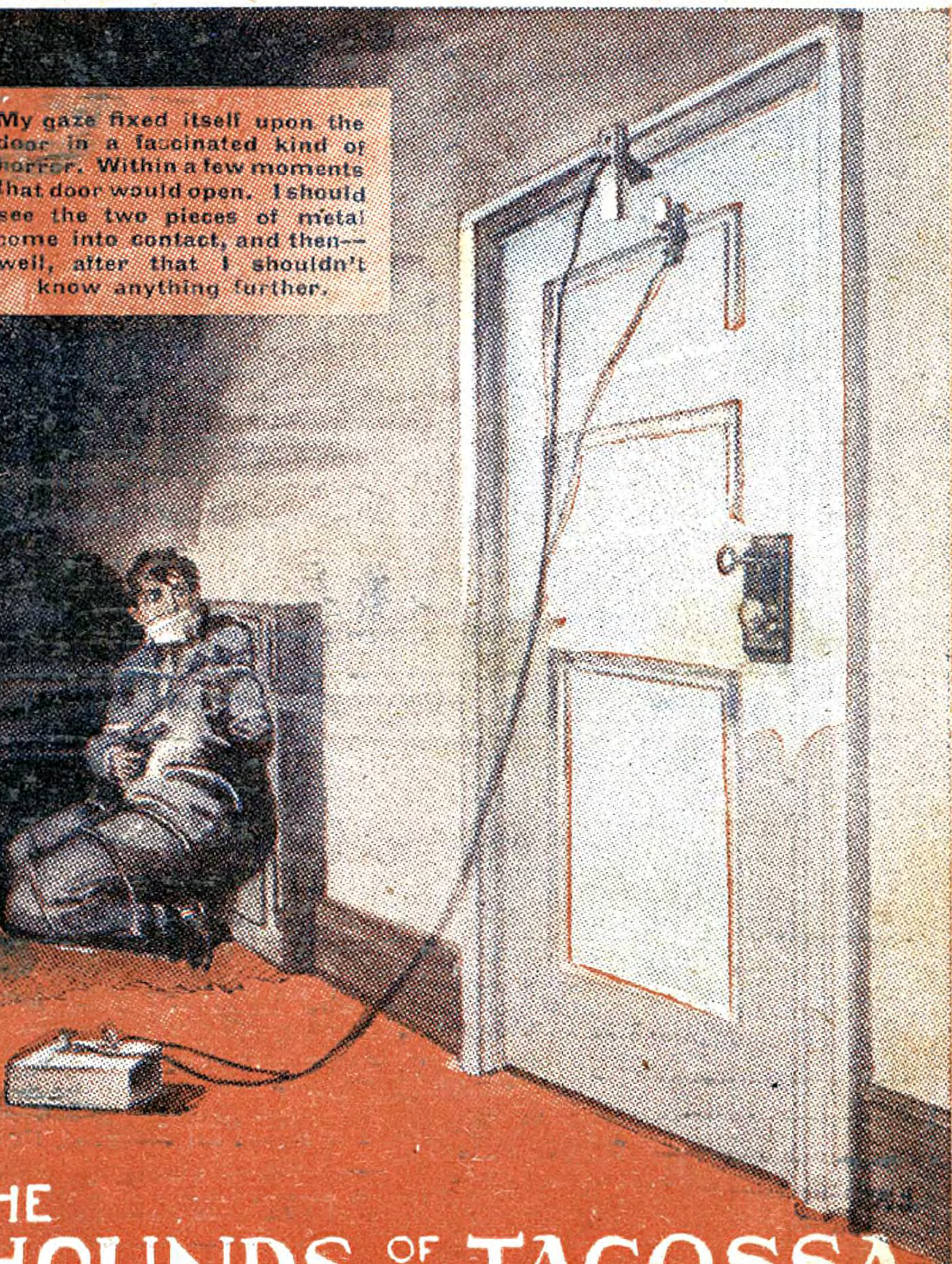


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My gaze fixed itself upon the door in a fascinated kind of horror. Within a few moments that door would open. I should see the two pieces of metal come into contact, and then—well, after that I shouldn't know anything further.



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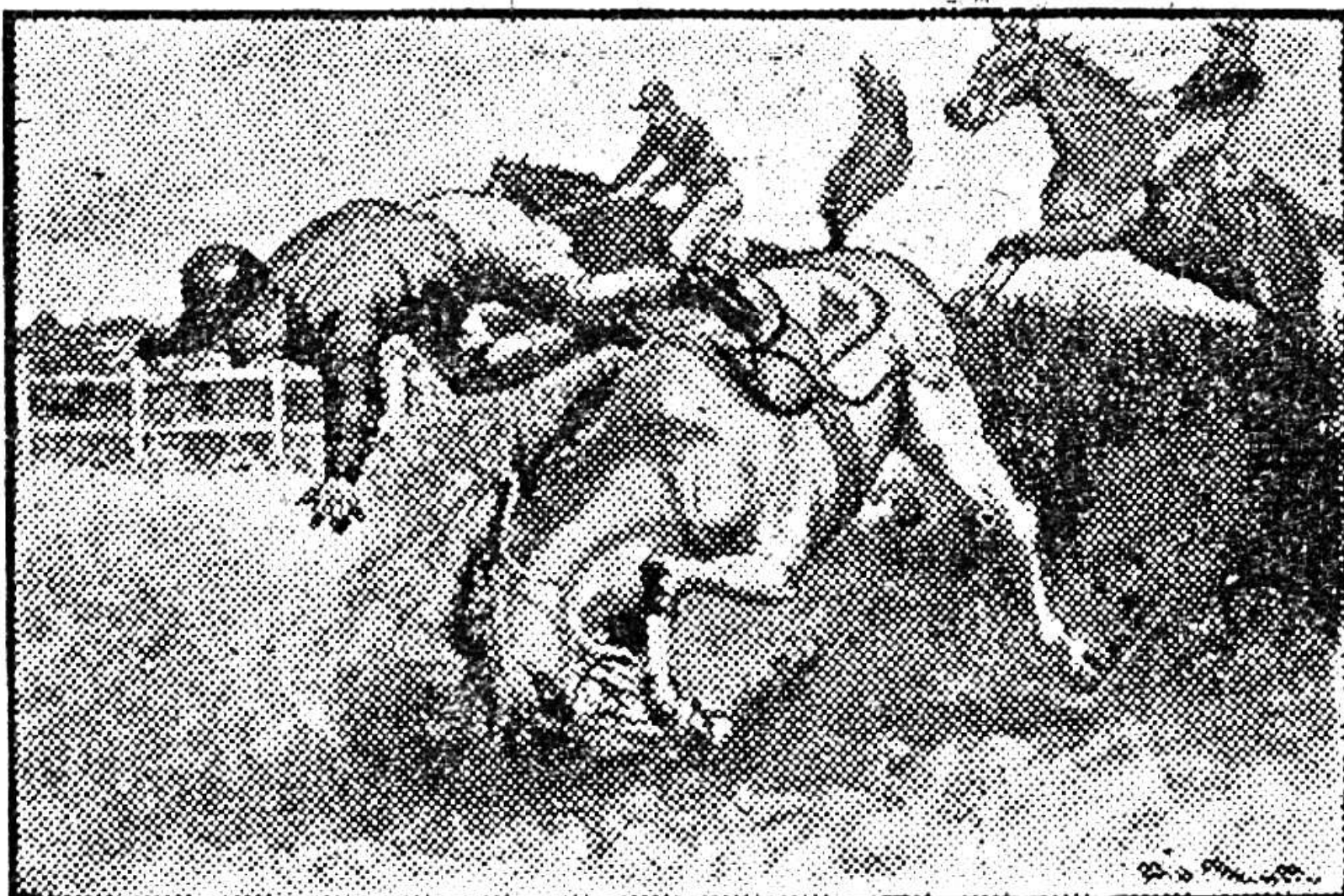
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

IN DANGER OF THEIR LIVES!

"I 'T'S just about the limit!"

I muttered the words in a tone of disgust as I stared gloomily out of the window of Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road.

It was Whit Monday—Bank Holiday—and the greater bulk of Londoners were out enjoying themselves. I had every reason to feel depressed as I stood at the window, gazing down at Gray's Inn Road, with its deserted pavements, and its Sunday-like aspect.

I had nothing to grumble at with regard to the weather. The sun was shining hotly from a sky which only contained a few fleecy white clouds. A cool breeze blew, and, in fact, the day was well-nigh perfect.

"I'm fed up!" I said irritably.

Nelson Lee looked up from his newspaper.

"I can quite understand your feelings, Nipper, and you have my sympathy," he said. "But, my dear lad, you must surely realise that it is quite out of the question for you to go out in the usual way just now."

I grunted.

"Oh, I realise that all right, sir," I said. "But that's what makes me wild—to think that we've got to stick in here just because those two confounded Mordanian murderers haven't been colared."

"They appear to be slippery customers, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "And your plight is no way different from that of your young friends of St. Frank's. Fifteen boys are being kept within stone walls by their parents or guardians. They are not allowed to approach a window even."

"Oh, that's carrying it too far, guv'nor," I protested.

"Perhaps so; but it is just as well to be on the safe side," said Nelson Lee. "Dorrie, of course, obstinately refuses to safeguard himself. At this very moment he is probably walking about, inviting his enemies to take a pot shot at him. Sooner or later we shall hear that Dorrie has fallen a victim to this vendetta."

"Oh, he's an ass, sir," I said impatiently. "After all, this danger is real, and I call it ridiculous to take unnecessary risks. I'm wild to think I'm kept in, I know, but that's only natural. On Whit Monday, too—that's what gets my back up!"

I glared out of the window again, and bestowed a ferocious stare upon two innocent strangers who were walking along the opposite pavement. I was, as a matter of fact, feeling thoroughly and absolutely sick of the whole thing.

It was only a short while since we had returned from our exciting sojourn in Mordania—that turbulent little kingdom in the heart of the Balkans. Upon our arrival in England we had

believed that we were safe, and that all our troubles were at an end.

But this delusion was very soon dispelled.

In Mordania we had been instrumental in breaking up a murderous secret society known as the Tagossa. There had been sixteen St. Frank's juniors there, including myself. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were also numbered in the party. And, largely owing to our efforts, King Boris of Mordania had regained his throne, and the Tagossa had been smashed up.

Soon after our arrival in England we had gone down to St. Frank's again—to be warmly and frantically welcomed. And then, within a few days, something had occurred which knocked all the confidence out of us.

We had received mysterious cards bearing a written sign representing a flaming torch—this, as we all knew, was the sign of the Tagossa, and it generally meant that death was to follow.

At first we had not taken these warnings seriously; but on the very same day a high explosive bomb had been flung at a charabanc, containing not only the sixteen fellows who went to Mordania, but fourteen others as well.

By a miracle we had escaped disaster, the bomb exploding after the charabanc had passed. And Dr. Stafford, acting upon Nelson Lee's advice, had packed all the juniors off home without delay.

The Whitsuntide holidays, in any case, were almost upon the school, so these juniors only went home a day or two in advance of the right time. They had just been at St. Frank's a sufficient length of time to get back into the normal run of things.

And we were hoping that when the new term started we should be able to go back without fear. At present all the other fifteen juniors were being kept within closed doors by their people.

Not only this, but each house was closely protected by police and by Scotland Yard detectives. And, indeed, it was highly necessary that some form of protection should be provided, for Ivan Grezzi was still at large.

This gentleman was mainly responsible for the whole trouble.

In Mordania he had been the right-hand man of the brigand chief. He had escaped from the country at the time of the great battle at Ludari, and, so far as we knew, he had only brought

one companion with him. And these two men had set themselves the task of exacting revenge for what had occurred in the Mordanian mountains.

The vendetta—the deadly blood feud—had been brought to England. Ivan Grezzi had sworn an oath to destroy every member of the party who had helped King Boris to destroy the Tagossa.

Grezzi had nearly succeeded in wiping out sixteen of us at one blow. Fortunately, he had failed, and since then no further attempts had been made. This, undoubtedly, was because such excellent protective measures had been taken. As soon as these protective measures were removed the danger would again be imminent.

"It seems jolly queer to me, guv'nor," I said thoughtfully. "Why can't they get hold of these two rotters? Scotland Yard, I mean. Goodness knows, it ought to be easy enough to nab two foreigners like Grezzi and his companion. I don't believe they can even speak English!"

Nelson Lee removed the pipe from between his lips.

"Scotland Yard is quite helpless while these two men remain in hiding," he said. "And there is no doubt, Nipper, that Grezzi and his companion are skulking away somewhere, beyond the gaze of the police. As soon as they emerge they will probably be nabbed."

"In that case, it's safe enough for us to walk about," I said.

"Certainly, if the police do nab our excellent friends," said Lee. "But we have no guarantee that such will be the case. We can't figure on it, Nipper. Then, again, it is possible that we have other enemies. Personally, I believe that these two are the only ones; but we can't be certain."

I grunted.

"Well, at that rate, we might be walking about with this menace at our backs for months," I said. "That's a lively prospect, isn't it? It's the uncertainty that makes me so impatient. I can't —"

I broke off abruptly, for at that moment the door of the consulting-room opened and a vision appeared—a vision of immaculate neatness and coolness. In other words, Lord Dorrimore stood in the doorway.

Dorrie himself, attired in a beautifully cut white flannel suit, with soft collar,

and a quiet silken tie. Upon his head reposed a panama hat. His white boots were spotless, and he carried a neat cane. As a rule, Dorrie was quite careless about his attire, but to-day he was a perfect model.

"Into the chamber of gloom and misery!" he remarked, as he strolled in. "By gad! What on earth's the matter with your face, Nipper? It looks about a yard longer than usual. Ah, that's better! The smiles burst forth!"

"They can't help bursting forth when you make such highly intelligent remarks, Dorrie," I grinned. "You madman!"

"Thanks," said Dorrie. "I always enjoy a delicately expressed compliment."

"I'm not sure that Nipper isn't right, old man," said Nelson Lee severely. "Haven't you more sense than to come here at this time of the day?"

Dorrie sighed.

"And this is the kind of welcome I receive," he exclaimed. "I thought you'd be glad to see me——"

"We are glad to see you, but you should not have risked the journey," said Nelson Lee. "How did you come?"

"I walked."

"Walked!" I yelled. "You! And you're generally too lazy to walk ten yards! Why, I've known you to call a taxi to cross the street!"

"That," said Dorrie, "is a gross exaggeration. I walked because the day was so sublimely sunny, and because I needed some exercise. Furthermore, there must be a taxi strike, because I couldn't find one for love or money!"

"That's about the true explanation," I said. "But think of it, gov'nor! He actually walked here, inviting Grezzi to take pot shots at him as he came along. It's a certainty you won't walk back, Dorrie."

"My dear kid, what's the good of worrying?" asked Lord Dorrimore, sitting down. "Personally, I don't believe there's half so much danger as you make out. And it may interest you to know that I've got a neat little revolver tucked away in my pocket. I was fed up with sticking indoors, and so I came for a stroll. And if you like to make a fuss about it, Lee, you can go ahead. But give me warnin', because I want to stuff some cotton wool in my ears before you start."

Nelson Lee couldn't help smiling.

"Well, Dorrie, I'm not your keeper, and if you choose to take these risks, it's your own lookout," he said. "I must admit that I have been acting in just the same way—I've walked about freely——"

"Then, if you start lecturing me, you'd better beware," interrupted Dorrie. "Any news? Has this Grezzi fellow been nabbed, or are we to expect a bomb through the roof at any moment?"

Nelson Lee smiled again.

"I don't think anything of that nature will happen, Dorrie," he replied. "Grezzi is probably lying low, attempting to lull us into the belief that he has gone away. Personally, I do not expect anything to happen until two or three days have elapsed."

