

A DETECTIVE STORY

THIS WEEK.

A

BY MAXWELL SCOTT.

1
2

DEAD MAN'S SECRET



"He cautiously made his way along the outside of the train, counting the compartments as he passed along."

THE "HALF PENNY MARVEL"

A NEW BOOK EVERY WEDNESDAY.

21, WHITEFRIARS STREET, LONDON, E.C.

NEWSAGENTS
WOULD DO WELL TO
STOCK BACK NUMBERS,
AS THEY ALWAYS SELL.

No. 46

A DEAD MAN'S SECRET.

This Story, showing how one of London's most puzzling Mysteries was Solved, is founded on Facts gleaned from the Notebook of Nelson Lee, the famous Detective.

By MAXWELL SCOTT.

CHAPTER I. The Midnight Mail.

It was a wild November night, as black as it was boisterous. The West of England mail was half an hour behind her time, and, as she thundered down the line between Reading and London, she experienced the fullest fury of the storm. What with the roaring of the engines, the clatter of the carriage-wheels, the bellowing of the wind, and the rattle of the frozen snow as it was hurled against the windows, her passengers found themselves surrounded by such a pandemonium of noise, that even the most sociable amongst them gave up attempting to carry on a conversation, and relapsed into a moody silence. A few, it is true, endeavoured to while away the tedium of the journey by means of books, but the majority wrapped their rugs around them, drew their travelling-caps over their eyes, and curled themselves up in the corners of the carriages. It was only here and there that a hardened traveller found it possible to sleep, and to one of these his slumber proved the sleep of death.

He was an elderly man, with crisp grey hair, and the ruddy complexion of one who had spent his life in the open air. He was reclining fast asleep in the corner of a third-class carriage, with his feet and legs enveloped in a travelling-rug, his hands enclosed in woollen gloves, and only his bronzed and sunburnt cheek exposed to view. The only other occupant of the compartment was a young and beautiful girl, who was sitting at the other end of the same seat as the sleeper. An open book lay on her lap, but, if one might judge by her drooping head, she, too, was fast asleep.

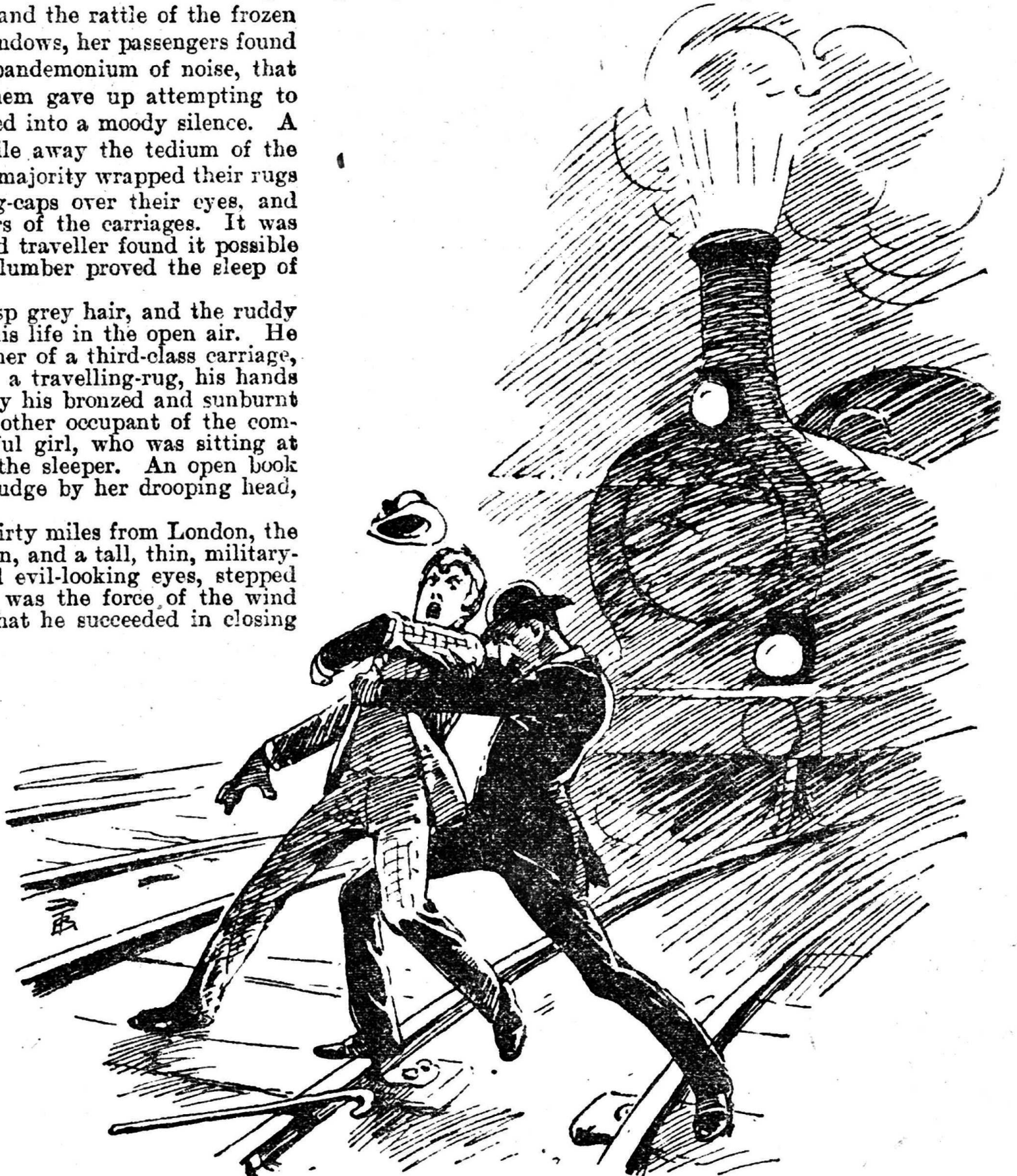
Whilst the mail was still some thirty miles from London, the door of a first-class carriage flew open, and a tall, thin, military-looking man, with tanned face and evil-looking eyes, stepped out upon the footboard. So great was the force of the wind that it was only after a struggle that he succeeded in closing the door again, and, when this was done, he cautiously made his way along the outside of the train, crouching down so as to avoid the carriage-windows, and counting the compartments as he passed along. When he reached the seventh from his own, he muttered, "This should be the carriage," at the same time raising his head to the level of the window, and peering into the dimly-lighted compartment.

It was the carriage in which the man and the girl were sleeping, and a chuckle of satisfaction from the man outside testified to the fact that this was the carriage he sought.

Whilst one hand grasped the handle of the door, he dived into his pocket with the other, and produced—strange weapon of assassination!—a blowpipe. In shape and size it resembled an ordinary lead-pencil, but inside that innocent-looking tube was a tiny dart, something like a short sharp thorn, whose point was tipped with poison. Placing one end of the tube between his lips, the assassin cautiously opened the door of the carriage sufficiently wide to admit of the other end passing through, and, as the air was filled with the roar and rattle of the train, the howling of the elements, and the clatter of the

driven snow, the slight noise made by the opening of the door was drowned, and those within the carriage slumbered on.

The sleeping man was sitting with his back to the engine, and his uncovered face, therefore, presented an easy target to the man outside. In obedience to a vigorous puff, the poisoned dart flew on its errand of death, and buried its murderous point in the sleeper's cheek. A sudden spasm shook his frame; he half-rose from his seat, and then, with a sigh that was half a groan, he fell back into the corner again, with such a sudden



SUDDENLY SEIZED FROM BEHIND, AND HURLED WITH IRRESISTIBLE FORCE IN FRONT OF THE SNORTING ENGINE!

shock that the dart was shaken from his cheek, and fell between the cushion and the back of the carriage. He appeared to be sleeping still, but it was the sleep that knows no waking here below. With a smile upon her pretty lips—for she was dream-

ing of the lover who would meet her at the journey's end—the girl slept on, whilst the author of this dastardly crime crept back to his first-class carriage.

When the mail drew up at Paddington Station, he sprang out upon the platform, and, after a hurried glance around, hastened towards a red-haired coachman, who was standing, whip in hand, beneath a lighted lamp.

"Did you manage it?" asked the coachman eagerly.

Before his companion could reply, the station rang with a woman's anguished scream, and, as a crowd of passengers flocked to the door of the carriage in which the dead man lay, the tall individual spoke again.

"You may take that scream as your answer," he said grimly. "My task, however, is only half completed. I must secure his luggage before his daughter claims it," and, calling a porter to his side, he hastened to the luggage-van, and asked for "Mr. Thomson's luggage."

The porter, not doubting, of course, that this was the owner of the luggage, procured it for him, and, assisted by the red-haired coachman, conveyed it to a carriage, which was waiting outside the station.

"King's Cross, as quickly as you can," said the tall, thin man, after bestowing a gratuity upon the porter; and, stepping into the carriage, he drove away.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee is Consulted by Arthur Pryce—A Very Difficult Case.

Nelson Lee, the famous detective, sat in his room in Gray's Inn Road, dealing with his morning's correspondence. So great was the demand for his advice and help that nine-tenths of his replies were to the effect that "Mr. Lee regrets that, owing to the number of cases he already has on hand, he is unable to deal with Mr. So-and-so's case." He had already replied in this strain to an earl whose family jewels had been stolen, a banker whose clerk had absconded, and a well-known member of the Jockey Club whose favourite race-horse had been poisoned, when he was interrupted by the entrance of his landlady, who handed him a card, bearing the following inscription:

MR. ARTHUR PRYCE,

19, Raglan Road,
Stoke Newington,
London, N.

"This is an early visitor," said Nelson Lee, pushing his papers aside. "It must be an urgent case. Show the gentleman up at once."

In obedience to this command, the landlady ushered into the room a tall, handsome young fellow, with curly flaxen hair and light-blue eyes. He was obviously in great distress, for his face was pale; his hand shook, and he had the unmistakable appearance of a man who had been up all night.

"Take a seat," said Nelson Lee in kindly tones. "You are in trouble?"

"I am," said the young man sadly. "I have been recommended to consult you by Professor Dawes, whose kidnapped child you traced and restored in so marvellous a fashion."

"I remember the case," said Nelson Lee. "It was a very simple case, and the professor has always given me a great deal more credit for it than I really deserve."

"He does not think so, at any rate," replied Arthur Pryce, "and if you display the same amount of cleverness on my behalf, I have little doubt of your success, although the case I bring you is a case without a clue."

"A case without a clue!" said Nelson Lee. "That sounds promising. I have already more work than I can do, but if your case is indeed as complex as your words imply, I shall only be too delighted to devote myself to its solution. Tell me all about it."

"To begin at the very beginning," said Arthur Pryce, "I must tell you that about twelve months ago I went to Australia, as the representative of a Yorkshire firm of woollen manufacturers. Amongst the sheep-farms that I visited was that of a certain Ralph Thomson. He was a widower, not over-prosperous, and one of the most silent men I ever met. He had an only daughter, named Ruth, as frank and cheerful as he was moody and reserved, and, before I left Australia, Ruth Thomson had promised to be my wife.

"It was arranged that I should return to Australia at the end of this year, for the purpose of getting married, and should bring my wife back to England with me. I also suggested that when we were married Mr. Thomson should sell his farm, and come to live with us; but his reply was to the effect that both his father and his grandfather had lived and died on the farm, and he asked no better fate than to follow their example. Judge, then, of my surprise, when about two months ago I received a letter from him stating that he had sold the farm, and was coming to spend the rest of his days in England.

"He gave no hint as to what had made him change his mind. But this did not surprise me, for he was by nature and by habit so reserved, that it was a wonder he condescended to write to me at all.

"Needless to say, I was delighted at the prospect of seeing Ruth so soon, and, as there was no time for a letter, I cabled to him that we should expect them to stay with us until they had decided upon a house of their own. I received a telegram from him last night, saying they had arrived at Plymouth, and were coming on to London by the West of England mail. My mother and I (my father is dead) went down to Paddington Station to meet them at four o'clock this morning, and—and—" But at the remembrance of what had happened the speaker completely broke down, and was unable to proceed with his story.

"Poor fellow!" said Nelson Lee sympathetically. "I know what you found. You found that Mr. Thomson was dead."

"How did you know?" asked Pryce, in surprise.

"It is in the morning papers," replied the detective, handing him a copy of the "Standard," in which was the following paragraph:

"SUDDEN DEATH IN A TRAIN.—On the arrival of the West of England mail at Paddington, this morning, a third-class passenger, named Ralph Thomson, was found to have suddenly died between Reading and London. An inquest will be held."

"That is true, as far as it goes," said Arthur Pryce, "but it is not all. The awful discovery upset us all most terribly, of course, and by the time we had recovered from the shock, we found that, with the exception of two small bags, which they had in the carriage with them, every box and bag of their luggage had been spirited away. Until then, I had been disposed to believe that Mr. Thomson's death was due to heart-disease, from which I knew he suffered, but the theft of his luggage, following so closely on the heels of his sudden death, makes me suspect foul play."

"A very natural suspicion," said Nelson Lee approvingly. "Have you any reason to suppose that the luggage contained any article or articles of particular value to anyone but the owner?"

"I do not see how it could," said Arthur Pryce. "Ralph Thomson, as I have already told you, was a very ordinary, and not particularly wealthy farmer. It is difficult to imagine him possessed of anything more valuable than the few hundred pounds for which he sold his farm; and I do not suppose he carried that amongst his luggage. He would almost certainly deposit it with his banker."

"One never knows," said Nelson Lee. "Some of these farmers are very averse to entrusting their money to other people's keeping. They will hoard it in an old stocking, or under the floor of a room, or anywhere where they can look at it from time to time, rather than let it go out of their sight. Ralph Thomson may have been one of these distrustful people, and he may have brought over all his money in one of his trunks or bags."

"That is possible," said Arthur Pryce. "But, even if we assume that it was so, I do not see how the thieves could know it, or could even know that he was in England at all. Except his daughter, he had not a single living relative in all the world, and I am positive that he knew no one in the country but myself."

"That may be," replied Nelson Lee, "but someone may have followed him from Australia, and robbed and murdered him here."

"True," said Pryce, "I had not thought of that."

For several minutes Nelson Lee remained buried in thought, his eyes half closed, his finger-tips pressed together, and his forehead drawn into the wrinkles which accompany concentrated thought. "If I read this problem aright," he said, at last, "everything depends upon the motive which induced Ralph Thomson to forsake his sheep-farm and come to England. You have no idea, you say, what this motive was. Does Miss Thomson know?"

"I cannot say. She is naturally so upset by her father's sudden death that I have not thought it wise either to worry her with questions, or to hint that I suspect foul play."

"That is all very well," said Nelson Lee, "but if we are to get to the bottom of this mysterious affair, she must be questioned, and the sooner the better. When can I see her?"

"At once, if you consider it necessary. I have a hansom at the door."

"I do consider it necessary," said Nelson Lee. "I will return with you to Raglan Road, if I may."

"Of course you may," said Arthur Pryce. And half an hour later they arrived at the house where he and his widowed mother lived, and where Ruth Thomson was at present staying.

