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or,

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CHAPTER I.

The Fight in the Quarry.

"**E**XCUSE me for a minute, old chap. Thompson here wants a word with me; but I won't keep you long. You can be looking round if you like, though I know you've seen it all before."

So saying, Captain Armour, Deputy Governor of Portmoor Convict Prison, stepped within the quarry watch-tower, leaving his guests outside gazing first across the breezy, bonny landscape of moorland and tor, then down into the famous quarries plumb at his feet.

The latter was a grim and savage scene; the tragedy of which increased rather than diminished in Nelson Lee's eyes every time he renewed acquaintance with it.

For this gentleman in dark blue, with trim, pointed beard and the general cut of a naval commander about him, was none other than Nelson Lee, the prince of crime investigators, though the name under which he figured on the prison visitors' book was the assumed one of "Norval Lane."

But that was permissible. It was even the governor's wish. For as Nelson Lee put it laughingly, a visit from him to Portmoor was like looking up "old friends."

There were dozens of criminals there always, who might still be roaming at large but for him. There was no reason why they should know when he came to pay them a visit. In fact, there was every reason why they should not.

However, Nelson Lee was not there in any professional capacity on this occasion, but as Captain Armour's private guest. There were salmon being caught in plenty in the River Meto close by the prison, and Nelson Lee had just run down to try his luck at hooking a brace.

But first the deputy-governor had to make his usual morning round of the prison, and now this was the famous quarries they had called at. Here stood the signal-tower overlooking the whole prison, and all the wide acres belonging to it.

"Yes, by George, a grim and savage scene," thought Nelson Lee, again gazing down into the cupshaped quarry hewn in a hill of granite. Picks and hammers thudded unceasingly; cranes clanked and rattled, and everywhere drab-coloured figures swarmed like busy ants.

These were the "hard cases"—those men, that is to say, who were hewing at the face of the granite cliff, or handling the rough blocks, getting them into position for the "dressers."

Down under this nearest shed by the gate, though, were the "doctor's gang," convalescents on "light duty," wearing steel gauze goggles and hammering refuse-stone to chips.

A whistle blew suddenly. A hoarse command rang through the quarry, and instantly the whole busy hive ceased work. The men on the cliff face climbed down, those beneath withdrew behind angles of rock and waited.

A "shot" was about to be fired. A second whistle shrilled at last to show all was ready. A fuse sputtered, and the last man dodged for cover.

Boom! A mighty cloud of smoke and dust burst from a point on the cliff-face. Crash! Rattle! Thud—thud! Great chunks of rock came thundering down, then peace again. That was over. The gangs got back to their jobs, and the work went on.

"I suppose the excitement of that sort of thing soon wears off, even for poor wretches like them?" suggested Nelson Lee, to the civil guard sentry beside him.

"Yes, I reckon so, sir," answered the man, quite ready for a yarn. "It 'ud take more than dynamite to shake life into some of them, particularly the ones just starting a long stretch. That's when they feels it most, I believe. Still, they aren't all that way. There's the other kind," he went on. "Now, there's one chap there—a real bad egg. You can see him down among them blocks of stone. He's a rough 'un, and giving all the trouble he dares. And since he can't take it out of nobody else, he's always getting a quiet punch in at some poor brute; venting his spite on him. A regular bullying waster he is, and I see more of his goings on up here than they do down there, or they'd stop him."

The guard was pointing to a hulking convict who was making great pretence of being hard at his job, but was really "miking" all he knew.

And sure enough, as Nelson Lee watched, he could see the bully had some quarrel he was picking with a gray-haired old convict working next to him. The man's ugly mouth was twisting as he hissed foul abuse out of the corner of it. Nor was this all.

When he could get near enough and the warder's head was turned, it was a savage kick or a jab in the ribs with the elbow, making his terrified victim stagger.

At last the bully's chance came for a more deadly punch. Out lashed his horny fist, and over went the old hag like a ninepin; the assailant dodging away cunningly to pretend it had nothing to do with him.

However, there was someone else watching all this besides Nelson Lee on the tower and the sentry. A convict—one of the "doctor's gang"—seated nearby with a heap of stones between his knees, had evidently had his eye on the bully. Up he jumped enraged, off came his goggles, and in he went at his enemy hammer-and-tongs.

Now, for a man to start fighting in a convict prison is a dire offence, of course, visited by severe penalties. And so the warders regarded it. They dashed in to separate the struggling combatants.

Suddenly to Nelson Lee's amusement they realised who it was the man from the doctor's gang was hammering. Promptly they pulled up short, turned about, and seemed lost in contemplate admiration of the blue summer sky above.

It was the funniest thing alive. For no sooner did the convicts see this than down went their tools to watch the battling twain.

They dare not yell their glee. They cheered in whispers, so to speak. And Spiko Gawdry, whichever he was, was undoubtedly the favourite.

"That's the chap out of the shed," the sentry informed Nelson Lee. "The one that's set about the big 'un. They all hate the brute; but none of 'em ever dared tackle 'im till now. I only hope the governor'll let 'em scrap it out and not stop 'em, that's all. It's just what the blackguard wants."

So thought all his comrades evidently. A grizzled old warder came hurrying up the winding path to the watch-tower. For it was known that Captain Armour was within. Nelson Lee, in fact, could see his host inside on tiptoe, watching the scrap through a loophole window like any schoolboy.

"I say, Westrup," he said, "what's all that going on down below? It's

a fight, isn't it? Yet all your chaps have got their heads turned the other way."

"Well, sir," apologised the warder, "it's like this, you see. That man, sir, is about the worst handful we've got in the quarries, and just spoiling for a thundering good hiding. And we thought that if that other chap would only give it to him——"

"It would do the coward good—eh?" said Captain Armour, finishing the sentence for him.

"Yes, sir, and the others besides," added the warder. "It 'ud be the finest thing in the world all round, I believe, if you'd only let 'em fight it out, sir."

"I—— Oh, I can't! How could I?" laughed the deputy-governor, with a wink at Lee. "I am so absolutely flabbergasted at the notion that I can see it is going to be several minutes before I can find breath to have it stopped. Meantime, what are you thinking of, Mr. Lane?" he added, giving Nelson Lee his assumed name. "Lovely view, isn't it? Isn't the colour of that heather yonder just perfect?"

The detective took his cue, of course. He thought the view over the moor was grand. But while they talked of the purple heather, it was the bully's crimsoned nose on which their eyes were glued. The man in the goggles had "tapped his claret" for him in about the second punch.

However, he was not having it all his own way. The bully of the quarries was strong as a gorilla. He was lashing out mighty blows, any one of which was likely to knock the heroic Spike in the middle of next week.

But Spike was nimble as a panther. Encouraged by hoarse cries from the gang he blocked and guarded, ducked and dodged, showing that there was not much about the noble art that he did not know.

"Who is the fellow?" demanded Nelson Lee of the captain, seeing that Warder Westrup had withdrawn, now grinning.

"Spike Gawdry. Can't you hear them shouting it?" answered the deputy-governor. "He's a cracksmán by trade, and one of the very cleverest and best, so they tell me. He is just finishing a three year sentence here, and is due for discharge in less than a week, in fact. He's been in hospital, and that's how he comes to be here on the doctor's gang."

"Well, anyway, he can box," said Nelson Lee admiringly. "I wonder where he picked it up?"

"Don't know. He's a case I'm rather interested in myself," was the reply. "He has always struck me as a fellow who, if only left alone by his old associates, would go straight and earn an honest living. He has told me so, in fact. Says he has a girl waiting to marry him as soon as he gets out."

"But there," he finished, with a hopeless laugh, "you know what these old lags are. They can't keep away from it, and the master-thieves wouldn't let them if they wanted to."

Meantime, all unconscious how his private character and affairs were being discussed in such high quarters, the valiant Spike was plugging away at his hulking opponent, getting knocked spinning more than once, but always springing to the attack again like a hero.

"Master-thieves!" echoed Nelson Lee. "You really think, then, that burglary is as much a business as running a blacking factory? That there are regular firms engaged in it, employing hands, taking them on and discharging them, according to the jobs in view?"

"Think! I'm sure of it!" exclaimed his host. "And so are you, aren't you?"

"Oh, well, catching burglars has never been my line exactly!" answered

Nelson Lee, though without the smallest trace of side. "I have heard, of course, that there are mysterious 'master thieves,' as you call them, who scheme and plan big crib-cracking jobs down to the smallest detail, and then hand them over to a mere jobbing burglar to carry them out. But what I want to know is why the police never nab these arch-villains, instead of running in underlings like our friend down yonder—"

"By Jove! Hallo! Did you see that one?" he broke off admiringly, as a terrific rally had ended in the bully of the quarries being nearly knocked head over heels. And still the warders were affecting not to have noticed that there was any scrap going on at all. "Spike's got the brute groggy, hanged if he hasn't! He'll whip him yet. I quite admire the fellow."

"And so do I," said the deputy-governor. "I think the chap is far too good to be allowed to let drift back into crime, as he certainly will do unless, as I say, some chap like you holds out a helping hand to save him."

"Like me! Why, since when was I turned into a discharged prisoners' charity organisation, I'd like to know?" quoth Nelson Lee.

"You aren't," was the grave reply. "But if you bent that mighty mind of yours to the problem I've just been telling you about, you would earn not only the thanks of the police—you would win the sincere gratitude. I believe, of scores of old lags who go out of here after years of penal servitude, knowing only too well that these vampires—these master-thieves—have already got their minions waiting to waylay hem. They have it on their diaries the very minute, almost, when these poor devils are due to get their discharge. And then the old, old process begins all over again; the temptation, the threats, the forcing them back to a life of sordid crime."

"They may try for a time to stick out and live honestly. But they are only ticket-of-leave men, so what can they do? The master-thief is always at them, and sooner or later they are bound to yield, only to get nabbed again, of course, and sent back here to Portmoor."

CHAPTER II.

The Master-Thieves.

CAPTAIN ARMOUR spoke with real fervour. He was governor of a prison, but he had a heart as big as a house. He had made a study of crime and the criminal these many years.

Nelson Lee knew this. He was interested, if for no other reason than that the subject of this conversation was obviously a lion-hearted fighter, and a right good sort.

For he had flown at a man half as big again as himself to avenge another, merely. He knew, moreover, that for so doing he would almost certainly receive a further sentence of imprisonment tacked on to the term he was just completing.

In this case, however, there was no question of that. Wisely they were letting the two fight it out; and Spike was winning now handsomely. He had the bully whipped. The coward was beginning to roar for mercy.

"Here! Hi, warder, this hog's knocking me about! Why don't you stop 'im? 'Elp!" he bellowed, trying in vain to cut and run. But his mates headed him back with lusty shoves.

"Go it, Spike!" they applauded. "Put him through it! Serve the mangy swab right! Finish him!"

And "finish him" their champion pretty well did. The bully's eyes were

"putting the shutters up" fast. He even went down on his knees for mercy. Whereupon a last lusty buffet knocked him head over heels, and "out."

"Here, steady! Stow that!" commanded a stentorian voice just then, and Warder Westrup suddenly rushed forward as if he had only just become aware of the scrap. "Hold that man!" he said to his assistants, who also made a great pretence of doubling-up with carbines at the ready. "Put the irons on him, and lay on to that other chap, too, that's sprawling there."

The bully, though, was too far spent to stand. He was blubbing like a child. They had to let him lie for a bit. Meantime, the victorious Spike was marched off, handcuffed, to durance vile, presumably.

However, Warder Westrup must have murmured something consoling in his ear, for as he went down through the subterranean passage leading out of the quarries under the road, a contented grin lit up his not unhandsome face.

Nelson Lee, through a field-glass, watched him go. A moment later the gangs were all back to their work, bubbling with glee that the bully's comb had been cut.

"Well, now, I suppose I must slide out of this without anyone seeing," chuckled the deputy-governor. "Come on, Mr. Lane, we'll get this way, I think."

Sneaking out by an iron footbridge, connecting the mound on which the watch-tower stood with the brink of the quarry, the two were soon out of view of the convicts, and away.

"Well, now, that's almost as good as catching a salmon, isn't it?" laughed Captain Armour.

"Quite," agreed Nelson Lee. "And now I suppose that poor beggar will be stuck on bread and water after doing you a good turn?"

"What, Gawdry? Oh, no!" said his host promptly. "He'll go into punishment cells, of course, for the sake of discipline; but a beefsteak and a cigar is more what I'd like to give him if I dared."

"And you won't dock him an extra month, or anything like that? He'll get his discharge this week, as you said?"

"Oh, yes! Why, what were you thinking about?" inquired the deputy-governor.

For it was evident Nelson Lee was thinking of something.

"Oh, I was just wondering!" was the tantalising answer. "Go on! I want you to tell me a bit more about these 'master-thieves' you say exist, and how you think they manage to evade falling into the clutches of the law."

"Why, yes, certainly," agreed the other, glad to have interested him.

For as a student of the prevention of crime it was a subject near to Captain Armour's heart. He dived straight to the bottom of it.

He described to Nelson Lee what the latter already knew, of course—how the pals of convicts awaited them on their release to welcome them, and incidentally help to blue the few pounds of good-conduct money he might have earned after his years in gaol.

Among these pals would be these harpies, he had mentioned; actually ready with a crib-cracking job, perhaps, at the "old terms," or even better.

"For as you know yourself," continued Captain Armour, "your jobbing-burglar does not get all he steals. Far from it. The master-thief who has marked down the crib to be cracked, worked out the details and made special tools for the job, if necessary, takes all the profits, and merely pays the burglar a fair night's wage."

"And is the burglar content? I should have thought having got the swag into his own clutches, he would have stuck to it."

"Oh, no; he daren't! The fences who are in with the master-thieves would promptly shut down, and refuse to relieve him of the stuff. Moreover, they would mark him—give him away to the police. Your burglar knows too well not to come those sort of tricks. He parts up honestly enough."

"And supposing he stole say three hundred pounds worth of stuff at receiver's prices, how much would he get out of it, do you think?"

"Well, now, Spike Gawdry told me that himself," answered the deputy-governor. "Three hundred was about the figure he put his last haul at, and all he was going to get out of it was three five-pound notes."

"Is that a fact?" gasped Nelson Lee, honestly taken aback. "A fiver for every year of liberty it cost him!"

"Oh, well, that was pocket-money, really," explained his host. "He was being kept all the time you've got to remember. In six months he cracked five cribs for his last employer, at much the same terms. In each case he had every possible detail worked out for him, even to the time his train started from London, and the one to fetch him back."

"He had plans, too, of every floor, door, and window of the house marked with arrows to know exactly which way he was to enter it, and where he was to go. On the plans were notes as to who occupied the various bedrooms he had to pass, whether they were light sleepers or snorers, and even where to look out in case he tumbled over the master's boots. He had a bit of poisoned meat all ready for the dog, and keys to open all the inside doors. All he had to do was to snip the burglar-alarms where indicated in the chart, open a window with a putty knife, walk in, and walk out again. So you see," concluded Captain Armour, "with all that prepared for him three five-pound notes was not such bad pay, after all."

"Perhaps not," agreed Nelson Lee. "But since it was all so simple, how came he to get nabbed at last?"

"Oh, the usual way! His employer sold him."

"To the police? Betrayed him—you mean that?"

"Oh, yes! In the coldest-blooded manner imaginable. It is the usual thing. Perhaps Spike had been trying to get a rise of wages, or more likely the police were getting too hot, and somebody had to be offered as sacrifice to lull them to sleep again. So a burglary was planned, and Spike sent off to do the job. Only the detectives had been given the tip, too, and were all waiting for him."

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, who, though he had never made burglar catching a part of his regular profession, flattered himself he knew all that was worth knowing about the ways and wiles of the knights of the jemmy.

However, he was mistaken. He was learning something to-day which was quite an eye-opener to him. He wanted to know whether Spike's first job now would not be to hunt out that master-thief straight away, and smash his head in for him.

"I should feel like doing it, I know that!" he said angrily.

"Ah!" laughed the deputy-governor softly. "But you've got to remember that he knows no more who this master-thief was who was employing him than the police, or you or I do. That's the whole point of what I am telling you. These arch-tempters behind the scenes never show themselves to their dupes. They work entirely through go-betweens, and even these do not know whose message it is they are carrying. That is a solid fact, I can assure you."

Nelson Lee stared. It seemed incredible. Yet by fact on fact the deputy-governor proceeded to demonstrate that what he said was true.

"And that's why I say a man of your undoubted genius ought really to

tackle this subject in grim earnest, and try and ferret out who these vampires are, and bring them to justice."

The frown knitting Nelson Lee's dark eyebrows showed how much he was impressed by what he had heard. The task appealed to him; he felt like taking it on. It was a challenge.

