

The NELSON LEE

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"WITHOUT TRACE!"

A grand long complete yarn of thrilling detective adventure
featuring Nelson Lee and his schoolboy assistants.

New Series No. 12.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

April 12th, 1939.

The THREE TERRORS!



A dangerous Italian Secret Society is on the track of Conkey & Co.—so the Three Terrors turn themselves into apes!

The Warning Letter!

CONKEY KING was having a good lay, in because he had been to the movies the night before.

He was asleep and dreaming although it was long past seven o'clock. He was dreaming that he had met his old friend, Ronnie Colman, who had borrowed half a crown off him. And he was beginning to get a bit anxious about his bit of dough, for Ronnie showed no particular signs of paying it back.

Just then a voice broke into Conk's dreams.

"Willyum!" called Aunt Ann's voice up the narrow stairs.

Aunt Ann never called Conk anything but William. That was his right name. The nits called him William the Conqueror when he licked Lobworm Huggins in two rounds, and that had shortened down to Conk in twenty-four hours.

"There's some hot water to wash your neck with!" said Aunt Ann. "And there's a letter for you! I hope it's about a situation!"

Conk crawled out of bed, feeling as if he had been done out of a bit of his sweet repose. But Conk did not often get a letter.

Once a girl with a face like a toothache had taken to writing him love-letters. But Aunt Ann had told Queenie Stodgers that if she did not sheer off, she would get a clip over the ear that would last her for a month of Sundays.

And Queenie had hopped it, for she was afraid of Aunt Ann, who, from much wash-

ing and ironing, had a fist as hard and as nobly as a briar root.

Conkey was a bit afraid of Aunt Ann, too, but he did not admit it. All the same, he was very fond of Aunt Ann, who had brought him up ever since his mother had died.

Some day Conk meant to pay Aunt Ann back for all she had done for him. He was going out on the wide seas, and he was coming back with a huge bagful of gold, which he was going to empty into her white apron—gold moldores, pieces of eight, bezants, ducats, and what not.

"I've got a nice bloater for your breakfast!" called Aunt Ann from the kitchen below. "It's on now, so hurry up, Willyum!"

Conk knew all about the bloater. It was already calling upstairs to him. He picked up his letter and looked at it rather suspiciously before opening it.

"It don't come from that girl Queenie!" he said, looking at the handwriting. "It looks a sort of foreign writing. It don't look as if it is about a job, either, or it wouldn't be addressed to Mr. Conk King!"

He opened the envelope, and his jaw sagged. There was just the single word, "Beware!" and a dagger done in a rusty sort of red ink that looked like blood.

"Coo lummy!" murmured Conk to himself. "That's all right, ain't it? Blood-red dagger—hey?"

"That girl ain't been writing you again?" asked Aunt Ann conversationally through the bed-room floor. "'Er and 'er kisses! Lipstick

'uzzy! I'll kiss 'er if she comes round 'ere any more!"

"It's all right, auntie," said Conk soberly. "There ain't no kisses in this letter, I assure you!"

"Is it a job, then?"

"Yes," replied Conk. "From the look of it, someone wants to find me a new situation."

"Well, you'd better put 'your best clothes on," said Aunt Ann. "An', for goodness' sake, Willyum, do wash well into your neck! It does make a clean collar so dirty."

"I'll have a clean collar, auntie," replied Conk dutifully, "but I won't put my Sunday clothes on. If a chap is going to give you a job, he likes to see you working like!"

Conkey looked at the dagger again as he washed his neck. Then he dived into his private locker, which he always kept locked. He brought out an old waistcoat.

It rattled as he lifted it, and it was heavy, for it was lined with chainwork burnishers bought from an army surplus store. It was, in fact, a waistcoat of chain mail.

"Now come on with yer toothpicks!" said Conk when he had put on his special waistcoat.

He descended to his bloater and ate it in peace. Aunt Ann watched him affectionately.

"Mind you stand up and keep your hands out o' your pockets when you meet the gentleman wot's written to you," she said when Conk reached for his cap.

"You bet I will, auntie!" said Conk fervently.

And he went off cheerfully as usual, save at the door he turned back and kissed his old

aunt on the
cheekbone.

Terrorising the Terrors!

CONK went down the Half Acre like lightning, keeping a bright

eye open for any foreign-looking nut with a dagger. He nearly stousted a Roumanian organ-grinder one in the nose on the off chance, but just then the monkey fell off the organ and got mixed up with Sonny Boy. So that was all right.

Conk dodged down Dudman's Rents. He knew that no Italian would dare show up there, and he was sure that it was Italian handwriting on his letter. The people up Dudman's Rents did not like foreigners.

They all had a friendly word for old Conk as he passed along. They thought a lot of Conk up Dudman's Rents since he had fished three kids out of the canal. Theso were

Dudman's Rents kids, and, after that, Conk owned the street, a deal more than the landlord who could collect nothing but punches in the eye!

At the end of Dudman's Rents he came face to face with his pals, Bob Smith and Whacky Clark. Both Whacky and Bob had a funny look on their half-a-mile as if they had been up to something.

"What-ho, nobles!" called Conk, and the Three Terrors greeted one another in their usual boisterous fashion.

"You had any letters this morning?" asked Whacky breathlessly.

"What, you had one o' them Valentines?" Conk wanted to know.

Both his pals drew from their pockets a letter similar to his own—same dagger, same word, same cheap little foreign envelope.

"Whatya think, Conk?" asked Bob in a rather worried tone. "Is it a joke?"

"Well, I put on me Daily Mail waistcoat, in case it wasn't," said Conk.

"So did we," nodded Bob. "What do you make of it, Conk?"

"Well, I make it that some guy is about who don't want to kiss us!" said Conk. "I was thinking that we'd go up and see old Okey Spiffiano about it at the ole Fish and Tater Palace!"

"That's a sound idea," agreed Whacky. "If there's anything wonkey about the letters Spiff will know. There's more under Spiff's hat than hair!"

"Oh, he's a brain," agreed Conk. "A feller wouldn't have worked up from a 'okey-pokey can to three Freezerias and a Fish and Tater Palace in twenty years without brains."

Bob held his sheet of threat and blood up to the light. There was a watermark on the paper.

"Napoli," he read. "Where's Napoli?"

"Why, Naples," replied Conk. "Close to Vesuvius, the volcano. You've said it, Bob. We are up against a secret society. An Italian secret society!"

"Lummy!" ejaculated Whacky, looking round him apprehensively. "Good job we got our tin shirts on!"

"We can dodge up Dudman's and round through Slaughterhouse Alley to Spiffo's," said Conk. "No Italians work round there, and if we cross by the police-station there's too many rozzers hanging about for any knife work at the cross-roads."

A few minutes later they marched into Signor Spiffiano's Fried Fish and Chip Palace. Spiff was behind the counter mixing monkey-nut oil with olive oil and labelling it, "Finest Italian."

"Hey, Spiff!" said Conk, laying down the three letters on the counter. "Someone's been sending us Valentines on Italian paper. Look—what about it? What would you do?"

**LOOK AT
THE THREE TERRORS
THIS WEEK!**

Do you recognise 'em?

Spiffo's dark face grew grave as he drew a magnifying glass from his pocket and squinted at the paper closely.

"Is it a joke?" asked Conk.

"Joke!" exclaimed Spiff. "Heem is no joke-a. Heem is dangerous t'reat from dan-derous societa. Signor Puzzolini, he have putta da Red Dagga Club on your track."

Conkey blinked. The Three Terrors had come up against Puzzolini—or Puzzo the Dude, as the notorious Chicago gunman was known—and he had come off second best. Apparently the Italiano was out to get his revenge.

"What are we goin' to do about it?" asked Conk.

"Op it!" said Spiffo, starting to wrap up some meat pies. "Op it to da countra, an' leave it to me to tell your relations dat you have gone out on beeziness—for me!"

"What about the police?" asked Conk. "What's the good of paying fat policemen good money if they can't protect you?"

Spiffo shook his head.

"Da polico is alla righta," said he, "but da Red Dagga work so dat do policeman, heem only come in at da inquest!"

"Coo lummy!" exclaimed Conk. "Do you mean to say we gotta be killed before we call a cop in?"

"What's da good of calling a cop to a hidden hand?" asked Spiff, picking out a good fat Bologna sausage and a loaf of bread and putting them into a parcel. "Mighta so well call a policeman in to a ghost. Listen, boys!"

"I'm all ears, like a blooming donkey!" said Conk.

"An' you will be da blooma donka if you don't take my advice!" warned Spiffo. "Hero is plenta good food. In da yard behind is a cart full of potato sacks. You getta inta da cart an' hide under da sack. And da man will drive you outa town, ten mile, to Gipsa Lee. You run with Gipsa Lee. I will give you letter to heem. He is a good man—and good friend of mine."

"What, you mean ole Cocker Lee, the ole fightin' man?" asked Conk, delighted.

"Dat heem!" replied Spiffo.

"Why, he's a fair clobber of ours," said Conkey. "An old friend!"

"So much da betta!" said Spiffo, writing a note with pencil on a greasy paper. "You give dat to Cocko an' he'll see you all right!"

The boys took their parcel of grub, and Spiffo let them out into the locked yard behind. Here was a horse and a cart which brought the spuds from the fields to the Fish and Spud Savoy.

The man in charge grinned as the boys crawled under the sacks. The boys knew him. His name was Murphy, and he was a bit of orlright, he was.

Then Spiffo, with a word or two to Murphy, unlocked the door of the yard, and the horse moved off.

The boys felt that they would die if they

could not peep out and see if any Red Daggers were hanging about. Whacky found a rift in the side of the spud cart.

"Coo lummy!" he whispered. "I believe I can see one of 'em standing on the corner of Market Square!"

"Come outa the way and let's have a squint!" said Conk.

He shoved Whacky aside and had a peep at the Italian-looking figure that was hanging about the corner of Market Square.

"That's no Red Dagger!" he said. "That's young Nobbs—the one that's learning hair-cutting at the barber's shop. He's took to wearing them plush four trousers an' side chop whiskers, 'cause he thinks that makes 'im look like a movie star. Cods the girls that he acts on films. Coo lummy! The only film 'e acts on is a film o' grease! Movie star! Tush! He's got a face like a sideslip! It fair disgusts anyone to see a feller puttin' on dorg like that!"

And Conk gave a growl of disgust.

"Here y'are, Whacky," he went on, moving aside; "here's your spyhole. I don't want to see any more sights like that. I want ter see a desperado, not a ham barber's boy!"

And Conk crawled under his camouflage of sacks and said no more as the cart jogged out of town and into the country, far beyond the end of the trams and buses and the Pole Star Inn, which was the boundary between the town and the real country.

Japed By "Apes"!

CONK knew they were making towards Hangman's Heath, a lonely stretch of moorland which lay along the hills to the south.

He was well pleased, because Hangman's Heath was the resort of gipsies, and it was said that Charley Peace once had a secret cave up there.

He went to sleep, and when he woke again the spud cart had finished grinding up a hill that was miles long and had turned off the road altogether.

Conkey put his head up. They were passing through a tangle of firs and blackberries and heather, and soon they rolled into a deep quarry where great walls of rock rose all round them.

There was Cocko Lee the gipsy, leaning over a gipsy pot and stirring a stew that smelled uncommonly like a stew of hare and pheasant with onions. But Cocko had burned the feathers and the fur so that no one could swear what was in the pot.

Cocko was a big-framed, handsome old man. He had been heavy-weight champion in the days when the champions would fight fifty rounds without the gloves for a ten-pound note.

"What-ho, Cocko!" said Conk, sticking his head up out of the spud cart.

Cocko looked up from his cooking.

"Hallo, Conk!" said he. "What brings you here?"

"We've brought a letter," explained Conk — "from Spiffo!"

And, jumping down from the cart, he presented his letter of introduction.

Cocko read it, and his grim old face grew a bit more grim as he studied it. Then Conk gave him the letters with the red daggers.

"Those are bad people," said Cocko Lee, "and no friends to the Romany folk. But, welcome to the merry green wood, boys. There is plenty of stew in the pot. I am expecting a few friends to-night, so there is plenty for all."

"But we got our dinner," said Conkey. "Spiffo weighed out a big parcel of grub—enough to keep us for two days."

Cocko shook his head.

"You can eat that later," said he. "Anyone who comes to a gipsy camp eats gipsy bread in welcome."

He made a sign to the driver of the spud cart, who drove off through the gorse bushes. Then he gave a shrill whistle.

"Come on, chum!" he called. "Dinner's ready."

The boys started as they heard a rustling in the tree overhead, and down came tumbling a chimpanzee in answer to Cocko's call.

"Coo lummy! It's a chimpanzee!" exclaimed Conk.

"Sure thing," said Whacky. "I saw some at the Zoo in London, having their tea, and they sat up like Christians. They are different from those blue-faced beggars that scowl at you through the bars. The chimps are more like us. They say we are descended from something like this chap, but millions of years ago!"

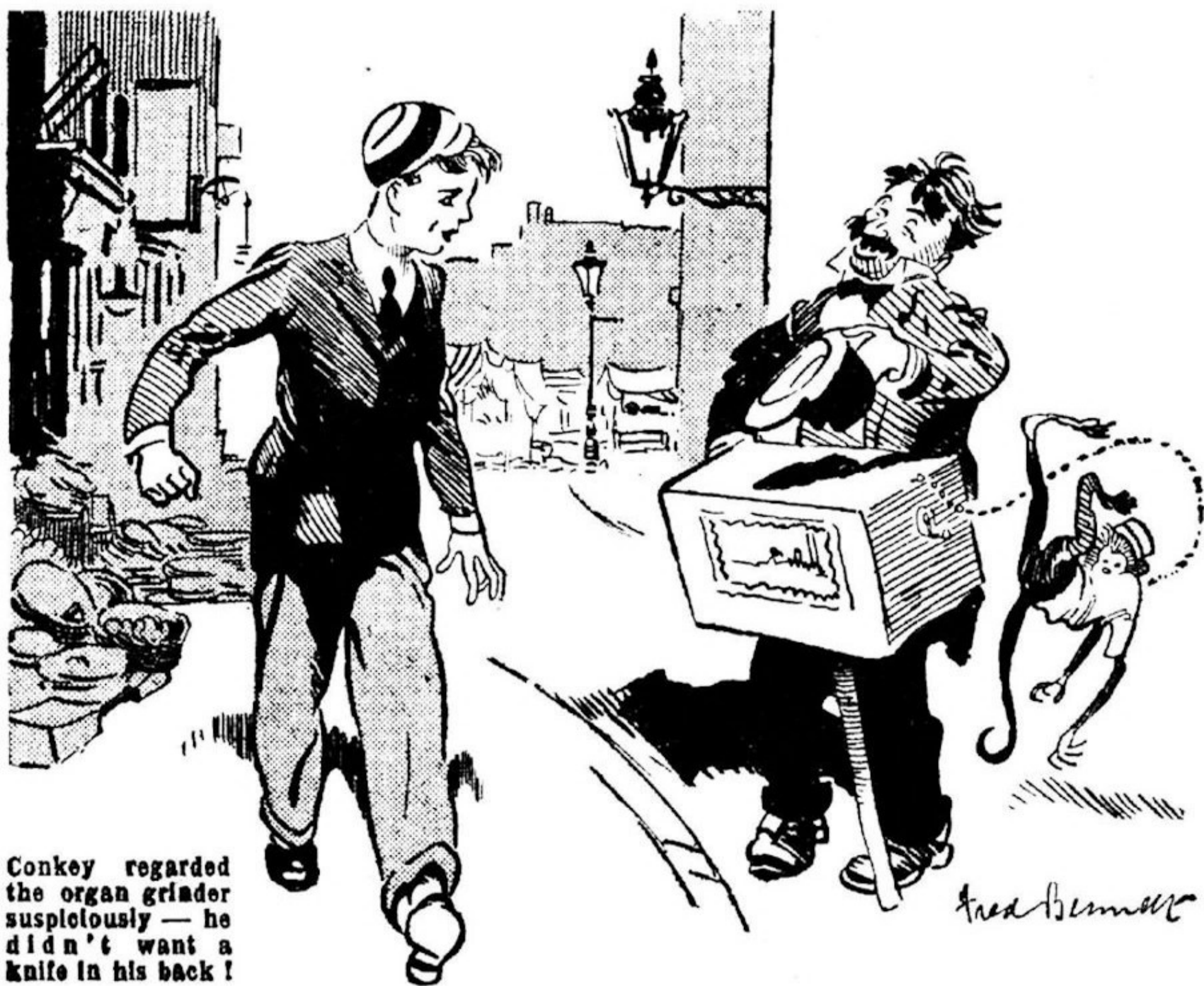
"You may be," said Conk quickly, "but we never 'ad one o' those in our family!"

"Yes, you did, Conk King," said the chimpanzee, "seeing that you are my second cousin!"

Conk for a moment was speechless.

"Streuth!" he warbled. "It's a boy! It's the boy Chummy Chubb. Why, what me olo Chummy! 'Ow goes it, cousin? And what are you doing in this rig?"

"He's Bingo, the boy monkey," said Cocko. "We are working up a show. You see, boys, I had a chimp, two orang-outans, and one gorilla, but they got old and died. So I had 'em skinned and gave the rest of 'em what you might call a Christian burial. Then I had in a nice troupe of four boys to take their places, but the gorilla went and joined the Army, and the big orang-outan wanted to go inter the Navy, and the little'un, led away by his example, ran away to sea. So I was



Conkey regarded the organ grinder suspiciously — he didn't want a knife in his back!

left with Chummy Chubb, the Boy Chimpanzee. Now, Chummy, fall to. The stew is ready, but tie a towel round your neck so you don't muss up that skin!"

The Three Terrors gazed at one another in astonishment and delight as they gathered round the savoury pot and Cocko dished out the stew.

What if Cocko would take them on in his troupe? The question was in all their eyes.

"I say, Cocko!" burst out Conko, at length. "What sort of a gorilla would I make?"

"First rate, I should say," said Cocko. "Have a bit more of this bird."

"Chicken?" asked Conk.

"Never ask a gipsy what he's got in the pot," said Cocko. "But, if you must know, it's one o' those long-tail chickens called pheasants. Enough said!" And Cocko nodded mysteriously.

"I catch your smoke all sereno," answered Conk, holding out his plate. "But to get back to business. How would we do for the monkey troupe? We are all acrobats, more or less!"

"You'll do," said Cocko. "I'll fit you up in the skins after dinner, and we'll rehearse."

Cocko was as good as his word. After dinner was over and the boys had washed up in the spring that was trickling into the old quarry, he fastened them up in the skins and made up their faces and gave them an hour in front of a mirror, pulling faces in imitation of the real apes.

Whacky nearly died of laughing watching old Conk, who was a fair genius at pulling mugs, for he had practised a lot at school. And Conk roared as Whacky, rather tight in his skin, scratched himself and gave a very good show as a middle-aged orang-outan.

But Cocko gave them no rest after that. He set Chummy the Chimp to teach them to tumble, and for three hours on end they tumbled, and tumbled a bit more than they wanted to. They were tumbling when the sun set, and Cocko told them not to take off their skins as he wanted his friends, who were coming to supper, to see them and tell him what they thought of his new apes.

The friends came just after sunset, all cleaned up and as smart as new pins. They were four big men who were working on a bit of new railway a mile or two away. But the boys gasped in admiration when they heard their names, for two of them were heavy-weight champions, Gunner Palmer and Mat Twiggett. Bill Towser was welter-weight champion of the navvies, and Crusty the Bargee was the fighting King of the Canals.

