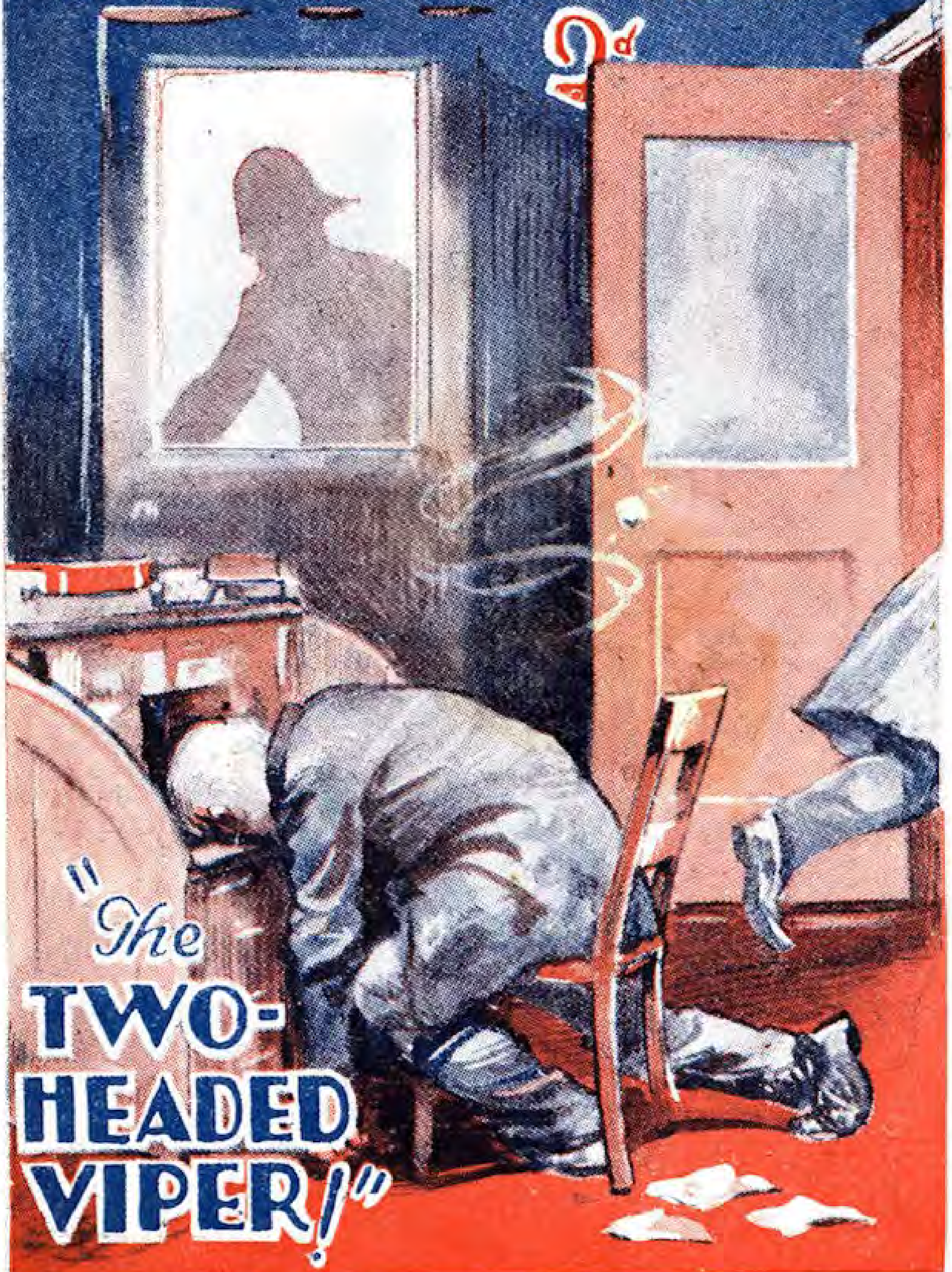


The NELSON LEE

2d



"The **TWO- HEADED VIPER!"**

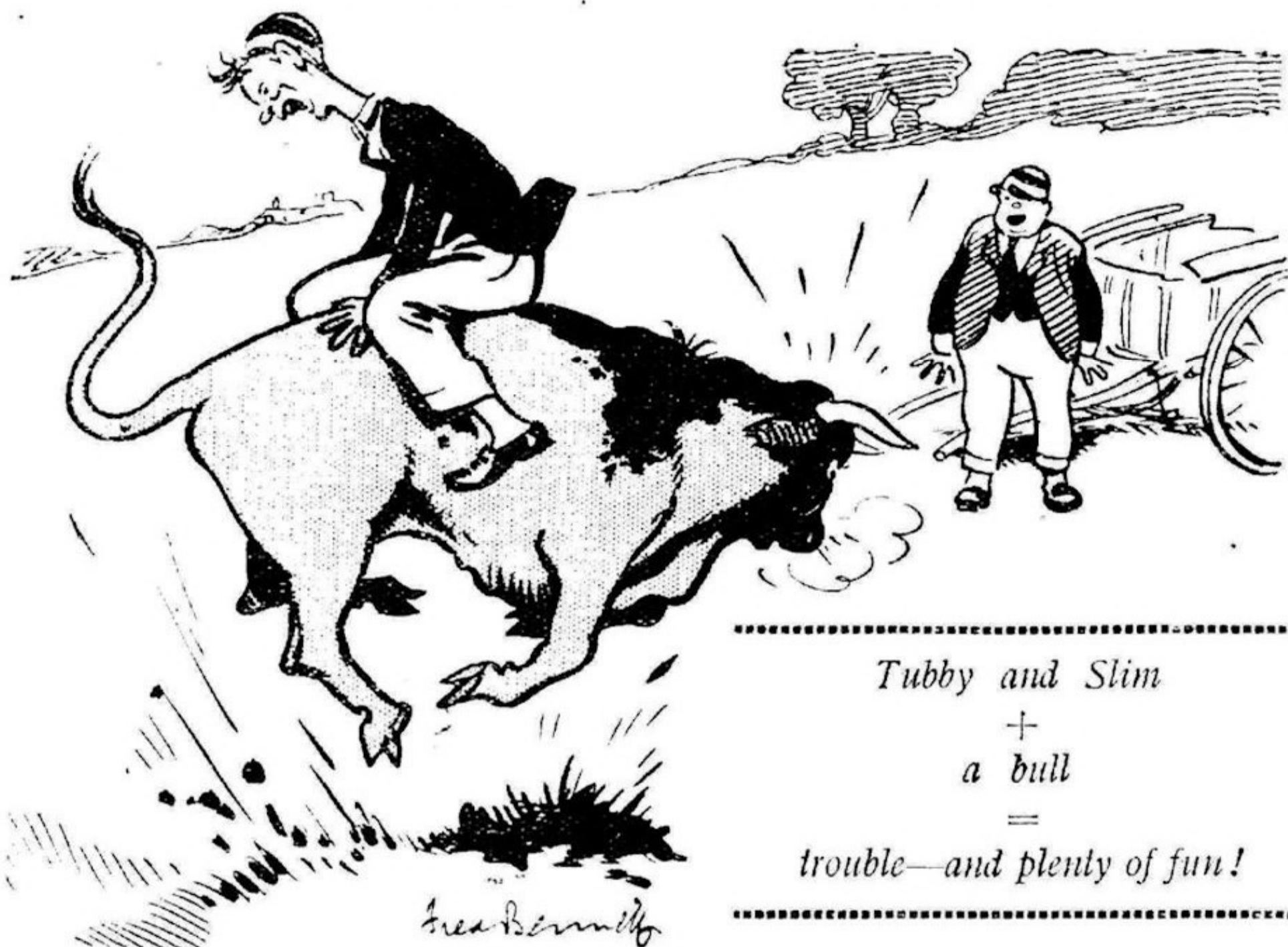
An enthralling long complete mystery and detective yarn,
featuring Nelson Lee and his schoolboy assistants.

New Series No. 9,

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

March 22nd, 1930.

The Laughable Larks of TUBBY AND SLIM!



Tubby and Slim

+

a bull

=

trouble—and plenty of fun!

Meet Gerald the Bull!

LISTEN to this!" exclaimed Tubby Bootles, as he unwedged himself from the somewhat inadequate arm-chair in which he was seated.

Bertie, his brother, looked up from his book and listened while Tubby read the following extract from an advertisement in the "Tumbledown Times."

"FIVE POUNDS FREE! In order to encourage trade, we will present to one of our customers a Five Pound Note. This note will be concealed in an article of furniture, and therefore the lucky purchaser will not only receive his money back, but perhaps a bit more. Roll up and buy from Plonk and Plunkett, Furniture dealers."

Tubby finished reading, and gazed at Bertie with glowing eyes.

"Five quid," he added musingly "Five jimmy o' Fishers, eh?"

Bertie, or Slim, as he was usually called, extended his hairpin form and yawned.

"Sneeze, laddie, your brain's dusty!" he said disgustedly. "You've got to spend five pounds or nearly that on a piece of furniture to stand a chance at all. What's the good of that to us?"

"I s'pose you're right," Tubby agreed, sighing deeply at the death of what at first seemed a bright idea for becoming rich quickly. "I don't know—perhaps the colonel could do with another desk."

"Or a couple of grand pianos!" jeered Slim. "Forget it, old man, and let's go out. I'm fed up with this book I'm reading. It's a rotten yarn."

The usual restlessness of the Bootle brothers would not allow them to stay indoors willingly for any length of time, and Tubby at once removed his hefty girth from the chair. Arm-in-arm, the two brothers left the house.

Farmer Crabapple's dogcart was resting on its shafts in the meadow opposite with no sign of its owner or the pony, and it looked as if the farmer had abandoned it for the time being. This being so, Slim and Tubby gravitated towards the vehicle with the unerring instinct of a fat boy smelling out a tuckshop.

"Hop in, shaver!" said Tubby to his brother. "I'll take the shafts and give you a trot round the meadow."

"Good!" grinned Slim. "With another couple of legs you'd look just like old Crabby's pony itself."

"Shirrup!" cried Tubby. "The only joke is that the ass will be riding. Hop in!"

Slim hopped in, literally. He didn't trouble to use the step, but with extraordinary agility leaped from a standing position clean over the side and into the driver's seat. The athletic prowess of these two boys was nothing short of marvellous—it was almost freakish.

Tubby picked up the shafts, and, after a preliminary jump or two, set off at a spanking pace round the field with Slim, standing precariously on the swaying seat, urging him on like a Roman johnnie in a chariot race.

All went well during one lap, but half-way round another, Tubby suddenly jammed both feet to the ground like an obstinate mule, and slithered along for a few yards before he could stop. Slim, not being prepared for this sudden alteration of speed, lost his equilibrium, and found himself on his back on the floor of the cart, gazing at the sky through his upflung feet.

"Ow! You podgy fathead!" he yelled as he struggled to rise. "What the dickens did you want to stop suddenly like that for?"

"Beef ahead!" shouted Tubby tersely, and a loud bellow confirmed his remark.

Regaining the perpendicular, Slim looked ahead and saw the snorting animal which had caused all the commotion.

"What ho!" he cried. "Cows in the corn-field, eh?"

"No," said Tubby. "Bulls in the Boulevard, to be precise." And as the animal showed signs of advancing, he added: "This is where we get mixed up in the bullrushes. Look out!"

Glaring wildly, the excited bull gave its head a toss and jumped forward to the attack. Slim was now on the ground, and, with such skill which would have earned him great applause in the bull ring, he vaulted over the charging animal and landed on its back, facing tailwards.

"Tally-ho!" he warbled gleefully, but his joy was short-lived. The bull bucked its hindquarters, and, with a futile grab at its tail, Slim shot off on to the grass, rolling quickly away as the beast turned in its tracks.

Tubby was right on the spot to meet it, however. He jumped over his brother, and, with tensed limbs, awaited the wild approach of the bull. With lowered head the animal charged, but Tubby seized its two horns, and, exerting his great strength to the full, held its head as if in a vice. Then, with a side-twisting motion, he levered the animal's head so that it was forced to fall over on to its side. And there, in true cowboy fashion, Tubby held it impotent while he shouted his orders to Slim.

"Chuck out the harness in that cart, old man," he said, addressing his brother. "We'll make this blighter work for his living."

"What are you going to do?" asked Slim curiously, as he brought the harness along.

"Do? Why, fasten this brute between the shafts and make him give us a ride. How's that for an idea?"

"Oh crumbs, Tubby!" chortled Slim, his childlike face breaking into delighted sur-

prise. "You've scored a bull this time. Hold him while I fix the 'gadgets.'"

Tubby, a gratified smile spreading from ear to ear, held him.

"Mind he doesn't land you in the ear with his hoof," he warned. "Calf's-foot jelly's jolly, but bull's foot jelly is rotten—especially if it's your ear that gets jellied."

Having harnessed the animal, Slim brought up the cart close so that they could fasten the shafts immediately the bull was allowed to rise. Tubby, still holding on to the bull with an iron grip, coaxed it up and steadied it into position. The buckles were fastened, and they were ready to start.

"What about the bit?" asked Slim. "We can't drive him without that."

"He'll have to drive us, then," said Tubby, relinquishing his hold and springing into the cart. "I'm not messing about near that fellow's molars, thanks. His bite might be worse than his bellow."

The brothers thereupon sat back, holding on to the sides of the light, springy cart, and waited for the animal to take them for a nice little sprint round the field in whatever direction it pleased him to wander.

Now, according to travellers' tales, bullock trekking in Africa and those sort of out-of-the-way spots is a very slow job. The bullocks appear to mouch along as if any old time would do, and it takes about two dozen of them to pull a solitary wagon. Slim and Tubby's bullock was evidently not remotely related to those lazy beggars. He was young and fresh, and felt that his dignity had suffered somewhat from his recent treatment.

His first action was to mark time savagely with all four feet until it seemed as if he was digging himself in so that he could take root. He soon tired of this pastime, however, and without warning sprang into activity and took to his heels.

"Good old ox!" shouted Slim, standing up and waving his arms.

"Gee up, Gerald!" vociferated Tubby, banging the floorboards with his feet.

Gerald gee'd up. At the other side of the field was a gap in the hedge, and straight for this went Gerald at a canter, bursting through and coming out on to the road leading to Tumbledown. Along the lane he galloped in fine style until he spied in the distance a five-barred gate. This gate controlled the level-crossing and was shut at the moment, denoting the approach of a train. The bull didn't stop for that, but, if anything, increased his speed.

"He's going to barge right into the gate!" yelled Slim. "The silly ass!"

"Ox," corrected Tubby. "Slide on his back and grab his horns. See if you can guide him round. I'll pull on the reins."

They were now going at about a mile a minute, and to stop the excited beast seemed hopeless. Slim hopped on the animal's back and tried to wrench his head round. Tubby dragged on the reins, but, without a bit, this made little impression, and, with Slim still

riding postillion, they rushed straight for the closed gate.

"Hold tight!" cried Tubby, and he bent forward and grasped his featherweight brother with one hand and yanked him back into the cart, where they sat waiting for the crash.

But Gerald was not a gate crasher. When within two strides of the obstacle, he gave a prodigious leap which took him and the light dogcart right over the gate, to land fair and square on the train lines.

"My hat!" shrieked Slim gleefully. "This must be the original cow that jumped over the moon!"

"I hope he isn't going to wait and catch this train," grinned the stout one, as the local, fussily puffing not many yards off, came rattling towards them.

The boys made no attempt to get out of the cart, merely waiting to see what the bull would do. They craved excitement, and generally managed to find it, and this thrill was too good to be missed.

Gerald was no fool of a bull, though; he wasn't going to be run over by a mere local train. He snorted antagonistically and belowed his contempt, turned round, and then backed quickly, sending the cart crashing through the other gate and so on to the road again. The gate gave way; the dogcart came through practically unscathed.

The Bootle chariot went on. The voice of the gatekeeper could be heard, but as his sentiments were not of congratulations at their escape from being run down, the boys did not go back to listen.

Gerald Causes a Disturbance!

A SHAKE of the reins caused Gerald to break into a trot, and away they went merrily until they reached the High Street. People was gaping at the quaint-looking turn-out, not quite knowing what to make of it. Police-constable Coppem also saw it, and, half recognising the irrepressible brothers with whom he was generally at loggerheads, he approached pompously with the intention of stopping them.

As the bull got nearer he thought again, and decided that the brute did not improve on closer inspection. The policeman, having arrived at this decision, proceeded to remove himself with more haste than dignity, but not speedily enough for Gerald.

With a sweep of his head, the bull endeavoured to help Coppem on his way. He luckily missed striking the constable, but one of his horns caught under the official belt, and he hoisted the man into the air. P.-c. Coppem dangled there ludicrously for a moment, until Gerald, with a mighty shake of his head, slung him off into a case of eggs.

A series of muffled explosions belied the ticket which labeled them as fresh, and the poor man staggered up, yellow and odorous, looking like a lost canary. To complete his discomfiture, he dazedly picked his helmet

out of the case, scooping up a further supply of hen fruit in the process, and rammed it on his head with a sickening squelch.

"Oouch!" was all he said, as the yolks trickled down his manly features and caused him to close his mouth tightly. He turned blindly away and staggered dizzily along the street.

Traffic was by this time becoming disorganised, owing to the crowd of shoppers who were gathered at a safe distance, intent on seeing the show. Gerald was bent on acting the giddy ox to the full capacity of his powers. He let forth a bellow which stampeded the crowd, and, getting his second wind, swerved towards the furniture shop of Plonk and Plunkett. Mr. Plonk was standing in his doorway, but as the bull approached he vanished with the speed of a professional illusionist. With a bump the dogcart mounted the kerb, and, despite Slim's efforts to deter him, Gerald insisted upon poking his nose into the entrance.

"Come out, you!" screamed Slim, slipping out of the cart and pummelling the creature in the spare ribs. The bull replied by swishing his tail round and catching Slim a smart flick on the ear which caused him to yelp and Tubby to guffaw.

"Punch him on the nose, Slim," advised Tubby from the cart.

"No fear!" said the thin one, rubbing his ear. "It's too near his mouth. Whoa! Come out, blow you!"

Slim pulled at the harness, but Gerald wouldn't retreat. He had seen himself in a mirror which hung upon the side wall of the shop. Evidently the bull thought that he had found at last that long-lost brother of his, for, with a playful swagger, he lunged at his own reflection.

Crash! The reflection had disappeared, and Gerald found himself facing the bare wall, his head through the frame. This startled him, and he backed out, putting his foot through a few odds and ends in the process. Slim, deciding that Mr. Plonk would be somewhat peeved at this, hopped back into the cart and hoped fervently that Gerald would quickly feel a desire to depart.

Gerald obliged. The recent hectic happenings had made him just a little homesick. He shunted off the pavement, still with the mirror frame round his neck, and then Mr. Plonk appeared again in the shop doorway, hopping about in an agitated manner.

"My fiver!" he quavered. "My fiver!"

Tubby heard him, and looked round. Then he looked at the mirror frame and saw the five-pound note tucked into one corner.

"We've clicked!" he shouted to Slim, and the bull chose this moment to gallop off. "The fiver's in the frame round Gerald's neck, laddie. Look!"

Slim goggled. Then, with heads on their knees, the two boys gave way to a spasm of uncontrollable mirth.

