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THE FORCED MARRIAGE LINES!

A thrilling, complete story of Nelson Lee and Nipper, and their further adventures with "Jim the Penman."

By the Author of "THE LIGHTNING CLUE."

CHAPTER I.

The Train Smash at Capleton Junction.

MR. DOUGLAS JAMES SUTCLIFFE, alias Bernard Lyle, alias Geoffrey Brandon, alias Jim the Penman, stretched his legs lazily and lay back among the cushions of the first-class compartment which he alone occupied. The rain rattled against the window-panes, and outside all was inky dark as the express rushed through the night. The hour was by no means late, however, for the train was due in at Paddington at 10.45.

"Another infernal April shower!" murmured the solitary traveller. "Nothing but rain, rain all day! Let's hope London has been spared. I shall regard it as an omen of ill-fortune if the advent of Mr. Geoffrey Brandon into London is signalised by a downpour from the heavens."

And Jim the Penman smiled quizzically at his own thoughts.

He was an extraordinary rogue, this man. A forger of amazing talent, who was not only a pastmaster at his own singular art, but a veritable wonder. He could forge any signature of handwriting, after a brief study of an original specimen, in less time than it takes most men to write their own name.

And his accomplishments did not end here. He was a magnificent actor, and highly skilled in the art of disguise. Moreover, he was quick-witted, resourceful, and always kept his head under the most trying circumstances. He was cool, collected, and possessed no such things as nerves. He was utterly unscrupulous, and, when occasion demanded, could be murderous to a point worthy of a torture-loving Chinaman.

At this present moment Jim the Penman had the appearance of being a rather elderly man of a soldierly aspect. A large, fierce, grey moustache adorned his upper lip, his eyebrows were bushy, and he wore gold-rimmed pince-nez.

Lighting a cigar, he leaned back still more comfortably and half-closed his eyes.

"First Sutcliffe, then Lyle, and now Geoffrey Brandon—but always Jim the Penman," he murmured softly. "I was forced to abandon my own

name and adopt another: my schemes in connection with Lord Woodbridge's fortune fell to the ground. And why? Simply because one man set himself the task of honouring me with his sole attention. And that man is now travelling to London with me in this very same coach!"

The forger's eyes became steely.

"Nelson Lee!" he exclaimed, in a sudden access of fury. "It was Nelson Lee who unmasked me at the outset! It was Nelson Lee who discovered the fraud in the affair of the Earl of Woodbridge's will! It was Nelson Lee——Bah! Pull yourself together, Jim, you fool! It's not like you to give way to temper!"

Thus admonished, Jim the Penman smiled slightly, and continued smoking. He was now on his way to London, having been away from the metropolis for several weeks. As a matter of fact, he had fled from the police, and no trace of him had been discovered. Now he was returning to London, as bold as brass, to commence fresh operations.

And, by a curious trick of Fate, Nelson Lee was on the same train.

Jim the Penman had seen Lee enter at Swindon; the forger himself having boarded the train at Bristol. But the great detective had not the slightest idea that his enemy was actually in the same coach.

Lee was accompanied by Nipper, his astute young assistant. The train being rather empty they had secured a first-class compartment for themselves. And they were in high good humour, having just brought a case to a successful conclusion.

"Rotten weather, guv'nor!" remarked Nipper, as he gazed out of the rain-bespattered window into the night. "Raining like the merry dickens again!"

Lee looked up from his magazine.

"Merely a shower, Nipper," was his reply. "At this time of the year we must expect unsettled weather. Where are we?"

"In a first-class compartment of a Great Western Railway train!" replied Nipper promptly.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Your attempts at humour, my dear Nipper, are rather weak," he said, with mock sternness. "You know well enough what I meant. Where are we?"

"Well, I'm not a wizard, and therefore I can't whizz!" grinned Nipper. "How should I know where we are, guv'nor? Somewhere between Swindon and London, and within a few miles, I think, of Capleton Junction."

Lee stretched himself.

"After a lot of useless conversation we get at it," he said. "Nearing Capleton Junction—eh? Oh, well, there's a good run ahead of us, and I'm feeling sleepy. I've a good mind to have a nap."

"There's no law against snoozing, sir," said Nipper. "You might as well chuck that mag. over to me if you're going to indulge in slumber. I've generally noticed, guv'nor, that after you've been working fairly hard for a bit you have a spell of sheer, downright laziness——Oo-o-o-ch!"

Nipper made that last unintelligible remark quite involuntarily. According to his request Nelson Lee had chucked the magazine across; but the detective had used quite a fair amount of force in the effort, and the magazine thudded upon Nipper's chest with a resounding whack.

"Not so much cheek, youngster!" chuckled Lee. "Bottle yourself up and let me rest."

Nipper grinned—he wasn't hurt at all—and settled himself in the corner opposite to his master. A few minutes later the lad was interested in a short story, and Lee was peacefully dozing to the accompaniment of the rhythmic roar of the wheels.

The rain had ceased to patter against the windows, for the shower was over, and the stars shone once more. Quite suddenly Nipper looked up from his book, and at the same second Nelson Lee opened his eyes.

A piercing shriek had sounded from the engine's whistle, accompanied by the sudden application of the brakes. The brake-blocks screamed on the flying wheels, and the whole train seemed to groan under the abrupt pressure.

The whole startling incident was over in ten seconds.

Crash! Thud! Crash!

Without warning Nelson Lee was pitched out of his seat, and he sprawled on top of Nipper. And when the pair picked themselves up the coach was standing still, and a roar of escaping steam came to their ears.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "What's happened, sir?"

"Smash of some sort!" Lee rapped out. "Can't be serious; this coach isn't even derailed. Lucky thing we are at the rear of the train, or we might——"

Boom!

"By James, that was an explosion!" exclaimed Lee briskly. "Gas, probably—one of the gas-tanks in the front part of the train. Come, Nipper, we had better get out of this, and see what has actually happened."

Lee turned the handle of the door, and he and Nipper leapt lightly to the ground. Other passengers were leaping out, too, and excited shouts came from all quarters. Cries of pain and husky yells proceeded from the front of the train; and one glance in the direction of the engine told Nelson Lee that the accident was more serious than he had first supposed.

A lurid glare lit up the darkness of the night, and the roar and crackle of burning wood sounded. Lee and Nipper hurried along the permanent way, and came upon a scene which was terrible enough, although the smash was not of very great proportions.

The first coach, in fact, was the only one which really suffered seriously. The prompt application of the brakes by the wide-awake driver had averted a disaster of appalling proportions, and the actual death-roll—when determined later—was insignificant.

The front of the train was a scene of terrible wreckage. The great engine was lying on its side, with the coal-tender broadside across the rails. The first carriage was badly telescoped, and overturned. The two following coaches were derailed, but quite intact; while the rest of the train had not even suffered a smashed window.

But, although the damage was trivial compared with some railway disasters, the accident was nevertheless a grim affair. The telescoped carriage had caught fire immediately, owing to the explosion of the gas reservoir. As Nelson Lee and Nipper hastened up they saw that the flames were roaring skywards with ever-increasing fierceness. The first two compartments, indeed, were simply a raging furnace.

The guard's van had perhaps suffered the most seriously, and the guard himself had been instantly killed. The engine-driver and fireman, by curious chance, had been flung out of their cab, and sustained only minor injuries.

"See, Nipper, the cause of the accident is quite plain," remarked Lee grimly.

Nipper needed no telling, for the glare from the burning carriage lit up the whole scene with startling distinctness. At this point of the track there was a level-crossing—quite a small lane crossed the railway lines. The gates were only small, and the traffic on this lane was not sufficient to

warrant a gatekeeper being employed; for the lane was more of the nature of a private road.

It appeared that a traction engine hauling a heavy load of bricks had attempted to cross the railway some five minutes before the train was due to pass.

The traction engine, however, had stuck half-way across the metals, owing to a high hillock over which the brick-laden trucks would not pass.

After several attempts to shift the trucks, the traction engine-driver had decided to back off the rails in safety.

But much time had been lost, and the train had suddenly appeared in sight round a bend, roaring onwards at full speed towards the obstacle.

Realising the impossibility of shifting the traction engine in time, the driver had flashed up a lamp and had dashed along the permanent way.

But, by an unkind trick of Fate, his lamp had blown out even as he started running. By the time he got it alight again it was too late to avert the crash.

The brakes of the train had been applied with commendable promptitude, but it was beyond human power to pull the train up in so short a space.

The traction engine was simply a mangled mass of wreckage, buried beneath the bulk of the express locomotive.

Lee and Nipper glanced round them, and saw that the bank beside the track was covered with rugs of all descriptions, and upon these were laid the injured passengers, most of whom were suffering from cuts, bruises, and shock.

A man with a torn coat and a scratched face was standing near to Nelson Lee, and the detective touched his arm.

"Hurt much?" he asked gravely.

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied the stranger. "Just a little graze. I was in that front coach. By George, I thought I was done for, too! Rest of the train seems to have got off scot-free. Where were you?"

"Oh, in one of the rear carriages," Lee replied. "We only felt a slight shock. By what I can see the injuries are not very serious—only cuts and bruises. Do you know if anybody has been killed?"

The stranger nodded.

"Yes, the front guard was killed, I know," he replied. "Killed on the spot—and no wonder, poor chap! He didn't have a dog's chance. Some young fellow who was in my compartment had his leg broken, and we had a deuce of a job to get him out before the fire reached him."

Another man—an elderly gentleman—hurried up.

"Terrible—terrible!" he exclaimed distractedly. "I fear there will be several deaths to record when it is possible to make an examination. This fire. It is impossible to approach the carriage at all! Disgraceful, I say! There ought to be fire extinguishers fitted——"

Nelson Lee touched Nipper's arm, and the pair walked away, leaving the two indignant passengers airing their views to their own satisfaction. A rather tall, well-proportioned man was right in front of Lee. He was picking his way over the sleepers, and calmly smoking a cigar.

The man was Douglas Sutcliffe—Jim the Penman.

The forger, having been in the same coach as Lee and Nipper, was unharmed, and he was now strolling about, interested in the novel spectacle which confronted him. The sight of the suffering passengers did not affect

him in the least, for Jim the Penman was utterly callous by nature, and he would have been unaffected by the most harrowing scenes.

He stood for some moments looking at the blazing coach. The roof had been practically torn off, and the guard's van and the first compartment splintered to matchwood. It was not known whether anybody had been occupying the compartment, for the fire had broken out so swiftly that a close examination was impossible. That end of the coach had naturally been the first to get ablaze.

Jim the Penman walked round the carriage, giving it a fairly wide berth, for the heat was considerable, and the wind was fanning the flames in his direction. Reaching the other side, however, it was possible to approach much nearer.

Simply out of curiosity, Sutcliffe walked up close, picking his way through a number of broken pieces of debris. Suddenly he paused opposite to the burning coach, and bent down. In the glare from the fire, he could see a lady's handbag on the ground. It was open, and had evidently been flung there at the moment of the collision.

Close beside it lay a small, unmounted photograph. This had no doubt fallen out of the bag as the latter had sprung open. Jim the Penman picked the photograph up, and saw the likeness of a very good-looking girl. She was well dressed, and was obviously of good birth. And across the bottom of the photograph Jim read: "Very sincerely yours, Phyllis Clavering."

The forger examined the photograph intently. He was so occupied, in fact, that he was unaware of the approach of a man and a boy—Nelson Lee and Nipper, to be exact. Jim the Penman's face was lit up with absolute distinctness as he stood there, perfectly still. It was not possible, in fact, for a face to be more brilliantly outlined.

Nelson Lee suddenly gripped Nipper's wrist.

"Do you notice anything familiar about that man's features?" asked the detective, in a low voice. "Look carefully, youngster!"

"Can't say that I can see——" Nipper broke off. "Yet his chivvy seems familiar, as you say, sir. Where have I seen——"

"Remove the moustache in your mind's eye, Nipper!"

"I'm trying to, guv'nor. Why—— Heavens, it's impossible!" gasped the lad. "He looks like Jim the Penman, sir!"

Lee clicked his teeth.

"You, too, observe the likeness, then!" he said softly. "Personally, I have not the slightest doubt. This man is Jim the Penman!"

At this moment Sutcliffe became aware of the detective's nearness, and a sudden grim expression entered the forger's eyes. Yet he did not fear recognition. He was quite satisfied that his disguise was impenetrable. He under-estimated the astuteness and keenness of the great detective, and did not know that Lee could see through almost any disguise a man could adopt. And in that lurid light there could be no mistake.

"A most interesting meeting!" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "You grab one hand, Nipper, while I secure the other! We don't want Mr. Jim to slip away this time!"

The pair stepped forward, Sutcliffe eyeing them with growing suspicion. They were apparently unconscious of his identity; but Jim the Penman knew who they were, and he was ready for instant action should action be necessary.

Nelson Lee wasted no time, and as he came up to the forger's side he said calmly:

"A terrible disaster this! Were you in one of the derailed coaches?"

"Look out, guv'nor!" yelled Nipper suddenly.

Crash! Jim the Penman's fist thudded full upon Lee's chin, and the detective was landed on his back with considerable force. Nipper grabbed frantically at Sutcliffe, but only succeeded in grabbing the thin air.

Next second Jim the Penman was dashing away into the darkness.

He had not anticipated discovery for a second, but he was an amazingly cute rogue, and there was something in the attitude of Nelson Lee and Nipper as they stood beside him which had instantly aroused his suspicions. Lee had said nothing which showed that he was aware of Jim's identity, but the forger meant to take no chances.

These two were his mortal enemies, and once they grasped him he knew there would be no escape. Possibly, probably, they had no idea as to who he really was, but there was a bare chance that they did. Accordingly, Jim had acted drastically and effectively.

He left nothing to chance. The safest plan was to lash out and then flee. In the darkness, he would easily be able to give his pursuers the slip. In five seconds he was clear of the permanent way, had leapt over the low fence, and was padding swiftly over a soft meadow.

"He's gone, sir!" roared Nipper excitedly.

"You young idiot! After him! Don't stand there!" rapped out Lee, struggling to his feet, and ignoring the dull pain in his jaw. "After him, Nipper!"

It was a little hard on Nipper to call him a young idiot, for the lad was already dashing away in pursuit. He had not wasted a second. But Lee was furious at the unexpected activity of Jim the Penman, and uttered the first words which came into his head. Next second he, too, was sprinting in full pursuit.

