

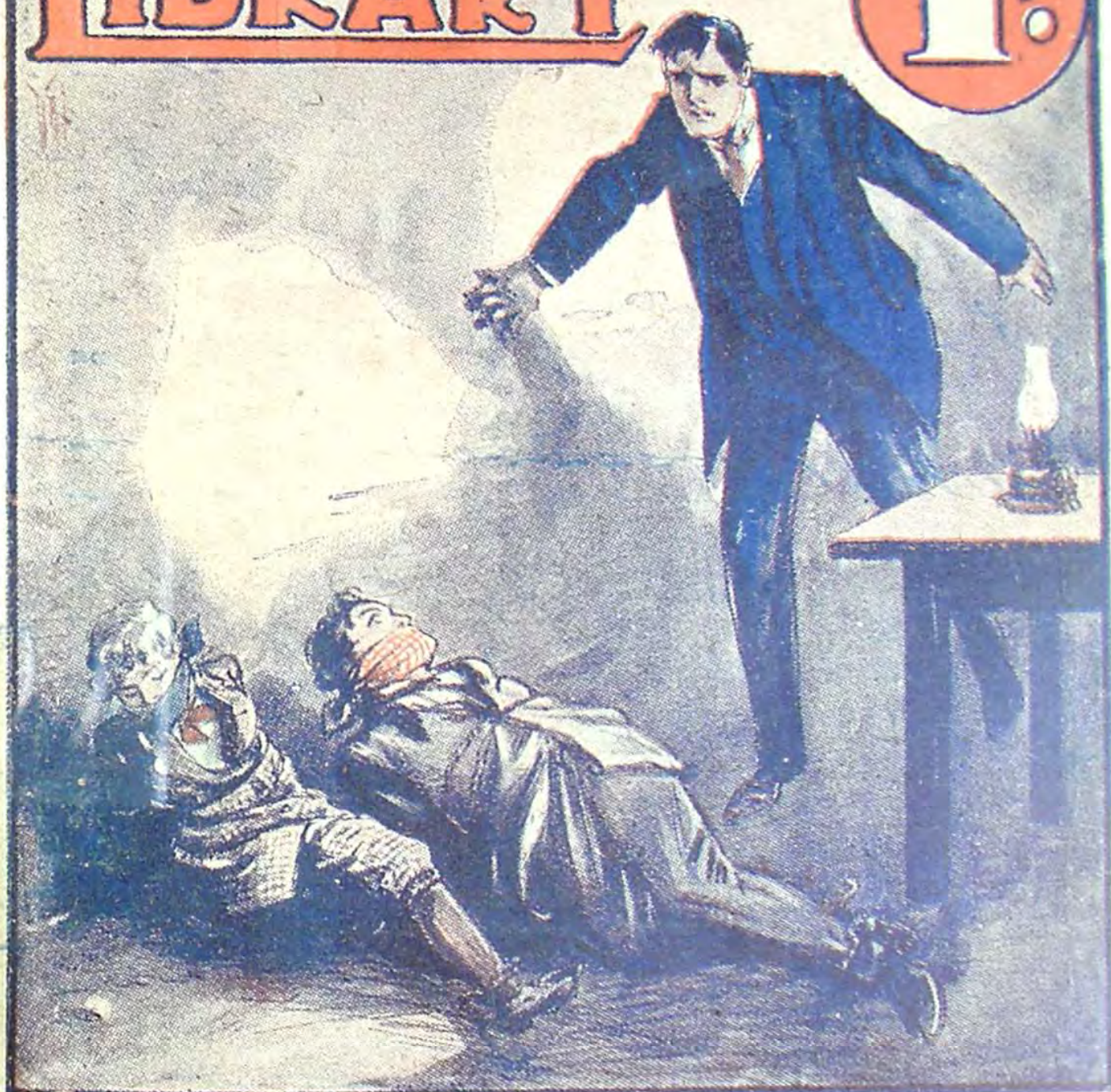
No. 2.—New Detective Story Paper.

THE NELSON LEE

(DETECTIVE)

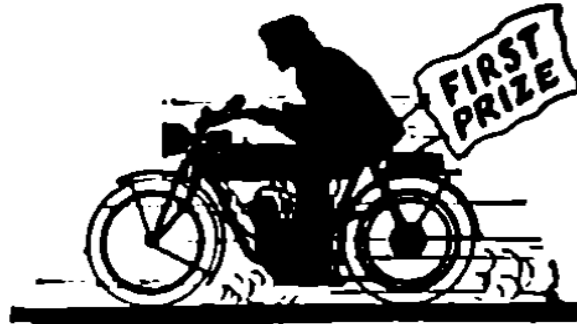
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THE CASE OF THE SECRET ROOM

A Magnificent Long, Complete Detective Story,
Introducing Nelson Lee and His Assistant
Nipper. Specially Written for This Issue.

By the author of "Graft," "Plummer v. Sexton Blake,"
"The Adventures of Detective Spearling," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Cyrus L. Spender—The Guardians of the House—A Faked Message—
Into Thin Air.

NELSON LEE pushed the papers before him impatiently away, rose to his feet, and stood staring through the window at Gray's Inn Road and the things that were happening in it. Not that there was much to look at from the point of view of the ordinary man. A cyclist carrying newspapers appeared to skid and with difficulty save himself from being thrown, but the detective did not fail to notice that the man who went to his assistance—who was of the horse-horsey—received a piece of paper from the cyclist's hand before the latter pedalled away.

"Yet they trouble to make laws against street betting!" Nelson Lee muttered disgustedly. Then his eyes brightened, and he beckoned Nipper to his side. "Do you see that man over there," he said quickly—"European clothes, but with the slanting eyes of a Chinaman? Probably his pigtail is coiled up under his bowler hat."

"You mean the lame one, sir—the man with the club foot?" Nipper, the detective's young assistant, answered brightly.

"The man who appears to have a club foot," Nelson Lee corrected. "If you watch him closely you will see that the bend of his knee is not natural, that his leg would be the same length as the other one if he cared to straighten it out, and——"

"But what's the idea of it, sir?" Nipper demanded.

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders, and the expression of his face suggested that he was bored to death.

"Opium smuggling," he answered briefly. "I have often thought that there was a depot for that kind of thing round King's Cross, and now I am sure. Look at the colour of the man's face, if you can call it a colour—the leaden-grey hue that speaks of the man who not only sells opium, but smokes it."

Nelson Lee turned shortly away from the window, and paced up and down the room, Nipper following him with anxious eyes.

"Why don't you do something about it then, sir?" he asked. "We're slack, and you've refused that job over the Entell diamonds."

"Of course I have refused it!" the detective answered, in an irritable tone. "It is an affair for the police, and if they cannot run the thief down it is about time they gave up their job." Bah! I'm getting sick and tired of these little affairs—old men whose sons have got into trouble, women who have raised bridge debts that they can't pay, all the little idiotic things of life that people ought to be able to look after for themselves."

Nelson Lee strode back to the window, and something of the boredom left his

face as he looked down at the occupant of the car that had pulled up before the building in which he had roomed.

"Cyrus L. Spender," he said, in a low tone.

"The American millionaire, sir?"

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered shortly, and with a certain amount of disgust in his tone. "Show him in when he knocks, but I'm not going to take on another case unless it shows some sort of real interest. For two pins I'd close the place up, and take a holiday!"

"And come back in about a day," Nipper chuckled. "I believe you'd rather look for a lost hairpin than be idle for——"

"Get out!" Nelson Lee snapped, though there was a smile on his lips. "There's the bell and knocker going at the same time."

Nipper did get out, to return in a very short space of time with a tall, clean-shaven man of something over fifty. He was thin and angular in every part, and, though his clothes were good, they were obviously not English. For the rest, his face rather reminded one of a hawk that has been baulked of its prey, and the broad-brimmed hat that he wore added to the impression that he was American.

"Say," he said quickly, closing the door behind him and standing with his feet a little apart, "you're Nelson Lee?"

"Correct at the first guess," the detective assured him coldly. "You are Cyrus L. Spender? By the way, Nipper will hang your hat up for you in the hall."

Cyrus L. Spender, who in America was used to even lesser millionaires cringing to him, frowned, and removed his headgear. It was the first time that in so many words he had been asked to take his hat off, and certainly it was the first time that he would have obeyed. He had a way of reckoning that millions counted for everything, yet there was something about the quiet-faced detective that made him doubt that fact for once.

"See here," he said, in his nasal voice, "there's a job on that I want you to take in hand, if your figure ain't too high."

"It all depends what the case is," Nelson Lee answered, in an even voice. "If it interests me I will take it up; if not, I must refer you to Scotland Yard."

Cyrus L. Spender's sallow face went red; then he snatched a roll of notes from his pocket, and threw it down on to the table.

"There ain't a man stands out against the dollars!" he said harshly. "There's a cool five thousand there, and if that ain't enough——"

"One moment," Nelson Lee interrupted. "There is no need to speak about terms yet. Please tell me what you want done. You will find the chair in the corner comfortable."

The American dropped his long body into the chair indicated—the light from the window was full upon his face—and Nelson Lee took the chair opposite.

"It's like this," Cyrus L. Spender began. "You may or may not know that I've thrown up business, and that I've settled down in this little island of yours—bought a place called Mallaby Grange."

Nelson Lee nodded, and there was the suggestion of a smile on his lips.

"You mean that James Duggan, the man who bought it before, had to let you have it in part payment of the debt he owed you," the detective put in. "If I remember rightly, he came a nasty cropper over the last corner in wheat that you engineered."

"Put it that way, if you like," the American agreed, with a grin. "If a man gets frozen feet waitin' round to get rich it's his fault." The smile died away from his lips, and there was an expression of nervous dread in his eyes as he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket and held it out to the detective. "Read that."

Nelson Lee took the single sheet of paper, and read the writing on it. It was short and to the point, running:

"Unless you can give me back Mallaby Orange and the sum of fifty thousand dollars you will lose your son Cyrus. If you agree to this leave the money

and the agreement on your study table in eight days from now, in the place where you found this letter. Remember that nothing will stop me taking the boy.—JAMES DUGGAN."

"Where is the envelope?" Nelson Lee inquired, looking up from the letter.

"There ain't one," Cyrus L. Spender answered; and the detective noticed that the man's forehead was damp. "I just found that sheet of paper on the study table seven days ago. How it got there I don't know."

"The servants may have been bribed," Nelson Lee suggested, without much interest.

"I guess not," the millionaire answered quickly. "There ain't one of my men that don't get paid enough to keep him loyal."

Nelson Lee looked at the paper again, and there was a little line between his eyes.

"What precautions have you taken?" he asked. "I see that to-day is the seventh day."

"That's just it," Cyrus L. Spender said huskily. "As soon as I got that letter it was me for bein' busy. There's a ring of men round the Grange, one watching every window or door that a man could get through. But still I ain't satisfied. I'm afraid that they'll get the kid even then, and you don't know what that means to me."

Nelson Lee's expression changed to one of surprise, and perhaps the American knew why. All his life Cyrus L. Spender had been working for himself, crushing anyone who came into his path, kicking ruthlessly aside anyone who showed the slightest sign of being in opposition.

"I know what you're thinking," he said slowly; "but you are all the same. You just think of the days when I was struggling to get the dollars, fighting against men who would have cut my throat or put a bullet into me to stop me doing it. You just think of the men who have failed because I have won through, and because you think of that you reckon that I haven't a heart. I'm the machine that's minted dollars to the tune of some millions, and I'm no good for anythin' else. That's what you think."

"Something like it," Nelson Lee admitted coolly.

"Then you're wrong!" Cyrus L. Spender said between his teeth. Then his voice softened. "I'll tell you a bit of my life, the part that you don't know anything about, and maybe you'll understand."

The American passed a handkerchief across his forehead, and his hand was none too steady.

"More than fifty years ago I knew what it was to starve," he said. "No, I don't mean just goin' without a meal for a day, but lyin' on a bed of sacks in little big New York for close on a solid week at a time, an' wonderin' why the dad didn't come and give me food like that I could smell cookin' right through the tenement building. My mother used to be away all day, too. Sometimes she brought food in, and sometimes she didn't. My father was away a long time just then, and kids in the street called after me 'Sing Sing.' I didn't understand then, but I did later. My father was in prison for stealing to get the food that we needed. He'd gone queer on Wall Street some time back, but it was years after that I was to know what that meant."

The millionaire paused, and though Nelson Lee said nothing, his face showed decidedly more interest.

"I went out on the streets," Cyrus L. Spender continued, "and there you bet that I learnt more of the hard side of life. I made a few cents here an' there sellin' papers an' runnin' errands right up to the time when I was fifteen. Then my mother died, an' the doctor said that it was through want of food."

"And say"—the millionaire's voice had grown very harsh, and his grey eyes were cold as bits of steel—"I'd been in Fifth Avenue sellin' papers, and I'd look in at the swell eating-places an' see folks have meals that would have kept us

for a year, and that's where I got started on the other game. The night after my mother died I stole a bag from a woman as she got out of a carriage, and I sold it. The money that I got paid for the funeral."

Cyrus L. Spender laughed huskily, without the slightest mirth in the sound.

"You are that I'm making no bones about it," he continued. "Somehow you're the sort of man I can tell."

"Go on," Nelson Lee ordered. And Nipper, who stood by the door, was listening eagerly too.

"I got a few dollars more, it don't matter how, and I started on my own with a fruit stall in the Bowery quarter. For five years things went pretty well, though there weren't no prospects of Fifth Avenue in sight, and I married."

The millionaire's voice grew huskier still, and it was fully a minute before he continued.

"I worked hard," he said, "for Minnie wasn't any too strong, and she needed the best of everything. Things weren't any too good, and I often wondered how Minnie managed to get the food for me when I came home at night. Later I knew. She was fairly starvin' herself so that I should do well on the grub stakes, and—that's what killed her later, when I'd made part of my pile and the kid was born. Ill-treatment in youth they called it."

"She died, leavin' me with the kid that's now ten, and I tell you that from that moment if I'd ever had a heart I lost it except for the boy I'd run straight, though you may not think it, in the way that I did business, but after that I did not care. It was money that I wanted, money for the kid, and I made it even though I had to trample other men underfoot."

"And one of them was James Duggan," Nelson Lee said slowly.

"Yee," Cyrus L. Spender snapped back. "One of them was James Duggan. He was my partner once, and he did his best to ruin me, but he failed. He went down and under, and I heard no more of him until I knew that he'd been in England, got the place that's mine now, and was doin' well. I hated the man—I tell you that right away, sir—for he might have left my boy to starve to death as Minnie had done. I saw that the money he had made should do him no good, and he flitted from this country a disgraced man."

The American wiped his forehead again, and his lips were twitching.

"Now you're right inside all that I can tell you, Mr. Lee," he said slowly. "Call me what you like, but put against it what my life has been. I want you to come right away to Essex—that's where my place is—and guard my boy, for I know that James Duggan is a dangerous man. Back in the old days—" his right hand wandered round to his hip, "I'd have shot him down like a dog, but the law don't allow for things like that, so I've come to you. I said five thousand dollars, but I don't care if it's fifty so long as the boy is safe."

"Will you do it for me?"

Nelson Lee hesitated. He knew what the character of Cyrus L. Spender was supposed to be, though he had never heard this tale of the man's earlier life, and he was inclined to be more merciful to him now.

"It seems to me that nothing can happen to the boy after the precautions that you have taken," he answered slowly; "but I tell you what I will do. Nipper can go with you to Essex to keep an eye on your boy, and if he spots anything suspicious I will follow at once. Nipper can be with him all the time, and I'll back him to see that nothing happens."

Cyrus L. Spender rose to his feet, and somehow he looked older than when he had entered.

"You can't come yourself—now?" he asked in his harsh voice.

"I could," Nelson Lee answered quietly, "but it would be of no use. If this James Duggan really has made a plan for getting your boy away it would simply mean that he would make a fresh one, but I promise you that if anything happens I will be with you in—let me see, how far is Mallaby Grange from here?"

"Forty miles."

"I promise you that I will be with you in an hour after I have had the summons."

Nipper and young Cyrus Spender were having a high old time of it in the great room of Mallaby Grange that was specially reserved for the boy who would one day inherit millions. If there was a known game that was not to be found in the room it was not the fault of Cyrus L. Spender, and Nipper for once had almost forgotten that he was the assistant of perhaps the greatest detective in the world.

Young Cyrus Spender was a boy of boys, unspoiled by the luxuries heaped upon him, and he had taken to Nipper right away.

"I wish we could go and play in the grounds," he said wistfully, after he and Nipper had contested a strenuous game of ping-pong: "but there are a lot of men who won't let me—one at every door. I wonder why they're there."

Nipper was about to answer when there was a knock at the door, and an old manservant of the name of Joe Miles looked in. He was butler to Cyrus L. Spender, and had served in the same capacity in the days of James Duggan.

"There's a ring on the 'phone for you, sir," he said, addressing Nipper. "The gentleman gives his name as Mr. Nelson Lee. If you'll come this way I'll show you where the 'phone is."

At the name of his master Nipper forgot all about the games, and moved hastily towards the door. Young Spender was safe enough where he was, he told himself, and anyway, he would not be absent for more than a couple of minutes.

"All right," he answered. "Show me the way."

Miles led the way across the hall and into a room on the left of it, where the receiver of a telephone hung down by its wire. Then the man retired, closing the door behind him.

"Hallo, that you, sir?" he said into the instrument.

A muffled voice came back over the wires, so that Nipper could not make out a word that was said; and he repeated his question, still with the same result.

For fully five minutes Nipper tried to get an intelligible answer, and it was at the end of that time that he received the shock of his life. Over the wires he clearly heard a man's laugh, and a voice that was certainly not that of his master spoke to him.

"Say," it said, "you go right along and see whether young Cyrus is all right."

Nipper paled as he heard a receiver being dropped back into its place, then, with the quickness that life with Nelson Lee had taught him, he dropped the receiver that he held and dashed out of the room and into the one in which he had left young Cyrus Spender.

The room was empty of the boy.

Nipper dashed out of the room again, across the hall, and threw the great front door open. A big man stood on the other side of it, leaning on a heavy stick.

"Has Master Cyrus come out?" he asked quickly.

"No," the man answered without hesitation. "Orders not to let him out of the house without special permission. Mr. Spender's out taking a walk."

Nipper felt his heart go cold, and for a moment he stood wondering what to do. Then he was dashing round the old house that stood in solitary state in its grounds. Here and there he found a big man posted, each determined looking and alert, but the answer from each was the same—he had not seen young Cyrus.

Back in the house Nipper ran into old Joe Miles, who expressed astonishment and alarm when he heard that young Cyrus was not in the play-room; and between them they made a search of the premises without finding the boy.