"By Jove, I will!" he said suddenly. "Anything which baffles Scotland Yard is good enough for me. You say these brutes have never been unearthed. I will unearth them, or one, at any rate."

"And which one is that?"

"This cur that first used this man, Spike Gawdry, of yours to his own dirty ends, and then betrayed him. I'll start on him first."

"And how?"

"Why, you say Gawdry is due for discharge in a week? Very well, on account of this scrap to-day you will give him further detention."

Nelson Lee was rapping all this out as if he were the Home Secretary himself. The deputy-governor smiled. He knew him of old.

"Gawdry's mates must not know but what he has been released in the ordinary way," continued the detective. "On the contrary, the morning when he is due for release will see him walk out of these gates a free man."

But the deputy-governor had to protest at this.

"One moment, you are getting rather mixed, or I am," he said. "Just now you said he was to have extra detention. How am I to release him and give him that, too?"

"Quite simple," said Nelson Lee. "For the Spike Gawdry who walks out of Portmoor Prison will be myself in disguise."

"The dickens!" gasped the deputy-governor.

"You say there will sure to be harpies waiting to waylay me. Very well, I shall be ready for them. They may even have another crib-cracking job to offer me at once, you suggest. Good! I will take it on. I will turn burglar, and steal the Crown jewels themselves, if necessary. But in the end I'll bet I'll get my fingers on the master-thief employing me, though he has forty thousand go-betweens, and his head office is in Timbuctoo."

"Bravo!" cried Captain Armour delightedly. "And, by George, I'll help you! I'll hold the luckless Spike in my deepest dungeon for a month or a year if you like; for it will all be for his soul's good in the end."

"I know he wants to go straight this time when he gets out," he repeated. "I know also that he will never be able to resist the terrific pressure these scum will bring to bear upon him, and that he will be dragged down into the slough again as sure as eggs are eggs."

"No doubt," agreed Nelson Lee. "The way of the transgressor is notoriously hard. No one wants to employ an ex-convict. Besides, you say he has got an honest girl waiting for him. We must think of her."

"Yes, by Jove, that you'll certainly have to do!" laughed Captain Armour, while Nelson Lee's jaw also dropped a bit. "Spike's sweetheart would be rather an awkward complication if she turned up to claim him."

"Still, that can't be helped," he said. "I'll have to chance that. And now to have a closer look at this man I am going to impersonate. It will have to be a mighty careful disguise."

The deputy-governor told him that the best time for making a leisured study of Spike's physiognomy would be at night, when the gas-lamp shining into the cell would be lit, and the convict would be seated beside it, reading or writing.

So they went off to their salmon-fishing instead, driving in the captain's fast two-wheeler to bonny Brookmead Bridge. There, having set up their rods, they tried the fly first and the prawn next, plumbing each foaming eddy in the rock-strewn river.

CHAPTER III.

Spike Gawdry's Double.

AT last a difficult cast of Nelson Lee's was rewarded by a furious swirl and a fleeting glimpse of a silvery body. The line tautened, and he was fast in a big fish of fifteen pounds or more.

Nipper, his youthful assistant, would have loved to have seen his gur'nor then. Nelson Lee, who could look down any revolver-barrel pointed at his head without turning a hair, was quite carried away with excitement.

The fish tore savagely downstream, reeling off forty yards of line, despite every effort to check him. Nelson Lee, in fact, was "giving him the butt." Captain Armour roared to him to let him rip a bit.

So rip the fish did, charging round and round pools, threatening to sever the good line against the sharp boulder edges. However, luck was kind.

"Now reel in; he'll come now," declared the captain, every bit as excited as his guest.

So Nelson Lee revolved the winch with infinite care. The salmon wanted to sulk; but he had to come. The rocks were desperately slippery for nailed brogues, such as the detective was wearing. But by precarious manœuvring he had almost brought the monster to gaff, when—biff!

His heels had flown up, bounce he fell and souse he went heels over head into the ice-cold river. The salmon, of course, was off like a rocket. Fortunately, Nelson Lee had let go of the rod, or it would have been smashed for a certainty. As it was it went whizzing away downstream, butt in air like the periscope of a submarine.

"You've lost him. Hard lines," declared the captain.

But he did not know Nelson Lee. No sooner was he out on the bank than he was off in pursuit like a house on fire.

"There he is! I see it!" he shouted; and then traversing another slippery granite boulder up flew his heels again, and he repeated the very same performance.

The captain simply shrieked. But Nelson Lee, now he was in the river, struck out to seize his rod. He got it, what was more, and then, floundering to dry land again, brought his fish to gaff like an expert, amid united cheers.

If it had been one of these master-thieves that they had hooked, they could not have been more elated.

"But I say, old man," panted Captain Armour, "you've cut your knuckles pretty badly, haven't you? And just look at that eye of yours."

"Why, is it black? It feels a bit like it."

"It isn't black yet, but it will be."

"Oh, well, all the better!" was the cool remark.

"Better! Man alive, what makes you say that?"

"Why, I'll be able to tell them I got it trouncing the bully of the quarries," said Nelson Lee.

The captain had clean forgotten this part of it. News of the fight would, of course, leak out. Such things always did, though nobody could say how

It was done. And, of course, Spike, on his return to his old haunts, would be expected to show some marks for his victory.

"And a painted black eye is never half so convincing as a real one," as Nelson remarked.

So his tumble into the river, if it did not give him double pneumonia, had proved a blessing in disguise. A mere ducking, though, was nothing to so tough a campaigner as Nelson Lee. He walked home instead of driving. That was all.

It was time then for the deputy-governor to take the nightly "march past" of all the gangs, both those working within the prison and those from the farm lands outside. Every man out of hospital had to parade, for every man had to be seen and counted.

Nelson Lee had never witnessed this part of the daily routine before.

"No. We never allow anyone to look on on these occasions," Captain Armour told him. "But, seeing it's you, you can be inside the orderly-room, where you can watch it all from the window. It is a weird sight, this march past of the Legion of the Lost."

And so it was, as the detective had to admit—a weird and tragic sight. Fifteen hundred hangdog wretches, tramping by the saluting-point, where stood the senior prison official on parade.

Tramp—tramp—tramp! The gangs which had been forming up on the many walks amid the trim-kept lawns and flower-beds of the main courtyard now began to swing by in never-ending procession.

"Oh, the bitter tragedy of it!" thought Nelson Lee, quite moved by the spectacle.

The mere boys of the juvenile adult division came first: hooligans who had committed murder and been reprieved, lads who had slain in anger, and others guilty of terrible crimes. They went swinging by, some sixty of them, with quite a soldier tread.

"But what must their thoughts be at night, alone in the dark in their cells?" wondered Nelson Lee.

Verily Portmoor Prison should be haunted, if ever a place was, with legions of hovering ghosts crying out for vengeance!

Next, when the lads had gone, the older hands passed by, two by two, gang on gang, the warder in charge marching behind, truncheon at the salute.

"Number forty-nine! Thirty-two, sir," the warder would sing out as he passed the saluting-point.

The first was the number of his gang, the last the men comprising it. Already, however, this had been checked by the eagle eyes both of Captain Armour and the chief warder beside him. It tramped away, to be followed immediately by the next.

Old men, with grizzle beards: bowed old men, with spectacles: tall, upright men, with squared shoulders and a swinging stride that showed they had been soldiers once—they all went tramp, tramping past on their way to their cells.

Here and there was a coal-black nigger, while at the heels of some of the gangs hobbled a cripple on crutches. Some wore jackets of blue, with red collars and cuffs. These were the more privileged prisoners. The rest had a slop jacket with blue and red stripes.

Occasionally came a man in parti-coloured garments of drab and yellow, and he wore a broad leather belt, with chains fastened to his ankles, or his garb would be quartered with black, according to his crime. For the first were men who had tried to escape, and the second those who had attacked their warders.

They would be doing "bread and water" for their sins. Yet they looked

more jaunty than the rest on the whole, for a convict who can boast that he has worn the leg-irons is a proud man and a hero for evermore.

At last the drab, grey legion had wound its way out amid the grass plots, each gang breaking off to its own particular block of cells in the courtyard beyond.

Their evening meal would be served now. After that would be Nelson Lee's time to study the facial characteristics of the man he was to impersonate. By-and-by Captain Armour and he set out. They crossed to the block of punishment cells, where Spike had been incarcerated since his fight.

The prison had meantime been locked up for the night. Nobody within could get out, for there were only three keys—the governor's, the deputy governor's, and the chief warder's—that could open the gates. And these officials all lived outside.

This system of locking in both guards and prisoners prevails throughout the whole prison day and night. The warder in a workshop is as much a prisoner as his gang. He has no keys by which the latter could escape if they did kill him, so they let him alone.

An iron-bound door and next a steel gate having yielded to Captain Armour's keys, he and his guest now stood within the special block of cells set aside for punishment purposes. The two warders on duty saluted.

The building was lit by day by a long skylight roof. Tiers on tiers of cells, opening on to iron galleries, rose on either side.

Here were the black holes and padded cells, with doors four deep, where a man could "shriek the house down," as the saying is, and yet not a sound be heard.

Spike Gawdry, however, had not been confined in these. When Nelson Lee peeped through the tiny observation-hole to which Captain Armour motioned him, there the convict sat, on his fixed log-stool, quite unconscious that he was being observed.

The gas-jet, set in the thickness of the wall and shielded by inch-thick plate glass, lit up his sunburnt features. He was rather a good-looking fellow, as Nelson Lee had already noted. Certainly he was no Bill Sykes.

He was writing laboriously. It was a letter to his girl, as the detective could not help reading. Nor was the handwriting uncultured, though he seemed to linger over every stroke as if to make it a work of art, worthy of the recipient.

"Dear Emily," it ran,—“Only another week, sweetheart, and I shall be with you again—this time to marry you and live honestly, which is my solemn vow. Old pals will be sure to be after me, I know; but I swear to Heaven and to you that I'll have nothing to do with them any more. It may mean starving for a bit until we can find some kind soul to give me a job, for your sake if not for mine. It's going to be a hard fight, like it always was, but with your love to help me——”

That was as far as the convict had managed to get. There he sat, as if his heart had suddenly grown too full for mere words. A tear came creeping into his eyes. They grew misty, and so did Nelson Lee's.

He had produced his miniature make-up outfit, which he always carried. It included a mirror as well as a stock of grease paints. Pausing from time to time to peer again through the inspection hole for a fresh view of his model, he set rapidly to work.

Long practice had made him a master of the art. With swift, broad strokes, he rubbed in the pigment on cheek and chin. Next came high lights and shadows, harsh and strong, until a few caressing touches softened and blended them.

Captain Armour watched him, amazed. The thin, intellectual face had already filled out and coarsened a little. The chin and mouth looked broader, the nose thicker.

At last, bending closer, the detective lined in a few careful wrinkles about mouth and eyes; a swift dabbing with hare's-foot and powder-puff completed the operation. He stood up and faced his host.

The captain was dumb-stricken.

"Call those chaps back again!" commanded Nelson Lee, for the warders had been told to retire during all this.

They reappeared from the empty cell where they had withdrawn. For the moment they quite imagined that the real Spike Gawdry had broken out of his cell, and was now confronting them in borrowed clothes. They took a startled stride to close with him.

But, before they could open their lips, Nelson Lee had taken a towel. One swift, vigorous scrub over his features, and he looked at them and smiled. Another, and he was his former self again, motioning with finger on lips for them to keep silence in case they alarmed the prisoner within.

"Well, of all the miracles! He ain't a man! He's a blooming Maskelyne and Devant!" he heard one of them gasping under his breath.

And Captain Armour agreed. How Nelson Lee, too, after his pains to get an absolutely life-likeness, could blot out all his work in that casual fashion he could not think.

"Oh, that's all right!" laughed the detective. "Once I've mastered a disguise, I never forget it. My next attempt, even without our friend to copy from, will be better than the first, I guarantee. To-morrow you must give me a chance to hear him talk. Then, after I have gone through his identification record, I shall be all right."

It was characteristic of Nelson Lee to dismiss in this light-hearted fashion an undertaking which, before he had finished with it, might cost him even his life.

CHAPTER IV.

The Mysterious Swiss.

SPIKE GAWDRY'S record of crime showed that the deputy-governor had in no wise over-flattered him when he described him as one of the most skilful and resourceful "cracksmen" who had ever been through Portmoor.

"By Jove, the Enderby Rubies! He was the beggar that swiped those—was he?" ejaculated Nelson Lee as he saw this famous burglary down among others to Spike's credit.

The detective remembered the robbery well. Spike must certainly be a master of his craft.

"Extreme cleverness in scaling walls, roofs, etc., and expert knowledge in the use of high explosives for forcing safes," were among his most remarkable characteristics noted by the police.

"H'm! Well, I rather wish I had hit upon an easier man to impersonate!" decided Nelson Lee, smiling up at the captain, who was watching him. "I don't know that I was ever particularly good at shinning up drain-pipes, if that's what it means. And as for blowing open safes—well, I know how it is done, and that is all. Still, there you are! I'm booked for the part, and I am going to play it, though I hope sincerely it will be for a few nights only."

And then, casting his eye down the long document to the last crime on the

last, for which Spike was doing time now, he again uttered a little grunt of surprise, for it was in attempting to burgle the house of the Hon. Trevis Sturton, in Cormac Street, Mayfair, that the convict had come to grief apparently.

"You know Sturton, then?" queried Captain Armour.

"Yes, as a collector and connoisseur. Who doesn't?" answered Nelson Lee. "Why, they say he has the finest collection of paste and gems outside the United States. The burgling fraternity know that, too, for, if I remember rightly, there have been at least four attempts to break into his place."

"But it is too well provided with man-traps and spring-guns, I suppose, for any of them to succeed," suggested Captain Armour.

Such was the case evidently. At any rate, Spike Gawdry's effort had been no happier than the rest.

Among other essential facts which Nelson Lee noted were that Spike Gawdry's customary haunts when at liberty were round about the Clerkenwell district, and that he was suspected to be a member of the famous Rat-tail gang.

The next day, then, having sat in an inner room while Spike was brought before the deputy-governor, so that he could study his peculiarities of speech and manner, Nelson Lee departed for London.

Spike, in any case, was not due for release until the end of the week. Now, on the pretext of his fight with Dave Brown, the bully of the quarries, he was told he would be detained another month—and perhaps two—according to his conduct.

The convict looked sick and savage. In vain he protested that he had only gone to the aid of an older and weaker victim. The deputy-governor, of course, was adamant, and Spike was marched back to his punishment cell.

The fact that he was being detained was to be kept a strict secret from the rest of the prisoners, needless to say. They were to be left to believe, when Nelson Lee, disguised, walked out of the gates of Portmoor on the Friday morning, it was Spike who was going forth to precious liberty.

It was evening-time when Nelson Lee drove up to his old rooms in the Gray's Inn Road. Nipper was cheekily waiting to receive him, with a sack in which to carry up all the fish his boss was supposed to have caught. But Nelson Lee's one and only salmon had been left, forgotten, in his host's larder.

"In a tin, I suppose?" chaffed Nipper cheekily, with a sly wink at their landlady, Mrs. Jones.

He would have been wiser to have kept his eye on his chief, it happened, for the next instant he found himself pinned by the ear and spun round, when the flat of Nelson Lee's boot, applied to the base of his backbone, projected him sprawling up the stairs for his impudence.

But Nelson Lee was only joking, too, of course. Mrs. Jones had dinner ready and waiting, but the detective bade his assistant bring in his diary of engagements first.

"I want to see if there is anything particularly urgent for the next week or two," he said, "because otherwise I've taken on a job of my own."

"Oh, and what's that?" demanded Nipper.

"Why, turn burglar," was the cool reply, which nearly made Mrs. Jones capsize the entire soup tureen down Nipper's neck in her shocked astonishment.

"Burglar!" gasped Nipper.

"Yes. What of it? You seem surprised," said his boss calmly.

"Why, yes, you bet I am—that is if you really mean it."

"Oh, yes, I mean it!" was the nonchalant reply.

"Mean that you are really going to burgle to steal?"

"Of course. You don't think I would take all the trouble to break into a man's house to play his piano? What do you take me for?"

"Why, a champion kidder," was Nipper's prompt, and not very respectful reply. And then he added: "Come, boss, you're pulling my leg. I know. What is this game you're on now? You may be going to turn thief, but if so, it's only to catch a thief, I know."

"Quite right," assented Nelson Lee, laughing. "You've hit it first shot, young 'un. I'm out to catch that rarest of all gaol-birds, by all accounts—the master-thief. They haven't any specimens down in Portmoor Prison, it seems, and they've challenged me to procure one for them. Or I can make it two or half a dozen if I like—and if I can," he added meaningly.

Thereupon he proceeded to narrate what Captain Armour had said, and what he in turn had undertaken. Nipper heard him out in silence. Nelson Lee asked him at last what he thought of the scheme.

