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THE AFFAIR OF THE NABOB'S JEWELS

Another Story of NELSON
LEE and NIPPER v. "JIM
THE PENMAN."

By the Author of "*The Mystery of the 10 20 Express*," "*The Secret of the Martello Tower*," "*The Caves of Silence*," etc., &c.

CHAPTER I.

What Happened in the Birlston Tunnel.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR MORLEY helped himself to one of Nelson Lee's cigars, and lay back in his easy chair. The worthy Scotland Yard official was looking quite pleased with himself.

"You take my word for it, Lee," he observed, lighting the cigar, "Sutcliffe is safe for ten years. He won't give us any more trouble now that he's been sentenced to a nice little 'stretch' at Portmoor. Penal servitude will soon tame him and dampen his ambitions."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I don't think Jim the Penman will have many opportunities of committing forgery down at Portmoor," he agreed. "I am, of course, very pleased to know that Sutcliffe is safely out of the way at last. All the same, Morley, I've a certain sneaky admiration for our unfortunate friend. He was an absolute criminal—and a cruel, relentless man; but there were many points about his nature which were really likeable."

"I'm not so sure of that, guv'nor," put in Nipper. "Jim the Penman tried to murder you and me four or five times, and he was about the most fiendish beggar we've ever come across. Not much to admire in that!"

"Having been the object of Jim's attentions, I'm afraid you are prejudiced," said Detective-Inspector Morley drily. "Well, you won't be troubled with him any more, Nipper, unless he looks you up after he's released, in ten years' time!"

"Is he down at Portmoor yet?" asked Nipper.

"Well, he will be by to-night," was the inspector's reply. "He is being escorted down to Portmoor by the afternoon express. And you can take it for granted that the most elaborate precautions are being taken."

Morley puffed comfortably at his cigar, and it was obvious that the topic of conversation was a genial one to him. The inspector was always in a good humour when discussing the fate of criminals.

He had called upon Nelson Lee some twenty minutes before, and was now in the celebrated criminologist's consulting-room. Lee himself was

also present, and the detective was evidently taking an easy day, for Morley had found him reading in front of the fire, while Nipper wrote a few letters.

The consulting-room was very cheerful, and the Scotland Yard man was in no hurry to depart. It was afternoon now, and the day was dull and misty. Outside the air was raw and chill, but within Lee's consulting-room all was bright and comfortable. The fire blazed genially, and there was an air of general contentment about the apartment.

Morley had come round, in fact, to have a little chat with Nelson Lee regarding the fate of Douglas James Sutcliffe, the master forger. Lee had encountered the notorious crook on many an occasion, and he had at last succeeded in bringing Sutcliffe to justice.

The forger, who had made himself known as Jim the Penman, had been captured red-handed by the great detective himself. There had been many charges against Sutcliffe, all of them big, and he had been committed for trial.

Quite recently the trial had been held at the Old Bailey, and the evidence had been absolutely conclusive. Jim the Penman had been sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, and he had accepted the conviction quite cheerfully and with a smile upon his dark, handsome face.

For Jim the Penman was tall, slim, and really good-looking. Throughout his trial he had maintained an air of quiet composure and amusement. He was cool, and appeared to be somewhat bored by the proceedings. Just after the sentence had been passed Sutcliffe uttered a quiet chuckle, and did not seem at all perturbed. The prospect of ten years of penal servitude seemed to amuse him.

Inspector Morley, who had been present, had remarked to the forger that he seemed to be quite resigned to his fate. But Jim the Penman smiled in quite a winning fashion to the official detective as he passed the latter.

"My dear fellow," Jim had said, "you surely don't suppose I mean to spend ten of the best years of my life in a convict prison? Within a month from now I shall be busily engaged upon some fresh scheme—I have scores of excellent plans in my mind!"

Morley had laughed outright at the words, and he referred to the little incident now that he was taking his ease in Nelson Lee's consulting-room. Morley crossed his legs, lay back, and chuckled.

"An audacious beggar," he remarked. "By George, what a nerve the fellow has, Lee! His sentence might have been one of ten minutes instead of ten years for all the emotion he showed. And fancy having the cool cheek to tell me that he'd be at liberty within a month!"

"I shouldn't be exactly staggered if he were," said Lee quietly.

"Same here, guv'nor!"

Morley twisted round and stared at Lee and Nipper.

"D'you mean to say you actually believe that bluff?" he asked.

"Not at all. It was characteristic of Jim the Penman to make a reply of that nature," replied Nelson Lee. "Mind you, I am quite certain that it was merely bluff, and I should be exceedingly surprised if he carried out his boast. But I should not be staggered, my dear fellow. Jim the Penman is a slippery fellow, and nothing would actually amaze me. In the past he has performed many astounding exploits—and he has clever confederates. Don't forget that, Morley."

"Confederates! How can confederates help him now?" demanded the inspector. "He is being guarded as though he were worth a king's ransom,

and once he's inside Portmoor he won't be given any opportunity for escaping. They know his little games down there as well as we do!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, time will show," he exclaimed smilingly. "We'll leave it at that, Morley."

"Let me see——" The inspector glanced at his watch. "Why, the express is just about starting out from the London terminus. Jim's pleasant journey is before him. And he won't slip away, either. The police may be rather slow in getting hold of a criminal now and again, but once they've got him they keep him!"

Morley's words were true enough—with regard to Jim the Penman's departure from London, at least. Even at that particular moment the express was preparing to leave the great terminus.

As Morley had said, too, elaborate precautions had been taken. Sutcliffe was an exceptional criminal, and so the police had given him exceptional attention. He had been brought to the station in a closed prison van. And there was no little stir among the throng of passengers when he was led through to the departure platform.

Jim was totally incapable of making a sudden dash for freedom. And it was also impossible for him to be helped by outside friends. He was in charge of two warders, each of the latter being huge, brawny men, against whom Jim the Penman seemed almost insignificant—yet he was a tall man himself.

The forger's wrists were handcuffed. But they were not manacled one to the other. His right hand was handcuffed to the left of one warder, and his left hand to the right of the other warder.

Thus, if Sutcliffe attempted to escape, he would drag both his captors with him—and that was obviously impossible. Moreover, both warders were armed, and could have stunned their prisoner with one blow.

In this helpless plight Jim the Penman was placed in a first class compartment. The doors were both closed and locked, and the blinds drawn. The forger sat between his two guardians, and seemed quite at his ease.

"Rather thoughtful, this," he remarked pleasantly. "I hardly expected a first class——"

"Stop that!" growled one of the warders. "No talking!"

"I beg your pardon—I quite forgot!" was Jim's easy reply.

He said no more, for he wished to cause no unpleasantness. He had been an exceedingly well-behaved prisoner, and both warders were rather impatient at the strict orders which had been given them. They considered it quite unnecessary for the prisoner to be manacled as he was. But, after all, orders were orders, and they were forced to obey them.

The express pulled out of the big station, and commenced its long run. The first stop would not be until well after dark, and would be the station at which the warders and their prisoner were to alight. Here a second prison van would be in attendance, guarded by armed warders.

There was absolutely no loophole for Jim the Penman to make a bid for liberty. Neither was it possible for confederates to attempt a rescue. For the train was a very fast one, and stopped nowhere en route. And it was obviously impossible for Jim to leap from the train while it was travelling at full speed. Moreover, the certain manner in which he was manacled obviated such a move.

The police had undoubtedly taken extra strict precautions. And yet, strict as they were, Sutcliffe's astute brain had formulated a scheme. It was a scheme so daring, so original, so undreamt-of, that the authorities were quite powerless to guard against it.

Without outside assistance Jim the Penman would have been helpless; but, as Nelson Lee had significantly pointed out to Inspector Morley, Jim had several faithful followers. They usually kept in the background, but they were formidable, nevertheless. It was the master forger's ready wit which planned everything, but his confederates performed the work.

Nothing happened until the evening was fairly advanced, and the express had been rushing through the country for over an hour. Jim had sat silent and thoughtful between the two warders, seemingly resigned to his fate.

The warders knew quite well that their prisoner had a name that was famous for audacity and daring. But what could he do now? The train would not stop until it reached the station where other warders would be waiting. If any attempt were made at all Jim's guardians were quite sure that it would be made during the journey by road—during the ride from the station to the convict prison.

But, knowing the forger's desperate and daring nature, the police had prepared against such an effort. They half suspected that the prison van would be raided; that armed men would spring out of the darkness and hold the vehicle up. If so, there would be a sufficient number of warders to repel any attempt. But it was obvious that Sutcliffe's confederates would know of the preparations, and they would, therefore, realise the futility of attempting any form of violence.

As the train rushed along Jim noticed that the electric light overhead had been switched on; yet it was still broad daylight. Reckoning out how far the train had travelled, he judged that they were about to plunge into the long Birlston Tunnel.

This tunnel was nearly three miles in length, and the fastest train generally took five minutes to pass through it. The warders, too, noticed that the electric light had been switched on. And they instinctively became more alert, for the knowledge that the long tunnel was ahead seemed to sharpen their wits. Somehow, it seemed more necessary to be briskly alive while the train was rushing through the darkness. Yet, surely, the tunnel was the least likely spot for Jim the Penman to make a futile attempt to gain his liberty?

The engine gave a shrill whistle, and the next second the train plunged into the darkness of the tunnel. The wheels underneath jolted rhythmically, and the roar of the train drowned all minor sounds.

Thirty seconds passed—forty-five seconds——

And then an astounding thing occurred.

At precisely the same second both the carriage doors were flung open, and two extraordinary figures stepped into the compartment. They were men attired in long cloaks, and their heads were completely covered with tight-fitting hoods. Yet they were not exactly hoods, for almost every line of the two faces were visible, and only the eyes gleamed with fixed determination. At first glance it seemed to the two startled warders that they were confronted by coal-black niggers.

But how had the men gained an entry? Both the doors had been locked, and the train was rushing along at nearly forty miles an hour. The warders started up with hoarse cries, their hands instinctively reaching for their weapons.

But there was no time for them to act.

The whole thing happened so abruptly, so startlingly swiftly, that the men were unable to protect themselves. For the strange intruders acted drastically and without the slightest hesitation. Even as they stepped into the compartment, one on either side, they struck at the warders with

sandbags. They struck forcibly, and with deadly accuracy. Both blows were effective, and the two warders fell back, stunned and helpless.

A sandbag is a deadly instrument of offence, especially when used by a practised hand. The weapons had descended upon the warders' heads with terrible force, and the poor fellows had not the slightest chance of defending themselves. The whole nightmare-like incident had happened with incredible swiftness, and the attackers had not shown the slightest compunction. They cared not a jot whether they merely stunned or killed. Their object had to be attained at any cost!

Jim the Penman's eyes shone keenly.

"Good!" he rapped out. "The neatest thing I've seen. Now then, get these infernal things off my wrists, and don't waste a second!"

"Glad to see you, Jim, old man——"

"No time for talking—get busy!"

There was, indeed, not a second to lose. Much time had certainly not been lost so far, for the two strangers had entered the compartment and had performed their whole work almost within a breath. It was the total unexpectedness of the affair which had taken the unfortunate warders by surprise.

Scarcely more than a minute had elapsed since the express had plunged into the tunnel, and it was still roaring through the darkness and smoke at great speed.

Using a key taken from one of the warders, the curious-looking strangers unlocked Jim the Penman's handcuffs. The forger breathed a sigh of relief as he stretched his arms for a second, but then he turned rapidly to one of the men who had come to his aid.

"The gloves and head-covering, Thornton!" he exclaimed briskly. "It's daylight, remember, so I must be out of sight before the train leaves the tunnel. By thunder, you've done well, the pair of you! I'll compliment you more thoroughly when I've got time!"

The man addressed as Thornton quickly divested himself of his big cloak. Underneath this was a very heavy fur overcoat, and Jim rapidly donned it. Then he pulled some huge padded gloves upon his hands, and a quaint-looking bag completely over his head. This bag, too, was thickly padded, so that Jim's head seemed to be twice its normal size. But he could see what he was doing through a pair of miniature tunnels in the padding. It was an extraordinary get-up altogether, and converted the forger into a very singular-looking object.

Without another word—for to speak now was impossible—he opened one of the doors, and stepped out upon the footboard. The rush of air was very forcible, and Jim was obliged to cling tight in order to avoid being swept off to certain death. The air, too, was charged with choking smoke and steam, and all was as black as ink—except for the dull glow from the carriage windows.

Crouching low, Jim quickly worked his way along the footboard. It was risky work, but he had nerves of steel, and he was as strong as a bull. The compartment he had occupied had been situated almost in the centre of the long non-corridor coach, and he was a full minute in reaching the end. With a great effort it would have been possible for Jim the Penman to step on to the next coach; but he did not want to do this.

Grasping hold of a metal support, he swung himself off the footboard on to one of the buffers. Here he stopped, panting heavily within his strange head-covering, and clinging for his life to the end of the carriage.

But he was sheltered here between the two coaches, and the blinding

rush of smoke-charged air no longer troubled him. But how had he bettered his position? What madness was he contemplating?

He had undoubtedly escaped from his captors, and was a free man. But only free in the sense that he had escaped from the two warders. He was still on the train, and there seemed absolutely no way in which he could get clear away from it.

To make a leap on to the permanent way would mean almost certain death—and Jim was not the man to commit suicide. He would take risks certainly, but he had never been known to act with unseen rashness.

The forger became aware of a greyish tinge in the darkness, and almost before he knew it the train plunged out of the tunnel into a deep cutting. It was evening, and still light, and seemed, indeed, absolutely brilliant after the blackness of the tunnel.

Not a single passenger on the express knew what had been going on. The cunning with which the rescue-plot had been engineered was remarkable. To have accomplished the feat in the open daylight would have been obviously impossible, and so it had been performed while the train tore from the blackness of the long Birlston Tunnel.

