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The Spendthrift

A Magnificent, Complete Tale of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

By the Author of "The Vengeance of the Eleven," "The League of the Yellow Brotherhood," "The White Mandarin," "The Council of Eleven," "The Yvonne v. Sexton Blake Series," "The Crimson Pearl," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Introduces Sonia Targenoff—A Meeting in Bond Street—Nelson Lee Starts a Clean-up—Tony Barron Hears Some Straight Talk.

THE girl who sat in the ladies' reception-room at the small but exclusive Paris Club, in Dover Street, looked very small and very woebegone in the great high-ceilinged room, from the walls of which portraits of former chairmen of the famous club frowned down upon her.

It was a dignified room was that reception-room. In days gone past, when the Paris Club had been the rendezvous of the early Victorian beaux, the room had been the morning coffee-room where the young bloods of the town gathered to discuss, in the stilted talk of the day, the passing events of the town. It still retained the beautiful Adams' ceiling and walls, with a great wide-mouthed fireplace gaping at one side and surmounted by a huge Victorian clock of white, inlaid with gold.

The floor was carpeted with a thick, yielding carpet into which one's feet sank with a delightful feeling of luxuriousness. Two high windows gave on to the street, and screening the room from the gaze of the passers-by were two window-boxes ablaze with blooms.

The crimson blinds which adorned the windows had been pulled low on the morning in question, leaving the room in a subdued twilight which the girl found very welcome. For she was unhappy with the first great sorrow of her life. Yet had the world been asked, it would have said that there could be no more fortunate young woman in all the town than Sonia Targenoff.

Making her debut at eighteen as the daughter of a Russian prince, whose wealth was a byword in society, and whose popularity was firmly established, she had been the rage of a season when the debutantes had been more than ordinarily attractive.

Of all the season's crop Sonia Targenoff had carried off the laurels, and during the ensuing four years she had been bombarded with attention.

Yet she was unhappy, and looking upon her as she sat in the huge leather armchair, which almost engulfed her slim form, one might have wondered who could cause sorrow to one so lovely.

More like some delicate flower she looked than anything else. Even in the gloom of the room one could see the white pallor of her face, which was at once the despair and envy of women less fortunate.

Her features were small and clean-cut as an exquisite cameo of old Venice. Above a high brow was piled a mass of dark hair, lustrous and with a texture soft as silk.

Gazing out upon the world with calm serenity, her eyes held all the mysterious lure of shaded forest pools, and only when one looked deeply into them did one discover that they were not black, but wide-pupilled and brown.

Two little feet, clad in silken hose and black suede, peeped out from beneath a costume of white which set off the pallor of her skin like sculptured alabaster.

She was very lovely and very desirable. Yet she was unhappy; and a moment later, when the door opened to admit a tall young fellow in the uniform of a lieutenant of artillery, a close observer might have seen a look of pain creep into the eyes, from which it could have been deduced that the young man was the cause of her unhappiness.

Just a trifle over medium height he was, with well-formed limbs and sturdy shoulders. He was not particularly handsome, but his face was a good one, and the eyes were those of a man who would look his fellow men in the face without fear.

He hurried forward, a smile lighting up his face as he saw the girl in the chair; but as he drew nearer the expression of pain in her eyes deepened. She had started to rise, but sank back again, giving the young man but the tips of her fingers.

"This is very dear of you to come to see me so early, Sonia," he exclaimed in an eager voice. "What is it—shopping? I was just saying to myself that I would call you up and ask you how you were. It seems ages since I saw you last night, and——"

"And yet your mind was so full of thoughts of me that you could come back here and gamble all the night," broke in the girl bitterly. "How can you do it, Tony? When you got your commission you swore you were going to give up gambling. Yet now, after only two months of the Army, you are playing cards again."

"Do you think it is right to your mother to gamble away nearly all your leave? Do you think it fair to me? Is gambling such a passion as all that with you, Tony? Can I—can your mother do or say nothing to make you realise what you are doing? You are only twenty-eight, yet you are as confirmed a gamester as your father was at sixty. It is all very well to talk about heredity, but surely you are man enough to drop what is threatening to ruin you!"

All the time the girl had been talking the young fellow had stood before her, a flush of shame mantling his cheeks and his eyes resting on the floor. When she finished, he lifted his eyes and looked into hers.

"I am sorry, Sonia," he said; "I——"

She made a gesture of impatience.

"It is always only that—you are sorry," she put in quickly. "Sorrow won't do it any good, Tony. It won't ease your mother's mind; it won't hold me to you."

"It won't—it won't what?" cried the young man sharply. "What did you say, Sonia?"

"I said, Tony, that sorrow wouldn't hold me to you," replied the girl, with quivering lips. "Much as I might love you, do you think I would marry the man whose name was a byword in town? Do you think I would risk all my future with a gambler? Do you realise how your name—Anthony Barron—is synonymous with the gaming at this club? Do you think for a moment that I would risk my future with such a man? My mother was English, Tony, but my father is Russian, and I have enough of my

father's native shrewdness in me to tell me that our lives would be utter misery."

"Then what is it you mean to do, Sonia?" asked Barron sulkily.

The tone brought a flush to Sonia's cheeks, and her eyes flashed with anger that he should receive her words in such fashion. For a few moments her breast rose and fell stormily. She was fighting hard to keep her control. At last she swallowed back the tears which threatened to bedim her lovely eyes, and, rising, stood straight and slim beside the young man.

"What do I mean to do?" she echoed. "Has it come to this—that Sonia Targenoff, the daughter of Prince Alexander Targenoff, must come to her fiance's club to ask him to choose between gambling and her?" she cried with heat. "Am I—a princess of Russia—to do this thing? Am I so old or so ugly that an inveterate gamester is the only man who will offer as a husband? Think you I have had no other offers but yours? Is it while our engagement is but a month old that I must go to your mother and make excuses for you—that I must humble myself by actually pleading with you to stop this fever which is ruining you?"

"Have you no shame that you stand there and sulk like a bad-tempered boy? What do you think my father would say if he knew this thing? Was my love given so readily that you do not value it? I am sick—sick to the soul of the whole sordid business, Tony. Either you choose me or you choose the gaming. You cannot have both. What is it to be?"

Trembling with the very violence of the storm which had swept over her, Sonia laid a hand on the back of the chair to steady herself, and gazed scornfully at Barron.

He had thrust his hands into his pockets, and, with a heavy frown on his face, was gazing at the portrait of a man which hung on the wall just in front of him. It was a portrait of his own father—a one-time member of the committee of the Paris Club, and a man whom all London knew had died an inveterate gambler.

Tony, as well as the girl, was fighting hard to control himself. It was true—everything that Sonia had said. He knew it, but a cursed demon of pride whispered to him that it was not for Sonia to scorn him so.

He might have his faults—undoubtedly he had—but he was not married yet, and until he was— He unconsciously finished the thought with a shrug, and turning towards the girl looked into her eyes.

They were tear-filled and misty just then, and for a moment there swept over the boy with terrific force the full meaning of just what he was doing. In that second his whole inclination was to take the girl into his arms and tell her how he did love her and that he would play the man for such as she.

But the next second pride had whispered again, and with a savage glint in his eyes he spoke:

"I should know that you are a princess," he snapped. "You have mentioned the fact often enough. I am also aware that you had other proposals for your hand. You have informed me of that fact as well. Since you have spoken so plainly I can hardly fail to realise what a terrible fellow I am. It seems too bad that you are engaged to such a black sheep when so many better men are desirous of marrying you. If that fact weighs so heavily on your mind it can very easily be removed, for I can release you if that is what you desire."

For a full minute there was dead silence in the room, while Sonia, standing white-lipped and rigid, stared at the man who had just spoken to her in such a manner. It was as though she could not believe that Tony, who had loved her so, could have set himself to deliberately wound her as he had just done.

Then, as the full force of it struck her, she drew a deep breath. Removing

her left hand from the back of the chair, she lifted her right and drew from the third finger of the left the diamond which Tony himself had placed there only a month before.

Slowly—ever so slowly—while Barron watched with tense gaze, she drew the ring over the end of the finger; then she held it out to the young man.

"Here is your ring, Tony," she said quietly. "Take it back, please."

Like a man in a dream, Tony held out his hand and took the ring, slipping it mechanically into his pocket.

"Sonia—Sonia, I—I——" he stammered.

Sonia held up her hand.

"Tony, if you have a shred of feeling left for me, you will please say nothing more. I only ask you to go out of the room, please. I shall leave a moment later."

Barron opened his lips again to speak, but something in the girl's eyes warned him that it would be unwise, and, swinging on his heel, he walked down the length of the room to the door.

There he paused for a moment, as though he would come back; but the old pride conquered once more, and, with a vicious jerk at the door, he passed out into the main lobby of the club.

Sonia stood by the big armchair until the swing-door closed after him, then, with a quick indrawing of the breath, she collapsed in a heap in the chair.

Burying her head in her arms she broke into a torrent of weeping. The floodgates of her soul were opened, and she gave vent to all the pent-up sorrow of a month.

The waywardness of the boy to whom she had given her love was as nothing to the way he had spoken to her. It seemed but a dream which could not be true, from which she must awaken to find the old Tony standing by her, petting her and loving her as before.

It seemed impossible to believe that he had stood there only a few moments before, and had spoken to her so callously. Yet, with his words still ringing in her ears, and her heart throbbing with the miserable ache of it all, she knew it was only too true. And now her hand was ringless. She had given back to Tony the pledge that she was his.

The engagement was broken. And the tragedy of it all was that she loved him. What mattered it now if she be princess or peasant? What did it weigh that she be wealthy, courted on all sides by sycophants, and envied by her sisters? It all went for nothing.

She was just a heart-sick girl, who had been wounded by the man to whom she had given her love, and the fabric of whose future had been roughly rent asunder.

Struggling to keep down the sobs which racked her, Sonia got to her feet, and drying her eyes, drew down her veil.

"I shall look a sight," she murmured chokingly. "But what does it matter? What does anything matter now? Oh, Tony, how could you—how could you?"

With her head bowed she started for the door, stopping to peer over the crimson curtain which covered it, to see if the lobby were free of people.

She could see only a uniformed commissionaire and a page-boy, and, pushing open the door, made her way to the street.

She made a negative gesture to the commissionaire's inquiry if he should call a taxi for her, and, scarcely seeing which way she went, crossed Dover Street to Stafford Street.

Through Stafford Street she hurried, and, turning up Albemarle Street, kept on until she reached Grafton Street.

There she turned into Bond Street, and was just starting to walk down towards Piccadilly when she felt a touch on her arm, and a cheery voice hailed her.

"Good-morning, little princess," she heard. "And whither so early?"

She lifted her tear-stained face, which even the heavy veil failed to conceal, and looked into the clear, grey eyes of the man who had just addressed her.

"Mr. Lee!" she exclaimed. "How do you do? I am afraid I didn't see you. I—I was thinking."

"I wondered what I had done to offend you," rejoined Nelson Lee, with a smile. "I started to bow to you a good ten feet away, but you looked at me and through me, but apparently did not see me. I—— But what is this, mademoiselle? You look upset. What has happened? You have not had bad news, I hope?"

The girl shook her head.

"It is nothing, Mr. Lee," she said. "I—I am upset, but——"

"Come, come," replied Lee, "this will not do. I thought you one of the happiest young women in the whole of London. If there is anything I can do, please do not hesitate to call upon me. You know your father has often made use of my services, and surely I am a sufficiently close friend to help you if I can."

Sonia laid a hand on his sleeve.

"I am the most unhappy girl in London, Mr. Lee, and it is all through that awful gambling at the Paris Club. I—— But I cannot tell you here, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee took her arm.

"You will tell me nothing at all until we are where you can talk freely," he said quietly. "You are upset and miserable. Walk with me to Piccadilly. We will go into the lounge at the Venetia, and you must have some coffee. There you can tell me all about it."

Sonia permitted him to guide her through the press of Bond Street until they reached Piccadilly. There they turned down towards Piccadilly Circus, and kept on until they came to the classic portals of the Venetia—that magnificent caravansary which stands for all that is perfect in hotels.

Nodding in acknowledgment of the salute which the gorgeously-uniformed commissionaire gave him, Nelson Lee conducted his fair companion through the lobby into the main lounge, which was but sparsely occupied at that hour of the morning.

Selecting a table in one corner, Lee called a waiter and ordered coffee. When it had been served, and Sonia had taken a few sips of the beverage, Lee again brought up the subject which they had been discussing.

"Now then, mademoiselle," he said, with a smile, "tell me all about it. If anyone has been worrying you, rest assured he shall be dealt with. We cannot have those young eyes so sorrowful."

Sonia smiled faintly.

"You are very good, Mr. Lee," she said, "but—but—oh, how can I tell you about it?"

"By starting ahead and telling me," responded Lee, good humouredly. "Now then, let us have it."

Sonia leaned forward a little, and, clasping her hands together, rested them on the edge of the table.

"It is about Tony," she said, in a low, hurried tone. "He—he has been gambling again, Mr. Lee. You know how he used to gamble before we became engaged, and then, when he joined the Forces, he gave it up for

a time. He came home on leave only three days ago, and his mother and I have scarcely seen him during that time.

"He left me last evening, intending to go straight home. I went to see his mother this morning, and found her terribly upset. Tony had not been home all night. We both knew he must have been at the Paris Club playing cards, so I went there this morning to see him, and to try to recall him to his senses. Perhaps I didn't handle him as diplomatically as I might have, but I have so little experience of such things. At any rate, it was all very sordid, and—and I gave him back his ring. That is all. I was feeling unhappy when you saw me, and now it is all off."

She broke off chokingly, and dropped her head on her hands. Her shoulders heaved tumultuously as she fought down the rising sobs.

Nelson Lee laid his hand on hers.

"Steady on, mademoiselle," he said quietly. "Let us consider this thing calmly. You say that you have actually handed Tony's ring back to him?"

A smothered remark was his only answer.

"And what did he say when you did so?" went on Nelson Lee.

Sonia's head came up sharply, and her eyes flashed. The memory of those last few minutes at the club had roused the pride of blood.

"He behaved abominably," she said. "He spoke to me as I thought it impossible for Tony to speak."

"He is a very foolish young man," remarked Nelson Lee. "He was the most fortunate of young men when he won you, and, if he has risked losing you over such a matter, I can only think he must have taken leave of his senses. But you care for him mademoiselle, and I am certain Tony loves you. Now the question is, what are we to do to smooth away this trouble, and bring you together again?"

Sonia's head came up proudly.

"Nothing can ever do that," she said tensely. "Words can never blot out Tony's treatment of me this morning."

"But if he expresses his sorrow and means it?" suggested Lee. "If he proves that he regrets what he said? If he gives up this foolish gambling, what then? He is a good fellow, mademoiselle. He is foolish, I grant you, but he is straight and clean. Now, won't you let me go to him and try to arrange matters. I am sure he, too, must be suffering. He will realise by now what he has done."

"Before I ever take Tony back again he will have to prove beyond doubt that he is worthy," replied Sonia. "I will not marry a man who is a spendthrift. Such a man is not worthy to have a wife. I will only marry a man who is earnest in his purpose, who can take care of a wife as she should be taken care of—not one whose name is a byword in all the gambling clubs in London."

"I quite agree with you, mademoiselle," rejoined Lee. "Tony has been foolish, and unless he puts the brake on he will regret it terribly. But I shall go along to the club now and see him. I shall say nothing to him of what has passed between us. Go along home by way of the Park, mademoiselle. Get some fresh air, and try not to brood over the affair. Things will come out all right."

Sonia rose, and held out a slim hand to Lee.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee," she said, trying to smile up at him. "You have been very good. I—I wish Tony would be the man you are."

And, before Nelson Lee could reply, she had turned and was speeding through the lounge to the street.

Nelson Lee stood by the table until she was out of sight, then his clenched hand came down with a bang.

"The young fool!" he muttered savagely. "To think that he will risk losing such a girl as that. Why, I know a score of men who would give all they possess to step into his shoes! I shall see what is afoot at the club."

With that he paid his bill; and, striding through the lounge, made his way to the street. Turning up Piccadilly, he walked at a brisk pace until he came to Dover Street, and a few minutes later was entering the Paris Club, of which he was an old member.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee Starts a Clean-up—Tony Barron Hears Some Straight Talk—Tony in a Fit of Bravado, Does a Foolish Thing—Tony Faces the Situation

THERE are two card-rooms at the Paris Club. One which is given over entirely to those members who are devotees of auction bridge, is on the first floor adjoining the great smoking-room. There, from the early hours of the afternoon until the early hours of the morning the god of chance is wooed and lost.

