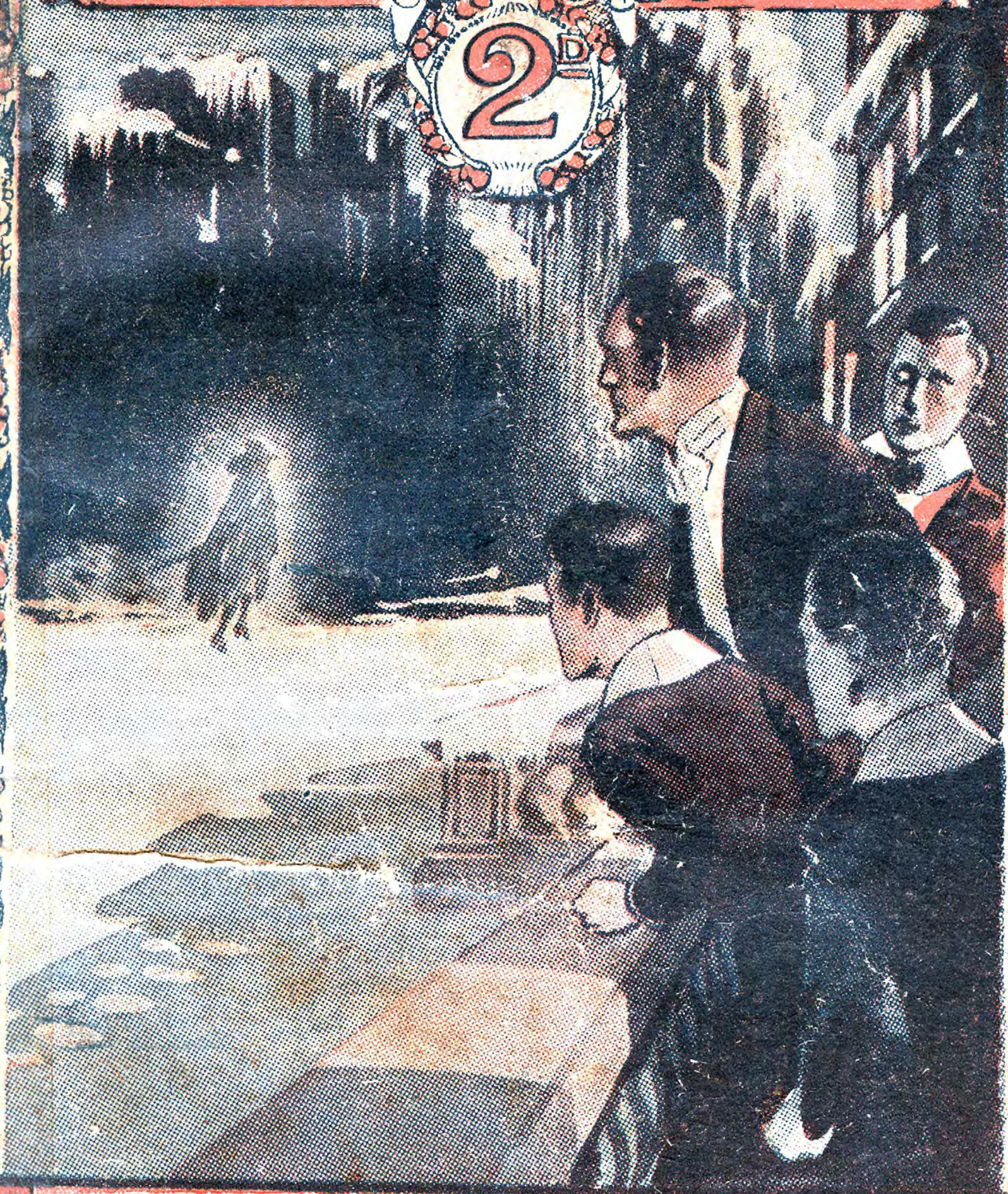


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A
HAPPY
CHRISTMAS
TO ALL MY
READERS

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH MY ESTEEMED GUV'NOR LETS
THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG—WE ARE INVITED
TO SPEND CHRISTMAS AT TREGELLIS CASTLE.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY
TREGELLIS-WEST sighed deeply.

"And won't you really come, Benny boy?" he asked, looking at me through his gold-rimmed pince-nez with an expression of grave concern. "It's shockin' to think of you moonin' about St. Frank's durin' Christmas——"

"I'm sorry, Montie," I interrupted quietly, "it can't be done. Perhaps you'll understand one day—but I can't explain now. It's—it's rotten. You're awfully good to invite me, but I can't possibly accept."

"Dear fellow, why not?" persisted Tregellis-West.

"Because—oh, because it's impossible!" I replied, turning abruptly and looking out of the window on to the Triangle.

We were in Study C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, and it was the last day of term. Outside, in the Triangle, everything was covered with dazzling and powdery snow. Icicles hung from the fountain, and the wintry sun

shone brilliantly over the whole white scene.

It was real Christmas weather, and the whole of St. Frank's was ringing with merry voices and laughter. The fellows were all going home for the holidays, and the spirit of good cheer reigned supreme.

I think the only miserable person among the numerous denizens of St. Frank's was Dick Bennett, of the Remove Form—in other words, Nipper—to wit, myself. Every joyous shout jarred on my ears; the very scene before my eyes appeared to be mocking at me.

The fact was, Nelson Lee and I would be compelled to remain at St. Frank's during the Christmas holidays. We should practically have the whole school to ourselves. If the conditions had been normal it wouldn't have mattered so much. But he was a schoolmaster, and I a junior; we should have to keep up appearances, even though all the fellows were away.

It was galling to see everybody preparing to journey home for the vacation, and to know that I should have to remain. But I'm not a moody chap, and the fit of depression soon passed. I smiled as I turned from the window and looked at Sir Montie again. He was staring into the fire gloomily.

This, in itself, was astonishing. Montie was about the most serene chap I had ever known. His eyes were always smiling, and he never allowed himself to be upset. This was the first time I had seen him really moved.

"Where's Tommy?" I asked, in order to change the subject.

"Tommy?" asked the schoolboy baronet absently. "Oh, packin', I think. He's comin' along with me, you know. It'll be rotten without you, Benny. I've been countin' on you comin' all along. But I won't press you any further, old man. I dare say you have a reason. There's a reason for everything—or ought to be."

I left the study, and strolled down the passage. Nearly all the doors of the junior studies were wide open, and Removites were dodging in and out continuously. Handforth, of Study D, bumped into me as I came opposite to his doorway.

"Hallo! What's the long face for?" asked Handforth genially. "Oh, you're going to stick at St. Frank's, ain't you?"

Hard lines, Bennett. What's the matter with your people? Got measles or something?"

And Handforth bustled away without waiting for a reply. The other juniors were equally as offhand. They were good chaps, most of them, but they were filled with their own concerns just now; they had no time to worry about my affairs.

I passed through the lobby and out into the Triangle. The white mantle of snow covered everything, and transformed the familiar scene into something quite new and novel. It was rather appropriate that snow had fallen during the night. It had descended during the hours of darkness, and St. Frank's had awakened to find Christmas at hand in earnest.

The air was crisp and keen; my breath hung like steam in the atmosphere. I trudged along rather aimlessly, for my thoughts were busy. The position of Nelson Lee and myself at St. Frank's was rather a curious one. We were there to escape the attentions of the Fu Chang Tong, a villainous Chinese secret society which had decreed that we should die.

That decree didn't quite appeal to us, and so we had disappeared from Gray's Inn Road, and taken up our abode at St. Frank's—Nelson Lee as Mr. Alvington, a Housemaster, and I as Dick Bennett, of the Remove. Under the circumstances, it was hardly possible for me to accept Sir Montie's invitation.

For I should be at his ancestral home under false pretences, and that wasn't to be thought of. We had been at St. Frank's for three or four months, the gov'nor and I, and during that time I had made two very staunch friends. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were fellows of sterling quality.

Somehow or other, I felt rather mean. They had often told me all about their people at home—but I had been unable to return the compliment. I felt that the position was more than awkward. The deception was all very well to protect us from the Chinese devils, but I badly wanted to be frank with my chums.

I wondered if it would be possible to tell them the truth; I wondered how they would take it if I did so. My position at St. Frank's would be ever so much improved if they knew the truth; for I should have no secrets from them at all.

I smiled rather bitterly as I thought of Sir Montie's concern. He was an orphan and the owner of thousands of acres. Tregellis Castle, his stately home, was one of the finest old mansions in Great Britain, with a stirring history. It was presided over by Lady Helen Tregellis-West, Montie's aunt.

His guardian was his uncle, the Earl of Westbrooke, who was a big landowner himself, and who lived at Westbrooke Hall, only seven miles from Montie's own lordly home.

The earl had told Sir Montie that he could bring home for the holidays just whom he chose, and Montie invited Tommy Watson and I. Tommy, of course, was going, but I couldn't accept. Study C was crowded with trunks and packages, and I felt very much "out of it."

I hadn't seen Nelson Lee that day. Somehow or other, I felt that if I did so I should begin to grumble. And I hate grumbling. It wasn't the gov'nor's fault that we were compelled to remain at St. Frank's.

A luxurious motor-car turned in at the gates, and came gliding noiselessly across the Triangle. It wasn't the first that arrived that morning. Many fellows had been taken away by car.

I wasn't in the least interested, although I watched the big automobile draw up near the Ancient House. A tall gentleman, wrapped in a fur coat, emerged. He stamped his feet vigorously, and said a few words to the chauffeur.

Just then Tregellis-West strolled out of the doorway with all his usual elegance, and he was smiling with pleasure.

"Hallo, uncle!" he exclaimed languidly. "I'm afraid I shall have to keep you waitin' a bit. How are you, sir? It's rippin' of you to come for me."

"Still as dandified as ever, Montie!" exclaimed the Earl of Westbrooke cheerfully. "Just like your father used to be! Well, I've got a piece of news for you, my boy. I'm not sure whether you will like it."

I walked nearer, and saw that Montie's uncle was a jovial-faced man of about fifty, with an iron-grey moustache, and twinkling eyes. I liked him at once. What a pity it was I couldn't accept Montie's invitation!

I was introduced at once, and then we walked along to Study C, where Tommy

was busily strapping up one of his bags. After he had been introduced, too, the earl sat down, and lit a cigar.

"I don't know whether smoking is allowed here," he smiled. "But I'm a visitor, eh? I don't suppose any condign punishment will descend upon my head. Now, Montie, for that piece of news."

"I hope it's nothin' upsettin', uncle," said Sir Montie anxiously. "Upsets are borin'—especially at holiday times."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be bored, Montie," said the earl. "At all events, there will be a bit of an upset. It had been arranged—as you know—that you and your friends should go straight from here to the castle, where your Aunt Helen would entertain you. But something happened at the castle last night which has caused me to alter the plan. I have decided, Montie, that you shall spend your Christmas at Westbrooke Hall, with me and your Aunt Diana. Of course, Aunt Helen will also be there."

"But that's simply rotten, uncle," protested Sir Montie. "We were comin' on to the Hall towards the end of the vacation, weren't we? Why can't we carry out the original arrangement?"

The Earl of Westbrooke looked serious.

"The truth is, my boy, the Tregellis phantom has reappeared," he said quietly.

"Begad!"

"The phantom?" asked Tommy, staring.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie again. "Don't you remember, Tommy boy? I told you all about that rippin' family ghost of ours—the Cloaked Cavalier, as he's called. An' has he really reappeared, uncle? I thought the old boy had retired from active business decades ago!"

"The Cavalier has not been seen for many years—until last night," replied the earl. "But your aunt and I distinctly saw the apparition at about ten o'clock last night. We saw it clearly, Montie, walking down the Pine Avenue. And, even as we watched, it vanished."

"Dear uncle, I really fail to see why we should be driven away by this interestin' gentleman," said Montie, shaking his head. "It will make the holiday more enjoyable, begad!"

"You seem to forget, my dear lad, that the Tregellis phantom is a very formidable ghost," replied Lord Westbrooke gravely. "Now, boys, don't

smile at me. I am not at all superstitious. But if the family records are to be believed—and there is no reason to actually scout them as preposterous—the Cloaked Cavalier is something very terrible. It is popularly believed that people have vanished for ever after encountering the phantom.”

“But that’s impossible, isn’t it, sir?” I asked, interested.

“It is said the ghost enfolds its victim within the wide cloak, and that the pair then completely disappear,” replied the earl. “That, of course, sounds very absurd. I don’t suppose for a moment that any such event ever took place. At the same time, I don’t want you boys to have your holiday spoilt by—”

“If that’s all, uncle, then you needn’t worry,” interrupted Sir Montie blandly. “Bless you, sir, we sha’n’t be frightened. Aunt Helen, I know, is a sport. Why, we shall enjoy it. I’ve been longin’ to see the ghost for years. Can’t we go straight to the castle, an’ risk it?”

The Earl of Westbrooke smiled.

“Of course, I leave it to you, Montie,” he said. “I don’t wish to be authoritative, and you can decide for yourself. But I advise you to come along to the Hall. It will be quite easy to run over to Tregellis whenever you wish. But we will decide this as we travel up. How many friends are you bringing?”

“Only one,” replied Sir Montie, with a sigh. “I’ve been pressing Benny to come, but he can’t see his way clear. It’s really too bad—especially as he has to stay at St. Frank’s over the holidays.”

“Why don’t you come, my boy?” asked the earl, turning to me genially. “The party will be quite a small one, as it is. I have only a few guests at the Hall, and I shall, of course, bring them to Tregellis for a day or two. There will merely be Major and Mrs. Carstairs, Captain Masters and his fiancée—”

“Captain Masters!” I gasped.

“That is the name I mentioned,” replied the earl, looking at me curiously.

“And—and Miss—Miss Dare?” I stammered incautiously.

“Exactly—Miss Eileen Dare,” smiled his lordship. “Apparently you know them; Master Bennett. That is an additional reason why you should—”

I didn’t hear any more of the earl’s words. My mind was simply in a whirl. Eileen Dare was to be among Sir

Montie’s guests—at least, that is what it amounted to. Eileen Dare!

I simply sat in my chair and gasped. Nelson Lee and I knew that sweet girl almost as well as we knew one another. During her campaign against that gang of rascals known as The Combine, she had been in contact with us almost continually. She had proved herself to be a wonderful detective, although she was a girl. I admired her more than I could possibly say, and the prospect of seeing her again thrilled me with absolute joy.

I wasn’t idiot enough to have foolish ideas about Eileen. Why, she was engaged! I just adored her because she was about the finest girl I’d ever seen, and because she was the cleverest. Captain Masters was a ripping sort, and the engagement had met with my hearty approval.

And then, in the middle of my sudden delight, I felt something cold run down my back. I wasn’t going to the castle! I shouldn’t see Eileen! I should be bottled up at St. Frank’s, mooning about—

At that point I simply had to do something, or burst a blood vessel. I acted in an extremely rude manner, for I sprang up from my chair, dashed to the door, and shot out. Both the earl and Sir Montie gave utterance to surprised exclamations, but I didn’t care.

I raced along the passage until I came to the doorway upon which was painted the name “Mr. Peter Alvington.” I hammered on the panel, and burst into the study. Mr. Peter Alvington—in other words Nelson Lee—was sitting at his desk, dreamily smoking a cigar. He looked at me sharply, however.

“Oh, it’s you, my boy,” he said as I closed the door. “Upon my soul, you’re looking extremely excited, Nipper. What’s the matter?”

I caught my breath in with a gulp.

“Guv’nor!” I gasped. “Miss Eileen’s going to be at Tregellis Castle, with Sir Montie—Tregellis-West, I mean!”

Nelson Lee nodded.

“Yes, I know that, Nipper—”

“You know it?” I yelled.

“Exactly,” replied Lee calmly. “As you are aware, young ’un, Miss Eileen is fully acquainted with the facts concerning our temporary retirement at St. Frank’s. She is one of the trusted few who know our secret. And she was good enough to write to me—under my as-

sumed name, of course—informing me of her arrangements for Christmas—and regretting that she would be unable to meet us.”

“You—you didn’t tell me, sir.”

“I didn’t want to upset you, young ‘un,” said the guv’nor gently. “But I have been thinking rather seriously, Nipper—even as you entered a moment ago, I was coming to a momentous decision. I think Tregellis-West has invited you to accompany him home.”

“Yes, sir. I told you yesterday.”

“Well, since yesterday I have been rather worried, Nipper,” confessed the detective. “I really don’t see why those accursed Chinese Tong-men should ruin your Christmas. I, of course, am content to remain at St. Frank’s. But you——”

“Yes, guv’nor?” I asked breathlessly.

“Well, you have been invited to spend the vacation at Tregellis Castle,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “There’s no reason why you shouldn’t, Nipper. But you can’t accept the invitation without Tregellis-West and his uncle knowing your real identity. It wouldn’t be playing the game.”

“You’re—you’re not going to let the cat out of the bag?” I gasped.

Nelson Lee nodded.

“There’s no earthly reason why our secret shouldn’t be given to those people **whom** we know we can trust,” he said, **laying** a hand upon my arm. “We can **trust** Sir Montie and his uncle, I am **sure**. And there is your other chum—**Watson**. We have been at St. Frank’s long enough to know that those two boys are trustworthy in every way. I am convinced that we shall not increase our danger by taking these good friends into our confidence.”

I looked at the guv’nor with shining eyes.

“Oh, guv’nor!” I said, in a whisper.

“You are pleased, eh?” said Lee, gently patting my arm. “Of course, Nipper—I quite understand. There is only one point which remains doubtful—and I don’t think that is doubtful either—to use a paradox. Will your chums change their attitude when they know that you are really Nipper—a detective’s assistant?”

I grinned.

“Why, if they do change, it’ll be a change for the better!” I replied enthusiastically. “They will understand,

and appreciate everything. And I’m jolly sure that Lord Westbrooke will be as pleased as Punch.”

“Very well; we will go along to your study, and make the revelation!” smiled Lee. “I was thinking of sending for you when you put in such a timely appearance. Lord Westbrooke is at the school, I believe? Let’s get it over, Nipper.”

I hesitated.

“But—but what about you, guv’nor?” I asked. “Oh, lor’! You’ll have to stop at St. Frank’s by yourself——”

“My dear boy, you needn’t consider me,” smiled the guv’nor kindly. “It will be no particular hardship for me to remain alone. I was thinking of you all along. You are young, and Christmas is a time for good cheer.”

I didn’t like it, all the same. But Sir Montie hadn’t invited “old Alvy,” of course. He couldn’t very well do that—although he almost loved the guv’nor. Nelson Lee was simply worshipped by the majority of the juniors in the Ancient House.

We were soon back at Study C. Lee tapped, and we entered. Sir Montie and Tommy rose to their feet respectfully as they saw the Housemaster; and Lord Westbrooke rose, also.

“This is Mr. Alvington, sir,” said Sir Montie, gallantly. “The finest Housemaster in any school, begad! My uncle, Lord Westbrooke, sir,” he said, turning to Lee.

They shook hands warmly, and we all sat down. I made quite sure that the door was securely closed. The window was already fastened. I noticed that my chums were eyeing me curiously. They seemed to guess that something was in the wind.

“I am afraid you will think it rude of me to interrupt in this way, Lord Westbrooke,” smiled the guv’nor. “But I have a very excellent reason. Your nephew has invited Bennett to Tregellis Castle for the holidays. I wish to say that Bennett is quite at liberty to accept that invitation——”

“Begad!” ejaculated Sir Montie. “Bennett won’t hear of it, sir!”

“I think he will,” smiled the guv’nor. “I have rather a difficult statement to make, and I scarcely know where to begin. I am, in short, going to take you all into a very solemn confidence. It would be unfair, of course, for me

to ask for any binding oaths before you know what that confidence is. But I am going to trust you—and I am satisfied that I shall be safe in doing so."

The Earl of Westbrooke and Sir Montie and Tommy looked rather bewildered.

"I—I really don't understand, sir," said the earl.

"Perhaps you have heard of a man named Lee—Nelson Lee?" suggested the gov'nor.

The earl smiled.

"Have I heard of him?" he repeated.

"Why, bless your soul, Mr. Alvington. I thought the name of Nelson Lee was a household word! I only met Mr. Lee once, and that was years ago. He is a gentleman I highly honour; he is one of the few men who command the highest possible admiration from all classes of society. Mr. Lee is one of Britain's finest gentlemen."

I simply hugged myself. The gov'nor hadn't been fishing for compliments—but he'd got them!

"Hear, hear!" murmured Sir Montie. "Weren't you telling me all about Miss Dare, uncle? She and Mr. Lee did some fine work, didn't they—or—or something? An' there's a really rippin' fellow named Nipper, I believe? Begad, I'd like to meet Nipper—I would, really!"

"I think it is time for me to continue my little story," smiled Nelson Lee. "Both Nipper and myself are highly flattered at your extremely kind words. We don't feel quite justified in accepting the compliments——"

"I—I fail to follow you, Mr. Alvington," said the earl, staring.

"Please let me make my meaning clear," went on the great detective. "This lad, whom you know as Dick Bennett, is, actually, my assistant Nipper. And my own name is Lee. I don't think I quite deserve the glowing eulogy you were kind enough to voice a moment ago, Lord Westbrooke."

Just for a moment there was a dead silence in the study; and then everybody jumped to their feet. Sir Montie and Tommy were looking from the gov'nor to me with excited, wondering eyes. Sir Montie was carried completely out of his almost perpetual state of equanimity.

"Are—are you joking, sir?" gasped Trogellis-West.

"Great corks!" Tommy Watson blurted out.

"There—there must be some mistake!" exclaimed Lord Westbrooke amazedly.

"There is no mistake—and I should not joke upon such a subject," was Nelson Lee's quiet reply. "Lord Westbrooke—boys—I half expected that you would be rather shocked by this sudden revelation. But I have made it for Nipper's sake—and I have entrusted my secret to you, being fully confident that you will respect it."

His lordship thrust out his hand.

"I don't pretend to understand what all this means," he said quietly. "But please allow me to state I am more than delighted to meet you again. By George, sir, I scarcely know what to say!"

Tommy Watson made a noise like a safety-valve emitting steam.

"But—but I can't realise it!" he panted. "Do you mean to say, Bennett, that you're—you're Nipper? Have we been diddled all this time? Great Scott! No wonder you made things hum in the Ancient House. I—I—Oh, hang it all, I'm bleased if I know where I am!"

Tommy sat down blankly, and Sir Montie merely contented himself by murmuring "begad" about every other second. I'd never seen him so completely at a loss.

But, when you come to think of it, this unexpected disclosure of the gov'nor's was a bit of a stunner. For months past I had been the leader of Study C—Dick Bennett, Sir Montie and Tommy had regarded me as an ordinary schoolboy. And now, all in a second, they had been told that I was the assistant of the world-famous Mr. Nelson Lee. And, furthermore, that Mr. Alvington was Nelson Lee himself!

In a quiet voice the gov'nor told his listeners of the events which had led up to our being persecuted by the Fu Chang Tong. All that has been described by Nelson Lee himself in the case which figures in his records as "The Yellow Shadow." So there's no need for me to go all over it here.

The plain fact was that our lives were seriously menaced by the murderous Chinamen. The gov'nor explained how we had sought refuge at St. Frank's; how our sanctuary had proved secure.

and how vitally important it was that the secret should be sustained.

Sir Montie and Tommy listened with overwhelming interest. I could see that they were delighted. There was no doubt about that. They had taken the news in the spirit I had expected of them. And Lord Westbrooke was extremely interested.

"Amazing--amazing!" he exclaimed when Nelson Lee had done. "My high opinion of you, Mr. Lee, is even greater than it ever was. You have shown the most astounding foresight and cleverness in your recent movements. The fact that you sought refuge here casts no discredit upon yourself. To have remained in London would have meant death—I quite understand that. I sympathise with you, Mr. Lee—I sympathise deeply. I sincerely trust that this trouble will soon pass so that your valuable services may be at liberty—at the liberty of the nation."

"In fairness to Nipper, I must explain that it was his idea from the very start," smiled Nelson easily. "It was his suggestion that we should seek refuge at St. Frank's."

"Benny, my boy, let me shake your hand!" exclaimed Sir Montie enthusiastically. "I suppose we shall still have to call you Bennett? By gad, I'm fairly startled—I am, really!"

He wrung my fist until my arm ached; and then Tommy Watson had a go.

"As I mentioned before, I know that our secret is safe," went on the gov'nor. "And my principal reason for taking you into my confidence is that Nipper shall be at liberty to accept Tregellis-West's very generous invitation."

"You're comin' then, dear fellow?" asked Sir Montie eagerly.

"Every inch of me!" I grinned.

"Then there's only one thing more to say," said Tregellis-West, in a firm voice. "We simply can't go away from St. Frank's without Mr. Alvington accompanying us. Of course, we mustn't forget to use the names we know, must we? It's awfully nervy of me, Mr. Alvington, but I hope you'll accept—"

"I appreciate your invitation, my boy," smiled the gov'nor, "but I really cannot leave St. Frank's—"

"Because it'll be too risky?" asked Sir Montie quickly.

"Not exactly that. But it would be taking advantage of the situation—wouldn't it?" asked the gov'nor quietly. "Nipper will enjoy himself tremendously, I am sure—and that will be gratifying for me. But I really can't go with him."

"My dear sir—my dear sir—"

"If you don't mind, uncle, I'd like to say somethin'!" put in Sir Montie grimly. "It's a painful duty, but it's got to be done. It's frightfully painful, in fact. Mr. Alvington, if you can't come to Tregellis Castle with us, I'm afraid I shall have to withdraw my invitation to Bennett. It's a shockin' trick of mine—but you force me to say it. It's an ultimatum, begad! Either you come with us, or Benny stops behind!"

Nelson Lee laughed light-heartedly.

"You're a good fellow, Tregellis-West," he exclaimed. "Since you put it in that way, I suppose I must succumb. Both Nipper and myself gladly accept the invitation, and I am quite sure that we shall enjoy ourselves far more at Tregellis Castle than we should have done at St. Frank's."

But, when Nelson made that remark, he little realised what a grimly exciting Christmas holiday this was to be!

CHAPTER II.

WE ARRIVE AT TREGELLIS CASTLE—AND THEN EXPERIENCE ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY PHENOMENA IT IS POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE.

TREGELLIS CASTLE lay in full view.

The journey in the Earl of Westbrooke's great car had been a very enjoyable one for us. During the ride—a long one—his lordship had explained to the gov'nor all about the Cloaked Cavalier. I was not so interested as I should have been ordinarily. For Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I were jawing to ourselves practically the whole time.

My two chums had got over the first amazement, and were able to think of the whole affair clearly and calmly. All sorts of things were clear to them now, which had been rather obscure before. And I knew that they both thought all the more of me.

It was extremely gratifying, and I won't be foolish enough to say otherwise. I was as pleased as a dog with two tails! That's what people say, anyhow. Personally, I believe that a dog with two tails would be decidedly unhappy. It's possible to have too much of a good thing!

I had often mentioned to the gov'nor, during our private little chats at St. Frank's, that Sir Montie and Tommy sometimes asked me questions which were very embarrassing. These two fellows were true blue—they were my chums—and it didn't seem "on the square" to keep them deceived.

Nelson Lee had appreciated the force of my remarks, but had said that it was highly necessary to sustain our secret. Yet what harm had been done? The Earl of Westbrooke was to be implicitly trusted, and Tommy and Montie were quite old enough to realise the peril of our position. They wouldn't breathe a word.

