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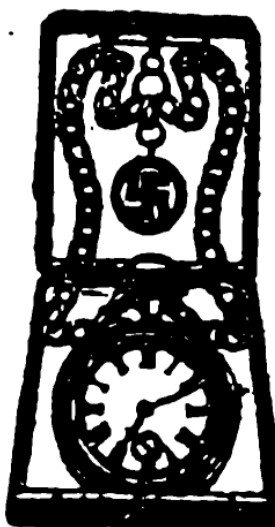
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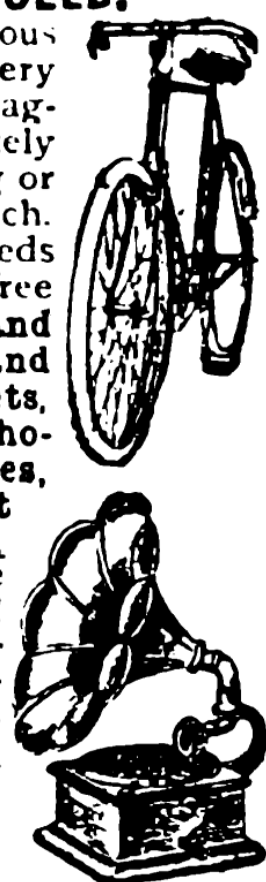
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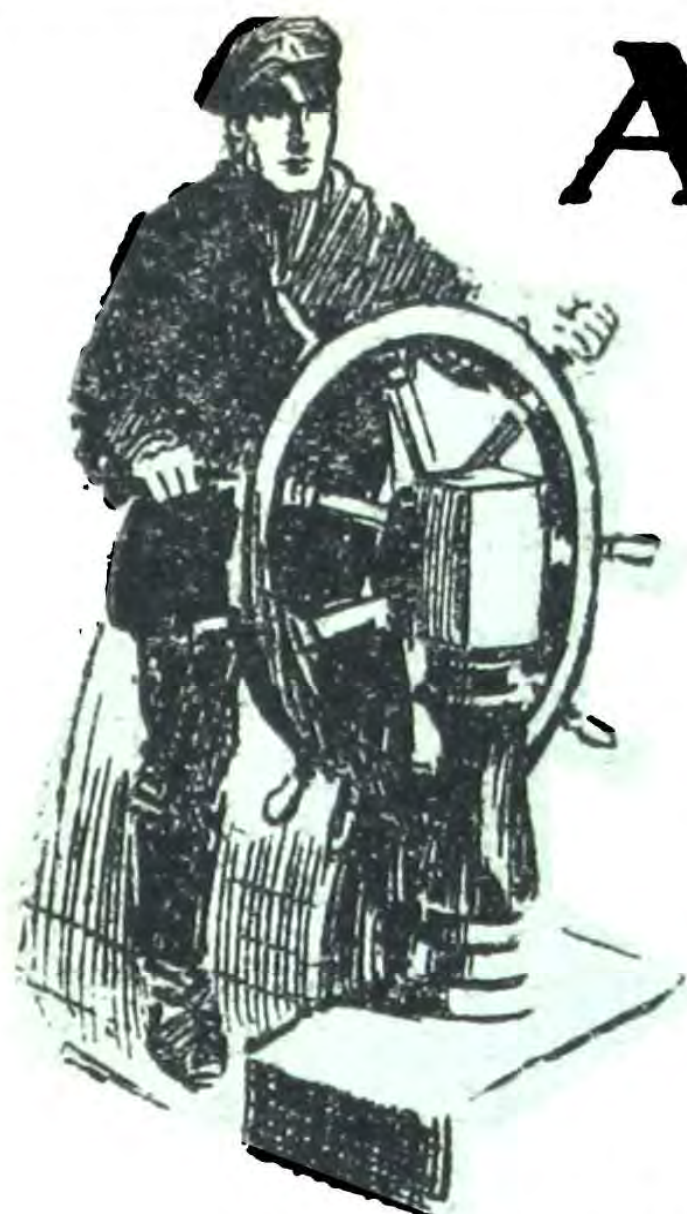
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CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee Meets With a Strange Experience.

MR. NELSON LEE was totally unaware that a pair of eyes were watching him furtively. He had strolled into the Venetia for tea, and while he had seen a few casual acquaintances, he had not, strangely enough, noticed anyone whom he cared to sit down with. Hence he had chosen a corner table in the big tea room, and, being somewhat preoccupied, had not taken note of the fact that a girl had followed him into the Venetia and had chosen a small table quite close to his own.

In that crowded room only some more than ordinarily distinct action would have attracted his attention. But while the girl had undoubtedly followed him into the place, and while, when he was looking the other way, she regarded him furtively, still she was discreet. And when he finally rose to go, Lee had no idea that the signal for his own departure served for hers as well.

Leaving the tea room, he made his way out to the lobby, where, chancing upon a friend, he stood chatting for some minutes. While he did so the girl emerged from the tea room, and, noticing that he had paused, stood leisurely drawing on her gloves. A little later, when Lee made his way into Piccadilly, the girl followed him, and, on emerging from the Venetia, looked up and down the great thoroughfare to see which way Lee had gone.

He had turned up instead of down towards the Circus, and, on noting this, the girl hastened after him. She trailed him past Bond Street and Albemarle Street. Then, as Lee crossed the end of Dover Street, the girl quickened her footsteps until by the time Lee had reached the Berkeley Hotel she was close at his heels.

It was just as Lee stood on the kerb at Berkeley Street, waiting for the motor traffic to pass, that the girl drew up beside him and laid a timid hand upon his arm. Lee turned his head quickly, expecting to see someone whom he knew. But as he gazed into the eyes of an utter stranger his gaze asked a question.

The girl started to speak—faltered, then gathered herself together, and, speaking in nervous, hurried accents, said:

“Please forgive me, Mr. Nelson Lee, I had to speak to you. I want to give you these.”

As she spoke she drew her hand from her muff and thrust into Lee's hands a collection of articles upon which his fingers closed mechanically.

"But I don't understand——" he began.

"Please take them, and please read the letter," she interrupted hastily. "You will understand then."

Then her hand slipped from Lee's arm, and before he could reply she had hurried across to the cab rank in front of the Ritz, and, giving an order to the driver, had jumped into a taxi.

Lee gazed down at the collection of articles which he held in his hands. One of them, he saw, was a lady's small gold mesh bag. One was a flat paper packet sealed with blue sealing-wax, and, lastly, there was a square envelope of thick, heavy paper, which he saw was addressed to himself.

The taxi was already well down Piccadilly, and for a moment Lee thought of going after it. Then, with a shrug, he decided against such a move, and, hailing a taxi which was just creeping past the kerb, told the man to drive to Gray's Inn Road.

When he was in the consulting-room he drew the articles from his overcoat pocket, and, laying them on the desk, sat down to examine them. Nipper, who had been at work at a desk in the corner, glanced at the articles, then at Lee.

"Did you find those things, sir?" he asked.

Lee shook his head as he sat down.

"No, my lad," he said. "But they have come into my hands in a most curious manner."

He told Nipper briefly what had happened. Then, turning the gold mesh bag upside down, he shook it. There was a rattle as something fell out on to the desk, and, laying the bag to one side, Lee saw that it was a small key. He examined it in a cursory manner, then, lifting up the packet which had been secured with blue sealing-wax, he gazed at it tentatively.

"I'll not break these seals yet," he murmured as he laid it down. "I think I'd better read the letter first."

Picking it up, he slit the flap and took out the folded sheet of paper which it contained. But inside there was not the explanation he sought—only a few brief words had been written, and these Lee read over with a puzzled frown. This is what he read:

"I beseech you to come to the following address to-night, at nine. I need your help. The address is: Number 22x, Church Street, Chelsea."

That was all—not a word about the gold bag, the key, or the packet. Lee laid the letter down and frowned thoughtfully.

"How—what can be the meaning of this?" he muttered. "Can it be a hoax? I do not think so. I don't think for a moment that the girl was acting. It seems to me I remember seeing her before she spoke to me in Piccadilly. Now, where was it?"

He thought hard for a few moments. Then suddenly his brow cleared.

"I remember now," he said. "She sat near me in the Venetia tea-room, and she came out while I was chatting with Philips in the lobby. She must have been following me, and I hadn't noticed it. Now let me see. A gold mesh bag containing a key—it might be the key of a small safe or a despatch box—a sealed packet and this letter, which indicates a state of fear. The contents of that packet might enlighten me somewhat, but I am not sure that she intended me to open it. At any rate, I don't think I shall until I know more. Now the next thing to decide is, shall I go to this house in Chelsea to-night, or shall I not?"

It was more a matter of form than anything else for Nelson Lee to ask himself that last question, for already he was intrigued over the matter, and once his interest was aroused in a mystery it was very seldom that he passed it by. He had already decided to go to Chelsea that night, not only because the mystery of the thing had gripped him, but also because in the girl's eyes he had read a desperate appeal.

Therefore it was, Lee left Gray's Inn Road about half-past eight that evening, and, with the gold mesh bag and the packet in an inner pocket, hailed a taxi and drove through to King's Road, Chelsea.

He left the taxi in King's Road, just near the corner of Church Street, and, paying off the man, walked along Church Street in search of Number Twenty-two X. He found it well down on the left-hand side. The house proved to be one of those old-fashioned places still to be found in certain parts of Chelsea, and reminding one of the days when Chelsea and Fulham and beyond were wide fields and country lanes.

The house sat within its own grounds well back from the street. Lee pushed open the gate and walked leisurely up the path. Not a single light showed anywhere in the house, and, sitting back from the road as it did, frowning gloomily upon the ever encroaching city, it seemed indeed a place of mystery itself.

Lee came to the steps which led up to an old-fashioned porch, then, pausing, he lifted his hand to raise the knocker. As he did so he found to his surprise that the door was not tightly closed. The pressure of his hand pushed it inwards, but no light revealed the details of the black hall which he knew must lay beyond.

Holding on to the knocker, Lee drew the door almost closed again. Then he let the knocker fall. The sound echoed and re-echoed as though through an empty house. But the next moment Lee heard the sound of footsteps within, and the next second the door was opened from the inside.

"Come in!" said a low voice.

And, in obedience to the invitation, Nelson Lee stepped over the sill. He started to turn his head as he did so, for the hall was so black he could not see his way, and it annoyed him a little that there was no light. But just as he did so there came a swishing sound close to him, and the next moment he reeled back under a heavy blow from some hard instrument.

Even as a million stars danced before his eyes, Lee saw that he had walked into a trap of some sort. With an effort to recover from the effects of the blow he staggered back, seeking to find his way through the door on to the porch. But before he could reach it the door slammed, and then a second heavy blow caught him on the shoulder.

Filled with anger at this surprise attack upon him, Lee gathered himself together and drove his clenched fist through the darkness. It thudded against a human body, and a grunt sounded as his invisible assailant was driven back.

Lee followed up his blow with another and another, but his last effort was expended on thin air, for the other had either dropped to the floor or dodged to one side. Lee got his back against the door and waited. He could hear heavy panting near him, but could not locate the sound exactly.

He dodged quickly as there came another swishing through the air. And well was it that he did so, for the next instant a terrific blow resounded from the door. Lee made a quick grab through the darkness, endeavouring to catch hold of the weapon, whatever it might be, but his fingers merely slipped past something which he took to be a heavy cudgel, and before he could launch himself forward a violent blow caught him between the eyes.

He strove to stand upright, and fought to retain his reeling senses, but the shock had been too much. And, with the mastery of his will slowly slipping from him, he lurched forward to the floor, striking out one feeble, ineffectual blow as he fell.

Only the sound of heavy panting followed Lee's fall for some minutes. Then the soft opening and closing of a door was heard somewhere down the hall, and a sibilant whisper came through the darkness.

"Is it all right?"

Lee's assailant had dropped to his knees and was running his hands over Lee's face.

"I've settled him," he whispered back. "Come and help me get him out of the way."

The soft scrape of feet being dragged cautiously over the carpet followed, and a few seconds later another man knelt down by the door.

"Where shall we take him?" he said.

"Into the dining-room," grunted the other. "Catch hold of his heels. I'll take his shoulders."

Lifting Lee up, they made their way carefully down the dark hall until they reached the door which had been opened and closed a few seconds before. There the man ahead dropped one of Lee's feet until he had turned the handle, then, catching hold again, he kicked the door open with his foot.

"Where will we put him?" he whispered.

"Put him on the floor by the table, that will do," grunted the other. "Then we'd better get away from here. It's been one of the biggest fizzes I've ever seen."

"Who can this bloke be?" asked the first speaker.

"How in blazes do I know?" snarled the other. "I thought he was a bobby when I slammed him, but he isn't."

"He might be a plain-clothes man," suggested the other.

"What would a plain-clothes man be doing here?" demanded his companion. "Hold your torch here, and let's have a look at him."

A moment later a circle of light fell on Lee's features, and behind, in the shadow, were revealed the indistinct outlines of the other two. As they bent closer, however, their features came within the penumbra of the light. One of them was heavy and coarse and brutal, the other thin and sharp and acquisitive. Both faces were criminal.

They studied Lee's features intently, but evidently that told them nothing, for no hint of recognition filled their eyes.

"I don't know this bloke," said the heavy featured one.

"Hold the light closer," snapped the other. "I'll see what he's got in his pocket."

Now it had not been with any special intent that Nelson Lee had refrained from putting anything in his pockets that evening which would indicate his identity. His cigarette-case, his match-box, and his watch all bore his initials, but that was all. In his hip pocket was his automatic, and beyond that he had his money and keys. In an inner pocket was the gold mesh bag and the sealed packet.

The sharp-featured one glanced only casually at Lee's watch, cigarette case, and match-box. An odd smile creased his lips, however, as he came upon the automatic, and thrusting his hand into his hip pocket, he took out his own weapon. Laying this on the floor beside Lee, he thrust Lee's automatic into his pocket, then proceeded with his search. As he came upon the gold mesh bag and the sealed packet, a sharp whistling sound escaped him, and his eyes met those of his companion.

