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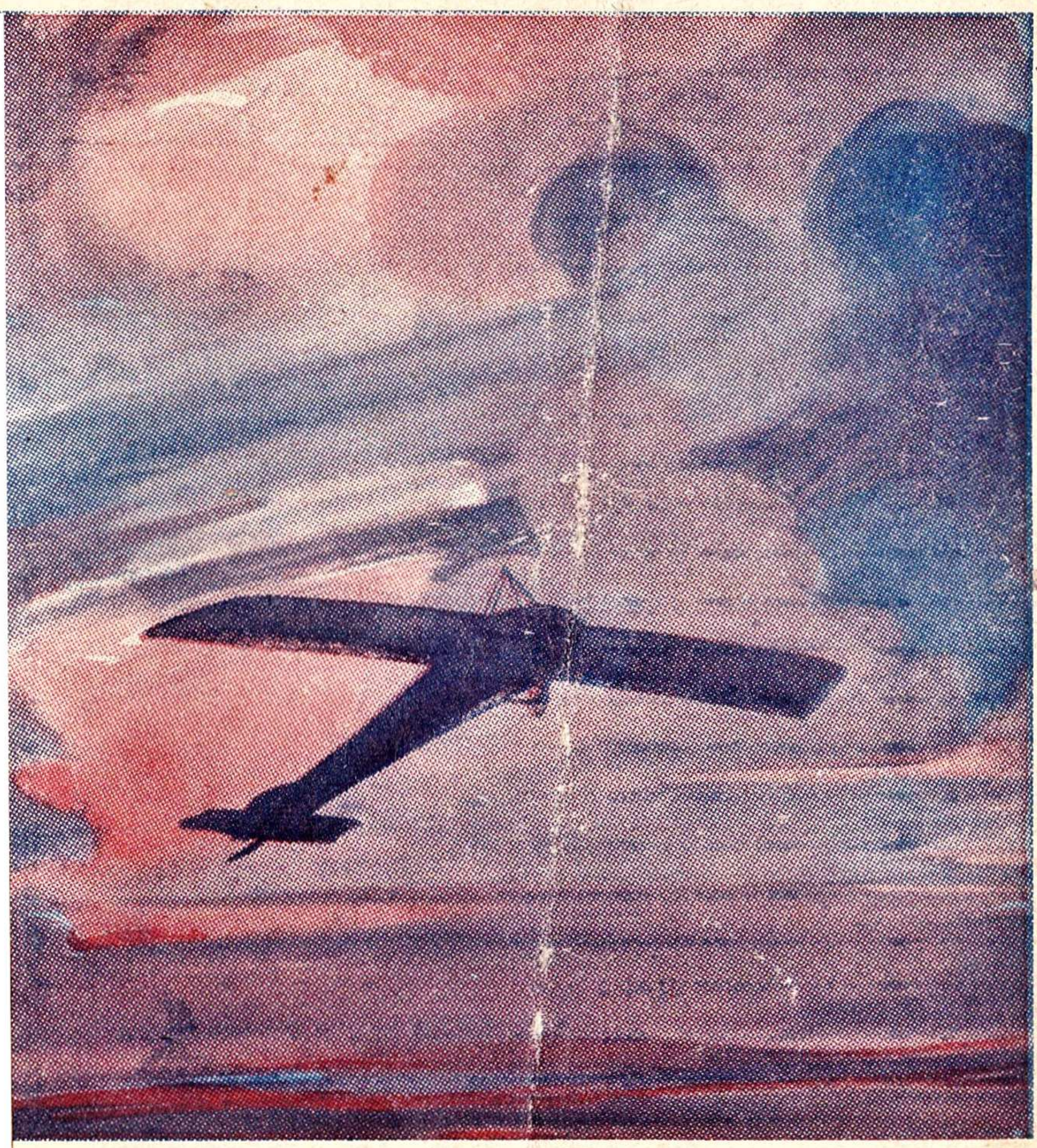

LOOT!

A TALE OF NELSON LEE AND NIPPER AND "THE BLACK WOLF."

the Author of "The Great Air Mystery," "The Crimson Disc," and other Stories.

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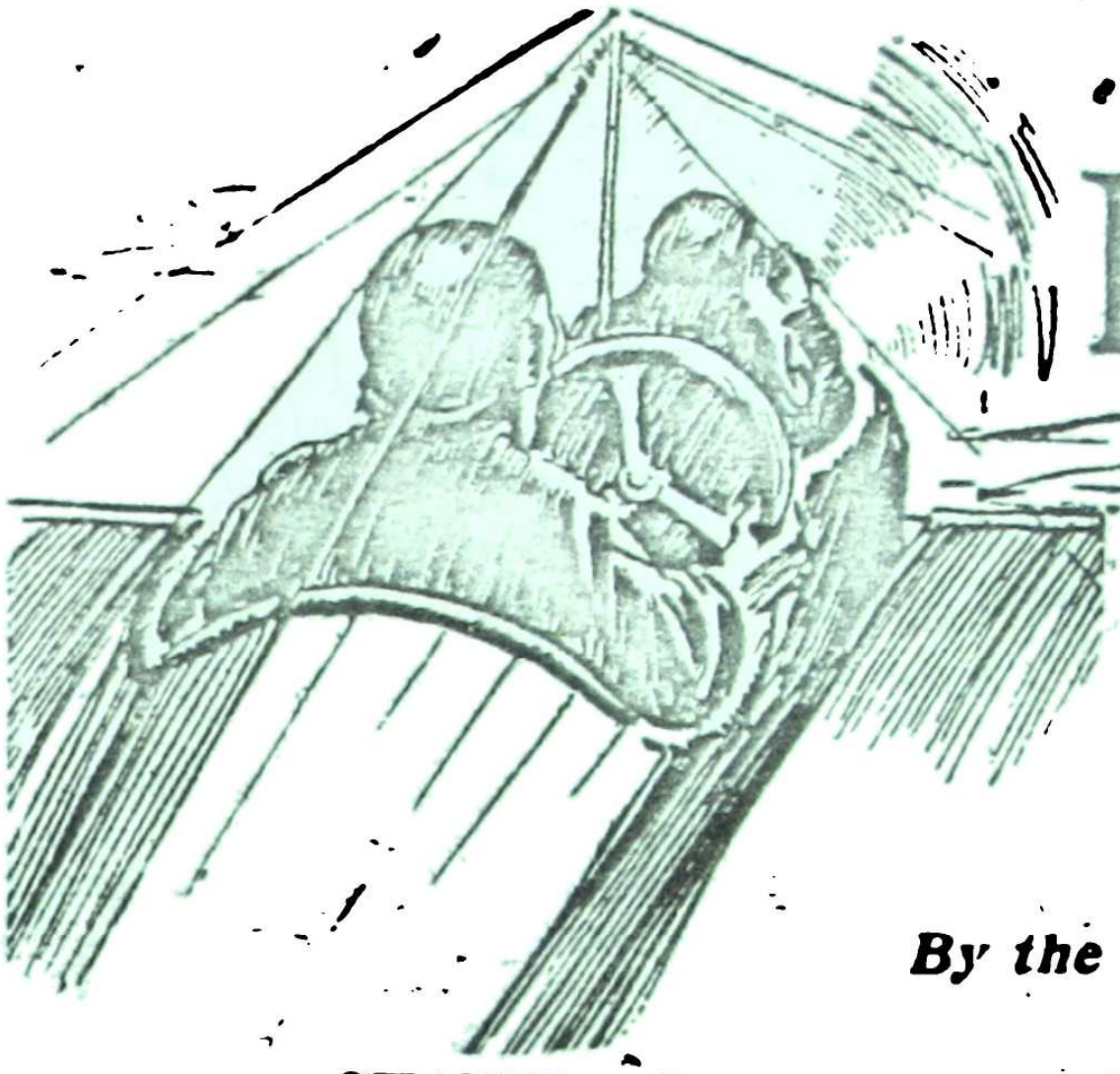

LOOT!

A Grand Complete Story of NELSON LEE and NIPPER and "THE BLACK WOLF."

By the Author of "The Crimson Disc," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE BLACK WOLF—THE MESSENGER—GOOD BUSINESS.

TO those south of the Tweed the symbol of dreariness and lonesomeness is symbolised by the bleak and jagged coast of Cornwall—that rugged coast which stretches as a terror to mariners from the far-flung rocks of the Scilly Islands to Hartland Point opposite the winking light of Lundy.

But to those north of the Tweed, where the broad burr of Scotland holds sway and where the blood of the fighter courses red, the fens and the moors and the mountains have hardened man to a different scale of thought, and if you go still farther north, until you have crossed the grey waters of Pentland and come to the Orkneys, you will find a concentrated essence of Nature's bitterness, which is scarcely exceeded on the wild, icy coast of eastern New Brunswick.

Far away from the fetid breath of the towns are those islands—removed from the ways and habits and lure of the lighted places, they sit stark and grey and lonely as Britain's second outpost to the North.

A handful of people inhabit some of the larger islands, but among the scattered humps of Nature's petulance there are many which lie under the hammering, breaking force of the waves alone, and, deserted even as they have lain since the days of the Druids—only their queer circles of stones telling of when the mystery rites of the Druids made them the habitation of man, and when, as the earth swung to an infinitesimally wider arc of the magnetic pole, the pointing stone of the primitive altar indicated that single bright star which rises in the north-east.

Unattractive in every way are these islands to him who would know the comforts of an effete civilisation. Those who would live there must exist in the most primitive manner. A few fish, a few cattle, a few wild ponies, and the bare necessities of life will be his. But with it will come an understanding of the elements of Nature, which breathe deeply into the soul of Man, and which bring him back to the simple faith of trust in goodness and fear of evil.

Yet, were one to sail among the myriad isles which make up the archipelago—a feat which would be by no means easy, and certainly not attractive in the winter-time—one would, if chance were with him, come to a small, apparently deserted island, which, nevertheless, had human life upon it.

Not from the sea would one see the stone house which was the sole dwelling-place on the island; from which ever side one inspected it one would see but the grey hump of stony ridges which hid from view the house which sat in the hollow between them. Nor had that house of grey stone been built haphazard. The builder had planned for the stone ridges to form a natural curtain round the habitation, and he had certainly succeeded.

To land was almost impossible, unless one made use of the rocket-line and breeches buoy, which was concealed from view by the seaward hill. Yet, as has been said, human life went on its course

behind those ramparts of Nature, nor was it the primitive life of the islands.

Inside that stone house there had been placed, with much expense, great cost of time, and even greater difficulty, all the luxurious appurtenances which one might find in the most exclusive part of London.

The house itself had been built bungalow style—all on one floor. The rooms were not numerous, but they were sufficient. On first entering, one passed through an outer storm-hall, then came to a large lounge-hall, sumptuously furnished in the Oriental style, and containing at one end a huge fireplace, capable of taking a four-foot log, if need be.

Off this opened the bedrooms and the dining-room, and a door in one corner led to a beautifully-fitted laboratory. Beyond, at the rear of the house, was the kitchen and the servants' rooms. Then, at the back, came a couple of stone outbuildings and the engine-house, where the pumping-engine and the electric generating-engine were located. In equipment there was nothing lacking, and although the occupants were dependent upon the monthly visits of a certain private steam yacht for their supplies, there had never been the slightest shortage.

On a certain grey day in late January life, as the house knew it, was going on its regular round. In the kitchen an elderly Frenchwoman was cooking, assisted by a younger person of the same race. In the engine-house two Frenchmen were working at the engines—oiling and cleaning and testing. At a corner table in the lounge a young Englishman sat busily writing, and in a low easy-chair before the fire an elderly woman, with the stamp of "duenna" about her, was knitting.

It was in the laboratory, however, that the mistress of the place was to be found, for there was no master. At work, over a small electric crucible, she stood, and had one gazed into the vessel, one would have seen that it was half-full of a molten, yellow metal. It might have been brass, but it wasn't. It was gold—almost pure gold—which, not long before, had glistened in the form of bracelets and watches and brooches.

The girl—she was no more—watched the crucible intently for some time. Then, when the molten metal had reached a certain stage of fluidity, she turned a button which shut off the heat, and by a patent tilting arrangement poured the yellow mass into an ingot cast.

Then she straightened up, and, walking to the wide window which lit up the laboratory, gazed out upon the grey rocks and greyer sky. In her face was the race stamp of the Latin. Her skin was like ivory—smooth and creamy and contrasting with her coal-black hair which lay in a great pile upon her shapely head. Her eyes were dark—almost black as the shadows that played with them.

Her nose was small, but shapely, and full of character. Her chin, though rounded in contour, was strong and full of decision. Her throat was like a pillar of alabaster, and her figure, though slight and almost girlish, was the lithe body of one who lives the healthy, open-air life and whose lungs are perfectly working machines, which send pure, red blood coursing through the body.

There were those in London and Paris and New York who would have recognised her standing there. They would have told you that for some time she had dropped out of sight. They would have told you that she was Mademoiselle Miton, otherwise known as the Black Wolf. For, indeed, it was she, and, when not cruising on her yacht, the La Rose, here, on this lonely, scarcely known and certainly unvisited island of the Orkneys, did she spend her time.

Far was it removed from the centres which knew her well—far indeed from the arms of the police from whose sight she had dropped, yet near enough was it for her to conduct the most colossal and most unique form of criminal profiteering which had ever been devised by brain which would pit itself against the law.

There never had been anything of the haphazard about the Black Wolf. Always had she planned thoroughly, and as a result her execution had been well-nigh perfect. It was rare for a woman to possess the organising brain which she possessed. Her executive power was equal to that of the most able businessman, and it was perhaps a mistake on the part of Nature that such a brain had been given to her.

With wealth to carry out her whims, she had become a menace to the peace of mind of more than one police organisation. Indeed, the only man who had ever succeeded in coming off victor in a

passage-at-arms with her had been the London criminologist, Nelson Lee.

More than once he had run her to earth, and more than once had he forced her to give up the loot she had taken.

It had not been fear which had caused the Black Wolf to drop from sight for so long. But she had realised that if she were to succeed in the strange career which she had mapped out for herself she would have to organise her resources differently.

Even in her most thoughtful moments it did not occur to her that there could be no permanent success in the line she had mapped out for herself. She regarded all those who had failed in the pursuit of criminal ideals as weaklings, or brainless fools. She would not allow that organised society, possessing the most highly trained brain power of mankind, was pitted against her, and that eventually she must fall victim to its superior force.

Magnificent as was her mind, and logical as was her thought, she yet fell into the same mistake which sometimes the young—sometimes the foolish and more often the lazy—fall into—that wealth can be wrenched from the world without honest work—that riches can be snatched without the application of the law of just return—in short, that a predatory life can have any lasting success.

For a time success might follow; but surely one day the reckoning must come. Yet the Black Wolf firmly believed that she at least would be able to side-step that reckoning. It remained to be seen if she would succeed.

