

LONG COMPLETE DETECTIVE-THRILLER INSIDE!

THE NELSON LEE

LIBRARY

2



New Series No. 123.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

May 28th, 1932.

Extra-Long Complete Detective-Thriller of Amazing Adventures . . .

LOOTERS of the



CHAPTER 1.

A Call for Help!

“LISTEN!”

Nelson Lee sat up in his armchair with a jerk, and bent his head in the direction of the window. Inside the room lights burnt brightly, and the famous detective, himself with his slippers on the fender, had been leisurely going through a pile of newspapers.

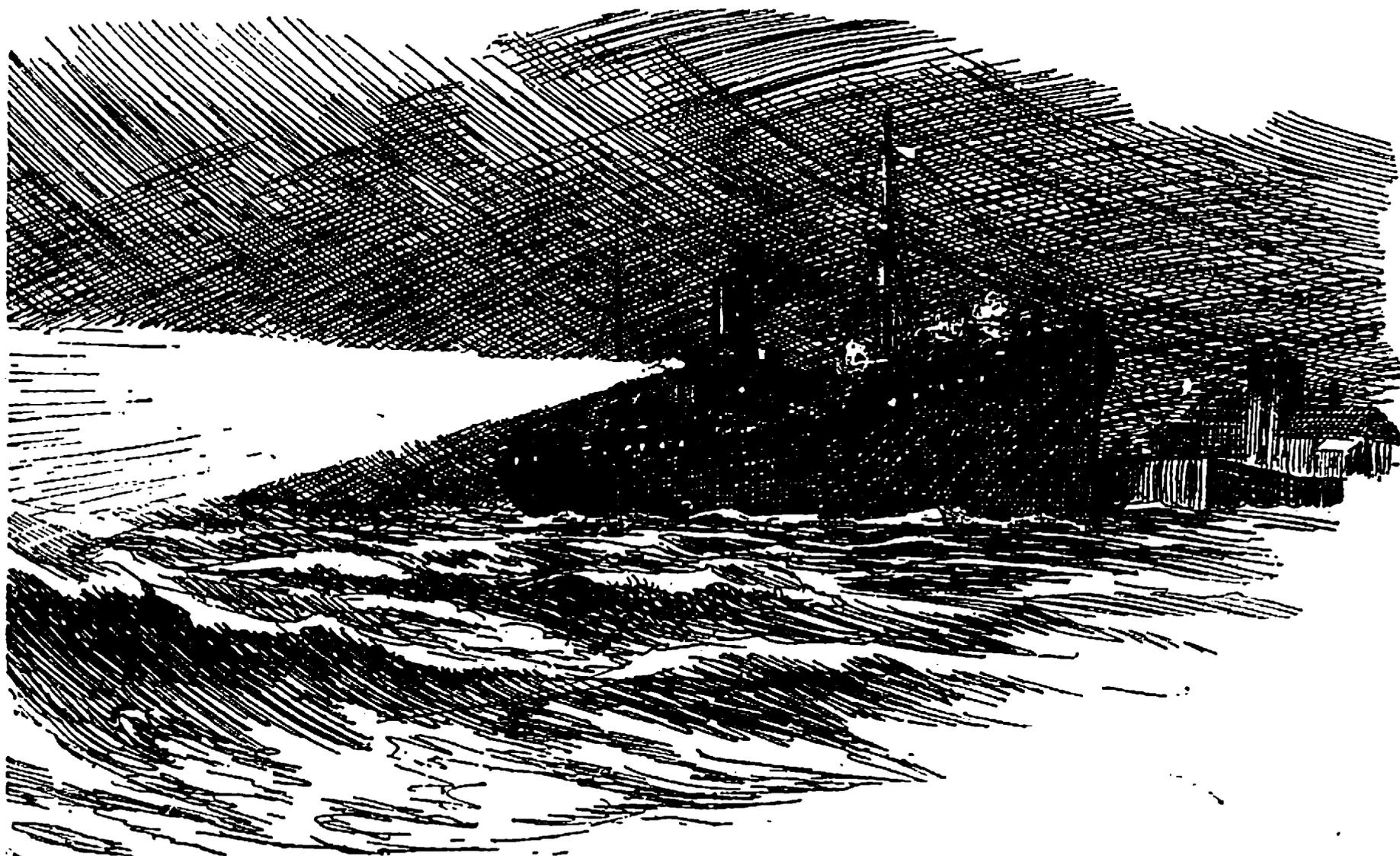
Nipper was there, quietly reading a

thriller. He had come to town from St. Frank's in order to take Wolf, the big Alsatian, back to the country where he usually lived when not engaged on one of Nelson Lee's cases. The great detective expected to be detained in London a few days' longer, clearing up the tangled ends of an intricate case, but there was no further need for Wolf—so he thought. Nipper and the dog were due to leave for St. Frank's by an early train the following morning.

Outside, however, was dark and cold. Earlier in the day there had been rain.

... At Home and Abroad, Starring Nelson Lee, the Famous Detective!

FAR NORTH!



Even though a call for help means trudging a perilous trail from London to the far North-East of Finland, where lies the Island of Death, that call does not pass by Nelson Lee unheeded. With typical grit and self-sacrifice the famous detective and his plucky young assistant, Nipper, face a hundred horrors to save an Englishman condemned to a terrible doom!

"Listen!" said Nelson Lee again, and let the papers slide from his hand to the floor.

From outside came, muffled and indistinct, the drumming noise of running footsteps. In any other thoroughfare they might have passed unnoticed, but in the tomb-like silence of the quiet court off Gray's Inn Road, where Nelson Lee had his town chambers, they attracted attention at once.

"Whenever I hear a man running at that reckless speed through darkness, I always feel that tragedy stalks close at his heels," Lee went on. "Ah, I thought as much!"

The footsteps raced past the house, checked, as though the runner were uncertain, and then grew more distinct again. A second later there was a furious peal at the bell.

Nelson Lee bundled the newspapers into a corner, signed to Nipper to tilt the shade

of the electric table lamp, so that the doorway was flooded with light while the detective's keen face was in the shade, then stood up, with his back to the fire, waiting expectantly.

Voices came from below, then more footsteps on the stairs, and the door was flung open violently.

The visitor was a young man of twenty-three or twenty-four, clean-shaven, square of jaw, with keen, blue eyes and fair hair. He was broad-shouldered and deep-chested, though not over the average height. He had a nasty cut over the left eyebrow—a jagged, ugly place which had evidently burst out bleeding afresh from his exertions in running—and his right hand was in bandages.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Nelson Lee?" he inquired breathlessly.

"Quite right."

"My name is Cyril Anstruther, lieutenant in the Navy—retired. I'm in a jam—had a rough time, and— Could you spare me a few minutes in private?"

"Sit down, Mr. Anstruther. This is my assistant, Nipper. You can regard him as part of myself. Here, hold up, man! What's the matter?"

The ex-lieutenant had swayed forward and clutched at the chair to save himself. He would have fallen if Lee had not sprung forward and flung an arm round him. He led him to the chair, and when he withdrew his arm his hand was wet and sticky. In a second he had ripped open coat and waistcoat, and disclosed a large, discoloured patch on the shirt beneath, just under the right shoulder.

"Brandy and water quickly, Nipper!" he exclaimed, and deftly slit up the shirt, revealing an ugly knife wound.

With skilful fingers he pulled up the shirt, darted to a drawer for bandages and anti-septic gauze, and, before their visitor had opened his eyes again he had him neatly bound up.

"Infernally stupid of me," began the wounded man faintly. "I——"

"Try some of this first," said Lee, and held the brandy to his lips.

The sick man gulped it eagerly, and his faintness passed away.

"That's better," said Lee, seeing the colour come back into his face. "I've patched you up temporarily; and now, if you feel fit enough, let's hear what you have to say. First of all, how did you find your way here?"

"Oh, I'd been told where you lived, Mr. Lee, and had got my general bearings; but I'd got a bit too much way on when I sighted your door, which had been described to me, and had to come astern a bit."

"We heard you," said Lee, nodding. "And now, what's the meaning of this?"

He pointed to the bloodstained shirt, and the other injuries.

Their visitor glanced at the clock on the mantelshelf. It was a few minutes past eleven.

"Those?" he echoed. "Oh, those are part of the story! I can tell you briefly. About eight months ago I came unexpectedly into a large fortune. Before that I was just an ordinary plain 'lootenant,' with my pay, and a couple of hundred a year of my own. Well, it's this same fortune that is at the bottom of all the trouble. I left the Service, much against my wishes, for—for private reasons, intending to settle down; but," he added with a whimsical smile, "I soon found that settling down wasn't such a peaceful job as I had imagined. To put it bluntly, I've had a pretty rough time of it, especially for the past couple of weeks. Things have been lively, I can tell you, and at last I was advised to come to you and ask your help. You see, there's someone else concerned besides myself."

He flushed a little.

"A lady?" said Lee, smiling. "I see. If you'd only yourself to think of you'd have preferred seeing the thing through single-handed, but the lady insisted——"

Anstruther nodded and looked rather uncomfortable.

"You've hit it, Mr. Lee. She got wind of my being followed about and all that, and so I promised to come. Now I'm a shocking bad hand at talking, so I've written the whole story out as far as I can get the hang of it." He drew out an envelope and placed it on the table. "What I want you to do—and I shall be much obliged if you will—is to read that through, and, when you've read it, come to my house to-night—the address is there—at—let me see—say, half-past twelve to-night, if that's not too late for you, and then we can discuss the matter."

"But why not now?"

"Because between then and now I have an appointment which I must keep with—the lady. It's of vital importance. I shall be back at the house before you are, don't be afraid of that. It's a dismal barrack of a place, and there's only my old manservant there; but it will serve our purpose, and I can get on with my packing while we talk."

Nelson Lee frowned, and thought for a moment before replying.

"We will be there at half-past twelve, Mr. Anstruther. Meanwhile, are you strong enough to keep this appointment?"

"I must."

"You may be running into fresh danger."

Anstruther shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I must chance it, but I don't think so. I fancy I shook the beggars off in the darkness on my way here."

"You were followed, then?" asked Lee sharply.

"Part of the way; and then I laid two of the beauties out and ran for it. That's where these scratches came from."

"You came from your house?"

"No; from my club, of all places in the world."

Nelson Lee sprang across to the window, and peered through the crack in the blind. Down below he could see men crouching at various points, staring up at the lighted windows. It was impossible to distinguish their faces, but equally impossible to mistake their purpose.

"They're surrounding us; you didn't shake them off," said Lee quietly. "They're men watching the house now. I should strongly advise you not to keep your appointment—or, at least, to let one of us accompany you."

Anstruther shook his head.

"I must go, and I must go alone."

"You are armed?"

Lee spoke with his back turned. He never took his eyes from those watching figures. Anstruther pulled out a revolver and showed it to Nipper.

"That would stop a Fuzzy-Wuzzy," he said, "let alone a white man."

Lee waved impatiently with his hand behind him.

"At half-past twelve, then. Nipper, show him out by the back way, through the garden, over the wall; don't go by the usual emergency way, but through the empty house. Make certain you are not watched or followed. See him safely into the main street—into a taxi, if possible; then come back here. You understand?"

"Yes, gov'nor."

"We shall be punctual, Mr. Anstruther. Good-bye, for the present."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lec, and many thanks. I shall be there before you."

The two went silently out, moving carefully on the far side of the lamp, lest their shadows on the blind might betray them; but Nelson Lee stuck to his post, watching the men below.

CHAPTER 2.

Anstruther's Letter!

FIVE minutes later the door of the room clicked softly, and Nipper re-entered.

"Safe into a taxi, gov'nor and gone away," he said; "but it's lucky we didn't use the ordinary back way. There was another beggar there, sure enough! Whoever the crowd are that are chasing the giddy 'lootenant,' they seem to know quite a heap about our habits, too. Can't make it out."

"Ah!"

It was a sharp exclamation from Nelson Lee, and he turned his head for an instant to glance at Nipper. It was only a fraction of a second, but when he looked back again the men outside had vanished, and even Lee himself couldn't tell which way they had gone.

He frowned angrily, and then, leaving the window, stood staring for a while into the blazing fire.

"There must be something pretty deep in all this, Nipper," he said at last. "I rather fancy this is going to be a job that will put us on our mettle, and I shouldn't wonder if you and Wolf don't go back to St. Frank's yet awhile. I wonder——" He broke off short. "Better get to work at once. Let's see what Anstruther has to tell us, first of all."

He ripped open the envelope with his long, thin fingers, and extracted the contents.

"Humph! Crested paper. One of the Service clubs."

"Dear Mr. Lee," it began, "I am writing this explanation as far as it goes, because I'm no hand at talking, and can always get things down clearer on paper, and am doing it because the lady to whom I am engaged—Miss Marjorie Carew—has made me promise to ask your advice and assistance. To begin with, I am an orphan, and was, until recently, a lieutenant in the Navy, with a small private income of my own.

"Eight months ago I received a letter informing me that I had fallen heir to the

estate of John Anstruther, my uncle, whom I only remember seeing once, when a boy. John Anstruther, my father's only brother, had for years been a prominent merchant in Finland—at that time, a part of Russia—where in course of time he amassed an enormous fortune in business. He married a very beautiful Russian lady, Vera Vasiloff by name, who died not very long afterwards, leaving him childless and a widower.

"As you know, after the Russian Revolution Finland obtained her independence, and my uncle's property was thus freed from any danger of being seized by the Bolsheviki. In fact, John Anstruther's fortune increased as the prosperity of Finland increased. At his decease—he died without leaving a will—his fortune, estimated at close on five hundred thousand pounds, has passed to me.

"A certain portion of this property is in lands and houses in England. He made a point of visiting his own country at least once every year, and that portion has already been made over to me. Amongst this part of the property is the house known as the Laurels, at the north end of Regent's Park, where I am at present living. It is an old, ramshackle place, standing back from the road in large grounds of its own. I only use a few rooms in one wing of it, with an old manservant and a woman who comes in to do odd jobs, and it is there that I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you to-night.

"By far the greater part of this huge fortune, however, is in Finland, and will not pass absolutely into my hands till I am five-and-twenty, which will be next year. It is entirely controlled by a man named Bortsh, who acted as my uncle's agent.

"On the advice of my lawyers, after having handed in my papers and left the Service, I went out to the Province of Ravgar, in Finland, to see this man, Bortsh, have a look at the various properties, and get from him an account of his stewardship. I found him a saturnine, gruff giant of a man, with the manners of a pig and the cunning of an Oriental. He openly objected to my presence from the first, but as I had arrived with proofs of my identity and position, he had to make some pretence of showing me round.

"I am no business man, and don't pretend to know anything about such matters, but it didn't take me half an eye to see that things were mighty wrong somewhere. The Finnish properties, as shown by papers here in England, should be worth something like four hundred and fifty thousand, sterling. Bortsh tried to bluff me that they were worth perhaps an eighth of that, and likely to be worth less.

"I told him straight out that he was a fraud, so he tried a bit of bullying and blustering, until he saw that he couldn't scare me worth a ha'porth; then he became oily, and from that moment I began to fear I was in danger. During the next ten days I met up with seven separate accidents, any of which might have been fatal if I hadn't

6 "CHUMS OF RIPPINGHAM." Rousing school yarn of fun and mystery.

been a trifle previous, and though I couldn't speak the lingo over-well, I traced Bortsh's finger in each one of them.

"Then he tried another dodge. He is as thick as thieves with some of the officials there, and one night I was arrested on suspicion of being a spy, and run out of the country. There was nothing for it, I had to go; so I went, vowing to return and wring Bortsh's neck for him. That was a fortnight ago. I came back to consult my lawyers and take up my temporary abode at the Laurels.

"The very next morning I received a letter threatening me with instant death if I set foot in the province of Ravgar again—or, at any rate, outside of a seaport town. The letter was anonymous, and posted in London. That made me wild, and I set my lawyers to work, through their Finnish agents. Three days later I was nearly run down by a motor—it was a private car, and in a quiet part of Regent's Park it deliberately hunted me and tried to pin me against the railing. I cleared the railing with a bound, but not before I had seen that the man in the car was Bortsh himself!

"After that I thought the club would be a healthier place to live at, and inside its doors, of course, I was safe. I wasn't worried so much about my own skin, but I was keen on wearing it long enough to stamp on Bortsh. Since then I have been attacked three times—once in Soho, when walking back from a theatre; once from under some arches at the back of the Strand, as I was going to a supper party at a restaurant, and the last time on the doorstep of Miss Carew's house.

"Till then I had kept things quiet; but after that, of course, they had to come out. She made me promise to come and consult you, and I propose doing so this evening, before saying good-bye to her, for I mean to go back to Ravgar and face the thing out, and it's on the cards I shan't see her again. I have made my will, which is at my lawyer's, leaving everything to her unconditionally, but if you could see your way to coming out with me, at your own figure, we might pull through. Failing that, if you would undertake to see that in the event of my death she would come into her own, it would be a load off my mind.

"There are many minor points to be explained, and that's why I intend asking you at our interview to be good enough to call at the Laurels later, for I shall be off for Hull and the Baltic at sunrise. Of course, it's obvious enough that Bortsh wants to get rid of me and lay his paws on the property somehow, but I don't understand how he—a Russian Finn—comes to have such a wide and well-organised set of scoundrels at his disposal in the heart of London. It seems to me as if there were some deeper and more far-reaching plot behind it all, and on this point, too, I need your aid and advice.

"There is only one other thing I wish to mention, and that is that all the attacks made upon me, the object seemed rather to maim me or disable me than to kill me off quickly. I am convinced that had they tried they could have killed me off-hand quite easily at any time, yet they refrained, and preferred to try to mangle me up a bit and then to collar me. The one exception to this was when they turned me out of Ravgar; but then I was backed up by very strong credentials from our Embassy at Helsingfors, and perhaps they funked anything in the nature of an inquiry. This reluctance to killing me off may have some connection with the fact that the Finnish property does not pass entirely to me until my twenty-fifth birthday, although I can, and have, willed it to whom I choose.

"This is a long screed, but will save a good deal of time in explaining how matters stand.

"Yours sincerely,

"CYRIL ANSTRUTHER."



At various points along the road the mysterious watchers moved slowly forward.

NELSON LEE refolded the papers and stared thoughtfully at the fire.

"Anstruther doesn't lack brains," he said at last. "The same point which he mentions occurred to me in reading this." He tapped the papers lying on his knee. "If this fellow Bortsh were playing merely for his own hand, how does it come that he has a gang of ruffians at his command in London?" He paused. "Surely the simplest way would have been to— Nipper, give me my reference books for B and C."

He ran his finger through the B's.

"Nothing here. Bortsh is unknown amongst the criminals of this country. I can't get the hang of it at all. Wait a bit, though. Anstruther said in his letter that Bortsh was as thick as thieves with some of the officials. If I remember right, we had a case some time back in which a secret society was implicated. They were Finns and renegade Russians committing crimes in various parts of the world in order to gain money to finance a scheme that was to make them masters of Finland. They called themselves the 'Circle of Seven.'

"You remember, Nipper, how furious they were when we stopped one of their members from trapping that poor girl, the Liverpool heiress, into going through a marriage ceremony so that he could get hold of her money, and how they dogged this house for days afterwards, until we got her off safely on a trip round the world. This is the same crowd. I feel sure of it. This man Bortsh is in with them, and with all the Finnish secret societies, and he has promised them John Anstruther's money—or such part of it as he doesn't collar for himself. Consequently, when he has followed Cyril Anstruther over here, the London gang give him every aid in their power.

"They're a dangerous crowd, Nipper, my boy—the most dangerous of their type in London, because they have so little to lose, and will stick at nothing. And this man Bortsh seems by all accounts to be one of the most dangerous of the lot, and, what's more, a person of some authority amongst them. I strongly suspect that he is a member of the Circle of Seven, which is the central controlling committee, so to speak, of the international gang.

"Come on quickly, Nipper! It's twelve now," he added with a change of tone, whilst at the same time he shoved an automatic and some spare clips of cartridges into his overcoat-pocket, and thrust Anstruther's letter into the heart of the fire.

"Leave the light on," he said curtly. "It may serve to keep some of their infernal spies busy. I've no doubt that somewhere out there, at least, one man is still watching. Better turn old Wolf in here, too, in case they're enterprising enough to try and get in. It'll be a bit of a surprise packet for them, anyhow."

Nipper flew off and fetched Wolf from his sleeping-place below. The great dog came in, blinking at the light and wagging his tail.



Nelson Lee sprang to the window and peered through the blind. Down below, in the dark street he could see the creeping, sinister shadows. "They're surrounding us," he said quietly to Nipper.

"Down, old man!" said Lee, smacking him on the head. "I'm sorry for the beggar who gets in here and finds you. Get down now, and don't slobber all over my coat like that!"

Wolf yawned and stretched himself in front of the fire placidly. Nelson Lee gave a last look round, and then he and Nipper slipped away, taking the same route which Anstruther had been shown not long before.

CHAPTER 3.

Strange Happenings!

AS Anstruther had said, the Laurels stood in large grounds of its own; in fact, the house was quite invisible from the road, and the grounds were, for London, quite park-like as far as they could judge, although, as a mist had settled down again, it was little enough that they could see.

Nelson Lee and Nipper passed through the gate, watching every patch of shrubbery keenly, and treading carefully on the grass bordering the drive.

They must have gone quite seventy yards before the house loomed up suddenly before them. It was a squat, ugly, two-storied building, large and rambling, after the fashion of a country house of a century ago. At one end was a big glazed-in winter garden with a domed roof. The main entrance was in the centre of the building, and a faint light showed through the windows on either side.

As they drew near Lee paused and peered about him. The drive was neglected and weed-grown, but even by stooping down he could make out no signs of wheel-marks. If Anstruther had returned he had certainly returned on foot, so far as the inside of the grounds was concerned, at any rate.

For a time they listened, but there was not a sound to be heard. Nelson Lee stepped boldly into the portico and rang the bell, or, rather, he pulled the handle, and it came away in his hand. The wire—it was an old-fashioned affair—had either been broken or cut. This having failed him, and there being no knocker, he rapped sharply with the handle of his stick.

