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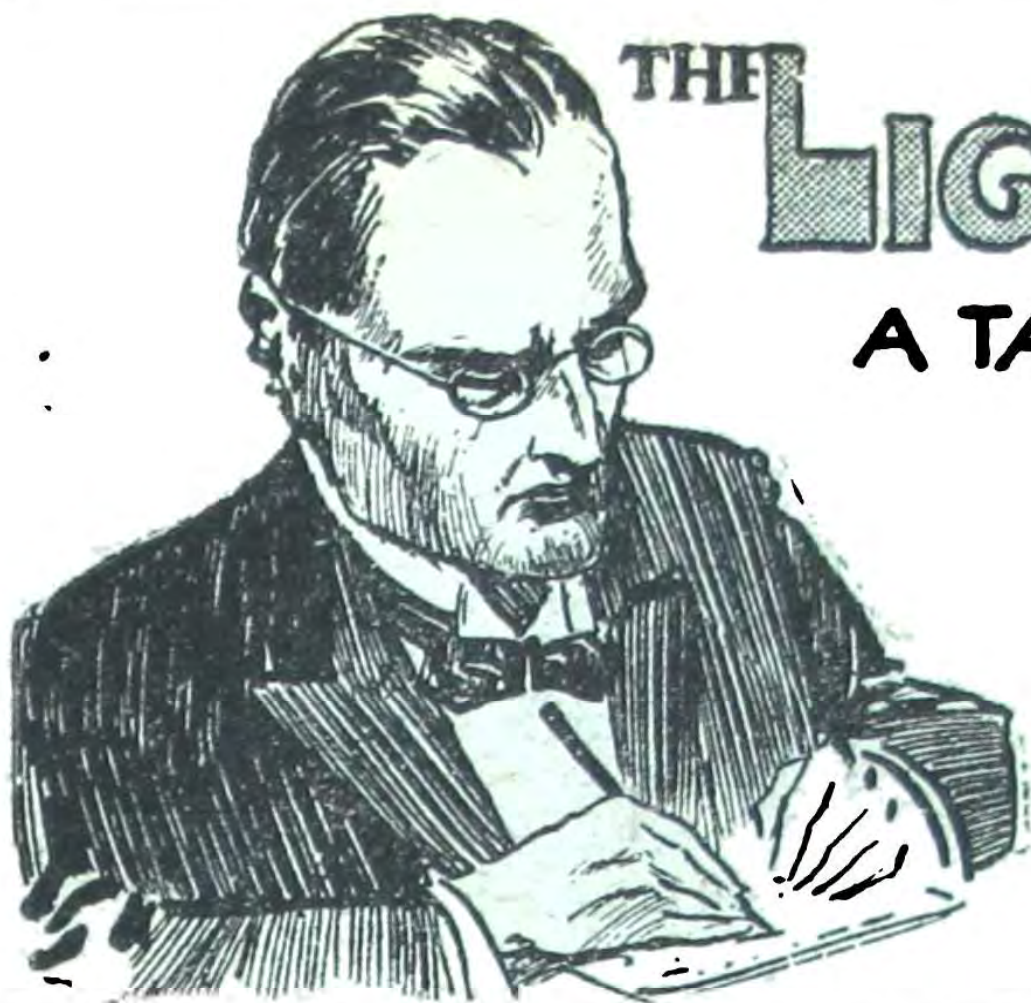
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CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee Investigates an Amazing Forgery.

"MY dear Nipper, are you attempting to commit suicide?" Nelson Lee, the world-famous crime investigator, asked the question with a note of concern in his voice; for Nipper, his youthful assistant, appeared to be in a decidedly perilous position.

The scene was Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. The sunlight streamed in at the open windows, and the air was soft and warm. Nelson Lee was sitting at his desk, and when he looked up thoughtfully he gazed upon a curious spectacle.

Nipper had nearly disappeared.

The fact was, the lad was leaning far out of the window—so far, indeed, that his master was quite alarmed. He pushed his chair back, strode across the room, and grabbed Nipper by the seat of his trousers and yanked him into the room.

"You young ass!" exclaimed Lee sternly.

"Hallo! What's the matter, guv'nor?" gasped the lad.

"What's the matter! That's a fine question to ask when you were on the point of hurling yourself down to the pavement below!" replied Lee. "Another inch further out, and you would have overbalanced. You reckless young beggar!"

Nipper grinned.

"Keep your hair on, sir!" he said coolly. "I was safe enough—no need for you to get into a fright. Just having a breath of fresh air, that's all!"

"If you want fresh air, put your head out of the window—not your whole person!" growled the detective. "You're a useful youngster, and I don't want you to take an express ticket to Eternity!"

Nelson Lee leaned out of the window himself, in order to show Nipper how it should be done. And he was just in time to see a tall, well-dressed man mount the steps and pull the bell. Lee turned, gave Nipper a push, and said:

"Look at your tie—look at your hair! We've got a visitor coming, and you look as though you've just tumbled out of bed. For goodness' sake make yourself tidy, Nipper!"

Nipper was something of a quick-change artist. He gave his tie a jerk, ran his fingers through his hair, and in ten seconds looked quite smart and trim. As he was gazing at himself in the glass, Mrs. Jones, the house-keeper, entered, and announced the visitor.

"H'm! Mr. Douglas Sutcliffe," murmured Lee, glancing at the card which Mrs. Jones handed to him. "Please show Mr. Sutcliffe up at once, Mrs. Jones."

And in due course the visitor was ushered into the consulting-room. As Nelson Lee saw by the card, Mr. Sutcliffe was a solicitor. As a matter of fact, the detective knew, without referring to the card at all, that Mr. Sutcliffe was a solicitor of some repute.

He was a medium-sized man with a rather commanding appearance. Clean-shaven, his hair was dark and carefully trimmed and brushed. Rather young for his position, he was a man with brisk actions, and a business-like tongue. His eyes were dark, and his brow high, denoting unusual intellect.

"Good-morning, Mr. Lee—delighted to meet you!" he said smoothly. "I have heard of you many times, but this is the first opportunity I have had of making your acquaintance. My business this morning is of rather an urgent nature."

And Mr. Sutcliffe glanced suggestively at Nipper.

"My assistant is to be trusted implicitly," was Lee's assurance. "Make yourself quite at home, my dear sir. You will find cigars at your elbow."

The visitor helped himself to a cigar, lit it, and faced the detective.

"I am here on behalf of my client, Sir Stephen Trundle, Baronet," began the solicitor briskly. "I dare say you have heard of Sir Stephen by repute. His name is one of much weight and importance in the City and on the Stock Exchange."

Lee nodded.

"Sir Stephen Trundle is a great financier," he agreed.

"Quite so. And, as it is usual for him to negotiate cash transactions at a moment's notice, he invariably keeps a substantial cash balance at his bank—the City and West London, Limited. At the present moment, for instance, it would be possible for my client to receive ready money for any cheque up to fifty thousand."

"It is not usual for a man to keep such a large cash balance."

"Oh, no. But Sir Stephen is different," said Mr. Sutcliffe. "His business is of such a nature that it is absolutely necessary for him to do so. Well, a rather startling incident occurred this morning."

"Indeed."

"It was almost as soon as the City and West London Bank opened its doors," pursued the solicitor. "A well-dressed man presented an open cheque for the sum of ten thousand pounds. The sum was a large one, and the man a perfect stranger, so the cashier took the cheque to the manager for advice. The cheque was in perfect order, however, and was cashed forthwith."

"But it is usual, is it not, for such large cheques to be presented?"

"Well, hardly. Sir Stephen himself frequently withdraws substantial sums, but for an utter stranger to present an open cheque for ten thousand pounds—well, it was a little out of the common. As I have said, however, the signature was in perfect order, and so there was no hitch."

"It happened that Sir Stephen Trundle himself visited the bank at half-past eleven," went on Mr. Sutcliffe. "In the course of conversation Mr. Soper, the manager, mentioned the ten thousand pound cheque. To his utter astonishment Sir Stephen disclaimed all knowledge of it."

"Dear me! It was a forgery?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Undoubtedly. But it was executed with such marvellous cleverness that even Sir Stephen himself could not detect the fraud. The cheque has been examined by the bank's expert, it has been subjected to minute microscopical inspection, but the signature is similar to the original in every detail. There is not a single flaw."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"There is no chance, I suppose, that Sir Stephen did actually sign——"

"My dear sir, that was one of the first things Mr. Soper suggested," interrupted Mr. Sutcliffe. "But Sir Stephen is very emphatic on the subject. He swears that he never set eyes on the cheque until the manager showed it to him."

"It was an odd cheque, I presume?"

"You mean——"

"It was not torn from Sir Stephen's current cheque-book?"

"Oh, no. It was, as you say, an odd cheque. But that is of no account," said the solicitor. "As the signature was in perfect order, the bank naturally had no excuse for not cashing the cheque."

"The police have been informed?"

"The very first thing. Mr. Soper rang up Scotland Yard at once, and already an expert is at the bank, and detectives are endeavouring to get on the track of the mysterious man who presented the cheque."

"Mysterious?" asked Lee.

Mr. Sutcliffe smiled.

"Well, I say mysterious in a general way," he responded. "The forger—for it is presumed that the man was the forger himself—left the bank, entered a taxi, and drove away. The police are now trying to find the taxi."

"H'm! That won't be of much use," murmured Lee. "A man who successfully cashes a forged cheque for such a huge sum wouldn't run his head into a noose. Well, Mr. Sutcliffe, what is the exact object of your visit?"

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders.

"I was called upon by Sir Stephen less than an hour ago," he replied. "and my client suggested that I should enlist your aid. I have accordingly come to you post-haste, on behalf of Sir Stephen, in the hope that you will be sufficiently interested to look into the affair."

"I am interested—decidedly."

"Then you will——"

"I will run round to the City and West London Bank at once," said the great detective briskly. "If, after my inquiries, I think my services will be of use to your client, I will certainly take up the case."

"Excellent."

Five minutes later Nelson Lee and Mr. Sutcliffe were seated in a taxi, bound for the City and West London Bank, in Threadneedle Street.

When they arrived they were at once admitted to the manager's private office. Mr. Soper was present, and he was talking to Sir Stephen Trundle and two other men—one of whom Nelson Lee recognised as Detective-inspector Goldston, of Scotland Yard. The other man was one of the Yard's experts.

Nelson Lee was introduced, and he took stock of his surroundings and his companions. The baronet was a tall, stoutish man. His face was keen and his eyes sharp; one glance at him told a close observer that he was a business man to his finger-tips.

"This is a pretty mystery, Mr. Lee," he said genially. "Just in your line, I should imagine. If you can succeed in bringing this interesting

forger to justice you will earn my sincere gratitude, and a very liberal fee."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Please don't talk of fees," he said. "I haven't decided yet whether I shall take up the case or not. If I think the police can rub along on their own, I shall certainly leave the matter in their able hands."

Detective-inspector Goldston made a grimace.

"You'd better get busy, Lee," he said gruffly. "You may as well join the Yard in a ghastly failure! It's not often I'm pessimistic, but I'm hanged if I can see a speck of daylight in this affair."

"For you to talk like that, Goldston, is tantamount to saying that we are up against a stiff problem," remarked Lee. "Mr. Sutcliffe put me in possession of the bare facts, but I should like to see things for myself. I cannot believe that the forged signature is absolutely identical with the original."

"Well, it is so identical that I originally suspected Sir Stephen of having a bad memory," replied Goldston bluntly.

The baronet shook his head smilingly.

"My memory is excellent," he said. "I certainly did not sign the cheque."

"You are taking the loss with remarkable good humour," Lee remarked.

"I do not believe in pulling a long face," Sir Stephen replied. "Ten thousand is a fairish sum, but nothing to worry over, Mr. Lee. I do not mind admitting, however, that I worry inwardly when I consider the possibility of other cheques being forged. I shall sleep a lot more comfortably if I know the scoundrel is under lock and key."

The detective moved across the room to a desk where Mr. Soper and the Scotland Yard expert were closely examining the forged cheque. The latter gentleman at once allowed Lee to sit down.

First of all Nelson Lee compared the ten thousand pound cheque to Sir Stephen's handwriting and signature with his naked eye. Then he produced his own powerful magnifying lens and spent ten minutes going over the signatures and handwriting inch by inch. Mr. Soper and the expert were talking quietly meanwhile, watching Lee with interest.

At last the detective laid his lens down, and leaned back.

"Well, Mr. Lee, what do you make of it?" asked the expert interestedly.

Lee glanced over at Sir Stephen, who was on the other side of the room, and then said with quiet conviction:

"I do not believe this is a forgery at all!"

"Ah! You really think that?"

"I cannot think anything else."

Mr. Soper and the Yard expert exchanged curious glances.

"Do you know, Mr. Lee, I was expecting you to say that," said the expert quietly. "I have examined those signatures a hundred times, and there is utterly no difference. I do not believe a man could possibly execute such a forgery."

"They are alike in every detail, in every stroke of the pen," said Lee. "And there is no sign of care having been taken in signing the name. It was obviously written straight off, without a pause. No forger on earth could do it!"

Mr. Soper bent forward.

"Between ourselves, Mr. Lee," he murmured softly, "I believe Sir Stephen signed the cheque. There is no other explanation. I do not say he did it deliberately, but he may have been—er—well, a little—— Shall we say merry?"

"Is Sir Stephen in the habit of——?"

"Oh, no!" Mr. Soper hastened to say. "Personally, I have never seen him intoxicated even in the slightest degree. I only put forward the suggestion as a possible solution to this astonishing puzzle."

"He denies having signed the cheque, doesn't he?" asked Lee. "Well, that's a rather unnecessary question, for he was emphatic on the subject a moment ago. H'm! I'd stake my life that this is his actual signature!"

Lee was silent for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"Yet we must not be too sure. We have no proof that the cheque is a forgery—except Sir Stephen's flat denial. But we have no proof that it is genuine. We must not be hasty, Mr. Soper."

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest nothing; but many astonishing things happen in this world. There are many men with certain abnormally developed faculties. For instance, there is a certain individual who can read a newspaper, and then repeat everything he has read, word for word. He has a kink in the brain which enables him to memorise to an almost unbelievable extent. It is possible that a man is similarly gifted with the pen."

The expert smiled doubtfully.

"A man who can see a specimen of strange handwriting, and then sit down and copy it with perfect accuracy, you mean?" he asked. "A man who can forge a signature—who can forge anything writeable, in fact—so exactly that the deception is undetectable?"

"Precisely."

"Come, Mr. Lee, that's a bit steep, isn't it?"

"Decidedly steep; but it is not impossible," Lee replied. "Mind you, I'm not stating this as actual fact; it is merely a suggestion. A man with abnormally developed faculties for penmanship is no more impossible than a man with a marvellous memory. However, we will not discuss that subject any longer. The fact remains that this forgery—if it is indeed a forgery—is the most astonishing I have ever experienced."

As he finished speaking there was a tap at the door, and the next moment one of the bank clerks ushered in a stranger. He walked straight to Sir Stephen and the two engaged in conversation.

"Who is the newcomer?" Lee asked, turning to Mr. Soper.

"Oh, Mr. Carkham," said the manager. "He is Mr. James Carkham, Sir Stephen's private secretary."

CHAPTER II.

Nipper Embarks Upon an Adventure, and Draws a Blank.

MR. JAMES CARKHAM was a small man at first glance; but his back was bent slightly, and this had the effect of lessening his true height. He was a man of about thirty, clean-shaven, with black hair and heavy eyebrows. Being dark, his shaven chin had a bluey appearance, which certainly did not add to his looks. When he spoke his lips parted wide, revealing two rows of white teeth, and his eyes, behind their spectacles, were piercing and alert.

Altogether, Mr. Carkham had a somewhat sinister appearance. Yet, at the same time, he compelled attention. Nelson Lee found himself watching the private secretary very closely, and for no apparent reason.

The detective rose, and a few minutes later was engaged in conversation with Carkham. The secretary backed his employer up firmly.

"There's no question about the matter, Mr. Lee," he said, in a quiet,

compelling voice. "Sir Stephen isn't in the habit of signing cheques and then forgetting all about them. The signature on that ten thousand pound cheque is a forgery."

"Have you examined it?"

"Yes. I was here half an hour ago."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"I think that the forger is an infernally clever man!" said Carkham. "I've seen Sir Stephen's signature a few thousand times during the years I've been with him, and I must admit that this forgery is absolutely identical. To tell the truth, the thing is almost uncanny."

"You are quite convinced it is a forgery?"

Carkham snapped his fingers.

"I'm not only convinced of it, I positively know it to be a forgery," he replied. "I have been with Sir Stephen long enough to know his habits and customs. He is the last man in the world to draw a cheque for a large sum and then forget it."