"I wish to spare your feelings as much as possible, Miss Thomson," said Nelson Lee, "but there are one or two questions I want answering, and you are the only person who can answer them. When did your father first broach the idea of coming to England?"

"About six months ago," she answered.

"Up to that time he had always declared his intention of ending his days on his farm?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea what made him change his mind?"

"I only know that it was in consequence of a discovery he made," she replied, "but what that discovery was I can only guess. There was a time when my father was light-hearted and demonstrative, but, after my mother's death, he seemed to shut himself off from the rest of the world, and became a reserved and gloomy man. He never took anyone, not even me, into his confidence, and all that I know of his reason for coming to England is this: One day—it would be about the middle of May, I think—he came to me, and, without a trace of excitement in his voice, announced that he had made an important discovery, which would probably result in our spending the rest of our days in England."

"Pardon my interrupting you," said Nelson Lee, "but at the time when he told you this had he recently been away from home? Had he been in the neighbourhood of the gold-fields, for instance?"

"Oh, no," she answered readily; "on the contrary, for several weeks previous he had been more at home than usual. This was because he was rebuilding a part of the house, which is a very old one, and one that has been in the family for many, many years. He was having one part of it pulled down, in order to build a new wing, and, as he was very much interested in the alterations, he stayed at home to see that his plans were properly carried out. I do not think he had been away from home for quite six weeks before he made the announcement I have told you of."

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee. "Will you continue your story, please?"

"After telling me of this discovery," she went on, "he added, 'I am going down to Melbourne now to see a lawyer, and, if he advises me to do so, I shall sell the farm before I return.' He was away about a fortnight, and, when he came back, he told me he had sold the farm, and that, as soon as he could settle his business affairs, we were to sail to England. I knew his nature well enough to know that it would be useless to question him about his discovery, and, as a matter of fact, he only alluded to it once again."

"When was that?" asked Nelson Lee.

"It was when our luggage was being taken aboard the boat at Melbourne," she replied. "He pointed to a brown-leather portmanteau, with his initials in white letters on the outside, and said, 'If anything should happen to me before we reach England, you will find my discovery hidden inside the lining of that portmanteau. Guard it as you would guard your life, for it will make you one of the richest girls in England.'"

"What construction did you place upon these words?" said Nelson Lee.

"You will probably laugh at my fancy, when I tell you," she replied. "There is a tradition in our family that one of our ancestors was a member of a titled English family, who emigrated to Australia, and changed his name. I thought, perhaps, this ancestor might have run off with some of the family jewels, and that when my father was pulling down the old house, he found them under the flooring, or behind the wainscoting."

Nelson Lee shook his head. "Do you know the name of the lawyer your father consulted?" he asked.

"I do not."

"Did he write to anyone in England about his discovery?"

"If he did, he never told me. But, as I have already said, he was not accustomed to take me into his confidence."

"I am afraid that his death, and the subsequent theft of his luggage, prove that he did write to someone in this country," said Nelson Lee, more to himself than to Ruth Thomson.

"You do not suggest that my father's death was due to foul play?" she cried, with a new, wild horror in her eyes. "Oh! do not tell me that my father was murdered!"

"Where is the body?" he asked, turning to Arthur Pryce, in the hope of evading her question.

"In one of the waiting-rooms at Paddington Station," said Arthur. "It will remain there until after the inquest, which is at two o'clock this afternoon."

"Very well," said Nelson Lee, taking up his hat. "I am going to Paddington now, to inquire about the luggage. Good-bye for the present, Miss Thomson. As soon as I have anything to communicate I will do myself the honour of calling upon you again."

"But you have not answered my question yet," she said imploringly. "You surely cannot believe that my father was murdered! He was alive and well when we left Reading Station; the train did not stop between there and London, and we had the carriage to ourselves the whole way."

"I will tell you what I think when I have seen the body," he answered gravely. "Your information has shed a flood of light upon the problem, but it is a difficult case—a very difficult case," and he bowed himself out.

CHAPTER III.

Nelson Lee Falls into a Trap, but obtains some Valuable Information.

It wanted still an hour to noon when Nelson Lee left the Pryces' house, but, owing to a dense November fog which had sprung up during his visit, it was almost as dark as night. The hansom, which he had left standing at the gate, was gone, and, as neither he nor Arthur had paid the driver for bringing them from Gray's Inn Road, its disappearance occasioned him no little surprise. Turning up the collar of his coat, for the air was damp and chill, he set out at a brisk pace towards the nearest cabstand, but had not proceeded far when a curious scene arrested his attention, and caused him, for the moment, to forget the singular behaviour of the cabman.

At the garden-gate of a house not far removed from the one he had just left, stood a red-haired individual, wringing his hands, swaying himself to and fro, mopping his brow with a huge bandanna handkerchief, and altogether presenting a side-splitting picture of helplessness and despair.

Upon the ground, at his feet, lay, or rather wallowed, a gentleman, as unlike his companion as could possibly be. He was tall and thin, with aristocratic features, and dressed in the latest fashion. He was apparently in the last stage of intoxication, and to all the red-haired individual's exhortations to "git up and come 'ome," he responded with a drunken grunt, and a realistic attempt to swim across the pavement on his stomach.

When the coachman (for such the red-haired man appeared to be) saw Nelson Lee, who had paused to contemplate the disgusting scene, a comical grin spread over his face, and, addressing the detective, he said:

"He's a beauty, ain't he, sir?"

"He's a beast!" said Nelson Lee, with a contemptuous glance at the figure on the ground.

"He's been drinking since yesterday arternoon," continued the coachman, "and now he wants to go down to the City."

"Is he your master?" asked Nelson Lee.

"He is," replied the coachman, "but if this sort of thing goes on much longer he'll have to look out for another coachman. What do you think I'd better do with him?"

"Oh, take him home by all means," said Nelson Lee, without a moment's hesitation. "Does he live far from here?"

"He lives there," said the coachman, pointing to a large house, whose outlines loomed indistinctly through the fog. "He couldn't git further than 'is own gate, and I don't know how I'm to git him back to the house again!"

"I'll give you a hand," said Nelson Lee. "Catch hold of his feet, and we'll have him indoors in a trice."

"You're a gentleman, sir," said the coachman gratefully, seizing his master roughly by the ankles, whilst the detective took charge of his shoulders.

"You go first, sir," said the coachman. And, raising the man from the ground, they passed through the open gate, and up the path towards the house, Nelson Lee, of course, walking backwards.

This proceeding apparently found little favour in the eyes of the inebriated gentleman. More than once he drew up his knees with an abruptness that nearly brought the coachman to the ground, and then, before the man had recovered his equilibrium, he extended them again so vigorously that he was all but upset in an opposite direction. With bulldog determination, however, the coachman stuck to his guns, or rather, to his master's ankles, and, finding that he could not shake him off, the struggling drunkard turned his attention to Nelson Lee.

After butting the detective fiercely with his head, and after vainly endeavouring to wriggle his shoulders out of his grasp, he threw back his arms, knocked off the detective's hat, and clasped his hands behind his neck.

This was more than Nelson Lee had bargained for. He had already been compelled to adopt the undignified procedure of walking backwards, with his body bent double, but to be tightly embraced by a total stranger, and to have his face drawn into loathsome proximity with a drunkard's, was more than he could stand.

"Come, stop this, my good man!" he said, with a shudder of disgust; and, dropping the man's shoulders, he seized his hands, and endeavoured to unlock the fingers. The moment he let go the shoulders the coachman dropped the feet, and the whole weight of the man's body being thus suddenly thrown upon Nelson Lee, he was dragged down upon his knees, and, but for his outstretched arms, would have fallen forward on his face.

As thus he crouched on his hands and knees, with the man still hanging like a millstone round his neck, a sudden suspicion of danger flashed into his mind. The breath of the man who was supposed to be drunk was as free from the odour of intoxicating liquor as his own!

He struggled furiously to free himself, but the man stuck to

him with all the tenacity of a leech, and presently he heard the coachman softly say, "Look out, sir!"

At this warning the man unclasped his hands, but, before Nelson Lee could take advantage of his freedom, the coachman dealt him a stunning blow upon his unprotected head, and, with a stifled groan, he fell senseless to the ground.

For a couple of hours he lay stunned and bleeding within a



HE SAW A MAN, WITH THE UPPER PART OF HIS FACE CONCEALED BY A MASK, ABSORBED IN EXAMINING A PACKET OF DOCUMENTS.

dozen yards of Raglan Road, which is usually a fairly busy thoroughfare, but which on this eventful morning was, owing to the fog, comparatively deserted. When, at length, his scattered wits returned, it would be difficult to say with whom he was the more enraged—his assailants or himself. An ordinary citizen, he told himself, might well be excused if he allowed a couple of accomplished actors to deceive him; but for a detective, and a detective so experienced as himself, to be so completely taken in, was both a humiliation and a disgrace.

The house which the coachman had asserted was his master's residence was an empty one, and the rest of his story was doubtless equally untrue, and had been invented on the spur of the moment, for the purpose of luring Nelson Lee into the deserted garden. That robbery had been their object the detective had no doubt, and, upon searching his pockets, his suspicion was amply confirmed. Yet it was robbery of a singular kind. His watch and chain, his ring, and his purse were still in his possession, but every scrap of written or printed matter which he had about him had disappeared.

"Nelson Lee," he muttered to himself, "this precious couple have made a fool of you, but they have given you some valuable information. The fact that Ralph Thomson's luggage was stolen this morning, and that you were entrapped and robbed immediately after you had visited his daughter, is too startling to be a mere coincidence. These men are doubtless the men who stole the luggage, and they were apparently watching the house where Miss Thomson is staying. Seeing you arrive, they probably thought she had sent for you in order to hand over to you the something which her father had discovered and brought over to England. That is as good as telling me that they haven't found the something amongst the luggage they have stolen. They imagine Miss Thomson still has it in her possession, and, fearing that she might have handed it over to you, they paid for your hansom, sent it away, and then entrapped and robbed you.

"As they have carried off all your papers, probably to examine them at their leisure, it is manifest that it is papers they are after, and that proves, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the something which Ralph Thomson discovered was not jewels, as his daughter fancies, but papers of some kind.

"We will forgive them, Nelson Lee, for this nasty cut, and for making such a fool of you, since they have given us these two valuable bits of information.

"Our object must be to trace the luggage, and restore it to Miss Thomson, before they discover where the papers are hidden, and we will never rest until we have done it. They shall learn what it costs to make a fool of Nelson Lee!"

CHAPTER IV.

Discovery of the Dart—The Face at the Window—An Attempt on Nelson Lee's Life.

The inquest on Ralph Thomson's body was held the same afternoon, and a verdict was duly returned of "Death from natural causes, probably heart-disease."

Amongst the handful of spectators who were present at the inquiry in the dimly-lighted room at Paddington Station was a benevolent-looking old clergyman, who seated himself next to Arthur Pryce, and followed the somewhat brief proceedings with an air of amiable and interested curiosity. When the jury, however, returned the verdict given above, he bestowed upon them a scathing glance of undisguised contempt, that seemed strangely out of keeping with the bland and childlike smile that played around his kindly-looking mouth.

When the coroner had departed, he managed, by a judicious distribution of tips, to gain admittance to the room in which the dead man's body lay, explaining to the policeman, to whose complaisance he owed this favour, that the viewing of dead bodies was one of his favourite amusements! Had the policeman seen the expression in his eyes as he scrutinised the body, he would have seen little of "amusement" in them. No police-surgeon could have examined the Australian's lifeless form with greater precision, or with a more intelligent appreciation than did this benevolent white-haired clergyman, and the result of his investigation was summed up in the half-muttered exclamation, "Where is the dart?"

After thanking the policeman very kindly for having allowed him to view the body, this singular clergyman sauntered on to the platform, where, in consequence of the all-pervading fog, the lamps were lighted. Accosting the first porter he met, he said, "Can you tell me, Mr. Porter, if the carriage in which that gentleman was found dead this morning is still here, or has it gone away?"

"It is still here," replied the porter. "It was taken off the train and shunted into a siding, in case the coroner's jury wanted to see it."

"Did they?" asked the clergyman.

"No, sir. They said it wasn't necessary."

"How wise of them," said the clergyman blandly. "Really, porter, you have no idea how this case has interested me. I have just been having a look at the poor man's body, and I should so like to see the carriage in which he died. Can you tell me where it is?"

The porter took him to the end of the platform, and, after crossing one or two lines of rails, pointed to a row of empty carriages, which could only just be seen through the thick yellow fog, and said, "You see those carriages in the far siding? Well, the third from this end is the one in which the gentleman died."

"How interesting!" murmured the clergyman. "It is too far away, and the fog is too dense, however, for me to see it clearly. I should dearly like to go close up to it, and have a good look at it. Do you think I might?" and he slipped half-a-crown into the porter's hand.

"I think so," said the porter, touching his cap. "Nobody will see you in the fog. You will have to keep a sharp look-out, however, for the half-past four express is almost due, and to get to yon siding you have to cross the line of rails the express comes up on."

"All right," said the clergyman. "I'll keep my eyes open. By the way, were you on duty when the West of England mail came in this morning?"

"Yes, sir," said the porter.

"I wonder if you were the porter who handed out Mr. Thomson's luggage?"

"Mr. Thomson's?" said the porter, scratching his head.

"Was that the luggage with the Australian steamboat labels on it?"

"It was," said the clergyman eagerly. "Did you get it out of the van?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who claimed it?"

"There were two of them, sir. One was a tall, thin, well-dressed gentleman, with a black moustache, and a yellowish sort of complexion, and the other looked like his coachman, or his groom. He was not so tall as his master, but he was stouter, and had red hair."

"The very same couple!" muttered the clergyman; and then aloud he said, "I want you to tell me exactly what occurred in connection with that luggage. I don't mind telling you that those men had no right to claim it. As a matter of fact, they stole it. You, of course, are not to blame, but I want you to help me to recover it."

"I will do what I can to help you, sir," said the porter. "I'm sure I'm very sorry if I have innocently helped two thieves, but I didn't know what the owner of the luggage was like, and when the tall, thin gentleman came up to me, and cried out, in a hurried voice, 'Porter! Mr. Thomson's luggage, quick! I want to catch a train at King's Cross,' I naturally concluded that he was Mr. Thomson. Certainly, now I come to think of it, he wasn't particularly spry at pointing out which was his luggage, but he was in such a hurry that at the time I couldn't think of anything but getting the luggage out of the van as quickly as possible."

"Yes; and what did you do with it when you had got it out?" asked the clergyman, deeply interested.

"The gentleman had a carriage waiting outside," continued the porter, "a four-wheeled carriage, driven by a couple of chestnut horses; and he was in such a hurry that both he and the coachman helped me with their own hands to stow away the luggage. When we had got it all in the carriage, the gentleman gave me half-a-sovereign, and jumped into the carriage, crying, 'King's Cross, John, as quickly as you can!' The coachman whipped up the horses, they dashed away at a furious gallop, and that was the last I saw of them."

"Your information does not help me much, I am afraid," said the clergyman in tones of disappointment. "Thank you, however, for—Hist! What was that?"