"By gad!" exclaimed his lordship. "An' in the meantime we've got to languish in suspense! We've got to wait with this bally sword of Damocles hoverin' over our innocent little heads!"

"Exactly," I chuckled. "Glorious prospect, Dorrie!"

"I'm afraid you don't take it quite seriously enough," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Just try and be thoughtful for once, Dorrie. This danger is absolutely real, and unless we take the most elaborate precautions, some of us will suffer. I am speaking in deadly earnest now. Our lives are in peril, old man, and it is up to every one of us to keep strictly on our guard. I've half a mind to keep you here now."

Dorrie shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not scared of this fellow Grezzi," he began.

"Neither am I scared," interrupted Lee. "But I don't mind telling you, Dorrie, that I have distinct objections to being murdered by the man. I rather fancy you have a desire to keep on living. But, if you will persistently ignore my advice, you will find a great deal of trouble."

"I'm a bit of a fatalist," said his lordship lightly. "An', somehow, I've got a hunch, as the Americans call it, that I sha'n't peg out this trip. I'm convinced that I'm not destined to die at Grezzi's hand, so I'm leavin' things to chance."

I grunted.

"Oh, well, if you will act the giddy ox, you mustn't blame us if you get a

bullet through your napper," I exclaimed gruffly.

"If I get a bullet through my—er—napper, young 'un, I sha'n't be in a fit condition to blame anybody," retorted Dorrie calmly. "So that settles that. An', unless I'm mistaken, I can hear fairy footfalls on the stairs. Who is coming to disturb our peace on a bank holiday?"

A moment later the door opened, after a thunderous tap had sounded upon the panel, and Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, strolled in. He was attired in a blue serge suit, dusty boots, a stiff collar, and a bowler hat.

He removed the hat, revealing a forehead which was bedewed with perspiration spots.

"Morning, everybody!" he said cheerfully. "Phew! It's hot work, walking! I'm glad to see you're still safe and sound."

"Sure thing," said Dorrie. "Found any sign of Grezzi yet?"

"I'm sorry, your lordship, but——"

"Oh, by gad!" interrupted Dorrie. "Cut that out, old man. You're one of Leo's friends, ain't you? Well, you're a friend of mine, too—an' I don't want any formalities. My name is Dorrimore."

Nelson Leo shook Lennard's hand warmly.

"Does this visit mean that you have something fresh to tell us, or is it merely a friendly call?" I inquired. "I needn't tell you, Lennard, that I am somewhat anxious—not concerning myself, but with regard to the boys. I can let the men look after themselves."

"I'm sorry, Lee, but there's really nothing doing," said the chief inspector, shaking his head. "As for your friend, Grezzi, we haven't seen any sign of him at all. As you may imagine, after that terrible outrage near Bellton, the whole police force of the country has been on the alert. But, although this fellow Grezzi ought to be easy to nab, we haven't found any sign of him."

"Which proves that he is in hiding," said Nelson Lee. "That's the only possible thing to think. He's waiting until the affair blows over. I am not satisfied that Grezzi has left the country and that there is no further menace. On the contrary, I believe that the danger is very real, and, at the first sign of carelessness

on our part, that danger will become apparent."

The chief inspector nodded.

"Yes, that's what we think at the Yard," he said. "All the fifteen boys are in London, at their various homes, for all these people have town residences. I think they're safer in London."

The chief inspector did not stay for long. He had nothing to tell, and it was quite useless questioning him. And, soon after he had taken his departure, Lord Dorrimore rose to his feet.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be goin', too," he said. "I'm off for the club. I promised to meet a fellow there to-day, and I can't disappoint him—some writer chap who's keen upon Mordania. He wants me to give him local colour for the stuff he's writin'."

"I'll ring him up, and tell him to come here," said Nelson Lee.

Dorrie grinned.

"No, you don't!" he chuckled. "Nothin' doin', old man. You don't catch me like that. As I told you before, I'm a bit of a fatalist, an' I'm fairly certain that I sha'n't come to any harm. We'll see. So long! I might run round again later."

And Dorrimore, before we could stop him, passed out through the doorway, and descended the stairs. I went out on the landing, and paused irresolutely. It seemed madness to me that he should court death in such a manner.

"Hold on, Dorrie!" I shouted. "Just a minute."

He looked round.

"What is it, young 'un?" he asked.

"Look here, Dorrie, it's too risky," I said. "Come up again, and let the guv'nor disguise you a bit. That'll be some safeguard, anyhow."

"No, old son; nothin' doin'," said his lordship.

He passed down the passage, opened the front door, and went outside. I returned to the consulting-room with a grunt of disapproval.

"Of all the pig-headed asses!" I snapped. "He jolly well deserves to be hurt! He won't even consent to be disguised."

"Well, it's just like him," cried Nelson Lee.

I crossed over to the window, and gazed down the road. I could see Lord Dorrimore's tall figure striding lazily along the opposite pavement. The street

was nearly deserted, and there was no traffic except an occasional electric tram.

I was just about to turn away when I caught my breath in with a gulp.

For, quite suddenly, Lord Dorrimore staggered. He paused in his walk, his hands went up, and he collapsed in a heap upon the pavement, lying perfectly still—a huddled mass! I turned round, nearly choking.

"Good heavens!" I gasped. "They—they've got him, sir!"

"What?" shouted Nelson Lee hoarsely.

I was almost stunned.

"Just now—up the road—Dorrie collapsed!" I jerked out, the lump in my throat nearly taking my voice away. "Shot, sir, I expect. Oh, my goodness! Why did we let him go? We ought to have kept him here, sir!"

"Yes, we ought!" snapped Nelson Lee furiously. "What a fool I was! What an infernal idiot! Poor old Dorrie!"

The gov'nor dashed to the door.

"Don't go, sir!" I shouted hoarsely.

But Nelson Lee took no notice. He went down the stairs four at a time. And I followed him, reckless and absolutely careless of what happened. I had seen Dorrie collapse, and my one thought was to rush to his side.

Arriving in the street, we sprinted along Gray's Inn Road like a couple of racers in a hundred yards handicap. Just ahead we could see a crowd collected round the spot where Dorrie had fallen. Other people were running up, too. A policeman was hastening to the scene.

We arrived breathless, and pushed our way through the crowd without compunction. We elbowed the people aside roughly, and found Lord Dorrimore lying motionless on the pavement, huddled up just as he had fallen. None of the gaping idiots had touched him. His face was partially hidden; but something else caught my eye, and caused me to utter a sharp exclamation of horror.

A tiny pool of blood had formed on the pavement!

"Dorrie!" I gasped.

"Stand back—stand back!" shouted Nelson Lee. "This gentleman is my friend. If any of you have any sense, do your best to get an ambulance!"

Nelson Lee's tone was sufficient. The crowd stood back at once, and two or

three men rushed off, holter skelter, vaguely wondering how they could obtain the ambulance. They collected round the policeman who was just coming up.

Nelson Lee gently lifted Dorrie by the shoulders. I looked on, with a dull feeling in my breast. I had no hope. The Tagossa had killed our large-hearted, affectionate old friend.

Nelson Lee caught his breath in sharply.

"Thank Heaven!" he muttered.

"Isn't— isn't he dead, sir?" I panted.

"No; and only slightly hurt!" replied Lee briskly. "A bullet wound, along the side of the head. Scarcely more than a graze, Nipper; but the blow of the bullet stunned him, and cut the skin rather deeply."

A great breath of relief escaped me. After the terrible things I had thought, it was glorious to know that Dorrie was not badly hurt. Indeed, just as Nelson Lee finished speaking, his lordship opened his eyes, blinked once or twice, and then grinned faintly.

"Much damage?" he inquired.

"You cool bounder!" I exclaimed.

"I'm blessed if you don't keep your wits about you even when you're unconscious! How did it happen, Dorrie?"

"Goodness knows!" murmured his lordship. "I don't remember anything, except a sudden pain on my head, and then I saw a few white and purple spots, and then you came. You might stop those drums beatin', old man. My head feels frightfully rocky!"

"It's all right, Dorrie; we'll soon have you in a place of safety," said Nelson Lee. "Nipper, hurry off and get a taxi. We'll take Dorrie straight home."

The ambulance, of course, was quite unnecessary. With deft fingers, Nelson Lee bandaged Dorrie's head, and by the time he had finished I arrived on the scene with a taxi-cab. With some difficulty we got Dorrie through the crowd and into the cab. We were only delayed a few moments by a police-sergeant, who took our names and one or two details. Then we hurried off to Dorrie's London house.

We soon arrived, and his lordship was taken straight to his study. And there Nelson Lee bandaged his head thoroughly, gave him a stiff dose of brandy, and told him firmly, but quietly, that he wasn't to move.

Dorrie obeyed these instructions by rising to his feet and selecting a cigarette from an open box on the mantelpiece. He was slightly unsteady, but by no means crooked.

"Sorry, old man, but there's no reason why I shouldn't move," he said lightly. "Have a cigarette? By gad! What did I tell you?"

"Yes, what did you tell me?" said Lee grimly. "You were positively assured that you wouldn't come to any harm."

"Well, my dear man, I haven't come to any harm," smiled Dorrie. "I don't call this anythin'—just a little scratch to remind me that it's not the first bullet wound I've suffered from. Ye gods and little fishes! What a rotten aim the fellow had!"

"Thank goodness for that!" I said.

"You couldn't find a better mark than I was," went on Dorrie. "And yet he couldn't pot me. Goodness knows where the bullet came from—I don't! But there was no report—and that's rather queer, too."

"Not necessarily," said Nelson Lee. "The would-be murderer probably used an air-pistol, and it is quite likely that he fired from his hip, with the revolver concealed in his pocket. That would account for the uncertain aim."

"I thought these Mordanians were dead shots?"

"They are, as a rule," replied Lee. "But this man was out of his element. No doubt he suffered from slight nervousness in a London street, and he was also in a hurry. We must be thankful that he was. And in future, my beauty, you're not going out alone."

"Help!" groaned Dorrie, in dismay.

"This incident proves quite conclusively that our theory was all wrong," went on Lee. "If Grezzi is lying low, his companion isn't. One of them is prowling about constantly, with the intention of potting one of us, if he can get the chance."

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"You don't step a yard from this house!" he said curtly. "Not a bally yard! I won't allow it. I ain't goin' to let you chaps run into frightful danger!"

"Nipper and I must return to Gray's Inn Road," said Nelson Lee. "But if it will please you at all, Dorrie, we will not venture out until darkness falls, and

then we will adopt slight disguises. I am not living in fear of these enemies, but this morning's events have proved that precautions are not entirely valueless."

And so, for the remainder of the day, we stopped at Dorrie's place. Fortunately he had a 'phone and I was able to have long chats with Sir Montie, Handforth, Church, Ernest Lawrence, and one or two others.

This whiled away the time, for it was rather a long job, ringing them up one after the other. It hadn't taken me long to look up their parents in the telephone directory, and jot down all the various numbers.

"It's frightfully wearyin', dear old boy," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, who was the last one I 'phoned. "I'm fed up—I am, really. It's simply shockin', bein' compelled to remain indoors all day. My aunt won't even let me go to the window, you know! Ain't it appallin'?"

"Well, Montie, it can't be helped; you've got to stick it," I said. "It can't last for ever, and within a day or two Grezzi and this other chap will probably be laid low. I've told you what happened to Dorrie, so you can see that the danger is a real one."

"Dear old boy, you needn't have told me that," said Tregellis-West. "I don't forget that frightful explosion near St. Frank's. That told me the danger was real, begad! Have you heard anythin' about the others—Captain Mason, an' the rest?"

"The gov'nor 'phoned up Mason not long ago, and he's all right," I replied. "He's keeping indoors, just the same as the rest of us. Horribly humiliating, isn't it?"

Sir Montie declared that it was shockingly so, and shortly afterwards bade me good-night, and rung off.

Nelson Lee and I whiled away the evening by playing billiards with Dorrie, and then, when it was dark, we slipped out unobtrusively, and wended our way homewards. We didn't enter our place in Gray's Inn Road by the front door. A man with a noiseless pistol is not a very cheerful customer, and he could easily take pot shots at us as we entered.

We chose the rear door, and got in quite safely. And somehow I felt that the perils of this strange Whitsuntide holiday were only just beginning.

CHAPTER II.

NARROW ESCAPES!

NELSON LEE and I were up in good time on the following morning.

It was not quite so fine as it had been on the previous day. The sky was clouded, and the sun, after making valiant attempts to break through, gave up its task as hopeless and made an unconditional surrender. Chagrined and beaten, he retired into obscurity.

Nevertheless, the day was quite warm, for the breeze was a sultry one, with a promise of thunderstorms in it. I had an idea that before evening came we should see much lightning, and hear many peals of thunder.

As it happened, I was quite wrong, for in the afternoon the weather cleared and the sun shone in full glory, with an air of triumph and supercilious victory which clearly indicated his swank at having driven the clouds away.

Both Nelson Lee and I had been expecting that further news would come to us; but the day passed absolutely uneventfully. From morning till night we didn't hear a thing. Certainly, Montio and Handforth and one or two others rang up, but there was nothing doing. The Tagossa made no sign.

Dorrie was better, and wanted to come out again. Nelson Lee told him that if he dared leave his house, he would be taken back and chained up. This threat, although not serious, had the effect of keeping Dorrie indoors.

"Well, guv'nor, I hope it won't keep on like this," I said, late in the evening. "I'd rather have attempts made on our lives than keep up this game. We should at least have an opportunity of getting on the trail. As it is, we're done."

"You need have no fear, Nipper—Grozzi will not remain inactive for long," said Nelson Lee grimly. "You must remember that the police and the best men at Scotland Yard are on the look-out. At any hour our Mordanian friends might make a slip, and then they will be caught in the net."

I thought possibly that something might happen during the night; but I was wrong. I awoke on the following morning fresh and bright, and in no way harmed. But I was not in my usual state of cheerfulness.

The knowledge that I was hemmed in,

bound to keep indoors by an unknown peril, made me rather irritable.

It was certainly very exasperating.

"I'm not going to stand it much longer—that's absolutely certain!" I told myself as I walked disconsolately into the breakfast-room. "This sort of thing can't last, and if those confounded Tagossa chaps aren't collared before long, we shall have to start making a move of our own. There's no sense in messing about like this!"

I addressed these illuminating remarks to myself. Nelson Lee was not present, being still in his own room, engaged in shaving. It was quite early in the morning—or, to be exact, just about a quarter to eight.

The guv'nor had given instructions the previous evening that Mrs. Jones, our worthy housekeeper, should serve breakfast at eight o'clock sharp.

I was not extremely delighted with this idea. I considered that eight-thirty would have been quite early enough. I glanced at the morning paper, found nothing of interest in it, and tossed it aside. Then I gave my attention to the table.

Next to Nelson Lee's plate lay a little pile of letters, and a well-wrapped, compact brown paper parcel. It was very securely tied, and the handwriting on the label was unfamiliar to me. And just at that moment Nelson Lee strolled in.

"Good-morning, Nipper!" he said cheerfully. "Well, the night passed without any alarming events."

"Why, did you expect a bomb to come through the roof, guv'nor?" I inquired.

Nelson Lee frowned.

"I'm afraid you regard this matter rather too flippantly, my boy," he said. "No, I did not expect a bomb to come through the roof, but I thought it quite possible that Mr. Ivan Grezzi would attempt some sort of violence."

"But why should he pick on us?" I asked. "Why not Dorrie, or Watson, or Tregellis-West, or some of the others?"