"H'm!" said Lee. "We were thinking that perhaps——"

The detective paused.

"Perhaps what?" asked Carkham curiously.

"This is confidential, Mr. Carkham," went on Lee. "We were thinking that Sir Stephen had been partaking possibly of rather more——"

The secretary interrupted Lee with a short laugh.

"Sir Stephen is a teetotaler," he said quietly.

"That disposes of that theory then," smiled Lee. "Under the circumstances I must work on the assumption that the signature is positively a forgery. Indeed, I am almost convinced that such is the case, amazing as it seems."

Carkham stroked his long, thin fingers.

"Do you think you will run the scoundrel to earth?" he asked.

"Well, it will be a difficult task."

"I can quite believe it," said the other, with a strange smile. "Believe me, Mr. Lee, you are up against a stiff proposition. I've got an idea that you will fail over this business--and the police will fail, too!"

"Well, I've got an idea," replied Nelson Lee quietly, "that I shall not fail!"

Carkham gave the detective a sharp look, but Lee turned, and was speaking to Mr. Sutcliffe and Sir Stephen.

Shortly afterwards Lee took his departure, after promising the baronet that he would put all his best efforts forward on the case. The one drawback in the affair was that there seemed to be no starting-point.

Word had already come from the C. I. D. men that the taxi which had conveyed the forger away from the bank had been traced, and that the driver had been unable to give any information of any value. The fare had alighted at Cannon Street Station, and no trace of him could be discovered.

Nelson Lee realised that he would have to make a starting-point for himself.

When he arrived at his rooms, he briefly told Nipper everything, and then discussed the matter with his young assistant. Nipper was greatly interested.

"We will take it for granted, youngster, that a forgery has been committed," went on Lee, thoughtfully puffing at his cigar. "Well, somebody must have forged the signature on the cheque. Who?"

Nipper scratched his head.

"It must be some chap who knows Sir Stephen well," he began. "Perhaps it's some shady stockbroker in the City, who gets regular cheques from Sir Stephen, and who—— Scott! I've got an idea, guv'nor!"

"Well, what is it?"

"You say the signature was absolutely genuine?" asked the lad eagerly.

"It appeared to be."

"Suppose Sir Stephen signed the cheque himself——"

"We have discussed that possibility," interrupted the detective. "Trundle swears positively that he did not sign it."

Ah, but my idea is this—suppose some awful rotter managed to hypnotise Sir Stephen," suggested Nipper keenly. "Suppose he was hypnotised, guv'nor? He would be made to sign the cheque, and would know nothing about it——"

"My good Nipper, be sensible!" was Nelson Lee's interjection. "Stick to feasible theories, and don't run away with fantastic notions. Sir Stephen Trundle is a hard-headed business man, keen-witted and alert. He is one of the last men on the wide globe to succumb to hypnotism. Besides, he is constantly surrounded by other business men during the day."

"It might have happened in his own home, sir," Nipper persisted.

"No, no. He is not a lonely man. He is married, with a family."

"What about the secretary—Carkham? You said Carkham was a queer-eyed chap."

Nelson Lee lowered his eyelids, and lay back in silence.

"Carkham!" he said presently. "Dismissing that wild idea of yours, Nipper, I believe we should be doing some good if we set ourselves the task of looking into Mr. James Carkham's past life. I did not see him for long, but I know that he is a resolute man, determined, and quite capable of an audacious fraud. Think for a moment, my lad."

"What's the good of thinking?" grumbled Nipper. "You only sniff at my suggestions!"

Lee laughed.

"Nonsense!" he said. "But I think you are off the track with your hypnotism idea. Now, let us consider. Carkham, in his position of private secretary, has the opportunity of studying Sir Stephen's signature twenty times a day if he wants to. And he is a trusted man—Sir Stephen never suspects him. A great many cases of forgery have been traced to men in positions of trust—men who were never suspected until proof was actually to hand."

"I don't usually suspect a man without justification, but Carkham is exactly the type of man who makes a successful forger. Not only is he a gentleman, but he has the brain-power with which to carry his fraud through with flying colours. And his fingers, Nipper—his fingers are long, supple, and sensitive."

"You reckon he's the forger, then?"

"I did not say that. But he is the first on my list to receive attention," replied Lee briskly. "If my inquiries lead to nothing I shall be forced to strike another trail. I am going out now——"

"It's just time for luncheon, sir!"

"Oh, bother luncheon! Tell Mrs. Jones to keep mine until I return."

And in a few minutes the detective had taken his departure. Nipper, being decidedly hungry, didn't see the fun of waiting until his master would return. Lee might be back in an hour, or he might not be back until dusk. So Nipper had luncheon in solitary state.

It was not until the middle of the afternoon that the detective returned, and while he was having his belated midday meal he told Nipper what he had been doing. This did not amount to much, as it turned out, but Lee had every cause to feel satisfied.

By dint of careful inquiry he had elicited the fact that a few days previously Carkham had been short of money. He had, at least, failed to

pay a certain large account at a big booksellers. It appeared that Carkham's hobby was book-collecting, and he had run up a very extensive account. Without making direct inquiries Lee learned that Carkham owed well over fifty pounds at this one establishment alone; and yet Carkham had, only an hour before Lee arrived, paid up in full. And this was only one matter. Lee discovered that Sir Stephen's private secretary had made a regular tour round, paying up his debts in full.

"It was an easy matter for me to obtain these facts," Nelson Lee proceeded. "To say the least, Nipper, it is suspicious. Moreover, I cannot possibly account for Carkham's movements during the early hours this morning. He left Sir Stephen's house before breakfast, and turned up again just before the baronet learned of the forgery. Carkham had ample time to make his preparations, to cash the cheque, and to cover up his tracks. Of course it would have been necessary for him to disguise himself, and I am inclined to think that he did not risk such a course. He probably has a confederate who obtained the money, and then converted it into untraceable cash. All said and done I have nothing but theories to go upon—bare suspicions, and flimsy ones at that. I hope, however, to obtain more concrete evidence before long."

"I hope you have got something for me to do, guv'nor," Nipper said anxiously.

"To tell the truth, I am going to set you on a task immediately," was the reply. "If once I can obtain even the slightest atom of proof against Carkham, the rest will follow as a matter of course. There is nothing better than striking while the iron is hot. Accordingly, you will disguise yourself, my lad, and will take up the task of watching Sir Stephen Trundle's house. Follow Carkham wherever he goes, and make a note of everything he does—whenever possible. You had better go on duty straight away."

Nipper jumped up.

"That's good enough for me, sir," he said promptly. "I'm off!"

And in a very short while Nipper was suitably disguised, and had set off for Sir Stephen's house in Russell Square. As it happened, he had hardly taken up his stand at a convenient spot when James Carkham drove up in a taxi and entered the house. Nipper had not seen him before, but Lee had described him so accurately that Nipper could make no mistake. Carkham was a man with a very distinctive appearance.

"Well, he's indoors now," Nipper told himself. "When he comes out again I'll be after him like his own shadow!"

But the lad was destined to kick his heels for several hours before Carkham reappeared. The spring day drew to a close, and a fine calm night resulted. The streets were dry, and the air clear.

Nipper's vigil was not a difficult one, but the lad was impatient to be doing something. At a few minutes to eight his opportunity arrived. Sir Stephen had driven up in a huge motor-car with a lady, whom Nipper at once took to be Lady Trundle. Five minutes after that the big front door again opened, and Nipper was relieved to see the bent figure of the private secretary.

"Now we're off," Nipper murmured. "But the question is—where to?"

Carkham walked briskly away from the house, and Nipper fell into stride about fifty yards in the rear. Carkham had no idea that he was being shadowed, for he never once glanced behind him.

Presently he entered a tobacconist's shop, but he left it a moment later, lighting a cigarette. Then, walking on again, he constantly looked at the motor-buses as they passed him. Finally he boarded a 'bus which was bound for Islington.

Nipper was on the vehicle instantly, and mounted the stairs to the top.

Carkham had taken a seat in the front, so Nipper sat at the back. He heard the secretary ask for a ticket to Islington, so Nipper booked to Islington also.

"Wonder what the game is?" thought Nipper. "Islington, eh? Well, it seems to smack of something fishy. I hope I strike the trail."

The ride in the motor-'bus to Islington was devoid of incident. When Carkham descended he did not even glance at Nipper. Even if he had done he would scarcely have seen the young detective, for the night was very dark, and there were several other people getting off the 'bus.

Nipper was soon down the stairs, and he saw his quarry striding along through the crowds. The lad edged up closer here, for he had no intention of losing sight of Carkham now that he had tracked him so far.

Presently the man turned into a quiet side turning. Before doing so he glanced at the name of the road.

"Looks as though he hasn't been here before," mused Nipper.

Carkham walked on, with his hands in his overcoat pockets, and with a cigarette in his mouth. The distance proved to be short, for the secretary very soon branched off into a still quieter road.

Small semi-detached villas lined both pavements. Carkham turned into the gateway of the villa at the extreme end on the left-hand side. Beyond this was a piece of deserted waste ground.

Nipper was softly walking on the opposite side of the road, and he halted now. As he did so he saw a big man leave the porch of the house, and meet Carkham half-way up the tiled approach.

The pair stood talking for a few moments, and Nipper edged closer. He had to do so with care, for not another soul was in sight, and the night was still.

"Looks interesting," muttered the lad. "This other chap is the confederate the gov'nor spoke of, I suppose. Sharing the giddy spoils, eh!"

As he watched, Carkham and the stranger turned to the door of the house, and a key rattled in the lock. A moment later the door closed softly, and all was quiet.

Nipper crossed the road, and took stock of the villa. To his surprise he saw that it was—or appeared to be—empty. There were no curtains at the windows, and the blinds were half-drawn. Not a single light showed.

"Well, this is rotten!" grunted Nipper. "Fat lot of good my shadowing Carky just for the sake of seeing him do the disappearing act into this house! I want to find out who that other chap is, and what the pair of 'em are doing!"

But Nipper didn't exactly know how to set about the task. After a while he softly entered the gateway, stole up to the front door, and applied his eye to the letter-box slit.

Pitch blackness, and utter silence.

Yet Carkham and the other man were certainly in the house. Obviously they were in one of the rear rooms. It wasn't a bit of good Nipper staying where he was, so he swiftly ran round, across the piece of waste land, until he was facing the rear of the row of villas.

Many lights showed—but not one from the end house.

"That's queer!" Nipper told himself. "Surely the two merchants aren't having a jaw in the dark? Perhaps they're in one of the back rooms with the shutters up. Anyhow, I can't see from here, so I shall have to make closer investigations."

A low fence divided the short gardens from the piece of bare grassland, and Nipper hopped over with one bound. He was glad of the darkness, for it veiled his movements. It was still comparatively early, and not many people were in bed.

When he arrived quite close to the house, however, he saw at once that there were no shutters to any of the windows. There were not even blinds, or curtains, indeed. The villa was obviously empty.

By this time Nipper was rather disconcerted. After shadowing Carkham to Islington he did not relish having to report to Nelson Lee that he had made no discoveries of any sort.

And yet the net result of Nipper's expedition was—nil.

It would be a sheer waste of time to go into full details. Nipper, after waiting some little time, got fed-up with the inactivity and succeeded in gaining entrance into the empty house by means of a half-open scullery window. At first he crept along the dark passages with every precaution. But he soon discovered that the house was not only empty of furniture, but devoid of human inhabitants also.

In short, Nipper drew a blank—he discovered nothing whatever.

After making a tour of every room, he left the house by the front door feeling that he had been swindled. The lad was decidedly upset. He had seen Carkham and his companion enter the house, but there all knowledge of them ended. Obviously they had left while he was examining the rear. And realising that his services were no longer required in Islington, he went straight home and reported to his master.

"Never mind, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, when he had heard his young assistant's tale of woe. "We can't always be successful, you know. You did the best you could—and your efforts have not been entirely unsuccessful."

"Well, I think they've been a rotten failure!" Nipper grunted.

"Not at all," was Lee's response. "You have made it clear that Carkham is not the staid private secretary he affects to be. The very fact of his meeting a man in an empty house proves that something shady is afoot. I am inclined to believe, Nipper, that Carkham was aware of your gentle attentions. At the first opportunity he gave you the slip."

"Looks like it, sir."

"We must walk before we run, and so long as we have got a starting-point, I am satisfied," went on the great detective. "Carkham is a clever customer; perhaps a lot cleverer than we realise at the moment. Well, it is up to us to prove his own words false. He expressed the opinion to me that I should not lay hands on the forger. Being the forger himself he thought he was safe in making that statement. Perhaps he does not fully grasp the fact that once I set my wits to work on a case I don't generally throw up the sponge until I have played my last trick and lost."

Lee carelessly threw his cigar-end into the fire-grate.

"I have many tricks to play yet," he added grimly, "and I don't think I shall lose them all. It only remains to be seen who holds the trump card."

CHAPTER III.

The Slate-Grey Notepaper.

"DEAR me! This is rather surprising!"

It was breakfast time, the following morning, and Nelson Lee uttered the words in a tone of mild astonishment as he glanced through a letter which he had just opened.

"What's surprising, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, as he looked up from the morning's newspaper. "Oh, a letter. Who's it from?"

"Sir Stephen Trundle. He politely informs me that my services are no longer required!"

"What!"

Nipper stared at his master for a moment, and then leaned across the table, and grabbed the letter which Lee had laid down. It was written on a thick piece of notepaper, slate-grey in colour, and ran as follows:

"Dear Sir,—Certain facts have come to my notice which have caused me to alter my views regarding the unfortunate affair of the forged cheque. I shall deem it a favour if you will discontinue your efforts on my behalf.

"Will you be kind enough to let me know the amount of your fee. I shall then have much pleasure in remitting a cheque.

"Very truly yours,

"STEPHEN TRUNDLE."

Nipper glared across at his master with a wrathful expression upon his face.

"Well, of all the cool nerve!" he exclaimed. "Only yesterday Mr. Sutcliffe came here at the express wishes of Sir Stephen, begging you to take up the case! What are you going to do about it, sir?"

Nelson Lee thoughtfully cracked an egg.

"Under the circumstances I can do nothing else but relinquish my efforts," he replied quietly. "Yet I don't feel quite comfortable in doing that. A man who can forge Sir Stephen's signature can forge other signatures with equal ease. He is a danger to the community, and should be exposed."

"But what on earth has made Sir Stephen change his mind so quickly?"

"I think I can guess. Very probably Sir Stephen has discovered that James Carkham is the forger. He is naturally shocked to find that his own private secretary is the culprit; but, owing to long association with the man, he does not wish to be harsh with him."

"Oh, you think Sir Stephen is going to hush it up?"

"That is the most obvious conclusion," replied Lee. "By birth, Carkham is a gentleman, and has probably got eminently respectable relations. Sir Stephen is a generous man, and he does not want to create a family scandal. No doubt he will send Carkham off to America or Australia—if he gets the chance!" he added grimly.

"What do you mean, guv'nor?"

"I mean that in spite of this communication I shall continue my efforts to bring Carkham to justice," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "In the goodness of his heart our friend the baronet fails to realise that he is doing more harm than good by taking up this attitude. The man with audacity enough to forge a cheque for ten thousand pounds is not likely to reform upon being found out and given another chance. He will simply go to a fresh field and start his tactics upon other unsuspecting victims. No, Nipper, I am not going to give up the case now!"

"Good egg!" said Nipper heartily.

Nevertheless, Sir Stephen's letter was rather disconcerting, and Nelson Lee was very thoughtful during the remainder of the meal. He was quite certain that his theory was correct. The baronet had discovered Carkham's guilt, and had taken compassion on him, and desired to hush the matter up.

But, an hour later, Lee received a surprise.

The telephone bell rang, and the caller proved to be Sir Stephen himself.

"Ah, is that you, Mr. Lee?" came the financier's voice. "I am rather anxious about that cheque forgery. I hope you'll forgive me for bothering you——"

"I received your letter, Sir Stephen," Lee interrupted coldly.

"My letter?"

"Yes, you have informed me that my services are no longer required, and I will now take this opportunity——"

"Wait, Mr. Lee—wait!" came Sir Stephen's voice. "What in the world are you talking about? Your services no longer required! I have written you no letter, or sent you a communication of any sort!"

The truth flashed across Nelson Lee's brain in a flood.

"By James!" he muttered between his teeth.

But the detective was quite cool and collected when he spoke again. If not before, he now had proof that the signature on the cheque was a forgery!

"I have news for you, Sir Stephen," said Lee smoothly. "Our friend, the forger, has been amusing himself at our expense. He seems to be a gentleman possessed of a sense of humour. By this morning's post a letter arrived, purporting to come from you, in which I was told to withdraw from the case."