They were standing at the end of a long row of empty trucks, some distance from the principal portion of the station, and all alone, as they supposed. Yet the sound which had startled the clergyman was the unmistakable sound of a smothered sneeze!

"We have been overheard!" exclaimed the clergyman, and he darted round to the other side of the empty trucks with an agility that was remarkable in one so old. The fog, however, was so dense that the eavesdropper—if such there had been—got clear away, and, in no very amiable frame of mind, the clergyman rejoined the porter.

"I hope it wasn't one of the inspectors," said the porter, in a doleful tone of voice. "If it was I shall get into trouble for bringing you here."

"I don't think you will, if you mention my name," said the clergyman, with a curious smile.

"What is your name, sir?" asked the porter.

"Nelson Lee," replied the clergyman.

"The detective!" exclaimed the porter; and, before he had recovered from his amazement, the clergyman had plunged into the fog, and was making his way towards the deserted siding in which stood the carriage he wished to see.

It was, indeed, Nelson Lee, who had adopted the disguise of a clergyman in consequence of the attack made upon him in Raglan Road. That attack had convinced him that the thieves were aware of the fact that he had been entrusted with the task of hunting them down, and, such being the case, it became imperative for him to conceal his identity, if he wished to pursue his investigations with a fair chance of success.

Before taking up the question of the stolen luggage, he had determined to inspect the body, in order to settle, once for all, the question of foul play. The reader already knows how he obtained an opportunity of examining the body, and, as he had been originally educated for a doctor, he was able to bring to bear upon his task a trained intelligence superior to that of the ordinary detective.

Not only did his quick eye discern, in the lividity of the face and the contraction of the muscles, the symptoms of death by poisoning, but he also detected a little black spot on the dead man's cheek, where the poisoned dart had entered. Marshalling his facts together, and setting them in what he conceived to be their proper order, he speedily traced in his mind as true a picture of the murder in the mail as though he had been an eyewitness.

Putting aside the important questions of the identity of the assassin, and the motive for his dastardly crime, the only other point that remained to be solved was the whereabouts of the dart. It was no longer in the dead man's cheek, and it was inconceivable that the murderer could have recovered it before the train arrived at Paddington. Unless, therefore, he had done so since, it must still be in the carriage, and if Nelson Lee could

find it, it would not only confirm his theory of the crime, but might also prove an important piece of evidence in after days.

The assassin would doubtless also realise the importance of removing this proof of his crime without delay, and, in his own mind, Nelson Lee had little doubt that the smothered sneeze he heard when conversing with the porter came from him. He was evidently on the same tack as the detective, and this is why Nelson Lee left his companion so abruptly. He wished to be first in the field.

So dense was the fog in the deserted siding, that he had some little difficulty in finding the carriage he wanted, and, when at last he did so, he was obliged to strike a match, in order to explore its dark and silent interior. With this in his hand, he groped about the compartment, subjecting every nook and corner to a searching investigation. Just when he was beginning to fear that the assassin had forestalled him, he espied the object of his quest between the cushion and the back of the carriage.

A low cry of satisfaction escaped him at the sight, but, as he was cautiously placing the dart in his pocket-case, he suddenly perceived a face—a thin, sallow face, with a black moustache and a pair of cruelly-gleaming eyes—closely pressed against the window on the opposite side of the carriage.

It disappeared the moment he caught sight of it, and, dropping the lighted match, he bounded towards the door, only to find that it was locked.

With a muttered malediction on his luck, he rushed to the other side of the compartment, leaped through the open door, and ran swiftly round the end of the row of empty carriages.

There was no one to be seen. Inwardly raging at his want of success, he entered the compartment once more, changed his clothes, and, when he started on his walk back to the lighted portion of the station, he no longer appeared as a clergyman, but as an ordinary individual. He had crossed several lines of rails, when a rushing sound upon his right, coupled with a trembling of the ground, warned him of the advent of the half-past four express, of which the porter had warned him. A mineral train was coming up in an opposite direction, and, as it was impossible, owing to the fog, to tell upon which set of rails the trains were travelling, he decided to stay where he was, until both of them had passed.

As events turned out, he was standing close beside the line up which the express was thundering. He did not realise this until it was almost abreast of him, and, when he saw his danger, he quickly stepped backwards, only to find himself suddenly seized from behind, and hurled with irresistible force in front of the snorting engine!

CHAPTER V.

A Midnight Intruder at Raglan Road—Arthur gets the Worst of a Struggle.

We must now turn our attention for a moment or two to No. 19, Raglan Road, in order to describe a series of events which were not only sufficiently exciting in themselves, but which, by a rare slice of good luck, led to the discovery of a most important clue.

Ruth Thomson was present, of course, at the inquest on her father's body, but she was so overwhelmed with grief that it is doubtful if she ever noticed that an individual in clerical costume was amongst the spectators. Arthur Pryce, as already stated, was also there, but, although Nelson Lee sat by him throughout the whole proceedings, he failed to penetrate the detective's disguise, and was secretly disappointed that Nelson Lee had not—as he thought—considered it worth his while to attend.

When the verdict had been duly entered, and the necessary certificates made out, he arranged for the removal of the body to Raglan Road, and then, with Ruth, drove there himself.

It had been a trying day for the orphan-girl, and his heart ached at the sight of her wan and tear-stained face. He tried to comfort her by oft-repeated expressions of his confidence in Nelson Lee, but these brought little solace to the stricken girl, for, after all, neither the great detective nor anyone else could bring her father to life again, and, compared with the loss of her father, the rest of her troubles were insignificant.

When they reached Raglan Road, they found that Arthur's mother had caused an appetising tea to be prepared for them; but Ruth declined all offers of food, and, in accordance with Mrs. Pryce's advice, she went to bed. Arthur and his mother passed a miserable evening together, discussing the mysterious calamity which had overtaken Ruth, and at ten o'clock they, too, retired to rest. The servants followed a little later, and by half-past ten the house was dark and silent.

For quite an hour after retiring to bed, Arthur tossed about, in a vain attempt to woo sleep, and, when at last he succeeded, he was haunted by frightful dreams and horrible nightmares. In one of these he dreamt that Ruth was being murdered before his eyes, and such were the violent efforts he made (in his sleep) to save her, that he awoke to find himself bathed in perspiration, and trembling in every limb.

"This will never do!" he muttered to himself. "If I go on like this I shall be a perfect wreck before morning. I wonder what time it is?"

As if in answer to his thought, the little clock upon the mantelpiece struck two, and, so strained were his nerves, that the low and silvery chime of the clock startled him like a clap of thunder.

"Great heaven!" he growled, "how shattered my nerves must be! I'll try what a cigarette will do in the way of composing them," and, with this intention, he got out of bed, and turned up the gas.

Finding that he had left his cigarettes downstairs, he slipped into a dressing-gown and a pair of woollen slippers, opened his chamber-door with as little noise as possible, so as not to disturb his mother or Ruth, and, with a lighted taper in his hand, stole noiselessly down the thickly-carpeted stairs.

On his way to the dining-room, where he had left his cigarettes, he had to pass the door of a little room in which he kept his books and papers, and which he dignified by the name of his "library." As he approached this door, he was surprised to perceive a faint band of light streaming through the narrow space between the floor and the bottom of the door. His first thought was that the servants had forgotten to turn out the gas before they went to bed, but immediately afterwards he remembered that he himself had put out the gas, and had also locked up the room, leaving the key in the lock on the outside of the door, where, as he could see, it still remained.

Extinguishing his taper, he crept along the passage, and placed his ear to the keyhole. There was someone moving on the other side of the locked door!

"It is a burglar!" he muttered. "He must have got in through the conservatory or the dining-room!"

In order to render this remark intelligible, it is necessary to explain that between the dining-room of Pryce's house and the room which Arthur called his library, there was a glass conservatory, which opened at one end into the dining-room and at the other into the library. There were consequently three ways by which the burglar might have entered the little room, without making use of the door which was locked. He might have entered by the library-window, which overlooked the lawn at the side of the house; he might have broken into the glass conservatory, and so made his way into the library; and, lastly, he might have effected an entrance through the dining-room window at the back, passed from that room into the conservatory, and thence into the library.

With cat-like tread, Arthur glided past the library door, and gained the dining-room. The window was shut and fastened, from which it was clear that the burglar had not gained an entrance in that direction. Arming himself with a heavy poker, he stole silently into the conservatory, and as the door at the other end, leading into the library, was open, he was able to see right into the latter room.

A singular scene met his view. Upon the corner of the mantelpiece stood a small dark-lantern, and by its light he saw a tall, thin man, with the upper part of his face concealed by a mask, kneeling in front of an open drawer, and absorbed in examining a packet of legal documents which belonged to Mrs. Pryce. The floor of the room was strewed with letters, bills, and papers of various kinds, all of which belonged to Arthur or his mother; and, as Arthur paused to observe the masked intruder, he tossed aside the papers he was then examining, and opened another drawer.

As he watched this man overhauling his papers, a dim suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon Arthur's mind. He was unaware, of course, of the fact that Nelson Lee had been robbed of all his papers, but he was shrewd enough to come to the same conclusion as the great detective. This was the man, he conjectured, who had stolen Ralph Thomson's luggage, and, judging by his present proceedings, it was natural to suppose that he had stolen it in order to obtain certain papers of value to himself. Failing to find these papers in the stolen luggage, he had broken into Arthur's house, to ascertain if Ruth had handed them over to her lover.

As none of the glass in the conservatory was broken, it was obvious that the nocturnal visitor had gained admittance through the library window; and as, no doubt, he would have left this window open, in order to make his escape at the first sign of interruption, Arthur's only chance of capturing him was to take him by surprise.

For this purpose, he threaded his way, with infinite caution, amongst the palms and plants with which the conservatory was filled. He traversed two-thirds of the distance without mishap, and then, in stepping aside to avoid a spreading palm, he stumbled over a watering-can, which had been carelessly left on the ground. A terrible clatter was the result of this mischance, and, all hope of taking his enemy by surprise being now at an end, he grasped the poker tightly in his hand, and rushed into the library. At the same moment the man in the mask, alarmed by the din, dropped the papers he was examining, and sprang to his feet. It was not until he did so that Arthur perceived that a revolver lay near him; but it was too late to think of

drawing back, and, though the intruder instantly covered him with his weapon, he still rushed on.

His bulldog courage met with its reward, for though the trigger descended there was no report, and, of course, no shot. The revolver, in fact, had missed fire, and, before the man could make a second attempt, the heavy iron poker descended on his wrist, with such terrible force that the revolver fell from his nerveless grasp.

Maddened by pain and anger, he sprang upon Arthur, just as he was preparing to repeat the blow, and, dropping the poker, which was useless at such close quarters, Arthur grappled with him in the centre of the room. A short, sharp struggle now took place, and, though Arthur's movements were considerably hampered by the heavy folds of his cumbersome dressing-gown, he managed to hold his own for a time. He made several attempts to tear away the mask from his opponent's face, and on his part the man put forth all his efforts to prevent any trace of his identity being revealed.

Round and round the little room they staggered, locked in each other's embrace, whilst a pattering of feet upon the stairs announced that the rest of the household was hastening to the scene of conflict. As the footsteps drew nearer, the exertions of the combatants grew more desperate, until at last Arthur managed to clutch the mask that concealed his enemy's face. With a sudden wrench, he tore it off, but, at the same instant, the man swung round his arm, and knocked the lantern off the mantelpiece, plunging the room in darkness, and so preventing Arthur seeing his face. Then, putting forth a final effort, he lifted Arthur off his feet, and just as Mrs. Pryce, with a lighted candle in her hand, was opening the door, he hurled him across the room with such savage force, that the door was banged to in the old lady's face, dashing the candle out of her hand, and knocking her backwards into the arms of the frightened servants.

Stunned by the force of the blow, Arthur lay unconscious and unable to rise; and, with a cry of triumph, his assailant rushed to the open window, and disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee gets further Information—An Uncomfortable Ride.

In the ordinary walks of life, the man who practises moderation is almost always more successful than he who goes to extremes, and this holds good to an even greater degree with those who follow the dark and difficult paths of crime. If, for instance, the man who pushed Nelson Lee in front of the incoming express had been content to give him a moderate push, there is little doubt that he would have succeeded in his murderous design; but, as it was, he overshot the mark, and failed through being too eager. Instead of quietly thrusting his enemy under the wheels of the locomotive, he hurled him right across the line, and consequently clear of danger.

It was a narrow squeak, and, in spite of his iron nerves, the detective's face grew pale at the thought of the awful doom from which he had so narrowly escaped. As soon as the express had thundered past, he darted back across the line, and ran hither and thither in a vain endeavour to discover the would-be assassin. After half an hour's useless toil, he gave up the attempt in despair, and once more turned his steps towards the lighted portion of the station.

When he reached the main platform again, the porter with whom he had previously conversed came up to him, and said:

"I wish I'd known you were still in the station, Mr. Lee. I thought you would have gone by now."

"So I should," replied Nelson Lee, "but for a dastardly attempt upon my life. But why do you wish you'd known I was here?"

"Because I could have introduced you to someone who knows where Mr. Thomson's luggage was taken after it went from here."

"You could?" cried Nelson Lee joyously. "Can you not do so now?"

"Not at present," said the porter. "It's partly my fault, for I forgot to tell you something when I was talking to you before."

"Out with it now!" said Nelson Lee eagerly. "Better late than never! If it enables me to trace the luggage you shall be well rewarded for your information."

"Well, it's this," said the porter. "There's a dirty young ragamuffin, called Nipper, who hangs about the station selling matches and evening papers, and who's a perfect young demon for jumping up behind the cabs and carriages. He was here about ten minutes ago, and, as soon as I clapped eyes on him, I remembered that I had seen him jump up behind the carriage in which Mr. Thomson's luggage was taken away."

"But surely he would only ride a hundred yards or so behind it?" suggested Nelson Lee.

"He went as far as the carriage went," said the porter

laughingly. "If I'd thought I was going to see you again to-day I'd have kept him for you to see."

"It's ten thousand pities you didn't do so in any case," said Nelson Lee bitterly. "When shall you see him again?"

"Oh, he'll be here again to-night, or to-morrow morning, at the latest!" said the porter. "But I must warn you that he won't answer any questions unless he's paid for doing so; and if he gets it into his dirty head that you are connected with the police, he won't open his mouth."

"He shall be paid, of course, if he has anything to communicate," said Nelson Lee. "I hope you haven't frightened him away by any indiscreet remarks?"

"Oh, no!" said the porter. "All I said to him was, 'Did you have a good ride behind that carriage this morning, Nipper?'"

"They drove so fast that I couldn't have jumped off if I'd wanted, which I didn't," he said.

"Then you rode behind it all the way to King's Cross?" I asked.

"King's Cross?" he said. "Why it didn't go near King's Cross."

"Where did it go?" I asked.

"Look here, porter," said he, "who're you trying to pump? Is it a perlice fake?"

"It's not," I said, "but I know a gentleman who would, maybe, give half-a-dollar to know where that carriage went to."

"Well, I can tell him," said he.