The sounds reverberated through the deserted building, echoing and re-echoing, but no answer came. He hammered again and again imperatively till the whole place seemed to ring with the noise, but for all the signs there were the house might have been a house of the dead.

One thing seemed certain. If Cyril Anstruther had returned he must be dead, drugged, or helpless.

Nelson Lee drew himself erect with a jerk.

"Come!" he said hoarsely. "This is no time to stand on ceremony. I don't like the look of things here. We're going in! Force that window, Nipper! Never mind about noise. We've made enough of that already."

Nipper went to one of the narrow windows beside the portico, through which they had first seen the glimmer of light, worked the blade of his knife in between the sashes, and sent back the catch with a resounding snap. The next instant he had flung the lower casement open and vaulted inside, Nelson Lee following him.

They closed the window and relatched it before going further, and peered about them. They were in a large, square entrance hall, from the far end of which rose a massive marble staircase. The walls of the hall were lined with heavy pieces of furniture swathed in holland covers, and looking ghostly in the dim light of the two gas-jets which illumined the scene.

On either side of them broad corridors led outwards to right and left. There were no signs of dust or neglect, simply the ordinary un-lived-in atmosphere of a house that has been left for months in the hands of a caretaker.

Lee moved slowly forward, his hand never shifting far from his coat-pocket.

"Watch the stairs, Nipper!" he whispered. And Nipper nodded silently

The floor was of tiled marble, big black and white squares, set diagonally. Almost directly beneath one of the old-fashioned chandeliers Nelson Lee came to a halt. On one of the black squares was the distinct impression of a muddy boot of about the size that a man of Anstruther's build might be expected to wear. The toe was pointed towards the interior of the house. It was an impression of the right foot, and was slanted slightly as though the owner of it had been trending towards the corridor on the left hand. Lee stooped and touched it with his forefinger. The stain was still damp.

He regarded it with a puzzled expression, and followed the track backwards towards the hall door. The muddy footprints were easy to follow. It was even possible to see where the man had turned to close the door behind him, after letting himself in.

"Did you get a chance to see the soles of Anstruther's boots?" he asked Nipper in a low voice.

"Yes, gov'nor, while you were bandaging him up. The right sole badly worn under the ball of the foot, pretty near through, square-toed, and had those patent rubber soles and heels."

"Then these marks are his beyond the shadow of a doubt, and equally beyond all doubt he came in here not long ago, let himself in with his own latch-key, suspecting nothing, for there is no sign of hurrying. He must have entered the house not more than, say, twenty minutes ago. The lights have been left on, as though he expected us; and yet, although we made noise enough to wake the dead, neither he nor his servant have answered. If he is still in the building, why on earth haven't they shown up?"

Lee drew an electric torch, and, with his revolver in his other hand, made his way down the left-hand corridor. It was broad and spacious, and many doors opened off it on either side. The carpets had long ago been taken up and stored away, but a drugget had been left, and their footstep fell softly. Lee tried each door in turn as he passed, and each was locked until he came to the end of the corridor which bent away sharply to the right.

"It's just possible that this may be the wing to which he referred," he said in low tones. "It is at the back of the house and a long way from the hall. If the bell was broken accidentally, without his knowledge, and he is busy packing, there is a chance he may not have heard us, after all."

The first door of this new passage was locked, the second also, but the third was standing ajar, and yielded to his touch. Lee held the torch, sweeping the beam of light round the room, the revolver thrown forward ready for instant use in his other hand. He swung the door right open.

The room was bare and empty, but in a far corner on the boarded floor lay something which caused Nipper to dart forward with a cry. It was the revolver Anstruther had shown him little more than an hour before.

"He's been here right enough, gov'nor!"

Nelson Lee pondered a moment.

"I think I see now. Anstruther entered the house all unsuspecting, as we figured it out before, and left the light on because he expected us later on. Knowing his way about perfectly, he didn't trouble to switch on the light when going to his rooms, wherever they are, when he heard a noise in this direction. He had his revolver, and dashed down here. Possibly he thought his old manservant was in trouble. That we can't say.

"Anyhow, he fell into the trap, much as we did ourselves. They came at him. There must have been more than one; probably three, at least. He fired, and his revolver missed. Then he turned loose with the butt, and damaged one man; but eventually they collared him and threw him. But with great presence of mind he managed unobserved to scribble those apparently meaningless lines, perhaps whilst they were roping his legs.

"Anyway, he must have been lying down at the time, from the position of the marks, just about the height he could reach if a rope were passed round his body and the upper part of his arms. He knew we should come at the appointed time, and hoped that, not finding him, we should search the house and see his message.

"Let's have a look how it reads. The first letter is V. If it had been turned the other way it would have been K. Now, then! V A R D O C A. C A are obviously his initials, to show that the message is his, and we have left V A R D O. Let me see now. Vardo—Vardo! By James, the thing's as clear as daylight! Vardo is a small northern port, first turning to the right round the North Cape.

Nipper, they're taking him to the very place he meant to go to of his own accord. They're taking him back to Finland, but by a roundabout route. They daren't take him openly, by any of the ordinary steamer routes, for fear of awkward questions being asked, so they're going to ship him up to that one-eyed place, where there are no such things as telephones, telegrams, wireless, or other inconveniences of civilisation, on some old timber tramp, with a foreign skipper who'll do anything and keep his mouth shut so long as he's well paid. And they'll smuggle him down from the north to Ravgar without a living soul but themselves being any the wiser; for once he has disappeared from Vardo Island, no one will know or care what has become of him, and——"

"And then?" said Nipper glumly.

Nelson Lee's face grew hard.

"And then that fiend Bortsh and his satellites will have him at their mercy. Maybe they will torture him—make him sign away his inheritance, or, maybe, they hope to prevent him willing it away, not knowing he has already done so. Whatever they mean to do we must get there in time to stop them! Let us get on!"

On the left a small passage jutted out, and Nelson Lee, torch in hand, checked as he glanced down it,

A huddled figure had been hastily thrust into the far end of it.

"The brutes!" muttered Lee hoarsely, bending over the figure. "An old man, and yet they've done him to death in that bestial fashion, and flung him down here like so much carrion. Well, it adds to an already long score against them. It is Anstruther's old servant of whom he spoke without a doubt. They had to rid themselves of the old man before they could trap the master. We must leave that part of the matter to Scotland Yard. I'll notify them before we go."

He left the body and ran lightly down the stairs.

But the lights were no longer burning. They had been switched off lest they might attract the attention of some too inquisitive policeman, who might consider it his duty to enter the grounds.

"No good wasting time over the rest of the house," said Nelson Lee. They hurried across the black-and-white flags and left by the window through which they had originally forced an entrance. "No hope of finding a taxi at this hour anywhere nearer than Regent Street," said Lee. "We'll have to foot it. Come along! We go first to Scotland Yard and then I'll have to head for Vardo and Finland."

"Can't I come, too, gov'nor?" queried Nipper. "You can't tackle this job single-handed."

"You mean you'd rather come than go back to St. Frank's?"

"Not altogether, gov'nor. St. Frank's is a fine show, and all that. But—well, can't I come?"

There was a grim smile on Nelson Lee's face.

"I think you'll have to come," he said. "I can't tackle this affair alone. I shall need you, Nipper, and Wolf. But first we must go to Scotland Yard."

They found a belated taxi and drove at a terrific speed to Scotland Yard to lodge information.

The chase had started in grim earnest. Nelson Lee was on the trail of Bortsh, and the Circle of Seven!

CHAPTER 5.

At Vardo.

V ARDO, which lies at the gate of Lapland, is a small island, with no telegraphs, wireless, trains, trams, or any other products of civilisation. No regular lines of boats touch there, though there is an ice-free harbour all the year round, in spite of its being six hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. Only an occasional timber boat or clumsy Russian yat comes in from the outside. The rest of the harbour is crowded with the local cod boats, and the whole of the small island reeks aloud of cod and the remains of cod.

Three short weeks after Nelson Lee's interview with the Scotland Yard officials, he, Nipper and Wolf, the Alsatian, stood in its cod-littered main street of modern dwellings and stared at the goats browsing on the turf-grown house-roofs. It was mid-day.

To have reached such an isolated spot in so short a time, Nelson Lee had lavished money like water—had bribed, cajoled, threatened, and worked with a superhuman energy. Before leaving he had applied to a very influential friend to bring every ounce of influence to bear in his favour that he could.

He had been granted specially vised passports to the Governments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, special travelling facilities leave to charter any boats he could, locally, and the right to demand post horses and reindeer at every post-house in preference to other less favoured travellers and Sir Richard Carew, a connection of Miss Marjorie Carew—Cyril Anstruther's fiancée—had left no stone unturned, and yet it had all been to no purpose. Once again Bortsh had proved himself too cunning for them.

Within an hour of his arrival, Nelson Lee had learnt that a Finn—a great, black-bearded giant of a man—with two servants and an Englishman, who was sick, as some said—mad, according to others—had landed from a boat bound for Archangel, a week previously and had gone into the interior beyond—across the narrow arm of the sea which made Vardo an island.

None of them had been able to see the Englishman clearly—none had been allowed to approach him. He had been kept carefully guarded, wrapped in rugs; and one of the Finn's servants had carried heavy leg-irons and handcuffs when they started for the interior.

Nelson Lee listened to all this with a sinking heart. He knew as well as if he had been told that those rugs had served to hide the ropes with which Bortsh had bound his prisoner; that Anstruther had probably been landed under the influence of some powerful drug; and that Bortsh, in spite of these precautions, had been cunning enough to let no one but his own servants have access to him.

The man was playing a desperate game for a terrific stake, and he would take no chances. Worst of all, he had a clear week's start. And if he expected pursuit—which he probably did—he would have taken care to use up all the reindeer along the post routes, which were already heavily covered with snow, and impassable for any other draught animal, even had such been procurable. Of course, the use of motors in that region at that season of the year was absolutely unthinkable, while aeroplanes would be of little use, partly on account of the lack of petrol supplies, partly because of the lack of landing-grounds, and because Bortsh could easily conceal himself and his party in the dense woods, and thus escape capture.

Nelson Lee shuddered to think what might happen to the man he had sworn to save in those long hundreds of miles of swamp and forest and lake which lay between Vardo and Ravgar. Worn out with constant travelling, they had retired early to their room in the little log inn overlooking the foul-smelling harbour.

The following morning the detective spent in buying necessaries for the trip, while Nipper arranged for a boat to take them across to the mainland, and for sledges and reindeer afterwards.

It was while the former was haggling over the price of some fur sleeping-bags that he became aware of a little wizened man in the dress of a Lapp who always kept on sidling close up to him, yet seemed too shy to address him openly—though apparently he wished to do so.

To every store that Lee went the little man persistently followed him; he rarely came inside, but hung about as though fearing to lose sight of him, until Lee felt rather as if he had picked up a stray dog and would have to take it home with him.

The short hours of twilight which served for daylight were drawing to a close, when, seeing that the little man still trotted at his heels, he made up his mind to settle the matter and be rid of him; and with this object, when he was in a side-alley, he suddenly wheeled round and made towards him.

Instantly the latter turned and fled away for a score of paces, then stopped again and looked at Lee wistfully. The next second he was walking slowly but deliberately towards the outskirts. Lee was about to call to him, but checked himself; for at that moment two high-booted Finns came round the corner. They were unkempt fellows of the fisher class, but they seemed quite enough to alarm the Lapp, who quickened his pace.

As soon as they were gone he slowed down again, and this time he beckoned unmistakably; and then, without so much as glancing over his shoulder, trotted slowly off towards the arid regions lying beyond the town, where several rows of codfish were hung up to dry.

It was a desolate, squalid spot, and as a rule no one goes there except on business connected with cod. Nelson Lee could see them hanging in long festoons, showing black against the snow even in the gloom, as he followed. A quarter of a mile beyond them the little man halted, and waited for Lee to come up.

"You Engleeshman," he said. "You frien' of other Engleeshman who go seek. No—what?" he continued, in pretty fair English.

"Do you mean the man who was supposed to be ill, and came through here with the big Finn a week ago, and went over there, south, through your own country?" said Lee eagerly, convinced that the little man had news for him.

"Iss—I mean-a dat. Him-a do real seek—him bound so"—he held his legs together and his arms close to his sides—"then him covered all-a up with blanket. Me very good

Lapp—what—my name Trouble. Me spik heap Englees, yes what?" he added.

"But how do you know this, little man?" asked Lee. "And where do you come in?"

"Me know—oh, rather, blame your eye, what! Me bin on whaler—savvee plenty. Me like Englees—heap plenty, yes what! No like Finner, him bosh!"

"Well, look here, Trouble, my son," said Lee, smiling in spite of himself. "The British nation are very thankful for your kind appreciation of them. Some of 'em are a bad lot, but you do them honour. At the same time, I don't see why you made me tramp half a mile through gloom and slush, if you only wanted me to take a message to them to that effect."

"Me no savvee what," said Trouble. "Englessman him all tie up—clove hitch—half hitch—sailor fashion. Oh, yes!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"But how do you know?"

The little man took off his quaint-shaped, four-cornered cap, packed with hay inside for warmth's sake, pulled back his shock of hair, and showed an angry-looking half-healed scar stretching from the centre of the forehead between the temples to his left ear.

"Dat Finner work," he said, scowling. "Dat big Finner he strike me—so—with him stick—for nothings what. I do no har. Then I pull my knife so, an' he knock me flat. All same bucko mate on whaler I no' mind a mate, him very good man. But dat Finner—I keel him one day—what!"

"You mean you fell foul of Bortsh, and he wiped you over the head?"

"Bortsh, dat him name—I take pain to learn dat name."

"And those Finns we met in the road when you hurried on—what of them?"

"They belong dat mane Bortsh. He own plenty fishing-boat along here—he very rich. They see me spik to you they keel me quick. So me bring you here. One night Bortsh an' de men wiz heem, they get ver' drunk what—dat same day he struck me yes. I go mighty quiet I guess—see seek man in dose blanket. I see plenty rope an' he breathe so"—he imitated the sound of snoring. "He lie on bed upstairs in guest house same as you. I wake him an' loosen rope; but he no can stand. Den he give me money, and say bring him things for write—an' all-a time Bortsh he downstairs drunk as pigs—yes what! I get Engleeshman write things, an' hol' him while he write on paper.

"Then he say: 'Maybe other Englees come dis way—tall thin man same as you. If he come give him-a dis paper write. Not to no one else only heem, an' no let anyone see. You ver' good man, Trouble. One day you have wings an' a banjo—same as first mate on whaler—only he got no wings, only banjo.' Then he say, 'You tie up rope again sailor fashion, and I go sham seek. I not real seek—yet—only pretend.'"

"Have you got the paper write, little man?" asked Lee eagerly. "Here, collar these; there are rouble notes enough to buy

you half a score of reindcer! Hand it over, quick!"

The Lapp hesitated, thrusting his hand into the capacious recesses of his baggy skin winter coat.

"You read paper write you go find dat man Bortsh—what?" he asked.

"Sure!" said Lee impatiently.

"You take me wiz you. You travel through my peoples. I help you ver' great deal, yes. I fin' you deer—show you the roads of my peoples. We travel ver' fast—go queek. I have take deer right down to Ravgar when de breeding season him done—yes. My peoples belong de Herder Lapps—yes—once ver' great peoples—not common Skolte Lapp—not Fisher Lapp. You will take—what?"

He spoke quickly, eagerly, and his little eyes gleamed.

"I will," said Lee. "Serve me faithfully, and I'll give you plenty more roubles—anything you want. But mind this: if you play the fool I'll wring your little neck with as little compunction as I would a rat's. Now, hand over that paper."

CHAPTER 6.

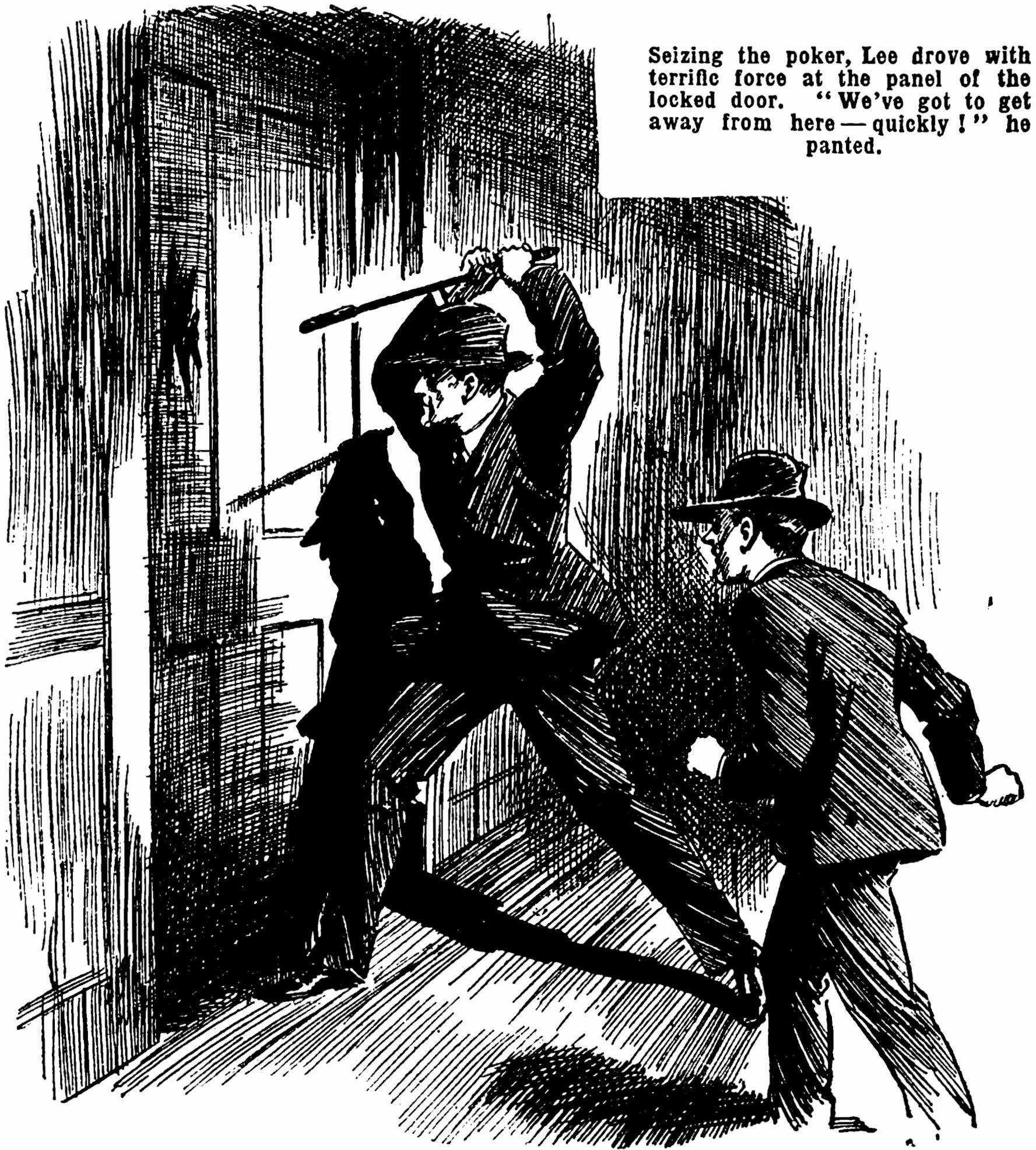
On the Trail!

THE little man passed it over, and Nelson Lee, by holding it close to his face, was just able to decipher the words.

"Dear Lee," it ran, "as you will know long before this ever reaches you, if it ever does, that Bortsh has trapped me. My fingers are cramped and I can hardly write; but if this ever meets your eyes, for Heaven's sake spare no efforts to save me. The cunning fiends have planned for me a living death. They are trying to force me to sign my Finnish property away to Bortsh. Should I do so I feel sure I should come by my death very quickly. But as they cannot obtain my legal signature they have sentenced me to a living death. I shall just disappear from mortal ken, while Bortsh remains agent and virtual owner of the property. In short, they mean to send me to the Leper Islands in Bothnia; and once there, Heaven alone can save me from madness or a terrible end.

"Bortsh has some reason to believe that you are already following on our trail. I hope it may be so, and in that hope I write these few lines, but beware of traps. He will do all in his power to prevent you reaching me alone. The Lapp to whom I give this was brutally ill-treated by him to-day, and is to be trusted, since he has sneaked up here at the risk of his skin, and I have little or nothing with which to reward him, so treat him well.

"Escape alone and unaided is, I fear, hopeless; my every movement is watched. This is the first time I have been left alone



Seizing the poker, Lee drove with terrific force at the panel of the locked door. "We've got to get away from here—quickly!" he panted.

since they bowled me over at the Laurels—the curs had tampered with my cartridges, or I should have bagged them. If I go under I look to you to see that Miss Carew comes into her own. All expenses, and your own remuneration, of course, to come out of the estate. Good-bye! I have little hope left, and the fate before me needs all my strength and courage to face.

"C. A."

Nelson Lee's face turned grey in the dusk as he read the lines. In a flash the whole diabolical plot became clear to him. He knew those terrible islands in the Bothnian Gulf by repute. Leprosy is still not unknown in Russia, though the presence of the dread disease is kept as secret as possible. As soon as the symptoms show themselves the

victim is hurried away—generally in the dead of night—to one of the isolated plague spots, which are strictly guarded, and there left to live or die amidst unspeakable horrors.

Bortsh had foreseen that the outrage at the Laurels must have caused a hue-and-cry, and Cyril Anstruther, of the Royal Navy, the betrothed of a relation of Sir Richard Carew, was far too important a person not to be searched and inquired for everywhere. To have killed him out of hand would, more than possibly, have put Bortsh's own neck in the noose, and the Finnish Government would have been heartily glad of the excuse.

But if Anstruther merely disappeared, and his identity became merged in those of the lost souls on one of the Leper Islands, let all the inquiries in the world be made, and

they would lead to nothing, and must eventually fizzle out.

Lee saw the diabolical cunning of the scheme—the foresight and the elaborate pains taken make it work smoothly. He guessed, too, gauging Bortsh's character, that with the vanishing of Cyril Anstruther, a codicil to the will would be forthcoming, or some ingenious manipulation of the books, by which Bortsh, the agent, would possess himself of the lion's share of the Finnish estates.