But how was Jim the Penman to get away from the train?

It was going at great speed, and was not due to stop until another fifty miles had been covered.

CHAPTER II.

Jim the Penman's Extraordinary Escape.

ALMOST as soon as the express had emerged into the open, Jim the Penman became active. Fixed upon the end of the long passenger coach were small, iron steps, leading on to the roof. The escaped criminal swiftly and nimbly mounted to the coach roof, and clung there with difficulty.

The wind was almost overpowering at first, but he rapidly became accustomed to the rush of air. Actually there was no wind at all, for the evening was absolutely calm, although chilly. But the motion of the express caused a tremendous blow upon the carriage roof.

Sutcliffe made an extraordinary figure as he stood there. The long fur coat was tremendously thick, and it made him appear almost stout. His hands, too, were encased in a pair of curious things, which strongly resembled boxing-gloves. And his head was completely covered in the huge padded hood, which made it appear double normal size.

Anybody seeing Jim on the top of the train would have received a considerable fright, for he looked like nothing human. But there was little or no probability of anyone seeing him, for on this side of the Birlston Tunnel everything was bare and deserted.

The railway track lay at the bottom of one of the deepest cuttings in the south of England. This cutting was almost five miles in length, for the railway had originally been built right through a high hill—hence the long tunnel. And the Birlston cutting was bare and ugly. The sides were steep, and practically no grass grew upon them. Along the top of each bank was set a wooden rail, and this was the extent of the passengers' view.

But beyond lay a wild stretch of country, with practically no houses and no cottages. Only one or two unfrequented roads lay in the neighbourhood, and it was most improbable that Jim the Penman would be seen. Even if he were it would make little difference to his schemes.

For it was obvious that elaborate preparations had been made.

Jim the Penman was one of the most daring crooks Great Britain had ever seen, and he had no intention whatever of setting foot inside a big convict prison. Once within such an establishment Jim knew very well that it would be practically impossible for him to break out. Clever and daring as he was, neither he nor his confederates would be able to break down the human barrier of Portmoor Prison. For that famous prison had never once lost a captive—except for a few days.

What, then, was Jim the Penman's plan?

He had escaped from his guardians, but he had not escaped from the train. If his confederates caused a stoppage Jim would be able to make a dash for it, but whether he got clear away or not would be a problem.

But the forger's scheme was far more elaborate than that. Just over a mile from the tunnel a high bridge was set across the cutting. It was one of those tremendously high arches which seem to tower on incredible distance above the permanent way. From above the trains could be watched below, almost looking like huge snakes. The bridge itself was not so very broad, but it had a wide span, and the main centre arch stretched across the track high above.

There was very little traffic over the bridge, for the road was a quiet country lane, mainly used by farm carts, and vehicles of a like nature. At this time in the evening there was practically no possibility of traffic crossing the bridge.

The driver of the express, leaning out of his cab, noticed that there was something different about the bridge on this particular night, but it did nothing more than merely arouse his curiosity. He did not even think it worth mentioning to his fireman, who was at the time stoking up.

The difference was trivial, and it appeared to the engine-driver that some sort of repairs were in progress, for a kind of scaffolding arrangement hung down from the parapet of the bridge right over the down track, along which the train was running.

At least, it appeared to the driver to be some form of scaffolding, for the light was getting rather dim now. Moreover, the steep sides of the cutting prevented the full light reaching the permanent way, and everything was rather gloomy.

Yet the arrangement which hung down was something of a very different nature to that which the driver supposed. It was, to all appearances, a huge canvas bag supported by a great number of thin ropes. It was slung in such a manner that the opening of the bag faced the train as it rushed along to meet it. But there was no danger of a collision, for the thing was fully two feet higher than the roof of the engine cab.

Jim the Penman, upon the top of the third coach from the rear guards' van, set his teeth grimly as the train rushed towards the high bridge. And there was a set expression of strong determination in his eyes.

"By Jove, it's going to be a risky chance!" he muttered. "Now that the moment has come, it doesn't seem nearly so simple as I thought it would be. But I've got to go through with it—or else be recaptured!"

And the latter possibility was quite enough to make Sutcliffe firmly determined to carry the project through to the end.

For his scheme was an utterly astounding one.

The risk was terrible, and most men would never have dared to take it. But Jim the Penman was absolutely fearless. He was resolved to obtain his freedom, and was quite ready to endanger his life in the attempt. If he died—well, that would be better than serving a term of ten years' penal servitude.

But, carried out properly, there was every reason for hoping that he

would not even be injured. Bruises were nothing; he was quite prepared to be bruised to a jelly, for he knew that he would recover within a short space of time. But Sutcliffe was as hard as nails, and could stand all manner of knocks.

The train rushed on, and the distance between the suspended bag and Jim the Penman grew rapidly less. The express was not travelling at its maximum speed by any means, although Jim would have preferred it to be going even slower. Perhaps the train was doing forty miles an hour, but certainly not more.

Jim crouched upon the roof, bending forward slightly to counteract the force of the wind. And his eyes were fixed upon the canvas contrivance as though he were a cat watching a mouse. Never for a second did his gaze leave it. He had planned this extraordinary expedient months before, but it was only now that he fully realised its terribly desperate nature.

In short, Sutcliffe intended leaping for life!

He himself had personally designed the canvas cradle which was now hanging down from the high bridge. It was a huge bag, supported by fully a dozen ropes. But the opening of the bag was directly facing Jim the Penman as he was swiftly carried towards it. It was ingeniously made, and no amount of swinging would cause the opening to alter its frontal position.

The engine-driver looked up at the queer thing as the locomotive thundered beneath. And he was then struck by the singular nature of the thing. He turned to his fireman now, who was resting on his shovel.

"What d'ye make of that, Tom?" he asked bluntly.

The fireman followed the direction of the other's gaze, and stared. He continued staring until the train had passed beyond the bag, and then it was lost to sight by the top of the front guard's van intervening. The fireman scratched his head.

"Queer lookin' object!" he commented. "Seemed to be mighty close to the train, too. I never saw anything o' that nature afore!"

"I thought it was a scaffolding arrangement at first," remarked the driver. "But then it seemed to be like a sack, slung down with ropes. I reckon it must be some fake thing o' the military. Then Army fellers are up to all sorts o' dodges nowadays."

And the driver let the incident pass at that. Having never seen anything of the sort before, he was naturally curious; but there was certainly no reason for him to be suspicious.

But what had happened to Jim the Penman during this time?

The forger, in fact, had taken the great chance. He saw the engine pass beneath the canvas cradle, and he then noted, with satisfaction, that the wide opening of the bag was just over two feet above the roofs of the coaches. The bag was swinging slightly, but that would make no difference.

The thing that happened next was all over in ten seconds. Jim the Penman gathered himself together and stood ready, crouching. His heart was beating wildly, in spite of his cool nature, for he knew very well that the venture would be a matter of life or death.

The swinging bag seemed to rush towards him at an appalling speed; but he judged his time with remarkable accuracy. At the precise second he jumped clean into the air, and then almost lost consciousness. Everything was confused, and he felt a thousand aches all over his body.

Jim the Penman had flung himself head foremost into the bag! A second's miscalculation and he would have missed his mark, and would have crashed down upon the train. And that, of course, would have meant instant death.

But Sutcliffe had not miscalculated. He landed within the bag fairly

and squarely, and the train rushed on beneath him and left him swinging. The violent shock had given the bag a pendulum-like motion, and it now swung to and fro in a wide arc.

But Jim was inside!

He had escaped from the express, and was practically uninjured. The protection for his hands and head, with which he had provided himself, probably saved him from serious harm, and the thick fur coat had certainly been a protection. The concussion with the canvas had been severe, as was only natural. But the interior of the bag was thickly padded and soft. Jim had taken every precaution, and the result was eminently satisfactory.

The speed of the train, however, had been so great that he was not saved from painful bruises. He landed within the bag neatly and cleanly. His head thudded against the padded side, and he crumpled up in a jumbled heap to the bottom. With his bulk inside, the exterior of the thing only just cleared the roofs of the remaining coaches by a couple of inches. But a miss was as good as a mile, and disaster did not come.

Jim's arms had been doubled beneath him, and they ached enormously. His neck was ricked too, and he felt completely broken up. Indeed, he was only capable of one thought at the moment, and that was that he escaped. His desperate plan had been successful!

It had been a chance in a thousand, but really the only one possible. And even then it had only been carried out successfully because of the forger's astounding coolness and daring. If Nelson Lee had been present at that moment, the famous detective would have admired Jim the Penman—he would have realised that the man was even a greater genius than he had given him credit for being.

In spite of all the elaborate precautions, Sutcliffe had escaped the law—escaped even while he was being taken to Portmoor. For although Jim would have been powerless without confederates, they too would have been unable to help him but for his ingenuity.

For the scheme was Jim's own right from the very start. Originally he had thought of standing upon the coach roof, and grasping a single suspended rope. But commonsense had told him that he could never have obtained a grip, and that disaster would have followed the attempt. And so he had contrived the cradle arrangement, and had planned everything to lead up to it.

The thing had been made months before, and certain men had been given their instructions. Sooner or later Jim had been certain of arrest. In the last extremity this desperate plan was to be carried out. It had been almost certain that he would be taken down to Portmoor after his trial, and his confederates, therefore, had watched events closely.

They had had their orders, and had merely carried them out. It had been easy enough to learn the date and hour of Jim's departure from London, and two of the men had occupied a compartment within easy reach of that occupied by Jim and the two warders.

Details, of course, had necessarily been left to Jim's accomplices. And he was highly pleased with the way in which they had acquitted themselves. Afterwards he would reward them liberally—and they knew it. Jim had always been an exceptionally generous man to those who assisted him.

The very instant he floundered within the quaint "catcher" the whole contrivance was slowly hauled upwards, and so it scarcely had a chance of touching the rear part of the train.

The rear guard, sitting in his van, had not the slightest knowledge of what was going on. And, as a matter of fact, nobody knew of the exciting

incidents which had just taken place. It had all been performed so deliberately and so methodically that there had been no commotion and no uproar.

Five minutes later the huge bag had been hauled over the parapet of the bridge, and two eminently respectable motorists were anxiously bending over it. They more than half expected to find a dead body, with a broken neck.

But the padded folds of the thing moved, and Jim the Penman staggered to his feet. During the hauling-up process he had had time to gather his wits, and he tore the huge covering from his head. His face was red, and streaming with perspiration.

"Air!" he gasped huskily. "By Jove, I was nearly done for in that infernal contrivance!"

"Nearly done for!" echoed one of the motorists. "We expected to find you smashed all up, Jim!"

"Well, I'm not exactly comfortable," said the forger, wiping his brow. "It was a rotten business, Galloway, but we have been successful. That's the main thing! No, I'm not smashed all up—not a single bone broken. But I'm bruised, and I honestly believe my neck is twisted half off!"

Jim pulled the gloves from his hands, and paced up and down for a few moments. The cool air was doing him good, however, and he presently chuckled with genuine amusement. He was able to bear pain, and he did not grumble.

"I've fooled them!" he exclaimed. "I've escaped right under their very noses! But I'm not free yet, and I sha'n't consider myself safe until we've got completely away from this spot. Everything is ready, of course?"

"Ready when you are, Jim," replied Galloway briskly.

"Right—we'll go at once!"

Both the men were more than astonished to find their chief as cool and collected as ever. But they knew that it was essential to leave the spot without the slightest delay. They were both delighted at the success of the scheme, and knew that their former doubts had been groundless.

Right in the centre of the bridge stood a powerful motor-car, of the landaulette type. And against one of the parapets lay the extraordinary contrivance which had given Jim the Penman his liberty. The thing was left exactly where it was, for there was no reason why they should take it away with them. There was, moreover, no room for it, for it had completely occupied the tonneau of the car. If it had been possible to keep the whole affair a secret Jim would certainly have allowed himself to be encumbered by the canvas cradle and the ropes—for there would then have been no clue left to show how Jim had escaped.

But it was not possible, for there was a soldier close at hand, and he was aware of the whole conspiracy. But he had been quite unable to lift a finger to prevent the escape or to give warning.

For the man was not exactly in a position to raise an outcry. He lay behind the hedge, near the bridge, bound hand and foot, and roughly gagged. He was a sentry, and he had been on duty, guarding the bridge—as is quite usual in these strenuous times of war.

It was not the sentry's fault that he was not guarding the bridge at the present moment. Some little time before a big motor-car had driven up, and two well-dressed motorists had alighted and had had a few cheery words with him. But, to his amazement and consternation, they had suddenly knocked the rifle out of his hands, and had felled him to the ground.

Within three minutes he had been bound and helpless, and had been

lying behind the hedge ever since. Jim the Penman's confederates had no intention of harming the soldier—who was rather elderly; but it was necessary that he should be out of harm's way. He would be discovered and freed when his relief arrived at nightfall, which would be within an hour.

Jim the Penman entered the landaulette, and nodded with approval as he saw a large suit-case and a smaller one of a similar design. There were clothes there, and a complete make-up outfit.

"You come in with me, Galloway," said the forger briskly. "We'll get off right away. You know where to make for, Channing."

Channing, who was, to all intents and purposes a gentleman of about sixty, nodded and jumped into the driver's seat. Sutcliffe and Galloway entered the tonneau, and snapped the door to. The leather cover of the landaulette was closed, and the two occupants were quite concealed by the drawn blinds.

And the big car moved off the bridge and disappeared down the narrow, little-used lane.

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Meanwhile, the express roared on its journey, and the gloom of the evening changed to night. There were clouds overhead, and no moon. Consequently the night was pitchy black, and the train rushed through dark stations until, at last, the brakes were applied.

Subdued lights ahead showed that the first stopping-place of the express was reached. It was a big junction, and outside the station was a network of gleaming rails. The train slowed down to a crawl before entering the station, and not a soul saw one of the carriage doors open and two dark figures step upon the footboard.

