

NO. 42.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

*Week ending
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THE PROLOGUE.

The Old Earl's Vow.

THE EARL OF WOODBRIDGE snorted.

It was not, perhaps, in keeping with the aristocratic repose of a noble earl to snort. But the Right Honourable the Earl of Woodbridge snorted, nevertheless. As a matter of fact, his lordship was frequently in the habit of snorting. It was his favourite method of expressing disapproval and impatience.

"He'll have to behave himself, that's all!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I'll be hanged if I'll put up with any of his confounded nonsense!"

The Earl of Woodbridge was seated in a massive oak chair before his desk, in the picturesque library at Woodbridge Towers, near Sevenoaks, Kent. And his lordship was holding a telegram in front of him, and smoking a cigar with really unnecessary vigour.

He was alone in the lofty, oak-panelled apartment, and the blazing sun of a hot summer's day poured in at the open French windows. The very air vibrated with the July heat, and the earl was wearing a ragged old alpaca coat and a pair of grey flannel trousers which had seen decidedly better days.

Yet the earl was one of the richest peers in the United Kingdom. He loved to be free and easy, however, and was somewhat eccentric. His temper was a constant source of anxiety to his servants, and old Paget, the butler, often attributed his grey hairs to his master's erratic temperament. Yet, in spite of his frequent fiery outbursts, the Earl of Woodbridge was a kind, genial man at heart.

Lady Woodbridge had been dead many years, and the earl was now well past fifty. He lived rather a lonely existence, and would have been utterly

melancholy but for the presence of his only daughter, the Hon. Frances Drew, a merry, homely, delightful girl of about twenty-two.

She and her father lived a quiet life. House-parties at the Towers were rare, and the only gaiety was when the father and daughter stayed at their London house. The Hon. Frances was the earl's only child. He had no direct heir.

When the earl died the title and estates would revert to his nephew, Roger Snell, a man of about thirty-one; still a comparatively young man. He was a well-known figure in the smartest West End clubs, and lived in luxurious bachelor quarters close to Piccadilly. Mr. Roger Snell, in fact, was one of the most popular members of society's smart-set.

It was of Snell that the Earl of Woodbridge was thinking on this warm summer afternoon. And while he lay back in his chair, puffing erratically at his cigar, a shadow fell upon the patch of sunlight, and a charming voice exclaimed:

"It's too bad of you, father, to stay indoors on such a delightful afternoon! Why don't you come out on the lawns? Oh, you're frowning, and you're simply ruining that poor cigar!"

The earl looked up. A rather small and dainty girl had just entered the library by the French windows, and she was standing there, her red lips parted in a smile, and her eyes twinkling reproachfully.

The Hon. Frances was not one of the most beautiful of girls; but she was attractive in a very delightful way, and was a girl one took to on the instant. Free and easy, full of vigour and gaiety, she seemed to bring a breath of youth and happiness into the rather gloomy old library. Attired in the prettiest of muslin frocks, she formed a delightful picture as she stood there, her dark hair waving in unruly curls over her white forehead.

She stepped forward closer to her father's side.

"Is anything wrong, father?" she asked, suddenly becoming grave.

"Wrong!" retorted the earl, in his bluff way, which Frances well knew. "Of course there's something wrong! If that rascal comes to the Towers he will have to behave himself, or——"

"Are you talking of Cousin Roger?" the girl interrupted smilingly.

"Who else? Perhaps I ought to use a more forcible term than rascal," the earl said grimly. "At times I suspect that Roger is a fast, good-for-nothing, dissipated rascalion——"

"But what has Roger been doing now?"

"Nothing in particular; it is his customary mode of life to which I am referring," replied his lordship. "We must look the facts in the face, little girl. Roger is my heir, and, by all that comes to my ears, I do not think he will prove himself a worthy successor to the old name. Ah, Frances, if you had only had a brother!"

Frances laughed merrily.

"But what about Roger?" she asked. "You said something about his coming down to the Towers."

"Yes, the young reprobate has had the audacity to send me a telegram announcing his intention of staying the week-end with us!" the earl exclaimed gruffly. "He will be here to-morrow. And if Master Roger doesn't behave himself——"

"Oh, give him a chance, dad!" Frances said. "He hasn't been down here for months, and perhaps he is not so wild as you think he is. By this time he may have sobered down, and become quite staid and quiet."

The old earl, however, did not care for company. He preferred to remain by himself, indulging in his favourite hobby—poring into ancient manuscripts and volumes. His collection of valuable old books was worth a fortune in itself.

The following day Roger Snell arrived. He arrived in a low, racing motor-car, early in the afternoon. And the manner in which he tore up the drive was not exactly calculated to improve his uncle's temper. The earl happened to be standing by the library window at the time, and he suddenly became aware of a pulsating roar, rapidly growing louder and louder.

Then, as he watched, a motor-car came into view among the trees which bordered the beautifully-kept gravel drive. It was travelling at a dangerous pace, and swerved round the graceful curve which led to the imposing steps before the main entrance. The gravel was rather loose, and the car's excessive speed caused the surface to fly up in showers over the velvet-like lawns. Two deep furrows were left in the drive, utterly ruining its appearance, and providing the gardeners with hours of unnecessary labour.

Mr. Roger Snell was alone in the car, attired in a dust-coat, goggles, and a check cap turned the wrong way about. He looked the very essence of the worst type of "road hog," and this performance seemed to amuse him highly, for he turned round as the car stopped and chuckled loudly.

The Earl of Woodbridge gave one of his characteristic snorts.

"The infernal fool!" he exclaimed angrily. "My little girl's evidently wrong. Sobered down—staid and quiet! Huh! The young dog's more of a ruffian than ever!"

He strode out on to the terrace, and Roger Snell came to meet him.

"Hallo, uncle!" he cried cheerily. "Looking just as shabby as ever! By James, if you go walking in the public road, you'll be mistaken for a tramp!"

The earl pointed with a quivering finger.

"Look at that, sir!" he thundered.

"Oh, the gravel!" Snell laughed. "That's nothing!"

"Nothing!" roared the old man. "Perhaps you'll rake it over! Perhaps you'll spend hours picking the stones out of the grass!"

Roger Snell chuckled.

"You employ gardeners—let them work!" he said carelessly. "I didn't know the gravel was so absurdly loose. Don't get wild over a trifle, uncle!"

He was a fairly tall man, dark, and with that free-and-easy manner which characterises a man of the world. His eyes were a little puffy, and his complexion somewhat thick. Nevertheless, Snell had a good figure, and dressed extremely well.

His cousin, Frances, was disagreeably surprised. Her hopes were not realised, for Snell was obviously a man to steer clear of. She was glad that his visit was to last no longer than the week-end.

That evening, after the earl and his nephew had played a couple of games of billiards, they adjoined to the library for a smoke and a chat. His lordship had been rather genial all the evening, and Snell decided that the moment had arrived for a somewhat delicate subject to be broached.

Having lighted one of his uncle's cigars, Snell lolled in a big chair, and looked thoughtfully out of the open French windows on to the moonlit lawns. The earl, he could see, was regarding him steadily.

"Well, boy!" exclaimed the old man. "Get it out! What do you want to say?"

"It's nothing much, sir——"

"Only a question of money—eh?" his lordship interjected bluntly. "How much? What about your income? Your father left you fifteen hundred a year, didn't he? That ought to be enough to supply every want of a single man!"

Roger Snell shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do want to speak about money," he admitted.

"You don't seem to realise, uncle, how many expenses a fellow has. After all, my income is rather paltry, and I only just manage to scrape along. To be straightforward, I want you to let me have a thousand pounds."

"Oh, you do! And what do you want a thousand pounds for?"

"Well, my luck's been rotten lately——"

"Your luck? Huh!" grunted the earl. "Gambling, I suppose?"

"One is forced to gamble nowadays," said Snell easily. "Still, I've made up my mind to chuck it up if I can only settle this affair. Be a sport, uncle! If you'll let me have a thousand, I'll give you my word I won't gamble again!"

The other lifted his eyebrows, and said:

"Gee! The boy's getting some sense! That's a promise, Roger?"

"Yes, sir—a definite promise."

Without a word the earl crossed to his desk and wrote out a cheque. Despite his brusque manner, he was kind-hearted and generous. And when Roger Snell glanced at the cheque he was pleasantly surprised to find that it was filled in for double the amount he had asked for—two thousand instead of one thousand!

His uncle gave him a quiet lecture, and declared that he expected him to abide by his promise.

The earl was soon to prove, however, that his heir's word was not to be trusted.

Snell stayed the week-end and then left. Barely ten days had elapsed, however, before he again appeared at Woodbridge Towers, with the intention of staying the night. He went straight to the library, and found his uncle alone, with a very grim expression upon his face.

Snell was now looking rather nervous, and he wore decided traces of recent dissipation. The earl noticed the change in his nephew's appearance, and his expression became stern and hard.

Snell evidently guessed what was coming, for he broke out:

"Let me explain, uncle! I've come to you for money—I don't deny that. But a friend of mine is in a terrible hole; he's had a set-back in business——"

"Don't lie to me, sir!" thundered the old earl angrily.

He rose to his feet, and stood over the younger man.

"I—I am not lying——"

"This morning I received a letter from some scoundrel named Varney—a well-known gambler, and a thorough-paced rogue," proceeded the earl relentlessly. "He declared that you were present at a disgraceful gambling orgy at his flat, and that you—in a more or less drunken state—lost to him to the extent of four thousand pounds. Four thousand pounds!"

Roger Snell gritted his teeth, and swore under his breath.

"You young dog," roared the peer. "Don't try to deny this; Varney sent me your promissory note, and requested me to pay your shameful debt."

"The hound!" muttered Snell furiously.

"What of your promise to drop gambling? Have you no sense of honour, boy? Heaven grant that you will change before you step into my shoes, and become Earl of Woodbridge! For the present, I will pay this debt of so-called honour——"

"By Jove, you're a brick——"

"Silence!" snapped the earl. "I was prepared to hear your version of the story; but after attempting to lie to me I will hear nothing!"

Snell clenched his fists.

"But uncle—I was going to ask you to let me have ten thousand!" he said desperately. "I have other debts—debts that must be met! I swear that I will not come to you again——"

"You swear! You unmitigated young rascal!" interjected the earl. "How dare you offer me promises again? Not a penny shall you get from me—not a farthing! I will pay this debt to the man Varney, but that is all."

"But——"

"Not another word!"

The old man's voice was firm, and Snell knew that it was useless prolonging the interview. With set lips and glowering eyes he left the library, and went out on to the terrace to smoke, and to console his bitter thoughts.

Snell went off to the billiard-room after dinner, and amused himself by knocking the balls about in solitude. The earl refused to accompany his heir; and made it clear that the sooner Snell left the Towers the better.

The unwelcome visitor, however, declared that he was going to stay the night.

As the evening progressed Roger Snell altered somewhat. Instead of being nervous and ill-at-ease, he became cool. A strange expression found a place in his rather sinister eyes, when he went to bed it seemed apparent that he had come to a positive decision.

What that decision was the earl never guessed or suspected.

He knew Snell to be a fast young blackguard; but the true depths of the man's scoundrelly nature were yet to reveal themselves.

It was all totally unexpected and amazing. And Frances was the means of unmasking her cousin's unsuspected roguery. The girl lay in bed restless and uneasy, for the uncomfortable events of the day had made her sleepless. She was thinking of Roger, and wondering if she could do anything to arrest his questionable habits.

The hour was about one-thirty when she suddenly sat up in bed, alert and rather startled. Her bedroom was situated right over the library—and she had distinctly heard a movement below.

What could it mean? Somebody was certainly moving in the library—but who? An uneasy suspicion of the truth came into her shrewd brain, and she caught her under-lip between her pearly teeth.

Very quietly she slipped out of bed, partially dressed herself, and then closely wrapped a dressing-gown round her slim form. Noiselessly she left her apartment, and descended the noble staircase. Everything was deathly still, and the darkness was pitchy.

But, from beneath the library door, a gleam showed. Without even pausing to consider the possible danger, Frances softly opened the door and stepped into the library. A little gasp left her lips at what she saw.

The small table lamp was burning beneath its shade, and the light revealed the fully-dressed figure of Roger Snell. He was attempting to force open a strong oaken cabinet which contained—as Frances well knew—her father's cash-box. In that cash-box was a very large sum of money in banknotes; for it was a whim of the earl's to always have a large supply of cash in the house.

"Roger!" Frances panted. "Oh! Are you mad——"

Snell twirled round, his face working furiously. Yet, at the same time, he strove to speak with forced calmness.

"What are you doing here, Frances?" he asked hoarsely. "I—I am searching for a book I left here——"

"You are not!" said the girl. "You are trying to rob my father!"

She stepped across the library quickly, and forced herself in front of the cabinet, with her back to it. Then she faced her cousin with flashing eyes and heaving breast. She was cool now—and dreadfully shocked.

"How can you, Roger?" she panted. "Oh, would you be a thief——"

Snell snapped his teeth, and exclaimed:

"Don't be a young fool, Frances! You've caught me in the act, so it's no use my denying anything. Yes! I am attempting to obtain money—but it's not robbery. I'll pay every penny back within a month. But I must have money to-night—must! Uncle is an old idiot."

"Stop!" interrupted the girl angrily. "How dare you speak of my father so!"

"Oh, don't get into hysterics, kid! Get away from that cabinet!"

"I shall not! I will not move—and if you touch me I shall scream!" Frances exclaimed tensely. "Think, Roger—think! You cannot realise what you are doing. You are my cousin; you are my father's heir! If you go away now I will shield you. I will say nothing——"

Roger Snell muttered an oath.

"You make me swear!" he said roughly. "I must have money—I must have it! If you don't move from that cabinet I'll——"

And then came an interruption—from an unexpected quarter.

Without warning the Earl of Woodbridge strode into the library!

Frances choked back a little gasp, and Snell turned deathly pale. The very expression upon the old peer's face was sufficient to tell them both that he was nearly on the point of apoplexy with suppressed fury.

"I have heard!" he said in a terrible voice. "Do not attempt to say a word, Roger, for I will strike you to the ground at the first sentence! My own nephew—the heir to my title and estates—attempting to rob me! This is the greatest shock of my life; I never guessed the depth of your vile iniquity!"

"Uncle! Let me——"

"Silence, you disgraced cur!" thundered the earl. "You thought to rob me while I slept, but I have saved you from dragging an honourable name into the mire. Go! Go from my house! I swear before my Maker that I will have no more to do with you from this hour onward!"