"There is no doubt, Nipper, that Grezzi regards us as his chief enemies," said Nelson Lee. "It stands to reason, therefore, that he will pay particular attention to us. By the way, what is that parcel you are holding?"

"Oh, it's for you, sir!" I replied. "I found it next to your plate."

"Let me see it."

Nelson Lee took the parcel and turned

it over thoughtfully. I could not quite understand it. He gave the thing altogether more attention than it deserved. He turned it over three or four times, judged its weight in his hand, shook it gently, and finally laid it down on the table.

"What's the idea, sir?" I asked. "Why don't you open it?"

"I shall open it—later," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "Before doing so, however, I shall take this parcel into the laboratory and immerse it in a large bowl of water."

I stared.

"What on earth for?" I asked blankly.

"You will probably smile when you hear my reason," said Lee. "But we cannot be too careful, Nipper. The chances are that this parcel is quite innocent and harmless. But we must not overlook the possibility that it may be exceedingly dangerous."

"Dangerous!" I repeated. "A miserable little parcel like that!"

"Precisely," replied the *guv'nor*. "Even a miserable little parcel like this, as you put it, may contain death. You must remember that we are menaced by the *Tagossa*, and it is quite a favourite trick of these secret societies to use bombs."

"But that's not a bomb!" I yelled.

"I don't suppose it is, but it is better to be on the safe side."

And Nelson Lee, picking up the parcel, walked through into the little passage which led to the laboratory. I followed him, not only amused, but rather indignant.

"Dash it all, sir, you might as well see what is inside!" I exclaimed. "That wouldn't do any harm, and by soaking the parcel in water you might ruin the contents."

"It is certain that I shall ruin the contents," replied Lee, taking a bowl and filling it with water. "That is my object, Nipper. And I am certainly suspicious, and I am quite indifferent to your scorn."

"Well, that's a good thing!" I said scoffingly. "Fancy overdoing it like this, *guv'nor*! I'm jolly well surprised at you! That parcel's as harmless as I am."

"In that case, my suspicions are correct," retorted Nelson Lee calmly.

By this remark I took it that Nelson Lee did not consider me exactly harmless. But I made no comment, and the precious

parcel was duly dumped into the bowl of water and held down. Large bubbles escaped and rose to the surface. The parcel dropped to the bottom and remained there.

"We will give it five minutes," said Lee, taking out his watch.

I did not trust myself to say anything, because I considered the whole thing ridiculous. If Nelson Lee was scared, I was not. For him to get into a panic over an ordinary parcel was astonishing to me.

"Well, the time's up, *guv'nor*," I said, at length. "Hadn't we better fish it out?"

Nelson Lee proceeded to do so. I knew that he was quite aware of my contempt, but he took absolutely no notice of it. Quite calm and deliberately he lifted the parcel out of the water and set it down gingerly upon the bench. Then he picked up a sharp knife, cut through the strings, and removed the sodden wrapper.

I stared eagerly, and then burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!" I yelled. "A box of cigars! Well, it jolly well serves you right, *guv'nor*! I hope you'll enjoy smoking them!"

Nelson Lee smiled slightly, and picked up the cigar-box. It was of the ordinary variety, and the highly coloured label on the surface informed us that the contents consisted of Havana cigars of a particularly expensive brand.

"Well, it was just as well to make sure, Nipper," said Lee evenly.

"And those cigars must have cost two or three quid!" I ejaculated indignantly. "It's a regular shame, *guv'nor*—spoiling good smokes like that! I expect they were sent to you by a friend, and it's a ten to one chance that there's a letter among that pile near your plate, saying who they're from."

Nelson Lee had taken out his pocket-knife. He inserted the blade under the lid, and gently prised it open. Then he uttered a short exclamation, and I noticed that his eyes were gleaming.

"Exactly!" he said. "I wasn't far wrong, young 'un."

"What—what do you mean?" I asked uncertainly.

Lee did not answer, but he placed the cigar-box on the bench and pointed to it. The lid was now open, but no soaked and ruined cigars were revealed to our gaze. Instead, I saw that the box was

filled with metal objects—one or two cogs were visible, and some little levers.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "What—what is it, guv'nor?"

"Nothing more nor less than a very ingenious infernal machine," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "Quite harmless now, Nipper, but deadly a few minutes ago. If I had not soaked the parcel, we should have been blown to atoms the very instant I lifted the lid."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Do you still consider that my precautions over this miserable little parcel were unnecessary?" asked Lee. "Do you still think that I have acted in a foolish way?"

For a second or two I could not say anything. I was rather staggered by this revelation, and I felt somewhat shaky. The knowledge that we might have been sent to Eternity made me turn somewhat pale.

"I'm sorry, guv'nor!" I said huskily. "I apologise for what I said just now. It only proves that I'm a young ass, and that you're just the opposite. The awful murderer! Why, if you hadn't been cute——"

"There is no necessity to picture what would have occurred if we had been careless, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Grezzi has failed in this little game of his. I was suspicious at once, not because I was expecting a bomb through the post, but because it is a general practice of mine to be always on my guard. The Tagossa made no move yesterday, and that indicated to me that Grezzi was preparing something."

I took a deep breath.

"Strictly speaking, we ought to be smashed to bits by now, sir," I said. "What a jolly good thing that parcel wasn't addressed to me! I should have ripped it open without thinking——"

"And after that you wouldn't need to think any more," said Lee grimly. "Well, it's over, Nipper, and we might as well get to our breakfast. Mrs. Jones is no doubt highly indignant with us already. I insist upon her being prompt with meals, and she, not unnaturally, expects us to be prompt also."

"I—I don't want any breakfast, sir," I muttered. "I feel rather queer inside. It's a wonder to me that parcel came through the post without exploding. Supposing it had received a tremendous jolt? What would have happened?"

"Nothing," replied Lee. "The explosive is well protected, and it could not take action until the lid of the box was opened. No, Nipper, the parcel was quite safe in that way, and Mr. Grezzi is evidently a man of ingenuity. We must be more on our guard than ever."

We went back into the breakfast-room, Lee announcing that he would give the infernal machine full attention later on. But he had hardly taken his seat at the table when he rose to his feet again. And now I saw that a startled look was in his eyes, an expression of hidden alarm and anxiety.

"What's wrong, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Don't bother, Nipper—don't bother!" snapped Lee.

"But the eggs and bacon are getting cold, sir," I said. "We may as well do our best to eat something."

"Never mind the eggs, there is something of much greater importance to occupy our attention!" interrupted Nelson Lee, his voice almost harsh. "What a dolt I was not to think of it before! There is not one moment to lose, Nipper."

"But I don't understand, sir!" I exclaimed quickly. "What's the matter? What's wrong? What are you calling yourself names for? A dolt—eh? I think you were tremendously keen——"

"But the others, Nipper—the others!" broke in Lee. "Don't you understand? We had this parcel sent to us—a parcel of death! Is it not possible that Grezzi has sent similar parcels to Dorrimore, to Mason, to Tregellis-West, and Watson—and all of them? Just imagine what would happen!"

"Good Heavens!"

It only took me a second to imagine the result. Not one of the others would be on their guard as Nelson Lee had been; they would all open the parcels, and there could be but one result. The very thought staggered me, and filled me with horror.

"Oh, but—but that's too awful, sir!" I protested huskily. "Even Grezzi wouldn't do that—dozens of innocent people would be killed!"

"Grezzi has already proved that he has no scruples," interrupted Nelson Lee. "At St. Frank's he attempted to blow up a charabanc containing a number of boys he had never seen before, and against whom he bore no animosity. So long as he kills those he considers his enemies, he does not care how many

innocent ones are involved. That is the way with these vendettas, Nipper."

I hardly knew what to say.

"And we must waste no further time in here," went on Nelson Leo. "How many of our friends have got telephones fixed in their houses?"

"Seven or eight, sir," I replied quickly. "That's including Dorrie and Tregellis-West, and Handforth, and Lawrence, Talmadge, and one or two more. Christine and Pitt and Watson and Fatty Little aren't on the 'phone."

Nelson Leo nodded.

"There is just one thing in our favour," he said. "It is now only just ten minutes past eight—distinctly early. Dorrie, I know, is a lazy scoundrel in the mornings. He never turns out before nine or ten. And it is hardly likely that the juniors are down yet. We may be able to avert these tragedies."

"I hope to Heaven we can, sir!" I said fervently.

"You must waste no time in ringing up all those who are on the 'phone," went on Lee. "I will rush round in my racing car to the others, and, between us, we may be successful. Warn them all not to touch any parcel, no matter how innocent it looks. And don't waste a second!"

I grabbed up a writing-book from the table. Upon this I had scribbled several telephone numbers, in order to save myself the trouble of looking them up every time in the directory. The first number I selected was that of Sir Edward Handforth's 'phone.

And it struck me that it would be just as well to 'phone Handforth up to begin with. Church and McClure were staying with him, therefore there were three fellows to warn here. They were well guarded outside by Scotland Yard detectives and police, but these men were no protection against the kind of devilry that had nearly brought disaster to the guv'nor and to me.

I rushed into the consulting-room, grabbed the telephone, and yelled Handforth's number into the transmitter. I only had a few seconds to wait, although those seconds seemed like minutes.

"Line out of order," said the exchange girl briefly.

"What!" I shouted. "But I must get through!"

"Sorry, but that's impossible," said the girl. "There was a fire in the West

End during the night, and the number you want was disconnected——"

I did not wait to hear any more. I jammed the receiver on its hook and rushed out of the consulting-room.

"Guv'nor!" I yelled.

Nelson Leo was just bounding down the stairs.

"Well, Nipper, what is it?" he demanded quickly.

"Go to Handforth's place while you're out," I replied. "His number's disconnected, and there are three of them there—Handforth, Church, and McClure. I can't get through on the 'phone."

"Right!" said Lee. "Be 'phoning the others."

I dashed back into the consulting-room and a few minutes later I was speaking with Sir Montie.

"That you, Montie?" I asked. "Has a parcel come for you this morning?"

"Dear old boy, whatever is the matter?" asked Tregellis-West. "As a matter of fact a parcel did come, but I haven't opened it yet——"

"Then don't!" I said. "It probably contains a bomb!"

"Begad!"

"If you open it you'll be blown to atoms!"

"Really, Nipper, old boy, this is no time for joking," pretested Tregellis-West. "I think it is frightfully absurd——"

"I was never more serious in all my life!" I insisted.

And I proceeded to tell Sir Montie, in as few words as possible, what had happened. He was very startled, and assured me that he would not touch the parcel, even with a barge-pole. He would have it taken outside in a pail of water. I wasted no further time, but rang off at once, and then 'phoned to Ernest Lawrence. The answer was exactly the same—a parcel had come for him, but Lawrence was not yet up. I spoke to Lawrence senior, and he promised me that he would put the parcel in water.

So far, everything was all right, but there was not the slightest doubt that Ivan Grezzi had made an attempt to kill every one of us.

I rang up Talmadge, and then Yorke. Neither of them had come down to breakfast. But parcels were waiting for both. It was quite obvious that these parcels had been sent broadcast, and if

the gov'nor and I succeeded in saving all the intended victims, it would be something like a miracle!

CHAPTER III.

THE VENDETTA!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH snorted.

"Do you think I'm afraid of these blessed Tagossa men?" he demanded warily. "Not likely! And, what's more, I'm not going to stick indoors all day—I had enough of it yesterday!"

"It's all very well to say that," put in Church. "But your pater won't let you go out, Handy."

"Oh, I can wangle it somehow," declared Handforth. "Why should I be compelled to stick indoors, like a prisoner? What's the good of the police? We've got to be protected, and I'm not going to skulk in hiding any longer."

Handforth and his two chums had just come downstairs. It was nearly eight-thirty, and breakfast in the Handforth household would not be served until nine. Sir Edward—Handy's pater—had not yet put in an appearance.

Church and McClure were staying with their famous leader. McClure's people had no London house, and Nelson Lee had deemed it better that all the juniors should remain in the metropolis. Church was there because he wanted to be with his chums.

Handforth, as usual, was grumbling. He knew well enough that he would not be allowed to go out, but it pleased him to say that he would take no notice of these orders. This was just one of his little ways.

"It's absolutely mad!" went on the leader of Study D. "It's known for a fact that only two of these Tagossa men are in England. Just think of it! We're all hemmed in because of these two rotters—and they may be out of the country by this time. It's a farce!"

"Well, we don't know about that," said Church. "I haven't forgotten that terrific explosion near Bellton. My hat! It's a wonder we weren't all killed then—and we should have been if luck hadn't favoured us. The incident proved, anyway, that Grezzi is in deadly earnest."

"Well, of course, it proved that," admitted Handforth. "But still, I don't see—Hullo! What's this?"

"It looks like a parcel," said McClure. "Of course it's a parcel, you ass!" went on Handforth. "Addressed to me, too. We'll see what it is. Come along—we'll open it in the morning-room; it's all quiet there."

The parcel was not particularly large, and Handforth seized it and carried it into one of the apartments which opened out from the dim hall. Church and McClure went with him.

Handforth set the parcel on the table, produced his knife, and cut the string. Then he commenced to remove the wrapping.

And, so far, Nelson Lee had not appeared!

No word of warning had reached Handforth that he was not to open the parcel. If I could have only known what these three juniors were doing at the moment I should have trembled in my shoes.

Handforth threw the brown paper aside. And a box of chocolates, manufactured by a well-known firm, was revealed.

"Chocs!" exclaimed Handforth, in surprise. "Well, I'm jiggered! I wonder who the dickens could have sent them—there's not a word inside to indicate the sender. Well, we might as well sample them."

"Not a bad idea!" grinned Church.

Handforth raised the cover, pulled off the paper shavings, and revealed a full layer of delicious-looking chocolates. This parcel, at all events, was not a deadly bomb. There was nothing whatever to indicate that it was even dangerous. Perhaps it was as innocent as it looked.

"My word, they seem ripping!" said McClure.

"They are ripping!" declared Handforth, who had sampled one. "Help yourselves, you fatheads! You don't want me to feed you, I suppose?"

Church and McClure selected a chocolate each, and declared that they were first class. And just as Handforth was about to partake of another, a footstep sounded in the doorway, and Sir Edward Handforth looked in.

"Good-morning, boys!" he said cheerfully. "What's this—what's this? Chocolates! Good gracious me! What next?"

"Have one, pater?" said Handforth, proffering the box.

"My dear Edward, what next?" de-

manded his father. "Ridiculous! Chocolates before breakfast! Whoever heard of such nonsense! Put them away at once—at once, you young rascals!"

Church and McClure grinned, and Handforth looked indignant.

"What's the matter with chocolates before breakfast, pater?" he demanded warmly. "There's nothing wrong with them, I suppose? We're going to finish half this box——"

"Nothing of the sort!" interrupted Sir Edward grimly. "Hand the box to me! Do you hear me, sir? Hand it to me!"

"Look here, pater——"

"Confound it! Will you obey me, or not?" roared Sir Edward. "Do you think I'm going to be talked to by a youngster like you? I refuse to argue, Edward, and I insist upon you passing me that box of chocolates this instant!"

Sir Edward didn't wait for Handforth to pass it. He strode forward, seized the box, and slammed the lid on it. In many ways Sir Edward was a larger and older edition of Handy himself. He was just as clumsy, and every bit as arrogant. He liked nothing better than an argument, and he always insisted upon having his own way. And, naturally, when father and son had a set to, Handy always succumbed.

"Now, you won't touch these again until after breakfast!" said Sir Edward. "The very idea, eating sweets at this time of the day!"

He strode out of the room, and took the chocolates to his own library, where he locked them away in a drawer. If he had been asked why he objected to the boys partaking of sweets at that hour, he would probably have had no answer. But it was one of Sir Edward's little ways to assert his authority on every possible occasion.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church, grinning.