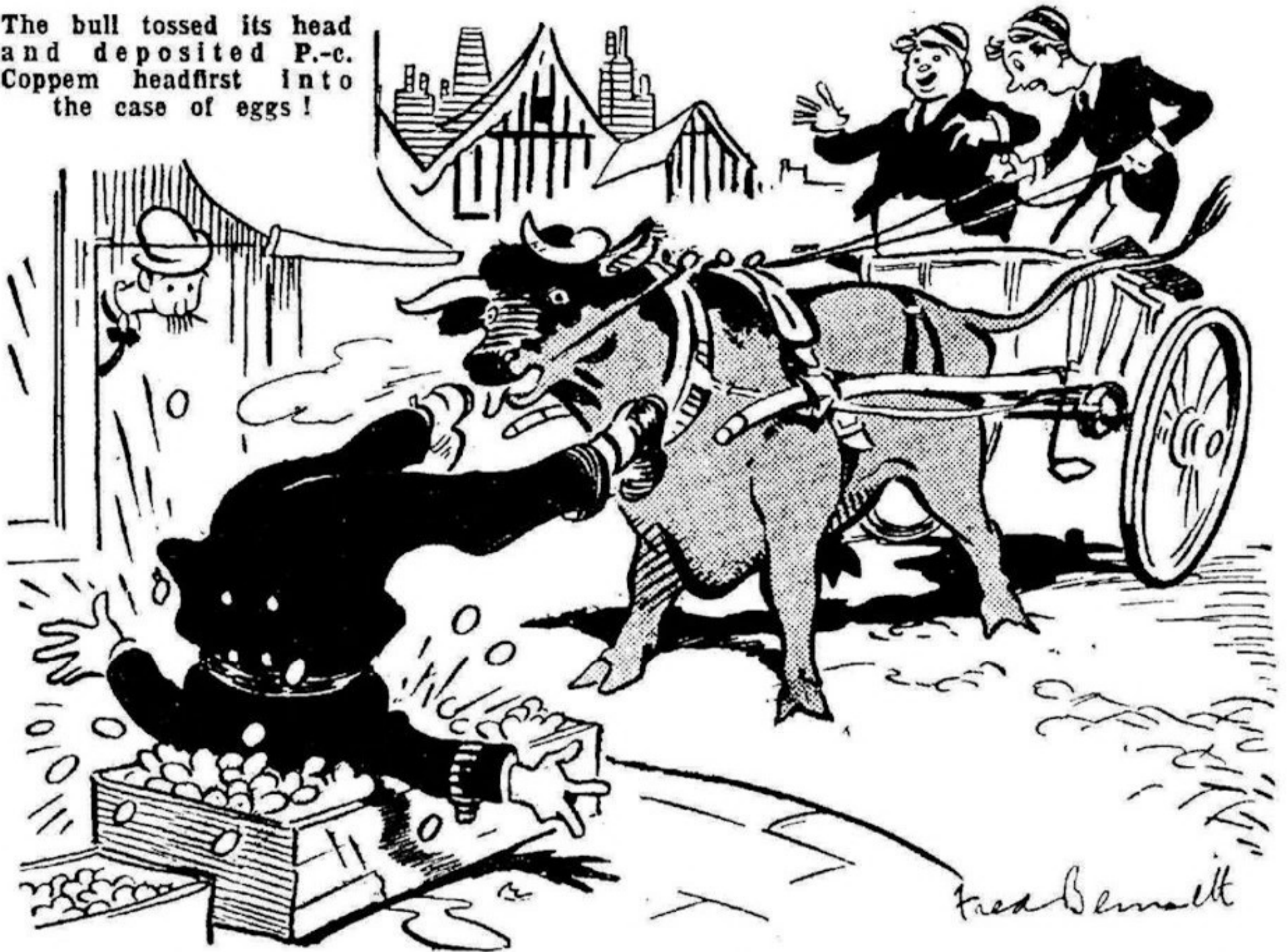
"Och, Gerald, me darlint, you're a broth of a bull!" gurgled Tubby.

"Ho, ho, ho!" cried Slim helplessly. "If I had any ribs, I'm sure they'd ache!"

And so they returned to the meadow whence they had started. As they passed through the gap in the hedge Gerald, with a final burst of energy, shook the mirror frame from off his neck, and, kicking his hind legs into the air, gave the dogcart a double upper-cut which absolutely pushed it off the shafts.

Bash! A rending and splintering of wood, and the Bootle brothers curved gracefully and landed with some force on the grass, Tubby first and Slim on top, while their late steed, with a mocking bellow, ambled away with the shafts dangling and the harness trailing behind him.

The bull tossed its head and deposited P.-c. Coppem headfirst into the case of eggs!



Tubby spoke first.

"Get off my face, chump!" he gurgled in a smothered voice. "I don't like the flavour of your check trousers."

"That's funny!" remarked Slim, as he slid off his brother's round face on to the ground. "My tailor said they were good taste."

They sat side by side and surveyed the field.

"Well," said Tubby, "jolly fine ride. We've been brought back and chucked out, but we've got a fiver chucked in. Of course, we shall have to pay for the mirror, else we're not entitled to keep the fiver."

"Yes!" said a querulous voice from behind them. "You'll have to pay for the mirror all right, and for the broken chairs and a vase. I'll give you in charge, I will."

The two boys stared at the speaker. It was Mr. Plonk, who had tracked them on his push-bike.

"Thirty bob I want for the mirror and my fiver back," he went on angrily. "And then there's the chairs."

"But if we buy the mirror, we're entitled to the fiver," protested Tubby.

"Certainly not," replied the dealer. "You can't buy the mirror 'cause it's broken, and I'm not selling damaged goods to anyone." He stooped and picked up the frame and also the note, which was still wedged in the corner.

"If you won't sell us the mirror, you can't ask us to pay for damaging it," argued Slim.

"If we pay, we want the mirror and the fiver

as well, otherwise we shall say your advertisement was a swindle."

Mr. Plonk scratched his head. There seemed to be a flaw in the argument somewhere, but he could not for the life of him pitch on it. Reluctantly, therefore, he agreed to take the frame, and the fiver.

"We seem fated to lose that fiver," said Tubby dolefully.

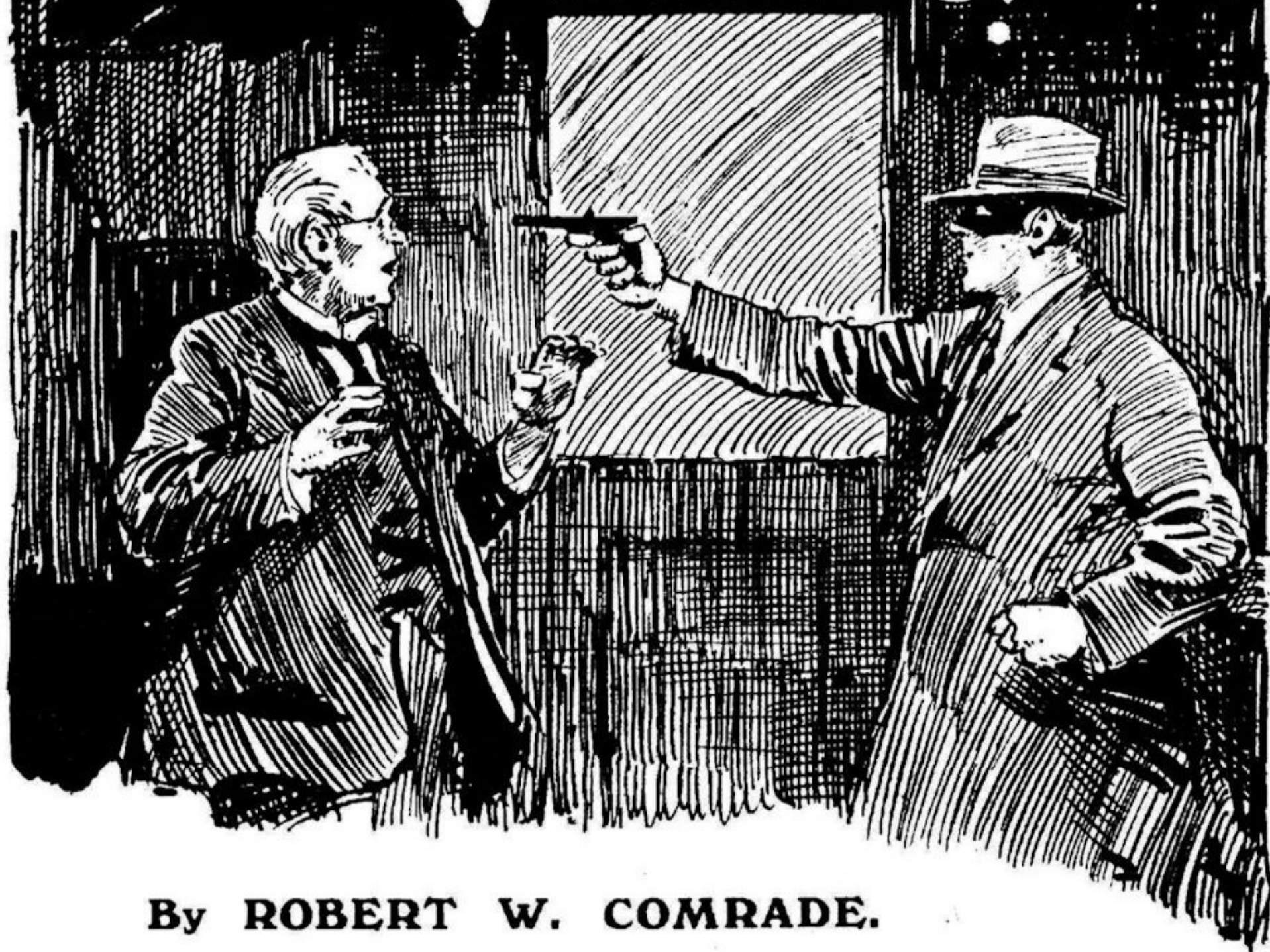
"Cheer up, old man!" grinned Slim. "It would have cost us more than that to pay for the damaged chairs and vase, not to mention the mirror. Let's go and feed."

And, arm in arm, they wandered back home.

(Look out for another rollicking yarn featuring our champion mirth-makers next Wednesday, chums!)

A THRILLING LONG COMPLETE YARN OF DETECTIVE ADVENTURE!

The Two-Headed Viper!



By **ROBERT W. COMRADE.**

A hold-up; a murder; a valuable curio missing—and Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives find themselves involved in one of the most amazing mysteries it has ever been their lot to solve!

CHAPTER 1. Silent Death!

MR. JULIUS ROFF looked up as the two customers entered his little curio shop, just off Knightsbridge. He adjusted his glasses and rose from the table at the back of the shop, where he had been examining some antique Spanish ear-rings under the shaded light of an electric lamp. The rest of the shop was in gloom, for the March evening was drawing in, and Mr. Roff was always tardy in switching on the main shop lights.

The two men who had entered were wearing overcoats and soft hats. One of them advanced towards the rear of the shop; the other remained at the door for a moment, and it seemed to the astonished Mr. Roff that this man was silently shooting the bolt.

"Hands up, and don't make a sound!" said one of the men, presenting a gleaming automatic pistol at the curio dealer's chest.

Mr. Roff made no reply. He was too startled to speak. The second man had come up now, and Mr. Roff could see that both of them were wearing silken masks, which more than half covered their faces.

"Sorry to be so unconventional, Mr. Roff, but our business is urgent," said the man who had first spoken. "This pistol of mine is fitted with a silencer. Understand? If you make the slightest outcry, I'll shoot you as you stand. Get back into the private room."

For an instant Mr. Roff's glance left the masked faces of his visitors; he looked out of the windows, into the dim street. A postman was passing, and Mr. Roff half opened his mouth.

"Remember!" said the man with the gun, clicking it suggestively.

Mr. Roff remembered. The postman passed by. There seemed to be nobody else in that quiet little backwater, although Knightsbridge, a minute or so away, was throbbing with the usual evening traffic.

"You have the better of me," said Mr. Roff quietly.

He walked towards the door at the back of the shop, half sideways, half backwards, his hands upraised above his shoulders. He was a shrewd man—a man who had been tackled by crooks on more than one occasion. The dealer passed through into the room at the back of the shop, and one of the men switched on the light. The other man closed the door. It was a glass-topped door, but the glass was frosted.

"That's better," said the man with the gun. "Sit down, Mr. Roff. We'll have a little chat, if you don't mind."

The curio dealer sat down at his desk. He was a small, wiry man, with slightly bent shoulders. His wrinkled face was clean-shaven, and he wore a black skull cap. The ridge of his large, bony nose supported a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"You are becoming very daring nowadays, my friends," said Mr. Roff, with a little shrug.

"Well, what do you want?"

"First of all, Mr. Roff, you will be good enough to put your hands on the desk in front of you," said the man with the automatic. "That's right. Keep them there—if you value your life. Make no movement of any kind."

"What movement should I make?" asked Mr. Roff mildly. "Do you think I keep revolvers in my pockets? Do you expect me to fight you with my fists?"

Never for an instant did the two men take their gaze off Mr. Roff.

"We want the Viper of Venice," said the man with the automatic abruptly.

Mr. Roff tensed.

"The Viper of Venice?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"And what, may I ask, is the Viper of Venice?"

"It'll do you no good, Mr. Roff, to take up this line," said the other curtly.

"We've no time to waste. You know as well as I do what the Viper of Venice is—and you've got it here, on these premises."

"I must confess," said the dealer, "that you know more than I do."

"Any more stalling, my friend, and I shall lose my temper," said the man with the gun. "I did not come here without full knowledge of my facts. You have recently secured the Viper of Venice for a client of yours—Mr. Millar



T. Hayle, of Cincinnati. Mr. Hayle has an appointment with you this evening to receive the Viper, and to pay you his cheque. You see, I selected my time with care."

Again Mr. Roff shrugged his shoulders.

"You have been misinformed," he said steadily. "It is true that I have an appointment with Mr. Hayle, but I know nothing of the Viper of Venice."

"It's too thin, Mr. Roff," said the other. "Your knowledge of curios is vast, and when you tell me that you have never heard of the Viper of Venice you merely give yourself away."

"Did I say I had not heard of it?" murmured Mr. Roff. "That is quite wrong, for I have heard of it. A remarkable example of Italian craftsmanship. But it is not here."

"Give me the key of your safe."

"Wait a minute," said the second man, speaking for the first time. "I'll take it out of his pocket. Better not let him shift his hands."

"Wait," said Mr. Roff mildly. "The key is not in my pockets—but in this drawer; the one on my left. I should hate to cause you any unnecessary trouble."

The second man came forward, pulled open the drawer, and in the same second Mr. Roff made a grab for the revolver which was lying just inside.

"Look out!" gasped the second man.

Thud!

Even as Mr. Roff's fingers clasped the revolver, a curious muffled sound hit the atmosphere, causing a number of ornaments and curios to vibrate and tinkle. A curl of pungent cordite smoke arose from the automatic pistol. Mr. Roff sagged in his chair, and the only sound which escaped him was a curiously-long sigh.

"The fool!" snapped the man with the gun.

"You've killed him!" said the other, his voice unsteady and husky.

"Didn't he ask for it? Do you think I was going to let him get hold of that gun? We've got to work fast now, Gus."

"You bet we have, Chief," said the other unsteadily. "Gosh! I wish I had your nerve!"

THE man called the Chief was as cool and as steady as though nothing tragic had happened. He quickly stowed his automatic away, and then took possession of Mr. Roff's keys.

"Dead, isn't he?" whispered Gus.

"When I shoot, I shoot straight," retorted the other. "Search these drawers, Gus. Turn everything inside out. I'll take care of the safe."

The safe was a big, old-fashioned affair on the other side of the room. It contained a number of moderately-valuable curios, but nothing of especial interest. The two men, searching rapidly, failed to find the object in which they were mainly interested.

"Curse the old man!" snapped the Chief. "What the devil can he have done with it? It's here, Gus—it's bound to be here."

"Maybe he's got it in one of his pockets?" suggested the other masked man.

"That's possible," said the Chief. "Help me."

Gus did not like the job, but he helped. The murdered man's pockets were thoroughly searched, but with no result. Then came another search of drawers and bureau and cupboards—this time more frantic. The Chief, breathing hard, looked at his watch.

"Nearly time for the appointment," he muttered. "Hang it, I didn't figure that we should have this trouble. We left it until close on time, Gus, and I thought the old boy would have the goods ready to hand. The thing must be here somewhere."

He looked round the apartment searchingly. He was annoyed. He had expected to find the Viper of Venice without any trouble. It had been easy enough to search the safe and the desk and the old-fashioned bureau, but this room was filled with antique furniture of all descriptions. Had Mr. Roff placed the Viper of Venice in one of these things, in readiness for his expected visitor?

Zurrrrrrh!

Suddenly, abruptly, the sharp sound of an electric bell split the comparative silence of that back room.

"Keep away from the door!" snapped the Chief. "Be careful where—— You fool! Your shadow fell on that glass top for a moment."

"Who is it?" panted Gus fearfully, with a sidelong glance at the dead man.

The Chief did not answer for a moment. He had noticed a tiny wooden slide, obviously covering a hole in the wall which separated the room from the old-fashioned shop. No doubt a little spyhole, through which Mr. Roff had been in the habit of inspecting customers before going out to tend them. The Chief raised this slide a quarter of an inch, and peeped through.

"Gus, we've got to get out of here!" he muttered abruptly. "It's a cop!"

"A cop?" gasped the other.

"Keep your nerve, you fool!" snapped the Chief. "This policeman can't suspect anything. We've got plenty of time. Can't do any more searching, though."

Gus reached for the electric light switch, but his companion grabbed his arm.

"You've got no more sense than a cockroach!" he snapped. "That cop may go if he sees nothing suspicious. What's he going to do if you put this light out? Come on—we'll beat it."

They found another door at the back of the room, and this led into a narrow passage. It was an old building, full of twists and turns, but presently the two men discovered a rear door, bolted and chained. It only took them a moment to pull the bolts back and to unfasten the chains. Outside, they found themselves in an enclosed yard.

"Follow me," muttered the Chief.

He hoisted himself to the top of a wall, and on the other side there was a dim alley. Nobody was within sight. The two men dropped down, walked through the alley, and found themselves in a quiet side street. Two minutes later they were in Knightsbridge, their silken masks now in their pockets.

"Drawn blank!" said the Chief, frowning. "Curse the old man for jibbing."

"And we've got—nothing," said Gus.

"But we shall have," retorted the other. "I'm not quitting yet."

CHAPTER 2.

The Viper of Venice!

POLICE-CONSTABLE JARVIS was a puzzled man.

"The old boy must be ill," he told himself.

He was standing outside the shop door of Mr. Julius Roff's modest establishment. There had been no answer to his ring—or to his second and third rings. And P.-c. Jarvis, being a conscientious officer, felt that it was up to him to do something more.

His beat seldom provided him with any excitement. It was usual for him to pass through this quiet thoroughfare at this hour of the evening, and his attention had been attracted towards Mr. Roff's shop by the fact that the main window lights were not on. What was more curious still, the door was locked. Yet there was a light in the inner-room. The constable could see the glass-topped door quite plainly at the back of the shop. And a minute or so earlier he had seen—or thought he had seen—a momentary shadow.

"Don't like the look of this at all," muttered the constable, shaking his head. "I often told Mr. Roff that he ought to keep an assistant. Something must have happened."

He rang again, but still there was no reply. The policeman's suspicions were acutely aroused. He did not hesitate any longer, but walked off and entered a nearby tobacconist's. There was a public telephone here, and P.-c. Jarvis was soon talking to the sergeant in charge at the local police station.

"Looks fishy, certainly," said the sergeant, when he had heard the report. "You'd better go back and wait. I'll tell Inspector Deacon, and I dare say he'll come along."

WHEN the constable arrived back at Mr. Roff's shop, he found a stranger waiting in the entrance. Not only waiting, but thumping on the door, and trying the handle.

"Oh, constable, just the man I want," said the stranger, in the soft, pleasant intonation of a well-educated American citizen. "There seems to be something wrong here."

"Just what I thought, sir," said the constable. "I've reported it to the station, and I'm to stay here until the inspector arrives."

"Nothing seriously wrong, I hope?" asked the other quickly.

"I don't know, sir," said the constable. "It's just possible that Mr. Roff has met with an accident, or has had a stroke, or something. You a customer of his, sir?" he added politely.

"Sure I am," said the American. "My name's Hayle—Millar T. Hayle, of Cincinnati. I had an appointment with Mr. Roff this evening, and I'm already five minutes late."

"An appointment, sir?" said the constable. "Then it's pretty certain that Mr. Roff wouldn't go away."

"I should say it's absolutely certain," replied Mr. Hayle. "This appointment of mine is a very particular one. I hope nothing has happened," he added anxiously.

Before the constable could reply, two figures came swingingly along from the direction of Knightsbridge. Both were in uniform—an inspector and a sergeant. Mr. Hayle was looking acutely anxious by now, and the constable saluted as the pair arrived.

"Anything fresh?" asked the inspector, with a glance at the stranger.

"No, sir," said the constable. "Still can't get any reply."

"Who is this gentleman?"

"My name is Hayle," said the American, answering for himself.

He gave a few more particulars, adding that he had had an appointment with Mr. Roff.

"You'd better wait, sir," said the inspector. "I am Inspector Deacon, and if there is anything wrong here, I'll soon let you know. I fancy we shall have to force an entry."

"Any way in which I can help?" asked Mr. Hayle.

"I think not, sir," replied the inspector. "What about the back, Jarvis? Any way of getting in that you know of?"

"There's a yard at the back, sir, and a door, I think," replied the constable.

"You'd better go round and see if it's unlocked, while the sergeant and I try to get in this way," said the inspector.

The constable saluted and departed.

The inspector tried the door.

"Bolted," he remarked. "That's queer, too. And you say you had an appointment, sir, for this hour?" he added, glancing at Mr. Hayle.



"I'm over ten minutes late for my appointment now," replied the American.

P.-c. Jarvis was evidently a quick worker. Before Inspector Deacon could say anything else the door of the inner room suddenly opened, and the constable came hurrying to the front of the shop. A bolt was shot, and the door opened.