"Good gracious!" gasped Sir Stephen. "Another forgery?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, upon my soul, this is amazing!"

"Where are you speaking from, Sir Stephen?" asked the detective. "I should like to bring this letter to you for your inspection."

"Please come at once, Mr. Lee," came the baronet's voice. "I am at my private house in Russell Square."

After a few more words Nelson Lee hung up the receiver, and gave Nipper a significant glance.

"A forgery, youngster!" he said quietly. "What do you think of it? The letter was quite objectless, as Carkham himself would know; but he is evidently so sure of his own security that he is laughing up his sleeve."

"Then—then Sir Stephen doesn't want us to back water, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Of course not. On the contrary, he is all the more eager for us to proceed," was Lee's reply. "Dear me! If this sort of thing goes on I shall be suspecting almost every letter I get of being a forgery! The puzzle is, it's impossible to detect the false from the genuine!"

Nelson Lee wasted no time in getting to the baronet's house. He was at once admitted to the library, and Sir Stephen welcomed him cordially.

"Mr. Carkham?" asked Lee, looking round.

"Oh, my secretary is out," replied Trundle, glancing at a desk near the window, thus indicating to Lee that the desk was Carkham's. "Well, Mr. Lee, what on earth is this about a letter?"

The detective handed the forgery across.

"Good heavens!" gasped Sir Stephen amazedly. "This is my writing—actually my writing! And yet I never saw the letter before this minute. The man who forged this is not only clever; he is possessed of almost uncanny powers!"

"I am beginning to think the same myself," was Nelson Lee's grim rejoinder.

"It is outrageous! It is galling!" went on the baronet angrily. "My cheques forged, my letters forged! Who is doing this infernal work? Have you no clue, Mr. Lee? The position is getting intolerable!"

Lee nodded.

"Yes, I have got a clue," he said quietly.

"Ah, then perhaps you will tell me——"

"My dear Sir Stephen, I am afraid that is impossible," cut in Lee. "So far I have obtained no actual proof. My whole structure is one of suspicion and conjecture. And I cannot reveal the name of the man I suspect until positive evidence of his guilt is in my hands."

"But you are going ahead—you are not at a deadlock?"

"A deadlock? On the contrary, I hope to lay the forger by the heels before many days have passed," replied Nelson Lee. "But an idea has struck me, Sir Stephen. When you have occasion to write to me, place a little cross in the bottom corner of the sheet of notepaper, on the back. If I receive a communication without that cross I shall know it is a forgery."

"An excellent idea," exclaimed Sir Stephen. "It is an extraordinary state of things when I have to place an identification mark upon my own letters! Good gracious me! The thing is becoming a positive nightmare!"

"Please mention nothing of this little arrangement to anybody else," went on Lee. "Let it be quite private between ourselves."

"Of course—of course!"

Nelson Lee walked over to the window, and cast a keen eye upon Carkham's desk. Then he turned as the baronet spoke to him. But in the act of turning he had carelessly picked up a blank piece of notepaper and folded it up absently as he continued the conversation.

Presently the detective rose to take his departure. But he paused as he was about to leave the apartment.

"One moment, Sir Stephen," he said. "That forged letter is written upon grey notepaper. Do you use grey notepaper?"

"Never!" replied Trundle. "By George, I hadn't thought of that! I always use white paper, Mr. Lee—remember that in future."

"I will," said Lee grimly.

And when he was walking briskly along Russell Square, the detective nodded to himself with satisfaction.

"Sir Stephen never uses grey notepaper," he murmured. "This forged letter is written on grey notepaper, and upon the desk of Mr. James Carkham is a little pile of grey notepaper of precisely the same texture and make."

The fact was significant, but it was not proof. Grey notepaper is common enough, but the make that Carkham used could be purchased at any large stationer's. But Nelson Lee was struck by the fact, and he felt that his suspicions would very soon change to positive certainties.

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CHAPTER IV.

Jim the Penman.

THREE days later the situation was much the same.

Nelson Lee found that the forger had covered up his tracks so perfectly that it was impossible to get on the trail. James Carkham was evidently a man with brains, resource, and a subtle touch of humour which strangely appealed to Lee. Somehow, he felt that his opponent was a worthy match for him.

The forger, convinced that he was safe from suspicion and discovery, seemed to take a delight in doing all he could to puzzle both Nelson Lee and Scotland Yard. The man's audacity became more marked as the days passed.

On this particular afternoon, three days after Nelson Lee's visit to Sir Stephen, the forger threw down the gauntlet, as it were. He revealed himself in his true colours, although he took care to keep his identity a perfect secret.

Nelson Lee knew that Sir Stephen Trundle and his household had gone into the country—to Trundle Hall, Surrey, Sir Stephen's country address. This move had been taken on Nelson Lee's advice, as the detective thought that with Carkham in the country, the circle of inquiry would be narrowed.

At Trundle Hall Carkham would not be able to do much without leaving evidence of his movements.

Lee and Nipper were in the consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road. It was raining slightly, and as there was work to do indoors—work in connection with the forgery case—they decided not to go out.

It was at about three o'clock that Mrs. Jones entered, carrying a letter in her hand. She laid it before Nelson Lee with the information that it had just been delivered by hand.

After the housekeeper had gone the detective picked up the missive carelessly, and then gave a short gasp, and ejaculated:

"By James!"

The letter was addressed in his own handwriting!

Instinctively, Lee knew that it was from the forger. He tore it open quickly, Nipper looking on with some interest.

"This is astounding!" Lee exclaimed, in a low voice. "I knew the man was clever, Nipper, but I never guessed that he had such amazing powers as are made apparent by this letter. It is the quaintest, the most bizarre, communication I have ever received!"

"That's a sweeping statement, guv'nor."

"It is the literal truth, my boy. The letter itself is not very long, and it is composed of four paragraphs. The first paragraph is written in my own handwriting, if you please; the second in the handwriting of Sir Stephen Trundle; the third I recognise as the caligraphy of Mr. Douglas Sutcliffe; and the fourth paragraph is apparently written by Mr. Henry Soper, the bank manager!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" Nipper gasped. "One letter in the handwriting of four men?"

"Exactly."

"But what the blue dickens is the meaning of it, sir?"

"There can be only one meaning," Lee replied. "The forger wishes to make me understand that he is a very formidable fellow, and that I had better cease to concern myself with the case. Upon my word, it is a most astounding business, Nipper. This 'Jim the Penman' is proving himself——"

"Jim the which?" asked Nipper, in astonishment.

"Jim the Penman. Here, read the letter through yourself, and then you'll understand," said the famous detective. "Upon the whole, I don't think a better name could be applied to our friend the forger. He has truly the most amazing powers of penmanship."

Nipper took the letter and looked at it curiously. It ran:

"My Dear Mr. Nelson Lee,—I should like to give you a word of friendly advice. By continuing your present course, you are only wasting your valuable time, and leading up to a dismal failure. The man who forged Sir Stephen's name on the £10,000 cheque is too clever for you. I'm that man, and you'd better not attempt the impossible.

"I think I possess enough wits to keep myself clear of your clutches. Take this letter as a warning; drop your investigations. I won't say more, but will leave it at that. I am a determined man!"

"It may interest you to know that I am writing this letter straight off, without a pause. I suppose I'm a bit of a freak in my own way, but my gift is developed to the very highest pitch, and I never make mistakes. This communication isn't a ha'porth of use to you, otherwise I shouldn't risk sending it.

"The more you persist in trying to track me down, the more I shall persist in giving you my attention. And if you don't drop your inquiries, I

shall make it my business to settle with you once and for all. About the time you receive this you will learn that I have been busy again. As my name happens to be Jim, and as I seem to remember something about a fellow named Jim the Penman, I don't see why I shouldn't adopt the pseudonym myself. It just about fits me, for I pride myself on being the cleverest penman on earth—and that's not boasting! So remember this, Mr. Nelson Lee.

JIM THE PENMAN (Modern edition)."

"Jim the Penman!" exclaimed Nipper. "I seem to have heard that name before, guy'nor."

"Very probably," Lee replied. "There was a famous character named Jim the Penman. But here we have Jim No. 2—and he is a real live man. By jingo! I'm beginning to be intensely interested, youngster. This forger is an original and daring individual!"

Nipper stared at the letter in amazed wonder.

"It's almost too much to believe, sir!" he exclaimed. "This is your writing—your fist exactly. The chap must be a regular genius!"

"A genius, yes," was the grim rejoinder. "But a man with such a genius is possessed of a terribly powerful weapon. Think, Nipper! With his ability to forge any and every handwriting, the most singular possibilities present themselves. This forger is clever, thorough, and cool; he will keep himself beyond the clutches of the law, and I fear he will give us a long run for our money."

"Isn't this letter any use?"

"As a clue? Not a little bit," said Lee. "You and I, Nipper, have strong reasons for suspecting James Carkham of being this audacious 'Jim the Penman.' How does this letter help us? It is quite useless——"

The telephone interrupted by ringing sharply. Lee drew the instrument to him, and placed the receiver to his ear. As he listened to the voice at the other end of the wire his eyebrows contracted and his lips set themselves in a thin line. But except for these slight signs of emotion Nelson Lee remained unmoved.

He put one or two brisk questions, received the answers, and then rang off.

"It's almost unbelievable, Nipper!" he said amazedly.

"What is, guv'nor?"

"Sir Stephen Trundle's name has been forged a second time! A second cheque for ten thousand pounds has been presented!"

"Great Scott!" Nipper gasped. "Then—then they've copped——"

"Not a bit of it! The cheque was paid!"

"Paid!"

Nipper dropped limply into a chair.

"Bub-bub-but it ain't possible!" he stuttered. "After the first experience the bank officials wouldn't be diddled a second time. Besides, this Jim the Penman wouldn't be such a fool as to risk exposure in that way!"

"The bank officials were 'diddled,' Nipper, and the forger has been clever enough—not fool enough—to repeat his first performance," Lee exclaimed, rapidly lacing his boots. "By James, I am curious to learn how the fraud was engineered! The audacity of the thing is simply startling!"

The great detective lost no time in setting off for the City and West London Bank. When he arrived he found Mr. Soper, the manager, nearly off his head with worry. Mr. Sutcliffe was there, also looking worried. Sir Stephen, Lee knew, was in the country.

"I am almost at a loss for words, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the manager hoarsely. "How were we to know? How were we to suspect? And now it is too late! The police have wired from Brighton that there is no hope of tracing the notes——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Soper, but will you kindly tell me exactly what has occurred?" put in Lee quietly.

Mr. Sutcliffe stepped forward.

"Perhaps I had better put you in possession of the facts, Mr. Lee," said the solicitor. "It happens that I am the unfortunate individual whom the forger chose to make his unwitting confederate. It was I who cashed the cheque!"

"Indeed!"

"When you have heard all, I am sure you will exonerate me from blame," went on Sutcliffe, with a slight smile. "As Sir Stephen's solicitor I am naturally entrusted with a great many of his private affairs. Yesterday afternoon, therefore, I was in no way surprised to receive a letter from Sir Stephen, commissioning me to undertake a certain task.

"Sir Stephen enclosed a cheque in his letter, the amount of which you already know. He requested me to cash the cheque immediately, and to send on the banknotes to Lady Trundle, who was staying at the Titanio Hotel, Brighton. My client intimated that he felt more comfortable in entrusting the matter to me, because of what had occurred earlier. As I have cashed many cheques for Sir Stephen before—although never for such a large amount—I was in no way surprised."

"You did not suspect anything?" Lee asked.

"My dear sir, for Heaven's sake don't lay any blame on my shoulders!" protested Sutcliffe. "How on earth was I to guess anything? Everything was in perfect order. The cheque was all right, the letter was written upon a sheet of Sir Stephen's own printed notepaper, and the postmark on the envelope was Bansham—the post-office for Trundle Hall."

"Ah! May I see the letter and the envelope?"

"The letter is here, but the envelope I threw into the fire," the solicitor replied. "I'm sorry, Mr. Lee, but I wasn't aware of anything wrong at the time. Well, to proceed with my story. I immediately came round to the bank, and presented the cheque. This was yesterday afternoon."

"How was I to suspect a second forgery?" asked Mr. Soper worriedly. "The very fact that Mr. Sutcliffe presented the cheque satisfied me that it was quite in order. For years Mr. Sutcliffe has transacted Sir Stephen's business, and we even joked over the matter. Laughingly, we declared that it was no forgery this time! Banknotes were handed over to Mr. Sutcliffe, and he left the bank."

The solicitor took up the thread of the story again, and proceeded:

"I went to my office, enclosed the note in a registered envelope, and personally posted the package. It was addressed to Lady Trundle, Titanic Hotel, Brighton. If I had had the slightest suspicion I would have wired to Sir Stephen for confirmation of his written instructions."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"Everything was so straightforward that you never dreamed of doubting the letter or the instructions," he remarked. "Your position, Mr. Sutcliffe, was an unfortunate one, and I do not blame you in the least for falling into the simple trap. When did you learn that something was wrong?"

"Not until two o'clock to-day," Mr. Sutcliffe replied. "I received a letter from Sir Stephen, and as he made no mention of the cheque, but that Lady Trundle wished me to send down certain papers, my suspicions were instantly aroused. It was apparent to me that Lady Trundle was with her husband. I wired at once, and in less than an hour learned that the whole thing was an audacious trick."

"You informed the police, of course?"

"At once. Brighton was informed, and the Titanic Hotel was visited by

detectives. But this, of course, was hours after the registered letter had been delivered."

"Who received the letter?"

"Yesterday, it appears," replied Mr. Sutcliffe, "a smartly dressed woman, giving the name of Lady Trundle, took a couple of expensive rooms at the hotel. Who suspected anything wrong? This morning the registered letter was handed to the lady, who went out shortly afterwards. Since that moment she hasn't been seen."

"With excellent reasons," said Lee drily. "Well, gentlemen, it is evident the forger is a daring man—a man who takes a certain delight in bringing off his coups. But what of the banknotes—have they been traced?"

"Not one!" said Mr. Soper dismally. "The scoundrel had the whole morning at his disposal—or her disposal! There seems to be a whole gang of them, Mr. Lee. The money was turned into untraceable cash within three hours, and the bogus Lady Trundle has disappeared without leaving a trace!"

"H'm! Matters are becoming interesting," Lee remarked carelessly. "Just before you rang up, Mr. Soper, I received this communication. As your handwriting was borrowed for the occasion, it may interest you. The same remarks apply to you, Mr. Sutcliffe."

Lee handed over the letter from Jim the Penman, and the two men read it with growing amazement.

"My writing!" gasped the manager. "Good gracious! I—I am at a loss for adequate words! This—this is incredible!"

"By Jove, the fellow is clever!" Mr. Sutcliffe said, with a note of forced admiration in his voice. "Four different specimens of handwriting here—one my own. And they are all executed so accurately that to detect the fraud is impossible. Mr. Lee, I can't help feeling just a little sorry for you. It's my candid opinion you'll never lay hands on this 'Jim the Penman.' He's a cute customer, in all conscience!"

Nelson Lee nodded in agreement.

"He is one of the cleverest criminals of modern times," he said. "But, sooner or later, even the smartest crooks make mistakes. This man is so sure of his own safety that he will ultimately take one chance too many. Then I shall get him!"

"Well, for our own safety, I wish you luck!" said the solicitor heartily.

Lee turned away, then hesitated. Finally he said:

"There's one little question I should like to ask. It is usual, is it not, for Mr. Carkham, Sir Stephen's private secretary, to write his employer's letters?"

"Well, not exactly usual. But Mr. Carkham often does write."

"There was no reason for you to be struck, then, by the fact that Sir Stephen wrote himself when enclosing the cheque?" asked Lee.

"No reason at all," replied the solicitor. "Besides, I know for a fact that Mr. Carkham is not at Trundle Hall."

"Indeed!" said Lee quietly.

"The secretary was given a couple of days holiday by Sir Stephen, and will return to Trundle Hall to-night. So, you see, I should have been more surprised if Mr. Carkham had written the letter."

"Exactly," replied Lee. "Thank you, Mr. Sutcliffe."

After twenty minutes further discussion, the detective took his leave. And as he strode along towards Gray's Inn Road, his thoughts were running in one groove—James Carkham had been given two days holiday, and it was during the two days of his leave that the second forgery had taken place!

The facts were significant; but there was a total absence of proof.

That was the galling part of it. No proof! Nelson Lee even thought it

possible that Carkham may have disguised himself as a woman, and that it had been the secretary himself who had stayed at the Brighton hotel under the name of Lady Trundle.

