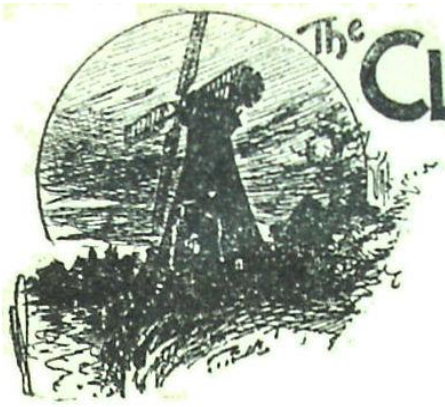
No. 3.—New Detective Story Paper.

The NELSON LEE (DETECTIVE) LIBRARY

1d.

The CLUE of The STRAW SAILOR HAT

Week ending June 26, 1915.



The Clue of the Straw Hat

or, The Waiting-Room Mystery.

The Story of a Sensational Affair That Baffled the Police, But Was Solved by Nelson Lee, the Famous Detective, and His Young Assistant, Nipper.

By the Author of "The Mystery of the Five Towns," "The Case of the Turkish Bonds," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I. - Nelson Lee's Decision.

FROM end to end all London was a-thrill with its latest mystery. Not for many months had the great city been so shocked as it was on the days following the tragic discovery in a waiting-room at Mandale Street railway-station.

The first facts which had come out were briefly these. Going his rounds shortly before midnight on Sunday, a railway official had come upon the dead body of a child. It was a little boy of not more than seven years of age. Round the child's neck, tied very tightly, was a narrow strip of strong scarlet ribbon, the effect of which had apparently been to bring about death by strangulation.

That a terrible murder had been committed seemed pretty plain, but as to who the murderer was, no tangible clue presented itself during the first few hours following the shocking discovery.

Like everybody else in central London, Nelson Lee, the famous private detective, had acquainted himself with these meagre facts as soon as they had been divulged. Seated at breakfast early on Monday morning, he had heard the shrieks of the rushing newsboys along the Gray's Inn Road, under the very windows of his chambers.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, turning to Nipper, the shrewd and clever youngster who had assisted him in the unravelling of so many mysteries. "Bit early for the evening papers to be out with a special edition. Big crime evidently; fetch a paper, my boy."

"Nothing for us, sir," was Nipper's remark as he came back with the newspaper a minute later. "It's a Scotland Yard affair entirely."

"That's so," Nelson Lee said, glancing at the paragraph. "Looks as if it may give them some trouble, too. Nothing to go on except that strip of silk ribbon. No clue to the murderer. But perhaps we shall learn more later"

"Now you're not going to worry over this business, are you, sir?" remonstrated Nipper. "You know that you've shoved everything aside in order to get a week's rest. You want it, too."

"All right, boy, all right," said Lee indulgently. "As you say, it's entirely a Scotland Yard affair, so I'm not likely to be troubled. We'll get that week's rest down on the East Coast after all."

But Nelson Lee was wrong. Glancing at each subsequent edition of the evening paper as it came out for latest developments of the Mandale Street mystery, the famous detective at length saw something that made him spring out of his chair.

"Nipper," he exclaimed with unwonted excitement. The child has been identified!"

"That was to be expected, sir, wasn't it? But it ain't any reason why you should allow it to interfere with your rest cure."

"There's every reason why I should go into the affair." Lee was pacing the room quickly. "Do you remember John Reece, my lad, the young carpenter who lived over at Camberwell? He fitted up those shelves in my laboratory."

"Just before answering his country's call by joining the Royal Engineers. Should think I do remember him, sir. Nice fellow he was, too. But what has he got to do with——"

"Nipper, my lad"—Nelson Lee's voice shook a little with emotion—"the murdered child is his!"

"Good heavens!"

"The child has been identified as little Jackie Reece by his grandparents, with whom he has been living since his father's departure for the Front."

"Poor John Reece! This'll be a bitter blow for him, sir, when the news reaches him. He always seemed so fond of his little kiddie."
"Fond! All the poor fellow's life was wrapped up in the child since the death of his wife twelve months ago. He could talk about nothing else when he was working here. And now—and now the poor little motherless fellow has been snatched from him by a murderer's hand!"
Nelson Lee paused to struggle with the emotion conjured up by the thought of the bitter blow which had fallen upon the young workman-soldier whom he had known so well and learnt to like.
"Think of him, my lad," he went on. "Think of the poor fellow doing his duty nobly for his king and country out in France, braving the enemy's bullets and shells, grateful enough to Heaven at escaping them so far, and then for this— this hideous blow, aimed at him through his only child, by an assassin's hand! Oh, I'd give a lot to spare him the sorrow this will cause him!"
"And so would I, sir," said Nipper, stirred to his depths as was his master. "But what can you do? You can't bring back the little kiddie to life."
"No, but I can perhaps avenge his death. I can at least assist in bringing the murderer to justice." "But the police have the matter in hand."
"Yes, but if they fail, as they may do? Then—then—I have no authority to act, and I trust the police may solve the mystery without me. But this I can do and will; I can hold an unofficial watching brief on poor John Reece's behalf. I see that the inquest is fixed for to-morrow. You and I, Nipper, will attend it."
But the first hearing of the inquest revealed little. If the police knew anything, they did not reveal it. At the adjournment, Nelson Lee, who had already carefully inspected the body of the child, approached Inspector Quex, who had the case in hand.
"Any discoveries, inspector?" he asked. "Any clues?"
"No actual discoveries at present, Mr. Lee, but clues in plenty. Following the publishing of the child's photo in the papers, a dozen different people have come forward with stories of having seen the child during the few hours before the murder. Some say they saw the little chap with a man, others with a woman. My men are out investigating each story. Pending their reports, I naturally can't say much to you about the business."
Nelson Lee inclined his head. He was on quite friendly terms with Inspector Quex, but he was quite prepared for this official reticence. More than once in the past he had scored heavily in cases where Scotland Yard had failed and a little natural if regrettable jealousy of his skill was the result.
"If I can help in any way, inspector," he said quietly, "please command me. I happen to know John Reece the father, and I have the greatest respect for the poor fellow. In any case, I'd like to know how things are going on, and if there's any chance of capturing the murderer! I don't want to interfere with your business, of course."
"All right, Mr. Lee. When I've anything really to tell you, I'll look you up." They shook hands and parted, Quex to follow up one of the clues he had referred to, and Nelson Lee to go back once more to the mortuary to make yet another minute inspection of the murdered child.
That inspection lasted a full half hour; it comprised a most careful examination of the body and of the child's clothes. It had been found fully dressed save for the head. The round straw sailor hat which little Jackie Reece had been wearing when last seen by his grandparents, was missing.
His inspection over, Nelson Lee rose erect. Upon his face was a set expression, a pressure of mouth and a knitting of brows which told of a keen brain already at work on a definite line of thought.
"I wonder if my theory's right?" was his inward question. "I wonder if such a thought has occurred to Quex? There's little enough to go on at present, but there's something, and I may find out more. I can do little until I hear from Quex, but if he fails, my theory is the one I shall work on!"

CHAPTER II. - A Startling Theory.

THREE nights later Inspector Quex came to Lee's chambers, a doleful look on his face.
In the interim, Nelson Lee had followed the newspapers, which had given a great space to the waiting-room tragedy. From them he had gathered that the police had so far met with no success. The whole affair remained a baffling puzzle, and as one paper put it, seemed likely with the lapse of time to "pass into the limbo of undiscovered crimes."
Quex's face seemed strongly to support that view.
"You've had no luck?" Nelson Lee said.
"Not a speck! This is the most baffling business I've known for years."
“Yet you spoke of having a number of clues. Have you followed them up?"

"All except two, and drawn absolute blanks every time. In every case the man or woman who has been seen with a child an hour or two before the crime, have accounted quite satisfactorily for themselves, and proved that the child was certainly not the murdered one."
"And the two clues you have not followed up? What were they?"
"One came from a tram-conductor, who said he saw a child in company with a well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman near Westminster Bridge. The other report was from the driver of a market cart, who saw a child with a lady elaborately dressed in costly furs, in a lonely by-lane at Merton, just off the Epsom Road. In both these accounts the child was wearing a round, straw sailor hat, very like the hat that is missing."
"Why on earth discard a double clue like that?" exclaimed Lee. "It sounds most promising."
"So I thought," smiled the inspector, "until I found that it was past twelve on Sunday night when the tram-conductor saw the child, and two o'clock in the morning when the lady was seen with a child at Merton."
"Surely a suspicious time for a lady to be out with a child?"
"I dare say. But it's clearly got no bearing on the Mandale Street affair."
"Why so sure of that?"
"It's a thing to be sworn to," said Quex, lifting his brows at what he considered the other's density. "You seem to have forgotten that the dead body was discovered at Mandale Street a few minutes *before* midnight. It's perfectly obvious that the child seen at Merton and Westminster Bridge was not the murdered one."
Lee stared straight before him in a whimsical way. "I suppose," he said quietly, "there's no doubt about its being a case of murder? I've got a sort of notion----"
"Now look here, Mr. Lee," cried Quex, jumping up half angrily, "when you begin to wonder whether black is black and white is white, and talk in that way about having a notion, I know what's coming. You're going to spring some wild, fantastic, bizarre theory on me, and I don't want to hear it."
"It might be worthwhile, though. Supposing the child wasn't murdered at all?"
"Bosh, Mr. Lee, bosh! It was strangled. The marks on the throat made by the ribbon prove that."
"The doctors who made the post-mortem say the heart was greatly dilated, and that the child when alive must have been in a delicate state of health. Supposing it died a perfectly natural death?"
Quex seized his hat with an impatient gesture.
"I'm off," he said, grinning."I can't listen to wild ideas like that. You'll be denying that the child's dead at all next, and you'll put my head in such a whirl that I shall wonder if I'm alive myself."
"I'm half inclined to believe that little Jackie Reece is not dead!" said Lee.
"There," cried Quex, smiting the table, and half doubling himself up with delight. "If I didn't think it would come to that. I'm going. If I stay listening to you, my brain will addle. I'll let you know when I catch the murderer. I've another line to follow up I haven't mentioned to you. So long!" He went off, mumbling as he went down the stairs:
"Well, I admit that Nelson Lee has shown himself smart at times, but blow me if I don't think sometimes that his brain's softening. Jackie Reece not dead! Did ever anyone have to listen to such stark, staring twopenny-halfpenny balderdash as that. It's my belief that Nelson Lee's gone clean off his chump!"
Even Nipper, though in nowise sharing Quex's doubts of his master's sanity, was greatly puzzled by what he had said. For three or four minutes after the inspector's departure, he sat watching Lee, who sat deep in thought without moving for some little time. When at length he did stir, it was to say:
"Poor old Quex! I suppose he's gone away thinking I'm mad."
"Well, you know, sir," said Nipper diffidently, "what you said was a bit— wasn't it? But I suppose you were pulling his leg?"
"I was in dead earnest!"
"What!" almost shrieked his assistant. "About Jackie Reece being still alive?"
"I think it is quite possible."
"But, sir!" exclaimed Nipper, staring incredulously.
"What I mean is that I don't believe the dead boy is John Reece's child at all!"
"Not when he's been identified by his grandfather and grandmother and by half a dozen neighbours?" said Nipper in amazement.
"People who identify dead bodies often make mistakes. Women have often identified dead men as their husbands quite honestly, only to find their husbands turn up alive and well afterwards. The fact is, that death obliterates many outward differences in people, and in cases where a strong resemblance existed during life, it is not difficult to make a mistake."

"But in this case, sir, think of the circumstances. Little Jackie Reece was missing at the time of the murder, and nothing of him has been seen since. The child found at Mandale Street was the same age and size, had the same features, and was wearing the same clothes, There's no room for doubt, sir, that I can see; no room at all."
"Ah, but you see, Jackie Reece didn't suffer from caries!"
Now, if Inspector Quex had been present to hear that astonishing and seemingly inconsequent remark, he would certainly have lost all lingering doubts about Lee's sanity. He would have sworn he was mad for certain. All Nipper did was to stare at his master, and to ask:
"Whatever's that, sir?"
"A disease of the teeth. I examined the dead child's mouth with the greatest care, and I found evidence that he had undoubtedly suffered from caries. There were slight traces of tartar remaining at the back of the teeth."
"But how can you be certain that Jackie Reece didn't suffer that way too?"
"Even if he did, that wouldn't alter the conclusion I have arrived at. The condition of the dead child's teeth showed that they had been attended to by a skilled dentist. Now we know for certain that little boy Reece's grandparents were in no position to afford such aid even if he had needed it; and I have learnt for certain from them that he had never been attended by a dentist in his life."
"Whew! Sounds like a discovery, sir. What do you deduce from it?"
"That Jackie Reece had been kidnapped, and another dead child dressed in his clothes and purposely left at Mandale Street Station so as to be mistaken for him!"

CHAPTER III. - On the Trail.

A THUNDERBOLT, dropping at Nipper's feet, could not have startled him more. Nelson Lee's theory might be extravagant, yet plainly there was reason in it.
"But who could have changed the kiddies, sir?" he asked. "And what possible motive could they have for doin' such a thing?"
"Ah, the motive! Once let us discover that, and we sha'n't be long in laying the criminals by the heels."
"Criminals. You think there are more than one in it?"
"Two at least. The well dressed man who was seen with the child on Westminster Bridge, and the be-furred woman who was seen at Merton at two o'clock in the morning."
"Why should you suspect them, sir?"
"Because they fit in perfectly with my theory. A child undergoing a fairly expensive operation at a dentist's hands, most probably belongs to well-to-do people."
"I think you ought to have told Inspector Quex this, sir."
"You heard me try to, and he wouldn't listen. But I shall tell him to-night all the same. I'm off to Scotland Yard now to get the address of the driver of the market cart."
He was gone more than three hours. Nipper looked up eagerly when at length he returned.
"What does the inspector say, sir?"
"Laughs at the idea. Thinks I'm mad. It appears he's got another clue himself. He's on the track of a man named Albert Ryland. It's pretty well proved that this man was seen talking to little Johnnie Reece a few hours before the discovery of the dead body. More than that, there is evidence to show that some years ago, before Mrs. Reece married our friend the carpenter, Ryland was in love with her, and an aspirant for her hand. When she married John Reece, Ryland was mad with jealousy. Quex has witnesses who can prove that he swore at the time to have his revenge some day."
"Sounds a fairly strong case against Ryland. sir."
"Yes, circumstances seem to supply a motive. Still, if Ryland had really meant revenge, it's hardly likely he would have postponed it so long, and his desire for revenge must surely have weakened after the death of Mrs. Reece, twelve months ago."
"You still hold to your own theory then, sir?"
"I do, and am going to follow it up in spite of Quex's ridicule. I have already seen Porson, the driver of the market waggon, and he and I have been over to Merton. He pointed out the spot where he saw the lady in furs with the child. It was too dark to do anything to-night, but to-morrow morning you and I go on the warpath."
It was quite early the next morning when the detective and his young assistant set off in a motor car.
"Here's where the man was seen with the child by the tram conductor," said Lee, as they crossed Westminster Bridge. "From here to Merton is about eight miles. Assuming the child seen in both cases to be the same, the

man would have just been able to cover the distance in two hours, and so hand the child over to the woman in furs at a few minutes past two in the morning."
Quickly the car sped on through Kennington and Clapham. Past Balham and Tooting it went to the end of the long, straight road. Then, at a point at Merton where a signpost showed the way to Epsom, they turned to the left.
"Here we stop," said Lee, bringing the car to a standstill a little way further on, and both alighted. They seemed to have come to the end of London at last, and reached the fringe of the country quite suddenly. Hitherto, their way had led past miles and miles of monotonous houses, interminable lines of ugly bricks and mortar.
Now all about them stretched fields and market gardens and waste lands, intersected by winding lanes and rough cart tracks, and dotted with trees and remnants of scrubby hedges. Down one of these lanes Lee led the way for fifty yards.
"There's the spot where the market man saw the woman and child," he said. "Strange place for them at two o'clock in the morning. The woman couldn't have been going home this way, for the lane leads nowhere. It's a cul–de-sac."
"Then why should she have come down here?"
"That's what we're going to try and find out. We're going to search every inch of this lane."
It wasn't a very difficult task, for the rough track only went some two hundred yards or so. Along it Lee and Nipper moved, keenly scrutinising the hedgerows on either side, but without discovering anything in the nature of a clue.
Suddenly, right at the very end, they came upon a shallow dip in the road. It was a pond for cattle, or rather, had been at one time. Now it was almost empty of water, the main part of its bed being one mass of soft, slimy, yellow mud.
"Footprints!" exclaimed Nelson Lee suddenly. “A woman's footprints, too. And wheel marks plain as anything in the mud."
"Tyre marks, sir," said Nipper. "Look as though they might have been made by a small motor."
"A motor-bike and side-car probably, my lad. Now, what do they mean?"
"They run right across to these bushes."
"So they do. We must investigate."
They were across the mud in a minute, and peering through the mass of brambles that fringed the high bank on the further side of the pond, and hung over to form a sort of arbour.
"Look there," said Nelson Lee, pushing the mass of hanging brambles aside. "More wheel-marks, that's where the motor-bike and side-car must have been hidden."
"Would have wanted some hauling out, sir."
"You're right. That means the woman must have been of powerful build. Now if we only have a little luck in tracing the tyre-marks---"
There was no difficulty to the end of the lane. The marks were quite clear along the soft ruts. But in the main road they were lost amid the maze of other tracks there.
"We must follow the road, and do the best we can by inquiring," said Nelson Lee. "A woman clad in furs and driving a motor-bike and side-car with a child in it at two o’clock in the morning, isn't a common sight. If anyone did see her they will remember."
But naturally, there had been few people upon that dark and lonely road at such an hour, and although Lee inquired at numberless roadside cottages, no useful information was forthcoming. The quest promised to be a vain one until Lee chanced to enter a roadside inn beyond Epsom.
"I see you're right on the main road," he said to the landlord. "I wonder if by any chance you heard a motor-car pass your house late on Sunday night?"
"Plenty of 'em, sir," smiled the landlord. "This road's thick with cars on Saturday and Sundays."
"But this was exceptionally late. Between two and three o'clock on the Monday morning, I should have said. Can you recall hearing any car at that hour."
“‘Fraid I can't, sir. I was asleep; dead to the world at that time. Not likely to be many motors about at such an hour."
"There were one though," chimed in a bewhiskered labourer sitting in the corner. "For I heerd un and see' un meself. Made my dog bark un did, so I looked out o' winder."
"Ah," said Lee eagerly. "And what sort of a car was it?"
"Green car belongin' to Dr. Kale," answered the labourer. "He'd had a late call seemin'ly."