They were Jim the Penman's confederates—the pair who had effected his release. One after the other they dropped from the footboard to the ground. It was a difficult task, but they both alighted on their feet, and disappeared into the night.

The train came to a standstill beside the platform, and those passengers who alighted noticed that something unusual was afoot. There seemed to be an air of expectancy about the dimly lighted platform, and two armed warders stood by the platform gate.

They stood there for two or three minutes, and then became somewhat impatient and uneasy. The stationmaster himself spoke to them, and one of the warders shook his head.

"No, we've seen nothing of them, sir," he replied, in answer to the stationmaster's query. "They're on this train—two special warders and a prisoner—and I can't understand why they haven't come along the platform."

"You're quite sure they're on this train?"

"Why, bless you, sir, it's been arranged for days," replied the official. "Two of our warders went to London especially to bring the prisoner down. Sutcliffe, he is—the forger chap, who got ten years. It's queer they haven't got out."

It was so queer, in fact, that the stationmaster at once instituted a search. And within three minutes there was considerable consternation and confusion, for, upon opening a first class compartment, which was marked "Reserved," the two warders were discovered. They were both unconscious, and suffering from severe blows on the head. One, indeed, had concussion of the brain.

It was obvious in a moment that something extraordinary had occurred. Of the prisoner there was no sign whatever. And, curiously enough, both

the warders were handcuffed! Jim the Penman's confederates had rendered their victims helpless, should they recover.

But the sandbagging had been very effectively performed, and both warders were quite insensible. There was dismay and alarm among the railway and prison officials, and hasty inquiries were made. The telegraph got to work.

But nothing resulted. There was no evidence whatever to show how Jim the Penman had succeeded in escaping, or where the actual escape had taken place. A goods yard shunter volunteered the information that he had seen two strange men leaving the railway track. The police were at once busy, and within an hour one suspicious character was detained.

The man, as a matter of fact, was one of Jim's confederates. He had twisted his ankle upon alighting, and had been unable to get clear away. He accepted his fate resignedly, for he knew that he could not be sentenced to a long term, indeed, it was more than probable that the police would not be able to prove a case against him.

Sutcliffe himself could have waited until the train slowed down in order to make his escape. But, as the arrest of his confederate showed, it would have been a risky proceeding. The plan which had been accomplished, although difficult, was by far the best. For by this time Jim the Penman was well away. He had been able to make his escape and cover his tracks before the alarm was given.

Later, of course, the sentry's story would be told, and the actual manner in which Jim had gained his freedom would be known. But by that time it would be too late to track him. Sutcliffe was a past master in the art of smothering his trail.

The news was at once telegraphed to Scotland Yard, and it was received at the famous London police headquarters fairly early in the evening. Detective-Inspector Morley, who happened to be in his own office, heard the story with amazement and concern. It was obvious that Jim's rescue had been performed with singular audacity and cleverness, and Morley was utterly taken aback.

He remembered his conversation with Nelson Lee that very afternoon, and he remembered how the great detective had said that he would not be staggered if Jim the Penman were at liberty within a month. And yet Sutcliffe was free already—after the lapse of a few hours!

The inspector rang up Nelson Lee at once, and informed him of the startling news. The famous criminologist was in his laboratory at the time, for he and Nipper were conducting an experiment. Nipper answered the 'phone, but at once yelled for his master.

Nelson Lee listened quietly as Morley imparted his information. And when he hung up the receiver, Nipper could see that something unusual had happened. Lee looked at his young assistant thoughtfully, and with an angry frown.

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

"I hardly know whether to be furious, or whether to laugh outright," was the detective's reply. "In short, Nipper, our friend Jim the Penman has succeeded in gaining his freedom!"

"Jim the Penman free!" yelled Nipper.

"My dear lad, don't tell the whole of Gray's Inn Road!" protested Lee. "I have merely handed you the information as I received it from Morley. How the forger effected his escape is unknown at present, but he's certainly at liberty. He has disappeared completely, and the two warders who accompanied him down to Portmoor were found stunned and handcuffed!"

Nipper simply gaped.

"Well, if this doesn't beat the band!" he ejaculated in an awed voice. "Jim's a marvel, guv'nor—I've always said so! And we'd better look out for ourselves, too. I'll bet he'll pay us attention at the first opportunity!"

"No doubt. But it would be foolish to alarm ourselves," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I pride myself, Nipper, that I am more than a match for Jim the Penman. But this news is infernally galling, all the same. I had thought that Sutcliffe was safely put away, but now he is at large again and certainly more dangerous than ever. Yet, in a way, I am not overwhelmed with astonishment."

"You said you thought he'd escape, sir," observed Nipper. "But I'm blessed if I thought he'd do the trick as promptly as this. I wonder how long it'll be before Jim gets busy again?"

"I'll guarantee he makes himself apparent within four weeks!" was Lee's grim reply.

But neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper guessed how soon the master forger was to recommence his astounding and nefarious practices!

CHAPTER III.

The Nabob of Rajpur Brings His Troubles to Nelson Lee.

MRS. JONES entered the consulting-room in a rather flustered condition. Nelson Lee's worthy landlady was usually quite a stolid soul, and it took a great deal to arouse her out of her customary matter-of-fact groove. But she was certainly lifted out of herself this morning. She stood within the room, breathless and rather flushed.

The forenoon was well advanced, and it was the morning following the surprising news of Jim the Penman's escape. Only one short night had elapsed since the forger's break for liberty.

"Well, Mrs. Jones, what is it?" asked Lee, who was writing.

"There's a gent to see you, sir," said Mrs. Jones. "I didn't rightly know whether to show 'im up or not. I never did hold with niggers, sir, an' I don't believe they ought to be allowed to mix with white folk——"

"Niggers!" repeated Lee, laying down his pen. "What on earth do you mean? Has a gentleman of colour expressed a wish to see me? You shouldn't have these prejudices, Mrs. Jones—it is narrow and little-minded. Negroes are sometimes the most excellent of fellows."

"Well, I never could abide 'em, sir!" replied the landlady flatly. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but this one fairly riled me. He seems to think a deal of himself, too, if you please! All dressed up like a dook, an' talkin' as 'aughty as a real haristocrat. It's a hinsult to the English language to 'ave them black men talkin' it as though it was their own, an' I——"

"My good Mrs. Jones, I have no wish to enter into an argument regarding the privileges extended to members of the negroid race," interjected Nelson Lee smoothly. "I perceive you have a card in your hand. Be good enough to hand it to me!"

The landlady sniffed, and handed the large slip of pasteboard to Nelson Lee. It was unusually large, and the lettering upon it was inscribed exquisitely, and with much scroll work:

"His Highness the Nabob of Rajpur, Dadan Ramset Khan, LL.D."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Nelson Lee.

"I always said them niggers——"

"Confound it all, Mrs. Jones, don't dare to call such a famous Indian potentate as the Nabob of Rajpur a nigger!" said Lee sternly. "You'll be getting yourself into trouble one of these days, I'm afraid. Show the gentleman up at once. Nipper, put your tie straight, and try to look presentable for once!"

Mrs. Jones departed, abashed, and Nipper chuckled gleefully as the door closed.

"A giddy Indian princeling, eh?" he exclaimed. "We're getting on in the world, guv'nor! Fancy Mrs. Jones calling him a nigger, too! I wonder what the dickens he wants with you?"

"We shall probably hear that in due course," replied Lee.

The detective was rather inclined to be angry with the landlady for having kept such a distinguished visitor waiting. For the Nabob of Rajpur was a very important personage, and a man of fabulous wealth.

Nelson Lee had never met the Nabob, but he knew that the influential Indian had just arrived in England on a ceremonious visit. He was, in fact, a guest of the British Government, and intended going out to the front to review Indian troops. The Nabob had come over from India in his own private yacht, and had arrived in port only the day before. He was a staunch friend of England, a thoroughly good man to the core. And Mrs. Jones had called him a nigger!

Nelson Lee half expected a deal of ceremony; possibly two or three native attendants would accompany the Nabob. Nipper, looking out of the window, remarked that there was no commotion and nothing unusual occurring.

And the next moment the door opened and the Nabob of Rajpur was ushered in. He was a tall man, and walked with a grave, stately manner. Yet there was nothing whatever dignified about him, and he was dressed exactly the same as any fashionable Englishman—with the exception of a turban.

His skin was darker than that of most Indians, and so, perhaps, Mrs. Jones had a little excuse. But his features were well cut, and his eyes were kindly. A large black moustache adorned his upper lip, and his sleek hair was absolutely jet.

"Mr. Nelson Lee?" he queried, in soft tones.

The detective bowed.

"This is an honour," he exclaimed. "You must forgive me if you were kept waiting below——"

The Nabob laughed.

"Not at all," he interrupted. "I am afraid the good lady who escorted me up here regarded me with a certain amount of suspicion," he added with a smile. "I shall be obliged, Mr. Lee, if you will merely address me as Mr. Khan. It is quite an informal visit—and I really hate ceremony."

The Nabob's English was perfect, and it was obvious that he was a highly educated man. His manners were irreproachable. And there was something about him which was eminently likeable.

He took the seat which Nelson Lee indicated, and then remained thoughtful for a few moments. His manner had become grave, and he was evidently troubled.

"I am here, Mr. Lee, to interview you in a professional capacity," he began. "I hardly expected to begin my visit to England by seeking the advice and aid of a distinguished detective. But certain events have occurred which render action of some sort very essential. You have heard, no doubt, of the Rajpur jewels?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Who has not?" he asked. "The Rajpur jewels are famous as being one of the most magnificent collections of precious stones in existence. I trust—er—Mr. Khan, that nothing untoward has happened——"

"On the contrary, something terrible has happened," said the Nabob, his eyes flashing with anxiety for a moment. "I shall be frank, Mr. Lee. The Rajpur jewels have been stolen from me, and have entirely disappeared."

"Dear me! That is, indeed, terrible!" exclaimed Lee gravely. "You have, of course, informed the police of your great loss?"

"Not yet. I have come straight to you," was the reply. "I wish to avoid publicity, if possible. The jewels were intact last night, Mr. Lee, and I only made the startling discovery that they had vanished this morning. I brought them to England, as you probably know, for exhibition purposes. It was my intention to place them on show with the object of raising subscriptions for certain war funds."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, I read in the papers that you were to exhibit the Rajpur jewels," he replied. "It was wonderfully generous of you, Mr. Khan, to allow other folks to have a glimpse of your marvellous collection. I am shocked to hear what you tell me, and I sincerely trust that there is nothing really serious——"

The Nabob bent forward, now very grave.

"It is serious, Mr. Lee," he said, in his soft, easy tones. "The Rajpur jewels have disappeared, and I wish you to recover them. Your fame has reached even to remote districts of India—that is, to British and British-educated people. I myself was greatly interested in several of your exploits even before I had ever set foot in England. But I scarcely came here to pay you compliments, Mr. Lee; I came to beg you to investigate this theft."

"Can you tell me any of the circumstances?" Nelson Lee inquired. "You have said that you discovered your loss this morning. How were the jewels taken, and where were they kept, that they should be so easily spirited away?"

The Nabob smiled.

"I'm afraid I am but a poor speaker," he went on. "This loss has affected me more than I dare admit, for it will be impossible for me to return to India without the Rajpur jewels. I do not show much emotion, Mr. Lee, but I feel it—I feel it terribly within me. But details? Really, there are very few to give you. I am residing in an old-fashioned house in Russell Square. It is not my own residence, but has been prepared for my reception—for my use during my visit to London—by the British Government."

"Where did you keep the jewels?" persisted Lee. "And surely you had them strictly guarded by your native servants——"

"Again I must excuse myself for having been uncommunicative," interjected the Nabob. "I omitted to explain to you, Mr. Lee, that my suite has not yet arrived in London. In fact, I myself have not arrived!"

"Really——"

"By that I mean to say that I am now in London merely bent on pleasure," went on the Nabob of Rajpur. "I must confess that my pleasure has been somewhat marred by the sudden loss of the jewels. In brief, however, I motored to London yesterday, leaving my suite behind, intending to have a few free hours quite to myself previous to commencing my ceremonious visit. Consequently, I was practically alone in the Russell

Square house, for only one native servant was there—and he was a stranger to me. My own servants will not arrive from the yacht until to-morrow morning. Perhaps you will think it rather strange——”

“Not at all,” was Lee’s interruption. “It must be irksome to be bound down to formalities during a visit to London. And I can quite understand your desire for a certain amount of freedom. I take it, then, that you were quite alone at the house in Russell Square during the whole of last night?”

“Alone except for the hand-servant I mentioned,” was the reply. “Of course, there were others in the remote regions of the house, but I have nothing to do with them. I merely dined rather late, and then went on to a music-hall. The jewels, you will understand, I brought with me, for I did not think it wise to leave them on the yacht. Apparently, however, that would have been the better course, as it has turned out.”

“How was the theft accomplished?” asked Nelson Lee.

“I really have no idea. But it is evident that somebody very clever was at work—somebody who knew the whereabouts of the precious stones,” replied the Nabob gravely. “Before leaving for the music-hall I placed the jewels in a locked cabinet, where I was positive they would be safe. But when I returned, between one and two o’clock—after supping at a famous restaurant—I was amazed and shocked to find the jewels gone. But here comes the amazing sequel, Mr. Lee. The native servant of whom I have spoken had forced open the cabinet, and had removed the jewels himself.”

“Then the man was the thief?” the detective queried.

“No. I am convinced that Singh was totally innocent,” replied the Nabob quietly. “He merely obeyed orders, Mr. Lee. For he showed me a letter of instruction, seemingly written by myself, which had arrived soon after my departure for the music-hall. Those instructions stated exactly where the jewels were, and ordered Singh to break the cabinet open, remove the jewels, and to hand them to the messenger who had brought the note. The servant did as he was ordered, and thought that he was obeying my will. And the mysterious messenger and the jewels have completely vanished. Singh himself knows nothing beyond what I have told you.”