"Well?" asked the inspector sharply.

"It's murder, sir!" said Jarvis, his voice hoarse, his manner strained. "He's as dead as a doornail!"

The inspector said nothing, and he quickly closed the door and bolted it again. Mr. Hayle looked uncertain; he hardly knew whether he was an intruder or not. But as the police took no notice of him, he followed them to the rear of the darkened shop. They went into the inner room, and the inspector came to a halt, pursing his lips. His attention was fixed upon the body of Mr. Julius Roff, after a quick, comprehensive glance round the room.

"Shot through the heart, eh?" he asked.

"Looks like it, sir," said the constable.

"Poor old chap! One of the best, he was."

Mr. Hayle pushed his way forward, his face expressive of horror and consternation.

"This is dreadful!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Roff murdered!"

"Looks like a hold-up, sir," said the inspector. "Some of these daylight bandits are getting infernally daring nowadays. You see, the whole place has been ransacked. Everything's upside down."

"The brutes!" shouted Mr. Hayle excitedly. "See here, inspector, I know why Mr. Roff was murdered! Those crooks have stolen my two-headed viper."

"Your what, sir?" asked the inspector, with a start.

"It's an old curio—a thing of tremendous value," explained the American. "I commissioned Mr. Roff to get it for me for my collection. The scoundrels! They deserve —"

"Steady, sir," said the inspector. "I can understand your disappointment—but it'll help us a lot if you keep cool. I shall be glad to hear more about this viper later on."

"Cannot we search for it?" asked Mr. Hayle. "Perhaps the crooks failed to find it. I have already paid Mr. Roff a substantial deposit—"

"That's very unfortunate for you, sir, but nothing here must be disturbed yet," broke in the inspector. "This is a case of murder, you understand, and nothing in this room must be touched. Sergeant, you'd better hurry out and get in touch with the Yard at once."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, saluting.

IN a remarkably short space of time a Flying Squad tender pulled up outside the shop, and several men got out. Two of them carried cameras. They were in charge of a big, burly man in a dark overcoat and a bowler hat. Inspector Deacon saluted him smartly.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Lennard," he said.

Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, acknowledged the greeting.

"Murder case, I understand," he said. "Have you taken any steps to inform the relatives?"

"As far as I know, Mr. Roff had no relatives," replied the inspector. "He lived at Hampstead, though, and I've sent a man there with the news. If there *are* any relatives, they'll be here before we need them, I'll warrant."

"And this gentleman?"

"He's Mr. Hayle, sir—one of Mr. Roff's customers who had an appointment," said the inspector. "But when he got here the door was locked. Mr. Roff had been murdered by then."

"I feel very deeply over this," said Mr. Hayle, in distress. "It was I who commissioned Mr. Roff to obtain the Viper of Venice for me. He telephoned to my hotel—the Pall Mall—this afternoon, saying that he had received the Viper, and he fixed up an appointment with me so that we could complete our deal."

The chief inspector nodded.

"I shall be glad of a little chat with you later on, if you'll be good enough to remain handy," he said.

"I'll be right here," said Mr. Hayle, with conviction. "You'll make a complete search, I take it? Maybe the Viper is still safe."

The Yard man smiled inwardly. The American, it seemed, was more concerned about his precious curio than he was about the tragedy.

"May I ask what this Viper is?" asked Lennard.

The American looked astonished.

"What the Viper of Venice is?" he repeated. "Say, haven't you ever heard of it?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"I thought everybody had heard of the Viper of Venice," said Mr. Hayle dryly. "But there, I'm a collector, and I suppose I'm different. This viper is world-renowned. It is a marvellous antique gold ornament in the shape of a two-headed viper. There are four great rubies for the eyes, and there is a ridge of extraordinary fine emeralds running all down the back. The thing has got a pretty ugly history, too. It was once in the possession of Cesare Borgia. In fact, it's sometimes called the Borgia's Viper."

"Do you know what it is worth?"

"I know that I've paid Mr. Roff a deposit of five thousand dollars, and that I was going to give him my cheque for ninety-five thousand dollars to complete the deal," replied the American quietly.

Lennard whistled.

"Phew! Twenty thousand pounds!" he ejaculated. "Then the motive for this murder is pretty obvious. This looks like the work of a gang. They've probably been keeping their eye on Roff ever since he took your commission—and they pounced at the last moment, before you could take delivery of the jewel."



One of the men broke open the window, and then the three masked figures crept in.

"You've got to find that viper," said Mr. Hayle grimly. "It's always been one of my greatest ambitions to add that jewel to my collection. At last, after years of searching, I found a man who promised to get it for me. I don't pretend to know how he bought it, or where he obtained it from. I gave him my instructions, and he said he would carry them out. The money doesn't worry me, either—I'm a millionaire. But after being so certain of this thing—"

"Yes, yes, I quite understand," said the inspector. "And you can be sure that we'll do our best, sir."

Yet when the police came to examine the room—and, indeed, the whole premises—they were forced to confess to themselves that they were baffled. There seemed no question that the crooks had secured the Viper of Venice—at least, it was nowhere to be found. If the crooks had not got it, then it had not been on these premises at all.

There were no footprints that could be recognised—not even a finger-print. The criminals had worn gloves, and in every way they had been cautious. They had left absolutely no indication of their identity—not a single clue.

The net was spread. Every pawnbroker in the country was warned. Receivers of stolen property, who were known to the police, were closely watched. Various shady foreigners—many of them in high positions—were kept under constant observation. But the days passed, and nothing new developed. The police were no nearer to the solution of Mr. Julius Roff's murder.

All mention of the Viper of Venice was kept out of the newspapers. Mr. Hayle, at the Pall Mall Hotel, became more and more depressed and pessimistic. By the end of two weeks the public had ceased to take any interest in the "Knightsbridge Shop Murder," as the case was called in the newspapers. But Scotland Yard was still pegging away—still hoping. It was disturbing to realise, however, that no headway had been made. Not a trace of the crooks had been found, and nothing had come to light concerning the missing Viper of Venice.

In short, Scotland Yard was baffled.

CHAPTER 3.

Nelson Lee on the Case!

MR. NELSON LEE, the world-famous criminologist, and head of the unique Detective Academy, halted on the edge of the pavement in Regent Street as he heard his name called. A moment later a car pulled up beside the curb, and a big hand thrust itself into Lee's.

"By the beard of the prophet! I'm glad to see you, Lee!" exclaimed Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, as he pumped Nelson Lee's arm up and down. "Been away, haven't you?"

"For a week or two," smiled Nelson Lee, amused by the Yard man's enthusiasm.

"Hop in, old fellow," urged Lennard. "Never been so pleased to see anybody in all my life! Been away in India, Timbuctoo, or some such place, haven't you?"

"Balghistan," replied Lee. "Only got back on Saturday."

"Yes, of course—all that fuss about the Ameer and the holding up of the Indian Air Mail Service," said Lennard. "The newspapers haven't had much of the story, of course. I understand you've been doing big things out in the East, Lee."

"We had a bit of excitement, anyhow," admitted Nelson Lee. "Fortunately, all my boys have returned safely."

"The whole menagerie, eh?" said Lennard. "That's good hearing. Well, look here, Lee, I might as well tell you the truth, I'm stumped."

"You confess it openly?"

"I'm on that Knightsbridge murder case," said Lennard. "Can't make headway at all. Most infernally irritating affair I've struck for years."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit out of date," said Nelson Lee. "I haven't had an opportunity of keeping in touch with home affairs during the past week or so."

"Well, old Julius Roff, a curio dealer, was murdered in the office behind his shop nearly a fortnight ago," said Lennard.

"I'm sorry to hear this," said the great detective. "I knew Roff quite well. A quaint old character—and, I believe, a man of absolute integrity and honour."

"Roff was one of the best, and it was an infernal shame that he should be murdered," said the inspector. "Look here, have you ever heard of a thing called the Viper of Venice?"

"Yes, of course."

"You would!" grunted Lennard.

"It is a remarkably valuable Italian ornament, once possessed by Cesare Borgia," said Nelson Lee. "It has a very queer history—not to say an ugly history. At the present moment, I believe, it is in the possession of an Italian family named Pazzio."

"You're wrong there, anyhow," said Lennard with some satisfaction. "It's in the possession of the crooks who murdered Roff."

And while he drove leisurely through the Mall and up and down some of the quieter thoroughfares, he gave Nelson Lee a full account of the crime.

"As a personal favour to me, Lee, I want you to have a look into this affair," he said at length. "The Chief Commissioner will welcome your entry into the case, and I'm sure he'll give it his official approval."

It was only natural that Nelson Lee should feel somewhat gratified.

"Well, I've started on nothing fresh since I returned, Lennard, so I'll gladly help you to the best of my ability," he promised. "Would it be convenient for me to have a look over Roff's premises some time to-day?"

"The sooner the better."

"You won't object if I bring one or two of my boys with me?"

"Bring the whole Noah's Ark, if you like," replied Lennard. "Not that you'll be able to find much—unless you're a magician, which, on the quiet, I believe you are."

Later that day, Nelson Lee took three of his pupils from the Detective Agency—Nipper and Handforth and Glenthorne—to the old curio shop in the quiet street off Knightsbridge. He made a thorough examination of the premises, and, although he made no discoveries of note, he became thoroughly "soaked" in the case. He acquainted himself with every known detail. He promised himself that he would have a chat with Mr. Hayle on the morrow. But before the morrow arrived a totally unexpected development of the case presented itself.

A STRANGE thing happened during the night.

Dim, stealthy figures lurked outside a modest house, standing in its own grounds in Hampstead. It was a comparatively modern house, and had lately belonged to Mr. Julius Roff. It had been his home. But now Mr. Roff was dead, and the only occupants of that house were the elderly woman who had acted as his house-

keeper, and Miss Elsie Villiers, his ward. There were two maidservants in addition.

Old Mr. Roff had been very attached to the young girl whom he had grown to look upon as his daughter. Elsie Villiers was the child of an old friend. When the latter had died, he had left the motherless girl to the care of the old curio dealer. Elsie had been four years old then—now she was sixteen. This house at Hampstead had been built mainly for Elsie—for old Roff's own wants had been few. For his ward, however, he had been ready enough to open his purse strings in many directions.

The lurking figures outside that house of mourning were three in number. They were all wearing black silk masks. After careful precautions, they broke open one of the rear windows. They crept in. And for the next two hours the premises were subjected to a thorough, painstaking search. And so quietly did the crooks work that not a sound of them was heard. Nobody in the house was awakened. Not until four o'clock in the morning did the three men depart.

"A wash-out, Chief!" muttered one of them.

"Yes, Gus," said the Chief grimly. "A wash-out. This is the first opportunity we've had since we failed in Knightsbridge. The Viper isn't there—and the police think that we've got it. But we haven't. It's here—in this house! It *must* be!"

"Looks as if we shall have to give up the game as a bad job," said Gus gloomily.

"Not yet," replied the Chief. "I tell you, the thing's clear. Why did Roff fix the appointment for the evening? Just before closing-time, too! I tell you, he meant to come home. He hadn't got the Viper at the shop—but in his home somewhere. He's got a hidden safe—some cunning device. We've drawn blank this time, but we'll win yet."

THE next morning, Nelson Lee was somewhat astonished to receive a visit from Chief-inspector Lennard. The Yard man was looking quite excited as he came into the consulting-room.

"Something fresh!" he announced briskly. "Something important, too."

"You're just in time, Lennard," said Nelson Lee. "We were on the point of starting out."

There were three others with the great detective—Nipper, Edward Oswald Handforth, and Archie Glenthorne. These three were looking very excited, and this wasn't entirely caused by the fact that they had been selected to accompany Nelson Lee on his latest case. They had just come from the Common-room, where they had been discussing with the other "cub" detectives the wonderful news—the news that St. Frank's, their old school which had been burned down, was being rebuilt!

"The crooks haven't got the Viper," said Lennard keenly. "At least, I don't think so. Up till now we've assumed that the Viper was grabbed at Knightsbridge."

"What leads you to suppose that it wasn't?"

"Roff's house at Hampstead was ransacked during the night," replied Lennard. "Everything turned upside down—but nothing missing. Household knew nothing about it until this morning, when they found everything in disorder."



"Yes, this is certainly significant," agreed Nelson Lee, nodding. "The crooks have evidently been watching—and waiting. They know that the Viper has not turned up at Knightsbridge. Therefore, it must be in Roff's private house—so they raided it."

"But how do we know they didn't get the Viper last night, sir?" asked Nipper.

"We don't know, young 'un," put in Lennard. "But the chances are that they failed—and, in any case, it's more than likely that we shall pick up a clue at Hampstead. The sooner we're there the better."

When they arrived, they found the household in a state of nervous tension. Mrs. Matthews, the housekeeper, was excited and voluble, but nothing she said was of any importance. She had slept like a top throughout the night. Elsie Villiers had slept well, too. She was a slim, dark-eyed girl, and her pretty face was wan and careworn. Although over a week had passed since the funeral, she was still mourning the loss of her guardian. She had loved old Mr. Roff dearly, and his tragic end had affected her in a very marked manner. She was rather a tragic little figure as she sat in the comfortable morning-room, whilst Mrs. Matthews gave the detectives an account of the disorder which had been discovered in the early morning. Handforth and Archie Glenthorne, at least, found it difficult to keep their gaze from the girl.

"You can question the maids, if you like," said Mrs. Matthews finally, "but you'll get no more from Jane and Bertha than you have got from me."

"They heard nothing in the night?" asked Lee.

"Nothing at all, sir," replied the housekeeper. "They sleep in an attic at the back

of the house, and the attic is only reached by a special little staircase. They weren't disturbed at all."

"Do you know if anything is missing?" put in the Yard man.

"As far as Miss Elsie and I have been able to discover, nothing at all," replied Mrs. Matthews. "But, of course, it's as plain as daylight that those good-for-nothing burglars were trying to find the late master's private safe."

"Private safe?" repeated Lee sharply.

"It was a fad of my guardian's," said Elsie, looking up. "He often spoke to me about that private safe—his hidden storehouse, as he would call it. He used to boast that it was burglar-proof, and that any article of particular value was always secure in that special receptacle."

"There's no evidence that this private safe was located, then?" asked the chief-inspector.

"It doesn't look like it," replied Elsie.

"Practically every article of furniture was turned out—bureaux, cabinets, bookcases, chests of drawers, and everything like that. Pictures were disarranged, too, and even the carpets were turned back."

"The crooks were evidently looking for some secret hiding-place, then," remarked Lennard. "H'm! Seems to me that they drew blank for a second time. Perhaps you can tell us where this secret hiding-place is situated, Miss Villiers?"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't know," she replied simply.

"You don't know?"

"My guardian never told me."

"That's awkward," said Lee, glancing at the Yard man. "We knew that there is a secret treasure chamber in this house, Lennard, but nobody knows of its whereabouts."

"A mistake, if you ask me, sir," said Mrs. Matthews in her straightforward way. "I often used to talk to the master about it. I told him plainly that it was foolish. 'What



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if anything happens to you, sir?" I asks. "How will we know where to find the safe?" But he only used to laugh at me, and say that nothing would happen to him."

"Can you remember the Tuesday before last?" asked Nelson Lee. "That is to say, the day of Mr. Roff's death?"

"I'm not likely to forget it, sir!" said the housekeeper with feeling.

"Did Mr. Roff return home at any time during the day?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, he did? At what time?"

"He came home during the afternoon, sir," said Mrs. Matthews. "Miss Elsie was out shopping, and I was busy with the silver."

"How long did Mr. Roff remain?"

"Not more than twenty minutes, sir."

"Was it usual for him to return home during the afternoon?"

"Most unusual, sir," said the housekeeper.

"He hadn't done it for months."

"Now why on earth didn't I think of this?" asked Lennard, annoyed. "It's as clear as daylight, Lee! Mr. Roff made his appointment with the American millionaire for about closing-time on that Tuesday, because he meant to bring Mr. Hayle home with him. He'd previously stowed the Viper of Venice away in his private safe. The thing's here."

"And I wish it wasn't sir," said Mrs. Matthews vehemently. "I always did tell the master that evil would come of his having secret hiding-places in the house, full of rare curios and such-like. Before we knew where we are, *we* shall be murdered, too!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Clue!

THE chief-inspector grunted.

"There's no need for you to get the wind up, Mrs. Matthews," he replied gruffly. "Nobody's going to hurt you—or Miss Villiers, either. This case is in our hands now, and we'll see that you have ample protection."

"Concerning this secret safe, Miss Villiers," said Nelson Lee, looking at Elsie. "You definitely state that you do not know where it is?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee," said the girl.

"Haven't you any idea in which room it is situated?"

"My guardian would never tell me, and as it was one of his fads I didn't bother."

"I believe you inherit everything from Mr. Roff?"

"Yes," murmured Elsie.

"Then I must point out, Miss Villiers, that it is very risky to leave this secret safe undiscovered," said Nelson Lee. "It is a direct temptation to criminals. Don't you think it would be advisable for us to locate this safe and to remove its contents to a bank vault, or some such place of security?"

"Why, yes, of course," replied the girl at once. "I wish you would, Mr. Lee! But I'm sure I don't know how you can start."

"I can start by asking you how long this secret safe has been in existence?"

"Ever since the house was built, I think," replied Elsie. "I was at school until quite recently, and my guardian had this house built while I was away. I didn't know anything about it until he brought me home to it one day—as a surprise."

"I see," nodded Lee. "We can take it, then, that this secret safe was actually built into the house during the course of construction. That is a highly important point. And now, Miss Villiers, if you don't mind, we'll have a general look round."

Every room was examined, but neither the Yard man nor Lee could find any definite traces of the marauders. There were no finger-prints—no tools left behind—no clues of any kind. Nipper and Handforth and Archie were not idle. Nelson Lee set them to work in the garden. Lee had seen that there were no footprints on the hard gravel paths; but there was always a chance that the crooks might have left some tell-tale marks.

Handforth was rather disgusted at being put on to this unpromising task; yet, curiously enough, it fell to his lot to make the only important discovery of the morning.

"It's just a wheeze to get us out of the way," he grumbled. "What the dickens can we find out here in the garden?"

"Orders, old thing, are orders," said Archie Glenthorne complacently. "I mean to say, the Chief has told us to investigate the daffodil and tulip department, and it's rather up to us to get on with the job."

Handforth, bluff, impetuous, eager for action, saw nothing promising in this search. But, as Nipper pointed out, detective work was not all excitement. The "high spots" only came occasionally. The garden was certainly a picture. The flower-beds were a glorious mass of daffodils and tulips.

"Spring, what?" murmured Archie as he wandered down one of the gravel paths, gazing intently at the flower-beds through his monocle. "And talking of spring, it seems to me that these blighters must have done a good bit of springing last night. They didn't tread on a single dashed flower-bed."

It had been easy enough for the crooks to jump from the top of the wall on to the gravel path. In this way they had left no traces. But it must have been more difficult for them to get out of the garden.

The young detectives entered into the work with a whole-hearted keenness. Even Handforth forgot to grumble. They took the garden systematically, and explored every inch of it. And after about twenty minutes Handforth uttered a loud, excited shout, attracting the other two quickly towards him.

"Found something, Handy?" asked Nipper as he ran up.

"By George! Rather!" said Handforth. "Look at this!" And he held up a thing of black silk, in which there were two little eye-slits.

"A mask!" said Nipper. "Where did you find it?"

"Here—stuck in one of the branches of this evergreen."

"Funny!" said Nipper, frowning. "How on earth could this black mask get caught in an evergreen? Perhaps it was left here deliberately—to put us on a false scent?"

"Rot!" said Handforth excitedly. "The crook must have caught his head against the bush in the darkness, and the mask was torn off."

"And he didn't know anything about it?" said Nipper sceptically. "No, that won't do, Handy. I'd better tell the guv'nor; perhaps he'll be able to put two and two together."

Nelson Lee came out at once when he heard of the discovery, and Chief-inspector Lennard was at his heels. Lee took the silken mask, examined it carefully, and even sniffed at it.

"This might be useful," he said. "There's a faint, elusive perfume of some kind. Rather distinctive."

"But men don't use perfume," objected Lennard.

"They do in the form of brilliantine."

"Well, yes, I suppose they do," admitted the Yard man. "You say this mask was caught in a tree branch here? How could it have got there?"

"I fancy the explanation is fairly simple," said Nelson Lee. "Put yourself in the place of the crook, Lennard. What would you do when you were on the point of leaving these premises?"

"What would I do? Well, I suppose I should take my mask off."

"Exactly," said Lee. "You would take it off and put it in your pocket. Then you would spring from this gravel path to the wall—since, naturally, you would not be foolish enough to tread on the flower-bed, and thus leave tell-tale footprints. In springing for the wall your coat might easily catch on these bushes, and if you had placed the silken mask carelessly in your pocket it might just as easily be pulled out by one of the twigs. It would thus be left clinging to the bush, in the darkness, and you would

know nothing of your loss until long afterwards, perhaps." Nelson Lee bent forward keenly, and he nodded with satisfaction. "Look here, Lennard," he added. "Wait a minute, though."

