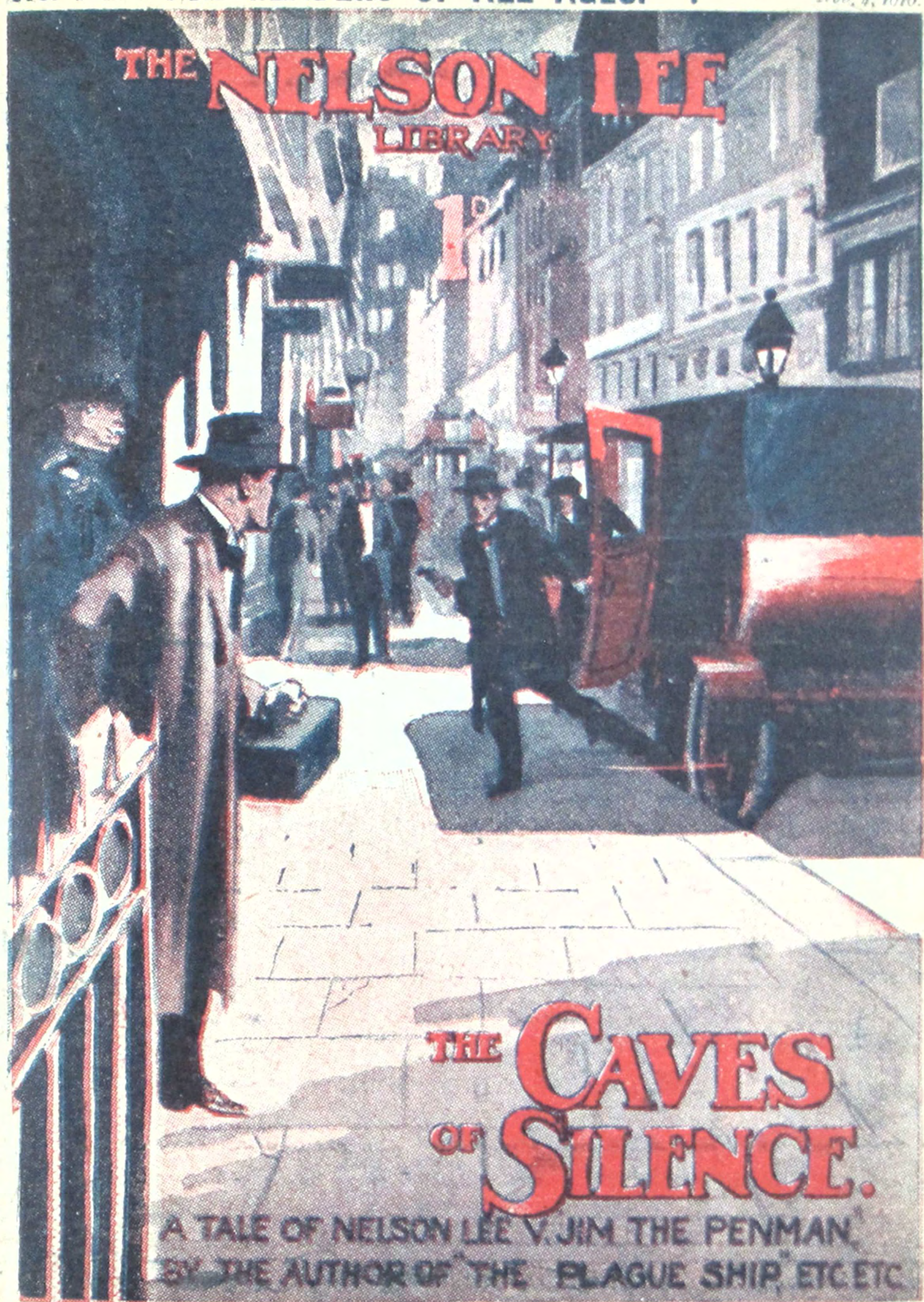


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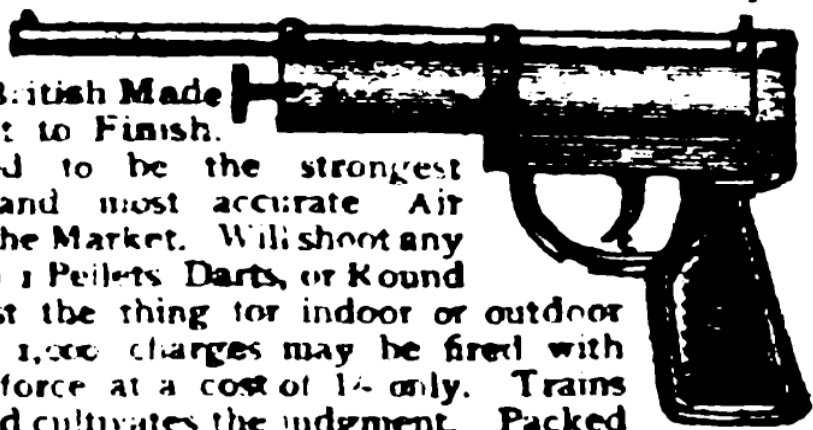
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THE PROLOGUE.

The Tragic Death of Sir Oswald Mastin.

"**M**AGNIFICENT, Sir Oswald—magnificent! You have every cause to be very proud of such a superb estate as this. By Jove, see how the evening sunlight is reflected upon the waters of the lake. A wonderful picture!"

Sir Oswald Mastin smiled and rubbed his hands.

"Thought you'd be appreciative, Staines," he remarked pleasantly. "Yes, I am proud of Mastin Park—and I don't deny it. The estate is not so very extensive, but it's wonderfully pretty. I'll warrant the scenery here is some of the finest in the whole of England."

"Well, I have never seen better, at all events," said Mr. Rodney Staines, puffing at his cigar. "'Pon my word, I almost envy you, Sir Oswald. And it's really very decent of you to ask me down here for a week. Those golf links look tempting, too. We'll give them a trial to-morrow morning, eh?"

"That's just what I was about to suggest," agreed Sir Oswald. "For this evening we'll content ourselves with an excellent but solitary dinner, and a friendly game of billiards afterwards."

The two men were standing on a fairly high spot, situated within Mastin Park. The old-fashioned ivy-covered mansion nestled about half a mile distant, among tall, stately trees.

Mastin Hall was Sir Oswald's country seat, and the park was really splendid in every respect. Tunbridge Wells lay just over four miles distant, and the village of Minthorpe was only just a mile away. The little church spire, in fact, could be seen peeping over the tops of the high trees in the distance.

It was evening, and the autumn day had been warm and pleasant. Now, in the light of the setting sun, the scenery was wonderfully peaceful and good to look upon. Right below the two men, at the foot of the long decline of sloping parkland, lay the lake, with one or two islands, richly wooded, dotted about the centre of it.

The private golf links of the estate were a little to the left, and they were beautifully kept and of excellent quality. They were natural links—not manufactured—and therefore a game on such a course was real pleasure.

"Well, I suppose we'd better be moving."

Sir Oswald suited the action to the word, and commenced strolling away. His companion followed suit, and they proceeded for a few paces in silence. Sir Oswald was tall and slim, and he carried his fifty odd years as though he were still a young man.

Yet in some ways Sir Oswald Mastin was not in the best of health. For some time he had been troubled with his heart, and was consequently rather nervous. His face was rather ruddy, and he wore a big moustache. Both this and his hair were slightly tinged with grey. Upon the whole, Sir Oswald was rather distinguished-looking—a real gentleman, a member of England's genuine aristocracy.

Mr. Rodney Staines was somewhat younger, and obviously a man of the world. Unlike Sir Oswald, who was somewhat careless in his dress, Mr. Staines was absolutely immaculate.

He was on very friendly terms with the baronet, and had been so for several weeks past. Staines was jovial, good-natured, and a wonderful talker. Sir Oswald had taken to him since their first meeting, and now regarded him as one of his staunchest friends.

Staines had visited the baronet at his town house a few days ago. It happened that Sir Oswald was about to start for Mastin Park, and he invited Staines to come down for a week.

As a matter of fact, Sir Oswald was rather lonely, and he would be very glad of Staines's company. The latter was such a wonderfully good companion that Sir Oswald had been delighted when he accepted the invitation.

They had arrived the previous day, and had kept mainly to the house owing to rain. To-day, however, the weather had brightened up, and the sunset seemed to give a promise of a fine spell.

Just at present the baronet was lonely. Lady Mastin was in America, and had been there for some little time. She would be returning within the next fortnight, and then visitors at Mastin Park would be many, and numerous parties would be held. Until her ladyship's return, however, everything would be extremely quiet.

Sir Oswald and Lady Mastin had no children, and, in consequence, when the latter was away, Sir Oswald did not have an especially lively time. He was not a man to make many friends, but when he did do so he made friends thoroughly. The servants at the Hall had noticed that he and Rodney Staines were almost like brothers.

The baronet had decided to remain at Mastin Hall until his wife's return from the United States. Two or three old friends—titled, all of them—were to pay him visits after a week. So, until then, Sir Oswald thought that Staines's company would be very congenial. Indeed, he was thinking of extending his invitation to Staines until Lady Mastin returned. For this friendship had sprung up since her ladyship's departure, and the baronet was anxious to introduce Staines to her. He was undoubtedly a splendid fellow.

As the pair walked down the slope Staines suddenly stopped, and pointed below to the lake.

"The very idea!" he exclaimed. "How about a row, Sir Oswald? You've got several good boats, and the exercise would give us an excellent appetite for dinner. Are you game?"

Sir Oswald laughed.

"I don't mind being a passenger, Staines," he said. "You can do the sculling. My appetite is quite excellent as it is."

"I never encourage laziness," said Rodney Staines reprovingly. "You've got to do your share of the work, my dear fellow."

The baronet chuckled as they walked down to the fringe of tall trees which bordered the expanse of water. Just behind these, on the very edge of the lake, stood a neat little boat-house.

The door was never locked, and the two men walked in, and very soon they were skimming across the lake in a smart little boat, Rodney Staines using the sculls. He was fairly expert with them, and Sir Oswald agreed that the row was certainly exhilarating, and that it would sharpen their appetites for dinner.

The baronet and his guest did not remain on the water long; but in landing a rather unfortunate incident occurred. Staines rowed the boat quite close to the little landing-stage, and then jumped up in order to make the painter fast. In some manner, however, his foot caught in the rope, and the next second he blundered forward.

It was all over in a moment. Staines, in attempting to save himself, tipped the boat violently, and the next second Sir Oswald Mastin was floundering in the water—soaked to the skin, angry, and nervous.

Staines himself had scrambled on to the landing-stage, and had only got one of his legs wet. The boat had righted itself again, after taking a considerable amount of water aboard, and was floating placidly against the bank.

"By Jove! I'm awfully sorry, Mastin!" gasped Staines, striving to keep a straight face. "You seem to have got wet."

Sir Oswald spluttered, and dashed the water from his face.

"Confound it!" he roared. "Why couldn't you have been more careful, Staines? Confound it, I say! I'm drenched from head to foot! B—rrr! And this water's as cold—I shall catch a chill—I know I shall catch a chill!"

Sir Oswald was in no danger at all, and while he was speaking he was wading ashore. The water into which he had fallen was no deeper than four feet. But, danger or no danger, it was by no means a pleasant experience, and Sir Oswald was rather incensed with his guest for smiling at his discomfiture. But Staines, being dry, was able to appreciate the humour of the situation.

"We must get to the house at once—at once!" exclaimed Sir Oswald, with chattering teeth. "Infernal idea of yours, Staines, to go out on the lake! I shall be in bed for a week now. I'm astoundingly susceptible to chills, and my heart's not over strong. Upon my soul, what a bothering nuisance!"

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," apologised Staines. "My foot slipped, you know, and——"

"Yes, yes! It was quite an accident, my dear man!" said Sir Oswald. "I'm not blaming you. But I'm soaked through, and I catch cold in no time. Afraid I shall be laid up——"

"Nonsense!" interjected the other, taking Sir Oswald's arm, and hurrying him along the path towards the house. "A ducking won't hurt you. A quick change into dry things, and you'll find yourself as right as ever."

But the baronet was a nervous man—nervous of his health, and, instead of changing, he insisted upon getting straight into bed. Then Tompson, the chauffeur, was sent off in the car to Minthorpe to bring back Dr. Kennedy, the village practitioner.

The doctor arrived within forty minutes. He was an elderly man, a kindly, genial country medico—clever, and wholly interested in his work. He had known Sir Oswald Mastin all his life, and had been the Mastins' family doctor ever since he had succeeded his father in the village practice.

"Dear, dear! What is all this, Sir Oswald?" he cried, in his cheery,

bluff voice, as he entered the baronet's bedroom with Staines. "Falling into the lake? I don't think you will come to much harm."

"Prevention is better than cure, Kennedy," said Sir Oswald, now comfortably in bed. "What's the verdict? Shall I have an attack of influenza?"

The doctor examined the patient critically.

"H'm! Temperature a trifle high, but that's the excitement probably," he remarked. "It's not serious, Sir Oswald. In the morning you'll be as hale and hearty as ever. A good thing you got straight into bed."

"It's a practice I adopted years ago," said the baronet. "Whenever I get wet through—caught in a storm, or anything like that—I always get straight into bed. Nothing like bed for preventing chills coming on. You'll look round in the morning, Kennedy?"

"Certainly, Sir Oswald—certainly," said the old doctor. "But, unless I'm greatly mistaken, you'll be out and about, feeling better than ever."

The doctor took his departure from the bedroom a few minutes later, after having accepted Sir Oswald's invitation to stay to dinner. And so Rodney Staines did not partake of a solitary meal, but had the genial company of Dr. Kennedy.

Both men were of a hearty, jovial disposition, and they kept one another well amused with their stories. They did not worry about Sir Oswald in the least. Even the doctor himself admitted that the baronet was somewhat faddy, and that there was no reason at all why he should have taken to his bed.

Staines persuaded the doctor to stay a little longer for a hundred up at billiards. So it was fairly late before the worthy medico took his departure. Staines himself retired after another cigar and a quiet read.

He was up early in the morning, and went out for a ramble in the park. When he returned, just as the breakfast gong was sounding, he met Parsons, the butler, in the big lounge hall.

"Is your master down?" inquired Staines. "I thought I heard him——"

"No, sir. The master's not down," replied Parsons. "Looks like that soaking he got last night hasn't done him any good. I do hope the master won't be laid up, sir. Sir Oswald's a real masterpiece for catching chills."

"Don't you worry, Parsons," laughed Staines. "He'll be down before long."