"Well, this beats the Dutch," he muttered. "The thing fizzles out, and we find we've had all our trouble for nothing. Then, just as we are about to beat it, the thing drops into our hands. I don't understand it."

"Are you sure that's it?" asked the other eagerly.

"Well, if it isn't, it's mighty like it. It answers the description all right. Come on, we'll leave this bloke here, and get away while we can."

The light was switched off, and they got to their feet. They crept across to the door, and there was a rattling sound while one of them drew out the key and thrust it in from the outside. Then they closed the door and locked it.

They stole up the hall to the front door, and, opening it a few inches, stood listening.

"It's all right," whispered one. "Come on."

They crept out on to the porch and closed the door after them. They walked rapidly down the path to the street, then, slipping through the gate like two sinister shadows, they hurried along to mingle with the crowds in King's Road.

Five minutes—ten minutes—a quarter of an hour went by, and still Nelson Lee lay unconscious in the dining-room of that house which sat in silence and darkness. Then, however, a faint spark of consciousness filled the void like a distant star, growing and growing as it hurtled onwards towards the line of conscious thought and action.

Lee stirred restlessly, and opened his eyes in pitch blackness. He lay there for a few minutes endeavouring to understand why he was where he was, and how he had come there. Suddenly remembrance flashed upon him, and he stretched out his hand to feel what might be near him. He encountered the leg of a table, and his wrist was swept by the cloth which hung from it. The size of the table leg and the texture of the cloth made him guess that it was a dining table with the cover laid.

Recollecting that he had been knocked down by the hall door, he rolled over and got stiffly to his feet. He stood rocking back and forth for a few minutes; then, as his head stopped reeling, he thrust out both hands before him and moved cautiously ahead until his fingers encountered a wall.

He waited there for a little, then, feeling mechanically in his pocket, searched for his match-box. Suddenly he paused.

"Someone has been through my pockets," he muttered. "I knew my match-box was in the lower right-hand pocket of my waistcoat."

He found it in the upper left-hand pocket, and, striking a vesta, held the flickering flame above his head. He found himself facing the door, and saw a switch on the wall close beside it. As the flame burned close to his finger he blew out the match, and walked across until his outstretched hands came in contact with the door. Then, running his hands up and down, he found the switch and pressed it.

The next moment the room was flooded with light, and turning, Nelson Lee gazed upon his surroundings. A startled cry escaped his lips, and hurrying across to the table, he bent down over the figure of a man, which was slouched forward in one of the chairs. In front of him were a few nuts and an overturned glass of port, which had spread across the cloth in a great crimson stain. On the floor close beside his chair a cigarette had burnt itself out in the thick pile of the carpet.

Standing as he was, Lee could not see the man's features, for his chin rested on his chest, and both arms hung slackly down over the sides of the chair.

In the centre of his white shirt was a crimson stain very similar to that on the cloth. It looked as though he might have spilt some of the port

while sipping it. But as Lee bent closer he saw that the stain on the white shirt-front was not the stain of wine, but that it was the life blood of the man who slouched in the chair!

A very brief examination proved that he was dead. But the rigidity of death had not stiffened his body. And his throat and wrists, Lee discovered, were still warm. Lee lifted his head and gazed towards the door.

"Whoever fired the bullet that caused death came by that door," he muttered. "It is in a dead straight line with his heart, and the bullet was fired within the hour. That much is certain. Murder is what it is, and it must have taken place a very few minutes before I reached the house."

Bending over once more, Lee lifted the dead man's head, and gazed at his features. He saw that he was a man past middle age, for his hair was white, as were his neatly trimmed beard and moustache. Yet even in death the man's face held an expression of power and dignity.

It had the stamp of the executive about it—it was the face of a man accustomed to command. And now, as Lee glanced at the plain though expensive furniture in the room, he realised that the dead man must have possessed considerable means.

But what could have been the motive of murder? On the sideboard were several pieces of valuable plate which had not been disturbed. If robbery had been the motive it was strange that the perpetrators of the deed had not taken the plate with them.

Then, suddenly, Lee remembered what had brought him to that house. He recalled the meeting with the girl in Piccadilly, and the urgent, almost desperate character of the letter.

Mechanically his hand went to the inner pocket of his coat in search of the gold mesh bag and the packet, and a look of puzzlement appeared in his eyes when he discovered that they were no longer there.

Swiftly he went through every pocket, but without success.

"I knew my pockets had been gone through," he muttered. "They have left all my own things, but have taken the—— Hallo! What's this?"

His eyes had just fallen on the automatic which lay on the floor, and bending down he picked it up. Swiftly his hand went to his hip pocket.

"Mine has gone," he said. "And this isn't it. Mine was a forty-five calibre, and this is only a thirty-eight. Now what's the meaning of all this? Where are the servants? Where is the girl? Isn't there anyone else in this house but myself and this dead man?"

He thrust the automatic in his pocket, and went back to the dead man. Quickly he went through the pockets of the other's dinner-jacket, but there was nothing there to indicate the man's identity.

"I'll go and have a look about the house," muttered Lee. "The servants should be somewhere about. I wonder if this is the girl's father? And I wonder if she feared something like this when she appealed to me to-day."

He moved across to the door as he spoke, and, turning the handle, pulled; but it did not yield.

"Locked, eh!" he grunted. "It looks to me as though my unknown assailants tried to plant me in a very compromising position. But if I can't get out by the door, perhaps I can manage by the window. But I'd better turn the lights out in order to avoid being seen."

He lifted his hand and pressed down the switch, and as the room was plunged into darkness once more, he stood listening, for a sound in the hall outside had caught his ears.

Lee waited long enough to discover that the sound came from the front door. Then, feeling his way across the room, he lifted the heavy curtains

which hung over the window. He pressed back the window-catch, and lifted the sash.

As he leaned out he saw that it was only a short drop to the garden path beneath, and, climbing over the sill, he lowered himself to the ground. Then, getting on to the turf, he stoled along through the garden until he came to a high fence in the rear. He climbed over the fence, and dropped into a lane which ran at the back. Then he followed the course of the lane until he came to a turning which brought him out into Church Street.

Lee paused at the entrance to the lane for a few minutes, then he lit a cigarette and walked up Church Street again in the direction of Number Twenty-two X.

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery Deepens.

AS Lee walked up the path for the second time that evening, he saw that some of the lights had been turned on in the hall. Pausing on the porch, he lifted the knocker and rapped sharply, and the next moment the door was opened by a police-constable.

He did not know Lee, and glanced curiously at him. Lee, who had not expected to find the police in the house, was in a dilemma. He did not wish to reveal the fact that he had already been there once that evening. Yet he could not ask for anyone by name. Therefore he simply said:

"My name is Nelson Lee."

"Oh! Did they telephone for you, sir?" asked the constable, throwing wide the door.

Lee did not reply, but bent his head slightly, as though in assent.

"We've telephoned for Inspector Brooks, sir," went on the constable. "He ought to be here very soon now."

"Where are the others?" asked Lee.

"Down there," replied the man, pointing towards the end of the hall.

Lee nodded, and made his way in the direction of the dining-room. The door was slightly ajar, and, pushing it open, he saw that a sergeant and two constables were in the room. The sergeant happened to be a man whom Lee knew. And as he recognised the detective, his brow cleared.

"I didn't know they had sent for you, Mr. Lee," he said.

"I was asked to come," replied Lee. Which was true enough, for the girl had done so in her letter. "What's the trouble, sergeant?"

"Murder!" answered the sergeant bluntly.

"Do you know any of the details?" asked Lee.

"Not many. About twenty minutes ago two young ladies came into the police-station and asked us to come round here at once—said the place had been broken into, and that a shot had been fired. We rushed round, and when we turned on the lights, found the door of this room locked on the outside with the key in the lock.

"On entering the room we saw this man sitting here just as you see him now. He was stone dead—shot through the heart. The lower sash of the window was up, as though someone had left the room that way. We found the cook and two maids trussed up and gagged in the kitchen. They're having hysterics now. That's about all we know so far, but I've telephoned for Inspector Brooks to come at once. I did not know the young ladies had sent for you."

"Where are they now?" asked Lee.

"They're in the study across the hall. I wanted them to go to their rooms, but they won't until the inspector has arrived."

"Is this their father?" asked Lee, indicating the dead man.

"Yes, sir," answered the sergeant.

"Then I think while we're waiting for the inspector I'll go across and speak to them," said Lee.

The sergeant nodded and went on with his examination, while Lee left the room and crossed the hall.

Tapping on the door which he judged would open to the study, he waited until an indistinct voice answered him.

Turning the handle he opened the door and entered a small but most comfortably furnished study. It was lit only by a big, heavily shaded reading-lamp which stood on the centre table, and at first Lee could scarcely distinguish the figures of the two girls who sat on either side of the open fire.

As he moved towards the table, however, one of them rose and came towards him. As she neared the table Lee saw the features of the girl who had spoken to him in Piccadilly that afternoon. But the next moment he experienced a severe shock as, controlling her sobs, she said:

"Are you Inspector Brooks?"

For a moment Lee was dumbfounded. Standing as he was close beside the table she could not have the slightest difficulty in distinguishing his features, and yet she had asked him if he were Inspector Brooks. Before he had time to get over his astonishment the second girl rose, and taking her handkerchief from her eyes, said chokingly:

"The--the sergeant is in the other room, inspector. Will you go to him first?"

Then Lee received his second shock, for the girl who had just risen also wore the features of the one who had spoken to him in Piccadilly that afternoon. They were both of the same height and the same figure. Their gowns were exactly similar in every respect, being made of some soft, filmy blue stuff.

Each wore a diamond pendant of the same pattern, and each had a diamond and turquoise earring in her ears. The hair of each was coal black and the eyes grey. Their facial features had been cast from the same mould.

Never in his life had Lee seen a more startling likeness, and though he scrutinised them closely he could pick out no single feature which would distinguish one from the other. It was almost uncanny.

"I am not Inspector Brooks," he said, after a few moments. "I am Nelson Lee, as one of you at least must know."

He watched them closely while he spoke, but neither of them betrayed the slightest hint in intelligence at his words.

"I came here to-night at nine o'clock, as one of you requested," went on Lee. "I cannot tell which one it was you are so much alike. I brought with me the gold mesh bag and the packet. But I regret to say that I have lost both since my arrival."

Still both girls gazed at him as though they did not understand what he was talking about. A feeling of annoyance crept over Lee, and bending forward a little, he said:

"I do not think this the time for subterfuge. A tragedy has happened here to-night—a tragedy which one of you at least must have feared would happen, for you sought my aid. Without knowing why I came I did so, and arrived here just a few minutes after the tragedy must have taken place. I know now it was when you both had gone for the police. No sooner did I set foot inside the house than I was attacked and knocked senseless.

When I regained my senses I found myself lying on the floor of the dining-room, and when I turned on the light I discovered what had occurred."

Here both the girls broke out sobbing afresh, and Lee said:

"I am sorry to have to mention this matter, but it must be spoken of. I got away from the house by means of the dining-room window, and made my way round to the front door again. The police think you telephoned for me before you went for them.

"Now, one of you, I don't know which one, met me in Piccadilly this afternoon and handed me three things. One was a gold-mesh bag containing a key, the second was a sealed paper pocket, and the third was a letter. The letter asked me in the most urgent terms to come here to-night at nine o'clock. I came.

"I regret that I lost both the gold-mesh bag and the paper packet. They were taken from me while I lay unconscious. I came as a friend; I came because I thought my help was needed. I arrived too late to prevent what you evidently feared would take place, but you must have had some warning of the danger before you wrote me the letter which you wrote. I am still prepared to act as your friend, and before this matter is finished with you may need one. Now will you tell me which one of you wrote that letter and what fear lay behind it."

He glanced from one to the other as he finished speaking, but they only returned his gaze blankly. Lee still waited, but when he saw that neither of them intended answering him he shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry," he said, bowing coldly. "I wanted to help you, if I could."

With that he turned and made his way to the door. As he opened it he paused for a moment looking back, then he passed out and closed it after him. And in the room behind him two girls who needed his help sorely were sobbing in each other's arms.

As Lee entered the dining-room once more he found that Inspector Brooks, of Scotland Yard, had just arrived. He shook hands with Lee.

"This is a nasty affair, Lee," he said. "What do you know about it?"

For several reasons Lee had made up his mind not to say anything to the inspector about having been in the house before that evening. He was considerably intrigued over the manner in which the two girls were acting, and he wanted to give it some thought.

One of them, he knew—so alike were they he could not tell which one—had spoken to him in Piccadilly that day and had written that note asking him to come there that evening. They had feared something then, and the thing they had feared had evidently happened before he got there.

Now for some reason or other the sisters were taking advantage of their likeness to baffle him, and to save his life he could not understand why.

Although Lee had watched them both very carefully neither of them had revealed by the slightest flicker of an eyelash that she was the one who had spoken to him that afternoon. Even when told of losing the gold-mesh bag and the packet one had shown no more expression than the other. And why was it? He couldn't understand. Their father had been shot down in cold blood, and it seemed to Lee that they should be anxious to tell all they knew—to reveal why they had sought his assistance that afternoon.

If they had needed him then to prevent what they feared would happen, did they not need him now, or did they know who had committed the crime and were they shielding that person. Was that the motive of their silence?

Lee was asking himself these questions while the inspector was making an examination of the dead man.

"What do you make of it, Lee?" he asked. "It strikes me that he was shot by someone standing at the other end of the table and who afterwards escaped by the window."

"Impossible," said Lee drily. "The sergeant will tell you that the door of the room was locked on the outside."

"So it was—so it was," muttered the inspector. "I had forgotten that. We'd better ask the young ladies and the servants what they know about it."

"The two girls are in the study across the hall," said Lee. "I think they're waiting to see if you wish to speak to them before they go to their room."

"Then I'll go across there at once," said the inspector. "Will you come, Lee?"

"I've just seen them," responded Lee. "But I haven't heard their story yet. I'll go along with you and hear what they have to say."

