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BY MAXWELL SCOTT

Week ending September 4, 1915.



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IN BORROWED PLUMES.

*A Magnificent Long, Complete
Story of Nelson Lee and Nipper.*

By **MAXWELL SCOTT,**

*Author of "A Miscarriage of Justice," "The Convict's
Vendetta," etc., etc.*

CHAPTER I.

A Kitchener's Man.

"D" Company of the Tenth Battalion of the Yorkshire Fusiliers had just finished dinner, and the men were enjoying an interval of rest before being summoned to "fall in" for the two o'clock parade. Some were shaving, some were reading, and some were simply "sitting around" and smoking. A few of the more industrious were cleaning their rifles, or polishing their mess-tins.

Taken as a whole, they were as fine a body of young Britons—smart, intelligent, well-set-up—as one could wish to meet. Hardly one of them had ever dreamt, until a few months ago, of entering the army. With scarcely an exception they had rallied to the colours at the call of duty, leaving comfortable homes and lucrative situations to "do their bit" for King and Country. In a word, they were "Kitchener's men."

Presently the door of the barrack-room opened and the sergeant-major thrust in his head. Instantly there arose a chorus of indignant protests.

"Oh, I say, it isn't time to fall in yet! Give us a chance to digest our dinners!"

Ignoring the clamour, the sergeant-major glanced round the room till his eyes fell on a handsome young private who was putting the finishing touches to his rifle.

"Private Wilmot," he called out, "Captain Austruther wants to see you in his room."

Wondering what the summons might portend, Godfrey Wilmot made his way to the officers' quarters. The captain was seated at a table on which lay a folded copy of "The Times."

"You wish to see me, sir?" said Wilmot, saluting.

"Yes," replied the captain. "Close the door, please. I want to talk to you privately; and by way of a beginning I'm going to ask you a rather curious question. Is there any mystery connected with your past life, or with your family?"

"Not that I'm aware of, sir," replied Wilmot, taken aback by the question.

"Would you mind telling me your history—quite briefly, you know?"

"It's hardly worth telling, sir. My father was a clergyman, and was rector of a parish in the north of England. Both he and my mother died

when I was young. I was educated at a clergy school and afterwards at Oxford. After taking my degree, I obtained a post as assistant-master at St. Peter's, York, and I was there up till the time when I enlisted."

"You are an orphan, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"No, sir."

"Any other relations?"

A faint smile crossed Godfrey Wilmot's sun-tanned face.

"The only relative I possess, and he's a very distant one," he said, "is Sir Frederick Dalling, of Wymnouth Hall, in Sussex. But I'm not proud of the relationship!"

"Why not?"

Wilmot shrugged his shoulders.

"If you knew Sir Frederick's reputation, sir," he said, "you wouldn't need to ask that question."

"You mean that he's a bad lot?"

"An absolute wrong'un, sir! Drinks, gambles, and has been mixed up with countless scandals. No, sir, I don't boast of my relationship with Sir Frederick Dalling!"

"In what way are you related to him?"

"My father, and Sir Frederick's father—the late Sir Henry Dalling—were cousins. In fact, my father was Sir Henry's next of kin; so that if Sir Henry had never married, or had died without a son, my father would have succeeded to the estates—which are strictly entailed—but not to the baronetcy, of course. But Sir Henry did marry—married a girl off the music-hall stage—and his son was born in the same year that I was born. Sir Henry was killed in the hunting-field on the day that his son was born, and his wife died about five years ago. The son, however, is still alive, and is now Sir Frederick Dalling, Bart., with a rent-roll of twenty thousand a year, while I'm a private in the Army, with one and a penny a day!"

There was just a trace of bitterness in the tone in which these last words were spoken, and the captain read the thought which lay behind the bitterness.

"I see!" he said sympathetically. "Your father is dead, and you were his only son. Consequently, if Sir Henry had never married, or if Sir Frederick had never been born, you would now be the owner of Wymnouth Hall, with its rent-roll of twenty thousand a year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is Sir Frederick married?"

"No, sir. But may I ask what is the object of these questions?"

Captain Anstruther picked up "The Times," which was folded so as to display the front page.

"In the 'agony' column of to-day's 'Times,'" he said, "there appears an advertisement which, as soon as I read it, I thought might possibly refer to you. That's why I sent for you. Now that I've heard your story, I'm sure it refers to you."

He handed the paper to Wilmot and pointed to an advertisement in the second column.

"That's the advertisement," he said. "Read it and tell me what you make of it."

Wilmot read the advertisement, which was worded as follows:

GODFREY WILMOT, son of the late Rev. — Wilmot of Yorkshire. If the above is still alive and will call at No. 35, Uppang Road, London, N.,

he will hear of something greatly to his advantage. No letters. A personal call essential.

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked the captain, as Wilmot looked up from the paper.

Wilmot shook his head.

"It is certainly addressed to me," he said; "but what it means I haven't the remotest notion."

"Does the address throw no light on the matter? Do you know anybody who lives in Uppang Road?"

Again Wilmot shook his head.

"I never heard the name of the road before," he said, "and I don't even know where it is."

"The mystery deepens!" said the captain, with a laugh. "I fully expected that as soon as you read the advertisement you would know—or, at any rate, that you would be able to make a shrewd guess—who had put it in, and what it referred to. It appears, however, that you're as much in the dark as I am."

"Absolutely," said Wilmot. "I haven't the vaguest idea who the advertiser is, or what his advertisement means."

"But you will answer it, of course?"

"Yes. I will write to that address——"

"It's no use your writing. Don't you see the advertisement says 'No letters. A personal call essential?' That means that you must go to that address yourself, and if you take my advice you'll go at once. I'll make it all right about your leave."

"Thank you, sir. Can you tell me what time the next train leaves for London?"

"Yes. Before I sent for you, I looked up the trains; and I find that if you leave here by the 2.15, you'll reach King's Cross at 10.45 to-night. I'm not quite sure myself where Uppang Road is, but if you take a taxi from the station you'll probably arrive there soon after eleven. How are you placed for money?"

"I'm all right in that respect, thank you, sir. But won't eleven o'clock at night be rather late to call on the advertiser? Hadn't I better put up at a hotel to-night and go to Uppang Road to-morrow morning?"

"Eleven o'clock is not very late for London, and if I were you I wouldn't lose a minute more than I could help in going to that address. You never know what may be happening behind the scenes—for instance, the advertiser may be dying, and if you wait until to-morrow morning you may lose all chance of clearing up the mystery. No; if you take my advice, you'll go straight to Uppang Road, no matter how late it is, as soon as you reach London."

"Very well, sir, I'll take your advice. Thank you very much for showing me the advertisement and for all your help and advice."

"You've nothing to thank me for," said the captain. "I'm only sorry that I didn't see the advertisement this morning, so that you could have left by an earlier train. However, better late than never. I hope the advertisement is the forerunner of good news, and that it presages good luck for you. I'll arrange for you to have forty-eight hours leave. You'll come to me and tell me all about it as soon as you get back, won't you?"

"I will, sir," promised Wilmot; and, bringing his heels smartly together, he saluted and left the room.

Three-quarters of an hour later he was on his way to London, little dreaming what startling events awaited him there.

CHAPTER II.

A Confession and a Raid.

THE train was late, and it was nearly half-past eleven when Wilmot stepped out at King's Cross. The hour being so late, he was in two minds as to whether he would go to Uppang Road that night, or drive straight to a hotel. In the end he decided to go to Uppang Road first, and if the inmates of No. 35 were in bed, to postpone his visit until the following morning.

"Do you know Uppang Road?" he asked, hailing a taxi off the rank.

"Yes, sir!"

"Then drive me to No. 35."

It was close on midnight when the taxi pulled up in front of the end house of a long row of houses, all of which were built on the same pattern. The front door of each house opened on the street, with a window at one side of the door, two windows on the first floor, and two more windows on the second floor.

As Wilmot stepped out of the cab, he saw that No. 35 was all in darkness, and he was about to turn away and tell the driver to take him to a hotel, when the door opened and a snub-nosed, cheeky-looking "slavey" peered out.

"Is that Mr. Wilmot?" she asked, in a shrill, cockney voice.

"Yes," he answered, startled in spite of himself.

"Wot cars the old gal 'as!" grinned the girl. "I was jest settlin' 'er dahn for the night, when she swore she 'card a taxi pull up ahtside the front door. I told 'er it was all fudge, but nussink would satisfy 'er, but I must come dahstairs an' see if it was Mr. Wilmot. Come in! The old gal 'as been expectin' yer all day."

Wilmot dismissed his taxi and followed the girl into the house.

"Who lives here?" he asked, when she had led him into a cheaply furnished sitting-room and had lit the gas.

"Me an' the old girl—that's all," she answered.

"And who is the old girl, as you call her?"

"Miss Markham."

"That tells me nothing. Who is Miss Markham?"

"Not knowin', can't say! I've only bin 'ere abaht six weeks, an' so long as the old gal pays my wages regular—which she 'as done up-to-date—I ain't curious abaht 'er privite 'istory!"

"She's in bed at present, I think you said?"

"Yer think right!"

"Well, tell her not to trouble to get up. I'll call again in the morning."

"Bless yor 'cart, she never gets up! She's bedridden—crippled with rheumatics. The doctor comes to see 'er twice a week, an' he told me, only the larst timd he was 'ere, that he didn't think she'd live much longer."

A bell rang upstairs.

"Wot! The old gal's gettin' impatient!" said Lavinia. "Wait 'ere arf a mo'!"

She bustled upstairs and was back within the prescribed "arf a mo'."

"You're to come up to the old gal's bed-room," she announced.

She conducted him upstairs and ushered him into a small room at the back of the house. Propped up in bed was a bent and crippled woman whose aged appearance was due to suffering more than to length of years.

"Are you Godfrey Wilmot?" she asked, when Lavinia had closed the door and gone downstairs.

"I am," he answered, as he seated himself in the chair which Lavinia had placed by the side of the bed.

"I must have some proof of that fact," she said, eyeing him narrowly.

He showed her some letters which he had in his pocket, and told her much the same details of his past life as he had previously told to Captain Anstruther. She listened to the story with half-closed eyes.

"That's enough," she murmured at last. "I do not wish to hear any more. I am satisfied now that you are the man who ought to be living at Wymouth Hall."

He started and leaned forward.

"What do you mean?" he said huskily. "Why ought I to be living at Wymouth Hall, which belongs to Sir Frederick Dalling?"

She opened her eyes, and a look of scorn crossed her wrinkled face.

"There is no such person as Sir Frederick Dalling!" she said calmly.

"Oh, but there is, I assure you!" he protested. "I saw him only a few weeks ago."

"I tell you there is no such person as Sir Frederick Dalling!" she repeated fiercely. "The man you saw—the man who lives at Wymouth Hall—the man who calls himself Sir Frederick Dalling—is an impostor. He has no more right to the name he bears than I have!"

Wilmot strove hard to keep his excitement under control.

"That is an extraordinary assertion to make," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly. "Can you prove it?"

"I can—and I will," she replied, half-closing her eyes again. "It is for that purpose that I have asked you to call on me. For twenty-five years I have kept my shameful secret, but now that the doctor has told me that my days are numbered, I have resolved to make a full confession of the whole wicked plot."

She ceased speaking, and a long pause followed. Wilmot began to think she had fallen asleep, but she was only collecting her thoughts.

"Twenty-six years ago," she began at last. "Sir Henry Dalling became engaged to a lady of very doubtful reputation who had won considerable success on the music-hall stage. Your father was a deeply religious man, with high ideals of honour; and when he heard of the engagement he did everything in his power to persuade Sir Henry to break it off. He even interviewed the lady herself, and I have no doubt he said some very hard and bitter things about her character. But it was all in vain. Sir Henry refused to give the lady up, while the lady herself conceived the most malignant hatred of your father for having tried to prevent the marriage.

"The marriage duly took place," she continued, "and the music-hall actress became Lady Dalling. In the following year she gave birth to a son, who was born at Wymouth Hall. I was a professional nurse in those days, and myself and the village doctor, whose name was Sopwith, were present when the child was born. He was born at eleven o'clock in the morning, and at three o'clock in the afternoon Sir Henry was thrown from his horse while following the hounds. He was killed on the spot, so that his baby son succeeded to the title and estates when he was four hours old! But he did not live long to enjoy them. About half-past eleven that same night he was suddenly seized with convulsions. Dr. Sopwith was hurriedly summoned to the Hall, but a few minutes after he arrived the unfortunate baby died in my arms!

"Only the doctor, Lady Dalling, and myself were present in the room when the baby died," she went on. "I thought her ladyship would go mad when we told her the child was dead. I naturally thought she was prostrated with grief at the loss of her little son, but it wasn't only that. She was maddened by the thought that your father, whom she hated so

vindictively, would now succeed to the estates and would deprive her of her position as mistress of Wymouth Hall."

Once more she paused. Wilmot's brain was working at high pressure.

"I think I can guess what is coming," he said. "You procured another baby and passed it off as Lady Dalling's son?"

The old nurse nodded.

"Yes," she almost whispered. "It was Lady Dalling who suggested the idea. Earlier in the day the wife of a young gamekeeper, named Gilroy, had given birth to a son and had died an hour later. Her ladyship was aware of this, for the doctor had told us all about it in the morning, and she also knew that Gilroy, who was little more than a boy, lived in a lonely cottage on the edge of the estate, and hadn't a relative in the world to whom he could confide his motherless child.

"Knowing all this, and being prepared to stick at nothing to keep your father out of his inheritance, Lady Dalling offered the doctor and myself a thousand pounds apiece if we would carry out the following plot. The doctor was to go to Gilroy's cottage and tell him that a gentleman, whose name he was not at liberty to reveal, was willing to adopt Gilroy's baby on condition that Gilroy asked no questions and never attempted to trace the child. If Gilroy accepted this offer, Dr. Sopwith was to bring the baby to the Hall and hand it to me through the drawing-room window. I was to give him the dead baby in exchange, and he was to bury it secretly in some secluded corner of the park.

"To our eternal shame the doctor and I agreed to do this. The doctor went to Gilroy's cottage and had no difficulty in persuading the young gamekeeper to let him take the child away. He brought the child to the Hall; and after I had given him the dead child, I smuggled Gilroy's baby upstairs, dressed him in the dead baby's clothes, and laid him in the dead baby's cot.

"Gilroy's baby," she concluded, "was not at all like Lady Dalling's baby; and in addition he had an ugly birthmark, like a bunch of grapes, on his left knee. That, however, was a matter of no consequence. Sir Henry was the only person who had seen Lady Dalling's baby, in addition to her ladyship, the doctor and myself—and Sir Henry was dead. None of the servants had seen Lady Dalling's baby, either before it died or afterwards; so that when they were afterwards shown Gilroy's baby, dressed in the baby-baronet's clothes, and, lying in the baby-baronet's cot, neither they nor anybody else had the slightest suspicion that he wasn't Lady Dalling's son."

"And that baby—Gilroy's baby," said Wilmot, "is now the man who lives at Wymouth Hall and calls himself Sir Frederick Dalling?"

"Yes."

"Does he know he's an impostor?"

"I cannot tell you. Lady Dalling may have told him before she died, but I don't know."

"At any rate, he has never been to see you, or written to you, and begged you not to betray his secret?"

"No! I left the Hall a few weeks after the events I've just described, and I've never been there since. Lady Dalling used to write to me sometimes, and send me money, but she never mentioned the affair in any of her letters. Since her ladyship's death, five years ago, I've neither seen nor heard from anybody at Wymouth. Until two years ago I was able to follow my profession as a nurse, but I then fell ill, and I've never been able to work since. I've been bedridden now for over six months; and when the doctor told me the other day that I hadn't much longer to live, I determined to seek you out and tell you everything. I want to make amends,

before I die, for the wrong I have done to you and your father, and if there is any further information I can give you, to enable you to claim your rightful position, I shall be only too willing to give it."