He took a pair of tiny forceps from his pocket, and very gingerly he removed some tiny shreds of substance from a projecting twig of the evergreen. In the sunlight,



Nipper and Archie came rushing up at Handforth's call. In his hand he held a black silken mask.

Lennard, looking at the fragments in Lee's palm, could see that they were woolly in texture and greyish in colour.

"Apparently torn from an overcoat," said Nelson Lee. "A grey overcoat, with a faint tinge of green in the texture. I should describe it as a tweed coat, generally grey in colour, with probably a green stripe or check."

"That's something, anyway," remarked Lennard, making a note.

"I'm afraid it's the only clue available," said Lee. "The crooks were particularly careful."

LATER on, Nelson Lee and the chief-inspector left for the curio shop in Knightsbridge. Nipper and Handforth and Archie, rather to their disappointment, were left at Hampstead. They

were instructed to remain there until they received further orders.

During the afternoon, Nelson Lee made a point of calling at the Pall Mall Hotel to have a word with Mr. Millar T. Hayle. The millionaire had not given up hope of securing the Viper of Venice for his collection. He had, indeed, already paid a deposit, and he was ready to hand his cheque

"Mr. Hayle is in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Will you come in, sir?" said the other. "I am Mr. Hayle's valet, sir."

Nelson Lee entered, and he looked at the valet with close attention.

"I fancy we have met before," he said dryly.

"No, sir."

"You think not?"

"I'm sure we haven't, sir," said the valet steadily. "I don't even know your name, sir."

"My name is Nelson Lee."

"Yes, sir; I will tell Mr. Hayle."

The valet, visibly shaken, glided out of the room. That he had been lying was obvious. Nelson Lee had an excellent memory for faces, and, although he had not encountered the valet for some years, he had no difficulty in placing the man.

"Why, this is a great pleasure, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed the millionaire as he came striding into the room. "I didn't know that you were assigned to this case."

"A little unofficial help, Mr. Hayle," replied Lee, smiling.

"More than a little. I fancy," said Mr. Hayle. "I'm mightily glad to know that you're working on the case, sir. The murder of Mr. Roff was a cold-blooded, brutal affair. I feel somehow responsible—and, certainly, I shall not leave London until Mr. Roff's murderers have been brought to justice."

"Then there is the matter of the Viper of Venice," said Lee. "We have every reason to believe that it is concealed in Mr. Roff's Hampstead home."

"Has something fresh turned up?" asked the millionaire, his manner becoming eager.

Nelson Lee gave him the latest information.

"This sure looks promising," said Mr. Hayle, nodding. "What are you going to do about that secret safe? Don't you think it's probable that the girl—Miss Villiers, is it?—don't you think it's probable that she knows where that safe is situated?"



to Elsie Villiers once the deal was completed. There would probably be some complications, however, for, so far, it had not been ascertained from what source Mr. Roff had obtained the valuable curio. However, this was a matter which did not really concern either Nelson Lee or the police. Their job was to discover Mr. Roff's assassins.

Lee was shown up to Mr. Hayle's suite, and the door was opened by a smallish, sleek-looking man, who gave an almost imperceptible start as he regarded the visitor. Nelson Lee did not overlook that start.

"She declares that Mr. Roff never informed her."

"Do you believe that?"

"In my profession, Mr. Hayle, it is most unwise to believe anything," replied Nelson Lee dryly. "The only safe course is to go upon facts—and nothing but facts. What people say to me is quite another matter."

"Then it's your idea that Miss Villiers was stalling—that she was trying to put you off?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it, eh?" said the millionaire shrewdly. "Well, I'm going to stand by, Mr. Lee. I've set my heart on possessing the Viper of Venice, and I'm not going to quit."

"That is definite?"

"Absolutely definite," said Mr. Hayle. "It doesn't matter to me who I pay the money to—Mr. Roff or his executors or his heirs. I want the Viper of Venice—and I'm going to have it!"

"I don't think you will have to wait very long, Mr. Hayle," said Lee as he prepared to go. "By the way, if it isn't a personal question, can you tell me how long you have had your valet in your employ?"

"Only since I came to England," said Mr. Hayle, surprised. "Why, what's wrong with the man?"

"Nothing that I know of—I was only wondering."

"He's a very excellent man—knows his business through and through," said the

millionaire. "Of course, I don't know much about him—got him through one of the ordinary employment agencies. I have no fault to find with him."

WHEN Nelson Lee left the Pall Mall Hotel he walked for some little distance, thinking hard. Then he turned into a shop where there was a public telephone. He got through to Mr. Roff's house in Hampstead. He was soon talking to Nipper.

"I shan't be coming along for some time, Nipper," he said. "You and Handforth must remain where you are—and watch."

"Do you think that something is likely to happen, sir?" asked Nipper, over the wires.

"I don't know—but it is best to be on the safe side," replied Nelson Lee. "You and Handforth must not go away from the house—unless, of course, the need is really urgent."

"You mean, unless it's connected with the case, sir?"

"Yes," replied Lee. "Glenthorne will keep his eye on Miss Villiers."

"How do you mean, sir—keep his eye on Miss Villiers?"

"If she goes out, Glenthorne will follow her—shadow her," replied Nelson Lee.

"Miss Villiers, you understand, must not be aware of this. She might not like it, but it is our duty to protect her. There is a possibility that the crooks may try to get



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.

Easy!

Pat and Mike were out rowing. Suddenly Mike gave a gasp of consternation, and turned to his companion.

"Begorra, Pat! There's a hole in the boat, and the water's coming in."

"Well, make another hole, and let it out!" replied Pat, very calmly.

(A. G. Wisker, 44, Selby Road, Plaistow, E.13, has been awarded a handsome gill watch.)



Exasperating!

A small boy, accompanied by his two pals, went into a sweet shop.

"Pennyworth of bulls-eyes, please," said one of the boys.

The shopkeeper brought out a pair of steps, climbed to the top shelf, and obtained the necessary jar. He served the boy and then replaced the jar, after which he put away the steps.

"Pennyworth of bulls-eyes, please," requested the second boy.

Again the shopkeeper went through the same performance, but this time, before putting away the jar, he asked the third boy if he also required a pennyworth of bulls-eyes. The lad shook his head, whereat the man placed the sweet bottle in its position on the top shelf and put away the steps.

"Well, my young man, what can I get for you?" he asked the boy.

"A ha'porth of bulls-eyes, please!"

(W. Taylor, 7, Booth Road, Waterfoot, Rossendale, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Spider Sense!

1st spider to 2nd spider: "How are you these days?"

2nd spider: "Very tired. What with these

at the girl. Therefore, she must be guarded."

"Right you are, gov'nor," said Nipper briskly. "Archie is to keep watch over Miss Elsie, and Handy and I are to remain here and keep our eye on things in general. O.K., Chief!"

And Nelson Lee rang off, knowing that his instructions would be obeyed to the letter.

CHAPTER 5.

Archie in Action!

IT was comparatively early in the evening when the telephone-bell rang. Elsie Villiers was sitting in the drawing-room, doing her best to entertain the three young detectives. Tea was over and cleared away, and there was a certain amount of tension in the air. Nipper, for his part, was expecting further instructions from Nelson Lee. Handforth and Archie, impatient at this inaction, were anxious for a new job of some kind.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" asked Elsie, as she jumped up upon hearing the bell.

"Shall I answer the 'phone, Miss Villiers? It might be the gov'nor—Mr. Lee, I mean."

"I think I'd rather, if you don't mind," replied the girl.

Mrs. Matthews was just coming down the hall as Elsie went out. The two maid-servants, in the special circumstances, were having the evening off.

"It's all right, Mrs. Matthews," said Elsie. "I'll answer the 'phone."

The instrument was in the hall, and she was soon holding the receiver to her ear.

"It's Miss Villiers, isn't it?" came a familiar voice. "This is Mr. Lee speaking."

"Yes, I recognise your voice, Mr. Lee," said Elsie. "Did you want me or one of your boys?"

"Well, I want you, as it happens," came Lee's voice. "Can you get on a bus, or the Tube, and come straight down to Knightsbridge, Miss Villiers? I want you at your late guardian's shop."

"Certainly, Mr. Lee—although I don't know much about the shop," replied the girl.

"That doesn't matter—I fancy you will be able to give me the information I require," came the voice. "You'll come as quickly as possible, won't you?"

"Of course," replied Elsie. "I'll come at once."

"There's really no need for you to tell the boys where you are going—or even that you are going out," said the voice. "It might be better if you left them in ignorance. One of them might feel disposed to escort you—and I really think it better that they should remain at the house."

"Then I'll say nothing, Mr. Lee," replied the girl.

She hung up the receiver, took her hat and coat from the stand, and quietly slipped out through the front door.

housemaids buzzing about with vacuum cleaners. I don't get a bit of rest. How are you?"

1st spider: "I've found a good place to rest. I sleep in an offertory box in Aberdeen."

(C. Howe, 155, Melrose Avenue, Wimbledon Park, S.W.19, has been awarded a penknife.)

The Ideal Place!

Manager: "I want to post this notice where all the employees will see it."

Under-manager: "Then you'd better paste it on the face of the clock, sir."

(S. Redfern, 12, Hollins Street, Buxton, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Eggs-actly!

It was in a restaurant in one of the smaller towns in England.

"Have you any oysters?" asked the diner.

"No, sir," replied the waiter.

"Any lobsters?"

"No, sir."

"Any prawns?"

"No, sir. The only shell fish we 'as is heggs, sir."

(David Wingfield, 110, Nightingale Lane, Wansstead, E.11, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)



Two In One!

An aviator took Sambo for his first flight, and on descending the nigger said:

"T'ank you for dose two rides."

"Two rides?" answered the airman, astonished. "You've only had one."

"Two," replied Sambo emphatically. "Ma first and ma last!"

(A. Angell, 48, Gernon Road, Letchworth, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Too True!

Cyril: "I know an artist who painted a cobweb so real that the maid spent an hour trying to knock it down."

Jack: "I don't believe it."

Cyril: "Why? There are such artists."

Jack: "I know; but there aren't such maids."

(R. Craig, "Mayfield," 12, Tovil Road, Maidstone, has been awarded a penknife.)

Speed!

It was Willie's first railway journey, and the train had just entered a tunnel when it rushed into the open again, and a small voice was heard to exclaim:

"Lumme! It's to-morrow!"

(R. Jones, 284, St. Benedict's Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, has been awarded a penknife.)

"**W**HAT-HO! A spot of work at last!" murmured Archie Glenthorne. "Frightfully delicate, and all that, but duty is duty. I mean, shadowing a sweet young thing like this, what? Dashed embarrassing, in fact."

Archie Glenthorne had not failed in his trust. Without any intention of eavesdropping, he had stationed himself close to the drawing-room door immediately after Elsie had left the apartment. He had heard a few murmured words of the telephone conversation, and he had seen Elsie slip out.

"On the job, dear old boys!" Archie had murmured as he had slid towards the French



windows in the drawing-room. "See you later."

"Here, what the——" Handforth had begun.

"The damsel has slipped out—so I've got to do a bit of slipping, too," interrupted Archie briskly.

And now he was keeping Elsie in sight as she walked down that quiet road. She had looked back once, but she had seen nothing of her shadower. Archie had already received a fair amount of training at the Detective Academy, and he was an expert at this particular job. Archie looked an amiable, useless kind of a youth, with his somewhat vacant face and his affected monocle, but actually he was an exceedingly wide-awake young fellow, and in any kind of a scrap he was extremely useful.

"Something dashed fishy about this," he told himself as he kept Elsie in sight. "I mean, what's the bright idea of whizzing off like this without saying a word to the lads? Was she really talking to Mr. Lee, or is there some dirty work afoot? Archie, old cheese, you'd better get ready for action. It seems to me that dirty work is absolutely indicated."

A closed motor-car, with only the wing-lamps glowing, swerved towards the pavement some little distance ahead—just opposite the spot where Elsie Villiers was walking. But, instead of overtaking her, it drew up sharply against the kerb, practically opposite.

"Good gad!" breathed Archie. "Here is the dirty work!"

He felt his heart give a jump. From the

first he had suspected that telephone conversation, but as yet he had not had much time to give it serious consideration. Now, within a minute of Elsie's leaving her home, this strange motor-car had materialised out of the evening gloom.

Elsie herself was thinking deeply as she walked. She was rather glad of all this activity, since it was keeping her mind from her recent bereavement. She rather wondered why Nelson Lee should want her at the old curio shop off Knightsbridge. No doubt he had a very good reason—

The motor-car swerved and pulled up close alongside her, and she glanced towards it quickly, mostly out of curiosity. She was in no way alarmed—yet.

"Miss Villiers! Just one moment, please!" said a sharp, crisp voice.

One of the Scotland Yard detectives, perhaps. She paused, inquiry in her eyes. The next second a heavy woollen rug fell through the air and enveloped her in its embrace.

"In with her—quick!" snapped a voice.

It was all done in a moment—a bewildering moment. Elsie tried to scream, but the folds of the woollen rug muffled her outcry. Furthermore, a heavy hand had been clapped over her face, forcing the rug on to her mouth and nostrils. A strong arm encircled her body, and she was drawn forcibly towards the car—the engine of which was racing. There was scarcely any struggle. The slim girl was no match for her muscular assailants. There were two of them; they had her in the car within a couple of seconds, and the door slammed.

Nobody had noticed Archie Glenthorne during these brief, tense moments. Yet Archie had done a "spot" of very rapid thinking; and he had put in some action, too. In a flash, his eyes had spotted the luggage-grid at the back of the car. He gave one bound forward just as Elsie was being dragged into the car. He clutched at the luggage-grid, rolled himself on, and in the same moment the car shot off.

ELSIE, bewildered, frightened, was held tightly between the two men in the back of the car. It was almost impossible for her to move.

"Take it easily, young lady!" came a voice through the folds of the rug—evidently spoken by a man whose mouth was close to her enveloped head. "This won't last long, and if you are reasonable no harm will come to you."

"Let me out—let me out!" panted Elsie.

The whole thing was like a nightmare. It was almost too fantastic to be true. Here, in Hampstead, at a comparatively early hour of the evening, she had been kidnapped in the open street! And there was nobody to help her! She realised—now—that that telephone message must have been a decoy.

The car sped across an open stretch of the Heath, turned off into a narrow by-street, and finally came to a halt in a deserted lane.

"Out with her!" said one of the men.

Elsie was forced out of the car. Without waiting a moment, the car glided on, vanishing into the gloom. There was a fence here, with a ramshackle door in it. The door creaked open, and Elsie was quickly taken across a weedy, disreputable patch of garden. A squalid house stood here—old-fashioned, mean, dingy, and obviously deserted. Some of the windows were boarded up, others had all the glass smashed. The roof was full of gaunt holes, the laths and rafters showing in ugly patches. But Elsie saw none of this. The rug was still closely wrapped round her. She was forced through a narrow doorway, and she heard some bolts being shot home. Then down a hollow-sounding passage, and finally down some stone steps. Another door closed.

"That'll do!" said a voice.

The rug was removed from Elsie's head. Frightened—terrified—she looked about her. She hardly knew what to expect in that dreadful moment. What she saw was disquieting enough, but it was not nearly so horrifying as her imagination had pictured. She was in a low cellar. Three or four candles were burning and guttering in the draught. There were three men facing her in a semi-circle. One of them wore a black silk mask, not only over his face, but entirely over his head. He was dressed, too, in a long cloak which completely concealed his figure and his normal clothing. The other men were also masked—but in a more ordinary way. There was nothing elaborate about their get-up.

"Well, we did that pretty neatly, Chief," said one of the other men.

"Leave this to me," said the Chief. "Miss Villiers, allow me to express my humble apologies for the ungentlemanly manner in which we were compelled to treat you. I can assure you that you are in absolutely no danger."

Elsie was a high-spirited girl, but she was very young, and this whole adventure had terrified her. She stood there, all the colour gone from her cheeks, her eyes wide with apprehension, her lips slightly parted.

"Who are you?" she whispered huskily. "Why have you brought me to this dreadful place?"

"Come, come!" said the Chief—for this strangely-cloaked figure was the leader of the crooks. "You must not let your imagination run away with you, Miss Villiers. There is nothing dreadful about this place. It is merely the cellar of an old, deserted house. We selected this spot as a favourable one, since there is little chance of a disturbance. Furthermore, it is handily situated. We have brought you here because we desire you to give us a little piece of information."

"I—I don't understand," faltered the girl.

"I wish to impress upon you that you are in no personal danger, Miss Villiers," continued the other smoothly. "If you give us the information we desire, you will be freed at once."

"Information?" repeated the girl wonderingly.

"Precisely," said the Chief. "We want you to tell us, as clearly as possible, exactly where your uncle's secret safe is situated."

CHAPTER 6.

A Spot of Bother!

"SO far," said Archie, "so good. The trouble is, it isn't so dashed far, and, if it comes to that, it isn't so dashed good, either!"

As noiselessly as a Red Indian on the trail, Archie had slipped off that luggage-grid—just before the car had come to a standstill. In a flash, he had been crouching against a clump of bushes near the ramshackle fence which bordered the lane. Unseen, unsuspected, he had watched the men take their prisoner to that deserted garden. And now Archie was prowling about, seeking an entry.

He had made up his mind on one definite point. He would go for help only after he had satisfied himself that Elsie was not in any immediate danger. The first thing, in Archie's opinion, was to get into this house, and to find out precisely what was going on. Needless to say, he was full of apprehension. Elsie was the late Mr. Julius Roff's ward, and these men were, without a shadow of doubt, the same men who had murdered the harmless old curio dealer. Therefore, Elsie was in dangerous hands.

Archie had already tried the door, but it was bolted. However, there were plenty of windows. He went from one to another, testing them quietly. His wits were at work, too. He was becoming more and more convinced that this place was not the headquarters of the gang; it was merely a hastily-selected spot where the girl had been brought to, and it had been chosen because of its isolation and loneliness.

"What-ho!" he murmured suddenly. "A spot of luck, by gad!"

He had hit upon a small window, boarded up like the rest; but the boards of this one were loose. The bottom plank almost came away in his hands as he touched it. He tugged gently, and it was freed. He laid it down, and then attacked the next. Within a minute he had three boards out, and there was room enough for him to squeeze through.

"Now then, old lad, pull up the good old socks, and get ready for the fireworks," he murmured. "I can't help thinking that there's going to be a large-sized spot of bother within a very few minutes."

He found himself in a narrow passage, and he stood there for some moments, listening intently. Was it fancy, or did he hear a faint murmur of voices from somewhere on his left? He crept down the passage, and his heart gave a jump. A tiny gleam of yellowish light was coming from a crack in a door. This door was in a kind of recess, just off the passage. He pressed nearer—and now luck was well on his side. For this door, like the rest of the building,



Crash ! The door burst open and in charged Archie. " You frightful blighters ! " he yelled, dashing at the three crooks.

was in a state of partial decay. There were one or two cracks running down it from top to bottom.

Archie stood there, and applied his eye to the biggest of these cracks. He found himself looking down some worn steps. He could glimpse a portion of a cellar, where there was a flickering yellow light. But the elegant young detective was affected most by the sight of a pair of slim, silken-clad legs. Elsie was standing there, just in the cellar! Owing to the formation of the staircase, Archie could not see her face or the upper part of her body.

It was clear to him, however, that she was no longer held. Archie could also see two pairs of men's feet just a little further on. He listened, eager and intent.

"I shall tell you nothing!" came Elsie's voice, bravely striving to keep itself steady. "I don't know where the safe is situated—and, even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"It will be much more pleasant for you, Miss Villiers, if you adopt a more reasonable attitude," came a hard but well-educated voice. "I should not like to threaten you—"

"You brutes!" broke in Elsie hotly. "You cowards! You are the men who murdered my guardian—and now you want me to betray his secrets! You—you curs!"

"Atta, girl, as they say in the good old American talkies!" breathed Archie. "Good gad! The fair maiden has considerable bags of spirit. A dashed priceless girl, as I always thought."

The Chief was speaking again.

"Come, Miss Villiers, we are merely wasting time," he said impatiently. "There are three of us here, and you must know that there is absolutely no hope for you. Hope, that is, for you to escape. But if you will give us this information we seek, you will be allowed to—"

"I will tell you nothing—nothing!" broke in Elsie fiercely. "Oh, you beast!"