"You—you fatheads!" snorted Handforth.

"Eh?"

"What have we done?"

Handforth didn't know, but he glared at his chums ferociously. As he couldn't "take it out of" his father, he naturally turned to his long-suffering chums to relieve his feelings.

"It was your silly faults!" snapped Handforth.

"Our fault?"

"Yes! Why didn't you start jawing

at him, instead of standing there like a couple of dummies?" said Handforth. "He wouldn't dare to roar at you the same as he does at me——"

"Oh, wouldn't he?" said Church. "We stand enough of your roaring, Handy, without taking the risk of having any from your pater."

It was an unfortunate remark, for it fairly started Handforth on the go. They were still arguing when the breakfast-bell rang, and when they went into the dining-room they were all looking somewhat flushed.

They were each aware of the fact that a subtle change had come about; they were not feeling quite themselves. In the heat of their recent squabble they had not noticed much; but now that they were sitting quietly at the table, they became more aware of the true position.

Under the eagle eye of Sir Edward, and the more kindly eye of Lady Handforth, the juniors could not continue their arguments. Church was feeling off colour. For some reasons the thought of food was distasteful to him. Yet, when he had come down, he had possessed a healthy appetite, and was eagerly looking forward to his breakfast.

But now he had completely changed. There was a very queer feeling inside him, and his head was in a most peculiar state. He felt dizzy, and now and again he heard strange noises.

McClure was in a somewhat similar condition. Handforth probably felt some symptoms, but he brushed them aside impatiently.

"I—I hope you'll excuse me, Lady Handforth, but—but I don't want any breakfast!" said Church uncertainly. "I—I couldn't eat anything."

His hostess looked rather concerned.

"Dear me! Whatever's the matter with the boy?" she exclaimed. "Come, Walter, you must have your breakfast——"

"I—I don't feel like it, thanks," said Church.

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped Sir Edward. "Upon my soul! What preposterous rubbish! No breakfast—a fine, healthy boy like you? What's the matter—sulky? Been having a squabble with that rascally son of mine?"

"Go easy, pater!" protested Handforth. "We haven't had a squabble—only—— Oh, my hat!"

Handforth suddenly broke off and held his head.

"What on earth is the matter now?" growled his father.

"I—I feel awfully queer!" muttered Handforth. "I—I don't know——"

He broke off, breathing rather quickly, and Sir Edward, looking at the boys closely, could not fail to observe that they were all pale and shaky. Their eyes were unusually bright, and Church was now laying back in his chair in a kind of stupor.

"Whatever is the matter?" asked Lady Handforth, in some alarm.

Sir Edward rose to his feet hurriedly, tipping his chair over backwards, and sending it with a crash to the floor. In matters of this kind he was just the same as his son. He went to Church's side, and shook the lad by the shoulders.

"Now then, young man——" he began.

But he stopped short, for Church went limp, his face as pale as a sheet. Then, as he rolled off the chair, his limbs became fixed and rigid, only to relax again a moment afterwards. And poor Church proceeded to squirm about on the floor, moaning slightly as he did so.

"Good heavens!" shouted Sir Edward. "What's the matter with the lad? Water—fetch some water! No—brandy! Brandy's what we want! Confound it! Can't somebody bring the water—brandy——"

Sir Edward was almost incoherent. Church's sudden collapse was decidedly alarming. And almost before another minute had passed McClure fell back in his chair in exactly the same position.

"Good gracious me!" gasped Sir Edward. "This is terrible—shocking! What can be the matter? Edward, do you know why your young friends—— By George! He's just the same as the others now!"

"Oh, my boy—my boy!" exclaimed Lady Handforth, in alarm.

"It's no good getting into a panic, Ethel! You must keep your head—remain calm! What in the world shall we do? Good heavens! I've never seen anything like it in all my life—three of them at once! Fetch some water! Fetch doctors——"

Of the two, Sir Edward was in a far greater panic than Lady Handforth. Servants were summoned, and they came in, looking scared. The three juniors, now quiet, but in a kind of trance, were

carried upstairs and placed in their bedrooms. They seemed to be conscious, although they could say nothing.

Sir Edward, slightly calmer now, went to the telephone—and gave voice to a few uncomplimentary exclamations when he found that the line was not working. He immediately sent one of the servants out to fetch a doctor.

But the servant had hardly been gone a minute, and the whole household was in an uproar, when an urgent ring sounded at the bell. Outside, near the pavement, stood a low, grey racing car.

Sir Edward was up with the boys, wondering what he could do, when his butler appeared, looking very agitated and scared. Sir Edward turned upon him fiercely.

"Go away—go away!" he snapped. "Don't come bothering me now, Weston! I won't be worried——"

"But there's a gentleman to see you, sir——"

"Confound the gentleman!" sported Sir Edward. "I won't see anybody!"

"But the gentleman insisted upon seeing you at once, Sir Edward," gasped the butler.

"I tell you I won't——"

"His name is Mr. Nelson Lee, sir!"

"Eh? What's that? Mr. Nelson Lee?" said Handforth senior sharply.

"Splendid! The very man I wanted to see! You infernal idiot, Weston! Why couldn't you tell me that at first? You've got no more brains than a rabbit!"

The butler—who was accustomed to this sort of thing—stood aside. At the same time, he was rather indignant with his master. Sir Edward brushed past him, and blundered down the stairs like an elephant. In the big hall he came face to face with Nelson Lee, who was looking very anxious and concerned.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Lee—tremendously glad!" said Sir Edward, grasping the detective's hand. "My boy, and those two friends of his—they seem to have come over queer. I can't understand it. I've sent for the doctor, but I understand that you know something about medicine——"

"Yes!" interrupted Lee curtly. "Take me to them?"

It was no time for politeness, or for asking questions. Sir Edward had already said enough to convince Nelson Lee that the worst had happened. With his heart filled with grave fears, Nelson

Lee bounded up the stairs, taking no notice whatever of his host, who was following close behind, and talking without a pause.

"This room?" demanded Lee, noticing a half-open door.

"Yes, they're in there," replied the other. "I can't understand——"

Nelson Lee did not wait to hear what Sir Edward was about to say. He quickly entered the room, and found Handforth and Co. stretched out on three separate beds, all of them fully dressed and looking extremely bad.

Nelson Lee gave them only one glance.

"Poison!" he muttered.

"What's wrong with them?" demanded his host. "Can you tell?"

"Please fetch me some water, Sir Edward," interrupted Lee briskly. "I think it is just possible that the boys can be saved, but it will be touch and go. It is fortunate I came at this moment, for there would have been no hope if I had arrived ten minutes later. If I am successful the lads will be completely out of danger within half an hour."

"Great heavens!" muttered Sir Edward.

He had hardly realised that the juniors had been in real danger. But he knew it now, and the knowledge sobered him. He hurried away to do as Nelson Lee instructed. Meanwhile, the detective took out a bulky little pocket medicine-case, and quickly unfolded it. There were many little glass tubes to be seen, some containing tablets, others liquids, and so forth.

Nelson Lee selected a tiny hypodermic syringe, and a moment later he was busy on the three patients. What he did seemed to be very little—merely a painless injection on the arm, and by this time Sir Edward had returned.

Nelson Lee was busy for some little time longer, then he looked up.

"I think we've just caught them in time," he said. "The boys were poisoned, Sir Edward. As you have just seen, I have given them an injection, and have forced them to swallow a couple of tablets each. I rather think they will pull round within half an hour, and will be very sick. If so, all the better. They have been poisoned."

"Poisoned!" ejaculated Sir Edward. "Good gracious! Such a thing is impossible! There's not a drop of poison in the house, and the lads haven't been out——"

"A parcel came this morning, I believe?" interrupted Nelson Lee.

"Yes, but only a box of chocolates."

"Exactly! Those chocolates are poisoned," said Lee. "Our friend, Grezzi, nearly succeeded, Sir Edward."

"Upon my soul! But—but——"

"I would like to stay, but I cannot," interrupted Lee. "There are other lads in danger, and I have already spent more time here than I could afford. Ah, there is a ring! The doctor, no doubt. Tell him what I have done, and I will see you again later."

And Lee hurried off, passing the doctor in the hall without speaking to him; he had no time to waste. Sir Edward came down, and quickly told the medical man what had occurred, and the doctor went upstairs and looked at the three youthful patients.

"A wonderful man, Mr. Lee!" he said at length. "That injection has saved the lives of these three boys, Sir Edward. I am afraid I could have done nothing, for I did not know the nature of this case, and consequently brought no drugs with me. And to have sent back for some would have meant delay—fatal delay. I have every reason to hope that the boys will quickly recover."

"Thank Heaven!" said Lady Handforth tearfully.

Meanwhile, at no great distance away, Fatty Little was engaged in an occupation which caused him the greatest possible amount of pleasure. Some kind but unknown friend had sent him a hamper. Not a large one, certainly, for it had arrived through the post. But any kind of hamper was acceptable to Fatty.

He had found it waiting for him when he came down, and without any delay he proceeded to examine its contents. Fatty had a great weakness for hampers, a fact which the sender was apparently aware of.

The hamper, upon examination, proved to contain the usual variety of articles—cake, sweets, and so forth. Fatty rather liked the look of the cake, and he proceeded forthwith to sample it.

But he had not succeeded in getting the cake to his mouth before the door burst open and Nelson Lee appeared. In two bounds the detective was across the floor, and he snatched the cake out of Fatty's hand.

"Great doughnuts!" gasped the fat boy.

"Where did you get that cake?" demanded Lee sharply.

"Out—out of this hamper, sir!"

"Where did the hamper come from?"

"I don't know, sir," said the bewildered Fatty. "It arrived by post this morning."

"Have you eaten anything out of it?" asked Lee quickly.

"No, sir. I was just going to sample that cake."

"Thank Heaven I was in time!" said Nelson Lee. "My boy, you have had quite a narrow escape. That cake is poisoned, to the best of my belief."

"Poisoned!" panted Fatty, aghast.

"It was an attempt on your life by the Tagossa," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Do not touch anything out of that hamper, Little."

The fat boy regarded the hamper in a fascinated kind of way.

"Great coconuts!" he muttered. "And I was just going to sample all the other things, too! It—it seems awful, sir! I can hardly believe it!"

Fatty's father entered at that moment—a very large man, something similar to Fatty himself in build. He was surprised to see Nelson Lee.

The latter, after being admitted into the house, had caught sight of Fatty through the half-open door, and had rushed straight to him without standing upon ceremony.

"I am sure you will pardon this intrusion, Mr. Little," said Nelson Lee. "I was compelled to act drastically, because I believed that your son was in great danger. In short, there has been a dastardly attempt to poison him."

"This is most astounding!" said Mr. Little, in amazement. "An attempt to poison my son? Ah, you mean this awful secret society?"

"Yes," said Nelson Lee.

And he briefly explained the circumstances. Mr. Little listened with astonishment and concern, and he was immensely relieved to know that the danger had been averted. The detective only remained a moment or two longer.

He hurried out of the house, jumped into his racer, and went off at reckless speed to Kensington—to the address of Reginald Pitt. With Pitt there were also Cecil de Valerio and Justine B. Farman.

Lee was greatly relieved to find that the three boys were not yet down. They had not been called until late, and this

was very fortunate. As they were forbidden to venture out of the house, there was no reason why they should not remain in bed a little later than usual.

As Nelson Lee had expected, a parcel was waiting. It was a foregone conclusion that one would be there, for it was now clear that Grezzi had not missed one of his enemies. Nelson Lee promptly explained the position, and took the parcel and dropped it into a bucket of water. Upon examination, a few minutes later, it was proved that the parcel contained a box of chocolates exactly similar to the one which had been received by Handforth. But it had been just as well to soak the parcel beforehand.

Nelson Lee's next visit was to the home of Bob Christine. The leader of the College House juniors answered the door himself, having seen Nelson Lee from the window, and the detective was greatly relieved to find the junior in his usual state of health.

"Why, this is a surprise, sir!" said Christine delightedly. "Have you come to tell me that it's O.K. now? Has that Grezzi chap been collared?"

"I'm afraid not, Christine," said Nelson Lee. "I'm very pleased to see you, my boy, and greatly relieved to find that you are unharmed."

"Unharmed, sir?" repeated Christine, in surprise. "Why, did you expect that something would happen?"

In a few words Nelson Lee told Bob Christine what had happened to the other juniors. Christine listened with wide-open eyes, and suddenly he uttered a shout.

"Why, I got a parcel this morning, sir!" he exclaimed. "Not sweets, or bombs, or anything of that kind."

"What was in the parcel?"

"Nothing dangerous at all, sir—simply a pair of boxing-gloves."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"H'm! They certainly seem innocent enough," he remarked. "I take it that you did not try them on?"

"No, sir," said Christine. "We were just sitting down to breakfast, and I decided to leave the gloves until my brother turned up. He's out now, but he promised to give me a round or two later on."

"That's very fortunate," said Lee. "Let me have a look at those gloves, Christine. Some sort of providence

seems to be protecting you all. Those boys who received high explosives did not open the parcels, and fate has taken a hand in many other little ways. But there have been some terribly narrow escapes."

Christine's father had come in by this time. He had already met Nelson Lee, and he listened with great interest while the visitor explained the reason for his call.

The boxing-gloves were produced, and proved to be an excellent pair, harmless enough, and just the things a boy would like.

"I couldn't make out who's sent them, sir," said Christine. "But they were addressed to me plainly enough, so I assumed that they were a present. People do send presents sometimes without putting any message inside."

Christine opened his eyes wide as Lee unsheathed the sharp blade of a big pocket-knife.

"You're not going to cut them, sir!" asked Christine, horrified.

"I am."

"But they're a ripping pair of gloves, sir—"

"Perhaps so; but, unless I am mistaken, they contain death," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I have no compunction whatever in destroying these gloves."

Lee proceeded to rip them open, and a moment or two later the truth was revealed. Inside each glove there was a tiny, almost invisible, metal spike, cunningly fixed to the lining.

"But that wouldn't hurt, sir!" said Christine. "A pin-prick like that would hardly do any damage to—"

"You don't seem to understand, my boy," interrupted Lee. "These spikes are coated with a deadly poison—snake poison, probably. One prick would be enough to cause death. It is a mercy you were not tempted to try these gloves on at once."

Christine turned rather pale.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered. "I've read about poisoned spikes in stories. They use 'em in South America and Africa, don't they? What a lucky thing it was I didn't shove those gloves on! It would have been all up with me."

"This man is a terrible scoundrel, Mr. Lee!" said Christine's father. "Isn't it possible to have him arrested? This kind of thing is terrible—positively terrible! There is no telling when my son will be relieved from this menace."

"It is fairly obvious that Grezzi realised his helplessness," said Nelson Lee. "He found that all his intended victims were being kept behind closed doors, and, consequently, he could not carry on his vendetta. In desperation, he tried this ruse—he prepared all these parcels and sent them through the post, hoping that the scheme would be successful. Even now he may have claimed one or two victims."

"It's awful, Mr. Lee!" said Christine. "Aren't all the chaps safe?"

"I don't know, but I hope so," replied Lee. "Grezzi is a most ingenious rascal—unscrupulous and without mercy. Unless I am greatly mistaken, however, these parcels will provide the police with many valuable clues—clues which will lead to the man's downfall."

Very shortly afterwards Nelson Lee took his departure. He was not relieved of all anxiety yet, but he knew that Grezzi had failed in almost every case.

But this failure was largely due to Nelson Lee's own activities.

CHAPTER IV.

A DESPERATE SHOT.

THE telephone bells jingled noisily. I simply grabbed the instrument and jammed the receiver to my ear.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed. "Who's that?"

