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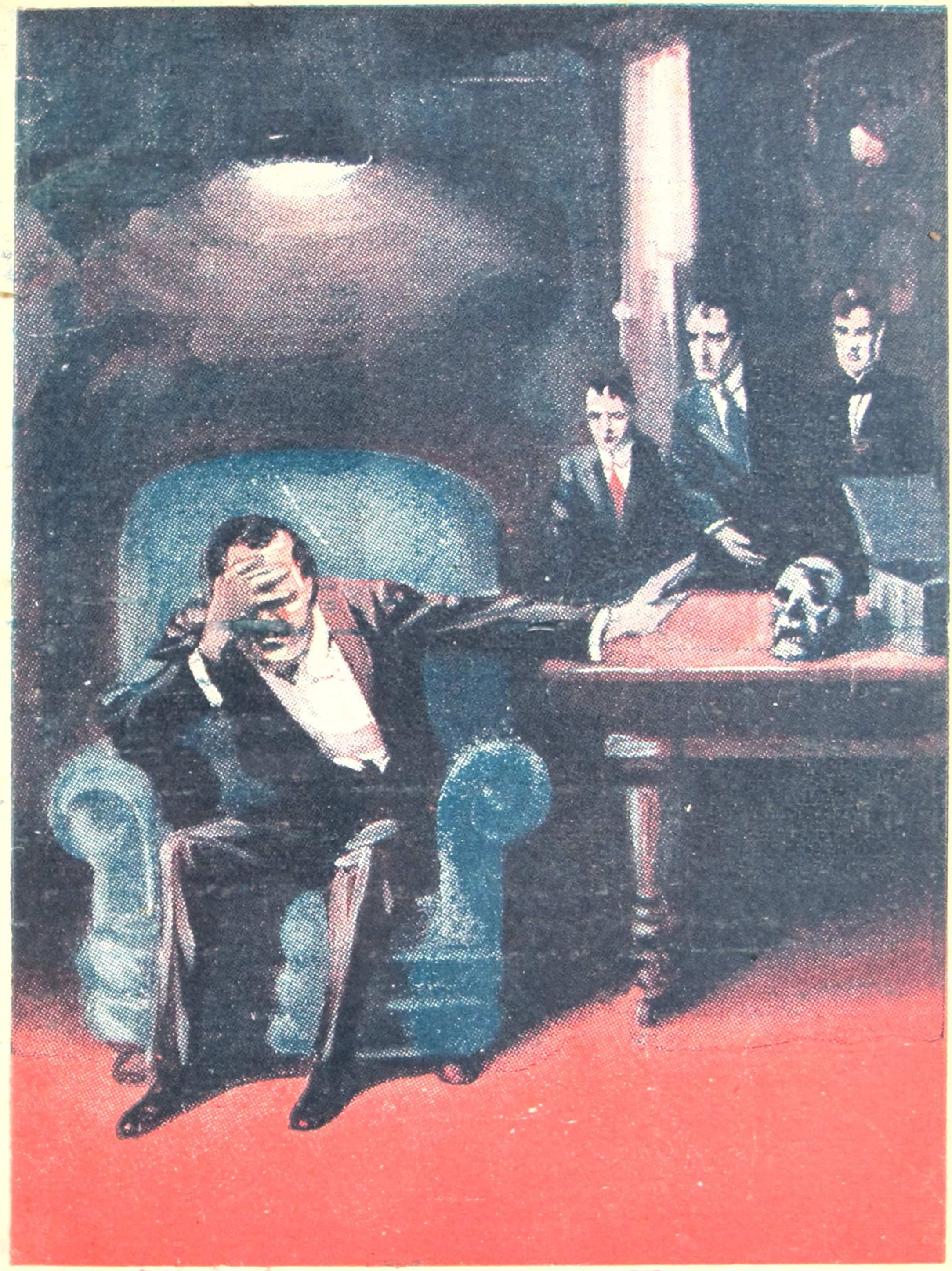

THE COMPACT OF THREE!

Another Mysterious Episode from the pages of "Nipper's Note-Book." Set down by NIPPER, and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "Nipper at St. Frank's," "The Ivory Seekers," etc., etc

No. 124. THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. ONE PENNY.
(INCORPORATING THE "BOYS' REALM.")

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CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE AND I HEAR A QUEER YARN FROM MR. OXENHAM BROWNE, R.I., AND THEN WE EXAMINE A SOMEWHAT GRUESOME PARCEL—AND ARE SURPRISED.

THE Wayfarers' Club, in Piccadilly, doesn't interest me very much as a rule, but just now the guv'nor and I were scouting round for a decent tea. And, when it came to teas, the Wayfarers' Club was It.

The tea-lounge was comfortable and select, and—what was more to the point—the grub was absolutely top-hole.

Therefore, behold Nelson Lee and I ensconced in one of the cosiest corners of the tea-lounge, partaking of hot muffins and tea. There were other things in the grub line, but muffins were what we were partaking of at the moment.

The lounge wasn't crowded by any means, and that was one of the reasons why we had chosen the club. Restaurants are usually packed at this particular hour—it was just about five o'clock—and the guv'nor doesn't like being crowded on to a table with several other people—who usually want you to pass them the salt, or pepper, or something else that isn't there.

Here we had plenty of space, and we were quite to ourselves. Nelson Lee was glancing down the evening paper, and I finished up my muffin and grabbed the last one on the plate—so that when the guv'nor reached for it, he wouldn't find it.

A gentleman entered the lounge, looked at us carelessly, and then looked again. He was a man of about forty, tall, but round-shouldered. From the way he looked at us he seemed to know us, but I'd never seen him before.

He looked over at our corner just long enough to see what coloured ties we were wearing, and how many buttons of my waistcoat were undone. Then, realising that he was rude, he shifted his gaze.

But when he sat down at a table on the other side of the room I noticed that he kept glancing over at us. Now and again he frowned at his own reflection in a mirror opposite.

"Ever seen that chap, guv'nor?" I asked, after a few minutes.

"Eh? What's that, young 'un?" said Lee, laying his paper down, and sipping his tea.

"That man over there," I said, jerking my head.

Nelson Lee glanced across.

"Well, what of him?" he asked.

"He seems to be taking a large amount of interest in us, that's all," I replied. "Do you know who he is, sir?"

"My dear Nipper, I'm not interested in every one who appears to be interested in me," said the guv'nor. "Hallo! What's become of that last muffin? Have you eaten it, you young glutton?"

"You seemed to be eating the paper, so I got on with the muffins," I grinned. "Plenty more if you ring for 'em, guv'nor. I don't think there's any restriction about the number of muffins a chap may eat at a meal."

There was a twinkle in Lee's eyes as he prepared to make a fitting reply, but, before he could speak, the round-shouldered gentleman crossed the lounge, and halted before our table.

"I hope you'll pardon me," he said hesitatingly. "But—er—the fact is, I'm taking rather a liberty. I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Nelson Lee?"

The guv'nor nodded.

"That is my name, sir," he smiled politely.

"My own name is Browne—Oxenham Browne," said the stranger. "Really, I scarcely know how to excuse my conduct. I am intruding upon your privacy, and introducing myself to you in the most barefaced fashion——"

"My dear sir, please don't let that worry you," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You are not intruding; neither is your introduction barefaced. I am not a stickler after formalities. Perhaps you will have tea with us? This young gentleman is Nipper, my assistant."

Mr. Oxenham Browne sat down, nodding smilingly to me.

"You are very good, Mr. Lee," he said. "You have made me feel comfortable already. You see, I have often noticed you in the club, but I have never been fortunate enough to secure an introduction. So I have been ill-mannered enough to introduce myself. To tell you the truth, I should like your advice."

"Professionally?"

"Well, yes. I suppose we may call it professional," said Mr. Browne. "I shall, of course, be only too willing to pay any fee——"

The guv'nor tapped his fingers on the table—a sure sign of impatience.

"I wonder why people will persist in offering me fees before I have performed the slightest service?" he asked. "My dear sir, I am not in my consulting-room. Is it possible for you to regard me as a private gentleman—and not as a fee-snatching professional?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Lee," our companion hastened to say. "But I have a very real horror of being taken for a man who is anxious to obtain the advice of such a famous gentleman as yourself gratis. Thank you—thank you!"

Mr. Browne accepted a cup of tea, and sipped at it for a moment or two. For some moments I had been trying to "place" him. I'd heard his name, of course—I'd seen it scores of times, in fact.

And then I remembered. He was the well-known water-colour artist and magazine illustrator. He was entitled to put R.I. after his name—and generally did. I'd seen his name in the corner of hundreds of excellent drawings. It wasn't possible to turn over the pages of a first-class magazine without seeing his name, in fact.

"I've always understood, Mr. Lee, that you take a particular sort of interest in queer mysteries," he said, after a while. "Well, something decidedly curious has happened to me to-day, and when I saw you it struck me that you might be interested."

"It all depends upon the nature of the mystery," smiled the guv'nor.

"Exactly. And I dare say this affair of mine will be very trivial to you," said the artist. "Now that I have got to the subject, indeed, I begin to suspect that I am the victim of some preposterous practical joke; and I am almost reluctant to voice the matter."

"Trivial incidents are very often the forerunners of great events," said the guv'nor sagely. "Go ahead, Mr. Browne."

"Well, this afternoon, I received a somewhat bulky package by parcel post," explained Mr. Oxenham Browne. "I was busy at the time, and I laid it aside for half an hour, without opening it. Then, having finished the sketch upon which I was engaged, I turned my attention to the parcel. I must confess, Mr. Lee, that I received something of a fright when I opened it."

"A fright?"

"Well, perhaps I have exaggerated a trifle," admitted Mr. Browne. "But I was certainly startled. Beneath the brown-paper wrapping I found a curiously designed, but cheap, casket. There was no letter to tell me from whom the parcel had come, and the handwriting upon the label was strange."

"But what was in the casket?" I asked interestedly, as I sampled the cake.

"A skull, my boy—a human skull!"

We looked at Mr. Browne queerly.

"That was certainly a somewhat shocking discovery," remarked Nelson Lee. "Merely a skull—nothing else, Mr. Browne?"

"Nothing else whatever," replied the artist. "A human skull, with a curious mark upon the forehead. Needless to say, I was considerably disgusted to see the gruesome article. If I could think of any explanation, I shouldn't have bothered you. But it's so strange that such a grisly relic should be sent to me."

"I hardly think that any man would be so foolish as to play that kind of a practical joke," said Nelson Lee slowly. "The affair is undoubtedly extraordinary. The writing upon the label was strange, you say? And there was nothing to indicate the identity of the sender?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Did you notice the postmark?"

"Yes. It was Croydon."

"H'm! That doesn't seem to express much," smiled the great criminologist. "Croydon is a big place, Mr. Browne. You said something about a curious mark upon the forehead of the skull?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't examine the wretched thing very closely," replied the other. "I didn't care to touch it, and, for another thing, my wife came in just at the time, and I didn't want her to see it. I'm quite sure that she would have been decidedly upset. So I put it back into the casket, and locked it in a drawer. And, as my wife and daughters went over to Bayswater soon afterwards, I came up here to confide in a friend of mine. He was away, and so I was rather at a loose end when I saw you."

The guv'nor smiled.

"Well, you have interested me, Mr. Browne," he admitted. "If it wouldn't be an intrusion on my part, I should like to have a look at that skull. Would it be possible for Nipper and I to accompany you home?"

"Possible? Why, my dear sir, I was anxious to suggest the same thing, but I was rather reluctant to do so," said Mr. Browne, with obvious relief. "I shall be delighted, Mr. Lee. But can you spare the time?"

"I don't value my time much this evening," replied Lee lightly. "Nipper and I, in fact, were wondering what we should do with ourselves."

This, in a way, was a bit of a fib, for we'd practically decided to pop into one of the theatres. However, we weren't keen on it, and this business promised to be more interesting than any theatre.

We finished our tea in comfort, and then strolled out of the club and engaged a taxi. Mr. Browne lived at Streatham, and so the run wasn't particularly long. We arrived in the dusk, just as the street lamps were beginning to show themselves in the gathering gloom.

Stonham Place, Streatham, was one of those classy roads, with big detached houses on both sides, and a long vista of trees in the front gardens. Our companion lived at No. 81, and this proved to be one of the best houses in the thoroughfare.

"It's rather a good thing that my wife and daughters are out," said Mr. Browne, as we walked up the path. "I shouldn't like her to know anything of this matter—not until we have come to some sort of an explanation, at all events."

We entered the house, and found ourselves in a beautifully appointed hall, with shaded electric lights gleaming down upon our heads. We left a certain amount of dirt upon the mat, hung up our hats, and followed Mr. Browne across the hall to his studio.

He closed the door behind us, switching on the lights at the same time. I'd caught a glimpse of a maidservant on the stairs, eyeing us interestedly. She was probably wondering who the two handsome visitors were!

The studio was a luxurious place, and I mentally decided that if the detective business failed, I'd have a go at art. Certainly Mr. Browne seemed to be taking things easily, judging by the lounges and other additions to comfort in the studio.

He bade us sit down, and he offered the guv'nor a whisky and soda. Then, the little preliminaries over, he unlocked the bottom drawer of a big bureau, and took out a rough-looking square box, or casket. After that came a sheet of stout brown paper, and some knotty string, with a label dangling from it.

"There you are, Mr. Lee," said our host. "Have a look at it, and tell me what you think. I detest mysteries of this kind. Receiving a skull by post is, you will agree, somewhat disconcerting."

Nelson Lee lifted up the lid of the casket, and he and I looked inside. The

electric lights were just over us, and we saw the bleached top of a human skull. The guv'nor fished it out and held it in his hand easily.

Mr. Browne would probably have held it with extreme gingerness, as though it might explode in his fingers at any moment. But Nelson Lee was more used to this kind of thing.

"H'm!" remarked the guv'nor thoughtfully. "The skull of a man. And, by the appearance of it, I should say that it had lain for months in the open, probably under a tropical sun."

"How on earth do you know that?" asked the artist.

"I don't know it—it is only what I judge from the appearance of the skull itself," replied Lee. "This mark upon the forehead is extremely suggestive. What do you say, Nipper?"

I looked at it closely.

"The poor chap must have had a tidy knock, sir," I remarked.

For the skull was cracked completely at that particular spot. If I knew anything about it, I should say that the man had been killed by some particularly violent means.

"A tidy knock, you say, Nipper?" observed Nelson Lee. "He was either brutally murdered, or he met with a fatal accident. From the very nature of the crack, it is pretty obvious that it wasn't' caused after death. And just look at this. Dear me, I am certainly surprised at this!"

The guv'nor was now looking at the upper teeth of the skull. The lower teeth, with the jaw, were missing. And I saw that there was some gold stopping between two of the teeth. This, naturally, would have been dull. But for some extraordinary reason, it was highly polished.