"Don't believe a word of it," was the laconic response. "I don't believe there are such things as master-thieves. If I were a burglar, risking years of Portmoor every time I cracked a crib, I would want all the swag I got for myself to repay me. You wouldn't catch me handing over three hundred pounds' worth of loot, and only getting three five-pound notes for it. No, nor anyone else, either. Your friend, the captain's, talking through his hat."

"All right," answered Nelson Lee, "we shall see. But to-night we'll take a stroll round Mayfair together, and find this house where our convict came to grief. He has a great reputation I find for shinning up stack-pipes, and I shall have to be ready to do the same. I want to see the kind of job I may be asked to tackle."

So off they set. They found Cormac Street, and the Hon. Trevis Sturton's mansion was number nine, a corner house turning into a palatial mews. It was a "crib," which, if Nelson Lee had been put on to "crack" it, he would not have known how to set about it all. For the lower windows were elaborately barred with ornamental grids, while to reach the upper ones would have puzzled a monkey. If Spike Gawdry succeeded in breaking into it at all he was a genius.

Nelson Lee wondered whether it was any more accessible from the back. Telling Nipper to wait where he was, he went down the mews to look. Here, though, was a wall guarding the back premises, at least ten feet high. There was a door in it, however, and this was suddenly flung open with some violence after the detective had passed.

He had already heard voices in altercation, and now no sooner was the door open than out of it came shooting a young man, to fall on his hands and knees in the road.

He was a foreigner obviously, and excited. He was more excited still when after him came hurtling an old tin trunk and a portmanteau, nearly catching him on the head.

"Hallo!" thought Nelson Lee, dodging promptly into the shadow. "One of the honourable's domestic staff been misbehaving himself, and got the chuck. And, by jingo, he doesn't mean to take it quietly, either!" he added, as the man turned on the figures within the gate, abusing them like pickpockets.

He was a Swiss, the detective judged.

"You Angleesh dogs! Tehah! You dare treat me like zis, do you? Ver vell, den I show you! You don't tink I live ere fife weeks wizout keeping my eyes open, do you? I go to ze poleece—oh, yes! I tell 'em vat I tink of you. Do you 'ear me, you fat fool, you?"

The "fat fool" was the honourable's butler, evidently. He was being egged on by someone behind who might have been the master himself. Rather than have the man there scandalising the whole neighbourhood with his shrill objurgations he wanted him fetched in again, neck and crop.

Whereupon the butler valiantly started to make a dart to recapture their quarry. However, he had no sooner moved than he was caught by the coat-tails, and jerked back. Nelson Lee began to get interested.

There was a pause then for a minute or two, during which the Swiss abused them more shrilly than ever. One or two coachmen and stable-helpers belonging to the news came out to listen. At last the detective saw the meaning of the evident change of tactics.

For suddenly just behind the spot where the Swiss was standing a coal-plate in the pavement was lifted, and a hand shot out, clutching him by the ankle. It was neatly done. The coachman roared.

And so did the Swiss. He roared, but he kicked and wriggled also. It was the butler's chance. Urged on by his employer, as Nelson Lee imagined, out he dashed to close with the captive. However, the Swiss was too agile.

Wrenching himself out of the grip which pinned his leg, he went stumbling backwards in a heap. The result was that the butler grabbed only at thin air. He lost his balance, too, which was worse; for the coal-hole yawned at his feet. In vain he tried to stride clear of it. Through went one leg, and down he came wallop on his fat stomach on the pavement.

The coachmen round shouted with glee, of course, as if it were the funniest thing in life to see a man break all his ribs. The Swiss showed better sense. Up he picked himself, and away he ran like a hare, leaving bag and box behind him. Down past Nelson Lee he came tearing top speed.

"The dogs, the thieves! But I will tell!" he heard him panting hysterically. And then out by a backway he vanished, and across Park Lane into Hyde Park opposite.

Nelson Lee emerged from the shadow then, and strolled past the gate where voices still wrangled. The butler had been pulled out of the coal-hole. The figure directing operations was the Hon. Trevis Sturton himself, as the detective surmised. He was rating his unfortunate servitor soundly for not recapturing their quarry, though one would have thought he was well enough rid of him, as it was. Anyhow, his servants dragged the runaway's bag and box back inside the gate again, and the door slammed.

The detective went to find Nipper round the corner in fits of laughter over the whole thing. And it certainly was funny. It was only just occurring to Nelson Lee, however, that it was also a trifle mysterious.

What did the fellow mean by boasting that he had not been five weeks in the house without keeping his eyes open? What could there be discreditable in the establishment of such an estimable member of the aristocracy as the Hon. Trevis Sturton? Moreover, there was the threat to tell the police.

"Oh, the usual bluster of a servant who is sacked, and starts to sling any mud, knowing that some is bound to stick!" he decided, annoyed that he should have ever thought twice about the affair.

So Nipper and he strolled next across to the Park just to see what display of flowers was to be seen in the well-kept beds. They wandered along in the darkness as far as the Achilles statue, and then turned back. Suddenly Nelson Lee's keen eyes detected a figure huddled up on one of the seats. It was the Swiss valet again. And still letting off steam by the sound of his "encre's" and "nom de chiens."

"Well, hanged if I don't just have a word with that fellow!" decided

the detective, his curiosity whetted once more. "In any case, I've got to remember that it was in the Hon. Sturton's house that my friend Spike, whose part I am understudying, came to grief last."

So he stepped up to the fellow with a sympathetic "bon soir." The man might be innocent of any harm and quite homeless, for all he knew. Nelson Lee told him he had just witnessed the way he had been summarily thrown out, and wanted to know if he could be of any help to him.

The man started and stared suspiciously. His face grew more and more sullen. He growled back a surly negative.

"Oh, all right!" said the detective promptly. "I've no wish to intrude myself, if you don't want to talk to me. But see here," he added, producing a card. "You're a manservant, I take it, and out of a job now. If you like to call on me at this address I may be able to help you. I won't promise, but I may, I say."

The Swiss looked as if he were going to refuse even this. But suddenly he reached out his hand and took the slip of pasteboard, pocketing it with a growled word of thanks. Then Nelson Lee rejoined Nipper, and the two resumed their walk again.

"What made you stop and talk to the brute at all?" demanded Nipper. "You don't really think there was anything in his gas about telling the police? It was just spite, of course, to get his own back."

"Quite likely," answered Nelson Lee. "But I suddenly thought I would, and when I think suddenly like that, I generally find it is wise to act on the instinct. However, I confess it is rather like listening to backstairs gossip," he allowed; whereat again Nipper snorted.

They strolled along home then, thinking no more about the incident. By midnight Nelson Lee was in bed and fast asleep. Two hours later the insistent ringing of the telephone-bell at last roused him with a start. He realised that it must have been buzzing for several minutes, for he remembered it in his dreams.

"Well? Hallo! Yes. It's Nelson Lee speaking," he answered, to the exchange.

To his astonishment it was the river police at Waterloo Bridge Station who were wanting him.

"It's a body we've just pulled out of the river," the inspector told him. "Only been in a few minutes we should say, and we're still working to bring the man round."

"Oh, and what do you want me for?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"Only that on him in a ticket-pocket we found a card with a name we believe you use sometimes—'Norval Lane,'" was the reply.

"'Norval Lane.' Yes, that's me," answered the detective bewildered.

It was the name he had passed under down at Portmoor. It was also the one he had given to the Swiss that very night, he remembered.

"What sort of a chap is he to look at?" he inquired next.

The inspector thereupon described him.

"Great thunder! That is the Swiss; I'll bet anything on it!" gasped Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER V.

A Successful Impersonation.

"ALL right. I'll be round as soon as I can get dressed," promised Nelson Lee; and a few minutes later had stumbled into a belated taxi, and was speeding along towards London's bridge of sighs.

For this was the conclusion the detective had come to as to the valet's fate.

" Alone in London, and kicked out into the gutter. Perhaps charged with stealing into the bargain. Hysterical sort of chap, anyway. Thought he would end it all, and jumped into the river," was his summing-up of the case.

However, when he reached the Embankment and made his way down the gangway leading to the floating-station of the river police, he soon found that he had spoken in haste. There was a wound on the back of the poor wretch's head that could only have been inflicted by a club.

" Foul play, if you ask me," said the inspector. " Do you know anything about him, sir? I suppose you do, since he has one of your cards in his pocket."

Nelson Lee was thinking hard. The fellow's threat against his late master, the latter's prompt anxiety to get possession of him again, and his subsequent surly suspicion when the detective had tried to befriend him, all lent additional mystery and suspicion to the case. Nelson Lee could not make up his mind whether to tell all he knew or not.

However, he did it at last. The inspector looked incredulous. It appeared he knew the Hon. Trevis Sturton quite well—so well that he was obviously loath to trouble him with the matter at all.

" Well then, don't, and leave it to me," said Nelson Lee promptly. " It may be just as I say. The fellow is one of the hysterical type, and, what is more, you say he is not dead, and may recover. Give him a chance to do so before you make inquiries. In fact, don't move in the matter at all until you hear from me," he added.

To relieve the inspector of all responsibility he promised to go straight to Scotland Yard, and get their consent to this course.

Nelson Lee and the river police had worked hand-in-hand together in many a case. He jumped into his taxi again, and drove to headquarters there and then. He told them of his new quest, and though the present case had nothing whatever to do with it apparently, he nevertheless wanted it left entirely in his hands.

The fact that the man was reported to be recovering under vigorous first-aid treatment enabled the police to comply. Off went Nelson Lee then homeward bound; and now he woke up Nipper.

" I've got a job for you," he told him.

" Have you, guv'nor? Now, you mean?" replied Nipper, reaching for his trousers.

" No, not now," answered his chief; " to-morrow will do. I want you to get taken on as a valet in the house of the Hon. Sturton."

" Valet in the house of the Hon. Howmuch?" gasped Nipper.

" Yes. I don't know what you are likely to find there, but you will soon see," was the imperturbable reply. " Anyway, that last servant of his we saw chucked out to-night has been knocked on the head by someone, and thrown in the river. They've just fished him out."

Nipper had not been told this much yet, of course. He wanted to know if his guv'nor wanted him knocked on the head, and chucked in the river, too?

" No, I don't. And I don't want any cheek, either," his boss reminded him. " You just keep your eye on the advertisement columns to-morrow, in case the Hon. Sturton advertises. Just cut round the servants registries, too, and then call at the house itself and offer yourself. I'll leave the names of three or four titled people, which will get you the job, if any reference can."

" Leave them?" echoed Nipper inquiringly. " Why are you going off, then?"

" Yes. I've got some business I want to clear up, and on Friday I must

go down to Portmoor again, for our friend Spike is due to be released then. So I sha'n't see you again for a bit. But don't forget when I do it must be in the Hon. Trevis Sturton's livery. You must not fail me there."

Nelson Lee hardly knew himself why he was so set on Nipper turning valet at the connoisseur's house in Cormac Street. Certainly his assistant did not. Still, it all came in a day's work so far as Nipper was concerned.

Next morning, sure enough, there was an advertisement in the "Morning Post" which might have hailed from the Hon. Trevis Sturton. Nipper chanced it, and found he was right. By noon he was signed on as second footman, to wear powdered hair, velvet shorts and canary-coloured calves.

Meantime his gov'nor was speeding on his way to Birmingham, where he had a case to put the finishing touches to. That night he was travelling down to Plymouth to make his way on the morrow to the lonely recesses of Portmoor where stood the prison.

Spike Gawdry, it happened, was within half an inch of his own height, and only a shade less powerful in build. His brand-new suit of clothes, which had been made for him in the tailor's shop ready for his release, fitted Nelson Lee to a T.

This and a new bowler-hat, shirt, underclothes, collar and tie—everything a man could need in fact—were all laid out in a cell in the punishment block.

A convict orderly was in charge. Nelson Lee was marched in in due time, wearing broad-arrow slops, and disguised as the man whose time was up. The whole routine was followed just as if it had been Spike himself, for, if ever the fraud was detected and leaked out, Nelson Lee might easily pay for it with his life.

At last, his ticket-of-leave given him, he passed out of the prison gates—a free man. At least, he had a warder beside him to see him on the London train.

Nelson Lee almost felt what he was supposed to be—a convict just released from duranco vile—for there was something about the cut of him, and perhaps the brown-paper parcel under his arm, which made all the guards and porters look at him askance.

Five hours later, however, saw him at Waterloo. Up till now he had seen no sign of any of those harpies which the prison governor had described to him. He was wondering what he was going to do with them when he did. However, once the train had drawn up, he was not left to wonder long.

"Why, Spike, old chum, 'ow are yer?" he heard a voice hailing him delightedly as he alighted. "'Ere, George—'ere 'e is! 'Ere's old Spike come back again! Shake 'ands, old son, and welcome to the Smoke once more!"

Nelson Lee turned, to see a short, stout, florid man wriggling his way towards him through the crush. Another as short, but pale as paste and thin as a weasel, followed hard in his wake.

"Now, who the dickens are these, and how am I to find out?" wondered the detective.

Then he remembered the real Spike's good resolutions to "try and run straight this trip." Treating the pair to a look of withering contempt, he turned on his heel to pass them by.

The rogues, however, were not to be shaken off thus easily. Nor did Nelson Lee intend them to be. It was to make these very men's acquaintance that he had been to all this trouble. With an exclamation of disgust, they came after him again.

"'Ere, Spike," remonstrated the fat man, "wot's the game? Ain't got too proud to be seen talking to old pals, 'ave yer?"

"Or are yer going to be silly enough to rat? Is that it, Spikey?" cried his party-faced pal, whose name seemingly was George.

Nelson Lee swung round on them.

"Yes, that's it. You've hit it!" he rapped out, with an ugly twist of his mouth modelled on Spike's when he heard he was going back to punishment cells for thrashing the bully of the quarries. "I am goin' to 'rat,' as you call it. I've done with you and the lot of you, if you want to know. I've come out now to go straight—and keep straight! I want to see my gal—that's 'oo I want to see! Not you!"

This was hardly the truth. The one person the detective did not want to run across—not yet, at any rate—was Spike's sweetheart. Moreover, a disconcerting grin spread simultaneously over the faces of both rogues. The detective marked how their eyes met in a swift, furtive glance. He was puzzled, and tried to look alarmed.

"Do you 'ear what I say?" he demanded. "My gal—where is she? Ain't she 'ere to meet me?"

The grin died on the fat one's face. He eyed the supposed Spike and shook his bullet-head.

"Em'ly, you mean," he said. "No; she ain't 'ere, old chum. And it's bad news for you, too—if she didn't let you know! But she's gone—Em'ly 'ere."

"Gone!" demanded the detective, with a simulated gasp. "Gone where? Where's she gone to?"

"Abroad—Amerriky—with Nat 'Olden," was the answer. "They got married las' Toosday, and sailed next day."

"Married last Tuesday!" cried Nelson Lee, smiting his brow in melodramatic horror.

"Yes. It was you comin' 'ome that done it. She always said on the quiet she never wanted to see you agin."

Nelson Lee was genuinely staggered by this bombshell—not for his own sake, of course, but poor Spike's—for had he not stolen a glimpse over the convict's shoulder of that last tender letter he had been writing, longing for the day, so near at hand now, when they would be reunited and could set up a little home of their own together?

And now the jade had jilted him, and gone off with a rival! Poor Spike! What would he say to that knock-down blow?

However, this was no time to wonder. He had taken the convict's place. What the real Spike would have said, if he had been there to hear it, he would have to say now for him.

And he did. He played the part of a jealous and jilted lover to a T. The two rogues grew quite scared at his vehemence. He vowed he would take the very next ship that sailed, and hunt his rival down, if he had to follow him to the ends of the earth.

"Don't be sich a bloomin' fool!" counselled the fat man hastily. "You don't want to take no steamers! You leave the gal, and forget all about 'er. She ain't wuth it—playin' you up all these years, and then lettin' you down at the last!"

"No; that she ain't, by gum," chimed in his weasel-chested mate, exchanging another swift glance with his pal, not intended for Nelson Lee to intercept.

But he did all the same, and then a light flashed upon him. These rogues were lying, perhaps. Spike's sweetheart might not have deserted him at all, but they were making out that she had. Why?

To drive the supposed Spike to fury and despair, of course—to shatter those good resolutions which they would know he had been making. His sweetheart might even have taunted his pals with them foolishly—that he

would never go stealing again. So, to checkmate this, they had concocted this lie.

These rogues, the detective had to remember, were emissaries of one of those mysterious master-thieves that the deputy-governor had told him about. Skilled cracksmen like Spike were far too valuable in their trade to be let slip in such easy fashion. They might even have kidnapped Spike's sweetheart, and be keeping her out of his way until, in disgust and despair, he had once more relapsed into his old career of crime.

