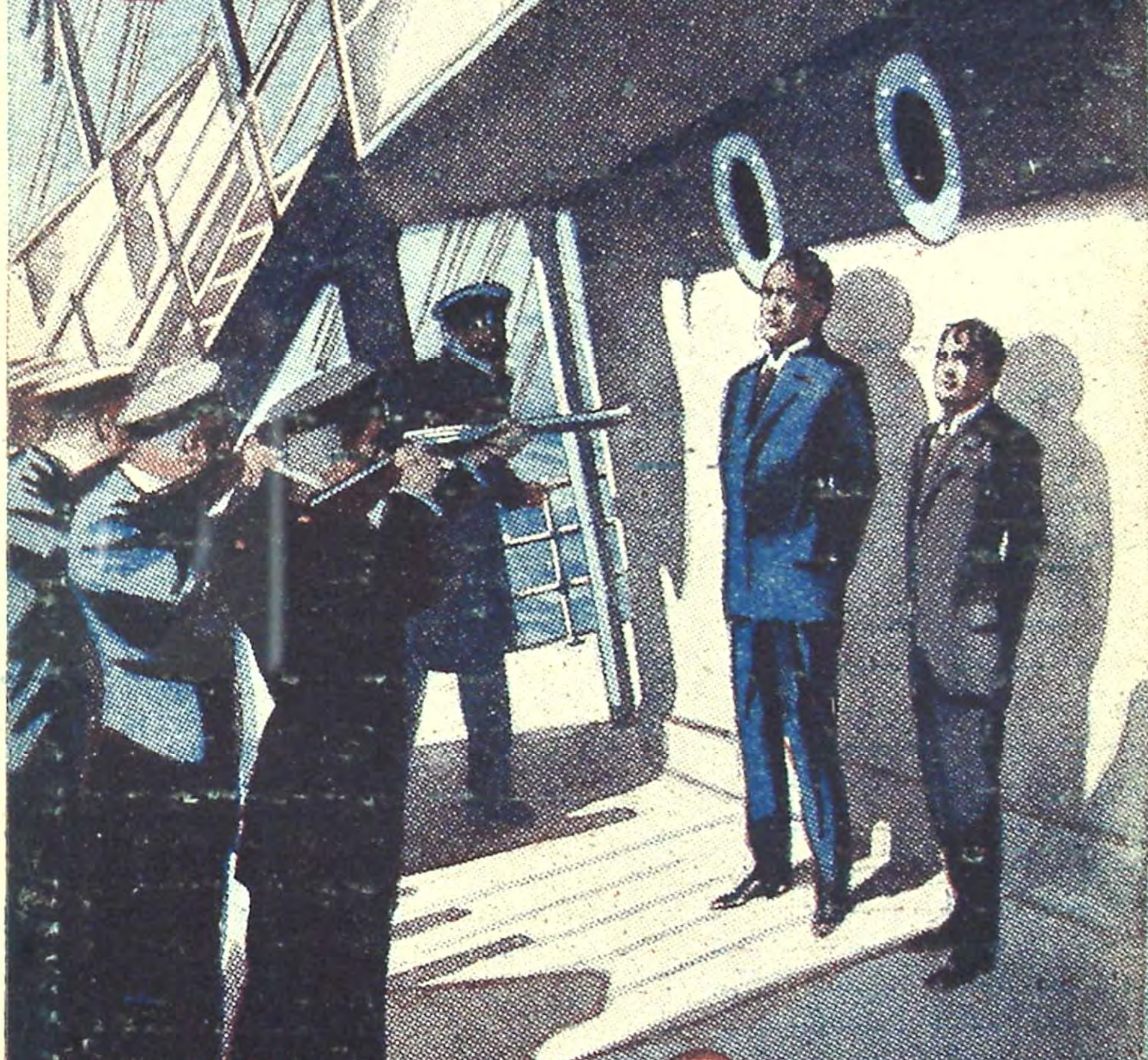


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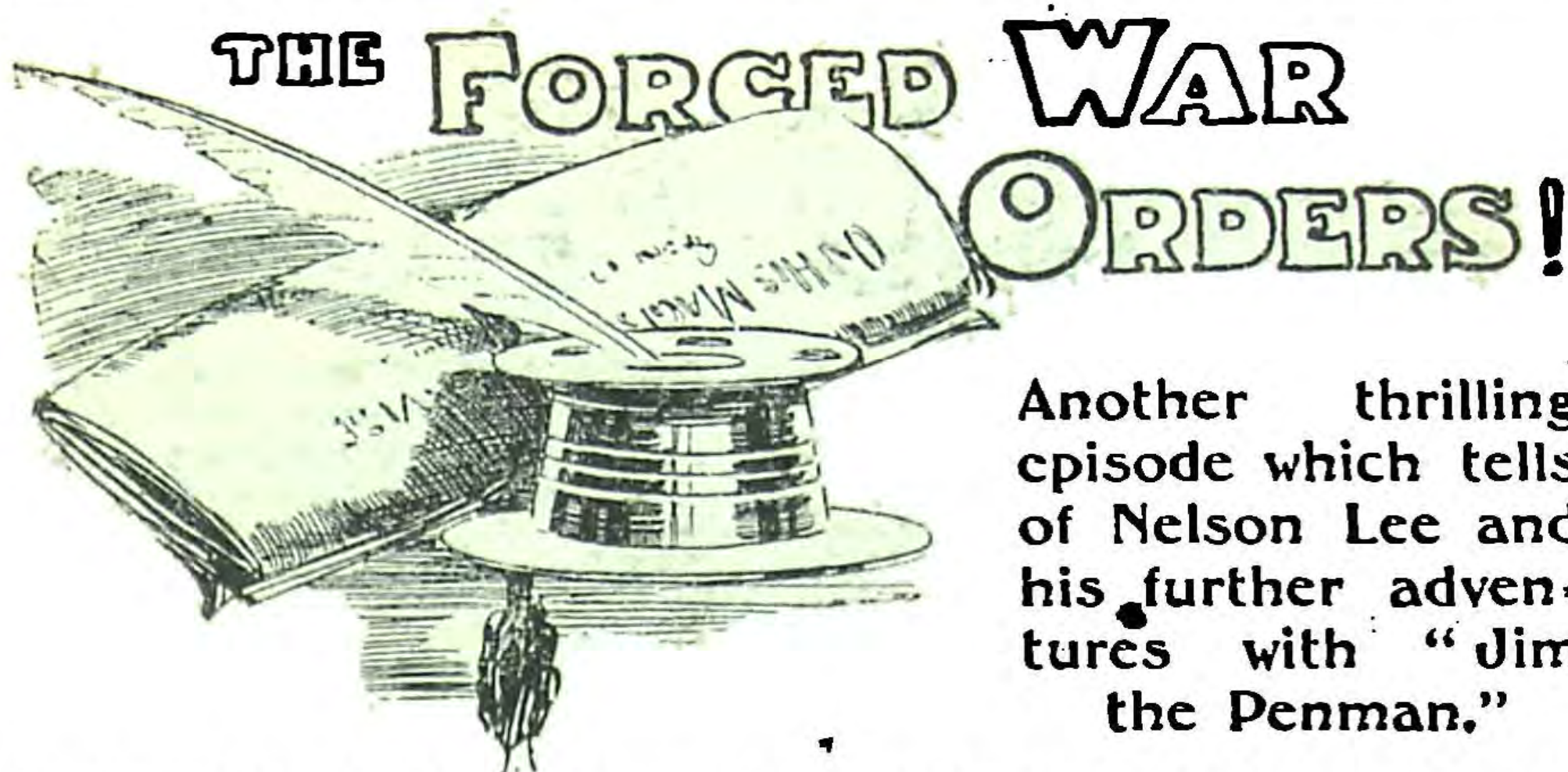


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CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee's Bad Luck.

TILBURY DOCKS wore a decidedly animated aspect.

It was late afternoon, and the spring sun was setting behind a bank of angry-looking clouds. The day had been fine, but there was every promise of a dull evening and a rainy night.

Just at present, however, the weather was excellent, and well suited to the business of the moment, for a large mail steamer, belonging to the Eastern Line, was about to depart for the other side of the world.

The usual bustle which attended the sailing of a large liner was apparent on every hand. The passengers were embarking with a good deal of commotion. There were groups on every hand, mostly laughing, but there was often more than a suspicion of tears behind the laughter. Eyes would be wet, too, when the actual moment of departure arrived.

The mail steamer itself was a large boat of twelve thousand tons, and was one of the Eastern Line's best vessels. She lay alongside the quay patiently awaiting the moment when she would warp out of dock. Thin wisps of smoke rolled lazily from her bright-coloured funnels, and the Blue Peter was fluttering from the masthead.

But there was something unusual connected with the departure of this ship. That is to say, the proceedings were very different from those which attend the departure of a liner in times of peace.

In war time stringent precautions must be taken.

No visitors were allowed to set foot upon the steamer's deck. Those who had come to see the last of their loved ones were forced to bid the last good-byes upon the quay. Moreover, every passenger found it necessary to display his or her passport before setting foot on the gangway, and after the passports had been examined the passengers were not allowed to mingle with their friends or relations again, for they were separated by strong iron railings.

It was impossible for anybody to get aboard without their passports being

subjected to examination; to attempt to board the liner without a passport was out of the question.

There was scarcely a soul present who had not one or more friends, but a tall gentleman, grey-bearded, and with a military aspect, was awaiting his turn to be passed by the officials in solitary aloofness.

He was smoking a cigar, and was quite at his ease. Indeed, the suspicion of a smile seemed to be lurking about his lips. Apparently he was not at all heavy-hearted at the thought of leaving the Old Country.

"It's the best way, Jim, my boy!" he murmured to himself contentedly. "To get out of England for a few months will be a welcome relief. It's a great pity I've been unable to settle with Lee—but my time will come! I sha'n't be away for so very long!"

He puffed at his cigar a little more fiercely, and his eyes became steely for a second. Then he gave his shoulders a slight shrug, and murmured into his beard:

"But what's the good of worrying myself about the past? I have no fears regarding the proceedings of the next few moments. I shall pass these dunderheaded officials without their having the slightest suspicion that they are allowing the cleverest forger the world has ever seen to escape beneath their very noses!"

For this tall, military-looking gentleman was, indeed, Douglas James Sutcliffe—Jim the Penman, the notorious forger!

He had called himself clever, but that was only proof that he was well aware of his own extraordinary abilities. For Jim the Penman was more than clever; in some ways, his talents almost amounted to genius. But for the fact that one man had constantly crossed his path, his career of crime would have been a triumph.

And that one man was Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated crime investigator.

Jim the Penman had very excellent cause to feel bitter against the great detective. The forger's most recent exploit—when he had attempted to gain a fortune by forging a false marriage certificate—had been brought to nought mainly owing to Nelson Lee's strenuous efforts.

Sutcliffe had been arrested, and had only escaped by a clever trick—a trick, moreover, which he would be unable to bring off again. He knew very well that, once the police got him into their hands again, they would watch over him as a mother watches over her new-born babe.

But Jim did not mean to let himself be captured again. By a mere fluke he was a free man, and he intended to remain a free man. He had methods of his own for frustrating any further attempt to make him a prisoner.

It was his present intention to sail for Italy. One of his confederates—for the forger had several—had put him on to something good in Rome, and he was therefore intent upon following it up. Afterwards, and in a comparatively short time, he would return to England and settle down to some extensive schemes which were already simmering in his master-mind.

It had been a very ticklish task—a very difficult task—to obtain his passport; but, by exercising the utmost care, and by using his amazing wits to their fullest extent, he had achieved his object. At first he had thought of forging a passport, but had deemed that such a course would have been too risky. By more elaborate care, he had gained possession of the real thing, and within half an hour he would be aboard the liner, safe from all possible discovery.

Jim the Penman took his place behind several passengers who were being passed on board, and he took his papers from his pocket in readiness. It was an infernal nuisance, this passport business, but there was no risk attached to it. Knowing full well that his passport was in perfect order, Sutcliffe was easy in mind.

At last he was before the officials. There were two of them, and a police-constable near by. Why the latter individual should be there, Jim didn't know—and he certainly didn't care, for he had utter contempt for police-officers of all ranks. The constable's presence, however, was quite ordinary and usual.

The passport was taken from Jim the Penman by a broad-shouldered, bluff man with a grizzled beard.

"Mr. John Reginald Logan!" he exclaimed, turning a pair of keen eyes upon him. "I shall be obliged, Mr. Logan, if you will accompany me!"

The forger tightened his jaw.

"Is this usual?" he asked calmly, and by no means alarmed so far.

"Oh, no! It is quite unusual!"

"Then——"

"You will kindly accompany me, Mr. Logan!"

There was something compelling in the official's voice, and a strong hand closed over Jim the Penman's arm.

For a second the forger was undecided how to act. This incident was so unexpected that he was completely taken aback. He had been quite confident of success. He had told himself repeatedly that no hitch could possibly occur. And yet the strong grip on his arm made it clearly apparent to him that things were not to be so easy, after all.

In spite of all his precautions, he was not destined to sail from England.

Some men would have become frantic with alarm. Some men would have made a desperate attempt to gain freedom; but not Jim the Penman.

Sutcliffe remained perfectly cool. He instinctively knew that he was in a very tight corner, and his eyes glittered with desperation; but he had himself under perfect control, and was apparently at his ease.

Without resisting, he allowed himself to be led away from the staring passengers, and was taken by the official to a quiet spot, free from observation. Jim the Penman noticed that the police-constable was close behind, in attendance.

"Now, Mr. Logan," said the official calmly, "I should like to have a word with you! You must pardon me for this rather singular proceeding! But it is necessary to be extremely cautious."

"Well, what's the trouble?" asked Sutcliffe calmly.

For answer the official jerked his hand forward abruptly, gave Jim's false beard a fierce tug, and pulled it completely away. The movement caused the forger agony for a moment, but he was too startled to notice bodily pain.

"By thunder——"

"Ah, now we can talk more freely!" exclaimed the official placidly. "I thought I was not mistaken! Better not give way to fury, Mr. Sutcliffe. You're caught fair and square—as I think you will willingly admit."

Jim the Penman swore furiously.

He clenched his fists, and his eyes blazed with awful fury. The constable moved a few steps nearer, but his assistance was not required. Jim the Penman dropped his hands limply to his side, and uttered a rueful laugh.

"I know when I'm beaten!" he said quietly. "Yes, you've got me; but how the deuce did you manage it? You're a policeman, of course! A confounded Scotland Yard meddler! I didn't think you were smart enough——"

The official smiled grimly, and said:

"Oh, no! I have no connection whatever with the very excellent institution you named. I am, in fact, a very old friend of yours, Jim the Penman! We have met several times before."

