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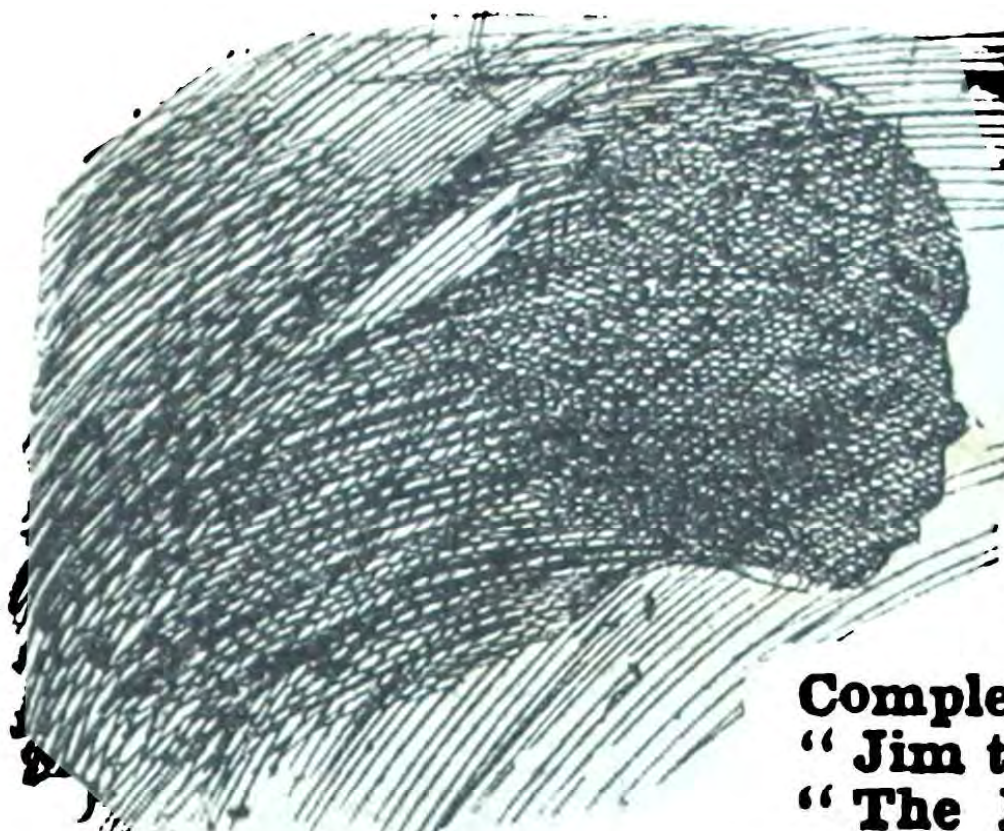
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THE INTRODUCTION.

IN WHICH NIPPER IS MADE TO UNDERSTAND THAT "SWELLED HEAD" IS AN UNFORTUNATE COMPLAINT, AND LIABLE TO LEAD TO AWKWARD CONSEQUENCES—NIPPER FINDS, TO HIS DISMAY, THAT HIS WORK IS TAKEN OUT OF HIS HANDS, AND HE IS CONSIDERABLY WILD.

MR. NELSON LEE, the famous criminologist, entered his consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road with a firm, brisk stride.

He had just mounted the stairs two at a time, and there was a look of great concentration upon his keen, clean-shaven face. His grey eyes were gleaming a trifle, and he was very obviously deep in the throes of some intricate mental problem.

It was rather late in the evening—the evening of a perfect July day. The air was now cool and delightful, a very slight shower having laid the dust of the heated streets.

Just inside the consulting-room, Nelson Lee paused. He did not see Nipper sitting at the desk. He did not see the softly shaded electric table-lamp. He was still deep in thought.

"Oh, lor'! This is about the limit!" exclaimed Nipper plaintively, from behind the electric lamp. "You said you weren't coming back until half-past eleven, guv'nor! Just when I'm tearing my hair for the opening words!"

But the lad's words fell upon deaf ears, for Nelson Lee was making some rapid mental calculations. During that day the great detective had been doing his utmost to solve an intricate cipher, and it was while he had been out that a sudden flash of light had come to him.

Nipper switched the shade of the electric light round, and looked up at his master. Lee's unexpected return was not welcome, for Nipper was puzzling his brain for the opening of a chapter—the first chapter of a story.

Recently Nipper had been amusing himself—and other people—by writing up in story form several of Nelson Lee's most mysterious cases of crime investigation. Nipper's efforts had been crowned with great success, and he was consequently a little proud of his achievements.

His "Note-book" stories, as he called them, had been handed over to me for preparation, my humble self being the "author chap." Nipper has occasionally referred to in his yarns. Upon the whole, Nipper turned out some really readable stuff, and my task of editing it had been pleasantly light.

On this particular night, it seemed, he was rather hung-up for an opening—so often a stumbling-block in story-writing. And it was certainly exasperating for Nelson Lee to return just when Nipper was on the point of grasping the elusive words he so badly wanted.

The glare which Nipper bestowed upon his master was, perhaps, excusable.

"I say, this is too bad, guv'nor!" protested Nipper irritably. "You're not going to interrupt me, I suppose? What's the matter with you? What the dickens are you standing there like a stuffed dummy for?"

Apparently Nipper wanted Nelson Lee to interrupt, for he seemed irritated more than ever by the detective's silence; and, in any case, Nipper was wanting in respect to address his master in such terms.

Quite suddenly Nelson Lee snapped his fingers.

"By James," he exclaimed crisply, "got it!"

He strode across to the desk, and then saw Nipper, apparently, for the first time.

"Hallo! What are you doing at my desk, young 'un?" said Lee, still in the same crisp tones. "Upon my soul, you've littered the whole place up until there's not an inch of space left! Clear that rubbish off, Nipper!"

Nipper fairly bubbled over.

"Rubbish!" he roared indignantly. "I'm just starting a new story——"

"My good Nipper, I can't help your worries!" exclaimed Lee impatiently. "I've just got the solution of that cipher, and I've got to work it out in detail. Hurry up! I shall lose the thread if you don't——"

"You're not going to use this desk now!" declared Nipper, with heat.

"Not going to use—— Look here, my lad! If that stuff isn't cleared off in fifteen seconds, the whole lot goes on the floor! Understand?" rapped out Lee tersely. "Your stories may be important from your point of view, but they're trivial from mine! The whole desk is littered with notes and papers and scribblings! Clear 'em off!"

Lee's tone was, perhaps, unduly sharp, but it was annoying to find his desk occupied in this way when he so urgently needed it for his own use.

Nipper stuck fast in his chair and glared.

"I'm not going to shift now!" he said rebelliously. "I've been trying to get the start of this story for a whole hour, and I'd nearly got it when you came blundering in! It's all very well, guv'nor, but this thing must be done!"

"Must! Must!" roared Lee angrily. "I'll soon show you whether it must! I'm quite in sympathy with this amusement of yours, but I'm not going to allow you to take this high-handed attitude! Now, then—out of that chair!"

It was very unusual for Nelson Lee and Nipper to have a squabble, for the pair had a very great devotion for each other. In his heart, Nipper loved Nelson Lee more than he actually knew. But occasionally outbursts of temper were unavoidable. After all, they were only

human. On this particular occasion, Nipper was certainly at fault for speaking so disrespectfully. At the same time, the lad had a certain amount of excuse.

But Nelson Lee was thoroughly incensed. For Nipper to defiantly thwart him in this fashion was going a little too far! The next second Nipper felt his collar grasped in a firm grip.

He was yanked out of the chair like a sack of coals; he floundered through the air, and came down with a thud in the folds of a great easy-chair. He wasn't hurt physically, but his dignity was decidedly injured.

Before he could speak, however—and he had quite a lot to say—his note-book and papers and jottings came hurtling on the top of him. When, at last, Nipper managed to scramble to his feet, he was as red as a beetroot with anger. This was a nice way to treat an author!

Nipper simply boiled.

But Nelson Lee was now seated at the desk, and was making piles of rapidly written figures on a writing-block.

Nipper glared at his master, and he glared at the litter of papers on the floor. Then he bounced over to the table.

"What do you mean by that, guv'nor?" he panted hotly.

Lee ignored his young assistant completely.

"Do you hear me?" bellowed Nipper.

Apparently Nelson Lee did not, for still he made no reply. Nipper, his heat rising every second, watched the detective making the rapid calculations and reckonings. And at last Lee laid his pen down, and looked up. His expression was very grim, and Nipper had a momentary qualm.

"Now, Nipper, you've got to explain to me why you gave such a display of temper a few moments ago!" said the detective evenly.

"Why—why, it was you who displayed ——"

"That's not the way to talk to me, young 'un!" interjected Lee curtly. "And, unless you can control your temper at once, you will earn my very severe displeasure! There is a limit to my patience, you know."

Nipper swallowed hard.

"What about my patience?" he growled. "You don't seem to understand the position, guv'nor. I've been trying to get the opening of that story

for a tremendous time, and I'd just about got it when you butted in——"

"Butted in!" interjected Lee sharply. "Who's consulting-room is this, Nipper?"

"Why, yours, I suppose!"

"You suppose!" Nelson Lee looked very grim now. "The truth of the matter is, Nipper, you have been writing these stories of yours, and I must admit you have made a good job of them. I commend you highly for your efforts. But you seem to have fallen a victim to a complaint which is, I am sorry to say, extremely prevalent. You are suffering from swelled head very acutely!"

"I'm not!" burst out Nipper indignantly.

"The sufferers from swelled head usually find the greatest difficulty in diagnosing their own symptoms," went on Lee, in the same relentless tone. "Your head, my dear Nipper, has swollen to such an extent that you seem to have lost your perspective of things. Your focus needs adjusting. I am now adjusting it. You have been imagining yourself to be quite an important person. Get that idea out of your head! You are not. And, unless you adopt a more respectful tone, I shall positively forbid you to write another word!"

Nipper stood quite still during this dressing-down; but his face was still flushed, and his eyes were still gleaming.

"It's all rot to say I've got swelled head!" he burst out. "You told me you weren't coming back until half-past eleven, and I'd settled down to a good two hours' writing. Then you come back again, and want to chuck me out——"

"You were at my desk, and I wanted it."

"That's all very well, guv'nor. This yarn I'm starting is a lot more important than your blessed calculations!"

Nelson Lee leaned back in his chair.

"I see that your focus has not altered itself in the slightest," he said grimly. "What story is this you were going to write—a story which is far more important than my own professional work?"

"You oughtn't to say anything, anyhow!" declared Nipper. "It's that yarn about those rotten Fu-Chang blighters. I'm calling the yarn the 'Yellow Shadow.' I don't come into it myself until the last chapter, and that's why it was a job to begin. I thought it was a

bit of a compliment to you to choose that yarn. But now that you say that I've got swelled head, I'm blowed if I'll write the yarn at all!" finished up Nipper warmly. Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Perhaps I had better be more drastic in my treatment," he said, facing Nipper fairly and squarely. "I must get you into a chastened mood, my lad. Understand, once and for all, I will not put up with any nonsense! And I forbid you to write another word of these 'Note-book' stories!"

"You—you forbid me!" gasped Nipper, in genuine dismay.

"I do! And, what is more, I intend to write this particular adventure myself," went on Nelson Lee calmly. "I have a fancy to. It is a case in which I played the principal part all through. I am going to write it up myself."

Nipper was really alarmed now.

"And what about me, guv'nor?" he asked huskily.

"You? You have dropped your story-writing altogether," said the great detective, lighting a cigarette. "I saw some excellent fairy-books for sale at a shop down the road. To-morrow you had better purchase a few, so that you may pass your idle moments pleasantly!"

Lee spoke the words very cuttingly, and Nipper boiled afresh. But he was now too indignant for words, and he bounced out of the room without being in the least chastened. Time, probably, would make him realise that he had been altogether too high-handed with his good-natured master.

For the present, Nipper was simply bubbling with outraged dignity. He'd been taken down a peg, and he knew it. That's what made it so tremendously galling. He was not only forbidden to continue with his famous "Note-book," but Nelson Lee had actually taken the whole thing out of his hands! It was undoubtedly the limit!

And, later on, after Nipper had gone off to bed—rather sulkily, it must be admitted—Nelson Lee settled himself down at his desk. The great detective chuckled as he drew a writing block towards him.

He had meant every word he had said, and then and there he set to work on the story which Nipper was to have written.

It was Nelson Lee's intention to teach his young assistant a lesson.

THE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

OPENS IN SNAKE CITY, COLORADO, WHERE I AM SEARCHING FOR A CERTAIN GENTLEMAN NAMED MR. HUNTLEY FERROLL—I MAKE MY ARRANGEMENTS WITH THE CITY MARSHAL, BUT THINGS GO WRONG, AND I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF AH-FOO.

SNAKE CITY, Colorado, U.S.A., is not one of the most beautiful cities on earth, but I must confess that it impressed me very favourably. That is to say, it impressed me favourably to begin with. Afterwards, when I had had a little deeper insight into the grim secrets of the place, my view altered. It altered to such an extent that I later came to regard Snake City with positive repugnance.

I was there on business. I had tracked a notorious criminal half across the world, and it was in Snake City that I finally ran him down. That is why I was favourably impressed. I thought, at the time, that I was going to get my "man" without any further trouble.

In this I was mistaken—as I intend to show.

To begin with, my quarry was a well-known criminal, named Huntley Ferroll. He had other names—quite a number—but Ferroll was the one he was using at the time. Let me say right at once that Ferroll was no ordinary "crook." He was a clever, scheming, well-educated man, who had an excellent public school and 'Varsity record. But he had gone to the bad.

I had heard of him often enough before I ever actually came into contact with him. Scotland Yard friends—notably Detective Inspector Morley, a very old friend of mine—had occasionally mentioned some of his exploits.

Ferroll had a long list of crimes to his credit—or discredit. He had dabbled in forgery, embezzlement, blackmail, fraud, and a few other choice accomplishments. And he had dabbled so successfully that he had never actually run against the law. The police knew that he was guilty; but they had no proof. And a man cannot be convicted without evidence.

Well, the climax came when Ferroll attempted a big forgery in connection

with some Government bonds belonging to Sir Albert Millington. Ferroll had made a slip, and had ruined his whole scheme. At the same time, Sir Albert had suffered considerable loss owing to the scoundrel's machinations.

The baronet visited me, in my rooms at Gray's Inn Road, and requested me to hunt Ferroll down. He had "skipped" to South America, having failed in his chief scheme, but still partially successful.

After consultation with Scotland Yard, I shipped for Buenos Ayres, hot on the track of Huntley Ferroll. It was a tedious business. From Buenos Ayres I traced my quarry to Rio, from Rio to New Orleans, and thence north-west, until finally I located him in Snake City, Colorado.

Ferroll imagined that he was free from capture; he was convinced that he had covered up his tracks so thoroughly that he was safe. But when I left England I did so with the intention of running Ferroll to earth. My task had been no light one, but I had overcome all obstacles, and was now quite ready to spring.

