

The **NELSON LEE** *2d*

Given Away **FREE** *inside*
A "SWALLOW-FLIGHT"

**BOOMERANG-
THROWER**

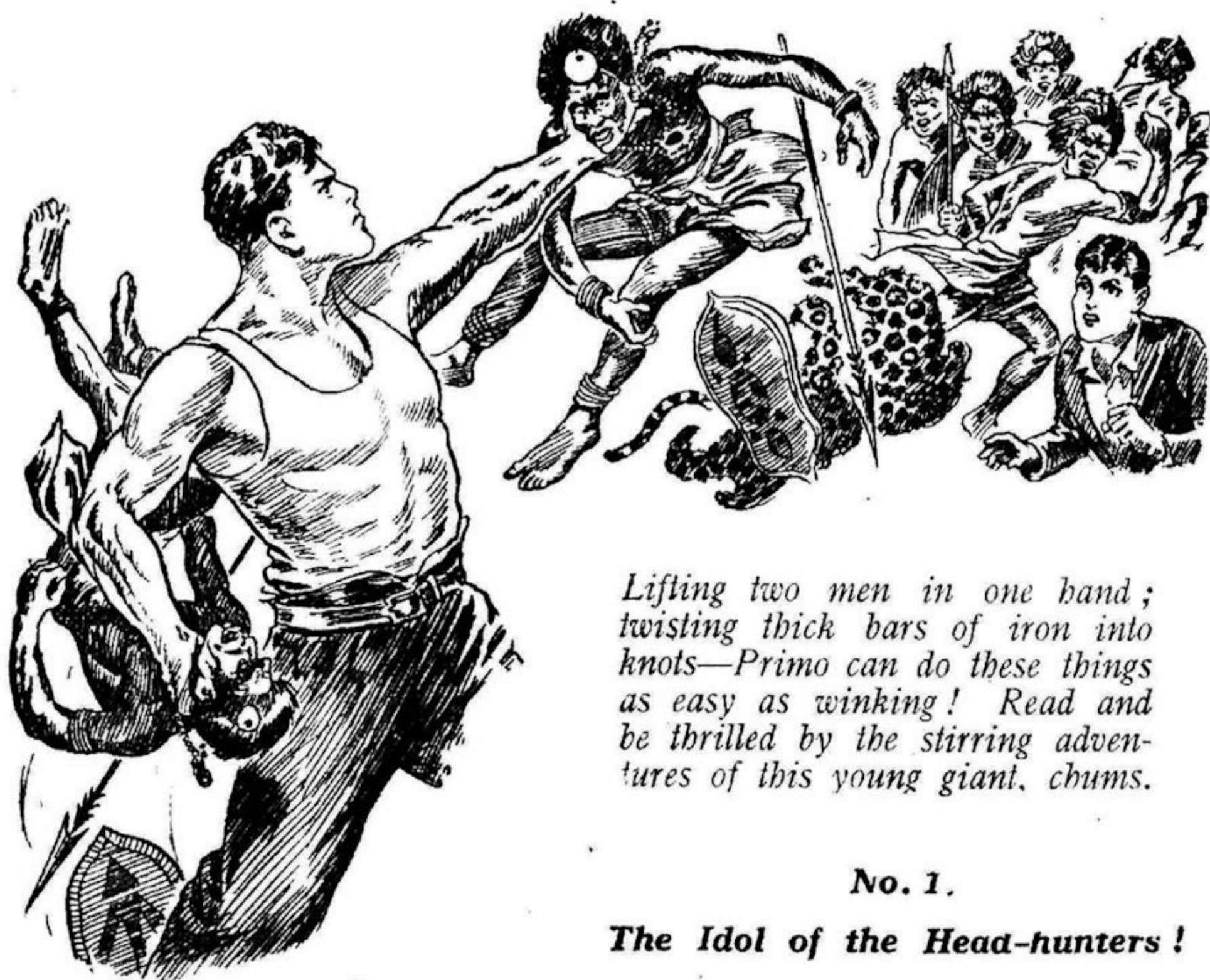


*The Free
Gift of the
Year!*

**NEXT WEEK'S
GORGEOUS FREE GIFT**
A "Shoot-Straight" **CATAPULT**

MAKE A CHUM OF THIS AMAZING NEW CHARACTER !

PRIMO THE TERRIBLE



Lifting two men in one hand ; twisting thick bars of iron into knots—Primo can do these things as easy as winking ! Read and be thrilled by the stirring adventures of this young giant, chums.

No. 1.

The Idol of the Head-hunters !

CHAPTER 1.

Primo Shows His Strength !

GOSH, but that fellow's got some strength!" muttered Tim Murphy, turning to the man who stood next to him, and who happened to be the third officer of the steamer *Kawanga*, which was then ploughing its way through the Java Sea, homeward bound.

"I'll say he has!" was the third's reply. "The strongest man in the world, I reckon. But he's a curious cuss, and rather ferocious, too, if annoyed. A variety agent discovered him in the backwoods of Australia, and is taking him to England to astonish the people there. Primo the Terrible's his name, and he doesn't know his own strength."

Tim nodded and turned his attention again to Primo—a veritable giant of a man, whose muscles rippled like whipcord under the silken, tanned skin. A concert was being held on the *Kawanga* that evening, and someone had persuaded Primo, the strong man, to give an act.

He had already taken great steel stanchions and bent them into knots. He had lifted

up two men with one hand. Now he was just completing the task of twisting a heavy kedge anchor, which had taken the strength of five men to carry down to him, into an unrecognisable mass.

Tim Murphy could hardly take his eyes off Primo. Never had he seen such a strong giant, and Tim, who was an apprentice aboard the *Kawanga*, had seen some "tough nuts" in his time.

"Phew!" he whistled. "I reckon he could drive a hole with his fist through an inch steel plate! If ever——"

Crash!

The *Kawanga* shuddered from stem to stern, and a terrible grinding noise struck upon the ears of the passengers. Then the vessel gave a lurch and heeled over sickeningly, sending everyone rolling over to the side of the saloon, in which the concert had taken place.

Instantly all was pandemonium. With one accord the passengers rushed out on deck.

"All hands to the boats!" came the order from the deck; and, shepherded by the ship's officers, the passengers were soon lined up on the boat deck.

Tim forgot all about Primo the Terrible in the hub-bub that ensued. The Kawanga, it appeared, had struck a submerged derelict, and her bottom had almost been ripped out of her. It would only be a matter of minutes before she sunk, and the utmost despatch was necessary if her passengers and crew were to be taken away by the boats.

Swiftly the work went on. Boats were filled and lowered, and before long Tim found himself standing by the last boat. This boat was the one to take the remainder of the crew, and it was necessary that some men should remain aboard and lower the boat, trusting to luck to be able to slide down into it before the vessel went under.

Tim had forgotten Primo the Terrible—but Primo was to make himself evident before long! The giant Australian had worked like twenty men in getting away the other boats, and, indeed, it had been largely due to his exertions that they had managed to get clear so quickly. Now, as he came up to the last boat, he saw the crew waiting to lower her.

"Get into it!" he ordered.

"Passengers first!" cried the captain, who, in accordance with the tradition of the sea, was standing by his vessel to the last.

Primo wasted no time. The next minute two men found themselves picked up as though they had been feathers. When they collected together their scattered thoughts they found they were in the boat, and that the rest of the crew were being thrown in, two by two, by the mighty man of strength!

Tim Murphy was one of them—and he gasped as he saw Primo throw the captain into the boat, and then, like child's play, take the falls of the boat, wrap them around his arms, and commence to lower away. Primo was staying behind on the sinking ship, and carrying out the work of eight or ten men in lowering the last boat.

So suddenly had it all happened that hardly anyone realised the great feat of strength which Primo, in the face of most deadly danger, was managing. The next moment the boat took the water, and Primo threw off the falls, allowing the boat to clear itself.

Then, with a sudden lurch, the Kawanga slipped stern first into the water, and the vortex made the boat spin around like a straw in a mill-race. And Tim Murphy, gazing upward, caught a last glimpse of Primo the Terrible sinking with the Kawanga.

"Gosh! What a man!" he gasped—and it was all he could gasp, for the next moment a mighty wave crashed over the little boat, picked up Tim Murphy, and swept him overboard, carrying him down, down into the vortex of the sinking Kawanga.

CHAPTER 2.

Out of the Frying-pan—

SOMETHING—it seemed like a grip of iron—grasped Tim Murphy by the back of his neck. Then it seemed that he was being torn in half as the vortex tugged to drag him down, and the grip on

his neck tugged to drag him up! The grip won! Like a cork from a bottle Tim was plucked from the water, and he subsided in a heap upon a heaving, rolling plank of wood.

He scrambled to a sitting position. It was almost pitch dark, but he could just see that he was on a raft, and there was one other person with him—a giant-like person who towered above him.

"Feel all right?" asked a deep voice, and Tim recognised it as the voice of Primo the Terrible.

"Yes," he answered. "But what happened? How did you get clear?"

"Ripped off a few hatch coamings and lashed 'em together," said Primo, as though the making of a substantial raft in a few minutes was a matter of no account. "I floated clear as the ship went down. Then I saw you being dragged under, and thought I may as well save you, too."

"You tugged against the vortex of a sinking ship!" gasped Tim. "My giddy aunt! The third was right—you can't know your own strength."

"Oh, I reckon I could tear a man in half," said Primo unconcernedly.

He squatted down on the raft, and Tim looked up at him.

"Say, you're the biggest, strongest, and the coolest fellow I've ever met in my life," he said in awe. "You're an Aussie, aren't you?"

"I am," said Primo. "Never even seen the sea till that agent fellow offered to take me to England and put me on the halls as a strong man."

Tim led him on to talk of himself. He gathered that Primo had been born in a tiny village miles away from civilisation, and he had grown up without realising that his strength was supernormal. Some of his feats were bloodthirsty, and made Tim's blood run cold as he related them. Primo knew little of the world, and cared less. He had not been particularly keen on the music-hall tour, and, indeed, he seemed just as happy sitting there on the heavy raft as he would have been anywhere.

They talked until the first flushes of dawn came over the eastern horizon, and then, as the light strengthened, Tim Murphy got to his feet and looked around. His heart sank as he saw no signs of the boats from the Kawanga, but it leaped again as he saw, some ten miles away, the rugged outline of a well-wooded island.

"Land!" he cried, and then his heart sank once more. "I guess the wind's taking us away from it, though."

Primo gazed in the direction of the land. Then, without a word, he stripped himself of his outer clothing, took up a length of rope which was on the raft, and fastened it about him.

"What are you going to do?" gasped Tim; but Primo merely looked at him, and then dived overboard.

The next minute—to Tim's intense amaze-

ment—he had started to strike out with vigorous strokes for the distant shore, towing the raft and Tim after him as though it had been a toy-boat!

"Je—rusalem!" gasped Tim, and subsided.

For hours Primo swam on, and he did not stop until, at last, his feet grounded on the sand of the island, and, as Tim scrambled ashore, Primo picked up the raft bodily and flung it on the beach.

"We may need it!" was all he said.

Suddenly something whizzed through the air and half-buried itself in the sand. Tim looked down, and his face grew a trifle white as he saw that it was a spear.

"Yes," he said, "and we may need it dashed soon. I forgot that some of these islands are inhabited by head-hunters—and, by the looks of it, we've struck a bunch of them!"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than another spear came from the woods which fringed the beach. Then a great cry arose, and a mighty band of natives dashed down the beach, brandishing spears and uttering war-cries!

CHAPTER 3.

King of the Rakatangans!

PRIMO took a deep breath, and his eyes flashed fire!

Then he took a little run forward—to the intense amazement of the head-hunters, who had expected their very appearance to strike terror into the hearts of the white men. Two natives, evidently men of account in the tribe, were leading the charge. They did not lead it for long!

So quickly had Primo moved that they did not realise that he meant to offer resistance. They struck out with their spears as Primo advanced, but he dodged the thrusts nimbly. Then the two chiefs found themselves seized by their throats in a grip that sent their senses reeling.

The next moment the air seemed to be full of flying legs and arms. The onrush of the natives ceased abruptly, and they gazed in wonderment at the spectacle of two of their chiefs being held upright, one in each of Primo's powerful arms. For a few seconds he shook the helpless men in the air. Their spears and shields dropped from their hands, and their leopard-skin cloaks joined them.

Then, with a mighty heave, Primo sent them flying through the air, over the heads of the natives, who, with wild cries, broke,

and made for the shelter of the forest, utterly bewildered by the strength of this strange white man.

"After them!" cried Primo. "I'll teach 'em a lesson!"

He made a spring forward, and Tim, nothing loth, followed him. But in the forest Tim was at a disadvantage. Primo crashed on like a charging buffalo. Tim, however, had not gone far before his foot caught in a tangle of undergrowth, and he pitched heavily to the ground.

What happened next he did not quite understand. It seemed that half a dozen hands seized him, and he was dragged quickly through the forest. Someone hit him on the head with a club, and he lost consciousness, but he knew that he was a helpless prisoner



in the hands of the head-hunters, who, with their superior knowledge of the forest, were hurrying away out of the reach of the formidable Primo.

Primo had beaten off the natives' attack—but in doing so he had allowed Tim to fall into the hands of the enemy!

Tim recovered consciousness with a start. He tried to stretch himself, and discovered that he was bound hand and foot. He turned his head, and tried to look around

him. He was lying on a flat slab of stone, and was inside a hut. It was already night, and through an opening in the roof the moonlight streamed in, lighting up the hut.

knew nothing of the language of these strange people, but there was no mistaking the actions of the witch-doctor, who pirouetted before the altar on which Tim lay.

The moon was rising. When it reached the idol and bathed the grinning figure in its rays, a human sacrifice would be offered—and the sacrifice would be Tim!

Tim watched in fascinated horror. The whole of the idol was now bathed in moonlight! The witch-doctor sprang forward. His arm was raised, and a keen knife glittered as he held it poised for the stroke. Tim closed his eyes—

Suddenly, even as the witch-doctor prepared for the downward stroke, there came a rending noise.

Cr—er—crack!

Fascinated, the natives watched. The knife fell from the hand of the witch-doctor, and terror filled his eyes. The idol had split into two distinct parts; and as it crashed on the floor of the hut, the natives saw that where the idol had previously been, there now towered the figure of Primo the Terrible, dressed in the leopard skins of the defeated chieftains! Primo had been inside the hollow idol; with his enormous strength he had burst asunder the huge stone god.



There came a crack, followed by a terrific crash. The huge stone idol split in two—and inside was revealed the ferocious figure of Primo the Terrible!

By the rays of the moon Tim saw that a massive idol towered above him, and that the slab on which he lay was, evidently, a sort of altar placed in front of the idol.

The sound of drums arose, followed by a chanting, and then a large number of natives filed into the hut and stood around. Their ranks parted, and one of the head-hunters, who, to judge by his curious garb, was evidently the witch-doctor of the tribe, came forward and stood by Tim.

The noise of the drums ceased, and the witch-doctor alone continued the chant. Tim

"I am Primo!" he cried. "Primo!"

"King Primo the Terrible!" he went on, and Primo, with an imperious gesture, motioned the natives to release Tim. This was done. Then he ordered them to leave the hut.

The miracle had happened, and Primo the Terrible was now King of the tribe which he was to learn were called the Rakatangans!

(Another enthralling story featuring Primo, the amazing young giant, will appear in next week's grand Free Gift issue of the NELSON LEE.)



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Big air liners vanishing into space, never to be seen again; no trace of wreckage—no wonder the world is startled. Nelson Lee and his young assistants are faced with a gigantic task when they set out to solve this baffling problem.

PROLOGUE.

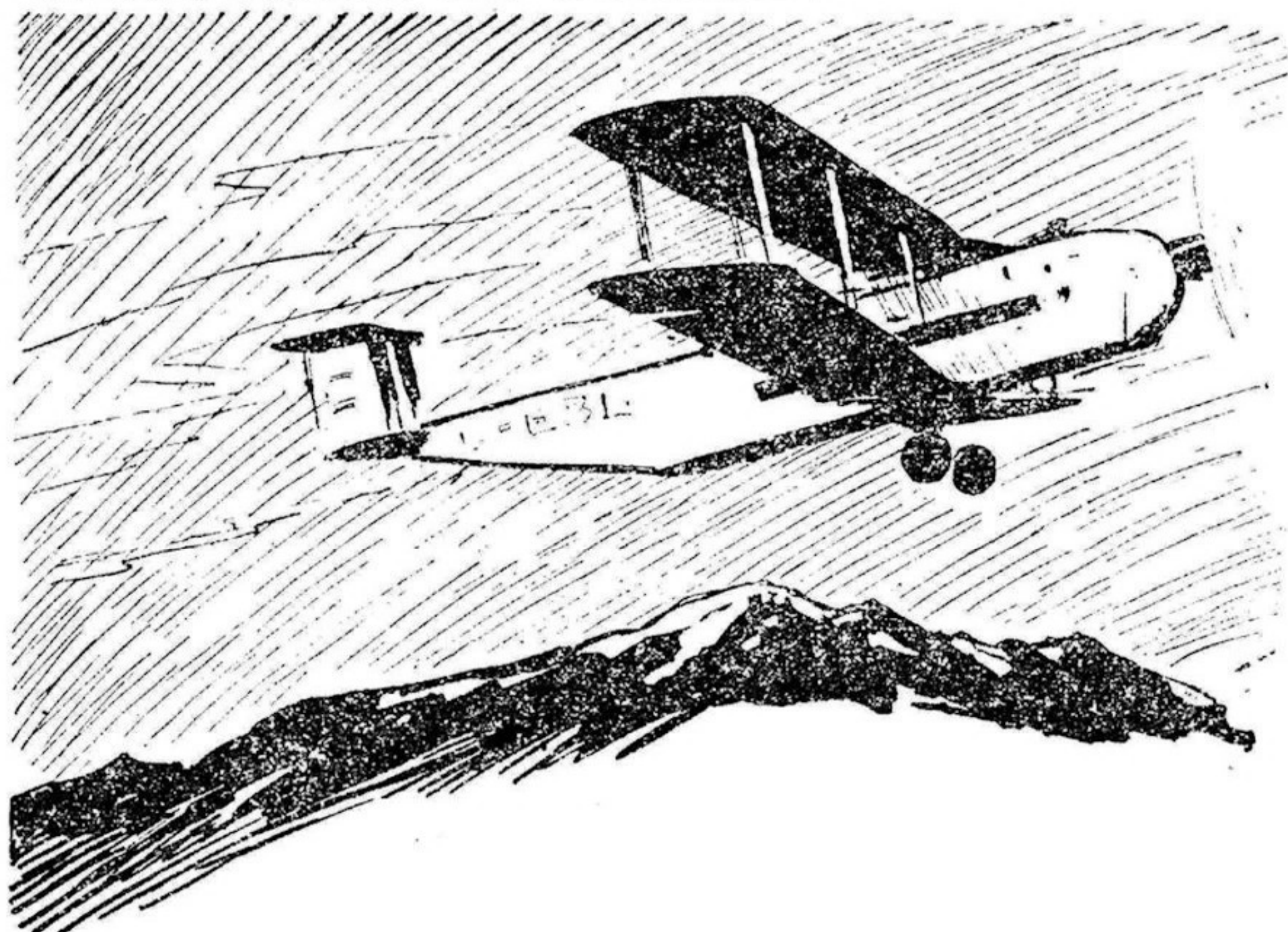
LORD DORRIMORE, the millionaire explorer, sportsman, big-game hunter, and globe-trotter, glanced at one of the indicators in the cockpit.

"Four thousand feet up," he remarked. "Well, nothing exciting has happened yet. Looks like being a fizzle."

His lordship was seated in the comfortable cockpit of his own private racing 'plane. Lord Dorrimore was a famous pilot, in addition to his other accomplishments, and he thought nothing of a lone flight from England to Egypt or from Egypt to India.

At the present moment he was on his way to India, following the celebrated route of the Indian Air Mail. He was somewhere between Bushire and Karachi, flying over wild, desolate hill country. This particular region was one of the loneliest imaginable, where barren hills dwindled away into the hazy distance, and where arid, waterless plains sweltered in the glare of the pitiless sun.

—THRILLS, MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE!



The air was clear; the visibility was amazingly good. Overhead, the sky was deep blue, without a trace of a cloud to be seen in any direction. Except for a slight bumpiness, caused by the heat and the drifting air currents, the weather was ideal for flying.

Lord Dorrimore's plane was a rakish, wicked-looking machine. She was well throttled down, for the machine was only travelling at just over a hundred miles an hour—and this racer was capable of well over two hundred, all out.

But Dorrie—as he was affectionately known among his friends—was accommodating his pace to that of the great air liner some distance ahead of him. He could see the sun glinting on the liner's all-metal planes. She was flying steadily, and had been doing so for many hours. Lord Dorrimore was keeping his distance in the rear, watching the great air liner constantly.

It was really curiosity which had prompted his lordship to undertake this trip. He was escorting the air liner on her flight from Bushire to Karachi—not because he had been asked to do so by the authorities, but because it pleased him. He was wondering if this great three-engined, all-metal machine would share the fate of its predecessors. For, recently, two of these vast liners of the air had mysteriously vanished.

The whole world was discussing the sensational mystery.

LORD DORRIMORE had been greatly intrigued by the riddle. It had been mysterious enough for one air liner to disappear, but the affair had become positively startling when a second machine had followed the fate of the first. One liner might have got into difficulties and fallen into the Persian Gulf or into the Arabian Sea, or perhaps into the barren hill country inland. But search parties had failed to find any clue. Aeroplanes had flown in all directions, searching. No trace had ever been found. It was as though the machines had been spirited completely away by some mystic force.

And this was not the only snag with which the searchers had to contend. Each of those air liners had sent out S.O.S. messages—messages full of drama, full of dread.

Suddenly, without warning, the call had arrived, throbbing over the air waves. An appeal for help, vigorous at first, but flickering away rapidly. And then—silence.