"That you, Nipper?" came the guv'nor's voice. "Lee speaking."

"Oh, good!" I said, with relief. "I've been worrying awfully about you, guv'nor. Well, any luck?"

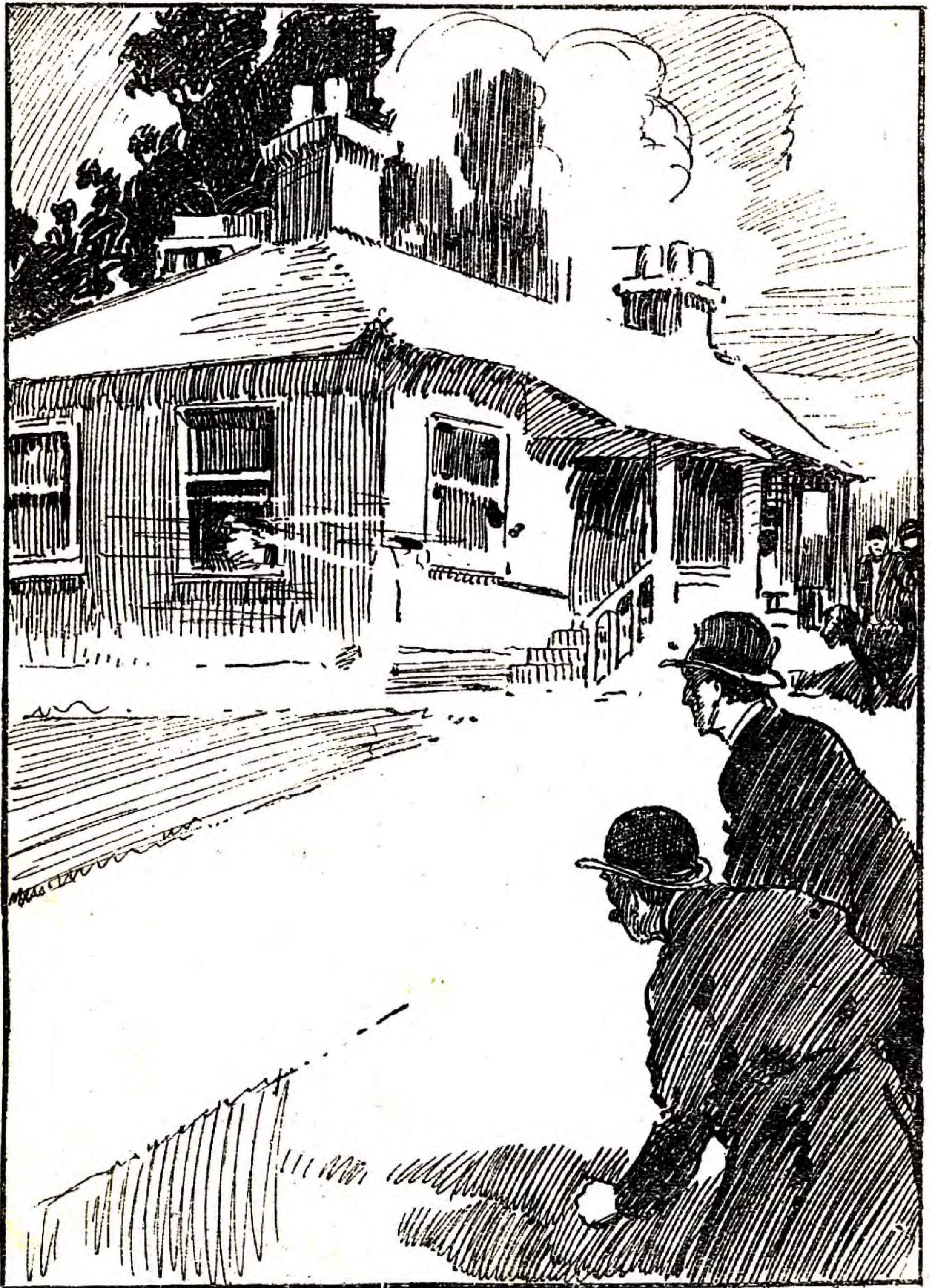
"The very best," replied Nelson Lee. "I am happy to tell you, Nipper, that I have been successful in every case, although it was a very near thing with Handforth and Church and McClure."

"You saved them all, sir?" I asked, nearly shouting with excited joy.

"Yes," replied Lee. "Handforth and Co., Pitt, De Valerie, Farman, Little, Christine, Watson, and Turner. The latter pair however, were not in any danger, since they had received no parcels, obviously owing to delay in the post. I have left instructions that the parcels are to be soaked in water the instant they arrive, for, of course, they will arrive ultimately."

"That's great, guv'nor!" I said. "But what's that you said about Handforth?"

"He and his two chums were poisoned,



Nelson Lee and Lennard had not moved another yard before a revolver fired twice in quick succession.

but I think I have managed to pull them through; but only because I arrived on the spot in the nick of time," said Nelson Lee. "This also proves how necessary it is for me to carry my little medicine-case."

"Oh, when it comes to poisons, you're the man for the job, sir," I said. "I don't think there's anybody in England who knows more about poisons and their antidotes than you do. But I've got some news, too, guv'nor."

"Well?"

"I rang up all the chaps, as you told me, and nearly all the lazy beggars were still in bed. They'd all got parcels, but, of course, they hadn't been opened. I gave strict instructions that they were to be drowned—not the chaps, but the parcels. Oh, and about ten minutes ago, Dorrie rang up."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Of course, I'd 'phoned him before," I went on. "But he'd just had a message from Captain Mason, and it seems that Mason had the narrowest squeak of all. He's out at Kingston, you know, in a little place near the river. Well, he got one of these parcels, and he opened it. According to what Dorrie says, Mason heard a queer hissing sound, and he chucked the thing completely through the window. The next second there was an explosion which demolished the house, and nearly demolished Mason."

"This is terrible, Nipper!" said Lee. "Was Mason badly hurt?"

"Scorched and stunned, and all the rest of it," I replied. "He's also got several bad cuts and grazes; but he's not fatally hurt. One or two of the servants caught it pretty hot, though—two broken legs, I believe, a cracked head, and one or two things like that. It's a wonder they weren't all killed—and they would have been if Mason hadn't thrown the bomb outside."

"I shall be anxious to hear from the other members of our party," said Lee; "Morgan, Leighton, and the other men who were with us on our Mordanian trip. I thought it was rather remarkable that none of these bombs had taken effect. Well, Nipper, I'm just off to make one or two further inquiries, and then I shall come straight home. I may as well inform you that the police are already very active, and I'm hopeful that our friends at the Yard will soon get on the track."

I rang off almost at once, feeling

greatly relieved and overjoyed. Ivan Grezzi's murderous scheme had failed, although, in one or two instances, it had come perilously near to success.

I was mad with the telephone people, because I urgently wanted to ring up Handforth's place, to hear the latest; but the line was out of order, and I couldn't do it.

I was sitting back in Nelson Lee's chair, and I now became aware of the fact that unusual sounds were proceeding from the direction of the staircase. I could hear Mrs. Jones's voice, and I could also hear a man's voice, and the pair appeared to be engaged in some kind of an altercation.

I didn't take the trouble to go and look, because I merely thought that the man was a tradesman and that Mrs. Jones was finding fault with his wares—one of her usual little habits.

However, as I afterwards found out, nothing of this kind was going on.

The housekeeper had opened the door in response to a short ring. She found herself confronted by a foreign-looking individual, with a small basket slung over his shoulders. This was now in front of him, with the lid held up, displaying for Mrs. Jones's dazzled vision a choice variety of buttons, reels of cotton, and so forth.

"Not to-day, thanks!" said Mrs. Jones curtly. "I don't hold with you men—I was cheated the very last time! You can go away!"

The man spoke rapidly in Italian, and pushed his way into the hall. And, before Mrs. Jones could prevent him, the fellow was inside, and the door was closed. Trams and motor-buses were passing in the street, and the traffic generally was thick. Yet nobody had noticed the entry of this man.

"You get outside—and quick, too!" shouted Mrs. Jones hotly. "I've had your sort before—and I won't be forced to buy what I don't want! If you think you can rob me, you've made a mistake —"

The man jabbered away in reply, and it appeared evident that he was not able to speak English fluently, if at all. He picked up a little bottle of scent, and removed the glass stopper. He held it out for Mrs. Jones to smell.

"Three penny!" he said. "Only three penny!"

For a bottle of scent threepence was a ridiculously low price, and Mrs. Jones

calmed down slightly. She picked up the bottle and held it to her nose, taking a good sniff in order to test its quality.

The Italian reached out his hand, and rescued the scent bottle just as Mrs. Jones fell back. The next moment the housekeeper was quite helpless, overcome by the fumes which arose from the scent-bottle—and which certainly did not contain scent of the usual variety.

Ivan Grezzi lost no time.

With quick fingers, he restoppered the scent-bottle, placed it in his basket, and then dragged Mrs. Jones into one of the rooms which opened out from the hall. It was her own little sitting-room, and he left her there, lying on the floor insensible, and not likely to recover her wits until at least a couple of hours had elapsed.

Grezzi took his basket, and quickly mounted the stairs. In the upper corridor he paused for a moment, looked about him, and then stood still. He could hear me in the consulting-room. He came to the door, opened it suddenly, and was inside.

I turned quickly, thinking that Nelson Lee had returned. And I found myself staring at the barrel of a revolver which was held in the newcomer's hand.

"If you move, or make the slightest sound, I will shoot!" exclaimed Grezzi, in Italian. "Keep perfectly still, or you will die!"

I stood transfixed, my heart thumping hard.

"Grezzi!" I exclaimed. "You brute! How did you get in?"

"I answer no questions," said the man harshly. "Your woman downstairs is out of harm's way——"

"You've killed her?" I asked, horrified.

"No, she is unhurt—merely drugged for the time being," replied Grezzi, still speaking in Italian. "Put your hands above your head, and sit down."

Just for a moment I felt like revolting. I wondered if it would be any good making a sudden dive, and then rush at Grezzi. All sorts of thoughts chased themselves through my brain at rapid speed. I didn't care for this situation at all, for I instinctively knew that Grezzi meant dire mischief.

He evidently divined what was in my thoughts.

"Take care—make no sudden move!" he muttered harshly. "I am ready, and this weapon is not explosive. It kills

without making any sound. I would shoot you now, only I have something better in view."

He was in earnest, and my better sense told me to obey orders without question. My hands were already above my head, and I had taken a seat on the edge of a chair. This man was desperate—a cold-blooded murderer at heart. He had proved that quite conclusively. And at such close range as this it would be absolutely impossible for him to miss me. So I decided to remain passive.

But how had this man gained admittance? I was astounded that such a thing could have been possible. Yet, actually, Grezzi's entry into the house had been extremely simple, and had been accomplished boldly and openly.

I didn't know whether the house was being kept under observation by Scotland Yard men. If so, they were not particularly keen. But Gray's Inn Road is a busy thoroughfare, and it would have been quite possible for Grezzi to seize his chance when the traffic was thick, and to enter the house without being observed.

He approached me, still holding the pistol steadily.

"You have escaped so far, but this will be the end," he exclaimed. "You and your master are responsible for all the trouble. May you be cursed a thousand times, and I, Ivan Grezzi, have come to obtain vengeance."

"That kind of talk is so much hot air," I said grimly. "Mr. Lee and I helped to smash up the Tagossa, and we're glad we had a hand in the game. And you can do your worst, you scoundrel. You haven't been very successful so far, have you?"

The Mordanian scowled.

"I have failed—and why?" he snarled. "Because you and your master have foiled me at every turn. I made careful plans yesterday, but those plans have come to nothing. Why? Because your accursed master has interfered! But this will be the finish—for him and for you!"

Somehow I couldn't help believing that Grezzi was right. We had had many narrow escapes, but it hardly seemed likely that we should slip through the scoundrel's fingers yet another time. Grezzi was persevering, and, sooner or later, success was bound to come to his

efforts. Our luck couldn't hold out for ever.

Grezzi advanced towards me until he was within arm's reach. Then, with a sudden swift movement, he whirled the revolver round, grasping it by the barrel, and brought it down with stunning force on my head—at least, this is what he intended doing. Swift as lightning I dodged, and the butt of the weapon struck my shoulder. The next second we were struggling fiercely.

"Not just yet!" I gasped.

Grezzi had evidently thought that he could deal with me fairly easily. But he had made a bad mistake, and we swayed across the consulting-room, locked together in a deadly embrace. Of course, from the very start the fight was hopeless. Grezzi was a powerful man, and he was not in the least bit particular. He fought like a tiger, and it was rather a wonder that I wasn't overpowered within a few seconds.

But I managed to get in one or two fierce punches, and Grezzi received at least one terrific swipe on his nose. The pain must have been considerable, for he redoubled his efforts, and fought with terrific fury.

And at last, with a tremendous heave he sent me staggering away. He found that he was not much good keeping at close quarters; his only hope was to break away, and then deal me a blow which would knock me out.

As it happened, Grezzi didn't find it necessary to do that, for I staggered away, tripped over a chair, and went flying backwards against the table. My head caught against something with a crash, which made me faint and dizzy. I believe the back of my head struck against the corner of the table. At all events, I couldn't remember what exactly happened afterwards.

In a dreamy kind of way I merely knew that Grezzi was bending over me, using some thin, strong twine. My wits returned gradually, and when I was in full possession of them I found that I could neither speak nor move. My head was aching terribly, and I had more than one nasty bruise about my body.

A gag had been forced into my mouth, and this was held in position by a thick bandage which was wound round my face. I couldn't make the slightest sound, and the gag was so firmly fixed that all my efforts to loosen it were useless.

And Grezzi had bound me up in a manner which defied any attempt to get free. The thin ropes were passed completely round me, binding my arms to my sides. My hands were behind my back, the wrists also bound.

My ankles had been treated in the same way, and I felt something like a chicken which had been trussed up ready for market. Grezzi did not say a word; he hardly gave me any attention.

After looking round, he nodded to himself and lifted me by the shoulders. Then he dragged me across the room and deposited me on the floor against the wall. I was, in fact, in a corner where a small safe was situated. This had been let into the wall and was nearly flush, and Grezzi proceeded to bind my ropes to the stout handle. His object, apparently, was to prevent me wriggling away, for, although securely bound, it would have been possible for me to roll across the floor.

Tied to that safe, however, I could do nothing. I was against the wall in which the door was situated. I looked along the door, and I could see the door, with the key sticking out beyond the handle. I wondered if Nelson Lee would return. It would be glorious if the gov'nor turned up now and surprised Grezzi at his work.

But what work was it?

At first I was rather puzzled. The man, having satisfied himself that I was perfectly harmless, proceeded with his other tasks. I noted with satisfaction that he was not altogether unmarked. He had a nasty graze on his arm—a graze which had been bleeding, for there were several spots of blood spattered about the floor. Grezzi's nose was also slightly larger than it ought to have been—the result of one of my punches. He had not escaped scot-free in our brief encounter.

The Mordanian had placed his basket upon the table. The reels of cotton and the cards of buttons were strewn about, and Grezzi took something from the basket which rather puzzled me. It was not a very large object—a flat tin box with several wires hanging loose, although I noticed that the ends of the wires were well protected.

And then, in a flash, I knew the truth

"A bomb!" I thought. "Of course, that's the game! This chap specialises in high explosive—it's the only thing he

can think about. And this time, it seems, he's going to be successful."

The infernal machine—for the object was undoubtedly such—was placed upon the floor. Then Grezzi took two pieces of metal, which had been carefully shaped, with several holes already bored. He went to the door, mounted a chair, and proceeded to get to work. I watched him with interest.