The whole thing was a puzzle. But Lee was convinced of one fact—James Carkham was Jim the Penman. There was not an atom of evidence against the secretary, but Lee was not greatly perturbed.

Sooner or later Carkham would make a slip, and then—well, then the game would be up, and Jim the Penman—second edition—would pay an enforced visit to an establishment where he would find no opportunity to exercise his remarkable powers of penmanship.

CHAPTER V.

Sir Stephen's Invitation.

NIPPER chuckled.

"It's not another forgery, sir?" he asked, with a grin.

"No. It's not a forgery this time, youngster, although it is impossible to detect the real handwriting from the false," Nelson Lee replied. "This is really a genuine letter from Sir Stephen Trundle."

It was the following morning, and Lee and Nipper were in the consulting-room awaiting breakfast. The detective was enjoying an early cigarette while he glanced over his correspondence.

One letter was from Sir Stephen. It was only a short note, inviting Lee and Nipper to spend a few days at Trundle Hall.

Nelson Lee decided at once to take advantage of the invitation. It was, in fact, just what he wanted. He had been determined to visit Trundle Hall, in any case. But it was better for Sir Stephen to make the first advance.

The detective was desirous of watching Carkham, and by staying at Sir Stephen's country home, he would be able to keep a sharp eye on the secretary without Carkham suspecting anything.

He knew at once that the invitation was genuine.

Firstly, it was against the forger's interests to have Nelson Lee close at hand; and secondly, there was a tiny cross on the letter in the right-hand bottom corner at the back. Sir Stephen had remembered to place that little identification mark there.

After breakfast, Lee and his young assistant spent an hour in packing a few necessary clothes, etc., and then they started off.

The detective did not mean to delay a minute. He was extremely interested in the case, and he wished to lay Jim the Penman by the heels in as short a space of time as possible.

The clever rogue, having been successful so far, would probably enlarge his field of operations before long. There were so many ways in which he could use his extraordinary ability that Nelson Lee determined to waste no time.

The day being fine, it was decided to do the trip by motor-car. Lee's own powerful automobile was brought round from a garage close by, and the detective and Nipper were soon speeding through London.

Lee himself was at the wheel, and after the suburbs were left behind, the speed was increased; but the detective did not believe in exceeding the speed limit except when such a course was vitally necessary. On such an occasion, Nelson Lee would send his car hurtling along at an appalling speed, regardless of all police regulations.

Now, however, there was no need for violent hurry, and so the journey was taken easily. The day was perfect, the sun shining down upon the country with delightful spring warmth and brilliancy. The green hedges and trees were fresh and good to look upon after the grime and drabness of London.

Trundle Hall was situated in the heart of Surrey, not many miles from Dorking. Bansham, the village near the Hall, was passed through, and then the gates of the long drive hove into view.

Trundle Hall was situated in the centre of a superb park, with thickly wooded hills on all sides. As the motor-car slowly approached the mansion, Nipper looked round him with interest.

"It's not bad!" he said critically. "I reckon Sir Stephen can afford to lose twenty thousand or so, guv'nor. This place must cost a small fortune to keep up."

"Our host is a very wealthy man, Nipper."

Lee steered the car alongside the great flight of white stone steps, and brought it to a standstill. Then he and Nipper hopped out, and mounted to the front door, which was sheltered by an imposing porch with marble pillars.

A stately butler answered Lee's ring at the bell.

"Sir Stephen is in the library, sir," he said, in answer to the detective's inquiry. "You say he is expecting you, sir? If you and the young gentleman will wait a moment, I will take your card to Sir Stephen."

Nelson Lee and Nipper sat down on a luxurious lounge.

But in a couple of minutes the butler returned.

"Sir Stephen will see you at once, sir," he said. "Will you please step this way?"

They followed the butler along a wide corridor, and were ushered into a large, lofty room, lined with superb bookcases. Sir Stephen Trundle was seated at his desk, but he rose at once as his visitors entered. There was no one else in the apartment.

"Ah, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Sir Stephen heartily. "And Nipper, too! This is splendid! An unexpected surprise, begad!"

Lee started as he shook hands.

"Unexpected, Sir Stephen?" he said quietly.

"Unexpected!" echoed Nipper.

The baronet looked somewhat surprised.

"You didn't send me a wire, notifying me of your visit, did you?" he asked. "I have received no——"

"But you sent me an invitation, Sir Stephen!" interrupted Lee.

"I—I don't quite understand!"

"Another forgery!" yelled Nipper. "Oh, lor', this is the limit!"

Nelson Lee clicked his teeth, and without a word produced the letter which had been delivered that morning. He handed it over to the baronet, who read it with an angry look in his eyes and with flushed cheeks.

"I did not write this!" he exclaimed huskily. "Good heavens, Mr. Lee! This business is becoming a horrible nightmare! I shall begin to think that I am a somnambulist—that I rise in my sleep and pen these letters and fill in cheques!"

"If I did not have proof to the contrary, I should suspect something of the sort myself," Lee replied. "You declare you did not write this letter, Sir Stephen?"

"Emphatically I did not!"

"Then I must admit that I am at a loss. What possible object could the forger have in bringing me down here on a fool's errand? I am inclined

to think it is merely another example of the fellow's rather crooked humour."

"But the cross, sir!" put in Nipper. "That private mark——"

"Begad, the cross is on this letter!" ejaculated the baronet, turning the sheet over. "Upon my soul, Lee, this is too much for me!"

The detective stroked his chin.

"Did you tell anybody of our arrangement?" he asked quietly.

"Regarding the cross? No; I didn't tell anybody except my secretary——"

"Ah, you told Mr. Carkham?"

"Why not? I also made the same arrangement with several friends and business men whom I can trust," said Sir Stephen. "But how did the forger get to know of it? Of course, upon seeing that cross you instantly accepted the letter as genuine?"

"Naturally!"

Sir Stephen paced the library agitatedly.

"Of course, you know all about the second cheque forgery?" he asked. "I do not blame Mr. Sutcliffe in the least. He was certainly not to know that the whole thing was a gigantic hoax and a fraud. I wish to Heaven you could lay your hands on this daring forger, Mr. Lee!"

"I am working my hardest," was the quiet reply.

"The fellow seems to have made a dead-set upon me!" the baronet continued. "Why? Why has he not turned his attentions in some other direction? Already, in this short space of time, I have lost twenty thousand pounds! It is appalling!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You can rest assured, Sir Stephen, that you will not lose another penny," he declared. "The second forgery was done more out of bravado than anything else. The man did it just for the sake of proving how clever he is. He will not trouble you with his gentle attentions again, I am sure. Indeed, if I can help it, Jim the Penman will not trouble anybody else at all—except the police."

"Jim the Penman?" said Sir Stephen questioningly.

For reply, Nelson Lee produced the note from the forger, and the baronet was freshly astonished.

"I urge you to put your best efforts forward and to get this man safely under lock and key!" said Sir Stephen earnestly. "I wish I knew who the scoundrel was! It is terrible being in the dark! There is nothing worse than fighting a man who persists in remaining out of reach. He has a tremendous advantage over us, Mr. Lee."

"Undoubtedly!"

Nelson Lee turned to Nipper.

"Well, my boy, we had better be getting back to London——"

"Not at all—not at all!" Sir Stephen interrupted quickly. "You must stay down here now, Mr. Lee—that is, of course, if you wish to. I shall be more than delighted if you will accept my personal invitation to remain at Trundle Hall for a few days. This, at least, is no forgery!" he added, with a smile.

Nelson Lee gladly accepted, and a few minutes later he and Nipper were escorted upstairs by the maidservant, who took Sir Stephen's orders. When the two visitors were alone, Lee gripped Nipper by the shoulders and looked into the lad's face.

"Why was that letter forged?" he asked grimly. "Why have we been brought down here, my boy? If Carkham is indeed the forger, it is strange that he should deliberately attempt to get us under the same roof as himself!"

"It's no good asking me, guv'nor," said Nipper candidly. "I'm past the thinking stage. My brains are all mixed up!"

Lee was a little worried. Had Carkham some sinister design in luring the pair down into the country?

Having got them at Trundle Hall, did he mean to adopt some drastic measure to encompass their destruction? It was very puzzling, and the detective was far from being easy in mind.

He decided to be very cautious. He had an idea that matters would come to a head before long, and when the crisis did come Nelson Lee resolved to emerge the victor.

But what was the next move to be?

CHAPTER VI.

The Fight in the Library.

THE rest of the day passed swiftly and pleasantly.

At tea-time, Nelson Lee and Nipper met Lady Trundle, and she proved to be a very delightful lady and a hospitable hostess. It appeared that several visitors were due at the hall at the week-end, but until then Lee and Nipper were the only guests.

James Carkham, the private secretary, was treated as a gentleman and almost as one of the family, and during the evening he and Nelson Lee enjoyed a game of billiards. The detective showed no sign whatever that he suspected Carkham. He did not intend the man to be on his guard.

Carkham was very pleasant, very cool, and extremely genial. But, although he strove to conceal it, he was labouring under a certain amount of inward emotion. Lee could easily guess the reason for this, but he affected to notice nothing.

Dinner was a success in spite of the small company, and after a quiet game of cards and a sojourn in the drawing-room, the household retired for the night.

The hour was not late, but it was customary for Sir Stephen to retire early when in the country. Nelson Lee and Nipper were allotted rooms next door to one another in the front of the house, but Nelson Lee did not retire into his bedroom to sleep. He had much to think over first.

The night was very still and calm. Indeed, the atmosphere was most close, and there was a feeling of thunder in the air. The detective lay in bed in the darkness, pondering over the extraordinary train of events which had resulted in his staying at Trundle Hall.

He knew that Jim the Penman was a formidable opponent—a criminal of a most unusual type. He was cool and clever. His remarkable powers with the pen were a wonderful asset, and they would certainly be used largely in future to the rogue's advantage unless he were brought to book.

Lee had crossed swords with many forgers in his time, but this extraordinary individual was a novelty. Apparently he could copy any handwriting without any preliminary practice. And if he could copy handwriting, it stood to reason that he could copy almost anything connected with penmanship.

Lee found himself pondering over several big forgeries—quite apart from the affairs of Sir Stephen Trundle—which had puzzled the police during the past twelve months. They were all unsolved, and were all forgeries for very large amounts. The detective was certain in his own mind that Jim the Penman was responsible.

Used as the forger was using it his talent was a terrible one. He was a master among master criminals. And he was unknown!

Lee suspected Carkham—was sure of Carkham's guilt—but he hadn't a scrap of proof to substantiate his suspicions.

Hour after hour the detective lay quite still, thinking deeply. Sleep would not come to his eyes. By the watch on his wrist—which had a luminous dial—he saw that the time was one-thirty.

Now and again thunder muttered in the distance, and the dull patch of the window was made clear at intervals by far-away lightning. And as the time slipped by, the thunder grew louder, and the lightning more brilliant.

The storm was apparently developing over the neighbourhood.

Fifteen minutes later Nelson Lee tossed the bedclothes aside, and slipped out of bed. He had decided to slip some clothes on and to descend to the terrace outside, at the back of the house.

He felt that he wanted fresh air, and a cigar would assist him to think more clearly. The household was all asleep, and would know nothing of his movements. And even if he were seen it would matter nothing—he was not a prisoner in his own room.

He donned some clothes, and slipped his dress-shoes on. Then, with a dressing-gown buttoned up, and a cigar in his hand in readiness to light, he left his bedroom and silently padded along the wide corridor to the great staircase. The mansion was utterly still and silent.

In spite of the innocence of his intentions, Lee felt almost guilty in stealing out of his room at dead of night. He smiled to himself, and passed down the wide stairs into the hall below.

To reach the terrace, which was covered by a verandah—and where he could enjoy his cigar in spite of the rain—it was necessary to traverse a long passage to a side door, or to pass through the library, and to emerge upon the terrace through the French windows.

Lee chose the latter, and the shorter, route.

Instinctively he opened the library door noiselessly. But as he stepped into the apartment he paused, his heart suddenly beating quickly. He had expected the library to be in utter darkness. But as he paused in the doorway he saw a small gleam of light at the desk in the centre of the room.

Lee stood perfectly still, motionless and silent.

Very dimly he saw the figure of a man outlined against the light. But the latter was so small and so concentrated upon the surface of the table, that he found it impossible to recognise even the shape of the man.

But it was a man—and he was sitting at the desk, writing!

Lee looked round him, and faintly saw that one of the French windows stood ajar. He wondered whether the intruder had entered by the window, or whether the latter had been opened as a precautionary measure, in case of a sudden surprise. Lee was inclined to think that the open window was merely to provide a quick means of escape.

But his thoughts only dwelt on that matter for a few seconds. Other and more vital thoughts surged through his brain.

Instantly he guessed that this man before him was Carkham—Jim the Penman! The scoundrel was engaged in his own peculiar work of forgery. Nelson Lee felt an exultant wave of triumph sweep over him.

He had caught his man red-handed!

As he quietly stepped forward into the library he thanked the impulse which had led him to descend at this particular minute. He would spring on the other from behind and would place him hors-de-combat within a few seconds. All the advantage in the situation lay with the great detective.

It is the unexpected that always happens. It was unexpected for Lee to find this man in the library. And that which happened next was decidedly unexpected.

As the detective stepped forward, a board under his foot gave a tiny

creak—a creak which would have been absolutely noiseless during the daytime. But in the stillness of the night—and on such a quiet night as this—the sound was intensified a hundred-fold. There was no wind, and no thunder at that moment.

And the little sound was quite sufficient for the occupant of the library.

Instantly the light was extinguished, and a quick movement and a sharp intake of breath told Nelson Lee that the other was prepared. With one bound Lee sprang forward and grappled in the darkness.

His hands encountered a form, and he gripped it with all his strength. But he was not to capture Jim the Penman so easily! The man did not utter a sound, but fought with terrific fierceness.

In a second a deadly struggle was in progress.

The darkness was intense, and Nelson Lee could not gain a single glimpse of his opponent. The man uttered no sound, but fought with desperate energy. But Lee was sure that he was Carkham. Once that fact was revealed the scoundrel's game would be up.

He knew this well enough, and was fighting for his liberty. And the detective was fighting to encompass the other's defeat. To and fro they swayed in the clear space in the centre of the room.

They were both matched perfectly, and neither one could gain the mastery over the other. Lee was seeking an opportunity to withdraw his revolver from his hip-pocket. Once he could do that he would use the butt without hesitation.

But Jim the Penman would not allow the detective a second's respite.

As they struggled a brilliant flash of lightning gleamed out. It came at a time when Nelson Lee's face was held ceilingwards by his opponent's throttling grip. And it prevented the detective seeing anything save the ceiling above him.

There was a skylight above, for the library was a kind of built-in addition to the house itself, with no rooms above. This skylight was outlined in bluey light, and then the darkness descended deeper than ever. It was a terrible disappointment for Nelson Lee; the light had come, and yet he had not seen his enemy's face.

As the struggle continued a terrific peal of thunder rolled out.

The storm had burst in all its fury right over Trundle Hall.

The detective knew that other flashes of lightning would follow the first, and during one of those brief illuminated intervals he would assuredly catch sight of Jim the Penman's face. He was positive that he could see the face of James Carkham—but it would be the proof he needed.

The other seemed to realise the peril of his position, for he fought with renewed strength. But Lee was just as determined to be the victor, and the fight progressed with neither man gaining the upper hand.

Panting and gasping the pair swayed backwards and forwards over a confined area. Strangely enough they were causing very little commotion. Lee thought of yelling for assistance, but decided not to do so. In the first place the library was so far from the bedroom quarters that shouting would be of no avail; and in the second place he wanted to effect the capture single-handed.

Nelson Lee was not the man to admit defeat.

And he would certainly have won the grim struggle had not an unkind fate intervened. It was a terribly cruel stroke of misfortune which caused Lee to lose the battle. He was even gaining the mastery when the crisis arrived.

He felt that Jim the Penman was weakening—that it would only be a matter of minutes before the rogue collapsed. And once that happened Lee would have him down and pinned to the floor.

Then the storm took a hand in the game.

Right over head the heavens themselves seemed to split asunder. A livid forked flash of lightning hissed down through the skylight in a blue flame. It seemed to fill the room with its radiance.

And Nelson Lee, far from seeing his enemy's features, was momentarily blinded by the glare. Lightning plays queer tricks, and it played a very queer trick upon this occasion. The great detective was struck—not seriously or fatally—but he was struck by the all-powerful electricity and rendered helpless.

With a choking cry he collapsed to the floor and lay there writhing.

