

The TREASURE of



CHAPTER 1.

Nelson Lee Takes a Hand.

IT'S rather tough luck, to my way of thinking," said Nelson Lee, half jokingly. "A fellow goes away on a difficult case, comes home at the end of it, looking forward to a rest and a short holiday, only to find that you and Nipper have got another case all ready for me to tackle."

Lord Dorrimore, Lee's stalwart friend and ally, smiled and bent forward eagerly.

"I wish I could be sure you would take it up, Lee," he said. "Twemlow put me on to the matter. Twemlow, you may remember, is a clergyman, and often acts as court missionary down in the East End. I ran into him when, at your request, I took Wolf, your Alsatian, to the veterinary hospital down that way. I happened to come across a woman who had fainted through sheer want and hunger, and naturally I took her to a coffee

stall and paid for what she had, then took her to her poverty-stricken home. I was aware at once that she was a well-educated and refined woman. She was living with her daughter, and the signs of great suffering and hardship were visible in both their faces.

"The next day I got on to Twemlow about it, thinking he might be able to help them, and it so happened that he had known them for some time. The woman's name is Legrand——"

"Legrand!" echoed Lee, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes thoughtfully. "Not a common name. I've heard it before. Go on, Dorrimore."

"It appears," continued Lord Dorrimore, "that Twemlow is very puzzled over the affair. Mrs. Legrand and her daughter work at home for a furrier, and make about five to seven pounds a week between them."

"They could live comfortably on that," said Lee.

HUNGER DESERT!

Over the unknown wastes of Hunger Desert in far-off Tibet, from town to town through Northern Europe, and thence to London, comes a call for help from a white man imprisoned in a monastery. And that call is answered by Nelson Lee, the famous detective, who sets out on a quest which is fraught with countless dangers!



"Yes, but they don't. They are always half starved. The point is, where does the money go? They have no vices, like drinking or drug-taking. And so I got into touch with Nipper, and we set a watch on the tenement where they live. In so doing we discovered that a Russian——"

"You said a Russian?" asked Lee sharply.

"Yes—a Russian—visited Mrs. Legrand frequently—always after she had received money."

"Blackmail," said Lee quietly.

"Exactly," replied Dorrimore. "I have seen this man several times, and I recognised him as the leader of a gang of anarchists and trouble-makers. His name—at present—is Ivan Vladski. That may be an alias."

"Ivan Vladski," murmured Lee, as if something had occurred to him. "Carry on, Dorrimore. I am interested!"

"Thought you would be, Lee. You see. I tried my best to get Mrs. Legrand to tell me all her troubles, but she is very proud. Her daughter, however, does not trust Vladski as she does, and she let fall enough to afford me an inkling of how matters stand. As far as I can gather, putting two and two together, you know, is that Mrs. Legrand's son went abroad somewhere and disappeared. At first they thought he was dead, but this Ivan Vladski suddenly turned up with the news that he was in prison somewhere Persia way, I fancy, and he wanted them to find the money to effect his release. But no matter how much money Mrs. Legrand and her daughter pour into Vladski's hands, he always comes back for more, and there is no hint of young Legrand's liberation."

"I see," said Lee. "And did you find out anything about Mrs. Legrand's son?"

"Oh, yes, guv'nor!" put in Nipper. "Sydney Legrand was a journalist on the staff of the 'Daily Report,' and he was sent out to Turkestan on a secret mission, from which he never returned."

Lee's keen face was very thoughtful.

"H'm, it's a strange case," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, I have met this youngster, Sydney Legrand, once or twice in Fleet Street. He's a very able man, and he knew his Turkestan wonderfully well. He spent several years out there, I believe, and could talk the various dialects like a native."

He looked across at Dorrimore.

"I don't suppose you ever heard the real reason why the 'Daily Report' sent Sydney Legrand out to Turkestan, Dorrimore?" he went on. "It was supposed to be in order to describe the conditions of life out there at the present time; but the truth of the matter was that the editor of the 'Report' had received, unofficially, a report to the effect that some of the crown jewels belonging to the Russian royal family had been taken to Tashkent, and they were hidden there by the people who stole them. It just happens that the jewels were rather well known, and no ordinary jeweller on the Continent would have failed to recognise them."

"But the scheme was to hold the jewels in a safe place until the trouble died down, then they were going to be taken down through China and across to America, where the thieves hope to find some wealthy American to pay a good price for them."

"That was the story, was it?" Dorrimore remarked.

"Yes," Lee continued. "I happened to hear about it because I met the editor of the 'Report' in the club just when he had received the letter. He was not quite sure whether it was a cock-and-bull story or not, and he asked me my opinion. I was inclined to think that the account was genuine enough, and—well, it was really on my opinion that the editor sent young Legrand out to Turkestan."