It was then that Nipper felt that he had failed in the trust that his master had reposed in him, though later, he was to learn that a man of double his age might have been deceived just as successfully.

With frantic haste the lad called up Nelson Lee, and this time he knew that the voice at the other end was that of his master.

"He's gone, sir," he gasped. "They told me that you'd ring me up, and——"

"I shall be down in an hour," the voice of Nelson Lee clipped in with, and Nipper heard the receiver of the telephone dropped back into its place.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee Arrives—The Visit of James Duggan—The Mystery of His Appearance—Escaped—No Clue.

NELSON LEE looked grave as he stood in the study of Cyrus L. Spender, in company with that gentleman and Nipper. True to his word the detective had been no more than an hour coming down in his powerful car, reaching the Grange just as dusk was falling.

As for the American millionaire, he was as pale as death, and he seemed to have suddenly grown old—very, very old.

"If you'd have come at first this might not have happened," he said in a shaking voice, then he held out his hands appealing. "You've got to find the lad, Mr. Lee. I guess that you can have half my millions so long as you find him. I've been grabbin' after dollars all my life, but I guess that they ain't worth anythin' compared with the little lad."

Nelson Lee nodded, and his fingers rubbed at his smooth-shaven chin. Possibly he was chagrined at what had happened, but if so his face did not show it, for it was immobile as ever.

"It would have happened just the same," he answered. "It is plain that James Duggan, if it is he who has done this thing, knows all about your movements. Possibly he has acted sooner than he intended to do, though, if you ask me; the talk about the eighth day was a bluff. It was the seventh on which he intended to act, and he has done so."

The detective walked across to the window, but the dusk had fallen to such an extent that he could see no more than a few yards into the grounds.

"You have sent your man Miles for all the men on guard?" he asked over his shoulder. "You are not afraid of them leaving their posts?"

"Yes, I have sent for them," the millionaire answered. "What is the good of them watching now that the boy has gone?"

It was then that the door of the room opened, and Miles stood aside to allow a file of men to enter. Each was a big man, bull-doggy and determined in appearance, and as Nelson Lee looked at them there was not one that he could pick out as not being on the square. The men were of the type—Britishers—who would undertake a task and carry it out to the best of their ability.

Yet young Cyrus had disappeared completely, despite the fact that every exit from the house was guarded, and the search that Nelson Lee had made of the house had convinced him that the boy was not there. And he knew how to search.

"You leave this to me," Cyrus L. Spender said hoarsely as the men stood waiting.

Nelson Lee nodded, and the millionaire faced the men, his features working with agitation.

"See here," he said. "I've paid you well to guard my boy, yet he's gone. Well, we'll leave that part of the business out. All I want is to get him back again, and I'm willin' to pay the price for it. There's a thousand pounds, and no action taken, for the man who tells me how my lad was taken away."

The men of the guard looked from one to the other, but not one of them spoke as the millionaire surveyed them with eager, anxious eyes.

"I'll make it two thousand—three," he said huskily. "I'll make it what you like so long as I get my boy back."

The big men whispered among themselves, then one of them stepped forward and touched his forehead.

"It's no good, sir," he answered shortly. "You paid us to do a job and we've done it as well as we could. Me and my mates are ready to swear that the young gentleman hasn't left the house."

"He has," Cyrus L. Spender snapped, and his face was almost that of a madman as he stepped forward towards the men. "I'll make the reward five thousand."

The spokesman of the men shrugged his shoulders.

"It's no good if you make it fifty thousand, sir," he answered. "D'you think that me and my mates wouldn't earn the reward, if we could? We aren't millionaires."

"You may as well let them go," Nelson Lee put in, and at a sign from the millionaire they left the room.

"Go back to your posts!" Nelson Lee called after them, and Cyrus L. Spender smiled bitterly.

"What's the good of it?" he asked, as the door closed behind the last man. "The boy's gone."

"But there's still James Duggan to reckon with," Nelson Lee answered. "If they watch closely enough they may learn how it was that the man got that last letter through to you."

Cyrus L. Spender took a cigar from the box on the table—he was a great smoker, and it was just a habit with him—and stood twirling it in his fingers until the leaf was broken and the cigar useless.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked at last.

"Wait to see the next move of Duggan," the detective answered, without hesitation. "Until then we can do nothing. We know that he is out for a reward, and I reckon that it won't be long before he tries to claim it."

"You're right!" a harsh voice said, and with one accord the two men and Nipper turned towards the door.

A tall, very thin man had entered, closing the door behind him, and now he stood with his back against it, a cruel smile of triumph on his narrow lips. He was dressed in black, and his clothes gave him something of the appearance of an undertaker's mate.

"Duggan!" Cyrus L. Spender panted furiously, and his hands were clenched as he took a quick step forward, but the other man did not move.

"Don't you try that game, my friend!" Duggan drawled. "I've got the whip-hand of you, and don't you forget it! You've played with me in your time, Spender, and I paid dearly for it, but it's my turn now. I've got you there!"—he held out his right hand and slowly closed the fingers of it as if he were gripping something. "I can squeeze you just how I like, and I'm going to do it!"

Cyrus L. Spender took another step forward, but still Duggan showed no sign of fear.

"You'd best not try force!" he warned. "You know me of old, Spender, and though I may have been a fool, you never knew me to be a coward."

The man turned his eyes on the detective, and the latter knew that the truth had been spoken. There was nothing of the coward about James Duggan. He was a cool, calculating man who had been taking risks all his life, and who was ready to take them again.

"I guess that you're Nelson Lee?" Duggan said, with a grin. "I've heard of you, though it's the first time that I've had the pleasure of meeting you. I suppose the boy's Nipper?"

"It is, old son!" the latter answered savagely. "And don't you be so easy with my name. The boss and I will have you in the dock, yet, and don't you forget it."

"Be quiet," Nelson Lee ordered, and faced Duggan. He knew that he was up against no mean antagonist, and somehow he was not sorry. It was a case like this that made detective work worth going on with.

"May I ask how you got in here?" he inquired.

"Oh, you can ask," Duggan agreed, and the glare of the electric light showed the wicked smile on his lips. "You can ask, but I'm not going to answer. I got here, if that's any good to you, just as the letter of warning to Spender did—it just got here, that's all."

"And what do you want?" Cyrus L. Spender put in, in a hoarse voice.

James Duggan's smile became broader than ever, and his narrow shoulders shrugged up to his ears.

"I thought that you knew," he answered, "but I guess that I'd better remind you. I want this place—I kind of took a fancy to it when I was here before, and until you swindled me out of it—and I want fifty thousand dollars. I reckon that I'm letting you down lightly."

Cyrus L. Spender passed his tongue over his lips, and his face was terribly haggard.

"Suppose I refuse?"

"That's up to you," Duggan said carelessly; "but if you do, you can take it from me that you'll never see that boy of yours again."

"Then I——" broke from Spender, but a quick motion of Nelson Lee's stopped him before he could say more.

"You would murder the boy?" the detective asked, his eyes looking straight into those of the other man.

"That's my affair!" Duggan answered slowly. "I'm not dealing with you!"

"That's where you go wrong, my friend!" Nelson Lee corrected him coldly. "You are dealing with me, and I will tell you one thing now: Mr. Spender will not pay you a farthing, and if so much as a hair of the boy's head is touched I shall devote the whole of my time, if it takes me years, to bringing the crime home to you. I should not rest until I saw you standing in the dock of the Old Bailey."

"Very noble!" Duggan sneered, but there was not quite so much confidence in his voice. "Why not let Spender answer for himself? It isn't as if you've lost that brat Nipper. You might want to make terms about him."

Nelson Lee turned to Spender, and looked at the latter's white, haggard face.

"You will not give in?" he said slowly. "We've got to settle this matter once and for all, or the same thing may happen again."

The American looked back into the detective's eyes, and they held him as though he was hypnotised.

"No, I shall not give in," he answered hesitatingly, and suddenly his hand darted to his hip, and he drew out a heavy revolver.

"Hands up, James Duggan!" he ordered, but the man who received the command did not move. Instead, the grin came back to his lips.

"Not on your life!" he sneered. "If you kill me, Spender, you say good-bye to seeing that precious boy of yours again. You sleep on what I've told you to-night, and to-morrow I'll ask you for a hundred thousand dollars instead of fifty."

It was not often that Nelson Lee failed to notice the movement of an opponent, but he had done so this time. He had not seen Duggan's right hand go behind him and grip the handle of the door, with the consequence that he was taken by surprise when Duggan suddenly wrenched the door open and darted out. The next moment the door had banged behind him, and there was the sound of the key turning in the lock.

Quick as lightning Nelson Lee darted at the door and tried to wrench it open, but he might as well have tried to push a stone wall over.

"We must get after him!" Spender gasped. "Break the door down!"

Nelson Lee drew back, then made a running kick at the panel just above the lock, but though there was a creaking of wood the heavy panel stood firm. He swung round and snatched up one of the heavy chairs that were in the room and,

using it as a battering-ram, he set to work on the door. Time after time wood crashed against wood until at last a crack appeared in the panel, and one more blow ripped out of it a piece of wood some six inches in breadth. Through the gap the detective thrust his hand, the key was turned in the lock, and he threw the door open.

Nelson Lee sprinted across the great hall, Nipper and Spender close behind him, making for the front door, which stood wide open, and a cry broke from him as he saw something that lay still across the step.

The thing that lay there was the big man who had been on guard over the entrance, and on the side of the man's temple was the red mark of a heavy blow. Spender saw it, too, and once more his revolver was out.

"He can't have gone far!" he cried fiercely. "I'll shoot the dog down if we can find him."

Nelson Lee turned to Nipper, thrusting a revolver into his hand.

"Down the drive!" he ordered quickly. "Find out from the man at the gate if anyone has passed him."

Nipper was off in a second, for danger meant nothing to him, and Nelson Lee dragged the body of the unconscious man into the hall.

"See to him!" he ordered briefly. "Get brandy—he may be able to tell us something when he comes round."

Once more the magnetism of the detective prevailed, and Cyrus L. Spender hurried off for the spirit. As for Nelson Lee, he walked quickly over the step, taking an electric torch from his pocket as he did so, and flashed the light of it on to the gravel of the drive. The gravel was new; in fact, it had not been down for the greater part of a month, and a recent heavy downfall of rain had left it soft.

Bending low, the detective examined the footprints that were on it, and there was an eager expression in his eyes. If he could pick up the trail there he knew that he would be able to follow it as certainly as a bloodhound.

He saw the marks of his own boots that had been made when he had stepped out of his car and entered the building; he saw the recent impressions made by Nipper's feet, and the other ones left by Cyrus L. Spender. The latter he knew from their curious narrowness, but there were no other marks that were at all recent, none that could have been made by James Duggan.

Nipper came sprinting back up the drive, but he had no need to tell Nelson Lee that he had made no discovery.

"He's not been seen, sir!" the boy panted. "He must have gone off through the grounds."

The detective looked back at the man who had been on guard, and who was coming round under the ministrations of Cyrus L. Spender and Miles the butler, and his eyes narrowed. He argued that if the guardian of the door had been knocked out, Duggan must have made his escape that way, yet the absence of footprints made that impossible.

"I don't know anything!" the man said huskily, as Nelson Lee bent over him. "I was just hit from behind as I heard the door open—that's all!"

Cyrus L. Spender looked at the detective hopelessly.

"What can we do?" he moaned. "What can we do?"

"I shall make an examination of the grounds," Nelson Lee answered mechanically. "Duggan may have escaped by way of one of the windows."

"But every one is guarded!" the millionaire protested in a shaking voice. "And why should this man have been knocked out if Duggan did not escape that way? He must have!"

"There are no footmarks," Nelson Lee answered slowly. Then he turned on his heel and walked out into the night. He had struck up against some curious case in his time, but this was one of the most curious.

As the American had said, why had the guardian of the door been attacked if the kidnapper of young Spender had not made good his attack that way?

With his electric torch in his hand, and accompanied by Nipper, Nelson Lee started on his search of the grounds. Outside each window he found one of the watchers at his post, and each swore that no one had passed him, a fact that the detective could have sworn to himself, for nowhere was there the track of James Duggan on the soft turf. Right round the house he went, and his face was drawn when he returned to the hall to find Cyrus L. Spender waiting for him.

"We must search the house," he said briefly. "I can find no trace of the man having got away."

For the next hour both Nelson Lee and Spender, carrying a revolver in his hand, the searching of the house continued, and under the expert direction of the detective there was not a spot that was left unexplored—yet without result. James Duggan had disappeared as completely as if he had vanished into thin air, and when the men and Nipper returned to the study, they stared at each other with a blank amazement which in the case of Cyrus L. Spender was tinged with dread.

"What does it mean?" the latter asked in an awed voice.

"It means that I am dealing with about the cleverest criminal that I ever met," Nelson Lee answered slowly. Then his chin went up. "I want you to promise me one thing, Mr. Spender."

"Yes?"

"That whatever happens you will not pay Duggan," Nelson Lee explained. "Sooner or later he will make a slip that will let us in. Will you promise?"

Cyrus L. Spender stood shaking in every limb, for strange though his life had been, he loved the boy that was all that was left to him in the world to care about.

"You are sure that you will win in the end?" he pleaded.

"Never knew the boss fail yet," Nipper put in confidently.

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered. "I have told you that I will undertake no other work until I have restored your son to you."

Once more the millionaire hesitated, then he held out his hand.

"I guess that I do as you say," he said.

CHAPTER III.

Things Happen to Nipper—A Fresh Trail—The Disappearance of Miles.

NELSON LEE sat deep in thought in the study, but the more he thought the more perplexed he grew. The case that seemed to be a perfectly simple one at first had taken on complications with which he had never reckoned, and inwardly he had to admit that he was absolutely at sea. Young Spender had disappeared. James Duggan had entered the house without being observed, and had left in an equally mysterious manner, in fact, it was enough to make anyone believe in the supernatural.

But Nelson Lee, who had probably run more criminals to earth than any other man living, knew that there was some explanation. Neither the boy nor his kidnapper could have vanished into thin air—but how had they gone?

For a solid hour the detective had been running theory after theory through his brain, but each one he had to throw aside as useless.

As for Nipper, he wandered about the room in the most disconsolate manner; inwardly telling himself that everything was his fault, though he could in no way be blamed for what had happened.

"I'm going to have a stroll round, sir," he said presently; "if you don't want me."

"No," his master answered mechanically. "Better not be late, as there will probably be a heavy day before us to-morrow."

Nipper left the room, closing the door carefully behind him, though he might as well have left it open considering the smashed panel. He took his cap from a stand in the hall, opened the front door, and went out into the night, the fresh man on guard there taking no notice of him, for he knew who the lad was.

Nipper walked a little way down the drive, then, for no particular reason, he left the path, and struck off across the grounds, going to the right, and making towards the stone-balustraded terrace that lay at the back of the house. Why he went in that direction he had not the faintest idea. Perhaps it was the prompting of providence, but anyway it was to stand him and his master in good stead before a very long time had passed.

More than once the lad stopped and looked about him in the darkness of night, peering among the trees, somehow wondering whether he might fluke upon some discovery. Most lads of his age would have been nervous after what had happened, but he did not suffer in that respect, a fact that had made him so useful to Nelson Lee.

He passed close to one of the windows over which a burly man stood guard, and stopped to speak to him. The man was an ex-policeman, and as straight as a die.

"Rum business, my lad," the man observed; "don't seem to me as if even your governor will get to the bottom of it."

The man gripped harder at the stick that he held in his hand, and stared away into the darkness, not without a certain amount of nervousness. He was as plucky as most of his class, but the things that had happened were enough to have shaken the nerve of the bravest man.

"Don't you worry about that," Nipper answered, with a confidence that, as a matter of fact, he did not feel; "I have never known the governor beaten yet, and he's getting too old to start in a new line."

"Hope you're right," the man said, "but I tell you one thing, my lad, if I were you I wouldn't go messing about these grounds at night. I'm paid to do my job, and I'll do it, but I don't say that I wouldn't rather be at home with the missus. It's rum, that's what it is—rum."

The man and the boy were facing out across the grounds; or otherwise they might have seen the face of old Miles pressed against the glass of the window, his eyes eager, his thin lips twisted into a grim smile.

"I'll risk it," Nipper answered carelessly. "I'm not worth pinching."

The lad strolled away in the darkness, still full of the idea that it was his fault that young Spender had been kidnapped. He reached the terrace at the back of the house, and stood there with his elbows resting on the top of the balustrade, that bent round in a half circle and touched the wall of the house. At this particular spot, for some reason or other, there was not a solitary window breaking the dead surface of the wall, with the consequence that there was not one of Cyrus L. Spender's men on guard.

Nipper stared away over the dark grounds, trying to find a solution for the problem that was beyond his master's unravelling, and he was not so deep in thought that he did not notice a figure that came crawling along the broad balustrade—until too late.

Suddenly the scraping of a boot on stonework made him start erect. For a moment he was looking at the figure of old Miles; for a moment he saw the expression of triumph in the man's eyes, then the latter was on him, gripping at his throat, and he was borne backwards to the ground.

Nipper was no fool when it came to a fight, and his muscles were uncommonly well-developed for a lad of his age, but struggle though he did he could not free himself from the grip of the man who suddenly seemed to have grown young in the matter of strength.

Nipper struck out savagely at the man, time after time, sometimes getting his blows home, but the grip on his throat did not relax, and as he gasped for breath

a red cloud started to swim before his eyes. He was fast losing consciousness, and he knew it only too well.

"I reckon they'll pay now," Miles chuckled; then an oath broke from him, as with a last despairing effort Nipper dashed a clenched fist upwards into his face. Involuntarily the man released his grip.

"Help!" Nipper shouted in a choking voice. "Help!"

Then something struck him over the head; the red clouds that had been before his eyes turned to a black nothingness, and he knew no more.

Nelson Lee started up from his chair as the cry for help reached him faintly, a cry that would have escaped the hearing of many a man less trained to be always ready for emergencies. Faint though the voice was, he recognised it as that of Nipper, and with a terrible fear gripping his heart he dashed out of the room, across the hall, and flung open the main door.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked quickly of the man who stood on guard, though he need not have asked, for the man was staring into the darkness with an expression of alarm on his face.

"Someone cried for help, sir," he answered.

"And which direction did the cry come from?" Nelson Lee demanded quickly, and his face was white with dread.

"I can't say, sir," the man replied. "I just heard the cry, that's all."

Nelson Lee dashed away to the right, crying out as he went, and in a way luck favoured him, for the moon slid out from behind a bank of clouds, and enabled him to see for some distance. He saw the sloping ground with the trees of the ornamental wood beyond, but no sign of Nipper, though he was certain that the cry for help had come from no great distance away.