As he did so the thunder boomed out its shattering roar, and to the accompaniment of it Jim the Penman uttered a great gasp of relief and dashed across with staggering gait to the French windows. He, himself, had not been affected by the lightning, and now he plunged out into the night and disappeared in the rain and the blackness.

Within the library, Nelson Lee staggered dizzily to his feet. His head seemed to be whirling round, and his brain was singing painfully. His very finger-tips were tingling as though he had just received a tremendous electric shock from a dynamo. He knew what had happened—and he knew that Jim the Penman had seized his advantage and made good his escape.

“What luck!” gasped Lee furiously. “By James, what terrible luck!”

For a moment he was inclined to dash out in pursuit, but his common sense told him that such a course would have been useless. Indeed, he would probably have fallen a victim to his enemy, who would be lurking in the dark.

For a full minute Nelson Lee leaned against the desk and recovered himself. He knew that he had been struck by lightning, and he was extremely thankful that his life had been spared. When he had recovered his breath and his composure he switched on his electric torch and looked round him. The only sign of disorder in the room was upon the floor, where a couple of rugs were disarranged. These he rapidly put straight, and then turned his light upon the desk.

A sheet of notepaper was lying upon the pad, and there was writing upon it. And at the first glimpse Lee knew that his opponent had indeed been Jim the Penman. For the writing upon the notepaper was a forgery of Lee's own.

Obviously the man had only just commenced operations, for only a couple of lines were written:

“I am utterly disheartened. My endeavours to capture the scoundrel who calls himself Jim the Penman have proved fruitless. Both Nipper and I——”

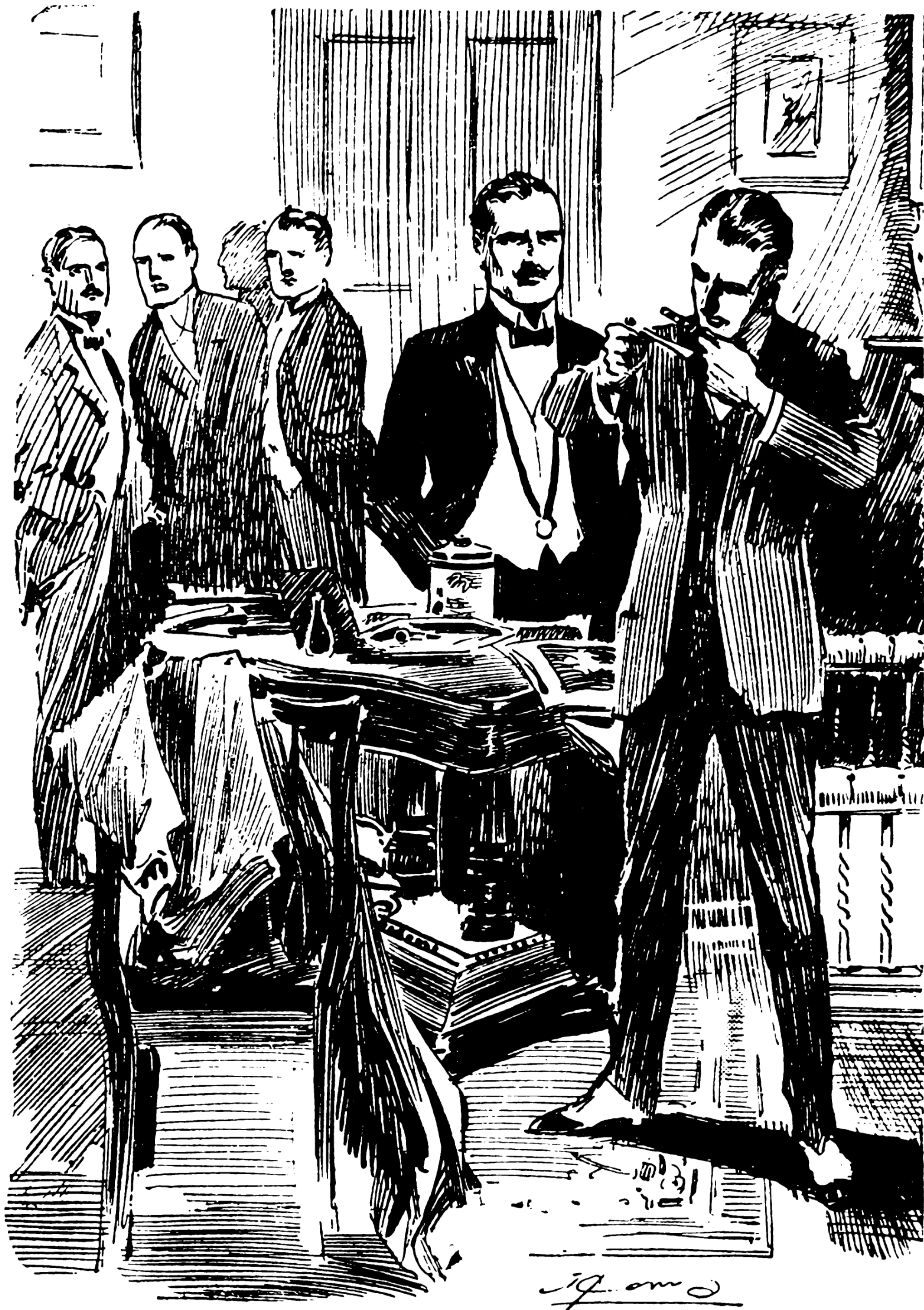
Lee wondered what the forger had been about to write. Possibly the words were only written as practice, before writing a totally different epistle. They were of not much use, anyhow; but Lee picked up the sheet of paper, and put it in his pocket.

Outside the thunder rolled, and the rain hissed down fiercely.

“Perhaps it is not too late even now to track that scoundrel!” Lee told himself. “The ground is soft, and plain tracks will be left on the gravel. I will awaken Nipper, and then we will investigate. First of all, however, I will satisfy myself upon one point!”

He left the library and swiftly mounted the stairs. Before retiring to rest he had noted which bedroom Carkham slept in. It was some distance from those allotted to the guests, and in another corridor.

The great house was as quiet as ever. The struggle in the library had aroused nobody, and the storm was causing no commotion. Probably the household were sleeping through the upheaval of the heavens.



First of all Nelson Lee compared the ten thousand pound cheque to Sir Stephen's handwriting and signature with his naked eye. Then he produced his own powerful magnifying lens and spent ten minutes going over the signatures and handwriting inch by inch.

Mr. Soper and the expert were talking quietly meanwhile, watching Lee with interest. (See page 4.)

Lee paused outside the private secretary's door, and silently turned the handle. The door swung open, and the detective entered.

If his theory was all wrong—if Carkham was not the forger—if he were peacefully sleeping in his bed, then Lee would receive a great surprise. He switched his light on suddenly, and directed its rays upon the bed.

One glance was sufficient for Nelson Lee, and he drew his breath in sharply.

The bed was empty!

James Carkham was not in the room!

CHAPTER VII.

Trapped by the Forger.

MY hat! Fancy all that happening while I was snoozing, guv'nor!" Nipper murmured the words as he slipped into his things. Nelson Lee had awakened the lad, and had just told him what had occurred.

"It is a stroke of misfortune that the forger escaped," Lee said quietly. "But I must be thankful that I am still alive, Nipper!"

"Rather, sir! Fancy being struck by lightning, and having terrific fights with unknown rotters in the dark! You have been going it, sir!"

"I do not think the 'rotter' is unknown, youngster," murmured Nelson Lee. "As I told you, I could not catch a glimpse of Jim the Penman's face, but I have just been in Carkham's room, and the fact that the secretary is not there is significant enough for me. If we can't track the rogue, we'll wait until he returns to his room, and then force the truth from him. But it will be better all round if we capture him red-handed."

Nipper was soon ready, and the pair stole downstairs to the library. Lee had dressed himself more thoroughly before awakening Nipper, and he now wore his boots, ordinary clothes, and cap. Nipper was prepared for outdoor work also.

When they passed through the French windows out on to the terrace, they found that the storm was practically over. The darkness was intense, but the rain had almost stopped.

One glance at the ground, however, told Lee that it would be futile looking for tracks. Until a few minutes ago, the rain had been pelting down in torrents, and every sign of a footprint was obliterated.

"H'm! Things don't seem very promising!" Lee muttered. "I think — Hold on, Nipper! Don't tread on those steps!"

Nipper held back, and his master leaned forward. Two of the steps leading from the terrace were partially under cover of the verandah, and were only half wet. They were stone steps, but covered with dust and dirt. Faintly, Nelson Lee could see some impressions on the damp dirt.

"This looks rather interesting, my lad," said the detective. "Perhaps we shall have some luck, after all. If only I can identify a bootmark with Carkham's footwear, I shall have the scoundrel in my hands."

"How's that, sir?"

"My dear lad, use your wits! It's proof we want—proof! If we find Carkham's footprints, freshly made, on these steps, it will be conclusive evidence that the secretary is the man who escaped from this room during the storm."

Lee felt in his pocket for his powerful magnifying-lens, and then uttered an exclamation:

"My lens is upstairs in my other waistcoat pocket," he said quickly. "Run up, Nipper, and fetch it—and mind you go quietly!"

Nipper departed on his errand, and as soon as he had gone the detective leapt nimbly over the steps on to the gravel below. The rain had stopped now, and the air was rather fresh after the storm.

Lee bent double with his back to the darkness of the grounds, and flashed his light upon the two steps which now faced him. The marks he had first seen were not very distinct, and, upon looking at them closely, he was not at all sure that they would prove to be of any value.

And as he bent down a little nearer to the steps, a startling thing occurred. At that moment Lee was certainly not prepared for an attack. He was in an excellent position for an onslaught from the rear, and that is what happened.

Without hearing a sound, or without receiving any warning, Lee suddenly felt a kind of bag thrust over his head from behind; and, as he was in the act of rising to grapple with his assailant, something hard descended upon his head with a sickening thud.

Nelson Lee fell backwards, partially stunned.

The whole incident had been so abrupt and unexpected that it was all over in a few seconds. Lee was not seriously injured, but for the moment all the fight was knocked out of him. He was not exactly unconscious, but, to all intents and purposes, in the same predicament as a man who has imbibed with unwise freedom of spirituous liquors. In short, Nelson Lee was helpless and incapable of action.

With his head singing an agonising song, he knew that he was being carried bodily away. Yet he could not lift a finger to help himself. For several minutes, he was carried along upon his assailant's back as though he were a sack of coals.

After that, Lee must have lapsed into unconsciousness for a short while, for when he next had the full use of his senses he opened his eyes to find himself in pitch, utter blackness. He knew at once he was not in the open air.

After a few seconds, he endeavoured to move, but then found that he was bound and gagged. He realised that he must be in one of the outbuildings he had observed some little distance from the house itself. Probably it was a disused stable, which had long since been left to its own devices, for new stabling and garages had been erected in a different quarter of the grounds.

Quite unexpectedly a voice cut through the darkness:

"A movement, eh? So you have come to yourself, Lee?"

Nelson Lee couldn't very well reply under the circumstances. He tried to recognise the voice, but as it was uttered in a hoarse whisper, he found it impossible to do so. In the stillness of the night the whisper was as audible as any loud voice, and the speaker was evidently adopting it to avoid recognition.

"You needn't trouble to answer," went on Nelson Lee's captor mockingly. "I admit, Lee, that you nearly had me in the library. To tell the truth, if it hadn't been for that flash of lightning, you would have gained the upper hand. Luck came to my aid at a very opportune moment."

Nelson Lee strained his eyes, but could see no sign of his companion.

"As a matter of fact," went on the latter, "I thought the lightning had finished you. I thought that you were struck dead. But it seems I have got to finish the task myself. It's just as well, because Nipper will not

share the same fate. I was just coming back to the library to satisfy myself of your demise when I overheard you instructing the lad to fetch your magnifying-glass. I accordingly acted with promptitude, with these results. As you have guessed, I am the excellent gentleman whom you are so anxious to entrap. I am Jim the Penman."

There was a chuckle in the darkness, and Lee struggled hard at his bonds.

"My dear chap, it's no good your attempting to get free," the mocking voice went on. "Even if you succeeded, I should drop you in a second. Perhaps you'd care to know what I intend doing with you? Well, so far I have confined myself to mere forgeries, but now I'm going to try my hand at something different. You're a clever man, Mr. Nelson Lee, and I don't feel comfortable with you on my track. Once you're out of the way, I shall continue my course, and shall snap my fingers at the police. You're the fellow who's worrying me—and you won't worry me much longer!"

Nelson Lee listened to all this while he recovered his full wits, and one fact was borne in upon him with conviction. He was in the power of Jim the Penman, and it was not of much use hoping for Nipper to effect a rescue.

The forger continued:

"I have already proved that I am rather an original fellow. Well, how does this strike you? In the morning, Sir Stephen Trundle will find, to his amazement and dismay, that Mr. Nelson Lee and his clever young assistant have committed suicide. By Jove, what an item of news for the daily papers! Famous detective takes his own life!"

Jim the Penman chuckled amusedly.

"As soon as I have got hold of Nipper, I'm going to carry out my plan," he proceeded calmly. "Both of you are going to be strung up—hung from a beam of this shed—and when daylight dawns you will both be as cold as New Zealand mutton. But, you ask, how will the world know that you have committed suicide? I will tell you.

"I am a pretty good hand at copying other people's handwriting, as you have had cause to know. When you are discovered, a note will be found pinned to your coat. It will be written by myself, and will state that you and Nipper have decided to take your own lives, being discouraged over your failure in attempting to lay Jim the Penman by the heels."

The forger came closer, for his voice was nearer to Lee when he spoke again:

"I was even writing your last words to the world when you broke in upon me in the library. I had different plans then for your untimely end. What they were is of no account, for they are altered. The final issue will be the same.

"The police, knowing all they do, will probably doubt that suicide is the cause of death," went on Jim the Penman. "But no man on earth can prove the contrary. The handwriting will be yours, and the cleverest expert will not be able to detect the forgery. The police will probably have suspicions, but no proof."

There was a pause of several moments, and Lee heard his companion pacing up and down the shed. When he spoke again, his voice was as cool as ever.

"There will be an inquest, of course. The jury will certainly bring in a verdict of suicide. They can do nothing else. It will be one of the plainest cases on record, whatever the police may suspect. I myself will be perfectly safe. There will be nothing to show that I had any hand in the unfortunate decease of yourself and your assistant.

"Even if I am captured later on—and I give you my word that will not

occur—the only charges that can be brought against me will be ones of forgery and fraud. I shall not be held responsible for your death. Therefore I am doing this thing with perfect safety and with excellent reasons. With you out of the way, I shall be free to do as I like. But, to be frank, you are an infernal nuisance, Lee! You are making yourself decidedly disagreeable, and I value my own safety more than I value your life. Under the circumstances, you cannot blame me for taking this course.”

Nelson Lee remained perfectly calm.

But he was little short of amazed that the scoundrel could speak so heartlessly of the crime he was contemplating. He already knew that Jim the Penman was a determined criminal, but that he could speak thus coolly of black murder was something of a shock.

The man's utter callousness was terrible to listen to.

He did not speak with fury in his voice, with passion in his words, but in perfectly modulated tones, as though he were discussing an everyday subject. More than ever, the great detective realised that this master-rogue who had styled himself Jim the Penman was a criminal of criminals.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were in his way, therefore they were to be wiped out as though they were flies.

And, so far as Lee could see, there was not an atom of hope. Nipper was a smart lad, possessed of wonderful resource and daring. But what chance would he have?

None!

Once he entered the shed, he would fall a victim to its heartless occupant, and the rest would be a mere matter of time. Lee himself was helpless, and would simply be hung without being able to offer the least resistance. When all was over, his bonds would be cut, and the note would be pinned to his coat, as Jim the Penman intimated.

It was a terrible death to contemplate. And what was even more terrible was the thought of Nipper sharing the same fate. To the forger's mind, the scheme, perhaps, was grimly humorous. To get rid of his enemies by making the world think they had committed suicide!

“Nipper ought to be searching for you by this time,” Jim the Penman exclaimed suddenly. “Let us see if we cannot attract his attention.”

Lee heard his companion walk to the door. A creak followed, and then a hoarse low voice sounded in the still air. And the detective instantly realised that the voice was an excellent imitation of his own—not exactly identical, but the affected hoarseness effectually covered any difference in the intonation.

“Help! This way, Nipper! I have got the scoundrel! Help!”

Lee struggled with his bonds in a frenzy of fury. If only he could prevent Nipper sharing his own fate, the end would not be so hard. The detective was simply choking with helpless rage. The forger's base intentions were almost too horrible to think of. And yet nothing could be done.

Of all the tight corners Lee had been in, he thought this was the tightest. And Nipper was still at liberty! That was the galling part of it all! The lad would walk into the trap—would walk to certain death!

