

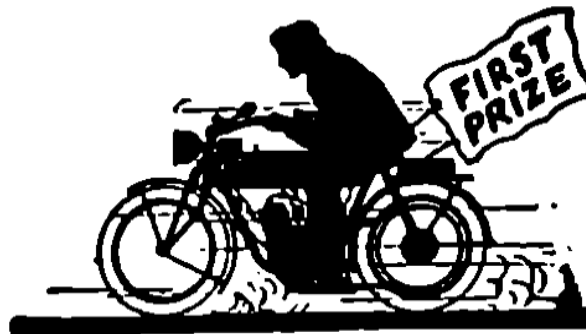
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The CASE OF THE
INTERNED DETECTIVE

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THE JUDGE:

The Decision of the EDITOR of the "NELSON LEE LIBRARY" must be accepted
as ABSOLUTELY FINAL

THE CASE OF THE INTERNED DETECTIVE.

A Brilliant Detective Story, introducing Nelson Lee and Nipper.

By the Author of "*The Mystery of Limehouse Reach.*" etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Late Call.

"**H** ALLO! Yes. It's Nelson Lee speaking now. Who is it, and what do you want with me?"

The face of the prince of crime investigators wore a frown of undisguised disgust, as he stood with the telephone receiver pressed to his ear.

The hour was late, he had just come in from a theatre, and he wanted to get to bed. Least of all did he want to talk fresh business, and, with a stranger as he reckoned this man to be, who had just been put through by the exchange.

"Speak louder, please.—I can't hear you. Major, what name did you say?" he demanded petulantly.

"Redley—Major Redley, here at the War Office," came back the reply, in apologetic tones. "I'm deeply sorry to be troubling you at this unreasonable hour, Mr. Lee. I can only plead the occasion as most urgent. But could you make it convenient to come round here now and see me——"

"Come round! At this time of night!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, in a tone as if he meant to see his interrogator further first.

"Well, yes. I know it's asking a great deal——"

"It certainly is," assented the detective severely. "What is the nature of the business upon which you wish to see me?"

"Well, that is strictly confidential," came back the reply. "I could not indicate it like this over the telephone, I am afraid. I would come round and see you myself, but I am one of the staff officers, on duty here all night, and am absolutely unable to leave my post. So I hope you will come if you possibly can."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch. It wanted ten minutes to twelve, and Big Ben would be striking midnight before he could get to Whitehall.

"Hallo! Are you there?" he called again snappishly. "Very well: I will come. But I hope it is a matter worthy the inconvenience which you are putting me to."

"Certainly! I can promise you that," was the answer back over the wire.

"Will see you here in a few minutes then?"

"Yes. I am just going to put on my boots again, and then I will start."

Nelson Lee hooked up the instrument viciously, and went back to the arm-chair in which he had been wearily yawning when the bell rang. He grabbed for his patent leather boots.

"Jolly Government officers! Deuced cheek I call it. Think everybody's got to dance attendance on them. Jolly well wish I hadn't said I'd come now," he growled.

He had just swallowed down a biscuit and a glass of claret, from the little supper tray left ready for him by his good housekeeper, when the front door bell rang. Nelson Lee listened and looked out of the window. A luxurious motor-car had drawn up at the door.

"What, more of them?" he said, gnashing his teeth. "What the dickens do people take me for, I'd like to know; an old cab-horse that never sleeps!"

However, he was grumbling too soon, he realised.

"A messenger from the War Office with a car to fetch you, sent by Major Redley," announced his housekeeper a moment later.

"Oh, well, come; that's not so bad," Nelson Lee had to allow. "A luxurious private car at the door was better than having to whistle, perhaps, five minutes for a taxi." The detective began to feel better then.

Down he went, still in evening dress, of course. A uniformed messenger awaited him, with a respectful salute.

"Major Redley sent this for me, you say?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir. It had just driven up with General Sir John Geary, sir, and my order was to bring it straight on for you."

Nelson Lee disposed himself inside, with a goodly fur rug about his knees. Then off drove the car.

"By Jove, but I'm jolly sleepy," decided the detective, after yawning three big yawns in quick succession. "I've often heard that motoring at night, is a first class cure for people who can't sleep through nerves. I—yer—yer—yer. Grr—rr!"

Another prodigious yawn had cut short his soliloquy. Nelson Lee realised that if he was going on like this, he had better never have started at all. For he would never be able to take in this precious "business," whatever it was.

"So steady up my son," he told himself severely, shaking himself together. But it was of little use. His head was nodding; he could hardly keep his eyes open, try as he would.

Up Tottenham Court Road, then across the Oxford circus sped the motor. Past him hundreds of taxis and motor 'buses were careering in dizzy procession. At least, it made Nelson Lee dizzy just now to look at them. He began to think there must be something wrong, and that his after-theatre snack at the Supper Club had not agreed with him.

He started to pull down the window, but the infernal thing jammed. With an impatient growl, he wrestled with the other, but this also refused to budge.

"Confound and hang it!" he raged, for a breath of fresh night air was what he felt a sudden consuming desire for. There was a sudden burning, bitter taste on his tongue, and a choking sensation in his nostrils.

But, alarming enough as all this was, it was all forgotten in a flash, when Nelson Lee came to realise where he was being taken to by the two men on the driver's seat.

Instead of going straight down Shaftesbury Avenue, the car was turning down—well, he did not quite know where the part was. It might be the top end of St. Giles, past the Seven Dials; but he was too dizzy by now to see.

All he knew was that if there was not foul play in all this, he did not know what it was. Even the doors were locked. He was a prisoner.

"Hi! Hang you; where are you taking me to, you two?" he shouted furiously through the speaking tube, which should have communicated with

the trumpet at the chauffeur's ear. Scarcely had Nelson Lee applied his lips to it though, than he received full in the face a more overwhelming whiff of the mysterious gas than ever. He had to take a mighty strong grip of himself, in fact, to keep from fainting dead away.

As for the War Office porter, as he was supposed to be, and the driver, neither of them took the slightest notice of his shouts, though he was backing these by beating on the glass panels until he nearly shattered the panes.

Then, at last, the pseudo porter did turn his head. Sure enough, there was a savage malevolent grin on his face that confirmed the detective's suspicions in a glance.

"Trapped!" he gasped, by this time ready to collapse. "Oh, what a fool to let myself be caught in this simple fashion! But, by Jupiter, I'll do them yet," he vowed, summoning all his strength, and hurling himself forward off the seat.

The man beside the driver was stooping down, apparently regulating some part of the dashboard gear, and watching him all the time as if enjoying to the full his struggles.

And all this time, the chauffeur was sending his car along at a swift rate, cool as a cucumber. Policemen on traffic duty were passed, but unfortunately none had cause to hold up his hand to delay them. Wayfarers stood back and let the car whirl by. It was as if the whole world had conspired to betray the great detective to his doom at last.

But Nelson Lee, though his senses were reeling, was not done with yet. The windows were all securely fastened and even rendered airtight, as was plain. The car was nothing less than a lethal chamber, in which any other man but himself, perhaps, would have succumbed long ago.

The detective, though, had the nine lives of the proverbial cat. Pulling himself together by sheer mastery of will, he plunged at the window-pane, and dashed it out with one blow of his fist. His hand was gashed and ran with blood, but he did not care.

Filling his bursting lungs with one deep draft of pure air, he let rip a yell, which must have filled the whole street. Unluckily, scarcely a soul was in sight. For here they were threading the purlieus of what had been Drury Lane in old days.

"Police! Stop these ruffians! Seize them!" he roared, hurling all his weight on the door, to force it even from its hinges.

That the man who had pretended to be a Government office porter was alarmed by this outburst, goes without saying. He had expected their victim to succumb minutes ago. Round he jerked with a savage oath. Nelson Lee was still kicking and thrusting at the door. The car had only quickened its speed.

Then suddenly that happened which Nelson Lee might have anticipated in calmer moments. The driver turned in his seat, and with one hand suddenly reached back and released the catch in the door, sending it flying open just as the car was tearing past a street refuge flanked by iron posts.

The moment was ruthlessly timed. Out pitched the detective helplessly, taken quite off his guard. Head over heels he plunged to strike one of the posts, and rebound right under the wheels, as it looked to the few scared passers-by.

"Hi! Whoa! There's somebody fallen out. You've killed him," was the alarm promptly raised. They expected to see the car clap on its brakes, of course. But not a bit of it. On it went, the door shutting with its own back swing. A callous whisk of its red tail light, and it was round the corner and away.

A belated bobby then appeared. But by the time he had looked at the fallen man, and listened to what excited bystanders had to say, he might have whistled himself black in the face, for all the good he would have done, as to arresting the runaways.

Nelson Lee was not senseless quite, but very near it. Every ounce of breath had been knocked out of him. It was lucky for him that his brains had not followed suit. How his body came to miss going under the car wheels was an even greater miracle.

"Well, 'ow do you feel now, sir," inquired the policeman sympathetically, as the patient succeeded in getting his breath at last.

"Feel!" groaned Nelson Lee. "Why, how do you expect me to feel after a tumble like that?"

"But why didn't your car stop? Your man couldn't have heard you, I suppose?" suggested the bobby. "He'll have reached home, perhaps, before he knows he's dropped you."

Now, Nelson Lee did not want to stop arguing there with a crowd collecting round him fast. Particularly, he did not want a song made about how he had been kidnapped like a fool. As for pursuit, it was right out of the question now. He could stand up he found, and no bones broken. The effect of the fumes, moreover, to which he had been subjected, were wearing off fast. He desired the bobby to get him a taxi, and assured him it was only an accident.

The constable plainly thought that Nelson Lee had been dining not wisely, but too well. However, since he seemed sober enough now, he pocketed the half-crown with which the request was accompanied, and a moment later he was sitting huddled in a taxi nursing his bruises, and howling back to his own chambers.

What was at the bottom of this dastardly attempt upon his life—for such it could only be—he was too dizzy still to try and think.

He had a thousand enemies, of course—a detective must have, who is any man at all at his job.

It was the simplicity of the trick and his own simplicity in tumbling into it that nettled him and made him mad.

"That 'phone message, of course, was all bunkum. I don't suppose there is a man named Redley at the War Office at all. It was merely a blind, and if young Nipper hears of it, I'll never hear the last of it for being such a chuckleheaded fool!"

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery of the Escaped Prisoners.

NELSON LEE reached home at last. Luckily he had told his housekeeper not to wait up any longer for him. Therefore he was able to crawl upstairs unnoticed.

Barely had he sunk into his armchair, though, with a groan, than—Trrring—trrring—trrrrring! It was that infernal telephone-bell again.

Nelson Lee nearly wrenched the whole instrument out by the roots in his temper.

"Hallo!" he roared. "What? Who's that you say?" he fairly bawled in astonishment.

It was the major again, ringing him up with all the impudence in the world, to know whether he had started yet.

"Started!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Yes, and jolly nearly got finished, too, you scoundrel! What do you mean by it, sending that infernal death-trap round for me——"

"Death-trap!"

"Yes! Don't pretend you don't know. You may think you're all safe at the other end of a wire, but I'll make it my business to show you you're not. Do you hear me?"

The major certainly did. It was more like an earthquake gone mad at his end of the wire. Nevertheless, he assured Nelson Lee that he could not make head or tail of what he was talking about.

"I sent no car for you, you may take it from me," he told him.

"No car from the War Office, with a uniformed messenger on it?"

"No. I wish I had been able to; but I hadn't got a car to send," was the polite reply, to Nelson Lee's complete bewilderment, needless to say.

So there was a real major, after all. Or was it another trap only. Shaken as he was, Nelson Lee made up his mind to see. He took a pistol with him this time, and gave the taxi-driver who conveyed him such a searching glare before he entered the cab that this, in conjunction with the blood-stained handkerchief round his fare's fist, scared the fellow to death almost. He thought he was dealing with a lunatic.

"War Office," rapped Nelson Lee.

"Right, captling! 'Op in!" blurted the cabby; and drove like the wind. In record time he had deposited his illustrious fare safely at Whitehall.

"Major Redley?" demanded the detective of the porter on night duty.

"Yes, sir. What name, sir?"

"Nelson Lee."

"Ah, this way, sir," was the prompt request. "Major Redley left orders that you were to be shown up to his room immediately.

"Oh, he did—eh?" echoed Nelson Lee to himself. "Well, that's all right, so far. Unless I'm quite mad, and this isn't the War Office, and this fellow knocks me on the head when he gets me down the first dark passage."

However, nothing so exciting happened. Conducting the detective up in a lift to the topmost floor of the building, his guide led him along a corridor more like that of a bedroom floor of a hotel than a Government office, and announcing the visitor at one of the rooms there, ushered him in.

"Good-evening, Mr. Nelson Lee!" said the occupant—a typical British officer to look at; tall and slim-waisted, with a tooth-brush moustache, and eyeglass. "I say, I'm awfully sorry to fetch you out at this infernal hour——"

He paused with a jerk. For he, like the cabby, had suddenly caught sight of Nelson Lee's hand with the bloodstained handkerchief wound round it.

"By Jove, how on earth did you come by that?" he demanded sympathetically. "But wait. I remember now. What was that you were saying about a car I had sent for you? You called it a death-trap, too. You don't mean it turned you over?"

"It did—very much over," answered Nelson Lee grimly. "But still, that part of it will keep, if you don't mind. It's late, and I'd rather hear what this business is on which you wish my advice. For that I suppose is what it comes to?" he added.

"Certainly. We do want your advice, and badly," answered the major frankly, wheeling forward a comfortable chair, and setting out the decanters. For anybody could see that Nelson Lee was badly shaken up. He ought to have a doctor, too, to that cut hand of his.

It took more than a flesh-wound to keep the detective back, though once he was fairly on the trail. And he was now if ever he had been. He had

was stupidly fooled by a couple of men—one of whom he knew he would be able to recognise again. Worse than that he had been savagely handled, in a way that could only point that it was his life they were deliberately aiming at.

Now Nelson Lee was out for blood, as the saying is.

"Well now," said the major, "before I come to details, I will tell you what my job is here. You see"—and he swept his hand round the snugly-furnished sitting-room—"I am in residence here. Thanks to this infernal war, I'm one of the 'perpetual duty staff,' as you might term it. I can't stir one yard over the doorstep without leaving word where I am gone to. Even then I may not go more than half a mile from Whitehall, without special leave. That is why I had to ask you to come and see me."

"I'm! I don't think that sort of life would suit me exactly," was Nelson Lee's dry comment to this. "Still, go ahead. Your job, you were about to say, is—"

"Well, the department I am going to talk to you now about is 'concentration camps'—camps, that is, where we intern enemy aliens—"

"I know," broke in Nelson Lee. "There is one down Bromley-le-Bow way. I was looking at the beggars out exercising this morning, as I was coming along in the train."

"You were!" echoed the major.

"Yes. Why?"

"Only because Bromley-le-Bow happens to be the very camp that I want to talk to you about just now."

"Oh! What's wrong with it?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"Nothing, and yet everything," was the enigmatical answer. "The camp is all right—double-fenced, heavily guarded, and as right and tight as human ingenuity can make it. What is wrong about it is that it doesn't seem to keep the prisoners in when we've got them."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nelson Lee again, looking interested.

"I don't mean, of course," the major continued, "that as fast as we pour aliens in at the top, they run out of the bottom. But there have been escapes—and most condemnably mysterious escapes, too. Four of them all told, and the last one this very night; and for the life of us we can't make out how they manage it."

"You don't say so," said Nelson Lee politely. "And when did to-night's escape occur exactly—at what time did they know about it?"

The major laughed a short, queer laugh.

"That's just it," he said awkwardly. "The guard at Bromley Camp don't know about it. It's we who have got the information here, not there. The first the guard will learn of it will be from us."

"Then how did you hear, may I ask?" demanded the detective.

"By wireless."

"Wireless!"

"Yes. But whose we don't know, and can't make out," said the major. "That is one of the mysteries I have at last got the chiefs to hand over to you to solve, Mr. Lee. The second is how these five prisoners, one after another, have managed to vanish into thin air as they have been doing. And the third, who are the gang outside contriving these escapes, as they must be contrived, and why do they always choose this one camp only, where there are no well-to-do Germans interned that we know of—"

But here the detective checked him with a quick movement of the hand. "One minute. I want just to get all this down on paper," he said, "and one or two facts besides which occur to me."

The major waited patiently while he wrote in a notebook, frowning and pausing to tap his strong, determined chin.

"Now you can go on, major," he said at last. "Tell me about *Mystery No. 1*--this secret 'wireless' that you suspect exists."

"Suspect! We know it," was the prompt reply. "There's never a message, not in code, Marconied from the War Office of late that isn't tapped somewhere—"

"For instance, this one concerning my being asked to take up the case," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Has that been discussed over the wireless—to-night, we'll say?"

