

The NELSON LEE

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"*The*
KING
of
KIDNAPPERS!"

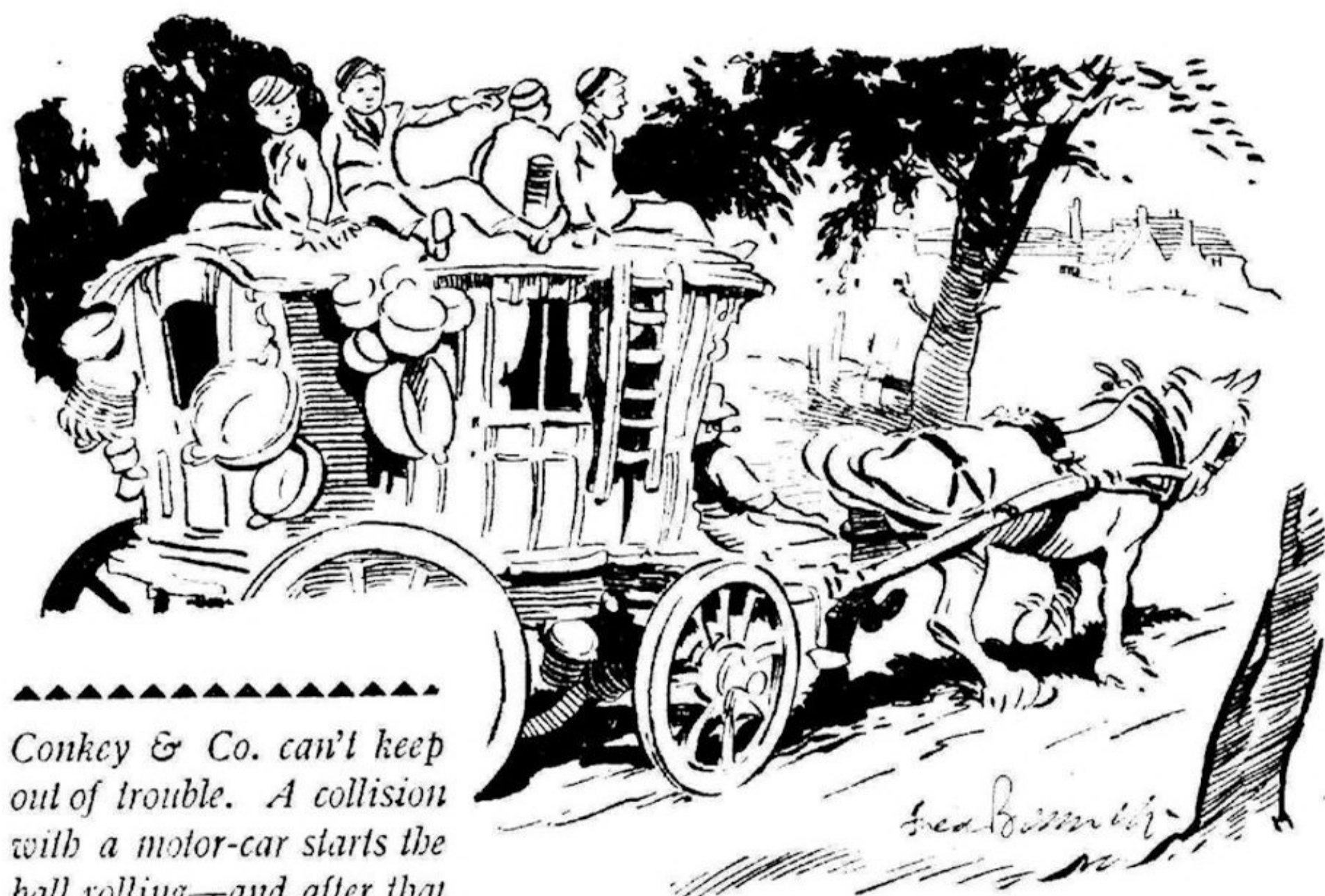
Thrills—rapid-fire action—exciting adventure—baffling mystery—all are contained in this gripping yarn featuring Nelson Lee and his schoolboy assistants.

New Series No. 13.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

April 19th, 1930.

The THREE TERRORS!



Conkey & Co. can't keep out of trouble. A collision with a motor-car starts the ball rolling—and after that the Three Terrors live up to their name—and then some!

A Caravan—a Car—and a Crash!

CONKEY KING, Whacky Clark and Bob Smith, known as—and acknowledged to be—the Three Terrors, sat side by side on top of the gipsy caravan. With them was a fourth youngster of about their own age. This was Chummy, and he was Conkey's second cousin.

The caravan was ambling along a winding country lane, drawn by old Whitewash. Whitewash wasn't much to look at, but he was one of the best as far as hosses are concerned. Walking alongside him was Cocko Lee, a kindly old gipsy who owned the van.

Conkey & Co. surveyed the surrounding country with approving eyes, for spring was in the air, and the landscape looked beautiful in the bright morning sunshine. Looking at the three smiling chums, one would never have thought that they were being hounded down by a dangerous Italian secret society. Yet such was the case.

Recently the Three Terrors had come up against an Italian crook who called himself Puzzo the Dude. Puzzo had come off decidedly second best, and in revenge he had set the Red Dagger Club on the track of

our heroes. Conkey & Co. liked excitement—you bet!—yet they did not crave having a few knives stuck in their anatomies, so they had taken to a roving life under the protecting wing of old Cocko.

Cocko was making for a village ten miles away, where he was going to do a bit of tinkering and knife grinding. Then the boys would work round the village, tell the tale and sell a few of the galvanised pails and carpet beaters and stores which were festooned all round the old van.

The Three Terrors were in no hurry to reach the village. All the morning they had been travelling along a gently-winding road which stretched its length over breezy heathlands and swelling, undulating country which was coated with the golden green of spring.

Conkey had a primrose in his buttonhole and a big bunch of bluebells, which he had gathered in a wood, where they lay in an azure carpet—millions of them.

"I don't know how it makes you feel, boys," said Conk, "but I feel all over alike—like the chap who biffed 'is tuppenny into a lamp post. Fancy being able to pick real flowers, instead of taking 'em outa a front garden, with the ole woman tapping at the window and a rozzer standing on the street corner. It's so quiet. So peaceful. Just like taking a nice, quiet walk round the cem'try."

The words were still in his mouth when there was a rush of a large, silent car round the sharp bend ahead. There came a biff and a crash—and then the four boys went flying off the caravan roof, landing in a deep-ploughed field beyond a stiff bank. The old white horse sat down with a surprised look on his face, and the caravan leaned precariously against the bank.

The car, which contained four men, had shot off the road, and came to a stop on a furze-covered slope, with a mudguard that was crumpled up like a bit of tissue paper.

Whacky, who had landed on his ear in the ploughed field, was the first to speak.

"So peaceful!" he snorted indignantly, glaring at Conky. "Just like a nice, quiet walk round the cemetery—and I don't think!"

Conk sat up, removed a tuft of grass from out of his mouth, and then felt his teeth, for he had come down on his face.

"Coo lummy!" he exclaimed. "Thought I'd loosened all me sausage mashers, but they're all right, thank goodness. Out on the road, boys!"

There came the sound of angry voices above them. The four men had climbed out of the car and were surrounding Cocko.

It was a swell car, and the men were all well dressed, but there was something about their quality that caught Conk's eye, who was experienced in the different types of men. The car was class, the clothes were class, but the men were not class.

"Hey! What you doing all over the road with your old rattle-trap?" demanded one of the men fiercely.

Cocko eyed him steadily.

"I was on the right side o' the road!" he retorted. "You're to blame for coming round that bend without blowing your hooter. Now you've broken my shaft, and I don't know how much you've hurt my old horse."

"Horse!" sneered another of the crew of the car. "Do you call that a horse? Oughta be on skewers, calling the cats!"

"Anyway," said Cocko, "I'm taking the number of your car, and I'll give you my address!"

"A gipsy's address!" sneered the man who had last spoken. "What's that?"

"As good as the number on your car!" said old Cocko quietly, noticing that the car number was freshly painted—so fresh that a lot of spring flies were sticking to it.

The leader of the four flushed as he realised the sharpness of the eyes of the old gipsy.

"I've a mind to thump your head for your impudence!" he snapped angrily.

And he squared himself up, doubling a huge pair of fists. Little did he dream, though he was a fighting man, that the frail-looking old gipsy had seen more ring work

in a month than he had seen in all his life as a second-class boxer.

He made to hit, but Cocko hit first, sending the bully sprawling across the road. With a savage snarl he leaped to his feet, but his three pals gathered round him, holding him back.

"Chuck it, Blinky!" said a little, wizened man with a face like a sheet of corrugated iron. "Whatcher up to? We don't want to get fightin' gipsies! Give the old chap ten bob and let's get away!"

Conk and Whacky and Bob had gathered round Cocko, and the three red daggers they had captured from the Italians during their last fracas with the Red Dagger Secret Society, flashed out.

"The young gippos are pullin' knives!" whispered the little corrugated man uneasily. "Come away, Blinky—don't be silly. Drop 'em a pound! That'll pay for the shaft!"

The man addressed as Blinky hesitated. Cocko had handed him the beginnings of a black eye.

"Give him a quid!" he muttered. "I'll give him—"

But the three overpowered him. The little man pulled a wallet from his pocket and dropped a note on the road. Then they shoved their champion up the hill to where their car had gone ashore, pushed him into the driving seat, and soon the car backed out of the bushes and was off!

Cocko picked up the note and examined it as the car disappeared round a bend in the road.

"It's a real one!" said he. "And the old shaft was cracked afore they hit it. Get the van to an even keel, boys, and I'll soon splice it up!"

They took old Whitewash out of the shafts, and the rare old Derby winner was soon gathering a bunch of primroses in his mouth, while Cocko doctored the cracked shaft with rope and splints.

"That'll hold," he said. Then he became serious and added: "Those fellows were no good. They'd stolen that car! They are bad men, keyhole men. That little chap with the shrivelled face has not been out of quod a month. I could tell it by his face and his hands!"

"How?" asked Conk.

"He's got sail maker's hands, and he's not a sail maker. He's been sewing mail bags," said old Cocko, with a chuckle. "And that chap who tried to hit me was a fighting man of sorts—one of those tissue-paper dubs that they put up for a bit of sparring before the big event comes off. Know anything of him, boys?"

Conk was thinking hard. The bully's face had been familiar to him.

"I remember!" he exclaimed at length. "That's Blinky Parsons, otherw'se Posh Parsons."

"When did you see him last?" asked Cocko. "And where?"

"In the dock at the town hall," said Conk readily. "I'd broke a street lamp by accident wiv my catapult, and I was goin' ter see the beaks about it in the Children's Court. But I strayed into the wrong court, and they was just handing out a moon to Blinky for hitting a man with a bottle. The beak told him that next time he'd get six moons!"

Old Cocko regarded Conk rather severely.

"So you've been up at the court?" he asked.

"'Twasn't my fault, Cocko," said Conky earnestly. "I'd got a new catty, and I went to try it on a tin can that was a-top of a wall. Somehow, the marble went wonky and crashed through a lamp just as a rozzer came outa the next alley behind the gardens—and he wasn't one of my ole friends."

"What did they give you?" asked Cocko, his black eyes twinkling.

"Why, nothing!" said Conk. "The Mayor took away my catapult, told me to be a good boy and keep off the cross-roads, and then, one day, he might see me in the Mayor's chair, like himself."

"Yes!" said Cocko. "What then?"

Conky grinned.

"Then he borrowed my ammunition! Said that he'd not pulled a catapult for years. And he pulled the old catty, and it went off unbeknowst and conked the copper who'd charged me through the helmet!"

"And what did the copper say to that?" asked the old gipsy.

"Why, he just laughed as if the Mayor had done something clever!" snorted Conk indignantly.

"Never mind, Conky!" said old Cocko, shaking his head. "It's the way of this 'ard, 'ard world. The old van is right again now. Come along—we'll be pushing on!"

Dirty Work at the Cross-Roads!

THEY drove on ten miles to the village of Sleepington. Cocko pulled up on the village green, collecting some tinkering, while the boys went round selling pails and bits of lino. They did very well, too, for Conk had a persuasive way with him.

One hard-faced woman opened the door to him and threatened him with the police. Conk told her that she reminded him of his mother, and that did the trick. He traded her a whole roll of lino, a scullery bowl and a washing board, and just to show that there was no ill feeling she gave him a bag of apple-tarts, which she had just taken out of the oven, and told him to be a good boy.

Conk said he would, and then the woman, thawing still more, intimated that he might bring his pals in to a bit of dinner. There was boiled beef, carrots and stodgers, and the chums tucked into it with gusto.

"What's the idea of those flags hanging up across the green?" asked Conkey of his hostess, as he stuffed a spud into his mouth.

The woman explained volubly.

It seemed that it was Lady Merlina Sleepington's sixteenth birthday, and she was the daughter of the Duchess of Grandshire, who lived at Sleepington Hall. There was going to be a grand fancy-dress party in the evening at the hall, and dukes and duchesses and the posh sons and daughters from the big houses in the county had been invited. Lord Archibald Sutton Strange, the son of the Duke of Carabas, and three of his pals were coming from Stonyhurst Castle, in the next county, and they had some great stunt or surprise—which was a secret—up their sleeves.

The woman was full of it. How the Sleepington Arms had arranged to take fifty overflow guests that night, and how Lord Archibald and his pals had arranged to kip on the billiard table, as all the baths were made up for beds, and how a hundred cars were to be garaged on the green because all the stables were full.

In fact, when the caravan drove off, she had got quite fond of the boys, and waved a duster after them in farewell.

"Jus' shows what you can do with a crusty old woman by telling 'er she's like your dear mother!" said Conk dreamily. "Say, Whacky, how would you like to be a young dook, like those young nuts that are coming to the dance to-night?"

"All Sir Garney!" enthused Whacky. "I should have a motor-bike that would do a hundred miles an hour. Rozzers don't pinch a duke!"

"I should invite a hundred boys like us to stop with me at my castle," said Conk thoughtfully. "And we'd divide into two parties and attack and defend the castle, and have a good time."

They had a glimpse of Sleepington Hall as they drove through the woodlands. It was a great, grey stone house, surrounded by terraces and gardens, in which was a lake.

Half a mile beyond the hall Cocko brought the van to a stop on a bit of waste ground and made camp. He said that it was the duchess' land, but she was made Gipsy Queen last year because she never worried gipsies. So gipsies never worried her. Her rabbits were safe as tom-cats, and no one pinched her rhododendrons or ferns.

He had a lot of tinkering to do, and the boys helped him till supper-time. Chummy could make cane chairs as easy as winking, and was hard at work by the firelight when sun set.

After supper he and Cocko were still so busy that Cocko told the Three Terrors that they might as well get into their monkey skins and spar about in the woods, practising their act till Chummy could join them. For Cocko ran a troupe of performing "apes," which consisted of Conkey & Co. and Chummy dressed up.

The three got into their skins and made up their faces properly. Cocko was an artist, and made them do everything to the last detail. Then they went into the woods and practised tumbling and swinging on an old oak bough, waiting for Chummy to come along.

Two hours passed.

"Where's ole Chummo?" asked Conk. "Must ha' tumbled down a drain!"

But Chummy was not far off. The clock at Sleepington Hall was just striking a quarter to nine when he appeared, sliding out of the old oak, for he had been travelling through the trees like a real chimp.

"Why, we thought you was lost, Chummo!" said Conk.

"I finished the chairs," said Chummy the chimpanzee, "and I pitched our tent for the night. And Cocko's gone to bed, he's tired. Now let's come through the woods. I know where there's a nice soft patch for falling. This ground here is full of roots and you'll bruise yourselves to death on it."

They followed him through the dark woods, four apes hanging on to one another. Chummy chuckled.

"If we meet a gamekeeper he'll shoot us!" he said cheerfully. "But I reckon the keepies are all up at the hall to-night, stuffing themselves with blanchmanges and stewed fruit an' cake."

Chummy had been through these woods in the daytime, and said that he knew the way by heart, but presently he hesitated. He had lost the trail, and they were bushed among the duchess' rhododendron walks.

There seemed to be miles of them. Then, at last, breaking through the bushes, Chummy came to a standstill. There was a tinny sound in the darkness. He had barked his shin on the wing of a car. There it was, thrust in among the rhododendrons, with no light showing.

Conk did a bit of investigating. The engine was still warm. He ran round behind the car and touched the number plate. It was sticky and covered with flies, and the white and black paint stuck to his fingers.

"Lummy, boys!" whispered Conk. "There's dirty work at the cross-roads. This is the same car that biffed into us this morning, and it's a sure thing that Blinky Parsons wouldn't get an invitation from the duchess. No! There's dirty work on at the hall!"

There was a path running through the rhododendrons here. Conk could see a light in the distance.

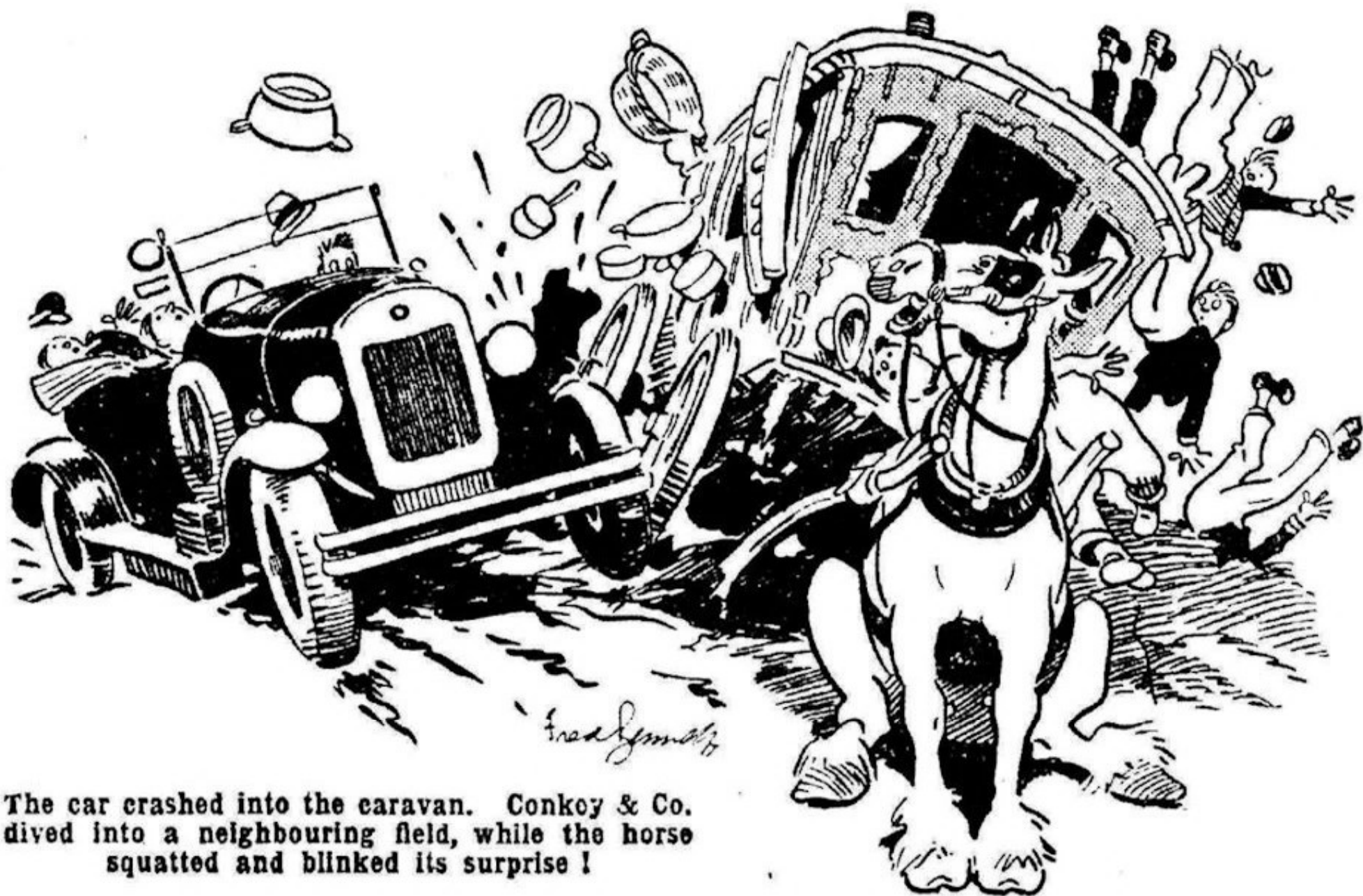
"Come along, boys," he added. "This way!"