There was something even horrible in those tragic appeals. They conjured up something that was terrifying and fraught with horror. What dreadful menace was it that assailed these air liners?

They had left Bushire in the normal course of their duties. With tens of thousands of letters aboard, and with passengers, they had flown off along that great lap of the journey to India. Everything had been in order—engines running perfectly, full supplies of fuel, pilots in good trim. Then, after a while, those S.O.S. messages—followed by silence. The planes had gone, disappeared into nothingness. Never a trace of them had been seen again.

The first disaster had caused a sensation, but it had been believed that the machine had perhaps developed trouble. Even after the lapse of a week it had been hoped that something would be found of the wreckage.

But when the second machine had vanished, then the world had known that there was something different about these tragedies. Too much of a coincidence to suppose that the second machine could have developed engine trouble and could have crashed down in a lonely plain or on a barren hillside. There was something else at work here—some dreadful menace which no man could name.

LORD DORRIMORE had happened to be at the big aerodrome at Bushire when an all-metal liner—a sister vessel of the ships that had disappeared—had been on the point of departing for Karachi. And on the spur of the moment Dorrie had decided to escort this big machine.

The pilot had scoffed at the suggestion, had laughingly told his lordship that any kind of escort was unnecessary. The pilot had point-blank refused to believe that there could be any evil influence at work. He held the opinion that both the other machines had met with commonplace accidents. His confidence in his machine was supreme, and he did not doubt that he would reach Karachi without incident. He had done the trip scores of times already, and, in his opinion, there was absolutely nothing to fear.

Nevertheless, Lord Dorrimore was escorting the liner, and he was now beginning to believe that the pilot was right.

Many, many hours back he had caught the last glimpse of the Persian Gulf. Both machines were now flying over this wilderness land—where no human habitations were to be seen, where there was scarcely a blade of grass or a tree or a patch of green.

Lord Dorrimore unwrapped a parcel of sandwiches and munched one of them. Flying was liable to become monotonous. He was thirsty, too, and he reached for the thermos flask which contained a supply of hot coffee. His 'plane was flying itself; it was seldom necessary for him to handle the controls unless he was taking off or effecting a landing. Aloft, she looked after herself.

"It's an infernally queer business," Dorrie told himself as he took a bite out of the sandwich. "Hanged if I can see how those machines could have crashed without leaving any trace! They stick to the same route, and yet no wreckage has been found. Why did they fly off their course, as they must have done?"

This was a point which was puzzling all the experts. If those machines had, indeed, met with disaster on the recognised route—the well-mapped-out course—some trace would assuredly have been found.

"Hallo! What the——"

Lord Dorrimore stared, the uneaten half of a sandwich dropping from his fingers. He was bewildered by what he saw.

Ahead of him the sky was clear and cloudless, and the giant all-metal machine was in plain view. But instead of flying on serenely, as she had been doing, she was now mounting rapidly.

There was something extraordinary about this change.

The air liner was climbing at a phenomenal speed, mounting higher and higher into the blue of the heavens. She was fairly shooting upwards. Lord Dorrimore was dumbfounded.

He was certain that the lifting power of that air liner was not capable of taking her up into the sky so rapidly. It was almost as though the machine was being drawn upwards—pulled by some mighty force, hidden and deadly.

His lordship clapped the wireless earphones to his head. He was just in time to get the S.O.S.!

It came clearly—frantically. And he did not doubt that it was being sent out by that air liner just ahead of him, in full sight. There was something dreadful in this situation. Dorrie

could see the great machine, and she was flying perfectly, although mounting at such an extraordinary speed. Yet she was certainly in no difficulties. And the S.O.S. was being broadcast!

It became erratic, feeble. Then, abruptly, it died out completely. The situation was precisely the same as in those other cases—only now Lord Dorrimore could see what was happening to the third air liner. And he was more bewildered than ever.

Suddenly, as though some giant hand had seized the little racing 'plane, the nose was jerked upwards. Lord Dorrimore was jammed back in his seat, and he felt, rather than heard, the straining of the struts and planes. Never had his machine behaved in this way before. Without touching the controls, she had leapt nose first into the sky and was attempting to climb crazily. Yet she should not be climbing at all—with the joy-stick in the position it was!

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie hoarsely.

He clutched at the joy-stick. His machine was fairly leaping skywards. It seemed as though he, too, was caught in that uncanny influence—that mysterious Force which was affecting the great air liner.

And now he was aware of something else, something even more horrifying and startling than the rest.



A sort of paralysis was creeping over him. He did not know why—he could not think of any possible cause—but his arms and his legs were lead-like. It was only with the utmost difficulty that he grasped the joy-stick. And he was aware, too, that the paralysis was increasing. He knew that very soon he would not have sufficient strength to keep control.

Desperately he reached forward, and he just succeeded in reaching the switch. He turned it, the engine ceased its purring beat, and now only the whirring and hissing of the propeller could be heard.

The racing 'plane hovered, staggered drunkenly, and then her nose reluctantly came down. She went off into a steep gliding descent which threatened to develop into an ugly spin. To Lord Dorrimore's infinite relief he could feel the strength coming back into his limbs. That awful numbness was vanishing, that paralysis had lost its hold.

For two thousand feet the little 'plane hurtled down, and by then Lord Dorrimore was completely himself. He was master of the machine again. He brought her out of the steep descent and switched on. The engine answered at once. But there was one fact which puzzled the pilot peer tremendously. Most of his electrical instruments were at variance; they no longer recorded truly.

He started climbing, looking round eagerly. But the sky, in every direction, was blue and speckless. The great all-metal liner had gone—vanished upwards into nothingness!

This was the most startling part of the amazing mystery.

That great machine, with her precious load of mails and her human freight, *had vanished into the infinite blue of the heavens!* She had not crashed, she had not come down out of control, but she had been drawn upwards, and apparently out of the earth's atmosphere, by some appallingly powerful force!

CHAPTER 1.

The Signals of Distress.

"**T**RY another wave-length," said Nipper.

"Anything you say, brother, although I doubt if we shall be successful," replied William Napoleon Browne. "Much as I hate to admit it, I am beginning to believe that this wireless set of mine is only remarkable for its uselessness."

The Detective Academy, in Gray's Inn Road, was quiet this evening. Only three members of that valiant band were in. Nipper, Handforth, and Browne were sitting in the Common Room experimenting with Browne's latest toy.

Nelson Lee, the famous detective, was out, busy on a minor case in which he needed no assistance. Travers and Fullwood and Archie Glenthorne and all the other boys were out seeing the sights of London.

In fact, things had been fairly slack at the Detective Academy during the past week or so.

The infamous League of the Green Triangle was now only notable for its inactivity. Nelson Lee had recently dealt a stunning blow at the League, and Professor Cyrus Zingrave—the notorious No. 1—was lying low. In fact, it was generally believed that the League of the Green Triangle would not become active again for many months.

The Detective Academy rather prided itself upon having been of much use in the recent "killing," for a number of the boys had helped in the big move which had drawn the League's teeth. And now things were rather tame by comparison.

The academy was situated right next to Nelson Lee's old chambers in Gray's Inn Road: it contained between twenty and thirty boys. Some of them were juniors, some seniors. They were all equal here, however. There were no Forms or ranks. All school work was done in the privacy of the boys' own studies—and, so far, Nelson Lee had found that this system was a great success. None of the fellows had shown any desire to shirk their school duties. They were on their honour, and they faithfully did their duty.

But they all felt that they were, first and foremost, budding detectives. They were keenest on the lectures and lessons which would add to their skill in the art of crime detection.

BROWNE'S wireless set was a very special one—and, incidentally, it was becoming something of a joke. He had built it himself. It was an experimental short-wave set, and Browne had declared that he would be able to pick up Australia with the greatest of ease. The set was not designed to receive any of the ordinary commonplace broadcasting stations. Browne had been unduly optimistic, however. So far the set had been a decided failure.

"Twiddle the knobs a bit," said Handforth. "Let's see if we can't get something on another wave-length. Here, let me have a go——"

THE FIRST TOPPING FREE GIFT

for all readers of the NELSON LEE is contained in this issue. Instructions on how to work the Boomerang Thrower will be found on page 15. And don't forget that *Two More* of these splendid gifts are on the way:

A "Shoot-Straight" Indoor CATAPULT—
Next Week!

A "Home-Jazz" KAZOO HUMMER—*In a Fortnight's Time!*

"Oh, leave it to Browne, Handy!" cut in Nipper hastily. "You know he's trying to pick up the next S.O.S. call."

And this, in fact, was true. None of them really expected to find S.O.S. messages coming in at any odd moment. It might be days—weeks, it was to be hoped—before another such message was sent out on the air. But, as Browne said, "you never knew." And there had undoubtedly been some remarkable happenings on the Indian Air Mail route of late.

"There's something uncanny about those disappearances," said Nipper musingly as he sat back. "By Jove! Three of those great air liners gone! Poof! Vanished like a puff of smoke!"

"And every one of them, brother, sent out the S.O.S. before poofing," remarked Browne, with a nod. "Let me remind you also that, long as the route is between England and India, it is only the machines on the section between Bushire and Karachi that are affected. A singular point—I might even say a significant point."

"Significant of what?" asked Handforth.

"This menace, whatever it is, is apparently localised," replied Browne. "It has been suggested, on the best scientific authority, that there is some astronomical cause for these disappearances."

"Astronomical cause?" said Nipper.

"It has even been hinted that there may be some celestial body—a comet, perchance, which has slipped its anchor—which is attracting the aeroplanes to the blue."

"That's a bit thick," said Handforth, shaking his head.

"Not merely thick, Brother Handy, but turbid in the extreme," said Browne. "In fact, being a practical man, I cannot possibly accept such a theory."

"Then where have those three great air liners gone to?" asked Nipper.

"Ah! There we have the problem," replied Browne, as he twiddled the knobs of the wireless set. "It has been established to the satisfaction of the authorities that the machines did not crash in the ordinary way. We have seen the statement of no less a person than Lord Dorrimore himself that Machine No. 3, at least, shot straight towards Heaven and did not return."

"Fancy old Dorrie being mixed up in it!" said Nipper absently. "Dorrie's a hard-headed chap, too—he's not likely to get any wild ideas. I understand he's coming home soon."

"Flying home now, I believe," nodded Browne. "I shall be most interested to have a chat with His Nibs when he blows in."

All the pupils of the Detective Academy knew Lord Dorrimore, of course. He was one of their greatest friends. They had been on many an adventure with this millionaire peer. And of late the newspapers had been full of Lord Dorrimore's dramatic story.

"Dorrie himself only just escaped the fluence," said Handforth bluntly. "His machine was nearly drawn into it, and when he looked round again the air liner had gone. What the dickens can you make of it? It's so—so horribly mystifying. It's uncanny."

Suddenly Browne held up his hand.

"One moment, brothers," he murmured urgently. "Is it my vivid imagination, or do I hear something?"

His fingers hovered over the control-knobs of the set. Nipper and Handforth listened intently. A curious kind of murmur, short and jerky, was sounding from the loud-speaker. Gently, gingerly, Browne continued to manipulate the controls. And quite suddenly he tuned in the strange signals. Whereas they had formerly been vague and indistinct, they now became loud, clear-cut, and pure.

The three boys stared at the loud speaker, and then stared at one another. There was something extraordinarily weird about these sounds.

There seemed no question that they were caused by a human being. It was a human voice—so natural, so clear, that one might have supposed the owner of the voice to be in the very room.

"Ug-ug-gud-gud-ug!" came the voice. "Zot-os-ug-ug-mit-mut-mot-mut. Ug-ug-zan-zog."

It was utterly unintelligible. The strange vocal sounds were guttural and throaty. Yet they were quite clear. There were no actual words used—nothing that could possibly be understood.

"What the dickens is it?" asked Handforth blankly. "What have you tuned-in—Timbuctoo?"

"Ug-ug-zog-zut," said the loud speaker.

"It isn't any language at all," whispered Nipper. "There's no such lingo as that."

"Ting-ting!"

A soft, silvery bell sounded—clear and pure. The boys could even hear a faint, half-checked cough—a very human cough. Followed another series of the uncanny guttural utterances, then again the silvery bell sounded, and after that silence.

"I'll make a note of this wave-length," said Browne, dotting the figures down on paper.

"Well, that's a rummy thing," said Nipper, scratching his head. "Who could have been doing that? It must be a private broadcasting station of some kind—and a station that's not very far off, either."

"I am inclined to agree with you, Brother Nipper," said Browne.

"How do you know it can't be very far off?" asked Handforth, staring.

"There were no atmospherics at all—not even a crackle," said Nipper. "And if that private station was abroad, or a long way off even in England, there would certainly have been some interference. But why should any private broadcasting station give out such a rigmarole of gibberish?"

"A sort of code, perhaps?" murmured Browne.



With a bestial cry the hideous dwarf launched himself forward. His claw-like hands gripped the man round the throat.

"But why? And who would understand such a code?" said Nipper. "Let's wait, and perhaps we'll hear some more."

They waited, interested and intrigued.

"Ting-ting." Again came the sound of that silvery bell.

"That must be the station signal!" breathed Browne.

"Ug-ug——"

It started again—the same guttural rigmarole. There was a predominance of "ugs," but there were all sorts of other short, jerky syllables. There was no word that could be distinguished as belonging to any language.

"Ug-zat-zot-ul-ol—— Oh!"

That last exclamation was long-drawn-out—a startled, frightened gasp. If the boys had had any question in their minds about the human source of the guttural sounds, that question was now answered. It was a very distinct human voice which had cried out in such startled fear.

And now there came a new sound through the loud speaker—even more dramatic and mysterious than the earlier sounds. Gasps, grunts, and heavy, forceful breathing. There were two voices now—two men breathing. There came a clatter, too—a thud—and the heavy breathing became more and more pronounced.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth. "They must be having a struggle! Can't you hear? They're fighting near the microphone!"

"Quiet!" urged Nipper. "Listen!"

Their hearts were beating rapidly—their eyes were glowing with excitement. And then something happened that made them all catch in their breaths.

A voice sounded from the loud speaker—an English voice—strained, hoarse, and so feeble that it indicated that the speaker was nearly on the point of exhaustion.

"Help! Help!" came the voice. "If anybody hears this, come at once! Help! Come to Withers Lane, Romford. If anybody hears— Ahhhhhhh!"

The voice died away in a strange grunt, and there was more heavy breathing.

"Ug-ug!" came those old sounds from the loud speaker—this time much hoarser.

There were only a few of them, then there was a sort of click, and the air became dead. That mysterious station, whatever it was, had closed down.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mysterious Hunchback.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE mopped his brow.

"That, brothers, I venture to state, was vastly better than anything that the B.B.C. has ever given us," he remarked. "Seldom have I been so moved."

"We've got to do something about it," said Nipper, springing to his feet. "What a pity the guv'nor isn't here!"

"When will he get back?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I don't know—it may not be until late," replied Nipper. "I can't get in touch with him, either."

"Can't we go off to this Withers Lane, Romford, by ourselves?" demanded Handforth.

"An excellent suggestion, Brother Handy," approved Browne, beaming. "Up, brothers! To horse! We must away!"

"As far as I can reconstruct what happened, it was something like this," said Nipper keenly. "Somebody was at the microphone—making those rotten, ugly, guttural sounds. I can only assume that they were a sort of code—a private lingo that can only be understood by others in the same clan."

"A secret society!" ejaculated Handforth excitedly. "That's it!"

"That's not impossible, either," agreed Nipper. "Perhaps a criminal society of some kind—with its own broadcasting station. And that 'ug-ug' business is a special language, by which orders are given. Something foreign, I should think. They must have got a prisoner—an Englishman—who broke his way into the broadcasting room and attacked the fellow at the microphone. We heard the struggle."

"And the man managed to send out his appeal!" nodded Handforth. "He even gave us the address. He must have had an awful cosh, because he suddenly petered right out."

"A desperate chance, brothers," said Browne. "Our unknown friend must have known that there was very little possibility of his appeal being picked up. How many wireless sets are there capable of tuning-in such a wave-length? I would remind you that it was I who manufactured this set—"

"Remind us of it another time, Browne," put in Nipper briskly. "We've got to get off. I'll leave a note for the guv'nor in case he comes in before we get back. It's only just about eight o'clock and he said he might be in before ten or eleven. I don't suppose the others will be back much before then, either. Browne, you'd better fetch your car round."

"I am already on my way," replied Browne promptly.

BROWNE possessed his own car—a smart Morris-Oxford saloon. And in less than five minutes the three "cub" detectives were on their way towards Romford with Browne himself at the wheel.

He took the direct route. He drove out of Gray's Inn Road, went down Holborn, through the City, and then straight through Fenchurch Street to Aldgate, and so on through Whitechapel and Bow and Stratford.

It was the main road out to the Eastern Counties. Romford, on the outskirts of the Metropolis, was not far away. And at this time of the evening, when the heavy traffic was over, the trip took little more than half an hour.

Browne pulled up at the cross-roads, in the centre of Romford, where there was a policeman on point duty.

"Withers Lane?" repeated the constable. "Why, yes, it's out Hornchurch way. Only a sort of cart-track, which leads to the old Withers Farm. Not really a road at all."

"Can you tell us how to get to it?" asked Browne.

"I reckon so," replied the constable. "Go along the main road as far as Gallows Corner. You can't mistake it—it's the big crossing where the Southend arterial road goes over this one. Big lights overhead, policeman on point duty, petrol stations, and all that."

"We know," said Nipper.

"Well, there's a road just beyond that," said the constable. "It goes off to the right. Leads to Hornchurch. You take this for a bit, and before long you'll come to a side-track."

He gave precise directions, and when the Morris-Oxford started off again, the three occupants were feeling excited and tense.

"It's true, then!" said Handforth breathlessly. "There is a Withers Lane! And it leads to an old, empty farm-house! By George! This is beginning to look exciting!"

"It's significant—that abandoned farmhouse," said Nipper grimly. "The kind of place we might expect to find. I mean a secret broadcasting station, and all that. Such a thing might easily be concealed in an old, deserted farmhouse."

They had no difficulty in following the constable's directions. They left the main road, and went along the smaller road towards Hornchurch. And at length they came to that narrow cart-track which led off abruptly to the left.

"I rather think, brothers, that we had better leave the car here," suggested Browne. "Much as I hate walking, when there is a car to carry me, this is distinctly a time for discretion. A car approaching this old farmhouse might attract attention—unwelcome attention."

"You're right, Browne," said Nipper. "There's a meadow here—and we can leave the car just inside. Come on, Handy—we'll open the gate."

It did not take them long to park the car just inside the meadow. It was left there, with all the lights out. Then they proceeded on foot down the rutty lane.

It was a dark, chilly February evening, and there were scarcely any stars to be seen overhead. The sky was mostly overcast, but there was very little wind and no sign of rain.

Dimly, vaguely in the distance, they could see a lonely, ramshackle building, half-hidden amidst some trees. Not a light was showing anywhere. There was something even sinister in this isolated, abandoned farmhouse.

IN that farmhouse, somebody was moving.

An unkempt, wild-eyed figure—a figure dressed in worn, tattered clothing. It paced up and down a low-ceilinged attic, limping painfully.

"At last—at last," muttered the man. "Has anybody heard? Will any help come? The devils—the fiends! I've beaten them at last!"

There was something exultant in his tone as he came to a halt in the middle of the attic, and stood there with clenched fists.

A WORD FROM YOUR EDITOR!

Best Free Gifts of the Year!

THE first free gift is now in your hands, chums; and I feel sure that you will agree with me that it's the real "goods."

The boomerang-thrower will give readers many hours of enjoyment; of that I am certain; as certain as I am that our next two free gifts which are to be presented with the NELSON LEE will prove equally as popular.

A boomerang-thrower, a catapult, a Kazoo hummer. These three articles were specially chosen because they are things which are the envy of all boys, and which are certain to give their owners the maximum amount of entertainment—all for nothing!

The NELSON LEE has always been famed for its excellent free gifts, for presenting to its readers just what they like. Once again the Old Paper has lived up to that reputation by giving away the best free gifts of the year!

All the Rage!

AND now that you've got your boomerang-thrower, it's not hard to guess that you're looking forward with keen anticipation to next week's free gift—the indoor catapult.

I know that when I was a boy one of my most treasured possessions was a catapult. I remember very vividly the great times I had. My pals and I all owned one of these "weapons," and we used to have shooting contests. Yes; we had some great sport, seeing who could score the most bullseyes on a paper target. And the boy of to-day is just as keen on his catapult. Next week's

topping free gift, therefore, is sure to be "all the rage" with readers.

The Office-boy's Opinion!

INCIDENTALLY, an amusing thing happened the other day when I was examining one of these indoor catapults which will be presented with the NELSON LEE next week. I was giving it a try-out in the Editorial sanctum. I had screwed up a sheet of paper for a pellet, and, after taking careful aim for my hat, which was hanging on a peg near the door, I released the elastic. The pellet whizzed straight for the target—a bullseye—and then ricocheted on to the nose of the inoffensive office-boy who had just entered at that moment. The said lad looked very startled. I felt that the dignity of the Editor of the Old Paper had suffered a severe jolt.

Hastily I explained the circumstances—that I was just trying-out one of the catapults which were to be given away in the NELSON LEE—and the office-boy was soon interested, especially when I gave him the catapult and asked him to have a few shots himself. His verdict after a minute or so was:

"Gee, it's ripping! I guess the readers will love this!"

Tell Your Pals!

I'M certain that that remark just hits the mark. Look out, chums, for your free catapult in next week's bumper issue of the Old Paper. Order your copy IN ADVANCE to make sure of securing it—and don't forget to tell all your pals about these magnificent free gifts.

THE EDITOR.

It was a small attic, and there was no window. Not even a skylight. Nothing but the bare roof overhead, with the quaint, uneven, heavy old beams. Underfoot there was the crazy oaken floor. No furniture of any kind—nothing but dust and grime. And in one spot a trap-door; and this was bolted on the under-side.