"That's no good to us," muttered Nipper, annoyed with the man who had raised their hopes only to dash them again.
"Don't be too sure of that, my lad," came in an undertone from Lee. Then he turned to the labourer and asked for the doctor's address.
"You see," he said to Nipper as once again they climbed into their car, "since Dr. Kale was out at the very time, he may be able to tell us something."
A few minutes run, and they were at the doctor's door. A minute or two later, and Lee was ushered into the consulting-room.
"Why, yes, Mr. Lee," the doctor said, in reply to the detective's question. "I was out at that hour, and I do remember meeting a motor-bicycle and a side- car."
"Driven by a well-dressed woman?"
"That I couldn't say. Nor could I venture to guess whether there was a child in the side-car. They were past me in a flash, you see, travelling like mad towards Dorking. Sorry I can't give you more definite information, Mr. Lee."
"Thanks, doctor, for what you have told me. I may hear more news at Dorking."

CHAPTER IV. - Nipper Makes a Discovery.

But arrived there no information was forthcoming at all. Lee inquired at several places in the main street, and even went the length of inter- viewing a policeman who had been on night duty on the previous Sunday. But, although the people remembered "hundreds of cars" passing through the place earlier, none knew anything about a side-car driven by a woman at three o'clock in the morning.
"What are you goin' to do, sir?" asked Nipper.
"Try further on. We'll chance our luck on the Horsham road."
But luck seemed to be still against them. All Lee's inquiries resulted in nought. Hopes of coming upon any further traces of the mysterious woman grew less and less as the day wore on. Still they pushed on doggedly, exploring side roads and lanes, and enquiring of everybody they possibly could. It was now late in the afternoon, and still they were without any further clue. They had left Horsham some miles behind, and were well set on the Worthing Road. For all they knew they might already have overshot their mark; the woman might easily have turned off at some road to the right or left.
Suddenly, while they were debating whether they should abandon their hopeless search and return to London, Nipper touched the detective on the arm.
"Pull it up, sir; pull up!"
"What's the matter?" asked Nelson Lee, bringing the car to a standstill. Nipper was staring back over his shoulder.
"I saw something, sir, as we passed that tree yonder—something lodged high up where the branches fork."
"What did you see?" asked Lee, calling after the boy who had hopped nimbly out, and was running back along the road.
Twenty paces off he stopped to stare up at a young and thriving oak, growing in a field near to the hedge.
"Yes, there it is, sir, right enough. Come and look!"
Lee had already jumped out of the car, and hastened to his side. "What do you see? he asked. Nipper pointed, seemingly too excited for speech.
"Good heavens!" gasped Lee. "A hat—a child's straw hat! We must get hold of it. Can you shin up that tree?"
Nipper was already thrusting himself through the hedge into the field beyond. Lee followed him.
"Hop on to my shoulders," he said.
The young fellow obeyed.
"Can you reach the branches?"
"Not quite, but I can manage it with a jump."
He made an upward leap, clutched a branch, and with the agility of a gymnast, swung himself up into the fork. In a moment he had extricated the hat from the place where it had been firmly wedged. "Here you are, sir," he said, and tossed it down. Lee caught it, and examined it eagerly.
"Well, sir?" asked Nipper, as he dropped to the ground beside him.
"It in the hat worn by little Johnnie Reece!" the detective said with decision.
"My word, if that's so"

"There's no doubt about it. It tallies with the description exactly. Yellow straw, black ribbon inscribed with 'H.M.S. Lion,' with the initial 'L' partly obliterated. There can be no possible mistake. This is the missing hat."
"How came it in that tree, I wonder?"
"Pretty easy to guess. The child was in the side-car, travelling fast. The wind look his hat off, and swirled it up there."
"Wonder the woman didn't look for it. She'd know the danger of leaving a clue like this behind."
"She *did* search for it," said Lee suddenly.” And a man helped her in the search, too. Look here!" He pointed to the edge of the freshly ploughed field in which they stood. It revealed distinct traces of many footsteps—those of a woman and those of a man— crossing in directions.
"A labouring man, from the hobnails," muttered Lee. “Searched all round pretty thoroughly, but missed the hat in the tree. It probably couldn't be seen from this side on account of that big bough. Hallo!"
"What's up now, sir?"
"Something a little curious. You notice there are no footprints within six or seven feet of the hedge. That means the searchers didn't approach from the road, but from the further side of the field. Yes, look! There's a distinct trail of two sets of footprints running across the field the other way."
"And there's a winding drive running through them trees, sir."
"So there is, and a lodge where the drive meets the road. Nipper, this is important. I've a strong suspicion that this is where the woman came to her journey's end."
"How can you tell that, sir?"
"Because, unless she lives in the house that drive leads to, she'd have entered the field from the road. Seems pretty plain the man who assisted her in the search for the hat is a labourer on the estate. Wait here with the car. I'm going to put the matter to the test."
He regained the road, and, carrying the child's hat in his hand, hurried towards the lodge seventy yards further on. Pausing a moment to thrust the hat beneath his great coat, he approached the door and knocked.
There was the wait of a minute. In that time he was conscious of someone moving about inside the cottage, and of a stealthy movement towards the window. Without seeming to look, he yet caught a distinct glimpse of a man's face behind the curtain.
He knocked again. This time a heavy footstep came along the passage, and the man whose face he had seen in the window opened the door. He was dressed as a gamekeeper, and was far from being prepossessing.
There was a saturnine look about him, while a pair of small, crafty eyes gazed at Nelson Lee from under heavy, shaggy brows.
"I don't like the look of him," the detective decided inwardly; but he smiled as he addressed the fellow.
"Sorry to trouble you," he said. “But will you be good enough to tell me who lives in the big house yonder among the trees?"
"What d'ye want to know for?" asked the man with sullen suspicion.
"Surely you've no objection to telling me?"
"What d'ye want to know for?" came in dogged repetition.
"I was wondering if there's any child living there?"
"Child—child!" exclaimed the gamekeeper, with a startled air. "What d'ye want to know that for? Look here, mister, what's yer game?"
"A very simple game," answered Lee imperturbably. "If there is a child there, I thought perhaps this might have belonged to him."
As he spoke he drew the hat from beneath his coat.
At sight of it, a startling change came over the surly fellow.
His face went white as paper, while into his eyes came a look of sudden fear.
"Where did you find" he was beginning, and then checked himself**.** "The hat don't belong to anybody hereabouts, and—and I don't want nothin' more to say to yer."
He slammed the door abruptly in Lee's face, and turned the key inside.
"H'm!" murmured the detective. "Odd sort of conduct. Won't answer a civil question, and gets a bad scare when he catches sight of this hat."
He returned to Nipper who was waiting beside the car, and was full enough of eager questions.
"A gamekeeper lives in the cottage," Nelson Lee said. "A surly sort of fellow. He refuses me all information, but got a bad scare when I showed him the hat."
"Did he, though?"

"Yes. I shouldn't be surprised if it was the mark of his boots we saw in the field. Anyhow, there's something suspicious about the big house yonder. He wouldn't tell me who lived there, or whether there was a child in the family. We must go on to the next village to find out."

The village was barely half a mile further on, and in a few minutes they had pulled up in the main street. Lee entered a little general shop, and, having made one or two small purchases, got into conversation with the middle-aged woman behind the counter.

Like so many people whose opportunities for talk with strangers are scarce, she was very voluble, and it was not difficult for so engaging a personality as Lee to draw her out. With a few preliminary remarks on the beauty of the surrounding country, he quickly got to the subject in which he was interested.

"Fine old house that is a little way back," he said. "I mean the one with the thick grove of elms in front and a lodge on the main road."

"Ah, you mean the Rookery, sir. Yes, 'tis a fine house. Belonged to Mr Ralph Telford, that did. Pity he ever died, poor gentleman. He was a very rich man, and a very good friend to everybody about here. He died of grief, so 'tis always said. And it's more than likely it was true, seein' that he only lived a few months after his beautiful young wife was laid in the ground."

"But the Rookery isn't empty?"

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. and Mrs. Roding live there now. Sort of cousins they were to Mr. Telford. But they don't keep up a lot of style. They hardly ever visit, and they never entertain. You see, there's only their two selves and the little boy."

"A little boy!" Lee's heart gave a knock at his ribs, but he uttered his next words carelessly. "So they have a child, eh?"

"Not their child, sir. Little Noel is an orphan. He's the child of Mr. and Mrs. Telford. Poor little mite! It would be almost a mercy if he was took, too. He's only seven years old, but he's that weak and ailing you don't know. Weak heart, they say. Always has to be wheeled about in a bathchair, poor little chap! They've took him away to the seaside now—-to Saxbury—to see if that'll do him any good."

A little more talk, and Nelson took his leave. He could have hugged himself with delight at his success. What the woman had told him dovetailed with his theory to perfection.

This Mr. and Mrs. Roding had in their custody an orphan child of the same age as Johnny Reece. An invalid child, suffering with a malady of the heart. Why, that accorded with the condition of the child examined at the post-mortem. True the doctor had given it as his opinion that he had died from strangulation, yet, at the same time, he had spoken of the heart being greatly dilated.

"Nipper." said Lee as he got into the car, "we are going back to London. We must make certain about this hat."

CHAPTER V. - "It Doesn't Fit!"

IT was dark when they got back to London. Arrived at Kennington Gate, Nelson Lee turned the car to the right, and instead of making towards Westminster, drove quickly along the Camberwell New Road. "We're going to see Johnny Reece's grandparents," he explained. "I want them to see the hat."

Old Mr. and Mrs. Greybrook lived in a humble street not far from Camberwell Green. Aged and weary with the burden of years already, the events of the past few days had told upon them grievously. They had loved their dead daughter's child very dearly, and his disappearance and supposed murder had caused them the greatest sorrow.

Not so much at their own loss as at the thought of the bitter anguish it would mean to poor John Reece, then fighting for his country. The aged do not grieve as younger people do. They are nearer to their own mortal end, nearer to heaven, and that fact robs death of much of its sting.

But the thought of John Reece's grief had caused them many a bitter pang. He was not their own son, but he had married their only daughter nearly nine years ago, and they had looked upon him as a son ever since.

"Good-evening," Nelson Lee said kindly, as the door of their little house was opened to him. "I am sorry to disturb you, but I have come on an important matter. I want you to look at this child's hat."

"Why, dearie me, it's little Johnnie's!" quavered the old man, going pale. "The very one he was wearing when he—when he---- Look at it, mother!"

But the old lady's tears were already falling fast.

"Ay, ay," she said, nodding her head sadly as, having wiped her spectacles, she looked at the hat; " 'tis his right enough."

"You are quite sure, Mrs. Greybrook?" said Lee gently. "It is very important there should be no mistake."
"There's no mistake, sir. 'Tis the same hat. I was with his father when 'twas bought, and here's the ribbon which I mended myself with my own hands. I'd a bin ashamed of such stitches years ago, sir, but now my eyes ain't what they used to be. Yes, yes, 'tis little Jackie's hat right enough. Poor little mite, to think he's no more! To think he should a bin took afore me or his granddad, and that his daddy will never see him no more!"
Lee murmured what words of comfort he could. He dare not say all that was in his mind, dare not buoy them up with false hopes lest after all those hopes should come to nought. But he said what he could, and won the gratitude of the old folks for his kindness. Old Mrs. Greybrook begged permission to retain the hat, but on being told this was impossible at present placed it lovingly to her withered old lips, and then handed it back.
Rejoining Nipper in the car again, Nelson Lee drove back into the main road. There was a good deal of traffic, and they travelled but slowly. In the Walworth Road they were attracted by a block of people round a shop window.
"It's a photographer's, sir," said Nipper, rising in his seat as the car halted. "There's a big photo of a child in the window. Blow me if it don't look like Jackie Reece!"
"You are right, it is," said Lee, looking over the heads of the crowd. "An enlargement of the very portrait that was reproduced in the papers. Wait here a minute; I'm going in to see the photographer. He may possibly be able to help us."
A closer view of the window showed it to contain not only the photographic enlargement, but many other portraits of the dead child.
"Evidently doing a big trade in them," said Lee to himself, with a sigh. "Well, it's an ill wind that"
He passed into the shop. Mr. Dimmock, the photographer, was serving a customer with a picture-postcard of Jackie Reece.
"Selling well since the crime, eh?" said Lee, when at length he got the photographer to himself.
"Why, yes, sir," answered Dimmock. "The affair has caused such a sensation, and so many people knew the little chap. They like to have his portrait, you see. Not surprising either. He certainly was a very pretty little fellow. People used to remark that when they saw his picture in the window long before the crime. Why, I remember a gentleman—quite a swell he was, sir—asking me about him four or five months ago, when I first took the picture."
"Indeed!" said Nelson Lee, pricking up his ears. "Who was the gentleman?"
"That I couldn't say, sir. He was quite a stranger. Had come a tidy distance, too, from the look of the side-car he was driving."
"A side-car!" said Lee, with an uncontrollable start, "He came up in a side- car?"
"Yes, one of those shaped like a shoe. A lady was in that. Tall, handsome lady, very dark; his wife it was, as I afterwards found."
Lee felt a tingling all over him. This was unexpected news. With difficulty he controlled his excitement, and asked quietly:
"So they were interested in Jackie Reece's photograph?"
"Very much interested, sir. I'd got the enlargement in the window just as I have now -- a pretty child's always an attraction in my trade. I was looking out of the window from the back of the counter when I saw the side-car pull up— It had only been going at a crawl. The gentleman caught sight of it first, and then drew the lady's attention to it. Both of them seemed very interested, and presently the gent came in and bought a cabinet-size photo of the child. 'Nice- looking little boy. My wife's taken quite a fancy to his picture,' he said. 'Who is the little chap?' I told him, and off he drove."
Nelson Lee was absolutely thrilling with interest. "Have you told the police this?" he asked.
"Oh, yes, sir. I told Inspector Quex when he called about the photos for use in the newspapers. But he didn't attach much importance to it. Nor do I for that matter, sir. You see, it happened four months ago, so it could have no possible bearing on the crime, could it, sir?"
"Perhaps not—perhaps not," said Lee evasively, and presently took his leave.
"The scent is getting hot," he said to Nipper as they drove on, and explained what the photographer had said. "It strikes me that the man and woman in the side-car will be worth finding."
"Fancy Inspector Quex not thinking it important because it happened four months ago!"
"Ah, you see, he's made up his mind that Albert Ryland is the guilty man, and it'll take nothing less than a bombshell to blow that notion out of his brain."
"You are going to see him, I suppose, sir?"