The inspector rapped on the door, then opening it, stepped into the study with Lee just behind him.

Lee noticed that the girls had resumed their seats in front of the fire, but they rose as he and the inspector entered, and Lee smiled grimly to himself as he saw the inspector's amazement at the startling likeness between the two. The inspector bowed heavily, and said:

"I am sorry to worry you to-night, but I would like you to tell me what you can about this sad affair."

Lee noticed that it was the girl who had first spoken to him—at least, he thought it was, for she had risen from the chair on the right of the fireplace—who took up the burden of answering the inspector.

"You are the inspector?" she asked.

The inspector bowed again.

"I am Inspector Brooks, of Scotland Yard," he said.

"I will tell you what I know," went on the girl. "We had been at dinner, and my sister and I left the table about half-past eight. Our father remained over his port as he always does. My sister and I came in here. It was about a quarter to nine when we heard a scream from the direction of the kitchen, and then someone rushed through the hall. Before we could reach the door we heard a shot; then we got the door open and found that the hall lights had been turned off."

"The door of the dining-room was closed, and running across the hall we tried to open it. It was locked on the inside. We pounded on it and shouted to our father, but he did not reply. Then we heard the sound of a shot or an explosion upstairs, and terror-stricken, we ran up the hall. We reached the street, and ran to King's Road, searching for a constable. We could not find one, but were directed to the police-station. The rest you know."

"When you opened the study door did you see anyone at all?" asked the inspector.

The girl shook her head.

"No; as I told you, the hall was in darkness. We heard someone rush through the hall when we opened the door, but did not see them."

"Did you hear anyone speak?"

"No."

"You have no idea how many persons there may have been?"

"No."

"Had your father any enemies that you know of?"

"No."

"By the way, miss," said the inspector, "what is your name?"

"Jessop," she replied. "My father was Henry P. Jessop, of New York."

"You are not English, then?" asked the inspector in surprise.

"No. My sister and I were educated in London and Paris, but we are Americans."

"How long have you lived in this country?"

"We have lived here less than a year now. It is only lately that we were able to persuade our father to live in London."

"Are there any others in family?"

"Yes; one brother."

"Where is he?"

"In London, I think."

"Are you not sure?"

"No."

"Does he not live at home?"

"No."

"How will you communicate with him in order to tell him what has happened?"

"I shall send a wire to him first thing in the morning."

The inspector nodded.

"I think you said, Miss Jessop, that in addition to hearing a shot you heard a report or an explosion upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the meaning of it?"

"I am not certain."

"What do you mean?"

"It seemed to come from my father's bedroom. He kept his safe up there."

"Very well, Miss Jessop, we shall have to go upstairs and investigate that point, but it will not be necessary for you and your sister to remain up any longer to-night. You need not feel nervous during the night, because I am leaving two of my men here."

The girl murmured her thanks. Then taking her sister by the arm, left the room.

"Well, Lee, what do you think of it now?" asked the inspector when he had closed the door after them.

Lee shrugged.

"I don't know, inspector," he responded. "I'd like to have a look at the bedroom, though."

"We will go up now," remarked the inspector opening the door.

As they reached the top of the stairs one of the sisters—Lee could not tell which—came along the hall and indicated the room which had been her father's. Before entering it they waited until she had disappeared into her own apartment, then the inspector opened the door and switched on the light. The very first glance showed plainly enough the cause of the explosion which the two girls heard, for in one corner of the room was a small safe, the door of which had been blown open. Lee and the inspector crossed the room and knelt down before it.

"A clean job and a quick one," said the inspector. "Whoever blew this safe open didn't waste any time in boring operations, he simply hung his stick of explosive over the knob of the combination, threw these blankets over the safe, then lit the fuse. The explosive was enough to do the job and no more. It blew the combination to pieces but didn't wreck the room. Now then, Lee, let us see if we can make anything of the inside."

Swinging the door to one side they examined the interior. On either

side were large open compartments for books and papers. In the centre was a small steel door forming a sort of inner safe, and beneath that a deep steel cash drawer. Both had been wrenched open violently. In the small compartment was a huge bundle of shares and bonds, with the broken tape which had bound them lying on one side. With the exception of a little silver the cash drawer was empty.

Lee reached in and took out the shares and bonds. As he did so a slip of folded paper was revealed, and opening it up, he saw that it was a detailed list of shares and bonds.

"This must be the list of what should be in the bundle," he said, showing it to the inspector. "Shall we check up and see?"

The inspector nodded and took the slip.

"All right," he said. "I'll call them out and you can see if they're there."

Lee nodded and picked up one of the bonds.

"Perhaps it would be quicker," he said, "if I ran through them and you check them off the list."

"All right, if that will be quicker."

So Lee began with some New York City Bonds, and slowly and carefully he went through the packet, while the inspector checked off on the list. When Lee had finished he looked up.

"How does it check out?" he asked. "Are they all there?"

"All but one lot," replied the inspector.

"What is it?" asked Lee.

"It is an item of fifty thousand dollars in City of Chicago, four per cent Bearer Bonds," answered the inspector. "I didn't hear you call them out."

"Nor did I," said Lee. "I should have remembered the item had I done so. Moreover, I think you said, inspector, they were Bearer Bonds, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And if I remember rightly, there are no other Bearer Bonds in the list?"

"No, you're right," said the inspector, running his eye rapidly down the paper.

"Which means," said Lee, "that the only bonds not here are those which can be negotiated by anyone. I think it is safe, too, to add the cash—amount unknown—which was in the cash drawer."

The inspector grunted.

"That gives us the motive for the crime all right," he said, getting stiffly to his feet. "Jessop must have been worth a fair amount of money. That list represents nearly two hundred thousand pounds worth of shares and bonds, and all gilt-edged."

Lee nodded.

"I rather fancy he was a little eccentric," he said. "I shouldn't be surprised if you find that these shares and bonds represent practically his whole fortune. What will you do with them, inspector?"

"I'll seal them up in the safe for the present," replied the inspector. "We've got the crime and we've got the motive, the next thing to do is to find the perpetrators."

"Yes, that's the next step," said Lee thoughtfully; "and I don't think it's going to be any too easy."

"It was done by somebody who knew that he kept his wealth in this safe, and that the safe was in this room. It was somebody, too, who knew enough to take the Bearer Bonds and leave the others. It was no ordinary

thief who did it, either. It was someone who was prepared to shoot and did shoot. And the shooting was not done in self defence. That's what puzzles me, Lee; it was rank murder, and I can't see where they needed to do it to get away with the stuff. It would have been just as easy to have held him up while they looted the safe. What do you think yourself?"

"I think, inspector," said Lee slowly, "that the shooting was inspired by some deeper motive than just the robbing of the safe. What immediate steps will you take?"

"I'll get the drag-net out," replied the inspector, "and rake in every man I can find who is capable of shooting. There's no sense in bothering with ordinary second-storey men. This job was never done by anyone of that class, and men who would kill are not so plentiful even in London that we won't be able to net most of them. What do you intend doing, Lee?"

The inspector was still under the impression that Lee had been sent for privately by the two girls, and not caring yet to explain his position in the matter, Lee merely shrugged.

"I don't see anything to do at present except what you propose doing, inspector," he said. "I'll give the matter serious thought to-night, and perhaps something will occur to me. When you have made your round up, perhaps, you will let me know how you figure out?"

"I will," promised the inspector as he turned out the lights.

They descended the stairs then, and Lee waited in the hall while the inspector spoke to his men. They left the house together and walked along to King's Road where they succeeded in getting a taxi.

Lee dropped the inspector at Scotland Yard, then told the man to drive on to Gray's Inn Road. And once back in the consulting-room, Nelson Lee filled his pipe, and drawing up before the fire, began to analyse the strange events which had occurred since that afternoon.

CHAPTER III.

Lee's Deductions—Nipper Follows a Trail.

IN an attempt to analyse the problem which confronted him, Nelson Lee began at the most logical point for beginning, namely, the moment when the girl had spoken to him in Piccadilly.

"For all practical purposes," he murmured, "any deductions I may be able to make must begin at that point. In the first place, it is evident that the girl—which one of them it was I cannot tell—was in desperate need of help or advice. It is plain that she had taken the trouble to find out about me, or, at least, to locate me. She probably had heard of me, and fixed on me as a person who might help her. Having decided on that point she watched my movements and followed me to the Venetia. That she sat at a table near me I am certain. She probably did not like to speak to me there so followed me when I left the Venetia, and then when I paused on the kerb at Berkeley Street, seized that moment to approach me.

"Now then, why did she approach me? As I have always said, because she needed help. Why did she need help? Undoubtedly the reason had something to do with the articles which she handed me. First, there is the gold mesh bag to consider. That, I think, may be eliminated. In my opinion it served merely as a receptacle for the key. That key, I am certain, fitted the safe in the bedroom. At any rate, it was about the size which would have fitted that lock.

"Now, why should she hand me the key of that safe? The obvious

reason would seem to be to place it beyond someone's reach. Beyond whose reach? Beyond the reach of a person who desired access to the safe. That person could scarcely be her father since the contents of the safe were his property. Nor is it likely that it was her sister. It might have been her brother—it might have been someone else. But whoever it was undoubtedly knew where the key was kept, and also had some definite reason for desiring to open the safe.

"Now, it strikes me that if Mr. Jessop himself knew the security of the contents of the safe were menaced, he himself would have taken proper steps to protect them. But I incline to the theory that he was ignorant of this menace, or, at least, unaware that it had assumed a concrete form. I think it was the secret of either one or both of the girls.

"Now, for whom would they go to such lengths to protect their father's property, and at the same time hide the menace from him? Who else but their brother? To the inspector, Miss Jessop said the brother did not live at home. Yet he is in London. Why does he not live at home? If he is a trustworthy young man, why did the girl not appeal to him for protection instead of to me, a stranger? Why, unless the protection were needed against him? I feel exceedingly suspicious of that brother. But without more evidence in the matter I cannot form a definite opinion.

"Now, to consider the sealed packet which she handed to me. I am sorry now that I did not open it. From its pliability I feel certain it contained documents of some sort. Those documents, Miss Jessop apparently desired to place in safe keeping. From the events which have occurred this evening it seems that fifty thousand dollars or ten thousand pounds worth of Bearer Bonds are missing from the safe.

"My deduction already point to the fact that it was Miss Jessop's desire to protect some particular item among the contents of the safe. What item could be more probable than that ten thousand pounds worth of Bearer Bonds which could be negotiated by anyone. And I strongly suspect that the sealed packet which she gave into my keeping contained those bonds.

"The girl knew they were in danger and, probably, without the knowledge of her father, opened the safe and took them out. She intended leaving them and the safe key in my care until the danger was passed. She must have thought that danger imminent, because her letter revealed a desperate and immediate fear.

"Did she hope that if the worst came to the worst, and the lack of a key did not prevent this person from forcing open the safe, that the fact that the Bearer Bonds were not there would end the matter for the time being at least?

"Did she hope to stave it off until she had sought advice in the matter and had decided what had best be done? I must say the matter points strongly to such a theory."

"But let us see what subsequent events indicate. On my arrival at the house to-night I find that the crisis which she feared had already been precipitated. Her father had been murdered, and the house was in control of the perpetrators of the crime. The assault upon myself I may pass over; it had nothing to do with the murder. My appearance at the moment must have been an intense surprise to the criminals. They may have thought it was a constable, or some casual visitor. But, in any event, they determined to deal effectually with him, and they did so.

"On regaining consciousness, I discover that I have been dragged into the dining-room and locked in. It is there I discover, too, the crime which had been committed. I myself have been robbed of the things which were given into my care, and that sealed packet contained the ten thousand

pounds worth of Bearer Bonds, if it was the motive, or even part of the motive, of the crime which was committed there to-night, then by sheer accident did those criminals achieve their purpose."

"Up to that moment they must have considered the whole affair a failure. From what Miss Jessop said to the inspector, it seems that the shot which killed Mr. Jessop was fired before the safe was blown open, not afterwards. Therefore, his murder was not due to anger on the part of the criminals that the thing which they sought in the safe was not there, which, to my mind, proves that his murder was part of the object in view when they went there to-night. Now it stands to reason, as well as being indicated by what Miss Jessop said, that there was more than one person mixed up in the crime.

"I did not hear the servants' testimony, but it stands to reason that one person could not bind and gag the servants, shoot the old man, and blow open the safe in the space of time during which these things occurred. Now, my analysis of the motive which inspired the girl to give the key and the packet into my safe keeping—I have proved myself a poor guardian I am afraid—pointed strongly to the fact that not only did she desire to protect her father's property, but that she also desired to prevent someone from doing a criminal act.

"With the amount of evidence in hand, that person was strongly indicated as being the brother. So far as the problem centred about those Bearer Bonds, such a theory seemed tenable. But murder—I don't know—I don't know. There is more than one indication that the murder of Henry P. Jessop was premeditated. It was not the corollary of the blowing open of the safe, because he was killed before the safe was blown open. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the person who was a menace to the security of the contents of the safe was the son and brother!

"Let us reconstruct a possible crime. Supposing one or both of the sisters knew that the son had designs on these Bearer Bonds. Supposing he had even gone so far as to threaten, in the presence of his sisters, to steal them. Then the sisters, we will say, determined to protect him against himself, as well as to safeguard their father's property. Yet, not to be deterred by this, the brother enters the house, and, while his father sits at dinner, makes his way stealthily to the room in which the safe is kept.

"He knows, as the sisters know, the hiding-place of the key, for it seems that Jessop did not carry it on his person. He would find the key gone. Perhaps his sister had told him she would remove it. But he would have come prepared. While his father sat unsuspectingly over his dessert and port and the two girls shivered in fear in the study, the boy, now utterly reckless, attaches the explosive to the safe and lights the fuse. He counts on finding the bonds he desired and getting away before his father comes up.