Few would have recognised in this gaunt figure with the unshaven chin the formerly smart, well-set-up, immaculate Mr. Robert Harding.

The name was not only familiar in the engineering world—for Mr. Robert Harding was an engineer of outstanding merit; his inventive genius had given many marvels to the world—particularly in that type of engineering which concerned aeronautics. Mr. Harding was a scientist, too, an experimenter of world-wide fame. Many of the intricate instruments on Britain's gigantic airships were the inventions of Mr. Robert Harding.

His name was familiar to the public in general because he had vanished some weeks earlier. One day he had walked out of his laboratory in Bayswater, and he had never been seen again.

His disappearance had been all the more remarkable because he had been engaged on some of the most important experiments of his whole career—experiments that he had been very secretive about—experiments that he declared to be revolutionary. It had been whispered that Mr. Harding's brain had given way under the strain, and that he had destroyed himself.

Rivers had been watched—even ponds and lakes had been dragged. His description was circulated throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles, and he was watched for on the Continent, and in the United States, too. But nothing had been seen of him since he had walked out of his laboratory on that eventful day.

Yet here he was—a prisoner in this grim, dingy attic of the old farmhouse—almost within ear-shot of the hum and bustle of the great Metropolis!

If there had been any light in that attic it would have been seen that Mr. Harding was a sorry sight. Blood was streaming from an ugly gash on the side of his head; it had dried on his cheek. His nose was badly bruised, his right ear puffy and swollen. There was a cut at the corner of his lip, and his hands were torn and battered. But he seemed not to care for these injuries of his. He paid no attention to them.

"Surely, surely, out of all the millions of listeners, somebody must have picked up my message?" he muttered hoarsely. "How long shall I be kept in suspense? When shall I know?"

His state of mind was pitiful. He was fraught with anxiety.

He knew more about wireless, perhaps, than many wireless experts. And he knew that the miniature broadcasting station in the farmhouse was of a very special type. He knew that it was a short-wave station—and it was doubtful, therefore, if anybody but enthusiastic experimenters had picked up that message of his. Yet, as he argued, out of all the enthusiasts in the United Kingdom, one or two, at least, must have heard him.

Would they take heed? Would they come—or would they inform the police?

SUDDENLY Mr. Harding became alert. He had heard a creak. He fastened his gaze upon the spot where he knew the trap-door to be. He heard a bolt shot, and the flap of the trap-door was suddenly thrust back. A lantern, giving forth a dim, flickering light, was pushed up on to the uneven boards of the attic floor.

Then a grotesque figure appeared. It climbed up into the attic very much after the style of a great gorilla—bounding up in one leap. And there it crouched, at the edge of the trap-door, just inside the attic.

Mr. Harding recoiled, horror in his eyes—repulsion in his expression.

"You again!" he panted.

The figure of the newcomer was hideous—revolting. It was the figure of a man dressed in black—dingy, sombre black—with a curious, cape-like cloak festooned about the shoulders. The thing was human—but so grotesque and bizarre that one might have been excused for mistaking it for something supernatural.

A dwarf—a hunchback—a misshapen thing that was foul to look upon. The face was brown—deep mahogany colour. The nose was broad and flat, something like an animal's. The mouth, just beneath, was marred by the yellow fangs that half stood out from the evil lips.

And there were the eyes—black, piercing, almost semi-luminous. The eyes, indeed, were the most terrifying part of this fearsome face. They were surmounted by great shaggy brows, and they burned and smouldered in their hollow depths.

"I understand, Mr. Harding, that you have been extremely rash."

The voice, coming from that hideous dwarf, was all the more surprising because of its cultured tone. It was soft and gentle, and the English was perfect.

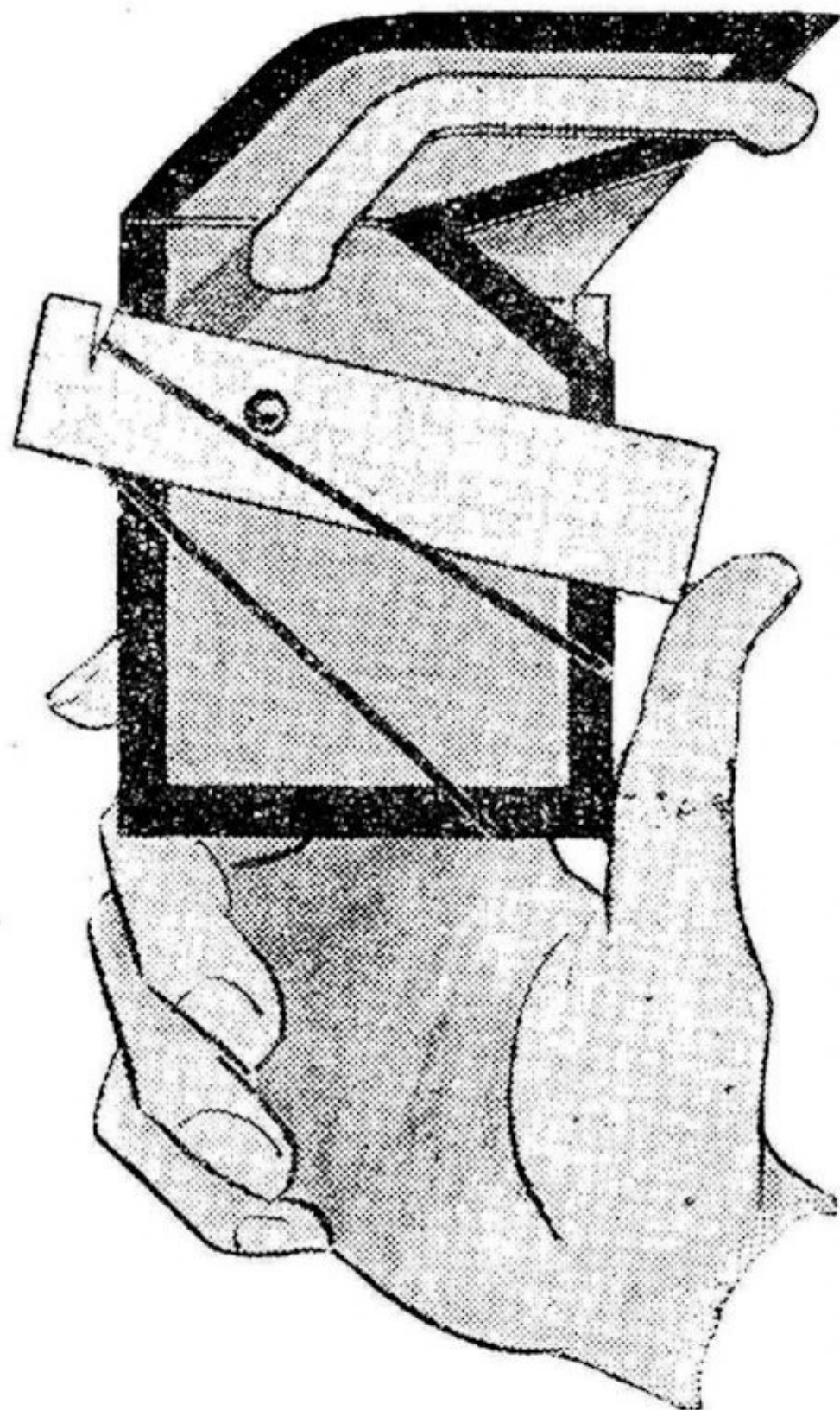
"You devil!" panted Mr. Harding, backing away. "Don't come near me—don't stare at me like that! Keep your eyes off me, you foul thing!"

The dwarf advanced with a rolling, animal-like gait. His eyes were fixed upon those of Mr. Harding—burning, glowing. Try as he would the unhappy prisoner could not wrest his own gaze away. There was something hypnotic—something utterly and devastatingly devilish about that horrid gaze.

"You are a rash man, Mr. Harding—a foolish man," said the dwarf softly. "It will be necessary for me to remove you from this house. I can take no chances. And your new quarters, I fear, will be less interesting."

"Keep away from me!" whispered Mr. Harding. "I defeated your accursed ghouls. Yes, I tricked them and got down."

"But you could not get out into the open, eh?"



How To Work Your BOOMERANG THROWER

This week's Free Gift is easy to work, and the results are highly effective.

Take your boomerang thrower and bend over the top, so as to form a platform. Now pull down the trigger with your thumb; bend the tips of the boomerang downwards, and then place in the position indicated on the platform. (See picture alongside.) Release the trigger, and the boomerang will fly for some yards, curl gracefully and return to you.

Don't forget, chums, that there will be *Another Grand Free Gift Next Week—*

A "Shoot-Straight" Indoor
CATAPULT.

Don't miss it—And Tell Your Pals !

"I couldn't get out—but I surprised the man who was uttering those ridiculous guttural sounds into the microphone," said Mr. Harding fiercely. "I spoke into the microphone—do you understand? I was heard—and people will heed! They will get me out of your clutches, you monster!"

The dwarf laughed softly.

"There is no hope for you, my friend," he said mockingly. "Nobody will have heard your appeal—for there is nobody who would listen in on that particular wave-length."

"They will come!" shouted Mr. Harding hoarsely. "I know it—and then you will get your deserts!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Devilry of Dacca!

DACCA, the Dwarf, did not take his eyes from Mr. Harding's face.

The engineer only knew him by this name—Dacca. For weeks Mr. Harding had lived this nightmare. He had known that he was in the power of this misshapen brown man.

Yet who Dacca was, and what evil power he represented, Mr. Harding did not know.

"You have tortured me enough!" said the unhappy man. "My wounds are not yet healed—the wounds made by your foul instruments——"

"Let us not talk of the past, my friend," said Dacca softly. "You were obstinate—and I desired you to speak. Even now it seems that your spirit is not broken."

"They will come for me—and you will be destroyed as you deserve!" panted Mr. Harding.

"Nobody will come," replied the hunchback. "And even if they do come they will find nothing. For within an hour you will be gone from this place."

"Wherever you take me, whatever you do with me, I shall lift no finger to help you," declared the engineer, trying in vain to get away from those burning eyes. "You have kept me a prisoner for weeks, but I will die before I lift another finger to help you. You have stolen my secret——"

"One of your secrets, Mr. Harding," interrupted the dwarf. "Only one of your secrets. You are a clever man—indeed, a genius—and I have not yet finished with your brains."

"Fool—fool!" shouted the other, backing away, half-hysterical with pain and weakness. "Do you think that you have so completely triumphed, then? What of my plans—my documents? By this time the Air Minister will have examined them—will have——"

"The Air Minister!" broke in the dwarf sharply. "You have never spoken of this before."

Mr. Harding suddenly laughed outright—a horrid, wild laugh.

"No?" he said mockingly. "Perhaps I haven't. I have kept that to myself, you devil! You didn't know that the designs, complete in every detail, of my revolutionary invention were in the hands of the Air Minister, did you? I submitted them only a couple of days before you seized me in your filthy clutches."

Suddenly, with a hoarse cry, the dwarf projected himself forward. He rose into the air like some animal, and his claw-like hands fastened themselves round Mr. Harding's throat. The unfortunate man was borne to the floor, and he landed with a dull crash. The dwarf squatted upon him, his claw-like hands still at Mr. Harding's throat.

"You are lying!" he snarled, his soft voice changed utterly, and now becoming harsh and terrifying. "You are trying to bluff me!"

"You will see!" gurgled Mr. Harding. "The air Minister has had my plans for weeks, I tell you! By now my invention will have been tested. It is not yours, as you think."

Dacca suddenly stood back, his evil face convulsed, making it even more hideous.

"The Air Ministry!" he said. "These Government departments are slow—lethargic. They do not deal promptly with such matters. Perhaps those plans have not yet been even touched. As for you, my friend, I have decided what shall be done. You are too dangerous to keep alive."

"You will murder me, then?" asked Mr. Harding wearily. "Well, get it over! Death will be preferable to this ghastly torture. I am ready. Kill me, if you will."

OUTSIDE, in the darkness, three figures stood in the shelter of a high blackthorn hedge, motionless and silent.

The three young detectives could make nothing of the farmhouse. Not a light was showing anywhere; and there seemed little doubt that the ramshackle old place was deserted and empty. Yet the boys remembered those dramatic words they had heard over the wireless.

"Looks like a frost to me," murmured Handforth, at length.

"It's too early to decide yet, Handy," whispered Nipper. "We'd better force an entry, I think. But we shall have to be careful about it——"

"Hush!" came a soft breath from Browne. "Listen, brothers!"

They all stood tense and alert.

"Did you hear something?" breathed Nipper.

"Unless I am mistaken, the cat-like purr of an automobile," replied Browne.

He parted the hedge slightly and Nipper and Handforth, peering eagerly through, caught a glimpse of a big closed car gliding off almost silently. It was carrying no lights. It seemed to be running over a meadow rather than along a road. Perhaps it was using a cart-track. The car was only in sight for a few seconds, and then it disappeared.

"Significant, brothers—not to say ugly," whispered Browne. "That car came from the direction of the farm. Why should expensive saloons lurk in the vicinity of deserted, ramshackle farmhouses?"

"It's a good thing we didn't advance sooner," said Nipper grimly. "We might have been spotted."

"A good thing!" echoed Handforth. "You ass! We ought to have gone long ago! We might have seen who used the car. The birds have flown! We're too late!"

"Perhaps not, Handy," said Nipper. "That voice over the wireless asked for help. There must be a prisoner in this old farmhouse—and the mere fact that the car has left does not prove that the prisoner has been taken away. We'd better do some investigating."

"And the sooner we get at it, the sooner we shall know the full truth," declared Edward Oswald.

He wanted to hurry off straight away, but Browne and Nipper were more cautious. They were disposed to wait for some minutes. It was impossible for them to follow the mysterious car now, so it was just as well to keep under cover for some little time longer.

THAT mysterious car did not go far. Less than half-a-mile from the farmhouse, long before the main road was reached, the saloon came to a halt. It stood there without lights. Dacca, the dwarf, sat in the rear, staring out across the bleak, dark countryside in the direction of the old farmhouse. It was as though the evil hunchback was waiting for something to happen.

"**W**ELL, we'd better make a move now," said Nipper in a low voice.

"About time," growled Handforth, who was always impatient.

They left the cover of the blackthorn hedge, and cautiously moved forward in the direction of the farmhouse.

"Don't you think we had better spread out?" asked Browne. "It might be more advantageous——"

He was interrupted in a dramatic, unexpected manner.

Woooooosh-boooooom!

They stood aghast. Even as their ears drummed and roared to the unexpected shock of that explosion, their eyes took in the lurid, purplish flash which split the darkness ahead. That flash

had come from the lower portion of the farmhouse—and now they could see the building literally disintegrating.

Most of it went skywards, scattering in every direction—beams, chunks of wall, chimney-stacks—everything flying skywards and spreading out in an appalling cascade of debris.

Then—swoooooosh!

A mighty wave of wind roared upon the three boys, and they were nearly bowled over. It was almost simultaneous—the roar of the explosion, the flash, and the wave of disturbed air. They staggered, but quickly recovered.

"That appeal over the wireless was genuine!" shouted Nipper, his voice sounding thin and weak in his own ears. "They've destroyed the farmhouse rather than risk discovery!"



The butler recoiled in horror. Lying on the floor was the still body of the Balghanistan Ambassador!

Browne seized Handforth's arm and bent close to him.

"A good thing, Brother Handy, that we delayed our approach," he said. "In the detective business it pays one to be cautious."

"By George!" gasped Handforth. "We might have been blown up! But how the dickens were we to guess that anything awful like this would happen?"

They listened, half-dazed, as they heard the crash and thud of the falling debris. And, succeeding it, there was a moment of dead silence. From the ruins of the farmhouse came a glare—lurid, startling, and ever-increasing.

"That explosion has caused a fire," said Nipper. "Come on! I don't think there's any danger now. We'll run up and get a closer look."

They could now hear the crackle and roar of the flames. The fire was burning with devastating rapidity. The boys ran up, and when they were at fairly close quarters they paused, and looked at the scene with awe-struck eyes. The farmhouse was practically gone—the roof had been

blown completely off, and parts of the walls were missing. And inside the shell that remained a raging fire was gathering strength. The flames were licking up with frightful, fearsome intensity.

"We're too late to do anything, I'm afraid," said Nipper, shaking his head. "If there had been anybody alive in that building, he must be dead by now. Hold on!" he added, becoming tense. "What's that? Can't you hear something? Listen!"

Apart from the roar of the flames, they fancied they could hear moans—the pitiful sounds of a human being in dire distress. And, extraordinarily enough, these sounds seemed to come from above—from out of the atmosphere.

"What on earth can it mean?" asked Handforth, with a gulp. "It—it's uncanny! I've never heard——"

"Look!" shouted Nipper, pointing. "Up there! Right in the tree-top! Isn't there a figure—caught in the branches?"

"As I live, brother, you are right!" said Browne. "Come! I do not approve of monkey-tricks, as a rule, but this is essentially a time for them!"

And the trio certainly did act like monkeys as they swarmed up that tall elm. It stood some little distance from the farmhouse, well clear of the blaze. And there, as Nipper had said, caught in the topmost branches, was a human figure.

It was incredible that there could be any life in that man. For, unquestionably, he had been blown skywards in the explosion—and, instead of falling to earth, he had caught in that tree-top.

This was literally the truth.

The unfortunate Mr. Harding, trapped in the attic, had been blown skywards in the explosion. He had not received the full force of the shock, for the entire top of the building had been blown off. By a miracle, Mr. Harding had landed in that tree-top.

The boys found him sprawling amid a tangle of broken branches. He was in a bad way. He was bleeding from numerous gashes on his legs and arms, and he was unconscious. Even his moans had now ceased—but he was breathing heavily.

"Gently—gently," said Nipper. "It'll be a job to get him down, but we've got to do it."

"This must be the prisoner!" gasped Handforth. "The fiends! Those crooks must have left him in the house, and he was blown up——"

"Never mind theories now, Handy—let's confine ourselves to work," broke in Nipper. "Come on! You take his shoulders, Browne. Can you manage it? Good man! Now then—easy does it!"



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature. If you know of a good rib tickler send it along now—and win a prize! A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; all other readers whose efforts are published will receive a pocket wallet or a penknife. Address your jokes to: "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

Nasty!

A schoolmaster was giving his pupils a lesson on the circulation of the blood.

"If I stand on my head," he said, by way of illustration, "the blood rushes to my head, doesn't it?" Nobody contradicted him. "Now," he continued, "when I stand on my feet, why doesn't the blood rush into my feet?"

There was silence for a moment, then a daring youth, jumping to his feet, cried:

"Because your feet ain't empty, sir!"

A Slight Mistake!

"What do you mean by this, sir?" demanded the angry advertiser.

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired the publisher of the local paper.

"Well, look here, in this advertisement of our delicious tinned meats from the best Colonial houses, you've made houses read horses!"

A Jolt for Jackson!

One day Jackson marched into his tailor's shop, and said:

"I've brought back these trousers, Mr. Jones. I want you to re-seat them. I sit a lot, you know."

"Very good," said Mr. Jones, "and if you bring back that bill I sent you some time ago, I will be pleased to receipt that also. I stand a lot, you know!"

Tommy's Triumph!

Tommy, the office-boy, burst into his boss's room, and cried out:

"Guv'nor, I want the afternoon off to see a football match!"

"That is not the way to ask for leave!" admonished the "guv'nor."

"You sit down at my desk, and I'll show you the way to do it!"

Accordingly, the small office-boy sat in the chair, and the boss left the room. After a short pause, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" said the office-boy, and the boss walked in.



AT last they got that poor, battered body to the ground. Foot by foot they lowered him through the branches of the elm tree. They were taking no notice of the fire—although the farmhouse was burning with a mighty roar that sounded like a gigantic furnace. The whole scene was brilliantly illuminated by the yellow glare.

"He's in a bad way," panted Nipper, as they bent over the injured man.

"Better rush him to the hospital, hadn't we?" asked Handforth.

"The sooner the better," nodded Nipper. "Now, if we lift him gently—— Hallo! I believe he's coming round! We'd better get some water——"

He broke off as Mr. Harding stirred slightly. The man's eyes fluttered, and then opened. He looked round him dazedly, his mind too stunned and battered to take in the situation yet. It was obvious that he did not know where he was, or what had happened. But it was equally obvious that there was something on his mind—something of vital urgency.

"Their minster!" he breathed hoarsely. "Their minster!"

"What does he mean?" asked Handforth.

"Go—go!" croaked the wounded man. "Warn him! Quickly! Warn him!"

"Warn whom?" asked Nipper.

"The air—the air——"

Abruptly, Mr. Harding ceased speaking. His whole body had quivered, as though from some sudden shock. For a single instant a light of deadly fear had come into his eyes as he had glanced past Nipper's shoulder.

Nipper looked round quickly, and a choking cry came into his throat.

"Look!" he shouted.

The others spun round. Just for an instant they caught sight of the figure of the brown hunchback—a figure with a loose cloak hanging over its misshapen shoulders; they saw the hideous face with the ugly fangs. They were all horrified.

Yet they ran swiftly towards the bushes where the hunchback had disappeared. They tore through. There was nothing. Search as they would, they could find absolutely no sign of that dreadful apparition.

"Great Scott!" panted Handforth at last. "Did—did you really see it?"

"You are to be forgiven, brother, in assuming that we only caught sight of a phantom," said Browne shakily. "May I never see another such sight!"

"It was a human figure—a real figure!" said Nipper sharply. "A horrible-looking dwarf, or hunchback! And there's something else, you chaps! I believe that——"



"Please, sir, can I have the afternoon off to see a football match?" he asked.

"Certainly!" cried the office-boy. "And here's sixpence to spend!"

The boss smiled and gave Tommy permission for leave—and the sixpence.

Two Points of View!