On this particular afternoon she was at the tail end of some work which had taken her a full month to get through. It was the day, too, on which a messenger should come from the outside world—not the yacht, bearing fresh supplies, for that would not arrive for another week yet, but a messenger by another route of communication which she maintained with civilisation.

She stood at the south window, gazing over the crest of the hill which stood between her and the north coast of Scotland, watching, watching, watching, until the light began to fade; and, as the grey sky slowly started to change to a deeper leaden tinge, which presages the black mantle of night, a little pucker of anxiety appeared on her brow.

"I do hope nothing has happened to André!" she muttered, as she pressed her face against the pane. "It is making for a storm, and as he is coming from the south, he may have encountered it on the way. It would be embarrassing, to say the least, if he should have to come to earth, and his cargo should become scattered with the shock. It is a risky method of bringing the stuff, but it is the only feasible one. I—ah, there he is!"

Her sharp eyes had picked out what at first seemed to be a gull flying high above the sea; but, even as she watched, it came on with marvellous rapidity, growing larger and larger as it came, until it assumed the graceful lines of a biplane.

It was heading straight towards Filroy Island, and when at a height of about two thousand feet it circled for the volplane, the Black Wolf turned and ran across the laboratory to the door leading into the lounge.

"André is coming!" she cried, as she opened the door. "Come on, Phillip, and help him with the machine. I shall call Marcel and Pierre as I go out."

Snatching up a heavy jersey from the divan, she put it on, then jammed a soft crimson wool tam-o'-shanter on her head. While the young Englishman, her secretary, jumped to his feet and picked up his cap, the Black Wolf raced along to the rear of the house, calling as she went:

"Marcel! Pierre! Hasten! André is coming!"

The two men in the engine-house ran out at the sound of her voice and followed her round the side of the house where they were joined by Phillip Smallwood, the secretary. They ran across the cleared ground to a wide, open patch which lay like a sunken table at the base of two of the encircling ridges; then, drawing to one side, all four turned their eyes upward to watch the descent of the biplane.

It was no less than five hundred feet from the ground, and plunging steadily earthward on the last leg of a long volplane. Down it came with graceful precision; the wheels touched the ground, rose, touched once more, and stuck, running forward at a sharp pace, until the friction of the ground stopped the impetus of the machine.

Scarcely had it halted, when the four watchers ran towards it and reached its side just as a leather-clothed, begoggled figure stepped stiffly from the cockpit. He jerked off the goggles and helmet, and saluted Mademoiselle Miton.

"A rough journey, mademoiselle!" he

said, in French; "but not a hitch the whole way. I have brought the cargo."

Mademoiselle Miton held out her hand.

"You are always dependable, André," she said. "Go into the house and get warm. Marcel and Pierre will attend to the cargo."

Saluting again, the pilot turned and walked stiffly towards the house.

At the command of the Black Wolf, Marcel and Pierre jumped into the cockpit, and, removing a blanket of canvas, dragged out two heavy leather kit-bags which were there. They lowered these to the ground, and after that lifted out a large wooden case, which, from the way they handled it, must have been of considerable weight.

Between them they carried the "cargo" into the house, stowing it in a large cupboard in the laboratory. Then they returned to where the machine stood, and, catching hold of it, began to wheel it towards the larger of the two stone outbuildings.

They paused just before reaching it, and, running ahead, Marcel pulled a lever which caused the whole front of the building to slide along, revealing the fact that it was nothing more than a great door working on rollers.

They wheeled the biplane inside, and, pulling the lever once more, caused the front to slide back into place. At a gesture from the Black Wolf, they returned to the engine-house, while she and Phillip Smallwood returned to the house.

They found André Casanova, the pilot, sitting before the fire warming his chilled limbs. He sprang up as the Black Wolf entered, but she waved him back to his seat. She drew up a chair beside him, and when Phillip Smallwood had gone back to his desk, she said:

"Any letters, André?"

"But, yes, mademoiselle," he answered, thrusting his hand into the inner pocket of his coat; "I have the usual packet."

He drew out a thick, blue envelope as he spoke and handed it to her. Excusing herself, she rose, and carried it into the laboratory. She locked the door after her, turned on the lights, then drew the curtains. That done, she sat down at the experimenting-table, and broke the seal of the packet. She took out several sheets of folded paper, and, after separating what was evidently a letter from the rest, she spread it out, and began to read:

"Mademoiselle," it began—"I beg to acknowledge the receipt of the settlement for last month's operations, which has been duly distributed as per the enclosed statement.

"In accordance with instructions received from you at the same time, operations were carried on at the places indicated, and with every success. By usual carrier I am sending you the result, with which I hope you will be pleased. The proceeds have been more than for some time past, and the information acted on was undoubtedly as reliable as ever.

"Although there has been little publicity about the last affair, the police are certainly straining every nerve to discover what is going on; but, so far, they have not the shadow of a clue. We are guarding our actions and our tongues, and I have no fear that they will have any success in their efforts.

"I am also enclosing the usual sealed letter for you, and which was handed to me in the regular manner.

"Awaiting your further orders, and assuring you of our continued allegiance and discretion at this end.—I am, mademoiselle, respectfully yours,

"(Signed) NUMBER FIVE."

The Black Wolf nodded with satisfaction as she finished reading the letter; then, laying it aside, she took up the statement which had been enclosed, and, after scrutinising each item, she placed it beside the letter.

Next she picked up a small envelope, sealed with black wax, and, slitting open the flap, she drew out a single slip of paper. On it was written just two addresses—nothing more. One was "69c, Ludgate Hill," and the other "27x, New Bond Street."

After reading the addresses, Mademoiselle Miton rose, and, crossing the room, stooped before a large steel cabinet. Taking hold of a fine gold chain which hung round her neck, she drew a small bunch of keys from beneath her dress, and, selecting one, fitted it to the lock of the cabinet.

The turning of the lock released a single wide shutter-door, which covered the whole face of the cabinet, and when it had swung wide, several small drawers were revealed.

The Black Wolf chose another key, and unlocked three of the drawers with it. She drew them out, and carried them, one at a time, to the experimenting-table. Then, seating herself, she took up the letter, and, selecting one of the

drawers, lifted off the top which had covered it.

Inside was a letter file, containing several letters, written on the same size paper and by the same hand. She carefully filed the one just received, then replaced the cover and pushed the drawer to one side.

Next she followed the same procedure with another drawer, this time filing the statement. Lastly, she took the cover off the third drawer, revealing the fact that it contained a card index.

Unlike the ordinary card index, which is arranged in alphabetical order, this one consisted of a series of cards, numbered from "1" to "100." The Black Wolf went through them until she came to the last card bearing any writing; then, selecting the two following cards, she laid them on the table, and picked up a fountain-pen. On one she wrote the Ludgate Hill address and on the other she wrote the Bond Street address.

That done, she picked up the three drawers and replaced them in the steel cabinet. She returned to the table, and, picking up the slip, started for the door. On emerging into the lounge, she walked across to the desk at which Phillip Smallwood sat, and, seating herself near him, began to dictate in a low tone. When she had finished, she said:

"Phillip, have you the statement of this month's payments?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," he replied, in a singularly deep voice. "It is all ready."

"Then I should like it, please."

He opened a secret drawer in the desk by the simple expedient of pressing a part of the inner panel, and took out a sheet of paper.

The Black Wolf took it and walked across to the fireplace. Rolling the slip of paper bearing the addresses into a tiny ball, she threw it into the flames, watching it until it had burned to ash. Then she turned to André Casanova.

"André," she said, "when are you leaving again?"

"I shall get away at daybreak, mademoiselle," he replied.

"Then I shall prepare your packet for you now."

Re-entering the laboratory, the Black Wolf closed the door and once more approached the steel cabinet. Pulling out a large bottom drawer, she thrust in her hand and took out a large bundle of French and American bank-notes. There were no English notes there; they are too easy to trace.

Returning to the table, she threw the notes down and seated herself. She lifted up the statement which Phillip Smallwood had given her, and scrutinised the first item and the amount opposite it. After checking it with her pen and writing a "P" after it, she took up the bundle of French notes and counted out several.

"Twelve thousand francs," she murmured when she had finished. "Number Seven is in luck this month."

Next she drew a packet of envelopes towards her, and on one wrote "Number Seven." She enclosed the notes in it and sealed it.

The next item called for nine thousand dollars, which she counted out in notes of a thousand each from the bundle of American bills. After enclosing these and marking the envelope "Number Three," she scrutinised the third item on the list.

So it went for a half an hour, during which the Black Wolf attended to some fifteen items, and counted out an aggregate of over a hundred thousand francs in French money and over thirty thousand dollars in American money.

After once more examining each envelope to see that it was properly sealed and addressed, she laid them on one side, and, picking up the remainder of the bank-notes, she returned them to the bottom drawer of the cabinet.

Now the Black Wolf crossed to the door and pressed a button in the wall. She returned to the table, and stood waiting there until there came a tap at the door, and Marcel and Pierre entered.

"Open the case in the cupboard!" she said briefly.

Evidently Marcel and Pierre had known what would be required of them, for Marcel carried a heavy iron nail-puller. They opened the door of the cupboard and dragged out the heavy case which had formed part of the cargo on the biplane. In less than five minutes they had drawn every nail, though they made no attempt to lift off the cover. Then the Black Wolf dismissed them.

When the door had closed after them, she crossed to the case and lifted off the cover, and as she did so the light fell on a marvellous array of gold—gold in every form of the artisan's craft.

There were gold watches, gold brooches, gold bracelets, and gold rings.

There were heavy pieces of gold plate and gold vases, gold frames and gold dishes, all packed inside the case with no regard for breakages or scratches or dents.

The Black Wolf stood gazing upon the treasure with keen satisfaction depicted on her face.

"Five thousand pounds' worth, if a penny," she murmured. "Now for the bags!"

She went to the cupboard, and dragged out the two brown-leather bags which André had brought. She unlocked them with a key on the chain which she carried round her neck, and, then, pressing the catches, opened them. Inside each were two black-cloth bags, which the Black Wolf lifted out and carried over to the experimenting-table.

She untied them, and then, up-tilting them, poured their contents on the table. As they rattled out on to the glass slab, they tinkled musically, and when she had removed the cloth bag, they were revealed in all their glory—rings, brooches, pendants, ear-rings, bracelets, and every conceivable ornament in which precious stones may be set.

They glittered there, a great, flaming mass of scintillating fire—diamonds and pearls, rubies and emeralds and sapphires—not a stone that did not belong to the precious grade.

They piled up and overflowed and tinkled down against the glass; but still the Black Wolf opened bag after bag, until all four had poured their treasure on to the table. Then, standing back, Mademoiselle Miton scrutinised them, after which she bent close, and picked up pieces here and there. All the time she kept nodding her head.

"A fine haul—a very fine haul!" she murmured. "It is even better than last month. There should be here well on to thirty thousand pounds' worth of gems—perhaps even more. I shall be able to tell when I make the detailed examination of them. Next month's pay-sheet will reach a pretty penny, I'll wager!"

She swept the great pile of set gems back into the bags, and, dropping the bags into the leather receptacles, locked them securely. She replaced them in the cupboard, then dragged the wooden case after them. That done, she returned to the table, and picked up the pile of envelopes in which she had placed the bank-notes. She made her way to the door, and, switching out the light, re-entered the lounge.

"Have you finished, Phillip?" she called, as she closed and locked the door of the laboratory after her.

"Just finished, mademoiselle," he replied, rising and coming across to her.

She handed him the packet, which he thrust into a large blue envelope, which already contained a letter. He carried it back to the desk, and stuck down the flap, after which he sealed it with black sealing-wax, and pressed down the wax with a seal bearing the likeness of a wolf. On the outside of the envelope was written simply "Number Five." He brought the envelope back to the Black Wolf, and, taking it from him, she gave it to André Casanova.

"There you are, André!" she said lightly. "Guard it well!"

"I shall guard it with my life, mademoiselle!" he said, rising and thrusting the envelope into an inner pocket.

At that moment the door opened, and a maidservant entered to announce that the evening meal was served.

"Come along, my friend!" cried the Black Wolf gaily. "To-night is a night we shall celebrate!"

Taking the arm of the elderly duenna, Mademoiselle Miton went toward the dining-room, followed by the two men. In the eyes of each was a look of deep admiration; but while that of André Casanova's was the flame of the South, with the stark soul of the animal revealed, that of Phillip Smallwood was tinged with tenderness and sadness. So is revealed the natures of men.

And at daybreak André Casanova climbed into his biplane, and, soaring high in the air, flew south.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT "ROUND BRITAIN" RACE—NELSON LEE TAKES PART—AN ODD INCIDENT.

NEVER in the history of aviation had there been such a contest as the great "Ten Thousand Pounds Free for All Race Round Britain," which had been organised by one of the most influential daily papers in an attempt to give another impetus to the science which it had nourished from the earliest days of the Wright brothers.

Previous races round Britain had con-

tained privileges to alight at certain points, and each landing was allowed to occupy a certain time to replenish fuel or make adjustments. But this new contest had been devised as a free for all, any type of machine with not less than one passenger besides the pilot, and no landing from the time a machine left Hendon Aerodrome—the starting-point—until it should return.

The course was a particularly stiff one; and only a top-notch machine would be able to make it without a landing on the way. But the object of the race was to discover the best long-flight machine as well as the speediest model, and to eliminate from the industry all machines which could not meet certain tests.

Aviation had come a long way since the day when the English Channel was first crossed, and modern conditions made demand which out-of-date aeroplanes could not attempt to fill. The course, as it had been decided on by the committee in charge of the contest, was to be a flight from Hendon to the mouth of the Thames, thence up the coast of England and Scotland to Pentland Firth, then to the West of Scotland, and down over the Irish Channel to Hartland Point, after which the machine was to wheel, and make in a direct line for Hendon.

As it had been planned, the flight would extend to nearly fifteen hundred miles—a non-stop flight in which the time was to be reckoned as well. The machine which made the course in the best time was to receive the prize, be it monoplane or biplane, and it can readily be understood that such a contest would attract the best airmen from France, Russia, Italy, and the United States, as well as British airmen.

The pessimists notwithstanding, the day of the race dawned clear and crisp, for the time was the month of February. Never in all its history had Hendon been so packed with motor vehicles and human beings as there were there on that day. Thousands upon thousands had journeyed out to see the start of the big race, and a great, tented city of extra hangars had been erected to house the machines which had come to take part.

Airmen, mechanics, officials, and men just getting their certificates were to be seen everywhere. Flying men who had not met for months were stopping for a word and a joke, and always the meeting began with a glance at the blue dome overhead.

As far as the southern part of Britain was concerned, it was an ideal day for the event. Scarcely a breath of wind was blowing. There were no clouds, and the glass was going up. What more could airmen want?