The detective hurried on, though from time to time he paused to listen and look about him, but he saw nothing and heard nothing, save the men guarding the windows. He questioned each of them, but no one could be more definite than the first. They had heard the cry of the lad's voice, and that was all. They had made no attempt to leave their posts, for their orders had been definite. Only if a man attempted to enter or leave by a window or door were they to take action.

Right round the side of the house Nelson Lee went, his heart growing heavier as he failed to find his young assistant. He knew that the lad was well capable of taking care of himself, and that he had proved it on many occasions, but somehow it was different now—in and around Mallaby Grange, the house of mystery.

The back of the house was reached, and almost hopelessly Nelson Lee ran along until he came to the balustrade that sloped round in a half circle and touched the wall of the mansion. Mechanically he clambered over the broad top, and went along close to it, still searching with his eyes, until they fell upon a cap lying on the ground. In a moment the detective had snatched it up and examined it, and a groan escaped him as he saw that it was Nipper's.

But where was the boy himself?

Nelson Lee looked around quickly, half expecting to see the lad lying injured on the ground, but there was no trace of him.

"He must have gone on the track of someone," the detective muttered in a tone of relief, and drew out his pocket-lamp and turned the light of it upon the ground. In a moment he had discovered the tramped grass and a grassless spot, where there were plain marks of boots. With narrowed eyes he bent to examine the place, and very quickly he knew something of what had happened.

There had been a struggle, there could be no question about that, for the state of the turf pointed to it only too plainly, and the marks of boots were just as plain. There were the small ones of Nipper, in one place where they had slipped as he fell, and there were several much broader ones with curious wide toes. Then there were the marks of heels and toes in the ground, the toes being those of the square

boots, and again Nelson Lee knew what had happened as plainly as if he had witnessed the struggle.

Nipper had been thrown down by this unknown assailant; but what had happened after that?

With his face grim and set, Nelson Lee moved a short distance away, always with the light of his lamp on the ground. He found Nipper's tracks leading to the balustrade, but none going away from it. Then he was looking down at the track of the broad boots, and they went away from the balustrade, and slanted off across the grounds. Nelson Lee hoped to see the marks that his young assistant would have made in following them, but he could discover no trace. The detective hunted round in a circle, still hoping to find the clue that would put him on the right trail, but all in vain, and ten minutes later he had come back to the solitary line of square-shaped bootmarks. He had soon boots that would make a mark like that, he was sure of it, but for fully a minute he stood examining them before he could decide where.

Miles! That was it. It was the old butler who wore boots of that curious shape.

Not for a moment did Nelson Lee hesitate. All along it had seemed to him certain that someone in the house must be in league with the kidnapper of young Spender, and now he felt that he had found the man. It was Miles who was in league with James Duggan.

In some way Nipper must have discovered the man and attacked him. Nelson Lee decided, and again he wondered anxiously what had happened after that. Then he told himself that the one possible solution of the mystery was that Miles had knocked Tinker out, and carried him away to some hiding-place. The detective felt certain of it, as certain that when he found Nipper he would find young Spender, and, though he was right about that, it was not to be as easy as he imagined.

Feeling to make sure that his automatic pistol was in his pocket, Nelson Lee set to work to follow the trail. Straight across the wet grass he went, having no difficulty whatever in following the footprints made by Miles on the soft, spongy turf. For close upon four hundred yards he went, always expecting to find a mark that would show where Miles had dropped his burden to take a rest, and a puzzled expression came into his eyes when he reached the boundary hedge without finding one. Surely a man of Miles's age must have had to rest at least once?

It was not time for theorising, however, and Nelson Lee clambered over the hedge and turned the light of his lamp upon the wet mud of the road. Again he was able to pick up the trail, for the road was one that was little used, and as surely as a bloodhound he followed the square-toed footprints after he had glanced ahead and saw that they led in the direction of the village, which lay a matter of half a mile away. He was half inclined to make straight for the village without troubling to follow the trail, but prudence told him that that would not be wise. After all, the chances were that it was not the village that Miles had gone to.

At as fast a pace as possible, Nelson Lee went down the road, the track of the boots always before him. Not a soul did he pass, for the hour was close upon nine, and all the local inhabitants who were not in the village inns were at home, for no one has a great ambition to roam round lonely country at night.

The detective reached the first of the houses in the straggling village street, and switched off the light of his lamp, for the last thing that he desired to do was to attract attention. He moved on mechanically, once picking up a footprint of Miles as the light from an open doorway shone out across the road. Then he reached the first of the village inns, and as he mechanically looked through the window, the blind of which had not been properly drawn, he came to a standstill, for inside the bar parlour was Miles himself. He was seated by the table, a glass before him, and the flush on his usually pale face showed that it was by no means the first drink that he had had since entering the inn.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate, but walked straight into the inn and into the parlour. There were three men there besides Miles, including the burly landlord, and they looked round indifferently to see who the visitor was. The landlord touched his forehead at the sight of the neatly-dressed detective, the other two men followed his example, but Miles stiffened in his chair, and the flush caused by drink suddenly left his face.

"I want a word with you," Nelson Lee said quietly, for he had no desire to cause a scene. "If you will come outside, Miles, I will speak to you."

The man addressed did not answer at once. For a moment his nerve had deserted him, but it had returned just as quickly. Possibly he, like James Duggan, was so sure of himself, that he considered that there was nothing to fear even at the hands of the greatest of all living detectives.

"In here will do," the man answered, with a touch of insolence in his voice; "or you can wait till I go home. I take no orders except from my master."

"Quite right, too," the landlord chimed in with, for Miles was one of his best customers. "If the gent's got anything to say that can't be said here, it's no business of yours."

Nelson Lee's face grew grimmer in expression, and his left hand went into his jacket pocket.

"Are you coming outside?" he asked, looking the man in the eyes.

Miles glanced round at the faces of the other men, then answered:

"No."

Something flashed in the lamplight, there was the click of steel, and with a snarling oath Miles was standing on his feet, his wrists handcuffed before him, his face as white as a sheet.

"Your own fault," Nelson Lee remarked quietly. "I gave you the chance to avoid publicity."

"What does it mean?" Miles stammered. "I've not done anything."

"Ay, what does it mean?" the landlord demanded truculently, laying a heavy hand on the detective's arm, and motioning to the two other men to back him up.

Nelson Lee shook himself free without effort, and the menacing attitude of Miles's friends obviously did not trouble him in the least.

"I should advise you not to interfere," he answered coldly. "I am Nelson Lee, and this man is my prisoner. I shall take him to the village police-station now."

The three men looked awestruck as they learnt that the man who had made the arrest was no other than the celebrated detective, and they fell back hastily.

"Sorry, sir," the landlord said, speaking for all; "we wasn't to know. But I'm tellin' you, sir, that there isn't a lock-up in this village; in fact, there ain't one nearer than Malton."

"Then I must keep my man at the Grange to-night," Nelson Lee said indifferently, and it was a pity for him that he was not looking at the man Miles.

Miles had been standing like a beaten man, his lips white and twitching, a great fear in his eyes, but as the detective spoke, that expression vanished completely; his lips stopped quivering, and twisted into a little smile, and there was an expression of almost sneering triumph in his eyes.

"I'm ready when you are," he said coolly. "I don't want these ornaments of yours on longer than is necessary. Good-night, all, and don't you worry about me. Mr. Nelson Lee's made a mistake this time, for all his cleverness."

Followed by the eyes of the villagers, Nelson Lee and Miles went out, the former gripping the latter firmly by the arm, for even a handcuffed man is capable of giving trouble. Miles, however, walked along without attempting resistance, and the last of the village houses had been passed before he broke the silence.

"What are you charging me with?" he asked calmly.

"With kidnapping Nipper, and being concerned in the kidnapping of young Spender," Nelson Lee answered readily.

Miles laughed softly, a curious expression on his face, and not another word left his lips on the way up to the Grange. The man at the lodge opened the gate to let the two men in, and in the darkness he failed to see that the butler was handcuffed. The latter coolly bade him good-night, and proceeded up the drive with Nelson Lee.

The house was reached, the man on guard started in surprise at the handcuffs on the butler's wrists, then pushed the door open to let the two men go in.

As luck would have it, Cyrus L. Spender, a worried expression on his face, was crossing the hall as the detective and his captive stepped into it. He turned wearily towards the latter, then his eyes lit upon the handcuffs, and a gasp of amazement broke from him.

"Miles!" he cried. "What does this mean?"

"Better ask Nelson Lee," the man answered with a sneer.

"It means," the detective replied, "that this man knows all about the kidnapping of your son, but I will explain all to you later. For the moment I want a length of rope to make him fast with, then we will lock him up for the night and see whether he is sensible in the morning."

Like a man in a dream, Cyrus L. Spender hurried away and returned with a lasso that was a relic of his days spent out in the Wild West; and in a manner that would have made even a sailor envious, Nelson Lee trussed his prisoner up until it was impossible for him to move hand or foot.

"What room can I put him in for to-night, Mr. Spender?" he inquired.

"There is an empty one at the back of the building," the American answered mechanically, his face working with emotion. "Follow me."

Nelson Lee picked up the bound and handcuffed man and followed from the hall and down a passage. Cyrus L. Spender threw open a door at the end, revealing a perfectly bare room that possessed no window, and after a glance round Nelson Lee put his burden down.

"He will be all right here," he said. And a few seconds later the door was locked on the prisoner.

It was a quarter of an hour later that Cyrus L. Spender knew all that had happened, and there was a little more hope in his eyes as he stood facing the famous detective in the study.

"You think that Miles will confess?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered with confidence. "James Duggan is the type of man who would never give in once his mind was set on a thing, but this man is different. He is trying to bluff, but that bluff won't carry him beyond the morning, and we shall learn the truth."

"I hope that you are right, Mr. Lee," the American millionaire said huskily. "I tell you that if I do not know the truth in two days' time, that I shall give into the demands of James Duggan—money, house, and all."

Nelson Lee nodded, and uttered aloud a thought that had been in his mind all day.

"I wonder why it is that he wants the house so badly," he said. "He is not the type of man to be actuated by sentiment."

The detective shrugged his shoulders as if to throw a load of worry from them.

"We had better go to bed and rest," he said. "We may need to be fresh to-morrow."

A little later both men were in their rooms, but neither of them had a prospect of sleeping. Cyrus L. Spender lay awake thinking of his missing child, and Nelson Lee lay awake thinking of Nipper. The boy was no relation of his, but he was just as dear to him as if he were actually his son.

CHAPTER IV.

Another Strange Happening—The Appointment With Miles—Nelson Lee Sees Treachery, Prepares for It, and Gets It.

NELSON LEE and Cyrus L. Spender descended the great staircase of Mallaby Grange together, both looking pale and tired after their night's vigil, for neither of them had slept for so much as a minute, Nelson Lee having the greater cause for worry. He was sure that young Spender was alive, for James Duggan would lose all by killing him, but he was not so certain about Nipper. It was he and the lad who stood in the way of Duggan's scheme, and Tinker might have been the first to be removed, leaving his master to the next turn.

In the hall the two men halted. A servant had opened the front door to take a mat outside and shake it, and the sun came pouring in warmly, making the little air atoms of dust sparkle like tiny goms.

The detective and the millionaire looked at one another, then mechanically they turned and walked towards the room in which the man Miles lay a prisoner, bound and handcuffed.

"You still think Miles will give in?" Spender asked as the door of the room in which Miles was confined, was reached.

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered without hesitation. "I have told you already that the man has everything to lose, and I'll swear that there's a yellow streak in him."

"I'm thinking of my boy," the American millionaire muttered.

"And I of mine," Nelson Lee answered quietly. "We've got to get the two of them, Mr. Spender, and we'll do it. If I was a betting man, I'd wager that inside five minutes from now Miles will tell the truth. He's the type of man who is not anxious to get a spell in Bleakmoor prison."

"Pray Heaven that you are right," Cyrus L. Spender answered fervently. "It's like the time when I was staking the only thousand dollars that I'd got, against a faro bank in the Yukon. She won out right enough, I knew that I'd got the streak of luck on me, but somehow it don't take me that way to-day."

Nelson Lee laughed and placed his fingers on the handle of the door, then he opened it and led the way in, turning to speak over his shoulder as he did so.

"You can get the police here in an hour, sir," he said. "It will be a good thing when——"

"Look!" the American gasped. "He's gone!"

Nelson Lee's head went round with a jerk, and his eyes were wide as he looked into the room in which he had left Miles. There were the bare walls, the plain boards of the floor, the dust and cobwebs that had accumulated for years, but there was no Miles. Again someone had vanished as completely as the Indians make a lad vanish up a bamboo pole.

The detective stood there in amazement. He himself had handcuffed Miles and bound him in a manner that he was certain would beat any man, yet Miles had gone. Pulling himself together, he hurried to the door and examined the lock, but there was not the slightest sign of it having been forced. The key had been turned from the outside; there could not be the slightest doubt about that. And it had been locked when Nelson Lee and Spender had reached it.

The famous detective looked round blankly, feeling almost as if he were in a dream, then his eyes fell upon a piece of paper that was pinned to the otherwise blank wall. In a moment he had snatched it down, and this is what he read:

"Dear Mr. Lee,—I am sorry to give you all this trouble, but really you have brought it on yourself by interfering. On the other hand I quite recognise that you are a man to be reckoned with, in fact, I would rather have you with me than against me,

"I am ready to meet you to-night at the spot on the terrace from which your assistant Nipper disappeared with a view to arranging terms. I tell you candidly that I am ready to throw over James Duggan, and my price will be infinitely less than his. Incidentally, it will be unwise for you to bring anyone else with you, as under those circumstances I shall not keep the appointment.

"Suppose that I suggest the hour of ten?"

"Nipper and the other boy are still both quite well, except that they seem to be tired of their confinement.

"With kind regards, and hoping that some day we shall meet under happier conditions,

"I remain,

"Yours sincerely,

"J. MILES."

Nelson Lee read the message through a second time slowly, and something of his old confidence returned to his manner as he handed the sheet of paper to Cyrus L. Spender.

"That ought to interest you," he said simply.

The American millionaire read, and he was breathing hard as he crumpled up the letter in his hand.

"You will go?" he queried. "You ain't afraid of the things that may be waitin' for you? It looks like treachery to me, though I tell you right out that I'll pay this man Miles any sum to get my boy back. You don't know what it means to wonder what is happenin' to the only bein' that you love on this earth, and——"

"That is where you are wrong," Nelson Lee answered coldly: "you seem to forget that Nipper has disappeared too. As for the danger, I know what that is."

"Then we'll have a guard ready to rescue you if Miles and his crowd try tricks."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly, and he laid a hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Look here, Mr. Spender," he said earnestly, "I can't say that I like you except for one thing, for I don't. But you love your lad as I love Nipper, and I want you to trust me to get the two of them safely out of the clutches of those villains. We know that there are two at least, Duggan and the man Miles, and there may be more, but you must leave everything to me.

"Will you promise under no circumstances to interfere?"

Cyrus L. Spender hesitated, and his naturally sallow face was more sallow than ever. For a full minute he was silent, then he shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who is utterly helpless.

"I reckon that I've got to leave it to you," he said at last, "though I feel half like a madman. First young Cyrus disappears, although every door and window is guarded, then we get your boy Nipper spirited away. It's enough to make a man believe in anything."

It was not much later that the millionaire and Nelson Lee had breakfast, at least, they made a pretence of doing so, for both of them simply toyed with their food.

What happened throughout the day there is no need to narrate. Cyrus L. Spender kept almost the whole time to his room, and Nelson Lee roamed the grounds, his hands behind his back, his head bent in thought. At night the men had a silent dinner, and at nine o'clock Nelson Lee retired to his own room and dropped into a chair.

At ten o'clock the famous detective was due to meet Miles, and as he sat there he was thinking of the possibilities that lay before him. Was the offer of Miles genuine, that is what he asked himself, and in the end he decided that it was not. He had to admit that for the time being he was at a loose end, and that the kid-

napper had beaten him, and he was trying to figure out what their next move meant. In this he was not entirely successful, for he came to a conclusion on which he decided to act.

He was sure that Miles and Duggan meant to get him into their power as they had Nipper, so leaving the way clear for them to rob Cyrus L. Spender. He was as sure as made no odds that treachery was awaiting him when he kept his appointment that night, and it was with a little smile on his lips that he set about making his preparations.

From the bag that he had brought to Lullaby Grange Nelson Lee took what appeared to be an ordinary lounge coat, and few people could have detected the fact that one part of the back seam was no more than a pocket, and that in it was a knife, sewn to the lining, with the sharp blade open. And beside the knife was a small steel instrument that the detective would have guaranteed to open any ordinary lock in the world with.

At five to ten Nelson Lee left the house, as cool as if he were going on the most ordinary mission, and ten o'clock exactly saw him standing by the balustrade at the spot from which Nipper had disappeared.

In the ordinary way the detective carried an automatic pistol, and it may seem strange that on this night it was absent from his pocket, but there was the best of reasons for it.

Nelson Lee wanted to be captured, for he was certain that in that way he would discover the secret of the hiding-place of young Spender and Nipper.

The detective stood with his elbows resting on the balustrade, a cigar between his teeth, and apparently as confident that all would go well as anyone could be. Yet he knew that within the next few minutes great things were to happen, and that he might go in danger of his life.

Nelson Lee heard a slight sound on the gravel, but he did not turn until there was another sound close to him, then he turned as coolly as if he were in his own consulting-room interviewing a client. To his surprise only one man faced him—old Miles, and for the moment he wondered whether, after all, his theory was incorrect, and that Miles really did mean to play into his hands.

"I'm late, I am afraid," Miles said with a touch of nervousness.

Nelson Lee looked into the man's eyes, and suddenly he knew that the theory that he had formed was not wrong. For a moment Miles looked at him, then his eyes glanced over his shoulder at something beyond, something nearer to the wall of the house.

Nelson Lee heard the sound of a man moving stealthily; he knew that he was going to be attacked, yet he did not move. He was certain that he was going to be taken a prisoner, but that was precisely what he wanted, for it meant that he would be taken to the hiding-place of young Spender and Nipper.

There was a sound even nearer, and once more Miles glanced over the detective's shoulder, and the latter knew that the time had come for him to act unless he was to arouse suspicion. He swung round on his heels, his hands raised as if to defend himself, and out of the darkness a man he recognised as James Duggan leapt at him. The next moment they were locked together, struggling backwards and forwards on the turf, and Nelson Lee's muscles remained comparatively slack, for it was not a time when he desired to use his unusual strength.