I had been in Snake City precisely twenty hours. Naturally, I had made no display of my arrival, and I didn't intend Ferroll to receive a premature warning. He was boarding with a man named Bud Riverby.

Bud ran a gambling establishment on Calamity Street, a fairly quiet thoroughfare. I discovered that the street had gained its name from the fact that in the distant past, in the city's "boom" days, it had been practically wiped out in a tornado. The name, in my opinion, served equally well at the present day. It was undoubtedly a street of calamity for many people; for Bud's place was not the only gambling-den in its length.

SNAKE CITY was a big place—a busy hive of industry. It was the centre of vast mining operations—copper, lead, etc.—and was one of the oldest cities in the great West. The old workings under the city itself had long since been deserted and closed up.

I thought it advisable to interview the city marshal before taking any decisive step, and I accordingly visited his somewhat palatial office on Main Street. Up till now I had been working quite alone, and had located Ferroll by means of careful inquiry and close investigation.

In America there is an appalling

amount of "graft" going on continuously, and I thought it inadvisable to approach the responsible authorities until such a step was absolutely necessary. I am not hinting that the city marshal himself was susceptible to "graft," but there were others beneath him who could, if they chose, give Ferroll the tip that he was on thin ice.

It was my intention, if possible, to make a surprise raid upon Bud Riverby's den that very night. Ferroll was there, I knew, but he was lying low, and it would be too risky to take any chances. I had no wish to go chasing right across the vast American continent; I had had enough of this affair, and was anxious to bring it to a successful conclusion.

The city marshal, Mr. Norton B. Ranmore, was a man of substantial proportions, and I found him in his shirt-sleeves, and with a big cigar clenched between his powerful teeth. The weather was appallingly hot, for it was summertime, and Marshal Ranmore was wearing the minimum of clothing.

"Mr. Nelson Lee, of London, England," he exclaimed, as I entered his office. "Say, I'm real glad to meet you, Mr. Lee. Shake!"

We shook hands cordially.

"I guess I've heard a whole heap about you, Mr. Lee," went on the marshal, handing me a fat cigar without ceremony. "You'll like that smoke—I guess I keep that brand for swell visitors. Say, what are you around Snake City for, anyway?"

"I'm here on business, Mr. Ranmore," I smiled, as I lit the cigar. "I've been chasing one of our own pet criminals, and I've located him right in this go-ahead city. I'm in this office to obtain your co-operation."

"Say, we'll hev' to talk business," said the marshal. "I'll allow we've got a surplus of crooks in Snake City, and we're not hankerin' after providing shelter for any other brand. Guess you must have come quite a piece after this feller?"

"London—Buenos Ayres—Rio—New Orleans—Dallas—Oklahoma—Dodge City—Pueblo—Snake City," I smiled. "That's been my route, marshal. As you say—quite a piece."

"Gee! You're a sticker, Mr. Lee—you sure are," exclaimed Ranmore. "I don't figger to disappoint you any, but I guess you'll hev' a blazes of a job to round up your man in this city. We're

crazy on crooks here; I guess we let 'em run around tame. You'll find more 'gunmen' in Snake City than in the hull remainder of Colorado State."

"You appear to be proud of the fact," I said pleasantly.

"Not oh your life, sir. You'll find the Police Department of this city one of the best-organised in the States," said the marshal. "But I guess we get crooks along in chunks. They ain't to be dealt with in a hurry. And crooks, when they strike Snake City, feel kind o' mean, and hate themselves worse than pizen. They're bright boys, generally speakin', and they guess that they don't need fixin' in penitentiary. When they get around this township they behave like they was angels. The Police Department of Snake City is some organisation, believe me. Guess ther' ain't no argument, Mr. Lee. Criminals, when they're around this locality, behave as though they were hired men in a swell livery-barn. They ain't got a puff of crookedness left in 'em. It sort of oozes out of their pores. And this special friend of yours will fancy he's struck heaven, and he'll sure turn that good that he'll mistake himself for a tract-writin' saint. And, say, what about toting him along back with you—if you capture him? Guess ther'll be a hull pile of trouble flyin' around."

I laughed good-humouredly at the marshal's amusing talk.

"I think I've got those details fixed," I replied. "At least, there will be no particular difficulty. The man I'm after is named Huntley Ferroll; he's wanted just at present for forgery. I have found out, positively, that he is lying low in Bud Riverby's gambling-den on Calamity Street."

Ranmore stroked his ample chin.

"Guess there are as many gamblin' joints on Calamity Street as there are side-shows at Coney Island," he replied. "But, let me tell you right here, Mr. Lee, that I'm going to see this thing through for you. I guess this visit of yours won't be for nothing."

"Thank you, marshal," I said. "Personally, I don't anticipate much trouble."

We had a chat, and arranged things.

I have no intention of going into full details. After all, Ferroll plays only a small part in this record of events. He was the instrument by which I was pitchforked into a maze of peril and ex-

citement such as I have seldom encountered.

But for Ferroll's villainy the adventure would never have happened, and so it is necessary to take the events in their proper sequence.

I fixed things up with Marshal Ranmore quite satisfactorily. Bud Riverby's "joint" was to be raided by a posse of armed constabulary soon after darkness had fallen. The object was to capture Ferroll red-handed; he would be carrying documents and papers which would positively prove his guilt in the particular "game" I was after him for.

If he had been warned, he would have destroyed those papers, and I should have had difficulty in proving my charge. I am saying this because I wish to drive home the fact that it was essential that Ferroll should be—surprised.

I could go into many details concerning Ferroll's criminal record—but I don't intend to. For one thing, they have no direct bearing upon the main scheme of this adventure; and, for another thing, such details would be wearisome.

The same remarks apply to several points of law I had to deal with. I was forced to attend to them, but that is no reason why I should enlarge upon the uninteresting routine-work of the affair. My object is to describe the amazing perils I was forced to pass through as a result of falling foul of Huntley Ferroll owing to an incident which was totally unexpected.

After leaving the city marshal I attended to several prosaic matters. I dropped into a hairdresser's saloon, and obtained a shave and a hair-cut. I had needed the latter since leaving Dallas, Texas, but had had no previous opportunity.

Then I returned to my hotel and fed. After that I lounged on the hotel veranda in the shade, and drank iced drinks, and read a newspaper. This was really the first few hours of real leisure I had had for quite a long time.

Just after sunset, in the comparative cool of the evening, I turned my thoughts to the business in hand. I had arranged to be on the watch opposite, or near, Bud Riverby's place well in advance of the time for the raid.

If I saw Ferroll leave the place I should follow him, and keep him in sight until I could attract the attention of the police. Then Ferroll would be quietly

and quickly arrested. It was impossible for me to arrest him myself.

But I didn't anticipate any such event. I was sure that Ferroll would remain within his hiding-place. He knew, of course, that I was on his track, but believed that he had shaken me off. I wanted him to remain in that state of misplaced belief. It was certain, in any case, that he would not venture abroad until darkness had fallen.

It was gloomy dusk when I turned into Calamity Street, and I had no fear of being spotted by Ferroll or any associate who had been "put wise."

Outwardly Calamity Street was quite respectable, although somewhat dingy. It was an old street, and had once been a residential quarter. Most of the buildings were unfinished-looking frame houses of the usual type. They had long since been given over to such delightful pastimes as "draw" poker, faro, and baccarat.

Bud's one particular den was an older house than the others, and it stood right on the side-walk. A wooden fence surrounded the back premises, and this fence was sadly in need of repair. I took up my stand in a position from where I could see both in front of the house and at the back.

At the present time no gambling was going on. Later, after night had fallen, all the houses would be teeming with humanity. Bud's precious establishment was perfectly quiet. I believed it to be deserted, except for a few Chinese hands.

Snake City was crowded with Chinamen—coolies mainly, who worked in the mines. But there were others—cooks, laundrymen, and such like.

I had hardly been at my post five minutes before my thoughts were interrupted. I had been wondering how Nipper was going on. I had left Nipper in London—much to his disgust and disappointment. The youngster had been eager to accompany me, but I had had other work for him.

The interruption came in the form of a shrill squeal, and then a gurgling gasp. The sounds proceeded from the small enclosed yard behind Bud Riverby's house. I was quite close to the fence, and there was a hole within a yard of me.

I quickly gazed through, and dimly saw, in the gloom, a couple of figures near the back-door of the house. One

was a Chinaman in a blue smock, and the other—Huntley Ferroll.

There was no mistaking his figure.

And Ferroll was attempting to choke the life out of his companion, it seemed. At all events, he had got the "Chink" by the throat, and was pressing him back until it seemed as though his neck must break.

"You infernal yellow scum!" I heard Ferroll exclaim. "Refuse to do as I order, will you. I don't allow your sort to thwart me. If you're found dead in the morning, Snake City will be all the cleaner!"

I decided upon action at once.

Ferroll was undoubtedly choking the Chinaman, and he was in a towering fury. Ferroll was cursed with a violent temper, and it had been his undoing on many an occasion. He was not likely to release his victim until he was either dead, or nearly so. And I had no intention of letting Ferroll add the crime of murder to his other accomplishments.

Moreover, this was an excellent opportunity of getting Ferroll red-handed. I had no real authority to arrest him—but he was committing a dastardly assault, and on that score alone I was justified in acting.

Just a little further along the fence there was a considerable gap, and I reached it in a few strides. Scrambling through, I pelted across to the spot where the two men were struggling. Ferroll had his back to me, and he did not see me approach.

Agonized gurgles were coming from the Chinaman, and he was obviously at his last gasp. Yet Ferroll was still shaking him like a rat. The man's temper was so uncontrollable that he hardly realised what he was doing.

I reached forward and gripped Ferroll's arm.

"That's enough, Ferroll!" I said curtly. "I don't think you're anxious to swing at the end of a rope by your neck, are you?"

He dropped the Chinaman as though he had been red-hot.

Nelson Lee!" he snarled savagely.

"If you're sensible you will come with me quietly," I said. "You were killing this man, and——"

He uttered a string of oaths.

"You—you hound!" he choked. "I thought I'd shaken you off!"

"It isn't quite safe to think—— Now then, don't move an inch!" I exclaimed

sharply, as he reached round to his hip pocket. "That revolver of yours isn't necessary, my dear Ferroll. I've got you—covered. Only my gun prefers to remain discreetly in hiding. The cloth of my jacket-pocket, however, is not substantial enough to stop a bullet if I happen to pull the trigger."

The bilge of my pocket was ominous, and Ferroll hesitated.

"How—how did you find me?" he gasped hoarsely.

"That is a matter which need not be entered into at the present moment," I replied, with perfect calmness. "You really must control your temper, Ferroll. It's led you into awkward corners more than once."

"You confounded——"

He did not finish his sentence. His temper, already at fever-pitch, rose to a point which was beyond control. He flung himself at me with all his strength, and the movement was so violent and so sudden that I should have been bowled over had I remained still.

But I shifted quickly, and he lunged past me. By a cruel trick my heel caught against a loose brick in the semi-darkness, and I almost lost my balance. For the space of one second I was at a disadvantage.

And Ferroll seized his opportunity.

He dashed his fist fully into my face, and then fled. That blow had been a stunning one, but I had flung my head back instinctively, and the full force of it never reached me. All the same, my cheek was cut by the ring on his finger, and I went down with a crash.

It was the height of misfortune. But for that loose brick the issue would never have been in doubt. I should have had him helpless within a minute. As it was, he had vanished by the time I regained my feet.

"Hang it all!" I snapped savagely.

I dashed to the fence, but there was no sign of him whatever. The whole position was unsatisfactory now, and I felt furious. Ferroll was warned, and he would take care to remain in fresh hiding. He might even "skip" out of the city. I could see that my work, instead of being nearly over, was to be prolonged.

And all because of a loose brick!

I heard a movement behind me, and saw that the Chinaman had managed to get to his feet. He must have been a hardy brute to recover so rapidly. He

staggered across to me, and looked into my face.

He was a smallish man for a Chinaman, with a wizened yellow face. It was impossible to guess at his age. At the moment I felt too angry to take any notice of him, and should have turned away had he not spoken.

"Me velly glateful," he said, in a kind of croak—the result of Ferroll's violent treatment. "You savee lifee. Me allee samee glateful."

His "pidgin" English was very broken.

"That's all right," I said. "I don't suppose he'd have killed you."

"Me velly nearly dead—he killee me, sure."

His fingers were at his throat, but he was looking uneasily towards the house. He suddenly tugged at my sleeve.

"Well, what's the matter?" I asked sharply.

"You blave man, mist'. No wantee you knifed," he whispered. "Goe away. Batee 'Melicans all 'lound. They killee you!"

I smiled at that. He evidently thought that I was in danger—and perhaps he was right. Ferroll had probably given the alarm, and if I found myself surrounded by a gang of toughs I should have considerable difficulty in extricating myself. This street was quiet, and was quite away from the busy quarters of the city. The Chinaman was justified in being anxious.

"You come 'longa me," he said quickly.

Again he tugged my sleeve, and we passed out in the side street. The fellow was certainly grateful to me—and I suppose he had reason to be. I considered that he had a right to be, at all events. I had lost Ferroll because of the incident—although the Chinaman was not to be blamed for that.

He took me down a tiny turning between two houses, and as we disappeared I heard hurried footsteps, and harsh, low voices. Jove! My yellow-visaged guide had been right!

I don't think any man can truthfully accuse me of being nervous, but I realized that I should not have had much chance against half-a-dozen murderous toughs. And if it had not been for my guide, I should probably have run bang into the crowd.

As it was, I found myself, after a time,

in one of Snake City's commercial thoroughfares, and there was no danger here. How I reached the street I do not know; the Chinaman took me through a maze of short cuts in the darkness, which I could never have found out for myself.

Under a street lamp he paused, and looked up at me. He was still fingering his throat, and his eyes were expressionless.

"Allee samee safee now," he said.

"Yes, I suppose I am," I said, smiling. "What's your name, my friend?"

"Me, Ah-Foo."

"Well, Ah-Foo, we're quits, I think."

"Me glateful, mist'," he exclaimed gravely. "You savee life. Me only guides you to big stleet. Me guesse me lepay you some day."

Before I could speak Ah-Foo glided away, and disappeared down a hidden turning. I laughed rather ruefully, and dismissed the Chinaman from my mind. His offer to "lepay" me some day was rather amusing, I thought. Ah-Foo would not have much opportunity of repaying me.

I little guessed how events would shape themselves!

CHAPTER II.

FERROLL ACTS, AND I AM THE VICTIM OF A DASTARDLY ATTACK—I FIND MYSELF IN A DREADFUL PREDICAMENT, AND SUFFER CONSIDERABLY—AT LAST I SEE LIGHT AHEAD, BUT DISCOVER, TO MY DISMAY, THAT I HAVE FALLEN OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

MY first consideration was to acquaint the city marshal with the news, and I accordingly hurried to his office.

He was concerned, but agreed with me that I had acted for the best. The only thing to do now was to keep a very sharp eye open for Ferroll, and "nab" him at the first opportunity.

The raid on Bud Riverby's "joint" was, of course, abandoned.