"Father!" Frances panted. "Think what you are saying!"

"This is no place for you, child!" the earl exclaimed harshly. "Leave me to settle with this forsaken blackguard alone. Roger Snell, I disown you! I make a solemn vow that I will not leave you a penny-piece; the title and estates will become yours at my death, but my private fortune is my own. And my last will and testament will bequeath every farthing I possess to my daughter. You, my heir, shall be a pauper and a beggar, so far as my money is concerned!"

The old nobleman pointed a quivering finger to the door.

"Go!" he said tremulously. "I know you no more! On my oath before Heaven I have made this sacred vow!"

And Roger Snell, cowed and white as chalk, went from the library.

The die was cast—and the Earl of Woodbridge had never been known to break his solemn word.

CHAPTER I.

Murder From the Skies!

NELSON LEE nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, it is rather sad, Nipper," he exclaimed. "The story is quite common property, of course. It is several years since Roger Snell was cast out from Woodbridge Towers. I find sympathy in my heart for the old earl, for his heir is one of the blackest sheep in society."

"He was bad enough before the rupture, gov'nor," Nipper said; "but he's developed into a regular outsider these last few years. I reckon the earl did quite right in sending the rotter clean away."

"Undoubtedly. But, as I said, it is all somewhat sad."

The famous detective and his assistant were slowly walking across one of the magnificent lawns at Woodbridge Towers. It was early evening, and the spring flowers were making a gorgeous show upon the well-kept beds. The sky was tinged with gold and rich red, and the sunset was magnificent.

"I wonder where Snell is——"

"Hush, my lad!" Lee said quietly. "The earl is coming this way, and I should not like him to hear us discussing his vagabond heir. The subject is a taboo one at this noble mansion."

A moment later the Earl of Woodbridge had joined his guests.

"Ah! Taking a walk round the lawns, Mr. Lee?" he exclaimed genially. "Jove! What a lovely evening. Everything is peaceful, and full of charm. It seems hard to believe that the greatest war in history is now being fought out to a bitter finish."

"Bitter for the rotten Huns!" murmured Nipper, sotto-voce.

"Not a breath of wind," Nelson Lee exclaimed. "Just the evening for——"

The detective paused.

"The evening for what, Mr. Lee?" asked his lordship.

"I was going to say Zeppelins; but I hardly like to dwell upon such a murderous subject," Lee said quietly.

"Huh! I get into a fury every time I think of the German campaign of aerial assassination," snorted the earl.

The old peer had changed very little during the past few years, and was geniality itself to Nelson Lee and Nipper. The pair had been staying at the Towers for two days now, and they had enjoyed the holiday immensely. Some time before Lee had rendered the earl a service, and his lordship, in consequence, was always delighted to entertain Lee and Nipper as honoured guests.

At present the Hon. Frances was in London, entertaining guests at her father's town residence. She was still unmarried; although her engagement to a young Scottish marquis had been announced, and the wedding was due to take place in the summer.

Nobody knew the actual facts of the quarrel between the Earl of Woodbridge and his heir; but it was general knowledge that Roger Snell was forbidden the Towers, and that the whole of the earl's fortune would go to his daughter when he died.

Those who knew the old earl intimately were convinced that he would never relent. He had sworn his vow, and he would abide by it until death overtook him. Every penny he possessed was bequeathed to his daughter, the Hon. Frances Drew; with the exception, of course, of several small legacies to old servants, etc.

But his lordship showed no sign of quitting this life. He was a healthy old man, active and strong. The family physician declared that he would live another fifteen years, and there were others who shared this opinion.

Fate, however, had willed otherwise.

Nelson Lee accompanied his host into the library, to be shown some interesting old parchments which the earl had lately acquired. Nipper went, too—but Nipper privately murmured to Lee that the "rotten old manuscripts" were about as interesting as a view of London from the Monument in a dense fog.

Scarcely had the trio settled down, however—the earl enthusiastic and voluble now that he was squarely mounted on his hobby-horse—than the telephone-bell rang. His lordship frowned.

"Infernal interruption!" he growled, reaching over for the instrument. "Hallo! Eh? Oh, it's you, Inspector Thornton. What? Heavens, you

don't say so! Confounded impudence! Good gracious me! Huh! Well, it's no more than I expected. Eh? Coming in this direction? James!"

The earl jammed the receiver down and glared at Nelson Lee.

"What d'you think of it, Lee?" he exclaimed fiercely.

The great detective smiled.

"I am afraid I didn't quite catch——"

"No, no—of course not! But you must be a prophet, bejove! Inspector Thornton, of the Sevenoaks police, tells me that three of those murder-machines—three Zeppelins—have crossed the coast-line, and are making inland!"

"My hat!" said Nipper, jumping up. "Good biz! We might spot one!"

"Huh! One might spot you, boy!" grunted the earl. "Confound the Zeppelins—let 'em go to Jericho! Like their infernal impudence to come over before darkness. I——"

But his lordship, fearing that he would become violent both in language and action—for he was already banging the desk forcibly—changed the subject abruptly, and soon forgot all about the Zeppelins in his lengthy discourses on the old parchments.

Nipper, however, finding the parchments dry, and the earl's conversation dryer, soon accomplished a skilful retreating manœuvre, and elipped through the French windows out on to the terrace.

Ten minutes later Nelson Lee emerged on to the terrace, and he found Nipper strolling on the lawns with his hands in his pockets. The pair walked about the grounds, Lee enjoying a cigar. Their host was still in the library.

"I don't suppose the Zeppelins will come this——"

Lee paused suddenly.

"By James!" he muttered, removing the cigar from his mouth, and staring at Nipper.

"What's up, guv'nor?"

"Listen, youngster!" snapped Nelson Lee. "Listen!"

Faintly, in the distance, a low humming sound could be heard. As Lee and Nipper remained perfectly still, their ears on the stretch, they heard the hum grow perceptibly louder.

"What is it, sir—an aeroplane?" murmured Nipper.

Lee shook his head.

"That sound is not made by an aeroplane," was his grim reply. "I have heard the low whirr of a Zeppelin before, and I know——"

The detective's utterance was cut short abruptly, and in a startling manner. He and Nipper were gazing into the sky towards the south, and they both saw a vivid flash of lurid light burst out upon the ground, quite a mile away.

Boo-o-oom!

A dull, reverberating explosion sounded, and the very ground shook. Nelson Lee set his teeth firmly, and gripped Nipper's arm.

"The Zeppelin's getting nearer, sir!" panted Nipper excitedly.

The throb of the giant airship's engine, in fact, was now seemingly quite close, and the air vibrated with the sound. Apparently the Zeppelin was flying fairly low.

The shock of the first bomb had aroused the household; for as Lee and Nipper stood upon the lawn they heard excited shouts, the frightened cries of the women servants, and the old earl's gruff tones.

The detective and Nipper were on the far side of the lawn, quite a considerable distance from the French windows of the library. His lordship appeared on the terrace, and his voice came to the ears of his guests:

"Confounded fuss!" the earl exclaimed, apparently to the evening air.

"Just because there's an explosion miles away—— Well, what the deuce do you want, Paget? Good gracious, man, are you frightened out of your wits, too? Bah! I'm ashamed——"

"The Zeppelin, my lord!" gasped the old butler. "It's coming this way!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper could see that Paget had joined his master, and a second later Mrs. Bodmin, the housekeeper, appeared at the French windows, and tentatively stepped forward to the spot where the earl and Paget were standing.

"Coming this way?" snorted his lordship. "Well, suppose it is? What's the good of getting into a panic? Don't be a fool, Paget! We can't stop the infernal thing, can we?"

"No, my lord!" said old Paget frantically. "But do go indoors, your lordship! Don't stay out here! The danger is ten times as great——"

"Rubbish!" roared the earl. "I'm hanged if I'm going to skulk indoors!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper were about to move across the lawn to the terrace, when Nipper clutched at his master's arm. The lad had been gazing searchingly into the sky, and now he pointed excitedly with his other hand.

"Look, guv'nor!" he panted. "There it is! Right over——"

"Scott! You're right!"

Lee stood still and stared upwards. Quite close at hand the Zeppelin was soaring directly over the Towers. The giant airship was flying fairly low, and its great engines were roaring noisily now. The shape of the craft was distinctly visible—a long, cigar-shaped monster with blunt ends.

Involuntarily, Lee held his breath. Would the German drop a bomb? The danger would be over in twenty seconds; but what would happen during——

Further thought was impossible. Without warning a terrible explosion occurred right in front of Nelson Lee and Nipper, and they were flung to the ground by the appalling shock. Just before the explosion Lee had heard a whining sound, and knew it to be a bomb dropping earthwards.

The next second he was flat on his back, with Nipper by his side. The shattering roar was terrible, and the ground rocked and shook. The crashing of glass sounded from all quarters, and Lee heard a fragment of shell drone past his ear.

But, although the bomb appeared to strike immediately in front of Lee and Nipper, it actually exploded on the far side of the lawn—on the very edge of the terrace. Consequently, the famous detective and his assistant were only affected by the shock. Neither of them were touched, but Nipper's nose was bleeding, and he sat up in a dazed and bewildered condition.

"The fiends!" cried Nelson Lee furiously, shaking his fist into the sky. "Oh, the murderous devils! Are you hurt, Nipper?"

"Feel a bit knocked-over!" mumbled Nipper.

The Zeppelin had passed over now, and a moment later another dull boom was evidence that another bomb had been dropped. Lee staggered to his feet drunkenly, and ran across the lawn to the terrace—to the scene of the disaster.

The terrace and the angle of the building were in shattered ruins. Utter silence reigned, save for hysterical shrieks and sobs from a far quarter of the great house. Then, all in a second it seemed, men came running from all quarters—the head-gardener, the under-gardeners, the grooms, and several strangers.

Nearly every window of the Towers was shattered to atoms, and the wall of the library was simply demolished. The noble old apartment was utterly

wrecked. Just outside the space where the French windows had been a great gaping hole was torn in the terrace.

In five minutes Nelson Lee knew the worst.

The great detective met Nipper as the lad was approaching, still somewhat dazed. In the gloom Lee gripped his young assistant's arm. They both turned their eyes towards the building, where men were moving about with lanterns.

"Has—has anybody been killed, guv'nor?" asked Nipper hoarsely.

"The bomb performed its murderous work only too well, youngster!" was Lee's quiet reply. "Paget, the butler, and Mrs. Bodmin, the house-keeper, are both victims——"

"But the earl, sir?" gasped Nipper.

"The Earl of Woodbridge was with Paget and Mrs. Bodmin at the second of the explosions," replied Lee gravely. "His lordship is dead! It is quite evident that all three must have met with instantaneous death!"

CHAPTER II.

Jim the Penman's Amazing Plot

ROGER SNELL paced up and down in his rooms. He was frowning somewhat, and smoking a cigarette vigorously. Now and again he paused and glanced at a newspaper and a letter which lay upon the table.

"Poor old chap!" murmured Snell. "I never entertained very affectionate feeling for my uncle—but I didn't expect he would die like this. Well, it makes very little difference; except that I am now Earl of Woodbridge, and that my income is not in any way adequate to my needs."

He glanced at the newspaper and the letter again. The former announced that Zeppelins had raided the south-eastern counties of England during the night, and that there had been many casualties, a famous nobleman being among the dead. And the letter—which had been brought by special messenger only ten minutes before—was from Messrs. Oldbury & Hill, solicitors.

These gentlemen requested his lordship to attend at their offices at his earliest convenience, when they would supply him with details regarding the tragedy.

Snell was still a comparatively young man, but he bore traces of dissipation and late hours. To tell the truth, Snell had lately been augmenting his income to a large extent by the use of his wits. And Snell's various schemes had by no means run along honest channels.

But now he was the Earl of Woodbridge. Knowing his uncle to be hale and hearty he had not expected to succeed to the title until many more years had passed. But the German murderers of the air had altered everything abruptly.

Snell's whole position was altered. He was a noble earl, and yet he only possessed the comparatively paltry income from his by no means extensive estates. The old earl's tremendous income had been derived from his huge private fortune. And Snell, remembering his uncle's vow, knew that his cousin the Hon. Francis Drew, would inherit that fortune.

"I'm hanged if I know whether to be sorry or glad," muttered the new earl perplexedly. "There was no love lost between my uncle and myself, so I sha'n't pretend to be cut up over his death. My main concern is centred

upon my own position. How do I stand? I am Earl of Woodbridge, owner of Woodbridge Towers, and Drew House, Belgrave Square. And yet the income I shall receive is not half sufficient to even maintain the old country seat. Bah! What a confounded fool I was to upset the old man on that occasion!"

But it was useless allowing his thoughts to drift in that direction. The mischief had been done, and there was no remedy. The Earl of Woodbridge—for it will be better to refer to Roger Snell as the earl hereafter—lit another cigarette, and prepared to go out.

In due course he presented himself at the old-fashioned offices of Messrs. Oldbury & Hill, the family solicitors. Mr. Hill received him with a marked coolness of manner, which the earl was quick to notice.

After Woodbridge had learned the tragic facts he hesitated a little before taking his departure.

"By the way, Mr. Hill," he remarked, "what about my uncle's will? I presume you have nothing new to tell me?"

"No, my lord. The late earl, as you have good reason to know, had a disagreement with yourself, with the result that he immediately destroyed his original will, and made a fresh one," replied the solicitor politely. "That was several years ago, and no change has been made recently. Every penny of his lordship's private fortune is bequeathed to his daughter."

"And I am left out?" said Woodbridge, with a bitter sneer. "I merely get the title and estates?"

Mr. Hill shrugged his shoulders.

"Really, my lord, these details will be entered into when the will of the late earl is read," he replied smoothly. "It is no secret, however, that you and your uncle quarrelled—with unfortunate results for yourself."

When the new earl left the solicitor's office, he taxied straight to Drew House, Belgrave Square, realising that it was incumbent upon him to express his sympathy to his cousin. The Hon. Frances was nearly distracted with horror and grief, but she granted Woodbridge a few minutes. In spite of her obviously terrible distress, she made it clear to her cousin, by her manner if not by her words, that his company was in no way desirable. Before leaving the house Woodbridge was made to understand definitely that it would be futile to expect any financial assistance from Frances. She not only disliked the earl, but she distrusted him. And the off-hand manner in which he referred to her father's sad death was a clear indication of his callous, brutal nature.

"The position is impossible!" Woodbridge muttered savagely. "A man in my position must have money—it is essential for me to have a very large income. And yet I have practically nothing! By heavens, I must set my brain to work somehow!"