The boys tumbled for them in the firelight as the great men ate their supper, and the fighting navvies said that they were a fair masterpiece. Crusty, watching Conk, said that if he had him for three months he would make the beginnings of a champion of him. Chummy, he thought, was too small for anything but a rat fight.

They were in the middle of their tumbling when Smoker, Cocko's great Alsatian, dropped through the bushes and laid his nose on his master's knee, giving a low growl that was hardly audible.

"Get into the van, boys," said Cocko quietly. "Smoker's giving warning."

The boys nipped into the gipsy van and peeped through the shutters.

In a few seconds three young men walked into the ring of the firelight, and Conk gave a grunt of astonishment. They were three young Italians of the flash set down Nancipalarni Lane—Loo Licori, generally known as "Stick o' Lickerish"; Allesandro Notti, otherwise known as "Alec the Nut"; and Jacko Lanti, who was called "Jack o' Lantern." They were dressed up to the nines and looked saucy.

"Ullo!" said Loo sullenly. "You Cocko, da Gipsy?"

"At your service," nodded Cocko politely.

"You 'ave t'ree boy 'iding up with you," said Loo. "We wanta dose t'ree boy!"

"What do you want three boys for?" asked Cocko quietly.

"Dat is our business," said Loo. "They are sure in your van!"

"You keep away from that van," said Cocko. "That's my private van, not a shove-apenny club for Dagoes!"

"Stand back!" commanded Loo. "We are determineda men!"

And, stepping forward, he showed a dagger with a red handle to Crusty the Bargee, who blocked his way.

Of course, that was just asking for it.

"You snake-headed dorg! Pull a knife on me, will yer?" demanded Crusty, and, lifting a fist like a ten-pound ham, he gave the Italian the dirty left just under the chin.

Loo went down like a ninepin, and Crusty stepped on his hand and took his red dagger.

Alec the Nut fared no better with Gunner Palmer, who picked him up by his collar and shook him till his teeth rattled, whilst Cocko chased Jack o' Lantern round the van.

The boys could stand it no longer. They burst out of the van as the three Dagoes got together and prepared to run from this rough house. At the sight of them Loo, who had got to his feet, gave a yell of fear.

"Monka!" he yelled.

"Orang-atanga!" howled Alec the Nut.

"Leetle Monk heem very cross!" cried Jack o' Lantern.

"At 'em!" cried Cocko. "We got their knives!"

The three Italians raced off through the bushes. Their eyes were starting from their heads, and they were panting as they dared to turn for a moment. They saw four horrid apes dancing after them against the rising moon, and they raced for the roadway, with Smoker bounding and snarling after them.



The Italian desperadoes were terrified to see three apes come dancing down the caravan steps.

Two of the Italians reached the road safely; one didn't—at least, he didn't reach it at the same time as his compatriots. Smoker saw to that. Smoker didn't like the look of these blokes, and he was determined to show his disapproval. However, the bow-wow realised that he couldn't tackle them all at once, so he made a grab at the nearest fleeing figure.

Loo Lickeri was the victim, and the Stick o' Lickerish gave a fiendish howl as he felt two rows of sharp teeth dig into the rear of his anatomy. He swung round—and Smoker went round with him, describing a graceful circle in mid-air. The dog thought it great fun and wanted more; so he took a fresh bite—harder this time. Round and round went Loo, shrieking in terror, knowing that he had lost a lump of flesh and fearing that he was going to lose a portion of his pants; and round and round went Smoker, snarling his appreciation of this free ride on a human roundabout. Then: Rip!

Loo's worst fears were realised, and he lost a large chunk of his bags, while Smoker sailed through the air for a dozen yards and then came a mighty cropper—right at the feet of Conkey & Co. as they rushed up. The Three Terrors stopped and watched Loo as he scooted painfully towards the road. They saw him join his companions in a small car which had been waiting in the shadow of the bushes on the moorland road.

"Drop, boys—quick!" shouted Conk, and, falling on Smoker's neck, he dragged him down to the ground and held him by the collar, rolling him into a deep hole alongside his companions.

Bang! Bang! went from the car as it started off. Then a perfect fusillade of bullets tore through the gorse, hitting nothing but a tin can which some picnic party had left behind to improve the landscape.

The boys listened as they heard the roar of the car die away in the distance.

"First round is ours," said Conk. "But it was a good job for us that Cocko had asked those Champeens to supper. It's always just as well to have a fightin' man around!"

And Conkey laughed at the rising moon as he took a squint at Whacky.

"Lummy, Whacky," he grinned. "I don't wonder that those Italianos 'opped it when they saw you!"

"I can't see anything to laugh at!" growled Whacky.

"Course you can't—not without a looking-glass!" grinned Conk. "But hurry up, boys. Back to the camp. We'd better take them red daggers away from the Champeens before they cut themselves! 'Scuse me, Whacky—I can't help laughin'!"

THE END.

(More about this cheeky trip of fun merchants next week, boys.)

Thrilling Detective Adventure—

Without Trace!



*A cleverly-written long
complete detective
yarn.*

By
**EDWY
SEARLES BROOKS.**

CHAPTER 1.

The Misadventure of a Postman!

THE postman hesitated with his hand on the gate of No. 12, Hedingham Road, Norbury. Was it fancy, or had he seen a shadowy figure lurking in the porch?

It was mid-evening delivery, and night had fallen prematurely on this cloudy April evening. Hedingham Road was one of those new thoroughfares on the outskirts of London, with modern middle-class villas standing in their own restricted grounds.

"Funny!" muttered the postman.

It was only a short step up the tiled path from the gate to the porch, with its stucco pillars. No. 12 was completely dark, as the postman expected. He knew that this house belonged to Mr. Clifford Underhill, a young man who worked somewhere in Fleet Street—a journalist, the postman fancied. He was a bachelor, too, and incidentally Mr. Underhill was a cause of much gossip up and down Hedingham Road. Nobody could quite understand why a bachelor should have bought a house of this type. Somehow, it wasn't quite the thing. Every-

—In London and Cornwall!



Off the lonely coast of Cornwall the tragedy happened. Three people drowned-- accidentally, so the newspapers said. It is left to Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives to throw a completely different light on the subject.

body else in that highly respectable street was married. So Mr. Underhill was looked upon as something of an intruder.

Mrs. Russell, who lived next door, had more than once seen him arriving home as late as 2 a.m. Sometimes he didn't come home at all. He had a housekeeper; but she always left, as regular as clockwork, at tea-time.

The postman selected a letter by the light of his waist-lamp, and walked up the tiled path.

"Just a minute," said a voice.

The postman had reached the porch, and was preparing to put his letter through the box slit. He pulled up with a start, knowing that he had not been mistaken in his

earlier impression. A shadowy figure had materialised from one of the recesses of the porch.

"What's the idea?" asked the postman sharply.

The light from his lamp revealed a shabby man of weedy appearance, with a sharp-featured, rat-like face. The man's eyes were nervous, but at the same time they contained an ugly glint.

"I'll take the letter," said this unsavoury individual. "You needn't bother to put it in the box."

"Sorry, but I can't let you have it——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the other. "I'm a friend of Mr. Underhill's. Got here a bit before my time, that's all. He'll be

here any minute, so you might as well give the letter to me."

The postman was suspicious.

"If you're a friend of Mr. Underhill's, I can't see what you want with his private correspondence," he replied bluntly. "This letter is going in the box, so you'll oblige me by standing aside."

Jim Sargent had been on this delivery-round for years, and his work was, on the whole, humdrum and uneventful. Except for an occasional fracas with the kids of No. 8 and those cheeky girls of No. 29, his round was singularly peaceful. Mr. Sargent was a peaceful man himself; he was smallish, elderly, and, at the present moment, he was decidedly nervous. He didn't like the look of this fellow at all.

"Don't be a fool!" said the stranger. "There's no harm in giving me the letter. Mr. Underhill came home without his keys—that's why I'm waiting here. He's gone round to the agent's to see if he can get a duplicate. Perhaps he won't get one—and then he'll cuss me for letting you put that letter in the box."

Jim Sargent was more suspicious than ever; this latest story was thin.

"Post Office regulations don't allow me to —" he began.

Before he could proceed any further a strong pair of arms gripped him suddenly from behind, pinioning him.

"We can't fool about!" snapped a new voice. "Take that letter, Josh!"

The postman struggled wildly.

"Help!" he shouted. "You infernal rascals—"

Thud!

Something struck him on the side of the head, just below the brim of his helmet, with great force. He sagged in his assailant's arms, and sank to the ground. As he fell Josh snatched the letter from his hand.

"You're mad, Luke!" he panted. "No need to have done that."

His companion made no reply; he simply seized Josh by the arm and pulled him away. They both hurried through the gateway, glanced up and down the quiet road and vanished into the gloom. Overhead dark masses of threatening clouds were ominously gathering, and rain was beginning to fall.

And in the porch of No. 12 lay Jim Sargent, the postman, unconscious.

MRS. MARCUS DRAYTON, of the Cedars, Maplestead Road, Highgate, paced up and down his shabby, untidy study with short, nervous footsteps. He repeatedly looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, comparing it with his watch.

"Why don't they come?" he muttered, almost savagely. "This is becoming unendurable! They must have failed!" He drew his breath in sharply between his uneven teeth. "And if they've failed I'm ruined!"

He opened the door, strode out into the hall, and opened the front door. He peered anxiously down the ill-kept gravel path, with its ragged laurel bushes, and a spot or two of rain fell upon his bald head. Maplestead Road was deserted except for a taxicab which was disgorging a noisy, laughing party two or three hundred yards away.

Mr. Drayton was irritated by the sound.

"Frivolous fools!" he snapped under his breath.

He went indoors again, and once more he stared anxiously at the clock. His nerves were becoming ragged. There was nothing particularly pleasant about Mr. Marcus Drayton. He was an elderly man—perhaps between sixty and sixty-five—with bent, rounded shoulders, as though he had spent most of his life at a desk. His face was hard-featured and clean-shaven—the face of a man who was accustomed to having his own way; and his pale blue eyes, behind their spectacles, were utterly devoid of kindness.

Suddenly he stiffened. A familiar creak had made itself heard. He leapt to the door, flung it open, and dashed into the hall. He got the front door open as two shadowy figures arrived at the step.

"Well?" he demanded tensely.

"Keep your hair on, guv'nor!" said one of the men. "We got it all right."

"You got it!" ejaculated Mr. Drayton, with untold relief in his tone. "Good heavens! I was beginning to fear— But where is it? Give it to me!"

The bigger of the two men laughed.

"Not so fast, guv'nor," he said, with an unpleasant note in his voice. "Ain't you goin' to ask me and my pal in? It is nice to keep us hangin' about 'ere on the doorstep?"

Mr. Drayton made a gulping noise.

"All right—come in!" he said. "I'd forgotten."

He went into the ill-lit study, and Luke Danby and Josh Adams followed him. They were shabby, down-at-heel, and quite representative of the sneak-thief class to which they belonged. Luke was the bigger man, and while he was quite at ease and fully master of himself, Josh was just the opposite. Josh stood there, looking about nervously and twisting his ragged cap in his hands.

"Now then—the letter!" said Mr. Drayton sharply.

"Hold 'ard, guv'nor," said Luke. "You gave us a couple o' quid before we went, didn't you? And you promised us another couple o' quid if we was successful?"

"Of course. The understanding was definite," replied Mr. Drayton impatiently. "I have the money here—"

"It ain't enough," put in Luke. "We want a fiver, guv'nor. Things wasn't so easy as you reckoned. Before we got that letter we 'ad to knock that postman on the 'ead."

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Drayton, aghast. "Didn't I tell you not to do anything violent? You fools!"

"You wanted that letter—and we've got it for you," snapped Luke. "And when you've handed over a fiver you'll get it. See?"

"You infernal scum!" muttered Mr. Marcus Drayton under his breath.

He whipped out his pocket-book, counted out five pound-notes, and handed them over. Luke grinned, and withdrew a crumpled letter from his pocket.

Mr. Drayton snatched it, and then an angry, impatient exclamation escaped him. He stared at the letter with mingled consternation and fury.

"You fools!" he panted, twirling round. "This isn't the letter I want!"

Luke shrugged his shoulders.

"That's not our fault, guv'nor," he replied. "You told us to get a letter from the postman, and we got it."

"But it's not the one!" said the old man, shaking it excitedly in the air. "Can't you see that this letter is from a business firm? The name is on the back, here! A typewriting firm."

"That's got nothing to do with us," said Luke coolly. "It's the only letter the postman was delivering, and we grabbed it. It's your funeral if it ain't the right one."

Mr. Drayton caught in his breath.

"The only letter?" he repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"You're positive that the postman had no other letter for Underhill?"

"Well, he only put one through the letter-box," said Josh Adams. "I see him as clear as I can see you, sir. There wasn't no other letter."

"And secin' as we've done our job, we'll be biddin' you good-evenin', guv'nor," said Luke with a nod. "Any other time you want us to do a little job——"

"Wait—wait!" broke in Mr. Drayton. "I may want you again now."

He paced up and down, looking again at the letter in his hand. With a muttered curse he tore it open, saw that it was only a circular letter regarding a new model of a certain typewriter, and then he flung it into the fire.

"This suspense is dreadful!" he muttered. "What did those confounded burglars do with that letter? Perhaps they didn't post it, after all! But it must be somewhere! Yet why did they take it away with them?"

He continued pacing, more agitated than ever.

"It was only last night," he went on, under his breath. "If the scoundrels *did* post it, it would be delivered some time this

evening. If Underhill gets that—if he opens it——"

He broke off, catching in his breath.

"What's the old boy muttering about, Luke?" whispered Josh Adams. "Queer old cuss, ain't he?"

"What do we care?" asked Luke. "We've made seven quid out of 'im already. Bit loopy, if you ask me."

"I dunno," murmured the other. "Maybe there's more in this than meets the eye, mate. Looks fishy to me. What's he want with another bloke's letters?"

Mr. Drayton suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Come here!" he said sharply. "Y o u have brought me the wrong letter, but it is not your fault. Perhaps the right letter will be delivered later. You must get it! Do you understand? You must go back to Norbury and find out all the details of the next delivery. Then you must report to me. It'll be easy enough—you can do it without arousing any comments. I'll give you another two pounds——"

"Ain't you generous?"

interrupted Luke contemptuously. "Two pounds your grandmother!"

"You impertinent hound! If you dare to speak to me like that——"

"Not so fast, old gent!" said Luke insolently. "What's the idea of offerin' us a measley two quid? An' don't call me names, neither, or I might give the tip to Mr. Under'll that you've been pinchin' his letters."

Marcus Drayton took a deep breath.

"We mustn't quarrel," he said thickly. "Perhaps this job is worth more than two pounds——"

"There's no 'perhaps' about it, guv'nor," retorted Luke. "Seems to me you've forgotten that we banded that postman on the 'ead? Like as not, there'll be a copper about on the next delivery. We can't do the same as we did before—can't 'ang about in the porch waitin' for the postman. It's a cert. that Mr. Under'll will be 'ome, for one thing; an' for another the postman might 'ave a mate with him, or a cop."

"You must try!" urged Mr. Drayton fiercely. "It is absolutely essential that I should get that letter. Do you hear me—essential!"

"All right, guv'nor, we'll get it for you," replied Duke Danby. "What do you say to ten quid?"

"Ten pounds!" ejaculated Mr. Drayton angrily.

"Each!"

"You grasping rascals——"

"Take it or leave it," said Luke, shrugging his shoulder. "But a risky job is



worth high pay. Ten quid each—or we walk out.”

And Luke flung his cap on the back of his head and made for the door.

“Wait!” said Mr. Drayton sharply. “All right—ten pounds.”

“Each?”

“Ten pounds each,” said Mr. Drayton. “But only if you bring that letter to me. If you fail I’ll give you five pounds.”

“That’s a bargain, guv’nor,” said Luke promptly.

They received some more instructions from their strange employer, and then took their departure. Mr. Marcus Drayton breathed hard after he had closed the door.

“The scum!” he panted. “But if they get the letter it’ll be worth it—every penny of it!”

CHAPTER 2.

The Snake Bracelet!

CLIFFORD UNDERHILL walked listlessly.

The street was remarkably dingy, but Underhill hardly seemed aware of his surroundings. As he walked there was a faraway look in his eyes. His editor had sent him to Walworth in order to get hold of a story, and he had got it. He should really have been very pleased with himself, for it was a good story. There had been a fire that evening in Walworth, and Clifford had obtained conclusive proof that the fire had been deliberately faked.

But, somehow, the journalist did not seem to care particularly. His only object now, as he walked, was to get back to the Elephant and Castle, where he would be able to board a bus for Ludgate Circus.

Until two months ago, Underhill had been the star reporter on the staff of “The Morning Mail.” Of late, however, he had fallen off to such an extent that the news editor was seriously beginning to think of displacing him. Underhill didn’t take the interest in his work that he always used to. He had lost a great deal of his pep and initiative. Even now, as he walked down this dingy Walworth street, with a good story for his editor in his pocket, his footsteps were listless. He just didn’t seem to care.

Things had been getting worse, week after week. It was such a pity, because formerly Underhill had been one of the cheeriest mortals in the office, alive to his fingertips, bubbling with energy, a new joke on his tongue every day.

Suddenly, as he was passing a squalid-looking second-hand jeweller’s, the window of which was ill-lighted, he half-turned his head, attracted by something which struck a familiar chord. He looked again, casually, preparing to walk on at the same time. But now he pulled up short, a startled ejaculation on his lips. He knew why his attention had been attracted; a man in the win-

dow had just hung a bracelet on a hook, near one of the electric lights.

“It’s the same—exactly the same!” muttered Underhill, a spasm of agony crossing his face.

He stood looking into the dingy window, his mind tortured with memories. Never had he expected to see a bracelet so like the one—

A mad thought came to him. His face became deeply flushed, and his eyes positively burned as he bent nearer. What if this bracelet wasn’t a mere duplicate? What if it was *the* bracelet? Clifford Underhill almost felt his heart miss a beat. This was sheer insanity!

And yet—and yet—

He strode to the shop door, and pushed it open. As he entered, he took a firmer hold on himself. It would never do to display excitement or over-eagerness; the jeweller would only become suspicious. So, with a supreme effort, he forced himself to adopt a casual manner.

The interior of the shop was as untidy as the window. The counter, and the shelves behind the counter, were filled with a miscellaneous assortment of second-hand articles—clocks, cameras, ornaments, electro-plated flower-vases, and so forth. Behind the counter stood an elderly, undersized man, who wore a shabby alpaca coat. His face was pinched, and his eyes, behind his spectacles, were foxy.

“You’ve got a bracelet in the window,” said Clifford, and he was surprised to hear the calmness of his voice considering that a tumult raged within him. “I’d like to have a look at it, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly, sir,” said the jeweller. “But there are many bracelets. Which one do you mean?”

“I think you just put it in—I noticed it as I was passing,” replied Underhill. “A sort of snakey thing.”

The jeweller nodded, and a certain eagerness came into his manner.

“You wish to buy the bracelet?” he asked. “It is a good one—solid gold, twenty-two carat. It is a bargain at ten guineas—”

“Never mind the price,” interrupted Clifford. “Let’s have a look at it. If I like it, I’ll buy it.”

