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No. 2. THE MANOR
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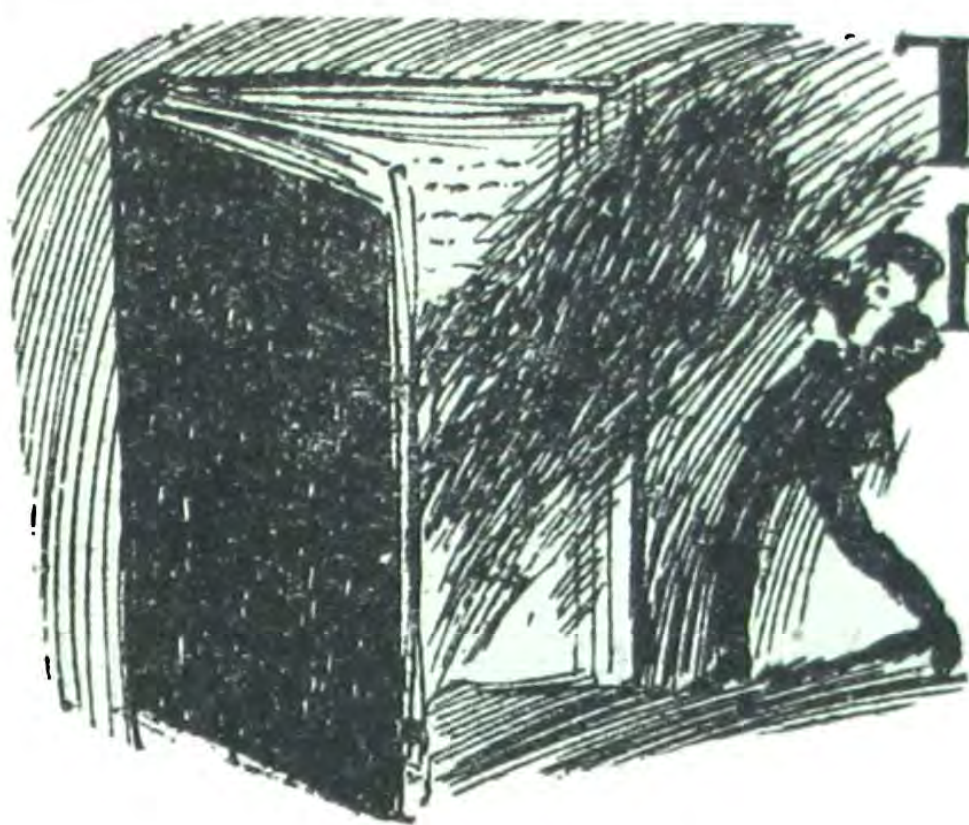
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THE MANOR HOUSE MYSTERY.

No. 2.—STORIES FROM NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK.

Set down by NIPPER, and Prepared
for Publication by the Author of
"JIM THE PENMAN" Series, etc.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I MAKE THE
ACQUAINTANCE OF AN AGITATED YOUNG
MAN, AND IN WHICH THE AFORESAID AGI-
TATED YOUNG MAN RELATES A STRANGE
STORY, AND TENDERS US A CORDIAL
INVITATION.

BRISTOL was sweltering, and I was
sweltering in Bristol. To tell the
absolute truth, the guv'nor was
sweltering, too. The whole blessed
country, from Land's End to John o'
Groats, was baking like a hot-cross bun,
in fact.

I thought it was best to begin like that,
just to show how thundering warm the
weather was. It was the last week in July,
and if August lived up to its supposed
traditions—well, the population would
simply melt.

The episode I am going to set down here
took place before the great war started,
and so Nelson Lee and I were not living in
such strenuous times as we are now. All
the same, this particular adventure was
strenuous enough, in all conscience. It
was mysterious, too—mysterious, weird,
and in some aspects grotesque.

The great criminologist (that's a good
word!) and I had been in Bristol for about
three days, and we were staying in one of
the best hotels. Of course, we had come
on business.

The guv'nor had been commissioned by
some shipping firm or other to look into
a queer affair connected with one of the
dockyards. As it turned out, we had
simply wasted our time by coming to
Bristol, for Nelson Lee jolly soon proved
that there was no mystery for him to
unravel.

But we'd wasted nearly three days, and
we intended leaving for London by the
evening train. It was afternoon now,

and Nelson Lee and I were seated upon
an upper verandah of the hotel, with a
red-striped canvas awning above us.

We were both lolling in deck chairs,
and, although we were dressed airily, and
although we hadn't moved an inch for an
hour, we were both perspiring. It was one
of those days when it's too jolly hot to
breathe.

"Bristol is a fine city, young 'un,"
remarked Nelson Lee languidly. "All the
same, I think it might provide something
better in the way of sea-breezes. Here we
are, in close proximity to the Atlantic,
and there's not a quiver in the air—
except the quiver of the heat. I dread to
think of London, Nipper. If Bristol is
like this, how hot will Gray's Inn Road
be?"

I shifted my head lazily.

"Oh, it's out of the question, sir," I
declared. "We can't go back to London.
Now we're right down here, let's take a
trip to Ilfracombe or Weston-super-Mare—
that's nearer, only twenty miles away
from here. There'll be bathing there, and
we can practically live in the giddy sea."

The guv'nor shook his head.

"There's work to be done, my boy," he
replied. "We mustn't think of holidays at
present. As a slight consolation, however,
suppose you go inside and conjure up a
couple of large, fat, long fizzy drinks?
And see that there's a chunk of ice in each
—or in mine, at all events."

"Too much fag!" I protested. "Why,
I should collapse on the way down.
You're stronger than I am, guv'nor—sup-
pose you go?"

I rested my head back and closed my
eyes, having no suspicion of the evil
thought which was even then formulating
itself in the guv'nor's mind. But I knew
all about it a second later!

Nelson Lee reached out a long lean hand and gripped the rear portion of my chair. It was an ordinary deck chair, and for a chap with the gov'nor's strength it was as easy as pie to jerk the supporting cross piece out of its notches.

Crash!

Of course, I wasn't anticipating anything of the sort, and I collapsed upon the hard ironwork of the verandah with a thud which shook the whole building, more or less. And, as I naturally fell upon a soft, tender spot, I was bruised fearfully. At least, I thought I was at the moment.

With a roar I jumped to my feet, and became entangled in the deck chair. Of course, that would happen! Before I knew where I was I went flop again and performed a weird series of acrobatic stunts on my head.

"Dear me, Nipper!" exclaimed the gov'nor in mild surprise. "You appear to be surprisingly energetic now, at all events. If you are not careful you will tumble over the parapet, and then, I'm afraid, that long fizzy drink will not be necessary. You will be an excellent candidate for the hospital."

I extricated myself and glared.

"If anybody's going to hospital," I panted, "it'll be you! Of all the beastly tricks! You might have injured me. Hlew! I'm sweating like a pig!"

"Naturally!" he murmured gently.

"Calling me a pig, eh?" I ejaculated, with rising wrath.

"You said it yourself, young 'un."

"I know I did. But I didn't mean——"

I paused at that moment, for I heard a tap at our door through the open French windows. I set my collar straight, and growled out "Come in!" A waiter entered, and he carried a card in his paw.

"Is Mr. Lee here, sir?" he asked.

"Outside," I said, jerking my head.

"What is it, anyhow?"

"There is a gentleman below in the vestibule," replied the man. "He says he wants to see Mr. Lee very urgently."

It was perhaps as well that the waiter-johnny had come at that moment, because I'd fully made up my mind to do something desperate, and chance the consequences. The sight of the gov'nor lolling in his chair grinning at me had got me into a fine old paddy. But I couldn't very well start the slaughtering business with the waiter hanging about.

"Somebody wants to see you, sir," I growled, chucking the card into Nelson Lee's lap. "Lucky thing for you this interruption came!"

He took the card, sat up, and looked at it. I was just at his shoulder, and so I could read it, too. The name and address were done in copper-plate stuff, and ran: "Howard Freeman, the Manor House, Thirtle." And, neatly written upon the top of the card were the words, in pencil: "Can you please spare me just five minutes? Very urgent. H. F."

"Tell the waiter to show Mr. Freeman up," drawled the gov'nor. "We're doing nothing, so we may as well oblige the gentleman. I wonder what he wants, Nipper? The name seems familiar to me, somehow."

I gave the waiter his instructions, and when I went out on the verandah again I found Nelson Lee lazily sparring with an impudent wasp. The latter gentleman ventured somewhat too close, and a tap from the gov'nor's fist knocked him clean out of time. Before I could count him out, though, he regained his feet—and wings—and buzzed off in a fine fright.

By this time the waiter had returned, and with him was a tall, well-built young man of about twenty-five. Rather a good-looking chap, fair-haired, with a certain cut about his chivvy which attracted me at once.

But it was plain to see that Mr. Howard Freeman was not easy in mind. There were lines about his eyes, and his expression was one of mingled sadness and grim obstinacy. And he was plainly agitated.

"I'm glad you've let me come up, Mr. Lee," he said simply.

Nelson Lee shook hands with Mr. Freeman, and I hastened to set up the collapsed deck-chair. By this time I'd completely forgotten my fury. As a matter of fact, I wasn't furious at all—and hadn't been. That was only my rot. The gov'nor and I often had good-humoured bouts of words.

"This is Nipper, I suppose?" said the stranger, looking at me and sitting in the chair. "I am delighted to meet you both. Now, Mr. Lee, I'll tell you straight out what I want. I want your advice and help."

"Do you mean my professional help?"

"Yes. I happened to be in Bristol to-day, and while I was talking to a friend he told me that you were in the city," said Freeman. "It's an infernal piece of impudence on my part to bother you. I know, but I simply couldn't resist the temptation to tell you of the mystery which surrounds the Thirtle Manor House."

"I know that you specialise in mysteries, Mr. Lee."

"If they are interesting," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

"By Jove! This one will interest you, I will swear," declared the agitated young man. "There is something grotesque about the whole business, Mr. Lee—something amazingly strange. I was going to say uncanny."

"I must confess that you excite my curiosity," smiled the gov'nor. "You are very astute, Mr. Freeman. You have commenced your attack by making me inquisitive. What is this singular mystery which surrounds the Manor House?"

Howard Freeman smiled slightly.

"You will hear my story through?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"And you will help me?"

"Ah, that depends upon the story," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Very well, here goes," said the young man, sitting forward in his chair and lighting a cigarette which the gov'nor had just offered him. The heat was tremendous, but we'd forgotten all about iced drinks. Beyond the canvas awning the blazing afternoon sun glared down with fierce heat, and I could see the air above the iron railings absolutely quivering and radiating. Down below, the street was dusty and sweltering.

I leaned against the doorpost and listened, fanning myself with my straw-yard.

"I don't know how long you've been in Bristol, Mr. Lee," went on Freeman.

"But you may have read an account in one of the local newspapers, of my father's funeral. The poor old chap was buried just over a fortnight ago."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Freeman," he exclaimed.

"Your name seemed a little familiar when I first heard it. I remember now. I did not see any reference to the funeral you mention, but there was a paragraph to the effect that the mystery of Mr. Howard Freeman's death was still unsolved. I understand that there was something—shall we say tragic?—about your father's death?"

"The coroner's jury brought in an inquest of suicide—suicide while of unsound mind," exclaimed the young man bitterly. "Pah! These inquests make me sick! It is always 'during temporary insanity' or something of that kind. In nine cases out of ten suicides are as sane as you or I."

"There is certainly something in what you say," agreed the gov'nor.

"But my father did not take his own life, I am as positive of that as I am of eternity!" declared Freeman quietly. "But let me explain the affair from the start, Mr. Lee. There are several facts which were not made public; which I have taken care to keep secret. For they are facts so extraordinary—so bizarre—that their publication would only excite incredulity and derision."

He tossed his cigarette away and proceeded; it seemed to worry him somehow, and his agitation was more marked. Both the gov'nor and I eyed him curiously, and wondered what this story was he had to tell.

"The Manor House, Thirtle, is about six miles out of Bristol," went on Freeman. "It is mine, of course, since I am the only son. My mother died years ago, and I have no close relative with the exception of my sister, Constance. She is at present, in London, and I have the Manor House to myself, with the exception of the servants, of course."

"I tell you solemnly and seriously, Mr. Lee, that a sinister mystery surrounds the old place—a mystery which is terrifying and almost paralysing. I feel helpless, and as weak as a child when I realise the dreadful nature of the peril. The police can do nothing; even if I went to them they would scoff at me."

"Why, is the place haunted?" I asked interestedly.

"I cannot say anything definitely, Nipper," replied Freeman, turning his head up to me. "The house itself is safe enough, there is nothing wrong with the building, and never has been, so far as I am aware. It is the park which fills me with dread every time I venture through it after dark."

"Is the park so extensive, then?"

"The Manor House stands practically in the centre of a thickly wooded park," replied the other quietly. "These woods surround the house on every side, and from the roadway to the house there is a long winding drive, fully half a mile in length. Tall, thick trees border the drive on both sides, and overhead the branches are entwined. In full daylight, of course, the walk from the road to the house is a delightful one. But at night—even a moonlight night—it is like traversing a black tunnel. No doubt you have seen drives of that description in other places?"

"Often enough," Leo replied. "But what is the mystery you refer to?"

"I don't know—I cannot tell. I have come to you to seek your aid," was Freeman's answer. "In some way, Mr. Lee, the park, and particularly the drive, is dangerous. It is like taking one's life in one's hands to walk from the lodge to the house itself after night has fallen."

"But what is the danger which threatens the innocent pedestrian?" queried the gov'nor curiously. "Surely the peril takes some form?"

"I don't know what the danger is, and where it comes from," replied Freeman. "That is just the staggering part of the whole business, Mr. Lee. Just over three weeks ago my father was found dead upon the drive."

"At what time of the evening?"

"It was no later than ten o'clock. He had been expected at nine, and my sister and myself were awaiting dinner for him," said Freeman. "Well, he did not come. And so I and a groom made our way down the drive to the lodge gates in order to question Melrose, my gate-keeper. But we did not get there. Half-way to the lodge we came upon my father lying close against the trees. He was quite dead."

"From what cause?"

"That was a matter of great speculation at first," said the other quietly. "Our local doctor, of course, was sent for post-haste, and when he arrived he pronounced life to be extinct. My father's face was drawn up and distorted in a ghastly fashion, and it was obvious that he had died violently. The doctor could offer no explanation."