It was possible that Ferroll would attempt to leave the city, and Mr. Ranmore promised to have a couple of men sent to the railroad depot. There was no train out to-night, anyhow, and I was determined to get on Ferroll's track straight away, if possible.

My task was not so easy as it might seem. Snake City was a large place, and it was teeming with humanity of all nationalities, and all colours. To find Huntley Ferroll among these thousands was rather like searching for a pin in a wheatfield. But I had one advantage.

Ferroll was a Britisher, and there were few Britishers in Snake City—barring a few business men who were well known in the place.

I determined to return to my hotel for a meal, and then complete my plans. I had already decided to sally out in a simple disguise—that of a rough-clad Westerner. I had sufficient faith in my powers to act the part suitably. Then I would visit several well-known gambling-dens, and keep my eyes and ears open. Ferroll would undoubtedly remain among the little gang of friends he had made.

But again my plans were useless.

I had scarcely turned into the street on which my hotel was situated, when Ferroll made me painfully aware of the fact that he was determined to settle with me, once and for all. Perhaps I was a little to blame for not being on the alert; but I had never anticipated such prompt action on his part.

I am not infallible, and I make more mistakes than many people have been led to believe. Mistakes are unavoidable; it is only the detectives of fiction that never blunder.

And, really, I was not so much at fault.

How could I have suspected danger in a well-lighted city street, with people on all sides of me?

As I said, I had turned into the street where the hotel stood, and was striding along the side-walk thoughtfully and briskly. I was taking no particular notice of the traffic.

A well-equipped buggy rattled up, drawn by a splendid team. I saw this almost unconsciously. There were several horsemen, too—rough, prairie men, they were, with be-chapped legs.

Quite suddenly two of the horsemen swung to the side of the road. The next second I received a bit of a shock.

A lariat whirled through the air, hovered above my head for a second, and then dropped neatly round my body. Instantly it was drawn tight, and my arms were rendered useless.

I had been "roped" in the public street!

Moreover, I could do nothing whatever to defend myself. The rope was tightened, and I was "yanked" forward at a run. I assure you, it is a most uncomfortable thing to be at the noose-end of a rope—when the noose happens to be drawn round your body in such a way that you can't shift a finger!

In order to save myself from being dragged off my feet I ran into the road. I was conscious that pedestrians were grinning unfeelingly at me. The horsemen themselves, one of whom had roped me, were roaring. I was angry and red.

Just for a moment I concluded that this was merely a practical joke upon a stranger. I was a "dude" from the East, and these prairie men were having some fun at my expense. Such a thing as a man being roped in the public street was evidently not new to Snake City. Nobody seemed inclined to interfere, and everybody was amused.

I was neatly drawn to the side of the buggy. Then another horseman swung round alongside me, bent over in the saddle, and hoisted me bodily into the low vehicle. The buggy at once started forward.

The team was a splendid one, and the driver of first quality. My position now was not only uncomfortable, but positively dangerous. The rope was still round me, and the other end of it was still held by the horsemen who galloped alongside.

I found myself wondering what would happen if something occurred to bring the horsemen to an abrupt stop while the buggy still kept going. For one thing, I should be jerked out of the vehicle with appalling force; in all probability the sudden shock would break my arms, and contact with the road would not be pleasant.

In fact, I saw that I was pretty well helpless under any circumstances.

But there seemed no prospect of a hitch; the buggy rattled along at express speed, and the horsemen kept alongside. We created quite a mild sensation as we roared through the streets. Incidentally, we created as much dust as a galloping herd of cattle could have stirred up.

I knew, now, that this was no practical joke—no piece of fun at the expense of a stranger. I had been deliberately captured in one of the principal streets of Snake City. And I was rapidly being driven to the outskirts.

I did not bother myself with any thoughts of escape. When I am in a hole, and there is a chance of freedom, I use my wits, then, to their utmost capacity. Very often I am successful in thinking out some favourable idea.

But what was the good of attempting any such thoughts now.

The only thing I could do was to release myself from the cruelly tightened rope. And to do that it was essential that I should be quite still and capable of free movement of my body. But I was hunched up in the buggy, and the latter was travelling at such a speed that the vehicle was rocking and swaying appallingly.

I needed all my wits about me to prevent myself being hurled bodily out at every fresh jolt. My feet were wedged firmly against a portion of the woodwork, and my back jammed against another portion. The prospects of freeing myself from the rope were not very promising.

I was boiling with anger, but I did not allow my emotion to express itself in any manner or look. These men were dealing with the matter coolly and grimly. Well, I wasn't going to be outdone by a gang of gunmen.

In spite of their laughs as they rode along, I knew well enough that this affair was really serious. They knew it, too, but they didn't want people to guess at the true state of affairs.

At last the pace was made easier, and, almost before I knew it, the buggy came to a halt outside a small, dark building. Even in the gloom, I could see that it was a ramshackle old wooden shack. No other house was in the vicinity.

"Say, I guess you're feelin' good'n sore!" exclaimed the man who had roped me, leaping out of the saddle, and coming to my side. "Mebbe you've bin figgerin' that we're jest all-fired joy-riders?"

"Not at all," I replied. "My impression is that you were paid to get hold of me by Mr. Huntley Ferroll."

"Gee! I guess you're smart goods!" went on the man. "Ferroll's the galoot who put us up to this job. He guesses that he an' you don't kinder hit it off together. He guessed that you need fixin'!"

I made no reply to that.

Personally, I was quite convinced that Ferroll would fix me very thoroughly. After that unfortunate incident with Ah-Foo, Ferroll was undoubtedly, in a

state of great alarm, and he would, at least, render his escape from Snake City easy by imprisoning me—or worse.

I could well understand Ferroll's state of mind. To begin with, he was no ordinary rough-and-ready criminal, as I have mentioned before. He had been given a gentleman's education, and his ideas of life were rather luxurious. Already I had chased him from England to Buenos Ayres, and from the latter place, by various stages, to Colorado. Ferroll had not had one minute's rest; it had only been by constant vigilance and nerve-racking strain that he had managed to give me so long a run.

In Snake City, however, he had fondly imagined himself to be safe. And then I had butted in at a most unfortunate moment. I knew that. But for that incident with the Chinaman I should have captured Ferroll without the slightest difficulty.

But I don't think anybody will accuse me of negligence or carelessness because I went to Ah-Foo's assistance. The man was a Chink, no doubt, but Ferroll had been choking the life out of him. And a Britisher can't stand by and see a man choked to death without interfering.

Ferroll had not possessed the nerve to stand up to me. I'd had him completely in my power until I happened to trip on that infernal brick. And the fellow had grasped his opportunity without a second's delay. That had been smart of him.

It was now made clear to me that he had made arrangements for my capture on the very instant. He had money, and he was paying these gunmen a considerable sum, probably, to carry out his orders. Ferroll knew that so long as I was in Snake City he was in very real danger.

Hence my capture.

I was hauled out of the buggy and forced without ceremony into the interior of the old shack. The only illumination in the place was a guttering candle, and Huntley Ferroll was standing in the middle of the room—I call it a room for the want of a better name—regarding me with a sneering smile on his lips.

"Quite a drastic touch, eh, Lee?" he exclaimed.

"I don't think you would have tricked me in any other way, Ferroll," I replied calmly. "Well, what's the trouble? I suppose you are going to take very full advantage of this pretty little situation?"

He laughed harshly.

"You've guessed right there, you confounded busybody," he replied. "I'm still smiling at the way you were captured. Rather like a cinema picture, wasn't it? If we had done the thing in daylight, the addition of a camera would have made us as safe as houses. That's one advantage of these Western cities, Lee. I couldn't have collared you like that over in London."

"I am quite sure of that," I replied.

"Say, git busy!" growled one of the gang. "Guess we want to finish this all-fired game without these blamed doses of hot air. Talk never ain't no good. Guess we'll need to act. This feller's got to be fixed, Mr. Ferroll?"

"That's the idea, Rawson."

"Then, say, fix him without no further exchange of compliments that ain't no use to a soul, anyways," said Rawson practically. "This is your layout, I guess, and you're doin' things according to your own ideas. Wal, Mr. Ferroll, I'm guessin' that this dead-head would be a hull sight safe if you wus to allow me to use my gun."

"No, Rawson, I'm not going to use any violence," said Ferroll sharply.

"Say, that's a pity. I'd blow holes through his carkiss that'd sure let pneumonia into his vitals in large-sized chunks," said Rawson with delightful care for detail. "I'd have him lyin' around lookin' like one o' them new-fangled sieves!"

"Don't take any notice of my smooth-tongued friend, Mr. Lee," said Ferroll, still keeping up his pretence of politeness. "His ideas are rather drastic, and—shall we say?—somewhat too refined for our coarse tastes. I have a plan which will, I feel sure, meet with your approval."

I began to get somewhat impatient.

"Look here, Ferroll, if you're going to use violence—use it!" I exclaimed curtly. "Don't stand there talking about it. Get busy."

Rawson chuckled.

"Say, he's sure a bright boy," he cried. "Guess he's got a pile o' sand, too! Quit talkin', Mr. Ferroll—he don't like it any more'n me!"

"I'm not going to talk for more than a few moments," said my captor calmly.

"You may be aware of the fact, Mr. Lee, but I will refresh your memory. Under Snake City there are hundreds of disused mine-workings."

"I am aware of that fact," I observed.

"Occasionally men have been put down into these deserted galleries, and they've never been seen alive again," said Ferroll, with a grim note in his voice. "I don't think any man has ever escaped into the open daylight, once he has been——"

"You're going to put me down into the old mine-workings?" I asked between my teeth. "Is that what you are driving at?"

Ferroll shrugged his shoulders.

"Either that, or you will give me your word of honour that you will drop all attempts to trace me," he replied. "You are a gentleman, Mr. Lee—I know that—and I have no grudge against you personally. As a professional tracker you are somewhat too persistent. I have decided to cool your ardour. If you will give me your word of honour that you will return East by the first available train——"

"That's not my way," I interjected curtly.

"You refuse to acknowledge defeat?"

"I am not defeated—yet."

"Jove! You are a remarkable fellow, Lee!" he said, half-admiringly. "You are not defeated? You will allow me to differ on that point, won't you? I rather fancy you are out of the running. Argument is useless?"

"Quite," I said grimly.

Ferroll sighed.

"Then there is only one alternative," he said. "You make me take it, Lee, although I am reluctant to do so. I am willing to accept your word—I have given you every chance. Violence is distasteful to me, but you compel me to act with decision. I must be allowed to leave this city in peace. You will, therefore, taste the joys of life in the deserted workings of the once-famous Addisbee Mine. Whether you will ever see the light of day again is a question. In any case, you will have only yourself to thank if you perish. You are free to go this minute if——"

"I'm going to nab you, Ferroll," I put in quietly. "That's what I'm out here for. If this talk pleases you, go ahead. I can't stop you. But you are only wasting time."

"I am merely making it clear to you that you are bringing this on your own head," Ferroll said resignedly. "I detest violence; killing is not in my line. Ferroll."

hope you will survive—I honestly hope so. But, by then, I shall have made myself scarce."

Somehow I knew that Ferroll was talking sincerely. He did not care to commit cold murder. In a blind rage he was a demon; but at all other times he would never dream of committing bloodshed. And I was to be cast down into the deserted tunnels of the Addisbee Mine because, by that method, no actual killing would be done.

If I died, I should die in days to come after lingering. Ferroll would see nothing of my death-agonies. I suppose his warped outlook could not understand that such a death would be ten times more horrible than a straight gun-shot.

But to give him my word that I would relinquish my efforts was impossible. I could never finish my chase by descending to such a confession of failure. This thing had to go through; for the moment Ferroll had the upper hand.

Rawson, the "gunman," was obviously disgusted.

"Say, what's the game, anyways?" he asked. "I guess this fool talk hez made me kind o' tired. I'll sure need wakin' up some. Say, Mr. Ferroll, you're handin' me out a high figger for this hyar all-fired job; but I guess I ain't countin' on stayin' in this blame shack for the night. Get me? My boys're outside, and they're sure guessin' that we've gone off into a kid's lullaby!"

Huntley Ferroll laughed.

"All right, Rawson, we'll get busy now," he said, rather huskily. "But, you see, I felt bound to give Lee a chance."

"Tacha! Lead-pizenin's what he's pinnin' for!" grunted the other.

This was quite untrue, however. I was not pining for "lead-poisoning" at all. I had no wish to be riddled with bullets. Rawson was a "badman" of the worst type, and thrived on violence. Happily, Ferroll had different ideas.

I must confess, however, that I was troubled with grave misgivings. Perhaps, after all, Rawson's plan would have been the best. To die straight away would be better than lingering on hopelessly until, at last, I dropped from sheer exhaustion—or fell down a treacherous shaft-hole.

But—and that little word means a lot—there was a chance that I should not die. Ferroll had said so himself. He had only taken this step because he

wished to assure his own safety. Privately, I suspected, he held the view that I should perish very quickly; but he liked to think that no actual murder had been committed.

The whole business was dastardly, and I had little hope of getting out of it alive. Nevertheless, there is an old axiom to the effect that while there is life there is hope; and I had proved the incontrovertible truth of that on many occasions. Often enough I had been in a tight corner, with the prospect of death staring me in the face—but I had escaped in the end. Sometimes I had escaped by sheer luck; sometimes by means of my own ingenuity; sometimes by unexpected aid.

It is one of my principles to remain optimistic until all hope is positively and absolutely dead. Before giving myself up for lost I would wait. Men had sometimes lost themselves in the mine-tunnels, and had ultimately escaped. Others—and I must admit that they formed the larger proportion—had perished alone and in darkness.

Was it to be my fate to add to that larger proportion?

It must be obvious, from the fact that I am writing this record, that I did escape. But I only escaped at an appalling cost—a cost such as I had never imagined possible.

Before talking about my escape, however, it would be as well, perhaps, to tell of my adventures down in the old mine. Nipper, no doubt, when he reads this, will be quite ready to criticise mercilessly. I must not complain, however; I have passed some pointed remarks concerning his own literary efforts on more than one occasion.

Well, the events immediately following the pleasant little conversation in the old shack were rather rapid. I was still roped, and quite helpless. If I shouted for assistance I should not do myself an ounce of good.

Ferroll left me, and I found myself in the grip of Rawson and two other men of the same calibre as himself. There was nothing particularly dramatic about my descent into the mine.

Just behind the shack there was a kind of pit. I could not see very well in the darkness, but I suspected that, years previously, a portion of the workings had caved in, leaving a deep depression.

At all events, I was pushed down to the bottom of the hollow, and then held by

Rawson's companions while Rawson himself fumbled with something in the darkness. He appeared to be lifting a weight of some sort, and I dimly saw a huge slab of timber fall back.

"Say, this'll be a fust-class, dandy grave for the feller," remarked Rawson. "He sure don't deserve such luxury. Guess we'll get busy, boys."

"I'd like to hear the dogone hoboe squeal," said one of the other men roughly. "He don't seem to hev' grit enough ter—"

Rawson interrupted with a short laugh.

"Geo!" he exclaimed. "Grit? Say, Spike, you'd best guess some other way! Grit? Believe me, this feller's so chock full o' sand that he ain't capable of speaking'. He's just chokin' with grit!"