The other—a very large gaming-room—is in the basement adjoining the billiard-room. This room is furnished with all the appurtenances of the great game of poker. The tables are specially constructed with little inlaid chip pockets beside each player's place, and in the centre a deep pocket for holding the "kitty."

Other tables in the same room are given over to the more ordinary games of coon can, cribbage, and the like. But mostly the room is used for poker, and there a member can get any size game he desires from a shilling limit to "pound rises."

Not until evening does the poker game usually start, and then it runs through until the morning. Like the auction bridge above stairs it has its passionate devotees, and of these none were more constant in their wooing of the god than Tony Barron—when he was in London.

There may or may not have been something in the theory that Tony had inherited his passion for gambling from his father. That is as it may be, but the fact remains that he was one of the heaviest, and, at the same time, one of the most unlucky players in the club.

It was an open secret that Tony had already gone through the money which he had received from his father's estate, and that he was at the present time receiving an allowance from his mother with expectations in the same direction when she should pass away.

But it was known to very few indeed that Tony was deeply in debt in another direction. His losses for the last twelve months had been far, far greater than the allowance he had received from his mother, and to do him justice he had not asked her for a penny more than she had agreed to give him.

But on the other hand he had used the credit which her name implied, and through another had borrowed heavily from a moneylender.

When war broke out he was in deep water indeed, and it had been almost an act of cowardice which had driven him to join up while still owing heavy sums. Then had followed his engagement to Sonia Targenoff, and with

the announcement of that his credit had boomed again, for the Targenoffs, as all the world knew, were very wealthy.

Tony Barron had about as much idea of the value of money as a Chinese coolie has of the fourth dimension. To Tony it was merely so much lucre which enabled him to indulge his desires and passions. Therefore, he did not quite realise how unpleasant would be his position when it became generally known that his engagement with the wealthy Princess Sonia was off.

When he had left Sonia in the ladies' room at the club, Tony had gone straight to the bar, and there had gulped down a double-size whiskey-and-soda. With this setting his blood a-tingle he had lurched along to the poker-room, and, with his hand on the door, stood watching the players.

For the first time he began to really realise the meaning of what had happened. He had actually broken with Sonia. And, with the realisation, it came upon him in full force that he did love her. It had all been so easy for Tony that he had not truly appreciated the worth of the girl who had promised to be his wife. But it was written in letters of fire that before he was very much older Tony Barren would offer his very soul to regain the prize he had lost.

Then the rattle of the chips on the poker-table came to him, and, with a savage exclamation, he pushed open the door and strode to his place at the table.

There were seven men in all at that table. In one corner another game was in progress which had half a dozen devotees, and if the playing ran over till the afternoon it was a safe bet that every table in the room would be filled by then. Old men and young men were there—men in mufti and men in khaki. At Tony's table there was a private, a lieutenant—Tony was a lieutenant—a captain, and an officer, with the red badge of a staff-officer.

Within the club portals the difference of rank was dropped. A member was a gentleman, which was sufficient.

Those in mufti, while looking less fit than those in khaki, wore the same eager look in the eyes as the cards dropped on the table before them. It was the flag of the gaming god which was being flaunted triumphantly.

Tony slipped into his place, and picked up the hand which had been dealt him. Like many, many hands which he had drawn since the night before it was almost barren of value. He gazed in disgust at a small pair of eights flanked on one side by a three spot and on the other by a jack and a four.

Tossing out these three cards he drew three, and, when he turned them up, saw to his surprise that he had drawn another eight and a pair of queens. A full house! The first decent hand he had held in many hours. Truly luck seemed to be coming his way since his talk with Sonia.

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, Tony felt for some money. His chips were low, and he intended to play the hand for all it was worth.

Vaguely he became aware that he had no money left, but that did not worry him. Gazing across to a man who sat directly opposite him, Tony said:

"I say, Grinton, let me have twenty pounds, will you, old fellow? I seem to be out."

Without a word the man whom he had called Grinton—a spare-framed individual with iron-grey hair and the typical face of the inveterate gambler—looked two ten-pound notes from his pocket and tossed them across the table.

Then the first bet was made.

It was raised once before it came to Tony, and he promptly made it the limit. The man on his left raised it again, the next man threw in his cards, while the next "saw."

So it went on until it came back to Tony, who once more raised it. There were now four players remaining in—Tony, the man on his left, who was the private, the man Grinton, and the staff-officer.

Grinton and the latter were "seeing," while the private was still raising back. So it went until the staff-officer and Grinton dropped out, leaving the private and Tony to fight it out.

Finally the private, a wealthy young rake who had joined upon the outbreak of war, said:

"Come on, Tony, make it a single bet for a show-down. How much?"

"A hundred, or what you want," replied Tony promptly.

"You must have them," responded the other. "Make it five hundred as a private side-bet."

"Done!" snapped Tony. "What have you?"

"A full. And you?" asked the other.

"A full," replied Tony. "What have you up?"

"Kings, Tony. How does that hit you?"

As he spoke the other tossed his hand on the table face up. Bending over it, Tony saw that there were three kings and a pair of sixes. His face did not change an atom, but inwardly he was deeply chagrined.

He had made certain of winning that hand, and now it seemed that his luck was not in quite so strongly as he had thought.

"You win," he said quietly. "I have only queens up."

He throw his hand on the table and started to feel in his pocket for a pencil. It would be necessary for him to give the other an I O U for the amount, since he did not have it on him, and since, also, all gambling debts contracted in the club must be liquidated within twenty-four hours.

He was just about to write the I O U when the door of the poker-room opened and Nelson Lee walked in.

The detective stood just within the door for a few minutes, taking in with his keen gaze all those who sat there. Then he strode to the centre of the room. Several of the players glanced up and nodded to him, but Lee paid no attention to their salutations.

He was waiting until he got their attention. His silent attitude in the centre of the room achieved his purpose, for first one then another glanced up curiously. They seemed to scent that something was coming.

Nelson Lee waited a few more minutes, then, when the click of the poker chips had quite stopped, he began to speak:

"Gentlemen," he said, in a voice which carried to every corner of the room, "I have come down into this room for a purpose to-day. I have some things to say to all of you. Some of you will probably take offence at what I am saying; some of you may understand the spirit in which it is said. But however you take it, I am going to speak. Gentlemen, I wish to talk to you about the gambling which is going on in this club at the present time. For a long time past I have seen the gaming here steadily increase until it has reached a stage which is not in keeping with a gentleman's club.

"It has grown, gentlemen, until the sole purpose of many of you in coming here is to gamble, and to gamble far more heavily than you should.

"You who are in uniform should not be spending the King's leave in such a way. You owe a duty to your country, and, while you wear the uniform you do, have no right to indulge yourselves to the extent you do. Those of you who are not in uniform should be doing something for your country instead of wasting the bright hours of the day in this smoky card-room. I will venture to say that scarcely one of you has seen the sun since yesterday; and I call it a scandalous use of time to do what you are doing.

"If you will game, then game during the hours which a gentleman usually sets by for such a purpose. But do not drag the club into the mire of a

gaming joint—do not lose all esprit de corps. And not only because it is not the thing to do it should you stop. There are other reasons why you should do so. I know that many of you are already gaming for sums far beyond your capacity to pay, and many of you are being led on by those who should know better.

"I have spoken plainly to you, because I intend bringing this up before the club committee and getting it stopped if possible. I did not wish to take such a step without first letting you know why I was doing so. There is one among you whom I shall, if possible, have removed from the roll of members. He is a new member in the club, and it is only since he has belonged that this gaming has become so heavy. I have spoken plainly, and you all know whom I mean. I refer to you, Grinton."

The man from whom Tony Barron had borrowed twenty pounds pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"You are a wonderful man, Mr. Nelson Lee," he snarled. "By what right do you interrupt this game and publicly insult me in the club? I shall see that this is brought before the committee. I had always understood that the members of the Paris Club were gentlemen. It seems I am mistaken."

"They were—until you became a member," replied Lee caustically. "I shall be delighted for you to bring this before the committee, Grinton. I have taken a step which I shall abide by, and every decent man in the club will stand by me. As for you, I reiterate what I have said. I shall do all in my power to have you removed."

There was another scraping of feet as Tony Barron pushed back his chair and also got to his feet.

"Look here, Lee, that is a bit thick, you know. Grinton is a friend of mine, and I can't permit you to talk to him like that."

"Oh, do sit down, Tony!" said Lee quietly. "You have made fool enough of yourself for one day!"

Tony sprang across the floor.

"What do you mean?" he jerked.

"You know what I mean," replied Nelson Lee curtly. "For goodness' sake don't be an ass!"

"I will not permit you to talk to me like that, Lee. I demand an apology to my friend Grinton."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, Tony," rejoined Lee tolerantly, though it was plain the young fellow's persistency was angering him. "Sit down, and don't be an ass!"

"Hang you, Lee; you have gone too far!" cried Tony. "If you don't apologise to my friend I shall knock you down."

"Then you had better start, Tony," said Lee.

For a moment Tony stood glaring at the other; then, with a sharp grunt, he sprang forward and drove his fist for Lee's chin.

With a lightning-like movement Nelson Lee side-stepped, and, dodging Tony's left, got in beneath the other's guard. With a swift motion he pinioned the young fellow's arms, and then, bracing with his leg, bent him slowly backwards until the cords stood out on Tony's forehead with the agony of the pain.

In Nelson Lee's arms he was helpless as a baby, yet he would not give in until he must. But Nelson Lee knew just how far to go. When he saw that Tony was on the point of breaking, and not wishing to humiliate him before the others, he suddenly released his hold and straightened up.

"There," he said, as he pushed Tony away from him, "I told you not to be a fool. Don't try to quarrel with me, Tony. Loyalty to your friends is a very fine quality, but be sure your friends are worthy. If you have got back your senses, come with me. I wish to speak to you."

"I'll see you further," muttered Tony, as he straightened his collar.

"You will come with me, Tony," said Nelson Lee evenly. "I have things to say to you which cannot be said here."

Something in Lee's tone made Barron look at him; then, without a word, he turned and made for the door.

Nelson Lee followed close on his heels, leaving a very uncomfortable crowd of players behind him. Straight past the bar and up the stairs to the floor above went Tony until he reached the lobby. There he turned to Lee.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"The ladies' room will do," replied Lee. "There will be no one there at this hour."

Tony nodded, and, making for the ladies' room, pushed open the door.

"Now then, Tony," said Lee, when they had walked the length of the room, "I want to say just a few words to you. It will be foolish for you to take offence, for I would not take the trouble to say them unless I liked you and had confidence that you are sound at heart. You well remember what a fool you made of yourself before you joined up. You threw money about like water. When you got your commission you seemed to steady down, and I had hopes that you had put all your wasteful habits behind you.

"Then your engagement to one of the nicest girls in all London followed. She was a prize worth winning, and many a man envied you. Now you have started it all over again, and not only are you spending too much money, but you are borrowing from the money sharks to do it. To complete matters you have parted in anger from your fiancée, and the engagement is broken."

"How do you know that?" asked Tony sulkily.

"Because I have just left Mademoiselle Targenoff," replied Lee. "Her father is a close friend of mine, and when his daughter is made as unhappy as you have made her, I think it is time I took a hand. In addition, you are giving your mother a great deal of worry. I do not care to bring up old matters, Tony, but I think, considering the fact that I was an intimate friend of your father, it is up to me to talk to you and to remind you of the tragedy of his later years. Now, then, will you play the man or not?"

Tony Barron stood close by the same chair where Sonia had sat huddled up a little time before. He was glaring at Lee with an angry scowl, and it was plain to the detective that Barron had worked himself into the state where he considered himself the injured one.

Lee wisely said nothing more, but waited to see if the better part of the young fellow's nature would conquer. But the demon of perverseness was in Tony that morning, and after a short struggle he laughed in Lee's face.

"All right, old meddle-pot," he jeered. "You and Sonia have me lined up beautifully, haven't you? You think so, don't you? Well, this for you."

With that he thrust his hand in his pocket and took out his cigarette-case. Selecting a cigarette, he was just feeling in his pocket for matches when the door of the room opened and a page-boy entered. On a silver tray he bore some letters which he handed to Tony.

Tony gave the lad a shilling, and, snatching up the three envelopes which the tray contained, muttered an excuse to Lee and walked to the window with them.

One was a long, thick envelope, which apparently had come by hand, for it bore no stamp; one was a small square envelope which also bore no stamp, while the third was the orange-coloured envelope of a telegram.

Lee strolled across the room, and stood with his back to Tony, studying one of the great portraits which hung on the wall. He could hear the rustle of paper as Tony read his letters, then a sharp exclamation made Lee turn round.

He saw Tony reading the telegram, while a frown of irritation gathered on his brow.

"Isn't that the limit," Lee heard him mutter. "Just when the oof turns up I must go back to the Front."

Stuffing the telegram in his pocket he walked back towards Lee.

"As I was saying, Lee," he said, "I am about full up of your interference. I will now light my cigarette and bid you good-day."

Thrusting his hand in his pocket he fumbled about for a little, then his hand emerged clutching a ten-pound note.

Walking across to the fireplace, where a small fire burned, he deliberately thrust the note into the flame, and, when it had caught alight, calmly proceeded to light his cigarette with it.

Lee's lip curled with scorn as he saw the act of bravado, but he made no attempt to stop the other. When the cigarette was alight, and the note half-consumed, Tony dropped it to the floor and stamped out the flame; then, picking up the charred note, he twisted what was left of it into a ball and flicked it into a waste-paper basket.

Still Lee stood motionless, waiting until Barron should finish.

"It may interest you to know that I have just received a wire to return to the Front to-night," said Tony. "I leave this evening, so you and Sonia will be able to foregather and discuss my failings in peace."

Puffing leisurely, and humming a song, he turned and made for the door. Still Nelson Lee made no effort to stop him, and a moment later Tony passed out. A full minute Nelson Lee waited, then, walking across to the waste-paper basket, he took out the charred note which Tony had thrown there.

"I will keep it," he muttered. "When that young fool comes to his senses he may need it."

Thrusting it into his pocket, Lee made his way out to the lobby. He thought Tony must have returned to the poker-room, but an inquiry of the hall-porter elicited the information that Barron had got his hat and had hurried out of the club in the company of Grinton, the man whom Lee had threatened with expulsion from the club.

With a shrug Nelson Lee turned, and, getting his own hat, started down Dover Street towards Piccadilly. And as he walked along he little dreamed of the tragedy which was so close at hand, or of the part he himself would play in it.

As for Tony Barron, he had got hold of Grinton as soon as he had left the ladies' room, and had drawn him to one side.

"Look here, Grinton," he said, "I have just had two envelopes from old Jacobus. He sent the five thousand pounds which you arranged for. But it must have come some little time ago, for there is also a letter from him written after he sent the money. What is the matter with the old fool? He tells me that circumstances make it necessary for him to recall the five thousand loan, and that he must ask me to repay all existing loans without delay. He was anxious enough to fix me up before. Now why is he howling for the money almost before he has given it to me?"

Grinton, the gambler, stroked his moustache.

"I can't say, Tony, I am sure," he replied. "Perhaps you had better go along and ask Jacobus what it means."

"Well, I am willing to do that, but you know perfectly well, Grinton, that I cannot repay the loans at the present time. Anyway, the agreement was that they were to run until after my marriage."

Grinton said nothing, but still stroked his moustache. Nor did Tony

Barron dream that while he and Nelson Lee had discussed the breaking of Tony's engagement, Grinton had started to enter the ladies' room, and had overheard every word that was said.

He had withdrawn quickly before either Tony or Nelson Lee had seen him, and, hurrying to the telephone, had called up Jacobus, the moneylender. For it was Grinton who had led Tony to Jacobus, and had seen that the boy had plenty of opportunity for gambling.

Grinton knew, and Jacobus knew, that when Tony Barron was married to Sonia Targenoff he would have plenty of money to liquidate any claims against him. But what Tony did not know, and what Nelson Lee only suspected, was that Grinton was the creature of Jacobus, and that he was a member of the Paris Club solely to push forward business for Jacobus.

No sooner had he telephoned Jacobus, the moneylender, than Tony's engagement was off than the moneylender had sent a hurried note round to the club asking Tony to return the five thousand at once. And this was what had caused Barron to hurry from the club in the company of Grinton.