Archie did some rapid thinking. He had just heard a piece of useful information. There were three men down there. Any attempt on his part to rescue Elsie single-handed would end in failure. Archie was a good man in a scrap, and he had plenty



Crash! The door burst open and in charged Archie. "You frightful blighters!" he yelled, dashing at the three crooks.

of faith in his own fistie abilities. But he knew his limitations. Every instinct within him was urging him to smash this door down and to go to the girl's rescue, but he fought down his desire. Archie's judgment told him that his better course was to slip out of this house at once and to fetch help.

WITHIN a minute, Archie was not only out of the house, but in that quiet, deserted lane. He was running hard, making for what he believed to be the nearest main thoroughfare.



And as he ran a disturbing thought came to him. Supposing he stopped people and told them that a girl was in danger in a cellar from a gang of crooks? Were these good people likely to help him? It was more on the cards that they would put him down as a practical joker, and take no notice. Or they might even think that he had taken leave of his senses, and forcibly detain him. It would sound so utterly fantastic.

As he ran, he took careful note of his bearings. He had left the little lane, and was

now in a more frequented street. It was called Wygate Road. He came to a crossing, and on the other side of the road he noticed a little suburban post office—closed. But outside there was a concrete telephone box!

"What-ho!" panted Archie, making for it.

His mind was made up. Why bring strangers into this affair? He would ring up Nipper and Handforth! He had plenty of coppers on him, and he knew the telephone number of the late Mr. Roff's house. He gained the number, put his pennies in, and waited, recovering some of his breath.

"Hallo!" came Nipper's voice.

"S O S, laddie—in large quantities!" ejaculated Archie. "Nipper, old scream, kindly dash to the rescue."

"What is it, Archie?" came Nipper's crisp voice.

"Trouble, old bean—trouble in chunks!" said Archie. "Listen! A gang of blighters collared Elsie in a car and carried her off."

"Great Scott! Where?"

"They've got her in an old house not very far from where you are," continued Archie. "Remember this, laddie—Wygate Road. Got it?"

"Yes—Wygate Road," said Nipper. "I know it—it's about two miles from here!"

"Absolutely," said Archie. "Go down Wygate Road, and after a bit you'll come to a little turning on the left—a sort of deserted lane where there aren't even any street lamps. A pretty foul sort of place, on the whole."

"Well?"

"I'm going back there now," said Archie. "Elsie will probably be in need of assistance—and I'm going to give her a couple of handfuls. Kindly rally round with the re-

inforcements. You can't mistake the house. It's about three hundred yards down that little lane, standing by itself in its own grounds. Ramshackle fence all round. House empty—windows boarded up. As soon as you arrive—wire in. You'll probably find me in the middle of a hectic fight. And, laddie, make it snappy."

"Don't go back, Archie!" urged Nipper. "Wait for Handy and me."

"Absolutely not!" retorted Archie. "When a damsel is in distress, dash you, it's up to me to rally round."

He hung up the receiver before Nipper could make any reply, and he immediately fumbled for two more pennies. He unhooked the receiver again and gave another number. Within half a minute he was through.

"Yes? Who is it?" came a voice.

"Fenton, old lad, listen to me!" said Archie. "Is Mr. Lee there?"

Edgar Fenton, the senior pupil of the Detective Academy, in Gray's Inn Road, was rather surprised by Archie's urgent tone.

"No, Archie," he replied. "We haven't seen Mr. Lee for some hours."

"Well, don't bother," replied Archie. "Gather all the lads together, and dash out here to Hampstead. Urgent work. A few murderers and so forth to collect."

"What on earth—"

"Absolutely," urged Archie. "No spoof, Fenton, old tulip. Positively the goods." He gave the same directions as he had given to Nipper—Hampstead—Wygate Road—the lane—the dilapidated house. "And remember, dear old sleuth, get a hustle on," concluded Archie. "If you find nothing here when you arrive, come straight on to the late Mr. Roff's house. You know the address, don't you? Good! It's time I was buzzing!"

He hung up at once, dashed out of the box, and rushed back to the ramshackle house.

ELSIE VILLIERS was calmer now. Her first terror was over, and she faced the three masked men with resolution and pluck. She knew—something positively told her—that this man in the long cloak was the murderer of her guardian. She loathed him; she hated him with a fierce intensity. And so great was this hatred that she forgot her former fear.

"I have been patient with you, my lady," said the Chief, his voice becoming evil, "but my time is valuable. I can waste no more of it. You know where old Roff's secret safe is situated in that house—and you are going to tell me."

"I shall tell you nothing," replied Elsie, breathing hard.

"No?" he replied. "We will see! Here, bring the ropes!" he said, turning to the other men. "We will soon make this child speak!"

Elsie's heart nearly stopped. She tried to back away, but the two men seized her. Ropes were roughly, cruelly tied round her wrists.

"Good!" said the Chief. "Now sling the other ends of those ropes over that hook in the centre of the beam. That's it. Give the ropes to me."

He took them and pulled on them gently. Elsie's arms were forced upwards until she was standing there on tip-toe, at the limit of her reach. The pressure on her wrists was great, and she was already in severe pain.

"Now, young lady," said the Chief. "As I told you before, I hate adopting these measures—but they seem to be necessary."

Will you tell me where that secret safe is, or shall I pull harder on these ropes?"

"I don't know—oh, I don't know!" cried the girl desperately.

"You are lying to me—and you know it!" snapped the man.

He tugged on the rope, and the girl was nearly lifted from her feet. The agony in her wrists was intense.

"You brutes—you brutes!" she cried. "I tell you I don't know. My guardian never told me—"

"Enough of this!" broke in the Chief harshly. "I am not going to be put off with any more lies. You'll tell me the truth, my girl, and you'll tell it to me now."

He pulled cruelly on the ropes; Elsie was lifted clean from the floor, and she hung there, the whole weight of her body on her bound wrists. She nearly fainted with the intense pain of it. And it was just at that moment that Archie Glenthorne, breathless and hot, arrived back. He was standing on the other side of the cellar door, his eye close to that crack. Archie was horrified to see the girl's slim legs clear of the floor; he did not exactly know what was happening to her, but he could easily guess. He heard her quick breathing—her anguished sobs.

"Oh, you fiends!" came an agonised cry. "Let me down—let me down!"

Archie saw red.

"What-ho!" he muttered. "This, I mean, is where we dash right in."

He drew back, gathered all his strength together, and charged at that ramshackle cellar door!

CHAPTER 7.

The Crooks Baffled!

CRASH! The door, at the very first onslaught, splintered and shivered from top to bottom. That charge of Archie's had been an effective one. He plunged through, and only just saved himself from pitching headlong down the cellar steps. He recovered his balance, and then dashed down, shouting at the top of his voice.

In the cellar there was consternation. Elsie, quickly released, had half-fallen to the ground. The Chief and his two companions stood back, their hands leaping towards their pockets. In that moment they believed that this was a raid—that the police were on them.

"You frightful blighters!" yelled Archie, leaping forward. "Take that, dash you!"

He flung himself at the Chief, and the latter gulped.

"One of Lee's cubs!" he muttered. "What the—"

Crash!

Archie's clenched fist, with plenty of driving force behind it, struck him on the nose. He staggered back, momentarily dazed.

Thud—crash—thud!

Archie was going ahead with enthusiasm. Three times he hit the Chief, but by then the other two men had sprung into action. They leapt across and seized Archie before he could do any further damage. One of them received a fierce uppercut, and the other reeled as Archie's left caught him on the side of the head. But this was only a brief scrap. The two men had Archie helpless before he could do any further damage.

"The young spitfire!" snarled the Chief. "Hold him! Put some ropes round his wrists! And mind he doesn't kick!"

Archie went down gamely, fighting all the way. Within a minute he was bound hand and foot, and by this time the crooks had realised that there were no other attackers. One of the men hurried out, and had a close look at the garden and the lane. He came back, reporting that nobody was within sight and that everything was quiet. The Chief, cunning and keen-witted, saw at once that Archie's presence could be turned to profit.

"Tie the girl up!" he ordered, pointing to her. "Yes; I know that her wrists are already bound, but tie her ankles up, too."

The girl, who was near Archie, looked at him with mingled gratitude and apprehension.

"Oh, why did you come?" she whispered. "You ought to have warned the police——"

"I know—I know!" groaned Archie. "But I was so frightfully anxious about you, old girl. Now we're both in the soup! I never thought of telling the police, you know. Dashed careless of me."

The Chief had not failed to overhear those words—as, indeed, Archie had intended.

"Leave the girl lying on the floor, there," he ordered. "That'll do—she'll be safe enough. Now bring the boy here."

Archie was pulled to his feet, and he was propped against one of the walls. Coolly and deliberately, the Chief produced an automatic pistol from his pocket. On the muzzle of it there was a curious protuberance—evidently a silencer.

"Now, Miss Villiers," said the Chief, looking round at the girl. "You have accused me of being the murderer of your guardian. That is not a question which need be discussed now. But do you see this pistol? If I fire it, there will be no loud report—only a muffled thud. I have no desire to destroy the life of this young fellow, but if you refuse to talk——"

"No, no!" cried Elsie, horrified afresh.

"I am in a hurry—I cannot afford to waste another minute of time," said the Chief. "I shall give you just one minute, my lady! Do you understand—one minute? Tell me where that secret safe is situated, and your friend's life will be saved. Remain silent, and——" He broke off significantly.

"Go ahead, dash you!" said Archie with contempt. "You're only bluffing, you frightful chunk of fungus!"

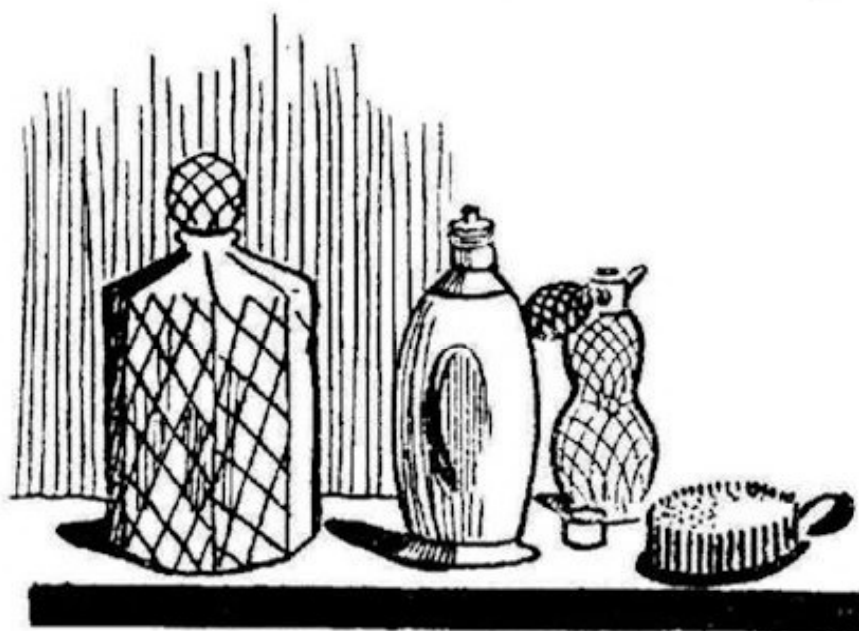
But Elsie Villiers was looking fascinatedly at that automatic pistol. She wasn't sure

whether the Chief was bluffing or not. Could she risk it? *Dare* she risk it? Archie had come to her rescue—had got himself into this fix on her account. She suddenly uttered a choking cry.

"No, no! Don't shoot!" she panted. "I—I'll speak!"

"Good gad!" breathed Archie.

"You'll speak, will you?" said the Chief, a note of triumph coming into his voice.



"Good! I thought we should bring you to reason, Miss Villiers!"

"Don't say anything, Miss Elsie!" urged Archie. "I mean, I'm not afraid of these blighters!"

"I must—I must!" whispered the girl. "The safe—the safe is hidden behind the built-in bookcase in the library."

"Which bookcase?" asked the Chief sharply. "We examined every bookcase——"

"This is a special one—although it looks just like the others," said Elsie. "It's the one in the recess. It's to the left of the fireplace as you go in by the door."

"The safe is behind that bookcase?"

"Yes."

"How can the bookcase be moved if it is a fixture?"

"It only seems to be a fixture," replied the girl breathlessly. "There are three ornamental knobs on the face of the marble fireplace."

"We know that!" broke in the Chief. "We tried them all—they're immovable."

"No, they're not," insisted the girl. "The middle knob, if you tap it sharply as though driving it in, will become slightly loosened. Then, if you turn it to the left, the bookcase will open, revealing the safe. I've seen my guardian open it many times."

The Chief's eyes gleamed behind his silken mask.

"Come!" he said to his companions. "We'll go straight away and verify this."

"Oh, but you promised to let me go free if I told you——" began Elsie.

"Not just yet, young lady," said the Chief. "First of all, we'll find out if your information is correct. If it isn't, we shall return—and it will be a bad thing for you if you have sent us on a fool's errand."

Without another word, the Chief mounted the cellar steps, and his two companions,

after blowing out the candles, followed. The ramshackle door was hastily set up, although it could not be properly fastened. But the two prisoners were bound so tightly that there was no possibility of them getting free; also they were both tied to a post now, so they would not be able to crawl out of the cellar.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry about this," murmured Elsie, after all sounds of the men had died away. "It's all my fault, too."

"Oh, I say! Of course not, old girl!"

"But it is!" insisted Elsie. "I thought it was Mr. Lee on the telephone, but it must have been one of these dreadful men! It was silly of me not to tell you that I was going out."

"It didn't matter, anyhow," whispered Archie. "I mean, I followed just the same. Strict orders, you know—Mr. Lee told me to watch over you wherever you went, Miss Elsie."

"And look at the trouble I've dragged you into," said Elsie, her voice full of worry. "We can't escape, and when those men come back—"

"Never mind the blighters," interrupted Archie. "I was frightfully sorry that you were compelled to give away the secret of that safe."

"But I didn't."

"Oh, I say! I distinctly heard you—"

"I had to say something," whispered the girl. "I don't know where the safe is

placed, Archie. You don't mind me calling you Archie, do you?"

"Good gad, no! I think it's ripping!"

"I had to tell them something—or they would have killed you!" continued Elsie. "So I made it up about the bookcase and the knobs on the mantelpiece."

"I say, that was most frightfully smart of you, old girl," said Archie admiringly. "Well I'm dashed! I mean, brains, what?"

"But it's only a temporary respite," said the girl. "They'll be back soon—when they find out how I fooled them—and their anger will be dreadful. We can't escape—"

"Everything is going to be all serene," declared Archie contentedly. "In fact, unless I'm absolutely mistaken—unless the good old earpieces are demagnetised—rescue is at hand."

"Rescue!" breathed Elsie, a catch in her voice. "Oh, but—but who could come?"

"The good old lads, of course!" chuckled Archie. "Dash it, I'm not absolutely useless, you know, Miss Elsie. I 'phoned up Nipper and Handforth, and after that I got in touch with the good old academy. They'll be swarming round here soon."

They both listened. Distinctly, they could hear stealthy footsteps. And then sounded a voice. Archie recognised it immediately. Handforth's voice.

"Tally-ho!" shouted Archie lustily. "To the rescue, lads!"

"Archie!" came a yell.



The Bully of the Shell!

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A moment later the door was flung down, lights appeared, and Nipper and Handforth tumbled down into the cellar. The gleams from their electric torches played upon the two prisoners.

"By George!" said Handforth breathlessly. "What the dickens have you been up to? How did you get into this mess?"

"Leave questions until afterwards, Handy," said Nipper briskly. "Get your knife out. You attend to Archie, and I'll release Miss Elsie."

Handforth would have preferred it the other way round, but Nipper was already cutting the girl's bonds.

"What about the crooks?" asked Nipper as he worked. "Do you know anything about them, Archie? How long have they been gone—and where did they go?"

"To Mr. Roff's house, of course—you must have passed them on the way, old boy."

And Archie and Elsie, between them, quickly explained the situation. Nipper was full of praise for Archie's able handling of the case.

"What about the police?" asked Handforth, as they prepared to leave. "Shall we collect some police on the way?"

"No need for that," replied Nipper. "The other chaps will be there, I expect—or they'll arrive only a few minutes after us, anyhow. We'll keep this thing to ourselves—until we've been able to report to the gov'nor. Come on!"

"It just shows you how brainy Mr. Lee was to leave us on guard," said Handforth. "My only sainted aunt! It's awful to think what might have happened to Miss Elsie if we hadn't been here to look after her. It's mainly Archie's evening, though. He gets the honours."

"Oh, I say, what rot!" protested Archie. "I've made an awful hash of things, really."

There was a car waiting at the bottom of the lane. Nipper had obtained it from a local garage. The three young detectives and the girl were soon speeding back to her home; and when they arrived they found the house in complete darkness. They were preparing to advance cautiously when a big, high-powered car came speeding up.

"Wait a minute!" said Nipper. "This is the crowd, I believe. By Jove, they've been pretty quick!"

The Junior Flying Squad—as Chief-inspector Lennard had once facetiously referred to the Detective Academy—tumbled out of the freshly-arrived car. They were ten strong, including Fenton and Morrow and Browne and Stevens and Church and McClure.

"Good men!" said Nipper heartily. "No time for explanations now. We've got to get into this house, and there might be some trouble. So be on the look-out for squalls."

"How many crooks?" asked somebody.

"Three," said Handforth. "They're after the Viper of Venice, and it's a cert that they're Mr. Roff's murderers. It's our job to nab them."

When they got into the house, however, they found everything silent and still. The crooks had gone. But there was plenty of evidence to show that they had recently been there. The library was in a state of great disorder. The bookcase which Elsie had described was practically torn to pieces. All the books lay in heaps on the floor; the bookcase itself was shattered. The bare wall beyond was exposed. But it was a solid wall, without any trace of any secret receptacle. The mantelpiece was smashed, too. The Chief and his men had satisfied themselves that Elsie's story had been a bluff. Now the men had gone—presumably back to that derelict house. But they would not get much satisfaction there, for their prisoners had escaped.

Mrs. Matthews was found in the kitchen, gagged and bound to a chair. Fortunately, she had come to no real harm, although she was greatly terrified. Her story was simple enough. Two men had suddenly sprung upon her from behind, and the gag had been forced over her mouth. Then she had been bound to the chair and left. She had seen a third man, but it was impossible for her to describe her assailants because they were all masked.

Not that this mattered much. The whole thing was obvious. Those men had been after the Viper of Venice, and once again they had failed.

CHAPTER 8.

On the Trail!

ALTHOUGH Nelson Lee had instructed Archie Glenthorne to keep a close watch on Elsie, and although he had told Nipper and Handforth to remain on guard at the Hampstead house, Lee had not really believed that the crooks would take any action until late in the evening. In this he had been wrong, for the crooks, desperately anxious to obtain the prize, had acted almost at once.

Nelson Lee, in the meantime, was quite busy on his own account. He had formed a theory, and after ringing up Nipper he had done some hard thinking. Following that, he had visited a cable office, and had sent off a long message, in cipher, to New York. Having done this, he visited Scotland Yard, and had another chat with Chief-inspector Lennard, who was, on the whole, inclined to be disconsolate. The case wasn't going on so smoothly as he had hoped.

Nelson Lee's next move was to visit the Pall Mall Hotel. He was by no means displeased when he learned that Mr. Millar T. Hayle was out. Lee had expected him to be out. And what was just as important, Perry, the valet, was out, too. On a pretext, Lee got up to the floor on which Mr. Hayle's suite was situated. And it did not take the detective long to get into conversation with a smart page-boy who usually attended to Mr. Hayle's minor wants. Nelson Lee gave

this young man a liberal tip, and also showed him his card. The latter move was magical in its effect. The page-boy was Lee's slave after that moment.

"This is quite unofficial, you understand, and the hotel authorities mustn't know anything about it," said Lee. "All I want to do, young 'un, is to have a quick look into Mr. Hayle's rooms."

"Yes, sir," said the page-boy. "I've got a key and it won't take me two jiffs to let you in."

"Good!" said Lee. "You'd better wait outside in the corridor, and if Mr. Hayle or his valet returns you can give me the tip."

"Right you are, sir," said the page-boy.

Lee was admitted into the suite. The page-boy remained on guard out in the corridor. Lee wasted no time in the sitting-room or the bed-room. He made his way into the well-equipped bath-room. Altogether, he did not spend more than five minutes in the American millionaire's suite, but when he emerged there was a light of quiet satisfaction in his eyes.

"Why, you ain't done, have you, sir?" asked the page-boy, in surprise.

"Yes, thank you, and here's another half-crown for you," replied Nelson Lee. "Now, remember, young man, that this little affair has been strictly between ourselves. Not a word to Mr. Hayle—or to his valet."

"Not a word to anybody, sir," said the boy, with a grin. "And if I've been of any use to you, Mr. Lee, I'm happy. By gum, what wouldn't I give if I was able to join that Detective Academy of yours!"