"You sent for a more experienced man, I assume?"

"Yes, I wired to a London specialist, and he came down the next day. And it was then proved that the poor old pater had died from the effect of some terrible poison. It had been injected into the fleshy part of his left forearm, and the specialist declared that he must have died in dreadful agony."

"How awful!" I put in breathlessly.

"Of course, there was an inquest, and the fools on the jury brought in a verdict of suicide. They claimed that all the evidence pointed to the fact that my father had taken his own life."

"Certainly the facts were suggestive of that," observed Nelson Lee.

"How were they? Why should it be assumed that my father killed himself?"

"Well, for one thing, it was the most

likely explanation. People do not get poisoned in a quiet English park—poisoned, that is, by some living reptile," replied the gov'nor quietly. "Either your father administered the poison himself, or somebody deliberately waylaid and attacked him."

"And yet that theory is hardly possible," said the young man. "Who would commit such a dastardly crime? My father had no enemies—not one in the wide world. There was no reason why his life should be taken. But some little time before his death, he had been greatly worried and troubled over certain business matters. He had been snappy with the servants, and had acted rather curiously on several occasions."

"How curiously?"

"Well, he once flew into a terrible passion with the gardener, and threatened to thrash the man within an inch of his life. It was merely a fit of anger—nothing more. My father was very hot-tempered, and I suppose his business worry made him worse. All this came out at the inquest, of course, and the jury was greatly impressed."

"I'm not surprised at that."

"By a curious chance, too, my father had been on his way home from Bristol, where he had received a telegram," continued Freeman. "This telegram was produced at the inquest, and it showed that my father had suffered a serious financial loss. Moreover, I was compelled to state, in my evidence, that the pater had sometimes used a small hypodermic syringe."

"For what purpose did he use it?"

"Merely for the injection of a harmless drug—not cocaine," replied Freeman. "He only used it when he was feeling run-down and depressed. And it was concluded that he had injected poison into his arm, and had flung the syringe away before dying. I'll admit that the facts were significant."

"I am afraid you were hasty in your condemnation of the coroner's jury," said the gov'nor drily. "All these things go to prove a strong case. Naturally, the police searched for the syringe?"

"Three men were at work for several days, but no syringe was found," replied the visitor. "This, however, was not very surprising. The specialist declared that my father might have injected the poison into his arm while walking from the station, a mile and a half distant. The syringe might be concealed anywhere in the tall grass which bordered the country lane, and it was impossible to search everywhere. The injection wound, too, was

in such a position as to lend colour to the suicide theory. But he was murdered!"

"Well, I'm blessed if I can see it, Mr. Freeman!" I put in bluntly. "It's about as clear a case of suicide as I've ever heard of. I don't want to hurt your feelings, of course, but I must speak out. What do you think, guv'nor?"

"I shall reserve any statement until I have heard Mr. Freeman's full story," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I feel sure that more has to be told."

"You are right, Mr. Lee," declared Freeman emphatically. "At the inquest I repeated again and again my firm opinion on the subject. I—his son—surely knew him better than any? And I knew positively well that my father would never take his own life. If absolute ruin had come, the pater would have borne it philosophically."

"And what was the extent of the loss?"

"Serious, I will admit, but by no means disastrous," replied Freeman. "My father was a rich man, and this particular transaction had gone badly wrong. All the same, our financial position was not greatly affected. The loss, to be precise, was about ten thousand pounds. But my father was worth twenty times that amount. Why should he commit suicide because of such a loss? The idea is absurd—fantastic! I repeat that he met his death by some foul and unknown means."

"Why do you reiterate that statement so emphatically?"

"You may remember that I opened my story by saying that the park was dangerous, that it was perilous to traverse the drive after darkness had fallen?" asked the visitor. "Very well, Mr. Lee. I told you that because I have an excellent reason. I know that my father did not commit suicide, for I, too, experienced a terrible adventure in the park."

"Oh, that makes a difference!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps I was a little too harsh upon the jury," went on young Freeman, with a faint smile. "For I, too, had begun to convince myself that a correct verdict had been returned. And if I had begun to think that way, surely it was not fair to blame the jury for coming to such a conclusion? Last night, however, I experienced an adventure which terrified me, and which told me that my father had died by other means than his own hand."

Freeman paused, and even in the heat of the blazing July afternoon he paled. The guv'nor looked at me rather queerly.

Freeman's adventure must have been terrifying indeed for him to blanch at the very thought of it.

And he was not one of those weak milk-and-watery chaps, either. Looking at him, I reckoned that he was as strong as an ox, and thundering well developed. He'd be able to hold his own in any scrap. What could it have been that terrified a man of his calibre?

"It happened that I was walking home from the doctor's house," went on Freeman. "I arrived at the lodge-gates at about eleven o'clock, and walked straight up the drive with my mind naturally reverting to the tragedy."

"This occurred last night, you say?"

"Yes. When I had proceeded about half the distance to the house—I was, in fact, almost at the same spot as where my father had been found—I saw something upon one of the branches of a tree."

"Something?" repeated Lee. "Don't you know what it was?"

"I have not the faintest idea. Remember it was pitch dark, and beneath the trees I could scarcely see my hand before my face," said Freeman with a shiver. "But I instinctively knew that there was something upon the tree-branch. It was not human, and it made no sound. There was just a dark blob there which, as I watched, seemed to elongate itself."

"Your nerves were on edge, perhaps?"

"You believe that I imagined it all?" suggested the young man impatiently. "I did not! I swear to you, Mr. Lee, that my eyes did not deceive me. I am as level-headed as any man, I believe, and it takes a great deal to shake my nerves. Instinctively I came to a halt just beyond the spot where I had seen the—thing. I looked back, my heart in my mouth for some reason. And as I stood there I heard something drop to the ground with a dull, squashy kind of thud. Good heavens, that very sound alone seemed to chill my blood!"

"Did you see anything of the object?"

"I will not be certain on this point. But I believe I did. Something shadowy and black came along the ground towards me—something which seemed of enormous size. I did not wait a second longer. Mr. Lee, said Freeman quietly. "Quite candidly, I will admit that I was in a state of sheer terror. I turned and ran—ran for my very life."

"My word! Were you chased?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes, Nipper, I was!" the other

replied with grim emphasis. "I made straight for the doorway of an outhouse—the nearest building. Flinging open the door I dashed inside, and then crashed the door to. Even as I did so there was a heavy thud upon the face of it, and the door shivered slightly."

"Great Scott!" I breathed.

"I shot the bolt to, and then stood panting wildly. What was it that had chased me? I could find no explanation, and I was in a state of extreme nervousness. But you will not suggest that I imagined that adventure, Mr. Lee?"

"You were highly strung at the time, remember," replied the gov'nor smoothly. "No, don't you think that I am casting a doubt upon your story," Mr. Freeman. "I am quite sure that something of a startling nature occurred. But you, naturally enough, connected your experience with your father's death. But we must look at the thing sensibly. Was there any connection?"

"I believe I should have been killed if I had not run as fast as I did."

"You think that a man chased you?"

"No, I don't. It was certainly not a man!"

"Then what was it? Cannot we find some natural explanation?" went on Lee, with a smile. "We are in England, Mr. Freeman. We have no great snakes and dangerous animals in our quiet woods. What could your pursuer have been?"

"A dog, perhaps?" I suggested brilliantly.

"My dear, good Nipper, don't make such wild statements!" protested the gov'nor impatiently. "Did you ever hear of a dog that climbed trees, and dropped to the ground from branches? Monkeys do that sort of thing. But the idea of a dog is ridiculous. Conjecture is equally so."

"There was a way out of the side-building into a rear courtyard," said Howard Freeman. "After a while I made my way indoors by this route, and it was some little time before I regained my composure. But there was something appallingly horrible in the sound of that thud against the door. It was soft and spongy, as though a huge amount of flesh had collided with the woodwork. Mr. Lee, I believe that this thing—this unnameable creature which chased me—killed my father."

"It's queer—infernally queer!" exclaimed Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "And I am certainly interested, Mr. Freeman."

"Some little time ago I was reading a book concerning the supernatural," went

on the visitor, hesitating somewhat. "At the time I thought it was rot, sheer, unadulterated piffle. I laughed at it, and declared that such things as ghosts did not exist. And in that book I read of those phantasms which are called Elementals, or Poltergeists. These horrible things, I read, become semi-materialised, and attack human beings in various forms——"

Nelson Lee laughed outright.

"My dear sir, thrust all such absurd ideas out of your head!" he exclaimed. "I have never troubled to study physical research, and I never intend to do so. Queer things happen, I'll admit, but the enthusiast who wrote the book you refer to must not be taken too seriously. The thing which chased you was no Elemental, and it is foolish of you to entertain such notions. Cast them from your mind."

"But what other explanation is there?" asked Freeman agitatedly.

"My dear fellow, there may be a dozen reasons—simple, commonplace reasons."

"Well, Mr. Lee, I should like you to spend a day or two at the Manor House yourself," said Freeman eagerly. "Will you come? I am alone there, and I can promise you some excitement. For I am convinced that my strange pursuer will again manifest itself. Will you accept my invitation?"

"Of course we will!" I exclaimed promptly.

And I looked at the gov'nor significantly. If he refused he'd have to go through the mill properly afterwards, for a week in the country was just to my liking during the baking weather.

Nelson Lee caught my eye, and smiled.

"I can see that I shall get into extremely hot water with Nipper if I decline your invitation, Mr. Freeman," he exclaimed drily. "Therefore, I can do nothing but accept. Perhaps it is fair to add, however, that I should have accepted it in any case, for your story has interested me greatly. Mind you, I still believe that your imagination has been playing on your nerves, and you must not resent my frankness."

"I don't, Mr. Lee. But I think you'll be convinced before two nights have passed," replied the other grimly. "Allow me to thank you sincerely for——"

"No, you must thank me later on—if I am successful," smiled the gov'nor. "We will be with you to-morrow morning——"

"Oh, I say! Can't you come over today?"

"I suppose we could, if you are very anxious," laughed Nelson Lee. "Very well, Mr. Freeman, Nipper and I will fall in with any arrangements you choose to make."

And two or three hours later Mr. Howard Freeman called for us with his trap, and we all started off in the late afternoon for Thirtle Manor House. I little knew, then, of the exciting times which were awaiting us.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH HOWARD FREEMAN'S STORY IS CORROBORATED BY MELROSE, THE GATE-KEEPER, AND WE RECEIVE FURTHER STARTLING PROOF OF THE GRAVE PERILS WHICH SURROUND US.

THE sun was still shining gloriously as we left Bristol behind, and passed out into the country over the dusty roads. The air, too, was close and hot, and myriads of flies buzzed about and hovered in patches.

Freeman possessed a motor-car, he explained, but had not used it to-day because one of the tyres had been punctured. The guv'nor and I did not take all our luggage; merely a few things in Nelson Lee's handbag.

"There is one thing I omitted to tell you, Mr. Lee," said Freeman, as we bowled along. "And, as a matter of fact, it is a very important thing. This morning my old gatekeeper, Melrose, came up to the house and told me that while locking up the gates for the night he had seen some strange object moving among the trees on the opposite side of the drive."

"Indeed," said Lee. "Did Melrose know of your own adventure?"

"No; I had not mentioned a word to him. I can see your line of reasoning. You think that Melrose invented the story for the sake of sensation? Well, Mr. Lee, that can't be the case, for he didn't know anything."

"But you must have told somebody else——"

"Not a soul. You must question Melrose when you arrive."

"I will," declared the guv'nor.

Freeman continued talking. I was sitting behind, but I could hear all he said. And Nelson Lee and I gathered that Howard Freeman senior had been a retired merchant, considerably rich, and something of a power in the quiet country neighbourhood.

But Freeman hinted that his father had

not been very popular—mainly owing to his hasty temper. All the same, his tragic death was generally regretted, and there was much sympathy from all sides.

Thirtle itself was only a tiny hamlet, and was situated just over a mile from the Manor House. We had to pass through the little place on our way, and it was a jolly sleepy hole—mostly cottages, about three shops, and a post office.

The Manor House proved to be a fine old place, and I certainly couldn't imagine tragedy there. We caught a glimpse of it from the road, before we came to the drive. It stood back upon a little hill, and the sun was shining upon it gloriously. An old-fashioned house, with tiled roof and queer little gables jutting out at unexpected corners. The building was rather rambling, and low. As Freeman had said, a well-wooded park surrounded it on almost every side.

On every hand all was quiet and peaceful. Sheep were grazing in a meadow close by; a herd of cattle gazed at us curiously as we trotted past them. Away on a rise several thatched farm buildings nestled among some trees. To associate death and peril and tragedy with this delightful spot seemed preposterous.

And the sun, sinking gloriously in the west, gave promise of a prolonged spell of fine weather.

I was jolly pleased with the events of the afternoon. But for Freeman's visit the guv'nor and I would have been on the point of returning to London by now. As it was we were booked for a week at the Manor House. Quiet, of course, but we shouldn't be dull—I'd see to that.

Dull!

If I'd only known what was to happen!

But I didn't know then, and I was pretty certain in my own mind that Freeman's yarn was all bunkum. It only shows that it's not wise to be too certain. I thought we were going to have a week of ripping idleness.

Ye gods! There was going to be a fat lot of idleness, I don't jolly well think! By the time that week was over—— But this is all wrong. I'm shoving the cart before the giddy horse. Let's take things in sequence.

I was yarning about the peace and quietness of the balmy countryside, wasn't I? Well, we arrived at the lodge gates at last. The Manor House was evidently a place of some importance, for the lodge was quite a decent cottage. The gates had been freshly painted, and they were smart in a coat of olive-green paint

and gold buttons—I mean gold touchings-up.

On either side of the gates grew magnificent copper-beeches, with their deep, ruddy leaves. Thanks to passing moters the real beauty of the trees was spoilt, for they were smothered in dust.

As we came to a stop I could see the drive winding away through the park like a white snake. It was narrow, and the trees grew closely together. Giant elms scarcely had sufficient room to spread their branches, and these intermingled with the branches of chestnut and oak trees.

It was a lovely place, and the coolness under the canopy of leaves was refreshing and welcome. For, although it was early evening, the sun was still hot, and the air close and humid.

The gates were open, and Freeman was for driving straight up to the house. But Nelson Lee decided otherwise.