"I must confess that I can't make anything of it," said Lee perplexedly. "I suppose you never knew any man with gold stopping of this nature, Mr. Browne?"

"Good gracious, no!" said the artist, at once.

I had picked up the label idly, and was glancing at it. The guv'nor turned the skull over in his hand and looked at it very closely. There was nothing on it whatever to give the slightest clue as to why it had been sent.

I looked up from the label with a keen expression.

"What's your number, sir?" I asked.

"My number?" repeated Mr. Browne.

"The number of this house, I mean."

"Why, 81."

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "And isn't your name spelt with an 'e,' sir?"

"Of course."

"Well, it strikes me as though there's something queer about this label, too." I remarked. "Have a squint at it, guv'nor."

He took it from me, and looked at it closely, and without comment until several seconds had passed. Then he glanced at Mr Oxenham Browne.

"Do you happen to possess a directory of this district?" he asked.

"I believe so. But why——"

"Well, I've got an idea that we shall arrive at a solution within a minute—that's all!"

The artist walked across the room to the bureau, and returned in a few minutes with a local directory. Lee took it, and turned up Stonham Place. I was bending over him as he ran his finger down the numbers.

"Ah, here we are!" he exclaimed. "No. 31, Stonham Place. The tenant appears to be a Mr. Charles Matthew Brown."

"Good gracious! I am beginning to understand——"

"There is really very little to understand," smiled Nelson Lee. "You have merely been the victim of a slight mistake, Mr. Browne. The postman, instead of delivering this parcel at No. 31, as he should have done, delivered it at your house. It is rather a coincidence that another Mr. Browne lives in this road—but I think we all agree that the name is not very uncommon," he added with another smile.

Mr. Oxenham Browne looked absolutely sheepish.

"I hardly know what to say, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "I've brought you to my house on an absolute fool's errand. If I had not been so crassly stupid I should have examined the label more thoroughly. Upon my soul, how preposterous!"

But the affair of the mysterious skull was not done with yet!

CHAPTER II.

WE PERFORM A SERVICE FOR MR. CHARLES BROWN, AND HE DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE VERY GRATEFUL—WE THEN RECEIVE AN ITEM OF INFORMATION WHICH IMPRESSES US RATHER DEEPLY.

NELSON LEE indicated the label which was lying before us.

"You see, Mr. Browne," he said, "at a casual glance the address seems to be quite correct. I don't think you are very much to blame for failing to observe the discrepancies."

"No, that won't do, Mr. Lee," said the artist. "You mustn't excuse me in that way. I'm intensely relieved, of course, but I am very much to blame for not having thought of the possibility."

"I really don't agree with you there," replied the guv'nor. "This handwriting is quite careless, and only a very close inspection would make it obvious that there is no 'e' to the name. And 81 and 31 are very much alike—especially if the '3' is hurriedly written. We can see, however, that this parcel was addressed to the gentleman who lives in No. 31."

"I wonder what I had better do about it?" asked our host, rubbing his chin. "It's rather a delicate matter, you know. I hardly like to tell the man that I have been prying into his parcels——"

"Nonsense, my dear sir, nonsense," protested the guv'nor. "If Mr. Charles Brown is a gentleman, he will surely realise that the mistake was a natural one. If anybody is to blame, it is the postman. You are surely not supposed to be answerable for his blunders? Under the circumstances, perhaps we had better take the whole collection as it stands along to Mr. Charles Brown. We'll hand him his property, and explain the situation."

"If you'll do that, Mr. Lee, I shall be immeasurably obliged," said the artist gratefully. "You will be able to perform the service far more satisfactorily than I could do. If Mr. Charles Brown cares to have skulls sent to him through the post, that is no business of mine."

I shook my head sagely.

"It looks to me as if this affair isn't over, guv'nor," I remarked "We've arrived at a solution—but we're just as puzzled as ever. Why should this skull be sent to Mr. Charles Brown?"

"My good Nipper, I should say that Mr. Brown himself will be the best judge of that," said Nelson Lee. "He may be an osteologist, for all we know."

"I don't know what that means, but he's welcome to be it!" I observed. "I seem to remember having heard you talking about oste-something-or-other, guv'nor, at different times. I suppose it's got something to do with bones?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"You seem to relish airing your ignorance before Mr. Browne, Nipper," he said. "Osteology is that part of the anatomy which treats of bones, their structure, and so forth. Mr. Brown will probably welcome us with open arms, believing that his precious specimen has gone astray."

So, after all, the whole business appeared to have fallen to the ground—with a wallop. But then, you can't always go by appearances

There was no sense in delay, and we decided to cart the osteological relic along to Mr. Charles Brown at once. It was still quite early in the evening, and, taking things all together, I was glad that Mr, Oxenham Browne had introduced himself to us. For, after we had performed our little service, he proposed that we should view some of his art paintings (if we cared) and stay to dinner which would be served at about eight-thirty. Well, I wasn't so keen on the art business, but the dinner sounded attractive.

We reckoned that we should be back within five minutes, and we didn't bother about putting on our hats. The evening was quite mild, and No. 31 was only a few yards away.

We strolled down Stonham Place and found that the house was quite large and prosperous-looking. Nobody but an osteologist could have had a house like that, I mentally decided. Several windows were illuminated, and the door was opened, in answer to our knock, by a pompous-looking man-servant.

The artist handed in his card, and said that we wished to see Mr. Brown for a few minutes.

"I don't know whether the master can see you, gentlemen," said the man-servant, stiffly. "At the moment he is entertaining guests, and he don't like to be disturbed. If you'll kindly step hinside, I'll see what can be done!"

"Give me that card a moment," said Mr. Oxenham Browne.

He scrawled a few words on the face of it, and we were then ushered into a small morning-room. It was cold and chilly-looking, and the single electric light was dull. The room was apparently used for unwelcome visitors.

"Condescending beggar!" I exclaimed, with a sniff. "He spoke to us as if we were tradesmen, called to collect the bills!"

We sat down on three hard chairs, and looked at one another. There wasn't much else to look at. We waited for about five minutes, exchanging a few words now and again, and then the door opened and Mr. Charles Brown deigned to notice us. The very instant I saw him I knew that we were quite mistaken. Under no circumstances could this man be an osteologist.

He was big and fleshy, with a broad expanse of waistcoat. His face was red and puffy, proving that his knowledge of spirits was generous. Prosperity seemed to ooze out of him. Diamonds glittered in his shirt-front, and on his fingers, his watch-chain looked like the cable of an Atlantic liner.

"Anything the matter, gentlemen?" he asked jovially. "Afraid I can't spare you more than a couple of minutes."

His watery eyes turned from one to another of us, and he removed a fat cigar from between his teeth. Upon the whole, I decided that Mr. Charles Brown was a most objectionable person. He reminded me of a Billingsgate fish porter who had come into a fortune—and who had been spending most of it upon himself.

"I wish to put right a little mistake, Mr. Brown," said the artist, rising. "It appears that the postman delivered a parcel at my house this afternoon when it should have been brought here."

"Why, that's all right," said the big man. "Thanks very much. These postmen will make silly mistakes, won't they? Sorry I can't spare any more time. I'm much obliged to you for coming round—— Ah, that's the parcel —— Why, it's opened!" he added with a frown.

"I was not aware of my mistake until I had removed the wrapping and had examined the contents," explained Mr. Oxenham Browne. "I am sorry, but my action was quite natural, and I really don't think I need to apologise."

"Some cigars from my tobacconist, I suppose," said the big man, casually. "Good-night, gentlemen——"

"One moment, Mr. Brown," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "The parcel does not contain cigars, and I think that you should know that we have been decidedly puzzled. This box contains a human skull."

The man stared blankly. It was obvious that he had not been expecting the receipt of such a parcel.

"A human skull!" he exclaimed. "Nonsense!"

"Perhaps you will care to look for yourself?" suggested the guv'nor.

"In any case, I call it a piece of infernal impertinence on your part to open a parcel which is addressed to me," said Mr. Charles Brown roughly. "It's a pity so many people like to pry into what doesn't concern them. Push the parcel over here, boy!"

He looked at me as he spoke. Now, I don't stand that sort of talk from anybody, and I just stared at him, and didn't move. Our interview wasn't progressing favourably, somehow. The man was obviously a hog of the first water.

Brown reached over and grabbed the parcel. We were all on our feet now, and the guv'nor and the artist were looking flushed with annoyance. To be accused of prying into what didn't concern them was rather the limit.

"Yes, this is for me," said Brown, looking at the label.

He pushed the brown paper back, and the casket was revealed. He opened it, and took out the skull. For several seconds he gazed at it with an expression of mingled wonder and bewilderment.

"Well I'm hanged!" he exclaimed blankly.

Nelson Lee and I were watching him keenly. Frankly, we didn't trust him, and although it was really none of our business, we couldn't help being interested. Having become aware of the parcel's contents by sheer accident, we naturally felt that it was up to Mr. Brown to give some sort of explanation. He couldn't very well accept the skull from us without any comment.

But, by the look of things, we were to have a repetition of Mr. Oxenham Browne's bewilderment. This man was

certainly not acting; and he was undoubtedly astounded at the sight of the skull.

He turned it over in his hands several times, and finally looked at the polished scrap of gold. Then just as we were expecting him to speak, he gave a very decided start. His eyes dilated, and a hoarse, throaty cry came from his lips.

"Why, good heavens——"

He didn't get any further. His florid face changed to an ashen grey with disconcerting abruptness, and there came a look of terror into his eyes such as I have seldom seen. He staggered, and sank into a chair, quivering from head to foot. His eyes were fixed fascinatedly upon the skull the whole time.

Nelson Lee stepped forward, but before he could reach Brown's side the man gave a shudder from head to foot. And with a cry which was almost a scream, he threw the skull on to the table, holding his hands with his fingers distended, as though they had become contaminated.

"My dear sir—my dear sir!" gasped our friend the artist. "Pray control yourself, Mr. Brown! If I had known you would be so horrified by the sight of a human skull I would not have——"

Mr. Charles Brown snapped his teeth together fiercely. At the same second he hauled himself to his feet. Nelson Lee and I could see that he was fighting—fighting hard—to control his emotions. And he succeeded amazingly well.

"I'm sorry," he exclaimed hoarsely. "Skulls always did affect me like that. It's foolish of me."

He laughed carelessly. At least, that's what he attempted to do; but it was a mere mockery of a laugh. It sounded hollow and almost horrible. His face was still ashen grey.

"It must have been Simpson," he muttered, still endeavouring to keep up his smile. "Simpson, of course. The infernal fool's always playing jokes. I'll make him pay for this foolery. Thank you, for coming, gentlemen."

We had no opportunity of speaking, for Mr. Brown threw the door open and called loudly for the man-servant. The latter came almost at once, and Mr. Brown waved his hand in a motion of dismissal—for us.

And so we were ushered out by the somewhat startled man-servant, and we found ourselves once more in Stonham Place.

We hardly exchanged a word as we walked down towards No. 81. Brown's queer exhibition had made us all feel subdued, and it was not until we were in the artist's studio that we discussed the affair. Lee and our host had taken a whisky apiece, and they now lit cigars.

"It's a hateful business—hateful," said Mr. Oxenham Browne. "That fellow was nearly struck dumb with terror, Mr. Lee. It's none of my business, of course, but why was he so utterly terrified?"

"It seems pretty certain that he recognised the skull," replied the guv'nor slowly. "Not at first, however. It was the polished tooth-stopping which gave him the clue, I believe. It was obviously polished for that very reason. It seems that we did Mr. Brown a very bad service in taking that skull to him. He certainly didn't want it—and he just as certainly was not expecting it. We, of course, know nothing, but I'll warrant that skull has a sinister history."

"And I'll bet that fat rotter knows something about the history, too!" I said. "A practical joke, eh? His attitude looked like a joke, didn't it? There's more in the business than meets the eye, guv'nor."

"You needn't tell me that, Nipper," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But I really don't see why we should puzzle our brains. We must leave Mr. Brown with his own troubles; we can't interfere, at all events. And I don't think I should care to go into the matter on his behalf."

"If my namesake cares to vouchsafe any information I shall, of course, listen to it," remarked Mr. Browne. "I have an idea, however, that we shall hear no more about it. I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Lee, for what you have done. I am afraid I shall insult you if I offer to compensate you——"

"I'm not in the least insulted, Mr. Browne," smiled the guv'nor. "After all, I earn my living as other men do; I don't usually work without being paid for my services. But in this particular case I really see no necessity for discussing the matter. Surely it is enough compensation for me to have the acquaintance of so distinguished a gentleman as yourself."

"Come, come, that won't do!" protested the artist, with a laugh.

But it had to do, and we were soon chatting on other matters. Mr. Charles Brown and his troubles were dismissed; for we assumed that we should hear no more about them.

The dinner was a big success. Mrs. Browne turned up with her daughters, and they all seemed very pleased to know the guv'nor and me.

The daughters were two girls of about sixteen and eighteen, and they were jolly nice girls, too. I wasn't at all in a hurry to go; and, as a matter of fact, we didn't leave until close upon eleven. And then both Mr. and Mrs. Browne—and the girls—insisted upon us visiting them again in the near future.

"A jolly decent evening, guv'nor!" I said with satisfaction, as we sat on the top of a motor 'bus—taxis being somewhat scarce in Streatham just at the time we wanted one. "That skull business turned out all right after all. We've made some ripping new friends."

"I have not the slightest doubt, Nipper, that you are referring to the two younger members of the Browne family," said Nelson Lee, with a chuckle. "I must confess that the girls are both very charming. If you get into the habit of disappearing for several hours nightly in future, I shall know where to lay hands upon you!"

"Rats!" I grinned disrespectfully.

We arrived home just before midnight, and I prepared for turning in at once. The guv'nor, however, elected to smoke a final cigar in the consulting room.

"What are you going to stew over?" I asked, yawning. "That affair of the skull, sir?"

"I was not aware that I was going to 'stew' over anything," replied Lee. "And as for the affair of the skull, I'm not sure that it's worth any further thought. The chances are that we shall never see Mr. Charles Brown again. At the same time, my interest is aroused. As you yourself remarked, young 'un, there's more in the episode than meets the eye. We are only permitted to glance upon the surface."

I stretched myself.

"Well, I'm going to glance upon the surface of my bed," I said. "And I'm going to get into it, too."

"Pleasant dreams, Nipper," remarked the guv'nor, as I went out. "I expect they will be about the younger one!"

I grinned as I went into my bedroom. As it happened, I didn't dream at all—about the younger Miss Browne or anybody else. And when I got up next morning, I found that Lee was already in the dining-room, conning over the morning's newspapers.

"Hallo, early bird!" was the guv'nor's greeting. "I went to bed hours later than you, you young rascal, and you calmly turn out at this hour."