“The note containing the instructions, then, was a forgery?” asked Lee keenly.

“Obviously,” replied the Nabob of Rajpur. “But it was so astoundingly accurate that even I could scarcely believe that I had not written it myself. It was amazingly performed, and I am convinced that a very clever criminal has been at work.”

“My hat!” ejaculated Nipper suddenly, from the window.

He and his master exchanged a significant glance, but made no further comment. And the Nabob went on to say that he would be very glad if Nelson Lee would investigate the robbery to the hilt.

“The forged letter is not here, for I omitted to bring it,” continued the Indian. “But no matter. I am anxious for you to investigate everything actually on the premises. If you can, therefore, manage to accompany me to Russell Square, Mr. Lee, you will be doing me a great service. If you succeed in recovering the jewels, your reward will be a fabulous one.”

“I am afraid I cannot come immediately, Mr. Khan,” replied Lee, glancing at his watch. “I have an appointment with a client at half-past twelve, and I really cannot see my way to miss it. I will, however, visit you during the afternoon, and will then go into a very close investigation.

You will have no objection, I presume, to my bringing my young assistant with me?"

The Nabob smiled.

"It will be better," he replied softly. "Nipper's fame, too, has reached my ears!"

Nipper accordingly swelled his chest out somewhat, and set his tie straight. And a few minutes later his highness the Nabob of Rajpur took his departure, highly pleased with the result of his interview.

"A forgery, guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper at once. "By Jingo, do you think it possible that Jim the Penman has got busy already? He only escaped yesterday evening, and yet this tinpot Indian lost his jewels only last night."

"Quick work—remarkably quick work," commented Lee. "Yes, Nipper, I have a feeling within me that Douglas James Sutcliffe is closely connected with this business. Upon my soul, I hardly expected to get to grips with the scoundrel again so soon!"

It was just about three o'clock when Nelson Lee and Nipper presented themselves at the large, old-fashioned house in Russell Square which had been specially furnished and set apart for the use of the Nabob of Rajpur.

Their ring was answered by a dark-skinned Hindoo, who was attired in native costume. He at once ushered them into an exquisitely furnished reception room, and requested that they should wait.

They were not kept waiting long, however, for in a few minutes the Hindoo returned, and, with many salaams, begged his masters to follow. His "masters" accordingly did so, and mounted some richly carpeted stairs, and were then ushered into a large apartment, which smelled mysteriously of the East.

The striking difference in this apartment was apparent at once. It was furnished in Indian style, and rare tapestries hung upon the walls. A queer kind of incense filled the air, and, although pungent, it was by no means unpleasant. The window was thickly curtained, and the light within the apartment was therefore subdued. Quaint chairs and stools stood about, and Lee was about to seat himself when the Nabob of Rajpur appeared. Singh, the Indian servant, salaamed and backed out of the room.

It was all very novel and unusual, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were rather enjoying the quaintness of their visit. The Nabob had appeared from behind some heavy curtains, which obviously concealed a door. His highness was attired in a rich loose robe, his feet were encased in silk slippers, and in his turban three magnificent brilliants glittered with a thousand fires.

"It is well, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed cordially. "You are prompt to time. You will honour me by coming into my private apartment."

"The cabinet you spoke of——"

"Is within," said the Nabob, pulling the curtain aside.

Nelson Lee crossed over the room, and passed between the curtains into the apartment beyond. Nipper remained where he was, grinning at the strangeness of it all. He did not follow because he had not yet been invited, but in all probability his master would soon set him to work.

The great detective found himself in a much smaller apartment. It was even more Eastern in atmosphere than the other, and it was from here, apparently, that the incense had its origin. For two braziers were burning lazily, and with ruddy flames. Thin coils of smoke arose, making the atmosphere of the room almost heavy and oppressive.

The Nabob of Rajpur seated himself on a pile of rich cushions, and motioned his visitor to become seated on a similar pile opposite. Between

them stood, upon a low stool, a superbly modelled hookah—the narghileh of India.

The hookah is an Oriental tobacco pipe, the bowl of which is attached to a vase containing water. Through this water the smoke passes—being delightfully cooled in the process—and then enters the smoker's mouth through a long, flexible tube.

There were two tubes fitted to this hookah, and Dadan Ramset Khan picked one of them up and offered it to Nelson Lee.

"You will smoke while we talk?" he asked with a smile. "There are other details I wish to tell you of, for since visiting you, Mr. Lee, I have made a surprising discovery. You will find this tobacco quite excellent."

Nelson Lee smiled, and took the proffered tube, and placed the neat mouthpiece between his lips. The detective was as grave as a judge, but he was really greatly amused at the whole quaint procedure.

After two or three pulls he obtained the rich, full flavour of the tobacco. It was, indeed, delightfully fragrant. Perhaps it was the pipe which rendered the smoke so cool.

Nelson Lee lay back among the cushions and listened dreamily to the Nabob's voice. He puffed away contentedly, while enjoying the wondrous sense of peace and languor which had come over him.

And then, subconsciously, he became aware of the fact that his host's voice had become a mere blur. Lee attempted to rise, but found that it was utterly impossible for him to do so. Mechanically, he puffed at the hookah tube, and within another ten seconds the mouthpiece slipped from between his lips and fell with a soft tap to the floor.

The great detective lay back, with closed eyes—unconscious!

CHAPTER IV.

An Extraordinary Story from an Extraordinary Man.

PRACTICALLY two hours elapsed before Nelson Lee recovered his senses. He first became aware of a feeling of lazy contentment. He was lying on a deliciously soft couch, and music, as though from afar, sounded dreamily in his ears.

After a few minutes, however, his mind became a little clearer, and it suddenly became apparent to him that the "music" was really Nipper's voice, speaking in low, anxious tones.

"Wake up, gov'nor!" the lad was saying. "Thank goodness, you've shown some sign of life at last! Pull yourself together!"

Nelson Lee moved slightly, and opened his eyes. It dawned upon him that he was still lying upon the cushions near the hookah in the Nabob of Rajpur's private apartment. But, although the cushions were delightfully soft, Lee now realised that he was not absolutely comfortable.

There was a curious tightness about his ankles and about his wrists; and when he attempted to move one of his legs he found that he could not do so. This had the effect of rousing him considerably, and he lifted his head and looked about him in a dazed kind of way.

"Why, hallo, Nipper!" he exclaimed huskily. "What the——"

The detective paused abruptly, for he saw that Nipper was bound hand and foot. And at the same second he knew that he himself was in a similar plight. It was not exactly a pleasing discovery.

"You must have had a bigger dose than I had, gov'nor," observed Nipper. "I've been awake for half an hour. It's no good trying to get free, because that beastly old Hindoo merchant keeps popping in and out. I expect he's waiting for you to recover."

Nelson Lee struggled into a sitting posture.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, in a dazed kind of fashion. "What has happened, young 'un? Let me think—let me think——"

"Nothing much has happened yet, guv'nor," interjected Nipper, who was lying on some cushions quite near. "About ten minutes after you'd come in here the Nabob called me in and invited me to smoke his blessed pipe of peace—if that rummy contrivance can be called a pipe. Well, after about six puffs, I felt jolly squiffy, and I didn't know anything more until I woke up half an hour ago, to find you lying beside me. Of course, he worked the same dodge on you."

Nelson Lee's brain was becoming quite clear.

"Exactly, Nipper," he agreed. "The Nabob worked the same dodge on me. Presumably he hid my unconscious form while you were being subjected to the treatment. But what, in wonder's name, can be the meaning of it?"

"I've been asking myself that for the last twenty minutes," said Nipper. "Why the dickens has the Nabob of Rajpur overpowered us and made us prisoners? It's the queerest business we've ever been mixed up in, sir."

It was, indeed, amazing. Without the slightest doubt the famous Indian potentate had deliberately trapped the great detective and his young assistant. But why? What could be his reason?

And then, when Lee was clear-headed and alert once more, the Nabob himself appeared. The heavy curtains suddenly parted, and he stood there regarding his bound victims with an amused smile. He had come noiselessly, and he now smoked an ordinary Virginia cigarette.

"I presume you have an excellent reason for this outrage?" said Nelson Lee quietly.

The Nabob of Rajpur nodded.

"The most excellent reason in the world, my dear Lee," was his smooth reply. "Ah! You recognise the voice, eh? I am taking no pains to disguise it now——"

"Jim the Penman!" gasped Nipper faintly.

The Nabob nodded.

"Precisely!" he replied calmly. "Jim the Penman—at your service!"

Nelson Lee said nothing. To tell the truth, the detective was so utterly flabbergasted that he was really incapable of expressing himself. It was not often that Nelson Lee allowed himself to show amazement. But he did so now, and made no attempt to conceal it.

Jim the Penman!

In a flash Nelson Lee realised the whole sequence of events. It had not been the Nabob of Rajpur who had visited him during the morning, but Douglas James Sutcliffe himself! The master forger, in some miraculous manner, had managed to adopt the personality of a famous Indian Nabob during the short period of one night. The previous evening he had been on his way to Portmoor, a convicted criminal. To-day he was in London, openly and under everybody's eyes, in a new identity—an identity, moreover, which was not merely a disguise.

It was little wonder that Nelson Lee was almost stunned by the revelation. Yet at the same time he admired Jim the Penman's cleverness tremendously. The forger's acting had been absolutely perfect. Lee prided himself that he could see through almost any disguise. But Jim's had been so clever, and had been carried out so thoroughly, that the detective was in no way to blame for having been deceived.

"Lost your voice, eh?" went on the disguised forger pleasantly. "Well, I'm not surprised. I anticipated that you would receive something of a

blow. But I have something quite nice in store for you—as you will presently find out for yourselves.”

Nelson Lee took a deep breath.

“You are an artist, Sutcliffe,” he said quietly. “Sometimes I really feel well disposed towards you. Your obvious ingenuity and genius make me regret exceedingly that you allowed yourself to drop into criminal ways. By James, you and I would have been great friends if you had adopted an honest mode of life.”

“You honour me,” said Jim the Penman banteringly. “Yet, Lee, I believe there’s something in what you say. You’ve done me many bad turns in the past—you’ve wrecked many of my most promising schemes—but I regard you as the only man who is a danger to me. For the police I don’t care a snap of the fingers. You have been the thorn in my side all along the line. And it is really regrettable that I must adopt the course I am now contemplating. It would have been far better if you had allowed me to go my own way.”

“That remark, I presume, contains a hidden threat?”

“Take it as you choose,” was Jim’s reply. “I shall certainly do my utmost to make you fully realise the folly of having fallen out with me. But this is really a pointless conversation. Let us get to rock bottom facts. I’ve been very clever, my dear Lee, and I am quite anxious to enlighten you upon a few details. It cheers me up to discourse upon my own cleverness!”

“Nothing like swank!” grunted Nipper ferociously.

“Swank, as you call it, has been my greatest help all through, Nipper,” said the pseudo-Nabob. “In other words, I have an unlimited supply of audacity and cool cheek. Nowadays cheek is the main factor of a criminal’s stock-in-trade. Without my wonderful nerve I should be useless. You heard, of course, of my escape? Well, I think you will admit that it was engineered with singular adroitness.”

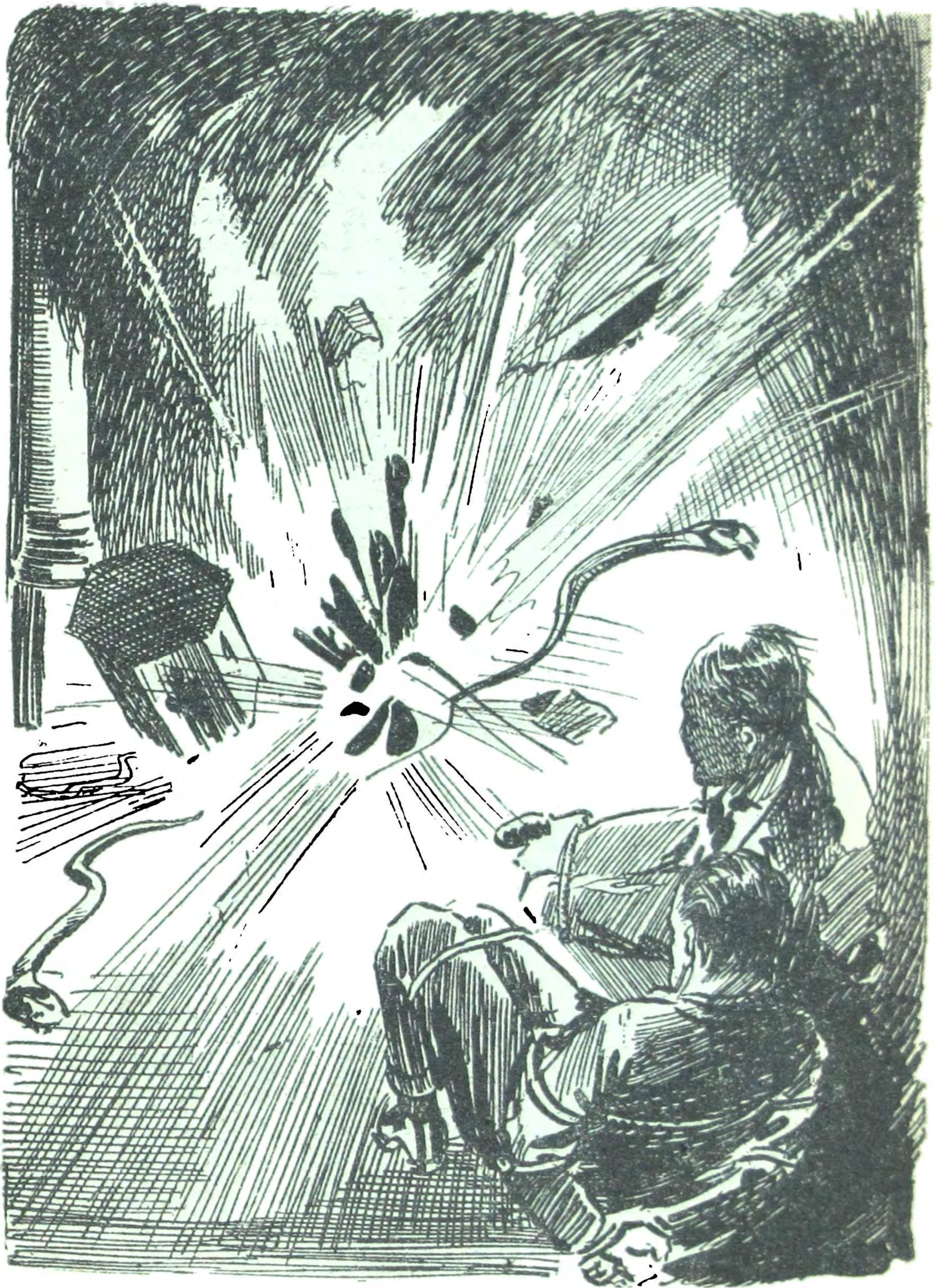
And Jim the Penman proceeded to explain how he had escaped from the express. The forger took a seat on a low stool, crossed his legs, and smoked his cigarette while he talked with perfect ease. Lee and Nipper, meanwhile, lay bound upon the cushions, listening with genuine interest. They both felt that Jim had something ghastly in store for them, but they did not allow their minds to wander.