Every machine was to be ready to start by eight o'clock in the morning, and, while it had at first been intended to start them at intervals of an hour apart, it was found necessary, owing to the large number of entries, to shorten that period to half an hour.

At half-past seven, every competitor was required to attend at one end of the flying-ground or to send a representative in order to draw for position of start. By seven the airmen or their mechanics were crowding up to the rendezvous for the draw, and at half-past seven sharp it began.

In all that throng, there was no one more eager to discover what place he would draw than Nelson Lee's assistant, Nipper, for he and Lee were taking part in the contest, using a very speedy monoplane, which they had scarcely flown as yet.

Lee, with a couple of mechanics, was busy tuning up, and as his representative, Nipper had gone along for the draw. At the appointed time the name of each competitor was called out by the presiding official, together with the name and type of the machine he would fly. Either the competitor or his representative answered, and then, when the list had been checked and found all correct, the draw began.

Into a large wicker-basket had been placed a number of coloured balls, numbered from "1" up to the number of competitors taking part. Those who were to draw were then formed in line, and, passing before the basket, took out a single ball. Whatever number might be on the ball was to indicate his place in the start, and each ball was to be kept until the machine for which it had been drawn had been wheeled out, when it was to be surrendered to the starting official.

Nipper was well up in the drawing line, and was filled with a glow of excitement as the distance between him and the basket shortened and shortened. He counted eagerly as man after man went on with the ball he had drawn, until at last only one remained between the lad and the basket.

It seemed an age to Nipper before this

man settled on which ball he would take; then, almost treading on the other's heels, Nipper stretched out his hand, and thrust it into the narrow mouth of the basket. He felt the array of balls inside, but fought his inclination to fumble about on chance. He had decided when he came to the draw that he would take the first one his fingers touched, and he did so.

Drawing it out, he clutched it tightly and passed on, nor did he pause to glance at it until he was well clear of the line. Then, however, he let out a whoop of delight which caused those about him to turn round and grin in his direction. And well he might be pleased at the result! Lee's last words had been:

"Well, my lad, see that you get us an early start!"

And here, on the chance of the draw, Nipper had drawn the ball with the number "1" on it! That meant they would be the first away—that they would have the benefit of the early morning visibility and that with luck they should be back at Hendon during the early evening.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Nipper broke into a run and tore down the ground towards Lee's hangar.

"Guv'nor," he cried breathlessly, as he dashed in to where Lee and the two mechanics were working, "we're in top-hole luck! I've drawn Number One!"

Lee lifted a greasy face, and stared at the lad incredulously.

"Do you mean it, Nipper?" he asked.

"Of course I mean it, sir!" cried the lad. "Look at this!"

As he spoke, he lifted up the ball he had drawn, and, after one glance at it, Lee nodded with satisfaction.

"Our luck is in!" he said. "Hurry up, boys, and finish! We shall have to get away at eight sharp! You, Nipper, get out our flying togs while I see to the map-locker and instruments!"

From that on until a few minutes before eight the four worked at a terrific pace. Then they heard the call for "Number One" coming down the line, and while the two mechanics wheeled out the slim monoplane, her 'planes looking far too small to lift the weight she must carry. Lee and Nipper hurriedly donned their flying clothes and followed.

As they reached the side of the machine, they found the starting official waiting to receive the numbered ball they had drawn. As soon as Lee had handed it over, the official made a gesture, and immediately two clerks of the course sprang forward. In their hands they held each a huge piece of white silk, cut in the form of a "one," which they proceeded to paste on to the underside of a wing. That done, Lee and Nipper climbed into the cockpit, and settled themselves ready for the start.

Now the engine was started, and while the powerful propeller whirred with a racket and scream, the two mechanics laid back with all their weight against the pull of the monoplane. Standing just to the left of the machine was the starting official, watch in hand, and when the finger pointed to exactly eight o'clock, he lifted his left arm and dropped it sharply. On the same instant the two mechanics released their hold of the machine, and the next second she shot away down the course, gathering speed at each revolution of the propeller.

Not until she was going with great speed, and almost lifting herself off the ground, did Lee shift the planes for the rise. But no sooner had he done so than they left the ground sharply and began to ascend. As they soared above the heads of the upgazing crowd, Lee shifted the rudder a little and began to circle. Up, up, up they went, seeking the two-thousand-foot level which Lee had decided on after the test balloons had been sent up earlier in the day.

Steadily circling, he climbed to the level in record time; then, jerking the rudder back to the straight again, he shot away towards the Thames which he was to follow to the sea. While the monoplane was on the ground her wings had looked far too small—too fragile—to lift her with a couple of passengers; but only a novice would have feared such to be the actual condition.

Her engine was one of the most advanced power units ever turned out, and at such speed did it drive the little machine, that less wing surface was necessary to keep her in the air than would have been the case had she been larger and slower.

She was working beautifully. As they picked up the Thames, and turned a little to follow it, the monoplane took it so easily that her reserve of power could be felt beneath the deep roar of the propeller. Like a great winged creature from a strange world she swept on, leaving the upper part of the estuary behind with almost unbelievable rapidity.

Then, as they swept beyond the lower estuary, Lee shifted the rudder again,

and, answering the touch as easily as a bird would have changed direction with a flirt of the tail, the monoplane sped north along the coast, which would bring them eventually to Scotland.

They had got a good start—they had the best of the day ahead of them for the main part of the run, and if the monoplane continued to work as she was doing, both Lee and Nipper felt that they would not be among the last when the list of results was posted up.

At the estuary of the Thames they had passed one point where a report sentry had been posted, and as they wheeled to the north a little puff of white smoke far beneath them signalled that they had been seen, that their number had been noted, and that they were so far following the course specified.

At Yarmouth they passed the second report sentry, receiving the "all right" signal as before. At this point Lee changed his course a little in order to raise Flamborough Head, where the next report sentry had been placed. It seemed almost to leap towards them with the blue water breaking in great creamy clouds about it as the monoplane, now warmed up to her work, sped onwards, with the indicator showing nearly a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

Nipper noted the puff of white smoke as they swept on past the head, jotting down the time as he had done before, and making an entry of their height, speed, and the exact time by the chronometer. Once more Lee shifted the course a little, this time towards the north-east, and then they settled down for one of the longest legs on the run where no report sentry was posted.

Gradually the land receded farther and farther away, until at last it was only a dirty, grey streak in the west, and then again disappeared altogether. For over an hour the only visible thing was the sea beneath them, with an occasional tramp-steamer or fishing-smack on the horizon. Then, on the left, the dirty, grey streak marking the land appeared once more, and finally grew more and more distinct, until at last the grey changed to brown, and then to green. They were approaching Aberdeen.

There was no report sentry posted at Aberdeen, but a little farther on, at Rattray Head, they saw another puff of smoke, and once more Nipper made his entries. Flying straight over Fraserburgh, Lee held his course across the wide sweep of Moray Firth, until once more the land dropped from view, though here there were more steamers to be seen. And here it was on the leg of ninety odd miles to Duncansby Head that a strange thing happened.

It was just about a quarter of an hour after they had left Fraserburgh behind that off to the left, apparently coming from the direction of Inverness, they sighted what at first appeared to be a large bird, but which steadily grew in size, until Nipper made out through the glasses that it was a big biplane, travelling a little higher than themselves, and at a great speed.

Lee jammed the telephone headpiece over his ears, and called to the lad:

"What can you make out? Is it one of the competing machines?"

"I can't see yet," answered Nipper. "But I hope it isn't," he added to himself. "If it is, then it means 'Good-night, nurse!' for us all right! If that biplane has been able to overtake us between Hendon and here—on less than half the length of the course—where will we be at the finish? But if it is one of the competing machines, then it hasn't held to the course. If it had passed the report sentry at Rattray Head it couldn't have got away over there."

He raised his voice now, and spoke through the 'phone to Lee.

"It can't be one of the machines in the race, guv'nor," he said. "If it were, then it wouldn't be coming from the direction of Inverness."

Lee nodded his understanding, and shifted the rudder a little. The biplane was growing more distinct each moment, and at the course each was holding they must both pass a given point before very long.

Now, as they shot along, both Lee and Nipper could see that the monoplane was travelling faster than the biplane, and if they both held on their present course, must overtake the other machine before very long.

In his mind's eye, Lee picked out the approximate point where both machines must pass, and when they were a mile or so away he saw the biplane shoot across it and hold steadily to the North. While it would lengthen the leg from Rattray Head to Duncansby Head, Lee, nevertheless, altered his course the veriest trifle, and as he tore off in the wake of the biplane, he saw the other machine come round more to the west again.

"Must either be off his course, or try-

ing to get in closer to the land," muttered Lee. "If it didn't seem absurd, I should almost think he was trying to avoid me. If he keeps on as he is going we are bound to overtake him. It can't be one of the machines in the race. No competitor would have gone so far inside Rattray Head."

The monoplane, now travelling at a higher speed than she had yet registered—nearly a hundred and thirty-five miles, shot after the biplane on the new course, and while the other machine was flying at remarkably high speed, the monoplane was overhauling her rapidly.

In fact, so close were they drawing to her now that Nipper, who had the glasses focused on her, could see that there were no numbers on the underside of her planes. He communicated this information to Lee over the 'phone, then turned his attention back to the biplane.

Just now the shore-line of Caithness appeared in sight, and almost before one could realise it, they were approaching Duncansby Head, where the next report sentry was stationed. It was just here, too, that the biplane sheered off seawards, and while he knew every moment was precious, Lee altered his course a little and started on a circle which would bring him out to sea and back over Duncansby Head.

Nipper had just reported the Head in sight, when the biplane rose to a higher level; and then, as they circled for the Head, both Lee and Nipper saw the biplane hold on straight to the north. The "all right" signal went on the Head, but the report sentry there must have wondered somewhat, as he saw a racing monoplane, marked Number One sheer off the course she should have followed and circle out to the north in a wide, sweeping curve.

Lee was puzzled over the actions of the biplane. In the first place, he could not figure out what a machine not in the "Round Britain" race could be doing so far north of any of the larger aerodromes. To be sure, it might be but a long test flight. But, in that case, why had the other airman so deliberately avoided them? For that he had done so, Lee was now positive.

The other airman must have known that the monoplane was one of the racing machines from Hendon, and by the code of camaraderie existing among airmen, it would have been a natural thing for him to signal them as they went past. But nothing of the sort had been done. Instead, the other machine had climbed almost to the three-thousand foot level, and was making due north towards the Orkneys at top speed.

Lee's course would bring him almost to the Orkneys, but if he did not overtake the biplane by then, he had made up his mind not to risk any further deviation from the racing route. The sweep he had started on was just reaching its arc, when Nipper sighted the Orkneys, and then, as the more southerly islands became still more distinct, Lee's compass showed the arc of his sweep had been reached, and they began to draw steadily away to the west.

But, even as they sped onwards, Nipper, who still had the glasses focused on the biplane, grabbed the telephone, and shouted:

"She is dropping to a lower level, guv'nor."

Lee nodded, and kept his eyes fixed ahead, for he would pick up the report sentry at Cape Wrath next, and did not want to get too far out. But when Nipper shouted again, just when the biplane was merging with the haze behind them, Lee risked one quick turn of the head to gaze back.

"Guv'nor, she is volplaning to earth!" the lad had called; and, just before the haze engulfed her, Lee saw that this was indeed a fact.

What on earth was the strange biplane doing going to earth in the Orkneys? The thing bothered him quite a little as the monoplane swept on towards Cape Wrath, and the signal smoke showed beneath them. But when Lee had brought the machine round the cape, and was heading south towards Ardnamurchan Point in Argyll, Nipper, knowing there was a fairly long leg ahead of them, picked up the telephone, and said:

"Guv'nor, there was something familiar about that biplane!"

Lee nodded his head, and, speaking down into the mouthpiece which hung round his neck, responded:

"In what way, Nipper?"

"Well," came back Nipper's voice, "I have seen her before, I am certain. I'll remember soon, too, where I have seen her."

Lee nodded again, and gave his attention to the machine, and they had almost raised Ardnamurchan Point, when Nipper spoke again.

"I've got it—I've got it, guv'nor!" he shouted, forgetting how close the tele-

phone receiver was to Lee's ear. "I knew I had seen that biplane before."

"Where have you seen it?" called back Lee.

"At Hendon, guv'nor!" replied Nipper. "She belongs to a Spanish airman, and he keeps her in that hangar in the lower corner—you know, the one we pass on the way to ours."

Lee knitted his brows for a moment; then he looked towards the lad and nodded. Speaking into the 'phone, he said:

"I believe you are right, Nipper. That airman's name is Casanova, but I thought surely he would be entered in the race to-day. If it is he, why isn't he in the race? And what is he doing flying over the Orkneys?"

"You can search me!" muttered Nipper; and as Ardnamurchan Point was raised, just then nothing more was said on the matter.

The report sentry at Ardnamurchan gave them the "all right" as they shot past, and, striking a sharp wind just there, it needed all Lee's attention to avoid air-pockets.

From Ardnamurchan Point it was almost a straight run down to Rathlin Island in the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland. With the same regularity with which they had picked up the other report sentries, they found the one on Rathlin Island; and when Nipper had noted the smoke signal below, Lee set his course down the Irish Sea towards St. David's Head on the Pembrokeshire coast.

There was no report sentry there, but the head was in the line for Hartland Point where the last report sentry would be picked up. A strong head wind was blowing up the Irish Sea as they got well over it, but the monoplane nosed into it with scarcely any effort, and the speed indicator showed no appreciable loss of speed.

On the way Lee dropped down to the fifteen-hundred foot level, seeking for a better air level; but there he found the wind was blowing a gale, so he shot up once more to two thousand feet. They raised St. David's Head without incident, and then, altering his course a little, Lee pointed the nose of the monoplane across the Bristol Channel towards Hartland Point.

They passed over Lundy Island a little later; and then, as they wheeled over Hartland, close to the little village of Clovelly, the smoke signal for which they were on the watch showed at the sheer end of the point.

Lee now brought the monoplane round sharply, banking steeply as he did so, and, heading east, sent the machine along on the last and longest leg of the flight. From Hartland it was a straight flight across the West of England—over Devon and Somerset, Wilts, Bucks, and, finally, Middlesex.

It was just after leaving Hartland that Nipper opened the grub-locker and took out some sandwiches and a thermos flask containing hot coffee. They had left at eight o'clock in the morning, and since then had come a distance of no less than thirteen hundred miles.

They had eaten just once on the way, and that had been between Cape Wrath and Ardnamurchan Point. It was now seven o'clock in the evening, and, reckoning on the average of speed they had made since the start that morning, it would be between half-past eight and nine o'clock when they finally arrived back at Hendon—that is, barring accidents. Thirteen hundred miles in eleven hours made a flat average for the distance of something like a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and not once had they been forced to descend for engine trouble.