"You are complimentary, my dear Rawson," I put in quietly. "I am not choked by any means, and let me remind you that this delay is neither necessary nor advisable. I fancy you grumbled at Ferroll for using too much 'hot air.' Get busy, and don't talk about it."

"Waal, you're cool, stranger!" exclaimed Spike. "Guess the Rockies are jest blazes compared to you! Say, do you know that you're goin' to certain death? Hev' you got that?"

"The penitentiary is a charming place for a holiday, Spike," I said thoughtfully. "You're booked for penitentiary—sure. You'll strike that institution before so very long. Maybe you thought I was working alone? I wasn't."

Spike cursed uneasily.

"Say, Rawson, that dude Ferroll is a biame guy, anyways," he said. "Guess we'd best let this feller go—"

"Guess you've got cold feet, Spike!" snapped Rawson. "Down with him! Mobbe we'd best lower him a piece before cuttin' the rope. If he gets out alive—waal, that's Ferroll's funeral."

My words, bantering as they had been, had some slight effect. Apparently, I was to have dropped down a disused shaft-hole. I was to have been dropped sheer.

But Rawson had changed his original plan. I was roughly hoisted up, thrust into the gaping cavity, and lowered. The long, stout lariat held me securely, and I was jerkily lowered into pitchy darkness. The rope cut into my arms cruelly.

Then, after I had descended a fair distance, I hung stationary. My feet were still dangling in space. The rope seemed

to give a ripping jerk, and I fell—down—down!

But, with a jarring shock, I struck the bottom of the shaft—which was, fortunately, fairly short. But I knew that the preliminary lowering had saved me from at least a broken limb. If I had been dropped from the very top I should certainly have smashed a leg—probably both.

My coolness and apparent unconcern had made all the difference. Rawson and his companions suspected, probably, that other detectives were at work—and my reference to penitentiary had struck home. The "gunmen" had fulfilled their contract to Ferroll—I had been dropped into the old mine workings—and they were satisfied.

In falling I struck my head rather severely, and I was dazed for several minutes. I dimly heard sounds far above me, and then all was silent.

The heavy piece of timber had been replaced, and I was left to my fate. The air was comparatively pure, so it was obvious that the shaft-holes, although closed and abandoned, allowed the air to circulate freely in the deserted workings.

My first concern, after my head had ceased its painful throbbing, was to free myself from the rope which encircled my arms. The rope being now loose, this was a simple matter.

I had fallen on my feet, but had at once staggered over. I was now sitting with my back to the bare wall, and I remained in this position until the blood had circulated somewhat.

My position was far from being cheerful, and I reviewed the events of the evening. To commence with, I did not blame myself in the slightest for being in such an appalling "hole."

I had been seized in the open city streets, and carried off helplessly. I had never imagined that Ferroll would adopt such tactics—and I think I was justified in taking that view. How could I have suspected? I had underestimated the determination and resource of the rascal, maybe, but it would be absurd to blame myself for being unprepared. The attack had come unexpectedly, and no man, no matter how astute, could have foreseen the event.

Well, the next thing was to get a full understanding of my predicament. It was serious, I knew—deadly serious. The chances were that I should never see the

light of day again—unless it was through the chink of surface opening far out of my reach.

If I shouted until my voice became a hoarse whisper I should not succeed in attracting attention. To hope for rescue from outside was futile. These mine-workings were never visited from year in to year out; they were abandoned by man.

I wanted to be furiously angry—with myself and with Ferroll. But I remained calm. Anger, at that time, would have been an absurdity. Anger would not help me—it was a time for careful thought—and action.

But what was there to think about?

And how could I act?

All the thought in the world would not alter the position; and action, it seemed, must be restricted to walking about in pitchy darkness, until, at last, I chanced to fall down a shaft-hole. These, I suspected, were quite unprotected, and their depth was unknown. Death would certainly follow such a fall.

"You're in a deuce of a mess, old man!" I confided to myself, having nobody else to talk to. "A—deuce—of—a—mess! If you get out of it alive you'll be a wonder. I fancy you're booked for the long trail this journey!"

And something seemed to reply in my brain.

"Get up, you lazy bounder!" it said. "You'll never escape by squatting in that position! Get a move on!"

Obediently I rose to my feet, and gingerly paced round within a restricted circle. The rock was dry, and there were little heaps of crushed ore lying about. After a while I felt better, for my blood was circulating freely.

Then I made a discovery.

In fact, I made three discoveries.

Placed in the correct order, they were the following: my revolver, my brandy-flask, and my electric-torch.

"By James!" I exclaimed. "My friends were very careless!"

I took a pull at the brandy, and felt greatly refreshed. Then I carefully felt my automatic, and found that it was fully loaded. And a touch of the torch-button resulted in a bright stream of light flashing across the cavern.

Of course, Ferroll had not searched me—there had been no need for such an act. I had been helpless, and had been cast down into this living tomb. Rawson and Spike and the other "gunmen"

would probably have rifled my pockets if they had thought of it—but, fortunately, they had been too anxious to get rid of me to think of such a detail.

And, upon due consideration, of what use was my revolver? Of what use was the electric-torch? Of what use was the brandy?

The latter, perhaps, would keep me alive for a certain amount of time—but the agony would be prolonged. I thought of firing my automatic, in the hope of drawing attention, but dismissed the idea as useless.

A thousand shots would have remained unheard—and there was the risk of the vibration causing a fall of rock—and that would have hastened the end very effectually.

The torch, however, promised to be useful.

For a certain amount of time I should be able to see my way about. Ferroll had counted upon my being blinded by the darkness. It was possible that I should, by careful examination, discover a spot which could be conquered—a shaft which I could climb.

It would be necessary to husband the battery very carefully. If used continually an electric-torch battery doesn't last much longer than an hour. But it is capable of giving some hundreds of long flashes. These flashes, at intervals, would save me from falling headlong down a treacherous shaft.

I did not raise my hopes too high, however.

Experience had taught me to smother emotion at a time like this. Hopes, as a rule, are only raised to be blighted, and I was careful to retain an open mind. I was in dire straits—and it was no good throwing dust in my own eyes.

I saw, by using the torch, that I was in a roughly-hewn tunnel. To right and left of me it penetrated into the solid rock. Above towered the smooth walls of the shaft, with timbers covering the exit.

One glance told me that escape that way was impossible.

Without further ado, I plunged along the left-hand tunnel, flashing my light occasionally. After a time I emerged into a wider chamber, and from this there were many tunnels, leading in various directions.

The silence down there was like that of an Egyptian pyramid. It could almost be felt. It was horrible. I was alone—

alone in a vast maze of mine-workings, which honeycombed the very foundations of Snake City.

Yet, in all that waste of tunnels, I felt hemmed in; I felt restricted in my movements. The tunnels mostly were narrow and low, and I had a feeling within me that I should be like a man on the trackless desert; I should wander round and round, only to find myself at my starting-point.

Haphazard, I selected one of the tunnels, and strode along it. To keep any idea of direction in my mind was impossible. The tunnels were everywhere, branching here and there, and I was constantly turning into fresh ones.

Pools of copper water lay in places, and I splashed through these, in every case before I was aware of their presence. More than once I stumbled over stray piles of broken ore, and my hands and legs were painfully grazed.

Great shaft-holes gaped in the flooring at intervals, and I was obliged to use the torch fairly frequently. Without it I should undoubtedly have perished within the first half-mile of my walk.

In places I discovered shafts leading upwards; but they were all unclimbable. When at last the battery of my torch showed signs of "petering" out, I felt the first pang of real hopelessness.

Tired out, parched, and depressed, I sat down in a dry spot, and considered the situation afresh. In the course of this consideration I apparently dozed. At all events, I awoke with a start—instantly on the alert.

Something had touched one of my feet!

I knew that I had not fancied that touch. For a few seconds I remained perfectly still. Again came the touch, soft and gentle. Absurd as it was, and ashamed as I am to admit it, a cold shiver seemed to pass down my spine.

I knew that I was alone—and yet—!

Then there came a sharp pain just near my ankle. I clenched my teeth and pressed the button of my torch—which was just near my hand. The battery, refreshed after its rest, so to speak, obliged with a brilliant shaft of light.

For a second I was dazzled.

Scores of little points of light seemed to twinkle round me.

Then something moved—some objects scampered over my legs, and several shrill squeaks rent the air sharply. I laughed in a harsh, nervous fashion, and sprang to my feet.

I was surrounded by rats!

They were not ordinary rats, such as we see in England. They were enormous mine-rats, famous for their appalling ferocity and daring. They were as large as well-developed kittens.

I knew well enough that the brutes would not hesitate to attack me unless I drove them off. And, being in such large numbers, they would have no difficulty in overpowering me, once they got me down.

To be killed by rats was not exactly a pleasant death.

The huge brutes showed no signs of retreating; on the contrary, they pressed forward relentlessly, and they appeared to be numberless. Obviously, I must act with decision.

Pulling out my revolver, I fired a couple of rapid shots.

The reports were almost overpowering, echoing and re-echoing through the tortuous mine workings. Fortunately, the vibration caused no fall of rock. And the rats, leaving two casualties behind them, scampered off with a perfect pandemonium of terrified squeals.

"Phew!" I muttered huskily. "No more sleep for me!"

The horror of my position was beginning to grip me. The outlook was so hopeless—so horribly devoid of promise.

Death would come sooner or later—the sooner the better, I thought.

I wandered on afresh, dully now, without hope and without animation. My perambulation was mechanical; I was keeping on the go because it was dangerous to rest. To tell the truth, I was moving all the time. From tunnel to tunnel I went, aimlessly, hopelessly.

My torch was nearly exhausted; it gave out a dim, yellowish light, and promised to die away completely. I remember looking at my watch. It had stopped when I struck the bottom of the shaft. I had no idea of the time. Perhaps it was morning already.

Then I stumbled. I staggered forward, my torch flying out of my hand. I was in utter, impenetrable darkness. Somehow, my left foot slipped, and I moved it so as to obtain a better footing.

But my foot met—space!

The next second I was plunging down a long, rough slope. Dust smothered me; I was blinded. In vain I tried to stay my headlong progress. I slithered down, bruised, torn, and breathless.

Then my head struck a projecting rock,

and I became dazed. Somehow, I knew that I had come to a standstill. I had reached the bottom of the slope. For quite a long time I lay there, getting my breath and my wits.

At last, rather surprised that I was still alive, I sat up.

"It's not a bit of good, old man!" I told myself. "You're finished——"

My senses seemed to whirl for a moment. I was looking along a low, narrow tunnel. At the end of it, far from me, a point of yellow light glowed! It was a lantern! I stared stupidly.

"You're dreaming!" I muttered.

But I knew, even as I formed the words, that I wasn't dreaming. The light was real! But what could it mean? A light—and a light in a lantern, moreover—can't burn without human agency.

How did the lantern get here—far down in the catacombs of the deserted mine-workings? I didn't think it worth while to puzzle over the question, but simply staggered to my feet and moved forward.

My heart was thumping briskly.

I was getting near the light when I heard voices. I paused and listened. Yes, I could hear human voices. But they weren't talking in English. The language was Chinese—the Cantonese dialect!

Just for one second I was filled with amazement; then the truth flooded my mind in a rush. The proprietor of my hotel had been chatting to me only that morning about the terrible Fu-Chang-Tong—a murderous Chinese secret society!

The Fu-Changs, so my informant had told me, were the most bloodthirsty ruffians in existence. I had heard of the "Tongs" on several occasions. I knew for a fact that the society had members in every big city in the world. And in Snake City, it seemed, the Tong had a great many members. The large number of coolies at work in the mines accounted for this.

I needed no telling about the murderous nature of the Fu-Changs; I had heard many stories concerning them. But the hotel proprietor had told me that the society held its meetings, in Snake City, far down in the bowels of the earth, in a section of the old mine-workings, which they had taken apart for their own use.

At the time I had been sceptical of this story—but now I knew!

And, with that knowledge, I became filled with fresh dismay. All hope of rescue had vanished from my breast. The Fu-Changs, finding me in their secret haunts, would not allow me to go free.

Apparently, I had fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire—and the fire promised to be decidedly hotter!

CHAPTER III.

I FIND MYSELF IN THE HANDS OF THE FU-CHANG-TONG, AND THINGS HAPPEN—A CERTAIN GRATEFUL PERSON HELPS ME, BUT LUCK DECIDES AGAINST ME—I MEET MY YELLOW FRIENDS AGAIN, AND THEY CONFER A GREAT HONOUR UPON ME.

THE Fu-Chang-Tong!

The very name seemed to scare me.

Perhaps that statement will be questioned. That I—Nelson Lee—should be scared! Why not? Why shouldn't I be scared? Anybody who has any knowledge of Chinese secret societies will understand my state of mind.

By allowing myself to be captured by the Fu-Changs I should be asking for death. More. The Chinese do not kill their victims painlessly. I should be regarded as an intruder, a spy. Any white men who intrude upon the secrets of the Chinese are not allowed to live. They die—violently—sometimes slowly.

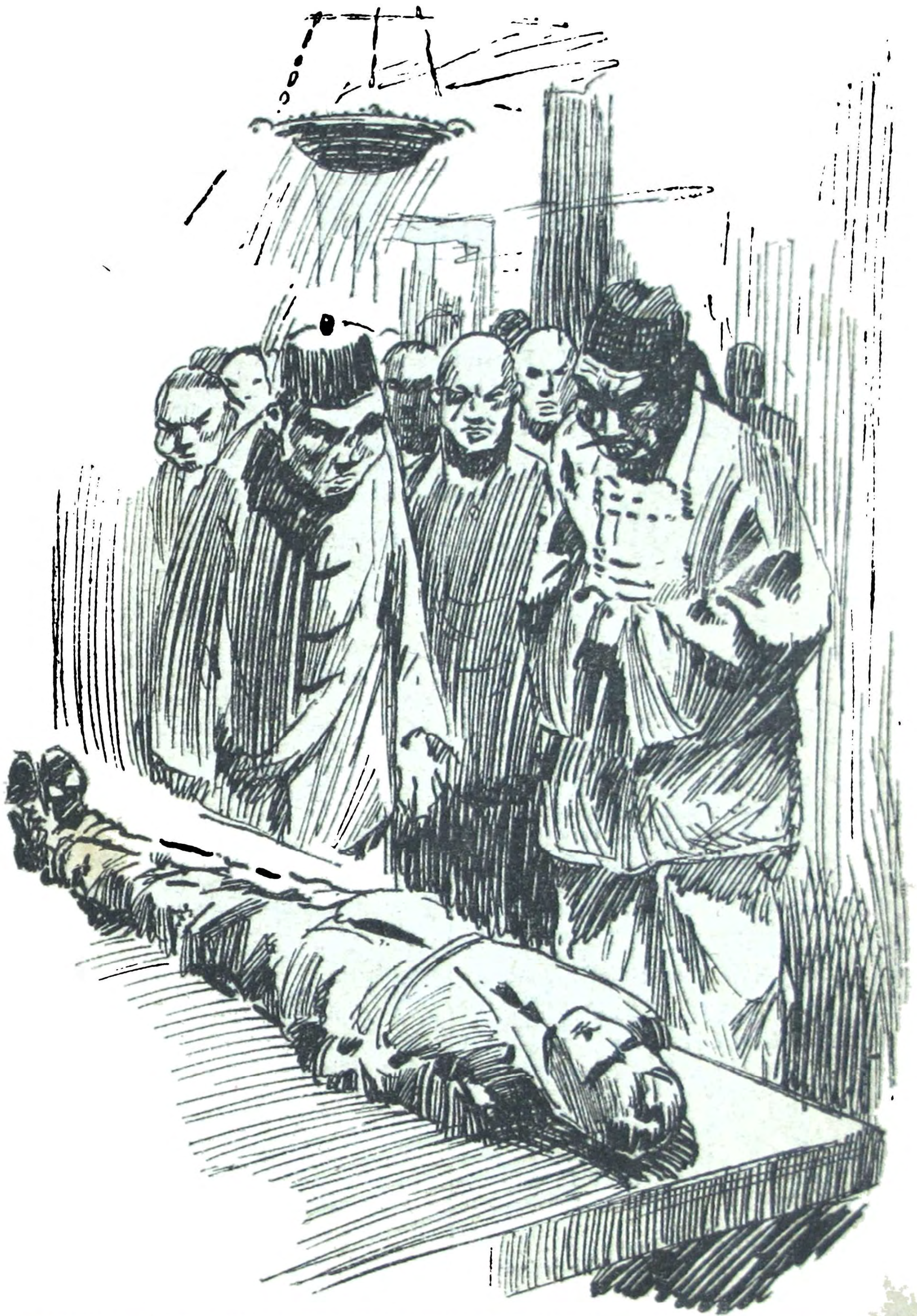
It will be realised, then, that I was not overjoyed by my discovery. I began to wish that I was still in the other galleries of the deserted mine. Death by thirst and starvation—and rats—was better than torture. Yes, that is what I suspected.