But my own position at St. Frank's would be ever so much improved when the new term started. In my own study, at least, I could be myself. I could be Nipper. Up till now I had been practically living a lie the whole time.

I had impressed upon the two Removites the necessity of maintaining appearances. Although they knew that I was Nipper, and that "Mr. Alvington" was Nelson Lee, they would have to be very careful not to make any slip. And they both agreed that it would be far the safer plan to always call me Bennett, as heretofore. This applied at once—even during the holidays.

And now Tregellis Castle was in sight.

"It's a rippin' old place!" said Sir Montie, with a touch of pride in his voice. "I don't know how old it is really. I've never troubled to think of those matters, dear fellows. But ever so many kings have stayed under its roof. Duels have taken place in the grounds, and all that sort of thing, you know. Tregellis has been besieged several times—gory battles in the grounds, an' round the moat. I suppose the castle is a grim old place, really. It looks awfully cold and cheerless from outside. But you wait until you get within its doors, dear boys!"

Both Tommy and I were at the window, looking out.

Snow was falling now. There had been much more snow in this part of the

country, I could see. It lay thick over everything. The car ploughed its way through the white carpet almost noiselessly. The gaunt, leafless hedges and trees were covered and clothed with the garb of winter.

And, away towards the left, on the top of a rising hill, stood the famous old Tregellis Castle. The evening light was rather gloomy, and the castle really formed a silhouette against the leaden sky.

The effect was rather grim, as Sir Montie had remarked. Tregellis seemed to be a place of evil forebodings, and I pictured to myself dungeons and wide, stone-paved halls, with dark corners and cutting draughts.

There were woods on almost every side of the castle, and it rose from amidst them, its towers and turrets standing out with strange clearness. The battlements were all covered with snow, and the walls were nearly hidden behind thick growths of clinging ivy.

In spite of the strange depression which the castle seemed to cast upon us, there was something very magnificent in the spectacle. It was one of England's most famous mansions. It had been the home of the Tregellis-Wests for centuries past. As far as the eye could reach, all the fields and meadows and woods were the property of this schoolboy beside me.

And then the lodge gates came within view. They were standing wide open, and the car turned into the drive slowly and sedately. Tall, stately poplars lined the drive, but the castle was hidden beyond the bend.

I sat back, with a little sigh.

"It's a fine old place, Montie," I said quietly. "Somehow or other, that yarn of the Cloaked Cavalier doesn't seem so impossible now. Amid these surroundings one almost expects to see ghosts!"

"I'm not at all sure that I have been wise in bringing you here, my boys," put in Lord Westbrooke, who had heard my words. "Lady Helen will be waiting for us, no doubt—I wired from Bannington, as you know—for she was to have driven over to the Hall this afternoon."

"I am glad Sir Montie insisted upon coming here," smiled the gov'nor. "To tell you the truth, Lord Westbrooke, I am rather interested in this Cloaked Cavalier. It is strange, is it not, that the apparition should appear last night after an absence of many years?"

"Infernally strange!" agreed his lordship, with a frown. "As I have told you,

Mr. Lee—I mean Mr. Alvington—the Tregellis phantom has never been seen by any member of the present family until yesterday. And I will swear that my sister and I were not the victims of imagination. Lady Helen is singularly clear-headed, and she took it all as a matter of course. Indeed, I believe she rather enjoyed the experience. At all events, she is in no way upset."

A minute later the big motor-car came to a point where the castle lay in full view. The poplar-enclosed drive dropped behind, and before us stretched the great lawns, now dazzlingly white, with the castle beyond. These, I afterwards learned, were called the south lawns; the north lawns were on the other side of the great building.

In the remote past a wide moat had surrounded the castle, but this had been filled in years ago. The massive draw-bridge, however, was still intact, although it was perpetually fixed in its lowered position.

The car rolled slowly across it, turned to the right, and passed along the imposing front of the ancient building. We drew up at the foot of the wide, shallow steps. The great door of the castle stood open, and I could see that the portal was large enough to admit the motor-car itself, if it could have mounted the steps.

We all tumbled out, stamping our feet vigorously. The steps were brushed neatly, but a fresh film of snow had covered the smooth stonework. An old man, with bent shoulders, came down from the door, smiling respectfully. Behind him were three footmen.

"Welcome home, eh?" said Sir Montie genially. "How are you, Fenn? Lookin' as sprightly as ever, begad!"

Fenn—the butler, I presumed—shook his head.

"Not sprightly, Sir Montgomery," he exclaimed, "but there's life in me yet—and will be for another ten years—please Heaven! It's glad I am to see you, sir! My, you have grown, and no mistake!"

I could see that Fenn was somewhat privileged. He was an old retainer, and had known Sir Montie since that cheerful youth had been a tiny toddler.

We passed up the steps, and entered the stately hall, leaving Fenn to superintend the removal of our baggage. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the great hall was brightly illuminated with numerous sprays of electric lights. There wasn't a gloomy corner in its whole depth.

Lady Helen Tregellis-West greeted us warmly, and was duly introduced to the gov'nor and me under our assumed names. There was no necessity for her to know the actual truth.

She was Montie's aunt—Lord Westbrook's sister, of course. For an "old maid" she was one of the jolliest persons I had ever met. It was difficult to determine her age, but I guessed that she must have been just over forty. She was one of those women who make you at home in the first minute.

The earl had wired from Bannington, briefly stating that Sir Montie was bringing two school chums with him and a gentleman friend, and we found that a large bedroom had been prepared for the use of Sir Montie and Tommy and me. We could have had two each, if we had wanted them—there were dozens to spare—but this arrangement met with our entire approval.

"It's better that we should be together, dear fellows," said Sir Montie, as we inspected our bedroom. "Begad, those beds look rippin', don't they? Aunt Helen knows how to make a fellow comfortable! Bein' the lord of the manor, so to speak, I am supposed to occupy the best suite; but I wouldn't give tuppence for it, dear boys! I much prefer to be with you!"

Our sleeping apartment was situated in the east wing, and was furnished superbly—not with a lot of old-worm-eaten furniture that had been in the family for countless ages, but with modern furniture of the most expensive kind. The carpet was like down; the beds were masterpieces in themselves. Lady Helen had very wisely decided that we boys would prefer something up-to-date.

There were many bedrooms in the west wing which were filled with the most priceless treasures in the furniture line—beds that kings had slept in, and all that sort of thing.

Nelson Lee's room was in the same corridor as our own, and a little farther down. Like ours, it was fitted with electric light; the whole castle, in fact, was ablaze, for the lights in the corridors were full on, and there wasn't a gloomy corner anywhere.

There were Christmas decorations all over the place, and a general air of gaiety seemed to pervade the atmosphere. Sir Montie's injunction to wait until we got within the castle doors was easily to be understood, for, although the great building was sinister and gloomy in appear-

ance from outside, the interior was a place of comfort and warmth and cheerfulness.

At all events, we shouldn't be afraid of meeting the family ghost in any of the passages. There wasn't a nook or a cranny that remained in shadow.

Having washed and dressed, we descended the fine old staircase, and found the gov'nor and Lord Westbrooke chatting in the lounge hall. Two great log fires were burning, and the gov'nor and his companion were standing before one of them, smoking.

From the polished oaken beams, high above, hung festoons of holly and mistletoe, and the walls were decorated with horns and antlers and stuffed deer heads. I regarded the scene with approval.

Of course, I didn't expect to see Eileen Dare yet awhile. She and Captain Masters were guests of the Earl of Westbrooke, and were staying, naturally, at Westbrooke Hall, seven miles away. The earl himself would leave us to Lady Helen's tender mercies after dinner.

On the morrow, probably, we should run over to the Hall, as Eileen and her fiancé would come to us. It was merely a matter of arrangement. The Hall was in telephonic communication with Tregellis, so we could ring up whenever we liked.

"Yes, it's queer, Mr. Alvington," Lord Westbrooke was saying as he stroked his grey moustache. "So far as the records show, the phantom has not been seen at the castle during the last seventy years. Indeed, I have always believed that the ghost was merely a myth. Most famous old houses have a ghost of some kind, you know, and there are naturally many exaggerated tales told concerning these supposedly supernatural phenomena."

"Personally, I have never had the pleasure of meeting a real ghost face to face," smiled Nelson Lee. "All the spooks of my experience have turned out to be very human. Of course, I don't suggest anything of that sort with regard to this Cavalier of yours, Lord Westbrooke."

"The thing which my sister and I saw last night was not flesh and blood," said the earl quietly. "It was hazy; yet, at the same time, we saw the outline of the figure most distinctly."

"Did it resemble a man, uncle?" asked Sir Montie languidly.

"Oh, I didn't know, you boys were here!" said Lord Westbrooke, turning.

"We'd better change the subject. I don't want to frighten you."

"Oh, I say, that's rather too bad!" protested Montie. "We're not girls! We don't get frightened just because a few enterprisin' spectres get lively. I'd like to see this Cavalier johnny, begad!"

"People generally say that before witnessing a sight such as your aunt and myself saw last evening, Montie," replied the earl grimly. "Mind you, I'm not nervous. I wasn't upset. But, to be candid, the thing was startling, and I didn't like it. And the fact that this phantom is popularly supposed to appear at Christmastime prompted me to alter the arrangement. But you're a wilful young beggar, Montie, and you get your own way. I hope no further manifestation will occur, that's all!"

"Dear fellows, it's no good! My uncle simply won't regard us as human bein's," sighed Montie. "He seems to think that we shall crumble away if the ghost appears. Personally, I'm longin' to see the gentleman."

Lord Westbrooke smiled.

"Well, there's nothing particularly horrifying in the Cavalier's aspect," he said. "By what Lady Helen and myself could see, the figure was that of a tall man in a picturesque costume which resembled that of a Cavalier. His cloak was long and flowing, and he held it stretched out on either side."

"Did it disappear suddenly?" asked the gov'nor.

"Without the slightest warning. It was, in fact, approaching us when it stopped in its tracks and disappeared," replied Montie's uncle. "It didn't simply turn a corner, or anything like that. There was no obstruction—nothing! It simply ceased to exist. That's the best way I can describe it."

"H'm!" murmured Nelson Lee. "I am quite interested."

"Well, I should be interested if it wasn't for the phantom's sinister reputation," remarked the earl. "Many bygone members of our family have positively declared that the Cavalier is possessed of terrible powers. If any unfortunate person is rash enough to venture within a certain distance of the apparition, he or she is struck helpless on the spot. The Cavalier then approaches and envelopes the unfortunate victim within its cloak. On the second, both disappear."

The gov'nor smiled.

"That sounds rather exaggerated, I'm afraid," he remarked.

"It does; it sounds impossible," agreed Westbrooke. "It is rather significant, however, that two or three members of our family have mysteriously disappeared while staying at Tregellis. They have retired at night, and have never been seen again."

"It was probably those mysterious disappearances which might give rise to the story of the phantom's extraordinary powers," smiled Nelson Lee. "Really, Lord Westbrooke, you must forgive me if I appear sceptical——"

"Bless your life, I'm sceptical myself!" laughed the earl. "In fact, I don't believe for a moment that any ghost could make a human being disappear. An apparition might cause death, but it can't dispose of a body. No, no; that's rather too difficult to credit!"

Just then the echoes were awakened by the sonorous booming of the dinner gong, and the discussion was adjourned.

We were all free and easy—that night especially. But there were no formalities of any kind, and wouldn't be. Lady Helen was a very homely hostess, and she did not insist upon everything being just so.

On Boxing-day, I understood, there were to be quite a number of visitors—many relations and other guests. At present, however, our party was small. We only occupied just the end of the enormous dining-table.

The dining-room itself was a sombre, ~~stately~~ apartment usually. But at present, what with the decorations and the brilliant lights, it presented a very gay and festive aspect.

The meal was a jolly one. Lady Helen proved herself to be a clever and witty hostess. She kept us smiling continually. Nelson Lee was just himself, and nobody else. For the time he had left "Mr. Alvington" at St. Frank's, and I was delighted. The earl, too, added to the general good humour.

I could see that we were going to enjoy our Christmas holiday at Tregellis—at least, that is what I reckoned then. If I thought anything about the phantom at all, it was merely idle speculation. I didn't even think that we should see the thing. Family ghosts don't appear just when they're required.

It was towards the end of dinner when the first inkling came that all was not to go as smoothly as we believed.

An inkling!

That's hardly the right word, for the interruption was of a most startling character. Lord Westbrooke was just reaching the point of a joke he was relating, and we were getting ready to laugh, when a strange sound came to our ears.

It seemed to be a gasping cry of horror. The earl ceased speaking, and we looked at one another almost furtively. What had that cry been? There was a moment's dead silence within the lofty apartment.

And as we sat there the cry was repeated. But this time it was doubly as loud, and rose to a wild shriek of absolute terror. It sent a shiver down my back, and I saw Lady Helen turn a trifle pale.

"What—what was that?" she asked falteringly.

"The cry of a man in mortal fear," replied Nelson Lee, with all his old crispness. "It came from the grounds, I believe. Shall we go to the window?"

"Yes—yes!" said Westbrooke quickly. "'Pon my soul, I can't understand—— The windows lead out upon the balcony, and we can obtain a clear view of the north lawns from there."

They were French windows, and the gov'nor opened one of them and stepped out upon the snow-swept balcony. An icy draught chilled me as I followed close upon Nelson Lee's heels.

Sir Montie and his uncle and Tommy Watson came pressing after me, but Lady Helen, I believe, remained at the table.

"Good gracious!" I heard the gov'nor mutter.

"What is it, sir?" I asked huskily.

Nelson Lee did not reply, but I heard him draw his breath in sharply. The others came tumbling out upon the balcony. And for a second there was confusion. For the darkness out there was intense after the brilliancy of the dining-room.

I stared into the blackness, but could see nothing except the dim outline of the trees against the night sky. The cold air made me shiver, and I seemed to feel that something uncanny was near by.

"Great Cæsar!" muttered Tommy Watson. "What—what is it?"

"I can't see anything——"

"There, Bennett—there!"

Tommy pulled me aside, and I then

understood. The bulk of the gov'nor's body had been in my way, but now I saw, away across the lawn, an extraordinary figure. As I watched my flesh seemed to contract.

I knew, in a flash, that I was looking upon the Cloaked Cavalier!

The figure was visible, in spite of the darkness, and was moving slowly across the lawn at the far corner of it. It was not coming towards us, but walked at an angle. And every line of the apparition was clearly visible.

Yet how could that be possible—in such darkness?

I clenched my fists and watched. The thing appeared to be a man, attired in strange clothing, and with a long, flowing cloak outstretched. The whole vision appeared to exude a faintly greenish haze—a haze which was wholly unearthly.

I could see no face, and I gasped when I realised that the apparition was headless! It was moving across the snow with swaying, ungainly strides. The wide terrace lay only a few feet away—I could dimly see the outline of the north wing beyond.

We all watched with acute fascination. Speech was denied us; we could only stand there and gaze upon this monstrous appearance.

It seemed to be hours before the Cavalier reached the terrace—yet, as I afterwards realised, the whole terrible incident occupied only fifteen seconds. They were seconds of great tension.

Just as the phantom reached the edge of the terrace I fancied I saw a reflection of the greenish glow—a repetition of the haze. And I caught my breath in with a gulp as I detected the figure of a man standing full in the path of the oncoming spectre.

He was standing quite still, one shoulder apparently lower than the other. His face was invisible, for he stood broadside to us. His whole attitude was one of frozen horror. It was this man who had screamed! He was standing there, transfixed with fright.

I recalled the earl's words—I pictured

And then Lord Westbrooke spoke. His voice was unnatural, and he seemed to form the words with an effort.

"Gill!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "It's Gill, one of the gardeners——"

"The—the thing's makin' for him!" gasped Sir Montie.

His uncle shook himself violently.

"Run, man!" he shouted, his voice harsh with alarm and excitement. "Run, you blockhead! Don't stand there——"

The earl broke off.

The figure of Gill was visible—clearly visible. Yet the night was as black as pitch! Everything in the near vicinity of the apparition was bathed in an eerie, unnatural glow. It was like nothing on earth.

The man didn't move; he seemed to be turned to stone. And then—then——

I shuddered violently, and clenched my teeth with an effort. For the Cavalier was right upon the motionless gardener now. The wide cloak outstretched further, and then curled itself round Gill's form.

A wild, despairing cry wailed out—a cry which seemed to turn my very blood to water. Only the faint greenish glow remained. And, as I watched, this grew dim; it seemed to fade——

I started forward, staring—staring.

The Cloaked Cavalier had vanished! Nothing could be seen but the dim outline of the battlements against the night sky. An icy wind sighed round the gables of the castle. The wide expanses of snow were just visible.

"Great Heaven!" muttered the Earl of Westbrooke.

That exclamation broke the spell. I heard Sir Montie sigh deeply; I heard the gov'nor take a deep breath; I found myself shivering from head to foot. And then I found my voice.

"What—what happened to the man?" I asked, trying to speak steadily.

"I don't know—I don't know, my boy!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "But I'll swear there was trickery at work."

"Trickery!" said the earl. "Impossible, sir! It was the Cavalier again—he appeared last night! But Gill—what of Gill——"

Nelson Lee didn't want to hear the rest of Lord Westbrooke's sentence; neither did I. We both leaped over the low stonework of the balcony, and ran quickly along the path, through the snow. Behind us came Tommy and Montie. I heard the earl talking excitedly and agitatedly to his sister.

In a few moments the gov'nor and I reached the terrace which bordered the

north wing. Lee suddenly checked, and gripped my arm.

"Wait, young 'un—wait!" he said tensely.

That awful feeling of horror had left me by now, and I was thrilling with excitement and eagerness.

Nelson Lee took out his automatic cigarette lighter, and sparked it. A bright little flame sprang up. Shading it from the wind, Lee held it close to the ground. A single set of footprints led onwards.

"Gill's tracks!" muttered the gov'nor. "Come, Nipper!"

We walked on quickly, until we came to the spot where the terrace ran flush with the lawn. And here the footsteps turned abruptly. They faced the lawn. We walked on a pace, and—and——

"Upon my soul!" murmured Nelson Lee, amazedly.

I stared down, and Montie and Tommy behind me craned forward.

The footprints ended abruptly, and we were yards from any wall or tree! They ended at the edge of the lawn, with unbroken snow on every hand. And then I uttered a great shout. For I had realise the terrible truth.

Gill's footprints were the only ones visible!

The Cloaked Cavalier had crossed the lawn without leaving a single trace!

CHAPTER III.

WE ARE ALL VERY UPSET, AND NELSON LEE IS AT A LOSS—WE RETIRE IN A DISTURBED FRAME OF MIND, AND THEN——

NELSON LEE'S little light grew dim, and went out.

We were left in the darkness, with the chill wind blowing upon our uncovered heads, and with our lightly shod feet rapidly becoming soaked.

Nobody spoke for a few moments.

The phantom had left no footprints! The marks made by Gill, the stricken gardener, were as clear as day in the thick snow—and they ended abruptly! That was the startling, amazing thing—they ended abruptly, as though the man had flown into the sky itself.

The snow upon the lawn stretched out in an unbroken expanse, yet the Cloaked Cavalier had walked right across it! We had seen him—clearly! It was not

as though the lawn was just a lawn; for the time being it had changed its character and had become a great stretch of yielding snow. A bird could not have walked across it without leaving a trace. The snow was soft and powdery, and—and——

I felt myself beginning to shiver again, and it was not with the cold.

The thing was impossible!

Nothing human could have crossed that lawn without leaving the marks of his progress across its surface. And what did that imply? What could be the only explanation? The Cloaked Cavalier had been a mere apparition, with no solidity!

I had read of ghosts passing through walls, and such nonsense of that sort. But this was the same—exactly the same! No trickery ever devised by the mind of man could account for this astounding happening. It was weird—uncanny.

Nelson Lee, I know, was vastly impressed. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson did not speak a word. They just stood beside me, motionless and silent. There was nothing to say, indeed. We were all thunderstruck.

But, after a few moments, the gov'nor touched my arm.

"Come, boys," he said quietly.

He turned and walked back along the terrace. We followed without a word, and when we arrived at the French windows of the dining-room we found the Earl of Westbrooke there, with Lady Helen beside him.

"Did you find the poor fellow?" he asked huskily.

"Something very extraordinary has happened, Lord Westbrooke," answered Lee, in a steady voice. "I don't pretend to account for it at present. The man you referred to as Gill is nowhere to be seen. His footprints lead to a certain point, and no further. By some strange means he has disappeared."

"Man alive! You don't mean——"

"Please don't get excited!" interrupted the gov'nor, setting a fine example by remaining as cool as ice himself. "Gill has vanished, and the appearances are strikingly significant. The powers you attributed to the Tregellis phantom appear to be justified. At the very moment the spectre ceased to be visible, so Gill ceased to be visible. Both vanished simultaneously, and there seems to be no explanation whatever."

"It is ghastly—ghastly!" muttered the earl.

Lady Helen said nothing, but listened with one hand at her neck, and with her eyes expressing very real horror.

"It is really impossible to form any conclusion at the moment," went on the gov'nor smoothly. "We must procure lights, and examine the terrace more thoroughly. Will you cause inquiries to be made, Lady Helen? Gill may have fled indoors—we don't know. I only examined the spot for a moment."

Our hostess went off at once, and we all proceeded to the great hall, where we waited while lanterns were procured. The experience seemed to have had a subduing effect upon us, and our faces were drawn and pale.

"What do you think, Bennett?" asked Watson unsteadily.

"I'm hanged if I know what to think," I replied, in a low voice. "It's—it's jolly queer, Tommy. I've never seen a ghost before, but——"

I broke off, and Sir Montie stared at me hard.

"Do you think that Cavalier was a ghost?" he asked quietly.

"Don't you?"

"Dear boy, I'm flustered—I'm all worked up inside," declared the young owner of Tregellis. "Family ghosts are all very well, but they're deucedly upsetting, begad! An' it's rather horrid when they start interferin' with people!"

Lord Westbrooke came over to us.

"You youngsters had better stop indoors," he exclaimed. "It's an infernal pity you went out on to that balcony——"

"That's all right, sir," I interrupted, smiling. "We're not more startled than anybody else. And I'm dying to go out to have a look at those footprints. You needn't worry about us in the least—we've got pretty sound nerves."

"By George!" said his lordship. "What are boys coming to nowadays? I thought you'd be on the point of collapsing, you young rascals! Well, if you want to go, I don't suppose I can stop you."

He tried to speak cheerfully, but it was a miserable failure. He couldn't control the unsteadiness of his voice. It wasn't the phantom itself which had startled us so much; it was the uncanny disappearance of the gardener. Where had the

man gone? And how had he been spirited away?

Spirited away! That's an expression which is often used when somebody had been kidnapped; but this affair was an actual case of spiriting! Gill had just vanished into thin air—that's what it amounted to.

Although the servants had seen nothing, they guessed things. Old Fenn, the butler, brought us lanterns, and I could see that he looked agitated. If he didn't know anything, he guessed much. And after that came a report that Gill had gone out to attend to one of his minor duties, and had not returned.

With our feet encased in our outdoor boots, we felt more comfortable. We donned our overcoats and caps, and the oaken door was opened. Lord Westbrooke accompanied us this time, and we trudged through the snow with three powerful lanterns.

Small flakes were descending thickly, and the air was as keen as a razor. The wind had risen a bit, and moaned round the old pile eerily. Somehow the very instant we left that cheerful hall a weight of depression seemed to descend upon our shoulders.

"It's a pity we didn't rescue the poor fellow by force!" remarked the earl, as we trod through the snow. "We could, at least, have saved him from this dreadful fate!"

"You seem to overlook the fact, Lord Westbrooke, that the whole incident did not occupy the half of a minute," put in Nelson Lee quietly. "Probably the space of time seemed much longer, but it wasn't. Even if we had rushed to the spot, we could not have arrived in time."

"I suppose not—I suppose not," muttered his lordship shakily.

We arrived at the lawn once more, and cast our lights about in every direction. Right away stretched the snow—a pure white sheet. Nothing human had touched it, and Gill's footprints just came to an abrupt stop. There was not even an indication that his feet had been shuffled. The prints in the snow were clear and well defined. Gill had stood in that one spot, and had been no more!

He could not even have retraced his steps in his own track. Both the gov'nor and I were experienced in this sort of thing, and a glance told us that the footprints were single ones.

But where had the man gone to? Surely—surely there was some explanation? But yet, when I stared at that

great expanse of undisturbed snow, a strange nervousness took possession of me.

I saw the gov'nor looking upwards, but he needn't have taken the trouble. Over our heads was nothing but the leaden sky. At this spot, near the edge of the lawn, we were yards from the nearest tree, and as many yards from the north wing itself. If Gill had jumped, he would merely have landed in the snow again. He hadn't jumped—he had just ceased to exist.

"It's a terrible affair—a horrible affair!" exclaimed the Earl of Westbrooke. "We can't get over the facts, Mr. Alvington. We all saw that uncanny thing walking across the lawn. No human being could do so without leaving very visible traces behind him. Thus we can only come to one conclusion. It was a ghostly visitation, and it would be rank nonsense to suggest otherwise."

"I am not satisfied, by any means," declared the gov'nor quietly.

"But how can you doubt——"

"If we had merely seen the ghost itself, I might, perhaps, have accepted it," said Nelson Lee. "But to believe that a spirit—a mere ghost-form—could envelop a living man and cause him to fade into nothingness—no, Lord Westbrooke, I cannot accept that!"

"But, my dear sir, what can you suggest?"

"At the moment I can suggest nothing," was Nelson Lee's reply. "I can only say that I am completely amazed. There are two ways of looking at this thing. First, we will assume that the hazy figure was a mere apparition. Could such a phantom cause the disappearance of the man Gill? No, Lord Westbrooke; it couldn't. I am very emphatic upon that point. Nothing will convince me!"

"But you saw with your own eyes——"

"I saw what appeared to be an impossible happening," said the gov'nor quietly, "but I have never yet encountered the puzzle which had no solution. Even supposing that the whole incident was the result of clever trickery, there are fatal flaws. Why should any trickery be perpetrated? What could be the object of such elaborate fakery? Why, above all, should an under-gardener be victimised? Frankly, I don't know what to make of the affair. It is a complete mystery!"

"You talk of trickery as though such a thing might be possible, sir," I put in. "I've never believed in ghosts in all my life. But I do know that nothing solid could cross this lawn without making deep marks! My own common sense tells me that!"

"Exactly, Bennett!" agreed Nelson Lee. "The absence of footprints and the abrupt termination of Gill's track are points which seem impossible to explain. But we must not jump to conclusions."

"I'm thinking of the danger," said Lord Westbrooke. "Don't you think we had better all run over to the Hall, Mr. Alvington? I don't like to think that we're running away, but, hang it all, the monstrous thing may appear again! It may create further mischief!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am inclined to wish that it would appear again," he said. "To tell you the truth, Lord Westbrooke, I am extremely keen to investigate this very singular phenomenon, and I wouldn't leave the castle under any consideration! The boys, I am convinced, will remain. It wouldn't be cowardly to run away under the circumstances——"

"I vote we stay here, anyhow," I put in quietly.

"Benny, boy, that's just what I was goin' to say myself," murmured Sir Montie. "This is my home, an' I'm not goin' to desert it. I'm game to risk bein' melted into thin air by the phantom!"

"Same here," said Tommy Watson unsteadily.