They trotted along the path, and they saw the light coming towards them. It was an electric torch which swept right and left, and its beam caught the reflectors of the car ere it centred on the four apes.

"Lord Archibald!" called a voice behind the torch. "'Pon my word! Capital! And Lord Wilfred and Lord Percival and Lord Noel!"

The light swept over them one by one.

"It's me, Mr. Jarvis, the butler," the voice went on. "Her Grace grew anxious. She thought you might come up by the quarry road, and it's none too safe! So she sent me to guide you. Will you leave your car



The car crashed into the caravan. Conkoy & Co. dived into a neighbouring field, while the horse squatted and blinked its surprise!

there? The crash is something awful up at the house, and it's less likely to get damaged here."

Conk nudged his chums. The newcomer was the duchess' butler, and he had obviously mistaken Conkey & Co. for Lord Archibald and his three swell pals who had been invited to the fancy-dress ball.

"Half a mo', Jarvis," said Conk in his best tones. "I forgot me gold fag case!"

Jarvis laughed appreciatively. Lord Archibald, the son of the Duke of Carabas, had the reputation of being a bit of a wag.

Conkey was a quick worker. He had worked in a garage, and he could spoil a car with anyone. In twenty seconds he had put in work on the car that would cost an hour to make it a starter.

Then he followed Jarvis towards the hall by a short cut through the gardens.

"You will enter by the back way, gentlemen, of course," said Jarvis. "It'll make your entrance to the ball-room more effective!"

Conk nodded. He did not want to talk too much to old "Kensitas," in case he gave himself away.

The Three Terrors' Triumph!

JARVIS led them in by a back entrance to the great building, then into a kitchen that made old Conk's mouth water. There were eighteen servants getting supper ready, and twelve gamekeepers stuffing themselves with jellies and pies.

Conk picked out the head gamekeeper. He could easily tell him, because he had got the biggest helping of pie. And Jarvis had leaked his name.

"A word in your ear'ole, Mr. Stousher," said Conk.

And everybody laughed, and the girls whispered what a nut Lord Archibald was. Conk muttered into Mr. Stousher's ear.

"Ask Jarvis where he saw our car," Conk was saying. "Get all your men and your guns, and hide round it and wait. It ain't our car at all. There are burglars round the hall!"

Stousher nodded. He could take a tip. He warned his men with a glance and led them out at the doorway, while Conk and his pals followed Jarvis through a lot of swell, carpeted passages till they came within earshot of a splendid jazz band playing: "Won't you be my Sweetie to-night!"

"Awchie—dear Awchibald!" cried a voice. Conk came to a standstill as something like the fairy off the top of a Christmas-tree came floating down the stairs. It was the Lady Merlina Sleepington herself.

"Awchie!" exclaimed the Lady Merlina again, hugging Conk and then holding him at arm's length. "No, I'm not going to kiss you—even though it is my birthday!"

"Coo lummy, miss, that's a pity?" said Conk.

"Dont' talk so asburdly," laughed Merlina. "But why so dreadfully late? Did you have a crash? Goodness, Noel, you look exactly like a chimpanzee! I'm not going to kiss you, either. Mama! Mama! Come into the library, boys, I want mama to see you."

And before they knew where they were, she bustled the boys into a stately room surrounded by bookshelves holding more books than the boys had ever seen in their lives.

"My darling boys!" exclaimed a cultured voice.

Sitting by a marble fireplace was Diana, Duchess of Grandshire. A fine-looking woman with dark eyes and white hair, roped up with diamonds and pearls and wearing the famous Grandshire emeralds in a tiara round her forehead like a fender. She sparkled so that she nearly blinded Conkey.

"My darling boys!" she cried again. "What admirable costumes! But I was anxious about you—you are late. Have you had any trouble with the car? Yes—I am going to kiss you, dear Archibald! I will not spoil your make-up."

Conk drew back.

"Coo lummy, lady, I might spoil yours!"

The duchess laughed.

"Archie," she said reproachfully, "if you keep on talking that stable slang, you'll speak it by habit. How is your darling mother?"

And she kissed old Conk, who almost struggled as she embraced him. Conk had never been kissed by a duchess before.

"S'welp me, duchess!" he blurted out. "We ain't lords; we're only nuts. But there's dirty work about. We've come to warn you. Thieves have got a car in the rhododendrons, but I've spoiled that, and I've sent your gamekeepers down to surround it. I'm Conkey King, and this is Whacky, and Bob, and Chummy. We run along with ole Cocko, who knows you. We was just practisin' our monkey act when we come on the car in your woods——"

Conk suddenly broke off. He leaped over to the window, and his pals followed him. Conk lost no time. He snatched a mace from a figure in armour which stood by the great window. Whacky, not to be outdone, had relieved the armour of one of the duchess' ancestors of a sword that weighed more than a sack of coals. Then all four boys sprang behind a large screen which stood near the open window.

There was the sound of movement behind the curtains, and then Blinky Parsons and the little parchment-faced man, both masked, stepped into the room.

The duchess was covered by two revolvers.

"Hands up, duchess!" said the first masked man. "Unhitch them jewels and throw them on the table!"

"How am I to unfasten them with my hands in the air?" asked the duchess, with



Disguised as apes, the Three Terrors joyfully pounced upon the crooks—and then the fur began to fly!

an eye on the Japanese lacquer screen, behind which the four apes had darted.

Blinky gave a low whistle, and two other men entered the room.

"Get the sparklers!" snapped Blinky, still covering the duchess with his revolver.

The jewels were not easy to unfasten, and the two burglars told off for ladies' maids were scared and clumsy.

"Come on, hurry up!" snarled Blinky. "Ow!"

He went down with a crash to the floor as a large ape conked him with a battle mace. At the same time, the little parchment-faced convict got one from Whacky's sword that laid him flat.

Conkey snatched up the fallen pistol and covered the two men who were fumbling with the duchess' pearls.

"Hands up, lads!" he commanded. "You are up against the Three Terrors and their little monkey!"

At the same moment, outside the door, there were cries of, "This way!" and a crowd of keepers and footmen and four large monkeys burst into the room!

"Lummy!" said one of the jewel snatchers. "It's a cop! Blow me, but it's raining monkeys! We surrender!"

Blinky had had such a konk that they had to take him upstairs and send for the doctor, as well as the police. The little convict looked decidedly groggy when Mr. Jarvis led him away with his companions to

lock him in the butler's plate-room till the police came.

The four monkeys stared at their companions.

"Coo lummy!" said the voice of the real Lord Archibald. "I don't know who you other monks are, but you've saved auntie's shiners. Come to supper with us!"

Conk recovered himself.

"I'm Lord Conk of Casey Court," he grinned. "An' this is Viscount Whacky, Lord Bob, and the Hon. Chummy."

"They are brave boys," beamed the duchess, "and I am going to kiss them all!"

And "Lord Conk" went off arm-in-arm with the real Lord Archibald—who explained how he and his companions had been late because Lord Noel had burst his skin getting it on—while Whacky, Bob and Chummy and the other nobles followed on to the biggest spread they had ever collided with. They started with strawberry ices and finished with Christmas pudding, and Lord Noel burst his skin again, and vowed that he was coming caravanning with the Three Terrors for the rest of his life. He said he had had enough of Eton.

"Garn, Noel!" spluttered Conk, as he sought to swallow a large mouthful of pudding. "You mean you've eaten enough!"

THE END.

(Always bright and cheery—that's the Three Terrors. Look out for another rollicking story about this mirth-making trio next Wednesday.)

The King of



CHAPTER 1.

The Mystery Carl

DORIS BERKELEY, her dark eyes shining excitedly, came into the Common-room at the Moor View School for Girls. Tea was just over, and a number of girls were gathered round the fire, chatting. It was very pleasant in there, in the twilight of the April evening.

"Telegram for you, Renie," said Doris, waving an orange-coloured envelope.

"For me?" cried Irene Manners, springing up. "Oh, dear! I hope there's nothing wrong!"

Irene, like many other people, regarded a telegram as a presage of evil tidings. She took the telegram with an anxious light in her blue eyes, and she turned it over doubtfully in her slim fingers.

Some of the other girls gathered round—not curiously, but with an idea of giving Irene some support in case the news should be serious. Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple were particularly alert because Irene was their special chum. Others, such as Mary Summers and Sylvia Glenn and Tessa Love and Winnie Pitt, were also on the spot.

"It's from mater," said Irene, with relief, after she had opened the wire. "Wants to see me in Bannington at a quarter past six. What in the world for?"

"Maters are trying at times," murmured Doris feelingly.

Irene glanced at the clock.

"Well, it's only half-past five, so I've plenty of time," she said. "I suppose I'd better go along and see Miss Bond about it. I'll run over on my bike."

"Couldn't you get permission for a crowd of us to go?" suggested Mary Summers.

Starts With A Bang—And Ends With A Crash!

Kidnappers

By

EDWY

SEARLES BROOKS.

Twenty boys and girls kidnapped and held to ransom! Consternation; panic — leaving only Nelson Lee unruffled and reveling in his stirring fight with one of the world's most audacious crooks!

men; scaffolding was up everywhere, and the school was arising once again out of the ashes. The recent fire, when St. Frank's had been nearly destroyed, was still the talk of the neighbourhood. It was really a glorious evening, with a tranquil sky, flecked with little fluffy white clouds.

Irene arrived in the busy market town of Bannington, and she rode straight to the station. The dusk was very deep now, and the station lights were twinkling brightly. Irene was in good time. She had been thinking a lot about the telegram on the way. It puzzled her that her mother should want to see her alone—and at Bannington. Usually, Mrs. Manners came down by car. Besides, as far as Irene knew, there was not a train from London which arrived at 6.15. That was another mystifying point.

It was only a little after six o'clock now, and Irene, having left her bicycle outside the booking-office, walked into the station. Everything was quiet. This was one of those sleepy spells, when there was very little doing.

"Excuse me, miss," said a voice.

Irene hesitated.

"Well, mum says that she wants to see me alone," she replied awkwardly. "It must be something dreadfully private, or she wouldn't say that. It's really awfully rummy, you know."

She went to the headmistress, and showed her the telegram. Miss Bond read it carefully: "Must see you alone, meet me Bannington Station 6.15, Mother," and then she nodded.

"Of course, you must go, Irene," she said. "Be back as early as you can, won't you?"

Irene promised, and very soon she had started off on her bicycle. She pedalled past the great pile of St. Frank's College, which was now in the hands of hundreds of work-

Irene, rather startled, turned. She found a man in uniform confronting her. He was evidently a chauffeur.

"Yes?" said Irene, brushing a wave of fair hair out of her eyes.

"Miss Manners?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Manners asked me to fetch you, miss," said the chauffeur respectfully. "The car is waiting just outside the station."

"Oh! Mother came by road, then?"

"Yes, miss."

The chauffeur turned, and Irene followed. Here was one little mystery explained. But if Mrs. Manners had come by road, why hadn't she driven straight through to the Moor View School? Why this secret meeting? Irene came to the conclusion that her mother's visit must be very, very private. Something unusual must have happened, and the girl's curiosity was aroused.

"What's happened to Williams?" she asked, as she walked out of the station yard with the chauffeur.

"Williams, miss?"

"Of course. My mother's chauffeur."

"Sorry, miss—I didn't quite understand," said the man. "He's ill—down with diphtheria, I think. I'm only a temporary man, miss."

"Oh, I see," said Irene.

They were approaching a big limousine, which stood just outside the station yard in a quiet little backwater. The chauffeur opened one of the rear doors and saluted. He held the door open for Irene to enter.

"Whatever's the matter, mumsie?" asked Irene, as she stepped in.

She saw a shadowy figure within. As she entered the chauffeur closed the door. The next second Irene felt two hands pull her forward. Her shoulders were clutched, and something was pressed hard over her face. She tried to scream, but the effort was stifled. Everything seemed to be going round, and she had a sensation of falling into nothingness, as though the ground had dropped away from her feet. After that came oblivion!

THE chauffeur climbed into the driving-seat, closed the door, and glanced round.

"All right?" he asked briefly.

"Yes—drive on," said a voice from the rear.

The big car glided forward, but it did not proceed very far. It came to a halt just beyond the outskirts of Bannington, at the cross-road which led, on the one hand to Caistowe, and on the other hand to Edgemore.

The chauffeur alighted here, and walked away from the car. He returned within three minutes, accompanied by an eager, stalwart junior schoolboy. This youngster was Hal Brewster, the junior captain of the River House School.

"In here, sir," said the chauffeur, opening the rear door of the car.

Brewster hopped in; arms seized him, pulled him forward, and something was pressed over his face. This time the chauffeur half-

entered, helping. Hal Brewster struggled slightly, but it was soon over.

"Number two," said the voice from within the car. "All clear out there, Jim?"

"Not a soul in sight," said the chauffeur.

"All right—drive on."

The car glided off again. It was a very spacious car—one of those enormously long limousines with room in the rear for five or six passengers. There were three passengers in the rear at present, and two of them were stretched on the floor, unconscious, and hidden by rugs.

The car only made a short trip. This time it passed through the town again, eventually coming to a halt two or three hundred yards away from the brightly-lighted range of buildings which represented Bannington Grammar School. The chauffeur left the car, returned soon afterwards with a schoolboy, and the same performance as before was gone through. Again there was no hitch.

Three of them!

A schoolgirl and two schoolboys, trapped in the simplest possible manner. Yet no blame could be attached to them, for there had been nothing to make them suspicious; and their fate had overtaken them in a flash. Stepping into that car, under the impression that they were to meet a dear relative, they were seized and silenced.

Once again this clockwork-like procedure was used. The limousine, with headlights gleaming, soon covered the seventeen miles between Bannington and Helmford. Near Helmford station it halted. The chauffeur got down, and went off. This time he returned with a boy from Helmford College. This boy entered the car as unsuspiciously as the others.

"Anything wrong, dad?" he asked wonderingly.

He was pulled forward, the door closed, and his struggles did not last for more than twenty seconds.

"That's the lot!" said the voice from the rear. "You know what to do now, Jim?"

"You bet," grinned the chauffeur, glancing over his shoulder.

THE limousine, gliding through the night with a gentle but powerful purr, proceeded on towards London. It made a sort of circuit near the Metropolis, and after many twistings and turnings, came out near Woodford. Here it took the Southend arterial road, passing on through the outskirts of Ilford, where London, in the shape of rows and rows of attractive villas, is thrusting out its tentacles.

The car sped on by way of Rayleigh and Rochford, finally slowing down on a misty, dreary stretch of open marshland. This particular part of Essex was unattractive—very different from the pretty, undulating country beyond Chelmsford. There was an old house standing amidst this great barren stretch of bleak, forbidding marshland. A few stunted trees grew about the house, and the whole place was surrounded by a high wall.

The car drove through a big gateway and came to a halt at the foot of some wide steps. The door of the old house was flung open, and a flood of light came out. A man stepped from the rear of the car. He was well dressed, wiry, and alert in manner. Another man stood in the doorway.

"We the first?" asked the newcomer.

"No—three other lots have been delivered," said the man on the doorstep. "Everything all right with you?"

"There wasn't the ghost of a hitch," said the wiry man pleasantly.

Irene Manners was lifted out first. She was carried carefully indoors, and taken into a big, warm room, where only a small light was burning. Here there were four other girls, stretched out on rugs on the floor. Like Irene, they were unconscious. Then the boys were carried in, and taken to another room. Here, too, there were others.

And during the next hour more boys and girls arrived. Eventually there were twenty of them all told—twelve boys and eight girls—and they lay in those two rooms, breathing gently and regularly, as though in a deep, sound sleep.

CHAPTER 2.

Memories of St. Frank's!

IT was just a few minutes after seven o'clock the next morning when Nelson Lee was aroused from a deep sleep by the quiet buzzing of a private telephone.

The famous Gray's Inn Road detective had a special system of telephones in his chambers. One line connected with the Detective Academy next door, another line connected with Mrs. Jones, his housekeeper.

"Yes?" asked Lee, as he placed the receiver to his ear.

"I wouldn't have woke you up, Mr. Lee, only there's a gentleman says he must see you at once," came Mrs. Jones' voice. "He says it's terribly urgent—"

"What is his name, Mrs. Jones?"

"Mr. Manners, sir—Mr. Hobart Manners," replied the housekeeper. "And between you and me, sir, he seems to be in a rare way."

"Show Mr. Manners into the consulting-room, and tell him that I'll be there within five minutes," promised Lee briskly.

The criminologist hopped out of bed, made a hasty toilet, and quickly donned his dressing-gown. Mr. Hobart Manners was one of his best friends. They had been in many parts of the world together—generally accompanied by their mutual friend, the cheery Lord Dorrimore. Incidentally, Mr. Hobart Manners was the famous aircraft designer and manufacturer.

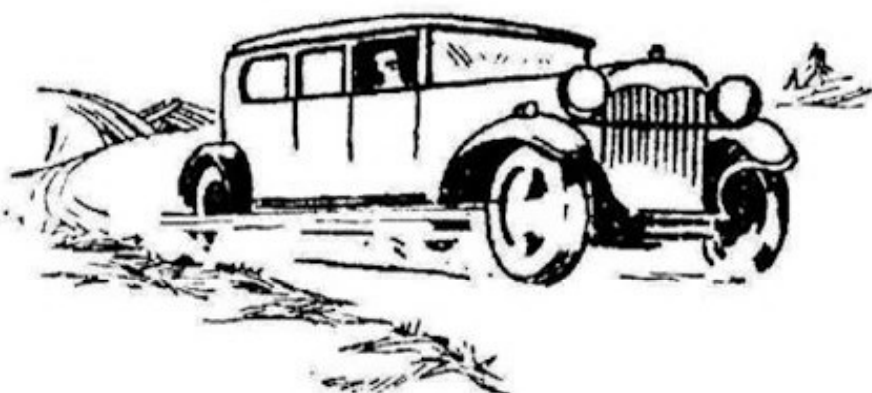
When Nelson Lee entered the consulting-room he found the spring sunshine streaming through the windows. Mr. Manners was pacing up and down impatiently, and he swung round at Lee's entry. His face was haggard.

"My dear Manners!" ejaculated Lee, shocked by the other's appearance.

"Forgive me, Lee, for digging you out of bed at this hour, but my daughter has vanished!" said Mr. Manners, striding forward and grasping Lee's hand. "I've been up all night—I'm at my wits end!"

"I'm sorry to hear this—" began Nelson Lee.

Another door opened, and two or three cheery young fellows piled in. They were robust and hungry after an early morning tramp. They were Nipper, Handforth,



Church, McClure, Watson, and Tregellis-West.

"Hallo, guy'nor! You're an early bird, too!" said Nipper, with a grin. "Why, here's Mr Manners! We didn't expect to see—"

"What's wrong, sir?" interrupted Handforth, running forward. "You look like a ghost, sir."

"Irene is missing, my boy," said Mr. Manners frantically.

All the cub detectives were startled. Edward Oswald Handforth turned pale. He and Irene were special chums. In the old St. Frank's days, before the Detective Academy had come into being, Handforth had frequently been chipped by his schoolfellows because of his warm friendship for Irene.

"Missing, sir!" he repeated hoarsely. "You don't mean that anything has happened to her?"

"I don't know what's happened—that's the ghastly part of it!" replied Mr. Manners. "She's been missing since six o'clock yesterday evening. There's not a trace—not a clue!"

"Steady, old friend," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Boys, you may stay if you wish, but there must be no interruptions."

"But we've got to do something, sir!" insisted Handforth fiercely. "If Irene's missing—"

"Handy, old man, didn't you hear what I said?" put in Nelson Lee gently.

"Sorry, sir," muttered Handforth.

But it was only by a great effort that he kept quiet. This news had hit him like a blow. It revived all his memories of St. Frank's, and it filled him with wild anxiety for his girl chum. It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and it was certainly a fact that Edward Oswald had many times sighed recently when thinking of the fair-haired, blue-eyed, cheery Irene.

"I want you to come down to Bellton, Lee," said Mr. Manners. "I've no faith in the police—I want you to come with me. I've been once, during the night, but I discovered nothing."

"Don't you know the circumstances in which your daughter disappeared?"

"Yes, in a way," replied Mr. Manners. "She received a telegram yesterday, just after tea. It purported to come from her mother—but, of course, it was a bogus message."

"I see!" said Nelson Lee.