"Why, yes, it was—with General Sir John Geary."

"The gentleman who was so kind as to put his death-trap car at my disposal to fetch me here," laughed Nelson Lee, again interrupting.

The major looked dumbstruck. He demanded to know what the detective meant.

"Oh, that's all right!" Nelson Lee assured him. "I'll explain later. Meantime, just tell me, please—you say you had a mysterious wireless to-night, informing you of the escape of this latest prisoner? It was received here on the War Office apparatus in the usual way, I presume? Have you the official copy of it, that I could see?"

It was there on the major's table. Nelson Lee read it.

"Regret having again to borrow one of your prisoners from Bromley Camp. Will promise to leave you a few. But may need more yet. Thousand thanks for lending. Please acknowledge.—SCHLOT."

"Well that's precious cool, I must say," agreed Nelson Lee, laying the paper down. And the author of this impudence signs himself Schlot."

"That is the German for 'chimney,'" said the major.

"Yes; and also for drain, flue, sewer—a delicate but sufficiently marked allusion, perhaps, to the cunning manner in which their apparatus is secreted. Hum!" continued the detective, tapping his prominent chin again. "Well, pray go on. This is the message as you received it, and it is identical in form, I suppose, with others that have gone before?"

"Yes—more or less. It is a trifle more impudent, if that were possible, in that it has the cheek to ask us to Marconi back an answer. But—"

The major paused. For the heavy footsteps of a messenger were heard approaching the door.

"A note for you, sir; delivered by express messenger," said the porter, handing in an envelope. The major looked surprised. He opened it, and looked more startled still.

"Well I'm dashed!" he gasped. "Is the boy waiting? Detain him and bring him up here instantly. Quick!"

He passed the note over to Nelson Lee as he spoke. The detective read it. Even he permitted himself to look surprised. For it was a written confirmation of the wireless message that had been received, scrawled in a bold hand that seemed to bear no pretence at all of disguise, except in the signature, which was printed in capitals—"SCHLOT."

Beneath it was roughly scrawled a human skull, with a sword transfixing the eyesocket.

"Well, of all the infernal sauce," sputtered the major, fairly dancing up and down the room in his rage. "Still, now we shall have something definite to work upon. This was delivered by messenger-boy. Someone must have taken it to the Express office. That will be a clue at last. They are bound to remember something—"

However, at this moment, a voice-pipe whistled dismally. It was connected with the night porter's box at the entrance below. The major's face went purple with fury as he listened. The boy messenger had vanished.

There was trouble after that, of course. The major had the entire staff up one by one and rated them for a pack of fools. Nelson Lee merely smiled behind his hand. But he was listening to the messenger's description, nevertheless. Meantime, he carefully folded up the aerogram and the note and put them in his pocket-book.

The major secretly was even more furious with the detective for being so absolutely calm and cool about the affair. He expected Nelson Lee to draw a revolver perhaps and go chasing off like a madman in pursuit of this urchin, who had been told to wait and didn't.

To his disgust and amazement, Nelson Lee never even suggested sending round to the Express Messenger Office at Charing Cross to find out whether the boy really came from there.

"You can, if you like," the detective told him. "But personally I rather think it is a waste of time. The boy was a fraud, without a doubt. Just as the car was that you were supposed to have sent to fetch me here."

"But, hang it all, I tell you I didn't send any car!" protested the major.

"No, I know you didn't," the detective assented. "Still, a car was sent, with a porter in War Office uniform in charge of it. But I had better tell you what occurred, perhaps, after I got inside."

So Nelson Lee related the fight for life he had had in that mad career through Seven Dials and on to Kingsway. Major Redley looked as if he were bewitched. It beat him entirely.

"Still, that is nothing," was his visitor's cool way of looking at it. "You had better get on and tell about these escaped prisoners, don't you think? To-night's makes the fourth in all, you say, and according to the message they may have occasion to borrow one or two more."

He let the major get into his stride then, while he sat listening with half-closed eyes, chewing a cigar which he did not light. It was a long recital, and each case necessarily bore a marked similarity to the other.

At night the roll was called, and all the prisoners locked in. Sentries guarded the dormitories so that no one could possibly pass out. Yet when morning came a man was missing; that was all they knew.

Nelson Lee looked more and more bored. At last he yawned outright.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I was up all last night and can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Then you would like us to defer this conversation till the morning, I suppose?" said the ruffled major.

"Not at all," was the prompt answer. "I was only thinking that the best thing would be for us to go over to this camp at Bromley now, and just see the place for ourselves. I could grasp things quicker then. But

"Oh, by the way," he broke off, "you can't leave this place, you say?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I can now," said the major. "My relief has just come on duty. So we will start when you like."

"I should like very much," said Nelson Lee. "We can be the first to inform the guard that another of their prisoners has flown. But we won't tell them that until I have had a look round and just see what vigilance is ordinarily kept. That will be best, I think."

As a matter of fact, the case promised to interest him hugely. It was a change of field for one thing. He got rather tired of tracking up the same old beaten paths of wrongdoing.

The matter of the secret "wireless" installation he had already dismissed from his mind. Not that he disbelieved in its existence. He had ample evidence of his own that it did in his adventure in the lethal car that night.

It was plain that there was a gang somewhere who were quietly tapping some of the War Office wireless messages. And if they were not one and the same with the men who were contriving these sensational escapes of

interned aliens, at least they had an interest in preventing Nelson Lee from being given the job of tracking them down.

Listening to-night to Major Redley's instructions to engage his services, they had seen their way, they thought, to intercept the detective and quietly make off with him.

But this, as has been said, he was not bothering about. The secret wireless station did exist; that could be taken for granted. But he was not going out to hunt for it to-night. It was this concentration camp he wanted to see. The rest he could tackle in due time.

CHAPTER III.

The Internment Camp.

SO Major Redley chartered a taxi and off they drove on a long and dreary journey across darkened London, to that dismallest place of all East End districts—Bromley-le-Bow.

Here, as at Stratford, on the further side of the Lea Marshes, there was a concentration camp, where enemy aliens were interned. The camp was nothing more than a disused boiler factory and yard surrounded by high barbed wire fences, guarded by military. The prisoners were all raked up from the purlieus of Whitechapel apparently.

Down mean and narrow streets the taxi bore Nelson Lee and his escort. Soon the stench of soap and chemical works, and a general atmosphere of petroleum, gas, and dirty water came wafting stronger and stronger to their nostrils.

Factories, goods sidings, gasworks, ramshackle sheds, and lumber heaps, stone yards, scrap iron yards, and canal basins, took the place of houses. Railways and waterways threaded the road above and below. It seemed as if London had been left behind and they were getting to the Back of Beyond.

At last they turned into a dingy street with a few mean cottages in it. What looked like a big stonemason's yard occupied half the length of it, and a canal bridge cut the middle. On the opposite side was a factory looking building devoid of windows, with a huge painted board on it "To let. These commodious premises, eminently suitable for engineering works, etc., etc."

This was Bromley War Prisoners Camp.

A burly Metropolitan policeman stood at the entrance gate. With him was an armed sentry with bayonet gleaming—a Territorial, as Nelson Lee quickly descried. Seeing a taxicab bearing down on them at this lone hour of morning—it was then half-past two o'clock—the men looked naturally suspicious and surprised.

The sentry stood alertly at the "slope"; the bobby unhitched his thumbs out of his belt and came forward. The cab pulled up, and out stepped Major Redley.

"Is the officer of the guard about, constable?" he inquired. "Give him my compliments, and tell him Major Redley, of the War Office, would like to speak with him."

The bobby looked dubious. So did the sentry. But the guard-room was just inside the closed wicket of the factory gate. They had but to pass the word back, and in a minute or two a smart young subaltern appeared.

The major showed him some kind of a pass he carried, and at once he and the detective were allowed inside.

"Is there some place where we can have a quiet chat without being overheard?" he inquired. So the subaltern led the way to his own dismal quarters, which once had been the manager's office. "Well, now," said the major, "first I'll introduce my friend with me. This is Mr. Nelson Lee, the detective, of whom you have doubtless heard. At the request of the War Office he has undertaken to inquire into the recent cases of escape which have been making this camp unpleasantly notorious. He is going to try and fathom how they were done. He is to have every facility for examining the whole place and everything in it, and to do just as he pleases, in fact. You will understand that, won't you, er Mr.—"

"Barham, sir," answered the subaltern promptly. "Yes, I understand."

He looked a likely lad, Nelson Lee thought, and not the sort to go to sleep or slack at his post. Yet that very night, apparently though he was still blissfully unaware of it, one of his prisoners had vanished from under his very nose.

How was it done, it beat everyone to imagine. Scotland Yard, after a fortnight's work had had to admit themselves completely baffled.

"Are Scotland Yard at work on the case now?" inquired Nelson Lee quickly.

"Well——" began the major.

"I mean I want a plain 'yes' or 'no,'" broke in Nelson Lee. "Because, as much as I admire the Yard, and have many of my greatest friends there, I seldom undertake a case which they have not entirely relinquished. It is not swank on my part. Merely that my methods and their's are inclined to clash sometimes."

"That is your ultimatum, then?" said the major.

"Absolutely. And not a new one. The police will be expecting it when they hear I have been called in."

So, of course, that was settled. Nelson Lee listened to all the measures that the combined police and military authorities had taken to solve the mystery of the escapes. He had to admit that every possible contingency seemed to have been guarded against.

"And so it has, I am sure," said the subaltern. "I don't think—in fact I am ready to stake my life on it that no more of the beggars will give us the slip now. That brute with the white beard and spectacles—Ringold, as he called himself—is the last who'll get away, you see."

"And he escaped—when?" asked Nelson Lee, with a scarcely perceptible wink to the major.

"Oh, three nights ago," was the blissful answer. "You have him on your list haven't you?"

The detective chuckled. He only wished he could see the youngster's face at roll call next morning, when he found that in the teeth of his boast another prisoner had bolted that very night.

Suddenly he began to take off his overcoat, next his dress coat and waistcoat. The major and the subaltern were staring at him as if he had gone mad, for he never said a word. There he stood in his shirtsleeves, tapping his prominent chin for a moment, deep in thought.

"Um, yes," he said at last, coming out of his reverie. "That will be the best thing, I think. I want a man of your guard," he added, turning to the officer, "who is near enough to my build to wear these," pointing to his discarded garments. "He will have to change into my shirt, too—and let him be clean-shaven, if possible. Do you think you can oblige me?"

The subaltern could, as it happened. He departed, leaving the major still staring dumbfounded. He wanted to know what on earth Nelson Lee was up to now.

But the detective seemed not to hear him. He had produced out of his pocket a tiny japanned tin box, which, when opened, revealed a number of miniature sticks of grease paint such as actors use.

There was also a tiny leveret's paw, lining pencils, and so forth. It was his emergency "make-up" box, which he always carried with him.

At that moment a perplexed-looking private was ushered in. He was in full kit, of course. Nelson Lee had him undress out of his khaki and swap clothes. While the Territorial changed into his evening-dress, the detective solemnly arrayed himself in his service kit, belts, bayonet, and all.

Then, with still never a word of what he was driving at, he took his grease paints, and with a few swift deft touches, began to work such transformations on the bewildered Tommy's countenance as made the two officers fairly gasp.

The man's own mother would not have known him when he was finished. He looked the typical stage detective that one sees in cheap melodrama, harsh, hard, and grim. Yet for all that there was a remote resemblance in every feature to Nelson Lee himself.

"And now Major Redley," said the latter, "I will explain to you what I want you to do, and why."

And he led the officer out of earshot of the others.

"You see, I have good reason to know, from the little incident I have described to-night," and he jerked his finger at the blood-stained handkerchief on his left hand, "that his gang, whoever they are, are perfectly aware that I have been engaged to take up this case."

The major grudgingly agreed.

"They will know," continued the detective, "that I have not only been engaged on the case, but that I have called upon you at the War Office, and that I am here now in fact, to take a walk round the sleeping-prisoners and generally spy out the land."

"They will, you think?" gasped the astonished major. "Well, what then? What would it matter if you did?"

"Nothing at all; except that a few of the prisoners are certain to be awake to see us pass. They will see a dark sinister-looking figure in evening-dress go stalking by, and when they are informed from outside that Nelson Lee, the detective, paid them a visit to-night, they will at once jump to the conclusion that the said figure was myself."

The major looked as if his head was buzzing with all this. He had had to do with many famous detectives, but never a one so strange and inscrutable as Nelson Lee. It was a revelation to see him set to work. His mind seemed to be ten streets ahead of his body all the time.

"You really think it possible that word will leak into the camp that you have been here to-night?" he ventured to protest again. For it was a direct reflection on the way the camp was run.

"I don't think—I know it," was Nelson Lee's uncompromising answer.

"This gang that can work a secret wireless that no one can detect and tap your telephone wires without your knowing it, would make short work of a simple problem like that."

"So, do as I request, please," he went on. "Promenade this man dressed up in my clothes round all the camp, and I will follow as your escort. It is quite simple!"

"Perfectly, if I only knew what lay behind it," said the major helplessly.

"Why, simply this," said Nelson Lee. "That to-morrow I want you to have me arrested as an enemy alien and interned here in this camp. And I don't want them to suspect that I am anybody but what my warrant acts

me forth to be—Hans Ludwig Rothstein of Hamburg, a fish-buyer's clerk of Grimsby, who has been hiding in Whitechapel since the outbreak of war. By the way, you might put those particulars down," he said coolly. "They will do for my papers of arrest, and I shall remember them. And tell the police they will find me outside the central gasworks in Bow Common Lane at three o'clock sharp, to-morrow, in a greasy, grey wig and spectacles, grey jacket, and old black trousers, munching a cold saveloy."

Nelson Lee stood to attention and saluted then, as a sign that his new role of "Terrier" had begun. The major taking the hint thereupon led the way back to the office again, where Lieutenant Barham and the Territorial private awaited them.

Nelson Lee often wondered what an alien prisoner's camp was like on the inside, but had never had time to get a pass to see.

However his curiosity was satisfied now. With all gravity Major Redley conducted the blushing private through what had been the old machine-shops, but were now dormitories. Here on lines of barrack cots some fifteen hundred captive Germans and Austrians lay snoring.

Huge tortoise-stoves spread a genial warmth through the gaunt, ugly sheds, so that the place was not uncomfortable. The sleepers looked snug enough, too. Here and there, though, an odd man or two awoke with a start, to stare sullenly on the visitors as they passed by.

All eyes were on the figure in evening dress at the major's side. Not one had a glance to bestow on the humble Tommy walking at his heels. The detective smiled.

From the dormitories they passed through to what were the feeding and recreation rooms by day. Again and again the major glanced back to see how much Nelson Lee's trained eye was taking in of all these places. But generally he seemed to be wasting time staring at some print on the walls as he passed. He did not seem interested, the smallest bit in fact.

At last a door carefully guarded by double sentries led them into the exercise yard. The cool night air was welcome after the tepid heat inside. And still Nelson Lee said never a word.

The yard was paved with cracked concrete, worn to great holes already by the eternal tramp of fifteen hundred pairs of heels. All round it were the high barbed-wire fences, through which ran "live" strands heavily charged with electric current. Outside the dim figures of armed sentries patrolled up and down.

Nelson Lee glanced round all this casually, and looked at the major as much as to say he had seen enough for his purpose. So they returned through the old factory again to the manager's office—now the officers' mess.

"Now, my man, that is all right," said Nelson Lee to the Terrier, bidding him get back into his own clothes again. "The only thing is, that I want you and your comrades not to breathe a single word about this little masquerade, nor speak of it even among yourselves. This place is choc-a-bloc with Continental crooks of the shadiest type," he told them. "I have seen a dozen, at least, while just passing through, who ought to be in Wormwood Scrubs, and not here. No doubt, Scotland Yard knows them as well as I do. I am only warning you that every brick and plank in this place has ears. Whatever you say even in whispers will be all round the camp like wildfire in two twos."

He was wiping the grease-paint off the soldier's features as he said this. In another minute or two the man was dismissed to his duty again, and Nelson Lee was satisfying himself once more in his own clothes.

"And now, Major Redley, I am at your service," he said, with a smile. "And to you, Mr. Barham, good-night, and many thanks for a most

interesting experience. To-morrow I hope to make closer acquaintance with your camp from the standpoint of a prisoner. Hans Ludwig Rothstein will be my name; you won't forget. And don't be too stiff on me. I shall have to be just a little privileged in my movements."

This was promised, needless to say, and Nelson Lee went blissfully home to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

"Hans Ludwig Rothstein."

"NIPPER, you young rip, come here and help me tie up this hand of mine."

The bed-room door opened, and Nelson Lee's youthful assistant pushed his astonished head in answer to the call.

It was next morning, and a particularly lovely one, as Nelson Lee remarked, with a sigh.