It only took him a few moments to fix the pieces of metal, each of which was provided with a flat, polished surface. Then he opened the door slightly, testing the efficacy of his contrivance.

When the door opened about five inches the two pieces of metal came into contact. Thus, anybody opening the door from the outside would cause the contact before knowing anything about it. An ordinary entrance would smash the two pieces of metal down, but not until after the contact had taken place.

And now I watched with a kind of fascination, for I knew what the game was. Grezzi went to the door which led into the laboratory. He passed through, and was absent for a few moments.

I knew why he had gone.

He was making sure that he had an exit, for, when he had finished his deadly arrangements, he would not be able to use the door which led direct on to the landing. He took some lengths of wire and proceeded to join them to the metal brackets on the door and the door-frame, and the other ends were secured to the infernal machine on the table. Other wires were carried to a small dry battery.

The whole thing was obvious.

The bomb was now connected up, but it was perfectly safe for Grezzi to work, because the circuit was not completed. The circuit would be completed when the door was open and when those two pieces of metal touched.

I was horrified by the simple ingenuity of the thing. The wires were hanging loose, trailing over the floor to the table. But this didn't matter; they could not be disturbed.

Grezzi's plan was easy to see through. He figured that nobody would enter by the consulting-room door. In this he was probably right, for Mrs. Jones was out of action, and Lee himself would shortly be returning.

Naturally, Nelson Lee would come straight to the consulting-room, he would open the door, and then, before he

knew anything else, the circuit would be completed by the contact of the metal strips, and the explosion would take place. Both the gov'nor and I would be blown up with the house, and there would be no escape for us.

And I was witnessing all this—I knew what was about to happen. And yet I was helpless! It was supreme mental torture for me to lay there, knowing what was planned, and knowing that I could do nothing to avert the terrible disaster. Nelson Lee, when he came up, would cause my death—and, incidentally, his own.

It was just possible, of course, that somebody else might come up—Lennard, of the Yard, for example. Or Mrs. Jones might recover and come upstairs to speak to me. Not that this affected my own position in the slightest degree. Whoever entered the consulting-room would cause the bomb to explode, and I should perish. My position was certainly an appalling one.

And it need not be imagined that I lay still and passive. All the time Grezzi was working, I was working desperately to free my hand. Without his being aware of the fact, I was squirming away at my bonds.

I really had little hopes of success, but it was better to work while I had the chance, for I had learned, during my long experience with Nelson Lee, that it is fatal to give up hope. And I was a bit of an expert with ropes.

I had learned many knacks in the art of freeing myself after being bound up. Something after the style of Houdini, the handcuff king, I had a way of getting free from ropes in quite a short time. This does not mean to say that it was an easy job for me to release my hands.

On the contrary, it was well-nigh an impossible task. But if Tommy Watson, for example, had been bound up as I was, he would have been utterly and absolutely helpless. He had had no practice—no experience. I had had much.

And before Grezzi took his departure I could feel that the ropes which bound my right hand were slightly looser than they had been originally. And now I worked feverishly, but all was stopped when Grezzi looked in my direction.

At last the man had finished. His movements were hurried, and he went straight out, through the laboratory, and I heard the doors closing after him. I

could understand his haste. If Nelson Lee happened to come in then, Grezzi himself would be involved in the explosion—and that wasn't in the programme at all.

Freed from the scoundrel's presence, I now worked with feverish energy, doing my utmost to force the ropes. Previously I had been handicapped by the fact that I was under Grezzi's gaze, but now I could move just as I wished.

My position was certainly a bad one. I could not even roll away from the wall, owing to the fact that I was bound to the safe-handle. I could now understand the man's care in this respect. Had I been loose, I might have rolled across the floor, and disconnected the wires; but now I could do nothing of that nature.

My only hope was to work an arm free, and then drag the gag from my mouth. Then I should be free to shout—to yell a warning as soon as I heard Nelson Lee on the stairs. But even if I succeeded in this, there was no guarantee that the tragedy would be averted.

My heart missed a beat when I thought about it. Hearing me shout, Nelson Lee would possibly misunderstand, and would come dashing into the consulting-room at full speed. But it was the only thing to be done, and I had to risk such a possibility.

I was already in agony, for the ropes were chafing my wrists in a manner which almost brought tears to my eyes. I could not see what was happening, for my hands were behind my back; but I knew well enough that the skin had been torn, and that my wrist was raw. Yet I persevered. After all, it was better to lose a few inches of skin than to lose my life.

I was hoping that I should get my hand free after about another five minutes. And then, in a way which surprised me, I suddenly felt the rope loosening, and my hand was free. I breathed a great sigh of relief, and paused just for a moment to get my breath.

I tried to bring my hand round, but met with a check. With the ropes loose, I imagined that it would now be an easy matter for me to work the rest of them free and get both my hands at liberty.

But Grezzi had been too smart for that.

He had used separate ropes, and,

although my right hand was free, my left was still tightly bound, and my arms, down to the elbows, were still tightly secured to my sides. My efforts had led to only one miserable result.

My right hand was free—just to the elbow. And, although I worked with superhuman strength and energy, I could not loosen any other ropes.

Of what use, then, were my efforts? I could not even get my right hand round. At the most I could just bring it to my side, in an awkward, cramped position. As for reaching up to my face, the thing was impossible. Even now I could not tear the gag from my mouth. To all intents and purposes, my position was not improved.

I fell back, limp; all hope gone. I could have sobbed with disappointment, for I knew instinctively that there would be no time for me to loosen the other ropes. With an hour at my disposal I might have done so; but I was expecting Nelson Lee any minute. In fact, he was overdue.

As I fell back in that limp way I felt something dig into me. Then I started, and became alert once more. My revolver was still in my hip pocket! My right hand was free, and in close proximity to the pocket opening! Without wasting any time, I forced my hand round and upwards, and just managed to get it into my hip pocket. This, of course, was quite possible, as my arms were tied behind me, and my loose hand was hanging near the pocket.

I found the revolver in my grasp, but I cannot say that I felt very hopeful. What could I do?

If I started loosing off a few shots I should only bring disaster, for somebody would be attracted and would come blundering in. But somehow I felt just a little more confident than before. I wondered if I could fire at the wires, and sever them. Possibly it would have been an easy solution to the danger. But I was afraid to fire—I could not bring myself to do so.

For, by taking such a chance, I might explode the bomb at the same time. I didn't want to interfere with those wires at all. It wasn't worth the risk—and certainly I had no intention of making the attempt.

And then, with a sudden feeling of horror, I heard the front door bang. I waited, my heart almost ceasing to beat. Footsteps sounded on the stairs—firm,

hurried footsteps, which I instantly recognised.

Nelson Lee was coming up the stairs!

"Good heavens!" I thought, aghast.

"It's too late to do anything!"

My gaze fixed itself upon the door in a fascinated kind of horror. Within a few moments that door would open, I should see the two pieces of metal come into contact, and then—well, after that I shouldn't know anything further. My interest in the world, and all its doings, would cease to exist.

Just a few seconds left—and then I found myself staring at the door key. I looked at it dazedly for a brief moment, for an idea had come to me—a rather startling idea, which fairly took my breath away.

The key was a large one—old-fashioned, with a big, flat end. I knew that the key worked easily, for I had had occasion to turn it many times.

I could not shout; I could scarcely move. But I had my revolver in my hand, and I determined to take one chance—a chance which would probably fail, but which might succeed. In any case, this was no time for hesitation.

Half twisting on my side, I levelled my revolver, and took careful aim—at least, as careful as possible under the circumstances. My hand was in an awkward position, and I was at a great disadvantage. I pulled the trigger.

Crack!

My gaze was fixed upon the key. The bullet struck the woodwork of the door-frame an inch or two beyond. I had failed! And now I could hear Nelson Lee on the landing, striding quickly towards the door. At the most, I had only two seconds.

Crack!

I fired again, this time desperately and hopelessly. I didn't see the bullet hit the key; but I heard a sharp "ping," and the key was now in a different position. The bullet had struck it. Then I saw the handle turn, and my heart sank into my mouth.

But the door didn't budge!

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRACK.

NELSON LEE shook the door roughly.

"Nipper!" he shouted. "Are you in here? Open the door at once!"

I could detect that the guv'nor's voice

was full of anger. Those two revolver shots had alarmed him—and the dead silence which now prevailed probably alarmed him even more. As for myself, I was not far from the point of fainting.

I felt sick and dizzy with the reaction. It had been about the nearest thing I had ever experienced. But my ruse had been successful. The bullet had struck the key and had caused it to give a sharp turn, shooting the bolt home. By firing at the key I had locked the door, thus making it impossible for Nelson Lee to enter.

He did not remain at the door long. I heard him rush round, through the dining-room, into the short passage which led to the laboratory, through the laboratory itself, and into the consulting-room. I watched him as he entered, his face set and pale with anxiety. Just for a moment he paused in the doorway.

He looked round, taking in all the details.

He saw me bound up against the wall; his gaze travelled to the object on the table, and then he glanced at the door, with its wires and fixtures.

"Upon my soul!" said Nelson Lee softly.

I half expected that he would rush over to my side and unbind me; but he did nothing of the sort. He gave all his attention to that terrible thing on the table. With swift but steady fingers he disconnected the wires, one by one, and taking great care that they did not come into contact. Then he took the metal object and carried it with great care into the laboratory. I heard a splashing of water, and I breathed with relief. Then Nelson Lee returned, drying his hands on a towel.

"Quite a near shave, Nipper," he said calmly. "And now we'll attend to you. It appears that some exciting things have been happening during my absence. I congratulate you upon your novel method of locking the door."

Nelson Lee was at my side by this time, and he slashed through my ropes and freed me. A minute later I was sitting in one of the easy chairs, limp and weak, with the most excruciating sensation of "pins and needles," owing to the restored circulation of the blood. And I could now see that my right wrist was smothered with blood, for the skin was badly grazed.

"We'll soon have you right, Nipper," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Here you

are—drink this; it'll make you feel better."

I gulped down some brandy, and Nelson Lee bandaged my wrist, after washing it and applying some soothing ointment.

"Thanks, guv'nor!" I said hoarsely. "By Jingo! I thought it was all up with us! I could only get my hand partially free, and it was a final desperate idea which caused me to fire at the doorway."

"And a very excellent idea, too," said Nelson Lee, with an approving nod. "It was most effective, for the door was securely locked, and the key is not even bent. I did not know you had such an excellent aim, Nipper."

I gave a faint grin.

"When I did aim, I missed!" I replied. "I hit the blessed key more by accident than by anything else!"

Within five minutes I was feeling a lot better, and then I told the guv'nor exactly what had happened, from start to finish.

"A desperate attempt to finish us off, Nipper," said Lee grimly. "I do not suppose that Grozzi has remained in the neighbourhood—he would not take the risk of being seen when the explosion took place. But I rather fancy that we shall get him now. He has been kind enough to leave some very useful objects behind him."

Nelson Lee indicated the basket with its collection of buttons and reels of cotton. And he also pointed to the spots of blood on the floor.

"But I don't see——" I began.

"It happens that our excellent friend, Mr. Sexton Blake, is in town," went on Nelson Lee crisply. "I was speaking to him not long ago, and our next move is to borrow Pedro—Blake's bloodhound."

"My hat!" I exclaimed tensely.

"Ring up Blake at once, and ask him to send Tinker, with Pedro, with as little delay as possible," went on Lee. "The trail is hot now, and we ought to take advantage of it. While you are doing that, Nipper, I will run downstairs and see what has happened to the unfortunate Mrs. Jones."

"My goodness! I'd forgotten all about her!" I said.

I went to the 'phone, and was soon speaking with Sexton Blake—the guv'nor's very friendly rival. But this is scarcely a true description, since Nel-

son Lee and Sexton Blake frequently worked hand in hand on the same case. Blake promised to send Tinker without delay, and he would bring Pedro with him.

Within a few minutes Nelson Lee returned, smiling.

"Fortunately, our worthy housekeeper is in no way hurt," he said. "She has already recovered, and I have made her comfortable on the couch. An hour or two's sleep will put her right. How about Pedro?"

"Tinker's bringing him round at once, sir," I replied.

"Good!"

Nelson Lee nosed about the consulting-room like a bloodhound himself. He found two or three finger-prints, and made a whole collection of the articles which Grozzi had left behind. The man had taken no care to conceal anything, since he had believed that the whole house would be blown up.

Now that it was all over, I couldn't help wondering. There had been no luck about our escape this time; we had been saved solely because of my desperate efforts. I'm not boasting when I say that, because it's the simple truth.

Tinker turned up in record time, lugging Pedro on a leash.

"What's the trouble?" inquired Tinker cheerfully. "How many murderers do you want to track down? By Jove! You're looking a bit rocky, Nipper!"

"And you'd look rocky, too, if you'd passed through the experience that I've just had," I replied.

I explained what had occurred, and Tinker whistled.

"Phew! That was a narrow escape, if you like!" he exclaimed. "What a ripping dodge of yours to turn the key with a bullet. You deserve to go up two places, old son. And now, I suppose, we're going on the track of Mr. Grozzi?"

"At once!" replied Nelson Lee keenly. "The trail is hot, and Pedro ought to be able to follow it without trouble."

"Oh, he'll do that all right," said Tinker, with confidence. "He's in fine form just now—he hasn't tracked anybody for weeks, and he's simply spoiling for something to do. Isn't that the case, Pedro?"

Pedro wagged his tail, raised himself on his hind feet, and planted two sprawling paws on Tinker's chest. A long, red

tongue came out, and Tinker dodged just in time.

"Keep that blessed thing to yourself!" he said sternly. "I've had one wash this morning, and I don't need another just yet!"

Without any delay we started off. Pedro took a keen sniff at the blood-stains on the floor, and at the basket which Grezzi had been carrying. Then, with Tinker holding tightly at the leash, he made his way out on the landing, and down the stairs. Nelson Lee and I followed.

I had indignantly brushed aside the gov'nor's suggestion that I should go to bed. I was determined to be in at the finish—if there was to be a finish. And I was feeling rather better now.

Pedro experienced no difficulty in following the trail down Gray's Inn Road. In spite of the pedestrian traffic, he picked out Grezzi's trail along the pavement, only being at fault now and again.

Fortunately, the Mordanian had not travelled along the main roads, but had taken the quieter back streets. Thus, the trail had not become obliterated. And, after going for some distance, we found ourselves making straight for an Underground station.

"That's done it!" I said disgustedly.

"Not necessarily," replied the gov'nor. "It ought not to be such a difficult task for us to gain some information about Grezzi. His knowledge of English, I believe, is distinctly limited."

"Well, if we lose the trail, it'll be no good going to Soho," I said. "Grezzi took lodgings there at first, but he vanished, and nobody knows where he's been hanging out for the last few days."

Near the entrance to the station Pedro lost the trail, and, in spite of all his efforts, he could not pick it up again. We all came to a pause, and Nelson Lee was looking thoughtful.

"The trail doesn't actually lead into the station," he said.

"Perhaps the fellow got into a taxi," suggested Tinker.

"No, I hardly think so," replied Lee. "Grezzi was attired in rough clothing, and he would have attracted unwelcome attention if he had chartered a taxi. I think it more probable that the trail has been obliterated by the constant traffic, for a good many people have passed over this spot during the last half-hour. We will inquire in the station.

Nelson Lee went into the booking-office, and we followed, attracting a good deal of attention. The booking-office was not crowded, for this was a quiet station, and the hour was not a busy one.

Lee briefly explained his difficulty to the booking clerk, who listened with much interest.