Striving to keep his hands steady, he gripped the counter. The jeweller opened the glass door of the window, reached forward, and took the snake bracelet from its hook. He brought it forward, rubbing it tenderly with a scrap of velvet.

“This bracelet must have cost between twenty and thirty pounds when it was new,” he said cunningly. “But it’s second-hand, and at ten guineas there’s no better bargain—”

“All right—let’s see it.”

Underhill held out his hand, and again he was amazed at his forced calmness. This bracelet was exactly the same—the same snake design, the same markings. He turned it over and over in his hand, looking ostensibly for a hall-mark.



One man held the postman from behind, while another struck him a heavy blow over the head.

"It's twenty-two carat——" began the jeweller.

"I know—I know," said Underhill thickly.

He wondered that he could speak at all. What he had seen had given him a tremendous jolt. Initials, scratched on the soft gold—"C. U.—M. F." There they were, faint and worn, but to Clifford Underhill they seemed to stand out in letters of fire.

If it hadn't been for the counter, he would have swayed. Until that moment, he had told himself that he was mad—that he was fooling himself with an insane hope. It couldn't be the same—such a thing was im-

possible! Yet here it was, in his hands, and those initials proved it. The same bracelet!

"How—much—did you say?" he heard himself asking.

"Ten guineas, sir," replied the jeweller promptly.

"I'll buy it—no, don't wrap it up," said Underhill. "I can slip it in my pocket just as it is." He took out his pocket book with trembling hands, selected two fivers, and added a ten shilling note. "Thank you," he added curtly, and turned towards the door.

"Wait!" ejaculated the jeweller. "If

you will please sign these notes on the back

"Nonsense," interrupted Clifford.

He felt that he could not stay in that shop another second. He reached the door, opened it, and plunged out into the ill-lit street. His brain was in a turmoil. He was bewildered, staggered, dumbfounded. And with all this a hope was dawning in his heart—such a hope that he felt giddy as he walked. It was crazy, of course, but—

It was Muriel's bracelet—Muriel who was dead—Muriel who had worn the self-same bracelet at their last meeting. Yet what was it doing in that grubby little second-hand jeweller's in Walworth?

"What can I do?" he muttered feverishly. "How can I get any help? If I go to the police they'll only think I'm a raving lunatic."

His thoughts came to a standstill. A name had occurred to him—a famous name, and one which stood for integrity. A taxi-cab was crawling past.

"Here!" shouted Underhill, beckoning.

The cab swung into the curb.

"Gray's Inn Road," ordered the journalist. "Mr. Nelson Lee's chambers—I don't know the number—"

"That's all right, sir—hop in!" said the cabby briskly. "I wouldn't be fit to be on the streets if I didn't know Mr. Nelson Lee's door number!"

NELSON LEE, the famous criminologist, smiled rather amusedly as he regarded the astonished expressions on the faces of the six "cubs" who were in his laboratory with him.

"Just a little demonstration, young 'uns," he said dryly. "You see, fingerprints, as a means of identification, are not so infallible as they are supposed to be. It is possible—indeed, comparatively easy—for a clever criminal to secure the impressions of a man's fingerprints, and then duplicate them. It is only a question of making a rubber-stamp with sufficient care. A fingerprint from a



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rubber-stamp looks exactly like a genuine fingerprint."

"You mean, Chief, that a crook might commit a murder, and leave somebody else's fingerprints all over the place?" asked a member of the audience.

"Exactly," said Lee. "The police, I am afraid, are too prone to accept fingerprints as positive evidence. I certainly do not."

It was one of the great detective's popular lectures. The members of his novel academy were always eager and anxious to attend, and the lucky ones who were chosen were never disappointed. This was an evening session, when only about half a dozen "cubs" were admitted into the laboratory.

The young detectives who were present now were Nipper, Handforth, Travers, Potts, Glenthorne, and Handforth minor. The other members of the academy were in their own quarters, lounging in the Common-room, or reading in their studies.

The evening hours in Gray's Inn Road were generally quiet; but there was never any telling. At a moment's notice, some of the cubs might be required to dash off to the other side of London, or even to the other side of England. There was a glorious uncertainty in this life, and all these youngsters, late schoolboys of St. Frank's—which, incidentally, after being destroyed by fire was now being rebuilt, and would soon be ready for occupation again—were never ceasing to congratulate themselves upon being members of Nelson Lee's most unique academy.

A soft-toned buzzer sounded, and Nelson Lee nodded, as though in dismissal.

"That's the excellent Mrs. Jones, indicating that she has shown somebody up to the consulting-room," he said. "Well, the demonstration is over, so you might as well get back to your own quarters."

"It might be a case, sir!" said Handforth eagerly. "Can't we wait?"

"Perhaps you had better come into the waiting-room with me," replied Nelson Lee.

The boys were eager enough to comply. It frequently happened that Lee allowed some of them to be present whilst he interviewed clients. It was all good training for them.

Clifford Underhill was in the consulting-room when Nelson Lee arrived; he was pacing up and down, his face flushed, his eyes burning. He twirled round as he heard the door opening, and he came forward.

"Forgive me for coming like this, Mr. Lee, without an appointment," he said quickly, "but I need your advice—and perhaps your help. My name is Underhill—Clifford Underhill. I'm a reporter on the 'Morning Mail' staff."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I think we have met before, Mr. Underhill," he said. "There are not many London reporters with whom I am not acquainted."

"Look at this, Mr. Lee!" said Clifford.

He thrust the snake bracelet into the detective's hands, and Lee took it wonderingly.

He could tell that this young man was consumed with a tremendous inward excitement.

"Quite pretty," remarked Lee. "But wherein lies its significance?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Lee," said the other, his voice tense. "That bracelet was supposed to be at the bottom of

the sea, somewhere off the coast of Cornwall. And I found it, not half an hour ago, in a little jeweller's shop in Walworth. If the thing wasn't absolutely fantastic—too deliriously wonderful to be true—I could swear that Muriel was alive, and not dead!"

"Miss Muriel Foster?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee!" ejaculated Clifford, staring. "But—but how did you know?"

"I have rather a good memory, Mr. Underhill," said Nelson Lee. "But sit down. There is something on your mind, and the sooner you get it off the better."

"I want to tell you a story, Mr. Lee—an extraordinary story!" exclaimed Clifford Underhill. "Please don't make me sit down—I'd rather stand here, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, then," invited Lee.

Underhill glanced at the cub detectives, who were in the background.

"Unless your story is strictly confidential—that is to say, for my own ears alone—there is no reason why these youngsters should not remain," said Nelson Lee. "They are my assistants."

Clifford Underhill nodded, but he hardly seemed to hear. He plunged straight into his story.

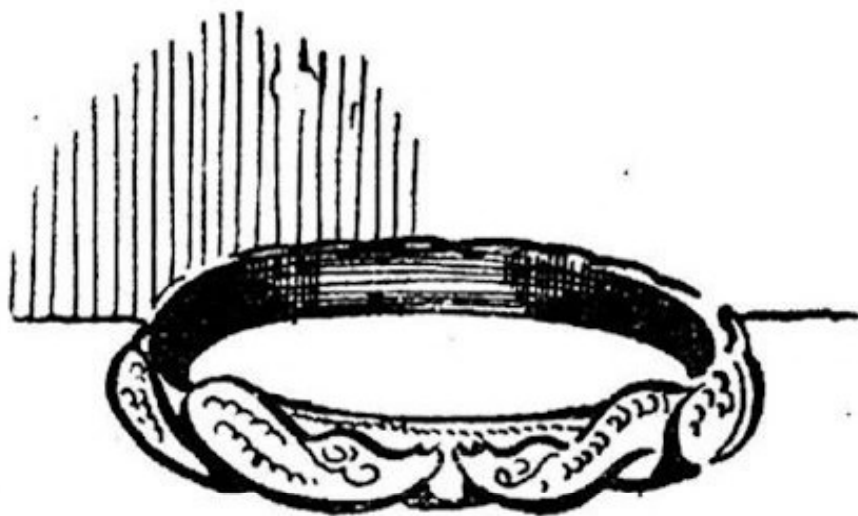
CHAPTER 3.

The Girl Who Vanished!

"IT doesn't matter how I met Miss Muriel Foster—although, as a matter of fact, it was because of a little service which I performed for her mother," said Clifford Underhill. "Mrs. Drayton became suddenly ill as she was leaving a big West End stores, and I happened to be passing at the moment. I lifted her into a taxi-cab and took her home to Highgate."

"A chivalrous action on your part, Mr. Underhill, which apparently had its reward," commented Lee. "But you have called the lady Mrs. Drayton?"

"Second husband," explained Clifford grimly. "I'll come to him presently. You're right when you say that I received my reward, though. I met Muriel after I had



got her mother home, and she was—well, grateful to me. I'm not much of a hand at speaking of these sort of things, but it's a fact that I fell in love with Miss Foster at first sight. It may sound silly——"

"Not at all," interrupted Lee. "Falling in love at first sight, Mr. Underhill, is one of the most commonplace events in our everyday life."

"I took advantage of Mrs. Drayton's illness to call again—and then again," continued Underhill. "Ostensibly, I went to inquire after the mother, but actually, as you can guess, my real object was to see Muriel. And she, to my joy, plainly showed me that she favoured my visits. The only trouble I had was with old Drayton. From the very first he treated me with rank discourtesy; he as good as told me that I was not welcome, and that the sooner my visits ceased the better."

"Marcus Drayton is a mean, petty-minded, cantankerous old codger. I was always thankful that Muriel had none of his blood in her veins; he was only her stepfather. What on earth possessed Muriel's mother to marry him has always been a mystery to me—but that's neither here nor there."

"Well, that fall of Mrs. Drayton's was the forerunner of a fatal illness," continued Clifford thoughtfully. "After about six weeks she died—that is, about six months ago, in October of last year. I attended the funeral, and did all I could to console Muriel, for by that time there was an understanding between us. We were not officially engaged, but we thoroughly knew our own minds."

Nipper, who, with the rest, was watching and listening, was mildly intrigued to see that Nelson Lee was showing a keen, lively interest in this somewhat ordinary story. Evidently the great detective could see more in it than Nipper could.

"Within a week of the funeral a great change came over Muriel's stepfather," said Clifford, his face hardening. "Previously he had tolerated me, but now he positively forbade me to go near the house; he told me, in the plainest words, to keep away from Muriel."

"But you didn't keep away?"

"I kept away from the house, since my visits there only brought unpleasantness, and, indeed, made things very difficult for Muriel," replied Clifford. "We managed to meet occasionally—at restaurants and picture theatres—but it was pretty hard. And after a month or two Drayton virtually kept Muriel a prisoner in the house. It became increasingly difficult for me to see her, or even to get in touch with her. There was no telephone at the house, and I had a feeling that my letters were intercepted. Still, Muriel and I were determined to get married, and we didn't mind waiting a bit; perhaps it was as well to let the old man have his way."

"Then one day I discovered that Mr. Drayton had taken his stepdaughter down to Cornwall," said Clifford, a change coming into his tone. "I knew, of course, that he had taken her there so that he should get

her away from me. This was in the beginning of February. The first I knew about it was a hurried note from Muriel, posted in Tregellen, and saying that she and her stepfather were staying at a small hotel there—ostensibly for Mr. Drayton's health."

"Did you go down?"

"I did!" replied Clifford grimly. "I regarded Drayton's action as a challenge. The trouble was, Muriel was only twenty, and she was still legally under the control of her stepfather. I went down to that inn, but Drayton created such a scene that, for Muriel's sake, I was compelled to go away. However, I found out that she had made friends with a Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin, a kindly, lovable couple. I believe they were the only other visitors in that small hotel, and Muriel naturally turned away from her cantankerous stepfather to them. So I returned to London feeling that things were not quite so bad as they might have been, and I was planning to put an end to the intolerable position at the earliest possible moment."

"You mean that you were making arrangements to marry Miss Foster?"

"I was fed-up with the whole ridiculous position," replied Clifford. "It wasn't as though Muriel was a mere child—she was nearly twenty, and knew her own mind. I had a good bit saved up, and, in addition, there was a legacy of mine from an aunt. I bought a comfortable little house in Norbury."

A spasm passed over Clifford's face, but he soon controlled himself.

"I got the home ready, Mr. Lee—everything complete. My idea was to get a special licence, marry Muriel as soon as ever she came back to London from that holiday, and snap my fingers in old Drayton's face."

"I don't blame you for that decision."

"And then came the tragedy," said Underhill in a low voice. "Heavens! I shall never forget that morning when I read the report in the newspaper. It was three days after I had got back from that trip to Cornwall. I was particularly cheery that morning, because I had seen the registrar, and had made arrangements about the special licence. I had been to Norbury, and had seen the furniture and everything else taken into the home that was to be ours. Then, when I opened my newspaper, I saw the headline: 'Shocking Boating Tragedy in Cornwall!' I had heard nothing of it at the office, for I had had rather a busy time on a job over at Watford. I only popped into the office for a minute or two that night, and then went home. So the shock was even worse than it might have been."

There was a silence as Clifford paused; everybody listened tensely. Edward Oswald Handforth, soft-hearted and romantic, felt a rather choky feeling in his throat.

"Muriel dead—drowned!" continued Clifford, after a short pause. "I couldn't believe it, Mr. Lee! It was appalling—it was too horrible for words!"

"I remember the case," nodded Lee. "A very tragic affair. A rather foolish accident,

Entering his consulting room, Nelson Lee beheld an agitated-looking man waiting there.



I believe—one of those unnecessary boating tragedies. I think Mr. Tomlin took his wife and Miss Foster out in misty weather?"

"Yes, there was a slight fog at the time," replied Underhill. "The Tomlins went out boating, taking Muriel with them, as they had done several times before. The sea was calm, and, except for the mist, the conditions were ideal. But the boat did not return, and the hotel people and Mr. Drayton became increasingly anxious. A thick fog developed later in the afternoon, and at night the sea was enveloped. The next morning wreckage was found. The boat was floating in Tregellen Bay, bottom-side up, her bows stove in. A few articles of clothing were recovered, too—Mr. Tomlin's hat, a scarf of Muriel's, Mrs. Tomlin's handbag. There was little doubt that the boat had struck one of the many half-submerged rocks on that part of the coast. It must have filled at once, and sunk. The

mist concealed the accident; nobody on the shore saw it, and so there was no alarm."

"The bodies were never recovered?" asked Lee.

"Never," said Clifford quietly. "There was, of course, a search, but there was little doubt that the bodies had been carried out into the Channel, and they had probably sunk in deep water. There are very tricky currents in and about Tregellen Bay. Of course, I went down to Cornwall by the first train, and I found old Drayton inconsolable."

"He had changed his attitude towards you?"

"Yes," replied Clifford in surprise. "How did you know that, Mr. Lee?"

"I merely thought it possible."

"He had changed completely," went on the young man. "He cursed himself again and again for frowning upon me as a suitor. It was all his fault, he said; if he had not been

so hard, things would have been different. He would never have taken Muriel to Cornwall, and the tragedy could not have happened. It was all his fault. I have seldom seen a man so utterly and absolutely abject. And yet all the time I had a vague feeling that he was play-acting. It was an uncharitable thought, but I couldn't get it out of my head, and at the time I was so grieved about Muriel that I did not pay much attention."

"There was an inquest, wasn't there?"

"Yes, but no new facts came to life," replied Clifford. "I returned to London a different man—and I've been different ever since. I lost interest in my work, and I've an idea that my editor is preparing to kick me out. You can't realise, Mr. Lee, how things have changed for me; all my dreams have been shattered. But to-night—to-night I'm different!" he went on, a new note creeping into his voice. "Something has happened which alters everything!"

He picked up the snake bracelet, and looked at it with burning eyes.

"There's a mystery here, Mr. Lee—a baffling, intangible mystery which I cannot fathom. That is why I have come to you. Perhaps you will be able to advise me."

"What is the nature of the mystery?"

"This bracelet," replied Underhill tensely. "Muriel was wearing it when she was drowned—and yet I find it in a squalid

jeweller's shop in Walworth! How, Mr. Lee? From the very first I've had a feeling, deep down in the bottom of my heart, that there was something strange about that tragedy. The non-recovery of the bodies! Not a trace of them was ever found. At times, in my anguish, I even suspected that old Drayton had played a trick on me—that Muriel wasn't really dead. Then, when I thought things out, I told myself that I was a fool. And now comes this bracelet!"

"Are you sure that it is the same one, and not a duplicate?" asked Lee gently. "You must remember, Mr. Underhill, that only bracelets of great value are unique. There may have been a hundred bracelets made according to this particular design and distributed throughout the trade. I don't wish to discourage you——"

"You won't!" interrupted Clifford. "This is Muriel's bracelet. It is the one I bought her. Look inside it, Mr. Lee. You will see some initials scratched there—Muriel's initials and mine. I put them there myself."

Lee picked up the bracelet, then nodded.

"The one thought which keeps throbbing through my mind is that Muriel might be alive," said the young man huskily. "How else can we explain it, Mr. Lee? This bracelet was on her wrist when she went out boating with the Tomlins."



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.

"Be Prepared" To Laugh!

A party of Boy Scouts was on its annual holiday. Each boy was being given his morning task, and one lad was told to prepare the soup.

"And don't forget to put in the turnip," said the Scoutmaster.

"What sized turnip?" asked the boy, who was not versed in the art of making soup.

"Oh, one about the size of your head."

Some time later a farmer came running into the camp exclaiming:

"One of your lads has



gone mad! He's pulling up all my turnips and trying his hat on them!"

(B. Ethell, 51, Warrenhurst Road, Fleetwood, Lancs, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

Polite with a Purpose!

Gamekeeper: "Didn't you see that board at the entrance to the wood?"

Bobby: "Yes; but it said 'Private' at the top, and I was too polite to read on."

(W. Woodage, 16, Simpson Street, Battersea, S.W.11, has been awarded a penknife.)

To Be Expected!

In the smoke-room of a hotel the guest from Scotland had bored everybody with tales of the wonderful things he had done.

"Well," said an Englishman, yawning, "suppose you tell us something you can't do and, by jove, I'll undertake to do it myself."

"Thank ye," replied Sandy. "I canna pay ma bill."

(R. Walker, 36, Portland Street, Aberdeen, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

The Same Applied!

Little Boy: "Grandpa, why is it you have no hair on your head?"

"How do you know that?" asked Lee sharply. "My dear Underhill, there is absolutely no proof that Miss Foster is alive. Drayton may have sold this bracelet some weeks—or days—prior to her death. Or he may have sold it after her death. Don't you think it possible, knowing it was bought by you, he forced it from the girl's possession?"

"No," replied Clifford, in a tone of absolute conviction. "I'll tell you why, Mr. Lee. When I put that bracelet over her wrist she swore to me that she would regard it as sacred; she would wear it day and night. There are two other facts which prove that she was wearing it at the time of the supposed tragedy. I deliberately say 'supposed,' because I'm not satisfied that she is dead. Oh, you may think me mad—but I tell you I'm not satisfied."

"What are these additional facts?"

"Firstly, the landlady of the inn gave evidence at the inquest that Muriel was wearing that bracelet when she left the hotel to go boating," replied Clifford. "Secondly, the bracelet fitted very tightly. Once on, it could not be easily removed. It could not possibly have dropped off in the water after she had been drowned. Bearing those facts in mind, why do I now find it in an obscure jeweller's?"

Nelson Lee fingered the bracelet thoughtfully.