In the middle of breakfast Staines heard the doctor's little car pull up on the drive. A few minutes later Dr. Kennedy himself entered the dining-room with an apology for disturbing Staines at his breakfast.

"I thought I'd come fairly early, Mr. Staines," said the old practitioner. "I've a rather serious case to go on to after this visit. How is Sir Oswald? Have you seen him this morning?"

"Not a sign of him," replied the guest. "I suppose he's fallen off into a second sleep. I'll come up with you, shall I?"

The doctor made no demur, and the pair were taken upstairs by the butler. A tap on the door elicited no response, and so Dr. Kennedy turned the handle and strode in. Sir Oswald Mastin was in bed. At first the newcomers thought that he was sleeping; but then they saw that he was watching them.

But both Kennedy and Staines uttered involuntary low cries, as they looked upon the baronet. It was obvious to Staines at once, although he was not a medical man, that a grave change had taken place in Sir Oswald's condition.

Instead of being hale and hearty, as the old doctor had prophesied, he was apparently exactly the opposite. He raised his hand a few inches, and tried to struggle into a sitting position. Then he fell back on to the pillow

"Thank Heaven you've come, doctor," he panted, in a mere whisper. "I've been waiting—waiting. Nobody came to me—nobody seemed to know that I was dreadfully ill——"

"Good heavens!" muttered Staines, aghast. "What has happened, doctor? Sir Oswald is seriously ill!"

"Hush—hush!" said the doctor softly, crossing to the bed. "Dear, dear, Sir Oswald, what have you been doing to yourself? This sort of thing won't do, you know."

"I'm ill, Kennedy," whispered Sir Oswald huskily. "For Heaven's sake, tell me what is wrong. My back—oh, my back! I'm racked with pain from head to foot. My legs are numbed, my brain throbbing as though it were a fire——"

"Tut—tut! Just a chill—just a slight chill!" exclaimed the doctor, with bluff good humour. "We'll soon have you right, Sir Oswald."

But, although the doctor spoke carelessly, he was greatly alarmed and almost staggered by the terrible change which had taken place in Sir Oswald's appearance in one single night.

It seemed almost incredible. The baronet was now haggard, pale, and his skin seemed puckered and almost yellowish. His eyes, too, had an unnatural light in them. How could a mere ducking have caused such a transformation? Sir Oswald was weak, too, and in great pain.

Dr. Kennedy gave Sir Oswald a thorough examination, Rodney Staines looking on, meanwhile, interestedly, and obviously greatly concerned. He was absolutely shocked and astounded to see the awful change in his friend.

The doctor was a fairly long time. And when he came across to the window, where Staines was standing, he left the patient laying with closed eyes.

"Well, is it serious, doctor?" asked Staines anxiously.

"Not so loud—not so loud!" murmured Kennedy. "I think he is dozing a little. I will be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Staines, and warn you that this illness may be even more serious than it now appears."

"But what is wrong with Sir Oswald?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear sir, I cannot exactly diagnose the complaint," replied the doctor uneasily. "His temperature appears to be almost normal, and yet he is certainly in great pain—at least, he declares that he is. And I have never known Sir Oswald to malingere in all my life. Besides, why should he do so? I am very much afraid that he has contracted some complaint which will require the expert knowledge of a specialist. Frankly, I am at a loss."

"It is not simply an exaggerated chill?" asked Staines. "Or the first symptoms of pneumonia——"

"Tut—tut!" interrupted the doctor, who was greatly worried. "You must give me credit for knowing my profession, Mr. Staines. Sir Oswald's temperature is almost as usual, and his pulse is as steady as a rock. I really cannot understand him at all. However, I will have some medicine sent at once, and will call again later in the day. If he does not improve, I shall be forced to call in the aid of a cleverer man than myself."

Kennedy soon left, after advising Staines to disturb Sir Oswald as little as possible. The baronet's guest declared that he would not go near the bedroom unless he was summoned.

As it happened, very shortly after the doctor had gone the butler hurriedly informed Staines that "the master" was groaning in his bedroom and calling for aid. Staines at once went, and found Sir Oswald almost speechless with agony and weakness.

The paroxysm seemed to pass, however, and the baronet once more

became quiet. The doctor called after luncheon, and found his patient very much the same except for a fixed, bright expression in his eyes. He was able to talk, and seemed to have come to a definite decision.

"It's no good, Kennedy, I'm in a bad way," he muttered hoarsely. "It's my heart—I know it's my heart. The most excruciating pains shoot through my chest almost every minute. You say my pulse is strong? That may be so, but my heart's diseased—you knew that years ago——"

"Not diseased, Sir Oswald; merely affected. But I am inclined to think that your heart is, indeed, the cause of this present trouble. But you will soon be better——"

"No, I sha'n't get better," declared Sir Oswald quietly. "Don't raise your eyebrows, man. I know what I'm saying. Heaven help me, I'm going fast. I can feel it—I know it. My poor wife will arrive home to find me——"

"This won't do," interjected the doctor sharply. "You're going to get well, my dear sir. Why, only last night you were as healthy as I am. It's only a passing attack, and it will leave you as suddenly as it came. To-morrow morning, however, I will have a specialist by your side."

"I shall not wait until then," whispered the patient. "Doctor, I want you to send my chauffeur into Tunbridge Wells at once. I want him to bring back Mr. Howard Price."

"Your solicitor!" ejaculated the doctor quickly.

"Exactly—my solicitor. Oh, don't raise objections. I'm not capable of standing much agitation," muttered Sir Oswald weakly. "Send for Price—send for him without a minute's delay!"

"Mr. Staines, will you see to it?" asked the doctor quietly. "Perhaps you will be good enough to run into Tunbridge Wells yourself? We shall be sure then of getting the solicitor. It is better to humour Sir Oswald!" he added in a whisper.

Staines was soon rushing towards Tunbridge Wells in Mastin's big limousine, and when he returned he brought back with him a stout, podgy, little bald-headed man, who had been simply amazed to hear the startling news. He was Mr. Howard Price, the Mastins' family solicitor.

"Ah, Price, I am glad you have come," gasped Sir Oswald eagerly, as the lawyer entered the bedroom. "I fear that I am not long for this world. If I recover, all well and good. But it is better to be prepared. I am anxious to make my will now—at once."

"My dear Sir Oswald, you have already——"

"I have already made a will?" interrupted the baronet. "Tush! Destroy it, Price. I have different plans now. I am going to make a fresh will. Oh, my heart—my heart! Be quick, Price—for Heaven's sake, be quick!"

The solicitor was greatly flustered, and his bald head shone with perspiration. But in as short a time as possible he was ready to take the legal dispositions of Sir Oswald Mastin.

"Nervousness—sheer nervousness!" muttered Dr. Kennedy testily into Staines' ear. "No need for all this tomfoolery! He'll be well within a week!"

"I hope so," said Staines doubtfully.

A few minutes later he was almost overcome with astonishment, for Sir Oswald stated that he desired the bulk of his fortune to go to Mr. Rodney Staines upon his death. Staines himself stared as though he could not believe his ears. And as for the solicitor, he simply gaped in horror and dismay.

The baronet was leaning upon his arm, and his face was almost leaden in colour. It was plain that he was seriously ill. Yet, in spite of the almost

glassy look in his eyes, he stated clearly and concisely exactly how he wished to dispose of his property.

And it was Rodney Staines who benefited above all others.

"But this is all wrong, Sir Oswald!" protested Mr. Price, almost tearfully. "You cannot mean what you say! It is impossible. What of Lady Mastin? You are leaving her a mere beggarly income, scarcely sufficient to keep up the Hall——"

"I dispose of my fortune as I choose, Price!" snapped Sir Oswald, gasping painfully. "I am not wandering in my mind. Lady Mastin is a lady of simple tastes; she does not require much. Heaven grant that I may live to see her again! And Staines—I owe everything to Staines. It is my wish—my command—that he should benefit nobly by my death. Be quick, man! I fear—I fear——"

The baronet paused, and pressed his side heavily.

After a few minutes he was able to speak again, but in a weaker voice. Dr. Kennedy stood by, worried and anxious. The will was made, legally and properly. Parsons and the doctor witnessed Sir Oswald's signature, and then the butler left the sick-room with a pale, scared face.

"It is done!" murmured Sir Oswald peacefully.

"But it is infamous!" was the solicitor's heated protest. "It is scandalous, Sir Oswald! Lady Mastin will be beggared by this will, and——"

"Hush, Mr. Price!" said the doctor. "Such talk will only do harm. And my patient is dozing now, I believe. It is all terrible, I know. And I would give much to be certain of Sir Oswald's complaint. His heart is troubling him. But this sudden and tragic collapse is paralysing."

The doctor went aside as Staines beckoned to him. They and the solicitor stood by the window, all with grave, troubled faces.

"I scarcely know what to think, gentlemen," said Staines soberly. "Until this afternoon I had no inkling that I should benefit to the extent of a penny by my friend's will. I am flattered, of course, but—— Well, it is all very disturbing and troubling. I only hope——"

A low cry from the bed caused Dr. Kennedy to turn suddenly. Then he took two quick strides to the bedside. For three whole tense minutes he examined the patient, who was now strangely still and rigid. His face was leaden, and his eyes open and glassy. Staines and Mr. Price looked on, fearful.

And then the old doctor spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a broken, husky voice, "Sir Oswald Mastin is dead!"

The baronet's tragic death was a shock to the whole countryside.

Dr. Kennedy was convinced that heart disease was the cause of death, and he signed the certificate to that effect. And the funeral took place on the morning of the third day.

It was a quiet funeral, only a few relatives being present; many had not been able to arrive in time. Rodney Staines was there, and he was grave, troubled, and strangely sad.

And while that tragic ceremony was being enacted, poor Lady Mastin, unconscious of the terrible shock which was to be hers, was on board a great Atlantic liner, homeward bound from the United States.

She would arrive within a week.

Sir Oswald Mastin had been in full health one day, and the next he was dead! He had died within twenty-four hours of his catching that fateful chill. His heart had been unable to stand the sudden strain, and he had succumbed. But was heart disease the cause of his death?

CHAPTER I.

Lady Mastin Makes a Startling Discovery—And Goes to Nelson Lee.

MR. HOWARD PRICE fingered his heavy gold watch-chain rather nervously.

"It was all very terrible, Lady Mastin," he exclaimed. "Really, I scarcely know what to think, or what to say. But I am anxious to express my deepest sympathy. The blow was a cruel one for you, and my admiration for the manner in which you have borne up is unbounded."

Lady Mastin pressed her white forehead for a moment.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Price," she said. "You have been most kind and sympathetic. But all these legal matters at the present time are hateful to me. You were quite right in acquainting me with the facts, but please do not go into further details. I know all that is necessary."

Lady Mastin and her solicitor were seated in one of the large reception rooms of Mastin Hall. Her ladyship had arrived at Liverpool on the previous morning—five days after the funeral of Sir Oswald.

She had been met by her sister, a Mrs. Olford, and brought straight to Mastin Hall. Mrs. Olford had remained the night with her sister, but had this morning returned to Edinburgh, where she lived.

Lady Mastin had been nearly prostrated by the stunning and awful news; but, after the first great shock, she had controlled herself wonderfully. And, although she was pale and haggard, she still managed to show a brave front.

Her sister had told her the amazing news regarding Sir Oswald's new will. But, compared with the first blow, this seemed trivial at the time. In any case, Lady Mastin possessed a considerable income in her own right.

All the same, it was an astounding revelation. Sir Oswald and Lady Mastin had been a very quiet couple, but they loved one another purely and simply. For the baronet to die leaving his widow practically unprovided for was a most extraordinary state of affairs.

It was morning now, and Mr. Howard Price had called upon Lady Mastin in order to acquaint her with the exact facts. He had done so, but his client had no wish to be troubled with all the details regarding the will.

"Mr. Rodney Staines will be here very shortly," said the solicitor, consulting his watch. "I took the liberty of asking him to come, Lady Mastin. He was a very great friend of Sir Oswald's, and I thought, perhaps, that you would care to meet him. He is also, as you know, the chief legatee."

"Really, Mr. Price, I am completely at a loss," said Lady Mastin quietly. "Before I went to America my husband had never heard of this Mr. Staines. I am uneasy; I have a feeling within me that all is not right. I hope to Heaven that my poor husband died naturally——"

"My dear lady!" protested Mr. Price. "I was present when Sir Oswald died. The cause was acute heart disease, and it took him off before even Dr. Kennedy was prepared. The ducking in the lake, no doubt, brought about the crisis."

A few minutes later the sound of a motor-car on the drive caused the pair to glance at the window. Mr. Rodney Staines had arrived in his own car from London. He was ushered in by Parsons, the butler, who seemed to have aged ten years during the past week. Parsons was an old retainer, and his master's death had affected him greatly.

Staines was dressed entirely in black, and his face was grave and troubled. He was a fairly short man, inclined to stoutness, with a big, clean-shaven face, which could be the very essence of merriment when

he chose. In serious moments, however, Staines was always grave and quiet.

"I am feeling rather uncomfortable, Lady Mastin," he exclaimed as he took her hand after being introduced. "I only wish that we could have met before Sir Oswald's tragic death. I need not tell you that I am grieved beyond measure so that all my sympathies are with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Staines. Since my return I have heard much about you from various people, and it seems that you and my husband were very great friends," said her ladyship. "I have been in America just under three months. When did you first meet Sir Oswald?"

"I forget the exact date," said the visitor smoothly. "But we seemed to take to one another instinctively, Lady Mastin. I was startled and amazed when I found out that he intended leaving me the bulk of his property. I can think of only one reason why he should have done so."

"And that is?" asked Lady Mastin quietly.

"Upon the occasion of our meeting I saved Sir Oswald's life," was Rodney Staines reply. "I have no wish to talk of my doings, but I think I risked my own life to save Sir Oswald's. He fell as he was crossing the road, and a motor omnibus, skidding in the grease, was unable to pull up. I did not think of danger at the moment, but I dashed forward and pulled Sir Oswald clear in the very nick of time. The 'bus slithered past the pair of us, missing us by a bare inch. Undoubtedly I saved him from a terrible death."

"That was very courageous and noble of you, Mr. Staines."

The other shook his head deprecatingly.

"I do not look at it in that light," he replied. "After all, I performed the action quite on the spur of the moment. I think, however, that Sir Oswald always remembered the service I rendered him then. And, when he was at death's door, he thought of me, and—— Well, you are acquainted with the provisions of the will, I believe."