Mother: "Johnny, I am ashamed of you! Fancy dusting your chair in Mrs. Jones' before sitting down! Little Willie was watching you, and is sure to tell his mother."

Johnny: "Yes, I knew he was; but I'm too old a fish to be caught with a bent pin!"

Pity Poor Pat!

Mike: "Faith, Pat, and how do you tell those twins apart?"

Pat: "Sure, 'tis aisy enough, Mike. Oi stick me finger in Dennis' mouth, and if he bites Oi know it's Patrick!"

Obeying Orders!

A darkie in the American army was doing "sentry go" for the first time in his life. Suddenly a dark form approached him.

"Halt!" he cried in a threatening voice. "Who are you?"

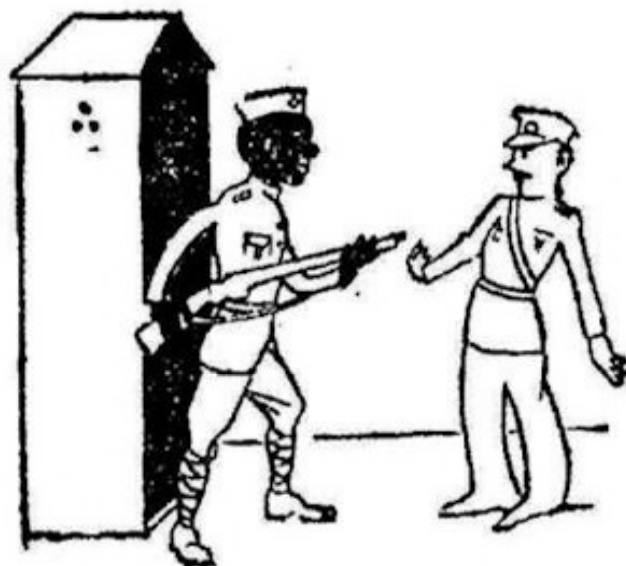
"The officer of the day!" came the reply.

"Advance!" cried the sentry.

The "O.D." advanced, but before he had taken many steps, the dusky sentry again cried: "Halt!"

"This is the second time you have halted me," cried the officer, "What are you going to do next?"

"Never mind what Ah's gonna do next. Mah orders is to call 'Halt!' three times, den shoot!"



He broke off, and ran swiftly back towards Mr. Harding. There had been something significant in the way Mr. Harding had abruptly ceased his utterance—there had been something suggestive, too, in that violent quiver of the wounded body.

"Good heavens!" gasped Nipper, horrified.

He had turned Mr. Harding over—and there, in the centre of the forehead, was a bullet wound. Mr. Harding had been shot even as he had been attempting to make his warning clear.

Dacca the dwarf had taken no chances! From the cover of the bushes he had fired at Mr. Harding, using a silenced pistol!

CHAPTER 4.

Nelson Lee On the Case!

THE three boys were horrified and staggered.

"Murdered—even while we were bending over him!" said Nipper. "We might have been murdered just as easily, you chaps! If I hadn't seen that look in this poor man's eyes, and if we hadn't jumped round when we did, I expect we should have been shot down, too."

"Phew!" whistled Handforth, glancing uneasily over his shoulder.

"And we failed to understand what this poor soul was trying to tell us," said Browne, with regret.

"I'm not so sure," said Nipper keenly. "He told us to warn somebody. And he said 'the air—the air.'"

"I expect he was asking for air," suggested Handforth.

"And he said, at first, something that sounded like 'their minster,' didn't he?" went on Nipper. "I'm wondering—By Jove! I've got it! He was clearer the second time, when he said 'the air.' He meant the Air Minister!"

"'Their minster'—the Air Minister," said Browne softly. "Brother Nipper, go to the top of the class! Undoubtedly you have solved the problem. This poor man was trying to tell us to warn the Air Minister."

"Come on—we'll carry him to the car, and take him straight into Romford," said Nipper briskly. "We'll give him over to the police, and they'll put him in the mortuary, I expect—until he can be identified. Then we'll rush back to London, and tell the gov'nor. He'll be home by now, I expect."

They felt they could do nothing further on the scene of the tragedy. The boys had a quick look round, in case there were

any other victims of the explosion, but they could see nobody. It was impossible to approach the burning farmhouse very closely. The flames were now tremendous.

It did not need much imagination to guess that the mysterious hunchback had been making his escape in the big saloon car. Doubtless he had spotted the three boys, and had consequently stopped. The whole matter was a complete mystery.

THE Romford police were very startled when they heard the yarn.

At first they quite refused to believe it—and it was not until they went outside, to the waiting Morris-Oxford car, and found the dead body, that they were convinced. After that there was a lot of questioning and Nipper and Browne and Handforth were required to make statements.

"Well, it's a queer business," said the inspector, when he had heard everything.

Just then the sergeant came in, and saluted. He was looking rather excited.

"Anything fresh?" asked his superior.

"I think so, sir," said the sergeant. "I believe we've identified the body. It's Mr. Harding."

"Robert Harding?" ejaculated the inspector, with a stare. "Harding, of Bayswater—who's been missing for several weeks?"

"He's the man, sir."

"Well, I'm hanged!" declared the inspector, with a whistle. "This is more important than I thought. So Mr. Harding didn't disappear in the ordinary way? He must have been kidnapped—and kept a prisoner in this old farmhouse."

It was getting on for eleven o'clock before Nipper and his companions were allowed to leave. They had signed their statements, and they had expressed their willingness to help the police in every possible way, should they be called upon.

"I thought we were never going to be out of that giddy police station," said Handforth, as they returned Londonwards in the Morris-Oxford. "It's a wonder they didn't clap us into the cells, on suspicion!"

"I must confess, brothers, that I could already feel the steel bracelets round my wrists," said Browne. "Fortunately, we have excellent credentials, and I now fancy we are in no danger of being embroiled in this unfortunate tragedy."

"What about the Air Minister?" asked Handforth.

"They tried to get him on the 'phone, but he's out," said Nipper. "I'll tell the gov'nor about it when we get home. Can't you go a bit faster, Browne?"



"I would point out that the indicator is already registering forty-five miles an hour," said Browne reproachfully. "Would you have me become a public danger?"

He drove brilliantly, and by eleven-fifteen the car came to a halt outside the Detective Academy in Gray's Inn Road. Nipper was the first to tumble out, and he dashed straight into Nelson Lee's chambers, and ran upstairs. To his satisfaction, he found Nelson Lee in his consulting-room, alone.

"Well done, young 'uns," said Lee briefly.

"You've—heard, sir?" panted Nipper.

"The Romford police have telephoned me—and I understand that Scotland Yard has been informed," said Lee, nodding. "However, you had better give me all the details, Nipper. This affair looks like being unusual."

"Unusual!" echoed Nipper. "It's one of the rummiest mysteries we've ever tackled, guv'nor!"

WHEN Nelson Lee had heard the details he sat for some moments in thoughtful silence. Browne and Handforth had come up by this time, and they had contributed their share to the story.

"You are quite sure about this hunchback?" asked Lee, at length.

"Certain, sir."

"What you saw was actually a dwarf—a brown-skinned man, dressed in a kind of cloak, with a decided hump?"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"You don't think that the man was an ordinary crook in disguise?" asked Lee.

"There was nothing ordinary about him, sir," said Nipper, shaking his head. "He was the queerest creature I have ever set eyes on. The pity is we couldn't get a longer look at him. He was off in a flash. He gave one bound which took him right over the hedge. More like an animal than a human being."

Lee was silent again for some moments.

"And those wireless signals you heard?" he asked suddenly. "You have described them as guttural utterances. Don't you think it possible that a language was being spoken?"

"No, it wasn't a language, guv'nor," replied Nipper. "Or, if it was, it was a lingo that none of us has ever heard of."

Lee rose to his feet.

"Well, boys, you've done well, and you had better go to bed," he said. "The Air Minister has been informed of the tragedy by this time, I expect, but I shall go round to see him, nevertheless. The urgent nature of my business will be sufficient excuse for my late call."

"But where does the Air Minister come in, sir?" asked Handforth. "How can he be mixed up in this strange business?"

"At first sight, Handforth, there seems to be no connection—but there is, really, a very close connection," said Nelson Lee. "Just before Mr. Harding disappeared he was engaged on some secret experiments connected with aeroplanes. His genius had always been more or less directed on aeronautical lines."

"A singular coincidence, brothers—or is it more than a coincidence?" asked Browne slowly. "While our thoughts were on the missing air liners—while we were trying to pick up an S.O.S. call—we get this appeal from the missing Mr. Harding. And he was an aeronautical expert!"

"It certainly seems rummy," remarked Nipper.

"Added to that, we have the further singular fact that Mr. Harding was shot dead by a brown-skinned man," continued Browne. "And these air liners have disappeared between Bushire and Karachi, a country that is inhabited by brown-skinned men. Can there be any connection?"

Nelson Lee was looking grim.

"I think there can, Browne," he replied quietly. "And for that very reason I must go and see Lord Dovercourt without delay. I am convinced that there is something huge behind all this—some vast conspiracy. Something, perhaps, that is bigger than anything we have yet imagined. Not an hour ago the news came through that still another air liner had vanished over the wild hill country of Balghanistan."

"Another!" said Nipper, taking a deep breath. "By Jove! It's getting terrible!"

The telephone bell rang, and Lee drew it towards him and placed the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo?" he said. "Who is it?"

"Ah, the sleuth himself!" came a cheery voice. "Hallo, Lee, you old son-of-a-gun! How goes it?"

"Very fit, thank you, Dorrie," said Lee, smiling. "Where are you speaking from?"

"Croydon Aerodrome—just blew in."

"At this time of the evening?"

"Why not?" asked Dorrie. "Beacon lights all the way across from Paris, and all that. I'm in a hurry, and I'm coming straight to your chambers. Thought I'd ring you up beforehand, and give you a warning."

Nipper and Handforth and Browne were listening eagerly. Nelson Lee's remark had given them the clue.

"Come along by all means, Dorrie—but I may not be in when you get here," said Lee.

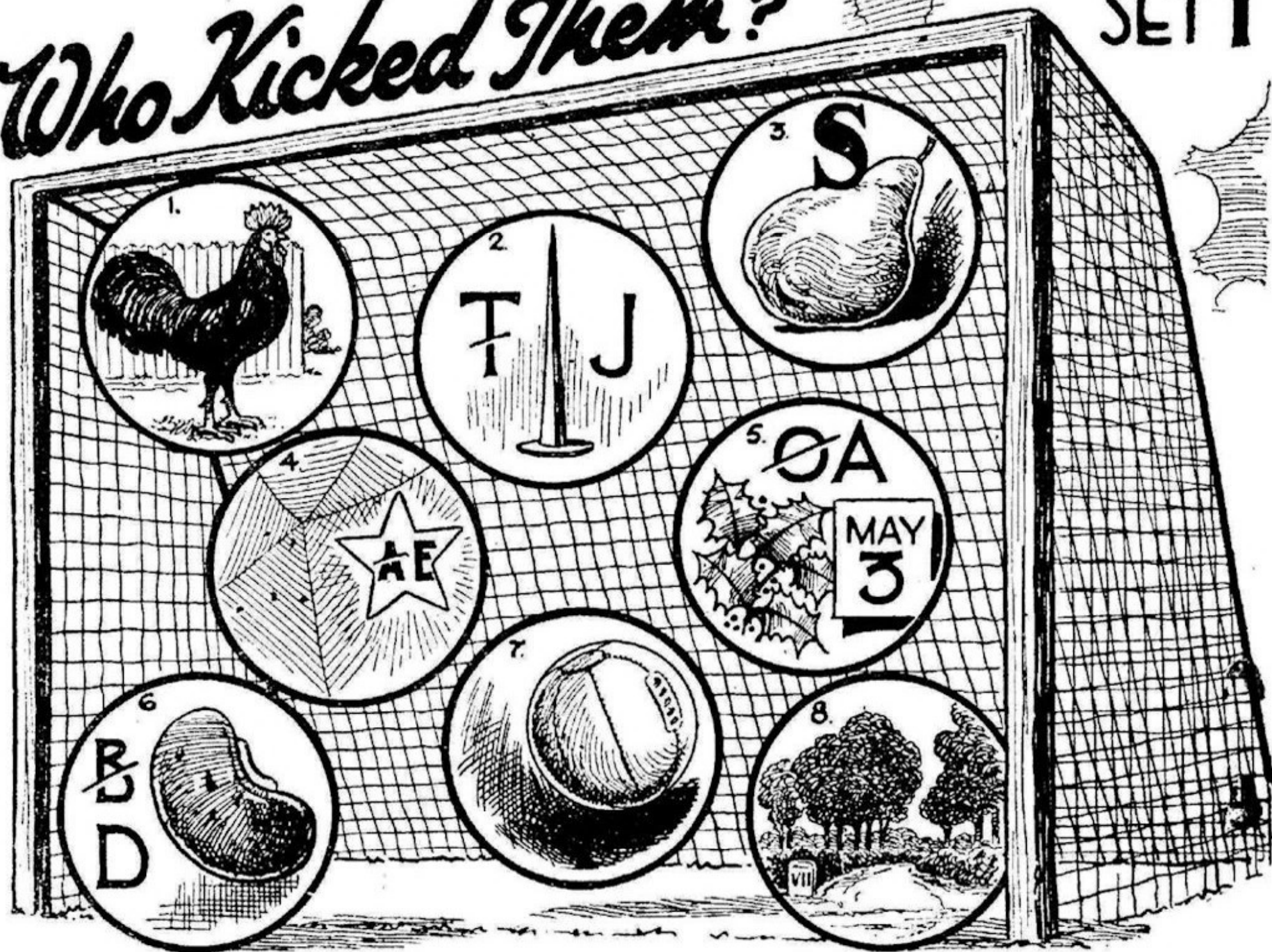
"What rubbish!" said his lordship. "You've got to be in! Man alive, I want to talk to you about the mysterious disappearances of those air liners. I've just flown from India, and——"

(Continued on page 24.)



Who Kicked Them?

SET 1



Scored those Goals?

Simple 4 Week Competition

Using "MEAD" CYCLES and

Wembley Cup Final Tickets OFFERED



Now then, lads, here's a really stunning offer for you! Just think of it—six first-class bicycles, all ready for the road! And then there are twelve tickets for the Wembley Cup Final—which every boy wants to see! These are the grand prizes we offer you, so come along, don't miss this opportunity whatever you do!

This is what you have to do to win one of the prizes. In the goal which you see here are eight circles, and in each of them is a picture-puzzle representing the name of a well-known footballer. For instance, take the first puzzle. Clearly, the answer is COCK, a player well known to you, and we have filled in the answer for you on the entry form. Easy, isn't it? Now see if you can solve the other seven puzzles in the same way.

To make the contest absolutely fair and equal for everybody, we give below a list of footballers' names which contains the answers to all this week's puzzles.

As you find the answers, write them IN INK, against the corresponding numbers on the entry form given here, which you should then sign, also in ink. Now cut out the coupon and keep it by you until next week, when the second set of puzzles and the list of names belonging to them will appear.

The competition will last for four weeks only, and with the final set we shall give you full instructions for the sending in of your entries.

Read the Competition Rules on Page 27, carefully

**You can Find the
Answers HERE!**

ADCOCK
ANDREWS

BACON
BALL
BARCLAY
BARRETT
BEDFORD
BISHOP
BOWEN
BRAIN
BROADBENT
BROWN

CABLE
CAMPBELL
CHANDLER
COATES
COCK
COOK
CRAIG

DEACON
DEAN
DIMMOCK
DOMINY

EASSON
EVANS

FARBELL
FORSYTH
FORWARD

GOMM
GRAHAM

HALLIDAY
HAMMOND
HARTLEY
HEROD
HINE
HUGHES

JACK
JOHN
KEENOR
KING

LANE
LOFTUS

MILES
MILLS
MORT

ODELL
OSBORNE

PEARSON
PRICE

RANKIN
READMAN
RHODES
RICHES
RITCHIE
ROWLEY
RUFFELL

SMEATON
SORRELL
STORER

TAYLOR
THACKERAY
THOMSON

VALLANCE

WALKER
WEBSTER
WEDDLE
WELLS
WILSON

YORK
YOUNG

"Who Kicked Them?"

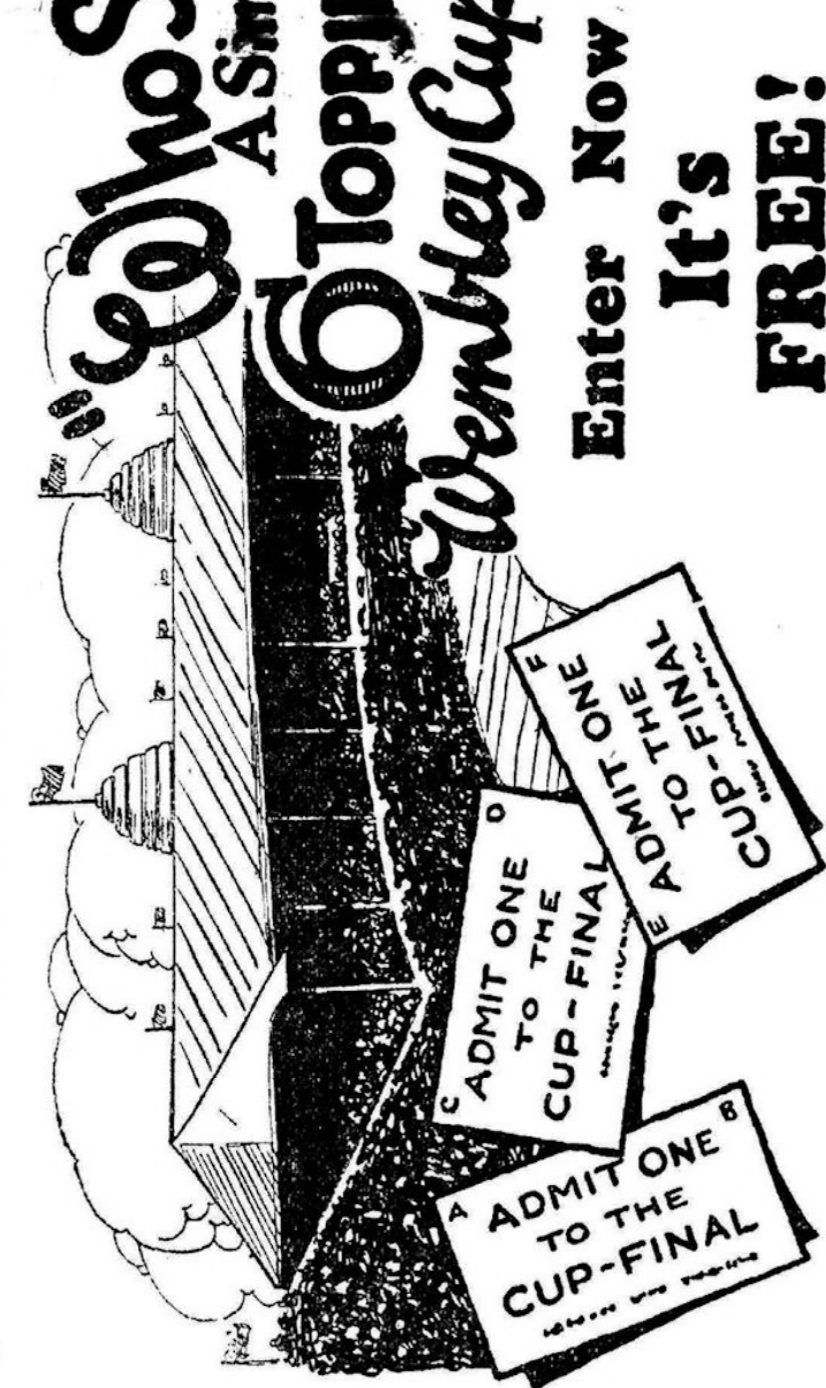
FREE ENTRY FORM No. 1.

- 1 **COCK**
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

Competitor's
Name

1

"Nelson Lee."



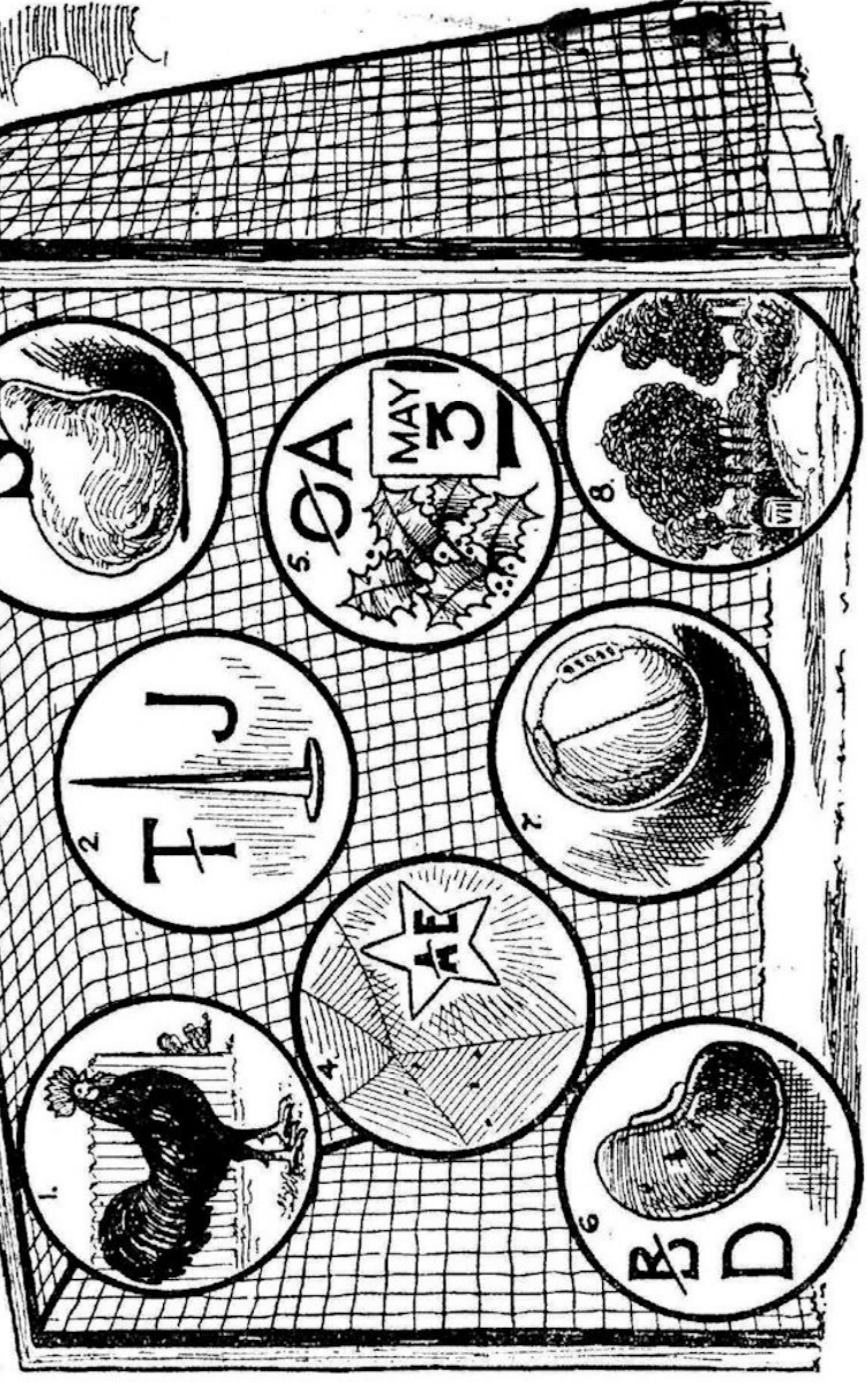
"Who Scored those Goals?"