I looked at him, and saw that he was very pale. Tommy had heaps of pluck, but the recent happenings had completely unnerved him. He was more affected than any of us, but he wouldn't have admitted it for anything in the world.

We retraced our steps, and entered the castle once more. There was nothing to be gained by remaining out in the snow—except, perhaps, a choice selection of bad colds. We had done all we could for the moment.

The one concrete fact which stood out above all else was that Frederick Gill, the under gardener, had vanished. Searching for him was impossible, for we had no starting-point. And the snow was now coming down in thicker clouds than ever. Lord Westbrook had glanced at the sky rather anxiously as we mounted the steps.

"I was thinking of going home to——"

night," he remarked, when we stood in the great lounge hall again. "Perhaps I'd better not, considering everything. The snow won't detain me, but the boys may feel that they are being deserted."

The boys grinned.

"You needn't worry about that, uncle," said Sir Montie. "I wouldn't dream of bein' disrespectful, but you needn't remain on our account. We've got Mr. Alvin'ton—an' he's a rippin' guardian!"

"True—true!" said Montie's uncle readily. "I don't suppose I should be a ha'porth of good if I did remain. But I was thinking of my moral obligation to the lot of you, if you understand me. However, I am quite willing to entrust the boys to your care, Mr. Alvington."

"If you think it would be better for them to go to Westbrooke Hall with you, I won't say a word to hinder."

"Oh, I say!" I protested. "We don't want to bunk, sir!"

"Which is a direct implication that I am going to 'bunk,' eh?" exclaimed the earl, with twinkling eyes. "Well, I suppose I am. But I am doing so because there are guests arriving at the Hall to-night, and I feel that it is my duty to be present. I am certainly not scared away by the Cloaked Cavalier!"

Lord Westbrooke spoke in a jocular tone. The truth of the matter was the brilliant electric lights, blazing log fires, the cheerful warmth of everything within the great hall, all contributed to the casting away of our former funk. I'm not ashamed to admit it. It had been funk—nothing else.

I'm not saying that we were actually cheerful. The uncanny disappearance of Gill weighed upon us heavily. If it had not been for that aspect of the case, we should have been quite jolly by this time. The effects of seeing the apparition had completely dispersed. It was Gill's strange fate which worried us all so deeply.

And while Lord Westbrooke made preparations for departure, the guv'nor set about the task of interviewing some of the servants. He was anxious to find out the gardener's precise movements during the hour previous to the appearance of the spectre.

I didn't know the result of Nelson Lee's questioning at the time, for Montie and Tommy and I had gone upstairs to change our wet socks and don clean ones. When we came down, the earl was on the

point of departure, and he and the guv'nor were having a few words.

"A splendid suggestion, Mr. Alvington," his lordship was saying. "Take the boys into the billiard-room and amuse them for a while. It may prevent them from brooding too much over what has occurred. But about the police? I don't think we are called upon to consult them—to-night, at all events. Gill has gone, but the police couldn't do anything, even if they came. The morning will be time enough, Mr. Alvington—quite time enough. Ah, Helen, I'm glad to see you are looking a little better!"

Lady Helen had just appeared.

"That's mean of you, Gerald!" she smiled. "You were far more upset than I was! Why, you were so excited that you could hardly speak for a moment!"

"How women do exaggerate!" protested her brother, lifting up his hands. "I suppose it's no good my denying that statement. It would only lead to endless argument. 'Pon my soul, Helen, it's rather lucky I'm going! If I had stayed, we should have been arguing until three in the morning!"

Lady Helen laughed. I found out afterwards that she and her brother never could agree on any point. As a result, they resorted to argument, and, as often as not, the earl lost his temper at the finish. Montie gave me this scrap of family information with many chuckles.

The Earl of Westbrooke was rather glad to leave, I imagined. He wasn't in the least cowardly, or anything like that, but our experience had undoubtedly disturbed him more than he would admit.

And, after all, he was leaving the guv'nor in charge. His lordship knew that the household couldn't have been in better hands than those of Nelson Lee.

After the earl's car had departed, we all stood before the fires in the great hall and talked together—Tommy and Montie and I at one fire, and Nelson Lee and Lady Helen at the other.

After about five minutes, the guv'nor beckoned to us.

"Under all the circumstances, my boys, Lady Helen has decided that it will be better for us to retire early," said Nelson Lee. "We will just amuse ourselves in the billiard-room for an hour and then go to bed."

Lady Helen nodded in agreement.

"Mr. Alvington has comforted me wonderfully!" she smiled. "It is terrible about Mr. Gill, but there may be some



"Without any previous warning two men ran towards me, and I was soon overpowered."—(See page 29.)

simple explanation, after all. Don't worry, Montie! To-morrow, perhaps, the mystery will be cleared up."

"Begad, I hope so!" murmured Montie.

His aunt bade us good-night, and then retired. Nelson Lee led the way along the wide, brightly illuminated corridors until we came to the superbly appointed billiard-room. Here we found a fire as cheerful as those in the lounge hall. The guv'nor set his back to it and lit a cigar.

"Now, boys," he said easily, "I'm going to leave it to you! Shall we play, or shall we have a little chat?"

"About the ghost?" asked Tommy Watson uneasily.

"I'm not sure that there is a ghost, Watson," replied Lee. "We are private here, and so we may talk freely. You know my little secret. You know that I am not merely a simple schoolmaster, and perhaps you will understand the keen interest I take in this matter."

"Rather, sir!" said Tregellis-West. "But you—you track criminals, don't you? Forgers, an' pickpockets, an' murderers, an' burglars? Ghosts ain't in your line, are they, sir?"

The guv'nor looked thoughtful.

"It all depends, my boy," he replied. "There are two types of ghosts—those which are supernatural apparitions, and those which are not. So far I have only experienced the latter. My dealings with ghosts have invariably led to an arrest at the finish."

"Are you suggesting that there are criminals at work here, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I hardly like to make any positive statement, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But the facts are peculiar. For one thing, why should any criminals choose the castle for their haunting ground? And how could any criminals fake up what we saw to-night? The Cloaked Cavalier crossed the lawn—we are all willing to swear to that. Yet the snow is undisturbed!"

"It's amazin'!" said Montie, shaking his head. "It's—it's monstrous, sir! We're up against two problems, begad! No ghost could cause a man to vanish, could he? An' no human being could cross an expanse of snow without makin' marks. So we're floored which ever way we look at it—what? I'm all confused. My brain ain't good enough to think it all out, sir!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You have explained the position well, West," he remarked. "If we accept the ghost theory, we are brought to a standstill; and if we assume that human agency is responsible for the phenomenon, we are at a standstill just the same. The whole matter requires very careful thought."

"And you don't want to be disturbed by three inquisitive boys—do you, guv'nor?" I grinned.

"I didn't say that, Nipper——"

"But you meant it," I said easily. "You want to squat down and think—I know you, sir. So we'll buzz off to bed just as soon as you like, and allow you to have one of your brain exercises."

Nelson Lee didn't protest. I knew quite well that he was anxious to be alone—so that he could think deeply over the problem, without fear of disturbance. But he didn't like to pack us off to bed peremptorily. So we packed of our own accord.

We left Nelson Lee in the billiard-room, and went upstairs. The guv'nor soon followed us, however. He looked into our bedroom for a moment, and bade us good-night again. Then I heard him go into his own apartment, and close the door. He was going to have his stew before his own fire.

For Lady Helen had made us very comfortable. Montie and Tommy and I had a lovely blaze in our own room, and the air was comfortably warm. What with the fire, and the electric lights, our spirits rose to such an extent that we were soon joking and laughing.

We undressed, and sat down before the fire for a little while, attired merely in our pyjamas.

"If it wasn't for the disappearance of Gill the whole thing would be interesting," I remarked, as I toasted my toes. "As it is, there is a rotten feeling of tragedy in the air. Who is that chap Gill, anyhow?"

"Dear fellow, it's no good askin' me," said Sir Montie. "Aunt Helen manages the castle an' everybody in it, begad! But we know who Gill is, don't we? One of the under-gardeners."

"I say, how could we see that beastly ghost so plainly?" asked Watson. "The night was as black as pitch, you know. Yet we could see the thing. Didn't you notice a kind of greenish haze, you chaps? It wasn't a light—just a kind of haze. I'll swear that wasn't natural!"

"Oh, well, it's no good worrying and guessing," I yawned. "This fire's made me sleepy. We'd better turn in."

And, after a little further talk, we tumbled into our beds, and switched the light off. The room wasn't in darkness, however, for a cheerful glow came from the big fireplace.

We all dropped off to sleep fairly quickly, I believe. But I wasn't settled in mind, and I awoke once or twice. The fire was dimming, and cast only a subdued reflection. Outside, the wind whistled and moaned, and one or two stray pieces of ivy tapped the windows now and again. It was a creepy sound, and I was glad the others weren't awake.

I dozed again, and it must have been a long dose this time. For when I awoke the bedroom was in total darkness, except for a very faint ruddy glow from the dying embers of the fire. I couldn't see the pictures on the wall opposite, but the glow of the fire was reflected in the glass of one big picture facing me. The effect was rather curious, for it looked as though the fire was high up on the wall.

I could hear the snow pattering against the window, driven by a wind which sighed mournfully now and again. I don't know why I had awakened. Sir Montie and Tommy were in their beds, fast asleep. Montie's bed was nearest to me, and I could hear him breathing regularly.

"Go to sleep, you fathead!" I mumbled to myself.

I was just about to turn over, with the intention of burying my face in the eiderdown pillow, when my limbs stiffened, and my heart commenced beating rapidly.

My gaze had been upon the reflection of the fire in the picture-glass.

And, suddenly, the ruddy glow had been blotted out!

In a second I knew that something—something—had passed between me and the picture! There was another presence in the room. As silently as a shadow I sat up, and shivered.

The air had become chill, and an icy draught seemed to catch me.

Who was in the room—what was in the room?

I stared before me, my eyes aching, my teeth clenched. I won't deny that I was just a bit scared. The feeling that something unknown was in the bedroom

with me made me quiver with excitement and uncertainty.

And then the door opened—I was sure of it. A draught of cold air came right across to me—a big, full draught. And I saw, in the dimness, the bulk of the door itself standing open. It was like a blob of blacker blackness, if you can understand what I mean.

I set my teeth, and slipped out of bed.

"I'm going to see what the thing is, anyhow!" I told myself grimly.

There was a little electric torch on the dressing-table—my own. I felt my way across without making a sound, and gripped the torch. Then I stole towards the door. It was wide open, and an icy bulk of air was entering from the corridor. I passed out slowly, and looked up and down. Something was moving near me—going away from me.

I compressed my lips—and pressed the switch.

A beam of white light shot out dazzlingly, and I held myself ready for— Well, I don't know what I held myself ready for. But I wasn't quite prepared for what I saw.

For I had an excellent rear view of—Tommy Watson!

Tommy was walking slowly and deliberately, and I knew, in a flash, that he was walking in his sleep!

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THE CLOAKED CAVALIER APPEARS AGAIN, AND TOMMY WATSON DISAPPEARS—BUT HE TURNS UP AGAIN SOON AFTER, AND IS RATHER DAZED.

I WAS so relieved that I nearly burst out laughing.

But it was rotten for poor old Tommy to be wandering about in that state. I'd seen a somnambulist before, and I knew that it would have been unwise to awaken him. The events of the evening had evidently been playing the dickens with his nerves, and this chilly jaunt was the result. Tommy wasn't so strong as Montie and I.

I don't know what I had been thinking a moment before, but I was ready to grin now. My relief was great. The nocturnal wanderer was only old Tommy; and, by the look of it, he was out for a ramble.

I hadn't been able to see his bed from

my own, and I had naturally assumed that he was snugly between the sheets. The slight sounds he had made in getting out of bed must have roused me.

"Poor old scout!" I grinned. "You'll go and fall off the battlements into the cruel snow if you're left to yourself! My hat! What a draught!"

I was only attired in airy pyjamas—and Tommy was in a similar state. Unless I got him back to bed pretty soon we should both develop colds of the best quality. I couldn't wake him up, and I couldn't leave him, and I was in a bit of a fix.

But Watson himself solved the difficulty by turning round at the end of the corridor, with the obvious intention of coming back. I switched off the light and waited. He came along with slow steps, and I felt just a bit queer. Seeing a fellow walk in his sleep like that was rather uncanny.

He went right past me, and turned into the bedroom again. When I crept in after him I saw he was getting into bed. He pulled the bedclothes over him quite deliberately, and sank back on to the pillow with a little sigh.

"Thank goodness!" I muttered, shivering.

I closed the door gently, put my torch back on the dressing-table, and hopped into my own bed. I was glad to get there, and after a while I looked over at Tommy again and found that he was sleeping peacefully.

These upsets had quite unsettled me, and I only slept in dozes. It made me wild to hear Montie snoring away with the utmost disregard for all the ghosts in Tregellis. It wasn't a loud snore, but it was a contented one.

I have always been a light sleeper—ever since the gov'nor had trained me, anyway—and any unusual sounds nearly always roused me. It seemed as though I had only been asleep for another minute when I again found myself wide awake.

This time the fire was quite out, and I looked into the darkness sleepily. But the room wasn't quite dark, after all. A few faint beams of moonlight were filtering in between the slats of the heavy Venetian blinds. The snow seemed to have stopped, but the wind had risen, and was howling miserably.

"What's the matter yith you, you

restless idiot?" I growled to myself. "If you go on at this rate you'll be fit for nothing—— Hallo! What the dickens——"

I sat up abruptly, with a quick intake of breath.

For, in the gloom, I had suddenly noticed that Tommy Watson's bed was—empty! While I had been sleeping, he must have gone off on another somnambulistic expedition, and goodness only knows where he'd got to!

I hopped out of bed like a jack-in-the-box. This was getting serious. I'd never known Tommy walk in his sleep before—and I don't suppose he ever had. But the excitement had unnerved him.

It was highly necessary to go in search for him, and I didn't see why I should do it alone. So I grabbed one of Montie's ears and pulled it. He had been snoring louder than ever, but he gave a gasp and twisted his head up.

"Who—— What—— Begad!" he ejaculated drowsily.

"Get up, you snoring grampus!" I hissed into his ear. "Tommy's walking in his sleep, and there's no telling where the dickens he's got to! Rouse up, ass!"

This was, perhaps, a somewhat peremptory way in which to deal with my host; but the matter was urgent, and Montie didn't mind, anyhow.

"Oh, it's you, dear Benny?" he mumbled, blinking at me. "At least, I believe it is. I know your voice, but I can't see anything of you. What's the matter, old fellow? You don't mean to say that the Cloaked——"

"Rats to the Cavalier!" I cut in. "Watson has gone!"

"Gone, dear boy?" asked Tregellis West blankly. "You don't mean to say that he's been spirited away——"

I told Sir Montie in about twelve words what had happened. He slipped out of bed instantly, and we both went to the door. The corridor was empty. There were narrow windows at close intervals, and a subdued amount of moonlight was entering. And we could see that the corridor, both ways, was deserted.

"Which way shall we go, Benny?" asked Montie, with chattering teeth.

"Any old way!" I muttered. "Come on!"

I turned to the left at random, and moved noiselessly across the soft carpet.

I was shivering already, for the atmosphere was freezingly cold. We hadn't had time to slip any clothing on. The main thing was to locate Tommy, and get him back to bed.

We arrived at the right angle, and the full stretch of the wide north passage lay before us. It was the longest corridor in the castle, and the end of it was so far distant that the narrow window looked quite tiny.

Our eyes had become accustomed to the gloom by this time, and we both plainly saw the pyjama-clad figure of Tommy Watson moving steadily along right at the far distant end of the passage.

"Thank the stars he hasn't gone very far!" I murmured. "We'll soon have him back, the ass! We shall have to chain him into bed this time!"

We both commenced running, but even as we did so, we became aware of a strange, eerie glow, which seemed to materialise from nothing at the side of the passage beyond Tommy.

Montie and I checked as though by instinct, and stood quite still. The glow appeared to be greenish, and I caught my breath in sharply. And then, before I could speak, the glow took shape.

"It's—it's—the Cavalier!" breathed Montie huskily.

The apparition was right in the distance, but we could see it distinctly. Although I wanted to dash forward, somehow or other I couldn't move an inch. I was intensely curious to find out what this awful appearance was. But I didn't shift from the spot where I stood—I couldn't.

The truth of the matter was, I was in a state of cold funk. Sir Montie was just the same. And neither of us are ashamed to confess it. There was something about this ghastly business which took every ounce of pluck out of us. We'd have faced a burglar with gusto, but this was different.

The Cloaked Cavalier advanced along the passage just as he had advanced across the lawn. But now the situation was more tense. We had been in the open before, and at this moment we were in confined walls.

Montie and I watched with a kind of intense fascination. The phantom came forward with its cloak outstretched—and Tommy was walking right into its arms!

He was asleep, and didn't know of the peril which assailed him.

I myself didn't realise it until I was brought to my senses with a rush.

We couldn't see the Cavalier so distinctly after the first moment, for Tommy stood—or rather walked—between it and us. But we saw the cloak outstretch—and then it entwined itself completely round Tommy Watson.

It all happened in a second.

There was a muffled scream—a scream which seemed to be a gasp of alarm and amazement all in one. And the Cloaked Cavalier just dematerialised—that's the best way I can describe it.

The green glow vanished, and with it went the form of the phantom—and Watson. I blinked, and took a great gulp. For the passage was absolutely clear—the window at the end, comparatively light, showed distinctly. There was nothing whatever intervening!

The thing was utterly impossible—and yet it happened!

"Good heavens!" I muttered thickly.

"Dear boy, I—I——"

Montie didn't get any further, for at that second we heard a faint step behind us. We both twirled round jumpily, but it was only Nelson Lee. He was wearing a dressing-gown, and carried a torch in his hand. A bright flash of light spread itself upon us.

"Did—did you see, guv'nor?" I gasped.

"See what?" asked Nelson Lee, in sharp tones.

"Why, the Cavalier——"

"I saw nothing," interjected the guv'nor quickly. "I merely heard a curious cry, and came out to investigate. Did you——"

"It was Watson, sir," I explained. "He—he was walking in his sleep, and Montie and I came out to fetch him back. Then the ghost appeared and— and simply spirited him away. They both vanished before our eyes!"

Lee shook me a trifle.

"Pull yourself together, young 'un," he said evenly. "Where did that happen?"

"Right at the end of the passage."

The guv'nor didn't wait, but ran off at full speed. His presence calmed Montie and I wonderfully, and we pelted off after him. But when we got to the end of the passage there was nothing to be seen—nothing whatever.

A quick search of all the passages beyond proved similarly fruitless. Poor old Tommy Watson had gone—just like Gill.

"The boy does not appear to be anywhere here," said Lee quietly. "It is extraordinary. There are no marks—there is nothing to give us the slightest clue. Poor lad, what can have happened to him?"

"I never did believe in ghosts," said Montie, somewhat shakily. "But after this I—I—Bogad, what can a fellow say?"

"Tell me exactly what happened," said Nelson Lee.

I did so, right up to the point where the gov'nor himself had appeared.

"We saw the phantom quite clearly, sir," I finished up. "He took Tommy in his arms, and they both vanished. We could see this window clearly—so if any human being had been between us, we should have seen the bulk. But there was nothing, gov'nor—nothing at all!"

Lee looked at me grimly.

"You mean there was nothing a second or two after the apparition had vanished?" he asked. "Be precise, Nipper. Do you mean that you could see the window right through the phantom itself?"

"No, I don't mean that, gov'nor," I replied. "We couldn't test that, because Tommy was in the way all the time. But as soon as over the green glow vanished the passage was empty—and there hadn't been time for anything human to reach the end of the corridor."

"H'm! And the walls are solid right the way along, except for the windows," murmured Lee. "It's queer, boys—it's ghastly. The windows are rather high, and would prove difficult to slip through. So we may as well dismiss them at once. And yet Watson did not evaporate into thin air."

"I'm beginning to think that ghost yarn was true," I said unsteadily.

"Then cease thinking it at once!" ordered Nelson Lee. "Upon my soul, I thought you had more sense, Nipper! But I mustn't be too exacting; your nerves are evidently strained rather severely."

"I'd hate to be rude, sir," put in Sir Montie, "but what can have happened if Tommy didn't evaporate? He didn't sink into the floor—"

"Nothing will convince me that Wat-

son melted into space," said the gov'nor. "Use your common sense, boys! The very suggestion is preposterous—absurd! Watson is to be found—and we must find him. It's no good getting into a panic."

"But he—but he puffed out before our eyes," I protested. "He just ceased to exist, gov'nor—that's the only way to put it."

"Since Watson left this corridor abruptly, without any previous warning, it merely proves that there is some means of exit, of which we are in ignorance," said Lee, grimly. "We have got to look at the material view of the thing. This is a very old mansion, Nipper, and I have no doubt that it is honeycombed with secret passages."

"Secret passages!" I ejaculated.

"Bogad!" gasped Sir Montie.

I could have kicked myself. Of course! Montie had even told me, months before, that there were many hidden chambers and secret passages in Tregellis Castle. I had been so horror-struck by my own thoughts, that I hadn't considered the matter with a level head.

"There are secret passages," went on our schoolboy host quickly. "I don't know 'em all, Mr. Alvington, but there are one or two panels—"

"Is there one near this spot?"

"There's one just round the bend, sir."

"We will examine it without delay," said Lee sharply. "Don't get wild ideas into your head, my lad. This whole experience is uncanny—horrible, even. I won't deny that I am really alarmed. But, if there is trickery, I must confess that it seems pointless. Who in the world wants to victimise such people as an under-gardener, and a schoolboy? No criminals, however desperate, would seriously attempt the task of scaring the inhabitants of the castle away. That theory can be dismissed at once. There is something deeper—something inexplicable."

We had walked to a point round the bend by this time, and Montie called a halt before a bare stretch of solid paneling.

"I believe there's an entrance here, sir," he said keenly. "My uncle showed it to me when I was home in the summer time. You press a knob, or something."

Nelson Lee's light was fully cast upon

the panelled wall, and we looked for a leech of some sort. Both Montie and I were cold through and through, but we didn't take any notice of this at the time. Our anxiety concerning Tommy made us forget everything else.

"This looks a likely place," said Lee, after a moment.

He put his thumb upon a knot in the woodwork. It was raised slightly, and as Lee put pressure upon it, something seemed to give way, and a black hole yawned before us. A puff of musty damp air assailed our nostrils.

"By Jupiter!" I murmured.

Lee put his head and shoulders through the opening, and flashed his light right within. I could just see, by craning my neck, what lay beyond. There was nothing except a narrow space, about a foot wide by five feet deep. And upon the floor the dust lay thick and undisturbed.

"It would be a mere waste of time to remain here," said Lee, straightening himself. "No human being has been within this secret chamber for years. Do you know of any more, West?"

"Not on this floor, sir."

The guv'nor stroked his chin almost nervously.

"Well, the only thing is to make a very careful search," he said. "It's not a bit of good sitting down and worrying. Watson has vanished, and it's up to us to find him. I shall never believe that he disappeared as the result of supernatural agency. Good gracious! You boys are nearly naked! Go back to your bedroom at once, and put some clothes on!"

Lee had noticed that we were both shivering, and that our faces were blue with the cold.

"What are you going to do, sir?" I asked.

"Search—search until I find some clue or other," replied the guv'nor. "You may come back to me after you have put some more clothing on. My dear boys," he added, as we hesitated, "you'll find me here when you return."

We were only too pleased to be off, for our hands were numb, and our whole bodies were shaking with the cold. We raced back along the full length of the north passage, turned, and reached our bedroom.

Although the fire had died out the

air struck almost warm as we entered. We switched the light on, and rapidly tumbled into our clothes—over our pyjamas. We felt much better after that.

"What does it mean, Montie?" I asked huskily.

"It's the most awful thing I've ever heard of, Benny boy," was Montie's quiet reply. "We just saw old Tommy go before our eyes. An' that scream of his! I shiver when I think of it!"

Without waiting any further we switched off the light, and went out to rejoin the guv'nor. I was carrying my own torch now, and I switched it on as soon as we got in the passage. That cry of Tommy's hadn't roused anybody else except Nelson Lee, for the great mansion was all quiet. The time, I noticed, was just after one.

We went along quickly, and I kept my torch alight all the time. A glow at the end of the passage made it evident that the guv'nor switched the lights on full in that direction.

My heart was throbbing painfully, and I knew that Sir Montie was greatly affected. But he always had been a quiet chap, and his emotions were generally well concealed. Just now, however, his eyes gleamed with acute anxiety.

We were both nearly frantic, and I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for a discovery we made just at that time.

Near the spot where the north passage started, there was a little alcove set into the wall. We passed this at a run, but immediately afterwards I checked myself, and pulled Montie to a standstill.

"Did you see anything?" I asked sharply.

"I—I believe so——"

We turned back, and I directed my light right into the alcove. And then both Montie and I let out a subdued shout of joy and relief. Tommy Watson was lying in the alcove!

"Guv'nor! Guv'nor!" I called.

I dropped to my knees, and bent over Tommy. He seemed to be asleep, and took no notice when I shook him. A cold fear gripped me, but I clenched my teeth and called myself an idiot.

"I—I thought——" Then I paused.

"But he's quite warm, so there can't be much wrong with him. Why the dickens doesn't the guv'nor come?"

Nelson Lee appeared at that very second, and uttered a little exclamation as he saw that we had found the missing boy. Without a word he dropped beside me and made a quick examination.

"Is—is it serious, sir?" asked Montie.

Lee didn't reply. At that moment he was bending right over Tommy, and he suddenly sniffed at Watson's face. And when he looked up his eyes were glinting with eagerness, and he was smiling.

"Serious, West?" he repeated. "Not at all. Our young friend will be himself before long, never fear. He has not fainted, or become unconscious through any natural means. Watson has been drugged!"

"Drugged!" I repeated quickly. "Then—then——"

"The inference is surely obvious, Nipper," smiled Lee. "Ghosts are not in the habit of using drugs, so far as I am aware. There is some astounding trickery at work at the castle—and there's nothing supernatural about it. The agency which is at the bottom of these phenomena is a very material one."

"Then—then there's no phantom at all!" panted Sir Montie.

"There is the Cloaked Cavalier, of course," replied the guv'nor. "But that gentleman is, as I suspected all along, merely a part and parcel of the elaborate mummerly which has been practiced. Possibly Watson will be able to give us some further information."

The great load of anxiety had lifted from my shoulders. I didn't try to explain why Tommy had been found in that alcove. He was safe—and that was all that mattered for the moment. And we now knew, for certain, that clever trickery was at the bottom of all the manifestations.

My courage returned with one bound, and I felt like searching for the phantom then and there—with the charitable idea of hurling him from one of the upper windows in my mind. He deserved to be hurled somewhere, at all events.

Tommy was taken to the guv'nor's bedroom, where a bright fire was still burning. And here he was laid in an

easy chair, and carefully doctored by Nelson Lee.

"You had better warm yourselves, boys," said the detective, indicating the fire. "I don't suppose you will come to much harm—you are both hardy young rascals. Watson will be himself again within thirty minutes I believe—at least, he will be conscious."

"Was he chloroformed, sir?" asked Sir Montie quietly.

"Not chloroformed, West—but pretty near it," replied Lee, with a smile. "The drug used is more expensive than chloroform, but quicker in its action. And it has the advantage of being almost odourless. But it is not quite odourless, and I detected the curious smell in a moment. I don't think Watson had a very large dose, and he will be all right by to-morrow at latest."