"Presently. But first we're going to the mortuary."
Nipper remained in the car, while Nelson Lee, taking the hat with him for testing purposes, went into the place where the dead child lay. He came out in a few minutes looking very grave.
"Scotland Yard now," he murmured, in a low tone; and that was all he said. Inspector Quex was in his room, and received Nelson Lee at once. "Hallo, Mr. Lee!" he said, with a sort of semi-patronising affability. "What's the news?"
"That's the news!" said Lee, and drew the hat from under his coat. "This is the missing hat." "Certainly looks like it. Tried it on the dead child?"
"I have." Lee's lips were firmly set. "More than that, I've shown it to the grandparents. They swear to it. It's Jackie Reece's hat beyond any doubt."
"H'm! An interesting find enough," said Quex, still with that irritating smile of patronage, "but I don't know that we shall want it. We've evidence enough without."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean that I've arrested Albert Ryland. I've got him in safe custody. I flatter myself I've beaten you this journey, Mr. Lee."
"Maybe—maybe. You're sure you've got the right man?"
"Oh, I think so." Quex rubbed his hands self-complacently. "You see, Ryland's made a confession."
"A confession of murder?"
"Well, not quite that. But he admits having met Jackie Reece a few hours before the body was discovered, and he admits having bought him a sponge-cake."
"Is that all?"
"Enough, isn't it?"
"I don't know. Depends what you've charged him with."
"What should I charge him with except murder?"
"Murder of whom?"
"Well, of all the questions! I have charged him with the murder of the child Jackie Reece, of course."
"You'll never prove it. The charge will fail."
"Fail! No fear! Who'll disprove it?" "If Ryland doesn't clear himself, I shall clear him."
"Will you, though? How?"
"By that hat!"
"Explain yourself." Quex's tone was savage. "I don't follow."
"You asked me just now if I'd tried the hat on the dead child, and I told you I had."
"Well?"
"Well, *it doesn't fit!"*

CHAPTER VI. - The Motive.

INSPECTOR QUEX wiped his brow, and stared like a man who has been shaken suddenly out of sleep.
"Doesn't fit! The hat doesn't fit!" he echoed.
"No, it's two sizes too small."
Quex mopped his brow again, while his cheeks flushed red. The mental pace was too fast for him. He had to pause to think before he understood the meaning of Nelson Lee's words.
"I don't quite see what this means," he said slowly. What's your drift, Mr. Lee?"
"My theory is confirmed. The dead child is not Jackie Reece at all."
"Rot! Rubbish! Bosh!" Quex sprang to his feet angrily. " You told me that wild tale before, and you still stick to it."
"I'm more than ever convinced of its truth."
"And I say it's all rot!" The inspector had recovered his reasoning powers, such as they were. "Don't want to be rude, Mr. Lee, but really you do try a man's patience. I admit what you said just now did carry me off my feet for a minute. But what's it amount to? Supposing the hat is too small?"
"It is, by two sizes."
"Well, what of that? It must have got wet, and shrunk. That's all."
"There's been no rain within a hundred miles of London since the night of the discovery of the body, and I found the hat lodged high up in a tree."
"The dew would shrink it," said Quex doggedly.

"Possibly; but it didn't. I've had the hat measured at a hat shop. It tallies strictly with the size named on the ticket inside the lining."
Inspector Quex bit his lip to keep his temper back.
"You're pretty thorough in your methods, Mr. Lee. I've always said that, and I admit as much now. But you're wrong this time. It can't be the same hat. After all, old Mr. and Mrs. Greybrook's eyesight is bad. They're not to be relied on in a case like this."
"Yet you have relied on them for the identification of the body?"
"Oh, that's different!" cried Quex, but in the manner of a man who couldn't have said how it was different. Then with a sudden, sledge-hammer vehemence he added, "Look here, Mr. Lee! You seem to believe in your own theory, but you'll never get me to. I've got Albert Ryland, and I'm convinced he's the man who murdered Jackie Reece."
"I'm convinced he isn't!"
"I'm going to prove it!"
"And I'm going to clear him because I think he's an innocent man."
"Very good, Mr. Lee," said Quex, with a snap of his big jaws. "Then it's a match between you and me. May the best man win."
"May the right man win," corrected Nelson Lee, and then took his departure.
"Mad!" muttered Quex to himself as he resumed his chair. "Mad as a--"
he was going to say "hatter" but remembering that a hat was involved, altered it to: " Mad as a March hare!"

Nelson Lee had not previously mentioned to Nipper the fact that the hat would not fit, but he did so now. Nipper was deeply impressed. He understood now the meaning of his master's silence and grim look as they drove to Scotland Yard, and also the reason for his calling at a hat shop on the way.
"Things begin to look black against the Rodings, sir," he said. "The thing that bothers me most is why should they have done a thing like this? What motive could they possibly have for kidnapping poor John Reece's child?"
"Ah, the motive!" said Lee, his brows all drawn with thought. "That is what we have to discover. I hope to get light on that matter to-morrow." His first visit the next morning was to Somerset House. He went there for a very special purpose, and in a very few minutes he was pouring intently over the Register of Wills.
Presently he found what he wanted—the entry of the will of the late Mr. Ralph Telford, which had been proved for probate some five years before.
Filling up a form with the index number, and paying the fee, he presently received the will itself from the hands of an attendant.
Eagerly he opened it and read it through. His eyes suddenly lighted up as they came to this clause:

"And I do hereby give and bequeath to my infant son, Noel Telford, all real and personal property whatsoever of which I may die possessed, save and excepting the legacies aforesaid, to be held in trust by Stephen Roding and his wife Phillipa Roding, whom I appoint sole guardians of my child Noel, the said Stephen Roding and Phillipa Roding to have and enjoy the income and profits accruing from my estate until the aforesaid child shall attain the age of twenty-one years. But if the said child shall die before he attain the age of twenty-one years, then I do devise that all my property and estate (with the exception of the legacies mentioned in the preamble) shall be sold by public auction, and the proceeds given, together with the whole of my personal fortune, to the charities named in the codicil attached hereto."

There was more, much more, in the will which Lee read, but the clause quoted was the one which held his attention. He read it through three times, then thumped the table.
"The motive!" he exclaimed to himself. "The motive, plain as plain can be!"
He hurried back to his chambers in Grays' Inn, where Nipper was awaiting him.
"Any news, sir?" he asked eagerly.
"Yes, of a most important kind!" And he recounted what he had found out.
"But would that be sufficient motive for their kidnapping Jackie Reece, sir?"
"Most certainly. Nipper, let me make quite clear to you what the will means. Under its provisions Stephen Roding and his wife are appointed sole guardians to little Noel Trafford. Until he is twenty-one, they have the right to use the income from the estate for their own benefit, but without any power to sell or realise any of the property.

"Now mark. Till Noel Telford becomes a man, the Rollings are to be rich people. But if Noel dies before he is twenty-one, all they get is a legacy of one thousand pounds. Now do you see why it is to their interest that the child shall live?"

"Yes, I see that, sir. But still, I don't see where Jackie Reece comes in."

"You will in a minute. Listen. We know on indisputable evidence that Noel Telford has always been a delicate child. He has been ailing for a long time—his heart being affected. Now, that being the case it must have made Stephen Roding uneasy for a long time past. At any time the child might die, and he and his wife would immediately pass from affluence to comparative poverty. What are they to do except strain every nerve to keep the child alive?

"But in spite of all their efforts (I am just telling you my theory, for I have no proofs of this yet), Noel Telford grows worse. Each day his weakness increases, and each day the menace of poverty draws nearer and nearer to his guardians.

"Then something happens. One day they are motoring along the Walworth Road, and they catch sight of a photograph in a shop-window. They are instantly struck by the remarkable likeness to the little child under their charge. At once they go into the shop, and not only buy a photograph; but make various inquiries about the child. As you know, the photographer tells them he is Jackie Reece, and that he lives with his grandparents in the neighbourhood.

"Yes, sir, I know that. Why did they take all that trouble?"

"I am just coming to that. The remarkable resemblance between Jackie Reece and Noel Telford gives them an idea. It is this: If anything should happen to Noel—if he should die—then by kidnapping Jackie Reece it would be possible to pass him off as their ward, and they would still be left in enjoyment of the property. Now you see?"

"You're making things plainer, sir," said Nipper in astonished tones. "But do you mean that the Rodings murdered Noel Telford?"

"No," said Lee, emphatically, "I don't believe this is a case of murder at all. It's serious enough in all conscience, but not murder."

"But the ribbon round the dead child's neck?"

"A mere blind! Just a pretence to make it look like murder, and to draw a red herring across the real trail. I believe they kept Noel Telford alive as long as they possibly could—it was to their interest to do so. But all their efforts failed. The child died. A perfectly natural death!"

"What do you think happened then, sir?"

"They concealed the fact that the child was dead. They were desperate, and forthwith proceeded to carry out a plan they had already arranged in case of emergency. They conveyed the dead child to London in a portmanteau or trunk. Then they waylaid Jackie Reece, kidnapped him, and effected a change of clothes between the living and the dead child. Having done that, they carried Noel Telford, dressed as Jackie Reece, to Mandale Street Station, and left the dead body in the waiting-room. Follow that?"

"It's as clear as daylight, sir. All except one thing. How could they make sure of meeting Jackie Reece?"

"Quite easily. They had first been made aware of his existence four months previously. In that time, by keeping a careful watch on him, they would learn when he was in the habit of going out, and where he was likely to go to. You will remember that, according to the evidence, the last seen of Jackie Reece was when he was on the way home from Sunday-school in the afternoon?"

"By Jove, sir, you make everything very plain! Of course, they'd have found out that he was in the habit of going to Sunday-school. But what's the next move?"

"To go down to Saxbury-on-Sea to get a sight of the child!"

CHAPTER VII. - The Mystery of Mill House.

SAXBURY-ON SEA is on the most lonely part of the Sussex coast. It is a mere village, half a mile inland from the sea. It consists of but one street, flanked by the grey, square-towered church at one end, and by two mills, both disused at the other.

One of these was a windmill, while the other was a water-mill. The former stood on the top of a hill; on the very brink, indeed, of a steep, chalk escarpment on its eastern side. Over this cliff hung the giant sails, while at the foot of it ran the deep, swift stream that fed the water-mill whose square wooden building spanned the river some forty yards further down.

Both these mills were railed off as part of the property attaching to Mill House, a rambling old residence standing amid a thick grove of trees some hundred yards away.
Down to this village had come Nelson Lee and Nipper by motor, to take up their temporary abode as ordinary tourists at the one inn which the place boasted.
It had taken them very little time to discover that Stephen Roding and his wife were living at the Mill House. The place had belonged to Ralph Telford, and the Rodings were in the habit of spending a few months of every year there with little Noel Telford. They had brought their ward down with them as usual this time.
Also, Nelson Lee had gathered that Mrs. Phillipa Roding was a very handsome lady of Spanish extraction, haughty bearing, and imperious temper. He had, indeed, once caught sight of her walking with her husband through the grounds in the dusk.
But of the child whom he most wanted to see he had not as yet caught a glimpse. The innkeeper informed him that it was the custom for the child to be wheeled out in an invalid chair at certain times of the day, in the charge of a nurse who had been with them for some years.
Determined to attain the object he had in view, namely, to look closely into the child's face, Lee kept a vigilant look-out. On the second day of his stay in the neighbourhood he came near to getting his reward.
From his room at the inn, the window of which commanded a view of the corner of the orchard belonging to Mill House, he caught a glimpse of the nurse wheeling the chair.
He went out at once, and turned out of the village street into the narrow lane skirting the orchard. A wooden fence divided it from the lane, and a dozen yards away, under the budding apple trees, was the invalid chair. Near to it stood the nurse—a tall, gaunt, grim-visaged woman of perhaps forty— a woman of hard, callous nature, as Lee, standing there unseen behind the fence, judged from her appearance.
Of the child himself he could see nothing, the hood of the chair concealing him completely from view. It was important that he should see him, but how was it to be contrived? It would be impolitic to scale the fence and boldly approach. The nurse might be alarmed and prevent his coming near. She would also inform the Rodings, and that would put an end to all hope of seeing the child.
While Lee was debating how to attain his end, his chance came.
A voice called out from the porch of the house, and the nurse walked away in answer to it.
Lee was over the railings in a second. Zigzagging among the orchard trees so that he should not be seen, he approached the invalid chair. Another moment and he would have looked upon the face of the child lying in it. But just as he was about to crane his head round from behind the concealing hood, a quick step sounded immediately behind him. An instant later and Lee felt, himself gripped by the collar and swung violently aside by a strong hand.
A tall, broad-shouldered man stood confronting him, his face livid with rage. It was Stephen Roding!
"Curse you!" he hissed furiously, while his slightly bloodshot eyes blazed like those of a madman. "What were you doing to that child?"
"I was doing nothing," replied Lee, recovering from the surprise into which the sudden attack had thrown him; "nothing to justify your assaulting me in that manner."
"By what right are you here? These are my private ground. You are trespassing. You have come to injure this child. It would serve you right if I sent for the police."
"Do so, by all means, if you think fit," said Lee, eyeing the infuriated man keenly.
Stephen Roding's reply to the direct challenge was a fierce contortion of his face. For a moment he seemed to be wrestling with some inward fiend of mania.
"Out of my sight this moment!" came with wild vehemence. "Leave this place or I will--"
"What will you do?"
For answer Roding's hand flew to his pocket.
"Kill you!" came in savage explosion. And Lee found himself facing the barrel of a revolver held within two feet of his head.
Nelson Lee had faced death a hundred times before, and was ever a brave man. But courage here would only amount to defiance, and to defy this semi-madman would be simple foolhardiness. In his present mood Stephen Roding would shoot on the slightest provocation.
"I will go," he said warily. “There is certainly no need for violence."
He backed among the trees towards the fence, conscious of that menacing revolver all the time. With his eyeballs bulging from his head, Roding watched him vault the fence and hasten away. Then quickly he moved towards the invalid chair and wheeled it back to the house.

Lee hurried along the lane and gained the village street. He found himself perturbed, not by the danger he had stood in, but at the violent attitude Roding had displayed.
What did it mean? Either he was half-crazy in the ordinary way, or had become so by a sudden fear. Surely no normal man would have behaved as he had done in an ordinary case of trespass. It must be a case of guilty conscience, an overwhelming dread that anyone should see the child and so discover the infamous plot in which he was engaged.
"I must see the child and make sure," Lee said to himself. "I must see him without delay. Roding threatened to send for the police, but declined to do so when I challenged him. It is time for me to obtain their assistance myself."
He knew where the village constable lived, and hurried to his house. Police-- constable Barker was out—going his rounds, his wife said.
Inquiring the way he had gone, Nelson Lee set out in search of him. Half a mile out of the village he found him.
"So you want to have a look at the child, sir?" the policeman said, when Nelson Lee had revealed his identity and stated something of his business. "It's a queerish thing to demand as a right. I'm bound to say I've no reason to think there's anything wrong, and if I made a mistake it might mean serious trouble for me."
"If trouble does threaten you, I will explain to your superior officers, and take all the responsibility. I have grounds for thinking that Stephen Roding and his wife are engaged in some underhand business, and it is of vital importance that I should see that child. I ask you to come along with me to the house."
"Very good, sir; but suppose they refuse to let us see him?"
"We must insist. I will take all responsibility. I tell you it is impossible to overrate the importance of this business."
"Very good, then, sir; I'll help all I can"
Reaching the Mill House, they rang the bell. To their surprise, the door was opened by Mrs. Roding.
"What do you want?" she asked, speaking with only a slight trace of foreign accent.
"Beg pardon, ma'am," said Barker. "But we wish to see the child who is under your care."
"The child!" The woman's dark, Spanish eyes flamed with anger, "Why do you wish to see him? What have you to do with him?"
"If you don't mind, ma'am, we'll discuss that afterwards. Please let us see him. I am a police-officer, as you see. It will be best to agree quietly to what I ask."
"Police-officer or not, you have no right to intrude here with such a demand. But right or not, it is impossible. The child is not here."
"Not here!" said Nelson Lee, speaking for the first time. "He was here a few minutes ago, in his chair in the orchard."
"He is not here now. Mr. Roding has taken him away to London."
"To London! Why this sudden departure?"
"To remove the child from danger," the woman answered. "The child has been very ill for a long time. His illness has greatly distressed my husband. He is under the impression that someone is plotting against the child, and only a few minutes ago he found a man in the orchard bent on doing him a mischief."
"I was that man," said Lee. "But I was not there with the intention of harming the child."
"Why were you there, then?" she asked quickly, a sudden spasm of fear flitting across her handsome face.
"I regret I cannot enter into that. Surely we may be permitted to see the child? One glance at his face will be sufficient."
"I tell you it is impossible; the child is not here."
"You must pardon me, madam, if I refuse to believe that."
"Do you wish to insult me?" she fumed, with a great show of indignation which, however, did not deceive Nelson Lee, who was wholly distrustful of the woman. "If you do not believe me, search the house."
They searched the house from top to bottom, but no sign of the child could to be seen.
"Seems she spoke the truth, then, sir," said Constable Barker, as he and Nelson Lee left the house and walked back towards the village. "The child ain't there."
"Not in the house," said Lee grimly. "But I don't believe for one moment that he has been taken to London."
"Why not, sir?"
"Because the way to the station lies along the road we came. We must have seen something of Stephen Roding if he had been going to catch a train."
"That's true enough, sir," the policeman said, stroking his moustache thoughtfully.