"I'm in time for breakfast, anyhow, guv'nor," I said cheerfully. "Hallo, that's our bell, isn't it? We don't want any visitors before we've fed ourselves, do we?"

A minute later Mrs. Jones, our housekeeper, entered. She was looking rather stern, for she strongly disapproved of anybody coming before eleven o'clock at the earliest.

"The gent said you'd see him, sir," said Mrs. Jones. "I don't hold with people comin' at these times—before breakfast, an' all! I'll tell him as you're not up, shall I, sir?"

"My dear Mrs. Jones, pray don't make me out a sluggard," protested Nelson Lee smilingly. "And, as it happens, you may show the gentleman up!"

"Oh, very well, sir," said the housekeeper tartly.

I found out later, that the stairs were in a state of considerable disorder, and Mrs. Jones didn't like being interfered with while household work was proceeding. I was feeling somewhat nettled myself.

"That's just like you, guv'nor," I growled. "Just as breakfast was coming on, too!"

"The visitor happens to be Mr. Oxenham Browne, Nipper."

"Oh!" I ejaculated. "That's funny, isn't it? What's he doing round here so early as this? He must like us very much."

Mr. Browne entered the dining-room apologetically.

"It seems to be my fate to disturb you at meals, Mr. Lee," he said smilingly. "I had to come up to London this morning, so I thought I'd just bring you a little item of information. As it concerns that skull episode, you might be interested."

"Any developments, then?" asked Lee, as he shook hands.

"A rather startling one," replied Mr. Browne. "I'm somewhat shocked, and I felt that I must come and tell you.

"As I was passing down Stonham Place on my way to the station, I was somewhat surprised to notice that a police-constable was standing at the door of No. 31."

"A police constable!" repeated the guv'nor sharply.

"Yes. I was naturally surprised, for policemen do not stand outside private houses unless some accident or tragedy has occurred," replied our visitor. "The man was known to me, and so I hailed him."

"Well?"

"I really know very little, for I can only repeat the constable's words," said Mr. Oxenham Browne. "He told me however, that the tenant of the house, Mr. Charles Brown, was lying unconscious."

"Dying of fright, perhaps?" I suggested brilliantly.

"No, Nipper; he was poisoned during the night!"

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CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH NELSON LEE TAKES IT UPON HIMSELF TO MAKE A FEW INVESTIGATIONS.

"POISONED!" I exclaimed, with a whistle. "By gum, I suspected something fishy, after that skull trouble!"

Mr. Browne looked very serious.

"Of course, I don't know how he was poisoned, or when, or by whom," he went on. "I can only repeat what the constable told me. He just said that the poor man had been fatally poisoned, and that's all I can say. Was I wrong in thinking you would be interested, Mr. Lee?"

"By no means," replied the guv'nor. "It is very good of you to come, Mr. Browne. I hope you will honour me by staying to breakfast?"

"No, no," our visitor replied. "A thousand thanks, Mr. Lee, but I really cannot. I have an appointment at ten o'clock, and I am afraid I shall be late as it is. You'll forgive me for rushing off, won't you?"

And Mr. Browne, who still had his hat and umbrella in his hand, bustled off. A few minutes later Nelson Lee and I were attacking bacon and tomatoes with great gusto.

"Poisoned, eh?" I remarked between mouthfuls. "What did we say, guv'nor? There's something jolly queer behind all this. I suppose there couldn't have been any trickiness about that skull? A poisoned needle, or something of that sort?"

"Now, Nipper, how often have I told you not to let your imagination run riot," said the guv'nor severely. "Don't you think I should have discovered such a trick? I'm inclined to run over to Streatham immediately after breakfast."

"But we shall be intruding," I remarked. "We can't very well force our services upon Brown's relations, can we?"

"We can give the police a tip, at all events," remarked Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I consider that it is my duty to do so. The skull may not have been discovered, and that may be largely instrumental in clearing up the mystery."

The guv'nor didn't often mix himself up in anything in which he wasn't directly concerned; but the facts of this remarkable case fully justified Lee in making some investigations.

Mr. Browne's information was very bare, and Lee wanted to learn the details. And it was one of the guv'nor's rules to help the official police whenever he could do so.

I was half afraid that Lee would consider my presence superfluous in this trip to Streatham; but he said nothing, and we both started off. We arrived at No. 31, Stonham Place, and found everything very quiet.

There was no police-constable at the door now; but as we pushed the gate open a stoutish individual appeared from the house. He had an important look about him, and I recognised the type in a second. Ten to one he was a divisional detective officer. He came down the path, and we met.

"Well?" he asked curtly.

"My name is Nelson Lee," said the guv'nor. "I——"

"Thought I recognised your face, Mr. Lee," said the other. "I'm Detective-inspector Gibson, of this division. What's your business?"

My surmise had been correct, and I wasn't at all pleased with the cold manner of Divisional Detective-inspector Gibson. He was apparently in charge of the case, and it was obvious he didn't welcome Nelson Lee's arrival.

Now, if a Scotland Yard inspector had been on the job, he would have been very pleased to see us. And there were plenty

of suburban men who realised the guv'nor's worth; but one or two pompous individuals of the Gibson variety were pleased to look upon Nelson Lee with a kind of contempt. These men very often had highly exaggerated—and most unjustifiable—ideas of their own importance.

"Well, Mr. Gibson, I've heard that a tragedy occurred here during the night," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "I thought, perhaps, that my services might be of some use——"

"You shouldn't believe all you hear, Mr. Lee," said the inspector tartly, and looking at us as though we were two inquisitive street urchins. "There was no tragedy, and there's no need for you to interfere."

The guv'nor compressed his lips.

"I really had no intention of interfering," he replied. "I came here for the sole purpose of doing my best to assist the police. I presume you are in charge of the case?"

"That is so."

"Have I your permission to have a look round?"

The inspector hesitated.

"The doctor's inside," he said brusquely. "You can have a few words with him if you like. But there's no need for you to trouble yourself, Mr. Lee. I have this matter well in hand. It's quite a simple affair, and your own peculiar talents would be rather thrown away. I advise you not to waste your time."

"As it happens, inspector, I do not value my time very highly," said the guv'nor sweetly. "Perhaps you will be kind enough to give me an introduction to the doctor? I am extremely sorry to give you this trouble, and to waste so many minutes of your time, which, I am quite assured, is far more valuable than mine."

The inspector nodded.

"We official detectives work for our living," he replied. "We can't afford to throw time away as if it were of no account. You, of course, being an amateur, are at liberty to do as you choose."

Mr. Gibson scrawled something on a card and handed it to the guv'nor.

"You won't stop longer than is necessary, will you?" he asked. "I shall be away for some little time, and I'm rather in a hurry to go. Otherwise, I should explain the simple details of this affair. The doctor will tell you about it."

"I presume you have discovered the sender of the skull?" asked Nelson Lee, calmly. "He is, I am assured, in some way connected——"

"Skull—skull!" repeated the inspector, staring. "I don't know what you mean."

"How foolish of me," said the guv'nor, with a smile. "It's not often I mix up my cases—is it, Nipper? Thank you, inspector."

We passed along the path to the door, and Inspector Gibson walked away. Before knocking Lee glanced at the card, and saw that it was a scribbled introduction to Dr. Reynolds.

"A bright specimen—eh, guv'nor?" I grinned. "It's a wonder to me how those sort of chaps become inspectors. Why did you dry up so suddenly about that skull?"

The guv'nor's eyes twinkled.

"My dear Nipper, I wouldn't presume to pit my puny wits against those of Inspector Gibson," he replied. "Apparently, the inspector knows nothing whatever about the skull—which is very unfortunate. If I had told him he would probably have sneered at me. He sneered quite enough, as it was. I came here to give what little information I know to the police. But, as Mr. Gibson appears to know everything already, it would be a pity to waste our breath. When we have looked round and have had a chat with the doctor, I shall go along to the superintendent. He will probably treat us with greater courtesy; he couldn't possibly treat us with less."

Lee was rather annoyed, but he wouldn't show it—except by way of the somewhat cutting remarks he had just uttered. If there was one thing that displeased him, it was to be belittled by a bumptious police official.

We knocked at the door, and the same manservant answered it—the fellow we had seen the previous night. He was looking decidedly scared, and took our card in at once to Dr. Reynolds—who, as it happened, was preparing to leave, and was just giving his instructions to a nurse.

His attitude was very different to that of the inspector's. He met us in the hall, shook hands with us both, and led us into the same little morning room we

had occupied during our interview with Mr. Charles Brown.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the doctor heartily. "And Master Nipper, too," he added, smiling at me. "I didn't know that you had been commissioned to look into this affair."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't," smiled the guv'nor. "I have taken it upon myself to make a few inquiries. I have a very excellent reason, Dr. Reynolds. When I came here I was led to believe that a tragedy had occurred. But Inspector Gibson told me otherwise."

The doctor was a kindly faced man of about fifty-five, with iron-grey hair. A slight frown came upon his face as Lee mentioned the inspector's name.

"Mr. Gibson is rather inclined to be high-handed," he exclaimed. "It is a pity some of these policemen are so deliberately uncivil. But don't you know the facts of the case, Mr. Lee? They are quite simple."

"With no complications?" smiled Lee.

"Well, that all depends," replied the doctor. "It appears that the trouble started just before twelve o'clock last night. A policeman on his beat, heard some extraordinary screams and cries from this house. Upon investigation, he had found several servants gathered in the hall, in a very frightened state. And in the library Mr. Brown lay upon the floor, writhing into contortions and foaming at the mouth. The policeman very sensibly sent for me—I only live at the top of the road. When I arrived Mr. Brown was quite unconscious—and, indeed, in a very bad way."

"Poisoned?" I asked curiously.

"Well, that's what the police thought at the time," replied Dr. Reynolds. "But I'm not convinced of it. The symptoms were very peculiar, but they didn't necessarily suggest poisoning. It may be merely a severe apoplectic fit."

"But, surely, there was some reason for supposing that poison had been used?" asked Nelson Lee.

"A very excellent reason," agreed the doctor. "Upon the desk stood a small phial, with the cork removed. This phial was half full of some colourless liquid—and I soon discovered that it contained a particularly deadly, but little known, poison."

"Can you tell me what poison it is?"

Dr. Reynolds did so, but it had a name about half a mile long, and I've completely forgotten it. Anyhow, it doesn't matter what the name of it was.

"H'm!" mused the guv'nor. "Are you quite sure that Mr. Brown did not take some of that poison? Its effect is to produce almost immediate death, with intense agony and terrible contortions. The poison, moreover, leaves no trace."

The docotr lifted his eyebrows.

"You appear to be well informed——"

"I have made a study of poisons for years," smiled Nelson Lee. "Frankly, doctor, I have an idea that Mr. Brown attempted to commit suicide. I came here to satisfy my curiosity."

"I'm afraid I can't give you any definite information, Mr. Lee. I have made a most careful diagnosis, but I have found nothing to support the theory that Mr. Brown took poison. He is still alive—and he certainly would not have been if he had swallowed even the smallest quantity of the contents of that bottle. Later on in the day, of course, I shall be able to form a more decided opinion."

"What view does Inspector Gibson hold?"

"Why, he is quite convinced that his time has been wasted—that the unfortunate man merely had a seizure. The police, he declares, will retire from the matter altogether—unless, of course, Mr. Brown dies. I'm afraid an inquest will be necessary, for I shall not feel justified in signing a death certificate. And that, no doubt, would lead to a post-mortem examination."

"I see," said Lee thoughtfully. "Do you anticipate death?"

"It is very difficult to say at the present moment. I shall certainly be surprised if Mr. Brown recovers, however," replied Dr. Reynolds. "I'm leaving a skilled nurse in charge. You'll forgive me if I leave you now, won't you? I have other patients, you know."

And the doctor took his departure a minute later, leaving Nelson Lee and me in the morning-room by ourselves. Actually, I suppose, we hadn't any right in the house. But we were there, and the guv'nor didn't seem in any hurry to go.

"Only a common fit, after all, sir," I remarked.

"I'm not so sure of that, young 'un—I'm not so sure of that," said Lee slowly. "A common fit? I am very suspicious, Nipper, and I don't feel inclined to drop

this matter until I have sifted it to the bottom. That skull is primarily responsible for this common fit. Who sent the skull—and why was it sent?"

I shook my head.

"Blessed if I know," I replied. "It seems that the skull hasn't been found by the police. Brown must have hidden it away somewhere."

"Or it was—taken away," said Lee significantly.

"Taken away?" I echoed. "By whom?"

"Ah, I can't tell you that," said the guv'nor. "But hasn't it struck you, Nipper, that a man doesn't send another man a skull unless he has a very strong reason? It is permissible to presume that the sender of the skull followed up his action by a personal visit."

"Are you suggesting that Mr. Brown was murdered?" I gasped.

"My good Nipper, how could he have been murdered when he is still alive?" asked Lee impatiently. "But I certainly suspect that Mr. Brown might have had a visitor. Gibson did not think it necessary to make the slightest investigation—I think otherwise. To begin with, we will question that manservant."

"But you've got no authority to do that!" I exclaimed. "He won't answer any questions, guv'nor. He'll probably show us the door."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The manservant saw my name, and he will assume that I am working with the police," he replied. "It is rather fortunate that the worthy inspector is away. We have a free hand for the time being."

The guv'nor calmly rang the bell, lit a cigar, and waited.

After a few moments the door opened, and the manservant appeared.

"You rang, sir?" he asked respectfully.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "What is your name, my man?"

"Jenkin, sir."

"Well, Jenkin, I wish to ask you a few questions concerning your master's strange seizure last night."

"Very good, sir," said Jenkin. "Inspector Gibson said as how there wasn't much to worry over—not so far as the police was concerned. It wasn't poisoning—only a bit of a fit, as I might say."

"Never mind Inspector Gibson for the moment," said Nelson Lee, as though he were the inspector's superior officer. "Mr. Brown had visitors last night, as I am well aware. What time did they leave, Jenkin?"

"Oh, early, sir—about half-past nine."

"What did your master do then?"

"He went into the library, sir, all by himself."

"Mr. Brown is a bachelor, I believe?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Did your master seem strange in his general behaviour last night?" asked Lee. "Did he act differently from usual?"

The manservant hesitated.

"Well, yes, I suppose he was a bit strange, sir," he admitted at last. "He's always hard to get on with—I was thinkin' of changin', as a matter of fact. Last night he wasn't himself, as I might say. He seemed regular upset, sir."

"After his guests departed, at nine-thirty, Mr. Brown went into the library?" said the guv'nor. "Tell me, Jenkin; did your master have any other visitor—after his guests had gone?"

"No, sir—nobody."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Positive, sir."

"Did you have occasion to go to the library while your master was alone?"

"No, not until I heard the cries," replied Jenkin, who was very different to what he had been the previous evening; there was no pomposity about him now.