A Simple 4 Week Competition

"TOPPING" MEAD "CYCLES and Wembley Cup-Final Tickets OFFERED

Enter Now
It's
FREE!

Who Kicked Them? SET 1



Now then, lads, here's a really stunning offer for you! Just think of it—six first-class bicycles, all ready for the road! And then there are twelve tickets for the Wembley Cup Final—which every boy wants to see! These are the grand prizes we offer you, so come along, don't miss this opportunity whatever you do!

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You can Find the Answers HERE!

ADCOCK ANDREWS	FARRELL FORSYTH FORWARD	PEARSON PRICE
BACON	GOMM GRAHAM	RANKIN READMAN RHODES
BALL	HALLIDAY HAMMOND HARTLEY	RITCHIE ROWLEY RUFFELL
BARCLAY BARRETT BEDFORD	HEROD HINE HUGHES	SMEATON SORRELL STORER
BISHOP BOWEN BRAIN BROADBENT BROWN	JACK JOHN KEENOR KING LANE LOFTUS MILES MILLS MORT	TAYLOR THACKERAY THOMSON VALLANCE WALKER WEBSTER WEDDIE WELLS WILSON
EABLE CAMPBELL CHANDLER COATES COCK COOK CRAIG	ODELL OSBORNE	YORK YOUNG
DEACON DEAN DIMMOCK DOMINY		
EASSON EVANS		

“Who Kicked Them?”

FREE ENTRY FORM No. 1.

1	COCK
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	

Competitor's Name 1

“Nelson Lee.”

S. O. S.

(Continued from page 21.)

"I know," interrupted Lee. "I can't explain everything on the telephone, but I must see Lord Dovercourt—the Air Minister—at once. I daresay I shall be back in about an hour. So you won't have to wait for me long."

"All right—make it as speedy as you can," said Lord Dorrinore. "So long, old man—until we meet."

Lee hung up, and he found the boys looking at him with eager eyes.

"Is Dorrie coming here, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Yes—at once," replied Lee. "Perhaps you had better wait until he arrives—so that you can keep him fully occupied until I get back."

"Good egg!" ejaculated Handforth. "It'll be a rare treat to see old Dorrie again."

There was a lot of excitement in the big Common Room of the Detective Academy when Nipper and Handforth and Browne went in, soon afterwards. Reggie Pitt and Fullwood and Forrest and Waldo and Fenton and all the others had come in during the latter part of the evening; and they were agog to know all the latest details.

So Nipper and the others were kept very busy, relating their adventures.

CHAPTER 5.

The Man of Mystery!

LORD DOVERCOURT, tall, dignified, and worried, paced up and down his comfortable library.

Lord Dovercourt's town house was situated in Devonshire Street, in close proximity to Regent's Park. It was after eleven o'clock, and the Air Minister was alone.

"Poor Harding!" he muttered, with a frown. "I am completely mystified over the whole strange business."

His lordship had been informed of the tragedy only a short while earlier, and he was very disturbed. There were other worries on his mind, too. He had just learned of the latest air disaster—the disappearance of yet another Indian Air Mail liner.

But, grave though the latest news from the East was, Lord Dovercourt felt far more concerned over the terrible fate of Mr. Robert Harding. It was so much nearer—and the mystery of Mr. Harding's death was intriguing and baffling. The story really sounded incredible. First of all Mr. Harding had been kidnapped and held a prisoner—then he had been blown up in the explosion—and afterwards he had been shot through the head.

"I cannot credit it!" said the Air Minister bluntly. "These boys must have drawn upon their imaginations. A dwarf, too—a hunchback. Preposterous! I shall be very glad when Mr. Lee arrives."

Nelson Lee had 'phoned through, telling Lord Dovercourt of his proposed call.

"Yet it's very significant," muttered his lordship. "Mr. Lee assures me that the whole story is authentic. And if Mr. Lee believes it, there must be some truth in it. Extraordinary!"

He paced up and down restlessly, his face haggard with worry and anxiety. The Air Minister, indeed, had been having a great deal of worry of late.

His department of the Government was directly concerned with the mystery of the missing air liners. The Air Ministry had been bitterly criticised by many newspapers; yet, in all conscience, Lord Dovercourt had done everything within his power. Royal Air Force machines—



scouts, bombers, and other types—had been sent to Bushire and Karachi. Air liners had been escorted, and Lord Dovercourt had believed that the disasters had ended.

Yet news had just arrived that another Air Mail liner had vanished! Details were to follow.

Now there was this mysterious affair of Mr. Robert Harding—and he had been engaged on some work connected with the aeroplanes, too. What could be the nature of Mr. Harding's warning? Why had he told those boys to "warn the Air Minister?"

Lord Dovercourt thought of something, and he paused in his restless pacing. Then he pulled some keys out of his pocket, and went over to a big safe on the other side of the library. He swung the door open, and pulled out a big drawer. There were many documents here, some of them

sealed, others tied with tape. He selected a long, official-looking envelope, which had seals at top and bottom.

"Harding's specifications for anti-aircraft device," were the words neatly typewritten on the face of the big envelope. There was a date, too, and Lord Dovercourt remembered that this sealed envelope had been in his safe for some weeks. Owing to a heavy pressure of engagements he had not, however, been able to give the matter any attention.

"I must examine these without further delay," he told himself. "A pity I didn't look at them sooner. But poor Harding's disappearance—Yes? Who is it?"

There had been a tap on the door, and now a dignified figure appeared. It was Lord Dovercourt's butler.

"Well, Benson?"

"A gentleman to see you, sir, and he craves your indulgence for the lateness of the hour," said the butler, advancing with a tray.

Lord Dovercourt took the card, and compressed his lips as he read the inscription: "Sir Akbar Laldhi." A string of impressive-looking letters followed the name.

"Certainly," said Lord Dovercourt, glancing up. "Ask Sir Akbar to come in at once, Benson."

The butler disappeared, and his lordship frowned with a puzzled air. He wasn't altogether surprised at this call. Sir Akbar Laldhi was the Ambassador for Balghistan, that vast country on the borders of India. Balghistan. And at the present moment

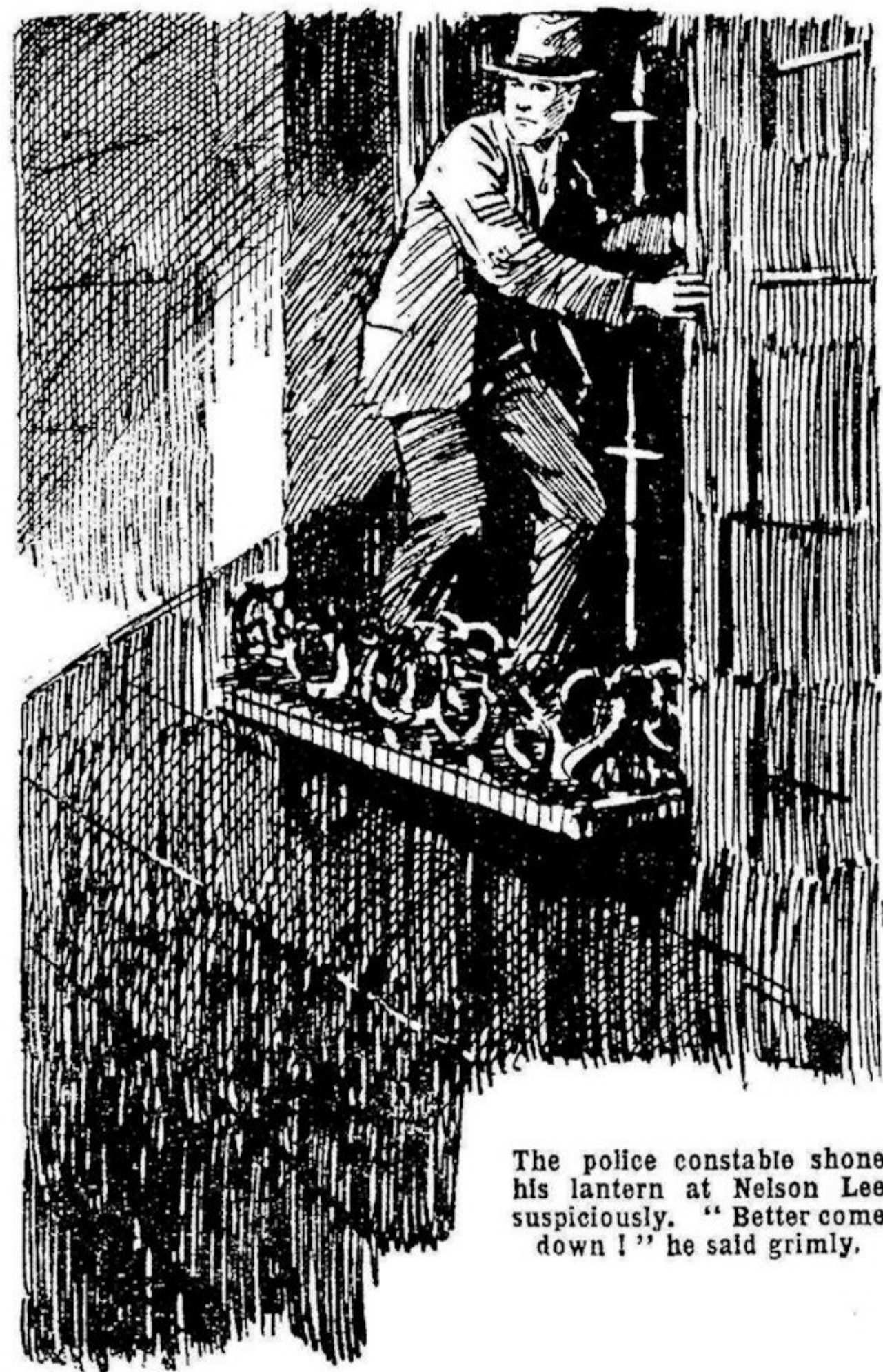
was, more or less, a buffer State—a most important country. Balghistan was very much in the public eye.

Sir Laldhi was ushered in—a tall, stately, impressive, handsome man. He was in spotless evening dress, and there was something dignified and noble in his bearing. Sir Akbar was only slightly brown, and it was hard to realise that he was a pure-blooded Oriental. His English, when he spoke, was perfect.

"Forgive me, Lord Dovercourt, for disturbing you at such an unreasonable hour," said Sir Akbar earnestly. "but circumstances are so urgent that I am sure that you will——"

"Please say no more, Sir Akbar," interrupted Lord Dovercourt. "I quite understand. You have been informed, no doubt, of the latest disaster?"

"I am more perturbed than I can possibly express," said Sir Akbar gravely. "Another air liner has vanished! And you can imagine my concern, Lord Dovercourt, when you remember that all these machines have disappeared whilst flying over Balghistan—my own territory.



The police constable shone his lantern at Nelson Lee suspiciously. "Better come down!" he said grimly.

I feel responsible. Yet I can assure you that my Government has done everything within its power to solve this remarkable mystery."

Lord Dovercourt was silent. Whilst there had been no breaking off of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Balghanistan, it was an open secret that there was a strained feeling in the air. The Ameer of Balghanistan was—frankly—not friendly towards Britain. And during this present trouble the Ameer had remained in the background. He had done little or nothing to help the British authorities. Not that Sir Akbar Laldhi, who was thoroughly English in his ideas and in his inclinations, could be held in any way responsible for the Ameer's lack of interest.

"This whole matter has become so urgent that I could not rest," continued Sir Akbar. "I was hoping that you would be able to supply me with fuller details, Lord Dovercourt. How was this aeroplane sent to disaster? What of the escorting machines?"

"Unfortunately, Sir Akbar, I have had no details myself," said Lord Dovercourt. "Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall be in a better position to grant your request. I can, of course, easily understand your anxiety. It is a very bad business. And it's all so mystifying."

"It has been established beyond all question that not one of these missing aeroplanes has landed or crashed in Balghanistan territory," said Sir Akbar. "Everything has been done, as you know, Lord Dovercourt, to solve this riddle. British aeroplanes have had free access over Balghanistan territory, and they have been absolutely——"

He suddenly broke off, and sat tense in his chair, as though listening.

"What is it?" asked Lord Dovercourt curiously.

"I fancied I saw a slight movement—but wait!" whispered Sir Akbar.

To Lord Dovercourt's amazement, his visitor padded across the library towards the heavy curtains which concealed the big window recess. They were closely drawn, and his lordship was startled at the suggestion that anybody might be hiding behind them. Sir Akbar whisked one of the curtains aside, and an ejaculation of horror escaped him.

"Good Heavens!" he panted. "What infernal fiend——Keep back, Lord Dovercourt!"

Suddenly, Sir Akbar seemed to be drawn behind the curtains, and the curtains themselves shook out in billows. Gasps and grunts came out into the library.

"Sir Akbar!" shouted Lord Dovercourt. "What is it? Upon my soul! What in the name of——"

He broke off, hesitated a few moments and then strode towards the swaying curtains. Before he could reach them, however, they parted and into the room stepped a hideous, hunchbacked figure—Dacca the Dwarf! Of Sir Akbar there was no sign. Lord Dovercourt backed away, bewildered, horrified, aghast.

"Make no outcry, my friend," said Dacca tensely. "If you utter one sound, you will share the fate of Sir Akbar Laldhi!"

"Who—who are you? What have you done to Sir Akbar?" panted his lordship hoarsely.

He was an ordinarily brave man, but in this moment he fairly shook with apprehension. There was something so diabolical—so demoniac—about this hideous dwarf. And the eyes! Dacca's eyes were burning evilly in their hollows, and they were fixed upon Lord Dovercourt's own eyes in a baleful glare. Indeed, there was something hypnotic in their depths. Try as he would, Lord Dovercourt could not shift his own gaze. He was held—he was fascinated.

"Your life, my friend, depends upon your common sense," said Dacca softly. "Make no outcry. Do so, and you will die. I am here for one purpose—and one purpose alone."

Lord Dovercourt attempted to shout, but no sound would come. He was paralysed with horror—he was helpless under the gaze of those horrible, hypnotic eyes.

"You will give me the Harding papers!" said Dacca, advancing, and holding out a claw-like hand. "Do you understand, Lord Dovercourt? The Harding papers!"

A choking cry sounded in the Air Minister's throat.

"No! You shall not have them!" he panted, his own will conquering for a brief second.

Simultaneously, he glanced at the desk—his gaze rested upon the sealed envelope. Without shifting his own eyes, Dacca saw. He moved forward, seized the envelope, and a hideous chuckle escaped his ugly, misshapen mouth.

"Sealed!" he said gloatingly. "So you have not examined them yet, my noble lord?"

"Let me have them!" panted the Air Minister. "Those papers are vital! They have not yet been——"

"Enough!" interrupted Dacca. "You have told me all I need to know!"

At the same moment, Dacca leapt forward. It was an animal-like spring, and so unexpected that Lord Dovercourt was not ready for it. The dwarf landed fully upon the Air Minister's chest, and Lord Dovercourt went staggering backwards, to fall with a crash to the carpet. Dacca's claw-like fingers closed round his lordship's throat.

"I could kill you!" he gloated. "But I won't! I could kill you as I killed Harding, my friend!"

The grip tightened round the unfortunate peer's throat, and strange lights blazed and glowed in front of his eyes. His senses reeled.

It was only two minutes later when Lord Dovercourt recovered his senses, and he sat up with a hoarse, wild cry. He believed that only two seconds had elapsed, and that Dacca was still there. But he was wrong. Except for himself, the library was empty.

"Help—help!" croaked Lord Dovercourt. "Benson—Benson! Help!"

He tried to stagger to his feet. He was feeling dizzy and weak, however, and he fell.

The door burst open, and Benson came in, looking startled and frightened.

"Is anything the matter—— Oh, my lord!" he gasped, in horror. "Are you hurt, my lord?"

"The dwarf!" croaked the Air Minister. "Have you seen the dwarf?"

Benson stared in blank bewilderment.

"The dwarf, my lord?" he repeated, as though he doubted his master's sanity.

"Never mind—help Sir Akbar!" panted Lord Dovercourt. "He's there—behind the curtains! Help Sir Akbar!"

"But—but—" began the bewildered butler.

"The curtains—behind the curtains!" insisted his lordship.

The butler hurried across the room reluctantly—for all his instincts urged him to help Lord Dovercourt. However, the latter was so insistent that Benson was compelled to obey.

He pulled the curtains aside, and then recoiled.

Lying on the floor, his evening dress disarranged, was the sprawling body of Sir Akbar Laldhi, the Balghanistan Ambassador. His white shirt front was crumpled and creased, his collar was unfastened, and his hair was in disorder.

"He's dead, my lord—he's dead!" faltered the butler.

"Dead!" repeated Lord Dovercourt, horrified.

He managed to get to his feet, and he staggered over to the butler's side. And at that very moment Sir Akbar stirred slightly, and his eyelids fluttered.

"You're a fool, Benson!" snapped the Air Minister. "Look! Sir Akbar is alive—he is recovering consciousness! Here, help me! We will carry him on to the couch."

Although Lord Dovercourt was in no fit state to exert himself, he took Sir Akbar's feet and

RULES FOR OUR GRAND COMPETITION.

See pages 22 and 23 for other details.

The Six "Mead" Bicycles will be awarded to the six readers whose solutions of the four sets of puzzles are correct or most nearly correct, the other prizes of Twelve Cup-Final Tickets following in order of merit.

In case of ties, the Editor may divide the prizes, or their value, as he considers necessary, but in any case the full value will be awarded.

Any number of entries may be sent, but each must be made out on a separate set of the "Who Kicked Them?" Entry Forms (Nos. 1-4, inclusive that is). No responsibility can be taken for entries lost, mislaid, or delayed in the post or otherwise, and no correspondence will be allowed.

The Editor's decision will be final and legally binding throughout. Entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative solutions will be disqualified. Employees of the proprietors of "NELSON LEE" and of "Gem", whose readers are also taking part in this contest, must not compete.

the butler took Sir Akbar's shoulders. Together, they lifted him on to the big comfortable couch.

"There! That will do!" said Lord Dovercourt. "Now, Benson, bring some water. First of all, though, pour out a little brandy."

"Some for yourself, too, my lord?" asked Benson, who was now beginning to recover a little of his normal dignity.

"Yes—yes! I can do with some."

The butler hastened to a hidden cabinet, and poured out two stiff tots of neat brandy. Lord Dovercourt gulped his down at once, and he held the other glass to Sir Akbar's lips.

"Thank you—thank you!" breathed Sir Akbar. "I am desolated, Lord Dovercourt, that this unhappy event should have occurred in your house."

"Never mind that, my dear sir," said his lordship. "We have both had an appalling experience. I really think I had better summon a doctor—"

"No, no! Do not do that!" urged Sir Akbar. "We cannot afford to have any publicity. Let us, at all costs, keep this unfortunate affair private."

He fingered his throat tenderly, and Lord Dovercourt could see the ugly marks which had been obviously caused by the dreadful hunchback's claw-like fingers.

At this interesting moment a ring sounded somewhere within the mansion.

"Who is that—at this time of night?" asked Lord Dovercourt impatiently. "Benson, you must not admit— But one moment!"

His lordship paused, remembering that Nelson Lee was due. He suddenly nodded.

"See who it is, Benson," he ordered. "If the caller is Mr. Nelson Lee, admit him. If it is anybody else, say that I have retired."

Sir Akbar looked mildly interested.

"Mr. Nelson Lee?" he repeated. "Splendid! His arrival is most timely."

CHAPTER 6.

Nelson Lee Is Puzzled !

NELSON LEE stood in the porch of Lord Dovercourt's mansion, waiting for the door to be opened.

The rain was pouring down in torrents now, and there was shelter in this porchway. A sudden sharp shower had come on ten minutes earlier, and it was still at its height.

Benson opened the door, and he regarded the visitor anxiously.

"I have an appointment with Lord Dovercourt," said Lee, presenting his card.

"Come in, sir—come in!" said the butler, glancing at the card. "Oh, Mr. Lee, I'm glad you're here! What a pity you didn't come a few minutes ago."

"Has something happened?" asked Lee sharply.