They were amazed to learn of the trick by which Jim the Penman had escaped custody. The tale of the swinging cradle was an extraordinary one, and Nelson Lee knew that no other man but Sutcliffe would have engineered such a device. But that the ruse had been entirely successful was only too obvious.

“It was nearly dark when the landaulette started off from the Birlston Bridge,” went on Jim the Penman easily. “The sentry, of course, was not harmed, and it was no fault of his that he was not at his post. My two men, Galloway and Channing, merely roped him up so that he could not cause trouble. Well, Galloway helped me to change my clothes, and then I disguised myself as a respectable old gentleman. By this time it was quite dark, and the car had travelled a considerable distance. I had my plans all cut and dried, but, as often happens, an unexpected incident occurred which completely altered everything.”

“You met the Nabob of Rajpur?” suggested Nelson Lee quietly.

“My dear Lee, your deductive powers are really astonishing,” was Jim’s reply. “To tell the truth, I did meet the dark-skinned gentleman you named. But the meeting was dramatic and unexpected. It was one of those lucky adventures which seem to favour me so generously! While



There was a deafening report right overhead, and the very house appeared to be tumbling to atoms. Masonry crashed, and heavy timbers thudded down.—(See page 33.)

the landaulette was rushing through the darkness, bound for the south coast, it nearly crashed into another car, which was coming from the opposite direction."

Jim paused to light another cigarette.

"It was not Channing's fault," he continued. "Channing is a most excellent driver, and he behaved splendidly when a small racing car shot round a corner at a speed which was not exactly conducive to safety. Channing swerved to the near side, and the racer went clean up the bank and overturned. As I had already disguised myself I thought it wise to stop, for I had no wish for the police to be on the look-out for my car. The racing car contained one occupant only, and he was partially stunned. As you guessed, he was his highness the Nabob of Rajpur."

"Was he seriously hurt?" inquired Lee.

"No. Merely stunned, as I said. He jabbered away in English after a few minutes, and informed me that he was on his way to London from a certain seaport, where his private yacht was in dock. I gathered that the Nabob was something of a sport, and he had been on his way to London in order to have a high old time before the ceremonies of his visit to England commenced. I told you something of the same story myself this morning."

"So you simply stepped into the Nabob's shoes?"

"Exactly," said Sutcliffe smoothly. "I learned from his highness that his suite would not follow him to London until Thursday morning—that is, to-morrow. Nobody, it seemed, knew the Nabob in London, and there would be no formalities whatever. Outwardly the Nabob of Rajpur was not to arrive in London until to-morrow morning. Of course, he was not doing anything in secret, for his secretaries on the yacht knew that their exalted master would stay at this house, in Russell Square. Thus the Nabob had the whole of last night, the whole of to-day, and the night which is now coming on, free to himself to spend exactly as he chose, without his suite knowing anything of his movements. The Nabob merely wished to have a couple of days of freedom, as was only natural. His yacht had arrived in port two days before time, and so he saw no reason why he should not go for a little spree. Unfortunately, the accident upset his plans."

Jim the Penman paused, and chuckled.

"Most men in my position would not have had brains enough to grasp the singular possibilities of the situation," he went on. "I am not boasting, but I think I may say that I displayed really striking quick-wittedness. I realised at once how fate had played right into my hands."

"Indeed, you were lucky," commented Nelson Lee grimly. "You were a fugitive from justice, and by that time there was already a hue and cry after you. Of course, you saw that by adopting the Nabob's personality you would be almost certain of immunity from detection. No matter how careful your original plans may have been laid, they could not possibly have been so favourable as the course which chance had placed in your hands. Moreover, there was possibly some other motive in addition to that of hiding from the police."

"My dear man, I saw a huge game right in a flash," was Jim the Penman's cool answer. "I saw that an absolute impersonation was not necessary, for nobody knew the Nabob in London. There was a chance of being bowled out, I'll admit—but I've always been a chap to take chances. Well, while the Nabob was lying by the roadside, dazed and fit for nothing, I and my men turned his little car right side up. But for a wrecked wind-screen, twisted mudguards, and wholesale loss of paint, there was nothing

wrong with the racer. She was still capable of finishing her journey. That made a big difference, and I formulated my plans straight off."

Jim went on for some little time longer. He explained that his two confederates, Channing and Galloway, had taken the Nabob of Rajpur off in a big landaulette. Previous to that, however, Jim had disguised himself as near as possible to the wealthy Indian. He ransacked the Nabob's pockets, and took possession of all his papers, money, and personal belongings. The Nabob, of course, had objected strongly, but he had been quite unable to resist.

Then, while he was taken off to a destination which Jim named, the forger himself mounted the little car and went straight to London. He had, in short, adopted the personality of Dadan Ramset Khan, and the latter unfortunate gentleman was being held a prisoner.

"As I had anticipated, not a suspicion has been aroused," said Sutcliffe amusedly. "The one Indian servant in this house, a fellow named Singh, has not the slightest idea that I am an impostor. As a matter of fact, I have had very little to do with him, just out of precaution. I know, of course, that I must be well away before to-morrow morning, for the Nabob's suite will arrive in style during the forenoon, and to remain would be to court disaster. Oh, yes, I shall have disappeared before to-morrow's dawn."

Jim rose and stood over his helpless listeners.

"But my object has been attained," he went on, his voice becoming grim and harsh. "One of my main reasons for adopting this disguise, Lee, was to entrap you. That I have done so is nothing to your discredit. I know you are a shrewd man, and any ordinary trap would have been futile. I knew, however, that you would never fathom the depths of the scheme I planned. You swallowed every word of my story this morning, and you and Nipper simply walked blindly into my hands. You can guess why you are both here—I mean to get even! I mean to be free of your infernal attentions in the future."

"Another murder threat, eh?"

"You have been at my heels, Lee, ever since I openly adopted forgery as a profession," said Jim the Penman fiercely. "You have consistently wrecked every scheme I formulated. Well, I am not going to be troubled by you any longer; and to-night I mean to have my revenge. And, as you hinted, there was another reason why I became the Nabob of Rajpur—a reason which will be very beneficial from a financial point of view. I don't intend to satisfy your curiosity further than that, for it can really be of no interest to you. By to-morrow morning you will be——"

Sutcliffe shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"You—you hound!" ejaculated Nipper hotly.

"That is a rather apt expression," was Jim's grim reply. "I have certainly hounded you both down, and there is no escape."

The forger glanced at his watch, and Nipper bit his lip in order to prevent himself speaking again. Nelson Lee was quite unmoved, but he was nevertheless aware that his position was extremely desperate.

Yet, in spite of the grim threats which Jim had uttered, the detective could not help admiring him; he could not help admiring Jim's amazing adaptability and audacity. Only the previous day he had been on his way to a convict prison! And to-night he was established in the identity of a rich Indian potentate, and had been masquerading as the Nabob for nearly twenty-four hours. Only Jim the Penman would have had the cool cheek to adopt such a daring enterprise.

Jim's disguise, too, was masterly. Even now, as Lee looked at him,

there was utterly no trace of the forger's own personality. Only the voice betrayed him; and, when necessary, he was capable of disguising that with remarkable ease. The dark colour of his skin assisted the disguise very materially, and the Oriental turban was an added effect.

Sutcliffe walked to the hidden door, and parted the curtains. And then he turned and stood looking at his two roped-up prisoners with a smile of evil amusement.

"I shall not be gone long," he remarked. "And, as a word of advice, let me say that any attempt to escape will be futile. I shall merely be in the next room, and every sound within here will be audible to me. Later on I have a nice little surprise in store, so I'll leave you to wait in anticipation."

And Jim the Penman passed through into the adjoining apartment.

CHAPTER V.

The Priceless Jewels of Rajpur.

NIPPER was inclined to be somewhat furious at first—immediately after Jim the Penman's departure. But Nelson Lee told the lad that an outburst of temper would be really an admission of fear.

So Nipper calmed down and wrenched at his bonds feverishly and without avail. His master, though he betrayed little emotion, was nevertheless inwardly boiling with helpless fury. The knowledge that he was a prisoner, absolutely at the mercy of Jim the Penman, galled him to such an extent that it was only with the greatest difficulty he had controlled himself.

But Lee was not foolish enough to heap blame upon his own head for what had occurred. This trap had been so cleverly laid, so perfectly planned, that the great detective must needs have been superhuman to have guarded against it. Jim the Penman had acted with such superb cleverness that no man on earth could have been aware of the true situation.

It was all the more galling, because Nelson Lee knew, without any bombast, that he was more than a match for Douglas James Sutcliffe. The great criminologist had proved on many an occasion that he could beat Jim the Penman even when the odds were all in the latter's favour. The forger was ingenious and cool; but his ingenuity and cleverness was not of that same quality which Nelson Lee possessed.

Therefore it was very bitter for the detective to realise that he was in the scoundrel's power, and that he had been tricked by the simplest of devices. Its very simplicity, in fact, had brought about the desired result. Yet, as Lee lay upon the cushions, he did not give way to despair. His brain was very busy, for he knew that Nipper and he were in dire straits.

Jim the Penman, in the adjoining room, was perfectly cool and calm. He knew that the trump card was in his possession—that he held the upper hand—that Nelson Lee and Nipper were completely at his mercy. The circumstances were singularly in favour of the scoundrel's plot. This great house, teeming with life as it would be to-morrow, was now practically deserted. The Nabob of Rajpur was not due until the following morning. Jim had merely stepped into the Nabob's shoes, and he could do as he wished and not be questioned.

The forger, however, was under no false impression. He had known right from the very start that his masquerade was to be of very short duration. He was only safe for a few hours longer. But his plans were already made, and he had accomplished much.

With really astonishing promptitude he had fully realised the possibilities. He had found letters on the wealthy Indian which told him much—for one thing, that the Nabob always wrote his letters in English—and generally talked in English.

This knowledge had removed the only stumbling-block which Jim the Penman had feared. He did not find it necessary to use any language but his own, and Singh, the one native servant, suspected nothing.

From the letters—and from reports in the newspapers which Jim had seen even before his arrest—he knew that the Nabob had brought the famous Rajpur jewels to England for the purpose of exhibition.

These jewels were of fabulous value, and it was certain that they were on board the Nabob's yacht.

Jim had realised that fact almost at once. And it was the possibility of gaining possession of them which had prompted him to adopt the course he was now pursuing. The trapping of Nelson Lee and Nipper was, after all, merely of secondary consideration. It was the jewels Jim the Penman had been after, right from the start.

And, as usual, he brought into play his extraordinary talent of forgery.

That very morning, before visiting Nelson Lee, Sutcliffe had acquainted himself with all the facts. Two things had struck him. One—that the Nabob's letters provided him with excellent specimens of the Indian's handwriting, and—two—that this big house would make a singularly effective trap for Nelson Lee and Nipper. Jim had sole control of it—for the time being, at any rate—and once his victims were inside, he would make sure that they would never leave again.

Moreover, Jim the Penman had made a certain discovery. On the very evening of his arrival, disguised as the Nabob, certain articles had been brought from the yacht by a special messenger—articles which his highness had intended using. The hookah had been among them; but it was Jim, of course, who had drugged the tobacco.

And, perfectly methodically, Sutcliffe mapped out his plan of action. The first consideration with him was to obtain possession of the jewels. To such a man as Jim the Penman this problem presented no difficulties. Indeed, the one thing which impressed itself upon his mind was the amazing simplicity of the whole business.

He simply sat down and wrote a letter of instruction to the Nabob's chief secretary, a highly educated Hindoo, who was at present on board the yacht. This letter was forged in Jim's usual masterly style.

The Nabob's handwriting was rather distinctive, and possessed many peculiarities. Yet Jim penned the letter as though he had written in that particular style all his life. Forgery to him was child's play. He was a genius at every branch of penmanship, and could commit forgeries so accurately that all the handwriting experts in the world would never be able to detect a single false stroke.

This particular letter was short and plain. The chief secretary was instructed to send the Rajpur jewels to London at once by a special trusted messenger. Jim had sent the letter down by an ordinary district messenger boy, and he was absolutely certain that his orders would be carried out.

For the Nabob's word was law, and the secretary would never suspect for a second that the letter was not genuine.