The situation was, indeed, a most uncomfortable one for the new Earl of Woodbridge. Unless he obtained large supplies of money, he would be unable to live with the pomp and grandeur he had so often looked forward to. He had known full well how matters stood, but had always relied upon a faint hope that his uncle would relent from his vow. But this sudden tragedy had decided matters beyond dispute.

He was a peer of the realm—and a pauper!

At least, Woodbridge considered himself a pauper. He entered his rooms with a dark frown upon his rather crafty face. But he received a surprise a moment later, for a cool, drawling voice exclaimed:

"Morning, Snell! But you're a bloated earl, now—eh? I sympathise with you heartily, old man, over your sad bereavement."

"Oh, it's you, Lyle!" said Woodbridge, without animation. "Don't waste your breath on sympathy. I've nothing to thank my old fool of an

unole for! I'm a bloated earl, as you put it, and I haven't a farthing to bless myself with!"

"There's a pretty decent income——"

"Pretty decent?" Woodbridge interjected. "Don't be an idiot, Lyle!"

"Sorry, old boy—sorry!"

The voice was soft and smooth, with a trace of quiet amusement in it. Woodbridge flung himself into a chair, and looked at his companion moodily. Mr. Bernard Lyle was a spruce, immaculate man-about-town, whom the new earl had met about six weeks previously. He was dark, wore a heavy black moustache, and gold-rimmed pince-nez. His age might have been anything from thirty to forty, and he had an air of quiet coolness and languid ease, which was singularly attractive.

Lyle had become quite intimate with Roger Snell almost at once, and now that Snell was the Earl of Woodbridge the intimacy would probably be closer. Woodbridge liked the man; and had, indeed, made quite a little pile of money on one occasion by taking Lyle's advice. The fact that the money had been made dishonestly in no way impaired the earl's conscience.

Bernard Lyle was a man who lived by his brains. Who he actually was, or where he came from, Woodbridge had not the slightest idea. But he was a decidedly pleasant companion and a very useful one. He had appeared, seemingly from nowhere, into Roger Snell's fast gambling circle, and the pair had become more than friends. They both had secrets which could not be disclosed to any third party.

And yet, could the Earl of Woodbridge only have known it, Bernard Lyle was really a famous man. Or, to put it more correctly, an infamous man, of whom all London had been talking not so very long since. Snell himself well remembered the case, but he did not connect Lyle in any way with it.

Who, indeed, had not read the account of how Nelson Lee, the famous detective, had exposed the amazing forgeries of Douglas James Sutcliffe? Sutcliffe had been one of the most highly respected, one of the most exclusive solicitors in the West End. He had victimised Sir Stephen Trundle, Bart., by forging the baronet's signature on more than one cheque. And Nelson Lee had solved the riddle, and only lost his man by the merest of flukes. Sutcliffe, before his exposure, had given himself a pseudonym which Nelson Lee had good cause to remember. For "Jim the Penman" had proved himself to be a unusually clever and daring criminal. Sutcliffe had fled and had completely disappeared; but there were many who were convinced that Jim the Penman would not be long in resorting to his dangerous talent again.

For the man was a forger of the most astounding ability. He was an absolute genius in penmanship—Nelson Lee himself was the first to admit that fact. During his encounter with Jim the Penman, Lee had experienced the rogue's remarkable forgeries on more than one occasion. They were so clever, so astonishingly accurate that the keenest expert alive could have detected no deception.

It was only logical to assume that Sutcliffe would not waste much time in recommencing his nefarious practices once he had covered up his tracks. At present he was resting on his oars, and gaining a footing in society in a new identity. Before long, when he felt himself secure, he would again set to work in the old direction.

Jim the Penman already knew a great deal of Woodbridge's history; for although Sutcliffe himself disclosed nothing of his own past, it did not take him long to learn most of the facts of his companion's previous life.

And now the earl unburdened himself to his friend.

"Taking it all round, this Zeppelin tragedy is infernally unfortunate!" he growled in conclusion. "I had already got one or two hazy plans for getting round the old man, so that he would alter his will at the last moment. But that's impossible now, for he's dead, and——"

"You say that the butler and the housekeeper were killed also?"

"Yes."

"Were they old servants?" Sutcliffe asked. "Had they been long in your uncle's employ?"

"Oh, yes; for years—I forget how many," replied Woodbridge. "But what the deuce are you driving at, man? What have Paget and the housekeeper got to do with the question?"

"Let me think," replied Jim the Penman smoothly.

And he wrinkled his brow, and puffed at his cigar ponderingly. The earl left the room, and when he returned, half an hour later, Sutcliffe was still deep in thought. But there was now a curious gleam in his eyes, and a queer little twist at the corner of his mouth.

"Hang it all, what's the matter with you, Lyle?" demanded Woodbridge testily. "What are you brooding over? I'm the fellow to worry, not you——"

"A scheme has entered my head," replied the other softly. "That's right; close the door securely. I think we understand one another perfectly, Snell. If you are willing to play a deep game, I think we can, between us, make a considerable pile. In short, it is possible, even now, for you to become possessed of your dead uncle's fortune!"

The Earl of Woodbridge stared, and then exclaimed:

"Are you mad, Lyle?"

"No, not mad—merely clever," replied the other candidly. "That may sound vain, my dear chap, but it's perfectly true. I pride myself that I am very clever indeed; and I can see a way whereby we can set our wits to work to the mutual advantage of us both. When I say that it is possible for you to obtain your uncle's fortune, it sounds as though I am talking wildly and foolishly. But I am not; I have a perfectly sound proposition to make."

The young earl seated himself beside the other with a curious expression upon his face. He knew, by this time, that Lyle was not the man to make such a statement without very good reason. And Woodbridge felt curious, and strangely excited within him. He leaned forward and tapped Sutcliffe's knee.

"Well, what do you suggest?" he asked softly.

"First of all, I have one thing to say," Jim the Penman answered. "The plan which I am about to suggest is—well, shady. To be quite frank, it is a crime punishable by very severe terms of penal servitude. No, don't get excited! If we enter into this thing there will be no fear of exposure; we shall both be perfectly safe. The question is, are you prepared to become a criminal?"

Woodbridge swore savagely, and growled out:

"This is no time for jokes——"

"I was never more serious in my life. Are you prepared to become a criminal—I repeat my former question. Are you?"

Woodbridge leapt to his feet.

"No," he exclaimed heatedly; "I am not!"

"Then I'm afraid it's useless my voicing the scheme," said Jim the Penman, with a cool shrug of his shoulders. "But let me say one thing, Snell. I positively state that I can get your dead uncle's fortune into your hands—every penny of it! Moreover, neither you nor I will endanger

our liberty in the slightest possible way. The thing is simplicity itself. But it is—forgery!”

“Forgery!” gasped the earl.

“Exactly!”

“And you have a safe plan for getting my uncle’s money into my hands?”

“There will be scarcely an atom of risk!”

“It is unbelievable—preposterous!” Woodbridge exclaimed. “Besides, how in the name of wonder do you suppose I am going to forge——”

“I don’t suppose anything of the sort. I shall do all the forging that is necessary. You will merely supply me with facts and copies of original handwriting. And you will, naturally, reward me as I choose to dictate.”

There was a silence for fully three minutes, and then the earl said:

“What you suggest is a tall order, Lyle. Don’t forget that I am a peer of the realm, and that discovery would have terrible consequences. But you speak with such conviction that I am intensely curious. Between ourselves, I am certainly prepared to go to almost any lengths to obtain my uncle’s fortune—provided discovery is impossible. But how will it be practicable to attain that end by means of forgery?”

“You are prepared to enter into this business with your eyes fully open?”

“Let us talk the matter over,” Woodbridge replied. “You know that I am pretty desperate. If I see half a chance of success I will agree unconditionally.”

“Good!” Jim the Penman smiled. “The facts lend themselves to our purpose in a most attractive manner. To begin with, the butler and the housekeeper were killed at the same time as your uncle. Will it be possible for you to obtain specimens of their signatures?”

“Paget wrote to me some months ago, so I have his signature here,” replied the earl. “I am not so sure of Mrs. Bodmin; but a visit to the Towers will almost certainly be fruitful. But why on earth do you want specimens of their signatures?”

“Because,” replied Jim the Penman very smoothly, “old Paget and Mrs. Bodmin will be the witnesses to your uncle’s last will and testament!”

Woodbridge opened his eyes wide.

“You—you mean to forge a will?” he gasped. “Why, you utter fool, the thing is simply impossible! It is out of the question——”

“On the contrary a second will—a forged will, which will deceive everybody—is perfectly easy to accomplish. The circumstances are such that there is nothing in the way to my success!”

“But—but it will be necessary to forge——”

Woodbridge paused for breath, and glared angrily.

“It will be necessary to forge three signatures,” said Jim the Penman coolly—“your late uncle’s, the late Mr. Paget’s, and the late Mrs. Bodmin’s. In addition, the whole text of the document will have to be forged in the old man’s handwriting. From beginning to end the thing will be a forgery!”

“You are mad—stark mad!”

“Not at all. I will perform the task with the utmost ease,” said the other. “You don’t believe me? You think that we shall be floored? Well, suppose the whole thing comes out? How can you or I be suspected? My dear man, it will be worked in such a way that even in the event of discovery, we shall be perfectly secure.”

The Earl of Woodbridge breathed hard.

“By Jove!” he panted. “You—you are amazing, Lyle!”

Jim the Penman nodded.

“Quite so!” he agreed easily. “I am well aware of that. Has not another significant point struck you? Your uncle is dead, so it is impossible for him to raise any dispute. Moreover—and this is the most important point of

all—Paget and Mrs. Bodmin, the two witnesses, are dead also. There will be no living person to doubt the authenticity of the fresh will."

"But—but how will the forged will be discovered?" asked Woodbridge, his eyes now shining with excitement and eagerness. "Tell me that, Lyle. I cannot go to the solicitors and hand them the will and declare——"

"Of course you can't!" interjected Sutcliffe imperturbably. "But that is a minor point. Once the will is drawn up and signed and witnessed, we can easily find some innocent tool to make the 'astounding' discovery. By James! We will do the thing in style, Snell! Nelson Lee himself shall find the later will!"

"Nelson Lee!" echoed the other. "I—I—— Oh, you're beyond me, Lyle!"

Jim the Penman laughed softly.

"Come, we will talk this matter over carefully, and make all arrangements," he said. "Within a week everything will be ready for action, and then your cousin, I am afraid, will receive an unexpected shock. It is nothing new for an eccentric old man like your uncle to draw up a later will in secret. Oh, this is going to be a perfectly easy game, my dear fellow!"

CHAPTER III.

Cryptic Note and What It Led To.

"THE EARL OF WOODBRIDGE—eh?" murmured Nelson Lee, glancing at the card. "Yes, show his lordship up at once, Mrs. Jones. Another gentleman with him? Very good; show them both up!"

Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, retired, and Lee looked thoughtfully at Nipper. The pair were in their consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road, and it was early afternoon. Nipper pursed his lips, and gazed at his master.

"The Earl of Woodbridge," he said. "That's Roger Snell, sir. What the dickens does that rotter want with you?"

Lee smiled.

"My dear Nipper, how can I tell until he states his business?" he asked mildly. "I have no quarrel with Snell, although we have reason to regard him somewhat askance. Perhaps his uncle's death has sobered him, however, and he realises the load of responsibility which rests upon him as Earl of Woodbridge. After all, there is nothing really against Snell's character; he only quarrelled with his uncle."

Nelson Lee, in fact, regarded the dead peer's action in totally disinheriting his heir as somewhat harsh. Several days had passed since that dreadful Zeppelin outrage, and the inquest and the funeral had taken place. Lee and Nipper had naturally returned to London with all speed.

Woodbridge and a stranger were ushered into the consulting-room.

"I am glad you have time to spare, Mr. Lee," said the rascally earl. "I have come to consult you on a curious matter—a matter which may possibly have the most far-reaching consequences. This gentleman is Dr. Silverton, of Yockley, the village nearest the Towers, as you doubtless know."

"An introduction is unnecessary," remarked Lee. "I have already met the doctor."

They shook hands, and the visitors seated themselves. Lee had met Dr. Silverton during his stay at Woodbridge Towers. Silverton had, in fact, hurried to the old mansion poste-haste soon after the tragedy. He was a small, studious man of about forty-five.

"I have come to town at his lordship's request, Mr. Lee," said the doctor. "There are reasons for believing——"

The earl interrupted.

"Your pardon, doctor, but perhaps I had better relate, in brief, exactly what occurred. Mr. Lee, I have made an astonishing discovery. You are doubtless aware that my late uncle and myself quarrelled some years ago over a trifling incident——"

"I know there was a disagreement, certainly," interrupted Lee.

"We will not go into the details of the matter," went on the visitor.

"My uncle was a curious, eccentric old man, with many prejudices. And owing to that ridiculous quarrel he swore to disinherit me—that is, to leave me entirely out of his will, so far as his private fortune was concerned. To all intents and purposes he has done so."

"To all intents and purposes?" asked Lee. "I understood——"

"Please allow me to continue. This morning," said Woodbridge, "I was down at the Towers, and happened to look through the drawers of a writing-desk in the dining-room. Dr. Silverton was with me, and a sudden exclamation from me brought him to my side. To be brief, Mr. Lee, I discovered a secret cavity at the extremity of the right-hand drawer of the desk."

"My hat!" put in Nipper involuntarily. "A secret cavity!"

"Was there anything contained in the hidden receptacle?" asked Lee.

"Yes—this."

And the Earl of Woodbridge produced a folded sheet of rich, expensive note-paper, pale mauve in colour. Nelson Lee knew, at a glance, that it was the embossed, crested note-paper of the late earl.

"This," went on Woodbridge, "is a short statement written by my uncle. But it is so curiously worded, and its purport is so significant, that I feel fully justified in bringing the matter before your notice. The doctor here agrees with me."

"Quite!" said Silverton. "I am convinced there is a hidden depth in the statement."

Woodbridge leaned forward eagerly.

"Mr. Lee, I want you to decipher——" He broke off. "But I am getting ahead too fast," he added. "I am afraid I am somewhat excited—and not without excellent cause. For I begin to have a vague hope that my uncle repented of his vow. Read this statement for yourself, Mr. Lee, and let me hear your opinion."

