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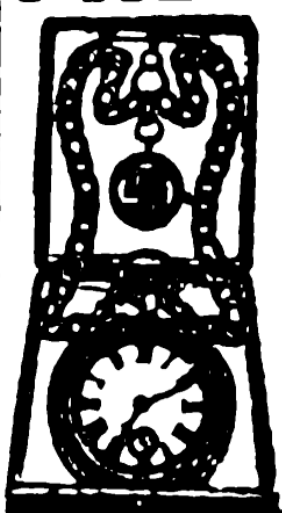


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Or, THE VENGEANCE OF
PARTEB SINGH.

An Entirely New Series of Episodes in the Lives of
NELSON LEE and NIPPER. Set down by Nipper, and
prepared for publication by the Author of the
"JIM THE PENMAN" Series.

INTRODUCTION.

NIPPER COMES TO A MOMENTOUS DECISION.

NELSON LEE'S consulting-room was quiet and peaceful.

The hour was just eleven o'clock p.m., and the clock on the mantel-piece had only a second before announced the fact in a slow, musical voice. The electric lights were switched on, and a cheerful fire blazed in the grate.

A big easy chair was drawn up before the fire, and within it lolled Nelson Lee, lazily pulling at a cigar, and scanning the evening paper. The famous criminologist was attired in dressing-gown and slippers, and he certainly looked extremely comfortable. As a matter of fact, he was extremely comfortable.

The clock ticked quietly, and this was the only sound except for the occasional rustle of Lee's newspaper.

The detective was not the only occupant of the room, however. Nipper, Nelson Lee's young assistant, was seated at the table, his elbows reposing gracefully upon Lee's blotting-pad, and his chin, in turn, reposing in his two palms.

Nipper was reading, too, for a book lay on the table—a cloth-covered "shilling edition." The lad was very quiet, and had been quiet for some little time. He and his famous master were indulging in a little ease after a rather strenuous day.

Suddenly, however, the quietness was disturbed.

A grunt came from Nipper—a grunt of impatience and disgust. The next second his book came flying across the room, its pages fluttering wildly, and the volume landed with a smack upon Nelson Lee's

opened newspaper. There was a tear, and the book went clean through the news-sheet.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lee, starting up.

"Sorry, guv'nor," said Nipper with a grin. "I didn't know you were there!"

"Upon my soul, Nipper, what are you playing at?" demanded Nelson Lee, turning his head and frowning. "Didn't know I was here! And, in any case, what do you mean by wildly hurling your book across the room?"

Nipper twisted round in his chair.

"I'm fed up!" he said impatiently.

"I am not surprised—you demolished enough supper, at all events!" declared Lee tartly.

"I mean I'm fed up with that rotten book!" growled Nipper. "Fed up to the giddy neck. I've never read such piff in my life!"

"If you are dissatisfied with the story that is no reason why you should throw it at me!" was Lee's reply. "If you want to vent your spite on somebody throw the book at the author—he is the guilty party. I should judge."

"Guilty! He ought to be hung, drawn, and quartered!"

Nelson Lee could not help smiling.

"I am afraid you are rather severe, Nipper," he said. "What has the poor man done? I believe you selected the book yourself, now I come to think of it. The cover, at all events, is attractive."

"It's supposed to be a detective story, guv'nor," explained Nipper. "I'll bet the chap who wrote it never met a real live detective in his natural existence! I've been trying to get the hang of the plot for

hours, and it's so complicated that I'm in a blessed maze all the time."

"Perhaps your intelligence is at fault, young 'un?" suggested Lee.

"My intelligence!" grunted Nipper. "I'll bet the author himself couldn't make head or tail of the thing! It's simply a mass of wild rubbish from start to finish. I didn't wade through to the finish, though."

"Then you oughtn't to pass sentence —"

"Have a good look at the book yourself, guv'nor!" growled Nipper. "The detective in it—the bang-up, go-ahead private crime investigator—is about as senseless as my left slipper. He doesn't see clues which stare him in the face. The story's piffle in every page!"

"My dear lad, don't get excited about it."

"I'm wild!" said Nipper. "I thought the yarn was going to be a ripper, and I meant to compare this fiction-detective's methods with yours. But that's impossible. The author ought to be suppressed!"

Nelson Lee picked up his torn newspaper.

"Moral: Don't buy any more of his books," he said leisurely.

"I jolly well won't," was Nipper's reply. "Why, I could write a better detective yarn than that myself. I've got heaps of real material to go at, anyhow. Some of our adventures would beat this stuff into bits."

"Oh, you could write a better yarn yourself, Nipper?"

"Yes, I could!"

"Then why not try?" suggested Lee drily.

"Eh?"

"Why not become a full-blown author yourself, my lad?" went on the detective. "If you are so certain of your capabilities—I don't like to call it boasting—you should prove your words."

"Who's boasting?" demanded Nipper warmly.

"Didn't you say that you could write a detective story?"

"Yes, I did. And I will, too!" declared Nipper decidedly. "I'll write up one of our cases, and if I don't make a better job of it than this chap I'll—I'll admit that I'm a duffer!"

"That will be something novel, at all events!" murmured Lee.

Nipper got up from his chair, and paced the consulting-room. There was a tense expression upon his face, and he was obviously suffering from inward excitement. His master's suggestion, uttered in jest, had impressed Nipper greatly.

For ten minutes Nipper paced the room; then he came to a halt before Nelson Lee's chair. There was an eager light in his eyes.

"I'll start right away, guv'nor!" he exclaimed intently.

"Eh?" Lee laid down his paper. "You'll start, Nipper?"

"Yes. I've come to a momentous decision," replied Nipper. "I'm going to write up a kind of journal in my leisure time. I'm going to set down some of our most exciting and mysterious cases. I've got heaps of notes packed away, and I'll choose the adventures in which I took a pretty prominent part. I'll show you whether I was boasting, guv'nor!"

And so the die was cast.

From that hour "Nipper's Notebook" came into being.

NOTE.—The following pages will prove very conclusively that Nipper was not bragging when he declared that he would write some exciting and mysterious detective stories. All the episodes are worked up from notes which either he or Nelson Lee took at the times of the actual adventures. Nipper's yarns in his journal are surprisingly well put together, and only require a slight amount of knocking into shape. My task of editing the journal, and preparing the tales for publication, has been—and is—a light and pleasant one.—AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I HIT UPON A SINGULAR MYSTERY.

THE powerful twin-cylinder engine was running beautifully—as sweetly as it's possible for an engine to run—and the old 'bus was mopping along at a good thirty.

It was as black as your hat (if that happens to be a black one), and there was just a suggestion of rain in the air. Mr. Lee and I were on the way up to London from the coast, and so far we had had a ripping journey—no punctures, no mishaps, no anything.

The old 'bus—by which I mean my brand-new side-car combination—was running as though she knew we were on the way home. The guv'nor was in the side-car, of course. He takes jolly good care to select the most comfortable place! I believe he was dozing, too; anyhow, he only uttered a sort of growl when I yelled

that we were eating up the miles like a sixty horse-power Rolls-Royce.

We should have been going faster, only the lighting restrictions are so rotten, that it's not possible to have a decent head-light nowadays. The engine was capable of doing twice the speed, and she was humming between my feet without a sign of a miss. The whole turn-out, in fact, was in fine form.

Mr. Nelson Lee and I were on our way home, after spending the day down at one of the south coast towns. We'd been there on business, of course, and we hadn't started back until late.

I glanced at my wrist-watch—fitted with one of those luminous dials—and found that the time was close upon one. Going as we were now, we should be home at Gray's Inn Road before two, at latest.

Mr. Lee was lolling in the side-car. I can't always add the prefix "Mr." when I refer to the guv'nor; so, at the risk of being disrespectful, I shall drop it. I'll simply refer to him by his name alone—just as the professional author chaps do. I reckon I've made a good start, and I'm feeling a full-blown author already!

As I said, Nelson Lee was reposing gracefully in the side-car with about a ton of rugs wrapped round him. I, of course, was on the saddle—a jolly comfortable one, I'll admit. And, to tell the truth, I preferred doing the driving business myself. This doesn't mean to say that the guv'nor wasn't so capable as I am—because I expect he could drive a heap better—but I rather fancy myself driving the old jigger.

The sky was black, and only one or two stars were to be seen. The moon was thundering lazy; anyhow, he hadn't troubled to come above the horizon on this particular night. There were showers about, too, and now and again I felt a spot of rain on my face.

We pelted through a little village, and I opened the throttle wide, in order to sweep up a hill which led out into the country again. We took the rise beautifully, and then settled down upon a long, straight stretch which would lead us directly into one of the outlying suburbs of the great metropolis.

I was just deciding what I should have for supper after we arrived home. I knew I should require a terrific amount of grub, for the ride had made me as hungry as a hunter. I expect Lee was a bit peckish, too.

Just at that time I little thought that it would be morning before we tasted food of any sort.

I was smacking my lips at the thought of poached eggs on toast—about six eggs and three rounds of toast—when Nelson Lee gave a sudden yell. For a second I was startled.

"Look out, young 'un!" roared Lee. "Brake, lad—brake!"

And then I saw something dark lying in the road about thirty yards ahead. As it happened, the surface just here was sandy and light-coloured, and so the dark object stood out rather clearly.

It was pretty obvious that the guv'nor hadn't been dosing much, for he spotted the obstruction before I did. I closed the throttle and practically stood upon the brake lever with my heel. At the same time I jerked the old 'bus round, and at last came to a stop perfectly alongside the thing which lay in the road.

Nelson Lee leaned out over the side-car to have a squint at it. From my seat I couldn't see anything.

"What is it, guv'nor?" I asked. "An old sack?"

Lee threw the rugs from him and leapt out.

"No, Nipper," he replied tensely. "I am very much afraid the thing is a human body. A man, by all appearances."

"Dead, guv'nor?" I asked, hopping off the saddle and dodging round the side-car. "I expect the poor chap was bowled over by a passing car, or something."

The famous detective—Mr. Lee will like that!—was bending over the still form, using his electric torch. After a moment he looked up at me, and I thought I saw an expression of relief in his eyes.

"Only unconscious, my boy," said Lee. "In fact, I don't think the man is really badly injured. No bones broken, at all events. Just bruised and stunned."

We looked down at the fellow. He was slim and rather smartly dressed. One curious thing, however, was that everything he wore was dark. Even his collar and shirt were of soft, grey flannel. Just upon his forehead there was a whacking great bruise, and it had been bleeding a bit.

"What's to be done, guv'nor?" I asked.

"Well, we don't happen to be travelling in a big motor-car," replied Lee. "Therefore, I think we had better take the poor man to the nearest cottage and leave him there. I'll give the cottager some money, of course, and we can either send a doctor out, or come ourselves in the morning."

"Hadn't we better try and find out who the man is?"

"I intend to do so," replied the gov'nor. He bent down again and started feeling through the stranger's pockets. But he didn't bring anything to light except a clean visiting card. This was just tucked into one of the injured man's waistcoat pockets. Upon it was the name, in rich, copperplate writing, "Roger Pavitt." Below was the address: "Hill Villa, Mollort Road, Beckenham."

"There's something written across it, isn't there, sir?" I asked.

Lee held it closer, and I read: "Communicate with me," in a wretched pencil scribble. That was all.

"Who's Roger Pavitt?" I asked. "Not this chap, surely?"

"I should hardly think so," observed Lee thoughtfully. "H'm! This is rather curious, Nipper. It looks to me as though this card was placed upon the fellow by the man who knocked him down."

I stared.

"Well, that's rummy!" I ejaculated. "Surely no man was fool enough to leave the poor fellow right in the middle of the road, unconscious and helpless? Even if it were impossible to take him away, I should think he could have been dragged on to the grass."

"Yes, it is rather mysterious," remarked the gov'nor, continuing his search. "And there doesn't seem to be anything else in the pockets, either. That is astonishing in itself. Not even a watch, not even a cigarette case or a pipe."

The whole thing looked jolly queer. Why on earth Mr. Pavitt hadn't done something was astounding. I figured it out that Pavitt had bowled the poor chap over, and had then continued his journey. But he must have stopped, or that card wouldn't be there.

And to leave the unconscious man lying in the middle of the road! That was what puzzled me more than anything else. Surely Pavitt could have dragged his victim on to the grass?

Beckenham, I judged, was about twenty miles away—on the other side of London. To get there it would be necessary to cut across country, and then through Sutton and Croydon and Penge, a roundabout route from this particular spot. We were just about as near to London as Beckenham is, but in quite a different direction.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed suddenly. "What's this, sir?"

I pointed to the man's left sleeve and wrist. Just near the cuff a portion of the cloth was completely missing, a piece about

two inches square. And the chap's wrist was rather badly jagged.

"His arm caught a portion of the vehicle which knocked into him," said Lee. "I didn't notice this before, Nipper. A rather deep wound, although by no means serious. It has been bleeding a lot."

The detective took out his handkerchief and lightly bound it round the injured wrist. Then he examined the torn sleeve. The material was dark, but of quite a distinctive pattern, a kind of check mixture stuff, with spots of dark green and red in it—Irish tweed, I believe.

"Come along, young 'un—lend a hand."

We lifted the stranger into the side-car. And then, while Lee hung on to the carrier, I started up the engine, and we shifted off fairly slowly. After going half a mile, we came upon two or three cottages lying back from the road.

"This do, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Splendid, Nipper!"

We stopped, and Lee pushed open the gate of the first cottage and proceeded to perform a lively tattoo upon the front door with his knuckles. After about three minutes a head was struck out of one of the upper windows.

"What'll you be wantin'?" demanded a gruff, sleepy voice.

"I want you to open the door to us, my friend," called up Nelson Lee quietly. "There has been an accident, and if you will provide accommodation for an injured man——"

"Lor' sakes! I'll be down there right quick, sir."

The head disappeared, and Lee strolled up the path to the gate where I was standing.

"I was going to offer the man money, Nipper, but he saved me the trouble," said the gov'nor. "Evidently our friends here are good-natured people. Well, the reward will be all the greater because they are willing."