"Now, supposing that Jessop, hearing the sound of the explosion, jumps up from the table and rushes up to his bedroom. In circumstances such as those the boy, desperate and with every nerve at concert pitch, might—I say might, advisedly—shoot. But that is not what happened. Henry P. Jessop was shot down in cold blood before the safe was broken open. And the crime was committed by one of two types of persons—either by a professional criminal, to whom that murder would be but one of several, or, if by a blood relative, then by one who was a maundering decadent. Which was it? If I am right in suspecting the son of the lesser crime, are the rest of my deductions strong enough to suspect him of the greater crime? That is a point which I cannot—I dare not—decide upon until I have had a chance to study him at close range.

"But of this I am convinced—the explanation of at least a part of this

mystery lies with the brother. And in order to gain enlightenment on that point, two things must be accomplished. The brother must be tracked down and one or both of the girls forced to talk. If I only knew which one it was who spoke to me in Piccadilly. If I could only decide which is which. But the truth there can only come if one of them forgets herself for a single moment, for the eye of man will never be able to distinguish between those two sisters.

"This first point of necessity I shall turn Nipper on to. The second I shall attend to myself. And the lad can hardly get started too early in the morning."

With that, Lee rose, and, opening the door of the consulting-room, made his way along to Nipper's bedroom.

* * * * *

It was still early the next morning when Nipper started out from Gray's Inn Road. Lee had told the lad what he required of him, and, in preparation for what he had to do, Nipper had carefully disguised himself. He had adopted the character of an Italian boy—a character which, owing to his command of the Italian language, he could fill with little risk of detection.

Heavy black boots, corduroy bags, a black coat, and a coloured neckerchief, with a large cap drawn well down, completed the make-up. And as he swung aboard a 'bus bound for Chelsea, certainly no casual observer would have taken him for other than he appeared to be.

He jumped off the 'bus at Church Street, and, sauntering along, passed Number Twenty-two X. He had definite instructions from Lee. He was there to watch for a certain thing, and must remain on the spot until it occurred—if it did occur.

He had bought a paper in King's Road, and now, as he walked along, he read a brief report of the murder. The Press had already got hold of the affair, and as he passed Number Twenty-two X he saw two men whom he knew to be reporters, walking up the path to the house.

As he drew just opposite it he saw the uniform of the constable who opened the door, then noticed that the two reporters were refused admittance. While the police had apparently issued a statement to the Press, it seemed that they did not intend, for the present, to allow any reporters to interfere in the affair.

Nipper strolled on past the place, and, on reaching the bend in Church Street, turned to come back. It was as he retraced his steps that he found a convenient spot to sit down and keep watch. And from this point of vantage he studied the persons who were admitted to the house and those who were turned away. It was easy enough to classify the various police officials, the doctor and the coroner. It was not difficult, either, to pick out the different reporters who had been sent out by their papers to get what further particulars they could.

In this way Nipper filled in the time until nearly eleven o'clock. Then he saw the door of the house open and two girls, dressed in black, with heavy black veils obscuring their features, come out and walk slowly towards the street.

"Those are the sisters," he muttered to himself. "Here's where my work begins."

They turned up Church Street towards King's Road, and, when they had got along some little distance, Nipper sauntered after them. They turned the corner into King's Road, then he quickened his footsteps. He was just in time to swing aboard a 'bus after them, and, going up on top, watched over the side to see when they might get off.

The 'bus went down King's Road, through Sloane Square into Lower Sloane Street, then along to Victoria. As it stopped in front of the Victoria Palace Nipper saw the two girls get off, and, hurrying down the steps, he crossed the street in their wake. They walked round the corner into Ashley Place, then, as they came to the great cathedral, passed inside.

Nipper hung about at the corner of Ashley Gardens for about a quarter of an hour. Then he saw one of the girls emerge. As she crossed the street and took her way round to Victoria Street, Nipper stood in indecision.

Now that they had separated it was difficult for him to tell what to do. Should he follow the one who had just emerged from the church, or should he remain and watch the other one?

He decided that events warranted him in following the first one. As he made the decision he turned and followed the girl round into Victoria Street. He saw that she had walked along to the Victoria Palace again, and he was just in time to spring on the 'bus which she had boarded. She descended at Charing Cross, and when she entered the station Nipper was close at her heels.

He noted by the station clock that it was just noon, and then he saw the girl ahead of him pause and look about her as though she expected someone. She was standing there only a few minutes when a young man approached her, and, drawing a little closer, Nipper scrutinised him closely.

He saw a face which was haggard with dissipation, and the shaky, almost furtive, manner of the young man indicated a nervous and mental strain which was racking his control.

He could not see the expression on the girl's face, for she kept her veil down. But the heaving of her shoulders told him that she was crying.

"I'll wager that that's the brother of whom the guv'nor spoke," he muttered, as the pair turned and walked over to one side of the station.

He moved along after them and watched while the girl spoke earnestly and rapidly to the young man. All during her talk the sulky, heavy expression on the young man's face did not lift. And when the girl placed her hand on his arm, as though pleading with him, he shook it off.

For over half an hour they sat there, the girl doing most of the talking. Then they rose, and, with what appeared to Nipper to be still one more effort to plead with him, the girl walked slowly across to the exit.

They parted there, and as the girl hurried past him Nipper could see that she was crying. He hesitated a single moment, then, as the young man passed out of the station towards the Strand, Nipper dodged after him.

He trailed him closely down the Strand until he saw his quarry swing aboard a 'bus. Nipper was close at his heels, and, following the young man to the top, sat down behind him. The 'bus took its way down Fleet Street, past St. Paul's and along to the Bank, where it turned up Cornhill. From there it made its way on to Aldgate, and at Aldgate the young man descended.

Nipper trailed him along through several streets which grew narrower and more malodorous each moment. And as they went along Nipper did not dream for a single moment that he, too, had been trailed all the way from Charing Cross.

At last the young man ahead turned down into a gloomy, dirty court, where ragged children were playing and slatternly women were gossiping.

At the far end of the court there appeared to be a covered passage way leading out of the place, and towards this the young man headed. Nipper saw him dodge into a doorway just before he reached the covered passage and disappear from view.

The lad did not pause in his course. Now that he had the house located,

It was his intention to continue on through the covered passage way and come out in the street beyond. But just as he drew opposite the door of the house into which his quarry had disappeared there came a quick rush of footsteps behind him, and Nipper turned just in time to see a burly ruffian bearing down upon him. Before the lad could dodge the other had thrown his arms about him, and, by the impetus of his rush, carried Nipper through the doorway into the house.

They fell just inside, and then, jerking out a heavy automatic, Nipper's assailant clubbed it and brought the butt down between the lad's eyes with terrific force.

Nipper made one feeble effort to rise; then, as a second blow caught him, he plunged into unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER IV.

Shanghaied—Nipper's Escape—Nelson Lee Receives a Shock.

NIPPER regained consciousness with the slow realisation that there was a heavy, steady throbbing pain in his side. Painfully he opened his eyes, and as he did so became aware of the fact that a big bearded man was standing over him, kicking him into consciousness.

"So you've woke up at last," he snarled, as the lad's eyes opened.

Then he bent over, and, grasping Nipper by the collar, jerked him to his feet.

"Get out there and get to work," he growled, with a curse.

The next instant Nipper was propelled forward by a savage kick, and a moment later he struck the open air and went sprawling on his face. Not until that moment was Nipper's consciousness able to grasp the meaning of the heaving motion which was all about him.

At first he had ascribed it to the painful throbbing of his head; but now, as he got unsteadily to his feet, he realised he was on board a ship. He staggered to the side, and, leaning against the rail, drank in the ozone in great gulps. The salty air served to revive him still more. But it was some time before he was able to force his mind to work clearly.

Slowly he recalled the events which had occurred before he had been clubbed into unconsciousness. But from that moment to the present everything was an utter blank. He saw that he was on board a small tramp steamer; but how he had got there, or whither they might be bound, he had not the remotest idea.

Nor did he have long for conjecture, for the next moment he saw another unfortunate individual forcibly propelled from the fore-castle. Then the big bearded personage appeared and began bawling orders. Somehow, he scarcely knew how it happened, Nipper found himself in possession of a piece of holystone, and someone had given him orders to holystone part of the deck.

Although he had never actually performed the work, Nipper had often seen it done, and he had a fairly good working idea how to go about it. He knew now that he had been shanghaied, and he knew, too, how utterly useless it would be for him to protest. Such a move would but serve to bring down upon him the anger of the bearded one, whom he now thought was the first mate. There was nothing for it but to swallow his chagrin and to the best of his ability do what he was told.

It was still early morning, as he could tell from the position of the sun; but whether it were the morning after he had followed his quarry from

Charing Cross to Aldgate, or several mornings after, he had no means of knowing.

Off to port no land was visible, but on the starboard quarter Nipper could make out a faint line of green, which he guessed was the south coast of England. If that were so, it meant they were running down the English Channel, and it just happened that in this surmise the lad was correct.

Up on the bridge was a stout, coarse-looking man, whom he took to be the captain. The bearded individual who had kicked him on to the deck was here, there, and everywhere. And not desiring to attract his attention, Nipper worked strenuously at his holystoning, though his head was still reeling, and at times it was all he could do to stand up.

As he worked his way down the deck, going through the motions of that back-breaking and most hated of shipboard jobs, he noticed that he was drawing closer to another individual, who was also holystoning the deck.

It was not until they had drawn much nearer to each other, however, that Nipper suddenly saw, to his amazement, that the man's face was familiar to him.

For a moment he was puzzled as to where he had seen it before. Then, suddenly, the truth flashed upon him. It was the same young man whom he had followed from Charing Cross to Aldgate. His presence on board intrigued Nipper more even than did his own predicament. Now he remembered that the young man had also been kicked out of the forecastle on to the deck, and that such a man-handling indicated that he, too, had been shanghaied. That puzzled Nipper more than a little. He had only a vague remembrance of the man who had attacked him, and bludgeoned him into unconsciousness.

In recalling the events that had occurred he had taken it for granted that his assailant had been a confederate of the young man whom he had followed—a confederate who in some way had spotted Nipper, and in turn had followed him. In these deductions Nipper was perfectly correct, but the trouble was his analysis of what had occurred did not go far enough. It was perfectly true that he had been attacked by a confederate of young Jessop's. But it was also true that Jessop had been shanghaied as well as Nipper, and by his own confederates, too. But this, Nipper was not to discover until later.

As his work carried him within a few feet of Jessop he saw that the other gave no hint of recognition. Just at that moment the bearded mate came along, and noting the rebellious manner in which young Jessop was doing his work, he roared out an oath and started for him.

Jessop turned on the mate with a snarl, but the latter's fist caught him full in the mouth, and sent him sprawling into the scuppers. Jessop got unsteadily to his feet, with the blood streaming down his chin; and snatching up a belaying pin he started for the mate.

Nipper went on working steadily. There was nothing for him to do, and he knew the inevitable ending of such an equal contest. Before Jessop could strike, the mate sprang in and drove another smashing blow to Jessop's face.

Jessop went down again, and, roaring like an enraged bull, the mate kicked him and kicked him until he lay a huddled, unconscious heap in the scuppers.

The mate then turned round and glared at Nipper, but the lad was working away industriously; and the mate satisfied himself by simply cursing the lad. As he disappeared aft Nipper dropped the stick with which he had been pushing the holystone, and snatching up a bucket of water which stood near doused the contents in Jessop's face.

The young fellow opened his eyes, and Nipper helped him to his feet.

"You're playing a fool's game when you buck the mate," he said. "It's bound to end the same every time."

Jessop clutched the rail unsteadily.

"I don't care," he said weakly. "I don't know how I got aboard here, but I did not come of my own free will, and I'm not going to work for them."

"You'll change your mind about that," said Nipper. "Take my advice, and buckle down to business. I was shanghaied, too; but there's nothing to be gained by refusing to work. While we're at sea we're helpless, and the only way to escape trouble and get three square meals a day is to do as you're told. Then when our chance comes to escape, you'll be ready for it. There's the mate coming forward again. If I were you I'd get to work. If you buck him again he'll batter you to pieces."

The good sense of what Nipper said must have sunk into Jessop's consciousness, for, as Nipper went back to his holystoning, Jessop returned to his, and when the mate strode by once more he was working with a fair imitation of Nipper's industry.

Steadily they forged down Channel until eight bells went, and then the crew was lined up for the watchers to be chosen. Nipper and Jessop found themselves in the first mate's watch, and Nipper thought grimly that if Jessop still continued mutinous, he would have an uncomfortable time of it.

After the choosing of the watches they all surged into the forecastle for the midday meal of bully beef and potatoes, and it was there that Nipper discovered the information which he keenly desired.

He chose a place next to one of the older men, and before the meal was over managed to elicit the information that they were bound for New Zealand by way of the Panama Canal, and would make only three stops on the way. The first was Savanilla in the Republic of Columbia in South America, the second was Colon at the eastern end of the Panama Canal, and the third, Panama, on the Pacific side. Nipper also discovered that it would take about seventeen days to make Savanilla, which meant that for nearly three weeks there would be absolutely no means of communicating with Lee.

Nipper was rather uneasy on that point. He knew that Lee would be terribly worried. And after some days, when the lad did not appear, his worry would develop into a definite fear for the lad's safety. And there was absolutely nothing which Nipper could do. And even on their arrival at Savanilla it was problematical if he would be able to communicate with Lee even then.

That afternoon Nipper and Jessop were sent back to their holystoning, and as they worked away Nipper watched for an opportunity to speak of certain things which were in his mind. And during the afternoon the opportunity came.

"I say, Jessop," said Nipper.

At the sound of his name young Jessop wheeled sharply, and his face went white.

"What—what do you mean," he gasped. "My name isn't Jessop."

"Oh, yes, it is," responded Nipper coolly. "I know all about you."