"Thank goodness for that," I said feelingly. "And thank goodness we've got something tangible to work upon."

"Have we, Nipper?" asked Lee drily.

"Well, we know that the Cavalier is a fake, anyhow."

"My dear lad, I knew that all along—my common-sense told me that much," smiled the guv'nor. "And this corroboration doesn't carry us an inch. It merely dispels any tiny doubts which may have existed. But we are no further; the reason for all this is still very obscure. I am hoping that Watson himself may know something."

This hope wasn't fulfilled, however.

Tommy "came to" after about twenty minutes. He struggled up quite suddenly, and gazed round him with wide-open eyes.

"What the dickens happened?" he mumbled huskily. "Who—who tried to smother me— Why, what—I ain't in bed at all!"

"What happened to you, Tommy?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm blessed if I know!" said Watson dully. "I—I thought I was in bed. This is your room, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, Watson," replied Nelson Lee. "I am afraid you won't be able to tell us much. It appears that you were walking in your sleep——"

"War-war-walking in my sleep?" stuttered Tommy, blankly.

It was quite evident that he hadn't the least idea of what had occurred, and

the guv'nor's statement had startled him considerably. He believed, during that first minute, that his leg was being pulled.

"It's the truth, old son," I said. "You did it twice—and the first time you scared me out of my wits. I saw you sliding out of your room, and I thought there were ghosts about."

"But I've never done such a fat-headed thing before!" he protested.

"You are not to blame, Watson," smiled Lee. "Lots of people walk in their sleep—especially after a big upset, or any undue excitement. Don't you know what happened to you?"

"Not exactly, sir," replied Watson, looking bewildered. "All I know is that I suddenly woke up, and found myself being smothered and choked. I was gripped, too, and I thought that these two fatheads were having a game. I don't remember any more than that, sir."

"And he didn't."

All the questioning we could think of elicited no further information. And when we told him what had actually happened, he could scarcely believe it. But it was quite easy to understand his point of view.

He had been asleep at the time. When he had awakened, he had been in the grip of the phantom, and had succumbed to the drug in a moment. The guv'nor declared that there must have been a soaked wad upon the phantom's chest, or something of that sort, into which Watson's mouth and nose had been pressed. Either that, or the "ghost" had used one of his hands very smartly.

"But how did he escape, guv'nor?" I asked, frowning. "Both the apparition and Tommy just faded——"

"They did nothing of the sort, Nipper!" interjected Lee impatiently. "When will you get that disappearing idea out of your head? It seemed as though Watson faded away; it seemed as though Gill faded away. But, as a matter of fact, they were merely carried off. There is obviously a secret entrance in the panelling just near the end of the north passage, and we haven't found it. That's all!"

"What about Gill?"

"Ah, that is certainly a problem!" said the guv'nor slowly. "A difficult problem, Nipper. But the solution will prove to be simple, I have no doubt. We can compare these happenings to a performance

at Messrs. Maskelyne & Devant's—or Maskelyne's, as I believe it is now. The most impossible things apparently happen. Why? They are the result of careful preparation; they are nothing but illusions. And the disappearance of Gill was an illusion. He appeared to vanish into thin air; but he didn't, because such a thing is impossible. Gill, I am beginning to suspect, was a willing victim. He was a confederate."

Sir Montie looked up admiringly.

"It's amazin' how you do it, sir," he said. "It all seems to come out straight when you begin talkin'. It does, really! You explain things so easily, begad!"

"There has been very little to explain," replied Lee drily. "Give me time, West, and I may possibly meet with some success. At present, everything is very hazy and obscure. Before I leave Tregollis Castle, however, I mean to do my utmost to get to the root of this villainy—for without a doubt there is some sinister work being perpetrated in and about these old walls."

"By Jingo! A regular mystery!" I said eagerly.

"Exactly! A Christmas mystery, young 'un," agreed Nelson Lee. "But, do you see the time? You had better get off to bed, boys! I don't think the spectre will return to-night. How do you feel, Watson?"

"Just a bit groggy, sir, but all right," said Tommy pluckily.

He got up from the chair, grinning; but it was a weak grin, and he shook as he stood. He had had a rotten experience, and his face was pale and drawn. A long sleep would probably set him on his feet again.

To be on the safe side, I arranged with Sir Montie that we would keep watches until dawn. Then, of course, we could both sleep. Thus I lay in bed, reading for a couple of hours, and then I roused Montie. He kept watch then, and so on. The arrangement interfered with our sleep, but that couldn't be helped.

Nothing happened, of course. We didn't expect any more activity on the part of the unknown that night.

What was the meaning of it all?

Who was the mysterious man who was haunting the castle? Why was he doing it? What could his object be? And had he any companions working with him? I fancied so. But the whole affair was complex and mystifying.

The dawn came at last, and it found

me thinking hard; although it was safe to sleep then, I remained awake for some time. I didn't know then how many things were to happen, and what excitement there was to be, before another dawn broke!

As the gov'nor experienced a rummy adventure during the day, I have asked him—very nicely—to set down what happened in his own words. He can describe it better than I, because he was alone at the time.

CHAPTER V.

(Related by Nelson Lee.)

AN ATTACK IN THE DUSK—AND AN UNEXPECTED RESCUE.

NIPPER is rather anxious that I should set down the events which occurred during the afternoon of the day following our arrival at Tregellis Castle. I am not at all loth to do so, for this extraordinary experience had gripped me, and I was very keenly interested.

The happenings at the castle had been strange, inexplicable.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason in the movements of the so-called "phantom."

I dismissed at once the theory that the unknown enemy was attempting to scare the inhabitants of the castle away. Such a programme would have been obviously impossible. No criminal would have been foolish enough to attempt it.

Clever trickery had been employed—as, for example, the spiriting away of Gill, the under-gardener. I was puzzled over the incident, but I was not hoodwinked. It had been a mere illusion, as I had told the boys. The absence of footprints in the snow was a bit of a startler, as Nipper would probably describe it, but the explanation would prove to be very simple. It must have been simple, otherwise the trick could never have been performed.

At breakfast-time Watson was nearly himself again, and I was glad. He was somewhat pale, but his spirits were excellent, and he declared himself ready for anything.

Our hostess, Lady Helen Tregellis-West, was much concerned when we told her of the events of the night. I questioned her regarding the Cloaked Cavalier, but she shook her head rather helplessly.

"I don't know anything, Mr. Alvington," she said. "Until last night not a single member of the living family ever saw the traditional phantom. Can it be possible that some terrible men are playing a—a joke?"

I smiled rather grimly.

"I am afraid there is not much question of it," I replied, "and there is no joke connected with the affair, Lady Helen. I don't pretend to know what all this queer business means——"

"Don't you think we had better call in the police?" she interrupted anxiously.

"Well, I would rather wait a day or two, at least," I replied. "You see, Lady Helen, the position is difficult. What have we to tell the police? If we merely gave them all the available information—and we could do no more—they would probably decline to act. Or, if they did act, the result would be questionable. One or two thick-headed country policemen would arrive, and would turn the place inside-out——"

"Begad, we don't want that!" protested Montie painfully.

His aunt nodded.

"I will do exactly as you decide, Mr. Alvington," she said at once. "I leave it all to you. But do you think you will be able to—to accomplish anything? I mean, will you succeed in finding out the truth?"

"If Mr. Alvington can't, nobody can," declared Montie solemnly. "You take my tip, aunt, Mr. Alvington is cleverer than all the Scotland Yard men put together."

I chuckled.

"That's hardly a fair statement to make, Montie," I protested. "And you mustn't imagine that the Scotland Yard detectives are duffers. Many of the cleverest crime investigators in the world are employed by Scotland Yard."

"Well, we can't get a Yard man down here," remarked Nipper, stirring his coffee. "So we'll see what we can do ourselves. What's the programme, sir?" he added, glancing at me. "Shall we search for secret passages and things?"

"I don't know about the 'things,' Bennett," I replied, "but we shall certainly have a shot at discovering the secret passages. And there is that mystery concerning Gill's disappearance. If we only had a starting-point our task would be simpler. But, as there is no starting-point, we must make one."

I still referred to Nipper as Bennett,

although Lady Helen knew our real identities. Her brother had already told her of our little secret. She had been surprised, of course; but she understood the position, and I had no fear of her "letting the cat out of the bag." She was a clever, clear-headed woman. And, after all, our secret was merely confined to this one family—with the exception, of course, of Eileen Dare and Captain Masters. And they were old friends.

As soon as breakfast was over, we donned our thick boots and ventured out. By "we" I mean the boys and myself.

The day was gloriously fine. The winter sun shone from a cloudless sky, but I anticipated a further fall of snow before long. The castle itself and the grounds were glittering; snow lay thick over everything. The air was crisp and invigorating, with a true Christmas "feel" about it.

We trudged through the snow to the terrace, and then I made an examination. My object was to solve the riddle of Gill's disappearance. Frankly, I was worried over that business.

Gill had vanished before my eyes—and there could be no secret passage here. There could be no subterranean tunnel. The fellow had been made to disappear in the open. But how?

I took stock of the surroundings.

The edge of the terrace, where it joined flush with the lawn, was quite a distance from the low-built portion of the castle known as the north wing. The terrace itself stretched out far, both to left and to right, and ahead lay the wide expanse of the lawns.

I frowned as I pulled at my cigarette.

"The phantom came right across the lawn," I said musingly. "It was no shadow we saw, boys—no reflection."

"But nothing solid could walk over the lawn, sir, without leaving deep marks in the snow," objected Nipper.

"You are right, young 'un—nothing could walk!" I replied smoothly.

"I don't catch on, guv'nor."

"Don't you, Nipper??" I smiled.

"Well, think it over."

I looked over at a tall chestnut-tree which adorned a portion of the lawn directly ahead. It was a magnificent tree, and looked all the more magnificent because its gaunt, bare branches were clothed in masses of feathery snow.

"Now, I wonder——"

I paused, and turned round, looking

keenly at the low battlements of the castle. Then I smiled to myself.

"I am afraid we can do nothing here, boys," I said, after a moment. "To discover the secret of last night's episode, we must search elsewhere; but that will do later on. For the present, I want to look for those secret passages."

"Search elsewhere, sir?" repeated Sir Montie. "I don't understand—I don't, really. This is where Gill stood——"

"Exactly, West," I interrupted; "but he didn't stand here after we saw him vanish. He took a trip elsewhere."

"Have you tumbled to the solution, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly. "Because, if so, you might let us into the secret!"

"Not yet!" I put in. "Not until I am certain, young 'un."

Nipper gave vent to a decidedly expressive sniff—a favourite habit of his—but didn't press the subject. He was aware of the futility of doing so.

We all went indoors after having a chat with the head gardener. That responsible individual was dubious. He declared, with many headshakes, that Gill had gone for good. He fully believed in the Tregellis phantom, and I did not trouble myself to explain that the "phantom" was very solid. The head gardener would have stuck to his opinions, in spite of my efforts to convert him. Who was I—a mere schoolmaster? I have an idea that the gardener strongly disapproved of my presence at the castle; at all events, he treated me with very cold civility.

I smiled as I went indoors with the boys. I hadn't arrived at any positive solution, but I had formed a theory, and I felt that the situation was improved. The next thing was to investigate the secret passages.

To-day was Christmas Eve, and, if it were humanly possible, I meant to wrest the secret of these faked phenomena from the grim old walls before Christmas was actually upon us.

Lady Helen knew practically nothing about the many secret entrances to hidden passages and retreats which were to be found in various parts of the castle. She had preferred to remain in ignorance of them. But Montie was acquainted with several stairways and passages.

Three hours were spent examining these, but the net result of our investigation was nil. In every case, we found that the passages were cul-de-sacs, leading merely into a poky retreat or to

another floor; and the undisturbed dust of years covered the ancient floors and stairs.

By the time we had decided that our efforts were wasted, the luncheon-gong sounded, and the boys, at least, were very pleased. Nipper was inclined to be somewhat grumpy—the young rascal! Set-backs always tried his patience, with very apparent effect upon his temper; and we had had nothing but set-backs all the morning. The slightest success would have banished his black looks at once.

“It’s a jolly queer thing, sir!” he remarked, as we came downstairs after washing. “You seem to be pretty sure that some intruders are having a game, and that they’re using the old secret passages to make their efforts seem genuine. If that’s the case, why haven’t we found traces of any footprints in all that dust?”

I smiled.

“The answer is very simple, Nipper,” I remarked drily.

“I’m blessed if I can see it, anyhow!”

“Then I am afraid you are very dense this morning,” I said. “My dear lad, we have found no footprints for the simple reason that we have not discovered the exact passages which the marauders have been utilising. Considering everything, it is really absurd to suppose that the unknown would make use of those secret ways which are well known to the family. Isn’t it?”

“I haven’t looked at it that way, guv’nor,” replied Nipper, puckering his brow. “I suppose you are right—you generally are. But what are you going to do? It’s no good searching. We might mess about for weeks. The only thing is to wait and watch. And we don’t know where to wait or where to watch!” he ended up gloomily.

I laughed outright.

“You are inclined to be pessimistic, you grumbling young bounder!” I exclaimed, slapping him on the back. “If you wish to know my plans—well, I am afraid you’ll have to wait a bit. I’m not quite sure of them myself. This afternoon, however, I intend to run over to Westbrooke Hall. The earl may possibly give us some information of which Montie is in ignorance.”

“I’m going with you—of course,” said Nipper.

“On the contrary, my boy, you will remain here,” I replied. “I am going to leave you in charge, and I shall expect you to look after Montie and Watson

and yourself. These unknown persons may attempt trickery as soon as my back is turned—but I fancy they will meet their equal in you!”

Nipper didn’t offer any objections to remaining behind. He was somewhat flattered by my words—although I had intended no flattery whatever. For all his minor faults—and Nipper has quite a few—he is an extremely capable youngster.

Watson and Tregellis-West were in the great lounge hall, before one of the fires, when we joined them. We all went in to luncheon at once, and we took excellent appetites in with us.

“I wish to ask a favour, Lady Helen,” I remarked, when the meal was well on the way. “Montie tells me that you have a little car in the garage. May I borrow it to run over to Westbrooke Hall? I expect I shall be back by tea-time.”

“With pleasure, Mr. Alvington,” replied our hostess. “I’ll tell Jevons to get it ready. Perhaps you would like him to drive you over?”

I explained that I preferred to be my own chauffeur—especially as the car was only a two-seater.

After luncheon I noticed that heavy clouds had arisen, and snow was already falling. As I intended to be back before dark—or just after, at all events—I had no qualms regarding the safety of Nipper and his chums. The enemy would certainly hesitate at taking any action during the daylight. I used the word enemy for want of a better expression.

Before setting out, I went along to the great library, and used the telephone. I merely rang up Lord Westbrooke, and told him that I intended running over to have a chat with him. I could, of course, have sought the information I needed over the wires, but I didn’t care to do that. If these mysterious intruders were astute enough to fake up the Cloaked Cavalier, they would surely be capable of tapping the telephone wires. At all events, the risk was hardly worth taking—since Westbrooke Hall was only seven miles away.

I told the boys to amuse themselves with some magazines before one of the fires in the hall during the time of my absence. They would be quite safe there, and they were ready enough to comply. We had had a tiring morning, and a little leisure was welcome. Until

a greater number of visitors arrived, there was really very little for the boys to do.

Lady Helen's car proved to be a decent little runabout. The going was rather hard, for the snow was practically undisturbed, and lay five or six inches deep upon the roads. There were two ways of reaching Westbrook Hall—one, by taking the main highway, and going nine miles round; or, two, by cutting across by means of a narrow by-lane. Lady Helen's chauffeur had told me that the latter was almost impossible, and so I chose the highway.

I turned into this after travelling a mile, and found that the day's traffic must have been very light, for there were very few tracks in the deep snow. In places—especially in the hollows—there were awkward drifts.

Snow was again falling thickly. It seemed as though the elements had loosed themselves for my especial benefit. The flakes came down in blinding clouds, and I half wished that I had used the telephone after all. But I had started now, and I was certainly not going to turn back.

The short winter's day was drawing to a close, and, before I had covered three miles of the journey, what with the gloomy dusk and the blinding flakes, I could scarcely see a dozen yards ahead.

Yet, in spite of these drawbacks, I rather enjoyed the ride. There is, after all, something novel in fighting one's way through a snowstorm. I was well wrapped up, and warm, and the car behaved in an exemplary manner.

I didn't meet anything or anybody—and I wasn't surprised. The weather conditions were such that traffic was necessarily at a minimum. And, after all, this highway was only a minor one.

The road dipped sharply somewhere about the fourth mile, and descended into a gloomy hollow, with high trees towering on either side. What with the gloom cast by these trees, and the whirling snow, it was something of a problem to see my way at all. And, at the bottom of the hollow the snow was fully a foot deep, and I began to fear that the little car would be unable to take the neighbouring rise.

My speed was a mere crawl by the time I reached the bottom of the hollow. And it was at this point, when I was least expecting trouble, that trouble

came. Without any previous warning, two men ran towards me—one from either side. I just saw them through the whirling snowflakes. And then they sprang upon the slowly moving car, and one of them gripped me from behind—gripped me before I could realise what the game was.

It was a surprise attack, and I don't think I was in the least to blame for being unprepared. Instinctively I closed the throttle, and applied the brakes. The car came to a stop abruptly.

The two men were attired in heavy coats and closely fitting woollen caps. It was quite obvious, from the very nature of the attack, that they had been lying in ambush for me.

Even as I struggled to gain the advantage, I wondered who the attackers were. Was it possible that the Fu Chang Tong had located me—No, I dismissed that theory in less than a second. These men were connected, in some way, with the mysterious happenings at Tregellis. I was sure of it.

The telephone! The wires had been tapped, after all—and the enemy had learned that I should travel along this road—

Further thought was really out of the question.

I was being overpowered—and I knew it. Under ordinary circumstances I am capable of dealing with two determined men, but these circumstances were by no means ordinary.

The car, as I have explained, was a two-seater, with a large flat space behind the twin-seat. One of the men had climbed on this during the first moment of attack, and his fingers were round my throat. The other man jumped into the empty seat, and held my arms down.

Therefore, while I was attempting to get my arms free, the second man was doing his utmost to throttle me into submission. I knew that the position was hopeless—I could never gain the mastery.

"Fool man!" exclaimed the fellow behind me. "Do not struggle!"

The voice was husky with excitement, and I knew that the man was a foreigner. There was a guttural twang about the words—but these rascals were not Germans.

Making a great effort, I wrenched myself round. But the grip on my throat merely tightened, and a mist swam before my eyes. The snowflakes

became a blur, and the road in front grew dim and—

I started a trifle, as I struggled. Coming towards the spot was a big, low-built racing car! I could see it hazily. A muffled up figure was sitting at the wheel, alone. Just for a second my pulse throbbed with hope, but then I realised that this car was probably the property of the scoundrels who were overpowering me. It had come for the purpose of carrying me away.

Then I heard a lusty shout. I managed to get my left hand free, for my attackers had looked round. My chance had come, and I tore the gripping fingers from my throat. The next second I lay back, gasping painfully.

Things happened after that. A burly figure simply hurled itself out of the driving-seat of the racer—which had stopped near by. And the newcomer charged to the attack. He was on the spot in a trice, and his be-gloved fists struck out right and left.

"Highway robbery—what?" he roared furiously. "Attackin' a helpless motorist, by gad! Take that, you olive-skinned dog! By jing! I was just pinin' for a scrap of some sort!"

In spite of my semi-dazed condition, I opened my eyes wide, and stared at the stranger. That exclamation of his—"By jing!"—struck a familiar chord; and the voice itself was familiar, too.

The snow drove down in a blinding whirl. There was a scampering of feet, one or two startled cries, and the two foreigners fled into the trees which bordered the road. They were swallowed up on the instant.

I scrambled down beside the man who had come to my rescue so opportunely. He was on the point of dashing after the fleeing men, but reconsidered his decision almost immediately.

"Not a bit of good," he growled discontentedly. "No chance of finding them again in this infernal smother. The cowardly curs! I hardly got a decent punch home! The whole thing was a swindle!"

"You must allow me to thank you heartily for your timely aid," I said, in a husky voice. "You see, they had me at a disadvantage—"

"I spotted that as soon as ever I came up," interrupted the other, looking me up and down with polite interest. "My car's a quiet jigger and those two brutes

didn't know I was on the spot until I landed out with my fists. Confound this snow!"

The flakes were whirling down furiously, driving into our faces with stinging force. But I had recognised my rescuer instantly, and the situation struck me as being somewhat humorous, in spite of the recent excitement.

For he was none other than my very old friend, Lord Dorrimore. To me he was merely "Dorrie," and he and I and Nipper had been to many strange parts of the world, and had experienced varied adventures. For Dorrie was a roamer, and I was astonished to find him in England.

I hadn't heard from him for several months, and it was an amazing piece of luck that we should run across one another at this precise moment. It was a sheer coincidence, of course—but coincidences of that sort are by no means so common as we are asked to believe.

Lord Dorrimore was really one of the most reckless fellows I ever knew. No house was big enough to hold him. He loved the wilds, and was, indeed, a famous explorer. His name was familiar in almost every corner of Africa—to say nothing of numerous isolated quarters of the Empire. Dorrie loved a scrap at any time, for he hated nothing worse than a coward.

"White-livered skunks—that's what they were!" he grumbled. "But what was the idea of it? Were they after your watch—or was it an attempt to pinch your spare petrol? Petrol's rather valuable nowadays!"

I laughed.

My throat was hurting me, but I couldn't help being amused. I knew Dorrie, but Dorrie didn't know me. For, in my character of Mr. Alvington, I wore an effective disguise, which changed my appearance considerably.

"They were getting the better of me, but you spoilt the game," I remarked. "By this time I should have been choked into submission. Dorrie, old man, you've got an excellent trait; when you see a fight, your fingers itch to take part in it. And you generally manage to appear just at the right moment—"

He stared at me.

"You seem to know me, don't you?" he asked. "My name's Dorrimore—I'm Dorrie to my friends. I don't object, of course—call me any old thing you like—"

but I'd rather like an introduction as a preliminary!"

"An introduction!" I chuckled—"to me? Come, Dorrie, what's the matter with you? My face may have changed, but my voice, although husky, is——"

"Great glory!" roared Dorrie. "It's—it's Lee——"

"Right on the nail," I grinned genially.

"But—but——" Lord Dorrimore gasped. "But what the deuce is that grey fungus doing round your chin? Lee! By jing! Give us your fist, you masquerading old swindler!"

He grabbed for my hand, and gave me a wild thump in the chest. This was rather an unwise proceeding on his part, for the snow was slippery, and the next second I sprawled over into a three-foot drift. When I came to the surface again, he was shaking my hand as though this method of greeting was quite commonplace.

"You—you impulsive idiot!" I muttered. "Can't you shake like a man, and not like an elephant?"

"The old professor!" exclaimed Dorrie delightedly—he always called me professor, for some weird reason of his own. "I don't care what happens now! I've been thinkin' of you for days, and I find you scrappin' with a couple of beastly dagoes in a snowstorm! Lee, you ruffian, do you know that I've been to your rooms in Gray's Inn Road about fifty times within a week? The whole place was forlorn and deserted. Mrs. Jones told me that you had gone to Africa, or somewhere, and I nearly fainted! What's the game? If you don't tell me, I'll finish the job those two foreigners were at!"

He paused for breath, and glared at me.

"What a chap you are to get excited!" I exclaimed, shaking the snow from my coat. "You're either bored to death, Dorrie, or else you're going about like a whirlwind. I've got several questions to ask."

"Ask 'em later. I want answers to mine now!"

We both sat in the car, lit cigars, and had a chat. It had always been my intention to tell Lord Dorrimore about the Fu Chang business; but, until this moment, I had never had the opportunity.

He was considerably amazed when he

learned that Nipper and I were in temporary retirement at St. Frank's. But he thought the idea was an excellent one. When he had got over that surprise, I explained the events which had taken place at Tregellis Castle.

"That attack you frustrated was connected with the ghost affair," I declared. "There's no doubt about that, Dorrie. I don't profess to know what it all means but there's something of a criminal nature going on. Possibly I was attacked because the unknown gentleman feared that I should get to know too much. I am rather glad it happened, for it proves that the enemy is getting nervous."

"It's a queer yarn, Lee," said Dorrimore slowly. "A deucedly queer yarn. I suppose you want to know why I'm here? I can tell you in about a dozen words. In a mad moment I decided to be at home this year for Christmas. I invited a crowd of people, but my butler was fool enough to contract measles, and I had to cancel the whole business at the last minute! A man of fifty, mind you—catchin' measles! It's sickenin', old man! Of course, I couldn't let any visitors stay at my place under those circumstances—although there was practically no danger. I was just off to London—meanin' to get abroad at the first opportunity."

He explained the whole circumstances to me.

"Well, if you haven't brought measles with you, you might as well come along to Westbrooke Hall. You know Westbrooke, don't you?"

"Yes, known him for years," replied Dorrie. "My dear chap, Westbrooke's a decent sort, but he's a frightful bore. I've asked him to come out to Africa six times, and he refused on every occasion, so I let him slide."

I chuckled.

"That's the worst of you, Dorrie," I said. "You want everybody to go rushing off into the wildest regions of the earth, and if they don't feel inclined to risk their lives in that way, you set them down as bores. Westbrooke's quite a good fellow, and he'll be glad to see you—especially as you're stranded. You'd better come along with me. I'm just off to the Hall."

"Where you go, I'll go!" said Dorrie cheerfully. "Now I've found you, Lee, I'm as happy as a nigger with a lookin'."

glass! But if you take me to Westbrooke's place, I shall probably be booted out. When he and I last met it was in the Wayfarers' Club, and we came pretty near to having a prize-fight! I wanted him to go out with me to Central Papua, and he calmly called me a mad idiot, or words to that effect."

"Your child-like simplicity is delightful, Dorrie," I smiled. "Did you imagine for one moment that a staid gentleman like Lord Westbrooke would go to certain death just because you asked him to? Central Papua may suit your tastes, but I'll warrant you found nobody to accompany you!"

"I didn't go at all!" growled Dorrie. "I couldn't do it alone, and everybody I asked told me that they weren't anxious to be made into rump-steaks! I know well enough ~~that~~ some of the Papuans are rather partial to cannibalism, but that makes it all the more interestin'!"

I didn't attempt to argue with him, for I knew that it would have been useless, and I gathered that his quarrel with Westbrooke had been merely a friendly tiff. There was not much risk of Dorrie more being "booted" out of the Hall.

He was quite content to accompany me, and we started off after switching on our headlamps, for the dusk was now very thick. By this time I had practically recovered from the rough handling I had received, although my throat was still rather tender.

I led the way in Lady Helen's little car, and Dorrie fumed behind me. His own car was capable of tearing along at an appalling speed, and he politely informed me that on another occasion I had better provide myself with a vehicle capable of speed, and not with a push-cart!

We arrived at the Hall just as the darkness descended in earnest. The snow-storm had almost subsided, and only a few flakes were descending. As I had expected, Lord and Lady Westbrooke were extremely delighted to meet Dorrie again, and they pressed him to stay over Christmas at once.

The Hall was a splendid place, but by no means so picturesque as Tregellis. There were many visitors, but there were three only who interested me particularly. These were Miss Eileen Dare, her aunt, and Captain Masters, Eileen's fiancé.