Torture!

The Chinese, ordinarily, may seem to be a submissive, peaceful lot. But in their heathen religion, in their secret meetings, they are bad fellows to butt up against. Down here I was at their mercy, far from any assistance.

I decided, then and there, to make my way back out of the light's range. I accordingly turned, and hurried along the narrow, slimy tunnel—for here the walls were moist and dank. The air was almost foul.

But I had realised the truth too late. Even as I was hastening away, I heard the swift patter of feet behind me. With set teeth I turned, having no wish to feel a knife slide into the small of my back.



Two blue-bloused, pig-tailed Ohinamen were glowering down at me.—(See p. 18.)

As I was turning something struck my head. I staggered and fell, momentarily stunned. When I was capable of connected thought again I made the uncomfortable discovery that I was bound hand and foot! Thin, piercing cords were about my wrists and ankles.

Two blue-bloused, pig-tailed Chinamen were glowering down at me. They were jabbering together swiftly, and were obviously angry. I was acquainted with Cantonese slightly, but these fellows were talking too quickly for me to understand.

My best plan, I thought, was to adopt a bold front.

"Now then, my friends," I said huskily. "what's the trouble? I haven't done you any harin—" I paused, then added: "You speak English, I suppose?"

They stared at me, but made no reply. Then other yellow men crowded along the tunnel, and the jabbering was renewed. Finally, I was roughly grasped by the feet and shoulders and carried away.

Through several dimly lit tunnels, all slimy and evil-smelling, I was conveyed. Then, at last, the tunnel widened, and I saw an opening with a big, dirty-looking curtain before it.

The curtain was pushed aside, and I was borne through into a big, well-lit chamber. The walls were dry here, and the roof high above. The air, too, was purer. But the place was choked with Chinamen, and excitement ran high.

The news that a "foreign devil" had been found in the sacred Fu-Chang-Tong stronghold caused tremendous animation. The Tong-men, I saw, were all very much the same—attired in blue blouses, and adorned with greasy pig-tails. They wore black hats. There were three men, however, who were dressed entirely in black—and these I knew to be priests. I was thrown upon a low bench, and one of the priests shouted out something in sharp tones. Instantly the chattering ceased, and the Tong-men stood round, looking at me with glittering, excited eyes. For the most part the faces were expressionless, but their eyes told of their animosity and hatred.

The priest stood over me.

"I Ling-Hoo—big priest," he informed me in fairly good English. "What you do in this place? Why you here?"

"I happened to drop down one of the old shafts of the Addisbee Mine," I replied, thinking it unnecessary to go into

full details. "It was quite by accident that I found myself in these particular galleries. If you will see me to the surface safely, Ling-Hoo, I will pay you well—"

"That fool talk," snapped Ling-Hoo harshly. "You gleat big liar! You no fall down shaft. You come spy. You come find out Tong secrets. You no go back to 'Melican people.'"

I laughed with an assumption of carelessness.

"My dear friend, I had no intention of spying whatever," I replied. "Why should I wish to spy? I am an Englishman—not an American. I am a stranger in Snake City. The Tong is no concern of mine, and I have no wish to interfere in its affairs. I am, indeed, greatly in favour of the splendid movement."

I thought it advisable, under the circumstances, to honour the Fu-Chang rascals. Not that I hoped for any mercy on their part. If I had done so I should have been disappointed. I didn't get any.

"You big liar," said Ling-Hoo candidly. "We dlop you down deep hole. You die. You no see big steets again."

I didn't make any reply. What was the use? To tell the truth, I did not feel up to arguing. I was greatly fatigued, and my throat was parched. All I wanted to do was to sleep. By all appearances I was destined to sleep very soundly—so soundly that there would be no awakening.

These Chinamen, having decided upon their course of action, did not waste much time. Certainly they went through my pockets and cleared me of every article I possessed. Ling-Hoo, I noticed, personally took charge of my pocket-book. This contained something like two hundred dollars in bills. I saw his eyes gleam as he noted the fact.

I was to be "dlopped" down a deep hole. That sounded quite definite. In all probability the deep hole was a regular burial place for enemies of the Fu-Chang-Tong. There would certainly be no escape for me this time—unless a miracle happened. And miracles, unfortunately, are things of the past.

Ling-Hoo gave his orders, and I was lifted by two burly coolies and carried out of the big meeting-cavern. I guessed that I was right beneath the busiest portion of Snake City—perhaps under Main Street itself.

But I might as well have been in the

heart of China itself. Everything about me was Chinese. Probably—almost certainly—I was the first white man who had set foot in these subterranean haunts since they had been appropriated by the Fu-Chang-Tong.

And the Tong could not allow me to go free—that was impossible. These Chinamen practised all manner of illegal acts: opium-smuggling, robbery, etc. They took me for a spy—a revenue detective, probably. And I couldn't blame them.

I was carried by the two coolies down tortuous passages. Here and there niches had been cut into the walls, and small lanterns stood in these places. At last the journey came to an end.

In the wall of the tunnel there was a kind of crack, scarcely wide enough to admit a full-grown man. I was forced through, and then saw that the place beyond was a kind of half-demolished cavern. Ling-Hoo had followed us in, carrying one of the lanterns with him.

Heaps of crushed ore were lying about, and here and there lay a pool of evil-looking water. The roof, jagged and torn, was quite low. In the very centre of the place lay a heavy slab of stone. This was lifted up with difficulty, and a black hole yawned below.

"You dlop down—savvy?" grinned Ling-Hoo evilly. "Bottom hundleds of feet below. Big locks down there; they smash you up. No escape from the Tong. Savvy?"

"I understand perfectly," I said quietly. "Go ahead!"

Of course, I had given myself up for lost. I was, indeed, practically resigned to the horrible fate in store for me. Of what use would it be to protest, to plead, to threaten? My words would be laughed at. I was surrounded by hundreds of enemies. These Chinamen had no personal enmity towards me, but I had intruded upon their sacred ground. For that I must die.

Without a doubt, the fire was proving hotter than the frying-pan!

I was lifted bodily and held over the gaping cavity. Just for one second I hung, suspended; then, at a word from Ling-Hoo, the coolies released their grip. I dropped sheer.

At the same second, the stone slab crashed into place. Ling-Hoo and his companions had done with me. I was dead. The incident had been settled.

I dropped into the inky blackness without touching any rocks. It was as though I had been plunged down into open space. A hundred thoughts flashed through my mind in that brief space of time.

"Nipper—poor youngster—he'd never see me again—"

Then I struck something. I must have dropped about twenty feet—no more. My falling body encountered something. What was it? My descent was abruptly stopped. I was floundering within the folds of a—net!

Except for a slight graze on my left cheek, I was unhurt.

But what in wonder's name had happened?

Yes, I was certainly caught in a net of some kind. Utter blackness surrounded me. I heard the ropes which held the net straining beneath my weight. I lay perfectly still, too completely surprised to think clearly.

I had anticipated certain death—and I was alive! I had been caught in a net after having fallen a bare twenty feet! The rocks below, according to the cheerful Ling-Hoo, were hundreds of feet farther down.

Then I heard a faint movement, and a voice.

"I guessee you muchee surprised, Mist' Lee!" came the soft, whispering voice. "I savee you, Mist' Lee. You savee me, I savee you."

"By James," I ejaculated—"Ah-Foo!"

"No speakee loud. Heap danger," said the voice. "Talkee velly soft."

The speaker was none other than Ah-Foo, the Chinaman I had rescued from Huntley Ferroll! I had completely forgotten the incident, and Ah-Foo as well. Apparently Ah-Foo had not forgotten me.

The truth flashed into my mind on the instant. I had saved Ah-Foo from almost certain death. And he, in his turn, had come to my rescue just when things had been desperate. The Chinaman had squared things up.

"Ah-Foo," I whispered tensely, "you have saved my life!"

"Me knowee that," he murmured. "I velly glad. Allee samee much danger. You no flee yet, mist'. Me lisk evelything. You no get flee until you gettee out of mine. Mo guidee you."

"By Jove, you're a brick, Ah-Foo!" I exclaimed warmly.

"Me no blick," he replied. "Me glateful. Me lepay you—as I plomise."

I felt him quite close to me in the darkness. Then a match scratched, and I saw Ah-Foo lighting a stump of candle. This he placed on a projecting rock. His yellow face wore a scared, hunted look, and I was impressed. The man was risking his own life by coming to my rescue, and I decided that a Chinaman, after all, is capable of gratitude and loyalty.

The net in which I was lying was coarse and strong. It was secured by ropes to the rocks, and below me yawned a black, empty space. The shaft was about ten feet square, and the net covered the whole space. With the net in position, it would have been impossible for me to plunge right down.

Ah-Foo grasped my collar, and dragged me to the side. He was standing in the hollow of a narrow tunnel, which, at this point, joined the shaft. Another tunnel opposite, I saw, was blocked by fallen rocks.

In a few moments I found myself lying on the floor of the tunnel, and Ah-Foo had cut through my bonds. I was too animated by what had occurred to worry about the "pins and needles" which seized me.

"Now, Ah Foo, how did you do it?" I asked softly. "I will reward you —"

"Me want no leward, Mist' Lee!" he interjected. "You savee my life, I savee yours. Guessee we quits. Savvy? Allee samee squared up."

I laughed softly.

"All right, then," I said. "But how did you fix up this net affair?"

Ah-Foo looked about him uneasily.

"No talkee much," he said. "Velly gleet danger. Me belong to Fu-Chang-Tong—velly powerful secler society. Tong-men velly dangelous fellers."

"And you're a Tong-man?"

"Allee samee dangelous," Ah Foo reminded me. "Me savee you—you good man to me. No likee you to die. When you comee into Tong Head-chamber, I there. I hear that you going to die—to dlop on to locks. No wantee you to die. sneakee away, and fixee net. Me catchee you—savvy? Now we go up tunnels to surface. I guidee you, Mist' Lee."

"Give your orders, Ah-Foo," I said. "I'm in your hands."

"This tunnel lower down than others—velly little used," he went on. "Safee so long as we don't makee noise. I leadee you to surface. Find yourself in Chinatown. Leavee Snake City stlaight off. Savvy? No lemain, or you gettee knife."

"I understand," I replied grimly.

I should certainly leave Snake City with as little delay as possible once I reached the welcome surface again.

Ah-Foo touched my arm as we were about to walk up the tunnel.

"No usee light," he said, blowing out the candle. "No talkee. Be velly quiet. Tong-men all 'lound. If we meetee any I leavee you—must. Chop-pee off head if I found helping you."

"I won't make a sound," I said. "Trust me, Ah-Foo."

We walked along the tunnel for some little way. Then the Chinaman gripped my coat, and whispered that there were steps ahead. We mounted quite a long flight of roughly hewn stone steps, and then found ourselves in another of the interminable tunnels. The atmosphere here was warm and unpleasant.

My heart was beating quickly. If things went all right, I was to get free. Free! After my experience, freedom seemed almost impossible.

But luck was dead against me. Things did not go right.

Ah-Foo led me from one tunnel into another. The lanterns in the niches glowed brightly in places, but the passages were mostly in shadow.

Just as we were turning a corner, Ah-Foo came to an abrupt stop.

"Allee up!" he breathed hurriedly. "Ling-Hoo comee with other pliests!"

"Great heavens!" I muttered, aghast. I had really believed that I should escape. I turned to Ah-Foo to speak again, but the man had vanished like a puff of smoke. As he had warned me, he had left me to my own devices. Under the circumstances, I could not blame him.

I crouched against the wall, hoping that the Chinaman would pass by another tunnel, for there was a maze of openings at this spot.

But I saw the black-hatted figure of Ling-Hoo turn into the very tunnel I was standing in. Discovery was inevitable. Flight was futile, for I should only run into other enemies within a few minutes.

It was essentially a time for bold action.

And there was no time for even rapid thought. Hardly knowing why I did so, I strode forward with an assumption of great assurance. Ling-Hoo and the two other Tong-men with him, both priests, came to an abrupt halt.

"You thought you would kill me, fool of a Chinaman!" I exclaimed sneeringly. "See? I am alive! The rocks on to which you hurled me have not even caused a scratch! I have magic powers! I am a great god!"

Ling-Hoo started back, with a string of Chinese oaths on his lips.

But I could see that he and his companions were startled. I had spoken the words desperately, scarcely realising their purport. Bitterly, I saw that death was to overtake me, after all. And I wished to shield Ah-Foo, if possible. He had befriended me, and it would be rough luck if he suffered.

Ling-Hoo was quite overcome for the moment. He had personally attended to my execution. He had seen me plunge down into the pit. And yet, within the space of ten minutes, I was facing him again, unharmed!

"How you get free?" he asked furiously.

"I got free because I have wings to fly with. I am possessed of great magical powers," I replied sternly, wondering, at the same time, how this tomfoolery would affect my captors. "Were you to fling me upon the rocks again, I should live. Were you to attempt to chop off my head, the axe would shiver to splinters in the hand of the executioner! You cannot kill me, Ling-Hoo! I am protected by spirits! I am a great god!"

Ling-Hoo's face blanched, and I detected in a second that I had impressed him. I had impressed his companions even more. They were talking together in low, uneasy tones.