With that matter off his mind Jim proceeded to prepare for his visit to Nelson Lee. The ruse had been entirely successful, and both Lee and Nipper were now in his power. It was evening, and the forger was expecting the arrival of the special messenger with the jewels at any minute.

By the morrow they would have disappeared—Jim with them.

He paced the quaintly furnished room slowly, his long silken robe swishing gently as he moved. And every now and again Jim the Penman chuckled delightedly. Whatever plan he had in mind evidently pleased him more than a little. And he was not thinking of his victim's fate now—he was thinking of what was to happen afterwards.

The time sped quickly, and it was already quite dark. The curtains had been drawn, and soft electric lights glowed down warmly. Once Jim the Penman went to the window and leaned out, looking down upon Russell Square.

The evening was very dark, for there was no moon, and the air was somewhat hazy. Not a breath of wind stirred, and everything was wonderfully calm. It was one of those still nights which are most favourable to fog in London. But there was no fog at present, and by the look of the sky it seemed as though there would be none.

Russell Square was very dark, for although the evening was still young, the lighting restrictions compelled the inhabitants to keep their windows shaded and their lights dim. And as Jim leaned upon the window-sill, gazing down and smoking a cigarette, he saw a taxi draw up in front of the house, and he caught a glimpse of a dark-skinned man alighting.

Sutcliffe at once withdrew into the room.

"The jewels!" he muttered. "By Jove, I've got a feeling that everything's going to pass off swimmingly. But I must be careful," he added grimly. "This messenger probably knows the Nabob well, and I have no intention of being bowled out now."

He seated himself in a low, easy chair which was in deep shadow. Anybody entering the room would be unable to distinguish him very definitely. His general appearance was that of the Nabob of Rajpur, but the forger had found it impossible to effect an absolute impersonation. To meet in full light a man who intimately knew the Nabob would be to court exposure.

Within three minutes a tap came at the door, and Singh entered. He announced that a certain gentleman with an almost unpronounceable name was awaiting an audience.

Jim the Penman waved his hand.

"Bring him!" he ordered curtly.

Almost at once the special messenger arrived. He entered, and salaamed solemnly. In his hands he held what appeared to be a rich leather travelling-case—small and compact, and carefully strapped.

Although Jim did not know it, the man was one of the Nabob's under-secretaries. For his highness considered himself to be a very great man, and travelled with a huge retinue of servants of all descriptions which would have satisfied the demands of a rajah.

To speak with this man would be merely to take risks. And so Sutcliffe merely beckoned towards a small carved table. The messenger understood, and he placed the leather case upon the table, and again salaamed.

"The jewels, your highness, are here," he exclaimed deferentially. "Your instructions have been——"

"Enough!" interjected Jim shortly. "Leave me!"

The messenger evidently suspected nothing at all, and he at once retired, closing the door behind him. There had certainly been nothing to arouse his suspicions, for he had only seen the "Nabob" dimly, and the latter had only spoken three words. In such a short space of time detection was quite impossible.

This was the cunning of Jim the Penman's scheme. This one secretary

was the only man he had met who was closely acquainted with Dadan Ramset Khan. The full suite would arrive on the morrow—but by then Jim would have vanished.

He rose to his feet eagerly, stepped to the door, and quickly locked it. Then he went to the carved table and unstrapped the leather case. Within was a superb golden casket.

It was magnificently ornamented and chased, and the lid was studded with rubies and emeralds. Jim pressed back the catch, and lifted the heavy solid gold lid. He had half expected to find a loose collection of jewels, but only a dozen tiny golden doors met his gaze, each door being the cover of a separate compartment. He opened one, and within he found six superb diamonds—diamonds of magnificent purity and of amazing size.

“Scott!” muttered Sutcliffe, with glittering eyes. “Each one will fetch a fortune! And they can be recut as easily as the winking of an eye. And they’re mine—they’re all mine!”

Each diamond was carefully wrapped in cotton wool, and he replaced them and opened another compartment. This contained a number of lovely rubies. And in other compartments there were emeralds, sapphires, pearls, and more diamonds. At last Jim the Penman straightened his back, and closed the casket.

“They are worth hundreds of thousands!” he muttered. “It is impossible to guess at their true value. And I have gained possession of them with an ease which almost seems incredible. And there is Nelson Lee! That infernal busybody will not hamper me this time—he and his brat shall pay the penalty to-night!”

For a moment he fondled the casket lovingly, as though it were a thing of life. The Jewels of Rajpur! Often enough had Jim the Penman read of those priceless gems, but never had he dreamed that he would one day possess them himself.

Yet they were his—his very own—and the way was open for him to escape.

The forger was elated beyond measure, and told himself that he would be completely triumphant. His daring plan, evolved on the spur of the moment as he was fleeing from justice, had been successful.

After he had replaced the casket in the leather case and had strapped it up, he glanced at his watch and was thoughtful for a few moments. By forgery he had obtained possession of the Nabob's jewels; and by forgery he meant to secure for himself a safe hiding place.

Jim chuckled afresh after he had been silently thoughtful for a full minute. But it was not a chuckle of amusement; it was a chuckle of cruelty and evil anticipation. He walked forward, and parted the curtains. A heavy oaken door was before him, and it was closed. Lee and Nipper, in the other room, had been unable to hear what had been passing. And Jim, who had roped up his victims himself, knew that they could not have escaped.

He passed into the smaller apartment, and found everything as he had left it. One single electric light showed Nelson Lee and Nipper lying bound hand and foot upon the cushions. Nipper, being impulsive, had attempted to free himself, for his wrists were red and grazed by the hard ropes.

The two prisoners had evidently been talking, but now they both looked round, and could not help noticing the malicious smile of cruel triumph which marred Jim the Penman's features. It was Sutcliffe's own smile, and now Nelson Lee could see the forger plainly enough through his clever disguise.

“I have just come in to bid you a long farewell,” said Jim the Penman

tauntingly. "Almost at once I am setting off for a quiet retreat, where I shall not be troubled by the police. As you already know, the Nabob of Rajpur has been conveyed to a small villa in Purley. By this time, of course, he has fully recovered, but he is being kept a prisoner by my trusted Galloway. Seeing that you will trouble me no more, I have no hesitation in telling you my own destination."

"We know where that'll be—when you get hanged!" growled Nipper fiercely. "There's no doubt at all about your ultimate destination!"

"Really, Nipper, I did not think your nerves were in a fit state to indulge in humour," was Sutcliffe's reply. "When I leave here I shall go as a lame old gentleman, and I shall engage rooms at the Greyhound Hotel, in Croydon. Not far from the Nabob's prison, eh? At the Greyhound I shall remain for at least a fortnight, making fresh plans meanwhile."

"You are rather rash, Jim, to tell me all this——"

"My dear Lee, let me assure you that you will never be able to take advantage of the information I have given you," interjected the forger. "Possibly enough, later on, you will call me fiendish. But when you know what your fate is to be, just think of the past—that's all. Think how you have constantly stood in my path. What happens to-night is merely my method of paying off old scores."

"There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," said Lee quietly.

"A proverb which is true enough," agreed Jim, with perfect composure. "But there can be no slip on this occasion. If there were even a thin shred of possibility in that way, I should settle the thing here and now. But it would be rather—well, troublesome to me. And I prefer that you should realise how foolish it was of you to cross my track!"

And Jim said no more.

He seized Lee by the shoulders and dragged the detective across the room and through a small doorway. This new apartment was pitch black, and obviously bare. Nipper was treated in a similar fashion, and then they heard the door close, and the key was turned in the lock.

That little room was disused, and nobody would have any cause to enter it. Sutcliffe was quite sure that his victims would not be found for many days. The door of the apartment was locked, and heavy tapestries hung in front of it. These tapestries continued right round the walls, and it was more than probable that the Nabob's servants would never know that the room existed.

It was a safe enough prison—that concealed room. And Jim the Penman knew it, and had laid his plans accordingly. That he meant to kill Nelson Lee and Nipper was certain. But how? By what means did he intend to gain his end?

What was the nature of his scheme?

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CHAPTER VI.

The Murderers of the Night.

UTTER darkness, and absolute silence.

The room in which Nelson Lee and Nipper had been concealed was indeed an effective prison.

The window was evidently heavily shuttered, for not a ray of light entered. It was impossible for the imprisoned pair to know whether any window actually existed. Probably enough there was none at all, for this little room might be merely a large store-cupboard.

The tapestries on the other side of the door, too, were thick and heavy. These, with the door itself, drowned every sound that might have proceeded from the larger apartment. For the silence was intense, and everything round Lee and Nipper was as black as a pit.

"Well, Nipper, we are a pretty pair," exclaimed Nelson Lee calmly, but with a touch of bitterness in his voice, a few minutes after Jim the Penman had departed. "I am very much afraid that this trap is one without an outlet."

"My goodness!" panted Nipper. "Can't we do something, guv'nor? I—I feel so horribly idiotic! Why the dickens didn't we spot the wheeze before it was too late? It strikes me that we've been taken in like a couple of raw rural bobbies!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I don't feel much inclined for humour, Nipper, but you really make me smile," he replied. "And it is scarcely a compliment to me to be likened to a rural bobby. You ask why we didn't get wind of danger? Simply because, young 'un, there was not the slightest indication of trickery. There is no reflection cast upon our astuteness because we fell into this trap. Now and again I have been careless, and have suffered in consequence. But on this occasion I accept no blame; if the whole facts were published far and wide we should not be condemned as inefficient. The plain truth is that Jim the Penman is the cleverest criminal of this decade."

"He's about the cleverest criminal that ever happened, I reckon!" growled Nipper. "Oh, shouldn't I like to get free! Just think what a surprise we could give Jim if we went and lugged him out of his bed at the Greyhound Hotel, in Croydon!"

"I wish I knew what his plans were," was Nelson Lee's remark. "That is the most important thing, Nipper. It is not a bit of use having any false hopes. Jim intends to take our lives—that is certain. But how is he going to do it? I have an idea that he is up to some ghastly devilry."

"That's right, sir—be cheerful!" said Nipper mournfully. "And why the dickens should we lie here, jabbering?"

"Can you tell me what else we could do?"

"Well, I don't suppose there is much else, is there?" confessed Nipper. "But I feel so jolly helpless, guv'nor! I've nearly skinned my giddy wrists in trying to work these ropes off, but it's no go."

"Sutcliffe has a certain knack of tying knots," remarked Lee. "The more you wrench, the tighter the ropes become. But surely we can manage to get a light? We can move our hands to a certain extent——"

"By gum! My little torch is in my waistcoat pocket," interjected Nipper. "I'll have a shot at trying to get it out, anyhow!"

Neither Lee nor Nipper had thought of obtaining a light before this, for in the other room there had been plenty of illumination. And Nipper found that, tightly bound though he was, it was still possible for him to work his hands up level with his waistcoat pocket.

It was a tremendous effort, and his already grazed skin was made quite raw in the process. Nelson Lee heard sundry gasps, but at last, after a full minute, he heard Nipper utter a panting exclamation of satisfaction.

"Got it!" he ejaculated in triumph. "Now we'll see where we are!"

The torch was a very small one, made especially for the waistcoat pocket, and when Nipper pressed the switch a tiny beam of light shot out and ripped through the darkness.

In a very short while the prisoners knew exactly where they were. The

room was even smaller than they had supposed, and was, indeed, a large store cupboard. There was no window, and only one small door. This, they knew, was locked. And Lee had noticed the tapestry as he had been carried to the doorway.

"Although we are right in the middle of a big house, help cannot come to us," declared the detective. "That tapestry conceals the doorway completely, and this cupboard is probably forgotten."

"Why not yell?" suggested Nipper practically.

"I'm afraid it would only be a waste of breath, my lad. The door is thick, and you may be sure that Jim would not have allowed us free use of speech unless he had been sure of his scheme. In the morning the Nabob's retinue will arrive in style, but by that time we shall be——"

Lee paused, and Nipper understood exactly.

"But we sha'n't die here, guv'nor," he observed gravely. "Unless, of course, Jim lets gas into the room, or something cheerful like that!" he added. "That's about the size of it, I expect. Gas—or he might set the house on fire!"

"My dear lad, don't allow your imagination to get the better of you. Things are quite bad enough without you making them worse." Nelson Lee suddenly paused. "But what is that string, Nipper?" he added, nodding.

The lad had been idly sweeping the beam of light across the floor, but he held it steady as he saw the direction of his master's nodding head. It had been a little difficult for Nipper to hold the torch, but he was getting used to it by now.

"String, guv'nor?" he repeated. "Oh, yes, I can see it. Well, I'm blown!"

There was a certain amount of cause for Nipper's surprise, for a very thin string was lying upon the floor. One end of it disappeared beneath the door, and the other was tied to a ring in the lid of a fairly large mahogany box.

What could be the meaning of it?

The little room was practically empty. Up one corner were two rough bundles, and next to them lay the dark-coloured box. The hinges were facing the door, and it was obvious in a second that if anyone pulled the string the lid would be lifted.

There was a short, tense silence.

"That's Jim's game!" whispered Nipper at last. "There's—there's something in that box, guv'nor. The rotter means to pull the string and open the lid. He didn't think that we should be able to get a light on the subject!"

"You are quite right, youngster," agreed Nelson Lee. "That string is certainly not there for nothing. The very fact that it passes beneath the door is highly significant. And, as you say, Jim does not know that we have been able to see in this dark apartment."

"But why hasn't he pulled it?"

"I suppose he's preparing to depart—disguising himself, etc.—and will pull the string at the last moment," was Lee's quiet reply. "That operation may release gas, as you suggested. Or it may ignite the fuse of an infernal machine!"

"My hat! What can we do, sir?"

Lee did not answer verbally. Instead, he wriggled round, and fell upon his chest. Nipper saw at once that his master intended reaching the string with his teeth and biting it through.