The official turned his head, and made some quick movements with his

hand. When he faced Jim again the grizzled beard had vanished, and a clean-shaven face was revealed. A pair of steely-grey eyes looked upon the prisoner with an expression of quiet amusement and triumph.

"Nelson Lee!" gasped the forger, utterly surprised.

"Precisely!"

"You—you infernal hound!" grated Jim. "You—— By James, Lee, what a dashed clever fellow you are!"

Nelson Lee smiled grimly. All in a moment his captive had recovered his composure, and was now perfectly under control. But there was a sinister glitter in the master-criminal's eyes which did not escape Lee's attention.

The famous detective was more than pleased with himself.

He had captured Jim the Penman a week or two back, after the latter had made an unsuccessful attempt upon the life of a young man named Hugh Ellison. Nelson Lee had performed his task with every success; but by a clever trick, Jim had slipped out of the hands of the police. That, of course, was in no way Nelson Lee's fault. Had the detective been present on that occasion the forger would never have escaped.

The great crime investigator had been working very strenuously just recently, in order to get on the criminal's track again. And he had succeeded. The police were completely at fault, but not so Nelson Lee.

Lee had pursued his investigations and inquiries calmly and deliberately. And, all unknown to Jim, the detective had learned that his quarry had boldly made his appearance under the pseudonym of John Reginald Logan, and disguised so effectively that he could have walked into Scotland Yard itself without arousing suspicion.

But Nelson Lee had acted with caution. He did not under-estimate the ability of the man he was after. He was aware, in fact, that Jim would probably give him the slip unless he acted with the utmost caution.

Accordingly, the detective had deemed it advisable to allow Jim to go his own sweet way, unsuspecting of the danger which hung over him, until the actual moment of embarkation arrived. In this manner Lee would be absolutely sure of his man. The success with which the plan had been accompanied was proof as to its wisdom.

Jim the Penman was caught!

But the forger himself had suddenly become cool for a very definite reason. For he knew that he would require all his coolness during the next few minutes. His plan for escaping from England had failed, but he was by no means resigned to the fate which seemed inevitable.

All the hatred and fury of a madman was in his brain. He felt an almost uncontrollable desire to fling himself at Nelson Lee's throat, and to choke the life out of him. It was this man he had to thank for all his failures—this man who had been constantly in his path of roguery.

But Jim held himself in check, realising the futility of such a move. He stored his hatred up, and promised himself that he would avenge himself upon Lee at no great distant date.

For the present he must confine himself to the necessity of the moment.

"Look here, Jim," said the detective quietly; "I advise you not to attempt any monkey tricks. It won't do you a ha'porth of good, and will only cause commotion. You are fairly collared, and there is no escape."

"I know when I'm down," Jim replied ruefully.

Lee motioned to the constable.

"Stand by the prisoner, Judson," he ordered. "Yes, you'd better hold him—I don't trust him an inch. I am sorry to inconvenience you, Mr. Sutcliffe, but you are such a slippery customer that these precautions are necessary."

Constable Judson laid a hand which resembled a shoulder of mutton upon Jim the Penman's arm, and a set of fingers closed themselves over the forger's sleeve which was like the grip of a vice.

"No tricks, mind!" growled the policeman stolidly.

Judson was possibly not a very intelligent officer; but what he lacked in brain capacity he certainly made up for in bulk and muscle. He stood well over six feet in his regulation boots, and was broad in proportion. Altogether the constable was a huge man, and he was possessed of terrific muscular power. Jim the Penman had about as much chance of slipping out of his fingers as a mouse has of escaping from a cat with a healthy appetite.

Nelson Lee was thoughtful for a moment. He saw that the prisoner was like a baby in Judson's hands, and he had not the slightest fear of any trouble ensuing. Moreover, he was determined to convey his captive to London in his own car. The latter was only a short distance away, around the angle of a building, with Nipper in charge. Lee himself would drive, and Jim would be seated between Nipper and the constable.

"Come on; we might as well go," said Lee. "Hold on, though!" he added, as he sighted a figure a short distance away.

The figure was that of the local inspector, and Nelson Lee determined to have a word with the officer before departing.

He therefore walked forward to meet the inspector, leaving Jim alone in charge of Judson. Lee was in no way lax in acting thus, for if that brawny constable couldn't manage Jim the Penman for half a minute, nobody on earth could!

The very instant Lee's back was turned a curious gleam shot into the forger's eyes. He was essentially a man of quick decisions and prompt action. And in this instant he made up his mind in less than three seconds—and acted before the lapse of another.

"I suppose I can smoke—eh?" he exclaimed pleasantly. "No ban against smoking, is there?"

And without waiting for the constable to reply, Jim dived his free hand into an upper waistcoat pocket.

"Now then—now then!" said the constable sharply. "Keep your hands out of your pockets——"

"My dear, good fellow," smiled Jim, "I am only getting a cigar!"

And he deftly opened a silver cigar-case which was now in his hand. Judson's momentary alarm was allayed when he saw a neat row of cigars within the case. Four were close together, and another occupied a solitary position.

With his one hand Jim the Penman extracted the lonely cigar, put it in his mouth, and replaced the case in his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Nelson Lee had met the inspector, and the pair were slowly walking towards him.

There was not a second to lose.

Jim removed the cigar from his lips, and remarked that he needed a light. Then, to the constable's amazement, his prisoner held the cigar within a couple of inches of his—Judson's—face.

"What the thundering——"

The policeman's words ended abruptly in a choking gasp. For, to his amazement, a reddish-brown cloud of powder spurted out in a cloud from the end of the cigar. The powdery vapour enveloped his face.

The next second Constable Judson was utterly helpless and incapable of action. Not that the powder was anything in the nature of a drug. But it was equally as effective for Jim the Penman's purpose.

The powder entered Judson's eyes, and caused the most excruciating

agony. Completely blinded for the moment, choking and sneezing, he staggered away, and Jim was free.

With lightning-like speed, the forger raced across an open space, his eyes fixed upon a motor-cycle which was leaning against a fence. It was the property of a young man who had come to see a friend off by the liner. But the question of ownership was no concern of Jim's. He wanted to escape, and here was a loophole for him.

He grabbed the motor-cycle, pushed it forward, and the engine instantly began to fire. Even as Jim leapt in the saddle he saw that the petrol-tap was turned off, but there had been sufficient spirit in the carburettor to allow him to start. He pushed down the tap, and a second later was speeding down the road "all out."

The whole incident had not occupied fifteen seconds.

The weird gasping noises caused by the police-constable attracted Nelson Lee's attention at once, and the detective twirled round just in time to see Judson collapse upon the ground, rubbing his eyes with frantic agony. And Jim the Penman was darting away like a deer.

A wild fury surged in Nelson Lee's breast.

"Bolted!" he roared thunderously. "By James! That infernal fool of a constable has let his prisoner escape! Oh, the imbecile, the dunderhead!"

The detective uttered these polite remarks as he tore along on Jim's track. But long before Lee could reach his quarry the latter had started the motor-cycle and was off down the road, which led away from the docks to Tilbury itself.

Quite a number of people had witnessed the amazing incident, and there were startled exclamations from all quarters. But the detective paid no heed to the excitement which prevailed. His eyes were blazing and his cheeks a little pale.

Like a whirlwind he burst upon Nipper, his youthful assistant, who was lounging luxuriously in a big touring car just round a corner.

"Out of that seat, Nipper!" roared Nelson Lee. "Look lively, young 'un!"

Nipper gasped.

"Why, what the merry dickens——"

"Jim the Penman's escaped!" Lee rapped out. "We've got to fly after him, and prove once more that if he can slip through the fingers of the police, he can't slip through mine!"

CHAPTER II.

Hobson's Choice for Jim the Penman.

NELSON LEE clenched his teeth hard as he crouched behind the steering wheel, and sent the big motor-car flying along the road at a terrific pace. Only a few minutes had elapsed since the race had begun, and a moment before Lee had seen a cloud of dust disappearing round a distant bend. He knew that that colour of dust had been created by Jim the Penman's stolen motor-cycle.

Nipper sat beside his master. Decidedly startled, the lad had remained silent so far, but now he leaned over towards the detective. The wind was roaring in his face, and he yelled:

"What's happened, guv'nor?"

"I don't know exactly, Nipper," was Lee's lusty reply. "But it is apparently necessary for two men to take charge of Sutcliffe—he is evidently

more than a match for one! Judson was big enough, though, I should imagine!"

"But what happened to Judson, sir?" asked Nipper. "Why did the blithering ass allow Sutcliffe to slip away? And where were you all the time?"

"I was quite close by—but how in Heaven's name was I to know that Judson would be fool enough to give his prisoner even the slightest opportunity of making a dash?" growled Lee testily. "By what I saw, Jim must have taken something from his pocket and squirted powder or liquid into the constable's eyes—cayenne pepper, probably. But Judson was an imbecile to allow Sutcliffe to perform such an act!"

"Just our rotten luck!" snorted Nipper. "That giddy chap is just like a slithery eel, guv'nor—I'm blessed if we can hold him for two ticks!"

The detective did not reply. Once again he had caught sight of the quarry ahead. The pace of the car was almost dangerous, but Jim the Penman was travelling every bit as fast—probably faster, for the tiny figure in the distance seemed farther away than it had done a minute ago.

Lee opened the throttle wider. He had no intention of being beaten after all the strenuous efforts he had made to run Sutcliffe to earth. The whole thing was galling. He had actually had his man prisoner, and the latter had escaped through the sheer stupidity of a constable. Perhaps Lee was a trifle hard on Judson, for not one policeman out of a thousand would have been prepared for a trick cigar of that character. But Judson was certainly to blame for allowing his captive to place a hand in his pocket at all.

Nipper clung to his seat, and set his teeth. The hedges seemed to be shooting past on either hand in dull, blurred masses. But Nipper was not at all averse to the chase. As a matter of fact, the young rascal keenly enjoyed high speed, and never even thought of the danger. It was exhilarating in the extreme.

Dark clouds were rolling by, and these, added to the dusk of the dying day, caused darkness to fall prematurely. The road ahead was dim and deserted, and by no means broad—for it was not a main road.

Once or twice the pursuers were held up by other traffic, and had it not been for Nelson Lee's magnificent driving, disaster would surely have overtaken them.

Jim the Penman undoubtedly had the advantage, for he was able to shoot past everything, so long as there was a yard of room to spare. He was a magnificent cyclist and possessed no such thing as nerves.

Moreover, at the present moment he was desperate. He was taking risks which he would never have ventured under less strenuous circumstances.

The forger was making for Brentwood. He hoped to arrive there well ahead of Lee—for he knew that the detective was on his track. Once he got on the main London road he would shoot through Romford and Ilford, and desert his motor-cycle somewhere in that district. If only he could do that he knew that he would be safe, for he could slip into a metropolitan railway station, and allow himself to be swallowed up amidst London's millions.

But—could he arrive at Ilford unchecked?

Jim was hopeful, but not absolutely confident. He would, at least, do his best. He was thankful that his stolen mount was an excellent machine. It sped along smoothly and swiftly. The miles slipped by with clockwork-like regularity. Once or twice, as the dusk grew thicker, Jim glanced behind him. But, although he occasionally caught sight of the pursuing motor-car, he had completely lost it when he was nearing Brentwood.

Through the latter town he slowed down somewhat, for he had no wish to

attract too much attention. He did not know how much petrol he had in the tank, but he decided that it would be unwise to stop. He would go straight on, and chance whether he had a sufficient supply.

Once out of Brentwood Jim opened the throttle to its widest extent, and simply tore along like a raging demon. It was now nearly dark, but he did not stop to light up. Every second was precious.

And then something happened which upset all Jim's calculations.

It was something which was extremely likely to happen under the circumstances. It was a wonder, in fact, that it did not occur sooner.

The fugitive motor-cyclist was now going "all out" with a vengeance. He had no light on his machine, and the road was extremely dark.

Quite suddenly, and without the least warning, a big landaulette shot out from an obscure side-turning and headed towards Romford—towards London.

At that very second Jim was speeding along with his eyes glued ahead fixedly, the engine beneath him firing in one continuous roar. The landaulette appeared about fifty yards ahead, and swung out right across the road.

A smash was inevitable.

Jim jammed the throttle over instinctively, and literally stood upon the brake with his heel. But he had been travelling at such a speed that to pull up was impossible. Had he lost his presence of mind he would have been killed on the spot. But he wrenched the handle-bars over in a desperate attempt to steer round the car.

The attempt failed, and Jim ran on to the grass bordering the road, and came a fearful cropper just ahead of the car. The front wheel of his cycle struck a hillock, and he was flung out of the saddle like a stone from a catapult.

He fell with a thud, his head striking a boulder with a stunning crack. The motor-bicycle turned a kind of Catherine-wheel behind him, and crashed down, very much a wreck, within a yard of its fallen rider.

The big landaulette at once came to a standstill, and the chauffeur jumped down and rushed to the side of the road. He was followed at once by a big, heavy man, and the pair could see that the injured man was in rather a bad way. His head was battered a good deal, and he was quite unconscious.

"Infernal nuisance!" growled the big man. "The fellow has only himself to thank for what has occurred. I will say, though, that you swung out of that lane a great deal too sharply, Jervis."

The chauffeur made no reply, but in a few moments Jim the Penman was lifted into the tonneau of the landaulette, and the car proceeded on its way. The wrecked bicycle was left exactly as it had fallen.

As the car started forward an old countryman slowly crossed a stile near by; he had arrived just in time to see the injured man being lifted aboard. He stood looking down at the wreck of Jim's machine, and as he was doing so, he heard the roar of another automobile approaching at high speed. This vehicle was fitted with big head-lamps; but they were, of course, greatly diminished in light-giving power owing to the lighting regulations.

It was Nelson Lee's car, and the detective at once saw the old countryman and something which looked like an overturned motor-cycle by the side of the road. The detective applied the brakes promptly.

He had, to tell the truth, been in a mood which was the reverse of cheerful. For a good many miles now he had lost sight of his quarry—but knew, however, that Jim the Penman had turned Londonwards from Brentwood. He was close enough on Jim's trail, but was very much afraid that

he would lose the forger once the latter succeeded in getting the other side of Romford.

But Nelson Lee soon received news which caused him the keenest satisfaction. The old fellow by the roadside informed him that a motor-cyclist had had a smash-up, and that he had been placed inside a motor-car which had been the main cause of the accident.

The red rear light of the landaulette was even then visible in the dim distance along the straight road.

Lee was highly delighted. He knew for a fact that it was Jim the Penman who had met with the accident, for he had noted the registration number of the cycle as it started off from Tilbury.