"Thank you," said Wilmot. "There are certainly one or two questions I should like to ask you. For instance, have you ever heard from Dr. Sopwith since you left the Hall?"

"Never."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't think anybody knows. About fifteen years ago he got mixed up in a scandal at Wymouth and disappeared. There was a rumour that he had sailed for America, and that the ship in which he had sailed had foundered with all hands; but whether that was true or not, I cannot say. At any rate, so far as I know, nobody has heard of him since he disappeared from Wymouth fifteen years ago."

"Do you know where Gilroy is now?"

"I've every reason to believe that he is now with his regiment at the Front."

"With his regiment! But I thought you said he was a gamekeeper?"

"He was—twenty-five years ago. Lady Dalling however, was always afraid that he might recognise his son if he remained in the neighbourhood of Wymouth, so she persuaded him to join the Army. He was only just turned twenty when his son was born, and he enlisted a few weeks later. Unless I am greatly mistaken—and I don't think I am—he's now a second lieutenant in the East Anglian Rifles."

"Have you heard from him, or written to him?"

"Oh, no! He doesn't even know that such a person as Nurse Markham exists!"

"Then how do you know that he's a subaltern in the East Anglians, and that he's now at the Front?"

"By putting two and two together. Lady Dalling told me in one of her early letters that she had persuaded Gilroy to enlist, and in another letter, written just before she died, she told me that Gilroy was then a sergeant in the East Anglian Rifles. Everybody knows, of course, that the East Anglians are now at the Front; and I read in the papers the other day that Quartermaster-sergeant Gilroy, of the East Anglians, had been promoted second lieutenant for conspicuous gallantry in action. Of course, it may not be the same man; but I haven't a doubt of it myself."

"Neither have I," said Wilmot. "I must try to find some way of getting into touch with him, as he appears to be the only person who can corroborate your story."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Gilroy can't corroborate my story," she said. "He never knew what became of his motherless son, and he has no suspicion that the baby he handed over to Dr. Sopwith is now the man who poses as Sir Frederick Dalling."

"That may be," retorted Wilmot. "But if Sir Frederick, as we will call him, denies that he is Gilroy's son—as he will, of course—Gilroy will be able to identify him by the birth-mark on his left knee."

"That's true," she admitted. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Meanwhile," continued Wilmot, "may I ask if you have told this story to anybody else?"

"No," she answered. "I told the doctor who attends me that I had something on my mind, but I didn't tell him what it was. I said I was anxious to get into communication with a young gentleman named Godfrey Wilmot, whose present address I didn't know. It was the doctor who suggested that I should advertise in 'The Times,' and it was he who wrote out

the advertisement for me; but I didn't tell him why I wished to see you."

Wilmot pondered for a few minutes in silence. He realised that he had a difficult task in front of him, and that he would need expert advice and help. He also realised that Nurse Markham was very ill, and might die at any time, and that her verbal confession was of no legal value until it had been reduced to writing and signed in the presence of a witness.

"I'll consult Nelson Lee," he muttered to himself. "If any man can help me, he's the man."

He turned to the sick woman, who was lying back on her pillows with a far-away look in her eyes.

"You've heard of Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective?" he asked.

She nodded.

"If I bring him here to-morrow morning," he continued, "will you be willing to repeat your story to him, and if he writes it down, will you be willing to sign it?"

Again she nodded.

"I will do anything you wish," she murmured. "But I may not live till to-morrow morning. Bring Mr. Lee to-night."

He glanced at his watch and saw it was nearly one o'clock.

"It's rather late," he said; "but if Mr. Lee is at home, I don't think he'll object to come. You are sure you would rather I went for him now?"

"Quite sure," she whispered.

"Then I'll do so," he said, rising to his feet. "If I can get a taxi, you may expect me back in about an hour."

He left the house, and after walking briskly through several streets he met an empty taxi. He hailed it, and was in the act of stepping in, when a curious droning sound fell on his ears.

"What's that?" he asked quickly.

"Sounds like an airyoplane, or a Zeppelin," said the driver nervously.

The words had scarcely crossed his lips ere a thunderous roar was heard, followed quickly by a second and a third.

"Bombs!" gasped Wilmot, and even as he spoke the monstrous form of a Zeppelin airship hove in view, flying swiftly across the starlit sky and dropping bombs as it flew.

Crash!

A bomb fell into the street in which they stood, and converted the centre of the roadway into a yawning crater. With cries of alarm the two men darted across the road and took refuge in a covered archway. But no more bombs were dropped, and after sheltering in the archway for about ten minutes, they ventured to emerge.

By that time the aerial pirate, having accomplished its murderous mission, was hurrying back to its lair. At several points the ruddy reflection of flames on the sky testified to the destruction it had wrought.

"At a guess," said the driver, "I should say that Uppang Road got the biggest dose."

Uppang Road! Wilmot started, and a sudden fear gripped his heart. Without a word to his companion he turned away and raced back to Uppang Road.

His worst fears were realised. Several houses in the road had suffered, but none so badly as No. 35, which was a blazing wreck. Panic-stricken men and women, all in night-attire, were running to and fro in wild confusion. Some of the women had children in their arms, and on all sides were heard the shrieks of the injured and the dying.

Wilmot elbowed his way to a constable, who was endeavouring to keep the crowd back from the front of No. 35.

"What of the people who were in this house?" he demanded breathlessly. "A young girl and a bedridden woman. Are they safe?"

The constable looked at him pityingly.

"Safe!" he repeated. "Look at the house, and don't ask foolish questions! Could anybody live five minutes in a hell like that? If they weren't killed when the bomb dropped through the house, they'll have been burnt to a cinder by now."

And the constable was right, for nothing more was ever seen of Lavinia and Nurse Markham.

CHAPTER III.

"Somewhere in France."

AN enemy airship appeared over London early this morning and dropped several bombs. No damage was done to any buildings of military importance, and the casualties were entirely confined to civilians."

Nelson Lee and Nipper having finished breakfast at their room in Gray's Inn Road were discussing this laconic bulletin, issued by the official Press Bureau, when their landlady announced a visitor.

It was Godfrey Wilmot, but a different Godfrey Wilmot from the smart-looking young private who had stepped out of the train at King's Cross the previous night. His uniform was creased and bedraggled, with here a smudge of soot, here a splash of blood, and here a stain of dirty water. The buttons of his tunic were dull and tarnished, as if by smoke, and one of his hands was scorched and blistered.

Without any beating about the bush he introduced himself and told his story.

"When I'd satisfied myself that Miss Markham and her servant had perished," he concluded, "I set to work to help to rescue the inmates of the other houses and to convey the injured to hospital. When my help was no longer needed, I had a wash and some breakfast; and then came here to ask you to advise me what to do."

"If it's only my advice you want——" began Nelson Lee.

"Your advice, and your help," interrupted Wilmot. "If Miss Markham's story is true—and I've no reason to doubt it—Sir Frederick Dalling, as he calls himself, is an impostor, and has no right to the title and estates which he holds. The title expired with the death of Lady Dalling's infant son; and the estates are mine. Before I can claim them, however, I must be prepared with evidence to prove the truth of Miss Markham's story. And where am I to obtain such evidence?"

"Lady Dalling is dead," he continued. "Nurse Markham is also dead; and even if Dr. Sopwith is still alive, his whereabouts are unknown. Only Gilroy remains—and Gilroy is at the Front. The authorities, of course, would not allow me to go to the Front and interview Gilroy; and even if they did, I shouldn't know how to proceed. That is why I've come to you. That is why I need your help."

"Which I shall be very glad indeed to give," said Nelson Lee. "I've listened to your story with the very greatest interest. It reveals one of the most ingenious conspiracies that has ever been brought to my notice; and it will be a real professional pleasure to me to assist in frustrating it."

"As you yourself have clearly realised," he continued, "the rock upon which all our hopes of success must be built is Second-lieutenant Gilroy. He alone can prove that Sir Frederick Dalling is his son."

"If he will," said Wilmot. "He can do it if he will, of course, but will he? After all, Sir Frederick is his son; and when he discovers that our object is to deprive his son of twenty thousand a year, and possibly to send him in prison as a fraudulent impostor, isn't there a fear that Gilroy will seal his lips and refuse to say anything to damage his son?"

The detective smiled.

"Leave that to me!" he said blandly. "I sha'n't be such a simpleton as to tell Gilroy that his son is now masquerading as Sir Frederick Dalling. In fact, I sha'n't mention Sir Frederick's name at all."

"I shall simply ask Gilroy to describe the circumstances in which Dr. Sopwith came to his cottage, twenty-five years ago, and took his baby-son away. I shall be very mysterious about the business, and I sha'n't give Gilroy a hint as to why I want the information."

"When he has told his story, I shall ask him if the baby had any distinguishing birth-mark by which he could be identified. When he has answered this question, and has described the birth-mark on the baby's knee, I shall write out his statement and get him to sign it in the presence of an independent witness."

"Armed with this statement, I shall then return to England and place the case in the hands of a first-class lawyer, with instructions to start an action at law for claiming the estates on your behalf."

"That sounds all right," said Wilmot. "But can you do it? You say after you've got Gilroy's statement you'll return to England. That means, of course, that you propose to go over to France and interview Gilroy."

"Certainly!"

"But will the military authorities allow you to go to the Front and interview an officer on active service?"

"It won't be easy to obtain the requisite permission, I admit," said Nelson Lee. "Civilian's aren't welcomed at the Front just now! However, I have friends in high quarters, and with their influence, and a little tact, I hope to be able to manage it. In the meantime, what about yourself? How long are you remaining in town?"

"My leave doesn't expire till to-morrow night," said Wilmot, "but as there's nothing more I can do in London, I thought of rejoining my regiment to-day. If, however, I can be of any help to you by prolonging my stay—"

"Oh! there's no need for you to do that," said Nelson Lee, "Go back to your regiment now, and leave the case in my hands. I'll wire to you as soon as I've got permission to go to the Front and I'll keep you informed from time to time of the progress of my inquiries."

The events of the next few days do not call for lengthy description. Thanks to the influence of his "friends in high quarters," the detective had not much difficulty in ascertaining the name of the "place in France" at which the Second Battalion of the East Anglian Rifles was stationed.

But the task of obtaining a permit to visit this place, and interview Gilroy, proved very much harder than Nelson Lee had anticipated. At first, indeed, his request was met with a point-blank refusal; and it was not until an exalted personage had intervened on his behalf that the War Office gave way.

Eventually, to make a long story short, the detective obtained a pass authorising him and Nipper to cross to France, to proceed to the place already referred to, and to interview Gilroy "at such and such a place, and under such conditions as the G.O.C. in his unfettered discretion shall deem advisable."

With the fear of the Censor before our eyes, we refrain from giving the

name of the port in England from which the detective and Nipper sailed, or the name of the port in France at which they landed.

From this latter port they travelled by train—crawled would be a better word, for the journey took three days—to a small French market town which served as the Divisional Headquarters.

Here they were held up for nearly a week, at the end of which time they again moved on, and in due course reached a half-demolished village about a couple of miles behind the firing-line.

Battalion Headquarters were situated in this village and were housed in an old French chateau, one wing of which had been converted into an advanced field hospital.

It was early in the afternoon when Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived, and on making inquiries, they ascertained that Gilroy was on duty in the trenches, and would not be relieved until night.

The detective's cool request to be allowed to go to the trenches and interview Gilroy there was firmly and not too politely refused.

"So there's nothing to be done," he said to Nipper, "but to hang around and kill time till Gilroy comes off duty."

It was what the official communiqués call "a quiet day" at the Front; and although the village was only two miles from the firing-line, there were few signs of conflict to be seen.

From time to time the thunder of long-range artillery could be heard, or the crackle of distant rifle-fire; and occasionally an aeroplane flew overhead.

Trains passed through the village at short intervals, laden with stores and munitions; and ever and anon a motor-ambulance came gliding down the road and turned off in the direction of the hospital.

"I wonder if they'd let us have a look round the hospital?" said Nipper, who was tired of wandering about the village and being turned back at bayonet's point whenever he attempted to stray beyond its boundaries.

"No harm in asking," said Nelson Lee.

As they strolled along the road which led to the old chateau a motor-ambulance overtook and passed them. When they turned in at the gates of the chateau, they saw that the ambulance had drawn outside the door and that two stretcher-bearers were carrying a wounded soldier up the steps.

By the time they reached the door, the stretcher-bearers and their burden had disappeared into the building.

"Was that a serious case?" asked Nelson Lee, addressing the driver of the ambulance.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Shot through the head by a — German sniper."

"Officer, or private?"

"Officer, sir. Lieutenant Gilroy, of the East Anglians!"

The detective reeled as if he had been struck.

"Lieutenant Gilroy of the East Anglians!" he cried. "The man, who was promoted a few week's ago for gallantry in action?"

"Yes, sir; and he deserved it, too. I know him well—in fact, I knew him when he was a gamekeeper in a small village in Sussex."

"Wyumouth?"

"That's it, sir," said the driver in surprise. "How did you know? Are you a friend of the lieutenant's?"

"No," said Nelson Lee. "But I've come all the way from England for the sole purpose of making his acquaintance—and now you tell me he is seriously wounded. How did it happen?"

"I didn't see it happen, for I wasn't in the trenches," said the driver: "but from what I hear, he raised his head above the parapet for half a

record, and one of the German snipers had him in a flash. He was quite unconscious when he was brought to the dressing station, but the doctor said if we rushed him to the hospital as quickly as we could, there was just a chance——"

Before he could say more the two stretcher-bearers reappeared, looking very glum and downcast.

"It's all up with him, poor chap!" said one of them to the driver of the ambulance. "He was still breathin' when we carried him into the ward, but he died before the doctor could examine him."

CHAPTER IV.

The Mine and the Motor-car.

It is easier for a civilian to get away from the Front than to get there! In less than twenty-four hours after interviewing the doctor, and making sure that Gilroy was dead, the detective and Nipper were on board a steamer bound for England.

It need scarcely be said that Gilroy's death had played havoc with Nelson Lee's plans and hopes.

"We're up against a tough proposition now," he said to Nipper, as they paced the steamer's deck. "It's no use claiming the estates for Wilmot unless we can prove that Sir Frederick is Gilroy's son; and how can we do that, now that both Gilroy and Nurse Markham are dead?"

"It can't be done!" said Nipper. "We'll have to retire from the case, as gracefully as we can, and admit that we are beaten."

"We may have to do that in the end," said Nelson Lee; "but I'm not going to haul down my flag yet. Although Gilroy and Nurse Markham are dead it is just possible—I don't say probable, but just possible—that somebody is still living who can prove that Sir Frederick is Gilroy's son."

"Meaning Dr. Sopwith, I suppose?"

"Yes. I'm not forgetting that Nurse Markham said it was rumoured that Dr. Sopwith had been drowned at sea, but we've no proof that the rumour was true. All we know for certain is that he disappeared from Wymouth fifteen years ago. For anything we know to the contrary, he may still be alive, and if we can find him, we may be able to persuade him or compel him, to make a clean breast of the whole conspiracy."

Nipper shook his head.

"It can't be done!" he said again.

"Perhaps not," said Nelson Lee; "but it's worth while trying to do it.

At any rate, it's the only thing we can do—except retire from the case, as you suggest."

"Then your next move will be to try to find Dr. Sopwith?"

"Yes."

"How will you set about it?"

"I shall first go to Wymouth and ascertain the exact circumstances in which Dr. Sopwith disappeared."

"How will you do that?"

"By making inquiries among the villagers."

"And then?"

"What I shall do next will depend on what I learn from the villagers. I shall sift their information very carefully, and anything that looks like a clue I shall follow up to the bitter end."

Again Nipper shook his head.

"Hopeless!" he said tersely.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not very hopeful myself," admitted Nelson Lee. "As I said just now, however, it's the only thing we can do, and you know as well as I do that many a quest on which you and I have embarked, which seemed utterly hopeless at first, has been crowned with complete success in the end."