"Where was it?" I asked.

"What do you take me for?" he asked, with a knowing wink. "I know how to take care of a good thing, when I've got hold of one. No, don't you try to come the confidence dodge on me!"

"What is his address?" asked Nelson Lee.

The porter laughed. "I asked him the same question myself," he said, "and his answer was, 'The open air, London!'"

"I should like to know the young rascal, apart from the fact that he may be able to help me," said Nelson Lee. "He seems to be quite a character. Here is half-a-sovereign for yourself, and if Nipper comes again to-day, tell him there is another for him, if he will come to my rooms in Gray's Inn Road to-morrow at nine o'clock."

"Thank you, sir," said the porter, touching his cap. "I will be sure to give him your message." And, with increasing hope and confidence, the detective returned to his rooms.

It was six o'clock when he reached home, and, without so much as a thought of food, he went straight to what he called his "workroom." This was a spacious room at the back of the house, into which nobody but himself was ever allowed to enter. On two sides the walls were lined with shelves, containing all kinds of chemicals used in testing for poison, whilst on a table at the end were microscopes, lamps, retorts, and all the paraphernalia of an analytical chemist. On another side of the room stood two massive book-cases, one containing a perfect library of scientific, medical, and legal works, and the other containing scrap-books, filled with newspaper-cuttings relating to crime in every part of the civilised world. Finally, the whole length of the remaining wall was occupied by drawers and cupboards, in which were stored wigs and disguises of every shape and hue.

For several hours he remained hard at work in this room, examining the dart which he had found in the railway-carriage, and analysing the film of poison with which its slender point was tipped. With regard to the dart, he found that it was nothing more than a simple thorn, but, from its size, he concluded that it was of tropical growth, for it is only in such regions that thorns of such dimensions are grown. The poison he discovered to be identical with that employed by the savages of Central and Western Africa to tip their poisoned darts and arrows.

"It is more than probable," he muttered to himself, "that the man who shot this dart has travelled or lived in Africa, and has come in contact with the natives, from whom he has obtained this specimen of their barbarous weapons. Unimportant though this fact may seem at present, it may come in useful at some future date as an additional aid to the identification of the murderer."

Having concluded his investigations, he remembered that he was hungry, and, after placing the poisoned dart in a place of security, he sat down to a good square meal. When this was finished, he smoked a single pipe, and went to bed.

Like Arthur, he found it impossible to rest. The dark, inscrutable problem of Ralph Thomson's death intruded itself even into his dreams, and made sleep even more exhausting than work. About midnight he got up, and, enveloping himself in a dressing-gown, he lit a pipe, and settled himself in an easy chair to think. He attacked the problem from fresh points of view, compared it with all the similar cases of which he had ever heard or read, and invented a score of plausible theories as to the nature of the papers which the dead man had discovered, and which someone in England was so anxious to secure.

Suddenly he sprang from his chair, and, tearing off his dressing-gown, began to dress with frantic haste.

"What a fool I am!" he said, speaking half-aloud, in rapid,

disjointed tones. "Those villains as good as told me this morning that they hadn't found the papers yet. They attacked me because they thought Miss Thomson might have given them to me, and, when they found I hadn't got them, they would naturally conclude that they are still in her possession. Since they have murdered her father, and attacked me, they will certainly not spare her, if they think she has the papers; and, whilst I am sitting idly here, she or her lover may be in deadly peril. I ought to have set watch on the Pryces' house, or, at least, to have warned Arthur of danger. I have failed in my duty to the Australian's orphan, and if murder is done at No. 19, Raglan Road to-night, I shall consider myself as guilty as the man who strikes the blow."

Thrusting a revolver into his pocket, he left the house without disturbing his landlady, and set off to walk at a rapid pace to Raglan Road. At that early hour he had little hope of meeting with a cab, and, as a matter of fact, the only empty vehicle he saw was a private carriage, which, with unlighted lamps, was standing at the corner of a deserted street, quite close to Raglan Road. This—although, of course, he did not know it—belonged to the man whom Arthur had discovered in the act of overhauling his papers, and was waiting here to convey him away when his task was done.

When Nelson Lee approached the carriage, the coachman, who was dozing on the box, gave so sudden a start that he jerked up the reins, and, the horses taking this for a signal to start, commenced to trot away. With a savage oath, the coachman pulled them up, but not before they had emerged from the shadow in which they had previously been standing, and had passed a lighted lamp, whose light enabled Nelson Lee to see them quite distinctly. With a thrill of exultation, he discovered that the carriage answered exactly to the one described by the porter at Paddington Station, and he had little difficulty in identifying the coachman with the man who had helped to attack him in the morning.

"There is mischief afoot, as I feared," he muttered. "This carriage is waiting here, no doubt, whilst its owner ransacks the Pryces' house in search of the papers which he thinks are there."

Whilst these thoughts were passing through his mind, he continued to walk rapidly towards Raglan Road, hoping against hope that he might be in time to prevent any further catastrophe. Presently, however, he heard someone running in the opposite direction, and, slipping through an open garden-gate, he waited for the man to pass. It was the man whom Arthur had unmasked, though, of course, Nelson Lee knew nothing about the encounter in the library, and, as he passed beneath a neighbouring lamp, the detective once more beheld the face of the man who had entrapped and robbed him in the morning. It was the face he had seen at the carriage-window in the afternoon, and it was the face the porter had described to him—long and thin, with sallow complexion and black moustache.

As soon as the fugitive had passed the garden in which he was hiding, he crept out and followed him. As the night was both dark and foggy, this was an easy task for one who was an adept at the art of "shadowing," and when the tall man reached the corner where his carriage was waiting, Nelson Lee was less than half a dozen yards behind.

The coachman was alert enough on this occasion, and, as soon as his master came within speaking distance, he asked in eager tones, "Did you find them?"

"Curse it, no!" replied the other. "I was interrupted before I had finished my search. But I do not think they are there."

"Either Nelson Lee or his ghost has just gone by," continued the coachman. "Did you meet anyone on the road?"

"Nelson Lee!" cried his master, in alarm. "If he is in this neighbourhood the sooner we clear out the better," and, jumping up beside the coachman, he seized the whip, and lashed the horses into a furious gallop.

Like a greyhound leaping after its prey, Nelson Lee sprang up behind the carriage, but so fast and furious was the pace that he had considerable difficulty in maintaining his seat.

"If they keep up this pace much longer," he growled, "I shall soon be shaken off into the road." But when the fugitives had put what they considered a safe distance between themselves and Raglan Road, they pulled up the horses, and for the rest of the journey proceeded at a pace less likely to arouse the suspicions of the passers-by.

After rattling through an endless succession of deserted streets, they crossed the Thames at London Bridge, turned sharply to the left, and finally emerged into the open country.

"We are now in the county of Kent," thought Nelson Lee, who, in spite of his cramped and difficult position, had followed the route by which they had come as closely as though an open map had been before him. "We have driven quite twelve miles from Raglan Road. Surely they cannot have much further to go."

The journey, however, showed no signs of coming to an end, and it was not until nearly five o'clock in the morning that they dashed through the entrance to a well-wooded park, and drew up at the door of a large old-fashioned country-house.

The moment the horses stopped, Nelson Lee slipped down from his perch and crawled beneath the carriage. The tall, thin man got off the box, and after a whispered conversation with the coachman, mounted the steps in front of the door, and inserted a latch-key in the keyhole.

"Good-night!" he shouted, as he opened the door. "Don't forget, to-morrow at ten."

"Good-night, Sir Oliver," replied the coachman. "I'll not forget," and, as the door silently closed, the coachman drove off to the stables, leaving Nelson Lee lying flat upon his face on the carriage-drive in front of the house.

"Sir Oliver!" he muttered. "I begin to see daylight at last!"

CHAPTER VII.

Nelson Lee Takes to Housebreaking as a Means of Escape—Chased by Bloodhounds.

In the City the fog still hung about the streets and houses, but in the country it was a clear and star-lit winter's night. When the sound of the carriage-wheels had died away, Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and, by the cold light of the stars, contemplated the house to which he had so courageously tracked the man he was hunting down.

It was a picturesque Tudor mansion, dating from the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and surrounded by a small but exceedingly well-wooded park, which, in one direction, extended to the very walls of the house itself. In spite of the decay into which some portions of it had recently been allowed to fall, it was still a fine old place, and one that was worthy of a better owner than the man who had just entered it.

Whilst Nelson Lee was surveying that part of the house which adjoined the park, a light appeared in one of the upper windows, and a moment later the man whom the coachman had addressed as "Sir Oliver" came to the window in order to draw down the blind. He was evidently in an angry mood, for he gave the cord such a vicious tug that not only the blind but the roller as well came rattling down about his ears. He made no attempt to replace them, but, flinging them from him with an angry gesture, walked away.

In front of the lighted window grew an elm-tree, and, by swarming up this, Nelson Lee gained an uninterrupted view of the interior of the room. Sir Oliver was in the act of gulping down a glass of brandy, and, when he had drained the glass, he flung himself into an easy chair, folded his arms across his chest, and scowled at the toes of his patent-leather boots.

"I know exactly what you're thinking of, my friend," thought Nelson Lee, as he watched the scene from his lofty perch. "You're wondering where on earth those papers can be. You have made desperate efforts to get hold of them, and, although you have actually succeeded in doing so, you are unaware of the fact! You're a baffled man, in your own estimation, and, in addition to that, you're haunted by the fear that you've jeopardised your own precious life without achieving the result you aimed at. That extra scowl you just now indulged in was produced, no doubt, by thoughts of me. You have every reason to hate me, I admit, and you shall have reason to fear me ere long!"

Presently Sir Oliver rose from his seat, and walking over to an iron safe in the corner of the room, unlocked it, and took out a couple of letters. The detective's eyes grew big with eager curiosity as he beheld these letters, for he could see that they bore Australian stamps upon the envelopes.

"I knew Ralph Thomson had written to someone before he left Australia," he muttered. "I would give ten pounds to have those letters in my possession for ten minutes."

Taking the letters out of their envelopes, Sir Oliver spread them out before him, and, with his elbows on the table, and his hands to the side of his head, he read them and re-read them half a dozen times.

"Again I follow your thoughts," said Nelson Lee, to himself. "You are trying to discover in those letters some chance allusion to the whereabouts of the papers—some clue that will enable you to find them. I fervently hope you will not succeed."

Apparently Sir Oliver did not succeed, for, after studying the letters until he must surely have known them by heart, he suddenly crumpled them up in his fist, and tossed them angrily into the safe again. In his anger he failed to notice that one of the crumpled sheets fluttered to the ground, and, having locked the safe, he took up the lamp, and left the room.

"Now is my chance," thought Nelson Lee. "This branch extends to within an inch or two of the window-sill. I have only to wait until Sir Oliver is asleep, and then—Great heavens! What is that?"

The sound which provoked this exclamation was the deep bay of a hound, which grew louder and louder, until at last a full-grown and ferocious bloodhound bounded to the foot of the tree in which he was hiding.

The animal made frantic efforts to get at him, and the park re-echoed with his loud-mouthed bay.

"Lie down, you brute!" shouted the detective.

The animal, however, evinced no intention of lying down, and, alarmed by the uproar, Sir Oliver threw open the window, and leaned out. It was only by lying flat upon the branch that Nelson Lee escaped discovery, for he was so close to Sir Oliver that he could almost have touched him with his hand.

"I don't see anything," growled the baronet audibly, "but there must be something wrong, or the hound would never behave like that. It cannot be poachers, for they would not venture so near the house. I know what it is!"—and Nelson Lee could hear him gasp as the thought occurred to him. "That scoundrel Lee has tracked me here! If such should be the case, he shall bitterly rue the hour when he set foot in Riversdale Park! I'll set the hounds on him!" and he drew in his head and disappeared.

The moment he had left the room Nelson Lee crept to the end of the branch, and crawled through the open window. Picking up the letter which Sir Oliver had dropped, he thrust it into his pocket, and darted back to the window, only to find that Sir Oliver and the coachman were standing underneath, with lighted lanterns in their hands.

It would have been madness to have attempted to escape by the way he had entered, and, slipping off his boots, he left the room and descended the stairs in search of some other means of exit. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he found himself in a long and thickly-carpeted passage, which led to the billiard-room. The footsteps of awakened servants could now be heard on every side, and, running swiftly down this passage, he entered the billiard-room and made for the window.

Just as he was preparing to open it, he heard footsteps on the gravel-walk outside, and, doubling back, he darted across the smoking-room, along a narrow passage, down a flight of steps, and into the kitchen. To unlock and unbolt the door was the work of a moment, and, passing through it, he found himself in a kind of area, at one end of which was a flight of stone steps.

With his boots in one hand, and his revolver in the other, he ran up these steps, and, after crossing an extensive kitchen-garden and climbing a low stone wall, he found himself in the park again, but in an opposite direction from before.

Here he paused to put on his boots, and also to consider what his next proceeding should be. Though he was now so far from the house that the voices of those who were searching for him could no longer be heard, the appalling howls of the bloodhound still continued to awake the echoes of the place, and a moment or two later a gruffer and deeper bay told him that a second hound had been set loose to hunt him down. In the east the first faint glimmer of dawn was illumining the horizon, and altogether the outlook was anything but promising for the intrepid and dauntless detective.

To make his situation more unfortunate, he had entirely lost his reckoning, and had no idea what course to take. This, however, was speedily decided for him, for he soon became aware that, led by the bloodhounds, a party of men were coming towards him from the right.

"Those infernal hounds have found the scent!" he muttered, springing to his feet, and darting away to the left. "Having found it, they will never leave it until they have tracked me down, and, when that occurs, Sir Oliver will not call them off until they have worried me to death."

He ran as he had never run before, in and out amongst the trees, and through the tangled brushwood with which the park abounded. He was running a losing race, however, for the yelps of the hounds and the cries of the men came nearer and nearer, but with such varying intensity that it was easy to perceive that one of the hounds was some distance ahead of the other, and both were ahead of Sir Oliver and the servants.

This discovery gave rise to a gleam of hope in the detective's breast, and the gleam grew brighter still, when his eyes caught sight of the reflection of the stars in a sheet of water about a hundred yards ahead. If he could manage to reach this sheet of water before the hounds caught up to him, there was a possible chance of throwing them off the scent, and he redoubled his efforts to do so.

Whilst he was still about twenty yards from the edge of the water, he heard the panting of the foremost bloodhound at his heels, and, turning swiftly round, he fired a couple of shots into the animal's face. With a yelp of mortal agony, the hound rolled over, and, without pausing to ascertain if it was dead, he rushed to the water's edge, and plunged in. A dozen powerful strokes carried him sufficiently far to render him invisible from the bank, and, by the time the rest of his pursuers came up, he was almost in the centre of what he found was a large, deep ornamental lake.

Here he took a rest, for he guessed that Sir Oliver would take the remaining hound all round the margin of the lake, in order to discover where he landed, and he wished to see what direction the lights on the bank would take. His idea was to wait until they started off, and then to select as his landing-place that part of the park which it would take them the longest time to arrive at. To his chagrin, however, the pursuers divided themselves into two parties, and began to walk around the lake in opposite directions!

