

MAGNIFICENT XMAS STORY BY E. S. BROOKS, INSIDE!

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The **SORCERER'S PRISONERS!**

NERKI THE



CHAPTER 1.

The House of Fear.

THE lights of many lanterns gleamed and flickered in the winter's night. On all sides stretched the snow-covered grounds of Forest House, and the lantern lights, appearing and disappearing behind the bushes and clumps of woodland, were like will-o'-the-wisps.

It was two o'clock in the morning, and the night was dark and still. This old mansion, the ancestral home of Lady Eustacia Bowers, stood in the rugged wilderness of

the New Forest. It would have been difficult to find a more desolate scene.

There were several parties with the lanterns; they were encircling the house, examining the garden pathways, the outbuildings, and everything else connected with the old house.

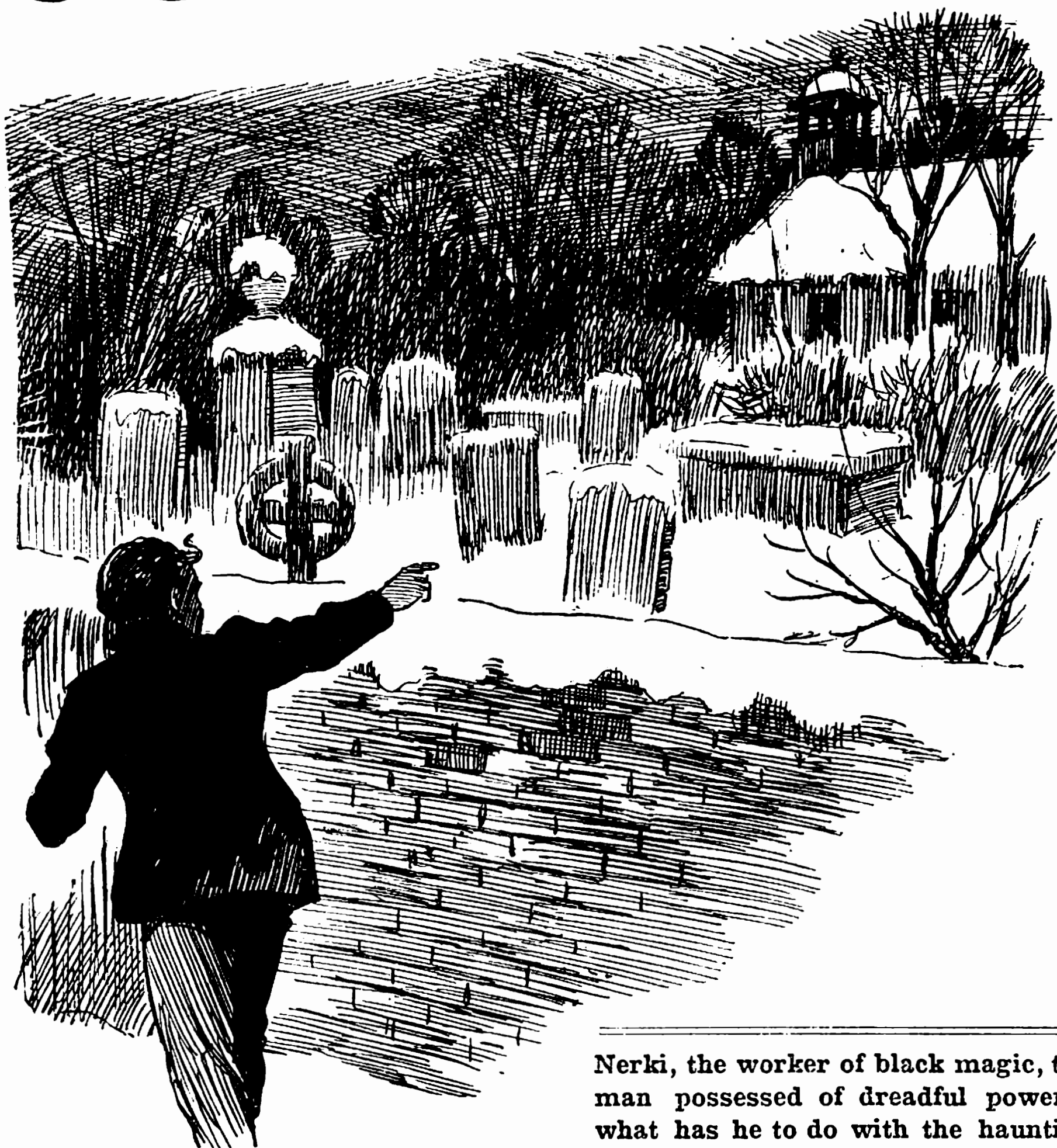
And it was evident that an intensive search was in progress.

Two of the parties met. One consisted of Handforth and Church and McClure, of St. Frank's, and Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple; the other party consisted of Reggie Pitt, Vivian Travers, Winnie Pitt and Violet Watson.

—*And The Chums Of St. Frank's—Complete Thriller!*—

SORCERER!

By EDWY
SEARLES
BROOKS.



Nerki, the worker of black magic, the man possessed of dreadful power—what has he to do with the haunting of Forest House? Never before has Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, been confronted with such a baffling and sinister mystery—never before has he been called upon to show such skill and steadfast courage as now, when he sets out to solve the mystery of “Nerki the Sorcerer.”

“Any luck?” asked Handforth, his rugged face haggard and worn.

“Nothing, old man—nothing at all,” said Reggie Pitt, shaking his head.

“It’s awful! We’ve got to find her! We must!” said Edward Oswald Handforth, in

anguish. “Some of the chaps are saying that she was spirited away by ghosts, but I don’t believe it. That’s rot! That crooked devil, Nerki, got hold of her somehow! If ever I see him again——”

“Steady, Handy, old son!” interrupted

Pitt. "It's no good going on like that. We know just how you feel. But it is more than ever necessary for us to keep our heads."

"But Irene is missing!" said Handforth frantically. "She's gone! Vanished as though into thin air! And there's not a trace left."

His anguish could be easily understood; for Irene Manners was his special girl chum; and the very thought that anything dreadful had happened to her drove him frantic.

"Perhaps the other parties will have some news?" suggested Church hopefully. "You can never tell, Handy. We'd better be getting back to the house. It's a waste of time being out here."

"Yes, yes—let's get back," muttered Handforth.

All these young people were the Christmas guests of Lady Eustacia Bowers. She was Archie Glenthorne's aunt, and it was Archie, in fact, who had invited the merry party to Forest House for Christmas. Archie had done so for a purpose—believing that the noisy, light-hearted boys and girls would lift Aunt Eustacia out of herself. For, for many weeks past, she had been getting more and more deeply under the influence of Professor Ivan Nerki, the strange occultist who called himself the "Sorcerer of the New Forest."

Nerki's lonely forest home was only a mile or two along this desolate, snowbound by-road. Lady Bowers had always been an eccentric—at least, since the death of her husband. She had taken up cult after cult, and Archie had bemoaned the change in her.

His efforts to help her, it seemed, were to be doomed to failure; for this Christmas party had been fraught with mystery and terror ever since the boys and girls had collected under that strange roof.

The various search-parties came in from all quarters; and, with snow clinging to their stout shoes, they collected in the great hall of the mansion, where the electric lights were gleaming brightly. There was not a servant in this house, for they had all fled at the first ghostly manifestations—and there had been many such during the past days.

Nevertheless, there were three men with the boys and girls—three of the most determined of men, too. For they were none other than Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, Lord Dorrimore, the intrepid explorer-peer, and Umlosi, the mighty King of Kutaland. The latter had had a strange experience this night, and he had been badly shaken, and he had even expressed a view that Forest House was genuinely haunted.

Umlosi feared no man—but he was superstitious, like many Africans.

"Well, boys, I'm afraid our efforts have been useless," said Nelson Lee, as he stood at the foot of the great staircase, addressing the guests. "We have searched the house, and we have searched the grounds. Irene has not been found—or any trace of her. It is a complete mystery."

"But we've got to do something, gov'nor,"

said Nipper. "She must be here somewhere."

"We've got to search the house again—" began Handforth.

"No!" came an agitated voice from the wide landing above. "It is useless to search for that poor girl. She is dead."

All eyes were turned upwards; and there, standing against the balustrade was Lady Eustacia Bowers herself. And the hostess of this strange Christmas party was looking a mere shadow of her own self. The tragedy—or what she believed to be a tragedy—had left her a haggard wreck.

"Please, Lady Bowers, leave this to me," said Lee quickly. "The girl shall be found—"

"She cannot be found, Mr. Lee," interrupted her ladyship, her voice harsh with agony. "Do I not know? Nerki appeared to me to-night, and he gave me a terrible warning. He knows that this house is haunted by the evil spirit of an elemental—a semi-materialised phantasm of the dead."

"But that is sheer nonsense, Lady Bowers," said Lee sharply. "Nerki has been putting these ridiculous ideas into your head—"

"Nerki is right!" said Lady Bowers angrily. "For a time, Mr. Lee, I allowed myself to be swayed by your arguments. But now I know the truth! Nerki warned me that unless all my guests leave this house, one of them would be seized—killed by the elemental, and carried away into the astral spaces, there to be destroyed by the evil spirits. Do not the facts prove that Nerki was right? This girl has vanished—without any apparent cause. You heard a scream, and that is all. She was seized in the open corridor, and thus she was carried away. It is folly to search, for she will never be found. She is dead—dead!"

Her ladyship's voice was a wail now, and she was sobbing. And before Nelson Lee could speak she thrust out a shaky hand.

"Go!" she panted. "Please, please! Everybody! Go away from this accursed house, lest others of you should be killed by the evil spirit which haunts it."

Archie Glenthorne ran up the stairs, and, deeply touched, he gripped his aunt's arm.

"Pull yourself together, aunt, old thing," he said earnestly. "Dash it, you can't turn our guests away in the middle of the night like this! There's nowhere for them to go, or—or anything!"

"Let them go!" whispered Lady Bowers. "Any place is better than this!"

EVERYBODY'S nerves were on edge. The "manifestations" which had been taking place at Forest House were so bizarre that even Nelson Lee was forced to confess that he was baffled. There was no ordinary ghost here, there was nothing which could be seen or identified. In this haunted house things—happened. Furniture was suddenly flung into the air, and smashed without any apparent cause. Objects were hurled across rooms. Crockery

was broken, and so forth. Any student of the occult would have declared that the house was haunted by an elemental, or semi-materialised phantasm of the dead.

But Nelson Lee was convinced that the "haunting" was the result of trickery by Professor Ivan Nerki.

It was a significant fact that Professor Nerki had obtained a firm hold over Lady Bowers, and she was immensely wealthy. Archie suspected that his aunt had already paid Nerki heavy sums. It was easy enough for the mystic to get money out of his victims—especially those victims who were wholly under his "spell." And Nelson Lee himself knew from experience how easy it is for lonely and wealthy women to part with fantastic sums to such charlatans. Even if Lee could prove nothing against Nerki, he was at least anxious to open Lady Bowers' eyes to his real character. For Lee was definitely of the opinion that Nerki was a fake and a fraud.

He was a clever man, too—a brilliant conjurer, and what he did not know about the art of the magician was not worth learning.

Nelson Lee had only come down to Forest House for a brief holiday in answer to Nipper's invitation. And he had found the house upside down, with all the servants gone. Lee had half a suspicion that the servants had somehow been "got at." Nerki was determined to rid the house of Lady Bowers' guests—and his object was obvious. Their healthy influence was having its effect, and he was losing her. And in losing her, perhaps, he was losing his most prolific source of income.

Finding things so serious in this old country mansion, Nelson Lee had sent a telegram to Lord Dorrimore, his old friend; and Dorrie had come down post-haste, bringing Umlosi with him.

And still the mystery remained as baffling as ever.

"LISTEN!" said Nipper suddenly.

He was in that crowd in the big hall. And it so happened that he was nearest to the great door.

"What is it?" asked Mary Summers, who was near him.

"Footsteps!" said Nipper.

"Oh!"

"Who can be outside at this hour of the night?"

Crunch, crunch, crunch!

In the momentary silence which ensued, the footsteps could be distinctly heard crunching over the frozen snow. The boys and girls looked at one another askance.

"Nothin' to be afraid of," said Lord Dorrimore briskly. "Probably the local bobby, wonderin' why the lights are on. It might be a good idea to invite him in."

Rap, rap! Rap, rap!

It was Nipper who flung the door open, and then he uttered an exclamation. For it was no rural constable outside, but the sinister figure of Professor Ivan Nerki.

"There is trouble here, I believe," said the mystic impressively.

He walked straight in past Nipper, and the others fell away as he advanced, for there was something eerie in his very appearance, and they shrank away. Nerki advanced to the very centre of the hall, and stood looking up at Lady Bowers. She herself seemed relieved, and a little colour came back into her cheeks.

"Ah, my good Nerki!" she exclaimed. "I am glad you have come. Perhaps you, with your wisdom, will be able to convince these foolish people how wrong they are to stay in this house."

If Nelson Lee had needed any evidence to show him how completely Lady Bowers was in Nerki's grip, that evidence was now supplied. The man positively held her under a kind of hypnotic spell. Yet there was really no suggestion of hypnotism in it. He had won her over by his mysticism, and this strange "cult" had gripped her as though in a vice. The extraordinary happenings at Forest House had satisfied Lady Bowers that Nerki's warnings were justified. He was a "seer"; he had known of what would happen, and she believed in him implicitly.

He seemed to be an elderly man, with a long white beard. He was dressed in a black cloak which reached to his very ankles, and on his head there was a shapeless black cap. The boys knew that the beard was false—and he had even explained to them that he only wore it for the sake of appearances, since people expected a magician to look his part. The man's audacity was startling.

"You are bold, Professor Nerki, to come here to-night!" said Nelson Lee steadily.

"No, sir; I am here because I feel that my presence is needed," replied the mystic. "To-night I have had a vision; I believe that a tragedy has been enacted here. And I have come to offer Lady Bowers my protection."

Handforth strode up to him, and his eyes were blazing.

"You mean you've come here to play some more of your dirty tricks!" he said ferociously. "You humbug! You tricky crook! What have you done with Irene?"

Nerki looked at him coldly.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" he asked. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Yes, you do!" shouted Handforth passionately. "You spirited Irene away—and now you've got the nerve to come here and pretend to know nothing about it! By George! I'll smash you up! I—I'll—"

He was preparing to hurl himself upon Nerki, for he was almost beside himself with anxiety and worry; but Church and McClure and Travers and one or two of the other fellows held him back. Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had advanced, and the detective was now facing the visitor.

"Just why have you come here, Professor Nerki?" asked the detective.

"I came to offer my services to Lady Bowers—and I will address myself to Lady

6 THE MAN WHO DEFIED THE WORLD ! Astounding Story of Modern Pirates.

Bowers," replied Nerki. "You are an unbeliever, sir. You have even cast doubts upon my own integrity. I feel no animosity against you for that, for all sceptics insult me. But I am pained. Indeed, I am sorry for you."

This was Nerki's favourite pose. Nipper and many of the other boys had actually seized him in his own house, and had locked him up in a shed. It was this trick, in fact, which had brought about the Christmas party. For Nipper had impersonated Nerki, and had advised Lady Bowers to invite the young guests. And Nerki, at that time, had merely expressed his sadness that the boys could be so misguided. It was clever of him to refrain from open anger.

"You say that you know that tragedy occurred here?" asked Nelson Lee. "How did you know?"

Nerki ignored him.

"I am distressed, Lady Bowers, that this dreadful thing should have happened," he said. "I do not know how I knew of it, but in my own home a vision came to me. I saw. And I was impelled to come."

"Tell them of the danger," said Lady Bowers urgently. "Oh, do tell them!"

"I tell them, but they heed not," replied the mystic with a shrug. "An innocent young girl has been spirited away by the dread elemental which haunts this house. By now she has been taken to the astral spaces, and is no more. Let these people remain, and another of them might be seized. It is impossible for me to say. I only know that the peril is ghastly. It is hideous. Even now, as we talk, the elemental might strike."

The boys and girls were looking at one another in a scared sort of way. There was certainly something extraordinarily impressive in Nerki's manner. He positively exuded an aura of ghostliness. But Nelson Lee, at least, took no notice of this. It was Nerki's stock-in-trade.

"You have heard?" asked Lady Bowers. "Oh, boys and girls! I beg of you to leave this house! Nerki is right! Mr. Lee, please see reason!"

"I think I see something else!" snapped Nelson Lee.

And, with a sudden movement, he leapt forward, and from Professor Nerki's coat he took two golden hairs!

CHAPTER 2.

The Footprints of the Monster.

PROFESSOR NERKI, quite unaware of Nelson Lee's intention, had backed away in sudden fear. Perhaps he believed that the detective was about to attack him.

"What do you do?" he asked breathlessly.

Lee held the golden hairs up to the light, and his expression was hard. Not much more than an hour before Irene Manners had left the others, and had gone back to her bed-room for some shoes. A scream had been heard—and that was all. She had

vanished. And her hair was fair—golden, in fact.

"Perhaps you will tell me, Professor Nerki, how it is that I find two golden hairs—girl's hairs—on your black coat?" asked Lee ominously.

"What!" shouted Handforth, running up.

"Keep back, young 'un," said Lee. "Let me deal with this matter."

Nerki was dumbfounded.

"But, no! It is impossible!" he exclaimed in confusion. "What do you try to do? Trick me? Bah! Do you think you can force me to speak—"

"I am asking you, Professor Nerki, to explain the presence of these golden hairs on your jacket!" insisted Lee. "I am making no accusation, but the hair of the missing girl is precisely this colour."

Nerki recovered himself; for he knew that this "clue" was no clue at all. Lee could prove nothing by it. But his momentary confusion had been quite sufficient to convince Nelson Lee of the man's guilt.

"I know nothing!" said Nerki angrily. "This evening a client came; she brought her child. I am fond of children, and the little girl climbed upon my knee."

"And do you expect me to believe that?" asked Nelson Lee contemptuously.

"Sir! You insult me!" said the mystic.

"And you insult my intelligence!" retorted Nelson Lee. "Do you expect me to believe that you were seated at home, by your fire-side, wearing that great overcoat? No, Professor Nerki; I cannot compliment you upon that hurriedly invented explanation. It is exceedingly feeble."

Nelson Lee's tone was scathing, and the man almost visibly writhed.

"I am the fool to give any explanation at all!" he said curtly. "I came here to give warning to Lady Bowers—"

"No, Nerki, this won't do!" broke in Lee, reaching forward and seizing the man by both arms. "We have had enough of your shilly-shallying, my friend! Where is that girl? I should advise you to tell the truth!"

"It will be—healthy!" said Lord Dorri-more, moving nearer.

Nerki looked like a caged tiger, and his eyes burned with hatred. Lady Bowers stood looking on, a new flush coming into her face. Perhaps Nerki's behaviour was bringing fresh doubt into her mind.

"Gentlemen—please!" she begged. "This conduct is most unseemingly."

"I am very sorry, Lady Bowers—but I do not hold this man in the same esteem as you do," replied Lee. "Now, Nerki, are you going to tell me the truth about these golden hairs?"

"I shall tell you nothing!" snarled the other, wrenching himself back.

Lee scornfully tugged at the false beard and pulled it clean away.

"Must you wear this make-up, even when you go abroad?" he asked scathingly. "Or are you afraid that Lady Bowers might sus-

pect you of being the trickster you are? You have not fooled me, Ivan Nerki."

"Oh!" came an exclamation from Lady Bowers.

And it was obvious that she was startled. Nerki, hearing that "Oh!" uttered a cry of uncontrollable rage, and he tore himself free.

"I will not stay to be further insulted!" he almost screamed.

And with a sudden run he reached the front door and was gone.

"Come on—after him!" yelled Handforth.

"Rather!"

"Let's grab him!"

The boys were thoroughly excited. Handforth, in particular, did not wish to see Nerki escape. For the finding of those hairs on the man's coat was sufficient evidence for Edward Oswald.

"Come back, you young idiots!" called Nelson Lee. "I don't mind Nerki knowing what I think of him; but we have no evidence against him. The hairs cannot be used as evidence. The man can snap his fingers at us."

But Handforth and several of the others had snatched up their lanterns and were well away by now. It is doubtful if they heard Nelson Lee's words. Not that their chase was of any use.

Nerki had obtained a fairly good start, and it was not even possible to follow his footprints on the frozen snow. For there had been such a lot of trampling round and about the house during the past hour that Nerki's footprints were not distinguishable from any of the others.

"It's no good, Handy," said Church, at last, as he paused for breath. "The rotter has got away. There's no telling where he is now. He might have dodged behind any of these trees, and we can't search all the grounds."

Handforth was breathing hard.

"Think of it," he muttered. "Irene's hairs on his coat! That means that the rotter must have grabbed her, and carried her off somewhere. I'll bet he's holding her a prisoner."

"It's no good guessing!" said McClure. "Besides, we've got to leave this to Mr. Lee."

Even Handforth realised the futility of further search. So he and the others took a short cut back towards the house, crossing the big lawns, where the snow was more or less unbroken.