And, to Nelson Lee's horror, he heard a faint shout in the distance.

“I'm coming, guv'nor! Yell again—I haven't quite located you!”

Lee groaned inwardly.

“Heaven help the lad,” he thought in agony. “And Heaven punish this base scoundrel for this great sin!”

Jim the Penman's voice again sounded.

“This way, Nipper! Hurry!”

“Right you are, sir!”

Quick footsteps followed, and Nipper entered the shed, panting and breathless.

"Blessed if I can see——"

The young detective got no further. As he stood in the doorway he heard something swish above his head. Instinctively he dodged—but it was too late.

A heavy object crashed down upon him and he crumpled up and rolled to the floor without a groan.

Jim the Penman's ruse had been successful!

CHAPTER VIII.

The Capture of James Carkham.

"EXACTLY as I anticipated, my dear Lee!"

The voice was as calm and collected as ever, and Nelson Lee felt sick and faint. Both he and Nipper were now at Jim the Penman's mercy. The rest of the house were asleep and there was utterly no chance of any help arriving. No alarm had been given, and nobody save these three was awake.

The detective realised, now, that it would have been wise for him to have aroused Sir Stephen Trundle and some of the servants. But it was idle to ponder over what he ought to have done. The grim fact remained that he and Nipper were in an awful trap.

The darkness made the horror of the situation even worse. In the shed not even a glimmer of light was admitted. The darkness outside was intense, but nothing compared to the interior of this building. It was windowless, and with the door closed the blackness was like that of the catacombs.

"There is now no reason for further delay," the scoundrel murmured softly. "It is an unpleasant task, and so the sooner I get it over the better. I pride myself, Lee, upon remaining cool in any and all circumstances. There is nothing like a clear head for work of this nature. I have never lost my wits yet, and I think my nerves are quite strong enough to stand the strain!"

Another chuckle sounded.

Lee could scarcely believe that any human being was capable of such callous disregard. The man was as impassive as a Chinaman; indeed, even a yellow-faced Oriental would scarcely have proved so cruel as this smooth-tongued, well-cultured crook was proving.

The whole thing was like a ghastly dream; it seemed too appalling to be actual reality. But the fact remained that it was reality. Lee himself was bound and helpless, and Nipper was on the floor stunned.

Jim the Penman moved forward in order to commence his operations upon the detective. And then both he and Nelson Lee received a stunning shock. But while the latter received the shock with joy, it fell upon the former like a bombshell.

Crack!

A tiny spurt of fire flashed in the darkness, accompanied by a sharp report. Instantly Lee knew that report to be the discharge of Nipper's revolver!

The bullet hummed within an inch of Jim the Penman's ear, and plugged itself into the beam in the roof—the very beam from which Nelson Lee and Nipper were to have been hung!

In a second Nipper was upon his feet.

"You murderous coward!" he roared furiously. "You thought you'd downed me, didn't you? Well, this darkness diddled you—I was whacked on the shoulder, not on the napper! Hands up, you fiend!"

Even now Jim the Penman did not lose his composure. He realised, in a second, that he had blundered. But he had no intention of giving in. The tables were turned upon him, and his deadly purpose could not be accomplished.

He acted on the second—without the slightest hesitation.

With one bound he was upon Nipper. The lad was expecting an onslaught, but not with such startling promptitude as this. He was knocked against the wall of the shed with a dull crash. And as he regained an upright position the door opened and Jim the Penman hurled himself into the open air.

Swift footsteps sounded, and when Nipper breathlessly gained the exterior of the building he could see nothing and hear nothing. The scoundrel had escaped.

But Nipper had not failed after all. The darkness which had assisted Jim the Penman had proved his undoing in the end. It was the one blunder he made. He thought that Nipper had fallen a victim to his fierce blow, whereas the lad had accepted the situation on the instant and had merely pretended to fall senseless.

Nipper's shoulder was badly bruised, but he scarcely thought of the pain as he crossed over to his master and rapidly removed the gag from Lee's mouth.

"It's all right, guv'nor—the rotter thought he could deal with little me without any trouble! I think I've proved that I was equal to the occasion!"

Lee spluttered and gasped.

"You're a wonder, my lad!" he muttered huskily. "The hound meant to kill us both, but your smartness has frustrated his evil design. Thank Heaven you adopted that ruse!"

In a few moments Nipper had his master at liberty, and the detective rose stiffly to his feet. After what had occurred he was in full possession of all his wits. The dizziness had left him, and although his head ached, his brain was clear.

He gripped his young assistant's shoulders tightly.

"You've done excellently, youngster," he said in a quiet voice. "We must now do our utmost to capture the murderous ruffian. I knew him to be a clever forger, but I did not think he was capable of such brutality."

"What was he going to do, guv'nor?"

Lee rapidly told Nipper of Jim the Penman's plan.

"Oh, so that was the wheeze?" said Nipper with a shudder in the darkness. "He was going to string the pair of us up, and make out that we'd committed suicide? Of all the devilish plans, that's about the worst I've ever heard! But who was he, sir?"

"The darkness prevented us seeing," Lee replied. "But, as I said before, Nipper, everything points to James Carkham being the culprit. I cannot possibly think of anyone else who would fit the description. Carkham is absent from his bedroom—and that evidence alone is only one item of many. Ever since I started on the case everything points to the secretary being the forger."

"Well, let's get busy and search for him, sir. After this I sha'n't be satisfied until he's in jail!"

They both passed out into the open. Lee was stiff from the effects of his bonds, and Nipper's bruised shoulder made him walk rather painfully. But after a short walk the effects wore off somewhat, and they felt more themselves.

After the interior of the shed it seemed almost light outside. The sky had cleared now, after the storm, and the black blotches of trees, and the dark mass of the building, stood out in contrast to the sky.

The ground was wet and sodden, but no rain was falling.

As the pair walked cautiously along they kept their eyes open. Lee was wondering if the revolver shot had been heard, but thought it unlikely. After all, it was only like the crack of a whip, and the sound had been confined somewhat by the shed.

The detective decided that it would be wise to go straight to the house and rouse Sir Stephen. A search would then be instituted.

But, suddenly, Nipper gripped his master's arm and pointed.

"I saw something, guv'nor," murmured the lad sharply. "Look! There's a man lurking there!"

For a second Lee saw a dim form against a clump of bushes on the other side of a small lawn. Without hesitation the detective dashed across, Nipper by his side. As they ran the form emerged from the bushes and ran almost into their arms.

For a moment there was a wild struggle, and then the stranger was upon his back in the damp grass, with Lee and Nipper pinning him down.

"Got him, guv'nor!" panted the lad.

"Yes, we've certainly got him!"

"Mr. Lee!" gasped a hoarse voice.

Nelson Lee looked grim.

"Ah, you're not disguising your voice now!" he exclaimed. "It's no use, Carkham. You're caught red-handed!"

The captive was indeed James Carkham.

"Why are you holding me?" asked the secretary, as though in bewilderment. "What's the matter, Mr. Lee? You must be mistaking me for somebody else!"

"I shouldn't advise you to adopt that tone," Lee said sharply. "So long as you were hidden by the darkness—so long as you held the upper hand—you chose to remain unknown. But you're not unknown now; Carkham. Finding yourself a prisoner, you are attempting to bluff it out. You infernal scoundrel, I suppose you will deny that you were about to murder both Nipper and myself?"

The secretary gasped.

"Murder Nipper—murder you!" he ejaculated in startled tones. "Are you mad, Mr. Lee? Have you taken leave of your senses? This is the first time I have seen you since——"

"Stop!" Lee interjected sternly.

"But——"

"Not another word, you hound!"

For one fleeting second Nelson Lee felt an uneasy doubt that Carkham was not the culprit after all. But was not the proof conclusive? Jim the Penman had proved himself to be a man of resource and coolness. It was only in keeping with his character that he should now adopt this attitude.

Lee dismissed the doubt from his mind almost before it had taken shape. It was not often that the detective was wrong in his calculations, and he was quite positive that he had captured Jim the Penman. Indeed, he would have been a fool had he listened to Carkham's protestations.

Probably the man realised that the game was up. For he allowed himself to be led by Lee and Nipper into the house without uttering another word. He was taken into the library, placed in a chair, and bound to it.

Nelson Lee meant to take no chances!

And while he busied himself with the telephone Nipper ran upstairs to arouse Sir Stephen.

The telephone was fitted in the library, and Lee was soon in communication with the nearest important police-station. The inspector in charge was somewhat surprised to receive a call at such an extremely early hour.

"My name is Lee—Nelson Lee," exclaimed the detective, as soon as he was talking with the inspector. "You have heard of me?"

"Heard of you, Mr. Lee?" replied the inspector across the wires. "I don't think there are many people who haven't! But what's the trouble, sir?"

"I am speaking from Trundle Hall, near Bansham. There is a man here I wish to be placed under arrest at once. Can you send a couple of officers immediately?"

"But—but I don't understand——"

"I don't wish you to understand," Lee interjected. "Perhaps you had better come yourself, inspector. I shall then be able to explain to you personally."

"But I have no warrant——"

"My dear man, a warrant will be obtained quickly enough in the morning," said Lee. "Until then you will hold your prisoner on suspicion. I shall have enough evidence against him in a few hours to convict him a dozen times. Besides, I suspect that he will make a confession."

"All right, Mr. Lee," said the inspector. "I'll be over as quickly as possible."

The detective hung up the receiver, and then turned to the prisoner with a grim expression.

"Well, Carkham, you've played your game and lost," he said. "You had better admit defeat and make a clear statement."

The secretary seemed to choke for a moment.

"I have done nothing," he muttered huskily, with a wild look in his eyes. "What does it all mean, Mr. Lee? Who do you take me for?"

Nelson Lee stared at the man in silence. Again an uneasy doubt crept into his mind. Either Carkham was innocent, or his acting was superb. Lee was so convinced of the secretary's guilt that he found it hard to think otherwise. How could it be possible for Carkham to be innocent?

All along, from the very beginning, Lee had suspected Carkham, had had a dozen different indications that the secretary was the forger. And Carkham had been captured lurking in the grounds immediately after the adventure in the shed. The evidence was perfectly clear.

And yet——

The doubt in Nelson Lee's mind was becoming stronger. Carkham did not seem to have the stamina in him which Jim the Penman had displayed so thoroughly. As Lee looked at the prisoner he sized up Carkham's frame. And it struck him at that moment, for the first time, that the secretary was not bodily capable of the struggle which had taken place in the library.

But it was absurd!

Carkham was Jim the Penman. If not he, who could the forger be? There was not another soul who would fit in with the facts. Nobody, in truth, was in a position to be the forger—except Carkham.

The man had proved himself to be a superb actor. The only explanation was that he was acting now; acting more realistically than ever.

Before Nelson Lee could think further Sir Stephen entered the library, attired in dressing-gown and slippers, and with his hair looking like a tousled mop. The baronet was decidedly startled.

"Good gracious, Mr. Lee, what does all this mean?" he asked hoarsely. "Carkham a prisoner—Carkham Jim the Penman! Impossible!"

"For Heaven's sake convince Mr. Lee that it is indeed impossible, Sir

Stephen!" gasped the secretary. "I am almost stunned by what has happened. Mr. Lee thinks that I am the scoundrel who has been committing these forgeries. I am not—I swear before Heaven I am not!"

Sir Stephen looked at Lee helplessly.

And the detective immediately told the baronet precisely what had occurred during the night. In a quiet voice he related all his suspicions connected with the case. And when he had done Sir Stephen looked at his secretary with grim anger.

"The evidence is black against you, Carkham," he said sternly. "I was quite prepared to believe you innocent, but after what I have heard I can only share Mr. Lee's views. By Heaven, I never suspected a man of being such a base hound as you are!"

James Carkham seemed too overcome to reply. His face was as pallid as chalk, and his eyes gleamed with unnatural brightness.

"I am innocent!" he choked. "I am not Jim the Penman!"

And then an interruption occurred. It came from the French windows, and it took a form which Nelson Lee had never dreamed of. There had been many surprises in this singular case, but that which was now about to be exploded was the greatest shock of all.

The doubt which had been troubling the detective was to become a positive certainty. At the very moment of triumph Lee was to learn that he was in more of a maze than ever!

CHAPTER IX

The Evidence of Mr. Walter Mumoy.

THE French windows were pushed open and two men entered the library from the darkness without. One was a heavily-built man in overcoat and bowler, looking decidedly alarmed; and the other was one of Sir Stephen's menservants, attired in careless haste merely in trousers and a coat flung over his night attire.

"Robson!" ejaculated Sir Stephen. "Upon my soul, man, what is this?"

"I know there was something the matter, sir," replied the servant. "I was looking out of my window when I saw somebody lurking against the trees near the new stables. So I hopped into my clothes, nips down, and collared the fellow. Can't be up to no good, hanging about private property in the middle of the night!"

Robson finished speaking with a look of indignation in his eyes, not unmixed with a certain amount of pride.

"Very well, Robson, you may go," said Sir Stephen. "You have acted very smartly, and I appreciate your efforts. Leave this man with us."

Robson took his departure, relinquishing his grip upon the stranger rather reluctantly.

The latter was losing his alarmed expression, and now looked aggressive.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "I'm not a thief! Nice thing to be brought up as though I'd been found stealing chickens, or——"

Sir Stephen cut in sharply:

"Silence! Whoever you are remains to be seen. But Robson did quite right in bringing you here. This is no time for a stranger to be trespassing on private property. It is obvious that you were not in my grounds for a lawful purpose."

"Your grounds? So you're Sir Stephen Trundle?"

"I am."

"I'm hanged if I can understand things yet," said the newcomer. "What's Mr. Carkham bound to that chair for? And whose this gentleman?"

The gentleman answered for himself.

"I am Nelson Lee, and if you have anything to say you had better be quick about it"—grimly. "To begin with, who are you, and what is your business?"

The other hesitated, and while he was hesitating, James Carkham leaned forward in his chair.

"Tell them!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Tell them everything, Mumby. You can clear me of suspicion; the truth must come out now."

"You want me to speak straight out?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Good enough. Well, gentlemen, my name is Walter Mumby," said the stranger, "and I am a financier by profession——"

"A financier?" Lee interjected. "I presume you mean a moneylender?"

Walter Mumby shrugged his shoulders.

"Financier sounds much better, but the other term is more commonly used," he said calmly. "Yes, I am a moneylender, and I am at Trundle Hall on business."

"Not on my business!" Sir Stephen interrupted sharply.

"I did not say that," Mumby continued. "My client is Mr. James Carkham, your private secretary. I don't pretend to know what has happened, but Carkham has certainly done nothing criminal. There is no reason why he should be bound to a chair like a captured burglar."

"I am innocent, Mr. Lee," said Carkham again. "Cannot you see that you have made a mistake? I am not Jim the Penman!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

Although outwardly calm the famous detective was deeply chagrined within. He realised, already, that all his theories were crumbling about his ears. He instinctively knew that James Carkham was not Jim the Penman.

And yet who could the forger be? There was nobody whom Nelson Lee could fit into the place. Jim the Penman was an unknown individual, and there was not a single clue which would assist in his capture.

It was one of the greatest disappointments Nelson Lee had ever suffered. But he took care to keep a calm face, and to display no emotion.

"Kindly tell your story as briefly as possible, Mr. Mumby," he said quietly.

"Well, some little time ago Mr. Carkham approached me and borrowed the sum of two hundred pounds," said the moneylender. "I lent him the money on the strength of a letter he showed me from a firm of publishers who offered him two hundred and fifty pounds for the sole rights in a novel."

"Upon the date the money should have been repaid I did not get a penny, and I naturally became somewhat anxious, for I cannot afford to lose such a large sum as two hundred pounds——"

"One moment," Lee interrupted. "When did you lend this money to Mr. Carkham?"

"Three months ago—I have in my pocket documents which will prove everything I am saying," replied Mr. Mumby. "Mr. Carkham received the money he was expecting from the publishers, and yet he did not pay me a penny——"

"That's a lie!" Carkham cut in fiercely. "I paid you seventy-five pounds, you shark! Seventy-five pounds interest—in three months!"

"Dear me," said Nelson Lee gently. "We must inquire closely into this."

Walter Mumby looked uncomfortable.

"Mr. Carkham went into the transaction with his eyes open," he said aggressively. "I have not deceived him in any way whatever. Business is business, and I have a right to receive both principal and interest. It was agreed that the whole amount of the principal should be paid to me—"

"Let me speak!" cried Carkham. "This man is making the case black against me, Sir Stephen! The whole truth must come out now, and it might as well be the truth, and not a perversion of it!"