It was a shrewd idea, but Nelson Lee was equal to the occasion, and, as soon as the two parties had separated, he coolly swam back to the very spot from which he had plunged in! This proceeding had not only the advantage of enabling him to elude his pursuers for the present, but it was almost certain to baffle the bloodhound, since it gave rise to no fresh scent!

He had no intention of retracing his steps as far as the house, and, when he had gone as far as he thought prudent, he struck out a path at random; and, as luck would have it, this led him to a turnpike road.

By this time it was fairly light, and as the roofs of a fair-sized country-town were visible about a mile away, he started to run along the deserted road, thus increasing the distance between himself and danger, and at the same time restoring the circulation in his frozen limbs.

As he approached the little town, he was overjoyed to perceive that it possessed a railway-station, and, meeting an intelligent-looking countryman, he inquired what time there was a train to London.

"There's one due now that doesn't stop between here and London Bridge," replied the man. "See! there she comes," and he pointed to a train that was rapidly nearing the station.

At the same moment the deep bay of a bloodhound caused them to turn round, and, to Nelson Lee's dismay, he perceived Sir Oliver and the red-haired coachman less than two hundred yards away!

CHAPTER VIII.

Nelson Lee Finds a Friend in Need—The Dead Man's Secret.

Nelson Lee, of course, had little fear that Sir Oliver would attempt to do him any personal injury in the main street of the little market-town, but he had several reasons for not wishing to be handed over to the police and detained—even though it were only for a few hours—on the charge of breaking into Riversdale Hall.

In the first place he had not yet read the letter he had purloined, and if he were taken to the police-station his pockets would be searched, and the letter would be taken from him, and possibly given back to Sir Oliver, before he had an opportunity of examining its contents. What light this letter might shed on the dark enigma, he knew not; and, in fact, up to the present, he had little or no evidence to substantiate the conclusions he had come to in his own mind.

It was possible that all his theories might be wrong, and, in any case, nothing but the recovery of the papers which were hidden in the stolen portmanteau could put the question beyond all doubt. At nine o'clock Nipper would be waiting at his rooms, to tell him where the luggage had been taken, and it was quite conceivable that before noon he might hold the key to the dead man's secret. On the other hand, now that Sir Oliver knew he had been hunted down, his first thought would be to destroy all traces of his crime. If he could manage to put the detective under lock and key for an hour or two, it would give him time to remove or destroy the luggage, and, in that event, not only would Ralph Thomson's secret perish for ever, but the case which Nelson Lee was slowly but surely building up against the owner of Riversdale Park would crumble into dust.

In a word, if he were captured now his plans would be spoiled, his future action would be hampered, and the solving of the mystery of the murder in the mail would be rendered a thousandfold more difficult, if, indeed, it did not become impossible. After thanking the countryman, therefore, for his information, he tore along the road towards the station at full speed.

The train was already in motion when he dashed upon the platform, but, in spite of the efforts of the porter to prevent him, he leaped upon the footboard of the nearest carriage, opened the door, and sank panting into a corner seat.

As the train moved out of the station, Sir Oliver, livid with rage, rushed on to the platform, and, with wild gesticulations, called upon the stationmaster to stop the train. This, however, he declined to do, and, as the train swept round the curve, Nelson Lee lost sight of him.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Lee?" said a voice from the other end of

the compartment, and, turning from the window, he found himself confronted by Professor Dawes, who, as the reader may remember, was the man who had advised Arthur Pryce to consult the great detective.

"I am indeed delighted to see you," said Nelson Lee. "Will you do me a small service?"

"Need you ask?" said the Professor. "But for your marvellous skill and dauntless courage, my kidnapped child would never have been restored to me. As I told you at the time, I would do anything in the world for you."

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee, touched by this display of gratitude. "Perhaps, however, I do wrong to call the service I wish you to perform a small one, for it may involve your arrest on a charge of burglary."

"What of that?" cried the Professor. "I would run much greater risks than that, if by so doing I could repay a small portion of the debt of gratitude I owe you."

"The debt will be mine, if you will do this thing for me," said Nelson Lee gracefully. "You were good enough to recommend a young gentleman, named Arthur Pryce, to place his case in my hands. It has been, and still promises to be, a remarkable, and, in many respects, a unique case. I do not feel at liberty at present to disclose its details. It will be sufficient, for my present purpose, if I tell you that, in order to arrive at certain information, I have been obliged to enter a certain gentleman's house without his permission."

"Unfortunately I have been discovered and recognised. For the present I have eluded pursuit, but it is possible that the gentleman to whom I have alluded will telegraph a description of me to London Bridge Station, and order me to be arrested as I leave the train. You know me well enough, I hope, to be assured that I have done nothing which any right-thinking person could condemn, and I am confident that if I allowed myself to be arrested I should be set at liberty in a few hours' time. It is this few hours' detention, however, which I wish to avert, and—to put the matter bluntly—I want you to change clothes with me!

"Possibly you may not be molested, but if you are you need only keep silent until I have got clear of the station; and it will then be an easy matter for you to prove that you were never near Riversdale Hall. Will you do me this service—not for my sake only, but for the sake of your friend, Arthur Pryce?"

"I would do it for either of you," said the Professor promptly, "but when you ask it in the name of both, your claim is irresistible."

A few minutes sufficed for the transformation, and, when the train arrived at London Bridge, Nelson Lee, who had had his head out of the window, drew back, and whispered to the Professor, "I am afraid you will be arrested, for, unless I am



HE HEARD THE PANTING OF THE FOREMOST BLOODHOUND AT HIS HEELS, AND, TURNING SWIFTLY ROUND, HE FIRED A COUPLE OF SHOTS INTO THE ANIMAL'S FACE.

greatly mistaken, there are a couple of plain-clothes constables on the platform!"

This proved to be the case, and, as soon as Professor Dawes stepped out of the train, he was pounced upon, and taken into custody. He made no remark in reply to the charge, and, whilst the constables triumphantly marched him off to the nearest police-station, Nelson Lee quietly made his way to the

cabstand, hailed a hansom, and drove to his rooms in Gray's Inn Road!

Here he found Arthur Pryce, in the act of walking away from his door.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Arthur, with a conical air of perplexity. "I ring your bell and ask if you are at home; your landlady says you are not yet out of bed, and, five seconds later, you jump out of a hansom, in a suit of clothes two sizes too small for you!"

"It is easily explained," said Nelson Lee, with a laugh. "I let myself out by means of a latchkey in the middle of the night, and, as I closed my bedroom-door behind me, she supposes I am still in bed. She has strict injunctions never to disturb me, for some of my hardest thinking is done in bed; and she is so accustomed to my habits, that I don't suppose she would knock at the door if I never came down at all! But you wish to see me?"

"I do," said Arthur, following him to his sitting-room. "I have something to tell you, and I also want your advice."

"You can wait for half an hour, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. Miss Thomson and my mother, who are shopping in the City, are going to call here for me in about an hour."

"That's all right. Make yourself at home whilst I take a bath, and clothe myself decently. We can then talk whilst I am getting my breakfast."

Half an hour sufficed for him to make his toilet, but, instead of returning at once to Arthur, he slipped into his workroom. Here, for the first time, he examined the letter he had purloined from Sir Oliver's room. It ran as follows:

"Melbourne,

"Oct. 8th, 189—.

"Dear Sir,

"I am surprised to have received no answer to my former letter. Though you have treated my offer (which my lawyer calls a 'foolishly-generous offer') with silent contempt, I am still desirous of avoiding litigation, and will give you one more chance of accepting it. My daughter and I are leaving Melbourne by the Orient Steam Navigation Company's boat the 'Austral,' which is timed to arrive at Plymouth on Nov. 21st. We shall proceed to London by train, where, for a day or two, at least, we shall stay with friends. If you decide to accept my offer, a letter addressed to the care of Mrs. Pryce, 19, Raglan Road, Stoke Newington, will find me. If you do not write I shall take it that you refuse to entertain my offer, and I shall at once place my proofs in the hands of a competent English lawyer.

"Yours faithfully,

"RALPH THOMSON.

"Sir Oliver Drew, Bart.,

"Riversdale Hall,

"Kent, England."

"How provoking!" muttered Nelson Lee. "Why on earth didn't he drop the other letter, instead of this? This makes the case clearer, of course, for it explains how Sir Oliver came to be so well acquainted with the Thomsons' movements, and how he obtained the Pryces' address, but the other letter no doubt contains the details of the dead man's discovery. Since, however, the letter is not available at present, I must try and supply the details myself," and, walking across to one of the book-cases, he took down a thick, gold-lettered volume, entitled, "A History of the English Aristocracy."

Turning to an article on "The Drews of Riversdale Hall," he perused it with a profound attention, which presently gave place to suppressed excitement. When he had finished the article, he closed up the volume, and, replacing it in the book-case, muttered to himself, "I no longer need to see the other letter. I have discovered the dead man's secret!"

When he returned to Arthur, whom he had left in the sitting-room, all trace of excitement had vanished from his face, and, seating himself at the breakfast-table, he announced that he was ready to hear his story.

In brief, straightforward terms, Arthur told him of his adventure with the masked intruder, and, in return, Nelson Lee described the attacks which had been made upon him in Raglan Road and Paddington Station. The story of his journey to Riversdale Hall, and the discoveries which had resulted therefrom, he suppressed for the present, for a reason which will presently appear.

"The point upon which I want your advice," said Arthur, "concerns the safety of Miss Thomson. Her father has been murdered, you have been assaulted twice, and I have been attacked once. Who knows but what she may be the next victim? What steps do you think I ought to take to protect her?"

"Marry her!" said Nelson Lee curtly.

Arthur shook his head. "I don't think she would consent to that so soon after her father's death," he said. "Besides, I would rather wait until you have found out—if ever you do find out—what it was that her father discovered. It may be that

the discovery will make her a very rich girl, and, in that case, I could not think of holding her to her engagement."

"Nonsense!" said Nelson Lee. "You surely do not doubt the sincerity of her love?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Arthur fervently. "But I would never lay myself open to the charge of marrying a girl for her money."

"You surely do not mean to say that you would deliberately wreck the happiness of two human lives for the sake of a silly scruple?" said Nelson Lee impatiently.

"I would never marry a girl who was immensely richer than myself," said Arthur firmly. "You may call it a silly scruple, if you like, but I should never respect myself again if I did."

"Ah, well!" said Nelson Lee, "it will be soon enough to discuss the question when it arises. At present my advice to you is to marry Miss Thomson without delay. And, as I live, here is the lady herself!"

Mrs. Pryce and Ruth had been purchasing mourning in the City, and, on their way back to Raglan Road, they called for Arthur. Nelson Lee went to the door to meet them, and, drawing Ruth aside, he told her more of his discoveries than he had deemed prudent to tell Arthur, and explained to her the nature of her lover's scruples. The result of this conversation was shown in the following dialogue, which took place when the ladies entered the sitting-room.

Walking up to where Arthur sat, Ruth took his hand in hers, and said, "Will you marry me, Arthur?"

"When?" he stammered.

"To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock! Mr. Lee says we can be married by special licence at the Registry Office, at Stoke Newington."

"Isn't this rather abrupt?" he began. "Would it not be better to wait until—?"

"Where is your chivalry?" demanded Ruth. "It is not every day that a woman asks a man to marry her. I have laid myself open to a charge of unwomanly forwardness, and you reject me!"

"No, no!" stammered Arthur. "I will marry you, if you wish, at the hour and place you name."

"And I will be the best man!" said Nelson Lee triumphantly.

CHAPTER IX.

Nipper—The Detective's Queer Disguise—On the Track of the Missing Papers.

Punctually at nine o'clock, just after Ruth and the Pryces had departed, the landlady knocked at the sitting-room door, and announced that "a dirty young vagabond" was downstairs, and had the impudence to assert that he had an appointment with her lodger.

"Show him up," said Nelson Lee, to her obvious disgust and surprise.

"Are you Nipper?" he asked of the barefooted urchin who presently entered the room.

"Yessir," replied that precocious individual. "Are you the gent who's offering 'arf-a-sov. for an address?"

"I am," said Nelson Lee, producing the coin in question. "This is yours as soon as you have told me all you know."

"Then it'll be mine afore you can wink," said Nipper. "I rode behind the kerridge till it stopped outside a empty office in one of the streets off 'Olborn. I seed about 'arf the luggage unloaded, and then I seed a bobby. Arter that I didn't wait to see no more. Tip up that 'arf-sov., guv'nor!"

"I'm afraid you haven't earned it yet," said Nelson Lee. "I must know the name of that street off 'Holborn. Can you remember it?"

"Never knew it, guv'nor," said Nipper. "But I'll take you to the very spot for a extra bob."

"Very well," said the detective. "But it would never do for us to go out together in our present clothes. The difference in our appearance would attract everyone's attention, which is just what I want to avoid. Either you must put on better clothes or I must put on shabbier. Which shall it be?"

"I should be happy to oblige you," said Nipper, with sublime cheek, "but unfortunately my evening dress is at my huncle's. But I don't mind being seen with you, for once in a way, in your working clothes."

There was something so indescribably ludicrous in the manner in which this impertinent speech was delivered, that Nelson Lee was doubled up with laughter. Having somewhat recovered his gravity, he presented Nipper with a cigarette (he knew the way to win a street-arab's heart!), and, after bidding him keep out of mischief, retired to his workroom to make the necessary changes in his attire.

Being left to his own devices, Nipper first made himself comfortable in an easy-chair, and then lit his cigarette. He was about half-way through it, when there was a rap at the door.

"Come in!" cried Nipper; and there shuffled into the sitting-room a seedy-looking tramp, who asked, in a thick, unsteady voice, if Mr. Lee was in.

"He is," said Nipper, blowing a cloud of smoke into the visitor's face, and thereby causing him to cough in a most distressing fashion. "But wot's your business with Mr. Lee? He's engaged at present, and I'm doing of his work."

"Indeed!" said the tramp, after another violent fit of coughing. "Then p'raps you can tell me where my little boy is? He come 'ere to earn 'arf-a-asov., and he's never been heard of since!"

"Wot!" cried Nipper, bounding to his feet.

"Don't try any o' your tricks on me!" cried the tramp excitedly. "Where's my lad? They tell me Nelson Lee gets boys to come to his house by promising to give them money, and then he cuts 'em up alive!"

"I'm off!" cried Nipper, whose hair was literally on end; and, seizing his cap, he made for the door. Before he reached it, however, the tramp had caught him by the collar of his coat, and the voice of Nelson Lee said, "Where are you off to, Nipper?"

This only added to his terror, and he made frantic efforts to wriggle away from his captor's grasp. At last, however, Nelson Lee—for, of course, it was he, disguised as a tramp—succeeded in making him understand the trick which had been played on him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Nipper. "Yer own mother wouldn't know you in that get-up. There's got to be no more o' these tricks, if you and me ain't to quarrel! My nerves won't stand 'em."

"All right," said Nelson Lee, "I only wanted to test my disguise. Now, then, come along with me to Holborn, and remember, if any questions are asked, my name is Stubbins, and we're both on the look-out for a job!"