But Sutcliffe's prompt action had given him a good start, and he was extremely fleet of foot. He plunged through a hedge like a charging bull, and landed on the other side with scarcely a scratch.

He then became aware that the photograph he had been examining was still in his hand. With a muttered exclamation he slipped it into his pocket and dashed on through the darkness.

Lee and Nipper raced behind, hot on the track.

But when they arrived at the hedge and broke through it, they could see utterly no sign of their quarry. All was dark and dreary. Straight ahead were several clumps of thick trees, but Jim the Penman had completely disappeared.

"You buzz to the right, while I nip round——"

Nipper paused as Lee grasped his arm.

"It's no good, youngster!" panted the detective regretfully. "We could search all night without catching even a glimpse of him. He's given us the slip, and it would be a sheer waste of time to continue the pursuit."

"But—but——"

"He might be hiding in any one of those clumps of trees," went on Lee. "While we are searching the one, he will be escaping in quite another direction. By James, I never suspected that he was aware of my intentions. That man is a marvel, Nipper! All his faculties are amazingly developed!"

"He's a giddy masterpiece, sir!" gasped Nipper. "The cleverest crook we've ever been up against, anyhow! I wonder if he's been up to any of his forgery tricks lately?"

But that was a question which Nelson Lee could not answer. And the detective and Nipper retraced their steps to the scene of the railway accident, little dreaming that this very accident was to provide a direct starting-point for another of Jim the Penman's audacious frauds.

CHAPTER II.

An Astounding Plot.

"WHY not? Why not? It's quite possible, and the prize is well worth a whole heap of risk! The very thought of it almost staggers me! And yet, in spite of its amazing nature, it's simple. It's absolutely simple!"

Jim the Penman stared before him, with his eyes afire with enthusiastic excitement. He was sitting forward in his chair, the long, slender fingers of his right hand tapping restlessly upon his knee. In his other hand, a cigarette burned unheedingly between his fingers.

The words were muttered very softly, and were spoken to himself, for the forger was alone. He was, in fact, in his own private apartments at the Court Hotel. It was evening of the day following the railway accident near Capleton Junction. Jim had simply walked into Capleton after altering his disguise somewhat, and from here he had proceeded to London, and had boldly engaged rooms at one of London's most exclusive West End hotels.

On the table before him lay a copy of one of the latest evening papers. After a few minutes, Sutcliffe picked up the newspaper, and reread a paragraph which was placed in a prominent position on the front page.

The paragraph ran as follows, with big headlines:

"THE CAPLETON SMASH.

"TRAGIC FATE OF YOUNG WILTSHIRE HEIRESS.

THREE DEAD, TEN INJURED."

"The accident at Lingfield Crossing, near Capleton Junction, last night, when an express train dashed into a traction-engine, has fortunately turned out to be less disastrous than was at first feared. The total death-roll is now three—James Hilton, guard; Miss Phyllis Clavering; and Thomas Player, a young commercial traveller, who succumbed to his injuries at an early hour this morning. Ten other passengers are suffering from injuries, some serious, but no more deaths are anticipated.

"Particularly tragic is the fate of Miss Phyllis Clavering. She was the daughter of a well-known Wiltshire gentleman, and she was travelling alone in the first compartment of the telescoped coach. It is to be hoped that the poor girl was instantly killed, or, at least, rendered unconscious, for the fire which immediately broke out converted the telescoped carriage into a raging furnace, from which there was no escape. It was not possible to recover Miss Clavering's charred remains until early to-day. Curiously enough, her umbrella was found beneath the body, scarcely scorched, while her bag was found lying on the permanent way.

"By a cruel trick of fate, this tragic death overtook Miss Clavering on her twenty-first birthday—on the very day she had inherited a fortune of something like £200,000 from a deceased uncle. Miss Clavering being unmarried, the great fortune now reverts to a half-cousin, according to the provisions of her uncle's will. It is a terrible misfortune that she should fall a victim to a comparatively slight railway accident at such a momentous period of her life.

"One eye-witness relates a thrilling account of——"

Jim the Penman ceased reading at this point, and he lowered the newspaper.

"Two hundred thousand!" he murmured. "Jove, it's worth trying for! It's worth staking everything for! And the trick can be worked with the most astonishing ease!"

Sutcliffe commenced pacing his room.

"This girl was unmarried," he went on softly to himself. "What if a husband should unexpectedly turn up? What if a man steps forward with absolute proofs that he married Phyllis Clavering only a week before the disaster? Being her proven lawful husband, he will naturally inherit the fortune as the girl's nearest relative!"

It was an astounding scheme which Jim the Penman had formulated.

To provide a husband for the dead girl!

At first, such a notion seemed utterly absurd and impossible; but the more Jim pondered, the more convinced he became that he could carry the fraud through with flying colours. But it needed very careful thought, and still more careful handling. One blunder, and all would be ruined. But Sutcliffe was not the man to make blunders. If he set himself a certain task, that task was performed with the utmost care, and after very elaborate preparations.

The cheque forgeries Jim had perpetrated at Sir Stephen Trundle's expense, before his exposure by Nelson Lee had been wonderfully executed, and the forger had safe-guarded himself so effectively that detection was impossible. Even Nelson Lee had been completely baffled; and had only triumphed by a sheer trick of chance, when the lightning revealed the forger's identity to him.

Jim the Penman had then boldly appeared in London again, and had engineered a huge forgery in conjunction with Lord Woodbridge. But on this occasion Lee had frustrated the plot, because Jim made one mistake, and because Nelson Lee was just a little more clever than the forger.

But this undertaking--this plot he was now contemplating--was far more ambitious than anything he had ever attempted. Jim the Penman was a man of action, and he soon made up his mind definitely. The first thing was to obtain more facts; and then he would be in a position to know whether the scheme was practicable or not. He had an idea that the difficulties would prove to be merely superficial.

But he must have an accomplice.

As the forger was gazing at something he held in his hand, he murmured: "Oliver Hall! He's the very man to do the job!"

Having settled upon a course of action, Jim the Penman studied the article which he held in his hand. It was the photograph of Phyllis Clavering which he had picked up at the scene of the disaster on the previous day. The signature was very clear and distinct, a bold handwriting, and neat withal.

"What a lucky thing I slipped this photo into my pocket, eh!" Jim told himself, with keen satisfaction. "As a matter of fact, it was the signature on this portrait which suggested the scheme to me. Well, it's a big game; but I'm equal to it."

The following day Sutcliffe purchased a weekly society journal. In this periodical he found very full particulars regarding Phyllis Clavering's fortune; for the sad affair had caused something of a stir.

By careful inquiry, too, he gained other information. Miss Clavering had been the daughter of Ronald Clavering, of Little Stoneford Manor, Wilts. The bereaved father was an invalid, and he and his daughter had lived a quiet life. She had been on her way to London to stay with a relation, and to visit the solicitors who had control over her fortune. By the dispositions of her uncle's will, the fortune was to revert to her husband in the event of her death; or, if unmarried, a somewhat distant relative benefited. It was all quite commonplace, and in no way complicated.

Having learned all that he deemed necessary, Jim the Penman visited a gentleman named Mr. Oliver Hall.

Hall lived in bachelor apartments, and was a man of no fixed occupation. He was a member of two West End clubs, and was well-known on the race-courses and in smart-set society circles. His source of income was unknown, but it was rumoured that a titled elder brother made him an allowance.

Oliver Hall was a youngish man, certainly no more than thirty-three. His history was as obscure as his general mode of life, but it was known that he had been something of a black sheep in former days—and that he was probably a blacker sheep than ever at the present time. But he was good-looking, popular wherever he went, and was admitted into that class of society which was tolerant and not too particular.

In his new personality of Geoffrey Brandon, Jim the Penman had met Oliver Hall, and had become fairly intimate. The pair had many tastes in common, and they understood one another pretty accurately. Needless to say, Hall had not the slightest suspicion that his friend was none other than Douglas Sutcliffe, the notorious forger.

Jim found the young bachelor in his rooms, attired in evening-dress, and just ready to go out to dinner at one of the "swell" restaurants. Of a night Hall was usually to be found in the West End—either at a restaurant or a music-hall, or at one of his clubs.

"Hallo, Brandon!" exclaimed Hall lazily, as Sutcliffe was shown into the room. "Just the fellow I want to see!"

Jim the Penman smiled.

"That's lucky," he replied. "I want to see you, too."

"Not on the same matter, I hope," Hall ejaculated. "I want to touch you for a tenner—or more, if you feel inclined."

"Oh, I can manage twenty, if you like."

"Good man! You're a stunner!"

Oliver Hall wrung his visitor's hand warmly, and pocketed the four fivers which Jim handed to him. Jim helped himself to a cigar from a box on the mantelpiece, lit it, and sank into an easy-chair.

"Sit down," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Oh, I say!" protested Hall. "We don't want to jaw here, Brandon. Come with me to the Regent Restaurant, and I'll treat you to grub—with your own money, by Jove! We can jaw there——"

"My dear man, we can feed any time," interrupted Sutcliffe. "The matter I wish to discuss with you is of too private a nature to be dealt with in a restaurant. It's a question of—money."

Hall sat on the corner of the table.

"Money, eh?" he returned. "Quite an interesting subject. It's one of the problems of life, old chap. If you can suggest any wheeze to enable me to rake in a few thou' I'll listen with all my ears."

"My scheme will put just about fifty thousand into your pocket."

Oliver Hall stared.

"I say, it's a bit too off-side jokin' on such a subject!" he exclaimed. "Jokes are all very well, Brandon——"

"I am not joking," Jim interrupted. "The sum I mentioned is within your reach."

"Good heavens! You can't mean it!"

"I do mean it. But, of course, you'd better understand at once that both of us will risk penal servitude," said Jim the Penman calmly. "That's putting it bluntly, to give you an idea of the nature of the scheme. But your part in the business will be quite secondary—you are essential to the success of the plot, but I shall require no actual help from you. The risks

will be nil; but if you have any objections to taking part in this flutter——”

“My dear fellow, it doesn't pay to be too scrupulous nowadays,” Hall broke in. “But you've amazed me! Fifty thousand! I suppose that means twenty-five thousand apiece?”

“Not at all. Look here, there's no sense in this beating about the bush,” said Sutcliffe easily. “I'll just outline the scheme to you in brief, we can then discuss it fully. You have, of course, read of the railway smash a couple of days ago at Capleton Junction?”

“I saw the headlines in the papers.”

“A girl named Phyllis Clavering was killed——”

“That heiress, you mean? Great Scott!” gasped Hall blankly. “You don't mean to say that you've got designs on that girl's fortune?”

The forger nodded coolly.

“If you will listen quietly you will understand fully in a very few minutes,” he replied. “I pride myself that I am pretty clever, and I know that my judgment is thoroughly sound. I'm not suggesting that we should attempt anything impossible, or even impracticable. My plan is perfectly sound and feasible.”

Hall looked somewhat dazed.

“You're takin' me out of my depth!” he exclaimed. “I thought I'd done some pretty big things myself but this suggestion of yours makes me feel like a kid! But how the deuce can you get hold of that fortune?”

“If Phyllis Clavering had been married the money she inherited would instantly have become the property of her husband,” replied Jim. “That's simple enough, isn't it? Well, we're simply going to produce a husband!”

“You're—you're off your head!” panted the other. “Who in the world can you get for a husband for the dead girl? She wasn't married, there's an end of it.”

Jim the Penman bent forward.

“You are going to pose as the sad widower,” he said calmly.

“I? I'm going to——” Oliver Hall leapt to his feet. “You're babblin' like a lunatic!” he growled. “What the thunder——”

“Now, now! Don't get excited,” drawled Sutcliffe. “My good chap, let me finish speaking before you flare up. I repeat that you are going to pose as Miss Clavering's husband. I know that the girl was staying in Westbourne, Sussex, a fortnight ago. She was there for a week, staying with some friends. While she was there you secretly married her, and you will produce documentary evidence to prove your statements to the hilt.”

“But—but——”

“Wait. You already know that I am a pretty fair hand with a pen,” proceeded Jim. “It happened that I was on the very train that was wrecked at Capleton. And I picked up a photograph of Phyllis Clavering bearing her signature. The whole thing is perfectly simple. It will be quite easy for me to break into the Registry Office at Westbourne during to-morrow night. I shall there fill in a certificate of marriage accurately and so thoroughly that the keenest expert in the kingdom will be unable to detect the forgery. I shall also forge an entry, coinciding with the certificate, in the register. And that, my dear Hall, is all the evidence that will be necessary.”

“But—but you will be tripped——”

“Don't be foolish!” Jim the Penman cut in sharply. “I shouldn't enter into such a business as this without being perfectly primed up for my subject. I shall leave no stone unturned, and it will be impossible to trip me. With the certificate and the entry in the register, you will be able to prove conclusively that the marriage actually took place. And, that settled, you will naturally inherit the fortune. It will be child's play to fake up a

story why you married the girl secretly, and why you did not come forward sooner."

Hall calmed down a little.

"But, even if what you say is true—even if there are not many obstacles—I can still see a whole heap of trouble ahead!" he exclaimed. "I dare say it will be possible for you to break into the Westbourne Register Office, and to forge the documents, but I've got a poser for you, Brandon."

Jim the Penman smiled amusedly, and said:

"Well, let's hear it."

"How do you propose to get over this difficulty? A record of every marriage is made at Somerset House, and although you may be clever, I don't think you're capable of breaking into Somerset House," said Hall grimly.

"I don't intend to attempt such an impossible feat," replied the forger. "You seem to forget that the marriage presumably took place only a few days ago. Therefore the records have not yet been sent to Somerset House. In any case, I will attend to that phase of the case, and you needn't let it worry you. Have you any other posers for me?"

"Yes—one," replied Hall, "and this is even more difficult than the other. You seem to have overlooked the fact that there is a registrar at Westbourne. You may be able to forge his handwriting, and all the rest of it, but you can't make him a party to this fraud. What will he have to say? He will come forward and declare that the whole thing is a tissue of lies—he will deny all knowledge of the marriage."

Jim chuckled.

"So that's your poser?" he said amusedly. "At first sight, I agree that it seems rather insurmountable. But just think, my dear Hall. What will the registrar's word be worth? There will be all the documentary evidence to prove your case—a good deal of it in the registrar's own handwriting. He can swear that it is forged until he is blue in the face, but no man on earth can prove his statement to be true. If it turns out to be a law case, we shall win hands down. Whatever the registrar says, nothing can disprove the written statements—nothing can disprove the certificate."