"Ah, the cries! What was the time when you heard them?"

"Just about midnight, sir."

"Who entered the library first—in response to the cries?"

"I did, sir, with Jane and the housekeeper just behind me."

"And what did you see?"

"The master was lyin' on the floor, sir," replied Jenkin, with a slight shiver. "I'll never forget it—never. It was awful, sir, as I might say. The master was writhing about something fearful. He was making the most horrid sounds, an' there was foam on his lips. I was frightened, sir."

"No doubt. And then?"

"The policeman came, sir," said Jenkin. "He sent for the doctor, and by the time the doctor came Mr. Brown became unconscious."

"What kind of a window is it in the library?" asked the guv'nor.

"They're French windows, leading into the conservatory."

"And were they open?" prossed Lee keenly. "Answer carefully, Jenkin. Were the French windows open when you first entered the room?"

"I didn't see at first, sir—but they must have been open, because I remember shutting them to stop the draught."

"Ah, the windows were open, then! Did you see anything which made you assume that a stranger had been present in the library?" asked Lee. "For example, a strange cigarette-end, or a second whisky-glass——"

"There wasn't nothing like that, Mr. Lee," interrupted the manservant. "Who could have been with the master, anyhow? The conservatory was locked—it always is locked. So nobody could have got into the library."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"Just one more question, Jenkin," he said, after a pause. "Was there a wooden box on the library table—a roughly made casket? Did you see anything at all of such a casket?"

"I don't exactly know what you mean, sir," replied the manservant. "There wasn't 'any box of any sort. I should have seen it if there had been, because I cleared up the library after the master had been carried upstairs."

Nelson Lee puffed at his cigar for a few moments, looked at me abstractedly, and then turned to Jenkin.

"We will have a look at the library," he said shortly.

"Very good, sir."

I half grinned as we followed the manservant out of the room. Tht guv'nor hadn't asked if we might see the library; he had calmly stated that we were going to. I suppose his action was a bit cheeky—although that word doesn't seem to fit Nelson Lee—for we hadn't any right whatever to be in the house.

But the guv'nor was only doing it because he wished to ferret out the truth, and get at the bottom of the mystery. I believe he had an idea that Mr. Brown had been the victim of an attempted murder. And, once Nelson Lee gets fairly going, he can't be shaken off very easily. Fees are all very well, but in some cases the guv'nor works just for the love of it.

The library was a big, well-appointed room. The bookcases were filled with hundreds of volumes, and they looked as though they hadn't been touched for months. Judging from Mr. Charles Brown's appearance, I should say he paid more attention to the sideboard than to the bookcases.

The sideboard was massive—and not without reason. For it had to support quite an array of spirit decanters. It was like a wine and spirit shop in miniature, and the room niffed somewhat of stale cigar smoke and whisky fumes.

Nelson Lee walked across to the French windows, his eyes busy all the while. Arriving at the glass doors, he turned for a second.

"Has anybody been out this way since last night?" he asked.

"Nobody, sir," said Jenkin. "Nobody's been out here for weeks past—leastways, not out into the garden. The door's locked, and the key's lost. The master didn't use this exit at all."

We passed through into the conservatory, Nelson Lee looking at the floor carefully. But the coloured tiles told us nothing whatever. The conservatory was not used, for there was scarcely anything growing in it except some old plants in pots.

Lee stood in the centre, looking round. Then he walked across to the door, tried it, found that it wouldn't budge, and turned his attention to one of the windows to the left. This was of the usual variety, the hinges being at the top, and the glass frame swinging outwards, with a long iron bar, with holes in it, to regulate the window.

The guv'nor pressed the window, and it opened easily. He swung it right up, and propped it. Then he nodded to himself, and looked very carefully at the window-ledge. I regarded him wonderingly. We seemed to be wasting time.

"Look here, Nipper," he exclaimed abruptly.

I went to his side, and saw that he was pointing to some marks on the green-painted woodwork. They had been caused by a man's boot, by the look of it, and there was a certain amount of soil left upon the paintwork.

"Somebody must have entered the conservatory by this window, sir," I said at once. "Quite recently, too, by the look of it."

"Exactly, Nipper—exactly," said Lee grimly. "As recently as last night, I will warrant. Mr. Brown's present condition is not due to a sudden fit, but to the intervention of a stranger—at present unknown."

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I GO ON A TOUR OF INQUIRY, AND FINALLY FIND OURSELVES IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF WEST CROYDON—ONLY TO DRAW A BLANK.

JENKIN looked rather startled.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, are you suggestin' that the master was attacked by somebody?" he asked. "I heard Dr. Reynold's tellin' the inspector that somebody else might have been with the master; but Mr. Gibson pooh-poohed the idea, sir."

"Just what he would do!" I grunted.

"I am afraid that Inspector Gibson has not given the affair the attention it warrants," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "However, there is no necessity to discuss the worthy gentleman. Yes, Jenkin, I am suggesting that your master's strange attack was not brought on by any ordinary means. I am convinced that another man was present in the library at the time; he escaped by means of this window."

"He must have entered by it as well, sir," said the manservant, "for he didn't come in the ordinary way. If you'd like to go out in the garden, I'll take you round by the lobby door."

"That is not necessary, Jenkin," replied the guv'nor. "We can easily slip out through this window."

We did so, the guv'nor warning me against stepping on the flower-bed. The path was of hard gravel, so it was safe for us to walk upon it. It would have needed a steam-roller to make any impressions on that path.

There were a few indistinct marks upon the soil of the flower-bed—so indistinct, in fact, that it was impossible to make anything of them. Lee looked round the walls of the garden.

"What lies at the rear?" he asked of Jenkin, who was in the conservatory.

"Why, there's an alley, sir," replied the man. "It leads out in the Place, about two hundred yards higher up."

Lee nodded.

"It's hardly likely that the stranger would have ventured by the front gate, and so round the house to the rear," he murmured thoughtfully. "Neither is it likely that he would come from the side walls—for there are other gardens beyond. I think we may take it for granted that the fellow gained admittance to the garden by means of the bottom wall. And he probably walked straight across the lawn in a direct line."

"What about the big flower-bed in the middle, guv'nor?" I asked.

"I am quite interested in that, Nipper," said Lee calmly. "Now, I'm going to make a little deduction. It was very dark last night, and the flower-bed is quite bare, and would not be distinguishable from the grass. It is just possible that the stranger walked into it unknowingly—thinking that he was still upon the lawn. Come, let us make sure."

We stepped upon the lawn, and moved across the grass to the big circular bed which adorned the centre. The whole garden was somewhat dingy; and this gave us an insight into Mr .Brown's character. The garden in the front was magnificently kept, but this, being hidden away, received little attention.

"Ah!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, walking round the bed quickly. "Here we are, Nipper. I hardly expected to be right—but see!"

He needn't have pointed. The soil was smooth and weedless, and right upon it were eight or nine clearly defined footmarks. They entered the bed from the direction of the lower wall. The man had walked several paces before he realised his mistake, and had then swerved to the left, regaining the grass. The tracks, therefore, were in a semi-circular course over the bed.

The man had apparently been wearing a pair of ordinary sized boots, to which rubber heels had been affixed. But the impression of the left foot was slightly different to that of the right. Somehow, it seemed to be deeper, especially at the toe.

"Looks to me as if the chap limped, guv'nor," I remarked shrewdly.

Lee didn't reply. He was already on his hands and knees in the grass bending over the flower-bed. For two or three minutes he examined the footprints without making any comment. Then he rose to his feet, and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think you're right, Nipper," he said in reply to the question I had asked a few minutes before. "It's something more than a limp. Unless I am very much mistaken, I think we shall find that the left leg of our unknown quarry is an artificial one."

"By gum! A wooden leg!" I exclaimed.

"Not necessarily wooden—but artificial."

"Why, that ought to help us a lot," I remarked. "It oughtn't to be a difficult task to follow the movements of a wooden-legged man. But sha'n't we have to tell that bumptious old inspector?"

"He's at liberty to make these discoveries for himself," said Nelson Lee calmly. "He sneered when I offered my services, young 'un, and he would probably sneer if I told him about this. So, until we have some very definite information, we will follow our own course."

"That's the wheeze!" I said heartily. "I'll give quids to see the inspector's face when you lay all the facts before him. Perhaps he'll be reduced to sergeant's rank—although that'll be rather hard on the sergeants."

"Just run up and tell Jenkin that we're leaving by way of the lower wall and the alley," said Lee. "Tell him, also, that we shall be back later on. And give him five shillings for himself."

I trotted across the lawn to the conservatory, telling myself that it was pretty cool of the guv'nor to make me fork out five bob. However, when I ran short I should draw on him, so it didn't make any difference.

Jenkin received the news without particular interest; but he received the five bob with real animation. He wasn't such a bad sort, after all.

When I returned to the guv'nor I found that he had strolled down to the bottom of the garden, and was now interested in a further set of footprints which decorated the wide bed bordering the wall. There were vegetables here, however, and both they and the footprints had suffered.

We climbed over the wall nimbly, and dropped into the alley. This, we found, was long and narrow and uninteresting. The ground was hard, but one or two slight marks led Nelson Lee to believe that the unknown man had turned to the right—which led towards the upper end of Stonham Place.

"Well, we can't track the wooden-legged merchant any further, sir," I remarked, as we walked along. "What's the next move?"

"The fact that the man had an artificial leg—at least, I believe so—may be of great help to us," said the guv'nor. "When he was present in this neighbourhood, however, the time was midnight—and there are not many people about at that hour."

"Why, that'll help us," I said quickly. "A chap with a limp wouldn't be noticed except very late at night, when people are few and far between. And I remember seeing a policeman on point duty at the top of Stonham Place."

"I'm glad to see that you have been observant, Nipper," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I was thinking of the police-constable, myself. But we sha'n't find the man on duty now."

"Yes, I suppose the poor chap needs some sleep now and again," I said. "My hat! What a life! Standing in one place for hours on end!"

We emerged upon Stonham Place near to where that thoroughfare ran into Streatham Hill. And there, sure enough, stood the constable. He looked happy enough, so I suppose the life must be fairly decent.

"The man who was on duty at midnight?" he asked, in response to Nelson Lee's inquiry. "Why, sir, he's in bed, I expect."

The policeman looked at us rather curiously, probably wondering what interest we could possibly have in the constable who had been on point duty the previous night. But Lee introduced himself, and briefly explained that he wanted to question the man.

We were directed to a certain address, and it proved to be only five minutes walk away. At the door of a neat little villa we were informed by a buxom lady in a cooking apron that we couldn't possibly see her husband at present. He was in bed, after night duty.

Ten shillings made a great difference. The lady's consideration for her better half's repose became greatly modified, and she assured us that she would fetch him down at once.

We were shown into a neat little parlour, where there were about a hundred small photographs set upon the top of the piano, and there we waited, hardly daring to move lest we should upset something. The parlour was obviously for show, and not for use.

P.C. Baxter appeared in his shirt and trousers, and little else. His hair was

tousled, he looked sleepy, and his temper didn't appear to be of the best.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he asked gruffly. "This is my sleeping time, you know. The wife tells me that you want to ask some questions. Thanks for the half-quid, sir; that'll come in handy to buy the kids some new boots these hard times. The wife said that you was Mr. Lee, sir. I'm mighty pleased to have met you."

The constable was quite civil, and was a good fellow.

"I'm sorry to fetch you out of bed in this way, Baxter," said Lee. "You may not be able to help me at all. We shall see. You were on point duty at the top of Stonham Place at midnight, I understand?"

"That's right, sir," nodded the constable.

"Now, Baxter, I want you to think carefully. Do you remember seeing a man with a limp walk down the Place at about twelve o'clock?"

"No need to think carefully for that, sir," said Baxter. "I remember the man well—shortish and with his left leg sort of stiff. A limp you said, sir? I reckoned that he'd got one of those new-fangled artificial legs."

The guv'nor shot a smiling glance at me.

"I had scarcely hoped for such prompt success as this," he remarked. "You saw the man go down, constable—but did you see him come back?"

"Yes, sir, about twelve minutes afterwards," replied Baxter. "I remember it particularly, because I admired his leg, and had half a mind to ask him about it. You see, sir, one of my nephews has come back from the Front, and he accidentally left one of his legs on the battlefield. We all want him to be fixed up properly—and there's nothing like asking a man who's had actual experience."

"And did you make inquiries of this man?"

"Well, sir, I was going to, but just as he was turning into Streatham Hill, one of my mates whistled from down the Place," answered Baxter. "Of course, I had to go at once——"

"And you didn't see in which direction the man turned?"

"He shouted to a taxi that was just passing, sir. I don't know whether he got into it—I couldn't wait to see that. There was some trouble at No. 31—some old chap poisoned himself or something. I haven't heard the real facts of it."

"Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Baxter," said the guv'nor. "I'm anxious to get hold of that man with the artificial leg. A taxi-cab? I'm afraid we shall have a bit of a task, Nipper. But we've got a line to work upon—and that's something."

We took our departure a few minutes later, and P.C. Baxter returned to his bed. There's more than one taxi-cab in London, and so our task now seemed to resemble searching for a needle in a haystack. I told the guv'nor so, too.

"I'm not so sure of that, Nipper," he replied, as we walked towards the main road. "Comparatively near to here—at Kennington, to be exact, are the premises of the South London Motor-Cab Company. It's quite on the cards that the cab Baxter saw belongs to that company. At all events, we will go along there just to satisfy ourselves. If we draw a blank, we shall have to resort to advertising in the evening papers—and that, of course, would mean delay."

To cut it short—for I don't want to make this narrative wearisome—we arrived at the offices of the taxi-cab company, and the manager sent out inquiries profusely. They were all fruitless until we were on the point of leaving.

And, then, by a real stroke of luck, a driver came in to take out his cab. The manager beckoned to him, and we found, to our satisfaction, that he was the very man who had picked up the limping fare.

Without a doubt, this was an exceptionally good stroke of fortune. Sometimes the guv'nor and I have wasted days in getting hold of a similar piece of information. On this occasion, however, we discovered the man right off.