"Yes, sir—something dreadful!" replied the butler. "My master has been attacked——"

"Take me to him at once," interrupted Lee.

He was deeply concerned. Remembering Nipper's story—remembering how Mr. Harding had gasped out a last word that the Air Minister should be warned—Lee feared the worst. He was relieved, therefore, when he was ushered into the library, to find Dovercourt dishevelled and pale, but otherwise unharmed.

"You are very welcome, Mr. Lee," said his lordship, as he warmly shook hands. "I have been attacked—and robbed. This gentleman is Sir Akbar Laldhi, the Balghistan Ambassador."

Nelson Lee bowed, and Sir Akbar inclined his head.

"You must pardon me for neglecting to rise, Mr. Lee," said the Ambassador gently. "I am unfortunately indisposed."

"May I know what has happened?" asked Nelson Lee, looking from one to the other.

"Certainly," replied Lord Dovercourt. "While I should hesitate to tell this story to the police, I am satisfied, Mr. Lee, that you will be discreet. I will tell you exactly what occurred."

He did so. He explained how Sir Akbar had suddenly noticed something moving behind the curtains—although Lord Dovercourt himself had seen nothing. He told how Sir Akbar had been attacked.

"I was taken utterly by surprise," put in the Ambassador, at this point. "No sooner was I behind those curtains than a pair of claw-like hands clutched at my throat. I was drawn forward, half-throttled. I tried to cry out, but I was held as though in a vice. After that, I am afraid, I remember nothing."

"Before I could reach Sir Akbar's side—before I could help him—the curtains parted, and the most hideous figure I have ever set eyes on came into the room," said Lord Dovercourt huskily.

"I was staggered—horrified. A hunchback, Mr. Lee—a vile, venomous-looking dwarf, with appallingly baleful eyes. Please do not imagine that I am exaggerating—that I have allowed my sense of proportion to desert me. In all seriousness, I tell you that this dwarf was utterly Satanic."

"I am quite prepared to accept your word," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Do you know of any particular reason for the attack?"

"There was a very definite reason," replied Lord Dovercourt. "This man—if he can be called a man—demanded certain papers. To be exact, the specifications of an anti-aircraft invention which Mr. Robert Harding left in my charge some weeks ago."

Nelson Lee looked keen.

"Mr. Robert Harding?" he repeated. "The man who was murdered near Romford this evening!"

"Yes."

"And this dwarf is obviously the same hideous figure that three of my boys saw near the spot where Mr. Harding was murdered," nodded Nelson Lee. "Do I understand, Lord Dovercourt, that you had not examined those specifications?"

"The envelope was sealed—just as it had been when I first put it into my safe," said the Air Minister. "I had intended examining those papers some time ago, but I have been so full of engagements that I have had very little time."

"Then, actually, you know nothing whatever about Mr. Harding's anti-aircraft device?"

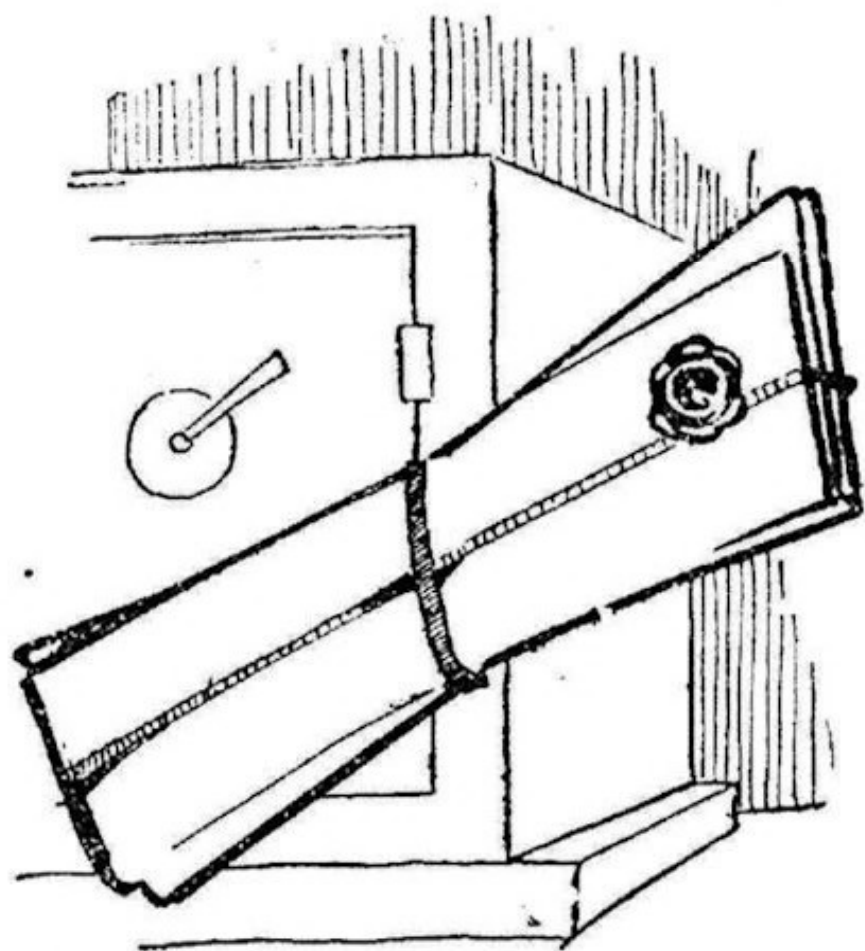
"I am afraid that is so," admitted Lord Dovercourt reluctantly.

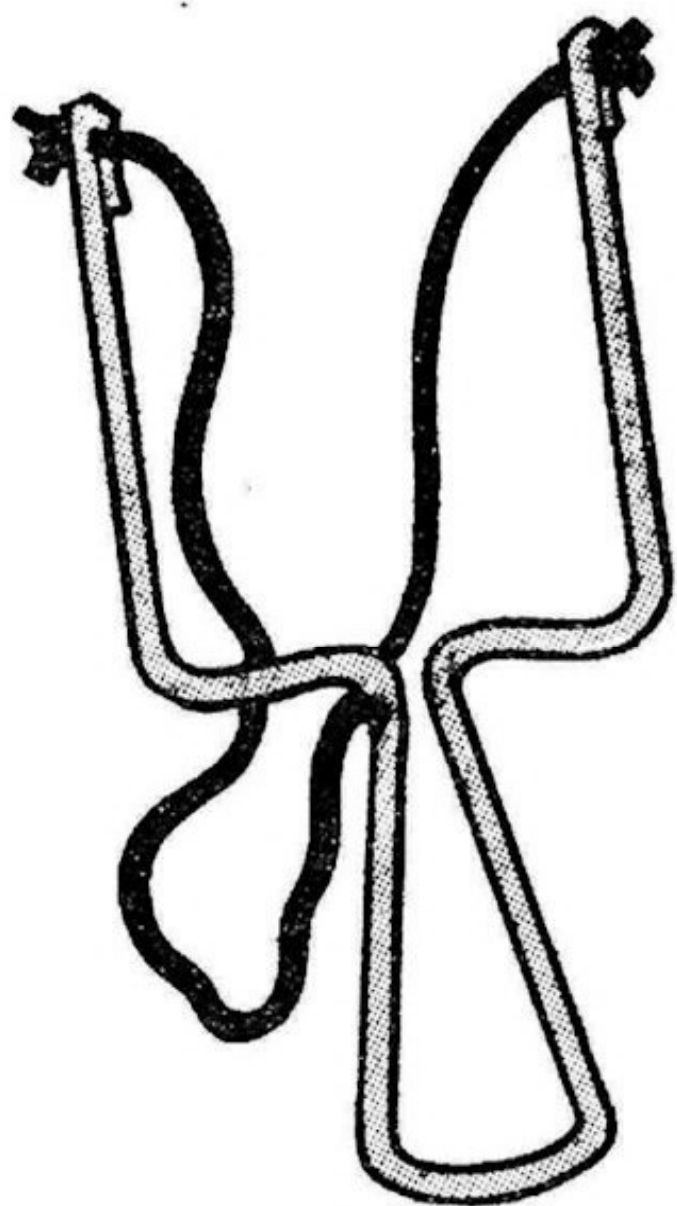
"And this hunchback took that sealed package?" asked Lee.

"That is so."

"Which way did the thief go when he escaped?"

"I cannot tell you," replied his lordship. "I was nearly choked into unconsciousness, and for a period I was quite incapable of knowing anything. But I doubt if this hunchback walked out in the ordinary way."



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Lee glanced across at the heavy curtains, and then he walked to the window. Pulling the curtains aside, he pursed his lips. The window was open, and a little rain was driving in. He looked out, and found a narrow street was immediately beneath. The windows on this side of the house all overlooked this street. By leaping down, one could easily reach the pavement.

"You say that the sealed envelope contained a secret device for dealing with enemy aeroplanes in wartime?" asked Lee slowly.

"I believe so—although I cannot be absolutely certain."

"You have no copies of those specifications?"

"None."

"It is a pity," said Lee. "There can be no doubt that the dwarf heard of the plans from Mr. Harding himself, and he lost no time in coming here to take possession of them."

"The wretched creature must have been hiding in this room," said Lord Dovercourt huskily. "He was skulking behind those curtains."

"That seems fairly obvious," agreed Nelson Lee. He was thoughtful for a few minutes. Then: "Were you alone for any time before Sir Akbar arrived?" he asked suddenly.

"For about fifteen minutes, I should think," replied Lord Dovercourt. "And that creature must have been hiding behind those curtains all the time."

"That is why I am puzzled," said Lee slowly. "Why did he not attack you when you were alone?"

The Air Minister started.

"That is certainly a point," he said, in astonishment. "I took the papers from the safe—and I was quite alone at the time. Why should this dwarf wait until Sir Akbar arrived—and thus give himself double work? Why should he have risked failure when he could have been practically certain of success?"

Sir Akbar offered a suggestion.

"Do you not think it possible that this dwarf knew of my intended visit?" he asked. "How he knew I cannot imagine—but, at least, it offers a solution to the little problem."

"How so, Sir Akbar?" asked the Air Minister.

"If this hideous man was expecting me, he naturally delayed action," replied Sir Akbar. "He did not want to be interrupted in the middle of his work. So he waited—and it was his intention, no doubt, to wait until I had departed. But, as it happened, I chanced to see a slight movement of the curtains, and thus the man was compelled to act then and there."

"Of course—of course," said Lord Dovercourt. "That is obviously the explanation, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully without hesitation.

BENSON was brought in and closely questioned.

He declared, with positive assurance, that the dwarf had not escaped through the hall. Benson had been within sight of the hall during the whole time of Sir Akbar's visit, and he would have known at once if the dwarf had passed through that way. There seemed little doubt, therefore, that the dwarf had made his escape by means of the window, as Lee had first surmised.

"I want you to use your best efforts, Mr. Lee," said the Air Minister earnestly. "At all costs, those Harding specifications must be recovered; I urge you to accept this commission."

"I accept it gladly—since I was already interested in this mysterious dwarf before I came here," replied Lee. "But I really think, Lord Dovercourt, that the police had better be informed. If

precautions are taken, the police will use discretion, and the newspapers will not get hold of the story. And, of course, Sir Akbar's name will not be mentioned at all."

"You are very generous—and I am grateful," said Sir Akbar, rising to his feet. "Owing to my position, I must certainly ask you to keep my name entirely out of this unhappy misadventure. No, no! Please do not help me. I am much better now. And I should take it as an honour if you will permit me to depart."

They shook hands, and Sir Akbar took his departure.

"**M**AY I know why Sir Akbar Laldhi visited you at such a late hour?" asked Nelson Lee, after the Balghistan Ambassador had gone.

"Frankly, I was rather surprised at Sir Akbar's visit myself," replied Lord Dovercourt. "He had heard of the latest air-mail outrage, and he was anxious to confer with me."

"And he had not been here long before the incident of the dwarf took place?"

"Sir Akbar had scarcely mentioned the reason for his call——" The Air Minister suddenly paused, and looked at Lee with startled eyes. "Good heavens! You are not suggesting, Mr. Lee, that Sir Akbar could be in any way connected with this wretched business?"

"I am suggesting nothing," replied Lee.

"Because the idea is preposterous," continued the Air Minister. "Sir Akbar's credentials are absolutely above suspicion. Moreover, as an Ambassador he is, as you know, immune from any prosecution. No man of honour would take advantage of his position like that."

"I understand that the dwarf was brown—in fact, an Asiatic?"

"Certainly," agreed Lord Dovercourt. "Unquestionably the man was brown—a native of the Far East. Sir Akbar is also an Easterner, but you must not assume——"

"Pardon me, Lord Dovercourt, but I am assuming nothing," interrupted Lee.

"Nevertheless, you are hinting that there might be some sort of connection between this thief and Sir Akbar," said the Air Minister, in a worried voice. "For heaven's sake, Mr. Lee, abandon that line of reasoning at once! Our relations with Balghistan are none too amicable, and there must be no suggestion of anything that is likely to cause hostility."

NELSON LEE was struck by the significance of the fact that Sir Akbar Laldhi and the mysterious dwarf were probably men of the same nationality. It may have been a coincidence, but it was strikingly significant nevertheless.

And those Harding plans—designs for an anti-aircraft device. They had been stolen from the Air Minister while the Ambassador for Balghistan had been in the room!

To add to the remarkable train of circumstances, the Air Minister himself was worried just now over the baffling disappearance of Indian Air Mail liners whilst flying over Balghistan territory.

There must be some connection here—all this was much more than coincidence.

Lee soon found that there was very little more to be discovered in Lord Dovercourt's house. The butler had nothing to tell. He had admitted Sir Akbar, and he had seen or heard nothing else until his master had called for help. Then he had found Lord Dovercourt on the floor, dishevelled and half-fainting; and he had found Sir Akbar Laldhi unconscious behind the curtains. Benson had seen nothing of the hideous dwarf.

Nelson Lee assured the Minister that he would do everything within his power to recover the stolen documents; he further gave his assurance that he would give the necessary information to Scotland Yard.

He took his departure soon afterwards, and as the rain had now ceased he decided to walk as far as Regent Street, at least. He would be able to get a taxi, no doubt, at Oxford Circus.

Before leaving the vicinity of the Air Minister's house, however, he went down that narrow, deserted side street. The library window was rather high, the sill being at least six feet from the pavement level. There were some ornamental iron bars at the top of the sill, but no bars across the window itself. The curtains were drawn and only a tiny chink of light could be seen.

Lee stood there for some moments, looking down at the wet pavement. He grasped the window-sill and pulled himself up.

"Now, then!" said a sudden voice. "What do you think you're doing?"

A police-constable, wearing rubber-soled shoes, had come along unexpectedly.

And he stood looking up at Nelson Lee suspiciously, the light from his lantern flashing on the detective's face.

"Better come down!" said the policeman, grimly. "And no monkey-tricks, mind!"

Nelson Lee dropped.

"It's all right, constable," he said. "I've only just left Lord Dovercourt—this is his house, as you may know?"

"I know it all right," said the constable. "So you've just left him, have you? That's not good enough for me——"

He broke off as the library window suddenly opened. Lord Dovercourt looked out—no doubt he had heard the voices outside—and he was astonished when he saw the policeman's hand on Lee's shoulder.

"What are you doing, officer?" he asked sharply. "That gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee."

The policeman removed his hand as though Lee's shoulder had become red-hot.

"Sorry, sir!" he apologised hastily. "I didn't know——"

"You were doing your duty, constable, and you had every reason for doubting my word. I was just having a look at the window-sill, Lord Dovercourt. Sorry if we disturbed you."

"Not at all!" said his lordship. "Now that the constable is here, perhaps you had better tell him to keep his eyes well open to-night?"

"I shall certainly do so," said Lee, nodding.

Lord Dovercourt soon closed the window, and Lee turned to the policeman with a smile.

"There's been a robbery!" he explained. "Some important papers were stolen from Lord Dovercourt about half-an-hour ago. The thief probably entered by this window and escaped by the same means."

"Not half-an-hour ago, sir!" said the constable promptly.

"No? Why are you so certain?"

The officer turned and pointed up the street to a deep doorway, some yards distant.

"It was raining then, sir, and I was sheltering in that doorway," he explained. "I was there for close on forty minutes."

"You didn't see a small, hunchbacked man—a kind of dwarf?"

"I saw nobody, sir," replied the constable.

"I was keeping my eyes open, too, because I was on the look-out for the inspector," he added confidentially. "I didn't leave the doorway until about ten minutes ago, when the rain stopped. And I'll swear that nobody got in or out of that window while I was about. I couldn't have helped seeing."

"H'm! Very interesting!" commented Lee. "Well, perhaps the thief escaped by some other means. You'd better keep an eye on this house to-night, constable."

"I will, Mr. Lee," said the officer. "Sorry if I was rough with you just now. I'd no idea who you were, sir."

When Nelson Lee walked away, after bidding the constable good-night, there was a curious light in his eyes.

"The dwarf did not escape through the house, and he did not escape by the window!" he muttered. "What, then, became of him? Quite an interesting little problem!"

CHAPTER 7.

The Unseen Menace!

TWO minutes later Nelson Lee turned quickly into an empty doorway and looked back. He was just in time to see a shadowy figure vanishing like a streak of lightning. He even fancied that he saw two shadowy figures, some distance in the rear. But he could not be quite sure.

"H'm! This looks promising!" he told himself.



The hideous hunchbacked dwarf leaped clean over the wall in one jump. "After him!" shouted Church excitedly.

Almost as soon as he had started walking away from Lord Dovercourt's house in Devonshire Street, he had felt certain that he was being shadowed. Yet, try as he would, he could not catch a glimpse of the mysterious enemy.

Nelson Lee experienced an uncomfortable feeling, used though he was to this sort of thing. He had not forgotten the cold-blooded murder of Robert Harding. That unfortunate gentleman had been blown up first of all, and then, as he had survived that dreadful ordeal, he had been shot through the brain. His enemies were ruthless. Leo suspected that those same enemies might be now trailing him. He half-wondered if he would suddenly feel the deadly impact of a bullet in his back.

The detective deliberately turned down one of the quiet streets in the neighbourhood of Langham Place. It would lead him out somewhere in the vicinity of Oxford Circus. Again he attempted to catch a glimpse of his shadowers, but he failed.

And then something happened that was remarkable for its unexpectedness and its bizarre nature.

NELSON LEE was walking on the left-hand side of the road, and here there was a fairly high wall, with some stunted, close-clipped trees showing just beyond—probably the back of a garden. There was a street-lamp twenty yards ahead, but just here, where Leo was, the light was not particularly good.

Something black and shapeless suddenly skimmed over the top of the wall in a single clean leap—in a movement, indeed, that was almost like flying. The figure alighted on the pavement just in front of Nelson Lee.

It was like a magician's trick, so mysteriously had this apparition come out of nothingness. Nelson Lee caught his breath in sharply, his right hand going round towards his hip-pocket. But he was at a disadvantage, for he was wearing his overcoat, and the overcoat was buttoned.

What he saw caused him a moment of repulsion. A dwarf—an animal-like hunchback—with a brown, evil face. The burning eyes were fixed upon Lee's own countenance, and he could see the yellowish fangs as the creature bared its thin, cruel lips. Festooned over its shoulders was a long black cloak. It was the dwarf—the murderer of Robert Harding—the vile creature which had robbed Lord Dovercourt!

"No, Mr. Nelson Lee, I cannot permit you to get at your pistol!" came a tense, vibrant voice. "It seems that you intend to make yourself a nuisance—and that is a thing I do not allow."

As he was speaking, Dacca the dwarf projected himself forward. There was something bestial in his agility. His claw-like hands came out of the folds of his cloak, and they reached for Nelson Lee's throat.

The detective half-turned, realising his danger—but he was a shade too late. Those clutching fingers reached his throat, and gripped hard. In spite of Lee's efforts he was borne back until he crashed to the pavement. Dacca sprawled over him, like some evil monstrosity.

"Fool!" snarled Dacca. "Fool to think that you could interfere in my affairs and live."

The strength of the creature was phenomenal, startling. Although Nelson Lee was a powerful man, and although he now fought with every ounce of his energy, he was like a child in the grasp of this foe! The grip round his throat tightened. He felt the life being choked out of him.

"SOMETHING'S wrong!" said Nipper, hoarsely.

He and Willy Handforth were crouching in a doorway, thirty yards in the rear. Still farther back Reggie Pitt and Stanley Waldo were hiding. And on the other side of the street there were two more—Church and McClure.

All six of them, in short, had been shadowing Nelson Lee!

These, then, were those mysterious shadowers whom Leo had suspected rather than detected. It had been Nipper's idea. Knowing that Nelson Lee had gone to the Air Minister's house in Devonshire Street, Nipper had suggested that a few of the "cub" detectives should place themselves handy.

There was a possibility of danger—and Nipper had wanted to be on the safe side.

"Mr. Lee's down—there's somebody crouching over him!" exclaimed Willy. "Come on! We can't wait here! We'd better reveal ourselves now!"

They left their doorway, and ran at top speed along the pavement. Dacca saw them coming—he heard them first, and looked up. His hideous face became distorted with appalling rage.

"It's the dwarf!" gasped Nipper, as he ran. "Look! Buck up, you chaps! To the rescue!"

Pitt and Waldo and the others came rushing up at the double. Perhaps it seemed to Dacca that the whole street had become alive with running figures. At all events, he must have known that he was in considerable danger. He could not risk capture. He dropped Lee abruptly, spun round, and leapt.

"Look!" yelled Pitt. "Oh, my only sainted aunt!"

They all saw Dacca as he leapt. It was a sight to be remembered. The dwarf rose up into the air as though he possessed the limbs of a kangaroo. Up he went, soaring high, to leap clean over the wall in one jump.



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"After him!" shouted Church excitedly.