"Right you are, Stubbins!" cried Nipper delightedly.

A ten minutes' walk brought them to Holborn, one of the busiest thoroughfares in London, and five minutes later they arrived at Barber Lane, a short and somewhat narrow lane, lined on each side by offices and show-rooms.

"This is where the kerridge drove to," explained Nipper. "The office where it stopped is about 'arf way along on the left-hand side."

"All right, but I must see it," said Nelson Lee. "Keep close to me, and we will saunter along on the left side of the street. When we pass the office don't stop and point at it, but just say, 'This is it,' and we will walk past as though we had no interest in the place."

When they had traversed about half the length of the street, Nipper suddenly stooped down to pick up a piece of orange-peel, at the same time saying, in a low tone of voice, "That's the place, guv'nor!"

The office they were then passing had little to distinguish it from its neighbours, except its general air of desertion and neglect. This, however, was very marked. The solitary window on the ground-floor was securely shuttered on the inside, and, like those in the upper storeys, was coated with dust and grime. The doorstep was the colour of the pavement, the handle was green with verdigris, and on the door, which was locked, an oblong patch of paint, slightly cleaner than the rest, testified to the fact that in former days the door had boasted of a plate. Now, instead of a shining plate, the door bore a label, on which were the words:

DENTON BROS.,
Toy Dealers,
Removed to 270A, Fetter Lane.

On the inside of the window, scarcely legible through the grimy pane, was a printed card, which stated that "these commodious premises" were to let, and that "full particulars, together with permission to view them," could be obtained of "Messrs. Gray and Whitworth, solicitors, 75, Cannon Street, agents for Sir Oliver Drew, Bart."

Having taken in these details at a glance, Nelson Lee sauntered across the road, to where an ancient individual with a broom was engaged in sweeping the street.

"It's a cold day, mate," he said, by way of introduction. "Dentons 'ave flitted, I see."

"Ay! They left a couple of months ago," replied the sweeper.

"Jest my luck," growled the detective. "Me and my lad could always count on a crust, and mebbe a copper, at Dentons'. Ain't nobody took the office?"

"I dunno," replied the sweeper. "The bobby on this beat told me yesterday that a couple of coves had drove up about five in the morning with a kerridge full of boxes and things, but I ain't seen nobody myself."

Whilst they were thus conversing, a man appeared at the end of the street, and, after glancing nervously up and down the road, approached the empty office. With a thrill of wild excitement, Nelson Lee recognised Sir Oliver's red-haired coachman! The red hair was concealed beneath a jet-black wig, and his clothes were evidently borrowed from his master's wardrobe, but that it was the coachman he had not the shadow of a doubt.

When he drew nearer he bestowed a searching glance upon

the three tattered individuals on the other side of the street, but apparently he failed to recognise Nelson Lee, and, producing a key, he unlocked the door of the office, and walked in. He only remained inside long enough to make sure that nothing had been disturbed, and then he reappeared, locked the door, put the key in the ticket-pocket of his overcoat, and walked rapidly away.

"Come along, my lad," said Nelson Lee to Nipper. "Let's be moving," and, bidding the sweeper adieu, he followed the rapidly-retreating form of the coachman.

"Can you pick a pocket, Nipper?" he asked, as they turned into Holborn again.

"I 'ave done it when times was bad," replied Nipper unblushingly.

"Well, you see that man who has just been into the office, in his ticket-pocket is a door-key. I'll give you five shillings if you'll get it for me without attracting his attention."

Without a word, Nipper took from his pocket a couple of boxes of matches, and, hurrying forward, begged the man to buy a box.

The coachman refused, with an angry gesture, and Nipper, with a crestfallen air, dropped back and rejoined his companion.

"Can't you manage it?" asked Nelson Lee, for though he had narrowly watched Nipper's every movement, he had seen nothing to arouse the slightest suspicion.

For answer, the young rascal coolly slipped the key into his hand!

"You're a perfect young terror!" gasped Nelson Lee, in amazement. "Where on earth did you learn to pick pockets like that? In future I shall look well after my pockets when you're about!" And, taking out his purse, he tendered a sovereign to Nipper, in payment of his services, at the same time intimating to him that he required him no longer. To his surprise, although Nipper regarded the coin with longing eyes, he did not offer to take it.

"Come, take your money and be off!" he said impatiently. "I have no time to waste."

It was some time before Nelson Lee was able to persuade his ally to accept the money and go, and then the detective retraced his steps to Barber Lane.

On the way he turned into a clothier's shop, and, pulling off the stubby beard with which he had decorated his chin, he said to the astonished shopkeeper, "I am a detective. It is necessary for me to change my disguise at once. Give me an ulster that will reach to my heels, and cover these rags and tatters."

NELSON LEE, DETECTIVE, DISGUISED AS A TRAMP.

The shopkeeper showed signs of demurring, but at the sight of a well-filled purse he hastened to obey. In less than ten minutes, and at a cost of seventy shillings, Nelson Lee had acquired a long brown ulster and a round felt hat, attired in which he once more sallied out.

He had not proceeded far before he was haunted by the consciousness that someone was dogging his footsteps. It was a strange, uncomfortable feeling, all the more disquieting because, though he turned round sharply several times, he was unable to detect or identify the shadower, or even to make certain that he was being shadowed.

"Bah! I am becoming nervous," he muttered. "I must take a holiday when I have done with this case."

At a lamp-shop in Holborn, he purchased a dark-lantern, ready trimmed, and from a boy in the street he obtained a box of matches. Then, turning up the collar of his ulster, he once more entered Barber Lane.

The uncanny feeling that he was being followed still continued to haunt him, but, brushing his fears aside, he marched boldly up to the door of the empty office.

Nearly half an hour had elapsed since his previous visit, and the old sweeper had worked his way to the door of the office. He suspended his operations when Nelson Lee appeared, and, muttering, "This must be the other gent," favoured the detective with a long and curious stare.

Apparently he failed to recognise in this well-dressed, clean-



shaved gentleman, the tramp to whom he had recently spoken, and, without interruption or incident, Nelson Lee unlocked the door and entered.

CHAPTER X.

Nelson Lee Discovers the Luggage, but is Himself Discovered and Taken Prisoner.

After closing the door and locking it on the inside, Nelson Lee found himself in a narrow passage, lighted only by the grimy fanlight over the door. At the far-end was a staircase, leading to the rooms above, and on his right was a door opening into the room, whose securely-shuttered window overlooked the street.

Cautiously lighting his lantern, for the place was as dark and silent as a tomb, he passed through this door, and entered a room which, in former days, had been used as an office and show-room. Empty shelves and cases lined the walls, and beneath the window were a long, worm-eaten desk and a couple of stools. What riveted Nelson Lee's attention, however, was a miscellaneous collection of empty trunks and portmanteaus, whose locks had been broken open, and whose contents had been turned out and scattered in all directions on the floor.

One glance at the labels proved that this was indeed Ralph Thomson's stolen luggage, and he could scarcely restrain a cry of triumph when his eyes fell upon the brown-leather portmanteau described by Miss Thomson as the one her father had pointed out to her on the quay at Melbourne. Stepping lightly over the clothes and things with which the floor was strewed, he made his way to this portmanteau, which lay on its side with its lock burst open, and apparently empty. By passing his hand carefully over the inside, he quickly detected a slight bulging of the surface, which was caused, no doubt, by the papers which were hidden beneath the lining of the bag, and, pulling out his pocket-knife, he was about to rip open the lining, when the sound of well-known voices just outside the door drove the colour from his face, and caused him to hold his breath in an agony of apprehension.

"Curse it!" said the voice of the red-haired coachman, "I've lost the key!"

"Just like your carelessness!" growled Sir Oliver. "We should have found ourselves in a pretty mess if I hadn't taken the precaution to provide myself with a duplicate key." And, as this key was thrust into the lock, Nelson Lee realised that it was time he was making himself scarce.

Snatching up his lantern, he glanced hurriedly around in search of a hiding-place, and, perceiving an arched doorway at the end of the room, he glided silently through it, and found himself in a small, dark room, which, judging from the amount of straw and tissue paper it contained, had formerly been used to pack up the goods which Denton Brothers sold. The doorway through which he had entered was not provided with a door, but on the opposite side of the room there was a door, leading into a yard at the back of the office. This door, however, was locked and bolted, and the key was gone. There was also a tiny window overlooking this yard, but, in addition to being screwed up, it was crossed by four strong iron bars. It was manifest, therefore, that if Nelson Lee were discovered, he would be caught like a rat in a trap.

Having observed these facts, he turned the shade over his lantern, not daring to extinguish it, lest the smell should betray him, and placed it on the floor, so as to be free to defend himself if necessity arose. He was only just in time, for, as the little room was plunged in darkness, the front door opened and closed again, and a moment later Sir Oliver and his companion entered the room where the luggage was.

In consequence of the removal of the former tenants, the gas-brackets had all been taken down, but, after a little fumbling, the coachman produced a candle from the worm-eaten desk, lit it, and placed it on the mantelpiece. From the conversation which took place whilst this was being done, the detective learned that the previous visit of the coachman had been for the purpose of ascertaining if the coast was clear, Sir Oliver having prudently remained some distance away until his accomplice had visited the place, and reported that all was safe.

When the candle had been lighted, the coachman, addressing Sir Oliver, said, "I'm sure it is a waste of time to examine the luggage again. We searched it so thoroughly before that we couldn't have overlooked a post-card, let alone a packet of papers."

"I don't intend to search any further," replied Sir Oliver. "I have done my best to get hold of them, not because I want the cursed things myself, but in order to prevent Miss Thomson making any use of them, and though I haven't succeeded I am pretty sure she hasn't got them. It is possible, therefore, that they may be concealed amongst this luggage, but I'm not going to waste any further time in looking for them, for so long as Miss Thomson hasn't got them my purpose is served."

"Then why are we here?" asked the coachman.

"For this reason," said Sir Oliver. "Now that Nelson Lee has taken up the case it will not be long before he unearths the luggage, and I wish to destroy it before he does so."

"But I thought you said you overheard him questioning the porter at Paddington Station, and the porter could give him no information?"

"So I did. But I know Nelson Lee. He has a scent like a bloodhound, and you may take my word for it that in some way or other he will find his way to this office. If we could have captured him this morning, and got the police to detain him for twenty-four hours, I should have been able to snap my fingers at him, but, as he escaped, we must make the best of it."

"What do you propose to do?" asked the coachman.

"Pack up the luggage again, leave it here until dark, and then convey it to Riversdale Park, and sink it in the lake. If the papers are amongst the things my purpose will be as well served as though I found them, and if they are not, no harm will be done. On the contrary, we shall have done ourselves a good turn, for if Nelson Lee should find his way to this place he will find the luggage gone, and we, of course, shall swear that it never was here. Now you know what we have come for. Let us get to work."

When everything had been packed up again, and the luggage was ready to be transferred to Riversdale Park as soon as it was dark enough to remove it with safety, Sir Oliver took the candle, and glancing round the room, said, "I don't think we've forgotten anything. When this has been removed there will be nothing to prove we were ever here."

"It was a lucky thing this place was to let," remarked the coachman. "If it hadn't been you would have had to take the things to Riversdale, and that would have been awkward, with so many prying servants about."

"It was lucky," said Sir Oliver. "Just run upstairs, and see if we have left anything up there that might incriminate us."

The coachman hastened to obey, and, when he had gone, Sir Oliver, apparently with the object of ascertaining if he had left any tell-tale evidence in the little back-room where Nelson Lee was concealed, stepped quickly across the room, and passed through the arched doorway.

For one brief instant hunter and hunted stood face to face in the candle-light!

Nelson Lee was the first to act. Doubling his fists, he bore down upon his opponent, with all the force and swiftness of an avalanche. Quick as lightning, Sir Oliver flung the lighted candle in his face, at the same time summoning his accomplice by a shrill, clear whistle.

Half-blinded by the scalding tallow, Nelson Lee paused for an instant to clear his eyes, and, with a panther-like bound, the baronet sprang upon him, his long, thin hands encircling the detective's throat.

With a mighty effort, Nelson Lee flung his adversary from him, but, ere he could make any use of his liberty, Sir Oliver leaped up and attacked him again. Once more the detective hurled him to the ground, and this time with such force that he was unable for the moment to rise and continue the combat.

Flushed with triumph, but too breathless to call for help, Nelson Lee dashed from the packing-room and into the dark front office. The sound of the coachman descending the stairs by leaps and bounds made him doubly anxious to reach the outer door, but in his excitement he quite forgot the bags and boxes which strewed the floor. It was a forgetfulness that cost him dear, for, before he had taken half a dozen steps, he caught his foot against one of the boxes, and, with a crash that made the empty place re-echo, fell floundering to the ground. Before he could regain his feet the coachman, with a candle in his hand, rushed into the room, and, taking in the situation at a glance, sprang upon him, and, by seating himself upon the prostrate detective's chest, succeeded in keeping him down until Sir Oliver lighted another candle and came to his assistance.

Whilst the coachman, with his hands tightly squeezing the detective's throat, prevented him crying out, Sir Oliver bound his legs together by means of a long portmanteau strap. Then, thrusting a silk handkerchief into his mouth, the baronet took charge of his hands, whilst the coachman pinioned his arms to his sides by a number of other straps. A second handkerchief, bound tightly round the lower part of the detective's face to keep the first from coming out, completed their precautions, and, with mutual congratulations, the two villains rose, and triumphantly surveyed their helpless captive.

"What shall we do with him?" asked the perspiring coachman.

"Kill him!" said Sir Oliver curtly.

"Yes, of course," said the coachman. "But how?"

"We will bind him a little more securely, and then roll him back into the packing-room again, and leave him there until we come for the luggage this evening."

"And pitch him into the lake with the luggage?" suggested the coachman.

"No. Hand him over to the hounds! He has escaped them once, but it will be a miracle if he does so again."

"Better kill him now, as you killed the old man in the

train," said the coachman, "and afterwards throw him into the lake. It would be safer."

"Not a bit of it," said Sir Oliver. "If I killed him with an Ashantee dart it would be all over in a couple of seconds, and he has earned something worse than sudden death. Come, give me a hand!"

Having tightened the straps with which he was bound, and having made the gag a little more secure, they rolled him back into the packing-room, rearranged their disordered dress, blew out the candle, and left the place, locking both the door between the front room and the passage, and the door that led to the street.

CHAPTER XI.

The Office in Flames—Nipper to the Rescue— Recovery of the Papers.

The front door of the office had scarcely closed ere Nelson Lee began to cast about for a means of escape, although to most men escape would have seemed impossible. From his ankles to his shoulders he was encased in leather straps, and the only movements of which he was capable were to roll along the ground, and to slightly separate his feet.

Rolling into the front office, he found that one of his captors had left a half-open box of matches on the floor, and at the discovery a daring, but terribly dangerous, plan flashed into his mind. This was to collect a pile of straw and paper under the worm-eaten desk, and set fire to it, in the hope that the smoke and flames would attract the attention of someone outside. It was possible, of course, that both he and the precious papers might be burned to a cinder before this happened, but, in his bound and gagged condition, it was the only plan he could think of.