"Gee, you've got a wonderful tongue!" exclaimed Hall admiringly. "You make the whole thing seem as easy as a kid's game! You say that I shall make fifty thousand out of the business?"

"Yes, roughly."

"That's a quarter of the whole fortune, isn't it?"

"Precisely," replied Jim the Penman evenly. "Considering that it is my idea from beginning to end, that I am going to do all the work, and that you will be scarcely more than a figure-head, I consider that the division is perfectly fair."

Oliver Hall nodded.

"Fair!" he repeated. "By Jove, it's wonderfully generous of you, Brandon. You do all the work and I rake in a cool fifty thou'! But perhaps it won't be wise to count our chickens before they're hatched. There's many a slip——"

"There will be no slip if we get to work properly," interjected Jim grimly. "Well, Hall, it's settled? You're game? You'll share the risk with me?"

The other extended his hand.

"You can count on me to follow your lead right through," he replied readily. "For such a stake I'd risk my bally neck! But you're the one who's goin' to take all the risk, old chap. It seems to me I shall simply play a walkin'-on part!"

The precious pair clasped hands warmly.

“ Well, now that we understand one another, we’ll sally out and have some dinner,” Jim the Penman remarked genially. “ After that we will return to these excellent apartments, Hall, and go fully into the details of this new undertaking. It’s going to be the biggest thing that ever happened—and it’s going to succeed !”

CHAPTER III.

Forgeries Wholesale.

WESTBOURNE slept.

At least, the hour was between one and two of the dark hours, and therefore the good citizens of Westbourne should all have been sleeping, even if certain of them were not.

The night was a blustery one, the wind being inclined to change into a gale. No rain was falling, but dark clouds scudded across the sky, obliterating the stars. There being no moon, the town was in utter darkness.

In a quiet little lane a shadowy figure lurked against the wall, moving along it slowly and cautiously. Presently the figure paused, and nimbly scaled a wall and dropped into a backyard of a semi-detached house.

Needless to say, the figure was that of Jim the Penman.

But it would have been hard to recognise the gentleman forger at the present moment. For, in addition to wearing shabby clothes, he was disguised cleverly and with elaborate care. Jim the Penman never did things by halves; he was thorough in all his undertakings.

The wind whistled round the yard, and buffeted against the intruder as he carefully picked his way towards the dark bulk of the building. The latter was the Westbourne Register Office, and Jim knew that it was utterly deserted at night.

The registrar, Mr. Walter Sladen, lived in a private house on the outskirts of the town. Thus the forger would have the office quite to himself for his nefarious work, and there was no fear of interruption.

Westbourne might have been a place of the dead, for all the sign of life Sutcliffe saw. Not a light showed in any direction, and—except for the blustering wind—complete silence reigned.

Arriving at one of the rear windows, Jim halted and drew from his pocket several steel tools.

The window-catch was old-fashioned, and in less than two minutes the lower sash was up, and Jim the Penman slipped into the room.

He closed the window again, and then flashed the light of an electric torch upon the floor. But there was a cap fastened over the bulb of the torch, with a tiny hole in the centre; therefore only a thin shaft of light was projected, almost invisible at a distance of five yards. Jim did not wish a glimpse of the light to be observed from one of the windows.

The patch of illumination on the floor was no larger than a penny, but it sufficed to show the intruder where he was, and it enabled him to pick his way to the door without blundering into any obstacle.

The room was roughly furnished, and was evidently a waiting-room, or an apartment of that nature. Opening the door, Jim emerged into a passage, and saw through the gloom the fanlight of the front door ahead of him. Opposite, and to his left, was another door—fitted with a Yale lock.

This was undoubtedly the office.

The cool criminal chuckled a little as he moved opposite to the door.

His task was proving extremely simple so far. He had the place quite to himself, and would be able to perform his work with ease and leisure.

The house shook now and again as the wind struck it. The night was very favourable for the purpose in hand. Even if the house had been occupied Jim would have been easy in mind, for the noisy wind drowned all other sounds.

Yale locks had no terrors for this complacent rogue. Not only was he a genius with the pen, but his skill as a cracksman was second to none. He selected a fine, delicate instrument, and was busy for about five minutes.

Then the door swung silently open.

"Obstinate brute!" murmured Jim. "But you're open now, and there's not a single mark on you, either!"

He entered the apartment, still keeping his torch directed upon the floor. Although the light was infinitesimal, Sutcliffe knew at once that he was in the register-office. He switched the torch off, and gazed at the window.

The blind was drawn, but there were tiny slits at the sides through which a gleam might be emitted. And as Jim never left anything to chance, and as he certainly had no wish to be interrupted, he felt for the shutters.

The house was an old one, and Jim the Penman was quite sure that the window was fitted with shutters. It was. And in two minutes these were securely closed and fastened.

Then the forger removed the cap from his torch, and allowed the full light to gleam out.

"Now to get to work," he muttered.

He had studied his subject with almost painful care all that day, and he knew exactly what to do to the last detail. The most important forgeries were the marriage certificate, and the entry in the register.

The certificate form, containing all the particulars, had to be signed by Oliver Hall, Phyllis Clavering, two witnesses, and by the registrar. This was to be a case of forgery wholesale, but Jim the Penman was quite equal to the task.

His talent was amazing. As Nelson Lee and the Scotland Yard experts well knew, Sutcliffe's forgeries were absolutely undetectable. He had a genius for copying any handwriting with the utmost accuracy. All the known tests were unavailing in cases where Jim the Penman had been at work.

Probably no other man on earth would have attempted such a fraud as this. Forgeries occur almost daily; but a case of this description—where every document was a false one—was unheard-of.

This fact, however, rendered the crime all the more secure from detection. Nobody would dream of such elaborate fakes. And, even if fraud was suspected, it would end in suspicion. It would be impossible to prove any case.

Jim the Penman set to work deliberately and calmly.

He had hours at his disposal, if necessary, and he had no intention of hurrying himself. This work was of such a nature that he must necessarily go about it coolly and without haste.

Seated at the registrar's desk, with the electric torch propped on the table so that the strong light was shed direct upon the paper, Sutcliffe commenced operations. The time passed, minute after minute, and he still remained there.

At the end of an hour Jim was still busy.

For some considerable time before he had commenced operations with the pen he had been making very close investigations. Now that he had been successful so far he did not intend to make a slip which would render everything futile.

He made a careful study of many documents he found in the registrar's desk, and before actually commencing the forgeries he made positive of all the minor details.

To commence with he forged an entry in the register, and copied Mr. Walter Sladen's handwriting so accurately that the registrar himself would swear to its genuineness.

It was necessary that the certificate of marriage should be witnessed by two persons. Jim the Penman did not write down the names of two fictitious witnesses. He had already arranged with two shady acquaintances in London to use their names, and had told them to come forward—if necessary—and to swear that they had witnessed the signing of the certificate, and that the marriage had certainly taken place.

No stone was left unturned to render the plot successful.

At last, between three and four o'clock in the morning, the forger sat back in his chair with a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Finished!" he murmured softly. "By James, I did not think it would be so absurdly easy to accomplish! The records are now complete, and Oliver Hall will be able to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is the lawful widowed husband of Phyllis Clavering!"

It was just after nine o'clock, and a miserable drizzle was falling, when Douglas Sutcliffe presented himself at the apartment of Mr. Oliver Hall.

As Jim had half expected, Hall was in bed, for the young society scamp was a staunch disbeliever in early rising. When his manservant informed him that Mr. Geoffrey Brandon had called, however, he leapt out of bed instantly, and hustled himself into a few clothes, and then had a quick wash.

When he presented himself to his visitor he was attired in a gorgeous dressing-gown, and looked somewhat showy. But Hall knew that Jim the Penman had visited Westbourne the previous evening, and he was naturally anxious to learn the result of Jim's expedition.

"Jove, I'm glad to see you, Brandon!" ejaculated Hall, closing the door behind him. "Well, what luck?"

"Everything is quite all right," replied Jim easily.

"You burgled the registrar's——"

"My dear fellow, you speak as though I have been on a common cracksmen's job," interjected Jim the Penman lazily. "Nothing at the register office has been touched, and I left no trace whatever of my visit."

"But you were successful?"

"Quite. It was really child's play; and yet it was the most difficult part of the whole scheme. This very morning, Hall, you will go forward and declare yourself to be the husband of the dead girl."

"By Jove, that's a bit quick——"

"There is no sense in wasting time now that everything is prepared," said the forger grimly. "The sooner the affair is decided the better. We have already discussed what attitude you will take up when you tell your story, so we needn't go into that again."

"But the certificate—the proofs?" Hall asked.

"They are here."

And Jim the Penman drew from his breast-pocket a long foolscap envelope, and handed it to his companion.

"That is the certificate of marriage which positively proves that you are the rightful heir to Phyllis Clavering's daughter," said Sutcliffe triumphantly. "I do not think there will be any hitch whatever, and once the fortune is in your hands—well, we will go into that later on."

Oliver Hall looked at the marriage certificate with staring eyes. It was

dated quite recently, proving that the union had taken place less than a fortnight before the girl had met her death, and while she had been staying at Westbourne.

Hall breathed hard.

"Amazin', by thunder!" he said tensely. "You're simply a walkin' miracle, Brandon! My signature, too! You told me you could write it as well as I could myself. Heavens, I—I feel dazed."

Jim the Penman laughed.

"Then go and have a tub and a good breakfast, and look alive!" he advised crisply. "You'll need all your wits about you to-day."

"Oh, I'll bluff the thing through!" Hall declared. "You've done your bit, old chap, an' now it's my turn. But—but this certificate—it's astoundin'! Before long I shall really think that I did marry the girl!"

Sutcliffe was left to himself for a time, and then, when Oliver Hall was ready, they both sallied out to breakfast, for Hall never "fed" at his rooms.

The evidence was complete.

It now remained to put Jim the Penman's handiwork to the test.

CHAPTER IV.

Hugh Ellison Arrives on the Scene.

"NIPPER!"

It was Nelson Lee who called out the name. The famous crime investigator was seated at his desk, and he knew that Nipper was sitting on the window-sill. Lee did not look round, for he was busy.

But there was no reply.

"Nipper! Are you deaf, you young rascal?"

Still no reply.

Lee turned round in his seat rather impatiently. Then he smiled. Nipper was lolling on the window-sill, deeply interested in the morning's paper. Breakfast had not yet been served, and Lee himself had not read the news. He was busy with his morning's correspondence, and would peruse the paper during breakfast. Nipper, however, was evidently very engrossed.

"Nipper!" roared Nelson Lee thunderously.

The lad started, and jerked upright.

"My stars! Eh?" he ejaculated. "What's up, guv'nor? No need to roar at me like a giddy bull! I'm not deaf!"

Lee frowned.

"Oh, you're not deaf?" he retorted. "Then perhaps you will explain why you failed to answer me when I addressed you twice previously!"

"Oh, rats, sir! You didn't speak until you let off that forty-horse-power shout——"

"You young sweep!" interrupted Lee. "Don't argue! I tell you I called you three times, and then turned round to find you simply buried in the morning's paper. What is it that you find so interesting?"

Nipper grinned.

"Keep your hair on, guv'nor," he said calmly. "I was just reading about that poor girl who was killed at Capleton. There's been a case, you know, about her fortune. It's all been decided now."

"Indeed?" said Lee interestedly. "Of course, I read all about it, for it has been given a prominent place in the papers for days past. Well, there was nothing very startling except that Miss Clavering was secretly married just before her death. What is the fresh news?"

"There's no fresh news, exactly, sir," replied Nipper. "But the girl's husband, Mr. Oliver Hall, has proved his case. You see, there was a fortune at stake, and the lawyer chaps had to go easy. Well, Hall's got the money now, and it's all ended. Rummy thing we should have been on that very same train, isn't it, sir?"

Lee crossed the consulting-room.

"I fail to see anything rummy in it, as you call it," he replied. "Let me have a look at the paper, youngster!"

There was silence for a few minutes while the detective read the report.

"Quite a curious interlude about the Westbourne registrar, Nipper!" remarked Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "I certainly do not think that he is a trustworthy man to be in such a responsible office. He actually forgot that he married the pair, and that he performed all the necessary functions to the ceremony!"

"It's queer, sir!"

"It was Mr. Walter Sladen who caused all the trouble with regard to the affair," went on Lee. "But for his denial of the marriage, there would have been no publicity. But, of course, the certificate and the witnesses and the register records are worth a lot more than the registrar's unsupported word. It has been proved to the hilt that the marriage did take place, and, justly enough, Oliver Hall is the heir to the fortune."

"Did you see that bit about the registrar's memory, sir?"

"To what are you referring, my lad?"

"Why, it's been proved that Mr. Sladen suffered from a short lapse of memory eight or ten years ago," replied Nipper. "It's quite certain that he suffered from another lapse recently. Anyhow, Hall's proved his case."

Lee nodded. Astute as he was, the great detective never suspected that he and Nipper were discussing one of the most amazing forgeries which had ever been perpetrated.

Over two weeks had elapsed since Jim the Penman had visited Oliver Hall, declaring that all was ready for action. And everything had gone smoothly. Hall had acted his part well, and not a suspicion of fraud had been entertained by a soul. The denial of the marriage by Mr. Sladen, the registrar, had been something of a sensation; but the certificate itself, and other documentary evidence, was overwhelming. The registrar's word was valueless in face of such proofs.

And to-day it was announced that everything was settled. Oliver Hall had inherited Phyllis Clavering's fortune. As her lawful husband, he was legally entitled to it.

In short, Jim the Penman's astounding plot had succeeded.

But, at the very moment of success, an unexpected development was to occur. Just when Jim and Oliver Hall were congratulating themselves, events were to take a turn which would very soon alter the complexion of matters.

Nelson Lee handed the newspaper back to Nipper and glanced at his watch.

"Time for breakfast, my boy," he remarked. "I wonder if Mrs. Jones——"

At that moment the door opened, and Mrs. Jones herself appeared. The landlady was carrying a tray, upon which reposed a telegram.

"Just come, sir," said Mrs. Jones.

"A wire, eh? And so early in the day," remarked Lee. "I wonder whether this is an urgent summons, Nipper? I intend to have my breakfast first, however urgent the summons may be!"