"Yes; Mr. Price has told me everything, and has read the will to me," said Lady Mastin. "Needless to say, I was amazed, Mr. Staines. But nothing can be altered now, and, indeed, I do not wish it to be. My husband was at liberty to dispose of his wealth as he thought fit. It is not for me to criticise after his death."

After a little further conversation Lady Mastin made an excuse, and retired from the room. The interview had been somewhat strained, and she did not feel inclined to prolong it.

And Staines, taking his cue, shortly afterwards departed, after a short talk with Mr. Price. The solicitor himself returned to Tunbridge Wells within the hour, leaving Lady Mastin alone to ponder over the tragic events that had occurred a week since.

She felt restless, and walked about the great house almost as though she were dazed. Some relatives were to arrive during the afternoon, but she was glad that she was now alone. She needed company and companionship badly enough, but there are times when one is contented with one's own company.

And Lady Mastin had other food for thought.

She had been prepared to like and respect Rodney Staines. She had fully expected to find him a gentleman and a man after her husband's own heart. But she was disappointed—and she was gravely uneasy.

Staines was certainly a gentleman; every word and action proved that. But there was something about him which Lady Mastin did not like. She could not exactly define what that something was.

But she distrusted him; she felt an instinctive antipathy towards him.

Right down in her heart she had an absolute conviction that all was not right. Sir Oswald's death had been so sudden, so abrupt, so mysterious.

Yes, that was it—mysterious. Even Dr. Kennedy had been somewhat vague when she had met him. He declared that Sir Oswald had died from heart disease. But he was a doctor of the old-fashioned sort, and, moreover, a man who had every confidence in himself and his powers.

Had his diagnosis been correct?

Lady Mastin scarcely knew what to think. Probably her fears and doubts were merely the outcome of her troubled brain. But it had all been so terribly unexpected. Dr. Kennedy himself had doubts; she knew it, she knew it as plainly as though he had expressed them.

But Sir Oswald was dead now—dead and buried.

Lady Mastin went upstairs to her boudoir, and tried to think of more pleasant things. But she soon found herself in her husband's bedroom, looking round her with sad, wistful glances. She had looked forward to happy times after her return. But now——

With moist eyes she went about the room, mechanically opening drawers and cabinets. She scarcely knew why she did so, and did not trouble to ask herself. Her thoughts were far away, dreaming of the times before her departure to America. She had little thought, then, that she would never see Sir Oswald again.

There was a large, old-fashioned cupboard in the bedroom, fitted with heavy, oaken doors. It was locked, but Lady Mastin remembered that her husband had always kept the key in a niche of the ornamental work.

She felt there now, automatically. The key was in its place, and she opened the cupboard and looked into the dark recesses of it. Everything was as it had been months before. The cupboard contained all sorts of oddments—every one of which brought memories of Sir Oswald flooding to her mind.

And then she caught sight of something that was new to her.

On a little shelf, tucked round the corner, almost hidden, stood a small blue bottle—a phial, with fluted octagonal sides. It was tightly corked, and from the small label stared the word “poison.”

Lady Mastin took the phial down, and looked at it with fast-beating heart. Poison! What was it doing here, in this cupboard?

It was a private cupboard, in which Sir Oswald always kept little personal belongings. Never since their marriage had Lady Mastin known Sir Oswald to have poison in the house.

The phial, she saw, was almost empty, only about half-an-inch being covered with a dark fluid. She carefully pulled out the stopper, and smelt. The poison was almost scentless, and not at all unpleasant.

The discovery was startling.

Under ordinary circumstances, the presence of poison in that cupboard would only have called for a few questions to Sir Oswald. But he was dead; and the circumstances were altogether sinister.

He had died within twenty-four hours after catching a slight chill—a mere cold. And the symptoms he had displayed had puzzled Dr. Kennedy, and death had occurred abruptly, tragically.

Had he died because his heart was weak, or because——

Lady Mastin was startled at her terrible thoughts. But, although she tried to brush the doubts aside, they came back to her intensified. She remembered that Rodney Staines had been on very friendly terms with her husband.

He had, moreover, stayed at the Hall, the only guest. He and Sir

Oswald had had the place to themselves. Only for a couple of days, it was true. But much might have happened, even in two days. And, being on such intimate terms, it was quite possible that Sir Oswald had admitted Staines to his bedroom, and that the latter had known of the cupboard, and the simple hiding place of the key—which was concealed there merely for handiness and to prevent the servants from prying.

Lady Mastin found herself growing really alarmed. Yet she knew that her fears were vague and that there was really nothing to substantiate them. She found herself picturing Staines creeping into the baronet's bedroom, taking the phial of poison, and mixing some of it with, perhaps, a glass of wine. Sir Oswald had partaken of it, and poison was the cause of the unaccountable symptoms.

Staines had probably persuaded or forced Sir Oswald to make a will in his favour. It might have been done by suggestion, by a stronger will, or by other means. Lady Mastin pictured Staines as a cold-blooded murderer, and her restlessness grew. Just the discovery of that bottle of poison had made all the difference in the world.

"Oh, this is intolerable!" she breathed tensely. "I know that all is not right—I know it! Poor Oswald was as healthy as I am; his heart never troubled him much. Oh, I am sure that there has been foul play!"

And, then and there, she decided to take the poison straight to the police, and to make known her suspicions. She at once gave orders for the limousine to be prepared, and then she got ready for the journey into Tunbridge Wells.

While dressing, however, another thought struck her, and she came to a definite decision. She would not consult the police after all. In all probability they would only ridicule her suspicions and muddle and delay until nothing could be done.

She would go straight to London and approach Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist. He, of all men, would be able to advise her. She would do exactly as he suggested. It was even possible that he, himself, would place the whole matter in the hands of Scotland Yard.

Poor Lady Mastin badly wanted advice and help. She felt that the police would be cool and disinterested. Nelson Lee, on the other hand, was in no way connected with the police, and yet his experience of criminal cases was vast and far-reaching. He would know exactly what to do.

And so, just before noon, Lady Mastin set out, and was driven straight to London by car. She had left instructions with her capable housekeeper as to how the expected guests should be received, and had said that she would be back in the early part of the evening.

She arrived at Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road soon after luncheon, and found both Nelson Lee and Nipper in the detective's consulting-room.

What she had to tell was simple and straightforward, and she laid the facts before Nelson Lee. Both he and Nipper listened with interest. Their visitor explained Sir Oswald's sudden illness and death; she told her listeners of the extraordinary nature of the will, and of her uneasy suspicions regarding Mr. Rodney Staines.

Finally, she told of the discovery of the poison, and laid the little blue phial before Nelson Lee with a shaking hand.

"Within me I feel my husband was foully done to death, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Lady Mastin, with deadly emphasis. "I have told you the main facts. What do you think of them? Are my suspicions justified, or are they merely the nervous worries of a foolish woman? I want you to be perfectly frank with me."

CHAPTER II.

The Post-mortem Examination.

NELSON LEE examined the bottle of poison in silence. He uncorked it, sniffed at it, frowned a little, and then laid it down. There was a very grave expression upon his face.

"This poison is of a very deadly nature, Lady Mastin," he said. "There is no necessity for me to tell you its exact nature, for I am sure you would not understand. But it is one of those poisons which are comparatively little known. Thousands of doctors have probably never experienced its effects upon the human system. A country doctor especially would hardly be likely to be well versed in such a branch of science."

"You think, then——"

"Pardon me, madam, but I do not think anything definite so far," Nelson Lee interjected quietly. "This poison was found within a cupboard which is situated in the late Sir Oswald's bedroom. That point is significant, but hardly convincing. Indeed, there is reason to suppose that your fears are ill-grounded."

"What reason, Mr. Lee?"

"Well, you have told me that you suspect a certain Mr. Rodney Staines of having been implicated in causing your husband's death," went on the great detective. "You have stated, in fact, that you believe Staines poisoned Sir Oswald. Surely that is a somewhat hasty conclusion to come to?"

"But I found the poison——"

"Exactly! Exactly!" said Nelson Lee quickly. "That is the very point I wish to emphasise, Lady Mastin. You found the poison. Do you think it probable that Staines would have left the phial in such an easy hiding-place? Do you think he would leave a piece of deadly, incriminating evidence behind him?"

"He may have forgotten it," suggested the visitor.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Dear me, no!" was his reply. "Murderers do not forget such things as that, my dear lady. If your suspicions are correct, this was a particularly cold-blooded affair. And Staines would have had to plan it almost to the last detail. He would never have been so criminally careless as to leave the poison where it could be easily found. We will suppose, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Staines actually administered the poison."

Lee paused and bent forward.

"What would Staines have done?" he asked. "He would have kept the poison in secret, and if there was any left when he had finished his evil designs, he would have destroyed it. Destroyed it at once, so that no trace would be left."

Lady Mastin sighed.

"I hope to Heaven I am wrong," she exclaimed. "You almost make me believe so, Mr. Lee. Nevertheless, I still have that inward conviction."

"I have not said that Staines is absolutely exonerated in my mind," Nelson Lee reminded her. "On the contrary, there is a distinct chance that the man had a sinister hold over your husband. And the fact that the poison was where you found it may have been a subtle touch."

"I do not quite understand you."

"I mean that he may have left the phial in the cupboard deliberately, guessing that nobody would believe that any of the poison had been administered," went on Lee. "On the other hand, it is just as likely that the poison was left there for quite another reason. Staines probably realised that there would be certain symptoms which would want explaining. You follow my argument? The absence of poison would have resulted in in-

quiries, and that would have been awkward. But a phial of poison, found in Sir Oswald's own bedroom, would have led to one definite conclusion."

"Oh, Mr. Lee, you don't mean to suggest——"

"Please do not anticipate my meaning," interjected Nelson Lee smoothly. "We must, however, look at this thing from every standpoint. Supposing, I say, that suspicions were aroused? A short search would reveal the bottle of poison. It was in Sir Oswald's own bedroom, in a locked cupboard, to which he alone had access. As I said, there would be only one conclusion to come to. Doctors and police would agree that Sir Oswald had taken the poison himself. Let me hasten to add that I do not for a moment suppose that such a thing actually occurred. But it is just a suggestion."

Lady Mastin was greatly troubled.

"Do you think that Mr. Staines could have done it?" she asked anxiously.

"It is quite possible that Staines 'planted' the poison in the cupboard for the reason I have stated," was Nelson Lee's reply. "Afterwards, finding that no suspicions arose, he forgot to remove the phial. Such a thing is improbable, but by no means impossible. I am very glad you came to me, Lady Mastin. Had you gone to the police, you would have done no good whatever. The police require concrete evidence—they want absolute proofs before they act."

Lee leaned back and crossed his legs.

"What you have told me is nothing but conjecture," he went on. "That would not do for the police at all. The discovery of the poison-bottle is not evidence. It may have nothing to do with Sir Oswald's death. But then, again, it may be directly connected with the case."

"What do you think yourself, Mr. Lee?"

"I would rather not say at the moment," replied the great detective. "Before making any definite statement, Lady Mastin, I must make certain inquiries and investigations. I will willingly undertake the investigation of this affair, for it interests me greatly. There are many curious points connected with it."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!" said the visitor, with relief.

"I do not promise that I shall achieve any definite results," Lee reminded her. "But I will do my best, and will report to you in due course. I hope, for your own sake, that your suspicions are unfounded, and that everything is in order. I am sure that you have no wish for unpleasant publicity."

Lady Mastin did not remain much longer, but when she left she was relieved in mind, and returned to Mastin Park comfortable in the knowledge that the truth would be revealed, whatever it was.

She little guessed the astounding nature of the plot which had been perpetrated!

Nelson Lee was rather thoughtful after his client's departure. He had never heard of Rodney Staines, and it was undoubtedly curious that Sir Oswald Mastin had left the greater part of his wealth to a man he had known only a comparatively short while.

Still, that fact alone was not extraordinary. Men have made far more eccentric wills than that. But there were other points—trivial, but suggestive. It had been Staines, Lee remembered, who had tipped Sir Oswald from the boat that fateful evening.

Sir Oswald had caught a chill, and in the morning he had developed startling and unlooked-for symptoms. Was it possible that Staines had deliberately tipped the boat over so as to provide a starting-point for his evil designs?

"I'm afraid, Nipper, that we have a somewhat difficult task before us," remarked Nelson Lee, as he lit a cigar. "We have, however, a direct line to work upon, and that is something. Lady Mastin suspects Mr. Rodney

Staines. It is for us to prove him innocent, or to ferret out some hitherto unsuspected facts. Who is Rodney Staines?"

"Never heard of the joker, guv'nor!" said Nipper.

"Have a look in the Blue Book, Nipper, and see if his name is there."

Nipper was soon turning the pages of the Blue Book over, and presently he looked up and nodded.

"Here we are, sir!" he remarked. "Staines, Rodney. They always put 'em backwards-way. I suppose he's our man, isn't he?"

"Of course! Where does he live?"

"No. 205, Mount Street, W.," replied Nipper. "Swell neighbourhood, guv'nor! I wonder if he really is a murderous rotter, as Lady Mastin supposes?"

"We shall have to satisfy ourselves thoroughly with regard to his character," was Lee's reply. "I did not say too much to Lady Mastin, but all the facts regarding Sir Oswald's death strike me as being significant. Dr. Kennedy may be a thoroughly efficient medico, but he is not a poison expert, and he could easily have been deceived. And, curiously enough, the effects of this poison here are very smiliar to those which the late baronet suffered from. One dose would cause collapse and abrupt death. In more than one instance, too, doctors have diagnosed heart disease instead of fatal poisoning. I really think, Nipper, that we have a case here for the Home Office. We shall see—we shall see."

Shortly afterwards, both Nelson Lee and Nipper started out on a round of inquiry. Their object was to look into the character, habits, and past record of Mr. Rodney Staines.

Two hours later, the pair returned to Gray's Inn Road and compared notes.

Their inquiries had certainly borne fruit, but it would not be said that they had discovered anything detrimental to Mr. Staines's character. Although Lee and Nipper had set out in totally different directions, their reports were almost precisely the same.

Rodney Staines was well known among sporting circles. He had lived in London for many years, was a bachelor, and his house in Mount Street, although modest, was well kept up. He was a member of an excellent family, and a fair proportion of his relatives were titled and honoured.

He was known among all racing men, and was a member of several West-End clubs. And everywhere he was spoken of highly. He was said to be a thorough gentleman, a sportsman, and a man of the world.

But it could not be denied that Rodney Staines was something of a scape-grace. In his early manhood he had been reckless, fast-living, and somewhat dissipated. The source of his income was not apparent, but his people probably saw that he was well provided for.