Finally, they came forward and seized me. Then, without speaking a word, they led me along the tunnel until we came to the Tong Head-chamber again. I was pushed in, and there was an immediate commotion. The great cavern was still thronged with Chinamen.

I could not help noticing that I was treated with much greater gentleness on this occasion. Ling-Hoo, who seemed to be the head priest of the Tong—in Snake City, at all events—commenced speaking

to the assembled coolies in rapid, grave sentences. The Tong-men listened with equal gravity.

Glances of curiosity were turned upon me; and then, at last, the yellow men let their tongues loose. They jabbered together excitedly. I wondered if the net trickery was generally known, or whether it had been a device of Ah-Foo's own. If the latter, then the Tong-men were indeed puzzled.

I was not held or tied, but allowed to stand apart from the rest. I assumed an air of carelessness which I was far from feeling. I smiled serenely, and strove to hide the fact that I was nearly dropping with fatigue and exhaustion.

At last Ling-Hoo turned to me and spoke.

"You are velly gleet man," he said gravely. "You wish to return to the white people, your blothers?"

"I intend to return," I replied. "You cannot stop me, Ling Hoo. My powers are such that I could strike you dead at this moment if I so chose! Be careful how you treat me!"

A light of anger gleamed in his eyes.

"You speak boldly, white man!" he exclaimed. "The Tong will cause you no harm if you agree to join us. You are a gleet man. You must join the Fu-Chang-Tong. We make you a blood-brother! You will be useful to us."

A blood-brother of the accursed Tong! I shook my head.

"I will not agree——"

"You will not agree?" Ling-Hoo repeated fiercely. "Then you die! Savvy? You die, fool! Your words are empty, and your blood shall flow! But if you become one of us, you live!"

I appeared to consider. These Chinese rascals actually believed that I possessed some strange powers, and they were ready to admit me into the Tong. They probably feared that evil consequences would result if they killed me. The priests probably guessed the truth, but the others were awed, and, unless the priests agreed to let me live, there would be big trouble!

But, in order to live, I had to join the Fu-Chang-Tong! By refusing to join, I should sign my own death-warrant! Serious as the step was, appalling as the consequences were to be, I took the only course possible.

I joined!

CHAPTER IV.

I BREATHE THE AIR OF SNAKE CITY ONCE MORE, AND HASTEN MY DEPARTURE, BUT THE CURSE OF THE FU-CHANG-TONG IS UPON ME, AND MY LIFE IS MADE A MISERY—I ARRIVE AT LIVERPOOL, AND MEET NIPPER—THEN SOMETHING STRANGE HAPPENS.

THE rest of that adventure, down in the stronghold of the Fu-Chang-Tong, seems to be a kind of nightmare, and I cannot bring myself to describe it in full detail.

Indeed, I don't think I could do so even if I wished to.

After announcing my willingness to join the Tong, the initiation ceremony at once commenced. I joined that terrible Chinese secret society in order to save my life. It was the only loophole of escape, and I took it.

Had I refused to become a "blood-brother," I should have been mercilessly murdered; but, because of my imaginary powers, I was suffered to live. But I soon found that life under the shadow of the Fu-Chang-Tong did not promise to be easy.

I was taken into another rock chamber and prostrated before an excellently made but hideous idol. This was the god of the Fu-Changs, and they worshipped the thing fanatically.

The idol was large, and it was squatting upon an altar, with punk-sticks and tapers burning near it. The Tong-men lay on their stomachs and worshipped. I was forced to do the same.

Then the ceremonies commenced.

I listened to Ling-Hoo's words gravely, and agreed to every demand. Refusal would have been useless. I was told that I must obey every order of the Tong. I must attend every meeting. I must accomplish such work as was allotted to me without question and without a grumble.

Above all, I must remain in Snake City. Departure from the town would stamp me a traitor, and I should be followed and hounded down, and finally killed. In this respect, however, there was a clause which interested me.

If I "skipped," and succeeded in eluding the Fu-Chang-Tong's vengeance for the period of six months, I should be allowed to go free for the rest of my days. I should be considered harmless.

They believed, of course, that I could never survive six months of "hounding

down." They believed that I should die long before the expiration of that time. Well, perhaps they were right.

At all events, be the danger what it might, I was fully determined to ignore the injunctions and orders. I certainly did not intend to remain in Snake City for the remainder of my days!

I took no oaths, so I did not consider myself bound by honour. The solemn declarations I made were spoken before the horrible idol, and I swore to abide by them in the name of that clever piece of fakery. Certainly I had taken no binding oath. The Tong-men might consider that I had, but I did not.

I pretended to swear allegiance, but did not actually do so. Therefore I felt myself at liberty to leave Snake City as soon as I possibly could. At that time, I must admit, I did not believe fully in the power of the Fu-Changs.

I reckoned that it would take the Tong-men six months to find me, and by that time I should be safe from molestation. Why the Fu-Changs allowed a traitor to live freely after the expiration of six months I do not know. Probably a traitor had never survived, and so the thing was hollow.

At last the talking was dispensed with. I had been made a blood-brother. Then I discovered that I was to be branded—branded with a hot iron! I was inclined to demur at first, but realised that refusal would have been fatal.

I saw, too, that the mark was to be placed on the upper part of my left arm, and was only small—no bigger than an inch at the most. This would cause me no inconvenience, and would, indeed, serve as a memento of the awful affair.

Well, the thing was done—I was branded—and some soothing ointment was smeared over the place, which was really remarkable in its deadening properties. The Tong-men were not altogether easy, I saw, but now that I had joined the Tong, they were willing enough to accept me as a "brother."

I noticed Ah-Foo among the crowd, and was glad that he had managed to avoid suspicion. Undoubtedly I owed my life to that yellow-faced rascal. And I guessed that when my treachery became known—for I meant to leave Snake City at once—Ah-Foo would be ready to knife me if he got half a chance.

When I finally reached the welcome upper air again, I found that I was in the heart of that quarter of Snake City

which was known as Chinatown. It was evening, and gloriously fine.

The stars looked superb to me, and I lost no time in hurrying to the civilised quarters of the city. I arrived at my hotel, and my first task was to wash and shave and change my clothes.

After that I felt more like myself.

It may be thought that I went straight to bed. I didn't. There was work to be done before I thought about sleep. I was tired out, I will admit, but a certain gentleman named Huntley Ferroll claimed my immediate attention. I was a member of the Fu-Chang-Tong, and Ferroll was responsible for that. Ferroll had to wait, however, until I had demolished a hearty meal. With good food inside me I felt tremendously better.

Then I rang up my friend, Mr. Ranmore, the city marshal, and arranged a chat with him. I told him something of my adventures, although I made no mention of the Fu-Changs. There was no necessity.

After that, accompanied by a number of police officers, I raided the gambling-hell on Calamity Street. Bud's "joint" was full at the time—and Ferroll was among the crowd. Thinking that I was dead, he had been in no hurry to quit Snake City. He was captured with ease.

I am going into no details concerning these minor affairs. Ferroll has nothing whatever to do with my history from this point. He was placed in custody, and I then made all the necessary arrangements for his extradition. Ultimately he would be tried at Bow Street.

But I did not intend to remain in the United States until all the formalities had been settled. That was not my business—or I did not choose to make it my business. And I was not quitting America because I feared the Fu-Changs. I had previously decided to return to England as soon as I had captured my man.

Nevertheless, I was certainly anxious to shake the dust of Snake City from my feet. My brief stay in that go-ahead township had been sufficiently strenuous to suit my tastes.

Considering everything, I was glad enough to escape with my life. But I knew that the Chinese business was serious. I was practically certain that the Fu-Changs would give me some sign of their activity before I reached New York.

Once across the Atlantic, however, I was pretty positive that I would be safe.

The question was: should I be able to leave the States? Or should I be murdered before I could set foot on the deck-planks of a homeward-bound liner?

I resolved to be acutely upon my guard.

As for my oaths to the Tong, they were so much "hot air." I did not consider an oath binding when it was made in the name of a heathen idol which was constructed probably of wood or papier-mache.

I left Snake City that very night.

There was an east-bound express passing through at ten o'clock—a trans-continental "limited." So I booked my ticket, and left the great mining town straight away. I went straight to bed, and did not awaken until noon the next day.

By that time I was mightily refreshed, and enjoyed a square meal. Upon the whole I was feeling satisfied. I had finished my task, and was now on my way home. The only thoughts which troubled me were connected with my associations with the Fu-Chang Tong.

By this time, no doubt, the Fu-Changs were aware of my flight, and I was on the look-out for trouble.

I certainly found plenty—of trouble, I mean!

The first indication I received of Tong activity was at a fairly large town in Illinois State. There are a good many Chinese "Tongs" in the United States, let me add, but most of them are harmless. The Fu-Changs were about the most powerful organisation of all. There was only one Tong which worried me.

The train had made a fairly long stop at this particular town. It was mid-day, and tremendously hot. I was sitting in the long car against one of the open windows. Quite suddenly, and without the slightest warning, something whizzed past my right ear, and struck the woodwork at my back with a thud.

I turned my head sharply, and saw a long dagger sticking into the woodwork!

Instantly I scanned the crowd of people on the platform outside. There were two Chinamen not far off, but they were looking in the opposite direction, and seemed oblivious of my existence.

With set lips I quietly wrenched the dagger out, and slipped it into my pocket. Another memento! My end of the coach was nearly empty, and nobody seemed to have noticed the incident.

But I was startled—I admit the truth

That dagger had missed me by about two inches only! Whistling to myself, I left my seat and sauntered down the open car to the end. Here, I reckoned, I was safe from a similar attack.

The incident made me think, and my thoughts were not pleasant.

The Fu-Changs were already dogging me!

I half-expected some more exhibition of activity before New York was reached; but there was no sign.

In New York I drove straight to a big hotel near Broadway, and engaged rooms. I hadn't been in the hotel a couple of hours before my life was attempted in the hotel lobby, which was, at the time, crowded with people.

I suddenly felt something press against my side, and then there was a slight snap. A slim, well-dressed man was threading his way through the throng for the great revolving door. As he disappeared I caught a glimpse of a yellow face. The man was a Chinaman!

It was useless following him, so I went up to my room at once to investigate. I found about two inches of a stout needle sticking into my waistcoat. The end of the needle was coated with a deadly poison!

Why hadn't it penetrated into my skin? Well, being on the alert for stray revolver-shots, knife-jabs, etc., I had deemed it advisable to invest in a serviceable under-garment made of the finest woven steel—something after the style of chain-mail. It was guaranteed to stop any bullet that was ever turned out.

I had donned this thing as soon as I had arrived, and it was lucky I did. But for its protection that needle would have penetrated my flesh, and I should have dropped dead within a minute. As it was, the deadly needle snapped.

Things were getting warm! The yellow shadow was on my heels constantly. The Fu-Chang-Tong was obviously a society to respect. But my determination to defeat the murderous "brotherhood" was stronger than ever.

There was a White Star liner leaving for Liverpool the next day, and I just succeeded in booking a saloon passage. I did not go aboard until the very last minute. And even then a revolver-bullet whizzed past my head as I crossed the gangway.

Three futile attempts! Would the fourth attempt be futile? I wondered.

The whole business was getting on my nerves. Why should I deny it?

I positively expected to be attacked on the ship itself. There were Chinese stokers, I knew. It is difficult, no doubt, for stokers to gain access to the saloon deck; but Chinamen are queer fish.

I took every precaution against surprises. And, as it happened, nothing of a suspicious nature occurred. The voyage was enjoyable in every way. The weather was delightful the whole way, and by the time the Fastnet Rock was sighted I was feeling invigorated and cheerful.

The danger had passed, I told myself. The Fu-Chang-Tong had done its worst—and had failed. Under no circumstances would I return to the United States until six months had passed by.

I was bronzed, smiling, and healthy when the liner docked at Liverpool. It was evening, and the sky was clear. Old England looked singularly attractive to me. I had never welcomed its shores so much before.

Among all the crowds on the quay I easily detected the slim figure of Nipper. He had run up from London to welcome me—I had expected as much. The youngster was looking rather anxious, and I chuckled.

But, by the time I reached the bottom of the gangway, loaded with personal luggage, he was there, grinning all over his face, and looking as pleased as Punch. He rushed up to me and dragged the luggage out of my hands.

"Hallo, guv'nor!" he exclaimed delightedly, "jolly glad to see you back! I've been moping terrifically all these weeks! My hair's going grey!"

"It seems to me, Nipper, that you are unduly fat!" I retorted. "Your waistcoat seems decidedly tight about the middle. That is the result of slacking. You have been lazing about in a disgraceful fashion during my absence!"

He grinned.

"You're not exactly a skeleton yourself, guv'nor!" he said cheekily. "By jingo! I'm glad to see you again! Good old guv'nor! Give us your paw!" He flopped down my luggage without ceremony and grabbed my right hand—or paw, as he disrespectfully called it. Then he did his utmost to dislocate my arm. Failing in the attempt, he gave it up at last from sheer breathlessness.

"You're looking fine, sir!" he declared. "Had a ripping time, I'll bet!"

"Oh, yes, Nipper—a ripping time!" I agreed grimly.

It was nearly dark, but there were crowds about, and the scene was one of great animation. Nipper and I edged our way aside until we reached a kind of backwater, and there exchanged greetings more fully.

I had been reminded of the Fu-Changs again by his words, but I soon forgot my Chinese friends of Snake City. I had nothing to fear in England. Of course not! The idea was preposterous!

And then, as we were preparing to make our way to the waiting boat-train, something happened. There was a sudden rush of feet, and the next second Nipper and I were in the grasp of a dozen—Chinamen!

"Good heavens!" I muttered savagely.

In a flood I realised that I was no safer in England than I had been in America! These Chinamen were dock-labourers; rough-clothed, powerful men. And they had the audacity to attack me on the crowded quay!

"What the dickens!" gasped Nipper.

I saw three of the brutes making for me; they were all flashing long, wicked-looking knives. The affair was startling. Evidently the yellow men were careless of the consequences to themselves. But I knew why. They had been ordered to kill me, and they dared not refuse to obey that order.

The attack could have ended only in one way, but for a happy interruption. I should certainly have been knifed, notwithstanding my protective steel vest. The hounds were slashing at my throat.

The interruption came as suddenly as the attack. The latter had scarcely developed before there came a chorus of lusty shouts out of the dusk. A swarm of figures rushed up, and the next moment the Chinese labourers were routed.

The rescuers were bluejackets—men from a British cruiser which was then anchored in the Mersey. Three of the Chinamen, at least, were carried off to hospital with broken jaws. Those bluejackets had hit hard.

To attempt my life in such a public place had been preposterous, of course; but the attempt had nearly succeeded. These attacks could not go on for ever. Sooner or later the brutes would succeed. That was certain.

Nipper was flabbergasted.

"What—what's the meaning of it, guv'nor?" he gasped, when he could find time.

"I'll tell you later, young 'un," I replied grimly. "Wait until we get into the train. For the moment we must thank these splendid fellows for having come to the rescue so promptly."

And, later, in the train, I told Nipper all about it.