"Breakfast is served, sir," said Mrs. Jones.

"Good! We'll come at once!" Nelson Lee had opened the buff envelope

by this time, and he now read the telegraphic message. "H'm! Nothing very startling, Nipper."

The telegram had been handed in at Liverpool, and ran:

"Just stepped ashore. Am coming straight to London to see you. Will arrive about 2.30. Please be in. Business absolutely vital.—HUGH ELLISON."

"Nothing very startling, sir, as you say," agreed Nipper, as he read the wire. "But this Ellison chap seems pretty frantic. Will you see him?"

Lee nodded.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't," he replied. "This is not one of our busy days, youngster. For all we know, Mr. Ellison might have a case of the utmost importance to lay before me."

The detective was not engaged on anything of a very urgent nature at the moment, and he was taking things easy. But he was well accustomed to receiving seemingly vital telegrams, only to learn that the prospective "case" was a mere, trivial affair, and he thought no more of the unknown Mr. Hugh Ellison until the latter's card was brought up to him.

"Ah, yes, Nipper; our friend from Liverpool," remarked Lee, pushing some reference books aside. "Put the cigars on the table, and shift that chair round so that it is opposite to mine."

Hugh Ellison proved to be a young man with a well-proportioned frame, dark hair, and frank, fearless eyes. He was well dressed, but showed obvious signs of hurried travelling. He had not even delayed to have a wash and brush up since entering London, as Nelson Lee saw at a glance.

"You received my wire, Mr. Lee?" exclaimed Ellison, looking round him nervously, but with a nervousness born of anxiety and grief. "I have come from Liverpool straight away. My ship, the Mersey, didn't reach port until this morning, and when I came ashore I learned the terrible news. Oh, it was a stunning blow——"

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"Please, Mr. Ellison—not so fast!" he protested gently.

The visitor bit his lip.

"I am sorry," he said quietly. "I determined to remain perfectly cool, but I can see that my good resolutions were in vain. I will do my utmost to be clear and brief. I am here, Mr. Lee, because I believe that a terrible crime has been committed. You may have seen in the newspapers some reports concerning the tragic death of Miss Phyllis Clavering——"

"Dear me!" interjected the detective. "Is your business connected with Miss Clavering? It is? Well, well; this is most singular! Pray proceed, Mr. Ellison! I am unusually interested."

The visitor cleared his throat.

"I have been in the United States," he went on somewhat huskily. "I was sent there by my employers on an important business mission, and have been away from England several weeks. This morning I learned for the first time that Phyllis was—was killed in that awful accident."

Ellison's eyes were filled with bitter grief.

"Pardon me," said Lee, "but was Miss Clavering a relation of yours?"

"A relation? No, no; more than that!"

"That is rather a curious answer."

Hugh Ellison bent forward tensely.

"Mr. Lee," he exclaimed deliberately, "Miss Clavering was my promised wife! She and I were engaged to be married."

Nelson Lee and Nipper stared.

"But—but Miss Clavering was married——"

"Hush, Nipper!" ordered Lee curtly. "Sit still, and say nothing! This is extraordinary, Mr. Ellison. I cannot quite grasp the significance of what you tell me. Miss Clavering was your fiancée?"

"That is so," replied the visitor. "You can judge my state of mind this morning when I stepped ashore, to receive two stunning blows. I nearly went mad for a time. I wouldn't believe what was told me. I wouldn't believe what I read. And even now I am positive that there is some ghastly mistake!"

Ellison rose to his feet, and paced the room restlessly, his head bent down, his hands clasping and unclasping themselves feverishly. He seemed to realise that he was acting strangely, for he suddenly turned to Lee.

"Forgive me," he said hoarsely. "I—I am a little overcome when I think of it all. I learned that Phyllis had perished in a railway accident, and I learned that an utter stranger named Oliver Hall had married her in secret."

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"Truly an appalling shock," he said softly.

"But there was another surprise," went on Ellison. "When I sailed for America, I had not the faintest idea that Phyllis was an heiress. She promised me that we should get married immediately I returned to England, and that there would be a big surprise waiting for me. Great Heaven above, I have certainly received the surprise!" he added bitterly.

"She did not hint what she meant?"

"No, not at all. But, of course, Phyllis was obviously alluding to her fortune."

"That is certainly the probable explanation," Lee exclaimed. "She wished the marriage to take place before you become aware that she was an heiress, realising that you would be in a very uncomfortable position if you knew beforehand. But it is an amazing puzzle, Mr. Ellison. I do not wish to appear inquisitive, but may I ask if you were greatly attached?"

Ellison banged the table fiercely.

"I swear to you, Mr. Lee, that no two people in the whole wide world could have loved one another more truly than Phyllis and I. She was a delightful girl—loving, absolutely innocent, and sweet-natured."

"That description of Miss Clavering hardly coincides with the circumstances," Nelson Lee suggested. "It must be obvious to you, my dear sir, that Miss Clavering practised a considerable amount of duplicity. After you had left England she straight away married another man——"

"After!" cried Ellison sharply. "It was not after I left, Mr. Lee—it was before. You do not seem to fully understand the position. I did not leave England until five days after Phyllis had been married to Oliver Hall. She had been staying in Westbourne, but came to London to see me off!"

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"This is extraordinary!" he declared.

"It is a dreadful maze! When Phyllis was actually assuring me of her faith, when she was telling me that we were to get married as soon as I returned, she was already married to this Oliver Hall. I am asked to believe that! I am asked to believe that she was deceiving me in the most terrible manner a woman can possibly deceive a man. She was telling me of her love when she was even then the wife of another man!"

"The situation is very strange, but I cannot see how I can help you," said Nelson Lee gently. "You must abide by the facts, Mr. Ellison—you must accept the situation. It must be clear to you that Miss Clavering was not worthy of your trust——"

Ellison frowned angrily.

"Phyllis was the dearest girl on this earth!" he cried hotly. "There was not an ounce of deceit in the whole of her nature."

"But——"

"There are no 'buts'!" interrupted Ellison fiercely. "There is some ghastly misunderstanding here. Phyllis was never untrue to me—I know it! I am willing to stake my life upon it! She was mine—mine! She had promised to marry me—— Oh, I know she was true until the last!"

"But it has been proved that Oliver Hall married Miss Clavering," was Nelson Lee's reminder. "The very marriage certificate has been produced——"

"I care nothing for that!" shouted Ellison. "It was a fake!"

"My dear young sir——"

"It was a fake, I tell you!" the visitor went on furiously. "Nothing on earth will convince me to the contrary. The certificate was a forgery, and the whole story was invented so that this scoundrel, Hall, could gain possession of the fortune! Oh, I don't know how it was done, but I know that some dastardly work has been perpetrated."

"But no man could forge a marriage certificate——"

"Why not?" was Ellison's fierce retort. "Even the registrar denied all knowledge of the marriage. Does not that point to a forgery? And there are men capable of such crimes—that has been proved. Only a short time ago a man forged a will from beginning to end—a man who called himself Jim the Penman, and who eluded the police!"

Nelson Lee started.

"By James!" he breathed tensely. "I wonder—I wonder!"

"Ah, you're beginning to have doubts?" persisted Ellison eagerly. "Oh, Mr. Lee, I want you to take up this case for me! I want you to ferret out the whole miserable truth. My fiancée is dead—Heaven help me!—but I can at least prove that she was not the scheming woman they would have me believe. The whole thing is a maze. What object had Phyllis in deceiving me? None! If she had really married Oliver Hall she would have told me so. She did not marry him after I had gone to America, remember. The ceremony supposedly took place before I left England. The most cruel woman on earth would not have sent me off with loving words—— Oh, I don't know what to say! I scarcely know what I am thinking!"

Ellison sank into his chair, his eyes gleaming feverishly, his breath hard and quick. His face was pale now, and he was striving his utmost to conceal his emotions.

"Come—come!" said Lee very quietly. "You have given me much food for thought, Mr. Ellison, and I will do my utmost for you. Take my advice and go home, and have a good sleep. You must let me think this singular case out in all its bearings. I want to be alone. To-morrow morning you can call upon me, and we will see what can be done. At the present moment it is urgently necessary that you should seek rest."

Ellison looked up.

"You will help me, then?"

"To the best of my ability. Your revelations have suggested grave possibilities," said Lee. "Pull yourself together, man, and go straight home. And do not confide your suspicions to anyone else—especially the police. The police would only blunder and cause great confusion. Indeed, I doubt if they would give any credence. You must admit that it is an extraordinary one."

The visitor stayed for some little time longer, and then took Nelson Lee's advice and stated his intention of having a good rest, and promised to call again the following morning. When he had gone Nelson Lee paced

the consulting-room for fully ten minutes without speaking. Then, quite abruptly, he turned to Nipper.

"This is an utterly unexpected development, my lad," he said grimly. "What do you make of it?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Nipper frankly. "My giddy brain's at a standstill. I'm flabbergasted!"

"Then you'd better get out of that state in quick time," said Lee shortly. "Unless I am mistaken, Nipper, there is work for us to do; and you can't work very well with your brain at a standstill. Be sharp and get it into working order again."

"But what does it all mean, sir?" asked the lad. "Miss Clavering was killed, and then Oliver Hall announced that he had married her—and he proves that she was his wife. Now Mr. Ellison comes on the scene and declares that he was the girl's fiance, and that a marriage could not possibly have taken place. What do you think, guv'nor? Some girls do queer things, you know," added the lad sagely, as though he were speaking from experience. "Miss Clavering might have had some object in throwing dust into Ellison's eyes."

The detective shook his head.

"No, Nipper; I have got an idea that our visitor's theory was correct," he replied. "His statements were very convincing, and his reference to Jim the Penman had set my mind working. We know well enough that Jim the Penman is audacious enough to commit almost any forgery."

"That's right enough, sir. There's the registrar, too," Nipper said shrewdly. "He denied that he had married the couple. If the certificate was actually forged, no ceremony, of course, would have taken place—and the registrar would naturally deny it."

"Precisely. Another point in support of the theory is that Sutcliffe himself was actually on the train which met disaster at Capleton Junction. He was examining something when we came upon him," Lee replied. "What was that something? It might have been a letter, bearing Miss Clavering's signature, and thus providing Jim with a starting point for his scheme. Yes, Nipper, there is undoubtedly something underhand connected with the dead girl's fortune."

The detective scorned the cigars and filled an old briar with tobacco, and then seated himself in an easy-chair, and settled down to think. And there was certainly much for the great detective to think over.

How was he to get on the track?

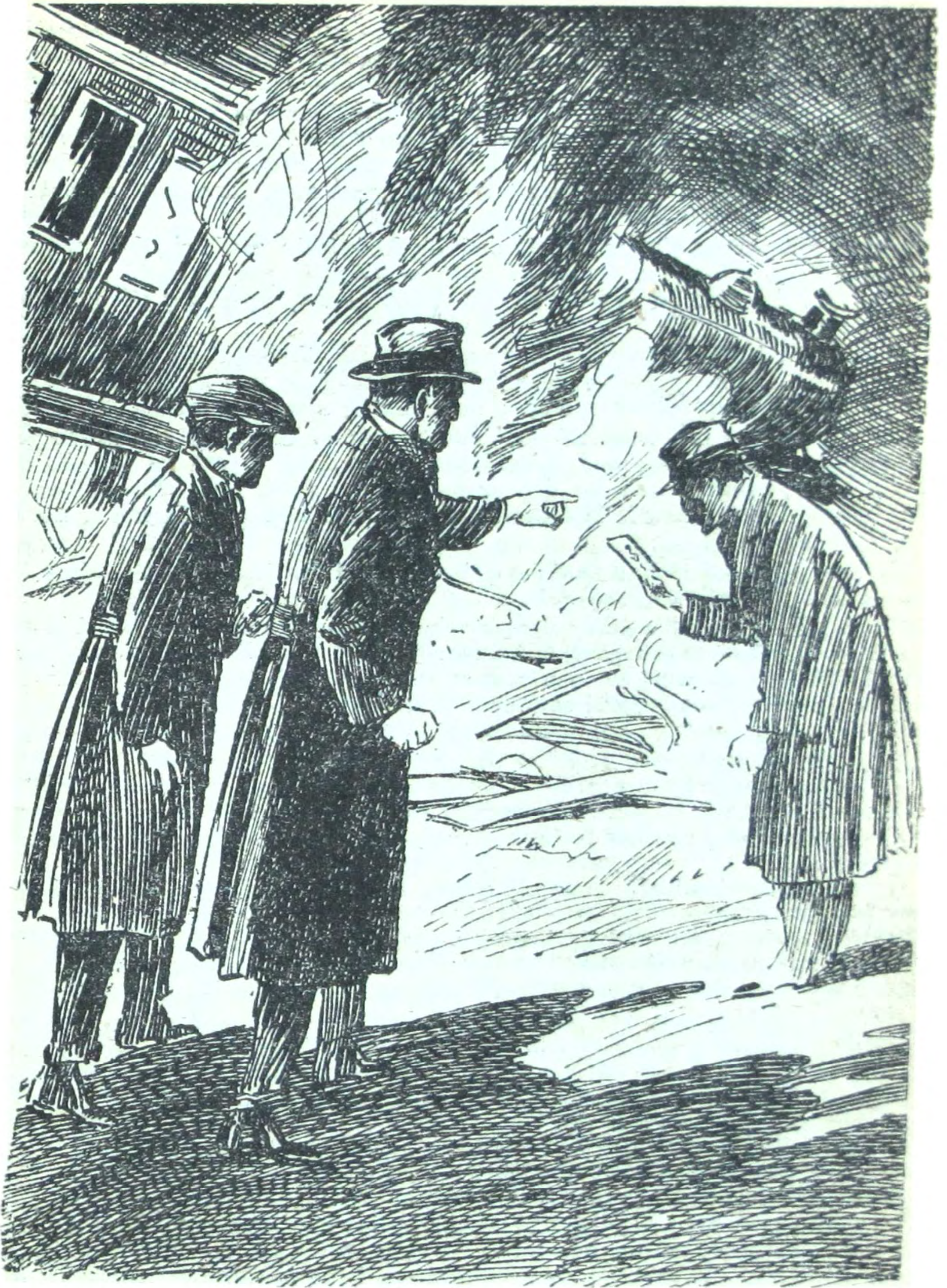
It was a stiff problem, but Nelson Lee was in no way dismayed.

CHAPTER V.

An Amazing Meeting.