Of late years he had been quiet, and had taken great interest in horse-racing and other sports. There was nothing absolutely bad against him. Hundreds of men with splendid connections were similarly reckless in their younger days.

"Well, we have progressed, and yet we have got no farther," said Nelson Lee. "That may sound contradictory, young 'un, but it describes the situation. I think it would now be a wise move to visit the Home Office and state the facts. Personally, I believe that a post-mortem examination of Sir Oswald's remains is really essential. The facts are very sinister, but nothing can be done until we are quite certain as to the cause of death."

Almost immediately, therefore, Lee took a taxi to the Home Office. Here he obtained interviews with certain exalted personages, owing to his influence and powerful name. Often enough interviews have to be arranged days

beforehand. But Lee, with a little difficulty, gained his object. He stated the whole facts, his suspicions, and the striking possibilities.

And when Nelson Lee took his departure a definite arrangement had been come to. The detective had had a long talk with Dr. Thornbury, the Home Office pathologist. The latter was to conduct a post-mortem examination of the dead baronet's remains that very night.

The promptness with which all this was arranged was solely owing to Nelson Lee's influence. There was no reason for delay, and it would be far better to have the matter settled one way or the other.

The famous pathologist had conducted hundreds of similar examinations, and if any man on earth could discover the truth, he could.

It was arranged, moreover, that both Nelson Lee and Dr. Kennedy should be present. The whole gruesome business was to be performed in secret—for such matters are not given publicity. Even Lady Mastin and Staines were to know nothing about it.

Lee and Nipper went down to Tunbridge Wells, and arrived in the evening. Here they engaged rooms at a big hotel, and at a given hour Dr. Kennedy arrived from Minthorpe. Lee had judged the village practitioner's character exactly, and he found that Kennedy was a clever enough man in most respects, but that his knowledge of deadly poisons was not extensive.

He was good company, and Lee knew that he was by no means to blame for having signed a death certificate when foul play had been engineered. But, of course, there was no evidence of foul play so far. Perhaps the night's examination would prove that Kennedy had been right all along.

At a fairly late hour the famous Dr. Thornbury arrived by motor-car. He was a small, clean-shaven man, with sharp, keen eyes and a quick, brisk manner. In spite of his smallness, he was very distinguished-looking, and commanded attention at once.

"Ah, Dr. Kennedy, I am pleased to meet you," remarked the pathologist crisply. "Let us hope that to-night's work will prove that Sir Oswald Mastin's death was due to natural causes. I know well enough that it would be unpleasant for you should any other result be attained."

The old doctor was flustered and uneasy.

"There was no evidence of poison—no evidence at all," he exclaimed, clasping his hands nervously. "But I may be wrong, Dr. Thornbury. I am not a specialist, and such things do occur. I hope to Heaven that your examination will be satisfactory."

Dr. Thornbury turned to Nelson Lee.

"Is everything ready, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Everything," replied the detective. "We start out for Minthorpe churchyard soon after midnight, and we shall not be disturbed. Not another soul but our three selves will be present, and no inkling of our work has been allowed to leak out. We want no morbid sightseers about the place!" he added grimly.

For it was true enough that if anybody in the hotel had learned why the two doctors and Nelson Lee were there, the news would have spread. And the trio would have arrived at Minthorpe to find a number of people waiting to watch the proceedings from afar. It is curious—indeed, painful—that people should be so morbidly interested in matters connected with death.

Nipper had no wish at all to accompany the party, and he was quite content to remain in the hotel. Lee and his two learned companions started out, as arranged, just after twelve. They went in Dr. Thornbury's car, and the latter, upon arrival at the old village church, was placed in an adjoining meadow, and the lights extinguished.

All arrangements had been made, and the three had no difficulty in setting to work. It was a grim enough business, but it had to be done. The

Mastin family vault was large, and in due course the newly interred coffin was removed and brought to the surface.

The night was intensely dark, and a stiff wind blew. Nelson Lee and the two doctors had no fear of their movements being observed, and the three men carried the coffin, with some little difficulty, to the small mortuary which was within the churchyard.

Here the coffin was laid upon the stone bench, and special electric lamps, brought purposely, were illuminated and placed in prominent positions. There was no window, and the door fitted so closely that no crack of light was allowed to pass outside. A high ventilating grating was obscured by thick foliage from an evergreen which grew outside.

Pitch black outside, the interior of the little mortuary was brilliant. Nelson Lee was to be merely a looker-on. And, indeed, Dr. Kennedy was required to do very little. The Home Office pathologist was quite capable of making the post-mortem examination alone.

Before opening the coffin he set out his delicate instruments and various other articles he would require. Then Nelson Lee himself essayed the task of unscrewing the coffin lid.

At last the final screw was removed, and then the heavy lid was taken off and laid down. Dr. Thornbury was bending forward at the moment, and he suddenly uttered an amazed cry, and stared into the coffin.

"Great Heavens!" he gasped, as though stupefied.

Both Nelson Lee and Dr. Kennedy quickly looked into the coffin. And then they, too, started back in blank astonishment.

For an extraordinary discovery had been made.

The remains of Sir Oswald Mastin were not within the coffin! In their place lay a bulky sack—which, it could be seen at once, contained nothing but ordinary garden soil!

There was no body in the coffin at all!

CHAPTER III.

Further Developments.

DR. THORNBURY was the first to speak.

"Well, upon my soul!" he gasped. "This is the most amazing experience I have ever had in the whole course of my career! What do you make of it, Mr. Lee? I—I hardly know whether I am dreaming or seeing——"

"This is no dream!" interjected Nelson Lee grimly, laying aside the antiseptic apparatus which he had worn over his mouth and nostrils. "There has been some amazing plotting, Dr. Thornbury. Sir Oswald Mastin's body has been disposed of by other means. But I admit that I am completely at a loss. Why has this astounding deception been perpetrated? Who is responsible for it? And what can the explanation be?"

"It is extraordinary—staggering!" ejaculated the pathologist.

And the old village doctor could only stand and gape, with his eyes wide open behind his spectacles.

Indeed, the sudden discovery was almost too stunning to believe. Such a vast vista of possibility was opened that even Nelson Lee himself found that cool, connected thought was impossible at the moment.

A hundred questions flooded to his mind.

How had the deception been planned? Why was this sack of soil substituted for the corpse? Where was Sir Oswald Mastin's body? Who had effected the change? And why, in wonder's name, had it been changed at all?

And then Lee saw something quite clearly. Rodney Staines was not the bluff, harmless man he appeared to be. For he, of course, had had a hand in this mysterious affair.

He had been alone—except for the servants, who didn't count—in the house after Sir Oswald's death. And he had had access to the room in which the coffin lay. For some unknown reason he had removed the body, and had replaced it with this heavy sack of earth.

The funeral had been a mockery—a farce. The burial service had been held over a mere mass of garden soil. And the most singular feature of the whole thing was that there was utterly no reasonable explanation of the mystery.

What had become of the body?

It was impossible to conceive of any reason why Sir Oswald's remains should have been carried away to some unknown destination. If murder had, indeed, been committed, there was still no reason why the body should not have been buried. This development was startling and unexpected.

But there was one splendid feature.

Neither Lady Mastin nor Rodney Staines knew that a post-mortem examination was being made. Staines himself could not get to learn of it in any way whatever. Therefore he would be off his guard, and would probably lay himself open to exposure. He did not even know that Nelson Lee was engaged upon the case.

On the contrary, he thought that everything had gone off swimmingly, and that no suspicions of any sort had been aroused. And Nelson Lee was fully determined to press his inquiries to the bitter end, and to ferret out the whole truth.

"Our investigations have not been fruitless, at all events," remarked Dr. Thornbury grimly. "We have made no post-mortem examination, it is true—but it would really be a waste of time to endeavour to discover traces of poison in a sack of mould! Now, Mr. Lee, there is work for you here!"

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"There is, indeed," was his reply. "At present I admit I am in a bit of a fog. But all fog lifts, sooner or later—especially if a breeze springs up. Well, I intend to create quite a considerable breeze just as soon as I can. This discovery has put me on my mettle, doctor, and I am keenly anxious to get on the track."

"But—but the body!" gasped old Dr. Kennedy, finding his voice. "Good gracious me! What has become of the body? Bless my soul! I was never so thunderstruck in all my life!"

"I frankly acknowledge that I received something of a shock myself," said Nelson Lee evenly. "But it must be apparent to you both, gentlemen, that there is something deep beneath the surface. A well-planned and daring plot has been perpetrated. It is for me to discover what that plot was."

"But who—why—— Bless me, I'm bothered if I can think clearly!" stammered Dr. Kennedy, mopping his brow. "I saw Sir Oswald's body placed in the coffin myself, and I attended the funeral—"

"Later on, doctor, I wish to question you," interjected Nelson Lee. "There are several things I wish to ask you, and I have no doubt that you will help me to the full extent that lies in your power. And now I wish to ask a favour."

"Of whom?" asked the pathologist.

"Of you both. We will place this coffin back in the vault exactly as we found it," said Nelson Lee. "Not a soul beyond our three selves is to know of what has been discovered. The police, of all people, must know

nothing. Please keep this secret, gentlemen, until I give the word that silence is no longer necessary."

"But why? What is your reason?" asked Dr. Thornbury.

"I wish to pursue my investigations quietly and secretly," was the reply. "The enemy—whoever it may be—must on no account be forewarned. You will understand that my work will be infinitely easier if I am allowed to go about my business knowing that I have a clear path before me. The criminals, knowing nothing, will place no obstructions in my way."

Both the medical men agreed to the detective's proposal. The result of the post-mortem was not to be made known. Nobody, in fact, except the Home Office, knew that a post-mortem was being held. And so no curiosity would be aroused, and the rogue, or rogues, who had perpetrated the strange fraud would not be warned of danger.

Lee opened the sack, and satisfied himself that it contained actually nothing but ordinary damp soil. After that, the coffin was nailed down as before and replaced in the Mastin family vault.

The time was now close upon two o'clock, but when the trio arrived back at the hotel in Tunbridge Wells they were at once admitted, for Lee had made arrangements.

Both the doctors had engaged rooms for the night, for they knew it would be too late to return to their homes. Dr. Kennedy could have done so, but the hour was so late, and the uncertainty of the time of his absence so vague, that he thought it a wise plan to stay in Tunbridge Wells over night.

Nipper was still up, anxiously waiting, and he was flabbergasted when his master briefly told him the news. At first Nipper thought that Lee was joking.

The detective was anxious to question the old village practitioner, but he delayed this until the morning. There was really no object to be gained by putting his queries to-night.

And so they all retired. Nelson Lee and Nipper were up in good time, and during an early walk they discussed the affair as it then stood. But, in the absence of definite facts, discussion was not of much use.

After breakfast, Dr. Thornbury started out for London, having arranged a meeting with Nelson Lee in the near future, when the detective would report the result of his investigations.

Dr. Kennedy was almost inclined to believe that he had been dreaming. But there was no doubt about the matter whatever—the body of Sir Oswald Mastin had mysteriously disappeared, and the perpetrators of the strange crime were unknown. Who was responsible? And what was the object of the substitution?

"I said last night that I wished to put a few questions to you, Dr. Kennedy," remarked Nelson Lee as he and the old medico sat in the former's private room after the pathologist's departure. "Well, if you are agreeable, I will commence now."

"I'm afraid I can tell you nothing," said Dr. Kennedy, with a shake of his head. "Heaven knows I'm in a dense fog over the whole queer business! Bless my soul! To think that such a thing could happen in these days!"

"I really think that stranger things happen nowadays than ever before," was Nelson Lee's comment. "One is always finding something new in crime, my dear doctor. And now, will you tell me just how Sir Oswald died, and what happened immediately afterwards?"

"I must admit that Sir Oswald's death came unexpectedly," replied the doctor. "From his condition, I had anticipated a prolonged illness, perhaps, but ultimate recovery. But then, soon after making his will, he uttered a slight groan, and when I arrived at the bedside he was dead."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"He died from heart-disease."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sir Oswald had suffered for some little time—two or three years, in fact—from heart-disease," replied Dr. Kennedy slowly. "But, at the same time, I always gave him another ten years, at least. But he certainly died from some affection of the heart."

"Dr. Thornbury came down here to see if poisoning had been the cause —"

"I know—I know!" interjected the other. "But, my dear Mr. Lee, there was no sign of poison! There was no symptom to suggest such a thing! I admit that I am not an expert in such matters, but I am not exactly a novice!"

"You are certain, of course, that Sir Oswald died at once?"

Kennedy smiled sadly.

"Why, it was dramatically sudden!" he replied. "When I got to the bedside, as I said, he was dead—stone-dead! I examined him thoroughly, and could only conclude that his heart had ceased its beating owing to a diseased condition of the organ. This post-mortem examination would, of course, have dispelled all doubts. But there is no body to examine!"

Nelson Lee removed his cigar, and tapped the ash into the fireplace.

"And the funeral?" he asked. "When did the funeral take place?"

"On the morning of the third day," was the answer. "The coffin was delivered during the afternoon of the second day. Mr. Staines was still there, and he and I lifted the body into the coffin. It was then rigid and cold, and looked really peaceful. Later on—that is, on the morning of the funeral—the undertakers arrived and nailed the lid on the coffin in readiness for the funeral."

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers and bent forward.

"Then Staines was alone in Mastin Hall with the open coffin during the whole of one night?" he asked keenly. "He had access to the body, and could do anything he wished without another soul knowing?"

"Yes, that is so," was the doctor's slow answer. "Mr. Staines was the only guest in the house at the time. He would, of course, have the main quarter of the house quite to himself during the night. The servants at the Hall sleep in a separate wing to themselves."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"That is suggestive," he remarked. "Of course, Dr. Kennedy, you will understand that this conversation is absolutely private? I suspect Mr. Rodney Staines of being directly implicated in a scoundrelly plot, but I do not want him to have the slightest suspicion that I am investigating. You must not mention to a soul——"

"Oh, you can rely on me, Mr. Lee! You can trust me," said the old doctor. "I shall be only too glad if you prove that Mr. Staines is not the rightful heir to Sir Oswald's fortune. I somehow think that all is not right."

Kennedy was not able to give much more information, and very soon afterwards he took his departure for Minthorpe, to attend his widely-scattered patients. And Nelson Lee, taking Nipper with him, went round to the offices of Mr. Howard Price, solicitor.

The legal gentleman was honoured to receive such a distinguished visitor, and his fat, ruddy face beamed as he shook hands. He nodded to Nipper, and requested the pair to be seated.