Sir Stephen nodded.

"I do not profess to understand," he said in some bewilderment. "You have apparently been getting yourself into serious trouble, Carkham. Let there be no secrecy. It will be quite sufficient if you clear yourself of the suspicions which rest upon you of being Jim the Penman!"

Carkham cleared his throat.

"I borrowed the money—I don't deny it," he said in a low voice. "I borrowed it because I wanted to help my brother in Canada. Henry is farming out there and he had a terrible spell of bad luck, and he wrote to me for assistance. I knew that I was going to receive a good sum for my novel, and so I borrowed money from this scoundrel on the strength of it. I sent a certain amount to my brother, and kept the interest paid regularly—at least, I thought so. Well, when I was paid for my novel I was naturally elated."

"When was this?" Lee asked.

"On the—the twelfth."

"The day before the first forgery," Lee thought.

"The next day I paid certain accounts which were pressing," Carkham continued. "There was one at a bookshop which was worrying me. In writing my novel I had found it necessary to purchase many books of reference—and I am a great book lover into the bargain. Well, I settled up several accounts, intending the rest of the money to go to Mr. Mumby."

"But you didn't pay me a cent!" the moneylender ejaculated.

"I paid you seventy-five pounds," persisted Carkham. "You claim it to be interest, but perhaps Mr. Nelson Lee knows more of this kind of fraud than I do. Mr. Lee," went on Carkham, turning to the detective, "I was about to visit Mumby when I received a cablegram from my brother urgently requesting me to send him a hundred pounds. He said that if he did not receive the money his farm would be ruined, and all his prospects shattered. What could I do?"

"What did you do?" Sir Stephen queried.

"For some time I was greatly worried," replied Carkham. "Then I went straight away and cabled the necessary sum to Henry. It was a choice between leaving my brother to ruin or to keeping Mumby waiting for his money. I chose the latter course. In any case I paid him a good amount, and I thought that that would be sufficient to keep him quiet."

"An agreement is an agreement," commenced the moneylender angrily, "and I——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Sir Stephen. "Let my secretary finish."

Carkham proceeded:

"I received threatening letters from Mumby. He declared that he would inform you, Sir Stephen, of the whole business. I was afraid to let him do so——"

"Why were you afraid?"

"I—I thought you would dispense with my services——"

"Tush!" ejaculated Sir Stephen. "You were a fool, Carkham, not to tell me everything. I should have put everything right. You were a fool, also, to go to this moneylender at all. Why did you not approach me?"

"I did not like to do so," admitted the secretary. "Finding that Mumby was persistent I obtained two days leave from you—just after we had come down here—and went to London. I explained the situation to Mumby, but he would not accept it. He declared that he would put the law on me and expose everything. Once I went and visited him at a small house in Islington, and we afterwards went to a restaurant."

"My hat!" murmured Nipper. "So that's why I missed 'em that night!"

"When I finally returned to the Hall nothing definite was settled," continued Carkham. "To my dismay, Mumby wrote and arranged an interview with me in the grounds here at midnight to-night."

"I kept the appointment, stealing from the house without anybody seeing. But Mumby was late, having been delayed by the thunderstorm. Well, we were talking among the trees, trying to arrive at some agreement, when we heard a revolver shot."

"Bogad! A revolver shot!" repeated Sir Stephen.

"Yes. I at once became alarmed, and left Mumby hurriedly, saying that I would return when I had discovered the cause of the disturbance. But after I had been walking about for some minutes I was sprung upon by Mr. Lee and tied to this chair, as you see me. Mr. Lee thinks that I am Jim the Penman——"

"No, you are wrong," Nelson Lee interrupted. "I do not think so, Mr. Carkham. At the time I was of that opinion, but now you have convinced me of my error. You yourself must admit that your mysterious movements lent colour to my theory."

"Yes, I do admit it," muttered Carkham. "Under the circumstances you could think nothing else. Well, that's all—you know the rest."

There was a short silence.

Nelson Lee and Nipper gave one another significant glances. The chain of events which had led up to this climax was a false one. The whole tissue of evidence against James Carkham had fallen to the ground. The identity of Jim the Penman was more of a mystery than ever.

It was a stunning shock.

Yet the great detective was in no way to blame for acting as he had done. He was only human, and under the circumstances he could not possibly have pursued any other course. From the very start circumstantial evidence had been against Carkham.

Nobody had ever seen the forger face to face. Although Nelson Lee had struggled with him, although Lee and Nipper had been at the man's mercy in the shed, they had neither seen the forger's features.

Lee could understand now why Jim the Penman had lured himself and Nipper into the country. He had intended that night to murder his enemies, the task being much safer and much easier to accomplish in the country than in London.

It was Walter Mumby who next spoke.

"Well, what's going to be done?" he demanded. "Now the whole truth is out I may as well get some satisfaction. I want my two hundred pounds——"

Sir Stephen snapped his fingers.

"Carkham, did you pay the interest regularly upon the money you borrowed?" he asked.

"Yes, and I paid him seventy-five pounds as well," Carkham replied. "I

am not a business man, and I don't understand these things thoroughly. But Mumby made out that I owed him the seventy-five pounds as interest also."

Mumby nodded.

"It's a little more than that," he said calmly. "But if the thing is settled now I will let you off at two hundred——"

"I will write you a cheque now," interjected Sir Stephen sharply, "and if you do not leave my house within ten seconds I'll have you kicked out!"

The moneylender merely smiled; and he could afford to smile, in spite of the threat. His visit to Trundle Hall was to bear fruit, after all. It didn't matter a jot to him what happened to his victim afterwards.

Sir Stephen rapidly filled in a cheque and handed it over.

"Here's your money!" he said curtly. "You needn't trouble about a receipt—the cheque is the only receipt I require. Now clear out of my house!"

Mumby grinned and glanced at the cheque. Then his expression changed, and a scowl appeared upon his features.

"What's this?" he demanded angrily. "The amount of the principal is two hundred pounds. This cheque is filled in for only one hundred and twenty-five——"

"And that is all you'll get!" declared the baronet. "You have utterly no right to the seventy-five pounds which Mr. Carkham paid you, except as part of the principal itself. I have had quite enough experience of sharks of your type to know what I am about. Indeed, I doubt if you are even entitled to such an amount as I have given you."

"By thunder, you can't bluff me——"

"Go!" roared Sir Stephen furiously.

"I am not going until I receive full satisfaction!"

"Can I be of any assistance?" Nelson Lee suggested quietly.

"I'll give a hand, too," put in Nipper with promptitude.

And the pair took a step forward towards Mumby. The latter did not wait to see what would happen. He turned swiftly, with a curse, and hastily made his exit by means of the French windows.

Carkham was immediately released from the chair, and he was looking utterly dejected.

"You are very good to me, Sir Stephen," he said, in a low voice. "I do not know how I shall be able to repay you. But, of course, you will require me to leave your service——"

"Nonsense!" snapped Sir Stephen. "Don't be an idiot, Carkham! You have acted quite foolishly enough without keeping it up any longer. You will remain in my service and——"

"Heaven bless you——"

"Hang it all, we'll discuss these things later," Sir Stephen growled. "I am intensely relieved, Carkham, to find that you are not the pleasant gentleman who has been forging my name, and who attempted the lives of Mr. Lee and Nipper an hour ago."

The baronet turned to the detective.

"The question is," he went on, "who is Jim the Penman?"

"I can say nothing in answer to that question," Nelson Lee replied, with forced calmness.

And Nipper put in:

"We're worse than we were at the starting-point. We haven't got a single clue, and we haven't got a line of inquiry to follow up. We're dished and diddled!"

CHAPTER X.

The Lightning Clue—Finis.

NELSON LEE was in a strange mood.

Shortly after the departure of Walter Mumby, the inspector from the local town had arrived, accompanied by a constable. Lee had found it necessary to explain the matter to the worthy police-officer, and it in no way improved the detective's temper to observe the rather supercilious smile which the inspector wore. Obviously the good man considered that Lee had made himself look small by calling in the police on a fool's errand.

But the detective had more important thoughts to occupy his mind. After the inspector had gone—having been told to keep an eye open for Jim the Penman, who was probably still in the neighbourhood—the household retired to rest.

Carkham was intensely relieved at the turn events had taken, and he went up to bed with a calm mind.

Sir Stephen and Nipper also adjourned upstairs. But Nelson Lee himself elected to remain in the library. All Nipper's entreaties were useless. His master positively refused to return to bed, so Nipper gave it up and left Lee downstairs.

The detective was in one of the queerest moods that had ever possessed him. He sat in the library, in one of the easiest chairs, with his eyes half closed, smoking cigar after cigar until the whole room was clouded with smoke.

His expression was immobile, but inwardly Nelson Lee was filled with troubled thoughts. All his theories had proved wrong. The identity of Jim the Penman was as much of a myth as ever. It almost seemed as though the scoundrelly forger was one too many for him.

The situation was galling in the extreme. Try as he would, the detective could not fix upon any plan of action. There was not a single opening point for him to commence his inquiries afresh.

A deadlock had been arrived at. It was obvious that Jim the Penman had taken advantage of Carkham's affairs to throw suspicion upon the secretary. In many ways the forger had acted so that Carkham would be suspected.

And he could not have done so with any object of ultimately causing Carkham to be accused of the forgeries. On the contrary, he had probably acted as he had done merely for the sake of amusing himself—for the sake of setting Nelson Lee on a wrong scent.

Hour after hour the detective remained in the chair, only moving at lengthy intervals in order to light a fresh cigar. Every man who had been connected with the case was considered one after the other, and there was not a single person whom Lee could suspect.

There was nothing Lee hated worse than fighting in the dark—than fighting an opponent who persisted in remaining in the background. Once he had his man in the open he was always the victor. But how was it possible for him to bring Jim the Penman to justice when he did not even know who the scoundrel was?

That he was clever and resourceful went without saying. Indeed, the forger had proved himself to be a man of startling methods and amazing ability. In a vague way Nelson Lee believed that he was a long way from settling with the mysterious criminal.

But once he knew the man's identity the aspect of the case would change. With Jim the Penman exposed the fight would be an equal one. But

again the question arose—how could the forger be exposed when there was no evidence to show who he was?

Almost unnoticed by the detective dawn broke. Lee had been sitting with the lamp turned low, and now the grey light of early morning began to filter into the library through the windows and through the skylight above.

Lee's eyes were fixed upon the skylight, and unconsciously he saw a kind of grey smudge upon one of the glass squares. His eyes were fixed upon this smudge as his brain continued to work.

An hour later, when full daylight had dawned, and when the sun was just rising, Lee was in the same position, and his eyes were still fixed upon that smudge.

What a situation!

Had Nelson Lee only known it he was actually gazing upon the most startling piece of evidence that Fate had ever conspired to make. He was gazing upon the evidence which the heavens themselves had supplied.

And yet Lee was even then resigning himself to the fact that Jim the Penman would elude discovery and capture. Even as he was thinking this the evidence was there above him—evidence that was the most conclusive and damning it had ever been his lot to discover.

Jim the Penman was clever. He himself had covered up his tracks with marvellous cunning; but Fate had supplied the one item of proof which would undo all the scoundrel's plotting.

After a time Nelson Lee's attention became more concentrated than ever upon the smudge above him, and it seemed to take a certain form. Suddenly he let his thoughts dwell upon the glass in the skylight.

"By James, that's queer!" exclaimed Lee to himself, suddenly sitting up. "That smudge looks remarkably like an undeveloped photograph. What a strange trick for the dust to play. It has collected upon the glass in such formation——"

Then Lee's thoughts came to a halt. He realised that there could be no dust upon the glass, for the heavy rain during the thunderstorm had certainly washed the skylight perfectly clean.

More out of curiosity than anything else he rose to his feet, and then stood upon the chair. Now, with his face only six feet below the skylight, he could see much more distinctly, and as he looked upwards Nelson Lee uttered a gasp of incredulous amazement.

"A hazy kind of photograph!" he exclaimed aloud. "Good gracious! How in the world could a photograph become imprinted upon a plain pane of window-glass?"

Lee continued to stare at the extraordinary sight, and as he did so his brain worked at express speed. When he jumped down from the chair his face was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming strangely.

"The storm!" he muttered, with grim tenseness. "That dreadful flash of lightning which hissed through the skylight and bowled me over! Such a thing is scientifically possible, although I have never experienced anything of the kind in my career. By James, can it be possible that the lightning has taken a photograph of the scene within the library at the moment of that flash?"

The thought was almost stunning in its possibilities.

Lee had heard of such a thing as a lightning photograph, and knew such a phenomenon to be possible. And in this case was not everything exactly suitable for such a remarkable occurrence?

He and Jim the Penman had been struggling immediately under the skylight, and the livid lightning flash had seared down through the glass in an absolutely direct line. If it were possible for lightning to photograph

a scene upon a plain sheet of glass, then the circumstances in this particular case were the most favourable possible.

Lee hardly dared to form any opinion on the subject.

His breath was almost taken away by the very thought which had entered his mind. If, indeed, the grey smudge did prove to be a photograph, it would supply the one piece of evidence which was necessary.

All the detective's bitter feelings were cast aside. It was quite possible that the photograph would prove to be well-defined. If so, it would assuredly reveal the identity of Jim the Penman. For Lee, during that grim struggle, had felt that the forger was wearing no mask or disguise. It was for this reason that he had fought so desperately for freedom. One glimpse of his face would have revealed his identity.

And now a new factor had entered the case. The lightning which had bowled Lee over, and which had enabled Jim the Penman to escape, seemed likely to bring about the latter's downfall.

Without pausing another minute, and with his heart thudding rapidly against his ribs, Nelson Lee hastened from the library, mounted the stairs, and reached a corridor window which looked out upon the slightly sloping roof of the library.

Without hesitation Lee lifted the sash, clambered out, and slid along the slates to the skylight in the centre of the roof. Eagerly he bent over the glass and gazed closely at it.

Then a surging wave of disappointment swept over him. He could see nothing—nothing at all!

Every pane was clear and transparent. Nelson Lee rested himself upon the plates, and his jaw set grimly again.

"Fool that I was to hope for such a thing," he muttered almost angrily. "I must be—— Ah!"

The exclamation left his lips abruptly as his head descended closer to the glass, but in such a position that he gazed upon it at an acute angle. And now, quite distinctly, he could see a remarkably well-defined snapshot upon one of the panes.*

Looked at direct, the photograph was almost invisible, but from a side position it was acute and clear. Lee bent closer and examined the remarkable photograph with feverish care.

And what he saw made him draw his breath in with a sharp hiss. With amazing distinctness he could see his own face, and that of another man. The snapshot was altogether grotesque, for it was, as it were, looking straight down upon the heads of the struggling men.

But there was no mistaking the identity of Lee's opponent!

The features themselves stood out clearer than any part of the photograph, and they were the features of Douglas Sutcliffe!

"Great Heaven above!" Nelson Lee gasped. "Douglas Sutcliffe! He is the forger! He is Jim the Penman! This is simply astounding!"

For some moments the detective sat perfectly still, the shock of his discovery almost taking the breath out of his body. Douglas Sutcliffe, Sir Stephen's solicitor, was the mysterious forger! There could be no doubt—no loophole for any other complexion being put on the discovery.

The evidence was perfectly conclusive.

"I remember now," Lee thought quickly. "His full name is Douglas

*Author's note.—Such a striking phenomenon as this is extremely rare, but actually possible under certain conditions. Many famous scientific men have vouched for the possibility of lightning imprinting the scene within a room upon a plain sheet of glass.

James Sutcliffe. But how was I to suspect? How could I possibly dream of such a climax as this? The man covered up his tracks so perfectly that, but for this Heaven-sent evidence I should be as much in the dark as ever. By Jove, what a startling thing!"

Now that he came to consider the matter the whole aspect of the forgery case became altered. He knew that Douglas James Sutcliffe was Jim the Penman, and he saw things in quite another light.

Many little details came to his mind in a flood.

Sutcliffe, of course, had been informed by Sir Stephen of the little private cross to be placed on the backs of letters; and, being Sir Stephen's solicitor, Sutcliffe was naturally a trusted man, quite 'above suspicion, and immune from being identified with the forgeries.

He had, of course, brought Nelson Lee and Nipper to Trundle Hall so that he would be able to murder them without possibly being suspected of the crime. Undoubtedly he had provided himself with an alibi before making the journey. But that alibi would be absolutely useless in face of the evidence provided by the lightning photograph.

Nothing could disprove that incriminating pane of glass.