Miles leapt from behind, putting a strangling arm round the detective's throat, and with a gasping cry the latter fell to the ground, Duggan on top of him. Still he fought on, though the men who were striving to make him a prisoner little imagined that he was exerting little more than half his strength. A cord was passed round his chest by Miles, and though he could have shaken himself free of Duggan and the cord he made no attempt to do so.

"The gag!" Duggan panted, and a knotted handkerchief was thrust between the detective's teeth, the ends of it being tied behind his head even as Duggan dragged a cord round his feet and made it fast.

Nelson Lee lay helpless on the ground, and Miles and Duggan stood panting over him, the perspiration shining on their faces, but with grins of triumph on their lips.

"And you're the great detective!" Duggan sneered. "Well, I guess that we're going to show you that other men have got brains, and we're not going to leave you lonely. We're going to put you with young Spender and that precious kid of yours called Nipper, just to show you that it doesn't do to interfere with us."

Nelson Lee could not answer on account of the gag that was between his teeth, and anyway he had no desire to do so. He was sure that inside the next few minutes he would learn the mystery of the disappearances, and that was all that troubled him. He had come prepared for this adventure, and he had not the slightest doubt about succeeding. Inside a few hours, he reckoned, James Duggan and his confederate would be safely in his power.

"Oh, we've got you set," Duggan continued; "and I don't know that we shan't make you pay a reward for the safety of Nipper."

"We shall, Jimmie," Miles chuckled, with nothing of the manner of a servant about him. "Nelson Lee has made a fortune by interfering with matters that don't concern him, and he's got to pay for it."

James Duggan stroked his chin and grinned, but suddenly the grin left his lips as he heard the crunch of feet on gravel. It was one of the guards employed by Cyrus L. Spender being relieved by a mate.

"Blindfold him," he ordered shortly, and a moment later a handkerchief was placed over Nelson Lee's eyes. Not that the detective objected in the least as he thought of the preparations he had made for his release and the saving of Nipper and young Spender. Everything had happened as he had foreseen, and he could not imagine what could go wrong.

Nelson Lee felt himself lifted by the two men, and he tried to guess the direction in which he was being carried. He felt himself being jerked upwards a distance of a few feet, a fact which puzzled him exceedingly, and he knew that he was being carried forward at a very cautious pace. Possibly, he told himself, that was for fear of making a sound that would alarm one of the numerous guards employed by the American millionaire, but he doubted it. What he told himself was that his bearers were proceeding along a dangerous way, and later he was to learn that that was the case.

The detective counted the paces that the men took, making it forty-five before there was a change in the method of progress. His head was then tilted up at a sharp angle, and the progress was slower than ever. After that he was placed on his feet, and he could plainly hear the heavy breathing of the men who had carried him. For a moment he wondered whether it would not have been better for him to have resisted their attack and made them prisoners, but the next moment he decided that that would have been foolish. James Duggan was not the type of man to give in even with prison threatening him, for apart from his desire for gain there was no doubt that he was also acting under the spur of hatred for Cyrus L. Spender. As for Miles, he would probably follow the example of the man who led him.

Again Nelson Lee was lifted and carried, and this time his body slanted at a greater angle than ever, so that he wondered what was happening. He felt certain that he was being carried up steps, but not for a second could he imagine what they were. Then once more his body was level, though only for a short time.

"Got the rope?" he heard James Duggan ask; and a rope was passed under his arms. Next he was being lowered down in a series of jerks for a distance that he had no chance of judging, until his feet came to rest on a solid floor. Through the bandage that he wore he could tell that he was in a place that was lighted, though not by a very powerful light. Probably, he decided, it was a lamp that afforded the illumination.

With no particular gentleness, Nelson Lee was thrown down on to the floor, and he heard the mocking laugh of James Duggan.

"We'll leave you for a bit," the latter said; "it's time that we had a meal. Really, you have caused us quite a lot of inconvenience, and I am afraid that you will have to pay for it."

"He will," Miles snarled. "We could have had the whole job over by now if it hadn't been for him. We could have cleared the stuff and all by now."

"Quiet, you fool!" Duggan ordered. And it seemed that he had a wholesome fear of the detective even now that he was captured. "Come on!"

Nelson Lee's quick ears heard the two men walk away, and also the sound of a door or panel closing; but he did not attempt to act at once. He felt certain that Duggan had sense enough to watch him for a while, and if his eyes had been unhandaged he would have known that that was a fact. Duggan had closed a door, but he had opened it again softly, and for fully ten minutes he stood watching the bound detective with keen eyes. Then he once more closed the door and was gone.

Duggan had closed the door softly enough, or so he had thought, but he failed to realize that he was dealing with an exceptional man in Nelson Lee. The click of the latch had been scarcely audible, but the detective had heard it, and knew what it signified. For five minutes more he waited, then he set to work.

Nelson Lee's arms were bound behind him, as he had foreseen, and the task before him was comparatively easy. The slit in the back of his coat gave way as he moved his shoulders, leaving the blade of the knife bare, and in a moment the bonds about the detective's wrists were being rubbed up and down it. Four times—then his hands were free. With a quick movement Nelson Lee pulled the handkerchief from over his eyes, as quickly he removed the gag from his lips, then his eyes blinked as he looked about the room.

It was a small, narrow compartment, the walls of plain brick, and without a vestige of furniture in it save the small table on which an oil-lamp burned.

At these things, however, Nelson Lee looked for no more than a moment, for on the floor lay Nipper and young Cyrus Spender, their limbs cruelly bound, their mouths gagged. Nipper appeared to be little the worse for his confinement, for he looked at his master as if to assure him that all was well; but that was not the case with the other. The little lad's face was drawn and haggard, his eyes were deep in their sockets, and in them was an expression of terror. The boy had been through pretty well as much as he could stand.

"The brutes!" Nelson Lee muttered as he drew the knife from the back of his coat and freed his legs. "They shall suffer for it!"

With quick steps he went to Nipper, for although the case of the other lad appeared to be the worse, it was natural that his first thought should be of his young assistant. With a jerk he freed the lad's mouth of the gag, and as he did so his back was towards the door.

"Look after Spender, sir," Nipper said huskily, the moment that he was free to speak; but his master took no heed of him. With his knife he slashed through the cord that held his young assistant's arms, another cut severed the cord about the lad's legs, and by the aid of his master he rose swiftly to his feet. As chance would have it his face was towards the door, and in consequence it was he who saw the new danger that threatened.

"Look out—the door!" Nipper gasped; and Nelson Lee swung round on his heels, ready for any emergency—at least, for any emergency that even a detective could expect.

James Duggan stood in the doorway, Joe Miles behind him, and, strange to say, there was an evil grin on the lips of each of them.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate. He had found Nipper and young Spender, and all that he had to do was to overpower these two scoundrels and make good his escape. He was quite aware that both of them might be armed, but that did not trouble him in the least, for he was confident that his own quickness would overcome any disadvantage of that kind.

Like a tiger the detective leapt at Duggan, gripping at his throat and bearing him backwards, but strangely enough the man made no real attempt at resistance. His eyes stared into those of the famous detective with an expression of triumph that appeared for the moment—and for the moment only—to be very much out of place.

Nipper was not standing back either. His limbs were numbed by the cords that had bound them, but with the courage of a young lion he leapt forward to help his master, meaning to attack Miles and keep him off while Nelson Lee dealt with James Duggan.

The lad was quick, but quick though he was Miles had time to thwart him and use a criminal dodge that is quite common in the United States.

From his pocket Miles snatched out a tube, jerked a cork out of each end of it, then blow down one end, sending out a cloud of powder that glistened in the light of the lamp. The powder sprayed out so that it struck Nelson Lee and his assistant full in the face, and in a moment the former knew what had happened. The powder entered his nostrils, and at the first breath that he took of it he reeled backwards, his fingers releasing themselves from Duggan's throat. He gasped, and tried to recover himself, knowing that the powder that he inhaled was the "sleep dust" that a certain type of criminal uses; then he crashed back on to the floor, and lay still, as Duggan, a hand over his nose and mouth, bolted out of the room.

Nipper struggled forward, for the powder had not reached him as surely as it had his master, but he was not to be on his feet for long. As he staggered forward almost blindly Duggan stopped for a moment, his arms crooked, and the lad went down before a vicious swing to the point of the jaw.

Then the door closed upon the two criminals.

Nelson Lee and Nipper lay quite still while the grains of golden "sleep dust" floated in the rays of the lamp. At first they drifted low to the bare floor, whirling about as if uncertain where to finally rest, then slowly they moved upwards towards the bare ceiling of the room that had no window; but the detective and his young assistant remained still. Young Cyrus Spender lay still, too, almost looking as if he were dead.

Five minutes later the door of the room was opened cautiously, and James Duggan, Miles behind him, looked in with a handkerchief at his mouth. His keen eyes stared into the room, looking for the gold specks that had floated upwards; then he laughed, and took the handkerchief away from his mouth.

"It's safe," he said coolly; and Miles stepped into the room beside him.

"What are you going to do, Jimmie?" Miles asked anxiously. "I suppose you'll keep this detective and his brat here with the other?"

James Duggan rubbed at his chin, and his eyes were narrowed in thought for some time before he answered.

"No," he said at last. "Nelson Lee has learnt how complete our plans are, and we are going to let him free so that he can force Spender to pay up."

"Are you sure that he will?" Miles objected.

James Duggan looked down at the unconscious form of Nipper, and the grin on his lips was one of sheer cruelty.

"Nelson Lee loves that boy like his own son," he said, "and I guess that we're going to make good use of it. We're going to give him and Spender twenty-four hours in which to weigh out—and they'll do it."

"I'm for keeping Nelson Lee here," Miles protested; and James Duggan's face flushed with anger.

"You cotton on to the fact that I'm bossing this show," he said savagely. "You take his feet and I'll take his head."

"But suppose the fresh air brings him round?" Miles ventured.

"He's good for an hour," James Duggan snarled back, and gripped Nelson Lee by the arms.

CHAPTER V.

A Strange Awakening—The Final Offer—Twenty-four Hours' Grace—
Nelson Lee Makes a Discovery.

When Nelson Lee opened his eyes his brain felt dazed, but not to such an extent that he did not expect to find himself in the room that he had been carried to after he had allowed himself to be captured. He looked for the bare wall and floor, for the two lads who should have been lying there bound and gagged; but all were absent. Instead, he discovered that he was in a soft bed, and that instead of James Duggan or Miles bending over him the man who looked down so anxiously at him was Cyrus L. Spender.

"Thank Heaven that you've come round!" the American said earnestly. "What happened to you? Where were you attacked?"

The famous detective passed a shaking hand across his forehead, and sat up quickly in bed. In a rather dim sort of way he knew that there was work to be done, and he was going to do it.

"The terrace at the back of the house," he answered, in a husky voice.

Cyrus L. Spender looked his surprise, and it was plain that he did not believe that Nelson Lee had recovered the full use of his faculties.

"Say," he said slowly, "a couple of the villagers found you a mile down the road, and brought you here more than an hour back."

"A mile down the road!" Nelson Lee muttered; and suddenly his brain became clear, as it always did when there was work to be done. "You are sure of that?"

"As sure as that we haven't got my boy back yet," the American replied bitterly, a catch in his voice. "For all I know he is dead, and——"

"He is not!" Nelson Lee broke in sharply. "Listen, while I tell you all that has happened."

In as few words as possible, but leaving out no essential detail, the detective related all that had happened that night. The attack that he had allowed to be made upon him, the finding of Nipper and young Spender, and the "sleep dust" that had prevented him affecting their rescue.

"I certainly was not carried far," he concluded, "and yet——"

"And yet you've failed!" the American millionaire cried passionately. "It would have been better if I had paid the price in the first place."

"It would not," Nelson Lee corrected him. "If you had paid the price of those men, you would never have been free of them. Ten thousand pounds and this house would have been no more than the start. When they have kidnapped him once they can do it again, and I tell you that you will not be safe until they are in prison. You've got your boy at stake, and I've got the lad who has been better to me than most sons, and I tell you again that we have got to see the thing through. I know why I was left on the road to-night instead of being kept a prisoner."

"Say, that's good!" a sneering voice drawled; and the eyes of Cyrus L. Spender and Nelson Lee turned towards the door. It had opened to admit James Duggan, and now that worthy stood with his back against it, an expression of triumph on his face.

Spender snatched down at his hip-pocket and drew out a revolver, but the sight of it did not appear to worry the kidnapper. He grinned more broadly than ever, that was all.

As for Nelson Lee, he sat bolt upright in bed, longing to leap at the man who held Nipper at his mercy—for the moment he did not think of young Spender—but checking himself as he realised that it would be sheer folly to do so.

"You can put that gun of yours away," Duggan sneered.

"Not before you've told me where my boy is!" Cyrus L. Spender cried

furiously. "I tell you right now, that if you don't speak the truth I'll put a bullet through you!"

The smile of James Duggan broadened, and the levelled revolver did not appear to worry him in the least.

"See here, Cyrus," he drawled; "it's a mighty long time back since you and me met in the States, but perhaps you will remember one little incident. There was a time like this, when a man held me up with a gun and threatened that he would shoot me if I didn't tell him something. Well, I didn't, and what I did then holds good now. I'm here to see whether you fall in with my terms. They've gone up a bit; your boy will cost you twenty thousand, and Nelson Lee's will cost him the same amount. I guess that he's got to come in on this deal."

Cyrus L. Spender's face was dead-white, and the revolver shook a little in his hand.

"There's nothing to prevent me giving you in charge," he said huskily, moving sideways and placing a finger on the knob of a bell. "I'm going to do it unless you give my boy up."

James Duggan's face hardened, but still he showed no sign of fear.

"Ring right away," he sneered, "and I'll tell you right out what it means. Your kid, and that of Nelson Lee, will starve. If you bring a charge against me, you'll have to withdraw it if you ever want to see that boy again. My price is twenty thousand and this house, and I'm getting cold feet waitin' for you to settle. You'd best write out a cheque for that amount, and I'll take Mr. Nelson Lee's I.O.U. if he hasn't got his cheque-book with him."

"I'll pay," Cyrus L. Spender said hoarsely, drawing a cheque-book from his pocket.

"I thought that you would," Duggan sneered.

"And I think that he won't!" Nelson Lee broke in with, as he leapt from the bed and snatched the revolver from Spender's hand, and covered James Duggan with it. "I am going to give myself twenty-four hours in which to clear up the mystery, and I tell you that if Mr. Spender doesn't agree to that, I will shoot you down now and risk the consequences!"

Cyrus L. Spender shifted uncertainly on his feet, but still James Duggan betrayed no sign of emotion.

"You can have that time," the latter answered coolly. "You're real cute, Mr. Lee, for you guess that I can see why you allowed yourself to be made a prisoner. Well, you've seen the lads are safe in my power, and it won't hurt them or me to wait for twenty-four hours."

The man pulled out his watch and glanced at it carelessly.

"I ought to be going," he added. "There's an appointment that I must keep, which reminds me that part of my terms is that I shall have five minutes in which to leave here. I guess that I'm not asking much."

James Duggan grinned at Nelson Lee, despite the revolver that the latter held, and at Cyrus L. Spender. He was like a man playing a game of cards, and who knows that he had an unbeatable hand.

"Five minutes now," he repeated, "and in twenty-four hours I will come back for the money. When the cheques are cleared, you will get your precious boys back, so long as there aren't any questions asked!"

James Duggan turned his back with the utmost deliberation, and his fingers were on the handle of the door.

"A mighty good chance to shoot!" he observed, over his shoulder.

But when the door closed behind him, neither Nelson Lee nor Cyrus L. Spender had made an attempt to stop him.

"We're beaten!" Spender groaned, raising his hands to his face. "I ought to have given him the twenty thousand!"

Nelson Lee looked at the man, and his face was very hard.

"I claim the twenty-four hours in which to work," he answered coldly. "You

need have no fear that Duggan or Miles will hurt your boy. If at the end of that time I have not succeeded, I will pay your twenty thousand, my own, and admit myself to be beaten!"

Cyrus L. Spender hesitated, but it was not for long. In business, he had been accustomed to dominate anyone who came into contact with him, but with Nelson Lee it was different. Even as he stood there in pyjamas, pale from all that he had gone through, the detective was a personality of a strength seldom to be found in the world. He was a man of action, of brain, of all the things that go to make a man the master of men.

"Very well," the American millionaire said dully, "twenty-four hours, and then —"

"And then," Nelson Lee interrupted, "I shall have solved this mystery, or I shall pay the forty thousand pounds!"

Nelson Lee sat in the bedroom that had been allotted to him by the master of Mallaby Grange. It was afternoon, but he had not dressed himself completely; in fact, he was wearing a loose dressing-gown over his pyjamas. A cold pipe, very much the worse for wear, jutted out from between his teeth, and all about him on the floor and on his dressing-gown there was the grey ash of tobacco.

Nelson Lee was puzzled—there was no getting away from the fact. So far James Duggan had had the best of him, but inwardly he swore that things had got to alter. At a cost of forty thousand pounds—and bear in mind that the famous detective was a wealthy man—Nipper and young Spender could have been released; but the mere thought of it made him savage. It was not the money—he would have given double that amount to make sure of his young assistant's safety—it was the question of being beaten.

It was afternoon, and Nelson Lee had far from wasted the morning. Every man on guard had sworn that James Duggan had not passed him, and he had no reason to believe that they lied. In other words, Duggan had some way of disappearing in the house itself, some secret way that he had learnt before Cyrus L. Spender had taken possession. But what was it?

Nelson Lee had been all over the house, examining floors, turning an eager eye on windows, and tapping walls. In the first two cases he had discovered nothing; in the last instance he had found that the walls were the same all the way through—a solid two and a half bricks thick.

Yet James Duggan was able to enter and leave the house, despite the men who were on guard at every door and window.

Nelson Lee shifted uneasily in his chair, a frown on his face, for he was not too pleased at being thwarted. In the course of his career there had been many times when he was puzzled, though in the end he had won through; but somehow this case was different.

"Hanged if I can make it out!" he muttered. "It certainly wasn't far that they carried me after they made me a prisoner, yet I am found a mile down the main road, more than a mile from any house save this one."

Nelson Lee hit savagely at the stem of his pipe; then rose to his feet and paced up and down the bedroom. He would have been the first to admit that there was no one in the world who could not be beaten—he had had his failures, though they were few—but it was the memory of James Duggan that made his blood boil. He remembered the sneering grin, the absolute confidence of the man who had so far outwitted him, and for success he would have paid considerably more than the forty thousand pounds that he stood to lose.