"The skunks!" breathed Nelson Lee under his breath, as this possibility burst upon him.

However, it would not do to betray that he had suspected their little game. He broke out into fresh revilings and threats.

Meantime, at a sign from the fat man, his pal had hailed a taxi.

"Ere, where are yer goin'? Wot are yer doin'?" demanded the supposed Spike, hanging back as they tried to urge him into the vehicle.

"Goin'? Why, to the old Pig and Gluepot, of course, where the boys are all waitin' to give yer a friendly lead!" was the reply. "You don't think ol' pals are going to forget a champion like you when 'e comes out of the jug? Not likely, old son! You come along with us!"

With something between a curse and a groan, the supposed Spike allowed himself to be stuffed inside, and the word was given:

"Rosebery Avenue!"

"Hallo! Clerkenwell again!" thought the detective, for he knew from Spike's prison papers that the district below Saffron Hill was the convict's favourite haunt.

The cab stopped in the main thoroughfare at last, and now, descending some steps to the foot of the viaduct over which the street passed, the three found themselves in Warner Street, and so round sundry squalid side-turnings into Three Harts Alley. At the mouth of this stood a low beerhouse, known to the thieves fraternity as the Pig and Gluepot.

The prince of crime investigators got ready, for the whole place was abuzz with beery loafers, all anxious to give the supposed Spike Gawdry a fitting welcome home.

CHAPTER VI.

At the Pig and Gluepot.

NELSON LEE'S superb make-up stood the test. They might have held his head under the pump, in fact, and never disturbed a trace of it, for it was stain, every bit of it, and a stain, too, that was the detective's own particular secret.

It was evident that the real Spike was quite a famous mortal. His admirers came crowding up from all sides, and now was the time for Nelson Lee to use his ears to catch men's names and know who he was talking to.

The little, stout man was Bill Gunter apparently, his weasel-chested friend George Fresh. Of the rest, mine host was hailed familiarly as Bungo, while two other slinky-looking specimens whom the detective kept his eye on particularly were Darky Kellerman and Jim Rees. And if they were not out-and-out ruffians of the most cunning and dangerous type, he knew nothing about crime and the criminal—that was all!

However, everyone for the moment was on pleasure bent. A round of boiled beef, entronched in mounds of steaming carrots, was only awaiting the pleasure of their honoured guest to offer itself to the steel.

The reception in the four-ale bar was over at last, and the viands were served. "Success to crime, coupled with the name of our ol' and distin-

guished pal, Spike Gawdry," was the toast of the day. It was drunk amid a roar of "For 'e's a jolly good feller," capped by vociferous cheers.

Nelson Lee was expected to make a speech in acknowledgment, of course. But he had his part to play—that of the jilted and vengeance-breathing lover, whose donah had deserted him basely.

"Ob, go on, Spike!" exhorted the fat Bill Gunter. "We know wot you're thinking about still. But be a man! There never was a gal yet in the world that there warn't a dozen better to match 'er. And Em'ly, arter all, was one of the blue-light sort, wot'd only have dragged a man of sperrit down, and never done 'im no good. So forgit all about 'er, ol' son! Fill up your bloomin' mug, and let yourself rip! Come on! The boys are waiting!" he cried, slapping the supposed Spike heartily on the shoulder.

The exhortation seemed to do their hero good. He began to laugh loud and recklessly. But it was not to say that every time his nose went into his mug that any of the liquor passed his lips. Indeed, Nelson Lee was never more alert in his life, for he knew that he had but to make one slip to arouse one glint of suspicion in the mind of someone more observant than the rest, and instantly he would be denounced as a "split." Then nothing on earth could save him!

But the tighter the corner, the better Nelson Lee enjoyed himself really. He threw himself into his part with a zest and abandon that quite swept his audience off their feet.

"Long life and success to every jolly cracksman!" I says. "Long life and good luck to 'im!" he cried, whereat the four rogues round him applauded and stamped.

"Yus, and may perdishun take every gal as ever sold a chap as mine sold me, the jade! Eh? That's it, boys, ain't it? That's fair!" he demanded, while the air rocked with sympathetic cheers. "I tell yer, mates, when I come out of the ol' jug this mornin' it was with me mind made up that I 'ad clucked crime, and was goin' to settle down and be honest. Arsk ol' Bill 'ere, if that ain't so?"

"'Ear, 'ear! Them was your werry words!" confirmed the stout man dutifully. "But now you've thought better of it, I 'ope, bein' a man of sense?"

"Better of it! Of course I 'ave! Just give me a job, and I'll show yer! I've done fifteen year in Portmoor, but if I was to do fifty more it wouldn't frighten me now my gal's been and give me the go-by," declared the supposed Spike. Whereat he gave the toast again. "Success to every jolly cracksman, and death to the splits!" The last sentiment sending the revellers into a frenzy of delight.

The fat man's hand was already on his arm as Nelson Lee sat down.

"D'yer mean that, Spikey?" he whispered hoarsely. "About bein' ready to crack another crib, if we've got one ready for yer? Good man! Then we sha'n't keep you waitin' long, I give yer my word. We've got one we been nursing just for the likes o' you. But come on out of 'ere, and I'll tell yer about it," he finished, tightening his grip and leading the impostor out and up the dingy staircase to another room.

Here promptly his pal, George Fresh, followed them.

"George as got the papers," began the stout man eagerly. "Show 'em to 'im, George. And I can tell you, Spikey, that if it's a crib that wants a bit of cracking, it'll make a millionaire out of you when it's done."

"Ah!" grunted Nelson Lee. "Well, that's talking! The price'll have to be a dashed sight better than the last time—I tell yer straight! No more three five-pound notes for me for two 'undred quids' worth of swag! The boss'll 'ave to spring a bit more than that, or I'm off."

The fat man soothed him down. That was all right, he coaxed. This was a special lay, and they would not quarrel about terms.

"And where is the crib?"

"Redlow Castle, in Kent," was the answer, that nearly sent Nelson Lee on his back with astonishment.

For he knew the place well. Lord Redlow was not merely an old client, but a personal friend besides. Nelson Lee had been down shooting his covers only last November.

"And now I'm booking myself to go down and burgle the old boy!" he gasped to himself. "Burgle that unique collection of gold plate of his! For it's that these scum will be after, of course."

The Redlow gold plate was known the wide world over. It dated back six hundred years, when certain lands were held by a neighbouring monastery at a rent of one goblet of purest gold for every five years tenure. These specimens of mediæval goldsmith's work were regarded as priceless now.

But they were but the beginning of a collection which any king might envy. Nor could any king have kept stricter watch and guard over its safety. Spike Gawdry must have a reputation as a cracksmán, indeed, if his pals thought that he could penetrate the castle strong-rooms at all, even with Lord Redlow's full leave and licence to try.

Nelson Lee knew that, for he had been in the strong-room himself. It was one of the dungeons of the castle originally, one which it was said was reserved for those luckless prisoners doomed never to see daylight again, but to rot there until they went raving mad and died.

The detective wondered what sort of a job the master-thief, who had drawn up these precious plans, had made of them. However, he was soon to see. They were unfolded. Yes, it was Redlow Castle right enough.

Here was the moat that his lordship had had cleaned out of recent years, and filled with water again. He had spent a small fortune, in fact, restoring the old stronghold as much as possible to its ancient plan and appearance.

The moat had a stone bridge thrown across it, guarded by a tower and portcullis gate. A dotted line on the plan, though, showed that the point of entry the cracksmán was to make for ignored this.

"Then, if this 'ere's water, it looks like swimming, don't it?" suggested Nelson Lee.

"Not swimming, my lad, or we shouldn't be offering you the job," answered the stout man, making the detective jump a little.

So Spike was evidently no swimmer. It showed how precious careful he must be.

"No, the Dook has thought of that," chimed in the other.

"Dook! What Dook?" Nelson Lee very nearly blurted. But he checked himself in time. The Dook might be the master-thief himself. "Well, wot's 'is little gadget?" he asked instead.

"We'll show you all in good time. All you've got to do is to stick your nose tight over the plan while Bill explains it. 'E knows," said the weasel-chested one.

Thus rebuked the supposed Spike fell to studying the tracing again. Whoever the Dook was he was a remarkably clever man.

A window which could be reached by a hooked pole from the improvised raft, was where the chosen cracksmán was to make his entrance. Thence a passage within the battlements would bring him to where Nelson Lee remembered the gun-room was.

The recollection suddenly reminded him of a strange coincidence. For now he came to think of it, this same Hon. Trevis Sturton who had been so much in his thoughts of late, was one of the shooting-party when Nelson Lee had visited the castle last.

The latter remembered dropping across him on two occasions in this very room where the guns of guests were cleaned and kept. His explanation was that he was a bit of an amateur gunsmith, and was adjusting the trigger of one of his twelvebores to lighten the pull.

He was filing away at some small piece of steel at the bench vice on the last occasion. Nelson Lee had not noted what the thing was exactly, for he had accepted the other's word. But the incident was worth bearing in mind now.

From the gun-room window that dotted line showed a brief climb up a gutter-pipe to the roof above. Thence some sloping leads gave access to the main building of the castle itself.

Thence all was plane-sailing, the detective noticed with increasing excitement. The venture quite thrilled him, in fact. Here were the bedrooms of any guests stopping in the place. To creep past these would be ticklish work, but once at the stair-head he would be able to breathe afresh.

But he would still have another hundred yards of lower floor rooms and passages to negotiate. And then only would the most difficult work commence.

"This 'ere marked in red, you see," explained Bill, "is a steel door leading down to the butler's pantry and wot-not. You'll 'ave to shift that. And with the cold stuff, too. You dussent try no crackers 'ereabouts just yet."

"Right-oh!" answered the supposed Spike, as if a few steel doors were nothing to him to force.

Nor was this one likely to offer insuperable difficulties. For the mysterious Dook had actually provided a false key to open the principal lock, while to demolish the second a heavy jemmy was to suffice.

Altogether it was a most creditable piece of work, and won Nelson Lee's whole-hearted admiration. He began to see now how it was that a mere journeyman burglar received such an apparently miserable fee. Nineteenths of his job was already done for him, as a matter of fact. He had only to take the risk of detection.

Now they had traced and explained the plan down as far as the steel doors of the strong room itself. Here apparently much depended on Spike's own special skill in the manipulation of high explosives.

For down in these dungeon depths, with every wall from nine to twelve feet of solid masonry, there should be small chance of the thud of any explosion being heard overhead.

"So that's where you come in, Spikey," the fat man told him. "And that's where the Dook'll be able to spring a bit more for the job than las' time, I reckon. We can but try 'im, anyway."

Nelson Lee stuck out for a "hundred," and wanted to know how soon he would get his answer. "Two days" was the reply. The request had to filter to the mysterious chief by slow degrees, it seemed.

In fact, the detective was able by a few crafty questions to satisfy himself that neither the stout man nor his wensel-chested pal had the remotest notion who this man they called the "Dook" really was, or how to get at him.

So Captain Armour, of Portmoor Gaol, evidently had not exaggerated when he described the amazing cunning with which these master-thieves covered up their tracks, even from the dupes they employed as cat's-paws.

Two days gave Nelson Lee leisure to marshal his theories, and even see how Nipper was getting on in his new job as second footman at the Hon. Trevis Sturton's.

A simple plan had been arranged between the two by which they could exchange messages. Every afternoon Nipper had been told he would be

allowed a half-hour off to take a constitutional in the Park. If Nelson Lee needed him he was to be sprawling like any Park loafer on the grass at a certain spot, reading an evening paper.

On Nipper's approach he would see the loafer rise to his lazy legs, and stroll away, leaving the crumpled news-sheet on the ground behind him. Nipper was to pick it up and adjourn to a seat to read it. On the margin would be any news in cipher that his chief had to communicate.

Having added his answer, Nipper would look out for Nelson Lee to come loafing back again. He would then leave the paper with any message of his own scribbled on it on the seat, and stroll off without a sign.

Nothing could be more natural, and it worked without a hitch. Nipper, when he captured the abandoned news-sheet, found this message written on one margin.

"Everything all right, so far. Off to Redlow Castle to-morrow night most likely. No sign of Emily yet. Told she is married, and in U.S., but suspect she may be kidnapped. How is that Swiss? Is he dead? And anything to report?"

When quarter of an hour later Nelson Lee, dusty and unshaven, came shuffling back towards the seat where Nipper was lounging, the latter promptly yawned and got up to depart, in turn also leaving the paper behind him.

His chief picked it up, lit an old clay pipe with leisurely deliberation, then spread out the crumpled pages as if he had never read it before.

"All right at my end, too," he read. "Master at home. Swiss still alive, but lost all memory. Have noted about Emily. Has given me an idea. Good luck!"

"Good luck! Does that mean on my burgling errand, the cheeky young scamp?" thought Nelson Lee. "And what idea had it given him, I should like to know? Why didn't he just jot down a line to indicate what he meant?"

However, there it was, and he had to be content. He made his way back then to a house close behind the Pig and Gluepot, where he was being provided with board and lodging ad lib, free gratis. At least, no pay was ever asked, and he was living like a prince.

CHAPTER VII.

A Perilous Expedition.

REDLOW CASTLE is almost, if not quite, the oldest inhabited dwelling in the four kingdoms, and is certainly the quaintest and most beautiful castle in Kent. Yet it is surprising how few people have ever seen it.

For one thing it stands some four miles back off the main London to Canterbury road, while a richly-wooded park completely shuts off all view of it from the highway.

Nor are there any days on which the public are invited to view it. It contains too many treasures for any Tom, Dick, or Harry to be admitted to its precincts.

However, to-night there was a rude surprise awaiting its noble owner. And two of the men who were laying themselves out to accomplish this were crouched down now in a clump of bushes beside the road running along the easternmost boundary of the park, a quarter of a mile from the castle itself.

Of these one, needless to say, was Nelson Lee. The second figure, crouch-

ing flat and motionless as a hare beside him, was Darkey Kellerman, one of the two rogues the detective had first set eyes on at the Pig and Gluepot that day of his release.

Nelson Lee had made up his mind then that Darkey and his pal, Jim Rees, were two crooks of the most cunning and dangerous type. Subsequent experience of them had justified this estimate.

At any rate, they were good enough for the Dook to select as brothers-in-arms of the supposed Spike Gawdry in this most desperate burglary of modern times.

Jim Rees had not appeared on the scene yet, but he was coming. They were waiting for him now.

"Hub! Ark! That's 'im!" whispered Darkey suddenly, giving Nelson Lee a jog.

The latter lifted his head an inch above the bushes. From far away the whirring note of a motor-car, driven at fair speed, drew nearer and nearer. It rushed upon them with a roar.

But it never slackened pace. With the glare of the headlights in his eyes, the supposed Spike Gawdry just had time to catch a glimpse of the figure at the wheel and a single passenger behind him. Then it was gone in a whirl of white chalk-dust.

Clank! Plunk! Thud! Clank! Clank!

What were all those objects being tossed out of the car one by one on to the soft turf beside the road?

The two in ambush knew. Nelson Lee crept one way, to collect those to the left. Darkey crawled the other. In a few moments he, like his companion, returned with his fingers crooked in nothing more formidable than a bunch of empty petrol tins.

That was all. True, they were covered roughly with felt, and had queer loops of metal soldered to them. But otherwise there was nothing remarkable about them.

Nor did either of the watchers seem at all surprised. It was just these articles that they were waiting for, in fact, for without them their burglarious entry into the castle by the route marked out in the Dook's carefully drawn plan was impossible.

There was a deep and wide moat to be crossed before they could gain the unprotected window they were aiming for. They needed a raft of some sort to do this and to ferry their booty back. The flat, screw-tight tins were to make the raft with, the loops soldered on receiving light cross-battens of wood to hold them together.

The smallest detail had been well thought out. Who ever this master thief they called the Dook was, Nelson Lee had to admit he was a man of genius at his job.

The felt covering the tins was to enable them to be carried in silence. Now that they had got what they were waiting for, Nelson Lee and his confederate stole back from the road, making for the high oak palings surrounding the park. To scale this, they had a rope ladder already fixed. In a couple of minutes both were over and striking away towards the dark clump of oaks shielding the castle from the road.

A couple of barbed-wire fences were the only obstacles to be negotiated. In ten minutes they were safe down in cover, with the lily-covered moat spreading broad and deep before them. Walls and battlements towered above. Not a light showed anywhere. The whole place seemed deep in slumber.

"Now then, Spike!" whispered Darkey hoarsely, producing the light bundle of ash laths by which their strange catamaran was to be constructed.

Even these laths were cunningly jointed. To slip them through the metal

loops of the petrol cans was the work only of a minute or two. The twelve cans then made a small and compact raft, which would bear double the weight they were likely to put upon it.