"But I'm going to make sure," Lee said. "I'm going to the railway-station.
His visit there confirmed his view. The previous train to London had gone an hour ago, the station-master informed him. Stephen Roding had certainly not gone by that, and there wasn't another for an hour and a half.
"There you see," said Lee to the constable. "It is impossible for them to have gone."
"Seems so. sir; but it's queer for Mrs. Roding to have told that tale. What are you going to do?" "Keep a careful watch on the Mill House until I have accomplished my purpose.
Constable, there's more in this business than you yet know."

CHAPTER VIII. - Trapped in the Burning Mill.

SUSPICION was growing into certainty in Nelson Lee's mind. The deductions of his acute brain were rapidly being verified by facts.
Every action of both Stephen Roding and his wife pointed to the existence of a plot. Their refusal to let the child be seen made it clear that they had something to hide.
So Lee felt himself perfectly justified in keeping a careful watch on the Mill House, and, with Nipper's assistance, at once put this plan into operation.
Turn and turn about they took up their position amid the undergrowth in a little copse running the whole length of the orchard, and extending towards the hill on which the windmill stood.
All through the day they had watched, and nothing had happened: no sign that Stephen Roding or the child were still in the neighbourhood had been observed.
And now night had come. Nipper had watched from six o'clock till ten, while as the church clock boomed out the latter hour, Nelson Lee turned up to relieve him, his intention being to watch all the night through.
"It'll be terrible lonesome, sir," Nipper said. "It wasn't so bad while people were up and about, but it'll be awful with not a soul movin'. Better let me stay with you, sir."
"No, no, my lad. You've done your share for tonight. Cut off to bed and get a good night's sleep. We may have a very busy day to-morrow."
Nipper tried to persist. He had the greatest affection for his master, and didn't relish the idea of his lonely vigil. But Nelson Lee was firm, and after a minute the boy had reluctantly to go away.
With his great coat wrapped closely about him, for there was a chill bite in the air, Lee took up his position in the copse. At present it was very dark, although he knew there would be a moon presently. Already, indeed, it was creeping up above the horizon in the north-west.
He had been waiting about twenty minutes when suddenly a faint scraping sound made him turn and look in the direction of the mill.
The door of the mill tower was opening, and a man was issuing forth.
Lee peered through the darkness. At first he could not make out what the man was like, but half a minute later, as he passed quite close to where the detective crouched, the rising moon fell across his features and revealed him as Stephen Roding! In a moment he was past, and hurrying through the orchard towards the house.
"So he has been in the mill. What for? It can be for only one reason. The child is concealed there!"
So spoke Nelson Lee to himself, and instantly resolved on action. Here was his chance of seeing the child at last. Without a moment's hesitation he moved out of the copse and up the hill.
Half a dozen crumbling wooden steps led to the door from which Roding had come. Two strides and Lee was at the top. He tried the door. It had been left unlocked and yielded to his hand.
He stood now in a short and narrow passage. At the end began a spiral staircase winding up the tower. On the left stood another open door, revealing a small chamber within.
Quickly the detective stepped to it and peered in. Nothing there, save a pile of empty sacks.
He returned to the passage, and moved to the stairway which ran right to the top of the half-ruined mill. Here and there was a landing each giving on to a small room. Lee glanced into each in turn, but all were empty.
Continuing his ascent, he soon found himself quite at the top. He stood within an octagonal room right under the rotating cap of the mill, and lighted all round by windows. Many of these had been broken by wind and weather, as had that part of the wooden wall itself from which the axle of the great sails projected. Of a sudden, a faint moan reached his ears. It came from the floor, from a padded box standing in the corner in the shadow. He stooped instantly, and his heart came into his mouth as he saw that the box contained a little boy! Being at a point too low for the light through the windows to illumine, it was impossible to see the child's features clearly. Full of excitement, Lee felt, in his pocket for matches. He drew out a box and struck

one. As he bent over the box and gazed into the child's face, there came the sound of hurrying steps behind him. Before he could turn, the matches were struck from his hand, and he found himself face to face with two men.

Who they were it was impossible to see in the darkness, nor indeed was there time to investigate. For before Lee could as much as rise erect, the foremost man had thrown himself upon him.

A horrible curse rattled in a husky throat, while the butt-end of a heavy revolver whirled aloft.

Lee essayed frantically to ward off the blow, but all in vain. His outstretched arm was beaten down, and an instant after, the weapon fell with a resounding thud full upon his head.

For a second the detective rocked upon his knees, while his hands clawed at the empty air as he struggled to maintain his senses. But only for a second. Then his head lobbed forward, his body canted sideways, and there he lay, prone upon the floor, with all the consciousness knocked out of him.

How long he remained thus he did not afterwards know, but it could not have been more than a few minutes before, his senses coming back to him, he opened his eyes.

His head ached furiously; a dull, dragging pain seeming to be centred at the back near the nape of the neck. His vision too, was blurred, as he looked round him, and for a minute his dazed condition prevented a clear recall of what had happened.

A slight movement on his part, however, brought his foot into contact with the padded box. In a flash he remembered. The child had been in that—the child whose identity it was all important to establish.

Raising himself to his knees, and clutching the side of the box, he peered inside. "Gone! Those scoundrels, whoever they were, have taken the child away!" Whatever emotions this discovery might have given rise to, were smothered at the outset, something else happening to monopolise all his thoughts.

From beneath came a sudden crackling sound, while to his nostrils rose a pungent smell of the burning of tinderous wood. Half-dazed still, he rose to his feet and tottered to the door.

One push and it flew open. A fearful sight met his eyes. The old mill was on fire; the narrow stairway was one vast sheet of wreathing flame, and his retreat was cut off.

Back he reeled into the chamber where he had been struck down, pulling the door to after him again. But the few seconds during which it had remained open had been sufficient, for the eager smoke to fill the place.

Dense rolling volumes curled everywhere about him, filling his eyes and ears and throat. A fit of spluttering coughing seized him, and for a minute he was on the point of suffocation. Only by a great effort of will was he able to save himself from utter collapse, and stagger across to one of the windows.

Helpless for a minute, he stood there, his fingers clutching the sill, his brain in a mad whirl, his senses brought almost to a state of inability to perform their office.

A threat of fresh danger forced him out of his lethargy, from outside a long tongue of flame licked upward to the window-sill to scorch his fingers.

He stepped back at the sudden pain, to find himself assailed by the flames in another direction. The fire was creeping up through fissures in the floor on which he was standing. Through the soles of his boots such heat struck upward as might have come from a baker's oven. One spiral of flame, finding vent through a broadening crack, curled about his trousers as high as his knee.

What was he to do? To stay where he was meant death for certain, death by burning; while long before that the horrible smoke, growing ever denser and, denser, must bring him to a state of stupefaction.

What could he do? He did not know—could not think, for the reason that the stifling fumes had drugged his reasoning powers. Blind instinct mastered him for a moment—the instinct of self-preservation unguided by judgment.

On hands and knees, he crept to the door. With eyes and ears and throat and nostrils filled with smoke, he hardly knew what he did. But somehow his hands pressed upon the door, and he opened it again.

A mad, disastrous action! In through the door the flames plunged in a perpendicular column. Only a backward fall saved him from being at once wreathed in their terrible embrace.

In gasping, choking agony, he crawled to the window again, fighting, fighting, and ever fighting frantically for breath. But by this time the outer spurts of fire had spread and met, to form a dense and glowing rampart through which the fresh air all but failed to penetrate.

Yet one meagre breath of the revivifying element managed to reach his starved lungs, imbuing him with a semblance of fresh vitality, and serving to clear his brain for an instant.

And in that instant he saw what he must do, recognised the one and only way by which his life might still be saved.

Further round in the octagonal tower the window and woodwork had been broken away. Out from this stretched the axle, and through the rolling smoke- cloud loomed dimly the outline of the great sails.
Across to the open space he plunged. With the strength of despair, he dived through the broken side of the tower and sprang on to the axle. A few feet along this, and he was clutching one of the huge sails.
There was no wind, and the sails were still; but beneath his weight they began slowly to revolve.
Down, down dipped the one he was clutching! As clearly as his half-suffocated condition would allow him, he had thought that his one way of salvation lay in dropping to the earth, trusting to Providence that he might come to no great hurt.
But now of a sudden he remembered something. The sails hung, not over earth, but over the deep and swiftly-running stream.
Amid other sounds—some of which seemed like human voices shouting up at him—came the harsh and dolorous gurgle of the rushing waters.
On the bank of the river, flitting about in the light of the flames with Rembrandtesque effects, were several figures of villagers who had been attracted there by the spectacle of the flaming mill.
For three seconds Lee looked down at them with glazed eyes. For three seconds the heavy rush of the waters reached his ears, as he dangled fifty feet above them.
Then his over-taxed strength at last gave out. His clutch upon the sail numbed, grew weaker, and then relaxed. The next second and he was hurtling down into the madly-rushing mill-stream!
His last vestige of consciousness left him as he struck the water. Like a plummet, he sank, the boiling river pouring over him, filling eyes and ears and mouth, and sweeping him along beneath the surface towards the water-mill forty yards lower down-sweeping him along to almost certain death!

CHAPTER IX. - Nipper's Brave Action.

Groans of horror broke from those assembled on the bank as they witnessed that great and perilous drop. "He's done for! He'll be swept clean under the millstones and crushed to death!" one cried.
"No; we must save him, if possible! Follow me and lend a hand, some of you!"
It was the agonised voice of Nipper who yelled out the words. Like the others, he had been attracted by the fire. He had arrived at the very moment Nelson Lee had started to crawl out along the axle on to the mill-sails. Recognising his master's deadly peril, and realising what he might do, he had rushed back for a long rope, and had returned with it just as Lee's hold had relaxed and he had fallen into the river.
Hopeless of rendering much assistance, yet spurred to action by Nipper's distracted cries, a dozen of the villagers followed him along the bank towards the water-mill.
Beneath the straddling buildings was a sort of sluice-gate, the woodwork **of** which had long been broken by the constant rush of water.
In the light of the fierce glow which the flaming windmill made, the waters were rendered almost transparent. Under the frowning water-mill buildings a range of broken piles could be seen thrusting upward just beneath the water, like a row of jagged teeth with one free and open space between. Against these piles something was presently hurled—a human body.
"It's him!" cried a villager. "Dead and done for already by the look of him See, he's wedged against the piles!"
"No, he ain't; he's washed free again!" cried another. "Look! He's being swept through, right
under the mill-wheel! Heaven help him! He'll be done for now, if he ain't already!"
Spellbound and horror-stricken they stood, as a crowd does that comes eye to eye with sudden tragedy. One alone saw the necessity for immediate and desperate action, and that was Nipper.
He, too, had seen the inanimate figure of Nelson Lee as the turbid waters swept him through that jagged space out of sight. With a prayer in his heart and a desperate purpose in his brain, he had instantly fastened the rope about himself. "Haul on to this!" he cried frantically. "I'm going to try and save him!"
"Try and save him? It's impossible! He's under the wheel by now!"
"Hold on to this!"
"You're a plucky youngster, but it's death to venture!"
"Not so long as you hold on to the rope. Here, do it! For Heaven's sake, don't delay; every moment is precious!"
They saw that. A dozen hands seized the long rope.
With a shout, Nipper slipped down the bank and dropped in. So swift was the boiling stream that he was carried far forward right against the sluice-gate in a twinkling.

For an instant he was brought up against the sunken piles.
"Pay out more rope!" he shrieked.
They did so carefully, a foot at the time, all filled with a fear lest he should be hurled beneath the mighty mill-stones. With Nipper out of the sight, a dreadful hush fell upon them as they awaited the sequel to his attempted act of rescue. Not one among them was there with any hope left in him on Nelson Lee's account; that he had swept beneath the mill-stones and was dead ere this seemed certain. Ten seconds of concentrated agony, and then a shout!
A faint shout, muffled amid the roar of the waters, yet unmistakable all the same.
"Haul away! Haul away!"
No second bidding was needed. With a will the men hauled. Slowly, against the terrific weight of water, Nipper came into view.
And not only Nipper, but another! Nelson Lee, borne like a helpless burden in his arms!
"He's got him, though he's dead, no doubt! Still, he's got him, and that's marvellous, for sure!"
"How did you get at him?" asked one man, as Nipper, bearing his burden, was dragged ashore. "How is it he ain't crushed!"
"Because he wasn't hurled under the stones. I found him wedged against some woodwork, with his head above the water. And he isn't dead--he isn't dead! He's alive! Quick, get him to warmth and shelter, and he'll be all right yet!"

CHAPTER X. - The Cunning of Phillipa Roding.

In the meantime, the two men who had attacked Nelson Lee, and afterwards set fire to the mill, had dashed out of the place, carrying the child with them.
They were Stephen Roding and a villainous-looking man named Safford.
At a shuffling run, they hurried back to the house. At the door they parted, Safford making for the kitchen with the child in his arms, while Roding hurried to a sitting-room on the first-floor.
His wife was there awaiting him.
"Well, well, what has been happening?" she demanded.
"That man, Nelson Lee, was in the mill. He was bending over the child. We knocked him insensible; then we set fire to the mill and left him there, He'll be burnt to death, and nobody will be any the wiser."
The woman's face, hitherto flushed with excitement, went deadly pale. "You fired the mill? Fool to do that—utter fool!"
"Why—why?" His face was all torn with a look of mania as he paced furiously up and down the room. "Phillipa, cannot you see that as long as he lives we shall be in---"
"Hush!" she said, with an imperious lift of her hand. "Cannot you see, my husband, that you are spoiling everything? If you had followed my plan, we should have been safe. We should have remained at the Rookery, as I advised. We should have faced things out—the police, Nelson Lee, everybody. We should have been safe then. Now, by attacking him and setting fire to the mill, you have made things ten times worse!"
"They are bad enough, anyway," he answered. "Whether I have acted right or wrong, there is only one thing to do. We must fly from this place, and take the child with us."
She stared at him aghast, startled by the look of madness in his eyes.
"That would ruin all," she answered. "We must find some better way than that. Stephen, tell me, did he recognise you in the mill?"
"No; it was too dark. Besides that, we were upon him before he could turn."
"Then he has no proof that you attacked him," she said, with a sigh of relief. "But the burning down of the mill is awkward."
He laughed a madman's laugh.
"Not much fear of his making a charge against me. He's dead by now. He'll be burnt to a cinder. When he is found, people will think it was he himself who fired the mill."
She looked at him again, more and more disturbed by his growing mania. "Stephen," she said, taking him by the arm. "You are overwrought. You need rest. Go to your room and sleep awhile."
The man seemed indeed to have wearied himself out, and with his excitement being rapidly subdued, allowed himself to be led away unresistingly.

For nearly two hours he slept, but not soundly. Troubled dreams were with him all the time he lay there. Suddenly he started wide awake, and hurriedly throwing on his clothes, went back to the room where his wife was.
He found her standing back behind the curtains, gazing out through the windows into the darkness.
"Why are you here?" she demanded, whipping round. "Why did you not continue to sleep?
"Because I kept dreaming horrible dreams. I dreamt that the police was after us. I dreamt that Nelson Lee was still alive!"
"Your dream is true," she said in a curious voice, and with her face all pale as she clutched the curtains.
"What do you mean? Was he not burnt in the mill?"
"No, he escaped. He dropped from the sails into the river. There he was rescued."
"How do you know all this?" he demanded in startled tones.
"Safford told me. He heard shouts and went out. He found a crowd of the villagers there, watching the flames, and they told him how Nelson Lee had escaped."
"Good heavens! Then we are undone."
"Not necessarily. He doesn't know who it was attacked him. We must brazen it out."
"Better to leave this place. Better to fly at once with the child."
"It is too late -- listen!"
The noise of a gate opening and shutting had reached their ears. A second after she had extinguished the lamp, and stepped to the window, the blind of which had not been drawn.
"Look!" came in a breathless whisper. "They are coming!" Across the now moonlit grounds, seven or eight figures could be seen advancing along the drive. Nelson Lee and Constable Barker led the way, followed by several villagers and Nipper.
Instantly Stephen Roding hurried downstairs to extinguish all lights and make doors and windows fast. He returned to the room where his wife was, just as the group approached the main entrance.
Almost immediately the whole house resounded with the clang of the bell as Nelson Lee rang it.
"Ring and knock—ring and knock!" hissed Roding, his eyeballs rolling, and all his face working with madness. "You shall never come in here!" To his astonishment his wife walked to the door. "What are you going to do, Phillipa?"
"I am going to admit them!"
"What , and spoil everything?"
"Don't you see that what you are doing will spoil everything? Be guided by me. Brazen it all out. Let them see the child. They can prove nothing, while we—we can prove by a dozen witnesses that he is Noel Telford. Let me go down and admit them."
"No, that I will never do!" he gasped, and gripped her by the arm. "To do that means ruin!"
"It is ruin to defy them. Listen how they are ringing and knocking!"
"Let them ring, let them knock! They shall never enter this place!"
With face all a tempest of mania, he was alternately pacing the room like a caged tiger, or gazing out through the darkened window.
"They are going away—some of them. What does that mean?" he asked suddenly.
His wife, standing beside him near the window, was watching breathlessly.
"They are coming back," she whispered a minute later. "They mean to get in. They bring a ladder—see! They are hoisting it against this window! And look, Nelson Lee is ascending!"
Stephen Roding watched from a distance of a pace from the window.
Suddenly as Lee rose to within a foot or two of the partly-open window, Roding snatched a revolver from his pocket, and pointed it straight at the detective's face.
"What are you going to do?" panted his wife.
"Kill him!"
"Madman, you would ruin all. You would bring us to the gallows!"
As she spoke she threw herself upon her husband. She knocked the revolver from his hand, and with all her strength (she was an exceptionally strong woman) hurled him back.
"Curse you!" broke from his throat hoarsely.
"Leave this to me," was her reply. "Hide yourself away for the time being. I will manage this affair, and I promise you we shall come through all right yet!" Something in her manner mastered him and partly calmed him. Deprived of his revolver, he felt himself helpless. He knew his wife's power, and with returning sanity he was ready to leave her to rescue them from this desperate pass.

