No 1.—New Detective Story Paper. Week ending June 12, 1915.

NELSON LEE LIBRARY

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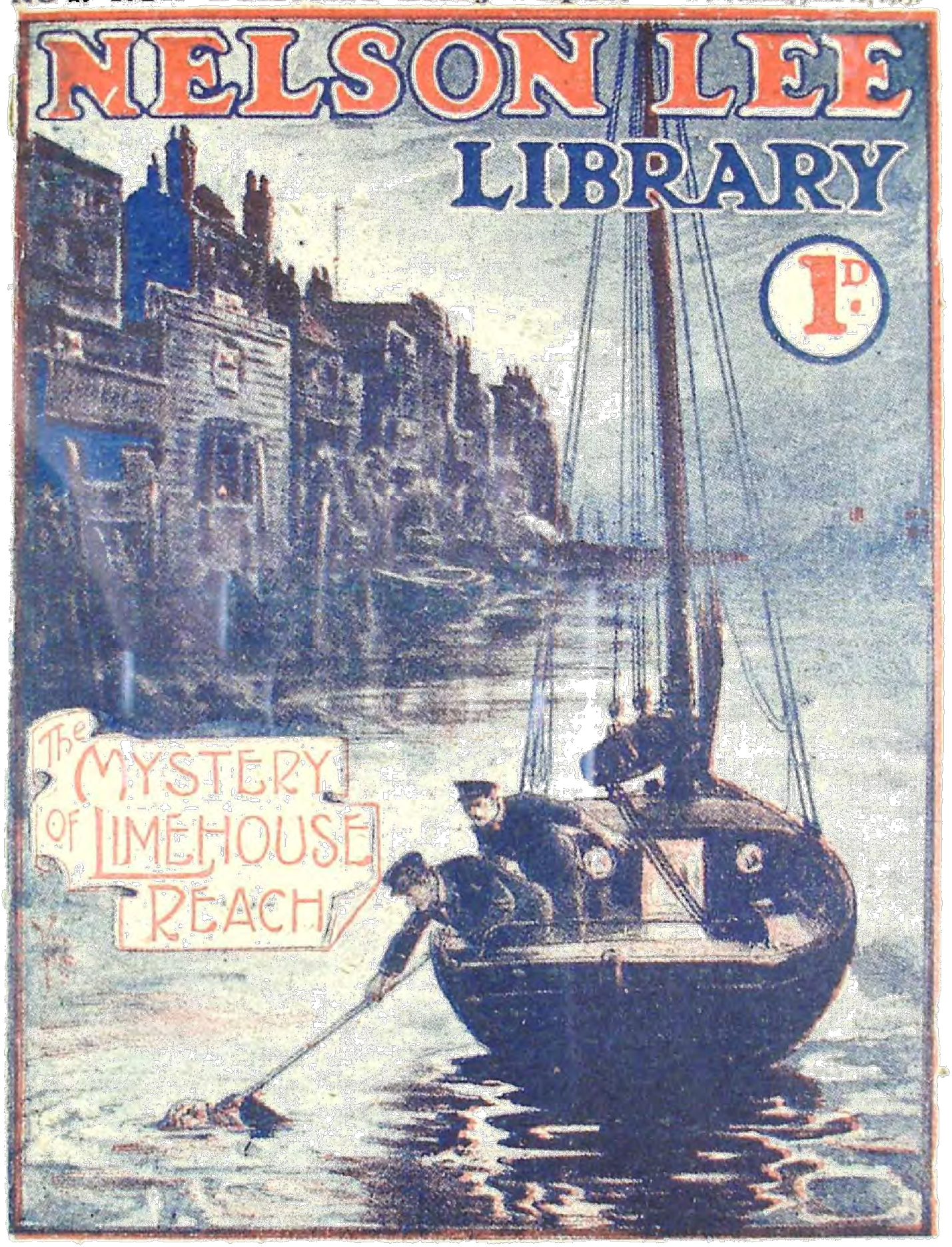

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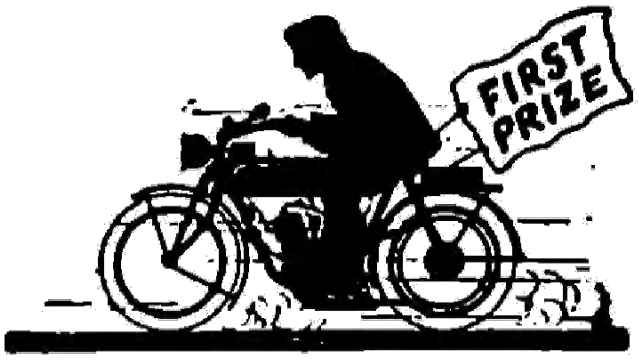

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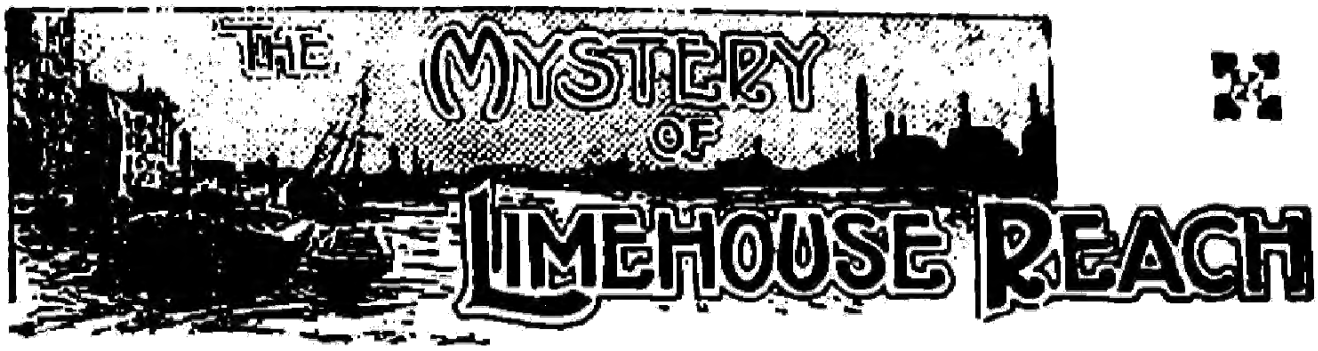

By the Author of "The Stock Exchange Mystery," "Sexton Blake—Territorial," "A1 at Lloyd's," "The Case of the Derby Winner," etc., etc. Specially written for The Nelson Lee Library.

