

NO. 14.—MAGNIFICENT DETECTIVE TALE.—1D.

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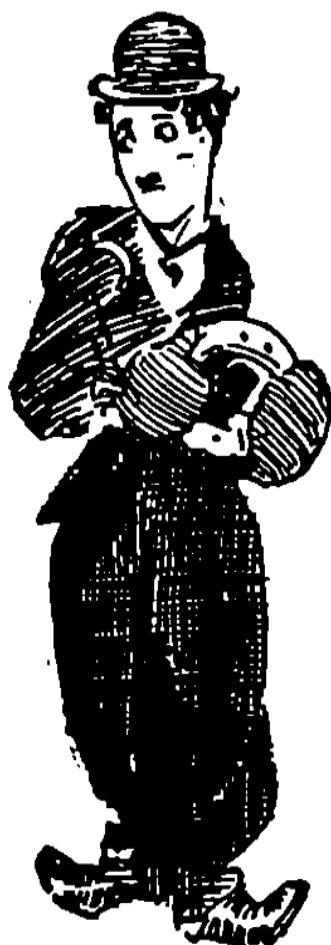
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The King's Bad Bargain;

Or, Corporal Mayne, V.C.

*A Magnificent, Long Complete Story, Introducing Nelson Lee
and his Assistant, Nipper.*

CHAPTER I.

The Tommy from Canada

THE big, bluff sergeant-major glanced along the platform, where groups of friends stood enthusiastically welcoming the warriors, home on sick leave. Then his fingers unfolded a letter. He turned his eyes on the lonely Tommy who, with wounded head shrouded with bandages, leaned back against the cushions, staring before him with dull, dreamy eyes.

"See here, son," said the non-com., "I guess you'd better take this note right along with you! Sort of identifies you, as well as tells you where you're going to hang out for the next few weeks."

Corporal Charles Mayne, of the 1st Canadians, sat up and smiled. The smile transfigured his clean-cut, pale features. It was a strong, frank, manly face, and the eyes, now alight, showed the spirit, the bravery, the never-be-done determination of the lad.

"Sorry!" he said. "I was thinking of mother and dad and home. Canada seems a long way off when you get crooked like this and have to fall back on the kindly help of—of strangers."

"You'll be all right, son!" smiled the sergeant-major. "This Sir Samuel Mortimer is one of the dearest old chaps living. There's been scores of Tommies down at his home. He's got a lovely show that'll remind you of the old farm out West. He treats 'em all topping, too—just as if they were his own sons, they say. You've got your Cross the King gave you, your papers, and your brass all right?"

"You bet!" grinned the wounded Tommy, tapping the left breast-pocket of his tunic. "Hang this head of mine! I wish I was coming back with you!"

"A piece of shell in the forehead ain't no joke!" said the non-com., shaking his head. "You'll soon get all right down Risedale way, though. They'll make heaps of fuss of you, you being a V.C.!"

Corporal Mayne took the letter.

"I hope they won't!" he replied. "I hate fuss! Well, so long, sergeant-major! It's real good of you to waste a precious hour of your leave to see me righted!"

The bluff non-com. gave a snorting laugh.

"Nothin', lad—nothin' at all!" he said, waving his huge hand. "Me and the boys I've left behind 'll never forget what you did for us—practically saved us. The fiends looked like gettin' through that night! Well, good luck, son! We're always glad of your sort back ag'in."

He dived his hand through the window and caught his corporal's. The big, strong fellow's voice had become husky. The memory of one awful

night when he and two platoons had raced through an inferno of gas and bursting shells to find Corporal Mayne holding a trench single-handed against twenty Huns made his eyes moist.

No longer had the quiet, unassuming youngster been able to hide his light under a bushel. He had been a hero with the 1st Canadians ever since.

"Thanks!" said Charley Mayne simply, his own eyes swimming. "I'll be back amongst the boys as soon as ever I can."

He sank back wearily against the cushions as the train began to move. There was a thin cheer from those on the platform. Nearly all the passengers were wounded Tommies, bound for nursing-homes along the line.

So far as he knew, Charley Mayne was the only Tommy travelling to Risedale. That was why he was alone as much as anything, though he preferred solitude for his ever-aching temples.

He looked out of the windows till the last of London's houses was lost to sight in the heat of the summer haze. As he fell back drowsily, the note the sergeant-major had given him fell from his fingers.

"Mustn't lose that!" he murmured. "It's all the introduction I've got to the kind-hearted old Johnny at Risedale."

He opened it out, and read the round, clear handwriting. At the top the words, "The Oaks, Risedale," had been impressed with a dye stamp.

"Kindly give this to Corporal Charles Mayne," he read. "If he will present it on reaching here, it will be proof beyond all doubt that he is really the brave lad whom the King has so deservedly honoured. For my part, I undertake to do all I possibly can to make Corporal Mayne welcome, and to help him regain fitness for returning to his duty at the front."

"SAMUEL MORTIMER."

The wounded Tommy put the letter with the other papers in his breast-pocket.

"Good luck to him!" he murmured.

He leaned back against the cushions again. There was over an hour and a-half's journey to Risedale. His mind reverted to Canada—to the farm amidst the flourishing wheat-fields of Ontario, to home and his parents. An only son, he had responded to the call of King and Empire.

After the strenuous training in England, after four months—that already seemed like a lifetime—in Flanders, after miraculous escapes, he had received his first wound. While in billets behind the firing-line, a bursting Jack Johnson shell had brought down the remnants of the cottage upon him and three comrades. They had never woken again from their sleep, but he had been dug out of the ruins with splinters of shell in his arms and chest and forehead.

A month in the base hospital had followed. His head alone remained obstinate to healing processes, and they had sent him to England—a temporary wreck of a stalwart, athletic lad who scarcely knew what fatigue meant—to regain strength and convalescence.

The rocking of the train, the sing-song pounding of the wheels, and most of all the heat, soon had effect.

Corporal Charles Mayne fell asleep.

That lapse into slumber was to have momentous consequences in the life of the young Canadian. Station after station was flashed by. Twice there were stoppages. Tommies alighted to continue their journey to some temporary home of rest, and still the young Canadian slept on.

It was when Risedale was but five miles distant that something happened.

Just outside Ambley Junction, in response to the signal-arm, the train came to a standstill. Two minutes it paused there, and then went on again.

In those moments a khaki-clad figure climbed to the step on the off-side of the compartment, swung open the door, and climbed in.

"Not empty, after all!" declared the new-comer, panting breathlessly. "Heavens, I wonder if I can risk it!"

He was a young man, well-built and good-looking, though eyes and chin were irresolute.

"Who's that?"

The slamming of the door, in the comparative silence of the motionless train, aroused Charley Mayne from his sleep. He blinked and stared drowsily.

"This isn't a station!" he said. "What the dickens——"

The new-comer advanced upon him threateningly.

"Dare to shout and warn 'em, and I'll brain you!" he hissed, raising a clenched fist.

The corporal's mouth grew grim. He pushed himself unsteadily erect, and looked into the bulging eyes of the intruder.

"Oh, it's like that!" he said quietly. "You've done something you want hushed up? You can bet your boots you'll get no assistance from me! I'll know you again, and I'll speak——"

The last word broke into a gasp. The interloper flung himself at the wounded Tommy. His hand went round the other's throat. Corporal Mayne's fists drove like piston-rods against his adversary's ribs, but there was not the old-time power in his blows. Sufficient there was, however, to wind his adversary and send him tottering to the seat.

Corporal Mayne fell on him. His brain was reeling. He was fighting by instinct, and fighting well. The two struggled erect, and, getting to wrestling grips, careered from side to side.

"Hold! Chuck it! I—I've had enough!"

The intruder gasped as he tried to push the wounded Tommy away.

Corporal Mayne had lost his tan. His face was ghastly—like marble, and as hard. He dived down, thrust his arm under the other's thigh. Lifting him as though he were a child, he pitched him with a mighty thwack against the door.

The man's head struck the woodwork. He fell into a limp heap, and a moment after he relapsed into unconsciousness. Corporal Mayne, his strength all out, a mist before his eyes, his head splitting with pain, groped his way to the cushions, and sank to them as helpless and as senseless as the man he had conquered.

For two minutes the sun blazed in on the outstretched figures in khaki. The limp heap by the door gradually straightened itself out. The intruder's face inflamed with rage as he blinked about him and realised what had happened.

"He's been done in, too!" he panted. "And—and he's in my power now!"

He stood over the unconscious Canadian, his eyes bloodshot and gleaming, his fingers opening and shutting with nervous tension. His brain was working quickly.

"I'll do it!" he decided, glancing furtively about him. "He sha'n't give me away!"

He bent over the young Canadian. His trembling fingers went to the tunic pockets. He emptied them of their contents, taking tobacco pouch and everything from them. The papers he casually glanced at before flinging them on the seat.

His fingers trembled when they picked out the little bronze cross which is the highest mark of bravery a man can win.

"A V.C., eh?" he mused. "May as well keep it. Perhaps it'll come in useful."

His work was soon accomplished. The one thing that pleased him most was the discovery of a little purse of gold tucked away in a pocket of the under-waistbelt. With a penknife, he cut away the blackened letters from the young Canadian's shoulder-strap.

The screech of the whistle warned him that they were nearing Risedale. He looked out of the window. They were passing through a deep cutting. The high grass ran almost to the track.

"It's either him or me!" he muttered, opening the off-side door.

Corporal Mayne did not stir when he picked him up bodily in his arms. He lurched with him to the door, clung desperately to the jamb as the train swung round a curve, and then released hold of his burden.

He dared not look down, nor even look back. He fell back on the seat, mopping the icy perspiration from his brow. So he sat for several moments.

"Risedale! Risedale!" called a raucous voice. "All change!"

He swung himself erect as if from a stupor. As the train slowed down, he rushed to the swinging door.

"My heavens!" he gasped, closing it. "Good job I noticed it! Might have blown the whole gaff!"

Sinking to the seat once more, he gathered up the wounded Tommy's belongings, and stuffed them into his pockets. He was reading Sir Samuel Mortimer's letter when the train came to a standstill.

With Corporal Mayne's railway-pass, he stepped out on to the platform. A coachman in a smart livery approached him.

"Corporal Mayne, sir," he exclaimed, touching his hat, "Sir Samuel and Miss Maisie is outside waiting for you."

The man hesitated. He was the only soldier to alight. He stared out through the exit. An exceedingly pretty girl was smiling at him from her seat behind two sleek, handsome greys.

"Right-ho!" he said suddenly. "Catch hold of my bag!"

He gave him Corporal Mayne's property, and stepped behind the coachman to the waiting barouche.

A little old gentleman, whose pink face beamed with geniality, took the letter from him he had himself written. A moment later he leaned forward and gripped his hand.

"Welcome to Risedale, my brave lad!" he said warmly. "It is an honour to have you with us! Friends," he added, raising his voice, "this is the gallant Canadian, Corporal Mayne, whom the King decorated yesterday with the V.C. for his sterling bravery. Give him a cheer!"

There was a considerable crowd around the station. The news of the hero's arrival had been the one topic of conversation that day in the sleepy, old-world town. They had been waiting for a cue like this.

"Good luck to 'ee, mister!" farmer and ploughman shouted alike. "Ay, we're proud to ha'e ye amongst us!"

The impostor's good-looking face became blanched. He looked about him almost terrified, but Sir Samuel gripped him by the arm. He felt himself plugged down on the seat beside the smiling, pretty girl.

"My daughter Maisie," declared the old gentleman. "She's a hero-worshipper, corporal! She has no discrimination. She thinks every Tommy a hero."

"I'm sure Corporal Mayne is a hero," laughed the girl, giving her hand to the man. "All heroes are modest, and disliko fuss, and it's plain Corporal Mayne detests it."

"Indeed I do!" murmured the man. "It—it's very good of you to take so much notice of a poor Tommy!"

The carriage drove away from the cheering crowd. He bit his lip and stared down the white road. He was playing a risky game. Dared he go on with it?

He shuddered as he thought of the figure he had hurled to the gleaming metals. Supposing the man recovered? He turned to meet the tender eyes of the bewitching girl at his side, and his own cheeks glowed.

"It's a chance too good to be missed!" he decided.

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CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee and Nipper Come to Risedale

"**M**ORE Tommies!" ejaculated Nipper. "Why, they're everywhere, sir! If you don't run across 'em in the training camps, you meet 'em, like these poor wounded chaps, round some big house in the country. My word, they're doing themselves proud!"

He rested his cycle against the bramble hedge, mopped the perspiration from his forehead, and nodded in the direction of a fine old mansion that was crowning the crest of the hill up which he and Nelson Lee, the great detective, had pushed their bikes.

The battlemented towers of the mansion before them made a picturesque background in the azure sky. Through the short, semi-circular drive, flanked with tall laurels, could be seen the broad, imposing front. It was the home of a rich man—a beautiful haven of peace and rest.

Before the wide steps was a big, handsome motor-car, filled with tanned-checked Tommies. A few bore evidence of their wounds—at least one had his arm in a sling—but all seemed very well pleased with life. Their laughter rang out over the hot August air.

"They're fortunate lads to be the guests of Sir Samuel Mortimer," said Nelson Lee. "There isn't a lovelier place in the home counties than the Risedale Oaks, or a kinder-hearted old gentleman living than its owner. He's entertained hundreds of poor Tommies, broken in the wars."

"Good luck to him!" cried Nipper. "I've read about him. Lost his only son in the first scrap of the war, when our boys found themselves outnumbered at Mons, didn't he?"

Nelson Lee wheeled his cycle out to the middle of the white road.

"Young Mortimer died a hero's death," he said. "It's cut Sir Samuel up badly. That's why he gives up his life and his home to the Tommies. We'll push on now, Nipper," he added. "Croxley's only three miles the other side of Risedale."

"Right-ho, guv'nor!" was Nipper's cheery response.

With a hop, skip, and a jump, he was in the saddle beside his master.

After a long and worrying criminal case that had entailed much investigation and not a little peril in the slums of London's dockland, Nelson Lee and his assistant had decided on a short cycling tour—usually all the holiday the busy detective was able to get.

This was their first day. They had left London after breakfast, had lunched amidst the beautiful Surrey hills, and now, at the close of the afternoon, were within a few miles of Croxley, where arrangements had been made for them to stay the night.

"Don't build your hopes too high, Nipper, my boy!" Nelson Lee had told his assistant as they set out from Gray's Inn. "We'll be lucky if we get a

whole week to ourselves. Some of my most perplexing cases have been sprung upon me when I've been bent on holiday-making."

And, if the truth were told, a curious presentiment seized the detective as they drew near the massive ornamental gates of Sir Samuel Mortimer's mansion, and came in full view of the car-load of wounded soldiers.

Boy-like, Nipper could not restrain his enthusiasm at sight of the brave fellows who had "done their bit" so gallantly and ungrudgingly in the terrible trench warfare in Flanders.

"Hi, hi!" he cried, swinging his arm. "Good luck to you all, old sons! Down with the Huns! Give 'em ginger!"

There was a general laugh and a wave of uninjured hands.

"We'll give 'em hotter stuff than that, young 'un!" called a Tommy.

The voices brought from the doors of the mansion a little, white-haired old man and a slim, pretty girl.

"Look!" said Nelson Lee. "There's Sir Samuel and his daughter."

Even as Nipper turned his head, the little old gentleman caught sight of the cyclists. It had a remarkable effect upon him. He dashed spasmodically down the steps and along the drive, his arm upraised.

"Mr. Lee!" he called. "I want you—want you badly, Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee swung from the saddle and wheeled about.

"We're up against it, Nipper!" he said, with a smile and a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Sir Samuel's in trouble. His quavering voice shows it. He looks years older."

"A case up here, anyway, isn't so bad as in the East End," agreed the lad with a philosophic sigh. "Go ahead, guv'nor!"

They wheeled their cycles into the drive.

"Nelson Lee! That's the famous detective, ain't it?"

The Tommies looked on with interest as their host warmly shook the big man's hand.

"I'm so glad you've turned up!" declared Sir Samuel. "Just the man I wanted to see! These are my friends," he went on, nodding towards the soldiers. "Some of them are fit and are returning to London, and the others are seeing them off. They're waiting for Corporal Mayne—the brave Canadian V.C., you know, who held a first-line trench single-handed against the Huns."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I've heard of the hero," he said. "I shall be glad to meet him."

"A splendid chap—isn't he, Maisie?" Sir Samuel continued, with enthusiasm. "He's a general favourite—always so merry and light-hearted. Generous, too! Gives away everything! And he's one of the best recruiting speakers I've heard. He's obtained scores of recruits. He's off to Croyley to-day, to begin a tour of the market-towns."

There was a voice from the car.

"Good old Charley! Here he comes!"

A fine-built, handsome fellow swung down the steps, a footman behind him carrying his kit-bag. He looked a soldier in every inch. At sight of the pretty girl in the white muslin dress he laughed gaily and stepped briskly towards her.

Maisie Mortimer held out a huge bouquet of roses—crimson, cream, and pink—the best the head gardener could gather for his young mistress.