"I have every reason to believe that the man came to this station," concluded Nelson Lee. "Can you remember him? A dark fellow, with a swarthy skin, and looking like an Italian. He was wearing—"

"There's no need for you to say anything more, sir," interrupted the clerk. "I know the chap all right—he came here just over half an hour ago."

"Excellent!" said Nelson Lee. "Do you know where Grezzi booked to?"

"Yes, sir—to Golder's Green."

Lee was rather surprised at the prompt reply.

"How can you be so sure?" he inquired.

"Well, it's not a great effort on my part to remember that, sir," grinned the booking clerk. "We had a bit of an argument about it. The fellow asked for a ticket, and I couldn't understand him at first, and it was only after he had repeated the words two or three times that I understood he meant Golder's Green. He jabbered in a foreign lingo most of the time—Italian, I expect."

Nelson Lee was so pleased with the information that he presented the delighted clerk with a ten-shilling note. Then he booked three tickets for Golder's Green, and very soon afterwards we were being whirled away to our new destination.

"Do you think we shall pick up the trail at the other end?" asked Tinker.

"It is quite possible," replied Lee. "Golder's Green is not a particularly busy place at this hour of the day, and only a comparatively short time has elapsed since Grezzi arrived there."

"But supposing he got out at some other station?" I suggested.

"My dear Nipper, in that case we shall certainly not pick up the trail," said Nelson Lee. "It is possible that Grezzi did so, but hardly likely. His object, apparently, was to get as far away from the scene of his crime as possible."

We arrived at Golder's Green in due

course, and then we experienced a considerable amount of trouble. In the immediate vicinity of the station Pedro failed utterly. He was eager enough, and he did his best.

But he could not find the trail.

We went wider afield, and led him along and across every road which branched out from the Broadway, opposite the station. This proved to be fruitless, too—at least, to begin with. But, just as we were beginning to give up hope, Pedro suddenly stiffened, and gave vent to a triumphant bay.

Then he gave a tug on the leash which nearly sent Tinker flying, and he set off up the road.

"He's got it!" I exclaimed excitedly.

"Without the slightest doubt," agreed Leo.

This road was a quiet one, and it was clear to us that Pedro had failed at first because the trail had become lost in the constant traffic near the station.

"Wait, Tinker, wait!" called out Nelson Lee. "Now that we have found the trail we may as well stay a minute or two longer."

"But what for, sir?"

"As you know, I rang up Scotland Yard while we were waiting for the train," said Lee. "I instructed Lennard to bring several men here as quickly as possible, and they ought to have arrived before now."

While Tinker and I waited, holding Pedro back with difficulty, Nelson Lee retraced his steps towards the station, which was just round the corner. And he was just in time to see a powerful motor-car pulling up near the station entrance. In it were Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, and a number of plain-clothes men.

"So here you are, old man!" said the chief inspector, as he approached and shook hands. "What's all this trouble about Grezzi? Did I understand you to say that you'd got on his trail?"

"Yes," replied Lee. "We've got Pedro just round the corner, and he's rather hot on the scent."

"Pedro, eh?" said Lennard. "Why, are you and Blake working together?"

"Hardly; he lent me Pedro just for the occasion," said Nelson Lee. "Tinker is with us, too. I'll tell you all about it as we walk along."

The Scotland Yard man gave some instructions to his subordinates, and then walked along with Nelson Lee. Tinker

and I went in advance, Pedro having picked up the trail strongly. He led us along without a pause.

Leo and the chief inspector came behind, and Lennard was put in full possession of all the facts. Some distance in the rear the other Scotland Yard men strolled along in two groups.

Very soon we turned off the road we were following, and made our way through several small lanes until we were in a very quiet part—almost in the open country, in fact. There were only a few houses, and most of these were glaringly new. Further along, Pedro suddenly made a bee line into the gateway of a small bungalow—one of those picturesque, modern buildings which are only erected for immediate use. Within a very few years the place would be a tumbled-down wreck. These bungalows look very nice when they are first built.

"Hallo!" muttered Tinker. "Here we are!"

"Better go straight on!" I said quickly. "There might be somebody watching."

"Good idea!"

We walked on, Pedro being dragged away from the gateway with difficulty. About a hundred yards further on we were hidden from the house by a high hedge, and here we paused.

Nelson Lee and Lennard came up.

"The little bungalow on the left, eh?" said Lee keenly. "I saw Pedro pause at the gateway, and it was wise of you to walk straight on. But we mustn't lose a minute now."

Leo spoke for a few moments with Lennard, and almost immediately afterwards the plain-clothes men were hurried off to surround the bungalow. There had not been sufficient time for the occupants of the place to escape, even if they had attempted to do so.

Within five minutes every window and door of the bungalow was under observation. And Nelson Lee decided to act boldly. He would go straight up to the front door, knock, and see what the result would be. Tinker and I were advised to hang about in the background. Trouble was expected.

"I say, guv'nor, you'd better go easy!" I said dubiously. "Don't forget that Grezzi is desperate, and that bungalow is probably full of bombs!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I'm afraid you have got bombs on the brain, Nipper," he said. "I do not

anticipate any such thing. But it is certainly possible that Grezzi might show an obstinate resistance. Fortunately, we are well prepared for him. By visiting Gray's Inn Road this morning, he made the greatest mistake of all."

Nelson Lee went to the gate, opened it, and passed inside. Detective-inspector Lennard went with him, and, at that very moment, one of the front windows was flung open, and a face appeared for a second. Nelson Lee and Lennard had not moved another yard before a revolver fired twice in succession.

Crack! Crack!

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF THE TAGOSSA!

NELSON LEE came to a sudden halt.

A humming sound near his left ear had not been altogether pleasant. He knew that a bullet had sped past him. Lennard instinctively dropped to the ground, uttering a few uncomplimentary remarks as he did so. This was rather more than he had bargained for.

"So this is the game, is it?" he muttered. "Man alive, we shall be shot down like dogs! We might just as well be in Mordania!"

With a sudden dash both Lee and the inspector reached the corner of the bungalow, where they were safely out of range. Two more shots followed them, and they came unpleasantly close, one bullet actually boring a hole through the top of the chief inspector's bowler.

He removed the injured headgear, and stroked his head.

"Phew!" he whistled. "That's rather too close for me!"

Nelson Lee was looking grim.

"Well, Lennard, there is no doubt that Pedro has led us to the right house," he said. "Grezzi is inside—and the other man too, probably. He knows that he has failed, and he will naturally do everything in his power to avoid capture."

Lennard grunted.

"Well, this sort of thing won't do him any good," he said brusquely. "When I get hold of him I'll give him a piece of my mind! And I don't very well see how we're going to put the bracelets on him, either. It's rather a difficult thing

to arrest a man who persists in firing a revolver at everybody in general!"

Tinker and I were watching from another angle of the building, and I was greatly relieved to find that both Lee and the inspector were unharmed.

"This chap you're after seems to be a bit of a nut to crack!" remarked Tinker. "He must be desperate to take pot shots in that way. And it'll be rather a difficult job to nab him. I think we'll stay here and witness the show from a position of safety."

"Well, there's no reason why we should go into danger," I said. "It's for the police to settle this business—we're out of it now. I don't altogether approve of the gov'nor taking a hand. Grezzi will naturally do his best to pot him."

As a matter of fact, I was very anxious, and I watched the house keenly. All seemed quiet now. The detectives had not approached nearer, and nobody could be seen at any of the bungalow windows. Fortunately, no strangers had come up, and we had the scene completely to ourselves.

I wondered what Lennard would do.

It would be foolish to make a sudden rush, for it would certainly end in somebody being badly hurt or killed. On the other hand, the police couldn't very well besiege the place for hours on end.

It was Lennard's job to make a decisive move.

And I was waiting eagerly for him to do so. But it was Nelson Lee who suggested the way to outwit Grezzi and his companion—for it was now fairly obvious that there were two men in the building.

"We can't risk any direct rush," said Nelson Lee. "It would probably mean bloodshed and tragedy. But if we act promptly we may be able to deceive the rascals."

"But how can we deceive them?"

"I'll tell you. There's a long pole lying in the grass just here," said Lee, pointing. "My idea is to work my way round the wall of the house to the rear. There's bound to be a window handy, and it will be quite easy to smash that window without exposing myself to the fire from within. Grezzi, I believe, is at the front——"

"And hearing the smash of glass, he will rush to the back?" said Lennard. "And I'll dodge in the open front window with several men? That's a

good idea, Lee. Of course, there'll be a scrap inside, but it'll be over before you can take a hand in the affair."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Are you armed?" he asked.

"No; I didn't figure on anything of this nature when I started out."

"Well, the best thing you can do is to take my part of the job," said Lee. "You creep round the house, smash the window, and I'll get in at the front with two of your men. I've got my revolver handy, and when it comes to a question of shooting, I think I can be first."

"But look here——"

"My dear fellow, don't argue!" broke in Lee. "We'll get busy!"

The chief inspector shrugged his shoulders, and cautiously gained possession of the wooden pole. Then he crept round towards the back of the house, after signalling to two of his men to approach.

It was quite safe for them to do so, for they were not in a direct line of fire from any of the windows—and it was fairly certain that Grezzi would not take the risk of exposing himself by leaning out.

Lee briefly explained to the men what was required. And he had hardly done so when a sudden splintering of glass was heard—a loud crash which proved that Lennard had done his work well.

Lee, who was listening intently, heard a sudden exclamation in the front room, followed by the opening of a door.

"Come!" said Lee sharply.

With his revolver handy, the detective hastened to the front window. He knew that he would be at a great disadvantage if Grezzi still remained in the room, for Lee's figure would be outlined against the daylight, in such a way that it would be impossible to miss him. Lee, on the other hand, would not be able to see his enemy.

But the ruse was successful.

And as Nelson Lee and the two C.I.D. men vaulted over the window-sill, they found that the front room was empty. Nelson Lee advanced swiftly across the room. The door opened abruptly, and Ivan Grezzi appeared.

His face was livid with fury, for he knew how he had been tricked; but it had been so quick that he had scarcely had time to collect his thoughts. He held a heavy revolver in his hand, and without hesitation he fired.

Crack! Crack!

But Grezzi was a shade too slow; for Nelson Lee fired first. The detective did not aim at the man, but at his weapon. Lee's bullet struck Grezzi's weapon, and sent it flying right out of his hand, and Grezzi's bullet dug itself harmlessly into the ceiling. The Mordanian gave a sharp cry of agony, for his whole arm was numbed by that sudden shock.

And before he could attempt any further attack, Nelson Lee was upon him. The detective got in one crashing blow, which caught Grezzi full upon the point of his jaw. The man went staggering back, and collapsed in a heap, dazed and half stunned.

Out in the hall a struggle was in progress; but it was only a brief one. The two Scotland Yard men had found Grezzi's companion, and they dealt with him dramatically. When Nelson Lee arrived in the hall the prisoner was on the floor, handcuffed and harmless. He was a powerful man, but he did not possess the determination of his leader.

Lennard entered the house a moment later. He was altogether too late to share in the capture, but he had come as quickly as possible. From the smashing of that window, the capture had only occupied one brief minute. It was over almost before one could realise that it had begun.

"By gad! That was quick!" said Lennard breathlessly. "I thought they'd got you, Lee!"

"No, I was a shade too quick!" said Nelson Lee. "You had better search the house at once. I don't think there are any more men here, but we cannot tell."

A search revealed the fact that nobody else occupied the bungalow. Nelson Lee wondered how Grezzi had come in possession of it. Later on, he learned that it had been rented, furnished, by a prosperous Italian restaurant keeper in the West End. But this man was missing when the police went to make inquiries. It was evident that he had befriended Grezzi, but had fled at the first sign of danger. It was quite possible that he was actually a Mordanian, and possibly an agent of the Tagossa.

"Well, thank goodness that's all over!" I exclaimed, with a sigh. "I hardly expected the robbers to be captured so quickly, and it wouldn't have

happened if Grezzi had been a bit more cautious."

"What do you think will happen to them, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"Oh, I don't know, and I don't particularly care!" I replied. "They'll either be sent to prison in England, or deported. But they won't trouble us any more. And the police will take jolly good care that any more Mordanians don't get into England, unless they can prove that they're harmless."

We were in the consulting-room at Grays Inn Road, quite a number of us. I was chatting with Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson in one corner, and Lord Dorrimore was lounging elegantly in an easy-chair, speaking with Nelson Lee and Sir Edward Handforth. We were all looking very cheerful.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, I am glad to say that the boys are doing well—remarkably well," said Sir Edward. "Within another three days they will probably be on their feet and ready to go. I don't know how to thank you, my dear sir! But for your timely arrival, and your still more timely ministrations, the three youngsters would have died."

"When it come to poisons, there's not a fellow in the land who knows a quarter as much as Lee!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I'm hanged if I know how he learnt it all, by gad! But he can diagnose a poison case at the first glance, and he generally walks about with a concentrated medicine-chest in his pocket."

"Have you heard anything more about Mason?" asked Lee.

"He's doin' fine," replied Dorrie. "A

bit smashed up, of course, but he considers himself very lucky to have escaped so lightly. It'll take about three weeks to patch him up, I suppose, and two or three of the servants will be in hospital for a month or two. But, thank goodness, nobody has been killed!"

Over in the other corner I was chatting with my chums.

"I am expecting Pitt and De Valerie, and one or two others, in a minute," I said. "They can hardly believe it's safe to go out again."

"Weren't you speaking to Handy, not long ago?" asked Watson.

"Yes; the guv'nor and I called at his pater's place, this afternoon," I said. "Poor old Handy! Those chocolates were all poisoned—that's been proved by examination—and it's a jolly lucky thing they didn't eat more than one each! Handforth and Church and McClure looked a bit groggy, but they'll be as fit as fiddles when they arrive at St. Frank's for the new term."

"Thank goodness!" said Watson.

"I suppose things will be rather quiet down at St. Frank's, after all this excitement," I continued. "But that will be a bit of a relief. I reckon we've had quite enough excitement to last us for a good many weeks."

But, as it turned out, I was wrong.

The new term at St. Frank's was not to be as devoid of mystery and adventure as I had imagined. And the greater part of this mystery was connected with a certain young gentleman named Jerry Dodd, of whom I shall have a great deal more to say in the very near future.

THE END.

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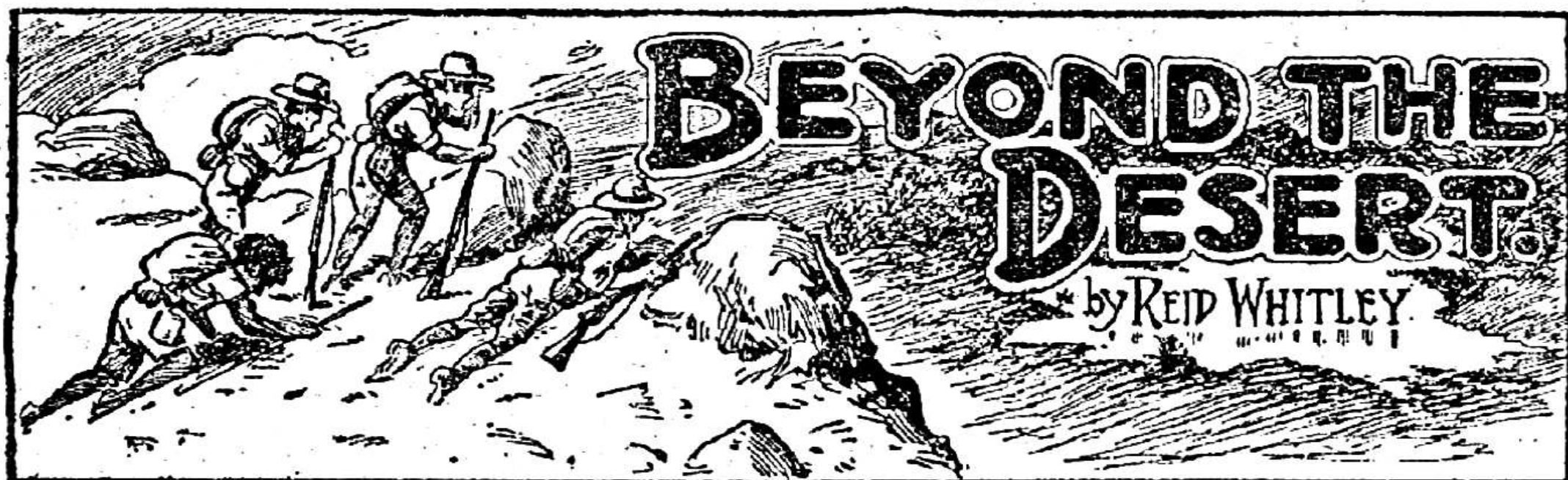
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(Now read on.)