For he had not committed himself to being arrested and interned as a sausage-eating alien in a squalid old factory set in a wilderness of soapworks and lumber heaps, where the atmosphere was enough to choke a frog.

"Great Gemini, guv'nor, wherever did you collect that?" demanded Nipper solicitously, as he eyed the ugly, gaping cut caused when Nelson Lee dashed out the car window with his fist.

His boss did not tell him at first. But later on he narrated his strange adventure of the night before and this new quest on which he had embarked.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" was Nipper's characteristic way of receiving the news. "Escaped prisoners! Springheeled Germans bounding over barbed wire fences like blooming kangaroos! So that's the new caper is it?"

"It is, you disreputable young monkey!" laughed Nelson Lee. "And now I'll tell you what part you're to play in the business."

"Right-oh! And what's that?" he demanded, his eyes dancing.

"Stop at home and do absolutely nothing," was the shattering reply.

"Oh—guv'nor!"

"Until you hear from me," added his boss dryly. "Unless, of course, you don't hear from me when you'll do the usual thing."

"Which is?"

"Why, start and look for me, of course—what else?" demanded Nelson Lee severely.

"Then you think it possible I may not hear from you?"

"Possible?" frowned his guv'nor. "You've been with me—how many years, you young blockhead, and you ask that? Haven't you learnt yet that in detective work all things are possible, particularly when you and I are on the trail?"

Nipper's heart leapt at that compliment. It was just one of those little touches that made him adore his guv'nor, so that he was ready to lay down his life for him.

"This gang we are up against this time is no ordinary combination of sharps and thieves merely," continued Nelson Lee. "It will have the whole resources of the German Government at its back, you may be sure. We shall find it composed of the keenest and cunningest brains the Kaiser can command. And they are up to some big and dirty work between them. I'll stake my life on that."

"Helping frowzy East End foreigners to escape over a barbed wire fence, you mean?" suggested Nipper slyly, to draw him.

And he succeeded. If Nelson Lee's nearest hand had not been the injured one he would have caught the cheeky rascal by the ear.

Still, the detective realised that if Nipper was to be of any use, he must take him into his full confidence regarding his suspicions and plans.

"You see I have been inquiring of the major who these four prisoners are exactly who have escaped one by one," he went on. "So far as the police know they are just men taken haphazard. But is that likely?"

"You mean they are members of this gang that got swept up and shoved in there. And the work can't go on until their pals got them out?" suggested Nipper.

"That's much more like it," assented his boss. "And as for their asserting that every prisoner they've got there is poor, that's nothing. If the gang's headquarters is in Whitechapel it isn't likely they're going to swell around in tail coats and top hats. They're going to dress as the natives do, naturally."

"Then you think that their headquarters must be round these parts?"

"I haven't begun to think at all yet, my son," said Nelson Lee. "I'm just soaking things in, so to speak. But what I have already decided on, you have, too. And that is, that the police seem to have swept up by accident four or five men who are indispensable evidently to some big job on hand."

"And it isn't for this country's good either, or it wouldn't be connected up with a secret wireless installation and a motor-car fitted up like the lethal chamber at the Dogs' Home," finished Nelson Lee.

He went in to breakfast then. As Nipper used to say, "nothing put the gov'nor off his oats," and breakfast was always his big meal of the day. After it he did not care when he tasted another bite until next morning.

A big briar pipe going, and then he was happy. The ordinary business of the morning was soon polished off. There were interviews to be postponed, minor cases that could wait to be shelved. Nelson Lee reckoned that this camp mystery that had already defied the united talents of Scotland Yard ought to take him roughly forty-eight hours to get at the bottom of.

"Or say Friday morning," he told Nipper coolly, as they were making out their diary. "If I'm not back here by Friday at ten, and you haven't heard from me, meantime—well you can start to inquire after me then, but not before."

Nipper duly noted this. Nelson Lee went out then as arranged, to catch Major Redley at his club. He was back after lunch, but Nipper did not know he had returned.

At a quarter-past two the youngster was startled to see emerging from his boss's bed-room a greasy, hump-shouldered, old ruffian, with spectacles, bushy grey hair, and a red nose, suggestive of the bottle.

"Here, you blooming old waster, where have you sprung from?" cried Nipper, springing to bar the stranger's path before he could escape down the stairs.

"Vat you say? Vate haf I come from?" echoed the fellow.

"Yea; you sneak, thief!" roared Nipper. "You've been in my gov'nor's bed-room sneaking something, but, by Jimmy, you don't go out of here till you've turned out your pockets. So, now then—over my dead body fir—"

Nipper suddenly seemed to choke, for he realised that it was his boss himself that he was talking to. Never had he seen such a perfect disguise, and this was saying a good deal where Nelson Lee was concerned.

The detective fairly shouted with laughter, for to hoodwink such an astute customer as Nipper was no mean triumph.

"Well, there's no fear of any of these sauerkrauters spotting me if you couldn't, young'un," he chuckled.

So off he shuffled, his penny saveloy in his pocket that he was to be munching, so that the police should know "Hans Ludwig Rothstein" when they saw him.

And they did. In another hour Hans Ludwig had been deposited in Bromley Prisoners' Concentration Camp, as an unregistered enemy alien at large.

A burly London policeman who evidently quite believed he was the genuine article walked him off from the police-station after the arrest, and delivered him over to the Territorial guard. Nor did the latter suspect that he was Nelson Lee in disguise. The detective was even handed over to the private who had impersonated him the previous night, and the latter never took a second glance at him.

The fifteen hundred alien prisoners were seated at their evening meal when "Hans Ludwig Rothstein" came shuffling in to join them—shabby and sullen.

"Phew!" he gasped in disgust. "What a mob! Like pigs round a trough—just look at them." And truth to tell it was enough to make any clean-living Britisher sick merely to watch them shovelling the rough but plentiful fare into their guzzling jaws, using knife and fork alternately, as if it were their last meal for a month, and they had only two minutes to bolt it in.

Sneering, supercilious Prussians, blue-eyed, milder-looking Saxons, round-faced and rather jolly Bavarians, greasy-haired Poles, Slavs, Czechs, and Magyars—it reminded Nelson Lee of the steerage quarters of a third-rate emigrant ship to America.

Still, there it was, and there was he, and if he permitted himself to stare like this much longer, with furtive eyes already watching him, he saw that he would be giving himself away at the outset.

So, mustering up his best colloquial German, which was good, needless to say, he shuffled to an empty space in one of the long tables and sat down.

"Halloo, kamerad! Woher kommen sie!" hailed his next neighbour, a broad cheekboned sailor he might have been by his garb. "Ich hoffe dass sie sich wohl befinden."

"Ah, ja! Ich bin ganz wohl," growled Nelson Lee, who saw the other meant to make a butt of him.

"Freut mich zu horen, mein freund!" declared the sailor, smiting him on the back amid the grins of his neighbours. "And have you just been nabbed by the verdommt polizisten—eh, old rednose?" he inquired, still in German.

Nelson Lee ground his teeth, as if in rage at the recollection, and said he had. They wanted to know where he had come from. He told them from Grimsby, though that was over a month ago. He had been hiding in various places since.

"Grimsby," quoth the sailor. He knew the place well. He had worked in and out of there on a German trawler many a trip. He wanted to know what "Hans Ludwig" knew about the place.

Nelson Lee told him he had been clerk to some large buyers and exporters of fish to the Continental market, and he gave the name of a well-known firm. The fellow knew it at once. His skipper had sold them many a catch, in fact.

"The dickens he has!" thought Nelson Lee. "Well, I hope you don't

know too much about them, that's all, for I've only seen their name in a trade catalogue."

However, some wag luckily had been filching the sailor's slab of corned beef while he had been pulling the new-comer's leg. Suddenly he saw it was gone, and that diverted his attention from the detective, fortunately.

Up he jumped with a bellow of rage, and, of course, picked on the wrong man. But that did not matter a straw. His victim had long side-whiskers, and looked as if he had been a funeral mute in happier days.

"Verfluchte schweinhund!" roared the sailor, clutching him by his face-sins and giving him a resounding spank across the cheek which knocked him flying backwards into a tin pail of scalding hot tea just behind him.

"Million teufels!" screeched the whiskered one, scrambling up promptly and aiming a swiping blow with the pail at his attacker's head.

The sailor, however, ducked. The result was that a stout man with a bald head and a carbuncle, who was routing and grunting over his food like a hog, got the pail across the back of his skull.

"Ja-ja-ja! Woof! Ouch! Yab!" bawled the fat one, bouncing to his feet then, and kicking away the trestle of the long table in the process. Crash! went the whole affair, and in a trice the whole long dining-room was in an uproar.

People talk of the German as phlegmatic, but never was there a greater mistake. To a man almost they danced about and shook their fists, and blew themselves out like bullfrogs, and sputtered and raged, while the sailor, the funeral mute, and the bald-headed man rolled on the floor, clawing and pummelling each other like three tomcats. The place might have been the padded room of a lunatic asylum.

By this time the Territorial guard had come hurrying on the scene. There was a big Cockney sergeant in charge. It did Nelson Lee's heart good to see the way he handled the Teutons.

"Now, you limpin' lobworms, wot's all this about?" he demanded, taking the sailor by the slack of his pants and his collar and literally hurling him aside like a sack. The fat man he quelled with a thunderous smack on his bald head, which left the scarlet impress of his five fingers there next morning even.

The gentleman with the face-sins was of sterner stuff, however. He resented being pushed backwards over a chair, and flew at the sergeant as if to have his life.

"Oh, so that's the talk, is it?" said the Territorial, dodging the first rush and planting his left flush on the Teuton's nose. The poor man screeched an agonised screech, but before he could collapse the Cockney had given him another broadside in the ribs which absolutely folded him up like a claspknife.

"Now, then," breathed the sergeant. "any more of you want a taste of the dominos while I'm about it—eh? Well, then, set down and set quiet, and let's 'ear no more of it. Go on, you slobberin' pigs!"

In a German prisoner's camp the chances are that someone would have been flogged or even shot over the affair. But here it was all over and done with. There was no one put in the guard-room even. Indeed, the Territorials were grinning all the time.

Nelson Lee, whose only fear was for his grey wig, in case some excited German clutched it in his excitement, was spotted by the sergeant then and told to go to the canteen and draw a ration of his own.

"And see you bloomin' well keep tight 'old of it till you've got it down

your neck, or these coxes'll 'ave it off yer 'fore you can say 'knife.' " was the non-com.'s kindly caution.

Nelson Lee profited by the advice and his own recent experience. He came shuffling back to find his sailor friend scowling at an empty plate before him, supperless.

It was the detective's chance to ingratiate himself with the sailor, and he did. His ration of bread and corned beef was enough, anyway, for two of his moderate appetite.

He was a hearty fellow, and, luckily, was full of those mysterious escapes of some of his comrades, which had thrown the camp into a ferment of delight and expectation.

Nelson Lee affected not to know anything about these triumphs, which the perfidious English seemingly had not allowed to leak into the papers.

"No, the dogs; that is always the way!" declared the seaman furiously. "But all the same, it is true that man after man has been disappearing during these last three weeks or so. We thought that the soldiers had murdered them at first.

"Well, perhaps they have," grumbled "Hans Ludwig" sourly. "They vanish, you say, but who is to know that they really get away as you think?"

"Ha!" exulted his new friend. "That is telling. But we know, never fear! Our comrades do escape without a doubt, though how it is done is not revealed except to the one whose turn it is next to vanish 'up the schlot,' as we chaff our guards."

"'Schlot!' Hallo! That was the word signed at the end of the wireless message the major showed me," thought Nelson Lee, under his breath. He asked innocently what "schlot"—chimney—his friend referred to. Whereupon the other only laughed.

"Not one of the chimneys that you think, though there is a big enough one right close to the camp here," he said. "But that has nothing to do with the way our comrades escape. It is merely a joke-name used by the syndicate.

"But there, that is all I can tell you honestly," he broke off. "I know no more about it than that, and perhaps never will unless my turn comes—and I hope it may—for our friends outside to help me to fly from this accursed hole!"

"Humph!" grunted "Hans Ludwig," and said he hoped his luck might turn in that direction, too. "But no fear of that." He laughed hopelessly. "This 'syndicate,' as you call it, will not bother about a fish-merchant's clerk. They will be friends of the men they have helped to get away only."

"Ach, that is so," assented the sailor, depressed. "It must be, at least. Though never were the men who are gone ever seen to talk to each other. They seemed strangers just. But two, we know, were really friends outside."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, though only in the mildest surprise. "And how are you so sure of that?"

"Because they had worked together in a chemische-fabrik at Grays, near London here. Another man recognised them, though they would not admit it!"

"Hallo!" breathed Nelson Lee softly to himself. "Two men who both worked in the same chemical factory, and yet denied that they had ever met before. Well, come, that is one small fact I've gleaned, anyway, and not an unimportant one, either, or I'm a Dutchman!"

CHAPTER V.

The First Clue.

BUT tell me," pursued Nelson Lee, "these fool Englanders—surely they don't let their prisoners slip them without making some fuss about it?"

"Puss!" quoth the sailor. "Teufel! You should hear the row they kick up. And their police, too. We have had their so-called detectives down in droves staring at us and turning the place upside-down. There was one brought here last night—at two in the morning even."

"You don't say so?" said "Hans Ludwig," repressing a smile.

"Yes, a man who fancies himself at the game, too, so they tell me," continued the sailor. "Nelson Lee his name is. An ugly-looking skunk if ever there was one. I happened to wake up just as he passed, and took a good look at him. They've all been wanting to know what he was like to-day," laughed the sailor.

"Is that so," said Nelson Lee, thinking he would give a sovereign to know who "all" meant exactly, yet not daring to ask. However, his unsuspecting friend pointed out one fellow, a round-faced, rather jolly-looking Bavarian, as the principal inquirer.

Just then, though, the meal was over. Orderlies had been told off to clear away and wash up the dishes. As the latest comer, "Hans Ludwig" was added to these. He was glad, for it permitted him to escape outside, a privilege not allowed to the rest now dusk had fallen.

"And now what about this tall chimney that chap spoke about," he thought to himself, glancing round, though he reckoned he knew which one it was already. There was only one, as it happened, a tall stack belonging to another factory a hundred yards away. This looked as if it were "to let" also.

The word "schlot" with which both aerogram and written message were signed meant "chimney." What use this shaft could be, though, in aiding a prisoner to escape out of this barbed-wire ring, Nelson Lee could not imagine.

Having washed his share of dishes, he was sent back to the recreation building again. Here pipes and cigarettes were in full blast, and card and domino parties had already been made up.

The detective wondered what our own poor interned prisoners at Ruhleben, and other German camps, would think if they saw them now, well-fed and snug as could be.

"Yes, by Jove! What fools we British are! How these brutes must laugh at us. Why, I do declare, they've actually got a piano going over yonder!"

And this was true enough. A sing-song was being started in one corner, and since his sailor friend was too deeply immersed in some gambling game to notice him further, Nelson Lee drifted over to listen to the music.

The same stout Bavarian that had already been pointed out to him was in the "chair." But, for all his ready jest, the detective noticed how his eyes were ever roving, lighting on a face here and another there—always the same faces, and always casting his glance back to where Nelson Lee was seated.

Yet no glance of friendly recognition seemed ever to meet his. The eyes of the men he looked at remained as dull and apathetic as if they had never spoken to each other before.

At last, though, one of the men he had been staring at got up as if to

stretch his legs in a saunter round among the card players. A minute or two later, though, the detective found him at his elbow.

"Guten abend, fremde!" saluted the fellow, and Nelson Lee wished him "good-evening" back.

The man squeezed into the seat beside him and borrowed matches. He also inquired where "Hans Ludwig Rothstein" hailed from, and the detective told him, of course.

But he was on his guard. With that unfailing instinct which had made him what he was, he scented that this man had been put on to draw him—that the stout man in the "chair" had got his eyes on him. That he was suspected, in fact; at any rate, he was to be catechized.

Nelson Lee, though, was equal to the ordeal. He knew all about Grimshy and the work on the fish pontoons, and he knew Hamburg, too, where he was supposed to have been born. So his interrogator got small change out of him.

He, on the other hand, by following the glances darted at them, was pretty well able to mark down the clique of which this man was emissary.

That he had told the fellow all about himself to his satisfaction Nelson Lee did not doubt. But he was wrong as it turned out. His disguise might not have been actually penetrated, but "Hans Ludwig Rothstein" had been written down by his fellows as a suspect, and a man to be watched.

Bedtime came in due course. A patrol of the guard appeared, and at once concert and cards ceased. The motley mob were evidently docile enough in spite of the easy treatment. The roll was called, and another day was finished.

Nelson Lee's plunk cot in the close-packed rows was a good way removed from his sailor friend's, but he preferred that. His own was nearer the door, and his immediate neighbours looked the sort to sleep through earthquakes.