"Roses—for you, corporal!" cried the girl, her eyes brightening. "You'll not forget your stay at the Oaks?"

He took the flowers, and pressed them to his lips with the gallantry of a stage lover.

"Forgot you and your dear father and this lovely home, Miss Maisie!" he said reproachfully, meeting her eyes. "Rather would I go down with the

first German bullet when I go back than forget all the kindness I've received here. On the battlefield, amidst the shot and shell, I shall think of your sweet face. It will urge me to greater efforts. It will——"

He broke off. For the first time he discovered the cyclists. Nelson Lee was within hearing distance. The hero discovered two shrewd, penetrating eyes fixed on him.

The glance was embarrassing. His gaze fell, the smiles left his lips, his back stiffened.

"Who—who's the stranger?" he stammered.

"Oh, it's Mr. Nelson Lee!" cried the girl. "How stupid of me not to introduce you! Of course, you've heard of the famous detective?"

Corporal Charles Mayne shook his head.

"It's late!" he said hurriedly. "It's really too bad of me to keep the other chaps waiting! They might miss their train. Farewell for a time, dear Miss Maisie! Good-bye, Sir Samuel! You and your servants have given me a simply gorgeous time."

Before Sir Samuel could stop him, the handsome hero sprang to the seat beside the chauffeur. The car rolled off at once.

"Canadian, is he?" remarked Nelson Lee casually. "Doesn't use much of the vernacular!"

"Oh, no; good reason for why!" smiled the baronet. "Mayne's an educated chap. Took his degree at Montreal. Not that I know much about him! He's as silent as an oyster about his personal affairs. If he'd been the most ignorant boor, I should still have been proud of him and his glorious feat!"

"H'm!" said Nelson Lee. "Now, tell me what's worrying you!"

The little old man's face became grave.

"It's a delicate matter, Mr. Leo," he said. "We've been the victims of several robberies during the past few weeks, and they've been carried out so successfully and mysteriously that I cannot for the life of me accuse a soul. I don't think the thief is one of my servants. All have so far been absolutely honest, and they've been with me for years."

"The only other conclusion is that the rascal is one of the 'Tommies' you've been entertaining so unselfishly," suggested the detective.

"I don't know what to think!" sighed Sir Samuel. "It seems base—unpatriotic—unjust to a brave and noble-minded class to even harbour the thought. May I put the meagre particulars before you?"

The detective led the way to a garden-seat.

The details were indeed meagre. On three separate occasions within the past fortnight seven articles of jewellery had been stolen from Miss Maisie's and Sir Samuel's own bedrooms. How, by whom, and precisely when, Sir Samuel did not know.

"All I can say is that it was by someone skilled in the burglary business, for he must have had possession of skeleton keys," the little old gentleman concluded. "On every occasion the theft was from a room where the door was locked."

"And the windows—what about them?" asked the detective.

"The robberies could not have been managed from the outside," answered Sir Samuel. "See, that's where they occurred! There, on the third floor, amidst the ivy! My daughter's room is next to my own. No; reluctant as I am to admit it, I cannot help feeling I've been sheltering a professional thief during the past few weeks. For the life of me, I can point no finger of suspicion at any man!"

They talked for some time on the subject. Nelson Lee made many shrewd suggestions, and at last called Nipper to him from the direction of the

orchard, whither pretty Maisie had taken him to stuff his pockets with grapes and peaches.

But Sir Samuel would not allow the cyclists to leave him.

"You may as well stay the night here as at Croxley," he exclaimed. "You can ring up the George on the telephone. My dear Lee, you and your lad must stay and have dinner with me! For another thing, I should like you to see my soldier boarders. Your keen eyes may discover the black sheep amongst them."

The upshot of it all was that Nelson Lee agreed to stay. Within an hour the motor-car returned. Three 'Tommies were in the tonneau. The guests besides these were seven others who hobbled round the lovely grounds on crutches or meandered about with the aid of sticks.

They were pathetic figures all, but as cheerful as schoolboys on holiday. The hour that Nelson Lee spent with them before dinner was a merry time. One would have thought, to see the frank way the soldiers talked with him, that he had known them for years.

"I'll guarantee that every one of those brave chaps is as honest as the daylight!" the detective declared to Sir Samuel, as they smoked an after-dinner cigar on the verandah.

"Then the thief is perhaps amongst those who have already left me!" exclaimed the baronet. "I'm glad of that, because it happens that at the moment I have a large amount of valuables in bonds to bearer and stock certificates in the house. My stockbroker is giving up business, and sent them on to me by registered post only this morning. I shall feel safer now, even though I've got them locked away in the combination safe in my bedroom."

Nelson Lee blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully from his lips.

"Does anyone know you've received them?" he asked.

"No one apart from my daughter and Jenkins, the butler, who's been in my service for forty years. Come and see what Maisie is so noisy about," he added.

The click of billiard balls came to them on the cool night air. Maisie and Nipper were playing a "hundred up," and though Nelson Lee's assistant could boast fairly frequently of a fifty break, his pretty hostess beat him soundly after a series of cannon shots that would not have disgraced a professional.

"Never mind, Nipper!" she laughed gaily. "All the luck came my way! I owe my victory to Corporal Mayne's teaching. He's an absolute wizard with the cue!"

"I should not have thought that of a Canadian farmer's son!" said Nelson Lee. "Billiards is not a Canadian game, and the heavy farm work soon spoils a cueist's delicacy of touch."

"Young Mayne was the exception that proves the rule!" laughed Sir Samuel. "There was nothing wrong with his touch. He was clever enough to compete for an amateur championship."

"I'm getting quite interested in this brilliant young hero," exclaimed the detective. "Tell me some more of his accomplishments."

Maisie Mortimer enthusiastically responded to the request. Her eyes flashed and her cheeks glowed as she told of the young corporal's skilful horsemanship, of his athletic powers, of his abilities with musical instruments, and of his amazing dash and recklessness.

"He is the cleverest and handsomest man I've ever met!" the girl declared, with flushed cheeks. "We all think heaps of him! The place is quite dull without him!"

"He seems a wonderful chap," said the detective, stifling a yawn. "It's a pity I missed making his acquaintance!"

"Oh, you'll hear from him again!" smiled Sir Samuel. "A man of Corporal Mayne's personality can't be kept under."

The kindly little old gentleman never dreamed how soon his guest was to make the impostor's acquaintance.

Soon after all went to bed. Nelson Lee stood in the hall while Sir Samuel made his examinations of the lower windows and the outer doors to see that all were securely fastened by the servants.

"Always see to them myself," he puffed, returning to the detective. "Can't sleep soundly unless I've been round! Got up often in the middle of the night to make sure. Bless me once if I didn't find one of the patients prowling round! Scooted off before I recognised him, though!"

Nelson Lee bade him good-night at the door of his room. Nipper was already in bed and asleep in the next apartment.

Darkness and silence settled on the old house. Nipper was thoroughly tired after his long day's ride, and slept on. One o'clock chimed, and then, soon afterwards, something happened that roused the boy as completely as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him.

"Help!"

A stifled cry came to him. It was followed by a dull thud.

Nipper had been dreaming of his hero. He and Corporal Mayne were in a trench, defending it against a horde of Germans. In the cloud of smoke from their weapons, the Huns disappeared, but the face of Corporal Mayne still floated before him. It grinned at him and mocked him.

As he sat up in bed, all his nerve-strings taut, listening intently, he still saw Corporal Mayne's handsome face mocking him.

"Hi, Corporal!" he shouted, so real did the face appear.

He leapt out of bed and ran to the door in his pyjamas. Only then the face disappeared. There was a short, sharp bang. The door was slammed in his face. Nipper felt the cool air on his cheeks as it closed.

"It was someone, after all!" thought the boy, and tugged at the handle.

It failed to move the door. He pulled and strained. He beat his fists on the panels. He had noticed the key in the lock on the inside of the door. Now it was gone. Obviously someone had withdrawn it, and inserted it on the other side to lock him in.

For what reason? Lest he should go to the help of the person who had uttered the stifled cry! What foul work was afoot? Where was Nelson Lee? The noise must have disturbed him!

He caught the handle and pulled again. The result was unexpected. Nipper swung suddenly back as the door opened. So violent were his efforts that, as the door crashed back, his fingers slipped, and he slid half across the room on his back.

"Nipper!" came a voice out of the filmy darkness. "Come, for mercy's sake! Mr. Lee——"

The boy bounded erect. In the doorway, seeing a shape that was unlike his master's, he flung up his hands and gripped a soft white throat. The clinging texture of a dressing-gown told him his mistake the next instant.

"Beg pardon, Miss Maisie!" he stammered. "I thought——"

"Oh, come—come quickly!" gasped Sir Samuel's daughter. "My father's room! Something terrible's going on there! I—I can't get in!"

She darted away into the gloom of the corridor. Nipper hastened after her.

A few steps, and he paused. The door of Nelson Lee's room stood wide open. The blind had been drawn. It was a moonless night, but a faint glow lighted up the room.

The bedclothes were tossed anyhow. Nelson Lee's cycling suit had vanished from the chair at the bedside. So had its owner.

"The gov'nor—gone!" thought the boy, momentarily pausing. "Then it's all right!"

As he got to the end of the corridor, Maisie Mortimer appeared with a lighted candle. She indicated a door.

"That's father's room!" she cried. "Oh, did you hear his call for help? There's been a fearful struggle going on in there!"

"It'll be all right, miss!" said Nipper, straining at the handle. "Nelson Lee's about! You've seen him, of course?"

The girl shook her head. She was trembling still, and looked wonderfully ghost-like, with her white face and her slim figure in the pale-blue dressing-gown.

"I got up at once—before father even called out," she said. "I've seen nothing of him."

Nipper turned from the door. Nothing would move it. From the room itself there was not a sound. The servants—an old butler and a middle-aged footman, and several frightened girls—came down from the floor above.

"We'll have to break it down!" cried Nipper. "Got anything heavy handy?"

While the butler hurried off, Nipper and the footman hurled their shoulders against the door. It was of stout material, and the lock was strong. Their efforts only bruised their muscles.

Benson returned presently with the heavy side-piece of an iron bedstead. With the three of them helping, and using it as a ram, they drove it again and again at the door.

Panels were splintered, and at last, with a report like that of a pistol-shot, the shattered woodwork flew inward.

Maisie was the first to enter the room. Nipper and the menservants followed. The frightened housemaids clustered in a group by the door.

It was a strange sight they witnessed. Light was shining from two electric bulbs over the dressing-table by the window. In the corner on the left the curtain had been drawn aside from a small steel safe, the door of which stood wide open. Papers littered the floor immediately before it. Signs of a struggle were evident in the overturned chairs.

All these things were focussed in Nipper's eyes at a glance, but his gaze rested longest on the limp, prostrate figure close to the safe.

Sir Samuel lay there, staring with wide, wild eyes at the ceiling, one arm poised, as if shielding a blow.

Nipper shivered slightly, and a girl behind him screamed out hysterically.

CHAPTER III.

The Robbery

"FATHER! Father!" sobbed Maisie, falling to her knees. "Speak to me!"

It broke the eerie spell that seemed to have settled over Nipper and the servants. The lad turned sharply about. With a manner worthy of his master, he took control of proceedings.

"Take that girl away!" he told the housemaids, trying to comfort their hysterical companion. "Get yourselves dressed! You may be wanted. Mr. Benson, will you ring up Sir Samuel's doctor on the 'phone? Keep on ringing till he answers! He's got to come at once!"

"And me!" said Timms, the footman. "Can I help?"

Nipper thought rapidly. Whether Sir Samuel had been fatally struck

down or not, it was up to him and his master now to lay the assailant by the heels. Whilst Nelson Lee was away, he must act in his place.

"Arm yourself with something," said the boy, "then go down and have a look round! Keep your eyes open for anything suspicious! I'll be down as soon as I can leave Sir Samuel!"

The man took the instructions from the junior without a demur. In a minute, Nipper and Maisie were alone with the prostrate figure. The girl was sobbing softly, doubled up over her father.

Nipper dropped to his knees beside her.

He remained silent whilst his keen, young eyes, far from unacquainted with the features of unconsciousness and even death itself, rested on the old gentleman's face.

There was a long, black bruise, an inch wide, that passed over the left eye in an oblique direction and was lost amidst the silvering hair. Minor marks of struggling, shown in scratches and blue, puffy spots, were on cheeks and chin. The wrists were red and scarred as Nipper took each up in turn.

He gave a little snort of delight. The pulses were throbbing faintly. Quickly his hand went to Sir Samuel's breast. The heart was beating. Its pulsations seemed to grow stronger in the seconds the youngster rested his hand on the flesh.

"It's all right, Miss Maisie," he said gently. "Sir Samuel's only been knocked out. He mayn't be badly hurt, after all. See, the brute's hit him with a loaded stick across the forehead. Can you find some water and a smelling bottle?"

The girl threw herself forward impulsively and kissed the white features, then she looked up at Nipper with eyes shining amidst her tears.

"You think that?" she cried. "Oh, I'm so glad! Dear, dear father! Of course—how stupid of me! I'm wasting time. I ought to help, instead——"

With the sentence unfinished, she sprang to her feet and darted away. She was quite courageous when she saw Nipper coolly and calmly sponging the senseless man's forehead. She helped him raise her father's head whilst some spirit was forced between the white lips.

In a few minutes Sir Samuel showed signs of recovering. His eyelids fluttered, and a gasping sigh left his lips.

Nipper lifted him bodily in his strong arms and carried him to a couch. Maisie was beginning to set right the disturbed furniture, when he stopped her.

"The gov'nor would like to see it where it is when he comes back," he explained.

But where was the gov'nor? That was puzzling his mind still when Sir Samuel suddenly clutched at his wrist and stared, open-mouthed, at him.

"It's all right, sir," the boy told him reassuringly. "It's Nipper—Nelson Lee's assistant. Miss Maisie's been a brick. She brought us here. Who gave you the omer across your head, sir?"

The girl put her arm lovingly about her father's neck. Her words comforted him, helped to clear his muddled mind.

"I—I remember now," he quavered. "I was asleep, when something disturbed me. A cold draught was blowing on me from the window. The casement was flung wide back. I got out to shut it, when a man sprang at me. I—I was no match for him. He was a big, powerful brute, and when he struck me I went down, and knew nothing more."

Nipper pressed the sponge against the old man's aching head. His eyes roved to the two windows. Both were casements opening on hinges. One was fastened by a latch. The other was closed, but not fastened. Obviously,

seeing that Sir Samuel had been found in a locked room, the burglar must have entered and escaped by means of the window.

Nipper's glance went to the safe. His knowledge of safes of all kinds was extensive and peculiar. He had once opened a so-called burglar-proof safe with nothing more than a hairpin. His glance showed him that Sir Samuel possessed a Chubb's of the very best kind. Its many steel compartments were dynamite-proof. No skeleton key would open its doors. Its secret was the combination of letters, and pressure on the pin-head spring in the heavy handle.

"What made you tell anybody about the pin-head spring, sir?" asked Nipper quietly.

"What—what's that?" gasped Sir Samuel. "I've told no one—not even Maisie. Why do you ask? You don't mean——"

He thrust the slim girl aside and tottered across the floor till he stood before the safe. He looked down at the litter of parchments—stock and share certificates—at his feet, then, with difficulty, he stifled a moan of pain.

"Robbed—practically ruined!" he groaned. He dropped to his knees and sorted the litter. "He's no fool," he murmured at last. "He's taken only the bearer bonds. Over ten thousand pounds' worth. He'll be able to change them as if they were bank-notes. My heavens, the loss will hit me hard!"

Nipper wanted to say something to cheer him.

"Don't you worry, sir," he exclaimed. "It'll be all right presently. The gov'nor's on his collar. You can rely on that."

He left father and daughter together, and went to Nelson Lee's room. Nipper was worried. Usually when his master went off mysteriously he first of all gave him instructions. Why had he not done so in this case? Was there foul play of a particularly cunning kind at work?

There was nothing to be learned in the detective's room. Nelson Lee's outdoor clothes were missing. He had been in bed, for the sheets were disturbed. Both the casement windows were half closed. Nipper went round the room slowly and carefully. His trained eyes could discover nothing.

"The gov'nor went off in a great hurry, that's certain," he decided, "else he'd have left a note for me somewhere."

Nipper went downstairs. Timms, armed with an old blunderbuss taken from the hall wall, was unlocking the front door to admit the doctor.

"Master's upstairs, Dr. Watts," said Benson, the old butler, coming from a room. "I'll take ye straight up to him, sir. He—he's been half-killed by a burglar, sir."

The stout, elderly doctor stifled a yawn and nearly dropped his case of instruments.

"Burglar—half-killed!" he ejaculated.

"Sir Samuel's recovered now," Nipper said shortly. "But he needs your attention. One moment, doctor. Did you notice anything unusual—extraordinary on your way here?"

Dr. Watts gave a nervous little laugh.