The fact that Bortsh—or, rather, Bortsh, as John Anstruther's agent—held big fishing rights in Vardo did not surprise Lee much. Properly financed, there is a big harvest to be reaped from the seas, and shrewd old John Anstruther had doubtless seen the point of investing spare capital there. The awkward part was that Bortsh had many men in his pay in the small township who would do anything for him—at a price.

Lee stood in the gathering darkness, rocking to and fro on his toes and heels, thinking hard—harder, perhaps, than he had ever thought in his life before, tearing the note into minute shreds as he did so, and scattering them to the winds.

"We start at the earliest light to-morrow," he said at last. "If you really mean to come, Trouble, you must be ready by then."

The little man shook his head and pointed south.

"Me join you there—yes, what?" he said.

"But why not come with us? We shan't wait for you if you're not there to time, mind!"

"Me come long-a you!" said Trouble.

"Then Bortsh fellow here he guess—what. Then me go so fashion—no good to you any longer, what?"—and he drew his finger slowly across his throat with a significant gesture.

"But how will you get across the water, little man?" asked Lee.

Trouble grinned. He was a most uncommunicative little dwarf of a man when he chose.

"Me be there!" he said, and vanished into the darkness, leaving Lee to tramp back to the guest house alone, which, in view of Trouble and his warnings, he did with one hand on the butt of his revolver.

CHAPTER 7.

Trouble on the Trail!

A GREY gloom everywhere. A sodden, slate-grey sky, dry, blue-grey snow, streaked here and there with the black ice of the watercourses, which the bitter winds had swept clear, and in all the scene from horizon to horizon as far as the eye could see, no living creature.

Nelson Lee wiped the ice fringe off his eyebrows with a fur-mittened hand and stared about him. The little boat sledge rocked and swayed ominously at his slightest

movement, and the double team of reindeer ahead in their grey fur jackets splodged along with their splay feet at a monotonous, slithering trot. Their ungainly, humped shoulders, and heavy, wagging heads showed only as deeper grey masses against the grey background.

Yet, after their own fashion they were shambling away at nearer ten miles to the hour than eight. No great pace, perhaps, but they had kept it going without a break, up hill and down hill alike, through bad snow and good, for over six hours at a stretch, and they were travelling now at precisely the same speed at which they had started.

Ahead, Trouble—the little befurred Lapp—hunched in the stern of his sledge, and swaying easily to every lurch of it, was guiding his animals with pole and voice alike, keeping them to an invisible trail which none but he and his people knew.

Astern, Nipper, jolted, sore of limb, was half dozing in a similar sledge, knowing that his deer would follow their leaders without any trouble on his part. And crouched at his feet in the bows of the sledge, cramped, uncomfortable, and shivering, lay the Alsatian, Wolf.

Wherever the snow lay hard and good, or when their course lay down a frozen stream, they made him run, for his big hulk and weight was a heavy, extra strain on the deer teams. But in soft, wet snow, such as they were traversing now, he would have sunk deeply at every step, and it was simpler to let him ride.

They were travelling dead light, and by short cuts. When they slept, they slept in their fur bags in the sledges where they halted, after throwing to the deer an armful of the crisp, ivory-covered moss which they love. They ate as they drove, living mostly on biscuits and chocolate, with one hot meal of canned soup and cocoa every twenty-four hours; but they were overhauling Bortsh rapidly.

Whilst they were still two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, they learnt from a Lapp team going north that they had gained three days on him. A hundred miles farther on Trouble guided them to a winter settlement of his own people, and there they learnt that Bortsh's deer had collapsed, and that he had been held up for four-and-twenty hours, while more were procured, in a small log rest house thirty miles to the westward of them. And now, encouraged by the news, they were, at an outside estimate, twelve hours behind.

But their own deer were overstrained by the heavy snow, and for the last three hours the sleighs had dragged heavily over half-buried, dead, tall trees and boulders, and a change of animals within the next stage of the journey was imperative.

Trouble headed for another encampment of his people, but the way was long and hard,

and taxed the reindeer to the uttermost, especially as several ridges had to be crossed. Their splay feet slithered and dug deep furrows in the snow, for the incline was steep, and Lee's leader came down heavily on its knees, compelling him to roll himself out of his furs and seize the ring round its muzzle, which served as a bit, to drag it on to its weary legs again.

Before he could get it up Nipper came cannoning into them, with the result that both his deer came down with a grunting crash, and Nipper and Wolf—the latter with a howl of surprise—were sent hurtling through the air like rockets. Wolf's covering blanket, flapping wildly round his scrabbling paws, until dog, blanket and all disappeared momentarily from view in a deep drift.

It was comic enough for the time being, and even Lee, struggling with his leader, laughed at the sight of Wolf and Nipper emerging, whilst Trouble, farther down the slope, let up a series of barks, which served him as joy signals. But when they came to separate the animals the laughter was cut off short, and they realised that they were face to face with what was little short of disaster. Both Nipper's deer were hopelessly done for, one poor brute had broken both forelegs, and, in its agony, using its powerful antlers, it had badly gored its team-mate.

Trouble examined them and shook his head.

"He no go no more, what?" he said dismally. "Him go dead—no can help."

Lee nodded, pulled out his revolver, and mercifully put an end to the poor brutes' sufferings. They were compelled to leave them where they lay, though the meat was valuable in that country of starvation; and the sledge was left beside them.

Then, at Trouble's suggestion, Nipper and Wolf got into his sledge, and Lee clambered back into his own.

"But what about you, little man?" Lee asked.

Trouble was already lashing on the pair of long, wooden ski which he carried on the side of his sledge.

"Me walk," he said. "Me go plentee quick—quicker'n you all downhill; so in half an hour we come to my people's 'ouse—some of my peoples they live down there winter-time, what? Then we get more deer, send back for meat and other sledge—yes?"

And away he went, once more slithering down the slope on his ski at a surprising speed through the cloudless, starlight night.

Sure enough, after a little more than half an hour's travelling, mostly downhill and at a good round pace, they saw a beehived-shaped mound rise out of the snow before them, and then another away to the right, and yet another, and another.

They had come upon the dwelling quarters of some of the harder Lapps—quaint little dwellings, stuck snugly away at the foot of

the low range they had just descended, and sheltered by it from the full blast and fury of the northern gales. Out beyond they could see a big stretch of forest, showing black against the snowy plain, and the sky beyond.

Trouble gave a series of sharp, barking yelps as they neared the tiny settlement, and here and there a head popped out of a tunnel entrance to see who the unexpected visitors might be.

The two men were invited into the nearest hut to warm themselves in the smoke and reek of the wood fire, and they did so to the accompaniment of much growling on the part of the Lapp dogs, which, however, quickly subsided into whimpering at the sight of Wolf; and one by one the four-footed natives slunk away unobtrusively.

The sole occupants of the hut were a very wizened old man, who crouched over the fire, wrapped in furs, and took not the slightest notice of them, and a young reindeer calf. The old man had a face the colour of mahogany, and was apparently nearly blind. He sat all huddled up, holding his skinny, claw-like hands out to the blaze, and sucked thoughtfully at an empty birchwood pipe.

Nelson Lee pressed some tobacco on him, but he didn't seem to understand, and so finally the detective took the old man's pipe from his hand, filled it, lit it, and passed it back. It was a trivial act of courtesy to an aged stranger, but it was to have strange outcomings. The old man, scenting the fumes of the tobacco, clasped the pipe greedily in his shrivelled fingers, and sat sucking in the smoke rapturously, whilst he blinked at the fire with his red-rimmed eyes.

Twenty minutes, perhaps, passed before Trouble came crawling in through the entrance, and a glance at his face was enough to make Nelson Lee's heart sink. He glanced at the old man, and then at Lee and Nipper.

"Dat man, Bortsh, him plentee bad," he said excitedly. "Very much plentee bad. Me tell you. You come long-a my peoples, me get you deer. Oh, yes, what? Now deer all gone long-a wood. No more deer."

"Do you mean to say we can't get relays?" cried Lee. "What about the feeding ground we came across a few miles back?"

"Dat fella Bortsh," continued Trouble stolidly; "him come here two-t'ree 'our ago; four sledges him come. He take my peoples an' he lash them, same as me." And he pointed to the scar on his forehead.

"Bortsh here, a couple of hours ago!" shouted Lee. "Then we'll have him yet! We must push on with the couple of teams that are left. Trouble, you must stay here, and come on as soon as you can."

Trouble shook his head.

"No can do boss; his deer all done up. What? Bortsh, he come, tak' eight, ten, twelve deer; de best there was. Iss, and he—

put t'ree to each sledge. Then he drive all de other deer away—so—with his whip, and they run, and make for de forest, yes? Then he laugh, and go 'way. He pay nothing and my people lose twenty, t'irty deer. He plenty bad man. He pull out of dis place less than two hour ago, and de seek Englees wiz him; but we no can follow. No; it tak' a night an' a day before my peoples find dem deer an' bring dem 'ome. Dese deer we have come wiz plentee seek, no good. Must have fresh deer. Yes, what?"

Nelson Lee frowned and turned away to hide his disappointment. He knew that what the little man said was perfectly true—their own cattle were done up. They had dragged along gamely through two forced marches, and more could not be expected of them. In any case, even if they could be goaded into movement, they would not have the remotest chance of catching up with Bortsh, who was driving three fresh deer to each sledge, and he had been cunning enough to stampede the rest, foreseeing the probability of pursuit.

Already Bortsh's party was far south enough to be amongst the big trees. Another hundred versts more would take them into the confines of semi-civilisation; they would be amongst the big, outlying estates of rich Finland landowners, and amongst his own people, many of whom might be members of the criminal gang known as the Seventh Circle, who were busy getting money together to enable them to get the Government of Finland into their own unscrupulous hands.

Four-and-twenty hours Trouble had given as the time limit in which they might expect to get relays of fresh reindeer, and in four-and-twenty hours Bortsh might have carried his captive five times as many miles to the southward, and to a horrible fate.

The old man by the fire stirred uneasily, and turning, blinked at them with his unseeing eyes. Then, divining Trouble's presence—or so it seemed to Nelson Lee and Nipper—he beckoned to the little man to approach, which the latter did, in some fear and trembling; and the two talked in undertones in their own tongue.

"Masthia he say he wish to see the man who give him good smoke stuff," announced Trouble, after a pause. "He say him heap plenty good man, but first he want to see him. Yes, what?"

"Well, here I am!" said Lee a trifle testily. "He's welcome to look if he wants."

"Masthia he see with his fingers," announced Trouble; "no see wiz his eyes. No, no. You come-a here, boss; let Masthia look."

"Oh, anything to oblige!" said Lee, half angrily. "Let the old gentleman do what he wishes. If only he could help us there would be some point in it."

Nevertheless, at a sign from Trouble he sat down by the fire close to the blind man.

CHAPTER 8.

Masthia the Wizard!

MASTHIA, as Trouble called him, turned towards Lee with that strange instinct for locality which is peculiar to the blind, holding his pipe in one hand, passed the skinny fingers of the other lightly and unerringly over Lee's features—not once or twice, but several times, and each time in an opposite direction.

Then, after musing some time, he spoke to Trouble again, and at length, and the little man translated.

"Boss, Masthia say you heap good man, good friend, and your smoke stuff heap good, too. He say he know you want help frien' of yours in plenty trouble—yes, what?—an' that white man—him mean Bortsh—tak' your frien' away out there." And he pointed south. "You no can follow, and bad man he travel plentee fast no can catch. Masthia no help you catch, but he stop bad man go plenty farther if you wish."

Lee smiled wearily.

"Same old tricks," he said to Nipper. "Upon my soul, we might be on Epsom Downs on a Derby Day, having our fortunes told for a shilling a time. Look here, Trouble, if it's more tobacco the old gent is angling for, tell him he can have it, and welcome, without going through his tricks."

The old man mumbled through his toothless gums, and again Trouble took up the rôle of interpreter.

"Nasthia say you plenty clever man, but you no believe. He say he much more clever than you. What? Him plenty big medicine man, an' him show you. He say he see the deer folk far away over to the dark place—north. They no go long-a forest. No. An' you must stay here wiz him a sleep an' half a sleep before the young men of my peoples bring back deer for him sledge. He tell you treat him kind, and give him smoke stuff—heap good baccy—though you no believe. He no tak' baccy no more at all, till he mak' you believe. He say he mak' dat bad man, an' your frien' stay still amongst de big trees, and no move at all till deer come for your sledge. Then you go catch best you can. If he make bad man stop, then bad man gain one sleep an' half a sleep, and you no catch him till he comes to his own peoples. What?"

"And how does he propose to stop Bortsh from trayelling just as far and as fast as he pleases?" asked Lee.

"He say he show. You no understand; only my peoples understand; but all a same he show you he can do."

"Fire ahead, then!" said Lee. He was bitterly disappointed, and had no heart for what he termed, inwardly, tomfoolery. The one idea that possessed him was to be off on the trail again, and the enforced delay galled and irritated him almost beyond endurance.

Masthia made a signal with his long-stemmed pipe, and Trouble, who seemed to understand what he needed, hung an undressed deerskin rug in front of the entrance of the tunnel, shutting off all ventilation, and making Nipper and Nelson Lee cough in the acrid smoke reek, though neither of the Lapps seemed in the least affected.

Trouble grubbed away the hard-beaten earth from a corner on the far side of the "smudge," removed a loose board which covered a hole beneath, and drew out a half oval-shaped thing about four times the size of a large coconut cut in half. It was of wood, black with age and much handling, and highly polished. It was covered with intricately carved designs of various patterns, most of them triangular, and the top of it—for it was hollow—was closed with the finely-dressed inner skin of a reindeer, tightly stretched, forming a kind of miniature kettle-drum.

Nelson Lee leant forward with a sudden gleam of interest in his eyes. He had both heard and read of the famous witch-drums of the Lapps, but he had never glimpsed one before. Few men ever have, for they are hidden away in secret places, and regarded as far too precious to be profaned by alien eyes, as a rule.

Northern collectors have sought them in vain, and the offer of their weight in gold would not purchase one. Still, there are some

in existence, though if questioned, the Lapps will, as a rule, vigorously deny the fact, and plead ignorance.

Masthia took the thing lovingly between his knees, as he sat crouching, and passed his fingers gently over the parchment-like surface, the while he gazed into the fireglow with his red, unused eyes, and seemed to fall into a kind of trance.

Never was there a more eerie scene. The choking smoke-reek eddied and swirled and hovered about the narrow confines of the igloo; the only light being the reddish gleam of the fire, which played full on the shrunken figure of Masthia, squatting there like some ghoul of the legends. Behind him, cowering in the furthestmost shadows, his face wet with perspiration, and distorted by mingled terror and wonder, lurked the sturdy, dwarf-like form of Trouble, and Nelson Lee and Nipper, wrapped in their furs, huddled together, blinking through the smoke.

Presently, though they could not see the old man's fingers move as they rested on the parchment—and they were watching him with close interest—a low, tremulous noise seemed to permeate the hut. It was more a deep vibration than an actual sound, and caused a curious sort of drumming sensation in their ears, similar to the drumming experienced when held under water over long.

Gradually, very gradually, this quickened and increased until it sounded like the sharp

LOOK FOR THIS COVER!



Good old Skimpole's off again! Take a look at him in the small cover reproduction here. No wonder he hasn't got much of an audience—he's always full of the most hair-brained ideas! And besides that Tom Merry & Co. have started a House of Commons at St. Jim's and everyone is listening to *them*. Read all about it in this week's tip-top GEM yarn, "The St. Jim's Parliament!"

A PRICELESS LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL YARN featuring TOM MERRY & CO.

Ask for the

GEM

NOW on SALE 2d.

pattering of rain or hail on a corrugated iron roof, except that the note was more musical. Yet still, watch as closely as they would, they could detect no movement of those talon-like fingers, all shrivelled and gnarled at the knuckles. The tips of the top joints, and the tips only, seemed to rest lightly on the parchment, without so much as a quiver, and bit by bit the pattering rose to a muffled roar—a monotonous, weirder than any other conceivable sound—till the noise hammered its way into their brains, and they stared owlshly at the smoke.

NELSON LEE made an effort to gather his senses. At the back of his head he had an idea that he was the victim of some sort of hypnosis. He felt unutterably drowsy, and yet with it all his brain was as clear as it could be; only his inner self seemed in some unaccountable way to be detached from his body.

He had a vague recollection of crying aloud: "Oh, stop it! Stop that infernal din, confound you!" And the next moment he was miles away amongst the big, black pine-trees which were bending and swaying beneath a terrific northerly gale. A branch came down close beside him, and he could see the splintered, white, gleaming patch where it had been torn away from the parent tree. And then came the snow, not in flakes, nor in sheets, but in a bewildering mass, which blinded and beat down everything before it.

He saw sledges and men and deer cowering for shelter, and he saw a forest giant keel over, and come crashing headlong down, burying three of the reindeer beneath it as they stood in their harness; and he seemed to hear Anstruther's voice calling above the din and general ruin: "For mercy's sake, spare no efforts!" Then everything was blotted out as by a solid white curtain.

The muffled roar of the drum rose and rose until the whole place shook and rocked. Wolf crept out of his corner, tail drooping, shivering in every limb and muscle, and throwing up his massive head, howled and howled again, in a note his master had never heard him utter before. It was a howl of terror and pain and savage longings; a wild, untamed thing calling to the untamable wild.

The louder and more deafening the roll of the drum, the wilder and more uncannily came the notes from the big dog's throat. And now the shrivelled fingers were moving quickly; so quickly, and with such marvellous dexterity that no human eye could have followed their movements. They beat out a chant of war, of defiance, of things no words have power to describe; of unseen powers unchained, and let loose to tear the world asunder.

Trouble was crouching down, his face pressed against the hard earth floor, his hood drawn over his head. Nelson Lee and Nipper sat like two statues, oblivious to their surroundings. Wolf, every hair on end and head thrown back, was howling in blind rage, and fear. The foam slavered from his jaws; and

Masthia, great beads of sweat dripping from his forehead on to his shrivelled hands and the parchment, was staring in front of him with so intent a gaze that no man would have believed him sightless.

Then came the wind. In one shrieking blast it swept down from the north like a solid wall. The igloo, sheltered by the ridge, it could not touch nor shake, but overhead it sounded as though all the lost souls since the beginning of the world had been let loose to wreak their vengeance.

Nelson Lee was aroused out of the semi-stupor into which he had fallen by a tap on the shoulder.

Masthia had fallen forward with his head on his knees, a wizened, frail, monkey-like object. The drum had vanished. Wolf lay crouched along the floor, his coat black and shining with sweat, and quivering as if he had ague. Nipper was blinking as if newly aroused from sleep.

"Eh?" said Lee drowsily, and looked up to find Trouble standing over him.

"You come look," said the little man. "He wills it."

Mechanically, and not understanding, Lee rose, and followed, and Nipper came after him. They crawled down the tunnel leading to the outer air, and, having gained the entrance, stood up and looked about them.

THE air was calm, overhead the stars shone brightly with a steely glimmer in an indigo sky, but to the southward everything was different. A solid white curtain blotted out everything from view. Half a mile away they could see the edge of a blizzard tearing the snow into wisps and wreaths as it flicked it off the ground and scattered it broadcast. The forest was blotted out, and the gale was such as no man could hope to keep his feet in for a second.

"For a sleep and half a sleep," said Trouble. "Our deer folk will come from the north. He has made it so. My people are a wise people, and an old, and Masthia is wiser and older than all."

Nelson Lee and Nipper stared incredulously. A glance was sufficient to show that whilst the gale held no living thing to the southward dare move from shelter. Yet, to the north, all was calm and clear. If it held, Bortsh would be stormbound until they, themselves with fresh deer, could hit the trail again.

Nelson Lee drew a deep breath.

"What is it, old man?" he said aside to Nipper. "Are we back in the Middle Ages—black magic, sorcery, and all that sort of thing? Or is it that Masthia, knowing the country well, had news of a gale from the north, and counted on the ridge protecting us and leaving us here in a calm? That's the common-sense answer, of course; and yet, somehow, it doesn't fit in. Goodness knows, I'm sceptical enough, but hang me if I can find an answer to the riddle! A

sleep and a half, he prophesies. Well, we shall see. If it's a trick, it's a deuced clever one. But is it? These old people of the earth can teach us moderns more than we dream of sometimes; and we know so little of their deeper knowledge. Ah, well, let's turn in and sleep; we shall need all the rest we can get."

He walked back to the hut, and Nipper followed him. They were both unaccountably drowsy, and their brains felt numbed, and their wits were heavy, as if they had undergone a severe and prolonged strain.

The gale and the snow lasted for exactly thirty-six hours!

CHAPTER 9.

A True Prediction.

THE fresh deer were driven in from the north, an hour before the gale to the southward had blown itself out, and whether by chance, guesswork, or some means not understood by a modern, town-dwelling race, the blizzard lasted for just so long as Masthia, the wizened old man, had prophesied.

Nelson Lee handed him half his available store of tobacco, which was greedily accepted. It seemed to be the only thing the old witch-doctor lived for. But when, in addition, the detective would have thrust into his hands a packet of rouble notes in payment for the deer, Masthia waved them aside with a gesture of contempt, and beckoned to Trouble, to whom he mumbled a few words.

"He say you very good man," said Trouble; "but that, in spite of all he do, you no believe. You think dem storm come by chance. He say he no want your money. He very big Lapp; very plenty rich man—see? My peoples have much-a more same as dat, but no show to Finner or Rushie—only show you."

He ripped up a rough trap-door of three planks pegged together with wooden pegs, and showed them a deep hole filled with marvellous old silver ornaments, many of them jewelled, and here and there was the gleam of a solid gold chalice and ewer studded with gems.

The accumulation of years and generations of pilfering and loot; some of them undoubtedly relics of the sack of the old Hansa Cities. There was not a cup amongst them which would not have created a sensational outburst of bidding in Christie's sale-rooms.

"Great Scott!" said Lee, under his breath, in amazement. "And I was offering the old man a few pounds' worth of greasy rouble notes."