They had walked quickly along to the office of Jacobus, in Albemarle Street, and, entering the lift, were shot up to the first floor.

They were admitted to the offices of the moneylender by a gorgeously uniformed commissionaire, and conducted along to a richly furnished waiting-room. There they sat until the commissionaire returned to tell them that Mr. Jacobus would see them at once.

They went along a corridor to a room at the end. It was a room which at first glance impressed one as being over-furnished, and when one had an opportunity to take in the details one saw that this was so.

It was plainly the attempt of a man of limitations of taste to make it impressive to the game which entered.

At a large, flat-topped desk sat a clean-shaven man of middle age. His hair was curly, and his nose the beaked nose of a Hebrew. Mr. Jacobus was one of the great tribe. He nodded curtly to Grinton, and shook hands with Tony Barron.

"I am very sorry to have been compelled to write to you as I did, Mr. Barron," he said smoothly, "but I found just after I despatched the money to you that I must have it back. I suppose you have brought it with you?"

"Perhaps I have and perhaps I haven't," replied Tony. "But whether I have or not, Mr. Jacobus, I have come down to tell you that I shall stand by our agreement. I shall not return the money to you; nor shall I pay the other sums due to you until I wish. You have a funny way of doing business. Our agreement was that all the money would stand until after I was married."

"But I have understood that your engagement was broken," said Jacobus, as his eyes hardened. "Is that true?"

"Who told you that?" asked Tony angrily, while at the same time he was racking his brains to puzzle out how the news had spread so quickly.

"I am not at liberty to say, Mr. Barron," replied the moneylender. "If it is so, then you must see that our agreement automatically ceases."

Tony Barron rose.

"There is nothing definite about it all," he snapped. "When my engagement is really broken, then I will tell you. Good-day!"

With that Tony strode to the door, and, opening it, stepped out into the outer hall. It was this door by which the callers of Mr. Jacobus usually departed, thus avoiding passing through the offices again.

Tony ran down the stairs to the street, and, with an angry scowl still on his face, hailed a taxi in Piccadilly.

Telling the man to drive to Belgrave Square, where his mother lived, he leaned back, muttering:

"The old shark! But how on earth has the news got out? I wonder if Nelson Lee is responsible? Old Jacobus is a magician to find it out so soon. I don't believe anything is hidden from him. He must have spies everywhere. Anyway, I shall be out of London to-night, and he can whistle for his money. Perhaps I shall stop a bullet over in France. Quien sabe?"

On reaching home Tony Barron went straight to his room, and, ringing for his man, ordered him to pack at once. Passing from his sitting-room into his bedroom, he was just about to enter the bathroom, when on his dressing-table he caught sight of a photograph of Sonia Targenoff.

He stopped before it; and, leaning forward, studied the features of the girl whom he had made so unhappy that day.

"I am a brute," he muttered huskily. "You are the best little girl in the world, and I treated you abominably. Sonia dear, I am sorry, and I will stop playing the fool. I swear that from to-day I will not touch another card. I'll write you to-night, little girl, and ask your forgiveness."

Picking up the photograph, he made to thrust it into his pocket when his hand came into contact with the thick envelope containing the money which old Jacobus had sent to the club.

Five thousand pounds there had been until Tony had used one of the notes in his act of bravado before Nelson Lee. Now there should be four thousand nine hundred and ninety pounds.

Laying down the photograph of Sonia, he drew out the thick packet of notes and hastily ran through them. The amount was correct, and thrusting them back into the envelope he stood for a moment gazing about the room.

"I sha'n't want this money in France," he muttered. "I could pay it back to old Jacobus now, but I'll let the old villain sweat for a while. Where can I place them until I come back from France again. Ah, I have it!"

Striding across the room, he paused close to the fireplace, and, pressing a small projection in the carved pattern of the white panelling, released a hidden spring. A smaller panel set in the large one opened, revealing a small square hole containing a few letters. Into this Tony Barron thrust the envelope containing the notes, and, closing the panel, walked back to the dressing-table.

Picking up Sonia's photograph again, he put it in his pocket just as his man entered to ask some question. So it was that Tony Barron unconsciously added to the mystery which was rapidly gathering on the heels of a tragedy.

Scarcely had Tony Barron left the office of Jacobus, the moneylender, when old Jacobus leaned across the desk, and said with a snarl at Grinton:

"A pretty mess this is, isn't it? You have the brains of a rabbit! Since that young fool became engaged to this Targenoff girl I have let him have over twenty thousand pounds in all. Now the engagement is all off, and I shall probably have to whistle for my money. But you can make up your mind that I shall not lose it. You will have to make it up in other commissions."

Grinton sat silent for a little, then he got to his feet. His eyes were hard, and his face worked with the violence of the storm of anger which was sweeping over him.

"You fiend!" he raved. "Ten years ago I got into your clutches, and since then you have made me nothing but your creature. Ten years ago I was a decent man, and could look my fellow man in the eye. Now what am I—a tout for you! Ten years ago I owed you five thousand pounds which

I found myself unable to pay. You discovered that I had forged my father's name to the guarantee, and well have you used your knowledge.

"You closed your grip upon me, and since then have been merciless. Touting for you as I have done, I have brought you business which has repaid my indebtedness to you over and over again. You set me on to young Barron. In order that you might get him in your clutches I became a member of the Paris Club, and on every occasion urged him to play. When his money ran out I brought him to you. Now that you see that your schemes were not quite so clever as you thought, you tell me that I must liquidate the amount from my commissions. And I tell you I will not. I am sick of the whole thing.

"In the attempt to ruin young Barron I have seen exactly how I stand. You bring nothing but ruin and unhappiness to those with whom you deal, Jacobus. You can do your worst, but I cannot and will not pay up for Barron."

"You will do as I tell you to do, or you will find yourself behind the bars," snarled Jacobus.

"And I say I won't!" snapped Grinton. "You can do what you wish."

Jacobus drew open a drawer of his desk, and taking out a folded paper held it up.

"Do you see this?" he asked, with a sneer. "This is the guarantee which you forged. Now, then, my friend, what do you say?"

"I say this," cried Grinton—"I say that I will tear it from you!"

He sprang forward as he spoke, and the next moment he and Jacobus crashed to the floor together.

The moneylender tried to utter a cry, but Grinton's fingers were at his throat, and the cry was choked off in a gurgle. Then, in a frenzy of rage, Grinton drove his clenched fist full into the other's face.

Jacobus squirmed and worked out from beneath Grinton. He struggled to get to his feet, but once more Grinton was on him, and the moneylender crashed back heavily.

As he did so his head came into violent contact with the corner of the desk, and as a great crimson stream poured down his face he dropped back inert.

Startled by the sight of the blood, Grinton started back, and, kneeling beside Jacobus, attempted to lift his head. But the head rolled back in a way which was sinister, and which sent a cold chill down the spine of the other.

Swiftly now he worked, opening the other's coat and laying his ear over his heart. Next he felt the pulse, but a moment later the truth came home to him, and he staggered to his feet.

"By Heaven!" he muttered wildly. "I have killed him! He is dead! What in Heaven's name shall I do?"

Running his fingers through his hair he paced up and down the office in a state of agitation, until suddenly he bethought himself of the door which led to the other offices.

Swiftly he strode to it, and softly turned the key. As he made his way back to the desk he muttered:

"I must get out of here before this is discovered."

Mechanically he took up the forged guarantee which for so many years Jacobus had held over his head. It seemed strange reading after all those years, and as David Grinton re-read the folly of his youth, his mind went back to the days when he was only on the threshold of life, as was young Tony Barron.

One little mistake, and he had been turned from a wild young fellow, who might have settled down, into a crook and a moneylender's tout.

Folding up the paper, he thrust it into his pocket. Just then he saw an

open letter on the desk, and recognised it as the one which Jacobus had sent to Tony Barron at the club, and which had demanded the return of the five thousand pounds. Grinton picked it up.

"Dear Mr. Barron," he read—"I am sorry to inform you that it will be necessary for you to bring me back the five thousand pounds which I just sent you. For certain urgent business reasons this is necessary. Knowing you as I do, I am sure you will meet my request promptly. I shall be in the office until three o'clock this afternoon.—Yours faithfully,

"EMMANUEL JACOBUS."

As he finished reading the letter, Grinton lifted his head and stared at the opposite wall.

"Why shouldn't I?" he muttered. "I have never had a chance, and now, with that guarantee in my possession and Jacobus dead, I have one. I really did not murder him, and they can prove nothing. It was an accident. But if I leave this letter here it will throw them off the scent until I get away safely. The only thing is how to get past the commissionaire and—Ah, I have it!"

Striding swiftly to a huge, full-length portrait which hung behind the desk of Jacobus, Grinton ran his finger along the frame and pressed a catch. Immediately the painting swung back, revealing the fact that behind it was a small staircase.

Grinton had not been Jacobus's tout for ten years without knowing something about the man, and he knew this staircase led to the rear of the building, and was often used by the dead man when he wished to enter or leave his office unseen.

Leaving the way open he returned to the desk, and, bending over the dead man, rapidly went through his pockets. A thick wad of notes and a handful of gold rewarded his efforts, and jamming the whole lot into his own pocket, Grinton made for the opening in the wall.

He stood there for a moment, gazing about the office; then, closing the secret door after him, he started down the narrow staircase which he knew would take him to the street unseen.

He came out into a narrow alleyway at the back of the building, and, closing a small door after him, strode rapidly along until he came to a small street which would take him up to Piccadilly.

He was agitated and upset, and knew that, hard as he tried to hide it, the effects of what had happened must show on his features. Stopping at a corner saloon he ordered a stiff brandy-and-soda, which he drank off at a gulp. He drank a second one; then, with the spirit coursing through his veins, he walked swiftly up Piccadilly until he came to Dover Street.

Ten minutes later Grinton was sitting in the poker-room at the Paris Club, playing cards as though he had not a care in the world.

And all the time the stark body of Emmanuel Jacobus lay on the floor in the moneylender's office with the blood soaking into the rich carpet.

At seven o'clock that same evening several things took place which had more or less bearing on the actors in the tragedy which had taken place that afternoon. At seven o'clock, just as she was dressing for dinner, a note was brought to Sonia Targenoff.

While her maid dressed her hair, Sonia tore open the note and read it, and her breast rose and fell softly as she saw that it was from Tony Barron.

"Dear Little Girl," she read—"Something has happened to-day which has made me realise exactly what a brute I have been. I love you truly and

dearly, Sonia, and I want you to forgive me for being such a brute to-day—that is, if you can. I have sworn never to play again, Sonia, and I will keep my word. I am off to France at seven to-night. If you get this in time, do send me word that you have forgiven me. All my love, dear.—TONY."

At the same moment when Sonia was reading Tony's note, Tony himself was entering a train at Victoria Station on his way back to the Front.

At exactly one minute past seven the commissionaire at the offices of Jacobus, the moneylender, forced his way into his master's private office to discover with horror the thing which lay on the floor by the desk, and even as he bent over the ghastly sight David Grinton sat down to dinner at the Paris Club.

Nor was that all. At five minutes past seven Nelson Lee entered his dressing-room to dress for dinner. According to his custom he took from the pockets of the suit he had been wearing his cigarette-case, his watch, his keys, and his money, and in doing so discovered to his chagrin that the charred ten-pound note which he had thrust into the pocket of his waistcoat was no longer there.

CHAPTER III.

Nipper Does Some Sleight-of-Hand Work in the Tube Lift—A Strange Haul—Nelson Lee on the Case—Hypotheses.

ENTIRELY unaware of the somewhat upsetting day which Nelson Lee had had, Nipper, who had been in the neighbourhood of the docks at Poplar most of the day, caught a 'bus as far west as Holborn late in the afternoon, and, descending there, made his way to the underground station of the Piccadilly Tube.

He had been on an investigation of minor importance for his master, and before going along to Gray's Inn Road to make his report, intended making a call at Piccadilly Circus on a little matter of his own.

Entering the lift at the Holborn Station he stood back against the side waiting while it should fill up and descend. There was a heavy rush of traffic at that hour, and the lift filled up remarkably quick. Jamming and jostling the crowd pushed along until Nipper heard the clang of the gates; then, pressing back out of the jam, he waited for the descent.

As he did so he became aware that a man just in front of him was acting in a very peculiar manner. The ordinary layman would have noticed nothing strange in the man's actions, but a plainclothes man or one of Nipper's experience would have grown suspicious at once. Nipper watched closely while the fellow pressed up close to an old gentleman who was making a futile attempt to snatch the news from his evening paper; then, squirming down, Nipper saw the fellow's hand go out, and a moment later it came back holding the old gentleman's watch.

Nipper said nothing, but watched while the pickpocket thrust the watch into his own pocket and began to edge away from the old gentleman. At the same moment the lift stopped and the gates clanged open. Nipper slipped forward, and as the pickpocket edged past him the lad's hand shot out. Ever so gently he insinuated it into the pocket of the thief, and, taking advantage of the crush, withdrew it swiftly.

His hand had come into contact with several articles in the thief's pocket, and without the slightest hesitation he had taken all he could clutch.

Ramming them into his own pocket he left the lift with the crowd, and

slipping along after the pickpocket, followed him to the Tube. As they went down the stairs Nipper caught sight of a plainclothes man from the Yard. He flashed a look of recognition at Nipper as the lad went past, and Nipper made a barely perceptible motion with his head.

The plainclothes man walked on for a little; then, turning, hastened after Nipper. As he came up with the lad, Nipper said, without moving his lips:

"Ripley, the man just ahead with the brown suit on, is a pickpocket. I caught him cold. Better grab him while you can. I'll fix up all the proof you need."

"Much obliged, Nipper," breathed the detective, as he hurried past. "I know that guy, but I haven't been able to catch him at his games. I'll take the risk and gather him in."

As Nipper saw that his man was safe, he hastened on after the old gentleman, whose watch had been lifted, and, entering the same carriage, sat down beside him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think this is your watch."

"Eh—eh! What's that?" snapped the old fellow.

"I said I thought this was your watch, sir," repeated Nipper, with a smile.

"Why, bless my soul, so it is! Where did you get this, my lad?" asked the old gentleman suspiciously.

Nipper, who saw that the other looked upon him as the possible thief, grinned broadly.

"It was picked from your pocket in the lift, sir," he said. "I saw the man take it, and just picked it from his pocket."

The old gentleman laid down his paper, and gazed sternly at Nipper.

"Is this a manufactured tale, my lad? Did you take this watch from my pocket, and then return it in the hopes that I would reward you? Answer me the truth now, my lad!"

Nipper almost laughed.

"You are wrong, sir," he said. "I told you what happened exactly as I saw it. Nor do I wish any reward for giving it back. But here comes Detective Ripley of Scotland Yard. He will tell you that I did not take it from you."

Detective Ripley came through from the smoking carriage beyond, pushing along a man clad in a brown suit.

Sighting Nipper, he guided his man to that seat, and, indicating to the other the inside, himself sat down on the outside of the seat.

Nipper bent over.

"Detective Ripley," he said, "this is the gentleman whose watch was taken. I have just returned it to him. I suppose you will want his name and address to use him as a witness?"

Ripley nodded, and, turning to the old gentleman, requested that he give his name and address.

Convinced now that Nipper had not been bluffing him, the old fellow was only too anxious to oblige, and when Nipper finally left the train at Piccadilly Circus it was in the company of the old fellow, who insisted on thanking him all the way up in the lift.

At the circus Nipper finally got rid of the other, and, hurrying along to the shop which he wished to visit, got through his purchases. Then, catching a 'bus at Shaftesbury Avenue, he was soon being borne along to Holborn. He got down at Holborn, and walked the rest of the way to Grays Inn Road.

It was just about seven when he walked into the consulting room, and, seating himself at the desk, began to write out the report of his investigations at Poplar. He had just started to write when the desk telephone

rang, and, drawing the instrument towards him, Nipper lifted off the receiver.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he called. "Yes, this is Nelson's Lee's house. Who is speaking, please! Oh, yes, Inspector Brooks. This is Nipper. I do not think the guv'nor is at home, but if you will hold the line a moment I will see."

At that same moment the dressing-room door behind Nipper opened, and Nelson Lee, clad in black evening trousers and white shirt, appeared.

"I am here, Nipper," he said. "Who wants me?"