"I am here on behalf of Lady Mastin," said Nelson Lee, getting straight to the point. "Lady Mastin has commissioned me to look into the affair of

the late Sir Oswald's will. You will realise that the matter is quite confidential."

Mr. Price frowned a little.

"I shall be infernally glad if you can detect a flaw somewhere, Mr. Lee," he said, with anxiety. "To tell you the truth, I don't like this Mr. Rodney Staines. I believe he's been up to tricks. Sir Oswald never willingly left him the greater part of his fortune. There was something behind it all—I'll swear that!"

"Why, do you know of any hold that Staines held over——"

"Oh, no; I have no proofs to substantiate my statement," said the solicitor. "But I've known Sir Oswald Mastin practically all my life, and I know that he was devoted to his wife. I was absolutely thunderstruck when I learned that he wished to make nearly all his property over to a stranger like Staines!"

"A new will was totally unexpected, was it not?"

"Quite."

"I understand that Staines himself was present at the time?"

"That is so."

"Did he seem surprised in any way?"

"Well, to be frank," admitted Mr. Price, "Mr. Staines appeared to be as surprised as the doctor and myself. He apparently had no notion that he was to be the chief legatee under the new will."

"Perhaps he was acting. Do you think he was?"

"If he was acting, he did it wonderfully well," replied the solicitor. "I remonstrated with Sir Oswald, but he told me that he owed everything to Staines, and that it was only right that he should benefit handsomely."

"He owed everything to Staines!" mused Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Staines himself says that he saved Sir Oswald's life. Perhaps that is what the late baronet meant. Did Sir Oswald appear reluctant——"

"My dear sir, he was anxious to make the new will," interjected Mr. Price. "That is the astounding part of it. There was utterly no evidence to suppose that he was being forced against his will, or that he was being influenced by Staines. It was all straightforward."

"And what is your opinion of Mr. Staines?" asked Lee.

"Well, to be honest, I do not care for him," was the reply. "I distrust the man, Mr. Lee. I believe that he cultivated Sir Oswald's friendship for the purpose of benefiting in the will. However, what is done cannot be undone. Sir Oswald is dead, and his will is proved. The bulk of the property is already in Staines's control, and he is coming down to Tunbridge this afternoon to see me."

"Oh, indeed? Do you know the object of his visit?"

"Yes. He is coming to receive the key of the late Sir Oswald Mastin's safe deposit, in London," replied Mr. Price. "When he was down here two days ago, the key was not handy. So he is coming to-day to get it, and to discuss certain other matters connected with his new property."

"You mentioned a safe deposit. What does it contain?" asked the detective.

"The Mastin family jewels," replied the other. "I should say the 'famous' Mastin jewels, for they are known among experts the whole world over, and their estimated value is close upon seventy-five thousand pounds."

Nelson Lee whistled softly, and glanced at Nipper.

"Dear me! Lady Mastin omitted to mention this to me," he said. "I know, of course, that Sir Oswald was something of a collector, and that the Mastin jewels are indeed valuable. But you surely do not mean to tell me, Mr. Price, that Sir Oswald bequeathed his jewel collection to Rodney Staines?"



"You scoundrel—you base villain!" It was a weak voice that uttered the words. In one second the most astounding discovery was made clear to Nelson Lee.
Sir Oswald Mastin was alive!

"But he did!" exclaimed the solicitor gruffly. "I was shocked, Mr. Lee. It's a mystery to me, even now! No matter what other provisions the will made, the family jewels should have been kept in the family. It is absolutely disgraceful that they should pass into the hands of a comparative stranger!"

"And Staines is coming this afternoon to obtain the key of the safe deposit!" murmured Nelson Lee. "What time will your client arrive?" he asked.

"At three o'clock."

"H'm! Well, Mr. Price, I am very much obliged to you for your information," went on the detective. "On no account tell Staines that I have been, and give him no inkling that we suspect him of some vague trickery. I want to pursue my investigations methodically and in secret."

Within five minutes, Nelson Lee and Nipper were walking back through Tunbridge Wells to their hotel. Lee was thoughtful, but just as the hotel was reached he turned to Nipper, and softly clapped the youngster on the back.

"We'll be on the watch this afternoon, young 'un," he said crisply. "We will take up positions within sight of Mr. Price's office just before three—and wait."

"Wait for what, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"For Mr. Rodney Staines," was Nelson Lee's reply. "When he comes out of the solicitor's office, I intend to shadow him, and find out exactly where he goes."

"Good egg!" said Nipper. "Something doing at last!"

And, as it turned out, there was to be "something doing" with a vengeance!

CHAPTER IV.

Nipper Makes an Astounding Discovery—In Hastings.

DURING luncheon, Nelson Lee summarised all the facts of the case in his mind. Truth to tell, there was nothing definite except the one outstanding feature of the missing body.

But why Sir Oswald Mastin's remains had been smuggled away was a deep mystery. Nelson Lee was quite positive that Rodney Staines was deeply concerned in some big plot.

"Nobody but Staines could have performed the substitution," remarked Lee thoughtfully, as he stirred his coffee. "You see, Nipper, Staines never anticipated a post-mortem examination. He thought that the coffin, once nailed down and placed in the vault, would lie undisturbed for all time."

"And he still thinks his game hasn't been spotted," observed Nipper. "That's something in our favour, anyhow. We've got the drop on the beggar. He thinks that everything's O.K.; but we've evidence to prove just the opposite. I wish to goodness we could get hold of something definite, though."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Well, we shall soon be leaving this hotel to take up our positions outside Mr. Price's office," he said. "For the sake of precaution, Nipper, we shall both be slightly disguised."

"But what can we do, sir?" asked the lad. "What's the good of shadowing Staines? He'll only go straight to London——"

"We don't know where he'll go," interjected the detective quietly. "I admit, Nipper, that the threads are very weak; but we must do our best in the one direction which is open to us. In all probability the shadowing of

Staines will be fruitless. But I suspect the man, and by watching his movements we may get hold of something tangible."

And that was all it amounted to. Lee knew well enough that it was rather a forlorn hope. As Nipper had said, Staines would probably go straight to London, to his house in Mount Street.

But, on the other hand, he might do something quite different. At all events, Lee did not think it would be a waste of time to spend the afternoon in interesting himself in Staines activities.

A few minutes before three Lee and Nipper were lounging about opposite the somewhat dingy entrance to Mr. Howard Price's still dingier offices. He was a sound and respectable solicitor, but he evidently did not believe in wasting money on appearances.

The detective and his assistant were quite separate and apart, and at five minutes past three they both saw the short, stoutish figure of Mr. Rodney Staines walk briskly up and turn into the lawyer's office. He was evidently in good humour, for his face was shining with geniality, and a big cigar stuck from the corner of his mouth.

In spite of his black clothing, he did not appear to be mourning very greatly over the death of his old friend. The man's very appearance and bearing told Nelson Lee that he was full up with self-congratulation at having pulled off a profitable and daring coup.

Staines remained in Mr. Price's office for about half an hour. And when he reappeared he seemed just as genial as before—indeed, even more self-satisfied. He merely paused to light up a fresh cigar, and then commenced walking briskly down the street.

Nelson Lee quietly moved along about a hundred yards in Staines's rear, and Nipper followed fifty yards behind his master. Staines himself had no suspicion whatever that he was being shadowed.

Contrary to Nelson Lee's expectations, Staines did not make for the station. Instead, he directed his steps towards the open country, and was very soon on the outskirts of Tunbridge Wells, walking briskly towards Mount Ephraim.

It would have been difficult for Nelson Lee to follow his quarry if the latter had had the slightest inkling of what was afoot. But Staines never once looked back.

Lee, nevertheless, took great precaution. And, whenever possible, he followed behind hedges—keeping Staines in view, but being invisible himself. Where was the man making for?

The detective was certainly surprised, for he had not anticipated anything of this nature. He had expected a trip to London at once. Obviously, Staines did not intend going very far, or he would have hired a motor-car. This particular country road was quiet and lonely, and traffic slight.

Very soon the road took a slight dip. At the bottom lay a dense spinney—or, rather, there were two spinneys, for both sides of the lane were wooded, and the hedges were high.

Staines paused in that gloomy portion of the road, and then turned abruptly at right angles and seemed to disappear into the hedge. Nelson Lee, who was in an adjoining meadow, hastened his footsteps. But presently, through a little gap, he saw his quarry again.

Staines had not moved. He had taken his seat upon an old stile, and was glancing at his watch. After that he idly whipped off the heads of the tall grass with his walking-cane.

"Oh, so that's the idea, is it?" murmured Lee to himself. "A rendezvous! Staines has come out here for the purpose of keeping an appointment. He is either early, or his companion is late. This is beginning to get quite

interesting. Why could not Staines have met ~~his~~ unknown friend in Tunbridge? Obviously because the meeting is to be quite a secret one."

The great detective was, indeed, interested. Staines looked down the road every now and again, and more than once consulted his watch afresh. After four minutes had elapsed Lee heard a slight sound behind him, and found that Nipper had crept up.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" breathed the lad. "Have we lost him?"

"Hush! He is just at the bend, seated on a stile," was Lee's reply. "Our efforts are to be rewarded after all, young 'un. This is evidently a secret meeting between Staines and—presumably—a confederate. It will be interesting to see who the latter will be."

"But why couldn't they have met in the town, sir?"

"There is only one answer to that question. Staines does not want anyone to know of the meeting, and so he has come out here in this quiet lane. It is possible, too, that his companion is afraid of being seen in Tunbridge. I think——"

Nelson Lee paused, and drew back a little. From where he was standing he could see a man's tall figure walking briskly down the road from the opposite direction. He was well dressed in a sporting kind of outfit, and carried himself in a soldierly manner. He wore a big, dark moustache, and smoked a cigarette.

"Looks like the giddy villain of the piece!" muttered Nipper, with a chuckle.

"Perhaps he is," was Lee's grim reply. "But I cannot agree with you, my lad, as to appearances. This fellow is a gentleman—a really handsome man. Somehow his walk seems familiar to me. In the back of my mind I seem to know his figure and the shape of his head."

The detective watched, and saw Staines and the stranger shake hands, and then they both took their seats on the stile, and became keenly engrossed in conversation. It was obvious that Staines was telling his companion something of importance, for his attitude was tense and eager.

"By James! I wish I could get near enough to overhear what they are saying," muttered Lee, with a frown. "I'm afraid, however, that——"

"Let me have a shot at it, sir," muttered Nipper eagerly. "Just look. I can creep down behind the trees, and get up close in their rear without making a sound. Anyhow, just let me scout round to see if it's possible."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Go off at once then, you young rascal," said Lee promptly. "Don't let yourself be seen on any account. I don't want Staines to be deprived of his feeling of security. Don't take too great a chance. If you can't get near enough, come back to me."

Nipper dived off like an eel. He fell to his hands and knees, and crawled through the undergrowth noiselessly and without disturbing a leaf. The lad's knowledge of woodcraft was great, and he felt absolutely at home in the enterprise he had volunteered to perform.

It was a simple task for him to worm his way round into the wood and then towards the stile. To his disappointment, however, he found that to get quite near was impossible. There was a tiny clearing just against the stile, with several thick bushes on its outskirts.

Nipper could reach the bushes, but dared not proceed further. So he came to a halt, and listened intently. The dull murmur of the two men's conversation came to him clearly; but to distinguish the words was impossible.

"Rats!" muttered the lad disgustedly. "Why the dickens aren't there some more bushes? Might as well be a mile off!"

This was rather an exaggeration, however. He soon found out that his

first impression had been somewhat hasty, for Staines had been talking in a low voice. When the stranger spoke, however, Nipper distinctly caught a few of the words, although they were disconnected.

"You . . . magnificently, Staines," said the stranger. "This will be . . . best coups . . . ever brought off. Within . . . weeks we shall have . . . quite beyond discovery. And we shall have raked in——"

Nipper heard no more of the sentence; but the words had been sufficiently significant to tell him that his master's suspicions were justified.

And there was something else. In some vague way Nipper knew the voice of the stranger. He had heard it before; he had heard it many times before. But he could not for the life of him remember whose voice it was. Perhaps this was because he had not heard the tones fully and distinctly.

And then Staines spoke again.

"It's . . . infernally risky, my dear Jim," he said "I think——"

Nipper could have heard more had he chosen. But he was simply panting with amazed realisation. He lay there amid the bushes, staring before him, his eyes large and round.

That one word—that short name—had filled the gap in his memory.

Jim!

Staines had referred to his companion as Jim! In one second Nipper knew exactly who the soldierly-looking man was, and where he had heard his voice before. He knew why Nelson Lee had vaguely recognised the figure.

"Great Scotland Yard!" muttered Nipper, quivering with excitement. "Jim! The chap is Jim the Penman!" He paused for breath. "Well, of all the surprising surprises!"

Nipper pulled himself together and listened once more. He heard Staines again mention the name, and when the tall man spoke the young detective was positively sure that he had made no mistake. The man was Jim the Penman, without a doubt. He was Douglas James Sutcliffe, the master forger!

Nipper felt that he absolutely could not keep such a discovery to himself. Within a minute he was wriggling backwards, and in due course he emerged from the trees and stood by the side of his master, behind the thick hedge.

One glance at Nipper was sufficient to tell Lee that the lad had discovered something of great importance. Nipper's face was red with inward excitement, and his eyes were gleaming strangely.

"Guv'nor!" he panted. "Guv'nor!"

"Well, I'm here!" said Nelson Lee coolly. "My dear lad, calm yourself. What's the matter with you? Apparently you have something of importance to tell me——"

Nipper grasped his master's arm.

"That chap!" he ejaculated. "Do you know who he is, sir? I'll tell you. He's an old pal of ours, guv'nor. We've had dealings with him many a time."

"Well, spring your surprise!" was Lee's remark. "Don't keep me on tenterhooks, you young rascal. Who is the stranger?"

"Jim the Penman!"

Nipper brought out the words with huge relish, and then stood back to watch the effect upon his master. He was somewhat disappointed, for Nelson Lee, after one quick start, slowly and calmly stroked his chin and nodded.

"Jim the Penman!" he repeated. "Upon my soul, you are right, Nipper. He made no attempt to disguise his walk, and I vaguely recognised it at the

time. Of course, the military-looking gentlemen is our old friend Sutcliffe. But you, of course, have some definite evidence?"

Nipper rapidly told his master what had occurred, and the detective listened with half-closed eyes. He was astonished, but in no way perturbed. On the contrary, the knowledge that he was up against Jim the Penman again pleased him intensely. He felt now that he was right on the track.