He was right. They snored like foghorns, all of them. And on top of that, some works near by, with a rasping, rickety steam crane, seemed to be working overtime, and making enough fuss about it to awaken the dead.

There were other subdued, scuffling noises, too, which kept him ever pricking his ears to tell where they came from. They seemed to sound rather from the roof.

Next morning he was up early to get a quick wash before the rush commenced. However, he need not have worried. Washing is not a hobby of the Teutons, as he might have remembered.

Breakfast over, all hands were ordered out to exercise in the yard. The whole fifteen hundred of them came pouring out like children from school. Certainly they were a motley crew. There were men in tweed knickerbocker suits, tail coats, greasy evening-dress even, but most in rags. The latter had been swept in from the poorer districts of Whitechapel and Bow.

Waiters, hairdressers, commercial travellers, sailors, butchers, and pastry-cooks—every trade and calling, seemingly, had its representatives. They looked cheery and contented, too, in spite of their lot.

It was the stout, round-faced Bavarian, though, that Nelson Lee wanted to get his eye on again. And there he was, with a knot of hangers-on around him.

Round and round the knots of prisoners tramped, moving and chatting as they pleased within the barbed-wire fence, behind which the Territorial sentries paced with fixed bayonets.

Some of the Tommies off-duty came into the yard with their charges, and a couple of old footballs were brought out. In a trice an impromptu game was in full swing.

Nelson Lee took the opportunity, while dodging the scuffling mob of

players, to take closer stock of the camp's surroundings. To the right was the other factory, with its tall chimney-stalk, which he had marked the evening before. The only remarkable thing about it by daylight was the lightning-conductor reaching to the summit, for it looked brand-new!

Bounding the camp on the other side was what appeared to be a busy stonemason's yard, with an overhead craneway for shifting heavy weights from point to point. It was this that had been making all the racket the previous night.

A ten-foot paling enclosed all the camp exercise-yard, to say nothing of the double barbed fence.

"The beggars would have to be pretty spry to slip away over that lot!" decided the detective.

In fact, the more he tried to puzzle it out, the more mystified he grew. Portland Prison looked no more hopeless than this.

On the other side was the railway viaduct, with yawning, empty arches. A goods train came lumbering along just then, the driver and stoker hanging out of the engine cab to watch the crowd of prisoners below. Then a local appeared, coming the other way.

Nelson Lee watched idly. Very few besides himself even lifted their eyes. Yet one did, he noticed, and this was the Bavarian.

Among the passengers there was curiosity enough. Many had their heads out of the windows to gaze at the captives as if they were caged beasts in a show. One, Nelson Lee noticed, had a copy of a periodical in his hand, its orange cover making a vivid touch of colour in the line of grimy coaches.

"Here, one moment!" gasped the detective, suddenly smitten with an idea. He turned, to dart a glance at the Bavarian, for who knew but that this might be some signal.

Sure enough, there the fellow was, his eyes fixed furtively on the passing train. A moment's hesitation, and then his hand went up to his mouth, and next the other was clapped on his cap as if to keep it from being blown away, whereat the man holding the paper let it blow open, hiding the orange cover, while he also clapped his hand to his hat, and then seemed to be rubbing a cinder out of his eyes.

A moment later the train had vanished on its way.

"Now, am I only an ass, or was that an outside accomplice signalling something to my stout friend?" thought Nelson Lee, turning to look for his Bavarian again.

But the man had swung on his heel, and was lost in the restless crowd. The next moment the detective heard, to his astonishment and chagrin, his name, "Hans Ludwig Rothstein," being shouted up and down the yard by a corporal. He answered with a guttural "Hier!"

"Oh, there you are! The officer, Lieutenant Barham, wants to see you. You're to come with me," was the message.

It maddened Nelson Lee, for he had most carefully instructed the officer not to send for him or take any notice of him until he had himself given him the tip. Now all eyes were attracted to him, of course, as he was marched away.

"All right, you young ass! I'll give you a piece of my mind over this—see if I don't!" he was breathing, as he was ushered into the private room of the officer of the guard.

However, he didn't, for a surprise awaited him. His friend of the War Office, Major Redley, was there as well, and looking unmistakably constrained and anxious. For a moment the major looked thunderstruck. At a sign from him, the escort retired.

"I say, I am awfully sorry. I can see you're upset at our sending for you after all you said," began the major, "but I have had worrying news.

You haven't hit on any clue to the escapes yet by any chance, have you?" He broke off eagerly.

"Well, I've hardly had time, do you think?" retorted the detective. "Still, you go ahead! You have had bad news, you say?"

"Merely a rumour—an anonymous letter," was the reply. "And quite likely it's bluff. But, coming on top of these mysterious disappearances, which have baffled everyone——"

"Let me see the letter," broke in Nelson Lee dryly. "What is it about?"

"Why, a warning of some great disaster threatening half London, by the sound of it. But see, there it is! Read it for yourself."

And the major handed over a sheet of paper, on which a dozen lines were written in an unmistakably German hand:

"To English Friends," it ran,—"Take care! There is a horrible plot by certain spies preparing for great slaughter of the people of London. Watch Bromley Prisoners' Camp particularly. That is all I know.—Well-Wisher."

"Well, what do you think of it?" ventured the major. "Funny, isn't it?"

Nelson Lee did not reply for a moment.

"A horrible plot!" he echoed at last. "Um!"

"Then you do think there is something in it?" persisted the major anxiously. "Does it mean dynamite? Are they going to start a huge series of bomb outrages, and have we by any chance raked in half their gang, and so crippled their scheme temporarily—as you suggested before? That would account for these infernal escapes."

"Oh, say something! Man alive," he implored, since still the detective had not answered, "have you discovered nothing? No clue at all?"

"I have found nothing definite," was Nelson Lee's cool reply. "Still, there are one or two little things—mere straws, which may, perhaps, show how the wind blows. But I prefer not to mention them just yet."

"By the way," he added, turning to Lieutenant Barham, "there is a man in here who rather interests me. They call him Ruski, and he looks like a fat Bavarian. He's evidently a boss amongst them, for he took the chair at a sort of sing-song last night. Can you tell me who he is?"

The lieutenant turned up his register. Fritz Ruski was the man, evidently, he was referring to. He had been employed in a big nitrate works at Stratford before he was interned.

"Ah, chemicals again—eh?" quoth the detective, recalling the other two men the sailor had told him about.

At last he did consent to tell the two officers about the man in the passing train, and his belief that these were signals that were being made and answered.

"Still, that's all right! You leave it to me," he added coolly, as if he had the whole plot at his finger-ends, when, as a matter of fact, he was just as perplexed as they.

"The only thing is that, now I am here, I had better not go back among that mob again. I suppose prisoners do come and go like that? It won't make them suspect me more than I believe they do already?"

The lieutenant assured him that it was quite a common thing for men interned to be suddenly taken out of one camp and perhaps sent to another, or even released. It all depended on circumstances.

"Then I'll tell you what I am going to do to-night," said Nelson Lee. "I am just going to lie out on your roof and watch. I don't want any fuss made. In fact, the sentries had better not know anything about my being up there."

The sub warned him that he stood a chance of being shot if they didn't. But that did not bother Nelson Lee. He had stood fire too often before in his career as a crime investigator to be frightened of a bullet now.

So that night after dusk saw him creeping out on the slates of the factory roof. It was from here that those weird, scuffling noises had come the previous night. He wanted to find out whether those were real, and, if so, what caused them.

Moreover, his vantage point afforded him a good view of the exercise-yard and adjacent premises and street. And, in any case, it was vastly preferable to being mewed up with these snoring hogs of Germans down below.

So the detective stretched himself out to cock eyes and ears and do a quiet think.

First, there was this "syndicate" that signed itself "Schlot," and sported a secret wireless apparatus that the authorities couldn't locate. From the first Nelson Lee had made up his mind that it was this gang that was plotting these escapes of prisoners from Bromley Camp. And, from what he had gathered already, he was right, he was sure. The motive was plain. By some lucky fluke the police had happened to rake in certain members of the syndicate without whom, evidently, some secret scheme they were hatching could not proceed.

What was this plot? was the next question. The anonymous warning which the War Office had received that day might refer to it, or it might not. Nelson Lee thought it did.

It might be a series of dynamite outrages, as the major had suggested. At any rate, the detective had made up his mind that it had something to do with chemicals, and chemicals of a rare sort presumably, since the syndicate were driven to all this trouble to steal back the men who alone, perhaps, understood their working.

"So there you are!" soliloquised Nelson Lee. "That's the cards I hold in the deal. Now we shall see what the enemy play to them."

He was keeping his eyes skinned all this time for any sight of signal lights which might be flashing from any building near by. For he could hardly imagine that more signs such as he had seen passed from the train could be all the information the gang had to work by.

He wanted to see what this stoneyard, too, was up to, working so late at night. There was the steam crane hard at it, as usual. It looked to be raising long slabs of undressed granite from a barge in the canal beside the yard, and conveying them along to the mason's sheds.

This was legitimate enough, of course. Though the detective wondered what all the rush could be, that they had to work far into the night on the job.

Certainly, there could be no question of the crane being used as a sort of fishing rod for hauling prisoners out of the exercise yard by. For the overhead trackway on which it travelled up and down, at no point approached nearer than a good two hundred feet to the outermost barbed wire fence.

Then suddenly, Nelson Lee noticed that the crane having run to the extreme end of its rails was no longer winding up its load of stone, though the engine was busy over something.

The detective lay and watched. And now, from a point right in the opposite direction, he seemed to hear a distinct twang like the vibrating of a banjo string. He twisted his neck, but could distinguish nothing in the darkness.

Nor did the solitary sentry in the yard below seem to have heard it. He was pacing his beat down under the rear wall on which Nelson Lee was stretched. It was here that the door of the prisoners sleeping quarters

opened into the exercise yard. No one could emerge from there without his seeing them.

But it was the twanging noise that worried the detective. He peered and pried. Twice again he seemed to hear it, though it might have been imagination. For the last time it appeared to come from straight over his head. The crane had already begun to travel backwards, then along its line of rails. He watched it keenly.

A second later an unmistakable sound broke the stillness. It came from quite close by—from the roof itself in fact, as Nelson Lee could swear.

"Now what was that?" he asked himself under his breath. "Yes. There it is again. And not on the roof but under it. It's coming from that skylight there."

The factory roof was built on the zig-zag plan. The slates rose ridge by ridge, running the length of the building. The reverse face of each ridge was glazed to admit light to what had been the machine shops beneath. At intervals were skylights hinged at the top. It was from one of these that the mysterious scrapings and shufflings were proceeding now.

Unluckily, it was close to the very spot where Nelson Lee was crouching. If it were anyone really creeping out by it, he must come full upon the detective stretched flat in the lead gutter.

"Still—can't help that," decided Nelson Lee. "Here I am, and I've got to chance it just. And—hallo! Well I'm blowed! There is the beggar's head stuck out at the skylight looking round. Now, how in thunder did he manage to swarm up there?"

The fellow had not spotted him yet. Nelson Lee himself could merely make out the dim shape of a bullet head, and that was all.

And then he remembered. These skylights were opened and shut by an arrangement of iron rods which, when turned by a handle at the bottom, revolved some contrivance of cogs at the top.

The authorities foolishly had left these just as they were. And here was the result. Some active athlete was using them to climb up by wriggling out under the skylight, and perambulating the roof to do as he chose.

This would not help him to escape from the prison camp perhaps, but it might go a long way towards it.

"Well, why doesn't the beggar come out? What is he still hanging there like a monkey for?" wondered Nelson Lee, since the head never budged. In fact, after a long pause, it slowly sank back out of sight again.

However, the fellow had not vanished altogether. Little by little it came creeping up into view again.

"I believe he spots something. Perhaps he can see me here like a bundle, and wonders what on earth I can be."

And so it seemed. With just its eyes above the level of the window sill, the head remained watching him. There was not a sound from anywhere. It was as if the whole world hung breathless, while these two stalked each other.

But Nelson Lee was too old a hand at the game to wink even so much as an eyelid. At last it looked as if his patience was to be rewarded. Slowly the head raised itself, and now the detective could make out who it belonged to.

It was the stout Bavarian, Karl Ruski. With an agility remarkable for a man of his build, he drew himself up by his arms and began to slide through under the skylight on to the leads.

Nelson Lee got ready. Gathering his limbs under him, he half rose to clear with him.

At that very instant, however, a second figure he had not seen, came leaping on him from behind. A stunning blow smote him on the back of

the neck—a blow which felled him like an ox, so that he struck his head with terrible force against the brick coping as he dropped. His senses flew from him in a tornado of flame, and he remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER VI.

A Surprise for Nipper.

NIPPER did not have to wait until the expiry of the third day for news of his boss. It came next morning, and was brought by no less a personage than Major Redley himself.

The youngster saw how agitated he was as he was ushered in. He guessed there had been bad news somewhere.

To his surprise then, the officer began by inquiring whether Nelson Lee was in.

"In!" echoed Nipper blankly. "How could he be in? He was taken disguised as a German alien, to Bromley Camp on Tuesday of course. Surely you knew that, sir?"

The major evidently did. But he was not prepared to discuss affairs of state with an office boy, as he put Nipper down to be.

"Office boy," snorted the youngster indignantly. "So that's what you think I am? Well, I may be a boy, and I certainly am in an office here, but I am Mr. Nelson Lee's confidential assistant, as anyone who knows him ought to know, too. So, if you've got any bad news about him, the sooner you let me have it the better, do you hear?" he rapped, making the major quite jump with astonishment.

"Is that so, indeed," said the officer still dubiously. "Well, since you know a little about it——"

"A little! I know everything," cut in Nipper.

"The dickens you do," gasped the major. "Well, in that case let me tell you that Bromley Camp, where you chief went on behalf of the War Office, has again been living up to its sinister reputation. Not only has another prisoner escaped last night, but Mr. Nelson Lee has vanished, too, into the bargain."

"Vanished! Do you mean that there has been foul play?" demanded Nipper, reading already the answer in the other's eyes. And he was right.

"Unfortunately I am afraid I do," answered Major Redley. "I had hoped to find from you that you had news of him—that he might have returned here in fact. But I can see that that chance is knocked on the head."

"Most certainly it is," said Nipper. "I have seen nothing of my guv'nor since Tuesday, as I say, nor heard a single word from him. That though, was as arranged——"

However, just at that moment, there was another ring at the door below.

"That will be the detective officers from Scotland Yard," explained the major. "I took the liberty of 'phoning them to come on here, so that we could talk the case over, should the worst come to the worst——"

"Great Scott! Look here, sir; what do you mean?" insisted Nipper.

"You talk as if there was a chance of my boss being dead. So out with it: is there or isn't there?"

The demand was peremptory. Before the major could reply, however, Detective Inspectors Churls and Jarrett were announced and shown in.

Nipper knew them both, of course, and if Major Redley had any doubts

as to the youngster status in the detective world; they were set at rest then. For the Scotland Yard men greeted him even as an equal.

They knew less of the errand on which they had been summoned than he did. When they heard that it concerned Bromley Prisoners' Camp, their eyebrows went up. For Nelson Lee, according to his custom, had expressly stipulated that the Yard must drop the case before he took it in hand.

Their eyebrows went up still more when it transpired that, not merely had another prisoner escaped under their rivals very nose, but that he, too, had vanished as mysteriously as the rest.

The major had just come hurrying from the camp, and knew all the details that were to be known. He related Nelson Lee's plan for getting himself interned as an unregistered alien. He had seen the luckless officer of the guard, and had heard from him about the supposed messages being signalled from the passing train.

"Last night, Mr. Lee resolved to climb up on to the roof of the prisoners sleeping quarters and keep watch from there. His orders were that no one was to disturb him, and that he would come down when he thought fit. Consequently, no one went near the roof until after roll call this morning, when it was found that a fresh prisoner had vanished. They went up to look for Mr. Lee then to tell him. But, to their dismay, there was no sign of him either. All that was left was a pool of blood——"

"Of blood!" echoed Nipper aghast.

"Yes, and a sock filled with sand, which had evidently been used to sell him, by someone creeping on him from behind."

The detectives looked no less astonished than Nipper. For they had both been engaged in making investigation at Bromley Camp before being relieved of the case. It had beaten them absolutely.

Nor had Nelson Lee been much more successful, so far as they could see. But he had drawn a bow at a venture—an unlucky one for himself as it proved. He must have stumbled into this new prisoner in the act of making his escape, and got the worst of the encounter obviously.

"Great Scott, guv'nor—why, what's this?" Nipper cried. For it was Nelson Lee himself who entered the room at that moment, and at his very last gasp as was only too plain.

Where he had been to goodness knew. He was covered in mud, while round his head was the sleeve of a shirt by the look of it, soaked with half dried blood.