Now all was ready for launching. The thing was light as a crate, and steady as a rock when in the water. A jointed pole was the means of propulsion. It had another use, as was to be seen later. In the end was a hook like a shepherd's crook.

With infinite stealth the two climbed on to their strange craft, and pushed off. Still not a sign or sound of life came from the battlements overshadowing them. They gained the other side.

There was the window for which they were making, some twelve feet only above them.

A narrow turf bank gave foothold at the base of the wall. Nelson Lee crept on to it. He could see how tense and white his confederate's face was under the strain even in that pitchy darkness. Darkey evidently looked to him as the older hand.

Nelson Lee chuckled under his breath.

"I wonder what the ruffian would do now," he thought to himself. "supposing I suddenly grabbed him by the neck and said: 'You skunk! You thought it was Spike Gawdry you had got with you, but it's not. It's Nelson Lee, here to spy out the whole dirty gang of you, and particularly your master-thief you call the Dook!' I believe the beggar would go clean head-over-heels backwards into the moat in his surprise," laughed the detective softly, as he got ready his climbing pole now for the attempt on the window, which was the next stage of the attack.

The hook on the pole had been contrived exactly to fit the sill above, showing that the Dook had been actually within the castle at some time or another, and long enough to have leisure to make the minutest measurements.

Perhaps, like Nipper at the Honourable Sturton's, he had managed to worm his way into the household as a servant—or even as a guest! More wonderful things than that had happened before now.

The hook fitted the window-sill to a hairbreadth. All the supposed Spike had to do now was to swarm up it and cling there while he worked back the catch with a putty-knife.

A last glance at Darkey, a furtive peep round to make sure that they were unobserved, and up went the detective hand over hand. Spike himself, for all his reputation, could not have done it more nimbly.

At the sill, Nelson Lee hung till he got foothold. Then out came his knife. The cheap German-made catch of a suburban villa could not have yielded more easily. With infinite care he raised the sash, then, still all being silent, he stepped boldly in.

He had a cord round his waist. He hauled this up now, and his kit of tools was on the end. It was time to say "good-bye" to Darkey, for the latter's job was to remain outside on watch. Nelson Lee gave him a parting wave, then went forward on his perilous quest.

Having stayed at Redlow Castle as his lordship's guest for over a week, he had no need of the Dook's precious plan to tell him which way to go. Nevertheless, he thought it advisable to follow the line thought out for him. It was the safest, no doubt.

His steps took him to the gun-room, therefore, where he remembered to have encountered the Hon. Trevis Sturton on two occasions when they were fellow-guests. The incident flashed back to Nelson Lee's memory again—this and the strange affair of the Swiss servant.

"Um! I wonder whether it is not just possible that the Hon. Sturton

may not be quite such an all-square-and-above-board gentleman as folk reckon him to be!"

It had struck him before that, whoever had planned this burglary of the Redlow antiques must have a market for them, and not merely be stealing them to melt down.

For the biggest of the gold cups would not be worth more than a hundred sovereigns in mere weight of metal, whereas as an example of mediæval craftsmanship it would make that money thirty times over and more.

On the other hand, each cup was as well known in the collecting world as the dome of St. Paul's. Who would dare to buy it, therefore, knowing perfectly well it must have been stolen?

"Oh, plenty of people!" decided Nelson Lee promptly, having in mind one or two unscrupulous Yankee millionaires who would snap at the chance, and this though it only meant keeping their ill-gotten booty hidden away in a cellar all their lives. There would never be the least difficulty in finding a purchaser.

Nelson Lee had gained the gun-room by this time, and now he had to climb out of the window and up to the leads above. From here to scramble to a window leading into the living portion of the castle was the easiest task in stockinged feet.

Once through this, the amateur cracksman stood in a corridor where the guests' bedrooms were situated. Here he experienced the first qualm of alarm. A sound had seemed to him to come from a corner of the dark passage, but though he waited, and finally crept forward to investigate, there was no sign of anyone about.

Downstairs now, and he arrived at the steel door leading to the butler's pantry. It was necessary to jommy a way through this to gain the castle dungeons beneath where the strongroom was situated.

Of the two locks fastening it, the mysterious Dook had been able to provide a key for one, and this the strongest. Nelson Lee fished it out. He slipped it in and turned it. The lock worked sweet as butter. All the same, he stood cocking his ears to make sure that still all was silence.

"Not a sound!" he congratulated himself.

Yet no sooner was the whispered word off his lips than suddenly from above a crushing weight came hurtling down with terrific force upon his shoulders, smiting him to the floor, and pretty well knocking every ounce of sense and breath out of his body.

He knew what it meant. Of course, he had been overheard, stalked and nabbed as neatly as anyone could wish. One of the landings on the staircase was just above where he stood. His captor had stealthily poised himself there, and dropped straight down on his shoulders, plumb as a stone. Now he was astride his back, kneeling on his arms, pinning him down. Others were hurrying to his aid.

"So, you beautiful blackguard, we've caught you—eh?" grated a voice triumphantly.

And it was Lord Redlow, of all people! Nelson Lee had been assured that he was safely away from home. Yet here he was, as if he had been actually waiting to pounce!

At first the detective did not know what to do or say, and then the humour of the situation struck him, and he laughed.

"Oh, so you think it is a fit subject for mirth then, do you?" said Lord Redlow grimly. "Here! Help me put these handcuffs on him, Captain Armour. Coming from Portmoor, you'll know how they work."

"What?" The grin on Nelson Lee's face had given place to a look of comical amazement.

So the cup of coincidence even now was not quite full! He knew that

the deputy-governor was an old friend of Lord Redlow, too, and here he had chanced to come to stop with him on the very night of Nelson Lee's burglarious quest. But his lordship thought he saw how his shaft had struck home.

"Ha! I thought that would make you sit up, you blackguard!" he laughed. "No doubt Captain Armour here can recognise you. You're an old hand at this game, I'll wager."

His lordship's butler and a footman were gripping hold of Nelson Lee as well. They picked him up and turned him over for the deputy-governor of Portmoor to scrutinise.

It was the latter's turn to gasp then.

"Why, great Cæsar!" he exclaimed as the familiar features of Spike Gawdry, as he imagined, were exposed to the blaze of an electric torch.

"Am I dreaming, or is this a joke—or what?" he demanded, bewildered.

"Joke!" quoth his lordship. "Not much of a joke, surely, to have a man breaking into your place after your valuables!"

"But I mean this man here!" explained the captain. "Either he's one who ought to be in Portmoor Gaol now, and has escaped, or else he's—"

"Quite right!" laughed their prisoner coolly. "He's your mutual friend Nelson Lee. That's just who he is. And jolly glad, too, to have Captain Armour here to explain matters!"



CHAPTER VIII.

A Tight Corner.

"NELSON LEE!" ejaculated his lordship, while the deputy-governor looked vastly relieved. He came to the detective's rescue like a man, for he could see what had happened, of course.

"But we won't attempt to apologise or explain matters here, if you don't mind," said the detective, interrupting him. "I've got pals outside, remember. So let us assume that I have succeeded in forcing this steel door of yours, will you, so that we can talk matters over in the safe recesses of the dungeons."

Even then Lord Redlow was inclined to see his captive further. However, Captain Armour assured him it could all be explained.

The door was opened then, and the five men passed through, for it was impossible now to keep the butler and the other servant out of the secret. Then, once absolutely safe out of earshot of Darkey Kellerman, lying lurking outside, Nelson Lee unfolded the whole "why and wherefore" of this violent intrusion.

Lord Redlow was thunderstruck. He hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels, for he noticed that Nelson Lee still talked coolly, as if the burglary must go on just the same as ever.

"Well, of course," said the detective, "that is if you don't want to spoil all the good work I have done so far. I can't say I am absolutely on the track of one of these precious master-thieves that Captain Armour here is so anxious to see bagged, but I believe I am. And if I am right, then I promise you the result will be worth it."

"Worth what? Having all my priceless gold relics melted up by a lot of rascally burglars!" expostulated his lordship. "I'll jolly well see you hanged first, both of you!"

"Oh, but I would not think of letting it come to that!" Nelson Lee

assured him. "Whatever I steal I guarantee you shall have back again unharmed. I'll drop the swag accidentally into the moat on the way back with my pal, if you like. You could dredge them up then in two twos. But I must show something for my night's work, otherwise they'll suspect me of not trying my best, and that would probably mean my being knocked on the head."

"Murdered, you mean!" exclaimed Lord Redlow.

This put a different complexion on the case, of course. And then a brilliant notion struck him. He had some replicas of his most famous specimens which had been on loan at a provincial exhibition. They were of silver gilt. Nelson Lee was welcome to those.

"Good! Then could I have them now?" said the detective. "I must not waste too much time, or my friend, Darkey, will be getting suspicious."

The replicas were fetched. Meantime, Nelson Lee took the opportunity to make a few inquiries as to the last occasion when the Hon. Trevis Sturton had honoured Redlow Castle with a visit.

"Why, what makes you ask about him?" demanded his lordship promptly—so promptly that it almost seemed as if he, too, had something against the fellow. However, it was mere sudden dislike it turned out. "He was down here two days ago, as a matter of fact," Lord Redlow said. "Dropped in quite casually for an hour or two. But when he came to start his car again the thing jibbed. So he had to stop all night."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, with a chuckle which only whetted his friend's curiosity the more. But beyond this he would say nothing. He had not time, in fact. Darkey would be waiting and wondering what was happening, and the swag was all ready and stowed in Nelson Lee's green baize bag he had brought for the purpose. "So I'll wish you good-night," he said, offering his hand. "And just see your two men keep absolutely mum about this, as honestly my life will depend on it. If these brutes ever get an inkling that I am a 'split,' and not Spike Gawdry as they think, my number is up without the smallest shadow of— Hallo! What noise was that? Outside the door, I mean," he whispered sharply—"or it might have been the window. We're all here, aren't we? There is no one else out burglar-hunting except you four?"

No, there certainly was not. It had happened that Captain Armour and his host were testing an astronomical telescope which Lord Redlow had fitted up as a new hobby in one of the towers.

From this vantage point they had watched in darkness the shadowy figure of Nelson Lee creeping across the gun-room roof. They had then roused up the butler and one of the menservants to help them. That was the simple explanation of how they had nobbled their burglar so neatly.

Consequently, this noise outside, if it really was a noise, was alarming, if only for the fact that they had too many people in the know already.

For a long minute they waited in dead silence. Then swiftly Nelson Lee flung open the door to try and surprise any eavesdropper; but none was outside. Nor was it possible that anyone could have been listening at the window, unless it was Darkey.

"Heaven forbid that!" said the detective fervently.

However, there was no one there now, and he must not delay. Gathering up his ill-gotten gains then he took a silent farewell, and began to retrace his steps along the route by which he had come.

A peep down at the edge of the moat showed Darkey still waiting patiently. He helped the supposed Spike Gawdry to lower the haul of swag. A moment later they were safe on the raft, and poling back to the other side of the moat.

Neither had spoken a word; but the detective had seen the other dip

his hand into the green baize bag, as if to make sure that their work had not been in vain.

Nelson Lee was plying the punt polo. Now was his chance he saw for an accidental capsizing. For to let the gang find that what he had brought back was only silver gilt, would have been almost as bad as returning empty-handed.

"Here! Hallo! Curse you! What the dickens——"

Darkey's frantic effort to right the tilting raft came too late. The supposed Spike seemed to have got his pole stuck deep in the mud somehow. The next instant, before Darkey could grab the precious swag even, they were both overboard, and floundering in the water.

"You cursed clodhopper!" spluttered Darkey, bobbing up to the surface. "Now you've done it. Lost the swag, and got us both nabbed. Yus, and that's the bloomin' game your arter, I suppose!"

"Game!" echoed Nelson Lee, as if he had no notion what the other meant.

Yet he had, of course, only too clear a one. That noise had been his mate listening, after all. If Darkey had not overheard exactly what had been said, he, at least, knew that the supposed Spike Gawdry had been talking to someone inside the castle, and had probably bought his own freedom on the promise of selling his pals.

Darkey was cunning as a weasel, and as vicious, as Nelson Lee knew. The question was how to bluff him? Fortunately, having fired his shaft, the other was too much occupied in hauling his carcass on to dry land to bother much what the detective replied.

And, having gained the bank, off he set as hard as his legs could carry him, leaving Nelson Lee to follow in his wake.

The latter was in two minds whether he would or not. But, finally, he decided to see the job a stage further, at any rate. So off he trailed at Darkey's heels.

But there was no pursuit, of course. This had been arranged. The two gained the road, and there, sure enough, lurking at the bend, was the same motor-car that had passed them an hour ago, delivering them their petrol tins out of which to make their raft.

Jim Rees was at the wheel; the other figure Nelson Lee had seen proved to be Bill, the fat one. They asked no questions, for they could see something serious was up. No sooner were the fugitives aboard than the clutch was dropped, and away the car flew at a cracking speed.

But not for long. Darkey had found his breath at last, and the others were wanting to know savagely what had happened to them both. It all came out then, just as the detective feared.

A glint of light shown incautiously in one of the windows had aroused, first Darkey's alarm, then his suspicions. Creeping his way along the side of the moat he had heard voices, and the supposed Spike Gawdry's among them.

"You lie!" lashed out Nelson Lee, for he was in a tight corner, as he could see.

"Liar yourself! You were speaking to someone—toss, too, by the sound of 'em, and as like as not it was this 'ere Lord Redlow himself!" asserted Darkey viciously. "They caught you, mebbe, but they let you go agin. And why, I asks yer? Why, if it ain't that you're sworn to do the dirty on the rest of us?"

"Yus, and that's why you went and tipped the swag into that rotten ditch, too, so we shouldn't get it!" he ran on. "But I've got a bit of it, anyway!" he sneered, fishing out one of the silver-gilt cups. "And it ain't gold neither, same as you were sent to pinch. It's faked stuff they

give yer, that they didn't mind losing. Only you wouldn't let us get 'old even of that.

"Garn, you nark!" he foamed, his fury getting the better of him suddenly, since the supposed Spike Gawdry merely sat eyeing him in silence.

"A rotten nark I say 'e is! Go on, Bill, down 'im, or 'e'll be out of the car and away before we know! Curse yer, I say!" he raged, clawing at Nelson Lee's throat. "Wait till the Dook gets yer, that's all! Quick, Bill, out 'im!"

It was a lonely stretch of the road, and as dark as pitch beneath the overhanging trees. The ruffian at the wheel was pulling up the car to get to the assistance of his mates. If it had not been for him Nelson Lee might have cracked their heads together, and sprung out of the car and away.

But Rees, reaching over from the driver's-seat, had a heavy spanner in his fist. Once he swiped, and twice, catching the detective on the arm with the first, and the head with second. Half-stunned and crippled, the others soon overpowered him. A last thudding clout over the back of the neck finished him. Nelson Lee pitched forward in a heap on the opposite seat, and for a minute or two knew no more.

When he came to his senses the brutes were tying him neck and heel. Darkey was still raving on about the vengeance the gang would wreak on the nark when they got him home.

"So they do mean to get me home. They're not going to finish me off out here," reflected Nelson Lee, finding comfort in the thought.

The car was set going once more. The detective now had been thrust down in a heap with a rug hiding him from view. Like Fat Bill, Darkey donned motor-goggles and a huge scarf, covering the rest of his face. For the telegraph-wires might easily be at work already to head them off. If they weren't, then they did not know what to make of it, except that Spike Gawdry had sold them somehow. Of that they were convinced.

Needless to say, the route they were choosing was as wide of the main roads as they knew how to make it. Such villages as they went whirring through were all "off the map." There was not a light to be seen anywhere, nor had they passed a soul on the way.

And then all of a sudden an oath came slinging from Jim Rees at the wheel. Here was a light at last, and straight in their path.

"Three of 'em, and all wavin', too!" cursed the driver. "Does that mean we're to pull up? I'll see 'em sugared first! Won't-you, you chaps?"

"Why, you bet, you ravin' idiot! Get stopped, you mean, with Spike tied up like this, and all our tools about? Do we want to drive straight to Portmoor, or what d'you think?"

The outburst was quite unnecessary, for Rees was entirely of their way of thinking. He did not mean to stop for a thousand waving lanterns. But what on earth could it mean? It was not another car in distress.

And then Darkey remembered. They were cockneys. They had forgotten that in these days of Zeppelin raids the special constables of country villages were often called out to block the roads, so as to intercept just such strange cars as theirs and examine them.

They might be German spies, for all anyone knew, out to pilot an enemy's aircraft; that was the notion. And here these three or four figures, now looming up fast into the glare of the car's headlights, were seen to have a scaffold-pole trestled across the road. The lights of the cars alone were sufficient excuse for stopping it.