"This is where Melrose lives, isn't it?" he asked. "The gatekeeper, I mean. I think you said his name was Melrose?"

"Yes," replied Freeman. "Oh, of course. You're going to question the old boy, aren't you? If there was somebody to take the trap we'd get out here, and walk the rest of the way. I could then show you the exact spot where my father was found, and where I saw the—the thing."

"Nipper will run the trap home," said the gov'nor calmly.

"Here, I say!" I protested. "I want to stay——"

"Jove! This is lucky!" ejaculated Freeman suddenly. "Bates, Bates!"

A man had appeared from the rear of the lodge—two men in fact. One was Melrose, I judged, and the other Bates—whatever he happened to be. As I soon discovered, Bates was the groom, and he had been chatting with the gatekeeper.

He came up as his master called to him. And the trap was handed over into his care, and we all got out—Freeman, Nelson Lee, and I, I mean. The trap jogged off up the drive in a smother of dust.

Melrose touched his cap as we approached him. He was a bent old fellow, with a wrinkled, lined face. His eyes were twinkling and genial, although I thought I could detect a certain sadness about them. The recent tragedy was still reflected in his eyes.

"That be wunnerful warm, Master Howard," he said, mopping his brow with a huge red bandana handkerchief. "Wunnerful warm."

The old chap still referred to Freeman as "Master Howard," I noticed. Now, however, Howard Freeman was the master proper—the owner of the Manor House and its surrounding estates.

"Yes, it is warm to-day, Melrose," said our host. "This gentleman is a friend of mine, as also is the younger gentleman. They are both greatly interested in my queer adventure last night."

The old gatekeeper's eyes seemed to become uneasy.

"That were a rum happenin', Master Howard," he exclaimed, eying me critically. "I don't reckon as all's right. I've seed things as I can't get the hang on. I've seed things that's fair fritted me outer me life!"

"There you are!" said Freeman. "Didn't I tell you so? Melrose knows something, and he can tell you something, too."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"There's one thing I want to ask you, Melrose," he said. "Do you think your late master took his own life, or do you think he met with foul play?"

The old man's eyes blazed now—they blazed with sudden fierceness. I stood looking on, and listening with great interest.

"The master never committed suicide!" declared Melrose flatly. "That I'll swear to. Them joory fellers was all daft, that's what they was. The master take his own life! Lor' sakes; it could never ha' bin, sir—never! He warn't the kind o' man to kill hisself!"

"You think he was—murdered?" asked the gov'nor.

"I won't go for to say, that, sir," replied the gatekeeper. "I dunno as the master was murdered. Who'd murder him, any way? Some o' the folks didn't fare to like him, but that was on'y on account of his temper. Them as understood the master got on with him real proper. Him and me never had a cross word. No, sir, I don't reckon as Mr. Freeman was murdered."

"Then how do you account for his death?"

Melrose stroked his grey, ragged beard.

"That was s mmat o' what you an' I don't know of," he said sagely.

"Exactly," smiled Nelson Lee. "We don't know of it, Melrose. But we want to know. And if you do know something, I want you to tell me. Surely you have some theory of your own?"

"I dunno what 'theory' means exactly, sir," admitted Melrose, scratching his head.

"But my idea is this—the park ain't a safe place to be in late at night. That's honest and straight!"

"Why isn't it safe?"

"There's—things about," he answered enigmatically.

"What things, eh?" I broke in impatiently. "Can't you tell us plainly?"

The old man looked at me and shook his head.

"I dunno myself, young sir," he replied. "But there's things. And a'mighty queer things, too! I was fritted outer me life —"

"You were frightened out of your life, you say?" put in the guv'nor quickly. "When, Melrose? When were you frightened?"

"Last night I was fritted awful," said Melrose. "You heerd o' Master Howard's adventure, sir? That was mortal bad, I'm thinkin', mortal bad. What could that ha' bin what chased him? I'm fair worried when I think on't. That warn't nothing human, sir, and nothing animal, either!"

"Then what was it?" asked Freeman sharply.

"That must ha' bin a ghooost!" said the old man, shaking his head.

"Nonsense!" put in Nelson Lee. "Melrose, ghosts don't poison people as your late master was poisoned. Your own sense ought to tell you that. Whatever this strange 'thing' is, it is certainly material. Tell me what frightened you last night?"

"That I can't, sir," said Melrose frankly. "I can't tell you nothin'—leastways, nothin' that you'll make anything out of. I don't know meself. But after Master Howard come in I went out to shut and lock the gates——"

"How long after?"

"Why, that would be ten or fifteen minutes after," said Melrose. "I know nobody else was a' coming'. I shut the gates, and then turned to go into my lodge. It was summat dark, sir, but I had my lantern wi' me. The air was kind o' close and still, and I felt nervous, somehow. I dunno why. I've got pretty good eyes, although I am gettin' on in life. And away up the drive I saw summat."

He regarded us with half-frightened, intent eyes.

"The drive showed up, plain against the blackness," he went on, "bein' as the surface is whitish, as you can see. An' as I looked I saw summat come outer the trees."

"An animal?"

"If that was an animal, then it was the queerest one as I've ever seed," declared

the gatekeeper. "But I didn't see it proper, anyway. From where I was it seemed long and shapeless and mighty large. An' it kinder grew, if you takes what I mean, it jost grew."

"Do you mean its size increased?"

"That's it, sir," said the old man. "It grew an' grew until it seemed to fill the whole drive. And I seemed to smell summat horrid and narsty. I dunno why, but I was all of a shiver, and them teeth as I have got left to me was a-chatterin' like they wanted to jerk theirselves outer me mouth. I stood still, not darin' to move."

"Where was your lantern?"

"Now, that's the queer part, sir," said Melrose fearfully. "The air was still—as still as it is now. And I suddenly noticed that me lantern was—out! Yet I'd only trimmed it ten minutes since! What put that there lamp out? That wasn't any-thing human, I'll swear. There was ghooosts about, and one of 'em was right in front o' me. You can't make me think no different, neither!"

I think we were all impressed by Melrose's tale. The old chap was sincere and grave. He, at least, believed in his story. Whether it was all imagination or not we couldn't tell. At all events, I began to feel just a bit uneasy. Could it be possible that Freeman's theory of an "Elemental" had any foundation of truth? The guv'nor had scoffed at it, but——

"Come, come, Melrose, there is surely a natural explanation of what you saw," said Nelson Lee crisply. "The 'thing' was probably a stray cow or a bullock. Your lamp had gone out because the wick was short, and the smell was that of the hot oil. Imagination did the rest, probably."

The gatekeeper laughed mirthlessly.

"That there won't do, sir," he said bluntly. "That wasn't no cow! Just look at the trees—there ain't room for anything to squeeze between 'em bigger'n a rabbit. And this horrid thing was like a haystack, it was so big! And it so happened as I put a new wick in me lamp that very night."

The old man turned pale, and pointed up the drive.

"You see them chestnuts?" he said, indicating a certain spot with gnarled finger. "That's where the thing come to. And it grew an' grew, an' then come towards me. Not a sound did it make, and the blood seemed to friz in me marrers. It was comin' for me! Suddenly I lets out a gasp of fright, an' I tore into me lodge an' slammed the door."

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "And what then?"

"I fancied I heard a kind of moan, but I wouldn't swear to that, young sir," said Melrose, shivering in spite of the heat. "But I will swear to one thing. A minute after I got indoors I heered summat kind o' slide past the window-panes, and then one o' the glasses cracked wi' a noise like a gun. I slammed the shutters to, and then sank back into a chair. Lor' sakes! I was shiverin' like a leaf in a gale o' wind, sir."

The old man's voice shook, and he pointed to a window. We could see it distinctly. It was a square pane, and it was cracked across and across. Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"H'm! Your story is a remarkable one, Melrose," he observed, "so remarkable that I am at a loss." He looked down at the roadway. "Too dry for any foot-prints, of course," he went on musingly. "Perhaps the window may show us something."

We all walked across to the lodge window as if by mutual understanding, and without a word being spoken. I suppose the gate-keeper's queer story had rather got on our nerves. It had got on mine, anyhow.

Something strong and heavy must have pressed against the window-pane in order to smash it, for it was only small and very stout glass. Nelson Lee looked closely at the sill and the surrounding wall.

Then he transferred his attention to the flower-bed below. This was neatly kept, and an array of brightly coloured flowers made a brave show. But not a single flower was disturbed, not a leaf crushed. The path was not far off certainly, but it wasn't possible for a chap to touch the window without going on to the flower-bed—unless, of course, he possessed patent telescopic arms.

"Was there a tap on the glass before the pane cracked?" asked Nelson Lee.

"There warn't no tap any time," answered Melrose shakily. "It was a kind of slidin' sound, as though something was pressin' against the glass. Then the old pane cracked acrost, and I was quick to close the shutters."

Melrose could tell no more, and we were all puzzled and mystified. The old man had obviously been in deadly earnest. He, himself, at least, fully believed in every detail of his story. And why should we doubt it? Perhaps we shouldn't, after we'd been at the Manor House for a bit.

We commenced to walk to the house, leaving Melrose standing by the door of his

lodge, looking thoughtful and rather pale beneath the rough tan of his old skin. The guv'nor knew by this time that something was jolly wrong with the place. Howard Freeman and his lodge-keeper had seen the unnameable night marauders, and they had both been chased by it.

This was a cheerful outlook, I thought.

After we had walked up the drive some distance, Freeman halted.

"This is the spot, Mr. Lee," he said quietly.

He meant the spot where his father had been found, of course. We looked round us carefully, and with interest. But the thick trees grew closely on both sides of the drive, and everything was as dry as dust. There had been no rain for over ten days, and only a few showers, which certainly had not penetrated to this protected spot.

The guv'nor did not stay long in the drive. After having looked at the tree, upon which Freeman stated he had seen the "thing," we continued our walk to the house. My word! It was like coming out of a world of gloom to emerge from the drive into the clear, bright evening sunlight.

Yet, during the heat of the day that wonderful avenue of trees afforded the most delightful shade. Freeman said that it was always cool in the drive, even on the most baking day. But I reckoned that the delights of the place were rather out-balanced by the sinister danger which lurked among its depth. For at night, it seemed, the glorious avenue was a place of death.

What could it all mean? I couldn't help thinking of old Melrose's story. Why had his lamp gone out? What was the unpleasant niff which had come to his nostrils? What was the thing he had seen—the thing which seemed to grow to enormous size as he watched it, and which filled the whole space of the drive?

I felt like questioning the guv'nor, but I knew that he wouldn't like me to. When there was nothing definite to work upon, and no positive facts known, Nelson Lee did not care to be bothered by questions.

And, after all, what could he tell me?

I'm not a superstitious idiot, but I must confess that I felt a bit groggy inside while we walked up the drive. And I'm not a funk, either. But when you're face to face with something unknown—something mysterious—your giddy courage seems to ooze out of your finger-tips, and leaves you as limp as a rag.

Of course, I wasn't like this at present. But if the guv'nor and I kept a night vigil—

well, I wondered what colour my hair would be in the morning!

It was fairly late by the time we'd had a look round the grounds and had gone indoors. The evening was glorious, and not a breath of wind stirred. Away in the west the sky was red and as clear as crystal. Not a sign of rain, and with every promise of further sweltering days.

In spite of the heat, I'd got a pretty good twist on me, and I wondered when dinner would be served. We'd had an early tea in Bristol before starting out. It had only been a snack, however, and now I was feeling absolutely fit for something big and substantial and satisfying.

Dinner, as it proved, was served at about nine o'clock, an hour later than usual, Freeman explained, owing to the exceptional circumstances. The dining-hall of the Manor House was a stately apartment, with polished oak beams crossing the ceiling. The whole place was modernised, though, and the work had been done well. But, to tell the honest truth—I'm a very truthful chap—I was a heap more interested in the grub than anything else.

There was plenty of grub, thank goodness, and it was all good grub. The dinner which was served, in fact, was absolutely A1. The table, long and well-filled, glittered with shining cutlery and silver plate. Overhead there were three sprays of electric lights, and they cast a brilliant glow downwards.

Electric light, you say! Impossible, in a little country place like Thirtle! But that's just where I say "Rats!" Because there was electric juice all over the blessed Manor House—in every giddy cupboard even.

Old Howard Freeman had been a go-ahead johnny, I can tell you. He'd had a whacking great dynamo, or motor-generator, or whatever it's called, installed in an outbuilding. This was driven by an oil-engine, and the result was—juice. Juice all over the house, just like Kensington. From the dining-room window the hum of the dynamo could just be heard.

Freeman sat at the head of the table, and the guv'nor and I opposite one another. The big window was wide open, and the blind right up—there weren't any rotten lighting restrictions then, thank goodness! A chap could leave his window-blind up without being spotted by a "special" and accused of being a German spy.

I had just got to that stage when one feels comfortable; when the grub, however good it is, doesn't seem to appeal to you any longer. Dinner, in fact, was nearly

over. We'd lingered rather long over it, Nelson Lee and Freeman talking on all manner of subjects.

And then, at that stage, something happened, something which was rather startling and certainly unexpected.

During a momentary lull in the conversation we all heard the frightened snort of a horse. We pricked up our ears, so to speak, and sat rigid, our eyes turned towards the window. Outside it was pitch dark, and as still as night on the desert.

Clearly, there came the sound of a man's hoarse shout, and then a sudden splintering crash. We were all on our feet by this time, and we rushed to the window. Upon the night air there arose a terrified scream—in a girl's voice! And then came running footsteps.

"By James! That sounds like Connie!" gasped Freeman amazedly.

He tumbled through the window, and we followed. And, out on the terrace, we almost ran into a slight figure which came rushing up.

"Who's that?" cried Freeman sharply.

"Oh, Howard—Howard! Save me!" exclaimed a frightened voice.

The next moment a girl had thrown herself into Howard's arms. Unfortunately, I wasn't on hand at the moment, or she might have thrown herself into mine. Without losing a second, we all hastened indoors. In the big lounge-hall there was plenty of light, and Nelson Lee switched on even more.

In Freeman's arms there was a girl of about eighteen. Not what you'd call a flapper; she was a bit too old for that, because her hair was up. But she was a jolly stunning girl, I could see, even though she was scared out of her wits. As pretty as a picture—and I'm a bit of a judge of feminine beauty.