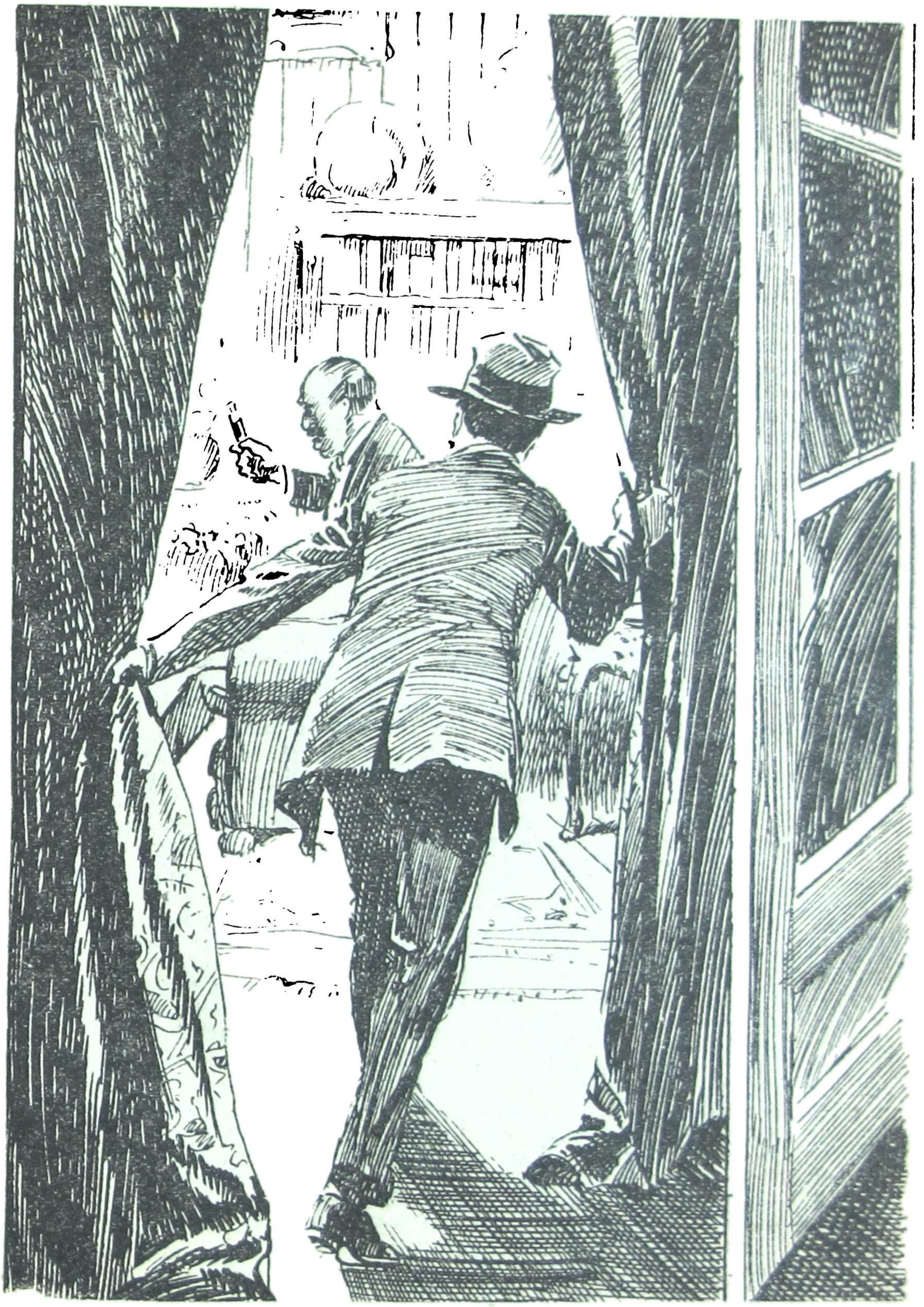
"We've been looking for you," said Nelson Lee, as soon as he heard that the cabby had driven the fare we were after. You picked up a man, who limped, just at the corner of Stonham Place, on Streatham Hill?"

"That's right, sir."

"Where did you drive him to?"

"West Croydon Station, sir," replied the cabby.

"That took you out of your way a bit, didn't it?" asked Lee. "I understood that you were on your way home?"



"I entered the library quickly and faced——the TRAITOR!"—(*See page 23.*)

"So was I, sir. But we ain't all like them drivers who refuse fares just because they're on their way home," said the man with a grin. "A short kind of chap he was, sir, and he paid up decently. Had a bit of a job getting in and out of the old cab, 'cos of his leg. West Croydon—that's where he went."

"You left him outside the station, didn't you?"

"You've got it, sir," said the cabby. "Why, thankee sir!"

He was rather surprised to receive the half-crown which the guv'nor placed in his palm. But we had got the information we needed, and that was splendid. We were getting hot on the track of the unknown man with the artificial leg—and we were doing so by dint of persistent inquiry.

We engaged one of the company's taxi's, and were driven to West Croydon by the very man who had taken our quarry. So there couldn't be any mistake. He would set us down at the exact spot.

During the drive to Croydon Nelson Lee hardly uttered a word. He sat back in the cab, smoking, and I breathed in the fresh air and basked in the sunshine—for the day was brilliantly fine.

I didn't ponder over the mystery much. Mr. Charles Brown had received a cracked skull by post, and it had given him a fifty horse-power shock; the same night he had been found writhing upon the floor of his study; he had either hidden the skull, or it had been taken away. That's all we knew, except that a man with an artificial leg had secretly visited Mr. Brown at the time of the seizure. As a matter of fact, I fully believed that Brown had been poisoned—and I think that Nelson Lee held that view, too. That was why he was intent upon bringing the culprit to justice. From Dr. Reynolds's words, it seemed practically certain that Brown would die. We were, therefore, hunting down a murderer.

Having argued that much to myself, I dismissed the matter, deciding to await developments. We whizzed through Brixton and Streatham, passing Stonham Place again at full speed. Through Norbury, past Thornton Heath Pond, then on to Broad Green, and, finally, West Croydon. It was a good road the whole way, being, of course, the main 'bus and tram route.

The taxi pulled up exactly opposite the entrance to the station, just against the bridge. North End was looking crowded, as usual, but we didn't pay much attention to our surroundings.

"This is where I set the lame gent down, sir," said the cabby. "Just at this here spot."

"Did he go into the station?" asked Lee.

"Ah, now you've got me, sir! I didn't see what he did, or where he went," replied the man. "I just turned my cab round and buzzed home. It was bed for me!"

The fellow received a further tip, and went off highly satisfied.

"Well, Nipper, we find ourselves in Croydon," said Nelson Lee. "It's past lunch-time, I believe, but we haven't any time to think of our tummies."

"We can think about 'em—we haven't time to fill 'em, though," I said ruefully. "Let's hope we have no further delays, guv'nor. If we draw a blank now, I shall vote for popping into the nearest restaurant for a snack. Some people seem to think that detectives can exist on air—but we can't."

We entered the station, and then made the cheering discovery that it had been totally closed up at the hour of the taxi's arrival. So our wooden-legged friend couldn't possibly have entered the station.

"This is annoying," said the guv'nor frowningly, as we walked out. "I hadn't considered this possibility, Nipper. I had an idea that the trains ran later down here—but probably the service has been curtailed owing to the war. I'm afraid we shall have to commence our inquiries all over again."

"Then we'll have some grub first," I said promptly.

"I suppose we had better fortify ourselves, as you suggest. We're at a deadlock at present, and half an hour won't make much difference——"

"Why, look there!"

"Why, what—— Oh, I see!"

The guv'nor's voice was quite calm, but it quivered a trifle. For, crossing the bridge, and walking from the direction of North End, was a short, stumpy man, who walked with a very decided limp.

His left leg was obviously artificial!

CHAPTER V.

WE MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF MR. BERNARD HAINES.

NELSON LEE tossed his cigarette away.

"He fits the description all right, Nipper," he said coolly, "but we mustn't be hasty."

"It's our man, as sure as a gun!" I declared.

"Don't forget that there are many poor fellows, home from the fighting line, without limbs," the guv'nor reminded me. "Artificial limbs are—alas!—becoming all too common, Nipper."

"But this chap is just the height I imagined him to be," I exclaimed, looking at the man keenly as he came along. "He's never been a Tommy, sir. Why, his hair's turning grey—he's over forty!"

"I admit, Nipper, that the odds are in favour of this man being our quarry," said Nelson Lee. "I am almost convinced, in fact—— Ah, that has added greatly to my conviction!"

I knew what the guv'nor meant, for at that moment the lame man had turned down a road exactly opposite the station. The taxi had set him down, the previous night, just at this place—obviously because he meant to walk down that street.

We watched him go, and instinctively crossed the road, dodging a tramcar and a motor-'bus. We strolled down the slight hill, noticing that we were now in Derby Road. Our quarry, however, bore to the right, and entered a thoroughfare which, I saw, was called Parson's Mead. I don't know why it was called that, because it was rather a dull road, and didn't suggest meads or parsons.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" I asked.

"I am just considering, Nipper," replied Lee. "We can't face this man in the open street. It will be better, I think, to follow him to his destination, and then act at once."

It was easy enough to shadow our man. He didn't once look back, but plodded along steadily, smoking a cigar. He was well dressed, and wore a slouch hat. This, with his bronzed complexion, suggested a Colonial somehow.

We got to the end of Parson's Mead, crossed the lower end of Chatfield Road, and then entered Croydon Grove. The grove looked like a road which had been high-class at one period, but had fallen upon lean times. It was dingy and quiet.

At the bottom it bore sharply round to the right.

"Unless my memory fails me," remarked Lee, "this thoroughfare joins up with Sumner Road at the bottom. And Sumner Road leads up to Broad Green. Why did our friend taxi to West Croydon Station last night?"

"Just a blind, perhaps," I suggested, "in case anybody was on the look-out—— Hallo, this is where to get to work!"

"Walk straight on, young 'un!"

Our man had turned into the gateway of a house in the neighbourhood of the bend. He walked up to the door, and was admitted. Nelson Lee and I paused twenty yards further on we heard the door close.

The house was old-fashioned, and very respectable looking. There was really nothing to be gained by delay, so we retraced our steps, and walked up to the door of the house, and knocked.

A kindly old lady answered our summons.

"Is it about the room, sir?" she asked. "I'm sorry, but it's taken——"

"Ah, I think we saw the gentleman entering a moment ago," said Lee tactfully. "A gentleman with an injured leg."

"That's right, sir," said the landlady. "Poor Mr. Haines has a wooden leg, but he gets about wonderfully. He's got the room, sir, so I'm afraid I can't accommodate you."

"Didn't I see Mr. Haines in the town last night, late?" said Nelson Lee musingly.

"You may have done, sir," exclaimed the old lady, falling into the guv'nor's little trap unsuspiciously. "Mr. Haines didn't come in until twenty minutes to one. He had been up to the West End, I believe."

So Haines hadn't arrived until a quarter to one!

Without asking a single direct question, Lee had found out what he wanted to know. Haines was our man—he was the man who had entered Mr. Charles Brown's library.

"May we see Mr. Haines?" asked Lee quietly.

"If you're thinking of asking him to let you share the room, sir, I'm afraid he won't consider it," said the old dame,

shaking her head. "Besides, I shouldn't like it at all."

"I wish to have a few words with Mr. Haines on quite a different matter," said the guv'nor smilingly.

"Oh, I see, sir."

The landlady stepped back a few paces, and opened the door of one of the rear rooms. Nelson Lee and I followed her closely.

"A gentleman to see you, Mr. Haines."

We pushed past the old lady without much ceremony, I'm afraid. There had been a quick movement from within the apartment. And now, as we stood just inside the door, we saw Mr. Haines upon his feet, staring at us with an expression in his eyes which was unmistakably that of fear. His face was very bronzed, with deep lines running in all directions.

"You want to see me?" he asked huskily. "What for?"

"My name is Nelson Lee——"

Haines's expression changed with extraordinary swiftness. A look of despair entered his eyes, and his bronze changed to a dull leaden colour. Then he squared his shoulders and stuck out his jaw.

"You're a detective!" he whispered harshly.

And, before the guv'nor could make any reply, Haines whirled up a heavy volume—some 'bound magazines—and hurled it at Lee with all his strength, which seemed to be considerable.

The book simply flew through the air, and the guv'nor dodged. But the door, being partially open, prevented him from moving. He caught his shoulder against it, and, at the same second, the book thudded upon his chest with terrific force. It was a half-yearly volume of a sixpenny monthly—and everybody knows how heavy such books are.

Nelson Lee gave a grunt, and staggered over. Haines came round the table with amazing quickness, considering his leg. I had half turned, in the hope of saving the guv'nor from falling. And, while I was at that momentary disadvantage, Haines drove a heavy fist into the side of my head.

I saw about a hundred stars of all colours, and crashed on to Nelson Lee just as he was in the act of scrambling up. We both fell to the floor together, the guv'nor's head hitting with a bang.

Just for that minute it was a gorgeous mix-up.

Haines dashed past us, his false leg thumping on the boards of the hall. He passed outside, and pulled the door to with a slam. The worthy landlady had backed away down the passage, and was holding on to the staircase for support, being on the verge of fainting.

"Oh, corks!" I gasped, rubbing my head dazedly.

"Confound you, Nipper!" raved the guv'nor, rather unkindly. "Get up, and rush after him!"

"Well, I like that!" I panted. "Do you think I fell down here for the fun of it? My head's nearly busted, guv'nor! I've never felt such a fist in all my life!"

But I scrambled up dizzily, and Lee bounced up after me. My head was aching in the most appalling fashion, and I could see two of everything. Through a haze I saw Nelson Lee dashing for the door, and I followed almost mechanically.

By the time I reached the gate, however, my wits were rapidly returning. The guv'nor was pelting down towards Sumner Road at full speed. In front of him rushed Haines.

It was a hopeless affair from the very start. The man couldn't run without considerable difficulty, and his flight consisted of more than a hop than anything else. If he had kept his wits about him he would never have made the dash.

I saw Lee catch up with him and grasp his shoulder. Haines hit out wildly, and one or two people in the distance came hurrying along. It was early afternoon, remember, and the streets were by no means deserted.

By the time I arrived on the scene the guv'nor was grasping Haines by both his shoulders. In that iron grip the man was practically helpless, in spite of his own great strength.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Nelson Lee was saying curtly. "I'm not an official detective, and I have no warrant for your arrest. Come back to your rooms before we get a crowd round us."

"You're lying!" gasped Haines. "You're going to arrest me——"

"If I had that intention I should arrest you now, on the spot!" said the guv'nor.

"Come back quietly, and control yourself. If you have done nothing criminal I shall not harm you."

"I'll come!" muttered the other huskily.

It was the only thing he could do, in fact. He had sense enough to realise that he was completely overpowered, and that any further resistance could only mean unnecessary pain and commotion.

Several people were standing round, gazing at us curiously. A boy, I believe, had rushed off to tell a policeman that murder was being done. If the policeman ever came, however, we saw nothing of him.

For, a minute later, we were once more within Haines's living-room. The man sat down heavily, his eyes burning with a fierce, desperate light. Nelson Lee set his collar straight, and looked towards the door."

"It's all right, Mrs. Short," said Haines, in a low voice. "There's—there's been a little mistake. Leave us please."

"Lawks!" ejaculated the landlady. "I didn't know what was amiss, sir. Such a fright I've had!"