"Unusual—that isn't the word for it," he said jerkily. "I'd hardly swung my motor round into the main road, when a madman—an absolute madman—came galloping at me on a horse as mad as himself. Took me at a lean, they did, as if I and the motor were a thickset hedge. George, I ducked for my life, and steered straight into the ditch. Nearly messed up my steering gear. Took me ten minutes to get clear again. But—but who are you? Don't like being cross-examined by bits of boys!"

"It's Nipper, sir, you know," interposed Benson.

"Oh, Nelson Lee's young assistant!" cried the doctor. "I remember, you told me on the 'phone. Of course, you and Mr. Lee'll take up this case?"

"The guv'nor's out," said Nipper. "I was asking you if you'd seen anything of him. Who was the mad chap on the horse?"

"True, it might have been Nelson Lee," said Dr. Watts thoughtfully. "Couldn't say. Couldn't see properly. On me in a jiffy, and out of sight the next. Wonderful horseman, though—wonderful! Got an idea he had a respirator, or a mask, over his face. Anyway, he disappeared round the bend in the direction of the dyke. I listened to the mad beat of the hoofs, and all of a sudden the sounds vanished."

"He left the hard road and went on the turf, I suppose," ventured the boy. "Is that all?"

"All!" ejaculated the medico. "I had a bigger shock next moment. I was straining at the car, trying to pull the off front wheel out of the ditch, when a cyclist, coming noiselessly up, banged clean into me. The pair of us went slithering into the middle of a duck-pond. Look at me!" he added, with a wail, his hands held trouserwards.

Neither the footman nor Nipper could suppress a grin. The doctor's outer garments, originally of grey flannel, were black and green with slime and weed. The wet was dripping from his trouser-ends as he stood there.

"We were only floundering about for a minute or two," Dr. Watts resumed. "This other fellow—the cyclist—must have been madder than the horseman. He didn't utter a word. He just grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, hauled me out, dropped me as cool as you like on the seat of my own motor-car, and went trotting off after his confounded cycle. In two seconds he'd disappeared."

Nipper let out a laugh.

"That's good news," he grinned. "I'll bet any money that cyclist was the guv'nor. The horseman was the burglar who stole Sir Samuel's bonds, but Nelson Lee'll nab him. You mark my words."

"They ought to be shot—the pair of 'em," grunted the little man.

Puffing and blowing, and wringing the water out of his cuffs, Dr. Watts passed upstairs.

CHAPTER IV.

The Meeting in Ghosties Dyke

"**H**ELP! For the love of Heaven—help!"

Old Joe Strudwick, stumbling homeward along the main line track after a long day at hay-making, jerked his bent figure erect and listened intently.

It was late. The night was dark; great grey banks of cloud hid the moon. The last train had passed through Risedale half an hour before. The track saved the tired old fellow a tramp of at least three miles.

"Seems as I be hearin' suthin'," he murmured; trying to pierce the darkness. Then all of a sudden he saw, with a start, something ahead of him, some dark shape with a white top—hardly human—dragged itself across the gleaming metals, and made a further despairing cry.

The old man stood stock still. His gnarled fists, clenched tightly, shook a bit. The figure suddenly collapsed. There came a piercing screech out of the blackness far ahead. An instant later, round a bend in the track.

rushed a locomotive, a long row of loaded goods trucks, snake-like, behind it. The ruddy glare from the cab lit up the issuing steam.

The ploughman dashed forward.

"Whoever he be, he'll be killed," he stammered. "I be an ol' fool to be so nervous. Looks a sojer, too. Lordy! Might be my boy Jim!"

Reaching the figure, he lifted it in his strong arms. There was little immediate danger. He had plenty of time to carry his limp burden to the edge of the embankment and to sink with it to the grass, ere the heavy train, laden with war material, thudded heavily past.

But for all that he had saved a life. He was thrilled by the thought as he clung to the figure till the last truck had disappeared.

"It be all right, lad—all right now," he said, with trembling lips. "Ye've nothin'—"

A groan escaped him. He was staring down into a grey face, the lifeless face of a good-looking young soldier. Round his head was the peculiar white thing that had first alarmed him. It was a bandage, marked, as he saw, with a shudder, with wet crimson stains.

The old man's heart went out to the young soldier. His clothes, of course, showed that he was a member of Kitchener's gallant army. Old Joe's only son, Jim, was one of Kitchener's men—and a sergeant, too—as he would have proudly told you.

"Be no use stayin' here," he determined, conscious that the soldier was still breathing. "Must get un 'ome. Maybe as Dr. Watts'll come an' see un."

Twenty minutes later, almost ready to drop with exhaustion, he stumbled to the door of a tiny, thatched-roof cottage, on the edge of the dyke. Very lonely and desolate it appeared in the gloom, with its surrounding pastureland and the great yawning chasm of the dyke, pitch-black and grim, only a few yards distant.

A kick sent the door flying open. Finding his way unerringly in the darkness, old Joe made for the bed, and gently, tenderly, laid his burden upon it.

Without pausing to think of his own comfort, he lighted a small oil lamp. Breathing more freely now, he kindled a fire, already laid, on the tiny hearth, and set a kettle upon it.

"Poor lad!" he murmured, moving in his stockinged feet to the bed, and gazing into the grey face. "Them's shell wounds as is under that bandage. What's he doing on t' railway? He be some father's boy, anyways."

He set to work to restore consciousness to the wounded man. His clothes were wet with dew. Evidently he had been lying on the track for hours. The old fellow was clumsy in his movements, but he kept rubbing away at the stiff, lifeless hands. When the kettle boiled, he made cocoa and forced some of the fluid between the white lips.

At last his efforts were rewarded. The lips parted to emit a moan of pain. Life seemed to come suddenly into the stiff hands. They fastened in a tight grip about the old man's wrists.

"You cur!" the soldier hissed. "I guess you thought you'd killed me."

The man's bloodshot eyes blazed fiercely in their hollow sockets. Old Joe Strudwick met the gaze steadily.

"It be all right, lad," he said gently. "Ye've nothin' to fear from an ol' man. It's my boy Jim as is in t' Army, same as yeself. Maybe as ye knows un?"

The fierceness faded from the grey face. The hands relinquished their hold.

"I'm sorry," stammered Corporal Charles Mayne. "I've made a mistake. I was thinking I was in the train again."

He looked round the room. Its furniture was of a crude order. The

smell of the oil lamp filled the air; it seemed as if as much smoke streamed from the fire into the room as passed up the chimney. The room was bare of anything save the necessities for one old man living alone; but to the young Canadian, with the hardships of the firing-line of Flanders still fresh in his memory, it was a haven of comfort and peace.

"Just ye luck into that, lad," said old Joe, hobbling to the deal table and drawing it close to the bed. "'Tis somethin' of a walk into Risedale for the doctor's, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

Corporal Mayne glanced at the eatables on the table. Beside a mug of steaming cocoa was a hunch of sweet, white farmhouse bread, and a knuckle of pink-and-white boiled bacon. It was the old man's supper. He was foregoing it, was ready to tramp the four odd miles to Risedale and back again for the sake of the wounded Tommy.

"Sit you down, friend!" cried Charley Mayne. "You want no doctor for me! I guess I'm right enough for anybody now."

He laughed with forced merriment as he swung himself erect from the bed and brought his hand to the forehead in a salute. The movement caused him to wince with the pain, though he turned away so that the old fellow should not see.

By the mercy of Providence he had fallen on his shoulders when his mysterious assailant had hurled him from the railway carriage. His head, however, had struck the rails and rendered him unconscious. At the foot of the embankment, half covered by dried leaves, he had laid for hours—until, in fact, a few moments before old Joe Strudwick's arrival on the track.

"Just sit you down!" the corporal went on. "You look tired out! I tell you, friend, I'm all right! Still, I'd be obliged if you could put me up for to-night. I'm due somewhere else to-morrow."

The old man willingly agreed. They sat down to the meal, and devoured the joint between them. Neither had eaten for hours, and as they ate Corporal Mayne told of the attack made upon him in the train.

"Why the hobo should have gone for me is more than I can answer!" he declared. "I'd never seen him before. But I shall know him again"—his face hardened—"and I pray for the day when I can meet him and settle accounts!"

But when old Joe got up the following morning at sunrise, his visitor was too ill to leave his bed. The kindly old fellow prevailed on the soldier to stay there for awhile. Corporal Mayne could not do otherwise than agree. Before he went, old Joe bathed and bandaged his wounds with the tenderness of a woman.

"Stay ye there, lad!" he advised. "Don't ye thank me! I be sure anyone'd treat my boy Jim—bless him!—in t' same way. I'll be back for a bit o' breakfast later on."

Charley Mayne had managed to dress when the old ploughman returned, but he was still stiff and sore and quite unable to walk, and by that time the postman had come, leaving behind him a letter which was like a knock-down blow to the old man.

"Read it, lad!" he urged, in a choking voice. "My old eyes ain't so strong as they was. It's bad news, I knows, by the strange writin'. I've no wish to live if anythin's happened to my boy Jim!"

He had torn the envelope open and glanced through the stiff, scrawly writing. Mayne took the missive from his trembling fingers.

It bore the address of the Royal Kent's camp at Wortley. This is what the wounded Tommy read to him:

"Dear Sir,—I very much regret to inform you that your son, Sergeant James Strudwick, has met with a serious injury in the course of his duty

here. Whilst in charge of the guard engaged in arresting a man caught in the act of robbing the canteen till, he was fired at by the scoundrel, receiving a bullet in his lung. An immediate operation will be necessary, and we sincerely hope it will be the means of saving your son's life."

Old Joe could not keep back a sob of pain. The corporal went on after a pause, his own voice a little husky:

"It may hearten you to know that Sergeant Strudwick is one of our most popular and efficient non-commissioned officers. There is a great future before him if only we can pull him through. Unfortunately, the scoundrel who fired the shot, a private in your son's platoon, escaped in the excitement. So far he has not been recaptured, but depend upon it that we will leave no stone unturned until he is caught and made to suffer for his crime. In the meantime, I tender my sympathy, and bid you be of good courage. I will let you know at intervals how your poor, brave lad is progressing.—Yours sincerely,
JOHN SOMERS, Colonel."

Corporal Mayne laid down the letter, and hobbled painfully to the old man. The ploughman was sobbing bitterly. The news had broken him up.

The wounded Canadian cheered and comforted him. But there was no more work in the fields for him that day. All the old fellow could do was to sit by the doorway of his cottage and stare before him with unseeing eyes.

The following morning, when the wounded soldier would have left him to continue the journey to Risedale, old Joe persuaded him to stay and keep him company. There was better news that day. The bullet had been extracted, and there was every possibility of Sergeant Jim's pulling round.

"The worst of it is," said Mayne, as he folded up this second missive from Colonel Somers, "they haven't bagged that varmint who plugged him yet! They traced him to the main-line track to London. After that they lost him."

The old ploughman's face became hard as granite.

"Only let me get my hands on him," he said fiercely, "an' I'll tear the ugly throat out o' him!"

The wounded Tommy nodded grimly.

"I understand," he said. "That's how I feel about that hound who pitched me from the train!"

The days passed until Corporal Mayne had been the old ploughman's guest for nearly a fortnight. By then Jim Strudwick was out of danger and making rapid recovery. Old Joe had been to Wortley to see him. He came back to the little thatched cottage with his mind full of vengeance.

"It was a skunk, Harry Stone by name, as nearly did my poor boy in!" he told the corporal. "A thorough bad lot he were, for all his good looks an' his devil-may-care spirits. But they can't get no trace o' him!" he added wearily.

Corporal Mayne held a lighted spill to the old fellow's pipe. They were having a last smoke at the door before turning in.

"Well, now you know your lad's gettin' better, old friend, you won't mind me leaving you," he said. "I must go to the big house at Risedale to-morrow. Sir Samuel Mortimer'll be wondering what's become of me."

Jim had written to nobody. He had expected to leave the cottage every day.

"I heered nowt about ye when I met Sir Samivel t'other day," observed old Joe. "Mindin' what ye said about keepin' a still tongue, I didn't let on as ye were stayin' with me. Likewise, t' squire had a sojer wi' him—band-some chap, he were—what they says is after courtin' pretty Miss Maisie."

Funny thing, this sojer's name was Mayne, come to think o' it! Any of your folk, lad?"

The wounded Tommy shook his head.

"Mayne's not an uncommon name," he said. "I got to know several out in Flanders. Dare say I'll get to know him to-morrow."

He bade the old man good-night. In less than five minutes after turning in, both were sound asleep.

"Corporal, wake up, lad!"

How long he had been asleep, Mayne did not know. He sat up at once on the couch that served as bed. It was pitch-dark still.

The old ploughman was gripping his shoulder and pointing with shaking hand in the direction of the dyke.

"There be a horseman there!" he quavered. "Listen! Hear them hoof-beats! 'Tis allus a sign o' terrible trouble when ye hear t' ghostie horseman in t' dyke!"

The soldier was inclined to laugh at the old man's fears. The smile died away. He gritted his teeth.

From the direction of the dyke there came the unmistakable sounds of a horseman. The beats of the flying hoofs were distinct and regular. Corporal Mayne had heard the sounds too often in the Canadian prairie to be mistaken.

They stood at the door, listening intently, ears and eyes strained. Before them yawned the velvet blackness of the great dyke—Ghosties Dyke, as the cottagers called it.

"It's a horseman right enough," said Mayne. "What's it mean? Can he be on the road beyond?"

"No, no!" replied old Joe. "'Tis three miles to the road beyond. There be a track in from Risedale, but only a madman'd tackle it."

"He's that, I guess, if he's in the flesh," granted Mayne.

And then his voice froze, and the old man clutched fiercely at his arm as the weird tattoo of hoofs broke off suddenly. It was succeeded by a wild, blood-curdling scream.

After that came silence—a silence more profound and tense than the old ploughman had ever experienced.

They waited, scarcely daring to breathe, but not a sound came out of the darkness.

"It's somebody down there!" declared the corporal. "I'm going to see! Where's that old lantern of yours?"

"'Tis the ghostie!" cried the superstitious old fellow. "Ye'll never come back! Don't go, lad!"

In vain he entreated. Corporal Mayne lighted the old storm-lantern, gripped a stout stick, and stepped off into the gloom, leaving old Joe expostulating behind him.

The dyke was like some crude pudding-basin. It had a width in parts of over a mile. Its steep sides, perpendicular save for a rugged bridle-track here and there, ended at the foot, a hundred feet below, in eerie black caverns where none but the boldest ever set foot.

With the feeble light of the lantern, Charley Mayne made for the path nearest the old ploughman's cottage. Finding it, he paused for a moment and listened.

Surely they were groans of pain he heard from far below!

"Here's for chancing it!" he decided. "Ghosties don't make sounds like them!"

Hooking the lantern-handle to his tunic, and with one hand gripping

tightly his stick, the other feeling his way down the steep path, and by occasionally grabbing at the long grass, he reached a broad plateau several feet wide.

And then, before he knew it, he stumbled into a soft, yielding figure.

Again there were moans of pain. There was no doubt now who was their author.

"All right!" cried Corporal Mayne. "I'll soon get you out of this!"

He unhooked the lantern, and laid it on the ground. The figure was lying in a huddled heap, the legs asprawl, the head tucked into the chest. With difficulty the Tommy lifted the man and turned him over on his back.

Then he stared, aghast. There was a mask of lines over the man's face. Nothing was to be seen of his features—nothing but two eye-slits!

"What be happened, lad?" came a hoarse murmur from the dyke top. "Be yo safe, lad?"

"Guess I'm all right," Mayne returned. "I've got him—poor chap! There's no sign of his horse, though!"

He knelt beside the figure. With a grunt of satisfaction, he made sure that the heart was beating. His brows knitted. Something in the build, in the pose of the man, seemed familiar! For some unaccountable reason his nerves became taut and vibrant.

With a quick, spasmodic movement, he unfastened the tape which held the linen mask.

He lifted the lamp the better to gaze into the unconscious man's features. Then he nearly dropped it.

"Him!" he cried tensely.

It was the man who had entered the train and fought him, the man who, no doubt, had flung him cruelly on the track!

A curious trick of fate had now delivered his enemy into his hands. Corporal Mayne flashed the lamp around. Below him, just a few feet from the edge of the plateau, yawned the bottom-most depths of the dyke—fifty to sixty feet below—black, remorseless, terrible!

For a moment murder was in his heart. He could have picked up the brute and hurled him to death as easily as he could kick a stone into the black abyss. Who was to know he had done the deed? The man was at his mercy even as he had been at his. The scoundrel had not spared him! He had flung him to his death! Why should he not take a similar revenge? Was it not fair to take an eye for an eye?

He stared down into the handsome white face, his mind a torrent of emotions. Calmer counsels prevailed.

"He shall suffer for it," he determined. "He's in my power now, but he's not worth spoiling my career for!"

Signs of returning consciousness made him hasten his plan. Stooping suddenly, he lifted the fellow across his shoulder. He staggered under the weight, but his mouth and eyes were grim and determined as he stumbled forward up the rugged, narrow path.

If it had needed courage to come down the path, still more it required a steady nerve to ascend it in the dark, laden as he was. Time and again his foot slipped on the loose path, and a grab at the strong-rooted grass saved them both.