"Oh, Howard!" she panted. "Such—such a terrible accident!"

"What happened, little girl?" demanded the owner of the Manor House. "And why are you here? I thought you were remaining in London, Connie, with aunt? You didn't wire that you were coming."

The girl sank into a chair.

"No, I meant to surprise you, Howard," she replied weakly. "Oh, what has happened?"

"That's what I want to know."

"I—I was going to hire a trap in the village—at the station," she said, looking at the guv'nor and I rather shyly—she'd just noticed we were present, and we were strangers to her, of course. "But I met

Bates at the station—he'd gone to fetch a parcel, I think."

"I know—I sent him," said Howard Freeman.

"It was fortunate, wasn't it?" asked Connie. "It was all right until we were coming up the drive, and—and then the horse suddenly stopped and became ever so frightened. Oh, ever so frightened, Howard! We couldn't see anything, but Bates jumped down, and I followed him."

"Well—well?"

"I don't know much more," faltered the girl, her cheeks very pale, and her eyes shining with strange fright. "But the horse suddenly bolted clean away, and—and I heard the trap smash to bits in the trees. I ran for all I was worth, and then I saw you."

"Why did you scream? What were you frightened of?"

"I—I don't know," said Connie Freeman simply. "I was just scared!"

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH I RUSH TO BRISTOL, AND THE GUV'NOR MAKES A GRAVE STATEMENT—AND IN WHICH WE SALLY OUT FOR A NIGHT INVESTIGATION, ENCOUNTER A BURKING OBJECT, AND CHASE IT THROUGH THE TREES FOR QUITE A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE.

HOWARD FREEMAN seemed rather impatient. He pulled at his sister's arm, and dragged her to her feet.

I don't suppose he'd have been so abrupt if she'd been somebody else's sister.

"You were just scared?" he repeated. "That's not very clear, Connie."

"Oh, do stop talking, Howard!" she exclaimed anxiously. "There's Bates out on the drive! He didn't follow me, did he? Something's happened to him—something awful, I know!"

"By Jove! I'd forgotten Bates!"

"Nipper and I will go!" exclaimed the guv'nor briskly. "I thought, from Miss Freeman's remarks, that Bates was with the horse. But we had better see what has taken place."

Nelson Lee strode out of the hall into the summer's night. And I followed him, although I was just telling myself what a really ripping girl Connie was. This was an unexpected pleasure. Life at the Manor House would be ever so much better with such a charming damsel on the premises.

The guv'nor and I plunged into the drive. Out in the open it had been dark, for there

was no moon, and the stars were a bit misty. But under the canopy of trees in the drive the darkness was Stygian—if that's the right word.

Nelson Lee, however, switched on his powerful electric torch, and I knew that his right hand was hovering near his automatic. What was it which had frightened the horse? The night was perfectly still, so a piece of paper couldn't have blown across the drive. Besides, horses don't usually take fright at a fluttering piece of paper. There was something else—something serious, I told myself.

The guv'nor suddenly gave a cry and ran forward.

Bates, the groom, was lying just against the trees, still and silent. He was huddled up in a queer attitude, and something seemed to jump in my throat. I half looked over my shoulder into the blackness behind me.

My very skin was tingling, and the roots of my hair seemed to bristle. Yet I wasn't a bit frightened. It was simply the knowledge that there was something mysterious here, something almost uncanny and unexplained. And the Unknown always makes a chap feel helpless and shaky.

The trees on this side of the drive, at this particular spot, were fairly far apart, and the horse had evidently swerved aside. For, against the chestnuts, about twenty yards in the park itself, I saw the trap, smashed and wrecked. The horse had bolted clean away.

Nelson Lee was bending over the unfortunate Bates.

"Is—is he dead, guv'nor?" I asked huskily.

"Help me to carry him to the house, young 'un," said the detective sharply. "No, he is not dead. But there is something amazing here. Look at his complexion, lad—look at his eyes. Bates is suffering from blood-poisoning!"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Just like the old man! This proves——"

"It proves nothing," said the guv'nor. "Come, take hold of his feet!"

We carried the unfortunate groom up the drive to the house. It was a stiff job, I can tell you, even with two of us. Carrying an inanimate human body is a heap harder than it sounds.

I couldn't help feeling as though something was about to spring out at me from among the trees. But we arrived at the house without having seen or heard a thing. And Bates was taken straight into a small reception-room and laid upon a couch. Here, Lee made a careful examination.

There was a wound upon Bates's left wrist—not much of a wound, either. The guv'nor seemed puzzled by it, and Freeman declared it was nothing like the little puncture which had been found on his father's arm. This wound was big—evidently a bite.

"Yes, it's blood-poisoning," said Nelson Leo gravely. "Fortunately, I have made a very careful study of poisons. I do not think there is a known poison which has not come under my notice. And it happens that I have my medicine-chest with me. I can administer an antidote which will save Bates's life."

"Thank goodness!" said Freeman fervently.

"Nipper, run upstairs and fetch—Phew!" the guv'nor broke off, and whistled.

"What's wrong?" asked our host.

"Is your motor-car in going order?" rapped out Nelson Lee.

"Yes. The puncture was repaired——"

"Good! Nipper, rush into Bristol with all speed," went on Lee crisply. "I have just remembered that my medicine-case is at the hotel. By an unfortunate chance I did not bring it here. Fetch it, young 'un—fetch it!"

That was enough for me.

I was off like a shot. Freeman, I could see, was dismayed, and he certainly had good reason to be. Bates's life hung in the balance, probably, and the antidote was not at hand.

Talk about speed! I've driven a motor-car a good bit, on and off, but I don't think I ever buzzed so much as I did on that journey.

Freeman rushed round with me to the garage, the guv'nor having told him that I could be trusted perfectly with the car. The young man had thought of accompanying me—driving, in fact—but that wouldn't have done. Speed was required.

We got the car out. It was a two-seater, and pretty powerful. There were two terrific head-lamps, and they cast a double beam of light ahead which would have made Eddystone feel kind of subdued and small. There being no lighting restrictions, as I mentioned before, it was not necessary to go about the country with a light which any ordinary humble candle could have surpassed with perfect ease.

Freeman saw me off, and saw, too, that I could handle the car perfectly. This isn't swank—it's just fact. I always was a bit of a nut at handling motor-cars. I knew exactly how to control it, too, because I'd used one of that make before.

I didn't think of "Elementals" and their kindred brethren—ghosts—as I shot down the drive. I was too jolly busy, and there wasn't time. I just streaked past the trees, and arrived at the gates in time to find old Melrose hobbling out of his lodge attracted, presumably, by the bright lights.

He yelled out something, but I didn't catch it. Inquiring what the crash had been, I supposed. Once out upon the road, I let the 'bus rip—absolutely went all out. And she could reach a cool forty-five, too! Of course, on bends and corners I slowed down considerably. But when I saw the road clear and straight, my name was S. F. Edge.

I arrived in Bristol like a whirlwind, and a couple of bobbies regarded me rather sternly as I pulled up in front of the hotel. I hadn't any time to attend to them, though. There little worries didn't concern me at all.

In about two ticks and a shake of a lamb's tail I was outside again, hugging the guv'nor's medicine-case. It was only a little affair, and most of the medicines were in tabloid form. Nelson Lee always carted it about with him in case of emergencies; a jolly fine idea, too.

I left Bristol as I had entered, and I passed the two bobbies again. This time they stared sternly, and yelled, too. I believe they told me to stop, but I wasn't in a mood to humour them. Bobbies are too jolly curious for my liking. They wanted to know my name, I suppose. Like their blessed cheek!

If anything, the return journey was quicker than the run out. This was because I knew the road better. The car ran without a hitch, without a mis-ère. It was as dark as pitch, but the air was hot and still. It was one of those quiet, sultry summer nights when people feel lazy and indolent.

At last I spotted the lodge, and I turned in sharply and smartly. Up the drive like a streak, and I pulled up outside the front door. As I scrambled out of the driving-seat the door opened, and a bright shaft of light shot out. Howard Freeman was there.

"You're not back!" he gasped.

"Oh, no, not at all!" I said, wiping the dust from my face. "This is my ghost, Mr. Freeman, and this is the ghost of the medicine-case. Haven't been long, have I? Your car is a scorcher!"

"Well, I'm hanged! You're a marvel!" declared Freeman. "Good thing you went alone! I shouldn't have done the double journey in the time."

"That's why the gov'nor told me to go," I said sweetly.

But it was silly to stand there, wasting time. I hurried in, and Nelson Lee took the medicine-case from me without a comment. He seemed to think it quite natural that I should return in such a short time. That's the worst of the gov'nor; he's always so jolly cool. Never shows surprise.

Well, he applied an antidote. I don't know what it was, because I was having a wash. But when I came down Nelson Lee was talking to Freeman and his sister. They were all looking rather serious.

"Thank's to Nipper's wonderful promptness, I believe the man's life will be saved," the gov'nor was saying. "If I had only had the antidote handy half an hour ago, I don't suppose Bates would have suffered. He would have been about as usual to-morrow. As it is, the poison has entered his blood seriously."

"Is he in danger, Mr. Lee?" asked Connie—who, of course, had been introduced.

"Perhaps I had better say that the danger is grave," replied Lee. "Bates will be unconscious all to-night and probably part of to-morrow. When he recovers his senses, I shall be better able to make a definite statement."

"Don't you think we ought to send for Dr. Wharton?" asked Connie anxiously.

"It is really unnecessary," was the gov'nor's reply. "The doctor would be unable to improve upon my methods. Without boasting, I think I can say that I know more of poisons and their treatment than the average country practitioner. If Bates shows signs of a fatal relapse, then have the doctor by all means. But I think I shall pull him through all right. He is better already."

"We will trust to you, Mr. Lee," said Freeman. "Don't you worry your little head, Connie. Bates will get well."

"But what happened to him?" asked the girl perplexedly.

"Yes, gov'nor, what was he poisoned by?" I put in. "What is the poison? You've recognised it, of course, else you couldn't have applied an antidote."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, Nipper, I have recognised the poison," he said slowly.

We were standing in the dining-room, and the electric lights shone fully upon the gov'nor's face. It was set and grave, and quite immobile. He didn't betray any of his thoughts.

"And what is it, Mr. Lee?" inquired

Freeman curiously. "The poison, I mean?"

"I prefer not to say."

"Oh! Why not?" asked Connie. "Do tell us!"

Nelson Lee smiled, and shook his head.

"At present I do not feel justified in making any statement," he exclaimed smoothly. "I am sorry, Miss Freeman, but you must forgive me. The whole thing is so extraordinary—my conclusions are so amazing and startling—that I really cannot voice what is in my mind. I would do so willingly if I had some concrete evidence in my hands. But I have nothing—nothing at all! When that evidence is obtained, I will be quite frank."

"Then—then it's really awful?" asked the girl with big eyes.

"Please do not pursue the subject," was all Nelson Lee replied.

And so it was dropped, but we were all a tremendous lot more curious than ever. After a bit the gov'nor took Freeman aside. I was near by, and I heard what he said to our host.

"Look here, Freeman, your sister came unexpectedly, didn't she?" said Lee. "Well, it's rather a pity she came, for I fear there is sinister work afoot. She cannot be sent away, but you must keep her indoors."

"You can rely on me," declared Freeman promptly. "Connie sha'n't go out—I'll see to that. Not that she'd care, anyhow."

"Watch over her carefully," urged the gov'nor. "And take care of yourself, my dear fellow. I advise you to remain indoors, too. No, I sha'n't go into reasons. Just take heed of my words."

"I'll cart her off to the billiard-room," said Freeman. "A game will keep her busy until bed-time, and she'll cool down a bit, perhaps. She's an excitable little beggar, and she's all upside down now. Perhaps you'll come, too?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No. Nipper and I are going out," he replied. "We are going to make a little investigation. Don't be alarmed—we shall look after ourselves all right. I don't suppose we shall be more than half an hour. You take Miss Freeman into the billiard-room, as you proposed. It is an excellent idea."

Freeman walked over to his sister. Like his nerve to call her an "excitable little beggar!" Just as if he'd been talking of a boy. But brothers are always incapable of seeing their sisters' beauty and daintiness. I thought Connie was simply ripping. One

of the sweetest girls I'd ever met. I was rather disappointed at not going to the billiard-room, too.

On the whole, though, it was better to go with the gov'nor. I'd be able to enjoy Connie's company on the morrow, in the full daylight. So far as I could see, this danger which threatened the Manor House was only in evidence at night.

Nelson Lee grabbed hold of my arm as I was looking at Connie, and pulled me to the open window. Then he jerked my face round.

"You'll be able to admire Miss Freeman to-morrow, young 'un," he said easily.

I believed I blushed.

"I—I wasn't looking."

"Well, never mind that, you young rascal," went on the gov'nor. "There's work to be done. Have you got your electric torch? Is it in good order?"

"Yes—to both questions, sir," I replied.

"Your revolver?"

"In my hip-pocket."

"Good! We're going out into the park, Nipper. I don't suppose we shall find anything; but we might. And it is necessary for us to be absolutely on the alert, and for us to be prepared for any emergency."

I looked at him curiously.

"What's the danger, gov'nor?" I asked.

"I only hope you will not encounter it," he replied gravely. "No, Nipper, I am not going to enlighten you. For one thing, I may be quite wrong in my surmise—and that would alarm you needlessly—and, for another thing, I shall be with you. If there is any danger we shall encounter it together."

It was rotten, of course, but what could I do?

I couldn't make the gov'nor tell me what was in his mind—the Prime Minister couldn't. But Nelson Lee was "startled and amazed," he said. There was something jolly wrong somewhere; that was evident.

It was late now, and the park was dark and tremendously silent. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. Overhead the sky was sort of misty, and the stars were almost hidden. It was a sultry, thundery kind of night.

We walked across the well-kept lawn, striking off towards the drive. There were big lawns on both sides of the house. In the front of the building there was a wide expanse of gravel, narrowing to the drive.

The lawn we had emerged upon faced the dining-room, and this side of the house was usually brilliantly lit up, as now. For the billiard room was there, too. On the other side of the house was the room which had been the dead man's library, and a big conservatory partially hid the out-building in which the electric juice plant was installed. Nearly always this part of the house was in darkness, and the trees of the park were fairly close to the house.