That, exactly, was what the detective meant to accomplish; moreover,

he intended placing his foot upon the broken end of the string, so that, when Jim pulled, it would move slowly—thus making the forger think that he had opened the box.

It was a smart ruse—but it was doomed to failure.

For even as Nelson Lee was putting his mouth forward the string tightened! It stretched taut across the floor, and when Nipper switched his light round the lid of the box could be seen lifting.

“Too late!” muttered Nipper. “Oh, why didn’t we find out——”

He paused, for the lid of the mahogany box, reaching the perpendicular, toppled backwards with a loud bang. This was followed by a snap, and the prisoners caught a glimpse of the string disappearing beneath the doorway.

The box had been opened and the string removed!

Apparently the string had been tied so that a steady pull would not affect it. A sharp, sudden tug, however, unfastened it, making it possible for Jim to pull the string away. The whole thing was uncanny. For not a sound had come from behind the door, and nothing had happened in the box.

“What’s the idea, guv’nor?” breathed Nipper huskily.

Lee did not answer. His gaze was fixed upon the now open box. Nothing was to be seen, and the whole incident seemed objectless. The minutes passed slowly and tensely, but still the situation remained the same.

Nipper sniffed the air once or twice, but there was nothing unusual to smell. The idea of gas, therefore, was wrong. And then, after fully five minutes had elapsed, Nelson Lee seemed to stiffen and become rigid.

During this time Nipper’s light had become weaker and weaker. It was only a small torch, and necessarily a tiny battery. It was only intended for short flashes, and not for prolonged lighting. Consequently the battery had been running down fast, and now the beam of light was weak and yellow.

“Great Heaven!” muttered Nelson Lee, horrified.

“What is it, sir?” Nipper asked, almost fearfully. “I can’t see—— Oh! What a scoundrel—what a devil!”

Nipper’s voice was full of horror, too. For a few seconds he could scarcely believe the significance of his own eyes. For, slowly rising from the interior of the mahogany box was the head and neck of a snake!

And, as Lee and Nipper watched, two other heads appeared. The three snakes commenced squirming down on to the floor, their evil eyes glittering venomously in the dim light of the torch.

So this was Jim the Penman’s revenge!

He had locked his enemies, bound and helpless, in a small room, and had released three deadly serpents! Both Lee and Nipper knew in a moment that, sooner or later, the horrible reptiles would bite. And they could do nothing to protect themselves.

“Don’t move, Nipper!” breathed Lee softly. “Don’t move a hair, and keep that light steady. We could, perhaps, attack these venomous snakes, but, bound as we are, we could not possibly hope to win.”

“And Jim—Jim thought of this fiendish plan!” muttered Nipper, in a thick, choking voice. “Oh, guv’nor, it’s almost too awful to realise. And this light, too—it’ll give out in less than five minutes!”

Lee nodded. He knew only too well that Nipper’s words were right. And when the torch gave out they would be left in darkness—alone with the poisonous serpents. It was a situation so appalling that both Lee and Nipper almost felt faint. At present they could see every movement of the three snakes; but presently all would be pitch dark. And Lee did not

care to let his mind dwell upon the terrible nerve strain which would then follow.

'To lie in the darkness, awaiting death!

The thing which filled the detective's mind at the present moment was the almost unbelievable cruelty of the plot. He knew that Sutcliffe was a fiend when he was aroused. But even Lee had never thought that Jim the Penman would descend to such depths of vile torture as this!

As a matter of fact, the forger had not really intended employing such dastardly means. But he had found the snakes on the premises, and had guessed that they had been sent on from the yacht by the Nabob's express orders. Undoubtedly they were sacred snakes, connected with some queer Indian rites. But, sacred or not, Jim satisfied himself that they were venomous. One bite, indeed, was sufficient to cause death within an hour. And it would be a death of agony and horror!

This, then, was what the master forger had planned for his enemy. Quite calmly he had laid his plans, and had accomplished his purpose with grim self-possession. And, as Jim had said, there was no possibility of escape, no possibility of the plan miscarrying.

There had been no danger in telling Nelson Lee that the forger would take up his quarters at an hotel in Croydon. Lee would never be able to make any use of his information.

The minutes passed draggingly, and the three snakes kept in the vicinity of the mahogany box; but, sooner or later, they would attack their victims. That was certain. Within an hour all would be over—an hour at the very most. And by now Nipper's torch was so weak that it was merely a red glow.

After the lapse of two further minutes the torch was useless. The captives lay in utter darkness, side by side, every nerve tense and rigid. Lee had full control of himself, and Nipper, brave lad as he was, did not utter a sound of complaint.

"Sha'n't have long to wait, guv'nor," he muttered.

"Hush, lad! We do not wish to attract—— But stay!" added Lee quickly. "Serpents are very susceptible to music—that is a well-known fact. I'm afraid it will be futile, Nipper, but while there is life there is hope. We must sing—sing softly and chantingly."

It was, indeed, a forlorn hope. Lee knew very well that the chances were one in a thousand, and he had really only made the suggestion so that their time should be occupied, and the deadly silence banished. They could not possibly sing hour after hour. Long before morning they would both fall victims to Jim the Penman's reptile emissaries.

"What shall we start with, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, clenching his teeth, and forcing himself to speak calmly. "What about 'Down Home in Tennessee' or 'A Broken Doll,' or something of that sort?"

Nelson Lee felt a lump rise in his throat as he listened to Nipper's brave attempt at cheerfulness. And the detective clenched his fists, and wrenched at his bonds madly and desperately. Oh, it was monstrous——

And then, as Nipper was starting to sing, a dull boom sounded as though from afar. The room shook and shivered, and almost immediately afterwards there was another boom, even louder than the first.

"Great Scott! They were explosions!" gasped Nipper. "What the dickens—— The Zeppelins! I'll bet a quid the Zepps. are over to-night, guv'nor!"

"Possibly—even probably," was Nelson Lee's tense reply, "one of the German airships has managed to get through the ring of searchlights and guns, and is now dropping its bombs on innocent civilians and buildings of no military importance. The murderers of the night——"

Nelson Lee's sentence was interrupted by a truly appalling explosion, which seemed to be quite near at hand. The house simply rocked on its foundations, and even in that confined room the crashing of glass could be heard, faintly and dimly.

Nipper was just about to speak—the snakes forgotten for the moment—when it seemed to him as though the world had come to an end. There was a deafening report right overhead, and the very house appeared to be tumbling to atoms. Masonry crashed, and heavy timbers thudded down. Lee and Nipper were smothered in choking dust, and a great beam from the ceiling crashed down within a yard of the detective's head.

The house itself had been struck by one of the Zeppelin's bombs!

CHAPTER VII.

Off to Croydon—An Unpleasant Surprise.

“**A** ZEPPELIN saved us from certain death, Nipper!” said Nelson Lee huskily. “Rather an unusual role for the Huns to adopt; but they certainly had no hand in our deliverance. It was Providence that came to our aid. Providence directed that bomb, and did good instead of harm.”

“It's about the first bomb which has saved life instead of taking it,” remarked Nipper comfortably. “But I haven't forgotten those horrible snakes yet. Thank goodness, we didn't have to stand the strain for very long. I honestly believe my hair's turned a bit grey!”

“Nonsense!” was Lee's brisk reply. “You are sound enough, Nipper—except for your grazed wrists and general feeling of excitement. Do you feel fit enough to pick up the trail straight away?”

“I'm fit enough to collar Jim the Penman!” said Nipper fiercely.

Just over an hour had elapsed since the high explosive bomb had fallen upon the roof of the Russell Square house. The conclusion of the imprisoned pair that a Zeppelin raid was taking place proved to be quite correct.

A solitary airship had managed to get over London, mainly owing to a thick haze, which hid it from the searchlights. The Zeppelin itself was probably totally unaware of its situation, and the bombs had been dropped at random. Later on in the night the news came that the Zeppelin had been spotted just outside the suburbs, and had been brought down by gunfire—a blazing wreck.

But there was no doubt at all that good had been done by the airship's visit. There were no casualties, and comparatively little damage had been wrought. And the lives of Nelson Lee and Nipper had been saved by the dropping of the bomb.

The latter had fallen fully upon the roof of the house, and had completely demolished two floors. Beams had crashed down, and had penetrated the ceiling of the store-cupboard in which Lee and Nipper were imprisoned. And, above, a fire had been started by an escape of gas.

Jim the Penman had been quite correct in saying that Lee and Nipper had no hope of rescue. The forger had never suspected such a denouement as this. It was, in all truth, a miracle. Nelson Lee solemnly believed that a Higher Power had taken charge of things, and had delivered Nipper and himself from the awful fate which Sutcliffe had planned.

The actual rescue had not occurred until half an hour had elapsed. Half choked by the dust, Lee and Nipper had nevertheless found themselves quite whole. And the snakes, frightened by the terrible uproar, had wriggled behind the two bundles in the corner. And there they had

stopped. Nelson Lee did not find this out until afterwards, when the snakes were caught and replaced in the mahogany box. But the detective could well understand why the snakes had taken fright.

Firemen, who had arrived quickly on the scene, mounted fire-escapes, and searched the ruins above for possible victims. And they soon extinguished the small fire. It was while they were up there that Lee had shouted with all his might. Attention had been attracted, and in a very short time the pair were freed.

The firemen, of course, had been startled and amazed to find two people bound hand and foot, but Lee satisfied them to a certain extent. Now the detective was standing in one of the lower rooms of the house, which had escaped harm.

It had been an exciting time. But, brushed down and feeling fresh after a vigorous wash, Lee and Nipper were little the worse for their dreadful experience. And, in spite of all, Jim the Penman had been defeated.

A few minutes before Lee had been speaking with a Scotland Yard official, and he had already made arrangements for certain events. And at the present moment Lee was awaiting the arrival of a motor-car.

"I don't want to waste a minute," said the detective grimly. "News travels fast, and Jim may possibly get to know that the raiders dropped a bomb on this house. And he may guess things and vanish. We want to get to Croydon at the earliest possible moment and catch him redhanded."

"With the jewels!" added Nipper, in a satisfied tone. "Of course, Jim was after those jewels all the time."

For Nelson Lee had received the information from Singh, the native servant—who had been nearly frightened out of his wits—that the Nabob had taken his departure, and had also taken the famous Rajpur jewels. Singh had known this, for he had been told that the leather case contained the jewels by the messenger from the yacht. And Singh had seen the supposed Nabob leave the house with the leather case.

This was quite enough for Nelson Lee. He was in no way surprised, for Jim had hinted that he had some other motive for impersonating the rich Indian. The forger had cleared off with the jewels of Rajpur. At last Lee understood the game. Of course, forgery was at the bottom of the whole business, and Lee determined, then and there, to run the forger to earth.

Jim naturally thought that his enemies were dead; he did not know that a Zeppelin bomb had come to their aid. It was a quaint trick of fate. And Lee felt confident that Jim the Penman would be calmly taking his ease at the well-known Greyhound Hotel, in Croydon.

There was only one thing to do—and Lee did that one thing.

He immediately arranged for a police raid to take place. And as he was talking to Nipper a big motor-car drew up outside, and within a minute the detective was talking with Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard.

"By George, you seem to have been having a strenuous time, Lee!" was the official detective's greeting. "Snakes and bombs! Sounds more like a comic cinema film than real life."

"I assure you there was nothing comic about it whatever," said Lee grimly. "But I'll go into details later, Morley. For the present there's not a moment to be lost. "I have every reason to believe that Jim the Penman, disguised as an old man, is now staying at the Greyhound, in Croydon. You have men with you?"

"Four of our best."

"Good. Then we'll go straight to Croydon and surround the hotel with the help of the local police," said Nelson Lee crisply. "I want to give Sutcliffe a big surprise. He has worked off a singularly audacious

robbery, and if it's within my power I mean to spoil his game. He has, too, kidnapped no less a person than the Nabob of Rajpur."

There were two motor-cars outside. Detective-Inspector Morley and Lee and Nipper took their seats in one, and the other followed close behind, with the four Yard men. Little time had been lost in getting on Jim the Penman's track!

During the swift journey to Croydon Lee explained to Morley exactly what had occurred, and the latter was greatly interested. When the detective had done, Morley puffed away at his pipe for a few moments, and then grunted.

"Some chaps have all the luck!" he exclaimed. "You generally manage to find your way out of tight corners, Lee, but I think this affair is about the luckiest escape you've ever had. A Zeppelin bomb, too! There's an element of humour in that, Lee!"

"I can appreciate that now," smiled the famous criminologist. "At the time, however, Nipper and I were scarcely struck by the lighter side of the affair. We have to thank a very kindly fate for having been delivered. But where are we?"

"Streatham, I think."

"Well, that's queer," remarked Nipper, gazing out of the side window. "We're just passing the Greyhound—the Streatham Greyhound, I mean. We sha'n't be so very long now, guv'nor. What's the time?"