The great detective took the sheet of note-paper and glanced at it. The statement was quite short, but, as Woodbridge had said, extremely significant. It ran:

"My unworthy heir is dead against me, and I do not grieve. My great vow to disinherit him holds good; but if he has enough brains left to find the secret of this statement, he is welcome to all. His hand is by his side, and of his free will he can find much information which is hidden beneath a cloak of words. If he is dense he will experience a difficulty in paying even for his board. More I will not say.—WOODBRIDGE."

Nelson Lee puckered his brow.

"H'm! This is curious!" he remarked. "A very singular document!"

"If I find the secret of the statement I am welcome to all!" exclaimed the new earl. "What does that mean, Mr. Lee? Is it not strange? There is a hint of information being hidden beneath the wording of the statement."

"Quite so! The old man has certainly set you a puzzle," said Lee. "Dear me! This reminds me of a cryptic letter I once received from a desperate criminal years ago. It is obviously written with clumsy sentences for the purpose of concealing its real meaning."

"Do you think you will be able to discover the real meaning?" put in Dr. Silverton curiously. "His lordship and I puzzled over the thing for some considerable time, but could make no sense of it. We accordingly decided to come straight to you."

Woodbridge nodded.

"Without a doubt my uncle wrote those words with a set and definite purpose," he said. "It seems to me, Mr. Lee, that the old man left me money, but determined to make it a matter of chance whether I should ever receive it. You have had much experience at this sort of thing, I am sure, and——"

"Of course, it is quite evident that these words have a special significance," Lee interrupted. "I do not pretend to be a magician, and I cannot solve the riddle at a moment's notice. If you will leave this curious document in my keeping, my lord, I will do my best, and will, in any case, run down to the Towers early to-morrow morning. I think I can safely say that I shall have news for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee! I only hope that thing is not a foolish hoax."

Lord Woodbridge rose to his feet and prepared to take his departure. Dr. Silverton did likewise.

After the visitors had gone, Nelson Lee sat back in his chair, lit a cigar, and gazed at the curious statement with knitted brows. He knew, at a glance, that it had been written by the old earl, for the handwriting was characteristic and quite familiar to him. Never for a second did the idea of forgery occur to him. There was, indeed, utterly no reason why he should suspect forgery. And he knew Dr. Silverton to be thoroughly honest and perfectly trustworthy.

"Well, guv'nor," asked Nipper abruptly, after he had been gazing over his master's shoulder for a few moments, "what do you make of it?"

"A lot, youngster—a lot!"

"Do you think you'll be able to solve it?"

Lee smiled, and calmly remarked:

"My dear Nipper, this is a comparatively simple puzzle! I'll warrant that I wrest the secret from this curious paragraph within fifteen minutes."

"They why did you send our visitors off, sir?"

"Because, if this turns out as I expect, I wish to be at Woodbridge Towers myself when the startling discovery is made."

"Which startling discovery, guv'nor?"

"Ah, that remains to be seen!" the detective returned. "Just look here, my lad! 'He can find much information which is hidden beneath a cloak of words.' That means to say that some of the words in this document have a special significance. Which words? A careful study will doubtless bring us enlightenment."

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it!"

"Several phrases are exceedingly clumsy," went on Lee. "For example: 'His hand is by his side.' Ah, by Jove! Hand is by his side. Leave out the incidental words, Nipper, and we get 'hand side.' Do you follow?"

"There's no sense in 'hand side'!" protested Nipper impatiently.

"But look at the line above, and you will see that the word 'left' appears," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "We now get 'left hand side.' Further down are the two words 'hidden beneath'; thus the sentence grows into 'left hand side hidden beneath.' We are getting on, Nipper—we are getting on!"

"My stars!" exclaimed Nipper. "This is interesting, sir!"

"Decidedly! But don't bother me for a few minutes, and I will make the fully connected sentence complete."

Nipper had not long to wait; and then his master rose, crossed to the desk

and dipped a pen in the red ink. Then he underlined certain words of the statement, and passed it across to Nipper. And now the lad was enabled to understand. For this is what he saw:

"My unworthy heir is dead AGAINST me, and I do not grieve. My GREAT vow to disinherit him holds good; but if he has enough brains LEFT to find the secret of this statement he is welcome to all. His HAND is by his SIDE, and of his free WILL he can find much information which is HIDDEN BENEATH a cloak of words. If he is dense he will experience a difficulty in paying even for his BOARD. More I will not say.

"WOODBRIDGE."

"I can't quite make it out now, guv'nor," remarked Nipper, with a wrinkled brow. "You've puzzled it out jolly well, but what did the old boy mean by this: 'Against great left hand side—'?"

"You are evidently dull this morning, my boy," interrupted the detective smilingly. "The old earl was apparently afraid to spell the word 'great' in the way he intended it to be read, for fear of it proving too direct a clue. I will just jot down the hidden sentence. Upon my word, I never suspected the old man of being so deep!"

And within a minute Nipper was looking upon a slip of paper, which bore the words:

"Against grate—left-hand side—will hidden beneath board."

Nipper scratched his head.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed blankly. "It's as clear as daylight now, guv'nor. My hat, so there's a will hidden beneath a board against the fire-grate. Which fire-grate?"

"Presumably that of the dining-room," replied Lee. "It seems, my lad, as though the old earl made a later will, and then partly repented of it. Instead of destroying it he concealed it in this hiding-place and left it to chance as to whether it would ever be discovered. The new will probably leaves a considerable amount to Roger Snell. Well, it is only right that he should have a certain proportion of his uncle's fortune in order to keep up the traditions of the family."

"But the rotter might squander it all, sir——"

"That is no concern of ours. We are engaged to unearth the will, and once we have done so I shall merely accept my fee and the lawyers will do the rest. There is a possibility, of course, that this thing is a hoax—but I do not think so. It would be a cruel hoax, and the old earl was always very much against practical jokes of every description."

The following morning Nelson Lee motored down to Sevenoaks, and when he arrived at Woodbridge Towers the young earl was waiting to receive him. The new owner of the Towers had taken the precaution to have Dr. Silvertown present, and Mr. Hill, of Messrs. Oldbury and Hill, solicitors, was there too.

Knowing exactly what was coming Woodbridge had thought it a wise plan to have the solicitor on the spot when the discovery was made. Mr. Hill was presumably at the Towers on quite different business, but all that would soon be forgotten once the will—the forged will—was brought to light.

So far Jim the Penman's scheme was working perfectly smoothly, and there was absolutely no reason why any hitch should occur. The plot, indeed, was so amazingly daring, and so cleverly carried out, that there was not the slightest loophole of any suspicion presenting itself. From beginning to end the whole scheme was Sutcliffe's; the planning of the forgery had originated in Jim the Penman's extraordinary brain. The Earl of Woodbridge had been simply aghast at the singular ease with which his scoundrelly associate had forged the will and the signatures. The earl was not

aware of "Bernard Lyle's" real identity—but that was of no consequence whatever.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, I am glad you have come in good time," was the earl's greeting, as he shook hands with the detective. "Have you been successful with that cryptic note?"

"My investigations here will provide an answer," replied Nelson Lee. "By all appearances it will not be so very long before I have a surprise for you."

Woodbridge smiled inwardly, but kept a grave face.

"A surprise?" he repeated. "I trust it will be a pleasant one. Ah, here is Mr. Hill, and Dr. Silverton is close behind."

Lee was introduced to the solicitor, and in a few moments the four men made their way to the dining-room. Nelson Lee was rather glad of the solicitor's presence, for it would be as well to have a legal gentleman on the spot.

Nelson Lee wasted no time.

He produced the sheet of mauve notepaper and handed it to Mr. Hill for the latter's inspection. Woodbridge and the doctor looked over Mr. Hill's shoulder as he read through the note; and all three men at once noticed the underlining of certain words in red ink.

"Why, what is this?" exclaimed the solicitor. "This curious document was written by the late earl, but I cannot quite understand——"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Woodbridge. "Why, I can see it now quite clearly. You're a marvel, Mr. Lee! But the chosen words do not seem to read smoothly; even now they hardly read sense."

Lee quietly explained that the word "grate" should be substituted for "great." The sense of the hidden message was then quite clear. The earl acted his part extremely well. He became greatly excited and behaved exactly as though this was all made known to him now for the first time.

A move was made towards the fireplace. And here, beneath the carpet on the left-hand side Nelson Lee discovered a loose board. It was the work of a moment to prize it up.

A small, hollow cavity was revealed, and in the cavity was a long, foolscap envelope, carefully sealed with the old earl's crest. Woodbridge gave a little cry as he saw it, but Lee was the first to pick the envelope up.

"See!" said the detective quietly, pointing.

On the face of the envelope was written the words: "My last Will and Testament. For my nephew, Roger Snell, should he be astute enough to discover this package."

"By James!" Woodbridge said exultantly. "This is my uncle's last will—it is dated barely three months ago! The other will is years old. See for yourself, Mr. Hill. It is in perfect order, and——"

The solicitor took the forged document, and Nelson Lee was allowed to glance at it over Mr. Hill's shoulder. Almost at once Lee noticed that the two witnesses were Mrs. Bodmin and Paget. Yet there was nothing singular in this, for the pair had been two of the late earl's oldest and most faithful servants. For them to have witnessed the will was only natural.

Nevertheless, Lee exclaimed:

"How curious! All three signatories are dead. Without a doubt this document is the late Lord Woodbridge's final legal disposition of his property. I——"

"It is absurd!" interjected Mr. Hill. "Absolutely preposterous——"

"But this will is valid, is it not?" asked Woodbridge quickly.

"Of course, of course. That is obvious. But it is absurd, nevertheless. Why on earth should his lordship have drawn up this will in secret. He should have consulted me. The dispositions in this will are outrageous, and

it is too late to make any codicil or alteration. What a pity—what a pity! Why didn't the earl seek my advice before taking this rash step?"

For the solicitor saw that practically the whole of the late earl's property and fortune was bequeathed to Roger Snell, the testator's nephew. The Hon. Frances Drew, his own daughter, was left a beggarly income which was totally inadequate.

"Poor girl!" said Mr. Hill gravely. "She will be thunderstruck when I make this sad news known to her. Practically nothing! Oh, it is almost criminal. I never dreamed that his lordship was such a fool—forgive me," he added, turning to Woodbridge, "but I feel strongly, and must speak strongly!"

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"You have not offended me," he said lightly, but with sparkling eyes. "Personally, I think my uncle has turned out a regular ripper. A great load is lifted off my mind. And as for my cousin—well, she will have to accept the circumstances with as good a grace as possible. I cannot feel much sympathy for her!"

Nelson Lee clicked his teeth.

The earl's words were callous and brutal. From that moment the great detective became grim and thoughtful. He realised that only harm had come out of this discovery. This will was unjust and unfair—and Roger Snell would now gloat over the sad discomfiture of his cousin.

But Nelson Lee never suspected that the document was a clever forgery, from the first line to the last!

The extraordinary plot, in fact, had worked like a charm.

CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Strikes the Trail

NELSON LEE did not like it.

The new will was altogether too absurd. The whole of the testator's great fortune was bequeathed to his nephew—with the exception of a small income for the Hon. Frances. It was such an astonishing change that had not the document been in perfect order, the solicitors would have doubted its genuineness.

But it was accepted without a suspicion.

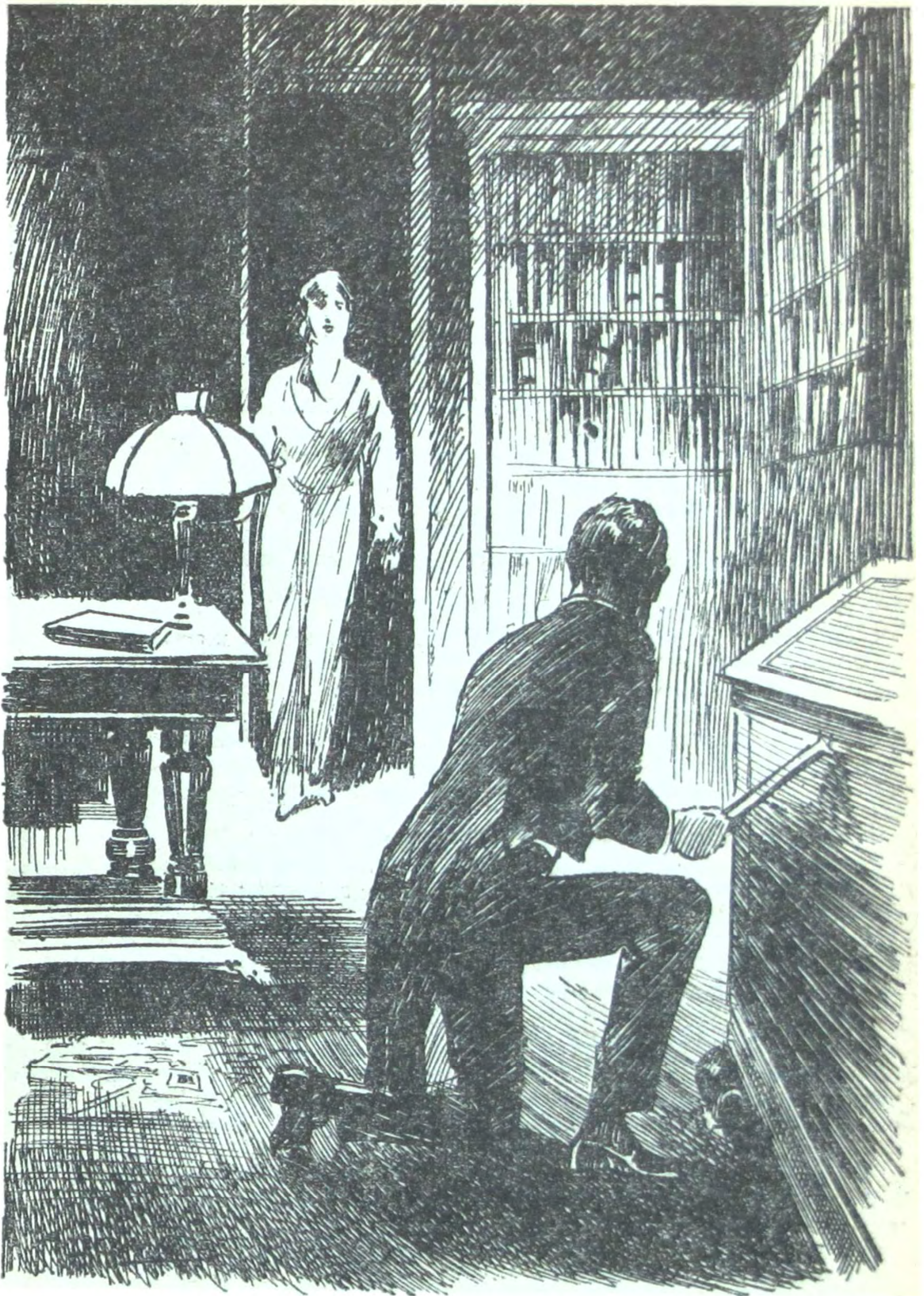
Lee could not help his mind reverting to the matter on this particular morning. Some days since they had left the Towers, and it was curious that he should be talking over the affair with Nipper when a visitor was announced—the Hon. Frances Drew. Lee had met the old earl's daughter once or twice, and knew her to be a very level-headed, sensible girl.