But the old lady, seeing that we were apparently on friendly terms once more, retired, closing the door after her.

"If you're not an official detective, why have you come here?" asked Haines fiercely. "I've heard your name before, and that's why I tried to escape. I've done nothing—nothing."

"Then why did you make an attempt to get away?" asked the guv'nor grimly.

"Why—why? Because the police are all fools—because I'm a fool myself!" replied Haines, breathing hard. "Why have you come here, I say?"

"Because you were in the library of Mr. Charles Brown's house last night," replied Nelson Lee deliberately. "Because you are, I believe, responsible for Mr. Brown now being in a dying condition——"

"It's a lie!" panted Haines, starting to his feet. "I didn't touch him—I didn't touch a hair of his head! You want me for murder, you say?"

The man sat down abruptly, and gave a harsh, bitter laugh.

"Murder!" he repeated tensely. "And Brown himself is the blackest murderer under the blue sky!"

CHAPTER VI

HAINES TELLS US A STORY OF HARDSHIP AND TREACHERY AND TRAGEDY—WE LEARN OF THE COMPACT OF THREE, AND FIND IT NECESSARY TO READJUST OUR VIEWS.

SOMEHOW or other, Haines's dramatic statement had scarcely any effect upon me—or, for that matter, upon Nelson Lee.

It was almost as though we had been expecting something of the kind. Mr. Charles Brown had impressed me as being a low blackguard, while this cripple excited my pity.

And that's curious, too. He'd done his best to brain me, and to bust the guv'nor's ribs in. Notwithstanding these polite attentions, I instinctively felt that Haines was a gentleman.

"Brown is a murderer!" he repeated, with burning eyes. "A despicable scoundrel, who ought to have been hanged years ago! You can do what you like with me, but I pray that that man dies!"

"Look here, Mr. Haines, I have taken a considerable amount of trouble to find you," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I am not your enemy; but, I can assure you, if you have broken the law, you will have to pay for it. If, however, you can give me a satisfactory explanation of your conduct, I shall not interfere."

"You're a detective," said Haines bitterly. "Detectives don't track men down because they wish to be friends, do they? I have nothing to fear—except the gross injustice which usually overtakes a man who is a victim of circumstantial evidence. You came here because you mean to arrest me——"

"You are mistaken there," interjected Lee steadily. "You seem to imgaine, Mr. Haines, that I am a member of the official detective force. I am nothing of the kind. My assistant and myself entered upon this investigation because we are interested in the unusual circumstances. If you care to tell me your reasons for having acted as you have done, I will give you my assurance that your confidence will be respected. Only—and mark this carefully—if you have acted criminally, I shall be compelled to lay that information before the police. Under no circumstances shall I permit myself to be a party to anything underhand."

There was a short silence.

"You have spoken frankly, Mr. Lee," said Haines. "I beg your pardon for my foolish actions of a few minutes ago. Yes, I will tell you why I went to Brown's house last night. I will tell you everything—for I have nothing to conceal. What I have to say is no confession, but an accusation."

"What about that skull?" I asked impulsively.

Haines started, and then smiled.

"So you know about that as well?" he queried. "By Jove! And I was fool enough to believe that I had done everything secretly! I realise now that I have acted in a most insane fashion. When you have heard what I have to say, however, I am sure that you will understand my state of mind. Listen, Mr. Lee—listen to the tale of a man who has been broken and foully wronged."

Haines was speaking with greater confidence now. The excitement had left him, and he sat back in his chair regarding us calmly. Just as we instinctively felt that he was white, he must have had something of the same convictions regarding us. In short, we were beginning to understand one another.

From his speech it was obvious that Haines was well educated, and that he was a gentleman. But it was equally obvious that he had suffered terrible privations. He could not have been more than forty, but his hair was streaked with grey, and his face was as lined as that of a man of over sixty.

"Tell your story right from the beginning, Mr. Haines," said Nelson Lee, laying back in his chair. "For your own sake, I hope you will omit nothing. Whether you have been guilty of wrongdoing or not, I want you to tell me the whole truth."

"You may judge for yourself whether I have done wrong," said the other. "Heaven above! What a mockery! But I am concerned about the way in which I attacked you, Mr. Lee—and you, lad," he added, looking at me. "I was mad at that moment, and I acted desperately."

"My head's still singing a bit," I said cheerfully. "Well, my name is Bernard Haines, and I am thirty-five years of age. I look nearer fifty, don't I? Five years ago I was a straight, nimble young man, with good prospects and a cheerful outlook upon life in general. What am I now? A cripple—a wreck—soured and bittered, and almost penniless!"

There was a world of despair in the man's voice, and the guv'nor and I felt sorry for him even before we had heard a word of his story. There was no acting about this. The man's words came from his heart.

"As you will judge, the trouble began five years ago," he continued. "I was in England then, as I am now, and I had just buried my father. My mother died over ten years ago. I had a little money, and, being adventurous, I elected to join an expedition which was going up the Amazon, in Brazil.

"My story has really nothing to do with that trip—but that expedition was really the start of my troubles. It was a failure—a ghastly failure. We were lost in the forests for close upon two years. We had to bury half our number, and when the survivors reached civilisation—myself among them—we were broken in health and in spirit.

For months after that I shifted about South America, recovering my strength and health. And, just about two years ago, I hit upon something which fired my ambition once more, and which led to the real disaster. All my resolutions to have done with expeditions went to the winds.

"I don't propose to go into close details, Mr. Lee. I will simply say that I learned of an old Inca temple in one of the wild spots of Peru. I had every reason to believe that my information was sound and well founded. This ancient temple contained a wonderful treasure of diamonds and other precious stones. It sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Haines," said the guv'nor quietly. "It happens that I have been in Peru myself—and in other parts of South America. I am fully convinced that there are fabulous treasures to be found—if only one knows where to go for them. If I remember aright, a company has been recently formed for draining a sacred lake, in order to retrieve a colossal fortune in gold which is supposed to have been lying in the mud for hundreds of years. But please proceed."

"I am glad you understand that part of the world, Mr. Lee," continued Bernard Haines. "It makes my story easier to tell. Well, these precious stones were reputed to be worth something like

half a million, at the very least. I heard stories of the temple from many quarters, and it was really by accident that I discovered its actual whereabouts.

"At that time I was on the coast, in one of the smaller towns. Cash was running short, and I had been thinking of getting to Callao, and joining a ship there—working my way home, you know. But then I learned of this treasure, and I was fired with the ambition to lay hands on it. There weren't many Englishmen in that little Peruvian town, but I knew them nearly all. Two men, particularly, were pals of mine. One was George Kenmore, and the other Charles Brown. I confided in these two, and we made a compact. It was agreed that we should set out for the temple, and that we should equally share whatever we found. The compact further provided that if one of us died on the way out, or back, his share should go to his relatives. It was a fair compact in every way, and we all shook hands on it.

"Well, we started off after a considerable amount of preparation. Time was of no particular account, and we meant to take things easily. Fortune favoured us right from the start, and we made far better progress than we had anticipated. Once or twice Kenmore sagely declared that our luck was too good—that it couldn't possibly last. You'll soon realise how accurate he was, poor chap.

"We were within ten miles of our destination, and we considered that we had practically arrived. Ten miles! It seemed but a stone's throw, after what we had been through—for our journey had been long and arduous, although we had met with no set-backs.

"Kenmore and I drew together, somehow. We didn't exactly distrust Brown, but our close association had brought out the best and the worst in our characters. And Brown had sometimes shown himself to be a bit of a scoundrel and a most contemptible coward. But we excused these backslidings on his part, and were generally on the very best of terms.

"Ten miles from the temple, as I said, the first serious disaster occurred. It happened to me. I left the camp one morning in order to catch some fish for breakfast. The creek lay down in a hollow, with a rocky descent towards it. I slipped on a loose stone, and fell sheer for about twenty feet. This was the result."

Haines tapped his leg, and we understood.

"I smashed it, just above the knee—a compound fracture," continued our companion quietly. "Kenmore and Brown found me after I'd been lying helpless for an hour. They carried me back to the camp, which was situated near an Indian village. These Indians were very friendly towards us, and expressed the utmost concern at my injury. They doctored me in their own primitive way, and lopped off my leg above the knee. I believe my life was saved by those Indians. Some tribes out there are very hostile to strangers, I know; but these people treated me with the utmost kindness.

"It was pretty certain that I should be useless for months. After the operation—after I had regained my senses after four days of delirium—I advised Kenmore and Brown to go on ahead, and secure the treasure. The Inca temple was only a day's march away, anyhow, and they decided to go.

"I expected them back within a week, but they did not return. The days passed slowly and monotonously; I became worried and anxious. My leg, without skilled attention, was causing me intense agony almost continuously. I lay helpless, solely dependent upon the Indians for everything.

"Well, Mr. Lee, three weeks passed in this way, and I suppose I improved a bit. At all events, I suffered less pain, and I had become duly resigned to further weeks of waiting. Either Kenmore and Brown had met with unseen difficulties, or they had deserted me. I couldn't believe the latter, for Kenmore, at least, was a white man right through; I wasn't so sure of Brown.

"About the middle of the fourth week Brown appeared. He came to me haggard, worn out, and in tatters. There was an expression of dazed horror in his eyes; I don't think I shall ever forget it.

"I was lying in a rough-and-ready litter which the Indians had made, in the shade of a big tree a little distance from the native huts. As I saw Brown slouching towards me, with a weak, unsteady gait, I half raised myself. A warm flush of excitement had swept over me, but this vanished when Brown drew nearer.

"His appearance told a story of tragedy and disaster, and the fact that

Kenmore was not with him filled me with a vague alarm.

"'Thank Heaven you are all right, Haines!' Brown exclaimed huskily, as he approached the litter. "You are better, I can see. I was half fearing that I should arrive to find you dead, too!'

"'Too?' I repeated quickly. 'Where is Kenmore, then?'

"Brown sank down on a corner of the litter, and passed a hand before his eyes. Then he looked at me gravely.

"'Poor old Kenmore is dead!' he said. 'I can see that you have guessed as much already, Haines, or I wouldn't have told you in your present condition. It's been a ghastly failure all round, old man. The devil must have prompted us when we set out on this accursed journey.

"I lay for some minutes without speaking. I was a bit stunned by the news. Kenmore dead! He was one of the best chaps breathing, Mr. Lee, and he and I had often planned what we should do when we got back to England. He was married, too, and I was thinking of his wife, thousands of miles away. At last I looked at Brown steadily.

"'Tell me about it,' I said simply.

"'There's not much to tell,' he replied. 'When we left you, Haines, we met with no difficulty until we got within a mile of the temple. In fact, it was in sight; only a hollow and a bit of wood divided it from us. We both started hurrying eagerly—and then the disaster came.'

"'Another accident?' I asked quickly.

"'Not this time, Haines,' he replied. 'We were attacked by a small party of hostile Indians——'

"'Nine miles from here?' I put in. 'My friends in this village have told me repeatedly that there are no hostile tribes within fifty miles.'

"'These brutes don't know what they are talking about,' said Brown impatiently. 'The Indians who attacked us, Haines, were formidable fellows. We had to fight hard, and only escaped after we had killed a dozen of them. We slipped into the hollow, and I then discovered that Kenmore had been pierced through the right arm with a dart. The Indians were after us, and so we fled madly. For hours we were forced to stagger on. Poor Kenmore could hardly walk, owing to loss of blood, but I supported him to the best of my ability.'

"'Well,' I asked intently, 'what then?'

"'By nightfall we had shaken the devils off, and I was able to give Kenmore some attention,' Brown answered. 'But, Haines, mortification had set in, and the poor chap was already in high fever. I have more than a suspicion that the dart was poisoned. At all events, he went off into a kind of coma, and I slept through sheer exhaustion. When I awoke the sun was high again, and Kenmore—was dead.'

"'Poor chap!' I muttered. "Poor old Kenmore!'

"I accepted Brown's story without question, Mr. Lee; without the slightest suspicion of doubt." continued Bernard Haines, shifting in his chair slightly, and looking from the guv'nor to me with grave eyes. "Why should I doubt? There was nothing in his story to arouse my misgivings.

"We were both silent for three or four minutes after he had told me about Kenmore's death. Then, without any remark from me, he continued.

"'I wasn't surprised,' he told me. 'Kenmore's condition had practically prepared me for the worst. I buried him decently, Haines—beneath a mahogany tree—and set up a little cross over him. It was the least I could do, in any case.'

"'And what happened after that?" I asked.

"'In our flight we had plunged into the forest, and I had lost all bearings,' replied Brown. 'After wandering about for days and weeks, I sighted the temple once more. It was quite by accident that I found it, and by then I was utterly exhausted. I have lived on nuts and fruits, and I had despaired of ever getting out of the forest. But there was the temple before me, and all my hopes were renewed. I tell you, Haines, I shouted with joy. You and I, at least, would be able to claim success—and poor Kenmore's wife would receive her share of the loot.'

"'Does it amount to much?' I asked, without interest.

"'Much!' repeated Brown bitterly. 'I went to the temple, old man, and spent three solid days in searching. There wasn't a sign of a pebble, let alone a diamond! That yarn of yours, Haines, was a string of fabrication. We've been fooled all along.'

"This, as you may guess, was nearly

the last straw, Mr. Lee. Poor Kenmore was dead, and I was a cripple for life. We hadn't gained a penny. It's an old story, of course—many expeditions, indeed, never survive at all. Brown and I talked over the matter thoroughly, and he agreed to stay with me until I was able to get about.

"I was sad and disappointed. Although I didn't say a word to Brown, I couldn't help thinking that it was rather a pity that Fate hadn't reversed things. If he had died it wouldn't have been so cruel, for he was a bachelor, and his character wasn't of the best. But Kenmore was a husband and a father, and one of nature's gentlemen. During the rest of that day I brooded over the terrible news, but recovered my spirits a trifle during the evening.

"The tragedy had made a great difference in Brown; he was more subdued, more kindly in every way. Good heavens! How I was deceived in that scoundrel, Mr. Lee! It was in the evening that we were sitting together, and I remembered he asked me if I should like a drink. I said that I should, and he went and fetched me a gourd of fresh water.

"Now, I firmly believe that I owe my life to the action of a little Indian kiddie. It was a tiny girl of about six, with brown skin and gleaming teeth. She was playing about with some of her brothers and sisters a few yards from where I lay. Well, just after I had raised the gourd to my lips, this little girl came rushing up to me, laughing and screaming, and claiming protection. It was a game, it seems, and the other little ones were after her.

"I had taken one sip of the water—a considerable mouthful I suppose it was—when this mite jerked my arm and sent the rest flying over my shoulder on to the ground. Brown had turned away, and he didn't see what had happened. When he looked round, indeed, the gourd was empty, and I noticed an unmistakable glint of triumph in his eyes. The little nipper had gone rushing off somewhere else. And my throat somehow felt as though it were burning with fire.