CHAPTER I.

Introducing Nelson Lee and Nipper.

Phwoot! Phwoot!

Bzoom! Bzoom!

"Hoi, you landlubbers! Where are you comin' to with that rabbit 'utch? Sheer out of it, can't yer? Blokes like you ought to be drowned, messing round the river this time of night! D'y'ear, you lunatics? You'll be run down in a minute!"

The "lunatics" in question were two highly bewildered amateur yachtsmen, benighted and becalmed in a tiny four-tonner, in one of the busiest, blackest, ugliest reaches of the Lower Thames.

Ahead loomed the lights and towering hull of a 5,000-ton steamer, tilting full at them out of the pitchy darkness. Astern, a tug with six barges in tow, was nosing on them hand over fist. Abeam, drifted a huge dumb-lighter, inert as a dead hippopotamus, cutting off all escape that way.

Syrens were hooting, look-outs bawling. Yet the yacht drifted helpless across everyone's bows. The light breeze which had only just afforded it steerage way before, now "fluffed out" entirely. Nothing, it seemed, could save it from being smashed and sunk.

In fact, Nelson Lee had already given the order to Nipper to collar hold of the only lifebelt and be ready to jump for dear life.

For it must here be confessed that the skipper of the doomed cockboat was none other than the Prince of Crime Investigators and the most famous detective of modern times.

It was not the first time that Nelson Lee had been afloat, of course. Very far from it. It was the first time, though, that he had ever attempted to navigate a small sailing boat on a dark, windless night through the busy traffic of the London river. And if he had his way of it, it was going to be the last.

His heart was hammering at his ribs, his throat was parched, and his tongue dry as a bit of old leather. It was not fear exactly, but the strain of dodging steamer after steamer crowding down on them out of the dark, and all the time knowing perfectly well that to these leviathans their tiny ship looked no more than a cork upon the waters. In fact, it was to be doubted whether half of them ever sighted it at all.

However, this big freighter ahead had seen them, and so had the tugboat. The lighterman also had given proof that he was fully aware of their existence. But as for trying to pull clear of them and help them—never a bit!

"Blooming Saturday sailors!" was all the comfort they got out of him.

However, Nelson Lee had quickly pulled his wits together. He had got the single oar out now, and was doing his best to shove clear of the converging steam craft.

"Lend a hand here, Nipper!" he panted to his youthful crew. "Heave! That's it. We'll clear them yet, if only that tug doesn't slew her barges into us. Better have the fender ready, in case. Be quick! We'll need to pull like the deuce!"

The big freighter looked to be right on top of them. High aloft her starboard lantern glared balefully. Three vicious hoots showed that she had been driven to put her engines hard astern to save them.

Then all in a twinkling a gust of wind came whirling across the water just in time. It caught the boat's mainsail and gybed it over with a crash, all but braining Nelson Lee in the process. But it saved the situation without a doubt. Round swung the yacht on her heel, and away she rushed.

How she missed going crash into the tug's string of barges was a miracle. But before Nelson Lee could get to the tiller, that danger was past and gone. Clear water seemed to lie ahead. So he let her rip while he mopped the sweat from his brow, and breathed deep breaths of relief.

The bargee on the dumb-lighter was howling something after them, but what it was they neither knew nor cared. And then—biff! wallop! They had gone full tilt on the mud, and were hard aground.

Over heeled the little yacht, the mainsail flapping wildly in the squall. Nelson Lee was shot on top of Nipper by the shock. A great guffaw of laughter came echoing back from the oaf on the barge.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gritted the detective, staring savagely over the side. But the river was like ink, and he could hardly see his hand before his face. He had been flattering himself that they were still in midstream. He could not make it out at all.

And then a break in the lowering clouds revealed the dim outline of wharves and warehouses close ahead. They were not more than forty yards from the shore, after all. And piled-up, hard and fast too, with the tide nearly at full flood!

"Why, we'll be caught here for hours, if we don't watch it," groaned Nelson Lee, grinding his teeth. The first thing was to get the mainsail down and stowed. The next would have been to lay off the anchor and heave on that. But they had no dinghy. The only thing was to use the spinnaker-boom for a quantpole, and shove for dear life.

He took the boom, and Nipper the boathook, for the oar had gone overboard when the mainsail gybed, knocking Nelson Lee across the cockpit.

"Now, you put your back into it. No time to lose. Heave!" he grunted, suiting the action to the word by plunging the gooseneck of the spinnaker-boom into the foul mud, and straining to release the keel from the ooze in which it was embedded.

Nipper did likewise with the boathook. He thrust the end down over the bows. The next instant he had uttered a yelp of dismay, all but tumbling backwards overboard. But Nelson Lee just grabbed him in time.

"You young idiot!" he said savagely. "Why, what's wrong, now? What do you think has happened to you?"

The youngster did not know. He was hanging on to the boathook gingerly, as if it were red-hot.

"Some awful thing it went into—something all soft!" he blurted, his teeth chattering.

"Soft! What do you mean? What the dickens are you talking about?" demanded his boss.

"It might—it might be a—a body!" gasped Nipper.

"Body!" echoed Nelson Lee, catching hold of the boathook then, and relieving him of it. He gave a hoist, and as promptly checked the effort.

"By Jupiter, yes!" he said. "I believe you're right, young 'un. We have got hold of something here."

He pulled it in, hand over hand. But just then he became aware of a wherry with four men in it, resting on their oars, watching. It was too dark to see their faces. He thought they might be River Police at first. But unluckily they were not. They were just waterside loafers who had marked their shipwreck from the landing-steps hard by, and had come off on the chance of extorting a few shillings.

Nelson Lee told them of their gruesome find. They were all alive at once to relieve him of it. A corpse drawn out of the river meant good money to them.

"You 'and 'im over to us, sir—for it is a 'e, I see," said their spokesman, raising the poor drowned head just above water.