She was nearly twenty-seven now, but she looked no more than twenty-three—a slim, attractive girl, with large, expressive eyes. As she entered Lee's consulting-room, the detective was struck by the change in her appearance.

When he had met her last she had been gay and merry, with smiling eyes and a silvery laugh. But the tragedy of her father's death, and the unexpected blow of the second will on top of it, had wrought a sad change. Her eyes were listless, and an expression of pitiful sadness seemed stamped upon her delicate features.

"I scarcely know how to begin, Mr. Lee," said the girl hesitatingly; "but I have come to you because—oh, because I want your advice. I want you to help me to set right a monstrous wrong!"

"I shall be only too pleased to assist you in any way that is in my power,"



Frances softly opened the door and stepped into the library. A little gasp left her lips at what she saw.

The small table lamp was burning beneath its shade, and the light revealed the fully-dressed figure of Roger Snell. He was attempting to force open a strong oaken cabinet which contained her father's cash-box. (See page 5.)

replied Lee quietly. "I have had no previous opportunity of sympathising with you over your sad bereavement——"

"Please—please, Mr. Lee, don't refer to that terrible tragedy," Frances interrupted. "Oh, those vile Zeppelins! Those murderous—— But I must remain calm, for I know your time is valuable, and I do not wish to waste any of it. I have come to ask your advice concerning that hidden will."

Nelson looked grave, and began:

"I am afraid——"

"There is something wrong!" interrupted the girl quickly. "I know there is something wrong, Mr. Lee! I don't believe my father made that will at all! Oh, I know perfectly well I am talking wildly, but something tells me that I am right. I want you to—to do something, Mr. Lee!"

"To do something?" repeated Lee vaguely.

"I—I am nearly distracted," Frances exclaimed pitifully. "You don't know what it means to me. Oh, you can have no idea——"

But Nelson Lee interrupted.

"On the contrary, I realise only too well what a stunning blow that second will must have been to you. But what can I do? I should be delighted to help you if I could. But it is not within my power to alter the last will and testament of your father!"

"I do not believe the document you discovered was my father's last will!"

"My dear young lady!" Lee protested

"Oh, you know as well as I do my father was very bitterly opposed to Roger Snell. It is inconceivable—incomprehensible—that he should have bequeathed his entire fortune to my cousin. I know—positively know—that a terrible mistake is being made!"

The girl's distress was very painful, and Nelson Lee scarcely knew what to do. Before he could speak she choked back a little sob and went on:

"My father made a solemn vow to disinherit Roger Snell—so far as his private fortune was concerned. Why, scarcely more than a month ago my father referred to his sworn oath. We had been talking about my cousin—at least, I had referred to Roger. But my father told me to dismiss the subject, and declared more emphatically than ever that Roger should never touch a penny!"

The detective thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"It is difficult to reconcile your statement with the later will," he said. "For your father had drawn up the will, leaving everything to Snell, when he made those remarks to you. It is decidedly curious."

"It is unaccountable," said Frances. "Months after the will was drawn up he declared that Roger shouldn't touch a penny. Besides, once my father made a vow he would rather have cut off his right hand than go back upon it. Oh, it is all some horrible mistake, Mr. Lee! My father would never have done such a cruel, cruel thing as this!"

And, in spite of all her efforts to control herself, the girl lowered her head a little and sobbed. Nelson Lee looked about him uneasily, and was greatly distressed by his visitor's breakdown.

But after a few moments Frances looked up again.

"Forgive me!" she murmured, with moist eyes. "I am so sorry, Mr. Lee. But I feel—I feel desperate. I don't know which way to turn. Not only has my dear father been brutally murdered, but every penny of his fortune has passed into the hands of my cousin Roger. And it is wrong—it is all terribly wrong! Father never intended this to happen, I know."

"But this will; don't forget the will, Lady Frances," said Lee quietly. "You say your father never intended things to happen as they have

happened. Why, then, did he draw up that later will? It is obvious he changed his mind."

"He didn't change his mind—he didn't!" cried the girl. "I know it! Oh, Mr. Lee, if you had only heard my father's bitter condemnations of Roger's conduct you would understand the position better. Isn't it possible that there is still another will?" she added quickly.

"Dear me! Another will!" said Lee. "I hardly think——"

"Father was very funny sometimes," went on Frances. "You know what I mean when I say 'funny'—eccentric and strange in his actions. He might have drawn up this second will for the sole purpose of punishing Roger. You understand? When Roger is quite convinced that he is possessed of the fortune, a third will may turn up and set matters right. Don't you think it's possible?"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips sceptically.

"I should not advise you to hope too much on that rather bizarre notion," he said gently.

"But—but something is wrong," the girl said steadily. "Oh, I've never felt so helpless in my life! There must be some explanation, Mr. Lee. I want you to—to get to work. I don't know how, but you are a wonderful man!"

"I am afraid I am not a wizard," smiled Lee. "I cannot perform miracles. It is not in my power to conjure up another will if no such document exists—as I am convinced it doesn't. But I will ponder over the matter, and will institute careful inquiries. Be sure of one thing, Lady Frances, I will see that justice is done."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee. You give me hope," said the girl gratefully.

A few minutes later she left, and Nelson Lee lit a cigar and paced up and down, deep in thought. Frankly, he saw no opening for inquiries.

During the afternoon Nipper went out, and when he returned he found his master deep in a big chair, and the room full of smoke. But the frown upon Lee's brow told Nipper that all was not right.

"What's up, guv'nor?" he asked concernedly.

"Eh? Oh, Nipper, it's you!" exclaimed Lee. "Don't bother me, my boy. I am thinking about that Roger Snell business—about the will."

"I thought that was done with?" asked the lad. "Oh, that reminds me, sir. I saw the Earl of Woodbridge not long ago, leaving his chambers."

"Well, he has a perfect right to——"

"I'm not thinking about the earl," interrupted Nipper. "There was some chap with him, sir, and I couldn't help thinking of that clever criminal you floored some time ago—Sutcliffe."

"Who?"

"That chap who called himself Jim the Penman," replied Nipper. "You remember him, sir?"

"My dear boy, shall I ever forget him?" asked Lee grimly. "He slipped through my fingers at the last moment, and he is now at large. One of the cleverest forgers—if not the cleverest—in the whole world. Well, go on."

"Oh, it's nothing, sir. But Jim the Penman, you know, had a little trick of taking a pencil from his waistcoat-pocket and knocking the ash off his cigar with it. I saw Sutcliffe do it several times before we knew who the bounder really was. I suppose he didn't want to risk burning his glove."

"Well?"

"Well, sir, this chap who was with Woodbridge did the very same thing," said Nipper. "The pair paused for a moment to call a taxi, and the chap took a pencil from his pocket—just like Sutcliffe—and neatly wiped off the cigar-ash. Funny, wasn't it, guv'nor? I've never seen anybody else

do it; and this man was something like Jim the Penman, except that he had a big moustache, and quite different coloured hair. It struck me as being rather a rummy coincidence. But, of course, the Earl of Woodbridge wouldn't hob-nob with a giddy forger."

"H'm! It is a trifle peculiar," said Lee slowly.

And he relapsed into silence. Nipper busied himself finding some letter, and he had not been long at this task when he suddenly received something of a shock. For, without warning, Nelson Lee leapt out of his chair, and banged his fist upon the table.

"By James!" he exclaimed tensely.

Lee turned a pair of gleaming eyes upon his young assistant.

"An idea, Nipper!" he exclaimed. "An astounding idea has just come into my mind. In fact, it's so extraordinary, that I have little hope of its proving to be the truth. But your reference to Jim the Penman set me thinking."

"What about Jim the Penman, sir?"

"I have been thinking of my recent visit to Woodbridge Towers, and of the discovery of the late earl's second will," Lee went on. "Just consider for a moment, youngster. The old peer made a solemn vow he would disinherit his nephew; his daughter has to-day told me that the earl repeated that vow scarcely more than a month ago. And yet this will—this new will—was drawn up in the autumn of last year. Everything was absolutely against Roger Snell being the sole legatee, for it was understood by all that he would not receive even a farthing. For his uncle to make a fresh will leaving everything to Snell was not only an extraordinary act, but an almost unbelievable one."

"But the old peer did make a second will!" was Nipper's remark.

"Did he? That is the question—the vital question. Did he, Nipper?" exclaimed Nelson Lee, pacing the room rapidly. "It was his own expressed intention to leave his entire fortune to his daughter, and to totally disinherit his nephew. And yet, lo and behold! almost immediately after his death a will is discovered which completely reverses the position. As Lady Frances told me, the thing is almost too monstrous to credit. And yet—there is the will."

"We can't get over that rotten will, sir."

"A singular idea has struck me," continued Lee. "What if that will is a forgery, Nipper? What if it is a fake from beginning to end?"

Nipper stared.

"A fake—a forgery!" he repeated. "You going dotty, 'guv'nor? Who ever heard of a will being forged? What about the witnesses?"

Nelson Lee snapped his finger.

"What about them?" he reiterated sharply. "Where are they? The witnesses were Mrs. Bodmin and Paget. They are both dead, my boy—they were both killed at the same moment as the earl himself. Not any one of the three signatories can dispute the document. Does not that fact strike you as being strangely significant? By Heaven, I am beginning to see light!"

"Then you're a marvel!" said Nipper frankly. "I can't see a glimmer!"

"Look at the matter squarely, and you will share my view," said Lee. "My theory—and, mind you, it is only a theory at present—is that the second will is a forgery. Provided a man could forge the document the rest would be simple. Both individuals who supposedly witnessed the earl's signature are dead and buried. The chief point is—could anybody forge the will from beginning to end?"

Nipper gave a yell.

"Jim the Penman!" he roared. "Oh, shooting stars!"

"You see the point now?" rapped out Lee crisply. "The new Earl of Woodbridge has the reputation—and has always had the reputation—of being something of a scoundrel. It was for that reason that his uncle disinherited him. What is more likely than his meeting Douglas Sutcliffe after the latter's flight? Knowing the desperate nature of his position Roger Snell and Jim the Penman concocted a scheme, and forged the will. The cryptic note which led to the will's discovery was only a clever dodge to make everything seem open and above board. Nipper, I verily believe my theory is right. Everything fits together perfectly. You have even just told me that you have seen a man in Woodbridge's company who answered to the description of Jim the Penman."

"Only in that little characteristic——"

"And that is the one vital point which is of all importance," was Lee's interjection. "Every man who has a little trick peculiar to himself is apt to resort to it unconsciously at times. You say this companion of the earl's totally differed from Jim the Penman in appearance? That counts for nothing, for it is very easy for a man to alter his personal appearance. On the other hand it is very difficult to drop one's unconscious little habits. Both you and I know what an amazingly clever penman Sutcliffe is. This will forgery would be almost child's play to him—and Snell, don't forget, would have no difficulty in supplying Sutcliffe with the necessary specimens of signatures that were required. Provided that the new Lord Woodbridge was a party to the fraud, there was nothing in the way to mar success. And, knowing Snell's character as we do, it would not surprise me at all to learn that he is hand-in-glove with Jim the Penman."

Without any further delay Lee taxied straight to the offices of Messrs. Oldbury and Hill. Mr. Hill was on the point of leaving, and he was somewhat surprised to see Lee.

"I have called on one particular matter," the detective explained. "It is with reference to the last will and testament of the late Earl of Woodbridge."

The solicitor frowned.

"Don't mention the subject to me, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I get into a fury whenever I think of it. His lordship must have been mad to totally reverse the dispositions of his former will. The new earl is a thorough young blackguard, and I have no doubt he will squander the whole fortune within a few years. And that poor girl—— Pah! It's terrible to think of!"

"Are you satisfied that the will is genuine?" asked Lee quietly.

"Genuine? My dear sir, pray be sensible, there is not a shadow of doubt about the matter. I have attended to the old earl's business a sufficient number of years, I think, to be able to know his handwriting and signature. Why, what do you suggest?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"At present I suggest nothing," he replied. "But you will be doing me a great favour if you will permit me to closely examine the document."

The will was taken from a massive safe, and the detective examined it with intricate care through his magnifying lens. But, upon comparing the handwriting with some of the earl's genuine caligraphy, there was no difference to be detected. If indeed the will was a forgery, it was a miracle of penmanship, Lee told himself. And Douglas James Sutcliffe, he knew, was the only man who could perform the task. Even the ink was identical—but this, it may be said, is accounted for by the fact that Woodbridge supplied his villainous associate with his late uncle's own ink from the Towers.

Having made several notes, the famous detective thanked Mr. Hill and

took his departure. Although he had not an atom of proof, he was by now practically convinced that he was hot on the scent.

If the fraud could be exposed Nelson Lee knew that the case would rank among his biggest successes. For he would undoubtedly succeed in capturing Jim the Penman and in exposing the greatest forgery of modern times. Such a forgery as this had never before been attempted.

But there was a doubt.

So cleverly had the whole thing been engineered—so cunningly had it been carried out—that there seemed utterly no loophole left for investigations. There was a chance, indeed, that the fraud would never be proved. Lee might even prove that Bernard Lyle was actually Jim the Penman, but that fact alone would not be sufficient. No person could come forward to dispute any one of the signatures, and the cleverest expert in the world would not be able to detect any flaw in the document.

There was one line of inquiry which Nelson Lee could follow up—one bare chance of proving his theory to be fact.

And that line of inquiry would be embarked upon without a minute's delay.

CHAPTER V.

What the Chauffeur Knew.

THAT evening, by way of a preliminary, Nelson Lee disguised himself with wonderful cleverness, and kept a strict watch on Lord Woodbridge's rooms in town. And he was rewarded for his trouble by seeing Woodbridge and "Bernard Lyle" enter, both laughing and obviously on the closest of terms with one another.

Later, "Lyle" took his departure, and he walked to his own flat. The clever rogue was in the highest of humours. Everything was going swimmingly.