The capacious tank of the monoplane carried sufficient petrol for sixteen hundred miles, and after finishing a quick lunch of sandwiches and coffee, Nipper measured the remaining supply. In answer to Lee's questioning glance, he nodded, and shouted through the 'phone:

"There is enough for three hundred miles yet, guv'nor! We have just used what we calculated on using."

They settled lower in their seats now, while Lee picked up the land again, and the next moment the fields of Devon were passing along beneath them. So far, they had not seen a single sign of any of the other competing machines, and if the second or third to start had not overtaken them by the time they had reached Hartland Point, it did not seem likely that they would do so now. That meant the monoplane was making as good, if not better time, than two of the other machines, anyway.

An hour passed, and Lee knew that they were approaching the home counties. The increasing frequency of lights beneath—for it was dark now—told him that, and when another quarter of an hour had gone by both he and Nipper kept a sharp look-out for the wide circle

of ground lights which would mark the landing spot at Hendon.

It was Nipper who picked it up, and as he signalled Lee brought the monoplane round still more, and then they were rushing along to prepare for the volplane. As they reached the spot where the start down would be made, Nipper picked up a rocket, and, thrusting the fuse into the flame of a specially prepared wind-lamp, threw it over the side. A second later three brilliant blue balls of flame showed—their signal that a machine was coming down; and the next instant they were plunging earthwards at a terrific pace.

Down to the thousand-foot level they plunged, then to the five-hundred foot, and still Lee kept her nose towards the earth. But now he shifted the rudder a little, and as they circled for the last drop Nipper bent over to watch the ground beneath, for there is nothing trickier than landing at night. Then the lights beneath suddenly widened and seemed to leap towards them, and the next moment the monoplane had touched earth.

She leaped up again, however, but touched once more, this time to stay, and after racing along for some distance came to a standstill not fifty yards from the line of closely-packed people who were still waiting on the grounds to see the return of the machines.

CHAPTER III.

A CONFERENCE AT SCOTLAND YARD—AN INTERNATIONAL PUZZLE.

"HELLO, inspector!" said Lee cheerfully as he entered the hangar. "Have you come out to watch the result of the race?"

The genial inspector rose, and shook hands with both Lee and Nipper, congratulating them on their fine flight.

"I came out here this morning to see you," he said, as Lee began to doff his flying-clothes. "I hardly thought it likely that you would draw first place, as you did! I wanted to get in touch with you badly, but you were already gone."

"What time did you come?" asked Lee.

"It was nearly noon."

"By that time Nipper and I were well up towards the north of Scotland!" laughed Lee. "But what is it, inspector?" he went on. "Has anything happened?"

The inspector glanced cautiously towards the door of the hangar and nodded silently. After a moment, he said:

"It is serious, but I can't tell you about it here! How soon can you get away?"

"In a few minutes now. I want to wait until the machine is wheeled in, then I shall be able to go with you. Ah, here it is now!"

At that moment the flap of the hangar was raised, and the two mechanics wheeled the monoplane in. Lee and Nipper made a rapid examination of her then. As he saw that she had weathered the trip splendidly, Lee gave a few instructions to the mechanics, and said:

"All right, inspector; I can go along now."

"Do you mind if I stay out here for a while, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, as Lee and the inspector moved towards the door.

"Certainly not, my lad! Remain as long as you wish! When you come in, bring the latest returns with you. Oh, by the way, Nipper, do you remember what happened this morning?"

Nipper nodded understandingly.

"Before you come in," went on Lee, "just have a look round, will you, and find out if we were right?"

"I understand, sir," replied the lad. "I intended doing so, anyway."

Lee nodded, then followed the inspector from the hangar. They walked down the course to the lower end; then, pushing their way through the press of people beyond the fence, finally succeeded in finding the car in which the inspector had come. They climbed in, and the inspector said:

"Must you go to Gray's Inn Road?"

"I should like to—unless the matter is very urgent," replied Lee. "I am very soiled, and must change."

"All right! I'll tell the man," rejoined the inspector. "I'll wait, too, until after you have changed before I tell you why I wanted to speak with you. Now describe to me all about your flight. Do you think you have pulled down the record?"

Lee laughed.

"I can't tell yet," he said, "but we are hoping so. I must say that the monoplane travelled beautifully the whole way. The engine did not miss once, and when I tell you that Nipper makes the average speed for the course just about a hundred and twenty miles

an hour, you will understand that we hope to be placed well up in the list, at least. I am more than pleased with the monoplane, and believe that model has a great future before it."

Here Lee branched off into technical details connected with the monoplane, which lasted until the car drew up before his house in Gray's Inn Road.

The inspector followed him into the consulting-room, and helped himself to one of Lee's cigars, while Lee went in to bath and change.

It was a half-hour or so when the criminologist returned to the consulting-room, looking much refreshed, and, after pouring out a whisky-and-soda for each, he lit a cigarette, and said:

"Well, now, inspector, what is the trouble?"

"It is serious!" replied the inspector slowly. "Before I go into details, Lee, I should like to say that afterwards I want you to come on to Scotland Yard with me. Monsieur Fabert, Prefect of the Paris Police, is there, as well as William J. Kennedy, the American detective. They are both in London on the same matter, and both suggested that I ask you to come to the Yard for a consultation."

Lee looked mildly surprised.

"I had no idea my two old friends were in town," he said. "When did they arrive?"

Kennedy got in this afternoon, and Monsieur Fabert has been here since last evening," responded the inspector. "Fabert has had a long interview with the Chief over the matter which brought him here, and the Chief has turned the case over to me. I don't mind saying that, in a way, we have been working on the matter for weeks, as have the police of New York, Paris, and Montreal. Now listen, Lee!

"The night before last there was a big robbery in London—in fact, two big robberies. One took place on Ludgate Hill, at a jewellery establishment there, and the other in Bond Street, also at a jewellery establishment. In each case, a great amount of jewellery and precious stones were stolen, and so far the thieves have made a clean get-away.

"Now, I don't know whether I have ever spoken to you about some other robberies which have occurred during the last few months. In case I haven't, I shall mention them now. I have them noted in my book. Every inspector at the Yard has had the matter in hand at one time or another, but so far we are all at sea on it."

As he spoke, the inspector took his notebook from his pocket, and, thumbing over the pages a little clumsily, finally came to the page he sought.

"About six months ago," he said, "we received a report at the Yard that a jewellery establishment in Regent Street had been entered and a large amount of stuff stolen. That report reached the Yard early in the morning, and shortly after another report came in saying that a place in Bond Street had also been entered, and a large quantity of set and unset jewellery taken, as well as precious stones. We put a man on the two cases at once, and while a paragraph appeared in the papers, there was not much publicity about it."

"I remember the affairs very well indeed!" put in Lee. "From what little I read, I came to the conclusion that the two jobs were the work of the same persons."

The inspector nodded.

"That is exactly what we thought at the Yard," he said. "In the first place, the method of entry in both cases was exactly the same, due, we concluded, to the fact that the position of the two places was not unlike. The thieves had gone round to the back, and forced a way in there.

"The windows of both shops were protected by heavy iron bars, but three of these had been sawn through, and then the glass in the upper part of the sash removed with a diamond.

"In one case, however, the window was a good height from the ground, and, in order to reach it, the thieves had fixed up an ingenious arrangement. They had screwed two strong hooks into the window-frame about half-way up, and then had fixed a rope, or strong strap of some sort, to the hooks.

"The man who cut the glass had stood on the sill inside this strap, and, leaning back against it for support, had been able to use both hands without fear of falling. Once inside the shops, the safes had been opened in the same way.

"In neither case had they been blown open, but either a microphone or a suction stethoscope had been fixed to the door, and the combination worked by listening to the fall of the tumblers as the knob was turned.

"I go into some detail about those two robberies because they were the first of what appears to be a long series of cleverly organised affairs. I had no idea that they had been extended on such a comprehensive scale until I discussed the matter with Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy. Curiously enough, the same business brought them both to London. They are here to seek the assistance of Scotland Yard.

"And now, Lee, I'll give you a rough outline of what has happened in the British Isles, then the list which Fabert has brought with him, and finally state the case which Kennedy presents.

"I have just described the two robberies which, so far as we know, appear to have been the start of the series. Now, following those two affairs in Regent Street and Bond Street, we were notified exactly one month later of two further burglaries, one in Brighton and the other in Manchester. Two months then elapsed before anything similar was reported, but later on I will show you that Monsieur Fabert has the record of two, one in the Rue de la Paix, in Paris, and the other in the Avenue de l'Opera, which coincide with the month when none were reported here.

"Following that, there were reports in Brighton and Eastbourne—two as usual. We were already at work on the case, but, although we kept a sharp look-out, nothing happened in the arena under our jurisdiction for another three months. In the meantime, however, Kennedy reports two robberies in Fifth Avenue, New York, and the date corresponds to exactly one month after the Brighton and Eastbourne affairs.

"Another month later there were reports, one in Montreal and one in Toronto. Then three months after the Brighton and Eastbourne affair we received notification that a jewellery establishment in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow had been entered the same night.

"After that, Kennedy's list shows two affairs a month later, one in Chicago and one in Cleveland. Those affairs occurred a month ago. After the two robberies in Fifth Avenue, Kennedy got in touch with us, thinking, perhaps, that the thieves had managed to get to England. We, on our part, communicated with the New York police, advising them of the several robberies which had occurred here.

"Shortly after that, Paris got in touch with both us and New York, and, because the whole series bore the earmarks of being the work of the same organisation, both Kennedy and Fabert decided to come here to consult with Scotland Yard, and endeavour to arrange some concerted scheme for running down the thieves.

"It was pure chance that they should be here when another job was pulled off in London—that occurred last night. As I said, an establishment in Ludgate Hill and one in Bond Street were broken open, and so far there is no clue as to who did it. Nevertheless, it bears distinct signs of having been the work of a gang which for months has been operating internationally.

"I wanted you to come along to-day with us and examine the two places. That is why I went to Hendon to find out what time you were starting on the race. The thing has reached such serious proportions, Lee, that something must be done.

"The Chief is hopping wild over the affair, and has told me to give my individual attention to the affair until we discover something definite. Therefore I want you to join forces with us, and see what we can do. Four of us, surely, with the criminal statistics of the three most important cities in the world at our finger-tips, ought to be able to find out who is engineering this affair!"

Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"What did you discover during your examination of the premises which were broken into last night?" he asked.

"Nothing remarkable, but sufficient to convince me that it was the work of the same gang. For instance, the place in Ludgate Hill had been entered in almost the same manner as the shop in Regent Street several months before. Iron bars at the back had been cut, and the glass broken in without any noise. The safe had been opened, but not with an explosive. Either a microphone or a suction stethoscope had been used.

"But during our confab. at the Yard to-day, we came upon one point which I think you will agree with me is not only important, but indicates the common source of all this robbery."

"What point is that, inspector?" asked Lee.

"It was this. In analysing the detailed reports of the different affairs, one thing

struck us as peculiar. In every case the thefts had been confined to gold ornaments, such as rings, bracelets, brooches, watches, and the like, precious stones, comprising diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, and pearls. There was, too, a little platinum in nearly every instance, but in no single case was there any report of either silver or semi-precious stones having been stolen.

"It would have been easy enough to have taken a large amount of silver-plate from the show-case in the Bond Street shop which was robbed last night; but this the thieves have passed over, confining their attention solely to the most valuable type of loot. And that is peculiar to every robbery, proving, to my mind, that for some reason or other they do not want to be bothered with less valuable stuff."

Lee puffed at his cigarette in silence for a few moments, then he said:

"That certainly is rather odd, inspector. It does seem queer that, with a quantity of valuable silver plate at hand, they passed it over. It must indicate something definite—perhaps something which, if we knew, would give us an important clue. I suppose, inspector, every man in the Metropolitan Police is on the look-out?"

"Yes, every man here; and every police force in the country has been notified. Every railway-station is being watched, and all out-going and in-coming baggage scrutinised at every point. Early this morning I had a large force on duty at every London railway-station. Motor-cars all over the country were being examined, and every seaport was under surveillance.

"I feel certain the loot has not yet been got away from London because, if it had, the steps I have already taken would have been almost certain to lead to its discovery, or, at, least, the discovery of some clue which would assist us."

"They may have some means of getting the stuff away which you have not suspected," suggested Lee. "Judging from the list you furnish, it strikes me you are not far wrong in your contentions. Undoubtedly the affairs in France and the United States have many points similar to those here, the two strangest of which are, firstly, the robberies have always occurred in twos, though not necessarily in the same city; and, secondly, and to my opinion the stronger point, is that the robberies have been confined to the most precious metals and stones. What is the value of the loot taken last night?"

"Something like four thousand pounds. I understand," said the inspector. "It is one of the biggest hauls they have made yet."

"Where are Fabert and Kennedy now?" went on Lee.

"At the Yard. Will you come along and discuss the thing with them?"

"Yes. I will come now, inspector."

Lee rose, and, donning his hat and coat, went out with the inspector to the waiting car. They drove through to Scotland Yard at once, and there, in the inspector's private room, found Monsieur Fabert, Prefect of the Paris Sûreté, and William J. Kennedy, the famous American detective.

They greeted Lee warmly, and then, sitting about the desk, the four men discussed the series of details of the robberies in all their aspects. It was after midnight when they broke up the conference, and by that time Lee had received all the details of the affairs as known to the police of London, Paris, New York, and Montreal.

The inspector elected to remain at the Yard, but, before parting for the night, Lee, Fabert, and Kennedy drove along to the Hotel Venetia for supper.

Lee had made an appointment with Inspector Brooks for early in the morning in order to make an examination of the premises in Ludgate Hill and the shop in Bond Street. Later the four detectives were to meet together for lunch and discuss any further points which might arise after Lee's examination.

It was nearly one o'clock when Lee finally parted from his companions in front of the Venetia, and hailing a taxi, he drove through to Gray's Inn Road, where, on his arrival, he found that Nipper had just returned.

"Well, my lad," said Lee, as he threw off his coat. "What's the news from Hendon?"

Number Three and Number Four returned while I waited," replied the lad "But Number Two has not turned up. There is a rumour that the pilot was forced to descend on the Irish coast owing to engine trouble. I have figured over the time occupied by Numbers

Three and Four to make the course, and I don't reckon their time is nearly so good as ours. Number Four, I estimate, averaged about a hundred and fifteen miles an hour, but Number Three only made about a hundred and ten miles. I may be wrong in my figures, but so far it looks as though we were running strong. What did the inspector want, sir?"

"He wanted me to assist in a case which has arisen. Fabert is over from Paris and Kennedy from the States on the same matter. I will tell you about it in the morning.

"By the way, what did you find out about Casanova?"