He was silent for a moment, puffing at his pipe.

"Of course, the report came through that Sydney Legrand had fallen foul of the authorities there, and had been killed," Lee added, "but I didn't pay much attention to it, and even now I do not believe that he is dead. In nine cases out of ten, if anyone vanishes in those parts of the world it is invariably assumed that they are dead. But Sydney Legrand struck me as being a very level-headed youngster, and I should be inclined to think he didn't take many risks."

"But if he isn't dead, surely he would have taken some means to have communicated with his mother," Dorrimore suggested.

"Yes. That is a point worth considering," Lee agreed. "But you know out there the question of getting letters through is a very difficult one. And again, Sydney Legrand may have sent messengers, but those messen-

gers may never get out of the country. Everything is still at sixes and sevens in that part of the world, you know, and no man can really say what is happening."

He knocked out his pipe, then glanced up.

"Of course, I had no knowledge of Sydney Legrand's relatives," Lee went on, "and the fact that they are living in poverty strikes me as being rather extraordinary. I am sure that if they had communicated with the editor of the 'Report' he would have taken care that they were at least kept from want."

Dorrimore shook his head.

"You haven't met Mrs. Legrand, Lee," he said, "or you wouldn't talk like that. I can tell you she is one of those women who would rather starve than accept charity from anyone; and apart from that, she has had money—money in plenty—quite recently. My opinion is that this skunk, Ivan Vladski, has been bleeding her; blackmailing her; getting every penny out of her as she earns it, and always demanding more. There's not the slightest doubt but that she is absolutely terrified of the brute, and if you can find out just why that terror exists, I'm also sure that you will discover something concerning Sydney Legrand."

They chatted it over, then presently Lee came to a decision. He telephoned to the "Daily Report" office, and made an appointment with the editor for that evening. Dorrimore went back to his chambers, and somewhere about eight o'clock Lee rang him up and told him that he had accepted a commission from the editor of the "Report" to try and discover the whereabouts of the missing youngster, Sydney Legrand.

"I thought it best to do it that way," he explained. "For I am now working on a deliberate job, and can demand assistance from the police if required. Have you any idea what has happened to Vladski?"

"No," said Dorrimore rather ruefully. "I suppose I ought to have got hold of more information about him than I have."

"Well, find out where he lives, if you can," said Lee, "and let me know. I will wait for your reply."

As Ivan Vladski was obviously an alien, Dorrimore had only to 'phone a few police-stations east of Aldgate to learn that Vladski was living in the Challie Street Hotel, a small commercial hotel off Holborn.

He rang up the newspaper office, got on to Lee, and gave him the desired information.

"Right you are, Dorrimore," Lee said. "There's just one more thing now I want you to do. Go along to Mrs. Legrand, and just see to it that she leaves Salter's Buildings at once—to-night, if possible. Tell her that Ivan Vladski will not trouble her any more, and try to get her story out of her. But if she won't confide in you

THERE was a quiet assurance about Lee's voice that hinted to the aristocrat that he knew a great deal more about Vladski than he had cared to tell. Of course, Dorrimore was itching to find out just what he did know, but he could not very well tackle the detective on it over the telephone, so after assuring Lee that he would carry out his instruction, he replaced the receiver.

It struck Dorrimore that he might as well get Nipper to go along with him, and he 'phoned Gray's Inn Road, and was fortunate enough to find the youngster in.

They agreed to meet, and the result was that shortly after nine o'clock they were heading eastward for Salter's Buildings, the tenements where Mrs. Legrand lived with her daughter.

Dorrimore felt a little timid about the task Lee had set him, for he, being an aristocrat himself, could appreciate how Mrs. Legrand would feel towards anyone who was trying to worm her secret out of her. And when he knocked it was Mrs. Legrand herself who opened the door, and a glance at her face assured the visitors that she was inclined to mistrust these who were willing to help her, no doubt thinking that their intervention might anger Vladski and so ruin what chances of escape her son had.

Nipper and Dorrimore went inside to find Marian Legrand seated at the table, hard at work with needle and thread. The room was a poky little place, and under the faint gas light on the table, Marian Legrand, who would have been a very pretty girl under happier circumstances, looked very pale and wan.

Dorrimore held out his hand.

"I want you to understand that we are your friends, Mrs. Legrand," he said. "It is true that I have interfered rather in your affairs, in a way perhaps I had no right to do, but I felt justified under the circumstances."

"I don't know that you can do any good," she said listlessly. "But you might do a deal of harm."