He lay there, white and exhausted, while Nipper pillowed his head on his knee, yelling for someone to come down and help him. The detectives were soon at his side. Together they lifted Nelson Lee and helped get him as far as his bedroom. But he would not let them take him there, signing to carry him straight to his office instead. He was done in body, but his spirit was indomitable as ever.

They laid him down and got brandy. Then they unwound the bandage and saw the hideous gash above his temple. They sent for a doctor then, though again he protested feebly with his hands.

The next thing was to undress him. For his clothes were soaked, as if he had been in swimming, as, indeed, he had as proved afterwards. What the queer mud was that bespattered his garments though, beat them all. It was full of glittering particles like mica. One pocket had a quantity of the stuff in it.

Seeing them examining it, Nelson Lee signed for a writing tablet to be given to him. On this he tried to scrawl something in a wandering hand. But the effort proved too much for him, and he fainted away.

But the doctor had arrived by then. He reported that there was a taxicab man still outside beginning to clamour for his fare. He was not out

whether it was an escaped lunatic, or one of those Spring Heeled Jacks from Bromley Camp that he had been carrying, but he meant to have his money anyway.

The police had him in promptly. They demanded to know where and how he had picked Nelson Lee up. It was at Upper Street, Islington, of all places.

"Great prisoners! Why on earth did the boss get there?" gasped Nipper. It was miles from the camp.

Just then though his governor began to revive again. His faint seemed rather to have done him good and lent him strength.

"Now, gov'nor, for Heaven's sake, tell us," pleaded Nipper anxiously.

"Where have you been to since last night, when you disappeared from the camp?"

"Yes, and how did you disappear like that at all?" chimed in one of the police-officers, more interested for the moment in solving the riddle that had baffled them than in what had befallen Lee subsequently.

Nelson Lee only shook his head. He simply could not tell. The mystery of how all these men—himself included—managed to get spirited away out of a place so closely guarded, was as great a secret to him as ever. He could only describe briefly his adventure on the roof up to the moment when he was rising to tackle the Bavarian. Then he fell, the blow and all was blank until he awoke to find himself buried alive, as it seemed to him.

To make matters more horrible still he was tied up in a sack. Some heavy substance which he thought was sand, was heaped about him, making it almost impossible for him to stir a limb. Moreover, he was suffocating fast.

Fortunately a wild effort freed his head at last of the stuff, so that he could draw breath. He managed next to draw a reserve knife which he kept always in a special pocket, and at last was able to get one arm free. All was pitch darkness still, and even now he was not sure that he was not immured in a living grave. He was dizzy and weak, too, from loss of blood. At last, though, after a desperate struggle, he managed to wriggle his body out of the sandlike substance oppressing it. He struggled up only to strike his head against a low roof above him and once more lose his senses.

However, again he recovered, and more cautiously this time set about investigating what his new prison might be. It was a barge, he saw. He was not inside the prison camp at all but in some craft beside a lone canal wharf. This in itself did not help him to locate his whereabouts, for there was a regular network of canals intersecting these Lea Marshes. Fortunately the spot was dark and deserted.

There was just light enough nevertheless to make out the signboard of a factory-like building near by. The Porox Chemical Fertiliser Company was the name it bore. That brought the whole thing back to Nelson Lee with a rush.

He did not waste time over the encounter on the roof, and the mystery of how he came to be where he was now. That could wait. It was the constant discovery of references to chemicals during these investigations that spurred his wits.

"The first thing," as he related, "was to escape out of this barge where the fiends had buried me, thinking evidently that I was dead. What the sandlike substance was with which it was loaded, it was too dark to see, but it felt more like crushed quartz of some kind. It was then I remembered that stone works next to the prison yard and the grinding of that crushing mill going night and day."

"Great Scott!" interrupted the major in alarm. "You don't mean that

you think the people there have anything to do with these escapes then, do you?"

"Quite possibly," was the quiet reply. "But I don't see that we need worry our heads now about that in light of the much graver disaster threatening us."

"Disaster! What disaster?"

"Why the one hinted at in that anonymous letter to the War Office you yourself read out to me," said Nelson Lee.

The major looked staggered and alarmed.

"Then you have found out something to verify that. It was not a mere joke to bluff us."

"Far from it," was the grave reply. "I can tell you there is a plot rapidly ripening to a head, which, if we fail to squelch it, may mean the death of many thousands of innocent men, women and children here in this London of ours."

"Impossible!" suggested the Scotland Yard men sceptically.

"It is by no means impossible," insisted Nelson Lee. "In fact the devilish arrangements have already been completed. It awaits now but one little thing to make it an accomplished fact."

"And that is?"

"A mere change of breeze to north or south, from the east where it is at present."

The major's eyes were rounding. Nelson Lee could see that he had guessed the awful thing that was in his mind. The papers were even yet ringing with indignation at the diabolical use the Germans were making of poisonous gases to force a gap through the Allies' line which could not be forced with bullet or blade.

And now by the same unspeakable methods the fiends were actually going to strike a blow at the heart of London itself.

Once let the breeze blow fair so that the greatest havoc could be wreaked, and at a signal, thirty—forty—perhaps fifty huge "stink-pots" were to be set going, pouring forth millions of cubic feet of poisonous gas to overflow London, slaying all who breathed it.

"Great stars!" gasped the major breathless with horror at the prospect. "And you say you know this for a certainty. How?"

Nelson Lee told them. He told them how as he lay exhausted after his fearful struggle for freedom, he had suddenly become conscious of a dim crack of light showing in one of the lower windows of the factory across the wharf.

This reminded him that he was in danger still. If the brutes found him like this they would certainly finish him. It occurred to him that in case they started to uncover the sack to make sure he was still there, he had better fill it and bury it again.

So he did, shovelling it full of the sandlike cargo for lack of anything else. Then he smoothed down the heap again, and hauling the barge closer in, managed to scramble ashore. But not till he had gone some head over heels in his exhaustion.

However, he managed to pull himself out, and now he made for the light in the window, wondering if it was the stout Bavarian who had transported him here by magic, that he was going to see inside.

Sure enough his hopes were fulfilled. Quite a dozen men were gathered in the room, which was an office evidently. They had a chart of some kind unrolled before them on the table.

"And the man who was explaining it was the very same one who I told you I saw yesterday, waving a paper out of the train window," Nelson

Lee went on "He was talking German—they all were in fact; for with my ear to the cracks of the window—I could hear almost every word."

"And you heard this plot detailed that you have described?"

"Yes—more or less."

"And the gas that is to be used in this infamous outrage?" urged the major breathlessly.

"That I cannot tell you," answered Nelson Lee. "But an analysis of the crushed mineral in the barge should help an expert to decide. For the retorts to be used for generating the deadly fumes are the barges themselves."

"Surely not—how?"

"By means of acids," answered Nelson Lee faintly. "Each barge is equipped with leaden pipes and cylinders, buried under the heap. These distribute the acid evenly throughout the mineral until they melt in the furious heat. I heard the whole action described."

There was silence for a long minute or two. Nelson Lee had closed his eyes with utter exhaustion. The rest watched him, realising how fatal it would be supposing he collapsed now before he had imparted all that he had gleaned perhaps at cost of his life.

CHAPTER VII.

London's Danger.

THEY scarcely dared breathe. The doctor meantime administered his stimulants gently. By and by the major, after vainly trying to decide what the greyish mineral could be that they had taken from the patient's pockets, rose to telephone the Home Office for a Government analyst to be sent at once.

Then little by little Nelson Lee found his strength again. To their astonishment and relief he suddenly roused himself. He signed to Nipper to reach down a large six-inch map of London hung on the walls. Then he traced with a wavering finger the course of the Regent's canal.

"There," he said, "that is the line along which these devils' cauldrons are already strung, waiting to get to work. The barges are at wharves everywhere, laden with this Perox Fertiliser, as it is supposed to be consigned to farmers up and down the country.

"Two carrying fifty tons each of chemicals are here at City Road Basin, ready to asphyxiate Goswell Road district, and all the teeming thousands working round there. For the attack is to be made by day."

By day! When the City was at its fullest! When business men, rich and poor, were all at their tasks—the blow was to be struck then!

But Nelson Lee's finger was still tracing the course of the canal. How he managed to remember the various points at which the death barges were stationed, it was impossible to think.

The poorer districts of the East End through which the canal ran, were not to be bothered about evidently. The first barge was berthed at Canal Road, Hoxton, right under the noses of the police; the next where Nelson Lee had already indicated.

"It was near there the taxi man said he picked you up," the Scotland Yard inspectors exclaimed. "How on earth did you get as far as that?"

"On one of the same barges," was the cool answer. "While I was listening under the window I was very early surprised by a man who came silently along the wharf. I had to make a dash and a run for it sharp."

Absolutely my only chance was to scramble aboard the barge beside the wharf again and hide under a tarpaulin.

"The man it seemed had come to tow this away. He had a horse ready. The ringleader of the crew inside came out to give him his instructions. He was a German too. But evidently he did not know that my body was supposed to be on board his craft. Presumably they were counting on it being consumed when the acid was set to work."

"And you were towed all the way to Islington then?"

"Yes, and left in the lock basin there. I must have lost consciousness soon after, I suppose. For when I awoke next it was broad daylight, and men were working all around me. However, I managed to pass unnoticed, and got a cabby to take me home here."

That was all except a brief description of the barge. It was just an ordinary canal lighter with a tarpaulin lashed down over its cargo. On this the name *Perox* was painted in white.

Nelson Leo was so worn out by this time the doctor absolutely refused to allow them to put another question to him.

"I feel utterly done and must lie down," murmured the patient. "Tell them to do nothing until I awake, doctor. I sha'n't sleep long."

They laid him on his bed, and in a few seconds he had sunk into a slumber so deep that even a Zeppelin bomb through the roof would scarcely have awakened him. The others tip-toed out into Nipper's sanctum.

There was a jeweller's in the next street with a many dialed clock outside, one face of which way the wind blew. The weather vane was visible from the window just above the roofs. Suddenly all found themselves watching it.

The vane was pointing to the south-east, and had been doing so for the last week.

But to think that it had only to swing just a quarter turn to give the signal for these thugs to commence their ruthless slaughter. It was unspeakable.

Yet they could quite see the reason why the brutes were waiting for a change of breeze. For the map showed the canal running roughly east and west. It was a northerly breeze, therefore, that they needed to wait the deadly gases across the City.

What the fate of its teeming millions must have been, but for Nelson Lee's good luck in fathoming the plot, scarcely bore contemplation. Caught absolutely unawares by the asphyxiating gases they would have been killed like flies.

The dense fumes, heavier than air, would have come rolling swiftly mile on mile, overflowing into the Tubes and Underground railways, into basement and cellar. Those in the upper stories of the taller buildings might escape the invisible flood perhaps, but all down below would be caught by the throat, throttled and killed.

Nor could these death barges be destroyed perhaps. One might never be able to get within sight of them for the gases they were belching forth.

"By Jove, it's awful to think of!" vowed the major. "And here we are sitting helpless. Can't we do something? We must!"

Nipper put on a bulldog look at once.

"You can't do anything until the gov'nor wakes again, so don't try it," he said determinedly. You heard what he said, didn't you? And you can see for yourself that the wind isn't shifting yet. If you go blundering out now, all of you, giving the show away, what do you think's going to happen—eh?

"Why," he said scornfully, "they'll just touch off their stink-pots and

but all the north side. It wouldn't be much difference to them, after all, only they've set their heart on the City."

This was true enough. The question was, had Nelson Lee a plan ready for squelching the plot?

"Well, you bet he has," said Nipper proudly, "or he wouldn't go off to sleep like that. And if he hadn't in two ticks, he'd hit on something better to do than you would, if you sat screwing your brains over it for six months."

This was putting it more bluntly than the major relished. However, fortunately, just then the Government analyst arrived with a whole car load of instruments and acids. For word had been sent exactly what he was wanted to do.

"Humph," he said, sifting the greyish particles through his fingers, sniffing and tasting them.

"Is it crushed granite?" demanded the major at last.

"Granite? Good heavens, no! Whatever made you think that?" laughed the scientist.

"That is Mr. Nelson Lee's theory," was the reply.

But Nipper would not have this.

"The boss said nothing of the sort!" he declared hotly. "The stuff looked like granite was what he said—that is, if it really came from the stone-yard by the prison-camp, as he thought it might. He watched it being swung in from barges by a crane in great slabs."

"Yes, quite likely," agreed the analyst. "It would look like granite in the block, and might even be shipped as such. But it is what is commercially called nutritite, and it is worked from mines in Eastern Galicia, though they are quarries really. It is of volcanic origin."

"And is it of any use as a fertiliser for agricultural purposes?"

"Not an atom," was the prompt reply. "It would poison any land it was put on, of course. But what is it you suspect about it?"

They told him, and at once his face became grave.

"Hum! Chlorine—eh?" he repeated, when they mentioned that gas as one in favourite use by the Germans in their attacks. "No, not chlorine," he said after a moment's thought. "But I tell you what it would produce if treated with certain acids—or combination of acids, rather."

He consulted some scientific tables in a pocket-book first. Then opening his leather case of retorts and phials, he set out certain of the apparatus, and put about a teaspoonful of the grey mineral in a test-tube.

Then making a few rapid calculations in formulæ, which were all Greek to the others, he began to mix three different acids, drop by drop, until he had brewed about a thimbleful.

"Now hold your noses," he said jokingly, "and we'll see what happens." With that he poured the acid on the powder, and instantly it began to seethe and boil up, cracking the test-tube, and scattering the pasty contents all over Nelson Lee's favourite morocco cover writing-table.

"Here, confound it!" expostulated Nipper at his clumsiness, "look at the holes you're burning in it. Wipe—"

He got no further. For to his amazement the analyst who had been in the act already of sacrificing his handkerchief to retrieve the damage suddenly grew rigid as a lay figure, and fell right across the table, knocking his case of phials to the floor, where they all scattered and sizzled holes merrily in the hearthrug.

Nor was he the only one who began suddenly to fall about the place in stiff and stark attitudes. The major had gone backwards into the coal-scuttle, while the two Scotland Yard men, after vainly clawing at each other for support, subsided magnificently on top of the scientific gentleman.

This final crash brought in the doctor, who was still attending on Nelson

Lee. He was in a white-hot fury, of course. However, when he saw the scene in the outer room he uttered a cry of dismay.

He saw four men down, and Nipper clawing his way towards him like one stricken and blind.

"Help," he was gasping piteously—"help!"

For the life of him he could not think what had happened to them. Then he caught a full whiff of the deadly gas, too, and down he went with such suddenness that poor Nipper, who was clutching at him for aid in his own dire distress, took a header clean over him.

The youngster was thinking of Nelson Lee: that was all that was keeping him from succumbing. He grasped instantly what had happened. The juggins of a chemist, without knowing what he was playing with, had brewed enough gas to asphyxiate the whole house perhaps.

And inside there was his beloved boss, already at the point of death by the look of him. It would kill him if anyone sure as eggs. He must get to him to save him, though how he did not know. But the doctor would help him.

Now the doctor was down, though, in a heap, with his head between his heels like the rest. So Nipper had to fight on alone. He could not shut the door to keep out the deadly gas, for the doctor's carcass prevented that. Nor had he strength to open the window.

The office poker, however, soon settled that. A flood of life-sustaining air came rolling in. It enabled the youngster to keep his reeling senses for just one minute longer.

He had remembered reading somewhere that soda was the best antidote, at any rate, against the gases the German devils used. There was some carbonate of soda in his gov'nor's desk, which he had been taking for rheumatic pains. He got hold of the tiny packet, tipped it on to his handkerchief, just succeeded in rolling it all up into a flat pad, and laying it on Nelson Lee's upturned face and lips, then down he went, too, with a thud like a sack of coals.

There they all were then, with the housekeeper away for the day, and nobody about. The breaking of the window had passed unnoticed evidently. No passer-by knocked or seemed to care a fig.

And yonder was the jewellers wind vane, pointing at them over the rooftops as in derision. It had but to turn to a puff from a northerly breeze now, and immediately perhaps this gas, which, brewed in an eggcup, had bowled over seven strong, hearty men, would be pouring forth from thousands of tons of chemicals at once, sweeping the metropolis like a flood, and slaying its hundreds of thousands.

And the terrifying part of it was that the only ones who knew of this fiendish plot, and could possibly avert it, were these same seven stretched senseless there, perhaps never to recover.

CHAPTER VIII.

In the Thick of It.

"NIPPER! Nipper! What has happened? Why don't you answer me?" Nelson Lee, his head splitting and mouth dry as old boot-leather, was trying vainly to rise from his couch, even on to one elbow, so that he could look round the strangely silent room.

"Nipper! Nipper!"

His first thought was that the gang of gas-poisoners must have got to

work while he slept, and that already London lay gasping out its life in the streets.