Almost exhausted and panting heavily, he reached the dyke top and sank with his burden to the ground. He gazed towards the little cottage. A light streamed out from the doorway. Old Joe Strudwick could be heard pottering about.

He gazed down at his prisoner. The eyelids twitched as he shone the light on the pale face. It did not strike him, nevertheless, that the man had

recovered his wits, and was in turn gazing up at him through his lashes in terrified bewilderment.

"Joe," cried Mayne, hurrying away—"rope, quick! I've got the scoundrel who tried to kill me!"

"Eh? What? What?"

The old ploughman was too amazed to bestir himself as the Tommy bundled into the living-room. He stared at him, with open mouth.

"It's what I say," cried the corporal. "I found him half-way down. He's the chap we heard galloping. Quick—before he comes round!"

The old man fumbled about in a cupboard. Precious moments were wasted before he found an old clothes-line. With it they hastened to the dyke-top.

The spot where the prisoner had laid was bare. In vain Corporal Mayne flashed the lantern about him. There was no sign of the man who had attempted to take his life.

"He's done me again—hang him!" cried the corporal, unable to control his chagrin.

But he stumped up and down in vain. There was not a trace of him—not even a footprint; and at last the two went back to the cottage.

"He be still in t' neighbourhood—that's clear!" declared the old ploughman, looking at Mayne's grim face. "Maybe as ye'll hear about 'un at t' squire's to-morrow."

Which was a pretty shrewd guess as events turned out.

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CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee's Dramatic Reappearance

NIPPER turned impatiently to Timms. He had made a tour of the lower floor. All had been in perfect order. He had discovered nothing.

Thence he had gone to the building wherein the wounded soldiers had their quarters. There again his investigations had met with no result.

The mystery became more baffling with every step he took.

"Now, Timms, what have you got to say?" he asked. "Have you seen anything suspicious?"

The footman fingered his chin.

"Nothing at all!" he answered readily. "There's not a sign down here of anybody having got in or gone out. I found every window and door was securely fastened as when I did 'em last night afore turning in. Seeing as how your guv'nor slept on the second floor, same as master, how could he be that cyclist Dr. Watts spoke of if these 'ere doors and windows ain't been touched?"

"We'll soon see!" was Nipper's answer.

Timms opened the front door, and they went out into the drive. The greyness before dawn cast an eerie light over the elms and the shrubs of the gardens.

Nipper led the way to the left wing, immediately below the windows of the room occupied by him and Nelson Lee. All that side of the house, right up to, and beyond Sir Samuel's windows, was thickly covered with ivy.

The boy thrust his hand amongst the leaves, and caught the thick stem beneath. To Timms's amazement, he began to haul himself up hand over hand.

"I'll bet that's the way the guv'nor came down," he said, dropping to the lawn beneath.

Yet he could find no broken leaves upon the grass! There were no signs

of scraped brickwork when he peered beneath the ivy! There were only the impressions of their own boots on the dew-wet lawn!

Not to be done, Nipper hastened round to the garage where they had left their cycles. Only his own machine was left.

"There you are!" he cried triumphantly. "This proves the guv'nor's gone after him! The next you'll hear of him'll be from the police-station where he's taken the housebreaker."

"I hope so," said the middle-aged footman, scratching his head. "It fair licks me! Who'd be villun enough, d'ye think, as to rob the dear, kind-hearted old master?"

Nipper shrugged his shoulders. When they got to the front of the house, Dr. Watts reappeared.

"It's shook Sir Samuel up rather badly," he declared. "He's got a nasty blow on the forehead. There's no serious danger provided he's kept quiet for a few days, though he's feverish and light-headed just now. I must get home to change these sloppy breeks of mine, but I'll be here again after breakfast."

Dawn broke, the sun rose higher and higher—another glorious summer day—and Nipper stepped impatiently about the grounds. For all his reassurance about Nelson Lee, he felt anxious. He strained his ears for every sound that might betoken the detective's return.

Breakfast-time came, and still there was no news. Maisie had become alarmed at her father's condition. He was calling out loudly in delirium. Dr. Watts was sent for. Nipper pushed away his scarcely-touched plate.

"I'm going for a ride round," he told Timms. "I can't sit idle here when perhaps the guv'nor may want me somewhere."

Getting out his cycle, he pedalled through the gates and emerged into the main road. First of all he cycled to the corner by Besley's Farm, whither lay the duck pond into which Dr. Watts had floundered during the small hours. Thence he passed to the dyke—a deep, natural hollow, with precipitous sides—that lay some fifty yards from the road. There were signs of hoof-marks in the red earth. Nipper followed them to the brink of the dyke, and there lost them. Of a cyclist's wheel-tracks there were no signs whatever.

Going back to the road, he turned his front wheel in the direction of Crozley. The red-tiled roofs of the outlying houses of the market town were in sight when a smart, soldierly figure turned sharply from a hedge, and a right hand swung to the forehead in a military salute.

It was Corporal Charles Mayne, tanned and handsome, immaculate as ever.

"Good-morning, Nipper!" the V.C. cried cheerily. "Just the very person I was anxious to meet! I've got a note here from your C.O., otherwise the great Nelson Lee."

Nipper was out of the saddle in an instant. There was an air of geniality about the corporal that seemed to make them pals at once.

"It served us an excuse, don't you know," smiled the corporal, "for my calling up at the great house. Now, I suppose I'll have to make some other plan to see Miss Maisie."

Nipper took the envelope, and tore it open. It was addressed to him in his master's familiar, characteristic hand. Inside was more of the same handwriting. It ran:

"Dear Nipper,—In case you should be concerned about me, please understand by this that I am quite O.K. I expect to be back at the Oaks by about eleven. Await me there.—N. L."

A shade of disappointment passed over Nipper's face. It was a colourless note. It told him nothing except that the detective was safe and sound. It hardly seemed worth the trouble of writing, seeing that Nelson Lee would be returning to Risedale so soon after its delivery.

"Did the gov'nor give you this?" asked Nipper, smiling admiringly up at the big, strong, handsome fellow.

Corporal Mayne shook his head.

"I'm staying at the George before I begin my recruiting tour," he answered. "Mr. Lee sent it up to me while I was shaving. He was off again before I'd smartened up and came down to the coffee-room. It's not bad news, I hope?"

"Oh, no!" smiled Nipper. "There's been bad news at the Oaks, though! There's no harm in telling you. It'll be all over the place before long! A burglar got into Sir Samuel's room last night, knocked the old gentleman out of time, and cleared off with a few thousand pounds' worth of bonds."

The V.C. fell back a half-pace. His lips opened, and his eyes went wide in incredulous amazement.

"No, no; it's impossible!" he gasped. "That gentle, kindly old fellow robbed and knocked about! After all he's done for the boys in khaki! No scoundrel would be black-hearted enough to rob him!"

"You can't get away from facts!" said the boy bluntly.

"And the dear old chap's been badly knocked about!" cried the V.C., his eyes blazing. "Oh, I could throttle the brute that's done it!"

He clenched his fists. Nipper watched the strong, handsome face grow stern and grim. It would have gone hard with the burglar if Corporal Mayne had him in his power that moment.

"Of course Miss Maisie's badly cut up," said the hero—"she's sure to be! She passionately loves that dear old man. How I should like to see her and comfort her and her father! Dare I go, Nipper? Would they think it impertinent of me?"

Nipper put a hand on the khaki sleeve.

"They'd never think that of you, corporal," he said enthusiastically. "whatever you did! Sir Samuel's as proud of you as if you were his son! There's no one alive who could comfort 'em more than you. If Nelson Lee was here, he'd say the same."

The soldier looked thoughtfully down the road.

"You're a good chap, Nipper!" he said. "I'll come back with you."

They stepped along side by side. They talked of the war. Nipper listened in silent hero-worship whilst Corporal Mayne told him some of his experiences with the Huns. Half-past ten was chimed from the tower of Risedale Church as they passed up the drive.

Maisie Mortimer hurried down immediately Corporal Mayne was announced.

"Oh, it's so kind of you to come over!" she said, with sparkling eyes. "I knew you'd come directly you heard of our trouble. Poor daddie is a little better now. Dr. Watts is still with him. Come up and see him—and you, too, Nipper!"

The lovers wandered in the garden whilst Nipper placed his cycle in the garage. Seeing nothing of them on his return, Nelson Lee's assistant made his way upstairs to the sick-room. Dr. Watts admitted him.

"I beg pardon, sir," he stammered, turning to the bed. "Miss Maisie asked me to come up. I thought she was already here, with Corporal Mayne."

"Ah, is that fine fellow here?" said the baronet, his face lighting up. "It's just like him to call! They'll be here in a minute. Sit down, my boy! Any news of your master yet?"

Nipper explained his meeting with the V.C. hero.

"Mr. Lee says he'll be back at eleven, sir," he replied. "We sha'n't be much longer in the dark. We'll soon know whether he's collared the burglar!"

Sir Samuel's face was pale. His eyes burned with fever as he sat propped up with pillows, and they talked of the theft. Dr. Watts was telling of his meeting with the strange horseman and the stranger cyclist when Corporal Mayne and Maisie came in.

The hero stepped across to the bedside. With great reverence he pressed Sir Samuel's cold hand to his lips.

"I would far rather have had a dose of German shell than that this should ever have happened!" declared the soldier—"you who have done so much for us 'ommies! This rogue must be one of the blackest-hearted scoundrels living!"

"Ay, he's all that!" nodded Dr. Watts.

A faint flush came into the old man's cheeks. The admiration, the gratitude underlying the corporal's words, impressed him greatly.

"You're a good chap, Mayne!" he said feebly. "I pity the rogue if you got hold of him!"

"You can well say that, sir," responded the hero. "No punishment's too bad for him! He'd be given to the Huns to torture if I had my way with him!"

"Nelson Lee's after him," said Sir Samuel. "He'll run him down, I'm sure, sooner or later."

"I only wish to Heaven he does!" cried Corporal Mayne emphatically. "He——"

A quiet, cold voice from the casement cut him short.

"Then your wish is gratified, Corporal Mayne," it said. "Hands up! Nelson Lee has already run you down!"

He swung round like a flash. His eyes saw what they all saw. In the half-open casement window appeared the head and shoulders of a grim-faced man—none other than the great detective! And while he clung to the wide sill with one hand, the other pointed a revolver straight at the soldier's heart.

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CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee's Leap into Space

NELSON LEE'S voice ringing through the room seemed to rob his hearers of all life and movement.

For perhaps two whole minutes they never stirred. Their gaze, focussed upon the dramatic figure in the casement, was held by the keen eyes and the strong, determined face. There was not a tremor in the hand that held the gleaming revolver.

"Stop that!" suddenly snapped Nelson Lee. "Take those hands away from your hips. Up with them!"

It switched attention to the erect figure of the soldier. Corporal Mayne's face was grey as ashes, and hard as granite. All its soft, pleasing lines, all the good looks, had vanished. There was an ugly, sinister appearance about it—characteristic of the criminal.

Maisie and her father could not repress a shiver. Yet their confidence and belief in the man reassorted themselves.

"Mr. Lee," stammered Sir Samuel, "I—I don't understand. What is the meaning——"

"It means that the man before you is as heartless a scoundrel as was ever in gaol," the detective interrupted, hauling himself to the sill. "He it is who has been robbing you for some time past—who attacked you and stole your bonds last night."

"It's a lie!" shouted the soldier. "How dare you! I'll make you eat those foul words. You can't prove it."

"Ay—ay, you must bring me proofs, Mr. Lee, before I can believe a word of this—er—surprising accusation," declared the old man quaveringly. "There must be some mistake."

Nelson Lee stepped into the room. There was a slight diversion. Maisie gave a little frightened shriek as Nipper darted across the floor. The soldier had half turned and swiftly dropped one hand.

As Nipper divined, he had a revolver in a hip-pocket. The boy's fingers closed round the other's wrist. A sharp turn and a twist—a little ju-jitsu trick—and the fellow gave a squeal of pain. A small Colt repeater dropped to the floor.

"Well done, my boy!" smiled Nelson Lee. "Pick it up, and use it if he attempts another movement, though we don't want to alarm Sir Samuel more than necessary in his present condition."

"Curse you, for a meddling fool!" bellowed the soldier. "I'll make you pay for this. I'll make you prove your words——"

His voice died away to a whisper. The detective had withdrawn a packet of papers from an inner pocket. He tossed them on to the bed before the patient.

"Have a look through them, Sir Samuel," he said. "If they're not your property, or there are any missing, I'm willing to withdraw my words. Still, you should know that I found them in that fellow's room at the George, Croyley."

There was a nervous rustle of paper as the old man's trembling fingers went through them. He gave a little gasp of delight.

"They're mine, and—and they're all here," he quavered. "It seems incredible that I've got them back so quickly. I—I can't believe the corporal guilty. Are you sure? Perhaps, after all——"

Maisie sprang to her feet. Her pretty cheeks were lily white. She had controlled her emotion only by a great effort.

"It's not true," she cried, with twitching lips. "There's been some terrible blunder. Charley and I love one another. I'll never believe he would stoop to such a mean crime as to rob father."

She turned to the khaki figure with outstretched arms.

"Charley—Charley," she cried beseechingly, "tell me it's all false, and I'll cling to you through everything. Your word——"

The soldier dared not raise his eyes to the girl's pale, agonised features. She had come between him and the revolver in the detective's rock-like hand. Nipper was at the bedside by Sir Samuel. The rogue glanced swiftly about him.

"Nipper," cried Nelson Lee, "the door—quick!"

The detective had seen a way of escape as quickly as the soldier. Nipper wheeled swiftly round. He was too late. As he leapt forward, the man in khaki seized the girl by the arms and hurled her savagely at the boy.

Both reeled backward to the bed. Next moment the room resounded with a noisy "bang," as the door was flung to and the ping of a pistol-shot.

The rogue had disappeared. The detective's bullet was buried in the closed door. Whilst the smoke still issued from the revolver, Nipper and his master threw themselves at the panels.

Again they were an instant too late. The fellow had twisted the key

on the outside. It was a new door. It had been put up scarcely more than a couple of hours before, and had replaced the one Nipper had broken open in the early morning in his effort to reach Sir Samuel. Consequently, though they threw themselves against it, they made no impression upon it.

Nelson Lee turned to the casement window.

"Follow me as best you can, Nipper," he snapped. "Wing him if you see him."

"He sha'n't get away," declared Sir Samuel. "He must be a rogue, after all. See to the poor child, doctor, while I put the servants on their guard."

Dr. Watts bent over Maisie. She had collapsed in a fainting heap on the floor. While the old squire took up the speaking-tube attached to the side of his bed, and urged Benson to rouse out the wounded soldiers and the menservants, and so prevent Corporal Mayne's escape, his dilated eyes were fixed on the detective and his assistant.

Nelson Lee disappeared through the window as quickly as he had come. Nipper was soon after him. He gasped with amazement as he saw the detective disentangle a rope from amidst the ivy, preparatory to sliding down it.

It was fastened to a stout ring staple that had been driven into the wall. Its length dangled to the ground. It had been hidden behind the ivy that covered this side of the building.

"Been up for weeks," jerked Nelson Lee. "Shows the rogue's craft and deliberation. I'll take the right. Rush round to the garage and get out your bike."

Nipper slithered to the ground. Taking the direction indicated, he raced round to the front of the house. Benson, the old butler, had just received his master's message.

"He hasn't come downstairs, anyway," he cried excitedly. "I've been in the hall all the time. Timms is watching now while I tell the gardener and the Tommies."

Nipper ran round with him to the gardens at the rear, where the wounded heroes from the battlefield were basking in the sunshine. They were chatting and smoking in pleasant contentment as they strolled about or lolled in hammock chairs. They had seen nothing of the corporal, they told the butler.

Nipper ran his cycle from the garage. Continuing his circle, he met Nelson Lee in the drive. The detective's efforts had been as fruitless as his own.

"He's still in the house, guv'nor," said Nipper. "We're bound to catch him. Here's the Tommies coming. Can't we make a cordon?"

The first of the soldiers hurrying along in their direction overheard the words.

"That we will, an' all," he asserted. "Benson's just told us. The dog, to rob that dear old chap what's treated him and us so well! Come on, boys! Any ol' thing'll do to knock the senses out of the rotter!"

Nelson Lee smiled as they seized pitchforks and rakes and brooms, and "shouldered arms," looking to the sergeant amongst them instinctively for orders as they lined up in double file.

They made a pathetic group with their empty sleeves and pale faces. More than one could only move at a hobble with the aid of a stick.

"Well done!" said Nelson Lee. "You can take my word for it that Corporal Mayne is a rogue and an impostor. He's only one black sheep amongst hundreds of thousands of brave British soldiers, but we're going to stop his capers."

"Hear, hear!" chorused the 'Tommies.

"Shun!" called the sergeant, limping back a pace, and cursing the German shrapnel that had taken all the movement from his hip. "Number off! Left turn! Quick march!"

Nelson Lee did not wait to see them form an extended cordon round the lovely old house. He darted within doors, bidding Nipper wait for him with his cycle at the steps.