"I am going," he whispered, and disappeared.
His wife stepped to the window and threw it up, just as Lee was about to raise the sash.
"What is the meaning of this outrage?" she demanded.
"No outrage intended, madam," the detective answered quietly. "We have come to see the child under your charge, that is all."
"For what reason? What have you to do with our ward?"
"That we will discuss when we have seen him."
"But why do you come this way? My husband mistook you for a burglar. He would have shot you had I not prevented him. He is in very poor health. I fear his mind is somewhat unhinged, and your coming like this has made things worse."
"I apologise, madam, but we could get no reply to our ringing. That is why I was forced to come this way. May I see the child?"
She paused for one second; then a little to Lee's surprise answered.
"I do not recognise your right to do so, but you shall if it will satisfy you, and end all the worry to my husband. Please go down to the door; I will let you in myself."
Nelson Lee hesitated, but one glance at the woman's set face showed him he could rely on her word in this. He descended.
Barely had he reached the ground than the door was thrown open by Mrs. Roding.
"Come this way," she said. "You shall see the child, all of you. I do not know why you wish to see him, but you shall."
Without another word she led the way upstairs and opened a door. Entering a room at the back, she lit a lamp, revealing a cot in which the child lay.
The critical moment was at hand. Lee felt that, and advanced to the cot in a state of suppressed excitement, leaving the constable and the others in the passage outside.
With a candle in his hand he bent over the cot. The little child lying within was not actually sleeping, but seemed to be in a dazed condition. For fully five minutes Nelson Lee examined the features minutely. Then he rose.
"Well," said Mrs. Roding, "are you satisfied?"
"Madam, I am. Who do you say this child is?"
"Who should he be?" she asked haughtily, with a lift of her fine eyebrows. "He is Noel Telford, the child of my husband's dead cousin, who appointed us his guardians. Have you anything more to say?"
Nelson Lee looked straight at her.
"One thing only. I say, madam, that this child is not Noel Telford!"
"Not Noel Telford!" came from her in amazed tones. “Who then is he?"
"His name is Jackie Reece, a child who has been missing from his home in Camberwell for some days past."
Absolute incredulity lived in the woman's face for a moment. The detective's words seemed to hold her spell bound. For three seconds she could utter no sound. Then of a sudden she burst into a mocking laugh.
"You are Mr. Nelson Lee, I am told," she said. "I have heard of you as a very clever man. If this is an example of your cleverness, I can only say the world has estimated you above your value. Mr. Nelson Lee, you are an utter fool!"
He bowed, meeting her smile of mockery without flinching. "Madam, we shall see."
"Yes, we shall see, and see at once," she said, and strode to the door like a haughty and affronted queen. She waved her hand to the policeman and to the villagers assembled there.
"You all know that for some years past it has been our habit to live down here during the summer months?" she said.
"Ay, we know that, ma'am," came in a chorus.
"And that we have always brought our ward down here— little Noel Telford?"
"Ay, that be right."
"Very well. The child has always been taken out for his daily rides, and many of you must have seen him in the past. Tell me, which of you are familiar with his features?"
"I've seen the child a goodish few times," said the constable.
"So've I—so've I," chimed in three of the villagers.
"Good then. Please step forward and look at the child here."
They did so, bending over the cot.
"Now, who do you say he is?" demanded the lady.

"Little Noel Telford." said the constable.
"Ay, ay, he's little Noel Telford right enough," agreed the villagers.
"The same child you saw here last year and the year before?"
"W'out a doubt, ma'am, wi'out a doubt," they answered, a little shamefacedly, and with a somewhat disdainful glance at Nelson Lee.
"Are you quite sure?" the detective asked, taken aback by their unanimity,
"Sure and certain!"
Nelson Lee stood surprised and silent. Mrs. Roding regarded him with a look of triumph in her dark, flashing eyes. In his downcast look and dejected appearance she read deep disappointment, the sense of bitter defeat. His next words confirmed such belief; they implied a shifting of his ground, a desire to cover up an ignominious retreat with some faint show of fight. Even Nipper heard them with surprise.
"If I have been wrong, madam," he said gravely and without lifting his eyes, "I must ask your pardon. But in justification to myself you must admit I had grounds for suspicion."
"In what way?" she asked, in the lofty manner of one sure of her victory.
"Your husband's conduct. Why did he attack me in the mill? Why did he set fire to the mill?"
"Who told you that he did either? I deny that he did. But if he had attacked you, would it have been surprising? Would it have been unnatural for him to think you were in the mill with some evil intent? You had no right there at all, while he had every right to try and effect your capture in order to hand you over to the police."
She paused a moment and looked round at the assembled group.
"Can any of you say my husband did wrong?" she asked spiritedly. "Is there one among you who would not have acted as he did, had you found a stranger in your house or premises, apparently bent on injuring a child who was very dear to you?"
A murmur of assent passed among the villagers, while even Constable Barker, impressed by her words, nodded his head. Nelson Lee, with eyes fixed immovably on the carpet, still remained silent, and looked more dejected than ever. A feeling of sorrow crept into Nipper's heart. Never had he seen his master so utterly beaten. Mrs. Roding pressed her victory home without mercy.
"Mr. Nelson Lee," she said. “You have behaved monstrously. You have chosen on the most meagre grounds to act as if perfectly innocent people had been guilty of a crime. It amounts to malicious persecution, and you deserve punishment. Be sure that if you persist in such conduct, you shall get punishment. Your malice shall be unmasked, and your reputation for cleverness blasted forever. You have overreached yourself for once, and you may think yourself lucky that you have not been handed over to the police. Now, if you have no more to say, leave my house, and never enter it again!"
In her vehement words was so much of bitterness, that almost any man would have been stung to angry retort. Not so Nelson Lee. Defeat seemed to have crushed him so utterly as to have subdued his spirit. He turned on his heel, and without another word left the room and the house.
Nipper followed him, so did Constable Barker.
"You have made a mistake, sir," the policeman said. "I can swear to that child, so can a dozen other people. I'm sorry, but you've made a bad mistake."
"Thank you, constable, thank you," answered Lee moodily. "We are all liable to make mistakes at times."
"I'm afraid I shall have to report the affair to headquarters, Mr. Lee, and I expect they'll communicate with Scotland Yard."
"You must do your duty, constable," answered Lee in a low tone. "I shall not try to prevent you."
"Oh, lor," groaned Nipper as, when they were alone, he looked at his master's dejected face. "Won't Inspector Quex chortle? You've never made such a bloomer as this before, sir, and Mr. Quex won't fail to make the most of it."
"And so you think I've made a bloomer, my boy?"
"Well, haven't you, sir? I never see you knuckle down to anybody as you did to Mrs. Roding."
"Because she is a woman, Nipper. A woman of fiery temper. It would have been worse than useless to have argued with her. Remember, she denied that it was her husband who attacked me, and in the absence of proof, what could I do? Yet I am pretty certain that it was he or one of his accomplices. Who else would have stolen the child away?"
"Of course, I see that, but why didn't you say that to her?"
"Because it would have put her and her husband on their guard. It was better for me to pretend that I was beaten, to leave her to think that I was beaten, and should go no further with the case."
"Then you are not beaten, sir?"

"Wait a little while and see, my lad. But there's no time for further talk now. The mail train to London goes at three o'clock, and we're going to catch it."

That Lee had successfully conveyed the notion of defeat was clear. Hardly had he and the others left the house than Stephen Roding came in to where his wife was. The madness seemed for the time to have passed out of him. He was a changed man, and smiled as he approached his wife.
"Phillipa my dear," he said, you are a genius." She shrugged her shoulders and smiled back. "You heard what took place?"
“Every word, and saw everything through the curtains there. How perfectly you managed everything, and what a bitter pill you gave to Nelson Lee."
"I told you we should come through all right. It is a pity you did not leave me to manage the business right from the first."
"I see that now. How cool you were. How you faced him, and how tamely he took your denial that I had attacked him, or set fire to the mill. But I say, Phillipa, supposing he had insisted on bringing down Jackie Reece's grandparents?"
"What if he did? I should be quite prepared for that. We could bring a score of people from Horsham to swear the child is Noel Telford, just as the constable and villagers here have done."
"But supposing the grandparents *did* come; and supposing they said the child was Jackie Reece?"
"No one would heed them. They are very old, and both are near-sighted. Above all, you forget one thing. They have already identified the dead child as their grandson. After that, what reliance would be placed on their fresh testimony?"
"I see what you mean, and no doubt Nelson Lee saw it too. That is why he didn't suggest it. Oh, what a fool you made him look, what an utter fool."

CHAPTER XI. - Nelson Lee Makes a Fresh Start

BUT in thinking Nelson Lee a fool and themselves so very clever, they were making a great mistake. The detective had his own very good reasons for desiring them to underrate his knowledge and determination to sift the mystery to the bottom.
Arrived in London, he merely visited his chambers for the purpose of getting a bath and breakfast. Then, not troubling about sleep, although he had had none all night, he at once started on the business he had in hand.
His first visit was to Finsbury Square, his cab drawing up in front of a house bearing a brass plate on the door. The plate bore the inscription: "Edmund Bazzard—Dental Surgeon."
"That's the man I want to see," said Lee, pointing to the name.
"Whatever for, sir?" asked Nipper. "You ain't got toothache or anything. What's the game?"
"You will know all about it later on, my lad," said Lee, and rang the bell.
His card secured him an immediate interview with Mr. Bazzard, and for the next twenty minutes, the two were engaged in close conversation. What they talked about will presently be seen. All that need be recounted at the moment is the detective's remark as he bade the dentist good-bye:
"I don't know precisely when I shall return to Saxbury, Mr. Bazzard, but when I do you will hold yourself in readiness to go down with me?"
"Most certainly. I shall be only too happy to assist if I can in clearing up this mystery."
"Where to now, sir?" asked Nipper, as Lee rejoined him in the taxi.
"The War Office. I'm going to call on Lord Kitchener."
"Gee whiz! What are you going to see his lordship about?"
"To see if it can be arranged for John Reece to come back from France for a day or two."
At such a time it was no easy thing to procure an interview with the Secretary for War, but here again Nelson Lee was successful. He was quite well known to Lord Kitchener, and was at once conducted to his room.
"I can give you just five minutes, Mr. Lee," said the famous Field-Marshal with a cordial smile as he shook hands.
"I hope to do my business in less, my lord. I am investigating a case in which the presence of John Reece, a sapper in the Royal Engineers, is highly desirable. He is at present in France. I wish to know if he can be brought back to England for a day or two."
"John Reece—John Reece, a sapper in my old corps," mused his lordship. "Surely I have seen his name mentioned quite recently."

He took up a dispatch, and ran his eye quickly down a list of names it contained. "Ha, here we are. Sapper John Reece, R.E. He has been recommended by Sir John French for the Victoria Cross, for conspicuous gallantry in saving three comrades after being wounded himself."
"He has been wounded?"
"Yes," said Lord Kitchener, with a glance at a casualty list. "Wounded by shrapnel in the shoulder, and ah, this is lucky! He has been brought to England, to London."
"To London, that is lucky indeed. Can your lordship tell me where he is to be found?"
The War Secretary rang a bell. A clerk appeared—received a quick order- disappeared for five minutes, then returned.
"Sapper John Reece is at St. Martha's Hospital," he announced. "There, you hear, Mr. Lee," Lord Kitchener said. "The gallant fellow is ready to hand, though whether you will be able to see him depends on the doctors. Apart from them, you have my authority to act as you think necessary." A word of fervent thanks and Lee was gone.
"Nipper, we're doing famously, much better than I had hoped. John Reece is in London—wounded, I'm sorry to say. I only hope he's well enough to be seen."
But his hope sank when, arrived at St. Martha's Hospital, he saw Dr. Warkworth, the senior house physician.
"Sapper Reece," the doctor said with a shake of his head. "I'm afraid it's useless to see him, Mr. Lee."
"Useless—is he so badly wounded then?"
"It isn't his wound—that isn't much, and he'll recover all right from that. It isn't his body at all. It's his mind. We fear his reason will totter."
"Poor fellow—poor fellow. So bad as that. Effect of shock I suppose?"
"Yes, but not shock of battle. It's the news of a bitter domestic blow received in this very place. I am sorry he was brought back to England. Had he remained in hospital at the base, he would have been spared the fearful shock. You know about the recent child murder at Mandale Street Station, of course?"
"I should think so," said Lee quickly. "It's the very business I have come about."
"Then you probably know that John Reece is the father of the dead child. It is the news of the terrible crime that has so completely knocked him over. It appears that all his life was wrapped up in his little boy, and now—and now--"
"The news threatens his reason?"
"We fear so."
"Would the news that his child is still alive, save him?"
Dr. Warkworth started at the sudden question.
"Why, yes. if such a thing were possible it would do the greatest good, the very greatest. But it's impossible—quite out of the question."
"You're wrong, doctor. It's quite possible. I give you my word, and I stake my reputation on it, that John Reece's child is still alive!"
"Good heavens! What do you mean, Mr. Lee?"
"Listen, and I'll tell you."
And forthwith the detective poured into the doctor's ears a brief account of all that he had discovered. The physician listened in sheer amazement. "If this is true," he said, "John Reese's mind may yet be saved. But how will you convince him that his little boy is still alive?"
"By bringing the two face to face, It is what I want to do. It is the one way of providing the last link in my chain of evidence. Is the poor fellow well enough to travel down to Saxbury-on-Sea?"
"Oh, quite. As I have said, his wound is not at all serious. It's merely a matter of time for his shoulder to heal."
"Then let us arrange for the healing of his mind, too."
"We will, at once. Come along to the ward. I fear it will be difficult to make John Reece understand anything, or even to listen, but you shall see him, at any rate."
The poor fellow was, indeed, sorely stricken with grief as he lay in bed. His arm and shoulder were bandaged, but it was not the sight of his wound that struck Nelson Lee to the heart.
It was the look of utter despair that lived on the poor fellow's face. His eyes were red with the shedding of many tears, but they were dry now with a look of far more tragic hopelessness. It was as if all that he had held most dear and precious had passed out of his life, as if the desire to live himself existed no longer.
He had known Nelson Lee well enough in previous days, but he showed no sign of recognition now. His mind seemed almost a blank—almost, but not quite. One idea was on it, one deeply-graven, indelible idea.

It found expression in the moaning cries that, all oblivious as he was of the presence of other people, now and then broke from him.
"Oh, my little Jackie! My dear little boy! Come back to me! Let me hold you in my arms once again! Jackie, little Jackie, won't you come back to your daddy? Won't you come and play with daddy again? Won't you come and let daddy carry you pick-a-back as he used to? Oh—oh, you can't—you can't!" scalding tears came into the brave soldier's eyes again. "You're dead, they say— Dead, dead, poor little chap! Done to death by some cruel monster!
O-oh!"
The mournful words, followed by the long-drawn, sobbing sigh, touched all who heard them. Nelson Lee had stepped close up to him, and touched him gently. "John, my dear fellow," he
murmured, swallowing hard, "don't you know me? I'm Nelson Lee. Don't you remember me? Don't you remember when you worked at my place?" The wounded man did not answer him, did not even look up.
"Little Jackie, my dear little boy, come back to me!" he moaned again.
"You see how it is," whispered Dr. Warkworth, "one idea—one fixed idea only. He is oblivious of everything else. If this lasts his reason will go for ever."
"But the sight of his child would save him?"
"There is a chance of it, and certainly nothing else can save him."
"Then let us arrange to take him down to Saxbury at once."
"Not to-day, Mr. Lee. He is too prostrate at the moment. But sleep will bring his strength back, and he will be well enough to travel to-morrow."
"Then arrange it for to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII. - The Truth at Last.