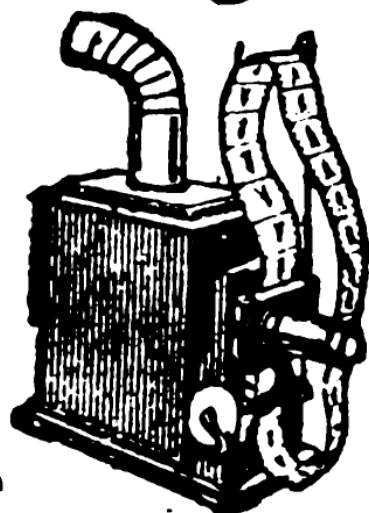
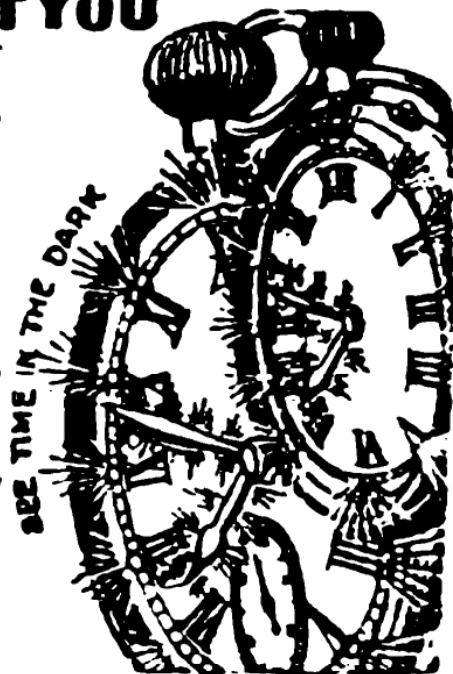
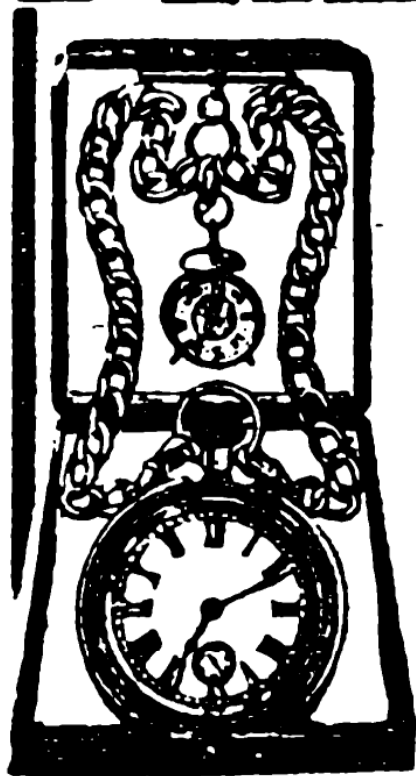
"Close upon eleven," replied Nelson Lee.

The motor-car proceeded swiftly, and was soon bowling through Norbury. From Norbury it was a short run to Thornton Heath Pond, and from there a direct road right into Croydon.

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As they passed Broad Green Lee examined his revolver to see that it was in perfect order. The roads in Croydon were almost without light at all, but groups of people were gathered about discussing the raid. Many people, indeed, thought that Zeppelins were still about.

Along London Road the police-car hummed swiftly, crossed West Croydon bridge, and then proceeded up North End. At the crossing where Crown Hill and George Street branch off, the car came to a standstill. The Greyhound Hotel was just ahead, on the left-hand side, opposite the Post Office.

A number of Croydon police were waiting here, having been instructed by telephone. Without any fuss, and without attracting any attention, Detective-Inspector Morley arranged with his men, and the Greyhound was soon surrounded.

It had all been done so that Jim the Penman would not be able to break through the cordon, if he happened to get wind of danger before the actual arrest took place. Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Inspector Morley entered the hotel, and were soon in conversation with the manager.

The latter was startled when he learned that the hotel was surrounded, and that the notorious Douglas James Sutcliffe was supposed to be staying at the establishment. The manager, in fact, became somewhat angry.

"This is absurd!" he exclaimed. "Jim the Penman is not here!"

"We are anxious to make sure of that," said Lee quietly. "Sutcliffe himself informed me that he was going to stay at this hotel for several days, and I have no reason to suppose that he was lying to me. He thought that I should never be able to make use of the information."

"Well, he fooled you, that's all," replied the manager. "He's not here, and I really cannot see my way clear to disturb what guests I have——"

"My dear sir, Sutcliffe was disguised as an old man," interjected Inspector Morley briskly. "We want you to give us the number of his room; we will then quietly go to it and effect his arrest——"

The manager laughed.

"There is no old man here," was his dismaying announcement. "The hotel has had no guests since yesterday evening. Not a single person, of either sex, has engaged rooms in this establishment to-day. I am sorry to disappoint you, gentlemen, but you are certainly on a false trail!"

And so it proved!

As the manager stated, not a soul had engaged apartments at the hotel during the whole of the day. According to Nelson Lee's calculations, the forger should have presented himself at the Greyhound somewhere between nine and ten. That he had not done so was an unpleasant surprise.

Even when Jim had been absolutely sure that Lee and Nipper were doomed he had not told them the actual truth! Either that, or he had altered his plans suddenly—and Lee thought this was more probable. For some reason Jim the Penman had abandoned the idea of staying at the Greyhound, and had gone elsewhere.

It was distinctly galling.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Rescue of the Nabob—And a Stunning Surprise—Finis.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR MORLEY was inclined to be gloomy and pessimistic. After the police and the Scotland Yard men had retired from the Greyhound Hotel the inspector held a short consultation with Nelson Lee in the big police car.

"I'm not blaming you, Lee, but it's infernally rotten, all the same!"

he grunted. "Are you sure it was Croydon Jim the Penman mentioned? Could it have been some other place——"

"My dear inspector, please give me credit for being moderately sensible, at all events!" Nelson Lee interrupted. "I should not have brought you here unless I had been quite positive. It is only too obvious that Sutcliffe was either fooling me or that he has made fresh plans. But it is not too late, even now, to effect his arrest. Nobody has been allowed to know that Nipper and I were discovered in the Russell Square house. Jim, therefore, is off his guard."

"That's right enough, guv'nor," agreed Nipper shrewdly. "He thinks that we're dead by now, and as he's not at the Greyhound he must be at some other hotel. And it's quite likely that he's in the same disguise as he mentioned to us. So it's up to you, Mr. Morley, to stretch the net round London and collar your man!"

Inspector Morley grunted.

"The police net may be effective where ordinary criminals are concerned," he replied gloomily, "but Jim the Penman is a kind of magician. The Yard's got good reason to know that. By thunder, if we get hold of him again—— But I'm afraid there's a mighty big 'if' about it!" he added lamely.

"Well, we can but do our best," said Nelson Lee crisply. "You had better give what instructions you intend, Morley, and then we'll continue on our way. The police station is only two minutes away, if you want to telephone to the Yard. After that we'll hasten on to Purley."

"By jingo, the Nabob!" ejaculated Nipper. "I'd quite forgotten the poor chap!"

Nelson Lee struck one fist into the palm of his other hand.

"By James! The thought has just entered my head!" he exclaimed, with an eager look. "Purley is only just beyond Croydon. Is it not possible that Jim the Penman has gone there? The Nabob is being kept prisoner in a small villa, and it's just crossed my mind that Sutcliffe may have gone there to give his confederate instructions!"

"Confederate!" repeated Morley sharply.

"Exactly. There's a man named Galloway who has been keeping the Nabob of Rajpur in captivity," was Lee's reply. "Before stretching your net, Morley, we had better hasten straight to Purley and try our luck there."

And within two minutes the two motor-cars were off again. Having drawn a blank at the Greyhound, it was quite likely that success would crown their efforts in Purley.

But such was not the case.

Nelson Lee was aware of the exact address, and the villa proved to be a small, modern detached house. It was surrounded and broken into. But of Jim the Penman there was no sign. The man Galloway was captured redhanded, fast asleep in a chair. And in the same room Dadan Ramset Khan, Nabob of Rajpur, was lying on a mattress, bound and gagged and helpless.

He was overjoyed to find himself rescued. And Galloway, although dismayed, accepted his arrest philosophically. He swore that Sutcliffe had not been near him during the whole of his stay at the house—and Lee believed the man.

The Nabob's story corresponded exactly with the narrative which the famous detective had heard from Jim the Penman's own lips. After the accident that night Galloway and Channing had brought their prisoner to this house. And he had remained a captive ever since.

He was utterly flabbergasted when he heard that his priceless jewels had been stolen. For a moment the wealthy Indian seemed to go mad with fury. He raved and shouted and stormed until he was almost exhausted.

Then, as a reaction, he adopted a moaning lament. Almost upon his knees he begged Nelson Lee to recover the jewels. He offered the detective the most amazing reward if he succeeded. He was willing to give anything—anything so long as he got the Rajpur jewels back.

Lee promised to do his utmost, and to report to the Nabob in the morning. His highness then went off in one of the police cars to London. His appearance was very similar to that Jim the Penman had adopted, and Lee could well understand why the forger had been so successful in his enterprise.

It was now after midnight, but Nelson Lee spent a full hour ransacking the house for any possible clue. But there was nothing to give him the slightest satisfaction. At about half-past one Purley was left behind, and Lee and Nipper returned to London in a special car which had been sent out to them. Morley had left long since, in order to spread the net.

After a long consultation at Scotland Yard Lee and Nipper made a round of the big West End hotels. There was nothing like striking while the iron was hot—and Jim might have been hiding in any one of them.

But the hours passed, and still Lee achieved no result. At last, before returning to Gray's Inn Road, he called at the Yard to hear if there was any news. But none was to hand. Jim the Penman and the Nabob's jewels had completely disappeared.

It was about half-past seven when Nelson Lee and Nipper wearily mounted the steps of their house in Gray's Inn Road, and opened the door. They had had a very strenuous night, and were feeling tired, sleepy, and generally "fed up." It was chilly now, and they had scarcely been able to see their way up Gray's Inn Road, for a heavy white morning mist had descended over London, and promised to develop into a regular fog.

"Why, goodness me! If it ain't Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, as the detective and Nipper entered. The landlady happened to be in the hall—having, as a matter of fact, just come down. "I never expected to see you back so soon, Mr. Lee!"

"Personally, I thought I was rather late," replied Lee drily. "I ought to have been here last night, safely in bed——"

"Why, what are ye saying?" interrupted Mrs. Jones, in surprise. "I understood from your letter as how you wouldn't be back for several days!"

"My letter?" reported Lee, frowning. "What the——"

"That's right, Mr. Lee. And the gent's upstairs now!" explained Mrs. Jones. "A nice, quiet-spoke gent he is, too. I didn't rightly know whether he should have your bedroom, or Master Nipper's——"

"What in wonder's name are you talking about?" demanded Lee sharply.

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"Well, I never! Fancy you not remembering," said Mrs. Jones. "Last night, sir, at about half-past nine, a gentleman came with a letter from you, sayin' that you wouldn't be home until the beginning of next week, and that your rooms were to be given over to the gentleman who brought the letter."

Nelson Lee gave a violent start.

"The letter!" he rapped out tensely. "Show it to me!"

Poor Mrs. Jones was somewhat flustered, but she fumbled in the pocket of her apron and produced a much-crumpled envelope. From this she extracted a piece of notepaper bearing the embossed heading of a famous West End club to which Nelson Lee belonged. And the writing was Lee's own!

The letter was quite short, and was addressed to Mrs. Jones—telling her that the bearer was a very old friend named Mr. Howard Patterson. Lee's rooms were to be placed entirely at Mr. Patterson's disposal.

The famous detective was nearly overcome with amazement.

"This letter is a forgery, Nipper!" he exclaimed, in a strange voice. "Good heavens, don't you understand? We have been chasing round London all night, and Jim the Penman is here—here in our very rooms!"

And Nipper was too overcome to do anything but gasp.

The master forger's audacity was simply startling. He had had the truly astounding effrontery to establish himself in Nelson Lee's own rooms! Yet, when Lee looked at the thing calmly, he could well understand Jim's motive.

He had been certain that Lee and Nipper were dead, and so—by forgery—he had obtained the free use of the detective's rooms. In reality it was an extraordinarily clever move. The police would never think of looking for their man in Nelson Lee's apartments.

And Jim the Penman probably had meant to stay there for a couple of days until he had planned a way of escape. Possibly, too, he had designs on Nelson Lee's bank balance—which was considerable.

In spite of the utter audacity of the move, Lee could do nothing but admire Jim's cool nerve. But a great exultation filled the detective. Jim the Penman was absolutely trapped! Totally unconsciously, the forger had placed himself in the worst possible position.

The end came quickly.

And although it was entirely satisfactory in one way it was very disappointing in another. Without hesitation Nelson Lee at once mounted the stairs and stood upon the landing, listening. Certain sounds told him that Jim was in the consulting-room. And Lee burst in abruptly.

An elderly man was seated at the detective's desk, calmly examining Lee's papers, and smoking one of Lee's cigars. He looked up quickly as the door burst open, and then leapt to his feet with a startled cry.

For one single second Jim the Penman was absolutely at a loss. He had thought himself safe; he had thought that Lee was dead! Yet all the time the detective was alive, and Jim the Penman was trapped!

The forger stood perfectly still for just that one second. And then he acted with amazing promptitude and determination. Even Nelson Lee was not prepared for such methods.

Jim the Penman clutched at a heavy paperweight and hurled it straight at Nelson Lee's head. The detective dodged, but the weight struck him a glancing blow, and he fell to the floor. It was all so completely dramatic that there was no time for action on Nipper's part.

The lad was at the door, and Jim rushed across the room, and simply

hurled Nipper across the landing by brute force. He pelted downstairs like a madman, tore open the main door, and rushed into the fog—bareheaded and filled with alarm.

But he escaped. Both Lee and Nipper set up a hue and cry, but the fog was thick now, and swallowed the escaping criminal up. Solely owing to his astonishing presence of mind Jim the Penman had escaped. But he had done so only by the skin of his teeth, and by instant and drastic action.

But although Sutcliffe escaped, his great effort had been a dismal failure. Nelson Lee and Nipper were still alive, and the Nabob of Rajpur's jewels were found intact in the detective's consulting-room.

Jim had only thought of escape; he had had no time to carry off his ill-gotten gains. The Nabob was overjoyed, and paid Nelson Lee a huge fee. The detective did not consider that he had earned it, but he accepted the cheque nevertheless. Indeed, the Nabob would have been highly insulted if Lee had done otherwise.

Financially the case was a great success, but Jim was free again. And Nelson Lee only too willingly acknowledged that Douglas James Sutcliffe was the cleverest crook he had ever crossed swords with.

THE END.

Your Editor regrets that, owing to lack of space, the usual instalment of the serial, "The Island of Gold," must unavoidably be held over until next week.

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