For there on the floor he saw Nipper first, then the doctor on the threshold between the two offices, and through beyond the major, the Home Office expert, and both Scotland Yard men, in huddled heaps.

Nelson Lee lay dazed and frozen with horror.

"Dead!" he gasped. "And now it will be my turn next. Or stay—what is this?" He broke off, groping again for the pad which he had found laid on his mouth. This and Nipper's body beside the couch told the detective that, at any rate, he had survived the worst.

"Brave little kid!" he said warmly. "He must have struggled up to me and given me this to save my life, no matter what happened to his own. That's true pluck for you—"

The sentence was left unfinished. For suddenly a familiar sound had fallen on his buzzing ears. A look of joy came creeping into his eyes. What was that he had heard just now? Yes, and there it was again!

He had been picturing London all around him as suffocated and lifeless. He was wondering even whether he might not be the sole survivor perhaps in the whole street.

And then one single note had come ringing through the broken window to reassure him—the note of a buses motorhorn, and the bounce and rumble of its wheels, as it went thundering merrily down the street.

"Yes, and there's a piano-organ, too, from the mews behind!" he cried, as a hurdy-gurdy struck up next. So all was still well. London was spared.

"Yet, what on earth can this all mean?" he wondered, as fresh alarm came rushing back to him at sight of his friends. He managed to roll on to his feet this time. He had been "gassed," too, evidently, but his strength was fast coming back to him.

Then he caught sight of the broken bottles and test-tubes in the outer room. He saw what it all meant then. The Home Office expert must have been conducting experiments with the grey powder, with far too much success as was evident.

However, Nipper for one was not dead. He had begun to groan. The major's limbs, too, were twitching. And now one of the Scotland Yard men began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"We shall have to have another doctor to this lot, I can see," decided Nelson Lee, climbing his way dizzily to the telephone. In five minutes a fresh medico had arrived. The detective flung out the latchkey to him, so that he could admit himself. Never was a man more staggered in his life when he saw the job that awaited him.

"You think I'm a lunatic, is that it? And that I've been attacking all these men and laying them out?" suggested Nelson Lee, with a laugh. For it was evident the doctor who was a stranger to him was thinking something of the sort.

"Very well, then," he went on. "Listen to me 'phoning to Scotland Yard to send up half a dozen of their best men at once, and perhaps that will reassure you. And, meantime, for goodness' sake get on with your work and pull these poor beggars round. It's gas they're suffering from."

"Gas?" gasped the doctor. "What gas?" For the room was lit by electric light.

But that was something that even the detective did not know. He only knew that bicarbonate of soda seemed to have saved himself from the worst effects. He suggested they should try that.

So the doctor did. Nelson Lee, meantime, got on to the 'phone, as he promised, and in about a dozen words had Scotland Yard fairly hopping

with excitement and alarm. For a "rush" call from Nelson Lee was a thing to make them jump themselves, they knew.

The assistant-commissioner came tearing round himself in his motor. By that time the Home Office analyst was sitting up, looking the biggest, boldest fool alive. The rest were very sick and sorry for themselves.

"Why we only used as much powder as would lie on a shilling-piece!" was all the analyst could find to say.

"Yes. Well, now you can realise what the effect on London is likely to be, when these fiends spring off about two thousand tons of it, as I know they mean to do," said Nelson Lee grimly.

He related to the assistant-commissioner then the fiendish plot, which even now threatened the Metropolis. The question how to tackle the gang was a ticklish one. The barges were already at their stations, strung along the Regent's Canal at vantage points from Kingsland Road even to beyond Paddington. To release the flow of acid from the tanks buried in the chemical needed but the turn of a tap. A man could do this and run. They would have to be careful. When they pounced there must be no mistake.

"All they are waiting for now is a shift of wind, and that may come at any moment, for the glass is going steadily back," concluded Nelson Lee, beginning to struggle to his feet.

But here the doctor tried to interfere.

"My dear fellow," he said, "whatever is done you must take no hand in it."

"What?"

"I mean, you are not fit. That cut on your temple was enough to kill any ordinary man twice over. You've got to get to bed at once, or 'pon my word, I'll not be answerable for your life," insisted the doctor.

"My life! You seriously advise that, knowing how a million innocent lives perhaps are trembling in the balance!" cried Nelson Lee. "Supposing I did kill myself in trying to save them, what then? I should have died doing my duty, shouldn't I? Well, what could man wish more?"

There were no cheap heroics about this. Nelson Lee meant every word of it. He was a fighter every inch.

The first thing was a council of war. The map was got down again. The Allied commanders in the field could not have drawn up their plan of campaign more carefully than did Nelson Lee and the Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

It was not enough to capture the barges merely. They had set their heart on roping in the whole band of conspirators as well. A gang that could sport a private wireless station in defiance of the authorities, rescue prisoners out of guarded camps at will, and now was plotting in cold blood to murder half the population of London, was one to be hunted out like rats and exterminated to the last man.

"So we've got to go carefully," insisted Nelson Lee. "The first thing to do will be to surround the Perox Works which I was telling you about, in case any of the gang are still there. Next we'll nobble bargeloads of chemicals quietly but firmly, and I'll tell you how I propose to do it.

"We have got to identify them," he continued. "Well, that's none so difficult, since those I have seen have the name of the Perox Chemical Fertiliser Company painted on their hatch covers. But if we go sending a lot of blundering policemen looking for these, they'll give the game away at once."

"You mean they'll simply explode them off, without waiting for any shift of breeze," suggested the commissioner.

"Exactly!" said Nelson Lee. "So we must get hold of a steam barge west of Paddington somewhere, fill it full of plain-clothes men, and then do a

quiet trip east along the canal, dropping two or three aboard each 'stink-pot' as we come to it.

"Let their orders be to shoot on sight any man then who insists on trying to approach their craft. That's not too hot for Headquarters—is it?" he finished.

"Hot? No! By all means let us follow your plan," agreed the Commissioner. "But you are sure the barges won't have Germans on board waiting?"

"No; I am not sure—far from it!" answered Nelson Lee. "I only know that there was none left on the two I saw berthed. Nor need there be. The stuff looks just what it pretends to be—chemical manure in bulk for scattering on the fields."

So that was fixed up. A telephone message to the Paddington head police-station ordered a hundred plain-clothes men to be paraded at once, even if special constables had to be called upon. They were all to be armed with police automatic pistols, and to be ready in an hour.

Simultaneously an order was sent to the Whitechapel divisions to mobilise five hundred men to surround the chemical works, and let not a soul pass in or out of them.

"In fact, you had better get a hundred soldiers on the job as well," decided Nelson Lee. "It is quite likely that the greater part of the gang will be there, fitting more barges with acid reservoirs and loading. They will make the biggest job they can of it, you may be sure."

"So, after we've marked down all their 'stink-pots,' we can go on there and collar them. Is that it?"

That was Nelson Lee's notion. While the orders were being despatched, he dressed in a suit of rough serge, and strapped on a heavy pistol of his own, calculated to stop elephants. With the bandage round his head, he looked like a pirate—and a pretty sick one, too. For he was pale as death, and ready to drop. But Nipper knew he would never give in while he had strength to stand.

The youngster himself had had just enough German "gas" to feel he could massacre the whole lot of the brutes single-handed. He had a throat like a rasp, and a brain like a boiler factory in full swing. So had the rest. Yet they had had the merest whiff of the deadly vapour.

To the canal bridge in the Harrow Road took no time at all in a taxi. Here a steam barge had already been commandeered. The hundred plain-clothes policemen had been passed into Paddington Workhouse grounds in ones and twos. Thence they would embark.

There was a breathless hour's delay here until news was 'phoned through at last that the Perox Works at Stratford had been surrounded, and all communication and escape cut off. The stone yard next to the concentration camp had been actually seized, but nothing suspicious was discovered so far.

Nelson Lee sent Nipper ahead now to superintend the embarkation of the boarding party.

"We don't want it to look like a school treat going on a launch trip," his guy'nor warned him.

The youngster managed the job so well that, when it came time for his chief to go aboard, the latter was under the impression that the embarkation had not started.

However, peering down below under the tarpaulin cover, he saw the craft was packed with hefty fellows like a tin of sardines. The astonished engineer got his old tub going then, and away it plodded steadily eastwards lock by lock along the canal. At the last moment of starting, word had come through that all was quiet at that end.

Maida Hill was the point where the "stink-pot" lay so far as Nelson Lee

had gathered from watching the gang conning over their map. Sure enough, moored in a little "bay," an iron lighter was seen with the name of the Perox Company on its hatch covers.

No one seemed to be guarding it. To run their own craft gently alongside and allow three men to slip aboard was the easiest thing alive. The steam barge never had to stop, in fact. It went steadily on to Grove Road Bridge, where another of the deadly death-traps was located, and then to where the canal passes over the Great Central Railway.

Along the north side of Regent's Park, they were fewer and farther between, but clear of the Zoological Gardens, through Camden Town, behind King's Cross, and on to Islington, the fiends had sewn their stink-pots thickly.

So far they had spotted no less than twelve of them carrying four hundred tons of deadly chemicals at least. And now, for the first time, just at the entrance of the three-quarter-mile tunnel under Islington Hill, they found one of the enemy's barges watched.

Two men, seeing the grimy old steam barge coming rubbing alongside their craft, began to curse Nelson Lee at the helm like true bargees.

Seeing that he took not the smallest notice, though, and suddenly scenting danger, they made a swift jump for the bank to escape.

"Halt, there!"

Nelson Lee had recognised one of them as a man he had seen the previous night. He gave them one challenge, and then fired. The rearmost man stumbled and twisted round. Before he could touch the ground, the detective had pulled trigger again. The second fugitive was just then diving round a corner into safety, as he reckoned. However, Nelson Lee had not been expending twenty rounds of pistol ammunition in practice every morning for nothing these last months. The second man dropped also as near dead as made no matter.

There was panic in the neighbourhood, needless to say, for it looked like rank assassination. But Nelson Lee never turned a hair. He left his guard of constables, and the steam barge plodded on.

The famous long tunnel, in which the bargees have to lie on top of their cargo and walk their craft along with their feet against the roof, was soon past. Hoxton and Bethnal Green lay beyond, and here another dozen of death ships were found lurking.

Nor were the police any too soon, for it was grown dusk by now, and the work of detecting their quarry quietly and without fuss became increasingly difficult. At last, though, they flattered themselves they had every one marked and guarded.

"Well, that's all simple enough!" sighed the police commissioner, with heartfelt relief.

"All too jolly simple, if you ask me!" growled Nipper, who had been looking forward to no end of a jamboree.

"Yes, so far it is," agreed Nelson Lee quietly. "We've spoked their wheel so far as we know. But we've got some stiff fighting ahead of us, you bet, if the gang are all cornered at their works, as we hope."

The commissioner could quite believe it, for all the way along they had been receiving reports from the Stratford force. These showed that a score of men at least were in the besieged factory.

Moreover, these were obviously awake to the fact that they were trapped. They had not attempted yet to get away—only to reconnoitre the ring of sentinels. They were watching merely.

"All right!" was Nelson Lee's comment to this. "When they want trouble they can have it, just as soon as ever they like. I'm all ready for them."

now. But, hallo! Here, we're coming to the place! That's it—just ahead, round the bend!"

The steam barge had long emerged into the River Lea, and was past Old Ford and Bow. Turning now into one of many cuts branching to the left, the detective recognised the enemy's works quite close to them. They had been well chosen for the dastardly work in hand, for all the adjacent canal side was given up to lumber wharves piled with rusty iron, old oil barrels, and such-like gear. No other building was near enough to overlook them.

In fact, there had been no reason at all to suspect them. The works had been chemical fertiliser works for the past five years, and had been employing mostly English hands.

"Which only shows what scheming fiends these Huns have been!" commented Nelson Lee. "Quite likely they have had this plot laid ready for hatching all that time. It might have been the preliminary blow to annihilate London had the Germans invaded Britain, as they reckoned to do."

"Yes, by Jove!" echoed the police commissioner fervently, thinking what a debt London's teeming millions owed to this lion-hearted, level-witted man at his side for saving them from such a horrible fate.

However, this was no time for congratulations. There was grim work to be done yet, and how grim was shown the very next instant when, from the beleaguered works, only five hundred yards away, a machine-gun—of all weapons in this peaceful city of ours—was suddenly turned on the barge.

There was never a word of warning. Beyond a prowling figure or two, the soldiers and police had scarcely seen a soul about the place. Yet now, like a jet from a fire-hose, a torrent of bullets was projected on the helpless craft, ripping sides and hatches to splinters, and shattering the tiller in Nelson Lee's grasp.

The barge engineer went down dead as a doornail. The commissioner himself was hit before he could plunge for cover. Nipper and two police superintendents—all that were left of the crew they had started out with—got minor bullet wounds even as they were diving overboard.

For that was the only thing to do. Nelson Lee had already shouted the order. The barge was being riddled like a sieve. He himself caught the wounded commissioner round the middle, and straightway rolled overboard with him.

Now, with the barge for cover, they had breathing-space in which to rally their scattered wits. It was all so sudden and unexpected—like a blow on the mouth in the dark.

It seemed difficult to credit that any ruffians could be so desperate as to lash out in this mad-dog fashion. It was a challenge to a war of extermination, and no less.

Moreover, it was plain the brutes had known all this time of Nelson Lee's canal trip, and had been deliberately holding their hand waiting for him.

In fact, wild German "Hochs!" of triumph told the fugitives that their leap for life had been seen. The brutes were reckoning that Nelson Lee, who had spoked their wheel for them, was done for, at any rate. Nevertheless, to make sure, they kept their Maxim gun still trained on the riddled barge, now sinking fast.

Nelson Lee saw it was no use clinging on any longer. They must swim for it quickly. But he had the wounded commissioner to look after. Only Nipper was able to lend him a hand, the others being in sore straits themselves.

"Come on, Nipper! Stick to it, young 'un!" urged his chief.

It was a wild struggle for the bank. Twice they thought they were gone, for the water was churned to foam by the merciless stream of lead. Still, they won through at last.

And now the Tommies, recovering their wits, had opened fire in return. That the gang had more than a machine-gun for weapons was soon evident. A regular fusillade of rifle shots burst from the factory windows.

Hoisting their groaning burden out on to the dock side, Nipper and his boss dragged him under cover, and next gave a helping hand to the two police. Then Nelson Lee, seething with vengeance, drew his revolver, and ran forward as if he meant to charge the enemy single-handed.

Fortunately it was deep dusk by now, otherwise his impetuosity might have cost him his life. A regular hail of bullets was whistling round. Meeting the Territorial major in command pulled him up.

"Why don't you close in on the dogs, and blow them to blazes?" the detective urged breathlessly.

The major was quite game. He had been wondering whether he was not dreaming. It seemed more like Ypres than Stratford Marshes.

There was plenty of cover ahead. Some stacks of rusty boxers and scrap-iron made excellent vantage points from which to command the enemy's loopholes. They were bullet-proof, too, what was more.

To skirmish forward and seize these was the work of a minute or two only. Nor did the enemy try to stop them seriously. They seemed to be demoralised, for the police and Tommies on the other flanks had also opened fire now, ringing them in with darts of flame.

The major thought he saw his chance.

"We'll pile in half my men here over against the door, and then try a bayonet rush—what do you say?" he asked of Nelson Lee eagerly.

It looked enticing. It was from the opposite angle of the building that the maxim gun was directing its fire now. The detective was inclined to think the scheme sound.

However, the first wild burst of anger over, he was more his old cautious self again. The foe he knew were as wily as the deuce. He did not want to run into any trap. Certainly he did not want any loophole left for the vermin to escape by.

But the major had already given his orders for two platoons of his command to "reinforce" and get ready for the cold steel. He was going to rout them out of it like rats.

"Then look out, younker; I must be in this; but you stand back," Nelson Lee told Nipper, who had no weapon but his fists. A bullet had just chipped the point of his shoulder, what was more, in his dive from the barge.

His chief pushed him back out of fire. Had he been more alert, the tame alacrity with which the youngster consented, might have roused his suspicions. But the charge had already started.

Cheering and shouting, the gallant Terriers came floundering down from the old scrap-iron heaps. The fence surrounding the factory yard was just beyond. They took it in their stride.

Yet, though last to start, Nelson Lee was first over, for all that. There was someone a precious good second, though, he noticed. Down he plumped, the Tommies after him like apples off a shaken bough.

Now, another twenty yards would see them at the door of the beleaguered building. Nelson Lee was firing and shouting like a schoolboy. One or two shots whizzed back in reply, but it was plain that victory was as good as theirs.

"All together now, boys. Blow in the locks with your rifles. Give the hogs gyp!" The ranks steadied, and then went forward with a rush and a yell.

Nelson Lee remembered about the first half-dozen strides; after that, he did not know what happened to him.