Rolling back into the packing-room, he seized a wisp of straw with his feet, and, after many disheartening failures, succeeded in rolling over with it to the space below the desk. Backwards and forwards between the two rooms he rolled, now with a wisp of straw and now with a crumpled piece of paper between his feet, until at last, after four hours' wearisome and exhausting labour, he had accumulated sufficient for his purpose.

Before setting fire to the pile, he managed, with infinite pains, to push into the little back room—where it would be farthest from the flames—the portmanteau containing the precious papers; and then, wriggling himself into such a position that the buckle of one of the straps with which he was bound was over the half-open box of matches, he deliberately rolled over on the box. As the metal buckle came in contact with the heads of the matches, they burst into flame, and, pushing them with his feet amongst the straw and paper, he rolled back into the packing-room with all possible speed.

A bright light streaming through the archway told him that his bonfire was alight, and presently a crackling sound testified to the fact that the worm-eaten desk was on fire.

Dense volumes of smoke now rolled into the little back room, and, as there was no sign of anyone coming to the rescue, he began to fear that he would be suffocated before the needed help arrived. Presently a little tongue of flame appeared at the doorway, and, with a sinking heart, he realised that the floor of the front room was on fire. Nearer and nearer crept the flames; the heat became more intense, the atmosphere more choking; but, just when he was beginning to despair, there was a thundering knock at the outer door.

To this summons he was, of course, unable to reply, and the knocking gave place to blows of an axe, beneath which the door flew open. The inner door was treated in a similar fashion, and there entered a member of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, who had been summoned from the station, a few score yards away.

As soon as he heard him enter, Nelson Lee began to roll from the packing-room, with the intention of rolling to the fireman's feet, and attracting his attention. When he reached the doorway, however, he was dismayed to find his further progress barred by a sheet of flame, which would have been easy enough to cross had he had the free use of his limbs, but which would inevitably have roasted him to death if he had attempted to roll through it. On the other side of the flame the fireman hacked away at the burning woodwork, blissfully unconscious of the fact that a human being was in deadly peril less than half a dozen yards away.

It was an appalling situation, but just when Nelson Lee had given up all hope, he heard—sweet as an angel's voice, just then!—the voice of Nipper!

"Let go!" he was shouting to a couple of spectators, who were trying to hold him back. "I tell you there's a pal o' mine inside that hoffice, and I ain't a-goin' to see him roasted to death!" and, eluding his would-be detainers' grasp, he dashed into the burning building.

Wild shouts arose from the crowd outside, and the fireman, pausing in his work, made a grab at Nipper, and caught him by the tail of his tattered coat. In an instant Nipper had slipped out of his coat, and, before the man could catch him again, he

darted through the flames—and, as luck would have it—into the room where Nelson Lee lay.

Before the fireman had recovered from his astonishment, a whoop of triumph from Nipper caused him to dash after him, and a few moments later, followed by the radiant Nipper, he bore the now unconscious detective into the open-air.

Although Nipper had appeared to go away when Nelson Lee dismissed him, he had dogged the detective's footsteps back to Barber Lane. Seeing Sir Oliver and the coachman enter the office a short time after, he had guessed that there would be a scene; and, when they came out alone, he followed them, in case their address should be afterwards wanted. He shadowed them for several hours, but at last they gave him the slip, and he then returned to Barber Lane, to find the office on fire.

"You have saved my life," said Nelson Lee gratefully, when he revived and heard the story. "More than that, you have given me a chance of saving my reputation," and he once more dashed into the burning building in quest of the brown-leather bag.

By this time the whole of the front office was in flames, and, finding that it was impossible to reach the packing-room in that direction, he seized an axe, rushed round to the back of the premises, and burst open the door leading into the yard. After a thrilling fight with the smoke and flames, he at last recovered the bag, one side of which was actually in flames. The side in which the papers were concealed was still uninjured, and, slashing it open with his pocket-knife, he drew out a packet of yellow papers, and thrust them triumphantly into his pocket.

Just as he did so, a carriage and pair drove up to the outskirts of the crowd, and, by the ruddy light of the roaring flames, he recognised Sir Oliver Drew and the red-haired coachman.

They had come back to fetch their plunder and their prisoner, but the sight of the burning building filled them with a vague alarm, and, leaping from the carriage, Sir Oliver eagerly questioned the nearest spectator.

"I don't know exactly what has happened," replied the man, "but they say that a man was found inside the building."

"Was he dead?" asked Sir Oliver, with an ashen face.

"Some say he was, and some say he wasn't," said the man. "Here's someone pushing his way through the crowd. Perhaps he can tell us."

Sir Oliver glanced in the direction indicated by the man, and, to his terror, saw Nelson Lee making his way towards him. Turning swiftly round, he endeavoured to spring up beside the terror-stricken coachman, but, before he could do so, the detective seized him by the arm.

"The game is up, Sir Oliver," he said. "Escape is out of the question."

Instantly the barrel of a revolver flashed in the light of the flames, and a bullet whistled past the detective's head. The next moment a second report rang out, and the master of Riversdale Hall fell to the ground, shot by his own remorseless hand.

CHAPTER XII.

The Dead Man's Secret.

Round an overflowing table at 19, Raglan Road, were assembled half a dozen people, all of them more or less known to the reader. At the head of the table sat Mrs. Pryce, and at the foot Professor Dawes. On one side, with grave but happy faces, sat Ruth and Arthur, whilst the other was occupied by Nelson Lee and Nipper, the latter clad in a brand-new suit of clothes.

It was Ruth's and Arthur's wedding-breakfast. An hour ago they had been made man and wife, and in another hour they would depart upon their honeymoon.

"You never told me how you got on with the plain-clothes constables, Professor," said Nelson Lee. "I hope your kindness didn't cause you very much inconvenience."

"Oh, no!" said Professor Dawes. "They took me to the nearest police-station, expecting, no doubt, to be congratulated on their smartness, but the superintendent recognised me as soon as he set eyes on me, and, after abusing the constables for their stupidity, ordered me to be set at liberty. He even went so far as to offer me an abject apology."

"I know you don't like to talk about your cases until you have got to the end of them, but I think—if only as a reward for my assistance—you might tell me how you are progressing with the present case. It is too bad to keep us all in the dark, and I, for one, am dying of curiosity."

"And I, too," said Arthur. "I should very much like to know, before we leave London, if you have any hope of recovering the stolen luggage, and thereby solving the mystery of Mr. Thomson's discovery."

"With Miss Thomson's—I beg pardon, Mrs. Arthur Pryce's—permission, I shall be glad to tell you all I know," said Nelson Lee.

"Yes," said Ruth, "tell them all about it. But, before Mr. Lee begins, promise me that you won't be angry, Arthur dear," and she took his hand in hers, and held it there until the detective had told his story.

"Angry with you on our wedding-day!" said Arthur. "That would be impossible! Why do you ask me to promise?"

"Because we have wilfully deceived you," said Nelson Lee. "We allowed you to suppose you were marrying a penniless orphan, whereas in reality you have married a wealthy heiress, one of the richest girls in England, in fact."

"Mr. Lee is rather premature," interrupted Ruth. "He means that I may turn out to be rich, for everything depends upon whether he succeeds in recovering my father's stolen papers."

"I beg your pardon," said Nelson Lee politely, "I meant exactly what I said. It is customary, I believe, for the best man at a wedding to give the bride a present. Here is mine," and he handed across the table the packet of papers he had recovered from the burning portmanteau.

As the rest of the party, with the exception of Nipper, were in ignorance of the events of the previous day, the dramatic effect of this presentation may be better imagined than described.

When Nelson Lee had described how he had succeeded in recovering the papers, and had given Nipper more than a fair share of the credit, Arthur said, "But what is the nature of these papers, and how do they concern my wife?"

"They are papers discovered by Ralph Thomson when he was rebuilding his farm-house," said Nelson Lee, "and they prove, beyond all doubt, his right to the title and estates held by the late Sir Oliver Drew. Ralph Thomson, unfortunately, is dead, but amongst the papers you will find his will, in which he left everything to his daughter; so that, as I said before, you have married one of the richest girls in England."

"Did you know this when you advised me to get married?" demanded Arthur, who, in spite of his good fortune, was inclined to resent the deception to which he had been subjected.

"I guessed it!" said Nelson Lee unblushingly. "It was 'The History of the English Aristocracy' that opened my eyes. I have copied out a portion of the article on 'The Drews of Riversdale Hall,' and, with your permission, I will read it to the company."

Taking a slip of paper from his pocket-book, he read the following extract:

"In 1784, Sir Jonathan Drew, the ninth baronet, quarrelled with his eldest son and heir, and the young man, whose name was Edwin, emigrated to Australia. From the moment he landed in Melbourne nothing more was ever heard of him, and when Sir Jonathan died, the title and estates passed, in the absence of the rightful heir, to a distant cousin. It is possible, of course, that Edwin Drew may have left descendants in Australia, and (if they could prove their descent) their claim to the title and estates could not be resisted. Probably, however, Edwin Drew would change his name, and his descendants, if there are any, will consequently be in ignorance of their ancestry. The present holder of the title is Sir Oliver Drew, who, at the time when he succeeded to it, was serving with his regiment in the Ashantee war."

"As soon as I had read this article," continued Nelson Lee, "I knew that I had discovered the dead man's secret; but it was not until I visited Riversdale Hall last night, in company with

the police, that I was able to prove that my view of the case was correct.

"In Sir Oliver's safe we found a letter from Mr. Thomson, written from Melbourne on May 21st, announcing that the writer had, when pulling down his house, discovered certain papers, proving that Edwin Drew had changed his name to Thomson, and that he, Ralph Thomson, was his grandson, and therefore the rightful owner of the title and estates Sir Oliver held. On condition that Sir Oliver acknowledged his claim, he offered to divide the estates with him, but, receiving no reply to his letter, he sold his farm, and came to England to enforce his claim in a court of law.

"He was shrewd enough to conceal the papers beneath the lining of one of his bags, but unfortunately he was foolish enough to tell Sir Oliver the name of the boat in which he was coming over, and the address at which he proposed to stay. I venture to think that if he had known the character of the man with whom he had to deal, he would never have committed this indiscretion, for it cost him his life.

"Sir Oliver fought in the Ashantee war, and, when he returned to England he brought with him a native blowpipe and a supply of poisoned darts. He brought them over as curiosities, but, when he found himself threatened with the loss of half his estates, he bethought himself of a fiendish plan whereby, with the least possible risk of detection, he hoped to avert the blow.

"He went down to Plymouth to meet the boat in which Mr. Thomson came over, and, having identified him, he got into the same train as his victim, and—but I will not harrow your feelings by describing the scene again. You know what happened.

"Whilst you were all lamenting the old man's sudden death, he and his accomplice were making off with the luggage. Not wishing to arouse the suspicions of the servants at Riversdale Hall, they took it to an office in Barber Lane, which belonged to Sir Oliver, and which happened to be to let. Failing to discover the papers, Sir Oliver rashly concluded that they were still in Miss Thomson's possession, and you know the desperate efforts he made to get them. That he did not succeed is mainly owing to the shrewdness and courage of Nipper, and, as the young rascal has promised me that he will never pick pockets again—except in the cause of justice!—I have made him my assistant!

"But here is the cab that is to take you to the station. If you will leave those papers in my hands, I will promise to have all the legal difficulties removed before you return from your honeymoon."

In handing him back the papers, Ruth, with tears of gratitude in her beautiful eyes, observed, "It is characteristic of your modesty that you should endeavour to give others all the credit. I know that I owe much to Nipper, as well as to my husband and Professor Dawes. But it is to you, my friend, that the lion's share of the credit belongs. Without a single clue to work upon, you have unravelled one of the most intricate problems in the annals of crime, and, when Arthur and I are settled in Riversdale Hall, there will be no one we shall be better pleased to see than Nelson Lee."

THE END.



A Story of School Adventures for Young and Old.

CHAPTER XI. (continued).

Still Jenkins hesitated. To offend Brading was furthest from his thoughts, for he knew from experience that a licking from the bully was not a thing to be desired; yet he could not even conjecture what would happen if he allowed his friend to see the letter. While he was racking his brain to find some way out of his awkward position, he was unconsciously ramming the wretched paper still further into his pocket, and, seeing this, Brading shouted, "Look here, Jenkins, isn't it part of our agree-

ment that we have the privilege of looking over each other's correspondence?"

"Yes, Brading; but you know you never show me any of your letters—"

"How can I, when I never get any—leastways, none that would interest you? Besides, haven't I been your friend when none of the others would look at you, and protected you from the third kids, who could lick a coward like you any day, though they are a head shorter? And ain't I your friend now, though I am taking a little holiday?" Brading paused, to note the effect of his words on the young sneak.

Jenkins, however, made no reply, but simpered, and clutched the pocket containing the letter with both hands.

Exasperated by the silence, the bully went on:

"Jenkins, it's quite three months since I had to lick you. So cease being a young fool, and fork out that letter."

Jenkins could no longer refuse, and, trembling at the thought of what must inevitably follow, he handed over the envelope, still retaining the postal-order, however.

With a triumphant air, Brading opened the letter, but he clenched his fist, and fired up indignantly, when he had perused a few lines.

"So your precious mammy 'hopes you won't spend the money extravagantly, or give any of it to that boy Brading, who will only get you into trouble,' does she?" he almost yelled. "You thundering little cad! Then you've been writing home lying about me, eh? I thought I told you to show me all letters before you posted them? A pretty friend you are!"

Jenkins had been expecting a thunderstorm to burst around his head, and had even wished the ground would open and swallow him up, but, as his "friend" finished speaking, he thought his wrath had passed, and was just congratulating

himself on having escaped thus lightly, when, in jeering tones, the bully read aloud:

"I shall have to save and scrape to make up the money I now send you, my dear boy, but I know I can trust you not to waste it. Try to get a better friend, my child; I feel sure the one you mention will do you no good. I look forward to the time when you will be a great and respected man, and then you do not know how proud your sister and I will be of you. So bear in mind what a great influence your school-friends can have on your future life, either for good or bad. Mary sends her love. Good-bye, my boy.—Your loving mother."

Surely such a mother's pathetic appeal should soften even a bully's nature! It had no other effect on Brading, however, than that of enraging him the more.

He savagely tore the letter into fragments, and then, seizing the unlucky Jenkins by the collar, proceeded to pull his ears, twist his arms, and punch his head; nor did he desist until the little sneak fairly howled for mercy.

"Fancy sneaking Jenkins being a great and noble man!" the bully sneered. "Loving mother and fond sister, indeed! A couple of gossiping old women!"

No matter how many insults he bears himself, the average British boy will not allow anyone to speak disrespectfully of his mother or sisters. Anyone else in Jenkins's place, no matter how small he might have been, would have endeavoured to knock the bully down.

No honourable feelings found a place in the little sneak's heart, however; he cared for nothing beyond his own personal safety.

Brading well knew this. He would not have dared to speak to any of his class-mates as he had to Jenkins, and he found some sort of satisfaction in gloating over the small boy's cowardice.