Waldo nearly imitated Dacca's leap. For Waldo—son of the famous Peril Expert—was something of a wonder himself. His leap took him to the top of the wall, and he quickly recovered his balance. He saw a garden, well-kept and neatly laid out, and although the gloom was deep, Waldo's phenomenally keen eyes saw a black figure moving some distance away, near the house. It rose for a moment as it topped a low wall, and then disappeared completely.

"He's gone!" panted Waldo, looking down at the others. "He must have run like a hare."

"Guv'nor!" panted Nipper, as he bent anxiously over Nelson Lee. "Oh, the fiend! Look at these horrible marks on the guv'nor's throat!"

Nelson Lee was fighting his way back to consciousness. His face, a moment earlier, had been nearly purple, but now he was recovering.

"Thank you, boys!" he muttered, his voice hoarse and weak. "You have taught me a lesson."

"But we did nothing, sir!" said Reggie Pitt. "We've failed. That hunchback man got away!"

"You would have been magicians if you had captured him," said Nelson Lee. "So you are the shadowers I glimpsed, are you? Well done, boys! It is a mercy you decided to watch over me in this way!"

"We'd no idea we should be so useful, guv'nor," said Nipper thankfully. "And I rather think we surprised that dwarf as much as we surprised you. You don't actually mean to say that he was strangling you, do you?"

"I had nearly lost consciousness when you came up," replied Lee, gravely. "That vile thing possesses the strength of a dozen men. I have never known anything like it. Make no mistake, boys, we are up against a deadly enemy this time—far more deadly than Professor Zingrave and all his myrmidons of the Green Triangle!"

CHAPTER 8.

Nelson Lee's Theory!

WHEN they got home—after no further misadventures—Nelson Lee, accompanied by Nipper, went into his own chambers.

They found Lord Dorrimore sprawling in Nelson Lee's easiest chair. He was looking bronzed and healthy. He shook hands warmly with Lee, and clapped Nipper on the back.

"Gad! It's good to see you again!" he said. "I wish you could spare time to come out to India, Lee. There's a pretty little problem there, waiting for somebody to solve."

"I may go to India yet," said Lee grimly.

"Do you mean that?" asked the sporting peer. "I can assure you that—— Good glory! What's happened to your neck, Lee? What on earth have you been doing?"

"If it hadn't been for Nipper and some of the other boys I should have been dead long before now," replied Lee quietly. "I've had a rather nasty experience, Dorrie."

He gave the details, and Lord Dorrimore listened in astonishment.

"Well, you're not the only one who's had a rummy adventure," said his lordship, when the detective had finished. "This affair out in the East is uncanny enough, I can give you my word! If I wasn't a level-headed man I'd swear that there was some devilry afoot—some sort of supernatural power. I saw one of those air liners vanish before my very eyes! And it was as much as I could do to keep my own machine out of the fatal zone."

He went into a graphic description of his experience, and Nelson Lee and Nipper listened with fascinated interest.

DORRIE gave all the details—he told how he had followed that air liner, and how he had suddenly seen the machine climbing higher and higher into the infinite blue of the sky. Then he told how the nose of his own machine had been jerked upwards, and how that dreadful paralysis had commenced to creep over him.

"I could do nothing!" he declared. "At least, that was my first feeling. Even now I don't know how I managed to switch off the engine. But it was that which saved my life. Within another few seconds I should have been so completely paralysed that I could not even have reached the switch, or moved the joy-stick in any direction."

"Have you flown between Karachi and Bushire since then?"

"I flew back," replied Lord Dorrimore. "Nothing happened. The journey was quite uneventful."

"And what kind of country is it—I mean, at this spot where you met with this strange experience?" asked Lee. "What is the nature of the country at that particular place?"

"Hills, for the most part—barren, bleak, sunburned hills," replied Dorrie. "An ugly place—a wilderness where there are no villages or towns, and where there is even a scarcity of animal life. Every inch of that country has been searched for wreckage, but none has ever been found. All those machines have vanished *skywards*. They have gone up, never to return."

"The latter part of your statement is a pure assumption, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "They have not returned to their usual bases, but it is incredible to suppose that they have never returned again to earth."

"If they had returned to earth, where did they come down?"

"Perhaps somewhere in the interior of Balghanistan."

"But why?" asked Dorrie. "Why should they come down in Balghanistan? And if this is the fact, why have not the Balghanistan authorities given us any information?"

"It's a very mysterious business, Dorrie—and I, for one, do not credit the scientific theory," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I do not believe for a moment that there is some phenomenal upheaval in the heavens which is causing the machines to be attracted away from the earth. That theory is fantastic. I have another one."

"Of course you have," agreed Dorrie. "I know you'd have a theory—and I'll bet it's a good one."

"I have already told you about this dwarf—this lurch back who murdered Robert Harding, the inventor," said Nelson Lee. "Well, it is my belief that this dwarf is the head of an organisation—or, at least, an important unit of the organisation. Mr. Harding was seized by these people, and his secret was forced from him."

"His secret? What secret?"

"A revolutionary method of dealing with enemy aircraft in war time," replied Lee. "The Air Minister has admitted that Harding presented specifications of such a device. It is significant that Mr. Harding should have been kidnapped at just about the time when he had completed his experiments, and had submitted his plans."

"And you think that the process has already been put into operation?"

"Doesn't it look like it?" asked Lee. "These people, with the dwarf at the head of them, have been putting Harding's invention to the test. But as there is no war, they have been preying upon harmless air mail liners. These men are undoubtedly enemies of England—of the British Empire. And they have Mr. Harding's secret entirely to themselves, for there are no duplicates of the plans. That is the really grave point. Harding is dead, and it is doubtful if a thorough search of his effects will bear any fruit. The outlook is certainly serious."

Lord Dorrimore looked hard at Nelson Lee.

"You are thinking of something else, old man," he said keenly. "You are almost suggesting that there is some world-wide plot afoot—some diabolical scheme for wiping out England. What, exactly, do you mean?"

"I would rather not say just now, Dorrie," replied Lee quietly. "I will admit that I have some startling thoughts in my head—but they are so vague, so indefinite, that it would hardly be fair for me to give voice to them. Yet I will confess that I suspect these mysterious enemies are plotting against the security of the Empire."

"And who are they?" asked Dorrie bluntly. "Indians? Chinese? Russians, perhaps?"

"My attention is centred upon Balghanistan," replied Lee grimly.

"Well, if there's going to be any scrapping—a war, or anything like that—I want to be in it," declared Lord Dorrimore enthusiastically. "Things have been pretty slow for me of late, and I'm getting a bit stagnated. I want something——"

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Handforth.

"Mr. Lee!" gasped Edward Oswald.

Handforth had burst in, and his face was excited and flushed.

"Well?" asked Lee sharply. "What is it?"

"Browne's wireless set again, sir!" shouted Handforth. "Those same guttural sounds! Browne's picked 'em up!"

"I'll come," said Lee promptly.

He sprang to his feet, and ran to the door.

"By the Lord Harry! What's all this?" asked Dorrie, staring.

"Don't you remember?" panted Nipper. "We were listening to Browne's wireless set—listening to those guttural sounds—when we heard Mr. Harding's appeal for help! But I can't understand it! I thought that the secret wireless station was burned down with the farmhouse! There must be another one!"

"I'm in on this," said his lordship briskly.

HE and Nipper followed Nelson Lee. They went out of Lee's chambers, and passed through a communicating door into the Detective Academy. And within a minute they were in the Common Room, where the young detectives were gathered round the amateur wireless set.

"Ug-ug-ug!" the loud speaker was saying, clearly and distinctly. "Zat-zot-zid-zad! Ug-ug!" Lee was listening intently.

"I fancy it must be a secret code of some kind," he said in a low voice. "There is another private broadcasting station, Dorrie. The one at Romford was destroyed. And yet, within a few hours, these people have got another one working—sending out those secret signals. In Heaven's name, what can this grim mystery mean?"

Abruptly the guttural sounds ceased. But before any of the boys could make any comment other sounds came.

"Listen!" urged Lord Dorrimore, his face alight with consternation. "The S.O.S.! Yes! It's another of those aeroplanes! It's sending out the distress call!"

They all stood there, fascinated, horrified.

These wireless signals were faint, and there were many atmospherics—indicating that the signals were coming from a great distance. Out there, somewhere over wild Balghanistan, another ill-fated air liner was sending out the distress call to the world. Already the signals were becoming faint, and soon they ceased altogether.

"Another one gone!" muttered Dorrie huskily.

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"There's something devilish about this, Dorrie!" he said, taking his lordship on one side. "That aeroplane sent out its S.O.S. on the same wave-length as that secret code. Doesn't it suggest something to you?"

"I don't understand, old man."

"You tell me that you were nearly paralysed just before you switched off?"

"Yes but——"

"How do we know that the pilots of these other missing 'planes were not similarly paralysed?" asked Lee tensely. "In that case, how could they send out any distress signals? Isn't it possible that these signals are coming, not from the victims, but from the unknown Force which is destroying them?"

"Ye gods! I've never thought of anything like that!" said Dorrie blankly.

"The use of this same wave-length!" continued Lee. "Here is this dwarf—known to be mixed up with this secret broadcasting station, and with these guttural code signals—in London. By tuning in on this wave-length, he can tell just when a machine is going to its doom. He can be kept constantly informed."

Lord Dorrimore made a helpless gesture.

"It's beyond me," he confessed.

"The whole affair is something of an enigma," said Nelson Lee. "But I am already inclined to the theory that the dwarf and Sir Akbar are one and the same——"

"Impossible!" broke in Lord Dorrimore.

Nelson Lee smiled.

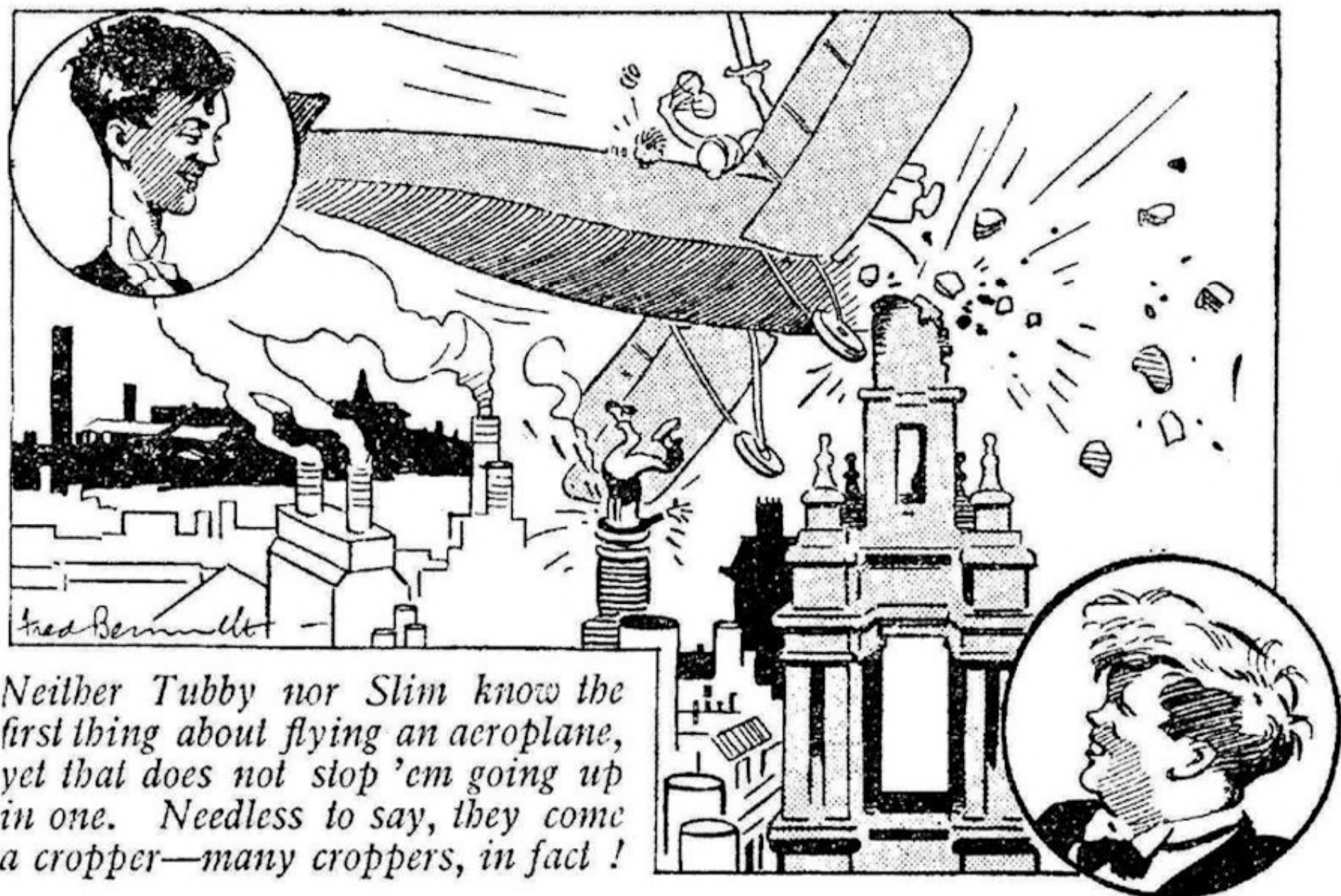
"You think so? Well, well, we shall see!"

THE END

Is Nelson Lee's startling theory right? On no account must you miss reading the next story in this amazing series, chums. It's entitled, "The House of Pattering Feet!" and is one long thrill from start to finish. And don't forget that there's another grand Free Gift awaiting you next Wednesday!

Meet the Champion "Funny Merchants" in their First Mirth-making Escapade!

The Laughable Larks of TUBBY AND SLIM!



Neither Tubby nor Slim know the first thing about flying an aeroplane, yet that does not stop 'em going up in one. Needless to say, they come a cropper—many croppers, in fact!

Aerial Antics!

WHIZ! Plop!
Bertie Bootle's cherubic smile was still in evidence as he cheerfully wiped the remains of a well-aimed snowball from his face.

"Jolly good shot!" he remarked to his brother Benny.

A February fall of snow had enticed them into a meadow close to their home, and the innocent recreation of snowballing had kept them out of mischief for at least a couple of hours—a thing almost unheard of as far as they were concerned.

They were rather curious lads, these two. The one thing in common which the brothers possessed in a superlative degree was the aptitude of getting into the most fearsome scrapes imaginable and the ingenuity for getting out of them again.

Benny Bootle, the taller and elder of the two, was of an ungainly build, his tubby body surmounting a pair of long thin legs which were capable of remarkable speed when set in motion. His full moon face, topped with an untidy thatch of hair, completed a picture which radiated a jollity which was seldom absent from his nature.

His brother, Bertie Bootle, was as thin as a rake; so thin, in fact, that you would almost mark him absent if he stood sideways. His childlike and innocent expression, however, had led many people into underestimating his powers of performing impish pranks until it was too late and the mischief was done.

Another snowball whizzed, and then a buzzing roar, gradually increasing in volume, caused the two brothers to stop the game and glance up to where a small aeroplane was flying overhead.

"It's coming down, I believe," yelled Benny. He was right. The machine landed about a couple of hundred yards off and taxied rather bumpily to a standstill.

The two boys started to run towards the 'plane, and the much begoggled pilot stood up and gesticulated to them.

"Anything wrong?" chirped Bertie. "No, nothing wrong, youngsters!" replied the pilot, stepping out of the machine. "I have an urgent call to make on Colonel Squint. He lives close at hand, doesn't he?"

"Just over the other side of that road," they answered, pointing to the red roof of a house which showed above the tree-tops bordering the meadow.

"Very well! Now, if you will stay alongside of my aeroplane and see that nobody touches it, I will give you a shilling."

"We're on!" exclaimed the two lads.

The pilot nodded, and then strode away across the field to Colonel Squint's abode.

"I reckon he's a detective," said Bertie. "He's come about those papers the colonel had stolen from him."

"Very likely," remarked his brother, with his interest focused on the aeroplane.

The boys had not troubled to tell the stranger that Colonel Squint was their guardian; he might have mentioned the fact to the colonel that his wards were minding the 'plane, and that would certainly have upset their plans.

"Know anything about aeroplanes, Slim?" asked Tubby of his brother, one of whose hobbies was tinkering about with odd bits of metal and springs, out of which he would conjure the weirdest of mechanical contrivances.

"No, nothing!" said Slim, wriggling his thin body in an ecstasy of anticipation. "But now is the time to learn, Tubby."

"Let's nose about," said the other tersely.

They nosed about, climbing up into the cockpit and studying the control board.

"What about a little flutter?" suggested Tubby. "Think you could fly the jigger?"

"Sure thing! What about waiting until the pilot chap returns and forks out the bob? Might as well have that first. Then trip him up and off we go."

Tubby gazed at his brother with admiration.

"You do get the right ideas, Slim," he chortled. "Hallo! Here he comes! Get away from the machine and prepare to receive our reward."

The two boys solemnly paraded round the machine for the benefit of the owner, and he appeared satisfied that his promise of a shilling had caused them zealously to fulfil their job. He was so pleased with them, indeed, that he increased the amount of their payment to two shillings, which sum was gratefully received by the brothers.

The stranger then switched on and swung the propeller preparatory to resuming his flight, and then, as he came round to the side, he suddenly received a shove from Slim and took a backward toss over the body of Tubby, who had stooped down behind him.

He was then made quite aware of the duplicity of the two youths, for he was rolled face downwards and sat upon by Slim while Tubby climbed into the cockpit.

The propeller was roaring in fine style when, at a signal from Tubby, Slim bounded off the back of the prostrate man and took a flying leap into the cockpit, sliding his thin body on to Tubby's lap.

Then, before the astounded owner could scramble to his feet, the machine jerked forward with a suddenness that banged Slim's head on his brother's nose.

"Hi! Steady, ass!" gasped Tubby, his eyes full of tears from the force of the impact.

Then he forgot the bang, for they were in the air, both cheering madly. The moment after, however, the cheers stopped, for the 'plane descended to earth again and raced along the ground with an eccentric gait caused through the buckling of one of the wheels.

"Look out, fathead!" yelled Tubby. "You'll be into that fence in a minute."

Slim looked up from the control board which was engaging most of his attention, and unconsciously moved the joy-stick over so that the jigger staggered round in a small circle. And then they caught sight of the scandalised owner of the aeroplane, loping along towards them and waving his arms with a fury not to be mistaken even at that distance.

The boys shouted ironical greetings to him as Slim, by an unsure touch, again caused them to take to the air, this time to stay, and they maintained an undulating course varying from about a dozen to twenty feet from the ground.

Feeling now more sure of himself, Slim started experimenting with the result that they zoomed upward and then glided unevenly round the meadow above the tops of the trees.

"This is great," bellowed Tubby. "Let's fly over the town."

Slim turned his head and a smile of sheer delight decorated his babyish face.

"Good idea!" he bawled with glee. "We'll be able to land in the school grounds." He referred to the Grammar School in the town which they attended as day boarders.

No sooner thought of than attempted, and, mounting still higher to get his bearings, Slim headed the 'plane for the little town of Tumbledown, about half a mile distant.

Trouble at the Town Hall!

IN half a minute the outskirts of the town were reached and the two boys could see the people on the sidewalks gazing up at them. Slim thought that there would be more fun if they took a nearer view of the townsfolk, and, with a preliminary circuit, he swooped down to within twenty feet of the roadway and swooshed up the High Street, actually flying between the shops and houses on either side of the road.

Spotting their old enemy the police constable regulating the scanty traffic, they dropped still lower and whizzed towards him. His startled amazement at this procedure was so great that he mechanically threw up his arm to stop their progress, catching an in-offensive horse a smack in the face with the back of his gloved hand. The insulted beast promptly reared up on his hind legs and pawed the air like a boxing kangaroo, one hoof swiping off the policeman's helmet and sending it through the windscreen of a motor-car, to the chauffeur's great annoyance.

All this took place in a few seconds, and the intrepid airmen were quickly past the cross roads and nearing the town hall. Here

again they were fated to cause more excitement than would normally have been the case, for, at this precise moment, the mayor and town councillors were issuing forth in full robes from some function or another, preceded by a pompous mace-bearer, his symbol of office sloped over his shoulder.

At the aeroplane's approach a mighty shout went up from the mayor and his corporation. The mace-bearer in his fright let go the handle of his mace, and the heavy end at once descended, with a thud on the head of the mayor and knocked him out. The member of the corporation immediately following him tripped over the fallen figure, and those behind him, stumbling one after the other across the man in front, finally ornamented the town hall steps with a gigantic heap of struggling councillors. Legs and arms waved; robes were torn to shreds and cocked hats of office were squashed to the thinness of pancakes.

Slim and Tubby did not stop to view the consequences of their unorthodox appearance, for, on seeing the confusion which they had caused, their chief hope was that owing to the suddenness of the occurrence they had escaped recognition.

To further ensure this, Bertie manipulated one of the controls, with the idea of sending the machine full speed ahead. Unfortunately Slim made a slight error. The 'plane started whizzing round in a circle and then:

Crash!

It jolted their teeth and made their heads buzz; a third passenger joined them. This passenger was the stone figure of Justice which had lately been perched on a pinnacle at the top of the town hall building, and who now lay across the cockpit inconsiderately pushing her feet into the propeller.

Fortunately this part of the town hall roof was flat and the aeroplane, minus propeller, flopped down the few remaining feet and came to an abrupt standstill against the coping. Slim shot out of the cockpit and took a dive down one of the chimneys, and luckily for him the room from which it came was on the top floor. He tumbled out of the grate into the room, bringing a cloud of soot with him, and standing up, a grimy figure, he took stock of his surroundings.

The room was empty, and he made for the door with the intention of mounting to the roof to find out what had become of Tubby. On the table was a thick envelope addressed to Colonel Squint, his guardian, and he picked the packet up and slid it into his pocket with the object of saving the post office the job of delivering it.

Mounting a short flight of stairs he came to a landing above which was a skylight, and looking up saw his brother's face peering in at him. He signalled to Tubby, who lifted the skylight and dropped down beside him.