CHAPTER V.

I FIND THAT LIFE IS TOO STRENUOUS TO BE COMFORTABLE, AND DECIDE TO DISAPPEAR FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS—BUT IT IS NIPPER WHO SUGGESTS THE WAY OUT OF THE TROUBLE, AND I ADOPT HIS SCHEME WITHOUT HESITATION.

NIPPER was looking very grave by the time I had finished.

"It's serious, guv'nor," he said, with a long face.

"Very," I agreed. "Far more serious than I had supposed."

"If these Fu-Chang rotters are in Liverpool, they'll be in London," went on the lad. "Why, you're not safe for a minute, sir! You might be killed before you reach home! It's—it's appalling!"

"Hardly that, Nipper. I am not appalled," I smiled. "Certainly, we shall have to be exceptionally careful. I find it necessary to readjust my view of the whole business. In England I am no safer than I was in the United States."

Nipper looked scared.

"Hadh't you better skip over to Paris, or—or Rome, or—or—"

"Or where?" I asked. "If the Tong can follow me to London, it can follow me to Timbuctoo! These Chinese ruffians are everywhere, Nipper. They have sworn to kill me—and I fear they will do so in the end."

"You—you fear they'll kill you?" Nipper stammered blankly.

He stared at me, aghast. He would probably have displayed greater emotion had we been alone in the compartment. But two other people were in the opposite corner seats.

"They won't fail every time, my boy," I said quietly. "I tell you frankly, I expect to be murdered before a month is out. It is just as well to treat this matter openly. There is no sense in—"

"Before a month is out!" gasped my

young assistant. "You're—you're joking, guv'nor! You must be!"

"I'm not. Why should I expect to escape by the skin of my teeth every time?" I asked quietly. "The pace can't be kept up, young 'un. Perhaps the next attempt will be a failure, too. And the next after that. But, in the end, the Tong will win. It must. It is only logical to suppose so."

Nipper was simply stunned for a moment.

"Can't—can't we do anything, sir?" he asked huskily.

"What can we do?" I asked, in turn.

"Tell me that, Nipper."

"The police—"

"My dear lad, how can the police help me? Am I to remain indoors, a prisoner, with a body of policeman surrounding the house. Or must I go about with a bodyguard of special Scotland Yard detectives on all sides of me? No, Nipper, we shall have to cope with this grim business alone—if we can."

"Why not rent a cottage in the country, or at the seaside—a furnished cottage?" he asked. "You know, guv'nor, live the simple life for six months. Disappear from London—"

"The Tong-men would find me within a fortnight," I interjected.

"Oh, lor'! What a situation!" said Nipper dismally.

He was far more concerned than I was, for I was weary of the whole affair, and cursed the day that I had set foot in the dusty streets of Snake City, Colorado. All the same, I was not exactly anxious to die.

When London was reached, both Nipper and I kept our eyes well open; but we saw no sign of a Chinaman, and we reached Gray's Inn Road without incident. I was glad enough to be home again.

Well, the whole of the next day I remained indoors—not because I feared to go out, but because I was setting things straight, and settling down to fresh work, for I was determined to carry on as though no danger menaced me.

The day after that I went to Scotland Yard in connection with the Ferroll affair, but made no mention of the Fu-Chang society. I was unmolested, and the enemy gave no sign.

Several days passed, in fact, and I began to wonder if the Tong had given me up as a bad job. Or was it possible that there were no members of the Fu-

Chang organisation in London. I had certainly never heard of any actual case of Tong-men being in London.

And then, just when I was beginning to feel a little easier in mind, the next blow fell.

Nipper and I had been to the neighbourhood of Blackfriars on business, and by the time we had done, the summer evening was drawing in. We decided to walk along the Embankment as far as Westminster, for the day had been hot, and the air upon the Embankment was refreshingly cool.

I had, indeed, mentioned to Nipper, some time earlier, that we would stroll by the river on the way home. Whether those words of mine had been overheard, I do not know; but I strongly suspect that such was the case.

At all events, just as we were traversing a portion of the Embankment which was rather more gloomy than the rest—several of the lights were extinguished, I remember—we were attacked.

I have often wondered if those lights had been put out by the Tong men. I am half inclined to believe so. But I only suspect. The yellow devils were capable of any mischief! In any case, they had prepared to receive us. That was certain. And that proved that they had had an idea that we should walk that way.

The attack was a rushed affair.

It was all over in less than thirty seconds. I had been questioning Nipper about a gentleman who had called at my rooms that morning during my absence—a gentleman who was connected with some big public school in the south.

Nipper had only just commenced to tell me of the visitor and his business when there came a swift patter of feet behind us. I twirled round on the instant, my hand going round to my revolver-pocket.

"Your police-whistle, Nipper!" I panted. "Blow it—blow it!"

The next second, seven or eight dark figures were upon us. I saw poor Nipper place the whistle to his lips, but he never blew it. Something descended upon his head, and he fell to the pavement, dazed and helpless.

As for myself, I was literally swept off my feet. An evil-smelling rag was jammed against my nose and mouth, and my senses reeled. Yet the drug was not chloroform. It was something more objectionable and more effective.

I have a dim recollection of being lifted sheer over the parapet of the Embankment. I dropped into the river with a plunge, but was immediately fished out and laid in the bottom of a small rowing-boat.

Exactly what happened after that is indistinctly written in my mind, but I know that the boat proceeded down the river for quite a distance. Wapping was the actual destination, I afterwards discovered. At Wapping I was landed.

All was pitchy dark. There were three Chinamen in the boat, all of them clothed in the usual attire of dock labourers. They wore no pigtails, and they spoke good English.

The boat nosed its way beneath the slimy piles of an out-jutting warehouse jetty. By this time I was recovering the use of my wits; but I found that I had been bound and gagged, and was quite helpless.

Right beneath the piles the boat went, and came to a halt at last against a low wooden ledge, wet and slippery with river weed. I was hoisted on to the ledge, and carried along it until a trap-door was encountered.

This was raised, and I was flung down roughly into a kind of cellar. The fall bruised me and effectually woke me up. My captors followed me down, and half carried, half dragged me along a dank passage until a wooden door was opened. On the other side of this, a dim gasjet was burning.

I knew well enough that I was now within the confines of some noisome East-End opium-den. I was in the hands of the Fu-Chang-Tong!

“You die, pig of a traitor!” exclaimed a soft voice. “But you die slowly, after much torture! Savvy?”

Roughly, half an hour had passed.

I was bound to a chair in the middle of the evil-smelling cellar. Two powerful gas-jets illuminated the apartment, and the features of two Chinamen who were standing near me.

They were both attired in native costume, and their yellow faces were alight with evil triumph and satisfaction. Near by stood a small brazier, and there were several irons heating upon it. I knew well enough what those irons were for!

I was going to be tortured! I was to be murdered by inches!

But even now I did not despair. This

affair did not seem to be so hopeless as one might think. I remembered that Nipper had not been brought with me. If he was capable of any action at all, he would not waste much time before getting busy. But then, of course, the poor lad may have been badly knocked about.

I did not know the names of my captors or the location of their den; but both the Chinamen wore the same black robes as those priests had worn in Snake City. The brutes were fully aware of the whole circumstances, and they had been commanded to put the traitor to execution.

Before doing so, however, a cheerful entertainment was arranged—an entertainment in which I was the central figure. I was to be tortured. And the yellow men made no secret of their intentions.

I was bound to the chair in such a way that I could not move. I was stripped to the waist, and one of my captors suddenly whipped out an iron from the brazier, and pressed its white-hot extremity against my ribs. But he removed it on the second, merely causing a slight burn.

“Tastee nice, eh?” he grinned maliciously.

“You devils!” I panted.

“Heap plenty burnee now!” the fellow added.

This time he seized two irons, and I knew by the glint in his eyes that he meant to inflict upon me the most appalling burns. I was afraid—really afraid—that he would give special attention to my eyes!

And then the Chinamen both turned their heads abruptly. A sudden thumping and crashing was heard from without. My heart began to leap. Could it be—was it Nipper?

It was!

Nipper, accompanied by a strong force of police! The opium den was forcibly entered, and many arrests were made. But both the Chinamen who had been about to attend to me slipped through a trap-door and disappeared. They were not captured.

I then learned that Nipper had been somewhat dazed by the blow which had been administered, and had recovered after treatment by the nearest chemist, to whom he had been taken. I, of course, had disappeared by that time.

But Nipper, knowing well enough that I was in the hands of the Fu-Chang-Tong, did not delay action a second. The

lad, with commendable shrewdness, taxied at once to Scotland Yard, and interviewed my old friend, Detective-Inspector Morley.

The official police acted with great promptitude. Several of the known Chinese opium dens were raided simultaneously, and, as a result of one of those raids, I was rescued. Even while that particular den was being broken into, at least six other raids were in progress. If these had failed, then other Chinese haunts would have been given attention.

Happily, I was found at the first attempt. But what was the use? It seemed to me that I was only delaying the inevitable.

Nipper and I were in the consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road. It was late at night, and we were both sitting in deep arm-chairs. I was looking weary and feeling weary. Truth to tell, I was heartily sick of the whole infernal business.

"Frankly, Nipper, this sort of thing cannot go on much longer!" I exclaimed quietly. "The yellow shadow is always behind me, haunting my steps wherever I go! Life is not worth living, my lad! The Fu-Changs mean to dog me until I am dead. I fear they will succeed."

"Oh, guv'nor, you're pessimistic!"

"Have I not every reason to be?" I interjected, rather irritably. "My dear Nipper, my life has been attempted five or six times! Luck, my own ingenuity, and your timely assistance have all contributed to my safety at the present moment. But it can't last, young 'un. I am not capable of withstanding these murderous attacks for the period of six months! The Tong-men will have me!"

Nipper jumped to his feet wildly.

"They sha'n't, guv'nor!" he cried, glaring at me. "Do you hear? They sha'n't! You're alive and well now, and you're not going to be done to death by a set of heathen, piggish Chinamen! We must skip out of England!"

"And skip into worse danger!" I put in bitterly. "That won't do, my boy! The only possible loophole that I can see is for the pair of us to disappear completely—to adopt fresh identities, to live in such a new sphere of life that the Chinese will never guess the truth. You are in this affair as well now. The Fu-Changs know that you rescued me, and their enmity is also directed towards you."

"I don't care!" said Nipper defiantly.

"I don't suppose you do!" I smiled.

"But how does that affect the position? The fact remains that we have got to disappear. By James, Nipper, you are inspiring me with determination! As you say, the Fu-Changs sha'n't murder us! But—and here we come to the stumbling-block—how can we defeat the devils?"

Nipper puckered his brows thoughtfully.

"Fresh identity!" he murmured. "A new sphere of life! What about taking on jobs in some City office? No, that's rotten! That won't do at all! We want to get right away. By glory, I've got it!" he roared excitedly.

"Then, for goodness' sake let me hear it!" I smiled.

"Only this morning, guv'nor, while you were out, a chap named Sir Rupert Manderley called. You remember, I started telling you about it on the Embankment. Sir Rupert is a governor of St. Frank's College, Sussex. That's one of our largest and most exclusive public schools, as you know, sir."

"Yes. But what on earth——"

"Well, that's the wheeze!" Nipper exclaimed excitedly. "One of the house-masters has disappeared, or something like that. My idea is to make arrangements—secret arrangements—with Sir Rupert, and go down to the school. You'll be a master, and I'll be a junior schoolboy. Those Tong blighters would never think of looking for us there, would they? And we'll be as safe as eggs for six months!"

I slowly rose to my feet.

"Upon my soul," I exclaimed tensely, "you have hit the nail on the head, Nipper! Yes, it can be done; but we shall have to take the most elaborate precautions to throw the Fu-Changs off the right trail."

We talked over the idea for hours, and all preparations were made. It only depended upon the decision of the school governors, and I was pretty sure that I should be able to influence them the right way.

For six months Nipper and I were destined to live the lives of master and pupil at a big public school. The prospect was novel, and, indeed, somewhat attractive. It would be a complete rest for the pair of us, although there was, it seemed, detective work to be done.

THE END.

EPILOGUE.

RECORDING A BRIEF CONVERSATION BETWEEN MR. NELSON LEE AND NIPPER.

NELSON LEE and Nipper were lolling in their consulting-room. The great detective was smoking, and smiling amusedly. Nipper had just finished speaking. The lad, in fact, had been expressing his regret for having "cheeked" his master so scandalously a few days earlier.

"That's all right, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee lazily. "You're one of the best chaps breathing, but you've always got to remember that you can't have everything your own way in this life. Let me see! I forbade you to write any more of your 'Note-book' yarns, didn't I?"

"Yes, you jolly well did!" growled Nipper.

"Well, I remove that ban."

Nipper's eyes sparkled.

"That's ripping of you, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "That yarn of yours—all about the rotten Fu-Chang—is first-class. Blessed if I thought you'd turn out to be a giddy author! You've whacked me at my own game!"

"Hardly, Nipper!" smiled Lee. "I'm not altogether satisfied with my effort, either. There are many ways in which it could be improved."

"Oh, rats! I don't see that, sir," said Nipper. "And, anyhow, what about all our adventures at St. Frank's College?"

Quite a lot of things happened there, during that six months' stay of ours."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"There is material there for a number of stories," he agreed. "Quite a long series, in fact. Those adventures will, I believe, make interesting reading. But I don't think I am quite capable of writing up your side of the game."

"Well, I'm going to write up those school tales," declared Nipper enthusiastically. "I'll put them in my 'Note-book' series. In fact, I insist——"

"Now, now, young 'un——"

"Well, I don't insist," he amended. "I'm going to ask you to let me do 'em. They've got to be written, anyhow, and I think I'm the chap for the job. And, as you've been such a success at the scribbling business, you'd better devote a portion of your time—spare time—to the writing of sundry other adventures. What do you say, guv'nor?"

"It all depends upon how much spare time I have," smiled the great criminologist. "We'll see, Nipper. At all events, you go ahead. I dare say I shall be able to turn out a few stray yarns, here and there."

And so it was arranged.

Nipper was to write up the school adventures which immediately followed Nelson Lee's strenuous encounters with the Fu-Chang-Tong. And Nelson Lee himself would devote some spare time to the writing of more sedate episodes of his career.

STARTS NEXT WEEK!

A Magnificent New School and Detective Series,

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GRAND NEW SERIAL—JUST STARTING!

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

Read this first!

TOM CRAWLEY, champion light-weight boxer, is a boy stoker on board *H.M.S. Flyer*. Whilst on leave he learns that his father's fishing smack has been torpedoed. It promises to go hard with Fisherman Crawley, until

DAN SIMMONS, an old friend of the lad, and proprietor of a well-known boxing hall, shows a way out of the difficulty by offering Tom a fight with Jimmy Yowl, famous bantam-weight. The offer is accepted. Leave for the contest being refused, Tom takes "French leave." He wins the fight, and on leaving the hall is arrested as a deserter. Eventually he is pardoned.