Jim the Penman had met with an accident in his headlong flight, and was only just ahead in a comparatively slow-moving touring car. The desperate chase was now ended. Lee had only to follow the landaulette, and he would capture his man.

In a few moments he and Nipper were off again, travelling speedily in order to overtake the foremost car.

"We shall probably find Jim the Penman in a fit state for hospital, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee comfortably. "Well, the only surprising thing is he didn't have the smash up sooner!"

By the time Ilford was reached the pursuers were close behind the big landaulette, moving along comfortably. Lee had no intention of making known to the unknown gentleman the fact that the injured man was a fugitive from justice. In all probability Jim was being taken to a hospital, and it would have been an act of inhumanity to cause a delay for no purpose. Being in close attendance on this strange automobile, which contained the forger, Lee had no fear now of losing his man.

Right through the East End the landaulette proceeded at a good speed, and Lee half anticipated that its destination would be the East London Hospital.

But it kept straight on, passed through the city, until it reached the West End. By this time Nelson Lee was decidedly interested. Where was Jim being taken to? Surely his unknown benefactor was not conveying him to a private house?

But this, indeed, was actually the case. For the landaulette pulled up before a huge mansion in Belgrave Square. Lee brought his own car to a standstill some little distance away, and then walked forward.

"Hallo!" he murmured to himself, with a sudden start. "What can be the meaning of this? The residence of Sir Otto Bruckmann! By James, I don't care for the look of things very much!"

There was good reason for Nelson Lee's sudden change of expression—for he had become very grave.

What could be the meaning of this unexpected termination of the exciting chase? This house in Belgrave Square was the property of Sir Otto Bruckmann, Bart.; it was therefore quite safe to assume that Jim the Penman had been brought to London in Sir Otto's own car—probably by Bruckmann himself.

The baronet, Nelson Lee was well aware, was of German birth, but had been naturalised for some years.

Why had Jim the Penman been brought here?

The most natural thing for a motorist to do, upon finding an injured man by the roadside, was to take him straight to a hospital. It was a decidedly singular proceeding to bring Jim to this baronet's house—who was, Nelson Lee was firmly convinced, a perfect stranger to the forger.

Somehow, the detective was uneasy, and hardly knew what to do. There was no reason for drastic action, for he knew where his man was whenever he wanted to lay hands upon him. He would do nothing without careful thought. This affair had developed in quite an unexpected direction, and was well worth looking into. Lee knew quite enough of Sir Otto Bruckmann to suspect that the baronet had not brought Jim to his house for any motives prompted by kindness. It was far more likely that there was some deeper reason behind it all.

"Whatever the reason for this development may be," murmured Lee to himself, "the surprising thing is this: Sutcliffe has just been taken into the house of an utter stranger—about the last man in the whole of London whom one would credit with kindness of heart. I can, of course, go straight up to the house at once and claim my prisoner. But I don't think I shall. I have a mind to pursue a little careful investigation before acting definitely."

A few moments before Lee had seen Sutcliffe's inanimate form being carried into the great house. The door was now closed, and the landauletto had driven off—presumably to its garage.

Nelson Lee walked to the spot where Nipper was waiting in the car, and he briefly explained to the lad what had occurred. Nipper scratched his head.

"Well, this is a rum go!" he exclaimed. "What's the meaning of it all, guv'nor?"

"That's what I wish to find out, Nipper."

"But why has the German beast carted Jim into his house?"

"It is possible, of course, that Sir Otto has merely done so because Jim is not seriously injured enough to be taken to a hospital," replied Lee. "But it is quite useless our making these conjectures, my boy. You take the car home, and I will follow after I have attended to this matter."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I don't exactly know; it all depends," replied Lee thoughtfully. "But we have got Jim—the Penman beautifully trapped, so there is no need to worry. In all probability he will be safely under lock and key before I turn up at Gray's Inn Road."

Events had turned in a singularly curious direction. Solely owing to that motor smash between Brentwood and Romford, Nelson Lee was to enter upon one of the most surprising cases that had ever come before his notice.

While the famous detective was talking with Nipper, a strange scene was taking place in the house into which Jim the Penman had been carried.

The master forger was quite unconscious, and he lay upon a luxurious couch in Sir Otto Bruckmann's library. Slowly pacing up and down, the baronet himself smoked a cigar rather jerkily, and glanced continuously at his visitor for the first sign of recovery.

Sir Otto was in a strange mood. He was a big, heavy man, clean-shaven, and with hair of a coarse, bristly nature, and tinged with grey. The top of his head was almost bald, and his eyebrows were fierce and bushy.

Bruckmann did not have many characteristics which proclaimed him to be a German. In fact, he looked very British when composed and smiling, and when in the company of other people. But at the present moment he was alone, and his jaw was set in a very curious, and a very ugly position.

It was quite plain to see that he was labouring under intense mental excitement.

"It can be done!" he muttered tensely. "I am positive it can be done! There is one man in the whole world capable of the task—and he is here, in this very room with me!"

Bruckmann, although of German descent, spoke pure English. He was

—so he declared at every opportunity—British to the backbone. He was wholeheartedly with the Allies in his views regarding the great war, and had subscribed huge sums to the various famous war funds and hospitals.

A more patriotic British subject did not exist—apparently.

He had, in fact, been on his way home from a patriotic meeting—at which he had, amid enthusiasm, pledged his loyalty to Britain—when Jim the Penman had met with his accident.

It had been Bruckmann's intention, originally, to convey the unfortunate motor-cyclist to the nearest hospital—as Nelson Lee had surmised. But in the well-lighted interior of the landaulette Sir Otto had seen that the stranger was only badly stunned, and that he could come round before so very long.

And Bruckmann had made a surprising discovery. He recognised his companion as Douglas Sutcliffe, the amazing forger! With this revelation had come the realisation that he had Jim the Penman completely in his power. If he took the criminal home he could compel Jim to do exactly as he pleased, under threat of instant arrest if he refused. A train of thought had been started in this way, and Bruckmann had been struck by an extraordinary idea.

The result was that Sutcliffe was now in Bruckmann's house. But there was one fact the baronet was in ignorance of: he did not know, and did not suspect that Nelson Lee had been on Jim's track, and that the detective had, in consequence, run his quarry to earth in this great mansion.

Sir Otto turned abruptly as there was a movement on the couch.

He strode over the room, and stood over Jim the Penman. Bruckmann was well acquainted with Sutcliffe's astonishing record, and knew the man's capabilities. He knew, moreover, that the police would be very glad to learn the whereabouts of the slippery criminal.

"Ah, you're coming round, are you?" murmured Sir Otto.

Jim's head was badly bruised, but he was not seriously injured. A little brandy forced between his lips soon caused his eyes to open. Ten minutes later Sutcliffe was in full possession of his senses, and was sitting up on the couch, quite cool, but rather "groggy."

A handkerchief was tied round his bruised head, and he was listening to his companion's explanation of the accident. So far Bruckmann had not revealed the fact that he knew the identity of his visitor.

"I remember coming a terrific cropper," Jim the Penman said, "but then everything went blank. You must permit me to tender you my heartiest thanks for your kindness. I am extremely grateful."

"Oh, I could do nothing less under the circumstances," replied Bruckmann.

"There is one point I should like you to clear up, if it is within your power," proceeded the injured man. "Some friends of mine were in a motor-car not far behind. Did you see any sign of them?"

The other shook his head.

"There was no motor-car," he declared.

Jim the Penman nodded to himself with satisfaction. He fondly imagined that he had shaken Nelson Lee and Nipper off the track, and he was almost glad that the smash had occurred. He had received a bruised head, it is true, but he was not quite safe from discovery.

"But, of course, you must be wondering who I am?" Jim asked, with a smile.

"Not at all. I am well aware of your identity."

"Indeed!"

"Sutcliffe is your name, my dear fellow," said Sir Otto, with perfect

calmness. "Douglas James Sutcliffe—better known to the police as Jim the Penman!"

The forger half started from his chair, and then fell back again.

"The deuce!" he growled. "Then I'm not so secure as I thought I was! How the thunder did you know? And you might do me the honour of acquainting me with your name."

Bruckmann laughed softly.

"You are wearing no disguise," he said, with a wave of his fat hand. "Your exploits, my dear Jim, have been rather prominently displayed in the newspapers recently. In your line of business publicity is unavoidable, and your excellent likeness has been reproduced in several illustrated dailies. In the strong light of my *lандаulette*, therefore, I had little difficulty in recognising your well-formed features. And if you are anxious to learn my name, you will find one of my cards at your elbow."

Jim was struck by the almost insolent coolness of his companion, and it was with some little curiosity that he glanced at the slip of pasteboard which Sir Otto indicated. A shadow fell across his face as he read the name.

"A confounded German, eh?" he remarked candidly.

Sir Otto's face was convulsed with anger for a moment; and then he chuckled.

"No, I am not a German," he replied. "I am one of his Majesty's most faithful subjects. This country being at war with Germany at the present time, I cannot altogether blame you for drawing a false inference. My name is against me."

Jim did not answer. He was feeling rather bitter, in fact, for he guessed that he was actually in a tight corner. He had shaken Nelson Lee off his track, but had fallen into the hands of this Teutonic "Englishman," who would probably send for the police.

"Look here, I've done no harm to you!" said Sutcliffe, in a low voice. "You won't receive any satisfaction by giving me up, will you? By the heavens, if you do I will have my revenge some day——"

"Not so impulsive!" protested Bruckmann gently. "It is never wise to give way to panic. Let me state the position clearly."

"You, Jim the Penman, are in my house, unknown to a soul save myself. My servants have no idea regarding your questionable character. If I choose I can ring up the police and have you taken away within fifteen minutes. There is no escape for you—you are quite in my power. You understand that fully, don't you? It rests with me whether you remain a free man, or whether you are cast in prison. It rests, moreover, a great deal with yourself."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jim curtly.

Sir Otto Bruckmann drew his chair closer.

"I have work for you," he said smoothly—"work that is solely in the interests of another country. In brief, you spoke correctly when you called me a German. I am a German, and I have all a German's hatred for this country. You are surprised that I am so frank with you?"

"Not at all," replied Jim grimly. "There is no reason why you should not be frank. I am convinced that we are in private, and what is my word against yours? Suppose I repeated what you have told me—who would believe me?"

"Exactly—exactly! You have put the position very neatly."

"And you are a spy—eh?" was Jim's next remark. "An infernal German spy? And you want me to assist you in your devilish work?"

Bruckmann smiled.

"I respect a man who speaks out plainly. You have spoken very plainly indeed," he replied. "Yes, it is my intention that you shall do certain

work for me. You are quite in my hands. If you refuse you will be taken to prison—it is Hobson's choice for you. If you consent you will be rewarded handsomely. Indeed, I can promise you a sum of money which will almost stagger you. Germany is always willing to pay highly for valuable services rendered!"

Jim's eyes gleamed. After all, why should he not accept Bruckmann's terms? He was quite convinced that if he refused he would be promptly handed over to Scotland Yard—and anything was better than that. Besides, what had he to thank England for? He was a criminal, an outlaw. It mattered not to him whether Britain went to the dogs or not. In truth, events had shaped themselves very much in his favour. Nelson Lee was shaken off, and he had fallen right on his feet into what was obviously a soft "lay." There was money in this business, too.

Suteliffe rose to his feet with a careless laugh.

"I am with you," he said coolly. "I have good reason to hate Britain myself, and my conscience will not suffer in the least. I realise, too, that I am between the devil and the deep sea. In other words, I am between you and the police!"

"That is quite complimentary," smiled Bruckmann, in no way angered. "So I represent the devil—eh? I think I shall prove to you that I am scarcely deserving of that compliment. We will work together, my friend."

"What's the game?" asked Jim the Penman bluntly.

"We will discuss that when you are somewhat recovered," replied Sir Otto. "But your wits will tell you that I am in need of a man with special ability regarding handwriting. You're about the cleverest forger in the world, Suteliffe, so I could not have chosen a better man. We shall be successful, I am sure."

The two men shook hands on their vile compact. Suteliffe was quite comfortable in taking this course. Refusal would have meant imprisonment; and he was not particular as to how he made money. Even treachery to his own country was not a crime in his eyes.

But even while the two scoundrels were clasping hands there was a witness to the scene. Bruckmann himself knew that he and his companion were in private; he knew that the window was securely closed, and that no sounds could escape from the room.

But one of the laths of the Venetian blind, three parts of the way up the window, was not resting evenly, and a tiny crack was formed. At this crack an eye was gazing into the room unseen by those within.

That eye belonged to Nelson Lee.

The great detective, in fact, had been pursuing a little investigation. After he had sent Nipper off he had made his way to a spot where he could enter the garden of Sir Otto Bruckmann's house without being observed. This was a comparatively easy task, owing to the restricted lighting. The night was dark, and Lee soon found himself quite close to the mansion at the rear. After a little trouble he located the library, but was not disappointed at being unable to overhear the conversation going on within. He had not anticipated any such stroke of luck. But he noticed the crooked blind lath at once, and, mounting upon the window-sill, he had applied his eye to the crack, and could see all that was taking place in the library.

When he first looked Sir Otto and Jim were talking quite calmly, and then, after a time, the forger rose to his feet and extended his hand. Lee was more than surprised; he was keenly suspicious and alive to the possibilities of this unexpected development.

And although he could not hear, he saw something which caused him to snap his teeth together sharply. He had been thinking that there was, perhaps, nothing in this scene he was witnessing; Sir Otto might think that

his companion was simply a gentleman who had met with an unfortunate accident. And the pair were naturally having a little chat before parting company. Leo was quite prepared to step forward and claim his prisoner.

But he saw something which gave him an inkling of the truth.

Bruckmann was facing the window squarely, and the electric light shone full upon his big face. Lee saw the baronet's lips moving, but he heard no sound. The very movements of the lips, however, was sufficient for Nelson Lee.

The detective was experienced in the art of lip-reading; he had found his knowledge very useful on many occasions. And now the circumstances were more than favourable. He could see Bruckmann's lips with acute distinctness. And he saw Sir Otto exclaim:

"We will discuss that when--somewhat recovered. But your wits will tell you that—I—need—man with special ability—handwriting. You're about the cleverest forger—world, Sutcliffe, so—not have chosen better man. We shall—successful, I am sure."

Bruckmann spoke quickly, and some words escaped Lee's attention. But he had seen quite sufficient to arouse all his detective instincts.

Quickly, and without making a sound, he lowered himself from the window-sill, and left the grounds of the mansion. Then, when he emerged upon Belgrave Square, he hailed a taxi, and drove straight home to Gray's Inn Road.