"That is a matter of opinion, of course," he replied. "I don't want to pry into your affairs, Mrs. Legrand, but I feel absolutely convinced that it is to your interest to let me know all you can concerning this man Vladski. Who is he? Where does he come from?"

He saw the mute agony in Mrs. Legrand's face. She clasped her fingers together, and her lips pursed tightly, indicated that she was determined to keep silent; but she reckoned without her daughter, for Marian Legrand, after a quick, appealing glance in his direction, went round to her mother and caught her by the arm.

"I am quite sure that these gentlemen can be trusted, mother dear," she said. "And in any case, we must do something. This doubt and silence is killing me, and you know that I—I am very much afraid of Ivan Vladski."

She drew back a pace and faced Dorrimore. "If we were only sure," she said. "You know how I love Sydney, and I would be willing to sacrifice much to save him. But I feel that Vladski is lying to us—has been lying to us all the time; but we have never had a chance of finding out the truth."

She looked across at Dorrimore.

"If my mother tells the story to you," she began, "you must promise not to reveal it to anyone. The people in this country all believe that my brother Sydney is dead, and we have allowed them to remain in that belief."

Dorrimore bowed.

"Anything you tell my friend and I, Miss Legrand, will be held as sacred," he said.

The girl slipped a chair forward, and her mother seated herself in it. Then Marian went to the other side of the table, and took a seat. There was a moment's silence, then Mrs. Legrand began.

"You are quite right when you say that Ivan Vladski has been getting money from me," she said. "Indeed, he has had a great deal of money. But I don't think it is exactly blackmail—at least, I didn't think so until recently."

She hesitated for a moment, then went on:

"Perhaps you have heard of my son, Sydney Legrand? He was employed by the 'Report,' and some twelve months ago he was sent out on a special mission to the East. He went to Tashkent to try to get particulars concerning a certain movement that had been carried out there."

Dorrimore had heard all this from Nelson Lee, but he thought it inadvisable to interrupt, and allowed Mrs. Legrand to continue to give him details concerning her son's profession.

"We heard that Sydney had been killed, and he had warned us that he might be in danger of paying such a penalty. It was a very bitter blow to me, of course, for Sydney was a good son, and we missed him very much when he went away. I had all inquiries made that were possible, but no trace could be found of him. I put several advertisements in papers for circulation abroad, and after many weary months I had the first communication. It came from Paris, and was signed by Ivan Vladski. He said that if I were the mother of Sydney Legrand he had some important information to give me, and he suggested that I should make an appointment to meet him in London."

She looked across at Dorrimore.

"You can understand just what we felt," she said. "It was like a ray of hope to us, and I answered the message at once. A week later I came to London and saw Vladski at the Challie Street Hotel, off Holborn. I can't say that I was exactly impressed by the man's appearance, but he knew so much about my boy, and gave me so many intimate details of his life, that I knew he could not be lying."

She leaned forward in her chair.

"My son is not dead, Lord Dorrimore," she went on. "He is in prison in Tashkent. They charged him with theft, and, according to Ivan Vladski's story, the evidence was very strong against him. So far as I could make out my son travelled in a railway carriage along with a number of very wealthy merchants, and when he reached Tashkent and went to a hotel there, he was followed by the police, and one of the merchants charged him with stealing a large parcel of pearls. A portion of the pearls were found in my son's possession, amongst his kit, and there were witnesses brought forward to prove that he had sold one or two of the pearls to them."

She clasped her hands together nervously and leaned back in her chair.

"My son did not give his real name," she went on. "Perhaps he was ashamed of the disgrace that might be attached to it. But he was put in prison at Tashkent, and Ivan Vladski was at that time connected in some way with the prison. He got in touch with Sydney, heard his story and promised to help him."

MRS. LEGRAND arose to her feet. "I will show you the papers that Vladski brought to me, and it was through them that I recognised that, at least, his story was genuine enough."

She disappeared for a few moments, returning presently with a little heap of papers which she handed to Dorrimore. They were Sydney Legrand's passport, and also one or two letters, together with a faded photograph of the young journalist riding on a shaggy Manchurian pony.

"My son gave Vladski these papers so that he would be able to prove that the story he would tell me was genuine. Vladski told me there was only one way of saving Sydney from his terrible position, and that was by bribery. I don't know much about the customs of the East, Lord Dorrimore, but perhaps you will be able to prove whether Vladski's statement is correct or not. He said that provided there was enough money, any prisoner would be allowed to get away in that part of the world."

Dorrimore nodded his head.

"That's true enough, Mrs. Legrand," he agreed. "Even in the old days in Russia it was possible to get away from prison if one had enough money to do the necessary bribing."

He leaned across the table.

"How much money have you actually given to Ivan Vladski?" he asked.