"He say our peoples plentee more 'like dem," continued Trouble; "but your baccy stuff very good, an' he whole heap oblige. Then he say, when you come to forest you see big tree with heap big white mark on dat side"—pointing west—"an' little far on you see big branch. Ten deer-length away you see big tree fall, so, an' under beneath dem tree you see deer-folk, one, two, tree,

all-a dead—squash. He say, when you see dat, then you no be so much plentee blame fool as no believe. Savvee? Masthia plentee big, clever man. He say you no believe, because you not know how. That bosh!"

Nelson Lee, remembering his half-waking dream-vision, was frankly startled.

"Tell him," he said gravely, "that when I see those things, and if I see them, then I will believe; that there are many things which I don't understand."

"Him plenty big word," said Trouble. "Why, you no swear plainer. Then me savvee."

"All right, little man," said Lee. "Don't you worry. Put it your own way, and let's get off."

The young herders had only been able to round up a brace of deer to each sledge, but they were fat for work, and in prime condition. And the derelict sledge having been brought in over night, the three teams were soon hitched up, and they were trundling south over the newly-fallen snow once more, with the certainty that Bortsh was only a few hours ahead.

As they entered the tree belt they found things exactly as Masthia had predicted, except that the dead deer were now merely mounds of snow, with an antler protruding here and there.

Nelson Lee pointed to them silently with his guiding pole, and passed by with a queer expression on his set face. He was an unbeliever still. A man who lives in an atmosphere of taxis, telegrams, and wireless, is hard to convince, and yet—

Twenty versts further on they picked up Bortsh's sledge tracks, and clung to them. No snow had fallen since their start, and Trouble was of the opinion that they were less than four hours old.

Once they were crossed by a bear track. The animal, driven from its shelter probably by the storm, had ploughed through the soft snow shoulder deep, leaving a trail as broad as a fodder sledge.

And after that they came to a stream, frozen into hard, black ice, with only a wind-swept coating of snow to cover it, and in many places not even that.

At the second bend of the stream, where the ice was bare and as hard as steel, they lost Bortsh's trail again. Whether his party had taken to one of the banks or not, for the sake of the safer going, they were unable to say; but, as the course of the river was approximately due south, they determined to stick to it.

The light, such as it was, had already gone, but they held on blindly till the sound of running water warned them of rapids and a fall somewhere ahead, and they pulled out to the right-hand bank, to rest and enjoy the luxury of a can of hot soup, divided into three portions, and a bowl of cocoa.

Five more miles of hard going and they found the tracks again, but whether of

Bortsh's party or of some other south-bound travellers, it was hard to say, for by the sign of axe-work amongst the trees, and an occasional pile of hewn timber, it was clear that they were nearing some big outlying estate, belonging, probably, to a Finnish landowner.

A little further on they came to a stout post-and-rail fence, and, further still, the twinkling lights on a low hillside showed them a cluster of peasant huts.

A break in the woodland, with a clear-cut sleigh drive leading straight ahead, showed them a grim, stone-built, two-storied house, huge and rambling—more like a fortress than a dwelling-place, and accessible, apparently, only by one archway of heavy masonry, flanked by great iron-studded doors.

Trouble slackened his team down, and let Lee come alongside.

"No like Quevnsk man," he said, a trifle sullenly. "Him no good fellow."

In spite of his anxiety, Nelson Lee chuckled drily, fully understanding the Lapp's objection to proceeding.

"But we've got to call here, little man," he said. "Bortsh is either here, or if, as I hope, we've managed to steal a few miles and get ahead of him, he'll come here. It looks like a spell of bad weather coming to-night. We know he's been pressing his deer hard, and he won't miss a chance of shelter like this."

Trouble looked at the place, with its grim stone walls and snow-laden roof, as a bear might look at a dead-fall trap.

"Me no come," he said decisively. "Quevnsk no like Lapp. Me sleep back yonder. Keep plentee good look-out."

Lee thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Have it your own way," he said at length. "Camp where you like and sleep where you like, but if you see or hear any signs of Bortsh and his party you'll come to that wall, there, and give a wolf howl by way of warning. Now we're going."

Trouble pulled out and vanished amongst the timber, with a wave of his hand, and Nelson Lee and Nipper held on towards the house. But Lee made sure that his revolver was handy for use before he hammered at the great gates.

A couple of men opened in answer to his summons, and through the gates he saw a high-walled, snow-covered courtyard.

"Can we have shelter for the night?" Lee asked.

The men, who had opened the doors hospitably enough, glanced at them askance, and one of them held up an old horn lantern to inspect these newcomers. Evidently they had orders to expect somebody, and it was plain they were disconcerted by Nelson Lee's arrival.

One of them signed to him to wait whilst the other ran across the courtyard to the house. Lights showed here and there, and presently the inner door swung open, and someone hailed. The doorkeeper signed to them to enter, and they drove up with a flourish, and clambered out of their sledges.

CHAPTER 10.

Treachery!

A MURMUR of astonishment went up as Wolf stretched and shook himself, and a man in a grotesque sort of livery beckoned to them to follow, whilst others led the door and the sledges away. Lee noted that the stables were at the far end of the yard, and then followed the man down a stone corridor. The servant looked nervously at Wolf, and mumbled something.

"Where I go, he goes," said Lee shortly.

The liveried man scowled, shook his head and threw open some folding inner doors. A huge fire of logs burnt at one end of the room, which suggested a medieval castle more than anything else; and near the fire, with a great tankard in his hand, sat a brawny, red-faced man, legs a-sprawl, sucking at a long pipe.

"You are welcome," he said gruffly, and not over heartily. "It isn't often we get visitors from the North. It's bad travelling weather now, too. You have come far?"

"Some little distance," said Lee dryly. "Our deer are tired, and so we thought we'd beg a night's shelter."

"Ah, we of this country never refuse shelter to a man or beast!" He leant forward curiously, his eyes narrowing, and a look of cunning creeping into them. "Your accent rings strange—too clear-cut. What are you?"

"We are English," said Lee quietly, though a spot of colour on each cheekbone showed that he resented the man's tone.

"English? Ah!" Again the dark eyes narrowed. "Well, you're welcome, as I said. Fridjof!" he bawled. "Get food for the strangers, you dog, and bring more tankards and some wine. Here, man, take that hound to the kennels. He'll find some nice friends there!" And he chuckled grimly.

Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and the servant hesitated.

"I don't know your name, sir," he said, addressing the sprawling giant. "But if my dog offends your susceptibilities we will go. I am sorry we intruded on you."

The big man sprang to his feet with an oath.

"No; but Waldimir, you shall not go! But your dog shall—to the kennels!"

"I beg your pardon," said Nelson Lee icily, "but if I say I shall go, it will take a bigger man than you to stop me!"

The Finn stood fingering his beard doubtfully, and drained his tankard before answering, a bit unsteadily.

"A wager!" he roared thickly, lurching a pace forward. "If your beast can beat the best in my kennels, he shall stay, and welcome!"

"You may have some good dogs," said Lee coldly, "but it would be no fair match. Mine has weight and power you little dream of. You couldn't stand against him yourself, unarmed. Besides, it is clear we had better be going."

"You're afraid!" roared the big man. "It's like you Britishers—you bluster and brag, but when it comes to backing your words with good hard money, you back out of it!"

Nelson Lee flushed darkly.

"Bring out your dog!" he said. "Afterwards we will go—either with or without your leave!"

"Come into the courtyard!" cried the man, and led the way.

Nelson Lee, following, caught Nipper by the arm and whispered swiftly.

"The man means mischief. He has been warned to look out for us—I feel sure of it. I hate risking Wolf getting a nip or two, but we must. This place smells too much like a trap for me."

Nipper nodded, and they passed out into the courtyard.

The big man whose name they learnt was Hansen, bawled out orders, and half a dozen foresters came running with lamps, and armed with long staffs—forming a rough circle of light on the snow.

"Let go your hound!" roared Hansen.

Nelson Lee gave Wolf's sleek flanks a resounding smack, and urged him into the ring, where he stood blinking at the lights and yawning. He was rather sleepy, and profoundly bored.

"I warn you," said Nelson Lee, "if one of your men touches my dog or interferes, he'll have me to deal with, if his throat isn't torn out for him beforehand!"

Hansen laughed harshly.

"I'll lay you a hundred roubles on my beast," he said.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I don't bet with strangers."

The circle of foresters parted, and two men came forward, leading a gaunt, grey brute on a double chain. It was a big timber wolf!

"That's no dog!" said Lee angrily. But aside he whispered to Nipper: "Wolf has met wolves before. I think friend Hansen will see something that will astonish him."

Wolf turned a sleepy eye, scented the old familiar wolf smell, and snarled. He made no movement, but stood stolidly waiting, his eyes gleaming redly in the lantern light.

At a sign from Hansen the two men slipped the chain, and the gaunt wolf bounced in, snarling fiercely. He sighted Wolf, and began circling round on the tips of his toes, neck-ruff bristling, eyes glancing wickedly wise-ways. Wolf yawned again, but this time the jaws did not quite close.

Although he did not show it he was fully alert to the first move of the huge timber wolf—ready to meet cunning with cunning.

The timber wolf mistook his stolidity for carelessness, and, quick as lightning, he dashed in and out again. Wolf's shoulder met his, fair and square, and before the wolf could get in his slashing, razor-like snaps of the jaws, he was on his back on the snow, twice his own length away, and up again quick as a cat, ablaze with anger and fear, too, for he knew the danger of losing his footing.

"Good old man!" said Lee, and Wolf wagged a heavy tail.

The timber wolf drew nearer, trying for a flank attack, but Wolf wheeled lazily and faced him. There was another cat-like spring on the part of the timber wolf, a quick scurry, and he was on his back for the second time, but now Wolf had him pinned by the throat and kept warily clear of his ripping, tearing hind claws.

"Is that enough?" said Lee sharply.

"Quick, or you'll lose your wolf for good!" Hansen, purple with rage, roared another order. The foresters scattered, and three more wolves were slipped from somewhere in the darkness beyond.

"You infernal coward!" cried Lee, and sprang forward, throwing up his revolver.

Crack, crack, crack!

The weapon spat three times, and at each report a grey wolf rolled over and lay kicking in the snow. Wolf had satisfactorily accounted for the fourth.

"You——" began Lee; but the sentence was never completed. The Finn ran at him like a man possessed, mad with the loss of his wolves, which were the only things he cared for, and catching Nelson Lee sideways and unprepared, he sent him staggering headlong.

The foresters and attendants, seeing which way the wind blew, flung themselves on Nelson Lee and Nipper, outnumbering them by six to one, and making resistance useless. In a trice they were bound and helpless, and Hansen, the great veins standing out on his forehead, gave a hoarse cry of triumph.

"Take them away," he roared, "and shoot that infernal elephant of a dog!"

But when a forester, gun in hand, ran forward to do his bidding, the dog was no longer there. From far away in the distance had come the long-drawn hunting-cry of the wild wolf, repeated again and again. Wolf had heard it, and, deeming wolves the most pressing business of the moment, had gone off like a shot.

Nelson Lee heard it, too, even as they bound his ankles, and groaned inwardly, for he knew that Trouble, far away in the woods, was signalling the approach of Bortsh and his party. Nelson Lee had outstripped him by incredible exertions, after a chase extending over hundreds of miles; and now, in what should have been his moment of triumph, he was bound, helpless, trapped!

CHAPTER 11.

Prisoners of the Dungeons!

THEY were jerked roughly off the ground, carried down some steps deep in snow; then came the grating of a rusty key in a lock, and the clank of heavy bolts, followed by the tramp of feet on solid flagstones.

Neither of them could see much of their surroundings beyond the uncertain flicker of

lamplight on a vaulted stone roof. Then even this seemed to recede and grow dim, and they were flung down on slimy rockwork. A door clanged—a heavy door, obviously—for the receding footsteps were instantaneously muffled, and there was silence.

Lee rolled over on to one side and listened in the darkness. Somewhere there was a slow drip-drip of water, and that was all. He was in a furious rage at the man's treachery. He had scented a trap, it is true, but he had never dreamt that Hansen would dare to go further than try to detain them of his own accord by a species of clumsy diplomacy, and was quite unaware that in his haste to save Wolf from an unfair conflict he had touched the man on his most vital spot.

An hour passed, and then once more the door clanged and lights shone about the place. Lee wondered dully what was going to happen next, but almost subconsciously his eyes were alert, keenly noting every detail which came within range.

He was yanked roughly to his feet amidst a knot of grim, scowling men, and the ropes were slipped from him. But that availed him little, for strong arms gripped him on either side, and he was forced slowly backwards to what he took to be a large pillar leading up to the vaulted roof of the dungeon-like place.

There was more clanging of metal, and suddenly he found himself surrounded on every side by stonework, with barely room to move his elbows enough to raise one hand at a time.

He realised his situation in a flash, and it sent a cold thrill through him. The core of the pillar, as it were, was hollow, and it was into this that he had been thrust, in an upright position. A heavy piece of masonry, working on concealed hinges, was swung round and bolted into place, and he was confined in a circular stone prison barely two feet in diameter, with a barrier breast high in front of him, and only a narrow, arch-shaped loophole to breathe and be fed through.

To lie down—even to crouch down—was quite impossible. The only rest obtainable was to lean against the wall on one side or the other, but always in a more or less upright position. Even to lift his hand to his mouth was, he knew, a movement only to be achieved slowly and with difficulty. The walls all around him were of foot-thick blocks of stone, and Samson himself could not have moved one of them a fraction of an inch.

The men, having performed their task, moved away, giving him a clear view through the narrow opening; and, to his horror, he saw that, opposite him, and some dozen feet away, Nipper was placed in a similar position, facing him. They were both confined in the two central pillars of the vault.

One of the headmen gave a final inspection to the bolts securing the masonry, and then, taking up his lantern, followed his comrades without even as much as turning his head to look at the prisoners again. Nipper whispered to him across the darkness as soon as the man had gone.

"Bortsh is here, and Anstruther. I heard one of those beggars tell his neighbour so when they were sticking me into this blooming pillar-box—at least, he said Bortsh and a sick Englishman."

"We're likely to be very sick Englishmen ourselves, Nipper, before long," said Nelson Lee. "Br-r-r! But it's cold! I wish I'd had time to take my hands to that brute Hansen before they collared us! I wonder what the programme is to be?"

Nipper laughed ruefully.

"We've got plenty of head-room, at any rate. They've done us proud in that way. Ugh! I wonder what poor beast was in here last? It's a creepy sort of hole!"

"Listen!" warned Lee. "I heard something move just then. One of the brutes may have a smattering of English and may be listening!"

THERE was a prolonged silence, and the unaccustomed sense of close confinement became intolerable. After what seemed an age, the door at the far end of the place opened again, and a man, dressed in high boots and rich furs, came swinging in, accompanied by a couple of torch-bearers. He was a big man, handsome in a brazen sort of way, with a great beak of a nose, and a big, black, square-cut beard and black eyes that glistened like stones. He was smoking a cigar, and wore an Astrakhan cap tilted jauntily on one side of his head.

Nelson Lee knew instinctively that he was face to face, for the first time, with the man Bortsh.

The men stuck their torches in some old-fashioned sconces, and then Bortsh walked straight to a crimson throne that was set facing the two pillars. He sat down and glanced casually at Nipper, then confronted Nelson Lee.

"Nice mess you've made of things, haven't you?" he said at last, speaking in fluent English, and showing his strong white teeth.

Nelson Lee stared stonily.

"You're dropping your cigar-ash on your furs," he said quietly. "They look an expensive set. One day, I suppose, I shall have to ask you to refund the price of them to the Anstruther estate."

Bortsh showed his white teeth.

"So you have a sense of humour, after all, you British—some of you!"

"Oh, yes; we appreciate our little jokes now and again. For instance, if you were to return to England—"

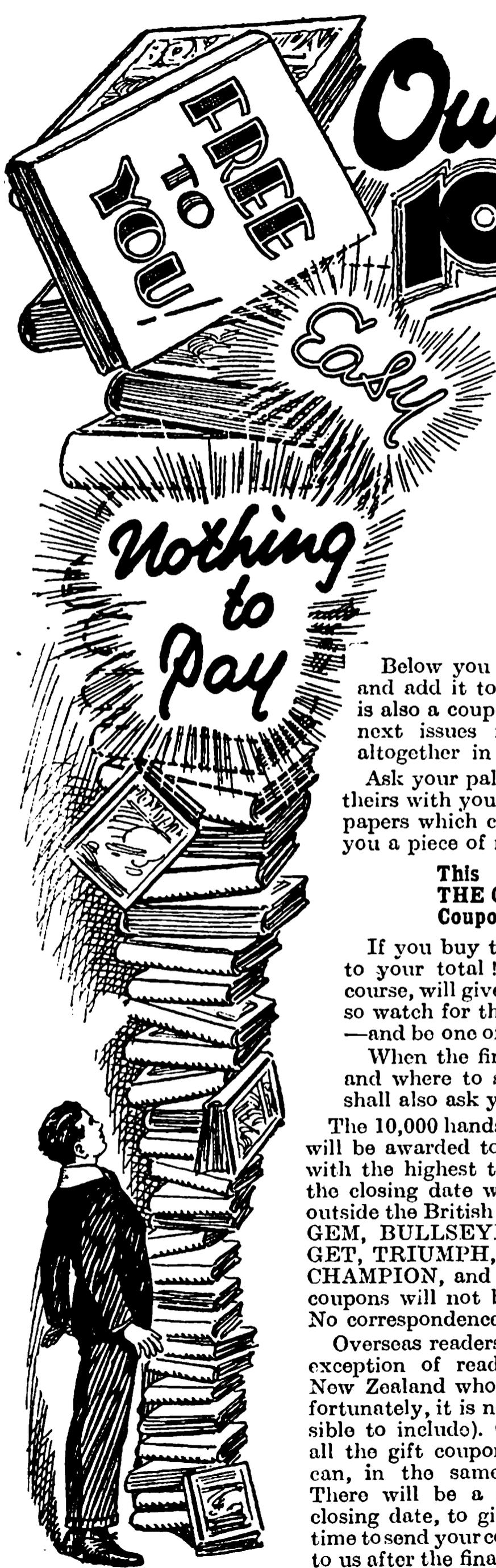
"Well?"

"You'd be hung."

"Oh! La, la!" Bortsh waved his cigar in the air. "The old man at the Laurels! Bah! You can prove nothing! It was a nuisance—yes—but he made a fuss."

"Now," Bortsh went on, "your mistake, my friend, was shooting those wolves. You didn't know, of course; but that was a very great mistake. He isn't clever, our friend Hansen, not at all. I knew you were close at my heels. I took pains to make sure. But

(Continued on page 24.)



Our

10,000

GIFT PLAN

Start Now

Nothing to Pay

10,000 FINE GIFT BOOKS OFFERED TO READERS

DON'T miss the grand opportunity you have here of winning a big gift book free! All you have to do to try for one of these magnificent prizes is to collect the coupons which we are giving away in NELSON LEE and in other popular boys' papers. Every coupon is worth so many points—10, 25, 50, and so on. And the highest total of points collected will win. This is the third week of the offer, but you can easily start collecting to-day.

Below you will find a coupon for 25 points; cut this out and add it to the others you have already collected. There is also a coupon value 25 points on page 27. Then watch our next issues for further coupons. You've five more weeks altogether in which to make your total a real snorter.

Ask your pals, too, about their coupons. Perhaps they'll pool theirs with yours. Below you will find a list of the other famous papers which contain these prize coupons. And now let me tell you a piece of news—

This week's issues of MODERN BOY and THE CHAMPION each contain a Special Bonus Coupon worth 250 points.

If you buy these books, you will be able to add 500 coupons to your total! Other papers, too, including NELSON LEE, of course, will give these Special Bonus Coupons from week to week, so watch for them. Get the coupon-collecting habit, you chaps—and be one of the fortunate 10,000 who will win a grand book.

When the final week's coupons appear we shall tell you how and where to send in all the coupons you have collected, and shall also ask you which book you would prefer if you win.

The 10,000 handsome gift books (500 of them for overseas readers) will be awarded to the ten thousand readers who send in coupons with the highest totals of points. There is NO entrance fee, and the closing date will be Wednesday, July 13th (except to readers outside the British Isles). Only coupons taken from THE RANGER, GEM, BULLSEYE, UNION JACK, MAGNET, SPORTS BUDGET, TRIUMPH, MODERN BOY, NELSON LEE, SURPRISE, CHAMPION, and BOY'S CINEMA will be eligible, and mutilated coupons will not be counted. The Editor's decision will be final. No correspondence will be allowed.

Overseas readers are eligible to enter this great scheme (with the exception of readers in New Zealand whom, unfortunately, it is not possible to include). Collect all the gift coupons you can, in the same way. There will be a special closing date, to give you time to send your coupons to us after the final week,



even then, if it hadn't been for that cursed storm which killed three of my deer, I should have given you the slip.

"As it was, I sent word by a ski-runner to our friend Hansen that two Englishmen might drop in on him, and that he was to be civil to them and keep them till I and my men came. But he has no tact, and he was a little drunk—eh?"

"I shouldn't care to keep him as a pet!" Lee replied.

"No; nor I. He is a fool, to begin with. Still, it was the shooting of the wolves that made him mad. They are his pets—all he lives for, the pig! He makes money all round the country by backing them against any dog that can be found. It is his idea of sport. When his wolf lost he was crazy with rage, and then you killed the others. I only wonder that he didn't kill you. Perhaps he would have done so, only he is a little afraid of me, and knew I was coming. By the way, where is that dog of yours?"

Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"He got off," he said.

Bortsh nodded.

"One of Hansen's foresters will shoot him, I expect."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Nelson Lee bluntly.

Bortsh laughed, and blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"My dear friend, I—I do nothing. The fact of my being expected may have saved you from being killed at once by that fool of a Hansen, as I explained to you, but that is all. Your present lodgings are no work of mine. I bear you no ill-will. Why should I? He may keep you here a week, a month, a year. That is his affair, and if you ever leave here—which I rather doubt—and if you ever get away, it will not matter if you write to the newspapers or the Finnish Government about it. No end of inquiries will be made, but nothing will be found out, and then everyone will forget."

"Possibly," said Lee curtly. "But you will find that they won't forget a certain Cyril Anstruther. He has connections who will take good care he is not forgotten. How is he, by the way?"

