

NO. 48.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

Week ending
May 6, 1910.

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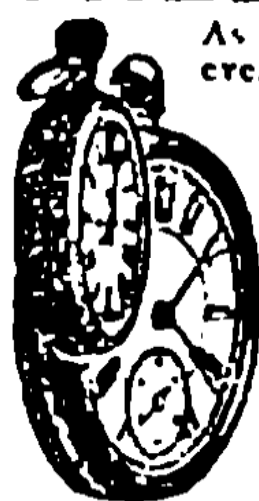


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OR THE CASE OF THE DELAVAL DIAMONDS. BY MAXWELL SCOTT.

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WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

A Brilliant Detective Story,
introducing Nelson Lee
and Nipper.

By the Author of "In Borrowed Plumes," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

The House On the Moor.

It was only a piece of an old newspaper, which somebody had thrown away, yet it might easily have caused the death of the greatest detective of modern times, to say nothing of Nipper and the landlord of the Treeton Arms.

The way of it was this. Nelson Lee and Nipper had run down by train to the village of Treeton in order to consult the parish register in connection with a case they had on hand. They had intended to return to London by the train which left Treeton at seven o'clock in the evening; but, on presenting themselves at the station at that hour, they were informed by the station-master that the line was blocked, owing to the breakdown of a mineral train, and that there was no hope of traffic being resumed on that particular section of the line before the following morning.

"If you're very anxious to get back to London to-night," added the station-master, "your best plan will be to hire a trap in the village and drive to Exham. It's only a ten-mile drive, and you will reach Exham in plenty of time to catch the ten-fifteen express to Waterloo."

Although the detective was not "very anxious to get back to London" that night, he was still less anxious to spend the night at Treeton. He decided, therefore, to adopt the station-master's suggestion, and half an hour later he and Nipper started out for Exham in a somewhat antiquated dogcart, drawn by a spirited young chestnut, and driven by the landlord of the Treeton Arms.

For eight miles of the ten their route lay across a rugged stretch of moor, picturesque in the daytime, but bleak and desolate to the last degree on a dark, cold winter's night. And it was on this moor, four miles from Treeton and six from Exham, that that piece of old newspaper played its fateful part.

It was lying by the side of the road, and on the opposite side of the road was a milestone. Just as the trap was about to rattle past the spot, a sudden gust of wind caught up the paper and whirled it into the horse's face. The startled chestnut promptly shied to the other side of the road, and in less time than it takes to tell, the vehicle lurched over to one side, the shafts snapped, the trap overturned, and Nelson Lee and Nipper and the driver were pitched out into the road.

It was an ugly accident, and might easily have resulted in a trio of broken necks. Marvellous to relate, however, none of the three was seriously injured, though all of them were badly shaken and more or less bruised.

"Well, what's to be done now?" asked Nelson Lee, when they had sorted themselves out. "There's no hope of your being able to patch up the trap, I suppose?"

The question was addressed to the driver, who mournfully shook his head.

"I've nothing 'ere to patch it up with," he replied. "I'll 'ave to ride the 'orse back to Treeton, and return with ropes and things."

The detective consulted his watch, glanced at the milestone, and turned to Nipper.

"What do you say?" he asked. "Shall we go back to Treeton, and spend the night there, or shall we push on to Exham on foot? It's now five minutes to eight, and according to this milestone it's only six miles from here to Exham."

"And the London train doesn't leave Exham till 10.15," said Nipper. "Two hours and twenty minutes in which to do six miles. I vote for pushing on to Exham."

This was also the detective's choice; and accordingly, after compensating the driver and questioning him as to the route, they bade him good-night and trudged away.

The night was dark and cold. Presently a drizzling rain came on, which was almost as baffling as a fog, and, after tramping through this for over an hour, an uneasy suspicion crept into Nelson Lee's mind that they had lost their way.

"I'm afraid we must have taken a wrong turning somewhere," he growled. "If we were on the right road, we ought to see the lights of Exham by now."

"That doesn't follow," objected Nipper. "Lights don't carry far on a night like this. Besides, this is war-time, you know, and the lights of the town will be obscured."

He had scarcely spoken ere, on turning a corner of the road, they perceived a blur of light about a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Ah! There's a light there, anyhow!" said Nipper. "A lighted window by the look of it. That suggests a house, though why anybody should build a house in a desolate spot like this passes my comprehension. But it is a house, isn't it?"

"Yes. There's a house there, sure enough!" said Nelson Lee. "The light which we see appears to be streaming through the fanlight above the front door, and not through a window."

A few minutes later, they came to the house, which stood back a little distance from the road, from which it was separated by a small garden. It was a fairly big house, substantially built, but had all the appearance of a house which had stood empty for many years. The garden gate, for instance, was rotting off its rusty hinges, and the garden itself was a wilderness of neglect. It was evidently occupied now, however, for in addition to the light in the fanlight, smoke was issuing from one of the chimneys.

"Cheerful-looking mansion, I don't think!" said Nipper, as they halted at the garden gate. "There's a name painted on the gate, isn't there? Yes—'The Hermitage.' A very good name, too, for nobody but a hermit would choose to live in a lonely place like that!"

"There's no accounting for tastes," smiled Nelson Lee. "At any rate, we'll interview the hermit, and ask him if we're on the right road for Exham."

He led the way up the garden-path, and on reaching the front door—which was not provided with a bell—he rapped on it loudly with his knuckles.

Then a series of strange things happened.

First of all footsteps were heard inside the house, bounding up the stairs

at break-neck speed. A moment later, an upper window was thrown open, and almost at the same instant the blinding light of a powerful electric-torch rained down on Nelson Lee and Nipper.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded a voice that was husky with excitement and terror.

The detective and Nipper glanced up at the window, but the fierce light dazzled their eyes, and they could not see the face of the man who was leaning out of the window.

"Why don't you speak?" cried the voice, rising almost to a scream. "I have you covered with my revolver, and unless you answer my question at once, I'll plug you both with a bullet apiece! Who are you, and what do you want?"

"We are two belated travellers, who have lost their way," said Nelson Lee, trying to dodge the light and get a glimpse of the man.

"Stand still, or I'll fire!" roared the man, keeping the light on the detective's face. "What's your name?"

"Nelson Lee."

"And who's your companion?"

"My assistant, Nipper."

The man heaved a sigh of relief, but he still kept the light on the detective's face, and they could dimly see that in his other hand he held a revolver.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked in a more conciliatory tone of voice.

"We merely wish to know if this is the road to Exham?"

"No," replied the man. "Where have you come from?"

"Treeton."

"Then you must have gone wrong at the four cross-roads. You should have kept straight on instead of taking the road to the left."

"Must we go back to the cross-roads, then?"

"No. If you continue along this road for a couple of hundred yards, you'll see a lane on your right. Turn down that lane, and it'll bring you out into the Exham road about two miles from the town."

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee. "And now, may I ask the meaning of your extraordinary——"

"You mayn't!" snapped the man. "I've told you what you want to know, so now clear off!"

The detective shrugged his shoulders and turned away, with Nipper at his heels. The man kept the light on them until they had passed through the garden gate; then the light went out, and they heard him slam the window down.

"I said the Hermitage was a very suitable name for the house," growled Nipper, as they resumed their tramp. "I was wrong. It ought to be called the Lunatic Asylum! The fellow's mad—absolutely off his chump! Did he think we were burglars?"

"I don't know what he thought," said Nelson Lee, "but our arrival evidently threw him into a state of panic-stricken terror. I've a shrewd suspicion that some secret tragedy lies behind the scene we have just witnessed."

"How? What do you mean?"

"Well, a man doesn't behave like that man behaved unless he has some reason to be afraid. For instance, if you had committed some crime, and you knew that the police were searching for you, you would naturally be terrified whenever anybody knocked at the door."

"But that can't apply to the man we've just left," said Nipper. "He grew calmer instead of more terrified when you told him you were Nelson

Lee. He wouldn't have done that if he were hiding from the police, would he?"

"Perhaps not," said Nelson Lee. "But there's another explanation which would account for his terror. He may have an enemy from whom he's hiding. That may be the reason why he has chosen to take up his residence in a lonely house like the Hermitage, and when I knocked at the door just now he may have feared that his enemy had tracked him down, and had come to call him to account.

"But all this is idle speculation," he added with a laugh. "As we shall never see the man again"—little did he think how mistaken he was—"we needn't worry our heads about him. Here's the lane of which he spoke."

They turned down the lane, and trudged along for some distance in silence. Then Nipper drew out his watch and his flash-light.

"Half-past nine," he said, shining the light on the dial. "That only leaves us three-quarters of an hour to catch the train, and it's two miles, the man said, from the end of this lane to Exham. I wonder how much farther we have to go before we reach the end of the lane. If we've very much farther to go, it'll take us all our time to——"

He broke off with a startled gasp, for at that moment an agonised cry of "'Elp! 'Elp!" came pealing through the darkness.

The shout appeared to proceed from a spot about fifty yards farther down the lane. The detective and Nipper broke into a run, and even as they did so a revolver-shot rang out, followed by the choking cry of a wounded man.

And after that the only sound that broke the brooding stillness was the swift patter of the feet of Nelson Lee and Nipper as they pelted down the lane.

CHAPTER II.

"Sunlight."

A VERY brief run brought them to the end of the lane, where it joined the Exham road. Here they halted, peering this way and that through the darkness and the rain.

"I can't see anybody," said Nipper, "and I can't hear anybody running away. Can you?"

"No," said Nelson Lee. "Just as we pulled up, I fancied I heard somebody running across that field, but I don't hear anything now, and it may only have been—— Hallo! What's that?"

A sign-post stood at the junction of the lane and the road, and at the foot of the sign-post the detective's roving eyes had suddenly discerned a sinister-looking object.

Snatching the flash-light from Nipper's hand, he darted to the spot and pressed the button. Then he and Nipper started back with simultaneous cries of horror.

Lying in a huddled heap at the foot of the sign-post was the apparently lifeless form of a man whose features were those of a typical Irishman of the lower classes. His clothes were ragged and ill-fitting, his boots were in holes, and his face was dirty and unshaven.

His left arm was doubled under him, but the other was outstretched on the road, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper were quick to observe that the first and second fingers of his right hand were missing. This, however, was evidently an old injury, and had nothing to do with his present condition, which was due to a bullet-wound in his left temple. The edges of this wound were blackened with powder-smoke, showing that the shot had been fired at close range.

At first the detective thought the man was dead, but on kneeling down and examining him, he found that he was still breathing, and that his heart was beating fairly strongly.

"He's still alive," he said to Nipper. "Indeed, I don't think he's really seriously injured. The bullet evidently glanced off the bone without penetrating the skull. The shock, however, has completely stunned him; but with proper care and attention, he ought to pull through all right."

Nipper gazed at the unkempt, ragged figure on the ground, and then at Nelson Lee.

"I wonder who he is?" he said. "An Irishman, I should say, by the look of him."

"Not much doubt about that," agreed Nelson Lee.

"And I wonder who shot him, and why?" continued Nipper. "What's your theory?"

"Haven't any," said Nelson Lee. "If I'd nothing better to do, I could invent a dozen theories, each of which would exactly fit the case—and each of which would probably be wrong. But there's no need for us to waste our time in weaving theories, since the man himself will tell us all about it when he comes round. In the meantime, the first thing to be done is to put him to bed and place him under a doctor's care as speedily as possible."

"Put him to bed!" repeated Nipper ironically. "Where? I don't suppose there's a house between here and Exham, and we can't carry an unconscious man two miles!"

"There's the Hermitage," Nelson Lee reminded him. "That isn't much more than a quarter of a mile from here."

"True," said Nipper. "But do you imagine for a moment that that lunatic who lives at the Hermitage would consent to take a wounded stranger into his house?"

"There's no harm in asking him," said Nelson Lee. "At any rate," he added, "it's quite certain that we can't leave this poor fellow lying here. We're bound to do the best we can for him, and the best thing—in fact, the only thing—I can think of is for me to stay here and keep watch on him while you cut back to the Hermitage and tell the man who lives there what has happened. If he's willing to take the man in, ask him to come back with you and help us to carry the man up to the house. If he isn't willing to take the man in, ask him where we can obtain a conveyance in which to drive the man to the Exham hospital."

Nipper started off, but immediately turned back.

"It has just occurred to me," he said, "that this Irishman may have been going to the Hermitage when he was shot. If so, the man who lives at the Hermitage probably knows him, and although he might not be willing to take a stranger in, he might be willing to take in a man whom he knew."

"Well?"

"Well," said Nipper, "before I go to the Hermitage, wouldn't it be as well to search the Irishman's pockets and see if there are any letters or papers which will tell us his name? If there are, you see, I could tell the man at the Hermitage what the Irishman's name is, and if it's somebody he knows he may be more willing to help."

The detective agreed that this was a good idea, and forthwith proceeded to carry it out. The result, however, was disappointing. The only things he found in the Irishman's pockets were a plug of tobacco, a clay pipe, some loose matches, a knife, a couple of shillings, and a few coppers. In none of his pockets was there any letter or paper to give any clue to his identity.

Five minutes later Nipper stood once more outside the front door of the

Hermitage. He knocked, and again somebody ran upstairs and flung open a bedroom window.

"Don't be alarmed!" he called out, as again that dazzling light shone down on his upturned face. "It's only me!"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" growled the man at the window. "Why have you come back. What do you want now?"

"A man has been shot," said Nipper, "and we want to know if we may bring him to your house."

"Accidentally shot, do you mean?"

"No. We didn't see it happen, but it certainly wasn't accidental. We were walking down that lane you told us of, and all at once we heard a shout for help. The next minute we heard a revolver shot, and when we reached the bottom of the lane we found a man lying by the signpost with a bullet-wound in his temple."

"Dead?"

"No, he isn't dead; but he's quite unconscious."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"A labourer by the look of his clothes, and an Irishman by the cut of his jib!"