Nelson Lee had come to a decision.

He had long had suspicions regarding Sir Otto Bruckmann's loyalty to Great Britain. Now he had positive proof that the German was a rogue. He knew, too, why Jim the Penman had been brought to the baronet's house. Bruckmann had recognised the forger, and had important work for Sutcliffe. And the latter, being caught in a cleft-stick, as it were, was forced to accept Bruckmann's terms.

By arresting Jim straight off the whole plot would fizzle out. That the plot was a villainous one, Lee was certain of. He knew where the forger was, and could lay hands on him whenever he wanted—for Lee was quite confident that Sutcliffe would remain with his new confederate until the latter's plans were carried out.

"I will allow things to proceed," Nelson Lee told himself grimly. "By following that course, and by keeping on the alert, I shall probably entrap Bruckmann in the meshes of the net, and he will be exposed for the alien enemy he actually is. This surprising affair has developed into a case where I am required to work for the good of my country—and it would be foolish to arrest Jim straight away and lose a man who is probably one of Germany's cleverest spies."

But Nelson Lee, astute as he was, had not the slightest conception of the true magnitude of the scheme which was simmering in Sir Otto Bruckmann's evil brain.

CHAPTER III.

Developments, and a Summons to Chelsea.

"YOU will understand, Mr. Lee, that what I am about to tell you is of national importance, and that the utmost secrecy must be preserved? I rely upon your honour to treat my revelations as absolutely confidential."

Nelson Lee inclined his head.

"I have been entrusted with State secrets of the very first importance on

more than one occasion, Mr. Graham," he said simply. "I do not think I have proved myself to be a man unworthy of such confidences."

"I am sure that I shall be safe in speaking frankly," exclaimed Mr. Dennis Graham, leaning a little nearer to the detective. "Well, as I mentioned in my letter, I am the inventor of the Graham Lightning-Fire Machine-gun, and my plant for the manufacture of the guns is situated at Stalton, in Essex."

Mr. Graham paused, and regarded Lee thoughtfully.

The visitor had arrived only shortly before, and Nelson Lee was more than interested. That morning the detective had received a letter from Mr. Graham saying that the writer would call at eleven o'clock precisely, and that he would be glad of Lee's advice in connection with a certain difficulty regarding an incident which had occurred at his machine-gun manufactory in Essex. Mr. Graham had turned up promptly to time, in order to go into details.

He was a smallish man, but his head was well-formed, and it could be seen at a glance that he was clever. There were lines upon his big forehead, and "crow's feet" about his eyes—clear evidence of worry and hard work and long hours. He was grey-haired, and about fifty-eight years of age.

"First of all, Mr. Lee," he continued, "I will explain that my gun has met with the unqualified approval of the military authorities and of the Government. The War Office is convinced that my invention will go far towards bringing about a speedy termination to this ghastly war."

"My factory employs a vast number of men, and they are all working at forced pressure. In a way, the works are under military supervision; but only in a slight degree. I, myself, am in sole charge, and am responsible for everything."

"My gun—— Well, I will not go into details concerning the gun, for no good purpose would be served. But, without boasting, I can safely say that no other make of machine-gun in the world can approach it for efficiency and deadly effect. The Germans have no weapon to touch it. It is no exaggeration to declare that the gun is fully ten times as powerful and efficient as any other of its type in existence. You will realise what this means in warfare. My gun can fire with lightning-like rapidity, its range is tremendous, and the effect of its fire deadly."

"I am more than pleased to hear of your success, Mr. Graham," said Nelson Lee. "I only trust that our brave fellows at the Front have been provided with an ample supply of your wonderful gun."

"I am coming to that now," was Mr. Graham's rejoinder. "So far, no guns have been sent out—for the sufficient reason that I have only just commenced to make them in quantities. When the first batch does arrive on the battle-fronts, I am sure that the Germans will receive a most unpleasant shock. But to get to facts again. I have a consignment of five thousand machine-guns, packed ready for shipment. You will admit that that is a very large supply, for a beginning. Five thousand guns will go a long way."

"The enemy will discover that, to their cost."

"At present I am awaiting orders from the War Office," said the visitor. "I am expecting to receive instructions within a few days regarding the shipment of the guns. But I am uneasy, Mr. Lee—very uneasy."

"Why?"

"Because I am firmly convinced that the enemy has spies working down at Stalton," replied Mr. Graham seriously. "You will say, perhaps, that there are no spies abroad now—that the Government has knocked espionage on the head? I do not believe it! I believe that there are many, many

German spies at work in this country. Look at Sir Otto Bruckmann—is he actually the pillar of patriotism he professes to be? I do not think so. Indeed, I am quite sure that Bruckmann is a German through and through."

A curious expression came into Lee's eyes. It was strange that Mr. Graham should give voice to his suspicions at such a time. Lee had very strong suspicions that Bruckmann was an enemy spy of the most dangerous character. And it was curious that this visitor should mention Bruckmann when Lee had already to keep the baronet constantly under observation.

"Perhaps it is beside the point for us to make conjectures," suggested Nelson Lee quietly. "I shall, therefore, be obliged, Mr. Graham, if you will tell me what reason you have for thinking that German spies are at work."

"I am afraid I can give you no concrete evidence," replied the inventor. "But a couple of days ago, one of the sentries guarding the sheds which contain the packed guns was killed under mysterious circumstances. I say a couple of days ago, but the incident actually occurred during the night. For when, at four o'clock in the morning his relief arrived, he was found lying on the ground stabbed to the heart. The affair remains a deep mystery, Mr. Lee, but I am personally convinced that German secret agents are at the bottom of the business."

"That is undoubtedly the most obvious explanation."

"Who else would murder the sentry but a spy? Don't forget, Mr. Lee, that the Germans would give almost anything for the secret of my gun. In some way they have learned of its vast superiority over their own, and with their usual cunning they are attempting to gain possession of the secret."

"Was anything discovered to show that strangers had been prowling about?"

"No, nothing," replied Mr. Graham. "It is my idea that the sentry was killed by the spies in order that they may make an examination of the sheds without interruption. When they act again they will probably blow the whole place—shed, factory, and all—sky-high in a million fragments."

"I am afraid you are taking rather a pessimistic view, Mr. Graham," protested Lee.

"There is more sound sense in such a view, at all events, than in allowing the matter to slide unheeded," replied the other grimly. "The thing is to act, Mr. Lee. Good heavens! A fine thing it would be to lose everything for want of little precaution. I have come to you because I want you to pay a visit to Stalton in secret—and, if possible, in disguise."

Lee stroked his chin.

"I see. You want me to go down to Essex, and keep my eyes open for any possible mischief?" he inquired. "You want me to find out if there is any truth in your suspicions that German spies are at work?"

"Exactly, Mr. Lee. Will you undertake the task?"

Nelson Lee was silent.

"Of course, you realise that the task will be a dangerous one?" went on Mr. Graham. "You will carry your life in your hands, and may even possibly meet with disaster. But I came to you, Mr. Lee, because I knew you to be a man of honour, and a man of sterling, proven courage."

The detective laughed, and interjected:

"Please let us make the conversation a little less personal. If you go on at that rate, Mr. Graham, you will make me vain. I don't think I am a man with more courage than most Britishers; but I will say that I have

had more experience of this class of work than the majority of my fellow-countrymen. You want me to serve my King and country, Mr. Graham, and I will do as you request. If the risks are many they are, at least, no greater than those our brave soldiers are cheerfully facing across the sea."

The visitor looked pleased.

"When do you propose to journey down to Stalton?" he asked.

"I cannot answer you definitely," Lee replied. "You will oblige me by leaving those matters in my hands. But you may rest assured that both I and my young assistant will be down on the Essex marshes to-night, and that we shall be well on our guard."

After a little further conversation, Mr. Dennis Graham took his departure. And when he had gone Lee talked over the situation with Nipper. The detective felt that the affairs of Mr. Graham were not far removed from the plot in which Jim the Penman was mixing himself. There was a possibility that there was no connection whatever; but the odds were all in favour of the other supposition.

"We will leave London late this afternoon, Nipper," the detective said. "And we will both travel independently of one another. I have no false view regarding the German spy peril. I believe the brutes are very active indeed, and neither of us have any desire to bid this world a premature farewell."

"In other words, guv'nor, we don't want our candles snuffed out all of a sudden, so to speak," remarked Nipper cheerfully. "But what about Jim the Penman? I thought we were going to keep our eye on that merchant?"

"You may be sure, my lad, that I will take steps to have Jim kept under constant observation," replied Lee. "He is staying in Bruckmann's house as a guest—that fact I learned early this morning, by careful inquiries. We need not worry ourselves about Jim for the moment. But I have more than an inkling that he will worry us before so very long."

During the morning the famous detective made his preparations. But at lunch-time he was rather astonished to receive a second letter from Mr. Graham. This was quite short and clear.

"Dear Mr. Lee," the letter ran—"An unexpected difficulty has arisen, and I wish to acquaint you with the new facts at once. As it is impossible for me to visit you in your rooms, will you kindly come at once to 63, Nation Road, Chelsea. You will find me there awaiting your arrival with eagerness and anxiety. You will understand that I cannot possibly be explicit in writing. In haste,
DENNIS GRAHAM."

The detective pursed his lips as he read the message.

"H'm! I wonder what this can mean?" he murmured. "What is this new difficulty?"

"What's the trouble, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

Lee handed the lad the note.

"Looks pretty serious," remarked Nipper. "Perhaps there's been another death down at Stalton. Of course, you'll go, sir?"

"Naturally."

How were Nelson Lee and Nipper to guess that this epistle was nothing more nor less than an impudent forgery? That it was, in fact, one of Jim the Penman's amazing efforts?

The truth was startling enough. Jim was very wide awake, and he had been informed by Bruckmann that Graham had visited Nelson Lee. Sutcliffe had therefore penned the forgery in order to entrap the detective. Whether the ruse would succeed remains to be seen. But it was quite obvious

that Bruckmann's plot and the affairs of Mr. Dennis Graham were connected—as Nelson Lee had surmised.

Bruckmann was not exactly alarmed at the prospect of Nelson Lee entering the case. He had means whereby the detective could be instantly silenced if he became too active. It was Jim's suggestion that the trap should be laid for Nelson Lee, for Sutcliffe still feared the great detective, and was determined to wipe off old scores once and for all. Moreover, when Lee was out of the way there would be nothing to mar the success of this new venture.

And how was the detective to suspect treachery in that innocent note? The handwriting was identical with the one he had received in the morning. The possibility of the letter being a forgery seemed too wild for serious consideration. Lee was not to know that Bruckmann had supplied his new tool with a specimen of Graham's handwriting and signature.

The ruse was cleverly engineered, and Nelson Lee went to Chelsea.

CHAPTER IV.

What Happened at 63, Nation Road.

RAT-TAT!

Nelson Lee rapped upon the door of a rather dingy house in a quiet street. It was Nation Road, Chelsea, and the detective was not exactly impressed by its aspect. Why on earth Mr. Graham should have come here was something of a puzzle.

Number sixty-three appeared to be almost deserted, for the little slip of front-garden was unkempt and rough. The windows of the house were dirty, and, for the most part, curtainless.

The front door was opened, in answer to Nelson Lee's knock, by a bent old man with a long white beard, and big spectacles resting on the top of his nose. He regarded the detective rather suspiciously.

"Who be you, sir?" he asked cautiously.

"My name is Lee—"

"Ah! And you're the gent that Mr. Graham is expecting," said the old fellow, opening the door wider. "Step in, sir, will you kindly? I'll lead you straight to Mr. Graham."

Lee had been using his eyes carefully, and he followed the old man along the passage, after the door had been closed, with a firm footstep. As they came opposite to the door of the front room, which was standing ajar, Nelson Lee suddenly gave the bent old man a violent push and sent him flying into the room. The detective followed him like lightning, and slammed the door.

A revolver gleamed in his hand.

"Hands up!" he rapped out crisply. "Hands up, Jim the Penman!"

At the same second he stepped forward, grabbed the old fellow's beard, and pulled it off. Douglas Sutcliffe was revealed! The forger's face was convulsed with livid fury. His carefully planned ruse had failed. At that second he was irresistibly reminded of that former occasion, on Tilbury Docks, when Nelson Lee had torn his beard off. The detective had now repeated the performance.

"You—you infernal hound!" grated Jim furiously.

"My dear man, if it will relieve your feelings, you may indulge in a few pleasant remarks of that nature!" said Nelson Lee easily. "But I warn you, Jim, not to attempt any tricks. Stand just as you are, and raise your hands above your head!"

"I'll see you hanged——"

"By James!" roared Lee. "Up with them!"

Click! went the revolver, and the forger's hands shot ceilingwards without another second's delay. That ominous click from the revolver was not at all a welcome sound in Jim's ears.

"That's better!" went on Lee smoothly. "So you thought that you could trap me—eh? You and your new friend, Bruckmann, will find that I am not quite such a 'dud' as you seem to imagine. Now then, keep your hands up! No more cigar tricks, my friend! You escaped from that fool of a constable at Tilbury, but I'm a little more alert!"

"You—you——" panted Jim.

"Lost for words—eh?" smiled Lee coolly. "Upon my soul, Jim, this is really amusing! You brought me here to trap me, and the reverse has actually happened. Why, you dunderhead, I was not deceived by that forgery for a moment. I freely admit that it was a masterpiece of penmanship, but I suspected that something was wrong at once. I knew that Mr. Graham was staying at a certain hotel before taking his train home, and I at once rang him up. Of course, you thought that I should blunder into the trap like a fool! Well, I didn't, and now you've got to do exactly as I tell you."

"I won't do a thing!" snarled Jim helplessly.

"You won't? I think the persuasive powers of this revolver will make you alter your decision," Lee said, with a grim note creeping into his voice. "Ah! Stop that!"

He moved a step forward as Jim suddenly lowered one of his hands and made a desperate dive for his coat pocket.

But the detective was too quick, and Jim was forced to raise his hands again. As he did so he suddenly assumed that insolent coolness which was characteristic of him when in a tight corner. His face broke out into a sneering smile.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to submit," he said, with apparent calmness. "But you will change your tone before long, Lee. Do you think I was fool enough to come to this house alone? Why, there's somebody entering by the door behind you even at this second."

Nelson Lee smiled amusedly, and didn't move an inch.

"Really, Jim, those elementary tricks cannot be worked off upon me!" he exclaimed. "You shall have no opportunity of making a spring at me, I can assure you of that. And as for you entering this house alone, I am quite sure that you certainly did so, and that you and I are the sole occupants. There is one very obvious point which you overlooked. If you had had a confederate, you would certainly not have opened the front door yourself."