Nelson Lee's next move was to get into his car and to drive straight out to Hampstead. When he arrived, and found half the Detective Academy there, and Mrs. Matthews nearly in a state of collapse, he was not altogether surprised. His arrival almost coincided with the arrival of the "cubs" from Gray's Inn Road. Lee turned up, in fact, only a minute or two after Mrs. Matthews had been released.

"I'm very sorry about this, Miss Villiers," said Lee gravely. "I feel that I ought to have taken stronger precautions."

"But you did everything that you could, Mr. Lee," replied Elsie. "Archie watched over me all the time, and he saved me, too."

"Good lad, Archie!" said Lee approvingly. "In fact, you have all done very well indeed. If I had suspected that the criminals would take action so early in the evening, I would have left a stronger guard. It is a mercy that no actual harm has been done."

"What's the next job, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"You and Handforth and Glenthorne will accompany me in the car," replied Nelson Lee. "All the others must remain here—on guard. And I fancy that the guard will be sufficiently strong this time. A word with you, Fenton."

"Yes, sir," said Edgar Fenton.

"Post your men round the grounds," said Nelson Lee. "Some of you remain on the

watch constantly—others keep indoors. If these men come back—which, after all, is doubtful—remember that they are armed. And if it comes to a fight, it will be grim one."

"But we'll collar them, sir," said Fenton confidently.

"You have your automatic pistol?"

"Yes, sir."

"Browne and Morrow and Stevens have theirs?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then if the crooks *do* come, and if they fire a single shot, you must fire back," instructed Nelson Lee. "Don't hesitate, Fenton, for it might be a question of your life or theirs. I am just saying this as a word of warning."

"O.K., Chief," said Fenton, smiling.

The senior boys of the Detective Academy were allowed to carry firearms, and Nelson Lee knew—better than anybody else—that it might be necessary for them to use those firearms this evening.

FIVE minutes later Nelson Lee, with Nipper, Handforth, and Archie, were speeding back towards London. Lee's first call was at Gray's Inn Road, and here, as he had expected, he found a long cablegram awaiting him from New York. It was in cipher, but Lee read it with ease. And as he did so that gleam of satisfaction increased in his eyes. He crumpled the slip of paper and thrust it into his pocket.

"Good!" he said. "Now we can act with decision."

"What's in the wind, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"I will only tell you, Nipper, that my suspicions are thoroughly confirmed," replied Lee. "Later—when I have time—I will give you the details. For the moment, we must act. Not a second is to be lost."

"Where do we go to first, sir?"

"The Pall Mall Hotel."

"But I thought we were after the crooks!" said Nipper, disappointed.

"I haven't said we're not," replied Nelson Lee, with a curiously grim note in his voice.

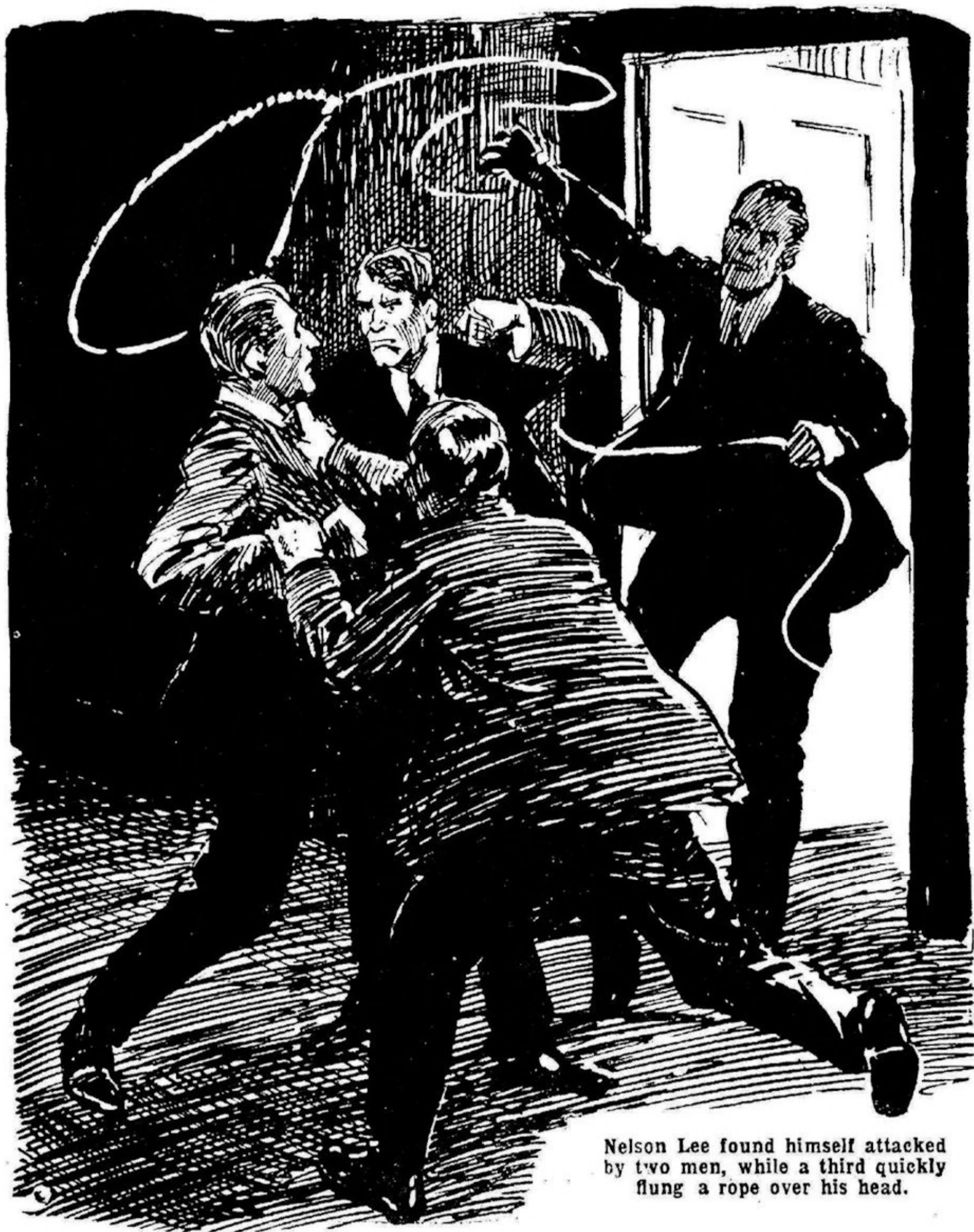
When they arrived at the Pall Mall Hotel, Lee left the boys in the car. He walked into the sumptuous lounge and got in touch with the reception clerk.

"Mr. Hayle, sir," said the clerk, "went out about twenty minutes ago. Weren't you inquiring for him earlier, sir? Pity you've missed him again."

"Did Mr. Hayle leave any message in case he should be wanted?"

"He said that he was probably going to Scotland Yard, and after that he would be at the Carlton Club, sir," replied the reception clerk. "I'll ring up the Carlton Club if you like—"

"No, it doesn't matter," interrupted Lee. "It will be just as satisfactory if I have a few words with Mr. Hayle's valet."



Nelson Lee found himself attacked by two men, while a third quickly flung a rope over his head.

"I'll see if he's available, sir," said the reception clerk. But two minutes later he came up to Lee and shook his head. "Nobody's in the suite at all, sir," he said. "The valet apparently hasn't come back yet. Mr. Hayle must have given him the half-day, by the look of it."

"Thank you," said Lee.

He went out, frowning. When he got to the car the boys regarded him with eagerness.

"Any luck, sir?" asked Handforth.

"In a way, yes," replied Lee. "The result of my inquiries here is what I expected. I only came as a precautionary measure. We're now going to Hampstead."

"To Mr. Roff's home, sir?"

"No, to the derelict house where Miss Elsie was temporarily imprisoned," replied Lee. "You know it, Nipper, don't you? You'd better give me directions after we get to Hampstead."

Nipper and the others were rather puzzled. This visit to the ramshackle house did not look particularly promising. The crooks had been there, of course, but there was very little likelihood of finding them there now. And why this visit to the Pall Mall Hotel first? In vain Nipper had tried to fathom Nelson Lee's reasoning. The car was left at the end of the lane, and Nipper led the way towards the deserted house. Archie and Handforth were feeling thrilled; they hardly knew what to expect.

"What's the real idea of coming here, sir?" whispered Nipper, as he walked by Lee's side.

"I will confess to you, young 'un, that I am just a little off the trail," replied Lee. "There is a strong possibility that I might be able to pick up a clue here. These three men have been here—quite recently—and with any luck we shall be able to learn something of importance."

"You don't think the men will be here now?"

"I don't," replied Lee. "But it is just as well to be on the safe side; we will approach with caution."

They did so, but Lee was right. The house was as deserted as it looked. After breaking in, the great detective and his assistants found that they had the place entirely to themselves. They made a quick search of the house, but no clues were discovered.

"Nothing here, sir," said Handforth, after he had finished looking round the cellar. "Only some old boxes and bits of newspaper and these scraps of rope—"

"Good gad! What about this, dear old things?" asked Archie Glenthorne suddenly.

"What is it?"

Lee went across, and found Archie holding an old newspaper in his hand. Across it were some traces of writing in blue-black ink. But the writing was blurred and smudged—and reversed.

"Somebody must have used the newspaper as a blotter," said Nipper. "Most newspapers are useful in that way—I've often blotted my signature with one when there hasn't been a proper blotter handy."

"Yes, but this might have been done months ago," said Handforth. "It's an old newspaper—August of last year."

"One moment," said Lee, his voice keen. "This was blotted only this evening. Ordinary blue-black ink was used, and blue-black ink, after a certain period, becomes almost black. This is still blue, as you can see."

"But why should any of the crooks write something down and then blot it?" asked Nipper sceptically.

"I think it is comparatively easy to guess the explanation," said Lee. "The chief of the gang gave instructions to his men to meet at a certain address—perhaps later on this evening. In order that there should be no mistake, he jotted the address down, using a fountain-pen. And one of the men,

being impatient, used this old newspaper as a blotter. Upon my word, this is an extraordinarily lucky find! Good lad, Archie!" added the detective approvingly. "Hold my torch!"

"Absolutely, sir!" said Archie, beaming.

Lee quickly took out a pocket mirror, and, holding the newspaper in front of this, he was able to read the smudgy inscription.

"Yes, this is fairly clear," said Lee, with satisfaction. "Three, Hoadgate Road, Cam."

"Is that all, sir?" asked Nipper.

"That's all."

"What does the 'Cam' stand for?" asked Handforth, staring. "By George, here's a go! It must mean Cambridge! We've got to shoot off to Cambridge now!"

"Odds dashes and jumps!" breathed Archie.

But Nelson Lee was shaking his head.

"Not Cambridge, Handforth," he said. "I fancy that 'Cam' in this case is short for Camberwell."

"Oh!"

"There is a Headgate Road in Camberwell—my knowledge of London is fairly extensive—and now that I come to look at this word again, I think it is Headgate, and not Hoadgate. Headgate Road, Denmark Hill, Camberwell, would exactly fit."

"What are we going to do, guv'nor?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"We are going straight to Camberwell," replied Lee. "And I fancy it will be the end of the trail!"

CHAPTER 9.

Unmasked!

HEADGATE ROAD, Camberwell, was a quiet, dingy thoroughfare, some distance from the main roads. The houses were not exactly squalid, but they were far from "desirable." No. 3 was a small, semi-detached villa, with a little patch of garden in front. It was, indeed, the end house, and the garden extended along the side and round to the front. There was a narrow passage alongside. Nelson Lee discovered these details as he made a brief reconnoitre before taking any definite action. The three "cubs" had been left with the car, down another street some little distance away. Nelson Lee had warned the boys to be patient.

"Give me twenty minutes," he said. "If I haven't returned by that time, you have my permission to come along and help. But whatever you do, be careful."

No lights were showing in the house. The front blinds were down. And when Nelson Lee crept round to the rear, he could still see no signs of life. In a business-like way he attacked a small side window. The catch was old-fashioned, and in less than a couple of minutes Lee had slipped it back, and was gently sliding up the window. He wormed his way through, and found himself

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Avoid Disappointment & Order Your "NELSON LEE" In Advance!

in a rear lobby. In one hand he gripped his revolver, and in the other he carried a small electric torch. He stood listening for some moments. Not a sound broke the stillness. He moved forward, intending to investigate the rear rooms first, but suddenly a hand clasped itself round his left ankle. He had gone forward to a point where a passage joined the lobby. The hand had slipped out of this passage. Quick as lightning Lee twisted round and kicked. There came a grunt, and the toe of his shoe thudded against something soft.

"On him!" gasped a voice.

A door opened, allowing a flood of light to come out. Nelson Lee was taken by surprise—and he was thoroughly annoyed with himself. He realised, in that moment, that the rear windows must have been very carefully blanketed so that no gleam of light should show outside. The doors, too, fitted closely, so that there was no crack at the bottom. And perhaps that window—the one he had opened—was fitted with a secret alarm. At all events, Lee now found himself menaced by three determined men.

"It's Lee, the 'tec!" gasped one of them. "Hadn't we better plug him, Chief?"

"Not yet!" came another voice. "How in blazes did he know we were here? Don't shoot—it's too risky."

Two of the men hurled themselves at Lee as the Chief was speaking. Lee's fists struck

out with tremendous effect, and one man went reeling back, howling. The other, sagging at the knees, almost collapsed: but he managed to fasten his grip round Nelson Lee's knees, and he clung there.

"That's right—hold him!" panted the other. "Pull, you fool—get him over!"

The other man jerked with all his strength, and Lee was thrown off his balance. At the same second, as he was falling, something struck him on the side of the head, and, although his senses did not leave him, he was dazed and weakened. A moment later the two men were upon him, and the third quickly flung a rope over his head and shoulders and drew it tight, binding his arms closely to his sides.

"That's got him!" said the Chief, breathing hard. "Bring him into the room."

Nelson Lee was hustled and pushed into the lighted room. His head was singing and his vision was affected, but he could see that this room was fairly comfortable. A fire was burning and two gas jets were glowing.

"Shut the door!" said the Chief.

The door was shut, and Nelson Lee was forced over to the fireplace. More ropes were tied round him, and then he was flung roughly into a hard Windsor armchair.

"Quite a little victory," said Lee mockingly.

"Quit the sarcasm," snapped the Chief. "I'll trouble you to answer a few questions."

"I am afraid I shall not be able to oblige," replied Lee.

"We'll see about that!" snarled the Chief. "First of all, have you got any of your infernal boy scouts outside?"

"Rashly enough, I entered alone," said Lee.

"I thought you weren't going to answer any questions," growled one of the other men. "Don't you believe him, Chief! He's lying! Gosh! We'd best get out of here—quick! Maybe those cursed boys are surrounding the place!"

"I'm not afraid of boys!" said the Chief contemptuously. "And while we hold Lee we're safe."

Lee's head was clearer now. He could see that the Chief was a broad, well-built man. He was wearing that long black coat, or cloak, and over his head and face was the silken mask. The other two men had also donned their masks—although at the beginning of the fight, out in the dark passage, they had not worn them.

"Before we proceed any further, Chief, wouldn't it be as well to dispense with the masks?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly. "You need not be afraid of disclosing yourself—Mr. Chester Morley, alias Mr. Dirk Masson, alias Manhattan Mike."

"Any other names?" asked the Chief, his voice throbbing with startled fury.

"Yes, there is one other," replied Nelson Lee. "Mr. Millar T. Hayle!"

The Chief flung his silken mask off, revealing the rage-distorted features of Mr. Millar T. Hayle, the American millionaire.

"You're a darned smart guy, aren't you?" he panted, going nearer to Lee. "How in heck did you get on to me?"

"In a very simple way, Mr. Hayle," replied Nelson Lee. "This gentleman on my left, I believe, is Perry, your valet. He is otherwise known as 'Porch' Williams, of Pittsburg."

Perry removed his mask, and his face was alight with fear.

"This bird's scaring me, Chief!" he panted. "He knows too much!"

"He knows so much that we shall have to take very great care of him," replied Mr. Hayle, nodding. "And now, before we go any further, I think we'll have a close look outside. If any of those boys are prowling about, we'll know just what to do with them."

"As soon as I suspected you, Hayle, I wired to the New York police," said Nelson Lee dryly. "I had their reply only a short while ago, and I decided to act at once."

"Trying to keep me talking, eh?" snapped Hayle. "Well, it won't work!"

"No? Why should I play for time?" said Lee. "It was clever of you, Hayle, to appear at the door of Mr. Roff's shop so soon after you had murdered him in cold blood. Having failed to obtain the Viper of Venice by theft, you thought it advisable to re-assume your character of the American millionaire. No doubt, you thought the Viper of Venice would come to light in the police

search. Then, as soon as you knew exactly where it was, you could lift it at your leisure. Am I right?"

"I set out to get the Viper—and I'll get it!" retorted Hayle, his eyes burning. "And your interference is not going to make any difference to me, Lee! As soon as we've dealt with you we're going to Hampstead. We've got an important appointment with the man who built Roff's house—although he doesn't know it yet! That guy is going to speak."

"So that is the reason for this interesting little meeting?" said Nelson Lee, nodding. "I am very much afraid, Mr. Hayle, that you are going to be disappointed. In fact, I am sure of it."

For whilst Nelson Lee had been speaking, he had noticed that the door was quietly opening. He caught a glimpse of Nipper's face in the crack; and, although he feared for the safety of the boys, he was glad that they had come.

"You are a crook, Hayle!" continued Lee, his words intended as direct information for the boys. "You have played your part well, but——"

"Can the talk!" snapped Hayle roughly. "I've changed my mind, Lee. I'm going to plug you—right now! This gun of mine is silent——"

"The same gun that you used to murder Mr. Roff?"

There was a tense silence. Outside, Nipper and Handforth and Archie, hearing those words, decided that instant action was necessary. The full time limit had not expired, but they had grown anxious concerning Lee, and they had approached the house. It had been easy enough for them to slip in through the window which Nelson Lee had already opened. Now, with a sudden crash, Nipper flung the door wide open.

"Hands up!" he snapped curtly.

Hayle and the other two men swung round, the automatic already in Hayle's hands. His face became livid, and his finger twitched on the trigger.

Crack!

It was Nipper's weapon which sounded. Hayle gave a scream, and his automatic went flying through the air. Nipper's aim had been true; the bullet had hit the automatic in the centre, and it seemed to Hayle that his arm had been struck by a sledgehammer.

"Hands up, I say!" ordered Nipper. "Quick, Handy! You, too, Archie! Take those ropes off the guv'nor!"

"What-ho!" sang out Archie Glenthorne.

"You men—keep your hands above your heads!" commanded Nipper. "If I have to fire again, I shall fire to do some damage."

In less than twenty seconds, Nelson Lee's bonds were cut, and he was on his feet.

"Good work, young 'uns!" he commented. "I rather expected you to come. Lennard's a bit late, though."

"Lennard!" gasped Nipper. "You don't mean——"

"Oh, yes," said Lee. "Lennard ought to be here at any minute, and it's quite probable that he'll bring half the Flying Squad with him."

Deftly Lee relieved Perry and the other crook of their weapons. Hayle, in the meantime, was looking dangerous. He was desperate, and suddenly, with a wild shout, he charged towards the door—risking the possibility of Lee or Nipper firing.

He reached the door, but he charged full tilt into the burly figure of Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard!

CHAPTER 10.

Nelson Lee Explains!

"JUST in time, Lennard," said Lee calmly.

"So it seems," grunted the chief-inspector. "Now, now, Mr. Hayle! It won't do you any good to make all this fuss."

The fight was short and sharp. Mr. Millar T. Hayle, nearly foaming at the mouth with fury, was handcuffed. Flying Squad men, entering the room, made short work of the other two criminals. All three were handcuffed and lined up.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, scratching his head. "What I'm wondering is how you Yard men came along so handily."

"That's easy," said Nipper. "Don't you remember that the guv'nor stopped the car on the way here to go into a tobacconist's for some cigarettes?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Cigarettes my eye!" said Nipper, grinning. "He 'phoned to the Yard."

"Sorry I didn't take you boys into my confidence, but there really wasn't any necessity," smiled Lee. "Yes, I 'phoned to the Yard—and this is the result."

Hayle, who had calmed considerably, looked at Lee with much curiosity.

"May I ask how you first suspected me?" he inquired. "Merely as a matter of curiosity—"

"You were careless, Hayle, in your use of brilliantine."

"Brilliantine!" ejaculated the American with a start.

"Exactly."

"Why, good gosh! You don't mean—"

"You were also careless in allowing one of your silken masks to drop out of your pocket when you first raided Mr. Roff's home at Hampstead," continued Lee. "That mask bore a distinct odour of brilliantine, Hayle. Not the ordinary brilliantine—but something quite different. Something distinctive. I will tell you frankly that I had absolutely no suspicions against you at first."