"Over five thousand pounds," Mrs. Legrand returned, with a little sigh. "It was all I possessed, and even that does not seem to be enough. Vladski is in direct touch with the people out there, and he sends money over to a safe place by cable; but he has had to advance more money out of his own pocket, and he—he wants that money back."

Nipper and Dorrimore fired off a number of questions at Mrs. Legrand and her daughter. The story that the woman had

told them was obviously quite complete in itself, and to Dorrimore it indicated clearly enough just what Ivan Vladski's game was.

Not for one moment could he credit the story that the rascal had told them.

Of course, he was prepared to admit that he knew something concerning Sydney Legrand, and had got hold of the lad's papers by some means or other, but Dorrimore was convinced that Mrs. Legrand's five thousand pounds had gone into Vladski's pocket, and his story concerning the money that he had provided from his own pocket was a tissue of lies.

He tried to get Mrs. Legrand to believe that, but she only shook her head.

"I don't say that Vladski's an honest man, but I do know that he has some information concerning my boy," was her reply. "And—well, he was the first one to bring me a ray of hope, and for that reason I did not mind parting with the money I had. I want my boy back—I want to save him, and if money can do it I will find that money."

Dorrimore saw it was useless to argue with her. Like many other women, she was prepared to blind herself to the obviously insincere side of Ivan Vladski.

She had evidently centred the whole of her life in her missing son, and nothing in the world would make her give up her belief that what she was doing now might ultimately help to save her boy.

When they rose to leave, Marian gave Dorrimore a little nod of her head, a signal which he understood, and presently the girl was walking across the dark courtyard with them towards the street.

"I want you to understand that I don't believe in Ivan Vladski, Lord Dorrimore," the girl said. "But you can see that my mother does, and I know just why that is. She is very fond of my brother

ing a mystery. Sit tight in London and leave it to us. Even to-night we may hear some unexpected development that will help to lift the cloud a little. In any case, I can assure you that whatever else may or may not happen, you will never be worried by Ivan Vladski again."

That, of course, was rather a bold statement to make, but Dorrimore was relying on Nelson Lee, and he had every right to do so.

CHAPTER 2.

Arrested!

WHEN Nipper and Dorrimore left Salter's Buildings they headed back for Gray's Inn Road, fully expecting to see Nelson Lee there. They arrived at the chambers shortly after eleven o'clock, but the landlady informed them that there had been no sign of the detective, and after kicking their heels for a while in the consulting-room, Dorrimore rang up the "Report" offices and discovered that Lee had left there shortly after his former conversation over the telephone.

Unfortunately the editor was out, so Dorrimore could not get any information from that quarter.

Ten minutes afterwards, however, the telephone bell whirled, and Nipper answered it. Dorrimore heard him taking a message; then, when he had replaced the receiver, he turned to his companion.

"It's all right, Dorrimore," he said. "We've got to go down to the Challie Street Hotel and ask for Room 45. I think it is one of the servants who gave me the message, but it must have come from the gov'nor."

They had half expected that Lee would get somewhere round the hotel where Vladski was staying, so neither of them doubted the genuineness of this message.

They left the Gray's Inn Road again, found a taxi, and were soon driven to the quiet hotel off Holborn. It was one of those dingy places well known to commercial travellers, but not what one might call a popular type of establishment.

It stood in a corner of a quiet square, and had obviously once been an ordinary dwelling house. They entered a dingy hall, and a sleepy-looking attendant in his shirt-sleeves came across to them.

Dorrimore asked for Room 45, and he pointed to the staircase.

"On the second floor, sir," he said. "Third door on the right."

They discovered afterwards that many of the patrons of that establishment used some of the rooms as show-rooms, laying out their merchandise and inviting their prospective customers to call and view them.

A commercial traveller has to keep busy all day during the short time he spends in London, and his customers are at liberty to call at all hours of the day or night, so the porter of the Challie Street Hotel imagined

that Nipper and Dorrimore were going to view someone's stock, and he allowed them to go off together up the stairs.

They reached the second floor and turned to the right, finding Room 45. Dorrimore knocked on the door, but there was no reply, and he turned the knob and entered, finding the place in darkness. Actually, he ought to have made inquiries then, but he didn't do so.

He had accepted the telephone message as coming from Lee, and he came to the conclusion that he had wanted them to get into this room and wait there until he arrived. So he simply strode into the chamber, followed by Nipper; then, after a search, found the electric switch and pressed it down.

The room had obviously been used as a show place on several occasions; there were five or six chairs and a couple of long tables. But there was no sign of any recent occupancy, and they sat down and began to chat to each other. Dorrimore noticed that there was a door on the left, and after five or six minutes had passed he rose to his feet, crossed to the door and opened it.

The adjacent room was in darkness, but as he stood there he heard a half muffled sound, followed by the creak of a bed. Nipper heard the sound as well, and came across to where his companion was standing.

"What is it, Dorrimore?" he asked.

They listened for a few seconds, and again the creaking noise came, followed by a thin, strangled breath; then a crash sounded, and the tinkling of glass followed.

Nipper slipped past Dorrimore, and the aristocrat heard him sweeping his hand over the wall until he found the electric switch. The room leapt into light, and they saw that it was a bed-room.

On the bed, lying out

man, was lifted and supported by a couple of the hotel staff.

He looked dazed and sick, but opened his eyes, and, after a glance round the room, raised a shaking finger and pointed it at Dorrimore.

"Don't let him get away," he said. "I—I saw him in my room."

The position seemed rather ridiculous. No doubt the old fellow had caught sight of Dorrimore as he stood in the lighted doorway leading from the other chamber, and in his half-dazed, stupid condition might have fallen into an error.

Before they had a chance to explain, the manager of the hotel, followed by a police-constable, appeared and took charge of affairs. Everyone in that room began to speak at once, and in the babble of sound neither Nipper nor Dorrimore could get a word in edgeways.

The porter who had directed them to Room 45 was very vociferous in his denunciation. According to his statement, they had gone up to the room half an hour before, which, of course, was absurd.

Gradually, however, the police-constable took control of affairs, and he managed to get some sort of clear statement from the old fellow who had been attacked.

He was the representative of a big manufacturing jeweller, and the chamber next door had been used as his show-room.

Of course, Dorrimore knew that he was making a mistake, but he swore that it was not more than half an hour before that he had been attacked in that room and had been carried to his own bed-room and tied up.

So far as he could judge there had been two individuals in the attack, but he had not been able to catch sight of them, for they had entered the room noiselessly, and had leapt at him while his back was turned. The lights had been switched off when the attack was made, so that he had not seen their faces, and all he could state was that one of them was a tall and very powerful man, for the traveller had been helpless in his grasp.

The fact that Room 45 was now empty made it very obvious that robbery had been at the bottom of the attack.

Three leather cases in which he carried his samples of various types of jewellery had been stolen, and, according to Mr. Revell, the traveller's account, most of the jewellery had been laid out on the tables when the attack had taken place.

The position was certainly a serious one, yet both Nipper and Dorrimore saw the humour in it, and although they tried to explain to the group of indignant hotel servants, it was no good.

Finally Nipper and Dorrimore were marched off by a couple of constables to the nearest police-station, with the old fellow and the hotel manager in the rear.

To Dorrimore it seemed as though they had walked into a trap, and he was half-inclined to explain the whole affair, but Nipper insisted on keeping silent.

"I don't know what's at the bottom of it, Dorrimore," he said, "but I am not going to let them know that we went there because we thought the gov'nor had sent us a message. If it is a trap—well, we can soon get out of it. But I think myself we had better let matters slide for the time being. It may mean that we will have to cool our heels in a police cell for to-night, but that's all we shall suffer."

The usual assortment of night prowlers had been following them, and when they entered the police-station Dorrimore glanced back over his shoulder and saw that there was a dingy mob of at least a score or so of interested spectators standing on the pavement outside.

The old traveller charged them with robbery and violence, and they refused to give their names, so that the upshot of it was they were both marched down the flagstoned passage and bundled into a cell.

The idea of spending a night on the bare boards was not by any means a pleasant one, and when the warder had gone Dorrimore looked across at Nipper and gave him a nod.

"I'm leaving this to you, young 'un," he said, "but, frankly, I don't see the force of it. Why not tell these people who we are now and settle things at once?"

Nipper was perched on the edge of the cot, and there was a grin on his keen young face as he looked up at his companion.

"What does it matter, old chap?" he said. "A night like this won't hurt us. Candidly, I am of opinion that the whole of this affair has been rigged, and I am willing to make a little bet that to-morrow morning Mr. Revell will find that he has not been robbed of his property, and it will all be returned to him some way or the other."

Ivan Vladski will realise that we are laid by the heels, and he need not be afraid of us following him if he has made up his mind to move."

Dorrimore could not quite follow Nipper's process of reasoning, but he was prepared to admit that the youngster knew much more about the detective's methods than he did, and he left it at that.

He stretched himself out on the cot, and it was just about the hardest thing he ever struck, but he managed to fall into a doze,

The inspector regarded them closely and took a pace forward.

"The messenger picked up the cases at Piccadilly Tube Station, where they had been left last night," he went on, "and from inquiries I have made it seems they were left there before you two reached the hotel. Now then, out with it! Who are you, and what is behind this game of yours?"

Dorrimore nodded to Nipper, and the youngster began to explain. As soon as he mentioned his name, and that of Nelson



Under arrest, Dorrimore and Nipper were urged forward into the police station. As they entered Dorrimore glanced back over his shoulder and saw that a number of night prowlers were keenly watching them.

and was only awakened next morning by the clank of the keys as the warder opened the door of their cell.

THE man asked if they wanted any food, and Dorrimore gave him some money with which he provided them with a decent breakfast; then somewhere about nine o'clock the first startling proof that Nipper's theories were correct came, for a police inspector entered the cell and nodded to them.

"Look here," he said, "what's the game? We've just been notified from the Challie Street Hotel that the whole of Mr. Revell's property was returned to him by a special messenger this morning."

"Indeed?" said Dorrimore, with a rather sarcastic inflexion in his voice. "And do you think that we sent it back?"

Lee, the police official's manner changed at once.

"Why on earth didn't you tell us that last night?" he said. "I thought myself, when I heard the report, that there was something fishy about it. We have been hunting all round London for that confounded swag that you were supposed to have cleared out of the hotel."

He turned to Nipper.

"I have never met you before, but, of course, I've heard of you and Mr. Lee," he said. "What's the idea?"

The youngster shook his head.

"I don't quite know," he returned, "but it seems to me that someone was mighty anxious for us to get locked up last night, and, under the circumstances, Lord Dorrimore and I thought we would oblige them."

"Have you got a map?" the official asked, and Nipper lifted one of the big atlases out of the book shelves, and presently they were studying that stretch of country which is perhaps the wildest of all Europe.

IT is true that one can reach Tashkent by railway. There is a line that runs from the Caspian Sea along the borders of Persia and up into the wild regions of Turkestan, of which Tashkent is the capital. Then, again, one can reach it by another line, but as that line starts from Petrograd, or Leningrad, and runs down through Central Asia, and is closely watched by the Bolsheviks, it was no open road for them.

"If you leave it to me," the Foreign Office official said, "I'll fix things up for you nicely. It is not going to be an easy job, but—well, I suppose you are both used to travelling, and, in any case, you've always got a side door by which you can escape. Down through Bokhara and into Kabul is the best way to get clear, although it is darned rough travelling. My idea is to send you by rail, but it will not be as Englishmen."

For a long two hours that slim, black-haired youngster, and Nipper and Dorrimore studied the map, and it was soon apparent that the Foreign Office man was an expert at the game. He seemed to know the region as though he were a native born, and presently Dorrimore asked him how he came to have that knowledge.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he said, "I was out there on a newspaper job along with Sydney Legrand, several years ago."

"Then you know Legrand?"

He looked at Dorrimore and smiled.

"He was my best friend," he said, "and that's one of the reasons why I have taken up this job. There are lots of people who believe that Sydney Legrand is dead, but I'm not one of them. Sydney knew that part of the world better than I did, and he had the gift of getting right in under the native skin when it came to disguise. I don't say that Sydney is not in trouble, but I don't believe he is dead, and I'd give a great deal to be able to go out with you. Unfortunately, I am a marked man both here and out there. They know me, and know what information I possess concerning that part of the world."

He drew a deep breath.

"I'd love to be able to come with you both," he repeated, "only I think I can serve my friend better by remaining here, for, as soon as I packed my kit I'd have a host of spies on my heels that would never let loose until they found out what I was after."

He smiled.

"But, although I am not going myself, I am going to make the way darned clear for you two. I'll give you letters of introduction all along the line to friends whom I know you can trust. Many of them are very queer types—horse-dealers, hotel-keepers, carpet-sellers. But they are all under the same ser-

vice, and are out to do their best to help a friend's friend."

They had dinner with that interesting official that evening, and before they left him they were armed with more information concerning the job ahead. He gave them all sorts of letters of introduction, and one or two signs which Nipper and Dorrimore got off by heart, signs which whispered into the right man's ears, would make him their friend.

Altogether, they felt that, although they were starting out on an extremely risky enterprise, they were not quite without support, and on the following day, when Dorrimore and Nipper boarded the train at Victoria, they had the feeling that they were on the verge of great happenings.

CHAPTER 3.

At Tashkent.

THE last leg of that long journey was performed in a railway carriage from Kinel, which is a station between Moscow and Celiabinsk, the junction for Leningrad. As they drew nearer to Tashkent, both Dorrimore and Nipper began to feel a trifle nervous.

They realised that at Tashkent police inquiries would be sharper, and it soon became apparent that they were entering a region where a sharper system of watchfulness obtained. They realised that they must avoid observation as much as possible and never loiter about places like railway stations.