Nipper had told the truth when he said that Inspector Quex would chortle over the supposed discomfiture of Nelson Lee.
When, on the morning following Lee's departure from Saxbury, the inspector received the news over the telephone from the chief of police at the nearest town, he threw himself back in his chair, and gave himself up to unrestrained delight.
"What a take down!" he laughed. “Oh, what a lovely take down! To think that Lee, who was
so cocksure about things, should have made such a ridiculous bloomer! How I shall be able to laugh at him in future! What an ass he must have looked! By Jove. I'd like to hear all about this at first hand! And why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I go down to Saxbury-on-Sea and congratulate Mr. and Mrs. Roding on the way they cleared themselves? I can't go down to-day, but I can to-morrow, and, by Jingo, I will! This is altogether too rich an occasion to miss."
So, in his desire to have the laugh of Nelson Lee, who had so often scored off him in the past, behold Inspector Quex journeying down to Saxbury the next day.
The announcement of his name at Mill House gave Stephen Roding a shock.
"Why has he come?" he asked, his face all pale.
"Have no fear," replied his wife. "We are better prepared than ever to rebut any allegation he may make. Remember we have now four independent witnesses from Horsham here who will swear to the child. Leave me to deal with him."
She received Inspector Quex with the same haughty and frigid air that she had shown to Nelson Lee.
"May I ask if you have come to make the same monstrous insinuations that Mr. Nelson Lee did?” she asked.
"Please make your mind easy on that score, madam," he answered, with an easy smile. "Mr. Nelson Lee is a very clever man—at times. But he is not one of us. He is not a police official. He indulges in wild theories which we at Scotland Yard would not entertain for one moment. I have been informed of what happened here the night before last, and I have taken the liberty to call on you to congratulate you on the way you proved Nelson Lee to be hopelessly wrong."
"That is more than kind of you, inspector," said Stephen Roding, who had recovered his colour and now joined in the conversation. "I must say that Nelson Lee put us to great annoyance. But lunch is just ready. Will you honour us with your company?"
Quex, who was considerably of a trencherman at all times, and especially hungry after his journey, intimated that he would be pleased, and an immediate move was made to the dining-room.

They grew quite merry over the meal, the Rodings regaling Quex with a detailed account of how Lee had looked at the moment of his defeat.
"Queerest part to me," said Quex, “is that he should have been so sure the child was Jackie Reece when he had never seen him before. All he had to go on was a photograph."
"There, inspector, you are wrong!"
The words, sudden as a bombshell, startled them all, and made them stare round. There, in the doorway, stood the very man they were discussing!
"Mr. Nelson Lee!" gasped Mrs. Roding, while her husband's face went white again, and Quex's knife and fork stood bolt upright in his hands. "How dare you enter my house again?"
"The importance of the business must excuse the liberty, madam. Inspector Quex, I am glad to find you here. I called at Scotland Yard with the idea of bringing you down, only to learn that you were not there."
"What—what is your business here?" demanded Stephen Roding between his teeth.
"The same as it was before. I wish to clear up the mystery of this child, and for that purpose I have brought certain witnesses down with me."
"This is monstrous, infamous!" cried Mrs. Roding. "The identity of the child has already been proved. In addition, I have four quite independent witnesses from Horsham who will swear he is Noel Telford."
"And I," said Lee imperturbably, "have witnesses who may swear otherwise."
"May swear!" sneered the lady.
"At any rate, madam, you will not object to their being put to the test. If they do not confirm my suspicions, then I shall never trouble you again. Come, Quex, this lady trusts you. You will persuade her to the course I suggest."
Quex shifted irritably in his seat.
"I say, Mr. Lee," he remonstrated, "isn't this coming it a bit too strong? I thought this lady had satisfied you that you had made a mistake two days ago."
"I was not satisfied. I kept silent because I was not prepared with witnesses as I am now."
"What witnesses have you?" demanded Mrs. Roding angrily.
"Two witnesses I consider most important."
"The grandparents of the child Reece, I suppose?" sneered the woman.
"Very little use bringing them," said Quex. "They have already identified the dead child as their grandson. They will stultify themselves altogether if they say different now."
"The very reason I have not brought them down," replied Lee. "My witnesses are different. Come, inspector, I have really good grounds for my demand, and I ask you to support me in it."
Quex whispered aside with the other two. After a minute Mrs. Roding turned to Lee.
"If it will put an end to this annoyance you shall see the child," she said. As she spoke Stephen Roding, white to the lips, sidled towards the door. In a moment Nelson Lee was barring the way.
"Where are you going, sir?" he asked.
"To tell the nurse to have the child ready."
"Please don't trouble. We will see the child together." Stephen Roding bit his lip. For a second he seemed on the point of an angry outburst.
"Keep calm, Stephen," his wife whispered so that nobody else heard. "We shall beat him yet. Come this way."
She led them from the room majestically, and with wonderful outward calm. The child was in his cot upstairs. Inspector Quex gave a start as he bent over it.
"The child is certainly very like the photographs of—of the other," he said. "But then, of course, Mr. Lee's conduct has led one to expect that. The child seems dazed."
"That is his ill-health," said Mrs. Roding.
"Or the effects of drugs," said Lee to himself. "The effect seems to be passing away, though. No wonder Roding wanted to see the child first. Wished to give it another dose, no doubt."
There seemed something in this surmise, for Stephen Roding seemed in a state of great nervous tension and in a great hurry. He turned on Lee irritably. If your witnesses, as you call them, are to see him, let them do so at once," he said savagely.
Nelson Lee stepped to the door, and beckoned. A well-dressed man entered the room.
"I think you know Mr. Bazzard," said Lee, turning to Mrs. Roding.
"The dentist of Finsbury Square," she said quickly, and for the first time she turned pale.
Instantly recovering herself, she held out her hand with a smile. "How do you do, Mr. Bazzard?” she said. "I don't know why you have been brought into this wretched affair."

"Nor I," the dentist answered. "But Mr. Lee asked me to come down."
"Will you please look at the child?" said Lee, and Bazzard bent over. "Is it the same child who was brought to you some months ago by Mr. and Mrs. Roding?"
"Yes, I should say so most undoubtedly."
"And entered in your books as Noel Telford?"
"That is so."
"There, you see!" cried Mrs. Roding, triumphantly.
"Shows you are wrong, Mr. Lee," added Quex.
"One moment," Nelson Lee said. "Now, Mr. Bazzard. What was the nature of the work you did to Noel Telford's teeth?"
"I treated him for caries, and scaled the necks of certain of the lower teeth."
"Signs of your work would still remain?"
"Of course."
"Then I ask you to examine the child's mouth." The dentist did so, and a look of amazement grew on his face.
"This is most strange," he said. "I could swear the child was the same, yet the teeth of this one show absolutely no signs of having been operated on."
"What can this mean, then?" asked Inspector Quex, taken utterly aback by this revelation.
"It can mean but one thing," replied Lee. "It can only mean that this is not Noel Telford. Ha, hold that man, Quex—hold him!"
There was need for this sudden exclamation, for, with a maniacal cry, Stephen Roding had taken a forward leap, revolver in hand.
Quex turned on the instant, caught his wrist, wrenched the weapon from his grip, and held him tight.
"It's a lie!" the fellow roared. "A hideous lie!"
"Calm yourself, Stephen," his wife said again. She was still fairly calm herself, but her face was deathly white, and her features twitching. "It's a lie—a base lie, but it will avail you nothing, Mr. Nelson Lee. As if anyone will pay attention to such evidence. How dare you pretend—you, Mr. Bazzard—that this is not the child we brought to you six months ago?"
"I am sorry, madam, said the dentist firmly, "but I am certain it is not."
"Then who do you say he is?"
"I will answer that," put in Lee. "The child is Jackie Reece!"
"It is a lie!" roared Stephen Roding, struggling to free himself. But Quex, fully alive to his dangerous character, and fast coming round to Lee's way of thinking, held him fast.
"I am going to prove it presently beyond all doubt," Lee said quietly. "As soon as the child has recovered from the effects of the drugs which have been administered"
"Drugs!" Mrs. Roding cried out, with a gasping sound. "Do you say that we have drugged this child?"
"I do, madam."
"How dare you make such a monstrous accusation? On what grounds can you make it? You are not an expert in such things."
"I am a sufficiently trained observer to see the influence of drugs here. It is plain that the child is dazed."
"Bah!" jeered Stephen Roding. "A judge and jury would laugh at such a statement. They would need more evidence than that."
"They will have more, you shall have more—at this moment. You shall have the evidence of one of the most distinguished toxicologists in England." He stepped to the door and beckoned to someone standing with others in the passage. A gentleman, with clean-cut, intellectual features, and wonderfully piercing eyes, entered the room.
"Professor Geard!" exclaimed Inspector Quex, recognising him.
"Yes," said Lee, by way of general introduction. "Professor Geard, the famous expert of the Home Office."
"I have heard of you, of course, professor," said Mrs. Roding. "Under ordinary circumstances we should have been greatly honoured to make your acquaintance. But under the present conditions your presence in our house is a gross insult."
"For which I will apologise most profoundly, madam, if Mr. Nelson Lee proves to be wrong in his surmises," said the professor, with a bow.
"His surmise is monstrous. The child has not been drugged."
"Then, madam, you will have no objection to my examining the child. If he has not been drugged, I can clear you in one minute."

He bent over the cot, looked at the child's face, at the little clenched fists, at the half-rigid limbs, and at the glassy, vacant, staring eyes.
"Well—well!" burst out Stephen Roding angrily. "What have you discovered?"
Professor Geard made no immediate reply to this outburst. He had drawn down one of the child's eyelids and was examining it intently.
"What are you doing?" shrieked Stephen Roding. "What have you discovered?"
"I have discovered that the child has been regularly dosed for the past two or three days with some drug, the influence of which is rapidly passing away." "It is a lie—base lie! This is a foul conspiracy!"
"We shall see. In a few minutes the child will have regained his faculties sufficiently to speak."
"And to recognise anyone he has long known and loved, professor?" asked Lee.
"Undoubtedly."
"Then," said Lee, turning quickly on the Rodings, "I shall prove that he is Jackie Reece beyond all doubt."
"You cannot, you cannot!" cried the woman wildly, and losing control of herself for the first time.
"I can, and I will."
Once more he stepped to the door and beckoned. A moment after, and he was leading in a big, broad-shouldered man in khaki, his right arm all bound up.
"Who is this?" demanded Mrs. Roding hoarsely.
"John Reece, the father of the missing child."
The soldier looked round slowly. His eyes still held some of that vacant look which had filled them yesterday. But now it was less pronounced. Mingled with it was a half-startled look as of a man in whom a sense of wonder was re-awakening.
Some slight power of reasoning was, indeed, beginning to reassert itself, for which good, ominous sign, Nelson Lee was chiefly responsible. Many times at intervals at the hospital he had repeated to the dazed man the news that the child for whom he had grieved was not dead, but alive. And all the way down in the train, both he and the doctor had reiterated the same thing.
As yet the poor fellow had been unable to grasp the happy truth. It had been a shock that had led to the temporary paralysis of his reasoning faculties, and, according to the doctors, nothing less than a counter-shock could restore them to him again. The most that they had been able to do so far was by way of preparation.
Now was to come the test—a crucial test. The sight of his child—if, indeed, it should prove to be his child—would, according to the doctors, act as the necessary counter-shock. It would either restore his reason in a moment, or it would show that his mind was wrecked for the remainder of his life.
No wonder that Nelson Lee and Dr. Warkworth—who had also come down and had entered the room with him—and the others who were aware of how doubly critical the moment was, should look on with bated breath.
Taking him gently by the arm, Nelson Lee led him towards the cot. Not one word did the detective or anybody say. Amid a silence that could be felt, the soldier bent down over the cot.
Five seconds of utter stillness as the eyes of man and child met. To describe the change of expression that grew in the man’s face during those tense moments would be impossible.
But like a lightning flash the vacant look swiftly faded, while from the soldier's eyes gushed a sudden torrent of happy tears.
"Blood calls to blood," whispered Dr. Warkworth. "Prepare for a miracle!"
The miracle happened. Forth from the lips of the man who, a few seconds before had failed to understand anything, there burst the hoarse, impassioned words:
"My Jackie—my dear little baby boy! Thank God, oh, thank God, you are still alive! Why did they tell me you were dead—why did they? Speak to me, Jackie, speak to me!"
One second of stillness. Then, as the little child, freed at that moment from the last influence of the drug, looked at the big man bending over him, his big round eyes stretched wide, a sweet smile came into them, while from his baby lips came the words:
"Daddy, dear daddy!"
A moment of heavenly holiness, this reunion of father and child. Yet because callous scoundrels were present, it was to be marred, outraged, profaned.
With a wild curse, Stephen Roding suddenly broke free from Inspector Quex's hold. At the same moment Mrs. Roding, losing all control of herself, and swayed by the fiery passions of her southern blood, snatched up the revolver which was lying on the table, and pointed it straight at Nelson Lee.

But ere she could pull the trigger, Nipper rushed into the room, followed by Constable Barker and another policeman. One swing of Nipper's arm, and the weapon was knocked from her grasp, while a moment after she was in safe custody.
Almost simultaneously the handcuffs clicked on her husband's wrists as he lay on the floor, to which he had been forced by Inspector Quex.
"Stephen Roding," the Scotland Yard officer said, "you are my prisoner. I arrest you on the charge of kidnapping Jackie Reece!"
Another curse from the villain was smothered by a cry from Lee:
"Look to poor Reece!" he called out. "He's fainting!"
Dr. Warkworth caught the soldier in his arms as he collapsed.
"The effect of the counter-shock," he murmured. "He has fainted, but he'll come to no harm through that."
The doctor was right. The sleep into which John Reece had fallen did him a world of good. When at the end of two hours he awoke, he was quite himself again, master of all his faculties once more, and sane as he had ever been.
To tell of his joy at finding his child still alive would be beyond all words. It was only equalled by his sense of gratitude towards Nelson Lee, when presently he was told of all that had occurred.
"I can't say what I feel, sir," he murmured tremulously. “But for you it would have always been believed that my little baby boy had been murdered. How to thank you, I don't know."
"Don't try, my dear old fellow," answered Lee. “I’m only too happy to have been able to do something for one who has done so much for his king and country in the trenches."
"God bless you, sir!" the soldier murmured. "God bless you!"

CHAPTER XIII. - Brought to Book.

"Mr. Lee I give you best!"
It was Inspector Quex speaking, as he and the detective journeyed back to London that day together. In another carriage were the Rodings, the man Safford, and the nurse, in charge of other police-officers. "You have proved your case absolutely," the inspector went on, with an
ungrudging look of admiration. "You've been right all through, and I've been wrong. There's no getting away from the evidence of the father and child. The moment John Reece cried out as he did, and the little one threw out his chubby little arms and cried, 'Daddy!' it was all over with the Rodings, and they knew it. But tell me again how you first got on the track? You told me before, but, like the fool I was, I refused to listen. Tell me again?"
"It was the child's teeth that first gave me the clue," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "On my first visit to the mortuary, I saw that the dead child had been treated for caries. At the same time I learnt from the grandparents that Jackie Reece had never been in the dentist's hands at all. That convinced me at the very start that there had been some sort of foul play. When, later on, I discovered the hat, and found that it was too small for the dead child, my suspicions were, of course, strongly confirmed."
"Naturally, and to think that, like the idiot I was, I paid no attention to what you said! Well, well, I shall know better next time. It's a clear case against the Rodings, and they deserve to get it hot. What an idiot I've been all along to try and fix the guilt on Albert Ryland! However, he'll be released now before many hours are over."

The trial of the Rodings, and the other people who had been associated with them as accomplices in their villainous plot, caused a great sensation when it came on for hearing.
During the preliminary hearing before the magistrates, such evidence as Nelson Lee put forward bred in the minds of most people the feeling that the prisoners were guilty. But at that hearing the very cute solicitor whom they had engaged to defend them reserved his defence, so that until the scene was shifted to the Old Bailey no one knew what their line of defence would be.
But on the morning the trial opened the news leaked out. One of the most famous criminal K.C.'s at the bar had been retained to defend them, and it speedily became known that he was going to put up a tremendous fight on their behalf.
Inspector Quex got an inkling of this, and came to Nelson Lee in a state of great excitement.
"What do you think of their move?" he said.
"What is their move?" asked Lee, looking up.