The man at the window started, and the hand which held the electric torch trembled so violently that the light danced to and fro on the garden-path like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"An Irishman!" he repeated, in an agitated voice. "Can it be—— No, no; impossible! And yet——"

He vanished from the window, and Nipper heard him hurrying downstairs. He unfastened the front door—which was locked and bolted and chained—and dragged it open.

"Come inside for a minute," he said. "I want to ask you a few questions."

By the light of the lamp that was burning in the front passage Nipper now, for the first time, saw the man distinctly. He was a middle-aged man, tall and erect, with a clean-shaven face and hair that was tinged with grey. In spite of the excitement under which he was labouring, his face was deathly white, and there was a look of haunting terror in his eyes which reminded Nipper of nothing so much as a hunted animal that was expecting every moment to be tracked to its lair. His clothes were good, and stylishly cut, but he wore them awkwardly, as one not accustomed to such luxuries. He had extinguished his torch and thrust it into his pocket, but he still carried the revolver.

"Now tell me more about this man who has been shot," he said, after closing the door. "Have you ascertained his name?"

"Haven't I told you he's unconscious?"

"You might have searched his pockets."

"We did, but we didn't find any clue to his name or address."

"Then how do you know he's an Irishman?"

"By his general appearance, that's all."

"Describe him to me."

"Come and have a look at him yourself," suggested Nipper. "That'll be better than my describing him."

"Describe him!" said the man fiercely. "Is there, for instance, anything peculiar about his right hand?"

"There is," said Nipper. "The first and second fingers are missing."

"I knew it!" cried the man. "It is he! But I must make sure." He turned to Nipper. "Wait here half a minute," he said. "I want to show you a photograph, and I want you to tell me if you recognise it."

Without waiting for Nipper's reply, he darted from the room, slamming

the door to behind him. He ran upstairs, and entered a bedroom on the first floor. After lighting a candle which stood on a chest of drawers, he drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and was about to unlock one of the drawers when a low hissing voice, scarcely above a whisper, fell on his startled ears.

"So at last I have found you, John Needham!"

Needham, for such was his name, spun round with a strangled cry. Crouching in the doorway of the bedroom, like a panther preparing to spring, stood a slightly-built but wiry-looking man, whose small black eyes were glittering with mingled hate and triumph. His left coat-sleeve was empty, and the end of it was thrust into the side-pocket of his jacket. In his right hand gleamed a revolver, the muzzle of which was levelled at John Needham's head.

"Sunlight!" moaned John Needham, and the bunch of keys fell from his shaking hand and clattered noisily to the floor.

CHAPTER III.

At Bay.

"YES, it's Sunlight," said the one-armed man, advancing a few paces into the room and still covering Needham with his revolver. "It has been a long and weary search, and at times I've despaired of ever finding you, but at last my luck has turned, and to-night I've found you both!"

Needham started.

"Both!" he echoed. "Was it you, then, who—who——"

"Who shot O'Grady?" said the man called Sunlight. "It was! I discovered this afternoon—never mind how—that you were living at this house in the name of Nixon. I set out to pay you a surprise visit, and at the bottom of a lane near here I overtook a man who was striking matches and trying to read the directions on a signpost. By the light of one of the matches I saw his face, and recognised him instantly. It was O'Grady!"

"Think of it!" he chuckled. "For months I'd been searching for you and O'Grady. At last I get news of you, but I can get no news of O'Grady. And then, on my way to your house, I accidentally meet O'Grady! How's that for luck? He was living with you here, I suppose?"

Needham shook his head.

"Where was he living, then?" demanded Sunlight.

Again Needham shook his head.

"I—I don't know," he faltered. "I—I had lost sight of him."

Sunlight looked puzzled; then a light broke on him.

"You treacherous hound!" he hissed, and his voice quivered with contempt. "You're viler than I took you for—and that's saying a lot! I can guess now what has happened. After plotting with O'Grady to rob me of my share of the plunder, you played O'Grady false and robbed him, too! Isn't that so?"

Needham did not answer, but the shamed look on his face was a sufficient proof that Sunlight had spoken the truth.

"I might have guessed it from the state of O'Grady's clothes," said the latter. "I might have known that he wouldn't have been in rags if he had had his share. So that's how the land lies, is it? First of all, with O'Grady's help, you swindled me, and then you swindled O'Grady and collared the lot for yourself. You cur! If I'd known this before, I might have showed more mercy to O'Grady. But he didn't give me time to

question him. As soon as he recognised me, he let out a shout for help and I heard somebody running down the lane, so I plugged a bullet into him and took to my heels."

"Do you know who it was who was running down the lane?" asked Needham, hoping to intimidate Sunlight with the news that the famous detective was near at hand.

"I neither know nor care," said Sunlight carelessly.

"It was Nelson Leo and his assistant, Nipper," said Needham.

A look of dismay flitted across Sunlight's face, but he merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Nelson Leo and Nipper," he repeated. "So that's Nipper in the room downstairs, is it?"

"Yes. Nelson Leo is with O'Grady, and Nipper has come to ask me if——"

"I know all about that," interrupted Sunlight. "After I'd settled accounts with O'Grady I cut across the fields to this house. While I was examining the doors and windows, I heard Nipper—though I didn't know it was Nipper at the time—coming up the garden path. I concealed myself and heard all that passed between you. I saw you admit him into the house, and I noticed that you left the door unfastened; so while you were talking to him in that room at the back, I quietly opened the door and stole into one of the rooms at the front. When I heard you go upstairs, I crept out of my hiding-place and followed you.

"And now what have you to say for yourself?" he concluded, coming a pace or two nearer and hardening his voice. "You are absolutely in my power now, and there's nothing to prevent my treating you as I've already treated O'Grady. If I only wanted revenge, I should shoot you without any further parley. But that would be killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. I want something more than empty revenge. Can you guess what it is?"

"Yes," said Needham eagerly. "And you shall have it. I'll give it to you now."

"Ah!" said Sunlight. "So the stuff is here, in this house, is it?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"It's hidden in a place which you would never be able to find without my help. I admit I'm in your power, and I admit I've treated you badly, but you won't gain anything by shooting me. If you kill me, my secret will die with me, and you'll never get a penny. On the other hand, if you're willing to let bygones be bygones, I'm prepared to make amends."

"What's your idea of making amends? What are you prepared to give me if I spare your life?"

"Your share, of course. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Sunlight's lip curled in a contemptuous smile.

"I must have the lot," he said—"the whole lot!"

"The whole lot?" repeated Needham blankly.

"All that remains, at any rate," said Sunlight. "No doubt you've sold some of the things to buy this house and furniture. All that remains is what I want, and what I mean to have!"

As he uttered these words he took a quick step forward and clapped the muzzle of his revolver to Needham's temple.

"What is your answer?" he said sternly. "Quick! We've wasted more than enough time already. Nipper will be growing suspicious, and Nelson Leo may arrive at any moment. Are you prepared to show me where the stuff is hidden, and hand it over to me on condition that I spare your life?"

"Yes," said Needham, who had suddenly thought of a daring plan for

outwitting his companion. "Your terms are hard, but I've no choice but to accept."

"That's so," said Sunlight. "And now where is the stuff hidden?"

"In the chimney of one of the bedrooms on the second floor. Shall I lead the way?"

"Presently! You have a revolver in your pocket, I believe. I must relieve you of that before we leave this room."

"You don't trust me, then?"

"I don't! I know you, you see! Draw the revolver out of your pocket by the barrel, and drop it at your feet!"

Needham sullenly obeyed.

"Now turn round," commanded Sunlight, removing the muzzle of his revolver from Needham's temple, but still keeping the weapon pointed at his head.

Needham turned round so that his back was to Sunlight and his face to the chest of drawers. On the top of the chest, it will be remembered, stood a lighted candle.

"Pick up that candle," ordered Sunlight.

Again Needham obeyed.

"Now lead the way to the room in which the stuff is hidden," said Sunlight. "I shall walk behind you, and the muzzle of my revolver will never be more than an inch from the back of your head. At the slightest sign of treachery I shall fire. Right about turn! Quick march!"

Needham walked across to the bedroom door with Sunlight at his heels. Passing through the door, he turned to the right and presently came to the foot of the stairs which led to the second floor. He mounted these stairs, with Sunlight close behind him, and on reaching the landing at the top he suddenly blew out the candle, while at the same instant he kicked out backwards with one of his legs and planted his foot in the pit of Sunlight's stomach.

Sunlight, who was then on the second stair from the top, was completely taken by surprise. Needham, of course, hoped that the kick would send him reeling down the stairs—and it very nearly did. By dropping his revolver, however, and clutching at the banister-rail with his only hand, Sunlight managed to preserve his balance, and then, as Needham spun round on the landing and shouted to Nipper for help, Sunlight leaped to the top of the stairs and seized him by the throat.

For a moment, but only for a moment, the two men grappled with each other in the darkness in a furious hand-to-hand encounter. All the odds were against the one-armed man, and the struggle would probably have ended in an easy victory for Needham if Fate had not intervened. For as Needham tore his adversary's hand from his throat, and wound his arms around his waist, he suddenly found himself falling through space.

CHAPTER IV.

Trapped!

"**W**AIT here half a minute. I want to show you a photograph, and I want you to tell me if you recognise it."

It was with these words, it will be remembered, that John Needham darted from the little room at the back of the house and slammed the door to behind him. After his departure Nipper glanced round the room and noted that all the furniture, including the carpet and the curtains, was brand-new.

"He hasn't been living here long, that's evident," he mused. "Some of these chairs look as if they'd never been sat on yet. I wonder who he is, and if he has a wife, or keeps a servant, or lives here all alone?"

"And I wonder what's the explanation of his curious behaviour to-night?" he continued. "Is he really hiding from the police, or from an enemy, as the gov'nor suggested? He certainly knows that Irishman, and I shouldn't be surprised if he knows who shot him. I wonder if he'll tell me who the Irishman is if I recognise the photo? I wonder if he'll let us bring the man to this house? I wonder——"

His musings ended in a startled gasp, for at that moment he heard an excited shout.

"Nipper! Help! Quick!"

The shout apparently came from the upper regions of the house, and was followed by the noise of a furious struggle. Quivering with excitement, Nipper sprang to the door, and as he dragged it open the house resounded with a deafening crash.

"Where are you? What has happened?" cried Nipper, as he bounded up the stairs.

There was no reply, and a moment later he reached the first-floor landing. There was no light on the landing, which, nevertheless, was faintly illuminated by the light of the lamp in the entrance-hall. A passage opened off the landing, and at the end of this passage Nipper dimly saw two figures lying at the foot of the stairs which led to the second floor. It was too dark at the end of the passage for him to see the figures distinctly, but he was able to make out that they were the figures of two men, one of whom was lying rigid and motionless, while the other was in the act of scrambling to his feet.

Dragging his flashlight from his pocket, Nipper sprinted down the passage. From head to foot he was shaking with excitement, and just as he reached the two figures, and before he had time to press the button of his torch, the flashlight slipped out of his trembling hand and fell on the floor. He stooped to pick it up, but even as he did so something struck him on the back of the head and all became blank!

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What had happened was this. When Needham and Sunlight fell down the stairs, Needham struck the floor first with the whole weight of Sunlight on the top of him. As afterwards transpired, he broke his neck, and death was instantaneous. Sunlight, on the other hand, escaped with nothing worse than a shaking, and he was in the act of scrambling to his feet when Nipper appeared at the other end of the passage.

Now Sunlight, it will be recalled, had dropped his revolver when Needham had attacked him. The weapon had rolled to the foot of the stairs, and while Nipper was sprinting down the passage, Sunlight had picked it up. And when Nipper stooped down to grope for his fallen flashlight, Sunlight suddenly flung up his hand and struck the boy a vicious blow on the back of his head with the butt-end of the revolver.

As Nipper stumbled forward and pitched on his face, Sunlight raised his hand in readiness to repeat the blow. But no second blow was required. Nipper lay where he had fallen, breathing rather noisily, but showing no other signs of life.

"So far, so good," muttered Sunlight, as he thrust his revolver into his pocket and picked up Nipper's flashlight. "Now let's see what the casualties are."

He flashed the light on Needham and saw at a glance that he was dead. "So his last act of treachery didn't profit him much," he soliloquised.

"It's a good job he told me where the stuff was hidden before he attacked me, otherwise, as he said himself, his secret would have died with him."

He examined Nipper, and found that the blow had completely stunned him, though it had not even broken the skin of his scalp.

"I needn't waste any time on him," he mused. "He'll probably be all right in an hour or so; but it won't take me more than ten minutes to find the stuff, and by the time he comes round I shall be miles away. In the meantime, Nelson Lee may grow impatient, and may come to see what's keeping the lad, so the sooner I get the stuff and disappear the better."

Needham had said that the "stuff" was hidden "in the chimney of one of the bedrooms on the second floor." Accordingly, as soon as Sunlight had satisfied himself that Nipper was unconscious, he once more mounted the stairs and proceeded to explore the various rooms on the second floor.

As he went from room to room his face grew blacker and blacker, and his eyes glittered with malignant fury. For all the rooms on the second floor were empty and unfurnished, and there was no fireplace, and consequently no chimney, in any of them!

"I might have known that he was lying!" he snarled, after relieving his feelings with a string of savage imprecations. "The treacherous hound only said the stuff was hidden up here in order to lure me into a trap. Probably the stuff isn't in the house at all. But I'll search every nook and cranny of the place before I go, and even if I don't find the stuff I may find some paper which will tell me where it is."

"I'll begin with the rooms on the ground floor," he added; "but before I start I'll fasten the front door and unfasten the back door, so that I shall have a way of escape if Nelson Lee arrives before I've finished."

He hurried downstairs and locked, bolted, and chained the front door. He then unlocked the kitchen door, which led into a yard at the back of the house, and left it slightly ajar so that he could dash out of the house at a moment's notice. This done, he commenced his search.

There is no need to describe his quest in detail. It is enough to say that in none of the rooms on the ground floor did he find what he sought, or any clue to its whereabouts.