Nelson Lee had crossed swords on many occasions with the scoundrelly forger. Jim the Penman was an absolute master at his own particular game. Moreover, he was daring and audacious to a degree, and was ever ready to seize the slightest opportunity for the practice of his astounding powers.

With the pen Sutcliffe was something of a magician; he was certainly a genius. Unlike most misguided men who choose forgery for a profession, he could commit his crimes with no preliminary practice. The most difficult handwriting, placed before Jim, could be copied by him on the instant without a single flaw. Indeed, his forgeries were so perfect that all the handwriting experts of Scotland Yard were quite incapable of detecting the fraud.

This was because it was a physical impossibility to discover a single fault. Jim the Penman's forgeries were more than mere copies. He wrote the actual handwriting of the man he proposed to defraud. And, coupled with his cleverness in this direction, he possessed the most extraordinary faculty for dodging the police.

He seemed to be able to scent danger from afar, and was always ready on the instant to grapple with any emergency. Moreover, he was utterly unprincipled and unscrupulous. If killing was necessary, he would kill. Without conscience, without fear, he was the hardest nut Nelson Lee had ever set out to crack.

And Jim the Penman was far from being cracked yet! Every fresh enterprise he was engaged in was more daring and audacious than the last. He had attempted some astonishing frauds, but Nelson Lee had generally frustrated them.

Now, it seemed, Nelson Lee had run across his old enemy again. Some little time before Lee had had an adventure with Jim on the coast, and had frustrated an attempt by the forger to gain possession of some hidden treasure-trove. Since then Lee had lost sight of the forger, but, as was now apparent, Jim had been very active.

The precise nature of the present game was rather uncertain, but there was obviously a gigantic fraud somewhere. The fact that Jim the Penman had a hand in it proved that.

But there was one very gratifying feature. In spite of Jim's ability for scenting danger, he certainly had no inkling that his plans were being found out. Nelson Lee was keen and anxious. He wanted to tear the truth out into the light; he wanted to bring matters to a head.

"Nipper, I had a notion that we should achieve some result by shadowing Mr. Rodney Staines," he said quietly; "but I never anticipated such a turn of events as this. We will follow Staines no longer, but pay our sole attention to Jim the Penman."

Nipper nodded.

"That's the wheeze," he agreed. "Jim's the chap for us to look after, guv'nor. I'm blessed if I know what the game can be—but we're on the track now. And once we take that road, sir, we generally manage to do things!"

It was fully ten minutes before Sutcliffe and Staines made a move. They then detached themselves from the stile, and commenced walking slowly towards Tunbridge Wells. With added caution Lee and Nipper followed. It was an easy enough task tracking the pair, for they walked slowly, and were so deep in their conversation that they did not once glance

around them. Even if they had done so they would have seen nothing to arouse their suspicions.

Just before entering the town the pair parted company, shaking hands, and setting off in two different directions. Jim walked briskly now, and was obviously making for a definite destination. At fairly long intervals Nelson Lee and Nipper followed. Mr. Rodney Staines was allowed to go his own way freely.

Jim went straight to the railway station, and Lee, who was close behind him in the booking office, heard him ask for a ticket to Hastings. That was sufficient for the detective. He quickly retreated, and got completely out of the forger's way.

"Hastings!" Lee said to Nipper. "Dear me, young 'un, I wonder what this little adventure will end in? We shall, of course, travel to Hastings on the same train as Jim. I fancy we shall have more serious work to do than mere holiday-making. There is a train, I see, in less than half an hour."

"Let's hope there'll be some excitement, guv'nor," said Nipper, with relish.

During the wait both the detective and Nipper kept well in the background. And when the train steamed out of Tunbridge Wells Jim the Penman sat in the next carriage to his two shadowers, and was totally unaware of their attentions.

The journey to the South Coast was uneventful. Nelson Lee kept his eyes open, and was certain that Jim did not leave the train at any of the intermediate stations. When Hastings was reached night had fallen, and the holiday resort was in black darkness.

Owing to the lighting restrictions Hastings was like a tiny country village. The streets were unlit, and every house had carefully shaded blinds. On this particular night, too, the sky was overcast, and there was no moon. In consequence the blackness was almost impenetrable.

Yet Nelson Lee and Nipper, well accustomed to night tracking, did not lose sight of their quarry. Nor did they cause Jim to suspect. The darkness, in a way, was very welcome to the great detective.

Once out of the station, Sutcliffe did not proceed down Havelock Road to the centre of the town—which is the usual way. Instead, he stepped out briskly along Middle Street, a fairly narrow thoroughfare, which is quiet and still after dark. Lee followed closely, Nipper, as before, bringing up the rear.

Outside the establishment of Messrs. Mitchell & Thunder, wholesale and retail newsagents, Sutcliffe paused to light a cigarette, entering the doorway for the purpose of shading his match-flame, for the wind was whistling shrilly down the road. Lee saw Jim's face clearly, and knew that he was on the right track.

At the bottom of Middle Street, against the police station, Sutcliffe turned to the right, and found himself at the Memorial. He did not make for the front, but turned along Wellington Place, and then to the left up the steep slope of Wellington Square. He took the right-hand side of the square, and proceeded to the top.

Here he mounted some steps, stumbling a little in the darkness, and made his way up a steep road, past Hastings Castle, until he arrived on the top of West Hill. Here there were no houses, for the place is all grass-land, with paths running in several directions.

The wind blew steadily across the hill, and was cold and cutting. Not another soul was to be seen. Over to the right the sea showed dimly, with

the red light on the extremity of the abandoned "harbour." The tide seemed to be in, for the waves were thundering noisily on the shingle.

Jim walked straight on without a pause, and Lee could see him fairly distinctly, in spite of the gloom, for the detective's eyes were as keen as those of a hawk. Nipper was quite close behind his master now, and the lad was wondering what the destination would be.

As a matter of fact, Lee himself was curious. His mind had been open, and he had expected nothing in particular; but what was Jim the Penman doing up here? Where was he making for?

Nelson Lee, who knew Hastings fairly well, was sure that Sutcliffe knew the locality even better. He was walking with the assurance of a man who had passed over the same ground many times. And, a few minutes later, Jim stood upon the brow of a steep hill. Trees grew upon it, and right below him were the roofs of the houses of the old town.

And then Nelson Lee realised something that startled him.

Jim the Penman was standing right over the well-known St. Clement's caves!

Had he arrived at his destination?

CHAPTER V.

Another Singular Development.

JIM THE PENMAN stood still for a couple of minutes, and then commenced to make a slow descent. Nelson Lee was crouching full length upon the ground, so that, when the forger glanced round him, he saw nothing but the bare bleakness of the Castle Hill, and the gaunt trees below him.

He proceeded downwards cautiously, and Lee followed fairly closely in order to avoid losing sight of his quarry. Suddenly, it seemed to the detective, Sutcliffe disappeared through a tiny opening in the cliff-face—for the hill here was practically sheer.

For three full minutes Nelson Lee waited. But he saw no sign of Jim, and heard nothing except the whistling and the subdued roaring of the waves from afar. The hill was some little distance from the sea.

The detective decided to run the risk of being seen, and crept forward. And almost at once he found himself gazing into a narrow slit in the soft sandstone. This was almost covered by tangled undergrowth.

"By James!" breathed Nelson Lee. "The old entrance of the St. Clement's Caves! Jim has made his way within, and is even now inside the caves. What can it mean? What can Sutcliffe be doing in such a place?"

It was certainly surprising. Nelson Lee himself had visited the famous caves about a couple of years previously. He remembered the visit clearly, and pictured the caves to himself as he now crouched there, waiting for Nipper to arrive.

The St. Clement's Caves are regarded as one of the most remarkable curiosities in the South of England. They have formed the subject of much speculation among visitors and antiquarians.

Although undoubtedly of great age, they were discovered entirely by chance in the year 1825 by a gardener named Joseph Golding. He had been engaged in the work of hollowing out the rock in order to construct a recess in which his employer might sit to enjoy the scenery.

To Golding's astonishment, however, the ground suddenly gave way, and the discovery of the caves had followed. But, for the purpose of allowing

visitors to view the singularly formed caverns, it was necessary to have them well ventilated, and to provide a means of entry and exit.

The old, original entrance, which had been used by the smugglers, was so situated that it could not be used for general purposes. And so Golding had tunnelled out an up-shaft and a down-shaft—both opening on to a large pillared lobby. Visitors usually pay the sixpence required for viewing the caves, wait in this lobby, and are then conducted round the caves by a competent guide.

Nelson Lee knew well enough that the entrance he now stood against was disused and blocked up. From within only a small chink of light could be admitted—and it was the only place in the whole of the caves where daylight penetrated. The detective guessed that Jim the Penman had enlarged the opening secretly for his own purposes.

And Lee now remembered seeing a paragraph in the papers almost a fortnight before. For some unknown cause a large portion of the cliff, immediately over the main entrance of the cave, had collapsed. It had happened in the middle of the night, and not a soul knew how the disaster had occurred.

But the entrance was completely blocked, and the main lobby itself had collapsed. Thus it was impossible for anybody to enter the caves until the debris had been cleared away. And this was a long job, and would not be completed for several weeks. The caves within were absolutely deserted and empty, and had been for many days past.

Lee was vaguely suspicious. The fact that Jim the Penman had entered the caves by that secret way seemed to prove that he had engineered the fall of cliff, and that he was using the caves for some nefarious purpose.

"Can it be possible that Sir Oswald Mastin's body has been conveyed here?" thought Nelson Lee grimly. "This is a gruesome business, and I am still very much in the dark. I am sure, at all events, that Jim is using these caves, and that he caused the accident, so that he should remain undisturbed. He knows that no entry can be made for two or three weeks."

The caverns themselves occupy a space of about three acres in extent. They consist of several chambers connected by passages and corridors. Some of the caves are quite large, and they are absolutely dry at all times of the year, owing to the sloping nature of the ground above them.

At one point the catacombs—as they are sometimes called—are about a hundred and sixty feet below the surface. It is a curious fact, but the temperature in the caves is precisely the same all the year round—fifty-one degrees. Thus, on a warm summer's day they are delightfully cool; and on a freezing January day the atmosphere strikes one as being warm.

Nelson Lee realised what a superb hiding-place the caves would make. Who would think of looking for a fugitive criminal there? Who would suspect that a man wanted by the police would lurk in such a public place?

The caves were closed, it was true, but there were men working on the collapsed entrance every day, and before long everything would be as it had been formerly. Moreover, the caves are a place to keep away from, for the darkness and silence are absolutely appalling when one is left alone.

"Hallo, guv'nor! What's the idea?"

It was Nipper who murmured the words in an almost inaudible whisper. The youngster had crept up silently, and now he stood close beside his master, staring before him at the narrow opening in the sandstone rock.

"Jim has disappeared into his burrow, my dear lad," whispered Lee softly. "This opening is the old entrance to the caves, and Jim is apparently making use of them while certain repairs are going on. As you may remember, the main entrance was blocked up some little time ago."

Lee quickly told Nipper of his suspicions, and then instructed the lad to remain on the spot and to keep alert and wideawake all the time. There was a peculiarly grim note in the detective's voice—and Nipper knew what it meant right enough.

"We must find out what Jim's game is, here and now," said the detective. "For both of us to enter the caves would be rather foolish. So while you remain on guard, my lad, I will do a little quiet investigating. I intend to get at the truth to-night!"

"But the risk, guv'nor!" exclaimed Nipper anxiously. "You'll be at a disadvantage in these rotten caverns. Jim'll spring out on you and bowl you over before——"

"If he does, then you'll have to come and rescue me," said Lee cheerfully. "But don't be fidgety, Nipper. I am quite capable of taking care of myself, and I think the advantage will lie with me. Jim will be off his guard, and I shall be on the alert. If you hear a revolver shot, come at once."

Nipper was not exactly satisfied with the plan, but he did not dream of objecting further. And Nelson Lee, with a little difficulty, squeezed himself through the slit, and found himself in pitch, utter darkness and almost deadly silence. He remembered that there were some much-worn steps right before him, and he moved forward very cautiously.

These steps were supposed to be those used by the smugglers who, at one time, occupied the caves. But Lee was not interested in bygone smugglers. He was here to effect the capture of a much-wanted criminal.

He spent seven minutes in traversing the steps. Under ordinary circumstances, with a light, he could have reached the sandy floor of the cave in five seconds. But it was as well to take every precaution, for he had no wish to give Jim the slightest warning.

Once on the sandy floor, however, he moved forward silently and quickly, feeling before him. He was forced to walk blindly, for he had no idea exactly where he was or what lay before him. But he passed from one cavern into another, and then came to a standstill.

The silence was terrible. And the blackness seemed to be like something solid—something tangible—which was pressing against him from every side. It reminded Lee of the silence and darkness of an Egyptian pyramid—only here the air was cool and breathable.

He could hear his own heart as distinctly as though it were a steam engine, and there seemed to be a constant singing in his ears. The sand prevented his feet causing any noise, and even when he moved the stillness was not broken. In one way it was terrifying, and a feeling of panic would have possessed a man with weaker nerves.

Indeed, many strong men could not have stood that strain for many hours. To be left alone in the St. Clement's Caves for one night would probably bring insanity. But Nelson Lee was as hard as steel; his nerves were toughened, and this experience had no terrors for him.

He walked on farther, still blindly. Jim the Penman was somewhere here—somewhere within the cave—for there was no other exit open to him. But where was he? Lee held an electric torch in his hand, instantly ready to be flashed on, if necessary.

And then, as he came to a halt again, he heard a distinct murmur of voices from some spot ahead. Sutcliffe was not alone! Who could his companion be? Probably enough, another confederate.

Lee padded forward silently, and as he moved the voices grew louder and more distinct. And presently, upon turning into another cavern, he saw the uncertain reflection of a light somewhat ahead. It was possible for

him to move more quickly now, and within two minutes he was crouching close against a portion of the caves known as the Roman Bath.

Jim was speaking softly, and in a bantering tone.

"Have no fear, Sir Oswald," he was saying. "After all, you are safe and well, and at the end of another fortnight you'll be as free as the day again—poorer, perhaps, but free."

"You scoundrel—you base villain!"

It was a weak voice which uttered the words—weak and tremulous. And Nelson Lee started and caught his breath in sharply. In one second the most astounding discovery of the whole case was made clear to him.

Sir Oswald Mastin was alive!

CHAPTER VI.

The Caves of Silence.

SIR OSWALD MASTIN was actually alive!