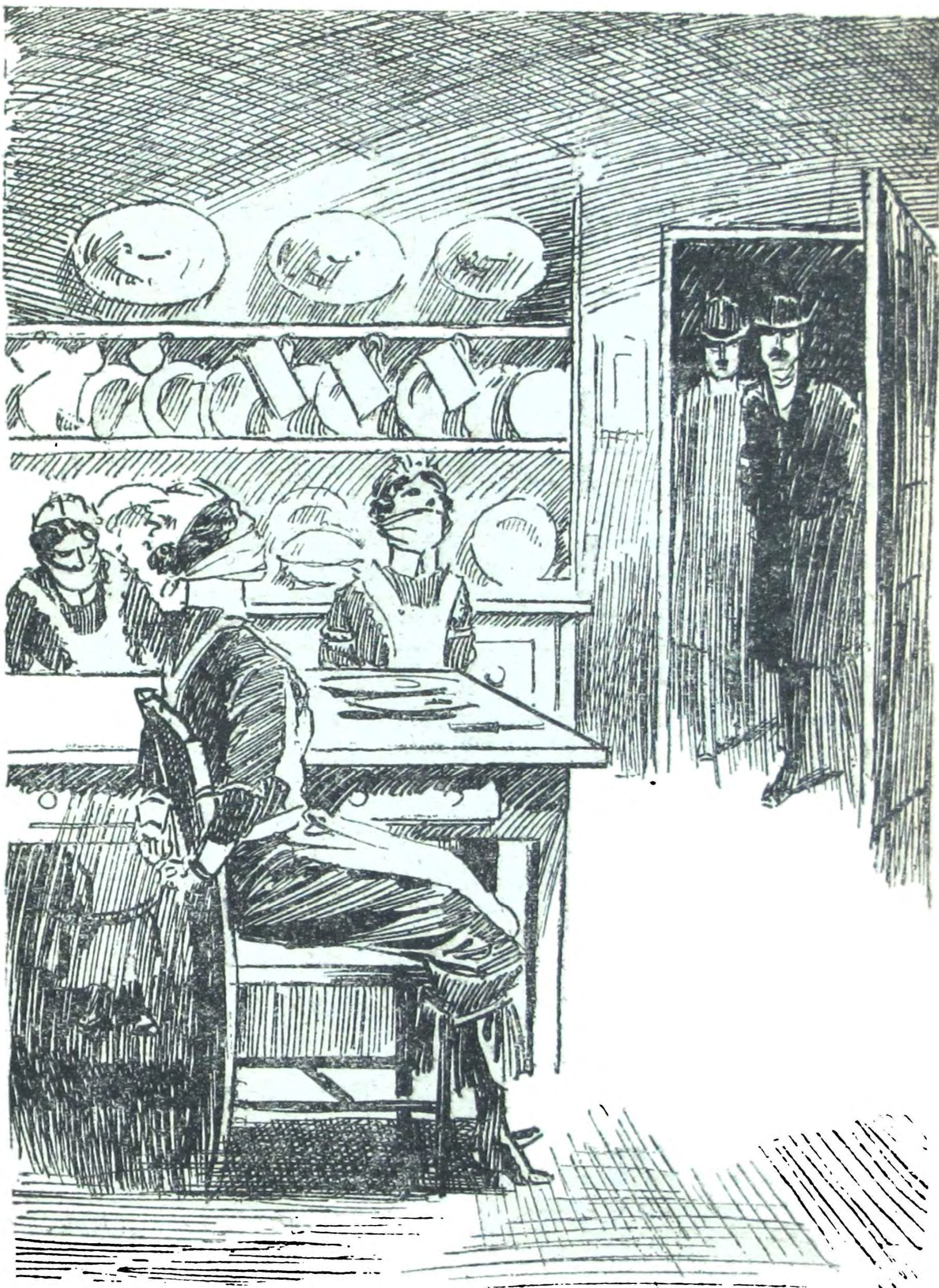
"What do you mean?"

Jessop grasped the stick with which he had been pushing the holystone, and came towards Nipper threateningly.

"I wouldn't do that," said Nipper. "In the first place I am liable to hurt you; and in the second place, if the mate sees you, you'll get it worse than you did this morning."

Jessop lowered the stick to the deck, and stared savagely at Nipper.

"Well, what do you mean?" he snarled.



The maids had screamed, but the two men had attacked them without delay, and had bound and gagged them.—(See p. 29.)

"Just what I say," responded Nipper, bending over the holystone. "Go ahead with your work, and I'll tell you what I mean as we go along. Do you remember meeting your sister at Charing Cross Station yesterday, or, at least, I think it was yesterday? I've lost count of time since I was shanghaied. Well, I was there when you met her, and I followed you back to Aldgate. That's how I fell into the trap."

"Who are you?" whispered Jessop hoarsely.

"I?" said Nipper. "Did you ever hear of Nelson Lee, the criminologist?"

"Yes," snapped Jessop shortly. "But you're not Nelson Lee."

"I didn't say I was; but I am his assistant, and I was on your track when I was shanghaied."

"What—what were you on my track for?" faltered Jessop.

"Don't you know?"

As he spoke Nipper lifted his head and gazed full into the other's eyes, which fell before his steady look.

"I don't know what you mean," muttered Jessop.

"You do know what I mean," said Nipper. "You know what happened at Church Street in Chelsea."

"I swear to you I did not do it," burst out Jessop.

"Do what?" said Nipper remorselessly. "Shoot your father or blow open the safe?"

"Oh!"

A sharp cry broke from Jessop at Nipper's words. But Nipper, who had a definite object in view, was determined to push the matter to a head before Jessop succeeded in getting his guard up again.

"If you didn't do it, what are you running away for?" he asked.

"I tell you I'm not running away," protested Jessop. "I don't know how I got on board this ship."

"What are you going to do when you get off it?" asked Nipper. "Are you going back to face the music?"

"I tell you I didn't do it," snarled the other.

"Do you know who did?"

There was no answer, and Nipper repeated the question.

"Do you know who did?" he insisted.

Finally the answer came.

"Yes," whispered Jessop. "But I did not know my father had been killed until I met my sister at Charing Cross. They told me they had only fired to frighten him."

"Who are 'they'?" asked Nipper.

"I—I cannot tell you."

"You'll tell me before we reach Savanilla," said Nipper coolly. "You don't seem to realise, Jessop, what you're up against. Murder is a serious charge, and I'll wager that by now the police are strongly suspicious of you."

Little did Nipper realise how terribly true his words were. There was no more chance for conversation then, for their work took them apart. But that evening, during their watch on deck, Nipper returned to the charge and began a persistent campaign to force Jessop to confess all he knew, which was to last all the way to Savanilla.

And as the days went by he saw that Jessop's face was beginning to clear. The dissipated lines beneath the eyes passed away, and his lips assumed a firmer line. His eyes grew bright and full of life, and he walked with a springy, healthy step. It was the hard work, the plain food, and the clean sea air which was changing him, and Nipper noticed too that his manner was more direct, more crisp, more decided.

So the days passed by until they skirted the Sargasso Sea and laid their course for Savanilla. They passed south of Haiti, catching a glimpse of the beautiful island as they went by. Then they laid their course south through the Caribbean to Savanilla.

And one night just at sunset they raised the low-lying parched coast of South America.

The swift tropic night had fallen by the time they had warped into the long, spindly, iron pier which stretches out over the shallow beach at Savanilla for four-fifths of a mile. At the far end of the pier were the lights of the village—a village consisting of the railway station and a few mud adobe huts.

Off to the left towards the mouth of the Magdalena and westward in the direction of Cartagena the surf washed shorewards lazily, breaking in long, creamy lines beneath the light of a young moon.

On their way down through the Caribbean Nipper had held many secret confabs with Jessop, for at Savanilla the lad was determined to escape, and he was equally determined to take Jessop with him.

No shore leave was given to the crew that night, nor would they receive any until they reached Colon. But the captain and the first mate both went ashore that evening, and Nipper knew they would not remain in Savanilla.

They would take the train which ran inland to Barranquilla, which was only eighteen miles away. For Savanilla, be it known, is the port that serves Barranquilla—the huge shifting sand bars at the mouth of the Magdalena preventing ocean steamers from going up to Barranquilla. And that evening, with the captain and first mate both ashore, Nipper laid his plans for escape.

The second mate, a mild-mannered man, gave permission for one watch to stretch their legs on the pier, and by good luck the watch so favoured happened to be the mate's watch to which Nipper and Jessop belonged.

Once the permission was given they lost no time in tumbling over the side, and then, sauntering past the tiny railway trucks which had been run along the pier, they moved shoreward to the point which the second mate had marked as the limit to which they might go.

There were several of the crew loitering about at this point, smoking and talking. A few yards away stood one of the quartermasters, and while he was there Nipper knew it was useless for them to attempt to make their escape along the pier.

He seated himself on the edge of the pier, and allowing his legs to dangle over, motioned to Jessop to join him.

"Can you swim?" he whispered, when no one was near.

"A little," replied the other.

"It's about a quarter of a mile from here to the shore," went on Nipper.

"Do you think you could manage that?"

"I can try," responded Jessop.

"Even if you can't you should make it all right," said Nipper. "The water is very shallow here, and about halfway in you ought to be able to touch bottom. Anyway, I shall be at hand, and can help you if necessary."

"Then you are going to try to swim it?" asked Jessop.

Nipper nodded.

"Yes," he whispered. "If we move cautiously and choose our moment, we ought to be able to slip over this side and into the water without being seen. I'll go first, and you can follow, and for goodness sake when you take the water do it quietly."

And the fact that Jessop was prepared to follow—Nipper knowing that, should they win through, the trail would lead back to England—proved the

effect the lad's word had had upon him during the voyage. It proved, too, the cleansing effect of hard work, clean living, and pure air.

They waited some minutes longer until the quartermaster moved along the pier a little, then, with a whispered word to his companion, Nipper grasped the side kerbing of the pier and lowered himself until his feet rested in the angle of an iron brace.

He released one hand, and reaching down grasped hold of the brace. Then he gripped it with the other hand, and releasing his feet, twisted his legs round the upright girder. In that position he slid slowly down into the water, and clinging there whispered up to Jessop:

"All right, come on."

There had been no need for either of them to discard boots or coats, for in that tropical climate they were wearing only vests and trousers and their feet were bare. Therefore there was nothing to drag upon them during their swim shoreward. Jessop slid down the girder and into the water beside Nipper.

"Keep close to the pier," whispered Nipper. "We will be in the shadow there, and besides, if you get tired you can hang on to one of the girders. I'll go first. Keep as close to me as possible."

Then Nipper let go his hold of the girder, and swimming with a steady, almost silent stroke, started for shore. There was a slight splash as Jessop took the water, but unless they were actually missed nothing much would be thought of that for there were plenty of tarpon jumping all about the place.

Keeping well in the shadow of the pier Nipper swam on through the warm water, placing each stroke with the utmost care, and turning from time to time to see how Jessop was faring.

They had covered about half the distance to the shore when Nipper heard a gasp behind him, and twisting his head round saw that Jessop was clutching one of the girders. Nipper swam back and clung beside the other.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Yes," panted Jessop. "I had to rest."

Nipper was just going to speak again when a shout sounded somewhere along the pier, and a few minutes later they heard the echo of running footsteps.

"We've been missed," whispered Nipper. "Climb in under the middle of the pier. Quick, they'll be along in a minute."

Frantically they swung themselves from one cross girder to another until they were braced under the centre of the pier and close up under it. No sooner had they esconced themselves in that position than they heard the sound of voices directly overhead, and the next moment the flare of a lantern struck the water close to the pier.

"I know they didn't go along the pier to the shore," they heard one voice saying.

"You'll find that they've gone back on board."

"And I know they didn't go back on board," said another voice. "They've set out for the shore."

"Then they must have tried to swim it," growled the first voice. "And if they tried that they won't get far. These waters are full of sharks!"

Nipper felt Jessop shiver and laid a warning hand on his knee. The voices passed out of hearing then as their owners moved towards the shore, but still Nipper and Jessop clung to the cross girders.

"They'll be back soon," whispered Nipper; "then we'll have to strike out again and reach the shore before they come along with a boat."

"But the sharks," protested Jessop.

"Sharks be hanged," snapped Nipper. "We've come through the dangerous part already. A little farther on and it will be too shallow for them. You get your nerve together and don't think about them."

He broke off then as the voices of the searchers sounded once more, and they crouched in silence while heavy footsteps passed overhead. Nipper waited until they had died away, then he whispered:

"Come on; you go ahead, and I'll come after you."

Jessop hesitated a moment, then climbing out along the girders he slipped into the water, and started shoreward once more. Nipper went after him, and whether it was because the rest had done him good, or whether it was the fear of the sharks, Nipper noticed that Jessop put far more energy into his swimming than he had done before.

They pushed on rapidly until at last Jessop's feet touched bottom. Then they floundered along the rest of the distance until at last they were only a hundred yards or so from the edge of the beach.

Just then some shouting broke out behind them, and turning Nipper saw the moonlight flash from dripping oars as a boat came round the bow of the tramp. Another shout sounded from the pier, and then, almost overhead, a Spanish policeman challenged them.

"Never mind him," grunted Nipper. "Move on. Once we get to the beach we'll stand a better chance."

Jessop needed no urging, and as the water grew still more shallow they were able to make much better time. The native policeman was running along close to the edge of the pier, now shouting at them as he ran. But Nipper only panted:

"Let him shout. It'll take him some time to get to the end of the pier and then round to the beach. By that time we'll be in the scrub. Hurry, Jessop, every second counts."

The water was only a few inches deep now, and they went splashing along through it until at last they ran out on to the soft, sandy beach which glistened leprous white under the young moon. Just ahead of them was a line of mesquite and scrub, towards which Nipper ran.

There was a shout from the native policeman just as they broke into it. But Nipper kept on crashing his way through the bushes until by chance he came upon a mountain trail.

Swinging into this he loped along it with Jessop close at his heels. The hard work on board ship had made them both as fit as could be, and although they panted heavily as they ran, neither of them yet felt any real fatigue.

For a good ten minutes they climbed upwards, then they came out upon a bare, weather-swept bluff from which they could gaze down upon the beach and the sea. They could see a boat a few yards off shore, and voices on the beach told them the native policeman had not yet ventured to plunge into the scrub.