At least, Jim the Penman fondly imagined so.

But Jim the Penman didn't know that Nelson Lee was on his track!

Lee had had an opportunity of studying "Lyle's" figure and features closely for a few moments in Piccadilly. And, unrecognisable as the man was, Lee knew that he was Jim the Penman. In his mind's eye, the detective swept the disguise off, and saw his enemy as he actually was.

The forger had managed to give the police the slip, and Scotland Yard was under the impression that he had fled the country. And here he was, as large as life, calmly living in the West End, and had started off by perpetrating a forgery compared to which his previous efforts had been simple. The man's audacity was remarkable.

But to prove his guilt—to prove that the will was a forgery—that was the thing to be accomplished. Lee could have had Sutcliffe arrested within an hour, but that would be an unwise proceeding.

Having satisfied himself that "Bernard Lyle" was the forger, Nelson Lee went home and slept soundly. In the morning he rose refreshed and eager for work. His labours had a double purpose; to establish the will's fraudulent origin, and to expose Woodbridge as a rogue and a vagabond.

"There is only one hope, Nipper," remarked Lee, at breakfast. "If that fails—and it probably will—there will be no means of proving the truth. In spite of all, the crime will never be brought home, and the Hon. Frances will be defrauded out of her rightful inheritance."

"What are you going to do, sir?" asked Nipper.

"The date on the forged will is October twenty-eight," Lee replied.

"Suppose, by diligent inquiry, I discover that Paget, the butler, was on a holiday on that day—that he was miles from the old earl's side? Suppose I can get positive proof of such a thing? It will be conclusive evidence that the butler's signature is forged."

"Yes, but Paget didn't go on holidays," objected Nipper.

"That was only a suggestion to illustrate my meaning. It is a very slim chance, but it is worth inquiring into. In a big undertaking such as this Jim the Penman is bound to have made a slip somewhere—perhaps only a slight slip, but enough to serve my purpose."

"My hat! That man's a cute beggar, guv'nor!"

"A wonderful criminal, Nipper," agreed Lee. "He will be far more use to the community at large locked behind prison bars!"

The detective's task was to discover exactly what was happening in the old earl's household during the week of October 28th. The first step, therefore, was to run down to Woodbridge Towers and institute inquiries.

Accordingly, Nelson Lee was at the old mansion before noon. Woodbridge, he knew, was in London, so he had no fear of meeting the earl. If he did so it would be of no consequence.

The great house was gloomy and quiet. If possible, Lee wished to discover his facts without going to the house. Therefore, he stopped when he came to the lodge, and was soon in conversation with an old man named Tennant—the lodge-keeper. Tennant had been in the employ of the family ever since he had been a lad, and he was something of a character. Lee knew him well, for he had had many conversations with the old fellow during his visit to the Towers.

"Ay, it's glad I am to see ye, Mr. Lee," said the lodge-keeper. "The old gentleman's dead—Heaven rest his soul! I'm afeared there'll be different times at the Towers now that rascal's come into the title. I allus did have me doubts regardin' Master Roger. A good-for-nothing——"

"Quite so, Tennant—quite so," interposed Lee gently. "But I wish to ask you a few questions. What sort of memory have you? A good one, that can be relied upon?"

Old Tennant grunted.

"I'll lay my mem'ry is as sound as most men's," he declared. "Why, I recall the day when his lordship fell over the north wall, near the ditch. That would be on a Saturday in March, ten years ago."

"You are sure it was on a Saturday?" smiled the detective. "Well, I don't want to tax your memory to that extent. I only wish to go back as far as last October. The family were down here last October, weren't they?"

Tennant removed the pipe from his mouth.

"His lordship and the little lady—meanin' Lady Frances, bless her!—come from London early in September," he replied. "They stayed down here until the last week in October. Yes, that's right, sir, I can remember it as though it were only yesterday. His lordship caught a chill after most of the servants had gone, and stayed behind with nobody in the house except Mrs. Bodmin and Paget. Oh, there was Treeves, of course—the chauffeur, I mean."

"The last week in October," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "That's just the period I wish to inquire about. The Monday would be the twenty-fifth. Can you explain more fully exactly what occurred?"

"Why, yes, sir. It was on Monday that his lordship intended going to London," replied Tennant. "Lady Frances left in the morning, and all the servants went in the afternoon. His lordship was going up by motor-car, and Mrs. Bodmin and Paget were to lock up the house and follow by train."

"And wasn't that programme carried out?"

"No, Mr. Lee. After the servants had gone the old gentleman went for a walk round the grounds, and gave me my orders, among other things," the lodge-keeper answered. "I thought at the time that his lordship was rather unwise, because it had been raining during the morning, and he only had a pair of thin slippers on. Well, just as he was about to start he found that he'd caught a chill, and didn't go. So all that week his lordship was in the house alone with Mrs. Bodmin and Paget. Treeves slept in his own quarters over the motor-shed, round at the back. It wasn't until Saturday that they all left."

Nelson Lee nodded.

So the very week during which the will was supposed to have been drawn up, the old Earl of Woodbridge had been alone at the Towers with the housekeeper and the butler—the pair who had supposedly witnessed the will. It seemed as though Jim the Penman had received information before dating the forgery October 28th. The actual facts were entirely in accordance with the signing of the document. The old earl was alone at the time, so had ample opportunity of making the will in secret; and Mrs. Bodmin and Paget were on the spot to sign it. Lee's inquiries had utterly failed in their objective; they had, indeed, only strengthened the already strong and conclusive case.

"I particularly wish to know what occurred on the Thursday of that week," exclaimed Lee, "the twenty-eighth of October. Was the earl well enough to write? Were both the butler and Mrs. Bodmin at home?"

"Lor' bless you, yes, sir!" replied Tennant. "On the Thursday his lordship was down and practically recovered from his chill—it was only fancy, I believe. And Paget and the housekeeper didn't shift out of the grounds the whole week. Ay, but let me see," added the old man pausing.

"There was something wrong with Paget. The old duffer cut his hand—cut it badly, so I heard."

"Which hand?" asked Lee quickly.

"I can't remember that, sir, because I never knew," was Tennant's reply. "I didn't see Paget not once before he left. But I know he cut his hand while he was along with young Treeves. Treeves 'd tell you all about it if he was here—but he ain't."

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed. There was a bare chance that he would trip Jim the Penman yet. Was this the slip which would mean the ruining of the whole clever scheme? It all depended upon which hand Paget had cut, and how severe the injury had been. Old Tennant, it appeared, could not give that information. But Treeves, the chauffeur, would certainly be able to do so. Further inquiry would probably end fruitlessly, but it would be wise to sift the matter to the bottom now that he had gone so far.

"Where can I find this chauffeur, Treeves?" asked the detective.

The old lodge-keeper scratched his head.

"I can't rightly say, sir," he replied. "Treeves ain't in the service of the family now. He wanted to go to London—to stay in London altogether, I think. So he took a motor-driving job with some baronet—Sir Fraser Somebody-or-other, I think the name was."

"Sir Fraser Troombe?" Lee suggested.

"Ay, that's the name. I knew it was something queer."

It was impossible to elicit further information from Tennant. That which he had already learned was valuable and instructive. But Treeves, it seemed, was the man who could supply the one vital fact. So, after liberally tipping the old lodge-keeper, Nelson Lee took his departure and returned forthwith to the metropolis. It was quite an easy matter to locate Treeves. He found the chauffeur in the private garage at the back of Sir Fraser Troombe's residence near Regent's Park.

The garage was situated quite to itself at the end of a narrow alley, and there were no other buildings near. When Lee presented himself Treeves was in his shirtsleeves getting a magnificent landaulette ready for the road.

Without delay Nelson Lee introduced himself and stated his business. And as he listened to Treeves's reply the detective's eyes gleamed with triumph. For this young man—this chauffeur—was able to prove conclusively, and beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the second will was a base forgery!

"I won't ask why you want this information, Mr. Lee, because that's none of my business," said the young man candidly, "but since you want the facts, here they are: On the Wednesday—that would be October twenty-seven—I asked Paget to lend me a hand in the garage with a little job I was doing. Well, Paget was helping me to lift the old 'bus' when his foot slipped on some grease. The full weight of the car came down on his right hand——"

"His right hand?" Lee interjected sharply. "You are positive of that?"

"Certain—I'd swear it in a court of law. The poor old chap mauled his hand pretty badly, though no bones were broken. The first two fingers were badly crushed, and a great gash was made across the palm. He immediately rushed indoors, and Mrs. Paget bound it up for him; he was a plucked 'un, and wouldn't go to the doctor. But he had to have his hand bandaged for nigh on a fortnight."

"Would it have been possible for Paget to write on the day following—on the Thursday?" asked the detective. "Could he have signed his name?"

Treeves laughed, and replied:

"Why, his hand was swollen and crushed, and bandaged up from fingertips to wrist. He couldn't have signed his name a week after the accident, let alone a day!"

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee quietly. "That is all I wish to ask." Inwardly the detective was singing a song of triumph. Treeve's evidence was absolutely conclusive. By this one little slip Jim the Penman had rendered his whole gigantic fraud useless.

Nelson Lee had very good cause to feel pleased.

But could he have known what was actually taking place at that moment he would not, perhaps, have been so comfortable and settled in mind!



CHAPTER VI.

Jim The Penman Plays His Last Card.

JIM THE PENMAN, in plain truth, was close at hand!

The forger was crouching behind a wooden fence, not five paces from the spot where Nelson Lee and Treeves were standing. And Jim the Penman had heard all that the chauffeur had to tell!

Yet Sutcliffe's presence there can easily be accounted for.

Very shortly after Nelson Lee had left Woodbridge Towers, the earl had arrived, and had learned of the detective's visit from Tennant, the lodge-keeper. Rather startled to learn of Lee's activity, Woodbridge had questioned Tennant, and had been told of the detective's questions regarding the family's movements during the week of October 28th.

To say Woodbridge was startled scarcely expresses his state of mind. All in a second the rascally young peer realised that the ground was not so secure and solid beneath his feet as he had fondly imagined it to be.

Nelson Lee, it was clear, suspected villainy, and was actually working on the case. Moreover, he would possibly learn from Treeves some information which would upset the whole plot. It was essentially a time for quick thought and rapid action.

Woodbridge had at once entered the house and had rung up his own rooms in town. He had left his friends, "Bernard Lyle," there, and the latter at once answered the call. A short conversation had been sufficient to warn Jim the Penman.

And when Nelson Lee had stepped out of Charing Cross Station, the forger was on the watch. Jim the Penman followed Lee to Regent's Park, and stole down the little alley in the detective's tracks. A leap over a low fence had enabled him to creep up near the spot where the two were talking. And when Treeves told his important evidence Jim the Penman heard every word of it.

The situation was desperate.

The clever criminal was thunderstruck. He had imagined himself safe, but he now had proof that Nelson Lee was dangerously near to upsetting the whole great game. The detective, in some manner or other, had got on the scent—and had now actually succeeded in discovering the one fatal flaw in the plot!

It was a disturbing discovery for Jim the Penman to make, but he did not lose his head. He remained perfectly calm, and did some quick thinking. Treeves was the only man in the world who could prove that Paget, the butler, had gashed his right hand so badly that it would have been impossible for him to have signed his name on the 28th of October. There was not another soul who could come forward to support the evidence.

And Nelson Lee, the forger soon discovered, took his departure, after arranging for Treeves to call upon him during the evening, when his work was done. So it was fairly evident that Lee did not intend to act at once.

Jim the Penman was not long in following Lee, once the latter had taken his leave. And as the forger was on his way back to Lord Woodbridge's rooms, his brow was wrinkled, and he was thinking deeply.

"There is a loophole—a single loophole of safety," he murmured grimly. "What Lee has learned will be valueless if Treeves is unable to repeat his story. And Treeves is the only man I have to fear. There is one way—one way!"

Soon after Sutcliffe's arrival, the earl himself appeared, having just motored up from the Towers. He was pale and haggard, for he could not stand the strain with the composure of his imperturbable confederate.

"Well, Lyle," he asked hoarsely, when they were alone, "what have you discovered? What has Lee learned? Good heavens, if that hound is going to ruin——"

"Calm yourself, Woodbridge," interrupted Jim the Penman. "There's no need to get into a panic. Things are bad, I'll admit, but not so bad that they can't be remedied. To tell the truth, we have been over-confident, and we made a bad mistake over the date of the will. The chauffeur, Treeves, has been able to prove to Nelson Lee that it would have been impossible for Paget to have signed——"

The earl clutched the other's arm.

"Then—then we have lost?" he gasped fearfully. "Oh, I knew what it would be! I knew only harm would come of this wild scheme. You fool, Lyle! It was you who persuaded me to enter into the infernal game! Now we shall be exposed, and placed in the dock as criminals!"

"Finished?" asked Jim the Penman coolly. "Don't be an ass, my dear fellow. If I were to get into a panic, too, we might indeed find ourselves in Queer Street. But I am level-headed, and I can see that there is one

way in which we can make ourselves safe, and frustrate Nelson Lee's designs."

The earl sank into a chair.

"I'm not used to this sort of thing," he muttered. "Well, what can be done? You're splendid to take it like this, Lyle."

"You flatter me," Jim the Penman said smoothly. "Well, Woodbridge, the situation is just this. Lee has arranged for Treeves to go to his rooms in Gray's Inn Road this evening. If Treeves actually does go we are lost, for others will hear the chauffeur's evidence, and will be able to testify to it. At present, however, only Nelson Lee himself has heard Treeves's story—and Lee's word, unsupported, won't be worth a ha'penny, for there is nothing to show that he isn't inventing it all."

"But what can we do?"

"There is only one way. Treeves must not reach Nelson Lee's rooms to-night!"

Woodbridge stared.

"How can we prevent him?" he asked. "And, even supposing we do, he will be free to go to-morrow, or another day——"

"You don't seem to understand," said the forger softly. "Treeves must not reach Lee's rooms to-night; in other words, the chauffeur has got to disappear—or, at least, he has got to be silenced. Whether he disappears or not is of no consequence."

Lord Woodbridge leaped to his feet.

"Are you suggesting to—to kill the man?" he asked hoarsely, and with a frightened look in his eyes. "Are you mad, Lyle? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Not at all. I'm as serious as a judge," replied Jim the Penman. "I am merely telling you what has got to be done. Oh, you needn't look so scared! I will attend to the little matter myself! You needn't move from these rooms unless you like."

The earl strode to Sutcliffe's side, and gripped the other's arm.