The detective could not make out the features in that darkness, nor did he see how the steersman, peering down into the upturned, ghastly face, recoiled involuntarily, and sat rigid for a second.

"Well, supposing I do hand him over to you, will you promise to take him straight to the River Police?" demanded Nelson Lee. The man hanging over the sternsheets recovered himself with a start.

"Why, you bet. In course we will," was his ready answer. "Wapping Old Stairs ain't no more than a mile and a bit from 'ere. We'll take him straight there at once, guv'nor. You don't want to be bothered with the likes of him in a little boat like yourn. 'Sides, you've got enough to do to get afloat ag'in and save your tide, if you're going far."

The detective was going far enough. At least, he wanted to make Blackfriars Bridge that night. And where they were was only Limehouse Reach. There was no time to lose. His renewed efforts with the quantpole were beginning to bear fruit, moreover.

So he left the body to them, knowing that they would know better than he what to do with it. A minute later the yacht was afloat, and he was hoisting the sail again.

The breeze filled the canvas. When he looked round to see what had become of the wherry, it had faded from view. But he could detect the steady "plug" of oars rowing upstream in the direction of the headquarters of the Water Police.

"So that's all right," he grunted, settling down to the tiller again. "As if we hadn't had trouble enough without going blundering into that. Still, I wonder who the poor wretch was, and how he came to get in there—eh, Nipper? You look shaken, and small blame to you. Pop down in the cabin and get a mug of cocoa going, that's a good chap."

Nipper was shaken. He had had enough of small yacht sailing to last him a lifetime, he reckoned. He would sooner face fifty burglars, all armed with six-shooters, than go through another trip like this. Yet his boss called it "sport."

As a matter of fact, Nelson Lee was secretly thinking much the same thing. He loved the water, but he had come to the conclusion that anyone who ventured forth on London's tideway at night in a small boat was a fool who deserved all he got.

"And yet I don't know," he mused, as now, with a "soldier's breeze," he went slipping up the river in comparative safety and comfort. "Old Father Thames is never so fascinating as at night, in my opinion. One thinks of the water rats and ghouls coming slinking out of their lairs to see what they can pick up, like those brutes just now, for instance. Never a care as to how the poor devil met his end—just gloating over the five bob the police would give them for landing the body at the station hard."

Nelson Lee pulled himself up then. It struck him that it was rather a case of pot calling the kettle black. For, after all, he had not bothered himself much as to the identity of the drowned man. And he was a detective, too, which made it worse.

Who was to know that the poor chap was not the victim of some foul murder; that his wraith was not hovering over the waters now, crying out for vengeance?

"Better not suggest that to Nipper," he decided. "The poor kid's shaken enough already. And hanged if I won't be jolly glad myself to feel my feet on dry land again.

"The first thing I'll do, though, when we get home, is to ring up Wapping, and just ask them what they make of the body. I oughtn't to have left it like that, I know."

The little yacht was scudding along merrily enough through the Pool, now. The outward bound steamers seemed all to have gone. Only an odd barge or two was under way. Nelson Lee began to stow away some of the gear. He picked up the boathook to rinse the mud off it. Suddenly he realised that there was something sticking on the end.

"Hallo! What's this? A piece of the poor chap's waistcoat torn off, by the look of it," he said, holding it down to the light streaming from the cabin door. "And, by George, here's something hard down along the lining! It must have got there through a hole in the pocket. Feels like a medal or something."

And this was just what it turned out to be—a bronze badge awarded for miniature rifle shooting. Engraved on it was the name of the winner, "J. G. Enwright."

"Why, that may be the poor beggar's name," decided Nelson Lee. "I must certainly send this on to the police at once. It may be the only clue to his identity."

He pocketed the gruesome relic then, for Nipper had pushed his head up from below to offer him a steaming mug of cocoa. London Bridge was passed. Blackfriars loomed ahead, and a very few minutes now would see them safely berthed, and the yacht left in charge of Nelson Lee's very good pals, the River Fire Brigade

CHAPTER II.

The Dock Thieves.

At last the anchor was let go, the sails snugly stowed. A wherry from the fire-float came to take them off. They would have had Nelson Lee stay for a pipe and a yarn, but he wanted to be getting home. He was dog-tired after his voyage from Gravesend Reach.

However, if he thought he was going to tumble straight into bed, he was disappointed. For when his landlady greeted him, it was to tell him that a caller awaited him.

"Caller at this time of night!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "Who is he? Hasn't he given his name?"

"Only that he was from Scotland Yard, sir," answered his worthy landlady. Adding that he "isn't one of the reg'lars as generally come about the place arter you, sir."

The detective laughed. He appreciated the compliment. But he wondered what those high officials at the Yard, who were often driven to ask his advice in difficult cases, would say if they heard themselves catalogued in this contemptuous fashion.

Still, crime investigation was not Nelson Lee's profession merely, but his hobby. He always lent a helping hand where he could. And now, tired as he was and hungry, he ordered his visitor to be shown straight in.

"Why, Superintendent Scales! How are you?" he said cheerily, as a tall, grim-looking officer entered the room. "Haven't seen you for goodness knows how long. You were down at the docks last, weren't you?"

"Yes, and am now, sir," answered the officer, taking the chair offered to him. "There's plenty of work to do there generally, so I don't often get the chance of running up West. And I wouldn't be here now, if it wasn't that I wanted to consult you particularly."

"Oh, right-o!" answered Nelson Lee. "Well, you won't mind my ordering in supper, will you? I'm deuced peckish and I know it's waiting for me. Perhaps you'll join me. Then we can talk while we eat."

The superintendent had dined already, but he accepted the invitation.

"Well now," said Nelson Lee, "fire away! What's the trouble?"

"Why, warehouse robberies it starts with," answered Scales. "Perhaps you've heard that we've been having a regular epidemic down our way? Some big hauls, too. Yet so far we haven't been able to lay hands on the beggars."

"No; so I understand," said Nelson Lee, who had been hearing a good deal about it, as a matter of fact. For the robberies were not the most serious part of the business. "Has anything more been heard of that detective-sergeant of yours that you had on the job?" he asked, revealing how much he was in the confidence of Scotland Yard already in the matter.

Superintendent Scales looked sharply at him from under his bushy brows, for this was supposed to be a secret.

Detective-Sergeant Brassard, a smart and daring young officer, who had served all his time in the East End of London, had been put in charge of these dock robberies originally.

What clues he had had to work upon had not transpired, unfortunately; but obviously he was getting too "warm" for the gang. For suddenly the luckless sergeant disappeared, and from that day to this had not been heard of again.

"Murdered, you think?" suggested Nelson Lee.

"Undoubtedly," was the answer. "They're a hot lot round our district. He isn't the first 'split' to have his light put out, as they call it. No; and, worse luck, he hasn't been the last," added the officer meaningly.

"Not the last?" echoed Nelson Lee, quick to catch his tone.

"No; there's been another since then. As smart a chap as ever I wish to have under me. I put him on to the case two weeks ago, and now I'm afraid the scum have got him, too!"

"No! Do you mean it?" exclaimed Nelson Lee, in dismay.

Two gallant officers murdered by a gang still at large, and not a single clue as to their identity! This was a bit too thick; it sounded like a case for him. He wanted to know more. When was this last man entrusted with the case? Had he been left to work alone? What were the reports he brought in? And since when exactly had he disappeared?

The superintendent told him. Scotland Yard never kept anything back from Nelson Lee. Like Brassard, his ill-fated colleague, this latest victim had been putting in his time round the Limehouse district, disguised as a docker.

He had been keeping an eagle eye on certain suspected characters, but these were mostly "river-rats" and small thieves already known to the police. They were hardly the sort to plan and carry out robberies so utterly baffling to the best brains of Scotland Yard.

Still, any straw may show which way the wind blows. He had been keeping these scum under close surveillance, and evidently had let them tumble to it. At any rate, no more had been heard of him for four days now.

"You see, he was down in a district where murdering a man is as easy as eating your breakfast," said the superintendent. "What with the crimping houses and the grog-shops, the opium dens and every other kind of dirty den——"

"I know; I know it well," cut in Nelson Lee. "Was down off there to-night, in fact, sailing up from Gravesend. Got shipwrecked, too, on the 'putty,' and before you could say 'knife' we had four hairy pirates off in a boat, smelling round to see what they could screw out of us.

"But tell me," he ran on, "you say this other man who took charge of the case has vanished, too. What was his name? Do I know him?"

"His name was Enwright."

"Enwright!"

Nelson Lee was staring open-mouthed.

"Yes—why? J. G. were his initials."

"And he did a bit of rifle-shooting?"

"That's it. But how did you know? You can't have met the man."

"Met him! I have, and to-night, poor fellow!" said Nelson Lee. "See, I

took this from his pocket." And he held out the bronze badge. "He is dead, as you feared. We found his drowned body in Limehouse Reach, Nipper and I, and I had it sent to Wapping police-station."

Superintendent Scales stared at Nelson Lee as if he were something not of this world at all. He looked at the badge, and the dead man's name on it; then he turned his eyes to the telephone on the detective's desk.

"Yes, ring them up and ask," said Nelson Lee at once. "They will describe him. I could see nothing of the features in the dark. The men in the boat said they knew what to do with him, so I handed him over to them."

Superintendent Scales had already taken down the receiver. He gave the number.

"Is that Headquarters, River Police? Then this is Superintendent Scales speaking. I have just heard that a body was picked up in the river off Limehouse to-night by Mr. Nelson Lee, which I am afraid is our man, Detective-Sergeant Enwright. The body was sent on to you. What—what's that?"

He broke off in sharp astonishment. The startled tone made Nelson Lee jump, too.

"No body has been brought to you to-night, do you say?" continued the superintendent, staring blankly. "But Mr. Lee says it was. He gave it into charge of four men in a wherry. He is here now; he had better speak to you."

Nelson Lee took the instrument at that. Surely there must be some mistake? However, there wasn't. Not a soul had been near the River Police Headquarters about any "found drowned" that night. The superintendent began to think Nelson Lee must have been dreaming.

"But there is the badge. I found it in a bit of cloth torn off on the end of the boat-hook. Those fools must have taken it to another station, that is all. Ring them all up and inquire."

He sat knitting his brows until the telephone bell rang again, but there was no better news.

"That's mighty queer, isn't it?" said Superintendent Scales. "These blackguards looked like regular waterside loafers, you say? Well, they'd know they'd get a reward for taking the body to the police."

"Of course they did. They offered to themselves," said Nelson Lee.

"Then why didn't they take it there? What else could they do with it?"

That was the question. Nelson Lee sat silent.

"Look here," he rapped suddenly, "when you came to me over this case, what was it you wanted me to do? Was it advice only you wanted, or my actual help?"

"Why, yes, sir, both! It all depended how busy you were. But I tell you frankly I am quite up a gum-tree over the case," confessed the superintendent. "It isn't only the difficulty of getting clues; it's this wholesale murdering of every man put on the job. They are not only a particularly clever gang we're up against, but an absolutely ruthless one."

"Quite so," assented Nelson Lee, "as evidenced by the way they've deliberately suppressed this evidence against themselves to-night."

"They've suppressed it?" echoed the officer, astonished.

"Not the smallest doubt about it," insisted Nelson Lee coolly. "If the men were not actually the brutes who slung poor Enwright in the river, they, at any rate, recognised him quick enough when they pulled him out. They know that the last people to get hold of him must be the police, so they took and stuffed him away again in some horrible hole somewhere. Ugh!"

How bitterly he regretted that he had not taken charge of the dead man himself! Still there was no use in wasting regrets over that now. Nelson Lee's mind was made up.

"Now, look here, Superintendent Scales," he said, "you've asked for my help, and I am ready to give it. It means letting half-a-dozen highly-paid jobs slide to tackle the case, but I don't care. I owe it to that poor wretch I turned my back on to-night. But, understand me, if I take it up, I want entire charge."

"Of course—of course," replied the superintendent.

He would have promised anything to secure the help of the prince of crime investigators in solving a series of impudent crimes which were likely to see the end of him in the service unless he could do something quickly to checkmate them.

That Nelson Lee would actually take the case up himself was beyond his dreams, yet the great detective meant what he said. If only for the sake of that poor wretch to-night, to give him Christian burial, he would track down these ruffians and bring them to justice.

CHAPTER III.

At the Blackboy Inn.

Begin to talk to your smug West-Ender about the terrible slums still to be found round Ratcliff, Shadwell, Limehouse, and other waterside localities in this year of grace, 1915, and he will most likely laugh in your face, and tell you, "Bosh!"

Such haunts did exist, of course, he admits, but, according to him, were swept away long ago by the beneficent L.C.C.

Well, let him flatter himself it is so. But, if he is wise, he will not put his boast to the test, poking his nose too deeply into some of the back alleys in these places, particularly after dark.

Nor is it the back alleys only, with their screeching, cursing population, where danger lies. Let him beware as keenly of those lone, narrow passages deep down between high, echoing warehouses, twisting and turning at bewildering angles until, as like as not, the stranger finds himself landed at a flight of weed-grown stairs leading down to the river, with nothing for it but to retrace his steps as best he may.

There are some of these back purlieus where after dark even our burly police only patrol in twos, and even threes. So this will show what chance a lone civilian stands who has been marked by "land-sharks" entering these mazes.

In daylight it is different, of course, when ships are unloading in the docks around, cranes swinging, and all the place abustle with life.

If anyone wants a little exercise then to develop his bump of locality, let him take a boat down the river, and pick his way vigilantly along the northern shore, past Wapping Old Stairs, Shadwell Basin, Limehouse Basin, until he comes abreast of Deadman's Creek.

There, amid a tumbledown old row of wharves and dwellings, old as Noah's Ark, he will see a certain ancient inn, with lopsided eaves, and one big gable propped out over the river itself on crazy piles.

Beside it, and beneath it actually, is a narrow passage leading down to a flight of worn and weed-grown steps, thence to foreshore mud and the water's edge.

Mark it well, how and where it lies. Then let your waterman take you, row you back to Wapping Wall again, and next try to trace your steps to the Blackboy Inn by land.

For that is the name of the tavern. But don't ask to be shown the way. Try to puzzle it out for yourself. The chances are you will have to give it up.

Nor would you be much the loser. The Blackboy Inn is all very well, but is hardly the place at the best of hours for an honest man who likes to keep clean ears and his fists to himself.

A man named Seth Grimes was the host in the days this story tells about. He had been a "cattle boss" on one of the big Argentine boats until he took to running a pub on land.

He was not tall, but there was not a door in the Blackboy Inn that he had not to squeeze through sideways. He had hands like portmanteaus, arms like a gorilla, and the strength of an ox.

He did not hesitate to use it, either. If he handled his cattlemen half so effectually as he did his customers when there was trouble in the bar, he must have been worth a fortune to any skipper at his job.

Yet the waterside toughs and loafers who frequented the Blackboy never resented this man-handling, or took their custom elsewhere. The police often wondered why. The fact was that they did not know what to make, quite, of its landlord.

Still they did not enquire too closely. The house, which had been a sinkpit of infamy until he took it over, was now at least fairly orderly. Seth Grimes ruled it with an iron hand.

When, therefore, two nights after this story opens, the swing doors of the Blackboy were burst open, and a rowdy sailorman came shouldering uproariously into the bar, there was an instant feeling that it would not be long before he was thrown out again neck and crop.

Mr. Grimes had already a smouldering eye upon the reveller. But the sailor was unabashed. Two customers that he had nearly knocked across a table he stood upon their pins again with elaborate solicitude.

"That's right, shipmates! No one hurt? My mistake, an' I apologise," he kept reiterating while he dusted his victims down. "Bill Muggridge is my tally. Just 'one from 'Frisco, and don't let no one forget it. Eh, boss?" he appealed, turning to the landlord. "No 'arm done, is there? Well, set 'em up, then. Let 'em all drink Bill Muggridge's 'ealth—all on 'em! I'm in the chair, and you can take it out of that, see?"

"That" was three golden "jimmy-o'-goblins" that he took from a well-plenished canvas bag, and sent rolling across the pewter-topped counter. Mr. Grimes fielded them dexteriously, but still regarded the newcomer with a frozen eye.

However, the jolly sailorman was not to be set down. With a further command to "set 'em up," he fished out a mouth-organ from the depths of a deep cross pocket and piped up a jig, toeing and heeling it nimbly the while on the sanded floor.

Now, Mr. Grimes, though a martinet, was not the sort to quarrel with his living. Three or four of the most evil of his customers, moreover, seemed attracted to the stranger by his light-hearted jollity. Or more likely it was the sight of the gold flung down, and the promise of more in the canvas bag thrust back so carelessly into the yawning trouser pocket.

They pressed round, clapping hands in time to the music and applauding. The rest sat pulling at their pipes, enjoying the performance, yet darting furtive glances at Mr. Grimes, as if to see what he thought about it. The landlord, fingering the three sovereigns, smiled wryly at last, and prepared to fill afresh the mugs which had been collected by Jim, the potman.

The dance finished at last, and the sailorman was escorted forward to the bar by his admirers with much thumping on the back.

"Bravo! Brav-ee-o, chum!" applauded one tallow-faced ruffian, with "landshark" written large in every line of his shifty features. "Good 'ealth to yer, matie. Glad to see yer safe back 'ome in Hengland ag'in. Wot's your wessel, and when did she come in?"

"Why, the Sindbad, of Hull," was the answer. "Bound for Ipswich with maize. Left 'er unloadin' down Butterman's Bay, to get in over the sill. Know it, mates?"

The tallow-faced man didn't, but he pretended he did.

He vowed that the sailorman was the identical image of a certain popular favourite in the locality, called "Happy Jack," and appealed to everyone in the bar to corroborate him. It wasn't only his face that reminded them of him, but his open, free-hearted ways.

After that compliment, of course, there was nothing for the blushing sailorman to do but to "set 'em up again." Which Mr. Grimes accordingly did. Mean-

time, the tallow-faced man, "to carry on the 'armony," obliged him with a long-winded ditty, extolling a certain—

"Brave Cap'n Knowles for the lives that 'e saved
In the wreck on that terrible shore."

One song led to another. The sailorman was elected to the chair, of course. He accompanied all the singers on his mouth-organ, until suddenly, in a lull in the concert, the squeaky flourish of an itinerant fiddler was heard just outside the doorway.

At once there were shouts of "Blind Dick!" He was evidently a popular institution in those parts. Yet again were seen those furtive glances darting from under eyebrows to the landlord's face, as if consulting him.

The sailorman, however, knew nothing about this. At the first shout he was out of his chair and through the door, returning the next instant leading the musician jovially by the shoulder.

"There, that's it, my hearty! Come in and jine us. We was just starting a tune when you come along. Wet your gab first, and then strike up. And see, here's a crown in your fist for a starter. That'll pay the piper. Drink 'earty, and tune up, old son."

Most men who had never set eyes on Blind Dick before, and now suddenly coming face to face with him in the full flaring light of the bar, would have shrunk back in loathing, almost in fright.

For a more villainous and repellent visage was never known. Blind he was. One eye had vanished completely from its socket, and it would have been as well if the other had followed its example. But it hadn't, unfortunately.

There it protruded, livid and white, like a boy's marble, rolling upwards horribly to the blazing gas. Nor were the rest of his features more engaging. His nose was pitted with blue about the bridge, as if it had been tattooed, while his mouth was twisted permanently into a saturnine snarl.

The story was that Blind Dick had been blown up in an explosion in a powder mill at some period of his variegated youth. But whether the accident occurred while he was earning so honest a living, was another matter. There were unkind friends who hinted something about "burglar-proof safes."

However, Blind Dick might have been a first-prize winner in many a beauty show for all the sailor cared about his looks. He clapped him on the shoulder, urging him to "name his poison," and "blow the expense."

"And so I will, mate," said the fiddler. "But it 'ud be the heartier if I knew who it was was standing it to me. 'Blind Dick' they call me. But who may you be? A stranger in these parts, ain't you, by your tongue?"

"Stranger! No, of course 'e ain't," struck in the tallow-faced man. "At least, no more than any other sailor that ever come round Wapping. Billy Muggridge 'is name is, off the Sindbad, of Hull, just in from 'Frisco."

"Ho, ho! Round the Horn!" quoth the blind fiddler. "I've made that passage, I 'ave. Sailing ship yours, too, eh? I know—I know. This sort of thing, eh, shipmate?"

He clapped his old fiddle under his bony chin, and after a scrape or two struck into one of the oldest of "chanties":

"'Oh, I served my time in the Black Ball Line,
Hurrah for the Black Ball Line:
From the Sou' Sea north to the 60,
Hurrah for the Black Ball Line.'"

"Know that one, eh?" leered Blind Dick. "Then cap it. Come on, shipmate. Let's give these landcrabs a treat. Now 'ere's another. Take your mouth-organ and let it rip.

"'O, they call me Hangin' Johnny,
With my hang, boys, hang.'"

But the sailor did not know that one, it seemed. He tried to strike into a much more familiar ditty, "The Capstan Bar." But Blind Dick rejected this with impatient scorn.

"'Fire on the foretop, fire on the bow,
Fire on the maindeck, fire down below.
Fire! Fire! Fire down below:
Fetch a bucket of water; fire down below.'"

"Go on, lad! Next verse! Sing it," invoked Blind Dick, scraping away with his fiddle fiendishly. "Let 'er rip! Surely they taught ye that on your old lime-juicer? Never was a ship weathered the Horn without chanting old "Fire Down Below," sure-ly."

But again the sailor was flummoxed. He seemed to realise, too, that the blind fiddler was making a butt of him. So did the men around. So did Mr. Grimes.

He leant over the bar with arms akimbo, enjoying the contest in a certain grim way. The tallow-faced man, on the other hand, looked sour and surly. All the jollity of the evening was spoiled. When the stranger, trying to keep his end up, struck into

"Blow the man down, Johnny, blow the man down,
Weigh heigh, blow the man down,"

Blind Dick merely cackled derision.

"Well, there you are, mates," he cried, cutting into the middle of the tune and rolling his dead eye horribly. "It may be years ago since ol' Blind Dick sailed the briny, but 'e can still set the lead to some of the young 'uns, ye see. And now it's my turn to put the old mug round, out of this crown our mate here has given me. Come, landlord, it's Blind Dick's call. You don't often 'ave him doin' the gentleman this fashion. So push 'em along!"

The fiddler had rapped five sharp raps on the zinc-topped counter with the coin as he spoke. Mr. Grimes looked hard at him, though he might as well have stared at a stone. There was a hideous twist to the blind man's mouth, however, which evidently conveyed something. Mr. Grimes never waited for the sailors mug this time, but filled him a fresh one from the shelf.

Yet, naturally as the thing was done, the stranger had observed this. He said nothing, of course. Why should he? There was no harm in a clean mug, surely.

Possibly not. But then Nelson Lee was taking no chances.

For the breezy Jack Tar, with the mouth-organ and the canvas bag of sovereigns, was none other than the famous detective disguised.

He had not let the grass grow under his feet as will be seen. He had staked his reputation on solving the mystery of these big dock robberies, over which two gallant officers had already lost their lives. Scotland Yard had gladly handed over the whole case to him, and here he was.

How he came to choose the Blackboy Inn as his "jumping off place" is easily explained. He knew no more about it really than the man in the moon, except the glimpse which anyone could get of it passing down the river. But there was something about its old timbered back and lop-sided gable that had always fascinated Nelson Lee.

It carried one back to old smuggling days—days of the press-gang—days when more murdered bodies were dragged from the river in a week, perhaps, than are found now in a year.

And it was close off the Black Boy Inn, he reckoned, that they had stumbled on the corpse of poor Sergeant Enwright.

So this was why he was there hobnobbing with this scum to-night. He had heard one man's voice answer from that wherry that was supposed to take the drowned man to the police at Wapping Old Stairs. Nothing more had been heard of it from that hour to this.

The inference was that the men—though the drowned man was disguised—recognised him as a "split," and did not mean the police to know of his recovery. This could only be because they had either murdered him themselves, or else the guilty parties were pals whom they were ready and anxious to shield.

Now, in the voice that had answered him from the wherry, Nelson Lee had a clue. He felt sure he would know it again if he heard it. Indeed, he was not sure he had not heard it already here in the Blackboy Inn.

It was the tallow-faced man he had his eye on. Bill Wragg, he had heard him called.

"A murdering, slink-eyed gallows-bird, if ever there was one," was his summing-up of the gentleman. "See how he's fastening on me, covering these other jackals while they sniff round my pockets."

That was before Blind Dick had appeared on the scene. Nor had the fiddler been in the place ten seconds before Nelson Lee had taken his measure, too.

The old ruffian might pose as a street musician, scraping for odd halfpence round tavern doors, but he was something more than that.

If his was not the master-mind among these blackguards, at any rate they had some dread of him. Even the tallow-faced man had subsided into sulky silence, though his voice dominated everything. The fiddler and Bill Wragg were rivals it was plain to be seen. The latter had sized up this roystering stranger who had dropped into their midst as a sailor fresh ashore blueing his pay. Now they wanted to see what Blind Dick made of him.

So, for all the breezy jollity he still maintained, Nelson Lee was on his guard: the more keenly because he knew well that a man bereft of sight is endowed by Nature with eyes in his ears, his fingers and his toes in compensation for the loss.

Nor was he exaggerating his danger, as events proved. The disguise which which was good enough for the tallow-faced man, did not dupe Blind Dick. The detective saw that.

This raking up of old sea chanties was a trap to catch him. It bowled Nelson Lee out, what was more.

He knew the old familiar ones, like "Blow the Man Down" and "Away Rio." But, then, what landsman doesn't? You may hear them at any smoking concert. These others, though, like—

"Fire on the maindeck; fire down below!"

that the fiddler had scraped with such ghoulish glee, were the true doggerel of the fo'c'sle. They left the detective tongue-tied, like a fool.

And now he knew that he was tried and found guilty as a fraud. A fraud, moreover, could only mean a "split" in this locality of crimps and thieves, and what short shrift was meted out to "splits" had been evidenced by the fate of poor Enwright and his colleague before him, Detective Sergeant Brassard.

CHAPTER IV.

The Police Raid.

NELSON LEE realised then exactly what he was in for. He was ready to bet a million pounds to a trouser button that the clean mug from the shelf had already a dose of dope mixture waiting in the bottom of it for such undesirable customers as himself. It might even be a deadly poison.

How to dodge drinking it was another matter. The detective was quite cool about it. But his eye never left that mug. Round it came to him as he knew it would. The potman set it down. All the rest took theirs in their grimy fists. Blind Dick roared "Chair!" banging on the counter for silence.

"Now, look 'ere, mates," said the fiddler, rolling that dead eye of his horribly to the gaslight, "I'm going to give you a toast! We've got a young friend 'ere

fresh from the perils of the vasty deep. 'E's one of the true deep-water sort, same as I used to be before I lost my precious sight.

"Ho, yes, I know 'em!" he cried, as one or two dull-witted ones began to titter, giving him away. The look of demoniacal fury that he darted at them, however, soon shut them up. "I know 'em," he repeated. "The finest chaps in the world—our British Jack Tars! And I'm going to give you their 'ealths. So up with you! 'Our brave British sailors! Drink 'earty, and no 'eel-taps!"

He swigged down his own half-pint, and every man did the same, with a shout of welcome first to Nelson Lee. The latter chinked mugs gaily enough, spilling what he could of the poisoned stuff in the process.

However, the blind fiddler seemed to be on the look-out for this. He cried to his victim to drink his down, too. So did the rest. There looked to be no escape. With a careless laugh Nelson Lee raised the drugged liquor to his lips.

And then suddenly, as by a miracle, a far-away note came cleaving to all their ears. It was a note, too, to set Nelson Lee's heart bounding with relief, just as it seemed to strike panic into the rest.

Even the redoubtable host of the Blackboy looked scared. For it was the shrill call of a police-whistle. More than that, down the narrow court approaching the tavern, footsteps were coming flying at break-neck speed. It was as if someone were being pursued, and was meaning to take refuge there. He must, for only the river lay beyond.

Mr. Grimes realised this. Whoever the fugitive was, he did not mean to have him captured on his premises. With an oath he flung up the flap of the counter to bar the door.

Before he could reach it, though, the feet had come skating up, the swing-doors were dashed nearly off their hinges, and in like a whirlwind a man came flying, cannoning into Nelson Lee and knocking him clean into a corner.

With never a pause, or a "by your leave," the fellow simply dived headlong round the counter and behind into Mr. Grimes's private sanctum beyond.

They heard the crash of overturned chairs, then the hurling open of another door, and feet flying down cellar steps, as it sounded. Certainly they were not wooden stairs.

But this was not the strangest part of the business. Nelson Lee had not caught more than the merest glimpse of the runaway as he came barging in.

The rest, though, seemed to recognise him at a glance. Seth Grimes had even sprung clear to get out of the fugitive's way. Panic there was certainly, but the outward and visible signs of it were stilled instantly. It was as if the whole thing were entirely expected and carefully planned.

Mr. Grimes was round and back inside the inner room in a twinkling. Chairs were set tidy again, and doors closed. Meantime, Bill Wragg, without a word from a soul, had darted outside.

His idea, as Nelson Lee could see, was to cover the fugitive by drawing off the pursuing police on to himself.

He flew for the weed-grown steps leading down to the river's edge. The door of the pub. almost opened on to these. A couple of boats were moored below.

To cast off the painters of both these, kick one adrift, and flounder into the other, was the work only of a moment.

A punch with butt of an oar sent his own craft shooting out on the tide. Unfortunately for him, though, the painter wedged between two timbers, jerking the boat back on the rebound.

The pursuit was close on the fugitive's heels. A trio of policemen, headed by a plain-clothes officer, had come bowling into view, followed by a mob of gamins and loafers.

It was then late dusk, but not too dark to see the figure in the boat struggling to cut his craft free. With a whoop the bobbies charged for the steps. They imagined they had their man fast.

However, there is many a slip 'twixt cup and lip. They had Nelson Lee to reckon with.