"Why don't you strike me, apron-strings?" he went on. "Can't you see I'm afraid of you? But, look here, Jenkins, you're a boy now, not a mammy's kid, and it's about time you had done with this lovey-dovey rot. I wouldn't stand it, if I were you. Stick to me, and you'll be much better off than if you had all the mummies and sisters in the world advising you. What do you think the others would say at school, if I told them? Why, they'd call you 'mummy's darling' until you left, and the name would stick to you even after that."

"But you won't tell them, will you, Brading?" pleaded the little sneak, who dreaded lest another weapon should be given to his torturers. "I'll do anything to please you—"

"There, now, you can't do without me, you see! Anyone else would have no more to do with you, and give you a good sound licking into the bargain, after lying as you have done. Confess they were all lies, now."

"Yes, Brading, yes," said Jenkins eagerly, a lie coming naturally to his lips, as he saw a chance of winning his friend back. "It was all untrue about you. I don't know why I wrote the letter. But I'll tell them what a nice fellow you are, the next time I write. Only forgive me this time!"

"Well, well," replied the bully, with a patronising air. "I always did like you; we'll be friends again. Come along, we'll go into Aintree. It would be no use your going to the post-office with that money-order, because they don't pay over to youngsters."

"But they did before, Brading."

"Oh, they did, did they? Then that's another occasion when you've been hiding things from your friend. I really ought to thrash you, Jenkins! But the post-office has made new regulations since then, and I know a nice place where we can get the thing changed."

This was, of course, a fabrication on the part of Brading, by means of which he hoped to drag the small boy still deeper into his power, and how he succeeded in this design will be seen later.

They took a roundabout road to Aintree, this course being necessary to avoid observation, and Brading led the way up one of the town's narrowest and dirtiest streets. He stopped outside a public-house that was obviously not of the first class.

It was one of the school rules that no boy should enter a public-house. This exists in most private schools, and is, unfortunately, the one most often violated; and, knowing this, the Doctor had had it printed in red, in order to impress it upon the boys' minds, whilst the rest of the rules appeared in black.

"I say," protested Jenkins, "you know we aren't allowed—"

"Don't be a young muff!" was the only reply he got; and, as it was not the breaking of the rule which troubled him, but the fear of the punishment which might follow, he glanced up and down the street, to make sure that no one saw him, and then followed Brading into a place which reeked with stale tobacco-smoke. The den—for it cannot be dignified by the name of room—was behind the public-bar, and seemed to be the private quarters of the publican. Here they found Ad Bealey, who seemed to be on very friendly terms with Brading, for he shook him cordially by the hand.

"Well, young shaver!" said the poacher, turning to Jenkins; "very pleased to meet yer. Anybody who comes with a young gent like Mister Brading is welcome."

To Jenkins's astonishment, Brading produced from a corner some tobacco and a very black pipe, which he proceeded to fill and smoke, and, though Jenkins was not a very sharp boy, he concluded that his friend was a frequent visitor here. His surprise was increased tenfold when the bully calmly called for a pint of ale.

"And what will the young gent take?" asked the poacher.

Jenkins replied that he would take a glass of lemonade.

Brading burst out laughing, while Ad Bealey said that lemonade was only the drink for kids, not for the friends of "Mister Brading," and a moment later placed a foaming glass of ale before the bewildered boy.

"Come, drink up!" said Brading. "You are not in school now."

Jenkins took a sip, and, though it tasted like poison, with an effort he kept himself from pulling a wry face, and, following his friend's example, smacked his lips with well-feigned enjoyment.

"That's the style!" said Ad Bealey, who had himself drained a huge jug; "now you're a real man, young gent. None of your namby-pamby school-kids for me! Who pays for these?"

"He will," said Brading. "He's got an order he wants changed, Ad."

Jenkins knew protestations would be useless, and, very reluctantly he handed over the note. To his wonder, he only received five shillings and sixpence change, but he dared not complain.

The air was stifling, the tobacco fumes got down his throat and threatened to suffocate him. Still, it would never do to let them see this was the first time he had been in a public-house, he thought, so he tried to look as if he was enjoying himself, although inwardly he longed to be breathing the pure air once more. When, however, the smoke became extra troublesome, and he could not prevent himself coughing aloud, Brading only laughed at his discomfort.

How the little sneak wished he had never set foot in that hole! But he was only one of the many who learn too late that though it is easy enough to fall into temptation, retracing one's steps is very up-hill work.

There was one point on which Jenkins wished to satisfy himself before he made an effort to get out of that place: whether Brading had dealt the blow which led to such terrible consequences, or whether the school was accusing him falsely.

He longed to ask his friend to clear up the mystery, but feared lest he might feel insulted by such a personal inquiry.

But at last he plucked up courage. He would ask the question, and then go.

"I say, Brading," he began, "did you really do it? All the boys say you did."

Brading fully understood what the "it" referred to. He burst out, with an oath that fairly startled the little sneak:

"So that's what they think, do they? It's just like the cowards, to go talking about me behind my back. I'd thrash every one of them if they were here. Well, if it'll do you any good to know it, I did do it, and I'm not ashamed to own it. It served the cad right, too, and I only wish I'd hit him harder. He was down on me when he got that sneak Alton to back him up, and when I—when I wasn't in fighting trim; but we're quits now."

"He's been awfully ill, though, Brading. Had the Aintree doctor in, and hasn't got up yet."

"No! It isn't so bad as that, now, or else the cad's shamming."

"But he is really very ill. They say you hit him with a stick!"

"The liars! It was only with my fist. Besides, it wasn't very hard."

This was, of course, the first Brading had heard of Leander's serious illness. On that fatal Saturday he had, from a distance, seen the wounded boy carried back to school, but had imagined that very little was the matter. Gradually, however, it came home to him that someone must have seen the act, and that when it came to the Doctor's ears he would not be allowed to go unpunished. Then, in a fit of desperation, he determined to play truant from school.

It should be said that when Brading struck his class-fellow he had not meant to inflict serious hurt. In his blind hate it was the only way he could think of to avenge the thrashing he had received from Leander. Neither had he intended to play truant for long, but, as each day went by, he found it all the more difficult to return to the school. So far he had maintained a show of bravado, but now, for the first time, he regretted the blow, and a feeling closely resembling fear took possession of him.

"Don't you think you had better come back?" asked Jenkins; "they are sure to find you sooner or later, and then it will be all the worse for you."

"I can't go back now," replied the bully moodily. "I must wait a little longer. At any rate, this is much better than being shut up in a beastly hole of a school, ain't it, Ad?"

Thus appealed to, the poacher assured his hearers that, in his opinion, there was no spirit in a boy who did not play "the log"

occasionally. He recalled his own schooldays, when the boys actually defied the masters if there was too much work or not sufficient holidays, and ended by advising Jenkins to stay away with his friend for a few days, and have a "high old time."

But this, with a display of courage that quite startled his friend, Jenkins absolutely refused to do.

"At any rate, you won't tell them where I am?" said Brading, "or even say you have seen me? I shall be safe enough here for a bit. Do you promise?"

And Jenkins promised, though, for his own sake, he longed to see his friend and protector back at the school once more.

Presently Ad Bealey produced a pack of greasy cards, and suggested a "quiet little game."

"I suppose you can play, young gent?" he added, to Jenkins. "A reg'lar dab at the game, I'll warrant."

Jenkins said he could play such games as "snap" and "dragon," whereat Brading and the poacher laughed.

"Them's only kids' games," said the latter, "and much below a young gent like you. I'll teach you to play like a young lord, although I see you'll turn out quite a nib with the pasties, and be winning all my money, perhaps."

Jenkins protested that he had never played for money, whereupon Brading called him an ass.

Ad Bealey owned that he was not much of a player, but such knowledge as was his he would cheerfully impart to his "young friend."

"Suppose we play penny 'nap,' he said. "It's quite a gent's game, and as easy as A B C. What do you say, Mister Brading?"

Brading, who had brightened up considerably at sight of the cards, was quite agreeable, and, almost before Jenkins knew it, he was seated at the table, grasping several cards in his hands. They were quite different to the ones he had played with at home, and, though Brading seemed to be quite at home with the game, it was as foreign to him as a dead language.

Still, the poacher looked over his shoulder and advised him what to call, and which card to play.

Of course, he lost. At first he could not understand why every time he called three the poacher or Brading went four, and why, on each occasion, he had to pay over something to one or both of these. But, by the time he had lost two shillings, he was fairly well advanced in public-house "nap," and signified his intention of looking after his own "hand."

Then, for a while, he fared better, managing, at least, not to lose, though he gained nothing, until, in response to a pressing invitation from Brading, he drank some more ale. In a dazed kind of way he wondered why his companions displayed no stakes of their own (they had made him place his five shillings on the table in front of him) except the money they had won from him.

Soon he began to lose again. Whatever he played, the poacher had something higher. It seemed strange that all the aces and kings (for he had learnt to distinguish these as the highest cards) should find their way into the hands of either Brading or Ad Bealey every time, while he had only threes and fours. But still he played on, in the hope of yet winning back all he had lost.

How many there are like Jenkins! His case is only an illustration of what is happening every day. The working-man who loses a shilling over a horse-race still goes on betting, hoping to make it up again soon. The rich man who loses £1,000 over a game of cards still plays on, thinking he must recoup his losses sooner or later.

But they both find out that that time never comes. Thousands there are who date their ruin from the moment they staked a shilling on a horse-race or a game of cards. At last Jenkins found he had only a shilling left. The ale was getting into his head, and he wished he had never left the school that day; but still he could not tear himself away from the game.

"I will go three!" he cried, growing desperate.

"Get them!" responded his companions.

He played a king.

The poacher threw out an ace.

He played a queen.

The poacher produced another ace, the counterpart of the one he had played before; but Jenkins was too bewildered to notice this.

"Your play again," said Brading.

Jenkins threw down a nine.

Brading played a ten.

"You've lost, my hearty!" cried the poacher. "That is six-pence each to us."

Jenkins did not endeavour to reason out how this could be, but calmly allowed them to take his money.

Five shillings is, perhaps, not a very large sum, but to Jenkins it represented several months' pocket-money, and now the last penny of it had gone—seven-and-six gone in one day.

He had a vague idea that he had been cheated, and, scarcely knowing what he did, he blurted out his suspicions, appealing to Brading to give him back at least a portion of his money.

By way of reply he received a sounding cuff on the ear from Brading, sending him stumbling over a chair.

"If you ever say again that I cheated," roared the bully, "I'll thrash you out of your skin!"

The fall seemed to bring Jenkins back to his senses. At any rate, when he rose to his feet he made for the door. Neither the poacher or the bully made any attempt to stop him, the latter simply warning him to keep his promise, if he valued his life.

(To be continued.)

THE EDITOR SPEAKS!

A friend to THE HALFPENNY MARVEL tells us of a pet he has, which has learnt to imitate his voice in a manner that is truly remarkable. It is a bird that a friend of his sent him from New Zealand, and is not unlike, in size and appearance, the English starling.

It is not at all unusual to find foreign birds with such marvellous power, and some of our larger British birds are admirable imitators, when properly trained and taught, of the different sounds they may hear. The raven, as is well known, has been long renowned for its imitative powers, and its ready knack of picking up scraps of talk from various sources.

Next to the raven, the magpie is, perhaps, the most wonderful of our mimics, seeming to possess the power of rendering almost any loud noise. One of these birds once startled its master by giving a repetition of a flourish of trumpets with remarkable accuracy. About a week before a band of Volunteers had paraded the town, the bugles fascinating the magpie to such a degree that he moped sullenly until he could render the call which had taken him so by surprise.

No less wonderful in his way is the starling. Carefully trained, this bird can almost say anything. To make him very talkative, it was supposed to be necessary to slit his tongue with a sixpence. But the starling can talk without any such cruel treatment. Now and then he learns odd words as he flies to and fro, especially if he be in the vicinity of a stable or inn, under the eaves of which he often builds his nest.

A starling so situated learned to articulate very plainly the words "Jack, quick!" much to the groom's annoyance, for that worthy (his name being Jack) was often called away by what he supposed to be his master's summons, but which in reality was only the acquired call of the loquacious bird.

Readers are constantly writing to this and other papers complaining of the hardness of the times, and bewailing that, owing to the increase of competition in every trade, it every year becomes more difficult to obtain a living.

Don't despair; big fortunes have been built from the smallest of beginnings.

William Whiteley, the owner of the biggest shop in the world, started with one little draper's establishment, not so very many years ago.

Huntley and Palmers were originally small bakers.

The father of the late Right Honourable W. H. Smith, owner of the railway bookstall system, once kept a little newsagent's shop.

Gatti, the famous London restaurateur, started in London with an ice-cream stall near Hungerford Market.

The late Jay Gould, who could probably have bought up half America had he chosen, as a boy sold newspapers on the railway.

A well-known baronet was originally a clerk at a few shillings a week in the very establishment of which he is now the head.

We have offended one of our readers, and he does not hesitate to lay his complaint before us.

"I write to inform you," he says, "that I am much annoyed to find that you very frequently puff the MARVEL, not only in the paper itself, but on walls and in tram-cars. Why do you do it?"

We do it, good Frederick, because the very best paper in the world (mind, we do not say that this is it!) would never succeed unless it were well advertised. Perhaps our critic will be shocked to hear that, though our chief aim in bringing out the MARVEL is to instruct and interest the public, we have another object in view—that of adding to the little store which, by dint of hard work and enterprise, we are collecting in our money-box. It is a by no means easy task though, so much are we giving for the humble halfpenny.

Perhaps good Frederick is one of those who think an editor has nothing to do five days of the week but sit in a comfortable chair and smoke a big pipe; and in that case he will probably now be offended the more, seeing that we have dignified our calling by the name of "work," but he knows now why we advertise ourselves. At any rate, we are obliged to him for giving us a chance of defending ourself, and for not going about condemning us unheard.

THE EDITOR.

NOTE.—The "summary of previous chapters" and a picture illustrating this week's instalment of "Charlie's Chum" have been "crowded out;" but we have made arrangements for it to appear in next Friday's "UNION JACK."

The "Marvel" is published EVERY WEDNESDAY.



Are you fond of Red Indian Stories? You probably are, so you should not miss seeing No. 21 of the "Union Jack." Our circulation has increased so rapidly of late that there must necessarily be many who have not heard of the "Union Jack." We might therefore mention that it is a companion paper to the "Halfpenny Marvel," and each of its numbers is complete in itself, containing a long tale of mystery or adventure, with plenty of illustrations. It is quite as good as the "Halfpenny Marvel," for such authors as S. Clarke Hook, Harry Blyth, Maxwell Scott, Hal Meredith, and Paul Herring write for both papers. So that if you like us you will like our companion. No. 21 of the "Union Jack" contains a story of peril and adventure with the Indians and brigands in Mexico, entitled

"THE APACHES' CAPTIVE,"

By PAUL HERRING,

and the picture below illustrates an incident taken from it.

Ask for No. 21 of the "UNION JACK" (Price ½d.), now on sale.



"Some of them carried a log of wood between them, and, giving this a swing, they battered at the stout door."