"Oh, I didn't know you were here, guv'nor!" said Nipper. "It is Inspector Brooks calling from the Yard. He wants to speak to you." Turning back to the 'phone, he called: "One second, inspector. The guv'nor is here, and will speak to you."

Crossing to the desk, Nelson Lee sat down, and, taking the receiver in his hand, called:

"Hallo, Inspector Brooks! What is it? Yes, this is Lee! What? Murder, you say? Good heavens! I was going out to dinner, but, of course, I will come along at once! Jacobus, the moneylender? Yes, I understand it is difficult to talk over the 'phone. I shall join you at the office in Albemarle Street in less than half an hour. Right you are! Good-bye!" Hanging up the receiver Nelson Lee turned to Nipper: "Old Jacobus, the moneylender, has been murdered, my lad," he said curtly. "It is not surprising in a way, for he must have had a large number of enemies. We shall be able to make more of it when we have made an examination of the premises. Get your cap and prepare to come along. I shall finish dressing at once. While you are waiting, get on to Colonel Muirhead at the Paris Club, and tell him I regret that it will be impossible for me to dine with him this evening. Say that I shall endeavour to look in at the club between ten and eleven."

Lee hastened back to the dressing-room in order to complete his toilet, and Nipper put through a call to the Paris Club.

In five minutes Nelson Lee emerged, fully dressed, carrying a silk hat in his hand, and a silk-lined overcoat on his arm. Nipper helped him into the coat, and, getting his own cap, ran out to the street to hail a taxi.

It was about a quarter of an hour later when they drove into Albemarle Street, and from the fact that there were no loiterers in front of the building where Jacobus, the moneylender, had had his offices, it was plain that so far the news of the murder had been kept secret by the police.

Nelson Lee had been told very little by Inspector Brooks. The inspector had simply said that old Jacobus, the moneylender, had just been found murdered in his office, that the commissionaire had made the discovery only a few minutes before, and that he had 'phoned through at once to Scotland Yard.

Inspector Brooks had called up Nelson Lee before leaving the Yard, and, as they went up in the lift to the offices of the dead moneylender, Lee was not surprised to see the inspector there already.

A constable opened the outer door of the offices, and ushered them along the corridor to the private room of the dead man.

There Inspector Brooks was already at work, while standing by were two constables and the commissionaire, who had made the discovery. There were no signs of any other employees of the dead man.

Nelson Lee shook hands with Inspector Brooks, and followed the latter across to the desk where Jacobus had been accustomed to transact his usurious business. By the desk just as it had fallen, lay the body of Jacobus. Inspector Brooks had not moved it, but had left it until the arrival of Nelson Lee.

Before bending down to examine the wound, which had been the cause of death, Nelson Lee stood close beside the desk, and sent his gaze travelling about the room.

From the door by which the commissionaire had forced a way in, to the door by which the dead man's callers had usually departed, his gaze travelled, and from the second door to the corner where the great oil-painting hung. Then floor and ceiling received their share of attention.

Satisfied that he had a perfect mental photograph of the room, Nelson Lee dropped to his knees, and began his examination.

"Is the doctor on his way?" he asked the inspector.

The latter nodded.

"Yes, I sent for him at once. He should be here at any moment. I have only had time to make a most cursory examination myself, but to me it seems like a case of plain murder."

Lee said nothing, but continued his examination. First he gave a close scrutiny to the wound in the head. It was deep and sufficiently severe to justify one in thinking that it had been the cause of death—which it had.

But Nelson Lee did not stop there. He opened the shirt of the dead man, and slowly and methodically made an examination of the whole body.

That done, he allowed the body to drop back to its former position, and, squatting on his knees, began to endeavour to reconstruct the situation as it must have been before the death of the moneylender.

Beckoning to the commissionaire, he said:

"At what time did you last see your employer alive?"

"About one o'clock to-day, sir," answered the commissionaire. "He had two visitors at about that hour."

"I have all the information, Lee," put in the inspector. "I have the names and addresses of the two visitors."

Nelson Lee nodded, but, nevertheless, continued his questions.

"These two visitors," he said. "Did you admit them?"

"I did, sir," replied the commissionaire. "Mr. Jacobus was expecting them. They came in here, and I saw no more of them. You see, sir, it was the custom for any visitors to depart by that door there."

"Which leads out into the hall, I presume?" said Leo.

"It does, sir."

"Have you any idea what time the two visitors departed?"

"No, sir. I went out to lunch shortly after their arrival. It was two o'clock when I got back. I came along to this office, sir, but it was locked, so I thought Mr. Jacobus had gone out by the other door."

"What followed upon that?" inquired Lee.

"Well, sir, nothing much. This afternoon there were several callers to see Mr. Jacobus, and several telephone calls as well. I simply thought he had gone out for the afternoon, although it was unusual for him to lock the door of his office. It was about six o'clock that I began to get a little worried, for he always saw that things were put away each evening. When it drew round to seven o'clock I became very worried indeed, and decided to risk forcing my way into the office here. I did so, and found him lying just as you see him, sir. I telephoned at once to Scotland Yard, and that is all, sir."

"H'm!" grunted Lee. "Did anyone in the office see the two visitors depart?"

"Not in our office, sir."

"Is there a commissionaire on duty at the street door during the day?"

"Yes, sir. He is in the building now."

"Please have him up at once," said Leo.

The commissionaire turned to leave the office in order to find the man who had been on duty at the street door, and while he was gone Lee questioned the inspector regarding the identity of the two callers.

"What are their names, inspector?" he asked.

Inspector Brooks drew out a notebook, and, turning over the leaves, stopped at the last one on which there was any writing.

"Their names," he said slowly, "were Barron and Grinton—Anthony Barron and David Grinton. From what I can find out they were both fairly frequent visitors to these offices. Clients of Jacobus, I presume."

So absorbed was the inspector in his own deductions regarding the two men, who, from what they could find out, must have been among the very last to see the moneylender alive, that he did not notice the sudden tightening of the detective's jaws.

"Barron and Grinton," he mused. "Why, they must have come here direct from the club this morning. I wonder what it means?"

Getting to his feet he sat on the desk musing until the commissionaire returned with the man who had been on duty at the street door that day. He stood by the door fingering his cap nervously.

Nelson Lee nodded to him, and said:

"What is your name?"

"Wilkins, sir," replied the other.

"Well, Wilkins, do you know a Mr. Barron, or a Mr. Grinton?"

"Yes, sir, I know both the gentlemen very well, sir. They come here a good deal—Mr. Grinton particularly, sir."

"Did you notice them enter the building to-day, Wilkins?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I had just come back from my lunch. I go at twelve, sir. Mr. Barron and Mr. Grinton came in together, sir."

"And did you see either of them leave again?"

"Yes, sir. I saw Mr. Barron go out, sir. He went out about ten minutes to two."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about him, Wilkins?"

"Well, sir, I did notice that he seemed agitated—angry like, sir."

"I see. And Mr. Grinton? You did not see him go out?"

"No, sir; but he might have done so without my seeing him. You see, sir, I run the lift as well, and I might have been up at one of the upper floors. Very few people bother with the lift when going down from this first floor, sir."

"I see. That will do for the present, Wilkins. You will please remember that you are to keep a close guard on your tongue about what I have asked you."

After an awkward bow the man departed, never dreaming for a single moment that he had been standing within ten feet of a dead man.

When he was gone, Nelson Lee turned to the inspector:

"Is that about all the information you gathered, inspector?"

Inspector Brooks smiled.

"There is a little joker which I have saved for you, Lee," he said. "I was anxious to know what you thought of the case. But now that you have heard all the commissionaire can tell you, read this."

As he spoke the inspector drew out a folded sheet of paper and handed it across to Lee.

The detective took it, and, spreading it out, began to read. It was the letter which Jacobus had sent to the Paris Club, asking Tony Barron to return the five thousand pounds which had been sent on to him.

When Nelson Lee finished reading the letter, he passed it back to the inspector.

"You seem to have your mind made up, inspector," he said. "May I ask what conclusions you have come to?"

Inspector Brooks again smiled.

"This will be one of the quickest cases on record," he said. "I can't figure out just yet what part in this affair this man Grinton has had, but I fancy we will put our hands on the right man when we arrest Barron. I know a little about that young man. I know that he was spending money like water some time ago, and that he was in deep with his creditors before his engagement to the Princess Targenoff was announced.

"Then his credit jumped high, and lately he has been in the hands of the moneylenders, borrowing on his prospects as the husband of an heiress. This letter proves, that for some very strong reason, Jacobus wanted the five thousand pounds back. The question is, did Barron bring the money here with him, and, if so, did he hand-it back? I fancy we shall discover he did not give it to Jacobus.

"My theory is, that during the interview, probably after the man Grinton departed—for, remember, the commissionaire at the street door did not see Grinton go, which makes me think he must have left before Barron—they had a row, in which Barron struck the old man, causing his death.

"And, remember, Lee, the commissionaire at the street door noticed that Barron was in an agitated state when he left the building. Yes, I think it will be safe to put our hands on Barron without delay."

Nelson Lee had listened closely to what the inspector had to say. When the other had finished, he drew out a cigarette and lit it.

"Look here, inspector," he said, "why did you send for me to-night?"

"I thought it might interest you, Lee," replied the other; "but this time I guess there will be little opportunity for your deductive process."

"I am not so sure of that," rejoined Lee quietly. "I am not at all satisfied that Barron did this thing. You see, inspector, I happen to know Tony Barron rather well. I do not think he is capable of it."

"They are all capable of it when driven into a corner," responded the inspector.

At that moment a figure appeared at the door leading to the other offices of the suite. The inspector and Lee glanced at him sharply as he came into the room in a hesitating manner.

"This is the chief clerk," whispered the commissionaire to the inspector. "I 'phoned for him to come down, sir."

"Ah, very good!" replied the inspector. Then, to the new-comer, he said: "I understand that you are the chief clerk?"

"Yes, sir; I am," replied the man—a weedy specimen of a moneylender's clerk. "The commissionaire told me on the 'phone that something serious had happened."

"There has been something very serious," replied the inspector. "Your employer has been murdered."

"Mur—my heavens!" gasped the clerk, staggering back. "Mr. Jacobus murdered!"

"Sit down, and answer some questions," said the inspector curtly. "And for goodness' sake pull yourself together! When did you last see your employer alive?"

"This noon, sir," replied the clerk, in wavering tones. "It was about one o'clock, I think."

"Can you tell us anything to assist us?" went on the inspector.

"I don't think so, sir. I was talking to him just before Mr. Barron and Mr. Grinton called. He left me then, and I haven't seen him since."

"He said nothing to you, I suppose, about the reason for their visit?"

"Yes, sir, he did. He said that he expected Mr. Barron to bring in five thousand pounds."

"Ah! That is the five thousand which you loaned to Mr. Barron only this morning?"

"Yes, sir. We sent it to his club, and for some reason the guv—Mr. Jacobus wished it back. He sent a note to Mr. Barron, asking him to bring it down."

"Do you know if Mr. Barron did bring it back?"

"I do not know, sir. The guv'nor didn't give it to me to look up."

"H'm; And there has been no money found either on the body or in the room," muttered the inspector. "There seems to be a mystery about that five thousand pounds."

Nelson Lee was sitting on the edge of the desk smoking thoughtfully, and apparently listening closely to the conversation between the inspector and the chief clerk. But in reality his mind was working on another matter.

There had suddenly come to him the memory of his interview in the ladies' room at the Paris Club with Tony Barron that morning, just before Tony had left the club in the company of Grinton.

He remembered how, while they had been talking, a page-boy had brought in some letters for Tony, and that Tony had read them at once. Lee remembered, too, how Tony had acted with bravado a few minutes later, when he had lit his cigarette with a ten-pound note.

And with the thought Nelson Lee's mind went back to the poker-room, where they had been a few minutes before the interview. In the poker-room Tony Barron had had no ready money. He had lost heavily at the table, and was going to pay his debts with an I O U.

Yet he had had a ten-pound note in the ladies' room with which to light a cigarette. What did it mean?

Nelson Lee recalled, now, that Tony had fumbled in the breast-pocket of his coat before bringing out the note. Had that long envelope, which had been among the letters on the tray, contained the five thousand pounds which Jacobus had sent to the Paris Club? If so, then he must have had the money in his pocket when he went to see the moneylender. Did he give it back, or not? If Lee only knew that it would settle a very vexatious point.

The inspector had just said that no money had been found, either on the body, or the dead man, or in the office. Then what had become of the five thousand pounds? That was the trouble.

Nelson Lee did not believe for a single moment that Tony Barron had killed Jacobus. About Grinton he permitted himself to make no definite opinion. He had a shrewd suspicion that Grinton had been more or less of a tout for Jacobus, and he had further suspected that was the chief reason why Grinton had joined the Paris Club.

It had been proved that Grinton had entered the building with Tony Barron, yet, so far, there was no evidence regarding his departure.

An interview with either Barron or Grinton might settle that point. But it was plain, too, that the inspector had already made up his mind that Barron was the guilty man. He had jumped to the conclusion that the five thousand pounds was the basis of the quarrel, and that the quarrel had developed into the tragedy before them.

It seemed to Lee that the most important things to be done were to first get track of Grinton and Barron, and then to endeavour to trace the five thousand pounds.

He was recalled from his absorption by the inspector's voice.

"Mr. Jameson," he was saying to the clerk, "I want you to get to work at

once, and make out a full list of all the transactions Mr. Barron had with Mr. Jacobus. Also, I want you to make out a list of the notes which went to make up the five thousand pounds which Mr. Jacobus sent to Mr. Barron. You will have the numbers?"

"Yes, sir; we always take the numbers of notes."

"How was the money drawn?" asked Nelson Lee suddenly.

The clerk turned towards him.

"In notes, sir," he said. "They were, if I remember rightly, all ten-pound notes."

Nelson Lee nodded, and, rising, tossed away his cigarette.

"There seems to be nothing more for me to do here, inspector," he said.

"I think I shall be getting along. By the way, I may want to run in here and make an examination to-morrow. Will you be so good as to give instructions to the man you leave here that I am to be admitted?"

"Yes, Lee, of course. I will fix that all right. I shall go along myself as soon as the doctor comes. I am sorry the case appears so uninteresting. I thought it might prove a plum."

Lee smiled faintly, and beckoning to Nipper, who stood by the door, went out into the corridor.

"Well, my lad," he said, when they were outside, "what do you think of it?"

Nipper was silent for a little, then he said:

"Guv'nor, I'd like to know more about the movements of this man Grinton."

"And so you shall, my lad," returned Nelson Lee grimly. "We are going to locate him now, and, unless I am much mistaken, there will be work for you to do to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

Nipper on the Trail.

THERE could be no greater proof of the changeful power of the small things of life than the example formed by the peculiar workings of the mind of David Grinton, after the affair in the moneylender's office. Bad as he was, and crooked as he had been during the past ten years, he had never gone quite so far, and while there had been murder in his heart when he had hurled himself upon old Jacobus, it had come as a severe shock to him when he had looked down and seen that the old man was really dead.

And like such crises in the lives of men, the deed did not give Grinton the release for which he hoped. It was but the proof of the old adage, that two wrongs do not make a right.

Instead of being released from the bondage which had driven him to the deed, he was but deeper in the mire. He had, as will be remembered, gone straight to the Paris Club, and during the afternoon and evening had played poker as though nothing had happened.

But the natural resiliency of his mind had asserted itself shortly after dinner, and there had come upon him a full realisation of what he had done. And in the same moment even he himself began to realise that he had not escaped as he had hoped.

With realisation came thought, and with thought came cunning. How could he escape from the consequences of the crime? He was determined not to pay the price which men set upon such a deed if he could help it.

Then, as he pondered upon the matter, he remembered, as Nelson Lee had remembered, that Tony Barron was still to be reckoned with, and that he had gone out of the moneylenders office with five thousand pounds in his possession.

Grinton knew that Barron had had the money in his pocket, for Tony had let out that fact in the presence of the moneylender.

Furthermore, Grinton had deliberately left the letter which Tony had received from the moneylender lying on the desk, in order to throw suspicion on Barron.

Grinton counted a good deal on the chance of the secret exit to the office not being discovered, thus ensuring that his own departure from the office would be effectually hidden. In that case, it would be only Barron's word against his, and since there was strong evidence against Tony then, it seemed on the face of it that Grinton had really little to fear.

Now, when he had convinced himself of that, Grinton's mind immediately set itself to work to discover if there were not some way by which he could further benefit by the affair.