"Hallo!" said Travers, holding his own lamp high. "What's that trail over there—by the rose garden? Rummy-looking footprints, aren't they?"

"Where?" asked Handforth, straining his eyes.

They all moved over, and presently they saw the trail which Vivian Travers had indicated. And the boys came to a halt, staring at the snow in wonder—and in some uneasiness.

For the footprints they saw were unnatural. They were great sprawly things, neither

human nor animal. But the creature which had made them was undoubtedly two-legged, and the strides were enormous. The footprints themselves were almost as wide as they were long, and there was no mark of any heel or toe. They were just great oblong splodges.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth in an awed voice.

"I don't like the look of 'em!" muttered Church, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder. "Great Scott! Nothing human could have made such footprints!"

"Nothing animal, either," said McClure.

"Then what did, dear old fellows?" asked Travers. "A ghost? The elemental itself? I've always understood that those johnnies were more or less vapourish."

"But they say that this elemental is half-materialised," said Church. "I don't know what to believe—"

"Well, you needn't believe that rot!" growled Handforth. "Whatever made these footprints was solid—and beastly solid at that. Look how big they are! And they weren't made more than a few minutes ago, by the fresh look of them! Come on! We'll follow them, and see where they lead us."

They moved forward in a body, keeping close together—and they took care not to disturb the footprints of the "monster." Nelson Lee would want to see them.

The trail led away across the unbroken snow of the lawns, and Travers suddenly uttered an amused chuckle.

"What's the matter?" asked Handforth, looking at him.

"It only struck me, dear old fellow, that we're mugs," said Travers calmly.

"Mugs? How?"

"Well, look at this trail!"

"I'm looking at it! What of it?"

"Doesn't it strike you that it was made deliberately—so that we should see it?" asked Travers. "It's well clear of all the other footprints. The man—or thing—which made the trail took care to make it with odd clarity. And it seems to me that we're walking right into the trap."

"Trap!" almost yelled Handforth.

"We're following the trail, aren't we?" retorted Travers. "Before we go any farther, I think we'd better sing out to the others. Mr. Lee ought to be in on this, anyhow. It's only fair. He'll be as wild as the dickens if we don't tell him."

"Rot! We ought to follow the trail while it's hot!" growled Handforth. "Why waste time?"

But the others demurred. Travers was right. And Church, without any further ado, broke into a run and made straight for the house, shouting as he went.

IN the hall, Nelson Lee was facing Lady Bowers.

"I don't know what to think, Mr. Lee," the good lady was saying. "I believed so implicitly in Professor Nerki. He has advised me for many months—I

have ruled my very life upon his injunctions. I believe he is right about this house; I believe he came here honestly, to give me an earnest warning. Yet, when I think of his behaviour just now——"

"I found it difficult, Lady Bowers, to convince you of the truth," said Nelson Lee, as she paused. "It was too brutal a truth to tell you bluntly. It was necessary, more or less, that you should find out for yourself. But I am certain that Nerki is a fraud—a humbug. He has been preying upon you, deluding you. He knew that this Christmas party would make such a change in you that he could no longer claim you as a victim. That is why he has been at such pains to frighten the boys and girls away."

"And then you came, gov'nor," said Nipper. "Nerki had started then, and he couldn't very well back out. Then, afterwards, Dorrie and Umlosi turned up, and that made it worse. Worse for Nerki, I mean."

"That he should wear a false beard," said Lady Bowers, with scorn in her voice. "I never suspected that!"

"Odds surprises and startlers!" said Archie. "We knew it long ago, Aunt Eustacia, old girl. Naturally, we didn't tell you. The blighter had the nerve to say that he wore it for effect."

The snatching of Nerki's beard had been a simple enough action on Lee's part—and, in fact, purely impulsive. But it had done much to convince Lady Bowers of the man's treachery. For some reason her ladyship was looking not only startled, but almost frightened.

"If he is false!" she almost whispered. "Oh, if he is false! It is almost too terrible to believe."

"Why do you speak in that way, Lady Bowers?" asked Nelson Lee, looking at her searchingly.

"Because Professor Nerki has persuaded me—— But, no! I cannot betray a confidence," said Aunt Eustacia, suddenly compressing her lips. "I am not yet satisfied that the professor is—is insincere. Oh, I cannot believe it!"

"If I can prove to you that it was he who engineered the kidnapping of Irene Manners, and that he caused all the so-called spirit manifestations in this house, will you be satisfied then?" asked Lee. "And, being satisfied, will you give me your full confidence?"

"Yes, yes!" said Lady Bowers eagerly. "Prove this to me, Mr. Lee—and I will tell you everything! But until then—until I know for certain that Nerki is false, my lips are sealed."

There was some secret here—some secret which Lee vaguely suspected. But he did not press his questions. Already he had got Lady Bowers doubting—and that was good progress. Nerki's visit had been ill-timed, indeed—for he had done himself an enormous amount of harm by coming. And he had thought, no doubt, to strengthen his own position with Lady Bowers.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee!"

The voice sounded vaguely from some urgency.

"Oh! Perhaps they've found Rene!" cried Doris, running to the door.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrिमoro were at the door in a moment, and they could see Church in the distance, waving his lantern.

"What is it?" called Lee.

"Can you come, sir?" came Church's shout.

"Have you discovered somethin'?" yelled Dorrie.

"No, sir—not about Irene!" replied Church, to the chagrin of the other girls. "It's—it's something else. We only want you, Mr. Lee! Don't let any of the girls come."

"Young ass!" muttered Lee. "That's the very way to bring the whole crowd."

And he was right. The schoolgirls, who had been searching with the others, and who were wearing their thick coats, came out at once, eager and curious. So it was that a considerable crowd gathered on the lawns, looking at those extraordinary splodgy footprints.

"We found them after we had chased Nerki—and after he had got away from us," explained Handforth. "What do you make of 'em, sir? I never saw any footprints like 'am in all my life!"

"They are certainly—unusual," agreed Nelson Lee, as he bent over the strange footprints.

"Do you know where they started?" asked Dorrie.

"We saw them, for the first time, near the terrace," replied Travers. "I think they were all mixed up with the other footprints, higher up. The snow is tremendously disturbed there, and I dare say it'll be impossible to follow the trail. But this way there's no other trail—and this is the way the monster went."

"Really, Travers, there is no reason to refer to it as a 'monster,'" said Nelson Lee, almost sharply. "Nerves are on edge enough. There is not the slightest evidence of a monster. Footprints are the easiest things in the world to fake. A man wearing padded sacking on his shoes could make just such footprints as these. So please keep your imaginations within a reasonable limit."

The boys and girls had a suspicion that Nelson Lee made that remark to allay their qualms. It was all very well to say that a man with padded feet could have made the marks; but they were quite clear-cut, and obviously the footprints of some enormous creature. No man could have made such a stride.

With Nelson Lee leading the way, the party followed the trail. It led right across the lower lawns, out beyond the orchards and the vegetable gardens. And soon the party found itself up against a low brick wall. The monster's footprints led right up to this brick wall, but when Lee and Dorrie prepared to scramble over the wall,

they paused, their lanterns held high. For on the other side the snow lay unbroken. The trail was ended.

"Hallo! This is infernally queer," said Dorrie, in a low voice.

He was amazed. There was snow on the top of the wall—it was quite undisturbed. So was the snow to left and to right—and on the other side of the wall. How, then, had this weird creature continued its progress? Where had it gone to? Why had it left no further trail?

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth, with a gulp.

"Well, it's a graveyard."

"What!" exclaimed Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore in one voice.

"Fact, sir," said Nipper. "That old building is a chapel. It hasn't been used for over a hundred years, I understand. But in the old days, this was the family burial ground."

"And—and those awful footprints come here, right to this wall—and then they vanish!" said Church, with a shiver. "Oh, let's get back to the house! I'm scared—and I don't mind admitting it!"



Irene Manners stopped short with a sudden gasp of terror. There before her in the underground vaults a flickering light moved steadily forward, and behind the light showed an enormous black Shape—she was trapped!

He was staring straight ahead—at a low building just visible at the outskirts of the lights' radius—a building which was partially concealed by thick trees.

"What is it, Handforth?" asked Lee quickly.

"That—that building, sir," muttered Handforth.

"What about it?"

"Archie was telling us, a day or two ago——"

"Good gad!" broke in Archie. "That's right, Handy, old thing! I mean to say, how frightfully frightful!"

"What are you boys talking about?" demanded Nelson Lee impatiently.

"I think I understand," said Nipper, a queer look in his eyes. "You see this space on the other side of the wall, guv'nor—where the snow is unbroken?"

"Yes."

There was a silence. They were all looking at one another in dread. And they looked, too, at that undisturbed snow—and their thoughts were alarming.

"They say that elementals are phantasms of the dead!" muttered Church. "Oh, my goodness! Supposing that chap, Nerki, is right? This awful thing can have come from one of these graves! It steals out after dark, and——"

"That's enough, Church," said Lee sharply.

"I'm sorry, sir——"

"You should be!" snapped Lee. "You are talking absolute nonsense!"

"Yes, sir," said Church meekly.

"We will all get back to the house—and I will examine this spot more thoroughly when daylight comes," continued Lee. "There must be some logical explanation. Why should this—this thing leave footprints

in one place, and not in another? Cannot you see that it is another dodge, to work upon your imaginations? I'm sorry you came here."

He turned abruptly, and walked away. And the others lost no time in accompanying him. Nobody wanted to be left until the last—with their backs turned to that silent graveyard.

CHAPTER 3.

The Prisoner.

PROFESSOR IVAN NERKI, the so-called Sorcerer of the New Forest, admitted himself into his lonely house.

He had deliberately walked back by road, although it was very much nearer across the park. In fact, it was astonishingly nearer, if one took the trouble to obtain a bird's-eye view, from the topmost path of the Forest House roof. But there were so many little spinneys intervening, with hillocks and gulleys, that one was apt to be deceived. By road, the distance was practically two miles. But as the crow flies, the two houses were not separated by more than three-quarters of a mile.

But Nerki had stuck to the road.

For he had a suspicion that Nelson Lee would follow his trail—perhaps look for his very footprints. And during that walk Nerki had come to more than one conclusion. He was frightened. He was thoroughly alarmed.

He strode into his "mystery" room—that room with the domed ceiling, showing all the signs of the Zodiac. There were no black curtains round it now, and it was revealed as a comfortably furnished sitting-room. Nerki switched on all the lights, and flung aside his great black coat.

"Ezra!" he called sharply. "Where in thunder are you, you fool?"

An inner door opened, and Nerki's manservant appeared. He was small and slightly wizened, with close-set, cunning eyes. Those eyes opened wide as he now beheld his master—beardless.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Your beard! Has something gone wrong?"

"Don't stand there asking idiotic questions!" snapped Nerki. "Get me a drink!"

The man hastened to obey.

"Things are getting hot, Ezra—brutally hot!" said Nerki, glowering. "If only I could 'get' that interfering hound, Lee, the situation might yet be saved. The kids don't matter now. It's Lee—and that fellow, Dorrimore—who do matter. They're getting the old girl round on their side. I'm losing my grip."

"But you can't do that!" said Ezra, in alarm. "I mean, just when things are coming right. You had her eating out of your hand before Christmas."

Nerki gulped down the drink, and such was his rage that he sent the glass crashing into the fender.

"Those kids!" he snarled. "I could have dealt with them! How could I possibly prepare for a man like Lee? I was in the game up to my neck before I knew that he was on the scene."

"Things broke badly, and no mistake," said Ezra gloomily.

"Now there are these others—Lord Dorrimore and that accursed nigger!" went on Nerki, in savage tones. "It's dangerous to go on, Ezra, but what else can I do? I can't draw back now—without letting the old woman know definitely, that I am a fake. I've got to go on. And in going on I stand a chance of Lee nailing me!"

Ezra was looking uncomfortable.

"There's that girl, too," he said. "You must have been pretty desperate when you grabbed her, Nerki. Don't you think it was a fool thing to do? What are you going to do with her?"

"I don't know," replied Nerki, pacing up and down. "Don't bother me with fool questions! When I 'appeared' before Lady Bowers, I told her that one of the guests would vanish. I had to keep the thing up, hadn't I? I thought she would collapse after the girl had gone—I thought she would send everybody away. But they're still there—and it's Lee's fault! My plan was to let the girl go afterwards. It wouldn't have mattered then."

"And as it is, we've got to keep her," said the other. "And that's awkward, isn't it? Seems to me, Nerki, that you've got things into a fine old mess."

There was nothing of the mystic about Professor Ivan Nerki now. He was just an ordinary man—and a very angry man at that. With all his trappings cast aside, he stood revealed as a commonplace crook.

"We shall have to think of something, that's all," he said. "I'm not admitting defeat. Perhaps those 'monster' footprints will have some effect. I don't know. I'm uncertain of everything now. With Lee searching into every hole and corner—Bah! Give me another drink!"

He gulped it down, and then told his assistant of his misadventure at Forest House.

"The man has got eyes like a lynx!" he snapped. "Actually saw two of the girl's hairs on my coat! What was the good of denying it? He can't prove anything, of course. But he knows. That's the trouble, Ezra. He knows—and he'll pry about and probe about, until he has discovered something else."

"Seems to me you've gone too far already," said Ezra, shaking his head. "It's not too late for us to bolt."

"Without the main prize?" snapped Nerki. "Not me! I'm no quitter! Where's the girl now? Sure she's all right?"

"Better come and have a look at her," said the other. "I'm hanged if I know what to do with her—now."

Nerki passed through the inner doorway, and having gone along a narrow passage, he soon turned into a small room at the back.

And here, lying on a couch, was Irene Manners. The girl was quite unharmed. She was fully dressed, and a rug had been laid over her, and she appeared to be sleeping quite peacefully.

"She's all right," said Nerki, as he gently lifted her eyelids. "The stuff won't do her any harm."

"When do you reckon she'll come round?"

"In about a couple of hours, I expect—but I shall have to give her another dose," said Nerki. "It would be fatal for her to wake up here—and find out where she is. In fact, we ought to get rid of her—take her somewhere else, in case the house is searched. I don't trust Lee."

"But he'll have to get a search warrant first," said the other.

"Don't you believe it! Lee isn't an official detective—and he doesn't use official methods," said Nerki. "He's got all those confounded boys behind him. What's to prevent them all swooping down upon this house and searching the place by force? What could we do?"

He looked at Irene again. The girl was breathing very evenly. She was, in fact, "doped"; but the stuff was quite harmless, and when she awakened she would be suffering from nothing more serious than a blinding headache.

"I tried to keep her quiet—but the little spitfire had plenty of courage," growled Nerki. "She struggled hard, and screamed, too. It was a lucky thing I got her away in time."

"It was while she was struggling, I suppose, that those hairs got on your coat?" asked Ezra. "Gosh! Lee must have sharp eyes."

"Are you surprised?" snapped Nerki. "Don't you know his reputation? Of all the men to come down to this God-forsaken spot, it has to be Nelson Lee! What do you call that for cursed luck?"

"It was a risky thing to grab this girl," said Ezra, troubled. "That's kidnapping, Nerki—and that means a long stretch. Until you did this there wasn't much against you—very little that could be proved, anyway. But it seems to me that you've gone a step too far—"

"I know it, don't I?" snarled Nerki, swinging round on him. "Shut up, you fool! I know I've made a mistake! But what am I going to do about it? Haven't I told you

that I thought things would break differently? Where's the infant?"

"Hasn't got back yet."

"He ought to have been back long ago," grumbled Nerki. "I hope nothing's happened to him. What a fool the fellow is! He needs looking after all the time."

He went across to a corner of the wall where there was no furniture—where the wall, in fact, was of bare stonework. He reached to the mantelpiece, and pulled against a projection; and, instantly, a part of the bare wall fell back, revealing a black cavity. A cold, dank draught blew upwards into his face.

"They'll never find this, anyway!" he muttered.

He pulled a powerful electric torch from his pocket, and flashed it on, and passed down some steep stone steps.

Presently, he came into a low stone chamber, and in one side of this—opposite the stairs—there was an almost circular tunnel. Nerki peered into it, flashing his torch into the depths.

"Hallo, there!" he sang out.

Then he listened intently. But no sound came in reply. And he knew from experience, that voices would carry an enormous distance in that strange tunnel.

He went back up the steps, closed the stone door, and looked at Ezra uncertainly.

"I ought to have kept my eye on him!" he said. "Until he gets back I shan't feel safe. Confound the fool! I need him, too. We've got to plan something—and it's got to be done to-night. There are still some hours of darkness left, and if only we can get a really big scare, we might win yet."

He moved towards the door, and then paused.

"You'd better stay here," he said. "Keep your eye on the girl—and give me warning the very instant she shows any sign of waking up. If she does wake up, clap that rug over her face, and hold her until I come. And when the infant returns, send him to me."

"Supposing the kid spots me before I can cover her up with the rug?" asked Ezra. "Wouldn't it be better to give her another shot of the stuff now?"

"Too risky," replied Nerki. "Do you think I want her to die on my hands? Oh, no! I'm not taking chances like that, my friend! And girls are queer cattle to play around with."

"She's all right yet," said Ezra, giving Irene another look. "You're unnerved, chief. Don't you think I'd better get you

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some hot black coffee? It'll steady you up a bit."

"All right—that's a good idea," said Nerki. "But make it quick."

They went out—and never in all their experience had they fooled any of their victims so thoroughly as one of their victims had now fooled them!

For the instant the door closed, Irene Manners sat up, her blue eyes wide open.

"Oh!" she breathed. "Queer cattle, are we? I'll remember that, Mr. Nerki!"

The girl was not only awake, but wide awake.

It had required all her nerve, all her courage, to simulate unconsciousness when Nerki had lifted her eyelids. But she had succeeded—she had fooled him.

Either she was stronger than Nerki had believed, or he had failed to give her a full dose of the drug. At all events, she had been partially recovering some minutes earlier—before the two men had come into the room. Very dazed, she had heard their earlier talk, and yet she had succeeded in remaining perfectly still, as though sound asleep. And, all the time, she was in dread, for it had been a terrible ordeal for her—to lie quiet upon that couch, and to know that two strange men were looking down upon her.

The room was in total darkness now, but Irene acted decisively. Venturing to slightly raise her eyelids when the two men had moved away from the couch, she had seen Nerki pull on the mantelpiece; and she had seen the opening of that strange stone door in the wall.

It was a way of escape!

She knew from what the two men had said that she would not be left alone for more than a few minutes. But for the black coffee she would not have been left alone at all. This would be her only chance.

Irene was exultant—if only for one reason. She overlooked the fact that she was now planning to outwit her kidnappers. She only thought of the one important fact—that she had seen Nerki as he really was. She knew now—for certain—that he was a fraud and a criminal. She had but to tell her story to Lady Bowers, and Lady Bowers could do nothing but believe it. And her eyes would be for ever opened.

Irene was plucky. In the darkness she got off the couch and stood on her feet. Then she nearly fell, for she was dizzy, and her head throbbed abominably. But, with an effort, she pulled herself together and felt her way across to the mantelpiece. She knew that there was a window in this room, and for an instant she thought of escaping by that means. But it was probably fastened—and perhaps barred. Many valuable minutes might be wasted—and then Ezra would come in and catch her red-handed. Better to use that hidden doorway.

Her slim fingers gripped the mantelpiece; she felt her way round, and her heart throbbed as she felt the stonework move. She heard a slight sound in the wall, too; and when she felt her way along the wall,

she came to the opening. She could feel the cold air blowing upon her.

She did not know what lay beyond—except that there were some stone steps, for she had heard Nerki descending. Perhaps it was only a cellar down there. But there might be a way out of it. She could not tell. She had no lights—no torch or matches. It required all her courage for her to undertake this step in the dark.

Having passed through the doorway, she felt carefully, and with a swing she closed the door. She heard something click, and her heart throbbed again. She had burned her boats now! There could be no going back.

With great caution she felt her way downwards, step after step. It seemed ages before she came to the bottom. And even then she could not tell where she was, or determine the character of this underground hole.

But, at least, she had escaped from Nerki's house; and she doubted if this black place down here was an ordinary cellar. The fact that the doorway to it was so secret looked significant.

Besides, it was too far down to be an ordinary cellar. She had lost count of the steps; and now, too, she could feel a cold, dank draught blowing mysteriously into her face. Yet it wasn't a draught. It was just a coldness in the air.

She fought against the terror which her surroundings created; she kept her head, and she displayed rare pluck and resource. She took a step forward into the darkness, feeling her way carefully. There was nothing but a blank void.

Then she suddenly halted and drew back, her heart throbbing quickly.

"This won't do!" she muttered. "I'd better keep track of the wall, or something."

She felt her way back to the steps, and then, with outstretched hands, she found the cold, damp wall close at hand. Knowing nothing of her surroundings, it would be better to keep the wall within touch. If this place was a cellar, she would ultimately work her way right round it; and by feeling carefully and by remembering just where she went, she would know whether there was another opening or not.

It was a trying ordeal.

Never had Irene known such utter darkness. It was like that of the Pyramids. A darkness so dense as to have the quality almost of being tangible. It seemed to Irene that she could feel it. It hemmed her in.

And a few seconds after she had left the stairway she lost complete track of her bearings. She knew that she came to an angle of the wall, and, stepping carefully, she edged her way onwards. But presently she had completely lost her bearings. There was only the wall at her left hand which kept her at grips, as it were, with realities.

The wall was of stone, damp and cold, and in some places slimy with the moisture. Once, when she reached above her head, she could feel nothing. She had no idea of her progress, but after a while a little sense of

panic took possession of her. She felt that she was walking on indefinitely. There were other angles. She had not the faintest idea now where she was. This cellar, or crypt, had no ending.

Then her fingers encountered nothing.

There was an opening here. The girl experienced a sense of cold, bitter disappointment. She was back at her starting place! She had made a complete circuit of the cellar, and here were the steps again. And it meant that there was no other exit.

When Nerki and his assistant discovered that she had gone they had but to come down here and she would be trapped. So her great effort to escape would come to nothing.

A sudden wild desire for light came to her. Any light, no matter how small. Even Nerki was not so terrible as this vile darkness.

She made as if to mount the stairs, but there were no stairs there.

"Oh!" breathed the girl with a catch in her voice.

For new hope had come to her. She had made a mistake. She had not made a complete circuit of the cellar, as she had at first supposed. This was no stairway, but a tunnel of some kind! By stretching her hands out, she could feel walls on either side. They appeared to be circular. When she reached up she could feel the roof, too. Yes, it was a tunnel.

And now that she had made certain of this, she could feel the faintest of draughts blowing against her face. It was from this tunnel, then, that the current of air had come. And it indicated that there must be an outlet somewhere—somewhere beyond in the black darkness.

Gathering all her courage, Irene walked on.

CHAPTER 4.

Another Disappearance.

WHEN the boys and girls arrived back in Forest House after that strange experience of the disappearing footprints, the warmth and the lights made them feel steadier.

The whole party gathered together in the great drawing-room, where a big fire was blazing, and where the lights were glowing comfortingly.

Some of the earlier terror had gone now. Most of the boys and girls were convinced that Professor Nerki was indeed a fraud; that there was nothing in this old house to be really afraid of. Nelson Lee would, sooner or later, fathom its secrets.

"I suppose it's no good suggesting that you young people go to bed again," said the detective as he looked round.

"Not a bit, sir!" went up a chorus.

"But it's an unearthly hour, you know—between three and four o'clock," said Lee. "It's most unlikely that any more 'manifestations' will happen to-night. It would be sensible of you all to get some hours of good sleep."

"But we couldn't sleep, Mr. Lee, even if we went to bed," said Doris Berkeley, her brown eyes full of trouble. "What about Irene? We must find her first!"

"Yes, rather!" said Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, we've searched the grounds, and we've been here, there, and everywhere. But the dear girl must be somewhere comparatively near."

"I'll bet Nerki took her," said Marjorie Temple with conviction.

"Absolutely! My idea exactly, old girl!" agreed Archie.

"I say. Why shouldn't we all make a raid on Nerki's house?" asked Reggie Pitt eagerly. "There are plenty of us. We could swoop down, surround the place, break the doors down, and——"

"Steady, you young ass!" interrupted Lee almost sharply. "You can't go about in the middle of the night doing things like that! It would be an unlawful act, and Nerki could lay a serious complaint——"

"But it was an unlawful act of his to kidnap Irene, sir," said Pitt.

"We have no proof that he did so," retorted Lee. "In any case, two wrongs do not make a right. No, Pitt; we mustn't put ourselves in the wrong like that. We mustn't give Nerki a lever to use against us."

"But we must do something, sir," said Nipper. "There's no doubt about Irene's disappearance; and it's just as certain that she was collared either by Nerki or some of Nerki's agents. I believe he has people working for him—just like any other conjurer."

"Anybody seen Handforth?"

Before Nelson Lee could say anything in reply to Nipper, Church and McClure came hurrying in. They were both looking worried.

"Isn't Handforth here?" asked Lee sharply.

There were some quick inquiries.

"I thought he was with Church and McClure, as we were coming in from that old burial ground," said Nipper. "When did you fellows miss him?"

"We were talking with some of the other chaps," replied Church. "And when we looked round, Handy had gone. We've been searching everywhere."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Another one disappeared!"

"Handy has been grabbed, too!"

There were all sorts of excited comments. Many of the young people felt nervous again. It seemed to them that none of them were safe. At any moment something might happen—and another of them would be spirited away.

Inquiries were quickly set afoot; the house itself was searched. But Edward Oswald Handforth was nowhere to be found.

"Now, you youngsters, there's no earthly reason why you should assume that Handforth has been kidnapped," said Lee. "We all know Handforth, don't we? We know how impulsive he is. It's any odds that he

went off alone, after getting one of his 'brain-waves.' He is very anxious about Irene, for she is a special friend of his. He'll turn up soon."

They were somewhat reassured; but that sense of uneasiness had been revived, and Nelson Lee could not quite stifle it.

BUT Nelson Lee was perfectly right. Handforth was not kidnapped; he had gone off on a lone venture.

It was a foolish thing to do—a reckless thing. But Handforth was celebrated for doing foolish and reckless things. The thought which kept drumming through his head on the way back to the house was that Irene was still missing. And Handforth had already made up his mind that Professor Nerki had kidnapped the girl. It was any odds, therefore, that Irene was being held in Nerki's own house.

If the situation had not been quite so acute, the burly schoolboy would have discussed matters with Church and McClure. But for once he was cautious. He instinctively knew that his chums would veto any plan which involved a raid upon the sorcerer's lonely house.

So Handforth did the obvious thing—and gave Church and McClure the slip.

He would go to Nerki's place alone. He had unbounded faith in his abilities as an amateur detective; he really and truly believed that he was good at it. Church and McClure were always telling him exactly the opposite, but their caustic comments on his methods always went in one ear and out at the other. Handforth said they were jealous.

"I'll show 'em!" he muttered, as he trudged through the black night. "I'll jolly well rescue Irene all on my own—and then everybody will give me a bit of credit!"

Exactly how he was going to proceed he did not know. The first thing, in any case, was to get to the mystic's house. Once there, he might be able to hit upon some plan of action. Handforth was generally lucky. It was surprising how often events turned out "just right" for him.

He was prepared to break into the house if necessary. He was in a fighting mood. And if Nerki started any of his "rot," well, Handforth had a couple of fists, and he could use them. He was sick of all this messing about, he told himself. It was time somebody did something drastic.

"By George!" he muttered.

He had turned a bend in the lonely road, and, twinkling warmly in the distance, away to the right, a gleam of light showed. It was coming from one of the windows of Nerki's house. There was nothing very remarkable about that, for Handforth knew that Nerki himself had been at Forest House not so long ago. It was quite natural that a light should be showing. But Handforth, in his present mood, regarded it as something suspicious.

"I'll bet Nerki has got poor old Irene in that spooky room of his, and he's putting

her through a sort of third degree!" he muttered fiercely. "Questioning her—examining her. That's it! Trying to find out just how much Mr. Lee knows, or suspects! Well, I'll give Nerki something to think about!"

And he instinctively clenched his fists as he broke into a run.

He was not nervous. The utter loneliness of the countryside did not worry him at all. He had no fear of anything mysterious happening to him; he was concentrating all his thought and all his energies upon his task. In some way or another, by hook or by crook, he had to get into Nerki's house.

He lost sight of the twinkling light once or twice as clumps of trees intervened. But very soon he had come out upon clear ground. And now he could see the squat house standing out against the skyline, with the trees bleak and eerie on either side. The light was glowing from a side window—for Handforth was approaching the house across the bare countryside. He had long since left the lonely road behind.

The close proximity of the house had some effect upon Handforth. Perhaps he remembered that other occasion, when he and his chums had come here in the moonlight. Many mysterious things had happened then.

But Handforth shook himself and crept on. He wasn't going to be scared with any silly trickery! He had come here of a set purpose, and he was going into action.

AND, far below the ground, Irene Manners was carefully and cautiously feeling her way forward along the mysterious tunnel.

Some of the dread fear had left her now. With every step she took she was getting farther away from her enemies. And she was beginning to hope. They had not discovered her escape yet, or they would have been on her track. They would certainly come down, and chase—

Then her thoughts took another turn.

Perhaps they would not search the tunnel at all! After all, how could they guess that she knew the secret of the stone door? What reason would they have for thinking that she knew that the door could be opened by touching a portion of the old mantelpiece? The first thing they would do, upon finding her gone, would be to look round the house—and outside, in the open. Very likely they would believe that she had run off into the night.

These thoughts gave her much encouragement. She even walked faster—although she knew that it would be dangerous to really increase her speed. There might be pitfalls in this strange old tunnel. She must go carefully.

With every step she took she felt cautiously with her small feet before venturing forward. Even the darkness had lost some of its terrors. Yet the uncertainty of the whole adventure gripped the imagination. Where did this tunnel lead to? Would she find an outlet,

or would she learn that there was no possible way of escape?

"Oh!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

For a moment she did not know whether she was dreaming or whether the darkness ahead had really changed. It seemed to her that something was glowing— Yes, there was a light, and it shifted cerily. Yet she could not see the source of the light. She only knew that the darkness was not so intense—

And then she understood.

For suddenly the light itself came into view—and she knew, earlier, it had been hidden by a bend in the tunnel. She heard sounds now—strange, shuffling sounds, as though the creature which held the light was shambling along. And Irene's heart seemed to come into her mouth.

The man who was approaching was carrying an electric torch—and the torch was held downwards, at an angle, so that the light splashed on the damp floor of the tunnel. If the man had held the torch more level, he would certainly have seen Irene's figure before now. She had halted, irresolute, hardly knowing what to do.

But she suddenly came to a decision. She must retreat! There was no possibility of this man passing her in that narrow tunnel—and the thought of encountering him terrified her.

For there was something strange, something unnatural, in that shuffling, shambling sound.

Furthermore, she fancied she could see something behind the light—something dim, vague, shapeless. And it was big. It was enormous; nearly filling the tunnel. It was as much as Irene could do to prevent herself from screaming. An unnameable terror took possession of her. She was suddenly afraid.

And yet she knew that she was foolish. Ghosts do not carry electric torches! Whoever held that light was a man—one of Nerki's assistants. Irene was well aware—she had reason to be!—that Nerki was a fraud and a crook!

Yet, in spite of this knowledge, she was unaccountably afraid. Perhaps it was the strangeness of this tunnel, and the thought of being trapped.

And even as she turned, intending to flee back into the cellar, she caught sight of something on the other side of the tunnel—something she had missed earlier, in the darkness. She had not even felt it, for her hand had been in contact with the other wall.

It was a wooden ladder!

She caught her breath in, for her quick wits had told her that here, perhaps, was a way of escape! For a ladder meant that there must be some opening in the tunnel roof. There was not a second to waste, for the man with the torch was getting perilously near. With a quick intake of breath, Irene grasped the ladder and ran lightly upwards.

Yes, there was a shaft going straight up into the solid earth—out of the tunnel. No sooner had she entered this shaft, and was safely above the roof of the tunnel itself, than

she halted, pressing herself flat against the ladder. And there she clung, hardly daring to breathe, listening to the thumping of her heart—and the shuffling sounds of the man below.

She craned her head so that she could stare down. She saw the torch go past—and, behind it, something huge, cumbersome. She thought she saw a head, but she was not sure. Whatever the thing was, it was of enormous size. Much bigger than a man. Again Irene felt strangely afraid.

And then the darkness enclosed her again. The mystery creature had gone; she listened to the shuffling footsteps as they grew fainter and fainter. The man—if it was a man—had not even seen her, or sensed her. He had walked straight on, beneath her, leaving her in that narrow shaft. The girl could scarcely believe in this extraordinary piece of good fortune. If that shaft had not been close at hand—

But there was no sense in conjecturing. She had escaped—for the moment.

And now a new hope was coming to her. What could this ladder mean? This shaft? Surely there was an opening at the top of it—and that meant a way or escape.

She climbed higher, feeling her way with excessive caution. Up and up. Would she never get to the top?

She felt the sides of the shaft pressing closer upon her. She believed that she was mounting through a circular opening, and it was of brick, or stone. Above this, however, there was no stonework. Her fingers encountered wood—rotting wood.

And she could smell the unmistakable odour of dead wood, too. Was it possible that this shaft actually led right up into a dead tree?

The very thought sent a thrill through the girl. An old hollow tree! Yes, that was it! There must be some cunning exit here, cleverly concealed— But then Irene's hopes were dashed. For, feeling above here, there was no exit at all. This shaft had a dead end.

Standing on the ladder, and feeling cautiously, her fingers encountered cold metal. She felt two rods, apparently rusty; and some flat pieces of metal, too. She tugged at them, half believing that there was some secret mechanism here.

Something clicked, and the girl found herself looking out through two strange holes, and she could see, faintly, the snow-covered ground!

CHAPTER 5.

Handforth Looks for Trouble and Finds Plenty.

PROFESSOR NERKI set his cup down and made a gesture of impatience.

"We're wasting time here," he said curtly. "Why doesn't the Infant come back? I'm getting worried about him."

"But you feel better for the coffee, don't you, chief?" asked Ezra. "You needed something to steady your nerve."

"There's that girl, too," went on Nerki, frowning. "We can't leave her here, it's too dangerous. If Lee should come nosing around—" He paused, and a new light came into his eyes. "I've got it!" he went on. "I think I know where I can put the girl—and she'll be safe there, too."

He rose abruptly to his feet, and went out of the room. It was his intention to give the fair prisoner another "shot" of drug at once, so that there would be no danger of her awakening. He went down the short passage, took a lamp from a ledge, and entered the rear room. But as he looked at the couch his jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wider.

"Say, what's this?" he demanded harshly.

The couch was occupied—but not by Irene Manners.

A man was sitting upon it, and he was yawning. He was dressed in black from head to foot, even his hands being enclosed in black, shapeless coverings. There was a kind of hood, hanging at the back of his neck—a hood which could easily be pulled over, so that his face would be concealed.

He started to his feet as Nerki appeared, and so enormous was his size that his head almost reached the ceiling. He was a giant of a man—a hulking mass of brawn and muscle. He was nearly seven feet in height, and broad in proportion; his great face was bland and childlike, however, and his eyes wide open and inoffensive. His high cheek bones told of Slav blood. He was, in fact, a Russian named Petrovitch, and he was of Cossack descent.

"I am tired, Master," he said, in his own language, and yawned again.

"Tired!" shouted Nerki, also in Russian. "What of the girl? Where is she?"

The Infant—for this giant of humanity answered to that name—looked at Nerki helplessly.

"I know not, master," he replied. "I have seen no girl."

"You big fool! She was here—on that couch!" snapped Nerki.

Petrovitch backed away, cowering visibly. He was like a great dog, in mortal fear of his master.

"How long have you been here?" asked Nerki sharply.

"I come one minute ago, master."

"And this room was empty then?"

"Yes, master."

Nerki did not doubt him. Petrovitch was too much of a child to tell lies. He was a curious mixture, this Slav giant. He possessed the strength of half a dozen ordinary men, but he was as harmless as a kitten. He would not wilfully have harmed a fly. There was not an ounce of viciousness in his whole make-up; but he was Professor Nerki's slave, and no matter what Nerki told him to do, he did. His growth had gone to muscle and brawn, leaving his brain semi-dormant. He was no half-wit, but he was as obedient as a

dumb animal. And such a man was very useful to a dealer in black magic and sorcery! Over a year ago, Nerki had picked him up in a circus, and had kept him ever since.

But not a soul in this part of the country had ever set eyes on Petrovitch. By daylight he remained indoors; and he only ventured abroad on the darkest of nights, and only when Nerki allowed him.

The giant's presence in this mystery house was suspected by none. It was of the utmost importance, indeed, that the Infant's presence here should not be known.

There was a secret room in this house which was Petrovitch's own special den. He only emerged from it when he was told. He was Nerki's slave in all things; and in fairness to Nerki it must be said that he generally treated Petrovitch kindly.

"You came up through the tunnel?" asked Nerki suddenly.

"Yes, master."

"You saw nothing suspicious?"

"No, master."

"The girl must have come round just before you arrived," muttered Nerki, his eyes aglow with alarm. "That means she escaped into the house. By this time, perhaps, she has got away. Ten thousand curses! Every one of my plans will be ruined!"

He dashed out, but suddenly turned back, and examined the window. The fastenings were intact, and it was impossible that they could have been disturbed.

He hurried out into the passage, and examined a rear door. It was bolted on the inside. He went into a kitchen, and here, too, the window was securely fastened.

"Anything wrong?" asked Ezra, coming in.

"We've got to search the house—every inch!" snapped Nerki. "That girl has gone."

"Gone!" repeated Ezra stupidly.

"She can't have got far—she's probably in the house still," went on the mystic. "Anyhow, we shall have to make a careful search, and—"

Zurrrrrrh—zurrrrrrh!

They stood silent, listening.

"The warning!" whispered Ezra.

They both knew what it meant. There were many such buzzers fitted up in this house of mystery. Somebody had trodden upon a concealed contact, giving warning of his approach. It was worked on the same principle as a shop electric bell, the contact of which is concealed beneath the door mat.

But in Nerki's case, the hidden contact was some distance from the house. There were many of them, and each buzzer had a different tone. So Nerki knew, in a moment, in which direction to look. And a prowler at this hour of the night could mean only one thing. Either Nelson Lee, or some of those confounded boys, were scouting round!

"Come!" said Nerki briefly.

Petrovitch made no move, for Nerki had spoken in English—and the "Infant" understood only Russian. Nerki and his



The black Shape swept ruthlessly down on Handforth, and held him in a powerful grip. But never for a moment in his dreadful plight, did the burly schoolboy lose his head. He fought to free himself with desperate but hopeless efforts !

assistant went to the front of the house, and, entering a dark room, Nerki opened a concealed door in the solid wall. It came inwards silently, and the two men crouched there, watching. They could see out distinctly, and there was no fear of the intruder seeing them—for this wall of the house was in dense black shadow.

Even as they watched, the figure advanced cautiously, tip-toeing. They could see it faintly.

"One of the boys," breathed Nerki into his assistant's ear.

"Shall we get him?" whispered Ezra.

"Not yet!" said the other. "Wait!"

Handforth fondly imagined that he had approached the house so silently that his movements were entirely secret. And now that he was here he scarcely knew what to do. The first thing, of course, was to get in. But how could he get in without attracting attention?

Theory and practice are two different things—as Handforth was beginning to realise. It was all very well to tell himself boldly enough, that he would come to Nerki's house, break in, and rescue Irene. But when Handforth found himself face to face with realities, he was more or less helpless. When it came to details, he realised the difficulties. He might try one of the windows, but it was any odds that all the windows of this house were protected—either by bars or by secret alarm devices.

"H'm! Looks a bit awkward," muttered Handforth, as he halted, and stared at the dark house.

He could no longer see the lighted window; he had, in fact, purposely come round to this side, in the hope of finding a way of entry. But the more he looked at the house, the less he liked it.

"By George! What about the roof?" he muttered. "There's a skylight up there!"

"Oh!" came a soft exclamation.

Handforth jumped. He spun round. Not a living soul was near him. He felt bewildered—and just a little scared. He was certain that a voice had sounded, and yet it seemed impossible. He was still some distance from the house, and standing quite in the open, with only one or two scraggy bushes near by, and the dead stump of an old tree.

"My only sainted aunt!" he ejaculated suddenly.

For he remembered that tree-stump. He remembered that he and Church and McClure had come here on one other night—and it seemed to them that they had seen the tree moving, as though endowed with some horrid life. This was the same stump!

He came to the conclusion that his imagination had been playing tricks. He gave his attention to the roof again. There was a square patch which looked as though it might be a skylight of some kind. It was difficult to tell in the gloom. But Handforth saw that two trees, at least, grew quite near the house. If he climbed one of those trees, he might be able to worm his way along one of the branches, and then get on to the roof. After that—

"Ted!"

18 THE IVORY TRAIL. Thrilling Yarn of Adventure in the African Jungle.

This time Handforth started violently. The voice was a whisper, but it was unmistakable. Irene's voice! And she had spoken his name!

He looked round, bewildered, more startled than he would have cared to admit. The voice seemed to have come out of the very air, and it was like a spirit voice, unreal, vague—

"Ted—Ted!" it sounded again. "Oh, I'm here—near you."

"Renie!" muttered Handforth, nearly choking.

He turned a complete circle, staring hard in all directions. But there was no living thing near him—not near enough, at all events, to account for the close proximity of that voice. And a wild, awful idea came to Handforth that Irene was dead—that she had been killed by the evil spirit, just as Lady Bowers had predicted—and it was her spirit speaking to him now. How else was it possible to account for the voice?

He pulled himself together with an effort.

"Fool—fathead!" he muttered fiercely. "You're going dotty! Renie Renie! Where are you?"

"Here!" came the voice. "Look—the tree!"

And then Handforth saw something which almost made his hair stand on end. One of the dead branches of the tree-trunk was moving! He believed he had seen it move once before—on that other alarming occasion. And his chief desire, now, was to bolt. There was something indescribably frightening in the sight of that inanimate thing becoming animate.

"Ted! It's a fake!" came Irene's eager voice. "Don't you understand? I'm in the tree! It's hollow!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Handforth hoarsely.

And all his terror left him. The one word "fake" had been enough. In a flood, he realised what it all meant. Nerki, or one of his assistants, must have been in that tree on the other occasion. Irene was in it now.

He moved nearer, and was even reckless enough to bring out his electric torch and flash it upon the tree.

"Oh, you've got a light!" came a thankful voice. "Thank goodness, Ted! This horrible darkness terrifies me!"

Even now Handforth found it difficult to control himself. For as he flashed his light upon that dead tree-stump, he saw two mossy knot holes. They were deep, and in their very depths he could see two eyes, and they seemed to glow in the light of his torch. And that crooked limb, too, was moving.

"Of all the horrible contrivances!" muttered Handforth.

But as he came nearer he saw that the eyes in the tree were Irene's eyes. And the girl, perched on that ladder, at the top of the underground shaft, knew the truth, too. There was no way of escape from this tree, by all appearances—but perhaps Handforth, from the outside, would be able to discover

some secret which was hidden from the girl within.

EZRA found a fierce grip upon his arm, and the wizened man winced.

"Hold on, chief—no need to hurt me!" he muttered, trying to free himself.

"Don't you understand?" asked Nerki, his mouth against the man's ear. "You heard the girl's voice, didn't you? Look! That infernal boy is against the tree—flashing his light upon it!"

"She's in there!" muttered Ezra, bewildered. "But how could she—"

"Never mind how!" interrupted Nerki. "I can only think of one explanation. While you and I were talking—while we thought the girl to be helpless—she must have had all her wits about her. She saw me move that mantelpiece, and thus she knew the secret of the tunnel. That's how she escaped. No need for us to search any further."

"You—you mean—"

"Come!"

Nerki closed the unseen door, and they both went back towards the rear of the house. And now the mystic was looking exultant.

"That confounded boy has played right into our hands!" he muttered. "We can get hold of him and keep him a prisoner as well as the girl."

"There might be other kids about," said Ezra shrewdly.

"Yes! I'd forgotten that!" snapped Nerki. "Wait here! I was a fool to leave so soon."

He hurried back to the front, and this time he crept right out, moving in the darkness with the silence of a Red Indian. He wanted to make sure that Handforth had no companions. And the unsuspecting Handforth played right into his hands.

INEARLY had a fit when I heard your voice at first," Handforth was saying in a breathless whisper. "Oh, Renie!

It's jolly good to know that you're unharmed, anyway! But what are you doing in this wretched tree?"

"I didn't know it was a tree at first," replied Irene, from within. "I'm in a shaft—there's a ladder, and it leads right down into an underground tunnel."

"My goodness!"

"I can't tell you everything now—it would take too long," went on the girl. "I don't think there's any way out of this tree. It's just a fake, and I expect Nerki uses it to scare people. There are some levers in here. One of them opens the eye-spots, and another works something else."

"Yes—the branches," replied Handforth. "I saw one of them moving."

"I don't know how you can get in, but there's a room at the back of the house," went on Irene. "I was carried into that room after the men had captured me. They drugged me, I think, but I came to myself before they expected."

"The beasts—the brutes!" panted Handforth. "By George! They shall pay for this!"

"You mustn't speak so loud," warned Irene. "Listen! There's a knob on the mantelpiece in that back room—and when you pull on it the secret door opens. You can get to me in that way—by going down into the tunnel."

"I'll be with you in no time," promised Handforth.

"But you can't—it's too dangerous!" urged the girl. "Isn't there anybody else with you?"

"No; I came alone."

"Oh, that was reckless of you, Ted!"

"I don't care—I was getting fed up," said Handforth. "I knew jolly well that I could find you. And I have. I've found you without any help at all."

Irene had not the heart to mention that he had found her by accident. In fact, it was more correct to say that she had found him.

"But you didn't tell anybody you were coming here?" she asked.

"No fear! I didn't tell a soul!" replied Handforth—and Nerki was listening to every word. "If I'd said anything they would have stopped me. This is a lone hand I'm playing. It won't take me long to get into that back room and find that tunnel—"

"You mustn't, Ted," urged Irene in alarm. "Oh, I wish I hadn't spoken to you now! I didn't realise that you were here all by yourself. Promise me that you'll go back to Forest House and get Mr. Lee. Get help! It's the only safe way."

"And while I'm gone these crooks will find out that you have slipped them, and they'll capture you again!" retorted Handforth. "Not much! It's up to me to rescue you, Renie, and I'm going to do it!"

Nerki waited for no more. He had heard enough. Like a shadow he crept back, and, within the house, he gave his orders. Petrovitch obediently slipped away. Nerki himself and Ezra went down into the mysterious tunnel.

And outside, Handforth was wasting valuable time in unnecessary talk.

"It's no good, Renie—you can't stop me!" he said. "You're in danger, and I'm going to save you."

"But, please, Ted," urged the girl. "They haven't really hurt me—and there's not one chance in a thousand that they will find me here up this shaft. They won't even suspect that I got into the tunnel. I don't mind staying here for half an hour. Nerki is a dangerous man—"

"And yet you say that he won't hurt you."

"I mean, he is a criminal, and he has been tricking Archie's aunt," said Irene. "If he had mean to hurt me he would have hurt me before now. And you can easily get back to the house and give the warning—"

"Sorry, old girl, but I'm not going to waste time like that," broke in Handforth. "So-long! I'll be seeing you soon. I want to find out where that tunnel leads to. I'm

going to solve this mystery on my own—and then I shall have the laugh on Mr. Lee and the others."

"Oh, Ted, don't be so foolish!" said Irene. "Please—for my sake! I ask you to go back for the others—"

She broke off abruptly—so abruptly that Handforth felt that something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked.

And then a scream came from within the tree—and never in his life had Handforth felt so hopeless.

"Oh! Something is pulling at my foot!" came Irene's anguished cry. "Ted—Ted! Help! Something is pulling me down—"

Within the tree, Irene was indeed terrified. Suddenly, dramatically, a hand had closed round one of her slim ankles. And she was being pulled downwards. Craning her head, she could see a light below, and on the ladder there was another figure—just beneath her.

"It's no good, young lady—you'd better come quietly," said Nerki's mocking voice. "There's no outlet at the top. Will you come obediently, or shall I drag you down? It might hurt—and I really don't want to hurt you."

Thud, thud, thud!

Handforth, in his helplessness, was hammering upon the outside of the dead tree.

"Ted!" cried Irene. "It's Nerki! He has got me!"

"Shout away!" came Nerki's voice. "Your young friend cannot help you. But you'll see him again soon. He will join us very shortly."

Handforth, outside, was almost in a frenzy. He could guess what was happening—in fact, he knew. Irene's cries had been eloquent. He turned, intending to make his way to the back of the house and smash his way in.

And then, as he was in the act of running, he checked. There was something in front of him—bearing down upon him. Something huge and terrible.

At first Handforth did not realise that it was the figure of a man. It was so vast. And it came at him with whirling arms—a thing of absolute blackness. He was black all over, even to the face. And in that gloom Handforth could be forgiven for believing, in the first seconds, that it was some vile creature from another world.

It swept upon him, enveloping him. He felt the grip of mighty hands—and at the first touch he knew that this thing was nothing supernatural.

In fact, he could hear the man's deep breathing.

"You—you fake!" panted Handforth, as he fought desperately. "Let me go! I'm not scared of you or Nerki, or all your rotten tricks!"

But he was startled, nevertheless. For, strong as he was, he found that he could do nothing against this mighty assailant. He punched, but his blows seemed to strike against something solid. The great man uttered a soft laugh, and the next moment Handforth was lifted completely off his feet. With his arms and legs wildly writhing, he

was held as helpless as an ordinary man holds a chicken.

As he struggled again, he was pulled round and drawn close against the chest of the giant. And there he was held, half-stifled, so that he could utter no outcry.

Petrovitch, laughing softly, strode towards the house.

And every atom of the eerie atmosphere had now gone; Handforth was in a world of grim realities. He had come to this place to do big things—and he had not only got himself captured by the enemy, but, through his folly, he had told the enemy how Irene had escaped. And Irene herself was now once again in the enemy's hands!

It was a pretty ugly state of affairs.

And Handforth was bewildered by his helplessness. He had never known a man to be as strong as this, or as big, either. But he was beginning to see daylight. This monster-man was another of Nerki's assistants—and vaguely Handforth began to see daylight in many directions. But he was far too flustered just then to think clearly.

At last he found himself in that back room, and Petrovitch, with the utmost calmness, and quite good humour, proceeded to place ropes round Handforth's ankles and to bind his wrists behind his back. Handforth was aghast. He began to appreciate the feelings of a rabbit in the hands of a human being.

And his wretchedness was increased soon by the sound of voices and by the sight of Irene Manners being forced into the room.

"So they got you, Ted," said the girl with regret. "I was afraid they would."

"It was all my own silly fault!" groaned Handforth. "If I had had my wits about me, I could have escaped—yes, and fetched Mr. Lee, and everything. You knew what to do. But I was so pigheaded that I ignored your advice."

"The less talk from you two, the better," said Nerki bluntly. "Now you needn't be frightened—"

"Who's frightened?" growled Handforth, glaring.

"I'm not going to do you any harm," continued Nerki. "But you can be useful to me—and you're going to be. I'm going to keep you both here."

"Suits me!" retorted Handforth recklessly. "By this time Mr. Lee and the others will have missed me—and they'll guess that I came here. They've only got to search this house—"

"And they will find nothing," interrupted Nerki. "Oh, no, my young friend! I am not quite so careless! You and this young lady will be placed beyond the reach of your friends. I can only hope that your captivity will be brief. It all depends."

He moved across to Petrovitch, who was looking as bland and as good-humoured as ever. The Infant, in fact, appeared to regard the whole affair as a kind of parlour game.

Nerki poked to the Russian giant at some length—in Petrovitch's own language. And

the big man nodded and smiled and nodded again.

Handforth's ropes were unbound from his ankles, although his arms remained secured. Then he and Irene were marshalled by Petrovitch through the secret door—and taken down into that tunnel. Nerki himself closed the door.

"Now we are safe!" he said, his eyes gleaming. "Let Lee come! Let him search the house! Those two youngsters are the only ones who know of the secret door—and with them in my hands I am safe."

"But what are you going to do with them?" asked Ezra uneasily.

"Don't look so scared, you fool!" replied Nerki. "The boy had to be seized—after what he had discovered. Now we must get busy. Other members of that Christmas party must vanish—silently, mysteriously."

"You're mad!" said Ezra, in alarm.

"Yes—mad with disappointment!" snapped Professor Nerki. "Do you think I'm going to be beaten at the post? If I can only cause two or three more of those youngsters to 'vanish,' the rest will get into a panic. And, once they have gone—once I can get Lady Bowers to herself—the rest will be easy. We've got to make a last effort, Ezra, and if we can only 'click,' we can do the vanishing act ourselves. The old girl is ripe for plucking."

CHAPTER 6.

Watchers in the Hall.

NELSON LEE had succeeded in persuading the girls to take possession of the drawing-room. They flatly refused to go back to bed. But in the drawing-room, with all the lights full on, and a great fire blazing, they recovered some of their normal confidence. But the continued absence of Irene distressed them greatly.

Nipper and Reggie Pitt and Travers and the other fellows joined the girls at first; but presently they drifted out, remarking that it would be better for them to remain on the watch.

As a matter of fact, Nipper had sent the word round. They were wanted. Lee was intent upon some sort of activity.

The great detective was convinced that something else would happen before the dawn came—and he wanted to be ready. The boys found him in the big dining-room, talking earnestly with Lord Dorrimore. Umlosi was there, too, but for once the redoubtable Kutana chief was not happy. This kind of "fighting" did not appeal to him.

"Anything fresh about Handy, sir?" asked Church anxiously.

"Never mind Handy," replied Nelson Lee. "By all appearances, Handy has been whisked away by the mysterious elemental which haunts this old house," he added, with an eloquent wave of his hands, and an even more eloquent note of mockery in his voice,

"We're dealing with a clever man—and a man, moreover, who is now becoming quite desperate."

"You mean Nerki, of course, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"Nerki is the villain of the piece," agreed Lee calmly. "I'm not sure that we are not safe in talking in this room—but we must chance it. Now, I am convinced that the secret of the old house lies in the hall."

"But we have explored the hall from top to bottom," put in Lord Dorrimore. "At least, you have, Lee. You've examined every panel, an' tapped every flagstone, an' measured up the walls, and you've proved that there's no possibility of a secret chamber, or anythin' of that sort."

"I've also proved, Dorrie, that the 'manifestations' either occur in the hall, or start in the hall," replied Lee. "I have had sealed threads on all the doors—across all the corridors and the staircase. I have protected every known entry and exit. And strange things have happened in the hall, in the darkness. And yet the sealed threads have remained intact. That proves one of two things—firstly, that Forest House is genuinely haunted by a dangerous evil spirit; or, secondly, that there is some cleverly concealed doorway into the hall. I prefer to believe the latter."

Lee was speaking in a very low voice, and the boys had gathered closely round him. They had the feeling, then, that even walls can have ears.

"What are we going to do now, sir?" whispered Travers eagerly.

"We are going to drift out into the hall, and I am going to get impatient with you," replied Lee. "I'm going to advise you to go to bed—yes, and the girls, too. But once the lower part of the house is left in darkness, half a dozen of you boys will creep downstairs."

"That sounds good, sir," said Pitt.

"I don't need more than six of you, so you must fight it out between yourselves," continued Lee. "Dorrie and Umlosi and I will creep down, too. There will be nine of us on the watch—stationed in different positions in the hall. If anything further happens to-night, it will happen there. And we must be ready."

The boys were thrilled. Here was a chance of making some big discovery—of being in the excitement.

"Once you are in your positions, you must not move under any pretext," went on Nelson Lee. "Make no sound or give no signal—until you receive a sign from me. That sign will be the sudden flashing of my electric torch. Then, and not until then, can you move. And be ready for instructions. I'm telling you all this now because it is unwise to discuss anything of a private nature in the hall itself. And when we go out into the hall, I will indicate to you boys just where I want you to stand. Now, who will volunteer?"

They all did. Nelson Lee had some little difficulty in selecting the six he required. In the end the watchers were—Nipper, Pitt, Travers, Church, McClure and Archie.

THE little comedy was quickly played.

Nelson Lee, in an impatient voice, advised the boys to go to bed. The girls were brought out of the drawing-room, and they, too, were treated to a sample of the detective's acidity.

"This is sheer nonsense—all of you!" he said sharply. "Do you realise that it is just upon four o'clock? Nothing further will happen to-night. Get back to bed, and have some sound sleep."

"But it doesn't get light before seven, sir," said Nipper. "Not even then, at this time of the year. There are three hours of darkness yet, and anything is likely to happen in this house."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Nonsense!" snapped Lee. "I want you all to go to bed. There has been quite enough disturbance to-night."

So, at length, they all went trooping upstairs. Lee, by various signs, had indicated to the six where they were to stand. And presently, after there had been a good deal of talking in the upper corridors, and closing of doors, the lights were all extinguished; and stillness and silence descended upon the mansion.

But, like shadows in the darkness, figures were creeping downstairs. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were the first. They took up their positions in absolute silence. And it was not long before they heard the boys creeping down. Not a whisper was exchanged. Every boy knew his own station, and he went to it unerringly.

Four o'clock boomed out as the boys were taking their places, and the sound seemed uncannily loud amid all that silence. The gongs vibrated and reverberated strangely. It seemed ages before the vibrations completely died away, leaving the silence more solid than ever.

The minutes ticked away.

Now and again a mysterious creak would sound—perhaps from the floor, perhaps from one of the walls, or from the staircase. The darkness was so intense that the watchers, standing motionless, and straining their eyes, could see nothing. And it wasn't long before the boys, at least, began to feel the effects. It was a nerve-trying ordeal.

Tick-tock! Tick-tock! Tick-tock!

The solemn ticking of the grandfather's clock, at first a part of the silence itself, seemed to obtrude like something tangible. Nipper, who was nearest the clock, could even hear the creaking and occasional squeaking of the centuries-old works.

Once the others believed that they heard the tiny sounds of a faint scuffle—and perhaps a muffled exclamation. But there came no signal from Lee! And as there was no repetition of the sound, there seemed to be

nothing to worry about. One of the watchers, perhaps, had smothered a sneeze, or the explanation was equally trifling.

"Good gad!"

It was an audible murmur from Archie Glenthorne, and the others thought perhaps, that something was happening on that side of the hall. Something was. Archie had felt, rather than seen, the presence of a figure quite near him. The next second two strong hands gripped his shoulders, and a voice whispered in his ear.

"Be quiet, you young ass! Not a sound!"

Archie was relieved to recognise Lee's whisper.

"Sorry, sir!" he breathed. "Didn't know it was you. I saw a frightful shape— At least—"

"That'll do!" whispered Lee. "Stick to your post, Archie."

So silently did Nelson Lee move about that nobody else knew of his activities. But the detective was busy. Like a shadow in the darkness, he was slipping from door to door, stretching threads across them and sealing the threads. He was, in fact, making certain that nothing material could enter the hall by any of the recognised openings. He had not been able to do this earlier, for he wished the enemy to believe—if the enemy was watching or listening—that the hall was empty. Lee did not want Nerki to know that any special precautions had been taken. So he flitted about, sure-footed, his hands ever active.

Whirr - whirr! Thud-thud!

The old clock was preparing to strike the quarter. As a preliminary, it made all sorts of peculiar sounds, as such grandfather's clocks will. Then came the chiming of the gong, and after that—silence.

But it seemed to some of the motionless watchers that there had been other sounds. The faintest of faint scuffles, and again a muffled exclamation. But as the vibrations of the gong died away, the silence was resumed. It was difficult, in that blackness, to tell if anything unusual was happening. Every tiny sound was exaggerated. The watchers were finding some difficulty, even, in controlling their breathing. Every one felt that his own breathing was idiotically loud.

At last Nelson Lee had completed his work, and he returned to his own station. And here

he remained perfectly still, his ears on the stretch. A slight wind was moaning outside, and, occasionally, it would come flurrying against the windows, causing the old casements to rattle.

It was a lonely, eerie vigil.

But nothing happened—at least, nothing that any of the watchers could see. And after an interminable age, it seemed there again came the whirring and thudding of the clock.



Even as
fusilade

The half-hour chimed.

Lord Dorrimore was frankly fed up. He had kept night vigils in many parts of the world—in festering jungles, in dense forests; but never had he experienced such a nerve-trying ordeal as this. As he afterwards said, he would rather have been surrounded by a howling mob of cannibals than go through such an ordeal again. All the watchers, in fact, would have welcomed some dramatic happening. The continued silence, the absence of anything definitely uncanny, was a sore trial to the nerves.

Those watchers in the hall were waiting for things to happen—they believed, indeed, that something had happened—but in the darkness

they could not be sure. They could only wait. And their minds, meanwhile, were conjuring up all sorts of fantastic things. At any moment some heavy article of furniture might lift itself from the floor, and crash against the wall. Such things had happened previously—so why not now? If there was really a ghost in this house, there could be no better opportunity for manifesting itself.

But Nelson Lee, for one, was grimly certain

Suddenly, the light from Nelson Lee's torch flashed out—and the others heaved universal sighs of relief.

"It seems," said Lee, with regret, "that we are wasting our time. Sorry it has been a frost, Dorrie. Nipper, switch on the main lights, will you?"

But no reply came from Nipper.

Lee flashed his torch about, and he saw Archie blinking; he saw Church and McClure and Umlosi—

"In Heaven's name, what is this?" shouted Lee, his voice acute with alarm.

He dashed at the switches and rammed them down. The hall became flooded with dazzling light.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore, staring.

He saw Lee by the switches; he saw Umlosi—and Church and McClure and Archie. But he saw none of the others.

"They've gone!" gasped Church, his voice sounding shrill with alarm. "Nipper and Pitt and Travers! They've gone!"

It was a fact.

Three of the watchers, during that vigil in the darkness, had completely vanished! The other boys were almost panic-stricken, but Nelson Lee ran forward, and he was angry and impatient.

"Keep your heads!" he commanded curtly. "There's nothing mysterious in this. It's impossible! Nipper and the other boys must have gone upstairs, or down one of the corridors. Anyhow, we shall soon be certain."

"Why do you say that?" asked Dorrie.

"Because I stretched threads across every doorway—and across the staircase!" snapped Lee. "Those

boys could not have left this hall without breaking the threads. For goodness sake keep calm."

But even Lee himself, a minute later, was far from calm. He had gone round to his sealed threads—and he had found every one intact!

"But—but this is impossible!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "The boys have gone—and they could not have left the hall by any of the ordinary means. They must inevitably have broken the threads."

"It was the ghost!" screamed McClure wildly. "We were all wrong about tricksters, Mr. Lee! This house is really haunted! Three more chaps have been spirited away!"



his confederate made a desperate rush for their car, a deadly
s caught them. Whiz! Whiz! Thud! Archie's Christmas
sts had run the crooks to earth at last!

that no such manifestation would take place. Ghosts—particularly faked ghosts—preferred to operate when their victims were not alert. There were too many people in the hall for anything tricky to be attempted. Anything in the nature of smashing furniture, at all events. Lee had half an idea that something else would happen. But the silence was maintained, the ticking of the clock was as monotonous as ever. The gusts of wind, striking the old casements, caused them to rattle and shake. But within the hall itself there was—nothing. The fire had long since died down, and there was not even a glow from it now. At times a faint crackle would come, as the contracting ashes would break.

"Hold that boy!" said Lee angrily. "McClure, have you gone mad?"

McClure, usually so steady, so dour, had rushed to the front door, and was tearing at the bolts.

"Let me out—let me out!" he shouted. "I'm not going to stay in this house another minute!"

"Good gad! I'm off, too!" gasped Archie. "I've had enough! The bally place is haunted!"

Footsteps sounded from the landing. Lady Bowers herself appeared, agitated, trembling.

"Oh! What is happening now?" she asked tremulously. "Mr. Lee! I warned you——"

"What's wrong?"

"Has anything fresh happened?"

"Oh, tell us—tell us!"

Some of the other fellows, and most of the girls, were crowding on the landing now, and everybody was shouting at once.

"It's Nipper—and Pitt and Travers!" shouted Church, staring up. "They've gone!

We were—we were watching in the hall, here, and everything was dark. And in the darkness they vanished! They couldn't have got away by any ordinary means. They were seized by the ghost!"

Nelson Lee stood helpless. The panic was spreading. It was running through the young guests like a fever.

"Wait—wait!" shouted the detective. "There may be some logical explanation——"

But nobody would listen to him. Already, the panic was getting beyond his control. The young people were dashing downstairs, almost fighting one another in their frantic efforts to get out of this house of mystery and horror.

CHAPTER 7.

Panic!

IT was a startling scene—even a painful scene.

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But now, after this long night of uncertainty and terror, they could no longer keep control. They went rushing out into the night, their one desire being to reach the open air. They wanted to get out of the atmosphere of Forest House.

And who could blame them?

First of all, Irene Manners had vanished in mysterious circumstances. Then Handforth—and, after Handforth, three more! All had gone mysteriously, uncannily, without leaving a trace. The last three had vanished within arm's length, almost, of their companions. Small wonder that the rest took fright.

The exodus was complete. Not a boy or girl was left in the house after the first panic-stricken rush. All of them had gone rushing out, and many, indeed, would have run until they were exhausted, but the others, restored somewhat by the cold night air, took a grip on themselves. So, at length, they were all standing out on the drive, in the snow—within sight of the flood of light which streamed out from the open doorway.

And there they stood, in a great crowd, shivering, talking hysterically, the boys doing their best to calm the girls. It was not, in fact, a particularly brave show.

"Boys! Girls!" shouted Nelson Lee, coming out on the steps. "You must not behave like this. There is no sense in—"

"It's no good, sir—we're not coming back!" shouted Watson.

"Absolutely not!" declared Archie. "I mean to say, I was the chappie who brought everybody here, and I thought it was a priceless sort of game. But I was a chump. We're going to Fordingbridge, sir—back to that hotel, where we stayed at first. We shall be safe enough there."

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's be going!"

"Yes, yes."

They were all very much excited; and their chief desire, it seemed, was to bolt. Even now, after they had got out into the open, they had not recovered their balance.

Nelson Lee was looking angry and exasperated; once or twice he looked at Dorrie in a helpless sort of way, for he could see that the young people were determined.

"What's next?" asked Dorrie.

"We shall have to let them go, I suppose," replied Nelson Lee, with an impatient shrug. "It's idiotic, at this hour of the morning. The people in Fordingbridge will wonder what on earth is the matter. There'll be rumours—stories will get about—this house will get a more sinister reputation than ever."

"Well, it's no good kickin'," said his lordship. "The kids have made up their minds. You can glare at me if you like, but I don't blame them."

"But, man alive, you don't seem to understand—" Lee paused, compressing his lips. "All right! They can go!" he said curtly. "And you'll oblige me, Dorrie, by going with them."

"Here, I say—"

"I mean it!" broke in Lee. "I'm not going to have those hysterical youngsters walking through the night by themselves. You take charge of them, please—and you'd better let Umlosi go with you, too. This affair is getting on my nerves. I'm tired of it."

"Well, you're not the only one," retorted Dorrie, with some heat.

All their nerves were getting on edge, apparently. Lord Dorrimore motioned to Umlosi, and they both went out into the night. The boys and girls, who had heard some of that dialogue on the steps, were not feeling too comfortable, judging by the looks they exchanged. But they said nothing. Perhaps they were glad that Dorrie and Umlosi were to accompany them.

"And you, Mr. Lee?" asked a cold voice.

Nelson Lee swung round on the doorstep. He was watching the crowd as it went off into the darkness of the night. Lady Bowers was standing in the middle of the now deserted hall; and she made a dignified figure. Her face was set with unusual determination.

"I am remaining here, Lady Bowers," said Lee, turning abruptly.

"Not against my wish, surely?" asked her ladyship. "Need I remind you, sir, that you and I are now entirely alone in this house? There is not a servant with us—not another guest. Even my nephew, in spite of his protestations of yesterday, has gone."

"They are young—susceptible—imaginative," replied Lee, making excuses. "Perhaps I expected too much of them. Well, Lady Bowers, they have gone. You and I remain. I hope you will permit me to stay in this house, so that I may afford you the protection—"

"No, Mr. Lee, you are quite wrong," interrupted her ladyship. "It is more likely that you will bring danger to this house—and you have already brought it. I shall be far better protected if you go."

"But I cannot go," insisted Lee, almost sternly. "There are the young people who have disappeared—"

"You will never find them," said Lady Bowers tragically. "Oh, Mr. Lee, when will you believe? With your materialistic ideas; with your fantastic stories of trickery, you have brought disaster upon my poor home. One innocent girl, and four equally innocent boys, have fallen victims to the deadly earth-bound phantasm which haunts this house. You will never see them again. Their parents will never see them again—and that thought horrifies me. You may search, you may tear the house down, and rip open its foundations—but you will find nothing. Those poor young people have been carried off and out of this world."

Nelson Lee looked at her hard.

"In Heaven's name, Lady Bowers, you cannot really believe that," he said earnestly.

"I do not merely believe it—I know it!" said her ladyship. "It is a dreadful, dreadful tragedy. Did not Nerki warn me? Oh, I was a fool not to heed him! Nerki knows!

He always knows! His wisdom is infinite."

She broke off, and before Nelson Lee could say anything, she pointed to the open door.

"Go!" she went on. "Go now, Mr. Lee! And, I beg of you, do not return."

"You will at least permit me to come with the daylight, and——"

"No! Never come near this house again!" she broke in. "And, I beg of you, see to it that nobody comes to this house during the next thirty-six hours. Let me be alone—so that I may meditate in peace. A day and a night of solitude may appease the spirits, and bring an atmosphere of repose, once again to this house of tragedy."

Nelson Lee shrugged.

"Very well, Lady Bowers," he said quietly. "It is your house, and in face of your wishes I cannot remain."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode out into the night.

AND Professor Ivan Nerki, in a strange chamber underground, uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He had earphones fixed to his head—and he had heard every word that had passed in the hall of Forest House.

"Success!" he breathed. "They have gone! All of them—including Lee himself!"

He had heard every word of that conversation between Lady Bowers and Nelson Lee; he had heard the boys and girls saying that they were going to Fordingbridge. That last "stunt" had brought complete and overwhelming success.

Forest House was left deserted—save, only, for Lady Eustacia Bowers. And this was what Nerki had been planning for days.

His success had come late, and he had five prisoners on his hands—but, if he played his cards carefully, he would still be able to achieve a partial, if not complete success.

So sensitive were the microphones that he distinctly heard Lady Bowers closing the front door; he heard the clicks as the hall lights were switched off; he heard Lady Bowers' footsteps as she ascended the stairs.

Not until then did Nerki remove the earphones.

He turned and looked at the strange scene. The apartment and its contents provided a queer contrast; for this place was a centuries' old underground crypt—a long-forgotten bolt-hole or dungeon. The roof was arched, and in places there were crumbling stone pillars.

But overhead hung electric lights; there was an iron ladder leading upwards against one of the walls. A low tunnel showed, with other lights gleaming in the roof. And there was a bench, containing odd-looking electrical contrivances, with switches, dials and levers. In one of these valves were glowing.

And in a row, with their backs to the wall, sat four boys and a girl. Their ankles were bound, and their hands were tied behind their backs, and fastened to iron rings in the wall. As if this was not sufficient security, the giant Petrovitch sat on a great stool, nearby, watching. In the full light from

the electricity, there was nothing fearful in the appearance of the Infant. He was, on the contrary, beaming with good nature. This enormous Russian with the body of a giant, and the mind of a child, was, indeed, one of the most harmless of men—and, by nature, one of the most kindly and likeable. A queer mixture and more to be pitied than blamed. Actually, he had done no wrong; he was merely Nerki's slave.

"Well, my fine young people, I don't think your captivity will be of any great length," said Nerki, as he surveyed his prisoners. "I am sorry to keep you like this, in such discomfort——"

"You needn't be a humbug as well as a crook!" growled Handforth, glaring.

"You're not sorry at all—and you know it. This is just what you were aiming for, isn't it?"

"Well, since you are my prisoners, and there is no hope of escape for you, I might as well be frank," said Nerki. "You know me now for what I am——"

"We knew you for what you are all along," said Nipper. "We knew it when we first grabbed you—even before the party started."

Nerki frowned.

"I hope, for your own sakes, that it will not be necessary to keep you here for long," he said. "It all depends upon Lady Bowers. After what has happened, I think she will be reasonable."

"You mean you're going to rob her, you swindling faker!" said Nipper. "What fools we were to allow ourselves to be grabbed in the dark——"

"No! Don't put the blame on yourselves," said Nerki. "Rather, give me the credit for being clever. However, I cannot waste time by talking to you."

He turned abruptly and walked across to the infant.

"You will stay here, Petrovitch, and you will watch the prisoners," he said in Russian.

"I will stay, master," replied Petrovitch, smiling.

"See that they do not trick you."

"Master, I am big, and I am strong," said the Russian. "If you say they shall not leave this room, then they shall not leave."

"I am trusting you," said Nerki. "Later on you can feed them—but feed them one at a time, and do not let them have the use of more than one hand. I am taking no chances with the youngsters."

"I obey, master," said the Infant.

And Professor Nerki, with a nod, passed out of the crypt and went along the tunnel.

And presently he came to those stone steps which led up to the back room of his own lonely home. He found Ezra waiting—an anxious and frightened Ezra.

"What has happened?" he asked. "You have been a long time, chief."

"The best has happened," replied Nerki briskly. "Lee and all his infernal brood have gone. The house is empty, save for the old girl. It's my chance, Ezra."

As he talked he went through into the other room—that room with the black-domed roof with the Zodiac signs.

"But what are you going to do now?" asked Ezra.

"Get the papers ready for me," replied the other. "I must fix on another beard—make myself as presentable as ever. I can think of some excuse to offer the old lady. She'll follow anything. I'm going back to Forest House, and I'm going to clinch this 'deal' before daylight comes."

"But I don't understand——"

"And who wants you to understand?" snapped Nerki. "I tell you this thing must be put through at once. The banks are open to-day, aren't they? You and I must be in Southampton as soon as the banks open—before Lee can get to know what has happened. All we need is a good start—and we shall get it."

And that little speech proved that Professor Ivan Nerki was a dead failure as a "seer" into the future.

CHAPTER 8.

Nelson Lee in Action.

WHEN Nelson Lee left Forest House he did not go far.

Half-way down the drive he turned aside, skirting some laurel bushes, and came to a halt behind the sheltered bulk of a big holly-tree. A dim figure was standing there, waiting.

"You haven't been long," said a soft voice.

"No; I got away quite easily," replied Lee. "How are you feeling, Dorrie?"

"Cold," said his lordship promptly.

"We'll soon remedy that, for we're going into action," said Lee, and there was a grim note in his voice. "Upon my word, it's time, too! It distresses me deeply to see such a charming lady so completely duped. That's the worst of it, Dorrie—Lady Bowers is absolutely in earnest. She believes all this twaddle. She actually thinks that the youngsters are dead, and their remains will never be found. She believed the house to be haunted by an earth-bound spirit. She thinks that Nerki is the most wonderful man on earth."

"It'll give a big shock when her eyes are opened, won't it?" asked Dorrie dubiously.

"The bigger the shock, the better," retorted Lee. "It's just what she needs—a confoundedly big jolt. I'm hoping that it will knock all this nonsense out of her for good. At heart, she is a sensible woman—a charming woman. And if it's within my power, I'm going to bring her back to normal before daylight comes."

"By puttin' a spoke into Nerki's wheel, I suppose?" asked Dorrie.

"Yes, by exposing him completely, and by providing Lady Bowers with such proof that even her reinforced steel armour will be pierced. What about the boys and girls?"

"They went off—accordin' to plan—all mightily excited."

"And Umlosi?"

"He's with them."

"I'm glad of that—he'll be useful," said Lee. "By Jove, Dorrie, it worked well, didn't it? Those youngsters did that panic stunt perfectly."

"So perfectly that at one time I half-believed that they really were in a panic," replied his lordship. "You're a cunnin' old fox, Lee! All the same, I've got to hand it to you. You're workin' this thing famously, an' it looks like ending up in a hot climax."

"It'll do that all right, for, if I'm not much mistaken, Nerki will lose no time in playing his trump card," said Lee. "He heard everything I said to Lady Bowers, I am convinced—and he will take action at once."

"You don't think he'll do her any harm?"

"Oh, no—he's not that sort!" replied Lee. "There's nothing violent about Nerki. But he's cunning and tricky, and he means to rob her to the full extent of his power. He knows that I suspect him, and his one thought now is to grab all he can and bolt."

"Even now I'm in a bit of a muddle," complained his lordship. "How were those kids grabbed in the hall?"

"Come with me, and I'll show you," replied Lee briskly.

They went towards the house silently, for Nelson Lee was taking no chances. The great detective had been serving Professor Nerki with some of his own medicine; he had been playing trick for trick. And it was an undoubted fact that he had succeeded in fooling Nerki up to the eyes.

Nerki believed that the boys and girls had fled in panic, and that Nelson Lee and Dorrie had gone with them.

Never had Nerki made a great mistake!

That panic had been carefully organised—by Lee. The word had been whispered round from boy to boy and from girl to girl. Each one had known what to do—and each one had done his or her part splendidly. It was Nelson Lee's way of unmasking the trickster.

Lee had little fear that his movements would now be under observations. Nerki was satisfied—and Nerki was busy with other things.

The detective and his companion walked silently round the empty terrace until they came to the French windows of the drawing-room. Lee had purposely left these only half-latched. It was a moment's work for him to slip the latch, and he and Dorrie entered. They closed the French windows, and then, without showing any light, crept across the soft carpet.

A minute later they were in the dark hall.

Everything was silent and still. Lee boldly flashed his electric torch on, and after listening carefully for some moments, he nodded.

"The coast is quite clear, I think," he whispered. "Come and look here, Dorrie, and I'll show you the secret."

His lordship was intrigued. For he, too, had searched the hall; with Lee, he had gone over every inch of the walls and flooring, and nothing unusual had been discovered.

But now Nelson Lee led the way over to the heavy grandfather's clock.

"You don't mean that?" asked Dorrie, staring.

"I do."

"Good glory! I remember seeing something like it in a play—'Raffles,' I think it was—"

"My dear Dorrie, that was merely a stage effect," said Nelson Lee. "Any cursory examination would have revealed the door. But I will defy you to discover the secret of this clock here. And, in case of accidents, keep your voice down to a whisper."

Lord Dorrimore watched fascinatedly. The clock, to all appearances, was an extra large instrument of conventional type. Owing to the loftiness of the hall, and the wide stretch of the wall against which it stood, its real size was not at first apparent. It was dwarfed by its surroundings. In an ordinary room, that grandfather's clock would have looked enormous; in this great hall it looked normal.

"Just a minute!" said Dorrie. "Didn't we shift this clock once—we an' a crowd of boys? You thought there might be something underneath it—"

"That's right," said Lee. "We lifted it bodily from the wall, and I was satisfied that there was no secret door in the rear—a la the Raffles clock. The floor was solid, too. In a word, it seemed that we could dismiss the clock without another examination."

"Exactly."

"But I did examine it again—for the simple reason that I eliminated every other part of this hall," replied Lee. "I made certain that there was no possibility of a secret door, or trapdoor existing in any other spot. This was the only one. Therefore, the 'ghost' must have entered here. For I gave the clock much closer attention. And I can assure you, Dorrie, that it is a real conjurer's piece of work. No trick chest or cabinet at Maskelyne's is constructed with greater ingenuity than this old-time clock-case."

"I'm bubblin' with impatience," whispered Dorrie.

"The clock itself is genuine—a fine old timepiece," continued Lee. "It it comes to that, the clock-case is equally genuine—it was faked up, no doubt, by conjurers of the past, who were every bit as clever as their modern colleagues. Now, if you examine this clock closely, you will find that it is built solidly, the front dovetailing perfectly into the sides. Ninety-nine cabinet-makers, examining this case, would declare it to be solid. The door, you will observe, is quite narrow."

He opened the door as he spoke. It was the usual kind of door, such as is fitted to most grandfather's clocks. It opened readily enough, revealing an empty black cavity. The heavy weights were swinging within, and the pendulum was going solemnly to and fro.

The doorway itself was so narrow that no human being could have passed through—not even a child.

"Well, I can't see anything funny about it," said Dorrie.

"Don't you think the pendulum is extraordinarily short for such a clock?"

"Perhaps so; but there's a little glass panel near the top," said Dorrie. "The pendulum shows through it, and it was made short on purpose."

"No; the glass panel could have been put lower, if necessary," replied Lee. "The pendulum is high, so that the lower part of the clock case is free of any obstruction—and you'll observe that there is ample room for three men to stand within this case. It is unusually big."

"But the doorway's tiny," objected Dorrie. "Besides, what about the weights? They're swingin' in the middle, in the ordinary way. If any man attempted to squeeze himself into here—providing that he could get through the doorway—he would stop the clock by puttin' the weights out of position."

"That is the natural conclusion one would arrive at—and, at first, I was fooled," admitted Nelson Lee. "Then, when I looked at the clock more closely, I saw these little staples in the sides, one opposite the other."

He showed them up with his torch, and Dorrie nodded.

"What are they for?" he asked.

"Ah, that's just the point," replied Lee. "What are they for? Apparently they have no use whatever. But when I examined them carefully, I found that the metalwork of the staples, on the inner side, is quite bright. The weights, you will observe, are hung on steel cables—not on chains. Look here."

With a quick movement he swung one of the weights to the side and hooked the cable round the staple. Then he did the same with the other. Both weights were now lying close to the inner sides of the clock-case, leaving the interior completely free. The clock continued its solemn ticking, for the utility of the weights was in no way affected.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Dorrie.

"Obviously, I had got on the track," continued Nelson Lee. "The next thing was to discover how the clock-case could be opened."

He pushed on a part of the woodwork—a part which looked just like the rest—and instantly the entire front of the clock-case swung open. It did so silently, without the ghost of a creak or the sound of a hinge. Not only the front came away, but a portion of the side, too. Thus the dovetailing meant nothing.

"You see, the actual join is along the ornamental line in the side," explained Lee. "That's how ninety per cent of conjurer's trick cabinets are made. The casual observer pays great attention to the obvious joins, and he finds them genuine enough. That's the

secret. The hinge, you will see, exactly corresponds to the opening. When the clock is closed there is not a vestige of a sign of the real secret. In a word, two men, abreast, could walk out of this clock in absolute silence."

"You mean that Nerki was hiding in the clock all the time?" asked Dorrie incredulously. "But surely he would not have taken such a risk?"

"There's another secret," replied Lee dryly.

He was wasting very little time, for he was speaking rapidly—and now, with the clock wide open, he pressed on another section of the inner woodwork. Lord Dorrmore was astonished to see the stone slab below—for the clock had no actual bottom—slide silently away into a void. And when Nelson Lee flashed his torch downwards, a deep shaft was revealed, with an iron ladder fixed to one side of it.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Dorrie.

"So here we have the secret of the 'hauntings,' old man," said Lee. "The 'ghost' came up this shaft, and entered the hall by way of the clock, and escaped in the same way. Thus all my carefully prepared traps—my sealed threads, and so forth—were useless. Naturally, I never thought of sealing the clock."

"But where on earth does it lead to?" asked Dorrie.

"That's what we've got to find out,"

replied Lee grimly. "That's why we're here now. Are you game? Cornered, Nerki might show fight—and he might become really violent. In a word, it's any odds that he carries a gun."

"We carry guns, too—and we're pretty quick on the draw," said Dorrie. "Come on! Let's go!"

He was preparing to get in, but Lee pulled him back.

"I'll go first, if you don't mind," said the detective. "This is really my job, you know, Dorrie."

"Oh, all right!" growled his lordship.

"You remember the skeleton hand which grabbed Handforth's ankle one night?" went on Lee. "Well, I've no doubt that that was merely a mechanical contrivance held by Nerki. He dodged underneath the staircase, and escaped into another part of the house. Then, when everything was quiet, he slipped back through the clock. In an old house like this it's easy enough to play hide-and-seek—and to remain undiscovered."

"Especially when you've got a pal, somewhere in the offin', workin' the electric lights," nodded Dorrie. "That's what's happened here, eh?"

"I believe you're right," said Lee. "When I examined the mains, of course, I found nothing wrong. But I have no doubt that Nerki has somehow tapped the mains wire, and has fitted in a number of master switches, so that he can put off the lights in any

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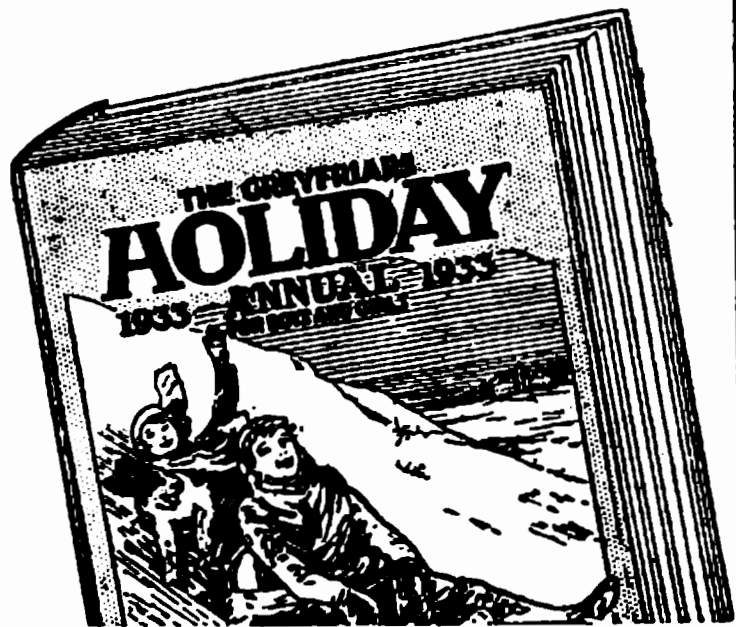


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part of the house he wishes. But that's an electrician's job. Come on."

"How long have you known about this clock?"

"Since yesterday," replied Lee. "But I did not know the actual secret as to how it could be opened until to-night. That's why I could not immediately go to Irene's help. But I don't think for a moment that the girl has come to any harm. Nerki would never dare."

"And Nipper and the other youngsters who vanished?"

"I arranged it with them," replied Lee blandly. "Didn't you know? Being certain that Nerki was listening, I arranged, in quite a loud voice, that we should all be watching in the dark——"

"Wait a minute! You did that talking in the dining-room."

"Yes; and there are hidden microphones in the dining-room."

"Great Scott!"

"I told the boys to 'casually' wander, just before the clock was due to strike, near it. I expected that Nipper, and, perhaps, one other, would be seized and carried off. As you know, I warned everybody else not to take any notice if they heard any sounds—not to do anything until I flashed my light."

"Deucedly clever!" said Dorrie, with grudging admiration. "I mean, I'll bet the youngsters were bagged just as the clock was makin' it's whirrin', an' then chimin'. The sounds of the clock muffled the sounds of the youngsters bein' grabbed."

"Yes, that was certainly how it was done," agreed Nelson Lee. "I was quite near at the time, in the darkness, and I heard the scuffles. Incidentally, I'll tell you now, Dorrie—just to relieve your mind about Irene—that I've already been down this shaft and have found a tunnel. Furthermore, I've satisfied myself that the girl is in no danger. But if I had rescued her, then I should have jeopardised my chances of capturing Nerki. For he might have taken fright and bolted. As matters now stand, I think I can grab him with ease."

"He's cunnin'," said Dorrie. "But, by glory, you're his master!"

"This thing has gone far enough now," said Nelson Lee. "We're going to put an end to it—definitely."

He led the way down the shaft—which was surprisingly roomy. Nelson Lee warned his companion to make no sound: so they went lower and lower in complete silence. Lee did not even show his torch. They went down in darkness.

But in spite of this darkness, Lee knew exactly where he was. For on that earlier descent he had taken the precaution to count the iron rungs of the ladder. He knew exactly when he would set his foot upon the solid ground of the shaft bottom.

He reached it at last, and Dorrie stepped down beside him. They could both see a tunnel, for there was a dim glow of light

some distance down; and they could hear, too, a murmur of voices.

Nelson Lee crept forward like a shadow, and when, at length, he reached an opening in the tunnel, he found himself looking into the strange crypt. He saw Irene and the four boys sitting helpless against the wall, nearly opposite, half-hidden by one of the intervening pillars.

"It's no good going on like that, Handy," Nipper was saying. "These ropes are too tight. We can't get away. Leave it to the guv'nor. I've already told you that he's on the job, and he'll be down here soon——"

"But something may have gone wrong," interrupted Handforth. "That beastly giant has gone away, and we're here by ourselves, and——"

"That's all I wanted to hear, young 'un," said Lee, as he softly advanced. "No, not a sound!"

Handforth had been preparing to yell; and the others, flushed and excited, would have burst into a chorus of acclamation, too. But Lee's finger went to his lips. He and Lord Dorrimore advanced into the crypt, and now they were bending right over the captives.

"Oh, thank goodness!" breathed Irene, her blue eyes sparkling.

"All right, young lady?" asked Lee. "Not scared, or anything? They haven't hurt you, I hope?"

"They've only hurt my wrists a bit with these ropes," replied Irene.

"We'll soon see to that," replied Lee crisply.

His knife was out—and Dorrie's knife was out, too. Quickly, they slashed through the bonds of the young captives. All were released.

"What's the next thing, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly. "We did our bit all right, didn't we?"

"Famously."

"When I was grabbed, I could have yelled eagerly," continued Nipper. "But I remembered what you said—and I pretended to be so scared that I couldn't utter a sound. A blanket was flung over my head, and drawn tight. Then I was held, and dragged back into the clock. The other chaps were treated in just the same way."

"Nerki took an absurd chance," said Lee grimly. "If I had flashed my torch on—as I might easily have done—the open clock would have been revealed, and the attackers, too. But during this last hour or two, Nerki has become reckless with desperation—and when a man is in that condition he loses his caution. And such a man as Nerki is arrogant, too—he is certain of his own cleverness. He thinks that he has played a master card—whilst, all the time, that card is lying on the table, waiting to be trumped."

"Listen!" said Reggie Pitt quickly.

They all stood quite still. They could hear soft footsteps from the passage.

"It's that big giant!" whispered Travers. "He went off about ten minutes ago—and I'll bet he's fetching us some food. He seems a

decent sort of chap. I mean, he looked at us in the friendliest possible manner."

"All the same, we must get hold of him—and see that he does not make any outcry," said Lee. "Here, you youngsters! Quick!"

He told them to return to the bend with their bonds arranged around them. Then he and Dorrie took up their own positions. Sure enough, Petrovitch came into the crypt carrying a big tray.

And no sooner had he entered than Travers ran forward, and pulled the tray forcibly out of his hand. This was done so that the tray should not fall, making a great clatter.

The Infant uttered a thick cry, but he was so startled that he could not put up any kind of a fight. Handforth threw himself at the big man's legs, and he was tripped. At the same moment Nelson Lee and Dorrie attacked from either side. The Infant went down. In spite of his bulk, and his almost superhuman strength, he was held. There were half a dozen on him, including two strong men. And in a very short time, ropes were passed round his legs and body and arms.

The unfortunate giant was looking bewildered and frightened—but there was no ferocity in him. He spoke volubly in his own language, and Lee, who knew a bit of Russian, answered him.

"We are your friends," he said. "We do not intend to harm you. Tell us where we can find Nerki, your master?"

But the big man loyally shook his head, and remained dumb.

"It doesn't matter," said Lee. "I think we know where to find him, Dorrie. Now, boys, we're going to leave this man with you."

"No need for us all to stop, is there, sir?" asked Nipper. "We want to be in at the death."

In the end it was decided that Church and McClure should remain to guard Petrovitch—and Irene would stay, too. There was little or no danger that the big Cossack would cause any trouble.

"Here we have a solution of the mysterious 'monster,'" said Lee dryly. "I've no doubt that the man was wearing some specially prepared pads on his big feet—and that accounts for the strange footprints."

"But what about when they disappeared, sir, near that graveyard?" asked Church.

"Oh, that's an easy one," laughed Lee. "Didn't you boys notice that the tree, almost overhanging the graveyard, was innocent of snow?"

"We didn't even look at the tree, sir," said McClure.

"No; you were far too worried about the vanished footprints," retorted Lee. "But every other tree was snow covered. This one wasn't. That proved that it had been shaken. In a word, a rope was left dangling from that tree; the man flung himself upon the rope, and so his footprints disappeared. He climbed into the tree, and was no doubt hidden in it while we were actually on the spot. A very simple trick—but baffling at the time."

"It must have been this giant who attacked Umlosi, too," said Dorrie. "I don't think there's another man in the world who could tackle Umlosi, an' get the better of him."

Lee was genuinely sorry for Petrovitch. The man was so obviously a tool—a harmless freak of nature, such as one finds in side-shows. Even now that he had been captured and roped, the Infant was in no way vicious. He accepted his capture calmly and stolidly.

With Nelson Lee leading the way, the party went down the tunnel. Lee was ready for any emergency now. He was half expecting to meet Nerki on the way—for he did not doubt that Nerki would show himself again to Lady Bowers at the earliest possible moment.

"What do you make of this place?" whispered Dorrie, as they walked. "This tunnel, I mean?"

"I've no doubt that it was constructed in the reign of Charles the First," replied Lee. "I've been dipping into history, Dorrie—particularly the Bowers' family history. There are many quaint and interesting books in the library. But you're not very interested in books, are you?"

"Go on," said Dorrie. "You seem to know everything!"

"I've also been inspecting other old records. Ordnance maps, and so forth," continued Lee. "One discovery I made is that Nerki's house was, at one time, on the Bowers' estate. But about a hundred years ago, the estate was broken up. It's my private opinion that there were some dangerous people in the Bowers' family, centuries ago—conspirators. I have found more than one reference to such conspiracies, particularly in Charles the First's reign. One plot was broken up, and two or three heads were lopped off in consequence, including a Bower's head. I've no doubt that this tunnel was made at the time of those conspiracies. The Bowers of the period held secret parties in this house—and the tunnel had been built so that the plotters should have a way of escape, in case of surprise. There are any amount of such 'back exits' up and down England, connected with famous old houses."

"The good old times!" sighed Dorrie. "Nowadays, tunnels like this are used by cheap crooks."

"Perhaps Nerki found the tunnel by accident—perhaps he knew of it even before he took the old house, and established himself in the New Forest as a sorcerer," continued Lee. "We can't tell—and it doesn't really matter. The main thing is that he planted himself here, and not only fooled a great many society people, but he singled Lady Bowers out as a singularly lucrative victim. Well, he's at the end of his tether now."

Lee enjoined complete silence when, at length, they reached the end of the tunnel. They mounted the crumbling stone steps in single file. Lee had no difficulty in finding the catch which opened the secret door. He swung it open, and, to his satisfaction, he found that the room, beyond, was empty.

"In here, all of you—quick!" he whispered. "And not a sound."

They came in, one after the other. And hardly the last one passed through before a quick step sounded in the passage. beyond—and then the door was suddenly thrown wide open.

"Why can't you hurry up, Ezra?" said Nerki savagely. "I tell you it will be dawn soon, and the old girl——"

He broke off abruptly, his jaw dropping. For the lights from four or five electric torches flashed out, concentrating their beams upon him. He was revealed in his flowing robes of "state," and he was now wearing a long, impressive beard. On his head was perched a conical hat. He was Nerki, the Sorcerer again—the mystic, the worker of black magic.

"Just a little surprise, professor," said Lee calmly.

And as the detective spoke, he took a step forward—and the automatic pistol in his hand gleamed in the beams of light.

"In case you're thinkin' of any funny business—don't!" said Dorrie. "Forget it. I'm armed, too, and if you make any false move, I shall shoot. I'm not so squeamish as Lee. In fact, I've had a good deal of experience of shooting reptiles."

"What—what does this mean?" panted Nerki, attempting, even then, to bluff.

"I'll tell you," said Lee crisply. "Your unfortunate dupe, Petrovitch, is a prisoner. Your secrets are known to me, Nerki—the clock, the microphones, the hidden wires, everything! And, although I have no official warrant, I'm going to arrest you on a charge of criminal conspiracy. Added to that charge will be the more serious one of kidnapping. Matters will no doubt be straightened out at the police-station afterwards. I might get into hot water for taking things into my own hands—but I'll take the risk. What are you going to do—act sensibly, and surrender, or——"

"You haven't got me yet!" screamed Nerki, mad with rage.

But Nelson Lee had been right. This trickster was no gunman. He made no attempt to fire—for, indeed, he carried no weapon. But, with a single leap, he fled backwards through the doorway.

Slam!

At the same time he crashed the door to, and shot two heavy bolts on the outside. He found Ezra beside him—pale, stricken.

"We're too late!" snarled Nerki. "Lee's here. The game's up! Our only chance now is to bolt."

He flung his hat aside—and his robe, too. Ezra, galvanised into action, leapt to the back door, and flung it open. They both knew that it would take Nelson Lee a considerable time to smash the door down—for it was of heavy oak. The window was fitted with iron bars, and there was no escape that way. It would take many valuable minutes to escape by the tunnel. And Nerki had a car. He and Ezra could get a good

start, and could be well away before there was any organised hunt.

But again Professor Nerki made a mistake.

He and Ezra raced over the snow-covered ground to the shed where the car was kept. The first gleam of dawn was showing in the sky. For now it was quite early morning. Thunderous bangs, and loud shouts were sounding from the house. But out here, in the Forest, who could hear?

Nerki himself unlocked the doors of the shed and swung them open. He and Ezra dashed in, to start up the car.

But suddenly Ezra uttered an alarmed shout.

"Look!" he almost screamed. "There are figures running up, Nerki. There must have been others on the watch——"

Nerki spun round, and, sure enough, he saw a dozen or more active figures—and, to his amazement, he saw that some of them were feminine figures! In a flash he knew the truth. The boys and girls! They had not gone off to Fordingbridge, as he had believed—as they had stated—but, by pre-arrangement with Nelson Lee, they had come to this old house, and had surrounded it in the distance—waiting for some such moment as this.

Whizz! Whizzzz! Thud! Thud!

"Go it!" yelled a voice. "Come on, girls—you can do your bit, too!"

Nerki and Ezra tried to get out; but they were met by a deadly fusillade of snowballs. They were smothered from head to foot, blinded, and the shower of snowballs continued.

There was a rush of feet, a crashing slam, and the doors of the shed were closed, and then locked.

"Got 'em!" sang out Jimmy Potts. "Mr. Lee was right all along the line!"

CHAPTER 9.

Explanations.

SOME of the excited boys dashed to the house, and Nelson Lee and the others were quickly released. Lee immediately took charge.

A search of the house proved that there were no other crooks. Nerki and Ezra, and Petrovitch worked all the "stunts" between the three of them.

Lee went out to the shed, and he found Nerki beaten. There was not an ounce of fight in the man now. He had, indeed, shot his bolt.

Both the prisoners were handcuffed. Ezra was nearly weeping, and he was wailing out that he had done nothing criminal. He was only Nerki's servant, and he had only obeyed orders. Nelson Lee ignored him.

Nerki himself, to his credit, displayed some kind of futile dignity.

"I am not fool enough to make matters worse by making futile efforts to escape," he said quietly. "You have won, Lee. I

might have known, from the first, that you would. For once you came down here and took charge of the case I was beaten."

"You should have thought of that earlier, my friend," said Lee. "If you had abandoned your folly some days ago and quietly disappeared, I doubt if Lady Bowers would have prosecuted. For she would never have been fully convinced you are the criminal you are. I am going to take you to Forest House now—and you are going to confront her."

A light of hope came into Nerki's eyes.

"All right," he said quietly. "I am in your hands. You must do as you think fit."

Before leaving Nerki's house, Lee had another look round. He made some interesting discoveries. In some of the other sheds he found an extraordinary collection of pigeons. They were highly-trained birds, and their feathers had been dyed jet black—and their wings were cleverly faked so that, in the gloom, the pigeons almost exactly resembled bats. So here were the giant bats Archie Glenthorne had seen on his first visit!

In another shed, confined in a cage, were three little monkeys. They were highly-trained creatures. In a cupboard, near by, were some quaint miniature head-dresses of hideous design. There was even clothing, too. Lee was convinced that these monkeys all dressed up—so that they resembled gnomes or pixies—were used by Nerki. They were sent out when visitors were expected—so that they would be seen. Handforth & Co. had seen them—and had been scared.

The secret of the hollow tree was already known; and Lee found many of the hedges, round and about the house, fitted with cunningly-concealed electric wires. These wires looked exactly like creepers, so cleverly were they faked. And, in places, there were disguised electric lamps. The luminous eyes which Archie had once beheld!

One hedge was particularly interesting, for in what appeared to be a dense clump of impenetrable brambles, a brilliant fake was discovered. It was, in fact, the almost lifelike representation of a traditional witch. By means of concealed rods it could be lifted silently upwards, out of the hedge top, when trailing garments would float eerily in the breeze. It was, in fact, a true magician's "prop," and operated by electricity.

"Frightfully ridic., really," said Archie Glenthorne, with a sniff. "This is the bally thing which gave me such a frightful turn when I first visited Nerki. But how did it manage to disappear, Mr. Lee? What about the hideous cackle, too, which somewhat ruined the night?"

"There's no mystery about either, Archie," replied Nelson Lee. "Didn't some black clouds suddenly obscure the moon just after the 'witch' had commenced her journey on the broom?"

"Good gad, yes," said Archie, with a start.

"Actually the 'apparition' merely rose up from the hedge, started off, and then the

darkness came," explained Lee. "The whole apparatus was then whisked back into its hiding place."

"But doesn't that seem dashed risky, old thing?" asked Archie sceptically. "I mean, supposing there wasn't any handy black cloud? Clever as this blighter is, he couldn't wangle the clouds, could he?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"If there had been no cloud, I have no doubt that your attention would have been distracted in some other way," he replied. "These fellows are up to all the tricks, Archie. As for the voice, there's a loud-speaker hidden in the witch's headpiece."

There were loud-speakers, in fact, in several parts of the hedge. Everything was electrically operated; and in the house itself there was an elaborate radio set, with many switches, which could be operated at will. Nerki, sitting there, could fake all manner of "black magic." It was Nelson Lee's belief that the "skeleton hands" not yet spoken of had been operated by Ezra. The door, of course, was electrically controlled, and the curtains in that mystery room were cunningly operated—as are the curtains of any magician's scene of operations.

In the house, too, Lee found a strange black robe. In the folds of it were a number of concealed electric lamps—so cunningly hidden that they were quite invisible, although they cast their light downwards at an angle. A miniature switchboard, at the waist, could operate these lights, so that any number of them could be brought into play at once.

Here was the explanation of that strange occurrence when Handforth & Co. had seen Nerki standing in the moonlight—and Nerki had cast no shadow.

Actually, Nerki had cast a shadow, just the same as Handforth & Co.; but, by switching those lights on, he had illuminated his shadow with bluish light so that it was virtually cut out. The lamps themselves had been unseen by the boys; and, at a little distance, it had seemed just as though Nerki had cast no shadow at all. Like all conjuring tricks, the explanation was childishly simple.

On that occasion, too, Handforth had discovered that Nerki's footprints suddenly ceased. But it was obvious enough that Nerki, thinking, perhaps that Handforth would return, had smoothed over the snow, so that his footprints were no longer in evidence. Another simple dodge, equally baffling at the time, and equally simple of explanation.

Indeed, once one piece of trickery was discovered, everything else was revealed. Nerki's only chance of keeping up the game was to defy discovery. Fraudulent spiritualist mediums practised for months—years—and all their effects have been produced by the simplest and crudest of devices. And then, suddenly, something has gone wrong—somebody has become suspicious. Like the falling of a house of cards, the fake medium's tricks have been exposed.

It was just the same with Nerki, the Sorcerer—but Nerki was far cleverer than the average "dud" medium.

THE daylight was strengthening when the party arrived at Forest House. Nelson Lee took his prisoners by road; and that procession, as it marched along, was a quaint one. Nerki and his assistant, in handcuffs, led the way, with Nelson Lee. And behind came the young guests of Forest House. At last they were feeling safe. The "haunting" was over.

Lord Dorrimore had left the main party, and had gone back, alone, through the tunnel. He was going to fetch Irene and the boys, and bring the third prisoner up the iron ladder.

In fact, when the main party arrived, the front door was standing wide open, and Lord Dorrimore was there. His own journey had been shorter.

"Everything's all right," he said. "That Russian chap is locked in one of the cellars. Irene has gone upstairs to arouse her ladyship, an' she'll be here at any minute."

"That was a good idea," said Nelson Lee. "I'm glad Irene went to Lady Bowers. For her ladyship believed that Irene was dead—killed by the spirits. And the girl's presence in the flesh will do much to lessen the greater shock which is to immediately follow."

They were all crowding into the hall now, and at that moment Lady Bowers herself, fully dressed, came almost running along the landing and then down the stairs. Irene was with her.

"Mr. Lee!" cried Aunt Eustacia. "What does this mean? Thank Heaven the girl is safe! She has been telling me some extraordinary things— Oh! What—what does this mean?"

"I am afraid it means that Nerki is a handcuffed prisoner," replied Lee quietly. "I have brought him here, Lady Bowers, because I think it is necessary that you should have your eyes completely and fully opened. This man is nothing but a cheat and an impostor. His one aim has been to hoodwink you—and I do not doubt that he has been attempting to obtain money from you."

"Nerki—Nerki! I cannot believe it!" exclaimed Lady Bowers, as she ran down.

Fortunately, Nerki himself, by his very words, convinced her.

"What's the good?" he asked, almost roughly. "Can't we get this over and done with? Do you think I like standing here, with these things on my wrists—and with all these boys and girls looking on? I'm through, and I know it. If I saw any loophole, I'd take it. But I'm through."

As Aunt Eustacia stood staring in stupefaction at Nerki, Archie Glenthorne almost murmured, 'I told you so'; but he was far too much of a sportsman to do so.

"Then—then you admit that it was all—trickery?" asked her ladyship. "The haunting of this house—the smashing of the furniture—the elemental——"

"If I had you alone, Lady Bowers, I would talk to you in a different way," said Nerki, with astonishing frankness. "But Mr. Lee is here, listening to every word I say. I might be able to deceive you, but I can't deceive him. So what's the use? We're just wasting time. If I'm to be taken to the police-station, why can't I be taken? You're going to prosecute me, aren't you?"

"This is dreadful!" murmured Archie's aunt. "And I thought— No, no! I won't prosecute. Let him go, Mr. Lee! Oh, that any man could be so deceitful, so wicked! But no, I won't prosecute. It would be too, too awful."

"Got your key, Lee?" asked Nerki, holding out his wrists.

"Oh, no, my friend, you're not going to get away as easily as that," replied Lee grimly. "Lady Bowers, I'm afraid I must insist upon you prosecuting this man. There is not only yourself to think about—there are others. He has duped many such ladies as yourself. Many gentlemen, too. His visitors, during the last few months, have been numerous. Do not, I beg of you, imagine that you will be sending a first offender to prison."

"What do you mean, Mr. Lee?" asked Aunt Eustacia, looking at him in wonder.

"I mean, that this man is not Professor Ivan Nerki at all," replied Nelson Lee. "The name, I will admit, is picturesque. But his real name is Rod Davenby, and he hails from Springfield, Illinois, in the United States of America."

Nerki started, and then he shrugged.

"Clever guy, aren't you, Lee?" he asked bitterly.

"For some years Rod Davenby was known as one of the most remarkable spiritualistic mediums," continued Lee. "He did things on a big scale; his séance chambers were colossal in their extravagance and their luxury. But in 1924, at a sensational séance at Jersey City, he was exposed by newspaper men, and he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. I have taken the trouble to look up his record—for I recognised him as soon as I saw him without his beard. If you care to go to Scotland Yard, they will tell you that Davenby was put in prison in 1918 for forging a cheque; he was in prison again in 1921, for forming a fraudulent company to build a great institution for the furtherance of spiritualism——"

"I—I have heard enough," said Lady Bowers faintly. "Please, Mr. Lee!"

Her eyes were wide open, and she knew that the amiable Archie had been right from the very first.

IT was found that there were some secret switches down below in that old crypt. Nerki had tapped the electric wires, and it was possible for him to dim and extinguish any lights he pleased.

Nelson Lee also found a cunning device, something after the fashion of an electro-

(Continued on page 44.)

Full Of Long Laughs—This Rousing Story Of St. Frank's!

COCK O' THE WALK!



Edward Oswald Handforth is junior skipper of St. Frank's. But as a skipper he is a hopeless failure. All the schemes that have been concocted to force him to resign have met with failure, and have made Handy all the more determined to stick to his post. Now comes the question: "What can the Remove do now?"

Reggie Pitt's Idea.

"**H**E'S worse than ever!" said Doyle indignantly. "It doesn't matter what we do, we can't squash him. He's even more violent, and he won't tell us anything about the football fixtures, or anything."

"We can't kick him out, and we can't make him resign!" said Fullwood desperately. "So what the dickens are we going to do? He's getting on our nerves!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie Glenthorne with a nod. "I don't like to say it, but the old fright is absolutely a smudge on the good old face of the Remove! Life, I mean, is becoming too dashed ghastly for words! We go thither, and we go thither, and this foul chappie haunts us like a family spectre!"

Reggie Pitt grinned.

"It's chiefly our own fault," he said. "We haven't used the right tactics."

"There aren't any more tactics!" growled Doyle. "We've used 'em all up!"

"Don't you believe it!" smiled Reggie. "What about our little experience a quarter of an hour ago? Two of you fellows went into Handy's office and came out in a state of wreckage. I went in, and came out whole."

"Just your luck!" said Bob Christine.

"Yes, you had a taste of him, too, didn't you?" said Reggie. "But it wasn't luck,

Bob—it was tact. Handy is one of the best chaps in the world at heart, but since he became skipper he's made himself about as popular as a prefect at a dormitory spread. He's lost his balance, you know. This captaincy has got into his head, and his mind is filled with one idea. He thinks he's a dictator, and that he's got to dictate. He thinks the whole Remove is against him, and that his only policy is to use force. He was always a forceful bounder."

"Then what the dickens can we do?" demanded Fullwood.

They were standing in the Ancient House lobby, discussing the fresh situation, and wondering how they could achieve the end they desired—the deposing of Edward Oswald Handforth.

"What can we do?" repeated Reggie. "We can use tact. We've been blind, my sons. Instead of taking a lesson from Church and McClure, we've used our own methods, and Handy is just as arrogant as ever. He knows we want to get rid of him, so he meant to stick in power."

"In that case, we'd better tell him to hold the captaincy!" said Doyle sarcastically.

"Exactly!"

"What?" gasped the juniors.

"That's the exact idea!" grinned Reggie.

"You know what a contrary mule he is. If he thinks we all want him as skipper, his one desire will be to abandon us, and leave us in the lurch."

"It's too risky," said Fullwood, shaking his head. "These things don't always pan out in practice. If we do a thing like that, he'll only be more triumphant than ever, and we shall have done ourselves in."

Reggie Pitt was quite serene.

"Of course, we shall have to do it cunningly," he went on. "I've got a few ideas in my head now—and if they can only be welded together properly, we ought to be able to knock Handy off his perch. But the first thing to do is to try a little experiment."

"An experiment?"

"Yes," nodded Reggie. "I shan't tell you what it is yet. If it succeeds, I'll go ahead with my plan—and if I know anything about Handy, it will succeed. We'll go to his office now as a deputation, and ask him to resign."

"My hat!" said Fullwood, staring. "Is that what you call an idea?"

"Yes—and I don't apologise for it."

"But, you idiot, haven't we tried it before?" asked De Valerie. "Haven't we asked him to resign scores of times? Haven't we sent deputations to him——"

"But this one's different," interrupted Pitt. "You won't see much difference, perhaps, and you'd better be prepared for ructions. But I'll do the talking, and it won't be many hours before you see the results. They won't come at once—they'll develop during the evening."

Reggie Pitt had succeeded in mystifying his companions, but he would not go into any explanations. So the deputation was formed, and off it marched to Handforth's office.

Pitt halted, and hammered on the door. Within, Handforth & Co. looked up. Edward Oswald frowned, but his chums expressed their relief. An interruption was just what they required, for it would give them an excuse to escape.

"Come in!" said Handforth gruffly.

The deputation went in, and there was just sufficient room for it on the outer side of the barrier.

"What's all this?" asked Handforth suspiciously.

"Just a little deputation," said Pitt gently. "I see you've got a new gadget for your wireless, Handy."

"You fathead—this is a typewriter!" said Handforth.

"Sorry!" said Pitt calmly. "I thought it was a condenser, or a new kind of loud speaker, or something. So you're going in for typewriting? I'm not at all surprised—it's just what we might have expected."

"What do you mean?" asked Handforth, glaring.

"My dear chap, you mustn't blame us for taking these things for granted," said Reggie with a smile. "Aren't you always up to date? Always bobbing up with the very latest? And now that you're skipper, you seem to be more abreast of the times

than ever. You're certainly full of go, old man."

Handforth thawed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"A Form captain has got to always be on the go," he agreed.

"That's just the trouble!" murmured Fullwood. "We only wish you were on the go, Handy! But you're not—you stick in one place!"

"Don't take any notice," advised Pitt. "We represent the Remove, Handy. We've just come along to put a few facts before you, and we want a fair hearing. Every Form captain ought to grant his critics a fair hearing."

"Critics?" snapped Handforth aggressively.

"Well, you can't get away from the fact that the bulk of the fellows are discontented," said Pitt sorrowfully. "They don't mind you being skipper so much, Handy, but they don't like all this display."

"What display?"

"Well, this office, and your methods," replied Pitt. "You seem to think that a captain of a Form is like the captain of a ship. You're the master, and we're the crew. That seems to be your attitude."

"So it is!" agreed Handforth grimly. "Anything else?"

"Before long you'll expect us to call you Captain Handforth, and salute you every time we come near you!" went on Reggie in a complaining voice. "You'll be ordering us outside for dress inspection, or something!"

Handforth started.

"There's no telling what I'll do," he replied darkly. "Anyhow, I'm captain. So you'd better understand that I'm not here to listen to any more rot. If you want trouble, just make a few more complaints."

Reggie Pitt grinned.

"Well, as we shall get trouble in any case, it won't make much difference," he said. "The fact is, Handy, there's a growing feeling in the Form that it would be a ripe idea for you to resign. Perhaps you don't think much of it, though?"

"You silly chump! I'm not resigning for anybody!"

"Not if we ask you with tears in our eyes?"

"I won't resign if you all go down on your knees and beg me to!" retorted Handforth curtly. "You elected me, and I got every vote in the Form. There's never been an election like it before—I swept the board!"

"Yes, you ass, but that was only a spoof," snorted Fullwood angrily. "If you had an ounce of sense, you'd know that we're all fed-up with you. You've either got to resign, or we'll——"

"Steady, old man," interrupted Pitt. "After all, it's for Handy to say. If he doesn't want to resign, there's an end of it. Our only course is to accept the inevitable and do our duty."

"Our duty?" repeated the deputation.

"Of course!" said Reggie. "Our duty to the captain. If we only please him, he'll probably show us that we've been misjudg-

ing him. He won't resign, so we'll try to be loyal to him. Good old Handy! Always sticking to your guns, and always firm! Dash it all, they're qualities we can't help admiring!"

"If you're rotting——" began Handforth.

"Rotting?" repeated Pitt, pained. "My dear chap, haven't I shown you how earnest I am? You're the captain—you're at the helm of the Remove. We want to be able to come to our skipper with our little troubles. We want to ask him for advice, and to guide us into the true path of right. We need harmony in the Form. So if you intend to cling to the captaincy, we can only resign ourselves and knuckle under. You're the great man, and we're only your subjects."

Handforth smiled rather indulgently.

"I didn't know you had so much sense, Pitt," he said with frank surprise.

"We're always learning things," replied Reggie. "Of course, at the same time, it would be heaps better if you resigned, old man."

"What?"

"Speaking quite candidly, the Remove is just about fed-up to the neck with you," said Reggie coolly. "The Remove is so tired of you that it hasn't got much strength left. As a skipper, you're a rank failure, and several kinds of a dud. It's high time you were knocked off your perch!"

Handforth uttered such a bellow of rage that Pitt beat a hasty retreat, and the deputation scuttled into the passage. Then it hurried off to the lobby once more—where it was comparatively safe. Pitt was looking highly satisfied. But his companions were flushed with impatience and indignation.

"Is that what you call smart?" asked Fullwood fiercely.

"My dear fellow——"

"You just went there to be funny!" snapped Fullwood, his eyes glittering. "But what else could we expect from a West House lunatic? What on earth was the idea of wasting all that time kidding Handforth and achieving nothing? You knew jolly well he'll never agree to resign!"

"Peace, O loud one!" said Reggie quietly. "You may not see the inner workings of the idea yet, but I don't expect too much from Ancient House chaps. We all know they're rather weak-minded——"

"Smash him!" roared the Ancient House juniors.

"You can't touch me—I've got my fingers crossed," said Pitt calmly. "Joking aside, though, that little deputation wasn't so objectless as you might think. Wait, my lads! Just wait until after tea, and your uncle won't disappoint you."

And they had to be satisfied with that—although they were more puzzled than ever.

Handforth's New Policy!

"HURRAH!"

"Here he is!"

"Speech, Handy, speech!"

Edward Oswald Handforth paused just inside the doorway of the Lecture Hall

that evening, and the roar of cheering startled him. He hadn't expected it. In fact, he hadn't expected to find many fellows present. He certainly had called this meeting, but the Remove had a habit of ignoring his orders.

He had just looked in to ascertain the absentees, only to find that there weren't any! With Church and McClure, just behind him, the entire Remove was present! As far as Handforth's amazed eyes could see, there wasn't one absentee.

"My only hat!" he muttered dazedly.

A full meeting was surprising enough, but this enthusiastic cheering was even more extraordinary. Another fellow might have suspected something. But Handforth, after the first moment of stupefaction, jumped to the conclusion that the Remove was at last appreciating him at his true worth!

He had been expecting this all along; he had been wondering why the fellows had failed to come up to the scratch. Surely they couldn't hope for a more energetic skipper than he? And at last they realised it!

Reggie Pitt had counted upon this characteristic of Handforth's to the full. It was so easy to pull his leg!

"All right—all right!" roared Handforth, as he strode down the hall towards the raised platform. "Don't make so much noise, you chumps! I want this meeting to be peaceful and serious. I've got some new ideas."

"Hurrah!"

"Let's hear them, Handy!"

Edward Oswald mounted the platform and faced the throng. And a less innocent fellow than he might easily have been deceived. There wasn't a sign of dissension. All the juniors in the hall were looking eager and excited, and their enthusiasm had the stamp of sincerity. Reggie Pitt was highly delighted by the loyal way in which the Remove was backing him up.

"Gentlemen——" began Handforth.

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Handy!"

"Gentlemen——"

"Hurrah!"

"Gentlemen——"

"Bravo!"

"Am I going to speak, or am I not?" roared Handforth, glaring. "If any fathead interrupts, I'll chuck him out of the meeting! I'm here to announce some new ideas, and I'm not going to be interrupted!"

The Remove became obediently silent, as though awed.

"I'm the captain!" roared Handforth, warming up to his work. "The captain of any ship is the supreme master of his crew! What happens if a member of that crew mutinies? He's dealt with drastically! So take warning, my lads! If there's any sign of mutiny, there'll be big trouble. I'm the captain, and you're the crew. That's understood!"

"A sound argument, old man!" said Reggie Pitt heartily.

"Hear, hear!"

"And there's something else!" continued Handforth. "Something I thought of this evening. The captain of the ship is entitled to respect, and he gets it. A member of his crew doesn't go up to him and say 'How are you, Jones?' He calls him 'Captain Jones'! And that's what you've got to call me, or I'll know the reason why! I'm captain of the Form, and from this minute I'm going to be known as Captain Handforth!"

"It's working!" breathed Jack Grey ecstatically.

"Dry up, you ass!" murmured Pitt. "Didn't I say it would?"

"So, from now on, you've got to call me 'captain' whenever you address me," said Handforth, highly satisfied with the Remove's attitude. "I've made up my mind on this point, and I'm going to be hard and fast in enforcing it. At the first sign of disrespect I shall act firmly!"

"You're the captain, so we'll obey!" shouted Reggie promptly. "All right, cap'n! Go ahead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right, captain!" roared the Remove.

Handforth found it rather difficult to continue for a moment. He had never really anticipated that that suggestion of his would be put into operation. He had anticipated a storm of derision, and had already glowed at the thought of wiping up a few of the objectors. But there was nobody to wipe up!

"You—you mean you agree to it?" he asked blankly.

"Agree to what, captain?" asked Fullwood.

"About calling me—— Why, yes, of course!" said Handforth hastily. "You can't do anything else but agree, my lads! You're just beginning to understand that my iron rule is made of concrete! It's hard and fast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" thundered Handforth. "What do the members of a ship's crew do when they happen to meet their skipper? Answer me that! What do they do?"

"Salute him, I suppose," said Reggie Pitt innocently.

"Yes!" roared Handforth. "They salute him! And you fellows have got to salute me! I'm the captain of this Form, and I've got to have that token of respect from all of you! In future, you'll salute whenever you see me!"

"You're mad!"

"You're getting worse every day, Handy!"

But the forgetful fellows, who shouted their real thoughts, were drowned by the shouts of mock approval. The Lecture Hall was a scene of wildly-exaggerated enthusiasm for a minute or two.

"There's just one question, Captain Handforth," said Pitt, during a lull. "Have I your permission to ask a question?"

"Yes, if it's not nervy!" said Handforth suspiciously.

"I wouldn't be nervy with you, captain," replied Pitt, with an air of shocked surprise,

and saluting at the same moment. "You say that we've got to always salute you? We want to get this clear."

"You've got to salute me every time you pass me and every time you speak to me," said Handforth loftily. "Is that clear enough?"

"And you'll salute back?" asked Pitt.

"Salute back?"

"Every ship's captain acknowledges the salutes of his crew," explained Pitt. "That's a recognised custom——"

"Don't be a chump!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "Of course, I shall acknowledge every salute! What do you take me for? That point's settled."

"Yes, captain!" said Pitt, saluting.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not so much noise!" roared Handforth.

"No, captain!" chorused the Remove, saluting.

Handforth was so astonished that he neglected to acknowledge it, but, as the idea was his own, he would probably get into the habit in time. He was full of eagerness to get on to the next point.

"Starting with to-morrow morning, there's going to be a daily inspection!" he continued grimly. "I'm not satisfied with the appearance of some of you chaps! Most of you are all right—and one or two go to the other extreme. But there's too much slovenliness—too many dirty collars and baggy trousers. So I'm going to hold a daily dress inspection in the West Square. Eight-thirty, prompt! So don't forget to-morrow morning!"

"Orders are orders, captain!" said Pitt, saluting. "I'll tell Mr. Stokes that breakfast will have to be altered. At half-past eight we're all in the dining-hall, but that can easily be altered——"

"Eh?" interrupted Handforth with a start. "Half-past eight? My hat! I'd forgotten about breakfast! We'll say a quarter-past nine, and leave it at that. Remember—nine-fifteen in the West Square!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Handforth!"

"Say the word, old man, and we'll agree to anything!"

The Remove expressed its approval with exaggerated heartiness.

"You see how peaceful this meeting is?" went on Handforth impressively. "Instead of opposing me, you're agreeing with me. Look at the result—nothing but harmony all along the line! As captain of the Form, I regard myself as a leader and a pal. And if any of you have any little troubles, bring them to me, and I'll settle them for you."

"Good old skipper!"

"If you can't agree in an argument, bring the argument to me, and I'll polish it off," said Handforth generously. "If you need any help, I'm here to help you! If you're in trouble, confide in me. I hold that a Form captain has something else to think of besides sports. He's the Form's guiding star! He's

got to lead the Form in the way it should go! So if you come to me with your worries and problems, I'll settle them for you. Come when you like, and as often as you like. You'll never be refused."

"Is that a promise, captain?" asked Pitt, saluting.

"Yes, it is—a promise!" said Handforth stiffly. "Do you expect a Form captain to utter hollow words? I've always meant what I've said, and I mean what I say now!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old guide and philosopher!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Captain Handforth!"

And the meeting broke up amid scenes of renewed enthusiasm.

"Yes, how shall we benefit?" demanded Hubbard.

"Hear, hear!"

"Steady on!" warned Pitt. "This idea is a corker. All you've got to do is to do exactly as Handforth has ordered, and he will soon be sick of the captaincy! But we can't jaw here—he'll probably overhear us."

And the puzzled Remove went indoors—some into the West House, and some into the Ancient House. Within half an hour, however, Pitt had been round to the various studies, and the full meaning of the plot was made clear.

Reggie Pitt had made a true shot—and by all appearances, Handforth was booked for a rather lively twenty-four hours!

Not Quite So Good!

CECIL DE VALERIE came hurrying down the Remove passage just as Handforth was emerging from Study D. He saluted smartly, and passed on. Handforth started after him.

"I say, that's a bit too bad, Handy," protested Church.

"Eh? What's too bad?"

"Why, you didn't acknowledge his salute," said Church.

"By George, no!" said Handforth with a start. "I'd forgotten!"

"Forgotten?" echoed Church, aghast. "You, the captain! You can't kid me like that, old son."

"Nunno! I—I mean——" Handforth paused in confusion and glared. "And none of your 'old son'! And none of your 'Handy'! Haven't I told you to address me as captain, blow you?"

"Yes, captain," said Church humbly.

"Just because you're my study chums, I'm not going to have you taking advantage of me!"

"No, captain!"

"You two fellows are just as much in the Remove as the rest!" snapped Handforth. "So don't forget it! And I'm not permitting any laxity!"

"No, captain!" said his chums in one voice.

"That's settled!"

"Yes, captain!"

"And I don't want any rot!" growled Handforth.

"No, captain!"

"Don't keep saying 'No, captain,' and 'Yes, captain!'" roared Handforth exasperatedly. "And don't keep messing about with your arms! What's the idea of pushing them up and down like that?"

"We're saluting, captain," explained Church.

"Saluting?" gasped Handforth. "Oh, I forgot——"

"Yes, and you haven't acknowledged us once," complained McClure bitterly. "We're members of your crew, captain, and we've got to obey orders!" he added with another salute. "That's what you told us, captain, and we're doing it!"

"Yes, captain," said Church, saluting in turn.

Handforth breathed hard and saluted twice.

"All right—but there's no need to make such a fuss," he growled. "Of course, you're right, now I come to think of it. And I like to see you fellows practising obedience for once."

Fullwood came by and smartly saluted.

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth.

He acknowledged the salute long after Fullwood had passed, and was just in time to salute back to Archie Glenthorpe, Watson, Russell, and Brent as they went down the passage, one after the other. Handforth's arm was kept going briskly.

"By George! This is jolly good!" he said with satisfaction. "They're all obeying my orders without question! Didn't I always tell you chaps that I'd make them eat out of my hand before I'd done?"

"Yes, captain," said Church, saluting.

Handforth saluted back grudgingly.

"Well, you stay here—I don't want you with me, saluting me every giddy time you speak," he growled. "I'm going to fetch my typewriter, and I'm going to do some work! My hat! The time's getting on, too!" he added anxiously. "I was going to type the first ten pages of that manuscript this evening, too!"

"Which manuscript, captain?" asked McClure, saluting.

"Eh?" said Edward Oswald, raising his hand to his head. "It's none of your business! You'd better go to the Common-room—both of you! I don't want to be bothered with you!"

He did not want them to know that he had promised to type a story for Irene Manners of Moor View School and get it finished before Tuesday.

He strode off and went to his office. But before he got to the end of the passage he passed no fewer than ten different Remove fellows, and every one saluted him in strict obedience to his orders. And whereas they only saluted once each, Handforth was obliged to salute ten times. But he didn't notice this

little detail at present. His chief sensation was one of supreme satisfaction.

He carried his typewriter out of the office and went back to Study D. The passage seemed to be swarming with fellows to-night. He no sooner came along than study doors opened up and down the corridor, and the juniors came along, and everybody saluted him, whether they spoke or not. Quite a number addressed him as "captain," much to his satisfaction. But by the time he had got into his study with the typewriter his arms were aching—his left arm from carrying the typewriter, and his right arm from the effects of continuous saluting.

"Thank goodness for some peace!" he muttered, as he sat down at the table with the typewriter in front of him. "Now I can get busy on this job for Irene! Once I get the hang of this giddy machine——"

The door opened, and De Valerie looked in.

"Got the right time, captain?" he asked, saluting.

"Eh?"

"The right time, captain?" said De Valerie, repeating the movement.

"What's the matter with the school clock?" demanded Handforth.

"Nothing that I know of, captain, but I thought I'd better come to you," replied De Valerie with a third salute. "The school clock might be wrong, but you being the Form skipper, you can't be wrong."

Handforth pulled out his watch.

"Twenty minutes to nine!" he said briefly.

"Thanks, captain," said De Valerie, saluting. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What do you mean—forgotten something?"

"You didn't acknowledge my salute, captain."

Handforth breathed hard.

"Clear out!" he snorted, saluting. "It's all very well to obey my orders like this—I'm glad to see it—but there's no need to come here asking me the giddy time!"

De Valerie looked very pained.

"Oh, captain, but didn't you tell us to come to you for advice?" he asked, saluting. "Didn't we understand that you would help us in everything—no matter how small or how big?"

Handforth saluted stiffly.

"Yes, of course," he replied. "Sorry!"

"Thank you, captain."

De Valerie saluted again and withdrew. Handforth allowed his hand to drop as the door closed. Somehow, this saluting business wasn't quite so ideal as he had expected it to be.

"I shall have to be careful!" he murmured. "I can't tell the chaps to clear out after I've asked them to come to me for advice! A Form captain must remember his duties—Yes, and there's this manuscript, too! I distinctly promised Irene she should have it—and she's more important than the whole Remove put together!"

He settled himself down to the labour of love—at least, he prepared to settle down. But within the space of five minutes no less than three juniors had looked in, and had asked various trivial questions in the politest of voices. During the brief period, Handforth had found it necessary to salute no less than forty-seven times. So far, he hadn't even looked at the typewriter.

"Oh, crumbs!" he murmured, resting his saluting arm.

And then Church and McClure came in. Handforth leapt to his feet.

"I don't want any saluting!" he said hoarsely.

"Why not, captain?" asked Church, saluting.

Edward Oswald's hand automatically shot up.

"Because I'm fed-up with it!" he snapped fiercely.

"Fed-up with it, captain?" asked McClure in amazement as he touched his forelock. "But the new order hasn't been in force for more than an hour, captain. We all thought you were tremendously pleased, captain."

"Don't keep calling me 'captain'!" hooted Handforth.

His chums backed away, saluting.

"But—but you told us to, captain!" said Church unhappily.

Handforth gulped and recovered himself.

"Yes, I know I did!" he muttered. "It's all right—I'm a bit worried this evening. I've got some typewriting to do, and during the last half-hour I've been pestered—I—I mean, I've been giving advice," he said hastily. "I'm going along to the office to do that typewriting."

"The office, captain?" asked Church.

"Yes—I shall be quiet there," said his leader. "This manuscript has got to be ready for Irene——"

"Irene!" interrupted McClure. "And you're going to use the captain's office for a purely personal job like that, captain? It wouldn't be fair!"

"Eh? What the dickens——"

"As Form captain, captain, you ought to know!" went on McClure severely. "That office is only for strictly official business. And you're proposing to go there to type out a manuscript for Irene? Why, it's unfair to the Form! You can't allow your conscience to agree to such a thing! Such a private matter ought to be done here in the study, captain."

Handforth acknowledged two salutes and ground his teeth.

"But I'll lock myself in, anyhow!" he vowed.

"Lock yourself in, captain?" repeated Church, shocked. "Then how can the chaps come to you for advice, and to tell you their troubles? This has got to be an ever-open door, captain—as you ought to know without any telling."

(Continued on page 42.)

All About Our Great New Year Programme!

MY DEAR CHUMS,—
This is the last week of the old year, and as this is the last opportunity I shall have of writing to you in 1932, let me here and now wish you all a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

1933 is going to be another year of triumph for the NELSON LEE. Upon that I have fully made up my mind. And you can do *your* bit towards making 1933 a greater year than ever for the Old Paper by introducing it to those pals of yours who do not at present read it. Let them know what they have been missing; it won't be long before they will be as keen as you are on the Old Paper. That can be your little job for the new year. Mine will be to provide you readers with the very best programmes possible.

Already I have started on a special campaign. Mr. E. S. Brooks, who is undoubtedly the most popular writer of boys' stories, has written a new series of yarns which will start in the early 1933 issues. This series will deal with Nelson Lee, the detective; Nipper; and the chums of St. Frank's. A strong detective theme will be running through the stories, and the scenes will be laid at St. Frank's and in other parts of the country. I need hardly tell you that this series is simply magnificent.

Then we have that wonderful war story, "The Green Button!" about which I said a few words last week. Here, indeed, is a hundred-per-cent treat.

"The Green Button!" is a story which deals with the adventures of the British Secret Service during the Great War of 1914-18. As you can imagine, this offers great scope for thrilling and unusual adventures. And when I tell you that most of the adventures will take place behind the German lines, you will be doubly eager to start reading it. This story starts in the Nelson Lee in two weeks' time, so look out for it.

READERS' PRIZE JOKES.

"Good morning, Mr. Flanagan, and how's business with you?"

"Bad! Even the people who never pay have stopped buying."

(J. Dagley, 390, Swindon Road, Cheltenham—a penknife.)

First Strong Man: "Every morning at six I get up and run into a field, and put my arms round a tree and pull until I have pulled the tree up."

Second ditto: "Every morning at six I get



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Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

up and run down to the river. I get into a boat and pull at the oars until I have pulled up the river."

(C. Eames, 24, Howsman Road, Barnes, Surrey, S.W.13.)—a penknife.)

The town dweller had been peppering the old farmer with

questions about everything he did, and at last the old man was completely fed-up.

As he was rolling a field the nuisance asked.

"Now, farmer, tell me, why do you use such a heavy roller for your potato field?"

"Ah," replied the farmer, "I'm going to grow mashed potatoes this year."

(M. E. Marx, Southfield, Bloomfield Road, Bath, Somerset—a pocket wallet.)

A Scotsman approached the attendant of a bowling green and handed him twopence.

"What's this for?" asked the attendant.

"A game of bowls," replied the Scot.

"Yes, but the fee is sixpence. Read the board?"

"I have done," nodded the Scot. "It says, 'Fees for the Green, sixpence a game,' but I'm not green."

(F. Aino, 11, St. Agnes Place, Kennington, S.E.11—a penknife.)

PEN PALS.

Ernest W. Jennings, 40, Dudley Street, Coogee, New South Wales, Australia, wants correspondents, 12-14, interested in cricket, swimming, and all sports.

Eric March, 16, Tripney Avenue, Peterborough, South Australia, wants to exchange stamps and cigarette cards.

Audrey Sullivan, Olive Dene, Rossall Beach, Fleetwood, Lancs, wants correspondents.

Miss Joan Coy, Hinton, Rugby, wants girl correspondents in South Africa, Australia and Canada.

Miss Edith Morse, Parsons Street, Woodford Halse, Rugby, wants girl correspondents in Canada; ages 15-17.

Geoffrey Webb, 42A, Walford Avenue, Birches Barn Estate, Wolverhampton, Staffs, wants Scout correspondents in China, India and Hungary.

H. J. Haycock, the Butts, Oughterside, Maryport, Cumberland, wants correspondents outside Scotland; ages 17-19.

Miss V. Baynes, Hinton, Woodford Halse, Rugby, wants girl correspondents in Canada; ages 13-14.

James Hutt (same address) wants to hear from stamp collectors; ages 12-16

(Continued from page 40.)

"Well, there goes the bell for bed!" said McClure with a grin. "That's settled all the argument for to-night, captain."

He saluted and went out. Church saluted and went out. And Handforth stood there, breathing heavily. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, and automatically saluted. And as his reflection naturally saluted simultaneously, he did it three times before he realised the situation.

"Bah!" he panted. "They're all mad!"

But he realised, with a fearful shock, that it was impossible for him to complain. The Remove was simply obeying his orders. And he ought, strictly speaking, to be filled with satisfaction.

But for some reason he wasn't at all satisfied!

Piling It On!

THAT night Handforth was troubled with many nightmares. He dreamed that his right arm had swollen to about five times its usual size, and St. Frank's, instead of being a school, was a huge ship. Not merely the Remove, but everybody else constantly passed up and down before him in a kind of parade, and he was kept at his saluting job until he fell overboard from sheer exhaustion.

He awoke in a perspiration, and discovered that the unwelcome note of the rising-bell was clanging out. He lounged in bed, immensely relieved to find that everything was normal. But it was a fact that his arm certainly did ache a little. He examined it, and thought he detected one or two signs of swelling, too.

He remembered the orgy of saluting the previous night. He had not been spared, even after the bed-time bell had rung. On his way up to the dormitory he had passed through thousands of juniors, who were all saluting. Actually, there had not been more than twenty or twenty-five, but many of them had made a point of passing Handforth three or four times by devious subterfuges, and Handforth had finally sought refuge in the dormitory, only to discover his chums saluting him with every word they said.

"There's got to be a change!" he muttered firmly.

But how? He was rather uneasy about it. These were the very first orders that the Remove had ever accepted without jibbing. So how could he possibly cancel them and retain his dignity.

Naturally, the idiots would only jump to the conclusion that he was cancelling the new order because it was too much trouble to acknowledge their salutes! They were bound to think something dotty like that!

"Human nature's a rummy thing!" thought Handforth bitterly. "If I rescind this order for their sakes, they'll think I'm doing it for my own! It's funny how people always misunderstand you! And this giddy

'captain' business, too! It's getting on my nerves! I wouldn't mind if they did it in reason, but it's all rot!"

Still, he had suggested it himself, so how could he get out of it?"

Church yawned, sat up, and glanced at the window.

"Another fine day!" he said drowsily. "A bit chilly, though, by the look of the wind."

"Don't be silly!" said Handforth crossly. "You can't see the wind!"

"No, but I can see the way it's moving all the trees and bringing down the leaves!" replied Church, getting out of bed. "Anything wrong, Handy? You're looking a bit peevish this morning."

"Well, you're wrong!" said Handforth very peevishly.

"After yesterday, you ought to be——" Church paused, remembering himself. "Sorry, captain!" he added, saluting. "Good-morning, captain!"

"Good-morning!" snarled Handforth.

"Good-morning, captain!" said McClure—saluting in turn.

"Look here, you chaps!" said Handforth thickly. "I'm fed-up with this! Remember, I'm talking to you in private! I'm fed-up to the neck! If either of you salute me again, I'll slaughter you! And don't call me captain, either."

His chums looked amazed.

"But you distinctly said——" began Mac.

"I don't care what I distinctly said!" raved Handforth. "I'm not going to have you saluting me every minute of the day! Understand that!"

Church breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, thank goodness it's over," he said with relief. "But there's never any satisfying some people. My only hat! This is a lesson for us, Mac, if you like!"

"One that we shan't forget in a hurry," agreed McClure, nodding.

"What do you mean?" demanded Handforth.

"What do we mean?" repeated Church, his voice quivering with wrath. "You're never satisfied, you discontented fathead! That's what I mean. And if you don't like it, we'll put your head under the tap, and half-drown you!"

"Quick!" added McClure grimly.

Handforth was startled by the aggressive tones.

"Why, you insubordinate mutineers——" he began.

"That's enough!" interrupted Church curtly.

"Wha-a-at?"

"I say, that's enough!" repeated Church. "You're a fine chap to give us orders, aren't you? You're a fine kind of skipper! The Remove jibs at everything you suggest, and you get wild, and distribute black eyes and thick ears until further orders! You're not satisfied with a discontented Remove!"

"Well?"

"Well, the Remove agrees to your suggestions, and gives you a free hand to do just as you like, and even that's not good enough for you! You order us all to call you captain, you order us to salute you, and within twelve hours you're fed-up! What you need is your own way every time—with full permission to change your mind twice an hour! You can mess about with Mac and me, perhaps, but you can't mess about with the Remove!"

"Oh, can't I?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, well, do as you like, of course!" snapped Church. "But what's going to happen to a Form captain who gives an order one day, and withdraws it the next. You'll forfeit all respect, and you'll be the laughing-stock of the school!"

"He's that now!" said McClure fiercely.

"Well, he'll be the yelling-stock of the school," amended Church. "My hat! Won't everybody yell if he abandons this saluting business—just to save his own arm! Why, Handy, you ass, you'll be ridiculed so much that you'll have to resign from sheer shame."

"I won't -resign!" hissed Handforth.

"Then stick in the captaincy, and do your worst!" shouted Church. "You won't resign, and you won't abide by your own orders, and you're just as discontented when the Remove obeys you as when it doesn't! You're like a baby that's been robbed of its rattle!"

Church went on dressing, and Handforth was so staggered by this rank mutiny that he hadn't sufficient strength to smash his chums to pulp. Besides, his conscience was pricking him. He had a most uncomfortable feeling that his chums were right. It had been bad enough while the Remove was opposed to him. But now that the Remove was doing exactly as he had ordered, everything was going wrong!

That was the rummy part of it. He had enjoyed himself thoroughly while the Form was jibbing at his orders. He didn't realise that opposition was the breath of life to him. He failed to understand that a meek Remove was the very last thing he desired in his heart. It left him nothing to shout about! There weren't any noses to punch! Robbed of any arguments, Handforth was like a lost sheep.

Church and McClure were dressed before he was, and when they went downstairs they found Fullwood and Reggie Pitt.

"Well, how's the patient?" asked Pitt.

"Peevish," said Church with a grin. "By jingo, Reggie, you're a cunning beggar! You couldn't do anything with Handy while you opposed him—but now he's nearly ready to knuckle under! He's fed-up with this saluting business, and he's like a bear with a sore head."

"He's fed-up, is he? Good egg! Rush round and tell the fellows to be ready! We'll give him another dose of it before breakfast! We'll make his arm ache so much that he won't be able to use his knife and fork!"

And when Handforth came down, he walked into the thick of it. He was cautious, too. He came out of the dormitory quietly, meaning to steal down and lock himself in Study D so that he could do some of that typewriting for Irene. He was very worried about it. It was Friday already, and he had definitely promised the complete MS. for Tuesday. It would take every minute of his spare time!

Brent came out of his own dormitory, saw Handforth, and saluted.

"Morning, Captain Handforth!" he said cheerfully. "Any fresh orders to-day?"

"No!" said Handforth, saluting in return.

"We're all eager to obey, captain!" said Brent, saluting again.

"Go and eat coke!" hooted the leader of Study D.

"Thanks!" grinned Brent, saluting for the third time. "But when I said we were willing to obey orders, captain, I meant anything within reason."

Handforth strode on, and that nightmare of his was a pleasant memory compared to the experience he went through now. Before he reached Study D, he had passed everybody in the Remove, and some of them twice. And they had all said "Good-morning, Captain Handforth!" with the utmost cheeriness, and they had all saluted. His arm was as heavy as lead by the time he found refuge in his study.

And then Church and McClure came in.

"Get out!" howled Handforth dangerously.

"But, my dear chap——"

"I'm busy!" raved Edward Oswald.

They backed out, and he slammed the door. The whole affair was getting on his nerves. Well, thank goodness he could get ahead with that typewriting now! If he didn't get ahead with it he would disappoint Irene, he would break his promise, and——

"Blow the Remove!" he muttered. "Blow the captaincy!"

He sat himself in front of the typewriter, and feverishly attempted to work it. And, naturally, being agitated, the thing jammed and jibbed worse than ever. The cleverness of Reggie Pitt's plan was now obvious. With the Remove docile, Handforth's position would have been quite aggravating enough—but this typewriting job made it a hundred-fold more so. That manuscript had to be typed—there was only a limited amount of time—and it was for Irene!

"Good!" breathed Handforth at last. "I'm just getting the hang of it. Now I can settle down, and——"

Clang-clang!

"Breakfast!" roared Church through the door as he thumped the panel.

Edward Oswald Handforth sagged down in his chair.

"What's the use?" he muttered dismally.

(The reign of Handforth, as skipper of the Lower School is drawing to a close. Just how it finishes you will read in next week's exciting chapters of this fine School Story.)

NERKI THE SORCERER!

(Continued from page 34.)

magnet. It was worked by a small motor, below—and the magnets themselves were concealed behind the walls of the dining-room.

Lee found out that Lady Bowers had been away, during the summer, for over two months, and the house had been locked up. But Nerki had had access to it, of course, by means of that secret passage. And during that time he had had ample opportunity to fix up his various fakes.

It was that electro-magnet which had lifted the silver from the table, and had then sent it crashing against the wall. It was no ordinary magnet, for the silver would not have been affected. There was some special quality about it which was Nerki's own secret.

As for the tables and the chairs, Lee was satisfied that these had been flung into the air by means of wires.

The door, which had been smashed on Nelson Lee's arrival, of course, had been burst open by Petrovitch. The giant Cossack, in the darkness of the hall, had easily accomplished that task. The fires had been doused by chemical powders. And those whispering voices which had been heard in the upper corridor, had come from secreted loud-speakers.

The great wood box, too, had been hurled by Petrovitch—and when Nerki had dropped into the hall, apparently to the floor, he had been caught by the Cossack, and so no sound had been made. And whilst Lee and the others had been half-blinded by sulphur fumes

—which Nerki had released—the pair had escaped through the clock.

Lee found that there was a hole in the ceiling of that bed-room—where the four-poster bed had rocked. A single wire, no doubt, had been dropped through that hole, and the hook had caught the bottom of the bed. Petrovitch, in the room above, had hauled on the wire, rocking the bed, and tipping it completely over.

As for Nerki's real game? Lady Bowers admitted to Nelson Lee, later, in confidence—that Nerki had won her completely over to the "art" of sorcery. With its aid, he told her, all ills could be cured. She had even promised to endow a great institution. His object was to obtain a sum of fifty thousand pounds from Lady Bowers, and this was to be paid into a bank in Southampton, where a joint account would be opened. And these funds were to be used for the building of the institution.

It was the old, old story. Within a couple of days Nerki would have grabbed all the funds and bolted.

And now she realised what a narrow escape she had had—and she was generous enough to thank Archie and to admit that she had been a very foolish old woman. And the rest of those holidays were happy indeed, for all the members of that gay party.

THE END.

(Next week's Detective-Thriller is entitled: "Secret Service!" which deals with the amazing adventures of Nelson Lee and Nipper.)

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