"Irene showed this telegram to Miss Bond, and received permission to leave the school," continued the distracted father. "The telegram merely told Irene to meet her mother at Bannington station at a quarter-past six. Nobody at the station seems to have seen her there—although her bicycle was found, abandoned, outside the booking-office. And that's all we know. From the moment she left the Moor View School she has not been seen. At least, nobody can give any information."

"When did you first hear?"

"Not until nearly midnight," said Mr. Manners. "Miss Bond, the headmistress, rang me up, asking if Irene was at home. She thought that my daughter was safely with her mother. She waited up, of course, but as no message came she got anxious. Finally, she rang up. Naturally, she was dumbfounded when I told her that Mrs. Manners had never been to Bannington, and that no telegram had been sent."

"We'll go to Bannington," said Nelson Lee briskly, "and we'll start at once."

"This is really awfully good of you, Lee," said Mr. Manners gratefully. "I feel that I can rely upon you to do something. If you could start soon after breakfast—"

"Never mind breakfast," interrupted Lee. "We'll leave immediately. Nipper, hurry round and fetch the car."

"Yes, sir," said Nipper promptly.

"Can I come, Chief?" asked Handforth, his voice unsteady with anxiety.

"Yes, you can come, young 'un," replied Lee. "And if you think there's room for two more at the back of the car, they can squeeze in."

THERE were four of the cubs in the back of Nelson Lee's Rolls-Royce Special when it sped out of London, soon afterwards. Nipper and Handforth went as a matter of course, and Church and McClure, being Handforth's closest chums—and being naturally interested in this case by reason of their friendship for Irene—succeeded in squashing in.

"Well, we often thought that we'd like to go back and have a look at the old place," remarked Nipper, as they left London behind, "but we hardly expected to go in these circumstances."

"It's awful!" muttered Handforth, his eyes alight with anxiety. "What can have happened to Irene? By George, if some crooks have hurt her in any way—"

Handforth was wont to jump to melodramatic conclusions; but for once his chums did not argue with him. There really seemed some justification for his pessimism.

"Well, try to keep an open mind, Handy," said Nipper soothingly. "We shall soon be

at Moor View, and then perhaps we shall get on the track."

Handforth relapsed into a moody silence, and he scarcely uttered another word during the trip to the South Coast. Mr. Manners was equally reticent. There was really nothing to say, and there was no sense in bothering Nelson Lee with all sorts of fears.

Although the roads were comparatively clear, and Nelson Lee drove quickly, the journey seemed interminable to Irene's father. Yet Bannington was reached while the morning was still young. Even Handforth bucked up at the sight of the old familiar surroundings; and when the car ran swiftly through Bellton his interest—and that of the other cubs—was intensified.

"Everything's just the same," remarked Church. "There's old Sharpe, the iron-monger, and Sparrow, the village policeman. And there's Farmer Holt talking to Joe Catchpole, in front of the George Tavern."

"Wonder how they've been getting on with St. Frank's?" murmured Nipper.

They were soon to see. When that great fire had devastated the old school, only the bare walls had remained standing. St. Frank's had become a shell. Now it was beginning to look its old self; even the roofs were on.

"Good old St. Frank's," said Nipper, rather wistfully. "By Jove, we had some ripping times there, you chaps! It won't be long before the old place is occupied again. Same old crowd, too."

"Except us," said Church. "Still, we needn't grumble—give me the Detective Academy every time."

The car shot past St. Frank's, with all its activity, and a minute later it drove into the courtyard of the Moor View School. None of the girls were in evidence, for morning lessons had begun, but Miss Charlotte Bond, the principal, was out on the doorstep before Mr. Manners had had time to alight.

"Anything fresh, Miss Bond?" he asked quickly.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Manners," said the good lady, her voice troubled and worried. "You don't know how grieved I am about this. I cannot imagine what has happened to poor Irene. It's so extraordinary—so frightening. I'm sure that she would never stay away of her own accord."

Mr. Manners groaned.

"I was hoping so much that there would be some news," he said huskily.

"We are only just starting, Manners," said Nelson Lee. "You mustn't become too pessimistic. Sometimes, no news is good news."

"There is nothing further to tell you about Irene, Mr. Manners," put in the lady quickly. "But we have heard that one of the boys from the River House School has disappeared, too."

"Great Scott!" murmured Nipper.

"Which boy?" asked Mr. Manners.

"His name, I think, is Brewster."

"Hal Brewster!" The four boys uttered the name in unison.



Irene stepped into the car—and the next moment something was pressed hard over her face.

"I learned from Dr. Hogge that Brewster disappeared at almost the same hour as Irene," said Miss Bond. "I believe the circumstances were very similar, too. He received a message telling him to meet his father, and he went out to keep the appointment. He did not return. Oh, and there's something else, Mr. Lee. Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington Police, rang up this morning to tell me that there was nothing fresh, and I happened to mention that Mr. Manners was coming down with you."

"What had Jameson to say?" asked the famous detective.

"He wants you to go to the Bannington Police Station at once—or to ring him up," replied Miss Bond. "He would not say why, but he asked me to tell you that it was extremely urgent."

"We will go at once," said Nelson Lee.

The journey was brief. Lee pulled up outside the police station in Bannington, and Mr. Manners fairly ran into the building. The detective was at his heels, the boys bringing up the rear.

"I'm glad you've arrived, Mr. Lee," said Inspector Jameson, who was just inside. "You, too, Mr. Manners. Do you mind coming into my private office?"

The boys piled in, too—although the inspector frowned a little as he noticed this.

"What have you to tell us?" asked Mr. Manners hoarsely. "Don't spare me, inspector! If there is some tragic news concerning my daughter, let me have it straight. I am in no mood for delays!"

The rather stolid police officer shook his head.

"There's nothing tragic, Mr. Manners—in fact, there's nothing at all," he replied.

"We've absolutely no news concerning your daughter. As far as we can tell, she has disappeared without leaving a trace."

"Then why—"

"But there's something else," said the inspector grimly. "Your daughter is not the only one, Mr. Manners. Nineteen other schoolboys and schoolgirls vanished yesterday evening at approximately the same hour as Miss Manners!"

There was a momentary silence; this startling news had come as a kind of bombshell.

"Can't be coincidence," went on Jameson. "It's an organised business. Kidnapping on a wholesale scale. All the boys and girls affected are from schools in South-East England. Reports have been coming in since early morning—and Heaven alone knows what the number will amount to before they've done!"

"But can't you do something?" asked Mr. Manners fiercely. "This is appalling! Wholesale kidnapping! I never dreamed— What

about Scotland Yard?" he demanded. "Surely Scotland Yard has taken it up?"

"Of course, sir," replied the inspector. "It's too big for us—too widespread. I tell you, it's an organised gang at work."

"My only sainted aunt!" murmured Handforth.

There was a look of relief in Nelson Lee's eyes as he laid a hand on the aircraft engineer's arm.

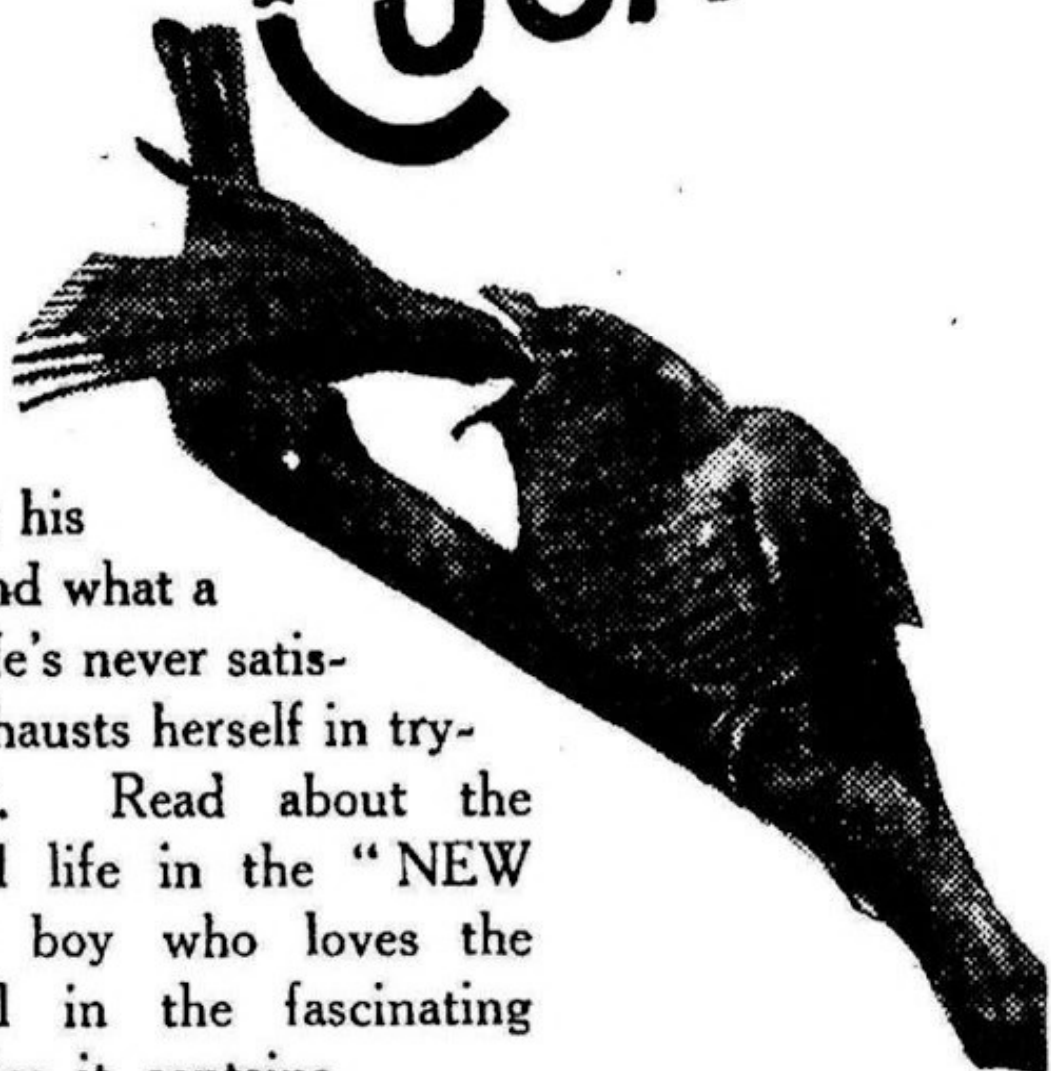
"This is good news, Manners," he said evenly.

"Good news?" repeated Mr. Manners, staring.

"Certainly it is good news," repeated Lee. "If Irene had been the only one to disappear, we might have had reason to fear that something tragic had happened to her, but now we know that she is but one of many. These kidnappers, you may be sure, will do no harm to their young victims. You are a rich man, Manners—and Brewster's father is a rich man. There will be developments be-

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fore long; this is an audacious attempt to extort money from you. I will warrant that the parents of all the other boys and girls are wealthy, too."

"They are," put in Inspector Jameson quickly. "In every case, the victims are the sons and daughters of rich and influential people. I don't mind telling you, gentlemen, that the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard himself is on this case—and he's mightily worried about it, too. It's the biggest sensation for years!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Prisoners!

IRENE MANNERS opened her eyes languidly.

She felt very comfortable and drowsy. She turned luxuriously in bed, and was thankful that she had awakened of her own accord, and not by the clanging of the rising-bell. It wasn't time to get up yet.

"Hallo! Here's another one coming round," said a voice, as though from a great distance. It was a girl's voice, eager and tense. Irene, in her dreamy condition, tried to place that voice. She couldn't do so; it wasn't a voice that she knew. She turned over again, and now she felt a hand suddenly placed on her shoulder.

"Wake up!" whispered somebody. "We want to know if you can tell us anything about this queer business."

Irene opened her eyes in some bewilderment, and saw a dark-haired girl of about fifteen bending over her. On the other side of the bed were two other girls of very much the same age. They were only half-dressed, and they seemed frightened.

The extraordinary thing was that they were perfect strangers. Irene had never set eyes on them before. The drowsy feeling began to leave her, and she sat up in bed, looking about her in wonderment and surprise. There were other beds, all in a row, and she could see a number of other girls in the room, too.

"Why, where am I?" asked Irene faintly. "This isn't my bed-room! What's happened?"

"That's what we want to know," said one of the other girls.

Irene shook herself. Her head was thick and "fuzzy." She had no headache, but everything seemed to be muddled. Her eyes opened wider as she took in her surroundings. This wasn't an ordinary room—or even an ordinary school dormitory. The walls were of granite, grey and forbidding; the windows were mere slits, high up in the walls, and out of reach. Bright sunshine was streaming through, but it was impossible to see anything except the sky. Irene found that there were seven other girls in addition to herself. Most of them were awake. They were all strangers.

"But this is silly!" she whispered. "I must be dreaming!"

"That's what we all thought," said the dark-haired girl. "Who are you? What's your name?"

"I'm Irene Manners."

"What's your school?"

"The Moor View School."

"I'm Joan Dixon," said the dark-haired girl. "I'm from Wesley Grammar School."

"I don't understand!" protested Irene. She was awake in real earnest now. Suddenly she started, and her blue eyes opened wider. Memory was returning to her. "I know



now!" she went on breathlessly. "That motor-car! I had a telegram from my mother, and I went to Bannington to meet her, and when I got into the car somebody took hold of me—I struggled—but I don't seem to remember—"

"Just the same!" said Joan Dixon, nodding. "It seems that we were all tricked in the same way."

"Tricked!" exclaimed Irene.

Within a very few minutes she knew all that was to be known. These other girls had met with precisely the same fate as herself; and the thing had been done in a similar manner, with one or two trivial variations. Now they had all awakened in this strange room with the granite walls. What was more, it was full daylight, proving that they must have been unconscious for well over twelve hours.

"We've been kidnapped—all of us!" said one of the girls. "Goodness only knows what it means. But I must say it's a bit of an adventure, isn't it? We don't know who did it, and we don't know where we are, and we don't know what's going to happen to us next. I say, what a thrill!"

"Oh, don't!" sobbed one of the others, in a frightened voice. "It's dreadful! What ever will become of us?"

"Drugged—and kidnapped!" said Joan Dixon, in an awed voice. "That's what happened to us. And while we were unconscious somebody must have brought us to this rummy place—yes, and undressed us, and put us to bed, too!"

"Well, they did the thing properly," said Irene. "They made us nice and comfy."

They all turned and stared as they heard a key grate in a lock. There was a big door in one of the walls—a heavy oaken door, with

iron studs. It opened slowly, and the girls waited, their hearts beating faster, hardly knowing what to expect. Their chief sensation was one of relief when they beheld a middle-aged woman, dressed in a neat blue linen frock with a white apron. She was closely followed by a second woman, similarly attired.

"You are all awake?" asked the first woman. "Dress yourselves at once. Luncheon will be ready in half an hour!"

This was too amazing.

"Where are we?" asked Irene. "Who brought us here, and what is this place?"

"I must tell you at once, young ladies, that none of your questions will be answered," said the woman shortly.

"But it's only right that we should know —"

"I am sorry, but no questions will be answered," repeated the woman. "You will find wash-basins along the other wall, and there's plenty of water and soap. I hope you won't be late for luncheon, because the meal is a hot one and it will spoil."

The girls were more astounded than ever; everything seemed so commonplace—and yet, at the same time, it was bizarre and mysterious.

"Well, this beats me!" said Irene, rubbing her fingers through her short shingled locks. "Perhaps we'd better get dressed straight away."

It did not take the girls long to wash, and to don their clothing. The women had gone, and they had not locked the door again. Fully dressed, and charged with curiosity, the eight girls opened the door and looked out. There was a wide stone passage with an arched roof, leading straight ahead, and again there were the slit-like windows, high up.

"Must be a prison of some sort," suggested Joan Dixon. "Or perhaps an old castle."

They suddenly found themselves in a great central hall, with a lofty arched roof. Two great doors stood wide open, allowing the sunlight to flood in. If this was a prison, it was a curious one. But the girls hardly noticed the open doors, or the set tables in the middle of the hall. Their attention was attracted by a dozen schoolboys, who stood about in groups, talking excitedly in low voices. If the schoolgirls were astonished, the schoolboys were staggered.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated one of them. "Girls here!"

"My only aunt!" breathed one of the girls. "Boys!"

And then Irene Manners ran forward, her eyes glowing.

"Hal!" she cried. "It's really you, isn't it?"

Hal Brewster, of the River House School, uttered an exclamation of joyous astonishment.

"Are you here, too, Irene?" he ejaculated. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

Out of all that collection of boys and girls, Irene Manners and Hal Brewster were the

only two who knew one another. Irene soon found that Hal had met with precisely the same experience as herself.

"It must have been the same car!" said Brewster, breathing hard. "I was collared about ten minutes after you, and I remember that, as I got in, I noticed something on the floor. It must have been you—covered over with a rug! Then somebody grabbed me. I struggled a bit, and I didn't know anything else until I woke up in this place."

Brewster's presence gave Irene confidence; she did not feel so isolated.

"Well, it can't be a practical joke," she said, shaking her pretty head. "Nobody would play such a joke as this. Where are we, Hal? Do you know?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," replied the River House boy. "It's a sort of castle—part of it in ruins. Come and look here."

He led the way to the door, where some of the other girls were congregated. Irene saw a big, quaint old courtyard, with a range of grey buildings, picturesque and grim. There were turrets and battlements, and curious little round towers. The place was like an old feudal castle of the Middle Ages.

"We're allowed to walk about as we like, it seems," explained Hal, "but this courtyard is completely enclosed by these high walls. They're over thirty feet up, Renie, and there's no hope of climbing them."

"But what's beyond?" asked the girl breathlessly. "I mean, where are we? I don't remember such a big castle as this anywhere in Sussex."

"I don't believe we're in Sussex," said Brewster, frowning. "That motor-car must have made a pretty long journey. We might be in Yorkshire—or Scotland—or Wales—or Cornwall. It's impossible to tell. Nobody remembers anything, and none of the men here will answer questions."

"What about climbing up to the roof?" suggested Irene. "We could see the surrounding country then, couldn't we? We might be able to get a clue—"

"No good," interrupted Hal. "We've tried that. There are only two staircases, and both of these are barricaded up. We're not allowed on the upper floors."

A gong sounded, and they turned. They found a tall, distinguished-looking man standing at the head of the main table. He was different from the guards the boys had hitherto seen. This man was middle-aged, with iron-grey hair, and a face which told of great strength of character. It was by no means a sinister face; yet the eyes were hard and steely.

"Luncheon is ready, boys and girls," he said, in a deep, resonant voice. "Come to the tables; I have something to say to you before we commence the meal."

They gathered nearer, filled with curiosity. "First and foremost, I want to assure you that you are in no danger," continued the man with the iron-grey hair. "While you are staying under this roof you will be treated



A dazzling beam of light suddenly flashed out, showing up the three boys with startling distinctness.

with every kindness and consideration—always providing that you cause no trouble, and that you obey orders. These orders, I may say, will be of the simplest.”

“Who are you?” asked Irene boldly.

“I? Well, perhaps it is only right that you should know something about your host,” replied the man dryly. “I am the King.”

“The King!”

“The King of Kidnappers,” smiled the man. “Your parents and guardians are being communicated with at this very moment; and in due course, if my very reasonable demands are acceded to, you will be restored safely to your homes.”

“In other words,” said Hal Brewster bluntly, “you’re a crook?”

“A crude way of putting it, my boy, but I cannot deny the statement,” replied the Kidnapper. “Yes, I am a crook—but I venture to suggest that I am not an ordinary crook. Have I treated you harshly? Have I subjected you to indignities and torment? You were brought here in comfort; you are provided with excellent sleeping accommodation; and your food, throughout your stay, will be of the best. You are my prisoners,

and you are valuable prisoners; therefore you will be treated with every care."

The boys and girls hardly knew what to say in answer to this; they could only stare wonderingly at the King of Kidnappers.

"And where are we?" asked Brewster, at length.

"Ah, that is a subject upon which I can answer no questions," said the man. "We are ready? Splendid! Let the meal be served."

He sat down, and men came round with food; excellent food, too.

CHAPTER 4.

The Clue of the Abandoned Car!

NELSON LEE discovered nothing of importance in Bannington.

He and the eager cubs went over the ground carefully. They visited the railway station, and they questioned all sorts of people, but they were only going over the ground that the police had already traversed; no information of any kind was forthcoming. Nobody had noticed Irene at the station, and nobody had seen how she had been kidnapped.

"It's baffling—absolutely baffling!" said Mr. Manners desperately. "What are we

to do, Lee? My girl is only one amongst twenty, but that does not alter the seriousness of the situation."

"At least, it hints that Irene is in no danger," replied Lee. "This kidnapping gang has seized the boys and girls for one purpose—extorting money from parents. It is hardly likely, therefore, that the young victims will be in any way harmed."

"Why don't they communicate with me?" demanded the father. "I'll pay! If I can only get Irene back——"

"You must think carefully before you agree to the first demand that is made of you," interrupted Lee, shaking his head. "Too many parents, I am afraid, will be ready to pay up, and that would be playing into the crooks' hands."

They were at the police station now, and Inspector Jameson hurried up to them, his eyes eager.

"Something fresh, anyhow, gentlemen," he announced. "A big limousine has been found near Guildford, abandoned in an old stackyard. The Guildford police think that it is connected with this kidnapping affair."

Nelson Lee heard a few more details, and then he nodded.

"As there is nothing for us to learn in Bannington, Manners, it might be as well to take a trip to Guildford and examine this abandoned car," he said. "We'll start off at once."



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.

A Wash-out!

An M.P. who was to have addressed a meeting was not able to turn up because part of the railway had been destroyed by heavy rains. He sent this message:

"Cannot come—wash out on line."

Back came the answer:

"Never mind—come anyway. Borrow a shirt."

(S. Hopley, 115, County Road, Walton, Liverpool, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

A Bed-time Story!

Thin One: "When do you do your hardest work?"

Fat One: "Before breakfast."

Thin One: "What do you do?"

Fat One: "Try to get out of bed."

(S. Hughes, Bishops Lydeard, Nr. Taunton, Somerset, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Safety First!

"And what are you going to be when you grow up, sonny?" asked grandpa.

"I'm going to be a soldier!" answered sonny proudly.

"But you might get killed, you know."

"Who by?"

"By the enemy," explained grandpa.

"Then I'll be the enemy," said sonny, promptly.

(D. Young, 20, Roseneath Road, Clapham Common, S.W.11, has been awarded a penknife.)

Fired!

The negro woman walked into an insurance office.

"Does you hab any of dat fire insurance here?" she enquired.

"We do," answered the clerk. "What do you want to insure?"

"My husband," was the reply.

"Then you don't want fire insurance," smiled the clerk. "What you want is a life-insurance policy."

"No, I wants a fire insurance," persisted the woman. "Dat man's been fired five times in de last two weeks!"

(W. B. Vickers, "Carre Arms" Hotel, Sleaford, Lincs, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

WHEN they arrived at the old stack-yard—with the cub detectives in the rear of the car—they found an old friend there. Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, was on the job.

"Just got here," he announced, as he shook hands with Lee. "I heard you were on this case, old man. Can't keep you out of anything for long, can we? Anything new at your end?"

"No."

"Well, let's hope that we can find something here," said the Yard man. "We've identified the car, anyway. It's one that was stolen from a parking place in London yesterday afternoon. Belongs to Lord somebody-or-other, I think, but that's neither here nor there."

A local inspector, who had already looked over the car, produced a tiny scrap of torn newspaper.

"We found this on the floor, screwed up," he said. "I don't suppose it's of any importance, but you can never tell."

The scrap of newspaper was dirty and crumpled, but it was instructive in a way. It happened to be a portion which contained the date—and it was the previous day's date. A part of the newspaper's name could also be discerned—"les Daily Post."

"Hallo, hallo! This looks important," said Lennard keenly. "This is a provincial newspaper of some kind."

"The 'South Wales Daily Post,' I should think," nodded Nelson Lee.

"By Jove, you're right!" said the inspector. "It might indicate that this car was in South Wales last night, eh? Looks like a clue."

"We don't know—yet," said Lee.

THE car was carefully examined, and before long a gold bracelet came to light. It was found, bent and twisted, pushed down at the back of the rear cushions. Handforth gave a yell when he saw it.

"That's Irene's, sir!" he ejaculated.

"You mustn't be too hasty, Handforth," said Lee warningly. "This is an ordinary gold bracelet, similar to thousands which are worn by schoolgirls. What do you say, Manners?"

Hobart Manners took the bracelet, a frown in his eyes.

"I don't know," he confessed. "It might be Irene's, but I couldn't be sure."

"But it is Irene's!" persisted Handforth. "I ought to know, sir! I gave it to her for a Christmas box."

"Oh! That's different," cut in the chief inspector. "You definitely identify this young 'un? Where did you buy it from?"

"From Campbell & Horton's, in the Strand—and I scratched my initials on the inside, too."

Labour-Saving I

Nervous Customer: "Why do you tell me all these horrible stories about ghosts and haunted houses while you're cutting my hair?"

Barber: "There's a very good reason, sir. When I tell these stories it makes people's hair stand on end."

(J. Sherbrooke, Pembroke Lodge, Southbourne, Hants, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

News to Him!

Visitor: "I see you have a college in your town, dear boy. Tell me who founded it?"

Village child: "Dunno, lady. Never knowed it was lost!"

(G. Duddridge, 13, Hind Street, Newtown, Retford, Notts, has been awarded a penknife.)

Nasty!

Small Boy (in hosier's shop): "I want a collar for my dad."

Assistant: "One like mine?"

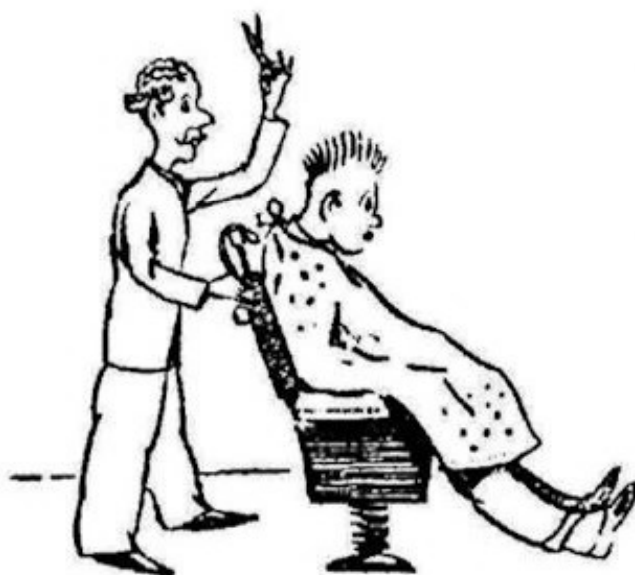
Small Boy: "No, a clean one."

(D. Campbell, 26, Adeline Street, Goole, Yorkshire, has been awarded a penknife.)

His Collection!

Visitor: "Do you collect threepenny bits?"

Freddie: "Yes."



Visitor: "Well, here's one. How many have you got now?"

Freddie: "One."

(P. Barrowman, 46, Nether Hall Road, Doncaster, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Ignorance!

Captain: "Well, Private Smith, what did you have for dinner?"

Private: "Taters, sir."

Captain: "What does he mean by 'taters,' sergeant?"

Sergeant: "It's only his higgerance, sir; he means spuds."

(H. Rowe, 92, Lower Union Lane, Torquay, has been awarded a penknife.)

Doing His Share!

Pat, Jock and Bill, seeing a hen-house for sale, decided to buy it. It was rather a formidable affair, and would take two to carry it. After a lot of wrangling, this task fell upon the shoulders of Pat and Bill.

While walking along the hot country lane the perspiring Jock missed Pat.

"Just let me lay my hands on that work-shy Irish spalpleen——!"

"Begorrah! What are ye grouching about?" came from inside the hen-house. "Oi'm doing my share. Oi'm carrying the perches!"

(H. Holder, 18a, Furness Road, Harlesden, N.W.10, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

"The youngster's right," said Lennard. "Look here, Lee—here are the firm's marks—'C. & H., 15 carat.' And here are the scratched initials."

"So Irene must have been in this car last night," said Mr. Manners tensely. "She was taken to South Wales!"

"Not necessarily," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head.

Another significant discovery was made a minute or two later. Hidden under the matting in the front of the car a return-half of a railway ticket turned up. The date was only two or three days old, and the ticket was from Swansea to Llandilo.

"We're getting somewhere," said Lennard, in a satisfied tone. "This girl, at least, must have been taken to South Wales—probable to a place in the neighbourhood of Llandilo. We shall have to set the telegraphs to work at once."

"What do you think, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

Nelson Lee drew the cubs aside.

"This is a false trail, young 'uns," he said grimly. "I shall warn Lennard, but I don't suppose he'll take much notice. All this is too palpable—too straightforward. These crooks, who were clever enough to kidnap twenty boys and girls and get them away without trace, would never be so careless as to abandon a car in this condition. The bracelet, the scrap of newspaper, the ticket—they were deliberately planted in this car so that they would be found."

Handforth's face fell.

"Then we're as far away from finding Irene as ever!" he groaned.

Ten minutes later Lennard, who had been away to telephone to Scotland Yard, came back in a hurry.

"Another development," he announced. "I'm summoned back to the Yard at once. You'll be wanted there, too, Mr. Manners. Messages have been received by most of the parents, and there is to be an important conference in the chief commissioner's office in an hour's time. We shall be able to get there in good time if we start at once."

"I'll attend this conference, if you don't mind," said Nelson Lee.

"Of course," agreed Lennard. "You're acting on behalf of Mr. Manners, and it's necessary for you to be present. I believe the Home Secretary himself will attend, so you can see how important it is."

CHAPTER 5.

The Kidnapper's Instructions

THE RIGHT HON. LORD SUDBURY, Secretary of State for Home Affairs, paced up and down the chief commissioner's office in Scotland Yard with short, nervous strides.

"The whole thing is intolerable!" he declared. "We must do something to circumvent this outrageous criminal, Sanders."

Sir John Sanders, the Chief Commissioner, nodded.

"Unless we do, Scotland Yard will be held up to ridicule by every newspaper in the country," he said. "But I must confess, Sudbury, that I don't know how we can even start. This is different from anything else that we have ever had to tackle."

Lord Sudbury, short and stout, was looking unusually florid to-day. He was a mild-mannered man, as a rule; but the recent events had rather put him off his balance. He was famous as a politician, and he had a big reputation as a diplomat, but the present situation had him rather floored.

Before they could continue the discussion Chief-inspector Lennard was announced, and Nelson Lee. They were ushered in by a plain-clothes man, and Lennard quickly told of the latest facts which had come to light.

"I've got through to Swansea and to Llandilo, and inquiries are being made now," he concluded. "Mr. Lee doesn't think much of this line of investigation—he believes that those things were left in the abandoned car as a blind—but, of course, we couldn't neglect it."

"I am glad you are engaged on this case, Mr. Lee," said the Home Secretary warmly. "I cannot forget your services to the country in that ugly Balghanistan affair, some time ago. You've heard of the printed letters, of course?"

"No."

"Well, it seems that most of the parents of these missing boys and girls have received printed letters," replied the Home Secretary. "They have been subjected to minute examination, but they have revealed no finger-prints or other clues. The parents, I may say, are now waiting in an ante-room. They are to be brought into this conference when the chief commissioner is ready."

"May I see one of these letters?" asked Lee.

He had sent Nipper and Handforth and the other cubs home to Gray's Inn Road. There was nothing that they could do at Scotland Yard; but he had consoled them by saying that there might be some work for them later on. Handforth was particularly frantic; he wanted to be "up and doing." Unfortunately, there was no line upon which to work.

Nelson Lee examined one of the printed letters. They were all precisely the same, he understood. It was short and polite, and stated that the kidnapped boy—or girl—was quite safe. He would be returned safely upon payment of twenty thousand pounds. Instructions would be sent later, the letter stated, as to how this money should be paid over. The captives would be dealt with separately—they would be taken in turn—and meanwhile the rest would be well cared for.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Lee?" asked the chief commissioner.

"This is an unfortunate business, Sir John," replied Lee. "The man behind this

wholesale kidnapping is a man with brains. It is certain that he has a fairly large gang to help him. I am afraid it will be a big task to lay him by the heels. With all those hostages in his power he has the upper hand."

"He has a great deal of audacity in thinking that he can defy Scotland Yard," retorted Sir John grimly.

"The situation is awkward," said Lee. "This man is certain to have spies, and as long as Scotland Yard engages actively in the search for the missing boys and girls this kidnapper will lie low."

Before long the parents were admitted into the conference. It was a big gathering of very distinguished people—between thirty and forty ladies and gentlemen of high rank and wealth. Not all the fathers or mothers could come, but every kidnapped schoolboy or schoolgirl was represented. Mr. and Mrs. Manners were both present, as also were Hal Brewster's parents. Prominent amongst the agitated throng were Lord and Lady Fairleigh, the parents of the Hon. Joan Dixon, and there were other people of title, too.

"Something must be done—and at once," declared Lord Fairleigh, who was a big, stern-featured man. "Our children are in danger and we must help them, no matter how big the cost."

"But, my dear sir, do you realise what that cost actually is?" asked Lord Sudbury. "There are twenty victims, and this daring criminal demands twenty thousands pounds for each. That represents close upon half a million sterling!"

"And if this money is paid over, the criminal will become more daring—he will be encouraged to kidnap other schoolboys and schoolgirls," said the chief commissioner gravely. "I must impress upon you, ladies and gentlemen, that this whole situation is fraught with danger. For the sake of the country, for the sake of law and order, you must think twice before giving in weakly to these exorbitant demands."

"We want our children back!" said one of the mothers fiercely.

"Of course—of course!" replied Sir John. "I realise that, madam, and you can rely upon us to do everything within our power."

"And what can you do?" asked Sir George Brewster bluntly. "This kidnapper will take no action at all if he has reason to suspect that you are trying to trap him. He has got our children, and he will hold them. It may be months before we see them again if there is any ridiculous delay. I am prepared to pay this demand and to get my boy back."

"Hear, hear!" said some of the others.

"It is all very distressing," said the Home Secretary gently, "but you must think of

your duty to the State, ladies and gentlemen. While admitting that your sons and daughters are in a position of peril, I must point out that it would be disastrous to surrender tamely to these impudent demands."

He looked at Nelson Lee, and then at the chief commissioner.

"It is my suggestion, Sir John, that Scotland Yard should pretend to be indifferent," he went on. "Let there be no police activity. I further suggest that Mr. Nelson Lee shall be commissioned to investigate in secret. We know that he is a man of remarkable talents; he did the country a splendid service quite recently in that Balghanistan affair. In my opinion, Mr. Lee will have more chance to unmask these rascals than the whole of Scotland Yard."

"And where will Mr. Lee commence his search?" asked Lord Fairleigh.

"In South Wales, I should suggest," replied the Home Secretary. "There are indications that the kidnappers have taken their victims to that part of the country."

"The indications are false," said Lee quietly. "All these clues that lead us to South Wales are in the nature of a herring across the trail. Not for one

moment do I believe that the boys and girls are to be found in South Wales."

"Perhaps you don't know, Mr. Lee, that there is a watermark in the paper on which these letters were printed?" asked Lord Sudbury. "That watermark is the private trade-mark of a big firm of Cardiff printers and stationers."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Merely another proof of the cleverness of these criminals," he said. "If I am to undertake this case—and I am eager and willing to do so—I must be allowed to take my own course and to work with a free hand."

An interruption came before anything further could be said. It seemed that a messenger had been sent post haste from Sir George Brewster's London house, and he brought with him a letter which had just been delivered.

"THIS is of vital importance, ladies and gentlemen," said Sir John Sanders, after the letter had been handed over to him by Sir George.

"This is a second communication from the Kidnapper."

"Perhaps we have all received a second letter?" suggested one of the ladies.

"No; this is especially addressed to Sir George," said the chief commissioner. "The criminals have outlined a definite form of activity."



Eagerly Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives pushed on as, in the distance, looking vague and awe-inspiring, they saw the towering pinnacle of rock which was known as the Graumarek Crag.



He glanced at the letter again, deeply concerned. It was printed in exactly the same way as the others, and it ran as follows:

"Dear Sir George,—Your son will be restored to you if you faithfully carry out the following instructions:

"You are to take the midnight train to-night, Friday, from King's Cross to York. You are to travel alone, and you must occupy a non-corridor compartment. You must carry with you a strong leather bag containing twenty thousand pounds in gold, and this bag, for reasons which you will soon understand, must be coated with a form of luminous paint which will show up prominently in the darkness.

"At some point between London and York you will see three purple flashes, followed by three blue flashes, from the left side of the train. As soon as these flashes appear you must throw the bag out of the window.

"Carry out these instructions faithfully and to the letter and your son will be returned to you, safe and unharmed, within twenty-four hours. But if you attempt to frustrate my plans—if detectives accompany you on the train—if any effort is made to pull the communication-cord after the bag has been thrown out—my agents will not show themselves, and your son will remain in captivity.

"I will add that this is to be a test case. If it succeeds, the other young people in my power will be restored on similar lines. Fail in this, and it is highly probable that you will never see your son again. Remember—travel alone, and throw the bag out the instant you see the signals.

"THE KIDNAPPER."

Nelson Lee nodded after he had read this extraordinary communication.

"This is all in keeping with the man's previous work," he said. "It is a clever plan, and well-nigh foolproof."

"I shall obey," declared Sir George Brewster, his face haggard with anxiety.

"I shall take this trip from London to York, and I shall carry with me that bag containing twenty thousand pounds in gold."

"You must—you must!" cried one of the mothers. "If you don't all our children may be murdered."

"And if you do, this audacious criminal will be encouraged to further lawbreaking," said the chief commissioner grimly. "The

Eagerly Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives pushed on as, in the distance, looking vague and awe-inspiring, they saw the towering pinnacle of rock which was known as the Graumarek Crag.



newspapers will ridicule us and—"

"What do I care about the newspapers, sir, or of Scotland Yard?" broke in Sir George hotly. "My son is in peril. I am a rich man, and I can easily afford the sum of money this man demands. He shall have it. Not for one moment will I consent to my son being placed in any unnecessary danger."

"I agree," said Nelson Lee. "I think, Lord Sudbury—and you, Sir John—that Sir George is right. It is better to pay this money over—to obey the demand strictly to the letter."

"But, my dear Lee, is it advisable?" asked the Home Secretary dubiously.

"It is better for this criminal to believe that he has the upper hand," replied the great detective. "What can you do, even if you decide to set a trap? The Kidnapper's precautions are too cunning. Even if detectives travel on this train—and even

if the train is stopped after the bag has been thrown out—nothing can come of it. You would not be able to get back to the spot where the bag was dropped until long after the Kidnapper's agents had flown. Far better to pay the money, and let the crooks believe that they are victorious."

"Let them believe!" echoed the chief commissioner bitterly. "They *will* be victorious!"

"Not necessarily, Sir John," replied Lee. "The chief reason I advise this course of action is because it will give me a chance to investigate. I am perfectly willing to undertake this case, but, as I have said, I shall want a free hand."

"I am willing to place my trust in Mr. Lee," said Sir George Brewster. "Pray do not misunderstand me, gentlemen," he added, looking at the Home Secretary and the chief commissioner. "It is not that I

NELSON LEE left soon afterwards, accompanied by Mr. Hobart Manners and Sir George Brewster. Lee meant to superintend the preparation of that bag of gold himself.

"And I want an earnest talk with you, Manners," he added. "You can help me in this. If things go right, we shall locate your daughter before her turn comes; my desire is to rescue all these boys and girls as quickly as possible—and to recover Sir George's twenty thousand pounds, too. I am only willing that it should be paid over because I am hopeful of recovering it."

"But what can I do?" asked Mr. Manners. "You are not suggesting that you should travel on this train, are you? You are not an official detective, I know, but these criminals are certain to be familiar

"No, I shall not travel on that train," replied Lee. "That part of the arrangement must be carried out to the letter—Sir George must travel alone. The Kidnapper is certain to have his agents watching at King's Cross, and if they see the slightest sign of organised attempt to thwart them, they will abandon the project."

For some hours Nelson Lee was busy with his preparations. Towards evening he became aware of the fact that his chambers were being watched. Looking through the window into Gray's Inn Road, he saw two men eyeing the house with marked interest. Very obviously it was known that he had been interesting himself in the great kidnapping case. During the evening Nelson Lee telephoned to Scotland Yard; Chief Detective-inspector Lennard came along to Gray's Inn Road,

and, accompanied by several of the cubs, they all set off for Paddington. They took the evening train to South Wales.

Nelson Lee was satisfied that spies had followed them, and had watched them commence their journey towards the West of England.



have a lack of faith in your abilities; but, Mr. Lee, acting privately, stands far more chance of success than the whole police force of the country."