Five thousand pounds! What would Tony do with it. Grinton knew that Tony was leaving for the Front that same night. If he had obeyed orders, he would be already on his way there. Had he done so?

Had the police not yet suspected him of having a part in the death of the moneylender? Or, if they did suspect him, had they not yet acted? What would they do if they suspected him, and he were at the Front?

Would they bring him back to stand his trial? Undoubtedly. But, supposing Tony should go straight into the trenches, and supposing—supposing he stopped a bullet? It was a certainty that he would be inclined to be reckless.

Grinton remembered the breaking with Sonia Targenoff. By the time he got away from the club and the gaming, Tony would begin to realise what a fool he had been, and in his self-disgust he would throw himself into the fray with a disregard for consequences which was a part of his nature.

But that five thousand pounds! Even Tony would hardly take that amount in notes to the Front with him. And if he had gone, as he had intended going, then he would have found it impossible to place the money in a bank. Then what would he have done with it?

Like a flash there came to Grinton the memory of one day when he had gone to Tony's house with him. He remembered distinctly how Tony had needed some money that day, and had gone to a small compartment which was set in the wall by the fireplace.

On that occasion Tony had joked about his secret chamber, as he had called it, telling Grinton that it was the receptacle for his letters and valuables. Was there any chance that he would put the five thousand pounds in there before leaving for the Front?

The very thought of such a thing made Grinton's pulses leap. If the money were there, could he get it? Five thousand pounds would put him right. With that sum of money and his own native shrewdness he could soon make it into a much larger sum.

And now, while the whole business was still complicated, was the time to try to get possession of it. But first to find out if Tony had really departed for the Front.

Getting up from his seat in the smoking-room at the Paris Club, Grinton walked down the main staircase to the ground floor, and calling a page, ordered him to call up Barron's house on the telephone.

It was only a few moments before the page called him to the booth, and, taking up the receiver, he called "Hallo!"

A woman's voice at the other end answered him, and, ascertaining that it was one of the maids, Grinton said:

"Can you tell me if Mr. Barron went to the Front to-night as he intended? I am a friend of his and wished to see him before he left town if possible."

"Mr. Barron left early this evening for France," came back the reply. "He was to leave Charing Cross at seven o'clock."

"Thank you!" replied Grinton. "I shall write him at the Front."

"Will you leave your name?" came the inquiry.

But Grinton hung up the receiver without answering, and leaving the telephone booth, made his way back to the smoking-room.

For fully half an hour he sat there pondering deeply, but at the end of that time he rose, and descending to the cloak-room, got his hat.

Ten minutes later David Grinton was passing up Piccadilly, walking briskly towards Hyde Park Corner. And that same morning, when he had got out of bed, David Grinton had not dreamed that before another twenty-four hours had passed, he would not only have the death of a man on his soul, but would be a thief as well—a thief first from the instinct of self-preservation, and secondly from self-greed.

It was the inevitable contretemps of ten years of crooked living. If he had only known that Nelson Lee, the man who that afternoon had arraigned him in the poker-room at the Paris Club, and had so easily read through the purpose of his membership there—if he had only known that Lee was on the case, it is just possible that Grinton would have thought twice before making a further move so soon after the death of Jacobus.

But he didn't know, and confident in his own ability to throw any vague suspicion from himself, he strode on towards Kensington, determined to get into Tony Barron's house in some way and to search that compartment by the fireplace.

Down into Knightsbridge he went until he came to the great shops. There he turned to the right and continued his way until he reached Brookton Gardens, where the Barrons lived.

Dodging his every footstep was a slim youthful figure, which had picked up his trail the moment he had left the Paris Club, and had hung close to him ever since.

Straight from the office of the pawnbroker in Albemarle Street had Nipper gone, and, ascertaining that Grinton was in the club, had taken up his post outside in order to wait. His orders from Nelson Lee were to get on the track of David Grinton and to keep him in sight that night.

Nipper had done so, and now, as Grinton paused in the shadow by the Barrons' house, Nipper also lurked close at hand, watching his quarry and wondering what was his purpose.

To a daring man it was not such a difficult matter to get into the Barrons' house, and when one considered that Grinton was not only daring, but had no small knowledge of the arrangement of the interior of the house, it can be understood that he was hardly in the position of a man who had never before set eyes on the place he proposed visiting by a means which the law frowns on.

Grinton knew that Tony Barron's rooms were situated on the first floor of the house, and that both the bed-rooms of the suite which his mother allowed him overlooked the garden at the rear.

If Grinton could but gain access to the rooms without being observed he would be comparatively safe, for now that Tony had left for the Continent it was unlikely that any of the servants would enter the rooms.

Grinton, now that he had made up his mind to take the plunge, wasted no time. Boldly opening the front gate of the place he made his way

round to the garden at the rear and stood gazing up at the windows of the rooms which were his objective. It was now well on towards eleven o'clock. The night had clouded over and there was a chill wind, with the promise of rain in it, blowing from the east.

The house itself was in darkness, for ordinarily Mrs. Barron retired early, and it was only natural that she should seek her room particularly early on a night when she had no small load of sorrow to carry.

It must have come as a good deal of a shock to her to know that the engagement between Tony and Sonia had been broken off, though it would be impossible for her to find any blame for Sonia, no matter how lenient she might wish to be with her son.

Then for Tony to leave again for the Front lot-foot on such news would be about the finish of things for her, and well had Grinton calculated on this.

Just beneath Tony's rooms was the dining-room of the house, from which there projected a wide bay-window. If Grinton could reach the top of this it would be comparatively easy for him to force an entry into the rooms, for the lower end of the windows came down almost to the top leads of the bay-window beneath.

Scouting about the garden, Grinton searched about for a ladder, and at last, near a small gardener's shed which stood against the rear wall, he found what he sought.

Stealing across with it, he planted it firmly beneath the bay window, and, after another cautious look at the house, began to climb.

Nipper, who had stolen into the grounds after his quarry, and had lain in the shadow watching his every action, now crept forward, and as Grinton reached the top of the bay-window, Nipper dodged across to the foot of the ladder.

Crouching there the lad heard muffled sounds up above as Grinton worked his way along the leads, and then a gentle tap-tapping as the other tried to force the catch of the window.

A few minutes only did this sound last, then Nipper heard a soft rubbing sound as of a window being pushed up; then there was silence from above, broken only by the rustling of the trees in the wind and the distant roar of the city beyond the secluded garden.

"He's made it," breathed the lad softly. "He's in those rooms. I wonder whose house this is, and why he has broken in there in that fashion? Funny thing for a West End clubman to do, if you ask me. But it's a safe bet he's up to no good. If he had been on the level he would have gone in by the front door. I'll just take a trip up and see if I can spot what he's doing."

Seizing hold of the ladder, Nipper started to ascend. Just as his eyes came above the top of the bay-window, a gleam of light broke out ahead of him, and before the blind of the room was drawn, he caught a fleeting glimpse of David Grinton standing just by the window with his hand on the blind cord.

The lower sash of the window was wide open, and so far Grinton had made no attempt to close it.

Working his way from the ladder on to the leads, Nipper made his way with infinite caution across the top of the bay-window, until he was crouching just beneath the window of the room in which he had seen his quarry.

Then ever so gently Nipper lifted his head, and insinuating his fingers beneath the blind, peered into the room.

He saw a well-furnished sitting-room, with a number of fine pictures on the wall. Against a large library table, which stood in the centre of

the room, Grinton was leaning in the attitude of one listening intently. Even as Nipper looked, Grinton stole across to the door of the room, and, bending his head, placed his ear against the door. For a full minute or more he stood thus, then, straightening up, he tiptoed across to the fireplace.

By twisting his head, Nipper could just see what he was doing. He saw Grinton stand by one side of the fireplace for a little and fumble about for a few minutes.

Then Nipper saw a small white panel swing open, revealing a square opening. Into this Grinton thrust his hand, and when it emerged, Nipper saw that he was clutching what appeared to be a bunch of paper.

And from the exultant look on Grinton's face Nipper knew that the man had found that for which he had broken into that quiet house in Brookton Gardens.

Grinton now came back to the table in the centre of the room, and, bending over it, spread out the papers he held in his hand. It was then that Nipper saw he was clutching a large roll of banknotes.

Feverishly Grinton counted the notes, then, thrusting them into his pocket, stole back to the fireplace and closed the panel. That done, he took another look round the room and switched out the light.

So rapid had been his last movements that Nipper was caught napping for the moment. He knew that Grinton would come through the window in a moment or two now, and to be quite safe he should have already started down the ladder.

He could but make the best of it, however, so slipping backward along the sloping top of the bay-window, he felt behind him with his foot for the ladder. He was still frantically feeling for it when the window-blind was thrown up and a dark figure came out over the sill.

Had it not been that Grinton's eyes were still somewhat blinded by the glare of the light which had been in the room he must have seen Nipper at once. As it was he did not appear to do so, and while he started to draw down the window after him, Nipper slid further along towards the ladder.

Then happened one of those things which Fate loves to spring upon us at the most awkward moment. Nipper, in feeling for the ladder, was pushing his foot this way and that frantically.

In his efforts, his foot suddenly caught the ladder when he least expected it to do so. The result was that the ladder was shifted along the edge of the bay-window a good foot or so, and the noise which it made rose with a dull grinding sound above the wail of the wind.

Nipper heard a startled exclamation above him as Grinton heard the noise, and then risking all in flight, Nipper slid boldly down the rest of the distance, caught hold of the ladder somehow, and wrapping his legs about the standards slid down to the ground.

He heard a scraping sound above him as Grinton came after him, and scarcely had he touched earth when a great bulk slid down the ladder after him.

Nipper's first instinct was to run. He knew that he could gain nothing by making a stand of it, and he desired as little as did Grinton, that the household should be aroused.

He had been ordered to get on to Grinton's trail, and to stay there but not to be discovered. Now he was discovered, and unless he were to incur Nelson Lee's keen displeasure, he must decide quickly what he should do.

On this occasion, the decision was taken out of his hands, for before he had time even to run for it, a great weight hurled itself upon him and he went down with a crash.

Nipper struggled fiercely as thick fingers sought his throat, but with the

fury of the attack he might have stood as much chance against a whirlwind. To put it plainly, Grinton had been startled in no uncommon manner by the lad. He was in a panic lest he should be discovered, and in his funk he exerted far more strength in his attack than was necessary.

He was a powerful man at any time, and could easily have taken care of the lad without throttling the breath out of him, as though his own life depended on how thoroughly and how quickly he did the job.

Over and over they rolled on the ground, with Grinton striving to overcome Nipper as quickly as possible, and Nipper, on his part, trying to get his voice free long enough to call out. Heavier and heavier grew the weight of the man upon him, tighter and tighter grew the awful grip on his throat.

Lights danced before his eyes, and his senses whirled in a madly-tossing mist of red; then the red merged into an ocean of black, and, with his tortured throat throbbing violently, Nipper dropped away into an ocean of black eternity.

David Grinton got to his feet, panting heavily. Standing at the foot of the ladder he gazed down at the unconscious figure of the lad at his feet, then up at the windows which opened on to the room from which he had just come.

For good or evil—and in his heart he feared now it would be evil—he had taken the great step. He was an outlaw, as the law knows the meaning of the word. It had been comparatively easy for him to slip away from the scene of his big crime. Could he get away from the scene of this one?

With a black look of hatred up at the windows of the rooms above, and a curse for the dead Jacobus, he bent down, and, lifting up the unconscious body of the lad, started for the wall at the rear. Throwing the lad down in the shelter of the wall, as though he were a bundle of rags, Grinton climbed over the wall.

He stole down the lane at the rear, and, turning to the right, came out once more into Brookton Gardens. From there he made his way into Knightsbridge, walking along until he came to the Hyde Park Hotel.

He entered the hotel, and, discovering the telephone booth, called a number. From the tenor of his conversation it was plain that he was talking to a man with whom he was on intimate terms, and one whom he knew would do his bidding, for in a curt tone he bade the one at the other end of the line to "get out the car, drive at once to the corner of Brookton Gardens, and to wait there until he was needed."

With that he closed off, and, striding out of the hotel, made his way back to the garden at the rear of the Barrons' House.

Climbing over the wall once more, he crept stealthily along to the place where he had left Nipper. The lad lay just as he had been thrown down, and, picking him up once more, Grinton hoisted him over the wall.

Before getting over himself he went back to the bay-window, and, taking away the ladder which stood against it, carried it back to the gardener's shed from the side of which he had taken it.

He next climbed over the wall, and, again picking up the body of the lad, staggered along the lane with it until he came to the corner. There he deposited Nipper; and, lighting a cigarette, strolled leisurely along to the corner of Brookton Gardens.

To see him as he stood idly by the street corner, any casual passer-by

would have taken him for but a highly respectable member of the neighbourhood taking the evening air before retiring.

Little would they have dreamed that the man who stood on the corner was he who was responsible for the death of the moneylender Jacobus—the news of which had in some mysterious fashion leaked out, and was already the talk of the restaurants and clubs.

He stood there perhaps ten or twelve minutes before a large black touring-car turned into the gardens from the direction of Knightsbridge, and, driving slowly to the curb, drew up beside the spot where Grinton stood.

With a scarcely perceptible nod, Grinton slipped back along the way he had come, and, picking up Nipper, started for the car. He walked rapidly, and on reaching the car dropped the body into the tonneau. Climbing in himself he said curtly:

"Drive to a place in Woodberry Down, Dickson; and, for Heaven's sake, drive quickly."

With a nod the man at the wheel started the car, and they went thundering round the corner into Knightsbridge. Along Knightsbridge the big car tore until they came to Hyde Park Corner.

At the Corner they turned down Piccadilly, swung into Bond Street, along Bond Street to Hanover Square, thence into Regent Street, and on into Great Portland Street. Along Great Portland Street they went at a rapid pace, for there was little traffic there at that hour of the night. From Great Portland Street into Albany Street the great car roared then on to Camden Road, and so past the Nag's Head into Seven Sisters Road, until at last they came to the Manor House Corner at Finsbury Park.

Here the car swerved suddenly, taking a turning to the right, and then down a heavily shaded road until it drew up before a large, gloomy-looking house set well back from the road.

The driver jumped out now, and, opening the main gates of the place, fixed the catch to hold them open until he should drive in.

When the car was panting before the high portico of the house, he went back and closed the gates. Then standing by the car he said:

"Well, you are here. Now what is the game?"

"Never you mind what the game is," snapped Grinton. "You will do as I tell you and keep your mouth shut."

"Oh! I'll keep my mouth shut all right," replied the other. "I owe you too much money to do anything else. But I suppose I can ask what the game is, seeing you have a body in the tonneau. If there is going to be any mix up over this then I want to know it."

"You fool," snarled Grinton. "The lad isn't dead. He is only unconscious."

"Well, even so," rejoined Dickson, "I want to know what is going on."

Grinton whirled upon him suddenly.

"Look here, Dickson, it strikes me that for a man in your position, you are too curious about this case. Since you came into my debt, I have been very lenient with you. I have allowed the debt to stand, and beyond using your car occasionally, have made no demands upon you. But if you thought I would forget the debt you made a mistake in your estimate of David Grinton. Things have developed quickly with me to-day. I have got into a tricky position, and only radical measures will ensure my safety. Now help me into the house with this lad, then drive away and hold your tongue. If you do that I will cancel the debt you owe me, and give you five hundred pounds besides. Will that do?"

"I guess that sounds like a fair offer," responded Dickson, with a strong

nasal twang. "It will let me get out of this town and get me back to little old New York. Come on, let's get the body into the house."

Grinton shuddered slightly as Dickson spoke of "the body," but opening the door of the tonneau he dragged the lad out, and between them they carried him into the dark porch.

Unlocking the door, Grinton led the way along a hall which was lighted by a single electric bulb at the far end. There he opened a door, and turning a switch, revealed a sort of morning room.

He motioned for Dickson to lay the lad on a couch which stood against the wall. Then he whispered: "Get away as quickly as possible. Come to the Paris Club to-morrow afternoon about four o'clock, and I will fix things up with you."

Dickson made a muttered response of some sort, and, slipping back into the hall, made for the door.

Grinton stood motionless until he heard the front door close. He still stood by the couch until the distant purr of the motor told him that Dickson was in the main road, and was heading townwards.