"We'll go this way," said Nipper. "It's nothing but sand and cactus most of the way, but it will take us to Barranquilla, and that's the place I want to make. We'll have to lie low though until the ship leaves for Colon."

"When does she get away?" panted Jessop.

"I heard the mate say they'd get away the day after to-morrow. By the way, have you got any money on you, Jessop?"

"Only three sovereigns," replied the other.

"That will do us," rejoined Nipper. "I haven't a sou myself; they stripped me clean when they shanghaied me."

Nipper took the lead, and, taking a distant clump of cactus as his mark, headed towards it. On that particular part of the coast there had not been

a drop of rain for more than two years, and as a result the vegetation had shrivelled to nothingness. Beneath their feet was loose sand, and dotted here and there were only gaunt cactus plants—the fruit of the desert.

Nipper knew that the search for them would not stop at the end of the pier. He knew that the scrub would be beaten up for them and that every effort would be made to pick up their trail. Therefore, he desired to get as far away from Savanilla as possible during that night.

Keeping a generally easterly direction, he plodded on until he judged that they must have come six or seven miles. It was then that a wooded gully appeared in front of them, and as they made their way down into its shadow, they plunged suddenly into the lush growth which marked it as a tiny lagoon.

"We're getting to the edge of the Magdalena delta," said Nipper, pulling up. "Look out for the alligators as we go along. They swarm in these places, and they like the moonlight. When we get across this lagoon—if this path takes us across—we'll head a little more south. We don't want to get lost in the delta. We might wander round there for months and never find a way out."

He moved ahead cautiously as he spoke, closely examining everything that looked like a log, for well he knew how easy it was for those "logs" to turn suddenly into alligators. Now and then a splash in the heart of the lagoon told him that an alligator or a tarpon was jumping, and he moved still more warily along the path.

They crossed the lower part of the lagoon safely, however, and were just starting to climb the other side, when suddenly Nipper caught sight of a small hut which had been built just a few yards to one side of the trail. He pulled up and gazed at it. Then, without a word, he turned and plunged through the lush lagoon growth towards it. So occupied was he in finding his way that he did not raise his eyes until he was close to the hut. Then as he did so he almost cried out in surprise, for standing in the open door of the cabin, motionless and silent, was the figure of an Indian. Nipper gazed at him stupidly for a few moments, then, gathering his wits together, he said:

"Buenos notes señor!" (Good evening!)

The Indian grunted a reply.

"What do you wish?" he asked.

As a matter of fact, as Nipper had plunged towards the hut it had been with no definite idea in view. But now it flashed upon him that if he could persuade the Indian to conceal them until the tramp should leave for Colon, they could not do much better than remain in hiding there. He knew, too, that there was no object in concealing the truth. By the following day every Indian for miles around would know that two seamen had deserted from the tramp. Therefore, mustering his Spanish for the need of the moment, he said:

"Senor, we have come from a ship which lies at Savanilla. We have escaped from it. We wish to hide until it sails. Will you conceal us for that time?"

"How much will you pay me?" asked the Indian impassively.

"An English gold piece," replied Nipper.

"Show me the money!" demanded the other.

"Show him a sovereign," said Nipper, in English, "and show him only one. Don't let him know you've got any more, or he'll demand the whole lot."

Obediently Jessop thrust his hand in his pocket and drew out a single sovereign, which he held up in the moonlight. The Indian's eyes glittered

with avarice as he saw it, and he reached out one coffee-coloured, claw-like hand for it.

"You give me the money," he said. "I'll hide you."

Jessop passed the sovereign over, and, after examining it closely, the Indian tucked it somewhere beneath his belt.

"Come with me," he grunted.

Instead of leading the way into the hut he emerged from the doorway and started round the side of the building, where he apparently plunged into the untracked depths of the lagoon jungle.

Nipper and Jessop followed him, and as they went along Nipper noticed that the path went steadily downwards. Then, when they had come what Nipper judged to be a couple of hundred yards or so, the Indian pushed aside some bushes and revealed a cunningly hidden adobe hut.

"You go in here," he said. "I bring you a light, some blankets, and some food."

He disappeared abruptly, and, pushing open the door of the hut, Nipper examined the interior as well as he could by moonlight. It was very small and very odorous, but it was better than nothing, and certainly should prove a secure hiding place. Their long walk in the warm night air had dried their garments; but later the night chill would come, and the promised blankets would come in useful.

It was only a few minutes before the Indian returned, bringing them with him. He also had a candle, some matches, and a dish of beans and rice, with half a dozen small bananas lying on the top of the dish.

"I give you hot food to-morrow," he said. "You will find a spring of water just outside. If they come looking for you I will send them away. They will never find you here. Good-night."

With that he turned and strode off through the lush growth, leaving them to their own devices. Nipper lit the candle and gazed about him. The hut consisted of a single small room with a hard-beaten mud floor. In the centre was the black scar of former fires, and in the roof was a small hole by which the smoke could escape.

There was absolutely nothing in the hut in the shape of furniture, so squatting on the floor, Nipper began to examine the food. A large black cockroach scuttled out from the rice and beans as he took off the cover, and that was sufficient to kill any intention they may have had of eating the mess.

Carrying the dish to the door, Nipper hurled the contents far out into the lagoon. Then they divided the bananas equally and ate them with slow appreciation. They found the spring of which the Indian had spoken, and gulped down deep draughts of the water. Then they returned to the hut, rolled up in their blankets, and ten minutes later were both fast asleep.

Early the next morning the Indian appeared with a dish of hot beans and rice and two very badly made tortillas, or native pancakes. They managed to eat the food somehow, and washed it down with further draughts from the spring outside. The Indian left them some more bananas, and well it was he did so, for they did not see him again until the evening. They lay low all that day, never venturing more than a few feet from the hut. And then, when the Indian appeared, it was to inform them that searchers had passed his hut twice during the day.

Their evening meal consisted of chile con carne—a meat preparation with pepper in it—and bananas. They turned in early, and when he came with breakfast the next morning, the Indian gave them the welcome news that their ship had left Savanilla at daybreak.

They emerged from their hiding place, and the Indian, who had a kindly

nature for all his stolid manner, put them on the right trail for Barranquilla. It was, he informed them, a little over twelve miles. They started out shortly after nine, and, following the sandy desert trail, they plodded on beneath a scorching sun until the brazen ball above and the glare from the sand beneath dazed them and confused them and woke in them a riotous fever.

Still they fought their way on until, about an hour after mid-day, they sighted the broad, turbid waters of the Magdalena, and then the white buildings of Barranquilla.

It was nearly two o'clock when they stumbled into the city just by the railway station. Even before seeking refreshment Nipper made his way to the cable office, where he wrote out a cable to Lee. They had so little money between them that it was necessary for him to be brief. And, after writing several drafts, this is what he finally sent:

" Nelson Lee, London.

" Shanghaied. Escaped ship 'Savanilla.' Cable funds, care British Consul. Bringing Jessop. Men you want at 10, Pinder's Court, Aldgate.

" (Signed) NIPPER."

When the cable had been dispatched and paid for they made their way to the British Consulate, where, despite his ragged appearance, Nipper introduced himself and explained his position. He made arrangements to call the next morning for the funds which Lee would cable him. Then he and Jessop went along the Pension Anglisa, where they secured a room. After a hearty meal they both turned in, and so utterly worn out were they that they did not waken again until early the next morning.

After a refreshing bath they had breakfast, then went along to the British Consul's, where Nipper found a long cable from Lee, and also a hundred pounds which Lee had cabled out. This is how the cable ran:

" Terrible anxiety lifted by receipt your cable. Have searched high and low for you. Are you all right? Cabling funds desired. Hope you will return first steamer possible. Greatly surprised to know you have Jessop with you. Case has been at standstill ever since you left. Think you should know there is warrant out for Jessop's arrest. Leave to your judgment to tell him or not. Have kept up continual search for men who were at house that night, but, so far, have failed. Will try Pinder's Court, as you suggest. If Jessop is not guilty, think he should come home and face music, otherwise stigma attached to him all his life, even if he does escape police. Cable me when you are sailing.

" (Signed) NELSON LEE."

Nipper collected the money which Lee had cabled him, then made inquiries about sailing for England. He discovered that a Royal Mail steamer would leave Savanilla for England that evening, and he determined to go by it. He did not reveal the contents of the cable to Jessop until they had walked along to the Plaza. There Nipper sat down, and motioned for Jessop to do likewise.

" Jessop," he said slowly. " There is a steamer leaving for England to-night, and I am going by it. Are you coming with me?"

" I told you I'd go back, and I will," replied Jessop.

" I think I should tell you what the gov'nor says," went on Nipper. " The police evidently suspect you of shooting your father, for there is a warrant out for your arrest. Will that prevent you from going home?"

" Do you think I killed my father?" demanded Jessop.

Nipper looked him straight in the eye.

"No, I don't," he said. "I think you were foolish and weak. But I don't believe you are a murderer."

Jessop shot out his hand.

"Thanks," he said as they gripped. "Now listen. I have been foolish and weak, as you say, but I'm going back and face the music, even if there are fifty warrants out. Back in England I was a dissipated young fool, heading for ruin as fast as I could go, but I've changed since we came out here. I'm a man now, and I have got a proper objective of what I was before. I'll go back with you, and I'll fight the thing out on its merits. That's my word and there's my hand on it."

"Good man," said Nipper as they gripped once more. "Come along now, we'll have to buy some clothes and things for the voyage."

They walked up the Plaza towards the business section of the city, where they made the necessary purchases. And that evening they sailed on the Royal Mail steamer for England. But a cable was sent to Lee just before they left, and it ran thus:

"Nelson Lee, London,

"Sailing to-night. Jessop comes with me. (Signed) NIPPER."

CHAPTER V.

Inspector Brooks Receives an Anonymous Letter—Lee's Anxiety—The Raid on Number Ten, Pinder's Court—Nipper's Return.

NEVER in his life had Nelson Lee gone through a more anxious time than during that long period of days which merged into weeks that Nipper was missing. Lee had felt no particular uneasiness when Nipper failed to return the first night. The lad had often been away for days at a time when out on the trail, and Lee knew that under most circumstances he could look after himself.

On the second day he was vaguely anxious, but he had little time then to worry, for it was on that day the inquest was held. The result was exactly what Lee had anticipated. The story told by the three servants coincided in every particular. They had been in the kitchen at work when two armed men had come from the front part of the house, and before any of the maids could see them properly had switched out the lights. The maids had screamed, but the two men had attacked them without delay, and by the light of a torch had bound and gagged them with cords, which they had brought with them.

A revolver held by one of the men effectually stopped any further screams. They had heard the sound of the shot in the front of the house, and following that a heavy report upstairs. Lee had questioned all three as to the length of time between the two reports, and from what he was told, put it down as something like half a minute. His insistence on this point rather puzzled Inspector Brooks; but Lee made no explanation of his reason for asking.

The story told by the two girls was practically the same as that which they had told Inspector Brooks. Then the brother was called, but failed to answer his name. Nor did anything come out at the inquest which threw any suspicion against him. The verdict, as Lee had anticipated, was "Murder by some person or persons unknown."

After the inquest, Lee had proceeded at once to Gray's Inn Road, for he thought surely Nipper would be there, or there would be a message of some sort from the lad. But as he found nothing, he began to grow distinctly uneasy, and was just making up his mind that he would go out in search of Nipper when the 'phone rang, and, lifting the receiver, he found Inspector Brooks was on the wire.

"Can you come round to Scotland Yard at once?" asked the inspector. "Something important has happened in this Jessop case."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," promised Lee.

Donning his hat and coat again, and hailing a taxi, he told the man to drive to Scotland Yard. There he found Inspector Brooks in a state of great excitement.

"I'm going to issue a warrant for the arrest of young Jessop," he announced, as Lee sat down.

"Indeed," said Lee. "What has happened, inspector?"

For answer the inspector picked up an envelope and tossed it over to Lee.

"Read that letter," he said.

Lee glanced at the superscription, and saw that it was addressed to Henry P. Jessop, Number Twenty-two X, Church Street, Chelsea. Then he took out the letter, and, unfolding it, began to read. It proved to be an hysterical outburst, and during its course distinctly threatened that the writer would get even, no matter what he had to do. It was signed "Paul." And Lee knew as well as Inspector Brooks that Paul was young Jessop's Christian name. As he laid it down Inspector Brooks pushed across another sheet of paper. It was of a cheap and lined variety, and was very dirty. A few lines of mis-spelled words had been printed on it with pencil:

"inspector Brooks scotland yard.

"dere Sir,—i send you a leter young jessop is the one you want he as run away.—yours,

"JUSTISE."

As Lee finished reading the scrawl he laid it with the other letter and looked up.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked the inspector. "Makes it look pretty bad for young Jessop."

"If that is his letter to his father it certainly places him in an awkward position. Still, it does not prove that he killed his father."

The inspector grunted.

"Do you see the date that letter was written?" he demanded. "It's just three days ago, and you couldn't find a more definite threat than that if you were looking for it. Somebody who's got it in for Jessop has known about this letter, and has managed to get hold of it. It might have been someone in the house. Anyway, it's good enough for me to issue a warrant on. This scrawl says he has run away; but I guess we'll nab him before he gets very far."

Unfortunately the inspector did not know that Jessop was already tossing on the Atlantic.

Lee shrugged and rose.

"You may be right, inspector," he said, "but somehow I don't fancy young Jessop killed his father. He may have had a hand in the blowing open of the safe, but the other—it is hard to believe. However, I grant you

the letter is serious evidence against him. Let me know if you catch him, will you?"

The inspector nodded; and picking up his hat and stick, Lee passed out. Getting a taxi in Whitehall, he ordered the man to drive to Church Street.

One of the maids answered the door.

"I wish to see Miss Jessop," said Lee curtly.

"They are receiving no one, sir," replied the maid, making to close the door.

"Wait a moment," he said, putting his foot against it. "I want you to take my card up."