In a short while we heard the bolts drawn, and then an elderly man came down the path towards us. He was a typical country labourer, good-natured and rough in appearance.

"What be wrong, sir?" he asked concernedly.

Lee briefly explained, saying we had found the stranger upon the road, and could not convey him far, because we were only mounted upon a motor-cycle and side-car.

"I don't think the poor man is badly hurt," continued Lee. "He will probably come to his senses by the morning. But if

not, a doctor will arrive—I will see to that. And you may be sure that we shall compensate you——”

“Don't you go for to mention nothin' o' that sort, sir,” interrupted the old fellow gruffly. “It ain't likely I'd want a reward for takin' in a poor gent that's been knocked down and injured. Why, when the Zeppelins came this way, eight months ago, I took in Mr. Biggs and his young nippers—fower of 'em. They was all knocked about a good bit.”

“Quite so—quite so!” put in the guv'nor, while I did a little grin. “I have no doubt, my friend, that you are only too anxious to oblige us. Nevertheless, I intend to leave some money with you, whether you like it or not.”

Jerry Gates, as the cottager was named, helped us to carry the stranger into the little house. There he was made comfortable upon an old-fashioned couch. He was still unconscious, but breathing regularly and evenly.

After a few more words we took our departure, Nelson Lee very thoughtful and abstracted. He climbed into the side-car without a word, and I didn't speak until we'd started off.

“There's something mysterious about that affair, guv'nor,” I exclaimed, when I'd coaxed the engine into an even hum. “You seem to be pretty thoughtful. What do you make of it?”

“Well, I hardly know, Nipper,” replied Lee, bending towards me. “It is quite obvious that the motorist who knocked the man down—Roger Pavitt appears to be his name—went off after finding that his victim was injured and unconscious. Upon the whole, however, I am inclined to think that the affair was only commonplace.”

“Perhaps that card was on the poor chap before he was bowled over?” I suggested.

“Possibly—quite possibly,” agreed the detective. “That is a shrewd suggestion, Nipper. It may not refer to this particular affair at all. The man may have been knocked down by a motor-car, and brutally left in the road. Such cases have occurred more than once. But I am convinced that Mr. Roger Pavitt is very closely connected with the accident.”

“In any case we shall learn all about it to-morrow, sir,” I said. “And now we'll buzz along home as quickly as possible. Why shouldn't we run out here in the morning?” I added. “It'll be a bit of a jaunt, anyhow.”

“We might, Nipper—we might.”

But we were very shortly to find that

there was no home for us that night. It was, indeed, to prove a night of stirring adventure.

We dipped down a hollow, and then proceeded rather slowly up a narrow winding hill. There were plenty of trees about here, and they stood out darkly against the night sky. Over to the left I caught a glimpse of a low built house, tucked away among the trees. There seemed to be no other houses in the vicinity.

The engine was making a fair noise, for she was hauling the old 'bus up the hill in a gallant manner. We were going pretty slowly, too, for we were on the second gear.

Quite suddenly a dim form appeared from a gateway, and came to a halt in the middle of the road. His arms waved wildly, and I slowed down.

“What's up, now?” I asked wonderingly.

We came to a stop right in front of the figure, so that the light of the head-lamp—pretty bright at such close quarters—shone fully upon him. He was elderly and bent, and was only dressed in a partial degree. At least, I saw that his braces were not over his shoulders, and he'd simply thrown an old overcoat on, and it was not buttoned.

“Thank Heaven, somebody has come!” panted the old man huskily. “I want help—I want help!”

“What is wrong?” asked Lee, jumping out of the side-car. “You appear to be greatly agitated——”

“And little wonder—little wonder!” quavered the other. “My master, Major Hansard Yorke, has just been brutally murdered!”

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH WE MAKE INVESTIGATIONS AND AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY.

THIS announcement took us by surprise.

Nelson Lee wasn't a bit flustered, though. What a wonderful chap the guv'nor is! He always keeps as cool as a chunk of ice in the most startling circumstances. Perhaps I've caught his way a bit. At all events, I just let out a soft whistle, and then waited for further information.

First an accident, and now a murder!

We were having quite a chapter of surprising incidents.

The old man said that his name was Simmons, and that he was Major Hansard

Yorke's butler. His hair was almost white, and it waved in the breeze as he talked. It was easy to see that he was terribly agitated, for his face was pale, and he quivered all over as though he'd got the ague, or whatever that shaky feeling is called.

"The poor master's been killed, sir," he said hoarsely. "Do you think you could fetch the police——"

"Are you sure the major is dead?" interrupted the gov'nor.

"Quite sure, sir; quite sure!"

"Why are you sure?"

"The poor master's lying in the library, still and silent," said Simmons shakily. "He doesn't breathe, and there's blood—blood! The room is in disorder, and the safe is smashed open!"

"H'm, sounds bad!" exclaimed the detective. "I think I will come and have a look round, Simmons."

The old man stared rather sharply.

"I'd rather you went for the police, sir."

"My good Simmons," interjected the gov'nor quietly, "you need have no fears regarding Nipper and myself. My name is Nelson Lee, and I will be fully responsible for everything that may occur."

"Lee—Lee!" murmured the old man. "I—I seem to remember the name."

"Mr. Lee is the famous London detective," I put in at this point. "Better than all the police put together, Simmons."

The butler's eyes opened wider, and there was relief in his eyes.

"Ah, yes! The detective!" he exclaimed. "And you are Mr. Nelson Lee? How fortunate, sir—how extremely fortunate. You may come in at once, and right glad I am to have companionship."

Nelson Lee and Simmons started off down the drive towards the house. And I pushed the jigger into the garden, and left it close against the bushes which bordered the drive.

When I entered the dimly lit hall, Lee and the butler were talking.

"No, sir, there's nobody awake but myself," Simmons was saying. "I came down and—and discovered——"

"One moment. How many servants are there here?"

"Three, besides myself. Two housemaids and a cook. I didn't want to wake the women," replied Simmons. "They're hysterical creatures, and I should have had the house screamed down."

The gov'nor smiled slightly.

"Probably," he said, with a certain grin. "But what of the major's

family, Simmons? Is there no Mrs. Yorke? Are there no children?"

"None, sir. The master was a bachelor. There was nobody here except the major and I and the women. Dear Heaven! And to think that this tragedy should come to us!" lamented the old man quaveringly. "We, who have lived so quietly and peacefully for these ten years past!"

"Tragedy always comes with overwhelming suddenness," said Nelson Lee gravely. "You must pull yourself together, Simmons. I wish to ask you a few questions before entering the library."

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best to answer."

The poor old chap was nearly overcome with horror and fright. He sank weakly into one of the hall chairs. Nelson Lee took out his brandy-flask, and allowed Simmons to take a gulp or two. I looked on with interest, and with a kind of stirred-up feeling inside.

What was the tragedy we had hit upon?

The dark, windy night, the old house among the trees, the aged butler's story, they all combined together to make the whole affair somewhat sinister and mysterious. I felt that we were on the verge of something "big."

Looking round the hall, I saw that it was fairly well furnished. The light was supplied by a small oil-lamp which was hung upon the wall; an old-fashioned ornamental affair, which was designed more for looks than for use. At least, the light it shed was disgraceful. The shadows were deep, and the corners of the hall were dark and dreary.

Somehow, I felt jumpy.

Nelson Lee was as cool as a cucumber, and his eyes were gleaming. Only twenty minutes before, in the side-car, he had been jolly dozey. He was keen-witted enough now, though.

"Now, tell me, Simmons, how long ago did the tragedy occur?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir, I don't know!"

"But you must have some general idea, surely?"

"I know the master was sitting up late to-night, sir," said the butler, who was looking more alive after the brandy. "He told me that he would lock up, and see all the lights out. He was going to write, I believe, in the library."

"And you went to bed?"

"Yes, sir."

"What caused you to wake—a cry, perhaps?"

Simmons shook his head.

"I heard nothing at all, sir," he replied.

"But at about one o'clock I awoke, and

lay in bed, listening. This must have been half an hour ago, because it's half-past one now," he added, glancing at the grandfather's clock across the hall, which was solemnly ticking away with a subdued note as though it knew that something was vastly wrong.

"Why did you listen?" asked Lee abruptly.

"It's queer, sir. I've been wondering that myself," replied the butler. "I seemed to know that there was tragedy in the air. I was uneasy and restless, and couldn't get to sleep again. The billiard-room is just below me——"

"The billiard-room?" I put in. "You didn't mention that before."

Simmons turned to me.

"No, young sir, I'm flustered—right flustered," he said. "Major Yorke sometimes went into the billiard-room of nights and practised alone. He'd be in there knocking the balls about for perhaps an hour or more. Then he'd go into the library for a smoke and a read."

"And you listened for the sounds of the billiard balls?"

"Well, partly, sir. I heard nothing except the wind in the trees outside my window," said the butler, shivering. "I got out of bed and looked out upon the garden. A glimmer of light upon the path told me that the library lamp was going. And I thought that the master had gone to sleep over his cigar."

"But you were not alarmed?" asked Lee.

"Not alarmed in the right sense, as I may say, sir. But I'm nervous of fire, and when I thought of the major asleep, and his cigar on the floor—smouldering perhaps—I decided to slip my trousers on and go down."

"To awaken your master?"

"Yes, sir, exactly."

"And when you got down—what then?"

Simmons shivered again, but violently this time.

"I opened the library door after knocking gently, and looked in," he said, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper. "I knew that something was amiss at once. The furniture was toppled over, and everything was in disorder. And Major Yorke was lying close against the hearth-rug—dead!"

"How had he died?"

"Why not go into the library and see, guv'nor?" I put in rather impatiently.

"We don't need to question Simmons, do we?"

Nelson Lee turned to me with a frown. "If you please, Nipper," he said curtly, "I will conduct this affair in my own way. I wish to hear Simmons' story fully before I make any investigation myself. If you cannot make sensible suggestions please be quiet."

I flushed a bit, rather abashed. Perhaps the guv'nor was right. It was better to hear what the butler had to say.

"The master was lying still, sir," said Simmons unsteadily. "There was a great bruise on his forehead, and his face was torn and had been bleeding. He had been killed with a heavy Indian club, and that one blow must have smashed his head."

"Is the Indian club there?"

"Yes, sir, beside the body. It is blood-stained—all blood-stained!" muttered the old man. "Heaven! Can it all be true? The master brutally killed with one of his own clubs!"

"There was no sign of life whatever?" asked Lee.

"None whatever, sir. I staggered away, almost mad with fear and horror. I believe I wandered about the hall for some time, not daring to go back into the library," explained Simmons. "And then, while I was still in a state of terror and uncertainty, I heard your motor. And I rushed out to stop you."

"And that is all you know?"

"All, sir—all!"

"Tell me one thing, Simmons," said the guv'nor quietly. "Are you a light sleeper or a heavy sleeper?"

"Why, rather light, as a rule."

"And the library is in a state of great disorder?"

"Terrible, Mr. Lee—terrible!"

"You intimate that a fierce struggle took place?"

"It seems so, sir."

"Then is it not somewhat curious, Simmons," said Lee quietly, "that you did not hear that struggle? You cannot be far from the library, because you saw the light on the path from the library window. Why did you not hear that dreadful struggle? There was surely a commotion."

This was rather a good stroke of the guv'nor's, and I looked at Simmons curiously. The old man had opened his eyes wide, and he was staring at Nelson Lee wonderingly and almost fearfully.

"Don't—don't you think I've told the truth, sir?" he asked huskily.

"To be frank, I believe you have," was the detective's reply. "But you have not answered my question, Simmons."

"I can't answer it, sir. I don't know—it never struck me like that before. Why I didn't hear anything unusual is a mystery to me. But I didn't; I just woke up and lay in bed, uneasy. I may have been awakened by a noise, but if so, all was quiet afterwards."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully, and was silent for a moment. We were all silent, in fact, and Simmons' forced breathing was decidedly wheezy and agitated. I thought just the same as Lee, I was sure that the butler had told the straight, simple truth.

He wasn't capable of lying, anyhow. He was just a kindhearted old family retainer, one of those old-world class of servants which are not met with often nowadays. As a rule, butlers are pompous, self-important bounders, who think they are everybody.

The front door was still open, and the rustle of the trees sounded. And there came to our ears the steady throb of a powerful motor. Nelson Lee looked at me sharply, and I wondered why.

"That is a motor-car approaching, Nipper," he exclaimed crisply.

"Yes, sir, I know," I replied.

"It's the London mail," vouchsafed Simmons. "It generally passes here at this hour. It wakes me up as a rule, because the house shakes. Maybe it was a passing motor-car or lorry which woke me to-night," he added as an afterthought.

"We must stop the mail-van," said Nelson Lee quickly. "The police—don't you understand? The driver will be able to carry a message to the police-station in the nearest town or suburb. Is the van going to London, Simmons?"

"Yes, sir."

"All the better. I will give the driver a message."

The guv'nor hurried out, and I followed him. Simmons, I heard, got up and toddled to the door, where he waited for us. We arrived in the road just as the lumbering mail-van was coming up at a fair speed. Those Post Office vehicles usually travel fast when they're on the open road.

In response to our wild signals the van came to a stop, and Lee soon told the driver what to do. He handed the man a half-crown, too, and we were promised that the police would be instructed as soon as possible.

Then we went back to the house, and found Simmons on the doorstep. I believe he was afraid to remain in the house alone. This affair had got on his nerves more than

a little bit; and I was feeling shaky, too. And I hadn't seen the library or the body yet. All the same, there was a sensation of mystery and tragedy in the very atmosphere.

"Any more questions, sir?" asked Simmons hesitatingly.

"No, not at present," said Nelson Lee. "You may lead us to the library now, Simmons. You have given me a fair outline of the tragedy, so far as you know it, and I must now investigate myself. It is possible that I may be able to draw certain conclusions from the data which the library will provide."

We all moved down the hall, and I could feel my heart thumping against my ribs. I wondered why I was so affected. In the course of dozens of cases, I had seen many a dead body, and I hadn't flinched in the slightest degree. A fellow gets used to anything in time, and our profession was not exactly a kid's game.