Then leaning against the table in the centre of the room Grinton muttered: "What on earth am I to do with him. If I had left him in the garden he would have told all he knew when he became conscious. But I can't for the life imagine who he is or why he followed me. He had some definite purpose in doing so, and he must have seen everything I did while I was in Barron's sitting-room. With the light on he would recognise my features, and would be able to identify me again. My heavens! I wonder if it is possible that he was on my track for any reason connected with old Jacobus."

As the fear swept over him Grinton shrank back against the table and stared at Nipper's white face in wide eyed terror. For the first time Grinton was experiencing to the full, the terror of the hunted criminal.

Things had been dulled by the whisper that he was safe—he had lulled himself until then into a state of security. But now—now, if that lad had followed him for a reason connected with Jacobus, then he must already be suspected of the crime.

As this thought came to him the beads of perspiration broke out on the man's forehead, and his hand strove shakily to loosen his collar. It was as though he could already feel the rope of the hangman about his throat.

Staggering to a buffet he poured himself out a stiff dose of brandy and soda, and tossed it off at a gulp. Somewhat steadied by the raw spirit, he returned to the couch and bent over the lad.

"If you are on my track for that reason I'll—I'll kill you," he muttered.

Opening the lad's coat he began to go through his pockets. Pocket after pocket he turned out until he had quite a collection of articles on the table. Letters, money, a watch, keys, a pocket electric-torch, a small but powerful automatic, a cheque-book, a gold pencil, and a dozen other oddments were there.

As he read the name and address on the letters, David Grinton's heart went cold within him. "'Nipper,' care of Nelson Lee, Esq."

So this was the boy assistant of the great detective. Swiftly Grinton's thoughts went back to that morning in the smoking-room at the club, when Lee had pluckily arraigned him. Was the lad on his trail only for that reason? Was Lee out to get evidence against him which would cause his expulsion from the Paris Club? Or, was he after him for that other and greater affair?

Up and down the room Grinton paced in a panic of fear. To save his

life he could not think coherently. Whether Nipper were on his trail for one purpose or the other, it was plain that he must know Grinton as Grinton, and he would be in a position to swear that he saw him rob the secret compartment in Tony Barron's sitting-room. And what an easy step it would be from that to the crime in the office of Jacobus, the money-lender.

Grinton's hands twitched nervously as he thought how calmly and methodically Nelson Lee would make his deductions. Grinton could, in imagination, see the great criminologist as he sat in his big armchair, clad, as his numerous photographs showed, in a dressing-gown and smoking the eternal pipe, with eyes half-closed, thinking, thinking, thinking.

He could follow the thoughts of Lee as he recalled the fact that Grinton had visited the office of the moneylender with Tony Barron. Then he could imagine the detective asking himself why was there no one who had seen Grinton depart?

If Nipper appeared to tell his master that he had watched David Grinton rob the compartment in Tony Barron's sitting-room, what would the detective immediately conclude? The very thought of such a calamity made Grinton shiver. He could feel the cold steel on his wrists, and could hear the remarks of the mob as he was led away to prison. Then his thoughts led again to the rope, and with that vision there surged over him a red mist of anger at the unconscious lad.

Hurling himself towards the couch he beat upon the lad's face with his fists.

"Curse you for a meddling brat!" he almost screamed. "I will—I will kill you!"

He grew calm with an effort, realising that unless he proceeded with more caution he would run the risk of waking the servants. Getting to his feet, he stole across to the door and locked it. Then he made his way to some heavy curtain at the opposite side of the room, which, when they were drawn aside, revealed a small conservatory just off the morning-room in which he stood.

Tiptoeing through this conservatory he opened another door, and there was just light enough from the stars overhead—for the sky had cleared—to show a stretch of lawn and gardens, and beyond a patch of black water. Grinton was looking at the New River and part of the reservoir system of the City of London.

Going down the steps which led from the conservatory to the garden, he kept in the shadow and stole along to the bank of the river. He stood there for some minutes gazing cautiously about him. He knew, as every resident in that district knew, that the reservoir and river were patrolled by special constables, and that to carry out the plan he had in mind he must move with caution.

Satisfied that there was no one about to see him, he hurried back to the morning-room, and catching up the body of the lad, made his way through the conservatory. Down the garden he went until he once more reached the bank of the river. There he laid the body down, and, kneeling on the bank, watched the black water flow past.

He listened for any noise which might reveal the presence of a "special," but only the wind sighed through the trees. Then, drawing a deep breath, Grinton caught hold of the body and gave it a push. Easily it slipped into the black water of the river, and, kneeling there on the bank, David Grinton shivered and cursed as a something white bobbed up and down at the will of the current.

CHAPTER V.

Sonia Targenoff's Vision—Nelson Lee Recovers the Charred Note—Justice

ONLY Sonia Targenoff herself knew what a day of misery that day had been for her. From the moment she had left Nelson Lee in the morning she had suffered as only a girl of her intensity of feeling can suffer when she discovers that the man to whom she has given her love proves that he values it less than other things.

It is hard to conceive how any man could for a moment, weigh gambling in the balance with the love of Sonia Targenoff, but it is one of the mysteries of human nature which only the devil can answer.

Into the soul of man he drives the spur of his evil promptings by the fever of gaming, by the lure of drink, or by the reeking dregs of evil living. Tony Barron had made a fool of himself, and in doing so he had stabbed to the heart the girl who, only a short month before, had given him her love.

Therefore, it can well be understood what her feelings were when that evening brought her Tony's note of regret, and the promise to give up the things which were sapping his manhood. Yet, though she might love him, Sonia would not permit herself to take back the man who had treated her in the club that morning as Tony had treated her. He had come to his senses, but he must be made to suffer punishment. And so, though her heart might cry out for him, yet would she make no reply to his appeal. It would have a salutary effect to leave him in doubt for a little.

With returning happiness hammering at her heart, and the soft breath of love flushing her cheeks, Sonia took the letter to her breast, and, slipping from the house after dinner, made her way down to the bank of the river which ran at the foot of the garden, for the Targenoffs lived in a great house which backed on to the New River and the reservoir, which was also overlooked by the home of one of the chief actors in the drama which had started in the Paris Club that day.

How little did Sonia Targenoff dream, as she lay back in the low wicker-chair in the shelter of a great rosebush, and watched the black water which flowed so close to her, that the danger clouds were gathering rapidly about the man she loved, and through love was planning sweetly to punish him.

She must have fallen asleep over her dreaming, for when she opened her eyes it was with the realisation that she had had a most disturbing dream about Tony Barron.

She had dreamed that she saw him standing at the brink of a great cliff, gazing off at a wide stretch of blue sea. Then, while he stood there, a man crept up towards him from behind, and, stealing closer and closer, crouched as though to spring upon him.

In her agony of fear Sonia tried to scream out a warning to Tony, but with the paralysis of limbs and tongue which assails one in a dream she found it impossible to do aught but stand in frozen horror watching the dreadful fate which was threatening her lover.

Nearer and nearer the man drew to Tony; then, rising upwards, he hurled himself upon the unsuspecting man. Tony, with upthrown arms, staggered forwards towards the brink, his arms upraised as though to ward off the fate before him. He faltered, almost recovered, then staggered, and as the man raced away again he began to fall forward over the edge of the cliff.

At the same moment Sonia became aware that another man was racing towards the spot where Tony was still lurching about, and she had just time to recognise the face of the new-comer as that of Nelson Lee, when Tony was swept from her sight, and she awoke full of tremblings and fears.

Still shaken from the effect of the vivid dream which she had had, Sonia sat trying to recover her composure. Strive as she might to control her

fear, she could not help picturing the white face of her lover as he would have looked had he gone into the greedy sea over which he had stood. Then her heart fairly stopped for a moment, as, gazing at the black, sinister water so close to her, she suddenly saw a white face appear.

She almost screamed aloud with the shock of it, but a moment later, when the current brought a bobbing something in closer to the bank, she saw that it was no figment of the mind born of the vivid dream she had had, but a fearful reality.

Sonia tottered to her feet, and stood with trembling knees striving to conquer the terror and panic which assailed her. Something told her that that something was a human body, and as the white face once more bobbed up from the black depths she dropped to her knees with a moan.

Gasping and moaning inarticulately, she crept to the edge of the bank, and, conquering her terror by sheer will, thrust out her hand. As it came into contact with the thing before her it needed all her powers of control to keep from dropping it and screaming; but she hung on, and, assisted by the current, managed to drag the thing in to the bank. Then, summoning all her strength, she caught hold of the body by the shoulders and slowly dragged it on to the bank. Leaving it lying there, she turned and ran for the house.

Bursting in through the French windows of the great dining-room, she tore open the door and ran along the hall to the door of the library, where she knew her father to be.

"Father—father!" she cried, as she entered. "Come quickly! I have found a most awful thing!"

At the large desk sat a handsome, elderly man in evening clothes. He was writing as Sonia burst into the room, but as he heard her cry he sprang to her side.

"What is this, my child?" he asked sharply. "You are overwrought. Calm yourself!"

"No, no, father," she replied chokingly; "it is true! I have dragged a body out of the river. Oh, do come quickly!"

Seeing that something had really affected her strongly, Prince Targenoff—for it was that distinguished nobleman—assisted her to an easy-chair, and, allowing her to sink into it, strode to a small table on which stood a *tantalus*. Taking the stopper from a decanter of brandy he poured out a little and gave it to Sonia to drink; then, ringing for a servant, he ordered the man who answered to call Sonia's companion. When the woman—a Russian—appeared, Prince Targenoff ordered her to assist Sonia to her room, and, then he passed through the dining-room, and, by way of the long, French windows, to the garden outside.

Striding down to the bank of the river, he almost stumbled over the bundle which lay on the edge of the bank. He drew a sharp breath as, bending over it, he saw that it was actually a human body. Without a moment's hesitation he gathered it up in his arms and started back towards the house with it. Making his way through the dining-room to the library he laid the body on a couch, and once more reached for the decanter of brandy.

He rang for his own man as he passed the door on the way back to the couch, and then, just as he was about to pour some of the raw spirit between the lips of the unconscious figure on the couch, he staggered back with a startled exclamation.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "Am I mad?"

Setting down the brandy he bent over the figure, and, swinging a near-by light on to the features, gazed at them searchingly.

"It is young Nipper, the assistant of Nelson Lee," he muttered. "I will

swear to it, though the features are badly bruised. How did he come in the river in this condition? Is it too late?"

Snatching up the brandy once more, he poured some of the spirit between the lad's lips. When some had trickled down Nipper's throat, the prince set the decanter back on the floor, and was just beginning to chafe the lad's wrists when his man entered. Between them they went to work, using every method they knew to restore the drowning, and at the end of a quarter of an hour they saw the lad's eyes open.

Leaving his man to go on with the work, Prince Targenoff hurried across to his desk, and snatching the receiver of the telephone off the hook gave the number of Nelson Lee's house. A few moments later he heard Nelson Lee's cool tones coming over the wire.

Just at the moment when the telephone on his desk rang, Nelson Lee was sitting in the great easy-chair which he favoured so much, pondering on a very startling discovery which he had made. Only a few moments before he had come upon a strange assortment of articles which lay upon the desk.

That they had been placed there by Nipper was evident to him, but he, of course, did not know that they were the articles taken by the lad from the pocket of the sneak-thief in the Tube lift at Holborn. Watches, rings, a couple of ladies' purses, three gold pencils, a fountain pen chased in silver, a spectacle-case, and two scarfpins were the most evident of the things.

In the very middle of the pile lay a crumpled piece of paper, which Nelson Lee idly picked up and spread out. Scarcely had he done so when his chair went back, and he was on his feet at a bound.

"Well, of all the——" he began, in amazement. "This is the very charred note with which Tony Barron lit his cigarette at the club this morning! I am dead certain that I lost it from my pocket on my way home to-day. Now, how in the name of fortune does it come to be mixed up in this extraordinary heap of stuff, which the lad has thrown down here? I must confess that I do not understand it. I must certainly ask him when he returns.

"And that reminds me that I suspected something about that note. What was it? Ah, I remember now! If my surmise is correct, then Tony Barron had no banknotes down in the card-room. But after he received those letters in the ladies' room, he used this ten-pound note with which to light his cigarette. And I remember, too, that he fumbled for a few moments in his pocket before he produced it. The time he took would just about be sufficient for him to fumble about in an envelope containing notes, and to abstract one from it.

"I wonder—I wonder if that was the case. It would prove one thing to me if I only knew. It would prove that at the time I was talking to Tony Barron in the club, he already had possession of the five thousand pounds which it is claimed that Jacobus sent him. That, in turn, would mean that the money was in his pocket when he went with Grinton to see Jacobus.

"Did Tony Barron leave the office after that with the money still in his pocket, or did he not? That is the question. If he did not have it on him when he left the office, then what has become of it?

"There again Grinton is obtruded into the case. He seems to crop up at every turn, and yet it has not been proved, so far, how or when he left the office. But from the investigations I was able to make there, after the inspector departed, I think, Mr. Grinton, that I can suggest how you managed it.

"That secret way into the office, which was concealed by the large portrait behind the moneylender's desk was a clever idea of the old man's; but I

think, during your long association with Jacobus, Grinton, you must have known about it. If you did, and if you left the office by that way, then it was just as probable that you left the office after Tony Barron left it as that you left before.

"If you left after Tony Barron, then was Jacobus alive when you left Grinton? And if he was alive, then who killed Jacobus, David Grinton? If I can only prove that you were in that office after Tony Barron left, then, Grinton, I think I can make things uncomfortable for you.

"Nor do I like the finding of the letter addressed to Tony Barron. That was more like a deliberate plant than anything else. Motive for Grinton to commit the crime there is in plenty, but proof—actual irrefutable evidence—that he was there when Tony Barron left I must have to clear Tony.

"Inspector Brooks thinks that Tony did the deed. He does not know Tony, and I do. But this note which Nipper has dropped here is another point added to the mystery. That must be cleared up, and if the lad can only discover something about Grinton to-night, then it may give me a definite line to follow.

"One thing there is I can do. I can prove now whether this charred note was one of the lot which Tony received from Jacobus. Inspector Brooks got the numbers of those notes from the clerk at the office, and should be able to give them to me over the 'phone."

Striding to the 'phone, Nelson Lee called up Scotland Yard, and after a few minutes delay succeeded in getting Inspector Brooks on the line. In answer to his request, the inspector told Lee that he had received the numbers of the notes, and requested the detective to hold the line for a few seconds.

Nelson Lee heard his voice over the 'phone asking if he were there. When Lee had answered in the affirmative, Inspector Brooks began to read out the numbers of the notes. Nelson Lee jotted them down on a pad of paper as he heard the numbers, and the inspector had read off less than a dozen when Lee recognised the one which was the number of the charred note on the desk before him.

So it was from the lot of five thousand, after all! He took down a dozen or so more; then, telling the inspector that they would do, hung up the receiver. One point, at any rate, had been proved, and now if he could only locate the present whereabouts of the balance of the five thousand, he would be a long way ahead in his investigation.

It was while he was still pondering over these amazing facts that the 'phone rang, and, with some surprise, he recognised the voice of Prince Targenoff on the line. Nelson Lee immediately jumped to the conclusion that the call had something to do with the estrangement between Sonia and Tony Barron, but a moment later, when he heard the startling news which the prince had to give him, he received a severe shock.

Lee only paused to acknowledge the message, and to say that he would be out at Woodberry Down as quickly as possible before he rehung the receiver. Something of a serious nature had happened to Nipper, and before that major fact all other matters must be thrust aside. Prince Targenoff had said little, but his voice more than anything else had told Nelson Lee that the matter was one for his immediate attention.

Slipping on his coat and grasping his hat, he hurried from the consulting-room to the street. He was fortunate to see a taxi crawling along close to the kerb, and jumping in, told the man to drive with all speed to the Manor House corner, at Finsbury Park.

Lee was a prey to the greatest anxiety during the run there, and when the cab turned down from the Manor House to Woodberry Down, he leaned out of the window and told him to go still faster.

At last he arrived at the big place where the Targenoffs lived, and curtly bidding the man to wait, opened the gate and hurried up the path.

His ring was answered almost at once by a manservant, who evidently already had his instructions, for he led Nelson Lee straight through to the library.

On the threshold he paused, and gazed in dismay at the figure on the couch. The next moment he had shaken hands with the prince, and was hastening forward to the lad. Taking Nipper's hand in his, he bent over the couch.

"I am very, very sorry about this, my lad. What has happened? And who is responsible?"

Nipper shook his head weakly.

"I don't know exactly, gov'nor," he replied. "I haven't the faintest idea how I got here."