About half an hour after this conversation the steamer ran into one of those thick fogs for which the Channel is notorious. "Half-speed" was the order for a time; then "quarter-speed"; and finally, as the fog increased in density and darkness came on, the vessel nosed her way through the fog with no more speed than sufficed to give her steerage-way.

"I hope there are no German submarines about!" said Nipper, who was leaning over the taffrail on the starboard side of the deck, while Nelson Lee was standing near-by with his favourite briar between his teeth. "We're practically standing still, and we should offer an easy mark for a torpedo, shouldn't we?"

The detective smiled indulgently.

"You needn't alarm yourself on that score," he said. "A submarine would be blind and helpless in a fog like this. If you had said you hoped there were no floating mines about——"

The end of the sentence was drowned in a deafening roar. By a tragic coincidence at the very moment when Nelson Lee was speaking of floating mines, the steamer had struck one!

The events of the next few minutes happened with such bewildering rapidity as almost to defy coherent description. It will help to clear the ground perhaps, if we anticipate matters a little by stating here that the vessel was not seriously damaged and was afterwards able to make port under her own steam.

Before that happened, however, Nelson Lee and Nipper had passed through a series of adventures which would be hard to match even in their adventurous careers!

The floating mine exploded on the port side of the steamer's bows, and so violent was the force of the explosion that the vessel heeled over to starboard and almost lay on her beam-ends.

At that moment, Nelson Lee and Nipper were leaning over the starboard taffrail. They were the only passengers on that side of the deck; and when the vessel suddenly heeled over they were both flung headlong into the sea!

Neither of them were hurt by this unexpected plunge into the sea; but as they rose to the surface, a few yards from each other, a wooden grating, which had fallen overboard, struck Nipper on the head and stunned him.

Fortunately, Nelson Lee was near at hand, and as Nipper threw up his arms and sank, the detective promptly dived after him and brought him to the surface again.

All this took place in a tithe of the time it has taken to describe; but a strong flood-tide was running, and the fog was very thick, and by the time that Nelson Lee rose to the surface again, supporting Nipper on one arm, the tide had carried him to such a distance that the steamer was no longer visible.

Although he could not see the vessel, however, he could hear the voices of those on board—the cries of the terrified passengers; the shouts of the officers, bawling orders; the answering hail of the crew.

He shouted himself, but knew that his voice would never be heard above the clamour. He tried to swim back to the ship, but the strength of the tide and the weight of Nipper's body were too much for him. At last he gave up the attempt in despair and allowed the tide to carry them whither it willed.

How long he drifted in this fashion he never knew. Eventually, just when his strength was beginning to fail, he heard the welcome sound of breakers; and, as the fog lifted for a moment, he caught a glimpse of a curving beach and a line of low-lying cliffs.

With hope renewed, he struck out for this beach; and a quarter of an hour later he waded through the surf, carrying Nipper in his arms.

A rapid examination of the unconscious lad showed Nelson Lee that Nipper was not seriously injured, and only needed rest and quiet to restore him. But where were such "rest and quiet" to be obtained.

Except that he was somewhere on the south coast of England, the detective had no idea where he was, or in which direction lay the nearest town or village. He observed, however, that a footpath ran down from the summit of the cliff to the beach; and, judging from this that there must be human habitations not far away, he once more took Nipper in his arms and carried him up the path to the top of the cliff.

The footpath ended at a stile, and on climbing over this stile he found himself in a road which apparently skirted the edge of the cliffs.

It was not quite so foggy here as it had been on the beach; but although he gazed up the road, to the right, and down the road to the left, no sign of any house or village could he see.

"I wish to goodness I knew where I was!" he growled. "If I turn to the right, I may be walking away from the nearest village—and I may be doing the same if I turn to the left! However, it has got to be one of the two—so here goes!"

With Nipper in his arms he staggered up the road to the right, and had covered perhaps a hundred yards when he suddenly halted and pricked up his ears.

"That's a motor-car!" he exclaimed, as a rhythmical humming fell on his ears. "If it's coming this way my troubles are over!"

He stood and listened, but, to his surprise, the sound neither grew louder nor fainter.

"The car is evidently standing, with the engine running," he mused. "Probably there's a house farther along the road, and the car is standing at the door."

He resumed his tramp, and presently came in sight of the car. As he had guessed, it was standing still—but it was not standing at the door of any house. On the contrary, no house, no building of any kind was anywhere to be seen.

The car—an open five-seater touring-car—was simply standing in the middle of the deserted road, with nobody in it, nobody in charge of it, and nobody in sight! Its electric lights had all been switched off, but its engine was still running.

"This is curious, to say the least," muttered Nelson Lee, in a puzzled voice. "Why is this car standing here, with no one in charge of it? However, the owner can't be far away, and he couldn't be such a heartless brute as to refuse to give Nipper and me a lift to the nearest village. I'll chance it, anyhow. I'll put Nipper in the car, and when the owner turns up I'll introduce myself and explain the situation."

He opened the door of the car, laid Nipper on the back seat, and covered him with one of the rugs. All the time that he was doing this he expected to hear the owner of the car coming down the road. When minute after minute passed, and nobody appeared, he began to grow impatient.

"I'll wait two more minutes," he mused, as he closed the door of the car and took his stand outside it. "If nobody has arrived by then, I'll commandeer the car and drive it myself!"

One minute passed. Then the sudden clanging of a distant bell fell on his startled ears, followed almost immediately by a couple of rifle-shots! The shots came from the direction of the stile, over which the detective had recently climbed, and before their echoes had died away he heard somebody—it sounded like two men—running up the road as hard as they could pelt.

"Now, what on earth——" he began, peering anxiously down the fog-enshrouded road.

His musings ended in a startled gasp, for at that moment two men dashed through the fog and raced towards the car. One of them was a young man in the costume of a chauffeur. The other was an elderly man in the blouse, knee-breeches and striped stockings of a convict! The young man was unarmed, but the convict carried a short, thick iron bar.

At the sight of Nelson Lee standing beside the car, the convict uttered a furious oath. With the swiftness of a lightning-flash he sprang at the detective, and before the latter could defend himself—almost before he had realised his danger—the convict dealt him a savage blow with the iron bar.

Dazed by the blow, the detective stumbled forward and pitched to the ground. Before he could pick himself up, the two men leaped into the front seat of the car—never noticing that Nipper was lying on the seat behind them—and in less time than it takes to tell the car was flying up the road with the speed of an express!

CHAPTER V.

Convict No. 88.

AS Nelson Lee scrambled to his feet and started to run after the car, a couple of warders came pelting up the road, each with a rifle in his hand.

"Stand, or I fire!" yelled one of them, levelling his rifle at Nelson Lee.

Half-demented by anxiety for Nipper's safety—scarcely knowing what he was doing—the detective continued to run after the car.

Ping!

A bullet whistled past his legs and brought him to his senses.

"I'm a friend!" he cried, pulling up and pointing after the rapidly-retreating car. "The man you want is in that car. Fire at the tyres of the back wheels! Quick, or you'll be too late!"

Ping! Ping! Ping!

Three shots rang out in quick succession, but all of them apparently missed the target; and the next instant the car whizzed round a turn in the road and disappeared from view.

Although the warders had been ready enough to take the detective's advice, and fire at the back wheels of the car, they were not prepared to take his bare word for it, that he was "a friend."

"Now, give an account of yourself," said one of them, gripping the detective roughly by the arm. "Who are you, and what were you doin' here, and how do we know that you weren't concerned in the prisoner's escape?"

"My name is Nelson Lee," said the detective simply.

The second warder started forward and peered into his face.

"By Jove, so it is!" he exclaimed. "I beg your pardon, sir, for firing

at you, but one of our prisoners has escaped, and we had tracked him into this road, and when I saw you running after the car, I naturally thought——”

“Don't apologise,” said Nelson Lee. “I quite understand. Also, I begin at last to have some notion where I am!”

The two warders looked at him in bewilderment.

“What do you mean, sir?” asked one.

“I mean what I say,” replied Nelson Lee. “Nipper and I were crossing from France when our vessel struck a mine. We were both flung into the sea, and Nipper was stunned, but I managed to keep him afloat, and after drifting about for a considerable time, we were washed ashore at the foot of these cliffs. At that time I had no idea where we had landed, but, after what has just happened, I suppose I'm right in saying we are in the neighbourhood of Greystones convict prison.”

“Quite right, sir. Greystones is only three-quarters of a mile from here. But where's Nipper?”

Before the detective could reply, a man on horseback galloped up. It was the Governor of the prison.

“Seen anything of him?” he cried, reining up, and addressing the two warders.

Then he saw and recognised Nelson Lee.

“Hallo! You here, Mr. Lee?” he exclaimed. “What on earth has happened? Why are you looking like a drowned rat? But you shall tell me all about it later. In the meantime, I must attend to business. One of the convicts under my charge has escaped, and was last seen making for this road.”

He turned to the warders and repeated his question.

“Seen anything of him?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” answered one of them. “We saw him racing across the quarry field, and making for a gate which opens into this road. We fired two shots at him, but neither of them hit him. There was a man standing at the gate who seemed to be waiting for him. As soon as Eighty-eight had vaulted over the gate, he and the man—who was evidently a confederate—dashed off up the road; and by the time we reached the gate, they were out of sight in the fog.”

“And was that the last you saw of them?”

“Yes, sir. We ran up the road, but the only person we saw was Mr. Lee, who was running after a motor-car. He shouted to us that the man we wanted was in the car, so we fired at the tyres, but we didn't hit 'em, and before we could fire again, the car flew round that corner and disappeared.”

The Governor turned to Nelson Lee.

“You evidently know more about this affair than I thought,” he said. “Were you aware that Eighty-eight was going to try to escape to-night?”

“Indeed, I wasn't!” said Nelson Lee. “I know nothing about number Eighty-eight! My connection with the affair—— But I'd better begin at the beginning, and tell you the whole story.”

“What an extraordinary story!” exclaimed the Governor, when Nelson Lee had concluded his tale. “It clearly proves that Eighty-eight's escape was planned and arranged beforehand. A confederate was to bring a car to this spot, and wait for Eighty-eight at that gate. When Eighty-eight appeared this confederate was to conduct him to the car and drive him to some place where he can hide, until the hue and cry have died down.”

“Probably,” said Nelson Lee. “To tell you the truth, however, I'm not in the least interested in the fate of number Eighty-eight! My only concern is for Nipper. As I've already told you, he was lying unconscious

in the car when the men sprang in and drove off; and I shudder to think what they'll do to him when they discover him!"

"I understand your anxiety," said the Governor, "but I don't think you need worry overmuch on Nipper's account. They'll probably drop him out of the car, at some lonely spot, and in an hour or two you'll get the news that he has been found lying in the road, at some place not very far from here.

"In the meantime," he added, "I must set the wires to work and telegraph a description of the two men and the car to all the surrounding towns and villages. You'd better come with me. I know you'd rather go after Nipper, but you can't pursue the car on foot; and even if you had another car, you don't know in which direction the fugitives have fled. Moreover, you're soaked to the skin; and unless you change your things at once, you'll catch pneumonia. From every point of view your best plan will be to come with me to my house and stay there till we got news of Nipper. I'll ask the police, at all the places to which I wire, to make inquiries and to wire to Greystones at once if anything is seen or heard of the boy."

As there seemed nothing better to be done, the detective accompanied the Governor to his house, which formed a separate block of the prison buildings. It was eight o'clock when they arrived, but although the Governor kept the wires hot with descriptions and inquiries, no news of the fugitives or of Nipper had been received when midnight struck.

It was in vain that the Governor tried to persuade Nelson Leo to go to bed. All that night the detective sat in the room in which the telephone was installed, waiting for news of Nipper. But the night wore on—dawn broke over the leaden sky—daylight came—and there was still no news.

"No news is said to be good news," said the Governor, as he and Nelson Lee sat down to breakfast. "In this case, however, I'm afraid the adage doesn't apply. I felt sure we should have heard of Nipper before now, and I'm disappointed we haven't. However, we're certain to have news before long."

The detective gloomily shook his head. He was listless and low-spirited; and more for the sake of making conversation than because he was interested in the subject, he asked a question and received an answer which banished his listlessness as if by magic.

"By the way," he said casually, "who was the convict who escaped last night, and what was he in for?"

"He was serving a sentence of seven years for conspiracy and fraud," replied the Governor. "At the time of his arrest, he was known by the name of Crispin, and was the proprietor of a bucket-shop, in the City; but it was afterwards discovered that his real name is Sopwith, and that he's a fully qualified medical man."

The detective dropped his knife and fork, and stared at the Governor in open-mouthed amazement.

"Dr. Sopwith?" he gasped. "The man who used to be in practice at Wymouth, in Sussex?"

"That's the man!" said the Governor. "Did you know him?"

"No, but I've heard of him," said Nelson Leo. "As a matter of fact, I've a special reason for being interested in Dr. Sopwith just now; and I shall be very grateful if you'll tell me all you know about him."

"I only know his official record, of course," said the Governor. "As you have just remarked, he used to be in practice at Wymouth. About fifteen years ago, he became involved in a scandal with one of his patients; and rather than face the exposure, he disappeared. He was supposed to have gone to the States, and it was rumoured that the vessel in which he sailed

was lost with all on board. The rumour, however, was false. He did go to the States, but not in the ship which was wrecked.

"In America," continued the Governor, "he changed his name to Wrightson; and for ten years he earned a more or less honest living, as the manager of a patent medicine concern. Growing tired of this, he returned to England about five years ago, and set up as an outside broker in the City, in the name of Crispin & Co. The business was a swindle from the first, but it was not until about eighteen months ago that the police were able to obtain sufficient evidence to warrant his arrest.

"He was accused, among other charges," he concluded, "of inducing his clients to part with their money by fraudulent misrepresentations, and of converting their money to his own use. He was found guilty, and sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. He served the first year of his sentence at Wormwood Scrubs, and was then transferred to Greystones; so that he had been here about two months when he escaped."

"I remember the case quite well," said Nelson Lee. "But it was never stated at the trial, I'm sure, that Crispin's name was Sopwith, or that he was a medical man."

"It wasn't known at the time," said the Governor. "In fact, his identity was only established by the police after he had been sentenced."

"So you knew, when he came to Greystones, that he was a doctor, and his name was Sopwith?"

"Yes."

"Did anybody ever come to visit him here?"

"No."

"Did he receive any letters?"

"I don't think so."

"Did he ever write to anybody?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"But he must have communicated with somebody outside the prison, you know. He couldn't have arranged for a confederate to be waiting with a car at a certain place at a certain time unless he had previously communicated with his confederate."

"True! That's a matter which will have to be cleared up at the official inquiry. In the meantime, may I ask why you're so interested in Dr. Sopwith?"

"Tell me first how he escaped last night?"

"By reason of the fact that he was a medical man, and in consideration of his exemplary conduct, he was appointed one of the attendants in the prison infirmary. As such, he had more freedom from observation than the ordinary convict; and, taking advantage of this freedom, he contrived somehow to possess himself of a file and a rope. Last night he made excuse to go to one of the lavatories, where, after barricading the door, he filed through one of the window-bars, lowered himself by means of the rope, and was over the boundary-wall before his escape was discovered. What happened after that, you know. And now, may I ask you again, why you're so interested in the man?"

In reply to this question the detective, after pledging the Governor to secrecy, told him the whole story of Lady Dalling's plot, and the part which Dr. Sopwith had played therein.

"But that isn't the only reason why I'm interested in Dr. Sopwith now," he continued. "Yesterday afternoon, my only reason for wishing to find the doctor was because he's the only man who can corroborate Nurse Markham's story. But I've an additional reason now for wishing to discover his whereabouts."

"What's that?" asked the Governor.

"Nipper!" said the detective tersely. "When Sopwith and his confederate discovered Nipper in the car, what did they do with him? It is obvious that they didn't simply drop him out into the road, or we should have heard of him by now. Then what did they do with him? Did they shoot him and hide his body? Did they bind him and take him with them as a prisoner? Did they leave him to die on some lonely moor? We do not know. But Dr. Sopwith knows; and consequently my principal reason now for wishing to find Dr. Sopwith is in order that I may force him to tell me what he and his confederate have done with Nipper. And I think I can do it," he added quietly.

"But you've got to find him first," said the Governor.

"That's what I meant," said Nelson Lee. "I think I can find him. I think I know who his confederate was. I think I know where they motored to last night."

The Governor gasped.

"You think you know who his confederate was?" he repeated incredulously.

"I think so."

"Do you mean you think you recognised the man last night?"

"No! I couldn't recognise a man I had never seen before! If Dr. Sopwith's confederate is the man I think he is, I never set eyes on him until last night."

"Then what makes you think you know who he is?"

"You have heard my story," said Nelson Lee, "and, having heard my story, you know that if Dr. Sopwith were to tell what he knows Sir Frederick Dalling would be deprived of his title and estates, and would probably be sent to prison for conspiring to defraud Godfrey Wilmot of his inheritance. In other words, Sir Frederick is completely in Dr. Sopwith's power, and the doctor has only to open his mouth to ruin him.

"It is obvious," he continued, "that Sopwith is an utterly unscrupulous man who would not hesitate to blackmail Sir Frederick if it suited his purpose. Wymouth Hall is less than fifty miles from Greystones, and Sir Frederick is a wealthy man who owns, no doubt, a powerful motor-car. He is completely under Sopwith's thumb, and dare not defy him. What more likely, then, that after Sopwith came to Greystones he wrote or sent a message to Sir Frederick, threatening to make a clean breast of the whole conspiracy unless Sir Frederick helped him to escape?"

The Governor nodded.

"I see what you're driving at," he said. "You suggest it was Sir Frederick Dalling who was waiting with the car last night, and that he took Dr. Sopwith to Wymouth Hall."

"That is my theory," said Nelson Lee.

"And a very plausible theory, too," said the Governor. "I have little doubt that you are right, but, unfortunately, I cannot act on your theory until I have some definite evidence in support of it. If I were to tell the police what you suspect, and were to ask them to obtain a warrant and search the Hall, they would certainly refuse."

"Of course they would. As you say, they would decline to act until you could give them some definite evidence in support of my theory. Consequently the first thing I must do must be to obtain such evidence."

"How will you do it?"

"I shall go to Wymouth by the next train and endeavour to see Sir Frederick without attracting attention. If I find that he's the man I saw last night I shall then wire to you, and after you've obtained a search-warrant you'll come to Wymouth with the police and a couple of warders, and we'll raid the Hall together."

"And if, when you see Sir Frederick, you find he isn't the man you saw last night?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a contingency I do not contemplate," he said. "In my own mind there isn't the shadow of a doubt that Sir Frederick is the man I saw last night, and that Dr. Sopwith is now at Wymouth Hall."

As it afterwards turned out, Nelson Lee was partly right and partly wrong. That is to say, he was right in supposing that—but perhaps we had better not anticipate events.

Let it suffice for the present to say that after breakfast the detective left the prison, walked to the station, and took the next train to Wymouth.

CHAPTER VI.

Discovered.

TO adopt a familiar phrase, the foundation-stone of Nelson Lee's theory was "well and truly laid." In other words, the detective was perfectly correct in his surmise that Dr. Sopwith had used his power over Sir Frederick Dalling to compel the latter to help him to escape from Greystones.

Through the medium of a friendly warder the doctor had sent an ultimatum to Sir Frederick, threatening to expose him unless he assisted him to escape and provided him with the means of leaving the country. Through the same medium Sir Frederick had expressed his willingness to do his best; and the rest had been merely a matter of details.

It was the friendly warder who had provided Sopwith with the file and the rope; and the doctors' escape would probably have been accomplished without any untoward incident if two of the other warders had not chanced to see him climbing over the boundary wall of the prison grounds.

These warders promptly raised the alarm and dashed off in pursuit. As they raced across the quarry-field, the prison bell began to clang; and a moment later they caught sight of Sopwith. He was making for the gate which led from the field to the road which skirted the edge of the cliffs.

Sir Frederick was waiting for him at this gate; but although the warders saw Sir Frederick they did not know, of course, who he was.

As already related, the warders fired a couple of shots at Sopwith, but both of them missed. Before they could fire again Sopwith vaulted over the gate and joined Sir Frederick.

"Whore's the car?" he panted.

"About fifty yards farther up the road," replied Sir Frederick.

"Have you brought me a change of clothes?"

"Yes."

"And a wig and false beard?"

"Yes; they're all in a bag in the car."

They pelted up the fog-enshrouded road, and at the same instant as they came in sight of the car they saw that a man was standing beside it. It was Nelson Lee, of course; but neither of them recognised the detective.

What happened next the reader knows. Sopwith still carried the iron bar which he had wrenched away from the lavatory-window; and with this he felled the detective to the ground.

Then he and his companion leaped into the front seats of the car—Sir Frederick slipped in the clutch—and a moment later the car was flying up the road with the speed of an express.

"Stand, or I fire!"

A warder's voice rang out behind them, followed by a rifle-shot. Then another voice rang out.

"I'm a friend! The man you want is in that car. Fire at the tyres of the back wheels! Quick, or you'll be too late!"

Ping! Ping! Ping!

Three more shots flew screaming over their heads; then the car swung round the corner and Sir Frederick switched on the lights.

"That was too near to be pleasant," he growled. "However, we're safe enough now, I think. Look back along the road and see if they're following."

Sopwith knelt on the front seat of the car and gazed back along the road. As the car was an open one, if he had lowered his eyes he would probably have seen Nipper. All his attention, however, was concentrated on the road; and presently he resumed his seat with a sigh of relief.

"No; there's no sign of pursuit," he said. "I wonder who that fellow was that I knocked down?"

"Some busybody, no doubt," replied Sir Frederick, "who was walking down the road and whose curiosity was aroused by the sight of the deserted car. Now tell me how your escape was discovered."

By the time that Sopwith had concluded his tale, the car had covered nearly twenty miles.

"Isn't it time I changed my clothes now?" suggested the doctor.

"Not yet," said Sir Frederick briefly.

"But if anybody stops the car and sees me in this rig-out, the game will be up."

"I shouldn't stop if I were ordered to. You've nothing to fear on that score."

"But I shall have to change before we reach the Hall."

"Of course; but their's time enough yet."

"Why not now?"

"For one reason, because you can't change your things in the road. It wouldn't be safe."

"But I shall have to change in the road sooner or later."

"Not at all."

"Where can I change, then?"

"About five miles on this side of Wynnsmouth there's a wood which comes down to the road. Many years ago a company was formed to prospect for coal in this wood."

"Coal in Sussex!"

"Oh, there was coal there right enough, but it wasn't a paying seam. After sinking a trial-shaft, therefore, the company abandoned the scheme: and all that now remains of the workings is the old pit-shaft."

"Very interesting, no doubt, but what has all this got to do with changing my clothes?"

"After you've changed, you'll want to get rid of that convict-dress, won't you?"

"That's easily done. We can shove it into the bag and burn it when we reach the Hall."

"I've a better and a safer plan than that. When we come to the wood I've told you of, I'll stop the car and switch off the lights. We'll then go into the wood, and after you've changed we'll make a bundle of your convict-suit and drop it down the old pit-shaft. In that way you'll be able to change without any risk of being disturbed, and you'll be able to get rid of those tell-tale garments without any fear of their ever being found!"

"A capital idea! That's what I'll do," said Sopwith, little suspecting the real reason why his companion had suggested this plan.

For Sir Frederick, be it known, was contemplating an act of unrepeatable treachery. He knew quite well that when he had assisted Sopwith to flee the country, he would still be in the doctor's power, and the latter would still be able to "bleed" him by threatening to expose him.

He had consented to help Sopwith to escape from Greystones because he had not dared to refuse; and, for the same reason, he had promised to provide him with the means of going abroad. But he had no intention of carrying out this promise.

He did not mean to be blackmailed for the rest of his life if he could prevent it; and the only sure and certain method of preventing it was the method which is summed up in the saying that "Dead men tell no tales." In a word, it was not only Sopwith's convict-clothes, but Sopwith himself, which Sir Frederick intended to "drop down the old pit-shaft."

By this time the car had been travelling at full-speed for over half an hour. During that half-hour Nipper's stupor had been gradually passing away; and a few minutes after the above recorded conversation he came to his senses.

For a little while he lay with half-closed eyes, wondering vaguely where he was and what had happened. Presently, as his mind grew clearer, two facts impressed themselves upon him. The first was that he was lying on the back-seat of a swiftly-moving car. The second was that two men, whose backs were turned towards him and whose faces he could not see, were seated in the front seats of the car.

Now, it must not be forgotten that Nipper knew nothing of what had happened after the steamer had struck the mine and he and Nelson Lee had been flung into the sea.

He remembered rising to the surface, and something striking him on the head, but after that his memory was a blank.

How had he got into the car? Who was the man who was driving the car? Who was the man who was sitting beside the driver? Where was the car going? Had Nelson Lee been rescued, too? Was he the man who was sitting beside the driver? Was the driver of the car the owner of the car, and was he taking them to his house? Such were a few of the questions which chased each other through Nipper's brain.

"I expect it's the gov'nor who's sitting beside the driver," he mused. "I'll tell him I've come round, and ask him where we're going?"

He pushed the rug aside and dragged himself to his feet. He leaned forward and was about to tap the driver's companion on the shoulder when he suddenly drew back with a stifled gasp of amazement!

For even as he stretched out his hand, he saw that the man was wearing a loose, drab-coloured blouse decorated with broad arrows!

"It isn't the gov'nor!" he gasped. "It's a convict!"

Words fail to describe his stupefaction at this astounding discovery. While he was still staring at the broad arrows, the man began to speak, each word falling clear and distinct on Nipper's straining ears.

"How much farther have we to go before we reach the wood of which you spoke?" he asked.

"Not far," replied Sir Frederick. "We're nearly there now."

"And what's the programme after I've changed my things?" inquired Sopwith. "Do we go to the Hall?"

"Yes. I told the servants before I left that I should probably bring a friend back with me to spend the night at the Hall; so your arrival will occasion no surprise."

This was a lie; for, as a matter of fact, Sir Frederick had never intended

to take his companion to the Hall. His intention was to drop him down the old pit-shaft.

"And when do I start for Spain?" asked Sopwith.

"To-morrow morning. My yacht is now in the harbour, and the skipper has orders to be ready to sail at half-past ten to-morrow morning."

This, at any rate, was the truth; for Sir Frederick had arranged to start on a cruise at half-past ten next morning and to remain abroad until he was sure that it was safe for him to return.

"That's a long time to wait," said Sopwith. "I shall never have a moment's peace of mind till I'm out of the country. Can't the yacht sail before half-past ten?"

"Impossible! The tide doesn't serve till 10.30."

"But there's no reason, is there, why I shouldn't go aboard before that time?"

"None whatever."

"Then couldn't I go straight on board the yacht to-night, instead of going to the Hall?"

"Yes, if you like," replied Sir Frederick. "But we'll discuss that question while you're changing. Here's the wood I told you of. We'll pull up here."

Suiting the action to the word, he clapped on his brakes and shut off his engine.

"The bag containing your disguise is under the back seat," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Sopwith turned his head to look into the back of the car, and no sooner had he done so than his eyes fell on Nipper.

"Good heavens!" he yelled, leaping wildly to his feet. "There's a boy in the car!"

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CHAPTER VII.

The Old Pit-shaft.

IT would be impossible to exaggerate the bewilderment with which Nipper had listened to the conversation between the convict and the driver of the car.

It need hardly be said that he had no suspicion that the convict was Dr. Sopwith, or that the driver was Sir Frederick Dalling. He was still completely in the dark as to how he had got into the car, or what had become of Nelson Lee.

All the conversation told him was that the convict had escaped from prison, that the driver had helped him to escape, and that the convict intended to sail for Spain in the driver's yacht at half-past ten next morning.

It never occurred to Nipper to suppose that the two men did not know he was in the car. He took it for granted that they knew he was there; but why they had put him in the car—why an escaped convict and his confederate had troubled to pick up a half-drowned boy—he could not for the life of him imagine!

If he had known that the two men did not know he was in the car, he would probably have jumped out and taken to his heels the moment the car pulled up. As already explained, however, he took it for granted that they knew he was there; and it was not until the convict turned his head and leaped to his feet with a startled yell that Nipper grasped the true state of affairs.

"Well, I'm jiggored!" he gasped. "They didn't know I was here until

this instant! If I'd only known that before I'd been over the side of the car by now!"

It was then too late, however, to make his escape; for at the same instant as Sopwith uttered his startled yell he sprang into the back of the car and seized Nipper by the arm.

"Who are you, and how did you get her?" he demanded fiercely.

Nipper stared at him with a dazed, half-witted air.

"Eh? What?" he mumbled.

"Answer my question!" snarled Sopwith, shaking him as a terrier might shake a rat. "Who are you and how did you get into this car.

Nipper giggled inanely; then burst into tears.

"The mine!" he moaned with an artistic shudder. "It was awful! I can hear the explosion now! I can feel the ship heeling over!"

His voice rose to a shriek, and he fell on his knees at Sopwith's feet.

"Save me!" he shrieked. "I'm sinking! Help! Help!"

"Bring him out and let me talk to him," said Sir Frederick, as he opened the side door of the car.

Sopwith dragged Nipper to his feet and pushed him into the road. Sir Frederick took him by the arm and led him into the light of one of the lamps.

"Why his clothes are dripping wet!" he exclaimed. "Salt water, too! He has been in the sea. He must have been on board some vessel which was sunk by a mine, and the fright has affected his brain."

He peered into Nipper's face.

"Don't be frightened, my boy," he said soothingly. "We're not going to hurt you. What's your name?"

Nipper stared at him vacantly; then he suddenly uttered a moaning sigh and pitched to the ground.

"He has fainted!" cried Sir Frederick.

Sopwith knelt down and examined Nipper; then he rose to his feet and drew Sir Frederick aside.

"He doesn't know I'm a doctor," he whispered grimly, "or he wouldn't have tried that dodge!"

His companion started.

"Do you mean he's shamming?" he queried.

Sopwith nodded.

"Absolutely!" he said. "He's no more in a faint than I am; and the rest of his performance was merely a clever piece of acting."

"Who can he be?"

"I neither know nor care."

"How on earth did he get into the car?"

"He must have climbed into it while I was standing in the road at Greystones, and while you were waiting for me at the gate."

"Then he has been in the car ever since we started."

"Must have been, for we've never stopped until now, and he couldn't climb into the car while it was running."

"If he has been in the car ever since we started," said Sir Frederick, "he must have heard what we were talking about."

"Of course," said Sopwith. "He may not have heard all that we said, but he has probably heard that you live at Wynmouth Hall, and that you and I are leaving for Spain to-morrow morning in your yacht."

Sir Frederick fumbled for his revolver.

"I'll talk to him!" he said viciously. "I'll make him tell us who he is and how much he has heard."

Sopwith shook his head.

"All the talk in the world," he said, "won't alter the fact that he

knows who we are and where we're going. He has only to tell the police what he has heard, and I shall be recaptured and taken back to Greystones, while you'll be arrested and sent to prison for helping me to escape. Then what's the good of wasting time in questioning him? What does it matter to us who he is, or how he got into the car, however much or however little he may have heard, the fact remains that, for our own safety's sake, we dare not let him go."

"Then what do you propose we should do with him?" asked Sir Frederick. "It wouldn't be safe to bind him and gag him and take him to the Hall."

"Certainly not! You can't keep him a prisoner for the rest of his life."

"Then do you propose that we should——" Sir Frederick tapped the pocket which contained the revolver.

"Not that way," said Sopwith. "Somebody might hear the shot, to say nothing of the fact that his body would afterwards be found and might lead to inconvenient inquiries."

"Then what do you propose that we should do with him?" asked Sir Frederick again.

Sopwith jerked his thumb in the direction of the wood.

"Drop him down the old pit-shaft!" he said bluntly. "In that way we shall get rid of him with a minimum of trouble and with no risk of his body being afterwards found."

Little did he suspect, when he made this suggestion, how completely he was playing into his companions' hands—how easy he was making it for Sir Frederick to carry out his treacherous scheme.

No wonder Sir Frederick heartily approved of the suggestion. No wonder he chuckled heartily to himself as he nodded his agreement.

"An excellent plan!" he said. "But we mustn't let him suspect what we mean to do, or he'll struggle and shout, and his cries may attract attention. Hadn't I better give him a knock on the head before we carry him into the wood?"

"Oh, I don't think there's any need to do that," said Sopwith. "He doesn't know that we've discovered his shamming, and we won't undeceive him. We'll let him think he has hoodwinked us, and that we think he is unconscious. We'll pretend there's a gamekeeper's hut in the wood, and we'll say that we'll carry him there and leave him. He'll hear what we say, of course, and he'll never suspect what we're going to do until it is too late."

All this time Nipper was lying in the road feigning to be unconscious. Although the two men were only a few yards away, they spoke in such low tones that he could not hear a word of their conversation.

He guessed, of course, that they were discussing what to do with him; but he was still in complete ignorance of the fact that one of the men was Dr. Sopwith and the other was Sir Frederick Dalling. For, although he had heard them talking of "the Hall," before the car pulled up, neither of them had mentioned "Wyumouth Hall," so that he was still without any clue to their identity or their destination.

Presently the two men came over to where he was lying, and Sopwith stooped down and peered into his face.

"He's still unconscious," he said, winking at Sir Frederick. "We have nothing to fear from him. He must have been demented with fright when he climbed into the car, so that even if he heard what we were talking about, he wouldn't have the sense to take it in."

"Then shall we drive on and leave him lying here?" suggested Sir Frederick with an answering wink.

Sopwith pretended to hesitate. As he did so, a distant growl of thunder was heard.

"I don't like the idea of leaving him lying in the road," he said. "We're evidently in for a thunderstorm, and he's wet enough as it is. How about that gamekeeper's hut where I'm going to change my clothes? It's in this wood, isn't it?"

"Yes!"

"Is it far from the road?"

"About fifty yards."

"We could easily carry him that short distance. There's nobody living in the hut, of course?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then we'll carry him to the hut and leave him there," said Sopwith. "That'll shelter him from the rain, and when he comes round he'll probably have forgotten that he ever saw us. But we'll have to be quick about it," he added, as a few big drops of rain pattered down on the road. "Fish out my bag, and lead the way. I'll carry the lad."

He waited until Sir Frederick had dragged the bag from under the seat, and had switched off the lights of the car, and had opened the gate which gave admittance to the wood.

Then he raised Nipper in his arms, and a moment later Sir Frederick was leading the way through the wood; with the bag in one hand and an electric torch in the other; and Sopwith was staggering after him with Nipper hanging limply over his shoulder.

It was now raining heavily, and the wind had dropped to a dead and oppressive calm. The rumbling of the thunder was almost continuous, and seemed to be drawing nearer every moment, but as yet there had been no lightning.

At last they came within sight of the old shaft. In former times it had been protected by an encircling fence of posts and rails, but these had long since rotted away, or had been stolen for firewood.

"Here's the hut!" said Sir Frederick, halting a few yards from the mouth of the shaft and setting down the bag.

"Right-ho!" said Sopwith. "Show a light, and I'll carry him in."

At that moment Nipper's head was dangling over Sopwith's shoulder, and his face, of course, was turned away from the mouth of the shaft.

As Sopwith strode forward, however, Nipper cautiously screwed his head round—just to see what sort of a hut it was into which he was being carried—and no sooner had he done so than he realised his danger.

What he saw, by the light of Sir Frederick's torch, was not a "hut," but the yawning mouth of an old pit-shaft.

With a startled cry of comprehension he wriggled out of Sopwith's arms and struck the doctor a blow in the face which sent him reeling back.

"You fiend!" he panted. "You were going to throw me down this shaft!"

Sopwith wasted no breath on words. Rushing at Nipper, he seized him by the throat and forced him back towards the edge of the shaft. It was in vain that Nipper fought and struggled. Inch by inch he was borne towards the mouth of the pit until at last he was hovering on the brink.

"If I go down, you shall go down with me!" he gasped, flinging his arms round Sopwith's neck.

"So he shall!" cried Sir Frederick; and even as he uttered the words he sprang at Sopwith from behind and gave him a violent push!

At the same instant as Sopwith and Nipper went reeling over the edge of the shaft, a blinding flash of lightning lit up the sky, accompanied by a shattering crash of thunder,

Sir Frederick was terrified. It was as though the very heavens were protesting against his dastardly crime.

For one brief moment he stood staring at the yawning pit into which his victims had disappeared; then, snatching up the bag, he turned and fled, and never stopped running till he reached his car.

CHAPTER VIII.

Sniped I

THE storm was practically over by the time Sir Frederick reached Wymouth Hall. As the car drew up outside the main entrance the door opened and two men appeared. One was Sir Frederick's butler and the other was the captain of Sir Frederick's yacht.

"Hallo, Bradshaw! What brings you here?" exclaimed Sir Frederick, as he stepped out of the car. "Nothing wrong with the Gadsby, I hope?"

"Oh, no, sir!" replied the captain. "I merely came up to ask if you had any fresh instructions for to-morrow. Your butler told me you were not at home, and I was just going back to the yacht when we heard you coming up the drive."

"Well, I needn't detain you," said Sir Frederick, as a chauffeur appeared to take charge of the car. "I've no fresh instructions and nothing to add to the arrangements we've already made."

He turned to the butler.

"You've sent my baggage aboard, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Parker took it down to the harbour this evening."

"Crew all on board?" inquired Sir Frederick, addressing the captain again.

"Not yet, sir; but they'll be aboard by eight o'clock in the morning."

"Very good," said Sir Frederick. "You may expect me about ten o'clock, and we'll slip our moorings as soon as the tide serves."

The captain saluted and took his departure. After he had gone, Sir Frederick changed into evening dress and sat down to a belated dinner. As usual, he drank more than was good for him, both during the meal and afterwards; and when at last he retired to bed the butler had to assist him upstairs and help him to undress!

He spent a wretched night, for after the effects of the drink had worn off he was haunted by a species of nightmare. Every time he fell into a doze, the scene in the wood came back to him with terrifying distinctness.

In imagination he heard again the despairing cries of Nipper and Dr. Sopwith as they reeled over the edge of the pit—saw again that lurid flash of lightning—heard again that appalling clap of thunder—so that he started up in bed, fighting for breath and trembling in every limb.

At last he could stand it no longer. The air of the bed-room stifled him. He felt that he would suffocate if he remained indoors. He must get out into the open air.

He had ordered breakfast for nine o'clock, and had told the butler to call him at eight, but at six o'clock he got up and dressed. Most of the servants were still in bed when he came downstairs; and those who were up eyed him with astonishment.

"You're down very early this morning, sir," one of them ventured to remark. "Will you be wantin' breakfast now?"

"No," he answered shortly. "I'm going for a stroll, but I shall be back by nine o'clock."

As he passed through the entrance hall, his dog came bounding after him. "Sorry to disappoint you, old chap!" he said, as the spaniel capered round him in delighted anticipation. "I'm not going after the bunnies this morning!"

"And yet—why not?" he added, after a moment's reflection. "Why not take my gun with me on the off-chance of potting a rabbit or two? It'll give me something to occupy my thoughts and keep me from thinking too much of last night's affair."

He turned back to the gun-room, and ten minutes later he was striding across the park with his gun under his arm and the spaniel at his heels.

It should here be explained that the grounds of Wymouth Hall were very extensive and covered an area of over fifty acres. Near the house there were gardens, lawns and shrubberies; and beyond these was an undulating, well-wooded park, through one corner of which flowed the River Wyn, which gave its name to the village.

At one point in its passage through the park the river narrowed to a width of less than twenty yards. As a result of this sudden constriction of its channel, when the river was swollen by rain—as it was on this particular morning—it raced between its banks with the velocity of a mountain-torrent.

At this point, where the river narrowed, it was spanned by a wooden foot-bridge, two planks wide, with a hand-rail on each side. From this bridge a footpath led to the main road from the village. Both the footpath and the bridge were, strictly speaking, private; but were often used by the villagers as a short cut to the Hall instead of going round by the lodge and up the drive.

After wandering about the park for a couple of hours, Sir Frederick's aimless footsteps led him towards the river. When he came within sight of the footbridge, he saw a man walking briskly down the path which led from the road to the bridge. The man was too far away for him to see his face; but something in his appearance struck Sir Frederick as ominously familiar.

With a startled intake of the breath he hurriedly concealed himself behind a clump of bushes from which, without himself being seen, he could see the footpath and the bridge.

A moment or two later the man stepped on to the bridge, and as he did so, Sir Frederick saw his face and recognised him.

It was Nelson Lee!

As the reader will remember, the detective had announced his intention to the Governor of Greystones of going to Wymouth and verifying his theory that Sir Frederick was the man who had assisted Dr. Sopwith to escape.

"I shall go to Wymouth by the next train," he had said, "and endeavour to see Sir Frederick without attracting his attention. If I find that he's the man I saw last night, I shall know that my theory is correct. I shall then wire to you, and after you've obtained a search-warrant you'll come to Wymouth with the police and a couple of warders, and we'll raid the Hall together."

In accordance with this programme, he had left Greystones by an early train, and in due course had arrived at Wymouth, where a porter at the station had directed him to the Hall and had told him of the "short cut" across the park.

Needless to say, Sir Frederick was ignorant of all this. As a matter of fact, he did not even know that the man he saw, coming down the path, was Nelson Lee. But he recognised him as the man he had seen the night before, in the road near Greystones Prison.

"It's the man Sopwith knocked down last night!" he gasped. "The man who ran after the car and shouted to the warders to fire at the back tyres! He has either discovered, or else he suspects, that it was I who helped Sopwith to escape; and he's going to the Hall to ask the servants where I was last night. If he questions the servants, and asks to see the car, I'm lost!"

For a moment, but only for a moment, he was overwhelmed with despair. Then his eyes lit up with a desperate resolve, and he swiftly slid the muzzle of his gun through a small gap in the bushes.

Waiting until Nelson Leo had reached the middle of the bridge, he took careful aim and pulled the trigger. Almost at the same instant as the shot rang out he saw the detective stagger back and fall against the hand-rail.

The rail immediately snapped in two, with the result that Nelson Leo fell headlong into the swollen river which instantly engulfed him and whirled him away!

For fully five minutes Sir Frederick crouched motionless behind the bushes, fearing lest somebody on the road might have heard the shot and might come to see what had happened.

When he had satisfied himself that the coast was clear, he rose to his feet, whistled to his dog, and strode rapidly away in the direction of the Hall.

His breakfast was ready when he arrived, and after breakfast he spent half an hour with his agent, whom he was leaving in charge of the estate. At ten o'clock he ordered the car and drove down to the harbour. The Gadsby was lying alongside the quay with smoke billowing from her funnel, and with the Blue Peter at the mast-head. She was the only vessel in the harbour, but outside the bar another yacht was creeping at half-speed towards the harbour-mouth with the evident intention of coming in.

"All on board?" asked Sir Frederick, as Captain Bradshaw came forward and saluted.

"Yes, sir. Shall we cast off now?"

"The sooner the better," said Sir Frederick.

The captain gave the necessary orders, and a few minutes later the Gadsby backed away from the quay, steamed slowly through the narrow entrance at the mouth of the harbour, exchanged salutes with the incoming yacht, and headed for the open sea.

CHAPTER IX.

"When Rogues Fall Out"

IT will be recalled that Sir Frederick had explained to Dr. Sopwith that the reason why the "Wynwood Colliery Company" had abandoned their undertaking was because the seam of coal which they had struck was not of a paying quality.

This, however, was only one of several reasons which had led to the closing down of the pit. Another reason, and the reason which had finally decided the company to suspend operations, was the fact that they had tapped an underground spring which had flooded the workings and had destroyed the results of twelve months' labour in half as many hours.

Of course, if there had been an abundance of paying coal, the company would have put down plant to pump out the water and keep the spring in check. This, however, would have cost a lot of money; and as the seam

was very thin, and the coal of the poorest quality, the company had decided that the game was not worth the candle. Accordingly, they had dismissed their workmen, sold the surface-plant, filed their petition, and gone into liquidation.

Sir Frederick may or may not have been aware of these facts; but one may be sure that he was ignorant of the fact that the old pit-shaft was practically full of water, or he would have chosen a more certain way of disposing of Nipper and Dr. Sopwith than pushing them over the edge of the shaft!

He expected, of course, that they would drop hurtling through space for several hundred feet and would be dashed to death at the bottom of the shaft. Instead of this, they merely fell about fifteen feet and plunged into an ice-cold bath of stagnant water!

At this point, again, Sir Frederick's luck was "out." At the same instant as Sopwith and Nipper went reeling over the edge of the shaft, a blinding flash of lightning lit up the sky, accompanied by a shattering crash of thunder.

If it had not been for this deafening thunder-clap, Sir Frederick would doubtless have heard the splash when his victims struck the water; and if he had then peered down the shaft he would have seen them rise to the surface, gasping and spluttering, but otherwise unharmed!

"The treacherous hound!" snarled Sopwith, as soon as he was able to speak. "He—*he* deliberately pushed me over the edge!"

"Not much doubt about that!" said Nipper, as he trod the water and fumbled for his flash-light. "He was evidently tired of your company, and he saw a chance of getting rid of you, and he was on it with both feet!"

A torrent of imprecations burst from Sopwith's lips.

"Oh, shut up!" said Nipper impatiently. "What's the good of swearing? Besides, it's not for you to call him names. You're as bad as he is! He tried to murder you. I admit, but you tried to murder me!"

"That's not the same thing," growled Sopwith. "You're a stranger to me. You've no claim on my gratitude, but that black-hearted scoundrel owes all he possesses to me. For years and years I've held my peace, when a word from me would have ruined him. But I'll hold my peace no longer! I've finished with him now. As soon as I get out of this, I'll go straight to the police, and tell them all I know."

"That's all very well," said Nipper, "but, first of all, we've got to get out of this, and I've a notion it won't be easy. Do you think he has gone away?"

"Yes. I heard the car start off some time ago."

"Then it'll be safe to show a light," said Nipper.

He drew his electric torch from his pocket, and flashed its rays up the shaft. He then perceived that the shaft widened out, about two feet above the surface of the water, so that a narrow shelf-like ledge ran round the four walls of the shaft.

"Let's haul ourselves on to that ledge," he suggested. "It'll be drier and more comfy than soaking here."

They hauled themselves up to the ledge, and wrung some of the water from their dripping clothes. When Sopwith stood up on the ledge, the top of the shaft was only eight feet above his head; but as there was no means of climbing up the smooth bare walls, it might as well have been eighty!

"We can do no more for the present," he said, as he squatted down on the ledge, with his legs dangling over the edge. "Our only hope is that somebody may pass this way when daylight comes, and may hear our shouts if we call to them."

"Is anybody likely to pass this way?" asked Nipper, as he squatted down beside his companion. "Is there a public path through this wood, or are there any houses near?"

Sopwith shook his head.

"Haven't an idea," he said.

"Do you mean you don't know where we are?"

"All I know is that this wood is about five miles from Wymouth."

Nipper pricked up his ears at the name.

"Wymouth?" he repeated. "Was that where you were making for when you discovered me in the car?"

"Yes. Do you know the place?"

"No! I've never been there, but I know—at least, I've heard of—somebody who lives there."

"Who's that?"

"Sir Frederick Dalling, of Wymouth Hall," said Nipper.

In the darkness—for he had extinguished his flash-light—Nipper heard his companion chuckle.

"It's funny you should mention Sir Frederick Dalling," said Sopwith, after a pause.

"Why?" asked Nipper innocently.

"Because," said Sopwith, "it was Sir Frederick Dalling, of Wymouth Hall, who pushed us down this shaft!"

Nipper nearly tumbled off the ledge in his excitement!

"Are you sure of that?" he gasped.

"I ought to be!" said Sopwith grimly.

"Then it was Sir Frederick who helped you to escape from prison to-night?"

"Of course," said Sopwith. "I have a hold on him. As I've already told you, I've only to say the word to ruin him. That's why he helped me to escape. I sent him word by one of the warders, that if he didn't fall in with a certain plan, which I explained, I should send for the Governor, and tell him what I knew. He sent word back that he would be waiting with his car at the spot I named at the time I mentioned. He said he would provide me with a disguise, and take me to Wymouth Hall. To-morrow morning, he said, he would smuggle me on board his yacht, and take me to Spain.

"Like a fool, I believed him," he continued bitterly, "but I now know that he was meditating treachery all the time. He never meant to take me to the Hall, much less to take me to Spain. From the first, his intention was to get rid of me by pushing me down this shaft.

"Even if we hadn't found you in the car," he concluded, "he would have acted just the same. He had suggested that I should change my things in this wood, and drop my convict-dress down this shaft. What he meant to do, of course, was to wait until I was in the act of dropping my clothes into the shaft, and then to shove me after them. Your appearance on the scene merely made it a bit easier for him to carry out his plans."

Nipper listened to this statement with growing excitement. A glimmer of the truth was beginning to dawn on him.

"You say that you have a hold on Sir Frederick," he said. "Has your hold any connection with the substitution of a living baby for a dead one, twenty-five years ago?"

Sopwith gave a violent start; and, dark as it was, Nipper could feel his burning eyes fixed on his face.

"What do you mean?" he queried hoarsely. "What do you know? Who are you?"

"I'll tell you who I am," said Nipper. "when you've told me who you are!"

"Well, that's fair enough," said his companion. "My name's Sopwith."

"Dr. Sopwith!" cried Nipper.

"Yea!"

"Then it was you who changed the babies, twenty-five years ago!"

Sopwith gripped him fiercely by the arm.

"Enough of this beating about the bush!" he said sternly. "Who are you, and what do you know?"

In reply to these questions, Nipper told him the whole story of Nurse Markham's confession and death; of Wilmot's appeal to Nelson Lee; of their fruitless visit to the Front.

"When the gov'nor had made sure that Gilroy was dead," he continued, "he decided to return to England, and try to find out what had become of you after you disappeared from Wymouth fifteen years ago. He knew it was rumoured that you had been drowned at sea, but he thought you might still be alive, perhaps, and if he could find you, he might be able to persuade you to confirm Nurse Markham's story."

He described how the steamer had struck a mine; how he and Nelson Lee had been flung into the sea; and how he had been stunned.

"What happened after that, I don't know," he concluded. "When I came to my senses, I was lying in the car; but how I got there, I haven't the ghost of a notion."

"I think I can guess," said Sopwith. "Mr. Lee must have swum ashore with you at the foot of the cliffs, near Greystones prison. He must have carried you up to the road where Sir Frederick's car was standing. It was very foggy at the time, and Sir Frederick was waiting for me, about fifty yards away from the car, so that Mr. Lee wouldn't see him. He must have seen the car, however, and finding it deserted, he must have lifted you in. Probably he had just covered you up, and was standing by the side of the car, wondering where the owner was, when Sir Frederick and I came running up the road with the warders after us. We saw Mr. Lee, of course, but we had no idea that you were in the car; so, after I'd knocked Mr. Lee down——"

"You knocked the gov'nor down?" cried Nipper.

"Oh, I didn't hurt him very much!" said Sopwith. "He was up again in a minute, but by that time Sir Frederick and I had jumped into the car; and, although Mr. Lee shouted to the warders to fire at the back tyres, we managed to get away without a scratch."

"So the gov'nor actually saw you?"

"Of course!"

"Well, if that doesn't beat anything I ever heard of!" said Nipper. "Just fancy! The gov'nor saw you—was within a few inches of you—and never knew you were the man he was hunting for?"

"That's so," said Sopwith. "However, there'll be no need for Mr. Lee to hunt for me any longer. He's probably at Greystones now, and as soon as we're out of this, I'll go back to the prison, and give myself up."

"In the meantime, as I've remarked before," said Nipper, "the first thing to be done, is to get out of this—which we'll never do by sitting here and jawing!"

"What else can we do?" said Sopwith gloomily.

"Shout!" said Nipper. "Bawl! Bellow! Yell! It'll do no harm, if it does no good. Game to try? Right-ho! Then let's see who can make the biggest row!"

They shouted, both singly and in unison; but the only result was to startle the birds in the adjacent trees.

"Half-time!" panted Nipper at length. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again! We'll repeat the performance in ten minutes, and we'll keep on repeating it at intervals until somebody hears us, or our voices give out."

This plan was adopted, but hour after hour passed, and their only reward was the echo of their own voices, or the cry of some startled bird. At last, however, just after the sky had begun to brighten with the dawn, they heard footsteps approaching the mouth of the shaft.

"Thank Heaven somebody has heard us at last!" cried Nipper delightedly. "Now we sha'n't be long!"

He put his hand to his mouth and let out a lusty shout for help. The footsteps quickened, and a moment later the wrinkled face of an old woman peered over the edge of the shaft.

"Mercy on us!" she croaked, on seeing the two figures on the ledge. "'Ow on earth did yer get down there?"

"Never mind how we got down!" snapped Sopwith. "Tell us how we can get up!"

The woman eyed him suspiciously, and Nipper saw that it was Sopwith's convict suit which excited her distrust.

"You needn't hesitate to help us, ma'am," he said reassuringly. "You won't get into trouble with the police. As you seem to have guessed, my companion is an escaped convict, but I give you my word, that his only desire now is to get back to the prison from which he escaped as soon as possible. That's right, isn't it, doctor?"

"Quite right," growled Sopwith.

Apparently the woman was only half-convinced. For a moment or two she gazed at them in thoughtful silence; and then, without a word, she turned on her heel and hobbled away.

"Curse the old hag!" snarled Sopwith, with an oath. "She has left us to our fate!"

"I didn't think so," said Nipper. "She has probably gone for help."

He was right, for presently, the woman returned with a stalwart young fellow, who proved to be her son. As afterwards appeared, they lived in a cottage on the outskirts of the wood, and the old woman had been gathering kindling for her fire, when she had heard Nipper's shout for help.

The son evidently did not share his mother's qualms about helping an escaped convict. He had brought a rope with him, and after tying one end of it to the trunk of a neighbouring tree, he lowered the other end down the shaft. Nipper quickly swarmed up the rope, but Sopwith was so stiff with cold and wet, that the united efforts of Nipper and the woman's son were required to haul him to the surface.

"Now, the next thing to be done is to dry our clothes," said Nipper to the woman. "You evidently live not far from here. May we go to your house and dry our things there?"

After a whispered consultation with her son, the woman agreed to this; and half an hour later, Nipper and Sopwith were sharing a bed at the cottage, while their clothes were being dried in front of a roaring wood fire.

"I wonder if the old girl would give us some breakfast if we asked her," said Nipper presently. "I'm awfully peckish, aren't you?"

"Not a bit!" said Sopwith, whose teeth were chattering, though his face was hot and flushed. "The very sight of food would make me sick, I think!"

Nipper looked at him anxiously.

"Are you feeling as bad as all that?" he asked.

"I am!" said his companion wearily. "I ache all over. I've caught a chill, I expect, and unless I improve very much, I'll never be able to travel to Greystones to-day. In fact, I don't think I could walk a mile if I tried."

"Then I'll tell you what I'd better do," said Nipper. "As soon as my clothes are dry, I'll leave you here, and I'll walk to the nearest telegraph-office, and wire to the gov'nor that you are here. As you say, he's probably at Greystones now, but if he isn't, they'll forward the wire on, and the gov'nor will come here as quickly as he can.

"That is, of course," he added, "if you're still prepared to give yourself up and make a clean breast of the whole conspiracy. You haven't changed your mind about that, I hope?"

"Of course I haven't changed my mind," said Sopwith. "Between you and me, I believe this cold is going to be the death of me; but, however that may be, I'm determined to have my revenge on Sir Frederick for his treachery. So bring Mr. Lee here as soon as you like—the sooner the better—and I'll tell him everything."

It was then a quarter to seven. Two hours later the old woman's son came into the room with their clothes.

"They're dry now," he grunted, as he laid them on a chair beside the bed.

"Thank you," said Nipper. "Half a minute before you go! How far is it from here to the nearest village?"

"'Bout two mile!"

"Is there a telegraph office there?"

"No!"

"Where is the nearest telegraph office?"

"At Wymouth."

"And Wymouth is about five miles from here, isn't it?"

"'Bout four mile and a 'arf!"

"Well, my friend here, as I've told your mother, is anxious to return to the prison from which he escaped as soon as possible. The prison is at Greystones, which is nearly fifty miles from here, and he's much too ill to travel so far at present; so I'm going to walk into Wymouth and wire to the prison to tell them where he is and that he's willing to give himself up. You've no objection, I suppose, to his remaining here until I come back from Wymouth?"

"I'll see wot my mother sez!" replied the young man cautiously.

He left the room and presently returned with the news that his mother had no objection to "the convict-feller" remaining at the cottage on condition that she was allowed to take charge of his clothes, so that he could not run away before Nipper returned.

This condition was agreed to; and after Nipper had dressed and made a frugal breakfast, he started out for Wymouth.

It was half-past ten when he arrived, and he was just about to turn into the post-office when he was suddenly seized from behind and his arms pinched to his sides.

"Guess who it is!" said a familiar voice.

For a moment Nipper could scarcely believe his ears. Then, with a rapturous cry of delight, he twisted himself round and found himself face to face with Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER X

Too Late!

IF it had been a rifle with which Sir Frederick fired at Nelson Lee, it is extremely probable that the famous detective's career would have been terminated then and there. As the reader knows, however, the weapon was a shot-gun; and although it was quite capable of killing a man at a comparatively short range, it was not capable of inflicting any very serious injury at the distance from which Sir Frederick fired.

As a matter of fact, the only injuries Nelson Lee received were a couple of pellets in the leg, and even these did little more than penetrate the skin.

Now, if Nelson Lee had had any warning of what was going to happen—if he had been expecting somebody to fire at him—a trifling injury like this, which was hardly as painful as a bee-sting, would not have effected his movements in the slightest degree. It was the absolute unexpectedness of the shot which did the mischief.

He was walking across the bridge, without a thought of danger, when suddenly a shot rang out and he felt a burning pain in his leg. Instinctively he started back, and in doing so he slipped and fell against the hand-rail of the bridge. The rail immediately snapped across; and the next instant, almost before he realised what was happening, he fell floundering into the river.

As already stated, the river was swollen by the rain of the previous night and was racing between the narrow banks with the fury of a mountain torrent. Against such a current, powerful swimmer though he was, the detective was helpless.

Realising this, he did not waist his strength in trying to breast the stream, but contented himself with keeping his head above water. Presently, however, when the channel widened and the current slackened, he struck out for the nearest bank, caught hold of an overhanging branch, and hauled himself ashore.

He was then about a mile below the bridge and well beyond the boundaries of the grounds of Wymouth Hall. At the point where he landed, a big grass field sloped down to the river; and on the far-side of this field was a cluster of farm-buildings.

Now, although the detective had never seen his assailant, he had little doubt that the man who had fired at him was either Sir Frederick Dalling or Dr. Sopwith.

"They arrived at the Hall last night, no doubt," he argued to himself, "and one of them, or both of them, must have been strolling in the park this morning when they saw me crossing the bridge. They may not have known who I was, but they evidently recognised me as the man they saw near Greystones last night. They guessed that I had tracked them here, and one of them tried to shoot me."

"Ah, well! Forewarned is forearmed!" he added. "I'll take no more risks. I'm convinced now that Sopwith is at the Hall, and that it was Sir Frederick who helped him to escape last night. But I won't give them another chance to make a target of me! I'll borrow some dry clothes at yonder farm, and then I'll go to the village and ask the sergeant to go with me to the Hall. When we arrive, I'll ask to see Sir Frederick; and if he proves to be the man I saw last night—of which I haven't the slightest doubt—I'll have him arrested on the spot. We'll then search the house and arrest Dr. Sopwith."

In accordance with this programme, he walked across to the farm, where his wet and bedraggled appearance created something akin to a sensation.

To all questions, however, he returned evasive answers which conveyed the impression that he had "accidentally" fallen into the river.

His request for the loan of a dry rig-out was readily complied with; and a few minutes after ten o'clock, having first ascertained where the sergeant lived, he left the farm and set out for the village.

The police force of Wymouth consisted of a sergeant and two constables. The sergeant's house was also the police-station, and was situated in the main street, a few doors past the post-office.

The moment Nelson Lee turned into the main street of the village, he saw a youthful figure trudging up the road about twenty yards ahead of him.

"Nipper, as I live!" he exclaimed, with a thrill of mingled joy and relief.

He quickened his pace, and just as Nipper was about to turn into the post-office, the detective seized him from behind and pinned his arms to his sides.

"Guess who it is!" he chuckled.

Nipper twisted himself round and let out a shout of rapturous delight.

"The gov'nor!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"I might ask that question of you," retorted Nelson Lee with a happy laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just going into the post-office to wire to you," said Nipper, and his eyes sparkled with triumph at the thought of the surprise he was going to give Nelson Lee. "I've great news for you! Do you know who that convict was who escaped from Greystones prison last night?"

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "It was Dr. Sopwith."

Nipper's face fell. His first "surprise" had not come off. But he had others up his sleeve.

"Well, do you know who it was that helped him to escape?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee again. "It was Sir Frederick Dalling."

"Dash it all! You seem to know everything!" growled Nipper in a disappointed voice. "However, I'll bet I can tell you something you don't know. Where is Dr. Sopwith now?"

"At Wymouth Hall, I expect," said Nelson Lee.

"Wrong!" cried Nipper triumphantly. "He isn't within five miles of Wymouth Hall!"

"You mean he has left the Hall?"

"I don't mean anything of the kind! He has never been to the Hall—at least, he hasn't been there for fifteen years."

"Then Sir Frederick didn't take him to the Hall last night?"

"No," said Nipper. "He shoved him down an old pit-shaft."

The detective stared at him in stupefied amazement.

"Shoved him down an old pit-shaft?" he repeated.

"Yes," said Nipper. "He treated me in the same way, but the shaft was nearly full of water, and Sopwith and I were rescued a few hours ago."

"Then Sopwith is still alive?"

"Alive—and mad for revenge! You know the old saying—'When rogues fall out, honest men come by their own.' Well, that's the case with Sopwith now. He has finished with Sir Frederick now, he says. Whatever it costs, he says, he'll make him pay dearly for his treachery. He has admitted everything to me, and he's willing and eager to repeat his confession to you and the police at the earliest possible moment."

"Where is he?" asked Nelson Lee. "But you'd better begin at the beginning and tell me all that has happened since we parted last night."

Nipper briefly described the scene in the wood, his conversation with Sopwith, and the manner of his rescue.

"So Sopwith is now at the old woodman's cottage?" said Nelson Lee.

"Yes," replied Nipper. "You'll go there at once, of course, and take down his confession."

"Not at once," replied the detective. "Sopwith is safe where he is, and can wait until I've arrested Sir Frederick. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to the police-station, to ask the sergeant to go with me to the Hall and arrest Sir Frederick, when I saw you walking up the street."

"That reminds me," said Nipper. "You haven't told me yet how you came to be here."

The detective told him how he had discovered that the escaped convict was Dr. Sopwith.

"As soon as I heard that," he continued, "I guessed at once that his confederate was Sir Frederick. I decided, therefore, to come to Wymouth by the next train and verify my theory."

He related how somebody had fired at him on the bridge, how he had fallen into the river, and how he had changed his clothes at the farm.

"I was convinced," he said, "that it was either Sopwith or Sir Frederick who had fired at me. I know now, of course, that it wasn't Sopwith; so it must have been Sir Frederick."

"But you've no proof of that," objected Nipper.

"I don't need any proof," said Nelson Lee. "I don't propose to arrest him for that, but for helping Sopwith to escape, and for trying to murder you last night. We have ample proof that he committed those offences, anyhow!"

"But we're wasting time," he concluded. "There's the police-station. Let's interview the sergeant."

The sergeant happened to be at home, and he recognised Nelson Lee at once, in spite of the fact that the detective was clad in a suit of the farmer's "Sunday clothes."

"This is an unexpected honour," he said, as he led the way into his office. "Is this a professional visit?"

"It is," said Nelson Lee. "I'm nearing the end of a difficult case, and I need your help."

"You flatter me! In what way can I help you?"

"By coming with me to Wymouth Hall," said Nelson Lee, "and arresting Sir Frederick Dalling."

"Arrest Sir Frederick Dalling!" gasped the astounded sergeant. "What for?"

"For conspiracy, attempted murder, and helping a convict to escape. Come along! I'll give you full particulars on our way to the Hall."

The sergeant hung back.

"It's no use our going to the Hall," he said. "Sir Frederick isn't there."

"Where is he, then?"

"I expect he's on board his yacht."

"His yacht!"

"Yes. Didn't you know he had a yacht?"

"Steam, or sailing yacht?"

"Steam. Her name is the Gadfly, and she has been lying in the harbour here for the past few days."

"And what makes you think Sir Frederick is now on board the yacht?"

"I met one of his grooms driving down to the harbour yesterday evening with a pile of luggage. I asked him if Sir Frederick was going abroad, and he said he was starting for a cruise in the Mediterranean this morning."

"Did he say what time the yacht was due to sail this morning?"

"No."

Then Sir Frederick may not have started yet. He may still be at the Hall."

"He certainly isn't at the Hall," he said. "I saw him go past here in his car, about a quarter-past ten, and I saw the car come back without him. I don't know for certain, of course; but I expect he went aboard the yacht, which would probably sail as soon as the tide served."

"What time would the tide serve?"

"About half-past ten."

Nelson Lee whipped out his watch. It was nearly ten minutes to eleven.

"Then there's not a moment to be lost!" he cried excitedly. "There's just a sporting chance that something may have delayed the yacht's departure, so that if we hurry down to the harbour at once, we may still be in time to arrest Sir Frederick before the Gadsfly sails."

He gripped the sergeant by the arm and pushed him towards the door.

"Lead the way!" he said. "I've never been here before, so I don't know where the harbour is."

As they ran towards the sea-front, the detective briefly explained the facts of the case, so that by the time they reached the harbour the sergeant was in full possession of all the material evidence, and was prepared to arrest Sir Frederick at sight.

But it was not to be. The moment they came within sight of the harbour, the sergeant pulled up with a cry of bitter disappointment.

"We're too late!" he groaned, pointing to a vessel about five miles out at sea. "There's the Gadsfly! She must have sailed on the stroke of half-past ten!"

CHAPTER XI.

The Submarine.

FOR a moment Nelson Lee was overwhelmed with despair; then his eyes fell on the other yacht already mentioned—the yacht which had been creeping towards the harbour-mouth while the Gadsfly had been casting-off. This yacht, whose name was the Dolphin, had entered the harbour after the Gadsfly had left; and her crew were now engaged in making her fast to the quay.

Signing to Nipper and the sergeant to follow him, the detective raced along the quay, halting for an instant to question the harbour-master.

"Is that the Gadsfly?" he asked, pointing to the distant yacht.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you happen to know if Sir Frederick Dalling is on board?"

"He is, sir. I saw him go aboard myself."

The detective threw a "Thank you" over his shoulder, as he ran across the gangway, on to the Dolphin's deck, with Nipper and the sergeant at his heels.

"Who's the owner of this vessel?" he asked, addressing one of the crew.

"Captain Anstruther," replied the sailor.

"Is he on board?"

"Yes."

"Then take me to him at once—at once, do you hear?"

Before the sailor could comply with this request, two men came up the companion-ladder leading from the saloon. Both men were in khaki, and wore evidently British officers. On the cuffs of the elder man were the three stars of a captain, while the younger man wore the single star of a second-lieutenant.

At the sight of this young lieutenant both Nelson Lee and Nipper uttered cries of bewildered surprise.

"Wilmot!" they cried in the same breath.

Hearing his name, Geoffrey Wilmot—for such it was—turned his head.

"Mr. Lee and Nipper, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed.

He ran to them and wrung them warmly by the hand.

"This is, indeed, a surprise!" he said. "Fancy you being here! Did you know that we were coming to Wymouth, or is our meeting as big a surprise to you as it is to me?"

"I'll tell you presently why we are here," said Nelson Lee. "In the meantime, I've no time to spare in answering or asking questions. Is that Captain Anstruther?"

"Yes."

"Introduce me to him, please."

Wilmot beckoned to his brother officer, and made the necessary introductions.

"I'm proud to make your acquaintance," said Captain Anstruther. "I have often heard of your brilliant——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "We'll exchange compliments and compare notes later! Meanwhile, I want to ask a favour of you, and there's no time to be lost!"

Rapidly and briefly he explained the situation.

"Sir Frederick, as he calls himself, is now on board that yacht," he concluded, pointing to the distant Gadsfly. "If once he gets clear away, I may never be able to lay hands on him. You haven't yet drawn your fires, or blown off steam, and the Dolphin, by the look of her, is a faster boat than the Gadsfly. Need I say more?"

Captain Anstruther nodded.

"You want me to go after the Gadsfly?" he said.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "If you will, we can signal to the Gadsfly to stop, as soon as we come within hail; and the sergeant and I can then go aboard and arrest Sir Frederick. It's a big favour to ask you, I know. Will you grant it?"

Captain Anstruther's answer was characteristic. Without a word to Nelson Lee, he dashed up to the bridge and spoke to the skipper of the yacht.

The skipper immediately ordered the crew to desist from making the vessel fast, while at the same time he rang down fresh instructions to the engine-room.

Ten minutes later the Dolphin had backed away from the quay, and the chase of the Gadsfly had begun.

"Now we can talk to our hearts' content!" said Nelson Lee, as soon as they were across the bar. "By way of a beginning I may tell you that I was never more surprised in my life than when I saw you come up that companion-ladder. You were the last man in the world I expected to see! How came you to be on board this yacht, and why are you in the uniform of a second-lieutenant?"

"I'll answer your last question first," said Wilmot. "As you know, I enlisted as a private; but after I'd spent a couple of months in the ranks, Captain Anstruther strongly advised me to apply for a commission. This I did, and my application was under consideration by the War Office at the time I came to consult you in London, but it was not until a week ago that I received the news that I'd been granted a commission.

"As soon as I received the news," he continued, "I promptly applied for, and was granted ten days' leave. As it so happened, Captain Anstruther had been granted leave for the same period and had arranged to spend his

lounge in cruising about in his yacht. He very kindly invited me to come with him; and after wiring to your landlady, and ascertaining that you had not yet returned from the Front, I accepted Anstruther's invitation."

"But that doesn't explain why you came to Wymouth," said Nelson Lee.

"It was sentiment that brought us to Wymouth!" said Wilmot, with something suspiciously like a blush. "As we happened to be cruising along the coast, with no definite object in view, I suggested to Anstruther that I'd like to have a look at the place where my ancestors had reigned as lords of the manor for many centuries. Like the good fellow that he is, Anstruther at once gave orders that the Dolphin should put into Wymouth for a couple of hours, so that I could have a look round the place. As you know, we had just arrived, and were making fast, when you and Nipper and the sergeant came aboard. Needless to say I had no idea that you were here—I thought you were still abroad—and your appearance here was as big a surprise to me as mine was to you.

"And now it's your turn!" he concluded. "Since you wired to me that you'd obtained permission to go to the Front and interview Gilroy I've heard nothing of or from you until this morning. You've given me a very brief outline of what you and Nipper have done, but I'm dying to hear the full story; so begin at the beginning and tell me everything."

With one eye on the distant Gadsby—which was every minute becoming less distant—the detective told of his visit to the Front; of Gilroy's death; of the floating mine; of Sopwith's escape from Greystones; of Nipper's adventures in the old pit-shaft; of his own adventure on the footbridge; of his meeting with Nipper outside the post-office; of their interview with the sergeant; of their mad race to the harbour, and their discovery that the Gadsby had sailed.

It was a long story, and all the time that he was telling it the Dolphin was steadily overhauling her rival. By the time he had finished, the distance between the two yachts was no more than a couple of miles.

"And now let's go up on to the bridge," he suggested, as he rose from the deck-chair in which he had been sitting. "It's about time now that we signalled to the Gadsby to heave to."

They mounted to the bridge—Nelson Lee, Nipper, Godfrey Wilmot, and Captain Anstruther. The Dolphin's skipper was already there, and with him was the man in charge of the wheel.

"Mr. Lee thinks we might signal to them now," said Anstruther to the skipper. "Will you please give the requisite orders?"

"What shall I signal, sir?" asked the skipper, turning to Nelson Lee.

Before the detective could reply, a muffled report was heard, while at the same instant a huge column of water was seen to rise into the air at Gadsby's side.

"She has struck a mine!" cried Nelson Lee, as the Gadsby heeled over and took a heavy list to port.

He snatched a glass from its bracket and focussed it on the Gadsby.

"She's badly holed below the waterline," he said, while the others hung on his words and the crew of the Dolphin crowded into the bows. "She's sinking fast. They're trying to lower a boat, but the list of the vessel hampers their movements, and I doubt if they'll succeed."

He removed the glass from his eye and turned to the skipper, who was staring blankly at the sinking yacht.

"Bestir yourself, man!" said Nelson Lee impatiently. "Full speed ahead, and make ready to lower the boats and pick up any survivors!"

The skipper glanced at his owner.

"It's risky, sir," he said. "There may be other mines about."

"We must chance that," said Anstruther promptly. "I agree with Mr. Lee. We can't let those fellows drown without making an effort to save them. Full speed ahead!"

"Very good, sir," said the skipper. "If we run on to a mine ourselves, don't blame me!"

He rang down to the engine-room, but even as he did so, the *Gadfly* suddenly turned turtle and disappeared from view!

"She's gone!" they cried in chorus.

"Yes, the ship has gone," said Nelson Lee, who was surveying the scene through the glass again. "But several of the crew are struggling in the water. Keep her going at full speed, captain, and order the boats to be made ready for lowering."

In obedience to the skipper's orders, two of the *Dolphin's* boats were swung outwards and everything was made ready to lower them as soon as the scene of the disaster was reached.

"Can you see anything of Sir Frederick?" asked Wilmot, as the *Dolphin* raced through the water with every ounce of speed her engineers could coax out of her.

"Not now," said Nelson Lee. "A little while ago I thought I saw—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned by a startled shout from Nipper.

"Look!" he yelled, pointing to a sinister object which projected above the surface of the waves, a short distance ahead of the *Dolphin*. "Isn't that the periscope of a submarine?"

"Good heavens! So it is!" cried Nelson Lee. "I was wrong! The *Gadfly* didn't strike a mine! She was torpedoed by a German submarine!"

"Which is now lying in wait for us, no doubt!" gasped Captain Anstruther.

At that moment the man on the look-out sighted the periscope.

"Submarine on the port bow!" he yelled.

The warning had scarcely crossed his lips ere the *Dolphin* drew abreast of the periscope. As she did so a cluster of bubbles appeared on the surface of the sea followed by another and another all moving swiftly towards the yacht.

"A torpedo!" cried Nipper. "They've fired a torpedo at us!"

On the bridge, as well as on deck, the direst consternation reigned. With one exception, everybody seemed to lose his head, and could only stand and stare at the advancing line of bubbles in fascinated terror.

The exception was Nelson Lee. With the swiftness of a lightning flash he sprang to the wheel, thrust the man aside, and spun the wheel round. He was only just in time, for as the *Dolphin's* head swung round the bubbles passed within three feet of her hull and went travelling astern.

"Saved!" cried Anstruther with a hysterical laugh.

"Keep back!" roared Nelson Lee, as they rushed forward to congratulate him. "I'm going to try to ram her!"

Another half-turn of the wheel, and the *Dolphin's* bows headed straight for the periscope. Too late the commander of the submarine realised his peril. Before he could sink into safety, the *Dolphin* was on top of him, slicing off his periscope and ripping open his plates.

So far as those on board the *Dolphin* were concerned, it was, for the most part, an unseen tragedy. All they heard was a rasping, grating sound. All they felt was a slight shock which made the yacht quiver from stem to stern. All they saw was the sudden disappearance of the periscope, followed a little later by a quantity of oil which floated up to the surface. But it was

enough. They knew as well as if they had witnessed the destruction of the submarine that another 'U' boat—another slayer of defenceless civilians—another pirate of the under-seas—had been sent to her merited doom.

How the sailors cheered! Once more those on the bridge crowded round Nelson Lee to offer him their congratulations. But again he waved them back.

"We haven't finished our work yet," he said. "We've sunk the submarine—we've avenged the sinking of the *Gadfly*—but we've still to save the *Gadfly's* crew, or such of them as are still alive. There'll be time enough to talk when we've done that."

He handed the wheel back to the steersman, and a few minutes later they reached the spot where the *Gadfly* had sunk.

For nearly half a mile around the spot the surface of the sea was littered with floating wreckage. Apparently most of the crew had perished, but here and there a man could be seen clinging to a grating or a floating spar. Among them were the captain and the second mate; but nowhere was there any sign of Sir Frederick Dalling.

Two of the *Dolphin's* boats were lowered and proceeded to pick up these survivors. Nelson Lee and Nipper were in one of the boats, and after they had rescued all the men they could see they were about to row back to the yacht when Nipper drew the detective's attention to an object which had drifted some distance away from the scene of the disaster.

"I think there's another man over there," he said. "He appears to be supporting himself with an oar."

The detective focussed his glass on the object.

"You're right!" he said quietly. "There is a man over there—and it's Sir Frederick!"

The boat's crew bent to their oars, and presently they came near enough to see that it was indeed Sir Frederick Dalling. As they afterwards learned, he could not swim; but by great good luck he had managed to grab an oar, when he had risen to the surface, and with the aid of this he had kept himself afloat.

"Hurry! Hurry!" he called out in a feeble voice, as the boat approached. "I'm nearly done! I can't hold on much——"

The sentence ended in a wild cry of fear, and his eyes dilated with terror.

He had just caught sight of Nipper in the boat!

Until that moment he had believed that Nipper was lying dead at the bottom of the old pit-shaft. Even now, when he saw him in the boat, he could not credit his eyes.

"It's his ghost!" he moaned.

Then he saw Nelson Lee—the man he had shot on the bridge, and whose body he thought had been swept away by the river and carried out to sea!

This proved the last straw! It may be that the shock was too much for Sir Frederick, and robbed him of his fast-failing strength. Or, it may be that he realised that the game was up, and preferred death to a long term of imprisonment.

However that may be, his fingers relaxed their grip on the oar and he sank like a stone!

Despite Nipper's efforts to dissuade him, Nelson Lee immediately leaped to his feet and took a header into the sea. After a moment's hesitation, Nipper followed his example. Again and again they dived, but without result.

From the moment that his white face disappeared into the sea nothing more was ever seen of the impostor who for twenty-five years had been known to the world as Sir Frederick Dalling of Wymouth Hall.

CHAPTER XII.

Conclusion.

BUT little remains to be told.

The Dolphin returned to Wymouth and landed the Gadsby's survivors. Later in the day the detective hired a car, in which he and Nipper, accompanied by Wilmot and the sergeant, drove to the old woman's cottage.