Nelson Lee and I struck off into the drive, and I must admit that I felt a little thrill run through me as we plunged into the inky darkness of that grim avenue. But with the gov'nor beside me it was astonishing how confident I felt. Nelson Lee absolutely inspires a chap with confidence, somehow.

"What are we going to look for, gov'nor?" I whispered.

"Hush! Talk as little as possible, Nipper," commanded the detective. "We are not looking for anything—we are just making an examination. It is my intention to examine the spot where the trap overturned—or, rather, the spot where poor Bates was found."

I didn't make any further inquiries. We walked on softly, our feet making no noise upon the grass which bordered the drive. I heard an owl hooting somewhere in the distance, and all sorts of insects were lively near at hand.

Under ordinary circumstances I should thoroughly have enjoyed that walk. But a fellow can't feel very comfortable when there's an uncanny feeling of danger in the air. What was the thing which threatened us?

What was it which had so scared old Melrose?

What was it which had attacked Bates after the horse had bolted?

I couldn't possibly think of any likely explanation. It was a baffling mystery to me. Yet, from what the gov'nor had said, I had an idea that he wasn't in such a fog as I.

Arriving at the spot where the horse had taken fright—about three hundred yards down the drive—we came to a halt for a moment. Then, without flashing his torch, Nelson Lee stepped between the trees and made for the spot where the trap had overturned; or, to be exact, where the trap had been caught between a couple of trees and badly smashed.

I was just about to whisper something when I received an unholy start.

All of a sudden there was a crackling

of twigs quite near at hand, and I actually felt my hair rise on end. Instinctively my hand scooted round to my hip-pocket, and the next second my automatic was in my fist.

"Look out, guv'nor!" I gasped.

But there was no need for us to look out. For it struck me with a certain feeling of amazement that the unknown thing we had disturbed was making away from us, and not coming to the attack. We heard the twigs crackling in the heart of the belt of trees.

"After it, Nipper!" rapped out Lee sharply.

I was excited now, and we both pelted forward for all we were worth. Lee was using his torch now, and we made splendid progress. But for that torch we should not have been able to proceed very quickly, for the trees grew thickly and there were nasty prickly bushes all over the place.

Using the light, however, we dodged 'em, pausing now and again to listen. Always ahead, we could hear the crackling of twigs; the thing was keeping its distance, at all events.

Nelson Lee put on a spurt, and I wasn't to be outdone. I kept up with him with a bit of an effort, for the guv'nor's a marvellous runner, and his knowledge of woodcraft would surprise a Zulu.

He was following the track of the fugitive unerringly. The strong light from the torch clearly showed the torn and broken bushes and trampled grass. The trail, being absolutely smoking hot, as it were, was quite clear.

Pausing again we heard nothing.

"The rotten thing's got away!" I gasped.

"I don't think so, Nipper—I don't think so!" exclaimed Lee tensely.

He started forward as he spoke. It happened that I had paused and bent down to fish out a prickly lump of twig from my shoe. It had been giving me what-ho for some little time. So when I started forward again Nelson Lee was about twenty yards ahead of me.

This state of affairs wouldn't do at all, and so I put on a two hundred horse-power burst of speed. But I think the guv'nor must have put on a five hundred horse-power burst of speed, because I couldn't catch him up.

I could see his light shining between the trees. Suddenly it came to a stop, and remained steady. Then, as I came plunging up, I heard Nelson Lee give vent to a breathless laugh.

And there he stood shining his electric

torch full upon a roughly attired man who was palpably and obviously nothing more nor less than a common or garden poacher! We'd been running like the very dickens after some confounded local character who was simply out for a night's spree.

After expecting something absolutely startling, this was scarcely to be borne calmly. I was not only disgusted; I was simply fed-up to the neck, and glared at the poor chap as though he'd done me a personal injury.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH MR. EDWARD BECKETT RELATES AN INTERESTING STORY CONCERNING A STRANGE FURRY, MIS-SHAPEN OBJECT, AND IN WHICH I ENCOUNTER THE ABOVE-MENTIONED OBJECT, WITH SURPRISING RESULTS.

AS a matter of absolute fact, the poacher gentleman had done me a personal injury; for my legs were scratched, and my hands were torn. And all because the guv'nor and I had thought that we were on the track of something interesting.

The man was quite breathless, and had sought shelter beneath a thick bush. He'd probably thought that we should dash past him. Which only proved that he didn't know Nelson Lee.

"Come, my man, who are you, and what are you doing in this park?" asked the detective sternly. "I fully understand why you led us such a chase—you naturally did not want to be captured. But we do not intend to harm you."

The fellow looked quite frightened. I wasn't surprised at that, for he couldn't see us at all, although he was as clearly visible as though it were broad daylight. This was because we both concentrated our torches upon his cowering figure; while we, of course, were obscured from him by the glare in his eyes.

He was a man of about forty-five, I should judge, with a scrubby chin and a good-natured cast of expression. His eyes gleamed like those of a frightened rabbit, and his breath came and went in gasps.

"You—you ain't Mr. Freeman?" he growled at last.

"No, I am a friend who is staying with Mr. Freeman," replied Lee. "But tell me, my man, what you were doing in this park? If you give me a satisfactory explanation, I will let you go."



"The horrible thing was just behind me all the while——."
(See p. 20.)

"You know what I was a-doin', sir," replied the man sullenly. "After a few rabbits, that's all. You ain't goin' to charge me for that, are y'r? You ain't goin' to lock me up and fetch the police —"

"My good fellow, that would be too much trouble altogether," interjected the guv'nor pleasantly. "You were doing a little poaching, eh? Well, there's nothing particularly criminal in that. You needn't be afraid of me on that score."

"You ain't goin' to give me away, guv'nor?"

"Of course not. As a matter of fact, my friend and I were under the impression that we were chasing something quite different. We were not after you at all, my friend. So you needn't be alarmed."

"Wot was you after?" asked the fellow quickly.

"Really, I do not see how that concerns you."

"My name's Ned Beckett, sir," went on the man, rising to his feet. "It ain't often I plays this sorter game, but I like a bit of fun once in a way."

"Profitable fun, eh?" suggested the guv'nor. "Well, it's not for me to inform against you, Mr. Beckett. I don't suppose Mr. Freeman would be hard on you in any case. You can go your way now, but I naturally insist upon your leaving this property. To tell you the truth, you will be wiser to do so."

Ned Beckett seemed strangely uneasy.

"Why, what's wrong with the property, sir?" he asked. "And wot was you a-chasin' just now—I mean, wot did you think you was a-chasin'?"

Nelson Lee did not reply for a moment, and the fellow went on.

"You said as how this park wasn't safe?" he asked. "Leastways, you said as how I should be wise to leave it. I reckon you're right, sir. There's things among these 'ere trees wot common men don't know of. There's—danger!"

Nelson Lee and I looked at one another curiously. What did this man know?

"What do you mean—danger?" I asked bluntly.

"That's wot I sez," replied Ned Beckett. "I was lyin' in that old thicket, real scared, when I 'eard you gents. Lummy! I thought as 'ow it was—— Any'ow, I hooked it."

"You thought it was what?" asked Nelson Lee. "Come, Beckett, don't beat about the bush. What have you seen in this wood? It appears that we have been at cross purposes. We thought we were

chasing—something else, and you thought you were being chased by—something else."

"That's it, sir, ezackly."

"Well, speak out, my man."

Ned Beckett could see his questioners now, because I held my torch sideways. And he saw that we were two highly respectable-looking individuals, and not at all fearsome. And the poacher's confidence returned to him.

"You'll let me go?" he asked gruffly.

"Certainly. We have no use for you, Mr. Beckett."

"An' you won't let on to the p'lice as you found me 'ere——"

"Tut-tut! Of course, we won't!" said Lee impatiently.

"Right you are, guv'nor, I takes your word—you look a decent sort," said the poacher frankly. "I've been right scared to-night, and glad I'll be to get out of this plantation—without your orders. I've—seen things."

"Yes?"

"Things as wasn't 'uman," said Mr. Beckett grimly. "Leastways, one thing. One's enough for me, too. It was about an hour ago, sir. I was lyin' in cover, gettin' some nets ready, when I seemed to 'ear something comin' towards me."

"My hat!" I ejaculated. "What was it?"

"Hush, Nipper. Let Beckett tell his own story," said the guv'nor gently.

I could tell that Nelson Lee was greatly excited inwardly. I knew the signs. Nobody could tell that he was excited, because he never displayed any emotion. But he was fairly eager to hear the poacher's yarn. But his gentleness and smoothness of voice gave me the tip. The guv'nor was pleased, too.

"I 'eard something comin' towards me," repeated Beckett. "I thought it was one of the Manor House servants, o' course. So I lay low, and waited. It was dark, o' course, but I'd bin out for a couple of hours, and my eyes was used to the gloom. I've got good eyes, sir."

"I don't doubt you, Beckett."

"No, sir. Well, I was lyin' low when I saw something come between two of the trees. I saw directly as 'ow it was—different. It weren't 'uman, sir, I'll stake my life on it. And it weren't no ordinary animal, neither."

"What was the thing-like, then?"

"No higher than a man, sir, but thick—terribly thick, and I couldn't see no particular shape. It was just like a big blob o' shapelessness," said Ned Beckett, look-

ing over his shoulder nervously. "It fair makes me creep to think of it! An' there was 'air all over it."

"Hair?" I asked.

"Well, fur" replied the poacher. "So it seemed—fur. It was covered wi' fur all over, an' its 'ead was nigh as big as its body. Its 'ead was a terrible size. It weren't no Henglish hanimal, that I'll swear."

"Did you see this distinctly?" asked Nelson Lee.

"There was a bit of a clearin' there, sir," replied the man. "This—this 'ere thing crossed it, and went between the trees on the other side. I saw it as distinct as the darkness would let me. Anyhow, I'll swear to the shape and the fur. I couldn't see no face."

"Shapeless—head of abnormal size—furry!" murmured Nelson Lee. "Dear me! This is extraordinary! Are you positive of all this, Beckett? You—pardon my frankness—you haven't been drinking?"

"Not a drop, governor," said Beckett, with a forced grin. "I can drink my quart wi' the best man, but not when I'm out on a job like this 'ere. I 'aven't touched a mug since this mornin'. An' I'm real positive, sir. That there thing I see was enough to scare a hangel!"

There was a short silence. I could see that Nelson Lee was plainly puzzled. He was no longer excited. A slight frown upon his brow told me that Beckett's story did not tally with his own theory. There was som thing wrong somewhere.

"An' you thought you was chasin' this self-same monster, sir?" asked the poacher curiously.

"Yes," replied Lee. "We certainly did not think we were on the track of a more commonplace poacher. You'd better get away while you are safe, Beckett. And I shouldn't advise you to poach on this property again."

"Never agin, sir—an' that's gospel!" declared Beckett.

"You have told me everything you know?"

"Yes, sir."

"I presume you have been here before?" The man grinned.

"Times enough, sir."

"And have you never seen anything unusual before?"

"Never once, sir."

"Very well. You'd better take yourself off, Beckett. Get out of this wood by the shortest cut—and go carefully."

The fellow muttered a "good-night,

gents," and then disappeared into the trees. He was obviously pleased to get off so easily. I stood looking at Nelson Lee in silence.

"But we were not chasing this extraordinary monster, Nipper," murmured the gov'nor. "I am puzzled—I admit it."

"What are we after, then?" I demanded. "Look here, sir, it's rotten of you to keep me in the dark. Be a sport and tell me what you've got in your noddle. Was it this furry thing which frightened the horse—and which bit Bates?"

"I don't know, Nipper," replied the detective. "To be frank, I am completely at a loss. And as for telling you of my suspicions, I shall certainly not do so at this juncture. My theory has received a jar—a nasty jar."

"Perhaps Beckett was spinning a yarn?" I suggested.

"No; he has seen som thing strange. His imagination may have carried him a little beyond the actual truth, but he was sincere enough," replied the gov'nor. "I know when a man is lying to me. Beckett was scared out of his wits—and he is a man, I should judge, who is afraid of nothing human."

I scratched my head.

"Furry, with a big head, and without any particular shape!" I said. "Sounds like a conundrum, doesn't it, sir? By jupiter—a gorilla! That's it, for a quid! A gorilla or an orang-outang—"

"No, no, Nipper!" snapped Nelson Lee impatiently. "Nothing of the sort!"

I came to a stop, abashed and literally squashed.

"I thought I'd got it, sir," I said meekly.

"My dear lad, I didn't mean to be snappy," said the gov'nor kindly. "You are doing your best, I know. But I was thinking, and your suggestion sounded rather absurd to me. A gorilla, you say? Have you ever heard of a gorilla with a head half as large as its body? It would be the opposite, if anything; I mean, a gorilla's head is small in comparison to its body."

"But this might be a different sort," I suggested lamely.

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"No, young 'un. You are on the wrong track. Gorilla's don't poison their victims, do they? Old Howard Freeman was found dead upon the drive—poisoned," he said quietly. "Remember that. There was a tiny puncture upon his arm—remember that also. Did a gorilla inflict that poison puncture?"

"No—o, I suppose not," I exclaimed.

"Of course not. And Bates—what of Bates? His case was totally different," went on Lee. "That is what makes this case so complex. The groom was bitten, Nipper, clearly bitten—but not by a gorilla. And there is Melrose's story to bear in mind, too."

"Oh, crumbs! I'm getting fogged!"

"I don't blame you, young 'un. But we shall clear the fog away sooner or later, I am sure. And now we had better get back. I think we'll abandon our original idea of examining the ground where Bates fell. We'll leave it until the morning. I am glad, however, that we came to-night, for, if we had remained indoors, we should have missed Beckett's remarkable story."

We started back, Lee going on ahead. I think I should have preferred to be ahead, but I didn't suggest it. I had a feeling that something big and furry was going to spring out upon me from behind, and for the life of me I couldn't prevent myself glancing back every moment or so.

It was a rotten feeling, and I should be jolly glad when we got indoors. Not that I'm a funk—I'd like to meet the chap who says I am!—but the mysterious nature of the whole business had got on my nerves.

Poison—a strange monster—and all the rest of it. Things didn't fit at all. It was like one of those beastly jig-saw puzzles which won't fit together. And the more a chap wrestled with it, the worse it became."

It must have been past midnight, now. I'm not sure, because I didn't look at my watch. But it felt late to me. And the air was as hot as ever. I was perspiring all over from the effect of that chase, and my clothes were sticking to me uncomfortably. A cold bath is what I wanted most.