"I'll now try the rooms on the first floor," he muttered. "I'll begin with that bedroom in which I surprised him. Now I come to think of it, there's a chest of drawers in that room, and he was just going to unlock one of the drawers when I disturbed him. Perhaps I'll find what I want in that chest of drawers."

He mounted the first flight of stairs, but before going into the bedroom he flashed his light along the passage in which Needham and Nipper lay. The former was lying in exactly the same position as before. Nipper had turned over on his side, but was still unconscious.

The bedroom door still stood wide open, and on the floor in front of the chest of drawers lay the bunch of keys which Needham had dropped in his agitation. Sunlight strode into the room, and was in the act of stooping down to pick up the keys when a sound downstairs fell on his ears and made his blood run cold.

It was the sound of a door being shut, and it came from the kitchen.

"Somebody has entered the house and shut the back door!" he gasped, swiftly extinguishing his flash-light.

Drawing his revolver from his pocket, he glided from the bedroom, and stole on tiptoe to the top of the stairs. He peered down into the entrance hall, but, although he could hear somebody moving about in the kitchen, he could not see who it was. Presently, however, he heard the new arrival coming along the passage which led from the kitchen to the entrance hall, and a moment later there emerged into view an elderly woman, wearing a

cloak and bonnet, both of which were drenched with the rain, and carrying a lighted candle.

"It's Needham's housekeeper," muttered Sunlight, with a sigh of relief.

He was right. The woman, whose name was Drew, was John Needham's housekeeper and only servant. On this eventful night, she had been spending the evening with some friends at a neighbouring farmhouse. Returning to the Hermitage, she had gone round to the back door, as was her habit, intending to let herself in with her latchkey. Somewhat to her surprise, she had found the door open and slightly ajar. Thinking that her master had forgotten to shut the door when he had come in, she had walked into the kitchen, closed the door, and lighted the hanging lamp.

Sunlight smiled to himself when he saw that he had only an old woman to deal with.

"I'll not show myself till she reaches the top of the stairs," he muttered, as he drew back into the passage where Needham and Nipper were lying. "Then I'll suddenly confront her, and clap my revolver to her head. If she doesn't faint, as she probably will, I'll bind her and gag her, and then I'll resume my search."

His plan, however, was never carried out, for just as the woman reached the foot of the stairs, which were only a few feet from the front door, she heard someone coming up the garden-path outside.

Wondering who it could be at that late hour, and knowing by experience how nervous her master was, she resolved not to wait until the new-comer knocked, but to open the door at once and ascertain his business. Accordingly, she set her candle down on the stairs, and hastily unfastened the door.

Sunlight had not heard the footsteps on the path outside, but needless to say he heard Mrs. Drew unlock and unbolt and unchain the door.

"What the dickens is she up to now?" he growled. "Why is she unfastening the door?"

Puzzled and somewhat anxious, but not seriously alarmed, he once more stole to the top of the stairs and peered down into the entrance hall.

And even as he did so, the woman opened the door, and the light of the hall lamp shone on the wet and glistening figure of Nelson Lee.

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CHAPTER V.

The Housekeeper's Discovery.

WHEN nearly half an hour had passed without any sign of the boy, Nelson Lee became impatient, and he had almost decided to walk up to the Hermitage and ascertain the cause of the delay when he saw the lights of a car that was coming down the road, and apparently making for Exham.

As the car approached the end of the lane, the detective stepped into the middle of the road and hailed it. The car at once slowed down, and as it came to a standstill he saw that it was a small four-seater, with a liveried chauffeur at the steering-wheel and a well-dressed couple, who appeared to be husband and wife, in the body of the car.

"Excuse my stopping you," said Nelson Lee, raising his hat, "but I thought you might, perhaps, be willing to do an act of kindness to a poor man who, I very much suspect, has met with foul play."

At the words "foul play," the lady passenger uttered a frightened exclamation. Her husband quickly opened the door of the car and stepped down into the road.

"Foul play!" he repeated. "What has—— But pardon me! Surely

I know your face! Are you not Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective?"

"Leave out the adjective, and I plead guilty," said Nelson Lee with a smile.

The man shook him warmly by the hand.

"I'm delighted to meet you," he said. "I've often heard of you, of course, and I've seen you once or twice; but this is the first time I've had the pleasure of speaking to you. Permit me to introduce myself. I'm Dr. Barton, of Exham. This is my wife. She has been spending the day at Treeton, and she intended to return to Exham by train; but there's been a breakdown on the line, so she wired to me to fetch her home in the car.

"But these personal details won't interest you; of course," he broke off. "You spoke just now of foul play. What has happened?"

The detective explained how he and Nipper had been walking down the lane when they had heard a shout for help, followed by a revolver-shot. He described how they had run to the bottom of the lane, and had there found an unconscious man with a bullet wound in his temple.

"I don't think the man is fatally or even seriously injured," he concluded. "But on that point your opinion will be more valuable than mine."

"Where is he?" asked the doctor.

Nelson Lee conducted him to where the Irishman lay, and Dr. Barton examined him.

"You're quite right," he said. "He has had a narrow escape, but with care and attention he'll soon be all right. I suppose you don't know who he is, or where he comes from?"

"No."

"And you've no idea, of course, who shot him?"

"Not the least. I know no more than you."

"Ah, well, the man no doubt will tell us when he comes round. In the meantime, he ought to be taken to the hospital as quickly as possible."

"That's why I took the liberty of hailing you. I didn't know that you were a doctor, of course, but I thought you might be willing to take him to the hospital in your car."

"Certainly I will. If my wife sits by the side of the chauffeur, there'll be plenty of room for the man and myself at the back. But what about you? Did I understand you to say that you were on your way to Exham when this happened?"

"Yes. I'd hoped to catch the London express, but that's out of the question now, of course."

"Then what will you do?"

"I must first find Nipper, and then we'll walk to Exham and put up for the night at one of the hotels."

"That reminds me! Where is Nipper?"

"There's a house not far from the top of this lane—the Hermitage. Do you know it?"

"Oh, yes! It was built many years ago by an eccentric artist, who died soon after it was completed. After his death, it stood empty for nine or ten years; but I heard a little while ago that it had been bought or rented by a man named Nixon, who has taken up his residence there with an old woman to act as his housekeeper. Is that where Nipper is?"

"I expect so."

"Then Mr. Nixon is a friend of yours?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Do you know Mr. Nixon?" he asked.

"No."

"I thought not, or you wouldn't have asked if he was a friend of mine!"

"Why?"

The detective described the extraordinary fashion in which "Mr. Nixon" had behaved when he and Nipper had called at the house to ask their way to Exham.

"The man must be mad!" declared the doctor.

"That's what Nipper said! However, when we found this man, I could think of nothing better to do than to send Nipper back to the Hermitage to ask if Mr. Nixon would take the man in. It's over an hour since Nipper left me, and I can't understand why he hasn't returned before now!"

"I hope the lunatic hasn't shot him, or anything like that," said the doctor anxiously.

"Oh, I don't think there's any fear of that," said Nelson Lee. "I expect Mr. Nixon refused to take the man in, and directed Nipper to some neighbouring house where he could hire a conveyance. All the same, I don't mind confessing that I'm feeling just a wee bit anxious about the boy, so if you'll take this man to Exham in your car, I'll walk back to the Hermitage and ascertain what has happened."

The doctor hesitated.

"I'd like to go with you and see if Nipper's all right," he said. "But if this man's life is to be saved, he ought to be taken to the hospital without any further delay."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he added. "I'll run this man to the hospital, then I'll drop my wife at our house, and then I'll come back. If I meet you and Nipper on the road, well and good. If I don't, I shall motor up to the Hermitage and interview Mr. Nixon."

"And in any case," he concluded, "I decline to hear of you and Nipper staying at an hotel. You will spend the night at my house, of course. I insist on it!"

To make a long story short, this plan was adopted, and, after the unconscious Irishman had been lifted into the car, the car bowled off in the direction of Exham, while Nelson Lee trudged up the lane and retraced his steps to the Hermitage.

As he was walking up the garden path, he heard somebody unfastening the front door, and, just as he reached the door, it was opened, revealing the figure of an elderly woman, wearing a cloak and bonnet, both of which were drenched with the rain. It was Mrs. Drew, of course.

"Is Mr. Nixon in?" asked Nelson Lee, raising his hat.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Is there anyone with him?"

"I don't think so, sir, but I'm not sure, for I've been out all the evening and have only just come in."

"Will you please inquire? Say to Mr. Nixon that Mr. Nelson Lee has called to ask if Nipper is here."

"I will, sir. But won't you come in out of the rain?"

The detective stepped into the entrance-hall and Mrs. Drew closed the door. Leaving him standing on the mat, she went to the door of the little back-sitting-room and knocked. Receiving no reply, she opened the door, and saw to her surprise that there was nobody there. She opened the doors of the dining-room and the still unfurnished drawing-room, but saw that both were in darkness.

All this time Sunlight was standing outside the bedroom door, a prey to mingled fear and dismay. Now it was too late, he cursed his folly in remaining so long in the house. He was trapped. With Nelson Lee standing at the foot of the stairs, escape was impossible!

"I'm afraid Mr. Nixon must have gone to bed, sir," said Mrs. Drew to Nelson Lee, "though it's very unlike him to go to bed and leave the lamp burning in the sitting-room. I'll just slip upstairs and see."

She picked up the lighted candle and started to mount the stairs. Hearing her coming, Sunlight swiftly drew back into the bedroom, dropped on his hands and knees, and crawled under the bed.

On reaching the landing at the top of the staircase, Mrs. Drew turned into the passage which led to her master's bedroom. No sooner had she done so than, by the light of her candle, she saw the two prostrate forms at the other end of the passage.

For a moment she stood staring at them in speechless, terrified stupefaction. Then she dropped her candle and let out a startled scream, which brought the detective bounding up the stairs as fast as his feet would carry him.

CHAPTER. VI.

The Sealed Envelope.

WHAT is it? What's the matter?" cried Nelson Lee.

Mrs. Drew seemed deprived of the power of speech. Pressing one hand to her wildly-beating heart, she pointed with the other to the end of the passage.

Glancing in that direction, the detective saw the two figures, and recognised one as Nipper. For a moment his heart stood still, for he thought that Nipper was dead, and all his faculties were numbed and paralysed. Then, with a heart-broken sob, he staggered down the passage and threw himself on his knees beside the boy.

A very brief examination showed him that Nipper was not dead, and was already showing signs of returning consciousness. This discovery roused Nelson Lee from his stupor, and he became once more the alert and business-like investigator. He rapidly examined Nipper's companion in misfortune, and saw at a glance that the man was dead. Then he turned to Mrs. Drew, who was still standing at the other end of the passage, watching him with dilated eyes.

"Pick up that candle and those matches," he commanded. "Then light the candle and come here."

With trembling hands she obeyed, and tottered to his side.

"Is this Mr. Nixon?" he asked, pointing to the man.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Is he—is he——"

"Dead? Yes," he answered. "He appears to have fallen down these stairs and broken his neck."

"And who—who is the boy?" she whispered.

"My assistant—Nipper. I sent him here with a message for Mr. Nixon, and as he didn't return I followed him."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"The only injury I can find is a bruise on the back of his head, which may have been caused by a blow, or which may have been caused by his falling down these stairs, like Mr. Nixon."

"Oughtn't he to be undressed and put to bed, sir?" she suggested.

"I don't think there's any necessity to undress him," he said, "but he would certainly be more comfortable on a bed, or on a couch, than lying on the floor."

She pointed to the door of the room in which Sunlight was hiding.

"That's Mr. Nixon's bedroom," she said. "Would you like to lay him on the bed in there?"

"Thank you, I think I will," said Nelson Lee.

He picked up Nipper in his arms, and Mrs. Drew led the way into the

bedroom. The detective laid Nipper on the bed, little dreaming who was hiding underneath it, and just as he did so, somebody knocked loudly at the front door.

"Don't be alarmed," said Nelson Lee, as Mrs. Drew started and began to tremble again. "Stay here with Nipper, and I'll see who it is."

Drawing his revolver from his pocket, but keeping it concealed behind his back, he hurried downstairs and opened the front door. Outside, with one hand resting on the handle-bars of a bicycle, stood a man in the uniform of an inspector of police.

"Mr. Nelson Lee?" he asked, touching his cap.

"That's me!" said the detective.

"I'm Inspector Pratt, of the Exham police," said the new arrival. "I was cycling out in this direction when I met Dr. Barton's car. The doctor told me what had happened, and he also told me you were anxious about Nipper. He said you had gone back to the Hermitage, and he advised me to follow you and see if you needed any help."

"That was very thoughtful of Dr. Barton," said Nelson Lee. "Although I don't need your help on Nipper's account, I'm very glad you've come. Events have happened in this house to-night which, unless I'm greatly mistaken, will provide the police with plenty of work. For example, Mr. Nixon has been killed."

"Killed!" echoed the startled inspector.

"And Nipper has been stunned," added Nelson Lee. "What has happened I cannot tell you, but as Nipper appears to be on the point of regaining consciousness, I hope it won't be long before the mystery is cleared up. In the meantime," he added, "you'd better come in and take official charge of the case."

Leaving his bicycle outside, the inspector stepped into the entrance-hall; and after Nelson Lee had locked the door, he led the way upstairs.

Nipper was still unconscious, and while they were waiting for him to come round, the inspector turned to Mrs. Drew.

"Now, what do you know of this affair?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied. "I went out about four o'clock this afternoon to visit some friends at Moorland Farm. Mr. Nixon was all right when I left, and was reading and smoking in the little back-sitting-room. When I returned, about half an hour ago, I found the back door open. I was rather surprised at that, but I concluded that Mr. Nixon had been out into the yard, and had forgotten to close the door when he came in."