Soon after the event, German battleships bombard the coast of England, and the *Flyer* goes into action. On the way back to port after a stiff engagement, in which she sinks a German destroyer, the *Flyer* strikes a derelict. The shock throws Tom overboard, and the *Flyer* puts back without him. Eventually he is picked up by Fisherman Thwaites. (Now read on.)

HOW THE NEWS CAME HOME.

THE *Flyer* had been in action. Like magic the news flashed through Weathersea, and a rush was made for the harbour by those eager to learn the details. In the first alarm among the wild rumours that prevailed it was said that she had been heavily fired upon and severely damaged, that she had been brought back to harbour with difficulty, and that she had many casualties aboard.

Relatives and friends of the members of the crew, with tears trembling beneath their eyelids, were among those who hastened, heart in mouth, most eagerly to the quay.

Mary Thwaites was among them, and presently, as she stood waiting and watching in the grey of dawn, before objects took their proper form and shape,

Bob Randle, who looked as if he had dressed in a hurry, joined her amid the crush.

"I've been looking for you, Mary," he said. "I knew you would be down here on account of Tom Crawley."

Mary smiled weakly.

"Tom is all right, I'm sure," she said. "though they say that the *Flyer* has been—riddled—"

"Don't you believe it, miss," cried a battered old fisherman, turning round. "I know that there *Flyer*. The German boat don't swim on the sea that could damage her."

And so, when the light of day came, and the ever-increasing crowd were able to see, they espied the *Flyer* lying snugly at anchor on the other side of the huge basin, with her nose flattened for the second time, but otherwise little the worse for her adventure.

They could see the seamen aboard her moving briskly about, cleaning up and polishing, as if nothing had happened. No shell-holes scarred her immaculate sides. Her smoke stacks stood erect, and they could hear the laughter of the seamen as they attended to their duties.

The relief was overpowering; and, to mark their sense of gratitude, the fisher-folk, men and women, broke into a mighty, resounding cheer that went echoing far across the water.

It was answered aboard the *Flyer*. There the seamen snatched their round caps from their heads, and roared until they were hoarse.

"Did 'e sink any Germans, mates?" shouted a leather-lunged old fisherman, hand to mouth.

"We blew the heart out of one of 'em," answered a burly A.B.

"And any casualties?"

"One man lost overboard," came in a roar.

A German destroyer sunk for the loss of a man! Why, it was nothing of a price to pay, though some hearts thrilled with apprehension as they feared it

might happen to be a Weathersea man who had gone.

The crowd melted, and went their various ways. Britain was strong at all points. The Hun was being hammered systematically everywhere, and he could do no damage without being forced to pay the price.

Bob Randle walked back into the town with Mary.

His face was serious as he turned his head to scan her charming profile and admire the tumbled masses of her hair, whose disarray seemed to suit her so admirably.

"Say, Mary," he said, after a while, "must you continue to go to sea aboard Fisherman Crawley's new fishing-boat?"

Mary raised her laughing eyes.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because of the danger of it."

"One oughtn't to think of danger in war-time."

"But you're a woman, not a man."

"I'm a fisherman's daughter, Bob."

Bob nodded, and was silent for a moment or so. Then—"It's not the risk of submarines that's troubling me, Mary," he went on. "It's the strewing of mines all round the coast. Did you see that twenty-three fishing-boats were sunk last week? They were all of them mined."

She tossed her glorious head.

"What do I care?" she replied. "Dad and the others are sweeping the mines up as fast as they are sown. I prefer to take the risk."

"And I am not taking any risk. I have secured exemption. And I am being sneered at, pointed at, in consequence. Mary, I sha'n't stand it much longer. Dad will have to manage as best he can with female labour, and I shall don the khaki uniform, and go out and fight for the Empire on the battle-fields of the Western Front."

Mary swung swiftly round.

"Bob," she cried, placing a pair of trembling hands upon his shoulders and smiling into his eyes. "Dear Bob, that's just like you. It has made me furious when I've heard Tom and a lot of others say you hadn't any pluck. But if nobody else is proud of you, I am."

How the grocer's son's face lit up.

"Do you mean it?" he cried.

"Yes, of course I do."

"Then do you think I'm right? Ought I to go? It may hit my old dad's business pretty hard if I do, for he's

nobody competent besides himself to look after it."

Mary's face grew serious.

"Yes, Bob dear," she replied, "I think you will be doing the right thing. I think you ought to go."

And so they ambled through the streets; and since she had eaten no breakfast, Bob asked her to "come in home" and have a bite with the family, a kindness of which she promptly availed herself.

Afterwards she went with him down into the shop, while he prepared for the day's activities.

Then, excusing himself to his father, Bob Randle saw Mary home.

As they opened the little wooden gate in front of the tiny but charming cottage in which she lived, Mary and Bob saw a sailor leaning against the frame of the door and talking to Mrs. Thwaites.

Mary, with a low cry, leapt forward, for she saw that her mother's face was white and drawn, and that she was trembling.

"Mother—mother," she cried, "what is the matter? Don't say there is bad news?"

The seaman turned, and eyed her critically. It was Bob's mate, Tomkins. He touched his cap, but remained silent.

Then Mary's mother spoke.

"Mary, my dear, poor sweetheart!" she sobbed, breaking down. "It's about Tom—Tom Crawley. He—he was lost overboard after the *Flyer* had sunk the German ship. Poor—poor Tom!"

Mary uttered a low cry, and her face went white. She stared vacantly at her mother and at the seaman who had brought the news. Only one life had been lost aboard the *Flyer* in that fateful engagement with the enemy, and yet fate had decreed that it should be Tom who had gone.

It seemed too, too cruel.

"Oh, mother!" she wailed; and she broke down, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Bob Randle removed his cap, and stood looking at her for a while.

Then he turned away, saying gently:

"I'll come and see you to-night, Mary, if I may."

Seaman Tomkins choked.

"It's a hard mission I've taken on," he muttered. "And now I must go and take the news to the old man."

The utterly unexpected blow thoroughly unnerved Mary Thwaites.

After Tomkins had gone, and she, in the privacy of the little front parlour, sat down alone, with moist eyes, to try and weigh up the tragedy which had suddenly made her life seem so empty, it seemed worse—far worse.

Only now did she realise all that Tom Crawley was to her.

When they'd been playmates together years ago, she had looked up to him as her hero. Later they had quarrelled and argued, as growing boy and girl will.

Latterly she had teased him by a pretended admiration for Bob Randle, though she really did like Bob as a dear friend. Piqued at Tom's indifference and blindness had perhaps led her on.

Now it all seemed so futile and silly. And Tom was lying out there in the deep, with the waves lifting him and carrying him over the surface of the ocean's bed, and she would never see him again.

Hiding her face in her hands, she rocked to and fro, moaning.

"Tom—Tom! Come back to me, Tom!" she cried, wringing her hands helplessly, and covering her face in turns.

But she knew that, if the news were true, she would never see the boy she loved, her wayward boxing sailor, again.

How the rest of the day passed, she knew not. She felt incapable of doing any work. She lay on her bed in her little room, under the low-tiled roof, abandoning herself to a fit of blank despair.

Only when the night came, and her mother forced her to come downstairs and eat, did she bestir herself.

And after supper Bob Randle came. He, seeing how it was with her, took her out, and together they walked up beyond the town, along the high cliffs, talking sympathetically all the while of Tom Crawley and his ways.

Had Tom been there to hear, his cheeks must have blushed at the simple, kindly things Bob said of him, and have stifled his jealousy of the civilian for ever.

Mary Thwaites was a strong-minded girl—a true fisherman's daughter. Yet she could not master her grief, and her pathetic appeal to Bob when they parted touched his heart as nothing had ever done before.

"Now Tom has gone, I have only you left, Bob, outside my relations. Be kind to me, Bob."

"I'll be as kind as I can be—as they'll let me be," he answered. "But I'm through with grocering now, lass. I've joined the Army. I shall change my armlet for khaki inside a week."

And Mary stared at him, big-eyed. She knew what that meant. Bob would go into training at once. Soldiers are quickly made these days.

Soon he would be leaving for France, and she might lose him there, even as she'd already lost Tom.

She bit her lip, and was brave. She smiled through her tears, but her heart was as heavy as lead.

"I'll come and take you for another walk to-morrow, Mary, if you'll let me," he cried, as he turned away, "and we'll talk about Tom. I know you like to talk about him."

There was no thought of self with Bob Randle. He was a real, live man, though Tom had always sneered at him and called him coward.

As Mary stood at the little gate and watched Bob stride away, her respect and esteem for him grew and grew. Bob was a good man, even though she had never cared for him, never could care for him, as she had cared for Tom.

THE FIGHT ON THE CLIFF.

IT so happened that the mine-sweepers remained at sea for two whole days and nights after Fisherman Thwaites had pulled Tom Crawley up out of the sea.

His intention of returning to port was frustrated by orders received from headquarters—imperative orders which he had to obey, and would never have dreamt of disobeying.

The orders were based on solid foundation, too, for Fisherman Thwaites and his mate of the sister ship never made such a haul of Hun mines as during that time.

At last they were relieved, and the trawlers returned to harbour for a brief and well-earned rest.

As the vessel steamed past the harbour's mouth, Tom stood amidships, peering over her side, looking around at the well-known and beloved scene, watching for a sign of the *Dora Grey*, and for faces he knew among the men who were busy within the harbour, or lounging upon the quay.

And his glad eyes saw the *Dora Grey*.

There she lay, beside the quay, the trim and neat little craft which he had enabled his father to buy.

There were men aboard her, too.

Thwaites had his vessel steamed in close beside her, and as she passed by, at a snail's pace, Tom heard his father's voice raised in a despondent hail.

"Hallo! Hallo, Thomas Crawley!" bawled Thwaites, leaning over the rail of the bridge. "How goes it, mate?"

"Sorrowfully enough, John," came in harsh reply. "It's heavy weather wi' me. I've lost my son—my poor brave boy, Tom. He was lost overboard off the Flyer, God rest his soul."

"It's bad news you've got for me, eh? Well, I've good news for you, Thomas. Your boy Tom was never more alive than he is to-day! He's aboard my ship, and eager to welcome you. Speak for yourself, Tom."

Fisherman Crawley, with a cry of anguish—for the news overpowered him, and hurt at first—rushed to the side of the smack, set his hand to his forehead, and peered into the gathering darkness.

"It can't be true! It can't be true!" he exclaimed, so hoarsely as to smother his words.

"It's true enough, dad," laughed Tom. "I'm alive—and kicking, thanks to John Thwaites, who rescued me from the sea. Go home and tell mother. I'll follow as soon as I can land."

Yes, there stood Tom Crawley, laughing and waving his hand at his father, and Bill Riley and Sam the boy cheered as they saw him drift slowly by, aboard the trawler.

Never had Thomas Crawley hurried home as he hurried then, breathless, and almost shouting in his joy, telling all he met that his son was safe. And never had any lad such a welcome as Tom when he returned home a few minutes after his dad, wearing his crumpled seaman's clothes, but as hale and hearty and well as ever he'd been in his life.

And the fuss they made of him! The tears of joy his mother shed, the hearty meal he ate, washed down with copious draughts of fresh-brewed tea!

Tom felt that he would willingly undergo another immersion as uncomfortable and as trying as the last to meet with such a welcome, and his contentment as he sat and smoked a cigarette and listened to all his father had got to tell him about the local news was profound.

Late he rose.

"Dad," he said, "I reckon Mary'll be very upset about me. I'm going round to see her. Her dad'll have told her that I'm back. She'll be expecting me."

His father, without a thought of Bob Randle, and unsuspecting of Tom's jealous feelings towards him, agreed that it would be only fair.

"So get you along, Tom, before it's too late," said he.

Tom hastened out and hurried, whistling, through the darkened streets.

He walked as if on wings, his feet hardly seeming to touch the firm, solid earth.

When he reached Mary's cottage, he saw Fisherman John Thwaites leaning upon the gate, smoking.

"Mary in, John?" inquired the irrepressible Tom.

"No, Tom lad! She's gone for a walk up the cliffs with Bob Randle."

"With Bob Randle?" And Tom saw red. "With Bob, and—Did she know that you'd picked me up, John?"

"No; for she was out when I got back. They've gone up beyond the light house. Why, drat the lad, what's he after? Hi, come you back, Tom! The lass will be home directly. Devil take the boy. Tom! Tom!"

But Tom, with a red mist before his eyes, was off at the run, and the fisherman's words followed him unheeded.

Tom's face was aflame; his eyes shot fire. What? Was Mary as false as that? She believed him dead, drowned, and yet she was walking out with a slacker who was doing all he knew to avoid military service. That was how much she cared about HIM!

Tom's heart thumped against his ribs, and his finger-nails dug deep into his flesh as he clenched his fists.

Wait till he met Bob Randle! He'd show him! And he'd show HER!

Tom passed out of the town at the run, gained the road which led to the cliffs, turned on to the footpath which swung along them up to the lighthouse and beyond, returning a surly answer to the military picket he passed, and thinking only of revenge.

Passion overmastered him, for he was as yet in many respects little more than a boy, and just as unreasonable as any other human fledgling.

Anon, as he hurried onward, with the beat of the waves on the base of the cliffs below him echoing in his ears, he fancied

(Continued overleaf.)

he heard the tread of feet and the murmuring of voices.

He stood still, waiting.

On they came, Mary and Bob, with their arms linked and their heads very close together.

"I want you to have your picture taken, so that I can bear your face with me always in a locket, Mary," Tom heard Bob say, "for I have never cared for anyone as I care for you. You'll do it, won't you?"

"Yes," Tom heard Mary reply; and he leapt from his hiding-place and confronted them.

In a fury, he tore them apart.

"Wait a minute, you false hound!" said Tom. "I'm alive and kicking, and I've got something to say to this! Off with your coat! Off with it! Let's fight it out!"

"Tom!" cried Mary, reeling back a step, and staring at him aghast.

"Tom!"

"Tom Crawley," said Bob Randle, in a quiet voice—"why, Tom, I am glad to see you, and if you'll let me explain—"

"Fight!" shouted Tom. "Fight, you shirker! I let you off the last time, but it's you or me now!"

And he hurled himself, in his blind, boyish passion, upon the quieter, more restrained man.

The thud of the blows, mingling with Mary's shrill cries and appeals, rang echoing on the night. The girl tried to part them, but it was driven aside.

Bob Randle backed—backed in the darkness, without seeing where he was going. Nor did Tom Crawley know that he was driving the man he chose to believe his enemy to the very verge of the cliff.

All too late, Randle saw his danger, and tried to avoid it.

Too late! A blow sent him reeling, and, with a cry of terror, he flung aloft his arms, trying to balance himself upon the very brink.

"Tom!" shrieked Mary, holding her hands to her cheeks in horror, and staring wide-eyed at them.

Tom saw what he had done then, and risked his own life in an attempt to drag Bob back from the verge.

He seized him by the coat, but the civilian overbalanced, and tore the cloth away from the sailor's grasp.

The next moment his body disappeared in the blackness of the pit. He was gone!

"Tom! Tom! Tom!" cried Mary, sinking down upon her knees, and covering her face with her hands. "You have killed him! You have killed him!"

(To be continued.)

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