HUGH ELLISON did not live in London; his home was in Wiltshire. He had journeyed straight to the metropolis especially to interview Nelson Lee, being quite convinced in his own mind that something was terribly wrong. The shock he had received that morning had been an appalling one. Arriving in England, he had learned that his fiancée was dead, and that she had—to judge by appearances—deceived him most cruelly.

The young man was feeling somewhat relieved after leaving Nelson Lee's rooms. But nothing could dispel the awful weight which seemed to bear him down. Everything was drab and dull to his eyes. The smiles and laughter of other people grated upon his ears.



Nelson Lee and Nipper stepped forward, Sutcliffe eyeing them with growing suspicion. They were apparently unconscious of his identity; but Jim the Penman knew who they were, and he was ready for instant action should action be necessary.—(See page 5.)

While others were gay, he was almost in the depths of despair. He realised well enough that he required sleep, and that sleep would do him a world of good.

He took Nelson Lee's advice and entered the Courtney Hotel, in Courtney Square, just behind Kingsway. Here he booked a couple of rooms, and retired without delay. Food would have choked him, although he had touched nothing the whole day. Perhaps, after a good rest, he would be able to eat; but not at present.

Ellison's intentions were good, and he had fully made up his mind to forget all his misery in slumber. He accordingly got straight into bed; but he tossed from side to side, his mind too utterly upset for sleep to come to his eyes.

Hour after hour he tossed about, and at last, through sheer exhaustion, he dozed off. But by nine o'clock in the evening he was awake again. He attempted to drop off once more; but finding this impossible, he rose.

He was feeling quite refreshed. The benefit of the little sleep was very apparent, and the inner man would not be denied. Truth to tell, Ellison was feeling hungry, and he determined to go down into the grill-room, and have a hearty meal. His common-sense told him that it would not do to starve himself.

He was surprised to find that he quite enjoyed the food, and certainly felt very much better afterwards.

"Now, I suppose I ought to go straight to bed again," he told himself. "I have not had much sleep, and there might be a lot to do to-morrow. But I couldn't sleep after such a meal without a little exercise first."

Accordingly Ellison sallied out for a walk.

It was quite early, even now—from a Londoner's point of view. The night was still and calm, and the air quite fresh.

Ellison's thoughts were always wandering in one direction. No matter how much he tried to divert his mind, he could think of nothing else but the girl who had promised to be his wife, and who had met such a terribly tragic death.

He walked mechanically, scarcely caring which way he went, and pondering over his sad troubles.

With haggard face and dull eyes, he wandered on down Oxford Street. Most of the shops were closed, but tobacconists were open, and the little light they were allowed was not sufficient to illuminate the pavement.

He was passing one of these shops when the door opened to admit a customer, and for a moment a bright gleam of light shot out. At precisely the same second a girl, who was walking slowly along, came opposite to the shaft of light, and her face was clearly outlined.

Ellison gave a strangled cry.

"Phyllis!" he gasped, his heart seeming to jump into his throat. "It can't be! Am I mad—— Phyllis!"

He started forward almost drunkenly.

For the girl whose face he had seen was his own fiancée! Such a thing seemed utterly impossible, and he knew quite well that this girl might be a total stranger. Everybody is supposed to have a double, and this was probably Phyllis Clavering's double.

But——

That one glimpse had been quite sufficient for the distracted young man. His whole mind had been filled with thoughts of the girl he had loved. And, all in a moment, he had seen her before him.

Ellison completely forgot everything in that one mad moment.

He forgot that Phyllis was dead; that she had positively perished in that dreadful fire in the railway accident.

She was here—within three yards of him!

With his mind in utter chaos he darted forward and gripped the girl's arm. He was not even responsible for his actions. He only knew that the girl he loved was before him; and she had appeared as though from the dead.

"Phyllis!" he exclaimed huskily. "My darling——"

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl. "I—I do not know you. Let me go—let me go!"

That voice! Those sweet tones were Phyllis's own; there was no mistake! A wild feeling of exultant joy surged in Ellison's breast. He felt that he wanted to shout at the top of his voice.

But he calmed himself and gripped the girl's arm more tightly still. He cared not one jot for the publicity of the incident. Phyllis was alive—his sweetheart was alive!

"Don't you know me, Phyllis?" he asked eagerly. "It is I—Hugh! Oh, Phyllis, my darling, tell me what it all means!"

She seemed to shiver slightly.

"Oh, I wish I could remember!" she murmured pathetically, and in a dreamy, dull voice. "Hugh—Hugh! Oh, I don't know the name!"

Quite suddenly the girl drew herself back, and her eyes flashed.

"Let me go!" she muttered angrily. "How—how dare you!"

Ellison listened to her voice like a man in a dream. She was strikingly beautiful, and he knew—absolutely knew—that he had made no mistake. No other girl in the wide world had those eyes; no other girl possessed that voice. And, to prove the question beyond the shadow of a doubt, he suddenly bent closer and gazed fixedly at her left cheek.

There, under her ear, was a tiny scar, almost invisible. It was shaped like an arrow head. But it was there, and it was conclusive proof that Phyllis Clavering stood before him in the flesh!

How often had she told him the story of how that scar had been caused! In a fleeting second he could remember sitting by her side and listening to her sweet voice telling the story.

But she was different. Her face, though beautiful, was pale, and her eyes somewhat sunken. And she refused to know him. Instinctively Ellison knew that she was not acting; she was not feigning ignorance of his identity. She actually did not know who he was.

But why—why?

"Phyllis!" he breathed, hardly realising that only a few moments had passed since he had first gripped her arm. It seemed to him as though he had been facing her for hours. And yet the passers-by were only just beginning to notice something curious in the behaviour of this pair.

"Why don't you recognise me, my own sweetheart?" he went on joyously, but with a note of uneasiness in his voice. "Surely you know——"

"Oh, will you let me go?" broke in the girl hotly. "I do not know you. I shall call a policeman unless you release my arm!"

"But—but——"

"You brute!"

Her voice was fierce and somewhat frightened. But it was imperative at the same time, and it seemed to restore to Hugh Ellison his scattered wits. He suddenly became cool and calm; he realised the extraordinary nature of this little scene.

Her tone told him that unless he obeyed her at once he would find himself in trouble. His brain worked quickly now, and he came to a sudden

decision. For the moment he put aside all his wild thoughts with regard to her condition, and considered only the need of the moment.

"I beg your pardon!" he muttered quietly.

And he released her arm and stood aside. He noticed that one or two people were standing watching him, and he felt strangely uncomfortable. But what were these people to him? What did he care what they thought?

Phyllis was alive!

The words boomed in his ears deafeningly, as though shouted by a hundred voices. In spite of all the evidence regarding her death she was here, in Oxford Street, in the land of the living!

Upon being released she walked away swiftly, as though afraid. But Ellison had already decided upon his course of action, and he immediately started in pursuit.

He knew that it was impossible to question Phyllis in the public street. Therefore there was only one thing to be done. He would follow her, see where she lived, and then decide upon the next move. She was not deliberately deceiving him—he knew that. There was something wrong with her, for she did not seem to remember him.

She walked quickly, but Ellison had no difficulty in keeping her under observation. And thus they went, this engaged couple, one shadowing the other! Surely it was one of the most singular situations which chance had ever brought about!

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Jim the Penman was "out" again.

That is to say, he was cleverly disguised, and out for mischief. The master-forgery had come to a decision. He fondly imagined that his great scheme was successful, and that there was a period of ease and luxury before him. Oliver Hall was in possession of Phyllis Clavering's fortune now, and nothing—so Jim thought—could alter matters. Notwithstanding the clever criminal's astuteness, he was unaware that his audacious plot was on the verge of tumbling about his ears.

His decision, in short, was to rid himself of his worst enemy. Sutcliffe had not forgotten that encounter with Nelson Lee at the scene of the railway accident. Lee had nearly captured him then, and it was quite on the cards that the detective would sooner or later come across him again.

For the police Jim the Penman felt nothing but contempt. He knew that he was quite capable of dodging the police. But he had no contempt for Nelson Lee; on the contrary, he feared the great detective, and had several times decided to settle things once and for all by murdering Nelson Lee. The forger was not troubled with any such inconveniences as scruples or a conscience. He came to this decision as though the project were quite an everyday matter of business.

Lee had ruined his former schemes, but on this occasion the detective was completely off the scent—at least, Jim the Penman thought so. He would give Lee no opportunity of foiling him on this occasion.

Sutcliffe went to work calmly and deliberately. He intended to indulge in no fancy methods; he would do the thing properly. There was only one way, and that was—the knife.

Jim the Penman could have found many opportunities of presenting Lee with a few inches of cold steel in the open streets. But the forger had a great respect for his own safety, and he had no intention of running his head into a noose. He would wait his opportunity, and perform the job quietly and thoroughly.

The callousness of the man was astonishing. That very same night—

indeed, at about the same time as Ellison came face to face with Phyllis Clavering—he coolly and deliberately set about his task.

For some hours he had been closely watching Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road, and at last his patience was rewarded. He saw Lee and Nipper go out together, and he instantly became active.

He made a detour, and arrived at the rear of the block of houses in which Lee's rooms were situated. One of these was vacant, and it did not take Jim the Penman long to make an entry, and to mount to the attic and to gain the roof.

Being one solid block, Jim had no difficulty in making his way along the leads until he came to a skylight which would admit him into the detective's house. No cleverer cracksman existed than Douglas Sutcliffe, and in a very short space of time he was within the building, and had descended to the floor on which Nelson Lee's rooms were situated. He entered a small apartment which adjoined the consulting-room. Here, as he expected, he found good cover, and having concealed himself he calmly settled down to wait.

A door led straight into the consulting-room, so Jim was quite confident of success when the actual moment arrived. It came sooner than he had anticipated. Indeed, he realised that he had barely had time to make his preparations.

For less than three minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper returned. But almost at once the detective despatched his young assistant on an errand, and Nipper went off whistling cheerfully. Jim could scarcely contain his exultation. Luck was certainly with him.

He was alone with Nelson Lee! He had been quite prepared to wait for hours, if necessary. Truth to tell, he had more than half determined to wait until Lee had retired for the night, and to perform his task while the detective slept. But there was no necessity to play the waiting game now.

Sutcliffe left his place of concealment, crept to the communicating door, and extended his hand ready to grip the door-knob. And then he paused. Down below a persistent ring at the front door bell had sounded.

"I must wait," Jim told him. "This may be a caller for my excellent friend. It would never do for me to be cornered!"

The ring, in fact, was the preface to Hugh Ellison's appearance in Nelson Lee's consulting-room. The young man burst into the apartment, and found Lee lounging in an easy chair, smoking a cigar, and reading a bulky volume. He jumped to his feet at once upon seeing Ellison.

"Hallo! What's the meaning of this?" was the detective's greeting. "I thought I told you to get straight to bed? Good gracious, what is the matter with you, man? One might think you had seen a ghost!"

Ellison was panting heavily.

"Mr. Lee," he exclaimed hoarsely, "not long ago I thought I had seen a ghost! Phyllis is alive! You hear me; she is as much alive as I am myself!"

Lee started.

"Are you mad, Ellison?" he exclaimed sharply. "For Heaven's sake pull yourself together. This terrible trouble is turning your brain——"

"I expected something of this sort," Ellison interjected. "But you're a keen judge of character, Mr. Lee. Look at me! I may be excited, but I am not mad. I am speaking deliberately, and with a full knowledge of what I am saying. Phyllis Clavering is alive. I met her half an hour ago in Oxford Street, and I know where she is living. There has been some terrible blunder!"

Nelson Lee clicked his teeth. He could see at once that Ellison was in

full possession of his wits, and that he was suffering from no hallucination. The detective was completely taken aback.

But if this was the case, Sutcliffe's state of mind was almost indescribable.

He was just behind the communicating door, and could hear every word that was being spoken. Phyllis Clavering alive! It seemed as though the roof were falling, and was about to crush him beneath its weight. If that statement were true, his whole plot was not worth a snap of the fingers. The fortune he had gained possession of would be torn from his grasp before he fairly felt the benefit of it.

For once Jim the Penman was completely startled out of his usual coolness. He felt a wild impulse within him to burst into the consulting-room to learn the actual truth. But he restrained himself with an effort, and stood quite still, listening.

He heard Ellison describe to Nelson Lee how he had met Phyllis in Oxford street; how he was convinced of her identity quite beyond doubt.

"Surely you can see that I am not wandering in my mind?" asked Ellison eagerly. "I am almost off my head with amazement and joy, I will admit; but what I have said is the literal truth, Mr. Lee. Phyllis is alive! It was some other poor girl who was burned to a cinder in that railway disaster!"

"By James, I believe you, Ellison!" Lee exclaimed. "You speak with such conviction that I am forced to believe you. And, when we come to think of it, there is no actual proof that the girl who was killed at Capleton was Miss Clavering. The poor body was identified as hers because she was nowhere to be found, and because her umbrella was found close by, and her bag on the permanent way."

"But what happened to Phyllis?"

"Ah, that I cannot say, but I can form a shrewd guess," replied the detective. "Miss Clavering was obviously only slightly injured, and she wandered away unnoticed before the fire actually started. A blow on the head, probably, rendered her incapable of retaining in her mind what had happened during her life previously."

"You mean that Phyllis has lost her memory?"

"I cannot speak with assurance, but that is a likely explanation."

"It is right," exclaimed Ellison—"I'm sure it is right. Phyllis has lost her memory. The dull look in her eyes, and the curious note in her voice caused me to wonder. But now I know the reason for it all. Indeed, there is nothing that remains a puzzle at all now. Phyllis naturally did not recognise me, although I saw she was striving hard with some inward emotions. Probably a familiar chord was struck, but her mind was incapable of bringing back the past."

"You say you followed Miss Clavering?"

"Exactly! What else could I do?"

"Nothing!" Lee replied. "You acted very wisely."

"Phyllis went to a house in Russell Square, and I crouched down against the railings and saw her enter," went on Ellison, his voice quivering with tense joy and almost indescribable relief. "The door was opened by an elderly lady, who immediately took my fiancée into her arms. There was something singularly sweet about the scene, and I am positively convinced that Phyllis is in safe hands."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"And the story of her marriage!" he mused. "By Heaven, Ellison, it is evident that the whole thing was a fake—a fraud! Since Miss Clavering is alive, we shall soon get to know the truth. You must not overlook the possibility, however, that she may never recover her memory."