"And then?"

"Then I interviewed you at the Pall Mall Hotel," continued Lee. "My first impression was of a vague, elusive perfume. It only took me a few moments to locate the source of that perfume—your head. Pre-

cisely the same scent as that on the silken mask."

"You're not a detective—you're a bloodhound!" snapped Hayle.

"By no means," denied Lee. "It was only the peculiarity of the perfume which gave me the clue. And having reason to suspect you, Hayle. I immediately saw the whole case in a fresh light. It was you who instructed Mr. Julius Roff to obtain the Viper of Venice; it was you who was at the shop door not twenty minutes after the murder had been committed."

"But I was safe in going there—I had an appointment with Roff."

"Precisely," agreed Lee. "You engineered the whole thing very cleverly. You thought that you would use Roff—he being an agent—to obtain that priceless jewel. You fixed up the appointment. Then, with your companions, you went to Mr. Roff's shop and held him up, thinking that you would obtain the Viper quite easily, since it would seem that Mr. Roff would have it there in readiness to hand over to his client."

"That's right," growled Hayle.

"But the Viper was not there—as you found, after you had murdered that poor old man," said Lee grimly. "You were foiled, and so you thought it better to keep your appointment. Suspicion would at once be directed against 'Mr. Hayle, the millionaire,' if it had been discovered that you had made an appointment with Roff. Hayle's very absence would look peculiar."

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"That's true," put in Lennard, nodding.

"You also thought, Hayle, that you would ascertain what had become of the Viper of Venice—where it actually was," went on Nelson Lee relentlessly. "And when you had reason to believe that it was at Hampstead, you raided the Hampstead house. Again you failed. Then I came on the scene, and I interviewed you. Having my suspicions against you, I deliberately put the idea into your head that Miss Elsie Villiers knew the whereabouts of the secret safe."

"You did that deliberately?"

"Yes," replied Lee. "But first of all I had safeguarded Miss Elsie; I had taken measures for her protection. My idea was to lead you on—so that you could be easily trapped. But I will confess that I did not expect you to act so soon."

"You're a clever guy!" said Hayle with vicious admiration.

"It is all merely a matter of deduction and putting two and two together," said Nelson Lee, shrugging his shoulders. "And once I had cause to suspect you, Hayle, I had plenty of evidence to support my suspicions. The very fact that you were employing a known crook as your valet was significant. That was a mistake of yours."

"Mistake nothing!" snapped Hayle. "I needed him—I had to have somebody who could keep me in touch with things. Besides, we figured to be out of the country weeks ago. If old Roff hadn't played the fool with that Viper, if he'd had it on the premises as he arranged, he would have been alive to-day. How did you definitely find out that I was not what I seemed to be?" went on the crook. "That's what's been puzzling me for some time. Gosh! I was sap enough to think that I had got you all guessing."

"I knew that my suspicions would be useless when it came to swearing out a warrant," replied Lee. "I cabled your description to America; I asked the New York police to give me all particulars of such a man. The New York police were very obliging. They gave me such details that I knew there could no longer be any doubt."

"But there really is a guy named Millar T. Hayle, of Cincinnati," growled the crook. "He's a curio hunter, too."

"Yes, and at the present moment he is lying ill in a nursing-home in some obscure little town in Germany," nodded Nelson Lee.

"There's one other little point," remarked Hayle, his coolness now absolute. "I should like to know—merely as a matter of curiosity—exactly where the Viper of Venice actually is."

"In Mr. Roff's safe, which is hidden behind a recess in his bed-room," replied Nelson Lee promptly.

"Oh!" said Lennard. "How did you know that, Lee?"

"I made it my business to interview the builders."

"The deuce you did!"

"Mr. Hayle, here, also interviewed the builders—but they were unkind enough to

send him away without any information," continued Lee dryly.

"Well, the Viper's secure—and that's all that matters," said Lennard. "Come along, Mr. Hayle. We won't keep you here any longer."

"JUST a moment, gentlemen," said Hayle, as the detectives prepared to lead him out. "May I be allowed a smoke? I don't suppose I shall have many opportunities of smoking once I am behind the bars."

With his manacled hands he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and produced a gold case.

"Go ahead," said Lennard, nodding.

He held the case open for Hayle, and the latter removed one of the cigarettes and put it into his mouth. Strangely enough, Hayle bit the end completely off the cigarette and then swallowed.

"Thank you," he said, a strange light in his eyes.

"Say, what's this?" shouted Lennard. "What's the game?"

"Only this," replied Hayle. "I realise that there is no possible hope for me; you have the goods on me. There's not one chance in a thousand that I shall get acquitted—or even reprieved. Gentlemen, you win."

A sudden, convulsive movement attacked the American crook's frame. The detectives tried to hold him up, but he gave a harsh, choking cry. The convulsions increased, then suddenly they ceased altogether. He became limp, and his face was now deathly white.

"Poison!" muttered Nelson Lee. "The beggar tricked us, after all."

THE rest was simple.

The safe was discovered, just as Nelson Lee had supposed, behind that recess in the late Mr. Julius Roff's bed-room. The Viper of Venice was safe—together with a number of other valuable curios.

At the Detective Academy, Archie Glen-thorne came in for a great deal of praise. It was felt by most of the fellows that he was deserving of the kudos.

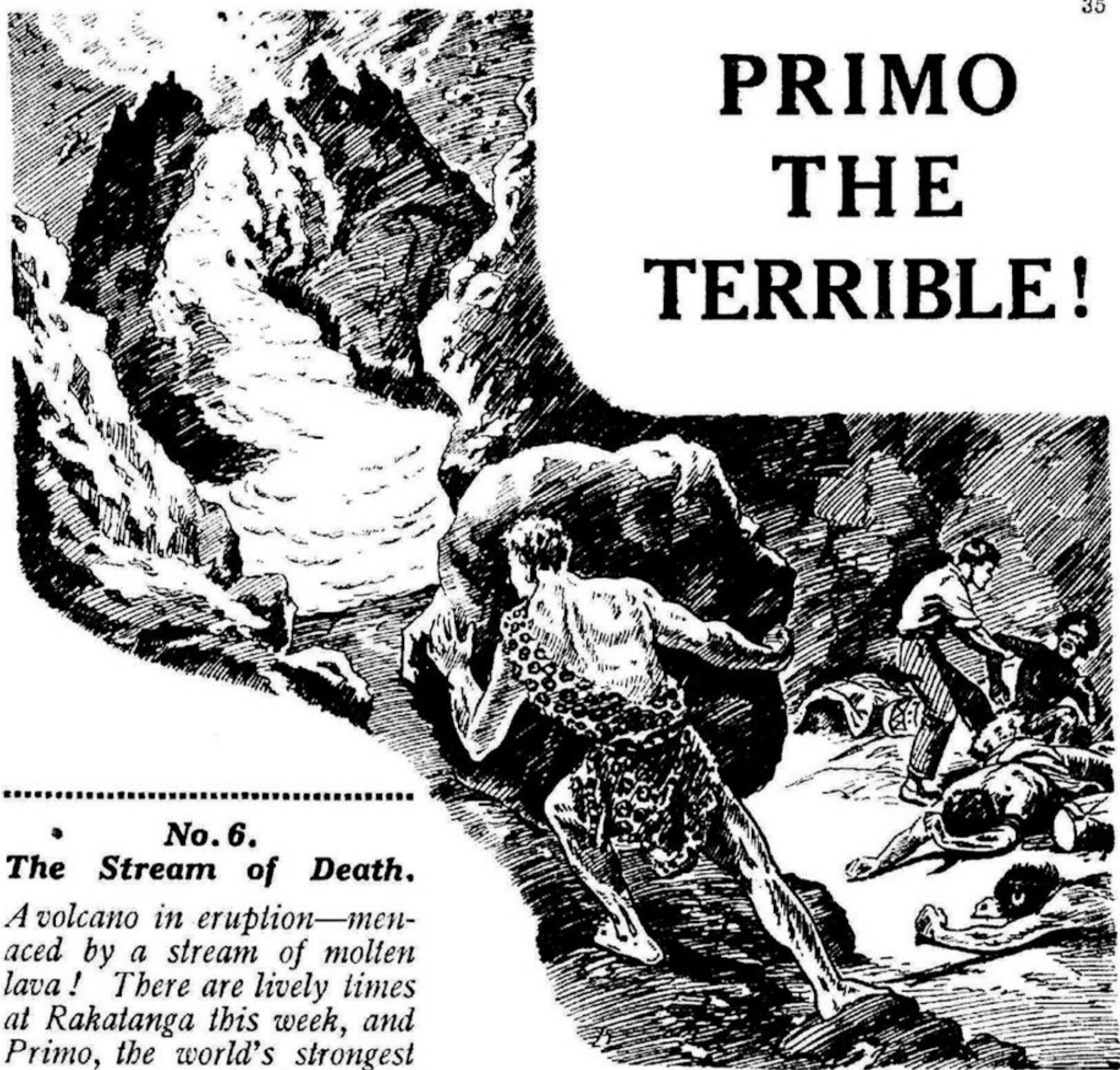
"Well, this has been Archie's case, in a way," said Handforth. "Nipper and I have had a bit of a hand in it, but it wasn't much. I dare say we shall all have a showing, sooner or later."

Greatly as the "cub" detectives had assisted, however, it was felt by them all that it was Nelson Lee who had earned the glory.

THE END.

("The Fatal Wager!" is the title of next week's gripping yarn featuring Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives. Full of thrills and exciting adventure; you'll revel in every chapter of this story. Make sure you don't miss reading it, chums!)

PRIMO THE TERRIBLE!



No. 6. *The Stream of Death.*

A volcano in eruption—menaced by a stream of molten lava! There are lively times at Rakatanga this week, and Primo, the world's strongest man, is in the thick of 'em!

Prisoners!

“**W**ISH that rumbling would stop, Primo; it's beginning to get on my nerves.”

Tim Murphy, ex-apprentice aboard the liner *Kawanga*, now a castaway on the remote island of Rakatanga, in the Java Sea, glanced back as he spoke and looked with troubled eyes at the gloomy mountain that reared above him and his companion. Primo the Terrible, his giant companion and the only other white man on the island, frowned, and his glance followed Tim's.

In their first days on the island, there had been little to indicate that the mountain was an active volcano. But recently, a change had become noticeable. Dense clouds of smoke had been seen to pour out of the crater at the top, and at night half the island was illuminated by volcanic flames, while deep, awe-inspiring rumblings sounded at intervals.

To-day, those indications of the workings of mighty natural forces were deeper and

more frequent than before; the smoke was thicker and more pungent. And young Tim Murphy, though by no means a coward, felt a little uneasy.

“Doesn't look good, does it?” growled Primo, surveying the scene with grim brows and set lips. “The natives don't like it, either, judging by the way they were jabbering away this morning. Hope they won't expect me to stop it for them!”

“Shouldn't be surprised if they do!” remarked Tim, with a faint smile. “Since they've made you their king, they seem to think that nothing's beyond your power.”

“This job is, anyway!” grunted Primo. “Let's get back to the village.”

And the giant Australian led the way across the white sands.

As they came in sight of the collection of primitive huts which formed the village over which Primo the Terrible held sway, they observed signs of considerable excitement among the Rakatangans, a large number of whom were crowded together in the central square.

“The witch-doctor!” exclaimed Tim, pointing to a weirdly-garbed native in the middle who seemed to be addressing the rest.

"Something is wrong!" growled Primo. "Follow me, Tim. No witch-doctor holds meetings in this village while I'm king!"

So saying, Primo broke into a run. As he did so, there was a shout from the youngster:

"Primo! Duck!"

Instinctively, the giant flung himself down. A fraction of a second later, an arrow whistled through the air above him. Had he kept on the run, the deadly shaft would have pierced his massive body, probably through the heart!

A deep bellow of rage burst from Primo as he leaped to his feet again. With a bound, he was flying towards a clump of tall palms from the direction of which the arrow had come. Two seconds later, a white-eyed native was whirled aloft in his arms, screaming with terror.

Primo dashed straight to the centre of the village, the yelling native still held above his head. Reaching the jabbering crowd, he flung the helpless body of his captive from side to side, scattering the Rakatangans confusedly in all directions.

He reached the witch-doctor, and with one whirl of his human scourge sent the strangely-garbed creature staggering a dozen yards, to collapse on the ground in a huddled heap. Having done that, Primo flung his burden on to the roof of the nearest hut, which immediately caved in, and the native disappeared from view with a wild shriek.

The giant ruler of the Rakatangans was in a towering rage, and his next action was to stride to where the dazed witch-doctor still lay grovelling on the ground. Seizing him round the neck in one hand, he carried the struggling figure to the witch-doctor's own hut. Flinging the screaming native through the narrow doorway, Primo then pushed against the hut, which promptly collapsed. And as this happened to be a closely populated portion of the village, about a dozen other huts collapsed at the same time!

Feeling a little better after this, Primo returned to where the other natives, terrified now at the wrath of their king, were congregated.

"Death to the dogs who listen to the words of the witch-doctor!" he shouted, in the Rakatangan dialect. "I, Primo, your king, have spoken!"

The crowd melted away—some viewing in dismay their wrecked huts—and Tim rejoined his giant companion.

"Bravo, Primo!" exclaimed the boy admiringly. "That settled the argument right enough!"

Primo laughed. But it was rather a grim laugh.

"And that arrow would have settled me if it had got me, I expect!" he remarked. "It was poisoned, without a doubt. There's something wrong among our black friends; and if I'm not mistaken, it's the volcano."

"Gosh! You mean they're putting the volcano down to our influence?"

Primo nodded.

"I know the aboriginals of Australia well enough to read the signs in the Rakatangans. Whenever anything unusual happens, they look for an evil magician as the cause. This time they've evidently selected me."

And time soon proved the giant's words to be true. At sundown that night, there was a subdued activity among the natives. Tim saw, with a feeling of growing uneasiness, tom-toms being taken out of the village, and groups of natives whispering together at the doors of their huts.

He went to Primo, to consult him about the matter. As he crossed the square, there was a sudden hubbub behind him and the pattering of bare feet on the hard village ground. Tim turned, to find a dozen wild-eyed blacks almost upon him. Tim gave a shout:

"Primo! Primo! Help!"

There was an answering roar from Primo's hut, but before the giant could come to his aid Tim Murphy had been overwhelmed and was held fast in the hands of three muscular savages.

An instant later, Primo was leaping across the village square. As he came out of the doorway of his hut, there was a sort of wailing cry from the natives, and a regular horde came pouring out into the square from all directions. Everything had evidently been prearranged, and the entire tribe was prepared to battle with the giant whose enormous strength and ability had made him their king.

The contest that followed was titanic. Primo the Terrible, his eyes blazing, flung his opponents about as though they had been so many rabbits. A dozen went down at his first furious rush. But for the dozen that fell, two dozen came to take their places, swarming round the giant white man like rats.

Primo punched, wrestled and kicked. Shrieking Rakatangans hurtled away from his whirling hands one after the other, but more and yet more swarmed into the fray. Their native cowardice seemed to have gone from them now. The witch-doctor's theories, working deep into their impressionable minds, had given them the courage of demons.

It was beyond the power of any man—beyond even Primo's terrific powers—to keep that furious mob at bay for ever. Step by step he retreated. Then he found that the crowd behind him was just as thick as the crowd in front. The time came when a veritable tidal wave of yelling humanity was surging upon him from all directions, and Primo, possibly for the first time in his life, collapsed at last.

The swift darkness of the tropical night had fallen by the time Primo was trussed up to the satisfaction of the witch-doctor, who had reappeared at the cries of victory when Primo was finally conquered.

Then the two whites, tied up like mummies, were taken out of the village on stretchers, preceded by the witch-doctor and a horde of warriors beating wildly on their tom-toms.

"Primo!"

It was Tim's voice, calling to his fellow-prisoner in the darkness.

"Well, Tim?"

"Where are they taking us?"

The answer sent a shiver up the lad's spine.

"We are going up the mountain, boy. They are going to sacrifice us to the god of the mountain by throwing us down the crater into the volcano!"

And the dull, weird beating of the tom-toms went on. And from the distance came the trembling rumble of the volcano, grown deeper still since nightfall!

minds that evil spirits were being frightened away by the noise they were making. The witch-doctor, at the head of the procession, had worked himself up almost into a frenzy, waving his arms about, and chanting incantations as he led the way.

And behind the din of the natives was the continual and more terrifying rumble of the volcano—a rumble which by this time was filling the air and causing the very ground to shake.

The gap was reached.

Then came a deeper, baser sound than any that had preceded it. A great streak of molten flame shot up in the air from the top



"Duck!" yelled Tim. Primo ducked—just in time to escape the arrow as it hissed through the air.

Molten Fire!

THE volcano still growled.

Flames were leaping from the top of the island mountain—dreadful, lurid flames, the light from which flickered eerily over the black, fierce faces of the savages, giving them a demoniac aspect.

The grim procession was half-way up the mountainside. The prisoners knew the route that was being taken—knew the track to the little gap between the rocks that led to the peak of the mountain and the crater which seemed destined to provide their ghastly grave.

That gap was only a few feet wide, and it separated a green, well-wooded part of the mountain from a grim, rocky, lava-covered land which had obviously seen a volcanic eruption before.

The tom-toms were beating more loudly as the procession drew nearer and nearer to the gap. Their primitive performers worked with a zest, convinced in their simple, untutored

of the mountain, illuminating the entire island like a protracted flash of lightning. A deafening roar, louder and more frightful than the roar of thunder, echoed across the heavens.

It drowned the terrific shriek of the natives completely, but Tim and Primo, almost bereft of their senses as they were, realised by the jolt with which they touched the ground that they had been dropped.

Primo rolled his eyes, looking upwards. A terrible sight met his gaze. Rolling down the mountainside towards the gap was a stream of molten lava, which at its present rate of progress would take but a few minutes to reach them.

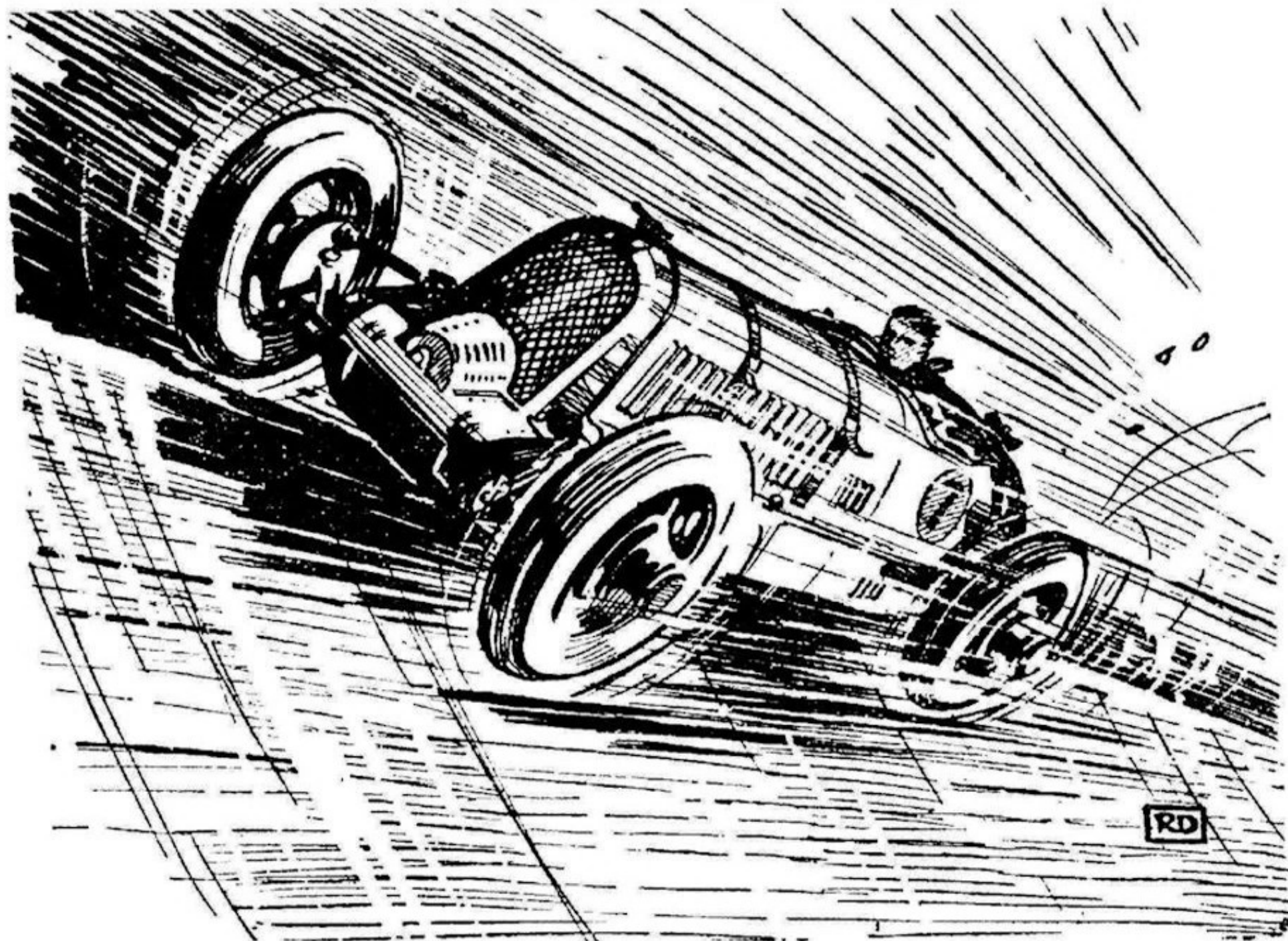
The witch-doctor was prostrate on the ground before the oncoming tide, stupefied by the sight of that dreadful stream. The rest of the natives, too terrified to act, were crouching behind him as if turned to stone.