I promised myself a long fizzy drink when we got in. And I remembered, incidentally, that I hadn't had that fizzy drink which the guv'nor had proposed on the balcony of the hotel in Bristol.

That seemed ages ago—yet it was scarcely nine hours!

It was rather curious that I should have been thinking about a gargle at that particular time. I was as thirsty as a salt fish, and my tongue felt quite dry. And then I heard a kind of trickle. A tiny little brooklet, no bigger than a couple of feet wide, wandered through the trees.

Nelson Lee stepped over it and continued his way—thinking, I suppose, that I was following. I daren't call to him, for silence was necessary. We'd both been walking like cats, to tell the truth.

But I didn't follow immediately—not me!

I bent down and scooped up some water in my two hands and carried it to my mouth. My word! Didn't it go down beautifully, too. A few stray bits of weed or a few insects may have gone down beautifully, too. But I couldn't see, and I was too jolly thirsty to care.

The water was as cool as ice, and delightfully fresh. I had about a pint, and then decided that I'd delayed long enough. When I stood up and listened I couldn't hear a sound of Nelson Lee.

I was alone in the wood.

To say that I was nervous wouldn't be correct. I wasn't nervous; but I felt a wee bit uneasy, and I won't deny it. Of course, the guv'nor was only a few yards ahead—but those yards seemed miles to me. I should have felt more comfortable in a Brazilian forest.

I hurried on, and then suddenly paused.

Somehow, I felt—absolutely felt—that I wasn't alone!

Looking sharply to the right I thought I detected something black against a tree. It was just black, and it moved a bit. I couldn't see any particular shape. Was it fancy? My nerves, perhaps—Anyhow, I switched on the light, to make sure. Under the trees, this was permissible.

Even as the bright beam of light shot out from my torch, a harsh, terrifying snarl went up into the air. I just caught a vision of something covered with fur—something which it was impossible to recognise. And it was grey—a dirty, ghastly grey.

Then the torch was torn from my hand, and everything was dark. I felt my heart leap tremendously, but I had the presence of mind to lunge out. It was the instinct of self-preservation, I suppose.

My fingers encountered some coarse, rough fur—and it was stone cold! This, alone, made me shudder. Cold! I clutched some of the fur, and I felt it tear in my grip.

Then I pelted away.

I admit it freely—I scooted for all I was worth. I was frightened—who would not have been? And I dashed through the trees madly and frantically, feeling that the horrible thing was just behind me all the while.

And then I came out upon the drive.

The open space of the narrow roadway seemed heavenly after the confined wood. I whipped out my automatic, and cocked it. Then I twisted round and stood still. I could fight now that I had elbow room.

But there was nothing to fight.

All was quiet; not a sound came to me except my own panting breath. And I felt that there was something in my left hand. Gazing down I saw several coarse, long hairs. I unclutched my fingers with disgust—but then remembered.

"The guv'nor will want 'em!" I muttered breathlessly.

Those hairs told me, at least, that I had not imagined the incident. And just then I saw a dim form emerge upon the drive about twenty yards further up. Just for one second I thought it was the thing, and I levelled my revolver.

Then, with a gulp, I recognised the guv'nor's figure. I ran up to him, and he caught hold of my arm.

"Why did you stay behind, Nipper?" he asked sternly. "Was that you I heard dashing through the trees?"

"I nearly potted you, sir!" I gasped. And as we walked up to the house I told him what had happened. I couldn't describe the monster because I hadn't seen it. But I knew that it was furry, and grey—and cold. Ned Beckett hadn't told us a faked yarn.

"What a pity I wasn't there," said Nelson Lee regretfully. "The pair of us might have overpowered this unknown. It seems that the brute was lurking in the undergrowth and watched me pass. Thinking that I was quite alone, it came out—followed me, probably—and then you came along and surprised it."

"I've kept the hairs, sir," I said shakily.

"Good lad! Don't drop them. I shall be greatly interested in them as soon as we get indoors," said Lee. "Buck up, Nipper, we're still alive. There's a strange and sinister mystery surrounding the Manor House, but we'll wrest the heart from it, never fear."

I breathed a sigh of relief as we entered the house. It seemed a wonderful haven of refuge to me after my experience. In the brilliant light of the lounge-hall Nelson Lee regarded me critically.

"You're looking a bit white, young 'un," he said. "I am not surprised in the least. From what you tell me you must have experienced—— Hallo, Freeman, we're back, you see."

Howard Freeman had entered the hall.

"I'd begun to get anxious, Mr. Lee," he said. "My sister has gone up to bed, and I was squatting in the library, smoking. Bates seems a little better, I believe. I shouldn't be surprised if he recovers consciousness before long."

"I'll examine him shortly," said the detective. "That wound of his must be re-dressed to-night. For the moment, however, I am interested in Master Nipper here. He has had an exciting adventure."

"Ye gods! You've discovered something, then?" asked Freeman eagerly.

"I should think we have!" I said, feeling miles better already. "Shall I tell Mr. Freeman, guv'nor?"

"Yes, Nipper, and save me the trouble. I will go into the other room and attend to poor Bates," said Nelson Lee. "Oh, and give me those hairs."

"Hairs?" said our host curiously.

I now saw that there were ten or twelve coarse grey hairs in my hand. I gave them up to the guv'nor, and he went off with them. Before I did anything—before I explained a thing to Freeman—I went and had a good wash.

Then I descended to the dining-room, and found Freeman standing on the hearthrug puffing at a cigar. I just told him everything, and he listened with open-mouthed wonder. I didn't tell him the poacher's name, for that wasn't necessary. And it might have got the man into trouble. He'd been useful to us, after all.

"Well, it beats me, Nipper," said Freeman blankly.

"Me, too," I said. "What could that rotten thing have been? It wasn't a gorilla, or any member of his tribe—I'll swear to that now. There's nothing on this earth I can liken it to. And it was cold, Mr. Freeman, cold!"

Before he could reply the door opened, and Nelson Lee entered. There was an expression of curious gravity upon the famous detective's face. We looked at him with expectation in our eyes.

"I have two amazing statements to make," he said quietly.

"I'm past being surprised, sir," I said. "What are they?"

"The first is concerning the hairs you succeeded in wrenching from our mysterious visitor in the park," replied Nelson Lee. "Those hairs, Nipper, I have discovered, were torn from—a dead skin!"

Freeman and I stared.

"And my second statement is in regard to Bates," went on the guv'nor, before we could say anything. "While dressing the wound I examined it with more intentness than before, and I have come to one terrible conclusion. The wound was caused by—human teeth!"

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH, AFTER A LULL, THE GUV'NOR AND FREEMAN ENTER UPON A CONSPIRACY TO KEEP ME IN THE DARK, WHICH THEY DO SUCCESSFULLY UNTIL AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY IS MADE, AND LEE'S SURPRISING RUSE IS REVEALED TO ME.

I STARED at Nelson Lee, and my heart seemed to cease beating for a second. What had the guv'nor been saying?

The hairs had been torn from a dead skin! Bates's wound had been caused by human teeth! And Bates was poisoned—poisoned by a bite from a human being.

No, it was impossible!

In those fleeting seconds terrible thoughts surged through my brain. I simply could not help myself thinking of my former reference to "Elementals"—whatever they happen to be. I don't know, exactly, but I've read about 'em. I believe they're supposed to be phantasms of the dead; only they are half alive, or half materialised, to be more exact. A lot of tommy rot of course. Sheer piffle. All the same, I felt a queer little shiver pass down my spine.

I once read a story about a phantasm of that kind. It was a horrible monster, with a big head, and was grey all over, and its face was half human, and like nothing else on earth. I remember I laughed at the ghost story uproariously, and chucked the book over the other side of the room.

But what had Nelson Lee been saying? Didn't these facts seem to tally with the supposed facts in that absurd yarn? An Elemental, of course, would be dead although capable of dealing death—at least, that's how I understand it. And the hairs had come from the dead skin! The thing I had seen had been grey, and it had seemed like something from another world—something appallingly horrible. And Bates's wound had been caused by human teeth. This thing—this ghastly horror which haunted the drive—was a phantasm of the—

"Rats!" I said loudly.

My voice seemed to shake the preposterous feeling of nervousness from me, and I cast the whole job-lot of absurdities from my mind. Elemental! Rot and rubbish! Such things only exist in the minds of spiritualists and other mad idiots of the same tribe. Thank goodness, I was level-headed!

"What is the matter, Nipper?" asked Freeman, turning to me.

"Nun—nothing!" I stammered.

"And my statements are true, young 'un," put in the guv'nor severely. "It is not respectful to say 'Rats' to me in that way."

"I—I didn't say 'Rats' to you, sir," I gasped. "I said it to myself, for having such idiotic thoughts."

Only a few seconds had passed since Nelson Lee had entered the room, and so it seemed as though I had mentioned rodents in response to the guv'nor's statement. Which was unfortunate; I hadn't meant to speak aloud, at all.

"Oh, so your thoughts were idiotic, Nipper?" said Lee pleasantly. "So idiotic that you throw them aside as preposterous? What were they?"

"I—I was thinking of what you said, guv'nor," I replied. "How the dickens can those hairs have been torn from a dead skin? The thing was as alive as I am! And how can Bates have been bitten by anything human? A man can't poison another man by biting him!"

"It's infernally queer," said Howard Freeman uneasily.

Nelson Lee came across the room and squatted down in a big arm-chair. I had expected him to be worried and troubled. But he was as cool as ice, and evidently in the best of good humours. He lit a cigarette, and smiled at me with a really delightful expression of satisfaction.

"Have—have you discovered anything, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Nothing beyond what I have told you, my dear Nipper."

"Then have you guessed—"

"I don't guess, young 'un," he interrupted, blowing out a puff of smoke into my face, which wasn't exactly polite of him. "Guesswork is always unsatisfactory. But I have certainly pieced things together in my mind, and this mystery is becoming disentangled."

"Hanged if I can see it!" growled Freeman.

"Nor I!" was my comment.

"There is danger—grave danger," went on Lee. "But I am convinced that I know the true state of affairs. And I can, accordingly, take certain measures to combat the evil. Your father was murdered, Freeman—he was certainly murdered."

Howard Freeman clenched his fists.

"I knew it!" he cried. "I knew it, Mr. Lee! But how—by what means?"

"Poison, as you know."

"Yes, but how was it administered?"

"You will oblige me by refraining from asking questions," said the guv'nor

smoothly. "You will know all in good time. And you must promise me, Freeman, that you will remain indoors after dark; or, at least, that you will not venture in the direction of the drive, or upon the lawns. There is terrible danger. And your sister, of course, comes under the same restrictions."

"Prisoners in our own house, eh?" growled Freeman.

"Exactly."

"That's simply rotten!"

"I agree with you, my dear fellow. But you have no wish to share your father's fate, have you?" asked Nelson Lee. "Tell me, did your father ever make any bitter enemy? Was there any man who ever threatened his life?"

"You're implying that there's somebody lurking about here."

"Never mind what I imply. Please answer my question."

"My father wasn't exactly popular about here," said Freeman. "But it amounted to nothing, after all. Certainly, nobody hated him. When he died everybody was genuinely sorry."

"And who benefits by his will?"

Howard Freeman stared.

"Why, I do, mostly," he replied. "Connie and I."

"Nobody else?"

"Not a soul. Good heavens!" gasped Freeman. "If you prove that the pater was murdered it will seem as though I killed him."

Nelson Lee laughed, and took Freeman's arm.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "You're not that sort. I should have known at once if you'd had a finger in the pie. There's somebody else, Freeman, and it is obvious to me that you and Miss Freeman are in considerable danger. This enemy, whoever he is, means to make a clean sweep. Suppose—horrible thought!—that you and your sister perished? Who would inherit the property?"

The young man stared wonderingly.

"There's nobody—except—except an uncle of mine," he said. "And Uncle Dave wouldn't— Good gracious, Lee, it's silly to think of it. My uncle's one of the best chaps in the world, and he's a tea merchant in Ceylon. He's worth pretty nearly half-a-million. I'm a pauper compared to him."

"Then we can set Uncle Dave aside once and for all," smiled Lee. "Suppose we all go to bed? We've had enough excitement for one evening. To-morrow we will make certain plans."

And the gov'nor wouldn't say any more. I knew that he was satisfied with the way the investigation was going, though. Personally, I couldn't see daylight anywhere, and I thought it was pretty rotten of him not to take me into his confidence. I told him so, too, but he only grinned, and said that I'd know everything in good time.

The next morning we were up in good time, and we went and had a gorgeous dip in the river which lay at the rear of the Manor House. The day was lovely, the sun shining from a cloudless sky, and with a gentle breeze blowing through the trees. One of those summer days which are absolutely perfect.

As we were returning to the house, all wet-haired and dishevelled, we met Miss Freeman, of course. She was looking lovely in a flimsy muslin sort of dress, all white. White shoes and stockings, too. Her hair was dark brown, and she didn't wear any hat. She was "some" girl, and I realised what a howling rotter the chap must be who was trying to kill her. For I guessed, now, that the attack, on the trap on the previous night had been directed at Connie, and not Bates at all. In the darkness the would-be murderer had made a bit of a bloomer somehow.

Talking of Bates, too, reminds me.

After breakfast the gov'nor and I went to see him. He was ever so much better, and was quite conscious. Lee's treatment had been a stunning success, and it wasn't necessary to bother the local doctor at all.

His arm was a bit swollen, but he didn't suffer much pain. And the yarn he told tallied exactly with the facts; except for one thing. According to Bates, the horse had become frightened, and while he was standing at its head, something—something black and big and long—had dropped from the branches of a great tree.

At the same second the horses bolted, and Bates was knocked flying, being caught by one of the dash-boards. As he lay on the ground he was attacked by a furry object—my friend of the previous night, of course. Bates had felt the fur, and had attempted to struggle. Then the thing had bitten him, and had rushed off.

That's all Bates remembered.

During the day he got better and better, and by evening he was able to walk about as usual. Nelson Lee, however, wouldn't let him leave the house. He didn't want any rumours to spread about. The

servants, too, had been told to say nothing to calling tradesmen.

We spent the day splendidly. During the morning the four of us—Nelson Lee, Freeman, Connie and I—had a ripping game of tennis, and the afternoon was spent even more delightfully. For I took Connie for a row up the river in a perfectly cunning little skiff. She was a lovely girl, and I enjoyed myself hugely.