Prince Targenoff moved forward.

"I can explain a little, Lee," he said; "but I am afraid it won't be much. I was sitting here writing some little while back, when my daughter suddenly burst into the room in a state of panic. She had been sitting on the river-bank at the foot of the garden, and I thought she must have suddenly taken leave of her senses, for she cried upon me to come with her at once, that she had drawn a body out of the river. I rang for her maid, and had her taken to her room, then I went down the garden to find out what had occurred to upset her so.

"Imagine my consternation when I almost went headlong over a body on the very edge of the bank. It proved that she had only told what had happened. Undoubtedly she had drawn the body out of the river. I picked it up and carried it into the library here, and then I received a second shock when I saw that it was Nipper. He had evidently had a very serious time of it. Frankly, I thought at first he was dead, but my man and I finally managed to bring him round, and then I telephoned for you. But before he came on the bank of the river, I cannot tell you what happened. He must, if he can, explain that himself."

Lee turned back to Nipper.

"Do you feel up to it, my lad?" he asked gently.

"Yes, gov'nor," replied Nipper. "I want to tell you all I know of it, please."

"Then, go ahead, my lad, but do not hurry yourself. Take it easy."

Then Nipper began, and related to Lee all that had happened from the moment he got on to the track of his quarry at the Paris Club, up to the moment when Grinton had hurled himself upon him at the foot of the ladder in the Barrons' garden.

"I can't tell you what happened after that, gov'nor," he said. "I lost consciousness, and the next thing I remember is Prince Targenoff bending over me."

Nelson Lee got to his feet, and walked across to the window. Standing by it, he gazed out into the night, thinking deeply. He was thinking of what the lad had told him. He was pondering on the amazing fact that David Grinton had gone straight to the Barrons' house, and had broken into Tony Barron's rooms.

He was more than amazed at the daring of the man, and he was surprised at the knowledge of Tony Barron and his habits which the deed proclaimed.

"So Tony really had the five thousand," he mused to himself. "The notes which Grinton took from the secret compartment by the fireplace in Tony's sitting-room proves that. It also proves that Tony left the office of the moneylender with the notes in his pocket. But why did he conceal them there? What was his object? Was it but to leave them until he should

return from Franco? Or was it because he had some strong reason for getting them out of sight? How did Grinton know they were there? Surely those two could not be working in together? No—a thousand times no! That is impossible. However much of a fool he has been, Tony Barron is neither thief nor murderer. And the viciousness of Grinton's attack on Nipper proves how capable that man is of both.

"But how in the name of fortune did Nipper come to be floating unconscious in the New River here, miles away from the scene of Grinton's attack on him? I must confess that is a great puzzle to me. It would be utterly impossible for him to motor out here and throw the lad into the river without passing through some house overlooking the river to do so, for where there is not a house backing on to the river, it is closely guarded by the specials."

Lee dropped into silence again, and, resting his head on his hand, went over and over the problem.

Suddenly his hand came down from his head, and he turned quickly.

"Prince, I should like to consult your directory, if I may. I wish to see a list of all those who live in this road."

"Certainly, Lee," replied the prince. "I will get it at once for you."

Going to a large bookcase in one corner, Prince Targenoff took out a large directory and carried it across to the desk. It took Lee only a few moments to find the page he needed, then slowly and carefully he ran his eyes down the list.

Almost one third of the way down he saw a name which caused him to pause. "David Grinton," he read. Then, noting the number, he made a rapid calculation. Knowing the number of the Targenoff place as he did, and remembering that Woodberry Down has residences only on one side, it was not difficult for Lee to make a fairly accurate reckoning in his own mind as to where the Grinton place would be situated. And from his reckoning he placed it less than half a dozen houses up the river from the Targenoff place.

In a single flash it was all clear to him how Nipper had been found floating helplessly in the river at the foot of the Targenoff garden. With the realisation of exactly what this meant, Nelson Lee grew cold with rage. If he had been determined before to bring Grinton to justice he was doubly determined now.

Sitting down at the desk, Lee took the receiver off the hook and gave the number of Scotland Yard. He got through at once to Inspector Brooks, and when he heard that official's voice, he said:

"Since I called you up earlier, inspector, several things have happened, but before I tell you what they are I wish to know one thing."

"What is that Lee?" asked the inspector.

"I wish to know, inspector, what you have done with reference to Barron?"

There was a short silence, then the inspector's voice came again.

"Well, Lee, we stopped him at Folkestone, and to tell you the truth, I am expecting him at the Yard here at any moment."

"But have you actually arrested him?" asked Lee quickly.

"Not that, but the evidence is so strong, Lee, that the charge will be made as soon as he is brought in."

"Inspector," replied the detective, "I want you to do something for me before you make that charge. I want you to come out to Prince Targenoff's residence in Woodberry Down, and to bring Barron with you. I think I can promise you a good deal of a surprise when you get here. Only come as soon as possible."

"Why, Lee, what— Oh! wait a moment, someone has come in."

There was a short silence, then the inspector's voice came again.

"Are you there, Lee?"

"Yes."

"Barron has just come in. I will bring him along at once."

"Good!" replied Lee. "I will wait for you."

Hanging up the receiver, he turned to Prince Targenoff, and in a few curt sentences told the nobleman what had happened that day. The prince listened gravely to Lee's relation.

"It seems to me that since you have discovered Grinton lives so near, it is almost certain that it was from his place Nipper was thrown into the water," he said. "What a monstrous thing! The man should be punished severely, Lee."

"He will be, if I have anything to do with it," replied Lee savagely.

But in that Nelson Lee was wrong. Fate again was to take a hand in the strange drama which had filled that day.

It was only a little time after that Inspector Brooks arrived with Barron. On entering the library Tony shook hands stiffly with the prince, for he naturally thought the latter informed fully as to the estrangement between himself and Sonia.

Then he wheeled and faced Nelson Lee.

"What does all this mean, Lee?" he asked angrily. "Is this any of your doing? Why am I stopped at Folkestone as though I were a criminal, and dragged back to Scotland Yard. If there is any charge against me why isn't it made and done with?"

Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"Steady on, Tony," he said quietly. "Before you lose your head, I should like, in the presence of these others, to ask you one or two questions. Let me ask you first if you went to the office of Jacobus, the moneylender, to-day in the company of David Grinton?"

"Yes, I did. And I fail to see what that has to do with you!" snapped Tony.

"There are grave reasons why you should keep cool and answer my questions," replied Lee curtly. "Now then, be good enough to tell us exactly what happened there."

Tony glared at Lee for a moment, then, making a sudden decision, began to speak.

"I went to see Jacobus with Grinton. Jacobus had sent me five thousand pounds on loan and wanted it back. I told him to go to the devil, and he demanded all I owed him, which was not living up to the agreement he made with me. I walked out of the office in a rage and went home. That is all that occurred."

"Did you leave Grinton there?" asked Lee quickly.

"Yes," answered Tony in surprise. "He was there when I left. Why do you ask?"

"You will know later," replied Lee. "Inspector Brooks," he continued quietly, "I should like a word with you. I wish to tell you where you can put your hand on the man who murdered, or was responsible for the death of Emmanuel Jacobus."

"The man who— Jacobus dead!" gasped Tony Barron, reeling back. "Is that why I was dragged back from Folkestone? Is—?"

Again Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"Please be quiet, Tony," he said.

But he had deliberately sprung the news on Tony as a sudden shock, and the boy's genuine surprise was sufficient to tell Nelson Lee, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he had not misjudged Tony Barron.

The inspector stepped across to one corner with Lee, and there the

detective told him exactly what had happened. To say that Inspector Brooks was astonished, was to put it mildly.

He readily fell in with Nelson Lee's plans, and in less than ten minutes they had begun to converge on Grinton's house. Nelson Lee and Prince Targenoff were to go by way of the river, while Inspector Brooks and Tony were to go by way of the road.

The Grinton place was exactly the sixth from the Targenoff place, and as he swung over the fence into the Grinton garden, Nelson Lee was not surprised to see a light still burning in the Grinton house.

Closely followed by Prince Targenoff, Nelson Lee made his way up the garden until he was close to the foot of the steps which led up to the conservatory. With a whispered word to the prince to keep close behind, Lee started up the steps, and turning the handle of the conservatory-door, found it was unlocked.

Softly he opened it, and standing on the threshold, looked along the length of the conservatory to where the curtains hung between it and the morning-room. They were not tightly drawn, and from where he stood Nelson Lee could see David Grinton seated at the table bending over something which lay in front of him.

Lee tiptoed along between the pots of flowers on either side until he was close behind the curtains, then, jerking them aside, he stepped into the morning-room, followed by Prince Targenoff.

"Well, Grinton," he said quietly.

Grinton turned swiftly and glanced, with a terror-stricken countenance, at the two men who had entered upon him so silently.

The moment he saw Nelson Lee standing there he must have realised that the game was up. He struggled valiantly with his self-control, but when the door of the room opened a moment later to admit Inspector Brooks and Tony Barron, he broke down completely.

Like a hunted deer he sprang across the table and backed against the wall.

"So you have come," he panted. "Well, it is as well. I have lived a rotten life, and I suppose I might as well pay the price. Stop!" This as Nelson Lee and Inspector Brooks started forward. "Listen first to what I have to say. You have come about Jacobus. I know it—I can feel it. I did kill him, but it wasn't murder. If you but knew the torment of the last ten years, during which I was in his clutches. I owed him money, and in a weak moment I forged a paper by which to borrow more. He discovered the forgery, and ever afterwards held it over my head as a threat.

"He made me his creature—his tout. It was at his bidding that I joined West-End clubs and laid my plans to entangle young fools in the net which Jacobus held ever ready for them. It was by those means I caught you, Tony Barron.

"After you left to-day, Jacobus told me I must pay the money which you owed him. In a fit of anger I assaulted him. He went down, and his head struck the corner of the desk. To my horror I discovered he was dead. I knew I must act quickly. I did so. I left the office——"

"By the secret entrance which is concealed by the oil painting," put in Nelson Lee quickly.

"That is so," said Grinton; "but I didn't know you knew that. I took with me all the money Jacobus had on him, and I left the letter which he had written to Tony Barron in order that suspicion should be thrown upon Barron. I knew Barron must have the five thousand pounds somewhere, and in thinking of it I remembered the secret panel which I had seen once when in Barron's rooms with him.

"I decided to visit them and see if he had put the money there before he went away. You will see how one thing led me into others, and all the time I was getting deeper and deeper. I went there; I found the money, and as I was coming out I discovered that I had been spied upon.

"It was too late then to retreat. There was only one thing to do to cover my tracks, and I did it. I attacked the spy and knocked him senseless. Then I brought him on here, and, Heaven help me, I deliberately murdered him. I threw him into the river. But, as Heaven is my witness, that is the only deliberate murder."

"That was not a murder," said Nelson Lee; "he was rescued, Grinton."

Grinton stared at Nelson Lee for a moment, then he burst out into hysterical laughter. They closed in upon him just as he collapsed, and between them bore him out into the hall. He was taken that evening to the hospital, where he fought for days in the grip of brain fever.

It was three weeks later that Grinton passed out quietly, and when he went to receive judgment at the Great High Court, Nelson Lee and Tony Barron stood beside him, while Nipper, to whom he had done such a wrong, gripped his hand silently.

As for Tony Barron, he had a short but painful interview with Prince Targenoff, and though he stuck manfully to his promise to Sonia, the estrangement between them has not yet been swept away.

It was the beginning of a stirring period in both their lives, and little did either of them dream what the near future held for them.

Little did they dream that the whole world was to ring with the name of Sonia Targenoff, and little did Nelson Lee think that he would, at no distant date, be mixed up in the play of Fate in a way which was to bring him much of pain and much of sorrow.

It was but the beginning of events for the spendthrift and for Sonia Targenoff.

THE END.

Another magnificent story dealing with these characters will appear in two weeks' time in the "NELSON LEE LIBRARY." Meanwhile, order next week's issue at once. In it will be found a wonderful long complete novel entitled:

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*Author of the famous Jack, Sam & Pete stories, appearing weekly in
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Dick Clare, a rich youngster, joins Ravenswood College, and he soon makes his presence felt.

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

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

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. However, Dick and Tom manage to escape a fearful death. (Now read on.)

A Voyage of Disasters.

IT was Saturday afternoon, and the two chums, dressed in rowing flannels, had left the college on their way to the river, when they heard hurried footsteps behind them.

"Bother it!" exclaimed Tom. "Here comes Melby. He feels safer in our company, for Gowl is on the look-out for him."

"I say!" panted Melby, coming up. "I call this jolly mean, trying to dodge me like this. You knew I wanted to come with you."

"But we haven't told you where we are going, or what we are going to do," said Dick.

"I don't care where you are going, or what you going to do. I don't consider that you have the right to sneak off like that and trying to drop me. You are always doing it, Dick. One would think that I didn't belong to No. 7."

"I don't believe you can come with us to-day."

"Why not?"

"Well, there are several reasons. I'm not sure that we have enough provisions for all. We are going up the river, and mean to camp out."

"Jolly good idea! I can easily buy some more grub, if you lend me the money. You give me half-a-sovereign; and I'll bring more than you can eat."

"Oh, no! If you come we will make shift with the little lot we have got. Can you paddle a canoe?"

"Paddle a what?"

"Paddle a canoe?"

"What's the good of going in those beastly things when we can have a boat? I hate canoes."

"That may be; but, don't you see, we are going in what we like, whether you hate it or not. There's not the slightest necessity for you to come if you would rather not. At the same time I would advise you not to come if you don't like canoes, because they are the craft we are going in."

"Why can't I have a boat. You can go in canoes."

"Right you are! You can have a boat, if you like; but you won't be able to come where we are going if you hire a boat. Can you paddle a canoe?"

"Of course I can. We have got several at home on our lake."

"Do you keep them with your motor-cycles?" inquired Tom.

"I should think the less you said about that the better!" exclaimed Melby. "It was a rotten trick making me fall into the duck-pond."

"You said you could ride. The same as you say you can paddle a canoe. Perhaps you can, but if you can't I'd advise you to have a bit of practice. The first time I went in one I got a ducking—so I did the second time."

"I shall come in a canoe," said Melby. "I'd rather run the risk of a ducking than get caught by that beast Gowl. He's vowing all sorts of things against us, and you ought to shut him up, Dick, by plainly telling him you will tell his secret to the Head if you have any more of his nonsense."

"Oh, dry up!" exclaimed Dick. "The very name of the fellow sickens me."

"All the more reason why you ought to quell him, if not for your own sake, at least for ours."

"Look here, Melby," exclaimed Dick, "I have never told you that I know anything about Gowl. If I did know something that he would rather not have made public, you can rest assured that I'm not so jolly mean as to hold it over his head as a threat. Your suggestion that I should do so makes you appear jolly contemptible in my eyes. I don't see how you can wonder at us giving you the cold shoulder, when you are up to mean tricks like that. Now, I'm going to give you a word of advice. Just you shut up about that affair. Don't you go talking to me about any secret again, else I'll have no more to say to you. That's the finish of it. Now, come along."

Dick had hired two canoes, which he had well provisioned in advance. There was no difficulty in hiring a third one—provided he made himself responsible for the hire. The man would not have trusted Melby, because he had trusted him too much already. However, Dick said the payment should be attended to, and this was perfectly satisfactory from the boatman's point of view. Melby got his canoe, without difficulty. He got into it, also, without difficulty, because the man was holding it firmly.

"Can you swim, young gent?" he inquired.

"Of course I can. Why?"

"Oh, nothink. Only I generally like to know when a young gent ain't accustomed to these craft."

"I am accustomed to these craft," said Melby.

"Oh, I thought you wasn't! It's a mercy that you are—a mercy for your mother. Otherwise, you might need a tombstone—and they come expensive. Besides, the Doctor wouldn't like my drowning his pupils, 'cos he would lose his fees. Haw, haw, haw! You must have got accustomed to them on dry land, I'd say."

It is the easiest thing imaginable to manage a canoe—when you know how. Dick and Tom did not experience the slightest difficulty, but then they knew how. Melby did not know how, and he experienced a fearful lot of difficulty.

He sent the light craft a few yards to starboard, and then a few yards to port, but he made no way, while he got a good deal of water up his sleeves.

That, and the roars of laughter from the boatman, angered him greatly, while he found the work fearfully hard, with very little—save splashing—to show for it.