Inquiry amongst the servants made it clear that nothing had been seen of Corporal Mayne on the lower floor. The detective hastened upstairs. On the second floor, where was Sir Samuel's bedroom, there was not a single locked door. Into every room went the detective, whilst Benson kept watch upon the stairs. Nelson Lee peered under beds and into cupboards in vain.

"There's only the top floor now, sir," explained the old butler. "It's where me and the other servants sleep. If he's there, you're bound to collar him, sir."

With his revolver in a handy pocket, the detective led the way upstairs. The result was the same. In none of the six rooms was there a sign of the rogue. None of the doors were locked. His search in cupboards and under beds being unavailing, the detective thrust a curtain-pole up the fireplace chimneys.

Nelson Lee passed into a small lumber room, used, to judge by the oddments in it, as a store-room for furniture needing repairs. Here at last he found a clue.

There were footprints in the thick dust that covered the floor. They led to the window. The top sash was lowered several inches.

"Those prints?" snapped the detective. "Can you account for them?"

The butler rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Can't say as I can, sir," he said slowly. "They ain't my size in boots, and they ain't Timms. Leastways——"

He broke off with a jerk. Nelson Lee had thrust up the window. With a sudden quickness of movement, he began to crawl through the space to the narrow ledge. There was scarcely enough room to admit his stalwart figure.

"For Heaven's sake be careful, sir!" he stammered; and then his voice rose in a squeal of amazed alarm.

Nelson Lee stood erect on the sill for an instant. Taking a deep breath, like a high diver before the plunge, next moment he hurled himself feet forward into space.

Old Benson clutched at the woodwork. His heart ceased to beat as he watched. The window overlooked the rear of the grounds. Far below—sixty feet at least—was the roof of the garage. Between it and the house were the spreading branches of a huge old chestnut tree. Just now it was thick with foliage.

"Crash!"

With a thud that seemed to split the old butler's ear-drums, Nelson Lee alighted and disappeared amidst the mass of dark green leaves as if he had fallen into a tossing, rustling sea. For a moment the old man lost sight of him. The detective reappeared again, the black shape of his figure like a snake, as he rolled and twisted and clutched for a hold on a stout bough. There was violent jerk and a snap. A branch broke off and made a rustling course through the leaves.

"Thank Heaven," gasped old Benson, "he's safe!"

With only one hand, for a terribly perilous second, Nelson Lee hung amidst space, forty feet from the ground. He dangled there, swinging to

and fro like a pendulum, then his figure straightened quickly. A sample then was given him of the detective's immense strength.

With the coolness and deliberation of a gymnast, he pulled himself up with one arm till his chin was above the bough. A grip with the free hand, and a swing of the leg, brought him astride the stout branch, and finally, as nonchalantly as you please, he drew out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"Bless you," cried the old butler. "Whatever made you do it?"

Nelson Lee thrust the handkerchief away, and began to crawl rapidly along the bough towards the trunk.

"The garage—quick!" he cried. "Can't you see? Below me now! Call to the 'Tommies to stop him."

Only then did the old manservant realise the reason for the detective's thrilling leap. It was through the window of the lumber-room that the rascally soldier had escaped. He, too, had leapt into the massed leaves of the chestnut tree.

Benson saw him now. Corporal Mayne was in the act of dropping from the lowest bough to the roof of the garage. At the top of his voice the old butler shouted:

"Stop him! There he is! On the garage! Stop him!"

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CHAPTER VII.

A Stern Chase and a Surprising Climax

THE next few seconds were crowded with incidents. The garage was outside the cordon formed by the wounded 'Tommies and the men-servants, yet, as the butler's voice rang out, those nearest turned in the direction indicated.

"By George, it's Corporal Mayne!" gasped a Tommy, hurrying forward and holding the long hay-fork as he would a bayonet. "Now we've got him, boys!"

"Look, there's another of 'em!" cried the under-gardener.

He pointed to the tree. The detective was scrambling down it with the speed and recklessness of a squirrel.

"It's Nelson Lee!" shouted Timms. "Good on you, so'jer!" he added. "Hold him!"

The footman cut round to where the garage path ran into the drive. The bogus corporal had leapt on top of a Tommy whose left arm was in splints. Both fell heavily to the ground.

As the rogue got erect, another Tommy swiped at him with a birch-broom, catching him on the neck, and sending him with great force against the wall.

The Tommy stepped forward to follow up his advantage. He could only do so with a limp, however, and before he got within striking distance the scoundrel leapt between two advancing patients and scooted along the drive to the front of the house.

He made direct for Dr. Watts's two-seater motor-car, which was standing at the end of the house, its engine softly purring. Into this he leapt, just as Nelson Lee alighted on the roof-top of the garage and continued the pursuit. At this moment Nipper, guessing the cause of the commotion, rested his cycle against the broad steps and ran in the direction of the noise.

But the luck of the Evil One was with the corporal. The car was in

motion before the boy could get in its way. The rogue's own repeater was still in Nipper's possession. He whipped it out to threaten the fellow.

"Pull up!" he cried. "I've got you covered!"

He could have sent a bullet through the rogue's breast, but he hesitated at taking such a terrible responsibility. In his hesitation he was lost. He was compelled to leap back to avoid being run down.

The two-seater swept past him. In the matter of moments, it had whizzed through the gates into the lane.

Nipper was standing, forlorn and crestfallen, beside his cycle when Nelson Lee, breathing hard, reached him.

"Follow him!" said the detective briefly. "I'll overtake you in the car."

Nipper was in the saddle in a twinkling. It gave him a chance to retrieve his mistake. He pushed off vigorously, and lowered his nose to the handle-bars. When he turned into the lane, the cloud of dust a hundred yards in front indicated his quarry's whereabouts.

Faster and faster whizzed the pedals. Nipper simply flew over the white, firm road. Round by Barley Lane, into the main road, shot the motor-car. Reaching there it slowed down, and on coming to the cross-roads pulled up.

Nipper was now less than twenty yards behind. As he raised his head, he saw the white, hunted features of Corporal Mayne staring at him. The rogue snorted in rage and amazement. He had never dreamed that he was being followed.

Nipper was alongside him before he could get the two-seater into rapid motion again.

"It's no good!" puffed the boy. "You'll have to give in! The gov'nor's after you!"

He reached out a hand and seized the upholstered seat-back. It was a daring thing to do. Perhaps Nipper thought the scoundrel would be compelled to stop the car in this way. Perhaps he had some notion of hanging on, and thus keeping in close touch with the thief. Anyway, it maddened the rogue. He made several wild blows at Nipper's head, all of which the boy dexterously dodged.

They turned into the Beesdale Road, leading to the big junction at Cross Heath by a thoroughfare that was parallel with the railway.

"Get away, you young fool!" hissed the rascal. "I'll brain you if you don't!"

He stood erect, the better to aim a blow at his persistent pursuer. But he could not reach Nipper without relinquishing his hold on the steering-wheel, and he sank back on the seat, cursing like a bargee.

Nipper chuckled in glee. The other's impotent rage amused him. He had only to cling on, and the fellow was bound sooner or later to give in.

There was another reason. A motor-car was in pursuit of them. There could be no doubt it was Sir Samuel's fast Rolls-Royce, with Nelson Lee at the wheel. Nipper dared not look round, but the pounding of the pistons and the whir of the wheels, in ever-increasing crescendo, was proof positive that they were being overtaken.

"It's the gov'nor!" he cried, half-tauntingly, as the rogue looked apprehensively round. "He's on your track!"

It was boy-like, but indiscreet. The motorist gave the wheel a turn. He was determined to be rid of the youthful limpet at any cost. They rushed toward a bridge where, in a deep cutting below, gleamed a series of railway lines.

It was just an ordinary brick-wall railway-bridge, such as are to be seen

in country roads. At each end was a solid mass of masonry, the supports of the span.

Corporal Mayne drove the car straight for these. It seemed any odds in those terrible moments that the whole car would hurl itself with tremendous force against the solid stonework. Instinctively Nipper released his grip on the upholstery. He owed his life to his presence of mind.

Just in time the rogue swung the two-seater round. There was a harsh, grinding noise as the front mudguard was smashed against the bricks. Next second the car shot the crown of the bridge, and whizzed safely down the sloping road.

But Nipper was not so fortunate. Carried along by his own impetus, though his feet still gripped the pedals as he free-wheeled, he was almost afraid to put the brakes on, and before he knew what was happening, his front wheel collided with terrific force against the masonry. Out of the saddle he shot like a stone from a catapult, to fall flat on his back with a thud that jarred every nerve in his body and completely dazed his senses.

He was still on his back, limp and helpless, when, with the grinding of brakes, a motor-car pulled up alongside him. He was sufficiently conscious to realise that he was picked up hurriedly and laid carefully down on a cushioned seat; then he went right off.

When he came to, a figure in khaki was bending over him, and a bronzed face peered into his own. Nipper instantly began to struggle. Something burning was upon his lips. He kicked out, his foot meeting something hard; then his ear was caught as if by the jaws of a vice.

"Stop it, you young fool!" cried a voice that was certainly not Corporal Mayne's. "Say, Nelson Lee, your urchin's like a greased eel! The young beggar's nearly winded me, and he's upset your spirit-flask."

There came a laugh—unmistakably his master's. It reassured Nipper, and brought back all his wits.

"Never mind about that," said the detective, "as long as the young rascal is all right."

"When you've done with my ear, sergeant," cried Nipper, "I'd like it as a sort of ornament to the left flank of my counting-house! Say, guard, am I right for Risedale?"

The boy's imperturbable good-humour was infectious. They had seen him clinging desperately to the rogue's motor-car, and they had shuddered when he had been hurled against the stone parapet. Nelson Lee had audibly groaned when he had bent over the unconscious boy, thinking that at least some bones were broken; yet here he was, grinning and audacious as usual.

"You'll be right for Colney Hatch after the way you threw yourself about on that jigger of yours!" grinned Sergeant Appleby.

In the car beside the wounded soldier and the detective was burly Timms, the footman.

"There he is, sir!" cried Timms suddenly. "He's taken the forked road! That's how we missed him. Over the level-crossing, sir! Sharp, before the gates close! There's an express coming!"

It riveted Nipper's attention to the chase. Nelson Lee swung the car round sharply through the gates. As they rushed across the gleaming metals, there in a series of two up and down lines, they could see the locomotive of the express rushing through Croxley, half a mile distant. Round into the road they swung again. An instant later the "clang" from behind told them that the gates had been automatically locked.

And then Nipper realised what the footman had seen, and what was Nelson Lee's object in racing the car at such terrific speed.

Before them, scurrying towards them, was Corporal Mayne in the stolen two-seater.

They had missed him in the forked roads outside Croyley. The rogue had circled the market town, and was doubling back on his track, congratulating himself on his cleverness at eluding them, when the detective's car leapt into the road before him.

The road was narrow. There was room, perhaps, for the two vehicles to pass if they slowed down and took care of each other's paint, but it was sheer madness to attempt to pass each other at the rate both were travelling.

Such an intention, however, was far from the detective's object.

"Hold tight!" he cried.

Shutting off the power and applying the brakes, he brought the Rolls-Royce to a standstill in its own length. At the same time, he swung the car half round, so that it almost blocked the road.

Nipper's head was spinning, and his back was sore and bruised, so that every movement brought a twinge of pain; but he leapt into the road after the others.

What would the scoundrel do? Would he pull up and surrender? There was no time to turn round. To dash at top speed into the Rolls-Royce was the maddest of suicides.

A shrieking whistle, no less than the cloud of steam and breath of flame from the locomotive, was a warning of the rushing express in the cutting parallel with the road.

Nipper's eyes passed from the gleaming track and the flying express to the white road. He shouted with horror.

Corporal Mayne was standing up in the two-seater, his face fiendish in its expression, his clenched fists held high. He was momentarily mad. He realised his doom.

And in that moment of obsession, with no control on the steering-gear, the motor-car cut a sharp tangent to the left, plunged through the fence of old, discarded sleepers, and disappeared down the steep embankment.

The sight paralysed the onlookers. Only Nelson Lee rushed to the fence, and saw the two-seater crash on the rails. It turned completely upside down just a moment before the locomotive flew into the ruins.

The rending and crushing of woodwork, the shriek of the escaping steam, the deafening grind of the powerful brakes, seemed to be mingled into one terrifying noise. For two seconds it lasted, then fell a silence by comparison that was tense and profound. It was broken in turn by the alarmed cries of the passengers.

"Is—is he killed, guv'nor?"

Nipper asked the question in a whisper as he reached his master's side and gazed down at the track. The express had stopped. Nothing was to be seen of the two-seater save a few scattered bits of twisted steel and fragments of upholstery scattered about the embankment.

"Nothing can have saved him, my boy," murmured the detective. "He has paid the penalty of his crimes with a terrible death!"

He, Nipper, and the others passed down the embankment through the gap made by the two-seater. The engine-driver, the two guards, and a few men passengers were gathered round some of the debris. They looked up with awed, white faces at Nelson Lee.

"We were pursuing the occupant of that car," explained the detective.

"He was wanted for a particularly heartless robbery."

"Oh, so you're a detective!" exclaimed a passenger, glancing at the keen features. "You'll be disappointed in a capture this time, sir. No man could live through that terrible collision."

"I didn't see anybody in the motor!" stammered the engine-driver.

"You'll bear witness as it wasn't my fault, sir? It ain't likely as I'd see much, though—it was all over so quick!"

Nelson Lee gave a few instructions to Nipper. With Timms as companion, the boy hastened round to the other side of the track.

"He was a well-built, good-looking man in khaki," said Nelson Lee, "and went under the name of Corporal Mayne."

He looked searchingly about him and came back.

"There's no need to delay the express, driver," he went on. "Report the matter in the usual way. We'll attend to the remains."

Many of the passengers had streamed on to the line by now. All took their seats. The train steamed on its way. With the track to themselves, Nelson Lee and Sergeant Appleby joined Nipper and Timms.

"Nothing doing!" the boy reported. "Heaps of splintered wood and busted wheels—that's all! Not a sign of the corporal anywhere!"

"Here's his cap, anyway!" remarked Sergeant Appleby, picking up that article out of a clump of furze. "My word, anyone'd think he'd been tossed into nothing with a high-explosive shell!"

Nelson Lee was puzzled. He strode along the track, peering to right and left. Ten minutes passed in this way. There were only the ruins of the car.

"He might have got away if he'd been thrown clear of the express," he reflected. "Still, he must have been seriously injured by the fall. It's impossible to conceive he had friends aboard the train. He must be lying seriously wounded somewhere."

But the four of them searched for an hour without result. They returned at last to Sir Samuel's home to recount the thrilling story.

Dr. Watts heard with dismay of the wreck of his car until Sir Samuel promised to replace it. In their absence, the old baronet had insisted on getting up. The recovery of the stolen bearer bonds had acted upon him with better results than the physician's tonic.

They were all—Nelson Lee, Nipper, Dr. Watts, and Maisie, the latter very white, with dark rings under her big, tender eyes—in the old gentleman's study.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned," Sir Samuel exclaimed, "I'm done with him. If he's escaped with his life, he's had a severe lesson. You see, Mr. Lee, with my lass interested in him, it's best to let the matter drop."

A painful silence fell on the room. It was broken by the girl. She spoke with an effort. Two red spots appeared in her round cheeks.

"I—I must admit I was deceived—like all the rest," she said hesitatingly. "You're quite sure, Mr. Lee, there was no mistake?"

"Listen!" said the detective quietly. "I will tell how and why I suspected him, and how I ran him to earth in the George at Croxley."

In his brief, explicit way, Nelson Lee began his story. He explained how he doubted Corporal Mayne's origin by his lack of Canadian accent, by his knowledge of billiards, by a dozen other incidents, trifling in themselves. On the evening of the robbery he had discovered the rope hidden beneath the ivy immediately below Sir Samuel's window. Consequently, when he was roused by the old man's cry for help and had found his door locked, he guessed the way by which the burglar would attempt his escape.

Climbing from his window, determined to stop him, he had got to the ground by clinging to the stout ivy stem. The rogue had disappeared amongst the elms lining the drive. There he had a horse hidden, and had galloped off before the detective could intercept him. There was nothing to do but to attempt to overtake him on the cycle.

"Ay, I know that part," interposed the doctor, with a rueful smile. "In fact, I shall never forget it!"

Nelson Lee went on to relate how he had lost his quarry in the dyke. Reaching Croxley, he began his investigations ere it was daylight. From Garrod's livery stables in the town a horse had been hired overnight and not returned. It trotted in an hour after sunrise in an exhausted state, foaming its muzzle, its coat in a wretched condition through dust and sweat.

"A man in a civilian attire had hired the horse," he continued, "but there was no doubt about his being Mayne. His description tallied with that of the rogue. I called to see the corporal, but was told he had gone to bed early, and was not yet awake. I won't weary you with all the details," he proceeded. "Suffice it to say that, by the time I returned to the George for breakfast, I was absolutely convinced that Mayne was the thief, and that he was still in possession of the bonds."