"I will agree with you, Mr. Clifford, that there is a need for an investigation," he said at length. "The unexpected turning-up of this bracelet is significant. There is another reason why I am interested in this case, Mr. Underhill. There is one vital fact of which you seem to be unaware."

"What is that?"

"Did you know if Miss Foster had any money?"

"Money?" repeated the young man, in surprise. "Well, she gave me to understand that her mother had left her a bit, but I never paid much attention."

"Then it will surprise you to learn, Mr. Underhill, that if your fiancée had lived until she was twenty-one she would have come into a considerable fortune!"

Clifford started up.

"A fortune!" he ejaculated. "How do you know? Why, if I had dreamed of this —"

He paused, and Nelson Lee nodded.

"If you had dreamed of it, Mr. Underhill, you might not have been comfortable in pressing your suit," said Lee gently. "Perhaps Miss Foster realised that—and for that reason she kept the fact hidden. Or she may have known nothing herself. But it is certainly true that she would have come into a great deal of money if she had lived until next year."

Grandpa: "Grass does not grow on a busy street, my lad."

Little boy: "Ah, I see! I suppose it can't get through the concrete."

(A. E. Harris, 28, St. Catherine's Vale, London Road, Worcester, has been awarded a penknife.)

Taking No Chances!

Making his final tour round the big Glasgow hotel early one morning, the manager suddenly came upon a "boots" kneeling down outside a bed-room door and cleaning a pair of shoes.

"Now, then," he said sternly, "you know that isn't allowed, boots. Take those shoes and clean them down in the basement."

"I can't, sir," answered boots. "There's a gentleman from Aberdeen in this room, and he's hanging on to the laces."

(G. Powers, 18, Percy Street, Swindon, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Irish!

A couple of Irishmen were at work on a scaffolding when one of them slipped and fell to the ground.

"Pat, are ye dead or alive?" called the other.

"Oi'm aloive," came the groaning reply.

"Sure, ye're such a liar that I don't know whether to belave ye or not."



"Begorra, then, I must be dead, for ye would never dare to call me a liar if Oi were aloive."

(Miss Ruby Morgan, 46, Tennyson Road, Portswood, Southampton, has been awarded a penknife.)

A Waiting Game!

Slow waiter: "Have you ordered anything, sir?"

Disgusted diner: "Well, I asked for a pancake, but that was so long ago that you'd better bring me a Christmas pudding."

(A. Packham, 6, Horsham Road, Crawley, Sussex, has been awarded a penknife.)

"Beaver"!

Teacher: "Now, Tommy, what is grass?"

Tommy: "Please, sir, the whiskers of the face of the earth."
(E. R. Morris, 120, Albion Road, Dalston, E.8. has been awarded a penknife.)

"S'mighty" Fine Team!

It was the day of the great—and gruelling—match between Blacktown Bashers and Smithtown Smiters. But the captain of the Smiters was looking glum.

"Hello, Tom!" called out a pal. "What sort of a team have you got out to-day?"

"Oh, the usual five letters, two telegrams, and four players," replied Tom.

(J. Sutcliffe, 4, Abbey Street, Burnley, Lancs, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

"And who—who gets it if she is really dead?"

"Who but her stepfather?"

"I knew it!" shouted Underhill, leaping up. "I tell you, Mr. Lee, that man is a scoundrel! Either he murdered Muriel, or —"

"Hush! Calm yourself, my dear fellow," interrupted Lee, taking Clifford by the shoulder. "Don't get such fantastic ideas into your head. Leave this case in my hands for the moment."

"You—you will really look into it?" asked Clifford eagerly.

"I will look into it at once," promised Lee. "Now, I want you to go home and take things easily. Never mind the office this evening. Go straight to your home and be patient. I will do everything that is possible."

CHAPTER 4.

A Visit to Highgate!

AFTER Clifford Underhill had gone there was a silence in the consulting-room. The cubs had been silent throughout the consultation, and even now they refrained from making any comments.

Nelson Lee was thinking, and they had no wish to disturb him. Yet they were all vastly intrigued by the story they had just heard.

"This is a very interesting case," said Nelson Lee at length. "More interesting, perhaps, than you youngsters yet realise."

"I feel frightfully sorry for the poor blighter, sir," remarked Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, having his girl drowned, and all that. Rather a chunk of hard cheese."

"And the worst of it is, he seems to think that the girl might still be alive," said Jimmy Potts.

"Perhaps she is alive," said Nelson Lee keenly. "I'm not making any statement, or even indulging in any guesswork; but the circumstances are extraordinarily significant. As Underhill told us, the finding of this bracelet in an obscure jeweller's in Walworth—on this day of all days—is rather more than a coincidence."

He dangled the bracelet in his fingers, and the boys regarded him curiously.

"Why to-day of all days, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"I'm going to tell you something, my sons," said Lee, glancing at their eager faces. "Gather round. I didn't tell Underhill about my discovery because I didn't want to excite him. You may remember that I was out this morning?"

"Yes, and you were late for lunch, guv'nor," said Nipper.

"I dropped in at Scotland Yard while I was out," continued Lee. "Our old friend, Lennard, was somewhat puzzled about a burglary at Highgate. Now here's the point

—the house which was burgled was the home of Mr. Marcus Drayton."

"Drayton!" echoed the cubs.

"The same!" nodded Lee. "Muriel Foster's stepfather."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "And Underhill found that bracelet in an obscure jeweller's in Walworth."

"Just after it had been placed in the window by the jeweller," added Lee, nodding.

"Good gad! I mean to say, what?" ejaculated Archie, jamming his monocle into his eye and staring at Lee. "You mean to say, dear old Chief, that that bally bracelet might have been bagged from Drayton's house during this burglary?"

"And sold by the burglars during the day?" added Travers. "Rather a juicy suggestion, dear old fellows. This jeweller Johnny might be a receiver."

"A fence!" said Handforth eagerly. "By George! It all fits in!"

"Unfortunately, there is not a shred of evidence that this theory is anywhere near the mark," said Nelson Lee warningly. "We must not take anything for granted, young men. I rather fancy that it would be advisable to apply a test—but if the test fails we must abandon the theory. Now, as you know so much of this case, I had better give you a few details regarding the burglary at Drayton's house. In many ways, that affair, seemingly so trivial, has some puzzling points."

The cubs waited, breathless.

"Chief-inspector Lennard was vastly intrigued," continued Nelson Lee. "Early this morning, Drayton rang up the Yard, frantic and overwrought, appealing for help. He reported that his safe had been forced open and burgled. Lennard, as it happened, was sent to Highgate on the job."

"And this bracelet was one of the things stolen, sir?" asked Potts.

"Oh, no—that's rather a bad shot, young 'un," said Lee. "Mr. Drayton made no mention whatever of a bracelet. He gave a list of the stolen articles, and it was this list which puzzled Lennard so much. About twenty pounds in currency notes, a gold watch, and a gentleman's diamond ring—about fifty pounds' worth of stuff altogether. Yet Mr. Marcus Drayton was frantic—positively frantic. When Lennard got to the house he found the old man raging up and down, cursing at the inefficiency of the police, demanding that he should have better protection as a householder."

"Queer," commented Handforth.

"Lennard did his best to soothe Mr. Drayton, but at first he was unsuccessful," went on Nelson Lee. "Drayton demanded, with a vehemence which suggested that he was in a panic, that the burglars should be traced and arrested. It wasn't until mid-morning that he calmed down and became more normal."

"Puzzle—why did Drayton make such a fuss over fifty quids' worth of stolen pro-

perty?" murmured Travers musingly. "Dear old fellows, this is rummy."

"And Drayton made no mention of any bracelet," continued Nelson Lee. "Naturally, he wouldn't—if Underhill's suspicions are well founded. If Drayton has been guilty of any trickery with regard to Muriel Foster—if that boating accident was *not* an accident, as it appeared—then it is quite likely that Drayton *was* in possession of the girl's bracelet. And it is just as certain that he would be frantic with anxiety, lest it should lead to suspicion against himself."

"But would he be as panic-stricken as all that, guv'nor?" asked Nipper shrewdly.

"That's just the point—I don't think he would," replied Lee. "It seems to me that there must have been something else taken from that safe—something of far greater importance even than the bracelet. In any case, I think it is worth while taking a little trip to Highgate."

"All of us, sir?" asked Willy Handforth brightly.

"Yes, you might as well all come—although I do not suppose that you will take any action just yet," replied Lee, rising to his feet. "However, there may be some work for you later on. My only object in going to Highgate is to tackle Mr. Drayton on this bracelet question. He may be a good actor or he may not; but we shall soon see. I rather fancy I shall be standing on firmer ground after this interview."

THEY went to Highgate in Nelson Lee's Rolls-Royce Special. Lee left the car at the end of Maplestead Road, with the boys in it. They were rather disappointed to be left behind, but what the Chief said "went."

Nelson Lee found the Cedars without much difficulty, although the name had nearly faded from the ramshackle gate. He walked up the untidy drive and arrived at the front door. Only a tiny light was glowing in the hall. The Cedars stood in its own grounds, and was, on the whole, a depressing, uninviting place. In answer to Nelson Lee's knock, the door was opened by Mr. Marcus Drayton himself. He peered forward eagerly through his spectacles.

"Well?" he demanded, his voice charged with anxiety.

Nelson Lee had an impression that Mr. Drayton was expecting somebody else.

"Mr. Drayton?" he asked briskly in an official tone.

"Why, yes," said the other in some little confusion. "Who are you? What do you want here?"

"I am a detective," replied Lee.

"Oh, I see—I see," said Mr. Drayton hurriedly. "Quite so! A detective?"

He did not invite Nelson Lee to step inside; but he assumed, as Lee had expected

him to assume, that his visitor was a Scotland Yard man. Lee was rather glad that the porch was shadowy, and that the door was half-closed. For while Lee stood in shadow, Mr. Drayton's face was clearly visible, owing to the proximity of a street lamp opposite the wall of the short front garden.

"I am tired of you detectives!" said the old man impatiently. "By this time you should have recovered the property which was stolen from my place during the night. What good are you? What have you come for now—merely to ask me some more questions?"

"Partly, Mr. Drayton," replied Lee. "There is a chance, however, that we have got on the track of your property."

"What do you mean—a chance?"

"Well, sir," replied Lee, "we've found something which we think might have been stolen from your safe—but it's something which you didn't mention in your list. It might easily have been overlooked. In short, sir, was there a bracelet in your safe last night?"

As a cat watches a mouse, Lee watched Marcus Drayton's face. It did not change colour, but there was a slight narrowing of the eyes, and the mouth became tightened.

"A bracelet?" snapped the old man. "No!"

"A snake bracelet, sir—"

"I tell you, no!" insisted Mr. Drayton harshly. "There was no bracelet in my safe."

This time there was no mistaking the panic-stricken light in Mr. Drayton's eyes. He had a guilty look about him, and, as men frequently do on such occasions, he strove to conceal his agitation by becoming angry.

"Well, it was only a suggestion, sir," said Nelson Lee, still very polite and official. "We thought perhaps—"

"You're a lot of blundering fools!" broke in Mr. Drayton curtly. "If you can't do better than that, you'd better drop the case altogether!"

"No need to get abusive, sir," said Lee reproachfully. "You're quite sure that this bracelet wasn't in your safe last night?"

He produced it, and dangled it on the end of a finger in front of Marcus Drayton's face. The old man gazed at it fascinatedly. Lee could see that he was having a struggle with himself.

"No!" he said thickly. "That bracelet was not in my safe. Where did you get it from? Tell me that!"

"If it wasn't in your safe, sir, I'm sure it doesn't matter to you where we found it," replied Lee.

Drayton had no answer to this; it would, indeed, have seemed very suspicious if he had insisted upon the question. He had betrayed himself—Lee was quite satisfied on



Clifford Underhill turned, but he was too late to avoid the crashing blow which descended upon his head.



this point—but it was impossible for him to claim that bracelet.

"Well, I'm sorry, sir, for having troubled you," said Nelson Lee apologetically. "If this bracelet isn't yours, I won't bother you any more. You're quite certain that you've never seen it before?"

"Never!" snapped Drayton.

"Or one like it?"

"I tell you I've never seen it—or one like it, either!" shouted the old man furiously. "What nonsense is this? Go away, confound you!"

He went indoors quickly, and he slammed the door in Nelson Lee's face. Lee went down the path, reached the road, and there was a gleam of intense satisfaction in his eyes.

Marcus Drayton had betrayed himself beyond recall now! He had stated that he had never seen the bracelet, or one like it—yet, if his conscience had been clear, he would certainly have recognised the trinket as one which had belonged to his stepdaughter. But supposing that drowning business had been faked? Supposing it had not been an accident—but a deliberate plot? Then Drayton would have been afraid to acknowledge the bracelet. Nelson Lee's theory was taking definite shape!

When he got back to the car, the boys were full of curiosity. Lee soon satisfied them.

"We were right, young 'uns," he said in a low voice. "I saw Drayton—he denied all knowledge of this bracelet, but he certainly recognised it. There's something very fishy here."

"You mean it was really stolen from his safe last night, sir?" asked Nipper.

"It must have been," replied Lee. "And if Drayton had nothing to hide with regard to his daughter's death, he would have recognised, and acknowledged, the trinket at once. His refusal to do so is very significant. That man has a guilty secret."

"But what can we do, Chief?" asked Handforth. "There's not enough evidence to have him arrested. Besides, what could the charge be?"

"There is more behind this, my boys," said the great detective. "Much more, perhaps, than we can guess at the moment. In any case, I think I shall be justified in setting you on the watch."

"Good egg!"

Clifford Underhill turned, but he was too late to avoid the crashing blow which descended upon his head.



"Don't allow yourselves to be seen, and don't take any definite action," instructed Lee. "You may be wasting your time—but, on the other hand, you may not. If anything suggestive happens, ring me up. I shall be at Gray's Inn Road. I'm going there at once to search through my files."

The cubs tumbled out of the car, and Lee drove off. He was relying upon them to do their job.

CHAPTER 5.

The Letter of Mystery!

AS it happened, the cubs were not on duty for more than five minutes before something took place.

Very cautiously, the six young detectives stole into Marcus Drayton's garden.



They climbed over the wall, concealed by the thick, tangled bushes. Nipper and Handforth remained in front, near the short drive, hidden behind the laurels. Archie Glenthorne and Willy went round to the side, so that they could keep their eyes on that part of the house. Travers and Potts were at the rear. From every angle this house was under observation.

Hardly had Nipper taken up his position behind his own particular bush, when footsteps sounded on the pavement; they halted opposite the gate, and the gate creaked open. Peering through the laurels, Nipper caught a glimpse of two rough-looking men. They went up to the front door as though they were thoroughly familiar with the house. There was no hesitation about pushing the electric bell; the taller of the two men

found it at once. Marcus Drayton himself opened the door.

"Why are you back?" Nipper heard him ask. "You haven't had time——"

"Keep your hair on, guv'nor!" said one of the men. "There wasn't any need for us to go right back to Norbury. You wanted to know about the postal deliveries, didn't you?"

"Well?"

"Well, it might 'ave looked funny if we had made our inquiries in Norbury, seein' what 'appened there this evening," continued the man. "So we asked, casual-like, at the G.P.O. There's only one more delivery of letters in Norbury this evening—in Hedingham Road, anyhow. That's at about nine o'clock."

"If you'd 'ad a telephone, guv'nor, we could 'ave 'phoned it, instead of comin' all this 'ere way," put in the other man.

"Nine o'clock!" ejaculated Mr. Drayton sharply. "What's the time now? You fools! You oughtn't to have come here, wasting your time like this. Go to Norbury at once—carry out my orders!"

"Excitable old gent, 'ain't you?" asked the bigger man, with a sniff. "'Ow many more times 'ave I got to tell you to keep your 'air on? There's plenty o' time for us to get to Norbury. Don't you worry, guv'nor."

"Then go—go at once!" insisted Mr. Drayton. "And if you bring what I want, you shall have your reward."

He closed the door, and the two rough men, making uncomplimentary remarks about the owner of the Cedars, passed through the gateway and vanished into the gloom of Maplestead Road.

There was a slight movement against Nipper.

"Did you hear that?" came Handforth's whispered voice.

"Yes."

"What do you make of it?"

"Nothing much—but it's a bit rummy," said Nipper. "Why did those men bring Mr. Drayton some information about the postal delivery in Norbury? Seems such a trivial thing—but it must be significant somehow. I think I'd better buzz off and telephone the guv'nor."

"He won't be home yet."

"He will by the time I find a telephone," replied Nipper. "You stick here, Handy. Don't move, and keep your eyes wide open."

"Right-o!" murmured Handforth. "Don't be long."

Nipper stole out, climbed the wall again, and found a public telephone two or three streets away. Nelson Lee had just got in.

"Some news already, Nipper?" he asked over the wires.

"I'm not sure whether it's important or not, guv'nor—but I thought I'd better ring up," said Nipper. "Two rough-dressed chaps just came to Drayton's house, and they told him that the last postal delivery at Norbury is at nine o'clock."

"Norbury!" repeated Lee sharply.

"Yes, sir—and they mentioned Hedingham Road."

"This is a vital connecting link, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "Clifford Underhill lives in Hedingham Road, Norbury."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Nipper. "I didn't catch his address——"

"What else did these men say?"

"Only that they had made inquiries at the G.P.O. because it would have looked funny for them to inquire at Norbury after what had happened this evening," said Nipper. "I don't know what happened, of course, but Drayton seemed to understand."

"So something happened at Norbury this evening—presumably in connection with the postal delivery," said Lee musingly. "That's interesting. You did well to ring me up, Nipper."

"Mr. Drayton told the men to go to Norbury at once, and to do the job," added Nipper. "And he said that if they got what he wanted, he'd give them their reward."

"All right; go back and continue to keep watch," said Lee. "You may hear from me later."

He rang off. After a moment he lifted the receiver again, and soon got through to Scotland Yard. He inquired for Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, and was put through to that officer's room.

"I want you to give me a bit of information, if possible, Lennard," said Lee. "Do you know if anything unusual happened this evening in connection with the postal delivery at Norbury?"

"I've heard nothing," replied the chief inspector. "That's a funny inquiry of yours, isn't it? Hang on—I'll make inquiries."

Nelson Lee hung on, and after a delay of three or four minutes—an exasperating delay to Lee—Lennard's voice came again.

"Infernally funny how you get hold of these things, Lee, but something did happen at Norbury this evening," he said. "A postman delivering letters in Hedingham Road was assaulted."

"Oh!" said Nelson Lee. "Was he badly injured?"

"Nothing much—just a crack on the head," replied Lennard. "He was seen by some passers-by just as he was coming to, and they went to his help, and then called a policeman. He was found in the porch of No. 12, a house occupied by somebody named Underhill. He said that two rough men

had stolen a letter from him that he was just going to deliver, and they cracked him on the head. Rather a mysterious affair, and the Norbury police haven't got to the bottom of it yet because Underhill isn't at home, and they don't know where to find him."

"All right, Lennard—thanks," said Lee. "That's all I wanted to know."

It was enough. Nelson Lee did not pause another moment; he switched off the lights, hurried down, and jumped into his Rolls-Royce Special.

CLIFFORD UNDERHILL, feeling more hopeful than he had felt for months, sprawled in an easy-chair in his sitting-room.

His mind was still in a turmoil. He hated this inactivity. He wanted to be doing something. Not his work—he didn't care two straws for his work now. His mind was back with that tragedy of two months ago—back with Muriel. Was it possible that there had been trickery there?

And Muriel! What if she should still be alive somewhere?

When Clifford thought of this, he felt stunned. It was too much to hope for—it was madness. Yet that bracelet couldn't have got into the obscure jeweller's if Muriel had really died. What *could* be the explanation of this mystery?

Then there was the extraordinary affair that Mrs. Russell, next door, had told him about. No sooner had he got in than she had come hurrying to his front door, and she had told him that earlier during the day the postman had been attacked while delivering a letter.

Clifford could make neither head nor tail of it, although he thanked Mrs. Russell very politely. She even said that the police had been round, and she hazarded the opinion that they would come round again.

Rat-tat—tat-tat!

It was the familiar double-knock of the postman. Clifford started out of the chair, and went to the door. Strange that he should be thinking about the postman at that particular moment.

"Threepence to pay, sir," said the postman.

"Oh, I see," said Clifford, fumbling in his pocket.

He took two letters and handed over the threepence. Then he was rather startled to notice a police-constable on the pavement. The latter saluted as he saw Clifford looking at him.

"The sergeant will be round soon, sir, to have a word with you," he observed. "Something queer happened during the earlier delivery."

"So I understand," said Clifford, nodding. "Hanged if I can understand it. It's all right about the sergeant—I shall be in all the evening, I expect."

He nodded and closed the door, still puzzled. He went back into the sitting-room, looking curiously at the unstamped

letter. He had failed to hear a slight creak at the back of the hall; he knew nothing of the two figures who lurked there—figures who had crept in through a rear window three minutes earlier, when they had first seen the postman coming along.

Luke Danby and Josh Adams had not been wrong in suggesting to Mr. Marcus Drayton that this second attempt would be more difficult than the first. Being men of resource, however, they were ready. They would get an additional ten pounds each, and it was worth a bit of risk.

Underhill turned the unstamped letter over again. The writing was bold and full of character; but, as far as he could remember, he had not seen it before. The postmark was "Camden Town."

"H'm!" murmured Underhill.

He was about to open the letter when the door creaked slightly behind him. He half-turned, but he was too late to avoid the crashing blow that descended on his head. He had had no suspicion until that second that there were others in the house besides himself.

"Swelp me!" breathed Josh, as Clifford collapsed.

"Only thing to do, mate," panted Luke as he bent down and picked up the two letters. "Couldn't take no chances—not with that cop along the road. If this feller had yelled out 'e might 'ave been 'eard."

"You ain't croaked 'im, 'ave you?"

"Don't be a chump!" said Luke, with a snort. "He ain't 'urt much. Come on! We'd best quit while we've got the chance."

They left Clifford just as he was, and, hurrying into the rear, they slipped out through the small scullery window which they had forced earlier. It only took them a few moments to creep across the garden, drop down into a little alley at the back, and walk out into a neighbouring road. Three minutes later they had got to their own car—a dilapidated two-seater, but one which could shift pretty well. They leapt in, started the engine, and drove off towards Streatham and the City.

Almost at that same moment Nelson Lee was walking up the tiled path of No. 12. He had found Hedingham Road deserted, and there was a light in Clifford Underhill's front window. Lee rang the bell with a sensation of relief. He believed that he was in time. It wasn't quite nine o'clock yet.

There was no response to his ring, and when he knocked the result was the same. This was disturbing. Why did not Underhill answer? He was hardly likely to be out, or that light wouldn't—Lee heard a movement now. He knocked again. A moment later the door opened, and Clifford Underhill stood there, holding his head with one hand and swaying.

"What has happened?" asked Lee sharply.

"Is it you, Mr. Lee?" murmured Clifford. "I—I don't seem to remember. My head's swimming—"

"Here, come inside," interrupted Lee quickly.

He took the young man by the shoulders and half-carried him into the lighted sitting-room. Lee pursed his lips grimly as he noted the great bump on the side of Clifford's head. There was a tiny trickle of blood running down his forehead.

"Sit down, Underhill—don't talk for a minute," said Lee. "Drink this."

He poured out a stiff whisky, and Clifford gulped it down. He was rapidly reviving now, although his head still ached abominably.

"The postman came," he said, looking at Lee in a bewildered way. "I brought the letters in here—and then somebody hit me on the head. I didn't even see him properly; I just caught a momentary glimpse of a heavy stick being raised."

"And the letters?"

"They seem to have gone," said Clifford, looking round. "There were two—three-pence to pay on one of them. Didn't know who it was from—posted in Camden Town. The other was only a receipt from the gas company."

"We can dismiss that one, then," said Nelson Lee. "An unstamped letter—posted in Camden Town. Good! We are getting along nicely!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Cubs Captured!

NELSON LEE was disappointed because he had arrived late. Still, no particular damage had been done. The mysterious men had secured the fateful letter—whatever it was—but Lee remembered that he had left his cubs on the watch at the house in Highgate. However, cubs or no cubs, there was no time to waste.

"If you're feeling fit enough, Underhill, we'd better be getting a move on," said Lee, eyeing the young man closely.

"I'm all right now, Mr. Lee, thanks," said Clifford. "The infernal blighters! Didn't give me a chance! I don't mind having a smack—"

"Of course you don't," agreed Lee. "Now, tell me—did you take particular notice of that unstamped letter?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you'd be able to recognise the handwriting again?"

"Quite easily," said Underhill. "The 'I's' had particularly wide loops, and the 'f's' had rather rummy zig-zag strokes across them. I'd know that handwriting again anywhere."

"Come with me, then," said the detective briskly. "We won't bother about this assault on you; somebody must have got in at the back. As you're not particularly hurt, it doesn't matter. The letter is the main thing."

"But I can't understand it," protested Clifford. "It's—it's so strange! Who on earth could have attacked me like that to

get a letter that I don't know anything about? This seems a day of surprises! I mean, after finding that bracelet——"

"There is a connection between the two incidents, Mr. Underhill," replied Lee, with a hard note in his voice. "We're going to Highgate now."

"Highgate!" ejaculated Clifford. "That's where Drayton lives!"

"Exactly," nodded Lee.

From Norbury Lee drove through Brixton, Kennington, and then over Westminster Bridge. He pulled up just on the other side, on the Embankment.

"This is Scotland Yard," said Clifford, in surprise.

They went in, and they were soon closeted with Chief Detective-inspector Lennard.

"Another favour, Lennard," said Nelson Lee. "I want you to let Mr. Underhill have a look through your letter files. There is some handwriting I should like him to identify."

"Bit of a tall order," said the inspector dubiously.

"Well, I could leave him here while I go off on a little errand," said Lee. "By the way, I think you mentioned, didn't you, that Drayton had written to you to-day?"

The chief inspector made a grimace.

"Cantankerous old buffer!" he snapped. "Not content with rushing out and 'phoning to us in the early morning, and then insulting us when we got there, he writes to the

Chief Commissioner complaining about the inefficiency of the police."

"May I have a look at that letter?" asked Lee. "I'm rather interested in this Drayton affair."

"It's here if you want it," said Lennard. "The Chief Commissioner handed it over to me as I'm dealing with the case."

He consulted a file, withdrew a letter, and handed it to Lee, who read it and then laid it casually on the desk.

"I see," he said. "Just what I expected. Now, Underhill, if you'll stay here with Mr. Lennard he'll show you exactly——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Clifford sharply. "May I have a look at the letter from Mr. Drayton?" He snatched it up without permission, and there was a quiet gleam in Nelson Lee's eyes. "This is the same handwriting!" he added excitedly. "There's no need to go through the files, Mr. Lee!"

"Oh, indeed! Then the handwriting on that unstamped letter was Drayton's?"

"It must have been—if this is Drayton's."

"I must confess that I suspected as much, although I didn't like to suggest it to you," said Lee. "I wanted you to have an entirely unbiased mind. I was doubtful because I thought it most likely that you would know Drayton's handwriting quite well."

"He never wrote to me," said Clifford Underhill, shaking his head. "I had plenty



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of letters from Muriel, of course, but never one from him. What does it mean, Mr. Lee?"

"That's just what I'm wondering," put in the chief inspector. "What is the game here?"

"I'll explain to you later on, Lennard, if you'll excuse me," said Lee. "My young friend and I are in a great hurry. Thanks awfully for your help."

He hurried out before Lennard could make any reply. Nelson Lee was hot on the trail now. He knew that that unstamped letter was the key to the whole mystery. It had been written by Marcus Drayton himself, and it was obviously the cause of all Drayton's panic.

What was behind all this?

That letter had had no stamp, and yet it had been posted. It was unthinkable that Drayton should have posted it himself, unstamped, and that he should then have employed two toughs to recover it.

It seemed more than likely that somebody else had posted it—somebody unauthorised. And in searching for a person to fit this bill, Lee inevitably thought of the burglar who had entered Drayton's premises during the previous night. Had this burglar found the letter in the safe, and had he posted it in a spirit of mischief?

AT the Cedars, Highgate, everything was quiet and peaceful.

It was about nine-thirty, and the house itself was dark except for a glimmer of light behind the curtains in the study and a dim glow in the hall. The wind was springing up, and the trees and the bushes were whispering and rustling. The heavy clouds had broken somewhat.

More than once Mr. Marcus Drayton had come to the door and had looked up and down; yet he had had no suspicion of the six hidden figures in his garden. The cub detectives were still diligently on the watch.

Nipper and Handforth, who were in front, knew that Mr. Drayton was waiting for somebody—and waiting anxiously, too. He had not made any appearance for over fifteen minutes, and now, as the two youngsters listened, they heard approaching footsteps. Two men turned in at the gate, and they came quietly up the gravel.

"Well, we got the blamed thing!" murmured one of the men, holding something white in his hand. "Better give it to him straight away, I suppose."

Nipper acted on a sudden impulse.

A letter! He could see it clearly in the man's hand, and he remembered the earlier talk about the Norbury postal delivery. So these men had been sent there in order to bag this letter from Clifford Underhill. What was more, they had succeeded. All this passed through Nipper's mind in a flash. Lee, for some reason, must have arrived at

Norbury too late. This was no time for watching and waiting, but a time for action.

Nipper leapt out, and with one grab he secured the two letters in Luke Danby's hand. The man spun round, startled and bewildered. A shrill whistle sounded—a signal from Nipper. In the same instant Handforth flung himself at Josh Adams, and the pair rolled to the ground. Archie Glen-thorne and Willy Handforth came tearing up, to be followed a moment later by Travers and Potts. But the fight did not



really develop. Nipper and Archie flung themselves at Luke, and bore him to the ground. Willy had gone to his major's assistance, and there was a big commotion.

In spite of this, Nipper's keen ears detected the banging of a door inside the house. Without hesitation Nipper dropped the two letters, unseen by the others, into a big, old-fashioned flower-vase on the right-hand side of the porch. There was another one opposite, but this one was cracked and broken. The next moment the front door was flung open and Marcus Drayton stood there.

"What is all this?" he demanded angrily.

"The letter, guv'nor!" panted Luke, as he struggled. "These blamed kids took it just as we was comin' in—"

"What!" snarled Drayton. He whipped out a revolver, and his face was now hideous in its distortion. "Hands up, every one of you!" he said fiercely. "By Heaven! If you attempt to run I'll shoot!"

There was such relentless ferocity in his tone that Nipper knew that this was no idle threat.

"Stick 'em up, boys!" he panted. "We're beaten. No good chancing it!"

"But—" began Handforth, aghast.

He paused. Nipper's hands were already up, and the rest were obeying. Even Handforth at last realised that Nipper was right. There was no sense in risking death from this infuriated man's gun. In his rage he was capable of any atrocity.

"Bring them indoors!" ordered Drayton. "Thank Heaven nobody has noticed. Keep your hands up, you young whelps. If you attempt to run I'll shoot!"

They all went in, and Nipper's confidence seemed to spread to the others.

"In here!" commanded Drayton.

The prisoners were marshalled into the study, and Drayton's eyes were gleaming with apprehension and rage. A sudden exclamation came from Luke Adams.

"Glory! These kids ain't ordinary school-boys!" he said with a frightened note in his voice. "They're Lee's cubs!"

"What!" barked Mr. Drayton. "What do you mean—Lee's cubs?"

"Ain't you 'eard of 'em, guv'nor? Mr. Nelson Lee, the bloke who keeps the detective academy!"

"Good heavens!" panted Drayton, staring at the boys with fresh interest. "So these young brats—the letter!" he snarled. "Where is the letter?"

"One o' these kids snatched it, guv'nor," said Luke. "I 'ad it in my 'and ready——"

"Fool!" broke in Mr. Drayton. "You shouldn't have had it in your hand. Where is your sense? What was the letter like?"

"There was two—one without a stamp."

"That is the one!" panted Marcus Drayton. "You got it, then? Did Underhill see it?"

"He saw it, but he never got a chance to open it."

Drayton gave a kind of gulp; then he turned ferociously on the boys.

"That letter—where is it?" he demanded harshly. "Come on. I'll stand no nonsense. What have you done with that letter?"

Most of the cubs were bewildered; they had seen no letter, and had no idea what Mr. Drayton was talking about. Nipper pretended to be as puzzled as the others.

"You don't believe this rot, do you?" he asked. "Why should we want to take any of your letters? And you'd better realise, Mr. Drayton, that this action of yours is pretty high-handed."

"Up with your hands!" retorted Drayton. "You men—here. Search these boys. Search them thoroughly. By Heaven! If they make the slightest move I'll shoot!"

He was like a maniac now. The thought that that letter had been almost in his hands, but had been snatched away at the last moment, drove him into a frenzy.

Nipper cast a warning glance at the others, and they submitted to the search. As each boy was finished with so Luke and Josh roughly tied their hands and ankles and flung them down.

"No good, guv'nor; the letter ain't 'ere!" said Luke at length.



Led by Nelson Lee, the search party plunged down the steep tunnel.

"It must be, if what you have told me is true!" panted Drayton. "Is it true? You scoundrel! If you have been lying to me——"

"Scoundrel yourself!" broke in Luke with a scowl. "Josh an' me want ten quid each. Understand? We got that letter, an' these boys snatched it. That ain't our fault!"

"If these boys snatched it, they will know where it is," said Marcus Drayton. "They are attempting to trick us. Come. We will soon make them talk!"

He strode across to the fire, and with a grim suggestiveness he thrust the poker into the heart of the burning coals!

CHAPTER 7.

Marcus Drayton's Secret!

"**W**AIT here, Underhill; it wouldn't do for Drayton to see you here in Highgate. I don't suppose I shall be very long."

Nelson Lee had just got out of his car, leaving Clifford Underhill in the front seat. The young man pulled rather a long face.

"I'm hanged if I can make head or tail of this queer business!" he grunted.

"You'll understand before long," said Lee as he strode away.

He left the Rolls-Royce Special down a little side turning, off Maplestead Road. It wasn't long before he arrived outside the wall of the Cedars. He approached casually, whistling in an absent-minded sort of way. That whistle was well known to his cubs; it was a prearranged signal.

Lee strolled past the Cedars, paused under a lamp-post to glance at his watch, and then

gravel path, and suddenly halted. There were signs of a disturbance; trivial signs, but obvious enough to the great detective's keen eye. One or two of the laurel branches were broken, twigs were lying on the gravel. The gravel itself was scraped about. A struggle! The crooks must have arrived, and the boys had attacked them or had been attacked.

Nelson Lee listened; everything was quiet out in the road, and no sounds were coming from the house itself. He quickly pulled out an electric torch and flashed it upon the gravel path. It was wide, and really formed a drive. Suddenly Lee's attention became fixed.

"I wonder!" he muttered.

There, on the gravel, was a curious sign. It had evidently been scraped by somebody's heel—and scraped hurriedly. It was rough and slightly uneven. There were three lines, scraped in the form of a broad arrow. In a moment Lee knew that this was Nipper's work! Caught un-



he strolled back. Anybody seeing him might have imagined that he was waiting for somebody. The detective was inwardly filled with a sudden apprehension. There was no response to his signal! What had become of Nipper and Handforth and the others? Why did they not show themselves—or, at least, answer?

Lee decided to act boldly. He entered the gateway of the Cedars, walked up the

awares, Nipper had left this sign, knowing that Nelson Lee would be coming along very shortly. It was a shrewd, brainy move on the young detective's part.

The arrow pointed roughly towards the steps, but over to one side. There was nothing there of any account except a big, old-fashioned ornament; a sort of receptacle for a flower-pot. Lee strode over to it, flashed his lamp inside, and caught in his

breath. Two letters were lying at the bottom of the deep hollow, amongst some tangled twigs and rotting leaves.

"Good lad!" murmured Lee.

He took the letters out, flashed his light off, and crept out of the drive. His visit had not been noted. When he arrived back at the waiting car, Clifford Underhill was surprised to see him.

"By Jove! You haven't been long!" he said.

"Look at this, Underhill," said Nelson Lee, thrusting something under the young man's gaze.

"Well I'm hanged—that's the letter that was stolen!" ejaculated Clifford.

"That's all I wanted to know," said Lee. "Something has happened to the boys. Nipper concealed this letter—and another one, which doesn't matter—in an old flower-vase near the doorstep. Drayton evidently does not know anything about that little incident. And look at this, Underhill."

He indicated the flap of the unstamped letter. It was curling back, for the dampness of those dead leaves had had effect. A slight pull, and the letter was opened, the flap not being torn in any way.

"Why are you so careful, Mr. Lee?" asked Underhill. "That's my letter, isn't it? It's addressed to me. Why be so particular about leaving the flap untorn?"

"I have a reason," replied Nelson Lee. "Quickly, Underhill—read this."

He switched on the dash-light, and Clifford, bending forward, unfolded the two sheets of paper and commenced reading. He had not got far before an ejaculation of startled amazement left his lips; he looked at Nelson Lee with burning, almost delirious eyes.

"She's alive!" he panted. "Muriel's alive!"

"Steady, Underhill—don't shout like that," said Nelson Lee sharply.

"I can't help it!" panted Clifford. "Oh, thank Heaven! I've always felt, deep down in my heart——"

"Never mind what you've felt, young man—read that letter, and read it quickly," broke in Nelson Lee. "We'd better read it together. I'm sure you don't want to keep it to yourself."

"Great Scott, no!" ejaculated Clifford. "Oh, this is too amazing! And as for that dirty scoundrel of a Drayton——"

He broke off and continued reading. Nelson Lee, bending forward, read the letter at the same time. This is the astonishing document they beheld:

"My dear Underhill,—When you get this letter I shall be dead. Having written it, I shall place it in my safe amongst other private papers, with instructions that it shall be posted immediately after my death. I am taking

this precaution in case I meet with a sudden accident, or if I have a heart attack.

"I have a confession to make to you. Muriel Foster, my stepdaughter, is not dead, as you have thought, and I am addressing this letter to you because I realise that I have treated you rather badly with regard to the girl. Now that I am dead, you are quite welcome to take her as your wife, if you are still in the same mind when you read these words. The 'tragedy' at Treggellen Bay was a fake. Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin—that is not their real name, but it does not matter—are in my employ, and when they took Muriel out for that boat trip, they merely transferred Muriel to another boat, some distance from the shore. They dropped a few articles of clothing overboard, stove in the side of the first boat, and left it floating, overturned.

"After that, in the other boat, they went through an old cave, once used by the Cornish smugglers. In that cave there is a secret stairway, cut through the solid rock, and this leads up to an old house on the cliff top, known as Cragside.

"If you go to Cragside, you will find Muriel there. She is quite unharmed, and well looked after. Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin, in the guise of an old couple, are ostensibly the tenants of this house. Muriel is there. I urge you to absolve Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin from all blame in this matter, for they are only in my pay, and this trick was undertaken at my instigation. I will admit that Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin have acted unlawfully, and that they are liable to criminal prosecution, but once again I urge you to let them go.

"My object in planning this affair is fairly obvious. Muriel inherits a large fortune from her mother when she is twenty-one; in the event of her death before that age, that fortune becomes mine. To the world, Muriel is dead at this very moment, but whether you will read this before she is twenty-one, or after, I cannot tell. In any case, my death, and this confession, will be sufficient to restore to her that which is rightfully hers.

"I have been very wicked, and you, no doubt, will curse me from the bottom of your heart. But, at least, my crime is not as great as it might have been; I did not descend to murder. That I could not do. And I once again assure you that Muriel, although a prisoner in that house, has been constantly provided with every comfort. It is for you to take her away—and, if you are still of the same mind, to make her your wife.

"MARCUS DRAYTON."

"**A** LIVE—she's alive!" breathed Clifford, all else dwindling to insignificance in his mind. "Mr. Lee! We've got to go to Cornwall—let's start at once!"

"We have certainly got to go to Cornwall," agreed Nelson Lee. "But there is no immediate hurry—"

"I'll go alone!" interrupted Clifford fiercely. "Good heavens! What a revelation! And old Drayton—dead!"

"Nonsense—Drayton is as alive as you are," said Nelson Lee. "Don't you understand, Underhill? There was a burglary at Drayton's place last night—this letter was stolen, and the burglar, probably a whimsical-minded man, posted it. Do you see the extraordinarily piquant situation? Drayton, his conscience pricking him, wrote that confession—and then, within a week or two, his place is burgled and the letter posted! Naturally, its receipt by you would mean his utter and absolute ruin."

"Ye gods!" breathed Clifford, staring.

"That is why Drayton has employed these roughs to attack the postman—to get your letter," continued Lee. "We have to thank Nipper and the others boys for now having the letter in our possession. Perhaps you will now understand why I opened it without tearing the flap?"

"Not exactly," said Clifford, breathing hard.

"Because I want Drayton to get this letter back—intact, as though it had not even been opened," replied Lee keenly. "In that case, he will think that everything is perfectly safe, and that he has no need to worry. Drayton tricked you—and now it is our turn to trick him. Once that is accomplished, we can rescue Miss Foster at our leisure."

THREE minutes later, Nelson Lee crept like a shadow into the grounds of the Cedars and dropped the fateful letter—and the other one—round the corner of the stone porch. After that he vanished amid the laurel bushes and waited. Then a thought occurred to him. He crept to the gate, tied a length of string to it, and concealed himself once more amongst the laurels.

He pulled on the string, and the gate came open, creaking loudly. Lee released the pressure, and the gate swung back. As he had half-expected, the front-door opened after a brief spell, and Marcus Drayton stood there, staring towards the gate. Lee pulled again, and there was the same creak.

"Bah! Only the wind!" he heard the old man mutter.

Drayton was about to turn back, and then he halted; he stared at something on the floor of the porch. With a hoarse cry he bent down and grabbed at the two letters which were lying there.

"Splendid!" breathed Lee, with an inward chuckle.

The door slammed. Mr. Marcus Drayton, inside, stood in the hall, breathing hoarsely. The letter! It was here! He turned it over in his hand, and the sense of relief which surged through him nearly made him giddy. He had recovered that fateful letter—intact!

"I am safe!" he whispered. "Those boys didn't grab the letters after all. They must have fallen into the porch during the scuffle."

He put the letters in his pocket, pulled himself together, and strode into the study. His prisoners were just as he had left them, and Luke Danby and Josh Adams were looking uneasy and, indeed, rather scared.

"Untie these bonds!" ordered Drayton curtly.

"Look 'ere, guv'nor—"

"Untie them!" repeated Drayton. "Don't ask any questions!"

The boys were all released.

"Young men, I have made a regrettable blunder," said Drayton, looking at the cubs. "I realise, of course, that I had absolutely no justification for detaining you or in handling you roughly. You are free to depart when you choose."

Nipper and the others were astonished—and relieved. They had half-expected that their captor would indulge in some form of mild torture. Thrusting that poker into the fire had been suggestive.

"It's a jolly good job you've changed your mind!" said Handforth aggressively. "We can give information to the police—"

"Do so, if you please," interrupted Drayton, with a shrug. "I doubt if they will believe your story. In any case, it was you who started the trouble. You attacked these men of mine. Far better let the whole thing drop. I apologise for my hasty action, and I repeat that you are free to go when you please."

"Good gad! Something frightfully fishy about this, old things," murmured Archie Glenthorne.

He was wrong. Mr. Marcus Drayton opened the door, and ushered the boys out. Finding themselves free, they lost no time in getting off the premises.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" asked Luke, as Drayton came back into the study.

"You blundering fools!" said the old man. "Here are the letters."

"Swelp me!" ejaculated Josh, as their employer pulled the letters out of his pocket.

"They were in the porch all the time—where they must have fallen during the struggle," continued Mr. Drayton. "There was no need to bring those boys in here at all. However, it doesn't matter—I very much doubt if they will dare to make any complaint."

"We get our money all right, then?" asked Luke eagerly.

"Yes—you get your money," replied Drayton. "But wait a minute. This infernal letter is going to cause no further trouble!"

He crossed the study towards the fire. As he did so, he ripped open the envelope and withdrew the letter. His intention was to fling it into the fire and burn it. And after that—no more premature confessions!

He glanced at the unfolded sheets, and was about to fling them into the fire when he paused. There was a smudge on the margin of the first sheet—a fingerprint. He looked at it closely. It was nothing much, but it was sufficient to make him pause. Instead of burning the letter, he put it on the desk.

"Well, you can go now," he said, turning to the two men. "Here is your money." He paid them, and fairly hustled them off the premises.

"Queer old boy," remarked Josh, as they walked down the road. "Darned glad we've got away, Luke. I was afraid he wasn't going to dub up."

"Here—get in this gateway!" hissed Luke abruptly.

The other man was startled. Then he saw the reason for Luke's sudden alarm. Just visible down a side turning there was a powerful motor-car; the six boys who had recently left the Cedars were clustered round that car. One of the men in the car was talking excitedly, loudly.

"We'll go at once," came his voice. "Isn't there a train to Cornwall to-night? Mustn't waste any time—"

Luke gripped his companion's arm.

"Don't know who the bloke is who was speakin'—but the other is Lee, the 'tec!" he hissed. "'Ere, there's some more money for us, Josh! I'll bet old Drayton will be glad to get this piece of news! Come on!"

They hurried back to the Cedars, and as they turned into the gate the door opened and Marcus Drayton came flying out, his overcoat half on, his hat on the back of his head.

"You have come back?" he almost shouted. "Thank Heaven! I was just after you—I want you!"

"Lummy, guv'nor, you're excited, ain't you?" asked Luke. "We came back to warn you that Nelson Lee, the 'tec, is hangin' about 'ere. There's another feller with him, talkin' about goin' to Cornwall, an' all those boys—"

"I knew it!" snarled Drayton. "What you have told me is proof! Listen to me, you men! I want you to do something for me—and I want a dozen other men, too. I don't care how much it costs—even if it goes into two or three hundred pounds!"

"'Ere, I say, guv'nor—"

"Listen!" commanded Drayton. "I'm desperate now—and I've got to go the limit!"

The two crooks were startled; they did not know that Mr. Marcus Drayton had examined that fingerprint on the margin of the letter, and that he had proved beyond doubt that it was not one of his own fingerprints! Yet that letter had been sealed just as he had left it—and he alone had handled

the inner sheets. That finger-print proved beyond doubt that there had been trickery—that the letter had been opened and resealed. His guilty secret was known! It was known, moreover, to Nelson Lee—and probably to Clifford Underhill himself!

Small wonder that Mr. Marcus Drayton was desperate.

CHAPTER 8.

Off to Cornwall!

NELSON LEE gripped Clifford Underhill's arm.

"My dear fellow, you mustn't be so excited," he said warningly. "You are speaking altogether too loudly. I tell you that everything is all right. Drayton has been fooled; he thinks that the letter has been returned to him intact."

"I know that, Mr. Lee—you've told me so," replied Clifford, his eyes burning. "I'm not worrying about Drayton. It's Muriel! She's alive—a prisoner in that house on the cliff! We've got to get down to her—to rescue her! It's all very well to talk about doing things at leisure—"

"Well, if it will please you—and I don't suppose you'll be content with anything else—we'll start straight away," said Nelson Lee dryly. "We'll go by road, after making a short call at Gray's Inn Road to pick up a few things we need. Yes, Underhill, we'll go down to Cornwall and rescue the young lady."

CLIFFORD scarcely remembered anything of that nightmare journey. At least, it was a nightmare journey to him. To Nelson Lee and his cubs the trip was both exhilarating and pleasant. Motoring through the night in the powerful Rolls-Royce Special, eating up the miles, had been a thrilling experience.

It was full day, with the early sun shining brightly, when the quiet little fishing village of Tregellen was approached. In addition to Nelson Lee and Underhill, Nipper and Handforth and Travers had come on this trip, the three of them being accommodated in the capacious "dickey" behind.

Not even Nelson Lee suspected that messages had been flashing over the telephone wires, and that there had been a good deal of activity in Cornwall. Still less did he suspect that powerful motor-cars were speeding along the great highway to the west.

Marcus Drayton was acting in a drastic way; he was making a last bid for victory. He knew that Underhill was going down to Cornwall, and he shrewdly guessed that the police would not be brought into this. For Underhill—or Nelson Lee, for that matter—could not get the police to move without any definite proof. And they had deliberately abandoned the proof that had been once in their possession.

Look Out For This Mammoth Budget Of Stories Next Wednesday, Chums!



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Each week a number of readers win handsome prizes in this feature—have you sent in your effort yet?

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT And Order Your "NELSON LEE" IN ADVANCE!

If only he could get Muriel out of the way, Drayton reckoned he would be safe. If Underhill faced him with the crime he would deny it, and there was no evidence against him.

"How do you propose to go to work, Mr. Lee?" asked Clifford, as the big car sped towards Tregellen village. "We shan't go to the police, I suppose?"

"No need for that," replied Nelson Lee. "We will go straight to this house and demand admittance—and if we are refused we will force our way in. We know that Miss Foster is there, and that is enough. You may be sure that we shall find her."

The long journey had been non-stop except for a brief pause in the fairly large town they had left not long back. Here Nelson Lee had telephoned. And now Tregellan was just ahead.

Nelson Lee did not drive actually into the village, but kept to a high, cliff road which skirted the picturesque bay. A brief inquiry from a land-worker had told them that there was only one old house perched on the cliffs, and this was known as Crag-side. It was occupied by an old couple, who had only been in residence for a month or two. The name, it seemed, was Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins.

"The Tomlins—in disguise," said Clifford grimly. "By Jove! We're going to give them a shock!"

"I imagine they are members of the theatrical profession," said Nelson Lee. "Unfortunately, every profession has its black sheep. No doubt these people are being very well paid by Drayton—after, of course, receiving a large lump sum for their initial services. I dare say they're making a good thing out of this."

"And they've got Muriel in their power!" panted Clifford. "Thank Heaven we're nearly there! If they've treated Muriel badly——"

He broke off, his fists clenched.

"That's not likely, old man," said Lee. "Considering the circumstances, it is far more probable that Miss Foster has been allowed every comfort and luxury—always providing, of course, that she has been kept a prisoner."

"That, in itself, is a torture," declared Clifford fiercely. "A cruel, wicked torture! By Heaven, there's going to be a heavy reckoning!"

They were all very alert as they approached Crag-side. It was a bare, bleak-looking stone house, high on the cliff. It was exposed to all the Atlantic blasts. There were double gates and a short drive. Nelson Lee left the car out in the road, and then he and Clifford walked up towards the front door and pulled at the bell. They could hear it clanging noisily somewhere within the house.

Nipper and Handforth and Travers, still in the car, waited expectantly. They might be required to go into action at any moment.

"They don't come!" said Clifford, frowning. "What's wrong? They must be up—it's not so early as all that."

Nelson Lee rang again, and although he had made no comment his eyes were expressive of sudden anxiety.

"These people couldn't have got to know anything," muttered Clifford. "Why should they get the wind up and refuse to answer the door bell? What are we going to do?"

"Stay here, Underhill. I'll go round to the back of the house," said Nelson Lee. "If anybody comes, detain them until I return."

He hurried away, found a rear door, and hammered upon it. There was still no response. Lee was now beginning to suspect that something was definitely wrong. Without compunction, he smashed the nearest window, put his hand through, and slipped back the catch. Two seconds later he was in the house, and he ran through into an old-fashioned, low-ceilinged hall. Everything was very still and quiet. Lee stood there, his lips pursed, an angry frown on his brow. Then he ran forward, opened the front door, and found Clifford Underhill fairly goggling at him.

"How did you get in, Mr. Lee?" he asked breathlessly.

"Never mind!" replied Lee. "Come in—you, too, boys!" he went on, raising his voice. "Underhill, the birds have flown!"

"What?"

"I'm really afraid so," continued Lee grimly. "In some way they must have received a warning, and they have dodged us—taking Muriel Foster with them!"

CHAPTER 9.

The Smugglers' Cave!

CLIFFORD UNDERHILL turned haggard and pale.

"It can't be!" he panted desperately. "Quick! Let's search! They can't have tricked us like that!"

He went rushing over the house, and Nelson Lee searched, too. As he had suspected, no sign of human life was found. The old house was utterly deserted. Nipper and Handforth and Travers joined in the hunt, eager and anxious, but in the end they were compelled to admit defeat.

"This is ghastly!" said Underhill, in despair. "What can we do, Mr. Lee? They've taken her away—they've fooled me again!"

"Keep your head, my dear fellow," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Things may not be so bad as they look. The Tomlins have not been gone long. I noticed a faint smell of oil in the kitchen, and although there is an oil-stove there, and the stove itself is cold, a kettle on the table is still comparatively warm. These people have not been gone long."

"But which way did they go?" asked Clifford. "Can't we give chase? We've

got the car, and they must have been seen by somebody in the village——"

"It is most improbable that they took Miss Foster along the open road," broke in Nelson Lee. "Had they been going alone, such a departure would have been feasible, but with Miss Foster a prisoner they could not have done any such thing. We mustn't forget Drayton's reference to a secret way up to this house from an old smugglers' cave."

"By Jove, you're right!" ejaculated Clifford. "That's how they must have done it! Escaped by boat! They took Muriel away just as they brought her here! But that makes our position even more hopeless than before! If they've escaped by sea, they may be half across the Channel by now, and once they get her into another hiding-place we shall be baffled. We've no proof——"

"We're not baffled yet, anyway," snapped Lee. "Come! This secret exit must be somewhere down in the cellars. By the way, you may have noticed this."

He indicated a telephone in the hall, but Clifford looked at it uncomprehendingly.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Drayton telephoned to these people—warned them that we might be coming," replied Lee. "Either he discovered our dodge in some way, or he did this as a precautionary measure. See if you can find anything in the cellar; I will join you in a few minutes."

Lee glanced at Nipper, and Nipper took the hint. The three boys hustled Clifford away, and Lee immediately lifted the telephone receiver and got into touch with the exchange.

"Can you tell me if there was a call to this house during the night, or in the early part of the morning?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the operator promptly.

"I haven't been on duty long, but the night operator tried to get your number half a dozen times."

"And failed?"

"Yes," replied the operator. "It was a trunk call from London. Somebody tried to get through last night at about eleven o'clock, but there was no reply until this morning."

"I see," said Nelson Lee, his eyes gleaming. "Thank you."

Additional proof that the birds could not have been long flown! Marcus Drayton, in London, had tried to telephone to his hirelings; but no doubt they had gone to bed early. There had been a high wind during the night, blustering and booming round the exposed house. The telephone bell was in the hall. It was quite understandable that the Tomlins, upstairs, had not heard.

It was a significant point. If Drayton had managed to get into communication with them late the previous night, they would have escaped at once with their prisoner. As it was, they had known nothing until this morning. After that, of course, there had been a frantic scramble.

LEE hurried down to the cellars, and he was just in time to hear some triumphant shouts from the boys and from Clifford Underhill. He found the young detectives flashing their electric-torches upon an arched doorway; steep steps could be seen leading downwards into the bowels of the earth.

"It's not even a secret doorway, guv'nor," said Nipper. "We found it easily, and it must be the one, because these steps lead right down through the cliff."

"Follow me, then," said Lee. "Perhaps we shall pick up some useful information in the cave. Indeed, there is just a chance that we shall be in time to prevent this flight. I am certain that the Tomlins, with their prisoner, left the house only a very short while before we arrived."

With his own powerful torch flashing, Nelson Lee plunged down the roughly-hewn steps. Clifford was at his heels, and the others followed.

It was like a steep tunnel cut out of the solid rock, and the steps were uneven and much worn. A powerful current of air blew upwards, striking them in the faces. It contained a tangy, seaweedy odour.

At last the staircase came to an end, and Nelson Lee hurried forward into a great, lofty cave. Daylight showed ahead, and there was a ripple of water. The sea, even at low tide, came into this cave. It had evidently been a secret hiding-place for a boat. What was more, a motor-boat. Lee could distinctly smell the faint traces of petrol fumes.

Without warning, as the searchers came out into the cave, there was a rush of feet. A dozen men, rough-looking customers, appeared from behind the rocks.

"Grab 'em, boys!" shouted somebody.

Lee had no time to pull his revolver, and hardly time to put up his fists. He and Clifford and the boys were soon fighting with all their strength. Yet the odds were against them from the very first.

"Buck up, you chaps!" yelled Handforth, lashing out. "Take that, you rotter. By George. I've been longing for a scrap for weeks!"

He sailed in with tremendous gusto, but even the valiant Edward Oswald Handforth, who loved nothing better than a fight, was soon vanquished. Two of those ruffians set on him, one hacking him in the shins. He crashed over and he was quickly held down.

Nelson Lee, still fighting, could not help feeling a momentary admiration for Marcus Drayton. The old man must have acted with remarkable promptitude. Quickly as Nelson Lee's famous car had done this journey to Cornwall, Drayton's hirelings had got there first. Owing to Nelson Lee's call at Gray's Inn Road these men had had a slight advantage. They had got off first. Clifford Underhill fought with the desperation of despair, aided by his blind rage against these crooks who were trying to keep him from the girl he loved.

The game was obvious; these men had been stationed here to detain anybody who came down into the cave. They were covering the real retreat. The Tomlins, with their prisoner, had set off by motor-boat, and were by now well away.

"You curs!" panted Clifford, as three of the men forced him to the ground by brute force. "You hounds! Let me go! What have you done with Miss Foster?"

"Take it easy, gents!" said one of the men. "We ain't goin' to hurt you. If you'll act sensible——"

"'Ere, look!" yelled one of the other men, his voice shrill with sudden alarm. "It's a trap, mates! The cops are on us!"

The others started round, frightened. A powerful motor-boat, its engine chugging noisily, had come nosing in at the cave entrance, and even as the ruffians leapt to their feet, releasing their prisoners, it grounded with a jarring noise.

"Well done!" said Nelson Lee coolly, as he brushed himself down.

There was a large number of police officers in the boat, and they came leaping into the cave, their truncheons ready. An inspector was at their head. The fight was short and sharp. The roughs, taken unawares, had no chance. They were quickly vanquished and handcuffed. Clifford Underhill gave Nelson Lee an appealing glance.

"What does this mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Only that I took a few precautions on my own account, my dear fellow," replied the great detective. "I wasn't entirely satisfied that Drayton had been fooled. In any case, I thought it advisable to be on the safe side."

"You never told me!"

"I didn't want to put any doubts into your head; you were excited enough already," replied Lee dryly. "Before leaving London I sent special messages to the police down here. That was the real reason for my call at Gray's Inn Road."

"You artful bounder, guv'nor!" said Nipper delightedly.

"I arranged for a powerful motor-boat, full of officers, to proceed at once to Tregellen Bay and to watch this cave," continued Lee. "That boat, to the best of my belief, has been on guard here most of the night."

"Quite true, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, coming up and saluting. "But nothing happened until about half an hour ago. You were right. A man and a woman, with a girl prisoner, attempted to escape from this cave in a small motor-boat."

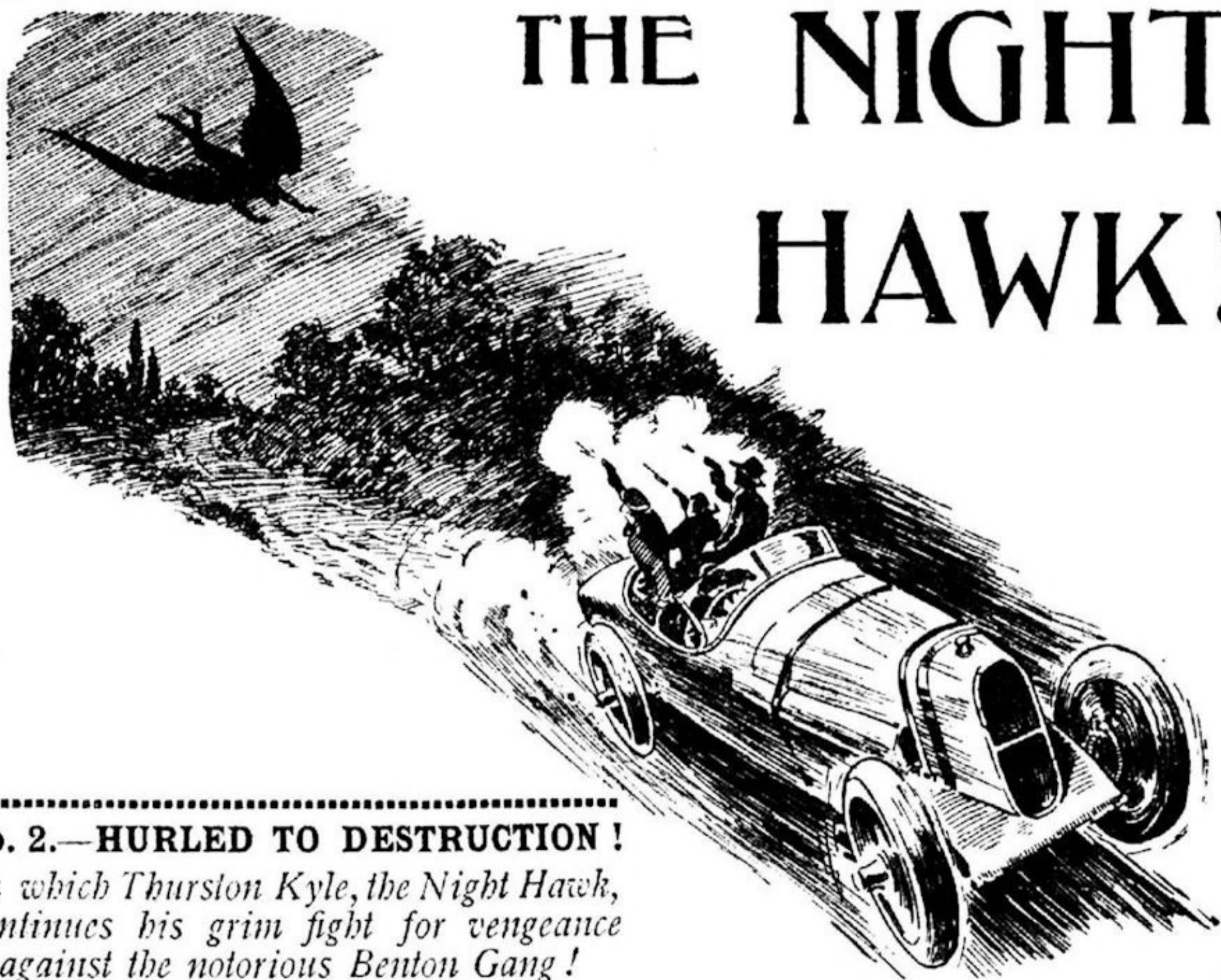
"Did you stop them?" asked Clifford eagerly.

"What do you think, sir?" replied the inspector. "Of course we stopped them. The man and woman are under arrest now, and the young lady is quite safe."

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Clifford, his eyes burning with joy and relief. "Where is she? When can I see her?"

(Concluded on page 44.)

THE NIGHT HAWK!



..... No. 2.—HURLED TO DESTRUCTION!

In which Thurston Kyle, the Night Hawk, continues his grim fight for vengeance against the notorious Benton Gang!

.....

Through the Ether!

COMFORTABLY reclining in the depths of a padded lounge, his jet-black flying clothes hidden by a gorgeous Eastern smock, Thurston Kyle, the Night Hawk, smiled gravely.

In a far corner of his magnificent workshop and laboratory, his youthful assistant, Snub Hawkins, was listening-in intently to their private radio, quivering with excitement from head to toe as he did so.

The radio receiver was Thurston Kyle's latest installation; and Snub had appointed himself operator! In his grim fight of vengeance against Silas Benton and the greatest criminal band in Britain, the Night Hawk had left not a single stone unturned. The invention of the radio had been an inspiration, and at once he had brought all the resources of his brilliant scientific brain to work to perfect the idea.

The first step had been to wire up the headquarters of the gang itself! On his great black wings he had accomplished this, speeding through the night to Silas Benton's old house on the lonely marshes of the East Coast; and there, hovering over it like a giant bird of prey, he had laid microphones and leads among the ivy-grown chimney-stacks and ancient eaves, while beneath him the leaders of the gang went about their fell work all unsuspecting.

After that, by means of special coils and

resistances, he had succeeded in cutting out all other sound-waves until, at last, he had tuned in on Deeping Manor.

Now, equipped with marvellously sensitive earphones, Snub spent most of his day listening-in. For the time being, at least, the sinister plans and secrets of Silas Benton were like an open book to his resolute foe, the Night Hawk!

Turning his head, Thurston Kyle glanced through the French windows of his room. A bright half-moon was hanging in the sky. Very soon it would be time for him to don the great wings leaning against the wall and swoop away on his nightly flight in search of adventure.

A muffled exclamation from Snub made him look up alertly, then cross to the radio with quick, light footsteps. Something important was coming through; the boy was straining every nerve to catch the words, and scribbling feverishly on a writing-pad.

Looking over his shoulder, the Night Hawk read what he had written. A light of triumph flared in his deep-set eyes, and he strode to where a bookcase of reference books stood in a recess. When at last Snub whirled breathlessly round, snatching the earphones from his head, he found his master laughing silently over the society column in the daily newspaper!

"A motor raid on the Lanchester Hunt Ball, sir!" he gasped.

The Night Hawk nodded calmly.

"Quite, Snub! Daring—but very profitable. This paper gives a list of the guests who will be there; and, Snub, unless we can put a spoke in their wheel, Silas Benton's gang will make a jewel haul of over a hundred thousand pounds!" He tapped the paper with a long, slim forefinger. "Including the black Brazilian pearls belonging to Lady Mostein!"

Snub did not answer. Instead, he hurled himself across the room and began to straighten out the control straps of his master's wings. The Night Hawk bent and studied a road map closely for several minutes; then he, too, walked over and held out his arms significantly.

"What's the programme, sir?" panted Snub excitedly, as he adjusted the buckles and driving battery behind Thurston Kyle's back.

"I shall stop them on the road if possible, Snub!" came the quiet reply. "But I may not be in time. They will have a start of over seventy miles—and Lanchester Towers means a flight half across the country!"

"And if you miss 'em, sir?"

Thurston Kyle's face hardened.

"I shall catch them—coming back!" he cried sternly.

A minute later Snub stood on the veranda of the laboratory, straining his eyes to watch the dark-winged figure sailing through the night sky across the twinkling lights of London.

Foiling the Footpads!

WITH the cool air beating on his face, the Night Hawk threw back his head and laughed. Above him, the great black wings were beating in smooth, powerful strokes, hurling him through the air at an ever-increasing pace. He drew down his vizor to protect his face and swept on, faster and faster. London fell behind him, and soon he was alone over the dark countryside, with only an occasional cluster of lights marking small towns and villages below.

Sweeping over Oxford, he turned north, rising to clear the line of high hills beyond. A deep roar above made him look up quickly, to see a giant airplane, on night-flying manoeuvres, heading across his course.

Suddenly, as he banked sharply to avoid its wings, the song of its engine ceased. He wheeled to find out what had happened, and saw the great 'plane side-slipping helplessly, completely out of control. Even as it went into its last fatal nose-dive, a tiny dot leapt out of the fuselage, sprang clear of the tail wings and dropped earthwards like a stone—the pilot leaving his doomed craft by parachute!

Sweeping in wide circles, the Night Hawk watched the descending airman closely; then, without hesitation, he dived headlong after him. The parachute had failed to open, and

the man was falling swiftly to a terrible death.

Catching him up, Kyle flung out his arms and caught the ropes of the apparatus, twined them tightly round his body and legs and struck upwards on strong wings. Almost at once he heard a strangled cry of relief from the aviator: that awful drop to earth was checked.

Slowly and carefully the Night Hawk sank with his swaying burden, the faintly moonlit earth coming up to meet them. With splendid judgment Kyle lowered the dangling airman until at last he collapsed thankfully on the firm grass.

Flinging the useless parachute away, the Night Hawk hung motionless twenty feet above the earth. The airman below scrambled to his feet and ran to where his flattened apparatus hung limply on the turf; and although he could not see the man's features clearly as he stared at the tightly closed envelope, Kyle could guess the utter bewilderment on his face while he wondered what miracle had happened to save him.

The Night Hawk's wild laugh made the dazed flyer look upwards in startled amazement. All he saw was a great black bird disappearing into the sky in spirals before it shot away through the moonlight out of sight.

Travelling at full speed to make up for the time he had lost, Thurston Kyle flashed onwards, his leather-clad body flat and rigid beneath the smoothly beating wings.

The lights of a big town loomed up, and he nodded with satisfaction as he glanced at

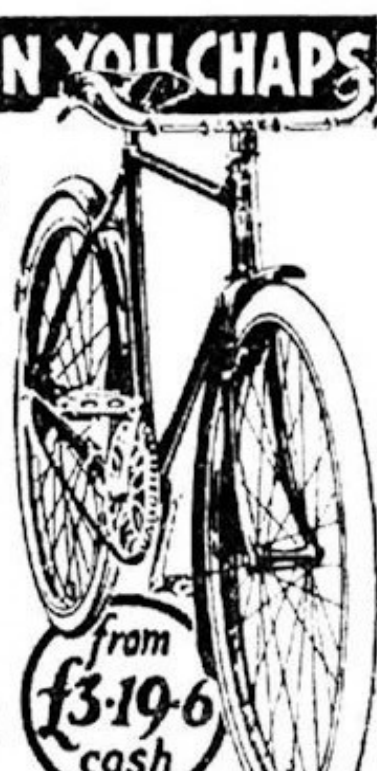
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his luminous watch. There was still time! Winging his way past the outskirts, he slipped once more into dark, rolling country, sinking lower and lower to check his bearings.

A thin, piercing cry from one of the dusky lanes beneath him checked his rapid flight. He wheeled around on gliding wings, listening attentively; and again the cry was repeated, the shrilling scream of a woman in distress!

From beneath the deep shadow of a dense clump of holly-trees, two lurking footpads had sprung upon a girl as she cycled home through the quiet by-paths. Her machine lay on the roadside, and one of the rogues held her in great clumsy hands, while the other ransacked her pockets and handbag for the handful of silver they contained.

Like a meteor the Night Hawk pounced upon the footpads from the tree-tops, whipped them off their feet and bore them cleanly and easily into the air.

Halting a few yards up directly above the hollies, he dropped his screeching captives, laughing mockingly as they blundered and crashed downwards through the merciless spikes of the prickly leaves. In case they gave further trouble, he waited until both men had tumbled into the lane: but his drastic punishment was sufficient. With hands to their torn faces, the terrified rogues jumped up and ran for their lives, their cries of pain and fear growing fainter and fainter until at last they died away completely.

Perched on the stout limb of an oak-tree, Kyle watched over the girl while she conquered her stupefaction and fright well enough to mount her bicycle and ride away at top speed; then, with a smile, he flew onwards on his mission once more.

The Night Avenger!

THIS last wayside adventure had definitely placed him behind time. Faster and harder he drove his powerful wings, and he skimmed through the air in mighty space-devouring drives.

Onwards he sped, over hills, streams, fields and towns. Presently the rugged country broadened out into the wide heaths and flat fields of the Lanchester hunting district, until at length, away to the left, he made out a brilliantly lighted mansion whose motor-drive led into a great main road, shining broad and silvery in the moonlight.

As he banked and turned towards the house, the quick throb of a high-powered car floated up to him, and peering down, the Night Hawk was just in time to see a low racer tear along the drive, skid miraculously through the huge gates into the main road and settle down at once to a whirlwind rush eastwards.

One glance was sufficient to tell him he had arrived too late to prevent the looting of Lanchester Towers. The gang had made their haul and were hurtling homewards in one of their powerful racing cars.

Tilting his curved wings, Kyle fell in a dashing, sweeping dive, his eyes burning with fury. A crowd of people were pouring into the grounds. Immaculate men in evening-dress were dashing frantically to and fro, while beautifully-gowned women huddled together fearfully on the steps.

Hoarse cries, commands, sobs and hysterical screams came to the Night Hawk's ears. The babel died away, however, as a big, commanding man dashed out, his fine face black with anger. It was Lord Lanchester, the host and Master of the Hunt.

"The curs have cut the telephone wires!" he shouted. "Into the cars, you fellows! Some of you warn the police; the rest—follow me!"

In a body the men crashed across the lawn to where a fleet of cars waited by the drive. Swaying above them, the Night Hawk listened, with a grim smile, to the roar of rage which went up from the excited dancers. He knew the Benton gang too well to hope they had left a single car in driving order!

At the point of the gun, the waiting chauffeurs had been herded silently into Lord Lanchester's garage and locked up; after which the gang had dismantled every car at leisure before proceeding to the ball-room!

There was no time to waste now. Lips compressed to a straight line, Thurston Kyle swirled upwards in a wide, clean circle, flattened out, shook his wings once—and flashed away in pursuit of the Benton car.

From the height he was flying he could see it plainly, flickering in and out of the trees that bordered the main road. It was five miles away already, and speeding up every second, roaring recklessly and triumphantly along the deserted midnight highway, unconscious of the great black bird overhauling it on fiercely curved pinions, as silent and as sinister as a wild hawk swinging above its victim.

Within ten minutes Thurston Kyle was on terms with his desperate foes; ten minutes in which his steel-feathered wings hurled him fiercely, madly, through the night until he was forced to extend his arms beyond his head to break the force of the wind. Planing down in daring, graceful swoops, he ranged up behind the car, gaining on it with every smashing stroke.

And then—the gang saw him!

Instantly from every throat a horrified shriek rang out. Memories of what had happened to their comrades on the night the North-East Express should have been robbed paralysed all save two, the driver and the gang-leader. The latter leapt to his feet and blazed away at the dim, gliding figure, coming nearer and nearer.

Then others joined in—a volley of shots spurted from the rear of the car. But they were going too fast for accurate aim; the driver, huddled over his wheel, watched with bolting eyes as the speedometer ticked upwards, 70—80—85: it was as much as he



The Night Hawk swooped down, whipped the two footpads off their feet and bore them into the air.

hedge, yawned the crater of an old abandoned chalk quarry. The eyes of the Night Hawk, peering through the slits in his black vizor, shone with a look of baleful triumph.

It was a matter of seconds now. He swooped, coming on and on, past the terrified men, who hurled their empty, useless guns at his shadowy form, till he hung on quivering wings above the driver, hand outstretched and fingers curved for a grip on the man's collar.

Inch by inch that steel claw crept nearer, biding its time. A turn in the road hid the quarry. Wrenching the wheel over, the driver slung his car round on two wheels—and then, as they swept abreast of the great pit, Thurston Kyle's wild, triumphant laugh of victory rang out again. With a last terrific drive of his bristling wings he hurled himself forward.

His long arm, tough and lissome as a steel coil, reached out, fastened in a death-grip round the driver's throat, and plucked him out of the flying car as a sword is drawn from its sheath.

A terrible scream burst from the parched throats of the gang, and the leader dived frantically for the steering-wheel. Too late! At a hundred miles an hour the car swerved drunkenly into the roadside and slashed across the ditch and through the hedge.

Turning in his own length on knife-edged wings, Thurston Kyle had an instant's vision of the back wheels spinning madly in mid-



could do to hold the crazy, swaying car to the road now.

And still the Night Hawk came on—steadily, terribly, the nerves of the fear-harrowed men snapping like fiddle-strings as that awful, silent flyer in black gained on them.

They were in open country by this time, rocketing along a secondary road that cut deep into the heart of a quiet downland, full of dips and sudden curves.

Just for a moment the Night Hawk changed his tactics, and the frantic watchers in the car saw him give up the pursuit and swoop high above them. A faint white blur by the roadside ahead had attracted his attention, and he laughed aloud when he saw what it was.

Less than a mile farther on, and separated from the road only by a ditch and a briar

air as the racer hurled herself over the brink of the quarry, flinging the men out like stones from a catapult. There was a last wild scream; a roar; a long, long silence—then, from the depths below, the sound of a dull, grinding smash!

Half an hour later something dropped from the skies to the feet of Lord Lanchester, where he stood before his house raving at the local police-inspector.

It was a bag. The impact of the fall had broken one side, and when the inspector bent to pick it up, a cascade of glorious gems fell out in a gleaming torrent. And high up above them, the Night Hawk, smiling triumphantly to himself, spread his wings in a leisurely flight for home.