"Halt!" they were yelling, while one had a gun even to back the command.

This was more than Jim bargained for. He clapped on his brakes, to the fury of his fellow-passengers. He even pulled up dead.

"Your lights! Them lamps!" shouted the specials, as the car came to a stop within a yard of the scaffold-pole barring the road.

"Lamps! What about 'em?" demanded Rees innocently.

"They're agin the law. They're too bright. We'll 'ave to summons you," announced the spokesman, fishing out a formidable-looking notebook, and taking the number of the car for a commencement. "And now let's have a look at your licence, please," he demanded, while his mates came sniffing round the footboards, flashing their bicycle lamps in the faces of the passengers behind.

This was Rees's chance, he reckoned. The pole ahead was only a single one resting on a crazy trestle. Suddenly starting his car forward dead slow, he let the pole just touch the bonnet of it, then he opened out, and butted through at top speed.

Away went pole and trestle like tipcats.

"Whoa! 'Ait!" bawled the discomfited specials, ducking to dodge the flying timbers.

But the road was clear, and the car was away. Bang! bang! went their gun in a wild endeavour to puncture their back tyres for them. But the only thing that got punctured was Fat Bill's car. Two pellets drilled neat holes in this, making him stamp and yell like a lunatic.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jim Rees defiantly. "That did them in the eye. And now let's hope there's no more of them, though if they're all as soft as them wo sha'n't come to much 'urt, I reckon."

There was another and bigger village ahead, though. What was more, there was no way of dodging it. It was with quaking hearts then that they approached it. They had profited by the first warning to douse their big headlights now.

But no lamps, denoting any barrier, were visible in the blackness of night. They heaved a deep sigh of relief. Their driver increased his pace a notch or two.

And then just when they were congratulating themselves that another ten-mile stretch ahead of them was free—flash!—a fresh array of lanterns bobbed up within a hundred yards of them. The beggars must have been telephoned up by the police on the last barrier, and been lying in wait for them. Worse still, they were soldiers this time.

"Halt, there! We've heard all about you! Pull up, and give account of yourselves!" shouted one Tommy, standing square in the road with rifle at the present.

CHAPTER IX.

Nipper has Some News.

THIS looked as if their burgling trip was finished. And no one was more delighted than Nelson Lee to hear it, needless to say. Stamped on by Darkey's heels, trodden on by Fat Bill's enormous boots, he was tired of being made a doormat of. Moreover, he knew that if these ruffians did once get him home for the Dook to wreak vengeance on, he was in for a very rough time indeed.

The Tommy's challenge then was like sweetest music to the detective's ears. He expected the car to pull up dead promptly. But he reckoned without its driver.

Jim Rees had not much time to glance ahead and see what obstacles

it was that barred their path on this occasion. But it looked like a row of empty barrels.

At any rate, he meant to chance it. It meant five years for him, at least, if he were nabbed. So—— Biff! Bash! Crash!

Straight at the row of barrels he charged full-tilt. But if ever a man was sold it was he. The barrels burst, but they did not budge. They were loaded full of stones. The shock was like a railway collision.

And yet the car must have been a mighty strong one. Brought up dead, and even rebounding under the impact, it nevertheless forged forward to the charge again. And this time it got through.

The 'Tommies were yelling angry threats. They threatened to fire, and they did. Darkey and Fat Bill had just time to fling themselves forward on top of their helpless prisoner when two rifle-bullets zipped through the back panels, and shattered the glass screen to splinters.

One even ripped the sleeve of Jim Rees's leather coat. But neither damaged their machinery apparently. The car still held on, though creaking and groaning in every joint.

However, it was mortally hit, after all, as it turned out. They discovered the fact when it came to rounding the next sharp bend of the road. The collision had crippled the steering gear. Twist and strain as the driver would, he could not get the wheel sufficiently round to clear the curve.

Before anyone knew what was happening, therefore, the car was mounting the hedge bank. For one breathless second they threatened to turn turtle on to the road. But it steadied itself, crashed through the hedge, and then went rolling on its beam ends in a ditch of nettles on the other side.

Out shot Jim Rees like a rabbit. Out blundered Fat Bill and Darkey, cursing themselves black in the face. The soldiers had heard the crash, and were coming on at the double, shouting like fiends. It was a case of cut and run for their lives.

"But we'll sock that narking hound first!" vowed Darkey, spluttering in his rage.

He snatched up a lump of twisted iron, and flew at his helpless victim. He smote, and the crash of the blow suggested that that was the last of Nelson Lee, at any rate.

It was nothing of the sort, however. It was not his skull that sounded so hollow, but the seat behind. Two minutes later he was being hauled out of the wreck by the excited soldiers and dumped about like a sack.

"Great scissors, what's this? Why, the beggar's soaked to the skin and bound!" exclaimed the sergeant blankly.

And so, of course, the detective was; but he was the coolest of the bunch.

"While you're all gaping at me, who can't run away if I wanted to, you're letting those vermin escape scot free!" he reminded them.

Whereat the 'Tommies did pull their wits together, and start to straggle in pursuit.

Those lost seconds, though, had cost them the rest of their bag. A very few minutes of blundering about in that pitch darkness convinced them of that. So they came back to their solitary prisoner then, and demanded to know what the game was all about.

"Oh, I'll explain all that to the proper authority!" answered Nelson Lee casually. "Have you an officer round about here? Because I should like a message sent to the chief constable of the county at once! He is the only one I could think of telling my story to."

The 'Tommies were mystified, but they saw that, whatever the rest of the occupants of the car had been up to, their captive could hardly be the criminal. So one of them, having a motor-bicycle, off he set. Meantime they still kept the detective tied up.

But when an officer did arrive, he had him cast loose. Then, since the residence of Captain Hamish, the county chief constable, was only ten miles away, and Nelson Lee flatly refused to divulge anything except to him, he was put into the officer's car and driven off there at once.

Once under Captain Hamish's charge, he knew he was all right, for the two had worked together in many a case, and were old friends. Nor was he disappointed, though, being disguised, it was not until the chief constable had 'phoned Captain Armour to come over from Redlow and identify him that he would accept Nelson Lee absolutely at his word.

"Well, Lee, my friend," said the deputy-governor of Portmoor Prison, "I suppose after this you'll have had enough of trying to bag a specimen of the master-thief for our gaol-bird collection at Portmoor!"

"I? Why, no; I certainly haven't!" declared the detective. "Why, I'm only just beginning to get into the swing of the chase! I'll bag a master-thief for you yet, or I'm a Dutchman—and a rare fine specimen he'll be, too! I'll promise you that!"

The deputy-governor laughed. He always admired Nelson Lee's indomitable pluck. Nothing seemed ever to daunt him. He was a marvel.

But when he tried to wriggle out of him where he thought this precious specimen was going to be found, the detective was mum as an oyster. He wanted a dry suit of pyjamas, a hot drink, and a bed. Those were all he was going to worry about for the present.

He got them, needless to say. As for Darkey and his mates, it is to be presumed that somehow they found their way back to their beds safely, too, for the police, thanks to Nelson Lee, left them undisturbed for the time being.

Next morning saw Nelson Lee out of his "Spike Gawdry" disguise, and attired more like his old self again, in a suit of borrowed clothes. He caught an early train to town. At Cannon Street Station, who should he run into but Nipper.

"Why, guv'nor, bless my heart! Fancy seeing you!" gasped his assistant, taken aback. "You don't mean you've just come up from—you know!—that place you were going to pay a call on yesterday? If so, where's the—er—luggage you went to fetch?"

"Luggage, you young scoundrel?" exclaimed Nelson Lee, and then he laughed. "Oh, I know what you mean!" he said. "That job, though, didn't come off quite. But I'll tell you about it later. Meantime, what are you doing so far afield?"

"Booking a passage for his nibs, the Honourable, to Spain first. Then he's off to Brazil, where the nuts come from," was Nipper's answer. "Or, rather, he isn't himself, but a friend"—he corrected himself—"a party of the name of— What was it again? I've forgotten!" He consulted a paper in his hand to refresh his memory. "Oh, yes—Mullins!" he finished. "Stephen Mullins, second-class rail and first boat only, so he don't sound very grand for his nibs to be worrying himself about."

Nelson Lee frowned a moment, as if conning this over; but the next second he seemed to have dismissed it. He wanted to know how Nipper had been getting on in his new post.

"And above all," he finished, "I want to know when I scribbled that on the paper about my believing Spike's sweetheart to be kidnapped, what you meant by answering that it had 'given you a notion'? What notion has it given you, and why the dickens didn't you say it out flat instead of keeping me in the dark?"

"Well, it was only sort of simmering!" explained Nipper. "All the same, I've about got it to the boil now, I fancy. But don't you think wo

had better find some quieter corner than this, instead of jabbering here?" he suggested wisely enough.

He reckoned that he need not be getting back to Mayfair for another half an hour at least. So they sought out an A.B.C. shop, where they got a quiet corner table and a cup of coffee. Then Nipper told him.

His notion, since his guy nor plainly suspected that the Honourable Sturton was "on the crook" somewhere, was that it was he himself who had got hold of Spike's sweetheart, and was keeping her close prisoner in a room in the mews just behind their house.

"Great Caesar! You don't mean it!" ejaculated Nelson Lee in astonishment. "And how the dickens do you make that out? What do you know?"

"Very little, except that there are some stables belonging to my master's house just at the back with a door between," said Nipper. "They're supposed to be empty, and no one lives over 'em even. But, all the same, I've caught Timms, our butler, skulking down after dark with a regular meal hid up in a basket, and it's through that door he vanishes."

"But that doesn't make out that it's Spike's Emily that the food is for!" protested Nelson Lee, disappointed.

"No, it doesn't; not alone. But the cook—Timms's wife, and a wrong-'un if ever there was one—she's in the mystery, too. And last night she didn't think I was anywhere about, but I was, and I heard her talking about a 'her' and a 'stubborn hussy,' and about it being better for them all if 'she' did die instead of only talking about it."

"And that's really all you've got to go upon?" demanded his boss.

"That and a remark she volunteered that it was the worst day's work the master ever did when he 'lumbered himself up with the jade. As if there weren't plenty of good men for his job without making all this fuss over one!' she finished by saying."

"And is that the end?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"So far as that conversation is concerned—yes," replied Nipper. "But this morning the Honourable was in the dickens' own stew. It was after he had been talking over the 'phone to someone about stocks and shares, though that might have been only a code. He pitched into Timms, though, like steam. At least, not Timms himself, but someone whose life he was going to have, he swore."

"I'm wondering now whether it mightn't have been you," concluded Nipper coolly, "for, as you may not know, the Honourable was down at Redlow Castle that very day I saw you last, and didn't come back till next morning. And then he went straight to his private workshop upstairs, where he has his lathes and things, you know."

But Nelson Lee did not know. This was the first opportunity that they had of exchanging notes at all since Nipper had become second footman in the Honourable's service.

So there was a lot to tell and describe. The Honourable, it seemed, was not merely a connoisseur in art and antiques, but an amateur engineer as well.

And this reminded Nelson Lee that the last and most important of the skeleton keys provided for the burglary of Redlow Castle had only been handed to him at the very moment of starting.

Was the Hon. Trevis Sturton then really the master thief behind all this ruffianly gang? It would be a knock-down blow to London society if it were proved he were. Yet Nelson Lee knew of his own experience that more improbable things were to be found in almost every page of the annals of crime.

Certainly the Honourable, in his dealings in the artistic world, rubbed shoulders with some very funny people. Millionaires and wardrobe-shop

dealers all found their way to his house in Mayfair to buy and to sell. If he were really a crook, and the Redlow gold antiques had been stolen, Nelson Lee would back the Honourable's chance of getting rid of them quietly and secretly against anyone else's in London.

And now, on top of all this, was this yarn of Nipper's about some girl being kept a prisoner in the mews behind the Honourable's house! That ought to be looked into certainly, and Nelson Lee took it on himself to do so at once.

He had one other question to ask, and this was as to the progress the little Swiss was making, whose job Nipper was filling now.

"Or is he dead?" demanded Nelson Lee.

No; the poor chap was slowly recovering, though still in hospital, but his memory was impaired. So far, he could recall nothing of what had happened to him, who had struck him that cruel blow over the head, or how he came to fall into the river.

This was a pity. He might have helped them a lot, for plainly he had fathomed something to the Honourable's disadvantage. That was evident by his threat to tell the police—a threat which no doubt had been the cause of his nearly losing his life.

Still, there it was, and Nelson Lee was quite content. Piecing out his chain of circumstantial evidence link by link, he had enough to work upon on his own.

As Nipper had surmised, probably this telephone message which had so upset him that morning was a code one, informing him that the Redlow burglary had failed. Likewise, that it was through Spike Gawdry's treachery or blundering—or both. Hence the threat to have someone's life.

CHAPTER X.

Bad News!

IT was time now for Nipper to be thinking of getting back.

"I'll be round your way to-night," the detective told him coolly.

"I'm going to break into that back stable of yours, and just get word with that girl they've got there. I don't think I shall need your help, but you can be keeping watch on your side. About eleven would be the best time, I think, from what you say. I'll be along about then."

His boss said it all as if it were merely a game at billiards he was fixing up. And, after all, the thing was easy enough. A word at the police-station of the district left him free of the mews to do as he chose. He marked down the stable behind the Honourable's house, and, snatching a moment when the mews was empty, he scaled the end wall and gained the roof.

He found a skylight opening down into what had been the living rooms for the coachman, no doubt. It was bolted, but the detective soon settled that difficulty. The skylight dropped him into a passage. He landed light as an acrobat.

And well he did, too, for at that very moment the click of a lock sounded from below. Someone was entering through the door leading into the garden of the Honourable Sturton's house. It might be Timms, the butler, or his master even. Nelson Lee glanced hastily round for some corner in which to hide. There was a tiny boxroom on the landing, the door of which was opened wide. It was full of picture packing-cases and other lumber. He dodged in there.

Nor was he a second too soon. A step was already sounding on the stair. Someone was coming up, feeling his way in the darkness. The figure passed along the landing to a door beyond. A glint of a pocket-torch, the grating of a key, a sharp caution to someone within to be silent, then the door was shut and locked again.

So Nipper was right, so far. It was here the Honourable kept his fair prisoner, for the electric ray had revealed the visitor as the Honourable himself.

Nelson Lee dodged out again. He tiptoed swiftly to the keyhole. There was no light visible and no sound.

"Hallo! A double door!" thought the detective, and pushed a long, slim pencil through to see.

His surmise proved correct. There was an inner door to keep any cries of the prisoner from being heard outside. This was unfortunate.

Then Nelson Lee remembered that in the ceiling of the box-room he had seen a trapdoor opening, probably into the space beneath the slates. He harked back to this, therefore. Scrambling on to a pile of packing-cases he quickly gained the trap, pushed it up, and climbed through.

To pick his way noiselessly along the rafters now in pitchy darkness and in silence, was no easy task. But he managed it.

A few strides brought him over what he reckoned should be the improvised prison-cell. Lying down at full stretch he applied his ear to the lath and plaster.

He was right; he could hear voices—the Hon. Sturton's lifted in loud, bullying tones, a girl's treble breaking in every now and then alternately, pleading and protesting. By straining every sense he could even hear what was being said.

"You lie!" the Honourable was declaring savagely. "You must know what your lover is. Do you think it is any good telling me that? He said when he came out that he wished to be done with all his old life, and he meant it. Last night we put him on to another job which he pretended to be keen on. But that was only a ruse. He deliberately bungled it, and played us false, and now he has vanished!"

"Hallo!" chuckled Nelson Lee, to himself. "Young Nipper was right, after all. This is Spike Gawdry he's storming at—or me, rather. And, therefore, the poor lass must be Spike's girl that I was told had jilted him. And, by Jove, she's giving it to the blackguard hot, too!"

In vain her gaoler was trying to threaten her into silence. The girl was not to be denied. She repeated proudly that her lover had meant to settle down and lead an honest life when he came out of prison.

"You knew that, you villain, for I was fool enough to tell you and entreat with you to leave him alone, and let him go straight as he wished," she ran on passionately. "But what did you do? Decoyed me here, you coward, to this place, and then kept me prisoner so that you could fill my poor boy with lies—that I had deserted him and married another."

"Certainly!" was the sneering response to this. "That was one reason. The other was that you alone, barring my one or two trusted hands around me, have been cute enough to discover that the Hon. Trevis Sturton has two roles in life that he plays—one, that of a rich dilettante, who collects, buys, and sells rare antiques as a hobby, the other what is vulgarly known as a 'receiver of stolen property.'"

"And more than that, too," laughed her gaoler cynically, "you discovered that I and the mysterious 'Dook,' as my dupes know me as, were one and the same. You came and told me so to my face, I remember. And then you wonder that I keep you here by force, when you have but to blab

one word of your belief outside, and the jackals of police will be on my track instantly.