Lord Dorrimore's Chinese servant, Wun Foo, was with them, but for fear his tongue might let drop some unfortunate reference to their enterprise and their identity, he had been ordered to pose as deaf and dumb.

kent, but they were not there for pleasure, and presently Dorrimore began to make inquiries, and discovered that the shop of the pearl merchant, Agru Kal, was situated in the old part of the city, the walls of which even yet have not completely disappeared.

They had reached Tashkent on a Friday, and that happened to be the day set apart for prayer, with the result that from the various mosques as they passed there came little streams of people, so that they were able to make their way through them without being unduly observed.

They halted at a small shop and had a meal, then, just about dusk, they began to search in real earnest for Agru Kal's shop.

They found it at last, a little booth of a place stuck away under a ruined arch which had obviously once been part of some great temple.

It was Dorrimore's command of the language which enabled him to read the name above the stall outside. In Tashkent, as in most towns of that type, the older parts still retain their primitive methods of trade, and this particular shop was very different from the splendid ones they had seen in the new town.

There was a slim, brown-skinned youngster squatting cross-legged beside the stall, and Dorrimore halted and pretended to examine some of the gaudy jewellery which was displayed there. Nipper was standing behind his tall companion, and he happened to catch sight of a man's bearded face looking out from behind the curtains in the rear of the shop.

Presently the man came forward. He was a middle-sized individual, rather Persian in appearance, and was wearing a tawdry, gold-embroidered robe.

He leaned forward, picked up a small gold bracelet, and held it out to Dorrimore, saying a few words under his breath. Nipper saw Dorrimore bend towards the fellow and reply, then the bearded man raised his voice and commenced to protest. Nipper could see it was all part of a game, and a few moments later the man and Dorrimore vanished into the shop, the latter reappearing presently and beckoning to the youngster.

They went behind a curtain and found themselves in a little octagonal chamber where there stood a European table and two or three carved stools.

"This is my companion, Agru Kal," Dorrimore said, as an introduction. Then, turning to Nipper he went on. "It's all right, young 'un. Agru Kal is a friend, and he has a message for us. Lee has been here."

This, of course, was good news, for it was the first definite indication they had had that the gov'nor had got through so far.

AGRU KAL leaned forward and began to talk in fairly good English. From what Nipper could make out of it, he was pretty well scared of his job, for right through the story he broke out now and again into a very grim warning of

what would happen to them if by any chance the people they were working against discovered them.

"In Tashkent you are safe," he said. "But in the Hunger Desert there is much danger awaiting you."

According to his account they had to join a small mule caravan which was leaving Tashkent on the following morning for a place called Gazakel. It was about five days' march over what Agru Kal called the Hunger Desert, and it was in that direction that Nelson Lee had gone.

They questioned the Persian jewel merchant pretty closely, and Nipper was satisfied that Lee was still keeping in close touch with Ivan Vladski.

"The caravan awaits you," Agru Kal said, "and I would advise you both to go straight back to your hotel now and not stir from it until to-morrow morning. Even although you have got through so far there is no reason why you should slacken in precaution."

He looked across at Dorrimore and smiled, revealing a row of blackened teeth.

"Even I knew that you were nearing Tashkent," he said. "The message came through to me yesterday that you might be here this afternoon, and lo, you have come!"

Dorrimore shrugged his shoulders.

"That sounds rather menacing," he returned, "for if you knew when we were likely to arrive, so might our friends the enemy. Still, we've got to take that chance, and so far, I must admit, we haven't had any signs of trouble."

They spent the best part of an hour with the old jewel merchant, chatting about the country, and also getting as much information as they could regarding the missing

I was deaf and dumb, honourable. Still, I told him nothing."

There was no use blaming Wun Foo for the incident, but Nipper felt in his heart that he had made a mistake in speaking to the fellow at all.

Dorrimore joined them then, and they went on through the new town and finally reached the hotel. As Nipper stepped inside the wide entrance he glanced back over his shoulder and saw a three-horse droshky swinging by.

The driver was a little squat fellow, leaning well forward in the shafts, and his face was turned in the youngster's direction. Brief though the vision was, Nipper felt pretty certain that it was the same man who had been talking to Dorrimore's Chinese servant outside the little shop.

Anyone in such a profession as Nelson Lee and Nipper followed must keep his wits about him, and Nipper made up his mind that Wun Foo's action was calculated to bring them into trouble. The result was that as soon as they were in their room together he told Lord Dorrimore about the incident, and after they had discussed it, they agreed that the best thing to do was to leave the Hotel de Franco at once and seek other lodgings.

