upon the terrible arid desert! It was Foss who had been the terror of the State for months past! Safe from suspicion in his character of a kindly, peaceful rancher, he had performed his villainies without fear of exposure. And he had "stolen" his own cattle in order to make his position more secure.

But, solely because of his efforts to kill the "new sheriff," he had now placed himself within reach of the law. He might, perhaps, have bluffed everything out, but the abrupt meeting with the gov'nor and me—when he thought that we were dead—had proved too much for his nerve. And he had hopelessly betrayed himself!

In the moonlight we approached the waterfall. The sheriff and me, and Ed Taylor and eight other "boys" formed the posse, as Ed called it. And in that pale, weak light, we saw a man making his way along a narrow ledge which seemed to lead right to the very face of the falling water.

Following, we found a secret path, leading to a ledge which ran behind the waterfall! The fall, in fact, formed one wall of the tunnel in which we found ourselves. And, in a cavern among the rocks, we ran Silver Mask to earth.



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He was supported by three of his gang, and they were all masked. There was a sharp fight, and several men were injured by revolver-bullets. But, just when the battle was getting really hot, Foss received a bullet in his leg.

He staggered back, lost his balance, and fell against the smooth green wall of falling water. There was just one appalling shriek, and then he disappeared. He had plunged down to certain doom.

His gang surrendered tamely, all the fight knocked out of them by the tragedy. Two of them proved to be Brimstone Joe and One-Gun Hank. And the precious trio were handcuffed and taken away.

In the cavern beneath the waterfall we found a large amount of booty. It was a splendid stronghold, and would certainly never have been discovered but for the fact that Nelson Lee and I had happened to pass directly over the fall. And we had done so while escaping from Silver Mask's devilry! He had brought about his own downfall!

There was tremendous enthusiasm in Blazing Gulch when the news "got round," and both Nelson Lee and I were feted for days on end. Mr. Kenway Stone himself came to the Gulch and publicly thanked Lee for his great services.

In private, Mr. Stone expressed his unbounded amazement. Nelson Lee had promised to bring Silver Mask to book within a month—and he had accomplished the task within a week!

It was some little time before the gov'nor and I could get away from that excited little Western township, but we did so at last, and resumed our journey to England the richer by fifty thousand dollars.

Our sojourn in Blazing Gulch had been short—but it had certainly not been devoid of incident and adventure!

To tell the honest truth, I shouldn't mind going out there again! A little variety now and again does a chap good, I've heard.

THE END.

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THE 1st CHAPTER.

THE BLACK SHEEP.

“IS there anyone here of the name of Peter Abbett?” cried a disreputable-looking individual, thrusting his head into the door of the sorting van as the Northern Mail drew up at a large midland town of Canbury.

“Yes, what do you want with me?” replied a smart, good-looking young fellow of about eighteen.

“There’s a chap wants to see you in the Railway Tavern just across the road. The train stops five minutes, so you have plenty of time.”

“If it stopped here five hours, it would be the same. I dare not go without leave.”

“He said you would be sure to come if I mentioned his name,” asserted the messenger. Then, lowering his voice, he added: “It is the same as your own, except that his Christian name is Sim.”

White to the very lips, Peter Abbett hastened to Mr. Delfer, the head clerk, and, rather to his surprise, obtained permission to leave the train.

A minute later he had accompanied the messenger across a dark and slushy road to a public-house, half inn, half hotel, almost opposite the station doors.

“Sim has only just returned to England, as perhaps you know,” volunteered his companion, “and as he doesn’t want the police to know too much, he has taken a private room. This way.”

As he spoke, he threw open a side door, mounted some ill-lighted stairs, thrust open a door, and the next moment Peter Abbett darted forward, crying:

“Sim, old chap, we meet at last!”

His elder brother, the black sheep of the family, grasped his extended hand, but there was neither friendship nor love in the grasp of those cold, trembling fingers, and the next moment a gasping cry of amazement, stupor, and rage burst from the post-office clerk’s lips,

as a thick cloth, saturated with chloroform, was flung over his head.