Nelson Lee was well accustomed to startling surprises. But he afterwards admitted that he was in no way prepared for such a revelation as this. From all that he had heard he accepted Sir Oswald's death as a certainty. He had never for a moment doubted that the baronet had passed away.

And yet Jim the Penman was here, in the St. Clement's Caves, talking with Sir Oswald, calmly and deliberately. It was apparent to Lee that Sir Oswald had been kept a prisoner.

Much became clear in a moment. Jim, of course, had caused the fall of cliff against the main entrance. He had probably fired off a miniature mine, buried right in the cliff. And he had done so—had adopted that extraordinary expedient—so that he would have the caves completely bare and deserted for a period of several weeks.

And Lee was able to realise that the scheme was a sound one. Where, in the whole of England, could Sir Oswald have been placed more securely? Who would suspect such a hiding-place as this?

And the audacity of the affair! Nelson Lee was intensely curious to learn the reason for Jim's singular activity. Probably much would be made clear to him now. And so we walked nearer still, and stood listening.

"Yes, to-morrow morning, Sir Oswald, the famous Mastin jewels will be in my possession," Jim was saying easily. "My friend Staines and myself will obtain them. You are wondering, perhaps, why Staines should lend himself to such base villainy—as you cheerfully term it? Well, he is not very well endowed with this world's goods, and such a chance as this does not often come a man's way."

Jim paused, but Sir Oswald did not make any comment.

"Altogether Staines and myself will obtain something like two hundred thousand pounds," went on Sutcliffe. "We share equally, for without Staines I should have been helpless. Now, one hundred thousand pounds is a tempting sum, and Staines was willing to forfeit his good name for the sake of it. Both he and I—he, at least—will go to America within the next fortnight, and there discovery will be practically impossible. Of course, two hundred thousand pounds is nothing like the extent of your fortune, Sir Oswald, but I do not think it would be wise to wait for more than that. You, however, will find, upon your release, that you have not much valuable property left. It will have been disposed of quickly—and therefore at a low price."

"By heaven! You may think that you will get clear away, but I will have the police of the whole world upon your track!" exclaimed Sir Oswald

Mastin furiously. "Oh, this is simply terrible. And my poor wife thinks that I am dead! She thinks that I bequeathed——"

"My dear sir, why worry like this?" asked Jim smoothly. "You'll be restored to Lady Mastin in a couple of weeks, and then you can explain everything. There will be a fine uproar when the facts come out, eh? But by that time Staines and I will be safe in hiding."

"And I trusted him—I trusted Staines, and regarded him as a friend!" exclaimed Sir Oswald's voice weakly. "Oh, the shame of it! And I'm going mad—mad with the silence of this place. Another week here, you scoundrel, and I shall be released only to become the inmate of a lunatic asylum!"

Jim the Penman chuckled amusedly.

"I'm afraid you are rather nervous to-night," he replied. "After all, you have not been left alone for long, Sir Oswald. I admit that you were by yourself practically the whole of to-day, but previous to that I have been your constant companion. And who could you have wished for better? Oh, you were, of course, alone at the first part of the time, but you got over that. And if you do go insane I am afraid that is one of the unfortunate necessities of the case."

"Are you a man or a demon?" panted Sir Oswald.

"Well, to be frank," was Jim's reply, "I believe I'm a bit of both. In modern crime one does not find any use for a heart. I'm heartless, Sir Oswald—callous and without conscience. You see, I am quite candid with you. Why should I not be? I wish to cheer you up as much as possible."

The forger's words were far from cheering, however; the very tone in which they were uttered sent a chill through Nelson Lee's iron frame. The great detective was standing with clenched teeth and blazing eyes.

The forger's brutality made Nelson Lee simply furious. He had always known Sutcliffe to be unscrupulous and calculating. And to hear him now, talking in such a way to his helpless prisoner, caused Lee to grit his teeth.

The detective did some quick thinking. The situation was amazing. Sir Oswald Mastin was alive—and yet he had been buried, and his will had been proved! Already Rodney Staines had received full control of a large part of the baronet's property.

Nelson Lee did not remember such another case in the whole course of his career. It was unique and bizarre. Of course, the whole thing was a fraud; and there was forgery somewhere. Jim the Penman's presence proved that.

But Lee was on the spot, and he had Sutcliffe absolutely at a disadvantage. The detective decided, then and there, to spring forward and to stun the forger on the spot. He could ask questions afterwards—after Jim was safely inside Hastings Police Station!

But the task was not to be so easy. As Lee had himself said, Sutcliffe seemed to smell danger from afar, and, although he was quite oblivious of the detective's presence at the moment, he became aware of the danger just one second too soon.

It all happened very quickly. Lee knew very well that he had himself to blame. He half moved forward, and then hesitated. He had paused because he decided, in that second, to pull his revolver. And, somehow, the weapon became stuck in his pocket, so he paused for a moment to free it.

That tiny incident, insignificant in itself, was enough to destroy the detective's plan. For, in stepping forward, one of Lee's feet projected a short distance into the radius of the light. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would not have seen it—but Jim was the hundredth! His eyes were like needles, and he saw Lee's foot instantly.

The detective heard Jim draw in his breath with a sharp hiss, and he heard a revolver click. Nelson Lee did not hesitate now; he acted on the second. He decided to pretend that he was afraid.

So, with a low cry, he turned and sped away into the darkness, bringing forth his electric torch and flashing it upon the brown sand below him. He intended giving Jim a run. And then, quite suddenly, he would double back and take Jim off his guard. It was a clever dodge, and would certainly have succeeded but for a stroke of ill fortune.

Lee dashed down a tunnel, and heard Jim the Penman thundering after him. It was the moment for action, and Lee slowed down in order to allow his pursuer to gain. There was a corner just before him, and the detective intended doubling back at that spot.

He ran on right to the corner, and turned. Crash! Nelson Lee received a great surprise at that moment. For he brought up against the rock wall with a dull thud, and it dawned upon him, at the same second, that what he had supposed to be a corner was really the end of the tunnel. The place was a cul-de-sac!

The sudden jar shook Nelson Lee considerably, and before he could regain his balance Jim was upon him from behind. An unkind fate had turned the ruse against Nelson Lee and in favour of Jim.

The detective scarcely knew anything, except that some heavy weight thudded upon his head from behind. He was not stunned completely, but his next clear recollection was that of being bound hand and foot.

This, in fact, was the truth. And Lee was lying in the old Roman Bath, beside Sir Oswald Mastin. The latter was secured by ropes to the rock wall, and he was amazed at the sudden dramatic adventure.

This particular cave was a sort of corner in a large cavern. It was a big, hollowed-out space, and it had certainly been, at some remote period, a kind of bath. At present it was quite dry, of course, and the sand was thick upon the floor.

"Nelson Lee, eh?" Jim the Penman was saying harshly. "I must admit, Lee, that I thought I had eluded you this time. And yet, here you are, like a bad penny, turned up again! By heaven, you've got yourself into a pretty fix this time."

"I generally manage to upset your schemes, Jim, don't I?" asked Lee, striving to quell the fierce throbbing in his head. I may tell you that I've been on the track for some little time, and you would have been placed hors de combat by now but for an absurd misadventure. I have hopes, however, of upsetting your game yet!"

Jim the Penman cursed furiously.

"You are like a nightmare, Lee!" he snarled. "You generally appear just when I think I am safe. But these caves are quite alone, and apart from the rest of the world. It won't be so easy to escape from here. You can yell at the top of your voice, and nobody will hear. A thunderstorm raging above cannot penetrate to this spot."

"Who are you?" gasped Sir Oswald, staring at Lee. "What does all this mean? Are you a victim of this base scoundrel as well?"

"Let me introduce you," said Jim smoothly. "This gentleman, Sir Oswald, is Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous crime investigator. He has wrecked many of my schemes, I will admit, but I think I have the advantage now. I have already said that I am cruel, and I mean to put a little idea of mine into practice. No doubt Mr. Lee came to rescue you, but he has hopelessly failed."

"You must not forget, Jim, that not one penny of Sir Oswald's fortune has come into your possession yet," Lee reminded him quietly. "But you

are generally very obliging, so perhaps you will tell me how you engineered this scheme?"

Nelson Lee, as a matter of fact, was very curious to learn the truth. And his shot went home. Jim's vanity always led him to relate his ingenious schemes. He took a certain joy in gloating over a fallen enemy.

"Ah, so you were not clever enough to fathom the little plot?" jeered the forger. "I pride myself, Lee, that I managed the thing really smartly. You know, of course, that Sir Oswald received a ducking in the lake? Well, he went straight to bed, and the doctor was called. As a matter of fact, there was nothing wrong with our friend here at all; he had not even caught a chill. He remained in bed, however, and the doctor said that he would call again in the morning. You know all that?"

"Yes, I know all that," replied Lee.

"Now, my dear fellow, I think you will admit that I am just a little smart," went on Jim the Penman, lighting a cigarette. "This is how it was worked—and I claim it to be the most audacious scheme that's ever been hatched. And I'm a bit of a wonder at audacity, eh? At one o'clock that night Staines admitted me to the house, and we quickly bound and gagged Sir Oswald as he lay in bed. He was then quietly transferred to a big motor-car and brought direct to these caves—which I had previously prepared for his reception. I then spent a full hour disguising myself as our friend here—and you will not be surprised to learn that I succeeded admirably. We are very much of the same build, and our heads are shaped similarly."

"Then it was you who died?" asked Lee, in astonishment.

"Exactly," replied Jim coolly. "But not until I had caused Dr. Kennedy a large amount of anxiety. It was easy for me to return to Mastin Hall, and to get into bed in Sir Oswald's place. The poor old doctor never guessed that there was any deception. I acted my part well, and he was neatly hoodwinked. The will, of course, was a forgery—although I defy anyone to detect it. This will explain to you why Staines was the chief legatee. It was I who made the will—not Sir Oswald. And now to remind you of an incident that occurred some months ago. Do you remember that I took a small tabloid in a London police station?"

"I do!" said Lee grimly, trying to work his bonds free. "You swallowed the thing, and we thought you were dead. Instead, however, you came to yourself in the mortuary, and escaped."

"Precisely. I have a little box of those tabloids—they were given to me by an American chemist—and after I had made the will I swallowed one. The effect is seemingly certain death, and no doctor could detect the fraud. I was declared to be dead, and the funeral was arranged. By Jove, it is quite laughable. One night, just before the funeral, I assisted Staines to place a weight in the coffin. Staines was present when the lid was nailed down, and he made sure that the undertakers did not look inside the coffin. That's all. The funeral took place, and a sack of garden soil was buried. No death took place whatever. I, of course, came down here and looked after Sir Oswald. Staines, meanwhile, has been carrying out my instructions."

It was really an amazing recital. But Lee could see clearly that there was really no difficulty in carrying out the plan. It was, in fact, easy enough to anyone with Jim the Penman's audacity. He had prepared everything beforehand, and had then carried out the plot with machine precision. There was really not one flaw. Lee could see now that the bottle of poison which Lady Mastin had found had really nothing to do with the case. Sir Oswald afterwards explained that he had obtained the poison for the purpose

of killing rats, and it was particularly effective for that purpose. And so the detection of the plot had come about more by chance than anything else—for the post-mortem examination would never have been arranged but for the discovery of the poison.

"In the morning," went on the forger, "Staines and myself will obtain the Mastin jewels. Confound you, Lee, I am going to give you a taste of torture to-night! You won't upset my schemes—but your advent is hard lines on Sir Oswald. Do you know why—do you know why?"

Jim bent forward, and his voice was quivering with hatred.

"Because I am going to leave the pair of you down here!" he snarled. "I am going to leave you here, quite apart from one another, in this terrible silence and darkness. You will go mad, both of you, with the horror of it all! That is the plan I'm going to carry out!"

CHAPTER VII.

A Race Against Time—Conclusion.

THERE was something fiendishly horrible in Jim the Penman's plan of revenge. He had not intended to commit murder, but Nelson Lee's appearance had led him to throw all scruples aside.

He carried Lee bodily to a small cavern quite a long way from the Roman Bath. In this way both the prisoners were bound and helpless, and so far apart that no sound could reach either. The darkness and silence would play havoc with their nerves, and shouting for help would be useless.

The nerve strain, combined with hunger and thirst, would soon effect its deadly work. Even the strongest of men could not stand such a ghastly ordeal, and three days would be enough to bring hopeless insanity. Rescue would not come from any quarter, for the main entrance of the caves was blocked up and the other was not used; only Jim had utilised it.

After the forger had gone Lee lay thinking bitterly over the situation. The silence was nerve-shattering. But the detective had not forgotten Nipper. Nipper had been left outside, on the watch.

But the hours passed, and the youngster did not arrive. What had happened? Nelson Lee formed a shrewd guess. Jim had surprised the lad, and had dealt with him drastically. That could be the only explanation.

And so the master forger's plot would be carried out. His victims would lie there helpless in the darkness and silence, hungry and thirsty, until oblivion came to them. A more appalling fate could scarcely be imagined.

But Nipper did not fail.

Truth to tell, the young detective had been having a nasty adventure. He had waited for his master to emerge, and had been about to enter the caves when Jim had come out. As Lee surmised, Nipper was taken by surprise, and he had been hurled down the face of the cliff. Luckily he came to a halt in the thick cliff growth, or he would certainly have met with instant death. Jim thought that the lad was dead, and the cliff was so steep that he could not go down to investigate. The forger, in fact, was in a bit of a panic at the sight of Nipper. He suspected that others knew of the detective's journey, and that it would be wise to get hold of what he could and then disappear.

Nipper had been partially stunned, and had taken some time to recover. But, upon doing so, he made his way round until he stood upon the downs. Here the night air cooled his throbbing brain, and brought realisation to him. The wind had now almost died down, and the night was calm.

The lad was in a state of terrible anxiety. Without thinking of anything except the safety of his master, he hastened to the caves, entered,

and explored them. And within fifteen minutes both the prisoners were released and upon their feet.

It had been a quick rescue; but dawn was now breaking, and many hours had passed since Jim the Penman's departure. Yet the rescue was only the natural sequence of events, and Jim's victims were not destined to undergo the frightful ordeal he had prepared for them.

Sir Oswald was weakened and ill. But the knowledge that he was free again braced him up wonderfully, and his gratitude to Nelson Lee knew no bounds. Frantically he implored Lee to get to London in time to stop Jim and Staines from obtaining possession of the Mastin jewels. Once taken from the safe deposit, they would disappear for all time.

And so the caves of silence were quitted, and the trio made their way up the cliff and hurried down into Hastings itself. It was now broad daylight, and the sun was shining coldly over the sea.