Eileen, of course, was very well known to me, for she had assisted me in a great

number of detective cases. She, indeed, had been mainly responsible for the smashing up of a dastardly gang of criminals who had termed themselves "The Combine." Having completed her work, Eileen had fallen in love, which wasn't particularly surprising. For Captain William Oliver Masters, D.S.O., had played an important part in her final adventure, and he was just the type of Englishman a girl admires. He was on Christmas leave at present.

Eileen was very pleased to see me, although, of course, she addressed me as "Mr. Alvington." Always delightfully pretty, she was looking exceptionally radiant now. Captain Masters was lucky in having won the love of one of the sweetest girls—and one of the cleverest, too—it was possible to imagine.

For quite half an hour I was engaged in chatting with various people. Aunt Esther was looking as comfortably stout as ever, and Captain Masters made no attempt to conceal his great happiness.

I should like to tell of these little conversations at greater length, but I am afraid that they would not be of sufficient interest to warrant their inclusion in this narrative.

I had come over to Westbrooke Hall for the purpose of telling Montie's uncle of the happenings of the night, and to ask him, more particularly, for all information concerning the more obscure secret passages of Tregellis. Lord Westbrooke was rather concerned when he learned of Watson's adventure; but, at the same time, he experienced a certain amount of relief, for he had been inclined to believe that the manifestations had been caused by some super-physical agency.

"And you really believe that some rascals are using the old passages for a nefarious purpose?" asked his lordship, somewhat doubtfully. "Who do you think is responsible, Mr. Alvington? Some of the servants——"

"I can't say that," I interrupted. "It is probable that one servant is in league with an outside confederate, but we are now merely theorising. Gill, of course, was paid to 'disappear.' From what I learned of his movements during the hour previous to the apparition, I can see that he carefully paved the way for the final tableau——"

"One moment, please!"

We had been chatting in Lord Westbrooke's library, and he now turned from

me as the telephone-bell rang. He placed the receiver to his ear, and then nodded, holding out the receiver in my direction.

"It is Nipper—or, perhaps I'd better say Bennett," he explained. "The lad seems to be quite excited over something."

I sat down by the instrument.

"Well, young 'un, what is it?" I called.

"Oh, is that you, sir?" came Nipper's voice. "I'm in the library by myself, and I thought I'd better ring you up at once. Can you come over here straight away? I've just discovered something."

"Something important?"

"Well, I believe so, sir," went on Nipper. "Tommy and Montie are in the hall, and I came along here for a book. I've found another secret panel—here, in the library. There's a passage beyond, with some stairs, I believe. And there are a lot of new footmarks in the dust—"

"Ah! Then your discovery may be important," I interrupted keenly. "Have you explored the place yet?"

"Not yet, sir. I was just going to when I decided to ring you—"

"Well, leave the place exactly as it is," I intervened. "Don't disturb anything, my boy! Wait until I arrive. I shall probably be with you within the hour. It seems that you have hit upon the very passage we were searching for!"

"Right you are, guv'nor!" said Nipper eagerly. "I'm just dying to have a look beyond the panel—and do hurry yourself, sir! Don't be longer than— Oh—oh! What the—"

A wild cry came across the wires—a cry of alarm and anger. Just for a moment I heard a dull confusion of sounds, but Nipper's voice had ceased. I was rather startled, and called sharply into the transmitter.

But no reply came!

"What's wrong?" asked Lord Westbrooke curiously.

"It seems that Nipper has met with an accident," I replied grimly. "Somebody seized him while he was talking, and I can't quite believe that the other boys were responsible."

I hung up the receiver, and then removed it once more, after a short pause. It was the exchange who answered this time, and I gave the castle number sharply. In about three minutes I heard the voice of old Fenn, the butler.

"Who is that, please?" he asked.

"I'm Mr. Alvington," I replied. "A few minutes ago Master Bennett was talking to me from the castle. Can you tell me where he is now, Fenn?"

"I am sure I don't know, sir," replied the butler. "When I heard the ring I came into the library and found it empty. Shall I go and look for Master Bennett, sir?"

"Yes, and please be quick about it!" I said anxiously.

There was a wait of fully four minutes, but it seemed much longer. Then I heard the voice of Montie.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Yes. Have you found Bennett?"

"It's amazin', sir," came Tregellis-West's voice. "Benny seems to have vanished somewhere. He's gone explorin', I expect. Benny's a beggar for nippin' away, you know. He came to the library for a book, an' that's the last we saw of him."

I breathed hard.

"Well, listen to me," I said quietly. "Go straight back to the lounge hall at once! Make no attempt to find Bennett. Stay in the hall with Watson until I arrive. Do you understand that?"

"Of course, sir. Do you think—"

"I have no time to waste, Montie," I replied. "Just do as I tell you, and wait in patience."

I hung up the receiver, and turned to Lord Westbrooke with a grim expression upon my face.

"It was unwise of me to leave the castle," I said, rising to my feet impatiently. "Some new development has taken place during my absence. Nipper, according to his own story, found another passage, and 'phoned me at once. While he was talking, somebody must have entered the library and seized him from behind. At all events, Nipper has vanished, and he is to be found nowhere. The fact that the newly discovered tunnel was not mentioned by either Fenn or Montie proves that the panel was closed. Nipper obviously was taken away by means of the secret passage. I must return to Tregellis without a second's delay."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the earl blankly. "What can it mean? Good gracious me!"

"I am anxious about Nipper—very anxious!" I exclaimed. "Look here, Lord Westbrooke, there is grim work going on at the castle. I don't know

what it is, but I am going to do my best to find out this very night!"

"This—this is very upsetting——"

"I am aware of that," I replied, "but the situation has arisen, and we must cope with it. The chances are that we shall get to grips with the enemy this evening. I shall want helpers. Montie and Watson are useful, but there may be dangerous work. I want to take Dorriemore and Masters, if possible."

The earl was galvanised into action by my urgent words, and in less than five minutes Dorrie and Masters had been informed of the new development. They eagerly consented to accompany me to the castle. Eileen Dare insisted upon forming a member of the party, as, also, did the earl himself.

And so, immediately afterwards, we set out upon the short journey, the earl, Eileen, and Captain Masters in Lord Westbrooke's landaulette, and Dorriemore and I in the racer.

I was impatient and worried, and condemned myself for leaving the castle. Nipper was not to blame for what had occurred, although he had been in charge. He had been taken unawares, while at the 'phone.

What had happened to him?

CHAPTER VI.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH I FIND MYSELF IN THE HANDS OF STRANGE CAPTORS—THERE IS A LITTLE MISTAKE, BUT THIS IS SOON RECTIFIED—WITH SURPRISING RESULTS.

WHILE the gov'nor was over at Westbrooke Hall, I had a most surprising adventure. You've had an inkling of that already, but I'm going to set down what actually happened.

I had gone to the library to fetch a book, leaving Montie and Tommy before one of the big fires in the hall. I only meant to be away a few minutes, and when I entered the library I was whistling cheerfully.

It was a big, noble apartment, and a banked-up fire glowed in the grate. There was nobody in there, of course, and I spent a few minutes having a look at the

books. The electric lights were full on and the blinds drawn, for it was quite dark.

Well, to get to the point, I happened to notice a little patch of thick dust upon the skirting close to the fireplace. I don't suppose that little patch of dust would have had any significance to ninety-nine people out of a hundred. But Nelson Lee had trained me to observe things.

I bent down and looked at the dust closely. There was just one little cluster of it upon the ornamental part of the skirting, below the old oak panels, and it struck me that so much dust, all in one little patch, was unusual.

How had it got there? Where had it come from? The room was spotlessly clean in every particular. The floor all round the carpet was polished like a mirror, and yet there was this dust—confined to one small patch! And it wasn't on the floor at all!

"By Jupiter!" I muttered excitedly.

A possible explanation had struck me. Supposing there should be a secret entrance here? Supposing somebody stepped out of it into the library? The chances were that he would bring some dust with him. If he had made any marks upon the floor, he would have brushed it away. But this was on the skirting!

I was pretty sure that I had a direct clue, and I was tremendously eager. Without delay, I searched for the signs which would show me that a concealed door existed. What a surprise for Montie and Tommy if I succeeded!

At first I was totally unsuccessful, but I didn't give up hope. I felt all round the panel immediately about the spot of dust. It seemed as solid as a rock, and when I hammered it with my first it gave out no hollow sound whatever.

"Rotten!" I muttered. "My smart wheeze is a frost, after all. Jolly good thing I didn't call the other chaps! They'd have cackled like old hens——"

And it was just then, when I was deciding I'd been an ass, I spotted a tiny projection in the woodwork right up one of the ornamental corners. This projection was merely a part of the ornamentation, but it differed from the corresponding three in the other corners, in one slight respect. The face of it—only about a quarter of an inch across—was just a trifle worn.

Why should that little knob be worn?

The answer was obvious, and I pressed the surface hard. Nothing happened. I pressed it harder. Still nothing happened. I came to the conclusion that if I used much more force I should smash the knob off altogether.

So I adopted different tactics. I took the little projection between my thumb and fingers, and twisted it—or tried to, because it didn't twist at all. But, while trying to do this, I pressed it downwards. And the big panel at once slid right back. I knew, then, that I had been putting the pressure on in the wrong way.

"My hat!" I ejaculated softly.

I fished out my torch, and switched it on. Then I flashed the light through the dark opening, and looked about. A narrow passage led flush with the wall of the library for about six feet. At that point the first steps of a steep circular staircase could be seen.

But it wasn't this which attracted my attention so much. For I saw, in a moment, that this hidden tunnel differed from all the others we had examined. In those the dust had been thick and undisturbed; in this the dust was just as thick, but there were distinct footprints all along. And it was quite obvious that they had been very recently made.

"By Jingo! This is a discovery, if you like!" I muttered elatedly. "Won't the guv'nor be pleased when he comes back!"

If I needed any further proof that the panel had been recently used, I found it during the next minute. For, upon flashing my light over the mechanism of the secret door, I found that it had been oiled thoroughly.

My first impulse was to make an instant examination. I thought about calling Tommy and Montie in, so that we could go on a tour of exploration. But then I remembered the guv'nor's words; he had told us to remain in the lounge.

So I decided, after a moment's consideration, to ring up Westbrooke Hall. If the guv'nor hadn't started back yet I'd hurry him up. The 'phone was on the desk, right handy, and I turned to it instantly. Nelson Lee had often told me that there's no sense in hesitation. If you're going to do a thing do it at once.

I left the panel right open, and as soon as I had got through to Westbrooke Hall,

I squatted down at the desk. It would be silly of me to repeat the conversation which followed, because the guv'nor's already told all that.

But what he didn't know was this: Just as I was telling Nelson Lee to hurry himself I thought I heard a slight sound behind me. The panel, you'll understand, was at my back. I never dreamed of the possibility of any rotter coming on the scene just then. But that's what happened.

While I was speaking into the receiver I was gripped from behind. At that very moment I had turned my head to see what had made the slight noise I mentioned. I caught a glimpse of a man in a dark suit. His eyes were burning with grim determination.

I stopped speaking abruptly—in sheer astonishment. And then something was clapped over my mouth and nostrils with such force that my teeth lacerated my lips. I struggled like a demon, and, for a second, I managed to free my mouth.

The yell I let out was a terrific one; but I didn't let out any more. I don't know what had been clapped over my face, but I seemed to be stifled, and my senses reeled almost at once. And then—

Well, then I woke up again.

But I wasn't in the library any longer. My head was a bit dizzy, and everything swam before my eyes. I seemed to be in a low vault, with hundreds of stone pillars rising from the floor to the low arched roof. There were about three dozen candles burning, but they seemed to give an extraordinary weak light. And, somehow, all the pillars and all the candles were shadowy and hazy.

There were men, too—scores of them.

I closed my eyes for a minute or two, and my head became clearer. The effect of the drug wore off rapidly, for, of course, I had been drugged. I had tasted some of the stuff which had knocked Tommy over.

And when I opened my eyes again I could see clearly.

I made discoveries. There were only two men, after all, and only six stone pillars, and only two candles. I'd seen dozens of them before. The vault was quite dry, but niffed unpleasantly of oldness.

The two men were a little distance

from me, conversing in low tones, and gesticulating in a foreign kind of manner. Who were they? Where was I? The last question wasn't such a hard one. I realised that I had been taken down to one of the old crypts, or vaults, or whatever they are called.

"What's the game?" I asked unsteadily.

The two men faced round abruptly; they hadn't expected me to recover so quickly. I had expected to see a pair of ugly-faced gaol-birds, but these men were almost distinguished looking. They were foreigners of some sort—Italians, or Poles, or something like that.

"So! You have awakened!" said one of them, coming towards me.

"Yes—so I have," I replied calmly. "What's the idea of this? I suppose you're the fellows who have been playing the ghost, eh?"

I sat up, and returned the looks of the two men. One of them, the elder of the pair, had a concerned expression on his dark face. He bent over me and touched my shoulder.

"Did we hurt you?" he asked gravely. "You are Sir Tregellis-West?"

"Yes," I replied, after a second's hesitation.

I didn't tell a whopper. He asked me two questions in the same breath, and I'd replied to the first only. It wasn't my fault if he misunderstood me, was it? I was hurt—my lips were sore and bleeding.

During that second of hesitation I had thought hard. These fellows imagined that I was Sir Montie. What did it mean? I realised that the situation permitted me to answer "yes" without lying, and I had done so.

"You are Sir Tregellis-West? It is so? Good!" exclaimed the elder man, talking rapidly. "My boy, we mean no harm. Have little fear. You will suffer not at all. No hair will be harmed. But you must do as we say."

"And what do you say?" I asked grimly.

"You ask questions—that must not be," replied the man in his fair English. "We wish no lies to tell. You do as we say. It is understood? We regret that these means are as we should not like—but there will be understanding for you later."

"That's good, anyhow," I remarked. "I'm blessed if I understand now!"

By this time I was feeling practically myself again. The two men took my arms and led me over to a comfortable camp-bedstead which stood up one corner. I sat upon this and looked round. I was wondering if it would be possible for me to escape, but I soon realised that my chances would be about one in ten million. And I don't care about taking such odds as that.

"You will take fruit, excellency?" asked the young man kindly.

I almost blinked at him. Why on earth had he called me "excellency"? And why were these fellows offering me fruit, and treating me as though I were a duke? As jailers they left nothing to be desired, these two men. They were treating me with amazing courtesy.

"I don't want any fruit, thanks," I said, feeling compelled to be polite as well. "I'd rather you'd tell me what all this means. I'm not inquisitive, you know, but I think I have a right to know something."

"It is not possible to tell you," said the elder man. "You will be comfortable; you will have the luxury; you will be treated——"

"But I don't want to be treated," I interrupted. "It's all very well for you to call me excellency, and all that kind of thing, but it won't wash. You can't diddle me so easily. I suppose it's a question of ransom, or something like that? My dear chaps, you won't get a brass farthing."

I was speaking very boldly, but I didn't feel quite so confident as I tried to make out. I was pretty sure that I had hit upon the solution. The whole idea of the phantom had been to get hold of Sir Montie. Having got him, these refined-looking rascals meant to keep him a prisoner until a fat sum of money was paid to them. I'd put my foot in it.

When they found out I wasn't Tregellis-West at all, they'd have several blue fits, and after that things would probably get lively. They might even keep me a prisoner as well. For, if I was allowed to go, I would naturally "blow the gaff"—to speak the eloquent vernacular of the criminal classes.

Both the men smiled at my words.

"We want no farthing of brass, excellency," said one of them. "You are mistake. We wish to gain no monoya."

It is not our idea to harm you, excellent boy. You understand? So?"

The other man suddenly lifted his head, and gabbed out something in a foreign tongue which was totally unfamiliar to me. It wasn't German, and it wasn't Italian, and it wasn't Russian, but seemed to smack of them all.

I knew why they had turned their attention elsewhere, for I could hear distinct footsteps. Somebody was approaching along a tunnel, the low entrance of which was just on the other side of the vault.

I wondered if I had been wise in making my captors believe that I was Sir Montie. Had they faked up the Cloaked Cavalier for the sole purpose of getting hold of my noble chum? Surely they could have collated him without going to all that elaborate trouble?

I waited rather curiously to see who the newcomer would be.

My two captors were waiting, too. I don't think they were at all afraid, for they whispered together for a few moments, and then one of them walked across to the passage entrance. The other remained by my side.

And then Anatole appeared.

I looked at him grimly.

Anatole, I had better explain, was a new chef whom Lady Helen had engaged for the cookery department below stairs. He described himself as a Swiss, and had brought excellent references. He had been at the castle for about a month, and had proved himself to be the most perfect chap imaginable. He had no faults. He was an ideal employee.

But now I knew that the man was a traitor; he was the spy who had supplied these other men with information. It was quite obvious that the game was a big one. Everything pointed to that conclusion.

I had seen Anatole only once before, and that had been during the morning. He uttered an exclamation of pleasure in reply to something which one of his companions said. And then he came right into the vault, and looked at me.

Instantly he frowned, and commenced talking rapidly in the unknown language. He pointed to me continually, gesticulating with considerable excitement. The other man hurled rapid questions at him.

Anatole shook his head emphatically, and jabbered more fiercely than ever.

"I'm bowled!" I muttered to myself. "These two blighters didn't know me from Sir Montie, but Anatole does! My hat, this is where the band begins to play!"

All three men turned to me with one accord, and their kindly looks had vanished. They were angry, and meant mischief of some sort. I set my teeth and wriggled away like an eel as they reached for me.

I'm pretty nippy (that's not a pun on my name), and I shot across the vault like lightning. But escape wasn't easy, for Anatole was after me in a flash. He grabbed hold of my coat, just as I was plunging into the black tunnel. It was rotten luck. Another half-inch, and I should have beaten them.

As it was, I was yanked backwards with a terrific jerk, and hit the floor with such force that I bruised myself severely. Without waiting to see if I was hurt, Anatole and one of the other men clutched me tightly, and carried me across the vault to a narrow doorway on the other side.

Without the slightest ceremony I was flung headlong into blackness. I struck hard stone with my hands and knees, and grazed myself. The heavy open door, as strong as iron, in spite of its age, thudded to behind me, and I heard bolts being shot.

For several minutes I lay still, regaining my wind, and allowing the acute pain to ease down. Then I struggled to my feet, and took out my electric torch. As I had expected, the tiny filament in the lamp had broken, and the torch was useless. I wasn't disappointed, because I'd expected it. Those lamps are not made to be knocked about forcibly.

But I had a few matches in a box, and I struck one.

That was quite enough. I saw that my prison was a low, confined dungeon. The walls were of solid stone; the roof was arched, and also made of stone. The only ventilation which came in was admitted by means of a few tiny holes in the top of the door. And the door itself was as impregnable as a strong-room.

There was no means of escape whatever.

What in the name of wonder could it mean?

I was angry, and astounded, and impotent. I'd made all these discoveries

—and yet I knew nothing whatever! I hadn't gone a step further; on the contrary, the position was even worse than before. For the others wouldn't know what had happened to me, and there would be general anxiety.

I sat down on the floor and wept. At least, that's what I felt like doing. I was quite ready to weep with helplessness and mortification.

CHAPTER VII.

(Nelson Lee relates further events.)

THE FRUITLESS INVESTIGATION—I STARTLE EVERYBODY BY ABRUPTLY CHANGING MY VIEWS, BUT EXPLAIN THINGS AFTERWARDS
—A TRAP IS LAID.

SIR MONTIE was waiting at the top of the great steps when our two cars arrived at the castle. The journey from Westbrooke Hall had been rather slow, owing to the fact that the recent snowstorm had caused the drifts to become deep and difficult to negotiate. Now, however, the fall had ceased, and the night was calm.

Lord Dorrimore and I were in front, and we alighted from our car first. Sir Montie came down the steps quickly, with Watson close at his heels.

"Bennett's gone, sir!" exclaimed my young host, with grave concern. "It's terrible. The dear fellow has just disappeared, you know. Tommy and I have been in the hall, as you told us—"

"That's right, Montie," I interrupted quickly. "Don't look so troubled, my boy; I dare say we shall straighten out this tangle before long. In a few minutes I want you to tell me exactly what happened, so far as your own knowledge goes."

There was some little time spent in introducing Eileen Dare and Captain Masters to Dorrimore. This was necessarily a hurried affair, as the situation was rather acute.

Eileen went off with Lady Helen, as was only natural, and I remained in the great lounge, talking with the two boys and Fenn. Dorrimore hadn't come in yet; after the introduction he had gone out to see about storing his car. There seemed to be a little difficulty. The

garage only accommodated two cars—Lady Helen's own limousine, and her brother's big landaulette. There was another big garage adjoining, but repairs were being done to the roof, and the place wasn't available. Dorrimore, I believe, placed his racer in an old coach-house some distance off.

Sir Montie and Watson could not tell me much. They had been sitting before the fire with Nipper, when the latter had gone up to the library. He had not returned, and the first they knew that anything was wrong was when old Fenn came searching for Nipper.

"It's astoundin', sir," said Tregellis-West. "I'm upset—I am, really. Poor old Benny's been collared by somebody or other. Tommy and I have been chafin' awfully durin' this last half hour. What's to be done, sir?"

"Our first task, Montie, will be to examine the library," I replied briskly. "Your uncle has told me the secret aperture Bennett found in the library is well known to him. So we have, at least, a starting point."

We went to the library without delay. The earl had explained to me during our journey that one of the panels in the library was capable of being opened; and this one, probably, was the panel which Nipper had discovered. An examination would soon show.

Dorrie had joined us by this time, and he was as eager as any schoolboy could be. He had entered into the affair in that whole-hearted way of his which was an essential part of his character. He was enormously enthusiastic.

"This is one of your detective cases, Lee, old man," he had said to me on our way from the Hall. "I'm enterin' into it with a will. By jing! I never thought I'd come down to this! I've always called this detective business rot, haven't I? I didn't know it could be so excitin'. You'll be havin' me as an assistant before you've done!"

I had smiled at that. The idea of Lord Dorrimore as an assistant was somewhat humorous. For sheer clumsiness, Dorrie would have been hard to beat. He was a first-class man in any scrap, but when it came to finesse he was hopelessly flummoxed.

His idea seemed to be that we should proceed to create pandemonium. He cheerfully suggested that we should get choppers and pickaxes to smash up all

the panels in the library, in order to find the right one. This didn't appeal to me, however, and Dorrie seemed disappointed.

"I expect your time will come, old man," I said. "We mustn't be ram-headed in this affair. We're dealing with clever crooks, and they'll beat us unless we're very careful."

"Have your own way, professor," he said. "I'm on hand when I'm wanted."

There were six of us in the library, for Sir Montie and Watson were anxious to be on the spot. Lord Westbrooke opened the panel by pushing down the small piece of ornamentation, and I flashed a light inside. There were evident marks in the dust that the narrow passage-way had recently been used.

"We are right so far," I exclaimed, stepping into the musty opening. "Do you know where this passage leads to, Lord Westbrooke?"

"My dear sir, I've never troubled to explore it," replied the earl. "I might spend half my time at that task, if I chose. The old castle is, I believe, fairly honeycombed. The dungeons below are fearsome holes."

"How cheerin'!" murmured Dorrie.

"I think you had better follow behind me, Dorrie," I remarked, glancing back. "We don't know what may happen—and your fists are handy."

"Good man!" said his lordship. "If there's to be any fightin', I'm there!"

But Dorrie didn't get much fighting. We passed along the passage in single file, Sir Montie following close behind Dorrimore, and Watson bringing up the rear. The earl and Masters decided to stay in the library, guarding the panel.

Leading the way, I soon arrived at the foot of a steep staircase. There were many recent footprints to be seen, and I eagerly ascended the stairs—keeping my hand in close proximity to my revolver meanwhile.

All our precautions, however, were unnecessary. For, at the top of the circular stone stairway, we merely came to another panel. Solid bricks covered our heads and every side save that occupied by the panel itself. And this, as we soon discovered, led out into the north passage, close to the spot where Tommy had disappeared the previous night.

"I am afraid we have drawn blank," I exclaimed ruefully, as we dusted ourselves in the wide, brightly illuminated

corridor. "We have merely come upstairs by an unusual route. But that little mystery of Watson's disappearance is cleared up. And that, at all events, is a step in advance."

"It was simple, sir, wasn't it?" said Sir Montie. "That beastly cavalier fellow simply dodged behind this panel—an' it looked exactly as though he vanished into thin air. Begad, we're progressin'! What's the next move?"

Montie's question was rather a difficult one to answer. I wasn't at all sure what the next move was to be. I returned to the library by means of the hidden stairway, but the others preferred to go by the more customary method.

My object in doing this was to search for a sign of an inner opening. It was quite possible that a secret doorway led out of the hidden passage itself. But my efforts were unavailing.

Montie and Watson were very disappointed, and Dorrimore looked glum. He was just as much a boy as they were. They had all three been expecting that we should come across a gang of desperate scoundrels, hiding in some corner, and that a terrible fight would ensue. But I had half expected this result.

"The whole matter requires careful thought and consideration," I said, as we stood round the fire in the library. "First of all, Gill disappeared. I think I can explain how that trick was worked——"

"The deuce you can!" ejaculated the earl. "I've been puzzling over that all day, Mr. Lee. And I'm hanged if I can make head or tail of it. What's the solution?"

"I don't think we had better go into that now," I replied. "I may, of course, be wrong in my theory, and I would prefer to wait a little while."

Watson and Montie had left the library for the time being; they had gone to tell Eileen of the result of our investigation. The library, therefore, was occupied by the earl, Captain Masters, Dorrie, and myself. We sat before the fire smoking, and there was no necessity for us to keep up any pretence.

"Your theory's not wrong, old man," said Dorrie confidently. "I don't know what it is, but you're a masterpiece at theories. It's amazin' how you think of 'em. There's somethin' to be said in favour of brains. I think all mine ran to muscles."

"Well, we don't want to talk about your brains, Dorrie," I smiled. "You've got plenty, when you like to use them. What we have to do is to face the situation. To begin with, there appears to be no rhyme or reason in the movements of the man, or men, who are responsible for these very material manifestations."

"I am quite convinced that Watson was taken in error and he was therefore placed in the alcove almost at once. His captors must have known that he knew nothing, and so they did not consider it risky to return him. Now, was Nipper taken by mistake? I fancy not. It is my belief that he was made a prisoner because he had discovered the secret of this panel. The enemy, in fact, became alarmed, and made a false move."

"A false move?" repeated the earl thoughtfully.

"Exactly. If they had left him alone, we should have attached very little importance to this old passage. As it is, I strongly suspect that a second passage leads out of this one. Otherwise, why should they have become alarmed? It is the total absence of motive which worries me. Cannot you suggest any reason for all this theatrical business, Lord Westbrooke?"

"I?" said the earl. "Good gracious me! How can I suggest anything, Mr. Lee? No practical joker would go to such lengths as this, and surely there are no actual criminals upon the premises? Motive? There is none, Mr. Lee—none whatever."

"There's some infernal trickery goin' on, anyhow," said Lord Dorrimore sagely, as though he were imparting a startling piece of news. "As to who is responsible, or why it's bein' done, I leave that to you, professor. You're the slouth hound, you know. It's your job to arrive at solutions."

"I'm put to the test, eh?" I smiled. "Well, I may fail—but I fancy not. And I'm not so sure about trickery, either. I have been thinking this all over, and the total absence of actual traces have led me to reconsider my former decision."