"I got hold of Kelly, our chief mechanic, and questioned him about the Spaniard. He went out and discovered that Casanova left Hendon a little after six o'clock this morning. Nobody knew where he went, and as his machine is one of the newest ones, some surprise was expressed that he had not entered for the race. Anyway, wherever he has gone, he's not returned, for his hangar was still empty.

"You know Mr. Dunne's hangar adjoin's Casanova's, and Mr. Dunne was Number Three in the race? I went across to see him after Kelly had told me, and managed to peep through the canvas into Casanova's hangar.

"I saw two mechanics asleep on the ground, and a lantern was burning near the door. It looked as though they thought Casanova might return at any time."

Lee nodded.

"It's rather curious," he said.—"I feel more positive than ever that it was Casanova whom we saw flying north over the Orkneys this morning. But what on earth he can want up there I can't imagine.

"I have an appointment with Inspector Brooks early this morning, my lad, and while I am busy with him, you had better go out to Hendon again and see how the results are going."

"I was going to ask if I might," rejoined Nipper. "I say, guv'nor, wouldn't it be top-hole if we got first place?"

Lee laughed.

"I don't think we'll be very far down the list, my lad; but, come along; we have both had a hard day. Let us turn in.

CHAPTER IV.

LEE'S INVESTIGATIONS—A CONCLUSION—THE MYSTERY OF CASANOVA.

IT was a little after eight the next morning when Inspector Brooks called at Gray's Inn Road to pick up Lee. Nipper had left for Hendon just a little after daylight, in order to get the latest returns of the race. After a hasty glance at his morning mail, Lee climbed into the car with the inspector and drove to Ludgate Hill. There they entered the shop which had been looted two nights before, and, conducted by the manager, made their way to the offices at the back.

There was little in the office itself to reveal what had occurred, but the glass had not yet been replaced in the window, and lying on the floor were the broken pieces.

Lee picked them up and examined them closely. He saw that, with the aid of a diamond, the square had first been cut in the glass, then diagonal lines had been made from corner to corner. The window had been protected by iron bars, four of which had been sawn away in order to allow easy access to the window.

The safe revealed absolutely no signs of having been tampered with—that is, no signs to the naked eye. But through his powerful pocket-glass Lee was able to discern a faint circular mark just above the nickled nob which turned the combination.

"A suction stethoscope," he muttered, as he rose to his feet. "There is a clever brain behind this business. Were all the stolen goods in this safe?"

The manager shook his head.

"All the precious stones were there, as well as the rings and some of the bracelets. The most valuable necklaces and brooches were in the safe, too, but the bulk of the watches and the rest of the gold stuff were in the show-cases inside."

"I should like to have a look at those cases," said Lee.

He and the inspector accompanied the manager to the outer shop, where the latter showed them the cases from which some of the loot had been taken. Close beside where it must have lain were several of the valuable silver ornaments, and next to that case was one containing a very fine collection of silver plate.

. . . . "And there, on the floor by the window, was Nipper—bound!—(*See p. 28.*)

In another case there were rings and brooches set with semi-precious stones, such as topazes, aquamarines, turquoises—all of considerable value—yet none of these things had been touched. The fact that such a clear sweep had been made of the gold and precious stones, as well as a consideration of the time necessary to break into the shop and open the safe, was proof that the silver plate and semi-precious stone had not been left because the thieves had not had time to take them.

Lee felt convinced that they had been deliberately rejected, and bolstering up this conclusion was the fact that in no theft of the whole series had such a class of loot been taken.

They returned to the office, where Lee made a detailed examination of the window and iron bars. And then, lifting the sash, he dropped to the ground outside. The back of the building gave access on to a small alley, by which the thieves had undoubtedly come.

When Lee had finished an examination of the ground there he indicated his readiness to proceed to Bond Street. Entering the car, they drove there at once, and in many respects the affair at the Bond Street shop coincided with that at Ludgate Hill.

Over the nob of the combination Lee discovered the same circular mark which he had found on the door of the other safe. There were no iron bars on the window of the Bond Street shop, but the glass had been broken in the same manner as at the other establishment.

Standing beside the safe in the office of the Bond Street shop was a huge plate-glass stand containing one of the most valuable collections of solid silver which Lee had ever seen. It would have been a matter of but a few moments for the thieves to secure it. And yet, strangely enough, they had left it untouched.

So persistent was this point in each case which Lee had considered that he felt sure it must have some very strong connection. But what could it connect? That was the puzzle.

From Bond Street they drove to Scotland Yard, where Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy were waiting for them. With the results of the examination fresh in his mind, Lee discussed the matter again with the two detectives from abroad.

But when they finally broke up for lunch they had reached no definite decision as to the line of action they should take. On arriving once more at Gray's Inn Road, Lee found that Nipper had been home for some time.

He had secured the final results of the great race, and while Lee did not know it, the early edition of the evening papers already contained head-lines announcing the fact that Nelson Lee and Nipper, in a racing monoplane, had started first on the race, had returned first, and that their time was over four miles an hour faster than the record made by the next machine, which meant that Lee and Nipper had gained the great prize for the "Round Britain Race."

When Lee and the lad had studied the results made by the other competitors they went into lunch, and as they sat down, Lee said;

"Well, Nipper, has Casanova returned yet?"

"Yes, guv'nor," replied the lad. "He got in just before I came home. I saw him land, and I ran across to Mr. Dunne's hangar. Mr. Dunne was not there, but his mechanics were, and they gave me the run of the place.

"I went along to the slit in the canvas which I discovered last night, and looking through, I saw Casanova's mechanics wheel in his machine. Casanova walked in behind it, and I noticed that he dropped the hangar flap behind him as he did so.

"Wherever he had been, guv'nor, he must have been prepared for a good stay, for the mechanics took out of the cockpit two large travelling bags. There was something funny in the way they handled those bags, guv'nor, for they carried them to the far end of the hangar and hid them under a large pile of canvas there.

"Casanova changed after that, and drove into town at once. I thought I'd follow him, so I did. He got out at a place in Jermyn Street and went in. I discovered that he had a flat there, so I suppose he's gone to have a sleep. Now what do you think he had those bags with him for, guv'nor?"

Lee shook his head.

"I can't imagine, Nipper," he said. "But there is something queer about our Spanish friend which I should like to understand. I want you to stay about after lunch, Nipper; I may have something for you to do.

After lunch Lee returned to the consulting-room, and sitting down at the

desk, drew his note-book towards him. He wrote steadily for over half an hour; then, after he had placed the different points of the case on paper, he leaned back, lit his pipe, and set his mind to work to endeavour to analyse those points, and deduce from the germane facts of the matter which, when properly considered, might initiate the hook of circumstances on which he could hang a definite clue.

To begin with, he had to consider first the two most outstanding features, namely, the fact that the robberies had always been carried out in pairs, and that only the most valuable loot had been taken. An analysis of this point yielded a tentative theory that the robberies were carried out in doubles, possibly with a view of baffling the police.

So similar were the methods that it would be the natural conclusion to suppose that after one place had been robbed the thieves had moved on to a second to carry out their purpose there. But against this there was the fact that robberies had taken place in two different cities on the same night, and while Lee felt certain the same hand was behind them all, he came to the conclusion that at least two, and possibly more, gangs were working by similar methods and under the same direction.

Next came the analysis of the second point. Now in Lee's mind that point was even more important than the first. He felt certain that there was some big reason why only the most precious metals and stones were taken. The theory that this, too, was done to baffle the police would not hold water.

No thief would leave behind such valuable loot for that purpose. He might do it once or twice. but not so consistently. No, there was some reason, Lee felt sure, and that reason was connected with the plans of the thieves themselves.

Now, to divide this puzzle into different parts. Firstly, to consider the start of the robbery. There was the forcing of an entrance to any given place which had been decided upon to rob. Secondly, the actual looting of the place. Now the leaving of the silver had nothing to do with either of those parts of the puzzle. What followed? There followed the immediate getaway from the place; then the hiding of the loot, and finally its disposal.

As these three points were brought under Lee's mental microscope something suggested itself to him, and swinging round in his chair, he drew the telephone towards him.

Ringing up Scotland Yard, he got in touch with Inspector Brooks.

"Inspector," he said, "I want you to find out if possible whether any of the precious stones taken during this series of robberies are stones with a history—stones which would be known again did they come on the market. I know you have already combed out every pawnshop in the country, but this is a point which we did not discuss."

"I'll investigate that at once," said the inspector. "I'll speak to Fabert and Kennedy about it, and ring you up as soon as I know."

Lee thanked him, and hung up the receiver. Then he returned to his cogitations.

"Now if they could get away with such bulky gold as they did get away with, then I do not think that the silver and the semi-precious stones were left behind on account of weight or bulk. It would be as easy to take them as to take gold. Therefore, that point does not seem to be explained by the three portions already considered. That leaves only the hiding of the loot and its disposal to be considered.

"There would be no more risk in disposing of silver plate than of gold, for, like gold, it would be thrown into a melting-pot. I am inclined to think, therefore, that the explanation must lie in the fourth section of the puzzle, namely, in the hiding of the loot before its disposal.

Now if that stuff were hidden in London, the silver could be handled as well as the gold. Had all these thefts been confined to London, I should entertain the idea that they were being kept here; but that does not explain the disposal of the loot secured in France, the United States, Canada, or the other cities of Great Britain. If these robberies have been conducted by a central organization, as I believe they have, then there must be a common receiving depot for the loot.

It would be too risky to get the stuff away by rail. It might be handled by motor-car, and if not by motor, then how. That leaves the sea to consider. But this would be as risky, if not riskier, than by rail.

If one only knew where that depot might be situated, one could guess this point far more quickly. Yet, even so. I believe that therein lies the explanation as to why the silver plate was left behind in every case."

At that moment the telephone rang, and lifting the receiver, Lee heard the inspector's voice.

"I have investigated the point you raised," he said, "and both Fabert and Kennedy state that while several well-known precious stones have been stolen during these robberies, not a single one has come back on the market. Kennedy thinks that the organisation is so wealthy that it is keeping back the stones until they have been recut.

"I shouldn't wonder if that were the case," replied Lee. "Anyway, I'll consider it from that point of view."

He hung up the receiver again, and resumed his deductions.

"It can't be considered generally," he muttered aloud. "If the stuff wasn't taken away by rail or by steamer or by motor-car, then how could it have been taken?"

How about an aeroplane?" put in Nipper, who had been reading the latest edition of an evening paper, and incidentally admiring the photographs which had been reproduced of himself and Lee.

"Huh!" ejaculated Lee absently. "What did you say, my lad?"

"I heard you speaking to yourself, guv'nor, and I said why not by aeroplane, since you seemed to reject the idea of a motor-car, railway, and steamer."

Lee gazed straight ahead of him for some minutes. Then suddenly his clenched fist came down on the desk.

"By heavens! I wonder," he said; "and if so, how—how—how?"

Swinging back to the desk, Lee drew the notebook towards him once more, and wrote for some minutes; then he leaned back and closed his eyes."

"By aeroplane." he mused. "I wonder if the lad might be right. If so, then how was it worked. A passenger-carrying machine could easily handle a considerable amount of loot, and—Scott! Is that by any chance the reason why silver and less precious stones were never taken? Is it because weight and bulk was an element to be considered? Such a theory would certainly fit in with the fourth part of the puzzle.

"Moreover, by such means the stuff could be taken a considerable distance to a central receiving depot, and with little risk. Where the police would be keeping a close surveillance of the railways, steamship lines, and all cars travelling in or out of town, they would hardly think of examining any aeroplanes which might go up.

"But, at the same time, if an aeroplane were used it is difficult to see how they could operate so far away as the United States and Canada, always supposing the receiving depot to be in Europe some place.

"On the other hand, if the depot were on the American continent, a machine would have the same difficulty in going from Europe. There might be two receiving depots—one in America and one in Europe, but that is hardly likely. It would double the risk to split up the affair in that way.

"Yet supposing that were the means used, then from what point would the machine operate, and who can be the pilot? It should not be difficult to make a list of all the airmen at the different aerodromes in Great Britain and France, and the bulk of them could be investigated quite easily.

"There is, of course, the possibility that the machine might be kept at a private aerodrome, but the police could soon ascertain the location of every one of such a nature. Certainly that suggestion is the most feasible one that has been advanced so far to account for the silver and lesser value stones being left behind."

Lee dropped into deep thought now, for he was mentally going over every airman whom he knew personally. Unconsciously the list comprised the competitors in the great race of the day before. Man after man he passed in review until, with the exception of one or two whom he could not remember, he had considered them, and rejected them as possible crooks.

Then suddenly on the retina of his mind there flashed the picture of the big biplane which he and Nipper had seen as they neared the north of Scotland.

"Casanova," he muttered. "I don't know much about him except that he appears at Hendon from time to time. I don't know either what his record is, but I should like to be able to find out.

Scott! I wonder if he might have any hand in this affair.

"Now, let me see. The robbery of the shops in Ludgate Hill and the place in Bond Street took place the night before last. Yesterday morning Casanova left Hendon a little after six. He must have had engine trouble, or else was flying slowly, for Nipper and I overtook him as we flew across Moray Firth.

"I thought it exceedingly strange then for a machine to be flying north so far, and even more so when it headed for the Orkneys. Now, unless I am greatly mistaken, that biplane came down somewhere in the southern Orkneys. It was certainly dropping when we lost sight of it.

"On our return to Hendon we discover that Casanova is out, so our suspicions that the biplane was his seem confirmed. Nor does he return until today, and when he does it is to bring with him two big travelling bags.

"From what Nipper saw there seems to have been some reason why those bags should be concealed. The circumstantial evidence seems to indicate that Casanova flew north to the Orkneys yesterday morning and remained there over night.

"Now where in the Orkneys is there a place where an aeroplane would have reason to land? I know about every possible point for landing in Britain, but I am blessed if I can remember any place in the Orkney Islands.

"Casanova has been at Hendon a good deal, but also he has been away a lot, and therefore his absences from the flying ground might not coincide with the robberies which have taken place. But it is sufficiently strong as a suggestion for an investigation of that gentleman to be made. I'll follow up that suggestion, and incidentally put Nipper on the trail of our Spanish friend."

Suddenly Lee turned to the lad.

"Nipper," he said, "I want you to get on a disguise of some sort and go to Jermyn Street. Hang round outside Casanova's flat until you discover his whereabouts. When you have done so, find him, if possible, and follow him wherever he goes. Do you understand?"

"Yes, guv'nor. When shall I return to report?"

"Don't come back here. Come to Hendon. I shall be there. I want to have a talk with some of the boys on the ground."

Nipper rose at once, and when he had disappeared in the direction of his room to don a disguise, Lee put on his coat and hat, and, making his way to the street, hailed a taxi.

"Drive to Scotland Yard," he said as he climbed in.

On arriving at the Yard he went up at once to Inspector Brooks's private room, but found that the inspector was engaged with his chief.