"I will pay you any fee you care to name, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Sir Oswald pitifully. "Save the jewels—for heaven's sake——"

"But how can it be done?" interjected Lee curtly. "Pardon me for being sharp, Sir Oswald, but I am worried—greatly worried. I really fail to see what can be done. There is no train out of Hastings so early, and even if there were we could not possibly arrive in London in time."

"What about a motor-car, guv'nor?" suggested Nipper eagerly.

"No use at all. We should arrive to find the jewels gone," replied the detective, tenderly rubbing the back of his head. "By James, I've got a pretty little bump on my head!"

"And I'm torn to ribbons!" said Nipper, gazing at his scratched hands and arms ruefully. "It seems to me, sir, that we're diddled. But why can't we telegraph——"

"We could do so, of course—and we will," replied Lee. "But I'm afraid it will be useless. Rodney Staines is the absolute owner of the Mastin jewels. They are his, legally. If we wish to prevent him taking them from the safe deposit, we must produce evidence of his villainy. The only safe way is to be on the spot ourselves in order to prevent him removing the property."

"Oh, for a giddy aeroplane!" sighed Nipper, as they emerged into Wellington Square, and walked briskly towards the Memorial. "My hat, I shall remember Hastings after this! The St. Clement's Caves as well, I reckon——"

"An aeroplane!" ejaculated Lee, suddenly stopping in the middle of the road. "An inspiration, Sir Oswald—an inspiration! An airship or an aeroplane is the only vehicle which will get us to London in time. By road the distance is roundabout and difficult to determine. By rail there is no way, for we can't get a train. But by air the way is absolutely clear and direct. We could do it in an hour—we could get there in time!"

Sir Oswald Mastin stared.

"But, my dear Mr. Lee, have you gone mad?" he demanded. "There is no aeroplane—there is no airship!"

"On the contrary, there is a small Service airship housed somewhere in the neighbourhood of Polgate—which is quite close to here. It is one of those neat little machines known as 'Blimps'—a quaint name, that! They are small, and they can travel at tremendous speed. It is a chance, Sir Oswald—a distinct chance. At all events, it's the only way open to us, and we will try our luck!"

Luck, as it happened, was very kind.

A fast car was hired in Hastings with practically no delay, and Leo

and Nipper rushed off to the airship station at an appalling speed. Sir Oswald Mastin was left at the Queen's Hotel, in Hastings.

As Lee had half expected, the "Blimp" was about to start on a morning flight. It did this almost regularly in fine weather. The airship was small, compact, and speedy. It was one of a type used for scouting purposes, and was fitted with a chassis similar to that of an aeroplane. And a powerful engine drove a tractor screw exactly as on an ordinary aeroplane.

The commanding officer was rather dubious at first. But the airship was in fine fettle, and the weather was favourable. Under the exceptional circumstances he agreed to Lee's proposition at once. Hesitation and delay would have been fatal. It was Lee's smooth tongue and persuasive efforts which brought the commanding officer to the right way of thinking. Lee assured him that he would profit handsomely by granting the favour.

And so Lee and Nipper took their seats, and the airship rose gracefully and was soon making a bee-line for London. The wind was favourable, and the vessel simply ate the distance. It flew magnificently, the engine roaring with a musical hum. The keen morning air effected a complete cure for both Nelson Lee and Nipper, and they were anxious for the journey to end.

At last it arrived over Hyde Park, and descended. Lee and Nipper jumped out on the instant, pelted across to Piccadilly, and jumped straight into a taxi which happened to be passing—to the elatement of the crowds who were watching.

The taxi made quick progress, and arrived outside the huge safe deposit building in record time. And then, even as Lee and Nipper alighted, they saw their men. Rodney Staines and Douglas James Sutcliffe were leaving with the jewels!

It had been a race against time; but Nelson Lee had won!

Jim the Penman was captured neatly. Nelson Lee took on the task himself, and police soon came to the rescue. There was a quick fight, and within half an hour both the prisoners were landed in Bow Street Police Station.

The master forger had been caught at last!

And the truth of the whole astounding affair came out. Lee benefited handsomely, and he was keenly satisfied with the whole case. For Sutcliffe had not escaped him. Jim the Penman was in gaol, awaiting trial. And Rodney Staines was with him. He had profited nothing by his adoption of villainy.

But would the police be able to hold the master forger? Would they be capable of retaining their grip upon Jim the Penman?

It was a question which caused Nelson Lee some little anxiety.

THE END.

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They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN. They appear friendly, and Storbin tells Clive and Alec that Pedro Diego, a rascally "blackbirder," has got an eye on the chums' expedition, for what reason he does not know. The warning comes only just in time. That same day the enemy makes an attack, and a desperate fight ensues.

(Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

Pedro Diego's First Appearance.

WITH a muffled ejaculation the Irishman did as suggested, and returned a minute or two later, evidently jubilant.

"Oi wish ye'd tould me afore," he said: "They're just roight! Oi've given a lot out, an' now we're goin' t' blaze away in earnest. But who wad av thought ye'd a had that stock wi ye? Did ye come out for a week's huntin'?"

"No," said Clive, laughing; and he explained how the cartridges came to be there.

Storbin struck a fist on the log before him, and accompanied the action with an expletive.

"Ye're pretty sharp lads, ye two," he declared admiringly. "Ye dished the lubbers grand! How Oi wish Oi'd known it sooner. We'd 'a' finished matthers off afore this."

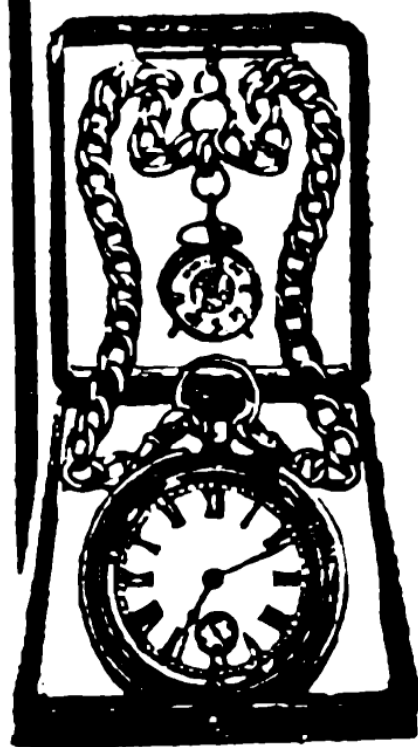
"How so?" Clive asked.

"Whoy, ye unnersthans, doan't ye, as they must be runnin' short themselves? Oi know now as they can't have no more'n they took out wi' 'em in the mornin', an' they've bin blazin' at us, more or less, all day, besides to-night. An' they had none at their camp to fill up with. Have ye noticed they're not firin' much lately?"

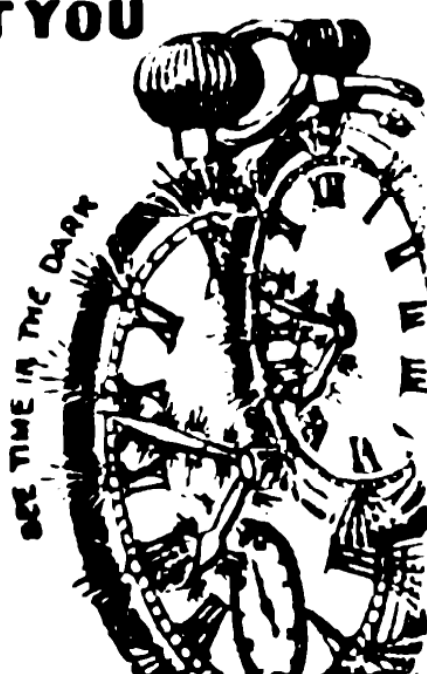
"Yes; I thought that's because they're busy cutting wood."

"Yes, an' they're cuttin' wood because it's their last chance. They've no cartridges left, an' they're goin' t' try a rush as a last chance, because they know my blacks is afraid av them thin. Now we'll sapprise 'em.

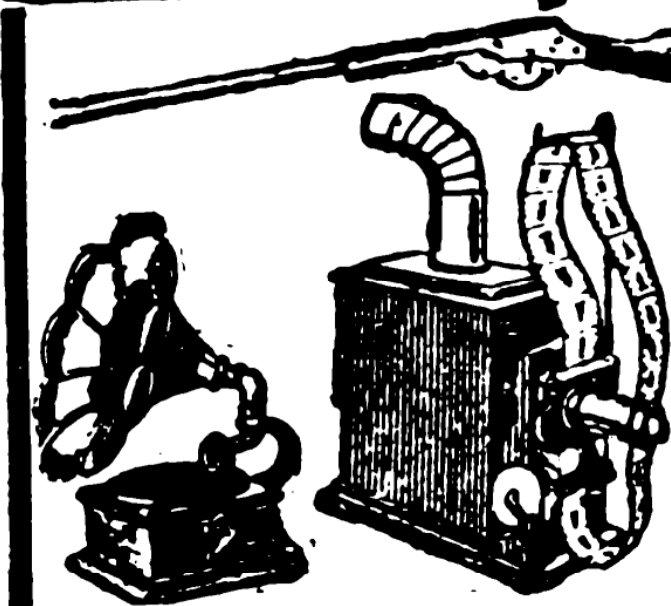
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Ye'll see phwat Oi've arranged—an' wud their own powder an' shot, too!" he added, with a chuckle.

He called out some order in loud, quick tones, and was answered by a chorus of sonorous voices.

And then every man with a gun began firing as hard as he could, aiming for the place where the wood-cutters were building their big bonfire.

Storbin himself kept loading and firing as fast as possible, and Clive and Alec, catching the idea, did the same. Blacks came round, crawling along on all fours, bringing fresh cartridges "to keep the ball rolling," as the Irishman expressed it.

But to their surprise their foes kept on steadily building up their stack, using it, meanwhile, as a protection from the flying bullets. It had indeed now reached such dimensions that the men were able to work behind it almost in safety, scarcely a bullet making its way through.

"This is no good," muttered Storbin.

"No; we shall use up even all that case of cartridges at this rate, and uselessly," Clive agreed. "There's one hopeful point; you see they're hardly replying at all to our fire, which confirms your idea that they've run short of ammunition."

"Yes; but still Oi doan't loike the look av it," said Storbin, shaking his head. "It do look t' me as if Diego hisself—the murtherin' hound—be amongat 'em urg'in' 'em on. Oi don't belave they'd stick to it loike this if his men was left to thimselves."

Nor did either Clive or Alec like the look of it any more than the Irishman did.

This was their first experience, it must be remembered, of actual fighting, and at first all had seemed to go well and to promise them a successful outcome if they only persevered. Storbin's reckless, devil-may-care courage, and the light manner in which he had treated the whole business, had impressed them with the idea that they were bound to beat off their assailants in the long run.

But now this persistence on the part of their enemies, exhibited in face of the obvious fact that they had run short of ammunition, sent a cold thrill through the two young fellows. There was in it a suggestion of such deadly determination, such stony, cold-blooded savagery as to be scarcely credible to the ordinary mind. The two realised then, for the first time, what the real character of these men must be, and their sullen, dogged ferocity in fighting was a measure of the cruelty and inhumanity such people would be certain to deal out to the unhappy prisoners who fell into their hands.

Neither Clive nor Alec was wanting in pluck or daring; but it is no discredit to them to say that these thoughts made them feel more fully than they had yet done the nature of the struggle to which they were committed, not only then, but subsequently, if they escaped from their present critical predicament.

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

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The Nelson Lee Library,

minus the title lettering, and signed by Mr. Arthur Jones himself; suitable for framing, will be presented to the reader who sends in, not later than November 22, the largest number of New Readers enlisted by himself. Each of these new recruits must sign the form below and give it to the prospective competitor.

Thus, for instance, if one reader enlisted a certain number of new recruits, he would be required to send in the corresponding number of signed coupons, not later than the given date, to: The Editor, "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.

Everyone will, I am sure, make an attempt to win such a prize. As to the picture itself, it suffices to give the measurements—15 in. by 11 in.

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.....

No. 74 -- November 4th, 1910.

The Editor's Decision is Final.

However, there was no time for much thought. The firing had died down. Their native allies had ceased to blaze away their new stock of cartridges, and were reserving their fire for what their instinct told them was to be a final, deadly struggle for life or death.

The big bonfire had been lighted, and masses of whirling smoke were already pouring forth from it and drifting with the wind up the slope of the hill.

And through this smoke the defenders could catch sight of the dim figures of their foes, like vague shadows, crouching in readiness for a final, furious rush.

The clouds of smoke grew in volume and in density, and now the defenders became aware that the beseigers must have gathered something more than mere wood and reeds for their fire.

The smoke was not merely unpleasant, it was acrid, choking, blinding. And as it came rolling up the slope it set even the blacks coughing. It got into the eyes and made them sore; it seemed to scrape the skin of the nostrils and throat like sandpaper.

It became quickly obvious to Clive that shooting would be of very little use in the midst of such an atmosphere—at least, so far as rifles were concerned. But they had their revolvers, and these, being more handy, might still be of use.

Clive pointed this out to Alec, who nodded his head in approval. Then the two silently shook hands, and a moment or two later they seemed to be suddenly in the throes of some direful, diabolical nightmare.

From out the thick smoke figures with the rage-distorted faces of fiends rushed at them and grappled with whoever they met in a wrestle for life or death.

Storbin singled out no particular adversary, but watched his followers, and rushed in at once to the help of any who were being obviously hard pressed. And in this way, there is no doubt, they did much to prevent a panic breaking out amongst their men.

As to Clive and Alec, as often happens in a fiercely-contested battle, they could never afterwards remember with certainty or clearness what exactly happened. It all passed like a wild, whirling, hysterical dream. They fought, they received hard knocks, they fired their revolvers, they tried their best to back up Storbin and Oltra. When these two, darting in to the aid of someone fighting against odds, were themselves followed up by foes, then the chums chipped in against those who were pressing them, and so freed them again.

At least, that is what they tried to do, and what they knew they carried out in some unreal, fantastic fashion; but whom they fought with, or what exactly happened, they never could clearly recall—except, that is, one thing.

Clive, standing for a moment beside his chum, both panting with their exertions, each with wounds to show, though not, fortunately, serious ones, saw a shadow in the smoke suddenly rush forward and take form, as it were. From a blurred shape only it became a man with the face of a devil, a face grinning with hatred and the expectation of revenge. This man rushed with crazy fury at Alec; and, seizing him with a maniac's strength, bore him away, despite his violent struggles.

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