And when the mail left, the travelling post-office carried Peter Abbett’s brother in disguise. Peter was still lying insensible in the Railway Tavern.

Barely had Sim laid his hand upon the first letter in the packet before him ere he swayed on his stool, and, dropping to the ground, made his way towards a rack containing a water-bottle and a number of glasses, which stood next a door leading from the sorting-carriage to its companion van, in which heavier parcels and baskets of ready sorted letters for the North were stowed.

Finding that the clerks were all busy sorting out the various letters, and putting them in pigeon-holes above their heads, Abbett slipped through the canvas-covered way into the adjoining van, then, without a moment’s hesitation, closed the door behind him, and drew an electric torch from his pocket, the light of which he flashed over a number of white, canvas-lined baskets.

Many large firms, both in London and the provinces, by paying a fee to the Post Office, are allowed to send their parcels, etc., to the various towns in private baskets.

Taking advantage of this, the gang to which Sim Abbett belonged had paid for the privilege of sending three baskets twice a week to the North.

Towards the baskets which had been put in at Canbury, Abbett hastened, and throwing aside those which held legitimate mail, threw open the lids of three of the lower and heavier baskets, and three men, each with a loaded revolver in his hand, stepped forth and stretched himself.

“What a time you’ve been, Abbett! I was nearly suffocated, and the pins and needles were something cruel” whispered one of the men.

"Look slippy, and cut the communication-cord!"

Without another word Sim Abbett returned to the swaying platform between the two vans, and, ripping open a large hole in the canvas covering, thrust his arm through the aperture, felt about until he had secured the communication-cord, then a slight click resounded in his ears, and he knew that those in the sorting-van were as much cut off from their fellow-passengers as though they were still resting against the platform at Canbury.

"Hallo, Abbett! Better?" asked Mr. Delfer kindly, as Sim entered the sorting-van. "Good gracious, man, what is the meaning of this? Have you gone mad?" he added, for instead of replying, Abbett, a revolver clutched in his right hand, advanced swiftly to the head clerk, whilst the remaining clerks found themselves confronted by three evil-faced, determined-looking men, each armed with a heavy Colts revolver.

"Throw up your hands, or you are dead men!" cried one of those whom Abbett had released.

White as death, Mr. Delfer swung off his stool.

"I am in charge of this office, and so long as I live you shall not rob me—kill me if you will."

As he spoke, his hand was closing round a heavy glass inkstand, the only weapon within reach, which he hurled straight at the speaker; but ere it had left his hand a loud, reverberating roar filled the van, and the brave head clerk, stricken in the chest by a .45 bullet, fell bleeding to the floor, after which the clerks, realising that resistance meant certain death, allowed themselves to be bound.

"Now, then, youngster," demanded Seth Blake, the man who had questioned Abbett about cutting the communication-cord, of a clerk, "where are the registered parcels?"

"Find them!" came back the quick, defiant answer.

This offered but little difficulty, and soon they came to a strong iron safe, the key of which they found in the stricken head clerk's pocket.

Evidently the thieves were not engaged on chance work, for though Blake thrust the majority of the packages and registered letters into a big bag Abbett held open, there was one small package which drew from his lips an exulting cry of:

"Here are the diamonds! We are made men for life! Now, lads, keep these beggars quiet with your pistols whilst we relieve the express of part of its load!"

Hastening with his three comrades to the front of the carriage, Blake soon had the ironwork telescopic platform which connected the two vans freed of its framework, then, as the buffers of the carriages came together, he leaned over, and with the swiftness of a trained hand, unscrewed the couplings and pulled the heavy links off the hooks.

But he had not taken into account the tremendous rate at which the express was travelling, for, as the last link fell from his fingers, a shriek of deadly fear was mingled with the crashing of the severed platform, and, clutching vainly at the broken and twisted ironwork, the desperado fell on the metals in front of the van, to be crushed beneath its swiftly revolving wheels.