"The rest you know. To disarm the rogue's suspicions, I left a note with him for delivery to Nipper. When he left the George, I found, as I suspected I should, the bonds hidden away in his room."

It was a modest story. Nelson Lee had made light of his difficulties, had discussed his perils as if they were jokes, but for all that his listeners had sat spellbound.

"It's a wonderful performance!" began Sir Samuel. "I've been the victim of a brilliantly clever rogue, and had you not been on the spot——"

There came a tap on the door. Benson, the butler, looking very grave, appeared.

"Corporal Mayne to see you, sir!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER VIII.

Flash Harry Turns the Tables

IF a thunderbolt had fallen into the room, it could not have created a greater sensation.

Ill as he was, old Sir Samuel sprang from his chair.

"The man has no limit to his audacity!" he snorted. "How dare he come here? He shall pay for his rashness! Send for the police, Benson!"

Nelson Lee stopped the old butler.

"Perhaps you'd better see him first, Sir Samuel," he suggested. "I've a notion you will be surprised."

"He will be surprised, too," declared the old baronet. "He'll leave this house only under police escort!"

They waited in a tense silence. Presently the old butler returned.

Behind him stepped a man in khaki—not an erect, stalwart fellow like the Corporal Mayne they had known, but a bent, white-cheeked young fellow, whose forehead was swathed in a linen bandage, and who trod the floor with uncertain step and the aid of a walking-stick.

"What does this mean? You're not Corporal Mayne!"

Old Sir Samuel tried to speak sternly, but it was impossible in the face of this pathetic figure. The new-comer raised his deep-set, earnest eyes.

"I'm nobody else, sir," he answered quietly. "I guess you're Sir Samuel Mortimer, the gentleman I was given a note of introduction to. I can't produce it. I lost it and the little bronze Cross the King gave me on the train journey from London."

"But—but the other Corporal Mayne had my note!" stammered Sir Samuel, puzzled. "And the Victoria Cross and the papers!"

The soldier broken in the wars drew himself sharply upright, and his dull eyes flashed fiercely.

"They were my property!" he cried, with emphasis. "He was an impostor—a thief! He waylaid me in the train on my way here. I was wounded, helpless—no match for him. And after he'd robbed me, he pitched me on to the metals!"

There was an indrawing of breath from all. Every word rang with truth. The old man turned to Nelson Lee.

"Dare I believe him?" he asked.

"I don't ask for charity!" cried the Canadian. "I haven't come here to cadge! I heard only to-day that a Corporal Mayne had been living here, had been using my name, and I came to show him up. If you doubt my word, send for old Joe Strudwick, who found me on the line and carried me to his home. I owe life—everything to him! My own father could not have done more for me!"

Sir Samuel was out of his chair before he had finished. His hand gripped the soldier's.

"Strudwick, the old ploughman!" he exclaimed. "I know him well for an honest old soul. I'll believe all he says. Fetch him in here, Nipper!"

Nelson Lee's assistant returned with a quaint-looking old man. His wizened face was framed with snow-white hair and a flowing beard. He was strongly built though bowed, and as he stepped in, twisting his cap nervously in his gnarled fingers, his little eyes twinkled with shrewd geniality.

Maisie placed a chair for the wounded Tommy, but though he smiled kindly at the pretty girl, Corporal Mayne refused to sit.

"I be listening, Sir Samivel," declared old Joe Strudwick. "'Twas all gospel as t' corporal said. Ay, he's a reet brave 'un, Sir Samivel! A hero he be—bless 'un! I was takin' short-cut home along the line that night when I found 'un lying bleedin' an' unconscious. But, dearie me, he wouldn't let me carry tidings to nobody. 'I'll find that scallywag my own self, I guess,' were what he kept sayin'."

"It's enough!" cried Sir Samuel, wringing the soldier's hand again. "I can see it all now! I've been duped by the scoundrel! Forgive me, lad! You have been treated badly. We've both a grudge against him. We'll run him to earth, and Nelson Lee will help us."

"You can have my hand on that!" said the detective.

They talked for some time. Sir Samuel insisted on Corporal Mayne being his guest. Though old Joe Strudwick had done all in his power for the wounded Tommy, there were few appliances for regaining health in his tiny, thatched cottage.

Old Joe himself urged the Canadian to accept the invitation.

"Thanks!" said the corporal. "I'll stay!"

"Well done, Mr. Mayne!" cried Sir Samuel. "We'll try to make up to you for the injuries you've received at this scoundrel's hands. There's no doubt he deliberately impersonated you."

"No doubt at all!" echoed Maisie, with white lips. "I can scarcely believe a man could be so vile! I hate him!"

Nelson Lee rose from his chair.

"And now," he said, "it's time we got moving again! Since Corporal Mayne has come forward, it has done much to simplify the mystery. I should like to make a tour of the places where our Canadian friend encountered the scoundrel."

"We'll have the big motor out!" declared the old baronet, and gave the order to Benson.

A few minutes later, with Nipper beside the chauffeur, Nelson Lee and the three men drove out into the high-road. At the detective's request, Corporal Mayne went again over the details of his life since leaving London. The visit to Ghosties Dyke brought a smile to the grave, strong face.

"I nearly had him there," he remarked—"should have had him, in fact, had it not been for my unfortunate meeting with little Dr. Watts. I reached the dyke, but from where I was I could find no path. To tell the truth, I thought the fellow had plunged over the brink to his death. It wasn't till afterwards that I learned he had returned safely to the George Hotel."

"Ho knew the dyke quite well," said Sir Samuel, "now I come to think of it. He was as well acquainted with its history as I am, which is surprising, seeing that he posed as a Canadian. He took a party of wounded Tommies down to the caverns only a few days ago! I wonder how it came about that Corporal Mayne found him on the plateau? Apparently his horse escaped."

"I've good reasons for believing that the horse shied on the very brink of the dyke," returned Nelson Lee, "and in that way threw his rider. By a merciful chance the rogue fell on the plateau instead of to the boulder-strewn bottom."

They drove first of all to the main-line track, where old Joe had found Corporal Mayne lying senseless upon the metals.

Nelson Lee's pencil and notebook became busy. The detective roughly sketched the scene. From the corporal himself he elicited the information that the express had left the London terminus at half-past two. Lee consulted a pocket time-table.

"The train was due at Risedale at five-ten," he said, looking up. "That means that the scoundrel pitched you out here at five-five as near as possible."

"And it be after nine afore I found 'un," exclaimed old Joe. "What a day! I shall no'er forget it. It was same day as my boy Jim were struck down."

"Ay, the fellow who shot him was as big a scoundrel as this rogue who impersonated me!" said Charley Mayne grimly.

"That's queer!" said the detective. "I should like to hear about that."

Old Joe Strudwick told the story of the canteen theft at Wortley Camp and of the shooting of his sergeant son.

"They traced him to t' track, too," the old man went on. "That was in t' afternoon, but they ain't set nary an eye on him since. 'Andsome chap, ho were, they say—'andsome as sin, an' as clever as t' Evil One. There were none to beat him at riding or boxin' or runnin' or any devilry, his mates told me."

"Phew!" ejaculated Sir Samuel, quick to see the analogy.

Nelson Lee was looking at the map of the main-line track.

"The nearest point from Wortley on the main line is Ambley Junction," he remarked casually.

Corporal Mayne drew in a quick breath.

"Ambley!" he exclaimed. "That's where the brute first made for me. I woke up all of a sudden. We flashed through a station as he came for me, and I just caught the name. By George, it's the same chap! Do you think, sir—"

Ho broke off suddenly. Nelson Lee led the way to the motor-car.

"It's cleared the air a bit," he remarked. "We'll soon find out whether the Private Harry Stone who shot Sergeant Strudwick is the same individual who impersonated Corporal Mayne at Risedale!"

Little more was said until they left the Rolls-Royce in the narrow by-lane that was nearest to old Joe's cottage, and tramped across the meadow. Reaching the dyke-top, from which the rogue had escaped, Nelson Lee sketched the scene generally.

He indicated the spot—the steepest and most dangerous side of the dyke—

where he had been pulled up in his cycle pursuit of the thief. It was a hundred yards at least from the rough, narrow track leading down to the plateau whereon Charley Mayne had found the masked man.

Nipper stepped before his master.

"Looks like some private papers right down at the bottom, sir—below the lodge!" he remarked. "Shall I get 'em?"

His keen, observant eyes had noticed what the others had overlooked. In fact, their attention was concentrated on the plateau. Down below this, sharply outlined against the black, yawning depths of the caverns, were various papers strewn about. They looked like letters scattered in the wind. That they had been recently blown there was obvious by their clean appearance.

"Ye can't reach t' caverns here, boy," exclaimed old Joe. "Ye'll have to go round by the path nearly opposite—an' that's a good mile!"

Nipper took another peep down the sloping sides. It was a bad enough track to the plateau, but beyond that it went down in sheer perpendicular, the claystone as bare of grass and furze as a marble monument.

"I'll bet you I'll do it, anyway!" declared Nipper.

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" threatened his master sharply. "But you can go down on a rope if Mr. Strudwick has one handy."

"Ay, that I have!" declared the old ploughman, and hurried off to get it.

When he returned, Nelson Lee suggested that they should go down to the plateau from which Nipper would be lowered. Sir Samuel insisted on accompanying them.

"My chauffeur will look after the car," he smilingly observed. "I'm thoroughly interested in this case. I'm not going to be out of the fun!"

Nelson Lee tested the rope before he made a noose and slipped it under Nipper's armpits. The boy's laughter went re-echoing strangely across the dyke as he was lowered down, twisting round and round, like a joint on a roasting-jack.

"It's the other chap who'll get the roasting, though!" he grinned. "Lower away, guv'nor!"

With hands and feet he kept himself off the rugged side, and avoided many a nasty blow. The last yard of the rope was paid out before bottom was reached. It was then that Nipper's perilous part in the proceedings commenced. Like an ant, far down below there, he crawled about, now clutching at a tuft of weed, slipping and swinging, bruising hips and shoulders, as he struggled to reach almost inaccessible places.

The first paper he picked up and glanced at was Corporal Mayne's discharge from the base hospital in Flanders and the doctor's recommendation for convalescent treatment in England.

"Hurroo!" came the boy's voice up to them. "Cheer up, corporal! They're your papers right enough. You've begun to get some of your own back!"

"As I expected," remarked the detective. "They must have fallen from the impersonator's pocket when he pitched from his horse and rolled here."

Nipper was gathering the last of the papers within reach—an envelope. Nelson Lee and Charley Mayne had their hands to the rope now. For a moment Nipper twisted round as he examined its contents.

"Look!" cried the boy, and held some small metal thing out on the palm of his hand.

"My Cross!" came a hoarse murmur from the wounded Tommy. "It's what the King gave me."

It was indeed the Victoria Cross, and bore upon it Corporal Mayne's name as Nipper presently informed them.

"Right-ho, guv'nor!" the boy went on. "It's time I had a rise in the world! Heave-ho, my lads—heave-ho!"

Nelson Leo and the Tommy strained at the rope. Old Joe and Sir Samuel prepared to climb the rugged path to the top. Then suddenly Nipper's voice rang out again, this time without banter and with a note of alarm.

"Look out!" he yelled. "On top, there!"

They glanced up hurriedly. A dishevelled figure, in soiled, ragged khaki, was standing on the brink of the dyke immediately above them.

In his hands, held high above his head, was a heavy boulder as big round as Nipper's body. He was glaring down at them like a madman.

For a second they stared at him with fascinated gaze. Neither Leo nor Mayno dared to move lest Nipper should be sent, a whirling heap, to his death below.

"The impostor and thief!" gasped Sir Samuel.

"The skunk who attempted to kill me!" cried Corporal Mayne.

There came a raucous laugh from the man on the brink. The hand holding the boulder never wavered.

"Go on!" he sneered. "Any more? Names don't hurt me!"

"I know ye now!" screeched old Joe. "Ye shot my boy, Jim Strudwick, at Wortley!"

This time the erect form quivered.

"Ah, so you've learned about that, have you?" he jeered next second.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter! You'll be in Kingdom Come, all of you, within the next five minutes!"

As his presence now showed, Harry Stone—to give him the name he was known by—had escaped from the motor-car disaster on the railway with that extraordinary good-fortune that daring criminals always seem to possess.

At the moment the stolen car reached the metals, and a full half-minute before the express thudded into the ruins, the scoundrel had jumped clear of the ruins. He pitched in the middle of the up-track, and laid there for a minute or two completely stunned. By then the express had come to a standstill. A third-class carriage at the end of the train was, indeed, towering at the side of him.

He stood up and looked about him. Not a single face appeared at any window. The passengers were, in fact, staring out from the farther side of the compartments, watching Nelson Lee and Nipper descend the embankment.

With the quick wits that had saved him from prison scores of times, the rascal climbed within the empty compartment, and gently closed the door. Thus Nipper and the footman saw nothing of him a minute later when they made their examination of that side of the line, and thus Nelson Lee only guessed at the means whereby the roguo had disappeared.

At the first stop he had alighted, paid the excess fare with the excuse that he had lost his ticket and his cap whilst assisting in clearing the lines of the motor-car ruins, and had tramped at once into the country.

It was the discovery that he had only a few shillings in his pocket that had led him back to the dyke. The money he had previously borrowed from the manager of the George by means of a specious tale, for his pockets had been emptied of Corporal Mayne's stolen papers and property when he had fallen to the plateau.

To regain these, and begin again a further career of imposture on the strength of them, he had visited the scene of his thrilling rescue by the man he had attempted to kill.

"You're at my mercy!" he bawled down at them. "I've heaps of boulders here, and I can hurl every one of you to death! Say, Sir Samuel,"

he went on, "have you got your cheque-book with you? I know you're in the habit of carrying it about with you."

"Well?" asked the old baronet fiercely.

"Then just fill it up—an open cheque, mind you—for five thousand quid in my name," was the cool request, "and give me the use of your motor for half an hour to cash it, and I—I'll alter my mind about doing you all in."

Old Sir Samuel boiled over with rage.

"Not a penny, you blackmailing hound!" he thundered. "I'll see you hanged first!"

Nelson Lee was quietly hauling Nipper up. It was at this moment that the figure above observed his action. Nipper was almost within hand-grip of the top bank.

"Stop that, detective!" bawled Private Stone. "I owe you and your brat something!"

Nelson Lee never looked up. He bent down and gave a hand to his plucky young assistant. Nipper scrambled on his knees.

"Down! Down!" he yelled.

Sir Samuel flung himself on his chest amongst the furze. Old Joe Strudwick was slower in his movements. It was unfortunate. The scoundrel at the top hurled the boulder down at them. As it happened, it first of all struck a projecting cornice of earth, thus breaking the violence of its force, ere it cannoned off and struck the old ploughman in the ribs.

It brought him down instantly, and but for the detective's quickness would have carried him with it over the edge to the depths beyond.

Nipper scooted up the path like a rabbit. Nelson Lee and Sir Samuel, attending the old ploughman, who had been knocked senseless, failed to notice; but Corporal Mayne did, and he followed him as fast as he could race up the loose stones.

"That's one to go on with!" came a husky voice from above. "Here's another!"

Private Stone reappeared. Again his hands held aloft a heavy boulder. Nipper was almost at the top by now. Before he could carry his threat into effect, the boy darted up and hurled himself at the scoundrel.

The boulder fell harmlessly. The two crashed down on top of it, and then, like a pair of Kilkenny cats, they fought and kicked and struggled. Over and over they rolled, perilously near the brink, each pummelling the other.

"Hold him, Nipper!" puffed Corporal Mayne, gaining the top.

It nerved the rogue to a greater effort. Nipper's fingers were about his throat, choking the life out of him. Suddenly he brought up his knees violently. They caught the boy a terrific blow in the stomach. His hold released as he panted out a moan of pain, and then, as he fell back, badly winded, Private Stone sprang to his feet and bolted like the rat he was.

Corporal Mayne went in pursuit, but his wounds handicapped him. He was not able to overtake the rascal, and when Stone vaulted a high bramble hedge and disappeared in the lane, he gave it up and returned to the dyke-top.

Nipper had recovered by now. Looking very white and sick, he was helping Nelson Lee and Sir Samuel carry the old ploughman to the cottage.

"Gently! Carefully!" advised the detective. "That brute's smashed the poor old fellow's ribs. We'll have to get a doctor, Sir Samuel. In the meantime, we mustn't bother about the rogue. We must render first-aid to his victim."

"They laid the old ploughman carefully on the bed in the tiny front room.

"John shall go for Dr. Watts in the car," declared Sir Samuel.

Nelson Lee was gently peeling off the old ploughman's clothes as the

baronet hurried outside. The chauffeur, sitting on the box-seat of the Rolls-Royce, in the lane a hundred yards distant, turned his face to his master.

Sir Samuel beckoned to him.

"John! John," he cried, "I want you!"

The man sprang down. He ran through the gate towards his master who was hurrying to meet him with Nipper and Corporal Mayne beside him.

A figure darted out of the hedge, and glided silently along the lane towards the motor-car. Nipper was the first to observe and recognise the man.