"I expected he was still in the sitting-room," she continued, "and I was on my way to my room to change my things when Mr. Lee arrived. He asked to see Mr. Nixon, but when I went to the sitting-room I discovered that Mr. Nixon wasn't there. I came upstairs to see if he had gone to bed, and as soon as I reached the top of the stairs, I saw Mr. Nixon and Nipper lying at the end of the passage. And that's all I know."

The inspector went to the end of the passage and satisfied himself that "Mr. Nixon" was dead. He then returned to the bedroom and resumed his cross-examination of the housekeeper.

"How long have you been in Mr. Nixon's employ?" he asked.

"About six weeks," she answered. "He advertised for a housekeeper, and I answered the advertisement, and he engaged me."

"How did he spend his time?"

"Mostly in reading and smoking. He hardly ever went out, and when he did, it was always at night. He was a very nervous man, and always carried a revolver, which he kept under his pillow at night. In fact, his manner was so strange that I often used to think he was in fear for his life."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, he seemed to me as if he knew that somebody was seeking for him to do him an injury. For instance, whenever anybody knocked at the door, he used to pull out his revolver and run upstairs and look out of his bedroom window to see who it was."

"That's what he did when Nipper and I called here to-night," said Nelson Lee to the inspector. "I suspected at the time that he was hiding, either from the police or from an enemy, and this woman's statement confirms my suspicion. Do you know anything about the man?"

"Nothing whatever," said the inspector. "I knew that man named Nixon had come to live at the Hermitage, but that's all I—— Ah, he's coming round at last!"

Nipper had stirred uneasily on the bed and had opened his eyes. For a second or two he stared at Nelson Lee, then his lids drooped over his eyes again.

The detective turned to Mrs. Drew.

"If you're not afraid to go downstairs," he said, "I should be much obliged if you'd brew a cup of strong tea for Nipper. By the time the tea's ready he'll be able to swallow it, and there's nothing like hot tea for reviving a fellow."

Mrs. Drew departed, and a moment later they heard her bustling about in the kitchen.

"You don't think she's hiding anything from us, do you?" asked the inspector.

"Not for a moment," said Nelson Lee emphatically. "I'm sure she has told us all she knows."

"It's a mysterious affair," said the inspector musingly. "I wonder if there's any connection between Mr. Nixon's death and the shooting of that Irishman?"

"I wonder, too," said Nelson Lee. "I suppose you don't know who the Irishman is?"

"Oh, yes!" said the inspector. "I meant to have told you before, but your news drove it out of my mind. As soon as I saw the Irishman in Dr. Barton's car, I recognised him as a man who was up before the Exham bench a little while ago for being drunk and disorderly. His name's O'Grady, and at the time of his conviction he was living at a common lodging-house in Exham. He was formerly a private in the Army, and fought in France and Flanders. He was wounded at the battle of the Marne—had two fingers of his right hand shot away, in consequence of which he was discharged as medically unfit. Since he left the Army he seems to have moved about from place to place, never staying very long anywhere, until eventually he was fetched up at Exham."

As he finished speaking, Nipper opened his eyes again; while at the same instant Mrs. Drew came into the bedroom with a cup of steaming tea on a tray and a puzzled look on her face.

"More mystery!" she exclaimed. "While I was waiting for the kettle to boil, I went to the dining-room for a tray. To my surprise I found that all the drawers in the sideboard had been opened and their contents littered about the floor. I then looked into the drawing-room, and found that that room had also been ransacked—just as if somebody had been searching for something in a great hurry. It's the same in the sitting-room—I can't think why I didn't notice it before!—but nothing appears to have been stolen. What does it mean?"

Without replying, the inspector darted from the room and ran downstairs.

He came back in about three minutes, looking just as puzzled as Mrs. Drew had looked.

"It's quite true," he said. "All three rooms have evidently and quite recently been subjected to a hasty but very thorough search. It can't have been Mr. Nixon who ransacked the rooms, and it can't have been Nipper or Mrs. Drew. Then who was it?"

Nelson Lee, who was holding the cup to Nipper's lips, shook his head.

"I can't imagine," he said. "The whole business is an inexplicable mystery to me at present, but Nipper will probably be able to throw some light on it in a minute or two. He's rapidly coming to himself, aren't you, old man?"

Nipper finished the tea and nodded his head. His expression was still rather dazed and vacant-looking, but was growing more normal every moment.

"Yes, I'm all right now," he said, in a shaky voice which belied his words. "Where am—— What has—— Oh, yes, I remember now! Have you got the man?"

"What man?" asked the detective and the inspector in the same breath.

"The man who gave me this knock on the head," said Nipper, touching the bruise on the back of his head.

"We've got nobody, and we've seen nobody," said Nelson Lee. "We know nothing of what has happened since you left me at the bottom of the lane. Begin at the beginning and tell us all about it."

And in a voice that gradually grew stronger Nipper told his story.

"The man who was lying quite still," said Nelson Lee, when Nipper had concluded, "was the man you had interviewed, and his name was Nixon. He and the other man had evidently fallen down the stairs, and Nixon broke his neck. He must have been killed on the spot."

"And who was the other man?" asked Nipper.

"That's just what we'd like to know," said the inspector. "What was he like? Describe him to us."

"I can't," said Nipper. "It was dark in the passage, and I never saw his features. I'm sure he was a man, and not a woman, but that's all I can say for certain."

"Then you wouldn't know him again if you saw him?"

"Oh, no! I haven't the least idea what he was like."

The inspector sighed, and turned to Nelson Lee.

"So Nipper hasn't thrown much light on the mystery, after all, has he?" he said.

Instead of replying, the detective addressed himself to Nipper.

"When Mr. Nixon admitted you into the house," he asked, "did he lock the front door again before he took you to the sitting-room?"

"No," said Nipper. "I noticed at the time that he simply shut the door, but didn't fasten it in any way."

"Then I think I can guess what happened," said Nelson Lee.

He turned to the inspector.

"You'll agree with me, I expect," he said, "that in all probability there's some connection between the shooting of O'Grady and the death of Mr. Nixon?"

"I don't think there's any doubt about that," said the inspector.

"Very well," said Nelson Lee. "As you say, Nipper may not have thrown much light on the mystery; but, after hearing his story, I think I can guess what happened. My notion is that the man who shot O'Grady had a grudge against both O'Grady and Nixon. After shooting O'Grady, he made his way to this house, intending to shoot Nixon. While he was examining the outside of the house and trying to discover a way of breaking

in, he saw Nipper arrive. He saw Nixon admit Nipper into the house, and he noticed that he left the door unlocked, so he opened the door and slipped in. When Nixon went upstairs for the photograph, the man stole after him. They had a struggle on the top landing, in the course of which they fell downstairs. Nixon was killed, but the man escaped unhurt, and afterwards stunned Nipper in the way that Nipper has described."

"And then?" queried the inspector.

"After stunning Nipper," said Nelson Lee, "he proceeded to search the rooms downstairs."

"What for?"

"I don't know," confessed Nelson Lee. "It is clear, however, that he ransacked the dining-room, the drawing-room, and the sitting-room. Apparently he found what he wanted in one of those rooms, and then he took his departure by the back door, which he forgot to shut behind him. Possibly he had only just left the house when Mrs. Drew arrived."

The inspector was not greatly impressed.

"Your theory sounds very plausible," he said. "It hangs together very well, and I dare say it's right. All the same, it doesn't go far towards solving the mystery, does it? It leaves all the really important questions unanswered. Who was the man who shot O'Grady? What was his grudge against O'Grady and Nixon? What was he searching for when he ransacked the rooms downstairs?"

"O'Grady will probably be able to answer most of those questions when he recovers consciousness," said Nelson Lee. "In the meantime we ourselves might be able to answer them if we knew a little more of Mr. Nixon's antecedents and past history."

"But how are we to find out anything about his past history?" said the inspector. "Mrs. Drew can tell us nothing, she says, and he himself is dead. Of course, I'll make inquiries in Exham——"

"Why not start your inquiries here?" interrupted Nelson Lee.

"Here?" echoed the inspector.

"Here," repeated Nelson Lee. "In this house—now!"

The inspector nodded.

"I see your idea," he said. "You think, if we search the house, we may find some letters or other documents which will furnish us with a clue to the mystery."

"Exactly."

The inspector looked dubious.

"I expect if there were any papers in the house," he said, "that fellow who stunned Nipper will have found them and taken them away with him. However, it's worth while putting your suggestion to the test."

He turned to Mrs. Drew.

"Do you know where your master kept his private papers?" he asked.

"I don't," she replied. "In fact, I don't know if he had any private papers; but if he had"—she pointed to the chest of drawers—"they'll be in there. Those are the only drawers in the house which he always kept locked, and nobody but himself was ever allowed to open them."

"Then I'll start on that chest of drawers," said the inspector. "The keys, I expect——"

He was going to say "will be in Mr. Nixon's pocket," but while the words were trembling on his lips, his eyes fell on the bunch of keys which was lying on the floor where their owner had dropped them when Sunlight had surprised him.

"Are these Mr. Nixon's keys?" he asked, picking them up and showing them to Mrs. Drew.

"Yes," she answered. "I wonder why they were lying there? I never knew him leave them about before."

The inspector tried the keys until he found the one that unlocked the drawers. Nelson Lee came over from the bedside to assist in the search, while Mrs. Drew watched the proceedings in interested silence.

There were five drawers in all—two small ones at the top, and three long ones underneath. The inspector first unlocked one of the small ones, and the first thing he drew out was a metal cash-box which, on being opened with another key, proved to contain about seventy pounds in treasury notes.

By the side of the cashbox was an unused private postcard, on the back of which was a photograph of a man in the uniform of the Wiltshire Light Infantry, and the moment the inspector drew it out, both he and Nelson Lee uttered the same exclamation.

"O'Grady!" they exclaimed. And Nelson Lee added: "That's the photograph which Mr. Nixon was going to show to Nipper."

The inspector agreed, and laid the photograph aside. He then drew from the drawer in rapid succession a box of blank notepaper, a packet of unused envelopes, a book of stamps, and several sheets of blotting-paper.

"There doesn't seem to be anything else of imp——" he began.

Then he checked himself, for as he spoke his eyes fell on a rather bulky envelope which had been lying at the bottom of the drawer under all the other things.

"I spoke too soon," he said. "Here's something else—and something interesting, too, by the look of it."

"What is it?" asked Nipper, as the inspector drew it from the drawer and showed it to Nelson Lee.

"A foolscap envelope, sealed with three red wafers," said the inspector.

"With an inscription on the outside, presumably in Mr. Nixon's writing," added Nelson Lee.

Nipper was consumed with curiosity.

"Bo a pal!" he said pleadingly. "Don't keep me in suspense! Read out what it says on the envelope."

The inspector smilingly complied.

"'Strictly private and confidential,'" he read. "'Not to be opened until I am dead. This envelope contains my will and other private papers. Whoever finds it after my death is earnestly requested to forward it, unopened, to Miss Margaret Beresford, sister-in-charge of the Red Cross Hospital, Lingdale.'"

And Sunlight, hiding under the bed, when he heard the inspector read these words, had need of all his self-control to repress the savage imprecation which rose to his lips.

CHAPTER VII.

A Romance of the War.

"MISS MARGARET BERESFORD," said Nipper musingly. "The name sounds awfully familiar. I'm sure I've either seen it or heard it quite recently."

"So am I," said Nelson Lee; "but I can't remember when or where I——"

"I know!" cried Nipper suddenly. "'A Romance of the War!'"

"Yes, by Jove, you're right!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "That's where we saw the name!"

The inspector and Mrs. Drew looked at them with puzzled eyes.

"You may know what you're talking about," growled the inspector, "but I'll be hanged if I do!"

The detective laughed.

"We're talking about a paragraph which appeared in the 'Daily ——' about a week ago," he said. "It was headed 'A Romance of the War. Peer's son becomes engaged to Red Cross nurse.' Didn't you see it?"

"If I did, I've forgotten," said the inspector. "And was the Red Cross nurse Miss Margaret Beresford?"

"Yes."

"And who was the peer's son?"

"Captain the Honourable Eric Norwood, only son and heir of Lord and Lady Delaval."

A reminiscent gleam came into the inspector's eyes.

"I can't say that I ever heard of the Honourable Eric," he said; "but I remember hearing a lot about Lady Delaval about eighteen months or two years ago. It was in all the papers at the time. You know to what I refer, of course?"

"Oh, yes," said Nelson Lee. "The theft of Lady Delaval's famous diamonds."

"I remember the case, too," said Mrs. Drew, anxious to show off her knowledge. "Lord and Lady Delaval had gone up to London to attend a state ball at Buckingham Palace. As their town house was under repair at the time, they stayed at the Hotel Majestic, and on the night of their arrival Lady Delaval's jewel-case, containing jewels to the value of over fifty thousand pounds, was stolen from her bedroom."

"That's so!" said Nelson Lee. "The thief was never discovered, and the jewels were never traced."

"And Lady Delaval's son, you say," said the inspector, "is now engaged to be married to Miss Margaret Beresford?"

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "The Honourable Eric was a lieutenant in the Army, and was promoted to be captain on the outbreak of war. He went out with the original expeditionary force, and was wounded at the second battle of Ypres. After being treated at one of the base hospitals, he was transferred to the Red Cross hospital at Lingdale, where he fell in love with the Sister in charge, and obtained her promise to marry him. According to the 'Daily ——' the captain is under orders to return to the front at the end of this month, and the wedding is to take place before he goes out."

The inspector gazed again at the sealed envelope, and scratched his head.

"And where does this come in, I wonder?" he said. "Why do we find, in the house of an obscure person like Mr. Nixon, a sealed envelope addressed to the future wife of the future Lord Delaval?"

"Ask me another!" smiled Nelson Lee. "After all, however, there may be nothing strange about it. For anything we know, Mr. Nixon may have been a relative of Miss Beresford's."

"I don't think much of that theory!" said the inspector bluntly. "I wish I knew what was inside this envelope. I suppose—er—I mustn't—er—open it?"

"Certainly not!" said Nelson Lee decisively. "The directions are perfectly clear and explicit. The envelope is to be forwarded unopened to Miss Beresford. Neither you nor I, nor anybody but Miss Beresford, has a right to open it!"

The inspector sighed, and, after another covetous glance at the outside of the envelope, he thrust it into the inside pocket of his tunic.

"You're right, of course," he said. "I'll take the envelope back with me to Exham to-night, and show it to the chief, and ask him to let me take

it to Lingdale and deliver it to Miss Beresford in person. Then, perhaps, she'll open it in my presence, and tell me what it contains."

"Yes. That'll be your best plan," agreed Nelson Lee. "In the meantime, we'd better examine the other drawers in this chest, and see if they contain any papers."

They unlocked and opened the rest of the drawers, but found nothing in them of interest.

"What other rooms are there which we can search?" asked the inspector of Mrs. Drew.

"The only other furnished room on this floor is my bedroom," she answered, "and I assure you there are no papers belonging to Mr. Nixon there. All the other rooms on this floor, and all the rooms on the top floor, are empty and unfurnished. Of course," she added, "there are the rooms downstairs—the kitchen, the dining-room, the drawing-room, and the little back sitting-room—if you think it worth while searching them."

"I don't suppose it is," said the inspector. "If there were any papers of importance in any of those rooms, that fellow who stunned Nipper will no doubt have taken them away with him. However, we may as well have a look."

"May I come with you?" asked Nipper, as they turned to leave the room. "I'm all right now, you know."

The detective hesitated before he replied.

"I think not," he said at last. "Dr. Barton, you'll remember, promised to come back for us and take us to his house in his car. He ought to be here in a few minutes, and your safest plan will be to remain where you are and not exert yourself until the car arrives."

"Do you mean you're going to leave me?" cried Mrs. Drew in dismay. "I—I can't be left all by myself, with a dead man in the house!"

"You sha'n't!" said the inspector. "When the doctor arrives to take Mr. Lee and Nipper to Exham, I'll ask him to call at the central police-station, and ask the chief to send out a couple of constables to take possession of the house. I'll stay with you till the constables arrive, so you won't be left alone for a single minute."

"And now," he concluded, "let's go downstairs and finish our search."

Leaving Nipper in the bedroom, they trooped downstairs and explored the rooms of the ground floor. Here again, however, they found nothing of interest, and they had just completed their search when somebody knocked at the front door.

"Dr. Barton!" said Nelson Lee.

It was not the doctor, however, but his chauffeur.

"Dr. Barton's compliments," he said to Nelson Lee, "and when he got home, he found an urgent message to go and see a patient who 'ad been taken seriously ill. He's sorry he couldn't come for you 'imself, but he's sent the car, and I'm to take you and Master Nipper to 'is 'ouse as soon as you're ready."

"We're practically ready now," said Nelson Lee. "The car is at the gate, I see. We'll be with you in a few minutes."

The chauffeur went back to the car, and Nelson Lee and his two companions returned to the bedroom where they had left Nipper.

"The car has arrived," said Nelson Lee. "You can get up now."

Nipper hopped off the bed, and the detective turned to the inspector.

"Before we go," he said, "I'll help you to carry Mr. Nixon into this room and lay him on the bed."

When this had been done, the detective—still in the bedroom, with Sunlight listening to every word—held out his hand to the inspector.

"Good-bye for the present," he said. "I'll call at the police-station and deliver your message. I shall spend the night at Dr. Barton's, and, if he'll have me, I shall stay there until after the inquest. When shall I see you again?"

"To-morrow morning, probably," said the inspector. "I shall stay with Mrs. Drew until the constables arrive, and I shall then cycle back to Exham and make my report to the chief. If he gives me permission to go to Lingdale, I shall leave by the first train in the morning, and I'll call at the doctor's on my way to the station."

Two minutes later, Nelson Lee and Nipper were on their way to Exham in the doctor's car, and the inspector was explaining to Mrs. Drew how very grateful he would be to her if she would make him a cup of tea and give him "a bite of something to eat."

CHAPTER VIII.

Victory I

ALL this time, the man called Sunlight had been lying under the bed, not daring to move and hardly daring to breathe.

He heard the detective carrying Nipper into the room and lay him on the bed. He heard the inspector arrive and question Mrs. Drew, and he heard Nipper tell his story.

He was greatly relieved when he heard Nipper confess that he could not describe the man who had stunned him, and would not recognise him if he saw him. And he was still more mightily relieved when he heard Nelson Lee say: "Apparently he found what he wanted, and took his departure by the back door."

"So that's all right!" chuckled Sunlight. "I'm safe for the present. They don't suspect that I'm still in the house. They think I left before Mrs. Drew arrived."

He heard Nelson Lee suggest that they should search for papers, and a little later he heard the inspector unlock and open one of the drawers in the chest. He tingled with excitement and literally held his breath when he heard the inspector say that he had found a sealed envelope, and, when he heard the inspector read the inscription on the outside of the envelope, he had need of all his self-control to repress the savage imprecations which rose to his lips.

"So that's how the snivelling cur proposed to salve his conscience, is it?" he muttered. "He hadn't the honesty to return the jewels to their rightful owner; but, having heard of Sister Margaret's engagement to Lord Delaval's son, he intended to enjoy the plunder as long as he lived, and then, when he had no further use for it, he meant to leave it—or what was left of it—to Sister Margaret."

"Oh, yes!" he continued. "I know what's in that envelope as well as if I'd opened it. There'll be a will, leaving what's left of the stuff to Sister Margaret. Probably there'll be a canting confession, in which the chief blame is thrown on O'Grady and me, and there'll certainly be a letter or something to tell her where the stuff is hidden."

"And to think," he added bitterly, "if they'd only left me undisturbed for another five minutes, I should have found that envelope myself, and I should now know where to lay my hands on the stuff!"

He listened with scant attention to the rest of the conversation which

took place in the bedroom. His thoughts were otherwise engaged. He was trying to think of some plan by which he could get possession of that precious envelope before it was handed over to Sister Margaret.

All his cogitations, however, were in vain. He could think of no plan which held out the smallest prospect of success, until he heard the inspector say to Nelson Lee:

"I shall stay with Mrs. Drew until the constables arrive, and I shall then cycle back to Exham, and make my report to the chief."

How Sunlight's face brightened when he heard these words! The inspector was going to cycle back to Exham. He would be alone, and the sealed envelope would be in his pocket. And there was only one road—a lonely road, too—by which he could cycle from the Hermitage to Exham!

"If I can only get out of the house before he starts," muttered Sunlight to himself, "I could wait for him in that lane, and the rest would be as easy as A B C!"

He had not long to wait for an opportunity to "get out of the house." When Nelson Lee and Nipper took their departure, the inspector and Mrs. Drew accompanied them as far as the garden gate. As soon as the four of them had left the bedroom, Sunlight crawled from under the bed, and stole out on to the landing. He saw them open the front door and walk down the garden path, and, taking advantage of the fact that their backs were turned towards him, he nipped down the stairs and doubled back into the kitchen.

The kitchen door was shut, but was not locked. As he was about to open it, his eyes fell on a bank of strong cord—it was Mrs. Drew's "clothes-line"—which was hanging on a nail behind the door.

"The very thing!" he chuckled.

To secure the cord was the work of a moment. Then he opened the door, stepped out into the yard, and silently closed the door behind him.

By certain sounds which came from the front of the house—the sounds of a free-running engine—he knew that the car had not yet started. Presently, however, he heard the chauffeur let in his clutch, while at the same moment he heard the inspector call out "Good-night, and a pleasant journey to you!"

He waited in the yard till he heard the inspector and Mrs. Drew re-enter the house and shut the front door. Then he stole round to the front of the house, glided down the garden path, and found himself in the road.

The night was still very dark, but the rain had ceased. The rear light of the car was still in sight, but an instant later it swung round into the lane already described and disappeared from view.

"It won't take the car more than ten minutes to reach Exham," he mused, as he trudged along the now deserted road. "In another ten minutes, it'll be at the central police-station. Allowing five minutes for Nelson Lee to deliver his message, and five minutes for the two constables to get ready, that makes half an hour from now before the constables start out for the Hermitage. If they walk, it'll take 'em a good half hour to get here; but if they cycle, they'll do it in a quarter. At the least, therefore, I've nearly an hour in which to make my preparations."

As a matter of fact, his "preparations" were completed in a very few minutes. Half-way down the lane was a five-barred gate leading into a field. Halting at this gate, he tied one end of the "clothes-line" to the top bar of the gate. Then he squatted down on the ground beside the gate and lit a cigarette.

Three-quarters of an hour passed; then two gleaming points of light appeared at the bottom of the lane.

"Bicycle lamps!" said Sunlight, hastily extinguishing his third cigarette and crushing it into blackness with his heel. "The two constables, without a doubt."

He climbed over the gate and concealed himself behind the hedge. A few moments later the two cyclists rode past his hiding-place, and, peering through a gap in the hedge, he saw—as he had already guessed—that they were a couple of policemen.

As soon as they had turned the corner at the top of the lane, he climbed back over the gate, picked up the loose end of the clothes-line, carried it across the lane, and wound it twice round the trunk of a tree which grew by the roadside.

If this description is clear to the reader, he will understand that the rope now stretched across the lane from side to side, one end being securely tied to the top bar of the gate, and the other end being loosely wound round the trunk of the tree. For the present, Sunlight left the rope slack, so that, except at the two ends, it lay on the ground.

Another quarter of an hour passed; then a light appeared at the top of the lane.

"Here he comes!" muttered Sunlight, as he grasped the loose end of the rope and prepared to haul it taut.

The lane ran steeply downhill to the Exham Road, so that the inspector rode down at a rattling pace. Sunlight waited until he had nearly reached the spot where he was standing, and then he swiftly hauled the line taut and wound the end a third time round the tree-trunk.

What happened next happened in far less time than it takes to describe it.

Suddenly, by the light of his lamp, the inspector perceived that a rope was stretched across the lane about four feet and a half from the ground. At the moment when he saw the rope, however, he was practically on it, and before he could pull up, or even slacken speed, the rope struck him smartly across the chest, jerked him backwards off his machine, and flung him headlong into the road, while the bicycle wobbled a few yards and dived into the ditch.

Half-stunned by his fall, but otherwise uninjured, the inspector was about to scramble to his feet when Sunlight leaped upon him out of the darkness and dealt him a violent blow between the eyes with the butt of his revolver.

With a stifled groan the inspector sank back, and lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness. No sooner had he done so than Sunlight fell on his knees beside him, hurriedly unbuttoned his tunic, thrust his hand into the inside pocket, and dragged out the sealed envelope.

With eager, trembling fingers he tore the envelope open and drew out a packet of papers. By the light of Nipper's flashlight he glanced through the papers; then he sprang to his feet and waved the papers above his head.

"Victory!" he cried exultingly. "I now know all I want to know, and the jewels are as good as mine!"

He glanced at the inspector, and saw that he was rapidly recovering from the effects of the blow which he had received.

"Shall I give him another?" he mused. "Perhaps I'd better. And yet, why should I? He's done me no harm, and if it hadn't been for him I should never have known where the jewels are hidden. No. I'll let him off this time."

With which reflection he thrust the papers into his pocket, climbed over the gate, and struck out across the fields in the direction of Exham.

CHAPTER IX.

A Council of War.

DR. BARTON had not yet returned from visiting his patient when Nelson Lee and Nipper reached his house. His wife, however, made them welcome; and while they were having supper and telling her what had happened at the Hermitage, the doctor arrived. He, too, had to be told, of course, and the detective had just finished his story when the bell rang.

"Another patient!" groaned the doctor. "There's no peace for the wicked!"

But he was wrong. It was not another patient. Voices were heard in the hall, and then the housemaid opened the dining-room door and announced:

"Inspector Pratt!"

Cries of dismay rose to their lips when the inspector walked unsteadily into the room. His clothes were dishevelled and caked with mud, and there was a livid swelling between his eyes that was almost the size of a pigeon's egg.

"Good heavens! What has happened?" cried Nelson Lee, springing to his feet.

"I've been attacked and robbed of that sealed envelope," groaned the inspector, as he sank into the nearest chair.

The doctor darted to the sideboard and hurriedly mixed a brandy and soda.

"Not another word till you've drank this," he said, handing the glass to the inspector. "Gulp it down! That's the style! Now tell us all about it."

The inspector's story was soon told.

"I remained at the Hermitage until the two constables arrived," he said. "After giving them their instructions, I mounted my bicycle and started off for Exham. Half-way down that lane which leads into the Exham road, I suddenly saw that somebody had stretched a rope across the road. I was into it before I'd time to pull up, and almost before I knew what was happening I was swept out of the saddle and thrown into the road. "I wasn't badly hurt," he continued, "but while I was lying on the ground a man sprang at me and gave me this." He touched the bruise on his forehead. "Butt-end of a revolver, I think," he concluded. "Anyway, the blow knocked me senseless for a minute or two; and when I came to myself, I discovered that the man had unbuttoned my tunic and made off with the sealed envelope that was in my breast-pocket."

"Did you see the man?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Not distinctly," replied the inspector. "But I saw enough of him to see that he had only one arm."

"Right or left?"

"Right. His left sleeve was empty, and was tucked into the side-pocket of his coat."

"Young or old?"

"I couldn't say. He appeared to be of medium height and slightly built but I never saw his face."

"Probably it was the same man who had attacked me," said Nipper.

"I think that's very likely," said Nelson Lee.

"There's not a doubt of it," said the doctor confidently. "After the rascal had stunned Nipper he started to search the house for that sealed envelope——"

"But how did he know that the sealed envelope was in the house?" interrupted Nelson Lee.

"He must have known," insisted the doctor. "As I was saying, after he stunned Nipper he started to hunt for the sealed envelope. While he was hunting for it—probably in the back sitting-room—Mrs. Drew returned. Then Mr. Lee arrived, and while Mrs. Drew was talking to Mr. Lee at the front door, the man slipped out of the house by the back door. He kept watch on the house, and saw Inspector Pratt arrive. He lay in wait in that lane, and when the inspector left, the scoundrel stunned him and stole the envelope."

"But how did he know that the envelope was in the inspector's pocket?" asked Nelson Lee. "In fact, how did he know that we had found the envelope if he was keeping watch outside the house all the time?"

The doctor scratched his head.

"Well, what's your theory?" he demanded.

"Haven't one!" said Nelson Lee. "As I've said once or twice already, the whole affair is an inscrutable mystery to me at present. And, so far as as I can see," he added, "there are only two persons who can help us to solve the mystery."

"Who are they?"

"I'll tell you when the inspector has finished his story."

"There's really nothing more to tell," said Pratt. "When I came round and found that the envelope had disappeared, I felt I must consult you at once. So I mounted my bicycle, which fortunately wasn't damaged, and rode straight here as quickly as I could."

"Then you haven't reported to headquarters yet?"

"No. I thought I'd like to talk the matter over with you before I made my report. What do you advise me to do?"

"Well, as I said just now," said Nelson Lee, "it seems to me that there are only two persons who can help us to clear up the mystery surrounding to-night's events. One is Miss Margaret Beresford, to whom the sealed envelope was addressed, and the other is the wounded Irishman, O'Grady."

"If you go to Lingdale and interview Miss Beresford," he continued, "she will almost certainly be able to tell you who Mr. Nixon was; and she may be able to give you such further information as will enable you to infer what the envelope contained, who the one-armed man is, and why he was so desperately anxious to secure the sealed envelope."

"On the other hand," he went on, "if you interview O'Grady, he will probably be able to tell you the name of the man who shot him. At any rate, he'll be able to tell you whether the man had only one arm or not; and, as in the case of Miss Beresford, he may be able to give you all the information you require to enable you to unravel the tangle."

"Such being my view of the case," he concluded, "my advice to you is to interview O'Grady and Miss Beresford at the earliest possible moment."

"I will," said the inspector. "I'll see O'Grady to-night, and——"

"But you can't!" interrupted Dr. Barton.

"Can't what?"

"You can't see O'Grady to-night. I called at the hospital again on my way home from my patient's, and they told me he was still unconscious."

"He may have come round since then."

"I don't think it's likely," said the doctor. "However, to make sure, I'll ring up the hospital and inquire."

He left the room, and was absent four or five minutes.

"No," he said, when he came back. "He's still unconscious. They say he's going on all right, and they quite expect he'll recover consciousness."

some time to-morrow morning. At the same time, the house-surgeon asked me to tell you that he didn't think he would be justified, from a medical point of view, in allowing O'Grady to be pestered with questions until at least twelve hours after he comes round. In other words, unless the matter is vitally urgent, he'd very much prefer that you postponed your interview until to-morrow evening."

"Then your programme is mapped out for you," said Nelson Lee to Pratt. "You will go to Lingdale to-morrow morning and see Miss Beresford, and you'll interview O'Grady when you return to-morrow evening."

"But I can't go to Lingdale to-morrow!" said the inspector.

"Why not?"

"Because I'll have to be present at the inquest on Nixon, which is fixed for to-morrow afternoon. Of course, I could send one of my men to interview Miss Beresford, but——"

He paused, and gazed reflectively at Nelson Lee.

"It's a big thing to ask," he said, "but nobody knows more about the case than you, and I agree with you that Miss Beresford ought to be interviewed as soon as possible. Would you mind running over to Lingdale and interviewing her?"

"My dear fellow, there's nothing I'd like better!" said the detective. "I was just itching to have a finger in the pie, but I didn't like to make the suggestion myself, as I didn't know how you'd take it. I thought you might think I was poking my nose into matters that didn't concern me. Of course, I'm only an outsider, so to speak, but it's a long time since I was so interested in a case, and if I can help you to clear it up, I shall be only too delighted! I'll go to Lingdale, with pleasure!"

"And I'll go with you!" said Nipper eagerly.

"Indeed, you won't!" protested the doctor. "After what you've gone through to-night, you ought really to stay in bed all day to-morrow. At any rate, you'll certainly not make the long journey to Lingdale and back—not with my consent, anyhow! What does Mr. Lee say?"

"I agree with you," said Nelson Lee. "I don't know that it will be necessary for Nipper to keep to his bed all day, but he certainly ought to remain here and keep as quiet as he can until I return from Lingdale."

"And what time will that be?" asked the inspector.

"If I leave here at 9.30 in the morning," he said, "I shall reach Lingdale at a quarter-past one. An hour will give me ample time to interview Miss Beresford. If I leave Lingdale at half-past two, I shall be back in Exham at 6.20. Shall I come down to the police-station and make my report, or will you come down here?"

"I'll come here," said the inspector. "I'll meet you here at a quarter to seven, and after you've told me the result of your interview with Miss Beresford, we'll go down to the hospital together and interview O'Grady."

This arrangement was finally agreed to, and, after some desultory conversation, the conference broke up, the inspector took his departure, and Nelson Lee and Nipper went to bed.

CHAPTER X.

A Double Blank.

PUNCTUALLY on the stroke of a quarter to seven the following evening, the inspector arrived at Dr. Barton's house, where he found that Nelson Lee had just returned from Lingdale, and was narrating the result of his visit to an interested audience, consisting of the doctor and his wife and Nipper.

"Well, what luck?" asked the inspector eagerly.

"None!" said the detective gloomily. "I've drawn a blank. I saw Miss Beresford, but she knows nobody of the name of Nixon, she never even heard of the Hermitage, and she hasn't the remotest notion why Nixon addressed the sealed envelope to her."

The inspector stared at him in blank dismay.

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" he exclaimed. "You told her what happened at the Hermitage last night?"

"I did, but it was all as big a mystery to her as it is to us."

"You say she knows nobody of the name of Nixon! But Nixon may not have been the man's real name."

"I thought of that, so I described him to her to the best of my ability; but she couldn't recognise him from my description as anybody she had ever known. I told her we were going to question O'Grady, and I said that if O'Grady couldn't throw any light on the mystery, I'd have Mr. Nixon photographed and send her a copy, and see if she recognised him then."

"You told her about O'Grady being shot?"

"Of course. But she knows nobody of that name. I described him to her, but she still declared she had never seen him, and knew nothing about him."

"Did you tell her that I had been attacked and robbed by a one-armed man, and that we strongly suspect it was the same man who shot O'Grady and stunned Nipper?"

"I did, but with no result. She has had one or two one-armed soldiers under her care at the Red Cross Hospital; but all of them, she said, were quiet, decent fellows, who wouldn't hurt a fly—unless it were a German fly!"

"And couldn't she hazard a guess as to what the sealed envelope contained?"

"She couldn't. To use her own words, she was absolutely in the dark as to the meaning of the whole business."

"Then we're no nearer solving the mystery than we were last night?"

"Not a bit! All our hopes now rest on O'Grady. But before we go down to the hospital and question him, you might tell us what you have done to-day!"

"I've spent most of the day," said the inspector, "in making inquiries in the town about Mr. Nixon. Without wearying you with details, I may say that I've ascertained that he came to Exham about two months ago, but nobody knows where he came from. He bought the Hermitage for two hundred pounds, and paid the money in notes and gold. He gave his name as Joseph Nixon, and described himself as 'of no occupation.' He purchased the furniture at various shops in the town, and paid cash down. He advertised for a housekeeper, and eventually, as you know, engaged Mrs. Drew. And that's all I've been able to find out about him up to the present."

"Has the inquest been held?"

"It was opened at the Hermitage this afternoon, but the proceedings were purely formal. Mrs. Drew identified the body, the police-surgeon testified that death was due to a fractured spine, and the inquiry was then adjourned for a week."

"And what about O'Grady? Have you inquired at the hospital?"

"Yes. I called there this morning, and again on my way here this evening. O'Grady is now quite conscious—in fact, the house-surgeon says he's practically all right except for the skin wound on his temple—and we can interview him as soon as we like."

"Then let's go now!" said Nelson Lee, rising to his feet.

"You'll use my car, of course," said the doctor. "I told the chauffeur you'd want it about seven o'clock, and unless I'm mistaken, I think I heard him bring it round to the door a few moments ago."

He drew the blind aside, and peered out into the road.

"Yes, he's there," he said.

Nipper glanced imploringly at Nelson Lee.

"I wish you'd let me come with you, guv'nor," he pleaded. "I've never been out of the house all day, and I'm sick of twiddling my thumbs!"

The detective hesitated for a moment, little dreaming what fateful issues hung on his decision.

"The house surgeon would doubtless object to three of us invading the ward," he said, "but if you're pining for a breath of fresh air, you can drive down with us to the hospital, and remain in the car outside while we interview O'Grady, and then drive back here with me."

"That's better than stopping indoors, anyhow," said Nipper. "Wait half a minute while I get my hat and coat."

Five minutes later, the car was on its way to the hospital, with Nipper seated beside the chauffeur, and Nelson Lee and Inspector Pratt in the seat at the back.

It was half-past seven and pitch-dark when they reached the hospital. Leaving Nipper and the chauffeur in the car, the detective and the inspector entered the building and asked for the house-surgeon.

"O'Grady still all right?" asked the inspector when the house-surgeon appeared.

"Right as the mail!" replied the house-surgeon. "I've had him moved into one of the private, single-bed wards, so that you can talk to him without fear of being overheard or interrupted. But won't you come round to my room and have a whisky-and-soda apiece before you go up to see him?"

"Speaking for myself," said Nelson Lee, "I'd rather see O'Grady at once!"

"So would I," said Pratt. "Thank you all the same."

"Well, will you come round to my room when you've finished with O'Grady?" persisted the house-surgeon, who did not have the chance every day of entertaining a famous detective.

The two men promised, and without any further ado the house-surgeon conducted them upstairs, and ushered them into the private ward to which O'Grady had been moved.

There was only one bed in the ward, and in this bed lay the wounded Irishman, with a bandage round his head. The only other occupant of the ward was a nurse who, at a sign from the house-surgeon, placed a couple of chairs beside the bed for Nelson Lee and the inspector. She and the house-surgeon then withdrew, leaving O'Grady alone with his visitors.

"Now, O'Grady," began the inspector, "we want you to help us to catch the man who shot you last night. You know who it was, I suppose?"

"Oi do!" said O'Grady grimly.

"Who was it?"

"Oi'll not tell ye!"

"But why?"

"Bekase I won't! It's meself that knows enough of the law to know that ye can't compel me to make a charge agin the man."

"That's true! But what's your reason for shielding the man who tried to murder you?"

O'Grady shook his head.

"Oi've nothin' more to say," he growled.

"The inspector glanced helplessly at Nelson Lee.

"So you decline to tell us the name of your assailant?" said the detective.

"Oi do!"

"He was a one-armed man, wasn't he?" said Nelson Lee, drawing a bow at a venture.

O'Grady started.

"Ye saw him, then?" he exclaimed, taken off his guard.

The detective smiled.

"No; I didn't see him," he said. "But your question proves that my conjecture was correct. Now, do you know what the one-armed man did after he had shot you?"

"Oi do not."

"Well, I'll tell you. He went to the Hermitage, and attacked Mr. Nixon. They had a struggle, and Mr. Nixon was killed."

For a moment O'Grady stared at him in speechless stupefaction.

"Are ye after tellin' me," he gasped at last, "that Nee—Oi mano Mr. Nixon—is dead?"

"Ah!" said Nelson Lee. "So Nixon wasn't his real name, eh?"

O'Grady bit his lip.

"Oi never said so," he said sullenly. "Is he dead? That's what Oi axed ye."

"He is. After his death, the one-armed man set to work to search the house. Do you know what he was searching for?"

"Oi can guess."

"What was it?"

"Oi'll not tell ye!"

"Was it a sealed envelope, containing Mr. Nixon's will and other private papers, and addressed to Miss Beresford, of the Red Cross Hospital, Lingdale?"

A look of blank bewilderment came into the Irishman's face. The detective saw at once that he had never heard of the sealed envelope before.

"If that was what the one-armed man was searching for," he said, "he didn't find it. The inspector and I arrived at the house before he found it, and he had to take to flight without it."

"He escaped, then?" said O'Grady.

"Yes."

"An' ye found the envelope after he'd gone?"

"Yes."

"Have ye got it with ye?"

"No. According to the instructions on the outside of the envelope, it was to be delivered unopened to Miss Beresford after Mr. Nixon's death. The inspector, therefore, took it away with him, intending to deliver it to Miss Beresford to-day. On his way back to Exham last night, however, he was attacked by the one-armed man, who stunned him, and stole the envelope."

O'Grady sat up in bed, his features twitching and his eyes ablaze with uncontrollable excitement.

"Is this the truth ye're after tellin' me?" he demanded hoarsely. "Did Sun—Oi mane the one-armed man—get that envelope an' make off with it afore ye opened it?"

"He did," said Nelson Lee.

O'Grady sank back on his pillow with a groan of despair.

"Then he now knows where they are," he muttered half-aloud. "By this toime, mebbe, he has got 'em."

"Got what?" asked Nelson Lee, who caught the muttered words.

"An obstinate look crossed O'Grady's face.

"Oi'll tell ye no more!" he said doggedly.

"But you haven't told me anything up to the present," said Nelson Lee. "It's I who've been telling you things! Come, now, be a sensible fellow! There's evidently some mystery here to which you hold the key. Why should you refuse to give us the information we require? You've done nothing wrong, so you've nothing to fear by making a clean breast of the whole affair. On the other hand, the one-armed man most certainly tried to murder you, and was undoubtedly responsible for Mr. Nixon's death. Don't you want him to be punished for those crimes?"

"Oi'll do all the punishin' that's required!" said O'Grady.

"But——" began Nelson Lee.

"Ye can spare yer breath!" snapped O'Grady, beginning to lose his temper. "If ye talk from now till Christmas, 't will be all the same. Oi'll tell ye nothin'!"

He was as good as his word. For half an hour, the detective and Pratt plied him with arguments and persuasions, but it was all in vain. He admitted that he knew both "Nixon" and the one-armed man, and that he had a shrewd idea what the sealed envelope had contained, but he stubbornly refused to reveal his knowledge.

At last the detective rose to his feet.

"We've drawn another blank," he said to the inspector. "It's no use wasting any more time on him at present, but we'll come again to-morrow and have another talk to him, and by that time, perhaps, he'll have changed his mind. Let us now go and sample the house-surgeon's whisky."

They left the ward, and the door had scarcely closed on them ere O'Grady slipped out of bed and hurriedly began to dress.

"If Sunlight has got them papers, there's no time to be lost!" he muttered. "The papers would tell him where the jewels are hidden, an' if he hasn't got 'em already, he'll be goin' for 'em to-night. He thinks Oi'm shut up in this 'ospital, an' he doesn't know that Oi know where he lives, so that if Oi call on him at once, an' take him by surprise, Oi'll be able to make him give me my share."

"But Oi'll not make the mistake Oi made last night," he added. "Oi was a fool to leave my revolver behind when Oi started out to call on Needham. Afore Oi go to Sunlight's, Oi'll slip round to Barty's an' get my revolver."

He finished dressing, and stealthily opened the ward door. The corridor outside was deserted. He stole to the top of the stairs, and saw that the hall porter was engaged at the telephone. His back was turned towards the stairs, and, without attracting his attention, O'Grady tiptoed down the staircase, glided swiftly across the hall, opened the big swing-door, and passed out into the street.

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CHAPTER XI.

— Nipper Takes a Hand.

THE doctor's car still stood outside the hospital door. It had been standing there for nearly an hour, and Nipper's stock of patience was rapidly nearing vanishing-point.

"If I'd known they'd be as long as this, I wouldn't have come," he said to the chauffeur. "If they don't turn up soon, I'll—— Ah, here they are—at last!"

The door opened, but the man who came out was neither Nelson Lee nor Inspector Pratt. He was a rather disreputable-looking fellow, with a typically Irish face, whose clothes were in rags, and whose head was encircled by a bandage.

Nipper recognised him at a glance.

"O'Grady!" he gasped. "And unless I'm mistaken, he's running away!"

He turned excitedly to the chauffeur.

"See that man?" he whispered. "It's the man the guv'nor and Inspector Pratt came to the hospital to interview. From the stealthy way he slipped out of the building, I'm inclined to suspect that he's doing a guy! Anyhow, I mean to follow him and keep him in sight till I find out where he lives. When the guv'nor comes out, tell him I'm shadowing O'Grady, and I'll come to the doctor's house when I've finished."

He had not time to say more, for by that time O'Grady was twenty yards away, and any further delay would probably have resulted in Nipper losing sight of him. Without waiting for the chauffeur's reply, therefore, Nipper stepped out of the car and set to work to shadow his unsuspecting quarry.

Apparently his task was destined to be short, for, after dogging O'Grady's footsteps for about ten minutes, he saw him enter a grimy building which appeared to be—and was, in fact—a low-class, common lodging-house. It was kept by a man named Bartholomew, but was familiarly known as "Barty's."

"So this is where he lives, is it?" mused Nipper. "Good! I'll wait a few minutes, to make sure he doesn't come out, and then I'll go to the doctor's and report."

He posted himself on the opposite side of the road, and had been standing there about five minutes when he saw O'Grady come out and walk briskly up the street.

"It's a good job I waited," soliloquised Nipper as he glided after him. "I should have missed him if I'd gone away."

From "Barty's," the Irishman struck eastwards, and, after shadowing him for nearly half an hour, Nipper saw him turn into a narrow-covered passage about half-way down one of the vilest slums in the town. For a moment, Nipper hesitated whether to follow him; and then, with a muttered "Nothing venture, nothing win," he crossed the road and stole on tiptoe down the passage.

The passage, he then discovered, led into a squalid courtyard, in which there were five houses—two on each side, and one at the end, facing the passage. Four of the houses had fallen into ruin, and were now mere roofless shells. The fifth, which was in slightly better repair than the others, was a miserable hovel, consisting of a small room on the ground floor, and a bedroom and an attic above. It was evidently occupied, for, although the window on the ground floor was boarded up, a narrow beam of light was streaming through a chink in the boards.

When Nipper stole to the end of the passage, he saw that O'Grady was crouching outside this window, with his eye glued to the chink in the boards. For several minutes he maintained this position, apparently watching the movements of somebody inside the house. Then suddenly Nipper saw him draw a revolver from his pocket, stride to the door, and rap on it with his knuckles.

After a slight delay, the door was opened, and by the light which streamed out into the yard, Nipper saw that the man who had opened the door was a slightly built but wiry-looking man, whose left coat-sleeve was empty.

"The one-armed man!" he gasped. "The man who shot O'Grady, attacked Nixon, stunned me, and robbed the inspector of the sealed envelope!"

He was right. It was the man called Sunlight, and the instant he opened the door, the Irishman stepped up to him and thrust the muzzle of his revolver into his face!

"Hands up!" he said fiercely. "Oi'm ready for ye this time, an' ye'll not catch me nappin' again! Put up yer hands, or by all the saints Oi'll blow the head off ye!"

To give Sunlight his due, he took his defeat very well. It was evident that O'Grady's appearance was a staggering surprise, yet his face betrayed no sign of fear.

"So it's you, is it?" he said, as he meekly held up his only hand. "You can lower your pistol! I know when I'm beaten, and I promise not to resist."

"Ye'd better not!" said O'Grady grimly. "Keep your hand where it is, an' walk backwards into the house!"

Sunlight obeyed, and O'Grady followed him, closing the door behind him with a backward kick.

"Sit down!" he commanded, pointing to the only chair the room contained.

Again Sunlight obeyed, and at the same time asked a question.

"How did you track me here?" he asked.

"Ax no questions an' Oi'll tell ye no lies!" said O'Grady curtly. "Now, listen to me! They're after tellin' me at the hospital that after ye'd tried to murder me last night, ye went to the Hermitage an' murdered John Needham. Is that true?"

"No," said Sunlight. "I went to the house, and demanded my share of the jewels. He promised to show me where they were hidden, but on the way upstairs he turned on me, and in the struggle he fell downstairs. It wasn't my fault that he broke his neck."

"Then ye hunted for the jewels?"

"Yes."

"Did ye foind 'em?"

"No. Nelson Lee and an inspector arrived before I'd time to finish my search."

He briefly related how he had hidden under the bed; how he had heard about the sealed envelope; how he had waylaid the inspector, and stolen the envelope.

"An' what was in the envelope?" asked O'Grady.

"A will, leaving all his property to Miss Beresford; an account of how we heard about the jewels; and a plan showing where he had hidden them."

"Where had he hidden them?"

"He had buried them in the garden at the Hermitage."

"An' the plan showed where he had buried 'em?"

"Yes."

"Where is the plan?"

"I've burnt it."

"Ye lie!" cried O'Grady fiercely. "Why would ye burn it?"

"Because I've got the jewels," said Sunlight calmly.

From head to foot, O'Grady trembled with excitement.

"Ye've got the jewels?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Yes," said Sunlight. "I went back to the Hermitage about two o'clock this morning, dug at the spot marked on the plan, and found the jewels in a biscuit-tin."

"Where are they now?"

Sunlight pointed to a square of matting in the centre of the floor.

"If you remove that matting," he said, "you'll see a trap-door. It leads into the cellar, and the jewels are there."

O'Grady came a step or two nearer.

"Stand up!" he said, still covering Sunlight with his revolver. "Now drag the mattin' out of the way."

Sunlight meekly obeyed. Under the matting, as he had said, was a square trap-door. But it did not lead into a cellar. It led into an underground rain-water cistern that was three or four feet deep in stagnant water.

"Open it!" commanded O'Grady.

Sunlight raised the trap-door, laid it down, and pointed into the cistern.

"There's the tin," he said—"on that shelf!"

O'Grady stooped down to peer into the supposed "cellar." This was Sunlight's opportunity, and with the swiftness of a lightning flash he shot out his hand, seized O'Grady by the scruff of the neck, and pushed him headlong through the opening.

"You fool!" he jeered, as the Irishman fell floundering into the water at the bottom of the cistern. "To think your clumsy wits were a match for mine! You said I wouldn't catch you napping again, but I rather think I've done it. What?"

O'Grady picked himself up, and wiped the filthy water from his eyes. He gazed in despair at the smooth and slimy walls by which he was surrounded, and then at the open trap-door six feet above his head. To get out of the cistern without assistance was impossible.

"Oi give ye best!" he growled. "Help me out, an' we'll call it quits. Ye can keep the jewels!"

"Thank you for nothing!" retorted Sunlight. "I intend to keep the jewels when I've got them, but——"

"But Oi thought ye said ye had got 'em!"

"That was just my fun! As a matter of fact, I haven't got them yet; but they're buried in the garden all right, and I've got the plan, and I'm going to dig 'em up to-night. As I was about to say, however, when you interrupted me, I want something else besides the jewels."

"What's that?"

"Revenge!" hissed Sunlight, and his face assumed a perfectly diabolical expression. "Revenge on the two black-hearted curs who played me false! One of them—John Needham—has already paid the penalty for his treachery, and the other—that's you—is going to pay it now!"

"Ye—ye're not goin' to kill me, Sunlight?" whined O'Grady.

"Oh, no!" said Sunlight pleasantly. "Killing is too good for you! Something slow and lingering is more to my taste! Besides, there's no need for me to kill you. You're quite safe where you are. You can't escape, and you might shout for help till you're blue in the face and nobody would ever hear you."

"An' how long are ye goin' to keep me here?"

"Till you die of hunger and thirst! In other words, I'm going to keep you here, without food or drink, until you die! And every day I'm going to dangle the jewels before your eyes to show you what you've lost by your treachery. How do you like the prospect, my friend?"

O'Grady was too crushed to reply. For a moment or two, his captor regarded him in gloating silence; and then, without a word, he closed the trap-door and replaced the matting.

"And now I may as well go to the Hermitage and dig up the jewels!" he muttered. "It's dark enough, now."

He picked up the candle off the table, and mounted the rickety stairs which led to the room above. He dragged a box from under the bed, and took out a small, explosive bomb, which he carefully placed in his pocket.

"It'll come in useful if I'm disturbed," he muttered.

From the same box he drew out a small spade and a trowel. Then, having donned his cap, he came downstairs, blew out the candle, and left the house, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

"Quite Illegal!"

STANDING at the end of the passage, Nipper saw O'Grady cover the one-armed man with his revolver, and order him to walk backwards into the house. The instant the two men had entered the house and O'Grady had closed the door, Nipper stole to the outside of the window and peered through the chink in the boards.

Although he witnessed all that happened, he could not hear a single word of what the two men said. When he saw the one-armed man push O'Grady through the trap-door, his first impulse was to rush into the house to the Irishman's assistance. On second thoughts, however, remembering that he was unarmed, he wisely abandoned this intention.

"My best plan will be," he mused, "to inform the police and send for the guv'nor as soon as possible."

When Sunlight picked up the candle and went upstairs, Nipper thought he had gone to bed, so he turned away from the window and hurried back into the street. As luck would have it, an empty taxi happened to be passing at the moment, and, in little more time than it takes to tell, he hailed it, and instructed the driver to take him to the nearest police-station.

At the police-station, in brief, excited phrases, he told his story to the sergeant in charge, who at once agreed to go back with him to the house, accompanied by a constable, and arrest the one-armed man and liberate O'Grady.

"Before we start," said Nipper, "I'd like to send a message to the guv'nor. You're on the telephone, I see—may I use it?"

"Certainly."

Nipper consulted the directory and rang up Dr. Barton's house.

"Hallo!" said a familiar voice. "Who's there?"

"Nipper. Is that Dr. Barton?"

"Yes."

"Has the guv'nor got back from the hospital yet?"

"Yes. He and Inspector Pratt have just arrived."

"Then ask him to come to the 'phone, please."

Interrupting the thread of our narrative for a moment, it may here be explained that Nelson Lee and the inspector were chatting to the house-surgeon in the latter's room at the hospital when an excited nurse burst in with the startling news that O'Grady had disappeared. A visit to the ward proved that this was only too true, and all their inquiries failed to find anybody who had seen the Irishman leave the building.

"We shall probably find him at Barty's," said the inspector. "That's where he lodged, I know. Let's go there and see."

There was no need to go to Barty's, however, for when they came out of the hospital, intending to tell the doctor's chauffeur to drive them there, he gave them Nipper's message. Instead of driving to Barty's, therefore, they drove back to the doctor's house, and they were telling the doctor what had happened when the telephone-bell rang. The doctor went to the instrument, but came back in a few seconds, his face aglow with excitement.

"It's Nipper," he said to Nelson Lee. "He wants to speak to you."

The detective went to the 'phone, and Nipper told him briefly all that had happened.

"So the one-armed man is now in bed," he concluded, "and O'Grady is in the underground cellar, or whatever it is. I'm now at the Commercial Road Police-station, and when I ring off, the sergeant and a constable are

going back with me to the house to arrest the one-armed man and set O'Grady free. Will you join us there?"

"You bet I will!" said Nelson Lee. "Where is the house?"

"In Furnace Lane, if you know where that is."

"I don't, but Pratt will know. He's here now, and will come with me. What's the number of the house?"

"I don't think it has one. Half-way down the lane, on the right-hand side going down, you'll see a covered passage. It's the only one in the lane. The house is in the yard into which that passage leads."

"Right-ho! You can ring off now. The inspector and I will be with you as fast as a taxi will bring us."

Nipper rang off, and a few minutes later he and the sergeant and a constable were on their way, on foot, to Furnace Lane.

On reaching that unlovely thoroughfare, Nipper led the way down the passage, and pointed to the hovel already described.

"That's the house," he whispered.

The sergeant surveyed the outside of the house, which was all in darkness. He gently tried the door, and found that it was locked. He peered through the boarded window, but could see nothing.