"The truth regarding her fortune will be ferreted out, at all events!"

declared Ellison grimly. "I mentioned a forger to you earlier to-day, Mr. Lee, and I have been thinking over the matter since."

"I have been using my wits, too," remarked Lee. "Yes, my friend, appearances seem to point to Jim the Penman being implicated in this singular plot."

Sutcliffe, behind the communicating-door, drew his breath in with a hiss.

"So they know," he muttered, with icy coolness. "Lee knows that I am at work on this business! By thunder, and I fondly imagined myself to be safe!"

He listened again, as Lee proceeded:

"The position is this, Ellison. Miss Clavering is not dead——"

"Heaven be praised!" interrupted Ellison fervently.

"I can imagine your feelings, my dear boy," said Lee. "It is as though your fiancée has come back from the dead. Well, she is alive, and it will be a simple matter for us to discover whether she actually married Oliver Hall. I am convinced that she did not, and the dastardly scheme will come to nought. But we must keep this extraordinary discovery to ourselves."

"Why?"

"Because we do not want Hall to get wind of what is coming," Lee replied. "I have an idea that Hall is merely a figurehead, behind which Jim the Penman is operating. My old friend, Sutcliffe, is responsible for this audacious fraud; no other man would have had the utter nerve to attempt such a swindle. And if we set to work carefully, we shall probably succeed in laying the forger by the heels."

"But I want to do something!" protested Ellison anxiously. "I want to know the actual truth, Mr. Lee! I want to see Phyllis——"

Lee smiled, and interjected:

"My dear fellow, of course you do! I know that you are simply consumed with impatience to see Miss Clavering. But glance at the clock! It is too late to make a move to-night, and there is no necessity for hurry. In the morning we will both go to the house in Russell Square, and then everything will run smoothly."

"I suppose that will be best."

"Of course it will!" smiled the detective. "You are excited and unnerved. Go to your hotel at once and turn in. Say nothing to a soul, and I will also remain silent. The clouds are rolling away, and the horizon is wonderfully bright. Your sweetheart is not dead, and will soon be restored to you."

"And you'll soon know what a splendid girl she is!" declared Ellison. "Married to Oliver Hall! Married to a stranger! Heavens, what a thought! I'll have all England ringing with the truth before a week's out!"

Ellison rose to take his departure.

And Jim the Penman, hearing the movements, swiftly stole across the inner room, and opened a door which led on to the passage. Then he descended the stairs, and let himself out by the front door.

When Hugh Ellison appeared, the young man started walking briskly down Gray's Inn Road, and a dim figure detached itself from a doorway, and silently followed in Ellison's footsteps.

Jim was on the track, and his mind was made up!

CHAPTER VI.

A Desperate Decision.

SUTCLIFFE had a deadly purpose in his heart.

He did not attempt to deny that he had received a stunning shock. But Jim wasn't stunned; on the contrary, his acute wits were sharpened.

The necessity of the moment was of such a nature that the forger was absolutely desperate. Always daring, he was now completely resigned to one fact.

Unless he acted, and acted drastically, the game was up!

And during these last few minutes he had been crouching in Nelson Lee's rooms, Jim had been thinking hard. By the lucky chance of his being there, he had overheard information of the most vital importance, and he had got wind of the danger before it actually was a danger.

One point was extremely significant. Phyllis Clavering was not dead. But—and this was a very important “but”—she had completely lost her memory. She did not know who she was, and those who cared for her did not know who she was. Moreover, Nelson Lee and Ellison were the only two on earth who were aware of the truth.

Sutcliffe was desperate, and his decision was one born of his desperation.

He saw all his plans and schemes falling shattered to the ground, but there was one way out of the difficulty. He had already decided to kill Lee. Well, he would kill Hugh Ellison first, and would then return and settle with the detective.

The double murder did not worry Jim the Penman in the least. Since he had already decided to do away with Lee, Ellison's death was merely a detail. But it was a detail which would make all the difference between safety and exposure.

Suppose Lee and Ellison died this very night?

Being the only living souls who knew of Phyllis Clavering's resurrection, as it were, their deaths would prevent a breath of the truth coming out. And the girl herself, having lost her memory, would be unable to upset the plot.

She would remain as she was, supposedly dead.

There was a chance that she would recover. Well, if she did, it wouldn't matter, for Jim was determined to transfer her fortune in such a way that it would be completely in his hands. If Phyllis ever came to her right mind, she would find her inheritance vanished into thin air.

Sutcliffe had a marvellous faculty for suiting himself to circumstances. He now found it necessary to commit two murders, and he was quite prepared to undertake the ghastly task.

It was all perfectly simple. With Nelson Lee and Ellison silent, the truth would remain hidden, for nobody else knew of that one important fact, that Phyllis was alive. In the morning it would be too late to act, for Lee was going to get busy in the morning.

Prompt action was required.

And so Jim the Penman came to a decision swiftly. Delay meant disaster, therefore there would be no delay.

He swore to himself that Nelson Lee should not frustrate him again. Jim was furious with the detective, and the thought of killing him was actually a pleasant one. Ellison was simply a pawn of circumstances. He would have to go because there was no other way out of the difficulty.

Nine rogues out of ten would have given up the game as lost upon learning of this unexpected development. But Jim the Penman was not one of those nine; he was the tenth. He was all the more determined to carry the project through. The fortune was actually in his hands, for Oliver Hall was merely his tool, and he swore that he would not admit defeat now.

He was quite ready to confess to himself that he had blundered. This revelation was a complete surprise to him. He had not known that Phyllis had been engaged to be married. Jim was quite sure that Ellison was the girl's lover, and he had evidently approached Nelson Lee upon the case. Well, the result would be unfortunate for the pair of them.

In the morning, when they were both found mysteriously killed, there would be nothing to connect the two deaths, and Jim would perform his deadly work so carefully that he was satisfied as to his own safety. He would certainly leave no clue for the police.

Thus, when Hugh Ellison left Lee's rooms, Sutcliffe shadowed him with his plans already cut and dried. It was fairly late, and Gray's Inn Road was quiet. Occasional tramcars and taxis and motor-buses passed in either direction, but the foot traffic was thin. Jim had no difficulty in keeping Ellison under observation.

He was glad that Ellison was walking, for it rendered his work easier. He knew that his quarry was bound for his hotel, but he didn't know which hotel. It was imperative that he should not lose sight of Ellison.

"It is an infernal nuisance—all this bother!" murmured Sutcliffe. "But there's no other way out of it. There's a little sum of two hundred thousand at stake, and I'm not going to throw up the sponge while there's a chance of success. And there's more than a chance here! It's a dead certainty!"

Ellison turned into Holborn, and walked westwards. Jim the Penman followed close behind, now perfectly cool and calm. He saw nothing in the way of success, except the work that had to be done. In the morning, all danger would be over.

But Jim was unaware of one very, very important fact. He was shadowing Ellison, but somebody was shadowing him!

To be perfectly frank, that somebody was Master Nipper. Exactly how Nipper came to be shadowing Jim the Penman is very easily explained. Nothing, in fact, could be simpler.

The young detective had been out, and naturally he had returned. Nipper didn't want to remain out all night, and so he returned home. He had walked along Gray's Inn Road, whistling cheerily, and had been about to cross the road to his master's door when he paused, and his whistle died away on his lips.

For he observed a very curious little incident. A stranger opened the door quickly, stepped out into the street, and then walked a few paces, and retired into the deep recesses of a dark doorway.

Nipper had been surprised, and with excellent cause.

"Now, I wonder who the merry deuce that joker is?" the lad had muttered to himself curiously. "The guv'nor doesn't usually have visitors who steal out and then creep into a dark corner! Besides, it's nearly midnight! Looks as though the beggar is waiting—— By Jimmy!"

For, as Nipper was watching—he himself in shadow—the door again opened, and another figure swung out. The light was not good, but Nipper could see that this second man was Hugh Ellison. A street-lamp was close by, and the dim illumination from it was sufficient.

"Mr. Ellison!" murmured Nipper. "So he's been to the guv'nor again! Something must have happened! He's looking as upright as a giddy Guardsman, and he's actually smoking! Yet this afternoon he was as miserable as a Hun!"

There was, in fact, a striking change in Ellison's bearing. Even in that gloom Nipper could see it. But he was not allowed to wonder for long; for almost immediately after Hugh had commenced to walk briskly away, the strange figure who had left Lee's rooms first detached itself from the dark doorway, and followed in Ellison's footsteps.

"Hallo—hallo!" Nipper muttered. "What's this? Ellison being shadowed! By gum, there's something queer here. I reckon it's up to me to toddle along behind this mysterious merchant and sniff out the game!"

Accordingly Nipper, in his turn, shadowed Jim the Penman.

The lad was acting sensibly. He didn't know the meaning of it at all.

But his shrewd brain told him that all was not right, and so he was looking into matters. Sutcliffe was heavily disguised, and so Nipper hadn't the slightest notion of his identity. But he was obviously up to no good.

Up High Holborn the trio went, Ellison having no idea that he was followed, and his follower being totally unaware that he, too, was under observation. It was a curious situation.

When Hugh arrived at Kingsway he turned off, and in a short time arrived at the Courtney Hotel. The young man thanked Providence for having sent him out for a walk. Had he remained in the hotel, as he had first intended, he would not have made the remarkable discovery which had altered his whole aspect of life.

He walked into the vestibule of the hotel with a firm, steady stride. He was feeling "good" now. On the morrow great things were going to happen. He didn't expect he'd sleep well to-night, but that wouldn't matter a jot.

Jim the Penman stood on the opposite side of the road for some moments after Ellison had disappeared into the hotel. He could, of course, have attacked Ellison during the walk from Gray's Inn Road, and he could have accomplished his dastardly object. But it wasn't Jim's way to act rashly.

He didn't want any hue and cry. He would go to work quietly, deliberately, and safely. As the forger stood there, carelessly puffing at the conclusion of a cigarette, he decided how to act.

Nipper was watching, and he saw Sutcliffe cross the road about two minutes after Hugh had disappeared. It was now Nipper's turn to wait and to come to a decision. The lad was rather puzzled.

"Ellison's gone into his hotel, and the other chap's followed," he murmured. "What the smoke does it mean? Nipper, my son, there's something fishy going on here!"

He wondered how he should act. Suppose he entered the hotel also? Ellison's shadower would probably be there, and Nipper wasn't disguised; he would be recognised at once, and the shadower would be warned.

"No, I mustn't be hasty," the lad told himself.

He didn't like standing there, however, idle. Somehow, he had an uneasy feeling that his master's client was in danger. He thought of Jim the Penman; and although he didn't see any evidence that this shadower was Jim, he kept the possibility in mind.

Ellison was in peril—Nipper was sure of that.

While the young detective was still wondering how he should act, his thoughts were suddenly brought to a standstill by the reappearance of the stranger. Sutcliffe strolled out of the hotel, and leisurely walked away.

"Well, I'm blessed if I know what to make of it!" muttered Nipper.

He did not know the reason for Jim's visit to the hotel. As a matter of fact, the clever criminal had merely been making one or two veiled inquiries. On the pretence of wishing to discover the whereabouts of a friend, he had questioned the hotel clerk. That gentleman had supplied Jim with the information he wanted in a very short time—without even guessing that the stranger had been "pumping" him.

"So Ellison is sleeping in Room 58, on the fourth floor," mused Jim the Penman, as he sauntered away. "And the window of Room 58 is the third from the right when one is facing the rear of the hotel. Excellent! Everything will now be perfectly straightforward, for the other information I learned is decidedly welcome. That fool of a clerk easily swallowed my yarn about seeing a friend at one of the windows!"

He walked on, and turned down a small street about a hundred yards away.

Nipper followed very cautiously, for there were very few people about now, and the lad had no intention of giving himself away.

"Well, of all the queer goes!" thought Nipper. "What's the wheeze?"

He was soon to be enlightened.

Jim arrived at another turning in a few moments, and before entering it he glanced round with apparent carelessness. But he saw nobody. Nipper was one of the cleverest shadowers in existence, and he wasn't likely to let himself be spotted.

There was a narrow lane running parallel with the rear of the Courtney, and Jim proceeded along this slowly. He was satisfied that he was unobserved, and he suddenly took a running jump at a fairly high wall, and the next second he had disappeared.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Nipper, in astonishment.

The lad was decidedly surprised.

He had certainly not expected his quarry to perform that unexpected manoeuvre. What was the man's object in scaling the wall? Over the other side was the rear courtyard of the hotel—at this hour quite deserted and empty.

"First the chap follows Ellison from the gov'nor's rooms, then he comes round here and sneaks over the giddy wall," murmured Nipper. "This is getting interesting. I'm not going to sheer off until I've nosed out the idea."

And he forthwith proceeded to do some "nosing." He cautiously moved along the wall until he came to a spot where he thought it would be safe to climb up; for now that he had gone so far he had no intention of allowing his quarry to become aware of his attentions.

Nipper raised himself cautiously, so that his eyes just projected above the top of the wall. He hung there, taking stock of all he saw. It was very dim, for there were practically no lights, and all the windows of the hotel were heavily shaded.

Nipper could see that two narrow iron staircases led from the top of the building to the bottom in a series of zig-zags. These, he knew, were fire-escapes, in cases of emergency. Right below him the courtyard was bare and rather small.

He watched intently.

And almost at once he saw the dim figure of Jim the Penman moving forward in the darkness. The figure was moving stealthily, and halted for a few seconds at the foot of the right-hand fire-escape.

Then, with the same stealthy movements, the man commenced mounting the iron staircase.

It was almost impossible to see him against the dark background of the hotel wall, but Nipper's keen eyes did not fail him. And, suddenly, the lad dropped to the ground again, and uttered a gasp of realisation.

"The blighter's after Ellison!" he ejaculated, startled. "Good heavens! He went in the hotel to find out which room Ellison was sleeping in, and now he's creeping up the fire-escape in order to reach Ellison's bedroom."

Nipper thought rapidly.

"I don't like the look of it!" he went on grimly—"I don't like the look of it at all. For some reason Ellison's in danger. This chap isn't sneaking up the fire-escape for the fun of the thing. Why, he might be Jim the Penman himself!"

All sorts of notions rushed through Nipper's brains, and his final decision how to act was a very sensible one. At first he thought of following his quarry and finding out exactly what his game was. But then he realised that he would probably fail in his effort, and the stranger would escape. He needed advice—and he meant to have it.

He hurried down a little lane swiftly, turned the corner, and in a very few minutes was at the front entrance of the hotel. He entered without hesitation, and found everything quiet within the vestibule. On one side stood a telephone box, and he immediately opened the door and slipped inside—his movements watched with some little interest by the clerk.

Nipper rapidly gave his master's telephone number; and, the line being clear, he was through in less than half a minute. He heard Lee's voice at the other end of the wire.

"That you, guv'nor?" he said quickly.

"Good gracious, is that you, Nipper?" came Lee's inquiry. "What do you think you're up to, youngster? I've been expecting you in for half an hour past. Where are you speaking from?"

"The Courtney Hotel, sir. Mr. Ellison's been with you to-night, hasn't he?"

"Yes; and he brought me the most amazing news," replied Lee. "I will tell you all about it later. What on earth are you doing——"

"I was just coming indoors when I spotted some chap leaving our door, guv'nor," interrupted Nipper rapidly. "Two ticks later Ellison himself emerged, and the other johnny started shadowing him. So I thought it was up to me to see what the game was."

"Good heavens! What are you saying?" Lee exclaimed sharply. "You saw a man leaving our apartments, Nipper?"

"Yes, sir; and he followed Ellison to this hotel, and at this very minute he's climbing up the fire-escape at the back," exclaimed the lad crisply. "What does it mean, sir? I believe Ellison's in danger——"

Nipper was interrupted by a startled exclamation across the wires.

"What's up, guv'nor?"

"I hardly dare formulate a theory," Lee replied. "But you have done well, lad—very well. It is evident that somebody must have overheard the conversation between myself and Ellison, and your fears regarding his safety are well-founded. In short, my lad, I suspect Ellison's shadower of being Jim himself!"

"Great Scott!"

"Do not waste a second, Nipper," ordered Lee sharply. "The fact that an unknown man is endeavouring to reach Ellison's bedroom is sufficient evidence that mischief is afoot. Say nothing to the hotel officials, but see Ellison at once, and secretly warn him. You understand, my lad? You must guard our young friend."

"But what about you——"

"I will rush round with all speed possible," interrupted the detective. "I expect I shall be there in a very few minutes, and you must take care of Ellison until I arrive. We'll catch the unknown man red-handed!"

"But, look here, guv'nor——"

"Waste no more time," rapped out Nelson Lee. "Hurry up to our client and carry out my instructions. I will be with you very soon."

Nipper hung the receiver up again, and emerged from the telephone-box. His heart was beating rapidly, and his face was flushed. He did not know all that Nelson Lee knew, and so could not guess the full significance of this little drama, as his master did.

Nevertheless, Nipper was decidedly alive to the possibilities of the situation; and he had a shrewd idea that something of a very startling nature was about to take place.

CHAPTER VII.

Face to Face.

"WELL, young fellow, what do you think you want? Coming in here, and using the hotel telephone as though it were your own——"

"It's all right—urgent case!" exclaimed Nipper rapidly.

He was standing facing the hotel clerk, who was regarding him somewhat suspiciously. The hour was late, and it was not usual for strange lads to rush into the vestibule and use the hotel telephone.

"Urgent case?" repeated the clerk. "What d'you mean? Look here, my lad——"

"Oh, I've got no time to waste!" Nipper interjected. "It might be a matter of life or death. You've got a guest here named Hugh Ellison, haven't you?"

"Yes; he came in ten minutes ago."

"What's the number of his room?"

"Fifty-eight—fourth floor. But what the——"

"Can't stop!" put in Nipper. "I must see Mr. Ellison at once!"

And, without waiting for the clerk to reply, the young detective hurried to the stairs and quickly mounted them. He was followed almost at once by a lad in uniform, who had probably been sent by the clerk to see that all was right. Nipper didn't mind, for the boy directed him to Ellison's room without delay. A thump on the door caused it to open almost at once, and Ellison stood there, partially undressed.

"This young gent——" began the uniformed lad.

"Hallo! What on earth do you want, Nipper?" exclaimed Ellison, in surprise. "It's all right, Buttons: this young gentleman is a friend of mine. Come inside, Nipper."

The hotel boy went off, and Nipper entered Ellison's rooms. The very first thing Nipper looked at was the window, and he saw that the blind was drawn, so that a possible lurker outside would be unable to see in. Nipper placed a finger mysteriously to his lips.

"What on earth——"

"Not so loud, sir," warned Nipper. "I followed you from the guv'nor's rooms—or, rather, I followed some chap who was shadowing you. At this very minute, I believe he's crouching outside this window waiting for you to put your light out. Chap's don't climb fire-escapes at dead of night unless they mean mischief."

"What the deuce are you talking about?" demanded Ellison.

He had been studying a photograph of Phyllis, thanking Heaven for the providence which had led to his meeting her. But Nipper's advent was certainly a surprise.

The lad lost no time in explaining fully to Ellison, and the latter's surprise turned to alarm. Not that he was at all nervous; but to know that a strange man was lurking outside his bedroom window was scarcely a pleasant revelation.

"By thunder, I wonder if the man is Jim the Penman?" breathed Ellison. "Since he left your master's rooms before I did, it is fairly evident that he must have been concealed somewhere near the consulting-room. He probably overheard the startling news which I took to Mr. Lee."

"What startling news, sir?"

"Why, Miss Clavering is alive!"

"Alive!" gasped Nipper amazedly.

"It is astounding, but true," Ellison said, with shining eyes. "But I cannot go into details under these circumstances. We will switch the light

off, Nipper, and see what happens. My unknown friend outside will think I have retired."

"But what about the gov'nor?"

"Oh, he will be here before anything happens," said Ellison confidently.

Nipper was quite in favour of the move. He and Ellison would be quite equal to the task of dealing with the stranger, if the latter attempted an entry. It would be rather a surprise for Nelson Lee if he arrived to find the capture already made.

As soon as the light had been switched off, Ellison went across to the window, raised the blind, and opened the lower sash a few inches. At the same time he yawned rather loudly; then he crept back to the far corner of the room where Nipper was crouching.

"If the rogue is outside, we may as well make things easier for him," breathed Ellison. "We want to lure him in!"

Nipper nodded in the darkness.

And thus the pair waited, minute after minute. Ellison was quite cool now, and he commenced snoring with natural effect. Nipper was grinning, and quite enjoying the little comedy—for, so far, there were no elements of drama in the happenings.

The situation was curious. Jim the Penman was, actually, outside the window; and he was entirely deceived. He thought that his intended victim had retired, and was now fast asleep. The intended victim, as a matter of fact, was wide awake, and quite ready for a tussle—with a very able companion by his side. Nelson Lee, too was due to arrive at any moment.

Suddenly Nipper gripped Ellison's arm, and the latter nudged the lad in return. A shadow had suddenly appeared upon the lower window panes—for the blind was now up. It was a very dim shadow, and only just visible against the dark night sky.

Then, very slowly, the sash was pushed up. And it was done so silently that had Ellison been actually asleep he would have received no warning. Undoubtedly, the young man owed his life to Nipper's shrewdness.

At last the sash was right up. It was a very large window, and the opening was of considerable dimensions. Jim the Penman stepped into the room, and stood still for a few moments. Then he moved forward like a shadow towards the faintly visible bed.

Just above Ellison's head was the electric light switch—Nipper had thoughtfully suggested occupying this position. And now Ellison slid up and pressed the switch down. It was evident to both himself and Nipper that the latter's warning had been very timely. They had indeed, caught the marauder red-handed.

The bedroom was flooded with brilliant light.

"Now, you hound, who are you?" roared Ellison?"

Jim the Penman twirled round with a furious oath. The very attitude of the man was sufficient to reveal his deadly purpose. The first glimpse of him which Ellison and Nipper had was significant enough. Jim was near the bedside, and in his hand gleamed a long, deadly surgical knife.

"On him!" shouted Nipper excitedly. "He meant murder, the brute!"

There was no doubt about that, and Ellison and Nipper started forward at the same second. For once in his life Douglas Sutcliffe was utterly startled. His face paled beneath his disguise, and the wicked-looking knife dropped from his hand as his fingers nervelessly opened. For that one second Jim the Penman was incapable of any movement.

And then his two attackers were upon him. At the first touch the foiled scoundrel seemed to start into activity. He was caught like a rat in a

trap. That fact was rammed home into his brain like the scar of a hot iron.

"By the powers," he snarled, "you sha'n't take me!"

He fought like a tiger, with appalling ferocity. Both Ellison and Nipper were somewhat taken aback. The lad received a fierce kick upon his shin—for Jim the Penman was not at all particular as to how he fought.

"Oh!" gasped Nipper. "Oh, you beastly cad!"

At the same second Jim lunged out with his right fist with all the force he was capable of. Ellison received the blow on the side of his head. And it was delivered with such force that the young man staggered across the room and collapsed upon the floor. For the moment he was quite knocked out of time.

But that moment was sufficient for the desperate criminal.

He gripped Nipper by the throat, with the gentle intention of finishing the lad once and for all. Even now Jim the Penman was calm enough to hope for the possibility of success yet. If he could quieten Nipper he would soon deal with Ellison.

The young detective, strong as he was, was like a baby in his attacker's hands. He struggled with every ounce of his strength.

"Help!" he gurgled desperately. "Help!"

"Quiet, you young dog!" hissed Jim.

And, the next second, Nipper was forced to be quiet, for the throttling grip round his throat was slowly rendering him senseless. Ellison was staggering to his feet. But, as it proved, it was not necessary for him to go to his young companion's aid.

The door burst open, and Nelson Lee simply hurled himself into the room. The great detective took in the situation at a glance. Before Jim could even look round, Lee's fingers were round his own throat. Released, Nipper dropped to the floor, and hastily crawled away. The lad was nearly done, but there was still plenty of life in him.

During the struggle Jim's disguise had been torn off, and he was now revealed for what he was—a brutal, callous criminal. All his gentlemanly veneer was cast off.

"Sutcliffe!" rapped out Nelson Lee triumphantly. "Jim the Penman! Face to face at last!"

"Curse you!" snarled Sutcliffe.

The knowledge that he was at grips with Nelson Lee seemed to lend him added strength. He was determined not to give in, and was as equally determined to make his escape.

The pair reeled about the room in a deadly embrace.

Ellison and Nipper stood watching with wide opened eyes. The fight was so furious that there was no opportunity for them to join in. For the end came with amazing swiftness. Just as Hugh was on the point of striding forward the sequel occurred.

Nelson Lee and Jim the Penman, locked together, swayed across the floor. At that second Jim was exerting every ounce of his strength in order to gain his freedom. And, indeed, he practically lifted Lee off his feet and swung him round.

The impetus of the movement caused the combatants to lurch headlong against the open window!

"Look out!" roared Nipper huskily.

But the warning came too late. Before either Lee or Jim could stay their rush they had crashed against the wall. The window was very low, and the next second the two fighters hurtled out into the darkness, still

locked together. They had overbalanced, and Nipper and Ellison turned deadly white.

For this was the fourth floor, and the distance to the ground was over sixty feet!

CHAPTER VIII.

Jim the Penman Fails Again—Conclusion.

"GUV'NOR—guv'nor!"

The words came to Nipper's throat in a choking gasp. He rushed to the window with a feeling of awful dread in his heart. He forgot his own pain, for he was convinced that his beloved master had plunged headlong to certain death.

He had leaned out into the darkness.

And a voice came up to him, breathless, but cool:

"My dear Nipper, don't stand there! Come and lend me a hand! Our friend Jim is completely knocked out of time!"

"Guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper, in sheer amazement.

"Great Scott! Can't you see?" exclaimed Ellison, who was now by Nipper's side. "By gad, what a relief! I thought they'd fallen clean to the ground. But they only bumped on the iron staircase just below the window!"

This, indeed, was what had actually happened. The iron fire-escape was immediately below the bedroom window, and at this particular point there was a kind of small landing. The struggling pair had fallen upon this, Jim undermost. Under those circumstances it was not at all surprising that the forger was completely knocked out of time. With Lee's weight upon him he was simply squashed breathless, and his head, incidentally, crashed with uncomfortable force against one of the iron steps.

Nelson Lee himself had not escaped scot-free. He was bruised, and the knuckles of his left hand were badly grazed. But he was perfectly whole and intensely satisfied with the turn of events.

In less than five minutes Jim the Penman had been carried up into the bedroom again. And there, handcuffed, he awaited the arrival of the police.

The hotel manager, having appeared upon the scene, fussed about considerably. Such a disgraceful occurrence as this, he pathetically declared, had never happened in his hotel. But, as Lee pointed out, such little dramas as these would occur in the best regulated hotels.

Nelson Lee had expected the forger to be insolent and cool. But the blow he had received seemed to have dazed him somewhat, and when he was finally marched off to Bloomsbury police-station, in the charge of two constables and a sergeant, he was sullen and silent. His great scheme was knocked on the head now, with a vengeance.

For, that very night—or, rather, in the early hours of the morning—Oliver Hall's rooms were entered by Nelson Lee and a Scotland Yard inspector. Lee had adopted this startling visit deliberately; and his purpose was achieved.

Hall was so utterly taken by surprise that he almost collapsed with fright. It was certainly a shock to wake up to find Nelson Lee and a police inspector by his bedside. When he learned that Jim the Penman was caught he feverishly bubbled out his own innocence. It was Jim's scheme, and he was only the forger's tool.

But the confession finally and absolutely settled the case. For it was proved beyond question now that the marriage certificate was a forgery.

and that the whole audacious scheme had originated in the astute brain of Douglas James Sutcliffe.

And now for the last act in this astonishing affair," exclaimed Nelson Lee briskly. "I have an idea, Ellison, that everything will turn out splendidly.

"It's been proved that the whole story was a lie, anyhow," Ellison replied, with a glad expression in his eyes. "That confession of Hall's makes it clear to the whole world that Phyllis was not untrue to me. I hope to Heaven that she will recover her memory, and become herself once more."

The pair were just entering Russell Square, and they were bound for the house in which Phyllis Clavering was living. It was morning now, and the sun was shining gloriously. It was with keen satisfaction that Nelson Lee realised that Jim the Penman had failed again. And on this occasion he had not escaped. He was in the cell, awaiting his trial. And his confederate, Oliver Hall, was in the hands of the police also.

Lee and Ellison mounted the steps of the old house in Russell Square, and were informed by the maidservants that it was occupied by Mrs. Mary Newton. The latter proved to be a sweet-faced old lady, who was only too willing to give her visitors information. When she learned Lee's identity she knew that she was quite safe in speaking out.

"This is wonderful—wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You tell me that the young lady's name is Phyllis Clavering, and that she is the girl who was supposedly killed in that dreadful accident at Capleton Junction?"

"She is my fiancée," Ellison said eagerly. "Is she here, Mrs. Newton?"

"Yes, I will fetch her——"

"One moment, please," Lee interrupted. "Before we see Miss Clavering, do you mind giving us details regarding her providential escape?"

Mrs. Newton shook her head.

"I am afraid I cannot do that," she replied. "I was motoring to London on that awful night, having been urgently summoned home. I had been staying in the country, you see, and when my car was in the vicinity of Reading—but quite in the open country—my chauffeur was astonished to see a girl wandering in the road as though mentally deficient. She was well dressed, but bore no signs of violence."

"But Reading is a considerable distance from Capleton," said Lee.

"For that reason I never connected the girl with the railway accident," went on the old lady. "But, you must understand, our meeting with Miss Clavering was many hours after the accident, and she had evidently been wandering about during those hours. Well, I did not know what to do, but I decided to bring her home and to care for her until I could discover her parents or guardians. For many years past," Mrs. Newton proceeded, "I have made it my duty to look after young girls who find themselves without a home in London."

It appeared that Phyllis had been utterly incapable of giving any account of herself. A nasty bruise on her head, however, plainly told that she had received a stunning blow of some sort.

When she was brought in Phyllis seemed in perfect health, but she treated Ellison as a perfect stranger, declaring that she did not know him.

Hugh was greatly upset, and almost at his wit's end. He was face to face with his sweetheart, but she had not the slightest idea who he was!

But Nelson Lee suggested a plan. It was that Phyllis should be taken at once to her father's home in Wiltshire. The reunion with her father, and the old, familiar sight of her childhood home would probably have telling effect upon her already slightly awakening brain. For, once or twice, the

girl had looked at Hugh with a spark of recognition in her eyes. But, struggle as she would, she could not bring back the past.

Lee's experiment, to Ellison's unbounded delight, proved a great success. But the recovery was slow, and quite the opposite to what had been expected. Her father was amazed to see his daughter, and the sight of him did much to aid to recovery. Gradually Phyllis began remembering things. And, before a week had passed, she was her old self again, and was able to give an account of how she had escaped from the train wreck.

By a miracle, it seemed, she had not even been scratched at the moment of the impact. She had found herself sprawling in the compartment, and had, with amazing presence of mind, tumbled through the open window on to the permanent way. Then, suddenly, something seemed to snap in her aching head, and she remembered nothing of what had occurred previously. She did not even remember that she had escaped from the wrecked train. Thus, Mrs. Newton had not the slightest clue to her identity. As Lee had suspected, the girl's loss of memory had been only temporary; and she would probably have recovered before had she been taken home. In her strange surroundings there had been nothing to stimulate memories of her past life.

But Jim the Penman's plot had fallen to the ground, and Phyllis Clavering came into her own. In parenthesis, she consented to marry Hugh Ellison without delay, and nobody doubted that the pair would be one of the happiest couples on this earth.

But, astonishingly enough, Sutcliffe eluded the law after all.

Two days after his arrest, while he was still in the cells at Bloomsbury police-station, a big motor-car drove up, and a man stepped out in the uniform of a police-inspector. He presented to the local inspector a note purporting to come from the chief of Scotland Yard himself.

It was, in effect, a written authority for the transfer of Douglas Sutcliffe from this local station to Bow Street. The authority was in absolute order, and the worthy inspector had not the faintest suspicion of anything wrong. Securely handcuffed, Jim the Penman was handed over into the charge of the Scotland Yard detective.

But, as soon as the car had driven away—Sutcliffe between the official detective and a plain-clothed constable—the forger chuckled heartily and complimented his companions. His handcuffs were rapidly unlocked, and from that moment Jim the Penman utterly disappeared again.

It then came out that the letter, purporting to come from the chief of Scotland Yard, was nothing but a clever forgery. It had been written by Jim the Penman himself, and had been handed into the charge of a confederate to use at any time should it be necessary. And the authority was so cunningly worded that it was applicable for almost any place or occasion.

Nelson Lee was furious when he learned the news, but he did not exactly blame the police. The ruse was a very smart one, and had succeeded solely because of the cool cheek of it.

And, upon the whole, Lee was not altogether sorry at the prospect of having another tussle with his astounding enemy.

For he was convinced that he had not seen the last of Jim the Penman.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

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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.

While at a waterside music-hall they hear a plot unwound to destroy the
Bonnie Jean; and Haggart Neil is the plotter. Running to the quay, where
both Neil's craft and the *Bonnie Jean* are moored, Ben and Hal change the
positions of the two boats. And Neil's plot falls through. Instead of
destroying the *Bonnie Jean*, his confederates begin to break up the *Vulture*.
(Now read on).

Neil Seeks an Ally.

"JA!" bellowed the biggest of the Dutchmen. "I split your skull oop,
verdomde schellum! Take dot!"

"Great guns!" choked Hal, mopping his eyes, as Neil disappeared
under a press of large fat Dutchmen. "Aren't they getting a pasting,
though? What a night we're having!"

"They're crawlin' all over him!" said Ben, with a grin. "There's the
rest o' the crew down, too! They're making hay o' them!"

Two of the *Vulture's* crew struggled out of the press, bruised and bleeding.
Only a heaving mass showed where Neil's powerful frame was striving to
fling off his assailants.

The cut and torn sails hung down like ribbons over the scene of the
fight; broken glass, and splintered wood, lay about like leaves in autumn;
and from the noise the wreckers had made below it was easy to guess what
the cabin looked like.

The fight began again, to finish in one last, lingering spasm. When it
was ended, the *Vulture's* crew, save for two men who had scuttled out and
escaped on the quay, were lying round in picturesque attitudes, utterly
beaten and exhausted. None was seriously injured; but they were simply
broken up and worn out by superior numbers, and black eyes, broken noses,
and the loss of good teeth, were the least of their misfortunes.

Then, hoisting the Vulture's only keg of Holland's up on deck, the leader of the Dutchmen shouldered it, and lurched ashore. The rest of the tipsy mob, surrounding him like a bodyguard, marched off, swaying down the road, singing a shaky deep-sea chorus.

Just as they disappeared, Grant arrived in a hurry, with Captain West and Lloyd in attendance.

"What's all this?" cried West, darting forward. "Are we too late? Don't tell me she's smashed up!"

"Into smithereens!" said Ben. "Stop, dad! You mustn't go aboard that craft! She's private, an' the family's in trouble. Don't you see 'em mourning on her decks?"

Hal exploded violently. Ben's face was immovable.

"The Vulture, by George!" said West, in bewilderment, checking himself. "Her gear cut to ribbons, too! What's it mean? Who brought her here?"

"Hal, an' me," said Ben, winking at his confederate. "We thought she looked lonely over there. Haggart came up with his mob of beauties, an' told them to go an' amuse themselves with her. An' they did!"

"Haven't they done her proud?" said Hal, leaning against a bollard, and surveying the scene. "Look at her gear! Then Neil and his men seemed to think there'd been a mistake somewhere, they tried to stop the fun. But the Dutchies didn't see it, and, as Haggart got uppish, they pasted him and his men, and then cleared out with his best keg of gin. What d'you think of it, skipper?"

West stared for a moment, and then sat down and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Grand!" he gasped. "Fine! An' they've sacked their own vessel! Boys, you've done the only thing that could have saved the old Jean. But where is she?"

"Where the Vulture was before the party began," said Ben. "Come on, dad! Let's get aboard. The boat's at the stairs. Look, there's Neil, crawlin' out, lifebuoy an' all! Blessed if I hadn't forgot all about him!"

Arm-in-arm, still chuckling, the crew of the Jean marched to the head of the steps. As they passed the Vulture Hal glanced at her decks, and his eyes met those of Neil, who was slowly picking himself up. But the man turned his head away quickly, and did not look at the boy.

"Ah," said Grant, in an undertone, "he has had enough of you for a day or two, Hal! He knows who did the trick. He'll let us alone a bit now."

"Bless you, we don't mind!" said Ben. "He ain't scored much off us yet. Make the boat fast astern, Hal—that's you!"

And the crew of the Jean being dead tired, turned in all standing, leaving Lloyd to the first two-hour watch. But there was nothing more to fear from the Vulture that night, and the men from the North Sea slept soundly.

Ben and Hal were the first to turn out in the morning, and they stared in astonishment at the quay where the Jean had formerly laid, and where the Vulture had had her trouble the night before.

"She's gone," exclaimed Ben—"vanished into space!"

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"What, the Vulture?" replied Hal. "How has she gone? Not to sea, surely? It would take a week's work to put her right."

"You aren't far out there," said West quietly, as he came up the companion; "but they was reevin' new gear all night, an' workin' like niggers. They'll have taken her to some snug place up the canals."

"Can't we get out to-day, dad?" said Hal.

"No," grunted the skipper; "not afore to-morrow midday. Ice don't come till the morning."

"Breakfast-ho!" came a loud hail from the galley.

They went down to a sumptuous meal; for Grant looked after the cooking, and he was reckoned a genius in that line.

During the meal Ben stopped talking, and pricked up his ears. Leaning back carelessly, he laid one ear against the side of the vessel. He seemed to be only resting his head, but he was listening intently.

He signed to Hal to do the same. The boy followed his example. A gentle thump, thump, tapping against the outer skin of the vessel, was plainly audible. After it came a scraping, rubbing sound. Hal glanced inquiringly at Ben. The others noticed nothing.

Ben signed to him to keep quiet, and soon the meal broke up. West and the others went ashore, leaving the boys in charge of the trawler.

"You heard that?" said Ben, as soon as they were alone. "What did you think it was?"

"A buoy, or a chunk of wood knocking against her," said Hal—"only it was below the surface."

"Just so," said Ben; "but it's something more than that. Let's have that boathook, and I'll show you one of Haggart's little games."

He groped about with the long boathook about four foot under the surface, and presently it hooked on to something. He hauled away, but nothing happened.

"Tail on here, Hal, an' haul! Put your back into it!"

The boys dragged with all their strength, but the hidden obstacle refused to budge.

"It's moored by a rope to a chain on the bottom," said Ben, "an' it wants divin' for. I'm a whale at swimmin', but I can't dive for nuts."

"I can," said Hal; "and I want to see what the game is."

He undressed rapidly, and in less than a minute was ready.

"Take this knife with you," said Ben. "You'll find the thing floating upwards, moored by a rope. Cut the rope, an' let it go."

Hal went down with a clean plunge, and was under water about fifteen seconds. Suddenly there shot up to the surface a big black brandy-keg, with a couple of distended bladders, and a great bundle of net corks fast to it, and by these it floated. Hal's head bobbed up beside it, and he looked at it with a puzzled air. He glanced up at Ben, who winked knowingly.

"Oh-o!" said Hal. "That's the game, is it? Here's after the rest, then!"

Twice more he dived, and two bundles, just like the first, came to the surface. Hal came out and helped Ben to haul them aboard. And just as the last was pulled on deck, a large, heavy-faced Dutchman, who had been watching the finish anxiously from a building shed close by, plumped into a boat, and pulled rapidly towards the Bonnie Jean, with many a hasty glance to right and left as he came. He ran his boat alongside, caught hold of the Jean's rail, and pointed meaningly to the brandy kegs.

"Dose vos mine!" he said, with a scowl.

"Are they, indeed?" said Ben. "Then just you go and fetch a custom's officer as witness, an' I'll hand them over, my fat friend."

(Continued overleaf.)

The man looked scared.

"See a-here, sonny, you nod vant to get me into trouble, ain't it? Gif me der kegs. If somebody see dem on your decks, you get it same as me."

"You'll have to wait till the skipper comes," said Ben. "I can't let 'em go without his orders. Ah, here he is! Dad, look here."

In a few words Ben told his father how the kegs had been found; while Hal, smiling acutely, got into his clothes. West turned sharply to the man, who did not look a dangerous ruffian.

"Are you o' Haggart Neil's lot?" said West, fixing the man with his eye.

"Me?" returned the man. "I got nodings to do mit dem. I was smuggler, if you like, but no cut-throat. I sell mine schnapps to boat dot pay for it; der rest is not for me."

"Are those kegs yours, or has Neil bought them?" said West.

"He nod bought dem yet; he going to buy dem. Now der price vill be higher."

"Very good," said the skipper of the Jean; "you can take those kegs. If they had been Neil's already, I would ha' stoved them in. Tell him so from me. Take your trash away! It's not for me to do coastguards' jobs, nor revenue spyin'. But you look a decent sort. Take my tip, and start earning an honest living for a change."

"A man must make his livin' as he can along der wharves," said the Dutchman, bundling the kegs into his boat, and hastily throwing a tarpaulin over them. "So long, captain, and goot luck to you!"

He rowed away briskly, with a wave of his hand, and disappeared along the quays.

"An' that's all right," said Ben. "Forewarned is forearmed. We know the Vulture's next move now. She'll have to get those kegs in for the coast. That's why she left in such a hurry. Neil thought we might find them, and split on him."

"I doubt if he knows we discovered 'em, as yet, though," said Hal.

"There isn't much Neil doesn't know," replied Ben, "when it comes to smugglin'. He needn't have worried himself, anyway. We shouldn't have troubled to give him away. We aren't Custom House officers, and sneaking about a man, even such a worm as Haggart Neil, isn't good enough. Dad, can we go ashore? We've done our work."

"Ye can take the day off, the pair o' you," said West. "You've done well."

"An' have a care, laddies," said Angus Grant warningly. "There's traps enough in this unco' city to trip up the heels of a pair of bairns like you. I shall be keepin' my eyes on ye, though ye mayn't know it. So don't get into mischief. d'ye hear?"

The boys laughed, and with a little chaff at Angus, they leaped ashore, and went off to seek entertainment in Amsterdam.

The old Dutchman who had claimed the brandy-kegs had taken the matter very quietly, while he was within sight of the Bonnie Jean. But after he had put the length of the quay between himself and the trawler, his wrinkled face took on a particularly sullen expression.

(Don't miss next week's instalment of this grand new sea story.)