"Behind you!" he shouted to the chauffeur. "Get back! Stop that fellow!"

The bewildered chauffeur pulled up. The man he had known as Corporal Mayne had reached the motor and was winding the starting-handle.

He wheeled round and reached the lane again. Nipper was speeding after him like a hundred yards' champion.

"Hi! Hi! Get out of that!" shouted the chauffeur.

Stone let out a coarse oath and a laugh.

"Done you again!" he gloated. "Tell Nelson Lee to chuck up his job! He's no match for Flash Harry of the Hawks!"

With brazen impudence, he set the car moving at a slow speed till Nipper, outdistancing the chauffeur, was within a few yards of him; then he began to open the throttle.

"Come on!" he jeered. "Don't give in, brat! I've got a bone to pick with you over that last chase! You won't come off trumps this time!"

Nipper gave up the pursuit. The motor-car disappeared round a bend in the lane. Within half an hour he and Sir Samuel were at Risedale Police-station, giving particulars of the stolen car, and the telephones were buzzing the description in all directions. By then Dr. Watts was attending old Joe Strudwick, pending his removal to a cottage hospital with fractured ribs.

When darkness fell, an officer came to the Oaks to report that all efforts to recapture the thief had been unavailing.

"Very well!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "He wants me to chuck up my job as private detective. I will, too, unless I bring him to justice within forty-eight hours from now!"

Nipper grinned and rubbed his hands.

"Now you're in for it, Flash Harry of the Hawks—or whatever you call yourself!" he said.

CHAPTER IX.

The Recovery of the Rolls-Royce

NELSON LEE hung up the receiver and turned to Sir Samuel with a smile.

"News of your car at last," he said. "Major Hicks has telephoned the police at Risedale that he saw a Rolls-Royce answering to the description of yours pull up last night at the King's Arms, Ambley."

It was the following morning. The detective had made ceaseless inquiries in all directions, up to that moment without success. No tidings could be gained of either the stolen motor-car or of the notorious Flash Harry.

"Major Hicks," repeated Sir Samuel, with a puzzled expression. "I've never heard of him before."

"Oh, you must have done, daddie," exclaimed Maisie. "He's one of the officers home wounded from the Dardanelles, who is to take part in the

great recruiting rally at Croxley to-morrow. Benson was telling us about it at breakfast-time this morning."

"Well, well, it's very good of him to give information about my car," said her father. "No doubt he's heard of the theft from the police. It's very decent of him, I'm sure."

"Very decent of him, indeed," remarked Nelson Lee. "At the same time, he may have been mistaken. There are probably more cars of the Rolls-Royce kind on the road than any other. Nipper and I are going to investigate, anyway. It may lead up to something."

"I'd come with you, Mr. Lee," said the kindly old man, "only I've promised to receive a deputation here about the great rally to-morrow. They want me to go there with the wounded Tommies staying here. Ambley is only a few miles distant. Take the small two-seater and run over there."

In little more than half an hour, with Corporal Mayne accompanying them, the detective and his assistant pulled up at the King's Arms.

The proprietor, an alert-eyed business man, came to them in the billiard-room. Nelson Lee had sent in his card.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lee," he said genially, shaking the detective's hand. "I can't guess why you've given me a call, though. Don't tell me, for goodness' sake, that I've been harbouring some dangerous criminal in my hotel for week's past."

His laugh was joined in by the others.

"Oh, nothing alarming in any way," smiled Nelson Lee. "I want to know if any of your guests are owners of Rolls-Royce cars, that's all."

"Not that I'm aware of," said the proprietor, knitting his brows. "At present—"

"You've got one in the garage," observed Nipper. "I saw it as we came by."

"Ah, yes, so we have," agreed the stout, keen-faced man. "It only came in yesterday, and I'd almost forgotten it. I shouldn't have, though, seeing that it made me fifty pounds the poorer."

"How was that?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Oh, some officer chap, who was driving it, had an accident, a spill of some kind, that put it out of order," was the answer. "He was in a dreadful way, poor chap; pitched him out, don't you see, and shook him up rather badly. He was due at Wortley with a War Office dispatch. Being very late, it was impossible to get a train, and we hadn't a single car in the garage. I lent him fifty pounds, after all, on the car as a guarantee to enable him to hire a car from Smith's, in the High Street, and continue his journey."

He led the way through to the garage. Nipper had not been alone in observing the Rolls-Royce as they pulled up at the door. Nelson Lee had seen it, and his quick, keen eyes had also observed the dent in the offside front lamp—remnants of a past collision—which characterised Sir Samuel's car amongst others.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Baxter, you've had the worst of the bargain," remarked the detective as they stood alongside the Rolls-Royce, unmistakably the stolen car. "This is Sir Samuel Mortimer's property. The thief to whom you gave the fifty pounds was the notorious crook, Flash Harry, the swell mobman."

He gave particulars of the theft to the astounded hotel-keeper, and finished with a description of the rogue.

"It's lifelike—undoubtedly the man who swindled me," Mr. Baxter admitted. "Oh, but he's a cunning rascal. He took me completely in. I

daresay he's done them down at Smith's garage as well. I'll 'phone them at once."

They followed him back into the hotel. He was soon in connection with the High Street garage. As Nelson Lee expected, the motor people knew of the theft, for the police had supplied them with particulars of the missing car, but the thief had never called at their premises.

"Apparently he was quite content to clear off with the fifty pounds," observed the detective. "I'll tell Sir Samuel to come along and claim his property. By the way, was Major Hicks staying here recently?"

Mr. Baxter shook his head.

"I don't know him personally," he declared, "but, being so near to the training camps at Wortley and Croxley, we have many officers calling here. Dear, dear, I feel very small at the way that swindler robbed me. Do you think you're likely to collar him?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders before he stooped over the Rolls-Royce. They had returned to the garage. He had lifted the lid of the bonnet.

"Look here," he said, "this will convince you if nothing else has. The rogue had no accident with the car. He deliberately put it out of order to spring his specious tale on you and get your money. He's been aiming blows at the delicate mechanism with a heavy spanner."

"And done far more than fifty pounds' worth of damage, the destructive brute," added the hotel-keeper.

Nelson Lee elicited that the money had been paid in gold and one-pound notes. The numbers of the latter Mr. Baxter had not troubled to record. After that they took their departure.

"That money will take him to London, Liverpool, even abroad," remarked Corporal Mayne, when they were back in the two-seater. "It looks as if he's slipped through your fingers altogether, Mr. Lee. You wouldn't have known even of the car but for the kindly act of Major Hicks."

"That's a fact," agreed the detective, and became silent and thoughtful.

Even Nipper was glum. The case was a complete fiasco. It seemed as if Flash Harry was too clever for them every time. And now it was hopeless to expect to get on his track.

"And the gov'nor's threatened to chuck up the sponge unless he collars him before to-morrow night."

In silence they turned into the drive before the Oaks. Nelson Lee had told them somewhat gloomily it was no use making inquiries elsewhere. It would only be a wild-goose chase.

An elegant motor-car, with the driver in a khaki uniform, was before the wide steps. Maisie, recovered from her shock, and radiant once more, hurried to meet them.

"The officers from Croxley are with daddy," she exclaimed. "This is Major Hicks's car. Poor fellow, he's been badly wounded, practically lost the use of his right arm. Oh, here they come."

A group of officers, five in all, came out of the house. In their midst, hobbling side by side, were Sir Samuel and an officer in a major's uniform. They made a couple of pathetic figures, Sir Samuel leaning heavily on his stick, the officer, his right arm in a sling, his left gripping a crutch with which he swung himself painfully along.

"This is most fortunate," cried Sir Samuel brightly. "Here is Nelson Lee and Corporal Mayne, the very men we've been talking about. Corporal, these gentlemen have come purposely to ask you to make a speech at the rally to-morrow."

Corporal Mayne swung his hand smartly to the salute and the officer gravely nodded.

"We shall be delighted to have the brave young Canadian, whom the

King so deservedly honoured, amongst us," said Major Hicks, in a stiff, commanding voice.

The corporal looked into the other's face. He was very pale and ill-looking. Tinted glasses covered his eyes from the strong sunlight. The short, brush-like moustache served to accentuate the strong mouth and chin.

"I'm no good at speaking, sir," replied the young hero, "but if you think my presence will bring in a recruit or two, I'll be glad to do what I can."

"Well done!" cried a young lieutenant. "I'm sure when the lads hear the stories of fighting on the battlefield which you and Major Hicks can tell them, they'll come along by the dozen to join us."

"And you'll come, too, Nelson Lee," said Sir Samuel. "I know you can make a rattling good speech. You'll persuade the lads to fight for the Flag."

All eyes were turned on the detective. He shook his head.

"Much as I should like to take part," he observed, "I am afraid it's impossible. I've sworn to lay this thief low before to-morrow evening. I shall have to take train for London at once."

Nipper glanced at his master in utter surprise.

"Oh, so you've news of him in London, then?" asked Sir Samuel.

"Oh, not exactly," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I feel almost certain I shall find him in the neighbourhood of his old haunts."

"It's a great pity—a great pity," said the baronet. "By the way, major," he went on, "I'm more than obliged to you for informing the police about my car. Mr. Lee has just told me that it has been discovered in the King's Arms garage at Croyley."

"I'm glad," said Major Hicks curtly. "I was in the hotel last night when the fellow came in. I could not help hearing the bargain he made with the proprietor. Wasn't his story true about the accident and his message from the War Office?"

The tinted spectacles were turned on Nelson Lee.

"It was an absolute tissue of falsehoods, sir," was the answer.

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Major Hicks. "I would never have believed it. I, too, was completely taken in. Sir Samuel has been telling me of his scandalous behaviour. He deserves to be hung."

"That looks like being his ultimate end," remarked the detective. "Allow me to help you to your car, major."

"Thanks," said the other coldly, "but I get on better alone."

With difficulty, he descended the steps and entered the tonneau. The other officers followed him.

Sir Samuel and Maisie waved their hands to him.

"What a splendid-looking fellow," said the old squire. "A born leader—anyone can see that."

"All the same, I shouldn't like to be under him," said the V.C. hero. "There's too much of the martinet about him."

"Oh, you mustn't judge him by his present conduct," said pretty Maisie sympathetically. "He must be in dreadful pain still through his wounds. I'm sure Mr. Lee will agree with me——"

She turned about with a smile. But neither the detective nor Nipper were anywhere to be seen.

"Where's Nelson Lee and that boy?" exclaimed Sir Samuel. "I want to ask them about that car of mine."

"I—I think they went towards the garage," said Corporal Mayne uncertainly.

The three of them went in that direction. They were not to be seen. Their cycles, however, had vanished.

"They've already gone to London, perhaps," ventured Maisie when inquiries in the house had been of no avail.

"It's extraordinary they should have gone so suddenly," exclaimed her father irritably. "My opinion is that Nelson Lee feels that his reputation has been damaged by his failure to trace this Flash Harry rascal, and he's cleared off out of it, though it's hardly like the great detective.

And with this ungenerous remark, he stumped off indoors.

CHAPTER X

Flash Harry's Last Daring Effort

"IT'S a great success, major—a great success! Your speech touched 'em up fine! And as for yours, corporal—why, it's brought at least a score of lads along to fight for King and Empire."

Sir Samuel beamed upon the wounded soldiers before him.

Undoubtedly the young Canadian, whom the King had so signally honoured for his bravery in France, and the stern, commanding figure of Major Hicks, pathetic as well with his white face and wounds, had made a deep impression on the crowds of young men who had flocked from the surrounding districts to Croydon, where the great recruiting rally had been held.

A fine band had marched through the streets at the head of a contingent of the Royal Kents, as smart a collection of Kitchener's army as had ever worn khaki. And in an open motor had sat the V.C. hero from Canada, side by side with Major Hicks, the hero from the Dardanelles. Others in the touneau were Sir Samuel, who had also made the speech of his life, and his pretty daughter Maisie, whose round cheeks seemed all the rosier in contrast with her simple white dress.

They had driven in the procession to the market square, where, with a motor lorry as a platform, speeches had been made by the heroes from the battlefield. Great enthusiasm had prevailed, and the rally had concluded with the huge crowd swelling their voices in the National Anthems of Great Britain and her glorious Allies.

They were back now at the George Hotel, the headquarters, and those concerned were congratulating each other on the success of the rally.

"I'm afraid you're exaggerating my small part in the affair, sir," said Charley Mayne modestly. "The lads don't want much talking to. You've only got to tell 'em the old country is in danger, to ask 'em to do something to protect their own dear ones from the barbarity of the Huns, and they cluster round to sign on for King and Country."

Major Hicks gripped his crutch, and turned impatiently, looking from right to left.

"Now it's all over, Sir Samuel, I must be getting on!" he exclaimed abruptly. "Remember, I've got to appear at another meeting at Agglestone this afternoon."

Sir Samuel bit his under-lip. Somehow, the more he got to know this officer, the less he liked him.

"Get ready there! We'll be off in a minute!" the major called curtly to his chauffeur, who sat rigid on the box-seat of the powerful Daimler.

He stumped off painfully up the steps and through the doors of the George Hotel.

Most of the officers and officials who had taken part in the rally were about the doors, chatting eagerly and laughing as they recounted their experiences.

"Now, I suppose we'd better 'get back home!' declared Sir Samuel. "Perhaps we'll hear from Nelson Lee there. I can't make out why we haven't heard from him! Surely he can't have given up the case!"

"There's a boy about, daddie, who strangely reminds me of Nipper, though," said Maisie. "Look! There he goes!"

She indicated a smart-looking, porky-faced boy in buttons, evidently page-boy at the George. As they watched him, this lad looked sharply about him, then ran down the steps, whispered for a few moments to a stalwart-looking man in the uniform of a private in Kitchener's army, before he returned to the hotel and disappeared.

"It's like Nipper, certainly!" agreed Corporal Mayne. "But it can't be! For what reason would he be there, and——"

There was a sudden diversion. The tall man in khaki pushed his way through to the Daimler. What he said was only indistinctly heard by them.

There were the words "Flash Harry," "Hawk gang," and finally:

"The game's up, Darky Wilson!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" cried the chauffeur, suddenly grey-faced. "But you sha'n't collar Harry! I'll warn him!"

He sprang from the box-seat. Before he could raise his voice, the big man fastened his fingers about his neck, and gripped his wrist with his free hand.

"Come on, Jeffreys!" he cried, nodding to where two constables had been standing watching attentively for some time. "This is the beauty! Make no fuss! Take him away!"

"That's Mr. Lee's voice, anyway!" declared Sir Samuel, pushed toward the motor by the crowd behind.

They stared in astonishment as the constables, without a word, seized the chauffeur, and forced him through the throng. It was soon over. In less than a minute neither the policemen nor their prisoner were to be seen.

"What do you make of it, daddie?" asked the bewildered Maisie. "Is—is it Nelson Lee?"

Old Sir Samuel could only shrug his shoulders. He was completely puzzled, the more so as the tall man in khaki coolly stepped into the Daimler and took the captive's place behind the steering-wheel.

"Make way, please!" cried a voice. "Where's Major Hicks's motor?"

Old Sir Samuel swung round. Two waiters, footmen for the time being, were behind him. Each was carrying a couple of stout leather portmanteaux.

"Here y'are, mate!" responded the gruff voice of the chauffeur. "This way!"

The tall man in khaki slipped down to open the door of the tonneau. The waiters laid their heavy bags upon the seat.

"Take care of 'em!" said the waiter who had spoken. "That major of yours is a grumpy old bounder!"

The chauffeur returned to his seat and sat rigid as a statue. Sir Samuel, doubtful whether the man before him was the detective, was on the point of openly questioning him, when there came a diversion from the door of the hotel.

"The manager!" cried an excited lieutenant. "Where's the manager? I've been robbed! My room's been cleared out of every valuable I've got! My watch, my rings, my revolver, my pocket-book—everything's gone!"

The manager wheeled round from the group with whom he had been chatting earnestly.

"That's a serious assertion, sir!" he began. "Are you sure——"

Another figure burst through the door.

"Ah, there you are, Mr. Bennett!" cried a white-faced, elderly gentle-

man. "Do you know, sir, that you've got thieves in your hotel? My room's been cleared! I've been robbed of over two hundred pounds!"

The pathetic figure of Major Hicks appeared on the threshold. With his arm in a sling, and clinging painfully to the crutch, he stood there, gazing mournfully at the excited scene.

"I'm not a bit surprised!" he exclaimed. "There have been several shady characters about this hotel! I haven't had time to see whether I've lost anything, but——"

Yet a further figure burst through the doors. It was Mr. Bennett, the hotel manager. His face was purple with excitement.

"I've just got a telegram from the War Office!" he cried. "They say Major Hicks is an impostor! I'm to give him in charge at once! Where is he? Oh, there——"

He made a grab at the crippled figure. Neither he nor the crowd before the steps were prepared for what had happened. Major Hicks suddenly withdrew his supposedly fractured arm from the sling, and drove his fist with all his strength into the manager's face.

Mr. Bennett reeled, lost his footing, and crashed heavily down the steps.