"But it wasn't this sensation which told me the truth—it was Brown's expression. He had poisoned me! I knew it—I was absolutely convinced of it. But I had only swallowed a minute portion of the water—but Brown didn't know it. He thought that I had taken the whole lot.

"'What have you done?' I gasped out. 'You foul scoundrel——'

"'You've both gone the same way—the pair of you!' he exclaimed, bending down and leering into my face. 'You'll be dead within an hour!'

"I don't remember what happened after that. I became unconscious, of course, and when I opened my eyes to reason again a day had elapsed, and the Indians told me that Brown had sneaked from the village on that fatal evening. They had seen no more of him. He had gone, Mr. Lee, positively convinced that I had died."

Haines choked back a kind of sob, and both the guv'nor and I saw that he was labouring under intense emotion. The recapitulation of that tragic story had aroused all his indignation and fury.

"The brute!" I burst out hotly. "The murderous rotter! And he's the chap who's now living at Stonham Place, Streatham——"

"The man himself!" interjected Haines. "Do you believe my story, Mr. Lee? Do you believe what I have said, or have you an idea that I am inventing this——"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I think I know when a man is telling me the truth, Mr. Haines," he replied quietly. "Your story rings true in every detail. It is a tale of hardship, treachery, and tragedy. I find it necessary to readjust my views very considerably, but I want to hear the rest of the yarn."

"You shall have it at once," said Haines, lighting a cigarette. "As you may imagine, I was in no condition for throwing off the effects of poison. My leg was still in the first condition of healing, and, if I had not been wiry and hardy by nature, I should have died straight away. And, had I swallowed the whole of the poisoned water, Brown's words would have come true.

"Fate had ordained otherwise, however. Owing to that little native kiddie's playfulness, my life was spared. I lingered for months, and it isn't my intention to weary you by going into all that. I will only say that I didn't walk until ten months had slipped by.

"For weeks on end, indeed, I was delirious, and I owe a very large debt to those Indians of that obscure village. In their care I mended slowly, but surely.

But what could I do? How could I bring any retribution upon the murderous brute who had professed to be my friend?

"As I grew stronger, I became suspicious, as you imagine. I went over the story Brown had told me—I remembered his last words to me. Had poor Kenmore died as the result of a poisoned dart, or had he met with foul play, too? I strongly suspected the latter, and meant to make sure.

"Brown's object in attempting to kill me was, of course, quite obvious. He had obtained the treasure from the temple, and intended keeping the lot for himself. Our solemn compact was broken—he only thought of his own gain. He broke his oath ruthlessly.

"Well, Mr. Lee, when I finally regained a slight proportion of my former strength, I set out for the temple. By this time I was hobbling about with an improvised stump. I did the journey with a party of the natives—who had assured me, time after time, that there were no hostile tribes within a considerable distance; and these tribes don't wander from their own territories.

"We arrived at the temple, and there, lying in the full sunlight, in front of the ruin itself, lay a human skeleton, clothed in rags and tatters. At a glance I knew that it was all that remained of poor Kenmore. Brown's story that he had buried my friend was nothing but a foul lie."

Our companion's eyes were moist, and he paused for some little time, allowing his cigarette to burn heedlessly between his fingers.

"I tell you, without hesitation, Mr. Lee, I sank down beside those poor remains and sobbed," went on Haines, in a low voice. "It was so pitiful, so ghastly. There, before me, lay the evidence of Brown's treachery and murder. He never intended me to see the evidence, for he planned to kill me also, as I have already told you.

"After a short examination, I knew that the poisoned dart story was false. There was a terrible gash in the skull, proving, beyond question, that Kenmore had been deliberately clubbed. I judged that he had been killed on the instant—attacked, probably, as the pair were leaving the temple with the booty.

"In the temple itself I found many traces that Brown had been there. He had secured the jewels, and had gone to the coast, having broken our compact, and leaving us both for dead. I was mad with helpless rage and sorrow. The jewels didn't worry me in the least at that time. I only wanted to find myself faced with Brown.

"But this mood didn't last long," continued Haines. "I am not a man who believes in bloodshed, Mr. Lee. Heaven knows, I had seen enough of it! I didn't want to take Brown's life with my own hands; that would have been wrong. But I swore that I would force him to make reparation, and that he should answer for his crimes.

"I buried poor Kenmore's skeleton reverently. But I brought his skull back with me. I don't know why—unless it was because I had a kind of notion that it could be used as evidence of Brown's foul act. That's the story, Mr. Lee. I came to England ultimately, bringing the skull with me. I had left these shores young, strong, and full of hope. I came back a cripple, aged twenty years, and with nothing but misery and bitterness in my soul."

Nelson Lee and I felt almost subdued. I know I did, at least. This story which we had just heard was nothing new. In various forms we had heard it before—a tale of treachery and avarice.

There was nothing but pity in our hearts for this poor, broken man, who had been so basely treated by a professed friend.

But we had yet to learn of his doings in England.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH EVERYTHING IS CLEARED UP, AND A FOUL WRONG IS RIGHTED.

THE afternoon sun was streaming in through the little back window, and I was reminded that luncheon had been conspicuous by its absence. But I was quite content to miss a meal under the circumstances. The story I had heard from Bernard Haines interested me exceedingly—as it interested the guv'nor.

"You arrived in England, you say?" asked Nelson Lee. "How long ago was that, Mr. Haines?"

"A little over a month," replied our companion. "When I set foot on these shores, Mr. Lee, I made a solemn vow,

I meant to demand two-thirds of Brown's ill-gained wealth—my own share and Kenmore's. Of course, it was possible that Brown had gone to America, but in Callao I had learned that he had sailed for England, and so I was confident of finding him. There was also the possibility that he had squandered away the fortune. I was convinced that it was a considerable one, or he would never have committed the crimes I have spoken of.

"I set myself to discover the facts immediately upon my arrival in London. I forgot to tell you that I found a small diamond on the floor of the temple. Just a single insignificant stone. I sold this in Callao, however, for three hundred pounds, and was thus provided with funds for my passage. and for my immediate needs in England.

"During my first day in London, I saw an advertisement regarding artificial limbs, and I at once spent some of my money on this leg. You can't imagine what a boon it is to me, Mr. Lee. It is a wonderful invention, and our poor maimed Tommies will be less conspicuous—as I am myself.

"I stayed at a small hotel in the neighbourhood of Victoria during the first week," went on Haines. "I had two objects in view—the finding of Brown and the finding of Kenmore's wife and children. For, in any event, I meant to tell Mrs. Kenmore that her husband had perished out in the bush—although I should spare her the actual truth.

"Without much difficulty, I learned that a Mr. Charles Brown was living at No. 31, Stonham Place, Streatham. There were, of course, hundreds of other men named Charles Brown in London, but this man had only come to England about a year ago, and he was very rich. He fitted my Brown exactly. I watched his house one evening, and saw him emerge. I knew him in a second, although he had grown amazingly stout and coarse, and displayed every evidence of evil living.

"Having located the scoundrel, I turned my attention to Kenmore's relatives. He had lived in Bristol, and I took a trip to that city. Well, in a squalid street, I found Mrs. Kenmore and her two little children—living honestly and cleanly, but in great poverty. I did not approach the poor woman, but returned immediately to London. I was ready for action."

"You did not go to the police?" asked the guv'nor.

"No. How could the police have helped me?" replied Haines. "Would they have taken any action, Mr. Lee? Even if they believed my story, I had no actual proof to offer."

"What about the skull?" I broke in.

"I was very much afraid that I should only cause suspicion to descend upon myself by showing it to the police," said Haines quietly. "I decided upon a different course of action, and commenced by renting this room. Croydon is a fair way from Streatham, but very handy. I told myself that I should have to go to work very carefully. The police couldn't help me to gain reparation—they could not even arrest Brown for the foul murder he had committed. I swear to you, Mr. Lee, that, if I meant to harm Brown, I only wanted to give him a sound thrashing—so far as I was personally concerned. If I could get him hanged, I should do so. But I did not mean to take the law into my own hands; although, even in that event, I don't think I could be blamed. But Kenmore and Brown and I had made a solemn compact. I swore that I should see that that compact was adhered to.

"My plan was to go to Brown, and demand two-thirds of his fortune—our fortune. My share I should keep myself, and Kenmore's share should go to his wife and children. Justice should be done in that respect, at all events.

"As I realise now, I went the wrong way to work. I made a bad blunder by giving Brown a preliminary warning. But I thought, at the time, that it would prepare him, in some measure, for my own appearance. Instead, as I have seen, it put him into such a state of terror that he collapsed.

"What I did was to pack up Kenmore's skull in an old casket I picked up for a shilling, and send it through the post to Brown. That brings us up to yesterday, doesn't it? I reckoned that the parcel would be delivered in the evening, and my own visit was planned to follow the same night—last night.

"All yesterday evening I was in a state of joy, Mr. Lee—real joy. I pictured to myself the shock which Brown had received. If ever a man deserved perdition, Brown does. I forgot to mention that I had polished up some gold stopping between two of the teeth

in the skull. Brown and I had often chaffed Kenmore about that gold during our companionship—and I knew that it would serve as a reminder. I knew that Brown would recognise the skull on the instant.

"Well, I went to Stonham Place last night, arriving shortly before midnight. I had already done some scouting, and I knew that Brown's library opened upon a conservatory—and that a small alley led to the back of the house. I couldn't very well go to the front door in the usual way and announce myself. Brown would certainly have refused me admittance. And, by tendering a false name, I should have been refused also, in all probability. Moreover, I wanted to catch Brown alone, and by surprise. In short, I intended giving him a fright. I anticipated great pleasure in appearing suddenly before the man who thought that he had murdered me. Can you blame me, Mr. Lee?

'Without any difficulty I crossed the lawn and got into the conservatory by means of a window, the door being locked. There were glass doors leading into the library, with thick curtains before them. But the curtains were half thrust aside in order to allow the fresh air to enter. For the door was open. And Brown was sitting in the room alone; he was sitting before his desk, staring dully before him.

"The skull was nowhere to be seen, and so I presume he had concealed it.

"In justice to myself I must tell you that I had no intention of murder in my heart. Look at me, Mr. Lee. I am by no means strong, and I am a cripple. Is it likely that I should face a huge man like Brown with the intention of killing him? I carried no weapons of any description. I entered the library quickly and quietly, and faced the traitor.

"He saw me at once, and started back in his chair, throwing something on to the table. It was a small cork, I believe, which he had been idly fingering. I was startled by Brown's attitude. He recognised me at once, and went nearly insane with fright. He was certainly too abjectly terrorised to offer the slightest violence towards me.

"In calm tones I told him that I wanted two-thirds of his fortune—that I had come to see that the letter of our contract was carried out. He listened to the words intelligently enough, I know, but just sat in his chair gasping heavily, his face almost purple with the emotion which filled him.

"As I was talking, I stepped nearer to him—menacingly, perhaps. My temper was rising, and I allowed all the passion of my hatred and suffering to enter my voice. So far I had not been in the room for more than two minutes. As I stepped close to Brown he suddenly gave a queer cry and staggered to his feet. Then he fell to the floor in a terrible fit, Mr. Lee.

"I hadn't touched him—I didn't lay a finger on his foul body. This sudden collapse startled me considerably. For Brown's cries were absolutely fearful, and his writhings made me shudder. I heard vague voices from the hall, and my common sense told me to leave the room without a second's delay. I did so, and came back to Croydon, my mind in a whirl of doubt and anxiety. And that, Mr. Lee, is the whole story. I know nothing more, for I have told you the plain truth."

There was silence for a full minute, Bernard Haines looking at us with an expression which was almost defiant. His eyes were steady, and his jaw firm. No man could tell such a yarn as he had done unless it had been true in every detail. It was obviously "straight."

"There's just one point, Mr. Haines," said Nelson Lee quietly. "A small phial was found upon Brown's desk—and it was half-filled with a deadly poison. Do you know anything about that phial?"

Our companion's eyebrows lifted.

"I know nothing of it," he replied. "It might have been there when I entered the room—it must have been there, I suppose. But I don't remember seeing it. Oh, but what about the little cork which Brown threw upon the desk? I do remember that, at least."

"I judge that Brown was contemplating self-destruction at the very time of your visit," said the guv'nor thoughtfully. "The poison was before him, and he was fingering the cork of the phial. The coming of the skull had overwrought him to such an extent that he was almost mad with fear. I am well aware of that, Mr. Haines, for I was present when the skull was delivered."

"You were present?" asked Haines, staring.

Nelson Lee explained the circumstances; how the parcel had gone to the wrong Mr. Brown, how we had been brought into the matter, and all the rest of it.

"It was that poison on the desk which led the police to first suppose that there had been foul play," went on the guv'nor. "But it is now fully believed that Brown's condition is due to a fit. The police, in fact, are dropping the matter, Mr. Haines. That is rather fortunate, perhaps, or you might have become seriously involved."

"Are you not going to give them any information?'

"I don't see why I should," replied Nelson Lee. "They could do nothing, even if I did, except, perhaps, make things uncomfortable for you. They would certainly detain you, and institute strict inquiries. But that's not necessary. I am quite convinced that you have suffered enough hardship without having indignity piled upon you."

"Then—then you believe me?"

The guv'nor thrust out his hand.

"I do, Haines," he replied frankly. "I believe every word you have told me, and all my sympathies are with you."

"Same here," I chimed in heartily.

"Furthermore," continued Nelson Lee, "let me say you have acted with commendable restraint, and your demands were only just and reasonable. Indeed, Brown really forfeited all right to any share of the fortune by his base treachery and murder. Nothing, of course, will ever compensate Mrs. Kenmore for her great loss. But I will help you, Haines, to see that justice is done regarding the sharing of the fortune. I don't think that Brown's crimes will ever be brought home to him, for there is only your unsupported word, and the skull, to offer to the authorities. Upon the whole, we will go our own way."

"So Brown was on the point of committing suicide?" said Haines thoughtfully. "The miserable coward! He knew very well that I must be alive. The arrival of the skull told him that. Do you think it possible he had taken the poison before I saw him?"

"No; that is out of the question. Twenty drops would have caused his death almost at once," replied Nelson Lee. "He is still alive, although it is doubtful whether he will ever recover. Our best plan, I think, is to return to Stonham Place without delay. If Brown has recovered consciousness, and is able to talk, I will take matters into my own hands. We can do nothing until we know the man's condition at the moment."

I was well aware that the guv'nor wished to obtain some kind of corroborative evidence of Haines' story. We both believed the poor chap, but it was really necessary to be absolutely sure. Brown's behaviour on the previous evening was quite convincing; that skull had given him the shock of his life. But by facing Brown now Lee would tell by his attitude, if by nothing else, that the story we had heard was veracious.