"A most startling one! The Rodings are going to plead that even though the child is Jackie Reece, they at least knew nothing of the change until they were charged."
"You mean they are going to plead ignorance of any plot, and to blame the nurse for it?"
"That's it. It's a daring thing to do, but most ingenious. I'm afraid they may wriggle through the net yet."
"No, they won't," said Lee. "The meshes are woven too closely. To tell you the truth, inspector, I anticipated some such possibility as this from a hint I got during the police-court hearing. It's a real lawyer's trick to try and got them off like this, but we are ready for them. I have got three more witnesses; here are their names. I have instructed them to be in court in case they are wanted. You will, of course, call them, under the circumstances."
There was further talk between them, and a whispered conference with the leading counsel for the prosecution. Now the latter had already nearly completed his opening speech, but on resuming it after the luncheon interval (during which the conference had taken place), he launched out in a new direction.
"It has come to my knowledge," he said, "that my learned friend who is appearing for Stephen and Phillipa Roding intends to deny all participation in the plot of kidnapping Jackie Reece, and to plead that even if such kidnapping took place, it was the work of other people. May I ask my learned friend if that is so?"
Mr. Martin Crane, K.C., beamed at his opponent.
"That is to be part of my case," he answered, in the tone of one who was going to win a triumph.
"Then let me suggest to my learned friend that he should at once abandon it." said the prosecuting counsel calmly. "I shall call witnesses to prove beyond all shadow of doubt that Stephen and Phillipa Roding were alone responsible for the kidnapping."
"I must emphatically object!" cried out Mr. Crane, jumping up in great excitement. "Not one tittle of evidence of that kind was produced at the police court."
"Because it was not thought to be necessary. Now that a fresh plea is to be put forward on behalf of the two chief defendants, and an attempt is to be made to put the guilt on somebody else, I submit, my lord, that I am entitled to call fresh witnesses to meet the altered circumstances."
"Certainly, I quite agree," said the judge. “And, in order to expedite the main part of the trial, we will dispose of this point at once. You may call your witnesses."
They were duly called. The first was the photographer from Walworth Road. Stephen Roding and his wife looked sharply up at him as he entered the box, and their faces fell as they recognised him.
Answering questions, the witness told of how, four months before the night the dead child was found at Mandale Street Station, the prisoners had purchased from him a photograph of little Jackie Reece. They had shown an inordinate interest in the child, and had inquired who he was and where he lived. Nothing the defending counsel could ask him was sufficient to shake this witness's testimony. He was absolutely certain that Stephen Roding was the man who had entered his shop.
The next witness called was a tram-conductor. He deposed that, shortly before midnight on the fateful Sunday, he had seen Stephen Roding hand-in-hand with a little boy on Westminster Bridge. He identified the child as Jackie Reece.
The third witness was the driver of a market cart. His evidence was to the effect that in the small hours of the Monday morning he had seen a lady dressed in rich furs in a by-lane at Merton. She had with her a little boy, whom he now identified as Jackie Reece.
The fourth witness was no other than Nelson Lee. In the clearest possible manner, he showed how he had traced a side-car from Merton to the Rookery, near Horsham, and how he had been able to discover that the occupants of that side-car had been Phillipa Roding and Jackie Reece.
The evidence that had gone before had been strong enough, but Nelson Lee's testimony was absolutely deadly. To Stephen Roding it was absolutely the last straw. In consequence of some pain in his foot, he had been accommodated with a stool on which to rest his leg while seated in the dock.
While listening to the damaging evidence against him, he had remained with his face half-hidden by his hand. Now, as Nelson Lee completed the web he had woven around him, the man suddenly leapt to his feet.
With all his features contorted with mania, he snatched up the stool, flourished it aloft, and, with all his force, hurled it across the court, straight at Lee's head. Serious, indeed, if it had reached its mark; but it didn't. Nelson Lee, with his head half-averted from the dock, beheld his danger just in time. He ducked, and the heavy stool crashed harmlessly to the ground. In the space of five seconds the infuriated man in the dock was overpowered by the warders.
The remainder of the trial produced evidence sufficient to place the guilt of the prisoners beyond all doubt.

Medical testimony was called to show how for months and months little Noel Telford had been suffering from an internal malady. From this illness, after much suffering, he had at length succumbed.

He had died a perfectly natural death, and had the Rodings allowed this fact to become public, no sort of blame would have attached to them.

But the death of their little ward meant that their income as guardians would cease, and in their wicked resolve still to enjoy the wealth at their command, the Rodings had kept the death a secret, had placed the dead body in Mandale Street Station, and at the same time had kidnapped the other child who bore so strong a resemblance to him. The silk ribbon placed round the dead child's neck had been adjusted in such a manner as to lead to a suggestion of murder, and so put the police off the real track.

In short, the theory which Nelson Lee had held all along was confirmed to the letter. Never had he presented a more complete case. Even Inspector Quex admitted as much with the utmost heartiness.

The result of it all was that Mrs. Roding was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, while her husband (proved by mental specialists to be unsound in brain) was sent to be detained in a criminal asylum "during his Majesty's pleasure."

The man Safford, the surly gamekeeper at the Rookery, and the nurse, were all proved to have been accomplices in the wicked plot, and were severely dealt with.

As to the villagers who had sworn that the child was Noel Telford, they were deemed in no way culpable. They had acted quite honestly, being deceived by the wonderful resemblance between the two children. Their deception was not to be wondered at, seeing that it was the marvellous likeness of the two little boys which had first suggested the evil scheme to the chief culprits.

Stephen Roding did not long survive his sentence. Within a few weeks of his incarceration, he eluded the vigilance of his keepers and committed suicide in the grounds of the asylum.

His wife still remains in prison, and is likely to do so for many years.

As to little Jackie Reece, he has long ago completely recovered from the effects of the drugging to which he had been subjected. He is once more the joy of his grandparents, and of his father, who rarely nowadays allows him out of his sight.

For John Reece, V.C., did not go back to the war. While his wounded shoulder healed sufficiently for him to pursue his trade as a carpenter, certain injuries to the tissues caused it to be deemed expedient not to send him again on active service.

Nelson Lee's warm friendship for him has intensified, while the brave soldier's gratitude to the detective is of a quality beyond all words.

THE END.

The Boys of Ravenswood College;

or, Dick Clare's Schooldays.

A New Story of School Life. By S. CLARKE HOOK.

Author of the famous Jack, Sam & Pete stories, appearing weekly in "The Marvel Library."

Tom Clare, a rich youngster, joins Ravenswood College, and he soon makes his presence felt. One day news comes to the school that Dick and his chum, Tom, have been drowned, but ultimately they turn up safe and sound.

How Melby Gave a Supper.

No. 7 STUDY was certainly a sight to behold, and as Gowl, the bully, beheld it, well knowing its disreputable appearance the previous day, Dick Clare's embellishments simply astounded him.

It was not so much the costliness of the really beautiful articles of furniture in the little room, because he know that Dick had unlimited means, his mother being enormously wealthy; but how Dick had got that furniture into the college without detection was a staggerer, and Gowl was duly staggered, while Melby opened his mouth and eyes widely, and exclaimed:

"Oh, I say, it must have cost thousands of pounds!"

"You little fool!" snarled Gowl. "You don't know what you are talking about. What do you kids mean by this?"

"The idea is general improvement," said Dick. "Tom and I are desirous of having surroundings in conformity with our aristocratic and exalted notions. We have begun on a small scale, but hope, in time, to get our study decently furnished. It stands to reason that chaps who spend an enormous amount of their time in studying should have comfortable surroundings."

"You senseless little brute! I don't believe you will spend five minutes a day in study."

"That seems an enormous amount of time when you are wanting to be playing cricket or something. But look here, Gowl. I know you are a Fifth Former, and therefore ought to be erudite. May I ask you a question, the answer to which I do not know, but which you will be able to give me?"

"What is that, you silly little ass?"

"Will you kindly inform me what the thump it has to do with you?"

“Yes! I'll give you the answer within five minutes," snarled Gowl. "You will wait here for it."

"I say," exclaimed Melby. "Won't you chaps got into a jolly row. He's gone for Foster. Of course, I'll help you all I can, but you are in for a jolly row. How did you get the things in?"

"We don't want to get you into trouble, Melby," said Dick. "All you have to do now is to say you know nothing about the matter."

"Well, I can jolly well say that when you have told me all about it."

"Melby isn't dogmatic concerning truthfulness," observed Tom.

"You will have to tell Foster, and I shall be in the room when you tell him." said Melby. Besides being a sneak he was fearfully inquisitive. "You may just, as well tell me now, and then I shall know how to dodge his questions, I can always floor him when he starts cross-examining me."

"I am not so sure about that, Melby," said Mr. Foster, entering the room in time to catch Melby's last words. "I certainly never like to doubt a boy's word, but--- Dear me! Are these things paid for, Clare?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have been fearfully extravagant."

"Well, sir, we like the place to look neat."

"I am glad to hear that, but surely you do not require all this luxuriance." "Well, sir, it isn't essential, of course, but it won't look anything like this in, say, a week's time. If we study and upset the ink over the carpet it won't look so well, and the same when we cook sausages, and slop the grease all over the place. I don't think you will consider it too well furnished by the end of the term."

"Now, suppose you tell me why you have furnished the study in this manner, Clare?"
"Well, sir, the fact is we know jolly well that our study will never be notorious for the brilliancy of its occupants. I don't know whether Tom and Melby are clever, but I'm certain that I am not; besides, I detest learning. Well, we wanted to shine somehow, and so I determined on having the best furnished study in the college."
"You had your mother's permission?"
"She bought the things, sir, and I've received a letter from her telling me to be sure and let her know what else we would like."
"Extraordinary," murmured Mr. Foster.
"I would point out, sir, that they must have broken bounds to get this furniture in." said Gowl. "It was not here yesterday evening."
"As you are aware, Gowl, I never strive to make a boy convict himself," said Mr. Foster. "I do not consider it fair, and for this reason, a truthful boy at once confesses; an untruthful one denies it, and unless the fault has been seen--"
"I saw Clare coming in last night," said Gowl. "I intended reporting the matter to you, sir. He came through the Head's private grounds."
"Did you break bounds last night, Clare?" demanded Mr. Foster.
"No. sir," answered Dick, calmly.
"Then how did he get the furniture in?" muttered Gowl, as Mr. Foster looked sternly at him.
"I know he did break bounds, and that is not the first lie he has told, although he appears to have got the character for truthfulness."
"Leave the room, Gowl," ordered Mr. Foster.
"I wish to say, sir, that"
"Leave the room without another word! Go to my study, and remain there till I come."
"I got the furniture in late last night, sir," said Dick; "but Gowl did not see me coming in, for the simple reason I never went out. I certainly opened the gates, and borrowed the key for the purpose."
"Under all the circumstances of the case I intend to let the matter drop," said Mr. Foster, after a pause.
"Thumping glad it wasn't me," murmured Melby. He had not intended his master to hear him, but he did.
"Your remark was uncalled for, Melby," said Mr. Foster, "and it was ungrammatical, You should have said, ' it was not I.' "
"Just my luck. I didn't mean you to hear, sir, else I'd have been more grammatical—and have said something quite different."
"Do you wish to insinuate that I have favoured Clare?"
"Er—no, sir. Oh, certainly not; but I mean if it had been—er—I—me—if it had been myself, I wouldn't have been so lucky."
"I never punish a boy who is perfectly straightforward, unless it is a fault that must be punished for his own sake, and as an example to others."
"But suppose Gowl goes and copies Dick, and buys about five thousand pounds' worth of furniture for his study, sir. And suppose after that——"
"I cannot go as far as the first supposition, Melby," observed Mr. Foster "It is extremely unlikely, and when such a case arises—-should it ever do so-- I will deal with it. Your ideas concerning the value of furniture are faulty."
"You are a silly owl, Melby," exclaimed Clare, when Mr. Foster had left the study. "You were thinking of shillings, not pounds; but it's near enough for you."
"I tell you what it is," exclaimed Melby. "This isn't half bad, and it will suit me down to the ground. I'm an excellent musician on the piano, and that looks a decent one. Besides, this easy chair is just my mark. I say, Dick, it was jolly plucky of Gowl to report you, considering that you might tell all you know about him. Oh, it's no good denying it, and if you were as straightforward as you have kidded Foster to believe, you would tell me all about it. Gowl is always bullying me, and I'd jolly soon put a spoke in his wheel if I knew his secret. I know it's jolly serious."
"You don't know anything about a secret," retorted Dick, "and you never will know."
"Still, Gowl has got his knife into you, and I'll bet he makes you sorry before he has done with you."
"He can go and drown himself."
"He's a jolly lot more likely to drown you, especially if your secret is anything like serious."
"Come on, Tom," exclaimed Dick. "Melby makes me tired."

Then Melby spent a quarter of an hour examining the various articles in the study, after which he brought in a lot of youngsters to view it, and he always spoke of the furniture as belonging to "us," until he really began to look upon himself as owning a third share, and when Dick accidentally upset a bottle of ink over the carpet, Melby was quite annoyed with him, and told him he was beastly careless, and that he ought to be ashamed of himself damaging the study like that.

On Wednesday afternoon Dick and Tom had made certain arrangements concerning a little outing, but they kept the matter secret, as Melby was not to be one of the party.

They were making their way to No. 7 with a view to making final arrangements for their expedition, when Dick stopped in the passage.

"Oh, my eyes," he gasped. "What a ghastly, horrid row. It's like a blessed cat having its tail twisted!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom. "I believe it's Melby singing."

"I'm jolly certain it isn't," said Dick. "It may be Melby trying to sing, and play the piano, but he isn't succeeding. I don't know whether the masters will stand music, but I'm downright certain they won't stand that row. They will think banshees have broken loose. Let's have a look at him."

Melby was trying to worry out, "Home, Sweet Home." The noise he made bore a slight resemblance to the tune, but that was all.

"Oh, come in, Dick," he exclaimed, stopping the ‘music.’ "I've invited a few chaps to supper to-night, and was just rehearsing a bit. I say, we ought to give them a jolly good supper. If you like I'll choose the things."

"Right you are," exclaimed Dick. "Are you going to sing many songs?"

"You bet I am. I've told them it's supper and music. The supper has fetched them a treat, and--"

"I'd say the music will drive them away," observed Dick.

"I don't think so. They all said they liked it."

"The 'it' must have referred to the supper," said Dick. "They couldn't possibly like the music, and I don't believe the masters will, either."

"Oh, bother the masters! They often do things we don't like. But about the supper. How much would you like me to go to?"

"Aren't you going to buy it?"

"Yes, but seeing that you are going to pay for it, it is only right that you should decide the amount. Suppose I say half-a-sovereign?"

"All right!" exclaimed Dick.

"Or a sovereign?"

"Why not stick to half a sovereign?"

"Well, I tell you what. We don't want to underfeed our guests. Let me have fifteen shillings, and if I don't spend it all I will give you the change. Thanks. Now, what do you think of 'Home, Sweet Home?' "

"I'd say it would be a rotten place with the row you were making in it,"

"Row! Bother it! What did you think of my voice, Tom?"

"It's like an ungreased cartwheel with the skid on it."

"Rats! I often sing at concerts, and-"

"I wonder the audience don't shoot you," said Tom. "But, look here, we may be a bit late for supper, so don't you wait for us."

"I'm jolly well not going to!" snarled Melby, who was most offended at the disparaging remarks concerning his voice. "When I give a supper, I never wait for anyone. If my singing isn't good enough for you it is for other people."

"Then I hope they will enjoy it to-night," retorted Dick. "Come along, Tom. It's no good us taking too much enjoyment in one day. I expect we shall be able to get enough this afternoon without bothering about Melby's caterwauling to night. We can leave that enjoyment for his guests and the masters."

"I don't believe this beastly piano is in tune," said Melby.

"It won't matter," answered Dick; "for I'm jolly certain your voice isn’t. You would want a piano tuned for every note you howl out, because you are jolly sharp, and at others you are dismally flat."

"I don't care"

"The masters will."

"I can sing a jolly lot better than you!"

"That's not the point, Melby. The point is that you don't sing well enough for masters to stand. They have got to try to educate me, and teach me that 'malus' means an apple-tree."

"It doesn't, It means 'bad.' "

"Very well. I stand corrected. Now I am going to try to educate them to bear one song a night. Never more; sometimes less. If they will bear my hooting all well and good. If not, we will turn the blessed piano into an aquarium."
Then the chums hurried off, and as they passed their study window outside they heard some hideous yells, accompanied by crashes on the piano, and the combination slightly resembled the air of “Home, Sweet, Home."
"I wish I hadn't bought a piano," murmured Dick, while Tom laughed.

A Perilous Escapade.