"What do you mean, Mr. Lee?" asked Masters curiously.

"I mean that the idea of supernatural force is not so far-fetched as we seemed to imagine at first. There have been

many extraordinary spirit phenomena in the past. I have never had any actual experience of elementals——"

"Elementals!" ejaculated Dorrie blankly. "You're mad, Lee!"

"Not at all, my dear man. Elementals, we are told, are semi-materialised spirits," I went on calmly. "They have the power of attacking human beings, although they are mere spirit forms——"

"Bosh!" interjected Dorrie. "Sorry, Lee, but, man alive, what's come over you? What's all this tommy rot about ghosts? You know as well as I do that the whole thing has been faked from beginning to end; you know it a lot better than I do, in fact. You're tryin' to be funny, old man. I suggest a systematic search, right through the whole castle——"

"No, Dorrimore, that would be useless," I interrupted. "All the searching in the world could not locate a phantom. Surely I am allowed to reconsider my decision? The only sensible explanation of this epidemic of ghost appearances is that the Cloaked Cavalier is, actually, a spectre of the spirit world. The footmarks we found in this passage were made by Nipper himself. There is no stranger near the premises, and, in fact, the suggestion of trickery is a hollow one. The whole affair is a clear case of haunting."

I tossed some cigar ash into the fender, and leaned back. The earl and Dorrie and Masters were looking at me in a startled fashion. They could see that I was speaking seriously, and hardly knew what to make of my words. They all knew that I should not make such an extraordinary statement without good cause. And my statement had certainly been very extraordinary.

"Haunting!" repeated the earl. "But you said——"

"What I said, and what I say now, are really quite different matters, Lord Westbrooke," I said quietly. "All the evidence goes to prove that the castle is haunted by evil spirits. Both Gill and Nipper have disappeared for all time—they will never return. It is, therefore, useless making any further investigation."

Lord Dorrimore looked at me anxiously.

"Your brain's givin' out, old man!" he declared, in a husky voice. "This is

what comes of workin' too hard. I always suspected it! You'll end your days in a lunatic asylum—unless I take you out to Central Africa——”

“There you go again, Dorrie,” I interrupted, with a chuckle. “You seem to have a fixed idea that Central Africa is a cure for all ills. But, seriously, we must come to a decision. I strongly advise everybody to drop all activity. What is the use of fighting against such a ghastly power? It seems that this elemental—as we will call it—has a special desire for getting hold of the boys. It evidently didn't want Watson, but it may possibly make an attempt to get hold of Montie. We will, therefore, leave him in a safe place to-night.”

“Really, Mr. Lee, I cannot possibly understand you,” said the earl flatly.

“Yet my words are clear, surely,” I proceeded. “I suggest that Sir Montie should be left in the library, here. He can be by himself, locked in. He will then be quite safe from any attack.”

“How do you make that out, Mr. Lee?” asked Masters, with a queer look at me. “Didn't Nipper vanish from this room? Why should young Tregellis-West be safe here? The idea is——”

“Quite sound, believe me,” I interjected quietly. “At all events, that is what I advise. You have left this case in my hands, and I assume that you will do as I say. Sir Montie will be left alone in this apartment during the night. And we, on our part, will go to bed in the usual way.”

I rose from my chair, and walked out of the library. Lord Westbrooke and Dorrie and Masters stared at me in sheer astonishment; and, after a moment's hesitation, they followed me out into the wide corridor.

When we arrived at the lounge hall Dorrimore gripped my shoulder and stared into my face.

“What's the meaning of this, Lee?” he asked grimly. “You weren't serious, were you?”

I smiled.

“Do you think I'm a fool, Dorrie?” I replied.

“I don't think anything about it—I know you're not.”

“Well, then, you mustn't take any notice of the preposterous statements I made in the library a moment ago,” I went on calmly. “Like yourself, I be-

lieve that elementals are merely the invention of crank spiritualists. And Tregellis Castle is haunted by very solid——”

“'Pon my soul, Mr. Lee, I can't make anything of you to-night,” interjected the earl blankly. “Within five minutes you have made the most conflicting statements. First you say one thing, then another——”

My eyes gleamed as I nodded.

“Just listen a minute, please—all of you,” I said, in a low voice. “On the face of it, it appears as though I have suddenly taken leave of my senses. I haven't. My reason for giving utterance to that bosh in the library was an excellent one. I will tell you. While we were talking, I happened to notice a tiny hole in the frieze, near the ceiling. It had not been there a moment before, and I at once realised the cause.”

“By jing!” murmured Dorrie. “There was method in your madness!”

“Didn't you guess that at the time?” I smiled. “That little hole near the ceiling, appearing so suddenly, meant only one thing. Somebody was listening to us—to our conversation. We were planning what to do, weren't we? Well, the enemy was bent on overhearing our arrangements. I merely obliged them by forming a plan which would meet with their entire approval.”

“I—I really can't quite grasp——”

“You will in a moment, Lord Westbrooke,” I went on. “A spyhole, with an eye behind it, means a spy. I tactfully altered the tone of my argument, and made some remarks which, I calculated, would gratify the listener. I have a strong suspicion that these unknown men are after Montie. Well, I planned everything very smoothly. They believe now that Montie will be left alone in the library all through the night.”

“By George!” ejaculated Captain Masters, admiringly. “Forgive me, Mr. Lee! I have been thinking hard things about you. In reality, you were acting in an extremely astute manner. The Cavalier will come for Montie, I am sure. Well, he will be captured himself.”

“Old man, it's rippin'—rippin'!” declared Dorrie enthusiastically. “You have merely been settin' a trap—what?”

“Precisely!” I agreed. “We have set the trap, Dorrie. It now remains to be seen whether we shall catch our prize.”

CHAPTER VIII.

[Recorded, at Nipper's special request, by Eileen Dare.]

DESCRIBING THE SMALL PART I PLAYED IN THE TREGELLIS CASTLE MYSTERY.

IT was really too bad of Nipper to press me so persistently to write down the minor events which took place in connection with the mystery at Tregellis Castle during my short stay there.

He asked me to do so because I played a certain part in the denouement myself. He knows all the details just as well as I do, but he declares that the narrative won't be complete unless I write this portion myself. And I really don't know how to begin. I'm not at all sure that I shall be able to write it, in any case.

I suppose I had better make a start, just to prove to Nipper that the task is too much for me. He and Nelson Lee and I are, of course, very old friends. We have been through many adventures together.

I didn't think, after my engagement to Oliver (Captain Masters), that I should be called upon to take part in any detective case. But I'm going wrong already! I wasn't called upon to do anything; I really used my own judgment.

Nipper's disappearance concerned me very deeply. I couldn't bear to think that anything had happened to him. He is a wonderfully good boy, and his master would have been shocked immeasurably if anything serious had occurred.

Oh, dear! I am quite sure that this is an awfully bad start! But I suppose I had better get on. Oliver told me all about Mr. Lee's plans soon after they had been made. I was very pleased with them, for it seemed that the only way to find out what had happened to Nipper was to entrap the scoundrel who was masquerading as the Cloaked Cavalier.

And by lying in wait in the library, it was quite possible that the ruse would succeed. We might have searched for Nipper for days without finding him, but by this method success was at least probable.

And just fancy all this occurring on Christmas Eve!

I had come from London with my aunt to stay at Lord Westbrooke's fine place for the Christmas. As Oliver was there, too, I thought the arrangement was a splendid one. That is, only natural, isn't

it? I didn't expect to go over to Trêgellis Castle until after Boxing Day.

But I'm straying away from the point again.

It was a great relief to me to know that something had been planned—something which promised success. I went and told Lady Helen all about it, and tried to comfort her, for she was greatly upset. Nipper's disappearance worried her more than she could say. She told me again and again that it had been foolish of her brother to bring the boys to the castle.

But it was no use talking that way. The boys had been brought, and Nipper had somehow got into the power of the strange men who were causing so much trouble. If Nipper turned up all right in the end, it would be rather a good thing that everything had happened as it had done, and I couldn't think that anything very dreadful had taken place.

It had been arranged that dinner should be served rather late, and that the meal should be partaken of in the usual manner. Of course, we were all eager to know what had become of Nipper; but, as Mr. Lee pointed out, it wasn't any good being impatient. By acting drastically, the lad's life may have been endangered. We really didn't know anything. The whole situation was rather obscure, and that's what made it so difficult.

"You mustn't worry yourself, Lady Helen," I said gently, as I sat with her in the drawing-room. "We can trust Mr. Lee to do the very best thing. And Nipper himself isn't a baby, you know! He is quite capable of looking after himself, and I shouldn't be surprised if he turned up of his own accord."

Lady Helen shook her head.

"It is very nice of you to comfort me, Miss Dare," she said softly. "I shall be so glad when this dreadful affair is all over. What can it all mean? Until yesterday, or the day before, nothing happened to cause me a moment's anxiety. All this trouble seems to have come at once!"

"And it will go just as suddenly," I smiled. "Surely we can get at the truth? Mr. Lee is on the spot, and if he cannot learn the secret, nobody can. I'd like to go upstairs now, Lady Helen, if you will excuse me for a little while."

"Of course, my dear—of course!"

I left the drawing-room and passed upstairs. Dinner would be served very shortly, and I wanted to prepare myself.

I should not wear evening-dress, of course. How could I? I had come over from the Hall with no other clothes but those in which I stood. But my hair needed a little attention, and— Oh, it's not necessary for me to go into those little feminine details, is it?

It was while I was in my bedroom that the incident occurred which led me to act on my own initiative. I had finished my little preparations, and switched off the light. Some fancy or other prompted me to go to the window and look out. It was a French window, leading on to a wide balcony. The weak moonlight shed a soft, silvery glow over everything. The snow glittered and sparkled gloriously, and I yielded to the temptation to venture out upon the balcony itself.

The night air was crisp and fresh. The temperature was well below freezing-point, and the sky was studded with many brilliant stars. I stood for a few moments on the balcony, looking down upon the snow-covered lawns and gardens.

It was a beautiful picture, and I could not help admiring it.

But, just as I was on the point of returning into the bedroom, I noticed a dim figure walking cautiously away from the house in the direction of a black pile of ruins which were clearly visible right away beyond the north lawns.

Somehow or other, it seemed to me that the man was walking stealthily. Once or twice he paused and looked back, and he took very great care to remain in shadow during the walk. Unless my eyes had been sharp, I should never have noticed him at all.

At first I was not at all interested. I assumed that he was one of the castle servants, setting about his usual duties. But then I saw that he was heading straight for the ruins. At last he disappeared among the black walls, appearing for a moment in the open moonlight.

"Now, I wonder what that means?" I thought. "Surely no servant has any cause to go out there at this time of the evening? Can it be possible—"

I didn't allow my thoughts to run any farther at the moment. I tried to dismiss them as absurd, for I had wondered if the man was in any way connected with the mystery of the castle.

Perhaps you will say that I had no cause whatever to suspect him. But I had. He had been walking in a manner

which plainly showed that he was very anxious to avoid observation. And that alone struck me as being suspicious. Why was he so stealthy?

I shook my head and smiled.

"You mustn't get such ideas, you silly girl!" I told myself.

And I decided then and there to go downstairs and dismiss the matter from my mind. But this decision was soon altered. By the time I had closed the French windows, I was again troubled by uneasy thoughts. Just supposing the man was connected with the mystery? Wouldn't it be as well to make sure?

But I didn't care to say anything to Mr. Lee or the others. What had I to say? I should only make myself look ridiculous if my fears turned out to be groundless, so I decided to run out myself. I should only be a few minutes, and if I found anything really suspicious I could tell Mr. Lee then.

I was already wearing walking-boots, and I merely threw a wrap over my shoulders and passed down the west staircase, which led into a little-frequented lobby. At the end of this lobby I had seen a door, and I believed that it led out upon the terrace.

It proved to be unlocked, and I soon found out that my supposition had been correct. The terrace had been recently swept, and I was glad of this, for I didn't much care for ploughing my way through the deep snow.

Of course, I hadn't been out in the grounds at all. I was quite a stranger to them. But I think I have a fair idea of direction, and I could see the old ruins in the distance.

Nobody had seen me leave the house, and this was just what I wanted. If my suspicions proved to be groundless, nobody could laugh at me; but if, on the other hand, I found out that I had been justified, it would be splendid to give Mr. Lee a piece of useful information.

The night air was icily cold, and I drew my wrap about my shoulders as I ran quickly along the terrace. The moonlight helped me well, for I could see quite distinctly. At the end of the terrace I had a little difficulty. I couldn't quite decide which direction the stealthy man had taken.

But, after walking a few yards farther, I saw a track of footprints leading along a wide pathway which bordered a high hedge. These footprints were clear and distinct, and I needed no telling that

they had been made by the man I had seen. I paused for a moment, and then quickly made up my mind.

Supposing the man returned after I had walked along the path? He would see my footprints, and would know that I had been there. And that would have looked rather curious. It would have been curious!

And so I stepped into the tracks which the man had made. The strides, fortunately, were short, and so I had no difficulty. The snow hadn't been swept here, as I ought to have explained before; and, by employing the method I have described, I avoided plunging ankle-deep into the snow.

I kept a sharp lookout as I walked, but I saw no sign of anybody; and at last I arrived among the ruins. By what I could see, the building had been at one time an old chapel. It was now a mass of broken masonry, smothered with thick ivy and snow.

I passed within, through a gap in the stonework. It was very gloomy in there, for a certain portion of the roof still remained, and only a small amount of snow had entered. I paused for a moment, in order to get accustomed to the gloom.

And then, stepping forward, I felt my heart beating at a more rapid pace. Were my suspicions justified? For I had seen that a large stone slab was lying back against the wall, and a black hole yawned almost at my feet. Very, very dimly I just made out the shape of some much-worn stone steps.

It was quite clear that the man had passed down this way.

What could it mean?

His stealthy method of approaching the ruin, and the fact that he had descended into what was obviously a secret stairway, aroused my excitement and suspicions. I wondered if it would be wise to go any further, or whether I should return to the castle at once and tell Mr. Lee.

A sudden impulse prompted me to take the former course. Sometimes Mr. Lee has complimented me upon my faculty for coming to very swift decisions. I didn't pause hardly a moment.

Bending down over the black opening, I gathered my skirts around my ankles, and commenced the descent. I was greatly interested, and didn't stop to consider the possible risks.

After descending ten or fifteen stairs, I found it quite impossible to see anything at all. The air was warmer down here,

and smelt stuffy in the extreme. And the darkness was so intense that I was obliged to feel my way.

I got quite a nasty jar by attempting to go down another step when there wasn't one, for I had arrived at the foot of the stairway, and when I went forward I found that a fairly narrow passage led along upon the level. But here and there I discovered that little alcoves lay back.

I paused in my walk and took stock of my position.

Seriously, I told myself that it would be foolish to go on; and just as I had decided to turn back, I became aware of a faint glow in the distance. Somebody was approaching along the tunnel with a light!

Then the light itself appeared—quite a bright one. Instinctively I slipped into one of the alcoves and crouched back. It was very deep, and I stood quite concealed. This had been my only course, for I should have been seen at once had I attempted to escape.

I waited, with one hand over my quickly beating heart, and the dull sound of footfalls reached my ears. Almost before I knew it, the figure of a man passed by. My heart nearly stopped beating at that second. But I needn't have feared.

The man went straight on without pausing, and I heard him ascending the steps.

All became dark and silent again, and I breathed with relief. It had been a narrow escape, and it had all happened so quickly that I could scarcely realise it. But I felt relieved. At least there was no further danger of meeting the unknown man, and my idea of turning back was dismissed. During that first glimpse of the light, I had noticed that the tunnel led straight ahead for quite a hundred feet, and I determined to go that distance at least. If I found it impossible to proceed owing to the darkness, I could quite easily make my way back.

So I went on, very cautiously and very quietly. The floor, happily, was smooth and seemed to be covered with some soft sandy substance. This deadened my footfalls almost completely.

At length I realised that I must have traversed the distance, and now I walked with very great care. I came to a corner. Beyond this the tunnel stretched away for another fifty feet. I could see this distinctly, for a faint glow was visible at the far end. This glow, how-

ever, was perfectly still, and I knew that the light was not being carried by anybody. By this time, as it may well be guessed, I was thrilling with excitement. It was because of this that I didn't pause to consider the rashness of my movements.

It was very foolish of me to go forward alone. Without a doubt my common-sense should have told me to return at once for help.

But as I didn't return, what is the good of saying anything? I impulsively crept forward, but took extra special care to do so silently. My skirts, as I walked, rustled a trifle, but I was quite sure that the sound was inaudible to anybody but myself.

The glow increased as I walked. But, although I paused frequently, I heard no sound. And I became aware of the fact that I had emerged from the tunnel, and was standing within a low crypt, or vault.

It was quite apparent, now, that the light was situated in another vault of the same description—which was reached by means of a short, low passage. The absence of any sound prompted me to go on.

When I reached the end of this communicating tunnel, I glanced round the stonework very cautiously. And I saw that I was quite alone. In the middle of the vault a small table stood, and upon it two candles were burning. On the other side I could see a low camp bedstead. There were several leather trunks, and various articles connected with food.

Boldly, I stepped into the vault itself.

Another opening yawned from the opposite wall, and I crept towards it. Why was this place deserted? It seemed to me that the one man was its sole occupant—or rather, late occupant. And, by the fact that he had left the candles burning, I concluded that he would shortly be returning.

This gave me rather a start, and I quickly stepped back. Unless I wished to be trapped, I must go at once. But I had been successful! I should have splendid news to convey to Mr. Lee and the others. Of course, ~~this~~ vault was the headquarters of the rascals who had been causing so much trouble. Perhaps he was acting quite by himself in the affair.

I had taken a long while over my journey along the tunnel, and fully twenty minutes must have passed since I encountered the man with the light. I determined to leave without the slightest delay.

But, just as soon as I went to make my exit, I distinctly heard the sound of soft footsteps. The man was coming back!

I was thankful that there was another tunnel on the opposite side of the low cellar. I ran towards it noiselessly, and then—

Oh, I got such a fright!

For, from this tunnel, I heard, not one man, but two! They were approaching quickly, and were talking as they walked.

I looked round me almost despairingly. Oh, dear! It was an awful predicament. I was caught between two fires—my retreat was completely cut off! I was paying for my foolishness in venturing so far.

But, then I noticed a pile of broken masonry right up in one corner of the vault. It might possibly provide me with cover. At all events, it was my only chance. I ran over quickly.

I took a clean leap right over the stonework, chancing whether I hurt myself in landing. But luck favours the reckless, and I alighted quite soundly and crouched down. The candle light was obscured by one of the stone pillars, and the corner lay in deep shadow. Unless the men came right over into the corner, they would never find me.

I had only just reached my place of concealment in time. Two men appeared, carrying with them a torch. This was switched off at once. And, while they were standing in the candle-light, talking, the other man appeared from the opposite passage.

"It is well, Anatole," said one of them, in broken English. "We will get the boy soon. Have no fear. It is well."

"And the other?"

"He will be not harmed——"

And the speaker went on talking, quite abruptly, in a foreign language. Now and again the men used English, but I could gather very little. What I had heard, however, brought me great relief.

By "the other" I was fairly certain that the men had meant Nipper. And they had said that he would not be

harméd. The few words had also told me that Mr. Lee's trap would probably succeed.

The man Anatole, made as if to depart after some little time.

"It is as I wish," said one of the men—a tall, refined elderly-looking foreigner. "Prepare everything, Anatole. You understand? Waste no time."

Anatole went almost at once, and I hoped that I should now be provided with a chance of making my escape. But I soon found that this chance was denied me.

For the strangers prepared a rough meal, and sat down to it. As they ate, they talked in low tones, with many gesticulations and shrugs. Needless to say, I was very astonished by all this. Who in the world were these foreign people? What could they be doing at this old English castle?

I did not attempt to arrive at any solution. What was the use? I might have conjectured for hours, all to no purpose.

There had been no sign of Nipper so far, but I was soon to be enlightened. The elder man rose from his chair with three or four sandwiches in his hand. He went across to a heavy oaken door, and pulled back the bolts. The door opened, and he passed within.

"You will feed?" I heard him say. "Take them, boy."

And then Nipper's voice came to me.

"I'd rather not, thanks," he said, quite calmly. "You know, old son, I don't quite trust you. Those sandwiches look tempting, but they may be faked in some way. I'll go hungry, thanks!"

"So? Boy, it is foolish you are."

The man came out from the doorway, and slipped his electric torch into his pocket. He closed and bolted the door again, and went back to his seat. I was greatly relieved by what I had heard. Indeed, my apprehension had vanished by now, and a great elation filled me.

My expedition had been quite successful—so far as it went. But I did not attempt to hide the fact that my position was very insecure. I could only wait and watch—and hope for an opportunity to escape.

The men finished their meal, and time dragged. Quite an hour passed, and I wondered what they would be thinking in the castle. Poor Oliver would be

greatly alarmed—for there was nothing whatever to account for my absence.

The younger of the two men left the vault, and plunged into the further tunnel. He was away for quite a while; and then he returned with a face which displayed great excitement. The men talked quickly and animatedly. Several times I heard the name "Anatole." Perhaps they were expecting him. This must have been the case, as Anatole himself appeared shortly afterwards.

After a few brief questions and answers, he was left in the vault, and the other two men went away. I wondered what it could all mean, and was, indeed, somewhat confused.

But I obtained a clearer insight into it all twenty minutes afterwards. For, then, the two foreigners returned; and they carried between them the limp, inert form of Nipper's chum, Sir Montie!

The poor lad was quite unconscious. Just for a terrible second I had an awful fear. But I saw Anatole pointing to the captive.

My mind was in a whirl. Why had these men kidnapped the boy? How had they got hold of him?

I could understand, now, that Montie must have been their objective all the time. For, having got him, they all three left the tunnel without delay—going in the direction of the old chapel exit. It was quite apparent that they were leaving for good, for they blew out the candles, after taking a quick survey of the ancient cellar.

I listened to their footsteps as they went. And after about three minutes I softly crept out, and felt my way across to the oaken door. The bolts worked stiffly after a little trouble.

"Hallo, back again?" came Nipper's voice, grumpily. "It's no good, you rotters, I'm not going to—"

"It is all right, Nipper," I said softly. "It is I—Eileen!"

Nipper gave a curious kind of gasp, and then he came blundering across, nearly knocking me over. He gripped my hands tightly.

"Miss—Miss Eileen!" he said joyfully. "Oh, geat Cæsar, I—I thought — Miss Eileen! I'm terrifically glad to see you!"

"You must have wonderful eyesight, Nipper," I said, with a little laugh.

"Oh, I know it's dark, but I can see you in my mind, anyhow!" exclaimed Nipper, not to be outdone. "Oh, Miss Eileen, what's happened? Why are you down here? And where are those confounded foreigners?"

As quickly as possible I explained what had occurred; and he, in his turn, related his own story. And now, I think, I will leave him to tell the rest himself. I'm sure I don't know how I have managed my "little bit," as Nipper calls it, but I do hope it will pass muster.

There were many exciting incidents after the events I have described; but, as I said, I'll leave all that to Nipper.

CHAPTER IX.

(Nipper continues.)

IN WHICH THERE IS VERY CONSIDERABLE EXCITEMENT AT THE CASTLE.

MISS EILEEN has related her adventures jolly well, I consider—although she believes she's made a proper mess of it. But that's only her modesty. She's done ripingly.

As soon as we had straightened things out, so to speak, we decided to make a move. I had been wondering how the dickens I could escape from that beastly dungeon; and Eileen was about the last person in the world I had expected to appear. But I couldn't have had a better rescuer.

"So they've got poor old Montie, have they?" I exclaimed eagerly. "What can it all be about, Miss Eileen? Do you think it's an attempt to get ransom——"

"We mustn't waste time saying what we think, Nipper," put in Eileen gently. "Those men have taken Montie away, and we must do our best to stop them. I'm sure I don't know the way out until I can find the passage entrance—— Oh, but there are some candles, I believe?"

"I've got some matches," I said promptly.

I fished them out, and we soon had one of the candles burning. It seemed a brilliant light after the pitchy darkness. Eileen stood before me, and I looked at her with real admiration. Her engagement ring sparkled with a thousand fires on her left hand.

But although those diamonds were superb, they were just bits of pebble compared to Eileen herself. She was looking lovelier than ever. I honestly think that Eileen was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. And, just now, she was at her very best.

"You mustn't waste time in looking at me, Nipper," she said severely. "You've seen me before, haven't you?"

"I—I—— Oh, hang it all, I'm blessed if I know what to say," I stammered, going red. "I'm an ungrateful brute—I haven't even thanked you for coming to my rescue. I've seen you before, eh? Why, Miss Eileen, what does that matter?"

"It matters a lot, Nipper," she replied. "We've got to go at once."

I realised that, then. But I had been so elated that poor old Montie's plight had taken second place. But now that Eileen had brought some sense back into my head, I took the candle and led the way out of the vault.

We passed along a low tunnel swiftly. At the end a flight of steps led upwards, and the air became chilly as we neared the surface. Out in the open snowflakes drove into our faces as soon as we emerged. We found that a snowstorm was raging angrily.

"Why, the evening was beautifully clear when I came down," exclaimed Eileen, drawing her wrap closer about her neck. "Oh, this is too bad, Nipper. I thought we were going to have such a beautiful night!"

"What's that?" I asked abruptly.

We both listened, and then heard the sound of a motor-car throbbing not far away. I looked round me, and recognised the spot. The garage was only just on the other side of a big wall, which divided the gardens from the domestic buildings.

"Do—do you think it's those chaps?" I asked quickly. "By gum, they're pinching one of the cars! There's no telling——"

"We must run, Nipper—we must run!" exclaimed Eileen urgently.

"But you can't run through all this snow," I protested. "You'll simply ruin your shoes and skirt and——"

Eileen didn't wait for me to finish, but was off like a deer, tripping through the snow at a great speed. I pelted after her at full gallop, feeling that I had been left in the cold. It was a fine thing to let Eileen beat me!

I caught her just as she reached the terrace. It had been swept, Eileen told me, but now the rapidly falling snow was covering it afresh. The flakes were fairly small, and they whirled down in great blinding gusts.

We reached the side entrance—or, rather, one of the side entrances, for there must have been a dozen—and entered, carrying a few thousand flakes with us.

We shook ourselves just inside, but didn't pause for anything further. We were in one of the corridors which led into the main part of the castle. And we sped down it rapidly.

From various parts of the great building we heard voices, and, by their tone, it seemed that general anxiety prevailed.

"Anybody about?" I shouted urgently.

I heard a great yell, and then Tommy Watson came tearing round a corner like a charging bull.

"Bennett!" he bellowed, in a great shout of joy and relief. "Oh, my only Aunt Jane! Where the dickens have you been, you—you ruffian! Where's Montie?"

"That's what I want to know, Tommy," I replied, remaining quite cool.

"Don't look so scared, you fathead!"

"But—but I can't understand——"

"My dear old scout, there's no time for you to understand now." I chipped in crisply. "Where's the guv'nor? Where's Mr. Alvington?"

There was no need for Tommy to answer, for at that moment three figures came hurrying along. The foremost of them, I could see at a glance, was Captain Masters—Eileen's fiancé.

"Eileen!" he shouted joyously. "Thank Heaven!"

"Have you been anxious, Oliver?"

"Anxious!" he cried. "Why, we've been nearly mad with anxiety! We've been simply off our heads for hours past!"