"No, my lady," he added savagely, "you are too frank, too simple altogether. You think your mere promise to keep silence, and your pleading for your lover's sake, are enough for me. You forget that I have my own skin to think about."

The Hon. Sturton paused, as if he were forgetting something, too, as indeed he was. He had come here to-night not to threaten his wretched prisoner, but to coax her, rather, with lies.

Spike Gawdry, without a doubt, had been caught talking to someone inside Lord Redlow's house. The Honourable had had every word of Darkey Kellerman's sworn statement on that point, communicated to him through other go-betweens, as secret and mysterious as the Dook himself.

Knowing already of Spike's avowed determination to have nothing to do with his former confederates in crime on his release, the Honourable had come to one conclusion.

Spike either did, or did not, believe their lie about his sweetheart deserting him. But, either way, he had resolved evidently to betray his old gang, lock, stock, and barrel to the police.

This was evident by the fact that though the attempted burglary must have been discovered long ago, there was not a word or sign of activity about it at Scotland Yard. The thing might never have happened. The Honourable's purpose then was, by hook or by crook, to get hold of Spike wherever he was, and once in his clutches to shut his mouth for ever. In this he wanted the man's sweetheart as a decoy. She must write to him, saying that it was all lies that she jilted him, and imploring him to come to her. She could pretend that he had been ill to account for her not being there waiting to greet him when he came out of Portmoor.

The Honourable put all this to Emily, but not as set out above, needless to say. He was all repentance apparently. He was willing to release Spike, and never tempt him back to the old bad life again. He would even give them a substantial sum to set up house with.

Nelson Lee, on the rafters overhead, only wished he could see what effect all these transparent lies were having on the girl. Overwrought as she must be after her close imprisonment, crazy with love and anxiety for her sweetheart, it might well happen that she would yield even against her better sense.

If she did it mattered nothing, of course; for Spike was safe in Portmoor. It was Nelson Lee these crooks were trying to get back into their clutches, though they did not know it.

And Nelson Lee, needless to say, could look after himself.

But if it had been Spike, by any chance, and his sweetheart did fall into the trap now being laid for her, Heaven help them both, that was all!

So the detective listened and chuckled.

"I want you to believe that I am genuine in all I am promising," the Honourable was assuring her. "You shall write to Spike now to-night, and tell him that all you have both dreamt is to come true. You shall have a little house that your hearts shall be proud of, and Spike, I swear, will never hear from me again, except as a friend. So take this pen and paper——"

However, just then, rather to Nelson Lee's disgust, again the back door clicked. Someone else was entering by way of the Honourable's garden. He wondered who it could be? Not Nipper, he hoped!

It was Timms, as it turned out, that rogue who was obviously not butler merely to his precious master, but chief-of-staff as well. He came hurrying

up the carpetless staircase. At this treble tattoo the double doors opened. The Honourable appeared.

"It's Spike—they've got him!" announced the butler breathlessly.

"Got him! Where? How?" demanded the Honourable, while simultaneously a wild cry of alarm broke from the girl behind him.

With a curse he turned to silence her. Timms followed into the room, too. Nelson Lee, dumbstruck, as well he might be, had to clap his ear to the lath and plaster again.

"Spike found!" he thought to himself. "Why, how can that be? Spike is in Portmoor, and I am here."

It was certainly amazing. Yet such was the message. Spike had come walking into the gang's haunt in Clerkenwell that evening as cool as paint.

"And the fools are holding him, I suppose?" demanded the Honourable breathlessly.

"Why, rather, you bet! Darkey and Rees gave him no chance, but downed him at once. They've got him tied up there in the cellar."

A fresh piteous outburst came from poor Emily at this. It was the signal for all the fury and spleen in the Honourable's currish breast to come boiling forth.

Like a cur he jeered and taunted her with the trap he had been tempting her feet into, but which was no longer necessary.

"For we've got your narking lover back into our clutches without it," he laughed. "And, by the powers, he sha'n't escape us this time, nor you either! No, there'll be none of us safe till you are both out of the way, and that'll be before another morning's daylight, or I'm a fool!"

"Come, Timms!" he broke off. "We'll leave this jade. I want to hear the whole story. Spike is captured, you say. And what excuse has he got to offer for last night's treachery?"

"Why, he tries to make out he knows nothing about it; that he was only let out of Portmoor this afternoon," was the bewildering reply.

"This afternoon! The liar! Oh, so that's the game, is it? But, by thunder, we'll show him! Come, Timms! I've never risked myself down among my gang before, but I'm going to do so to-night."

"You, sir!" exclaimed the other. "Don't you be fool enough to do anything of the sort!"

"And why not? I shall go disguised, of course. Do you think that I, with all the shrift I am likely to get, am going to leave anyone else to settle my account with a traitor who has tried to sell me. Not much! I am going now, I tell you! You can send them warning to look out for me. Tell them that I shall be masked, and warn them, too, that if any fool tries to find out who I am, he will get my bullet in his heart as sure as fate. Hurry now while I change. This slut we will deal with afterwards, on our return."

With that the pair hurried down the stairs to the door and vanished, leaving Nelson Lee not quite sure whether he merely was dreaming, or utterly daft.

"Spike let out of Portmoor this afternoon! Why, how in humpty-dumpty can that be?" he kept asking himself, again and again.

He had seen Captain Armour only last night, and heard from him how Spike was being kept safely shut up still, though only the warders knew it.

And then it suddenly occurred to him that Captain Armour was only deputy-governor of the prison, and had a chief over him. The latter was a bit of a fool, too, and jealous of his brilliant subordinate. He had been away on leave while all this pretty plot was being fixed up with Nelson Lee.

"Surely he has not come back and found Spike being detained over his time, and so gone and released him without a word!"

This was just what the governor had done, as it turned out, and in so doing had sentenced the unfortunate convict to death, as surely as if he had sent him to the scaffold.

Still, of course, there was time. But what about poor Emily, left to break her heart in terror here in her prison-room? Nelson Lee thought a moment. He listened for any sound of anyone returning, then with his knife began to hack a small hole in the plaster ceiling.

The noise and the crumbs of whitewash falling alarmed the girl below, as well they might.

"It's all right," Nelson Lee assured her, in a tone that told her here was help come at last. "I am a detective, not a police-officer, but one who can and will help you just the same. And your sweetheart, Spike Gawdry, too. But you must wait."

"Wait! Here in this awful place they are murdering my boy!" sounded back the anguished voice out of the darkness.

"Yes, for a little while. But they will not murder him—trust me. I am off to prevent that, and to bring this villain and all his rogues to justice. So good-bye for the present, and be brave."

CHAPTER XI.

Nelson Lee's Triumph.

TO release her now was impossible. There were double doors, both locked, and the risk of discovery besides. So reluctantly Nelson Lee had to make for his trapdoor again, and thence scale his way to the skylight by which he had come in.

Once outside he was down out of those mews like a pickpocket. Scotland Yard was the place he was making for. Only headquarters could supply the force necessary for a haul of this magnitude. He hailed a taxi, and sprang in.

"A sovereign if you do it under the five minutes!" he told the driver.

The man failed, but got his sovereign all the same. Ten seconds later Nelson Lee was in the chief's office.

"Hallo! Sorry to worry you, but I've got a little rush job I want your help in," he said coolly. "I've just jotted down about the number of men I need, and where they're to go, if I can have them. It's a burglary case, and possibly a murder one, too, though that depends on how quick we can get there to stop them."

The chief was thunderstruck, needless to say. However, he knew Nelson Lee of old, and that he would never speak like this merely in joke. So he rang his bell as a signal to "stand-by" for a starter. Then he got to business.

It took only a few words to show him that they were on to one of the biggest coups that the Yard had known for several years. Like the Deputy-Governor of Portmoor, he also was itching to get his fingers on a few of these master-thieves, who pulled all the strings in the criminal world, or most of them, yet were too cute always to be nabbed themselves.

That it was a member of the aristocracy whom Nelson Lee was accusing in this capacity, did not surprise him in the least. It might have been an archbishop. For they knew out of their experience that these villains could scarcely belong to the ordinary run of criminals. They would have dropped on to their tracks before if they had.

So Nelson Lee got all the men he asked for, and the taxis to rush them

to the scene of action besides. A regular fleet was soon tearing off in the direction of Clerkenwell, filled with plain-clothes men and uniformed constables. The latter were to keep outpost, and help in the general clearing up work at the end.

They had heard that it was in a cellar of the Pig and Gluepot, as the pub was known as, that the real Spike Gawdry was to be tried for his life.

The first position to be rushed then was the house in the street behind backing on to the yard of the tavern.

"Is it likely to be a job for barkers?" the chief had asked, before they started.

And Nelson Lee had told him that it certainly was. So they had lent him an automatic pistol, too.

The raiders disembarked from the taxis some streets away, scattering round the flanks of the enemy's position. Then Nelson Lee, the chief, and a dozen picked detectives turned into the back street, and made straight for the house at a rapid run.

One huge constable accompanied them. His boast was that there was never a locked door yet, not bolted and barred, that he could not burst in at the first bounce.

His method of "bouncing" it was to run at it backwards. And this he did very promptly and effectually. A muffled thud, a sharp splintering of wood, and the next instant they were bundling into the house, bowling over and throttling two men in the passage, who were obviously there on guard.

Meantime the street in front of the public-house had been closed to all foot passengers, needless to say. There was no chance of anyone giving the alarm to the assembled gang that way.

"Now through the yard at the back!" commanded Nelson Lee. "And see we go slow here! Those fiends will finish off their victim sure as eggs if we give them the least chance, for they'll only think that it is he who has brought the police down on them."

There was no door communicating in the high wall at the back, but a short ladder and some loosened bricks on the coping betrayed what Nelson Lee already knew—that between the two houses was a right of way.

Now they were in a typical London backyard of the slum type. A few scraggy hens, in a ramshackle run at one side, threatened to spoil the whole raid with their clamour, but fortunately no one came out of the pub's back premises to inquire the cause. After all, a man is not tried for his life in one's house every night in the year!

Nelson Lee could picture them all agog, peeping in at the strange tribunal, less interested in the wretched victim even than his judge in the black mask—the Dook!

What Spike Gawdry thought of this for a homecoming after five years penal servitude can be imagined. Barely had he shown his nose in his old haunts than he was half-brained by his own old pals and trussed up like a pig.

And now here was this brute in the mask declaring that he lied in his throat—that he had been released from Portmoor not that morning but a week ago nearly, and had been actually engaged cracking another crib last night. Worse than this, he was accusing him of selling them to the "splits," and if the police had not swooped down upon them already as a result, it was only to make sure of a bigger bag when they did pounce.

"But we'll see them farther—yes, by thunder, we will!" declared his judge, while the evil ring of ruffians round cheered. "Spike Gawdry may be a clever man—we know he is—but he was just too clever when he came back here thinking to bluff us with his baby-talk, pretending it's someone

else all the time we have mistaken for him. A man as clever as that, I say, is too clever to live!"

"'Ere, 'ere, guv'nor!" applauded the crooks around. "'E ain't safe! Put his light out, we say!"

Spike Gawdry confronted them like a brave man. He had argued and pleaded even, and he would plead no more. He could only imagine that these men were all gone raving mad, or else some other fellow—a "split," no doubt—had been among them, palming himself off as him. He had suggested that, but they only laughed and reviled him the more.

So there it was. They had gone through the mockery of letting him plead; now they had gagged him again. But they had not bound his ankles, while the lashing that secured his wrists had been growing looser and looser by the furtive working of his clenched hands. He knew already, in fact, that with one last wrench he could get them free. And then he was going to leap on this black-cloaked villain at the head of the table, and tear the square of silk from his face, unmasking him for the vampire he was, battenning on the blood and liberties of better men.

Then, with luck, he would throttle the life out of the brute! And he would, too, let him but get both hands on his lying throat! They might knife him to ribbons, but he would not let go!

"No, curse him! Never—NEVER!" Spike suddenly screeched, his impotent rage getting the better of him.

Before he knew what he was about himself, scarcely, his hands were free, and he was across the table in a bound, clawing at the master-thief's windpipe.

It all happened so unexpectedly that the two were rolling there for several seconds before the rest gathered their wits sufficiently to go to their chief's aid. There the pair were fighting like wild-cats, gasping and cursing, overturning the table even in their struggles, capsizing man after man.

At last, though, the masked man managed to get at his pistol. There was a report, a briefer struggle, and the master-thief broke free. White with passion he was, and shaking like a reed. Seeing him safe, the rest were for flinging themselves upon his adversary and bludgeoning the life out of him. The master-thief, however, called to him to "Stand back!"

"No, you dogs! You left me to him before," he taunted them, "you can leave him to me now! So back, you fools, unless you want to get one of his bullets in you!"

He fired again as he spoke, making the rascally crew scatter. Then, slowly advancing step by step to where his victim lay groaning, with cold-blooded deliberation he set his revolver muzzle to Spike's temple and grinned.

"Now, Spike Gawdry!" he sneered. "Whatever chance of mercy you might have had before, you have thrown that away for good and all. You can say your precious prayers now, and in the quickest time on record, for when I count three I fire! Do you hear, you spy? One—two—thr——"

Bang! A shot rang out, but it was not the master-thief's. His weapon had been literally blown from his startled fingers and sent hurtling across the room. He swung round in fury.

"Not a move there! Hands up!" commanded a level voice promptly.

It was Nelson Lee who stood in the doorway, his still smoking pistol levelled this time at the master-thief's heart.

"We are the police. This house is surrounded. If anyone is fool enough to try and get away, his blood is on his own head, for I at any rate will shoot him like a dog and take the consequences."

"Now, sir—you!" he added sharply, since the master-thief's arms still hung twitching at his sides. "I don't speak twice even to you! So up with them or, by thunder"—he strode forward boldly in amongst the scum and clapped the weapon right against his quarry's cheek.

The hands went up then quick enough. Next, with a contemptuous snatch, Nelson Lee tore off the villain's mask.

"There you are, gentlemen!" he said to the police-officers, who now swarmed into the room. "Permit me to introduce you—the Hon. Trevis Sturton, of Mayfair, connoisseur and collector, of world-wide renown! His fame will be even wider known after to-night, I reckon, now that we have also proved him Master of Thieves!"

It was almost pitiable to see how the guilty wretch staggered and seemed to crumple where he stood. His eyes, that had blazed defiance, suddenly sank in their sockets. His chin fell forward on his breast, and his arms sank, too, as if he had not the strength to keep them up.

Nor did Nelson Lee pay much heed to this. The darbies were already clinking that were to close on his prisoner's wrists. He turned to make way for the officer.

And then—it was all done in a flash! In a trice the Honourable Sturton's hand had flown to his pocket. There must have been a tablet of poison there that he had been keeping ready against this very moment, when he knew the game was up. A gulp, and the poison was swallowed.

In vain Nelson Lee closed with the wretched man. It was too late—so late, in fact, that even as he clutched him he found the wretch slipping to the floor. A few convulsive struggles, a bubble or two of greenish foam upon the livid lips, and the master-thief was gone beyond reach of human justice.

It was a pity. Dearly would Nelson Lee have loved to see such a vampiro sent to wear the broad arrow and toil in the Portmoor quarries, as Spike Gawdry and many another had toiled who had been his cat's-paws in crime.

Still, it was done, and there was no use bemoaning. And, after all, Spike himself had come to small hurt in the fray. The bullet-hole through the muscle of his arm was a mere flesh wound. He had fainted, but already he was regaining consciousness. By the time he opened his eyes, every inmate of the house was handcuffed and under guard.

They searched the place then and all the houses round it. This job, however, Nelson Lee left to the police. Without waiting even to see Spike safely on his way to hospital, he sprang into a taxi again with the chief. They drove next at top speed to the Honourable Sturton's house in Cormac Street, Mayfair. A second cab, full of detectives, followed hard in chase.

Posting four men at the front, to cut off escape that way, Nelson Lee hurried round to the mews at the back with the rest. They had managed to commandeer a crow-bar from a roadmender's store of tools on the way.

Thud! Smash! Splinter—Crash! The door of the stable was down.

"Whoa! Look out! Here's one of them!" exclaimed the first officer through, tackling a figure confronting them with a wild-bull rush.

"That'll be Timms! Hold the blackguard!" commanded Nelson Lee, never pausing, but climbing over them, and making for the staircase. He had the crow-bar now.

"Good news, Emily! We've got Spike safe!" he called out, to reassure the terrified girl within. "These are friends coming to help you now. Stand aside while I break in the door!"

Three or four deadly punches sufficed to smash the double doors to splinters. Then Nelson Lee flashed a pocket-torch into the room, half dreading that even now they might be too late.

CHAPTER XII.

Conclusion.