Taking out a card and a pencil, he scribbled on the back, "Something very serious has happened. For your own sakes I must see either or both of you without delay."

The maid took the card, and Lee waited at the door until she returned.

"Will you come into the study, sir," she asked.

Lee followed her along the hall to the study, and was only kept waiting a few moments before both the girls appeared. They bowed silently, and stood waiting to hear what he might have to say. Lee gazed at first one and then the other before he spoke:

"When I spoke to you the other night and offered you my assistance, you refused it. That same evening I decided that you had refused to speak because you desired to shield someone. And the person upon whom I fixed as the one you were shielding was your brother. I shall not go into details as to how I arrived at that decision, but I do not think I am very far wrong. You feared that your brother had a hand in the terrible tragedy which has occurred, for you both knew of a certain letter which he had written to your father. Now I want to tell you that letter has fallen into the hands of the police, and a warrant is already out for the arrest of your brother on the charge of murder."

While he had been speaking both girls had been gazing at him in undisguised horror. And as he finished with the dread word, one of them gave a low moan and staggered to a chair. The other controlled herself with an effort, and attempted to comfort her sister.

"I am sorry to hurt you," went on Lee, "but it is necessary. You sought me the other afternoon because you needed my help and advice desperately. When I offered you that help the same evening you refused it, I think, for the reasons I stated. With the issuing of a warrant for the arrest of your brother, those reasons no longer exist; and it is because my deductions do not point to your brother as the one who murdered your father that I have come to you again to offer my assistance."

"I want to impress upon you the fact that the letter which the police hold will make a very black case against your brother. If he is innocent, it is going to be no easy matter to save him. To do so you must be perfectly frank with me, and place in my hands all the available material; then I am prepared to do what I can. Of course, if you still do not desire my assistance, I have only to apologise and take my leave."

"The girl who was still standing walked across to Lee, and, laying her hand on his arm, said:

"Mr. Lee, we both thank you for what you have done. We should have confided in you the other night, but we were frightened—frightened for the very reason which you have named. But tell me, do you—do you truly believe that our brother did not—did not——"

As she broke off sobbing, Lee laid his hand over hers.

"Miss Jessop," he said, "I dare not state that your brother is not guilty. What I do say is that my analysis and deductions do not point to him as being guilty of the murder. When I see him, when I have talked with him, when I have probed his character, then I can speak more definitely. But at the present moment I am probably the only person who is not prepared to pronounce him guilty; and if you care to make a confidant of me, I shall do all I can to help you.

"Will you sit down, please, Mr. Lee? I will tell you everything."

Lee drew up a couple of chairs; and, seating himself, prepared to listen. The girl took a little time to collect herself, and although she began to speak in weak, quavering accents, her tone grew stronger as she proceeded.

"The trouble with our brother began about five years ago," she said. "Our father lived in New York, and my sister and I were at school at the time here in London. Our brother came over to visit us, and then decided to stay. He took a studio out here in Chelsea, and got in with a crowd which did him no good. My sister and I went to Paris, and did not see him for nearly a year. When we returned to London, we were shocked at the change in him; but he would not listen to our advice.

"We returned to Paris for another year, but when we came back to London, we found that instead of altering his ways, he had gone lower than ever. He was in with a very coarse racing crowd, and all our efforts to make him break with his companions failed. Seriously worried, we wrote to our father asking him if he could possibly arrange to come over here and live. Paul absolutely refused to return to the States, and we thought our father would have some influence over him. After some months our father came. We took this house, and since Paul consistently refused to live at home, we had to tell our father something of his life.

"For six months our father did all he could to make Paul change his ways, even going so far as to threaten to stop his allowance. There were several scenes, and at last our father lost patience. He sent for Paul, and gave him a last chance to alter his mode of life. That was about a week ago. They had a terrible scene here, and Paul was forbidden the house. Our father also told him he would cut him out of the will.

"The next day I received a letter from my brother, which was evidently written under the stress of great emotion. He knew that my father had most of his private fortune in the form of shares and bonds, and he also knew that they were kept in the safe in my father's bedroom. He knew, as my sister and I knew, that among them were fifty thousand dollars' worth of bearer bonds, which could be negotiated by anyone.

"In his letter he told me that he was coming to get those bonds, saying he would take them as his share of the estate, and that then he would go away, and we should hear no more of him. He named the night on which he would come, and said it would be while we were at dinner. He charged me and my sister to keep our father occupied while he would be in the house.

"My sister and I talked it over, and tried to think of some plan to save him from himself. We resolved to take the bearer bonds from the safe and to hide them and the key. We dared not tell our father, for we did not wish another scene. Then we thought that if our brother failed that night, he would come again, and, of course, we could not keep the key of the safe hidden for more than one night without our father discovering that it was missing.

"We needed the advice of someone older and wiser than we, yet we

could think of no one to approach. Then your name occurred to us. We had both read of you, and we decided to ask you to help us.

“That afternoon I went to Gray’s Inn Road to see you, but I could not get up my courage to go in. While I was hesitating I saw you come out, and, thinking you must be Mr. Lee, I followed you. I wanted to speak to you in the Venetia, but before I could make up my mind to do so you had risen to leave. I followed you up Piccadilly, and you know how I finally plucked up courage enough to speak to you while you were waiting on the kerb by the Berkeley Hotel.

“The key I gave you was the key of the safe, and in the packet were the Bearer Bonds which my brother had threatened to steal. We wanted you to come here that night at the time he was expected, in order to meet him, to talk to him, and to try to turn him from his purpose. But the terrible thing happened before you came, and after that we were afraid—afraid. That is the story, Mr. Lee, and now if you can help us we shall indeed be grateful.”

Lee had listened closely to the girl’s words, which in almost every point coincided with his own deductions. He did not speak at once, for he was pondering things over in his mind.

“Have you any idea where your brother lives?” he asked, finally looking up.

“No,” she said. “I met him in the morning after—after what happened, at Charing Cross. In his letter he had made that appointment with me in order to say good-bye. My sister would not come, so I left her at Westminster Cathedral, and went alone. When I saw him he demanded to know what had become of the Bearer Bonds, and I told him. I also asked him how he could speak of such things after what had happened. He asked me what I meant, and I told him. He seemed very much affected, and said that was the very first he had heard of my father’s death. He said he was at the house with two others, that his original plans had been changed, and he had brought two confederates to help him.

“He said that it was he who had blown open the safe, but denied all knowledge of what had happened to my father. He says he knew there was a shot fired, but that it was fired only to frighten my father. I begged him to come to the house, but he seemed frightened and left me. That is the last I have seen of him, and I do not know where he has been living. But my sister and I knew about the letter he had written our father, and although we searched for it we could not find it. We knew how it would look if it fell into the hands of the police, and that made us afraid.”

— Lee asked a few more probing questions, then, rising, he said:

“I shall go along now and endeavour to get into touch with your brother before the police find him. You can depend on me to do everything in my power, and as soon as I have any news I will let you know.”

With that he took his leave, and, climbing into the taxi which he had left waiting, he drove back to Gray’s Inn Road. It was then his anxiety for Nipper returned. There was not a single line from the lad, and while Lee had said nothing to Miss Jessop, he knew the chances were Nipper had followed her when she went to Charing Cross to meet her brother. If such were the case, then Nipper would have left the girl to follow the brother, and, if that were so, then the chase was either a very long one, or something serious had happened. Lee determined to wait until evening, then, if there were still no word of the lad, to start out himself and search.

Evening came, and no news of Nipper. So changing into a rough tweed

suit and cap. Nelson Lee started for the East End of London and began a fruitless search for the lad, which was to last many days.

At the end of the third day Lee abandoned everything else and concentrated every effort upon that one thing. While he managed to keep the fact of the lad's disappearance out of the papers, he had the police working on the matter, and, in addition, had cabled his own agents in every great city of the world.

He himself practically lived in the East End of London, only returning to Gray's Inn Road at necessary intervals. He visited every public-house which he could come upon. He consorted with thieves and criminals of every degree. He gambled in every gambling place he could find; smoked opium in every opium joint he could ferret out; and slept in doss-houses and East End "dives" of the lowest description.

During days which merged into weeks he kept up his search, but not a single whisper did he hear of Nipper. It was not until nearly three weeks had passed that Lee began finally to give up hope.

It was in a very sad mood that he returned to Gray's Inn Road one morning, almost a physical wreck himself from the life he had been leading, and there sorrow had turned to joy, as lying on the desk he had seen a cablegram which, on being opened, proved to be from Nipper. His answer to that cablegram is already known, and when he had bathed and changed, his first act was to answer Nipper's cable and send him the funds he needed. Then he had driven to Scotland Yard to see Inspector Brooks.

The result of his confab. with the inspector was the issuing of an open warrant, and that same night Nelson Lee, Inspector Brooks, and four plain-clothes men motored through to Aldgate, and, leaving their car in charge of one of the constables there, they made their way quietly through to Pinder's Court.

If Pinder's Court were squalid by day, it was sinister by night, and as they entered it they moved along warily, looking for number "ten." Lee and the inspector went first, and, pushing open the door quietly, crept up the stairs to the first floor.

As their eyes came on a level with the top step they saw a horizontal line of light coming from beneath a door just ahead of them. At that same moment one of the steps creaked loudly, and there followed the scraping back of a chair, while the next moment the door was flung open.

There came a startled curse from the man who stood in the doorway, then he jumped back, jerking out an automatic as he did so. Lee and Inspector Brooks rushed the room, and as they burst in a shot rang out from behind the door.

Lee pulled out his revolver and fired at the man in front of him. Two reports rang out at almost the same moment, but Lee had pulled his trigger the tiniest fraction of a second sooner than the other. For a while a bullet whistled over the top of his head, he saw the man before him stagger back and clutch his right arm.

The inspector had already grappled with the man behind the door, and now Lee and two of the plain-clothes men rushed the man whom Lee had wounded, while the remaining pair of plain-clothes men went to the inspector's assistance.

The struggle which followed was short and sharp, and in less than five minutes the police had their men handcuffed and rendered harmless. It was then that Lee bent over and picked up the automatic which had dropped from the hand of the man he had wounded. One glance he cast at it, then he turned to the inspector.

"These are the men you wanted all right," he said.

"Are you sure, Lee?" asked the inspector quickly.

"Dead certain!" answered Lee. "This is my own automatic which he was shooting with."

"Your own automatic!" exclaimed the inspector. "Why, what do you mean, Lee?"

"I'll explain later," said Lee grimly, as he pocketed the weapon. "I think it would be advisable if we searched the place."

While two of the plain-clothes men guarded the prisoners, Lee and the inspector, with the other plain-clothes men, began a systematic search of the premises. Under the boards which formed the flooring of the adjoining room they came upon a small gold mesh bag containing a key, which Lee recognised only too well. There, too, they found the packet of Bearer Bonds, quite intact, and with them a thirty-eight calibre revolver with the initials "P. J." scratched on the butt. Lastly, they found a roll of clothing, which Lee shrewdly guessed belonged to Paul Jessop.

When they were satisfied that there was nothing else to be found they marched their prisoners along to where the car had been left. Then they drove through to Scotland Yard, after leaving the prisoners in the cells at Bow Street.

The next day the Finger-Print Department of Scotland Yard proved the prisoners to be one Flash Ike and one Bull McNab—both New York criminals who had done time at Sing-Sing, but who had dropped out of sight for nearly two years. They were both professionals of the most vicious description, though it was Flash Ike—he of the pointed, acquisitive features—who was the brains of the combination.

At the first hearing Inspector Brooks, at Lee's suggestion, asked for a remand, and then there was nothing to do but to wait until Nipper and Paul Jessop should reach England.

Seventeen days later they did so, and when the boat train arrived from Liverpool Nelson Lee was at Euston to meet them. They drove direct to Scotland Yard, where Inspector Brooks was waiting.

At Lee's request, Paul Jessop made a full statement confessing everything he had done on the night of the murder. Then he was asked to retire while Lee undertook to demonstrate to Inspector Brooks why the warrant charging Paul Jessop with murder should be quashed and why Flash Ike should be charged instead, with Bull McNab as an accessory to the fact.

When the door had closed after Paul Jessop, Nelson Lee walked across and picked up a small black bag which he had brought with him. Opening it, he took out three automatic pistols and laid them on the desk. Then he began to speak.

"Inspector Brooks," he said. "I am going to lay my case before you and leave it to you to decide whether the warrant which still exists against Paul Jessop shall be quashed or not. First, I want to tell you how I came to take a hand in this."

Then briefly Lee related how Miss Jessop had approached him in Piccadilly and had handed him certain articles, one of which was a letter asking his assistance.

"Now, when I got that letter," he said, "I made up my mind that I would go to Church Street and find out what was the trouble. I did so, arriving there at exactly nine o'clock in the evening. When you saw me, inspector, it was the second time I had been at the house that evening."

"The second time!" exclaimed the inspector in amazement. "Why, what do you mean, Lee?"

"I will explain," said Lee.

Then he related how when he had stepped into the dark hall he had been attacked and rendered unconscious. He went on to tell how he had regained his senses in the dining-room and of the gruesome discovery he had made when he had turned on the light.

"It was I who opened the dining-room window," he said. "For whoever had dragged me in there had locked the door on the outside. For the first time in my life I experienced the feelings of criminals who anticipate discovery at any moment. I can understand the desperate panic which must be felt as I have never understood it before. Had I known it was the police whom I had heard in the hall I should have remained. But thinking it might be others, I escaped by way of the window and made my way round to the front again.

"Now I want to state, inspector, why I do not think it was possible for Paul Jessop to have fired the shot which killed his father. Paul Jessop confesses that he came to the house that evening with two companions known as Flash Ike and Bull McNab. The plan, he states, was really Flash Ike's. He and McNab were to secure the servants and keep the old man quiet while Jessop robbed the safe.