"You can't do it—you sha'n't do it!" he exclaimed fiercely. "You understand me, Lyle? Great Heaven, what are you—a man or a fiend? You talk of murder as though it were a mere trifle. I was willing to enter into this forgery business with you, but to kill a man—— I would rather the whole plot be exposed! What you suggest is monstrous, horrible——"

Jim lost his patience at last, and said grimly:

"You are a weak fool, Woodbridge; but I don't blame you. Stiffen yourself, man, and don't continue these silly heroics. We're in the very deuce of a hole, and there's only one way out. Are we going to lose everything just because you are in a miserable funk? I'm not asking you to help me; I'll attend to Treeves myself."

"You—you demon!" gasped Woodbridge huskily.

"Very likely," was Jim the Penman's calm reply. "One has to be a demon now and again; it doesn't do to always remain a human being. When a certain kind of work has to be done it is useful to become suited to the part. But enough of this nonsense. We must face the situation calmly."

The earl regarded his companion with a nervous expression in his eyes. To do Woodbridge justice, he was dead against this proposed crime; he would rather have given himself up to the police than take part in any violence against Treeves. But Jim was perfectly cool and collected.

And he very soon talked his confederate round, although he did not propose that the earl should help. The forger was an extraordinary man; he did not possess an ounce of fear in his whole composition. He always remained self-possessed under all circumstances, and he would allow nothing

to stand in his way. At present the chauffeur Treeves was a menace—therefore, Treeves had to go. Simply that and nothing more.

And Jim did not waste time. He set about his preparations immediately, and by the middle of the afternoon everything was ready. He made careful inquiries, and found that his task would be quite an easy one—from his point of view.

It was Treeves's habit to take his tea in the garage, when he was working there. And to-day the chauffeur was making a repair to the car. He was quite alone in the building, and whistled to himself as he poured some hot tea from a Thermos vacuum flask into the metal cup.

Having had a sip, he bit into a sandwich, and moved across to the back of the garage. His tea was on a little bench, quite near the big open doors. With his back to the doors, Treeves stood contemplating the job he was engaged upon. He was thinking, however, of Nelson Lee's visit earlier in the day.

Suddenly he seemed to stiffen, but he remained perfectly still.

"By thunder!" he muttered, under his breath.

For an amazing thing had just occurred. From where he was standing it was possible for him to gaze into a little reflex-mirror which was fitted to the motor-car. It was one of those handy articles which are fitted to many automobiles, and which enables the driver to see at a glance what is behind.

Treeves, standing there with his back to the door, fancied he saw a slight movement in the reflex-mirror, and he fixed his eyes upon the thing. And it was then that he stiffened. For, perfectly distinctly, he saw an arm protrude beyond the door-post, and the next second something dropped noiselessly into his steaming tea!

What could it mean?

The incident was so startling that Treeves was on the point of twirling round and rushing out to investigate, when he paused. He was a level-headed young man, and guessed that if he pelted out of the garage he would only scare the owner of the mysterious arm away, and would discover nothing at all.

He determined to adopt a smart ruse.

An explanation had come into his brain, and it was an astute idea: Treeves proved himself to be decidedly clever. What was it that had been dropped into his tea? The chauffeur guessed that it was a drug to make him insensible. Once in that state the scoundrel—whoever he was—would enter the garage and steal the motor-car. That his very life was being attempted never occurred to Treeves.

He determined to adopt a ruse, and to catch the would-be thief red-handed. So, after a few moments, he turned casually, walked across to the bench, and picked up the metal cup, containing the tea. Half-turning his back, he made a pretence of drinking deeply, and then set the cup down behind an obstacle which concealed it.

Then, as he moved away again, he uttered a choking cry, and fell to the floor with a thud. As a matter of fact, Treeves acted so realistically that he rather overdid it. He bruised himself by the fall, and lay there murmuring choice words to himself, and vowing to "take it out" of the would-be thief.

He had not long to wait.

For in less than a minute he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a man appear round the side of the garage. He wore a heavy black beard, and he came softly forward and stood quite close to the chauffeur.

Just as the latter was on the point of springing to his feet the black-bearded stranger murmured, quite audibly:

"You're settled, my friend! If you're not dead now, you will be within the next two minutes. I don't think you'll interview Mr. Nelson Lee to-night."

Then the mysterious man turned quietly on his heel, and walked away. Treeves was so amazed that he lay there, trying to gather his wits.

The man had attempted to murder him! It was not a drug in the tea, but deadly poison! And the reason for the crime was to prevent him keeping his appointment with Nelson Lee!

After a while Treeves sat up rather dazedly, and turned a little pale as he realised what a narrow squeak he had had. But for that glance in the reflex-mirror, he would have been dead by this time!

The chauffeur carefully emptied the good tea out of the Thermos flask, and poured the poisoned beverage into it. And when he presented himself at Nelson Lee's rooms he was armed with the flask.

He told the detective all, and Lee listened with a grave face. Certainly, Lee had not suspected that Jim the Penman had been aware of his investigations. That the forger had brutally attempted Treeves's life was not in the least surprising. Nelson Lee knew from experience that Jim was utterly callous and murderous.

The detective commended the chauffeur highly on his presence of mind, for by acting as he had done he had completely duped Jim the Penman, astute as that amazing rogue was. Jim fully believed that Treeves was dead.

And this belief was confirmed late in the evening. For when Sutcliffe bought a late evening paper he immediately saw a prominent paragraph concerning the mysterious death of a chauffeur named Treeves, in a garage at Regent's Park. Jim would have been surprised had he known that Nelson Lee himself had caused the paragraph to be inserted.

The forger was on his way to Lord Woodbridge's flat, and when he arrived there he found the earl looking pale and haggard. But Jim the Penman, in spite of the crime he thought he had committed, was perfectly cool.

"The danger has passed, my dear chap," he said casually. "Read the report for yourself. There will be an inquest, of course, but no doctor on earth will know that poison was the cause of death."

The earl shivered.

"You—you fiend!" he muttered fearfully.

At that moment he felt sorry that he had ever entered into the compact with Sutcliffe. But, later on, when Jim the Penman's genial companionship began to cheer him, he recovered his usual composure to some degree.

"This letter was delivered this evening," he said, taking an envelope from his pocket, and passing it to his companion. "I suppose I'd better go."

The letter was from Messrs Oldbury & Hill, solicitors, and merely stated that they would be honoured if the Earl of Woodbridge would call upon them in the morning, with regard to some details concerning a transfer of stock.

"Yes, you'd better go," Jim the Penman said, tossing the letter back. "Thank me, my dear boy, that you have any stock to transfer! And don't look so infernally blue! After all, there is nothing to fear—the danger has flown away."

But had it?

For once Jim the Penman was totally wrong.

Neither he nor Woodbridge suspected that the letter from Messrs. Oldbury & Hill was nothing more nor less than a trap!

CHAPTER VII.

The Earl Confesses—Jim the Penman's Little Jokes.

"A H, good-morning, my lord! You are punctual!" It was Mr. Hill who spoke the words. Lord Woodbridge has just entered the solicitor's private office, and was somewhat surprised to find Nelson Lee there, in addition to Mr. Hill.

"I was not aware that Mr. Lee was concerned with my business?" said the earl sharply. "I prefer to see you in private, Mr. Hill——"

Nelson Lee stepped forward.

"Excuse me, my lord, but you have been brought here for the special purpose of having a quiet interview with myself. No, don't go, please! In any case, the door is locked—as you will find if you turn the handle."

Woodbridge, already careworn, now turned a sickly white.

"What is the meaning of this—this outrage?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Hardly an outrage!" Lee suavely protested. "I wish to introduce you to a certain gentleman, my lord—one I believe you met some time ago, when he was in your late uncle's employ, and one who has been very much in your mind since yesterday."

"I—I do not understand!"

"I refer to Mr. John Treeves," said Lee quietly. "This way, Treeves!"

And the chauffeur stepped from behind a large screen which occupied a corner of the room. Mr. Hill sat back and eyed the proceedings somewhat askance. Such a scene as this had never before occurred in his sedate and sleepy office.

Lord Woodbridge staggered back.

"Treeves!" he croaked. "You—you—— Lyle said that he had——"

"That he had killed me—eh?" exclaimed Treeves. "Well, he didn't! And I have come to this office, Lord Woodbridge, to tell the truth about that forged will."

The earl uttered a choking cry and sank into his chair. Lee had been quite sure of the rascally peer's guilt, but it was a revelation to Mr. Hill and Treeves. They knew at once that Woodbridge was a party to the base forgery.

He seemed stunned, and sat in his chair, blank of expression, and with a wild, hopeless look in his eyes. The whole castle was tumbling about his ears. Everything was ended now—the reckoning had come.

In quiet tones Treeves told the solicitor exactly what had occurred on October 27th last, thus proving that Paget could certainly not have signed his name on the following day. Woodbridge listened dully at first, and was given an opportunity of regaining composure. And he realised that he had acted in a guilty manner. As he became calmer he could think better, and his mind was filled with alarmed thoughts.

Treeves's evidence, of course, simply squashed the will. But what had Lyle said? Even if the will was discovered to be a forgery, both Woodbridge and he would be perfectly safe from detection. Nelson Lee could suspect much, but nothing could be proved.

The earl set his teeth. He would bluff everything out, he told himself—he would brazen the whole affair out as though he, himself, were as astonished as everybody else. By the time Treeves had done Woodbridge was quite composed.

"This—this is astounding!" he said huskily. "If what Treeves says is true, the will must be a forgery! In reality, I have no right to my uncle's money at all. Good heavens, what a terrible blow——"

"Do you think this is exactly wise?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly.

"What do you mean? I know nothing of the matter!" the earl protested.

"What should I know? Who in the name of wonder can have committed such a audacious forgery? And what was the object?"

"H'm! The object's pretty plain!" said Mr. Hill bluntly. "Your lordship benefits solely under this new will—this forged abomination! Now that it is proved to be a fraud, you are penniless. The object of the forgery was clear enough, egad!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips, and smiled slightly. He had expected something of this sort. And he was prepared. Woodbridge chose to bluff the matter out; well, a trick would be resorted to, and Lee had every confidence in its being successful. Without allowing the earl to see him, he pressed a bell-push.

A minute later there was a furious hammering on the door, and Mr. Hill's pince-nez almost fell off his nose as he started. Lee strode across to the door, and unlocked it. Nipper panted into the room, waving a newspaper.

"It's all out!" he gasped excitedly. "It was the Earl of Woodbridge himself who forged that will! Lyle, his confederate, has been arrested and has confessed——"

Nipper paused, pretending to see Woodbridge for the first time.

But the earl had heard quite sufficient.

"Lyle arrested!" he croaked. "He accuses me—— Let me see the paper!"

He snatched the paper from Nipper's hand, and stared at the great black-letter headlines with protruding eyes. Half-way across the page were the words:

"WELL-KNOWN PEER A FORGER!"

A STUNNING BLOW.

THE EXPOSURE OF A GIGANTIC FRAUD!"

Below, in big type, was a brief statement by "Bernard Lyle," who had been arrested by Scotland Yard men that morning. Lyle declared that Lord Woodbridge had instigated the plot, that he had forged the will, and that the earl had attempted the life of Treeves, the chauffeur.

And yet it was all bluff!

Nelson Lee, too, was playing a game of bluff! The newspaper was one which had been specially set up for the occasion, Lee anticipating trouble with the earl. He wanted to force a complete confession out of Woodbridge. In this way the forgery would be proved beyond doubt, and there would be conclusive evidence against Jim the Penman. It was a confession that Lee wanted.

And Lord Woodbridge swallowed the bait whole!

As he read the headlines his face went whiter than ever for a moment; and then flushed crimson with fury. Thinking that his companion had rounded on him, and was accusing him of the crime, he was naturally furious.

"This is false!" he shouted excitedly. "Mr. Lee, this is wrong! The lying hound! I had nothing to do with the forgery. Lyle suggested it, and actually executed the writing of the false will. I did nothing—nothing save supply him with the facts he wanted."

Woodbridge glared round him fiercely.

"It's a lie—a lie!" he rasped out. "I know some of the blame attaches itself to me, but if it hadn't been for that murderous brute——"

"I think, Lord Woodbridge, that you have said quite sufficient to show us that you were implicated in this forgery," put in Nelson Lee grimly. "Well, I may as well tell you, now—now that the confession has been forced from you in the hearing of three witnesses—that the newspaper before you was prepared especially by my orders. Your confederate has not

been arrested, and has confessed nothing. The whole thing was merely a trick to make you speak."

The earl choked back an oath.

"You—you hound——"

"Steady—steady!" Nelson Lee said quietly. "Look here, Woodbridge, you know perfectly well that you are in very grave danger of standing in the dock at the Old Bailey to answer a charge of fraud and forgery. You may not have been the chief instigator, but you were largely connected with the plot. A sentence of penal servitude would certainly be passed upon you. But——"

"But what?" Woodbridge panted quickly.

"It is not the wish of your cousin for any prosecution to take place, although she was the chief victim," went on Lee. "Provided you comply with my demands, you shall go free, and the whole disgraceful business will be hushed up. Not a soul knows anything of it except we in this room—and your cousin."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the earl, now thoroughly subdued, and only too eager to grasp at the flimsiest straw within his reach.

"You must tell me where your confederate is to be found at the present moment," was Lee's reply. "I think it possible that Sutcliffe has prepared a way of escape, and I don't want the man to slip through my fingers. You appear surprised? Perhaps you are not aware, Lord Woodbridge, that your boon companion for some time past was none other than Douglas Sutcliffe, the astounding forger, who called himself Jim the Penman?"

"Jim the Penman!" cried the earl. "You—you amaze me! But I begin to understand more fully now. You can find him, Mr. Lee, at his own flat. I know he is there, and he suspects nothing, for he thinks he killed Treves last night. If you go to his flat you will catch him unprepared. And I—what must I do?"

"You will be handed a large sum of money," put in Mr. Hill reluctantly, as though he disapproved strongly of what he had to say. "Lady Frances has already been approached by Mr. Lee, and she has acted in the most generous manner. You will be provided with this money, and you must leave the country at once on a prolonged tour. When you return, you may, perhaps, have repented of your many past sins."

"I have been a fool!" he muttered bitterly, and in a broken voice. "But I have learnt my lesson, Mr. Lee. From this day onward the Earl of Woodbridge will be a very different man. I swear that on my oath. This terrible experience has brought home to me the fact that villainy is always a losing game."