For an instant Bortsh's face grew dark, and he took a puff of his cigar to check an angry retort.

"I believe he is shortly returning to England," he said slowly. "The climate doesn't suit him, and he is a little sick. He will take over such property, or its equivalent value, as remains to him here, and he will go away."

Lee braced himself against the stonework.

"You're a clever scoundrel, Bortsh. One day I fancy we shall be at hand-grips."

"But, my poor friend, your hands seem—shall we say?—at a temporary disadvantage, and in a month or two of our winter here they will become numbed."

"There are other hands than mine at work. Scolland Yard is very busy at this moment hunting up the records of one Alexis Bortsh, member of the Seventh Circle!"

CHAPTER 12.

The Escape!

BORTSH sprang to his feet with a snarl, and for the first time showed himself in his true character. It was as though a great purring cat had suddenly thrown off its mask of domesticity and disclosed the wild, tigerish animal beneath.

"So!" he said, breathing quickly. "You know that much, do you? That decides it! There will be no writing to the papers for you! You stay here and rot! Better still, I have but to make Hansen a little more full of wine, to talk to him of his wolf children, and he will come here now to-night, and kill you where you are!"

"You spoke too soon!" Bortsh went on. "And your words will be your death warrant. The Finns, they will not speak. Not a soul knows you are here. Two fool Britishers may have started from Vardo, but the rivers are wide, and the forests large, and your bones will be found under the ice a hundred versts from here. The good Hansen is too foolish. He will know nothing. He will not even be questioned. I will not say good-night, but good-bye!"

He made them a mocking bow, snatched down one of the torches, and was gone.

"We've uncaged the lion this time with a vengeance!" said Lee. "He means what he says, every word of it. And with the officials to back him, there's an uncomfortable amount of sense in his arguments."

"Why didn't you drop him a hint that we've got a pal outside?" asked Nipper. "It might have scared him."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"This is our concern, not Trouble's. If I'd said a word about him, or even let Bortsh suspect, poor Trouble would have been hunted down and shot within the hour for poaching, or some other trumped-up excuse. No. Bortsh will make Hansen wild and send him down here right enough, and he himself will take good care to be clear of the place first, and probably establish a snug alibi for himself, in case anything leaked out through the servants or the foresters. I don't mean to be handled by the brute upstairs without some sort of fight if I can help it. I'm going to try and work my arms free if I can, and I should advise you to do the same. It's something that Bortsh went off in such a blind fury that he left one of the torches behind!"

Nelson Lee wasted no more time in words, but set to work, painfully and laboriously, to work one arm free at a time. By turning sideways, and at the expense of a certain amount of skin, he got his right arm clear to the shoulder, after ten minutes hard work.

The left came free easier. He was still cramped and confined, and to strike any sort of blow was a sheer impossibility. Still, there was a bare chance of catching the fellow by the throat if he came alone, and

Lee felt sure he would, as he wouldn't want witnesses.

Nipper fared better. The "stonebag" had been built for a full-sized man, which Nipper was not. He worked his arms free easily enough, and even succeeded in getting his head and one shoulder out, but there he stuck. He could get no leverage from his feet and legs to help him.

Nelson Lee, watching him, concealed the comparative freedom of his own arms by resting his elbows on the sill of the opening.

Nelson Lee's face was very pale, for he knew that whatever the result, it would be touch and go, and that he had never stood in greater peril in his life.

"You dog!" roared the man again. "You British cur-dog, now——"

Lee's left arm shot out, and his fingers grabbed the man's beard and jerked the great head forward. His right arm flashed out, and gripped the great sinewy throat, gripped it till the fingers sank deep into the flesh and there clung.



The foremost deer in the front sleigh suddenly crumpled in the snow, and before Lee could yell a warning, the second sleigh came crashing into them, sending Nipper and Wolf hurtling through the air.

"Try once more!" he whispered encouragingly.

The door suddenly opened with a crash, and Hansen reeled in with a flaming face and slammed the door behind him.

"You dog!" he roared. His whole animosity and wild fury seemed directed against Nelson Lee. He never even saw Nipper, or so much as glanced in his direction.

In one hand he carried a lantern, and in the other a heavy revolver. The sight of the torch seemed to stagger him a little, but he had the wit to set his lantern down, and so leave his spare hand free. He made a rush for the pillar, the weapon dangling by his side, his great hairy chin thrust forward.

"You shot my wolves, did you?" he spluttered. "Well, now I'm going to shoot you, like the dog you are! A dog in a trap! Ha, ha!"

Hansen tried to scream, but the sound died away in a bubbling gurgle, and he frothed at the lips, his eyes bulging, and his face within a few inches of Lee's.

He had dropped his revolver with a clatter at the first shock of surprise; and with his head drawn forward half through the small aperture he could do no more than flap the stone pillar with his arms and drum his heels.

Yet the strain on Lee's wrists was fearful. He could barely squeeze his elbows through far enough, and the man was as powerful as an ox.

"Quick, Nipper—quick, if you can!" he panted. "I can't hold him much longer! My wrists will give out in a minute!"

Nipper had only half his second shoulder through, and was working desperately, tearing skin and clothes, and straining every muscle in his body.

Suddenly, with a wriggle, he managed to draw up one leg and set his heel against the back inside wall of the pillar. He gave a kick—another—and came out head first like a cork out of a bottle, with a badly-strained leg and a wrenched arm, it is true—but free!

"Coming!" he gasped, picking himself up and limping.

"That stool over there by that pillar man—quick!" panted Lee. "Stun the brute if you can!" And as he spoke a handful of beard tore loose in his fingers.

Nipper, limping, with the stool raised high in both hands, brought it down with a crash. The heavy seat caught the man square on the top of the skull, and he went down like a pole-axed ox. Nipper swayed, lost his balance, and fell heavily across him, and there he lay for a few seconds, hopelessly exhausted; whilst Lee, uncertain how long Hansen's thick skull would take to recover from the blow, raged frantically, for he was a bit overstrung.

AT last Nipper picked himself up, and his first action was to hand Lee the fallen revolver. Then, after fumbling with the bolts to no purpose, he rolled Hansen over roughly and searched him for the keys.

There was more delay while he found the right one. But at last he got the clumsy hasps and padlocks open, and with an effort swung the heavy masonry back, and Lee stepped out. He wrung his wrists and rubbed them, and then clapped Nipper on the shoulder.

"That's a trick to you in our game, Nipper, and I shan't forget it. I couldn't have held him another five seconds when once I lost grip of his beard. Now, I think, we'll give him a taste of his own medicine, the brute. Ah, my own revolver! I wouldn't have lost that for a million!"

He pulled the weapon out of the unconscious man's pocket, and half lifted, half dragged him into the hollow pillar and propped him upright. Together they swung to the heavy-hinged masonry, which made the prison secure, bolted and locked it, and left their would-be murderer there, breathing stertorously and still insensible.

"He can roar and ramp till he's blue in the face," said Lee, "but I doubt if they'll hear him till they come to look for him, and I suspect he's packed all the servants off to their quarters for the night before coming here. Put out that torch, old man."

Nipper took the thing down and stamped on it, and Lee picked up the lantern. And so they went out, Nipper limping behind.

The big house was perfectly still, and as Lee had guessed, all the servants had long since gone to their beds.

"We must make sure that Bortsh has left, and taken poor Anstruther with him," Lee whispered. "Stay here and rest your leg a bit. while I go the rounds. It's all

right, I'm armed, and they won't catch me napping again."

Coolly and methodically he went over the great, rambling place. Every room was empty. The servants slept in another part, and the deer-tenders in the stables.

Bortsh had gone and taken his victim with him, sure enough, and was scurrying southwards to rouse up the next of the big farms, and prove that he had passed the night there, in case of awkward questions.

Lee glanced at the clock in the big hall—a weirdly carved and coloured thing, with a pewter face—and realised, with a start, it was three in the morning.

"We must be getting off," he said to Nipper. "There's no one about."

"What about Wolf and Trouble?" said Nipper suddenly.

"They'll both be waiting and watching for us somewhere in the woods. Didn't you hear Trouble's signal howl just as I went down—a wolf howl? It was that that took Wolf off. He thought it was a genuine wolf. He'll have found Trouble all right; and the two are as thick as thieves. Got your gun ready in case of a fuss? Good! Now, we'll go out and stir up the deer-tenders, and make them roust out our sledges and give us the pick of Hansen's cattle. I've not the slightest compunction in helping myself."

They battered imperiously at the stable doors until they had aroused half a dozen sleepy, frowsy men, who, at the sight of the revolvers, obeyed their orders with unnatural alacrity.

Nelson Lee chose the six best deer he could find—great, powerful beasts, as fat as butter, and fit to do two stages in one—saw them harnessed to the sledges, and the big doors swung open, and, after wrapping themselves in their driving furs, they went whirling out into the night.

CHAPTER 13.

News at Last!

THEY urged their deer along for a time in silence, Lee taking the lead. He had the lantern swung on a stick in the bow of the boat-shaped sledge, and by this he was able to follow certain tracks, which seemed fresh, and led to the south and towards Ravgar.

Whether they were Bortsh's or not it was impossible to say for certain, for he had never even set eyes on his outfit, and did not know what type of sledge he might be using.

There had been big, high sleighs on runners in Hansen's stables, and narrow, steel-shod racing sledges, such as are used in preference to the native boat pattern as one gets farther south, and the going is more practicable. Bortsh might have changed his own for some similar to these, or he might not—Lee could not tell.

When they had gone about a couple of miles he checked, amidst the tall, black pines. The night was very still, and the frost had thinned the air, so that the slightest sound carried far. A knot of a branch, loosened in its socket by the cold, went off with a crack like a pistol-shot, and away on his left Lee could hear the pattering of some small animal on the frozen crust.

There was no sound of pursuit, however; no uproar of discovery from astern of them, as Lee assured himself by sitting there listening intently.

Presently he threw back his head and gave the wolf call—a long-drawn, drawling cry—a trick of the throat—which trailed off into a high-pitched whimper.

Three times he called, and the sound was so weird and realistic that Nipper shivered, and even the reindeer shifted uneasily on their splay feet, moving their heavy heads restlessly from side to side and blowing clouds of steam through their nostrils.

Lee waited and listened again; and then, from away behind them came a sharp, yap-yapping answering call—the call of a pack-leader bringing his fellows along at a gallop.

Five minutes later they heard the creak-creak of a sledge on the snow, and Trouble came in through the trees at a canter, Wolf bounding along beside him.

He drew up in their midst and sprang out, while Wolf pranced about from one sledge to the other.

"Me see you go, boss," said Trouble. "Yes, I t'ink—what—me see you leave dat bad place; and blame my eyes, I mighty glad—yes! I come along, too, but dem fool deer dey find heap plentee moss, and I no could get dem harness, and no dare call so near dat place. Big dog, he come first—yes, and when I hear de shoots I very seek—me t'ink you all feenish—so when I see you I mighty glad!"

"Did you see the others—Bortsh—and was Anstruther with him?" asked Lee sharply.

"Oh, yes, I see him, too, boss, but he drive mighty fas'. When you go in there I hide up in trees, boss; I make lectle shelter for de win'. I hear de shoots, and den I see dat man Bortsh drive up, an' I make de signal for tell you, but I was ver' mooch afraid by dat time you-all gone squash, same dead fellow. Still, I wait, an' one—two hour ago I see dat Bortsh come out again, three—five sleigh with him, and he drive like how you say he was—dotty. Sick Englees, he come in second sleigh, all wrap up, wiz a mans driving in front, an' all go away down long dere like de blizzard, dey go so fas'!"

"Two hours?" said Lee. "Surely it can't be as long ago as that, little man,"

"Iss!" said Trouble, nodding twice.

"I'd no idea we'd been so long. I thought we were closer on his track than that. Come on! Trouble—you're the lightest—take Wolf in your sledge."

And whipping up their teams, they sped off once more on the track.

AS the grey sky lightened they kept bearing away to the right whenever opportunity offered. There were no tracks to follow, but guided by his instincts, Lee argued that if Bortsh hoped to get rid of his prisoner quickly, he would make at once for the dreaded Leper Islands, and that meant heading for the coast.

After a halt for food, they were just starting again when Trouble held up his hand in warning, and from far away down the avenue of tall pines they heard the jingle of a sleigh bell.

Nelson Lee and Nipper drew back into the gloom of the trees, and soon they saw a small sledge, drawn by a solitary deer, approaching from the opposite direction. As it drew nearer they made out that its occupant was a Lapp.

Trouble stepped forward into the track and hailed him. The hail was answered, and in a few moments the man drew up and

scrambled out of his sleigh. He was a wizened little elderly man of about Trouble's own size.

"He one of my own people. Herder Lapp very good man," explained Trouble. "Me savvee him plentee. Him been down to coast to give deer to peoples there. Now he go back homes. Him hongree."

"Give him something to eat, then," said Lee, "and find out what he knows. Ask him whether he has seen anything of Bortsh and the sick Englishman."

Nelson Lee and Nipper sat and waited patiently whilst the two Lapps talked and chattered over the food. And at last Trouble turned towards them.

"Me heap much obliged. He say him tummy full, fit to bust. You very good. Dat Bortsh an' fine sledge reach Limo scex hour ago. This feller say we not come right way—come too far south altogether. Limo she there," and he pointed to the west. "We lost plentee time. He say big black smoke ship—what him call 'dead man ship'—from Vara, stay at Limo two-three days. When Dat Bortsh come, he an' seek Englees go on board and smoke ship smoke away. She go one big island, which he no can say. No one know dat island, but it where dey

HERE YOU ARE, CHAPS!

Another Coupon to cut out and add to your collection.



take dead mans who go white as snow. Heap bad place. Soldier mans live on islands all about. You try go away, then they give you plentee shoots—bang, bang! No more you at all."

Lee leapt for the sledges.

"How far is it to Limo? Ask him, quick—and the nearest way from here."

Trouble asked.

"He say no far; less nor half a sleep. Four-five hour track him, lead way over there."

"Then come on, in Heaven's name! We must drive the deer till they drop, if need be. Every hour may mean the difference between life and death!"

He flung the Herder Lapp some roubles, and they were as fast as they could make the deer move.

The next five or six hours were to Lee like some hideous nightmare. The Lapp, like all natives, especially when they are anxious to please, had grossly underestimated the distance, and nearer eight

hours than five passed before they drove into the collection of squalid log huts which comprised the little fishing village of Limo on the Bothnian shore, with half their deer dead lame, and most of their stores thrown away to lighten the sledges.

There were not more than a dozen of the miserable huts in all, and the occupants of these seemed asleep. There was not a soul to be seen anywhere, and not a light except in one hut, rather better built than the others, its doorposts painted in the official colours.

"That's a guard house, right enough," said Lee. "I expect it's placed there to see that the fisherfolk don't try and smuggle things out to the poor wretches on the island."

It was plain that something had startled the rogues, and that they were anxious to lose their prisoner as soon as possible, and in such a manner that his disappearance could not possibly be traced to them. For this reason they had hastened to land him on the

A
Book-length
Yarn for
4d. ONLY!



CONDEMNED
BY THE
FORM!
by
FRANK RICHARDS

All that is evil in Herbert Vernon-Smith comes to the surface when his father befriends and places at Greyfriars School an orphan named Paul Dallas. To the headstrong, jealous Bounder, the new boy is an interloper and a "charity cad," and he is determined to

make Greyfriars too hot to hold him.

To what lengths the Bounder's unreasoning rage leads him, in his hatred for Dallas, makes a stirring long complete story that will grip you from first line to last. Make certain of reading it.

Ask for No. 171 of

SCHOOLBOYS' OWN Library

Now On Sale - - - - - 4d.

Leper Island, from which it seemed he could never escape.

Leaving the tired deer where they were, Lee's party skirted round the hut and made for the water's edge. A crazy-looking jetty straggled out for a few feet, and beside it what was obviously a guard boat rocked at her moorings.

She was like the other fishing boats which were drawn up on the beach. High in bow and stern, an exact model of the Viking ships of old; open, and rigged with a single pole-mast amidships, which carried a square, tablecloth sail of black canvas. Astern she had a small, low, hut-like cabin, rather smaller than a big dog-kennel, and a rudder with two wooden tillers, one on either side. But she was strongly built—designed for the treacherous, steep waves of the stormy Bothnian Gulf—and the lines of her promised speed.

Nelson Lee had handled such craft before, and knew that for all her quaint, clumsy rig, she would be dry in the wettest kind of sea, and that the tablecloth sail had wonderful lifting and driving power.

CHAPTER 14.

Off to Leper Island.

OUT beyond the jetty the heaving waters showed black as ink, with here, there, and everywhere the grey-white glint of broken ice floe.

"You stay here, little man," said Lee to Trouble, "and if anyone comes, shout and give us warning. Come," he said to Nipper. "We must try and settle the guards first—if there are not too many of them to handle. Bortsh has bribed all the officials, so it's no use trying to get official aid. We've got to handle this ourselves. I saw a telephone wire on the corner of the hut. It runs nearly all along the coast, for fishery purposes. But if those beauties hear us, or find their boat gone, they'd send the alarm down to Vara before we could make an offing."

Silent-footed, they crept through the snow and slush towards the lighted window. It was double-framed and glazed, and well packed with moss to keep out the cold. Lee raised himself cautiously from a stooping position, and peered in. There were three bunks, and an arm-rack, a rough stone stove, and at a table two men were seated, playing with a pack of greasy cards, while there were bottles and glasses on the table. In a corner lay some spare gear, evidently belonging to the boat.

"We must chance the owner of the third bunk, and rush them," whispered Nelson Lee. "Come on."

The door was on the same side as the window, facing seawards. He reached out, tried the latch, and felt it yield under his fingers. There was a scarcely perceptible click, and a vertical streak of yellow light shone out into the darkness.

The man with his back to them was studying his cards. The other, who was directly facing the door, was filling his glass.

"I'll take the furthest!" cried Lee, flinging the door open.

The man who was filling his glass had no time to cry out or reach for his gun in the rack. Lee was on to him in a flash, and, catching him squarely under the jaw, sent him crashing backwards with his head against the stone stove. At the same moment Nipper flung his arms round the man with the cards, and threw him sideways.

Lee's man was stunned, and required no more attention for the moment, so Lee sprang back to help Nipper, who was endeavouring to hold his man down, and at the same time prevent him from calling out. The fellow, struggling desperately, had got his strong white teeth firmly closed on Nipper's hand, and was kicking furiously.

In a twinkling Lee had seized his legs, and, kneeling on them, thrust the muzzle of his revolver into the savage, hairy face.

"If you move again you're a dead man!" he said, in a stern whisper. "The rope, from the corner, there—quick, Nipper!"

The man's jaw dropped and his eyes bulged, but he made no further resistance. He was particularly fond of his ugly carcass, and under no circumstances would he allow a sense of duty to imperil it. Nipper got a piece of cord from the raffle in the corner, and bound the man's legs and wrists, and Lee dragged him against the wall and propped him up there.

"If you open your mouth until I tell you, you won't live long enough to open it a second time!" he said threateningly.

But the man was far too thoroughly cowed to attempt anything of the sort.

They bound the other man, and flung him on to a bunk, and Lee helped himself to a drink by way of refreshment, and signed to Nipper to do the same. It was vile stuff, but they were chilled to the bone, and had a perilous voyage in an open boat, through floe ice, ahead of them.

"Now," said Lee, speaking still in Qvensk, "answer me quickly; but don't raise your voice if you want to keep a whole skin. How far is it to the island where the steamer took the Englishman a few hours back? How is it guarded, and on which side is it easier to approach? If I think you're lying or trying to mislead me, I shall take you, with me, bound as you are, and then, if the boat strikes a reef and sinks, you will drown. If you tell the truth you won't be hurt."

The man answered volubly enough. The island was forty miles distant. It was a large one, some four square miles in extent, hilly on the exterior, the centre forming a sort of basin, in which the poor wretches condemned to live and die there built their miserable hovels, though they were free to roam about so long as they made no attempt to get away.

Once a month the steamer from Vara landed supplies and necessaries, and took a fresh load of unfortunates. There were no

officials, not even a priest or a doctor, on the island, which was unnamed even on the Government charts, though it was known as Dead Island, and anyone attempting to approach it was fired on. For round it lay a chain of smaller islands, on each of which was a guard-house with four soldiers, who were relieved monthly.

THE course was west by a half south, but the place was littered with reefs, and the only navigable channel was boomed at rare intervals. A white stone cairn on the island marked the landing-place, which was on the southern side, and commanded by a couple of guard-houses on an islet opposite. The steamer had been gone some twelve or fourteen hours, and an Englishman in irons had been taken aboard. Usually she did not call at Limo.

Nelson Lee listened attentively. The man, he saw, was too frightened to tell anything but the truth, so far as he knew it. He held up some rouble notes and laid them on the table, then he gagged the man.

"For your own safety's sake!" he explained grimly, as he knotted the handkerchief. "You might be tempted to shout the moment our backs are turned."

He took rifles and ammunition from the rack and turned to leave. Just as Nipper put out his hand to open the door, another hand thrust it open from the outside, and a woman stepped in. At the sight of them and the bound guards, she screamed and darted quickly away, yelling at the top of her voice, as though she fancied that some poor wretches had escaped from the dread island, and the plague had come to the village.

Nelson Lee gave vent to an exclamation of anger, seized the lamp, and hurled it into the snow.

"Run for it!" he cried. "We'll soon have the whole place about our ears. I meant to have cut the telephone wire, but there isn't time for that now."

They raced to the jetty, hustling Trouble along with them, and tumbled into the boat. Nipper slashed away the moorings, and Lee and he got out the oars and shoved her clear, pulling for all they were worth. They were barely ten lengths from the shore when a crowd of villagers came down to the water's edge, some armed with lanterns, some with guns, all shrieking with rage and terror.

Half-a-dozen guns were let off, more or less in their direction. One, better aimed than the rest, sent a cloud of duck-shot over their heads, but none were hit.

"The cat's out of the bag now, with a vengeance!" said Lee grimly. "Confound that woman! They'll have the guards loose, and be using the telephone inside five minutes! By James, what's that?"

A fresh uproar arose from the kennel-like cabin, accompanied by thundering blows on the sliding door.