"Bless my soul, it's Nipper and Miss Eileen!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, striding forward. "We must straighten out this tangle somehow——"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I shouted. "It's Lord Dorrimore! Talk about surprises! Dear old Dorrie!"

I rushed at his lordship and gripped his hand. For I, of course, didn't know anything about his arrival until this moment. The guv'nor hadn't had time

to tell me anything about the meeting over the 'phone.

"Keep your hair on, young 'un," grinned Dorrie. "Take the example of your clear-headed guv'nor. He's as cool as the North Pole, by jing! This is where we've got to talk one at a time, or there'll be a rippin' imitation of the Tower of Babel!"

Dorrie wasn't so far wrong in that remark. There were eight or nine of us there, and everybody was asking everybody else questions. But, after a minute, we managed to make known the fact that Sir Montie had been carted off, and that he'd probably been taken away in a motor-car.

During those few moments I gathered that Eileen had not been missed from the castle until dinner had been actually served. And then, of course, there had been ructions. Consternation had been let loose. Eileen had disappeared! Nobody knew where she had gone, and the natural presumption was that she had fallen a victim to the unknown marauders—just like me.

Nobody had thought of looking outside; and, besides, the falling snow had obliterated every footmark. The alarm had been general, and dinner had been totally forgotten. Poor Captain Masters had been nearly frantic with anxiety.

And the situation had certainly been acute. Both Eileen and I had vanished! The affair had become deadly serious. The whole house had been ransacked inside out, high and low. But no clue had been discovered.

And then, when everybody was beginning to become gravely alarmed, a cry had proceeded from an upper corridor. Tommy and Montie had been up there, for they had been searching with the rest. Passing down, Montie had been left behind for a moment. And Tommy had heard a queer kind of scuffle. When he went back, he had made the awful discovery that Montie had disappeared into the bargain! The whole thing had become a ghastly nightmare.

Three of us gone!

Even Nelson Lee himself had been infected with the general feeling of complete impotence. But at the crucial point, when all nerves were on jagged edges, Eileen and I had put in an appearance.

The relief, as I have explained, was general. And our story cleared up a lot

of the mystery. The one fact which stood above all else was that the foreigners had been after Sir Montie all the time. And they had got him!

They had succeeded in their object, and had taken Tregellis-West away in an unconscious condition. Nelson Lee grasped the situation in a moment, and his first thought was to ring up the police—with the object, of course, of having the car stopped at once.

The gov'nor and I raced to the library, and Lee picked up the receiver of the instrument. In less than ten seconds, however, he snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Disconnected!" he exclaimed, between his set teeth. "By James! These scoundrels have done their work well! The wires have been cut, Nipper!"

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

"We ought to have been prepared for it," said the gov'nor tensely. "The fact is, Nipper, all these things have happened in such quick succession that there has been more than a little confusion. The castle is now isolated!"

"What—what about Montie?"

"There are other cars, Nipper—Lord Westbrooke's and old Dorrie's," replied Lee sharply. "Also, there is Lady Helen's limousine. We must be thankful that the snow lay thick upon the ground. It should be an easy task to follow any car—provided we start without delay."

"By jingo! I forgot that, sir!" I said eagerly. "Of course, we can follow the tracks easily, can't we? But why has Montie been taken away—"

"My dear Nipper, don't bother me with such questions now?" exclaimed the gov'nor, striding from the library. "The main thing is to rescue him. Until we have done that it is idle to discuss anything else."

In the hall we came upon Dorrie and the earl—and nearly everybody else, in fact—talking excitedly. There was a general feeling of relief, for two of the missing people at least, had been found. And the third was known to be in the hands of the strange people who had been engineering the whole queer business.

It wasn't even certain that Sir Montie had been taken away from the castle, but we only had the flimsiest evidence to go upon. Eileen and I had seen

Montie's captors making preparations for departure, and we had, a few minutes later, heard the sounds of a motor-car from the direction of the garage.

It was significant that Anatole, the chef, was missing. I was quite sure, in my own mind, that he had left the castle with his confederates.

The telephone having proved useless, we hurried into our coats and mufflers, and rushed to the garage. By "we" I mean Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrmore, Captain Masters, Tommy Watson, and myself. Eileen Dare had been anxious to come, but Masters positively refused to let her stir out of the house. In his opinion, she'd had enough excitement for one evening.

When we arrived at the garage, Lady Helen's chauffeur was already there. He had been told to get one of the cars in readiness for instant departure—Lord Westbrooke's own landaulette.

The chauffeur had only arrived a minute before us, and the garage stood open, with the electric light shining out into the swiftly descending snowflakes. Distinct wheel-marks showed in the snow.

"The limousine's gone, sir," cried the chauffeur, addressing the gov'nor. "Somebody's taken it—the door's smashed, and—"

"That's what we suspected all along," I cut in. "So they took the limousine, eh? Do you think the landaulette will be able to overtake it, sir?"

"Of course, my boy," began Nelson Lee.

"Sorry, sir," put in the chauffeur concernedly. "I don't know what's happened, rightly speaking, but there don't seem to be no petrol! Not a drop! The whole garage is swilling with it!"

We didn't wait to hear any more, but investigated for ourselves. A very brief search showed us that Lady Helen's limousine had been stolen, and that every can of spare petrol had vanished also. The gov'nor rapidly unscrewed the cap of the petrol tank on Lord Westbrooke's car; all depended, now, upon the amount of petrol which the tank contained.

"By James! It's empty!" exclaimed Lee, in a hard voice.

"Empty!" repeated Masters.

"Can't you see all this petrol on the floor?" went on the gov'nor bitterly.

"The scoundrels evidently pierced a hole in the tank from underneath; every drop of spirit has run away. The object of committing the outrage was, of course, to avoid pursuit. The enemy has escaped with Sir Montie, and we are unable to follow!"

We stared at one another blankly.

"It's rather thrillin'," isn't it?" said Lord Dorrimore, scratching his nose. "But didn't I have a car when I came here? Don't tell me that anybody's walked off with it. It's the best car I've ever struck——"

"Blockhead!" rapped out the guv'nor sharply.

"Quite true, Lee, old man, but you're rather blunt, you know——"

"My dear Dorrie, I was calling myself a blockhead!" said Lee with a momentary smile. "How could I forget such an important thing as that? Your car is in the old coach-house, of course! Has it been tampered with? Everything depends upon the answer to that query."

"Let's go an' make investigations," suggested his lordship.

We were already going, in fact. It was rather a long detour to the coach-house, but we arrived there quickly, for we ran all the way. The snow was falling thickly, and the bare space in front of the garage was one white sheet.

"No one has been here during the last hour or two!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, with satisfaction. "It seems that our unknown friends overlooked your car, Dorrie."

"Very kind of 'em," said Lord Dorrimore. "It's saved the situation, professor. I've got gallons of petrol aboard, and the car can shift like blazes. We'll catch the infernal brutes, I'll wager!"

Once the coach-house had been opened we saw his lordship's racer standing there intact. It was only a two-seater, really, but there was heaps of space upon it. In less than three minutes we were off.

Dorrie took the wheel, and the guv'nor sat beside him, and Captain Masters crouched upon the step. Tommy and I, not to be outdone, clung to the big luggage grid at the rear. It was a huge thing, and we could sit upon it without any discomfort.

And thus we started off.

CHAPTER X.

(*Nipper continues.*)

A RACING MOTOR-CAR, A MOTOR-BOAT, AND SUNDRY ROCKS PLAY THEIR RESPECTIVE PARTS IN THE LAST STAGES OF THE DRAMA.

LORD DORRIMORE proved himself to be an amazingly capable motorist. He handled his car with superb confidence and skill. The guv'nor himself could not have done better—and that's saying a lot.

Very fortunately, the snow didn't hiss into our faces so much as we had feared. For the squall had almost passed over by the time we got fairly started. Once out upon the drive, we had seen the wheelmarks in the snow quite clearly. And when the highway was reached general relief was felt when it was seen that no other vehicle had passed along. So there could not possibly be any confusion. By following these tracks we knew that we were following our quarry.

I'm not going to describe that journey—for a very excellent reason. There's nothing to describe. We simply scudded across the countryside like a grey demon. Dorrie had switched on the two great headlights, and expressed supreme contempt for all regulations.

Thus, we were able to travel very swiftly, and we followed the wheelmarks of Lady Helen's stolen limousine without any trouble.

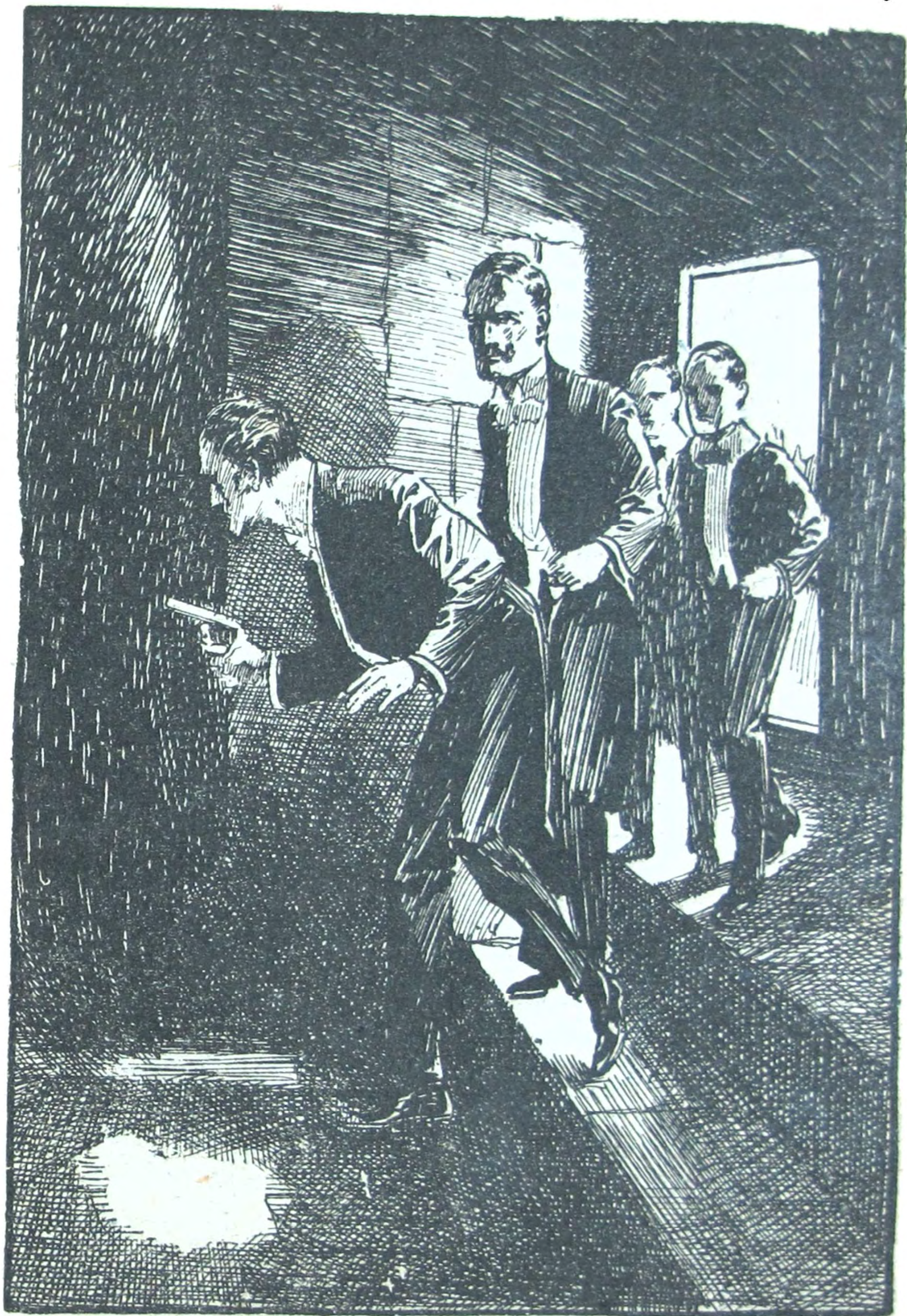
And, at last, Dorrie pulled up with such a jerk that Captain Masters was flung off the seat into the snow. The spot was a bleak and lonely one, and if it hadn't been for the weak moon, we should have been very puzzled as to our whereabouts.

As it was, Nelson Lee declared that the sea was quite near by. We had caught a glimpse of the waves a moment before.

"What on earth's the matter?" gasped Masters, scrambling to his feet.

"I'm not particularly anxious to run into the sea," exclaimed Dorrimore calmly. "Durin' the last five minutes we have been proceedin' down a little gully—we left the main road right back there. And I fancy I can see a black blob over towards the left."

We looked as we scrambled off the racer. The black blob Dorrimore had referred to was the limousine, and we



We go on a tour of exploration.—(See page 39.)

rushed up to it quickly. The car lay in a seemingly crippled condition, but we found that the two off-side wheels had more or less sunk into soft sand—which had been concealed by the snow.

It was empty, of course, and had been abandoned.

"It's clear enough that the fellows were making for the beach," said Nelson Lee crisply. "They were stranded in a fortunate position—for them. I'm very much afraid that Montie is being taken out to sea."

"Oh, my hat!" said Tommy Watson excitedly. "Do you think we shall be able to rescue him——"

"We can only hope for the best, my boy."

With hurried footsteps we ploughed through the snow and sand until we stood upon the beach itself. The sea lay right ahead, and looked almost calm, in spite of the low boom of the waves.

Then I saw the reason for it. We were in the centre of a little bay, and out against the headlands a reef of black rocks stuck out of the sea menacingly. The full force of the waves was expended on these rocks. In consequence, the bay was almost like a lagoon, and the sea remained calm.

Not a soul was to be seen, although the moon had sole possession of the sky at the present time. We all paused a little distance from the water, and looked about us with anxious eyes.

"We're too late, old man," said Dorrie glumly. "An' I made the old car shift, too. It's a confounded pity——"

"Wait a moment! What is that over there?" asked the gov'nor sharply.

"I can't see——"

"Why, yes! Look!" I exclaimed excitedly.

I pointed, and all the others at the same moment saw what the gov'nor and I had seen. Riding out upon the waves, and making for the open sea, was a tiny motor-boat. It was almost invisible in the weak light of the half-moon. I don't suppose it was half so tiny as it seemed.

"How—how rotten!" I muttered thickly.

We all felt like yelling with fury, I believe. After rushing through the night upon the track of the fugitives, we were now being presented with a spectacle which filled us with dismay.

We were too late! We had arrived upon the seashore, only to see the quarry

escaping. For we could do nothing but stand upon the beach and watch. We were beaten! It was galling in the extreme!

"What's to be done, sir?" I asked huskily.

"Nothing, young 'un! We can't do anything," replied Lee.

I felt like shouting with rage and alarm. What was happening to poor Sir Montie? Why had he been stolen in this extraordinary fashion? I just looked at the motor-boat and the waves with a dull feeling of misery within me.

The boat was comparatively near, although we had failed to see it during the first minute; but it was low in the water, and the moonlight was deceptive. I don't suppose the boat was more than fifty fathoms out, and it appeared to be having a hard struggle against the current.

For, during the time we had been watching, it almost seemed to have remained in one position. It was rocking about, of course, but we couldn't see much progress. The fact that it was a motor-boat was made clear to us because we heard, now and again, the faint beat of its engine.

"Hallo! What the dickens——"

It was Lord Dorrimore who had uttered the exclamation, and he broke off abruptly.

For, at that moment, a dull crash had reached our ears. Almost at the same second we heard several wild cries, and when we looked for the motor-boat we couldn't see it!

"She's sunk!" I yelled excitedly.

"There's not the slightest doubt," said Nelson Lee, ripping off his great-coat hurriedly. "There are evidently submerged rocks in the bay, and the boat struck one of them by accident. Good gracious! What will happen to that poor lad?"

The tragedy had taken place within the space of a few seconds. It had been startling in its suddenness. Almost before we could take breath, the boat had been sunk, and we knew that its occupants were now struggling for life in the icy water.

They say that the unexpected nearly always happens. Well, this was unexpected, at all events.

"We've got to do something," declared Dorrimore grimly. "Can you swim, Masters?"

"I've won prizes——"

"Good man! Off with that coat!"

But the captain didn't need any telling. He was in the act of stripping his coat off as Dorrimore spoke. The pair of them, as well as the guv'nor, were preparing to swim to the rescue.

"But—but you can't swim in this water!" gasped Tommy Watson, in alarm.

"Why not?" growled Dorrie, as he flung his waistcoat in the snow.

"It's too—too freezing!"

"Don't you worry your head about that!" exclaimed his lordship calmly. "By jingo, didn't you hear those cries? They're yelling for help!"

Dorrimore ran swiftly down the beach and plunged into the water without hesitation. Nelson Lee and Masters were only a second behind him, and Tommy and I were left upon the beach by ourselves.

We could see the three men swimming out with powerful strokes, and I felt cold and intensely calm. I knew what it meant—this attempt at rescue. It was probable that one or more of the rescuers would lose their lives in the gallant act.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Watson shakily.

"Cheer up, old man!" I said, patting him upon the back. "The guv'nor can swim like a fish, and so can the others."

"But the water—it's icy cold!"

"That doesn't matter so much," I replied reassuringly. "What about the U-boat outrages last winter? Scores of men were forced to remain in water just as cold as this for hours on end. And they came through alive in lots of cases. I'm thinking of the current, Watson. It's jolly strong!"

An idea suddenly came into my head.

To stand there inactive was simply galling. I felt like plunging in myself, for I'm a pretty decent swimmer. But the guv'nor had ordered me to remain on the beach. And now I thought of something.

"Look here, Tommy!" I said quickly. "We passed some cottages about half a mile back. You pelt back there as hard as ever you can! When they come out of the water they'll want warming up."

"But I don't see——"

"What you've got to do is to wake up those cottagers, and explain that some chaps have fallen into the sea," I went on rapidly. "Tell 'em to make fires and get plenty of blankets ready. I don't suppose they'll want any money, but here's a couple of quid in case."

"Rats! I've got my own tin, I suppose?" said Watson excitedly. "It's a ripping idea of yours, Benny! I'll buzz off at once!"

He pelted up the beach and disappeared from view. All this time I had had my gaze fixed upon the heads of the three swimmers. When they neared the vicinity of the disaster, they spread out, and I lost them. And then I was compelled to wait in dire misery and apprehension.

My attention was diverted by the sight of a struggling form right away near the edge of the bay to my left. I ran quickly along the beach, and soon found out that somebody was attempting to reach the shore.

As I plunged into the surf, knee-deep, the man uttered a hoarse cry, and flung himself upon the shingle. I bent over him. He seemed to be utterly exhausted, for when I spoke to him he made no reply.

With some difficulty, I dragged him up the beach, and laid him in the snow. And then, as I was wondering what to do, I heard a hail from the spot I had recently left.

Running along, I soon made out the figures of two people. They were walking up the beach.

"That you, young 'un?" called out the guv'nor's voice. "You needn't have any fears; we're all safe. Dorrie's got Montie, and they'll both be ashore in a moment. One of the fugitives went off by himself, I believe——"

"I've just lugged him ashore," I exclaimed quickly. "Thank Heaven! I'd begun to think that——"

"Where's Watson?"

"I sent him to those cottages, to have blankets got ready and fires lit," I replied. "You'll need drying, won't you?"

"Splendid idea, my boy," said Lee approvingly.

He seemed to be quite fresh, and his ducking hadn't affected him much. The man he had brought ashore was the elderly foreigner I had seen in the vault. He was quite conscious, and the guv'nor kept him pacing up and down continuously. He, for his part, was apparently dazed by the shock.

Lord Dorrimore came ashore with Tregellis-West a few moments later, and just behind him I saw Captain Masters assisting Anatole. The rescue had proved an entire success.

"Benny boy, it's gettin' steep, ain't it?" gasped Sir Montie, as he saw me. "Begad! This water isn't so warm as I should like it, but we mustn't grumble. These things will happen, you know. Life is full of hardships!"

"You—you bounder!" I exclaimed huskily.

In spite of everything, Montie appeared to be as serene as ever. His nerve was amazing. Even Dorrimore, although cast in the same kind of mould as Tregellis-West, could not equal my chum's perfect equanimity.

"Christmas Eve!" exclaimed Dorrie, with chattering teeth. "What a game! Well, it's better than loafin' about! We've had some excitement!"

"Upon my soul," put in Nelson Lee sharply, "you fellows seem to imagine that you can stand here talking for as long as you like! If you're not careful, you'll all be down with pneumonia!"

Anatole and the elderly foreigner did not speak at all. They were both dazed by the startling events which had just taken place. They knew, however, that their game was up—that their attempt to kidnap Sir Montie had failed. And they knew, also, that they had been rescued from certain death, for all three would have perished miserably if it hadn't been for the timely rescue work.

Nelson Lee and I went off to fetch the man who had fallen upon the beach. Dorrie and Masters hurried with the others up to the cottages. The gov'nor and I found the third man just recovering consciousness; but he was in the last stages of exhaustion, and we were compelled to half-carry him.

This exercise was really beneficial to the gov'nor, for it warmed his chilled blood, and at last we arrived at our temporary destination.

The cottagers were all awake and busy. Tommy had done his work well, and we found many fires alight and piles of blankets in readiness. The good people were kindness itself, and were doing all this without any thought of reward.

Well, to be brief, all the soaked fugitives and rescuers were provided with blankets and towels. After about an hour everybody was feeling nearly right again. This prompt "warming up" had averted all ill effects.

And, as soon as clothing had been found us, the party prepared to leave. It wasn't possible to wait until all their own clothing was dried, and so Nelson

Lee and the others donned a weird assortment of garments which made them all look freaks, but which were dry and warm.

And we all returned to Tregellis Castle, taking with us the three men who had been responsible for everything.

CHAPTER XI.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH WE GO ON AN EXPLORATION TOUR, AND FIND OUT MUCH.

I HAD been mistaken in thinking that all the three prisoners were as good as recovered. The man who had seemed utterly exhausted at the time of the rescue—he whom I had pulled ashore myself—was, strangely enough, quite able to talk. He was, in fact, almost himself.

Anatole was shaky and shivery, and I was pretty sure that he was booked for a severe attack of influenza—or perhaps something worse. The elderly foreigner fainted just before we reached the castle, and Lee's efforts to bring him to were unavailing.

"It is only a brief spell of weakness!" declared the gov'nor.

I dare say you're wondering how the dickens we all managed to get home on Dorrie's little racer? Well, we didn't. Nelson Lee and Sir Montie and Dorrie and I and the elderly foreigner made the first trip home. Dorrie would return to the seashore—a distance of ten miles—at once, and bring back with him Tommy Watson and the other two foreigners and Captain Masters.

Of course, as soon as we arrived there was tremendous excitement—and relief. The Earl of Westbrooke and Lady Helen were filled with joy to find that Sir Montie was safe and sound, and that the perpetrators of the crime had been made prisoners. The first thing, of course, was to change into some decent clothing of our own. The single prisoner we had brought with us was attended to by the gov'nor, who expressed the opinion that he would recover within the hour. The gov'nor had brought him with us because he was obviously the leader of the trio.

Dorrie merely stayed to change his clothes, and then he took the car back for

the others. He was feeling a little bit "groggy," I know, but he wouldn't have admitted it for worlds.

After he had gone, the guv'nor and I and Sir Montie stood before the fire in the big lounge. This was after the first excitement had passed over. Montie was as cheerful as possible. His ducking hadn't affected him. He explained that the elder of his three captors had supported him nobly after the boat had sunk. Montie, therefore, had not taken a drop of water "aboard," and his hardy constitution had immediately thrown off the effects of the wetting.

"Really, Mr. Alvington, I can't make it out," he declared quietly. "I was captured in one of the corridors, you know. Somebody sprang out at me, and forced something over my mouth and nose. An' when I woke up, I was in the motor-car. Those three chaps treated me splendidly. An' that's why I'm puzzled. Can you suggest any explanation, sir?"

"I can't, my boy, and I don't intend to try," replied Nelson Lee. "This man will be able to tell his own story before long, and I have little doubt that he will be quite frank with us. For the present, we had better employ ourselves by exploring that old vault. The others will not be back for an hour, at least. But do you think you are fit enough to come with us, my boy?"

"Begad, sir, I'm as fit as a fiddle!" declared Tregellis-West.

We went on our exploration tour, and commenced operations by visiting the ruined chapel. Here we descended the stairway, and finally arrived in the vault. From here we proceeded with lanterns up the opposite passage. It led us straight along for quite a distance, and then we came upon a flight of circular steps.

Ascending these, we found ourselves in another passage, which led very soon into the short stairway which led from the library to the north passage.

"I suspected something of this sort," remarked the guv'nor. "That spyhole, I noticed, is just round the bend. Somebody must have been listening while we were talking in the library. Now, my boys, we'll go back to the vault."

We did so, and commenced a thorough search. After about five minutes we discovered a similar dungeon to that which I had occupied before Eileen had rescued me.

Going into this, almost the first thing

we saw was the figure of the Cloaked Cavalier. It gave me a bit of a start at the first second, for I thought we had come upon another man. But the figure was merely a suit, hung upon a stand in the middle of the vault.

"The phantom!" smiled Nelson Lee.

"By jingo! It looks a heavy get-up, anyhow," I remarked. "Now, why the dickens did this suit of clothes look so ghostly? There's nothing faked about it, guv'nor."

"I fancy there is, my boy."

We walked over to the stand, and examined the clothes carefully. Almost at once we discovered the secret of the greenish glow which had so puzzled us. Fixed into the under side of the cloak—against the lining—were numerous tiny electric lamps. The bulbs were dark green in colour.

"Well, I'm blowed!" I exclaimed. "It's as simple as A B C!"

"Of course it is, Nipper," said Lee. "These things always are simple when you examine them closely. There is a battery, of course, which supplies all the lamps. Ah, and here is the switch—two switches, in fact."

Near the waist of the coat we saw a little tablet, and upon this two miniature switches were fixed. We pressed one of them, and, at once, half the electric lights gleamed greenly. The other switch turned on the second half.

"When he vanished," I exclaimed, "he must have switched off half the lights to begin with. That made it appear as though the greenish light dimmed before shutting out. But just putting out these lights didn't make the 'ghost' disappear."

"Of course not, Nipper. Up in the north passage the wearer of this suit merely stepped into the secret tunnel. Thus he disappeared," explained the guv'nor. "And outside, in the grounds, the darkness was all that was necessary. There was no moon at that early hour, you must remember. A black edge lay right behind the lawn; therefore, when the lights were switched off, the phantom ceased to exist—to all appearances."

"But what about the absence of footprints——"

"I am going to have a look into that matter almost at once," said Nelson Lee. "I wanted to do so early to-day, but didn't get a chance. This suit is

very cunningly arranged. The man who designed it was clever."

The Cavalier's costume was, indeed, extremely cleverly made. Those little electric lamps, while quite invisible, cast a reflected glow upon the figure of the man who wore the cloak. The effect was uncanny and weird; and, at a distance, absolutely spectral.

I was glad that we had found the costume, for it cleared up that little mystery completely. But I was still very puzzled regarding the disappearance of Gill. Nelson Lee wasted no time, but took us on to the low battlements of the north wing. We reached the roof by means of a little turret, and then walked out upon the leads.