There was a general chorus of approval; and Lord Sudbury and Sir John Sanders bowed to the voice of the majority.

CHAPTER 6.

No Escape!

SEATED in a small chamber in the mysterious castle, the Kidnapper partook of coffee and liqueur. His only companion was a youngish man with a foreign appearance. This man had all the signs of dissipation in his face; his chin was weak, and he lacked character.

"I'm nervous about this, Hanson," he was saying. "It's too big. I can't believe that it will succeed."

The Kidnapper eyed him almost contemptuously.

"All my life I have done big things, my dear count," he replied. "I am not frightened because this project is ambitious. The mere fact that the police of the entire country are in arms against us does not worry me. Our preparations have been so complete that we are certain of success."

"But if there should be a hitch——"

"There will be no hitch," interrupted the Kidnapper curtly. "It is not my habit to boast, but I will tell you that I have never failed—never blundered."

"No?" said the man called the count. "You did not blunder, then, ten years ago?"

The Kidnapper gripped the arms of his chair and his eyes flashed ominously.

"No!" he said, his words cutting like a whip-lash. "I did not blunder ten years ago. It was one of my associates who blundered—who ruined me."

Hanson! Could this man be the notorious Rupert Hanson, the great City financier who, ten years ago, had been sent to penal servitude for seven years for fraud? It was a fact. Since coming out of prison, Hanson had disappeared; nobody knew what had become of him, but it was thought that he had gone abroad—perhaps to the United States, to recommence his criminal practices under a false name.

There had been a tremendous sensation in London at the time. Hanson was a genius—a financier who could juggle with millions and make money apparently out of nothing. His crash had been spectacular and sensational. Tens of thousands of innocent people had been involved, and many great banks had suffered enormous losses.

Hanson, in spite of his Public school and University education was, at heart, a criminal. He had proved this in his financial jugglings. He was still a criminal—and now he was hardened and embittered by his terms of penal servitude. No longer was it possible for him to own a great Park Lane mansion, and to move in London's best circles. He was an outcast—an ex-convict—a creature to be avoided. So he was now exercising his genius in a different direction; he had turned outlaw; his hand was against society in general.

"The test will come to-night," he said. "Sir George Brewster will comply. Of that I am certain. We shall receive the first twenty thousand pounds before the sun again rises, my dear count. As for the police——"

He snapped his fingers. "That for the police!"

IN another part of the castle the captive schoolboys and schoolgirls were occupying the evening hours by talking and discussing the everlastingly fascinating subject. Where were they? How did they get here? How were they to get away? How long would this captivity last?

"It's a funny thing if we can't do something," Irene was saying. "There are guards about, I know, and the walls round this castle are thirty feet high, but if only one of us could get out it wouldn't take long to bring help."

Hal Brewster, who was in this particular group, nodded.

"I'm going to try it, too!" he said in a low voice. "These two chaps are going to help me."

The "two chaps" were youngsters of about his own age, named Smith and Winter.

"What are you going to do?" asked Irene eagerly.

"There's a narrow passage which leads to a sort of side door," explained Winter, also lowering his voice. "We had a look at it earlier, before darkness. The door doesn't seem to be guarded at all, and it leads out into the rear courtyard."

"But what can you do, even if you got out into the courtyard?" asked one of the girls. "You could never climb those walls!"

"Well, I'm going to have a shot at it," declared Hal grimly. "The walls are very rough, and there are lots of crevices between the stones."

"And what if you fall when you are near the top?" asked Irene, with concern. "You'd come a dreadful cropper, Hal! You might even kill yourself!"

Hal Brewster grinned.

"I'll risk it!" he said cheerfully. "Can't expect to do anything unless we take a chance."

HALF an hour later, when everything was quiet, Hal Brewster and his two companions strolled carelessly out of the main hall, and were soon in that narrow passage they had spoken about. They had not gone far before Hal pressed his companions back into a deep crevice. A yellowish light was gleaming some distance ahead.

"The guards!" muttered Hal.

Two men were approaching, carrying a lantern. They were talking as they walked, and the subject of their talk was singularly commonplace.

"... nice girl, too," one of them was saying. "These Welsh girls want a lot of beating, Ted. It's your turn to go out into the town, but I wish you'd change places with me for to-night."

The other man chuckled.

"I don't mind," he replied. "You can go into Llandilo if you want to. You always were a bit of a devil with the girls, eh? Who did you say she is?"

They went past that recess without turning their heads, and Hal Brewster and his two companions breathed more freely as the men's footsteps died away. The boys were left in total darkness.

"Did you hear?" whispered Smith eagerly at length.

"Yes, rather!" said Hal. "Welsh girls. Llandilo. My only Sunday topper! We must be somewhere in Wales."

"Perhaps this is Llandilo Castle?" suggested Winter. "I've never heard of a castle at Elandilo, but there may be one."

"If only I can get out, I can run into the town and fetch help," said Hal tensely. "The townspeople, as well as the police, will lend a hand. I'll bring a giddy army up here, and we'll storm the castle in the good old-fashioned style."

It was an encouraging thought, and the three schoolboys were excited and eager when they found that little door at the end of the passage unguarded. Without a sound they shot the bolts and crept out into the dark courtyard.

Overhead the stars were gleaming brilliantly and the air was crisp and invigorating. Outlined against the sky were the grim battlements of the old feudal castle, and the great outer wall, with its little towers and embrasures, stood out in black contrast to the star-spangled sky. The boys halted halfway across the courtyard, listening. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

"We can't be near any town!" whispered Brewster. "I expect Llandilo is some miles away. This old castle is perched out among the Welsh mountains for a cert. Still, it doesn't make any difference—once I'm out, I can find a village."

"Perhaps there'll be a telephone there," murmured one of the others.

They crept along to the wall, and Hal, feeling carefully, had no difficulty in finding deep crevices which provided him with strong fingerhold.

"Good luck!" whispered Smith.

"Thanks, old man," said Hal. "I'll do my best—"

He broke off with a gasp. Without warning a flash of brilliant light shot out from the castle. It wavered for a moment, swung round, and fell upon the three boys at the foot of the great wall. It showed them up with startling distinctness. They turned and stared into that dazzling beam. It was a searchlight, operating from one of the castle windows.

"I think I have warned you, my young friends, that it will be inadvisable to make any attempts to escape," said a gentle but ominous voice.

A figure was standing in an arched doorway, near at hand. It was the figure of the Kidnapper.

"Keep them back!" hissed Hal. "I'll try to climb—"

"Foolish boy!" snapped the Kidnapper.

A number of men ran up from the darkness, and after a brief scuffle the three school-

boys were seized and held. They were marched straight into the great central hall where the others were gathered, most of them rather scared.

"You three boys have disobeyed my orders," said the Kidnapper, as he stared at the three. "As a punishment for this attempted escape you will be locked in a dungeon."

"You rotter!" shouted Hal. "We've failed this time, but—"

"Take them away!" ordered the Kidnapper. "Lock them in one of the big dungeons, and let them have nothing but



dry bread and plain water for the next two days."

The three prisoners were hauled away, and the Kidnapper turned to the rest.

"Let this be an object lesson to you," he said. "You will have comfort and good food and leisure, providing you remain submissive."

He turned on his heel and strode out, leaving the boys and girls in a fever of apprehension.

CHAPTER 7.

The Midnight Train

THE midnight train for York and the North steamed slowly out of King's Cross station. In a first-class compartment of a non-corridor coach, Sir George Brewster, Bart., sat tense and alert. On the seat beside him was a suitcase, and this contained a strong leather bag, coated with luminous paint.

Sir George knew that this trip was going to be a severe strain on his nerves. Without relaxing his attention for a second he must stare out of the left-hand window, waiting for those purple and blue flashes. He might see them within twenty miles, or he might not see them until the train had covered the greater part of its journey. At any point along that long stretch, covering hundreds of miles, the Kidnapper's agents might be waiting.

Therein lay the cunning of the scheme.

It was impossible for the police to take any action, since they could not know where the crooks would be waiting. To have the whole

line patrolled from London to York was out of the question. In all probability, the signals would be given at a place where the train was travelling at sixty or seventy miles an hour—far out in the open country, miles from any village.

Sir George had arrived at King's Cross unaccompanied. There had been no detectives, no police of any kind. The Kidnapper's instructions had been carried out to the letter. If there were any spies at the great terminus—as was most probable—they must have been satisfied that all was well. It was more likely that these spies were travelling on the very same train.

SOMETIME before midnight two men walked on to a quiet field in the open country just beyond Romford, in Essex. In this field stood a small aeroplane.

"Everything is arranged, Manners," Nelson Lee was saying. "We ought to experience no difficulty in picking up the train. Fortunately, the night is clear and very dark."

"You've said nothing to the Yard people about this stunt, have you?"

"Nothing at all."

"That's just as well," said Mr. Manners. "We are the only ones who know, and there is no chance of the thing leaking out and getting into the hands of the enemy."

They stood near the aeroplane. It was one of the new-fashioned monoplane type, with

an enclosed body—a light machine with an engine of comparatively small horse-power. But it was different from any of its rivals; it was Mr. Hobart Manners' latest product, and it embodied many features which were new in aviation.

"Our only chance, Manners, is to fly high," said Nelson Lee. "You assure me that the engine of this 'plane is quiet?"

"Wait!" replied the aircraft designer. "Somehow, Lee, I think you will be astonished. You think these crooks will be on the look out for a 'plane, eh?"

"It is practically certain," replied Nelson Lee. "They will be on the look out, in fact, for any form of activity. And if they hear the engine of this machine, if they see it in any way, they will defer action. They will allow that train to travel all the way to York and no signals will be given."

"Well, I will guarantee that this machine will be as invisible and as silent in the night sky as a bat itself," replied Mr. Manners. "There can be no absolute silence with an aeroplane, owing to the whistling of the propeller, and, flying low, even this machine would certainly be heard and seen. But at a reasonable height her presence in the night sky will not be suspected."

They both climbed into the 'plane, Lee occupying the rear part of the comfortable enclosed saloon. Mr. Manners was to be the pilot on this trip.

HIT first and ASK afterward

That's the only way to deal with trouble-hunting redskins, in the opinion of the Rio Kid, Boy Outlaw. He's got himself mixed up in another 100 per cent thrilling adventure this week. Adventure in the heart of a desolate plain, with fiery redskins all round him. Every week in the **POPULAR** there's a powerful long complete Western Yarn dealing with the adventures of this ex-cowpuncher daredevil. And if you like stories **THAT LIVE**, that thrill, then these are the tales you want.



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"Ready?" he asked coolly.

"When you are."

Mr. Manners pressed the self-starter. The engine sprang into life, purring as smoothly and as silently as the power unit of a Rolls-Royce car. The pilot suddenly let her go all out, and the machine moved across the field, gathered speed, and then hopped off with graceful ease. The darkness did not seem to affect Mr. Manners in the least. He was familiar with the ground; he had taken off from this field many times.

Climbing steadily, the sturdy little 'plane mounted higher and higher until she was flying at a height of several thousand feet. Mr. Manners' faith in the machine was justified. The engine made only a soft purring sound, which certainly would not be heard by anybody on the ground level; and in the blackness of the night the 'plane would not be seen.

"She's a handy little bus," said Mr. Manners, over his shoulder. "She'll go up to eighty with ease, and maintain a steady flying speed at fifty. She can't stall, and she can't get into a spin, and she can practically fly herself. My company is preparing to produce these 'planes by the hundred."

"We couldn't have a better machine for our particular job," agreed Nelson Lee.

THUS, when the midnight train steamed out of King's Cross, there was a black speck hovering far above, silent and invisible.

Through a specially prepared observation window in the flooring Nelson Lee, using powerful night glasses, kept his eye on all the trains that were coming and going from the great terminus, and just after midnight he picked up the particular train that they were on the look-out for.

Once the Metropolis was left behind, the chase became supremely easy. Flying at a greater height than ever, Mr. Manners kept the express in sight without the least trouble. He flew almost immediately overhead, accommodating his speed to that of the train. So, even if there had been any faint noise coming from the 'plane, it was drowned in the roar and thunder of the express.

Sir George Brewster was having a nerve-trying experience, and so was Nelson Lee. It was easy for Mr. Manners to keep the train in sight below him; but Nelson Lee was on the look-out for those purple and blue flashes. They came sooner than Lee had expected. The train was thundering along at over sixty miles an hour, across a lonely stretch of open country in Cambridgeshire, when, at the side of the line, a gleam of purple showed itself.

Sir George, in the train, saw it at once, and his heart seemed to give a leap. Then came another flash, and another. Then, instantly, three blue flashes followed. They were all dazzlingly brilliant—not merely the flashes from a hand-lamp, but probably some special kind of firework. It was because of this brilliance that they were so quickly

seen by Nelson Lee, far, far above in the night sky.

Sir George did not hesitate for one second. Leaning out of the window, he flung the heavily-laden, luminous bag out on to the wide grass strip beside the permanent way. He stared eagerly, but saw no sign of any human beings. The spot where the flashes had come from was dark and apparently deserted.

"THIS is to be the real test, Manners," said Nelson Lee grimly. "The train has gone now, and these men may possibly hear us. If they do

—"

"They won't," promised Mr. Manners. "I am circling now, and losing height rapidly, with the engine shut right off. She's hardly different from a glider. By using the air currents, I can keep her like this for a considerable time. Not a whisper can be heard on the ground, and it was too dark for her to be seen."

Never once had Lee removed his gaze from the night-glasses. He had caught the bright flash of that luminous bag as it was flung from the train. He had counted upon that from the first—he had relied upon seeing that bag. It was there now—beside the railway line—a tiny, faintly-shimmering spot. A mere speck amongst the surrounding blackness, even with the aid of the powerful glasses.

Nothing happened for some little time. The train had roared on into the distance, and had now completely disappeared. This whole stretch of countryside was quiet and still; no lights were showing anywhere. There was not a house within miles, it seemed. But Nelson Lee had noted one thing—and, to his mind, it was significant. Close to the spot there was a bridge, carrying the main road across the railway.

"Anything happening yet?" asked Mr. Manners tensely.

"No, nothing—the bag's still there," replied Lee. "These beggars are cautious. They're waiting— Ah, it's moving now! I can't see any figures, of course, but the bag must have been lifted. It is being carried along— Yes, it keeps vanishing and reappearing again. There are probably two men, and one of them keeps obstructing my view."

The 'plane circled silently at a height of something under two thousand feet. It was with some little difficulty that Nelson Lee kept his attention concentrated upon that elusive, will-o'-the-wisp speck of luminosity. A glow of satisfaction ran through him. In spite of all the Kidnapper's precautions, his agents were being observed—and they knew nothing of it!

Lee was more keen than ever when he saw that the glowing speck was moving towards the bridge. The grass border along the permanent way now became a steep embankment, and that luminous dot was keeping to the top of the embankment. Then, suddenly, two bright beams of light shot

out; a stretch of the highway was illuminated. The luminous dot became emerged in the brighter light.

"I was right, Manners," said Lee exultantly. They've got a car with them. See! It's moving now. They're off! Follow them, old man!"

"Sure thing," chuckled Manners. "This is a job after my own heart!"

CHAPTER 8.

Nelson Lee Makes Discoveries!

THE car drove back towards London, passing through Cambridge; and at this hour of the night the famous University town was quiet and empty. Mr. Manners still found it easy to follow his quarry at a safe distance.

After Cambridge the car did not keep to the main road, but branched off across country in a direction which, Lee gathered, would take it through Haverhill and so on to Braintree and Chelmsford. Lee was right. Those towns were passed, one after the other. Beyond Chelmsford, the car went down towards the Essex marshes.

"They're going slower," remarked Mr. Manners suddenly.

"So I notice," replied Lee. "Look! The car has turned now—turned at right-angles. It must be going up a side lane— Yes! There's a big house here, Manners. I can just discern the dim shape of the building, with trees surrounding it. There seems to be other buildings, too—great outbuildings, some little distance away on the open marshes."

"Looks as if this is the end of the trip," said Mr. Manners. "I don't like this next thing, Lee. You're taking too much of a risk——"

"The car's lights are out now," said Lee keenly. "Yes, this is the end of the journey. Throttle down again, Manners, and glide off. So long, old man. You can shut the door after me, can't you?"

"Quite easily. But if I were you——"

"See you to-morrow," interrupted Lee dryly.

He opened the small door of the saloon, crouched there for a moment, and then dropped. He went down sheer for a hundred feet or so, pulling the cord which released his parachute. It billowed out, checking his headlong descent. Within a few

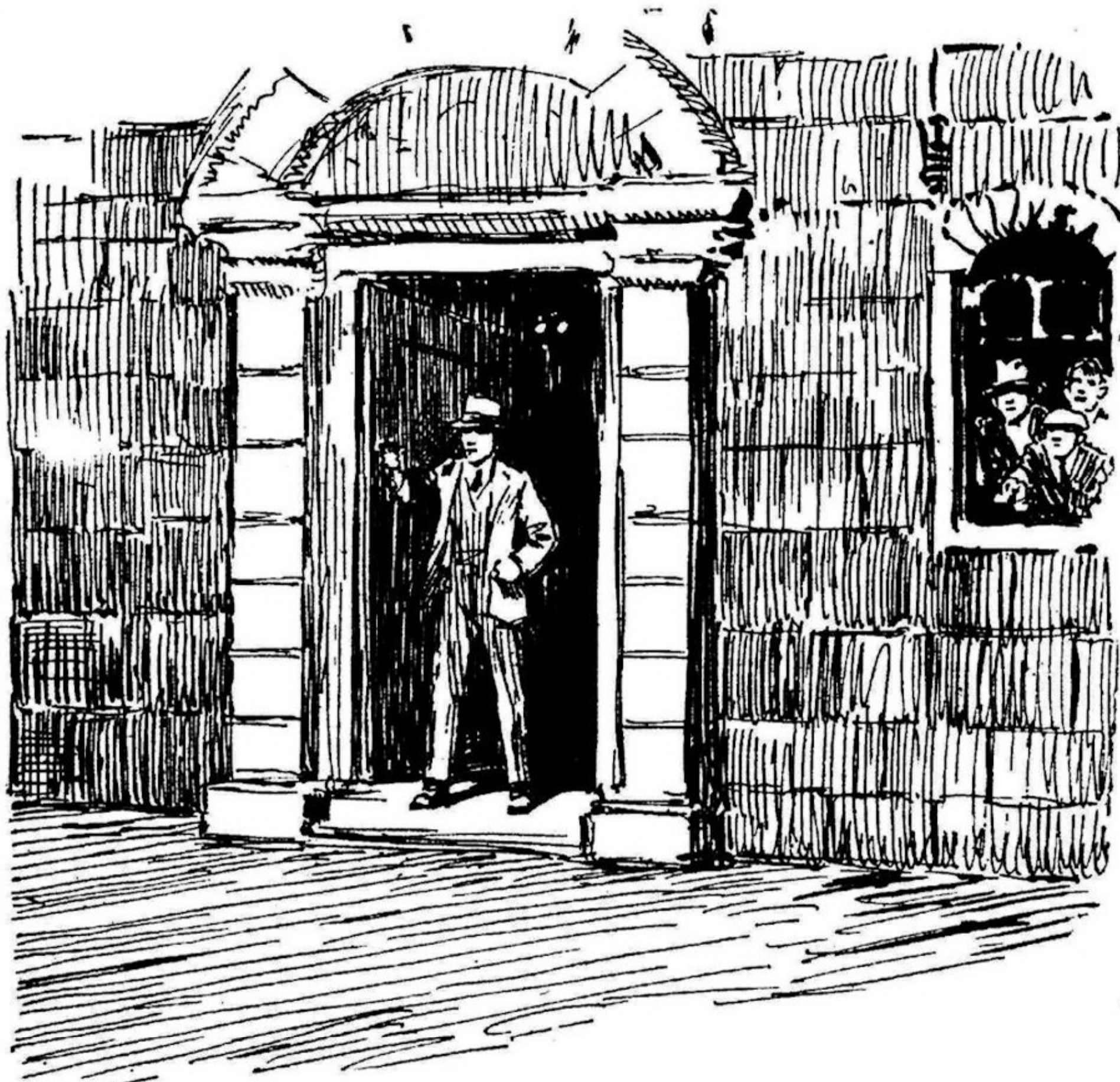
moments he was floating easily, hovering between sky and earth, swaying gently in complete silence.