On making inquiries, Lee discovered that Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy were expected at any moment, so he decided to wait.

Fabert appeared in less than ten minutes, and Kennedy turned up in about a quarter of an hour. They were smoking and chatting when the inspector opened the door and walked in. He glanced inquiringly at Lee.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Not yet," responded Lee. "But I have an inquiry to put forward. I want to know something about a certain individual, and as I fancy he may be well known in both France and America, I have withheld my questions until you came, in order that we may all consider the matter together."

"What is the inquiry?" asked the inspector, plumping into his chair.

"I want to know if the Yard records can tell me anything about an airman at present in Hendon. His name is Casanova.

"André Casanova!" exclaimed Monsieur Fabert. "I know him, Lee. He flies much in France."

Kennedy nodded. "He comes to America also," he said. "He is a Spaniard, I think."

"His father was a Spaniard and his mother a French dancer," said Monsieur Fabert.

"I don't seem to know the man at all," said the inspector.

"Can you tell me when he was last in France?" asked Lee, turning to Fabert.

"I can't quite remember," responded the Frenchman, "but I can easily ascertain. I can send an urgent wire to Paris and get full particulars."

"I wish you would," responded Lee. "Do you mind having the message sent at once, inspector?"

The inspector pressed a button on his

desk, and when an orderly appeared he instructed him to wait until Monsieur Fabert finished writing the message; then it was despatched, and when the door had closed Lee said to Kennedy:

"Do you think you could find out when he was last in America, Kennedy?"

"I can tell you in a few moments," replied the American. "I'm thinking now. I saw him fly there a little time ago. Ah! I have it. It was on the occasion of a meet at Brighton outside New York. Let me see—what was the date? I will have it in my notebook diary."

He drew out a notebook as he spoke, and thumbed over the leaves. Then he paused and read an item. "I was right," he said, looking up. "It was at Brighton during the last big meet there. He was entered in the five-hour race, but did not take part. I saw him make a few exhibition flights, though.

"How does that date correspond with the date of the last jewellery robbery in New York?" asked Lee carelessly.

Kennedy looked at Lee for a moment. Then rapidly turning over a few pages, consulted his notes. Suddenly he looked up and gave a low whistle.

"It corresponds very well indeed," he said slowly. "In fact, the meeting at Brighton outside New York took place at the same time as the two robberies on Fifth Avenue."

Lee's eyes filled with satisfaction.

"I say, Kennedy," he went on, "make out a cable message to your people in New York, and ask them to ascertain if Casanova was flying at Chicago, Cleveland, Montreal, and Toronto at the time of the robberies there, will you?"

Kennedy nodded, and drawing his chair up to the desk, reached for a cable form.

"What does it mean, Lee?" asked the inspector.

Lee shrugged.

"Just a line I am following up," he said. "I shall tell you what it indicates as soon as I have heard the result of the messages sent by Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy. We can't do much, anyway, until we get a reply; so in the meantime I shall go along to Hendon. I want to make a few inquiries out there. Where are you all lunching?"

"Kennedy is lunching with me," said the inspector, "and Monsieur Fabert is lunching with the Chief."

Lee nodded.

"All right," he said. "I shall get something at Hendon. I shall probably ring you up early this afternoon."

With that he took his leave and, climbing into the taxi, told the man to go to Hendon.

Lee mulled the matter over in his mind on the way to the flying ground, and so absorbed was he in his thoughts that he hardly noticed when they turned in at the gate. He was recalled to his surroundings, however, by the roar of an aeroplane engine, and glancing out of the window, he saw a big biplane just rising in the air.

"That is Casanova's machine," he muttered, as he climbed out and paid the driver. "I wonder where he is off to and where Nipper can be. He turned round just then, and as he did so he saw Kelly, his head mechanic, coming towards him.

CHAPTER V.

NIPPER MAKES AN UNWILLING FLIGHT.

NIPPER lost no time in getting into a disguise which would effectually hide his identity.

During the past year or two he had become extremely proficient in Italian, and found that, garbed as an Italian youth of the type one sees in Soho, this linguistic accomplishment was a great asset to him.

He left Gray's Inn Road not long after Lee had departed, and taking a taxi as far as Piccadilly Circus, got out there. He walked down St. James's Street until he came to Jermyn Street, and turning along there, strolled past the building where he had ascertained Casanova's flat to be.

There was nothing to be gained by walking up and down outside, for although he kept up his surveillance for nearly an hour, Casanova did not appear.

Nipper finally resolved to take the bull by the horns in order to discover if Casanova were at home; so the next time he came to the entrance to the building he turned in boldly, and, walking along to the liftman's lodge, respectfully in-

quired if the Senor Casanova were in. The liftman, evidently taking Nipper for a compatriot of the Spaniard's, grunted a reply in the negative.

"It is important that I should see the senor," went on Nipper. "Can you tell me, please, where I might find him."

"He said he was going out to Hendon," snapped the liftman, and murmuring his thanks, Nipper turned and made for the street.

"Hendon, eh!" he muttered. "I'll have to take a taxi out there at once."

He walked into St. James's Street and hailed a taxi, and all the way there he was in a fever of impatience lest he should miss Casanova after all.

Once the taxi had turned in at the gate of the flying ground, Nipper leaped out, and, paying the man, ran along until he reached the first line of hangars. There he dropped into a walk, and, slouching past the hangars where mechanics and airmen were busy, he kept on until he came to the one used by Lee.

The flap was up, and inside he saw Kelly and his assistant working over the monoplane. Kelly frowned at Nipper as the lad entered, but when Nipper spoke the mechanic grinned.

"I shouldn't have known you in a dozen years," he said. "What's the game?"

"Kelly, I wish you would do something for me," said Nipper, in a low tone. "It is important that I should find out if Casanova is in his hangar. Can you manage it for me?"

"Sure, I'll find out all right," replied Kelly. "I'll ask Mr. Dunne's mechanics. They are sure to know. You seem to be showing a lot of interest in Casanova, Nipper. What has he done to you?"

"Nothing, Kelly. I am doing this for the guv'nor."

"Right-ho! responded Kelly. "You stick here for a few minutes and I'll tell you." He left the hangar as he spoke and started down the ground towards Dunne's hangar. Nipper watched him disappear within, then a few minutes later he came back to where the lad was waiting.

"He's there all right," he announced, as he entered the hangar. "Roberts, Mr. Dunne's mechanic, says he has been there for half an hour or so. He fancies Casanova and his mechanics are working on the biplane."

Nipper thanked him, then said:

"I guess I'll go over to Dunne's hangar. I want to find out exactly what Casanova is doing. I—Kelly, there is Casanova now. He is coming out of the hangar.

Kelly stepped to the front of the hangar and watched while André Casanova emerged into view and walked across the flying ground towards another hangar.

"That is the hangar used by another Spaniard," muttered Kelly. "He often goes in there. They will chin for some time, I expect."

"I say, Kelly," said Nipper eagerly, "I wonder if you can manage to decoy Casanova's mechanics out of the hangar for a little. I am awfully keen to get inside there for a few moments."

Kelly scratched his head.

"I might," he said thoughtfully. "I'll have a shot at it, anyway. If I manage to get them along to another hangar for a few minutes, will that do?"

"Splendidly."

"Well, wait here, and I'll try to manage it. When you see me come out with them, you slip across to the hangar and do what you have to do. But don't be long. I don't know them very well, and they might get suspicious that I was having a game with them."

"It won't take me long," rejoined Nipper.

He kept watch while Kelly crossed the ground once more and entered Dunne's hangar. He emerged a moment or so later with one of Dunne's mechanics, and the pair strolled along to Casanova's hangar. Nipper saw them standing at the entrance as though talking to someone inside, and then he saw two mechanics appear from the interior.

All four walked up past several hangars until they came to one which Nipper knew contained a new and very fast biplane. As they paused before it he knew that was his chance, so, slipping across the ground, he paused before Dunne's hangar.

After a cautious look round, he sauntered carelessly along to the next hangar, and then disappeared within. The big biplane stood just inside, and from the litter of tools and rags about

Nipper knew that the mechanics had been going over it. There was no one in the hangar, however, and if there had been Nipper had a plausible excuse ready.

Once inside, though, he moved swiftly. He looked through the opening to see if anyone was approaching, then, passing between the biplane and the canvas wall of the hangar, he reached the back of the place and stole along to the pile of canvas at the rear beneath which he had seen the two mechanics hide the bags which had been taken from the biplane that morning.

Kneeling down, he thrust his hand beneath the pile, and then, after another cautious look round, began to drag one of the bags towards him. He managed to get it out from beneath the weight of canvas, but, to his chagrin, when he tried to open it he found it locked.

Fearful lest someone should come, he thrust it back where it had been concealed, and drawing back, was just starting to make his way back to the front opening when it was suddenly darkened by a shadow, and the next moment André Casanova himself entered the hangar.

He saw Nipper at once, and, as the lad rose to his feet, Casanova's eyes darkened with suspicion and anger. He walked along until he was close to the lad, then, bending forward, he hissed:

"Well, who are you, and what are you doing in here?"

"I must have entered the wrong hangar," replied Nipper, making a move to pass the Spaniard. He knew the excuse sounded lame when he made it, but he was not prepared for Casanova's next move. He did not know that the Spaniard was living under a terrific nervous tension, and that he was suspicious of everything about him.

Without the slightest warning he sprang for the lad and gripped his throat with long, powerful fingers. Nipper struggled hard to throw off the other's weight, but Casanova's hold was not to broken so easily, and steadily, while the lad fought, he pressed him back and back until Nipper's back was nearly breaking and his eyes were starting from their sockets. Still Casanova dug his fingers into the lad's throat until Nipper's struggles became weaker and weaker, and at last, as a great blackness filled his brain, he relaxed in the Spaniard's grip and collapsed in an unconscious heap on the ground. Casanova released his hold now, and dropping to his knees, began to make a rapid examination of the lad. In very few seconds he had discovered that Nipper was disguised, though there was nothing about the lad's person to indicate his identity.

"A spy!" muttered the Spaniard to himself.

"That means I am suspected. It means danger. There is only one thing to do, and that is to get away at once. Thank Heaven, I have long prepared for just such an emergency as this. But, by the saints, this spy shall not be left behind to make his report. He shall come with me."

Rising swiftly to his feet, Casanova crossed to a pile of rope in one corner, and, seizing a length, went back to where Nipper lay. He securely bound the lad's feet and wrists, then he fashioned a rough gag and thrust it between Nipper's teeth.

"I think that will keep you safe," he muttered as he rose to his feet. "Now to get you out of sight."

Lifting Nipper bodily, he heaved him over the side of the machine and lowered him into the cockpit. Climbing in himself, he pushed Nipper's unconscious body well forward, and then concealed it with the big canvas cover which he ordinarily used to cover up the "cargo," which he carried once a month. That done, he climbed out of the machine and, lighting a cigarette, went to look for his two mechanics. He met them at the entrance to the hangar, and immediately began to swear at them for leaving the place.

Under the lash of his tongue they leaped to obey the orders which he snapped out. The petrol tank was filled, then the engine tested, and finally the locker fitted with its different belongings. When that had been done Casanova donned his flying clothes and instructed the mechanics to wheel the biplane outside.

He followed them, and then, when the engine had been started, he settled himself, and gave the signal to let go.

It was at that moment Nelson Lee entered the grounds and saw the biplane just rising.

CHAPTER VI.

A GREAT CHASE—FILROY ISLAND—THE ESCAPE—LOOT—THE END.

"HALLO, Kelly!" said Lee, as the mechanic approached. "What are you doing down here?"

"I saw you coming, Mr. Lee, and came to meet you."

"Is anything wrong?" asked Lee quickly.

"There is and there isn't, sir," replied Kelly. "Leastwise, I don't know, Mr. Lee. I'll tell you what's bothering me. About half an hour or so ago Nipper came out here. He was disguised, and when he first entered the hanger I didn't recognise him. Then he spoke, and afterwards asked me if Casanova was on the grounds. I went across to Mr. Dunne's hangar to find out, and they told me he was. Then I went back to Nipper, and while I was talking to him he and I saw Casanova leave his hangar and go across to another one. Then Nipper asked me if I could decoy Casanova's two mechanics away from the hangar—said he wanted to get inside for some important reason.

"I said I'd have a shot at it, and, with the assistance of one of Mr. Dunne's mechanics, I succeeded. We stood in front of Casanova's hangar, and kidded them about the new biplane up the row a little. They came along with us to have a look at it, and I saw Nipper cross the grounds and go into Casanova's tent.

"Well, sir, I watched all the time, and the next thing that I saw was Casanova himself going back to his hangar. Now I know for a fact, sir, that Nipper had not come out again. There is only one way of exit, and that by the front. I had been watching the front every second, and I knew he was inside.

I was too far away to warn him that Casanova was coming, and when the Spaniard disappeared inside I knew there would be trouble. I watched, expecting to see Nipper coming out on the run, but nothing happened. I thought he had succeeded in bluffing Casanova, but still I was worried, and got the Spaniard's two mechanics started back for the hangar.

"I stayed round the entrance of Mr. Dunne's place for a bit watching to see if Nipper appeared, but he hidn't show up, sir. The next thing I saw was Casanova's biplane being wheeled out, and then Casanova got in. That was the biplane which just went up, sir. While they were busy getting it away I peeped into the hangar and called to Nipper, but there was no answer; and then I stepped inside. Mr. Lee, there wasn't the slightest sign of the lad any place, but I found this on the ground."

As he finished Kelly thrust his hand in his pocket and drew out the cap Nipper had been wearing.

Lee regarded it gravely.

"This looks serious, Kelly," he said, thrusting the cap into his own pocket. "Are you sure the lad isn't in the hangar—or perhaps in Mr. Dunne's?"

"I know he isn't sir. I was just going to scour the place for him when I saw you getting out of the taxi, and I came along to tell you what had happene. It may be all a mare's nest, Mr. Lee, but it looks funny just the same.

"There are reasons which you don't know, why this may be even more serious than it looks, Kelly," said Lee gravely. "You go along to Mr. Dunne's hangar again and see if Nipper is anywhere about. I shall go along to our own hangar to see if by chance he got there without being seen by you."

Kelly ran along to do as Lee had ordered, and, quickening his footsteps, Lee hastened on to his own hanger. Five minutes later he and Kelly met outside the hangar.

"I couldn't see a sign of him, sir," panted the mechanic. "And, Mr. Lee. Casanova's two mechanics have just left the hangar and started for town. They can't expect Casanova back to-night."

"You say they have left?" said Lee sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Then come along, Kelly. We shall get into Casanova's hangar and have a look round."

They crossed the ground together, and a few moments later had slipped under the flap of Casanova's hangar. Lee's first duty was to search the place for any further signs of Nipper. But beyond the cap which Kelly had found nothing was revealed. It was during his examination of the place that Leo came upon the two leather bags which had been hidden beneath the pile of canvas at one end of the hangar.