HOWEVER, there the girl was, safe and sound, though the reaction after the terrible strain had already set in, and she was sinking to the floor. But Nelson Lee was in time to catch her. She was a pretty girl, too, for all her face was so pale and drawn. She would make a bonny wife for Spiko Gawdry yet.

And now, with Mr. Timms laid by the heels, the back of their work here was broken, Nelson Lee flattered himself.

Unfortunately, though, it was not Timms at all that the police were pinning down while they forced the handcuffs on his wrists. It was Nipper, and right lustily was he letting the world know it, too.

Never was a fellow more furious—not at being man-handled in this violent fashion, but at his boss for not letting him know somehow that all this fun was afoot. He was going to resign. It was not treating him fairly at all!

“Oh, rubbish, you young ass!” rapped Nelson Lee. “Stow your gab, and show us the way through to your backyard. You can collar Timms yourself, if that’ll please you. Go on, you baby! Time’s short, and the brute may try to fire the house if we don’t watch it.”

So Nipper got a “bit of a look in,” after all, as he described it. He owed the butler one or two, in any case, and right well he repaid the debt. All the servants were rounded up and locked in, in fact, and to their credit be it said that a more utterly bewildered crew could not be imagined.

For, if Timms and his wife knew that the Hon. Trevis Sturton was one of the biggest scoundrels out of gaol, the rest most certainly did not. Seeing the police swarming all over their master’s beautiful house, filled to its roof with artistic treasures, made them think the world had gone crazy.

However, there were plenty of shocks still in store for them, and the British aristocracy besides. Stolen property—the proceeds of fifty burglaries which had completely baffled the police—was found stowed away in all sorts of secret cupboards and corners. The house in Cormac Street, to which Society had been wont to flock, was nothing more than a “receiver’s den” of the most impudent and barefaced kind.

The pity was that the arch hypocrite running it had succeeded in dodging his just deserts. Portmoor had to swallow its disappointment, and do without its promised specimen of the master-thief among its collection of gaol-birds after all, for Nelson Lee was too busy just then to turn to and hunt for another.

Nevertheless, he managed to find time for one thing, and this was Spike’s wedding to Emily. It took a long while for the ex-cracksmen to forgive the liberty his benefactor had taken in palming himself off as him, though it was entirely for his own good, as he was forced to allow. Still, all said and done, it was a liberty, and he did not like it.

Emily did, though. She will never cease blessing the name of Nelson Lee till her dying day, for through him her husband has got not merely a job and a fresh start in life, but a neat little home besides—such a home as Emily had always dreamt about, but never thought for a moment they would ever possess.

THE END.

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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.

Melby manages to get hold of some rabbits, and prepares to cook a meal in the dormitory.

A Scratch Meal.

"I 'LL be lighting the fire," said Melby, after having explained matters. "You start skinning and cleaning the rabbits, Dick. Tom will help you."

"No, he won't," said Tom.

"Well, some of the other fellows may."

"No, they sha'n't!" said Dick.

"Hang it all!" cried Melby. "Someone must do it."

"Very good," answered Dick. "By all means let them do it; but they are jolly well not going to help me."

"Do you want to do it all yourself?"

"No, I don't. I don't want to do any of it."

"Rot! Can't you clean a rabbit?"

"I might be able to manage it if I tried, but as I have not the slightest intention of trying we needn't discuss the matter."

Melby induced three enterprising youths to undertake the work, and a frightful mess they made of it. Dick said they reminded him of pirates, and he made a mental vow not to touch the result of their operations.

In about two minutes the dormitory was full of smoke. The boys opened the windows, but that did not do much good.

"Have you got the register up?" inquired Tom, gazing at the busy Melby through a cloud of smoke.

"What register?" inquired Melby. He had commandeered a scuttle of coal from the kitchen, and smuggled it, and his cooking utensils, up the back staircase into the dormitory.

"Well, as a general rule there is only one register to a stove," said Tom. "Of course, there may be five or six to this one. I suppose it's possible, although it isn't probable."

"Why, the silly owl has got it down," cried Dick, kicking it up with his foot. "No wonder it has been smoking. I should say Melby wanted to turn his rabbits into kippers."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the masters smell this smoke," said Tom.

"It won't make much difference. They will be bound to smell the onions," answered Dick. "Of course, there's no accounting for taste, but personally I would prefer jam tarts for supper."

"You can't cook rabbits without onions," declared Melby. "If you don't know anything about it the best thing for you to do is to shut up."

"What am I to do with these skins and the insides?" inquired one of the operators.

"Leave them on the newspapers for the present."

"It wouldn't be a bad wheeze for you to shove the little lot in Gowl's bed," suggested a youth who was notorious for his vivid imagination.

"You are a stupid idiot, Sank," said Melby severely. "Of course, the proper thing to do is to use the giblets for gravy."

"Oh, my eyes!" gasped Tom.

"So it is," declared Melby. "They use the neck as well. I've seen our cook—our chef do it."

"If I were your mother, I'd jolly well shoot the beast," said Sank.

"Well, leave them where they are," snarled Melby.

"I'm going to," said Sank.

Melby cut up the prepared rabbits, and stuffed them into the huge saucepan, the water in which was now boiling. He had got it full of water, overlooking the laws of displacement, and he not only burnt his fingers severely as the boiling water slopped over them, but he got hot ashes in his eyes from the fire. This made him furious, and the chums' badly suppressed laughter increased his rage.

"You are like a lot of giggling schoolgirls," declared Melby. "What is there to laugh at?"

"Nothing from your point of view," said Tom. "You look just like you used to when you first came to Ravenswood and hadn't got over your snivelling."

"You are an empty-headed fool."

"So the masters seem to think," observed Tom calmly; "but I'm not so foolish as to roinp my hands into boiling water, and slop it over a roaring fire, making it spurt hot ashes into my eyes."

"Do you suppose I did it on purpose?"

"Couldn't say, Melby. I should imagine not, because I don't believe the sensation would be pleasant. They say Russians flog each other's backs when they are having their steam baths, but I never heard of a man stuffing hot ashes into his eyes in order to obtain a little enjoyment. The same remarks apply to putting his digits into boiling water. Of course, there may be men who like doing it, but I'd say they would be the exception to the general rule."

It was possible that Melby might enjoy the supper when it was cooked, but it was certain that he was not going to enjoy the cooking. He got chaffed too much.

Sank sat on the end of his bed and made sarcastic remarks.

"I say, Melby," he exclaimed, "there's a pungent perfume in this place, and it's not as cool as ice-creams. Don't you think the beastly thing is nearly cooked?"

"It's not far off it now," declared Melby. "I forget the exact time a rabbit takes. Do you know, Clare?"

"Well, an egg takes three minutes. I would say a rabbit would take longer."

"Would you really?" sneered Melby. "Perhaps you imagine a twenty-pound joint of beef takes longer than an egg?"

"Exactly!"

"You don't know anything about it."

"I can cook an egg."

"Who's talking about eggs?"

"I am."

"Then you had better go on babbling to yourself, because no one cares to listen to the rot you talk. If you can't cook, it doesn't follow that everyone else is an idiot."

"I have already told you I can cook an egg—with luck. I have cooked one once. It was hard, but it was distinctly cooked."

"That's nothing to what Melby is doing," said Sank. "He's cooking four rabbits—and himself. You can jolly well tell by the odour that he's doing it pretty thoroughly."

"It's done now," declared Melby, taking the saucepan off the fire and standing it on the floor.

But he was not the only one in the building who was rabbit cooking that night. Vance had made friends with Mary, the cook, who had prepared a nice little supper with the other rabbits, and the servants had enjoyed them.

Vance also enjoyed a little stimulant as well, and he was giving some of the experiences of his past life when a scream from Mary caused him to leap to his feet.

Through the kitchen window, which she faced, could be obtained a view of the upper dormitory where the chums should have been sleeping.

The night was dark, and, happening to glance upwards, Mary saw a red light flashing in the windows. If it had been a candle-light she would not have thought much of it, having often seen such a phenomenon on previous occasions after "lights were out."

But that red, flickering light gave her a shock, the same as her sudden scream had given Vance one.

"Fire!" shrieked Mary. "We shall all be burnt in our beds."

This was an impossibility, seeing that they were not in their beds, but it was near enough under such trying circumstances.

"Ring the fire-bell!" howled Vance, rushing up the stairs. He knew which dormitory it was. He flung the door open with a violent crash, and rushed across the room howling "Fire!" at the top of his voice; then he caught his foot in the saucepan, and, falling forwards, dabbed his face in the paperful of "giblets."

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Tom. Thoughts of the future failed even to make him serious. "Ha, ha, ha! Don't you eat our gravy!"

"You silly ass!" cried Melby. "The masters will hear you if you make that noise."

"Ha, ha, ha! Hold me up, someone!" howled Tom. "If the masters haven't heard the beastly fire-bell, and Vance's howls of 'Fire!' all I can say is that they must be jolly deaf, and a little further noise will never reach them. I say, Vance, you have made your face in a gory mess; but it's no good howling like that."

"Murder! I'm scalt!"

"He's got in a regular stew," said Sank. "He needs a bath. Why not turn the fire-hose on him? We ought to start it going if there's a fire. Who's game?"

Fortunately no one was. Dick felt that they had gone too far already, and that if they started the fire-hose on the top of it there would be serious trouble. Tom felt quite reckless, but not reckless enough to start the fire-hose.

Melby scrambled into bed, not desiring to play a leading part in the treubulous times before them.

Then the noise suddenly ceased, for Mr. Foster, the Housemaster, strode into the room.

"Oh, they've nearly murdered me!" howled Vance, scrambling to his feet. "Oh, every bit of skin is boiled off my body."

"Is there a fire?" demanded Mr. Foster.

"No, sir," answered Dick: "only in that grate."

"Beastly sneak," muttered Melby.

"Sank, go down immediately and give my orders that the ringing of the bell is to cease immediately. Now, Vance, follow me! Can you walk?"

Mr. Foster was forming a wrong impression. He imagined Vance's face was injured.

"I'm very bad, sir."

"Sit on that bed and tell me what has happened," ordered Mr. Foster, sincerely hoping that it was not as serious as he feared. The fact that Dick and Tom were making strenuous efforts to control their laughter gave him this hope.

"These 'ere boys lit a fire and cooked some rabbits, sir," said Vance, who was able to guess pretty well what had really happened. "They stole a saucepan to cook it in, and also stole the coal, which is theft——"

"I do not require your comments. Tell me what has happened."

"They gave the alarm of fire, and, when I rushed up, made me stumble over the saucepan, scald myself, and bash my face in the rabbits' innards, what they had left on the floor on purpose."

"What have you to say, Clare?"

"He is fairly accurate, sir, except that we did not give an alarm of fire, neither did we place the saucepan for him to fall over, nor put the rabbits' 'innards' there for that purpose. We left them there having no particular use for them. There was an objection to turning them into gravy as was suggested as being the correct thing."

"Did you break bounds? You need not answer that question unless you wish."

"No one broke bounds, sir. We got the rabbits in the afternoon."

"Where did they come from?"

"From a shop in the village. I bought them, sir, for a hoax."

"Is that the whole truth, Clare?"

"I'm afraid it's all that I can tell, sir, without incriminating others."

"I would advise you to tell me everything."

"Well, sir, the original idea was to shoot rabbits. Some shots were fired with a revolver."

"I shall confiscate the weapon."

"I will place it in your hands to-morrow morning, sir."

"I accept your promise. For having lighted a fire in the dormitory, and cooked a supper, you will all be gated next Saturday afternoon, and each boy in the room will write a hundred lines in Latin and translate them into English." Then, glancing at the fire to make sure it was quite safe, Mr. Foster left the dormitory, telling Vance to follow him.

"How much will you take for your revolver and all the cartridges you have got, Melby?"

"You ought to give me a sovereign, but——"

"Here you are. Hand them over."

And Melby was delighted with the bargain, while the youngsters were perfectly content, not having expected to get off so lightly.

In Training.

"ARE you talking, Melby?" demanded Mr. Foster.

"No, sir."

"You were talking, boy!"

"What an idiot the fellow must be to ask me if he knows!" murmured Melby.

"What is that you say, Melby?"

"I said that you couldn't exactly call it talking, sir. I merely asked Clare if he understood what you were explaining."

"Do you confirm that statement, Clare?"

"I'd be glad if you would excuse me answering that question, sir," mumbled Dick.

"Oh, I say!" cried Melby. "I call that shameful, Dick Clare! My very words were 'Do you understand,' and you answered 'Yes.'"

"Quite correct," said Dick.

"Then why couldn't you have said so? You made Mr. Foster think I wasn't speaking the truth."

"Were you talking, Clare?"

"Yes, sir."

"About what I was explaining?"

"I was talking about the regatta, sir."

"You will each write fifty lines for talking in class," said Mr. Foster. "Melby, you will write five hundred for telling me a falsehood. The work will be neatly done, otherwise I shall not pass it. Now attend to what I'm saying."

"You are the meanest sneak I ever came across," declared Melby, when they entered No. 7 Study to work off their lines.

"Rats!" exclaimed Dick. "I never sneaked at all."

"Yes, you did!" declared Melby. "You could have thrown dust in his eyes just as easily as I could."

"You are right there," laughed Dick. "The fellow who starts throwing dust in Mr. Foster's eyes will succeed as easily as you do, and that's not at all. I consider Mr. Foster is a very clever master. He would have to be a perfect fool to believe the sniry-tales you tell him."

"He would have taken your word if you had said we were talking about what he was explaining. He never doubts your word. You know that perfectly well."

"Yes, and I know why he never doubts my word," said Dick. "I'll never give him cause to doubt it. I don't care what row it is, or who gets into it—including myself—if I speak at all it shall be the truth."

"You know jolly well if you told the truth about that secret between you and Gowl. He knows it, too, and it is very honourable of him not to tell. You hold it over him, but it amounts to blackmail, and if you call that honourable, I don't."

"You haven't got the sense of a maggot," said Dick. "The thing is too jolly ridiculous, isn't it, Tom?"

"Rotten!" exclaimed that worthy. "Polish off your lines. What's the good of talking to him. Don't you see, Melby, if you weren't lying in saying Dick ever blackmailed Gowl, or any other bully, how do you suppose Dick could do it if his secret would cause him to be expelled?"

"I don't care—"

"No. When you are talking you never care whether it is the truth or not. It's much more likely that Dick will one day become captain of Ravenswood College than he will ever be expelled from it."

"He's favoured because his mother is rich, and——"

"When Hal Lakin's father died, his mother was so poor that had it not been for the Head Hal would have had to leave. He became captain of this college. You remember he told us all that in public, in spite of Dr. Stanley trying to stop him, and he told us that the Head was the truest friend he had on earth, and the truest friend every boy in this college had, then he came a cropper with his speech, and couldn't finish it, although Hal isn't given to sentiment. It shows you what rot you talk. I don't believe the Head would favour a boy if he owed his life to him. He takes Dick's word because he knows he takes the truth, and Dick takes a few lickings he might escape by lying."

Then Dick rattled on with his lines, and he knew from past experience that Tom was right concerning the Head's unalterable rule never to show favouritism.

"It's the meanest trick a fellow could play," declared Melby. "It would serve you jolly well right if I got my own back, Dick."

"Oh, go on with your lines, and be thankful for them, you silly kid!" laughed Dick. "I don't believe Foster will pass that scrawl. Can't you write better than that?"

"It's as good as yours, at any rate!" declared Melby.

"I never said it wasn't," retorted Dick. "I'm only telling you it's jolly bad. If Foster doesn't tell you it's abominable I shall be surprised. Just look at that capital A."

"It isn't an A. It's an H."

"Well, I don't care what it is. It's bad. Looks as though a spider had drawn it with his foreleg while he was scratching himself with his back leg."

This made Tom laugh, but it made Melby savage. He muttered something about refusing to steer them in the race, for they were all three training for the double sculling races, and the youngsters considered that No. 7 Study would stand an excellent chance of winning the prize in the Lower House. Dick did not, for reasons of his own, but he kept those reasons secret even from Tom.

The man whom Dick had engaged to train them was named Rabbits, and called Bunny. He had once been in the town crew, and was a boatman. Having saved money he bought a little riverside inn, and fortune smiled on Bunny.

As a trainer he was frightfully severe, but he thoroughly understood his work, and made the youngsters do theirs. He wanted them to win, and although he was far from complimentary, he never used bad language, as it was strictly forbidden, and would have put his boats out of bounds, which would have meant the best part of his income lost.

He supplied the want by the most extraordinary expressions, and always made an ominous pause before he used them. What they meant would have puzzled Bunny or anyone else to explain. He appeared to make them up on the spur of the moment.

(Another rattling, long instalment of this rollicking school yarn will appear on Wednesday next.)

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