Being a famous solicitor, Douglas Sutcliffe had been entrusted with the most private and confidential matters, and, possessed of his terrible talent, he had been able to use it to his own advantage with astonishing impunity. Doubtless he had been engaged in his forgeries for months past, and had now become daring and impudent. Probably Nelson Lee's connection with the case had caused him to display his rather warped sense of humour to a dangerous degree, and he had therefore decided to put Nelson Lee and Nipper out of the way before they could do him any harm.

"The man is a clever rogue," Lee told himself grimly. "I do not attach any credit to myself for having unmasked him. Heaven itself has performed that operation. Sutcliffe evidently came to the library to write the note which was to be pinned to my dead body. It was the one fatal blunder he made. But how was he to know that the thunderstorm would take such a dramatic hand in the game?"

The detective thought it quite possible that Sutcliffe had a confederate—probably a woman confederate; but of this he could not be sure. To effect the capture of the man himself would be sufficient.

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Two hours later, Nelson Lee's powerful car was just entering London. The detective had removed the pane of glass from the sky-light, and it was now safely packed in the automobile. Sir Stephen Trundle had been almost thunderstruck at the revelation, but he had nothing to say. The evidence of the lightning photograph was beyond question, and, after a hurried breakfast, Nelson Lee and Nipper had started for London post-haste. Their intention was to drive straight to Douglas Sutcliffe's office and to effect the capture as soon as the scoundrelly solicitor arrived.

The climax was now almost at hand, and it was to be a climax quite in keeping with the rest of this astonishing case.

Nelson Lee had already wired to Scotland Yard, and at Charing Cross Station approach Detective-inspector Goldston was found waiting. He hopped into the car, and Lee only provided him with a few words of explanation. The first thing was to arrest Jim the Penman. When he was safely under lock and key the rest would follow as a matter of course.

The car drove up to Sutcliffe's offices, and Nelson Lee, Goldston, and Nipper entered. But they were informed that Mr. Sutcliffe had not yet arrived. The clerk politely asked them if they would wait. The solicitor would almost certainly be there in a few minutes. It was already past his usual hour.

With grim expressions the trio waited. They had not to wait long! For after seven minutes had expired a cheeky little district messenger boy was ushered into the inner office by the polite clerk. The messenger boy held out a note.

"For Mr. Nelson Lee," he said calmly.

The detective took the letter with a strange qualm in his heart. With steady fingers he tore the envelope open, and he and Goldston and Nipper read the contents together. The words were few, but their import was grim:

"First round to you, Mr. Nelson Lee! I do not profess to know how you got on my track, but I'm not fool enough to let you capture me. I learned that you were coming to London to effect my arrest—never mind how! Well, since you've chosen open warfare it's going to be warfare—to the death! I am well prepared to carry on my work, in spite of exposure. I will be even with you yet, and I look forward with pleasure to crossing swords with you on a future occasion.

JIM THE PENMAN."

"How did the hound get to know?" grated out Detective-inspector Goldston. "Some spy, I suppose, among the servants at Trundle Hall? Your intentions were overheard, Lee, and Sutcliffe was informed!"

"That is a likely explanation," said Nelson Lee calmly. "Well, Jim the Penman has slipped through our fingers at the last minute of the eleventh hour. I shall certainly cross swords with the scoundrel on another occasion!"

And the expression upon the famous detective's face told that he did not altogether dislike the prospect. Jim the Penman had proved himself to be a master crook, and one well worthy of Nelson Lee's remarkable powers.

THE END.

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HAL FORSYTH, a young English lad, who is very fond of the sea, is one of the crew of the steam-trawler *Bonnie Jean*.

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The *Bonnie Jean* sets sail with "the curse of Shielegh"—uttered by Neil—ringing in the ears of its crew. After a day or two a great storm breaks, and ANGUS GRANT, a brave young Scotsman, begins to think the curse is falling on them!
(Now read on.)

The Black Mutineers.

THE others laughed. They did not believe that fifty Neils could command the winds, and they had perfect faith in the *Bonnie Jean*. She had weathered many as bad a hurricane, though probably never a worse one. Two solid days the wind roared and the little trawler rode it out, but she suffered more damage than any gale had wrought her since the winter. When it blew itself out, she was in sight of the Dutch coast, and her bulwarks along the starboard side had been smashed clean away. The covering-board was started, and she was making a good deal of water.

"Laddies," said West, "she'll need repairs, an' we're so far from home that I'll take that trawler's tip an' unload our catch on the Dutch markets. Yonder's Ymuiden, the port for Amsterdam, not six miles under our lee. We'll make it next tide."

Hal and Ben were delighted. They had been ashore in Holland before, and welcomed the opportunity, though Joe West did not.

"Amsterdam isn't half bad," said Hal. "There's generally a few British craft in there, too. Look! There's one now, three miles off to windward, making for the same port—a trawler like ourselves." He stared long at the distant vessel, which was edging along slowly under easy sail. "Why, Ben, it's the Vulture!"

"Great flounders, so it is!" said Ben, in surprise, for there was no mistaking Haggart Neil's craft. The rest of the *Jean's* crew came from below and looked at her.

"She's ridden out the gale, too," said West. "Neil's heading her north for the Texel. He isn't going our way, and we can do without his company. We'll be in port in an hour."

The Vulture had changed her course, and it came on so thick that she was soon lost to sight. Nobody on the Bonnie Jean troubled their heads further about her. But West's hope of reaching port in an hour came to nothing. As often happens after a storm, the wind fell flat calm, and with the tide against her the Jean lay rolling for nearly four hours off Ymuiden, the harbour of which was no longer visible, for the haze made it impossible to see farther than about half a mile.

"Can't be helped," said Ben philosophically, when a big tea had been brewed and disposed of on deck. "There'll be a breeze off the land after sundown, and we'll turn into Ymuiden. Hallo! Look there!"

Up from the southward, wavering in her course, and crawling at a snail's pace, came a great slate-grey steamer, streaked with rusty-red, and bearing two big, yellow smoke-stacks. She waddled up through the shimmering heat-haze that hung over the sea, and the throb of her screw, audible as a human voice in the stillness of sea and sky, sounded like the pulse-beats of a man with heart-disease. The crew of the Jean, lying lazily on deck and waiting for a wind, looked at her critically.

"Something wrong in the engine-room," said Grant. "Listen to the cough of her."

"Something a good deal more wrong on deck," returned Ben. "She's steering like a beetle on its back. Are they all asleep aboard her?"

"Oil-coast boat from Lagos," said West, "or the Congo. They mostly go to Antwerp; but she's bound for Hamburg, I reckon. She's no business so close ashore, anyway."

The steamer crawled up like a lame duck, and passed the Bonnie Jean within half a mile. Then a confused noise came across the waters, and the beat of the screw suddenly ceased. She came to a standstill, and lay motionless on the oily sea.

"Broke down," commented West. "Well, she's in no danger. It's a flat calm, an' they'll soon have her under way again."

Ben, who had been staring at the steamer intently, turned to his father.

"Dad," he said, "there's no chance of a breeze for hours. Can Hal an' me paddle off to her an' see what's wrong?"

"You boys are always gaddin' off after somethin'," grunted West. "Reckon you'd better stay aboard. There ain't a skipper in the fleet gives his cubs as much liberty as you get."

"Well, dad, you always said cubs are all the better for trapesing round on their own," said Ben, winking at Hal. "Maybe, we'll get some useful experience out o' that hooker."

"Go on, then," said the skipper. "But mind, ye'll get no leave ashore till the catch is cleared out. An' if a breeze springs up I'll not wait for you. Ye'll just have to pull to Ymuiden."

"Come on, Hal!" cried Ben gleefully. "Haul up the boat. We'll be back before you start, dad, never fear!"

Away went the boat, pulling with quick, swinging strokes, and the two boys headed up for the steamer. She lay about half a mile away, rolling lazily on the greasy swells, and as the boat fetched a compass round her, and pulled towards her farther side—for the boys did not want the eyes of the Jean's crew upon them—an angry clamour went up from the steamer's decks, and the sound of blows.

"There's fun to be had here," said Ben, looking over his shoulder. "Looks as if the old man was having trouble with his deckhands. P'r'aps we can get aboard. What d'ye say, Hal? Are you game?"

"Come along!" cried Hal, licking his lips. "Let's have a finger in the pie, if we can. Anything for fun!"

"Maybe they don't want us," said Ben; "but we'll—— Great Scott, Hal, look here! Pull! Put your back into it!"

A fierce outburst of oaths arose on the steamer, and a scuffle swayed back and forth around the boats slung on her upper deck. Three or four dark figures swarmed into one of the boats as it hung from the davits, and the ropes screamed through the blocks as it descended swiftly. Before it reached the water one of the tackles that held it suddenly checked, while the other ran out still faster. As a natural result, the boat hung end upwards, spilling her living freight into the sea. The two boys pulled for the spot with all their might.

"They're niggers!" exclaimed Ben, glancing ahead as he pulled. "We shall be too late, I'm afraid. What on earth does it mean?"

"Pull away; don't talk!" gasped Hal.

But they were still a long way off, and when they shot alongside the great grey hull there was no sign of life in the water. The victims had apparently sunk for the last time. A terrific din arose on the vessel's deck, and the boys saw a handful of white men, officers and crew, facing a yelling mob of blacks, whose white eyeballs flashed savagely.

"Mutiny!" gasped Ben. "That's what this means! Hark! There's a British voice. She's got a crew of Kroo-boys, and they're up against the officers!"

"Then we've got to help our own colour!" cried Hal. "Come on, Ben! How are we to get up?"

"This way," said Ben shortly.

And he made the painter fast to the steamer's boat as she hung, her stern nearly touching the water. Then he climbed into her, got hold of the davit-tackle by which she swung, and swarmed up it. Hal followed close behind him, and they found themselves on deck.

A quick glance round showed them a little knot of white men—Dutch, Frenchmen, and a grim-looking, wiry engineer, who spoke in cool, broad Scotch. They had their backs to the deckhouse, and the boys had come up beside them. In front surged a yelling mob of Kroo-boys—the negro ship-hand of the West African coast. Both whites and blacks were thin, hollow-eyed, and wasted.

For the moment the fight had ceased, and the spokesman of the Kroo-boys—a huge, gaunt nigger, in greasy dungaree stoking-clothes—was addressing the determined little crowd of white men in broken coast-English—the tongue of the palm-oil and ivory shores.

"We no stay!" he shrieked, and a clamour went up from the evil crew behind him. "If we stay here we all libe for die! Better you let us go, or we makee cut your troat one-time. Dat land dere ahead, an' we go in do boats. Dis ship bad ju-ju, an' de fever kill us all!"

"Ye half-baked scum o' the swamps," said the engineer coolly, sticking his thumbs in his greasy belt, "if ye're no awa' forrard in tae ticks there'll be more o' ye toeing the line in Hades than ever the fever took! Hallo! Who have we there?"

He turned his cigar-stub between his lips as Ben and Hal joined the white men, and he looked them up and down as calmly as if they were stokers reporting themselves on joining the ship. Of the chorus of savage yells that came from the mutinous crew he took no sort of notice.

"We're with you in this little conflict of opinion," said Hal. "I'm Scotch myself, and my friend here's from the Dogger. What's the argument about?"

"It's just a wee bit fever we've got on board," replied the engineer, taking no notice of the gesticulating negro spokesman. "We took it aboard

wi' the rest o' the freight on the coast. We've lost half our staff, an' there's a matter o' twenty sick lyin' below now."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Hal.

And as he looked round he saw the terrible seal that the fever had set upon the crew—the fever of that coast called the White Man's Grave. Yellow eyeballs, dry skin, and sunken cheeks marked more than half the men, the negroes as well as the whites.

"So these trap-mouthed ornaments ha' e'en taken it into their heads tae desert the ship, an' leave their sick to tucker out as best they can," continued the engineer, tucking a handspike under one arm, and lighting his cigar carefully, "though it's only a day's passage on tae Hamburg. I'm no denyin' we'll be kept in quarantine there. The niggers e'en started tae lower the boats, an', as we didn't see it in the same light, there were a wheen heads broken. They held off, and started to palaver then. When yon jabberin' nigger has talked himself dry they'll start in tae try an' butcher us, for they've made up their minds tae go, an' we've made up ours they shanna'."

"What's that shindy down below?" exclaimed Hal, as a terrific noise of kicking and bellowing sounded between the decks.

The gaunt Scot's eyes twinkled slightly.

"That's the auld man," he replied, blowing a cloud of smoke through his nostrils. "They locked him up in his cabin before they started this game. Gin he could get loose ye'd see the coloured population yonder runnin' for it's life, for he has a pair o' pistols an' a fine notion o' usin' 'em. But, ye see, we canna get awa' tae let him oot."

"You are mit us, ain'd it?" cried the second mate, a big Dutchman, turning to the boys. "You vos help us mit dem black scum?"

"Rather!" chorussed Ben and Hal, hot with indignation at the cowardice of the negroes in trying to desert the ship and leave their sick to die as she lay helpless. They never doubted that the white men must come out on top.

"Then get ye ready," said the tall Scot, taking the handspike from under his arm. "For yon muckle nigger's done talkin', an' they're comin' on! Laddies, ye'll find a wheen wooden staves in the deckhouse. They're no bad weapons."

The boys armed themselves hurriedly, and the Kroo-boys, with a horrid yell, rushed upon the compact bunch of white men. Knives flashed and handspikes whizzed. The Dutchmen fought like demons, but, above all, the grim Scottish engineer struck with cool, deadly ferocity. His heavy handspike whirled like a flail, and the negroes went down like ninepins before him. In a few moments there was a tearing, mixed-up scuffle, and the boys found themselves driven back like leaves before the wind at the first mad rush of the black men.

A huge black sprang at Hal with a knife; but the boy leaped aside nimbly as a terrier. As the man blun-

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dered past him he thrust out his sea-booted leg, and the negro tripped over it and came down on his face on the deck-planks with a yell.

Three of the attackers set upon the big Dutchman, and, though he fought like a tiger, stretching out two of them, others filled their places, and a knife-thrust in his left arm crippled him badly. A moment later he was beaten down, and sank on one knee, still wielding his handspike with great strength. But two of the maddened negroes pinioned him, and another raised a knife and struck at the fallen man's throat. But the blow never reached its mark, for Ben brought his heavy stave down upon the man's wrist with all his force, and the nigger dropped his knife with a howl. Another of the white crew, freed for a moment from his own adversaries, sprang to the Dutchman's rescue, and the big man struggled to his feet and flung himself into the fray again.

Hal's opponent leaped up again, and came at the boy with a deadly rush, his evil face transfigured with rage. Hal dealt him a blow on the head that would have split a white man's skull like a walnut, but the cranium of the African is almost invulnerable, and the man never checked or heeded it. The boy barely escaped his opponent's knife by throwing himself down on deck; the blade grazed his shoulder even as he dropped. Hal leaped up again, wondering desperately what he should do, for the big Kroo-boys seemed to care nothing for blows, and rushed at him again, glaring with fury.

"His shins, laddie!" cried the engineer, catching sight of the situation from the corner of his eye as he fought. "Gie it him athwart the shins! Dinna aim at his head!"

Though he did not see the use of it Hal seized on the advice, slipped aside from the man's rush, and whacked him across the shins with the whole strength of his arm.

The result was surprising. The big negro flung down his knife, and went hopping along the decks, howling like a madman and caressing his long shanks with zeal.

Hal had found the one vulnerable point in the African's body, for, though a negro be as strong as Hercules, he will succumb to a single kick on the shins. By the yells that arose from the thick of the fight Hal knew that the tall Scot was using the same means whenever he was able.

But the black crew, maddened with rage and fear, could be held back no longer. By sheer weight of numbers they bore the white men down, and Hal found himself swept off his feet and rolled over in a heaving, kicking scuffle. He wriggled clear, and a sudden thought struck him as, above the din of the fight, he heard again the kicking and bellowing below decks.

"My aunt!" he gasped, as he got clear. "If I can get away below now they're all mixed up I'll let the Old Man out. Here goes!"

He slipped round the back of the deckhouse and down the companion. Guided by the noise the prisoner was making he ran to a locked state-room, the half-splintered door of which still clung to its hinges and lock, in spite of the efforts of the man who pounded it. A continual stream of the very finest sea language came from inside. Hal, after a quick search, found a heavy iron crowbar in the fitter's cabin, and in a few moments more the captain's door was wrenched open, and a wiry, clean-shaven man in white drill clothes, purple-faced with rage, came tumbling out.

"Quick, sir!" said Hal, with a rapid salute. "They've got to the upper deck, and the staff's near done for!"

"Have they, by gosh?" snarled the skipper, as he rushed past the boy. "I've six funerals in each hip-pocket, and I'll soon put that inky-faced scum in its place! Lock me in my state-room, would they?"

(To be continued.)

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