The Kidnapper started back as he saw that grim figure standing in the doorway. "Hands up!" ordered the detective



NELSON LEE touched the ground fully half a mile away from the lonely house on the marshes. He came down on the edge of a deep dyke, and only escaped a soaking by luck. However, a miss was as good as a mile, and he soon disentangled himself from the billowing silky masses of the parachute. The dyke came in handy, as it happened, for Lee, after folding up the parachute, wrapped a number of heavy stones into it, and then flung the whole lot into the water. It sank rapidly, leaving no trace.

Like a shadow, the detective crept across the marshes, making for that lonely house which stood so bleak and forbidding amid its stunted trees. Was this really the end of the chase? Were the missing schoolboys and schoolgirls here—prisoners in this house?



Nelson Lee did not think so. Such a thing did not fit in with his ideas. Lonely as this house was, desolate as the district was, the Kidnapper would hardly take the risk of imprisoning his twenty victims so near to London.

Lee made a discovery as he slid forward through the darkness. Those big sheds that he had seen were exceedingly interesting. They were hangars! This great stretch of grassland, adjoining the house, was an improvised aerodrome. And now, even as Lee drew nearer, he saw lights flashing near the hangars. Suddenly there was the loud purring roar of an aircraft engine.

The detective halted, lying flat on his stomach in the grass. He watched. Presently a small machine, of the scout type—capable of excessively high speed—fairly zoomed into the air, half-circled, and vanished in the direction of the sea. The throbbing notes of its engine came to Lee's ears as a rhythmic beat for some time, and then it faded away. The lights vanished at the hangar, and all became quiet once more.

"Smart work," muttered Lee. "That twenty thousand pounds in gold is on that plane for certain. The idea, no doubt, is

to get it out of the country as quickly as possible. This organisation seems to be pretty elaborate."

The great detective was more convinced than ever that he would not find the missing schoolboys and schoolgirls here. The place was merely a sort of depot. The gates stood wide open, and there was a notice board stuck up on a post near by. Lee read the board with interest:

**"ESSEX AIRCRAFT DEVELOPMENT
COMPANY,
Offices."**

It was all very ordinary, but Lee was not blinded. He crept on into the grounds, approaching the house itself. All the windows were dark except one. This showed a mere gleam of light, indicating that there were heavy curtains in front of the window.

Lee hesitated before getting right up to that window. He wondered if it would not be better to leave at once—and return here in the daylight, perhaps in disguise. Was it worth the risk of getting captured? The chances were that he would discover nothing

now. Yet he could not resist the temptation to creep up. Crouching under the window, he raised his head. A number of voices came to him, and even when Lee placed his ear close to the cold window-pane, he could not distinguish anything that was being said. He glanced at the wall nearby, and saw that it was covered with ivy. It would be easy enough for him to shin up, and get in by an upper window. Perhaps—

He caught in his breath. One word had come out to him—and a peculiar word, too. One of the men had raised his voice—or perhaps he was walking about within the room and had come near the window. At all events, Nelson Lee heard the word distinctly—"Graumarck." That word brought the criminologist to an instant decision. A gleam of understanding—not unmixed with startled surprise—came into his eyes.

"Graumarck!" he repeated, under his breath. "I think I've learned all that I need to learn; my object here is achieved."

Like a shadow of the night itself, he stole away!

CHAPTER 9.

On the Trail!

"I CAN'T stand this much longer!" said Nipper fiercely.

"Nor I!" said Handforth. "They've got him! What's the good of fooling ourselves? They've collared the Chief! Perhaps they've murdered him by this time!"

It was mid-morning at the Detective Academy. The April sunshine was pouring through the windows, but it did little to dissipate the gloom within.

"I must remark, brother Handy, that you display a singular lack of trust in our respected Chief," said William Napoleon Browne. "Personally, I am not dismayed. Ere long the Chief will turn up, bright and smiling."

"I wish I could believe you, Browne," said Nipper. "We all know that the guv'nor went off on a secret mission last night. He wouldn't tell any of us about it—but we knew that it was a risky job. And he hasn't returned!"

"We know nothing—absolutely nothing!" exclaimed Handforth huskily. "Scotland Yard can't tell us anything—there's not even any further news about Irene or those others."

All the cubs of the Detective Academy were in a state of acute anxiety—and there were between twenty and thirty of them. This absence of news—good or bad—kept them on edge. The suspense was harrowing.

By mid-day the cubs were almost desperate. They held a kind of general meeting in the big Common-room, Fenton presiding. Edgar Fenton was in charge during Nelson Lee's absence, and he felt that it was time for something to be done.

"We've got to keep our heads, young fellows," he said earnestly. "There's no evidence that the Chief has been captured by these crooks. He may be at work on the case now."

"He's been gone for over twelve hours, and we've heard nothing," said Nipper, in a weary voice. "Dash it, I'm not a pessimist, but I can't help feeling that something serious must have happened."

The door of the Common-room opened. Nelson Lee looked in, smiling and cheerful.

"Morning, you fellows," he said genially.

"Guv'nor!" yelled Nipper, leaping round.

"It's the Chief—alive and well!" gasped Handforth. "Oh, my hat, he's safe!"

"My dear young ass, what did you think had happened to me, then," asked Nelson Lee. "Of course I'm safe."

"Where have you been all the time, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"In bed, mostly."

"In bed?"

"Is it very startling that I should indulge in some well-earned repose?" asked Lee dryly. "I have been sleeping at Mr. Manners' place, since about four a.m. As there was nothing particular to do this morning, I slept until eleven o'clock—and now, I am glad to say, I am feeling like a giant refreshed. I am ready for hard work."

"Nothing particular to do this morning, Chief?" ejaculated Handforth, staring.

"That's what I said—but there will probably be some excitement later," replied Lee. "Oh, and by the way, I shall want most of you for work."

"What kind of work, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, clutching at Lee's arm. "You—you mean that we're all to go to the rescue of Irene and those other schoolgirls and school-boys?"

"Exactly," nodded Lee. "This is our private job, and we'll do it on our own."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Chief!"

"Then you've got a clue, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, his eyes gleaming.

"More than a clue, I fancy," replied the detective. "To-night we are going to the place where this unique Kidnapper has imprisoned his victims. And if we have any luck we will rescue the whole crowd!"

THE cubs felt rather weak after that. They had had such fears for Nelson Lee's safety, and now he had turned up as cheery as ever, as though nothing particularly exciting had happened. Yet he declared that they were all to go on this rescue stunt that very night!

Nelson Lee's first task, when he got into his private study, was to look up a large number of heavy reference books. He consulted his own private records, too. He was nearing the end of this task when the telephone-bell rang.

"Yes?" said Lee. "Oh, hallo, Lennard! What's the latest?"

"Something that will surprise you, I expect," replied the chief inspector. "Young

Brewster has been found wandering on a road near Canterbury, and he is now being brought to London. He'll be at the Yard in about half an hour. His parents are coming, and I thought perhaps you would like to join in."

"Thanks, Lennard—I'll be there," said Lee. "So the Kidnapper has kept his word, eh?"

"To the letter," said Lennard. "Somehow, I didn't think he would. And I'll tell you this much—the whole thing is more mysterious than ever."

"You think so," replied Lee. "Well, we'll hear what young Brewster has to tell us."

Hal Brewster had very little to tell, however. When Nelson Lee arrived at the Yard, he found Sir George and Lady Brewster there, talking with the chief commissioner and the Home Secretary. Sir George was looking haggard after his harrowing experience of the night. That trip to York had been a very severe strain on his nerves.

Hal was brought in very soon afterwards, and after an affecting little scene, during which Lady Brewster sobbed a good deal, the youngster told his story. It was evident that the Scotland Yard authorities were hopeful of obtaining some vital information.

Hal explained how he had been tricked into a waiting motor-car near Bannington; how he had awakened in that grim old castle. The previous night he had gone to bed as usual, except for the fact that he and two other boys were in a sort of dungeon, instead of the ordinary dormitory. When Hal awoke he found himself in a straw stack.

He was dazed and bewildered, and could not remember anything for some time. A lady and gentleman in a motor-car had come along and, noticing his strange behaviour, had stopped him and questioned him. They were struck by the fact that a piece of paper was pinned to his jacket, bearing the printed words: "Returned safely, as promised."

"H'm! Not very much here, I'm afraid," commented the chief commissioner, frowning. "So you don't remember how you were brought to this stackyard, near Canterbury?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, sir," replied Hal. "I must have been drugged in some way—just the same as I was when I was collared."

"And this castle, what was it like? How about the surrounding country. Surely you were able to recognise——"

"We couldn't see the surrounding country, sir," broke in Hal. "We weren't allowed upstairs, and the walls all round the courtyard are thirty feet high. We couldn't see anything."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It would have been awkward for the Kidnapper if you had seen what lay beyond those high walls," he remarked.

"At least we know that the other boys and girls are comparatively safe," said Sir George, with relief. "That will be good news for everybody."

"There's one other thing," said Hal eagerly. "Although we didn't see anything, I know the castle is somewhere in Wales."

"Wales!" ejaculated Chief-inspector Lennard, who was present, and shooting a triumphant glance at Lee. "How do you know that?"

Hal told of the scrap of conversation he and the other two boys had overheard.

"That clinches it, sir?" said Lennard, looking at the chief commissioner. "Those clues we found in the motor-car were genuine, then!"

"Of course," said the chief commissioner. "We must concentrate on Wales at once; we must have every old castle searched. For once, Mr. Lee, your conclusions are wrong."

"I beg to disagree with you, Sir John," said Nelson Lee quietly. "During my little investigation last night I heard one word—one solitary word—and that word supplied me with the key to the riddle. The kidnapped boys and girls are not in Wales."

Everybody looked at Lee in astonishment.

"Not in Wales?" echoed Lord Sudbury. "But this boy has said——"

"He was deceived—as the Kidnapper intended him to be deceived," said Lee. "That castle is not even in Great Britain!"

This was another staggerer.

"What on earth are you saying, Mr. Lee?" demanded Sir John Sanders. "Not in Great Britain? Where is it, then?"

"In the Austrian Alps!" replied the great detective smoothly.

Everybody in that room stared at him with incredulous eyes.

"Forgive me for saying so, Mr. Lee, but this statement of yours is utterly absurd," declared Lord Sudbury. "How could all those boys and girls have been transported from England to the Austrian Alps? How could this boy here have been brought home during the night and left in a stackyard in Kent? The very suggestion is preposterous."

"I will admit that it sounds preposterous—but there are the days of fast aeroplanes," replied Nelson Lee. "The gold was handed over, as demanded; it was immediately dispatched to the Austrian Alps. At the same time, a telegraph message, probably in code, was sent out from England, saying that the money had been paid. This boy was drugged, placed on board an aeroplane, and sent home. Before dawn he was in that stack—or it may be that he was not placed there until mid-morning. It is a minor point, and does not matter."

"But—but this is almost unbelievable!" protested the chief commissioner.

"Have you ever heard of the Graumarck Crag, Sir John?" retorted Lee.

"The Graumarck Crag? Why, yes——" Sir John paused, a startled look coming into his eyes. "You don't mean—— Upon my soul! What evidence have you that your supposition is right?"

Nelson Lee turned to the others.

"The Graumarck Crag is an enormous pinnacle of rock," he explained. "There is

a castle perched upon its summit, and the building is still in a fair state of repair. It is the property of an impoverished Austrian nobleman, and has, indeed, been in the Graumarek family for centuries."

"You think that this is the actual castle which this boy describes?" asked the Home Secretary.

"All the evidence indicates that such is the case," replied Lee. "In the old days, Graumarek Castle was a mighty place—a veritable citadel of the mountains. It was reached by a steep, winding road up the mountain side. But eighty years ago there was a tremendous landslide, and that mountain road was wiped out of existence. The Crag was left bare, jutting up like a pencil, with the result that the castle was isolated. It became inaccessible—perched high up there with no means of reaching it except by arduous climbing. Alpinists have found the Crag a happy hunting ground for their efforts. On most days the castle is hidden amongst the clouds, for it is a peculiarity of the neighbouring valleys that the clouds collect there."

"But your proof, Mr. Lee?" demanded the police chief.

"Last night I followed the men who took the money from Sir George," replied Lee quietly.

"You followed them! But how could you have been there? The train was travelling at sixty miles an hour——"

"I was overheard—in an aeroplane," replied Lee. "There is no need for me to go into those details now. I dropped by parachute; I located the house on the Essex marshes which is used as a kind of meeting-place by the Kidnapper's men. While I was there a fast aeroplane took off, and vanished towards the sea. That 'plane, I am convinced, was carrying the gold. I only heard one word while I was prowling about that house—the word 'Graumarek.' It threw a vivid light on the whole affair."

"Upon my soul!" murmured Lord Sudbury.

"I have since looked up the records of the Graumarek Crag," continued Lee. "The Crag top is more than half a mile across, from end to end. Thirty-foot walls surround the entire rock. Those boys and girls up there, being unable to see beyond the walls, never dreamed that they were virtually perched above the clouds."

"But how were they taken there?"

"By aeroplane," replied Lee. "On the night of the wholesale kidnapping, they were collected at this Essex house, and a big machine ventured off, flying direct to the Crag. The castle grounds are extensive, and any machine, skilfully handled, could easily land and take off. And remember that the Crag top is mostly above the clouds. Thus the few people in the valley below would see nothing—and hear nothing. And that Crag top, jutting out, would be an easy mark for any aeroplane to find—even in the dark, providing that a powerful searchlight was showing."

"It is all very extraordinary," said the Home Secretary, shaking his head. "And this house in Essex?"

"It is presumably the headquarters of a small aircraft firm," replied Lee. "A very cunning touch, that. This firm is supposed to be making experiments in night-flying, and thus the coming and going of machines in the small hours would not arouse any suspicions."

"This is very grave news," said the chief commissioner, frowning: "What are we going to do? We are more or less helpless. These kidnapped boys and girls are on foreign soil."

"If any official action is taken, the Kidnapper is certain to hear about it," replied Nelson Lee. "He will then remove his prisoners, and that might bring endless trouble. It was your suggestion that this case should be left in my hands; give me another twenty-four hours, and I will guarantee to have all these boys and girls back in England. Unofficially, I can act decisively, since I shall not be hampered by any international complications."

The Home Secretary glanced at the chief commissioner, and then he coughed.

"You think——" he began.

"I know," said Lee quietly. "I started this job, gentlemen, and I should like to finish it."

Lord Sudbury held out his hand.

"Go ahead, Mr. Lee," he said heartily. "You have already proved your brilliance in this case. May your final efforts be crowned with success."

CHAPTER 10.

The Rescue Party!

THE Kidnapper carefully lit a cigar, and glanced across at his companion. "Well, my dear count, what about it now?" he asked amusedly.

Count Graumarek, his face flushed, took a deep breath.

"You were right, of course," he admitted. "You're always right, Hanson."

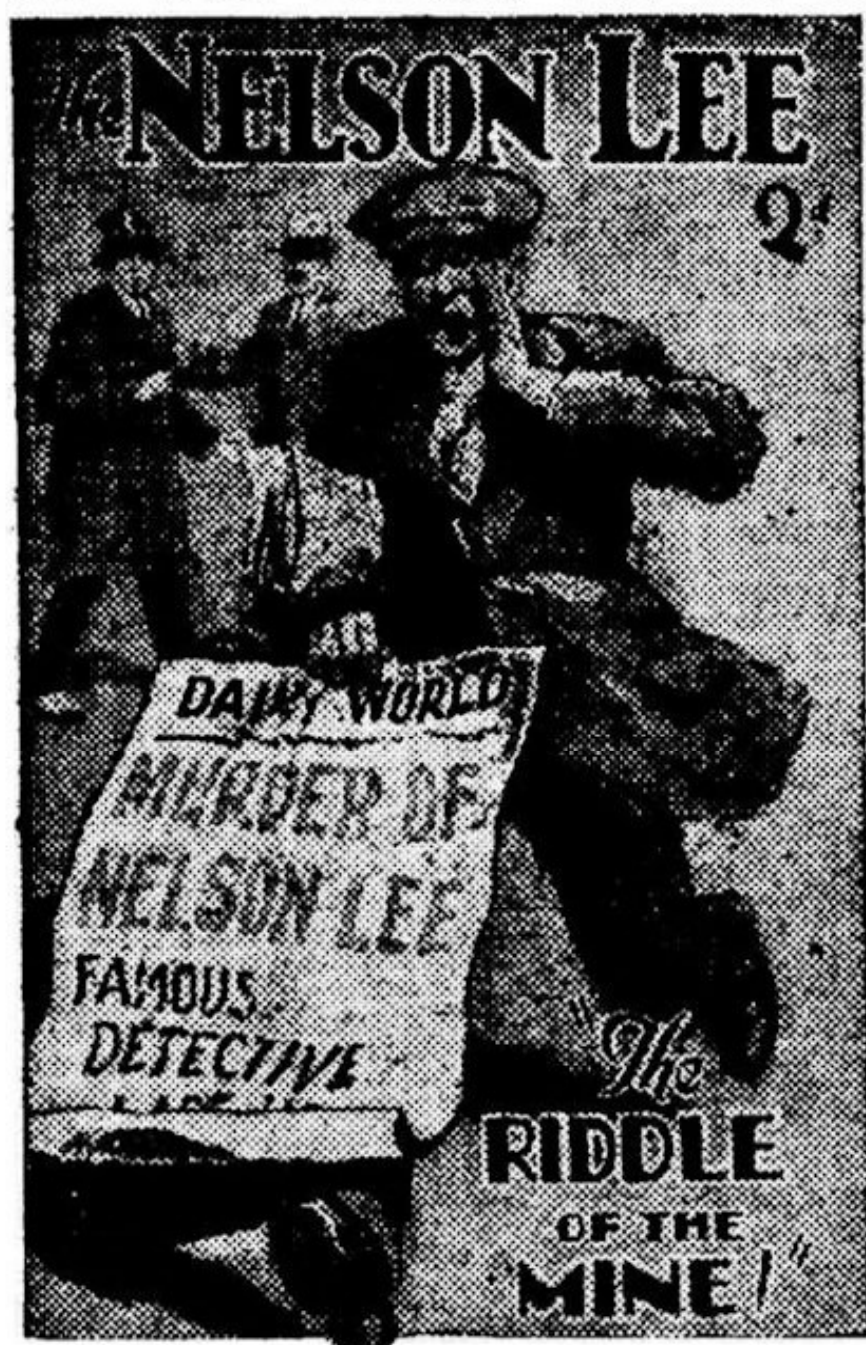
"We have the first consignment of gold in our hands," continued Rupert Hanson. "Twenty thousand pounds, Graumarek. Our plans have been completely successful. And the very fact that this first boy has been returned safely will induce all the other parents to submit. They will agree to our demands."

"And—the police?"

"The police can do nothing," replied the Kidnapper contemptuously. "They are fooling about in Wales, probably enough, trying to find this castle." He laughed. "Let them amuse themselves. Out here we are quite safe. Even if things do go wrong, we are outside the jurisdiction of the British police."

Hanson was revelling in the whole ugly business. It was an outlet for his energies. A man who could never rest on his laurels for long, he had entered upon this adven-

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The Riddle of the Mine!

Reuben Prance, swindler, stared at Nelson Lee in terror. He had been hounded down! Then he leaped forward, pushed—and Nelson Lee, losing his balance, fell: fell into the murky Thames far below. A splash—and then silence. . . . Next morning the sensational news became known. Nelson Lee dead—murdered.

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ture with much enthusiasm. He had had a reserve of money, and he had spent every penny of this in his preparations. He now regarded that money as well invested. This first "instalment" alone had more than recompensed him for his original outlay.

Before this affair was over, he would be in possession of hundreds of thousands of pounds. Twenty thousand for each victim! And all the parents would pay up. Furthermore, when this batch was done with, he would kidnap another batch! Oh, yes, it was a great game!

He had met Count Graumarck by chance somewhere on the Continent, and this young nobleman, practically destitute and a victim of drink, had readily listened to Hanson's glib suggestions.

It had been Graumarck's talk of the inaccessible Crag, with its castle on the summit, which had first put the kidnapping idea into Hanson's head. After that the rest had been merely a matter of organisation—and a financial genius of Hanson's stamp was a past master in organising.

"We will take a girl next," said the Kidnapper thoughtfully. "I'm not sure that we oughtn't to demand more for the girls, Graumarck. Twenty-five thousand, eh? Girls may not be so useful as boys—and that, in itself, is a debatable point—but parents are apt to worry a great deal more

if their daughters are missing. Therefore they will be willing to pay more to get them back."