The glint in Jim's eyes told Lee that the shot was a true one.

"What a smart brute you are, Lee!"

"Not at all. I have done nothing that can be termed smart," went on Lee imperturbably. "I should have been a sorry duffer if I had conveniently slipped into your clutches. I suppose it was your polite intention to knife me unawares? Well, I don't intend to waste time with you, so I will get to business. I have a suspicion that you are working with Sir Otto Bruckmann on an enterprise which is connected with Mr. Dennis Graham. The fact that you knew of Mr. Graham's visit to me proves that there is something in what I say. But I mean to have a confession from your own lips."

The forger burst into a laugh.

"How are you going to manage that?" he asked.

"I think you value your life more than your liberty, Sutcliffe," replied Lee quietly. "If you refuse to speak, I shall certainly not hesitate a moment in pulling the trigger!"

There was something in Lee's voice which was full of menace, and Sutcliffe knew quite well that the words were no hollow ones. He stood there, with his hands still above his head, and curled his lip.

"You won't get any information out of me, Lee," he growled. "I'll tell you the absolute truth, since I realise it is the best course. I have agreed to work for Bruckmann, but I don't know what his game is. It may be connected with Graham, but I'm in the dark. That German pig has forced me into his service, and I daren't attempt to escape, for his devilish spies are everywhere. I've got to do as he orders me. And it may interest you to know that I'm perfectly contented to do so."

Lee was silent for a moment. He instinctively knew that Jim was speaking the truth; and, after all, there was really no object in prolonging this interview.

"At the present moment you have got to do as I order you," said the detective, with conviction. "I came to this house quite prepared to meet you, and if you are wise you will agree to accompany me without——"

Crash!

Nelson Lee had walked near to the window for a moment, and then back again. But without the least warning one of the panes of glass in the window was shattered to fragments.

Lee gave a choking gasp, clapped a hand to his breast, and fell to the floor heavily, his revolver flying across the room and falling at Jim the Penman's foot.

The latter was so astonished that he was at a loss for breath for a second. He glanced out of the window sharply, but Nation Road was quite deserted.

"By thunder!" muttered Jim amazedly.

He gazed down at Nelson Lee's prostrate form. It became clear to him now that the detective had received the bullet which had crashed through the pane of glass. But where had the bullet come from? Who had fired the shot?

Jim bent down quickly, and tore Lee's hand away from his left breast. Then he swiftly unbuttoned the waistcoat.

A hissing intake of breath sounded through Jim's teeth.

There was a dull crimson stain upon the detective's white shirt immediately over his heart. And even as Jim watched, the stain enlarged, and it glistened through the thin material wetly.

"Good heavens!" the forger gasped. "Dead! Shot through the heart!"

For a second Jim's hand went out to feel the detective's heart, but that stain, so ominous and so significant, deterred him. There was no necessity for him to seek further proof. Without a doubt Nelson Lee was lifeless!

Jim transferred his attention to the detective's face.

His eyelids were up, and Lee was staring in a fixed glassy stare at the ceiling. In spite of his hardy nature, Sutcliffe shuddered and rose to his feet.

A wild feeling of exultation was surging through him. Who had killed Lee he did not know, but he formed a shrewd guess. Bruckmann knew of this enterprise, and had probably sent one of his spies to hang about in case of necessity. It was quite possible that this spy was in a house on the other side of the road. With powerful glasses he would have been able to see Nelson Lee's form when he moved near the window, and had probably noticed that Lee held a revolver. The rest was simple. Jim's unknown friend had fired his weapon, possibly an air-pistol.

But, although Sutcliffe was wild with evil joy, he was upset nevertheless,



"Seaplane coming up from eastward!" bellowed the voice of the look-out. The captain started violently, pulled a pair of binoculars from his pocket, and rushed on to the bridge. Here he applied the glasses to his eyes. It was much lighter now, and in the dim greyness a big seaplane could be seen approaching from England's shores. It was coming rapidly. (See page 39.)

and his keen wits told him that the sooner he left the house the better. That crash had probably been heard, and would attract attention.

There was not a moment to waste, and Jim did not waste one. He stepped across Lee's prostrate form swiftly, left the room, and in a few moments was striding down the street with swift, steady footsteps. The clear air seemed to revive him, and his eyes glittered at his thoughts.

Nelson Lee, his mortal enemy, was dead! Whatever the detective knew regarding himself and Bruckmann was now utterly useless. The German's foul work would be able to go on without let or hindrance, for Lee had been the only man to suspect.

Meanwhile, in the house in Nation Road, Nelson Lee calmly sat up on the floor and gave vent to a chuckle of keen satisfaction. This was a very extraordinary thing for a dead man to do, but Lee did it all the same.

Then he proceeded to button up his waistcoat again and scramble to his feet. He made his way swiftly to the rear of the house, and found himself in a small, enclosed garden with a high fence at the bottom. He nimbly climbed over this, and made his way along a narrow lane, which finally led him into a main thoroughfare. Five minutes later, he met Nipper outside a tea-shop, and the pair walked away together.

"Well, guv'nor, how did it go?" asked Nipper easily.

"Excellently, youngster—excellent!" replied Lee calmly. "You acted at the exact second, and Jim was totally deceived. Clever as the man is, he is now firmly convinced that I am lying in that house, shot through the heart."

"Good biz.!" chuckled Nipper. "Oh, my hat, what a chap you are for wheezes, sir! This is about the prettiest you've worked for some time!"

Lee nodded, and stroked his ample moustache, for before leaving the house he had swiftly donned a disguise.

And what was the explanation of this extraordinary affair?

It was simplicity itself. Lee was anxious to pursue his investigations untroubled by the attentions of Sutcliffe or Sir Otto Bruckmann. He had therefore adopted this smart little ruse. He had made all arrangements with Nipper beforehand, and the lad had been calmly sitting in the front room of a house in Nation Road, exactly opposite No. 63. At their agreed-upon signal—his master moving near to the window—Nipper had used a harmless little air-pistol with excellent effect. The pellet had been just sufficient to smash the window-pane, but would have done Lee no harm had it struck him beyond inflicting a slight sting.

Lee, within the room, had instantly collapsed, and had burst a tiny bladder of crimson fluid concealed beneath his shirt. The ruse was so simple that success was assured.

Jim the Penman had naturally been deceived, although he might have guessed things had he remained perfectly cool and calm.

But the detective's calculations were not at fault. He had reckoned on the shock unnerving Jim, and his own acting had been so superb that Jim had guessed nothing. The urgent necessity for the forger to make his escape at once prevented him examining the matter too closely.

Twenty minutes later, Lee had arranged with a news agency to circulate a report in the evening papers that an unknown man had been found shot through the heart in an empty house in Nation Road, Chelsea. The report went on to state that the identity of the deceased would probably be learned later.

The whole thing was now complete.

Jim would certainly see the paragraph in the evening paper, and his suspicions would be verified. Nelson Lee had been killed beyond doubt!

The coast was now clear for the great detective to go ahead with his

work without fear of interference. All the advantage lay with Lee, and so far he had scored all along the line.

He fully intended to nab Jim the Penman when it suited him—and Sir Otto Bruckmann would accompany Sutcliffe when that moment arrived.

CHAPTER V.

The War Minister's Secret Instructions.

THAT evening Nelson Lee and Nipper departed for the little coast village of Stalton, in Essex. They were both disguised, and the journey was to be in the nature of a preliminary look around.

Lee knew for certain that Bruckmann and Sutcliffe were working hand-in-glove together in a plot which was directly connected with Mr. Dennis Graham's machine-gun, but what that plot was the detective had no inkling.

He had a shrewd idea that he would learn more by journeying to Stalton than by remaining in London. If, however, he was unable to get on the track down in the country, he would return to the metropolis and institute a new line of investigation.

As matters now stood, even Jim the Penman himself did not know what was required of him. Lee was satisfied that the forger had been speaking the literal truth when he made that statement.

And truth it was.

Sutcliffe was quite in the dark, and he didn't like it. That evening, however, while Nelson Lee and Nipper were journeying to the Essex coast, Sir Otto Bruckmann and Jim were alone in the former's study in Belgrave Square.

Jim had told his companion of the incident of the afternoon, and Bruckmann had been surprised to hear of the unexpected shooting of Lee. Sure enough, they saw the paragraph in the evening paper, announcing the discovery of a man's body in an empty house at Chelsea.

"Lee is dead at last!" exclaimed Jim comfortably. "Somehow I feel a little sorry at times, for he was as smart as they make 'em. But he's best out of the way. We can proceed with our scheme without fear. I understand, Sir Otto, that you are going to bring matters to a head at once?"

Bruckmann nodded, and lit a cigar.

"Yes, my friend, the time for action has arrived," he said softly. "Sit there and listen, and I will explain matters. If we do not act to-morrow, we cannot act at all. My information is positive, and I know that I can rely on it. My agents are always sure of their facts before reporting to me!"

"You're a sort of chief, I suppose?" asked Jim.

"Exactly," said the German. "But I have no intention of explaining our secret service system to you! You must confine yourself to your own particular task. Well, I have received information which I shall act upon at once!"

"To-morrow a messenger will leave the War Office for the Graham Machine-gun Works, at Stalton, in Essex. There is a large consignment of those wonderful guns all ready packed for shipment to the British front. And this War Office messenger will convey the War Minister's own personally written instructions to Graham concerning the delivery of the guns."

Sutcliffe nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you know what those instructions are?" he queried.

"No; and I do not care a jot!" Sir Otto replied. "I say I do not know. Well, I know this much—the War Minister's instructions do not come into operation until a week has passed. That is to say, although Graham will receive his orders to-morrow, he is to do nothing until the elapse of a week! That is essentially British, my friend! Waste of time—waste of time! This Government—— Ach, but I am talking in a wrong direction! My agents have informed me that the messenger will be a certain Lieutenant Randall, and that he will be instructed to deliver the orders straight into Mr. Graham's own hands."

"I presume," said Jim, "that you want me to get those orders——"

"Heavens, no! Nothing so simple as that!" replied Bruckmann. "Please allow me to finish before you make any remarks! Now, Graham is fully aware that the messenger will arrive to-morrow, and he knows that the instructions are coming from the War Minister himself. Graham and the Minister, in fact, are well acquainted."

"Lieutenant Randall will leave the War Office at 3.30 precisely to-morrow afternoon, and he will catch the 4.12 train from Liverpool Street. He will journey straight to Stalton, and arrive during the evening. Graham himself will be waiting to receive the lieutenant, and not a soul will know the reason for the officer's visit. The whole business, in fact, will be perfectly secret."

Jim the Penman allowed himself to chuckle.

"Perfectly secret!" he repeated. "There does not seem to be much secrecy about it, so far as I can gather!"

"Ah, you do not understand our methods!" Bruckmann replied. "In many cases, we are fully aware of secret information long before the intended recipient! But to continue. I will now reveal the plan to you—the plan which will be mainly carried out by you. The orders which Lieutenant Randall will carry must be taken from him and a substitution effected. And it must be done in such a way that the messenger will have no idea that a change has taken place."

"It will now be your task to seat yourself at this desk," went on the German, with a wave of his hand, "and to write as I dictate. And you will write the letter in an exact reproduction of the War Minister's own handwriting. In truth, Sutcliffe, your task is to forge a new set of instructions altogether!"

Jim the Penman sat back and whistled softly.

"By James, that's a tall order!" he ejaculated.

"Compared to some of your past feats, the job will be child's play," replied Sir Otto quickly. "You see the idea? These false orders are to be substituted for the real, and Graham will accordingly deliver up his machine-guns to my countrymen instead of his own."

Sutcliffe frowned slightly.

"And what do you intend doing with the guns?" he asked.

"That is no concern of yours," Bruckmann replied curtly. "You will be paid to do as you are ordered, and it is not wise to ask questions."

"Suppose I refuse——"

"Ach! Why talk such nonsense?" interjected the German in harsh tones. "We have got on quite pleasantly so far, Sutcliffe, so let us have no foolery now. To talk of refusing to obey my orders is absurd. For one thing, I could hand you over to the police at any moment I like; and for another, if you attempt to escape, you will be followed by my spies, and—well, I leave you to imagine the rest. You are in this business now, Sutcliffe, and there must be no talk of retracting."

"Oh, get on with the jaw!" growled Jim.

"I have nothing further to talk about, as yet," rejoined Sir Otto. "It is now for you to demonstrate your skill with the pen. Once you have written the forged instructions, we will go into further details."

Jim rose from his chair and seated himself at the desk, which occupied a corner of the room. A brilliant electric lamp hung right overhead.

Some plain sheets of paper were on the blotting-pad, and Bruckmann produced several letters and scraps of paper bearing the War Minister's handwriting and signature. Jim examined the originals with great care for several minutes without speaking. Then, suddenly, he picked up a pen and started writing deliberately and steadily.

Bruckmann glanced over his companion's shoulder as he wrote, and the German uttered an exclamation of amazement and incredulity.

"Himmel!" he gasped. "Is it possible? You are copying the handwriting with life-like accuracy at the very first attempt. You have had no practice, and yet you can do this?"

Jim handed up the piece of paper, with a short laugh.

"That's just a preliminary specimen," he remarked carelessly. "Will it do? I don't think you can detect much difference between my effort and the original—eh?"

Bruckmann compared the two with rapid, keen glances.

"Amazing!" he murmured tensely. "Astounding! Good gracious, it is almost uncanny! There is no difference—no difference at all. You are a genius, Sutcliffe—absolutely a genius!"

Jim the Penman smiled.

"Quite so," he agreed. "I am well aware of that, Sir Otto. No other man in the wide world has such a command of the pen as I have. Perhaps there is something abnormal about my brain—a kink in that one certain direction. But the fact remains that I can copy any hand-writing or signature without troubling to practise beforehand."

The German drew a deep breath.

"You are undoubtedly the man for my work!" he exclaimed. "Indeed, without your assistance, the scheme could never have been put into practice. But when Graham receives the War Minister's own written instructions, he will have no cause for suspicion. What a coup—what a triumph!"

Sutcliffe, although he claimed to forge any handwriting without previous practice, now proceeded to write whole sentences in the War Minister's caligraphy. There was nothing like being thorough, and it would be as well to make absolutely sure of himself.

Then, on some special War Office paper, which Bruckmann produced, Jim wrote out the forged war orders. These were fairly brief, but clear and concise.