"Here we are, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper stood outside the door of Jim the Penman's flat. The detective had a couple of Scotland Yard men below, in the wide hall, and they would take charge of the forger without delay. But Nelson Lee was anxious to have the pleasure of arresting the criminal himself.

"Now, be prepared, Nipper," he said softly. "I do not think that Sutcliffe will answer the door himself, but there is a possibility of such a thing, and we must not be taken off our guard."

As it proved, however, Jim the Penman did answer the door himself. But he was disguised in a thick black beard, and a full black wig. He was utterly unrecognisable as Douglas Sutcliffe. But Lee stepped straight into the hall, with his revolver pressing into the other's chest.

"Hands up, Jim the Penman!" said the detective triumphantly. "The game's up, my friend. I should advise you to——"

"Nelson Lee!" snarled Jim. "You—you clever brute!"

But he put his hands up, recognising the warlike expression in Lee's eyes. And Nipper reached up and tore off the wig and beard. Now, standing revealed, was Jim the Penman without the slightest doubt.

"Let me wear them!" growled the forger sullenly. "I'm beaten, Lee. I'm known in these flats, and I don't want a crowd staring after me. Let me wear the wig and beard until I arrive at—at my future home," he added, with a sudden return to coolness.

Lee allowed Jim to replace the wig and beard.

"Now, Nipper, the bracelets," said the detective crisply.

But, at that second, Jim the Penman made a desperate break for liberty. He had seemed quite resigned to his fate, and Nelson Lee had not expected anything of this nature. Like a flash of lightning the forger sped down the hall, darted through a half-closed doorway, and slammed the door behind him with a crash.

"By James!" roared Nelson Lee furiously. "After him, Nipper!"

Lee himself led the way, and he was only a few seconds behind the forger. He tore the door open, and then gave a cry. Jim the Penman was in the act of scrambling through an open window which led to a fire escape. In less than a minute the forger was handcuffed and gripped securely by Nelson Lee and his young assistant—the pair of whom were panting rather heavily. It had been a narrow squeak. But Jim's bid for liberty had not been successful.

The forger did not say a word. He remained utterly silent, and seemed almost crushed. Probably he had expected to get clear away, but owing to Lee's quickness had failed.

By taxi Scotland Yard was soon reached. And there, in the superintendent's office, Lee announced his capture.

"Excellent, Mr. Lee—excellent!" exclaimed the superintendent. "It is indeed a good thing to have such a desperate criminal as Sutcliffe safely under lock and key. Constable," he added, turning to a police-officer, "remove that wig and beard, and let us look at the man squarely."

And then Nelson Lee received one of the greatest shocks of his life.

Jim the Penman was not Jim the Penman at all!

The man who now stood revealed was precisely the same height as the forger, and of the same build. But his features were different, as could be plainly seen now that the disguise was removed.

"Tricked!" roared Nelson Lee. "Well, I'm hanged!"

"Tricked neatly, Mr. Nelson Lee," jeered the prisoner. "So you thought Jim the Penman would be caught—eh? Not he! He's not such a fool! He was warned that you were coming, and prepared everything. But he daren't leave the flat, for fear of being watched by detectives. So he adopted the little ruse which has worked so successfully. When he ran into the kitchen he simply flew into a cupboard. I was waiting against the fire escape—waiting to be made a prisoner! And after we had gone Jim calmly left, knowing that the flat was watched no longer."

"Begad!" gasped the superintendent. "What a clever scoundrel! This is one against you, Lee! Although I don't see how you can be blamed—the trick was superb!"

And thus Jim the Penman had given Nelson Lee the slip once more. He was still at large. The forgery had been made apparent, however, and the Hon. Frances came into her rightful inheritance.

But as for Jim the Penman, Lee felt quite sure that he had by no means encountered the amazing criminal for the last time.

What was the next tussle with this astute forger to be?

NEIL THE WRECKER

A Thrilling Story
of Adventure in
the North Sea.

By DAVID GOODWIN.

HAL FORSYTH, the hero of our story, is one of the crew of the trawler *Bonnie Jean*.
The skipper,

JOE WEST, takes a great liking to the lad as does his son,

BEN, whose chum Hal quickly becomes. The young seaman has a great enemy in HAGGART NEIL, the brother of "Black Jack," a notorious North Sea pirate, who, by Hal's hand has been brought to book. Neil swears revenge on the lad and the *Bonnie Jean* in general. Ben and Hal soon show their bravery by boarding a large ship whose crew is in mutiny, and rescuing the captain, who has been locked in his cabin.

Order is soon restored, but just as the captain comes forward to thank the two lads several figures scramble over the side of the ship—and, wonder of wonders! the newcomers are Haggart Neil and his crew. They, however, are soon put to flight, and the fish being disposed of in part the lads go ashore. (Now read on.)

The Dutch Wreckers

THE boys entered a garish music-hall, where a crowd of idlers sat at little iron tables, and looked listlessly at some very feeble performers on the stage, drinking strange liquors the while. Ben and Hal sat just by the door of a sort of private room leading out of the music-hall, and ordered black coffee, as being the least noisome of the various unlikely-looking drinks on sale.

The coffee was undrinkable, being composed of burnt breadcrumbs and chicory: but the boys kept a sharp lookout upon all present, watching everybody who entered or left the place, and keeping an eye on the street outside. There was a good deal of noise, but when they got used to it the boys heard behind them a peculiar rasping voice that rose above the rest.

They pricked up their ears and looked at each other meaningly.

"Well, by George!" muttered Ben. "Here we've been staring round high an' low for a sign of the beggar, and here we've almost gone and sat on top of him!"

"I tell ye," said the voice of Haggart Neil, sounding muffled amid the din, "they're the forerunners of a lot mair like themselves. You Dutchies may gie up your trade when the rest o' them come."

An angry murmur followed the voice. Hal looked cautiously over his shoulder. The boys' table were away from the rest, and the room behind it was full to overflowing with the lowest kind of Amsterdam "wharf-rats," and that type of low

country fishermen who goes out far enough to earn as much as will keep him in liquor daily, and then come ashore to spend the rest of the day in his pet particular gin-palace. Sprinkled among them, and fraternising with them freely, were the various members of the Vulture's crew, and at the head of the trestle table, with a big jar of schnapps—third-class Dutch gin of the most powerful and fiery kind—in front of him, sat Haggart.

"He's playing host," whispered Ben. "Look how he's pilin' the liquor into them! They're half-screwed already. There's some game on here. Neil the Wrecker don't give liquor away for nothing!"

"But do those dock-rats understand English?" queried Hal, in a low tone, watching the unsavoury crowd.

"Enough to get along with," said Ben. "All these longshore Dutchmen do. He seems to be getting their dander up, too."

The mutter of drunken anger rose again, and Neil continued:

"Yo may weel grummle," he said earnestly. "I tell ye this smack's gaun tae bring dozens o' others wi' her, an' tak' the fishin' trade out o' yer hands. They're handier at it than ye are. The crew are just spies!"

"We won't stand it!" came the answer from a dozen tongues, in broken English and longshore Dutch. "Why should these pigs of Englanders take the bread out of our mouths?"

"Ay," said Haggart. "Friends, ye ken me well enough. I'm one o' yourselves, though I'm from ower the watter, an' we all work together. Many's the job we've helped each other at. But these others——"

"We'll kill them!" snarled the crowd, hiccoughing and glaring wildly. "We'll smash their vessels and club them!"

"I'm no incitin' ye tae violence," said Neil. "Fill up agen, laddies. There's plenty o' liquor in the jar. But it wad e'en be a fine thing for ye if she were smashed, an' her dirty crew knocked o' the head, I'll agree. There's a score o' ye here, an' ye would dae the job fine. Hech! wadna it be gay? She lies doon by Kellner's Wharf, not far frae here."

"Great Scott, Hal!" whispered Ben. "He means the Bonnie Jean! I thought as much. He's working those drunken brutes into a frenzy against us, an' they'll start out in a minute. Back to the smack—quick!"

The boys slipped away and darted into the street, just as a louder and more threatening growl arose from the side-room. They pelted down to the wharf as fast as they could travel. The Bonnie Jean was lying snugly in her place, unconscious of impending danger, and there was only Grant in charge.

"Where are the others?" said Ben eagerly.

"Gone up the town," replied Grant.

In a few words Ben told him what they had heard.

"Eh!" said the young Scot. "There'll be big trouble! Thae low-down Dutchies are terrors when they're drunk and worked up. They'll make matchwood o' the smack!"

Grant sprang on to the quay, alert and ready.

"Fetch the others!" cried Ben. "You know where they are; you can find them quickest. We'll mount guard till they come back."

"This is a fine mess!" said Hal, as Grant dashed away on his errand. "Those beggars were ripe for any villainy when we left. They'll be along here in a few minutes, that's certain. We'll fight, of course; but how are we to hold out against twenty of them?"

"We must do our best," said Ben, though he had little hope. "Perhaps dad'll bring some help."

"Stop!" cried Hal. "I've got a better plan. Chuck off the ropes. Shove her off from the quay. We'll change places with the Vulture!"

"By George," shouted Ben, "you're a genius, Hal! The very thing! Lively, now, or we'll be too late!"

The warps were whisked off the bollards on the quay, and fell on deck with a thud. The Bonnie Jean glided out from the quay, and Hall, seizing a quant, poled her along the waterway rapidly. Once the sleek trawler gathered way she went along easily, and they ran her alongside a barge just above the Vulture, which was lying on the farther side. Then they sprang aboard the enemy's craft.

The boys knew that the crew was with Neil in the "Ness," and there was only one watcher on board. He was lying in the bows and smoking. And as the boys boarded the vessel he arose and faced them. It was Simon Neil.

Without a word, Ben collared him round the waist, and, before he had time to struggle, put forth all his strength and slung him clean over the side into the water.

Hal raised a cry of protest. It seemed to him like murder. But Ben snatched up a lifebuoy, and flung it to the splashing, spluttering figure, who grabbed it eagerly. Ben took no further notice of him.

"Come on!" he cried fiercely. "It's no time for kid-glove work! We've got to best the villains. Off with those warps! Shove her astern! That's it. Make her fast to the barge. Bring the Jean into her place. Now shove the Vulture along to where we came from, an' move lively! Shove away!"

In a little over two minutes the Vulture was on her way to the quay the Jean had left, and was brought neatly alongside it in exactly the same position. Behind them they could see the form of Simon Neil sitting forlornly across the lifebuoy, and yelping for help, for he could see no way up the quays.

Ben chuckled grimly.

"Nobody'll touch the Jean," he said. "They'll all come down this side to see the fun. But if they did, our crew'll be back soon, an' we could get across in the boat in two ticks. Ah, here come those beauties! We're just in time. Nip ashore and hide among those barrels. We can watch from there."

The tramp of feet moving quickly, but unsteadily, broke upon the silence of the night, and a ragged mob, most of them armed with staves and heavy sticks, swept round the corner, uttering hoarse cries of rage. A tall man that followed beside them lifted his arm and pointed to the Vulture, while they were still some fifty yards away. The mob rushed forward with oaths and savage shouts; but the tall man, joined by five or six others, stood back in the shadow of a wall and watched.

"That's Haggart an' his precious crew!" said Ben, with an unholy chuckle, nudging Hal in the ribs. "D'you see the humour of it, Hal, my boy? Does the jest strike you? He's made all those wharf-ornaments drunk at his own expense, and pointed out his own blessed craft for them to work off their temper on! Ho, ho! I wish our fellows were here to see the fun!"

Shouting with drunken rage, the ragged crowd swarmed on to the trawler's decks.

A crash of glass opened the ball, as one burly ruffian battered in the skylight, followed by the loud splintering of wood, as another tore off the hatch-slide by main force and hurled it overboard. Half a dozen of the mob tumbled down below, and a terrific uproar arose.

A heavy fire of tin mugs, coffee-pots, articles of clothing, and other property, came whizzing up through the hatchway, to be battered and ripped and kicked overboard. The din below decks sounded like a herd of bullocks charging through a general store.

But more substantial damage was in progress on deck. Three or four of the rioters, howling like wolves, drew their knives and hacked the rigging

to pieces. The shroud-lanyards and runners twanged like burst banjo-strings, as the strong blades slashed them through, and the Vulture began to look like a craft that had been on the Goodwin Sands in a winter gale.

"My wig, aren't they doing her proud?" chuckled Hal, dancing among the empty barrels. "I'm blessed if those beggars by the wall aren't laughing themselves sick! They think it's the Jean! Ha, ha, ha!"

"There'll be a mighty different tune in a minute," grinned Ben. "Look, they're coming forward! They've seen there's something wrong. Oh-o, Haggart, we've sugared your milk for you this time!"

Neil, who had been watching the scene with a look of savage triumph, while his men laughed hoarsely, started out from the shadow with an oath.

He glared at the looted smack for a moment as if thunderstruck. Then he yelled something the boys could not hear, and the Vulture's crew, waving their arms wildly, and shouting like maniacs, rushed down upon the drunken mob.

"Stop it!" yelled Neil. "Ye fools—ye dolts! Ye're smashin' up ma ship! That's no the Bonnie Jean!"

Beside himself with anger and baffled vengeance, Neil leapt aboard his vessel, followed by his men. He seized the nearest Dutchman by the scruff of the neck, and tried to drag him away.

But the man who had just finished smashing the skylight frames, and was beginning thoroughly to enjoy himself by battering in the guards with a handspike, was annoyed at the interruption. He was a big, hefty ruffian, and, with a snort of rage, he aimed a savage blow at Neil's head.

"Coom on, lads!" shrieked Haggart. "Pitch 'em out afore they wreck the vessel! There'll be naught left o' her in five minutes!" Gosh, but there's been de'il's work here!"

Frantic with rage at the destruction of their smack, when they had hoped to see their enemy's craft ruined, the crew flung themselves on the drunken Dutchmen. Howls and shrieks, and the sound of heavy blows, were bandied back and forth upon the night air, and in ten seconds the decks of the Vulture were covered by a raging scuffle. The Dutch mob turned savagely on their attackers.

Up from below tumbled the rest of the wrecking party, and added themselves to the fight without any questions. The crew of the Vulture were outnumbered by five to one, and the ruffians they had taken so much trouble to get together and enrage turned upon their allies with drunken fury, and, like all long-shoremen, they hit to leave their mark. Ben and Hal watching from the wood-pile on the quay melted down and dissolved in hurricanes of laughter.

"Loons—idjits!" screamed Haggart, struggling with three heavy Dutchmen at once. "I tell ye this is no the ship ye're seekin'! It's ma ain craft!"

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand sea yarn next week.)

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