"Plentee bad man in here," said Trouble, struggling to keep the door shut. "Him swear fine, same as whaler mate. You listen him swear plentee!"

"The third guard, by Jove!" cried Lee, listening. "Well, he's got to come now. Keep the door shut on him, little man; then I'll come aft and attend to him."

A huge lump of ice floe came crashing against the boat's prow, making her shiver from stem to stern, and making her broach to a steep, curling sea. Nipper got an oar and wrenched her head on again, but not before she was half filled to the thwarts, and Wolf had been sent sprawling to leeward.

Another ice mass hovered over them, but by this time Lee had got the sail up, and she slid from beneath it in the nick of time. The lights shorewards dwindled and vanished, and she began to lift to the oncoming seas as the square, black sail bellied out, and the sheets grew taut.

Nelson Lee blundered aft, nearly knee-deep in water, and took the tiller, whilst Trouble and Nipper baled for their lives, and the prisoner in the cabin howled curses.

"Forty miles," said Lee grimly, "and there's dense ice ahead!"

CHAPTER 15.

Through Treacherous Seas.

THE guard boat they had annexed was a beamy thirty-foot craft, with a fine entry and a clear run aft. With the wind off shore and astern as it was, she simply tore along from wave to wave, as light as a cork, and she answered splendidly to the helm.

The ice was a terrible danger, and time and again they escaped disaster by little more than a miracle. They were sodden from head to foot, and the cold was bitter. Nipper and Trouble baled till their backs and arms were sore. Wolf, utterly miserable, crouched up in the eyes of the boat and whimpered; and Nelson Lee, his keen eyes watching carefully every gleam of grey-white ice against the inky blackness, held on his course as near as he dared.

The Gulf of Bothnia is a strange place to those who have never navigated it. Its waters are, for the most part, dangerously shallow, and it is literally smeared with islands of every sort, shape and description. Over and over again they tore past a jagged-toothed reef on one side, and a semi-submerged rock on the other, with less than the boat's own beam to spare, and only the gleam of broken water to show their whereabouts until they passed swiftly astern.

They were strung up nigh to breaking strain, and the darkness only lent them a more desperate courage. Had they once touched, or even grazed, a rock, there would not have been enough left of the boat in five minutes to make a matchbox. Lee did take the precaution of sending Nipper up into the bows, but even there it was impossible to see three clear lengths ahead.

Towards early morning the wind blew itself out, and veered round southerly. Then, and not till then, Lee resigned the tiller

to Trouble, who was a fair enough small-boat sailor—and dropped on the floorboards, awash though they were, with his back propped against a thwart, bruised, sore and bone-weary.

For the better part of an hour he dozed fitfully, and when he woke Nipper had managed to make some cocoa in the kennel-like cabin, the captive guard being too sick and scared to interfere.

The dim daylight was already showing signs of fading before they sighted the island a couple of miles off the starboard bow. It was the only one of any considerable size, so there was no mistaking it, hidden

“Take the tiller, Nipper!” he cried, scrambling aft. “Keep her as she goes. You, Trouble, stand by the sheet in case of accidents. I’ll be with you again in a moment.”

He slid back the low cabin door and crawled in. The reek of the place sickened him and made him cough. The guard was limp and prostrate, and lay inert on the floor. Lee pulled him half up, and shook him into consciousness.

“Get up!” he said curtly. “Strip off that uniform. Sharp—or I’ll take my hands to you.”

The man raised himself into a sitting



Lee saw the bunch of figures come suddenly round the bend of the shore, and he knew they were cut off. “Back to the boat for your lives!” he whispered hoarsely to his companions, just behind him.

though its hills were in a sudden scurry of sleet.

A couple of miles farther on they picked up the first of the booms, a mere pole, crowned with a straggle of brushwood, which marked the passage; and as they swirled by it they sighted the first of the guard islands, not more than the same distance away, and lying dead ahead athwart their course. Lee skipped up into the bows and studied it carefully, bracing himself to each heave and lurch of the boat.

He could see the ochre-coloured guard-house on the end of the islet. The passage between it and the outlying reefs of the next was less than a hundred feet broad, and there was a fine tumble of sea which promised trouble. To escape observation was hopeless. If the guard were keeping any sort of look-out at all they must have been sighted already.

Lee watched the place for some few minutes. It seemed to be leaping towards them every moment, and rising higher out of the sea and surf; and then, in a flash, he made up his mind.

posture—all that the head room of the cabin allowed—and flung off the garments obediently. Lee threw him his own sodden fur coat and slipped on the tunic and trousers and the sheepskin overcoat, stuck his revolver into one pocket and a spirit bottle into the other, and crawled out again, sliding the door to behind him and fastening it with its wooden peg.

“I’ll take her,” he said to Nipper, and thrust the tiller under the crook of his arm. “You and Trouble lie down flat under the thwarts close up to the weather side. If you’re seen we’re done.”

The island was barely a quarter of a mile away now, and the guard, recognising the official boat came running out. There were three of them, each man carrying a rifle; a fourth, yawning and stretching himself, appeared at the hut door. The men raced down to the end of the island till the churning water washed about their boots. Lee reckoned that if he followed the channel he would have to pass within fifteen yards of them.

“If they smell a rat, and one of ’em can

shoot well enough to hit a haystack, I'm due to die of lead poisoning inside the next ten minutes," he muttered to himself grimly, and deliberately swung the tiller over so as to come as near the point as was safe. A voice hailed him from the beach, but the roar of the wind and the boom of the surf drowned the words.

Nelson Lee lurched as he stood, and bawled back an inarticulate answer. He was nearly abreast of them now, and the hail was repeated. Lee, with his free hand, pulled out the spirit bottle and waved it at them.

"Skol!" (good health) he shouted in a drunken voice, and made a pretence of lifting the bottle to his lips.

"What cheer, comrade?" cried one of them. "It's a wet sea, and a wet boat, by the look of it! Keep her out, you fool, or you'll be on the rocks! What brings you here? What news?"

"News for the commandant!" cried Lee. "Two mad Englishmen came into Limo last night—English, do you hear?—and tried to surprise the guard! Wanted to get the other Englishman brought down as a prisoner from over yonder!" And he signalled with the bottle over his shoulder.

"Did you get them?"

"Oh, aye! They're safe enough!" Lee laughed tipsily.

"Well, so is he!" came the answer, roared back across the foaming surf. "Safe as the dead! They knocked off his irons and drove him ashore. And we've got orders to keep an eye open for him, and shoot him down if he comes near enough to the water to wet his boots. A fine fuss to make over one mad Englishman! He'll never trouble the world again, I can tell you! And you must be mad to come out with such a sea running! Where's Olsen? Isn't he with you?"

Lee lurched and laughed again, and waved the bottle, and nodded towards the cabin. He gathered that Olsen was the name of his prisoner.

"Had to come—and reportsh!" he roared thickly.

"Report, you blockhead!" jeered the guard. "If you weren't as drunk as an owl you'd know that the commandant and the steamer ought to be half-way to Vara by now. Still, Providence, so they say, looks after fools and drunken men. You're in luck's way, comrade; for the steamer is still here alongside the landing-stage. She strained her propeller on a lump of ice, and—"

A sudden gust drove the rest of the words away; but Lee's heart seemed to turn into a lump of ice itself at the words. He had relied on the death boat having left the island hours ago; and her presence practically finished all hope of getting Anstruther away. She carried boats and a large armed crew, and if she were to give chase in the open waters of the gulf he would not stand one chance in a thousand.

He could just make her out now in a break

between two sleet scurries—a lean, black-painted craft. To hold on as he was going meant that he must run in almost under her stern—straight to discovery and disaster. He risked a glance over his shoulder. The Point, with the three soldiers on it, was barely half a cable's length away; yet something had to be done, and done at once.

He eased off his sheet and hauled on his tack, then he flung his weight on the tiller, and the boat came round in a sweeping curve; her new course laid away from the steamer and parallel to the coast of the main island.

He heard yells and shouts of surprise from the men behind him, and fully expected them to be followed up by a patter of rifle fire; but none came, and the darkness was sweeping swiftly down over everything.

"The son of a pig is blind!" growled one of the guard. "He doesn't know his right hand from his left. Olsen should have steered the boat himself. He knows these waters like his pocket. That man is a fool! He'll never fetch back to the steamer to-night with this sea, and the tide running as it is."

"And to-morrow the commandant will flay both their backs for them—and a good job, too!" grunted another. "Br-r-r! But it's cold here! Hantz you owe me fifty kopek. Let's get back to our play."

CHAPTER 16.

Terror Island!

NELSON LEE, momentarily safe inside the ring of guarded islands, ran the boat along as near inshore as he dared, peering through the opening in the rock wall nearly abeam of him, and brought the boat's nose round to it. She bumped once on a submerged rock, touched, bumped again, and slid over into smooth water.

"Down with the sail! Quick, Nipper!" he cried. "Let it come with a run; she's got too much way on her. Trouble, up into the bows, and stand by to fend her off with an oar. There's rock ahead there."

They obeyed his orders at the jump, and found themselves in a little sheltered cove—a mere fissure in the rock face. Her bows lifted gently as she ran head-on to a slab of shore ice, and she came to anchor of her own accord.

"That was a near shave!" said Lee. "My heart was in my mouth all the time I was talking to those fools out there. You heard what they said? The steamer is still here! Heaven help poor Anstruther if we cannot get him off to-night! And Heaven help us all if those guards get suspicious and raise the alarm! Let's have a meal! There's no knowing when we may get another—if ever. And I'm frozen stiff with cold!"

They made a meal of cocoa, biscuits, and bully beef, giving their prisoner, Olsen, a share before they tied him up and gagged

him. Then, as an afterthought, Lee tied up Trouble, too—but leisurely, so that he could easily slip the cords if he wanted to do so.

"You see," he explained, "if an alarm is given, and the boat discovered while we are away, it will look as if you had been brought here under compulsion, and ten to one they'll let you off with a few hard words; but if they find you in charge you might get 'the shoots!'"

"Me tink me come 'long a-you; me keel dat Bortsh!" said Trouble sulkily.

"All in good time, my son. I'm quite as ready to perforate Bortsh as you are. But first we must try to get hold of our friend. So in you go!"

He bundled him into the cabin after Olsen, drove Wolf in, too, and bolted the door on the three of them.

"Now," said Lee, drawing a long breath, "better put some biscuits in your pocket, Nipper, in case of a last resort, and a good stout boat-stretcher apiece—they're the weapons for us. A single shot might arouse the whole island. Come on! The longer we think about it the less we shall like it!"

They stepped out on to the ice slab and made their way cautiously up the rocks to the hillside above. The wind howled and moaned through the stunted firs, and every now and again a blinding rush of sleet forced them to cower for shelter. It was pitch dark; at no time could they see more than a few paces ahead of them, and they had before them the task of searching for a man over an island three miles in extent, who was as ignorant of the ground as they were themselves—and, worst of all, the darkness was, as they knew, peopled with unspeakable horrors.

All that Lee knew for certain was that the centre of the island was, roughly, a cup-shaped depression, and that there the poor, doomed wretches who inhabited it had their main dwellings.

Time and again he looked back anxiously over his shoulder, noting a bent tree here and a distorted one there; for if once they lost their bearings and missed their way back to the boat, their only line of retreat, their case would be hopeless indeed.

Pocket compass they had none, and not a star was visible to guide them. Only one thing was in their favour—there was little chance of their being heard; a false movement or a carelessly-placed foot would hardly be audible above the roar of the wind at even a few paces' distance.

They breasted the hill, making the highest ground their first objective, and there, crouching amongst a clump of dwarf pines, they gazed down into the hollow beyond. It was black and awesome enough; but they could see the twinkling of log camp-fires—dozens on dozens of them—the lepers passing and repassing in and out of the little circle of red light.

The arrival of the death-boat meant the bringing of fresh supplies, and the poor, forsaken rebels were evidently holding a ghastly feast of some sort.

"We must get nearer," said Lee, after watching steadily for a little while.

His voice shook a little, in spite of himself, and he was sick and shuddering at the thoughts that persisted in chasing each other through his brain.

"Yes," said Nipper, and as he spoke he could scarcely recognise his own voice. It sounded so strained and unnatural.

"Mark this tree well," said Lee, pointing to a gnarled and twisted stem. "It's upper part has been wind-blown, and bent, as near as I can guess, from north to south. If we get separated, make for that. Due east downhill is the line to the boat, as near as I can judge."

Nipper nodded, and they began the descent. The nearest pine was perhaps two hundred yards away, and towards this they crept. Another savage gust of sleet blotted out everything for a moment or two, and, taking advantage of this, despite the stinging cold of it, they raced forward. By the time it had passed they had flung themselves down close to the outer fringe of fires.

ROUND one fire, the nearest, were seated some dozen creatures, dressed for the most part in filthy, tattered sheepskin coats and grotesque odds and ends of raiment. Part of the carcass of some animal was roasting over the fire, and a bottle of some spirit was being passed from hand to hand.

One who seemed to be in some sort of command snatched the bottle from his neighbour, drained it, and flung it away, empty.

"To the death-ship!" he cried. "She brings us food, and to-day three more companions—one, a foreigner!"

"Where are they? Fetch them in! Bring them in!" cried another.

"Two have been brought in, but the other—the foreigner—he fled. He fought—oh, yes, he fought first! Two guards he felled with his fist, and a third he brained with a heavy stone. Then he fled along the shore like a mad thing; but he will not get away. The island guards will see to that! Either—pouf, bang!—and his body will be rolling about in the waves, or he will come here for food. There is none anywhere else. Oh, I've seen them before! They run and they run, and they fight with a stick or a stone; but in the end it is always the same. They have to join us, or—the waves and a bullet!"

There was a lull in the howling wind at that moment. The words and the scene sickened Nipper. He stirred slightly, and a stone rolled and rattled from his foot down the slight slope. The figures round the fire leapt to their feet at the sound, and one of them caught sight of Nelson Lee, who was still in the guard's uniform he had taken from Olsen.

With a yell of rage, for the guards were the enemies of the lepers, naturally, the crowd rushed at them pell-mell. Some could only hobble or limp, but the others came on, hurling volleys of stones and flaming sticks from the fire.

"Run for it!" cried Lee, and, side by side, they raced up the hill.

The crowd pursued them for some way, and more than once they were struck by stones; but they soon outdistanced their assailants, and, finding themselves safe, flung themselves down by the twisted pine on the top of the ridge. Nipper was sobbing with something more than mere want of breath, and even Lee's iron nerve and control was near breaking-point. In spite of the bitter cold, great drops of sweat glistened on his face.

"And Bortsh would condemn an Englishman, a gentleman—any living creature—to that!" he said hoarsely. "By James, killing is too good for him! Pull yourself together, Nipper, old man! We must save Anstruther at all costs. We'll get back to the boat. I've an idea, but there are some things we shall need. Come on!"

CHAPTER 17.

Rescued!

NELSON LEE and Nipper went blundering down the hillside through the darkness in a headlong rush, glad to face the biting wind and sleet and sniff the fresh salt air once more.

The boat, without light or welcome of any kind awaiting them, lay where they had left her, and they scrambled aboard across a shelving mass of shore ice as best they could.

Lee got a light, unlocked the little cabin, and dived into it. A fragment of broken mirror hung on the wall, and he jerked it free and crammed it into his pocket. Lamp or lantern there was none, but he unearthed some fragments of candle-ends and some dry matches.

Trouble blinked at him uneasily.

"Me no come, boss? Me very much like keel dat Bortsh—what?"

"All right, little man," said Lee. "We're playing for high stakes to-night, so you may as well have a seat at the table as the rest of us. Slip those ropes, you indiarubber-faced little rascal. Grab that rifle and come along. Wolf will look after our guest."

Nipper bolted the cabin door and wedged the wooden peg which secured it well home. Trouble shouldered the rifle and took a pocketful of cartridges, and Lee led the way up the hill once more.

The wind was blowing a full gale, and at times they were forced to crouch on all fours behind boulders to escape the most furious gusts. By the time they reached the ridge overtopping the hollow, and were threading their way amongst the distorted pines, they could see that there was an unusual commotion in the leper camp.

Fresh logs had been thrown on the fires till the sparks flew up in such a way as to endanger the rough, wooden huts. And the spirit bottles had evidently been circulating freely, for around each fire wild groups were gesticulating and capering in a mad abandon.

Lee glanced over his shoulder seawards, and on the death-ship, too, there were signs of unusual activity. She was well lit up, and tiny little black figures were racing and scampering about her decks. He caught Nipper round the shoulder and shouted above the roar of the wind.

"Looks like a rebellion of sorts. None of our affair. Come on, this is our chance to pick up Anstruther, if the poor beggar is still alive, and hasn't been dragged into that inferno there. Pull yourself together, old man! We've got to see this thing through, and, with luck, those poor wretches will be too busy with their own affairs to worry their heads over us. I fancy they mean to make a raid on the ship. The alarm's been given. Look, there goes a light, on one of the guard islands!"

A blue flare sizzled up out of the darkness half a mile away, and was instantly repeated from the next island, and the next, as far as the turn of the hill would let them see. Ten seconds later the death ship got her searchlight to work, and by sheer chance the pencil rays swept the very spot where the three were standing, half blinding them and making the whole place as light as day.

Nelson Lee flung himself flat, and the others did the same, till the rays swept past and over them. Then they raced westwards, keeping just below the crown of the hill until they had passed out of the danger zone. From there onwards they had a long, tedious crawl, Lee leading the way, until they came to a patch of low, tangled scrub. So far as he could make out, this stretched right down the hillside, and was a strip about a hundred yards broad.

They were now almost immediately above the death ship, where she lay at the landing-place, though her searchlight continued to play over the barren ground behind them which they had just crossed.

Suddenly Lee checked, and thrust a warning hand behind him to warn the others. The bush all about them was swarming with stealthy, creeping figures. They seemed to be on all sides, and were moving with caution, bodies crouched low, darting from bush to bush, and cover to cover. One passed so close as almost to brush Lee's shoulder, but he said nothing, evidently mistaking Lee's party for some of his own.

Lee looked back over his shoulder. Full in the glare of the searchlight an orderly party of guards were scurrying towards the crest of the hill over the barren ground.

"By James!" he whispered in Nipper's ear. "The lepers are outflanking and outmanœuvring the guards! They mean to seize the ship! It's now or never! Come on!"

Other island folk passed them, but mercifully none of them caught sight of the hated guard's uniform which Lee was still wearing.

Lee gave a heartfelt sigh of relief as he emerged once more on the far side of the scrub, and met the full rush of the bitter gale. Anstruther, if anywhere, would be on

that side of the island between the crest and the shore, and Lee's one hope was to discover him before either of the other parties did so. A hoarse scream or two, and a pattering of rifle fire showed that they were already busy with their own affairs, so the detective made for the lee of a rock which overlooked a good stretch of the shore, and was at the same time hidden from the death ship by a promontory.

Squatting behind this, he contrived to light one of the candle ends, and by means of it and the broken mirror began to flash signals in the Morse code.

"Friends! Friends! Friends!" he flashed. "Come quick! Come quick!"

Getting no answer, he changed the call to his own name, and sent the word: "Lee! Lee! Lee!" in all directions.

Then for ten hopeless minutes he waited.

"If he doesn't come soon we must try farther along," he bawled in Nipper's ear above the whistle of the wind.

They were on the point of moving off when Trouble suddenly grabbed him by the arm.

"Somethings come this a-way, I t'ink," said the little man.

They listened, and above the howl of the gale they heard the tinkle of a falling stone. Nelson Lee peered forward through the darkness, and the white oval of a face rose up from behind a boulder some seven feet below them.

"Anstruther! Thank Heaven!" cried Lee, and passing the candle to Trouble, he ran forward and gripped the youngster by the arms. The latter was well-nigh hysterical, and very weak—so weak that he could do little more than crawl.

He collapsed in Lee's grip in a sagging heap.

"I saw!" he muttered thickly. "I was just going into the water, and I saw in time. Heaven be thanked!"

Nelson Lee passed him over to the other two.

"Get him along between you somehow," he said. "There isn't a second to lose. Back to the boat, for your lives! Follow me!"

He snuffed out the candle and groped his way along the back trail, the others half dragging, half carrying Anstruther along with them in his wake.

They reached the patch of scrub and crossed it without anyone hindering them. From below they could hear the pattering of rifle fire.

There was no doubt that the remnant of the crew of the death ship were hard pressed.

With Anstruther between them they were hurrying forward through the darkness, when suddenly a harsh voice called out "Halt!" and at the same time a couple of bullets came singing past their heads.

Nelson Lee thrust Anstruther behind him quickly, for he had recognised the voice of Bortsh. The latter had evidently heard them approaching, and mistaken them for fugitives from the leper colony.

His next words made this certain, for he called out in Russian:

"Back to your kennels, you dogs! Get back at once, or we'll shoot you down!"

Lee peered forward, trying to see how many men he had with him. He could just make out the loom of three or four figures against the dark hillside.

Lee guessed that Bortsh and his small party had run the risk of coming ashore to try and make certain of Anstruther's whereabouts, and that, if he sighted him he would shoot him down on the spot rather than chance his escaping.

Lee whispered to Nipper to drag Anstruther to cover behind a rock, and he himself sprang for another one—just in time, too, for Bortsh barked out an order, and a hail of lead swept the spot where they had been standing.

Lee, who had purposely placed himself some dozen yards from the rest of his party, whipped out his revolver and fired at random. Then, passing swiftly to another boulder, he fired again, hoping to draw Bortsh and his men away, and leave the road clear for the other three.

The ruse seemed likely to succeed, for he could just glimpse the men moving cautiously after him as he darted back from boulder to boulder, and red spurts of rifle-flame betrayed their movements.

Suddenly a bullet splashed against a rock close to his head from higher up the hill above him.

One man had evidently outflanked him. The danger was too serious to be trifled with. Lee fired at the flash, and a yell told him that the bullet had found its mark.

CHAPTER 18.

The End of Bortsh!

LEE reckoned by this time Nipper and Trouble ought to have got Anstruther clear, and be well on their way to the boat, and so he changed his tactics.

"Bortsh!" he cried in English. "Bortsh, where are you? Stand out! There's a score to settle between us. I promised you the last time we met that I should do my best to kill you, so come out, and let's finish it, man to man!"