The very same night on which the instructions were received, Graham was to deliver up his first consignment of guns without delay. All the packed cases were to be taken to the shore between nine and ten o'clock, and the utmost secrecy was to be observed. The cases were to be placed in readiness, so that they should be shipped aboard a vessel without a second's unnecessary delay. This vessel, a light steam yacht, would lower her anchor, with all lights out, at ten o'clock precisely. At ten-five certain signals would be displayed, and if these corresponded with the signals agreed upon in the instructions, the machine-guns were to be shipped aboard at once. The War Minister's written orders went on to state that no communication whatever was to be made with the War Office, or with any military authority, or with the Admiralty, until the morning following the yacht's departure. No questions were to be asked, but the plan to be carried out with all possible expedition, and with not a soul knowing of it save those who were compelled to do so.

The orders, altogether, filled up two sheets of paper, and when this was done Jim the Penman signed the War Minister's name with an easy flourish, which was extraordinary. The man was undoubtedly a genius at penmanship. It was the easiest matter in the world for him to do such work as this.

Bruckmann took the sheets and pored over them for fully five minutes. Then he folded them carefully and looked at Jim with enthusiasm.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "I am confident of success. You may be sure that you will be rewarded with liberality for the part you have played in this great scheme."

The papers were enclosed in a thick foolscap envelope, and then sealed with elaborate care. Even the seal was an exact copy of the War Minister's own. Bruckmann's spies had left no stone unturned to make the plot an assured success.

"And now, with regard to the substitution of the false orders for the real," said Bruckmann. "I shall entrust you with the task, and if you fail——"

"Don't talk of failure!" interjected Jim curtly. "You need have no concern about the matter, Sir Otto. I will do the job thoroughly and easily. Already a plan has entered my mind."

And for some considerable time longer the two men sat and talked in low voices. The hour was late when they retired. Jim was staying in the house as a guest of the baronet's, and when he got to his room it was some little time before he could compose himself for sleep.

Somehow, Sutcliffe could not quite settle down to this business with an easy mind. He had told Bruckmann that he cared nothing for England, and that he was quite willing to undertake the work. Yet, now that he had actually committed the forgery, he was strangely uneasy. After all, Jim the Penman was a Britisher; and, scoundrel though he was, it went against the grain to do the bidding of a German—a German, moreover, who was one of the vilest creatures on earth.

Yet, who was the most vile of the two, Bruckmann or Sutcliffe? Bruckmann was working in the cause of his own country, but Jim the Penman was betraying the land of his birth.

After a time the forger angrily thrust his thoughts aside. The thing was done now, and if he attempted to undo it he would surely pay the penalty with his own life. And Jim the Penman valued his own life far more than he valued his duty to his country.

When he arose the following morning, he was in a reckless mood, and called himself a fool for having had scruples overnight. There was money in this job, so why should he forsake it?

He would carry his task through right to the end.

And at three-fifteen in the afternoon Sutcliffe was within sight of the War Office. He was not recognisable, for he was wearing a totally different disguise from any he had donned before.

At half-past three, almost to the minute, a young officer in khaki stepped briskly out of the War Office and walked away up Whitehall. Having been shown Lieutenant Randall's photograph, Jim the Penman recognised the young officer at once.

And the forger set about the task of shadowing his man, and the pair walked on—the War Minister's messenger being totally unaware of the fact that somebody not far behind him was taking a keen interest in his every movement.

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee Suspects Things—And Meets with Misfortune.

STALTON was only a small village, situated right on the marshy shores of Essex. It was a considerable distance from any other village or town, and was four miles from a railway station. The sea was very close, and during the spring tides sometimes flowed right through the main street of the village. There were no cliffs, and the beach was bare and almost level.

Mr. Dennis Graham's munition works was situated a mile from the village, and round it were dotted scores of roughly-built huts. In these the skilled workmen lived, and a somewhat more pretentious wooden building, standing apart from the main factory, was the temporary residence of the proprietor himself.

It was also his office, and Mr. Graham was usually to be found there at any time of the day or night.

The sun had set, and dusk was falling over the flat landscape, when a trap drove in at the gates of the works, and pulled up before the door of Mr. Graham's office. Near by the great factory was humming and roaring industriously.

It was Lieutenant Randall who stepped down from the trap, and he was soon admitted into the inventor's private, inner office. Mr. Graham was seated there, alone, but he instantly leapt to his feet upon seeing his visitor.

"Ah, lieutenant!" he exclaimed, taking the young man's hand. "I was glancing at the clock only five minutes ago. I thought it was about time you were due to arrive."

"A pretty lonely life down here, Mr. Graham—at least, it would be if it wasn't for the bustle of the works," remarked Randall. "You are aware, of course, of my mission?"

Mr. Graham nodded.

"I am aware that you are bringing me sealed orders from the War Minister," he replied.

The other took a leather wallet from his inner pocket, and from between the two flaps extracted a neat foolscap envelope, bearing several large seals. Upon it was written: "Mr. Dennis Graham, Stalton. Strictly private. O.H.M.S."

The inventor took the package, and turned it over in his hands.

"You know what this message contains?" he asked.

"Not in the least. It is unknown to a soul, save the chiefs of the War Office," replied the lieutenant. "My orders, however, are to remain down here until I receive further instructions. I gather that I am to assist in the dispatch of the consignment of guns when the time arrives."

After Randall had taken his departure—and that was a few minutes later—Mr. Graham was in the act of breaking the seals of the all-important package when there was a tap at the inner door, and a tall gentleman entered.

"Ah, Mr. Doyle," exclaimed Graham, laying the War Office orders down. "the messenger from Whitehall has just arrived—and thankful I am, too! I shall be intensely relieved when this first batch of guns are safely away."

"May I be permitted to know your plans?" asked Mr. Doyle, closing the door and taking a seat close to the other.

Mr. Graham considered for a moment.

"I have taken you into my confidence so far, Mr. Doyle, that I feel quite secure in allowing you to read the contents of this package with me. In any case, my own work-people must know of these instructions before so very long. I only hope that the military authorities are going to move swiftly."

The War Minister's instructions were opened, and Mr. Graham and his companion read them through very carefully. Mr. Graham was intimately acquainted with the War Minister, and had received many letters. This communication was written in the Minister's own handwriting, and the paper was official War Office stationery.

"The authorities are losing no time!" exclaimed Graham, with satisfaction. "This very night the consignment of guns are to be shipped. I certainly cannot understand why such secrecy should be observed; but doubtless the War Office is also suspicious of German spies. Well, I am glad there is going to be no delay."

He leaned a little closer to his companion.

"Is there anything further to report?" he asked softly. "Have you made any discoveries? Is your visit to Stalton justified, Mr. Lee?"

Graham's companion—who was, indeed, Nelson Lee himself—shook his head.

"No," he replied. "Nipper and I have discovered absolutely nothing. We have made careful inquiries and investigation, and no incident of a suspicious nature has occurred. I can only assume that the spies are lying low, or that your fears were ill-founded."

Mr. Graham rose and paced the office.

"I wish to impress upon you, Mr. Lee, the very urgent necessity for watchfulness to-night," he said gravely. "It is possible that the Germans are delaying action until they see evidence that the great consignment of machine-guns are being moved. I scarcely know what to think! But I am sure that mischief is afoot, and I want you to be well on your guard."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I will do my best, Mr. Graham," he replied simply. "I only hope that no hitch will occur; but I shall be well on the alert. Let me see, the cases of guns are to be taken to the beach between nine and ten? And at ten o'clock a steam yacht will drop anchor off shore with all lights out?"

"That is so."

Lee stroked his chin in deep thought, and very shortly afterwards he took his departure and left the vicinity of the works in the dim twilight. Mr. Graham gave his orders, and very shortly afterwards several of his chief men were closely closeted with him, and everything was put in train for the rapid carrying out of the War Minister's orders.

Never for a second did a suspicion arise that those orders were false—that they were, in fact, an ingenious forgery, and that by carrying out the instructions the whole valuable shipment of guns would pass into the enemy's hands! The full significance of the coup was enormous. These machine-guns, five thousand in number, instead of going to the British front, would ultimately find their way into the German trenches; and there they would be used to hurl death and destruction upon the inventor's own countrymen. The guns used ordinary ammunition, and the German factories would be able to supply the exact article. There would be no difficulty in that direction. It was the gun itself which was of such tremendous value and importance. The ordinary type of machine-gun was utterly futile against this new deadly weapon, and Mr. Graham was confident of astonishing results once the guns were tested in great numbers.

And now his valuable invention was to be stolen from him in such an audacious manner that no thought of the clever trick entered the heads of

those who were to carry out the orders. The Germans, moreover, once they had the gun in their possession, would be able to copy it in their own factories.

The result would be appalling. This invention, which was to give the British Expeditionary Force such an advantage, would be rendered almost futile, for the Germans would be using the same gun actually before the British. When the trick was discovered it would be too late. The secret, preserved so carefully, was about to be learned by the enemy.

Even Nelson Lee himself had no suspicion—as yet. These orders were due to arrive at this particular time, and Lieutenant Randall was known to be an officer of unimpeachable honour. The orders were in the War Minister's own handwriting, and it was made clear that no communication was to be made with the authorities until after the transfer had taken place.

It seemed more than probable that, through Jim the Penman's help, the enemy would bring off the amazing coup with complete success.

Nelson Lee met Nipper some little distance away from the works, and told the lad what was to happen between nine and ten that evening. It was nearly dark now, and the night promised to be a black one.

"I feel helpless, Nipper," Lee exclaimed grimly. "I am sure that Bruckmann intends mischief, and that that mischief is to be directed against Mr. Graham. But we have received no signs—we have learned nothing."

"Hadn't we better get back to London, sir?" Nipper suggested.

"Oh, no. We must not desert our post at such a crucial time as this," the detective answered. "As nothing has been done so far, I think it is fairly obvious that Bruckmann means to bring off a surprise at the last moment. Of course, he cannot possibly be aware of the War Minister's orders; but he will have spies on the watch, and they will know, when they see signs of activity to-night, that their moment has come. We must remain here and keep our eyes open to their widest extent!"

Nipper looked doubtful.

"Not much good our keeping our peepers skinned if there's nothing to see!" he said shrewdly. "This German sausage, Bruckmann, is a deep 'un, guv'nor, and Jim the Penman is deeper still. They're up to some little game on the quiet, and it'll be sprung on us like a bombshell."

"I feel that you are right, Nipper," Lee said slowly, as he walked. "It is remarkable that our enemies have shown no sign of activity. We are sure that Bruckmann intends some mischief in connection with these marvellous machine-guns, and yet we are quite at a loss. We know nothing; we have no line to follow up."

Nelson Lee paced on, Nipper by his side, and for several minutes nothing was said. The great detective was thinking deeply. His keen brain was working at full pressure; he was reasoning, arguing, dismissing one theory and considering the possibilities of another. And as he reasoned his eyes became keener, and he suddenly halted in the lonely lane and gripped Nipper by the shoulders.

"What's up, guv'nor?" asked the lad curiously.

"An amazing thought has struck me," Lee replied. "When it first entered my mind I dismissed it as absurd—I cast it aside as impossible. Yet I have been arguing the probabilities, and I am inclined to think that there might be something in the theory, after all. In any case, I mean to put it to the test by visiting Lieutenant Randall at once. He is staying at the Stalton Arms, I know."

"What's the wheeze, sir?" Nipper inquired eagerly.

"Consider all the points, youngster. We have received no sign that Bruckmann has been getting active," the detective replied. "Suppose, for

a moment, that the German has already acted? We know that Sutcliffe is working with Bruckmann, and Sutcliffe is no ordinary criminal. He specialises in one particular art."

"Forgery?"

"Exactly, Nipper—exactly!"

"But there's been no opportunity for forgery——"

"How do you know?" said Lee keenly. "There is one certain document which, if forged, will place us entirely in the enemies hands—which will cause a disaster of the most appalling magnitude. Let's see what you are made of, Nipper! Cannot you offer any suggestion?"

Nipper scratched his head for a moment, and then gasped:

"The—the War Minister's instructions, sir? Oh, but that's rot! Even Jim couldn't do anything so impossible as that!"

"Never mind the possibility or the impossibility of it for the moment," Lee continued. "I see that you are following the trend of my argument, my lad. That is excellent. Now listen to the points in favour of such an argument:

"First of all, it is rather surprising that the War Office should give such short notice. These cases of valuable machine-guns are to be shipped this very night, within a few hours from now. The yacht is to approach the shore with all lights doused, and it is a strong point in the orders that no communication is to be made with the authorities until hours after the yacht has departed."

"Well, that's because the thing's got to be done in secret."

"Exactly. But does it not strike you that there is really no necessity for such mysterious secrecy?" asked Lee quietly. "Precaution, yes; I heartily agree that proper precautions should be taken. But the War Minister's orders strike me, now that I have thought over them carefully, as being decidedly curious."

"I wish you'd tell a chap what you mean, sir!" complained Nipper.

"My dear lad, the process of deduction is very simple," Lee retorted. "Why such elaborate secrecy?—that is the vital question. Why is it necessary for a yacht to come here, with lights out, and to make mysterious signals? Why is it necessary for Mr. Graham to make no report until to-morrow? Because, Nipper, the yacht is an enemy vessel, and because it wants to get clear away before the alarm is given! That is my suggestion!"

"I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Nipper.

"The idea is staggering, I will admit. But the facts are extremely significant. I can see no reason why a British transport vessel should not anchor off shore here, and send a party of men ashore quite openly. I see no reason why Mr. Graham shouldn't report the safe shipment of the guns the very instant they are on board. And we must not forget that we are up against Jim the Penman. Forgery is his pet crime, and here we have an opportunity for forgery of the most vital nature. I have absolutely no facts, but I am beginning to suspect that the war orders are audacious forgeries!"

"But—but Lieutenant Randall is a decent chap——"

"I quite believe that," interjected Nelson Lee. "If he can positively swear that the package was given to him by the War Minister in person, and that it never left his possession for a second during his journey down here—— Well, in that case, I shall have to accept the orders as genuine. But the thing is to interview Randall without a second's loss of time."

Thus, by sheer wit—by clever deduction—Nelson Lee had hit the right track. He and Nipper walked the short distance to the village inn, and

found Randall in a private room, disposing of an excellent tea with remarkable gusto.

Lee, who was disguised, introduced himself without waste of time. Randall was somewhat astonished to find that the detective was down at Stalton, but he readily consented to answer a few questions. He declared that he had no knowledge of the contents of the package he had handed to Mr. Graham.

"The War Minister gave you no inkling?" asked Lee.

"Well, he intimated that the transfer of the guns would be effected in about a week," replied the lieutenant.

Lee gave Nipper a significant glance.

"The guns are to be shipped to-night!" he said quietly.

"H'm! That's quick work!" said Randall, setting his cup down. "Might have given Graham a little more notice—what?"