The Nigger in the Wood Piles.

NEARER came the sound, and nearer. A long line of faintly glimmering light appeared ahead. It was the gleaming phosphorescence of surf breaking on a beach or reef.

"Hang on, and hold your breath!" cried Maxwell, and slashed his knife across the sagging section of balloon sausage above him.

A gush of gas followed, and the balloon descended rapidly. Darkness leapt up at them, and as they hung breathless and half stifled by the gas, there came a swish of branches across their swaying bodies, a sound of breaking twigs, and then, with a heavy thump, they reached Mother Earth once more.

For a minute there was dire confusion, as they crawled about under the billowing folds of the envelope, seeking a way out of the bushes into which they so fortunately had fallen. None dared strike a light, for there was still much gas in the folds of the balloon, and a terrible explosion would surely have resulted. Each hacked about with his knife till he could clear a space to stand up and look about.

Harding crawled on hands and knees from beneath the net that confined him, thrusting an arm in front, patting the ground. Suddenly his hand encountered—vacancy! He halted, swept aside a leafy branch that hung low across his face, and understood.

"Sit tight!" he called. "Don't move from where you are. We're on the edge of a cliff above the beach. I don't know how high it is. Keep still! I'm coming back."

He backed away, and rejoined the others, who by this had found their feet and were hacking the balloon to shreds. Soon the gas had been released. Anson lit a match. They were in a thicket of low, scrubby bushes that grew man high on all sides.

Soon they had cleared a space, and lit a fire, around which they sat for a little, in the best of spirits. Luck had been with them so far—surely it would not desert them now! Since there was no need to keep watch, for they were on ground too high to be visited by alligators, they set no watch, but, rolling themselves in their blankets, were soon asleep.

The first light found them astir. Harding followed the short trail he had made on the night before, and came out at the edge of a cliff, as he had surmised, but a cliff that was low and shelving, covered with clumps of bushes, and easy to descend.

The others joined him, and, pushing into the open at the edge of a ledge, looked about them. They were at one horn of a small bay. Across the mouth of it lay a reef that served as a breakwater. The surf broke heavily across it, except at one point, where dark water indicated a passage. Not far from where they stood the low cliff sloped down to a mud flat beside the mouth of a sluggish stream, rising again beyond.

But it was not this that riveted their attention. Midway between them and the little river stood a rock, rising like a church from the sand, and behind it, sheltered from the sea side by it and almost covered on the other by the overhanging brushwood on the cliff, was a small house!

It was of the usual weather-board and corrugated iron order of architecture, with a single stove-pipe projecting from one side,

and certainly not a thing of beauty. But they hailed it with a yell of delight, and would have scrambled down the cliff and run towards it full pelt if Professor Maxwell had not checked them.

"Hold on!" said he. "Let us decide what we are going to do. There are some queer characters along this coast, and we have turquoises and opals enough to make a rich booty. I propose that we leave the most precious part of our finds here. Buried in a wrapping of that balloon stuff, they will do very well, and perhaps it will preserve someone from temptation. It is only a precaution. I am older than you, and so perhaps inclined to be nervous.

They laughed, but went back to the camp and did as he proposed. Then, all together, they marched along the beach, and came to the door of the house. It stood a little open, and the smell of frying bacon wafted temptingly to their nostrils. They peeped. A man stooped over the stove. As the door creaked he swung round, his hand dropping to the holster at his belt.

Anson got a good view of him in the light that fell through a narrow window, and gasped in sheer amazement.

"Brown—or Braun!" he ejaculated; then in another, sterner, voice, "Put 'em up, Jerry!"

The man obeyed as the Australian's pistol slid out and into line with his stomach.

"Here's a jolly coincidence," went on Anson. "This is the chap I told you fellows about when we first met. Well, Braun, I won't hold a grudge against you, for I took it out of your hide. If I'd only known what you were then, I'd have finished the job; but I can't do it in cold blood. What are you doing here? You know the police are after you, of course?"

As he spoke, he had stepped in and relieved Braun of his pistol and a long sheath knife. The German showed no embarrassment, and when he spoke there was no tremor in his voice nor a shade of foreign accent.

"Yes, I know about the police; that is why I am here," he answered. "They are mistaken, though I admit they have plenty of reason for their suspicions. I am very sorry for what I did to you, but when you hear how I was driven you will perhaps find it in your heart to forgive me. But it is quite a story. Will you not have breakfast first, and then I will tell all and let these gentlemen judge."

"We're hungry, Anson, and the proposal seems reasonable," said the professor, from the door. "We accept. Only, remember, sir, we make no promises."

"I ask only for reasonable consideration," replied Braun, and, going to a store cupboard, brought out more bacon and plates. He seemed to be well provided.

The meal was eaten nearly in silence. Anson never took his eyes from their involuntary host, and kept his revolver beside his plate, while Jack glanced often at the door leading to the further room, which occupied the greater part of the whole

building. It had a padlock on it. He wondered what required to be so carefully guarded in that remote place.

Braun was wonderfully at his ease. He ate heartily, and, assuming that they had been prospecting for shell, or something of the kind, asked how they had fared. He got only stony silence for answer.

"Well, gentleman, you are certainly not prejudiced in my favour," he said at last, as they pushed back the packing-cases on which they had been sitting and rose. "But at least you will grant me a fair hearing."

"We will listen patiently," said Professor Maxwell. "Please begin."

Braun began by telling how he had been born in Australia, of German parents, and would have lingered over an account of his happy childhood if Anson had not curtly told him to cut the cackle and come to the horses.

He told how he had been sent to a German university, and had there joined a students' club.

"It was a harmless affair, I thought," he said. "We drank beer, and had concerts and talked of various things. When I returned to Australia I kept up a correspondence with some of my friends. What could be more natural? But shortly before the war started I received a visit from one of them. He was then an official in German New Guinea, and he told me curtly that I must do something to serve the Fatherland. He desired me to get certain information for him. I refused point-blank, and he left me in a fury, after warning me that I should suffer for it.

Soon I did begin to suffer. My parents were dead, and I had inherited my father's business. Mysterious influences soon began to undermine it. I was on the verge of bankruptcy, when this official, who had been my friend, came again. He offered me the choice between doing his bidding and utter ruin. I asked for time, letting him think that I would do as he wanted, and, collecting all the money I could lay my hands on, I fled to Northern Queensland. I got to Wurra-Wurra, and settled down to keep store there. I thought I would wait a little, then slip away to America. But the war came and stopped me."

"You didn't join up, did you?" growled Anson.

Braun glared at him, and swept on.

"If I had attempted to do so, I would have most likely been arrested for running away from my creditors, and if I had gone to the front and had been captured, I would have been shot sooner or later, for I was a marked man. I lay low. Then Mr. Anson came. About that time I had a visit from a man whom I had known in Melbourne. He threatened to denounce me to a certain underground German organisation. They would assuredly assassinate me as a traitor, he said. He blackmailed me till I had nothing left. Then, in desperation, I robbed Mr. Anson here.

"I took all my money and his, and went to meet him in the bush. He took the

money, and vowed he would trouble me no more. I felt that if I had a breathing spell I could recover myself, so I faked the report that deceived Mr. Anson. But the black-mailer came back. Driven mad by his blood-sucking, I took a pistol with me and shot him dead in the bush. He had a large sum on him. I took it, buried him, and returned to encounter Anson. Before I had a chance to explain he struck me down.

"When I recovered consciousness he had gone. I remembered that the blackmailer had spoken of a letter which would be sent to the police denouncing me if he did not return to where he had been staying. I dared not stay to see whether this was mere bluff or no. I bolted, made my way along the coast with a trader, and so came here. My partner is away just now in the yawl, but he will be back in a few days. Now, Mr. Anson, you have heard how I was driven from pillar to post. I do not ask you to forgive me, but at least try to pity a man who has been ruined because he would not betray the country of his birth."

Anson shook his head doubtfully. The narrative certainly sounded true enough, while there was sincerity in every accent of Braun's voice. He turned his head aside, to hide the perplexity which he felt and showed in his face. And as he turned his eyes fell on something engraved upon the padlock that secured the door into the other room. Doubt and perplexity fell away in a flash.

"Right you are, cocky! I'll forgive you—and kiss you, too, if you like—if you'll open that door and show me what's inside that store-room!"

Crash! Braun had leapt to his feet, hurled Professor Maxwell against his three companions, who, seated on rickety packing-cases, went over like ninepins, grabbed his holster and cartridge-belt from the table, where they had lain during his affecting narrative, had sped through the door, dodging aside barely in time to escape the bullet fired by Anson as he rolled over on the floor.

Before the young men could pick themselves up and rush out, he was out of effective range. They saw him hurtle through the mud at the river bank and disappear in the bush on the cliff top beyond.

"There! Once a Hun, always a Hun!" declared Anson. "But for one of Jerry's occasional lapses into monumental stupidity that beggar would have pulled the wool over our eyes. This shed is all right, isn't it? The regular sort of thing you'd expect to find here, just the usual sort of shack with store-shed behind that you meet everywhere. Only—and that's where he slipped up—I saw the mark on that padlock. It's the regulation mark of the German Imperial Navy—that once was!"

"Jehosaphat! Keep an eye lifted on the door, uncle. I'm going to bust the Imperial lock conclusively, and solve the secret," said Jack Maxwell. "Stand clear! 'Ware splinters!"

With that he blew the padlock off, and

swung open the door. Within, stacked to the roof and set very closely together, were many boxes that the three recognised at a glance, as they did the swathed objects beside them. Jack Maxwell whistled.

"A dozen machine-guns and lashings of cartridges, as I'm a living sinner! And there's a sweet little field-gun, with its dear little wheels beside it, not to speak of rifles and side arms. What a prize-packet! Anson, I congratulate you! By Jove! The beggar took me in. I was pitying him when you called the bluff. But why should these things be here?"

"Don't know. Perhaps they meant to try a landing, though that seems improbable. Perhaps these were meant to equip the crew of some raider which never got here. Anyhow, there are likely to be more buried underneath and around. There may be petrol or oil for subs. We'll look and see. But, meanwhile, we're in danger every moment from now on. That beggar'll stop at nothing."

"Then we had best begin by clearing away the cover near the house. After that we might try hunting him," suggested Harding. "Let's make a start!"

But before they started work, which promised to be hard, they armed themselves with rifles, and, assembling a machine-gun, set it in the hut door, in charge of the professor, who, keen as any boy, discharged a few rounds across the river in the general direction where Braun had disappeared.

"Keep it up, sir, if it amuses you," said Anson. "It'll keep that beggar on the hop and wring his heart over the waste of good ammunition."

"Thank you! And, for my part, let me suggest that, as the wind has changed and that brush up there is fairly dry, you might start a blaze. The smoke and, later, the heated ground, will effectually prevent Braun from surprising us on this side for the next dozen hours. Pop-pop-op-op-op!"

He concluded with a burst of machine-gun fire, chuckling as he saw the mud fly beyond the river. Soon the bush was flaring in half a dozen places, and a heavy, smothering pall of smoke rolled inland. Except Braun attempted to advance along the open beach, which was unthinkable, he must, perforce, remain where he was or seek another refuge beyond the bay.

The Under-Sea Boat.

THE day passed slowly away. The bush fire roared, flared, died down, and revived after the manner of its kind. Professor Maxwell having perforated his whole field of fire with some thousands of rounds, desisted and turned to cooking a sumptuous dinner.

If any further proof had been needed, Braun's larder would have testified against him. There was a pile of food of a sort which seldom came the way of any coastal trader—canned delicacies, and a variety of

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sausages that could only have come from a German source.

Anson and Jack Maxwell cut poles and began probing the sand around the hut. They had not far to seek before they came on what they now expected to find. Scarcely had they started the search than the poles brought up against something hard, and on digging, they came upon a number of sealed tanks evidently containing petrol and lubricating oil.

The secret was out. The place had been intended for a submarine base.

"But the tin fish evidently never turned up, probably because it was turned down," said Jack. "And the arms and ammunition were most likely intended to equip good sons of the Fatherland and start a little war somewhere along here. One thing is evident. We must keep on the alert night and day, or that beauty Braun will play us some nasty trick. To-morrow we had better try to trait and catch him. Perhaps, though, he will try to get away along the coast. Most likely he has no supplies, though."

"Oh, trust him for that! He'll have some grub stowed somewhere else," growled Anson. "I think our best stunt would be to load up what we could carry, set this place on fire and trek eastwards along the beach. We'll see about it to-morrow."

The night passed without incident. They took watch and watch, but neither heard nor saw anything suspicious. Morning came. Professor Maxwell, the last on guard, looked at his watch, rose from beside the door where he had been seated, and turned to rouse the young men within.

Whee-it! Thud!

A bullet screamed within a few inches of his head, drove through the planking of the hut and continued its flight. The professor flung himself inside and dropped flat as other missiles followed the first, while the sleepers wakened to his shout.

They seized rifles, Anson lugged the machine-gun into position and swept the high ground beyond the river with a burst. The firing ceased, only to begin again apparently from another spot—for now the bullets came swishing through the door. One glanced from a leg of the gun, another perforated Anson's shirt, scraping the skin of his shoulder, while a third sent the rifle in Harding's hands spinning as it splintered the stock.

Then Anson found the sniper's line, and though he could not exactly locate him, he made the neighbourhood so uncomfortable that again he had to change his position. For a little they had peace.

"He had only a pistol when he went off. Now he has a rifle and plenty of ammunition. He must have another cache somewhere handy," said Jack.

"Likely enough. They wouldn't put all their eggs in one basket," replied Harding. "It seems to me we had better go out and get him. A march along shore with that beggar hanging on our rear and sniping from

(Continued overleaf.)

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the bush would be no picnic, and somehow I feel we've earned the right to a little repose. Let's toss up who stays here with the professor while the other two go to look for Jerry."

"They agreed, and much to Harding's disappointment, it fell to his lot to remain on guard over the hut."

"But all the same, we may have the fun," he said. "If Braun spots that you're on his trail, he may come down here. The

(To be continued.)

bush is cool now and there's enough cover left to hide him."

"Yes; and sweet work it will be crossing the burnt patch," grunted Anson.

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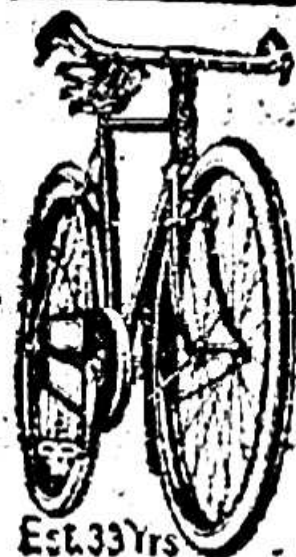
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