But there was grim work to do after dark.

While Freeman and his sister remained indoors, the gov'nor and I kept watch upon the drive. We were three solid hours out in the darkness, and then a slight thunderstorm came on. So we went indoors, and nothing had happened.

The next day was the same, and the next and the next.

The holiday was splendid, but the week passed without a single recurrence of the singular night happenings. Bates was well by this time, his arm as good as healed. And Nelson Lee wasn't at all satisfied.

"The unknown enemy has ceased his efforts," he said one morning, as he and Freeman and I stood on the terrace in the shade. "Why? I am convinced that your life is in danger, Freeman. Why has this lull come about?"

"Because you and I are here, sir?" I suggested brightly.

"Exactly, Nipper—exactly! That is the precise reason. Because you and I are here," replied the gov'nor smoothly. "And while we remain here, the enemy will remain in cover. It is his intention to lie low until we have gone. Then he will have everything his own way."

"D'you mean you're going, Mr. Lee?" asked Freeman gloomily.

"Yes, this afternoon," was Lee's reply. "Tell all the servants that we are going, Freeman. Make it known to all."

"Oh, I say, that's rotten, you know!" protested Freeman.

"But you need not tell anybody that Nipper and I shall return," went on Nelson Lee calmly.

"Return?" asked Freeman quickly. "Oh! You mean——"

"I mean that it will be a wise plan to trick our unknown enemy," said Lee. "If we go this afternoon he will almost certainly make a bold attempt to attain his grim object to-night, especially if everything seems in his favour. We shall take care that everything is in his favour, Freeman. Nipper and I will leave the Manor House this afternoon; but we shall return secretly after dark, by a devious

route. And our presence must not be made known to a living soul."

"Not even to little Con?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Freeman may know of the arrangement."

"I should think so!" I exclaimed. "She'll keep mum enough—she's a ripping girl! Oh, here she is!" I added, as a vision in pink flimsy stuff came out of the conservatory. "I say, Miss Freeman!"

She came up to us, and listened seriously as the gov'nor told her what was mooted. She was delighted with the plan, and wanted to know if she could help. But Nelson Lee smilingly shook his head, and told her that there was too much danger in the enterprise.

I went upstairs to pack, for it was necessary to do the thing thoroughly. I went to the window once, and saw the gov'nor and Freeman in solemn conclave. What were they jawing about? Evidently it was an important discussion.

When I saw Lee again, I asked him what the jabber-talky had been about; but he simply said that I should know by eleven o'clock, perhaps before. That's the way the gov'nor treats me. Disgusting, I call it! I believe he does it on purpose, just to make me riled.

We went off in state after luncheon, Bates thanking Nelson Lee profusely for healing him so quickly. I believe Bates regarded the detective as a kind of magician. The wound had certainly healed quickly.

We tipped him, and tipped Melrose, too. The old jossar touched his cap until he nearly knocked it off, and then we buzzed off. We were in Freeman's car, and we were deposited at the station. Oh, the thing was done properly. We even went by the next train, but alighted at the nearest station.

And so it came about that at about ten-thirty in the evening, when it was quite dark, two dim and mysterious forms might have been seen lurking—that's a good word—against the trees opposite the library window.

This side of the house was in total darkness, and we could hear the hum of the electric-juice plant. There was a little window in the outbuilding in which the current was generated, and this was open. The hum was musical and pleasant. And there was not another sound.

The front of the house was lighted, of course, but we couldn't see it. And the trees close by us were dim and ghostly. We were on the edge of the lawn, crouching beneath a bush. We could see the whole lawn and the beginning of the drive. I'm

absolutely certain there were ants beneath that bush, because I was as itchy as if pepper had been sprinkled all over me.

But we daren't move, and I'd strict orders from the gov'nor not to breath a sound. So we waited in silence—waited and watched.

The front door must have been open, for I heard the old grandfather's clock solemnly chime a quarter to eleven. Everything was as peaceful as possible, and it seemed absurd to suppose that there was danger lurking about.

Then I heard a sound near the conservatory, and I saw Howard Freeman's form emerge. This was quite near us, and I could see him distinctly. He bent down for a moment or two, tying his shoe-lace, I suppose, and then stepped upon the lawn.

"Silly ass!" I thought, and I nudged the gov'nor.

He nodded to me, but I didn't know what he meant. Then I saw that Freeman was lighting a cigar. And, bless me, if he didn't let the wax vesta flare like a torch! That light could have been seen miles away on such a dark night. Absolutely asking for trouble! And Freeman had had strict injunctions not to leave the house. He was a bigger fathead than I had supposed.

Freeman paced up and down the lawn leisurely, enjoying his cigar. I expect he felt he wanted a breath of fresh air. And, exactly as eleven o'clock struck, I became aware of something else.

From among the trees there came a soft sound. If my ears hadn't been on the stretch I shouldn't have heard it. I looked there, and I felt the gov'nor stiffen and grow rigid. Then I saw some thing long and black gliding across the lawn straight towards Howard Freeman!

I opened my mouth to yell out a warning, when I felt Nelson Lee's hand over my lips. And his mouth was close against my ear.

"Don't move, Nipper!" he breathed. "Don't make a sound!"

I didn't. But, all the same, I thought the gov'nor had gone dotty. The black thing was long and shapeless, and didn't make any noise as it glided across the grass. And I saw Freeman pause suddenly, and face the danger.

It was a tense moment. I don't know what I expected. I saw Freeman stand as rigid as a rock—and then came a low, curious cry. It was followed by intense silence. And Howard Freeman was still standing there; but now he was bending over something.

"Good heavens!" I heard him mutter amazedly.

At the same second Nelson Lee broke from cover and darted across the lawn, but in the opposite direction—in the direction of the drive. I heard him crashing through the bushes, and I knew that further secrecy was useless.

So I scrambled to my feet, too, and I rushed across to Freeman. As I came up he gave a warning shout.

"Don't come near me, Nipper!" he gasped. "Don't touch me!"

At these close quarters I could see distinctly. At Freeman's feet there was a large dark object—a huge snake! It was fully fourteen feet in length, and absolutely black. In spite of the darkness I recognised it at once.

It was a Black Mamba of South Africa—probably the most deadly snake in the whole world, although this is not generally known. Its bite is nearly always fatal, and it is dreaded and feared. And it was dead—stone dead!

"Great Scott!" I panted. "How—how—"

"It's dead, Nipper!" said Freeman, in a curious voice.

"Yes, I know. How in thunder did you kill it?" I gasped.

I looked at him, and I needed no verbal answer to my question. For I saw now why he had frantically told me not to touch him. He was encased in a thick rubber suit—the gov'nor had fetched it from Bristol only that morning I found out—and his face and hands were carefully protected.

And around his body and legs there were "live" electric wires. He was literally a walking death-dealer. The wires were so arranged that he couldn't touch them himself; but the snake had touched them. And the snake was dead.

It was an amazingly clever ruse, and I simply gasped. The current, of course, was supplied from the power-plant in the outbuilding close by. A cable ran from Freeman across the terrace and through the little window, and the juice was run through this cable.

Of course, Freeman's movements were restricted to a very limited area—the cable wouldn't let him go far in either direction—but he'd been able to walk up and down the lawn, for all the world as though he had just been taking a stroll and a smoke.

And the enemy had been drawn. Lee's remarkable ruse had had the desired effect.

The snake, hurling itself at Freeman, had naturally met its death. Before it could even attempt to bite it had been killed, electrocuted in a second.

I was almost staggered at the astounding smartness of the wheeze. The unknown enemy, of course, could never have guessed the truth, everything had seemed so absolutely natural.

Freeman bent down, and with one of his rubber-gloved hands he disconnected the cable. When I thought he'd been tying his shoelace he had, of course, been connecting up the wires. He threw the things from him, and then said that he'd go and turn the juice off.

But at that second there came a cry for help from the drive.

And the cry had been uttered by the gov'nor!

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH WE MAKE A CAPTURE AND LEARN THE TRUTH. AND WHICH TELLS OF A VILE PLOT AND WHAT IT LED TO. THE GUV'NOR EXPOUNDS UPON THE BLACK MAMBA, AND SOME STARTLING FACTS ARE REVEALED TO FREEMAN AND I.

FREEMAN looked at me and caught his breath in. And, by a common impulse, we dashed across the lawn and tore down the drive. It was pitchy black there, but we seemed to see a blacker blob in the centre of the white dusty road. Arriving at the spot we found Nelson Lee struggling fiercely with something which lay beneath him.

"I've nearly settled the fellow!" gasped the gov'nor. "Hold him, Freeman! Grab his legs, Nipper! The infernal brute's bitten me!"

"You'll be poisoned, sir!" I cried in dismay.

"It's nothing!" panted Lee. "I've got the antidote on me, I sha'n't come to any harm if I apply it at once."

Freeman was kneeling on the chest of the thing now, and he held its arms down. I jumped on its legs. Against such odds a fight was hopeless. And a weak, hoarse voice came to us.

"I'm done!" it said painfully. "Hang you all! I'm done!"

Nelson Lee was standing against us, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him dabbing his right hand with something out of a bottle. Then he bound his handkerchief round the place.

"It's only a scratch, fortunately," he

said. "I called for help because it was necessary to attend to the wound at once. Turn the fellow over on his back, we'll bind his hands behind him."

"I'll go quiet—I'll go quiet!" said the thick, savage voice.

But his hands were tied behind his back, all the same. Then we forced the thing—I can't call it a man—to his feet, and led him to the house. It was the furry monster, of course—the blighter I'd encountered in the wood.

He was as meek as a lamb now. He realised probably that he was completely trapped. And we marched him into the house, and took him straight to the dining-room. This was empty, except for Constance Freeman.

"Oh!" cried the girl, springing up. "Oh, what——"

She paused in horror.

"It's all right, little sis," said Freeman with a laugh. "The danger's past. We have laid the spook, or, to be more exact, Mr. Lee had. This scoundrel here is the murderer of poor old dad!"

Connie stared at us all, and particularly at our prisoner. I stared, too. In fact, we all stared. For the thing was a grotesque, amazing sight. We could see now that the captive was a man.

But he was covered with a thick fur from head to foot. It was made so that it encased him, head and all. The head part was out of all proportion, and was as furry as the rest. There was no face, but two holes were cut so that the wearer could see clearly.

Nelson Lee tore the skin off—it was grey and dirty—and then we saw the man's figure. He was only wearing shirt and trousers, but he was perspiring terribly. I didn't wonder, either.

"It's—it's Melrose!" I gasped amazedly.

"Melrose!" echoed Freeman, starting forward. "Great Heaven!"

And it was Melrose, the lodgekeeper!

Old Melrose, the seemingly harmless old fellow who presided over the gates, was the murderer of Freeman's father! The man was almost foaming at the mouth with heat and rage and disappointment. His eyes glittered with savage, mad fire.

"I meant to kill the pair of you!" he grated out. "The whole Freeman brood—father, son, and daughter! Ay, and mother, too, if she'd been alive. Curse you—curse you all!"

"The man's mad—stark mad!" said Freeman, holding his sister tightly.

"No, I'm not mad; I'm as sane as you are," snarled Melrose. "If I'd been mad,

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"No on L. L. Library" 4/4/27

I couldn't have thought out my revenge. It's you who's spoilt it all—you, hang you, for the interfering hound you are!"

This last compliment was directed at the gov'nor. But Nelson Lee only smiled with serene satisfaction. His plans had gone beautifully, and he was immensely pleased with himself and everything in general.

And, later, we learned Melrose's story. It was a job to drag it from him, but we succeeded. Fortunately Connie Freeman was out of the room at the time, and she never knew the real reason for Melrose's terrible hatred.

For, in a way, Melrose was justified in feeling nothing but enmity and bitterness against the Freemans. It was a bit of a shock to Howard, but he bore it well. And we were obliged to believe the yarn; it was obviously true.

I won't attempt to tell it in Melrose's words, because that would take too long. We were hours getting it from him, and then only by continual questioning. He was savage and fierce the whole time, and swore frightfully again and again. This was another reason why it was thankful that Connie was not present.

All said and done, Melrose had a certain amount to be said in his favour, for he had been scurvily treated—shamefully, horribly treated. Old Howard Freeman had been a bit of a scoundrel in his time, although his son had never known it until now.

Melrose was not the man's name, of course. That was assumed, and I don't remember what his real name was. It doesn't matter, anyhow.

Years before, it seemed, he had been in South Africa, engaged on some shady business connected with diamonds. Illicit diamond buying, I think. While out there he had met Howard Freeman, the elder. They had transacted several shady deals together, and understood one another perfectly.

Long after that—the first incident had happened over twelve years ago—Howard Freeman came to England, and retired, buying the Thistle Manor House, and settling there. He was never popular, as I've said, but he was regarded as a thoroughly respectable man.

He was, in a way, I suppose. He was respectable in every ordinary sense. He'd made a good bit of money in London, as a diamond merchant. Well, one day Melrose had come to the Manor House with a pocketful of uncut diamonds. This was while Howard and Connie were

both at their respective colleges, far from home. They had known nothing whatever of the affair.

Those diamonds, so Melrose told us, were worth fifteen thousand pounds. Melrose had spent two years in getting them—illegally, of course. But that didn't concern the matter much. They were Melrose's now, however he'd obtained 'em. He knew that Freeman could dispose of them, for Freeman had been in the diamond business, and still had a finger in it, even after his retirement.

Melrose had approached Freeman because the pair understood one another. They had sat in the library discussing the projected deal. Freeman had agreed to give Melrose seven thousand pounds spot cash for the diamonds—a mean enough figure in any case. For Freeman would get double that price.

Our prisoner told us that Freeman had said he didn't want to have any personal dealing with his former associate; he didn't want to hand him money in exchange for the diamonds. So an arrangement was come to. It was Freeman's arrangement, of course.

The diamonds were left with him, and Melrose was told to come in three days' time. The cash would be there then. The library window would be left unfastened, and the safe door unlocked. In the safe the seven thousand pounds would be placed all in notes. Melrose was to quietly enter the library after everybody had gone to bed, and take the notes and slide off.

Of course, Melrose was an utter fool to trust his confederate. It was a trap—a rotten, mean, despicable trap. But Freeman had arranged it so cunningly that Melrose had not suspected treachery. The arrangement had been made in perfect good humour, and Freeman had lured Melrose on.