A deep oath of surprise and amazement answered him, for up to now Bortsh had no inkling that he was anywhere on the island.

Lee fired at the sound, and a revolver spat at him, but in the bad light neither shot took effect.

Bending low, Nelson Lee dashed across to another rock, ready to fire again, and as he did so a change came over the scene.

From somewhere above there came a crowd of yelling, grotesque, horrible figures, brandishing torches, which cast a lurid glow over the scene—the sparks streaming far out behind them as the torch-bearers leapt forward.

The leaders evidently recognised Bortsh and his men, for with a snarl of rage they flung themselves at them. The guards huddled together and fired a ragged volley, and four of their assailants dropped, but the rest held on, and the guards were swept away, shot down at point-blank range, or clubbed.

Bortsh alone remained on his feet, but a torch was hurled at him, striking him across the face as he fired his last shot, and one of the leaders, a giant of a man, gripped him and held him in a tight embrace.

Nelson Lee heard Bortsh cry out, and saw him strike out blindly with the butt of his revolver. Then there was the flash of a naked knife in the light of the torches, and he dropped with a groan, and the yelling, leaping, maddened crowd swept over him.

The ruthless, scheming brain was stilled for ever.

Lee turned away with a shudder at the manner of Bortsh's passing. He gave one glance at the upturned face, and it seemed, in the dim light, as if the grim mouth snarled angrily at him. Then Lee raced on after Nipper and the others—stumbling, tripping and panting, his body bent low against the rush of the wind.

Down below it was clear that the poor wretches of that gruesome island were being mown down ruthlessly. They had no chance against the machine-gun fire from the death-ship, and had Bortsh and his handful of guards been content to stay on board, they would doubtless have been safe enough, but the man's eagerness to ensure Anstruther's end had proved his own undoing.

Already some of the saner spirits amongst the lepers were straggling back, and Lee had his work cut out to avoid them.

Eventually, however, he managed to make his way down to the little cave where the boat lay and gave a cautious hail.

Nipper, who was looking out for him, answered instantly, and, guided by the sound, he scrambled aboard.

Anstruther, who had been given food and a cup of steaming cocoa, was already much better, and Lee told them briefly of Bortsh's fate.

"We must get out of this at once," he said. "We've still to run the gauntlet of the island guards, and they'll be thoroughly on the look-out, so it will be no easy job."

He pulled the captive guard out of the little cabin.

"Look here," he said sternly, "we wish you no harm, but we can't take you with us. Keep close to the shore, and you can work round to the ship in safety. There's little chance of your being seen by any of the islanders, and, anyway, it's a risk you must take."

They put the man overside protesting volubly, shoved the small boat out of the cove, double-reefed the tablecloth sail, and started off.

So long as they were under the lee of the island they were safe enough, but the only passage to the open sea which they knew, and dared risk in such weather, was the one

by which they had come, and that would take them almost within hail of the death-ship.

Anstruther and Trouble were packed into the little cabin. Lee took the helm and Nipper stood by the sheet, ready to go about when the time came.

There was just a suspicion of greyness in the sky, and they all knew that their safety depended upon gaining open water before the dawn broke.

The little viking broke, heeled over as the full force of the wind caught her, but she rode the steep waves like a cork and scarcely shipped a bucketful.

They could see the outlying islands like dim banks lying head of them, and Lee set her nose at the opening they knew of. There was a nasty lump of beam sea, and, to make matters worse, flares were suddenly started on the island points.

"By James!" said Lee suddenly. "Look there! We shall be caught like rats in a trap yet! And though Bortsh is dead, there are other members of that infernal Seventh Circle on board who will be as keen to prevent Anstruther's escape as he was!"

Nipper looked, and his heart sank. The death-ship, now nearly abreast of them, was ablaze with lights. She had already got steam up, and her warps were being slackened off; in a few minutes at the outside she would be under way.

They could see a bustle of activity on her decks, and, even as Nipper looked, her searchlights sizzled into life once more, turning the murky grey dawn into full daylight.

Full on the little viking boat the rays fell, turning her sail and dripping planking into silver, and a hoarse challenge rang out from the steamer.

Nelson Lee set his teeth and held on straight for the opening, the waters fairly swirling under the boat's cutwater.

A shot rang out, and then another, then came a ragged volley, and half a dozen bullets ripped through the tablecloth sail, but she was a mere dancing cockleshell of a thing, a landmark in that lump of sea. Over and over again her low hull was completely buried in a smother of foam, and only one bullet came near enough to splinter her gunwale.

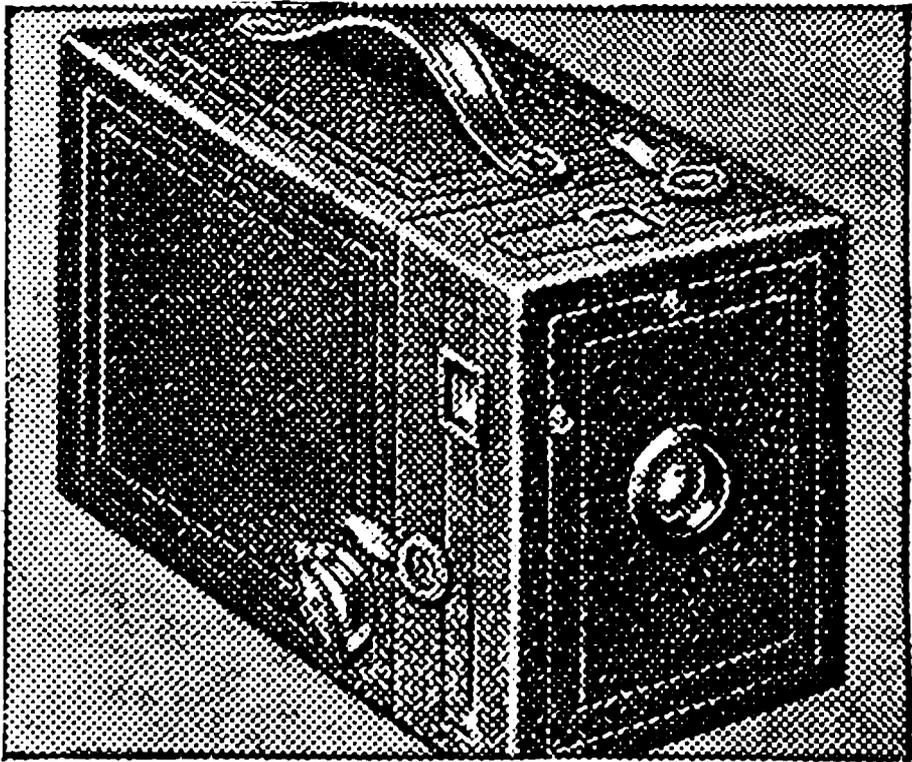
There were cries of alarm from the outer islands, and they, too, began to fire, but almost at once a bugle sounded the "Cease fire," for as she slipped between the two points the guards were in danger of hitting each other, and there was no knowing where a low-flying bullet might not be deflected to by a wave-crest.

The guards swore frantically and shook their clenched fists, but Lee only waved his hand and laughed in answer.

It was not them that he feared, but the steamer, which was already tacking away slowly from the landing-stage.

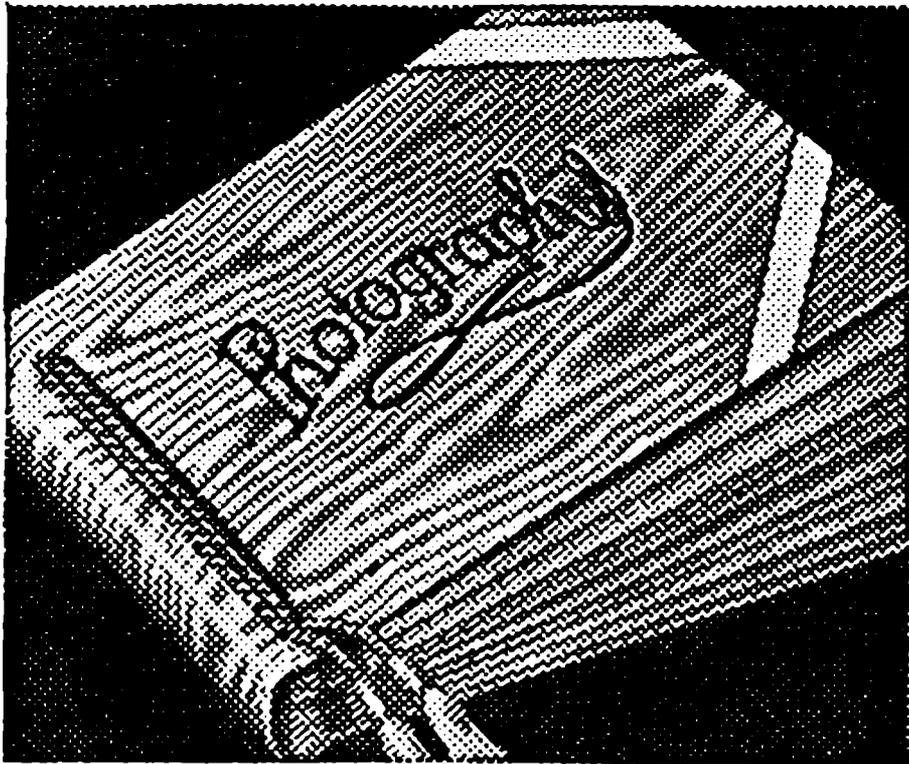
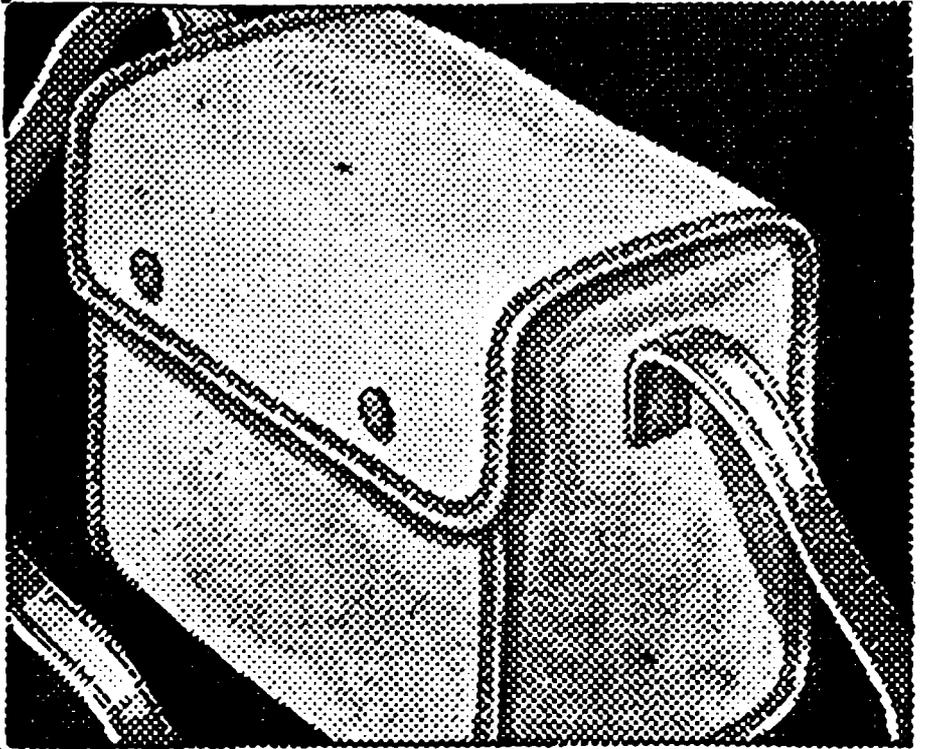
"We may just hold our own in this breeze!" he shouted to Nipper. "But if the wind drops, she'll overhaul us and sink us!"

(Continued on page 38.)



LOOK AT MY FREE GIFTS FROM NESTLÉ'S

A "Hawkeye" camera made by Kodak.
A waterproof case to carry it in.
A silk-bound album to mount the fine
snaps you have taken! These are just
three out of scores of useful gifts
in the Nestlé's Free Gift Book. And
there are one or more Free Gift
Coupons in every Nestlé's packing,
from the 2d. wrapped bar upwards.



Send to-day for this the finest list
ever offered of things you really want.
With it comes a voucher for five coupons.

- G.135. Camera. Two View-finders. 140 Coupons.
One View-finder. 120 Coupons.
- G.136. Shoulder Strap Camera Case. 50 Coupons.
- G.197. Moiré Silk Album. 48 Pages. 110 Coupons.

NESTLÉ'S CHOCOLATE

To NESTLÉ'S (*Gift Department*), Silverthorne Road, Battersea, London, S.W.8.
Please send me Voucher for 5 FREE COUPONS and the Nestlé's Presentation List.

NAME.....
IN BLOCK CAPITALS

Address

53/28.5.32

This offer applies only to Great Britain & Northern Ireland. ½d. Stamp sufficient if envelope is unsealed.

FIVE FREE COUPONS

LOOTERS OF THE FAR NORTH!

(Continued from page 36.)

next to no time, and we daren't make for a Finnish port."

For three hours he drove her along, pressing her recklessly, and taking chances that would have turned an ordinary man's hair grey.

Both of them were soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone, but they dare not leave their posts for a minute.

It was daylight now, and Leper Island was hull down behind the waves, but astern of them the death-ship was ploughing along through the steep seas, belching volumes of black smoke from her stack.

She had gained perceptibly when once she cleared the island, but they had got a long start of her, and there was a two-miles interval which she could not make up, try as she would.

The wind showed signs of weakening, however, and Lee's face, grey with the bite of the cold, was lined and furrowed with anxiety.

Anstruther and Trouble came crawling out of the cabin and took their turn with tiller and sheet, but neither Nipper nor Lee felt like taking a spell below. Matters were too critical.

Another couple of hours went by, and the two-mile interval had diminished by a half. Lee, watching through his glasses, could see some of the steamer's crew getting a machine-gun mounted on her fo'c'sle deck, and raged inwardly, knowing that if she could close up to five or six hundred yards, the gun could turn their thin planking into a sieve inside three minutes.

None of the four spoke. There was nothing to be said, and poor Wolf lay in the cabin, a victim to seasickness.

Nelson Lee closed his glasses with a snap.

"She'll open fire in less than twenty minutes. I'm sorry, Anstruther, but we did our best."

CHAPTER 19.

Unexpected Help!

ANSTRUTHER gripped his hand in silence. He was still weak from his terrible experience, and dared not trust his voice.

Suddenly Trouble, who had gone up into the bows, raised a yell.

"There be one sheep, I tink—what? Inglees sheep. Yes, by dash! By de islan' dere. Got piece red flag, all same Inglees flag!"

Nelson Lee looked and gave a shout. Under the lee of a low island, not half a mile to starboard, lay a ship. They could not see the hull of her, but they could see her masts above the fir-trees, and an unmistakable "red duster" flying from her gaff.

"By James!" he cried. "If once we can get aboard her, I'll defy the Seventh Circle

and the whole Republic of Finland to lay a finger on us, though I don't suppose the Finn Government would want to harm us! Still, there's our chance. Ready about, there!"

The black tablecloth sail slatted wildly as she came about, and he set her on her new course—her best point of sailing dead before the wind—and the little boat leapt forward as though inspired with new life.

The death ship had evidently sighted the ship, too, and realised that their prey might yet escape them.

The machine-gun spluttered, and the water three hundred yards astern was lashed into a scurry of foam.

The chatter of it must have reached those on the British ship, for they saw a couple of men scrambling up into the rigging like monkeys, and a moment later the red ensign was dipped frantically up and down as a signal of encouragement.

Again the machine-gun spluttered, but the range was longer and the aim more uncertain.

The little craft rounded the island within biscuit toss of the rocks, and ran alongside an old tub of a tramp steamer, piled high above her bulwarks with timber and redolent of Stockholm tar.

Her crew sent up a ragged cheer, and a red-faced, whiskered man, evidently the skipper, hailed them with a stentorian shout.

"Mr. Lee—Nelson Lee aboard?" he yelled. "And a gentleman called Anstruther?"

"Yes," said Lee. "But how the dickens you—"

"Come aboard, lively, sir! Come aboard, the lot of you, and we'll teach those blamed Dutchmen a lesson! We've been looking about for you for three weeks, sir—cruising round after picking up our cargo, and ran in under the lee of the island to get out of last night's blow.

"Orders from the owners," he went on, "from a Sir Richard Carew, to keep an eye lifted, sir. Got 'em off Riga a month ago. My name's Hart—Dick Hart, sir—very much at your service. This ship is British territory, under the good old red duster, and if one condemned Dutchman so much as tries to set foot on these decks, he'll go overboard with his head cracked by a belaying pin.

"Must be a big bug, your friend Carew, sir. He's stirred up the Finnish Government, and they've a tin-pot gunboat lying yonder on the same job as us.

"We'd pretty nearly given you up, when we heard the rattle of firing, and I sent a couple of hands aloft. You see, Sir Richard had posted us on your story by wireless, and we've been trying to sight you for days past."

They scrambled up gladly enough. Wolf was slung up after them, the table-cloth sail was lowered, and the little boat passed astern.

"Good old Dick Carew!" cried Lee. "I knew we might trust him to do his best, and I'm mighty glad to feel a British deck

under my feet again, captain. It's more than any of us expected, I can tell you!"

"We're the best he could do, sir," said Captain Hart. "You see, we were on the spot, more or less, tramping round, so he wirelessly ordered us through our owners. We may not be much to look at, but I guess we've saved your lives in the nick of time. Ah, see that, now! Dutchy is sheering off, and there's the Finnish tea-kettle coming up as though she were in a hurry to catch the last train home."

THE death ship had veered off, and was lying about half a mile away, and out of the troubled seas beyond, a gunboat, flying the Finnish colours, was coming along in a smother of foam.

She fired a blank shot across the death ship's bows as a peremptory hint to heave to, and as she slowed down a boat slipped down from the davits, into which dropped a couple of officers in glittering oilskins and four men.

They came dashing up to the tramp steamer, and swarmed up the gangway.

"Mr. Lee?" asked one of them in English, stiffly acknowledging Captain Hart's salute.

"Here, sir," said Lee.

The officer bowed.

"Let me congratulate you on your escape, sir, and the gallant manner in which you handled your small craft. I take it that you have succeeded in rescuing your compatriot? I bring a message from Sir Richard Carew, a connection of Mr. Anstruther's, through your Embassy at Helsingfors. At his instigation, and with the full concurrence of the Finnish Government, your Consul has taken over Mr. Anstruther's estates, and my orders are that you are to proceed home in this vessel as quickly as possible. I regret that I cannot stay with you longer, or express myself more fully; but there is urgent work waiting for me over there." And he nodded grimly at the death ship.

"The Seventh Circle?" queried Nelson Lee. "I ought to tell you that the man Bortsh is dead."

"So much the better," said the officer; "but those others still remain, and we've been waiting an opportunity to get our hands on them. It will mean long terms of imprisonment for them."

He clicked his heels together, bowed, and in five seconds he and his men were speeding towards the black-hulled vessel to arrest the conspirators.

Nelson Lee turned and clapped Anstruther on the shoulder.

"It was a narrow squeak, but we pulled it off," he cried. "Nipper, old man, give Wolf some grub, his inside must be empty. Trouble, you small villain, you're coming back with us, and when you get home again you shall have the finest herd of reindeer in Lapland. And now, captain, if there's such a thing as a square meal for all hands on board, for goodness' sake, let's have it, and blow the expense; and then we'll drive the

old tub home, for there's a certain young lady who is anxious to see Mr. Anstruther."

"Why, sir," exclaimed Captain Hart, "you needn't worry yourself too much over that. I've got Sparks, our wireless operator, you know, sir, tapping out the news of Mr. Anstruther's safety already. I reckon it won't be long before he'll have a message for you all from your friends ashore."

He was quite right. Miss Marjorie Carew had been living through weeks of terrible anxiety and dread, and she had been waiting and waiting for news, hoping that when it came it would be good news.

Consequently, no sooner did the wireless message reach her than she hastened to reply, and the tramp steamer picked up the message of joy and congratulations which meant all the world to Cyril Anstruther, while the simple but sincere thanks of the Marjorie Carew, which she wirelessly to Nelson Lee and Nipper, not forgetting Wolf and Trouble, went far to repay them for all they had gone through.

But the personal interest was not the only one in the case, and a week after his return to London, Nelson Lee received the thanks of the Finnish Government for his services in running the conspirators of the Seventh Circle to earth, and making it possible for the authorities in the Bothnian Gulf to crush that danger, which might have meant the destruction of law and order in Finland.

In addition to all that, the famous detective's adventures were written out and sent officially to the British Consul at Helsingfors, who presented them to the Finnish Government. On the basis of that report the authorities were able to suppress the abuses in connection with Lepet Island, and to do much towards making the lot of the poor wretches who had to be isolated there more happy and comfortable.

Thus, even in that far corner of Europe, the name of the famous detective, Nelson Lee, is remembered with gratitude, and is not likely to be forgotten for some time to come.

Hansen, the treacherous landowner, was brought to book, together with other more humble paid servants of the dreaded Seventh Circle, but Trouble returned to his native land, a rich man as Lapps go, carrying with him pounds and pounds of tobacco to make happy the last days of Masthia, the witch-doctor.

THE END.

Nelson Lee is brilliant in next week's Gripping DETECTIVE & THRILLER entitled: "MYSTERY ISLAND!" which is staged at St. Frank's and features Handforth and Co., and Nipper of the Remove.

Every chapter thrill-packed—don't miss it!

Our Great Story of Perilous Adventures in Unknown Africa!



THE CITY OF GOLD!

Tom Cook, a young English explorer and owner of a wonder craft, the Flying Fish, has been crowned king of a mysterious city in the heart of Africa. With his companions, Tom is celebrating a victory against an invading horde of dwarfs.

The Pool of Doom!

BUT as Ben Bold raced away from the clutches of Lulu he had forgotten that this end of the garden in which they had been regaling themselves ended in a high wall before which stretched a large ornamental pond, shaped like a gigantic shell. Its placid surface was covered with gigantic water-lily leaves and a light green scum which gave no indication of what else the water might contain.