"Out of the way!" roared the "major." "You're the simplest lot of mugs I've ever struck!"

Before those round about could recover from their astonishment, the crippled man, swinging his crutch around his head, had them rushing back and making a lane for him to the motor-car.

In a trice he was in the tonneau beside the bags.

"Sharp, now, Darky!" he called out. "Let her rip!"

"Right-ho!" responded the chauffeur, and the next second the big Daimler shot off, and, with increasing speed, rapidly left the hotel and disappeared.

There was indescribable confusion and excitement. Men ran out into the lane, shouting after the car to stop. Women screamed and fainted. A few, amongst them Sir Samuel and his friends, were too amazed to do anything except stare down the road at the cloud of dust which marked the impostor's departure.

"In the name of goodness, what does it all mean?"

Charlie Mayno was the first to break the silence.

"It means, lad, that Major Hicks is none other than Flash Harry," sighed the old squire. "It means he's duped us again, and now he's got clean away once more!"

"I'm not so sure of that, sir!" said a small voice at his elbow. "Nelson Lee isn't quite finished with him yet, I'll wager!"

It was the boy in buttons. There was no mistaking that pert grin.

"Why—why, it's Nipper!" said Maisie.

"It's no right enough, miss!" grinned Nelson Lee's assistant. "I've got a new job. Been here since I left your house yesterday. I'm giving it up, though, now. Bit of a sag, you know, running errands for other people. I——"

Sir Samuel caught the boy by the ear.

"You young rascal!" he cried. "A nice job you and your master have made of things! Do you know you've let Flash Harry escape again? Where is he? Where's Nelson Lee?"

"Would you like to see him, sir?" smiled Nipper. "He isn't far away. That's your two-seater over there, isn't it? We'll call on him right away!"

Nipper led the way to the car and climbed upon the box-seat beside the chauffeur. With puzzled face, Sir Samuel, Maisie, and Corporal Mayno followed him.

Nipper whispered to the chauffeur. In ten minutes the two-seater pulled up outside Risedale Police-station. There was a powerful Daimler car in charge of the police standing outside.

"Upon my soul!" said Sir Samuel, rubbing his eyes. "This is the very car the scoundrel escaped in! What does this mean, you young rip?"

"This way, sir!" grinned the boy. "The gov'nor'll give you full particulars."

Inside the charge-room they found the tall man in khaki talking with the chief officials. When he wheeled round, there was no doubting his being Nelson Lee any longer. He had brushed away the slight false moustache and the lines of the make-up pencil.

"Well done, Nipper!" cried the detective. "I'm glad to see you, Sir Samuel! And you, too, Miss Maisie! Corporal Mayne, you'll be interested to know that the man who so brutally attacked and impersonated you has had his career suddenly cut short. He'll be lucky if he leaves the dock with less than seven years' penal servitude."

And as he spoke two constables led a handcuffed prisoner from an inner room into the corridor in the direction of the cells.

It was Major Hicks—Private Harry Stone! Otherwise Flash Harry, of the Hawks gang of swell mobsmen!

"Curse you, Nelson Lee!" he hissed, shaking the handcuffs frantically. "Only wait till I come out again——"

His voice died away along the corridor, and Nelson Lee turned to explain to his friends how the trick was done.

"There was nothing in it, really!" he laughingly explained. "By his very daring and audacious effrontery, Major Hicks threw us off the track for a time; but when Nipper got a job as page-boy, and was enabled to peep about his room, we soon got our doubts settled. Inquiry of the War Office did the rest. You've seen the contents of his bags? Of course, they contain the property stolen from the George."

He took them into the inner room. There on the table lay a miscellaneous collection of valuable articles—jewellery, silver-backed brushes, binoculars, and such-like.

"He hired the Daimler and then stole it," the detective went on, "and had got one of the members of his gang to act as chauffeur. Darky Wilson made a poor show of it, so I took his place, and gave Flash Harry a free ride to the police-station. It was a treat to see the rogue's face when he discovered how he'd been tricked."

All met again at the assizes, where Flash Harry was sentenced to seven years "hard," whilst his companion, Darky Wilson, was given three years of the same medicine.

Sir Samuel was able then to give them good news. Old Joe Strudwick had recovered, and was fit enough to accept the post of head gardener at the Onks, whilst his son Jim, no longer a sergeant but a sergeant-major, was doing well at the front.

"And that's where Corporal Mayne, V.C., is too!" whispered the old squire. "But I'll tell you a little secret. He's to be given a commission any day now, and—and as soon as he comes back there's to be a pretty little wedding at Risedale. Isn't that so, Maisie?"

And neither Nipper nor his master had need to ask the name of the bride when they looked into her lovely, rosy face.

THE END.

Next Week's Grand Complete Tale of Nelson Lee and Nipper, will be entitled: "THE SPENDTHRIFT."

The Boys of Ravenswood College;

or, Dick Clare's Schooldays.

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

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

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

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

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

Dick and Tom climb to the top of an old tower and Gowl imprisons them there. Later, to his horror, Gowl learns that the tower is on fire. (Now read on.)

Melby Gives the Show Away.

"**O**H, Gowl!" gasped Melby, gazing at the burning tower. "They will be burnt to death. They are doomed. It's an awful crime for you to have on your shoulders."

"You mad little villain!" gasped the bully, who was really as terrified as Melby. "We had nothing to do with it."

"Of course, I didn't! But you took the ladder away so that they couldn't get down."

"What has that to do with it? We shifted a ladder—although there is no necessity to mention such a thing."

"If you hadn't done it they would have been able to escape."

"Absurd! Even if we knew they were there we could not know the place would catch on fire. To my mind, they were attacked by some of the gang who attacked them on the island. Very well, if that is the case, do you suppose the gang would have let them escape? Of course, we are not so foolish as to get ourselves into a bother, and so shall say nothing about it. I have a perfectly clear conscience——"

"Oh, I say, Gowl," exclaimed Melby, "I don't see how you could possibly have that, even apart from this awful thing! In fact, it doesn't sound likely that you have got any conscience at all."

"If you dare to talk to me like that, you little thief, I'll knock your head off your shoulders!" snarled Gowl.

"Oh, I'm not going to say anything to offend you! It isn't likely I would, seeing how savage it always makes you. But, don't you see, I don't want to be an accessory after the fact. There's no sense in two chaps getting hanged for your crime."

"Very well," exclaimed Gowl; "the best thing for you to do is to go to the Head, and tell him that the tower is on fire, and that you know Clare and Hart are in it, because you took the ladder away, and they could not possibly get down without it."

"I should have to mention that you took it away."

"And I should have to prove that I was never near the spot. In fact, I have been in Fox's company all the afternoon and evening. We certainly saw you going towards the tower, and we warned you not to go there, because it was out of bounds. It is a question whether I shall not have to report your confession to the Head to-morrow morning. I will consider the matter—after having spoken to Fox. I am sorry for you, Melby. Of course, I am ready to believe that you lighted the straw in the place for a lark, but if it has cost two lives, you will have to answer for it."

"Oh, I say! And you talk about your conscience after that! Why, you have just said probably the gang from the island did it."

"That was my first impression; but after your confession of having lighted the straw, naturally I know that my impression was wrong. Good-night! I am deeply grieved at your awful crime."

As Gowl went to his dormitory, Melby slunk back to bed; but sleep was out of the question. He had not the slightest idea that Gowl would execute his threat and lay all the blame on him, while Fox would only be too ready to back up his friend the bully.

"It's sinful," mused Melby, commencing to weep. "My word is never believed. Just because the Head has bowled me out in one or two lies, he never believes me when I speak the truth. It's not fair. If Gowl goes and pitches that awful yarn about warning me not to go to the tower, the Doctor will naturally believe he had nothing to do with it. I've a jolly good mind to be the first in the field."

And the more Melby thought over the affair the more terrified he became. It was a moonlight night, and he cast many an anxious glance round the dormitory, for he had worked himself into such a state of nervousness, that he started at every sound. The boys were all asleep and Melby was thinking of some excuse to awaken one of them, when the slight rattle of the window caused him to start up in bed.

Then in the moonlight Melby saw Dick Clare's face.

It was more than Melby's highly-strung nerves could bear. He uttered yells that awoke every boy in the dormitory, then rushing from the dormitory and down the stairs, he burst into the Head's study.

It was nearly midnight, but Dr. Stanley was still up. He had been reading a learned looking volume, and as he sprang to his feet he dropped the book to the floor, while Melby very nearly bowled him into the fireplace as he rushed at him.

"Save me!" howled the terrified youth, badly tearing some of the pages of the book as he trampled on it in his wild terror. "Save me from his ghost. I never killed him. I wouldn't do such a thing. It was Gowl, and he ought to be hanged. He pulled the ladder away. He has murdered Dick Clare and Tom Hart. They are burnt to cinders, and their ghosts are roaming all around."

Dr. Stanley was quite accustomed to surprises, but this was what Tom would have called a startler. Melby's sudden entrance had given him a shock, while the information that two of his scholars had been burnt to cinders was enough to upset the strongest nerves. Melby's ravings were quite incoherent to anyone not knowing the facts of the case.

"Remain where you are," commanded the Head, leaving the study, and locking the door.

He made his way to Dick's dormitory, and met Mr. Foster coming from it.

"Has any accident happened?" inquired the Head.

"Not as far as I can gather," answered Mr. Foster. "None of the boys appear to know what has happened. Melby is missing, and I fancy he must have uttered the shrieks. I was reading in my study——"

"So was I in mine. Melby is there. Will you come? I expect they have played him some wild prank. Clare and Hart are quite competent."

Melby was still in a state of terror when the masters entered the study. He implored them not to have him hanged and vowed he had nothing to do with it, although what the "it" was, neither the Head nor Mr. Foster had the slightest idea.

"Now, Melby," exclaimed the Head, with all the sternness he could command, "stop this nonsensical talk, and tell me what you mean by stating that Clare and Hart are burnt to a cinder."

"Oh, please, sir, it's the honest truth. If it isn't, may I never speak it again. Just because on one or two occasions I have—have been misunderstood, it doesn't follow that I speak the truth sometimes, and I'm doing it now. I saw them both burnt to death. I heard their shrieks of agony. I was watching the whole scene from the passage window."

"Where were the two boys?"

"At the top of the blazing tower, and the flames licked round them. They writhed in agony."

"I never heard anything so preposterous in all my life," gasped the Head.

"The tower is at least two miles away, and yet you dare to tell me you saw and heard all this?"

"Well, sir, when boys are being burnt to death they make an awful row. I know my mother made a frightful noise when I accidentally slopped some boiling tea over her hand, and my father——"

"We are not dealing with that. Have Hart and Clare been playing you some trick?"

"Oh, I say, sir! Do you suppose two boys are going to frizzle themselves up like rashers of bacon just to play a trick on me. They are burnt to ashes, and I saw Clare's ghostly face at the dormitory window."

"What had Gowl to do with this?" inquired the Head, who began to see light.

"He burnt them, sir."

"Those boys are both in their beds," said Mr. Foster.

"Not, really?" exclaimed Melby, gazing at the Housemaster in wonder.

"Then they must have—must—— Well, I say, I'm sorry, sir—sorry that I told—that I had the nightmare. I was dreaming. I wasn't feeling well last night, and think it must be indigestion. My mother often gets indigestion. And I'd say my father does, too, judging by his beastly temper when——"

"Melby," exclaimed the Head, "go to bed immediately!"

"Good-night, sir. Hope I haven't disturbed you with my nightmare. Lots of people get it; and I've had it hot and strong to-night."

Then Melby bolted, and the two masters stood gazing at each other with a gaspy expression.

"Foster," sighed Dr. Stanley, "I trust there is nothing in our dispositions to cause a boy to imagine we are so unutterably stupid as to believe a story like that?"

"Let us trust not," said Mr. Foster. "I do not believe even Melby himself would credit such a fable."

"What are we to do with the boy?"

"I really do not know. Falsehood comes as naturally to him as truthfulness comes to his study chums. I fear your hope that their influence would do Melby good is in vain."

The following morning Tom and Dick were ordered into the Doctor's study, and they found Gowl and Melby there, as also Mr. Foster.

"Did you break bounds last night, boys?" inquired the Head.

"No, sir," answered Dick; "but we came in late."

"How did you get in?"

"Through the dormitory window, sir. Climbed the ivy."

"Did you know there had been a fire at the ruined tower on Farmer Garling's land?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me exactly what happened."

"We went to the tower, climbed to its summit, and couldn't get down again—at least, we thought we couldn't. But you never know what you can do till you try. The stonework is broken away on the cliff side, and—well, we got down somehow."

"It was terribly perilous!" exclaimed Mr. Foster. "Had you fallen you would have been dashed to pieces on the rocks at the base of the cliff."

"Yes, sir, we thought of that; but—well, we also thought of the fire. The flames were roaring up, and we had the chance of a fall, or the certainty of being burnt alive. We risked the fall—and didn't have it."

"What set the tower on fire?" demanded Dr. Stanley.

"I fancy a tramp, sir," answered Dick. "The place was full of straw, and possibly he came in to rest. We did not see him come in, but we thought we smelt tobacco, and soon after the flames burst up we saw a man bolting for all he was worth—er—retreating as fast as he could go."

"You knew you had no right to go to the tower?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there anything more to tell?"

"No, sir."

"You have told me everything that occurred?"

"No, sir; but—well, I'd rather say nothing more."

"Were you near the tower last night, Gowl?"

"Yes, sir. I was with Fox."

"Did you know these two boys were up the tower?"

"I had not the slightest idea. I was some distance from it."

"And never entered it?"

"No, sir."

"You positively assert that you never removed the ladder to prevent their descent?"

"I certainly did not."

"Nor incited another boy to do so?"

"No, sir."

"Do you confirm that statement, Melby?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Every bless—every single word of it. It's one of the most truthful statements I have ever listened to. In fact, I was surprised at its truthfulness."

"Why, surprised?"

"Oh, I don't mean to say that Gowl doesn't always speak the truth; but he stated the actual facts so exactly."

"Were you there?"

"I, sir? Oh, no—not at all near!"

"And did not remove the ladder?"

"I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"How did you know it had been removed?"

"I never did, sir."

"You told me last night that Gowl had removed it."

"Oh, I say, sir!"

Dr. Stanley fixed his gaze on Gowl, and if ever a bully looked uncomfortable, it was he. He lowered his eyes before the steady gaze, and although Dick had good cause to detest the fellow, he really felt sorry for him now.

"I do not know what statement Melby has made, sir," he muttered at last; but still the Head was silent.

"I can only say that I know nothing of the removal of the ladder, which I presume was done for a joke—or possibly by the tramp."

And still Dr. Stanley remained silent.

"I'm certain it was, sir!" cried Melby, regardless of Gowl's black looks. "I happen to know it was. Of course, like Dick, I don't care to tell the whole truth, and I haven't got such a jolly convincing manner about me as he has. Masters always believe him, and it doesn't give other fellows a fair chance, because if they say one thing and Dick says another, the other thing is always believed, and he shoves that calm, truthful sort of a look into his eyes that is better than all the evidence. It's a gift. I only wish I had inherited it."

"It is a gift," repeated Dr. Stanley. "A great inheritance. Do you suppose that the expression of a boy's eyes would induce me to believe his word. Do you imagine that I would believe Hart and Clare if they had spoken as falsely as you and Gowl have done on this occasion—and, I regret to say, on many other occasions. The reason why I believe those boys is because they have never given me cause to doubt their words. Cannot you see the sinfulness and meanness of your mendacity, Gowl? Think how those two boys must scorn such action, and how contemptible it makes you appear in their eyes; as contemptible as it makes you appear in the eyes of Mr. Foster and myself. You are many years the senior of these two lads, yet you have much to learn from them. Will you never learn the lesson. Will you go through life branded as a liar. Have you no sense of shame, nor sense of honour. Cannot you realise that unless you amend your ways you will force me to publicly degrade you. You are a young man. The world is all before you. Let me see a change in future, and the past shall never be brought against you."

"For the rest I am convinced that no real harm was intended. On this occasion there will be no punishment. You can go."

Gowl hesitated for some moments when he had left the room, then he followed the chums to No. 7 Study.

"You canting young hypocrite!" he cried, striding up to Dick. "You miserable little sycophant, I'll have vengeance on you for this! You can do your worst, and I will do mine; then we shall see who suffers most."

"I don't know what your worst is going to be," retorted Dick, gazing at him contemptuously. "but I'm jolly certain it will be more serious than my worst, as you call it. There will be no worst on my part. If I had the power to injure you I would never use it."

"You young liar, you have used it! I know that by words that have reached me from others."

"You do not. If any stupid report has been spread about this college it has never emanated from me."

"You little viper, just you bear my threat in mind."

"Rats! Do you think I'm going to bear in mind the rotten silly threat of a contemptible bully? It isn't my fault if the Head has dressed you down. It's your fault for lying to him, and it serves you jolly well right."

Possibly, if Dick had been alone, he would have suffered for his daring words. As it was, Gowl left the study, and for the next day or so Melby gave him a wide berth.

(Another rollicking, long instalment of this fine school yarn will appear next week.)

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