Tim Murphy uttered a horrified cry.

(Continued on page 42.)

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

By ALFRED EDGAR



Jim beats Lon Stargie to a frazzle during practice ; he'll beat him again in the big race—if only his rival will play the game !

A Surprise for Sniff !

ROUND the long banking Jim went in one wild swoop, and again he braced himself to take the bend at the finish and down to the flat by the Fork. The fencing to one side looked like a solid wall. The tree branches above it were a thick blur of green. The replenishment pits past the Fork were just a black line—and Joe Cooper was a raving maniac!

He was signalling wildly, both arms raised high above his head, and near him Steve was waving, too.

"Done it!" Jim gasped the words as the steep banking ahead swung at him; then, as he went on to it, he eased the car's speed. The machine ran on, slowing. He was travelling along the Byfleet banking again—low down now and moving at less than 100 m.p.h.—when there came a roar from behind and Lon Stargie went past.

He looked at Jim. His hair-shrouded eyes were glaring through the lenses of his goggles, and his lips were stretched to bare his stone-white teeth. For a moment Jim thought of chasing him, but he changed his mind.

The car rolled to a standstill by the pits, and Joe came rushing at him, yelling:

"You did it—142.4 miles an hour!"

Jim twisted in his seat to look at Sniff Dix. The Ace tester was standing with his mouth open, and the mechanics with him were goggle-eyed. Not one of them had imagined it even remotely possible that Jim could get the speed out of the car.

Joe bent over the cockpit and looked at the speedometer.

"You didn't half shift!" he gasped. "Look, the blessed speedometer needle's bent, tryin' to show how fast you travelled!"

The Spy!

THAT evening the Ross-Eight stood in the middle of the old aeroplane hangar. The car had been cleaned down; Jim and Joe were just putting away their rags, while Steve fastened the engine-cover.

"If Lon Stargie couldn't get round at more than 125 m.p.h.—then the blighter's beaten already!" Jim said cheerfully, as he peeled off his overalls. "I'll have another go in the morning, and see if I can't travel a bit faster."

"You won't!" Steve exclaimed. "When you take the car out again you'll just trickle round the track at a hundred miles an hour, finding out where the bumps are and getting used to the feel of the course. When you go fast you have to take risks with the engine—and the time to take risks will be during the race!"

"I've got to have some practice at speed, haven't I?" asked Jim.

"No, you don't need it," and Steve smiled quietly. "If you have to travel fast during the race, you'll manage it. This is the only car we've got, and we can't afford to have anything go wrong with it. We know how fast it will go, and that's all we've got to worry about."

"I bet Lon Stargie's doin' a bit of worrying!" Joe commented.

It was the evening of Jim's speed-burst, and the race was now only two days off. There was sound sense in Steve's advice, and Jim realised it.

Steve's manner had changed a little towards him now. It was as though the tall fellow didn't regard Jim as quite so much of a boy; that was because Jim could do something that was beyond Steve's own capabilities.

"By the way, we've got to fit another speedometer," Joe went on.

"It's not much good. I don't have time to look at it when I'm going fast," Jim told him.

"Look here, young 'un, you don't think you're going to ride out the whole race at a hundred and forty miles an hour, do you?" Steve asked. "You won't have to lap at much more than a hundred and ten to win; if you go faster you'll strain the car. The best machine ever built couldn't do half a dozen laps of Brooklands at the speed you did—not straight off! It'd crack up. You've got to keep well within your limit, and I'll put that speedometer right now. I can wangle it to show up to a hundred and forty, I think."

"Anything you say, Steve," Jim grunted.

"Then you two clear off and take a walk—and I'll want you in bed here by nine o'clock!" Steve said. "We'll be up early again in the morning, because it'll be the last day of practice and there'll be an official inspection of the car."

In a little while Jim and Joe ambled out of the hangar on to the winding road which led to the paddock. Lights showed everywhere through the gathering dusk, and presently the two found themselves outside the camp of the French racing team.

They discovered the place to be a perfect hive of activity. Mechanics were working frantically on all three of the blue French cars, yapping at one another and slinging tools about. The boys watched for a while, then wandered towards the paddock.

"Let's see if those German chaps are still eating sausages," Joe suggested, and they walked across to where the German team was housed.

Both were surprised to discover that the Germans were not eating sausages. They appeared to be working as desperately as the Frenchmen, although they were not so noisy about it. The two stood in the doorway until one of the Germans—a big, blonde-headed fellow—suddenly sighted them and grinned as he looked at Jim.

"Ah, you are der one who by der ears us haf!" he grunted.

The two chums moved on, wandering around to the sheds outside the track, where the Ace team had their camp, amongst others. The sheds were blazing with light, and high-powered lamps were strung on poles outside the end garage, where some Italians had their flaming red cars.

The Italian mechanics were working, just as the other foreigners had been. Every garage appeared to be the scene of intense activity, and men were busy on all the Ace cars.

"What's the idea?" Jim gasped. "We're the only ones who aren't at it! That's Lon Stargie's car over there, and they've got the engine in bits! It was running all right, wasn't it?"

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

JIM ROSS, iron-nerved, daring, is a born racing driver. His father, now dead, was a star speedman, and Jim is following in his footsteps. The boy's brother,

STEVE ROSS, has just completed building a special racing car known as the Ross Eight, and they take it down to Brooklands for a big race, which is due to be run in a few days' time. They are accompanied by

JOE COOPER, Jim's chum, who acts as mechanic. Steve takes out the car for a practice spin, and is easily passed by

LON STARGIE, the crack speedman of Ace Motors. Steve threatens to withdraw the Ross Eight from the race, for he realises that he hasn't the nerve to drive the car, whereat Jim says he will take his place. To prove his worth, he drives the car round the Brooklands track there and then and beats Stargie to a frazzle!

(Now read on.)

"Yes." Joe stared blankly, then he gasped suddenly: "My hat! Can't you see what's happening, Jim?"

"Yes, they've all gone mad!" Jim answered. "Hark at the way those Italians are raving!"

"You're enough to make 'em rave!" Joe was grinning now, his eyes alight.

"Me?"

"Yes, you ass—you're the cause of all this!"

"Me?" gasped Jim again.

"Can't you see what's happening? You've scared them all stiff! You went round at a hundred and forty, more'n ten miles an hour faster than anything else in the race can get round. It's put the breeze up them! They're all working overtime to make their cars faster!"

Jim whistled softly as he realised the truth of what Joe was telling him. No wonder the German had pointed him out as "der one who by der cars us haf"! When the teams had believed that their cars were all tuned up to stand a good chance in the race, the Ross-Eight's performance had come like a thunderbolt, setting a speed which was many miles an hour faster than any of them could hope to do.

The mechanics of rival teams had started on work that was to last all night and far into the daylight, almost up to the hour of the race itself.

"We'd better slope, then," Jim said. "Those Italians are too excitable, and they might start blaming me for it!"

He stepped away with Joe into the shadows which surrounded the garages, returning to the dusky paddock road. They had covered hardly twenty yards when they sighted a figure approaching them.

"That's Stargie!" Joe muttered, and half checked.

"Come on!" Jim grunted. "We're not afraid of him—and now's my chance to ask him why he broke into our garage!"

With his dark face in shadow, and his sinewy body swinging under his stride, Lon Stargie looked very dour and grim. He saw the boys and recognised them, but his pace did not slacken until Jim stepped before him and grunted:

"Just a minute!"

Stargie stopped dead. Reflected light from the garages behind showed Jim that the speedman's eyes had narrowed; his lips seemed to tighten, but he said nothing.

"You broke into our garage at Woodburn the other night," Jim said quietly. "You came up into my room and you were going to warn me about something, but you got interrupted. What about warning me now?"

Stargie frowned. His eyes widened a moment, then he snarled:

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about!" Jim answered.

"You came up into our room and thought we were asleep!" Joe cut in. "But we weren't!"

"Don't talk such confounded nonsense!" Stargie said suddenly, and started to force himself past the boys, but both barred his way.

"We're going to have it out with you now!" Jim said, and his big fists bunched as he looked into the speedman's narrowed eyes. "You broke into our place, and I want to know why!"

"I've never been near your garage!" Stargie snarled. "And I'm not going to stand here and listen to——"

"D'you mean to say you never broke in, an' I didn't jump on the back o' your neck?" Joe gasped.

"I don't even know where you live!" Stargie rasped, then thrust the astounded pair aside and stalked on. They stood staring in blank amazement after him, until bushes blotted out his figure.

"Have we gone balmy?" Joe gasped.

"He's telling lies, that's what it is," Jim answered. "He did break into our place!"

"Or else it was somebody like him!" Joe suggested suddenly.

"No, I couldn't have been mistaken," Jim told him. "He bent right over me and said, 'I've come to warn you, don't——' and then you jumped at him and he cleared off. It was Lon Stargie, all right!"

"Well, he doesn't want to warn you now!" And Joe grinned.

"Then what's he playing at?" Jim wanted to know.

They talked about it on their way back to the hangars and their own racing camp. As they neared it, both saw a figure darting silently across the grass between the road they were following and the racing track on their left. Not until the figure became silhouetted against the concrete of the Byfleet banking did the chums recognise the man as Sniff Dix.

"See him?" Jim asked. "What's he want up this way? His camp's by those garages!"

"Think he was dodging us?" Joe pulled up as he stared after the man. "I saw him nip across the grass pretty lively!"

"He was coming away from our shed!" Jim gasped. "I wonder if he's been up to some dirty trick with the car——"

That thought was enough to send them both racing forward. They found the doors of the big hangar half open, and Steve was just finishing work on the speedometer.

"Hallo, what's the matter with you two?" he asked, as they came dashing in, and they told him that they had seen Sniff Dix.

"Well, he hasn't been in here," Steve said.

"But he might have been spying around!" Jim said. "The Ace team would like to see our machine knocked out, Steve!"

"Anybody that puts our car out of action for the race has got to be clever!" Joe grinned. "I've got an idea!"

Fire!

WHEN Steve heard the chums' story of the activity in other racing camps he laughed, but he did not deny the possibility that Sniff Dix—or, for that matter, Lon Stargie—might try something overnight.

Nothing happened, however. The next day Jim put in about thirty practice laps for the race, the machine was scrutinised by the officials, then once more returned to the hangar for a final examination prior to the race.

When the three turned in that night the car was absolutely ready. They locked both the shed doors and the smaller door at the back, then spread a great tarpaulin over the car so that the sheet came well to the ground all around.

Joe lugged his bed across the front of the machine, and arranged it so that the tarpaulin sheet was beneath him as he lay between the front wheels. Steve and Jim slept at either side of the car, also with their beds on the tarpaulin which covered it.

By this very simple device, no one would be able to get at the machine without disturbing at least one of the trio. And anyone who disturbed them was likely to get the weight of a spanner across the side of his head before any questions were asked!

It was nearly midnight before they finally settled down, and an hour after that before Jim sank to sleep. He wasn't nervous about the race he had to ride on the morrow; he was thinking about tactics, how to get still faster around the bends of the track, and whether he and Joe had practised wheel changing and replenishing enough, so that he would lose no time at the pits.

Eventually sleep claimed him, and he dropped off secure in the knowledge that no damage could come to the car against which he rested.

Yet another hour went past, then came a faint creaking at the most remote corner of the hangar, as of an old board being forced away from its rusted nails. For five minutes the sound continued, very low but persistent, then it ceased altogether.

In the corner a hole had now appeared, and through this a figure stepped, crouching and looking towards the car. Where there were holes high in the walls of the hangar, moonbeams streaked through, filling the place with a thin light and revealing the features of Sniff Dix.

He crossed the floor very quietly, almost ignoring the shrouded shape of the car and the blanketed figures lying close against it. Sniff went to the little stack of petrol tins which contained the special fuel Steve had had made for the Ross-Eight. It was made from the purest petrol obtainable, with the addition of certain chemicals.

Almost every car in the race ran on a similar, special fuel, although what suited one car would be useless in another. This stuff was one of the contributory secrets of the Ross-Eight's speed, and Sniff knew it. He also knew that, with the race coming off in the morning, Jim and Steve wouldn't be able to get any more of it in time for the event.

Very quietly Sniff set to work. All the caps of the petrol tins were turned outwards, and first he loosened them, breaking the wire seals. When the stiff caps were no more than finger-tight, he looked around the garage, presently sighting a bundle of old sacks, which he brought across—working all the time with the utmost silence and caution.

He hung these sacks over the front of the tins, packing them up at the bottom. Then, starting with the lowest row, he unscrewed the caps of the cans. As the fuel gushed out it came into contact with the sacks, and, therefore, did not gurgle or make any sound likely to arouse the three sleepers. It simply rushed out on to the sacks, soaked them and overflowed to form a pool on the ground.

When the last can was emptying its precious contents, Sniff Dix stepped away to the

(Continued at foot of next page.)



JIM AND JOE, whose stirring adventures will enthral readers from week to week.

PRIMO THE TERRIBLE!

(Continued from page 37.)

"Primo! Act! You must!"

"And I will!" came the answer.

There was only one chance.

A huge boulder stood beside the gap—a boulder which looked so exact a fit for the gap that it might have been just blasted out of the solid rock at that point. If that boulder could be rolled into the space and kept there, the stream of the lava might be diverted from the gap back to the rocky side of the mountain which formed its natural channel.

Primo was bound almost like a mummy. But he made a supreme effort. It succeeded. The tension round his arms and shoulders relaxed, and his bonds snapped in a dozen places. An instant later, Primo had leaped to his feet. Seizing the witch-doctor's knife, he bent over Tim Murphy and slashed him free. Then, before Tim was on his feet, Primo was beside the boulder, bending to it, wrestling with it, to roll it back into the gap.

It was a grim, unearthly scene. The petrified natives, prone and inert, the young white boy struggling to his feet, and the giant Australian, straining his muscles like a veritable Titan to shift the boulder that might save them all—and the whole lit up by the ghastly light of the volcano.

There was a sudden violent movement from Primo. Then a shout from Tim.

"Primo! You've done it! Hurrah!"

But the struggle was not yet over. Primo, by his superhuman strength, had rolled the huge boulder into position, but there he had to keep it until it could be safely held by other supports.

"The natives, Tim!" he panted. "Wake them and get them to pile stones round the bottom here!"

Tim was away in an instant, kicking the natives, punching and shaking them. Dimly they realised what was required of them, and they began to follow Jim's example in shifting stones and boulders towards the blocked gap.

Primo received help in holding the great boulder in position as they banked up a firm foundation for it, and finally he was able to release his hold. The tide had been dammed, and their lives and the lives of all the natives in the village had been saved!

Right through the night they stayed there, watching over their great barricade, but never once did it show a sign of giving way, and while, on the other side of the mountain, a molten stream flowed down to the sea itself, their side remained untouched.

The ferocity of the volcano seemed to have exhausted itself by the time dawn came, and though it was a weird enough dawn, it seemed a dawn full of hope to the two whites.

And so it proved.

After that, no further eruptions occurred. And as to the natives' plans to cast their visitors down the crater, they were abandoned, even the witch-doctor joining in the general veneration with which Primo was received in the village next day.

A night of dreadful danger had come and passed. And it had left Primo the Terrible and his young lieutenant in a stronger and more secure position than ever!

(Primo, the world's strongest man, is booked for many more amazing adventures in next week's gripping yarn, chums!)

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

(Continued from previous page.)

corner by which he had entered. His arms were soaked almost to the shoulders with petrol which had swished from the cans and splashed back off the sacking as he undid the caps. Sniff Dix forgot this as he stood in the corner, his features twisted to an evil, satisfied grin.

From his pocket he produced a box of matches and an ordinary firework—one of the harmless kind which give off a shower of golden sparks.

Sniff struck a match and lit the blue touch-paper. He blew out the match and held the firework in his hand until its fuse reached the powder inside, and a great streamer of yellow sparks hissed out.

Sniff swung his hand back, and sent the firework sailing through the air to where the Ross-Eight's special fuel was still bubbling out of the stack of petrol cans.

And as Sniff's hand went back, some of the brilliant little yellow sparks fell on his arms.

They ignited the petrol-soaked cloth just as, ten seconds later, the hissing firework set light to the sacks, so that sacks and pool of petrol and bubbling cans suddenly dissolved in a mad pillar of howling flame!

It reached along the floor and up the walls to the roof, like some fiery torch. And in the corner Sniff Dix stood transfixed, flame bursting from his clothes where the petrol had soaked them.

He saw the car, covered by its tarpaulin, tinted yellow-red by the burning stuff near it, and he saw the three sleepers rouse, shouting to one another as they sighted the fire.

Only then did Sniff Dix, burning like a guy, turn to run!

No petrol—and it's the eve of the big race! What will Jim and his companions do in the face of this disaster? Look out for another thrilling instalment of this magnificent serial next Wednesday!

The St. FRANK'S LEAGUE GOSSIP

The Chief Officer always welcomes letters from his fellow members of the St. Frank's League : he is always willing to help and to give advice. Here's his address : The Chief Officer, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Something "Extrasplash"!

GOOD news comes to hand this week from Eddie B. Waterfield, the cheery President of the Extrasplash Correspondence Club. This club, although comparatively newly-formed, already has a considerable membership and, as Eddie puts it in his letter, "is now going great guns."

Still more members are required, however, so readers who are interested should write to Eddie B. Waterfield, 92, Hill Street, Swadlincote, Nr. Burton-on-Trent.

The Same Name!

TWO clubs with the same name. This difficulty has been encountered by B. Brett-Pitt, secretary of the Imperial Correspondence Club. He recently received a letter from a fellow-League-ite who is also running a club under the same name. In order to avoid confusion with readers of the NELSON LEE, my chum has decided to change the name of his own club, and in future it will be known as the East London Correspondence Club. Incidentally, this organisation will welcome new members, who should write for particulars to S. Brett-Pitt, 20, Plaistow Road, Plaistow, London, E.13.

Wonderful Progress!

HERE'S interesting news from the All Nations Correspondence Club, which is in the capable hands of Thomas W. Hutt, of 58, Union Street, West Kogarah, Sydney, Australia. Recently I inserted a notice in this chat to the effect that this club wanted new members, and my chum tells me that the response has been highly satisfactory. The All Nations C.C. has only been in existence three months, yet it can now boast of 76 members, who are all in constant communication with each other.

My correspondent has just qualified for a bronze medal, which I have had much pleasure in sending him. I trust he will go all out to obtain the silver medal now.

An Appeal!

STERLING G. DAVIES, of 39, Burdett Street, Lark Lane, Liverpool, has asked me to announce that he wants to get in touch with Ken Petrie, of St. Lambert, Canada. Come along, Ken: it's up to you to do the necessary. My Liverpool chum would also like to hear from local readers who are Boy Scouts and who have Jamboree photos for sale.

He Wants to Join a Cycling Club!

LEONARD COWEN, 18, Faith Street, Cambridge Road, Mile End, London, E.1., is an enthusiastic cyclist, and he is keen to join a cycling club. If any readers of the Old Paper can assist Leonard in this direction, will they please write to him.

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

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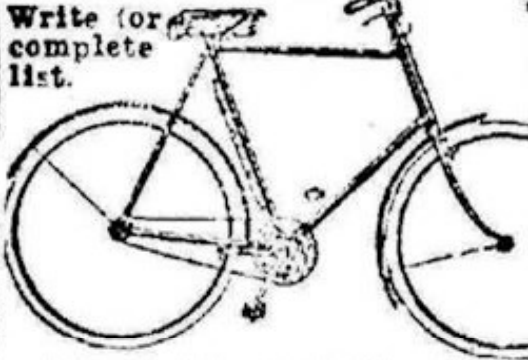
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