The pair made their way to the shore, and on the beach appeared a small sailing-boat; standing
beside it was Bill, the boatman. He was a notorious character at Ravenswood, and he was a man of striking appearance—and temper. In height he was about five feet, but as he scaled sixteen stone there was quite enough of him. His face was like the rising sun on a foggy morning.
"You are late!" he growled. I dunno why the thunder boys can't be punctual!"
"Got the provisions in, Bill?" inquired Dick.
“Of course I have, and a gallon of ale, ‘cos I thought you might like that. Mind it’s two bob the hour, ‘cos she’s got a sale, and you will have to pay for the hour you've kept me waiting. I don't quite like the look of the weather, but we sha'n't go out fur. Now, jump in, and I'll shove her off. You can keep her bows straight with that ere boathook."
And Dick winked at Tom, who tried to look serious.
Bill had brought his boat in stern first. The tide was ebbing, and he kept her afloat on the shelving beach. Dick grabbed the boathook, while Tom got possession of an oar, which he used to help shove the boat off.
Bill placed his portly back against the boat's stern, and his weight shifted her slowly; but at that moment a big wave rolled in, and the chums put forth their whole strength. The boat shot forwards, and Bill shot backwards. That wave rolled over all of him except his legs which waved above its foam.
"Have you got wet, Bill?" inquired Dick, keeping the boat off the shore.
Bill stood up. The Head had warned him that if he ever used profane language in the presence of the boys, his boats would be put out of bounds, and he knew this warning would be enforced. He gazed at the chums, and his face turned purple, while his fists and teeth were clenched.
What he muttered was inaudible, and for quite a couple of minutes he looked as though he were about to have a fit. Then he spoke, and his words came in a furious howl.
"Bring the thundering boat back, you little varmints!"
"Look here, my dear Billium," exclaimed Dick, "you are damp! If we took you you might catch rheumatism, and that is painful. You would get spasmodic kinks in your fat. Go home and dry yourself, then we will take you some other day. You can't come now. We shall be back at about seven or eight. We are all serene until half-past eight. Oh, go home, you silly man! Don't make that gurgling noise. You will frighten the fish, and there's the possibility of your frightening us; but it isn't probable."
"Will you come back?" howled Bill, stamping about in his impotent fury.
"We hope so. At any rate, we shall do our best. Can you sail a boat, Tom?"
"About as well as Melby sings."
"Then you've a lot to learn—you have really."
"There will be a row, Dick."
"There is a row, and Bill is making it, but it isn't having any effect. We are not going to take you, Bill, so it is useless for you to make that disturbance. You are only exciting yourself. You will be all skin and bones if you go on like that. We are off, my dear man."
Dick commenced to hoist the sail, and Bill knew further threats would be futile. He needed consolation, and thought of the gallon jar of ale.
"Well, if you will go I can't stop you!" howled Bill. "But if you are drownded —and you will be—I shall call on you to bear witness it was against my orders. And before you go, jest fling out that ale. Throw it into the sea---"
"Certainly, my dear man," answered Dick, uncorking the jar, and pouring the beer into the water.
This was more than Bill could stand. It was the last drop, and overflowed his cup. The Head's warnings were ignored, and Bill let himself go. He had once been a Thames bargee, and it was only when the boat was well out at sea that the chums heard the last of it. "I fancy we have made him angry, Tom," observed Dick.

"Ha, ha, ha! He certainly sounded like it," roared Tom.
"Well, we don't want him" said Dick. "He would be in our way, especially as he says we are not going out far. If we want to reach the island, and encamp there, we are bound to go out far. Then again, if the wind drops, and we have to row---"
"It isn't going to drop," said Tom, glancing to windward where angry clouds were gathering. "It's going to increase."
"So much the better."
"I don't know that."
"Well, it will save us rowing." observed Dick, handling the helm with more skill than Tom had given him credit for. "I don't like rowing in a heavy boat, and this is a heavy one. As she only carries a lug-sail and foresail she's handy to manage sailing. There's the island. It will be quite a simple matter to reach it."
Tom had an idea that it would not be such a simple matter to reach the mainland afterwards if a storm arose, but he was not one to raise difficulties, and Dick certainly knew how to handle the boat, even Tom's limited knowledge convinced him of that.
The island in question was small, but there were several trees on it, while bushes grew densely. Dick declared it was a splendid place for a picnic, and that the storm would pass away. Then he gave Tom directions to lower the sails. But as Tom stood up a fierce gust of wind caught the little boat, and Dick luffed with a suddenness that caused Tom to stumble backwards over the thwarts, and sit with a dismal crunch on their basket of provisions, which
was an open one.
Yellow spurts shot upwards then showered on Tom, while Dick shouted with laughter.
"Ha, ha, ha! I believe you've broken some of our eggs, old chap!" he exclaimed.
"Oh thump!" gasped Tom. "I believe I've broken a good many of the beastly things. How many were there, Dick?"
"Two bob's worth."
"Then you can bet I've broken twenty-four, assuming that they were penny ones, and some of them smell like halfpenny ones which came from Germany before the war."
"Well, never mind. We have got plenty of bacon, and you can't have squashed that. I'm a little worried about the jam tarts."
“I'm more worried about the eggs!” exclaimed Tom, extricating himself from the basket and lowering the sails, while Dick shook with laughter, for Tom was in a fearful mess.
They landed without difficulty, and then lighted their camp-fire. Dick had brought an axe, but they really did not need it, for there was plenty of dead wood round about.
"We will bake some potatoes in the ashes," observed Dick. "Here's the frying-pan. Would you like to fry the bacon?"
"Well, I'm not sure that you would care to eat it afterwards," answered Dick. "You see, I have never fried bacon. I have fried sausages." "It's much the same thing."
"In that case you wouldn't be able to eat the bacon," said Tom. "I shoved the sausages on the fire and forgot all about them. When I went back to the study the blessed things were about red-hot, so was the frying-pan, and I got a hundred lines for the fumes. They spread all over the college, and nearly choked the masters. That's the worst of masters; they are so jolly particular!"
"Perhaps I had better fry the bacon," said Dick. "You've squashed eggs all over it, but that won't matter. You generally have eggs with bacon."
"So you do," assented Tom. "But you don't smear the eggs over it as though it was fried soles. I wish the wind would keep in one direction; the beastly smoke keeps blowing into my eyes!"
"That's nothing," said Dick. "Shove the potatoes in the ashes. They are jolly good baked in a bonfire, if you do them properly."
Dick's task of frying the bacon was almost impossible. He dodged round the blazing fire to get to windward; then the wind came sweeping round, blowing smoke and hot ashes into his eyes, and Tom felt thankful that he had not undertaken the task.
"I tell you what, old chap!" exclaimed Dick, with tears streaming down his cheeks. "I'll shove the frying-pan like so, then leave it till it's cooked. After that we can eat it, and---"
"Bothered if I'm going to eat a cooked frying-pan!" observed Tom.
"Rats! I'm talking of eating bacon!"

"It sounded as though you were talking of eating a cooked frying-pan!" Do you think that bacon will get smoked?"
"Not likely! Besides, smoked bacon is the best, I believe. How long do you cook it for?"
"Not as long as I cooked those sausages. I don't know any more than that. Eggs take three minutes, but I don't know how long bacon takes. I should say half an hour would be ample."
"Bother! I'm not going to wait half an hour. Look here, we will have a few jam-tarts while we are waiting. There are some that you haven't smashed, and there's plenty of ginger-beer."
This part of the feast was all right—so good, in fact, that the chums began to look forward to the bacon.
"It must be done by now!" exclaimed Dick, dodging the smoke and grasping the handle of the frying-pan, which was nearly red-hot.
"Wah-yooh!" he yelled, hurling it into the air.
Three rashers of bacon landed on Tom's head, while Dick received the frying- pan and the scalding grease; and the way he danced about struck Tom as funny, although he himself looked odd with the rashers of bacon on the top of his cap.
"The beastly thing was hot!" exclaimed Dick. "Ha, ha, ha! If you give a leap in the air and a snap, you will catch the blessed bacon. It's reposing on the top of your head. See if you can work the trick, Tom. Our old dog can do it with a lump of sugar, so I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to do it with bacon."
"I'm not snapping at bacon cinders," said Tom, removing his cap. "Look here, Dick; it's foolish to bother about rancid bacon, when we've got tarts. We will finish up our cooked provisions, and chuck the rest away. We are going to have a frightfully rough voyage back. It's blowing great guns, and when the tide turns it will be jolly rough."
"That doesn't matter," declared Dick. "It makes it all the more exciting. Fire ahead! It will take us some time to get back, as we shall have to keep tacking. The wind appears to have shifted, and it will be against us."

Meantime, Melby was practising his songs. Then he went out for the provisions, and ate a good many tarts for his tea. After that he prepared the supper, and made a really excellent spread.
"Seems almost a pity I invited those bounders!" he mused, gazing at the good things. "Still, I wanted them to see our study. I'll just ask Vance if Tom and Dick have come in."
Vance really did not know. He generally slept a little in the afternoon, and guessed which boys had come in, if questioned. On this occasion he considered it most unlikely the chums should have come in before they were compelled, so he said they had not; and he was still discussing the matter when Bill, the boatman, who had changed his drenched clothes, came in.
"I have to report two boys drownded," he said. "They took my boat without leave, and was smashed up off the rocks. There will be ten pounds to pay for the boat. She's on the rocks, broke to pieces, and---"
"Oh, I say!" yelled Melby. "Here, come this way, Bill, and tell Foster the news. Follow me; I'll break it to him gently. The Head is out, else I would break it to him."
Then Melby dashed along the passage, and flung Mr. Fosters door open with a crash that so startled the master that he upset the ink-pot all over the exercise he was correcting.
"Oh, I say, sir!" yelled Melby. "Dick and Tom are drowned, and their corpses are lying on the shore! Their boat is broken to splinters, and they've got to pay ten pounds damages. Here comes Bill, but, as I was the first to learn the sad news, I thought it better to break it to you gradually, so that it mightn't give you a shock."
"What is this, William?" inquired the master, gazing at Bill's stolid face in dismay.
"The two young gents are drownded, sir! Took my boat without leave, and got caught in the storm. I was going to take "em out for a short distance, but the dratted young-- but the poor young gents went by theirselves and are drownded. I'm sorry for their parents, but it serves 'em right!"
"Come down to the shore at once," said Mr. Foster, hurrying from the room. "Surely this terrible news cannot be true?"
"But it is, sir!" declared Melby. "Their lifeless forms lie on the beach! Bill saw them."
"No, he didn't!" growled Bill.
And Mr. Foster felt a little relieved.
"Why, you said you did!" declared Melby.
"That's pretty thick, too!" growled Bill. "I said I saw the boat!"
"Well, that's the same thing. You said they were drowned, and I naturally took it for granted that you saw the corpses."

"I wish you would remain silent, Melby!" said Mr. Foster sternly. "One would expect you to be grieved at the terrible news, and you are only excited. Your behaviour is callous!"
Melby was quieter after the reprimand, because he knew that if he spoke again he would be sent back, and he wanted to take an active part in the affair.
Mr. Foster spent an hour on the shore, but Bill declared it was useless, because the tide would have been bound to carry the bodies away.
At last the master returned to the college, and Vance informed him that the Head had just come in, but that the news had not yet been reported to him.
"I am going to tell him now, sir, but he's only just this minute arrived. I heard the motor-car come past.
"Leave me to tell him, Vance," ordered Mr. Foster.
"Shall I break the news to him, sir?" inquired Melby. "I shall do it better than you."
"Certainly not!"
"Well, you see, sir, if you tell him, he will at once believe you, and get his shock. But if I tell him, he won't believe a word I'm saying, because he never does; and by the time he sees I'm speaking the truth, like I invariably do, it will have come to him gradually."
"Follow me, boy!" ordered Mr. Foster, intending to leave Melby in No. 7, so that he should break no more news in his gentle manner.
He entered the study, then uttered an exclamation of surprise, while Melby uttered a cry of rage.
Dick and Tom were seated at the table, and, judging by the appearance of the feast, they must have been seated there for a pretty considerable time. They had certainly run the boat on the rocks, but had swum ashore, the distance not being great and both of them being excellent swimmers. They had had time to change their clothes, and, being fearfully hungry, had consumed the supper, finding no guests there.
"Oh, I say!" cried Melby. "You horrid gluttons! Why, you have wolfed all my provisions! That's stealing—mind, Dick, there's no other word for it. I don't believe Mr. Foster will overlook theft. I know you are a favourite of his, Dick, but---"
"Your conduct is disgraceful, Melby!" said Mr. Foster. "Surely you ought to be as thankful as I am that the lads' lives are spared?"
"Well, I can't see that, sir," muttered Melby. "They haven't stolen your supper. Perhaps, if they had, you wouldn't be so jolly thankful that they weren't drowned.
"Preposterous!" fumed Mr. Foster.
Then he asked for an explanation, and received an account of what had happened.
"Do I understand that you hired the boat, Clare?"
"Yes, sir. Bill wanted to come with us, but I dodged him. We couldn't see the rocks, but there
was no real danger. It was nothing of a swim."
"What about my provisions, sir?" cried Melby. I invited some fellows to supper, and now what am I to give them?"
"Were these provisions yours?" demanded Mr. Foster.
"Yes, every one of them, sir. I bought them this afternoon, and there will be a jolly row when the fellows find these greedy brutes have yaffled up the little lot!”
"Do not use that slang, boy!" said Mr. Foster. "What made you take the provisions, Clare?"
"Well, we were jolly—inordinantly hungry, sir!" said Dick, glancing at his master.
"Come, my lad! I expect a better reason than that from you."
"Well, sir, I considered that I had a right to the provisions."
"Why?"
"Because I paid for them, sir!"
"Oh, I say, of all the horrid sneaking!" cried Melby. "We don't allow sneaking at Ravenswood!"
"There's nothing to sneak about," said Dick. "They were your provisions, in a sense, and you did buy them. At the same time, seeing that I paid for them, I considered we had the right to go whack—to participate."
"All right!" cried Melby. "Here comes the doctor, and he's jolly furious, I can see! Now you are in for it, and serve you jolly well right!"
And as Melby spoke the Head entered the study.
The Head gazed round No. 7 Study with an expression of surprise. Mr. Foster had mentioned the matter to him, but he was certainly taken aback by the sumptuous manner in which Dick had renovated and refurnished the little room. The doctor did not look best pleased.
"If you please, sir," cried Melby, "I think it only fair to myself to state that I did not buy this furniture!"

"I am quite aware of that, Melby," said the Head drily.
"Neither did I go out in the boat, nor help smash it up, sir. But perhaps you do not know of that. But Mr. Foster will have to report it, so-----"
"I know all about it," said the doctor. "Hart and Clare told me."
"Oh, my eyes!" gasped Melby.
"What is that you say, boy?" inquired the Head.
"It was an--er---explo---expla--- No; an explotive."
"Try explosion." muttered Dick.
"I assume you mean an expletive," said the Head, glancing at Mr. Foster. "I met these two boys coming in after the accident, and they told me everything."
"I'll bet they didn't," muttered Melby.
"Yes, we did," said Dick. "It wasn't a virtue; it was a necessity."
"I have dealt with the matter," said the doctor. "The only fault was in connection with the boatman, and taking the boat without his sanction. There was no harm in going on the water: nor could the storm have been foreseen. Why did your mother send a piano, Clare?"
"She thinks I can sing and play, sir. Melby thinks he can do the same, but--- well, I've heard him"
"And you think you can do better?" inquired the doctor, smiling.
"Well, sir, there's not much thinking about the matter. I couldn't possibly do worse. I don't believe if I tried my hardest I could make the unholy row that Melby can without trying at all. It comes quite natural to him.
"Let me hear a sample of your work, Clare," ordered the Head. "Your mother has written asking me to give her my candid opinion of your capabilities. I wish to form an opinion as to your qualifications."
"Just my luck, Tom," murmured Dick, seating himself at the piano and striking the cords of "When the Angelus is Ringing." Then he sang the song in a voice that might have brought him a fortune had he needed it. Not only was his voice a very beautiful one, but his accompaniment was in quite professional style.
The masters looked at each other in surprise.
"I shall be able to give an excellent report concerning your musical ability, Clare," said the Head. "As regards your studies, we must hope the same remark will apply."
"I'm not so sanguine as that, sir," said Dick, shaking his head despondently. "You see, I have worked hard at music, because I like it. Now, I don't like lessons. I never have, and never shall."
"Perhaps you have never tried," suggested Mr. Foster.
"Quite correct, sir."
"A strange lad," exclaimed the Head as he left the study.
"Remarkable. I believe him to be absolutely truthful."
"Is he backward?"
"Yes, in a sense. There are many simple things he does not know. He has excellent ability, and if he can only be convinced that it is his duty to work he will do it. Of that I feel certain. He will get into many scrapes, but there will be nothing vicious about them, I believe."
"I formed a similar opinion," said the doctor. "I purposely put Melby in their study in the hope that he might learn the virtue of truthfulness from their companionship. Hart is also very straightforward. In telling me about the boat accident, Clare candidly admitted that he would not have confessed had I not met him."

Printed and published weekly by the proprietors at The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, England. Applications for Advertisement space should be addressed to the Manager, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. Communications for the Editor should be addressed—"The Editor, NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London E.C. Agents for Australia: Gordon & Gotch, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z. South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town and Johannesburg.

No. 3 D