He dragged them out and tried to open them. The locks resisted his efforts, however. So, turning round, he gestured for Kelly to hand him a

flat iron wrench which lay close by. Forcing one end of the wrench under the catch, he gave a sharp jerk upwards, splintering the lock.

There seemed to be nothing whatsoever inside, and after a close examination of the side pockets, he discovered that this was indeed so. He pushed the bag to one side, and turned his attention to the one which Kelly had now opened.

Like the first bag, it appeared to hold nothing. But Lee did not satisfy himself with a cursory glance inside, but thrust his hand in each side pocket as well. And it was in one of these side pockets that his fingers encountered something small and hard. He drew it out and held it up before his eyes. It was a small brilliant, cut and polished, and apparently had at one time formed part of a setting.

Lee thrust the stone in his pocket, a glint of satisfaction appearing in his eyes as he did so. Then he turned to Kelly.

"Come along, Kelly," he said. "We can do no more here. Let's go over to our own hangar."

They had just emerged into the open when they saw Lee's second mechanic running down the flying ground. As he caught sight of Lee and Kelly he changed his course and ran towards them.

"I didn't know you were on the ground, Mr. Lee," he panted as he came up. "You're wanted on the telephone."

Lee nodded, and quickening his footsteps, made for the 'phone in one of the near by flying schools, and which he had an arrangement to use. It proved to be Inspector Brooks on the wire, and on hearing Lee's voice, he said:

"We have received replies to both cables, Lee, and have compared notes. Casanova was flying in France at the time of the different robberies there; and investigations, so far, show that he was in Canada and the United States on similar occasions. Now if his presence in England coincides with the different affairs here, it looks rather suspicious."

"I've got even more definite clues than that now, inspector," said Lee quickly. "But listen; there is no time to be lost. Casanova has cleared out on his biplane, and I have a feeling that he is trying to make a getaway. Get hold of Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy and come out to Hendon as quickly as possible. I am going after Casanova, and if you others wish to come along I can make arrangements for machines."

"You can count me in as one," replied the inspector. "And I know that Fabert and Kennedy will go, too."

"I can take one man with me," rejoind Lee; "and I'll arrange for three other machines."

"But how can you follow Casanova?" asked the inspector.

"Never mind that now," rejoined Lee. "There isn't time to discuss it. But I'm certain I know where he has gone."

He closed off then, and making for Dunne's hangar, found that Dunne—one of the keenest of the visiting American airmen—was on the grounds some place, though not in his own hangar.

Lee sent one of the mechanics to find him. Then, getting hold of Kelly, he ordered him to discover if two other airmen—Darwin and Boothe respectively—were on the grounds, and, if so, to give them Lee's compliments and ask them, if possible, to come to his hangar at once.

He himself went along to see that the monoplane was ready for instant flight. And while he and the second mechanic were still working on it, Darwin and Boothe appeared. Dunne sauntered in a moment later, and, getting the three airmen together, Lee told them what was required.

The eyes of each man lit up with anticipation as Lee outlined his plans, and almost before he had finished they were running towards their hangars in order to get their machines ready.

Lee's monoplane had just been wheeled out when a big car drove into the grounds, and the inspector, with Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy, climbed out. As they came up Lee told them what had occurred at Hendon—relating how Casanova had apparently cleared out, taking Nipper with him, and how he, Lee, had discovered a small brilliant in one of Casanova's bags. He exhibited the stone as he spoke. "I might be dead wrong," he said. "But finding this stone in the bag certainly does look queer. In my opinion it has fallen out of a setting, and when the bag was emptied of the stuff it contained this stone was overlooked. It had worked down in the very corner of one of the side pockets, and only a close examina-

tion of the inside of the bag revealed its presence.

"Now I think since my machine is the smallest, I had better fly alone. Anyway, we shall need one vacancy in order to bring Nipper back if we succeed in finding him. Dunne will take you, inspector. You will go with Darwin, Kennedy, and Boothe will take Monsieur Fabert.

"They are wheeling out the machines now. Come along and I'll introduce you. Then we can get along without delay. I have told the other three our course. I shall lead, and they will follow in my wake."

A few minutes later, when Lee had made the introductions and assigned each man to the machine in which he was to travel, he hurried back to the monoplane and, donning his flying clothes, climbed in.

Lee was anxious not to lose any time, for his objective was the Orkneys, which had so aroused his suspicions of Casanova, and, even making the best time, it would be nearly dusk before he reached there. Of course, he would not be compelled to fly in the roundabout course which he had followed during the race. But, starting from Hendon, could lay a direct course for the Firth of Forth, flying over land practically all the way. From the Firth of Forth he would lay his course for Dundee, picking up the Moray Firth just east of Inverness, then straight over John o' Groats to the Orkneys.

He had no idea where Casanova had descended among the islands, but, judging from what he and Nipper had seen on the day of the race, it was one of the southern islands.

He got away without incident, and when the monoplane had climbed to the two thousand foot level, Lee pointed her nose to the north, and gazing back once to see Dunne climbing behind him, he settled in his seat and fixed his eyes on the speed indicator. Steadily the needle rose from ninety to a hundred, from a hundred to a hundred and ten, and when the engine had warmed up still more, to a little over one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

Lee found less wind on the two thousand foot level, and there he kept his course, though once he climbed to the three thousand foot, but discovered a gale was blowing there.

Hour after hour went by with monotonous regularity. He raised the Firth of Forth without incident, and later on the Moray Firth. The sun was getting low in the west now, and Lee was giving the monoplane everything she would take, anxious to reach the islands before sunset.

When finally he crossed the Moray Firth, and later picked up John o' Groats, he could see the islands dim and grey ahead. But instead of continuing his course he went in a circle, and, flying in a wide arc, waited for the other machines to come up.

Dunne appeared first, and a few minutes later the other two came on with the regularity of express trains. Such has been the advance in aerial flight.

As he came back to the starting point of his circle over Duncansby Head, Lee signalled to the other machines, then flew straight for the Orkneys. He raised the most southerly islands very soon. Then, with the other three machines spread out to right and left, they began a search of an island which would serve as a landing.

It was Lee, in the monoplane, who spotted a little island where, hidden behind stone ridges, was a series of buildings which looked strangely out of place in that barren waste. Nor was that all which his gaze picked out, but, riding at anchor between this island and a larger one, was a slim yacht, the outlines of which were only too familiar to him.

As he recognised the yacht, and, flying lower, saw certain preparations going forward, he signalled quickly to the other machines. Then banking steeply, he wheeled for the volplane. As he got still lower, Lee saw that the open space enclosed by the four ridges was an ideal landing spot, and circling a little more widely, he brought the monoplane down steeply towards it.

A moment later the wheels bumped, rose again, then took the ground, and the monoplane ran on, to come to a stop just at the base of one of the ridges.

Lee sprang out of the machine, and stood signalling to Dunne as he came down. The big plane touched the ground a hundred yards away, and came on swiftly to a place close beside the monoplane. Then in quick succession followed Darwin and Boothe.

At that moment the sound of a shot broke out from the low stone house near at hand, and a bullet whistled just behind Lee and Inspector Brooks. In a

few hurried words Lee explained what the presence of the yacht meant, and what he read from it. Then, drawing his automatic, he raced towards the house.

As they ran across the ground they saw several figures dash up one of the ridges behind the house, then disappear from view.

"They are making for the yacht!" cried Lee. "But come on to the house first. If they have transferred the loot we shall have to go after the yacht."

Dashing in the front door, Lee stood for a moment in the luxuriously furnished lounge. Then opening door after door which opened from it, he finally came to the laboratory. As he opened that door he caught sight first of several packing-cases ready for shipment. And then, on the floor by the window, the bound figure of Nipper.

Leaping over the cases, Lee took out his knife and slashed the lad's bonds. As Nipper came to his feet he said:

"They've taken three cases already, guv'nor."

"Then there's no time to lose," jerked Lee, as he handed Nipper a spare weapon which he carried. "We'll have to go after them."

He dashed along the passage followed by the others and, gaining the rear door, made for the ridge at the back. As he topped this he saw several figures at the edge of the water, and at the moment a large breeches buoy was being run out to the yacht. They were seen by the enemy at the same instant and, as they raced down the other side of the ridge, a volley of revolver shots met them.

Then, as Lee and his companions still came on, the men on the shore—there were four of them—turned and dashed into the sea. They swam towards the yacht, and as Lee's party reached the shore they saw that the breeches buoy had just arrived at the yacht. Two women climbed out of it and were assisted to the deck of the yacht. Then the cable holding the breeches buoy was slashed and the basket went tumbling into the water. Now the sound of the winch reached their ears and, a moment later, ropes were thrown to the four swimmers.

Just then, at the base of the derrick which had supported the land end of the cable, Nipper came upon three cases and, as he made the discovery, cried out to Lee:

"They haven't had time to take the three cases with them, guv'nor, they're still here."

Lee ran up the rocky promontory to see. Then calling the others round him he said:

"Well, inspector, what shall we do?" Casanova had too much start, but not enough for them to get the loot away. Unless I am greatly mistaken we shall find a good deal of jewellery or its equivalent in the cases which we have come upon. Now I know who is at the head of this international gang and who conceived the whole thing. Do you not recognise the yacht?"

The inspector shook his head.

"No, I don't," he said.

"It is the La Rose," said Lee, "and is owned by the 'Black Wolf.' We could easily keep them in sight with our machines, but we cannot stop them, nor can we follow them indefinitely on account of the petrol. My idea is to examine the cases at once, then, if possible, get away to-night and have a British gun-boat go after them."

"That is the only thing, I think," responded the inspector. "Shall we get these cases back to the house now?"

Lee turned and gazed after the yacht, which was rapidly steaming through the channel between the two islands. As it turned the headland which would shut it off from view, three derisive blasts sounded on the siren. Then the jutting promontory hid it from sight. And, keenly chagrined, Lee nodded and said:

"Yes, I fancy that is all there is to do, inspector!"

Among them they carried the cases back to the house and into the laboratory. Then they removed the covers of all, and as Lee had anticipated, came upon a vast quantity of unset gems and rough golden ingots, result of the melting down of the different articles of gold.

Among the stones Monsieur Fabert and Kennedy recognised many which were in the lists of the French and American thefts respectively. Others were identified as part of English robberies, though, of course, all the gold objects had had their identity merged in the ingots. By the time an inventory was made of the contents of the cases and a thorough search carried out in the house, it was too late to fly back to the mainland that night.

Dunne and Boothe constituted them-

selves cooks, and, raiding the larder, prepared a very passable meal. Then the whole party turned in until morning.

The following day the cases were transferred to the machines. And in one of the buildings at the back they came upon Casanova's biplane.

After testing it Leo decided to use it to transport the balance of the loot, leaving Nipper to fly the monoplane. Then, heavily laden, machine after machine rose in the air and headed away south.

After a long consultation it had been decided to make straight for Hendon and then place the matter in the hands of the commissioner at the station yard. Through him the police of Scotland Yard would take charge of the house on Filroy Island, and through him, too, would the British Navy and merchant service be on the look-out for the yacht.

A final inventory of the loot brought its value up to nearly a hundred thousand pounds, a little more than half of the amount which had been stolen in the series of robberies of which they had particulars.

Undoubtedly the balance was on board the yacht, and, therefore, every effort was to be made to run her down. Inside of twenty-four hours every ship in the Atlantic that carried wireless had been notified. Every world port was instructed to keep a lookout, and the Mediterranean, the Cape and the Straits of Magellan were to be patrolled in case the yacht attempted to reach the Indian Ocean or the Pacific in that way. Finally the Panama Canal officials were notified, and it seemed that the whole Atlantic had been completely bottled in.

When on board the La Rose, Mademoiselle Miton had anticipated just such moves as these, and in order to circumvent them she decided on a daring plan, which even Lee had not taken into his calculations.

This plan was nothing less than attempting to force the North-West Passage, right up through the Arctic and the north of Canada. And a few months later a white yacht, very much discoloured, very much battered by the ice, and very much dilapidated, limped through the Bering Straits, and steaming towards the Aleuts, made her course for the South Pacific, towards those myriad unknown islands where half a navy might lie hidden.

It was the La Rose!

THE END.

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The Boxing Sailor

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SAVED.

POOR Tom Crawley. As he listened to Fisherman Thwaites, and the full significance of what his father's old friend said forced itself home, a hoarse cry burst from his lips. The sea of faces that surrounded the ring heaved and swayed, the ring floor seemed to roll, and for a moment he could see nothing.

Tom had just come through a pretty stiff contest, fought in an atmosphere of indescribable stuffiness. Therefore the ill news which Mary's father brought had an almost stunning effect.

Bob Randle, although he had just received a hammering at Tom's hands, uttered a few words of friendly sympathy.

"Tom," he declared—and his voice trembled with emotion—"I am awfully sorry."

Tom's head cleared just then, and he thrust Bob aside in a burst of irritable unreasonableness.

"I don't want you to be sorry for me," he said roughly.

"Tom, Tom," said Mary, the tears falling from her pretty eyes, "don't carry on so. Your father was very brave, and—and—it was the sort of death he would have preferred."

Tom glared fixedly at Mary, and a hysterical laugh burst from his lips.

"Who said he's dead?" he murmured. "And, besides, you don't want to fuss after me. You go and talk to Bob."

He swung round on Fisherman Thwaites.

"There's no chance of a mistake is there, sir?" he gulped.

"Not a bit. Jerry Morgan, who brought me the news, saw the Elsie Jane go down."

Tom Crawley bolted to the ropes.

"Wait for me, Mr. Thwaites," said he. "It won't take me long to get my clobber on, and we'll go down to the harbour together. Will you wait?"

"I'll come along with you, boy," was the ready answer.

Tom was through the ropes in a moment, and ignoring the friends who pressed round him eager to learn what was the matter, he fought his way to the door leading to the dressing rooms.

Fisherman Thwaites, dour and sad at heart at the loss of his lifelong friend, followed.

Bob Randle drew Mary after.

"You mustn't stay here, Mary," he said. "They want the ring for the last fight."

Mary, pale, wretched, and with tears in her eyes, descended the steps of the ring, and mingled with the crowd. As soon as she could she left the boxing hall and waited in the darkness outside the side entrance, through which the boxers gained the dressing rooms. She guessed that her father and Tom would come out that way.

She was right, for she had hardly been there a minute ere the door swung open, and her father's burly form appeared. Close upon his heels came Tom.

"Is that you, Mary, my gel?" asked the fisherman.

"Yes, father."

"We're going along to the harbour. You'd better come, too."

"Tom, doesn't want me, dad."

"Tom not want you? Why, he worships you, my lass. He don't rightly know what he's doing now, poor fellow. Take his arm, Mary; take his arm."