"Suspecting after he had written to his sisters that they might hide the key of the safe a stick of explosive was taken along in case of emergency. Now mark this point closely, the first report which sounded was the shot which was fired downstairs. That shot, we know, was the one which caused Henry Jessop's death. Now the three servants and the two girls all agree that it was only about half a minute from that shot until an explosion sounded upstairs. Now if Paul Jessop blew open the safe he could not have shot his father as well. It would be a physical impossibility for him to go upstairs, search for the key of the safe and, when found it missing, attach his explosive. Why, the fuse of the explosive would burn for half a minute at least, and I estimate that the shortest space of time in which he could have carried out those acts would be between six and eight minutes.

"Now I come to the second point. I have already told you how, when I regained consciousness in the dining-room I discovered that my own automatic—a weapon of forty-five calibre—had been taken and a thirty-eight calibre left on the floor beside me. Now I'm going to prove to you that that was the biggest mistake Flash Ike ever made in his life. See here."

Reaching into the bag Lee took out two small paper packages, one marked "F. I.," and the other marked "P. J." He opened them, revealing that they both contained brass cartridge shells of thirty-eight calibre from which the nickle bullets had been removed.

"Now, inspector," went on Lee, "we know it was a thirty-eight calibre bullet which caused Henry Jessop's death. I don't know whether you have taken the measurements of that bullet, but I did so on the day of the inquest. On my return home I removed the bullets from the cartridges which I had taken from the automatic which had been left in place of my own—I may say here that the clip was an eight-cartridge clip, but that there were only seven cartridges in it when I emptied it—I found that the bullets in every instance tallied with the measurement of the bullet which had caused Henry Jessop's death.

"Now, the fact that the automatic had been deliberately left behind—the fact that there were only seven cartridges in the clip, and the fact that the measurements of the bullets coincided exactly with the fatal bullet, made me strongly suspect that I had in my possession the weapon with which Henry Jessop had been killed.

"Without knowing that we had Flash Ike and Bull McNab in custody Paul Jessop states that they were with him that night. At Pinder's Court we took from Flash Ike an automatic which proved to be mine, and I think that is sufficient evidence to prove that the weapon which was left on the floor beside me belonged to Flash Ike, and that he had some very strong motive for wanting it to be found in the possession of someone else.

"At Pinder's Court we also found a thirty-eight calibre automatic marked with the initials "P. J." In the cartridge-clip were eight cartridges—all it would hold. I have also taken the measurements of the bullets contained by those cartridges, and I find that not only were the cartridges made by a different firm than the one who manufactured those in Flash Ike's weapon, but that they were shorter than the other bullets—shorter than the bullet which caused Henry Jessop's death by one one-hundredth of an inch, which I think strongly indicates that the bullet which caused death was not fired from Paul Jessop's revolver.

"Now I ask you, inspector, to consider the anonymous note which reached you and which was enclosed with the hysterical letter which Paul Jessop wrote his father. In conjunction with this I want you to consider the fact that, like Nipper, Paul Jessop was shanghaied and got out of the way. I maintain that Flash Ike and Bull McNab shanghaied both Nipper and Paul Jessop. It is very probable that Henry Jessop had his son's letter on his person, and after he had been killed a search of his pockets would reveal it.

"Then it was sent to you to throw suspicion on Paul Jessop, and he was got out of the way to make it appear that he was fleeing from the law. In the meantime those who engineered the plot sat tight until it should be safe to dispose of the bonds, and the fact that we found those bonds at Pinder's Court in the possession of Flash Ike and Bull McNab instead of on the person of Paul Jessop, proves that Flash Ike and Bull McNab are the persons who engineered the plot.

"Therefore, inspector, I charge Flash Ike with the murder of Henry Jessop, and Bull McNab as being an accessory to the fact, and for these reasons I think that the warrant which still exists against Paul Jessop should be quashed. This is my case, inspector; I leave it to your judgment."

Inspector Brooks brought his fist down on the desk.

"You have convinced me, Lee," he said. "I believe you have got the truth of the matter, and because I do believe that, I shall quash the warrant against young Jessop. It is not our desire at Scotland Yard to hound down the innocent. We only want to get at the truth and punish the guilty."

Lee thanked the inspector, and made an appointment to meet him next day to prepare his evidence for the trial, for Lee would be chief witness

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

after

for the Crown. Then he went to tell Paul Jessop what had been decided, and as the young fellow grasped his hand he said:

"I want you to go home at once and see your sisters. You have much to thank them for and much to be forgiven. I shall come round this evening, for I want a long talk with you."

Paul Jessop was too affected to speak, so taking him by the shoulders Lee gave him a friendly push into the corridor. Then he returned, and taking Nipper affectionately by the arm he said:

"Come along, my lad, you have a host of things to tell me."

So taking leave of the inspector they went along to the Venetia for tea, where Nipper related all that had occurred.

When the trial of Flash Ike and Bull McNab came off Nelson Lee was put in the witness-box by the Crown Prosecutor, and his evidence listened to with deep respect.

When he had finished it was a foregone conclusion that the police should secure a conviction, and it was then that Bull McNab in a panic of fear broke down and confessed all. He stated that it was Flash Ike who had killed Henry Jessop—that he had seen the shot fired. As a result Flash Ike was sent to penal servitude for life, while Bull McNab was given ten years.

And thus out of the mouth of one of the criminals was Nelson Lee's keen deduction endorsed. And with the passing of the last act of the tragedy there passed for ever the reckless, wasteful Paul Jessop. He had truly said that he was a different man, and his future life was to prove it.

THE END.

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THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By FENTON ASH

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, Dr. Campbell, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures. One day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be coated with gold—one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN, who warn the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—PEDRO DIEGO, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition. Later a fight takes place, but the pirates are driven off. This encounter points to the necessity of a stronghold, and it is while one is being constructed that a loud report is heard, apparently from some point inland. (Now read on.)

Euried Alive!

"IS that a blast now, or is it another of the little volcanic tune-ups we have had several of lately, I wonder?" said the captain, as he stood straining his ears and listening intently.

Since their arrival they had had many reminders that they were on an island which was practically the upper part of an active volcano. Not only was there frequently that pall of smoke high up in the sky which they had seen when they had first caught sight of the place, but there were frequent rumblings and other curious sounds.

And of late these had rather increased in frequency, and had even at times taken the form of small explosions. Therefore they were now rather in doubt as to whether what they had just heard was due to the same cause or to something more unusual.

"I'd almost swear that's villainous saltpetre, as they call it," the skipper went on.

"But how can that be?" Alec asked. "Nothing they might be doing inside the mine would make such a noise as to be heard here. Why, it would mean they had blown the whole mine up—and themselves too!" he added half jestingly, half anxiously.

"Well, it had a very odd, sinister sort of sound, and I don't like—" Barron began; when again there came an interruption.

From a ledge on the side of the wall of rock behind them came a cry of "Sail ho!"

And on top of that came the sound of three shots fired quickly one after the other, but in a peculiar way.

"Hark! Our signal!" exclaimed Alec. "Surely it must be someone back from the mine—or perhaps my darkies. Anyway, it must mean that there is something amiss!"

"I see one thing that is amiss," the captain, who had promptly climbed on to a high boulder, called out. "I see smoke—and it may mean the Hawk coming this way! Ah! And—— Yes, you're quite right! I can see your two darkies coming along the shore. They're running like mad, as if the very devil himself is after 'em. It all means mischief, my lad, and it begins to look to me as if our rehearsal is going to be turned into something very like the real thing!"

The two natives, fleet of foot, came racing along at a great pace. And as they ran they were joined by other natives, who had been out in various directions, scouting or otherwise engaged, and who had been warned by signal shots that something was amiss.

They saw Alec on the top of the rocky platform, and hastened on to him direct, scaling the steep path like mountain goats.

Then partly in broken words, but chiefly by signs, they delivered their momentous message.

And this is the news which they brought, though as to some points Alec did not clearly understand it until subsequently. For the sake of clearness, therefore, it is given here as he afterwards understood it.

Menga and Kalma had gone out to the mine, intending to get some of their belongings which they had left there, and which, now they were staying in camp, they wanted. They had left a message with another native, explaining their absence, and saying they would return as quickly as possible, which message, however, the men promptly forgot to give to Alec.

The two reached the mine, and after obtaining what they had come for started on the way back to the camp.

Suddenly they heard the sound of shots, then of shouts and cries, and, making their way cautiously back, they got near enough to the entrance to the mine to see that a lot of Diego's men were in possession, and the two guessed at once what must have happened. They guessed that the freebooters had ambushed the natives left on guard, no doubt killing them all, and had taken their places.

Menga and his companion considered the best thing they could do would be to hurry back to the camp and give warning of what they had seen.

They set off, therefore, at once, expecting to be pursued, and were rather surprised that this was not the case. No one followed them, but, as they were drawing near the camp, they heard the sound of the explosion.

Greatly frightened—for it sounded to them where they were much louder than it did to those at the camp—they ran on faster than ever, firing their rifles now as they ran. And this timely warning had the effect, as above stated, of collecting all outlying natives, as well as preparing those at the camp for what was to come.

The horror of it that seized upon Barron and Alec when they knew the terrible truth can be better imagined than described.

Barron had no difficulty in understanding what had happened.

"The fiends had blown in the entrance to the mine—that's what the explosion meant," he declared. "They've sealed up our friends inside, and will leave them to die while they come on here to loot the camp and capture the yacht."

Alec was so overwhelmed that he seemed for a while unable to realise the position of danger in which they all now stood. He talked wildly of hurrying at once to the rescue of the doctor and those with him, for-

getting, as the cooler-headed skipper pointed out, that such a thing was absolutely impossible.

"Buck up, my lad!" cried Barron. "We must stay here and fight the rats off first, and trust to Providence. If we can get the better of 'em here we'll lose no time in going to the help of our friends. Now do you think you understand your part?"

"I think so, captain," Alec declared determinedly. "It sha'n't be my fault if we don't beat 'em off. I see how fortunate it is that you had your plans all ready beforehand."

"So long, then, lad, so long. I guess we'll meet no more till we've either taught 'em a lesson or they've busted us."

The two clasped hands, and the captain hastened away to the boat that was waiting for him. Within a very short space of time he was on board the yacht, had hauled up the anchor, and was heading her as though to make his way up the creek.

The sunken reef was a ledge—not of coral, but of volcanic rock—which ran not far under water nearly across the creek. It had been discovered by the natives when swimming and diving, and they had reported it to the captain. He had surveyed it himself, and had found that there was a gap at one part, not far from the shore and just opposite the crow's nest, where a large vessel could pass through. Everywhere else the reef was so near the surface that only small boats and canoes could pass over it with safety.

In order to be quite certain, however, Captain Barron had carefully sounded the whole of it, and in places where he thought the rock lay a little lower he had had bags of shingle secretly sunk there, so as to make it shallower. It was to assure himself that these bags were still in position and had not been shifted by the currents or the waves that he had gone out the first thing that morning, and so had missed seeing the doctor before he started for the mine.

Alec now watched the yacht as she made her way slowly through the gap. In order to do this she had to pass within a few hundred yards of the crow's nest. And as this towered up, fifty feet or more above the level of the water, those on it, peering over the boulders which had been placed round almost like battlements, could look right down on the yacht's deck.

So narrow was the channel that she could only go very cautiously; indeed, they could see Captain Barron feeling his way all the time with the lead.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Alec, "if the Hawk should attempt to follow her through there, we could shoot down every soul on board her as easy as knocking over a lot of ninepins!"

Tom Read grinned.

"I'm only hopin' as she will try, sir," he said between his teeth. "Maybe we may get our chance that way to be free t' go an' look fur the doctor and Mr. Clive."

This reminder of what these callous-minded ruffians had done set Alec's blood boiling again. He pictured his chum Clive and the doctor sealed up in that underground passage with their native followers and their small stock of food and oil for their lanterns. He pictured the awful despair with which they must regard their terrible situation, and he thought with a sickening feeling that the only alternative to staying there and dying of hunger was to go down once more to that horrible

(Continued overleaf.)

underground lake, where perhaps some other dreadful death would be awaiting them. He shuddered at the thought of their going back there without even so much as a boat with which to attempt the passage of the tunnel.

He wondered if they were waiting expecting that he and the skipper were hastening to their aid? Did they realise that, so far from doing that, all at the camp had now to fight for their own lives?

And there before him he could now see the people who had planned this diabolical thing. There was the Hawk steaming towards the shore, its crew ready to complete their infamous work by the shooting down and murdering wholesale any who opposed them, and selling the survivors into lifelong slavery.

Small wonder is it that, as these thoughts passed through his mind, Alec began to "see red." For the first time in his life he felt the battle fever; for the first time he was impatient to begin, eager to pour forth death and destruction upon this scoundrelly gang, who, it seemed to him, more than ever must consist, as Storbin had said, of fiends rather than human beings.

He wondered that the party, which he knew must be on its way from the mine after carrying out their fell work there, had not yet put in an appearance.

As a matter of fact, they were just then waiting out of sight along the shore. It was a part of their plan not to attack the camp before the Hawk had got close enough to help them with its guns, which threw small shells. Two or three of these fired amongst the defenders should, they reckoned, be sufficient to drive them out like rats from a burning haystack, sending them an easy prey to the party on shore waiting in ambush for them.

The Hawk came on, and Alec, through his glasses, could now see that her deck was crowded with men. Doubtless what Captain Barron had said was correct. Diego had been away to one of those coast towns to which he retired at intervals to spend his unholy gains, and there he had picked up reinforcements. That meant some of the scourgings of the seaboard—a collection of thieves, scoundrels, and murderers of many types and, doubtless, of divers nations. And these had joined together for the nonce to capture so attractive a prize as the explorer's yacht and all their belongings, and then take up their interrupted task of treasure-hunting.

As the pirate vessel came yet closer Alec noticed a stir on board. They were making preparations to begin hostilities. He could now, by the aid of his glasses, see even the faces of the men, and he had certainly never seen so many evil countenances gathered together in one place before in his life.

It was a good thing indeed, Alec reflected, that they had had warning, and that Captain Barron had shown such foresight in devising a plan for thwarting these men. What chance would the explorers have had had they been caught unawares, and with no settled plan of defence to guide them?

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