Aghast at the fearful fate which had befallen their leader, the others returned to where Abbett was keeping guard over his prisoners.

But a few minutes later he was awakened from the stupor of regret and despair into which he had fallen by his comrades snatching up the bag of spoil and beckoning him to the end of the van, which, losing its momentum as it crawled up an incline, was gradually slackening speed.

"Quick, lads, the guard is putting on his brakes; he'll be round to see what's wrong in a minute!" cried one of the men, as he moved towards the front of the van.

THE 2nd CHAPTER.

BREAKING UP THE GANG.

BARELY had the tail-lights of the Northern Express disappeared from view ere a wild, unkempt, half-dressed figure staggered on to the platform of Canbury Station.

"Where's the station-master? Quick! There's villainy, murder, robbery on foot!" he gasped, turning to a porter. At that moment the station-master appeared upon the scene, and Peter told his story.

(Continued overleaf.)

"There's not an engine in England could overtake them," the official said; "but if, as I suppose, they uncouple the van—for it is unlikely they'll dare to remain in the van until the train pulls up at Carlisle—we may yet be in time. Follow me."

Without another word the station-master led the way to a round house where an engine, with steam up, was waiting to carry a mineral train to its destination.

A few words to the engine-driver, and the station-master and Peter Abbett scrambled on to the footplate; then the doors of the round house were thrown open, and, whilst telegraph clerks were busily clicking an order down the rail for the line to be kept clear, the powerful locomotive crossed the points, flew on to the down line, and a few minutes later the engine-driver was chuckling to himself as he proudly asked his passengers if the express engine herself could do more than his old favourite was doing.

Presently the driver moved his face for a moment from the look-out, and beckoned the station-master to his side.

"What are they, signals against us?" asked the latter, as he saw a red light at the distance.

"Too low. Down with the brakes, Jack. We have overtaken 'em!" cried the engine-driver, shutting off steam as he spoke.

"She is still moving; though," he added, a minute or two later, as his engine neared the red lights. "By Jove, the guard is putting on his brakes!" he added, his keen eyes detecting sparks arising from the rail.

Suddenly the station-master laid his hand upon the engine-driver's arm.

"If they stop, the villains will jump out and escape. Cannot you keep them moving?"

With a quick look of comprehension, the driver turned to his fireman.

"Whistle off brakes, Jack," he ordered, adding: "Perhaps the guard will understand what we mean. If not, there's apt to be a bit of a smash-up. Anyhow, we'll risk it." And the next moment the signal rang out upon the night air.

Evidently the guard understood what was wanted, for the sparks ceased to fly from under the wheels of his van, and shortly afterwards, with an unavoidable jerk, the buffers of the engine struck the guard's van, sending it flying on ahead for several yards.

On went the engine once more, until, skilfully manipulated by its experienced driver, it was soon pushing the guard's van and the travelling post-office before her.

"There's a downgrade a bit ahead, slip on to the front of the engine and couple on, if you can," ordered the engine-driver.

This the fireman did, with the result that, although only held by a single chain, the engine and the vans were kept in touch with each other. At last the bright lights of a big station hove in sight, and five minutes later they came to a halt at a platform where, warned by the sight of the express rushing through with only half her proper complement of carriages, and also by telegraph from Canbury, a large force of police and porters were assembled.

They rushed into the van as soon as the train came to a halt, and a few minutes later the two ruffians who had been hidden in the baskets with Blake were secured.

Peter Abbett found his brother was not in the van, and, inquiring of the prisoners, learnt how he had been standing ready to jump out of the front of the van when the pursuing engine had struck the detached vans, with the result that the jerk had thrown him under the wheels.

Very soon the dead body of Sim Abbett, and shortly afterwards the mangled remains of Seth Blake, were found on the line.

Fortunately; Mr. Delfer was not mortally injured, and soon recovered.

Thanks principally to Abbett's prompt return to the station, two of the gang had been secured, and, what was of more consequence, the valuable packet of diamonds, to say nothing of the other registered parcels, had been recovered.

THE END.