"You'd better draw your staff," he whispered to the constable. "He's evidently a desperate character, and we may have to use force to effect his arrest."

Then he knocked. There was no reply. He knocked again, and yet again, but still there was no reply.

"I don't believe there's anybody in," he growled. "The place appears to be deserted."

"O'Grady is certainly in the house," said Nipper. "But the one-armed man may have gone out while I was at the police-station. You'll have to burst the door open."

The sergeant thoughtfully rubbed his chin. He was a very cautious man, with a great respect for the law.

"It's a risky business breaking into a house without a warrant," he said. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather wait till Inspector Pratt arrives."

As events turned out he had not long to wait, for he had scarcely finished speaking ere they heard a taxi humming down the lane. It stopped at the end of the passage, and a moment later Nelson Lee strode into the yard, with Inspector Pratt at his heels.

The situation having been explained to him, the detective drew a flashlight from his pocket and examined the lock of the door.

"There's no key in the keyhole," he said. "That would seem to show that the one-armed man has gone out, locking the door behind him and taking the key with him. If he had locked the door and gone to bed, he'd have left the key in the keyhole. However that may be, the fact that there's no key in the keyhole makes our task an easy one."

He drew out a small bunch of skeleton-keys and fitted one into the lock.

"Isn't that illegal?" whispered the sergeant to the inspector.

Nelson Lee glanced over his shoulder with a smile.

"Quite illegal!" he said sweetly.

Then he turned the key, raised the latch, opened the door, and led the way into the dark and silent house.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Mystery Solved—Conclusion.

THE moment he stepped across the threshold the detective heard a muffled cry of "Help!" which he rightly guessed came from the imprisoned Irishman. Before proceeding to liberate O'Grady, however, he sent the sergeant and the constable upstairs to explore the upper rooms; and it was not until they returned and reported there was nobody there that he dragged the matting aside and raised the trap-door.

O'Grady was standing up to his waist in water, a perfect picture of wretchedness and despair. At the sight of Nelson Lee, however, his weebe-gone expression quickly changed to one of joyous relief.

"Thank Heaven, it's you!" he exclaimed. "Help me out of this, an' Oi'll tell ye all ye want to know!"

The task of hauling him out of the cistern was soon accomplished, and a few moments later he stood in the little room, wet to the skin, but otherwise unharmed.

"Now, foire away!" he said to Nelson Lee. "Ax me any questions yo plase, an' Oi'll answer 'em if Oi can."

"First of all, then," said Nelson Lee, "where is the one-armed man?"

"He went out about half an hour ago."

"Do you know where he went?"

"Yes. He's gone to the Hermitage to dig up the jewels."

"What jewels?"

"Lady Delaval's diamonds."

The detective whistled.

"So that's how the land lies, is it?" he said. "The stolen jewels are at the Hermitage?"

"Yes. But ye needn't worry about them. He's goin' to bring 'em hero when he's dug 'em up, so ye've only to wait here an' ye can nab him when he comes back. He hasn't been gone more'n half an hour, so he'll not be back for a long toime yet. If ye follow him to the Hermitage, he may see ye an' give ye the slip, an' then ye'll never foind the jewels."

"There's sense in what you say. At any rate, we'll wait here till we've heard your story."

"Where'll Oi begin?"

"Well, by way of a beginning, tell us what you know of the man who lived at the Hermitage, and who called himself Nixon. That wasn't his real name, was it?"

"It was not. His real name was John Needham, an' at the beginnin' of the war he was a corporal in the Woldshire Light Infantry. He an' Sunlight was privates in the same——"

"Who's Sunlight?"

"The man that shot me an' stole the sealed envelope."

"The one-armed man?"

"Yes. His real name's Pringle, but we always called him Sunlight for a nickname. Both him an' Needham had more eddication than me, but for all that we was bosom pals. When war was declared, our reg'ment was one of the first to be sent out, an' we was present at the battles of——"

"Never mind your battle-honours! Where do the jewels come in?"

"Oi was just goin' to tell ye. One day—it was just afore Mons—Needham an' Sunlight an' me was on outpost duty, an' we captured a German sniper that was prowlin' near our lines. He had formerly been a waiter in London—at the Hotel Majestic—an' it was him that stole Lady Delaval's diamonds."

"Did he tell you so?"

"He did. He said he'd stolen the jewels out of her ladyship's bedroom at the hotel, an' had afterwards concealed 'em under the slates at his lodgings. He had meant to clear out of the country with 'em as soon as the hue an' cry had died down, but afore he had time to do so he was summoned back to Germany to rejoin the army, as war was expected every day. He told us that the jewels was still under the slates at his London lodgings, and if we'd let him go free, he said, he'd give us the address of the house an' tell us how to find the jewels."

"And you accepted the German's offer?"

"We did. First we made him swear that what he said was true, and then, after he'd given us the address of his lodgings, an' told us exactly where the jewels were hidden, we let him go. The three of us—Needham an' Sunlight an' me—then took our dyin' oaths that we'd be true to each other an' act on the square. We arranged that whichever of us returned to England first should take lodgings at the house the German had told us of, an' get the jewels an' keep 'em till the other two returned, an' then divide 'em equally between us."

The detective nodded.

"I begin to see daylight now," he said. "I think I can guess what's coming. Although you'd sworn to be true to each other, you and Needham decided to get the plunder for yourselves and rob Sunlight of his share?"

O'Grady nodded his head in a shamefaced way.

"It was Needham's idea," he said. "He proposed that him an' me should get slightly wounded, so as to be sent back to England. We could then desert, he said, an' get the jewels, an' divide 'em between us."

"And you agreed to that?"

"Oi did. At the battle of the Marne, Needham shot himself through the foot when nobody was lookin', while Oi held up my hand an' let the Germans put a bullet through it. We was sent down to the base, an' afterwards shipped across to a hospital in England. Needham's wound soon healed, but mine did badly, an' Oi had to have two fingers took off. Oi was in the hospital for over a month, an' when Oi came out an' got my discharge, Oi found that Needham had disappeared, an' nobody knew what had become of him."

"Was he discharged from the Army, like you, or did he desert?"

"He deserted. As soon as Oi heard he'd disappeared, Oi guessed in a minute that he meant to collar the jewels for hisself, and so Oi hurried up to London an' went to the house where the German used to lodge. But Oi was too late. A man answerin' to Needham's description had taken

rooms there for two nights, an' had left ten days afore Oi called. Oi engaged a bed there meself for one night, an' in the middle of the night Oi crept up to the top of the house an' searched at the spot the German had told us of. In the dust under the slates Oi found marks which showed that the jewels had been there, an' that somebody had removed 'em."

"So you then set to work to hunt for Needham in order to demand your share of the plunder?"

"Oi did. Months went by afore Oi picked up the scent, an' while Oi

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was huntin' for him Oi heard that Sunlight had had his arm blown off at Wipers an' had been discharged, an' was huntin' for Needham an' me!"

As O'Grady paused, Nelson Lee consulted his watch.

"If we linger here much longer," he said, "Sunlight will be returning before we're ready for him. You'd better cut the rest of your story as short as possible. You can give us the details later. It comes to this, I suppose—that eventually you discovered that Needham was living at the Hermitage in the name of Nixon?"

"Oi did. An' on the same day that Oi discovered that, Oi discovered that Sunlight was in Exham, an' was livin' in this house."

"He had also discovered that Needham was at the Hermitage?"

"He must have done, though Oi didn't know it at the toime. Oi thought that Sunlight had only traced Needham as far as Exham, so Oi thought Oi'd go to the Hermitage at once, afore Sunlight found out where Needham was livin'."

"What happened next, we already know," said Nelson Lee. "You decided to go to the Hermitage last night. Apparently Sunlight had also decided to do likewise. He met you on the way, and tried to murder you. He then went to the Hermitage and attacked Needham. After Needham's death, he searched for the jewels, but failed to find them. So much is clear. But how did he know about that sealed envelope? And how did he know that it was in the inspector's pocket when he left the house?"

"He was hidin' under the bed in the room where ye found the envelope. He waited till ye an' Nipper had gone; then he crept out of the house, an' waited for the inspector in that lane. He told me so hisself to-night."

"Did he tell you what the envelope contained?"

"He did. He said there was a will, lavin' everything to Miss Beresford; a confession; an' a plan showin' where the jewels were buried in the garden at the Hermitage."

Again Nelson Lee consulted his watch.

"I think that's all we need to know at present," he said to the inspector. "Our best plan will be——"

He paused and caught his breath.

"There's somebody coming down the passage!" he whispered, as he blew out the candle and whipped out his revolver and his flashlight. "Don't move or speak! Perhaps it's Sunlight!"

He had scarcely uttered the warning ere footsteps were heard in the yard. They halted outside the door, which was closed, and a sound was heard as of a metal box being put down on the step.

"It's Sunlight, without a doubt!" muttered Nelson Lee to himself.

He was right. It was Sunlight. He entered the yard, carrying in his hand a large tin cash-box, the outside of which was caked with soil and clay. On reaching the door of his house, as he had only one arm, he set the cash-box down, fumbled for his key, inserted it in the lock, and tried to turn it.

When he discovered that the door was not locked, a sudden fear assailed him that some hidden danger threatened him; and, almost without knowing what he was doing, he thrust his hand into his pocket and dragged out the bomb already mentioned. Then, smiling at himself for being so nervous, but still holding the bomb in the palm of his hand, he pressed down the latch with his thumb and pushed the door open.

The instant he opened the door, Nelson Lee switched on his flashlight, and framed him in a circle of dazzling light.

"Stand, or I fire!" said the detective quietly. "Raise your hand above your head—quickly! I have you covered, and we're six to one, so you may as well give in without any fuss!"

Sunlight raised his hand, and stood blinking at the five men and Nipper. The inspector struck a match and relit the candle. The sergeant chuckled and drew out his handcuffs.

Sunlight watched these proceedings with ominous calmness.

"I suppose you think you've got me now?" he inquired blandly.

"We don't think--we're sure!" said the inspector, striding forward with the intention of searching him and taking possession of his revolver.

Sunlight did not stir, but his expression changed to one of malignant triumph.

"Advance another step, and I'll blow the whole lot of you to Kingdom Come!" he snarled, opening his hand, and showing them the bomb between his finger and thumb. "I shall kill myself, too, of course, but I'll do that before I'll be taken alive!"

The inspector recoiled with a cry of dismay. The sergeant dropped his handcuffs and dived underneath the table. To Nelson Lee's surprise, Nipper let out a terrified scream, and bolted upstairs into the bedroom!

"You're sure you've got me, aren't you?" jeered Sunlight. "Then why don't you come and take me? Why don't you shoot me? Are you afraid that the bomb will explode when I fall to the ground?"

He continued in this mocking strain for several moments: then he addressed himself to Nelson Lee.

"And now to business!" he said. "Lay your revolver on the floor in front of you!"

For a moment the detective hesitated. Then a curious look came into his face. His acute sense of hearing enabled him to hear certain sounds upstairs which the others failed to hear.

"Good old Nipper!" he muttered, as he meekly laid his revolver on the floor.

"Now kick it across to me!" commanded Sunlight.

The detective gave the weapon a kick, and it slithered across the floor to Sunlight's feet.

"Now, open that trap-door!" he ordered, still holding the bomb above his head. "I'm going to make you all jump down into the cistern, and then I'm going to shut the door and keep you there, while I've time to make my escape."

The detective raised the trap-door, and dropped it on its back with a bang--a bang which resounded through the house, and completely drowned the little noise which was made by Nipper, who had taken off his boots as he stealthily opened the bedroom window, which was only eight feet from the ground, and lightly dropped into the yard.

"Now, Grady, you cur, back into your kennel!" ordered Sunlight. "You go first, then Nelson Lee, then the inspector, and then the sergeant and the constable!"

O'Grady was about to obey when his eyes fell on a figure outside the open door, behind Sunlight's back. The look of amazement which came into his face was so pronounced that Sunlight could not fail to notice it; but, before he could turn round, Nipper leaped on him from behind, and wrested the bomb from his hand.

Then Nelson Lee and the three police-officers threw themselves on him in a body, and after a brief but desperate struggle, he was overpowered and handcuffed.

With the capture of Sunlight, and the recovery of the stolen jewels, our story comes to an end.

(Continued overleaf)

On Sunlight were found the papers he had taken from the sealed envelope. These consisted of three documents, all in Needham's writing. One was a plan, showing where he had buried the jewels in his garden at the Hermitage. Another was a will, signed but unwitnessed, leaving all he possessed at the time of his death to Miss Margaret Beresford. The third was a letter—a sort of confession—relating how the jewels had come into his possession, but making no mention of the treacherous way in which he had treated Sunlight and O'Grady.

"I have a presentiment that I shall not live long enough to enjoy my ill-gotten gains," he wrote. "As Lady Delaval is dead, I cannot restore the jewels to their original owner; but as you are engaged to Lord Delaval's heir, and will be Lady Delaval some day, I have decided to bequeath them to you."

He had sold one or two rings and a diamond tiara in order to raise funds, but the great bulk of the jewels were found in the metal cash-box which Sunlight had unearthed. Needless to say, Miss Beresford refused to take them, though the Honourable Eric tried his hardest to persuade her.

"The man was a scoundrel," he said, "and his notions of making restitution were curious, to say the least of it. All the same, I don't see why you shouldn't accept his legacy. The jewels are family heirlooms, you know, and always have descended from one Lady Delaval to another, so they're bound to come to you sooner or later. Then why not accept them now?"

Miss Beresford, however, declined to listen to such pleading, and the jewels were duly handed over to Lord Delaval. On the day that she was married to his son, however, his lordship formally presented them to her, accompanying the presentation with the smiling remark:

"Another proof, my dear, of the truth of the old adage that when rogues fall out, honest folk come by their own."

THE END.

The Editor regrets that owing to lack of space the usual instalment of our Serial, "NEIL THE WRECKER," must be held over until next week.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

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