For when Melrose came, as arranged—when the programme was carried out—Freeman had suddenly entered the library, had switched on the lights, and had yelled for help. Melrose, utterly startled, had been unable to fight. And when a butler and a groom (now both dismissed) had entered the library, they had found their master grappling with a stranger.

Freeman had pantingly declared that Melrose was robbing the safe—and the two servants believed that to be true. It was obviously true, to all appearances. Police had been fetched, and the case was as plain as daylight.

Melrose's yarn was palpably faked, although he told the actual truth. The

Butler and the groom gave evidence against him—in all good faith—and he was sentenced to three years' penal servitude. And Howard Freeman had the fifteen thousand pounds worth of diamonds!

He had secured the diamonds for nothing!

It was a shabby, terrible trick—but Freeman paid for it with his life!

In prison Melrose had sworn he would be revenged. And he thought out a scheme—an appalling scheme. The whole Freeman family should suffer; they should die violently. Truth to tell, the poor chap was half mad. He had his wits about him enough, though, to carry out his fearful scheme.

After his release from prison Melrose had gone to South Africa. Here he had followed up a certain matter which had attracted his attention while in Africa previously. The Kaffirs, it seemed, make a decoction from the poison of the Black Mamba, the most deadly snake on earth.

If this decoction is taken in sufficient quantities, gradually, the drinker becomes inoculated against all snake poisons. So the tale runs. This is absolutely true. Any South African hunter will tell you so. Snakes, too, will lie quiet and submissive under the hand of a man so inoculated. While the man can give a bite which will cause blood-poisoning.

Melrose had tested this theory—at the risk of his life. And he, at least, had proved that there was something in it. Somehow or other he had brought a Black Mamba snake to England. It was before the war, remember, and he had done the trick fairly easily.

Once in England he had secured the position of game-keeper at the Manor House. He was greatly changed now, and Freeman had not known him. Melrose, too, had acted his part to perfection. He had kept the snake secretly behind his lodge, and it had obeyed his calls—he seemed to have a strange influence over it. He had worn the fur disguise for a double reason: so

that he should not be recognised if seen, and to protect him from the snake if it turned on him. Which proved that Melrose didn't believe much in the Kaffir yarn of inoculation!

• • • • •

"An extraordinary affair," commented the gov'nor, two days later, as we sat on the terrace in the evening cool. We were all there—Freeman, Connie, Nelson Lee, and myself. "Happily, Melrose was not able to carry out his full programme of revenge. Undoubtedly the man is half-insane."

"What beats me is how the snake was made to chase me," said Freeman. "And how it was made to attack the poor old pater. A snake isn't a dog—it can't be sent after a man."

"The Black Mamba," said Nelson Lee, "is a terrible snake. African hunters will agree with me on that point. It is certainly Africa's most dangerous and most poisonous snake—probably the whole world's. Of course, Melrose chose this time of the year for his deadly purpose because the heat of summer is necessary. On a cold day snakes are sluggish and indolent. In great heat, moreover, their bite is much more dangerous."

"But it's queer about Melrose, isn't it, sir?" I asked. "Do you mean to tell me he was able to give a bite which caused blood-poisoning?"

"We have the evidence of Bates's wound," replied the gov'nor quietly. "But to return to the Mamba. It is principally a tree snake, and one often sees it hanging from a branch with only a coil or so twirled round the tree to give it grip. The one which was killed here was a large specimen, and fully developed."

"The Boers can tell many stories of people being chased by Mambas," continued Nelson Lee. "They are very aggressive snakes, and have been known to chase the natives on many an occasion—

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and white men, of course, too. This particular snake can move with astonishing speed, and it is deadly and vindictive. Its temperament is decidedly warlike, and the Mamba sometimes chases people on sight."

"So when it was let loose in the drive it chased my father?"

"Presumably, Miss Freeman," replied Lee, turning to Connie. "I am not at all surprised at that aspect of the case. Melrose had no difficulty in setting his deadly pet upon those he wanted to kill. I fully believe that the snake escaped from him when the horse was frightened—he did not intend it to attack then. It seems to me that Bates caught a glimpse of the snake, but Melrose called it off somehow. The man then bit Bates during the struggle."

"And what of Melrose's yarn about his lamp going out?" asked Freeman.

"That was, of course, pure invention," replied the gov'nor. "With regard to the decoction Melrose is supposed to have drunk, this is called, I believe, 'zebuiba' in Zulu. I have often heard of the tale, and believed it to be merely a Kaffir yarn. This experience seems to prove that there is something in it. A man who drinks 'zebuiba' becomes inoculated against all snake poison. The Kaffirs also maintain that a person who has drunk of the mixture is able to give a dangerous bite, which causes blood-poisoning."

"It's—it's horrible!" exclaimed our host.

"I agree with you there," replied Nelson Lee. "Of course, I recognised the poison at once, and it filled me with amazement. We do not know, of course, but something of this nature may be the explanation of the secrets of the Indian snake charmers. The whole question is rather difficult, and we can only judge by what we have seen."

"And that's enough!" I grunted.

"Quite enough, my dear Nipper," said the gov'nor smoothly. "It is a matter of great thankfulness that Melrose was prevented from carrying out his full programme. He fell into our trap beautifully, and the deadly snake was killed with singular ease. I do not think the Manor House will be further troubled by the horror which has surrounded it these last few weeks."

Nelson Lee was right. And, two or three weeks later, I may as well add here, Melrose died while in the custody of the police, before he could be put on trial. He had lived for nothing else but his revenge, and he died with bitter curses upon his lips.

I believe even now that the man was very wrong in the upper storey. And, somehow, I can't help feeling just a little sympathy for him. In any case, I don't think Howard Freeman senior was much loss to the world.

THE END.

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THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By FENTON ASH

The Golden Temple.

BUT while Diego had been away beating up recruits, by way of getting a stronger party together, Miguel and Slaney had commenced operations on their own. And after a long search among the numerous underground galleries, had stumbled upon one with flights of stone steps which led to the top of the mountain.

It had not, however, led them to the gold cave, all the same. They had wandered about up there for over a fortnight, Slaney now declared, sleeping in the open, and living on the wild fruits which abounded, and they had come upon numerous caves, as well as endless galleries, leading out of the one which had brought them to the top. But though they had found, here and there, pebbles and shells coated with gold, they had come upon nothing of sufficient value to fulfil their expectations.

The man knew nothing about Diego's recent movements. He declared that he (Diego) did not know that the two had succeeded in reaching the top as they had done.

Asked about the pirate leader's habitation on the other side of the island, and his resources there, Slaney stated that Diego had there a number of canoes, and a sailing vessel of some size.

"Ha!" said the doctor thoughtfully. "Then he has boats enough to take him, and all those he has left with him, away from the island, if they should want to leave it?"

"Oh, yes, sir. There would be plenty of room for all of 'em."

"That is as well. They may be glad of it shortly," the doctor commented grimly. "Well, now, it may be worth your while to show us where your underground staircase is. It will be useful to us, and you can save us time hunting around for it if you like."

This, after some talk, Slaney finally agreed to do. Then the doctor left the two—bound securely as before—while he went to see how his friends were getting on.

He found that Grove had picked out a log, and managed to roll it to the place where Alec and Clive had fallen through, and get it into position, crosswise, over the opening. Then, securing his ropes to it, he was able to slip down to them, and they were able to climb out if they wished.

At present, however, none of the three wanted to return to the outer air—just yet. They had found—now that they had the help of the brilliant lights—too much to interest them below ground.

So absorbed, indeed, were they in what they saw, that the doctor had some difficulty in attracting their attention. He shouted to them again and again; and finally, as no reply came, he let himself down into the gallery.

There he saw their lights in the distance, and hastened to join them.

As he passed along, he could see, even then, the gleam of the lights upon the glistening sides and floor of the gallery, though the lanterns were quite a long distance away.

When he drew closer, he found the three gazing about as though entranced, and he no longer wondered that they had been deaf to his calls.

Dr. Campbell himself, old and experienced traveller as he was, became almost spellbound as he glanced around.

They were actually in a grotto of gold, or, rather, a long gallery or cavern of gold. As they walked onward it grew in height and width; yet still everywhere—roof, sides, even the very floor—there was gold—nothing to be seen but gold! It covered everything, but without destroying its shape; therefore, one could see the forms of the rocks, and so on, and their edges and angles made an endless variety of glittering lines of kaleidoscopic, dazzling beauty.

But the explorers were really only, as yet, in a lofty, spacious passageway leading to something yet more marvellous.

There was a bend, and then they stepped out into what proved to be a great temple—a temple where everything was of gold!

The blazing acetylene lanterns threw their brilliant light upon immense images—idols—sixty feet or more in height, shining and glittering—all, to outward appearance, of solid gold.

It was the same on every side. The lofty, domed roof, the various altars—of these there were several—and alcoves, the rows of seats for worshippers—all appeared to be composed of the precious metal, or, at least, to be covered thickly with it.

It was evident that the astounded spectators stood in what had once been the great golden temple of some long-lost, prehistoric race. In this extraordinary sanctuary the people of that race had carried out their religious rites, had met to offer their prayers, perhaps to sacrifice their unhappy victims in seasons of trouble or defeat; and to acclaim their thanks and gratitude in times of victory and triumph over their enemies.

And the learned scientist, scrutinising, with thoughtful eyes, the various markings and hieroglyphics, was led to speculate upon the history of the place and its probable identity.

"Yes," he mused aloud, "I believe it must be so. I can think of no other theory which will fit in—which seems to explain all one sees here. It is that this island must be the highest part of the lost island of Atlantis, which, tradition asserts, once existed hereabouts. We mortals of to-day are standing in the legendary golden temple of lost Atlantis—lost to history for thousands of years!"

Presently, after they had looked their fill, so to speak, upon this gloriously wondrous scene, they went round and up and down, trying to find a way out; but in vain. They found no outlet save the passage by which they had entered, which itself ended abruptly, in a seemingly solid wall of gold, only a little way from the hole in the roof by which they had gained admission.

And neither then nor subsequently, it may here be said, did they discover any communication leading to the labyrinth of galleries which they knew lay outside and probably all around. Some such connection must, of course, have existed, but it had been too artfully concealed that no trace of it could now be found.

This marvellous temple had been sealed up in some way, and so it would

have remained if it had not been that, in some way, the roof of the gallery leading to it had become so thin that at last it had given way and a hole had been formed.

It seemed likely that the man who had raved to Grove—as he supposed—about “the cave of gold,” years before, may actually have found that hole and entered by it, afterwards covering it up, as well as he could, in order to conceal it from others. And when Alec and Clive had thrown themselves down in that very place, to escape the bullets of the two desperadoes, their weight had sufficed to cause the slight covering to give way and let them through into the golden gallery beneath!

The intrepid band of explorers had thus, by a strange and remarkable concurrence of events, succeeded beyond—it may truly be said—their wildest dreams. Here, indeed, before them was wealth “beyond the dreams of avarice.” Would they be able to reap the harvest which lay there ready to their hands, or was it to be snatched from them at the last moment by some convulsion of nature of which Dr. Campbell had noted so many ominous signs?

That was the weighty and disconcerting question which troubled the scientist and his captain when they came to discuss together the amazing discovery the aviators had made upon the mountain top.

The task which now lay before the treasure hunters was a curious one. They had found a cavern or gallery full of what was undoubtedly pure gold, and yet was not solid gold. The rocks which seemed to be lumps of gold were—like the shining pebbles and shells Ben Grove had shown to Alec in the first place, only covered with a facing of the precious metal.

The thickness of this facing varied in different places; in some parts it was found to be comparatively thin, while in others it might be as much as half an inch.

So intimately had it worked itself into the rough surface of the rock, and into all dents, interstices, cracks, and so on, that it was found impossible to scrape or chip it off save in a few rare cases.

Many more or less ingenious plans were tried to get over this difficulty. Somebody was seized with a new idea, on the average, about twice a day. All the proposed methods, however, turned out useless when tried in actual practice, save one. This was to break off the rock in pieces, as thin as possible, carry it to some place where a fire had been made giving out sufficient heat, and melt the coating down into lumps or ingots.

This was not only a laborious method, but a work of time; and as the days went on the leaders grew increasingly anxious, for the signs of an imminent eruption of the volcano became day by day more ominous.

The knowledge was no longer confined to the leaders, however. The portents were now obvious to all there, including even the natives.

The first symptom had been a great increase in the volume of smoke issuing from the crater in the midst of the island. This, in itself, did not at first seem of much importance; but when the soaring column of smoke began to spread out far above, like a huge black mushroom, shutting out the sunlight and plunging the whole island into a kind of gloomy twilight, then it affected everyone more or less.

The deep, dark shadow thus caused, which was of a curious bronze or coppery hue, was dazzling to the eyes as well as depressing to the spirits, apart from its effect as a portent of what might be to come.

Then other things began to happen. At night sparks and flames rose high in the air amidst the smoke, affording a grand and awe-inspiring sight

(Continued overleaf)

which, at any other time, would have driven the natives from the island in a panic.

But they, no less than the white men, were now bitten with the gold fever. The more threatening the symptoms became the harder they worked, black men and white men alike. When the plan of melting down the gold covering up above seemed too slow, they picked out the best pieces and carried them all the way down to the shore on their backs. And when this, in its turn, appeared too dilatory, they shot them over the face of the cliff in barrow-loads for those below to sort out and do the best they could with.

The interior flights of rocky staircases discovered by Miguel and Slaney were, it is needless to say, of great service to the "gold miners" at this time. Indeed, they would have been able to do very little without them. All day long—ay, and even all night long—natives were running up and down these steps in feverish haste with but one thought in their minds—how much gold could they secure before the threatened eruption?

Even when matters grew worse they would not cease their toil for a moment. When, in addition to smoke and sparks and flames, the burning mountain began throwing up stones and mighty rocks with reports and reverberations like the ring of heavy artillery, the gold seekers showed no inclination to leave the place and seek safety in flight.

They even welcomed the lurid glare given out by the volcano at night as a useful light which enabled them to work the faster.

The doctor watched developments, it need scarcely be said, with an anxiety which increased from day to day. He would fain have gone away for a time, content with what they had collected, but now he had to reckon with the gold-lust which had been awakened in others.

(To be concluded Next Week !)

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