It was not a bullet that took him, for none was fired. The enemy might all have been dead. Yet suddenly something seemed to catch him in the throat, and over he went like a ninepin. Simultaneously he saw someone else go diving past on hands and knees. And by all the impudence it was Nipper.

"You cheeky hound!" expostulated Nelson Lee angrily, but got no further. The strangling grip had clutched his lungs next. He felt he was choking.

And now he realised what trick this was the enemy had served them. That he was not to have suspected it before. The gang had left this flank of the building undefended apparently, merely to draw the attackers into a trap. This was their infernal gas that they were belching forth to mow them down with.

On all sides of him, Nelson Lee saw the Terriers dropping like flies. Those that turned blindly to run fared no better. They were pursued by jeers and cheers from the enemy. The deadly fumes came straight down breeze, engulfing them. In vain, Nelson Lee summoning all his strength and will power, struggled to his feet to try and escape. It was no use. Over he went again.

There he would have lain, too, and died, as many another poor fellow did around him. But, luckily for him, Nipper had disobeyed his command to remain behind. Luckier still, the youngster had been quietly thinking that something of this sort was likely to happen before this job was through.

The police left on the barges had been told to make mouth pads for themselves while they waited. Nipper, though, had collared a bottle full of the preparation of soda supplied for these, and soused a couple of handkerchiefs with the stuff, keeping them ready in his pocket.

He knew from past experiences what was happening, the instant the gas gripped his nostrils. Scarcely had he touched the ground then than he had his own respirator out, tying it over mouth and nose. It brought instant relief.

To crawl to his bosses side and do the same to him with the second pad, was only the work of a minute or two. Nelson Lee, he saw, was not yet insensible. The soda acted magically on him, too.

"By Jingo, Nipper; you've saved my life for me—for the second time to-night," he gasped gratefully.

"You shut your mouth and don't talk," commanded Nipper severely. "We've got quite enough to do to steer clear of here without wasting wind thanking each other. Here, let me get you on your legs quick. It's worse low down on the ground the papers say."

Just as Nelson Lee was preparing to obey, he chanced to see through the darkness the door of the factory thrown open, and half a dozen figures emerge at a run. They darted into a double gate opening into a yard. He clutched Nipper's arm and pulled him down beside him again. Grabbing at a rifle belonging to an insensible Terrier, he thrust it into the youngster's hand. Nipper knew how to use it all right.

"Why, what's up?" he mumbled angrily behind his mouth-pad.

"Wait and see," was his guv'nor's answer. "It's my idea some of the boggars are going to make a bolt for it under cover of the gas. If so, and they come this road, we've got to wing them. See?"

Nipper did. The renewed outburst of firing from the other face of the building lent colour to the belief. They lay low. The mouth-pads made breathing tolerable if nothing else. They could manage to hang on for a time.

And then they knew that they were to be rewarded. The reverberating note of a motor's engine sounded above the din. A moment later, out a

big car came swinging, to come heading past the very spot where they were ambushed.

Nelson Lee loosed his grip of Nipper's arm then. "Now," he suddenly yelled, and rising on one knee, "let fly three lightning shots full into the ruffians."

That they were taken off their guard, was shown by the startled swerve the driver made. So sudden was this that one wretch who had sprung convulsively to his feet with a bullet through his lungs, was sent headlong sideways out of the car.

That another of the detective's shots had also found a billet, was seen when the man beside the driver went slipping from his seat, to roll like a sack into the road as the car was swung back on to the straight again.

But there were four of the ruffians left untouched, and right soon did they prove it. Each had two magazine pistols, and the shots they blazed into the gallant pair, as they thundered by, flew like sparks from a grindstone.

"Why, that's Lee himself," the detective heard one of them yelp in rage, as the flashes lit up his features. He could have sworn it was the stout Bavarian, too; though, like the others, he was wearing some pattern of mask which hid not merely his mouth but his whole face.

"Curse the dog! Halt the car! We must get him," the ruffian was shouting in German. However, Nelson Lee had got his "gun" to bear again emptying the last chambers into the back panels of the car.

That he scored one more bull's-eye he knew. For he saw a blurred figure jerk up and collapse again. But it was not his stout enemy unfortunately.

And now, after a parting fusillade of pistols bullets from the fugitives, the car had turned along the canal towpath and vanished from sight. It was quite likely to escape altogether. For it was following the dead line of the drifting gas.

"And after that, what will the vermin get up to?" exclaimed Nelson Lee aloud. Neither he nor Nipper had ever a thought as to how they could possibly have escaped such a tornado of bullets alive. Yet neither had been touched apparently.

That was the question. Three of the mad dogs, at least, were at large now. What would they do to wreak vengeance for this destruction of their carefully laid plans.

"Why, try and get some of their barges, and start them going, you bet," said Nelson Lee, wondering how on earth he was going to stop them now.

He ran, nevertheless, and so did Nipper. It cut them to the heart to leave all these poor fellows lying senseless, but they were but a handful compared with the thousands who might soon be gasping out their lives, unless these scum were pursued and wiped out.

They might shoot down the guard of constables on each death barge before they were alert to the attack. The turn of a tap then would do the rest. Whole streets would be wiped out before the inhabitants could escape.

But what use was it picturing all this when they had only their own legs to pursue on. In vain they halloed for some of the rest. They forgot that while they could exist in the gas-zone alive, for the rest to come near them was certain death. So they went stumbling on.

And then they did see, about a quarter of a mile ahead of them, the headlights of a big motor-car come sweeping into view. It was not likely to be an enemy's car with such lights as that. So they ran on shouting louder than ever.

"It's stopped, gov'nor. They've heard us," panted Nipper, as sure

enough the car pulled up with a sudden jerk. There it stood. But there was no answering hail as they closed on it.

It was a queer looking thing, too. Nelson Lee got his revolver ready in case it was another hornet's nest they were running their heads into.

"Why, the blooming thing's run into the wall," exclaimed Nipper in amazement. "And there they're all sitting like a pack of fools staring at it." But his boss had awakened to what was wrong by this time.

"Why, of course, they're gassed, too. They've run right into it. We're straight down wind from the works here, and, my stars, those chaps have just caught it square in the chest."

"Yes, and by George, do you see what sort the car is, giv'nor," cried Nipper. "Red, white and green lights! It's an aircraft gun-car. They've been sent over to smash the factory down. And here it's stuck."

They were alongside it by this time. It was as Nelson Lee had said.

The driver was hanging over his wheel in a huddled heap. The four men of the gun-crew behind were also collapsed. But they were not senseless quite. They were not in the full flood of the vapour just here. Still, they were bad enough to be unable to lift a finger to escape.

But Nelson Lee was well able to look after them in that respect. The car though it had swung into the wall was not damaged. Taking the driving seat himself, he soon backed it out and round, and Nipper jumped in. Then off they set at top speed on the runaways trail.

On the black cinder towpath, the tracks of the fugitive car showed up plain. The pilot evidently knew his country well. Cleverly extricating himself from the maze of canals and waste lands hereabouts, he had turned at last into Old Ford Road. But there the wheel tracks vanished.

Nelson Lee knew pretty well though the goal they would be making for. By hook or crook the fiends were meaning to explode, at least, one of the bargeloads of chemicals. They did not mean to throw up the sponge like this.

The gun-car was a fine Rolls Royce, and on a clear track they would have sent it along at eighty miles an hour. But the news of the pitched battle waging on Stratford Marshes had spread fast; crowds poured to meet them at every turn.

The police, however, were on the alert, the more so since the mad-dog car had not long come tearing through at breakneck speed. Men and women were knocked down by it, but it still held on.

So when the red, white and green lights showed in chase, the bobbies kept a clear road for it, yelling the course of the fugitives, as Nelson Lee went roaring by.

Bowers Road, Pritchards Road, Regent's Row—they were all Greek to the intrepid detective. But word had been 'phoned along to the point police to direct him. A wave of an arm, a swing and a swerve and down one street and up the next, the gun-car thundered in pursuit.

Meantime, its original crew, thanks to Nipper's first-aid efforts, were beginning to recover their breaths and wits. They wanted to know where they were being taken to. Nipper soon told them.

For, like his boss, he knew that the gang would be making for those barges in the most thickly populated districts, to try and set them to work.

"Anywhere between Hoxton and Islington tunnel I reckon we'll find them," his giv'nor shouted back to him once. Half a dozen of the biggest "stink-pots" were in this stretch, and, with the wind north-east as it was blowing now, the fumes would go pouring over some of the most densely populated districts to be found.

They were among the poorest, too. The idea of asphyxiating London by

day, when all the rich city magnates would be at their desks, was knocked on the head.

At last, cutting the New North Road into Eagle Wharf Road, Nelson Lee suddenly saw that the worst had happened.

A man, collapsing in mid-street, right in front of his wheels, was the first sign. The gang ahead had succeeded, at least partially, in their hideous design. A few yards further on lay a policeman in a heap. Beside him was a railway van with both horses down. On all sides figures came staggering out of houses shrieking with terror, only to drop to the pavement to struggle in the throes of death.

"Whoa! Pads!" warned Nipper, and promptly the car was pulled up. His boss and he both had their own handkerchiefs ready. Saturating these afresh with the chemical from Nipper's bottle, they helped the car's crew to do the same.

Unfortunately though, their former dose of poisonous fumes had weakened their resistance. Nelson Lee saw that to rely on them working the gun for them when it came to a stand-up fight, as he meant it to do, was out of the question. Nor did Nipper know enough to manage the vicious little pom-pom which the car mounted.

"So here you are. You drive," commanded his chief, climbing back over the seat to where the gun was fixed.

Nothing loth, Nipper exchanged places. It was not often he got a chance to drive such a car as theirs. Still, there was not much about a motor that he did not understand. In two shakes he had got the hang of it.

Nelson Lee gave the word to go ahead again. He had already been shouting to the panic-stricken inhabitants around to get indoors and up on their roofs. For safety lay in keeping as high out of the fumes as possible. It was like stepping into an invisible river to come running out into the street now.

Poor wretches! Nelson Lee knew what horrible fate this was that had overtaken them, but they did not. It was piteous to see them struggling on, falling and rising, only to fall again.

And then the death agonies! It cut them to the core to think that they themselves were protected comparatively by their mouth-pads while all these poor creatures were helpless.

"But what can we do, except blow the cursed 'stink-pot' to pieces and sink it out of action that way," decided the detective. "So on you go, Nipper. Don't sit staring there. Think of the lives yet that will be destroyed if we don't buck up and do something."

Nipper was only waiting the word. He started the car going again. That was in Eagle Wharf Road. Nelson Lee reckoned that the barge that must be doing all the damage was the very one in which he had hidden himself the previous night, and left lying at the top of Wenlock Basin.

He gave the order to steer for this. And sure enough he was right.

"There you are, I thought so!" he cried savagely, as, turning into Shepherdess Walk, they were assailed with dense billows of fumes, shining a sickly yellow in the white glare of the car lights.

Still Nipper held on, though everywhere was encumbered with the dying and dead. Carts blocked the road, horses prostrate and drivers hanging lifeless from their seats, motor vehicles, too, with engines still racing, had run across pavements into walls, showing with what dreadful swiftness the gas had overtaken the drivers.

The choking fumes were beginning to get hold of Nipper again; what was more, Nelson Lee had to roar at him or he would certainly have lost grip of himself and sunk off into fatal oblivion.

"You young idiot! Watch what you're doing! Pull yourself together,

for mercy's sake. A million lives may depend on you!" implored his chief. He himself was working away at the gun to try and get it trained for any target so low down as the barge would be. For being an aircraft gun it was only mounted to shoot at the skies.

At last Nelson Lee "wangled" it somehow. It was only a one-pounder pom-pom after all, and he knew the working of it well. Nipper had managed to pull the car through safely to the north side of the canal, meantime. Here they were to windward of the poison-cloud.

Yet still the air was thick with fumes as ever. Dense greenish clouds swirled up from the wharf where they knew the barge was lying. You could not have seen your hand before your face. The very buildings were tinged a ghastly yellow, while the water around looked to be boiling with a fierce chemical action.

It was like a glimpse into the infernal regions. Nipper was quite terrified. For two pins he would have abandoned the car and bolted. But his chief was of the bulldog breed.

"Turn round and back her in!" he commanded sharply. "Turn and back her quick. I can't bring the gun to bear until you do."

This was obvious. Nipper had to swing the motor round. Then aiming into the heart of the frothing, belching cauldron, Nelson Lee loosed off his weapon.

Five shattering reports followed, for the pom-pom was like a maxim. And each report was capped simultaneously by the bursting of a one-inch shell buried in the barge's vitals.

The detective jammed in another clip. But the first salvo had already done its work. A furious cloud of steam showed how the hull had been holed, admitting the water to the seething mass of chemical. The clouds of vapour, too, lessened instantly.

"Still, we'll give her another. Hang on!" cried Nelson Lee, and again he sent a chain of the miniature shells hurtling into the wreck.

"Hooray! That's done it!" he cried, as this broadside demolished the hulk completely. The green vapour was swiftly subsiding; it was all steam now.

With a last lurch and a roll the barge disappeared beneath the waters of the canal, and the poisonous mass was quenched.

Now the atmosphere promptly cleared as the wind wafted the last of the deadly fumes away. Nelson Lee was wondering where next to head, in case this was not the only "stink-pot" the enemy had managed to ignite.

It was just then that the humming note of an approaching car grew louder and louder out of the distance. It was travelling obviously at tremendous speed. Only a madman would drive at such a breakneck pace.

"Here—by George, I say!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, his eyes aglow with revenge. "Do you know who I believe this is? It's those fiends returning. They've been headed off, and they think they're going to escape by following down the track of the gas. This is them, I'll swear!"

With desperate speed he was reloading again.

"Here, Nipper, take my revolver, in case," he commanded. "Pray Heaven it is the fiends, for I swear not one of them will get away alive!"

The car was coming rushing along the narrow street overlooking the canal. It was already a street of the dead. Suddenly round the corner it swung into view.

It was the gang right enough. Their yell of baffled rage when they saw Nelson Lee's car barring the way, made him laugh with delight. Promptly their driver clapped on his brakes, sending the car skidding broadside almost into the canal.

"Halt, you dogs. Or, no—come on, if you like!" cried the detective.

"For it's your lives or ours, you murdering curs. Do you hear, Karl Ruski?"

Nelson Lee's taunts were cut short by a volley of pistol-shots. It was no time for playing with his quarry he saw. So, with eyes to his gun-sight, he pulled the trigger.

Like the rattle of a drum the five shells darted square into the centre of his target. Each one burst true, and when the last crash had died away nothing was left of either car or occupants save a mass of twisted machinery and torn and quivering flesh.

Even Nelson Lee was dumbstruck at the destruction he had wrought. Then Nipper and he sprang down and went forward. The stout Bavarian was the only one of the five not torn literally limb from limb. He was still conscious. He glared up at his captor with lips drawn back and teeth bared in a grin of fiercest hate.

"Schwein of an Englander!" he cursed. "It was you then. I knew it was. I——"

But death had him by the throat. He suddenly checked, heaved up as if to spring at his vanquisher, but fell back in a lifeless heap.

Nelson Lee turned away to find young Nipper sick as a dog, and collapsing fast now that all the excitement was through. He himself felt little of the effects of the fumes, strange to say. He sprang into the car again, and in three minutes had brought it clear of the danger zone, to where strong bodies of police and troops were now at work doing what they could to succour the hapless victims of this crowning example of Teuton "frightfulness!"

How many had succumbed down that long narrow track swept by the drifting gases it would take hours to discover. But as far as Clerkenwell Road even, a yellowish stain was to be seen covering the houses like some hideous moss, while right south to Fleet Street wayfarers were caught by the fumes and sank senseless.

So what the fate of London would have been had all the twenty-two death barges been exploded, may be imagined, when this was the effect of only one.

For it was as Nelson Lee surmised. The first barge had been caught unawares, and the policemen guarding it shot down. But the next were more on the alert. They had promptly opened fire with their automatic pistols and driven the enemy off. The latter had harked back then, only to meet their conqueror and their doom.

It took young Nipper a long week to get over his effects of his "gassing." It was then that he heard the story of the finish of the battle of Stratford Marshes. The gang had put up a terrific fight, and it was only when the roof was blazing fiercely over their heads that the handful of survivors surrendered.

Nelson Lee took the youngster over in his car on his first day out to view the smoke-blackened ruins.

"But what about the way all those beggars managed to escape from the prison camp, guv'nor? Did you ever find out about that?" asked Nipper suddenly, remembering that part of the mystery.

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Yes. I believe I have, though I have not tested my theory yet," said his chief. "I thought of going on and trying it now. We'll get along, shall we?"

So they got back into the car again. They drove to the stone-yard next. Here after a long rummaging about, the detective unearthed a great coil of fine and pliant wire rope, which made him chuckle still more.

Then passing round the prison camp, he led the way to the empty works

where stood the tall chimney shaft. This was directly opposite the stone-yard with the prison between. He examined this brand-new lightning-conductor that both had noticed before. Whereupon, he laughed again.

It was not a lightning-conductor at all, it proved, but another length of the same wire rope running right to the top of the chimney shaft.

"But I don't see how that helps matters," protested Nipper perplexed.

"Don't you? Then just wait," counselled his boss. And with that unearthed the end of the dummy lightning-conductor buried in the ground. On this was a screw shackle.

Nelson Lee got the officer of the camp guard over then to witness what he had discovered. Next he had the end of the coil of wire in the stone-yard led across. There was a loop already spliced in this, and he secured it to the shackle.

And still Nipper did not see what he was driving at. However, his gut'nor knew he was on the right track. He went back to the yard and hitched the other end of the wire to the winding-drum of the overhead crane. This he had run to the furthestmost end of its scaffold.

"Now wind away," he commanded to the engineer they had got to start it. The fellow did. The wire tautened, hanging at last in one long curve right from the top of the factory chimney two hundreds away, on the further side of the camp.

As the crane stood now, the wire was clear of the camp exercise-ground. But as it was backed along its overhead railway, the wire in mid-air was led right over the prison buildings.

"Now slack away," the detective told the engineer, and sure enough the loop of wire hung down until it touched the very place on the roof where he had been surprised and struck senseless.

"There you are," announced Nelson Lee triumphantly. "A travelling pulley and a hook in it is all now that is wanted—and that is the gear for it there, if I am not mistaken," he broke off, pointing to a corner of the shed. "A hooked pulley runs down the wire as it slackens to be caught by the prisoner inside, and then all he has to do is to hang on while the wire is wound up taut again, when the slope from the greater height of the chimney shaft will cause the pulley to run back clear over everything, depositing the fugitive safe in the stone-yard, whence he can escape.

"That is my theory, at any rate, and we can soon put it to the test," finished Nelson Lee. Whereupon such a travelling-pulley was rigged on the wire and one of the Territorials sent on to the prison roof to make the transit. It all worked sweetly and silently, and without a hitch.

"And the secret wireless. Have you found that out yet?" asked the officer.

"Not yet. It will be time enough to worry about that when we hear from it again, which will be never if you ask me," answered Nelson Lee.

And so far he has proved correct. The apparatus, no doubt, still exists somewhere in London, but the aliens who knew its whereabouts and how to work it must have been all wiped out in the Battle of Stratford Marshes.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

NEXT WEEK!

The Great Submarine Mystery.

Another Stirring, Long, Complete Tale of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

DON'T MISS IT!

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 rich youngster, joins Ravenswood College, and he soon makes his presence felt.

One day news comes to the school that Dick and his chum, Tom, have been drowned, but ultimately they turn up safe and sound.

Melby, one of the other boys, takes a violent dislike to Dick Clare, and is especially jealous because the Headmaster takes special notice of the new boy.

"Now, that's what I complain of," said Melby, softly opening the door, then closing it again when he saw the masters were not there.

"What are you looking for?" inquired Tom.

"Only to see if the masters were listening."

"Ha, ha, ha! You surely don't suppose masters would listen?"

"I jolly well wouldn't trust them," said Melby. "There's no telling what a master would do. But it's unfair that the Head should have called on Dick to sing, and not asked me. How does he know I can't sing a jolly lot better? He could have sent a good report to my parents, which would have been a change for them. The rotten reports he sends makes my father savage. There's always a row every term."

The following afternoon Tom and Dick were passing the porter's lodge when Dick stopped and looked through the little window.

"Did you ever see such a chap for sleep?" exclaimed Tom. "I believe he has an hour's sleep after every meal. Got his feet on the table, too! It would be rather funny if a master saw him. Come on, old chap!"

But Dick did not move. Vance was in his easy-chair. They could see his mouth open, and the soles of his boots as they rested on the table.

"Are you admiring him?" inquired Tom.

"It's slothfulness," observed Dick. "I often get it myself. It must be conquered. We will cure him, Tom."

"How?"

"Wait here for half a mo., and I'll show you; but be sure you don't laugh."

Dick soon returned with the clothes-line, which he had borrowed from the kitchen. He cut off two lengths.

"Follow me," he whispered, "and be sure you do not make a noise."

"He will report us."

"Not he! He would have to admit that he was asleep."

"Well, he will hurt us if he catches us."

"I don't fancy so. Not after I have fixed him up. You watch me, only do be sure you don't laugh."

It was a good thing for Dick that Vance was a heavy sleeper, for the operation was a risky one. Dick slipped a piece of rope round Vance's left ankle, then tied it. After that he stole round to the other side, fastening the other piece of cord round that ankle.

"Get behind his chair," whispered Dick, "then haul on your rope while I

haul on mine. When we have elevated his nose, make your rope fast to the leg of the chair. Look here, Tom, do be serious! If you start laughing it will spoil the giddy trick."

"He's bound to see us."

"He can't if we keep at the back of his chair. Are you ready? Go!"

The unlucky porter's legs shot into the air, and his attitude became ridiculous. The two chums made their respective ropes fast to the back legs of the easy-chair, and Vance's remarks were not edifying.

They wheeled him to the front of the window, then crawled out of the room on their hands and knees, and it was not until at a safe distance that Tom gave vent to his pent-up laughter.

"My eyes!" he exclaimed, gazing through the window, although he took the precaution of standing some distance from it. "How jolly picturesque he looks! But won't there be a row!"

"Well, I don't know, but he's making a pretty good one for the start," observed Dick. "Here come some of the fellows. Let's see what effect Vance's elevation has on them."

The youngsters stopped outside the window in surprise; then they burst into yells of laughter, and Mary, the cook, came to see what was the matter. She knew Dick Clare had borrowed the clothes-line, and was rather anxious about the matter.

"Whatever are you boys making this noise for?" she demanded.

"It's the porter, Mary," said Dick, looking demure. "He's sort of inverted. Look at him. Seems to be trying to turn a backward somersault, doesn't he?"

Mary became almost hysterical. Like all the other servants she detested Vance, because he gave himself such airs and invariably complained of her cooking.

"You bad boy!" she cried, when she had somewhat recovered from her laughing fit. "You must go and release him."

"Not for a pension," said Dick. "He will be as wild as a stirred-up hornet!"

"Oh, well, I'm not frightened of him," said Mary, entering the lodge, followed by some of the boys. "How ever did you get in that position, Vance? I'm surprised at you, making yourself look so ridiculous! You are making the young gentlemen laugh."

"I'll make the young blackguards weep before I've done with 'em!" howled Vance. "Let me down, can't you? You are as bad as them, and I believe you did it just 'cos I told you that you can't cook. No more you can't!"

"Oh, if that's the case, you can stay like you are!" retorted Mary. "You look like a rolled-up maggot!"

"It's strange you can't take a bit of a joke, Mary," said Vance. "I only——"

"I'm taking a good-sized bit of a joke now," retorted Mary. "You don't know how funny you look!"

"Of course, I was only joking when I said you couldn't cook, and I know you would never play a wicked trick like this. I've always respected you."

"Oh, yes," snapped Mary, severing his bonds with a table-knife, "I know all about that. Now, don't you tie yourself up again like that, else I sha'n't release you."

"It's these dratted boys!" hooted Vance. "They are enough to drive a man raving mad. Oh, don't I wish I was a master for a couple of days! I'd flog them in turns, day and night!"

"Oh, I dare say you would manage them a lot better than the master. But see here, Vance: you will be wise not to report this. You could not have been tied up like that unless you had been asleep, and me waiting for the knives! You come and clean them at once, else I shall have something to report."

Vance muttered something about knowing the boys who had played him the trick, and making it hot for them, but he thought it better to go.

"You can bet he doesn't know the boys," laughed Tom, as he and Dick made their way to No. 7.

"Not likely," answered Dick. "How could he? But look here, old chap, do you think it would be safe to break bounds to-night and get in some tartlets?"

"I don't. All the same, I'm game, and——"

Tom stopped suddenly, for at that moment Melby entered the study. He tried to look as though he had not heard the words, but when the chums saw him enter Gowl's study a little later they felt confident that he had heard, and, further, that he had gone to curry favour with the bully by reporting their intention.

They were perfectly correct, too.

"Of course, I don't want to sneak, Gowl," said Melby, shutting the door, "but I don't think it fair that Dick Claro should hold that awful secret over your head——"

"You little senseless villain!" roared Gowl, springing to his feet. "If you ever dare to speak about anyone holding a secret over my head I'll jolly well break yours!"

"Oh, I say! It isn't my fault, Gowl. I don't want to know it, you know. In fact, I stopped Dick when he was about to tell me why you are in dread of what he is saying."

"What is he saying?"

"Oh, he doesn't exactly put it in words. Just hints that you are afraid of him, and——"

"Listen to me, Melby. If you ever speak like that again I'll make you sorry. I don't believe Claro has said anything; in fact, there's nothing to say. What have you come here for?"

"Well, under all the circumstances of the case, I thought it my duty to tell you those two chaps are going to break bounds to-night, and I know a way of catching them. They never take me into their confidence; in fact, they dodge me when they can, so they mustn't expect me to take their side, especially after the cheeky manner Claro behaves to you."

"Well, they will get into an awful row, and I'm going to let Foster catch them. I happen to know he's sitting up pretty late each night. Well, they don't know that, but he's engaged on some blessed papers. Now, if he hears them coming downstairs he's bound to catch them, and he shall. You leave it to me. If you hear a row you can come out to see what it is, you know, and then you can catch them as they dodge up the stairs again. Only don't tell them I split."

"Very well. You had better go. I'll be on the watch," said Gowl, looking vicious. "I will make the little brute sorry before I have done with him! I'd like to see him expelled. You can act as you like, but just you recollect that it has nothing to do with me."

"Oh, no. I won't let Claro know you had anything to do with it, else—— Oh, I say!"

Gowl had sprung to his feet, and Melby bolted from the room, knowing that the bully was dangerous when he lost his temper.

The Bully's Fall.

THAT night, after lights were out, Melby crept from his dormitory: then, descending the stairs, he brought a pail of water from a cupboard where he had previously concealed it, and placed it half way up the stairs. After that he took up his position in the cupboard in order to watch the fun.

His only fear was that a master might possibly go up those stairs, but Melby comforted himself with the conviction that no master would think of going up

in the dark, while Tom and Dick would certainly come down in the dark. It did not occur to Melby that they might possibly hurt themselves if they sprawled over the pail, and he would not have cared much if they did.

For a quarter of an hour he waited in vain. Then he began to think that there was not much sense in waiting longer, so he groped his way towards the stairs, but stumbling over some object he went sprawling forwards. Then the opening of the master's study door and the door of a room above caused him to dart back into the cupboard, and hope for the best. But nothing like that happened.

Gowl had heard the noise, and taking it for granted that it was the chums descending the stairs, he commenced following them.

He could hear someone moving in the passage below; then he quickened his pace, and, putting one foot in the pail of water, pitched headlong down the stairs, while a cascade of water and a clattering pail followed him up.

The next moment he landed in Mr. Foster's chest, causing him to sit on the floor and bang his head against the opposite wall, while water flowed round them.

"Boy!" cried Mr. Foster, in his sternest tones. "Who are you?"

"Gowl!" snarled the bully. "Some silly devil has placed a bucket of water on the stairs, and I've pitched over the confounded thing!"

"Don't dare to use that language, young man! What were you doing on the stairs?"

"I thought I heard something."

"Ho jolly well did!" mused Melby. "I hope they don't look in this cupboard. Wonder if I could dodge up while they are talking?"

It was risky work, but Melby considered it far more risky to remain there, for Mr. Foster would be almost certain to bring a light. Melby groped his way to the stairs, then went up them two at a time in spite of the darkness, for Mr. Foster, who had heard him, was ordering him to stop.

He was nearing the top when Dick came out of his dormitory with a flat candlestick in his hand. Melby dived between his legs, and so sudden was his charge and so unexpected, that Dick shot over Melby's back, and pitched headlong down the stairs. Before he reached the bottom Melby was in bed.

"Are you hurt, boy?" inquired Mr. Foster anxiously. It looked as though Dick must have broken his neck.

"Well, sir," exclaimed Dick, seating himself on the bottom stair, "I couldn't truthfully say that I'm not hurt. You see, hot grease was splashed into my face, and I struck about fifteen stairs most severely with the back of my head. I think I may say that I'm hurt all right. I should say I'm about as badly bruised as a rotten medlar."

"What did you put on the stairs?"

"A flat candlestick and Dick Clare, sir. I put him on several stairs. It seemed like fifty thousand, only I don't expect there were as many as that."

"Both of you remain where you are," said Mr. Foster.

In a few moments he returned with a light, and saw Dick in his pyjamas seated on the stairs and looking perfectly calm, although he had a big bump on his forehead and a graze on his cheek.

"Can you walk, my lad?" inquired the master anxiously.

"I should say so, sir," answered Dick, rising. "I haven't tried. Yes, it's quite all right, thank you. Good-night, sir."

"Stop! Come to my study, both of you."

"There was some suppressed laughter from the top of the stairs.

"Which boy is that?" demanded Mr. Foster.

"Hart, sir," answered Tom. "I thought I heard a slight disturbance, and came to see—"

"Come to my study. At what were you laughing?"

"I fancy I made him laugh, sir," said Dick. "I was trying to emulate Gowl's waddle, and expect I looked funny in my pyjamas."

"Did either of you boys place a pail of water on the stairs?" demanded Mr. Foster, when he had entered the study.

"Certainly not, sir," answered Dick.

"You answer for Hart?"

"Well, sir, I know he did not do it, because we were both in bed, and talking."

"That is correct, sir," exclaimed Tom. "We did not do it."

"Who was the boy who fled up the stairs, Clare?"

Now, this was an awkward question. Dick felt perfectly confident that it was Melby; at the same time he had not actually seen him.

"I did not see his face, sir."

"You cannot be certain who it was?"

"Well, in my own mind, I am certain. I could not be absolutely certain because I really did not see him."

"It is a very serious matter, Clare. I think you will have to name the boy."

"But, sir, I don't think it would be straight to tell. Even if I had actually seen him, I hope you would not press me to tell."

"Do you know who it was, Gowl?"

"Probably Hart. He is always playing some idiotic trick."

"At any rate it wasn't me—er, it wasn't I this time," said Tom. "I was peacefully reposing in my pyjamas when I heard you swamping over the pail, and bumping down the stairs."

"So you knew a pail was there?" cried Gowl.

"Oh, bother! Of course I did—so did you when you romped over it. I saw the thing lying at the bottom of the stairs, and the water. I didn't know it was a pail till I saw it, although it sounded like one."

"These boys broke bounds to-night, and——"

"We did not!" said Dick.

"Then I happen to know you intended doing so."

"That is so, but we didn't break bounds," said Dick.

"You hear what he says, sir?" cried Gowl. "He intended breaking bounds."

"We changed our minds, sir," said Dick, as the master looked hard at him.

"Do you wish me to infer that you repented of your intention?"

"Can't say I did, sir," answered Dick, thoughtfully. "You see, we didn't venture because we had an idea that we would get caught."

"Why?"

"Well, we thought our little scheme had been overheard."

"You received information that these boys intended breaking bounds, Gowl?" said Mr. Foster. "You have so informed me. Who told you?"

"The information was given in confidence, sir, and——"

"Very well. You three boys will come to my study at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. Melby will come with you. You can go."

(Another rattling long instalment on Wednesday next.)

NEXT WEEK:

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An Appeal from the Trenches!

THESE SIGNATURES

are those of sixteen brave lads now in the trenches, representing a few of those who have read ONE COPY OF THE "UNION JACK" LIBRARY sent out by a friend.

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"I can say that it is the best periodical I have ever read; and the only fault that I can find is that it is not a double number every week. I wish it was."

"It was just ripping of you to send the UNION JACKS, for they are the first decent books I have been able to get since leaving home, and, you know, time does hang heavy on our hands when we have nothing to do but wait for the next shell to come along. I can't thank you for the books as I would, but if a fellow was grateful to you I am, and that is as much as I can say."

"We are never pleased, if we get a parcel of papers from our homes in Glasgow, unless we get a UNION JACK with it. Plenty of our boys who did not read them before the war started are the most anxious to get the weekly copy of your paper, as they get some good lessons and enjoyment from Sexton Blake and the great assistants. All are anxious to read the next story of Yvonne."

Send your fighting-man a "UNION JACK" to-day! Send him SIX to distribute among his pals! And send them regularly every week. THE "UNION JACK" is Tommy's favourite book. Send a copy to every Tommy you know every Thursday as it is published. It is only One Penny.