WHILE this conversation was being carried on, a great passenger-carrying aeroplane was flying swiftly across a section of Europe.

It was piloted by Mr. Hobart Manners, and the passengers consisted of Nelson Lee and all the members of his Detective Academy. Nelson Lee had more faith in these boys of his than in an army of foreign police.

It was true that the Austrian authorities had been informed; and it was equally true that these authorities were willing to help; but it was all strictly unofficial and in secret. The Home Secretary had been pulling the wires, and he had made the way easy.

It was certain that if any open action was taken, the Kidnapper would become aware of the plans, and he would immediately pack all his young victims into an aeroplane, and fly off with them to some fresh prison. The whole rescue, therefore, was left in Nelson Lee's hands.

That big aeroplane came to earth some miles from the Graumarck Crag, in the hollow of a valley. After this came a long trudge through the darkness—a trudge that the boys would always remember.

The country was wild and rugged, with peaks rising on all sides. At length they beheld the Crag itself—a veritable pinnacle of rock stretching straight upwards, sheer and awe-inspiring, the summit lost amid the low-lying clouds.

At length the base of the Crag was reached. There was no village here—no houses of any kind. A more desolate tract of country could hardly be imagined. Hills stretched away into the distance, their slopes thick with pine forests. Even here, at the base of the Crag, the pines clustered round in profusion.

Mr. Manners did not accompany this party; he had been left behind with the big aeroplane. Only Nelson Lee and his cubs were here.

"I may be some hours, boys—but you must be patient," said the great detective. "If I accomplish my purpose an hour before dawn, all will be satisfactory."

"Good luck, Chief!" chorused the cubs.

Nelson Lee, single-handed, was determined to climb the Graumarek Crag!

CHAPTER 11.

Action!

AT last! None of those waiting cubs would ever know of the hair's-breadth escapes that Nelson Lee had had during that climb.

Clutching at tiny projections of rock, worming his way up foot by foot, sometimes hovering between life and death, he had steadily progressed. Whenever possible he had stretched his rope over some rocky spike, as a measure of protection in case he slipped, but in spite of these precautions he had been within an ace of hurtling down to death a dozen times.

And now he stood just beneath the great wall of Graumarek Castle. It wanted an hour to dawn. Almost to the minute, Nelson Lee had carried out his plan.

After only a short pause to regain his breath, he started work again. A film of low-lying clouds which clung round the summit of the Crag like a blanket hid the ground, far below, from his view, but this made no difference. Lee now lowered a rope; it had been wound round his body during the upward climb.

At last he felt a tug upon it, and after a short pause he began hauling. He pulled up a stout rope ladder, the weight of which became enormous before long. Lee was obliged to exert every ounce of his strength to haul it up, but when it was firmly fixed the rest was simple. One by one the cubs climbed up, and at length they all stood under the grim castle wall. The real business of the night was about to commence.

It was just at this vital period that something unforeseen took place—something which Nelson Lee could not possibly have calculated upon, but it was something which helped him to an incalculable extent!

WITHIN the castle, sleeping peacefully, the kidnapped boys and girls were in their respective quarters. It was nearly dawn. They were aroused abruptly by a splintering, grinding crash. Imprisoned in their bedrooms, they did not know what had happened.

But Rupert Hanson, running out into the great courtyard, was startled. He had been awaiting the arrival of a messenger from England—and for over an hour a searchlight had been sending its beam straight up into the heavens to act as a guide.

The aeroplane, carrying the messenger, had arrived; but in some way the pilot miscalculated. Instead of landing gently, he over-ran the centre of the courtyard, where there was a big white guiding patch. The machine crashed with tremendous force into the great wall. The pilot, bruised and battered, managed to stagger out of the wreckage, and at the same moment there was a blinding burst of flame. The machine had caught fire!

"Quick—bring extinguishers!" shouted the Kidnapper urgently. "This fire must be put out at once!"

The dazed pilot only just managed to get out of the danger zone. Then every available man in the castle rushed up with fire-fighting apparatus. Even the two women joined in. It was a case of all hands to the pumps.

It was here that Nelson Lee was unexpectedly assisted. For Lee, climbing that high wall, saw that every able-bodied person was engaged in the fight against the flames. The castle itself was left unprotected! Here was a chance! Lee seized it. He and his boys, like shadows, scaled the great wall, lowered themselves, and ran to the open doors of the castle. Within five minutes it had been seized. Every door was closed and barred and bolted.

A hurried search met with instant success. Doors were opened, and the kidnapped schoolgirls and schoolboys were found. All were dressed by this time—aroused and excited by the sounds of commotion which had been going on.

"Renie!" yelled Handforth, as he caught sight of Irene Manners.

"Oh, Ted!" almost sobbed the girl, as she went into his arms, regardless of the others. "I knew you'd come, Ted!"

"I've had an awful time, old girl," breathed Handforth. "By George, it's good to see you again—and to know that you're safe!"

"But what's happened?" she asked, looking at him wide-eyed. "How did you get here? We're rescued! And it's glorious to know that you've helped!"

"Never mind that now—we'll give explanations later," said Handforth joyously. "There's going to be a big scrap, and you girls must keep out of it!"

"Not likely!" cried Irene. "We're game for anything!"

The cubs were posted at the slit-like windows, and Nelson Lee himself opened one of the doors which looked direct out upon

the courtyard, and he stood there. It was just at this time that the Kidnapper became aware that something was wrong. He saw Nelson Lee, and he started back—bewildered.

"Hands up!" ordered Lee grimly. "Every man here is a prisoner, and if there is any resistance I shall fire."

Rupert Hanson was a man with a quick brain; he realised, in that moment, that his game was up. He did not trouble to wonder how the castle had been seized. He saw all the faces at the windows—he saw the gleam of the weapons. It was a coup—and he was defeated.

"Quite clever," he said bitterly.

"The castle is in the hands of the law!" continued Nelson Lee. "If you are wise, you will surrender. I desire no bloodshed; but I must warn you——"

"I am not a fool," interrupted the Kidnapper. "This castle is a fortress, and since you have gained possession so cleverly, it is yours." He turned to his startled men. "Quickly—the big aeroplane!" he ordered. "We must escape! Take no notice of this man's threats. He will not shoot us in cold blood."

The men ran. The fire had been put out by this time, and the first streaks of dawn were appearing in the sky. From around an angle of the courtyard the men hauled a big modern passenger-carrying aeroplane. There was a great stretch of flat ground here—a perfect get-off for a skilful pilot. The top of this Crag, as Nelson Lee had said, was more than half a mile from end to end.

Nelson Lee hesitated. He hardly knew what to do. As the Kidnapper had said, Lee could not bring himself to shoot in cold blood at these men. Only if they opened fire first would he feel disposed to retaliate. Perhaps it would be as well to let them go; they would fall into the hands of the authorities sooner or later. And, in any case, their game was up.

But Fate took another hand—and, again, from the same cause.

Rupert Hanson, his soul filled with bitterness, entered the aeroplane, the engines of which were already roaring. At the moment when he had expected complete success, disaster had come! Escape was the only thought in Hanson's mind.

Everything was done at lightning speed. While the cub detectives watched, feeling rather helpless, and perhaps disappointed because there had been no fight, the Kidnapper's 'plane started off. With a tremendous roar from the engines, the machine gathered speed.

"Look!" yelled Handforth suddenly.

The aeroplane was just taking off, and at the same moment something shadowy and vague materialised out of the morning mist. In a flash, the boys recognised it; it was Mr. Manners' own machine, planing down with the obvious object of effecting a landing on the top of the Crag.

There was a moment of dreadful suspense.

The escaping 'plane was just rising—the other plane was swooping towards it. At

the last moment, Mr. Manners saw the peril, and he suddenly zoomed up, his engines thundering. The pilot of the escaping 'plane swerved at the same moment, too. A wing-tip caught the parapet of the great wall as the machine dipped. There was a splintering crash, and the watchers caught a glimpse of the fugitive 'plane dropping and vanishing into the void. It hurtled downwards towards those pine-clad slopes at the base of the Crag!

MR. MANNERS landed perfectly, and the first person he saw on climbing out was his own daughter. He gathered her into his arms, and his eyes were moist.

"It's all right, dad—I'm safe!" murmured Irene happily. "Oh, it's glorious to know that you came to rescue me—and Ted, and Mr. Lee and all the boys!"

"It is Mr. Lee that you must thank," said her father. "It is he who organised this rescue-party—he who carried out the whole stunt from start to finish."

"Why did you fly here, Manners?" asked Nelson Lee.

"The signal," replied Hobart Manners. "Did you not arrange that I should come if a signal was given?"

And then Lee understood. Mr. Manners, waiting and watching in the distance, had seen the blaze from the accident, and he had mistaken that for a signal to him! Hence his flight, and his perilous landing on the Crag.

Nobody knew, then, what had happened to the Kidnapper and his employees. It was generally believed that they had all gone to their death in that crash. In the joy of being rescued the boys and girls hardly thought about the matter. The cubs, too, were happy in the knowledge that they had succeeded.

As a matter of fact, Rupert Hanson and his gang escaped with their lives. The crippled 'plane, swooping downwards, certainly crashed, but the pilot managed to retain a certain amount of control, and the big machine, landing in the tree-tops, shot forward, smashing through the branches, and finally came to a stop with the wings stripped off, but the main cabin intact.

Hanson and two or three of his men were bruised and stunned, but their injuries were only slight. Later on they were all rounded up by the Austrian authorities, for none of them was able to get far. Unexpectedly, dramatically, their sensational plot had collapsed.

The rescued boys and girls were restored to their anxious parents, and once again Nelson Lee and his cubs had triumphed.

THE END.

(Sensational detective adventure in England and South America. Next week's long complete yarn, featuring Nelson Lee and his young assistants, is a whirl of excitement from the first chapter. "The Riddle of the Mine!" is the title—make sure you read it, chums!)

THE NIGHT HAWK!



No. 3.—MENACE OF THE UNDERSEAS!

BELOW the sea a deadly submarine, the Benton Gang's latest arm of war.

ABOVE, the Night Hawk—a solitary human embodying justice and vengeance.

And then—the battle!

Out into the Storm!

“VILLAINS! Dastardly curs!”

At the grimly muttered words, Snub Hawkins, the Night Hawk's sturdy little assistant, leaned forward breathlessly and touched his master's arm.

“What is it, sir?” he whispered tensely.

Thurston Kyle did not answer. With ear-phones strapped to his head, he sat silent and intent in the laboratory before his private radio, that delicate invention of his own which enabled him to listen-in to the dark plots of his sworn foe, Silas Benton, Britain's master-criminal.

Of late, Kyle had brought the radio to an even greater stage of perfection. Secretly tuned in to the headquarters of the gang, far away on the lonely east coast, it was as though he sat in the same room with them while they were plotting their latest crime.

The harsh tones of Silas Benton, their leader, came clearly through the ether. And his words made the Night Hawk's sombre face grow pale with bitter anger.

Removing the earphones at last, Kyle whirled round in his chair.

“Quickly, Snub! Get me the ordnance map of the east coast, together with the sea-navigation charts between Harwich and Amsterdam!”

Snub Hawkins snapped into action without a word. When Thurston Kyle spoke like that, he knew better than to waste time in ques-

tions. He dashed across to a big cabinet where Kyle kept an up-to-date collection of maps and charts covering all Britain, and soon had the required two spread out on the table.

For twenty minutes the Night Hawk pored over them in silence. Then he turned and glanced grimly at Snub—and Snub went quickly to the wall, where he began adjusting the buckles of the Night Hawk's huge black wings. Meanwhile, Thurston Kyle paced his magnificent laboratory in long sinuous strides.

“To-night, Snub,” he burst out suddenly, “unless I can prevent them, Silas Benton's gang perform their foulest crime!”

Snub waited, alert. His master went on:

“At this moment, a submarine is crossing the North Sea from Amsterdam! It has slipped out of the Dutch harbour secretly and is speeding on its journey like the evil thing of the Underworld that it is!”

“But what's the game, sir?” breathed Snub.

“Drugs!” snapped the Night Hawk bitterly. “The curse of civilisation! Unless I can find a way to beat the gang, a cargo of drugs will be smuggled into Gaunt Creek to-night—a mile below Silas Benton's house!”

His clenched fist thudded on the table.

“This is no paltry jewel robbery, where a few rich people suffer. This spells doom and misery to hundreds of poor weak fools! To-morrow that cargo—cocaine, heroin, all the

evil drugs that sap people's brains and strength—will be circulating among the feeble dolts who crave them! Fools! Weaklings!"

Snub was silent. Thurston Kyle's dark eyes flashed.

"But we shall beat them! There is something else, too, Snub—the Duchess of Dulwater's diamonds, the gang's latest haul. They cannot dispose of them here, so they are sending them over to Amsterdam by the submarine."

He laughed mockingly. Tearing off his gorgeous smock, he held out his arms, and Snub hastened across with the great, steel-feathered wings. As the boy buckled them on, he glanced nervously through the window.

"Take care, sir!" he warned. "There's a storm coming—and a bad one, I'm afraid!"

Kyle shrugged. Patting the lad kindly on the shoulder, he stepped out on to the veranda, threw up his arms and launched himself into space.

Snub watched him skim away and disappear into the night sky above London. As he did so, a faint flash of lightning lit the gloom, followed by a distant rumble of thunder. The heat was stifling; big warm drops of rain began to fall. A violent storm was obviously on its way.

The Night Hawk Strikes!

FOLLOWING the Thames until the London lights gave way to dark mud-flats, the Night Hawk struck east across the Essex lowland until he felt the beat of the sea wind and saw tumbling waves before him. As he swerved to follow the coast, the storm broke in a smashing explosion of rain, thunder and brilliant forked lightning.

Up there, swinging alone above the dark sea, Kyle had no fear of the elements. The rain, descending in solid sheets, glanced harmlessly off the oiled-silk covering of his wings and his black leather flying-suit; and although the lightning played perilously close to him once or twice, he flew on triumphantly.

Once, however, instinct made the Night Hawk glance up—just in time to turn and twist like a swallow in mid-air to escape the rush of a fiery thunderbolt that whistled downwards, casting up a great fountain of shining water when it hit the sea.

The thrill of its passing and the joy of battling with the storm made Kyle laugh aloud. On and on he hurtled through the gale, following the windings of the shore until at last he was circling high over Gaunt Creek, a desolate spot on the coast, where a hollow stream from the wild marshes flowed into the sea.

Hovering there on outstretched wings, the Night Hawk surveyed the scene below. A great flash of lightning showed him a tossing maelstrom of furious white-capped waves, with a solitary ship in sight, reeling across the wind. She was a small tramp steamer, perilously close to land and almost opposite the mouth of the creek.

But the lightning showed him something else besides. Down among the sand-dunes, crouching close to shelter from the rain, three men peered anxiously out to sea through powerful night glasses!

The Night Hawk's firm lips curled. They were plainly Silas Benton's men, awaiting the coming of the submarine. In the lonely creek, under cover of the fierce storm, she would discharge her evil cargo, collect the Dulwater diamonds and glide back beneath the waves to the foreign port from which she had sailed. Everything was ready for her—delay might be dangerous!

Of the three men below, one of them must have the jewels, ready to hand them over. But which? The Night Hawk laughed again and dived leisurely. Another flash lit the sky; and he recognised one of the men—Oscar Daniels, a minor leader of the gang.

It was all he wanted. He knew now which of the three Silas Benton had entrusted with the precious stones, and when the next glare of light flamed in the sky, Kyle swooped.

Intent on their vigil, none of the men saw their deadly foe. Daniels shrieked as two steel hands whisked him high into the air; then his voice was cut off sharply.

Frantically the others jumped from their lairs, jerked out revolvers and fired at the dark blur above them. Both bullets went home—and spelt death to their leader. Powerless in Thurston Kyle's grasp, Oscar Daniels twisted, groaned and fell limp.

Holding him in one arm, the Night Hawk felt in the man's pocket and drew out a flat velvet case. Opening it, he saw the Dulwater gems sparkling in the gloom. With a triumphant laugh, Kyle stowed them away inside his leather jacket. He allowed Daniels to drop contemptuously into the sea and then he swooped down upon the other men.

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They saw him coming in a blaze of lightning, fired desperately, missed, and tried to bolt. Two strong arms shot out, picked them easily off their feet and, a moment later, flung them helplessly into the foaming sea. Three more of the Benton gang had gone to their doom!

An awful, shattering crash from the sea at that moment made Thurston Kyle whirl round on quivering wings. And the next flash of lightning showed him a stirring scene.

Driven out of her course by the gale, the little tramp steamer had crept too far inland. A treacherous tide rip had clutched her and the low shelving coast had done the rest. Even as the Night Hawk stared, he saw her bow shoot high into the air and disappear in foam as two mountainous waves thundered over her. When he looked again, she was lying on her side, defenceless and crippled with a broken back.

In a few seconds he had smashed his way through the gale and was flying above the doomed vessel.

Her port side boats had been swamped and crushed when she first rolled over, and although the crew fought hard, it seemed impossible to launch those on the starboard side either.

Men were busy on her upper deck. A rocket gun roared, something whistled past the Night Hawk's face and burst into stars high in the storm-wracked sky. Other flares followed in quick succession, narrowly missing him, but although he cruised about, he could see no other ships in the offing.

Returning to the wreck, he saw a party endeavouring to rig the breeches-buoy. Taking the rope, a sailor ran to the bridge rail and poised himself for a gallant dive into the boiling waves beneath.

He sprang. But before he had reached the water, the Night Hawk had swooped upon him in an effort to save him from certain death. Thurston Kyle's outflung hand missed the man by inches. He hit the water, and furious waves snatched him out of sight in a second.

Flying recklessly on the very surface of the foaming sea, the Night Hawk searched for him. The glimpse of a white despairing face some yards off sent him skimming towards the spot, just in time to catch the sailor's outflung arm.

For what seemed an eternity, sea and Bird Man struggled for possession. Then Thurston Kyle's great strength won. Wrenching the man from the angry waters, he flashed his way to the shore, deposited his burden gently on the sand and turned back.

On the ship, the drenched and frozen crew were still staring hopefully into the darkness shorewards. They had a glimpse of an enormous bird wheeling above them, then one of their number vanished in its talons.

For the next half-hour, Thurston Kyle fought against the storm for the lives of the men on the wreck. The vessel was breaking up quickly; at almost any moment now the

water would get into her boilers and explode them.

One by one he whisked them off the swimming deck and battled his way to land. Some lay quiet in his arms, stupefied with amazement, while others struggled in terror. But the result was the same in each case, and the little crowd of grateful men on the sand dunes grew larger until only the captain of the ship remained on his bridge. The waves were dashing over, threatening to tear him away, but he clung on desperately, determined to go down with his craft.

At length the explosion came. A great roar ripped the air, drowning for a moment the continuous roll of thunder above. The stricken ship seemed to crumple, a cloud of steam shot into the air—and through it came Thurston Kyle in a headlong dive, flinging out his arm to catch the captain as he was hurled overboard.

The man was unconscious but unhurt. Getting him safely ashore, the Night Hawk laid him gently among his awe-stricken men, wheeled above them once, then disappeared out to sea with a laugh.

Fighting His Foes!

THE shining dial of his luminous watch told the Night Hawk the crucial hour in his night's work had arrived! Somewhere in the darkness the submarine was creeping beneath the waves. She must be very near to the shore now!

Kyle flew in wide circles just above the tops of the waves, heedless of danger so long as he could pick out the one thing he was searching for—the submarine's periscope.

The sinister vessel was overdue! The Night Hawk's grim jaw was beginning to harden when, at last, he saw a slender stick moving through the tumbling waves in a little smother of foam. He watched its course carefully, his eyes glittering as bright as dagger points through the slits in his black vizor. Although the storm was petering out, flashes of lightning still shone on the angry waves. The slim periscope drew nearer and nearer to the shore!

In the brief second when a sizzling blue streak lit up beach and sky, the Night Hawk measured his distance. He was flying easily above the submarine, but now he stiffened his body and dived.

A foot above the periscope he stopped, steadying himself on wide-flung wings. His hand streaked to his waist, a thin pencil of fire whipped out, and the lens within the hollow tube flew into a thousand fragments.

To make sure of blinding the submarine completely he ranged alongside, firing shot after shot into the tube until a jagged hole appeared in its side. Leaning down, he gripped it firmly. A few powerful twists of his long, muscular hands and he had snapped it off short.

A larger wave than usual sprang up viciously behind him and nearly dragged him down. He fought clear with a beat of his curved pinions, rising into the air to watch. Water was pouring through the gap in the periscope; the submarine and its crew were at his mercy!

It was easy for the Night Hawk now to guess at the panic that must be raging among the crew below. Blinded and swamped, there was but one course left open; a hasty climb to the surface to find out what had crippled them. The sleek, narrow vessel broke water and two men clambered through the conning-tower on to the steel deck. A wild, triumphant cry made them look round fearfully.

"Bah! A sea bird!" muttered one gruffly. "Mein gott, our periscope, captain—it is destroyed!"

"Himmel! We are close to shore, though!" growled the other. "Go, Hans, and ring for half-speed!"

Hans turned. But the order was never given. Looking up, he saw two piercing eyes glaring down at him, felt two hands close round his throat and lift him.

Stiff with horror, the submarine commander saw his lieutenant hurled far into the racing seas. He made a frantic leap for the conning-tower, screaming "Dive, dive!" Once again that thin pencil of fire darted from Thurston Kyle's hip, straight for the man's head. Throwing up his hands, the commander staggered and fell across the rail. Next moment his vessel had dived. And the waves, closing over the deck, washed him carelessly out of sight.

Straight for the mouth of Gaunt Creek shot the submarine, blind, helpless and full of panic-stricken men who had no idea where they were or what had become of their officers. They had had no orders to change speed or direction—only to dive; and, having dived, the vessel rushed ahead—

Something like a giant hand seemed to strike the boat suddenly. She stopped dead, shivering; then the screaming crew saw her steel walls buckle and tear like cardboard. Water rushed in—hideous, foaming water; the electric lights snapped out. In utter darkness, the boat tilted her nose, turning over giddily. There was a hideous, grinding noise; gasping cries; gurgles—then silence!



The ship exploded with a roar; the captain was hurled overboard—and at that moment the Night Hawk swooped down in a headlong dive to the rescue!

Flying noiselessly over the waves, the Night Hawk saw a huge bubble of oil rise lazily to the surface, expand and burst. At full speed, Silas Benton's submarine had crashed into the sunken wreck of the tramp steamer, burst her sides and scattered her deadly cargo and crew into the sea!

The storm had ceased. Dawn was beginning to break in the east, clear and peaceful. Climbing in great spirals, Thurston Kyle, the Night Hawk, stared at the great oily patch beneath him, touched the velvet case of jewels inside his leather jack, and turned for home.

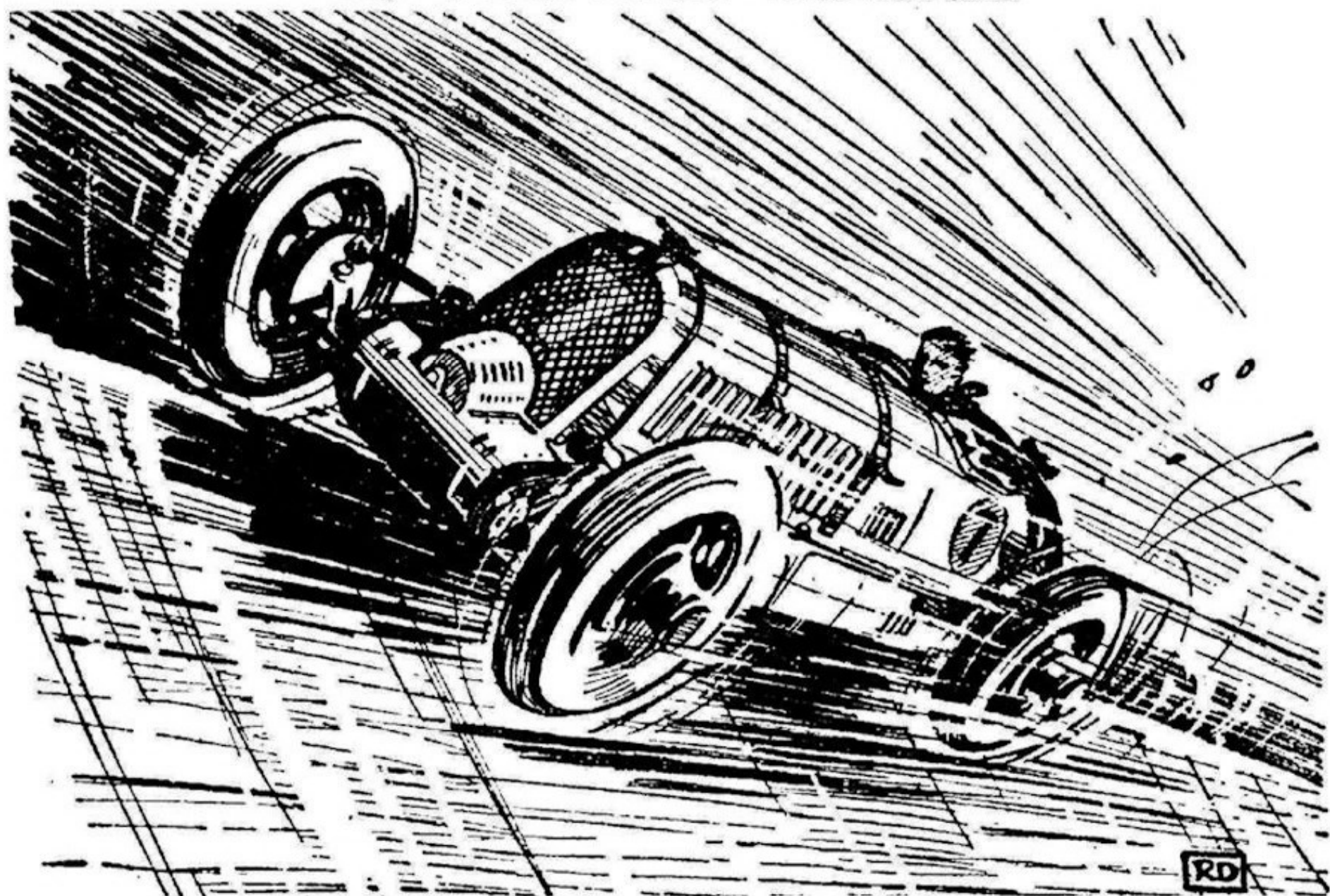
As the great black wings bore him across the sky, he flung back his head and laughed again. Victory over his enemies had gone to him once more!

THE END.

(The grim fight between the Night Hawk and the Benton Gang continues next week—in a story which has a thrill in every line.)

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

By ALFRED EDGAR



After the Crash!

THE crash was seen by the crowd at the other side of the track. Joe, standing up in the pit, also saw it. He made one dive off the plank, cleared the railings, raced across the enclosure and soon was tearing madly over the grass which filled the centre of Brooklands.

The ambulance, and official cars, started off around the track, while machines went racing up the road from the paddock. But Joe travelled as straight as a homing bee, and he was the first to reach the shattered car.

He dashed up, breathless, and his forehead was wet with cold perspiration. He saw the tyres in shreds and the whole car a battered wreck, with the cockpit half crushed in, and Jim's crumpled figure down beneath the steering wheel.

Joe was trying to drag him out when the others arrived. They had to smash off the steering wheel to get Jim clear, and an ex-racing man gasped, as he worked:

"He must have kept his head! See how he ducked down there when he found he couldn't hold the car. If he'd been chucked out nothing could have saved him!"

Gently they drew Jim from the smoking wreckage, just as the ambulance arrived and,

for the second time that afternoon, Jim was lowered to a stretcher.

Three doctors had arrived, and each examined Jim's senseless form in turn. Neither of them could find a bone broken anywhere. They discovered small cuts and innumerable bruises, but nothing more.

He was knocked out for nearly a quarter of an hour, then he sat up coughing and choking from the fiery liquid which one of the doctors had poured down his throat.

When he came round he found Joe and Steve kneeling by the stretcher, and he grinned at them faintly, blinked around for a moment or two and tried to get up.

"Stay where you are for a bit!" one of the doctors exclaimed. "You can't stand yet!"

"I'm—all right!" Jim gasped. "Where's—car? Got to—got to beat Stargie!"

They could tell that his eyes were blurred, and his head rolled as though his brain was still dizzy. But he struggled again to come to his feet, so that they had to hold him down.

"Jim, the car's wrecked!" Steve leaned towards him. "But it doesn't matter! Only you can't drive on now!"

"Wrecked?" Jim blinked at him. "Stargie made me—" He stopped suddenly.

The Ross Eight is a battered wreck, and in it lies Jim—dead or alive?

The faces all round him were misted and his brain was thrumming. In spite of that he remembered that it would do no good to blame Stargie for the crash. Jim knew that the man had deliberately driven him off the track—only he couldn't prove it!

If he said anything, Stargie would deny it—and who would believe a boy who was driving at Brooklands in his first race? They'd only say that he had been asking for trouble at the mad speed at which he had been travelling.

"Let's—let's have a look at the car!" Jim gasped, and the crowd parted so that he could see the wreck from where he sat.

Grey-black smoke still wafted from the wreckage. Jim saw the radiator torn adrift, with the engine-cover wrecked behind it. He saw the sun gleaming on the fractured edges of the broken axle, the splayed front wheels and the battered cockpit.

"Sorry, Steve!" he muttered.

"That's nothing!" his brother told him. "We can soon put it right, Jim! Any pain anywhere, old son?"

"No, just—muzzy!" Jim answered. "I'd like to stop here for a bit till I feel better. Can't you keep 'em from making so much fuss?"

"Let's get him over behind those bushes," Joe suggested, and the ambulance men carried Jim to where bushes formed a little screen some way off. They set him down, leaving him only with Joe and Steve; but a doctor remained quietly within call.

After a while, Jim told the two what had happened. Steve and Joe listened in silence, then Steve said slowly:

"If Stargie had had his way, you'd have been dead now, Jim."

"I thought I was going to be," and Jim smiled a little. "The car turned right over with me—looped the loop! I bet I'm the first chap to do that at Brooklands!"

"You're the first to do it an' still live!" Joe cut in. "I reckon we ought to go for Stargie over this!"

"That wouldn't do any good," Steve said slowly. "Jim can't prove anything!" He stared at his brother for a moment, then he said: "What he did to you is what he did to dad!"

"Eh?" Jim sat up with a sudden movement.

"He cut in on him in just the same way—deliberately!" Steve said.

Again silence fell between them. Jim and Joe glanced at one another. Out on the track cars were still roaring round, and Stargie passed in that moment. Jim, looking through the bushes, saw him go by, glancing across to the wrecked Ross-Eight.

"He was scared of you," Steve went on after a space. "You know, when you get into racing kit, you're just like dad used to look. And I reckon it must play on Stargie's mind a little—he knows he killed dad!"

"And he just had a go at you!" Joe said, and stood up to stare after the receding Ace, now with an unassailable lead and headed for victory in the great race.

Jim lifted his feet off the stretcher, and stood up with Steve aiding him. He watched the Ace out of sight, then he said:

"Well, it looks as though you're right, Steve. Stargie's scared of us—and we'll make him more scared before we're through! I'm all right again now, so let's pack up and go home—and repair the car! Next time I race against Stargie, I'll beat him!"

There was still a crowd about the wrecked machine when Jim made for it, a little unsteady on his legs. They parted to let him through, and he walked around the car.

"It looks in a nasty mess," he told Steve, and his brother nodded.

"The best thing we can do is to get it aboard the lorry. We can't tell how much it's damaged until we've got it home."

Joe went off to fetch the lorry, but they could do nothing until the race was over, because the officials would not let him bring the vehicle on to the track until the speeding cars were off it.

So the three had to wait, and watch Lon Stargie go on to win the race. He took the winner's flag, with one of the big Germans running into second place, and another British car coming third.

When Stargie came off the track he was laughing. Sniff Dix sat high in the cockpit, grinning at the cheers of the crowd. People ran up to congratulate the crack speedman, to grip his hand—and of all the watchers Jim and Joe and Steve alone knew that Stargie had gained victory only by as foul a piece of driving as any track had ever seen.

It took a long while to get the wrecked Ross-Eight on to the lorry, and dusk was falling by the time the trio got away. When they passed the pavilion, Stargie was on the balcony, surrounded by a group of admirers.

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—as Jim discovers to his cost during the race. The Ace speedman is leading by three laps, and then Jim, going all out, overhauls him easily. Victory will go to the boy, unless—Hurling round the steep banking at breakneck speed, Stargie gradually closes in upon his young rival, and forces the Ross Eight to the centre of the track, where the concrete is broken up and bumpy. Suddenly Jim's car skids, somersaults in mid-air, and then lands on its side—a smoking wreck!

(Now read on.)

He was laughing with them, but his laughter died when he saw the wreck pass below. For a moment the gaze of his dark, narrowed eyes met Jim's. The boy sat at the side of the smashed machine, and he said nothing as he looked up at Stargie.

But the speedman read grim resolution in Jim's gaze. For an instant he seemed to shrink back, then he laughed with his lips curving downwards in a sneer.

"Stargie's riding in the Irish International Road-Race next," Jim told Joe, as they left Brooklands behind them. "We'll get the car ready for that, see? It can lick anything the Ace people can turn out. I'll be on my guard then—and if going fast will win a race, I'll win!"

"I wonder how long it'll take to put the machine right," Joe said. "We haven't looked at it yet, but——"

"It'll be after midnight when we get home, but we'll examine it straight away and see," Jim answered. "It's six weeks before the Irish race—and that's enough time even to build another car!"

Darkness fell, and the lorry trundled on towards Woodburn. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning before Steve pushed his key into the padlock which secured the garage doors. They ran the lorry in, then the boys rigged tackle to lift the wreck from the vehicle which had brought it home.

Steve started his inspection immediately, tired though he was.

His examination lasted, maybe, half an hour, and with each minute that passed, his face grew more and more set. Finally, he summed up the damage.

The front axle was fractured, and the frame was cracked in two places. The engine had been wrenched from its supports, so that both crankcase and cylinder block were shattered and distorted. The body itself was, of course, completely useless now, and the radiator was just a mess. There were many other things broken, and the boys listened in silence. At the end, Steve said:

"So, you see, the whole machine's not much better than scrap. What's broken, is broken beyond repair. Some of the parts we could use again, but they don't amount to anything."

"We'll have to build a completely new car, is that what you're driving at?" Jim asked.

"Yes, that's what it means," said Steve quietly.

"That's all right!" Joe exclaimed. "It's six weeks before the Irish Grand Prix, and we can do it in that time."

"If we have the material," Steve said slowly, and he went on as the boys stared at the sober tone in his voice. "You see, it will cost a lot of money to build a new car. It took me two years to save enough to build this one," and he nodded to the wreck.

Neither of the boys said anything, as they slowly realised what Steve meant. He added:

"Trade's bad. We can't possibly repair this machine—and it will be another two years before we've got money enough to build another car like it!"

There was a catch in his voice now, and he turned his face away as he finished speaking. All his hopes had been wrapped up in this silvery Ross-Eight, the car his father had designed, and the machine with which he had sworn to make good.

For a full minute, silence reigned, then Jim spoke. He was still a little pale from the shock of his two crashes, but his face was set and his fists bunched as he said:

"Two years, eh? I'm not going to wait two years before I beat Lon Stargie. We'll get another car somehow, and we'll get it soon! And when I've got it I'll take it out and avenge my dad!"

Up Against It!

JIM faced his brother across the wreckage of the racing car, and the powerful glare of the electrics above showed that the boy speedman's features were hard and set.

"But we can't buy the stuff for another car without money!" Steve exclaimed, and he smiled wryly. "It's all right to talk like this now, but wait——"

"We'll raise the money somehow!" Jim exclaimed. "Stargie's running an Ace car in the Irish Grand Prix in six weeks' time—and we're going to have a Ross-Eight in the same race. And I'll be driving it!"

"And I'll be riding as your mechanic!" said Joe.

"Well, where are you going to get the money from?" Steve asked.

"I don't know," Jim answered. "But we'll get it!"

His eyes were glittering as he looked across the smashed racer into his elder brother's worried face. All Steve's hopes had been wrecked in the day's startling events, and he still looked upset. He was clever, but he hadn't Jim's wild courage and desperate resolution.

Jim's attitude was characteristic of the lad. He would never admit defeat. A new Ross racer would cost hundreds of pounds. All three of them were utterly broke. So far as they knew there was no one who would help them. They were up against one of the most powerful firms and the most ruthless speedman in the motor world—but that made no difference to Jim.

He meant to do the impossible. He meant to produce another Ross-Eight for the big Irish race!

Soon afterwards the three prepared for bed.

The garage was locked up, the lights were switched out, then Jim and Joe climbed to their room above the stables.

"Talk's cheap!" Joe murmured reflectively, as he pulled off his shoes. "Any fathead can say he'll get another car!"

"And so I will!" Jim blazed at him, as he dragged his coat from off shoulders bruised in his crash. "And with it I'm going to win the Irish Grand Prix!"

"Perhaps!" Joe answered. "If you've got a car—and you'll have one!"

"Eh?" Jim stared at him. "I thought you agreed with Steve that I wouldn't get one!"

"You won't—I'll get it for you!" Joe told him.

The following morning, Jim and Joe spent some time tidying up the wreckage of the Ross-Eight, while Steve was busy on other work in the garage. It was mid-morning when Joe beckoned to Jim and drew him out of the door at the back of the garage.

"We'll take a little walk," he said.

"Where to?" Jim asked. "And what's that idea of yours about—"

"You'll see in a bit," Joe said.

He had refused to make any explanation of what he had said the night before, and Jim knew that he would not get anything out of his chum until Joe was ready to tell him. So he ambled along at Joe's side, around the garage to the main road.

Right to the far end of the village Joe led the way, hardly speaking all the time. Here he turned up a narrow lane. At the end was a set of four or five buildings, and the roof of one bore a sign: "RYAN ENGINEERING COMPANY."

"What are we coming here for?" Jim asked.

"You'll see," was all Joe answered.

Jim knew Mr. Ryan, the owner of the engineering firm. He had been a great friend of "Big" Ross, and he had made all the parts for the wrecked Ross-Eight.

As they neared the buildings, Jim heard the slap and swish of driving-bands, the roar of lathes and the hum of machinery. The doors and windows were open, and he saw men at work, bending over machines which skimmed off metal as easily as a carpenter's plane will skim wood.

The end of one building did duty as an office, and Joe was making for the door when a man stepped out. He was short, tubby and very red-faced; his hair was quite grey, but his eyes were very bright. He smiled.

"Hallo—hallo!" he exclaimed. "'Morning, Joe—'morning, Jim! How are you feeling, my boy?"

(Why has Joe brought Jim to see Mr. Ryan? Is it because he wants the man to build a new racer for his chum, so that he can beat Stargie in the Irish Grand Prix? Don't miss reading the next exciting instalment of this fine serial, chums!)

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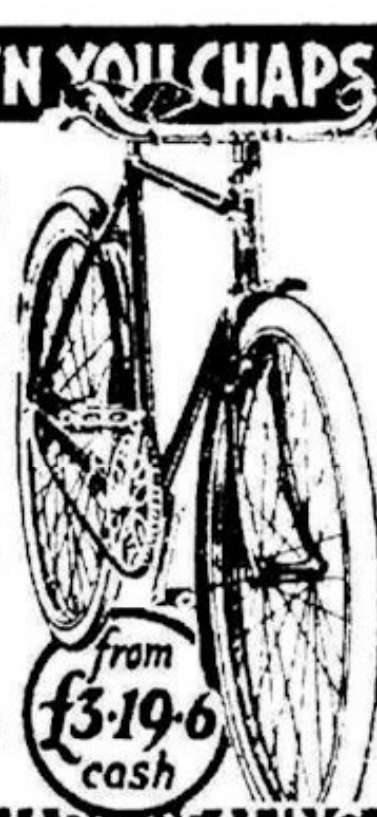
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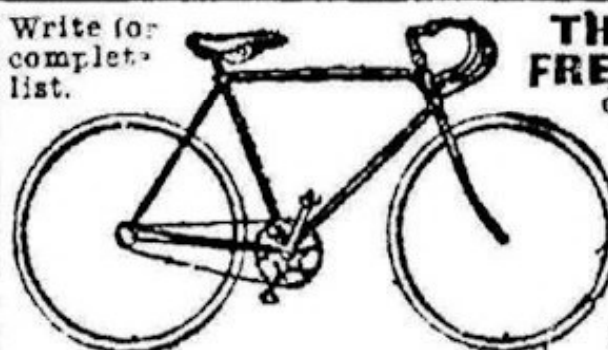
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