"Hallo, nigger!" said Tubby. "You all right?"

"Fine!" replied Slim. "How did you come off?"

Tubby's moon face was split with a smile reaching from ear to ear.

"I was wedged in a bit," he said, "but when I stood up the whole machine fell to pieces, so I simply stepped out, and there you are."

"Well!" yawned Slim, wiping some of the soot from his face, "that's that! Jolly good sport, aviation; don't you think so, Tubby?"

"Best I've enjoyed for a long time," agreed Tubby. "And now, what about getting back to tea?"

"Yes! That's the next thing." Slim held up his hand. "Listen! Lot of excitement going on down below by the sound of it. We shall have to look slippy, old man, else they'll be coming up and catching us."

The two lads then jumped astride the banisters and slid down two or three flights of stairs. The confused sound of many voices was now much louder, and they gathered that a search party was coming upstairs at the double.

"Along this corridor," hissed Slim softly, and they ran silently for twenty yards and, risking disclosure, opened the door of one of the many rooms. Their luck still held; the room was empty.

Tubby walked over to a cupboard and opened the door.

"My hat!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Look here, Slim!"

Slim looked, and saw, hung upon pegs in the cupboard, two or three sets of robes such as were worn by the members of the corporation.

"See the idea," continued Tubby. "We'll get into these and join in the chase for ourselves. When we get near the doors we can slip away."

Without wasting any more time, for it was now very precious if they were to escape, the brothers donned each a set of the gold-braided, fur-collared robes. Then they put on the triangular, feathered hats, and sallied forth with some confidence.

By the sound of it, the pursuing party was searching the rooms floor by floor. Our two friends proceeded leisurely down the main staircase and were fortified in the merit of their disguise by the deference shown them by one of the house servants whom they passed.

Good fortune guided them to a small door leading out into a street at the side of the town hall, and to their delight they saw a taxi standing at the kerb a few paces away.

Beckoning the driver, they bundled quickly into the vehicle, and Tubby gruffly gave the address of a well-known mansion some few miles away past their home.

The man touched his hat and off they went, sitting back to avoid discovery as the car clanked through the throng of townsfolk who were gathered, chattering and speculating, outside the scene of the forced landing. Once at the edge of the town, they slipped off their robes and Tubby, lifting the speaking tube, ordered the chauffeur not to drive too quickly as it was bad for their nerves.

At an agreed spot, Tubby then slithered through the cab window farthest from the



The constable caught the inoffensive horse a smack in the face with his hand, and the insulted animal reared up like a boxing kangaroo.

driver, and dropped off quietly on to the grassy bank at the side of the road. Slim immediately followed suit, and the taxi driver was left with two sets of aldermanic robes and hats as his sole passengers.

After a peep through the hedge to see that the coast was clear, the two brothers boldly crossed the meadow towards their home.

They managed to get through the front door and that was all, for the voice of their guardian, Colonel Squint, boomed out at them.

"Come in here, you two," he rasped, and into his presence they perforce had to go.

And then they got the slating of their lives. From the stuttering and snorting colonel they managed to gather that the owner of the aeroplane had followed after them into the town, had learned of the destruction of his machine, had suffered from about fifty pink fits and had finally reported them to their guardian.

They also were given to understand that the colonel had offered to reimburse the pilot for the loss of his aeroplane, and had prevailed upon him to take no further action in the matter, leaving the punishment of the boys in their guardian's hands.

"Thank goodness," concluded the colonel, having exhausted his indignation, "I shall be going back to India shortly. I shall then be able to enjoy a quiet holiday hunting tigers and other wild animals instead of being responsible for two untamed, irresponsible, mad-headed monkeys like you!"

"I have, therefore, decided that you two will be sent right off to a boarding-school. I

have chosen one in Sussex called St. Fluke's, and the principal, Doctor Flybnight, has agreed to keep a very strict watch on your doings, I can tell you. Now, get upstairs and start packing. You will start for St. Fluke's to-morrow morning."

This was a blow to the lads, and with downcast faces they turned to leave the colonel's room. Slim thrust his hands deep into his pockets disconsolately, and felt the letter which he had picked up from the table after his fall down the chimney at the town hall.

"Here's a letter for you, sir. I picked it up at the town hall." He offered the packet to his guardian, whose eyes goggled.

"Why, bless my soul! Those are my missing papers which were stolen. I'll wager that was the work of my enemy, Councillor Mugwump. But I have no proof. Thank goodness you picked them up, my boy; it has saved me a lot of worry."

Slim was quick to seize the opportunity.

"Do you think, sir," he said boldly, "that, as we have recovered your papers, we might in the circumstances postpone our attendance at St. Fluke's until you actually go back to India?"

"Well—er—huh! Perhaps I shall change my mind and not send you off to-morrow. I'll think it over. You need not commence packing until I tell you—er—grrrr!"

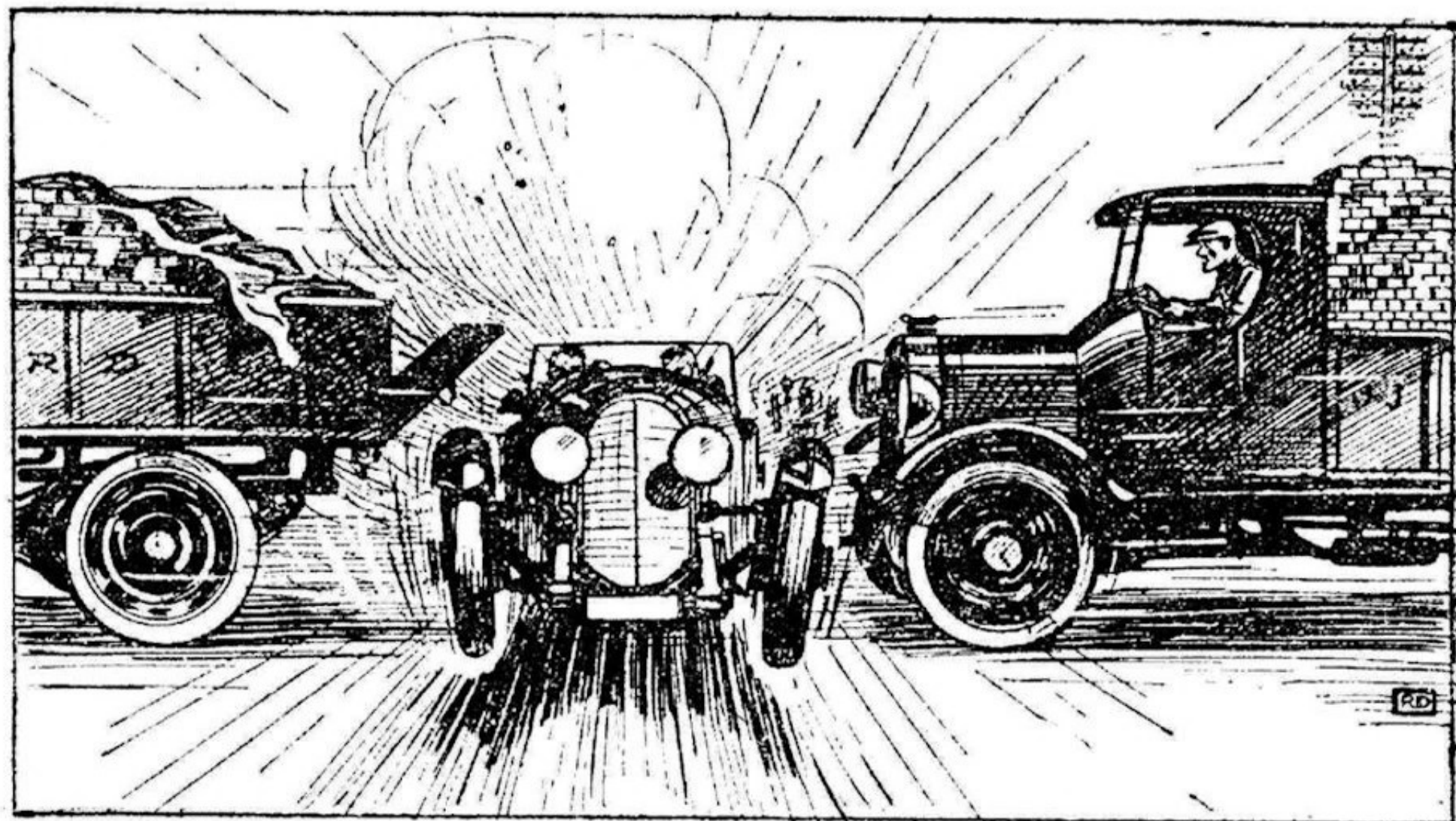
And with artful winks at each other, Slim and Tubby went in to their belated tea.

(Tubby and Slim will keep you in fits of laughter next week—don't miss the next story in this amusing series.)

OPENING INSTALMENT OF A GRAND NEW MOTOR-RACING SERIAL!

THE IRON SPEEDMAN

By ALFRED EDGAR



Hurthling between two lorries at a hundred miles an hour, with mere inches to spare—that's just the sort of thing Jim Ross delights in doing!

Chapter 1.

The Challenge!

THE afternoon quiet of drowsy little Woodburn village was abruptly shattered by the approach of what sounded like a sheet-iron thunderbolt travelling at speed.

Windows flew up and folk ran to cottage doors. Sheep on the village green stampeded past the water-trough, and sleeping dogs awakened with hoarse barking. The village policeman, lounging at the back of the Woodburn Arms, almost choked himself in his effort to finish his free drink and still be in time to witness what appeared to be the coming end of the world.

When the entire village had been roused, when pigs were grunting in terror in their sties, and every horse in hearing was shying, a car hurtled around the bend beyond the green. Its spinning rear wheels raised a streaking dust-cloud, and sunlight shone blindingly on polished aluminium.

Flame spurted from the fat copper exhaust pipe, accompanied by the sound as of a quick-firing battery in action. Through the mad uproar of the high-powered engine shrilled the screech of a supercharger, and behind the little wind-screen huddled two goggled figures.

"It's only young Jim Ross—the varmint!" grunted the policeman, then choked as the machine tore past him, slashing dust and small stones over his uniform.

"Bit noisy, isn't she?" Jim Ross yelled to his companion, as he eased the steering over and half-skidded past the local baker's cart; the aged horse between the shafts was rearing like a two-year-old and trying to block the road.

"Yes, she is a bit," agreed Joe Cooper, and he rubbed a clot of oil from his cheek as he braced himself anew in the bouncing cockpit. "Goes all right, though!"

"Steve said it ought to do a hundred!" Jim yelled. "I'll step on it properly when we get on the Great North Road—she's only doin' about eighty miles an hour now!"

"A mere crawl!" grinned Joe. "Watch out for those cows!"

From a farm-yard gate just outside the village a herd of a dozen cows suddenly ambled on to the road, spreading across it. Jim's eyes narrowed as the big car rocked down at

them. He pulled to the side of the road, timed the movement of the animals, and then was on them, with his near-side wheels skimming the ditch and the other side of the car missing a pair of wicked-looking horns by less than six inches. A movement of the wheel, and they were in the centre of the road again.

Ordinarily, travelling past a herd of cows at eighty miles an hour would have been thoroughly reckless driving. If anyone else had been at the wheel, Joe Cooper would have resigned himself to waking up in hospital. But he knew that Jim could place the wheels of a speeding car to split inches, could skid round a sixpence, and always kept his head in emergencies.

If anybody but Jim Ross had come through the village at so fierce a speed, the local policeman would have roused the county to catch him. As it was Jim, however, the constable only grunted, while everybody else just smiled and went back to their work, or shouted angrily at their dogs for making so much noise.

They all knew Jim Ross, of Ross's Garage at the end of the hamlet, and almost everybody liked him. He and his elder brother, Steve, had been left the garage by their father—"Big" Ross—who had been killed in a motor-racing crash.

In his day, Big Ross had been a famous speedman, with steely nerve and supreme daring. Jim took after his father. He was absolutely fearless, without being reckless; he loved cars and he regarded sixty miles an hour as a perfectly natural gait at which to get about the country. He would not admit that he was going fast until his speed approached somewhere around 100 m.p.h.

But Jim could not be trusted with a job in the garage, because he would be just as likely to use a sledge-hammer to try and set the points of a sparking plug as anything else; setting points being rather tricky and necessitating accuracy to within thousandths of an inch.

Jim was strong and hefty for all his youth, full of energy. In his vigour, he had completely wrecked a petrol pump.

He and lean, oily, grimy Joe Cooper were chums. Joe was head mechanic at the garage; in fact, he was the only mechanic. He was always cheerful, and he was brainy in his way. The first thing Joe would think of when faced, say, with a leaky radiator, would be to plug the leak with soap or chewing gum, while Jim would stand by marvelling at his chum's smartness.

Steve Ross was much older, and he had inherited his father's cleverness, where Jim had inherited his dad's strength and courage. Both the boys had a great admiration for Steve. To them, he could do absolutely no wrong.

The aluminium car which Jim was now driving was an Arvin. It was a flash, showy model, but its owner had never been able to get more than 70 m.p.h. out of it. He had asked Steve to overhaul it and tune it up for him. Jim had brought the car out to test it, and his brother had said that the machine should now do 100 m.p.h. on the open road.

"Steve's put some stuff into this old tub!" Jim yelled, when the cows had vanished behind them, and the stout telegraph posts which marked the Great North Road showed ahead.

"Wonder if he'll do any good with the racing car?" Joe asked abruptly.

"He'll make it so fast nobody'll be able to hold it!" Jim told him.

The racing machine referred to was a car known as the Ross-Eight, and it had been built by Jim's father. He was still perfecting it when he died, and it was the ambition of the brothers to make the machine all that Big Ross had meant it to be. Steve was even now getting it ready for a five hundred miles race at Brooklands, in which he himself was to drive the car.

"Sit tight!" Jim called suddenly, as he sighted the point at which the by-road they were following intersected the main highway. "I'm goin' to try the brakes!"

He sent the big Arvin on at more than eighty miles an hour. The main road appeared to leap to meet them. Joe clung to the side of the car, and in the moment that it seemed as though the Arvin must dash full across the broad highway, Jim reached for the foot-brake.

There came the harsh screech of brake-shoes in their drums. The machine wagged its tail and slowed like magic, with the muscles of Jim's leg putting a four hundred pounds pressure on the pedal and bringing the machine to a dead stop on the very rim of the Great North Road.

"Not so dusty!" he commented. "It's a——" He broke off.

Through the noisy beat of the Arvin's engine they heard the fierce boom of another car. Both recognised the bellow of a racing exhaust, and they craned forward to look.

A machine was flinging itself down the centre of the famous highway. It was a Super-Sports Ace, out on its final tests, and behind the wheel was the helmeted, goggled figure of the head tester of the Ace Motor Works. Both recognised him.

"That's 'Sniff' Dix!" Joe bawled. "Put it across him, Jim!"

The red-painted machine ripped past them. As it went, Jim kicked the Arvin's throttle wide open and sent his car bellowing in pursuit.

Chapter 2.

Rivals of the Road!

THE Arvin was one of the noisiest cars ever made, but Jim knew all about making it go. He screamed to the peak of second gear, then slid into third, and almost pushed his foot through the floorboards in his effort to open the throttle wider.

With everything on the car howling in protest he made a sixty-five miles an hour change into top gear, and settled behind the wheel as he peered ahead at the smooth, low-hung tail of the semi-racing machine ahead of him.

"Whack her up, Jim!" Joe leaned towards him and bawled the words. "Now's the chance to show Sniff he isn't so hot as he thinks!"

Neither of them liked Sniff Dix. He happened to be racing mechanic for a crack speedman named Lon Stargie, Ace Motors' star driver. Because of this, Sniff regarded fellows who worked in poky little country garages as of no importance whatever.

It amused the chums to bring a fairly fast car from the garage and annoy Sniff with it when the head tester was out with some Ace saloon model that couldn't do more than about seventy miles an hour. The two would pass him, then look back and laugh at him—just as Sniff did when their positions were reversed.

Both knew that when he was mounted on a Super-Sports Grand Prix model Ace—as he was now—Sniff regarded himself as king of the Great North Road. That anything else could possibly catch and pass him was unbelievable, and he got the shock of his life when his rear view mirror showed him the shining nose of the Arvin coming up.

"He's seen us—he's stepping on it!" Jim gasped as he saw the Ace start to shift faster—but still the Arvin crept up.

Joe bent to peer at the speedometer. The quivering needle was flicking at 95 m.p.h. and still rising. They were fifty yards behind the other car then, and the broad stretch of the most famous road in England showed wide and straight in front with nothing on it.

Jim was half deafened by the mad roaring of the car he drove, and the speedometer needle surged to just 100 miles an hour as the Ace ahead reached the limit of its speed—while the old Arvin went still faster!

"Steve must ha' put a couple more engines in this, from the way she's shiftin'!" Joe craned up and shouted the words. "We're doin' a hundred an' five!"

"When we touch a hundred and ten we'll probably fly off the road!" Jim answered. "She's beginning to wobble now!"

He could feel the front wheels wobbling under the speed, kicking back through the steering wheel. The machine lurched and he fought to hold it, then they were clattering at the red Ace's tail.

Jim saw Sniff Dix glance at them, his eyes glaring behind his goggles. His teeth were gritted and his lips parted as he recognised Joe's cheery grin.

The roaring Arvin came level. Jim saw the cockpit of the other machine, its instrument board loaded with dials and gauges. As they travelled past, he saw Sniff bending, cursing as he tried to find yet more speed in his Ace.

The silvery Arvin went past his engine-cover, with its broad straps, drew ahead and left him behind.

"Walked past him!" Joe yelled. "That's the way to do it, Jim! Wobblin' a bit now, ain't she?"

"Yes!" Jim gasped the words. It was taking all his strength to hold the machine and prevent it shooting over the side of the road. A glance at the speedometer told him that they were doing more than 105 m.p.h.; then, as he focused his gaze on the road ahead once more, his heart almost stopped.

A five-ton lorry, loaded with bricks, had come out of a lane and was crossing the highway to a turning opposite. And behind the first lorry was another!

Jim stuck one hand over the side of the car in a quick signal for Dix to slow down, then stamped on the throttle pedal in a desperate effort to cut through the opening between the two vehicles before they both blocked the road.

He heard Joe shout, then he piled all his strength to his hands, forcing the steering steady. The fraction of a second later they went between the two machines like a shot from a gun. Jim had a glimpse of the flapping tailboard of one, and the massive radiator of the other, with a startled driver almost falling off the lorry—then they were clear.

Jim eased the throttle, reached for the brake-pedal, and slowed as he glanced back. He expected to see Sniff come between the two huge lorries, but as Jim had got through with only about an inch to spare on either side of the Arvin, Sniff elected to go around the tail of the second machine as it cleared the mouth of the lane.

He didn't get round.

The startled eyes of Jim and Joe saw a red meteor strike the hedge behind the lorry and go through in a perfect hurricane of flying earth, branches, and leaves. A thick telegraph pole shuddered as the Ace hit it, beyond the hedge, then leaned majestically backwards and came down with the sun gleaming on its copper wires as they snapped and went flying.

The two watching boys saw the car jump high, then there was another crash and a huge fount of dust. After that, as the Arvin stopped, the chums heard only the solemn rumbling of the five-ton lorries as they continued unheeding on their way.

The Ace machine was a complete wreck. "That's the first time I've ever seen anybody use a car to knock down a telegraph pole!" commented Joe, as he and Jim watched interestedly.



Jim and Joe jumped from their car and ran back along the road, while the telegraph pole sank across the top of the hedge, its fat white insulators shining through the broken wire that now coiled about them. The two scrambled over the grass towards it and peered through the depression which the black pole made in the bushes.

They saw the ace on its side, with Sniff Dix just getting to his feet as he clawed himself from the cockpit. One front wheel had gone, the engine cover was off, and the car's tail was crushed almost flat. A rear tyre had burst and the machine was smothered with dirt, bits of bushes and oil.

From the dead engine a plume of smoke wreathed upwards.

"That's the first time I've ever seen anybody use a car to knock down a telegraph pole," commented Joe interestedly.

The boys climbed through the hedge and went over the meadow towards the wreckage. Sniff Dix saw them coming, and his eyes glittered.

"This is your fault!" He had a rasping, snarling voice, and he habitually spoke from between his teeth.

"My fault?" repeated Jim in surprise. "How do you make that out?"

"You did it deliberately!" Sniff added, and pointed a blackened finger at Jim.

"Did what deliberately?" asked Jim, more than ever surprised at the other's accusations.

"Led me into this smash!" Sniff Dix spoke passionately. It was obvious that a terrible anger consumed him. He realised that Jim had "bested" him all ends up, and Sniff didn't like that at any time. The fact that a mere youngster had done it only served to increase his anger. "Yes, you did it on purpose—and I'm going to teach you a lesson, my lad!"

The man advanced threateningly, his fists clenched. He thought he would be able to deal with this youngster easily enough.

Jim's eyes hardened. He wasn't going to be spoken to and accused in this fashion. His own fists bunched. He wasn't afraid of Dix, anyway!

And so the two faced one another. A fight seemed imminent!

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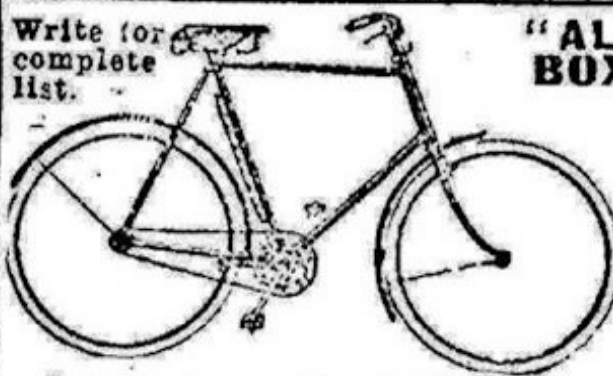
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