It was dusk, then, and when they had found Wun Foo again they went down to the reception office, explained matters to the clerk, paid for their rooms and cleared out, finally finding another and quieter hotel off one of the main squares.

They had made up their minds to make an early start on the following morning, and they were up before dawn, snatching a hurried meal; then Dorrimore and Nipper and Wun Foo started off to pick up the caravan.

They found it drawn up under the shadow of a crazy old wall, and it was obvious that they were expected, for as soon as they appeared a tall, lean fellow, dressed in a sheepskin coat, came up to them, followed by a couple of men leading mules, and, without saying a word, the tall man indicated that the mules were for them.

And so the rising of the pale sun saw them jogging along behind the long line of pack-mules, heading away from Tashkent, through the cultivated lands that lay eastward.

The road was a pretty good one at first, but gradually died away into a rough cart-track, and presently they found themselves winding down a narrow ravine and across a very shaky bridge, over which only one mule at a time could pass.

WUN FOO was riding ahead of them now, and they made up the end of the caravan. Nipper saw Wun Foo's mount carry him carefully across the bridge and vanish round a boulder on the other side, then he urged his own mount on. While he was yet half-way across the bridge there came a shout ahead.

"Quick, honourable Nipper! Quick! Quick!"

It was Wun Foo's voice.

Owing to the fact that the bridge was a narrow one, the caravan had been rather upset in its arrangements, and as each mule had reached the other side it had been forced into a gallop by its driver. There was, of course, a gap of almost half a mile between Wun Foo and the tail portion of the caravan now.

Nipper urged his mule into a half trot, and his heart was in his mouth as the animal jogged over that shaky bridge. But as soon as he gained the firm ground he hurried forward and saw that Wun Foo's mule was standing on the left of the track, while Wun Foo himself was seated against a boulder, holding his arm.

Nipper caught sight of a thin trickle of blood running between the Chinaman's fingers, and he turned towards Nipper with a quick gesture.

"Over the rocks, honourable! Quick! Catch him!"

Nipper swung from the saddle and ran to where Wun Foo was seated. He saw that the ravine dipped here in a sharp slope, which was covered with rough, mossy boulders. Half-way down the slope a figure was riding in between two tall boulders, and it was towards the horseman that Wun Foo pointed.

"There he goes, honourable," he cried. "It is the same man who spoke to me outside the shop. Get him!"

The man had halted to look back as Nipper approached, and he raised his arm and shook his fist in their direction.

It was a challenge, and Nipper accepted it. He didn't stop to ask how Wun Foo had come by his hurt, but, reaching the edge of the slope, he charged down through the boulders, heading for the squat figure of the droshky driver.

He flattened out at once, and Dorrimore, releasing his hold on the thick throat, rolled the chap against the wall, and arose to his feet.

"Come along, quick! There's the cart!"

At the far end of the courtyard they could see the outlines of a rough native cart, and they had to slink along beside the wall, keeping as far as possible from the fire.

It was one of those crude, cumbersome vehicles, with solid wooden wheels, and without springs, which one meets all over that part of the world, creaking and groaning along the rutted roads. It was piled high with dried grass, and already the double team of oxen were yoked to it.

"In you get, Wun Foo!"

So far as they could see there was no sign of a driver to the cart, but the mere fact of it being there had put fresh heart in Nipper, and he realised then that his doubts concerning that voice in the shaft had been groundless.

Wun Foo was the first to climb over the

back of the cart and bury himself in the heap of fodder; then Nipper followed, and Dorrimore brought up the rear. There were heaps of room in the sweet-scented grass, and they were only too glad to snuggle down and rest there.

Dorrimore was lying close beside Nipper, and they had arranged a huge barricade of grass over them, which would conceal them all right, while allowing them to breathe.

Over the top of the fodder a thin sheet of canvas had been stretched, and tied here and there to the edges of the cart, kept the whole in position.

Nipper could have sworn that not a single soul had noticed them tackle the sentry, nor their clambering into the cart, yet they had scarcely settled themselves into position when there came to them the muffled crack of a whip and a sudden jolt, telling them that the cart had started on its journey.

The wheels of the vehicle sadly wanted greasing, for the creaks and groans of it made a tremendous din. It was springless, too, and

On the Western Trail!

By
MARTIN
CLIFFORD



**A Book-length
Yarn for 4d.
ONLY!**

Here's a magnificent book-length complete story of thrilling schoolboy adventure in the Wild West that no boy should miss reading. This 96-page yarn features Frank Richards & Co., the popular chums of Cedar Creek School, in the backwoods of Canada, and their nerve-tingling adventures provide a story that thrills from the first chapter.

Get it to-day.

Ask for No. 184 of

SCHOOLBOYS' OWN Library

Now on Sale

4d.