Up and down the room the detective paced, thinking, thinking, thinking, but always without result. The concrete facts were that Nipper and young Spender were still missing, that they were in the little narrow room with bare walls in which he himself had been a prisoner, and that was all. Every brick and board in the room seemed to start out and form a picture before his brain; he remembered

the ancient appearance of the mortar between them and the other signs of age. Then suddenly his eyes fell on the suit of grey clothes that he had been wearing when he was captured.

Nelson Lee bent over the coat as it hung at the end of the bed, and a new light came into his eyes as he examined it.

"Soot!" he muttered, looking closely at one of the arms. "I believe that I've got the solution, after all!"

As speedily as possible Nelson Lee dressed himself and left the room, making for the study. He found Cyrus L. Spender there right enough, and the millionaire looked up eagerly as he entered.

"You have discovered something?" the American asked.

But the cool face of the detective told him nothing.

"I have discovered that it is cold," Nelson Lee replied. "I shall be obliged if you will have a fire lit in every room of the house."

"What?" Cyrus L. Spender gasped, and involuntarily looked towards the window, through which a hot sun was streaming. "Say," he added slowly, "I guess that you must have got fever pretty bad!"

Nelson Lee smiled without mirth, and his pale face was more than usually grim and determined.

"Please do as I ask," he said quietly. "In the meantime I will go for a stroll in the grounds."

Cyrus L. Spender still stared at the detective as if he did not believe him to be quite sane.

"I guess that I'll do it if you say so," he answered haltingly, "but I reckon that you liek me hollow as to the reason for it!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders, and there was a sudden gleam in his grey eyes.

"I reckoned that I should," he said. "But I will tell you one thing. When those fires are alight, I expect to find your boy and Nipper!"

CHAPTER VI.

The Smokeless Chimney—The Finding of the Boys—Nipper Has Bad Luck—The Last Move.

NELSON LEE strolled out into the grounds, and there was a more hopeful expression on his face than there had been there since he had undertaken this strange case. At a distance of fifty yards, or so, he stood looking at the Grange, with its walls that had stood for hundreds of years defying the weather. The detective's eyes passed over the walls that in places were hidden by thick ivy, over the diamond-paned windows, and so up to the roof with its numerous chimney-stacks. A few quite modern chimney-pots could be seen, evidently placed there by a comparatively recent owner of the place, but for the most part the chimneys were of a very old variety, large and round and ugly.

Nelson Lee lit a cigar and smiled.

"It's a marvellous thing that I didn't think of it before," he mused. "Ah, well, everyone has to make a fool of himself at some time or another, and I suppose that this was my turn!"

As Nelson Lee spoke a wisp of smoke went up from one of the chimneys, showing that Cyrus L. Spender was carrying out his orders. Another wisp showed, and another, and another, until anyone in sight of the Grange must have wondered at the fires there on so hot a day. It was enough to make them rush away to fetch the village fire-brigade.

For fully twenty minutes the detective waited, allowing that time for all the fires to be lighted. Then he strolled back into the house, meeting the American millionaire in the hall.

"I guess the fires are all goin' like a furnace!" the latter said.

"Except that one over there," Nelson Lee objected, nodding to the big grate in the hall.

"We couldn't light that," Spender replied. "It was blocked up years ago, and I was warned about it."

"By whom?" Nelson Lee asked calmly, though there was a glint of excitement in his eyes.

"Miles," Cyrus L. Spender explained. "I reckon that it was one of the first things that he told me."

"It would be," Nelson Lee murmured drily.

Then the truth dawned upon the American.

"You mean," he gasped, "that the chimney's a fake, that it's the way into some secret room where they've got my lad?"

"Just that," Nelson Lee assured him, as he moved towards the grate, thrust his head forward, and peered up the great space of chimney that was quite big enough to allow for the passage of the body of a man. Then he lifted up a hand, and he smiled as his fingers touched an iron rung. He reached higher and found another one, and he was satisfied.

"I am glad that you lit the one fire before Miles warned you," the detective said.

And Spender stared at him in surprise.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"Soot in the chimney!" Nelson Lee answered laconically. "If it had not have been for that I might never have guessed the secret of the hiding-place."

Cyrus L. Spender moved forward, and his face was white.

"You are going up through there now?" he asked hoarsely, as he drew a revolver from his pocket. "You are going with me to save my lad?"

"We're going to save him all right," the detective agreed, "but we are not going to the hiding-place through this chimney. You forget that there is another one—the one on the roof—and I shall feel more certain going that way. I am sure that in that way we shall get directly into the hiding-place, while this way may be far more complicated."

"As you like," the American agreed grimly, spinning round the cylinder of his revolver. "Are you going to take any of my men with us?"

"Better take a couple," Nelson Lee answered. "Though I fancy that we could manage the job by ourselves."

The fingers of Nelson Lee had missed the foot of Miles by no more than a few inches, and the man was shivering as he clung to the iron steps in the chimney and realised that the hiding-place in which young Spender and Nipper were being kept was no longer a secret. He knew that in a very short time the secret room would be raided, that the fortune that he had dreamed of would vanish into thin air, and that he—well, he thought of a great prison out on bleak moors, and shuddered again.

Yet what could he do? For the moment it was only liberty that counted with him, but he knew how hard it would be to win. He dared not try to slip across the grounds in broad daylight, for at least one of Cyrus L. Spender's guards would be bound to see him.

Miles still clung there and shivered. He would not have hesitated in murdering either of the two lads who had been kidnapped, but his own liberty was a very different matter. He wondered whether he dared creep down into the hall as soon as it was empty and hide himself about the house until he got a chance of escape, but a minute's reflection told him that that would be of no use. There was always the man on guard at the door waiting to stop him—the man at the door, and the other men who kept close watch over the windows.

Miles listened eagerly, but no further sound came to him, and with limbs that felt half-numbed he made his way up the broad, disused chimney, crept up the slant that it took to the right, and so into the room in which James Duggan waited. It was a narrow room, like the one in which the two captive lads lay, but yet there was a very great difference.

The room in which the boys were—a room which was really a part of this other one, comparatively recently partitioned off by a wooden wall and a door—would have made the eyes of any man from Scotland Yard sparkle.

The room was just as bare as the part used as a prison, so far as furniture was concerned, but it was very far from bare in other respects. The floor was littered with packing-cases, some fixed down, some open, and the ones that were open allowed one to see great pieces of silver looted from many a mansion in the country. And about them, loose on the floor, was more silver and plate, enough to have stocked one of the biggest shops in London.

There it lay, the proceeds of Heaven alone knows how many burglaries, the stuff that would have been worth a fortune had it not have been for the intervention of Cyrus L. Spender. He had dropped on to James Duggan at a moment when it was impossible for the latter to sell any of the stolen property to pay his debts, and so it had been necessary to form the later plan—and fail.

Miles stood wiping a few specks of soot from his clothes, and Duggan looked up from one of the smaller boxes. These were devoted to jewellery, and even the one box over which he had been bending held a small fortune.

"What the blazes is the matter with you, man?" he demanded.

"We're done!" Miles answered hoarsely. "Nelson Lee has found out the secret of the room, and any moment he may be here."

James Duggan rose to his feet, and his face was full of a vindictiveness, that suggested a bad time for anyone who came in his way just then.

"You are sure of this?" he demanded. "What do you know?"

Miles passed his tongue over his dry lips, and he looked from the opening in the wall to the one in the ceiling. From the latter a knotted rope hung down.

"I know that they will come by one way or the other," Miles answered shakily; "I was in the chimney-shaft that leads to the hall when I heard them speak of it. Nelson Lee has had every fire in the house lit, and you know what that means—he can see which is the one blank chimney—the one without a fire."

James Duggan started, his eyes darting from the hole in the ceiling to the one in the wall.

"Only one chimney will be blank," he muttered; "for the one from the hall has no outlet on to the roof."

"What good does that do us?" Miles asked despairingly.

"It means that Nelson Lee and his friends will come that way!" James Duggan answered, nodding towards the hole in the ceiling.

"And we shall shoot them down as they come?" Miles asked breathlessly.

"I—I can't do that!"

"Who asked you to?" James Duggan snarled, and there was a grim, deep line between his eyes. "I'm not going to give this stuff up, even for Nelson Lee."

He dropped to his knees, and from one of the boxes he drew a string of pearls that the veriest tyro could have told you was worth a small fortune. Then he swung round sharply upon Miles, and pointed to the hole in the bare brick wall.

"You know what is going to happen?" he said quickly. "At any moment Nelson Lee and the others may be here. They'll find the boys, and we can't stop them doing that. They'll arrest me——"

"And me!" Miles stuttered in accents of fear.

"That's just what they won't do!" James Duggan said savagely. "You've got to be free for my benefit. They know that I'm here, for otherwise I could not have seen them this morning and told them what my terms are, but for all that, they know you may have gone away. Therefore I am the man who is to be captured."

"And me?" Miles said again.

James Duggan walked to the hole in the bare brick wall; his finger touched one of the lines of cement between the bricks, and without a sound a section of brick slid forward and filled the gap so exactly that it was practically impossible to say that there had ever been an opening there.

"You've got to wait in there until the way is clear for you to escape," he explained. "You will take the lad Nipper with you, and if the worst comes to the worst we must try and force the hands of Nelson Lee through him. I shall be arrested and taken to Morden Prison, the nearest gaol to here."

Duggan paused, and glanced at the rope that led up to the false chimney.

"With you at large they won't leave the stuff here"—he nodded towards the packing-cases—"it will be taken to the station, too, and probably be placed in one of the cells. Now, can you guess what I want you to do?"

Miles nodded, and a more hopeful expression came into his face.

"I go to the gaol after dark," he said in a low voice: "I use the keys that we managed to get a year ago just on the chance that one day we might need them, and I set you free."

"And get the loot," Duggan agreed with a chuckle. "Say, I fancy that Mr. Nelson Lee will get a surprise, for all his cleverness." A frown formed between his eyes. "It means that we sha'n't get this house or the reward, but we'll have to be contented. You've got the keys all right, and the car that we've kept for emergencies is in the empty cow-shed off the main road to London?"

"Yea," Miles answered, glancing nervously towards the false chimney. "I'd better clear, now? They may come at any moment."

Duggan nodded, pushed open the door, and entered the further room. The two lads still lay there, but their eyes had been blindfolded, for the man had seen the possibility of this change in his plans. As noiselessly as a cat he approached Nipper and picked him up, so softly that young Spender could not possibly have heard what was happening. Then he was out of the room again, and the door had been closed behind him.

Duggan thrust Nipper through the opening in the wall, then for a few moments he faced Miles and stood looking sternly into his eyes.

"Say," he drawled; "I just want to impress one thing upon you, Miles—I'm not the sort of man to be fooled with. You've got to carry out the plan that we arranged a year ago, and not trouble only about the safety of your own hide. I'm goin' to let Nelson Lee and the police take me, and it wouldn't be difficult for you to sneak away and leave me in the lurch, but I reckon that you won't do it?"

Duggan reached out a hand and laid it on the man's shoulder, and the latter wilted as if the touch of the fingers burned him.

"I'm good for five years at least if you fail me," he added, "but you won't—and I'll tell you why. If I got fifty years I shouldn't forget you, Joe Miles, and as sure as I'm going to the gaol at Morden you'd go to a gaol, too, to end up in Dartmoor Prison. I've always kept the records of those little affairs of yours in the States, Joe, and you bet that I use them if you forget that you're my partner."

Miles licked his dry lips again and tried to force a grin to them, but he was not very successful in the effort.

"You—you know that I shouldn't do that!" he stammered. "I—I shall be with you to-night."

James Duggan smiled evilly, drew a cigar from his pocket, and lit it.

"Somehow I think that you will be," he drawled. "Now clear."

Miles cleared hurriedly, scrambling through the opening in the wall, and a second later Duggan had closed it behind him. With keen eyes he examined the bricks to make sure that no opening showed at all, then he drew an automatic pistol from his pocket and placed it on one of the packing-cases.

"I reckon that it won't do to appear to give in too quickly," he muttered. "Now to make sure that there are no tracks on the boards."

From a corner the man took a soft broom, and with it he swept the dust on the boards so that there was no possibility of a footprint being left that could lead Nelson Lee to the secret place in the wall. When he had finished he replaced the broom—and he was none too soon. He heard a soft footfall on the roof above him, and instantly moved to one of the packing-cases farthest from the one on which he had placed his pistol. He knelt by the case as if absorbed with the contents, and they were valuable enough to be interesting to any criminal, but his ears were strained all the time to warn him of the approach of Nelson Lee and his men. If there had been a chance of the famous detective coming alone to investigate, it would probably have been his last day on earth, for Duggan would not have hesitated to shoot him down in cold blood, but he knew that that would not be the case. There would be a band of men against him from whom it would be impossible to escape, and his one chance of liberty lay in the plan that he and Miles had formed more than a year ago.

There was the sound of feet softly touching the floor-boards, and James Duggan leapt up and made a dart towards where he had placed his pistol.

"Hands up!" the stern voice of Nelson Lee ordered, and James Duggan came to a standstill within a yard of the blue-black barrel of an automatic held in the detective's hand. As he did so, Cyrus L. Spender dropped into the room, and close behind him followed a couple of the big men who had been on guard.

"You've got me!" Duggan snarled, and he was actor enough to look longingly towards the pistol that he had been unable to reach.

"It looks like it," Nelson Lee agreed coolly, and signalled to one of the big men. "I should advise you not to offer any resistance."

Duggan held his hands out sullenly, and the handcuffs clicked on to them. For a moment he shivered, for it was the first time that he had come into contact with that kind of steel; then he pulled himself together, remembering that his captivity was not to last for long.

"My boy?" Spender asked hoarsely, looking about the room. "Where is he?"

"I should have thought you might have guessed that he was the other side of that door," Duggan drawled.

And Spender moved hastily towards it. Before he could reach it, however, Nelson Lee barred his way.

"There is the man Miles to think of," he said meaningly. "I will go first—I'm paid to take risks."

Without argument Nelson Lee flung the door of the other room open, holding his pistol before him, a grim expression on his lips. But that expression quickly changed to one of horror.

"Nipper!" he panted, as Cyrus L. Spender thrust by him and flung himself on to his knees beside his son. "Where is Nipper?"

Cyrus L. Spender was almost sobbing with joy as he cut away his lad's bonds with the knife that he had drawn from his pocket, but Nelson Lee took no heed of him as he looked about the room with haggard eyes. At first it had been young Spender he had been anxious to rescue, but in the end it had been Nipper who really concerned him, for he loved the lad as well as if he were his own son.

Nelson Lee swung round upon Duggan, who had been brought into the room by his guards.

"Where is my boy?" he demanded.

James Duggan grinned, and his amusement was not pleasant to look at.

"I guess that he's where Miles is," he answered coolly. "Say, I suppose that, you bein' a detective, you've noticed that he's not here?"

Nelson Lee could have struck the man in his sneering face, but somehow he managed to control himself.

"It will be hard for you if any harm has come to him," he said sternly. "You had best tell me where he is."

James Duggan raised his eyebrows in a feigned expression of surprise.

"Say," he said, "I know that you aren't a regular policeman, but don't you reckon that you ought to warn me that anything I say may be taken down and used in evidence against me?"

Once more Nelson Lee was tempted to strike the man, and once more he kept himself under control, though Heaven alone knew how much it cost him to do so.

"You had better take your son away," he said dully to Cyrus L. Spender. "He looks as if he will need nursing for a bit, so you had best send for a doctor."

The American, holding his son close to him, turned to the detective, and for the first time he realized that in saving the lad the latter had lost his own young friend.

"I am sorry, Mr. Lee," he said simply. "I was goin' to thank you for getting my boy back, but I guess that you don't want thanks just now. All I can say is that you can command me and my money in any way."

Nelson Lee bowed in acknowledgment, but his eyes were very gloomy as he watched Cyrus L. Spender carry his son away.

James Duggan grinned as he stood between his two guards, for now he was sure that no inside of a prison would see him for long. Even if Miles failed to rescue him, he still had a threat to hold over Nelson Lee's head—the safety of Nipper. And somehow he knew—as a matter of fact, he was not wrong—that the detective would stop at nothing, even at setting him free with his own hands to get the lad safely back.

"Take that man away," Nelson Lee ordered. "'Phone through to the police, and I will join you presently."

With some little difficulty James Duggan was hauled up through the false chimney, and Nelson Lee lost no time in getting to work. Miles and Nipper had disappeared from this room without a door, but he was not going to be too certain that they had actually left the building until he had made a thorough search.

Nelson Lee moved slowly about the room in which he had been confined with Nipper and young Spender, but it did not take him long to be absolutely sure that no one could be hidden there. Wall, ceiling, floor—all were examined, with the result that a blank was drawn, and the detective transferred his attention to the next room. When he had entered the room for the first time one glance had been sufficient to show him why James Duggan had been so anxious to regain possession of the Grange; but that did not trouble him now—the contents of the packing-cases could wait until later. All that mattered was the finding of Nipper.

With all the skill that it had taken him years to acquire the detective set about his search of the room, but even he was to be thwarted by the hidden hole in the wall. It was many years ago that the secret passage had been constructed, but there could be no question about the skill with which the work had been carried out. Nelson Lee positively touched the movable brickwork with his fingers, but he passed on without realizing that he had stood in front of the passage that would lead him to Nipper and Joe Miles.

For fully an hour Nelson Lee examined the room until he was certain that it was not possible that his young assistant could be hidden there, and then, his face white and haggard, he turned half-heartedly to the packing-cases. As he quickly examined the contents of one after another he realized that he had scored a triumph that would make his name more famous than ever throughout the world. He handled the necklace of pearls, and knew that it was the one that had been stolen in such sensational fashion at a great reception three years back. He held in his hands great diamonds that correspondingly great rewards had been offered for. All about him lay the fortune of thieves, but it meant nothing to him. It was Nipper he wanted to find.

"Miles must have got him away," he muttered, in a tone of despair that was very unusual with him. "They're going to hold him over my head as a threat, and, Heaven knows, it will be one that will be successful."

As wearily as an old man Nelson Leo hoisted himself up through the false chimney, and it was hard to recognise him as he went slowly through the grounds, and so back into the hall of the great house.

It was an hour later that the inspector, who had come over from Morden, stood beaming triumphantly at the private detective.

"A great capture, sir!" the man said. "We ought to get a good bit of credit for it, and perhaps it'll mean the transfer to a bigger place that I've been hoping for some time."

"Perhaps it will," Nelson Leo answered listlessly. "You had better see about the removal of the plunder. With Miles still at large it will hardly be wise to leave it here."

The inspector nodded, and tugged at his short beard.

"How about your boy, sir?" he ventured.

Nelson Leo raised his head slowly, showing his grey face.

"I shall find him," he said between his teeth; "and if so much as a hair of his head has been injured Heaven help Duggan and Miles!"

CHAPTER VII.

Nipper's Escape—The Chase in the Darkness—Duggan Waits for Release.

JOE MILES stood on the steps that led up from the fake fireplace in the great hall. He had been there for hours, always listening, scarcely daring to move, though his limbs ached with fatigue. Day had given place to night, but still he hung on, listening, always listening to discover all that he could with regard to what was taking place in the Grange. The liberty of James Duggan was at stake, but it was not that which troubled the man most. It was the fortune in stolen property that he was thinking about, and inwardly he cursed Duggan for not having realised upon it sooner. The board had grown and grown. Duggan always wanting to make it larger; then had come the move that had forced them out of the house in which it was so securely hidden.

And Joe Miles also inwardly cursed Nelson Leo as he hung there with aching limbs, for he told himself that if it had not been for the interference of the famous detective that all would have been well, that Cyrus L. Spender would have agreed to James Duggan's terms for the sake of his son.

Above Miles hung Nipper, bound hand and foot, and gagged, his wrists fastened to one of the iron rungs, his ankles to another. He hung there like one already dead, but if the truth were known he was quite as alert as Joe Miles. He had been in awkward places before, and it was not in his nature to give in. His senses were alive all the time to the sounds that were going on in the house, and he knew as well as did the man what was taking place.

Some time back there had been the sound of a heavy cart drawing up before the main entrance, the noise of cases being bumped about, and the gruff voice of the inspector from Morden. Occasionally, too, he had heard his master's voice, and that had leant him courage.

"That's the last of the loot," he had heard the inspector say. "It will be all right at the police-station to-night, and to-morrow we shall receive our instructions from the Yard."

"It seems a risk to me unless you keep a special guard over it," Nelson Leo had answered, in a voice that had lost all its life.

"Bunkum!" the inspector snapped. "Only my own men and Mr. Spender will know that it is there, and it will be as safe in one of the cells as if it were

in the Bank of England. Besides, there are always some of my men at the station, and the one on duty at the door would quickly give the alarm."

"Well, you know best," Nelson Lee had replied doubtfully.

"And what do you intend to do over that lad of yours, sir?" the conversation went on. "It doesn't seem to me likely that he and Miles are hidden anywhere in the neighbourhood. As likely as not they got away in a car."

"I have thought of that, inspector. I have already sent to my agents in town, and if I hear nothing from them I shall go there to-night. I have little doubt that I shall hear from Miles; he will threaten me as Duggan did Mr. Spender."

That was a considerable time back, and since then there had been only the ordinary noises of the house.

Nipper felt that he must faint through the strain put upon his limbs, especially as he was weak from hunger, for he had had mighty little food given to him since his capture; but he fought against the feeling, and it was not so very much later that he had reason to be glad that he had done so.

Joe Miles came cautiously upwards until his body was against that of his captive, and the latter heard him chuckle softly.

"The fools!" the man muttered. "Fancy thinking that we should leave that fortune in the hands of the police! They'll get a surprise in the morning when they find the stuff and Duggan gone!"

Miles climbed higher, his foot striking against Nipper's face; then the latter was alone. He heard Miles's feet scraping on the iron rungs, the sound growing fainter and fainter as the man went further upwards. Then all was silence, and Nipper was ready to try and carry out the plan that had formed in his fertile brain—a plan that had been there even before he had learnt that Miles had a scheme of rescuing James Duggan and laying hands upon the treasure that lay in one of the cells of the police-station at Borden, a matter of twenty miles away.

Nipper braced his feet as well as he could against the rung to which they were bound, then his hands moved slowly and painfully above his head as he endeavoured to rub the cord that bound them up and down the rung to which it was fastened.

The steel rung was thin and worn to a jagged edge, and almost at the first movement Nipper gashed his right wrist; but that did not deter him. He had got to win free, and that was all that counted. Moreover, he was fairly certain that his master had not left the Grange, and he wanted to see him before he had the chance of doing so.

Slowly the lad's wrists went backwards and forwards, and, though it was impossible for him to tell what impression the steel rung was making on the cords, he felt that he must win. There was so much at stake.

To Nipper it seemed that he was sawing away for hours before he got a grain of hope, and the sweat was dripping off him with his exertions.

At last!

The lad distinctly felt one of the cords part, and in a moment he was able to move his hands more freely. Practically he worked the second cord up against the rung, and it parted so suddenly that it was by little less than a miracle that he saved himself from pitching head-downwards, to be left hanging by his feet. If that had happened, he would have had little further chance of making his escape good.

Nipper snatched the gag from between his teeth and the bandage from his eyes, but he made no attempt to free his ankles. Instead, he let out a yell for help that would not have disgraced a Red Indian, repeating it again and again after pauses in which to draw his breath freely.

There was the sound of men hurrying over the polished floor of the hall; then the voice of Nelson Lee rose above it.

"Where are you?" the detective shouted eagerly.

"Up the chimney, sir!" Nipper answered excitedly. "My feet are bound to a rung!"

Nipper clung to his perilous position, but he did not have to do so for much longer. He heard an exclamation of surprise escape his master, then he felt a strong hand feel for his feet, and once more he stood the risk of falling as the cord was cut free. He steadied himself, however, but he could have cried out with the pain of his cramped limbs as he made his way down into the hall, where Nelson Lee and Spender awaited him.

"Thank Heaven, you are safe!" the detective said quickly. "If I can only run Miles down, I shall be satisfied."

Suddenly he moved towards the chimney as a thought struck him, but his assistant called him back.

"Too late, sir!" he said. "Miles was in there until to-night, listening to all that he could; but he slipped away just before I got my hands free and was able to shout to you."

Nelson Lee swung round upon the boy, and Cyrus L. Spender also watched him curiously.

"Listening?" the former said sharply. "What did you and he hear?"

"We heard that Duggan had been locked up at Morden," Nipper answered promptly, "and that a lot of loot that had been hidden here had been taken to the police-station and put into a cell until the morning."

An exclamation of dismay broke from Nelson Lee, and the lines of his jaw grew hard.

"I never thought of that," he muttered. "That may account for the way in which Duggan was captured, and his cool manner afterwards."

"You don't mean that there is a chance of Duggan getting away?" the American millionaire cried.

For he feared that quite as much as the detective could have done, and he knew that he would feel a great deal safer with his old enemy in prison.

"I do," Nelson Lee answered, between his teeth. "and with the stolen stuff, too! Don't you see that there was nothing to prevent Duggan hiding away in the same manner as Miles? He wanted to be captured, and that is the long and short of it."

Cyrus L. Spender gasped, and still looked more than a little doubtful.

"But the prison——" he started to protest.

"Prisons have been broken into and out of before now," Nelson Lee interrupted. "But this is no time for talk. I must get on to the telephone at once and warn the police, then I shall take my car and run into Morden. I don't know that I care to let the police handle two such criminals alone if I can prevent it."

Nelson Lee stepped quickly into the room where the telephone hung, Nipper and Cyrus L. Spender following him. The lad looked tired and ill, and, if the truth were known, he felt as if he would like to go to bed for a week. He reckoned that he would be at rest soon, for a 'phone message to the police would quickly settle all Duggan's chances of escape. The criminals had laid their plans well, but they were to fail. That was what Nipper thought, and he was to find out soon that he was only too right about the plans, for they had been laid even better than he imagined.

Nelson Lee picked up the receiver of the telephone.

"Hullo!" he said sharply. "Hullo!"

The detective frowned, and tapped impatiently on the wall with his free hand.

"Hang them!" he snapped. "Why can't these operators keep awake instead of wasting time? Hullo—hullo—hullo!"

For fully a couple of minutes the detective shouted into the instrument, and it was Nipper who furnished him with a clue to the reason why he could not get through to the exchange.

"Do you think that they can have cut the wires, sir?" Nipper asked.

"That's about it," Nelson Lee said, in disgust. "What a fool I was not to have thought of it!"

He turned to Cyrus L. Spender.

"Where are the wires fixed to the house?" he inquired quickly.

"Just at the top of the fire staircase," the millionaire replied promptly, an expression of disgust on his face. "I guess that the lad's right, and that there won't be any using that 'phone to-night. There's not another one nearer, too, than five miles, and it's a bad road to go over in the dark. It seems to me that you're going to have your hunt for those two scoundrels all over again."

It seemed very much the same to Nelson Lee, too, though he did not say so.

"It depends how much start Miles has got of us," he said. "Of course, he must have had a car in waiting somewhere, for otherwise it would be impossible to move the loot. It must be a big, powerful car, too."

"I don't suppose it could lick ours, sir," Nipper put in.

And before he could say more, Nelson Lee was out of the house and going round to the stables at a run. After him went his assistant and Cyrus L. Spender, but the detective had switched the light on before they had reached the entrance to the stable that had been turned into a garage.

A very fine heavy-power car stood there, its polished body showing the care that was bestowed upon it. As a matter of fact, a machine kept in better condition could not have been found in the length and breadth of the country, for there were times when speed meant a great deal to Nelson Lee and Nipper—a speed that meant the doing away with special trains and similar delays.

"Get the headlights on, my lad," he ordered. "We shall want them along these dark roads, and we mustn't risk a smash."

Nipper set to work at once, while his master lifted up the bonnet of the car to make sure that all was in order with the powerful engine. At first glance it appeared to be in perfect condition, but a second glance brought an exclamation of anger from him. For it seemed to him that Duggan and Miles had laid their plans perfectly, and that it would be impossible to catch them. He had no doubt whatever that the scheme for getting Duggan and the loot out of the police-station at Morden had been just as carefully conceived.

"Hang the brutes!" the detective cried. "Look at that!"

Nipper and Cyrus L. Spender looked, and they soon saw what was wrong. There was not a wire that had not been neatly severed, and, which was even worse, down among the finer parts of the engine a number of nuts had been dropped. It only meant getting one of those into the engine when it was working to wreck it.

"You can take my car," the American suggested quickly. "It's in the next coach-house."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly and without a vestige of humour as he followed the millionaire to where that worthy's three cars were kept. As he had fully expected, each one of them had been treated in the same manner. For a moment the detective felt that he was beaten, then a fresh hope came to him.

"Have you got a horse?" he asked.

"Sure, just one," the millionaire answered. "I keep it for the sake of exercise. But you don't mean to say that you're going to ride the twenty miles to Morden in the dark?"

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered abruptly. "I must get to the police-station at all costs."

"But you can't leave me behind, sir!" Nipper protested; for, although he was absolutely dead-fagged, he hated the idea of being left out of any work of his master's.

"You will follow with the car as soon as the engine is clear," Nelson Lee answered rapidly; then spoke to Cyrus L. Spender.

"Show me where the horse is," he said.

And the millionaire hurried him away to another part of the rambling stables. Nipper did not follow, however, for he was telling himself that he was going to put his master's car to rights in record time.

It did not take Nelson Lee long to saddle and bridle the powerful bay that stood in the stable. The animal fidgetted a little at being disturbed at such an unusual hour, but the detective quickly smoothed him down and led him out into the open. Then he was in the saddle, and, without a word, he touched the horse's sides with his heels, and the animal bounded away into the darkness at a gallop.

"You're going the wrong way!" Cyrus L. Spender shouted excitedly after the detective. "The drive's to the left!"

Nelson Lee had made no mistake, however. He was not waiting to find drives: he felt sure that the horse he bestrode could jump, and so he had made up his mind to travel across country. Fortunately for him the moon had come out, otherwise he would have stood every chance of breaking his neck. Anyhow, it was not a ride that most men would have cared to have undertaken.

The horseman reached the high hedge that bounded Spender's estate, and he settled himself more firmly in the saddle. If the horse really was a good jumper, it would clear this all right, but if not—well, Nelson Lee did not concern himself with the smash that would inevitably follow. His was a profession in which one expected to take more than ordinary risks.

The horse rose beautifully, landed without a fault on the other side, then Nelson Lee rode forward with added confidence. Close upon twenty miles of ground had to be covered, but he had no fear about doing it.

Morden is not a big place, and its police-station is in proportion to it, being a fair-sized old-fashioned building right on the outskirts of the town, and which might have been taken for a private residence had it not been for the blue lamp before the front door, and the bars that covered some of the windows at the back. As a matter of fact, the only other thing that had been done to convert the place into a police-station was to turn one of the large rooms at the back into three cells, a task which had been carried out by the local builder, much to his own satisfaction, and apparently to that of the authorities, for they had never been altered since the day when they were first constructed. Other towns might have their ideas, new-fangled, and all that, notions of what cells should be, but so had Morden, and she lived up to them.

In one of the cells, in fact the only one occupied, James Duggan sat on the wooden bench in an attitude of listening. Everything was so still in the station that he could plainly hear the ticking of the old-fashioned clock in the main office, but so far as the sound of a human being were concerned, there were none, save for an occasional gentle snore that suggested that the man on duty, expecting matters to be as tame as they usually were in Morden, and in the police-station in particular, was asleep.

James Duggan's eyes glistened as he listened, for in the next cell had been packed the stolen property, and in a short time——

At last there was the sound that the criminal had been waiting for, and it was plain that it came from the back of the building, along which ran a private road just large enough to allow of the passage of one vehicle. The sound was one that many men could not have placed, but a man used to motors could have done so. A large car, its great engines working almost silently, had been brought to a standstill in the road.

"Let's hope that nothing's been altered," James Duggan muttered, as he rose to his feet, and there was a slightly anxious expression on his face. "It strikes me that they haven't moved so much as a cobweb since I was shown round as an honoured guest."

Five minutes passed, ten minutes, and the face of the man was beginning to get

more anxious until, without the click of a lock, the door of his cell slowly opened, and Jim Miles slipped in, closing the door behind him.

"I expected you earlier," Duggan whispered.

"Couldn't be done," the other man muttered. "I had to queer the cars before I came away, for there's no knowing what a man like Nelson Lee will discover at any moment, and I didn't get the chance for a long time."

Miles drew a pad of linen and a small bottle from his pocket, and a rather sickly smell filled the cell as the contents of the bottle were emptied on to the pad.

"Now for it!" Duggan whispered. "I believe that the man's asleep; if so, we can get him with this. But if he isn't, use the sandbag for all you're worth, for we mustn't risk anyone being roused."

Duggan crept out into the passage, which was lit by a jet of light, and made his way along it with a certainty that showed him to be sure of his ground. He rounded the corner, Miles close behind him, an ugly-looking sandbag swinging in his hand. There was much at stake for the criminals, and it was going to be hard for anyone who attempted to interfere with them.

The door of a room stood open, and now the heavy breathing of a sleeper could be plainly heard. Then Duggan was in the room, creeping along with bent body to where a young policeman slept in a chair, and the rest was simple. The man awoke with the chloroformed pad over his mouth and nose, but his very gasp of surprise drew the drug well into his lungs. Anyway, his resistance was slight and practically noiseless, so that when the criminals took their departure from the office they left behind them a neatly-bound and gagged policeman, for they were not changing the risk of him coming round too soon.

Without a word the men went back into the passage where the cells lay, and still without a word Miles drew from his pocket a key and inserted it in the lock of the cell next to the one that James Duggan had occupied since his arrest. The door opened without the slightest trouble, and the eyes of both men were glistening as they looked at the packing-cases within.

"Better open the side door first," Duggan whispered. "Wedge it with a gimlet, or the wind might bang it to and queer our business. I'll wait here and watch."

Miles slipped away noiselessly, but he was soon back again, and the work of removing the loot started at once. The first of the heavy packages was lifted by the two criminals, carried down the passage, through the open doorway, and out into the private road. There it was lifted into the spacious back of a very powerful car that might have been built for the purpose.

Silently as ghosts the men continued their work without let or hindrance, as undisturbed as if they had been working on an ordinary honest removal job. Then the task was finished, and with a sigh of relief James Duggan slipped into the front seat of the car beside Miles.

"Get her going!" he said in a low tone. "The sooner that we're in London, the better."

The car moved forward almost silently, and turned out of the private road and to the left. The road here was so narrow, however, that it was necessary to do quite a lot of manœuvring with such a large car before it was possible to get its bonnet turned towards London.

Miles manipulated the levers cautiously, then suddenly, when he had backed the car for the final turn, he paused and listened.

"Get on, can't you!" James Duggan cried with a startled oath, for he had heard the sound, too, and guessed what it meant. Nelson Lee had found a way of following.

Miles wrenched at the wheel, and a moment later the car would have dashed away, if a sudden thought had not occurred to Duggan.

"Wait!" he ordered. "If we got away now, he will get all the 'phones working, and the police will have us long before we can reach London. We've got to make Nelson Lee a prisoner, and—"

As the criminal spoke, the forms of a horse and horseman rose above the hedge, a tired animal stumbled as it landed in the roadway, half flinging its rider up its neck, and before he could recover himself, Duggan and Miles were on him.

It could hardly be expected that Nelson Lee would be fresh after his twenty mile ride, but despite that, he might have been a match for the two criminals had he not have been taken so completely by surprise. As it was, the sandbag that Miles wheeled struck the side of his head and dazed him, though not with force enough to stun him. Then he was down in the road, Duggan kneeling on his chest and gripping his throat to try and keep him from calling out, while Miles hung on to his arms.

Nelson Lee got one hand free and smashed it up into Duggan's face, but though the blow drew blood, the latter held on grimly. There was a fortune at stake.

In the heat of a struggle men do not think of much save their own passions, and that was the reason why the powerful headlights of a car swept round the bend of the road not fifty yards away. In another second the glare of the lights were full on the figures of the struggling men. Realising that their only hope of safety was in quick flight, Duggan and Miles leapt up from Nelson Lee, but they were too late.

Nipper brought up the car with a jerk within six feet of the two criminals, and at the same time he took a heavy automatic pistol from the seat beside him.

"Hands up!" he ordered, with a sternness surprising in one so young. For a moment the men hesitated, but as Nelson Lee scrambled to his feet, also with a pistol in his hand, they made no further attempt to argue.

"Quick march to the police-station!" Nelson Lee panted. "And you take it from me that Nipper and I will stop here to keep you company for the rest of the night. I have been looking for you too long to want to lose you again."

Nelson Lee looked at the cheque that he had received with a letter while having breakfast with Nipper, and frowned down upon it.

"Cyrus L. Spender done the mean stunt, sir?" Nipper suggested, for he guessed who the letter was from.

"No," the detective answered. "The fact is that he has sent a cheque for ten thousand pounds."

"Not so bad, sir," Nipper said with satisfaction. "Almost enough to take us away for a week-end."

But Nelson Lee dropped the cheque on to the table and shook his head.

"You can get this changed into notes after breakfast," he said. "You will send a thousand pounds to each of the ten charities that I am interested in—of course anonymously. I don't fancy the money, Nipper; it wasn't got any too cleanly if I know anything of Cyrus L. Spender's career. Between us we saved his boy, as we'd save even a dog from drowning, but the money's another matter. Do as I have told you with it."

Nelson Lee drew a fountain pen from his pocket and endorsed the cheque.

THE END.

Next week's magnificent story will be entitled:

THE CLUE OF THE STRAW SAILOR HAT; or, The Waiting-Room Mystery.

It will be written by the author of many famous detective yarns, including: "The Mystery of the Five Towns," "The Affair of the Billiard Champion," and "The Nottingham Mystery." Please order in advance.

The Boys of Ravenswood College;

or, Dick Clare's Schooldays.

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

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

Dick Clare—a new boy—slips the driver of the waggonette on the way to school, and drives up to the school just as the headmaster appears on the doorstep.

"**W**HERE is the driver, boy?" demanded Dr. Stanley, severely.

"If you please, sir, we left him at the inn. Something went wrong with the off wheel of the coach in which the big fellows were travelling, and our driver went down to assist. Then our horses went on, and something went wrong with the near wheel of that coach."

"I presume the horses bolted, and that you have driven them on here, my lad?" inquired the doctor.

"I certainly drove them here, sir, but they did not bolt. We—at least, I—wanted to get here before the big fellows, and so I did not wait for the driver. No doubt he will be here presently, although it may be some little time, if he should have to walk the five miles, and the same remarks apply to the big fellows."

The boys were astounded at Dick's daring. They held the Head in awe; but then Dick had never been to school, and as his mother allowed him to do exactly what he liked, the consequence was that he did not hold anyone in awe.

"You mean to tell me, boy, that you purposely drove on without the proper driver?" demanded Dr. Stanley.

"Yes, sir. I don't think I would have told you as much, only there was no possibility of concealing the fact."

"What happened to the wheel of the other coach?" demanded the master.

"It wouldn't go round, sir. You see, it was the front wheel, and this made it rather awkward, because it caused the coach to lurch that way. Then there wasn't quite room for me to pass, and I damaged the other wheel in trying."

"Do you know what was the matter with the wheel, Clare?" inquired Dr. Stanley, fixing his eyes on him.

"Yes, sir."

"What was the matter with it?"

"I would rather not say, sir."

"Which means, I suppose, that you played some trick?"

Dick thought silence would be golden on that occasion, and so he did not answer, but gazed at the horses' heads.

"Did you play a trick, Clare?" inquired Dr. Stanley.

"Yes, sir."

"What trick?"

"I fixed a few extra washers on the axle, then screwed the cap up tight."

"Why did you play such a trick?"

"So that we might wheel the big boys, sir."

"I helped him, sir," cried Tom Hart.

"Well, you are a silly owl, Tom," exclaimed Dick. "Whatever did you want to get yourself into my stew for? I hope, sir, you will let me bear the blame—"

"There is no doubt about there being any," said Dr. Stanley.

"It was my idea entirely, sir," said Dick. "I do not wish to boast, but——"

"There is nothing to boast about," interposed the Head. "You do not appear to realise that you have endangered the lives of your schoolfellows."

"Pardon, sir! I really don't see how."

"By driving those horses in place of the driver."

"I can assure you, sir, that I am perfectly competent to drive four horses, let alone two. At home I frequently drive four—when I got the chance. I drove four tandem fashion once, only that caused trouble, because the leaders leapt into the front garden of an irritable old fossil who——"

"Come to my study, Clare. Hold those horses, Vance."

Vance was the school-porter. He was a thin, cadaverous-looking individual, and he had a most abominable temper; but then he had a fearful lot to try him.

"Warm again!" murmured Dick, descending from the box, and following the doctor.

That gentleman seated himself in a chair. Dick stood before him, looking demure, although there was a laughing light in his grey eyes which he could not have concealed from Dr. Stanley if he had tried.

"Do you realise that your action was very wrong, my lad?" inquired the doctor.

"Well, it was a lark, sir. I suppose they are all wrong, but think how deadly dull life would be for a boy if he did not get up to larks. There was not the slightest danger, sir. My mother has not got a horse in her stables that I can't drive, and they are rather more spirited than those poor old hacks."

"There will be trouble with the two drivers, so that I shall refer to the matter when they arrive. Now, my lad, I hope you will be very happy at this college. It will be a new life to you, but you will soon make friends with the lads. I know your father. That he was a brave man, you know. But there was one thing about him that you may not have heard. He was absolutely truthful. Not even in argument would he exaggerate his case. I believe, from the few words you have spoken to me, that you are the same. Now, Clare, that is a thing to be greatly admired in a lad or a man. Amongst so many boys you will meet with some who are not possessed of this quality; never be influenced by such. Your father was a very brave officer. He gave his life for another, as I daresay you have heard? But more than this, he was a very good man. My lad, never do that which would bring sorrow to him."

"My mother spoke to me almost in the same words, sir," said Dick. "I promised her. I repeat my promise to you, and I am grateful to you for speaking thus of my father."

"You must be grateful to him, Clare. Had he not been what he was, I should not have spoken in that manner. I should not have mentioned his name to you. His was an example that any son might be proud to follow. Strive to do so, and you will become respected by all. Now, have you any friends at Ravenswood?"

"No, sir. I came down with some of the fellows. There was Tom Hart."

"Ah! A lad too fond of practical jokes, and I have an idea that you have the same failing. However, find Hart and a boy named Melby. Hart will point him out to you."

"I know him, sir. We came down together."

"Very well. You three come here in an hour's time. I wish to speak to you."

Then Dick bowed himself out of the study, delighted with the result of his interview, for he had imagined that it would have been very much more serious. All the same, he had an idea that those drivers might upset the harmony, and so he determined to intercept them. He left the college and made his way along the lane, hoping that they would come on to see how the coach had fared, and fortune favoured him, for he had not proceeded very far when he met the two worthies in a dog-cart, drawn by one of the four horses.

They pulled up, in fact, they had no choice, for Dick stood right in the middle of the lane.

"I say, old chaps," he exclaimed, "I have made a good impression on the doctor, and I don't want you to spoil it. Now, I know you have been put to a lot of inconvenience. There's a sovereign each for you, and let me know the damage to the coach, and I'll pay for it straight away. The other coach and horses are as right as rain. You twig? I want you to tell the truth—what I did to the wheel and all—but let me down as lightly as you conveniently can."

"Don't you bother about that, young gent," grinned one of the delighted drivers. "You can drive a treat! Mind you, if you ever want any riding, we've got some mounts. But there's just one thing. Take my tip and keep out of Mr. Gowl's road. He's dangerous in his present mood, and if he does a quarter of what he has threatened to you, every bone in your body will be broken."

"Right you are!" exclaimed Dick. "I'm going to bolt back, because I may be wanted when you call. Let me get a bit of a start."

Then away he went, and the driver walked his horse so as to let Dick get back first.

He found Tom at once, but they had some little trouble to discover Melby's whereabouts. He was in the porter's lodge, making inquiries concerning his luggage.

"Now then, Melby!" exclaimed Dick. "We three have to come to the doctor presently; that is to say, in about half an hour's time. There is plenty of time to settle our little account. You say you are a boxer, so that will be all right."

"Come into the gym," said Tom. "That's a nice quiet place."

"It is quite impossible for me to fight now," said Melby. "My left hand is crushed. All the same, I am not going to stand impertinence from a new boy. If you like to meet me with sword-sticks, I can use my right hand."

"All right," answered Dick; "I am not going to have my face slapped without returning it. I'll meet you with what you like."

Melby was a very good fencer, and he fondly imagined that he would have an easy victory at single-sticks. Fighting with fists, with such a sturdy opponent as Dick, was a thing he would never have contemplated. He led the way to the gymnasium, and was rather glad to find some of the Fourth Form youngsters there, because he wanted to show them what he could do.

"I shall not accept an apology!" he said loftily, as he took down a fencing-stick. "And as you have chosen those weapons, come on."

"I don't think I did choose them?" retorted Dick, taking another one. "However, I dare say I shall be able to express my meaning with them."

There was a smile on Melby's face, but it quickly disappeared. He cut at Dick's left leg, but it was guarded, then Melby received a cut that caused him to leap into the air and yell. He was not at all good at bearing pain, but he had to bear it now.

He could not have named a worse weapon, so far as he was concerned, for Dick's fencing was really grand. Many an hour had he spent at it with his tutor, when they should have been at lessons, and as this tutor was an excellent fencer, while Dick was a very apt pupil, the result was highly satisfactory, except from Melby's point of view.

"You can tell me when you have had enough!" exclaimed Dick, getting in cut after cut, and each one caused his opponent to yell, for they were severe. "But mind you this, Melby, you will have to express your regret for your impertinence before I will stop."

"Ah! Stop! I am sorry!" cried Melby.

"Well, I must say you look it," said Dick. "Now, next time you feel like slapping my face in public, just recollect that I'll give you the thrashing you deserve!"

"My hand is maimed!"

"Rats! You are not using your left hand," said Tom, "and that's the one I trod on."

"I don't care. I——"

"Well, if you don't care," interposed Tom, "all I can say is that appearances are deceptive. You look as if you were about to snivel again. I suppose you will tell Gowl, and get your bully friend to take your part? He is pretty sure to do so, now that you have some pocket-money."

"You may think yourself very clever," sneered Melby, "but before so long you may find that I am not to be insulted with impunity."

"You three boys are to go to the doctor immediate!" exclaimed Vance, the porter, suddenly making his appearance. "I've been looking for you all over the place. You have been fighting, Master Melby. I shall report you."

"Go and hang yourself, you yard of pump-water!" snarled Melby. "I haven't been fighting at all, and you can report what you like."

"You are to go to the Head——"

"So you have said before, you silly idiot!" snarled Melby. He felt very sore in all its senses.

"If you don't obey me, Master Melby——"

"What an utter idiot you are, Vance. Your master has given you a message that he desires the pleasure of my company at——"

"Well, if that isn't the limit! Haw, haw! Fancy the Head talking like that to a snivelling little boy like you!"

"I'll make you sorry for those words, you beast!" snarled Melby. "And you won't be the only one who will be sorry. Do you think I'm frightened of the Head?"

"No! I don't think you are!" grinned Vance. "I'm downright certain you are. I hope he will cane you as severely as you deserve. If he does you will need a medical man."

Melby strode away, and he was the first to enter the doctor's study.

"Do you know what has happened, Melby?" demanded the Head, fixing a searching gaze upon him, for past experience had taught him that Melby's word was not to be relied on.

"No, sir," answered Melby, gazing at the two drivers, who looked perfectly happy and contented. The doctor had not spoken to them yet, thinking it better that the matter should be arranged in the culprits' presence. "I only know that the other coach wouldn't go, and I have reason to believe it was stopped from going by a certain boy, whose name I would rather not mention. I also know that the same boy has behaved to me in a shameful manner, but I am not one to bear malice, especially against a new boy, and——"

"That will do, Melby," interposed the Head. "If you have any complaint to make against a boy, do so openly, and it shall be inquired into. Now, my men, I believe you have cause to complain of the action of these lads?"

"What, me, sir?" exclaimed one of the worthies. "Not me! Better behaved young gentlemen—especially that new young gentleman—I never came across."

"But I understand that Master Clare, the new boy, stopped your wheel; and, Hall, and——"

"Sir, don't you believe it! He wouldn't do such a thing. He's just the sort of young gentleman to make the wheel go faster!"

"Did he not run into your coach?"

"What, him, sir?" gasped Hall. "He never could do such a thing!"

"Do you mean to say your coach was not run into?"

"Merely a graze, sir. We don't mind them, do we, mate?"

"We rather like 'em!" declared the other.

"It is terrible!" sighed Dr. Stanley. "You can go. Get some refreshment in the kitchen."

"Thanky kindly, sir."

They hurried out of the room, carefully shutting the door.

"Did you meet those two men, Clare?" demanded the Head.

"Yes, sir."

"And, I suppose, gave them money?"

"Yes, sir."

"But surely you did not want to bribe them to tell such abominable falsehoods as that?"

"Certainly not, sir. I asked them to let me down as lightly as they could. My impression was that if they came here storming, it would anger you against me, and they seemed frightfully savage when I was driving off."

"It would have been far better had you not given them money. However, it is obvious to me that you did not wish to make them deceive me, otherwise you would not have told exactly what happened. I am willing to overlook the matter on this occasion, taking into consideration that this is your first day at Ravenswood, and that you are quite unacquainted with the necessary discipline of college life. I have decided to allow you three boys to share Study No. 7."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" cried Tom.

"I would prefer sharing a study with two other boys, sir," exclaimed Melby.

"That may be, but I have decided that you shall share a study with these two lads, Melby."

"Am I to be made answerable for their tricks, sir?"

"If you participate in them; most decidedly. I have my reasons for making such an arrangement, and I hope you will be good friends, and gain good from each other. The college rules must, necessarily, be enforced, and if any of them are broken, the boy must be punished, but if a boy is truthful and honourable, and bravely confesses his fault, it is an easy matter to pardon him. You can go, my lads."

The three hurried away, well satisfied with the result of the interview, but when they made their way to the new study, they were met by Vance, who looked almost cheerful.

"Now you are in for it!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't be in your shoes for something."

"What's up?" inquired Tom.

"Why, this is up. The Fifth Formers have had to walk five miles through you, and they ain't at all pleased. The new boy is to go to Mr. Gowl's study imajoiate. If you won't go of your own free will, I'm to take you."

"Then you shall jolly well take me!" cried Dick, suddenly leaping on Vance's back, where he stuck, in spite of the porter's efforts to dislodge him.

At that moment Gowl entered the room, and now Dick's position became precarious, for Vance would not let him get off.

"Here's Dick Clare, young gent.," he bawled, as the bully raised his cane.

"What?" gasped Gowl, starting back, while his face turned livid. "Wha—what is his name?"

"Richard Clare."

"I—I did not know—his name!" gasped Gowl, lowering the cane. "It does not matter. I shall not hit a new boy."

"Now, I wonder what there is between those two?" mused Melby, as Gowl hurriedly left the room. "If I can't find out I'll get some of my own back from both of them. I owe them a good bit, and it's odd if I can't pay it."

Dick Defies the Bully.

"Come on, old chap," cried Tom, rushing from the porter's lodge, followed by Dick and Melby. "I'll introduce you to Study No. 7."

Along the corridor they sped, then entered their domain.

"Now, what do you think of that little lot, Dick?" inquired Tom, gazing proudly around the miniature apartment.

"Not much," answered Dick with perfect candour. "It wants repainting, repapering, refurnishing, and generally renovating. Who sweeps the carpet?"

"Vance, the porter."

"I'll vow he doesn't—at least, I'd say he hasn't swept it for a year or so. Look here, Tom! Being a new boy, I don't know your capabilities. Are you clever?"

"The masters have never hinted at such a thing, in fact one of them told me I was a perfect idiot."

"Then it's jolly certain that this study will never become famous for its learning. Let's make it famous for its beauty. Let's have an original study. See! We'll paint and paper it for the start."

"That ought to make it look original enough."

"Can't you paper a room?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Neither have I, but we can easily try. Can we get down town?"

"By breaking bounds, but there's not much chance of getting caught this evening. You come with us, Melby?"

"Why, I don't know——"

"Well, I do," said Tom. "If you won't come we shall not go."

"Why?"

"Oh, there might be some leakage of news. You see, if you are going to share the benefit of Dick's adornments you ought to share the risk."

"Besides, he ought to share the splendid supper we shall have in the town," said Dick. "I didn't mention that I am going to stand a supper, nevertheless it is a fact."

That did it. Melby knew that Dick Clare's resources were practically unlimited, and that he was of a very liberal turn of mind. Such a supper as he would provide was not a thing to be missed.

They got out without detection, then went at a run to the town, where Dick bought some large tins of paint, and wallpaper according to his taste. He also purchased a quantity of flour for forming into paste.

Then they had their supper, and got safely back through the doctor's private grounds.

"I'll commence work at once," declared Dick. "You see, we'll get the room papered before morning."

"Can't be did," exclaimed Tom. "It's against the rules of Ravenswood to sit up all night papering studies."

"Chaps can't be expected to work hard in a dirty study," observed Dick.

"The masters won't expect us to work hard," declared Tom. "At least, if they do they will be jolly well disappointed."

"Well, we can make the paste so as to have it all ready for an early start," said Dick. "May we get up early?"

"I don't know of any rule forbidding a boy to get up early," said Tom thoughtfully. "The difficulty is to get them up at the usual hour. I believe a rule against early rising wouldn't be any good—especially in the winter."

"Right you are. Go and fetch a basin of some sort, Melby, and I'll light the fire and get the kettle boiling."

This was quite simple, and so was Melby when he held the basin in which Dick had mixed the flour and water while the new boy poured boiling water out of the kettle on it, and Tom stirred.

"Ah—murder!" yelled Melby.

"Keep it still," cried Dick.

"How do you suppose I'm going to keep it still while you pour boiling water over my fingers, you silly ass?" hooted Melby, placing the basin on the carpet, and flapping his hands about as he marked quick time.

"It doesn't matter," said Dick. "We can do without him. You see——"

"Wow—wooh!" howled Tom.

"Go on stirring, old chap. It must be stirred."

"It's jolly well not going to be," growled Tom. "I'm not wallowing my hands in boiling water to suit the requirements of your paste."

"It will get lumpy if you don't stir it."

"It can turn into suet puddings with plums in it for all I care. You are too jolly reckless with that boiling water for my liking. It went all over my hands."

"It's not likely to do it again," observed Dick.

"I know it isn't," observed Tom. "I'd say it's about the unlikelyest thing on the face of the earth. I don't mind pouring while you stir, but I won't stir while you pour."

Dick got his paste to his satisfaction, then the youngsters had to adjourn their proceedings until the morning.

Tom said it was lucky that they slept in the same dormitory, in fact, their beds were side by side; but he did not think it so lucky the following morning, for before it was quite light Dick awoke him.

Hurriedly dressing, they went down, and having borrowed the steps without leave, commenced their operations.

"I say, Dick," exclaimed Tom—they had not brought Melby—"you are slopping the paste over the carpet."

"It doesn't matter. We are going to have a new carpet. Think I've got enough paste on the paper?"

"Couldn't say; but I'm certain you have got enough on me."

"Well, hold the bottom part away from the wall. You want to stick the top part first, and then work downwards."

"I've believe you've cut it too long."

"Doesn't matter. We can easily shorten it. We've got heaps of paper," said Dick, mounting the steps while he held the piece by its two top corners. Tom had got hold of the bottom, so that it should not flap against the wall. Dick reached over to dab the top against the wall when the two corners tore off and that piece of paper flopped over Tom's head. He was completely papered.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Dick. "Don't wriggle about like that else you will tear it."

"Oh, my eyes," gasped Tom. "Slimy slugs are not in it. The beastly paste is all over my hair and in my mouth."

"It's quite clean, you know. There's nothing nasty about it."

"There's nothing so jolly nice either," spluttered Tom, struggling from the piece of wallpaper, which was badly torn.

"It doesn't matter," said Dick. "We may do better with the next piece."

"We jolly well can't do worse," grumbled Tom. "Just look what a ghastly mess you have made me in, and I don't see that you are improving the appearance of the room. Look here, Dick, how would it be to paste the wall and stick the paper on the paste?"

"Why, that's a jolly good idea, old chap. It will save no end of trouble. I'll try it."

Dick placed the basin of paste on the top of the steps, then climbed up, and he had just dipped his large brush into the basin and was pasting near the ceiling when the door was flung open. It caught the bottom of the steps, jerking Dick forward, and as he tried to save himself from going over the steps, he sent the basin of paste right over the head of Gowl, the bully of the Fifth.

"Oh, I say, Dick Clare," exclaimed Melby, who had followed Gowl into the study. "Won't you get it hot now. Just look what a ghastly horrid mess you have made Gowl in."

"Sorry, Gowl—ha, ha, ha!" roared Dick. "Jolly sorry. Accident—ha, ha, ha! Glad I haven't hurt you. Basin smashed, and—ha, ha, ha!—made you a bit messy—but you are not hurt. You don't consider he's hurt, do you, Tom?"

Tom knew there would be trouble in store, but as that paste streamed down the bully's face and clothes Tom was so convulsed with laughter that he could not speak.

Gowl seized the steps, and hurled them to the floor, but Dick was too quick for him. He took a flying leap on the table, thence to the floor, and he kept on the opposite side of the table.

"I don't care what happens," panted Gowl. "I'll thrash you till you howl for mercy, you little demon. Only wait until I catch you."

"Yes, that's what I'm going to do," answered Dick, winking at the convulsed Tom, as Gowl scooped the stuff off his head and face. "I want you to cool down a little first, because it would be a pity for damage to be done, especially if I were the damaged article. But look here, Gowl, suppose you start by considering that the incident was a pure accident, and that you yourself caused it."

"You have good cause to fear my vengeance," panted the bully. "You are wise to plead—but you plead in vain."

"I want you to view the matter in its proper light before we come to a settlement," said Dick.

"Do you think to blackmail me, you little demon," panted Gowl.

"I think that remark is utterly ridiculous, and most injudicious considering you make it in Melby's presence," said Dick. "You see, Gowl, you don't know my character at all. If I had the power of blackmailing any one on earth, I would face death before I'd use that power. Nothing the fellow could say or do should make me use it. That is one little error on your part. The other one is that you say I am pleading to you because I fear you. Time will prove that I have spoken the truth in the first place concerning blackmail. Time is not needed to prove that I do not fear you. Come on. I am quite ready for you."

Dick strode boldly up to the infuriated bully, and looked him full in the eyes. The youngster's daring simply astounded Gowl.

"You mean to say you will fight me?" he cried in a voice tremulous with passion.

"If you hit me I shall hit back," said Dick. "Of course, I know I shall get the worst of it, but it will take you some time to knock me out, and while you are doing it I shall hurt you."

"You think because——"

"You had better stop there," interposed Dick. "You know what I have said. It is the solemn truth. Fire ahead."

Gowl's left fist was clenched, and there was a very vicious light in his eyes. He appeared to be hesitating as to how to act, but Melby's words decided him.

"You won't be able to frighten Gowl, Dick Clare," he said. "He isn't the sort of chap to be influenced by your bluff. You are bound to get it hot, and must jolly well know it serves you right."

"Let that teach you to insult me," cried Gowl, striking with blind fury at Dick's calm face.

Dick slipped his head round the blow, and landed right and left on the mark, while he got in a third one beneath Gowl's jaw, bringing his teeth together with a snap.

He had expected nothing like this, and, grappling with the plucky youngster, flung him heavily to the floor, while he fell upon him with all his weight.

But Gowl was far worse winded than Dick, and he was dazed by the blow beneath the jaw. He began to consider that even victory against such a youthful opponent would not redound to his credit, while, judging by the blows he had already received, he came to the conclusion that victory could only be gained at considerable cost.

"Don't you hit him when he's down," cried Tom, springing forward, as Gowl raised his fist.

"Who is going to do so, you young fool," retorted the bully rising.

"I don't know," said Tom; "but I do know you will have another foe if you don't fight fairly."

"Fight! Ha, ha! Pretty good that. Do you suppose I'd fight a kid like that? I have punished him sufficiently for the present. You will come to my study at twelve o'clock, Clare, and I shall then decide as to whether I shall cane you. Clear up this mess at once, you dirty young rascals, and don't let there be any more noise."

But the smile on Dick's face maddened the bully as he slunk from the room, and by the expression in his eyes Tom came to the conclusion that his new chum had not heard the last of it.

"I say, Clare," exclaimed Melby. "There's not a doubt that he's afraid of you. Now, Tom and I would be able to help you a lot more if you told us all about the affair. Of course, we wouldn't mention it again."

"Oh, dry up, you silly," exclaimed Dick. "I have got nothing to tell you."

"Well, that's pretty thick for a chap who pretends to be truthful. Fanoy declaring that there's no secret between you and Gowl after what has happened. I happen to know more about it than you think for. He often tells me things, and he said he had met you when I told him you were coming here. I think he said he met you at your father's house—it was either there or——"

"I don't think he told you anything of the sort," said Dick. "If he did so it was an abominable falsehood, for we had never met before I came here, nor has he ever been to my mother's house."

"Oh, well, he might not have said that, but he said——"

"I don't care what he said. I have nothing to tell you."

"I don't consider it fair that you should take Tom into your confidence and leave me out, seeing we are chums."

"I never said I had taken Tom into my confidence."

"Well, I happen to know that you have told him every blessed word about it."

"Then you know a jolly lot more than I do," said Tom. "It so happens that Dick and I have never spoken about the brute except to mention that he was a beastly bully. You can go and tell him I said so if you like. You appear to be jolly anxious to ferret out matters that don't concern you. You had better clear or you will get splashed with paste. Dick says he's going to make our study look nice. I have my doubts whether he will succeed, but he's going to try, and there's no telling what a chap like Dick can do when he tries. But look here, old chap, you will have to try some other time for there goes the second bell."

"Think the Head would mind my having a workman in to do the papering, Tom?" inquired Dick.

"Yes! I don't believe he would like it."

"Well, I shall defer the decorations for the present," said Dick. "The work is too sloppy and slow for my constitution. I don't mind Melby doing it, but I have decided that the work does not suit me. You can start now if you like, Melby."

"Go and drown yourself," exclaimed Melby, hurrying away, while Dick did not mention the matter again, and made use of some of the wallpaper for lighting the fire when he wanted to make tea.

The Mysterious Visitor.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Vance was on the watch for such scholars as had been gated, when a tall gentleman, wearing a new, tall hat, frock coat and light trousers, entered the lodge. He also wore lavender kid gloves and a flower in his buttonhole, while he was smoking a cigar.

"Is Master Clare within?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," answered Vance. "What name shall——"

The stranger took out a card case and handed the porter a card on which appeared the name of Mr. Richard Clare.

"Shall I fetch him, sir?" inquired Melby, who had followed the stranger in.

"You see, he is in my study, so I know exactly where to find him."

"Acquaint him of my arrival, portah! I will not trouble you, my lad."

"Not a bit of trouble, sir. Dick will be jolly glad to see his father."

The stranger bowed, but did not set Melby right.

"I say, that's a bad job about Dick's secret with Gowl, isn't it, sir?"

"Shocking."

"Of course, I should not think of repeating it."

"Quite so."

"Think it will get Dick into trouble here, sir?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Do you consider it was Gowl's fault, or that Dick was partly to blame. I wouldn't like Dick to get into trouble. It's jolly serious."

"Awful! It makes my blood run cold."

"I suppose you have called about it, sir?"

"Exactly."

"It might mean imprisonment, don't you think?"

"It's a case of hanging."

"Wha-what?" gasped Melby.

"It's a case of hanging," repeated the stranger.

"For Gowl?"

"No, for Dick Clare!"

"Oh, I say," gasped Melby. "Don't you mind your son being hung?"

The stranger had not time to say whether he minded or not, for at that moment Vance returned with the request that Mr. Clare should come to Study No. 7, which he did, while Melby followed.

"How do you do," exclaimed Dick, grasping his visitor's hand. "Sit down. Don't go, Tom."

"Oh, we are not going, Dick," exclaimed Melby. "You know this is jolly serious, and your father has admitted that it is a hanging matter for you. Of course, I will help you all I can, but——"

"You are wanted immediately in the French master's study, Master Melby," said Vance. "He's waiting special for you."

Melby had to go. He did not find the master, but then Vance knew such would be the case, but he had received half-a-crown from Dick to get rid of Melby, and he considered that the best way. To make doubly sure he pushed Melby into the empty room, and locked the door.

"Fire ahead, old chap," exclaimed Dick, when they were alone. "We haven't much time to lose."

"Right you are," exclaimed the visitor, pulling off his gloves and coat, and turning up his shirt sleeves. "Haw, haw, haw! That kid is what you might call rather soft. When I told him it was a hanging matter he thought you was going to be hung instead of the paper; and when he saw your card he took it for granted that I was your father instead of a paperhanger. Now, you've got the paste all right?"

"Yes. I smuggled that in last night. You see, Tom, I dressed Hunt up to make that ass of a porter imagine he was a rich relation, or something like that. Jolly neat get up, don't you think?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom. "Oh, my eyes! Melby will spread the news all over the college that you are going to be hanged. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he doesn't go to the Head with the news. At any rate, he's bound to take it to Gowl."

"Wonder what he thinks I'm going to be hanged for?" exclaimed Dick. "How-
ever, it doesn't matter. There is the paste, Hunt."

"Does it matter if I paste your table a trifle, young gent?" inquired the man. He liked the job, having been paid for it in a most liberal manner.

"Not a bit of it!" answered Dick. "You will have to be a jolly sloppy pastor if you make more mess than we did."

Hunt started work, and he soon proved himself to be a very rapid worker—when he liked. Apparently he liked now. Dick had paid him five pounds for the job, promising him an extra sovereign if he got it finished quickly.

"You see, old chap," explained Dick, "our furniture is coming in to-night."

"What?" gasped Tom.

"At midnight, you know. I've tipped the men to get it in without making a noise."

"I say, Dick, there will be an awful row. The Head isn't going to stand this sort of thing. It's against all rules."

"Is there a rule that a fellow mustn't buy furniture?" inquired Dick, calmly.

"Well, I don't suppose there's a rule like that——"

"So much the better. The Head can't expect a new boy to keep a rule that was never made. I tell you our study has got to be quite up to the mark, and it will be with the little lot I have bought. There's a piano amongst it. There isn't much room, I know, but we will crowd it in somewhere. Can you play the piano?"

"No!"

"That's a pity; still, you can easily learn. It really doesn't much matter, though, because I can play the piano. I'll get a cornet for you to play on."

"I can't play the cornet," said Tom. "The only instrument I can play is the gramophone."

"Very well. I'll get one of those as well. I'm fond of music."

"The masters won't be, especially if I start playing the cornet and they want to work."

"Well, if they don't like it they can easily say so."

"They jolly well will. But Vance is bound to hear your furniture coming in."

"I don't fancy so," answered Dick. "I have been asking him whether he thinks he would be able to hear it, and he says he doubts it, because he sleeps so heavily. The masters can't possibly hear it, because they sleep upstairs. No, I feel sure Vance won't hear it, only keep that dark, of course. You are making a jolly good job of that, Hunt. You paper a room a lot better than Tom and I can."

"Well, you see, young gent, papering a room is like playing the cornet—you want a bit of practice before you can do it anything like agreeable. If you start putting the paper on upside down and pasting it on the wrong side it spoils the general effect. I'd have made a better job if the walls had been stripped. However, this won't look amiss. You've got about five times as much paper as you will require here, and I'd say you paid a big price for it."

"Well, you may have what's over, if it's any good to you," said Dick. "So long as we make the room look nice we don't mind the cost, do we, Tom?"

"I don't a bit," said Tom. "But perhaps that is because I'm not paying for it. If I did pay for it, it would have to be on the three years' hire system."

Dick was born lucky as well as rich, and fortune smiled on him once more. Hunt finished his job, and got out of the college in the clothes that Dick had bought for the purpose; then Dick locked the study door, as he did not want Melby to enter the room until his new furniture was in.

They went to release Melby, but discovered that he had already made his escape through the window, and later on they found him in Gowl's company.

"I wish the Head hadn't landed us with the sneak!" grumbled Tom. "Can't think why he did it."

"Perhaps he thought our influence might be beneficial?" suggested Dick.

"He jolly well couldn't have thought mine would be," said Tom, "and as far as I can see of your start, I don't believe yours will be either. Still, we've got him, and we shall have to make the best of him, although the best will be ~~only~~ had. There he goes, and if he doesn't report matters to Foster—our housemaster—I shall be surprised."

Tom was perfectly right, for just before bedtime Mr. Foster sent for the chums. He was a very severe-looking gentleman, but he was a favourite with the boys because he took such a deep interest in their welfare. Melby was in the study.

"This lad has been locked in the French master's study," said Mr. Foster. "The matter was reported to me by a Fifth Form boy. I sent for Melby and questioned him, but I cannot understand what he is talking about."

"I don't care to sneak, sir," said Melby.

"I have not asked you to do anything of the sort," retorted Mr. Foster.

"I did not even tell you that Claro's father called here this afternoon, sir, because there was a terrible reason why I should not do so."

"You are talking utter nonsense, boy!" said Mr. Foster. "Claro has no father."

"Why, I spoke to him, sir, and he admitted that his son had committed a crime for which he would be hung if it was discovered."

Mr. Foster stepped to the window, and looked out. It was not quite dark, but there was not much to be seen. Dick looked quite serious, but Tom was nearly convulsed with laughter.

"I don't know what you are laughing at, Hart," snarled Melby. "but——"

"At Dick being treated like a joint of meat," answered Tom, who knew his master was striving to refrain from laughing at the same thing.

"Your remarks are really too ridiculous, Melby," said Mr. Foster, turning towards him and looking far from serious. "Claro lost his father many years ago, and our country lost one of its heroes."

"Well, all-I can say is that Claro's relations are the most frightful liars that ever lived!" cried Melby. "The one that called to-day told me Dick was his son, and that he had committed a crime for which he would be hung. It's a dead secret."

"It would be if I am hanged," said Dick, shutting one eye as he gazed at the convulsed Tom.

"I require you to explain to me exactly what happened, Claro," said Mr. Foster.

"Seeing it is a dead secret, sir, which is only known to Tom and myself, would you mind my telling you while Melby is not here?"

"Leave the room, Melby," ordered the master.

And Melby had to go, while Mr. Foster watched him down the corridor, knowing from past experience that he had a playful habit of listening.

"I don't like dirty wallpapers, sir," said Dick.

"Naturally. But I do not require you to speak about wallpapers."

"Well, you see, sir, they are in the plot. I decided on repapering our study. It was a ghastly failure. To overcome the bad effect I engaged a decorator, and toggled him up—made a full-sized swell of him, with kid gloves and cigar. Melby mistook him for my father. He seems to have remarked that he came about a hanging matter, and Melby appears to have imagined I was the party to be hanged, and not the wallpaper. He's hung it, and we are clean and tidy."

"You should have asked permission. Did you know that?"

"Yes, sir. That is why I disguised him—to throw dust in Vance's eyes."

"I am glad to find that you do not make excuses for your fault, Claro. It is overlooked. You can go, my lads. It would have been far better had you asked for your study to be repapered, Claro."

That night when all lights were out Dick and Tom stole from their dormitory. Having put on their sleeping garments over their clothes there was no delay in dressing.

Dick had provided himself with a bull's-eye lantern, and they found the key of the college gates hanging on its usual nail in the porter's lodge.

"Jolly convenient, that," observed Dick. "All we have got to do is to open the gates and get the furniture in."

"That's all," said Tom.

"It's quite simple."

"I'm thinking of what is going to happen afterwards."

"Oh, I sha'n't tell the Head what we have done."

"I don't suppose for a moment that you will, Dick, but as he is bound to find out it will amount to much the same thing. The van is at the gates!"

Dick shone his lantern into the window of Vance's bedroom, and he caught sight of the porter scuttling back to bed. Vance was remarkably fond of reporting boys, but not when one of them had given him a sovereign to sleep soundly. He only trusted that the furniture removers would not make much noise.

There were two men, and they spoke in whispers. Their first operation was to clear out all the furniture in the study, but there was not much of it.

"I don't see how we are to get all your furniture in, young gent," said one of the grinning men.

"Well, start with the carpet; then worry up the piano. The latter is most important."

Tom gasped a little when he saw his chum's furniture come up. It struck him that the cost must have been very great. The backs of the leather chairs were black carved oak, the sideboard and bookcase the same.

"How do you like my taste, old chap?" inquired Dick, when the last of the furniture came up.

"A lot better than your mother will, I expect," answered Tom.

"Why, don't you see, she made out the order, so she can't possibly mind. We will invite her to tea one day. You will like her—everyone does. You can't help it. Now, I'll just get rid of these chaps, then we will go to bed. I want our study to look as well as the others."

"My eyes! It does. It's better furnished than the Head's study. I don't believe we shall improve this carpet if we start cooking over it."

"A carpet is meant to use. Come on! I expect Melby will like the alterations all right. It's impossible to consult him because he would be bound to tell it all over the college, and then we might have been stopped."

Dick got rid of the men, who went away thoroughly delighted with their night's work. Then, having locked up and replaced the keys, the chums went to bed.

The following morning they went to their renovated study, the sumptuousness of which took away Tom's breath. Dick's books were of a mixed nature; they gave the impression that he had bought them for their covers. His red velvet tablecloth looked slightly incongruous for a youngster's study, but then the same might have been said of every article of furniture in the little room.

There were three easy-chairs, and the chums were seated in two of them when they heard voices outside. The door was flung open, and Gowl, accompanied by Melby, strode into the study.

Gowl's eyes dilated, and his jaws gaped open. The alteration in the room was as astounding as it was, to him, unaccountable.

For some moments he stood gazing around in speechless amazement.

(A Long and Laughable Instalment of this School Story will appear in next Wednesday's issue of the "Nelson Lee Detective Library." Order In Advance.)