Ben gave a yelp as he saw the stretch of water in front of him, whilst Lulu gave a howl of triumph as he saw his insulter at his mercy. As Ben put on a fresh spurt and raced for the low wall surrounding the pond the Zulu's great mouth stretched from ear to ear in a grin of satisfaction.

"Now I have you!" he yelled derisively. "Throw custard apples in my face, will you? Insult the commander of the army. In one minute I will show you—"

He certainly did, but not just in the manner he had intended. Just as he reached for the American's fleeing back Ben dodged again, swerved to the left, and, as Lulu

plunged after him, suddenly dropped to his knees, "making a back" for the Zulu on his knees at one of the jutting corners of the shell-shaped pond.

It was impossible for Lulu to pull up his flying bulk in the time, and he took a neat header over into the slimy waters.

Instantly the surface was whipped up by the tails of two of the scaly denizens of the pond—enormous crocodiles that had been kept as "pets" by generations of kings of the Golden City, who had amused themselves by feeding slaves to the brutes in slack times.

Lulu came to the surface emitting yell after yell as the crocodile's teeth clicked against his chain armour. He had gone in so rapidly that he had had no time to either shut his eyes or his mouth, and the result was that he had swallowed about a pint of the slimy, mucky water.

"Ow! Help, little man—help!" he yelled, as the crocodile's great fangs snapped at his ribs, fortunately protected by the armour. "Give me your hand; help me out and I will forget— Ow—look at that!"

As the great tail whipped the water he stooped, and exerting his really enormous strength, grabbed the brute round the body and hurled it with all his might across the pond.

Ben could only stand and stare at the Zulu's predicament. He had had no idea that the pond was inhabited, and for a moment he could only stand and gaze in spell-bound horror.

Then, from behind him, came a mighty scream of terror and dismay, and down towards the pond trundled the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. Black as the ace of spades, she must have been as tall as Lulu himself, and probably weighed more.

"Lesardu, Lesardu, my loved one, I come!" she bellowed in a voice like the bass notes of an electric organ. "Strong man, warrior of my heart; oh, that my pets should treat ye so! Back, Loti; away, Noolah! Dost ye not know that it is my lover, little ones? Back, or Soupsa will feed ye no more. Come, Lesardu, make for the wall; I will hold my pets at bay. Peesta belooka walli gablit, voetsaak! See, here is meat—leave the warrior—he not good to eat!"

She was carrying a basket of meat on her head, an enormous wicker thing that smelled of high meat, for evidently the dainties the crocodiles preferred had to be on the high side. As she threw great chunks in she warded the crocodiles off poor Lulu with a ten-foot stave like a scaffold pole, which she wielded with ease.

Then, as the horrid creatures left him, Lulu waded to the wall, and as his hands went to clutch it they were seized in a grip like a polar bear's, and his huge body was lifted out of the slime with ease as the enormous woman hauled him to safety. Not only to safety, but to a loving embrace which was like being clutched by a gorilla.

"Ow, Lesardu, my beautiful, my bougwan! Soupsa has saved you, my own! Soupsa, your own Soupsa—your future wife!"

Gasping for breath, Lulu searched his memory. Where had he heard the name of this dreadful woman before? Then he remembered old Gobo in the temple, when he thought he was Lesardu and—

". . . You desire my granddaughter, Soupsa, to wife. She is yours, and you shall be . . ."

And this—this monster, was "Soupsa"! He cast an imploring glance at Ben, but the little American was choking with suppressed laughter.

"Poor old Lulu!" he muttered. "I'm bettin' he'll be wishin' th' crocs had got him afore this blubber queen. Gee, I wouldn't be in his shoes for somethin'! That's th' worst o' bein' such a lady killer!"

But little did either of them think of what Lulu's assumption of Lesardu's name and station was to lead to; that it would mean warfare; the breaking up of a kingdom and perils for them all that they had little dreamt of!

Lulu's Daring!

HALF strangled in the embrace of the enormous Soupsa, poor Lulu gestured behind her back to the grinning Ben to do something to release him. But the little American engineer was enjoying himself far too much to think of interfering.

"Say, two's company an' three's a crowd; I guess I'll be beatin' it," he shouted to the Zulu from a safe distance, for he did not know how much the Amazon might understand or guess of their talk, though they spoke in English.

With a wriggle the Zulu suddenly escaped the fierce Amazon, and stood breathing heavily whilst he addressed her in his deepest bass.

"Listen, Soupsa! I am, as ye know, in the service of the Tomkuk, the most High. Sneer not! I know what your grandfather thinks, but for once, even his wisdom is at fault, as he will find out in time. But as commander-in-chief of the army, my time is not mine own, so for the time being I cannot dally with thee. But to-night, after sunset, perchance I shall be free for a while. Wait for me hereabouts, then you can take me to your kraal and give me of the meats you cook so well. Tell me—your grandfather, Gobo, is he safe with you? I would do all I can for him as he is your relative. Perchance I could speak with him, if he is with you?"

A peculiar sinister smile curled the full lips of the Amazon and she turned sly eyes to the big Zulu.

"Fear not, Gobo is safe—in the secret place you know of, Lesardu; but as to help and protection— He lacks our bodily strength, 'tis true, but he outweighs that with the cunning of his brain. He needs no man's aid—or a god's, even Tomkuk's—ha, ha! He does but bide his time and then—"

She broke off short and turned swiftly, staring at Ben, whom she seemed to notice for the first time.

"What is this—thing—doing here listening to our words?" she demanded, fidgeting with a huge dagger in her belt. "If he is not a friend of yours I will cut him up and feed him to my pets yonder! What wants he?"

"Lady wanter be interdooced to muh?" asked Ben, with a grin, and, sweeping off his solar topee, he made her a low bow. "Delighted to meet yuh, marm. Any friend o' this yer big stiff is a friend o' mine; but I don't wanter make him jealous so didn't butt in. Gee, what's thet perfoom she uses, Lulu?"

"Keep away, little one; she wants to cut you in pieces and feed you to the crocodiles," warned Lulu out of the corner of his mouth. "He is the servant of my lord Tomkuk and controls the great bird on which he came hither. Heed him not, Soupsa. So Gobo is safe with you?"

"Gobo is safe, fear not," was the evasive reply. "But there is something seems to have angered him with you, my beloved! Once he did give his consent to our marriage, but now he seems bitter against you, and when I asked news of you he used strange oaths and swore that he could have your blood and give your bones to the jackals."

"H'mph! He knows that his Lesardu was the mouthpiece of Tomkuk thro' the idol!" muttered Lulu, with a grim chuckle. "If he could lay hands on me— Fear not, Soupsa, it is but a passing anger to which the aged are liable. Now that I have come to great honour and am in command of the army he will not say me nay. In fact, he dare not, for am I not the Tomkuk's right-hand man, high in favour, whilst Gobo himself is but a fugitive from the wrath of Tomkuk and dare not show himself!"

Soupsa threw back her bullet head with the tight little black curls all over and a guttural laugh came from her thick throat and massive chest.

"Say you so, Lesardu? You have changed somewhat in speech and thought and—yes, perhaps in appearance—handsomer, perhaps, once that green slime is washed from your face. But you are dear to me in any guise." She dropped her voice and cast a glance behind her, scowling at the waiting Ben Bold.

"But listen, why do you speak thus to me of the Tomkuk, as if he were a real—a living thing? I, that come from a long line of priests, know that the Tomkuk is a sham, invented by a cunning priest long years ago as a cloak for his own benefit. Who this white-faced lad is I know not, but he cannot be the Tomkuk, seeing that Tomkuk has no existence."

"Say you so, Soupsa?" snorted Lulu; "Be not so sure! Is not this white-faced lad the living image of the great statue down in the river? His magic is greater than Gobo's, who has been defeated in the very hour he expected to triumph!"

"I care not either way, Lesardu," replied the woman, with a shrug of her massive shoulders; "but now that you are the general you will soon be a rich man and able to pay my grandfather the two hundred fat milch cows he demands for me and we can be married at once, eh?"

"Two hundred fat cows for one of you?" cried Lulu, luckily in English. "Wow! You would be dear at the price of a span of thin oxen with lung-sick! Listen, Soupsa! That can wait. One day is as good as another to me, and I have much on my mind at the moment. Waacht een beetje! Wait a bit!"

"You—you hesitate when Soupsa offers herself?" demanded the lady, in tones like the double hiss of a boa constrictor. "Beware, if you think to play me false! Ere now I have killed better men than you and thrown their bodies to my pets yonder. Remember who I am—Captain of the King's Pachaka (Amazons). Remember that and who I am, and what I have done with my

life. Meet me here at sunset and see ye do not fail. No one crosses Soupsa twice!"

With a sweep of her great arm she flung the big Zulu aside, and, twitling the stout staff with the hook on the end as easily as a light cane, she strode off like the drum-major of Grenadiers.

On the Trail!

"SUFFERIN' crows, but thar goes a sure 'nuff dee-terminated dame!" murmured Ben, who had skipped out of the angry Soupsa's way. "I guess yuh did th' late Lesardu a good turn when yuh stuck a knife under his wish-bone!"

"Ja, nigh to; but come, we will go seek baas Tom. He will give us the wise words, for this woman has dazed my brains so that my head whirls!"

"Poor feller, thet's l-u-v, love; but don't worry, yuh'll git over thet quick 'nuff arter yer married."

They soon found Tom and Alva Vandeck, for they were seated in big wicker chairs on the veranda with two or three girls standing behind them lazily waving ostrich feather fly-whisks and palm-leaf fans.

"Hallo, Lulu, what's happened? Been fishing for tadpoles or what? Why, man, you look like a duck waddling out of a pond!"

"Ikona mai, baas; wait till you hear my word," implored the Zulu, twitching his body under the armour in memory of the slimy things that had got next to his skin. "We have great news."

"Waacht een beetje; let's send these fly flappers away. Ah, shoo 'em off with you."

"Right-ho, great Tomkuk, one word from your royal silliness and we do as we like," grinned his cousin. "Hi, you dames with the feather dusters, beat it! Repair without and order the chef to prepare the fatted muffin against my lord's tea."

The damsels could not understand what he said, but his gestures were expressive, and they sidled off giggling together at the strange "white lord's" glass eye, for Al's monocle had made a great impression in the palace, where he was regarded with great awe as the "Master of the Great Bird."

"I reckon you'll have to 'suffer and be strong,' Lulu," said Tom, after he had heard the story of the Zulu's love adventure. They had seen the enormous negress about the palace, but had had no idea that she was such an important person as Gobo's grand daughter. They had also heard about the "Pachaka," or King's Amazon guard, but had seen nothing of these damsels, and came to the conclusion that they had probably gone over to Gobo's camp as so many of the Golden Guard had done under the old high priest's artful persuasions.

"It's most important that we get hold of Gobo, for while he's at large I'm afraid he'll be a constant menace," continued Tom.

(Continued on page 44.)

Now For A Cheery Chin-Wag—Gather Round, Chaps!

MY DEAR CHUMS,
—How's the jolly old coupon collecting going on? I'm referring, of course, to our Grand 10,000 Gift Plan which again appears in this week's issue.

We're giving away two more coupons totalling 50 points in these pages, so be sure to cut them out and add them to your collection.

The Free Gift plan is in full swing now, so it's up to you chaps to make hay whilst the sun shines, as the saying goes. Don't forget our companion papers, the "Ranger," "Magnet" and "Gem," are also giving away coupons in this stupendous Gift Scheme, so if you want to be well in the running for one of the handsome books, there's your opportunity—buy any of these papers.

There's a bit of a surprise in

Next Week's All-Thrilling Story.

Professor Zingrave, the master-crook and all-powerful leader of the infamous Green Triangle League, returns once again into the limelight. But this time he simply staggers society with his new challenge against law and order. I won't spoil the story by giving you any details, but let me tell you this much—it's a winner!

Talking of stories reminds me of a very interesting letter I read from an Australian reader the other day.

Here Is An Extract

from it: "I like the personal touch in the Old Paper. The weekly 'Round Table' confab. seems to make the readers take part in the very making of the book. Miles of ocean which separate England from her Colonies are bridged; we get to know each other on common ground. If a fellow wants some yarns about Zingrave, he just writes and asks for them, and if he wants some other kind of detective-thriller, he does the same. Then they appear in the Old Paper, and we are all satisfied. We know our views are always considered, and that goes a long way to making the success of the paper."

Eric C., you are quite right. I do consider your views, and all those of my many chums, and I hope the personal touch which I try to put into the good Old Paper will keep us for many a long year together in this happy bond of friendship. Let me hear from you again.

READERS' JOKES WIN HANDSOME PRIZES.

Sam: "Hallo, Bill! Jolly cold, ain't it?"

Bill: "Cold? Oh, that's nothing! I remember once, when we were in Iceland, we had to throw the candle-flame to put out the light."

(D. Webb, 22, St. Paul's Place, Canonbury, N.1, a pocket wallet.)

Merchant: "Look here! This horse I hired from you runs on to the pavement every time he sees a motor-car."



Letters to the Editor should be addressed to **NELSON LEE LIBRARY**, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Horse-dealer: "Well, you don't expect a horse to run up a telegraph pole or climb a tree, do you?"

(T. Harper, 22, Rose Bank Road, Newton Heath, Manchester, a pen-knife.)

Shopkeeper: "No, we can't take a gramophone back if you've had it a year. What's wrong with it?"

Scotsman: "The needle's just broken!"

(F. Chilcott, 16, Regent Street, Bedminster, Bristol, a pocket wallet.)

Pompous Individual: "Is this seat right in the front?"

Box Office Manager: "My dear sir, if it was any closer, you'd be in the cast."

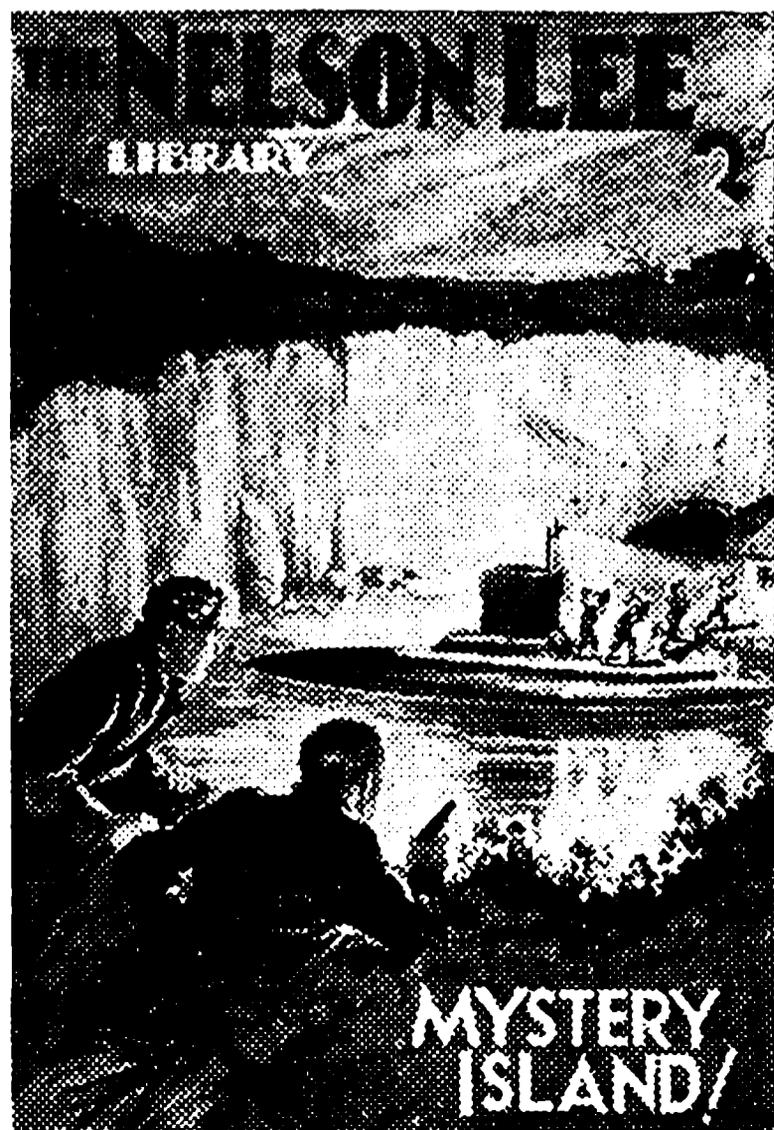
(W. J. Phillis, 29, Bedford Place, High Street, Portland, Dorset, a pocket wallet.)

Bill: "We had a terrible storm last night."

Tom: "Why didn't you wake me up? You know I can't sleep through a storm."

(A. Butterfield, 6, John Street, Denholme, W. Bradford, a pocket wallet.)

LOOK OUT FOR THIS COVER NEXT WEEK!



"THE CITY OF GOLD!"

(Continued from page 42.)

"We'll have to leave it to you how to set about it. What is it, Ben?"

"Wa'al, yer Royal Highness," said Ben Bold with a grin. "Me, I've come to th' conclusion th' strategy is th' on'y way to get a rope on that old maverick, an' seein' th' th' dame's took a shine to ol' Nugget hyar—why, let 'im rip whilst th' goin's good. Mebbe whilst Romeo hyar is canoodlin' with his Jooliet I c'ud kinder amble in an' git a grapplin' iron on Gobo, yank him out an' beat it back hyar wi' him. He don't weigh more'n eighty pounds, I reckon, an' I c'ud tote him along jest as easy."

"It would be a good thing if we could bring the old blighter along here and let the people judge him according to their own laws. I have promised that to the counsellors who are set on having things done just according to tradition. I don't exactly know what it all is, but I daren't ask for fear of showing my ignorance, and bein' Tomkak. I'm s'posed to know everything."

An hour later Lulu strode forth from the palace in all his glory. He had had a hot bath and his armour had been carefully cleaned and burnished so that it shone like the rising sun, and he had added a two-foot plume to his helmet which made him look more gigantic than ever and fit spouse for the "great" lady who awaited him by the croc. pool.

Lulu, who would have faced a dozen warriors of his own size in a fair face-to-

face combat, was shivering like a cheap jelly at the thought of meeting this gigantic granddaughter of the crooked old witch doctor, but though he was scared he was determined to go through with it for the sake of his "young baas."

Soups-a gave a laugh as he swung along. "Lead on!" growled the Zulu under his breath. "Take me to the kraal quickly or I return to the palace."

Like most big brutes Soups-a was easily quelled by a master, and the big Zulu's tone of authority carried sway. She cast him a peculiar look from under her brows with a sly smile at some secret thoughts, but answered meekly enough:

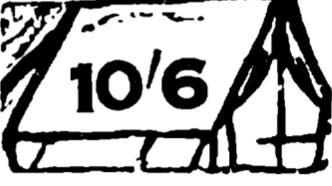
"Va eunuki, lord Lesarda; your servant obeys. Follow!"

Lulu followed, but kept his eyes skinned and his ears open for treachery.

Now and again he stole a glance behind him to see if there was any sign of Ben Bold following him as promised, but either the American had funked it or he was a better trailer than the Zulu had given him credit for being. As a matter of fact, it was the latter, but Ben had started out before the Zulu "chanced his arm" about the direction and was carefully hidden away amongst some trees down the trail towards the temple.

(Next week's chapters of this Powerful African Story are Great! Don't miss them, chums—they teem with thrills and excitement!)

SPURPROOF TENTS. Model X.



Made from lightweight proofed material. Complete with three piece pointed poles, pegs, guy lines, and brown valise. Weight 5 lbs. Size 6 ft. x 4 ft. 6 in. x 3 ft. 6 in. With 6 in. wall and 3 in. eave. **10/6** Post, 9d.

Accommodates three boys. Extra light weight in Egyptian Cotton. Weight 3½ lbs. 15/-.

Send for beautiful Illustrated Catalogue List, post free.

GEO. GROSE & CO., 8, New Bridge St., E.C.4.

MY GREAT OFFER



Write for my free Bargain Lists of the best ALL BRITISH cycles, 14 DAYS' APPROVAL. CARRIAGE PAID. Cash price £3 15s. or terms. All accessories FREE. Value 21/-.

2 WEEKLY

O'Brien THE WORLD'S LARGEST CYCLE DEALER, 17 COVENTRY

BE TALL—Your Height increased in 14 days or Money Back. Amazing Course. Write for Free Book, sent privately.—**STEBBING SYSTEM, 28, Dean Road, LONDON, N.W.2.**

Blushing Shyness, "Nerves," Self-consciousness cured or money back! Complete Treatment, 5/-, details, striking testimonials Free—**L. A. STEBBING, 28, Dean Rd., LONDON, N.W.2.**

VENTRILOQUISM. Throw voice, empty rooms, chimneys, etc. Imitate persons. Mystifying; great fun. Book containing full instructions, dialogues, 1/6 post paid. Money back if unsatisfied.—**NOVAL, 77, Grange Rd., Norwood, S.E.**

300 STAMPS for 6d. (Abroad 1/-), including Airpost, Barbados, Old India, Nigeria, New South Wales, Gold Coast, etc.—**W. A. WHITE, Engine Lane, LYE, Stourbridge.**

All applications for Advertisement spaces in this publication should be addressed to the Advertisement Manager, "The Nelson Lee Library," The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

STAMMERING. Stuttering. Now, remarkable. Certain Cure. Booklet free privately.—**SPECIALIST, Dept. A.P., 28, Dean Road, London, N.W.2.**

BE TALLER! Increased my own height to 6ft. 3 ins. Treatment £2:2s.—Details 2d stamp.—**A. B. M. ROSS, Height Specialist, SCARBOROUGH, ENGLAND.**

BLUSHING, SHYNESS.—For FREE particulars simple home cure write **Mr. HUGHES, 26, Hart St., LONDON, W.C.1.**

STOP STAMMERING! Cure yourself as I did. Particulars Free.—**FRANK B. HUGHES, 26, Hart St., LONDON, W.C.1.**

PRESENTS for boys who will act as our agents for sale of stamps from our Approval Sheets.—**N. L. FIELD & CO., 14, Cursitor Street, London, E.C.4.**

Be sure to mention **THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY** when communicating with advertisers.

Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian magazine post. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 11/- per annum; 5/6 for six months. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd.