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THE CLUE OF THE TWISTED RING.

STORIES FROM
NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK—No. 3

An Amazing Case in which NELSON LEE and his Boy Assistant played the leading parts.

Taken from the pages of NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK, and prepared for publication by the Author of "The Green Triangle" Series.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH A MOTOR-BUS HAS A FIT ON BLACKHEATH, AND DECIDES TO TAKE A WELL-EARNED REST—AND IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I SHELTER FROM A STORM, AND HAPPEN UPON A WHOLE HEAP OF EXCITEMENT.

BLACKHEATH was black. That's not a very surprising statement, is it? I suppose Blackheath always is black, come to that; it can't be anything else. But at this particular hour, and on this particular evening, it was as inky as the Styx—which was a river of Hades, I believe, or somewhere like that. Anyhow, I once heard the gov'nor mention it, so it must be right.

The gov'nor—Mr. Nelson Lee, the world-famous criminologist—and I were crossing Blackheath on top of a motor-omnibus. At least, we were supposed to be doing so. To tell the truth we ought to have been in Lewisham by this time.

But Fate willed it otherwise—as the novelist say.

Nelson Lee and I had been in Blackheath village—"some" village, too!—inquiring after the health of a certain gentle individual who was wanted for embezzlement, fraud, and a few other little complaints. We'd collared the joker, too, and had handed him over to the police. Not much of an affair—tame, in fact.

And now, at half-past-nine, we were on our way home.

Some evil imp of mischief had persuaded us to get on a motor-'bus. The gov'nor, I remember, said that I was that imp of mischief. I admit that I suggested the idea, but how was I to know the 'bus was paralytic?

It seemed all right when we got on it. I won't say the name of the company the 'bus belonged to, because they might sue me for libel and damages. Not that they'd have any case; I could produce half-a-dozen witnesses to prove that the 'bus was nothing more nor less than a perambulating mass of old iron.

I'd suggested the idea because the night was calm and balmy. It strikes me, though, that I was balmy, too! After we'd been on top five minutes the trouble started. We'd just got on to Blackheath, and the dark, long stretch of the great common was before us.

Nelson Lee was pulling at his pipe comfortably, and doing his utmost to shove me off the seat. There's none too much room on these omnibus seats, and when a chap like the gov'nor squats nearest the rail, there's very little chance for a poor fellow on the rest of the seat.

I was just thinking of sending him a note of protest—I couldn't very well declare war until he committed an overt act—when the engine gave a kind of dismal series of konks, and the old 'bus vibrated all over. The driver humoured the beast, however, and we crawled onwards.

"Splendid means of locomotion, Nipper," remarked the gov'nor pleasantly. "We shall arrive home to breakfast, with luck."

"Don't rub it in, sir," I grunted. "We'll get out at Lee or Lewisham and then go by train. Can't you push up a bit? I've only got about two inches of seat, and you're sprawling about as though I wasn't here at all!"

Nelson Lee chuckled, and edged up about a sixteenth of an inch.

"How's that, young 'un?" he asked blandly. "Any better?"

"Any better!" I snorted. "Why,

you haven't moved at all! You only jolly well pretended to. There ought to be a division in the middle of these seats, so that a greedy bounder can't take the giddy lot!"

I felt a bit scared then. It wasn't respectful, to say the least, to call the guv'nor a "greedy bounder," and I wondered if the heavens would fall. But it wasn't the heavens that fell—it was Nelson Lee's hand.

He caught me a beautiful whack on the left knee; one of those mighty slaps which sound like an explosion and which don't hurt a bit. I believe an old joanser behind us thought the 'bus was collapsing.

"How dare you, Nipper?" demanded Nelson Lee sternly.

"How dare I what?"

"Refer to your master in such outrageous terms?"

"Well, ain't you a greedy bounder?" I asked boldly. "I didn't speak without cause. This seat was made to accommodate two people— Oh, rats! We've stopped altogether now!"

It was perhaps as well that the diversion occurred, because diplomatic relations seemed on the point of being severed. I jumped up and leaned over the front of the 'bus. I could see the driver fairly plainly; at least, a part of him. The rest was buried in the interior of the works. The poor chap was investigating, and he was bending right over the engine.

Then the conductress strolled along the back, and commenced making sarcastic inquiries. This was unkind, as well as being the limit. The driver came to the surface again, so to speak, and proceeded to bestow compliments upon petrol-engines, motor-buses, and this old turn-out in particular.

"Can't we get on, Sam?" asked the conductress.

"Git on! You make me tired, gal!" snapped the man. "'Ow in thunder can we git on when the bloomin' injin won't wozzle? It ain't the juice, 'cos the carb'rotter is swimmin'. I reckon it's the blamed mag!"

"What's the mag, Sam?"

"'Oo's the driver of this 'ere 'bus?" growled the poor chap. "You go an' attend to your own affairs, miss! An' tell the coves inside as they'll 'ave ta wait for the nex' 'bus to come along. This old can's 'ad a fit, an' perished!"

"We've been going badly all along."

"'Ave we, now? You surprise me—you do reely!" exclaimed the driver, with heavy and delicious sarcasm. "Fancy me not noticin' it! Go back to your perch, do! You're all right be'ind, but when it comes to a job like this 'ere a man's wanted."

"You're a man, Sam," hinted the conductress naively

"Oo sez I wasn't?"

"Well, you don't seem to be doing much, do you?" she asked. "I could stand and look at it, just as you're doing. Why don't you have a look at the plugs? Or there might be a wire missing somewhere?"

I chuckled, and the driver glanced 'up at me. He shrugged his shoulders, and turned back to his engine with an expression of absolute fed-uppishness on his face. I jabbed the guv'nor on the arm.

"We'd better slide, sir," I suggested.

"Yes, I suppose it is useless remaining on this vehicle," said Nelson Lee, rising to his feet. "Rather a pity, Nipper; I was quite comfortable."

We get off, the conductress informing us that another 'bus would probably be along in about a quarter-of-an-hour.

"We'll be walking on, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "If this 'bus is a sample of the company's fleet, we may have to wait for a couple of hours. Walking will do us no harm, in any case."

So we started, leaving the stranded 'bus behind. Two or three other passengers sat in it looking woebegone and miserable. It was certainly a rotten state of affairs. Being stranded on Blackheath wasn't exactly pleasant.

It was quite dark, and the stars were hidden by thick clouds. Yet the air was warm and pleasant for the time of year—spring—and the road was dry. So walking wasn't much of a hardship.

Blackheath stretched out on all sides of us, and the wide expanse seemed somewhat grim and sinister to me. I suppose it was the complete loneliness and the absence of bright street lamps. It was a job to follow the road at all.

"I think we'll cut across here," suggested Nelson Lee presently, turning from the road and making his way up a footpath which crossed the heath. "This will land us at the top of a hill which leads directly down to Lewisham."

"Then we shall miss the next 'bus when it comes along," I objected.

"Never mind. It's a splendid exercise—walking."

I didn't object much. After all, we should arrive at Lewisham in heaps of time to catch a train for town. And as long as we got home to Gray's Inn Road in time for a good supper, there wasn't anything to grumble at.

Thinking of grub reminded me of something. I fished in my pocket and produced a packet of chewing-gum—a special brand which isn't on sale everywhere. I always got it from a place in Holborn. Ripping fine chewing-gum, flavoured with clove. Most chewing-gum is peppermint, and I don't like peppermint much. This stuff was Al, and of extra good quality. I knew what was good.

"Have some, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Some what, Nipper?"

"Chewing-gum—I've got heaps here."

"My dear lad, enjoy yourself," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head. "Don't ask me to weary my jaws by chewing an unknown substance which refuses to be masticated. Chewing-gum, I believe, is beneficial, but hardly dignified. I have no desire to be mistaken for a New Yorker. My opinion of America is not exactly at high-water mark, at present. I only hope events will cause me to change my opinion."

"Right-ho, sir, all the more for me," I said cheerfully.

I got through the whole packet, and by the time it was soft I had about as much as I could manage. A mouthful, in fact. Still, I didn't want to talk much, and it passed the time.

Over to our left I could see a row of big old houses, each standing in its own grounds. And a little further on there was another footpath crossing the one we were traversing.

And just then, of course, it started to rain.

This would naturally happen when we were without machintoshes and umbrellas. And it didn't rain gently, either. In about two twos it was pelting down furiously, and we seemed to be in for a drenching.

"Dear me, Nipper!" exclaimed the gov'nor. "This is unfortunate— Ah, some trees. I think we had better run for shelter; this rain is probably only a shower. It will be over soon."

We ran for the trees, which, I dimly saw, grew in a clump close by. When we arrived we were just damp on the

surface. And we stood there listening to the hiss of the rain, and feeling happy.

"Just our luck!" I grunted, shifting the chewing-gum into my cheek.

"I fancy that gentleman is getting wet," remarked the gov'nor.

I looked round, and strained my eyes a bit. Coming along the other footpath was a slight figure. In that gloom I judged the man to be rather old, for he seemed to stoop a bit, and he walked curiously. He was hurrying towards the row of detached houses I mentioned a minute ago.

"Silly juggins!" I said unkindly.

"Probably the gentleman lives close by, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "He is anxious to get indoors— Upon my word, look there!"

His tone was sharp now, and I stared again. A big drop had just descended my neck, and was exploring my back, so I didn't feel comfortable. But Lee's tone told me that something was doing.

I was just in time to witness an incident which filled me with indignation and warlike desires. Two dim forms had risen from behind a bush, and they stood right in the path of the solitary wayfarer. And without hesitation they hurled themselves upon him and bore him to the ground.

I could see a mass of struggling forms, and then came a low cry; or half-a-cry, for it was abruptly cut short.

"The—the rotters!" I gasped. "Come on, gov'nor!"

Of course, Nelson Lee was rushing to the rescue already. We pelted across the uneven grass, forgetful of the rain and everything else. The poor chap in front of us was being attacked by a couple of footpads, and there was no telling what they'd do to their victim.

Our feet made no sound upon the grass, and we got right close before the rotters knew that we were there. And we heard something quite clearly—something which seemed to show that this was more than a common assault.

"Now we've got yer, old 'un!" grated a harsh voice. "If you don't tell us the secret we'll choke the life—"

"Look out, Mike!" gasped another voice.

The brutes had seen us, and they didn't wait for further particulars. I heard several horrible curses, and then a hoarse cry of alarm and pain. It was all confusion for a moment or two.

The two attackers rushed off, and—preposterous though it seemed—there was now utterly no sign of the man they had assaulted. I rushed on madly, nearly swallowing my chewing-gum in my excitement.

Next second I got a terrific shock.

Without warning I felt myself plunging downwards—into space! Then I hit the ground with a jar which shook every bone in my body. I rolled over like a shot rabbit, and lay there gasping and seeing whole constellations of stars.

For a moment I dazedly wondered what the thunder had happened. But as I rose to my feet—rather unsteadily—I saw that I was in a kind of pit-like depression. This was right alongside the footpath, and in my hurry I hadn't seen it. Naturally, I went over the edge and collapsed.

The sides of the depression were sloping, of course, and grass-covered. At an ordinary walk, or a trot even, I shouldn't have come to any harm. It was my speed which bowled me over.

But, being a hardy young beggar—that's what the *guy*'nor calls me—I didn't come to much harm. When I got to my feet, almost the first thing I noticed was the depression into which I had fallen, and a dark form which lay on the grass near by.

I understood, now, why the attacked man had disappeared. The two footpads had chucked him over the edge in their anger, and he'd fared more severely than I. Before I could bend over him I saw Nelson Lee coming towards me.

"Did you catch 'em, *guy*'nor?" I asked gaspingly.

"No, Nipper, I didn't," he replied. "The scoundrels succeeded in finding cover among the trees. They had a good start, remember, and, once concealed, it was impossible for me to locate them."

"Well, it doesn't matter much, does it?" I exclaimed. "Even if you had copped 'em they'd have been a nasty handful. We just came on the scene in time—although they knocked this poor old fellow out of gear!"

The *guy*'nor came nearer to me.

"Did you hear what one of those ruffians said, Nipper?" he asked, as he bent over the fallen man.

"Something about a secret, wasn't it, *guy*?"

"Yes, they were threatening to choke him unless he told them something," went on Lee. "That doesn't seem as if this

were an ordinary 'robbery with violence' case, does it? I believe there is more in this affair than meets the eye. H'm! Rather a bad knock, I'm afraid."

We were both bending over the unconscious man now, and I fished out my electric torch and switched it on.

"Ah, that's better, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee.

We saw a somewhat small man with a wrinkled, wizened face. He was clean shaven except for neat side whiskers. His hair was slightly grey, and just over his left ear there was a nasty, ugly bruise.

This had obviously been caused by violent contact with a sharp stone which lay near by. One of the man's hands, too, was bleeding.

"I wonder who he is, *guy*?" I said.

"I think we had better find out, my lad."

And Nelson Lee placed his fingers in the two waistcoat pockets of the unconscious old fellow. In one was a watch, but the other contained—as the *guy*'nor had surmised—a card-case.

And we both read the following: "Professor Marcus Walton." There were about eight or ten letters after the name, but I forget what they were exactly, but they all signified that he was a tremendously scientific individual. And the address was: "Myrtle House, West Road, Blackheath."

What could the reason of that strange assault have been?

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH NELSON LEE AND I ENTER A MOST REMARKABLE HOUSE, AND ENCOUNTER THERE SOME EVEN MORE REMARKABLE ADVENTURES—AND IN WHICH PROFESSOR WALTON ACTS IN A MANNER BOTH ASTOUNDING AND MYSTERIOUS.

NELSON LEE took a clean handkerchief from his pocket, and calmly tore it into strips.

"We must do the best we can for the professor, Nipper," he exclaimed briskly. "West Road, as I know, is quite close by. Those houses we could see, in fact, are situated in West Road. It is a road with only one side—that is to say there are houses bordering one pavement only. And those houses, of course, face the Heath."

"Are we going to carry the old Johnny home?"

"Yes, if necessary. He won't be very heavy, Nipper."

By this time the gov'nor had prepared his bandages, and one of these were fastened round the professor's head. For the bruise had been bleeding a little, and was swelling seriously.

The other bandage, much smaller, was reserved for the injured hand. The rain was still coming down, but finely now, and I expected it would be all over before long. We were all soaked, of course, but we hadn't any time to think of little worries of that sort. Fortunately the ground was hard and the grass thick.

"Hold the light a little nearer, Nipper."

I did so, and Nelson Lee lifted up the injured hand and placed it upon his knee. It was the third finger which was injured; nothing much, a long cut, which had probably been made by a sharp pebble. But it was bleeding and required seeing to at once.

"That's a queer looking ring, gov'nor, isn't it?" I asked.

"I was just thinking the same thing, Nipper," he replied. "I don't think I have ever seen such a quaintly designed ring before. It's a ring that can't help being noticed."

"Sort of stares at you, doesn't it, sir?" I observed.

The ring was a gold one, of course, but the design was exceedingly novel. It was a mass of twists, and there were two blue stones set in it. The twists were wonderfully executed, and the thing must have been of some value.

"They're sapphires, aren't they, sir?" I asked.

"They appear to be, Nipper. But I am attending to the injury, my dear lad," Lee went on. "It doesn't matter whether the stones are sapphires or rubies or diamonds. Being blue, however, I should say they were the former."

This was a bit of sarcasm on the gov'nor's part, and I didn't say any more. I knew that he was looking very closely at the ring, though. Nelson Lee was always interested in anything that was novel and unusual. And this twisted ring was certainly out of the ordinary.

"Now, Nipper, I think we'll carry——"

He paused. It was rather curious, but just at that moment Professor Marcus Walton sighed a little, and shifted one of his feet a trifle. Both the gov'nor and I looked at him closely.

"He's coming round," I said.

Nelson Lee didn't reply, but we bent over the professor and watched him. And after a few more sighs he partially recovered. His eyes opened and he stared at us dully and dazedly.

"You—you scoundrel," he muttered hoarsely. "You won't get anything out of me——"

"Come, my dear sir, we are friends," said the gov'nor gently. "We have just saved you from the violence of two foot-pads. If you feel well enough to walk we will assist you home."

"It's a lie—a lie!" breathed the professor. "You're going to rob me—— But the secret—you sha'n't get the secret out of me! You scoundrels! You rogues! You vagabonds!"

"He's giving us nice characters, ain't he, sir?" I murmured.

"Hush, Nipper. The poor man is still very dazed."

As Nelson Lee spoke he assisted Mr. Walton to rise. The man couldn't possibly have done anything alone, but with the pair of us to help him he was able to stagger to his feet.

The scientist hung on us heavily, and if we hadn't grabbed hold of him with all our might he'd have slipped to the ground again. We were forced to practically drag him along, his feet trailing.

But after the first hundred yards had been covered he got a bit better and was able to drag his feet himself. He allowed us to do exactly what we wanted, but quite suddenly he roused himself. It was with an effort, I know.

"Bear to the left!" he muttered huskily. "It's the third house—the third——"

His voice trailed away again. But we were saved the trouble of finding out the exact position of Myrtle House. This would have been a bit of a job, I expect, in that darkness. And although the hour wasn't late—it was not yet ten—we couldn't see a soul about.

The rain had ceased now, and we staggered along until at last we stood outside the gate of the house the professor had indicated. Just to make sure I bent forward, and on the gate I saw "Myrtle House" in dingy white letters.

"Good thing he told us where to come, sir," I panted. "There's nobody about at all, and we should have had the dickens of a job."

We pushed the gate open and walked

up the somewhat untidy gravel path. There was not a single light showing in the house, and, by what I could see, it didn't look very neat and tidy. This wasn't very surprising, though. Old scientific professors are proverbially careless and untidy.

Nelson Lee rang the bell hard, and didn't trouble to ask the injured man if he was feeling brisk enough to open the door himself. We wanted to get him indoors as soon as possible. His head needed bathing and bandaging urgently.

The door was opened very quickly, and we saw a dimly lit hall—large and shadowy, with old dingy furniture. In the doorway stood a stoutish man who was obviously a butler. I can spot butlers in half a jiffy. There's something about the breed that absolutely marks 'em out as though they were labelled.

"This is Professor Walton's house, I believe?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir. Good gracious me——!"

"Don't be alarmed, my man. The professor has been assaulted on the Heath, and we have brought him home. Show us into one of the rooms at once."

"I—I don't know as I ought to let you come in, sir——"

"Tut, tut!" said the gov'nor impatiently. "The professor is injured, and it is necessary that he should be attended to at once."

The butler was plainly scared, but he led the way down the hall, and opened a large door. Going in before us he switched on some electric lights. We got into the apartment, and the professor was gently lowered into a big chair.

"Phew! Glad we've got him home," I said, stretching myself.

I looked round, and saw that we were in a kind of library. There were bookshelves all round, and they were packed with volumes. The carpet was soft, but rather old, and worn in several places.

The electric lights were brilliant, and they cast a light down direct upon a big, flat-topped desk—one of those pedestal-desks of the old-fashioned variety. It was smothered with papers and books and nasty inkstands. I saw "The Lancet," too, and several other scientific journals.

At the other end of the room, opposite the door, there were some thick plush curtains. And on the walls were the most extraordinary objects—bones, and glass cases containing stuffed reptiles and

snakes and insects. Over the mirror at the fireplace were a couple of human thigh-bones, placed cross-wise, as though they had been ornamental trophies! And I got a bit of a start when I turned my gaze towards the far corner of the room. A blessed skeleton was standing there, grinning cheerfully at us. It was all wired and screwed together, of course, or it couldn't have stood upright as it did.

A jolly cheerful room altogether, I thought. Just the room for a chap to be in when he felt lonely. With those horrid-looking stuffed things, and the bones, and the whole skeleton, a chap couldn't very well feel lonely, could he?

There was an electric-light fixed upon the desk, so that it cast a light upon the blotting-pad. And I noticed, with a fresh feeling of creepiness, that the light-bulb was held in the hand of a stuffed monkey. The monkey itself wasn't so bad—in fact, it was jolly well stuffed—but on its face was the most awful look of savagery. Its teeth were bared, and its eyes seemed to be blue; they glittered and scintillated as though they had life.

"Ugh!" I muttered to myself. "I'll be glad to get out of here!"

Not that I'm a nervous bounder. I'd keep my wits if I were suddenly cast into a mortuary. But, somehow, this apartment was so full of "horrors" that it gave me the creeps. The Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's was a kid's nursery compared to it.

Nelson Lee didn't seem to notice anything. Yet I knew that he'd taken in every article in the room in one swift glance. The butler chap was standing at the door obviously uneasy.

The gov'nor was about to speak to him when Professor Walton roused himself somewhat. That whack on the head had been a nasty one, and he was still decidedly groggy.

He half-rose, holding on to the desk.

"Go, George—go!" he ordered shakily.

"I—I thought, sir, that you didn't permit——"

"Go, I tell you!"

"Yes, sir."

George went, apparently as uneasy as ever. George evidently didn't like his master being knocked about. And I believe he regarded the gov'nor and I as a pair of thieving rascals. George was evidently an ass.

The door closed after him with a kind

of thud, and then a click. This was because it was covered with thick green baize—evidently to shut the sound out. The professor was a lover of quietude, I expect. He was welcome to it, with all those cheerful companions around him.

I looked at him curiously. His wrinkled face was pale, and his eyes seemed to shine rather weakly. Yet they were kindly eyes, and he suddenly smiled. When he did so he looked strangely genial.

"I am dazed," he muttered, raising a hand to his head. "I have to thank you, sir, for rescuing me from a pair of rascally—rascally—— Ah! The pain is returning, I believe——"

His voice went into a whisper, and he flopped back into the chair with a sudden gasp. Nelson Lee bent over him, and then turned to me.

"He is unconscious again, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "Fetch some water quickly. There is some here, probably."

I looked round.

There was a sideboard, but it was quite bare of water-bottle or spirit decanter or soda-syphon. There wasn't a drop of liquid anywhere. I turned to Lee again, and shook my head.

"There's nothing here, sir," I said.

"My dear Nipper, go to the door and shout for George, then," said Nelson Lee impatiently. "I'm not sure that we ought not to send for a doctor. I am quite capable of attending to the injury, but the professor will probably be more comfortable if in the hands of his own physician. Yes, my lad, fetch a doctor as soon as possible. We shall then be relieved of all responsibility."

"Just as well, perhaps," I said. "I'm not anxious to stay here long."

I stepped briskly to the door, and turned the handle. I pulled, but nothing happened; the door wouldn't budge. Stuck, of course. It was the baize which made it go hard. I gave a more vigorous pull, but the door didn't open.

"Well I'm jiggered—we're locked in, sir!" I ejaculated.

"Eh?" asked the gov'nor. "What did you say?"

"We're locked in!"

"Nonsense! Pull harder, young 'un."

We couldn't ask the professor anything because he was insensible. I jammed my foot against the woodwork and pulled with both hands. It was amazing. The rotten door wouldn't even shake. It was

as though it were part of the wall itself. And I could see that it was a massive thing, probably made of oak.

"You come and try, sir," I gasped.

Nelson Lee came over to me, frowning with perplexity. And our united efforts were useless. The door was certainly locked. The detective bent down and examined the baize closely.

"Why, upon my soul! There is no keyhole, Nipper!" he exclaimed.

"Have we struck a private lunatic asylum, or what?" I asked amazedly.

"No, there's not a sign of a keyhole. Well, this is queer and no mistake!"

For a second we stared at one another.

We were locked in the library—whether intentionally or unintentionally we couldn't know. But we were there right enough, and our only companion was a senseless old scientist—except, of course, for the skeleton and his stuffed brethren.

"That fathead George must have locked it by accident," I said. "Perhaps there's a spring bolt, or something. What shall we do, gov'nor?"

Nelson Lee took a deep breath.

"We must have a doctor quickly—or some hot water and bandages and soothing ointment, Nipper," he replied. "The doctor is the best, for we shall then be able to hand the case over to him. We don't want to be stranded on Blackheath to-night; and it is getting late."

"Twenty past ten," I said, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece. And even this harmless article was adorned with its own particular horror. For there was a ghastly-looking stuffed lizard thing stuck on the top of it.

Mentioning the time reminded me that I was thundering hungry, and I remembered my faithful chewing-gum. I'd still got it tucked away in my cheek, and I recommenced chewing it. The movement of my jaws annoyed the gov'nor.

"My dear, good Nipper, don't eat that abominable stuff now!" he snapped. "Come, help me to thump on the door-panels. We must attract George's attention somehow. I will give the fellow my tongue when he comes."

"Perhaps there's a bell?" I suggested.

"Of course—how absurd!"

Nelson Lee crossed quickly to the fireplace where bell-pushes are usually placed. But there was nothing there. Meanwhile I was hammering on the door, and my blows seemed to be like a baby's. I know jolly well they couldn't have been

heard ten feet beyond the other side of the thick door.

I chucked it up at last, and turned again.

"Well, here's a giddy go!" I exclaimed breathlessly. "Of all the queer positions! In a stranger's house, and locked in the library! And the owner of the house with us, knocked silly and unable to help!"

"The position is preposterous, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "To tell you the truth, I don't feel comfortable. One never knows what people may think. If the professor happens to mislay something to-morrow, and can't find it, he'll think we have been pilfering. Confound that fool of a servant!"

"The professor ordered him to go, sir?" I hinted.

"He didn't order the fellow to lock us in, did he?" snapped Lee irritably.

I hadn't any answer to that, and for a few seconds we looked about us without speaking. Nelson Lee bent over the chair in which the professor lay. After a little while he straightened himself again.

"Any sign?" I asked.

"None whatever. He has gone off into a dead swoon, I believe," replied the detective. "I can't be sure without making a thorough examination, and I don't feel inclined to do that. Having brought the professor home, we have done all that can be expected of us. It is for a doctor to attend to him now. I don't like this affair at all, Nipper. Is there nobody else in the house except the butler? Has the professor no women-folk?"

"No good asking me, sir," I replied.

"I should not think of asking you, my lad!" said Nelson Lee tartly. "You appear to be too busy with that wretched chewing-gum to attend to anything. Do something, you young rascal! Go to the window, jump out, and hammer at the front door again. We must have hot water, at least."

The gov'nor was a bit fed up, and I didn't wonder. Professor Walton required attention at once, and here were we marooned with him, as it were, in his own library. George must have either been a fool or something was keeping him. He might even have gone for a doctor, and thought it best to lock us in while he went.

I suggested this to Lee, and he thought

it probable—especially if George was the only servant in the house. Either that, or the ass didn't know he'd let the door lock itself as he left the library.

Anyhow, it would be silly to sit still and wait. Suppose the professor pegged out? We should have been in a fine old mess! And chaps do peg out sometimes, after they've had a whack on the brain-box.

I went to the window and shoved the heavy curtains aside. Then I raised the Venetian blind and slipped back the catch. It was a new catch, I saw, and one of the most expensive and effective makes. But when I pushed at the window it wouldn't budge.

Looking to see if the catch was defective in some way I saw that there were two others!

"Great Scott! There are three catches on this giddy window, gov'nor!" I ejaculated. "One in the centre, as usual, and one at each side! Are we in the Mint, or where? Three catches!"

The place was full of surprises. I opened the window easily now, and was preparing to lean out into the darkness—to see how far the ground was off—when I caught my head a terrific bang against something.

"Oh, criky!" I gasped.

I stared in front of me, wondering what the dickens I had hit. And there, staring at me, were several whacking great iron bars! The window was barred like a prison, and to jump out of the window was impossible.

Nelson Lee was as amazed as I was—and not so much hurt, either. He came across and gazed at the iron bars. Then he gazed at me, and I gazed at him. In fact, we didn't do anything else but gaze for a full ten seconds.

"Locked in and barred in," I said. "What next, gov'nor? I expect we shall wake up soon! And this is Blackheath! What's the meaning of it?"

Nelson Lee closed the window and re-fastened the catches.

"Don't make a mystery, Nipper," he said. "There is probably a simple explanation. The professor is a nervous man, and he has taken care to be safeguarded against burglars. We know for a fact that he has some 'secret' or other to keep hidden. Didn't those two men attack him with the object of forcing it from him? And George, the butler, is either unable to hear us, or he has gone out."

He turned to the injured man again, and then back to me.

"But we must have some water," he went on. "I am afraid the wound will commence bleeding again. I have not even examined it yet, being reluctant to take the bandage off. The injury may be more serious than I suppose, or fairly light. Hang it all! We must do something, lad! This position is intolerable!"

He walked straight across to the plush curtains on the wall opposite the door. Pushing these aside, Lee revealed another door. I quickly went to his side, but we found that this door, too, was locked. It was painted dark green, and felt icy cold.

"Why, it's made of steel, sir!" I exclaimed wonderingly.

"So it is, Nipper—so it is," said Nelson Lee. "This is remarkable! Ah, but there is a keyhole here! A lock of the Yale pattern is fitted, you see. If we only had the key, we could get through."

"Naturally," I agreed.

"What would this inner room be, Nipper?" mused the gov'nor. "A steel door, and fitted with a patent lock."

"A strong-room?" I suggested brilliantly.

"This is not a bank, Nipper," said Lee. "I think it very probable that the room beyond this door is the professor's laboratory. Indeed, that is practically certain. That Walton possesses a laboratory is evident by the test-tubes I see on the sideboard."

"Well, suppose it is a laboratory?" I asked. "We shouldn't be any better off, sir."

"Laboratories, I believe, usually have water laid on," he replied easily. "There will be a water-tap, Nipper, and probably some bandage material. We must try to get in here."

"With a skeleton-key?"

"I'm afraid this particular make of lock would not succumb to the assaults of a skeleton-key, young 'un. I was wondering— Yes, the circumstances are exceptional, so we are fully justified in going to rather questionable lengths. After all, it is all for the professor's good. We are going to a great amount of trouble quite gratuitously."

Nelson Lee walked over to the chair in which the injured man lay. He bent down, and dived his hand into the professor's right-hand trousers-pocket. When he brought his hand out, he held a bunch of keys.

"I remembered feeling them there,"

he said. "Ah, this looks a likely customer, Nipper! Since we are imprisoned by locks and bars, we must do something to improve the position."

It was, after all, quite justifiable. The gov'nor had done nothing wrong in fishing out the keys. I thought I saw the professor move a bit, but I wasn't sure. I eagerly took the keys from Nelson Lee, and tried one in the keyhole.

The first wouldn't fit, nor the second. And the second beggar jammed a bit, so that there was a bit of a delay in getting it out. The gov'nor stood against me, watching my efforts.

The third key went in smoothly, and a twist sent back the wards of the lock. I pushed the door, and it silently opened, revealing complete blackness beyond. I jerked the key out, and held it in my hand, still separated from the bunch.

"Stay here, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee.

He stepped into the darkness, and I thought I heard a sound behind me. Even as I was turning I got the biggest shock of my life, for there was a sudden explosion, an appalling report, and a bullet went "plug" against the steel door, within a couple of inches of the gov'nor's head!

For just one second, we stood rooted to the floor. Then Lee turned back, his face perfectly calm and cool. I was pale. I know, for the abruptness of the shot had startled me out of my wits.

Twirling round, I stared with wondering eyes.

And there, standing shakily and unsteadily upon his feet, was Professor Marcus Walton, his eyes glittering with fury and hatred, and in his hand a levelled revolver!

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH I ADOPT A SMART RUSE AND OBTAIN SOMETHING VALUABLE, AND THE PROFESSOR, AFTER A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF GENIAL CONVERSATION, CONDESCENDS TO EXPLAIN TO THE GUV'NOR AND I HIS WONDERFUL SECRET.

THE whole affair was so astounding that my brain seemed in a whirl. Professor Walton was standing there against the desk, livid with fury, and looking grotesque in his rough-and-ready bandage.

He had fired at the gov'nor!

I simply boiled at the thought. Nelson Lee might have been killed! But both

he and I were helpless. That revolver was levelled at us, and the professor's hand was unsteady; and a loaded automatic held in an unsteady hand is something to steer clear of, I can tell you.

He must have come to his senses while we were fiddling with the keys, and he had loosed off his revolver at us. Yet I could see in a second that he wasn't mad. His eyes blazed with anger, but not with insanity.

And then the tense silence was broken by the gov'nor's voice.

"May I ask the reason for this sensational display?" he inquired smoothly. "I don't wish to be inquisitive, but that bullet came dangerously near to my head—"

Professor Walton licked his dry lips.

"Stand back! Stand back, you cur!" he grated harshly. "I'm dazed still, but I can shoot! You infernal ruffian! You cunning hound! You thought to trick me, but you won't! You won't!"

The detective took a step forward.

"Stand still—still!" thundered the professor, his voice growing stronger. "Move another inch, and I will shoot again! This is all a trick of yours—a clever, clever trick!"

"What do you mean?" I asked furiously. "We haven't done anything! We were trying to find some water to bathe your head!"

"Some water!" The professor laughed bitterly. "Water! By Heaven, you think you can hoodwink me still! I see it all! I see everything! You are both confederates of the scoundrels who attacked me on the Heath! You brought me home, pretending to be kindly and sympathetic, and all the while you intended forcing your way into my laboratory! But I caught you in the act, after you had stolen the keys from my very pocket! I caught you in the act, you vagabonds!"

I saw a slight smile cross Nelson Lee's face.

And I realised the meaning of the affair at the same time. After all, the professor wasn't so much to blame, although it was almost criminal of him to let fire that shot.

He was labouring under a false impression, of course.

He thought that Nelson Lee and I were associates of the ruffians who had attacked him on the Heath—that the whole thing had been a put-up job, in fact, and that we had brought him home with the intention of getting into his

laboratory while he lay insensible. I expect he forgot that he had ordered George out of the room himself. Perhaps he thought we had done some horrible injury to the butler, and had hidden his remains under the sofa! And why did he get in such a panic about us going into the laboratory? What was there that we were forbidden to see?

It was a bit of a mix-up, and I wasn't exactly pleased with the way Professor Walton was acting. He had a certain amount of excuse, because he was shaky on his pins—or, perhaps, I'd better say shaky in the upper region. I knew that he hadn't fully recovered from the effects of his fall.

And he was in a temper.

My word! It was a temper, too! His eyes simply glittered with fire. They burned with a strange, fierce light which seemed to eat right into a chap. I had thought his eyes to be kindly, and I believe they were as a rule. But when he was angry, he looked awful.

"My dear Professor Walton, I think—"

"Silence, you hound!" shouted the enraged professor, cutting the gov'nor short. "I know that you and your companion got into this house by a ruse. Heaven knows what you have done to my butler! But I recovered in the nick of time."

"You are mistaken——"

"Don't dare to deny your guilt!"

Nelson Lee bit his lip.

"This position is absurd!" he exclaimed impatiently. "If you'll allow me one minute to explain, professor, I think you will realise that you have been acting with undue haste, and most certainly with an unwarrantable display of recklessness. That, however, I can overlook. Your position is far from satisfactory, even now. As you stand, you are dizzy and——"

"I know it! I know it!" snapped Walton fiercely. "And you think you can take advantage of me, eh? I warn you not to move an inch! And don't talk to me about explaining—there is nothing to explain, you cur! The whole thing is as plain as daylight!"

"But, one moment——"

"I will not listen! I will not hear a syllable!" roared the professor, his voice rising shrilly. "Close that door and lock it, and then hand me the key. You! I am talking to—you!"

He turned to me as he spoke, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. His

blessed voice cut like a razor, it was so sharp. And then I looked down and saw that the key was still in my hand. I'd forgotten the blessed thing.

"Keep your hair on!" I exclaimed cheerfully. "I'll lock the door—only don't point that cannon at me all the time!"

"Do as I bid!"

I could almost have laughed, the situation was so absolutely farcical. There were we, the gov'nor and I, two harmless individuals, being ordered about as though we were the blackest of black criminals! And we were actually criminal trackers! That's what made it so jolly funny.

Well, it would have been funny if that revolver hadn't taken a part in the proceedings. I had a tremendous respect for that gentleman, however, and I moved across to the laboratory door and shoved the key in the lock. Of course, I was boiling with fury. That was only natural.

After we had gone to so much trouble to help the chap, his attitude now couldn't be called exactly grateful, and he was a confounded idiot to get into such a rage.

I was simply bubbling over with anger. It would have been a nice thing for me if his finger had twitched, wouldn't it? I don't suppose this narrative of events would have been set down in that case.

And, of course, I didn't like it. Right within me I felt there was something queer connected with the place, and I gave way to a sudden impulse. It was irresistible, and I had done the thing almost before I knew it.

My back was towards the professor, of course. He couldn't see what I was doing. And as I drew the key out of the lock, I gave a little gasp. A brain-wave had struck me.

In one jiff, I popped that chunk of chewing-gum out of my mouth. The next second the key was pressed firmly upon the surface of the soft gum. This latter was of special quality, as I said, and it received the impression of the key as clearly as though it had been proper wax, and, being stiff kind of stuff, it held the impression.

I turned round, with a sullen expression, and threw the bunch of keys upon the desk. Then I put my hands behind me. The furious professor had seen no sign of my little piece of by-play. And now I proceeded to stow the chewing-

gum away. As I had thrown the keys down, I slipped a match-box from my waistcoat-pocket.

I knew that the professor's eyes were upon the keys, and he didn't see the quick movement of my hand. When he looked up, my hands were behind me. Without appearing to move my hands, I slipped open the matchbox, and let fall the half a dozen matches which remained in it.

Neither Walton nor the gov'nor saw what I was up to. But I slipped the chewing-gum into the now empty box, and softly closed it. I knew that the gum would very soon become hard, and I was rather satisfied with my ruse.

"Of course, I don't suppose I should ever want to use the key-impression; but it was as well to be on the safe side. Calming down a bit, I realised that my action was rather absurd. After all, Professor Walton was probably a peace-loving citizen. He was acting now in a warlike manner because he thought we were criminals.

That was preposterous in itself.

The gov'nor and I—criminals! Why, the very look of our chivvies ought to have told him that we were just the opposite. He was still holding on to the desk. He was unsteady, and in obvious pain.

"You shall suffer, you scoundrels!" he grated. "You shall pay the penalty for this outrage!"

"The position seems rather awkward, to my mind," observed Nelson Lee, with delightful smoothness. "How do you propose to overpower us, professor? We are cut completely off from the house, and before long your arm will get tired, you know. In the long run, you will be forced to give in."

"Never! Never!" shouted Walton savagely. "You are in my power, and unless you obey my orders to the letter you will be killed! Oh, I am not mad! I realise the seriousness of what I am saying. Don't attempt to speak, or I may act drastically. Do as I order!"

The gov'nor gave me just a little look out of the corner of his left eye, and he shrugged his shoulders slightly. What could we do with such a chap? If we attempted to explain the preposterous position, he would pull the trigger of his confounded revolver.

The professor looked straight at Nelson Lee.

"Over by the chair, against the door,

you will find a ball of thick string," he exclaimed. "Fetch that, and then bind your companion both hand and foot. After that, bind your own ankles, and then hold your hands above your head."

Rather a cool order, I thought, and I couldn't exactly see the gov'nor following out those instructions. Of course, Walton wanted to render the pair of us helpless, and that little idea would certainly have done so.

To my astonishment, Nelson Lee proceeded to obey the order!

With another shrug, he walked across the room and picked up the ball of string. This had been lying upon a little table, and was good, stout cord. I suspected that the gov'nor meant to tie me with fake knots, so that I should be able to get free in half a tick.

But the next second I got a surprise.

Nelson Lee shot his hand out with lightning-like swiftness.

"Drop, Nipper—drop!" he shouted urgently.

I dropped to the floor on the very second, and as I did so the electric light went out with a snap. And then I knew what the gov'nor's ruse was. To get the string, he found himself quite near the electric-juice switches.

And he'd turned them off!

While I was grovelling on the floor, I heard him dart forward. It all happened in about a second. I expected to hear three or four revolver-shots, and to feel a bullet or two whizzing about through the air—or, perhaps, through me!

But the only sound was that of a sudden, abrupt gasp.

After that, there was a moment's silence. What was happening? I was half-raising myself on my elbow when I heard a low, angry growl. Then the gov'nor's voice came to me.

"Switch up the lights, Nipper!" he exclaimed pantingly.

I was on my feet in a moment, and felt for the switch. There were two, to be exact, and I pressed them both down. I looked round curiously, and saw that Nelson Lee had gained the day.

Professor Marcus Walton was disarmed, and lay back in the big easy-chair, babbling with fury. His revolver was in Lee's grip, and the positions were reversed. It was the gov'nor who was going to do the talking now!

"I am exceedingly sorry that this has happened, professor," said the detective, with genuine regret in his voice. "It is hateful to be forced to attack an injured man. But you compelled me to do so. In common justice to myself, I was forced to act in a drastic manner."

"You've beaten me—beaten me!" wailed Professor Walton weakly.

"Not at all. You will find, in a moment, that you have been behaving most absurdly," went on Lee. "But I can overlook that when I remember your unfortunate condition, professor. With your mind still bewildered, you took it for granted that we were enemies —"

"Soft words—soft words!" muttered the professor bitterly. "Why do you keep up the pretence? You have beaten me—I know it! And you will try to get my secret. But you won't! You can kill me before I breathe a word!"

Nelson Lee took a deep breath, and squarely faced the professor.

"I am going to make you understand, Mr. Walton," he said sternly. "My young companion and myself were crossing Blackheath when we saw you attacked. We went to your rescue, and brought you home. By some mischance your butler locked us in this apartment—I don't know why. The door is a peculiar one, and we could not get out."

"A fine story—a fine story!"

"Man alive, when will you be convinced?" cried the governor angrily. "Finding ourselves locked in this room, we sought to escape. It was necessary that water should be fetched to bathe your wound—it is necessary even now, although your injury is not so serious as I first thought. It would have been unwise of me to remove the bandage without water and fresh linen handy."

I could see a light of doubt creeping into the professor's eyes, and I knew that he was listening to the detective's story with interest. Until now we had not been allowed to say anything, and I believe it was just beginning to dawn on Walton that he'd been acting the giddy goat.

"Go on—go on!" he panted, half-raising himself.

"Believing that this steel door led into your laboratory, I assumed that there would be a water-tap there," continued

Nelson Lee easily. "You were unconscious, and we could make nobody hear. Accordingly, I took the liberty of taking out your own bunch of keys. And the rest, of course, you know. We have been in an unfortunate position, professor—you misunderstood everything from the start."

"Dear me—dear me!" gasped Walton, struggling into an easier position. "Can I believe my ears? Have I indeed made such a pitiable fool of myself?" There came a look of sudden suspicion in his eyes. "But this is bluff, perhaps—you are attempting to delude me with a fine flow of words—"

The gov'nor simply glared.

"Upon my soul, you are the hardest man to convince I ever met in all my life!" he exclaimed tartly. "Nipper and myself have been doing our utmost for you, and you still persist in regarding us as black villains. My name is Nelson Lee, professor—you may have heard of it? And this young gentleman is Nipper, my assistant."

A startled light came into Professor Walton's eyes.

"Nelson Lee—Nelson Lee!" he ejaculated blankly.

"That is my name—my address is Gray's Inn Road."

"The—the famous detective?"

"I am a detective, certainly. Perhaps you will realise the ludicrous nature of the whole affair?" proceeded Nelson Lee. "I have no feeling of enmity towards you, professor; but I shall certainly be angry if you still persist in your incredulous attitude."

"But you didn't tell me who you were!" panted the professor. "You didn't say that your name was Nelson Lee."

"Did you give me a chance?" asked the detective drily.

"Dear me! I—I suppose I didn't!" ejaculated the professor.

I laughed. The tension seemed to be relaxed. We were beginning to understand one another. But, of course, I knew that the gov'nor would expect a very full explanation of the scientist's extraordinary conduct.

"I apologise, Mr. Lee—I apologise humbly and sincerely!" exclaimed Professor Walton brokenly. "I had no idea—no notion that you were who you are. I was mad to fire that shot; but I was

dazed and filled with terrible alarm. I awoke to find you passing through into my laboratory, and acted on the spur of the moment. And afterwards my fury was so great that I was scarcely able to control myself."

"You would not even let me explain the position," said Lee grimly.

"No. I have acted foolishly all along," admitted Walton. "Forgive me, please. I thought you were enemies, and was too consumed with my alarm to allow you to speak. And, no doubt, you wish me to explain?"

"I certainly do," replied Nelson Lee. "I think we have a perfect right to expect an explanation. After having received such treatment at your hands, it is your bounden duty to be frank and open with us. I have no wish to pry into matters which do not concern me, but you must certainly tell me why you fired that shot—why you behaved in such an astonishing manner."

"I—I will do so, Mr. Lee," said the other. "Indeed, I shall be extremely glad to do so. And you will appreciate the position, I am sure. You will tell me that my actions were only natural. After all, I shall be telling you no more than many others know. I do not intend to reveal the inner secret to you—you will see that that is impossible—but you shall know the truth."

The professor passed a hand over his eyes.

"Perhaps you would like your head attended to—"

"No, no. I am better now. The excitement has had a strange effect," he declared. "I am stronger and my brain is clear at last. Upon my soul! I sustained a terrible blow! It was the fall—the fall down the pit."

The scientist regarded us curiously.

"I will tell you why I fired that shot," he exclaimed quietly. "I will tell you why I flew into such a mad panic. You will discredit my statement, perhaps, but that cannot be helped. After all, you will be justified."

Walton turned, and pointed to the steel door.

"My laboratory is beyond that door," he said. "In that apartment is the secret of my life. The laboratory contains the complete plant—the finished apparatus—for the manufacture of the purest sapphires!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I HEAR SOME SURPRISING FACTS, AND PROCEED TO VERIFY THEM THREE DAYS AFTERWARDS. WE ARE SUDDENLY CALLED UPON TO TAKE A TRIP TO BIRMINGHAM, AND WE START OFF.

PROFESSOR MARCUS WALTON made that statement in a quiet, well-modulated voice, and for a moment I didn't realise the full significance of it. I saw Nelson Lee lift his eyebrows.

"The manufacture of sapphires?" he repeated smoothly.

"That is what I said, Mr. Lee. You do not appear to be so very surprised."

The gov'nor laughed.

"It requires something truly amazing to make me express any particular emotion, professor," he replied. "I am distinctly astonished, however. Your statement is a large one."

"It is, nevertheless, perfectly true."

"You—you can make sapphires—precious stones?" I asked wonderingly. "Not—not good ones? Not sapphires that could be used commercially?"

"Oh, yes. I have manufactured thousands of pounds' worth," said Walton, smiling at my incredulity. "My efforts have been entirely successful. For ten years I laboured and only attained partial success. Then I hit upon the correct formula—and the result is sapphires."

"Not diamonds or rubies or emeralds?"

"No, sapphires only. I have lately been making experiments regarding rubies, and I am hopeful of success in the very near future," replied Professor Walton, his voice becoming enthusiastic. "A ruby, as you may know, Mr. Lee, differs only from a sapphire in its colour. They are both the same mineral—corundum."

"Yes, I was aware of that," smiled Nelson Lee. "Rubies, however, are much more valuable."

"Exactly—exactly! That is to say, rubies of the correct colour," replied the professor. "The pale stones are little valued in comparison with those of a dark red. I have been successful in producing pale rubies, but they are paltry—they are unsatisfactory. In a very short time I hope to produce the finest variety. I mean the ruby of a rich carmine red, known as the 'pigeon-blood' colour."

"Dear me! You are aiming high," remarked Nelson Lee.

"And why not—why not? When I have such means at my disposal? When I have discovered the method of manufacture, why should I not make the most of my amazing knowledge?" asked Walton eagerly. "But you discredit my statement, of course."

"Why 'of course,' professor?"

"Are you not staggered by what I have told you?"

"Not staggered. Surprised, maybe. Other men have attempted to make precious stones, and they have failed," replied the gov'nor quietly. "In the long run somebody was almost bound to succeed—and why not you?"

The professor rose to his feet and rubbed his hands together. He seemed to have forgotten his injury. He was fairly "off" now, excited and gratified to find that Nelson Lee was interested.

"I have met with great success," he said. "But I shall achieve even greater success in the near future. Indeed, victory is in sight—complete, absolute, staggering victory. I shall amaze the world. So far I have kept my secret well. Some know of it, of course—"

"How to make sapphires?" I struck in.

"Good gracious me, no!" he exclaimed sharply. "Not that secret, boy! I meant the secret of my life's work. The other secret—the method of manufacture—is locked in my heart, and in the laboratory. You will understand now why I flew into such a panic when I saw you entering the laboratory?"

"The position is certainly clearer," replied Lee.

"Those scoundrels on the Heath attacked me with the intention of forcing my great secret from me," went on the professor. "They had somehow learned that I was engaged in the manufacture of precious stones, and their object was to force the truth from me. And I foolishly assumed that you were confederates of those two ruffians. I was dazed and bewildered. Did not the position seem dire to me, Mr. Lee? I came to my wits and found you on the point of entering my laboratory! And in that apartment is the complete apparatus for the manufacture of sapphires! A clever man would be able to discover much in a very short time. Mad with rage and panic, I

draw my revolver—I always carry one—and fired wildly.”

“I must readily admit that appearances were against us,” smiled the gov’nor. “Your explanation, Professor Walton, has thrown much light upon the affair. I can understand everything now. Your natural anger and alarm got the better of you, and you would not listen to reason.”

“Exactly—exactly! And George, my butler, went away, closing the door after him. He did so, thinking that I was in possession of my wits—for it was not until after he had gone that I swooned. George is somewhat deaf.”

“Oh, that explains it,” I exclaimed. “We thumped on the door, but we couldn’t make anybody hear. And the window is barred.”

“I take the most stringent precautions, as you have seen.”

The whole affair, in fact, was cleared up. I was a bit sceptical, I’ll admit. Was there any truth in the professor’s statement? Could he really manufacture sapphires? It was a tall order.

When I said I was sceptical, I meant about Walton’s sapphire yarn. His explanation as to why he fired at the gov’nor was quite satisfactory. I could appreciate his terrible alarm and panic easily. But about the sapphires. Perhaps the scientist was carried away by his enthusiasm. I shouldn’t have been astonished to learn that he was hopeful of complete success in the near future. And that, of course, would have been never. But he spoke as though he had already made precious stones.

My doubts were set at rest a few minutes later.

“I have been making sapphires for twelve months, Mr. Lee,” said the professor. “I have been obtaining better and better results all the while. And as I said, I hope to produce rubies before many days have passed. Everything is in train for a great experiment. That is another reason why I was so alarmed. I am on the verge of my greatest achievement.”

“You are confident of success?”

“Absolutely. Rubies, as you may know—I mean ‘pigeon-blood’ rubies—are worth far more than diamonds of the first water,” went on Walton eagerly. “A ruby that weighs a carat is twice as valuable as a diamond of equal weight, and of the finest water. And a ruby of ten carats is ten times as valuable as a

diamond of the same size. Large rubies are rare—but I hope to obtain some.”

“I have heard of reconstructed rubies,” I remarked, airing my knowledge.

“Reconstructed rubies!” snapped the professor sharply. “They are of no value, boy! Or very little. They are paltry to what I intend making. Mine will be real—real! Reconstructed rubies are obtained by melting small rubies in an electric furnace, and then allowing them to cool. Crystalization takes place, and the result is pitiful—a ruby with countless imperfections of colour, and with air-bubbles and flaws, similar to a—a sixpenny-ha’penny glass cake-dish!”

Nelson Lee laughed.

“And your stones will not contain flaws?” he asked.

“Not a sign of one, Mr. Lee,” replied Walton enthusiastically. “They will be as perfect as any stone obtained from Upper Burma or Siam. But I have not reached the ruby stage yet. The greater success will come later.”

“You are confident, professor.”

“Have I not every reason to be? After all, my only difficulty has been colour,” said our strange host. “Sapphires, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, topaz—they are all forms of precious corundum, distinguished only from the common mineral by their colours and transparency. Having manufactured one form successfully, why should I despair of making the others? These varieties of corundum owe their value to their rich and beautiful colour, the perfection and brilliant lustre of their polished surfaces. I succeeded in producing sapphires after years of hard work and keen disappointments. My progress in the future will be more swift. My heart is set on making rubies—and I shall succeed.”

“May I ask if you have sold any of your productions?” asked the gov’nor.

Professor Walton laughed.

“Dear me! You surprise me by that question, Mr. Lee,” he said softly. “Have I sold my sapphires? I do not suppose they will admit the fact to you, but Messrs. Henson and Wilding, Ltd., of Bond Street, have bought a large number of my manufactured gems. Messrs. Rudolff and Son, too, have been largely supplied by me.”

And the professor named several other firms who had purchased his artificial sapphires. But that’s just where it came

in. Walton declared that they were not artificial. In every respect they were precisely the same as the valuable precious stones procured from the earth by mining.

I could see that the gov'nor was rather astonished at the professor's frankness. And I was a bit startled, too. I'd thought that he was an enthusiast—Walton, I mean. But, unless his statements were true, he was a fool. He hinted, however, that the various firms would not admit that they had artificial sapphires in their windows.

"I should like to take you into my laboratory and show you everything, Mr. Lee," went on the professor. "But you must surely realise that such a course is impossible. I trust you, but—well—"

"I quite understand," interjected Lee, smiling. "And now, Mr. Walton, I really think that Nippcn and I must be going. And I am rather concerned about your injury. I am quite sure that you must be in great pain."

"No, no! At least, if I am in pain I do not notice it," said Walton, gently touching the rough bandage which was bound round his head. "George will attend to me after you have gone—you need not worry in the least. I am much better now."

"I was thinking of sending a doctor along—"

"Oh, dear no! There is no necessity for me to be bothered by a doctor," declared the scientist. "I don't think I told you, but George and myself are the sole occupants of the house. Although somewhat deaf, he is a splendid servant, and attends to all my wants. I suppose he is in his own room now, totally unaware of what has taken place."

"But how do you get out of this room?" I inquired curiously.

Walton laughed.

"When I am at work I must be absolutely alone," he replied. "You will surely realise that? George, of course, is not allowed an inch beyond this room. Nobody but myself has ever stepped into the laboratory. And when I'm at work—sometimes for ten hours at a stretch—I cannot be disturbed on any account whatever. And I therefore make certain that I am in seclusion. Naturally enough, I have the communicating door open—the steel door I mean—and so I have fitted up an arrangement so that the baize door is locked in such a way that it is as secure as a part of the wall itself. I

have never given George the slightest opportunity of surprising me when in the midst of an intricate experiment."

As he spoke the professor rose to his feet and crossed over to a small solid cabinet I had seen set into the wall. The door of this he opened with another key of the Yale pattern. And, inside, the gov'nor and I saw a brass knob.

"The door is locked electrically," declared the professor. "An invention of my own, Mr. Lee. It is impossible to enter the library from the hall once the door has been closed. It closes automatically, and can only be opened again by the pressing over of this switch."

"Then how did your butler get in when we arrived?" asked the gov'nor.

"When I went out this evening I left the door unfastened, because George had planned to clean out the room," replied Walton. "There is a catch on the other side, you see, which prevents it closing. My man, of course, knowing that I was inside, pushed that catch back and the door locked itself."

"But suppose you locked yourself out by accident?" I asked.

The scientist smiled.

"Well, in that case, I have a means of entering of my own," he replied. "My butler knows nothing of it, of course, for I only let him enter this room occasionally."

It seemed a pretty queer idea to me—a blessed lot of messing about—but, after all, it was the professor's business. If he liked to have loony wheezes for opening his doors, that was his own concern.

But I suppose it was necessary to take extraordinary precautions, considering he was engaged in such a queer business.

He pressed over the knob, and the door at once gave a little click and opened about half-an-inch. Going to it the professor touched the handle, and the door opened wide.

"I trust I have explained everything satisfactorily, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Oh, quite," said Nelson Lee. "And you have interested me greatly, professor. I must confess that I should be even more interested to enter your laboratory, but I realise that that is forbidden ground. I should not dream of asking you to allow me admittance. But are you quite sure your head—"

"My head is aching abominably, but by the morning I shall be all right," smiled Professor Walton. "As for a doctor, the idea amuses me. My finger throbs painfully, but that, too, will right



"The poor chap in front of us was being attacked by a couple of footpads."—(See p. 3.)

itself. I am well accustomed to burns and cuts," he added genially.

"He bade us a cordial good-night, and actually pressed us to visit him whenever in the neighbourhood of Blackheath. This was rather surprising, after he'd tried to pot the gov'nor with his revolver. However, things were explained now, and Nelson Lee and I found ourselves once more out in the darkness.

The sky was clear now, but the pavements and roads were still damp. Which reminded me that I and the gov'nor were in the same condition. I hadn't had any time to think of damp clothes.

"A very queer adventure, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee as we strode along.

"I'm blessed if I can believe it all, quite," I replied. "It's a bit tall, isn't it, gov'nor?"

"Not exactly, Nipper. Mind you, I accept Walton's statement regarding his manufactured sapphires with a certain amount of reserve. He is an enthusiast, and has probably exaggerated."

"Then you don't think he's made any sapphires?"

"I didn't say that, young 'un," replied Lee. "I think that Professor Walton has succeeded in making some small stones, and these he has sold to various firms—probably at an absurdly low figure. I imagine the sapphires cost more to produce than they are worth."

"Then it's a losing game!" I ejaculated.

"Such games are usually losing ones, my lad," replied the gov'nor, smiling. "I expect the professor has more money than he knows what to do with, and spends it upon this quaint hobby of his. He lives for it—it fills his whole horizon—and he was accordingly maddened when he thought we were going to steal his precious secret."

I told the gov'nor how I'd taken an impression of the laboratory key, and he chuckled heartily. It was a smart ruse, he told me, but, of course, unnecessary. We arrived home well after midnight, and the next morning got up sneezing.

We don't take cold very easily, however, and we only had a slight touch. Three days later we happened to be passing down Bond Street. It was quite early in the morning, and the sun was shining splendidly.

"Oh, there's Henson & Wilding's, gov'nor," I remarked, indicating a big jewellers' shop on the other side of the road. "That's one of the firms that

buys the old Blackheath professor's sapphires, isn't it?"

The gov'nor nodded.

"I believe he mentioned Wilding's," he replied. "And let me add here, Nipper, that Professor Walton is not old. I should say his age is no greater than forty-five at the most. His brown and wrinkled complexion is probably due to much foreign travel. But suppose we cross the road, Nipper?"

"Why, what for, sir?"

"Well, I have a mind to enter the jewellers'," was Lee's reply. "I happen to know Mr. Wilding. You may remember, Nipper, that we investigated a robbery at this very shop some years ago? That was before Mr. Henson's death. Wilding, of course, is now the principal man in the concern."

We entered the shop and were approached by a gentleman in immaculate attire. He looked like Lord Somebody-or-Other, but I suppose he was getting about fifty bob a week as a shop-walker—if that's what they're called in jewellers.

This gentleman took the gov'nor's card into Mr. Wilding's private office, and after a few minutes we were admitted. It was a big firm, but Mr. Wilding always made a point of attending business daily.

He was a short, stout man, with a well-fed look about him, and he gazed at the gov'nor and I through his pince-nez as we entered.

"Why, I hardly expected to see you, Mr. Lee," he greeted us. "Anything wrong, or is it just a friendly call?"

A few greetings were exchanged, and then Nelson Lee broached the subject we had called about.

"By the way, Mr. Wilding, do you know a certain Professor Marcus Walton, of Blackheath?" asked the gov'nor, in a careless kind of way.

Mr. Wilding looked at us rather strangely.

"Yes, I know the gentleman," he replied. "Why?"

"He has been supplying you, I believe, with artificially made sapphires," went on the gov'nor. "That is so, is it not?"

"Really, Mr. Lee—"

"I do not wish to be at all inquisitive," the detective hastened to add. "I have really no right to ask you at all, Mr. Wilding, and I should not have done so if I had thought the matter to be a confidential one. Please speak quite frankly."

The jeweller pursed his lips.

"I suppose I shall be safe in trusting to you, Mr. Lee?" he smiled. "Of course, what I tell you is in strict confidence. And your companion, here, is equally trustworthy——"

"I will answer for Nipper," said the guv'nor, smiling.

"Well, Mr. Lee, I have been buying artificially made sapphires from Professor Walton," admitted Mr. Wilding slowly. "But I had believed my transactions with the professor to be a closely-kept secret. I don't like to ask how you obtained your information——"

"Oh, from Walton himself."

"Why, then, there's no harm in our discussing the matter, is there?" laughed the jeweller, with obvious relief. "But, 'pon my soul, these things have to be kept infernally secret, you know. I've got a few of Walton's sapphires in my window at the present moment, but I shouldn't like the fact to be published."

"Why not, sir?" I asked curiously.

"Why not? Supposing you were buying a brooch for your best girl?" he asked me with a chuckle. "And supposing you were told that the jewels in the brooch had been made by artificial means? Wouldn't you think that they were imitation?"

"Well, perhaps I should think 'em a bit off side, sir," I admitted.

"Then you will understand why it is necessary to keep quiet about it," said Mr. Wilding. "Customers would not think they were getting value if they knew the sapphires were manufactured at Blackheath!"

"And are they of value?" asked Nelson Lee.

"My dear sir, when Professor Walton brought his products to me I simply would not believe him at first," replied the jeweller. "His stones are identical with the real thing. It is absolutely impossible to detect a single flaw. They are as pure as—as sapphires. In fact, they are sapphires, without the slightest doubt."

"You surprise me," declared the guv'nor. "The professor told us all this, but I rather discredited his statement, I regret to say. I am extremely glad you told me this, Mr. Wilding. May I ask if these jewels are fair sized?"

"They are all sizes—large, small, and medium. Walton has supplied me with some very large stones, and I have paid him the usual market price. He is making a fortune very quickly, I should

assume—— Pardon me, one moment."

Mr. Wilding broke off as the telephone bell rang, and the guv'nor looked at me with elevated eyebrows. The professor's words were completely corroborated, and, somehow, I felt jolly pleased. If he had any decency in him he'd send along a couple of tie-pins with a whacking great sapphire in the middle of each! If he could make 'em just as a cook makes a pudding, there was no reason why he shouldn't do the generous thing and remember us!

A startled ejaculation from Mr. Wilding made me look round. What he had been saying into the 'phone I didn't catch—I wasn't interested, because it wasn't my business. But there was a look on his face, now, which made me sit up pretty smartly.

He had suddenly become pale, and in his eyes there was an expression of complete dismay and untold worry.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed hoarsely, hanging up the receiver.

"Is anything the matter?" asked the guv'nor quickly.

"Grave news—appalling news!" replied the jeweller. "I have just had a trunk call from Birmingham. You may know that I have a big establishment in that town. Last night there was a very serious robbery there, and burglars got away with booty to the value of twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Phew!" I whistled.

"From what my manager tells me the burglary was performed with singular cleverness, and there appears to be no clue," continued Mr. Wilding agitatedly. "The local police are busy, of course, but Scotland Yard is sending a man down at once. I think Providence must have sent you here this morning, Mr. Lee!"

"You want me to go to Birmingham?"

"At once—by the very earliest train," replied the jeweller anxiously. "Years ago you recovered a great deal of property for me, Mr. Lee, and I shall feel intensely relieved if you will accept this commission. Your services may not be necessary, of course—— But we are wasting time! Will you investigate on my behalf?"

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"I think there is a train in about half-an-hour," he replied coolly.

And so it came about that in thirty-five minutes's time Nelson Lee and I were off to Birmingham. And, by a curious chance, we came across our old

friend, Detective-inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard, on the train.

He was on his way to Birmingham to investigate the same robbery as ourselves, and things promised to be interesting.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH WE INVESTIGATE THE BIRMINGHAM JEWEL ROBBERY AND HIT UPON SOMETHING WHICH CAUSES THE GUV'NOR AND I CONSIDERABLE ASTONISHMENT. AND NELSON LEE EXPLAINS TO ME A MOST AMAZING THEORY.

WE found that the big jewellery establishment of Messrs. Henson & Wilding, Ltd., was situated in one of the busiest quarters of Corporation Street, Birmingham. It was a magnificent shop. Like so many provincial branch establishments of a London firm, it was even larger and more imposing than the chief office.

Outwardly there was nothing to be seen. Corporation Street was as busy as ever, and when we entered the jewellers', people were being attended to calmly and politely. There was no sign whatever of anything being amiss.

Detective-inspector Morley was with us, of course, and we were at once shown into the private office of the manager, Mr. Lancaster. We found this latter gentleman there, in company with a local inspector of police.

They knew of our arrival, of course—they had been informed from London that we were on the way. The local police official at once engaged Morley in conversation, and the guv'nor and I learned the facts of the robbery from Mr. Lancaster.

These were quite simple, as it turned out.

The burglar—for it appeared that the job had been done by one man—had made no attempt to rob the shop itself. He had confined his attention to the manager and his office—the apartment in which we were now standing.

There was a whacking great steel safe here, and it had contained many jewels, some in settings, and some loose. The whole lot had vanished with the exception of three thousand pounds' worth of diamonds. These had been in a locked drawer, and the burglar had evidently not troubled to open it.

He was probably satisfied with the haul he had made without the diamonds. And

I reckon he ought to have been, too! For Mr. Wilding's estimate of the loss wasn't far out. Mr. Lancaster told us that the value of the stolen property was not less than twenty thousand.

The robbery had been committed with the most astonishing coolness. Although Mr. Lancaster and his wife and children lived on the premises they heard absolutely nothing of the night marauder. When the manager had entered his office at nine o'clock he had found the safe open, and the jewels missing.

The window looked out upon a small court-yard, and in this yard a fierce bull-dog was kept. The dog itself had been found dead—apparently poisoned. A piece of meat had been thrown to it, in all probability.

"It is perfectly obvious that the man who committed the robbery knew the place as well as I know it," declared Mr. Lancaster. "He was well acquainted with every window, and with the constructional details of the building. Having killed the dog, the scoundrel forced this window, and then set to work on the safe."

"A very simple case," commented the guv'nor thoughtfully. "Very simple indeed, Mr. Lancaster. I don't quite like that aspect of the affair. How was the safe forced—have the local police found out?"

"They say the lock was simply melted off—"

"By the use of oxy-acetylene, I presume?"

"Yes, I think that's what they said."

"Any clues?"

"None whatever—not a sign of a trace."

"H'm! We shall have to see, Mr. Lancaster," said the guv'nor thoughtfully. "I don't like the robbery being so simple. Simple robberies are always the most difficult to investigate. A burglar commits a straight theft, and there's nothing for a poor investigator to get hold of."

The guv'nor always told me that the simpler the crime the cleverer the criminal—and, incidentally, the more difficult to follow up. Of course, this is easy enough to understand, isn't it? When a burglary has been done cleanly and neatly there's nothing whatever to get hold of in the way of a clue.

This affair was not at all mysterious.

A man with a clear knowledge of his "crib" had entered the office, had busted open the safe, and had vamoosed,

and that's all there was to it—in elegant language.

Poor old Morley was jolly worried.

"Not a clue—not a confounded trace!" he grunted to Lee and I. "And that safe was one of the best on the market, too. A marvellous job, Lee—that's what I call it. The firm will be lucky if they see their stuff again."

"You think we shall fail, then?"

"Frankly, I do."

"I am afraid Mr. Morley is rather inclined to be pessimistic," murmured the gov'nor into my ear. "We must not get into that frame of mind, Nipper. Use your eyes, my lad, and see if you can see anything of interest."

I used my eyes right enough; but there wasn't anything to see—except just the ordinary things. Not a finger-print, not a foot-print. The door of the safe was a fine sight. A great chunk of it had been wiped out, so to speak, and the burglar must have spent three or four hours, at least, on the work.

Mr. Lancaster's bedroom was situated on the second floor, and there was nothing directly over the office except an empty drawing-room. For the robbery had, of course, been perpetrated in the small hours of the morning.

There was one exceedingly cute dodge which we admired tremendously. In fact, we couldn't help admiring it. It seemed that the lights in the shop and the office were kept going all night, although the shutters were down.

The manager's office had a glass-topped door, with curtains over the glass. But at night these curtains were pulled aside. And through a grating in the shutters any passing policeman was able to see right into the shop, and into the manager's office. And as the safe was placed exactly opposite the door, the lock could be seen distinctly. So, at any hour of the night the big safe was under observation.

How, then, had the burglary been committed?

Ah! That's just where the cuteness of the dodge comes in. I was fairly flabbergasted when Mr. Lancaster explained it to us.

The curtains couldn't be pulled over the glass because that would have excited suspicion in a tick. The burglar knew that right enough.

The only part of the safe which could be seen through the shutter grid was the lock and about four inches of green

paintwork on each side. Quite enough, of course.

There was a screen in the room—a big, high screen, and the burglar had brought with him a large strip of green canvas—painted especially for the occasion. On it was a perfect painting of the brasswork of the safe lock.

The simplicity of the thing was remarkable.

The burglar chap had simply hung the strip of canvas over the screen, and had placed the whole thing about midway between the safe and the door. And there he was! Comfortably getting into the safe behind the screen.

And any passing bobby, happening to look in, would have seen the safe as usual! This proved that the thief was thoroughly acquainted with the premises, and that he was a man of unusual intelligence and forethought. And he had not even troubled to take the canvas strip away with him.

I thought this was rather careless of him at first, but the thing was completely useless as a clue. And I dare say he thought it would serve to show the police how neatly they'd been dived.

If he had taken it away with him there would have been a pretty mystery, and no mistake.

The safe forced open after hours of solid work—and under observation all the time! But the thief had left the canvas behind him, and so there was no mystery at all.

"Clever—infernally clever!" exclaimed Morley irritably. "I don't think I've come across anything quite like it before, Lee. Somehow or other, I've got a real respect for the man who did this piece of work. He's an artist."

"He painted the picture of a lock all right, anyhow," I put in, grinning.

"So he did, Nipper—so he did!" agreed the inspector. "The man's an artist in two ways, isn't he? And he's got clean away, too. The Birmingham police have been on the look-out the whole morning, but they haven't discovered the slightest trace. I don't wonder."

Some little time later Morley was engaged with Mr. Lancaster and the local police-inspector. The gov'nor and I were left to ourselves. Morley, I knew, acknowledged the sterling abilities of Nelson Lee. But the local man regarded the gov'nor as an intruder, I believe.

Not that this mattered a jot.

We had been commissioned by Mr. Wilding himself to investigate, and, as it happened, we were able to discover a clue where no clue existed!

That sounds a bit Irish, I expect, but it's true enough. To the police our discovery—or, rather, Nelson Lee's discovery—wasn't a clue at all. It meant absolutely nothing to them. And I honestly believe that if the gov'nor had not used his eyes and wits with exceptional keenness, the burglary would never have been probed.

The fact that we got on the track was solely owing to Lee's sagacity.

I found him bending over Mr. Lancaster's blotting pad. This was lying upon his desk, deserted, empty, and forlorn.

Nelson Lee seemed to be interested in the surface of the blotter, not that there was anything particular to see. There were one or two ink stains, and a few jottings in pencil; just as one sees on most business men's blotters.

"You seem jolly intent on that thing, sir," I remarked.

It was several moments before the gov'nor looked up, and when he did so, I almost jumped.

There was a look in his eyes which I knew of old—a look of keen concentration and subdued excitement. Oh, yes, Nelson Lee could get excited when he liked.

He wasn't an automaton; he was a man, in capital letters, and he had emotions like other men. Only he kept 'em all inside, as it were. When he was inwardly excited, though, I knew the signs in a tick. Anybody else wouldn't have noticed anything, of course. But I knew the gov'nor's little ways.

"What is it, sir?" I asked breathlessly.

"Nipper, I have formulated the most amazing theory," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I am almost staggered by the possibilities which are unfolding before me. And, somehow, I have got a feeling within me that I have hit the nail on the head. The data I possess is negligible, but it is astoundingly significant."

"You've got a clue, sir?"

He laid his finger upon the soft blotting paper. There was a whole pile of it, ten or fifteen sheets, I should say, and it was very soft paper. I gazed at the spot where he was pointing, and saw three little dents, close together.

"Well, what of it, gov'nor?" I asked, after a bit. "That's nothing, is it? Looks like the mark of a brooch, or some other piece of jewellery. It's been pressed on to the blotting paper somehow."

"Right, so far, my lad. But look again."

I suppose I was dull, for I couldn't see anything else.

"Nipper, these three little impressions are strangely familiar to me," said Nelson Lee softly. "See the curious curves of the dents; see the deep, sharp points in the lower part of the centre depression. What do they suggest?"

"Why, yes, of course!" I said, in desperation, knowing that I had to say something, or else appear horribly stupid. "A ring, sir, a ring, with two diamonds set in the middle. Those sharp points were caused by the diamonds."

"Sapphires, Nipper, sapphires!"

Then, in a flash, it came to me. I stared at the gov'nor with my mouth open, and my eyes staring out of my head.

"The—the twisted ring!" I gasped. "Professor Walton's ring!"

"Precisely!" said Nelson Lee, with huge relish. "I gave you a hint, certainly, but I think my own shot was correct. Professor Marcus Walton's twisted ring, Nipper. Those indentations are unmistakable; no other ring could have made that curious, characteristic mark. And it was made there since yesterday."

"How do you know that, sir?"

"By using my eyes and wits. A short note has been blotted here yesterday—a postcard, perhaps, and the date is quite clear. And there is an ink-mark at the bottom of one of the indentations. If the mark had been here yesterday, the ink-stain could never have got there—that tiny portion of the letter would have been blotted, since there would have been a hollow beneath the paper. This curious mark was made during the night, Nipper."

I stared, incapable of grasping the gov'nor's meaning.

"What—what are you getting at, sir?" I asked.

"It is almost certain that there is not another ring like Professor Walton's," said Nelson Lee. "It is unique, distinctive and original. This mark is precisely such a mark as would be caused by the pressing of that ring upon the blotter."

"Great jumping Joseph!" I gasped. "You're not suggesting that—that Professor Walton was here last night, sir? That he was the burglar?"

"What else should I suggest?" he replied grimly. "This mark has been made accidentally. The mere resting of the fist on the blotter would cause this seemingly unimportant dent. My inference, Nipper, is that Professor Walton was here, that he committed the robbery, and that he is nothing more nor less than an expert cracksman!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH NELSON LEE EXPLAINS FURTHER, AND FAIRLY MAKES ME GASP. WE RETURN TO LONDON, AND PAY AN INTERESTING CALL UPON A GENTLEMAN OF SINGULAR ATTAINMENTS.

I WAS simply flaggergasted.

"You must be joking, guv'nor!" I exclaimed, at last, gazing at Nelson Lee with undisguised bewilderment. "Professor Walton a—a cracksman? Oh, it's impossible! You must be right off the rails!"

He had a far-away look in his eyes.

"It is possible, young 'un," he said in a low voice. "In fact, the more I think of it, the more convinced I become. This little clue, apparently so trivial, has supplied me with the complete key to the puzzle."

"What puzzle, sir?"

"The puzzle of Professor Walton's attitude towards us the other night," replied the detective. "I have never fully satisfied myself that all was right on that occasion. And the possibilities which now lie before me are almost staggering."

He glanced round, and saw that we were still to ourselves.

"I believe that Walton is nothing but a common burglar," he went on. "No, don't interrupt me, Nipper. A common burglar, I said, but 'uncommon' would have been the correct word to use. And he is perpetrating one of the greatest feats of audacity I have ever come across."

"It's—it's beyond me, sir!" I said blankly.

"Yet, surely, my line of reasoning is perfectly clear? Here we have conclusive proof that Walton was in this room last night. I say conclusive because I know that this strange mark was caused

by Walton's ring. And, since the professor was here, it is safe to assume that he is connected with the burglary."

"Go on, guv'nor."

"Why should Walton risk his liberty by committing a crime of this sort, when he has the means of making precious stones for himself? That was the question I asked, Nipper," went on Nelson Lee. "It was then that the amazing solution came to me. Supposing Walton's story was false? Supposing it was a faked story? What is the logical inference? Why, that his laboratory is nothing but a workshop where he recuts and refaces the jewels he steals—in readiness to sell as artificially made products of his own! In the cutting process they would lose value, no doubt, but that would be a minor point."

"Oh, crumbs!" I said. "It's absolutely the limit, sir. You mean to suggest that Professor Walton can't make sapphires at all? That he's nothing but a fake and a fraud? And that his yarn about making sapphires is all bunkum?"

"Exactly, Nipper, sheer bunkum. Why did Walton commit this burglary? In order to provide himself with fresh material! I shall be surprised if Mr. Lancaster tells us that there were not a large proportion of sapphires among the stolen jewels. Remember the diamonds that were left behind. Walton has no use for them."

"Why hasn't he? If he pretends to make sapphires, why couldn't he pretend to make diamonds and rubies?"

"Because he is working cautiously, cleverly. He has confined his attention to sapphires hitherto. By so doing he has completely avoided suspicion. And for several weeks past he has probably been hinting to his customers that he will soon be able to supply rubies. You may remember he mentioned rubies to us. He is progressing slowly and surely. By taking these diamonds he would only have placed himself in peril—unless he threw them away. And, rather than do that, he left them here. The professor has no use for diamonds."

"Oh, it's almost too thick, sir," I protested.

"My dear lad, the world is full of clever men, and it is only natural that some of them should turn their attention to crooked modes of gaining a livelihood," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Walton went to work in a thorough, business-like way. Before starting on his cam-

paign he prepared the way for himself. And he probably bears a high reputation in Blackheath. Who would suspect him of burglary—a learned scientist? Mr. Wilding, you remember, said Walton's products were unrecognisable from the genuine articles. That would not be surprising, would it, considering that they are the genuine articles, dished up in a new suit?"

"Of course, he refaces the jewels so that they won't be recognised again," I exclaimed. "All the same, gov'nor, it's a tall order. Why, if what you say is right, he actually robbed a firm he supplies, perhaps securing some of the very sapphires he sold!"

"Which only proves his astuteness, young 'un. By doing that he really renders his position more secure. And don't forget the incidents of the night on Blackheath. Professor Walton tried to kill me—at least, he fired at me—because I was entering his laboratory."

"That was because of his secret, sir."

"Ah, but what secret—a guilty or an innocent one?" asked the gov'nor quickly. "It seems highly probable that it was a guilty one. He knew that if I entered the laboratory I should see the tools and other articles which showed his true calling, because, if I entered the apartment he would be exposed."

"By Jupiter! That seems likely!"

"Far more likely than the explanation he gave," Lee went on. "After all, what could I have discovered? Supposing I had seen his apparatus for the manufacturing of sapphires? Could I have grasped the secret working of the plant in five minutes?"

"Assuredly not. Nor yet in five hours, Nipper. I should have required the formula of ingredients, the necessary proportions of alumina and flux substances, and oxides, to discover the secret of manufacture. But five seconds would have been sufficient time for me to see that the laboratory was a jewel-facing workshop. And Walton knew it, and took means to stop me entering."

I couldn't help seeing that the gov'nor was jolly clever in his arguments. The case seemed stronger and stronger. And there was no getting over that curious mark on the blotting-paper. It had most certainly been made by Walton's ring—or one exactly like it. And that didn't seem possible; that there should be another ring exactly like it. I mean.

Detective-inspector Morley couldn't have made the discovery, nor could the

local police. If anything came of this theory of Nelson Lee's, the capture would be absolutely ours. And it was about time Professor Marcus Walton was laid by the heels, if he was the sort of chap I now began to think he was.

Soon after, the gov'nor got a word with Mr. Lancaster; and he learned that the bulk of the stones stolen were—sapphires and rubies! There were several valuable rubies and many sapphires. A few emeralds, too, were missing.

This looked significant, anyhow!

Walton had hinted that he could "produce" rubies before long. They'd be easy enough to produce if he stole them!

Anyhow, Nelson Lee decided to follow up the clue without delay.

We couldn't very well do anything on that day, because we shouldn't arrive back in London until late. So we remained at the jewellery establishment for two or three hours, Lee doing his utmost to find further evidence to support his theory.

His efforts were fruitless, and when we took tea with Inspector Morley the latter was decidedly gloomy. Lee didn't tell the worthy Yard man that he had hit the trail.

In all probability the inspector would have scoffed at the story. He was a bit of an ass, in his way.

Clever enough when he had a straight trail before him, but slow at seeing difficult theories.

Nelson Lee, by cautious inquiry, found that Professor Walton had not been in Birmingham for two or three weeks. But, about a month before, he had come down with Dr. Wilding himself, and the branch manager had been introduced to him. It was on that occasion, of course, that Walton had spotted all the details of the place, and had seen how easy it was to "crack the crib."

The gov'nor and I left Birmingham by the night train. Detective-inspector Morley remained behind, and we parted with him rather pathetically. The poor old boulder looked as though he had lost a shilling and found a threepenny bit.

In the train Nelson Lee went into details. We had the compartment to ourselves, and we jawed a good bit.

"To-morrow evening, Nipper," said the detective, after a bit, "we will go to Blackheath and investigate. With such flimsy evidence we can't ask the police to raid the professor's house. We could ask, but without avail, I am afraid,

We must do this thing ourselves. Once we have obtained positive evidence—well, then Walton's career will be abruptly ended."

"You seem certain he's an impostor, sir."

"I am becoming more and more certain with every successive thought, Nipper," declared the gov'nor quietly. "I am worried, however. We must settle upon a plan of action, and we have a good chance of making plans now. It will be easy for us to watch Walton's house, and wait for him to go out."

"And then nip in?" I asked eagerly.

"Exactly. But it won't be an easy matter to 'nip in,' as you call it, young 'un. George won't hinder us much, but the library door will! Even if we enter the house we can't get into the library."

"We could break into the library window, sir," I suggested.

"Yes, we could do that. Those iron bars would not prove much of a hindrance," he said musingly. "A couple of stout files, and the trick would be done. Or acid, Nipper—strong, corrosive acid. That would be quicker, perhaps. But supposing we get into the library, even?"

"There's that steel door," I said gloomily. "No doubt about it, the professor's taken every precaution to make his precious laboratory safe. Aren't there any windows to the laboratory, gov'nor?"

"I don't know. But if there are, you may be sure they are impregnable. I am in favour of the library myself. If we could only get the better of that lock—the lock of the steel door——"

I gave a terrific yell.

"Great Scott!" I roared excitedly.

"My good Nipper, don't deafen me!" protested Nelson Lee, staring at me in amazement. "Have you suddenly gone off your head——"

"That chewing-gum!" I gasped.

"Chewing-gum!" he echoed angrily.

"Did you roar at me in that way because you remem—— Dear me!"

The gov'nor remembered himself then! And there came into his eyes a look of complete satisfaction.

"That chunk of chewing-gum's still in the match-box, sir," I exclaimed quickly.

"I left it on the mantelpiece at home. If that old frump, Mrs. Jones, hasn't thrown it away, we've got an exact impression of the key!"

"Mrs. Jones won't have thrown it

away, Nipper," said Lee. "Our respected housekeeper never dares to touch any of our belongings. She once found a filthy and dilapidated boot upon my table, you may remember, and threw it into the dustbin in disgust. That boot was a valuable clue, and it was lost for ever. Mrs. Jones spent a disagreeable five minutes with me afterwards—and since then she has touched nothing. I verily believe she would allow a burst water-pipe to remain unattended—believing that we had deliberately burst it with some motive of our own!"

I chuckled, and was hugely pleased.

"I never thought that lump of chewing-gum would come in so handy, sir," I said, with relish. "I-only took the impression of the key in a fit of anger. Almost seems providential, doesn't it? Our difficulty is solved, gov'nor. Once we've got into the library we can walk straight into the laboratory as though we owned it!"

Nelson Lee was quite elated, and when we got home I had a look for the chewing-gum. It was there all right, and was quite hard. And the impression of the key was implanted upon it to perfection.

After a good sleep we got up—at about mid-day—for we didn't arrive in London until the early hours. Nelson Lee set to work at once to manufacture a key. He was busy in his laboratory for some little time, but the key, when finished, was identical with the original.

At about seven o'clock that evening, armed to the teeth, so to speak, we set out for Blackheath. We arrived soon after eight, and we took up positions close against Myrtle House. The place was in darkness, and very few people were about. The night was black and chilly, and a stiff wind came across the Heath in shivery gusts.

Luck was with us, for we hadn't been waiting ten minutes before we saw the door of Myrtle House open, and the figure of Professor Marcus Walton was visible against the dim light of the hall. He left the house, and set off down the road at a brisk walk.

"Splendid, Nipper—splendid!" murmured Lee. "We will certainly take this opportunity. Fortune favours us to-night."

Like a couple of shadows—solid shadows, I'll admit—we stole into the professor's garden, and made our way round to the side of the house where the

library window was situated. Our project was risky, we knew, but that only made it more exciting. We might even be absolutely off-side. Professor Walton was possibly as innocent of the Birmingham robbery as I was. But it was best to make sure. We couldn't go and ask him point-blank, so we were doing the next best thing to it.

Getting into the library was an easy job. We had the advantage of knowing just what we had to tackle. The window was within reach of the ground—that's why the bars were there—and we made short work of the bars. They were thick, but fairly soft. And within fifteen minutes the window was up, and we entered. The gov'nor had removed a chunk of glass, and had slipped the three catches back.

It may be thought that we were a couple of horrid burglars. But we weren't. We were simply aiding justice—and there was surely nothing wrong in that? If Nelson Lee had not felt fully justified in breaking into the house he would not have done it.

One flash of my torch showed us that the door leading into the hall was closed. George, at all events, couldn't disturb us. And we didn't waste time, either. We just meant to slip in and out of the laboratory, and nothing more. It was evidence we were after.

Nelson Lee slipped the window down, and drew the curtains. Then he crossed to the steel door and inserted his recently-made key in the lock. It jammed a bit, and for an awful moment I thought we were diddled. But, with a certain amount of persuasion, the key turned.

I felt rummy as we entered that mysterious apartment, the laboratory. What were we going to find? That Professor Walton was guilty or innocent? I half-hoped that the gov'nor's theory was wrong. I don't know why, but I suppose the idea of Walton being able to make precious stones appealed to me. It would be rotten to expose him as a fraud and a swindler and a rogue.

Before entering, Lee pulled the curtains right, and then took the key out of the lock. On the other side of the door there was a knob, just like a Yale lock. We could get out easily enough, even without the key.

He closed the door with a soft click, and we stood in total darkness.

"Now, Nipper, the light," murmured the detective.

We both had torches, and we switched on together.

The laboratory was small; so small that I got a surprise. And the roof was low enough to touch. Along one side of the room there was a strong wooden bench, and there were all sorts of delicate tools lying about.

"There are no windows, sir!" I whispered.

I don't know why I whispered; there was certainly no need to. But, being intruders, it seemed out of place to talk in an ordinary voice. He nodded in answer to my remark. The four walls of the place stared at us blankly. There was only the steel door. Not a window, and not a skylight. Only a couple of small ventilators against the roof at the other end.

The floor was covered with neat oil-cloth, and there was no ceiling—only the bare wooden rafters and the slates. But the place was well-built, for the walls were lined with matchboarding. There was a pile of papers and clothes against one of the walls, and near by a couple of ordinary petrol cans.

"As I suspected, Nipper!" murmured Nelson Lee exultantly.

I turned to the bench, and then saw what the gov'nor had seen. There was not a sign of an electric furnace, or anything which one could associate with the manufacture of precious stones. But on the bench there was every appliance for the unsetting and re-facing of jewels. And there was a small electric furnace, after all, I noticed. But it was obviously intended for the purpose of melting down gold. There was a crucible upon it even now—with molten gold in it!

"Then—then the professor's a burglar, sir?" I asked, with bated breath.

"Without a doubt, Nipper. He is a clever criminal, though, and he has been perpetrating a gigantic fraud for months," murmured Nelson Lee, half-admiringly. "Upon my soul! What an astounding scheme! He steals sapphires and then pretends to make them—selling them openly as his own product. It is extraordinarily astute." The gov'nor paused and nodded to me. "But we had better go, young 'un."

"This gold seems to show that the professor won't be long, sir."

"That is what I was thinking, lad. Walton had evidently left the place for a short time only. We had better get

away at once, and then return with a force of police. He is——"

Nelson Lee paused suddenly.

There was a distinct sound from beyond the steel door! We stood rooted to the floor. Professor Walton had returned—and we were trapped in the laboratory!

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH A CRUCIBLE OF MOLTEN GOLD, TWO CANS OF PETROL, AND A CERTAIN APPARATUS PLAY VERY IMPORTANT PARTS.—AND EVENTS HAPPEN SO QUICKLY THAT THE GUV'NOR AND I DON'T GET MUCH BREATHING SPACE!

"WHAT'S to be done, gov'nor?" I hissed rapidly.

Nelson Lee played his light round the apartment, and I could see his jaw set itself stubbornly.

"That pile of paper and clothes, Nipper!" he rapped out. "Get into cover behind them—quickly! We must make the best of a bad job. I didn't want the professor to return yet, but we can't order the laws of fate. We must take him by surprise, and overpower him in his own den!"

"Ye gods! What a bit of excitement!" I gasped.

We tumbled behind the pile of clothing quickly, and switched off our torches. The clothes were all in a heap, and it was easy for us to find cover. I wondered why they were there—unless a kindly providence had placed them in the corner especially for our benefit.

Then I remembered Walton's real character. Of course, the clothes were his disguises—used when he was out for plunder. He couldn't keep 'em in the house, and so, naturally, they were here. He was certainly an ingenious beggar.

It was a near thing. We'd hardly got into cover when we heard the steel door open. And the next second the apartment was flooded with electric light. Professor Walton had turned the switch. Supposing he saw us! I felt a shivery feeling go down my back, and hoped that the gov'nor would make a move. I'd rather face the rotter straight away than wait for discovery.

Moving ever so slightly I managed to peep over a corner of the pile of clothing. The professor was standing by the bench smoking a cigar, and looking very pleased with himself. His back was half-towards us.

I gently nudged Nelson Lee. Surely was better to act at once?

The gov'nor evidently thought so too.

By waiting we should gain nothing and we might even find ourselves at a disadvantage. Now we had the professor at a disadvantage.

With a quick movement, Lee threw the clothes aside and sprang to his feet. He was up like a Jack-in-the-box.

"Hands up, professor!" exclaimed Lee curtly.

The man twirled round, a kind of choking sound in his throat. And I don't think I ever saw such a look of absolute consternation and alarm on a man's face before. He was completely thunder-struck.

That picture will always remain in my mind.

Walton was against the bench, one hand half in the air, the other on the bench. He seemed to be petrified. His wrinkled face had smoothed itself somehow, being so drawn with emotion. And he looked younger and more agile.

I realised then that his stooping attitude and "old mannish" habits were merely part and parcel of an elaborate pose. It was necessary for him to live up to his character of a learned scientist, and he had done so with singular cleverness. But here in his own workshop, he was himself. Undoubtedly the man was a superb actor.

And if this picture is impressed on my mind, I reckon another picture must have been impressed on his. For what he saw froze him to the spot, and made him stand as though turned to stone.

Nelson Lee was just a little in front of me, and he was holding his automatic before him steadily, the muzzle of it being turned towards Walton, so that he could inspect it thoroughly. And the business-end of a revolver isn't exactly a pleasant sight.

How long that spell lasted I don't know. But it was broken suddenly, abruptly, by a scream. It was a scream of fury and alarm and terror, and it issued from the professor's throat in a long crescendo.

At the same moment he recovered the use of his limbs; and he did something which both Nelson Lee and I were unprepared for. I'll admit readily that we were taken off our guard. We had never anticipated such a measure. We w.

guard against ordinary attack—but not against this.

And nobody could blame the gov'nor for being surprised.

For, with a lightning-like movement, Professor Walton snatched up the crucible of molten gold! Before we could dodge—before Lee could pull the trigger of his revolver, the crucible was flying through the air.

At the self-same second both the gov'nor and I ducked. If that ghastly object struck us—! The gold was the melted-down settings of precious stones—brooches, rings, and articles of that sort. But it was molten, and deadly.

By a merciful stroke of luck it remained in the crucible, except for one single splash. That came down close against me, and landed upon the linoleum, and sprayed up. My left ankle was burnt, and I felt a touch of the fiery stuff on the back of my hand.

Then there came a thud behind us, and a sudden burst of flame.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Simultaneously, there came a heavy crash. Both Nelson Lee and I looked up; we hadn't had a chance before. And we saw that Professor Walton had gone!

He had flung himself backwards, and had managed to get on the other side of the steel door. This was now closed, and we suddenly heard three heavy blows upon the steelwork.

Nelson Lee rushed to the door and grabbed the handle of the lock.

It wouldn't turn!

"He's driven something into the key-hole, Nipper!" panted the gov'nor. "The hound! The lock's jammed, and we can't turn the handle. He's beaten us—he's beaten us! And we had the advantage! Fools—fools!"

"How could we be prepared for that devilish act, sir?" I gasped. "Oh, the fiend! He tried to blind us with that molten metal!"

"But he's escaping, and we are imprisoned in this infernal place!" shouted the detective hoarsely. "See! The lock is set right into the steelwork of the door, and we cannot even knock it off!"

This was true enough. The lock was jammed, and we couldn't budge it. The professor had proved himself to be a man of action, and we knew that to our cost. Yet I never blamed myself or the gov'nor for being tricked. It was just one of

those misfortunes which will happen, however many precautions you take.

Suddenly there came a booming explosion behind us, accompanied by a blinding flare of light. Liquid fire splashed about in every direction, and I saw that Lee's coat was ablaze.

With a gasp of alarm I beat him, and smothered the flame. The heat was terrible, and I thought that my last moment had come. The whole apartment was in a blaze of dreadful fire!

"Good heavens!" I gasped. "What's happened?"

"The petrol, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee huskily. "Those cans have exploded! The paper caught alight from the molten metal, and we did not see it in the excitement of trying to open the door. Our position is appalling!"

We stood with our backs to the steel door, gazing at the fire with a fascination which I find difficult to describe. Nelson Lee had referred to the laboratory as an "infernal place." Goodness knows he was right!

The petrol was all over the floor, and it was flaring amazingly, the flames licking the very rafters. We were compelled to hold our arms before our faces. And I realised, with a dull sense of horror, that we were caught in a death-trap.

The only exit was the steel door—and that was immovable. There was no window, and no skylight. The ventilators were out of reach, and only six inches across at the most. The trap was complete and absolute!

"We—we can't get out, sir!" I choked.

"My dear lad, I am afraid you are right," muttered the gov'nor brokenly. "And it is my doing; I brought you into this terrible inferno—"

"Rats!" I ejaculated sharply. "It wasn't your fault, sir! Good heavens! How could we anticipate such a move on Walton's part? And fancy that stuff setting fire— Phew! The heat's awful!"

"If we only had a cold-chisel and a hammer!" panted Lee. "This door is of steel, but the steel is thin; we could easily smash our way through. But there is nothing—nothing at all. Our bare fists are useless!"

We still stood against the door, and I now noticed that the fire wasn't so fierce. Yet it had really gained a firmer hold. This was because the petrol had nearly burned itself out, and it was now only the pile of clothing and the matchboard-

ing round the walls which blazed. Besides, the absence of any draught, and the enclosed nature of the apartment, made the fire choke itself somewhat.

We were nearly choked, too. The air was horrible, and so thick that we could scarcely see one another. One of the petrols cans must have been empty, and the other only partially filled, or we should certainly have perished.

The linoleum was blazing against the bench; and soon this would be alight, too. It was impossible to beat out the flames; the fire had gained too strong a hold. And then the guv'nor suddenly darted forward.

He went right over the burning oil-cloth, and dived beneath the bench. When he staggered back he held some curious metal object in his hand. His hair was scorched, and his wrists burnt somewhat.

"What is it, sir?" I asked chokingly.

"The apparatus which Walton used to force the safe at Birmingham!" panted the detective hoarsely. "By heavens, Nipper, we have a chance! If we can only get this thing to go we shall be saved! This will eat through the door in less than a minute!"

"What is it—oxy-acetylene——"

"No. Something more compact and easier to manage, I believe," replied Nelson Lee, examining the apparatus carefully. He was cool now, and went about his task methodically. "I thought that the Birmingham safe had been forced by oxy-acetylene, but I was mistaken. Walton used this thing—probably his own invention."

"How's it worked, guv'nor?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"I imagine it burns petrol——"

"And all the petrol's gone!" I cried in anguish.

"No, there is fully a pint in the container, here," he replied quickly. "Walton evidently placed it under the bench just as he took it from his bag. By James, it's an ingenious arrangement, Nipper. This thing is capable of giving a flame every bit as powerful as that of oxy-acetylene. By a cunning blending of petrol with a chemical spray a flame of appalling heat is created. Wait—wait, young 'un! I must discover the method of working before I attempt to use it."

"The fire's getting worse, sir," I muttered dully.

He was only keeping himself calm be-

cause he knew that our very lives depended upon his efforts. I was simply reeling already. My head was singing and felt as heavy as lead. My eyes watered so much that I could scarcely see a thing. It—it seemed to me that my throat was on fire.

I knew that it would be a long while before rescue came. The fire would not be seen for some little time, of course—not until it broke through the roof—and even then the door had to be broken down. Unless the guv'nor succeeded, we were surely doomed.

I watched the fire through the film of water which smothered my eyes. It was gaining in strength at the other end of the room. Already the licking flames were creeping along the walls——

And then came a hoarse, husky roar. I heard a yell from Nelson Lee, and he jumped back. Twisting round, I saw him beating out some flames which threatened to consume his trousers below the knee.

"It's going, Nipper!" he cried triumphantly. "See—see!"

On the floor was the curious apparatus. A tremendous flame was issuing from a little nozzle—a flame which was perfectly blue, and evidently of stupendous power. A drop of petrol had splashed out upon the guv'nor as he lit it. And now the thing was roaring softly, in a subdued kind of way.

It was marvellous, the way the guv'nor had found out the method of working.

Wrenching off his coat, he wrapped it round the apparatus as a kind of shield, and then carried it to the door. It was necessary to lean well back, for the heat from the hissing flame was terrific.

I caught my breath in. Were we going to escape after all? I had nearly given up hope.

Then I got a great surprise. As the blue flame played upon the door, the steel simply withered away. It was as though a plumber's blow-lamp had been placed before a sheet of thin oilcloth. The metal work crumpled up, became white-hot, and then fell away in molten lumps.

It was very different to the door of a great safe. A safe would take hours to force. The metal of this door was thin, comparatively, but quite capable of withstanding any ordinary assault. I watched with strange fascination as the paint smoked and the metal withered.

Nelson Lee guided the flame round in

a semi-circle. His object was to melt the lock right off. I could see that he was nearly dropping. He was only keeping on by sheer will-power. And I—well, I scarcely know what happened.

I seemed to be looking at the steel door in a dream.

How many minutes passed I could not tell. I was dazed and choked and blinded. Things seemed to swim before my eyes, and then came a curious sensation of floating. I was floating somewhere. By Jove, it was ever so lovely! And in my ears there was a sound of pleasant humming, and—and—

And then I came to myself dizzily as I felt myself violently jerked.

"The door's open, Nipper!" came a voice in my ear, as though through a telephone. "Come, young 'un—we are saved!"

I felt myself staggering out, somebody holding my arm. The gov'nor, of course. We went straight to the window of the library, and breathed in the glorious night air. Oh, heaven! How glorious it was!

Neither of us swooned. We had just got out of that terrible inferno in time. And by the time we felt comparatively steady the fire-engines came, and all was commotion. When the hoses got to work they made short business of the fire, and there was enough evidence left among the charred wreckage to prove Professor's Walton's guilt a dozen times over. But where was the professor?

• • • • •

Retribution overtook the would-be murderer even as he was escaping.

The scoundrel had deliberately attempted to kill us, of course, and he had been fleeing from his crime when he met with disaster.

It was a curious trick of chance. Yet,

when I come to look at it, there wasn't much chance about it. Walton was hurrying across Blackheath when he was suddenly attacked by two men.

The pair of ruffians who had been foiled by Nelson Lee and I on the previous occasion! They fell upon him, and attempted to force his secret from him. Failing to gain their object, the men had savagely mauled him, and left him lying upon the Heath too weak to crawl away.

And so he was found, and taken to a doctor's. And it was while he was there that he was recognised and detained. Later he was conveyed to police-station and lodged in the cells. Later still, he was tried and proved guilty of burglary and fraud and attempted murder, and he is now serving a term of ten years' penal servitude.

This ended the career of Professor Marcus Walton.

Whether he was a real professor I never knew; I don't think he was. But he was a clever scoundrel, and he only failed because of the jealousy and greed of the two unknown roughs who attacked him.

Those men were never discovered, but they were evidently professional crooks of the lower order. They had somehow heard that Professor Walton was engaged in the manufacture of precious stones.

Little the rotters guessed that the whole story was a fake!

Little they guessed that Professor Marcus Walton was one of their own breed—and that they had been the direct cause of a comrade's downfall! For, had it not been for the first attack of those two men, Nelson Lee and I would never have encountered the professor. And had it not been for the second attack of those two men, the escaping criminal would probably have got clear away.

Fate works in strange paths!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

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AS the smart little trap pulled up at the farmhouse, Jack Hardy flung down paint-brush and tore across the orchard and out through the gate on to the lawn.

Two boys sprang down from the trap, and ran to meet Jack with outstretched hands.

"Cheer-ho, my sons!" cried the farmer's son. "Jolly glad to shake your old paws again. Sorry I couldn't come down with dad to the station to meet you, but I've been jolly busy all the morning. It's something to do with that jape I mentioned in my letter."

"We know you're good at fixing up wheezes——" began Charlie Fairfax.

"Come over here," interrupted Jack. "Nobody knows anything about it yet, not even dad and mother. The great thing, my sons, in running japes, is to keep them a secret till the proper time."

The farmer's son led his school chums across the lawn, through the orchard to a spot shaded by a huge cherry tree. Stretched out over a fence was a large canvas sheet on which was painted the figure of a Red Indian riding at full gallop on a creature intended to be a mustang.

"But what's this got to do with the jape?" exclaimed Charlie.

"Why, this is it, you chump," said Jack. "We're going to camp out, not as ordinary kids, but as real live redskins."

"What, and go scalp-hunting and looting log-shanties, and stopping mail-coaches, and catching wild buffaloes?" inquired Fred, with a grin.

"You'll catch a thick ear pretty quickly, my son, if I have any more of your cheek," retorted Jack. "Now, if you've done trying to be funny, I'll tell you the wheeze."

"Go on, old man," said Charlie, "we're deadly serious. Honest injun."

"Eh?" sniffed Jack quickly, looking quizzically at his chum. "You are both game for the camping-out dodge? Good. Well, as we want to go one better than the other chaps, I thought we'd have a Mohawks' camp."

"Named after the Mohawk Minstrels?" asked Fred, with a grin.

"No, you ass," grunted Jack Hardy, "after the Mohawk Indians of Minnesota, or some other fine place. Interrupt me again, and I'll biff you one."

"Now, do dry up, Fred," pleaded Charlie. "It sounds like a ripping wheeze. Shove along, Jack, old boy."

"Well, I thought we'd live in our camp like redskins to the very life. I've got everything all ready. I've been collecting feathers for days from the poukry run, and I've got enough to make head-dresses and to trim the trousers of all three of us. There's plenty of paint left here to colour our faces, and up in my room I've prepared a number one lot of spears and shields and all the rest of it."

There was silence for a few moments. Fred and Charlie looked at each other dubiously.

"We could have some jolly fine fun," said Fred, at last, "but wouldn't any of your people who chanced to see us think we were playing the giddy goat? If any old ploughman or labourer saw us, he'd have the fright of his life."

"No fear," said Jack. "We'd pitch the camp right over in the corner of the old cornfield. You don't see a soul over there once in a week."

"Then you don't mean to scrag or frighten anyone?" asked Charlie.

"Not likely, unless I scrag you for being an ass," exclaimed Jack. "It'll all be done in imagination—sort of acting. I thought I'd be Roaring Bull, Chief of the Mohawks, because I thought of the jape, and you'd be two of my favourite

braves. Charlie here could be Morning Dew and Fred could be White Eagle."

"All agreed. Carried unanimously," piped Charlie. "When do we get on the lone trail, Roaring Bull?"

"Right here," grunted Jack laconically in the approved Indian fashion. "Before the sun rises once more on the palefaces the Mohawks will have pitched their camp and be breathing the sweet, pure air of the prairie. Give me a hand, my sons. We'll soon haul this tent over to yonder cornfield."

"Over here, half a dozen yards from the edge, will be the best place to pitch the camp," said Jack. "This hedge at the back of us will hide us from anybody who may happen to come along this way."

Fred walked to the hedge and looked over. Another small field adjoined, the border of which was a hedge that separated it from a public lane.

"I say, do many people come along that lane?" asked Fred. "I can see a chap there now, sitting on a gate."

Jack hurried up.

"Him? Oh, that's Snooker, a village chap. Don't let him see you. He used to work for dad, but he had to turn him off for laziness. He and I are not exactly the best of pals, I can tell you."

"Spoken, O chief, with all the wisdom of thy cunning brain," said Charlie. "From henceforth the palefaces will know us no more. Death to all who are not of the coppery race."

"Ay, death, Morning Dewdrop," cried Roaring Bull solemnly, raising his hand dramatically, as he struck what he meant to be a heroic pose—"death to all who are not of the coppery race. Swear thou to it also, White Eagle!"

"Death to the coppery—I mean, to all but the coppery——" stammered Fred, his face crimsoning. "Oh, hang it, you chaps, can't you see those louts grinning at us from the other side of the hedge?"

Jack and Charlie turned round sharply. They ran across to the hedge, and were just in time to see two biggish lads scurrying along the field.

"They're Snooker and Clogg, two of the louts from the village, and a couple of brutes," said Jack, thoughtfully fingering his chin. "I don't think they'll dare to interfere with us. Come on, my braves, let's hence to the tepee."

THE 2nd CHAPTER.

THE MOHAWKS GET THEIR OWN BACK.

HALF an hour later three lads from Runton village crept noiselessly along the hedge that adjoined the field wherein the Mohawk camp had been pitched.

"There 'um are, the beauties!" chuckled Snooker, the tallest of the lads, making a hole through the hedge with a nobbly stick. "Do you believe me now, Banby, that they're up to some game?"

The ferret-eyed, scowling-faced lad addressed peered through at the Mohawks.

Jack Hardy and his chums were sitting round a tripod fire, over which a large stew-pot was simmering. Truly they were a remarkable sight.

Each boy had daubed his face with paint till he was almost unrecognisable. Fowls' feathers, which Jack had previously highly coloured, were secured about their heads with black thread, while each had a fringe of smaller feathers pinned down each trouser-leg.

"They've been a-readin' o' Bufferloo Bill," muttered Clogg. "an' it's got on their brains. We can't allow sich goin's on down Runton way. What say, boys, shall we out 'em?"

"Don't you make no error," sniffed Banby. "That's the gamo. I'm feeling fit for a slog this afternoon, 'specially when there's a chance of picking up some'ing afore its lost!"

He winked prodigiously at his pals, who chuckled so audibly that the three imitation redskins turned their heads and pricked up their ears.

"Thought I heard somebody laughing then," remarked Fred. "Supposing it's your mater, or your sister, Jack? My word, I shall have a fit! Here, I'm going in the tepee on the off-chance!"

"Don't be an ass!" cried Jack. "Both the mater and Grace have gone to a garden-party, and won't be home till after dark." He looked into the pot over the fire. "The stew's doing lovely. It'll be ready in about ten minutes. Let's have a scoot round the prairie while we're waiting."

The three chums got up on their feet. With his back bent, Roaring Bull was just advancing in stealthy fashion, with a palm curved above his eyes, when, with a terrific whoop, the village louts

leaped over the hedge and rushed towards him.

Jack looked startled for a moment. But he quickly recovered. He leapt nimbly aside as Snooker—a lad quite four years older, and a couple of stones heavier than himself—grabbed at him.

"Here, Snooker," he cried indignantly, "what do you want, interfering with us? You know very well that this is my father's field. You've no business on private property. Clear out of it!"

"Not me!" roared Snooker. "Coller them other two, boys! We've come in to have a game with you. We've played the Bufferloo Bill racket afore, ain't we, Banby? You're the redskins, and we're the Bufferloo Bill gang. Ouch! Oh, you little 'ound!"

Snooker drew in his breath sharply as Jack drove his fist full on the lout's heavy jaw; then he rushed at his small adversary. Before Jack could dodge he was locked in the arms of the big village lout.

The farmer's son made a plucky fight, but it was against long odds. Several times he got home heavy blows on Snooker's body which made that worthy grunt and snarl.

Snooker forced Jack's head back till the boy thought his neck would crack. He suddenly released his hold of the bully, and endeavoured to drop limp to the ground, but Snooker apparently saw through the dodge, for quickly he released his hands from Jack's throat, and flung them round the boy's waist, and threw him to the ground.

Charlie and Fred had also made a desperate resistance. Big though their opponents were, neither boy showed the white feather. Banby, indeed, had such a warm time with Fred that he retired in a hurry, and Clogg only overcame Charlie by brutally banging the boy's head on the ground as they rolled over and over.

"Come on, you cur, Banby!" roared Clogg, at his companion's retreating figure. "I've outed this one! He's chucked a dummy. Go for the bloke behind you!"

Thus abjured, Banby turned round shamefacedly, and again rushed at Fred, who was pursuing him. Over on to the ground they rolled at once, as Clogg came running up. He threw himself on Fred, who was uppermost, and held him in a grip which the boy could not throw off.

"Get up, Banby, and go through his pockets!" he commanded. "I've got him safe. Quickly, now, before t'other comes round!"

As directed, Banby emptied the contents of Fred's pockets on to the ground. There were five shillings, some coppers, a penknife, and a watch.

"Good! Stow 'em in my pocket. We'll have to give Runton a wide berth after this!"

Charlie, however, had recovered from his momentary unconsciousness, and had leapt to his feet. Seeing Jack on the ground, with Snooker bending over him, he ran to his chum's aid. Snooker, taken unawares, was compelled to release his hold, and instantly Jack was on his feet, and calling to Charlie to make a dash for it.

"Well done, Charlie!" cried Jack. "I thought at first that brute had done you an injury. Let's rescue old Fred!"

Clogg and Banby, seeing the two chums racing towards them, with Snooker well in the rear, released their victim, and ran back towards the tent, where they armed themselves with the spears and shields which Jack had manufactured.

"They've robbed me, the beasts!" cried Fred excitedly, directly the chums hauled him to his feet. "They've taken all my money, my watch, and my pocket-knife! Come on, I'm going to get them back again—somehow!"

"No, no!" protested Jack. "They're too big and too strong. Besides, they've got weapons, and we haven't! We'll have to find some other way. Quick—come with me. I've got an idea. If only we can get some hose we'll make the brutes sit up!"

Jack explained his idea as they hurried across the field, with the derisive shouts of the village louts ringing in their ears. They stripped off the redskin feathers as they ran. When they had reached the stables—where water was to be had—they quickly cleaned the paint from their faces.

"Ha, the very thing!" cried Jack, picking up a long length of hose which hung coiled on a peg on the wall. "Not far from the tent, at the back of the old cornfield, is a well. You chaps can take it in turns to pump while I give the louts a cooler."

A few minutes later, as Snooker and

(Continued overleaf.)

his pals were sitting at the door of the tent eating the stew which the Mohawks had prepared, and were chuckling over the way they had routed them, a sudden stream of icy-cold water shot into the midst of them.

So unexpectedly did it come that they went reeling over, while Jack, with roars of laughter, continued to give them a thorough sousing.

"Ow! Stop it, you little 'ound! I'll skin you for this!" roared Snooker. "I'll make you——"

A stream of water shot into his face and cut off his utterance. The three fled in all directions.

Snooker and Clogg bolted within the tent, and refused to allow Banby admission.

So hurried was their flight within the canvas, that not being firmly erected in the first place, it began to show signs of collapse.

Meanwhile Banby was dancing a hornpipe, and endeavouring to obtain shelter from the water, which streamed down incessantly upon him.

Jack was enjoying himself immensely, whilst the chums working the pump

against the old well were impatiently longing to see the fun.

Then suddenly the tent collapsed, and the three village louts were buried beneath it.

"Fred, Fred," cried Jack, "come here at once! Let Charlie work the pump! We've got the beasts by the neck now. Get over amongst them, Fred, and make them stomp up all they've taken from you. I'll keep the hose on them till they do!"

Snooker and his pals stumped up, though not without many scowls and threats of vengeance. They were glad to get away from that ceaseless drenching at any price, and they slunk away like whipped curs.

That was the last of the Mohawks' camp. Even Jack admitted that his great jape had its drawbacks.

For the rest of the holiday the chums camped out in the ordinary way, and, strangely enough, when they returned, a fortnight later, to St. Anselm's, not a word was breathed about the great Mohawk camp. Jack Hardy made his chums solemnly promise that.

THE END.

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