Dr. Sopwith was still there, but was in a raging fever. He subsequently became delirious, and died a few days later. Before he became delirious, however, he repeated his confession to Nelson Lee, who took it down in writing and guided the sick man's hand while he signed it.

"That finishes my work," said the detective, as he folded up the confession and handed it to Wilmot. "You have only to take this to a lawyer, and your claim to the Wymouth estates will be established without any difficulty."

Wilmot said nothing at the time, but as they were motoring back to Wymouth he tapped the pocket in which he had placed the confession.

"I shall keep this paper, of course," he said; "but I don't suppose I shall ever make any use of it."

The detective stared at him, as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses.

"Do you mean you won't claim the estates?" he gasped.

Wilmot laughed and shook his head.

"Indeed I don't mean anything of the kind!" he said. "The estates are legally mine, and I shall most certainly claim them; but I don't suppose I shall ever use this confession."

"Why not?"

"Because there'll be no need to. Now that Sir Frederick is dead, I am next in the line of succession, and the estates will descend to me as a matter of course."

"That's all right so far as the entailed estates is concerned. But Sir Frederick has probably left a will bequeathing his horses and carriages and cars and money to some of his friends. You can't claim those things unless you prove that he was an impostor and had no right to them; and you can't prove he was an impostor unless you produce that confession."

"After all, why should I want to prove that he was an impostor? It would only bring disgrace on the family name. If he had lived, I should have had to produce this confession to secure my rights. Now that he's dead, and the estates are mine, why shouldn't I let the matter rest there? A few horses and carriages, and a few hundred pounds in the bank, are not worth the cost of bringing disgrace on the family name. No. Unless I change my mind—and I don't think I shall—I shall never make any use of Dr. Sopwith's confession."

He was as good as his word. In due course, he succeeded to the estates; but Dr. Sopwith's confession remained locked up in his desk at Wymouth Hall, and so far as Godfrey Wilmot was concerned, the public never knew that "the late Sir Frederick Dalling, Bart.," was a gamekeeper's son, who for twenty-five years had masqueraded "In Borrowed Plumcs."

THE END.

NEXT WEEK:

"THE KING'S BAD BARGAIN."

The Boys of Ravenswood College;

or, Dick Clare's Schooldays.

A New Story of School Life. By S. CLARKE HOOK.

Author of the famous Jack, Sam & Pete stories, appearing weekly in
"The Marvel Library."

Dick Clare, a rich youngster, joins Ravenswood College, and he soon makes his presence felt.

One day news comes to the school that Dick and his chum, Tom, have been drowned, but ultimately they turn up safe and sound.

Melby, one of the other boys, takes a violent dislike to Dick Clare, and is especially jealous because the Headmaster takes special notice of the new boy.

Dick and his chum Tom motor-cycle out into the country and sit down to tea at a little hotel. After making a good meal, they discover that they have made a mistake and eaten a strange man's tea. (Now read on.)

Mr. Melby, Senior.

HA, ha, ha!" roared Tom. "I thought there was some mistake!"
"Mistake be hanged, you young thieves!" hooted the angry man. "I have a good mind to flog you within an inch of your lives. As it is I shall give you in custody."

"You see, we thought it was our tea," said Dick.

"That is false. You knew you were robbing me!"

"Can't see how we could have known that. Still, if this is really your tea—why, my dear man, you are welcome to it."

"Why, you young rascal, you have eaten it!"

"There's some plum cake left, and it's jolly good. We couldn't have known we were robbing you, because we don't know who you are; and, what is more—we don't care!"

"You don't care, boy! I am Mr. Melby, and I'll——"

"Oh, my eyes!" exclaimed Dick. "As Shakespeare would say, this is passing strange. Are you the great Melby who has got two motor-cycles and a son who goes to Ravenswood?"

"My son is at Ravenswood College."

"So are we—when we are not away from it, as on the present occasion. Your son would have been with us this afternoon had he not plumped into a miry duckpond, and——"

"What! Has he spoilt his clothes?"

"Well, he went headfirst into a few feet of mud—black mud, and slimy. The water was pretty black, although not so black as the mire. You can imagine whether his clothes are spoilt. Candidly, I would not care to wear them."

"It is abominable! Perfectly scandalous. I shall stop his pocket-money until the end of the term."

"Rough on you, Dick," murmured Tom.

At that moment John, the landlord, entered the room.

"These young vagabonds have stolen my tea!" cried Melby senior.

"No matter, sir," exclaimed the genial host. "I——"

"No matter, fellow! Hang your impertinence. What do you mean by no matter? I ordered tea——"

"So did the young gents, and no doubt they thought this was their tea, and they must have got on to it while I came to tell you it was ready. But it doesn't matter, because I have prepared an exactly similar tea for them, and it can be served up to you in three minutes. Exchange is no robbery."

"Listen to me!" howled Melby.

"Very good, sir. I'll be getting your tea while I'm doing it. I can easily hear you in the kitchen if you talk in that voice. Hope you've enjoyed your tea, Master Clare?"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Dick. "I say, Mr. Melby, if you would like to see your son, I can run you over to the college in my side-car in no time."

Now, Mr. Melby was on his way to the college, but, being an ardent fisherman, he had spent the week-end at the Mermaid, where he knew he would get good sport and comfort.

The landlord set his tea on a table near the window, and by the time he had finished it he was in a far better temper.

"Is your motor-cycle safe, boy?" he inquired, thinking it would be a cheap way of getting to Ravenswood.

"My dear man——"

"How dare you address a gentleman in that manner, boy?"

"Well, my dear Melby's father, had you seen the clever manuer in which your son manipulated the contraption, you would never ask if it were safe. It's as safe as the German Emperor. When it is doing nothing it is quite safe. So it is when it is going along the road in the right direction. When it starts running amok it becomes less safe; but you only need a firm hand to control it."

"I should be disposed to come with you if you are sure you can drive with safety."

"I am quite sure on that point."

"I had intended taking the six-thirty train."

"Think of the peril. Trains run off lines, smash into other trains; besides, they are costly. There will be room in the side-car for you and Tom. All you have got to do is to say the word, and we will start when you are so disposed."

Melby considered the matter a little. He had never ridden in a side-car, but knew other people did so, therefore he imagined it would be quite all right, and it ended up by his accepting the invitation.

Like his son, he was very mean, and not overburdened with wisdom.

Moments of Peril.

ALL was ready for the start, and John was grinning, although he kept to the rear of Melby, so that his merriment should not be seen. Tom sat inside, and found there was very little room when Melby took his seat.

"Now, boy," exclaimed the great man, "you understand me! You are to drive very cautiously."

"Well, naturally, I don't want to break Tom's neck," answered Dick. "The same remarks apply to my own, and to yours in a lesser degree. We are off!"

"Let her rip!" murmured Tom, whose one hope was that Melby would insist on getting out.

"Right-ho! Are you all comfortable?"

"Not by long chalks!" growled Tom. "This blessed side-car is about three feet wide, and Melby is taking up about two feet nine of them. Now we are moving!"

"Boy!" howled Melby, as they rushed onwards at a truly fearful pace. The motor-cycle did not appear to feel the additional weight, and they were going down hill. "Boy! Are you mad?"

"Hush!" cried Tom. "Don't infuriate him! Jolly awful thing to infuriate a dangerous maniac when he's driving you in a side-car!"

"He will hurl us into eternity."

"Well, I don't expect he will hurl us as far as that; still, if we come to a sudden smash I wouldn't be surprised if we are hurled a pretty long way. You can reckon we are going at about forty miles an hour. Are you insured?"

"This is utter madness!" gasped Melby. "You are to go slower, my boy. I command you!"

"What's the good of going slowly?" inquired Dick. "We want to get back as soon as possible. It won't take us long at this pace. You leave it to me, and I'll guarantee to get you to Ravenswood in quick time; unless, of course, we have a smash-up. Then it would take us longer."

For about five minutes Melby protested, but finding it had not the slightest effect on their speed, which appeared to him to be greater than ever, he insisted on Dick stopping.

"Well, what's the good of stopping, Melby's father?" inquired Dick. "We must go on again, you know. There's no more danger in going fast than slow—if you don't have a smash-up. If you have a spill, of course, it hurts more when you are going fast; but I don't anticipate anything like that."

Melby was not so sanguine. He insisted on getting out, and Tom declared it was the very best thing he could do.

"But look here!" exclaimed Dick. "You can reckon we have come seven or eight miles, and he can't possibly catch his train if he has to walk back."

"This is scandalous!" cried Melby, as Dick pulled up, and he stepped from the side-car. "I shall report the matter to your master."

"Like son like father," observed Dick.

"You have dared to bring me all this way, boy! You shall take me back—at a slow pace!"

"Can't be done!" declared Dick. "If you like, I'll whiz you back, but it will have to be at top speed, because we have something in hand. Oh, if you prefer it, I'll romp you on to the college. If you don't care for either of those, you will have to walk back; but it won't take you more than a couple of hours or so. You see, we have come along fairly fast."

"It is positively——"

"Are you going on?"

"No, I'm not; and——"

"Then I am!" said Dick, starting off; and Melby's howls of fury died away in the distance.

"Jolly timid, isn't he?" said Dick.

"Ha, ha, ha! Rather! We shall get into hot water over this, I expect."

"Not a bit of it. He won't dare to confess to the Head that he was frightened. No; he will only hope that we break our necks. She goes beautifully, doesn't she?"

"Rather! Exhilarating and exciting!"

"Well, I want to get back for a little idea of mine. You see, we must be in before eight."

"Yes—if we can, Dick."

"We generally do. The idea is this. You know that ruinous old tower on the cliff?"

"Perfectly well. Farmer Garling stores his taters in it, as he calls them."

"Well, I want to explore it. It looks rather a jolly old place from the outside. Can you get to the top?"

"Couldn't say. I've never been inside—in fact, you are not allowed on the land. It belongs to Garling, and he doesn't like trespass."

"Oh, that's all right. We sha'n't do him any damage by walking over his land. It's all nonsense. People are always walking over my mother's land, and she doesn't mind. They even shoot our rabbits and pheasants. Well, we are not going to do anything like that. We shall merely explore the tower—if we can get in."

Dick drove right on to the college, putting up his motor-cycle at the tuck-shop, he having made arrangements with the old lady who kept it, as he wanted to have it handy in case they should desire to go for a spin any day.

Then, having purchased some chocolate creams and ginger-beer, the chums made their way to the cliff where the tower was situate.

It had once been used by the coastguards, and previously to that it was a reputed lighthouse. At any rate it was little more than a ruin now.

The door was locked, but it was a comparatively simple matter to get through one of the lower windows, and now the chums discovered that Garling had stored a quantity of straw inside the place.

"It's quite simple to get to the top," said Dick. "All we have to do is to ascend these stone steps. They are a bit rugged, but that doesn't matter. Mind how you follow, and if I knock a chunk of stone on your head let me know."

"I won't be able to if it weighs about a hundredweight," answered Tom, following up the steps.

They gained a little platform about half-way up the tower, and from that part they would have to ascend by an iron ladder. It was a movable one, and by no means secure, but they got up without mishap, and then climbed on what remained of the roof of the tower.

Their position now was decidedly dangerous for the masonry was crumbling away, and a fall from such a height would have proved fatal, even if they had not pitched over the cliff, as was only too likely, for they were on that side.

"I say, Dick," exclaimed Tom. "Here come Gowl and Melby, and I believe they have seen us. They are coming straight to the tower."

"Well, crouch down," whispered Dick. "The chances are Gowl hasn't seen us. I don't believe he will dare to come up the ladder, even if he ventures to the top of the steps. It wouldn't be pleasant to have a tussle at this giddy height. They are coming in, I believe."

The chums remained listening. If Gowl had seen them he would certainly report the matter, and then there would be trouble. They could hear him moving about below, but a few minutes later they saw the pair hurrying away, and Melby was laughing.

"My eyes!" gasped Tom, crawling to the opening in the roof, and gazing through. "The villain has lowered the ladder."

"Then we are lauded!" exclaimed Dick. "Well, it doesn't matter much. You see, we sha'n't get in a much worse row than if Gowl had caught us."

"Suppose he leaves us here all night?" suggested Tom.

"Why, you can bet that is what he is going to do," answered Dick

calmly. "It won't be so jolly pleasant, especially if it rains, and however fine it may be it won't be particularly comfortable sleeping on chunks of rugged stone. Still, I don't see how it is possible for us to get down. We should break our necks if we tried to jump. All we can do is to wait until someone comes to our rescue. I expect Gowl will send the porter, but what I fear is he won't send him until to-morrow morning."

Meanwhile the bully was striding towards the college, and Melby, considering it an excellent joke, was talking about the comrades' difficulty.

"Don't you dare to mention a word to anyone," said Gowl.

"Oh, I wouldn't think of doing anything like that," said Melby. "Dick Clare jolly well deserves it for the scandalous manner he speaks about you. It will show him that you are not frightened of him."

"Why should I be frightened of him, you little idiot?" snarled Gowl.

"Well, that's just what you won't tell me. If you were to tell me I would be able to help you out of your difficulty, and——"

"When I require the help of a kid like you, I'll let you know," sneered the bully.

"Very wise, too," said Melby. "I'll always be ready to help you, Gowl—provided it isn't lending you money. I can't lend you any more because I haven't got it, and I'd be awfully glad if you would pay me what you owe, because I'm beastly short—and shall be until my father turns up. My mother says he's coming to see me in a few days, and I shall be able to get a bit out of him. If you could let me have a little to go on with—say fifteen shillings, or even a pound, I'd be glad."

"Then you will have to go on being sorry," said Gowl. "If I had five pounds capital I know a way of making quite a large sum, and you should have half. You had better see if your father will let you have it. It will do us both good."

"So it might, but it's not coming off. He'd have fits if I asked him for a sum like that. If I get a sovereign out of the old bird it will be jolly lucky. But, I say, how long are you going to leave those two there?"

"All night, of course. I mean to pay them for their insults to me."

"Suppose they saw us?"

"They didn't. Do you imagine they would have let you pull the ladder away if they had seen you. What I'm going to do is to send a message to Garling that two boys are in his tower, and if he doesn't pay them I shall be surprised."

Melby considered this an excellent arrangement. The only thing he feared was that he knew Gowl would lay all the blame on his shoulders if their action should be discovered; but as he was certain that neither Dick nor Tom would tell he felt fairly comfortable. He just reminded Gowl that they had both pulled the ladder away, and then the pair returned separately to the college.

Probably Vance had not missed the pair, at any rate, he made no report, and that night Gowl had just got into bed when Melby rushed into his room.

"Oh, Gowl!" he gasped. "An awful thing has happened——"

"Hold your row, you little brute, or I'll strangle you!" cried Gowl, leaping out of bed. "How dare you make this row. Now, I suppose it's only some foolery on your part. What's the matter?"

"The tower is in flames! Fire is pouring from its roof. I have seen our victims' forms on the top being burnt to cinders!"

Gowl knew perfectly well that this was an utter impossibility. It is true the tower could be seen from the upper dormitory windows, but it was too distant for anyone to see forms on the top of it.

"It's a lie!" he gasped. "You have seen nothing of the sort. I don't believe a word you are saying."

"Then come and look. You can see it from our window—or even from the passage window."

"Is anyone about?"

"Not a soul. It is awful. They are burnt to death, and their sufferings must be terrible. I don't consider that they deserve it, Gowl, and I'm awfully sorry you pulled the ladder away. Of course, I couldn't possibly stop you. You remember I implored you not to do it."

Gowl was so alarmed at the news that he made no reply. He foresaw that if Melby had spoken the truth about the fire that he himself would have to bear the greater blame, he being so much older. He was trembling when he reached the landing window from which he had an uninterrupted view of the tower, then a gasp of horror escaped him, for he saw a rush of flames pouring through the roof of the tower.

(Another rollicking, long instalment of this great yarn on Wednesday next.)

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