It was the general atmosphere of the place, I suppose. Everything seemed to be so sinister. The semi-darkness, and the isolated position of the house, added to the general tragic effect.

When we entered the library, however, I felt a lot better. This may seem curious, but it's a fact. There was a big lamp in the library—a huge table-lamp, which shed a bright light over the whole room. It was turned fully up, and the circular wick was giving a splendid flame.

Nelson Lee did not pause to look round the apartment. He strode straight across to the hearthrug, and knelt down beside the still form which lay stretched there. There was just a scrap of fire in the grate, and the room was comfortably warm. I stood looking on silently.

"You are right, Simmons," said the guv'nor, after a minute. "Major Yorke is quite dead, and has been dead, I should imagine, a full hour. According to your statement, he must have died only a few minutes before you awoke, for it is just upon two o'clock now."

"Perhaps the struggle woke me, after all, sir," suggested Simmons. "I may have been disturbed, I mean, and woke up after the noise had died down. I don't know anything more than I have told you. Oh, I wish I had been awake all the time!" he added fervently.

I looked down at the body.

Major Hansard Yorke had been a fairly big man, and his age, I should judge, was close upon fifty-five. He had a profusion of dark hair, turning slightly grey, and a big military moustache. His face was

lined and haggard, as though with great worry; but perhaps this was the effect of death.

Upon his forehead, half-hidden by the hair, was a great bruise. The skin had only been broken slightly, and the wound had not bled much. But his nose was scratched and his cheek badly grazed.

"Looks as though he had a fight before that fatal blow was struck, guv'nor," I said keenly. "Look at those marks. And what a blow he must have received! The murderer's a strong chap, anyhow."

Lee remained kneeling for several minutes, and he didn't answer my remark. When he got to his feet he looked at Simmons, and nodded slightly.

"I am convinced that Major Yorke died instantly," he exclaimed. "Or, perhaps, I had better say that appearances all go to prove that theory. That would account for the absence of any sudden cry. The fight may have been a quiet one."

"Quiet, guv'nor?" I repeated.

"It is perfectly possible for two men to struggle without raising an outcry," said the detective. "Supposing, for instance, the major entered this room and found a burglar in possession. He would, perhaps, spring at the man. They struggle for several minutes, panting heavily, each endeavouring to gain the mastery. Then the other man, finding himself near the wall, wrenches down an Indian club. He steps back and delivers a blow which settles the fight very abruptly. I repeat, that is a possible theory."

"Sounds jolly likely," I remarked, glancing at one of the walls. There was an Indian club hanging there—evidently one of a pair. The other was lying upon the hearthrug, just where it had been flung down by the murderer.

While we had been in the hall I had had a notion that suicide might be the explanation of the mystery. And I believe the guv'nor thought something of the same sort himself. But we knew positively, now, that Major Yorke could not have taken his own life. The blow which had killed him had been delivered by a man possessed of great strength.

To have imposed such a blow himself would have been absolutely impossible.

Nelson Lee picked up the club, and closely examined it. I drew nearer, and had a look, too. It was a heavy thing, and made a deadly weapon. The fat end of it was smooth, and this accounted for the absence of any great skin-wound. The death-blow had been

a straight swing, killing the major outright, without making any serious surface wound.

There was just a trace of blood upon it, though, and a couple of dark hairs. But these may have belonged to the rug; it was impossible to tell without a careful examination.

I looked round the room. As Simmons had said, the library was in great disorder. Two chairs were overturned, and a lot of papers had been swept off the table on to the floor. And in the far corner of the room a small safe was set into the wall. The green-painted door was open half-way.

"The safe's been busted, sir," I remarked, crossing to it. "This seems to point to burglary, doesn't it?"

"Probably the murderer's object was burglary," said Nelson Lee. "The major surprised him, and there was a fight. Dear me! This job was performed by no amateur," he added, looking closely at the safe. "An expert cracksman forced this lock; it is really a masterly piece of work."

"Isn't it rather curious that a burglar should crack the crib while the major was in the billiard-room?" I suggested. "Surely he would have waited until the house was all quiet?"

"I don't suppose he knew the master was up, young sir," said Simmons. "It was after midnight, you know, and outwardly the house was all quiet. There are shutters to the windows in the billiard-room, and when they're closed—as they are now—there's not a ray of light escapes. And one can't hear much in this room when the door is closed. It's baized-covered, you see, and shuts off the sound."

I turned my eyes towards the door. It was baize-covered, as I now noticed. While I was shifting my gaze I spotted something lying on a chair. The chair was half under the table, and it was a metallic gleam which caught my eye.

Crossing over, I picked the thing up. It was a kind of metal disc, made of partially polished brass. And upon it were some words, roughly scrawled in blue pencil. It was only just possible to read the words.

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated suddenly. "Look at this, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee came to my side quickly. He took the disc, and read the words which had so startled me—"THE VENGEANCE OF PARTER SINGH." What could it mean? Who had written that significant message?

"Dear me! This is rather interesting," said the gov'nor quietly. "The vengeance of Parteb Singh, eh? We are getting somewhat deeper, Nipper. This smacks of India——"

"India—India!" Simmons crossed to us, his eyes alight with sudden excitement. "Did you say India, Mr. Lee? The major spent several years of his military career out in the Punjab. He has been on the retired list for six or seven years, and has lived here during that time."

"A case of Hindoo revenge!" I exclaimed.

Nelson Lee frowned.

"Do not jump to conclusions, Nipper," he said. "This may be a blind. Anybody could have written these words. However, we will bear this interesting disc in mind, and see how it tallies with the rest of the evidence."

He turned to Simmons.

"Did your master ever refer to his life in India?" he asked. "Did Major Yorke ever hint that he was in danger——"

"Never, sir—never!" declared the old man. "Now and again, perhaps, the master would chat with me about some adventure or other in the jungle, or about the native customs out there. But he never once mentioned that he had made any enemies."

"H'm! This problem is rather interesting," commented Lee.

I could see that he was very keen. I knew that light in his eyes well enough. The gov'nor always is interested when there's anything especially tough in the mystery line to be unravelled. He turned back to the safe again.

"Do you know if the major kept a large sum of money in here?" he asked.

Simmons smiled weakly—the first smile I had seen on his haggard, worn old face. And he shook his head.

"The master never did have any large sum of money, sir," he replied. "If a burglar did break open the safe he must have been disappointed. There was nothing in it except a few pounds for current expenses, and the tradesmen's account books."

"The major was not rich, then?"

"Rich!" Simmons almost laughed in a bitter kind of way. "He was poor, sir—dreadfully poor. I was completely in his confidence; indeed, he owed me several months' wages. But I never grumbled. The master had a bit of money at one time, but he invested it badly, and he lost it all. And through that he got

into bad financial difficulties. I know for a fact that several London people were on the point of issuing proceedings against him. This tragedy has only just averted a smash-up, sir. The major often told me that his home would soon be sold up."

Nelson Lee and I looked at one another.

"Then it couldn't have been robbery," I said decidedly.

"And why not?" asked the gov'nor in that smooth, exasperating way of his. "Why not, my good Nipper? In my opinion the mystery is clearer. A professional burglar entered the house, thinking that he would rake in a good haul; but upon opening the safe he found nothing—or next to nothing. And he was consequently enraged. The major, entering the library at that moment, received the full brunt of the unwelcome visitor's fury. Hence the fight, and the tragedy."

"Yes, that sounds a likely theory," I admitted grudgingly.

"The murderer, terrified at his own action, sought for some means to smother the trail," went on Lee. "Knowing that Major Yorke had spent many years in India, the murderer hit upon the idea of leaving a dramatic message behind him. By the way, Simmons, have you seen this disc before?"

"Never, sir."

Nelson Lee turned to the dead man, and after a short examination he covered the poor remains with a cloth. Rather curiously, I thought, the major's eyes were closed, and there was an expression of dull despair upon his face. Certainly there was no sign of anger or fear.

I noticed that there were French windows, and I walked over to them. They were closed, but not locked. Passing through, I found myself upon a wide, old-fashioned rustic verandah. I took out my electric torch, and flashed the light to and fro. Then, suddenly, I caught my breath in.

I had not expected to find anything out there, but then, of course, it is generally the unexpected that happens in this life.

Just on the edge of the verandah there was a small bag. I picked it up, and felt that it was jolly heavy. Looking inside, I saw several highly-polished steel tools. A burglar's kit!

I was just about to turn when I spotted something else. For perhaps twenty seconds I stood as still as a statue. Then I twisted round, burst open the French windows, and stuck my head into the library.

"Guv'nor!" I gasped hoarsely. "Here—come here quick!"

Nelson Lee was by my side in a moment; he knew that something was up by the tone of my voice. I dragged him out upon the verandah, and focussed my light upon one of the upright posts. A nail was projecting from the woodwork—a nail which had probably been stuck there to secure some creeper or other.

"Do you see, guv'nor?" I asked excitedly. "There's a trace of blood on that nail, and a piece of cloth. And it's exactly the same pattern as the clothes of that man we picked up unconscious in the road a mile or so back. It's the piece of cloth which was torn from his sleeve. That man, now lying senseless in a labourer's cottage, *is the murderer!*"

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH SEVERAL EXCITING INCIDENTS OCCUR.

I BROUGHT out that dramatic statement rather well, I thought. But Nelson Lee didn't seem to be so vastly impressed. That's the worst of the guv'nor, he takes everything so blessed coolly.

"You appear to have made an important discovery, Nipper," he exclaimed, in an even voice.

"Appear to!" I echoed. "I jolly well have!"

Lee bent closer to the verandah post, while I held my light steady. As I had said, there was a small piece of cloth hanging to the nail. It was a piece of tweed stuff, with traces of red and green in it. There was no mistaking that material; it had certainly been torn from the sleeve of the man we had picked up in the road.

That chap, therefore, was directly connected with this murder!

He had certainly been here, and had just as certainly fled from the house in a terrific hurry. He was, of course, the burglar—the man who had forced the safe, and who had killed the major. That was as clear as daylight.

We were fairly on the track now.

"You are undoubtedly correct in your statement, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee, after a few moments. "This scrap of cloth is the piece which is missing from the sleeve of our friend up the road. I did not connect him with this crime at all. Yet it is now obvious that he is very closely allied with the whole affair.

"He's the murderer, sir!" I declared.

"Look here—these are his tools! I found 'em just below this post on the floor."

"Yes, I saw them in your hand," said the guv'nor calmly. "It is easy enough to reconstruct what happened. The burglar was surprised at his work; he flung himself upon the major, and a fatal fight ensued. Terrified at his crime, the guilty man dashed out, and happened to catch his hand and sleeve against this nail. The sudden shock jerked the bag of tools from his grip, and he was too frightened to stop to recover it. Later on, while continuing his flight, he was unfortunate enough to try conclusions with a motor-car—or, at all events, a motor vehicle of some sort. And he is now within Mr. Jerry Gates's cottage, a mile or so away."

"We've got him, guv'nor," I said—"we've got him properly."

"Yes, young 'un, I believe we have," replied Lee, with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "We got him, as a matter of fact, before we knew that any crime had been committed. I don't think we have often nabbed our man before we knew that he was our man. There are several singular aspects of this case."

"Why, it's all as clear as daylight now, sir!"

"Hardly, Nipper. There are one or two minor points which puzzle me. This torn piece of cloth points to one thing—it would appear that the murderer fled from his crime in a state of mortal terror."

"So he did, didn't he?"

"At least, he stayed behind a sufficient length of time to write those words upon the brass disc," replied the detective quietly. "Don't you consider that remarkable, Nipper? Having remained behind for that, one would think that he would be comparatively calm. Yet it is obvious that he fled wildly and swiftly."

"Does seem queer," I admitted.

"And perhaps you noticed those two chairs within the library?" continued Nelson Lee. "They are heavy chairs, Nipper: they are of solid mahogany."

"Well, what about 'em, sir?"

"They are overturned, and therefore my original theory of a silent fight is knocked on the head. Those chairs in crashing over—if they did actually crash over—must have caused two decided bangs, which would have been felt plainly in Simmons' room. Yet he heard nothing."

"Are you suggesting that the chairs were quietly laid in that position, sir?" I asked wonderingly.

"My dear Nipper, you know as much as I," replied the guv'nor. "And you will

tell yourself, after careful thought, that all these facts do not fit. There is something wrong somewhere. But I don't just know where to lay my hand upon the flaw. I have an inkling that we have not yet reached the bottom of the mystery.

And, to tell the truth, Nelson Lee had made me feel a bit uncertain. Still, it was clear that the injured stranger was the burglar, and that was as good as saying that he was the man who had committed the murder.

"What's to be done, guv'nor?" I asked.

"Well, you may remember that our friend at the cottage was not seriously injured," said Lee. "He will certainly recover the use of his wits before morning, and, naturally, he will make tracks without the loss of a second. The police may be here at any moment, but we had better not rely upon that."

"We mustn't let the rotter escape," I said seriously.

"No; that would be unfortunate. Therefore, Nipper, you had better hurry back to the cottage on your motor-cycle, and keep your eye on the man. As soon as ever the police turn up I will send somebody along."

I should have liked to remain there, but I knew better than to argue. Besides, it was important that I should go.

"Right-ho, sir," I exclaimed briskly. "I'll be off at once."

"Good luck."

Just before we went in I felt a few spots of rain, but this didn't worry me. Only a shower, probably. And, in any case, rain won't hurt you; at least it doesn't hurt me.

I drew my cap on, buttoned up my warm overall coat, and then started off, leaving the guv'nor explaining things to old Simmons. When I got outside, in the front drive, the rain was coming down smartly.

But, as I had expected, it wasn't much. After one burst the pelting rain eased down to a mild shower, and then stopped altogether. By this time I was well on the way to the cottage, and I was somewhat damp, too.

Of course, my overalls kept me as dry as a bone, really, and the side-car was all right, because there was a big waterproof cover for wet weather. The air was feeling cool and fresh, and there was a general earthly kind of niff about.

I was on a curious errand.

Riding through the small hours of the morning, with the intention of watching

ever an unconscious, unknown murderer! In a way retribution had overtaken the scoundrel, and he had been placed hors-de-combat.

I soon covered the distance, for, after all, it was only a short way, and the old 'bus simply whizzed. The surface of the road wasn't spoilt at all by the rainfall; only dampened slightly.

Rather to my astonishment I perceived a dim figure standing at the door of Jerry Gates's cottage, and a candle was burning in the room behind it. I slid from the saddle and crossed the road. The figure was now at the gate.

"Hallo! It's Mr. Gates!" I exclaimed, peering through the darkness. "Anything wrong?"

The old labourer recognised me at once.

"Ay, Master Nipper," he said. "I be glad you've come back. That there man o' yours has woked up."

"Phew!" I thought. "Only just in time!"

"An' he's fair gone mad, in my way o' thinkin'," proceeded Gates, in a worried tone. "He came to hisself about ten minutes ago, while I was upstairs, talking to the missus. When I got downstairs he was a-sittin' up, and he looked at me in a way that made me feel right queer."

"Don't you worry, Mr. Gates," I said pleasantly. "I'll look after the man. Good thing I came back——"

"Ay, but I ain't done," interrupted the man. "As soon as ever that feller saw your card—or your master's card mebbe it was—he stood up and started swearin' something frightful."

I grinned a bit.

"Not much wrong with him, then," I said. "That knock on the napper——"

"An' he staggered out of the house like he was afeared," said Gates. "Not two minutes ago, young master. I was tryin' to look for him when you come up. He's clean gone——"

"Gone!" I yelled.

"Not two minutes ago!" repeated Gates heavily.

"Why, you—you——" I stopped suddenly, and gulped. "Which way did the chap go?" I added frantically. "Which way? Why the dickens didn't you tell me at once, instead of wasting all this time! Which way did he go?"

"Down the road to the right, I believe," said the old labourer, jerking his head in the direction. "I was right startled. I knew the poor man wasn't fit to be out, but before I could get to

the gate he'd vanished into the darkness."

Gone!

The murderer of Major Hansard Yorke had given us the slip!

To say that I was wild would be putting it mildly. I was simply boiling with inward rage. Only two minutes ago! And I had been talking to that old idiot for nearly two minutes! If he had only told me at first——

"What luck—what ghastly luck!" I groaned, in absolute dismay.

And then I saw something which gave me hope. Upon the surface of the road, damp with the recent rain, I could see a set of clean-cut footprints. They were rather uneven and unsteady, but I knew that they had been made by the fugitive.

Perhaps that rain would prove a help, after all!

At any rate, the surface of the sandy road was in such a condition that footprints stood out with surprising distinctness. Without hesitation, I set off on the track, leaving the jigger on the grass beside the road.

After all, not much time had passed, and I stood a good chance of nabbing my man. But it was annoying, nevertheless. All this trouble for nothing! But even the guv'nor had not thought that the injured man would recover so soon.

Of course, I knew thundering well why the chap had hooked it; that was as plain as a pikestaff. Nelson Lee had left his card with the old labourer, and it had been lying upon the table. The injured man, upon recovering, spotted the card, and then received a forty horse-power shock.

Being a professional criminal, the fellow was naturally very well acquainted with the guv'nor's name. And he had simply rushed out of the house in terror. After a few moments I wasn't feeling quite so dismayed. I began to see the thing in its proper light—in its true perspective, as the real authors say.

The fugitive must have made his escape while he was still extremely groggy on his pins. After recovering from that blow he certainly couldn't have felt very comfortable. He had been stunned—and I've been stunned more than once.

I know what the feeling's like.

It's not nice, by any means. Sometimes your head is throbbing as though somebody were beating it with a mallet; sometimes you're just dazed, and don't know exactly what's happening around you. In any case, it's not possible to recover from a huge

whack on the head and be fit within the next minute.

Therefore, my quarry must be in a pretty bad way, even now. -

He couldn't have progressed very quickly, and I don't suppose he got far during the few minutes I lost while I was jawing with old Gates. And to follow the footprints with the aid of the jigger wasn't practicable. In addition, the chap would have heard the engine, and would have taken cover.

I think I may safely say that I've got good eyesight. The guv'nor's told me sometimes that I've got eyes like a cat—but I don't reckon that's a compliment. Although it was very gloomy, I could see the footmarks upon the damp surface of the road quite easily.

From the way in which they went from side to side of the road, it was clear that the walker had been unsteady. And this gave me further satisfaction. By the time I caught up with him he'd probably be as meek as a lamb. If he wasn't—well, I was quite ready for a scrap.

The man was a murderer, and I was in no mood to deal lightly with him. If it did come to a fight——

But just then, while I was thinking of my special left-hand uppercut, I caught sight of a dim figure about a hundred yards ahead. Instinctively I came to a halt and stood watching and listening.

Not a sound came to my ears except the rustle of the leaves in the night wind. The man in front of me had evidently stopped, too. This seemed to show that he was aware of my presence.

I decided to act boldly.

So, clenching my fists, I ran swiftly ahead with the intention of closing with the fellow at once. Afterwards, when I thought of it, I realised that it was a pretty risky proceeding. For the man was a murderer, and absolutely desperate. If he had been in possession of his usual strength and agility, I reckon it would have been a poor look-out for me.

But I'm an impulsive sort of bounder, once I get going, and I don't stop to consider the odds. When I arrived at the spot the road was perfectly clear. The chap had vanished again. But by looking at the road I saw in a second that he had broken through a gap in the hedge which was just opposite.

I gripped my revolver and cautiously slipped through the gap. Before me was a large meadow, rising slightly upwards. And as I looked, I saw my quarry clearly

outlined above, against the sky. He was running hard—fleeing.

"Oh! So that's your little game?" I muttered grimly.

He was trying to give me the slip. And if I wasn't pretty smart, he'd do it. There was no sand here in which footprints would be visible. Once I lost sight of my man he'd be gone completely. For in that darkness it would be a hopeless task to search about on the off-chance. And, of course, he would have the advantage of the situation; he would be able to spring out upon me from behind.

I pelted across the meadow with every ounce of speed I could manage. And when I arrived at the top I uttered a little exclamation of relief. The murderer was still visible, moving quickly towards something huge and towering which was dimly to be seen a short distance away.

It was a bridge—one of those girder bridges, something like a miniature edition of the tremendous Forth Bridge. This thing, of course, was just a tiny affair in comparison. But when I arrived close I found that even a tiny one like this is pretty big.

The girders rose into the air for a considerable height, and through the criss-cross of steel work I could see the sky. The fugitive was making straight for this bridge, with the idea, I suppose, of crossing it. I couldn't make out whether it was a railway bridge or one of the other kind. But it spanned a kind of deep gorge, with a shallow bit of a river in the middle of it. From the bridge to this stream it was a pretty deep drop.

I gained on the fellow quickly, and I was confident of being successful in my enterprise. After all, I was armed, so that in the event of the man turning nasty, I could show him the business end of my automatic. If that didn't do the trick, then I should grab the business end myself, and use the butt.

But I was thinking a little too much ahead, as I soon found out. For, to my huge surprise, my quarry didn't cross the bridge at all! Instead, he gripped hold of the girders and started hauling himself up the criss-cross work.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I muttered amazedly.

I arrived at the spot, but by that time the chap was high above me, and making his way towards the centre of the huge span. His idea, of course, was clear to me in a minute. The cunning fox! He knew jolly well that if it came to a straight chase I should gain on him hand over fist.

And so he had hit upon this wheeze. He reckoned that I should miss him in the darkness. If I followed him on the girders he would perhaps be able to drop off and get safely into cover by the time I reached the ground again.

I expect he thought that it was the gov'nor who was on his track. If he had known it was only little me, he might have acted differently.

Of course, there was only one thing to do—and that was to follow him. He had the advantage in a very marked degree, because he was above me. But if I stood there much longer he would get out of sight, and then I should be diddled properly.

Nobody ever called me a funk—at least not without reckoning with me, and then they had a nasty, sore, tender feeling all over them—and I lost no time in grabbing hold of the ironwork.

It was ticklish business climbing those huge girders. It was dark, don't forget, and the ironwork was all wet and slippery with the rain that had fallen a short time before. Somewhere above and ahead of me was the murderer of Major Yorke, and he was desperate. I don't suppose he would care tuppence whether he added me to the list or not. A chap of his calibre isn't at all particular.

Still, he was groggy, to the best of my belief. By this time, perhaps, he had recovered his full wits, and was steadier on his pins. But I was as fit as half a dozen fiddles put together, and quite in the mood for a scrap.

The question was—would it come to a scrap? Or would he drop something soft and juicy on my head from above, such as a chunk of granite? I remembered seeing heaps of stones near the bridge. He might have pocketed a few.

After climbing up the steelwork for a good bit, I paused, and listened. I was hanging on to my eyebrows and toe-nails, figuratively speaking, and there was a sheer drop below me. Looking up I saw that a ledge, about a foot wide, ran along in an upward slope to the apex of the bridge.

And coming along this, towards me, was the murderer!

This was a discovery which cheered me up to a huge extent. I was only about three feet below the ledge, and in about twenty seconds the chap would be immediately over me. One kick from his boot, and I should be sent down to a wet and watery finish. Seeing my helpless position, the rotter had turned on his tracks.

I was absolutely at his mercy. It was

my own fault, of course, but I didn't hang there weighing the chances. I just moved—and moved like a mouse that's strolled on to the hot kitchen stove by mistake.

With a terrific leap I arrived on the ledge. How I did it, I'm jiggered if I know. Under ordinary circumstances I should have been mad to attempt such a risky feat. But things had begun to look ugly, and I didn't stop to consider the chances. I might have plunged down—— But, then, I didn't, so what's the good of talking?

It was a near thing.

I had only just got to my feet when that fellow was on me. He came along the ledge in a crouching attitude, and seemed mightily surprised to find me ready for the scrap. He paused, evidently thinking of his own precious skin. In the darkness he could not see much of me, nor I of him, for that matter.

"Who are you?" he grated out harshly. "Who are you? Why are you following me? I'll throw you down——"

"No, you won't, my friend!" I interjected, in gruff tones. "Please understand that I've got you covered by my revolver. One movement on your part will lead to unfortunate conse——"

That's as far as I got. He was on me, snarling out an oath of fear and desperation. Don't lose sight of the fact that we were standing on a ledge no wider than twelve inches, with a sheer drop on one side and some beastly sharp steel girders on the other. I grabbed hold of a girder, and landed out.

My fist caught him on the jaw. I'll admit freely that it was sheer luck—I hadn't aimed for his chin-piece at all. But he caught it fine, and there was a dull kind of crash. My knuckles felt tingly, but his teeth, I believe, were all knocked sideways.

Anyhow, he swayed backwards, and paused. Then he spat something out of his mouth, and I heard his breath pumping like a steam-engine. He was gathering his strength, I concluded. That which had happened was merely a joke compared to the next—so I thought.

But then a surprising thing occurred.

I was almost resolved to use my automatic—I didn't want to unless I was absolutely forced—when he sprang at me. His foot, however, slipped on the wet sloping steel, and he came barging right into my arms.

Instinctively, I backed away; I didn't want to be pushed off the girder. Uttering a low cry of fear, the man fell flat

on his stomach, and I heard his head go whack against the ironwork.

Now, when a chap had been nearly brained by a motor-vehicle, his head isn't exactly his strongest spot. And I judged that this fresh blow, on top of the other, didn't do my cheerful friend a large amount of good.

And I was right. He lay there, moaning slightly, and made no attempt to get to his feet. The position was easy now, for he was at my mercy. I had begun to think that I was an ass for not having made my will, but this sudden collapse altered the aspect of things completely.

He raised his head slightly.

"I'm done, boss!" he muttered thickly. "Don't be hard on me. I'm dizzy and dazed: I can't see straight. For the love of Heaven, let me get to the solid groug again! Jimmy the Gent knows when he's down and out!"

I nimbly stepped over him.

"Right you are," I said. "I've got behind you, my friend, so you'd better not try any fool tricks. Climb down in front of me, and don't think you'll get away. You won't. The game's up."

"I know it, guv'nor—I won't play the goat," he said huskily. "I was a blamed fool to get on this bridge. But I thought I'd trick you. I haven't, so I'll give you best. I'm beat, absolutely!"

And he was, too.

We got down to the solid earth somehow, and I took good care to arrive just before him, so as to prevent him dashing away. I needn't have feared, though. That second blow must have dazed him afresh, for he was as meek and mild as a lamb.

And, together, Jimmy the Gent and I returned to the main highway.

I'd got my man.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

MY captive frankly admitted himself beaten. He didn't attempt any more tricks, but obeyed my orders without question. As a matter of fact, he wasn't capable of jibbing. He was just about on his last legs.

When we got to the spot where I'd left the old 'bus I found that it hadn't walked away during my absence. I don't suppose anybody had passed along the road, as a matter of fact. It was between two and three in the morning.

"Hop into the side-car," I said briskly.

The man did not seem to understand. He was leaning against the back of the jigger, with one hand to his head, in an attitude of sheer exhaustion. For a wee second I wondered if he was shamming. If he was, and if he tried any more tricks, he'd find himself facing the wrong fellow. I wasn't going to stand any more tomfoolery.

I flashed my electric-torch upon him, and saw at once that my suspicions were wrong. The man was as pale as a ghost, and his arm had been bleeding afresh. I jerked the side-car cover off, and opened the little door.

"Get in," I ordered, pointing.

Without a word he got in, and I took the precaution of passing a strap round his neck and securing it to the back of the car. I don't suppose he felt it at all; but if he tried to jump out of the car—well, the hangman would be done out of a job.

The engine started up at the first kick, and in two shakes we were bowling along towards the major's house. I let the old jigger rip, and we simply flew. I'd had a bit of excitement, and I was feeling "good," as the Yanks say.

In next to no time we had arrived at the scene of the crime. I drove right in, and pulled up in front of the main door. Before I could dismount the door opened, and Nelson Lee appeared.

"Why, is that you, Nipper?" he asked, in surprise.

"Large as life, sir!"

"I thought it was the police when I heard the engine's hum," went on the guv'nor. "They haven't turned up yet. But why have you come back, young 'un? I thought I told you to remain. Dear me, who is that in the side-car?"

"Well, he told me his name was Jimmy the Gent," I replied. "But he didn't act much like a gent, so far as I could see."

The man grimed feebly.

"You've got me proper," he exclaimed. "Luck's been dead against me to-night, anyhow. I know when I'm beat. Jimmy Payne is my handle—Mr. James Payne in private life. This'll mean another stretch, I suppose, and me only out of quod a couple of months. They can't give me much, though. I didn't pinch so much as a hairpin."

Nelson Lee and I looked at him grimly. Was he trying to bluff us—us, mind you? He spoke as though he knew nothing of the murder. They couldn't give him much! Oh, no! Only about a month of waiting, and then the rope.

The guv'nor stepped forward.

"I have never had the doubtful pleasure of meeting you before, Mr. Payne," he said smoothly. "But I have heard of you on several occasions. Mr. Morley, of Scotland Yard, is quite anxious to make your acquaintance. Since you came out of prison you have committed no less than four daring burglaries."

"Jee-hosephat! You seem to know my record all right," said Mr. Payne in surprise. "And I thought I'd covered up the trail, too. What a fool I was to crack this crib to-night."

He had evidently recovered during the ride in the side-car. The cool air, no doubt, had revived him a lot. Before letting him loose I told the guv'nor what had happened. Nelson Lee listened interestedly, and nodded with approval when I had finished.

"Well done, Nipper," he said. "You were smart to capture your man. I think we will have him inside and hear what he has to say. I am glad you have brought him here. I have been making one or two interesting discoveries, and Mr. Payne's story might prove to be of interest."

In a very short time Jimmy the Gent was seated in a big chair in a small breakfast-room on the opposite side of the hall to the library. Simmons, the old butler, still looking scared, hovered about uneasily.

We had not referred to the murder at all, and for some reason Payne was now looking quite cheerful. He was evidently resigned to the fact that he was collared, and, being a cheerful soul by nature, he made the best of it.

"Now then, Jimmy, let's hear your version of what happened," said Nelson Lee, handing the man a cigarette.

"Right you are, boss," replied the captive. "I reckon I know when it's safe to talk. If I should harm myself by spouting I'd keep as mum as an oyster. But there's no reason why I shouldn't let you have the yarn. I'd like a drop of something warm, though," he added, gazing longingly at a whisky-decanter which stood upon a sideboard.

The guv'nor nodded to Simmons, and the butler poured out a stiff dose. Jimmy Payne tossed it down in one gulp, smacked his lips, lit a cigarette, and then leaned slightly forward.

"Seems a deal of mystery here," he began. "Where's the major? I thought he'd be pottering about. Gosh! My head's a sight better than it was."



Nelson Lee was bending over the still form.—(See p. 3.)

"I will attend to it presently," said the guv'nor.

"Thanks, old sport. Well, you want to know what happened?" said Jimmy the Gent. "There's precious little to tell, anyway. I happened to be out this way a week or so ago, and I got into conversation with a smart bit of goods who's housemaid at a big toff's place about a couple of miles away. She was a talkative sort—girls always are—and she yarned about Major Yorke. Said he was worth pots of money, and had a big safe in the library. Of course, I was interested. That safe smacked of swag, and I was on the job right slick.

"The girl had applied here for a situation once, I believe, and saw the safe then. Anyhow, I thought it was worth trying, so to-night I came out here all prepared—nothing on me except my tools. I arrived here and scouted round."

"What time did you arrive?" asked Nelson Lee.

"What time? I don't know exactly," replied the captive. "About half-past twelve, I believe. I figured that everybody would be in bed by then. Well, after having a look round I opened the French windows of the library—kid's work.

"The safe wasn't much of a thing—one of those cheap, soft articles. I did the trick quickly, and after swinging the door open, looked inside. Thunder! You could have knocked me down with a penny ruler! Three quid was what I found—three measly, mouldy quid currency notes, and about six bob in silver and copper."

The guv'nor smiled slightly, and I grinned.

"You expected to find more?" suggested Nelson Lee drily.

"Have some sense, boss," protested Jimmy Payne. "What do you think I came here for? I'm not a sneak-thief—I do things properly when I do 'em at all."

"What did you do next?" asked the guv'nor quietly.

"Well, I said a few complimentary things regarding Major Yorke, his father, his mother, his relations generally, and his ancestors," replied Jimmy the Gent grimly. "Then, as I was looking round, I heard a footstep out in the passage. By Jove, that surprised me! I thought that I was as safe as a bank."

"You picked up a weapon, probably?" Jimmy Payne stared.

"A weapon?" he repeated. "Not

likely, boss! That's not my handwriting. If I'm alarmed when I'm at work, I slide—and slide without waiting for developments. I've never yet touched a soul unfairly, and I never carry weapons. I'm not one of those brutes who use violence—not this child!"

I looked over at Nelson Lee, and he looked at me. We both wore expressions of disbelief and grimness, I believe. Old Simmons, I know, was boiling over with inward wrath. But he managed to keep his tongue still.

"So you don't use violence, Mr. Payne?" said Nelson Lee very smoothly. "We will go into that aspect of the matter later on. Proceed with your story. What did you do when you heard footsteps in the passage?"

"I turned towards the door and then saw an old gentleman enter," replied the captive. "At least, he was fairly old, with a big moustache and a regular mop of hair. Majors, as a rule, are supposed to be bald—especially the retired variety.

"Well, that's all I waited to see. For all I know, the old chap was carrying a shooter, and those articles are thundering unhealthy. I bolted. As I was passing through the verandah, however, I caught my sleeve on an infernal nail, and this is the result," he added, indicating his arm.

"You had time to pick up your tools?" asked the guv'nor pointedly.

"They were all in the bag, ready to my hand," replied Jimmy the Gent. "I didn't want to leave 'em behind, boss; they might have served as a clue. When I caught my arm on that nail, I was in such pain for the minute, that I didn't notice that my tool kit had dropped from my hand. I just slid off, and romped along the main road like a two year-old."

"And that is all you have to say?"

"Yes, except for the accident," replied the other. "I knew, of course, that I'd miserably failed, and so I walked along, intending to get into London as soon as possible. Well, I was tramping in the middle of the road when some blamed fool of a motor-cyclist came tearing round a corner——"

"A motor-cycle—not a car?" asked the guv'nor sharply.

"No, just a bike. It was on me before I could even dodge. I just remember feeling a terrific crash, and then I woke up in the front parlour of a little cottage," replied the cracksman. "I was half dazed, even then, but I woke up quickly enough when I saw a card on the table bearing the name 'Nelson Lee.' Dazed as I was, I thought

the best thing I could do was to clear off. Well, as for the rest, this young feller here can tell it. I'm feeling in need of another drink."

There was a short silence. For my part, I was really struck with the fellow's acting capabilities. He'd have made pots of money at Drury Lane or the Lyceum. He'd told his story as though he knew nothing whatever about the murder. Bluff, of course, and jolly clever bluff at that.

Nelson Lee walked across to where the burglar was sitting, and faced him squarely. The great detective was looking very grim.

"Don't you think you had better be perfectly frank, Mr. Payne?" he suggested quietly. "I strongly advise you to tell me the whole story while you are about it. It will be all the better for you afterwards."

The man stared.

"I have told you the whole story," he declared. "What else is there? They can't give me much for this job, anyhow—three years at the most."

"And you intend to say no more?"

Jimmy Payne swore under his breath.

"What in thunder are you getting at, Mr. Lee?" he growled. "I've been absolutely frank with you—told you everything from start to finish. I can't do more than that, can I?"

"Since you appear to be in ignorance of the fact," replied the guv'nor, "I will inform you upon one interesting point—a point which you seem to have considered unworthy of mention. Major Hansard Yorke is at present lying lifeless in the library. He has been killed by violence—in short, murdered!"

Jimmy Payne opened his mouth and looked at Nelson Lee with a curious expression upon his face. The guv'nor himself was taking particular notice of Payne's actions. I was, too, to tell the truth, and we were both rather surprised.

For Jimmy the Gent seemed absolutely bewildered. He looked first at the guv'nor, then at me, and then at old Simmons. After that he uttered a queer kind of gurgle and started up in his chair.

"The—the major's been murdered!" he gasped out hoarsely.

"Brutally—with an Indian club."

There was another tense silence.

"Do—do you think I killed him?" panted Payne at last.

"The evidence is conclusive, my friend," said Nelson Lee grimly. "You broke into this house, you opened the safe, and you killed——"

"I didn't—I didn't!" shouted the man frantically. "I swear before Heaven that I know nothing about the murder—nothing at all. I am innocent. I only saw the major for a second——"

"One moment," interrupted the guv'nor, in that deadly calm way of his. "As you have omitted a certain portion of your tale, Mr. Payne, I will oblige you by describing what occurred. Upon seeing Major Yorke, you were startled and enraged. You were enraged because of the poor haul you had made. And you at once sprang upon the major, and a struggle ensued. During that struggle you snatched an Indian club from the wall and dealt the old man a fearful blow. Probably you thought that he was only injured. And you fled precipitately."

"It's not true—it's not true at all!" gasped the other, with sheer terror. "Oh, for the love of Heaven, believe me, Mr. Lee! I am innocent. I don't know anything of what you are saying. I didn't touch a hair of the major's head."

"That's enough of this bluff!" I struck in.

"Bluff! It's gospel truth, youngster!" panted Jimmy the Gent. "Ask about my record—Scotland Yard will know. I've never harmed a soul all the time I've been at this game. Jimmy Payne never carried a shooter in his life, and never lifted his hand against—— You believe me, Mr. Lee?" he added breathlessly. "Say that you believe me!"

There was a strange earnestness in the man's tone. Surely this was not bluff? I and Nelson Lee and Simmons looked at the fellow queerly. Somehow, we all believed him at that moment; we all believed that he had told us the plain truth.

But, if this was the case, the mystery was deeper than ever. Who had killed Major Yorke, if Jimmy the Gent was innocent? We knew nothing of any other participant in the night's events—at least, I didn't.

"I didn't harm a hair——"

"Don't go over it again, Payne," interjected Nelson Lee. "I will admit that I am inclined to be doubtful. If you did kill the major, then you have acted with amazing cleverness during these last few minutes. We will let the matter rest for the time being."

Curiously enough, we heard a motor just then, and in about a minute Simmons ushered in a police-inspector and two constables. The former introduced himself as Inspector Merritt—although, judging from appearances, I shouldn't have thought

he possessed much merit! He was short and stout, and evidently regarded himself as a kind of walking Scotland Yard.

The gov'nor told him just what had occurred.

"H'm! Hardly a fit case for you to handle, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the inspector heavily. "Too big—too big! You've done good work, I know—good work, for an amateur, of course. Just as well you sent for me."

I felt like landing the pompous bouncer a wallop on his red nose; but Nelson Lee was as serene as ever. Inspector Merritt evidently regarded the gov'nor as a kind of kid at the game.

"It was indeed fortunate that you arrived at this moment," said Lee smoothly. "I was beginning to feel the responsibility exceedingly, inspector. I have a prisoner for you."

"The murderer?" asked the inspector sharply.

"I am inclined to think the man is merely one of the actors in the drama," replied the detective. "Not the principal actor, Mr. Merritt. However, that is for you to decide. I have not the slightest doubt that the affair will become perfectly clear in all its details just as soon as you get to work. An officer of your undoubted ability will naturally make light of this singular mystery. I am merely an amateur, as you say, and cannot expect to possess that insight and acumen which is characteristic of the police force."

I grinned openly. The gov'nor's voice was as grave as a judge's. I believe the inspector suspected that his leg was being pulled, for he looked at Nelson Lee rather sharply. Lee, however, walked out of the room, and I followed him. We came to a halt in one of the rear apartments.

"The self-important beggar!" I exclaimed. "Why didn't you put him in his place, sir?"

"My dear Nipper, why should I trouble?" asked Lee leisurely. "I have more important work on hand. While you were away I made one or two discoveries."

"What were they, sir?" I asked eagerly. "Do you think that Payne killed the major? Do you think—"

"Not so fast, young 'un. No, I don't think that Payne killed the major. I purposely sprang the surprise on him to note the effect it would produce. I am convinced that he was genuinely startled—that he learned of the murder for the first

time. Jimmy the Gent did not commit the crime."

"Then who the dickens did?" I asked wonderingly.

"That is what we have to discover. It is necessary to go off on a completely new trail."

"We've got to find it first, gov'nor," I said ruefully.

"On the contrary, Nipper, the trail is fairly clear," said Nelson Lee. "I did not think it necessary to take Inspector Merritt fully into my confidence. He is such an astute man, however, that he will probably get on the track himself sooner or later."

"Rather later than sooner, I expect," I grinned. "Well, sir, what's the new trail? It seems that while I was dodging about after that chap I thought to be the murderer, you were getting on the right scent. Just my giddy luck."

The gov'nor smiled rather amusedly.

"You did well, young 'un—very well indeed," he replied. "After you had gone I sat down and had a good think. There were two things which puzzled me greatly; the brass disc, and the overturned chairs. Everything went to prove that the burglar had fled precipitately. Who, then, had written those words upon the brass disc? Payne's story makes it clear—if he was telling the truth—that he did not leave the disc behind. And, then, the chairs. They appear to have been knocked violently over, yet Simmons heard no sound of a struggle."

"It's thundering queer," I said thoughtfully.

"Very queer indeed. Well, after a while I examined the dead man's diary, which I found lying upon the desk," went on Nelson Lee. "It contains merely commonplace references to everyday happenings. Occasionally, however, I found the name of Roger Pavitt. How does that strike you, Nipper?"

I stared, rather bewildered.

"Roger Pavitt!" I echoed. "Why—that's the name on the card! The card which was left in one of Payne's pockets, as he lay on the road. Roger Pavitt was the man who bowled Payne over!"

"Exactly. I realised at once, that a fresh line of inquiry had sprung into being. Roger Pavitt was evidently a friend of Major Yorke's, and he has been here to-night. He has been here after Jimmy Payne left the house!"

"Phew!" I whistled. "Hold on a bit, sir. I—I can't quite get the hang of things."

"Yet, surely, it is very clear?" went on the guv'nor easily. "The burglar was hurrying away from the house when he was knocked down by the motor-cycle. This proves that the motor-cyclist was travelling in this direction—towards the house—at the time."

"But he might not have been coming here."

"Tut-tut! Where are your wits, young 'un?" snapped the guv'nor. "Cannot you put two and two together? We know that the motor-cyclist was Roger Pavitt; the card he left upon the burglar proves that. And in the murdered man's diary are several references to Pavitt."

"Then Pavitt must have arrived some little time after Payne left?" I asked.

"Precisely. He and the major were therefore alone for some little time, and Simmons was then asleep. He did not awaken until one o'clock. The question which faces us is this: what connection has the unknown Roger Pavitt with this extraordinary mystery?"

"Looks as if he is the chap who did the dirty deed," I exclaimed.

"Appearances certainly go to prove that theory," said Nelson Lee. "But we must not be too sure, Nipper. We were certain, were we not? that Payne was the murderer. Now that these fresh facts have come to light Payne's innocence is almost proved. But Pavitt—I am highly suspicious of Mr. Pavitt, my lad. We know that he comes here, and it is equally obvious that he must have taken his departure. Oh, and there is something else I must tell you. Close against the porch there are distinct signs of motor-cycle tyres."

"I wheeled my jigger right up——"

"No, Nipper, the marks were not made by your tyres," interjected the guv'nor. "I believe the wheels of your machine are shod with Kempshall tyres, are they not? A very distinctive pattern, too. The marks I saw were clearly those of a studded Dunlop—vastly different. Pavitt was certainly in this house during the night, and the facts are suggestive."

I scratched my head.

"That disc and all the rest of it looks as though the murder has been premeditated, doesn't it?" I asked. "It seems that Pavitt came here with the deliberate intention of killing the major."

"The evidence seems to point that way."

"Then Pavitt wouldn't want a soul to know that he'd been on the spot, would he?"

"Obviously not."

"Then why the dickens did the chap leave his card stuck in one of Payne's pockets?" I asked, with an air of triumph. "It doesn't seem in keeping with the rest of the facts, does it, guv'nor?"

"Frankly, Nipper, it does not. If Pavitt had had murder in his heart he would surely not have left such an obvious clue—such a deliberate clue. There is something about the whole affair which puzzles me exceedingly, and I am now anxious to interview the mysterious Mr. Pavitt. I intend to travel to Beckenham at once, my boy."

This was just like the guv'nor. Once fairly on the scent he was anxious to carry on his inquiries until he arrived at some definite solution. For my own part, I was just as anxious to get to the bottom of the business as he was. And it seemed our best course to take a journey to Beckenham. Even if Pavitt wasn't to be found there we might learn something of a conclusive nature.

When we returned to the library we found Inspector Merritt looking as self-important as ever. He had uncovered the body, and was bending over it. As we appeared he looked up at us.

"It's quite plain to me how the man met his death," he exclaimed in a tone of voice which seemed to imply that he had made a remarkable discovery.

"Indeed!" said the guv'nor, elevating his eyebrows.

"Major Yorke was murdered by means of an Indian club, which has been removed from this left-hand wall," announced the inspector.

"You astound me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee calmly.

"You're a marvel, inspector!" I put in, crossing over to him. "How do you do these things? You must have had a brain wave when you found that the major had been killed with an Indian club. I dare say the club itself, lying there, gave you a clue?"

"A direct clue, my lad," said Inspector Merritt, with no inkling that the guv'nor and I had been pulling his leg again. "And I'm willing to swear that James Payne is the murderer. The proof, in fact, is absolutely conclusive."

I bent over the body, and put out my hand in order to push back a lock of the dead man's hair which partially obscured the bruise. But the old ass of an inspector jerked my hand back sharply.

"Don't interfere, boy!" he snapped.

"Serry," I gasped. "I suppose I shall

disturb a whole nest of clues. Hallo! Why, what the dickens——"

I paused, in sheer amazement. Completely regardless of the pompous inspector I gave a tug at the dead man's heavy military moustache. In jerking my hand back the inspector had caused me to brush the moustache, and something had resulted which caught my eye in a jiff.

The moustache came off in my hand—it was false.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH WE TRAVEL TO BECKENHAM AND MAKE A CAPTURE.

NELSON LEE gave a little jump as he spotted what had happened. He was by my side in a moment. As for Inspector Merritt, the poor chap opened his mouth to say something, but only succeeded in gaping.

"It's—it's false, guv'nor!" I ejaculated quickly.

"Dear me! This is a most unexpected discovery, Nipper—a most remarkable discovery!" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I frankly admit that I never suspected anything of this nature."

"Bless my soul! Bless my soul!" gasped out the inspector.

And then, for want of something better to say, he added "Bless my soul!" again.

Old Simmons came in at the door at that moment, and it was a few seconds before he could grasp the significance of my discovery. He stood on the other side of the table looking at the dead face—now clean-shaven—with an expression of blank amazement and consternation upon his countenance.

"What—what has happened?" he panted.

"It seems that your master was in the habit of wearing a false moustache, Simmons," exclaimed Nelson Lee quietly. "Either that, or this is not the body of Major Hansard Yorke at all. This discovery complicates matters, I'm afraid."

"A—a false moustache?" asked Simmons, with a catch in his voice. "It can't be true—it can't be true! I know right well the major never wore a false moustache!"

"Then this body here is not that——"

"It is!" declared the butler vehemently interrupting. "No other man but the major has a forehead like that, or a nose of that particular shape. I'd know him in a thousand, moustache or no moustache."

"You are positive that this is the body of your late master?"

"Certain, sir—absolutely certain!"

Then, for some reason or other, it was the major's habit to wear a false moustache," said Nelson Lee. "Does this come as a total surprise to you, Simmons? Think carefully. Has anything ever happened in the past which, although seemingly trivial, now strikes you in a new light?"

"No, nothing, sir," replied the butler. "I can't understand it at all. I never dreamed that the master's moustache was false. But he is the master—I'll swear to it!"

There seemed to be no doubt about the matter. But, to say the least of it, there was something strange—sinister in the discovery. But the mystery was deeper than ever, and I looked at the guv'nor with a rather blank expression.

But Nelson Lee was just as cool and serene as ever. It takes a blessed earthquake to upset him, and even then he'll keep his head. There was a certain grimness in his eyes, though, that I was well acquainted with.

The guv'nor was right on his mettle now, and he meant to follow the thing up for all it was worth. And I was pretty nearly the same. Sundry gnawings beneath my waistcoat reminded me that I hadn't tasted grub for hours, and that the poached egg on toast supper I had promised myself was further away than ever. Still, for the time being I was being fed on excitement, and so didn't feel so hungry as I should have done otherwise.

After closely examining the moustache we found that it was an expensive article, not one of those cheap theatrical things. Naturally enough, we hadn't noticed anything wrong with it, because it was utterly absurd to suppose that the dead man's moustache was false.

The guv'nor wasn't inclined to be talkative, and I knew better than to question him. After the inspector had made a few unnecessary remarks Nelson Lee and I decided to take our departure. We went outside and found that the light was now clear and fine.

Of course, we didn't say a word to old Merritt regarding the object of our journey. He probably thought that we were off home. But that was just where he made a bloomer. For we headed straight for Beckenham.

We were soon off, the guv'nor in the side-car, as before. He could drive a jolly lot better than I could, but I knew that

he wanted to think, and so I took the saddle as a matter of course.

I said we went straight to Beckenham. "Straight" wasn't exactly the word to use, though. Beckenham was only to be reached by devious and roundabout routes, and we had the very dickens of a job to find our way in the darkness.

And at last, somehow or other, I found that I had driven into Sutton. I turned to the guv'nor with a grin.

"This is Sutton, sir!" I yelled as we bowled through the place. "I know my way all right now. We're sutton to get to Beckenham——"

Nelson Lee looked at me with such an expression of pain that the rest of the words froze on my lips, as the novelists say. We were practically in Croydon before the guv'nor had fully recovered from the effects of that ghastly pun.

We simply mopped through Croydon—passed the Swan and Sugarloaf, and down High Street until we shot past Crown Hill, and so along North End.

If we'd been going to London I should have kept straight on towards Broad Green, but it was our idea to get to Beckenham. So we turned up Poplar Walk, opposite the old Croydon Guardian offices, and then bore round to the left. We soon struck the tramlines again, and followed them through Selhurst and South Norwood. My idea was to get to Penge, and then take the Beckenham road. There may have been a more direct way to Beckenham, but I knew this route well. So I stuck to it.

We shot up the hill to the Robin Hood which stands opposite the end of Anerley Road—and then commenced the gradual descent into Penge.

Here we turned to the right, and in a very short time we had arrived in the neighbourhood of Beckenham. It was still quite dark, of course, and about the loneliest and quietest period of the night. Even the bobbies seemed to be asleep, for I hadn't spotted one since passing through South Norwood. But, of course, this was comparatively a country district.

As it happened, we found Melfort Road with very little difficulty. It proved to be one of those new roads, with all detached houses, each one built in some old-fashioned style or other—white plaster walls and red-tiled roofs. And Hill Villa was in about the centre.

The house was in total darkness, and seemed quite in an excellent condition—I mean, the windows were neat, and the garden was well kept. It was the guv'nor's

idea to drive straight up, for there was nothing to be gained by secrecy.

Lee hopped out of the car and strode up the garden path. I was close at his heels feeling somewhat excited.

Should we find Roger Pavitt at home?

Personally, I was pretty sure we shouldn't. Having committed murder, the chap was not likely to return home. I believe the guv'nor, too, wasn't hoping to nab the man.

At the front door it was as dark as pitch, for there was a kind of trelliswork porch, with a spring creeper growing over it. Lee rang the bell loudly, and we could hear it buzzing away somewhere inside. Then we stood quite still.

There was no wind, and everything was tremendously quiet. As we stood there we both grew a little more rigid. For we distinctly heard the sound of soft footsteps, and then a kind of stumble. After that all was quiet.

"There's somebody there, sir," I murmured.

"Yes, so I heard."

But evidently the somebody did not intend to answer the door, for there was no further sign. Again we rung the bell, but nothing happened. I gripped Nelson Lee's arm softly.

"Perhaps it's Pavitt!" I whispered. "And the rotter may be escaping by a back door. Shall I buzz round——"

"No, remain here."

The guv'nor picked out a bunch of skeleton-keys and attacked the lock. It was one of the Yale type, but of a cheap make, and, after a few seconds of almost noiseless fumbling, I heard the wards slip back, and the door opened.

We strode into the hall, Lee flashing his electric-torch straight before him. Of course, this was a pretty high-handed action on our part, entering a private house without the slightest warrant. But the guv'nor thought it best to act boldly. The circumstances were very exceptional.

I believe we were both rather highly strung at that moment. I know I was, at all events. There's something that gives you a rummy feeling inside when you enter an unknown house and know that there might be a murderer lurking somewhere inside—perhaps armed and desperate.

I shouldn't have been surprised to hear a revolver-shot at any second, but the guv'nor and I were well accustomed to taking all sorts of risks. And, as it happened, nothing of an alarming nature did occur.

Nelson Lee walked forward quickly, and cast his light round a band of the wall. And there, standing fully exposed in the light of the torch, was Major Hansard Yorke!

For just one second the pair of us were too flabbergasted to move another inch.

The man who was facing us was absolutely the exact counterpart of the man who lay dead in that house among the trees, twenty miles away!

He was clean-shaven, of course, but the features were the same in every detail.

What could it mean?

What was this astounding revelation?

I began to think that I was in the middle of some weird nightmare or other. This man was Major Yorke—positively, certainly, undoubtedly! The same head, the very same mop of black hair, turning slightly grey at the temples.

He was as pale as a ghost, and obviously frightened out of his wits. Even at that tense moment I felt a kind of inclination to laugh. The very thought of this man proving formidable was ludicrous.

He pulled himself together with a great effort.

"Who—who are you?" he demanded huskily; and his voice seemed to give him more confidence. "What are you doing in this house? How—how dare you—"

"My name is Nelson Lee," said the guv'nor quietly. "You are Mr. Roger Pavitt, I believe?"

"Yes—yes, that is my name!" exclaimed the other with surprising eagerness.

"On the contrary, I think your name is Major Hansard Yorke," said Lee, his words coming out like bullets from a Maxim. "You will consider yourself my prisoner."

A hoarse, inarticulate sound came from the man's throat, and he suddenly dashed up the stairs for all he was worth. He had been standing just at the foot of them, and so he had the advantage.

My word! I've never seen a chap mount a staircase at such a terrific rate! And he wasn't exactly a two-year-old, either. We were after him hot-foot, and got to the landing just in time to have a door slammed in our faces. Even as Lee shoved his shoulder against the door the lock clicked.

"Confound it!" growled the guv'nor. "We were slow, Nipper, we were slow!"

"You can open the door in two ticks, sir!" I gasped.

He flashed his light into the keyhole.

"To pick the lock is impossible, my lad, the key is still there, and it is blocking

the way. We shall have to use our shoulders."

Three or four times we charged the door, but the blessed thing wouldn't budge. Either the lock was a very strong one, or there was something jammed against the door on the other side.

While Lee was still thudding away I dashed into an adjoining bedroom and grabbed a pair of tongs from the fireplace. The house seemed absolutely deserted except for the man we had seen.

I hurried back and the guv'nor grabbed the tongs.

"Good lad!" he panted. "The very things!"

He hammered away at one of the top panels, and the wood splintered and smashed. But a full minute passed before the panel gave way completely. One flash of the electric torch showed that the room was empty, and that the door was only locked. Nelson Lee turned the key, and we burst in.

The room wasn't furnished in the ordinary sense. It was quite small, and had evidently been used as a lumber room, for there were several trunks and bags lying about, and one or two old mattresses. One glance was sufficient to show us that our quarry was not there.

Yet there wasn't an inch of room for him to hide.

"Where the blazes has he got to?" I gasped breathlessly.

We crossed to the window and saw that the catch was unfastened. But it was tightly closed, and the ledge outside was only a narrow one. The window was fairly high from the ground, too, and right beneath it was a concrete path.

If the man had dropped from the window he could not possibly have escaped a couple of broken legs, or several other similar pleasant little injuries.

"He couldn't have jumped out, sir!" I exclaimed. "And he's certainly not in the room. Great Scott! The fellow can't have vanished into thin air."

We looked round amazedly, the guv'nor plainly at a loss. Then suddenly he strode forward and directed the rays of his light upon a certain portion of the flooring. I was on the spot in a tick.

"My hat! A trap-door!" I ejaculated.

"Exactly, Nipper, a trap-door," said Nelson Lee in very satisfied tones. "I think we have our man cooped up beautifully. He evidently thought that we were half-blind—for this trap is by no means invisible."

I levered up the trap-door with the tongs.

and then we both stood ready. Lee flashed his light right into the cavity which yawned at our feet. There was a space about five feet long by three broad—and it was completely filled by a water-tank. This tank, of course, supplied the house.

"Great Heaven! Has the man——"

Nelson Lee paused, and directed his light straight down into the water which filled the tank to the brim. It was so full that the water was almost overflowing. And the bottom was clearly visible.

There was nothing in the tank except water.

"Not here, sir!" I said disappointedly.

"But where is he?" exclaimed the guv'nor. "Where is he? I was sure—— Come, Nipper, we must search the grounds!"

"Why, do you think he jumped——"

"My good lad, the fellow escaped somehow, and the window is the only means of exit, except the door—and we know he did not pass that way," said Lee rapidly, as we descended the stairs. "In some way or other Pavitt—or Yorke—escaped from that room by the window."

But a thorough search of the small garden was barren of result. There was not a mark or a sign. We came to a halt beneath the window, which was the highest in the house, the room being a kind of half-attic.

"It's uncanny, sir!" I said in a whisper.

"Yet there must be some explanation, Nipper," said Nelson Lee impatiently. "Hang it all, where are my wits? There must be some explanation! That water-tank was certainly empty——"

"Except for water," I struck in. "And it was nearly overflowing, too. Those supply-tanks don't usually fill to such an extent, do they, sir?"

Nelson Lee slapped his leg.

"Dunderhead!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Thanks, guv'nor!"

"I was referring to myself, not to you, young 'un!" he went on. "The man must be in that tank! No, don't interrupt. He must be there, I say. It is the only possible solution. Didn't you notice a mark all round the inside of the tank, about six inches from the top? That mark shows the usual water-level. The man's bulk, of course, raised it until the water nearly overflowed!"

"But we saw the bottom——"

"A delusion!" cried the guv'nor. "A piece of sacking, Nipper, a square of oilcloth, perhaps—anything you like!"

But the man is certainly there! Come quickly! We must not lose a second!"

We dashed round to the front and found the door still ajar, as we had left it. Bursting in we rushed at the stairs pell-mell, Lee leading. Quite suddenly he came to a halt, and I butted into the small of his back with a crash.

"Whoa! What the merry dickens——"

I paused, and recovered my balance. Looking over Nelson Lee's shoulder I saw a peculiar spectacle. Upon the stairs stood the man we were after. He was drenched to the skin, and looked like a drowned rat. His hair straggled over his white forehead in thick matted masses.

"I—I thought you had gone!" he muttered thickly. "Oh, Heaven! This is too much for me—too much! You are police, I suppose—detectives? Great powers! How soon you were on my track!"

"I warn you to take things quietly——"

"I am done, completely done," said the man, descending the other stairs wearily, and with an air of resignation. "I have failed, and I am glad that it is all over. I could never have carried it through!"

"Perhaps I had better tell you that I am not an official detective," said Nelson Lee quietly. "All the same, I shall detain you, and hand you to the police on a charge of murdering Major Hansard Yorke——"

The man gave a hoarse, bitter laugh.

"I am Major Yorke!" he cried. "There has been no murder on my part—I have not harmed a soul! Thank Heaven you are not the police. I think you said Lee, did you not? I seem to remember your name, Mr. Lee."

"This fencing is objectless," put in the guv'nor curtly. "Whether you are Major Yorke or not makes little difference. The events of the night, and your actions now, prove quite conclusively that you played a sinister part in the killing of the man we assumed to be Major Yorke——"

The wretched man clung to the stairs, and looked at us with alarm and fear in his eyes. And, somehow, I felt pity for him. He was so helpless—so utterly and completely exhausted, both in body and mind.

"Hear what I have to say, Mr. Lee—for mercy's sake hear me!" he exclaimed huskily. "Don't hand me to the police yet! I give you my word as an officer and a gentleman that I will make no attempt to escape!"

Nelson Lee was only a couple of seconds in deciding.

"I will believe you, major," he said

quietly. "Change into some dry things, and then we will talk."

"God bless you, Mr. Lee!" said the other fervently.

We little imagined, then, what a strange story our prisoner had to tell.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I HEAR A QUEER YARN, AND THINGS ARE CLEARED UP GENERALLY.

WITHIN fifteen minutes the three of us were seated in a cosy little smoking-room, and a gas-fire was roaring cheerfully. Major Hansard Yorke was looking quite different now, for he was attired in a suit of tweeds, and his hair was carefully brushed.

He had recovered his composure, to a certain extent, too, and he didn't look such a terrific wreck. As I mentioned before, I felt jolly sorry for him. I don't know why, for he was, of course, a rotten murderer. But there it was—I felt as though I could pity him.

"I am Major Hansard Yorke," he began. "Perhaps you will not believe that statement, Mr. Lee? Nevertheless, it is the truth. This house belonged to Mr. Roger Pavitt, and it is Pavitt who is lying dead in my own library."

"Yes, I believe you," said Nelson Lee. "I had gathered that much already."

"The dead man was my brother, my twin brother."

"Oh!" I exclaimed.

"What I have said is true, young man," went on the major, turning to me. "Indeed, it is my intention to tell you, now, the exact facts. I shall suppress nothing, or exaggerate nothing. I realise that my wisest course will be to be perfectly frank. I am in a dreadful position, and I cannot see daylight. And, in a way, I have made my position doubly perilous by my own foolish and mad actions."

"But the name, Pavitt?" I asked curiously.

"Was, of course, assumed," he replied. "My brother's name was Robert Yorke, but he changed it to Pavitt some six or seven years ago."

"Why did he change?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I really do not know exactly," was the reply. "Some business affair, Mr. Lee. My brother was in trouble, I believe, and he thought it wise to alter his name. I am certain that there was nothing dis-

honourable in his action. It was merely a matter of discretion. Pavitt was our mother's maiden name."

The gov'nor inclined his head.

"Roger and I did not get on very well together," continued the major. "We did not quarrel, but our tastes were totally different. We resemble one another, perhaps you will say?"

"As alike as two pebbles," I remarked, "just like the Terry twins on the halls!"

The major smiled wearily.

"At one time there was confusion," he said. "And so, to stop it, we decided upon a certain course. Roger remained clean-shaven, while I grew a heavy moustache. This effectually altered our appearance to such an extent that there was no further danger of mistakes being made. Seen together, we were not even greatly alike—for my brother, too, always wore his hair plastered straight back."

Our prisoner waved his hand about him.

"This house belonged to Roger," he continued. "Roger was comparatively rich, and he did not want for anything. Yet he was eccentric, in a way. He lived here quite alone, being a bachelor. Now and again I would visit him, but he never visited me—he disliked travelling exceedingly. Recently, however, he purchased a motor-cycle, and had promised to come to my place occasionally."

"What about servants?" I asked wonderingly.

"When I said alone, I did not mean alone in that sense," replied Yorke. "Roger declared that he would not have servants sleeping in his house, and so a maid and a cook were engaged daily. They still come in the morning, as usual, of course," he added bitterly. "Poor things—poor things! What a shock for them!"

Nelson Lee gave me rather a curious look. We could neither of us quite make out this captive of ours. Certainly, he didn't seem like a murderer. I knew that the gov'nor's hand was on his revolver, though, and his jaw was set jolly sternly. There was nothing "soft" about the great detective.

The major leaned forward, towards the fire, shivering slightly.

"To come to the events of this fateful night—this terrible, ghastly night," he pursued. "For some time past I have been in great financial difficulties. I invested money badly, Mr. Lee, and lost it all—every penny. And debts accumulated around me until ruin threatened.

to overwhelm me. As a last resource I asked Roger to help me out. I say as a last resource because I loathed the idea of going to my brother for assistance. But what could I do? We had no other relatives, and my hand was forced. It was wiser to swallow my pride than to succumb to the ruin which hovered over me."

"Roger promised to help you?"

"Yes. He said that he would do what he could," replied the other. "We talked over the telephone yesterday, and he promised to run over to my house to-night on his motor-cycle—I say to-night, although, of course, it is the morning. But you will understand me, no doubt. Well, I sent Simmons, my butler, to bed."

"Did Simmons know that Roger was coming?"

"No, I did not tell him. He is in my confidence to a certain extent, but I decided to say nothing to him until I had surmounted the stile. He went to bed, and I adjourned to the billiard-room for a little practice. Now and again the local doctor would call upon me, or the vicar. I lived very quietly, Mr. Lee, and was, in a way, happy. By Heaven! What an outlook is mine now!"

He gulped for a moment, and then proceeded, both the gov'nor and I listening with great interest.

"After I had been in the billiard-room some time I went into the library to read, and to await Roger's arrival. As a matter of fact, he was overdue even then. You can imagine my consternation when I found a man in the apartment—a man who was very obviously breaking open the safe."

"What followed next?"

"He fled; Mr. Lee—he fled without waiting a second," was Major Yorke's reply. "I did not attempt to follow, because I knew a chase would be hopeless. I merely went to the window and looked out. But all was dark and quiet."

"So Payne told the truth, gov'nor," I remarked.

"As I believed, Nipper. Well, major?"

Our prisoner smiled bitterly.

"I now come to the part you will scoff at," he said. "Oh, I am prepared for it; I know that you will say that I am lying. How can I expect otherwise? The case is black against me—as black as night. I shall be accused of killing——"

"Please describe what occurred, major," interrupted Lee quietly.

"For some time I examined the room,

and found that the burglar had stolen nothing," said Yorke. "In his hurry he had even left the few notes which the safe contained. I don't know exactly how long I was in examining the safe and the room, but I was suddenly attracted by the noise of a motor-cycle. Roger, of course, I told myself. I had forgotten my brother in the unexpected excitement of the burglar's unwelcome visit. I opened the French windows, and allowed the light to stream out upon the garden path."

The major's face became hard and set, and there was an air of dogged defiance about him when he proceeded.

"You will disbelieve me now," he said pitifully. "So will the police—and the judge—and the jury! All will be against me—I know it as well as I know that I am innocent."

Nelson Lee laid a gentle hand upon the major's shoulder. In some way, the gov'nor had become totally changed during the last few minutes. There was a look of real concern and sympathy in his eyes.

"Perhaps not, major," he said quietly. "You must not be pessimistic."

"By Heaven, Mr. Lee, your voice gives me hope!" cried the other. "But no! I must not hope—I am a fool to hope! The case is too black against me. You will laugh me to scorn. Well, to continue," he added, calming himself. "I saw Roger dimly in the gloom. To my astonishment he let the motor-cycle crash to the ground, and he came staggering across to me. When he entered the library I was shocked and amazed to see that he had a terrible bruise upon his head; his face was scratched, and his breath entered his lungs in great, hoarse gasps."

"Great Scott!" I yelled. "Payne's acci——"

"Hush, Nipper!" said Lee sharply. "Let the major proceed."

"Roger stood against the table," went on our captive, breathing hard. "Before I could ask him questions, he began to tell me that he had met with a terrible accident up the road. And while I was supporting him he suddenly uttered a hoarse cry and fell limply to the floor. I was shocked and alarmed. Examining him, I was horrified to find him dead!"

The major took in a great long breath of air.

"You don't credit that statement, of course?" he went on quickly. "You will think that this is a faked story—a lie from beginning to end. But it is the truth of

Heaven, as I live. I did not kill Roger ; he died from the result of an accident. At the actual time he was able to mount his motor-cycle again, but succumbed as soon as he reached my house. Such accidents have happened again and again."

"Please go on," said the gov'nor softly.

"There is little else to tell—except an account of my own folly," said the major bitterly. "I was struck by my own ghastly position, Mr. Lee. Simmons was in bed, asleep, and he knew nothing of what had occurred. I, alone, knew the truth. There was not a single witness to support my story. Roger's accident, of course, was unknown to a soul. He had fallen from his machine, I suppose, and there would certainly be no witness at that hour of the night. My position almost dazed me ; but I thought of a solution.

"Think of the damning evidence against me, Mr. Lee. Roger had come with money, and I was known to be in sore straits. Upon Roger's death, too, I inherited all his wealth—there was every reason for me to kill him. The motive for such a crime was dreadfully apparent. I should be accused of murder—I shall be accused, no doubt. There was nothing to prove that an accident had occurred ; the circumstantial evidence is overwhelmingly against me. There is not a single loophole. I realised all this with fearful swiftness."

"Your predicament was indeed appalling," said the gov'nor gravely.

"Half mad with fear, I conceived the insane idea of making it appear that I had been killed—that it was I who had been murdered !" went on Major Yorke. "The thing took possession of me—it grasped me completely. It was a way out. Nobody but myself knew that Roger had arranged to come, and he, therefore, would never be accused of the crime. His name being different to mine, I had never even mentioned to Simmons that I had a brother. The way of escape was open before me."

"You changed places with your brother ?"

"Yes, yes ! But you don't believe me—you are leading me on !" said Yorke fiercely. "It is the way of you detectives. I determined to step into Roger's shoes. It was easy. He lived alone, and his name was different. I had only to shave off my moustache to become Roger to the life. In my desk I had a case of theatrical make-up—a high-class, expensive set—which I used occasionally at Christmas time, or other festive occasions. And I

ed a false moustache upon poor

Roger's dead face. By Heaven, it was a ghastly task !

"After that I took down one of the Indian clubs and smeared a little blood upon it. Then I gently overturned a couple of chairs, and swept some papers off the desk on the floor. As an afterthought, I pencilled some words upon a flat brass disc which I had found in Roger's pocket—anything to send the police on a wrong scent. It was a mad scheme—the act of a desperate, despairing man.

"It appeared, now, as though I had been murdered, and I took my departure on poor Roger's motor-cycle, and came here. Half-dead with fright, I nevertheless prepared a hiding-place. The tank upstairs struck me as being a likely spot. Years ago, in India, a native once eluded capture by lying completely under water in a river, and breathing through a hollow reed ; his pursuers lost him completely. I wondered if I could adopt the same device. I cut a square of linoleum, and found a long piece of rubber tubing. This I fixed in the tank, the end hanging over the side. When you came I dashed upstairs and got in the tank, pulling the linoleum over me, and placing the tube in my mouth. I judged that the dull pattern of the oilcloth would resemble the bottom of the tank."

"By Jingo ! It did, too !" I burst out.

"But I was mad," said Major Yorke. "I left the tank too quickly, and you came and surprised me. Well, I suppose it is all over. I am beaten—I am doomed to die a felon's death. Yet I am innocent ! Oh, what a blind fool I was to fake that evidence ! It has added to my troubles—"

Nelson Lee stood up.

"Major Yorke," he said quietly, "the evidence seems as black as night——"

"You think I have lied, of course !" the wretched man exclaimed fiercely, his eyes blazing. "I didn't expect you to believe me. Go away from me ! Take me to the police ! I know that I need expect no mercy from you."

He seemed to shrivel up, and his voice trailed away. I was on my feet, too, by now, and both the gov'nor and I stood over the poor old johnny. There had been no murder, of course. The whole thing was as clear as crystal now.

"You acted unwisely, Major Yorke," said Nelson Lee very gently. "Yet I cannot blame you. Your position seemed hopeless to you ; you were caught in a terrible trap. And so, in desperation, you adopted a scheme which was practically bound to fail. Yet, at the time, you could not realise this."

He looked at us wildly, and the gov'nor held out his hand.

"I believe your story, major," he said simply.

The old chap stared dazedly.

"You—you believe me!" he panted, his eyes growing wider.

"I do. For, as it happens, the facts are not so black as you imagined," replied Nelson Lee. "Your brother met with a fatal accident—but there was a witness to that accident. I knew almost every word of your story before you told it to me, for I had already pieced the facts together. You thought that Roger's accident was unknown to a soul save yourself, major. You were wrong. Nipper and I have spoken with the man your brother knocked down."

"Oh! Oh!" was all the major could gasp out.

"We found him lying upon the road," went on the gov'nor. "It was the burglar who broke into your house, by a curious chance. Yet it was not so curious, when all is considered. The burglar was hastening away, and your brother was cycling along the same road. They collided, and the burglar was knocked senseless; Your brother, although fatally injured, was conscious at the time. He left his card upon the other man, hence I am here."

Roger, presumably becoming weak, mounted his machine in a dazed condition, and rode to your house. Once there, as we all know, he fell dead, even while he was gasping out the story of the accident."

Major Hansard Yorke lifted his face to the ceiling.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed fervently, "for He has been merciful!"

What a fat-headed ass I was! Me, a great hulking chap like me! I turned my head away, and my eyes were more than a little damp. I was blubbing, or jolly near it. And I believe, on the quiet, that the gov'nor wasn't far off the waterworks, either.

Of course we had to hand over the major to the police—that was only to be expected. But his evidence, and our evidence, and Jimmy Payne's evidence, jolly soon set matters to rights.

About a month later Major Yorke called upon us at Gray's Inn Road, and he handed Nelson Lee a really decent cheque. For the old boy was out of his difficulties now.

And the gov'nor, like the thundering good sort he is, handed the cheque to me, and told me to send it to the Red Cross Fund, as a kind of memoriam to poor old Roger Yorke.

THE END.

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YOUR EDITOR.

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 threw 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 warns 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. This points to the necessity of a stronghold, and the very day following its completion, **Pedro Diego** attacks, but is beaten off. Our chums, whilst exploring, are fired upon by two strange men, and in the act of seeking shelter tumble through an aperture in the rocks into an underground cavern.

(Now read on.)

The Golden Temple.

BUT even before they gained their feet there was a report close behind them, followed quickly by another. At the same moment a man rushed in upon them.

A man—yes, and an honest, brave man—yet one who was just then a raging demon, filled with murderous revenge, and possessed of a madman's strength.

Too eager and impatient to aim or fire again, he sprang upon them, and, with swinging blows, laid low the one who had escaped his bullet. Down he went beside his companion, who had fallen under Ben's first bullet.

And now, looking down on them as they lay motionless at his feet, he recognised them—they were the **Dago Miguel** and the deserter **Slaney**.

As the old seaman stood there gazing in some surprise on his fallen foes, watchful as a cat with a mouse for the slightest sign of resistance, he heard his name called.

He knew the voice; it was the doctor's. But he would not take his eyes off the two.

"Come over here, sir," he called out. "Come and help me tie up these two—or," he went on, between his closed teeth, "help me to finish 'em. For they've killed Mr. Clive and Mr. Alec!"

Dr. Campbell had been brought up to the place by the sound of the shots. He had seen, as he had approached, the two strangers rise up from among

the thick vegetation, and had seen Ben spring up, too, close by, fire at the pair, and then rush at them.

"What did you say, Ben?" cried the scientist, as he got close. "They've killed Alec and Clive? Heavens, man, it can't be true? Tell me that I did not hear aright!"

"I be afraid it be only too certain, sir," Ben answered in a voice choked with emotion. "I meself see these two murdering hounds shoot 'em down behind their backs, wi'out warnin', wi'out givin' the poor young fellows a chance to defend themselves. What shall we do with the dogs? Shall I finish 'em both off, like the snakes in the grass they've showed themselves? It's the two as tried t' kill Mr. Alec afore—the Dago an' Slaney."

"No—no; you mustn't do that, Ben," the doctor replied gravely. "We must hasten to find the two—they may be wounded and in sore need of our aid. In which direction are they?"

"Over yonder, sir." Ben pointed to where he had last seen the two. "You go, sir," he begged in husky tones. "An' I'll stay an' keep guard here. I—don't feel—I be—ekal t' look on 'em—not jest yet."

The doctor put a hand on the old sailor's shoulder. Its firm, friendly pressure told that he understood. Then, with a heavy sigh, he murmured:

"So be it, Ben. Stay and watch these two, and I will go. You can signal to me if I am going right. And I will let you know at once how things are."

He set off in the direction Grove had indicated, and, looking back once or twice for guidance, speedily found the place where Alec and Clive had been.

It was easy to know when he came to it, because there was one of their

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rifles lying on the grass, and an impression on the herbage as of a body having lain there at full length.

But of the two young fellows themselves there was no sign whatever.

Yet there, alongside where they must have been, was a hole—a long trench rather—partly hidden by broken ferns and other plants.

The doctor went closer and examined the place. He could see an oblong-shaped opening, like a yawning grave; and, throwing himself down at full length, he peered into it in a state of mingled curiosity, astonishment, and anxiety.

He could see that there was a dark space below like a cave or vault, but his eyes could not pierce the gloom.

“Anybody there?” he asked tremulously.

And then there came back an answer—the sound of the voice seeming to him more welcome than almost anything he had ever heard in his life.

“Why, yes, doctor,” said the voice—and the listener knew it was the voice of Clive. “We are down here, and we are all right, except for a few bruises. But how the dickens we’re going to get out again I’m blessed if I know, unless you can get some rope or something to help us up. We were just going to try firing off our revolvers, in the hope that you might hear the shots, and come to our assistance.

The doctor’s delight at hearing they were all right was so great that he could hardly find words to express himself.

“And you’re really all right?” he said at last. “Ben thought you’d been shot, and he followed up the two who had fired at you, and nearly killed them both. In fact he may have done so, for all I know. I didn’t stop to see, but came on to look for you.”

“Bravo, Ben! Good old Ben!” came from Alec. “So he soon avenged us, then, as he thought? Who are our two honourable foes? Any idea, sir?”

“Yes; they are two you ought to know well. One is Miguel the Dago, and the other is his crony, Slaney—the two who tried conclusions with you before.”

Alec whistled.

“Fancy that!” he murmured. “Well, if Ben has given it ’em hot it only serves ’em right. But how in the world did they come to be up here? They seem to have found a way to get up here when we couldn’t!”

“That must be so,” the doctor agreed.

“The fact is,” Clive put in, “this mountain seems to be a regular labyrinth of underground galleries. It must be honeycombed with ’em. But, doctor, we’ve got better news than that for you!”

“So; I shall be glad to hear it, my lad. I’ve reasons of my own for wishing to hear something cheerful. What is your news?”

“We believe we’ve found the cave of gold!” was the astonishing answer. “In fact, we’ve tumbled into it. The ground opened beneath us and let us through, and here we are in what seems to be a most wonderful place; only it’s so dark down here we can’t see properly, so can’t yet tell you more exactly what it’s like!”

“I can scarcely believe my ears!” exclaimed the doctor.

“We could scarcely believe our eyes,” Clive returned, “when we grasped what was around us. We had felt more like swearing when we found ourselves tumbling down into the earth, and plunging into what, for all we knew, might be a sort of bottomless pit. And when we scrambled to our feet, in a smother of stones and dust, and found we couldn’t reach the hole above us to get out, we were in a fine stew.”

“I can well understand that,” said the doctor.

"And then, you see, there was the question as to what the jehunies who had fired at us might do. They might come and peep in and shoot at us here from above, or they might try to cover the hole up in some way, and go off and leave us here, and perhaps you would never have found us. So we were in a regular pickle, as it seemed, and, on the whole, we thought it wiser to lie low for a bit, hoping the beggars might miss the place, and so leave us alone.

"I can see the dilemma you were in," the doctor commented.

"So we went off along the gallery we found we were in for a little way, to be out of sight in case they looked down. And then, using our little electric lamp, we found we were in a place which seemed all solid gold. I don't suppose it's that; but, any way, the whole place—sides, roof, even the floor and all, as far as we've been able to investigate—glistens in the light of our little lamp like polished gold!"

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Dr. Campbell. "This is wonderful news, indeed! We must come down to you with some lanterns, and find out more. But first I must inform Ben. He's in a terrible way about you, poor fellow. It will be such a relief to him to know that you are safe. And then I must tell him the rest, too. I'll be back very shortly."

"All right, sir," said Alec. "We don't mind now. We're in no particular hurry to get out. We're not so used to being shut up in a cave of gold as to have grown tired of it yet."

The doctor laughed. It was a relief indeed to be able to laugh, after the strain of the last quarter of an hour. And he hastened away to where Ben awaited him, still standing over his prisoners, like a bulldog on guard.

The doctor signed to him before he came close that their two friends were safe. He did not call it out because he did not wish the two men to hear. And the same applied to the other news.

Ben looked at him, wondering if he could have understood aright.

"They're not killed, sir?" he whispered, when his leader was quite close.

"They're all right, Ben. Only fell into a hole, and couldn't get out—that accounts for their not shooting back. But I've got more astounding news still!"

And then he told him, and the veteran's delight and joy and thankfulness were so great that he felt he could almost forgive the two he had captured.

To these the doctor now gave his attention. They were both pretty badly hurt, one—Miguel—having a bullet wound in the breast, while as to the man Slaney, Grove in his rage and indignation had so banged him about that he was evidently severely bruised all over.

Dr. Campbell and Ben between them carried the two to a stream of water which ran near, and there they bathed their injuries, and did the best they could for them. And both soon revived.

(Continued overleaf.)

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

If you are not getting your right PENSION

"We must go back to where we left our things," said the doctor, "and fetch a few articles we want; and amongst them we must bring some lint and bandages for these men."

"But we'll have t' tie 'em up, sir, whilst we're gone, won't we?"

"This one we will," indicating Slaney. "But there is no need to bind the other one. He is too badly hurt to be able to get away."

Ben had a length or two of line wound round his waist, and with this he bound the deserter. Then he and the doctor went back to where their two young friends were imprisoned, and held a short talk with them, honest Ben expressing in loud exclamations his wonder and delight at the discovery of the veritable cave of gold.

"And so it wor through them blackguards we've captured as ye found it!" he commented finally. "They tried t' murder ye, and made ye lie down—an' ye lay on the very place we was a-searchin' for!"

"That's how it was, Ben," Alec answered. "If it hadn't been for them we might have searched about for months before we found it."

"Well, well, well! For sure, Providence do find wonnerful ways of doin' things!" was honest Ben's pious comment.

Then he and his leader set off for the place where they had left the aeroplane. Dr. Campbell had taken the precaution to bring up from below some special lanterns, as well as ropes, and other articles that he thought might be useful in exploring dark caves and galleries.

In less than half an hour they were back, and the scientist sent Grove on to their two friends, while he himself took the two injured men in hand.

Having bound up their wounds and made them as comfortable as he could, he began to question them as to how they had gained access to the top of the mountain, and other matters. He found the Dago sullen and silent, but the man Slaney was evidently cowed and depressed, and was inclined to be communicative.

It seemed, from his account, that Miguel's imagination and greed had been so excited by what he had overheard the doctor say when he had listened outside the leader's tent that first night, after he had been rescued from the snake, and then from drowning in the pool, that he could think of nothing else. He went back and told the rest of Diego's gang, and thereafter they, too, as has been told, determined to search for the cave of gold after capturing or driving away the doctor's party.

(To be concluded shortly)

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