Mary timidly complied with the request, and Fisherman Thwaites supporting the diminutive A.B. on the other side, they progressed in this way through the deserted and darkened streets in the direction of the harbour which they all knew so well.

Soon they were walking along the great stone quay, and the glint of the rippling water lay below them.

On every hand they could see the masts, spars, and rigging of the fishing

boats and mine sweepers rising like trees in a darkened forest about them; and beyond the dim outline of the funnels of the steamships which came and went night and day, in spite of the U boats.

Over there lights were moving, and they could hear the beat of the powerful engines of a U boat motor chaser. It was heading for the harbour mouth.

From the distance came a murmuring of the sea, the echo of a steam siren, and on the quay itself rang the heavy tread of fishermen's boots.

Presently, as they hurried along, Mary's father stopped, and nodding gloomily at the waterway, said solemnly:

"That's the old berth, Tom, boy. And to think that the Elsie Jane's gone, and that we shall never see the old man again, Tom? By——" and he swore a mighty oath, shaking his clenched fist in the air, "somebody will have to pay for it."

"Wait until I get aboard the Flyer again, John," declared Tom, with a vicious setting of the lips." We got laid out in a nasty collision, but we're the fastest destroyer in the whole bloomin' flotilla, and we'll give Fritz something to think about once we get to work. I'll bag a German for every hair of my father's head."

They walked slowly onward, and presently mingled with a group of fisherfolk, men and women, who were discussing the latest sea tragedy, while they directed their eyes seawards, watching, watching for those who, alas! were to return no more.

"Here's Fisherman Thwaites and his girl—and Tom Crawley, by goom," said a Weathersea man, and the others silently made way for them to pass.

And there they waited for hours, waited until the inky blackness of the night changed to purple, and the purple to grey, and the dull dawn came.

Patiently the bulk of the men and woman waited, too. Thomas Crawley, of the Elsie Jane, was a character in Weathersea, and loved by one and all. There would be no bed for these folk until his fate had been decided beyond a doubt.

As the day slowly came, and objects took shape on every hand: the eyes of the watchers picked out a distant vessel, two, which appeared making for the harbour.

No, there were three of them. A fishing boat, whose hull was low in the water, was being towed landwards by a tug. In escort came a long, snake-like warship, a destroyer of the Flyer class.

"It's some of 'em," said Thwaites, excitedly. "They were in the same little mix-up as the Elsie Jane, I'll swear, mates. Poor Tom Crawley! We shall hear all about how he went out now."

Slowly, ever so slowly, the tug drew the crippled fishing boat nearer and nearer to the harbour. Fisherfolk and boatmen came crowding to pier and quay.

And at last, to a deafening roar of cheering, the tug and its burden passed the bar. There upon the deck of the crippled boat, aboard which some of the hands could be seen pumping away for dear life, stood a group of watersoaked and grim-looking men.

Fisherman Thwaites stared, closed his eyes as if he could hardly credit what he saw, opened them again, and looked once more.

Then he whipped his hat from his head and waved it frantically, as did the others who stood about him, while little Tom Crawley, A.B., pushed his way to the brink of the quay, and stared, and stared through a mist of tears.

"Strike a light!" roared Fisherman Thwaites, in a stentorian voice. "Ain't that Bill Riley over there—and near him, ain't that the boy Sam? And whose that big feller that's waving, Tom; who is he, eh, Mary? Ain't he Thomas Crawley, skipper of the Elsie Jane? Why, it is—it is! Your father's alive, Tom, my boy! The old man's alive—alive—alive."

As for poor Tom, he could only wave, and stare, and wave again.

Not a sound could he utter, for there was a lump in his throat which choked him. The mist that rose before his eyes would not permit him to see; but Mary and her father got hold of him and rushed with him along the quay, so that they might meet the boat that brought the survivors ashore when it touched the landing-steps.

And in their ears rang the echoing cheers of the overjoyed crowd.

TOM CRAWLEY MAKES A MATCH.

THOMAS CRAWLEY let the hand which held an official communication from His Majesty's Government fall to his side, and uttered a deep sigh.

"That, Tom, my boy," said he, with emphasis, "is an end of things. I had no understanding with the Admiralty or the Government about the employment of the Elsie Jane as a mine-sweeper, and they say I can't 'ave a penny of compensation. She was everything to me. How can your poor old dad earn his living now?"

The morning sun was slanting in at the window of the cosy little parlour, touching the leaves of the geraniums with a golden light.

Tom Crawley and his mother sat watching "father" while he read the important letter.

"It seems hard, dad," said Tom. "Do you really mean to say you'll get nothing?"

"Nothing, boy. I ought to have had a proper understanding before I helped in the sweeping, they say. Now I've got no fishing-boat, and it means ruin."

"Your father had invested all his savings in the Elsie Jane, you see, Tom; and though he's made handsome profits several times this winter, yet cost of living is high, and he's only a bit put by."

"I'm too old to start on any other job now, boy," said the fisherman gloomily. "And I'm too independent to work under any other master fisherman, even under Thwaites."

And he stared gloomily at the floor.

Tom sat silent for a while. His nimble brain was busy thinking, thinking, thinking.

The Flyer was in dock, and likely to remain there for some time. He wasn't wanted, and had some weeks before him ere he would be wanted again, he thought. Couldn't he do something to help? Couldn't he?

That morning Tom Crawley hurried through the streets of Weathersea to the Boxing Hall to see Dan Simmons. He found him in his office, busy with the making out of the bills for next Saturday night's boxing show.

"Hallo, Tom, lad, come right in," said Dan breezily. "Glad to see yer. Want another fight? You can box in my ring as often as you like, kid; but I can't afford London terms, you know. It's war-time."

Tom sat down.

"I've not come to you for a fight, Mr. Simmons," said he; "but I want your advice. My father's ruined by the Germans who sent the Elsie Jane to the bottom, and I want to try and buy him another fishing-smack if I can. Some of the owners might be induced to sell if they got the right price."

Dan Simmons started.

"'Ere, now you're tawkin'," said he. "Ships costs money, specially in these days. How could you buy one—a boxin' A.B.?"

"I've got a bit put by," answered Tom, "a matter of a hundred and fifty pounds odd. And I knocked out the bantam-weight champion, don't forget. The night I did that I got into a quarrel with Jimmy Yowl, the feather-weight champion, and we had a scrap. He's bin after my blood ever since. Some of the boxing critics thought I might stand a chance against him. It would be worth money if some London promoter were to arrange a fight between him and me. And I'm game to box, if they'll give me a chance, and a decent bit for taking a hiding besides. Think there's anything in it?"

The Weathersea boxing promoter stared at Tom, and stared and stared.

"Wot!" he said at last. "You'd fight Jimmy Yowl? You'd give all that weight away?"

"I'd fight a giant, if by doing so I could help my old dad."

Dan stared again at Tom, and then seizing the telephone, yelled to the operator to give him Weathersea 995.

"That the Malt and Shovel?" he asked, as soon as he was put through. "Well, ask Mr. Giddy to come to the 'phone, will yer—Simmons, of the boxin' 'all speakin'." There was a pause, after which the conversation was continued. "That you, Giddy? Right! I want you to step round here and see me. What for? Your time's valuable? So's mine. Well, I've got Tom Crawley, the chap as knocked out the bantam champion here. You know—fought Bob Randle in my 'all the other day. He wants a fight in London——Ah, thought that'd fetch yer! You're comin'? Good!" And up went the receiver on its hook again. "Tom, Frank Giddy, the boxing agent, is steppin' round, and

I think there may be somethin' doin'."

Ten minutes later a cab stopped outside. Then Frank Giddy, a tall, loudly dressed, fresh-faced man of fifty, entered the office.

A greeting, an introduction to Tom Crawley, and Simmons explained the situation to the boxing agent.

Giddy slapped his thigh, and emitted a hoarse laugh.

"If this don't beat the band!" he exclaimed. "Here have I bin wasting my time trying to induce some of Dan's second and third raters to come and box in town, and never thought of tackling the King Pippin. Why, Tom, lad, you're the very chap I want. If you're game to fight Jim Yowl, I think I can manage it. Jim's got a contract with Bob Steadman, who runs the Queen's Boxing Hall. Good men are hard to find these war-times, and it's only a bit of luck has thrown you in my way. How much do you want to box fifteen or twenty rounds with Yowl, Tom Crawley."

Then they began to haggle, the agent trying to get a cheap thing for the promoter. Tom standing out for stiff terms, and backed up in his attitude by Dan, who, not being himself concerned, was out to bleed a brother promoter all he could.

At last the following understanding was come to: That Tom Crawley would box Jim Yowl, feather-weight champion, at catch weights, fifteen or twenty rounds at the Queen's Hall, providing he were paid £200 as his end in a fifteen-round contest, or £300 ditto in a contest of twenty rounds, win, lose, or draw.

Also Tom agreed to put up side stakes to the amount of fifty as an earnest of his good intentions, while stipulating that the match should take place as soon as possible.

"I'm fit. I'd fight Jim Yowl or the bantam-weight champion to-morrow night if need be," said Tom. "I don't want time to train; and, besides, if we don't bring the match off soon, the Flyer will be off to sea again, and I sha'n't be able to box until the war's over."

This was an argument which seemed to appeal to Giddy, the agent.

"I'll wire Steadman to-night," he declared, as he rose to go. "I'll call on him to-morrer morning, and if I don't fix the fight for yer, Tom, write me down a fool. And, mind you, I shall only charge you five per cent. for my trouble."

"Think I stand any chance of getting that fight, Dan?" asked Tom Crawley, after Giddy had gone.

"Well, they're big terms you've asked for, kid," was the promoter's reply. "And it's war-time. Still, Steadman has made a pile out of the Queen's 'All, and it'll be a 'igh-priced attraction. If Jim Yowl's agreeable, I sh'd say it's a cert."

His forecast proved to be correct, for after telegrams had passed between Tom and Frank Giddy, the agent, much to Thomas Crawley's surprise; and after two days surcharged with excitement had passed, Tom burst into the little parlour waving an agreement above his head.

"Dad," said he, "look here. I've just fixed up a big fight, and you're going to have a new fishing-smack as sure as you're sitting there. I'll buy her for you. I shall have the brass to do it with, for, what with what I've got, what I'm going to earn, and what you'll be able to raise from the bank, you'll be afloat again in your own fishing-smack before the Flyer puts out to sea."

The match was settled. Tom Crawley, the sailor-boy boxer, got the articles of agreement in his hand. He was going to box Jimmy Yowl, feather-weight champion, for fifty pounds a side, and was to receive £300 for his trouble, which for such a lad was a fortune.

No wonder the fisherman, who had toiled all his life for small and hard-earned money, stared blankly at his son, when he at last grasped all the details.

"Why, Tom, my boy," said he, his voice trembling with emotion, "you're a walkin' gold mine, and all because you can use your fists a bit—and yet you're just an ordinary A.B."

TROUBLE AHEAD.

"EIGHT HUNDRED AND FIFTY pounds is what I ask for 'er, and not a penny less," said Joe Lee, a Borrowmouth Fisherman, as he cast his eyes up and down the deck of the fishing-smack on which he stood. "Mind, ships are worth a lot these days. What with the U boats sinkin' 'em wholesale, and a man being able to ask famine prices for his fish, I ought to ask double; and I'm not sure I won't to-morrow morning."

(*Continued overleaf.*)

"Eight hundred and fifty's all she's worth," pronounced Bill Riley, first hand of the sunken Elsie Jane; "and you know it, Joe Lee."

"I know you'll catch enough fish the first month at sea to pay for her entire," answered the fisherman, pulling at his pipe. "I consider it chucking 'er away."

"Why not keep her, then? Why not catch your £100 cargoes of fish? Why sell at all?" asked John Thwaites, who formed another of the deputation bent on the purchase of Lee's smack, the Dora Grey.

Joe Lee grinned, and winked and grinned again. He was a white-haired, white-bearded, sly-looking man, but hale and hearty withal.

"I'll let you into a secret," he said. "There's many reasons why I want to sell. One, hands ain't to be got in Borrowmouth for love nor money—the Army, the Navy, and the mine-sweeping have collared 'em all. Consequently there ain't much fishin' doin'.

"Two, if you get a good catch, and bring it into harbour here, there it stays until it rots, for the military have control of all the railway lines, and they're wanted for other purposes.

"Three, I ain't as young as I used to be, and want to retire. My boys are all in the Navy. And the old woman's lonely at home.

"Besides, I haven't the nerve for some of the jobs they put a fisherman to nowadays. I'm too old."

"Very good reasons, all, Joe," said Fisherman Thwaites.

"And the reason why I'm willin' to let the Dora Grey go at the figure mentioned," the old fisherman went on," is that I've always had a deep respect for Thomas Crawley.—I'm sorry to hear he's fallen on bad times, and I'd sooner he sailed my smack than any other man I know."

"And eight hundred and fifty pounds is the lowest figger?"

"Bed-rock."

Thwaites and Bill Riley conferred apart with little Tom Crawley, who presented his usual comical appearance in his seaman's kit, for a minute or two, and then the first-named said: "It's a bargain, Joe. We'll buy."

"Money down——?"

"Money to be paid next Monday week—after Tom Crawley's fight with Jimmy Yowl. But Tom's willing to hand you £100 on account, the balance to be paid before Thomas Crawley and his crew come to work the smack round to Weathersea."

Then and there Tom Crawley wrote his signature to the biggest cheque he had ever drawn, a cheque which practically closed his banking account, and the deputation having wet the bargain, and clinked glasses with old Joe Lee, a move was made for the station, and they returned to Weathersea to report to Tom's father.

As soon as he heard that a smack had been as good as purchased for him, the said smack being one he had known for years, the fisherman's eyes filled, and his lips worked with emotion.

"Tom, dear lad, God bless you," said he. "Thwaites, I shall never forget what you and Bill Riley have done for me to-day. May I prove worthy of your confidence."

"Prove worthy, you old sinner," said Thwaites, smacking his old friend on the back. "Why, there ain't a worthier."

Having arranged for the purchase of a vessel for his father, the said vessel having been found thorough by the united exertions of Fisherman Thwaites and Bill Riley, Tom Crawley began to devote himself strenuously to the work of getting fit to box Jimmy Yowl.

He had plenty of opportunities for training in Weathersea.

The undulating country, which stretched away to the ridge of the chalk downs ten miles inland, and the bracing nature of the climate, were ideally suited to the purpose in hand. Added to which there was Dan Simmons and his boxing hall, with boxing ring and boxers and trainers attached, for Tom to make use of as he thought fit.

(To be continued.)

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.4 Communications for the Editor should be addressed—"The Editor," NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4 Agents for Australia: Gordon & Gotch, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z. South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town and Johannesburg. Inland and Abroad, 7s. per annum.

No. 107. D June 23, 1917.