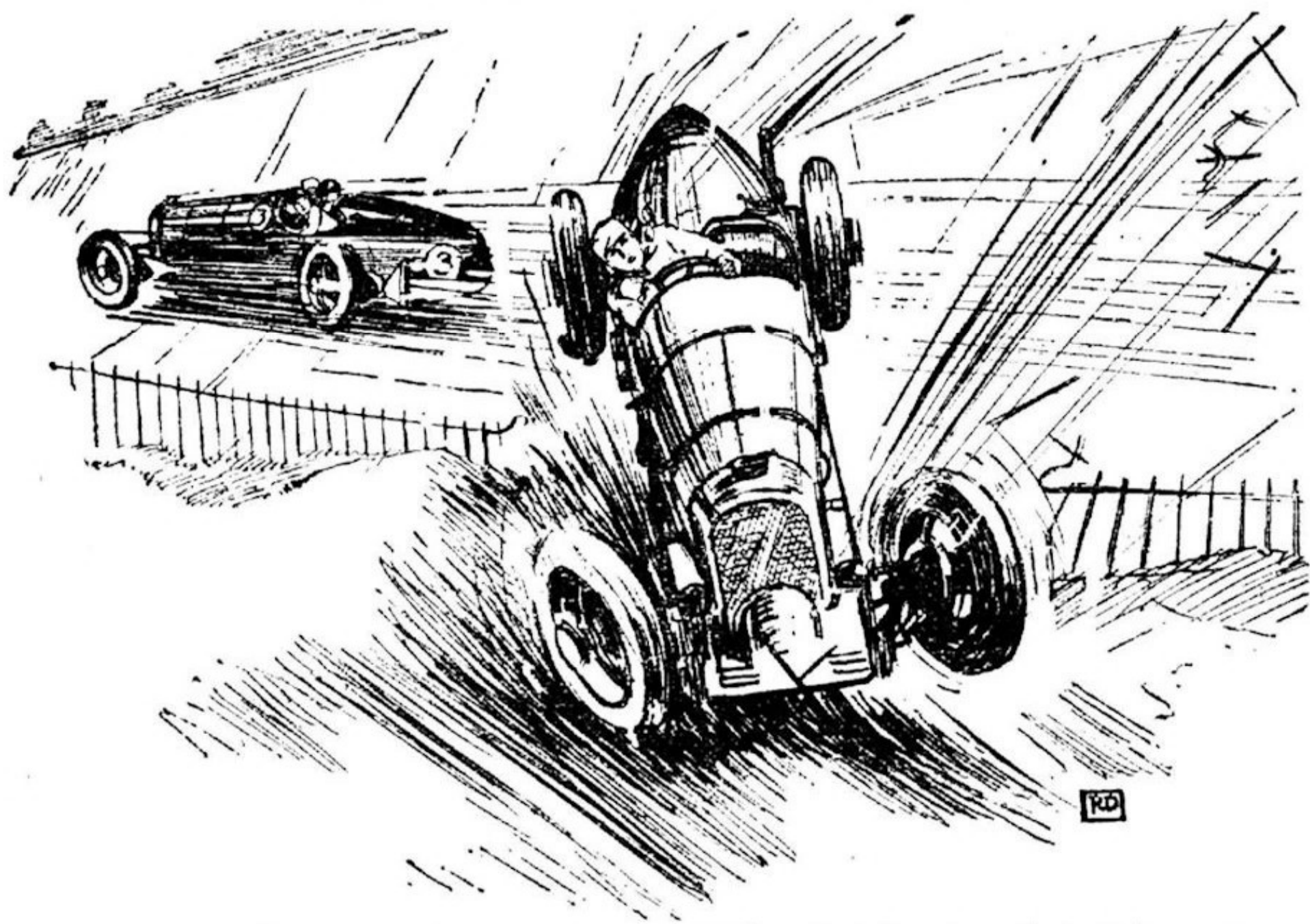
THE END.

(Another thrilling episode in the amazing adventures of the Night Hawk next Wednesday.

HERE'S ANOTHER STIRRING INSTALMENT OF OUR GRAND MOTOR-RACING SERIAL!

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

By ALFRED EDGAR



Joe at the Wheel!

HOW much Jim was hurt, Joe could not tell. Something terrific must have hit him to split his crash helmet like that.

They were having every kind of bad luck—dud petrol, and a crash when they had been leading on the second lap!

Joe saw officials waving him in towards the dead-car park as he neared the Fork.

"You go and eat your blessed hats!" he gasped indignantly. "We're not finished yet! Jim—Jimmy!" He yelled to the figure slumped beside him, but Jim did not rouse.

Through the roar of the engine and the grinding of the lamed wheels, Joe heard the crowd cheering wildly in relief, for their applause to die as they sighted the inert figure stretched in the cockpit.

Straight for the Ross-Eight pit Joe drove, to brake and stop as officials swarmed round him, with ambulance men.

"We thought you were killed!" somebody gasped. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right, but Jim's laid out!" Joe panted, as he struggled from the car.

He helped them to get Jim clear. His helmet was gently removed and a doctor bent over him as they lowered him to a stretcher laid on the track just behind the machine.

"The helmet saved him. It isn't much of a cut—stunned, I think!" the doctor said quickly.

Joe gulped at the man's words, then jumped clear of the crowd and turned to the car.

"Sure you're all right?" An official caught at Joe's arm, staring into his face. "Are you going to retire?"

"Retire be blowed!"

Joe gasped. "I'll carry on until Jim can take over again. Stand clear o' the car!"

He jumped for it, making a swift examination of the wheels. The two burst tyres now lay in torn and smoking fragments about the rims, but Joe saw that little other damage had been done; the dents and jagged rips in the tail amounted to nothing. The Ross Eight was still in fighting trim!

With Jim badly injured, the Ross Eight would seem to stand little chance of victory in the Brooklands race. But Jim is made of stern stuff—and he's not beaten yet!

He grabbed a jack from the pit-plank and crashed it under the rear axle. Joe worked like a nigger, changing the wheels for spares, while the spectators who crowned the railings behind the pit cheered his every movement.

It was hard work, single-handed. He burnt his fingers trying to hack away the tattered rubber of the burst tyres, but he got it clear and had the fresh wheels on—to see Jim now on his feet, with a bandage round his head, pushing officials and first-aid men back as he reeled towards the machine!

"Joe, is she—is—" He clung to the battered tail as he gasped the words, his eyes still a little dazed.

"She's all right. I'm carrying on!" Joe gasped. "You take a rest in the pit—"

"No, you drive. I'll—come with you!" Jim panted. "The air'll bring me round. I'm only a bit—dazed, and—" He broke off as there came a shattering roar. Stargie and the German were going past for the second time since they had stopped, with the Ace fifty yards in the lead. Sight of his rival seemed to act like a tonic on Jim.

"Get behind the wheel. Joe! Come on!" he yelled, and tumbled into the mechanic's seat as he spoke.

The doctor rushed up, protesting, as Joe re-started the engine.

"I'm all right!" Jim assured him. "My head's a bit muzzy, but that'll pass off. Let her go, Joe!"

Joe fairly flung himself behind the steering wheel. The Ross-Eight's vibrant bellow spanged out, then the car shot forward into the race again.

Fresh Fuel!

ANYBODY can drive a car fast. It is just a matter of stamping the throttle pedal wide open and holding it down.

The Brooklands track is everywhere at least a hundred feet wide and, because of this, it needs only nerve to travel at 100 m.p.h. around the concrete.

But over that speed, skill enters into the business. Brooklands is not smooth. The track has all kinds of bumps which only become noticeable, and dangerous, when a car is travelling really rapidly. The curves on and off the bankings, too, call for skill if they are to be negotiated safely.

Jim had the real instinct of a racing driver. If a bump made the car start a skid, he did the right thing to keep it straight, and did it naturally, because fast work was natural to him. Joe was different.

Joe never claimed to be a good driver. He was all right in the mechanic's seat, but he was no good behind the wheel. He was no good when, travelling around the banking with the machine heeled over at a wild angle, other cars came up from behind and started to pass, their wheels spinning within bare inches of his own—death waiting on them all should either start to slide or skid, or should a tyre burst under the strain.

Nobody can hit a fence at two miles a minute, miss disaster by the merest hair's-breadth, and not have his nerve shaken a little. Joe's nerve was shaken. He would have admitted it if anyone had asked him. Yet, in spite of all this, Joe kicked the throttle wide open the moment that the Ross-Eight started off, and he kept it open! Lon Stargie was ahead of them and they had got to beat him.

But Joe's best wasn't anything like Jim's. He couldn't take the curves as Jim took them. He had to ease for the big bends, and he had to slow before he dared take the worst of the bumps.

So, in spite of all his efforts, Joe couldn't get around the track at much more than 100 m.p.h. He stuck it for ten laps, and it was then that Stargie overtook them and started to pass.

He went by with his engine howling and his exhaust spitting a faint spear of ruddy flame.

"That means he's three laps in front of us!" Joe bent to yell the words to Jim. "Feeling better yet? Can you take over?"

"Do another couple of laps!" Jim answered. "You're driving fine, Joe! It's — There's Steve!"

His voice cracked as he shouted. They were almost on the pits then, and both saw Steve leaping across the front of their own. He had a big parcel with him, and behind him came half a dozen men from one of the paddock petrol depots, carrying cans of fuel. Steve sighted them, and waved as they smashed past.

"See that?" Jim gasped. "He's got the chemicals, and he'll make up fresh fuel with the stuff those chaps had in the cans. He'll be calling us in when he's ready, Joe!"

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

JIM ROSS, iron-nerved, daring, is a born racing driver. His 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. They are accompanied by

JOE COOPER, Jim's chum, who acts as mechanic. Jim is to drive the car in the race, and he realises that his most dangerous rival is

LON STARGIE, the crack speedman of Ace Motors. Stargie is unscrupulous, too, and he gets his mechanic, a fellow named Sniff Dix, to set fire to the special petrol which the Ross Eight is using in the race. Steve goes off to get some more, but is not back by the time the race starts. Using ordinary fuel, Jim is leading; and then he has a skid. Tyres burst, the car nearly overturns, and Joe, who is riding as mechanic, discovers that Jim has been knocked unconscious! Slowly Joe drives the lamed Ross back to the replenishment pits.

(Now read on.)

"All right, I'll drive until he signals us, then you take over!" Joe shouted back, and set his teeth as he fought the great car on.

Next time round they saw Steve with little packages of chemicals on the bench, too busy even to wave to them. The men helping him were filling little churns with petrol when the car went past the next time; Steve himself was standing at the front of the pit, both arms held high in a signal for them to stop when they came round again.

"Good!" Joe yelled. "You take over after the stop, Jim? Are you all right now?"

"Yes—near enough!" Jim answered, and he glanced at Joe as he spoke, then grinned.

Hardly two minutes later the Ross-Eight went sliding towards the pit, to pull up with brakes screeching, for Jim to leap out and spin towards the petrol tank, while Joe dived for the pit and jerked off a big bath which Steve had got from somewhere.

He shoved it under the car, then turned on the drain tap of the petrol tank to allow all the dud fuel to run out before they replenished with the new doped petrol which Steve had prepared.

The chums did not talk while they worked. Once the tank was empty they slugged in gallons upon gallons of fresh fuel, and it was as the last went home that Jim caught Joe's arm.

"Joe, let me go on alone!" he said. "Stargie'll be four laps ahead of us by the time we get off again, and I can go faster if I haven't got your weight in the car!"

"My weight won't make all that difference!" Joe gasped.

"It will," Jim said. "Besides, you can signal me my speeds. Be a sport, Joe, let me go on alone! It may make all the difference between winning and losing."

"All right," Joe nodded quickly.

He knew that he weighed somewhere around ten stones. If he didn't travel, it would mean that the car would have a hundredweight or so less to carry, and would be correspondingly faster.

But that was not Jim's real reason for dropping his mechanic. When he started off again he meant to take every risk there was in order to travel fast. He had the right fuel, and the car was still in good fettle. He did not want to hazard his chum's life as well as his own.

He slammed the cap on the petrol tank, then took a running leap into his seat. Joe crouched up behind the tail and shoved the machine on. The engine fired, and the Ross-Eight shot away, just as the Ace hurtled past it—leader in the race and four laps ahead of Jim!

The Death Curve!

AS the silvery racer gathered speed, Jim watched Stargie getting away from him, zooming round the banking. After it Jim went, and before he had finished

the lap he was nearing the peak of his own car's speed.

Faster travelled the Ross-Eight, and faster yet—gaining on Stargie now! Another lap, and Jim passed him down the railway straight. There was a new, more purposeful note to the engine's roar, and the sonorous boom of the exhaust had hardened to a vengeful crackling bellow.

Jim came up with the Ace hand over hand, travelling at 145 m.p.h., to swoop past and go ahead, starting on the long, long trail which, if the Ross could go fast enough, might make up the time and distance it had lost.

The silver car clung to the uttermost rim of the bankings, and the amazed crowd gasped as they saw the way in which it went by other machines. It was now far and away the fastest car in the race, and a roar went up when it passed the leading Ace again, at the end of another thirty minutes.

The crowd saw more than mere fast driving. Jim was cutting the bends, forcing the car down so that it ripped sheer across the curves, saving yards on every lap. He passed the Ace again, and then again, and there was only a quarter of the race to run when he had lessened Lon Stargie's lead to but one lap. Next time Jim passed he must go on to victory.

In all its existence, sunlit Brooklands had never seen a car travel as the Ross-Eight was now being driven. To the spectators, the driver seemed to be an immobile speck behind the steering wheel, with the white of his head-bandage turning black under the influence of oil blown back from the engine. Jim appeared to be a part of his machine, almost inhuman in the way he drove.

Jim alone knew that the cut on his head was a fiery ache which seemed to stab through to his very brain. The fierce heat from the engine was scorching round his ankles, burning the very soles of his racing shoes.

The machine itself seemed to be alive. At that speed he had to fight it all the while. It tried to get out of hand every time it hit a bump; again and again it skidded—long, devastating slides off the banking, which he checked only by his innate skill.

Each bump wakened a fresh bruise and made his head-wound throb more painfully, but he cared nothing about this as his goggled eyes ranged the track ahead for sight of Lon Stargie's car.

The Ace pit was flying signals to its crack driver, telling him to go all out. The Germans were urging their men on, and the Italians were telling the drivers of their wicked little red cars to spare nothing in their efforts to keep up with the silvery meteor which thundered round and round the track.

Stargie was travelling like a madman but, inexorably, the Ross-Eight gained on him, and Jim sighted his rival at last as he went on to the Byfleet banking once more. The low-built car gathered greater speed as it rode the banking's very lip. The little bushes and small fir trees which fringed it bent and wavered under the car's passage.

With Stargie only a hundred yards ahead, the Ross dived off the banking in one colossal leap. Daylight showed under its threshing wheels, then it stormed past the great gap it had torn in the fence, where debris was now piled high.

Past the Fork the two cars zoomed, with Joe cheering frantically, and the whole crowd roaring at sight of the Ross-Eight's speed.

As he went on to the steep banking, Sniff Dix—riding at Stargie's side—looked back. Clearly, Jim saw the man bend and shout a warning to the driver's ear, and with that Stargie asked his engine for its last ounces of power—but still the Ross gained!

Round the banking went the two cars, shuddering under their speed. The foot-bridge whipped above Jim's head like a flail, and he held his machine to the very outermost edge of the track to gather speed for a 150 m.p.h. dive down the railway straight. Stargie did the same, and Jim was only twenty yards behind him when they shot down at the flat, and now Jim eased his car towards the inside of the track, ready to cut the Byfleet bend.

He closed in. He could see Stargie's helmet nodding under the furious jerking of his car, then Sniff Dix turned to look back. Jim sighted his eyes shining from behind their goggles, saw the man's set jaw, and his dust-smirched teeth gritted behind parted lips.

Jim grinned into the gale which slashed past his ears, bracing himself as he bored his car over and began to pull up on the inside of the Ace. The railway straight slid under the spinning wheels, and Jim was almost level with Stargie when he saw the rise of the Byfleet banking and the start of the curve.

His smile died as he prepared for the wild, skidding fight he would have in his effort to cut the corner and get the car safely around. He sighted the dials on the rival Ace's dashboard, and saw Stargie half turn his head, glancing at the Ross-Eight—and edging his car over towards it!

Jim gasped at the sight of it, then gasped again as the Ace came yet nearer to the meteor-like silver machine.

Both cars were hurtling for the bend at colossal speed, and they were into it a split second later. Yet again the Ace drew nearer, forcing the Ross to where the inner edge of the track was broken and covered with dust; where grass grew between the cracks and crevices in the concrete!

Jim shouted, and once again the Ace lurched at him, cutting into his track—forcing him yet further over—driving his wheels on to the broken edge!

Dust flew like the tail of a comet, high and wide, as the challenging machine's wheels bit the edge. A jagged rim of concrete gashed through the rubber, and a tyre burst, fraying out and sailing like a sudden black fountain from the wheel as the car lurched.

The Ace drew away, its deadly work done! The burst tyre sagged on to the grass and the tail of the Ross-Eight skidded round. Jim rose in his seat, using all his strength to try and force the machine straight—but the tail only slung full round, and an instant after he was on the grass.

He felt the machine buck from a ditch, and then the nose stubbed to the low bank beyond. The tail lifted and the car jumped high, somersaulting in mid-air, turning completely over before it crashed down on its wheels.

The front axle snapped, and a rear wheel broke clean away. Again the car bounced, then went on in furious, slithering leaps, until it turned on its side, skating round and round, finally to stop.

Smoke burst from the wreckage, spinning and whirling high on the air and then drifting across the track, where the Ace was hurtling on with Sniff Dix looking back, his face twisted—grinning!

(Is Jim dead—badly injured? Look out for some more exciting chapters of this grand serial next week.)

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED

Miss Norah Fitzgerald, 20, West Crescent, Lane-side, **Accrington**, Lancs. desires girl correspondents.

B. Duffy, 37, Denzil Avenue, **Southampton**, wants to join a correspondence club.

Noel G. Strachan, 25, Ravensbourne Park, Catford Bridge, **London**, S.E.6, would like to hear from readers interested in the formation of a club.

Miss Alice Cowan, 87, Hill Street, Perth, **Western Australia**, wants girl correspondents (aged 15 and upwards) in U.S.A., France, Scotland, Canada and South Africa.

Miss Alice Derriman, 191a, Romany Road, West Norwood, **London**, S.E.27, desires girl correspondents anywhere.

Reginald J. Sandon, 6/351, Bridge Street West, Hockley, **Birmingham**, would like overseas correspondents; he also offers back numbers of the N.L.L.

D. J. Thornton, 29, Orchard Road, Crossgates, **Leeds**, requires members for the Phoenix Hobby Club.

Miss Barbara Penny, c/o Simmonds Bros., Port Pirie, **South Australia**, wants girl correspondents.

Roy Field, 32, Bellevue Street, Arncliffe, N.S.W., **Australia**, wishes to correspond with readers.

A. Kemp, 29, Barclay Road, Fulham, **London**, S.W.6, wants members for his club.

Fred. Greenhalgh, 2, Duckworth Fold, **Bury** Lancs, desires correspondents.

Miss Gwen Gray, 58, Queen Street, Solomons-town, Port Pirie, **South Australia**, would like girl correspondents.

Harry Kenyon, Junr., 77, St. Bees Street, Moss Side, **Manchester**, wants correspondents interested in camping, cycling, and outdoor sports.

Miss Marjorie Moore, 4, Ada Street, **Keighley**, Yorks, would like to hear from girl correspondents overseas.

Malcolm Wark, 3, Thistle Place, **Aberdeen**, wants correspondents interested in Meccano.

Geo. K. Whyte, Junr., 97, Baldwin Avenue, Knightswood, **Glasgow**, wants correspondents.

Miss Pearl Welsh, 8, Falcon Street, Pirie West, **South Australia**, desires girl correspondents.

D. Pearson, Forestry Dept., Perth, **Western Australia**, wants correspondents—not in Australia.

(Continued from page 35.)

Clifford Underhill was the only man who did not look - The motor-boat had just come in, and Underhill was plunging out, knee-deep, to get to its side. A man and a woman were in there, both handcuffed;

"The King of Kidnappers!" is the title of next week's enthralling detective adventure yarn featuring Nelson Lea and his boy assistants. This is a story you mustn't miss reading, chums - it's a real gripper!

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