"Now, I want you to think very carefully before you answer me," went on the detective. "Was that letter placed into your hands by the War Minister himself?"

"Yes."

"No third party touched it?"

"Of course not. What the dooce are you gettin' at?"

"The package didn't leave your possession for a second?" Lee persisted.

"Not for a fraction of a second——" Randall paused, as he was raising a forkful of ham and eggs to his mouth. "Well, there was a fool of a fellow in the train," he went on; "but the package didn't leave my possession."

Nelson Lee's eyes glittered behind his lowered eyelids.

"Tell me of the incident," he said carelessly.

"There's nothing to tell," the lieutenant replied. "I was in a first-class compartment with some talkative old gentleman. At Colchester he prepared to get out—and I wasn't sorry, for he could jaw like a mother's meeting! He'd shoved his portmanteau on the rack over my head, and in getting it down the old idiot let it slip, and it fell on my shoulder."

"Well?" said Lee interestedly. "Well, what then?"

"If he'd let things be I shouldn't have cared," said the young officer. "But he made a dive after the bag, bashed into me heavily, and sent me sprawling. Somehow my coat opened, and my wallet fell out. The package was in my wallet."

"I see."

"The old fool was all over apologies, of course," laughed Randall. "He picked up the wallet, handed it back to me, and then hustled out of the compartment—jabbering regrets nineteen to the dozen. But as for the war orders leaving my possession, that was impossible."

Nelson Lee rose.

"Thank you very much, lieutenant," he said genially. "You have satisfied me upon a rather knotty point."

Two minutes later Lee had excused himself, and he and Nipper were striding away up the village street—now black as pitch, for not even a glimmer of light was allowed.

"Proof, young 'un!" said Lee tensely. "Proof! Those orders are dastardly forgeries! By James, what a discovery!"

"You found it out by your own cleverness, sir," said Nipper. "But why didn't you tell Randall?"

"Waste of time, my lad—sheer waste of time. The thing is to warn Mr. Graham without a second's loss. We will bag the whole crowd, Nipper!" exclaimed Lee exultantly. "Bruckmann, Sutcliffe, and many others! It will be a terrific coup!"

"But are you sure——"

"Am I sure?" rapped back Lee. "That old gentleman Randall spoke of was none other than Jim the Penman! When the wallet fell out of the lieutenant's pocket—or, more probable, it was wrenched out by Jim—the forger substituted the false orders for the real. It was really a matter of clever sleight-of-hand—and we may be sure Jim is proficient at the art."

Nipper chuckled breathlessly.

"And we shall cop the whole—— Whoa!" he gasped. "What the thunder——"

Without the slightest warning Nelson Lee and Nipper were attacked by dim, shadowy forms, which sprang at them from the surrounding darkness. The onslaught was so sudden that the pair were "downed" before they could attempt to put up a fight.

Lee received a crack on the head which made him sick and giddy. He was not stunned, but by the time he had recovered his wits he found that his arms were bound behind him, and a thick mass of cloth was tied tightly over his face so that he could not see, and so that it was difficult to breathe.

A wild fury took possession of the detective, and he suddenly spun round, wrenching at his bonds. But the next second he was given proof that his captors were not inclined to stand any resistance. For a heavy fist crashed upon the cloth covering over Lee's face, causing the detective's teeth to gash into his flesh. At the same second a voice, low and menacing, muttered:

"You fool! Don't try any tricks! Next time you'll be sorry for yourself!"

Lee controlled himself with an effort. Sundry scuffles near him told him that Nipper had also fallen a victim. A moment later the two prisoners were pushed forward, and forced to walk quickly away from the spot. Lee could tell by the soft grass underfoot that they had left the road, and were crossing meadowland.

The detective's thoughts were terribly bitter.

What a disaster this was! For a few moments Lee could scarcely realise the true seriousness of the incident; then it burst upon his mind in a flood of horror and impotent rage.

He and Nipper were prisoners—captured by German spies! That was obvious, for nobody else would attack them down here at Stalton. Moreover, Lee had heard a voice speaking in English, but with a decidedly German note about it.

And he and his young assistant were the only souls who knew of the forgery! They alone knew that the war orders were faked and false. Oh, what a blockhead he had been for failing to warn Lieutenant Randall!

But Lee was blaming himself unfairly. He had acted for the best, and was in no way to blame for having been taken unawares. The attack had been so sudden that a fair fight was out of the question.

The result of this turn of fortune would be far-reaching and appalling—quite apart from the undoubted danger which threatened the two prisoners. Mr. Graham would carry out the War Minister's orders—the forged orders—and the priceless consignment of machine-guns would fall into the enemies' hands! Nelson Lee had unmasked the plot only to fall a victim of the plotters.

From every point of view the situation was hopeless. To escape from the spies would be impossible. Indeed, Lee had a strong suspicion that he and Nipper were being led to a quiet spot for the sole purpose of being quietly killed. And Lieutenant Randall? Even supposing he had been warned, these Germans had probably collared him into the bargain. Lee knew

that the Germans always did things thoroughly—even at the cost of outraging all civilisation and humanity.

As a matter of fact, one of the German spies had seen Nelson Lee and Nipper enter, and had overheard enough of the conversation between Randall and the detective to warn him that drastic measures would have to be taken if the success of Sir Otto Bruckmann's scheme was to be ensured. And these spies were utterly unrecognisable as such. This particular man was staying at the hotel, and had been staying at the hotel for many weeks. He was a well-known English artist, of proved ability, and even Nelson Lee had found absolutely no cause to suspect him. Yet his sympathies were entirely with Germany, for he was of Teutonic origin. Lee had instituted the most searching inquiries regarding the artist—for Lee suspected everybody—but nothing had resulted. The man was beyond suspicion.

Yet he was, actually, one of Bruckmann's keenest workers! He had, to make sure of his convictions, followed Lee and Nipper—first of all warning several fellow-spies who had arrived in Stalton soon after dark. A few words of Nelson Lee's had been sufficient, and the attack was made. All the rogues were provided with rubber-soled shoes, and they had followed their intended victims silently, and with the latter having no knowledge of their presence.

The whole incident, in fact, had been so abrupt and so unexpected that Nelson Lee was in no measure prepared for it.

And his rather grim thought that he and Nipper were to be immediately killed was ill-founded. For it was the spies' intention of keeping their prisoners under strong guard near the beach until the mysterious yacht made its appearance. Then the pair would be placed in a boat and taken aboard the vessel. It was too risky to deal with them on shore—under such circumstances. Once on the yacht the Germans would openly unmask themselves, and Lee and Nipper would receive their deserts.

At the present moment, however, the detective was not thinking of the fate in store for him. His mind was centred upon two facts: Jim the Penman was not merely a scoundrelly forger, but a base traitor to his country, a vile reptile who deserved the utmost penalty of the law; who should be placed with his back to a wall, and riddled with honest bullets.

Until this moment Nelson Lee had always entertained a certain amount of respect for Jim the Penman; the man had been a criminal worthy of the detective's steel. But now he had shown himself worthy of nothing better than a firing-party. He was a traitor of the most despicable order—a thing unfit for decent men to touch.

The other fact which throbbed through Nelson Lee's brain was even more terrible. He and Nipper, the only souls who knew of the foul plot, were in the enemy's hands, utterly unable to lift a finger to stop the dread work

Bruckmann's plot would succeed!

CHAPTER VII.

"This Vile Thing Shall Not Go On!"

SIR OTTO BRUCKMANN leaned back in his chair, removed a fat cigar from his lips, and gave vent to a throaty chuckle. There was something in the sound which was sinister and grim. A chuckle, not of amusement, but of gloating triumph.

"Success!" murmured the German. "By this time everything is in train for the great coup, and before another hour has passed the machine-guns will be possession of my own fellow-countrymen!"

Jim the Penman, who was seated in another part of his host's library, rose to his feet with a frown upon his brow. There was no sign of triumph in Sutcliffe's bearing. On the contrary, he seemed to be almost downhearted.

He had not heard Sir Otto's words, but now he stood looking down upon his companion, who was lying in his chair with half-closed eyes, and with an expression of keen satisfaction upon his coarse, fat face.

"You seem infernally contented!" growled Jim.

Bruckmann smiled broadly, rose to his feet, and crossed over to a massive mahogany sideboard. Here he poured out two stiff glasses of whisky, and handed one to his companion.

"Drink, my friend," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Drink to the success of our plans! By this time the prospect of failure is not worth considering. With your help I have performed the greatest feat——"

"I shouldn't advise you to crow too soon!" interjected Sutcliffe somewhat sharply. "There are many hitches that may occur—many unforeseen difficulties which may have arisen. We must not be triumphant until we know that the project has succeeded."

Bruckmann laughed coarsely.

"Have no fears!" he exclaimed. "There will be no hitch. The man who was most to be feared was dealt with by you yourself. Nelson Lee is dead, and I have received a report from Stalton saying that the packet was delivered, and that Graham is unsuspecting."

Jim sipped at his whisky.

"But suppose—suppose for a moment that the whole thing falls to the ground?" he argued. "What then?"

"We have nothing to fear," replied the other. "No suspicion can possibly fall upon either you or I. We are safe. When it is discovered that the forged war orders were substituted for the real, nobody can trace the old gentleman who performed the substitution. But it is absurd to talk in this strain. There is no question of failure."

Jim made no comment.

There was a vast difference between the two men. Bruckmann was simply cooing with self-satisfaction and coarse triumph. But Jim the Penman, scoundrel though he was, looked thoughtful and rather grim. For many, many hours he had been thinking over the deed he had performed. At the time the forgery had been committed he had cast aside all thoughts of patriotism. What cared he for England? What did it matter to him if the old country went under? Gradually, however, it had begun to dawn upon Jim that he was getting no satisfaction whatever out of this undertaking.

He even thought of telling Sir Otto that he would accept no money for the villainous work he had performed. But, all said and done, Sutcliffe was a rogue, and, upon consideration, he saw no reason why he should not benefit.

He argued with himself continuously, assuring himself that he possessed no such thing as a conscience—that he did not care a jot what type of work he undertook, so long as it was a financial success.

But just now Jim was in a curious mood. He was in no humour for Bruckmann's vulgar expressions of satisfaction.

"Success will attend the scheme," Sir Otto went on. "I know it—I'm sure of it. Once the yacht gets away with her valuable cargo she will make no blunders. Apparently she is a British pleasure yacht, and will make for a certain neutral port. There her spoils will be unloaded and passed into other hands. Oh, yes, my good friend, there is every reason to congratulate ourselves. Those 'other hands' referred to will see that the guns are despatched straight into Germany. And before these British pigs

realise that they have been fooled the guns will be spitting death at them from the trenches of my countrymen! Is it not fine?"

Jim the Penman swore.

"Perhaps you think so!" he growled. "We will dismiss the subject, Sir Otto."

"And why? Ach, what is the matter with you, Jim?" asked Bruckmann. "You are heart and soul with me in this enterprise, I know. I can assure you that your reward will be magnificent. My Government pays liberally, and proportionate to the services rendered. In this instance I am sure that we shall both receive munificent recognition—you with money and I with honours. When the war is over I shall return to Germany, and I am convinced that I shall receive nothing less than an Iron Cross!"

Sutcliffe laughed for the first time.

"A splendid reward, indeed!" he said half-sneeringly.

"Ach, you are an Englishman—you do not understand!" exclaimed Bruckmann. "But think what it will mean, Sutcliffe!"

"I have thought!"

Bruckmann swung round on his companion, his little eyes gleaming with evil joy.

"It will mean more than you or I can realise!" he exclaimed gloatingly. "I am ready to admit that Germany has not had the success she anticipated, and it is really humiliating that such a state of affairs as this should exist at all. But this machine-gun is a miracle, and altogether ahead of our pattern, I will confess. It is astonishing that an English dog invented it!"

Jim the Penman clenched his fists, but said nothing.

"But it is practically in our hands now," went on the German. "Long before it finds its way into the British trenches it will be in daily use in ours. Himmel! What a triumph!"

Sir Otto chuckled afresh.

"The Englishman's own gun will be used against him!" he continued. "It will wipe out scores and hundreds—ay, thousands—of the accursed enemy. Think of it, Sutcliffe! Your own action will bring about the destruction of thousands of your own countrymen!"

"By Heaven, I have thought of it!" said Jim between his teeth.

"But you do not care, eh?" Bruckmann laughed. "It matters not a jot to you, my friend. You are an outcast—a criminal. Naturally enough, patriotism is dead within you. You are a worker for any and every nation!"

The German's coarse, gloating voice vibrated with evil triumph. But Bruckmann did not notice that his companion was holding himself in check with the greatest effort. In his present mood Sir Otto was displaying a complete absence of tact. He was allowing his feelings to get the better of him, and permitting his tongue to run riot to his thoughts.

And with every word he uttered, with every sentence which rolled from his ugly lips, Jim the Penman became more and more alive to one certain fact.

He loathed himself!

That was the fact which was impressing itself upon his mind. He loathed himself for what he had done. He was surprised as the realisation grew stronger and stronger within him. And this man—this grinning, "cultured" German—was responsible for everything. It was he who had forced Jim, in the first place, to forge the orders which would result in a tremendous triumph for Germany.

A spark of decency found a place in Jim the Penman's soul—a glimmer of patriotism. What had he done? Forgery—yes! But not the type of

forgery which would mean personal gain, and nothing else. It was forgery which would have the most far-reaching effects in the great war; which would, perhaps, turn the tide in a great battle and effect a terrific victory for Germany.

A victory for Germany! A defeat for the British! And he was the sole, the absolute cause of it. Without his aid Bruckmann would have been helpless. The full enormity of his dreadful crime imprinted itself upon Jim's brain like the scar of a red-hot iron.

For a moment he tried to convince himself that he didn't care. But he dismissed the thought at once, angrily and impatiently. He did care! Rogue though he was, he still had a certain sneaking love for the Mother Country. Now that it was too late, he knew that he had acted the part of a base traitor.

Too late! Was it too late? Could not the terrible wrong be righted? Jim asked himself the question almost feverishly. The blood rushed to his face hotly, and a wave of hope came over him. Strangely enough, he knew that he was doing something commendable, and yet the thought thrilled him. Somehow the prospect of setting things in order put fresh life into him, and his eyes sparkled with keen determination.

Meanwhile, Bruckmann rubbed his hands together and paced up and down.

"Yes, my excellent Jim!" he said. "This will be a triumph——"

"Stop that!" rapped out Sutcliffe huskily. "You hear me, Bruckmann? Stop that accursed crowing! I won't stand it!"

Sir Otto halted and stared.