"Now, I'm not quite sure that my theory is correct," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Yet that trick could only have been performed in one way. It is possible to have variations, of course, but the principle employed must have been the same. See if you can find a coil of wire, my boy—wire or rope."

In about one minute Sir Montie hauled something up out of the deep snow.

"This looks rather interestin', sir," he exclaimed.

He was grasping one end of a length of thick steel wire, and Nelson Lee smiled as he took it. The wire was securely fastened to one of the pillars of stonework. It was secured by means of a big adjustable screw arrangement, so that it would be pulled taut.

Just near this a piled up hummock of snow attracted my attention. I kicked it, and brought to light a little cradle affair, with a pulley and rope attached. I couldn't quite make out what it was for.

But the guv'nor proceeded to explain.

"It is really simple, although rather elaborate," he said. "The wire was stretched from this room to the big chestnut on the other side of the lawn. Gill, of course, knew his part well, and, as a preliminary, he uttered a startled yell—which drew us all out upon the balcony.

"The Cavalier was already suspended over the lawn, with his feet a few inches from the snow itself. Do you understand, boys? He appeared to walk very clumsily, didn't he? Of course, he didn't walk at all—he merely pretended to. He was riding in this cradle, with the pulley overhead running on the

wire. It sounds rather complicated, but it was really easy. Another man on the roof—Anatole probably—merely hauled upon the rope, and pulled the phantom across the lawn."

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie.

"Fancy not thinking of that before!" I said blankly.

"As a matter of fact, Nipper, I thought of it almost at once," smiled the guv'nor drily. "But, when I looked into the sky, I saw no sign of any wire—and that puzzled me. Perhaps the wire was there, but I fancy not. It must have been hauled across immediately—so that when we arrived upon the spot there wasn't a single clue."

"I'm frightfully dense, sir," said Tregellis-West. "I haven't got it clear yet. It's all mixed up, you know. How did Gill disappear? He wasn't on the wire, was he?"

"Of course not, Montie," smiled the great detective. "He simply stood in the phantom's path, and waited. We saw him enfolded in the cloak, didn't we? Well, at that moment, the lights were switched off, and both the Cavalier and its victim vanished. They were swiftly hauled up to this spot by means of the cradle; Gill had lifted his legs clear as soon as ever he was grasped. These battlements, as you know, are very low down, and the two men on the wire were merely hauled to the face of the building. There, probably, a rope ladder was hanging, up which they climbed in the darkness. But, as I said, many variations were possible, and the actual method employed may have been different in detail."

"And while we were standin' down there gapin', those rotters were grinnin' at us from the roof!" exclaimed Montie indignantly. "Begad, the awful rogues!"

"The whole thing was a theatrical business," observed Nelson Lee. "It was performed for the sole purpose of making everybody believe that the phantom was a deadly thing. By what I have seen, I should judge that the most careful preparations were made beforehand. These men must have been here for weeks. Anatole, as we know, was engaged quite a month ago. It is natural to assume that the others arrived at the castle on the same day. It was a cute dodge. Anatole, being the chef, was able to supply his confederates with food."

"Not a bad idea," I grinned. "It seems to me that the whole game went wrong because Tommy and I were here. Those silly foreigners didn't know t'other from which! First of all they collared Tommy, then they got hold of me. And, by doing that, they roused the hornet's nest. If they'd captured Montie right off he would have been done for, as sure as a gun."

"Dear fellow, why should I have been done for?" asked Montie solemnly. "Why do these fellows want me? I'm not valuable—I'm not, really. There's nothin' about me that warrants all this fuss. It's a mystery."

"I fancy an explanation will soon be forthcoming," remarked Lee. "Well, boys, I don't think there is anything further to investigate in regard to the movements of these Christmas plotters. All we want now is the story—the reason for all the whole scheme."

We left the roof by the way we had come, taking our lanterns with us. And then we returned to the lounge, with the intention of joining the ladies in the drawing-room. The hour was late, of course, but nobody thought of retiring.

But just then we heard Dorrie's car outside, and he and Masters and Tommy arrived with the other two prisoners. Anatole was ill—really ill—and he was packed off to bed without delay. The other man couldn't speak a word of English, and so he was useless as regards all questioning.

Lord Dorrimore and Captain Masters were both quite lively; their swim had made them tired and achy, but nothing else.

Eileen Dare approached the guv'nor and I as we were chatting with Dorrie. She was looking somewhat excited.

"Can you come at once, Mr. Lee?" she asked quietly. "I just took Oliver into the library—the patient is there, you know—and when we got there we found he had recovered from his faint. He wishes to tell us all something."

"Oh, that's rather good," said Dorrie. "I'm not a curious chap, but I must confess that I'd like to hear this particular yarn."

"I can't really understand the man," Eileen went on. "He seems a real gentleman, and he has expressed the deepest concern for having given us so much trouble. I wonder what it all means?"

CHAPTER XII.

(*Nipper concludes the narrative.*)

WE HEAR AN ASTONISHING STORY—AND EVERYTHING IS MADE CLEAR TO US.

EILEEN didn't find it necessary to wonder for long.

We all collected in the big library—the whole crowd of us. Lord Westbrooke, of course, hadn't gone back to the hall, and he was more keenly interested than anybody. In fact, he looked very grim and stern.

Anatole was in bed, and the other man was in the library with us. The guv'nor didn't think that he would attempt to escape, but it was wiser to have him where we could keep an eye on him.

But we were all interested in the elderly man who had treated me so courteously—and then so roughly—in the vaults. As Nelson Lee had surmised, his fit of faintness had soon passed. And now, after some brandy, he looked haggard, but well enough otherwise.

He was a foreigner of some sort. His dark eyes gleamed strangely as he looked at us all. His slightly grizzled hair was untidy, and his small pointed beard needed clipping. In spite of this, however, he carried himself with an air of distinction, and we couldn't help wondering.

"Ladies—gentlemen," he exclaimed in a low, deep voice. "I sit before you in humility. I have acted the part of a criminal—and I leave it for you to judge me as you think fit. But I am honest—I have no evil thoughts. What I have done has been for my country's good—as you will learn. I have failed. I am glad of that, for my life has been miserable during these weeks."

He paused, and nobody made any comment. Of course, the stranger didn't speak perfect English, and I'm not going to attempt to set everything down as he actually said it. It would only make the yarn tedious if I did so.

"My name," continued the man, "is Count Vangarod. I surprise you? Perhaps I shall surprise you still more when I tell you I am one of the chief advisors to the Queen of Merania."

"Merania?" murmured Tommy Watson. "Where's that?"

"Is my country so small?" asked the count with a faint smile. "Merania, as

I am well aware, is but a tiny state in Europe. But we have managed to keep out of all the wars—perhaps we are too insignificant to be noticed. Yet I am proud to be a Meranian, and I have done nothing to disgrace my honour. As my plans have fallen about my ears, it is only justice that you should learn the facts—justice to myself, and justice to you."

"I have heard your name, Count Vangarod," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Unless I am mistaken, it was owing to your efforts that Merania succeeded in keeping out of the great conflict which has convulsed Europe. And the feelings of your countrymen are, I believe, all in favour of the Allies."

"That is true—very true," replied Count Vangarod. "And the Allies have no more staunch supporter than myself. That is why my mission to England filled me with dismay. But I came by the queen's command—and it was not my place to question her Majesty's decree."

"I will not call myself a fool, for these plans were not of my making. But the safety of a nation was at stake—a tiny nation, it is true—but nevertheless dear to my heart."

"I realised, before I started upon my mission, that it was almost doomed to failure. I told the Queen that the whole scheme was hopeless—and an insane dream. For those words I earned her severe displeasure."

"Now, to tell you my story clearly, I must go back for a period of fifteen years. It was at that time her Majesty was blessed with a son, the present King Nikoli. At the same time, during the same week, I believe, an English lady, staying in the capital, gave birth to a son. Her name was Lady Tregellis-West—"

"By George!" ejaculated the Earl of Westbrooke. "That's right! That's where you were born, Montie. I thought there was something familiar about this talk of Merania."

"Was I born out there?" said Sir Montie. "How interestin'!"

"A few weeks after the infant king was born," proceeded Count Vangarod, "the queen's brother attempted to perpetrate a foul plot upon the young king. The queen's brother, Prince Karlos, has always been an enemy to his own country, and has schemed to gain

complete mastery. I do not intend to go into all the details—my story would be too long—but I can, at least, tell you the main points."

"Prince Karlos schemed to kidnap his tiny nephew, with the intention of putting the infant to death. He could see that his power would be destroyed for ever, if the king reigned."

"Little Nikoli was taken into the palace grounds by his nurse every fine morning. And, as it happened, Lady Tregellis-West had obtained permission from the queen's secretary to have her own child given its morning's ride in the grounds, also. It was owing to this fact that a mistake was made—a mistake which was to mean ruin to the prince's plans."

"For on the morning set aside for the abduction, the hired bandits of Karlos committed a blunder. They kidnapped the little child of Lady Tregellis-West instead of the king. But they discovered their mistake almost at once. As the alarm had been given, they seized the baby king in addition—he was with his nurse near by. The scoundrels fled with the two babies, but the project failed at the very outset. The queen's soldiers made the ruffians prisoners at once. But then a sad discovery was made. The two babies had become confused."

"Oh!" exclaimed Eileen. "How could that be possible? Surely their mothers would know them at once?"

Count Vangarod smiled faintly.

"In the case of one baby, its mother, I am grieved to tell you, did not live to identify her child," he went on. "But you, Lord Westbrooke, must know all this—it is old history to you."

"Quite so," agreed the earl. "But please proceed."

"Lady Tregellis-West was in a very weak condition," continued the count. "She died, poor lady, upon hearing that her baby had been stolen. The shock was too great for her. And so the two mites were taken to the queen, and her Majesty at once identified little Nikoli. At Sir Lancelot Tregellis-West's request, the name of the second child was never made public. Why should it have been? The poor gentleman had enough grief without having his affairs made the subject of newspaper paragraphs. The whole population, however, knew of the plot; they knew that the two babies had

been confused for a time. And, in spite of all my efforts—in spite of all the queen's efforts—a certain proportion of ignorant people believed that there might still be confusion. Prince Karlos fled as soon as he learned of the failure of his scheme. But in the course of years he returned to Merania—to the capital.

"And now, fifteen years later, the evil prince is in almost complete power. For, as certain whisperings must have told you, King Nikoli is a born imbecile."

"How dreadful!" murmured Lady Helen sympathetically.

"It is sad," said the count gravely. "The king is not violent, you will understand—but his mind is as weak as that of an infant. He is totally unfit to be a ruler. In Merania the knowledge is general. And Karlos has, for some time, been fanning an agitation to force the weak-minded king to abdicate in his favour. If that happens, Merania will be ruined."

"You can have no idea of the intrigue which has run riot in the capital. Rumours have spread, and are being daily discussed, to the effect that King Nikoli is not the king at all! It is believed by many that the real king was taken away from Merania by Lady Tregellis-West."

"I am beginning to understand," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"It is clear now, is it not?" pursued our narrator. "The queen has made herself believe that the rumours are well founded. Oh, she was mad—mad! She wanted to believe the absurdity! And she gave me instructions to obtain the son of the late Sir Lancelot, and to bring him to Merania."

"It was her dream to have a son of whom she could be proud. Her life has been a misery for years and years. Against all her better judgment, she forced herself to believe that this lad here—Sir Montgomery—was her own child. And so she sent her emissaries under my charge to fetch the lad by force. Once in Merania, she would identify him as her own flesh and blood."

"With this lad upon the throne, everything would be different, for Prince Karlos would be helpless. I argued with the queen again and again, but she threatened to cast me into a fortress unless I obeyed her will. And so I came to England. I knew that the boy could

not be taken from his school, and so for weeks I planned things at this castle.

"I obtained much information concerning the secret passages from an aged servant who has now retired from the service of the family. I do not care to give his name; although, after all, he acted in all innocence. I wanted to make Sir Montgomery disappear in such a way that no trace would be left, and no inquiries would be made. We are superstitious, we Meranians, and we believed that the phantom would be accepted without question. I realise now that I was wrong."

"And you intended to take Montie to Merania?" asked the earl.

"It was all planned—almost to the last detail," replied Count Vangarod, inclining his head. "No expense was too much. Once the boy reached the capital he was to have been proclaimed king—but his real identity would never have been made public. And he would have been told that he must either consent to our wishes or die. He would have been forced to take a solemn oath to forget his former life and to become King of Merania. The lad is an orphan, and the queen believed that he would have consented. I thought the opposite—I still think so. Refusal, however, would have meant death. That was her Majesty's decree. I acknowledge that the whole scheme was mad from start to finish. But what could I do? I was compelled to carry out the queen's wishes. And, believe me, I would never have allowed the lad to die. In point of fact, I had already made plans to deceive the queen—to bring the boy back to his own country."

"The whole idea of the phantom was to get Sir Montgomery away in such a fashion that no search would be made. I make no excuses for my own actions. I have done nothing harsh, and it is my wish to express very sincere regret for having caused this commotion at such a time of goodwill and peace."

"Ladies—gentlemen, I have said all that is necessary," concluded Count Vangarod gravely. "I am in your hands. It is for you to decide what punishment shall be meted out to me. Whatever that punishment may be, I shall not grumble. I must suffer in silence for the follies of my queen."

Nelson Lee nodded gravely.

"There are one or two points which

need clearing up, Count Vangarod," he said, leaning forward. "For example, I was roughly attacked by two men while travelling by car to Westbrooke Hall——"

"Ah! I am sorry—I am sorry!" interrupted the count quickly. "I apologise with all my heart. You must forgive me. That was an act of desperation—I meant no harm, believe me. But you were suspicious—I knew it—and you were dangerous. You imperilled the success of my mad venture. It was my plan to capture you, and hold you a prisoner for a few hours only—until the boy had been secured."

The guv'nor smiled.

"I understand," he said. "And why did you attack Watson last night, while he was walking in his sleep?"

"That was a blunder—a bad blunder," replied the count, shrugging his shoulders. "It was not I who made it. The boy was mistaken for Sir Montgomery. The error was discovered, and so the lad was left in the alcove. Oh, there have been many, many mistakes over this disgraceful business! This evening, while we were waiting for the household to retire, I discovered that one of the lady visitors had vanished. I was puzzled, but I decided to take advantage of the opportunity. And so Sir Montgomery was captured almost at once. Oh, it was foolish of me—— But why talk?" concluded the count bitterly. "I have failed—and I must suffer for that failure."

.

The Earl of Westbrooke and Nelson

Lee decided that Count Vangarod had suffered sufficiently. Any publicity would have meant grave political trouble. It was far better that the whole thing should be hushed up.

Nothing could have been gained by prosecuting these innocent emissaries of the foolish Queen of Merania. As Nelson Lee afterwards told me, her Majesty had become notorious for her mad follies in almost every direction.

And so, to avert a terrible scandal, Count Vangarod and his companions were allowed to go free. But Nelson Lee made them swear that they would leave England at the earliest possible moment.

As for Gill, he had been paid to play his part, and had afterwards left the neighbourhood with a considerable sum in his pocket. He hadn't been told anything that mattered, and so we didn't worry ourselves about him.

And thus ended those exciting hours at Tregellis Castle which preceded our most enjoyable Christmas.

For Christmas Day dawned bright and glorious, and all the trouble was at an end. The guv'nor and I—and everybody else—spent an extremely happy Christmas under Sir Montie's hospitable roof.

And that's all.

In due course, the guv'nor and I returned to St. Frank's, and it wasn't long before we were plunged into an affair of a very dramatic character——

But I haven't got room for any more here. So I'll finish up by wishing everybody the happiest Christmas they've ever spent—and many of 'em!

THE END.

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THE MURDER-BOAT'S LAST FIGHT.

WOULD she hit her target, or miss? They held their breath and watched and waited, until there was a sudden upheaving of the water near the doomed vessel, a spurt of smoke and flame, and the ship ceased her fire.

"They've got her! She's lost!" groaned Crawley. "See? They are lowering their boats! Thank Heaven the shore is near! Ah, the devils are firing on the crew!"

It was only too true! The Germans, angered, perhaps, at the fight the steamer had made, were directing their shell fire upon the boats.

Yet, to his great joy, Crawley saw two of them cast away from the ship's side and make for the shore.

The U-boat turned now, and those in the little boat realised in a moment that she intended to attack them.

"The scoundrels! The villains! They'll let nothing live!" growled Thomas Crawley. "But they'll pay for their campaign of murder in the end! Ah!"

A shell struck the water near them, followed swiftly by another, and yet another.

Spray drenched them; water was hurled into the boat. Flying fragments cut through her sail and struck the side of the doomed craft, yet those within her bore a charmed life.

Then Crawley cried:

"Bail—bail her out, boys! Lend a hand, missy! We've sprung a leak and are sinking!"

Ignoring the other peril, they set themselves to deal with the inrush of water, while Thomas Crawley issued orders for their safety.

"There are the oars and the mast and

sail!" he cried. "If we sink, cling to them, boys! One of you give the lass a hand. Unship the mast now! Cut those cords away! That's it! See those oars are free! We can't save the boat, boys, but we may be able to keep afloat until help comes."

White-faced, Hilda Moore listened; and then, being a lass of grit, she set to work to bail the in-rushing water out.

Meanwhile the submarine had ceased her fire. Why?

Tom looked round for an explanation, and let forth a yell of delight.

"Dad, Bob!" he shouted. "Look! There's help at hand, and they've got the submarine in a trap. Look! Look!"

They looked, and realised in a moment that Tom was right.

Seaplanes were speeding through the air and swooping down upon the submarine. From north and south and east destroyers, which seemed to have leapt from the bed of the ocean, they appeared so suddenly, came speeding up at a terrific rate, belching black smoke as they came.

Nor did they wait to get nearer ere they opened fire. Swiftly they got the range, and their guns were speaking with no uncertain voice.

Shells whistled over the sinking boat, and burst in the vicinity of the submarine. On board the latter the crew could be seen running about in panic. Their guns were stowed away, and preparations hastily made for the submersion of the U-boat.

Too late! A shell hit her, and left her crippled upon the surface.

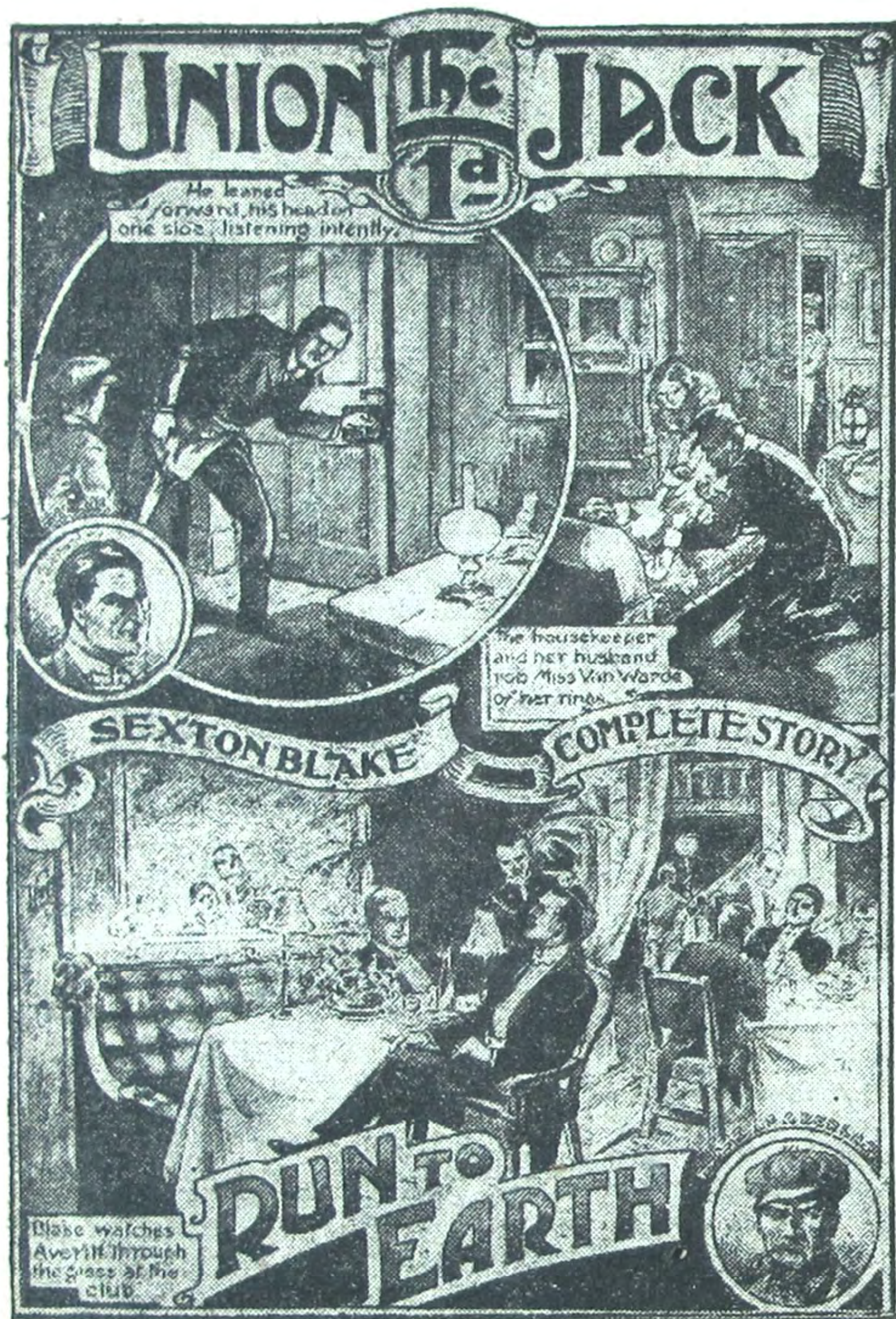
Then above her swung a naval plane, a fast-moving instrument of destruction, and a bomb was dropped sheer upon the murder craft.

How the occupants of the little boat yelled as they saw the burst of flame and saw the debris fly.

One of the survivors of the crew of the U-boat at this juncture held up a white

(Continued on page 63.)

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flag in token of surrender, and the crews of the destroyers who had crippled her burst into a frantic cheer, which was echoed by Bob and Tom, and the fisherman and the girl.

A moment later the boat sank under them, and left them clinging to the oars and the mast.

Bob Randle clutched the girl by the waist with one hand as the boat settled down beneath them, and supported himself on one of the oars with the other.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I'll hold you up until the destroyers come and rescue us."

Luckily for them, their plight had been reported aboard the nearest of the destroyers, which sped up to where they were immersed like a streak of lightning.

Cheery voices hailed them, eager faces peered down at them from the deck of the warship, and ropes were thrown to them.

First the girl was hauled aboard, Bob seeing that she had a firm grip of the rope ere they hauled her in. Then the fisherman followed. Bob was the third to leave the water, and Tom Crawley the last.

And as Tom reached the deck of the destroyer, grasped the hand of the first seaman he saw, and noticed that his cap bore the name of the ship—the Wasp—he let forth a yell that might have been heard ashore.

"The Wasp, of the Weathersea patrol!" he yelled. "Bust me, if this isn't a piece of luck! Here, mates, don't you know me? I'm Tom Crawley, of Weathersea, late of the Flyer, and here's my dad, and Bob Randle, and a girl we've brought back from Belgium with us."

"From Belgium?" came in excited comment. "How's that, my lad?"

"We were all prisoners of war, but we escaped from the German prison at Antwerp, and here we are!" yelled Tom.

A minute later he was led below with the others to effect a change of clothes, leaving them to wonder at what appeared to be a miracle.

LIGHTS OF HOME!

THAT night the Wasp steamed into harbour at Weathersea, soon after dusk had fallen over land and sea.

News of the capture of the U-boat had already reached the port, and

cheer upon cheer rang from the throats of the assembled fishermen who had come to give the Wasp a rousing welcome back.

On the deck of the vessel, among the grinning and cheering seamen, stood Bob Randle, Tom Crawley, his father and Hilda Moore.

The relief and joy they felt on their return home is indescribable.

They did not land at once, it being thought advisable to send news of their rescue and homecoming on ahead, so that their sudden arrival home might be broken gently there.

This was done, and within the hour Mrs. Crawley knew that her husband and her son were safe; whilst an eager messenger took the glad news of their return to the Thwaites', and then hastened to let the Randles know that their soldier son had come back.

With what eagerness the fugitives awaited their landing can be guessed. The time seemed to pass on leaden wings.

While they were awaiting the happy moment, however, Thomas Crawley arranged with Hilda Moore that the girl should come and stay with them at the little cottage.

"We'll make you welcome, my brave lass," said the fisherman, "and my wife will be a second mother to you till you find your own."

And so, when at length a boat pulled them away from the side of the Wasp, and bore them towards the landing steps, the girl went with them.

The news had gone round. At the head of the steps a group of fisherfolk were waiting. Thwaites was there, and the boy Sam, and a host of old friends, and with them—yes, there she was—Tom could see Mary Thwaites, standing with her hands folded, her big eyes glancing wistfully down.

Up the steps they swung—Thomas Crawley first, with his arm linked in the girls', then Tom, then Bob Randle.

How the fisherfolk swarmed around them, shaking them by the hand, slapping them on the shoulder, cheering and petting them.

And then, then—Tom Crawley found Mary's arms around him, felt her soft, warm lips press a kiss upon his cheek, and the warm tears follow it.

"Oh, Tom, Tom, you've come back, and I believed you dead! Oh, Tom, dear Tom!"

"Are you glad, Mary dear?" whispered the sailor boy.

"Glad—glad! Oh, I never knew how much I cared for you until the news came that the Flyer had been sunk, and that—you'd gone down with her!"

How Tom's heart leapt. He looked round for Bob, but Bob Randle was looking after Hilda Moore, and trying to force a way through the delighted and enthusiastic crowd.

.

The escape of the three Weathersea heroes from their captivity in Antwerp and their safe return to the famous seaport town was more than a nine days' wonder in that part of the country. People are talking about it still.

Congratulations were showered upon them, and rewards too.

A public subscription fund was started on behalf of Thomas Crawley, who soon found himself in a position to buy a new fishing boat—a\$, and bought it, too.

Nor did he hesitate to go out upon the treacherous deep to help to win food from the depths for the benefit of the people at home.

As for Tom, he came to an understanding with Mary Thwaites ere he had been ashore a week. Mary had made up her mind.

She was fond of Bob Randle, but she did not love him as she loved Tom, whom

she'd known and quarrelled with and worked with all her life.

Bob saw how things lay, and accepted his fate like a good sportsman.

"We'll be friends always, Tom, old boy," said he. "You and Mary and I And, when the wedding takes place, you'll let me be best man, won't you?"

"Of course," laughed Tom. "Of course."

Tom, who was as sound as a bell, and unshaken by his experiences, was drafted to another vessel belonging to the Weathersea patrol, a fast and up-to-date destroyer—the Hornet.

Within a month he was at sea again, searching for submarines, and on the look out for chance enemy destroyers, though the latter were wise and kept away.

As for Bob, he went seedy for a bit, and was placed upon the sick list.

He went about as usual, looking fairly well, with a gold stripe on his left cuff.

"But I shall go out to Flanders again, and be in at the finish," he declared.

Meanwhile he had grown to be very fond of Hilda Moore.

Hilda had found her mother, who was in London, but as her reception was not a very cordial one she presently came back to Weathersea, stayed at the Crawleys' cottage, and started work in a local munition factory.

And they say she is going to marry Bob.

THE END.

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