And so, fifteen minutes later, we left for Stonham Place.

* * * * *

Jenkin opened the door in answer to our ring, and his face was as long as a fiddle. He ushered us in, and was about to speak when we saw Dr. Reynolds descending the stairs. Somehow, there was a kind of hushed feeling about the whole place.

"Oh, I wanted to have a word with you, Dr. Reynolds," said Nelson Lee. "How is Mr. Brown? Is it possible to have a word with him?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Mr. Brown is dead," he replied quietly.

"Dead!" I gasped.

We all stood rooted to the floor for a second. Haines had turned slightly pale, but he showed no other sign. But we all knew this news was a terrible blow. Haines could not possibly obtain his share of the fortune, nor could he see that Mrs. Kenmore received hers. The news was all the more staggering because it was unexpected.

"This is extremely unfortunate," said the guv'nor. "Did Mr. Brown recover consciousnes before dying, doctor?"

"Oh, yes. He was conscious for fully half an hour," replied Dr. Reynolds. "He seemed very quiet and subdued. But I have another piece of news for you. The patient knew that he was dying, and expressed a wish to make reparation for some act in his past which he left obscure."

"Oh!" exclaimed Haines. "What did Brown say?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, gentlemen, Mr. Brown requested me to ring up for a solicitor. The latter arrived within ten minutes, and Mr. Brown made a will. I can't tell you the contents of it, of course."

We were greatly cheered by the added information, and Nelson Lee meant to discover the dispositions of that will without any loss of time. We instinctively felt that Charles Brown had repented of his crimes in his dying moments—repented sufficiently, at least, to make amends so far as the fortune was concerned.

And in due course we learned that our surmise was correct.

The will provided for the equal division of Brown's fortune and property into two portions. The one half was for Bernard Haines, and the other for Mrs. George Kenmore. Roughly, the residue amounted to two hundred thousand pounds—that is, a hundred thousand for Haines, and an equal amount for Kenmore's widow.

Thus, before leaving this world, Brown had made the only amends possible to him. Needless to say, Mrs. Kenmore was nearly struck dumb with amazement when Haines personally told her of her good fortune.

Incidentally, the police didn't take any further action in the matter, for Dr. Reynolds signed a certificate of death after all. It had obviously been a case of heart failure following an apoplectic seizure.

Haines promised Nelson Lee an extra fat cheque, but the guv'nor wouldn't hear of it. He declared that he had absolutely no right to any fee, and told Haines that he had entered the case out of mere curiosity.

This, of course, was true enough; and, unless Nelson Lee is positively commissioned to look into a case, he doesn't accept payment.

As for Haines' story being truthful, there was no doubt upon that point. We had received the corroberation we wanted. For the very fact that Brown had made his will in such a way proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he had been guilty.

Nelson Lee was satisfied that justice had been done.

In conclusion, I'll just add that Mr. Bernard Haines is now living in a perfectly appointed little flat in the neighbourhood of Hammersmith. He's one of our best friends, and visits us fairly often.

But—and this in a whisper, mind—I believe there's somebody else on the horizon now. This new friend is far more attractive than the guv'nor or I; and by that you'll know that the friend referred to isn't of the male persuasion. In fact, she's a girl Haines had known five years before.

That's about all, I think. Other things will happen by-and-by, I dare say. A wedding, in all probability.

At least, I hope so. Poor old Haines has been through a terrible time, and he wanted somebody to look after him, and to care for him.

The guv'nor and I both hope that she'll turn out to be the right sort.

THE END.

BEGIN THIS THRILLING SERIAL TO-DAY!

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

Read this first!

The Principal Characters in this Story are:

TOM CRAWLEY, *light-weight boxer, and stoker on board H.M.S. Flyer, who has been captured by the Germans, as also has his father, though several months before;*

BOB RANDLE, *who has been sent to France with his regiment; and*

MARY THWAITES, *daughter of old Fisherman Thwaites, with whom both Tom and Bob are in love. Tom is taken to Zeebrugge at the time of a British aerial bombardment.* (*Now read on*).

FATHER AND SON.

THERE came the dull explosion of falling bombs, meaning that our naval aircraft were getting busy.

They could hear motor-cars rushing about the town, and the big guns which line the shore in their emplacements answering our warships' fire.

And how the prisoners laughed at the idea of Fritz getting it so strongly. They wouldn't have minded if the whole prison had been blown up as long as the Hun caught it heavily.

In the morning, when they were marched through the town, they saw shell craters yawning in the roads, houses blown to pieces, and signs of damage inestimable. Red Cross cars were busy, too, and they guessed by what they saw that the casualties were very heavy.

In the train they were packed like sardines, but they didn't mind, but talked brightly of the damage Fritz had sustained.

"He'll have to quit Zeebrugge and the coast," said one of the naval airmen. "If he don't, we'll blow him out of it."

"Silence!" came in a roar from an angry guard, and the speaker was prodded with the butt-end of a rifle.

For the rest of a long and tedious journey, suffered under the very worst conditions, without food or water, the unhappy, but plucky prisoners were taken to some large seaport town—Antwerp, Tom thought it must be—and were interned in a prison there.

It was a huge building, evidently built for the purpose to which it was put.

Tom Crawley was there four days, before he was allowed to take exercise in the yard, and then, as he turned out, and joined the crowd of prisoners who lounged about, or walked up and down in gloomy silence, he scanned the faces of everyone with a strange feeling at his heart, until he caught sight of a fine, upstanding figure of a man, with bushy beard, and resolute air, who came pacing slowly towards him.

One look at that face, and Tom bounded forward with a glad cry of recognition, caring not a fig for the guard, or anyone else.

"Father—father!" he cried. "Look, it's Tom—your son—Tom! Don't you know me, dad?"

And the fisherman, with a start, looked at Tom, then with a sobbing cry opened wide his arms, and clasped the boy he loved tight to his heart, while tears of happiness welled from his eyes and guttered down his cheeks.

"Tom—Tom—my son, my son——" and to think that we should meet like this, out here—prisoners of—war——"

How Tom Crawley laughed as he looked into his father's face. How the father's eyes brightened and how his lips curled into a smile as he gazed upon the face of his son once more.

Since his captivity Thomas Crawley, fisherman of Weathersea, had lost much of his old independence of spirit and high initiative.

Perhaps the long struggle he had made to earn a living under war conditions, and the loss of his two ships, the Elsie Jane and the Dora Grey, had preyed upon his mind. At any rate, he had resigned himself to his fate, and was prepared to spend the rest of the war-

time in prison, hoping the while that his strength would last out, and so enable him to return home and see the white cliffs of England once more, and gaze upon the faces of those he loved again, when the termination of the war should release him from his prison.

Ever since he had landed on Belgian soil, Tom's father had been a silent and morose man, a pathetic figure, which sometimes excited the pity even of his German guards.

The man presented the same dogged, rugged exterior as of yore, but the fighting spirit had been weakened within him.

Many a time and oft the fine old fellow wished that he had gone down to the bottom with the Dora Grey; the only circumstance that leavened his regret being the kindness and humanity of the U-boat commander who had saved him, and proved by so doing that there was a few Germans with some sense of decency left in them still.

Every day when the prisoners had been turned into the grey courtyard in which they took exercise, into which the golden rays of the sun seemed reluctant to penetrate, Thomas Crawley had paced up and down silent, with bent shoulders and bowed head, seldom talking to the other prisoners of war confined there, brooding over thoughts of home, and wondering how it was going with the war, and if the British would ever manage to get the U-boat menace in hand.

He cared no longer as to what became of himself. Had they sent a firing squad out into the yard, set him against a wall, and shot him down, he would not have flinched.

All he longed for was the victory of the dear Homeland, and that he felt was far away indeed.

Since he had been walled up such a victory seemed impossible. And since his landing he had seen so many Germans, so many German guns, and had come into contact with so much German efficiency, that he doubted whether the Allies, strong though they were, could ever vie with the enemy's effort.

For him the arrival of his son Tom in the Antwerp gaol came none too soon.

"Tom, Tom, my dear boy, my dear son," faltered the grizzled old veteran, when he had overcome the first flush of his emotion, "I can't believe even now that it is you. How did you come here? What's happened to the old Flyer? Have we lost a battle at sea, that they have brought you here? Is the Old Country going under at last?"

Tom drew himself away, and gazed reproachfully into the seamed and dour old face.

"Dad," he cried, "you mustn't talk like that. The Old Country going under? My word, she's never made such efforts as she's making now. Here, do you know that the Americans have landed in France; that we've got thousands of 'em in training in England. Going under? It's Fritz who is going under, and Germany's going to drag the ramshackle empire down with her."

"Is it true? Can I believe that?"

"Believe it, dad? Of course. The Flyer got sunk, but she sent two enemy ships to the bottom before she went down. The Huns haven't a ghost of a chance against us in the open. They only sink our ships when they skulk in the darkness of the night or under the surface of the sea."

"And how's Fisherman Thwaites, and Mary, and Bob Randle, and all the old folks at home. How's your mother. It must have broken her heart when she heard that I was gone with the Dora Grey. Tell me, Tom, how is she?"

"Grand, thanks, dad! And from the moment she heard that you were alive——"

"Does she know that?" eagerly, and the fisherman's eyes brightened.

"Yes, she knows it. A Hun tailor told me. I saved his life. That's what he did in return. Mr. Thwaites is grand. Bob's in France, fighting the Huns. Mary's fine. And what's it matter, dad, if you and me are here as long as we win the war? That's all we've got to worry about."

"Ay, lad, and a very good all." He set his shoulders back. "And if we can only do it——"

"It'll be done, dad."

"And I've doubted. Somehow, I seemed to imagine that the bottom had dropped clean out of the war after I was taken prisoner, Tom, boy. I hadn't any wish to live. But now—now, I feel as if the four walls aren't built that can hold me."

"Why should they be?" whispered

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

Tom eagerly. "I know these Huns are thorough in all they do, and that they keep strict watch over their prisoners, that they've got hungry, fierce hounds to help guard the prison. I saw some of 'em when I came here. But we know how to navigate a boat, dad, and the sea's not far away. We aren't in Germany yet. Maybe, we'll find a chance of escaping before they take us over the Rhine."

At that moment an armed guard strolled up to them, glancing from one to another suspiciously.

"Stop that talking!" he cried.

"What for?" asked Tom Crawley.

"It's forbidden. Who are you?"

"We're father and son," said Tom, with a bit of a smile. "I've just come here, and I suppose you'll allow us to talk a bit together. seeing that we haven't met for so long."

The German hesitated, then with a shrug of the shoulders turned away with a scowl.

"This once," said he, but from a distance he watched them with suspicious eyes.

This man, like most other Germans, had the greatest respect for the British seamen's uniform. And since two of the same sort were talking together, he was uneasy in his mind.

THE FORTUNE OF WAR.

TO Bob Randle soldiering was just a great game, serious though the business was, with Britain at war, and the fortunes of the Empire at stake.

He, who had always been confined in a shop in peace time, revelled in the open-air life, and rejoiced in the hard toiling to which he was subjected.

Never had he felt so strong, and fit and well. Never had he dreamt that he possessed the atheltic powers which hard training in the army now brought out.

Apart from the deep regret and distress he felt in parting from the loved ones at home, he was glad when the time came for him to cross the Channel, and take his place with the new draft in the ranks of the regiment to which he had the honour to belong, and heard that he would soon be in the thick of the fighting.

Some said he would be used at once. Other declared that the new lot would undergo a further period of training in France before entering the trenches.

Meanwhile they were stationed at a base behind the lines, lived in quaint domed huts of iron, fed on plain, wholesome food and plenty of it, and when relaxation from duty allowed, entered into sports and games with all the abandon of their kind.

Bob played football, baseball, and took part in running races and jumping competitions; he went down to the narrow but deep river close by and swam with the rest of the boys; and, this he loved beyond all else, entered into the boxing competitions which were held at regular intervals with a joy that amazed him.

And in this last sport he proved himself almost a champion.

True, bigger and stronger men sometimes beat him, but he never met a man anywhere near his own weight whom he did not lick with the utmost ease.

All the time he fought chivalrously and pluckily, and was the first to offer his hand to an opponent who gained a decision over him, or to accept that of a lad whom he had beaten.

And his comrades loved him.

Bob Randle, son of the Weathersea grocer, was, in a way, the most popular lad in the regiment.

For a week or two this went on, and then—the order came for them to move. Carrying their full kit, they swung along the well-worn and muddy roads to their new position immediately behind the fighting lines.

Almost at once they came under shell fire, but so beautifully designed and organised were their defensive positions, that they hardly sustained a single casualty there.

Not even the enemy's airmen who flew above, dropping their bombs whenever they saw a chance—these raids being made principally at night, for the Hun in war is like a sneaking, crawling thief—could damage the regiment seriously.

Meanwhile the guns boomed behind them, in front of them, in the far distance, giving the enemy no rest, and the whisper was passed that soon there would be a big advance.

(*Continued overleaf.*)

Fresh drafts arrived, new regiments were sent up, and the cavalry were waiting in a selected position, there to remain till wanted.

There was liveliness everywhere, hopefulness and cheerfulness, too.

At last Bob Randle found himself in the support trenches, with a crowd of comrades, steel helmeted, and ready.

Officers and men were there in thousands, hidden from view, but everywhere along a line extending for miles and miles.

Bob, white-faced and eager, listened to the never ceasing roar of the guns in silent wonderment. Never could he have believed that such a thing was possible. Fritz replied to the bombardment, too, and pretty severely, but he was outgunned, outclassed, and the khaki-clad heroes felt that at last they would be able to make their presence felt, that perhaps they would be the first to really break the German lines.

For upwards of twelve hours this incessant bombardment continued, and flights of our aeroplanes went speeding over the German positions.

Then for an hour every gun on the British front spoke, and the cannonade increased in violence.

At the end of an hour the word was given, and the Tommies, springing out of their trenches into the open, began their walk in open order over the shell-torn and churned-up ground, with its mud, its craters, and its slime, behind the barrage that lifted and dropped again at regular intervals.

To Bob Randle this experience was the most thrilling he had ever known.

As he went, he saw shells bursting behind him, to right and left of him, as well as in front, where the British shrapnel broke forward.

He saw Tanks wobbling and rolling their way onward for all the world like the fishing smacks of Weathersea in a heavy gale, and he laughed.

The work of death was being carried out more than efficiently.

Soon his laughter gave place to anger. He saw some of his comrades go down, and heard the singing of the bullets as the enemy's machine guns opened fire from concrete positions that had withstood the heaviest of our fire.

For a moment fear of himself, of death, came over him. The next he shook it off, and plunged on after the barrage.

He saw ahead of him a dome-shaped structure of concrete, which was spitting flame and smoke. The Huns were beneath it.

Dropping down upon his hands and knees he crawled forward, and at length reached the spot.

(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.