"Ach, what is wrong?" he exclaimed. "What——"

"I've had enough of your jeering, you dirty German!" said Jim the Penman fiercely. "I've done your foul work for you, and now you've got to be quiet! I'm not standing any jibes from a skulking pig of your calibre!"

Bruckmann's eyes glittered with fury for a second, and then he burst into a sneering laugh.

"What is this?" he exclaimed, lifting his eyebrows. "The traitor becomes patriotic after he has sold his country! Dear me! If you realise what a hopeless fool you look, Sutcliffe——"

There was something indescribably biting in the German's tone, and at that moment Sutcliffe was in no humour for such ill-timed banter. All in a second the forger lost control of himself. He only saw the face of this vile German spy before him. His fingers itched to get at that brutal throat. In fact, Jim the Penman "saw red."

And before Bruckmann could be prepared for the attack, Jim was upon him. The forger's fingers closed over Sir Otto's throat, and the baronet staggered back drunkenly.

"Now!" panted Jim hoarsely. "Now you shall pay!"

But Bruckmann had no intention of going under easily. He was a big, strong man, and now he seemed to realise that it was going to be a fight for life itself.

As it happened, however, the struggle was to be very short, for Chance took a hand in the game.

With a great effort, Bruckmann wrenched himself away, breathing curses in German. But Jim was on the offensive again in a second. Sir Otto stepped back hurriedly, and his foot caught upon the head of a magnificent skin rug, which adorned the polished floor.

Bruckmann swayed drunkenly, and waved his arms above him in order to regain his balance. But his efforts only made matters worse, for the rug slipped on the smooth flooring, and the heavy German crashed down.

For a second even Jim the Penman felt sick.

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.....
Nelson Lee Library, May 13th, 1916.

There had been a terrible thud, caused by Bruckmann's head coming into violent contact with a sharp brass spike which ornamented the fender. It was a terrible blow, and, although Sutcliffe did not know it at the time, had caused instantaneous death. The spike penetrated right into the fallen man's skull.

Jim stood with panting breath and clenched fists.

"Settled, eh?" he muttered hoarsely. "By Heaven, there may still be time for me to prevent the worst happening! This vile thing shall not go on!"

For once in his career Sutcliffe had decided to perform a commendable act. The spark of patriotism had grown within him every minute, and now he was fiercely determined to wreck the plot which he himself had done so much to make successful.

Jim the Penman was a rogue, but not a traitor!

CHAPTER VIII.

Poetic Justice—Finis.

NELSON LEE and Nipper were scarcely likely to forget the grim happenings of that dreadful night. Believing that Jim the Penman was working hand-in-glove with Bruckmann, they naturally believed that no help could come to them. Never for a second did they imagine that it would be Sutcliffe himself who would turn the tables.

There was no chance of the detective and his young assistant escaping from their captors by their own efforts. The two prisoners were taken to a quiet spot on the shore, and there closely guarded and watched.

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper could see what was going on owing to the suffocating pads over their faces. But after hours had passed, they were placed in a boat, rowed across to the steam yacht, which had arrived according to programme, and placed on board. A few words to the captain had been sufficient. Nelson Lee and Nipper were hastened below, placed in an evil-smelling compartment down in the bowels of the ship, and locked in. Outside the door a sentry was placed with a revolver.

The captain of the yacht had been told of the identity of his prisoners, and he promised himself a little pleasure as soon as the open sea was reached.

In exact accordance with the supposed War Office instructions, the machine-guns were transferred on board without a hitch. The whole business was completed in the shortest possible amount of time; then the yacht turned her nose seawards and steamed away.

In spite of the dispatch with which the transfer was made, it was in the early hours of the morning that the vessel put to sea. And now dawn was breaking faintly in the East.

As the light grew somewhat stronger, Nelson Lee and Nipper were led on to the deck forward. They were now merely bound by the wrists. The muffling cloths had been removed, and they were free to talk and see. And what they did see in no way cheered them up. The sea was bare and deserted on every hand; no other vessel was within sight, and the whole aspect was grey and drab in the faint light of dawn.

The captain placed the two prisoners with their backs against a deckhouse, and he regarded them with a sneering smile on his thick lips.

"You have chosen to mix yourself in with our affairs, Mr. Nelson Lee, and therefore you and your young companion will now receive the only punishment possible under the circumstances. Have you anything to say?"

"Much!" replied Lee quietly. "But I have no intention of saying it to you! A Higher Power will bring retribution upon your head!"

Nipper breathed hard. He wanted to burst out into furious abuse, but he restrained himself with a brave effort, realising that his anger would probably be mistaken for fear; and Nipper was as brave as any lad in the kingdom, and had a horror of being thought a funk.

The captain uttered a sharp order, and the next minute Lee was in no way surprised to see six members of the crew step forward, armed with carbines. They stood in a row, at attention.

"Oh, guv'nor!" panted Nipper. "They're going to—to shoot us! It's horrible, guv'nor! This isn't warfare at all!"

"Hush, my lad!" said Lee steadily. "You must remember that the Germans have outraged every known method of warfare. To murder us in cold blood is nothing new! The Huns are practised in such foul work. Be calm, my dear lad! We will show these infernal brutes that we are true Britons!"

"Attention!" rapped out the captain suddenly. The firing party stiffened.

"Present arms!"

Six deadly carbines were levelled at the breasts of Nelson Lee and Nipper. The pair were pale and calm. This horrible outrage could not be prevented, for they were completely in the Germans hands.

It was a tense moment. Silently Nelson Lee gazed into Nipper's eyes, and the pair mutely expressed their last farewell.

Then, clear and distinct, came an interruption.

"Seaplane coming up from eastward!" bellowed the voice of the look-out.

The captain started violently, pulled a pair of binoculars from his pocket, and rushed on to the bridge. Here he applied the glasses to his eyes. It was much lighter now, and in the dim greyness a big seaplane could be seen approaching from England's shores. It was coming rapidly.

"Take the prisoners below, and throw them in irons!" roared the skipper sharply. "Man the guns down there, and prepare to resist any possible attack!"

For, in the captain's eyes, this approach of a seaplane was not exactly a healthy omen. The captain was convinced that the trick had been discovered, and that the seaplane had been sent out to locate the enemy yacht.

But, as a matter of fact, it was Jim the Penman who was piloting the swiftly moving water-plane. It was Jim the Penman who had, without a doubt, saved the lives of Nelson Lee and Nipper. It was a remarkable turn of events. Jim desired the deaths of these two more than anything—and yet he was the cause of them being alive now!

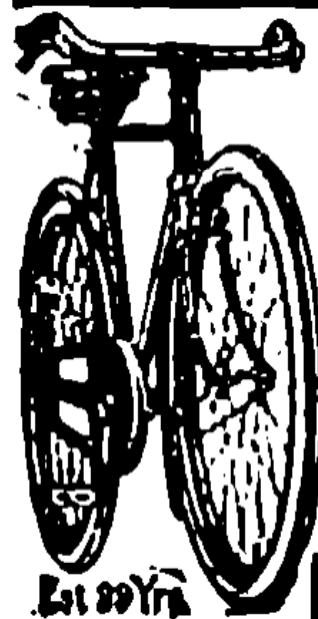
He had left Bruckmann's house after the latter's death and then obtained a fast motor-cycle. With all possible speed he had rushed down to Stalton;

but arrived too late. The yacht had gone! He realised that he could inform the authorities, but he wished to trick the Germans himself. He had caused the whole disaster, and it was up to him to set things right.

He knew that a seaplane station was situated not far along the coast. To this he had rushed with all speed, and had arrived just before dawn. To his great joy he found two mechanics getting one of the machines ready for an early morning's flight. There was nothing unusual in this, for our air-men are very early birds.

At the point of his revolver Jim

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had forced the mechanics to get the seaplane ready for instant flight. Then to their consternation, he had started off. It was over a year since Sutcliffe had piloted any form of aircraft, but before his exposure by Nelson Lee he had paid many visits to Hendon, and had actually performed all the tests which entitled him to a pilot's certificate.

Jim had decided upon a settled plan. The machine-guns had been obtained by means of forgery. It would be poetic justice to have the whole gang of spies trapped by means of a forgery! The thought pleased Jim, and before making his raid on the seaplane station, he had already penned a note.

He knew that the yacht had not steamed far, and he overtook it in a surprisingly short amount of time. Planing down, fluttering a white handkerchief, he alighted on the sea, and was soon transferred aboard the yacht.

"I am from Sir Otto Bruckmann," he said quickly to the captain. "There has been some grave news received, and you are running straight into danger. In this message Bruckmann states exactly what course you must now steer."

The captain was relieved to find that the seaplane was friendly, but he was suspicious. But he knew Bruckmann's handwriting intimately, and this forgery was accurate. Moreover, it contained a secret sign of Bruckmann's own. The spy never guessed that the same trick was being played upon him as had been played upon Mr. Dennis Graham.

The yacht's course was altered at once, in accordance with the new instructions, and Jim the Penman mounted his seaplane again and flew off into the clear morning air.

The end of the great enterprise was sudden and dismal. The yacht had not been steaming an hour before two wicked-looking destroyers nosed over the horizon. They came up rapidly, and proved to be British.

The yacht was captured without resistance, and every man on board made prisoner. Nelson Lee and Nipper were released from their noisome compartment below, and taken back to England on one of the destroyers, the other remaining in order to escort the prize to port.

Lee learned from the destroyer's commander that information had been given to the authorities by a strange seaplane pilot, who had since disappeared, his machine being left deserted, but quite unharmed, upon a lonely stretch of shore.

The detective soon learned of Bruckmann's death, and he pieced the facts together accurately, reasoning out the whole course of action. From the descriptions he received, he knew that the seaplane pilot had been Jim the Penman.

The latter had now completely vanished. Lee had lost his man—he knew that well enough—but he was not angry. In fact, the detective was inclined to forgive Sutcliffe much. At the eleventh hour he had proved himself worthy to bear the name of Britisher. A forger and a scoundrel, but not false to the country which gave him birth.

The daring German plot had failed, and Nelson Lee was once more faced with the task of hunting Jim the Penman down and bringing him to justice.

Somehow, the great detective was quite elated at the prospect. He was always ready to do battle with a man whom he could respect, and now, if not before, he felt a great respect for Jim the Penman.

THE END.

Next week's story will be entitled "The Great Club Raid," a tale of Nelson Lee v. "The Green Triangle."

NEIL THE WRECKER

A Thrilling Story
of Adventure in
the North Sea.

By DAVID GOODWIN.

"For King and Country."

"**N**OW," said the Boer, "the first lesson begins. The foremost vice of your British is your conceit for your miserable country. I am going to lower it. Loose the prisoner's hands. Take that piece of chalk, you English rat, and go to that blackboard!"

The furtive-looking man said "Yes, sir"—which made Hal's blood boil—in a whining tone and a foreign accent. He walked to the board and stood trembling slightly before the huge Boer.

"Do you know enough to draw a map of your detestable country?" said the Boer. "Then do it!"

The man, with a shaky hand, drew an outline that looked remotely like the British Isles, but might have been anything.

"Very poor," remarked the Boer; and then his eyes flashed savagely. "Now, underneath it, for your own knowledge and the edification of your countrymen here, write the words: 'Britain, the Thief and Assassin Among Nations!'"

The Boer folded his arms grimly. The man with the chalk flushed red, and his arms dropped to his sides. Though not a pure-bred Briton, he had pride enough to jib at such an order as that. He looked furtively at the speaker.

"Quick!" said the Boer sternly. "Write, or you shall be cut to shreds! Start him, Piet!"

The second Boer made the sjambok whistle through the air, and it fell with a cruel lash across the man's shoulders. He screamed aloud. The great whip fell again, and the half-breed, shrieking and writhing, threw up his hand in token of surrender and leaped to the blackboard. The whip was withheld, and with a trembling hand he wrote, in scarcely legible characters: "Britain, the——"

He got no farther. With a cry of anger Hal broke away from his captor and rushed at the man. Before he could be caught he tore the chalk from the half-breed's hand, flung it down, and hurled him aside.

"You cur!" he cried. "Will you insult your country at the bidding of a ruffian like that?"

"Well done, Hal!" shouted Ben, struggling madly to rid himself of that noose that bound him fast.

"Hold the cub!" roared the big Boer; and Hal was seized again. "You

(Continued overleaf.)

impudent brat, do you dare come between me and my orders? You shall take that weasel's place, and do his work for him! Pick up that chalk!"

Hal picked it up. The Boer drew a cloth across the blackboard, and wiped out what the half-breed had written.

"Now do as I bade that man do! Stand over him, Piet."

Leisurely, as if he were merely amusing himself—and the Boer gritted his teeth threateningly—Hal raised his hand to the board, and with easy confidence, drew a capital map of the British Isles.

The excellent education he had had stood Hal in good stead. Knowing it would enrage the Boer, he put every harbour and river carefully in its place. Then, as if he enjoyed it, he began to fill in the names of the towns.

"Enough!" said the host impatiently. "Now write under your work as I told you."

Hal made no sign. A dead silence fell upon the room.

"Go on!" said the deep voice of the Boer. "Britain, the Thief and Assassin Among Nations!"

The boy stood motionless before the board. The Boer signed to Piet.

Swish-thud! went the sjambok, curling round the boy's shoulders like a black snake.

The blood left Hal's face and he looked white as marble. But he did not move.

"Help—help!" shouted Ben at the top of his voice, sick at the sight of his mate's torture. "Isn't there an Englishman in Amsterdam to smash up this den of thieves? Help!"

A blow of the sjambok was the only answer he got, and two more fell upon Hal's shoulders. There is no whip in the world that can compare with the South African lash for cruelty; but still the boy made no sound.

"Cut the cub to ribbons! He deserves it!" cried Neil.

"Stop!" ordered the big Boer, and he thrust his savage face close to Hal's and scanned his features. "Boy, you are earning useless torture. I have sworn to make you do this, and you shall. You refuse still? Then on your head be it! Piet, throw down your whip, and put an inch of your knife into him! Another! Go on!"

Sick and giddy, Hal raised his hand to the board. The torment ceased. Only the deep breathing of the men was heard in the stillness of the room.

The big Boer glared at the boy in savage triumph. Piet still held the blade, flecked with crimson at the tip.

Captains and prisoners, saying no word, watched the words grow under the boy's hand. In his heart even Ben condoned him. No man could long have held out against that torture.

In a firm, sweeping hand, he wrote right across the face of the board:

"BRITAIN, VICTOR AMONG NATIONS. QUEEN OF THE SEAS."

and below it, in great bold letters:

"GOD SAVE THE KING!"

Then, facing his captor, Hal flung the chalk upon the floor and ground it to powder beneath his heel.

(To be concluded shortly.)