Dick told him to persevere, and he told Dick to be hanged; then he tried to induce the chums to have a boat, a thing they flatly refused to do. He would not even take Tom's advice to go home, where he would find more safety and less labour.

Dick pointed out that coming back would be easier, because then they would have the tide with them, while Melby would have got into better form.

"How would you like us to go ahead, Melby?" inquired Tom, at last. "You see, we can get the tea already by the time you come up."

"I say," exclaimed Melby, "you wouldn't play me a dirty trick like that, Dick. It's no good pretending to be honest if you act dishonestly. I'd call a trick like that deadly dishonest, and untruthful. You asked me to come with you, and——"

"I don't remember that," said Dick.

"Well, you wanted me to come with you."

"I don't remember that, either. But you attend to your canoe, else it's jolly certain you won't come with us. You will have to swim ashore, and I shall have to pay for the beastly canoe, if it is lost down the river."

Melby improved as they went on, but he still had much to learn, and he grumbled at the amount of work required to make progress, while Dick pointed out that he wasn't making very much, so that there ought not to be much labour.

At last they reached the first weir, and Melby wanted to go back, or have tea on the opposite bank.

"I don't want to go through the lock," he said, when the others objected to his proposal.

"We are not going through the lock," said Dick. "We are going up the backwater. There's a narrow stream leads out of it, and that is what we are going to explore. That is the reason why we could not bring a boat. You would never be able to get it up the stream. In fact, I'm not at all sure that we shall be able to get the canoes."

"Then what's the good of trying?" grumbled Melby.

"To see if we can succeed. Now, give the weir a wide berth, else you will get swamped in the rapids. And think what an awful thing it would be for the coming generation if a Melby got wiped off the slate."

"My family is as good as yours. My father is considered one of the greatest men——"

"We know him, Melby," interposed Dick.

"Oh, I say! I'm jolly certain you have never seen him."

"I'm equally certain we gave him a ride in the side-car."

"Well, that I know you didn't. He couldn't get into it. He's as fat as butter, and about as broad as he's long. He would have smashed the beastly side-car to a certainty."

"All the same, we gave him a ride, until he got frightened at our speed, and had to walk all the way back. He wasn't best pleased, either. I expect he will pay you a visit in a day or so. I know he's coming on here sooner or later."

"Then I jolly well hope it's later, for I always get into rows when he comes. The Head invariably has dozens of complaints to make—so does my father. I believe he only makes them as an excuse not to give me any pocket-money. Now, my mother——"

"Look here, Melby," exclaimed Dick, "if you don't pay more attention to your canoe and less to your parents for the present there will be a catastrophe."

"Rot! I know what I'm doing without your telling me."

"So do I; and it's what you oughtn't to be doing. You are getting too

close to the falling waters, and you will be swept round in circles directly. Keep this way."

Melby fortunately took the advice, and passed the weir in safety, then they got into still water; but now, instead of his difficulties ending, they increased tenfold, and the fault was his own.

In the back-water were two lordly swans, who appeared to think that part of the river belonged to them.

They made an angry hissing noise as the canoes approached, and seemed to be in doubt as to whether they should attack the daring intruders or not.

"Do you like swans, Tom?" inquired Dick, ceasing to paddle, and gazing dubiously at the stately birds.

"I don't seem to have any particular affection for those two," answered Tom.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Melby. "You don't mean to say you are afraid of a bird?"

"There are two birds," answered Dick. "Big birds. They say a swan can break a boy's arm. Just you go ahead, Melby, and see if it's true."

"I believe you are frightened of them!" cried Melby. "I never knew such funks. We've got lots of swans at home. My father keeps swans——"

"I'll vow he keeps a goose," said Dick.

"I know he does. Lots of them. If a bird dared to defy me I'd wring its beastly neck."

Melby said this in a loud voice, as though he expected the swans would understand his words. If such were the case, those words certainly did not daunt them. Dick and Tom, not being so recklessly brave, made for the river bank, and Melby laughed at their fears—but he followed them.

"Look out, Melby!" shouted Dick. "That biggest swan is coming to have his neck wrung."

"Where? Oh, I say! Get off, you brute!"

He paddled straight for the muddy bank, but he had no chance against the swan, whose speed was alarming.

Melby struck at it with his paddle, but the swan, who received the blow on the back, did not seem to mind. It went for Melby, and seizing him by the ear, commenced flapping its wings with a vigour that drenched him with river water.

The combat did not last for many seconds, because when the convulsed chums paddled to the spot, the swan considered the better part of valour, and swam away—but it was a white swan no longer. It looked more like a black one, while Melby looked something like an industrious sweep on a wet day.

The chums got his canoe to the side of the river, by which time Melby had crawled out. He held his ear, and howled.

"It's all right, Melby," spluttered Dick. "The bird has flown, and you are not hurt much."

"Oh, I say! The brutal beast has torn my ear off!"

"Not a bit of it. Your ear is as long as ever— isn't it, Tom?"

"Ha, ha, ha! A bit longer, I'd say, judging by the way that bird pulled at it. Why didn't you wring its neck, Melby?"

"I'll shoot it. You mark my words, I will. And I'll shoot its owner, too, if ever I come across him. Just look what an awful mess I'm in: and this is the second suit of clothes I've spoilt this week. It's awful. I wish I hadn't come with you. I believe you did it on purpose."

"But we didn't do it, Melby," said Dick. "The swan did it, and it comes of your threatening language. A swan won't be threatened. Of course, you may understand them better than I do, because my mother does not

keep swans, and if ever she wants to keep them, I shall strongly advise her not to. I prefer a less impulsive bird—such as a kitten, or a canary."

"Oh, I say! This is too awful! Just look at me."

"We are, Melby," said Dick. "But what does it matter? We are going to have a grand tea directly. We are going to light a camp-fire and boil our kettle, and I've got some supreme grub."

"How can I enjoy my tea when I'm in this horrid state?"

"Why not have a swim and wash it off?" suggested Tom.

"I'll see you hanged first!" grumbled Melby. "Do you think I'm such a fool as to swim in the river when those swans are there?"

Dick did, but thought it better not to tell him so. They emptied the water out of his canoe, and then induced him to continue the voyage up the narrow brook which was close by.

How Melby Met His Father.

IT was not particularly pleasant work ascending the narrow stream in the canoes. Every now and then they were stopped by the weeds, and Melby grumbled the whole way because he was in such a fearful state of mire.

"It will dry all right if you give it time," said Dick.

"And how do you suppose I'm going to look when it is dry, you silly idiot!"

"Couldn't say," answered Dick cheerfully; "but you've got the consolation of knowing that you can't look much more awful than you do now that the mud is wet. Ha, ha, ha! You look like a wet worm that has been crawling through dry mould. What do you say to stopping here, Tom?"

"I'm doing it," said Tom, who was leading the way. "My beastly canoe has run aground. The water is only about three inches deep."

"Right you are," exclaimed Dick. "We will camp here. All we need is a fire to boil our kettle—and to dry Melby."

"It will be a mercy when he does dry up," declared Tom. "He's been grumbling the whole way, and I'm jolly certain he ought to have enjoyed the combat with the swan. Cheer up, Melby, and try not to look like a mangy rat. You can't help looking like an idiot, but you might be able to help looking like an owl."

"I haven't got any more clothes," snarled Melby. "You silly brutes have spoilt two of my suits. How do you suppose I'm going to church on Sunday like this!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I don't know," laughed Dick. "You had better borrow one of Vance's suits. You would look no end picturesque in his yard and a half trousers."

The fire was soon lighted, and Dick made the tea, then Melby became slightly more amiable, for the provisions were decidedly good, and he forgot that his father was coming to the college, and might be there any day when there would certainly be trouble in store for him.

The *al fresco* tea was rather a lengthy affair. Dick had supplied more provisions than were necessary, but as he explained, they would leave the remainder on the grass, and very likely some countryman would come along to finish them off, or failing that the birds and rabbits would see that nothing was wasted.

"You be hanged!" exclaimed Melby, with his mouth full of jam-tart.

"I'm not going to leave anything."

"You can't put it in your muddy pockets," said Dick.

"He's not going to," said Tom. "He's going to stow it all away."

“ You didn't buy it!” snarled Melby.

“ Neither did you, else those jam-tarts would have been bread-and-butter, and there would only have been enough for yourself.”

“ It's downright caddish to invite a chap to tea and then make personal remarks on what he chooses to eat.”

“ We never invited you to tea,” said Tom. “ You jolly well invited yourself, and you are doing yourself a treat. They are pretty sparing with the jam in these tarts, but I'll bet you've eaten a potful. Black snowflakes will be floating before your eyes to-morrow morning, and you will feel as though you had got ice creams in your brain. In other words, you'll have a bilious attack.”

However, in spite of the chaff, Melby went ahead, and only left the birds and rabbits crumbs, while he left the countryman nothing.

But he soon discovered that it put him out of training, and the chums discovered that it made his temper worse than ever. Then it came on to rain, and Melby's mud got wet again.

The voyage back was far from pleasant, and it was so slow that the picnickers knew they would be reported.

As a matter of fact they were an hour behind their time, and Vance, the porter, was delighted.

“ Oh, won't you get into a row this time, you young varminths!” he exclaimed. “ Haw, haw, haw! Jest look at that mudworm. I wouldn't know it was Melby if it wasn't for the size of his ears. You are to come along with me. Your father has been here all the afternoon, and he ain't in much of a fury, neither. You've made him miss his last train back.”

“ Oh, I say! I can't go like this, Vance!” gasped Melby. “ I must get a change. Dick, you will lend me some of your clothes. I sha'n't be long.”

“ I know you won't,” cried Vance, grabbing his arm. “ You are coming now, and so are these other two. My orders are to take you to the Head's study immediately you come in, and that's when you are coming. Haw, haw, haw! You are in a tidy mess, too. If your father don't flog you I shall be surprised.”

There was no help for it. The porter dearly loved getting the boys into trouble, and this was an excellent opportunity.

He shoved the delinquent into the Doctor's study.

“ If you please, sir, Master Melby has returned,” said Vance. “ And he's in nearly as bad a state as he was last time he went out.”

Mr. Melby sprang to his feet, and gazed at his promising son in speechless amazement. His face turned a purplish colour, and Dick got the impression he was going to have a fit.

Dr. Stanley looked quite calm, although astonished. He was so accustomed to all sorts of surprises that they really took little effect on him; although Melby's fearful condition was enough to astound the calmest man. He was making a terrible mess on the carpet, too.

“ You utter young rascal!” roared Melby, senior. “ Oh, how dare you get into this abominable state, and I hear it is the second time this week. Hang me if I don't flog you!”

“ Now, stop it, father!” yelled Melby, rushing round the Head's desk, and leaving his trail behind him. “ I'll tell mother if you dare to touch me, and you know what an awful row you'll get into if I do.”

“ Silence, boy!” cried the Head. “ How dare you talk to your father like that?”

“ I'm sorry to have to reprimand him in your presence, sir,” said Melby, keeping his eyes on the infuriated man; “ but, as you could tell him, he ought to be able to govern his temper. It's for me to be angry, not him. He's always getting into passions over some silly thing.”

"It is lamentable," murmured the Head, referring to Melby's mode of addressing his father.

"So it is, sir. He ought to be ashamed of himself, oughtn't he? Mother is always telling him so."

"I am referring to your misconduct, boy," said the Doctor sternly, and, glancing severely at Tom and Dick, who were making strenuous efforts to refrain from laughter. "How did you get into that disgraceful state?"

"If you please, sir," exclaimed Melby. "As my father knows I always treat those above me with the deepest respect, and I respect you even more than I do him, because you've got a convincing way with you. He blusters a lot, but when mother comes on the scene he's meeker than tame cats."

"How dare you speak of your father in that manner?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I thought you required me to tell you the truth, which is my invariable custom, as you know."

"Unfortunately I know nothing of the sort," sighed Dr. Stanley. "You are not to talk about your parents when I ask you a question. How did you get into that abominable state?"

"If you please, sir, I was coming to that, and if you will only listen to my explanation with the patience that you invariably advance——"

"I presume you mean evince?"

"Yes, sir, that is what I said, only you misunderstood me. Dick will know jolly well how I deeply respect you——"

"I don't want to hear about that."

"But, you see, sir, it's necessary that you should know that I respect you, because when I refuse to tell you how I got into this bal—this egregious mess, you may think that I'm not respecting you as much as I really am."

"Do I understand that you refuse to obey my command and inform me how you got into such a mess?"

"Not refuse, sir. Merely—er—request you not to ask me the question."

"I have asked you the question."

"Then I should be extremely obliged, sir, if you would kindly withdraw it, and we will let the matter drop."

"I hope you will severely flog the young rascal!" roared Melby, senior. "He's an empty-headed idiot, and his mother makes a fool of him."

Dr. Stanley was positively shocked. He even felt inclined to make some excuses for a boy who had such an extraordinary father.

"Why do you refuse to tell me, Melby?" he demanded.

"Sir, I will not get my chums into trouble. Although I know that I am perfectly innocent I would rather bear the blame than that they should."

"Was the fault yours, boys?" demanded the Head.

"No, sir," answered Dick.

"Oh, I say, Dick!" exclaimed Melby. "I call that downright mean; besides, it's sneaking."

"I insist on your telling me exactly what has happened, Melby," said Dr. Stanley. "If you disobey my order I shall cane you. If you tell me the whole truth I shall not punish you. I presume it was an accident, although no doubt you were doing what you should not have been doing."

"No, sir. I assure you we were not," said Melby, jumping at the Head's promise. "Dick and Tom wanted me to come on the water with them in canoes. We went up the river, and a beastly swan attacked me and knocked me into the mud, then came flummoxing around me and hurting me severely. Had it not been for my anxiety not to hurt the beastly bird, I would have wrung its neck. It's not very respectful of you to burst with laughter like that, Dick and Tom. The Head doesn't allow boys to laugh at him, except behind his back, when, of course, he can't stop them."

"I'm laughing at you and the swan," said Dick. "At the remembrance of how that bird caught you by the ear, rolled you in the mire, and flopped mud all over your classic countenance."

"Do you confirm Melby's statement?" demanded the Head.

"Yes, sir. I fancy he struck the first blow, but the swan was an easy winner."

"Did you go to his assistance?"

"No, sir. I was too convulsed with laughter to be of any assistance; besides, the combat was over in a very short space of time."

"It would appear that your son was not to blame on this occasion, Mr. Melby," said Dr. Stanley.

"Then it's most unusual!" growled Melby, senior. "Those are the two young rascals who took me miles out of my way, and left me in the middle of the country. I should have been here more than a week ago if it had not been for them."

"You have had the pleasure of looking forward to seeing your son during your fishing excursion," observed Dick; "whereas, if you had not been frightened of our speed, and insisted on getting out, instead of having had that pleasure in front of you, you would have had the sorrow of the parting on your mind during the whole of your holiday."

Melby muttered something that the Doctor did not hear, and it was just as well he did not. Melby, junior, did not hear it either, but he guessed what it was from past experience.

"Oh, I say, father!" he exclaimed reprovingly.

"Go and change your clothes at once," ordered the Head.

"If you please, sir, I can't," answered Melby. "This is my last suit, and I shall have to wear it every day and for best. I haven't got any more clothes. I spoilt my other suit some little time back. I shall have to go about like this till I get a new suit."

"It was my intention to have given you a sovereign for pocket-money," declared Melby, senior, glaring at his son in a most unfatherly manner. "I shall now give you nothing, and your pocket-money next term will also be stopped. I am determined that you shall be punished for such wilful destruction."

"Oh, I say, father," cried Melby, "that isn't honest. It's really robbing me, and I shall be compelled to write to my mother to let her know how shamefully I have been treated. It is most dishonest."

"Boy! How dare you speak like that to your father in my presence?" demanded the Head.

"Oh, well, sir, I wouldn't jolly well dare to do it if you weren't here. You have a sort of restraining influence on him. He's a jolly bad-tempered old bouncer."

"It is positively scandalous. You do not appear to have the slightest respect for your father."

"Well, sir, I really don't see how I could have, considering the shameful manner in which he treats me. Fancy stopping my money because I met with an accident that might have cost me my life. I believe he would have been glad to see my cold, clammy corpse brought home; but my mother wouldn't. She's always fearfully upset when even distant relations die, but then she's tender-hearted, and black doesn't suit her. I've often heard her say so. Now, my father generally wears black when he goes to business, so he wouldn't care twopence; in fact, judging by his cruel conduct, I believe he would be glad."

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