He did not know from Adam who this mysterious runaway was who had come charging into the Blackboy Inn. Nor did he care. He had himself to think about, and, even more important in his eyes, the case on which he was engaged.

These ruffians had already marked him as a "split." A less brave man would have accepted defeat, and been mighty glad to snatch at this chance to escape.

Not so Nelson Lee.

He saw his chance here to throw dust in the eyes of his quarry, to seem to prove that he was not a spy. To think was to act with him.

Forcing his way to the door as the chase rolled by, he flung himself in the path of four policemen.

"'Ere, wot's all this about?" he demanded with a roar, slewing his shoulder into one and sending him cannoning into the next, bringing both heavily to the ground. "Wot's all this about—eh? We don't want no bloomin' rozzers this road! You sling out of this, d'y'ear?"

He lashed out with his left with all his might at the plain-clothes officer as he spoke, knocking him head over heels on top of his mates.

It was difficult to say which were the more flabbergasted—the police or Blind Dick and his pals.

The tallow-faced man, taking fresh heart, was hacking at the rope which held his craft prisoner.

"That's it, chum," roared Nelson Lee, still holding the narrow stairs against his pursuers. "Off with you! I'll 'old these bluebottles back. They sha'n't get you so long as Bill Muggridge can stop 'em!"

"Ah, would you, you swab?" he challenged, as the fourth policeman, seeing his mates go down, whipped out his truncheon, and aimed a swiping blow at Nelson Lee's arm.

The detective knew better than to try and parry it. He leapt back, then sprang in again, meeting the burly bobby shoulder to shoulder with a crash that shook the breath out of both of them.

Nelson Lee's arms were round the other's waist before he knew what was happening to him. The stairs and the river were just behind. With a heave and a trip the policeman was sent flying, to fall flat on his back with a splash like a whale.

His downfall made the mob behind him howl with glee. All ideas as to "Bill Muggridge" being a "split" in disguise were completely knocked on the head. For the police themselves were flying at the sailor's throat as if to tear him to tatters.

Nelson Lee gave them as good as he got. He did not spare them. He landed the plain-clothes man a wallop on the nose calculated to make him see stars for a week.

"Bravo, mate! Pitch into 'em! Booh! Yah! Splits! Out 'em!" bellowed the crowd, dancing round the heels of the combatants.

Whenever a bobby was tripped and went rolling they kicked him savagely. That was the only thing about it that made Nelson Lee feel like throwing up the sponge.

He knew, however, that the bigger the fight he put up the surer his position would be among these riff-raff when he came back amongst them, as he intended to do. So he slammed away still, planting left on left like the good boxer he was.

All this time, of course, the whistles were being kept going for more help. It came at last, and not from the alley beyond, but the river. A motor-launch of the River Police suddenly swept into view, almost ramming the steps full tilt.

"Look out! Behind yer! Watch yourself!" screeched the sailor's admirers hysterically, for they realised that their champion was done for now.

So did Nelson Lee. Yet he meant to go down with colours flying. The more wildly realistic he could make the whole business the better for him afterwards.

As the river constables leapt out of their boat and then scrambled up the stairs to take him in rear, he simply turned, and made one flying leap clean over their heads into the river.

It was a mighty spring. It only just landed him clear of the steps, and in the water nevertheless. Down he went, nearly getting stuck head foremost in the foul mud. But he struggled to the surface, and struck out. Away he went, swimming for dear life as if to escape across the river.

There was no doubt about the bravado of the deed appealing to the crowd on shore. They whooped wildly, hustling the police, and doing all they could to hinder pursuit.

Two or three battered old wherries that had miraculously appeared from nowhere managed to get foul of the motor-launch. Nelson Lee had plenty of time, in fact, really to get clean away had he wanted to.

But this was not his game, of course. He could afford to be captured now. So he plugged steadily on.

At last, when all the constables had been loaded on board, the launch came tearing after him. A strong acetylene headlight flashed over the waters soon located him.

"Now then, you beggar," hailed the coxwain savagely, "give up, or by thunder you're for it when we get you inside! Give up, do you hear?"

The bowman was lunging at the swimmer with a mighty boathook. Nelson Lee rolled on his back, and came to hand without a struggle.

"Curse the meddling fool, who is he?" said the plain-clothes officer who had led the original pursuit. "Do you know him, anyone? Is he a pal of that chap we were after, or what?"

"Tell us first who the chap was we were after, and then we may be able to help you," was the rather sour retort of the uniformed sergeant who had been backing him in the chase. "You saw the man; we didn't. And, in any case, I don't recognise this beggar here. He looks like a stranger round these parts to me."

From what Nelson Lee could gather, this was an echo of the same dock robbery case that he was supposed to be in charge of. A suspicious character had been marked loitering about a certain warehouse, and on being challenged had promptly taken to his heels. That was all.

And now, after half a mile's chase down back streets and crooked alleys, a fool of a sailor had chipped in and robbed them of their quarry right on the post.

All the police had got out of it were two brace of black eyes, three badly cut lips, and one swollen ear. Small wonder, then, that they were gouging their knuckles savagely into their captive's neck, half throttling him as they hauled him aboard.

"You scut, we'll get you six months for this, see if we don't!" grated the plain-clothes man, giving his prisoner a final clout on the head, which left Nelson Lee's head ringing for hours.

But he did not mind a snuff. He would have been inclined to do the same himself. He was only wondering what the poor beggars would say when they found out who it was, after all, who had dished them out of their prey.

The trip to Wapping Old Stairs, where the headquarters of the Water Police are, was not a long one fortunately, for they were using him as a doormat all the way.

Once alongside the boat-hard, Nelson Lee was frog's-marched out with his nose bumping on the muddy cobbles. They carried him up to the charge-room, and dumped him in the dock dripping wet.

The station-inspector at the desk stared at the array of black eyes and swollen visages. Rarely had he seen four burly men so knocked about by a single prisoner.

Moreover, the sailor in the dock was no Jack Johnson, as he could see for himself. He demanded his name.

"Bill Muggridge," was the surly answer.

"Where from?"

"49, East Sou'west Street, Atlantic Ocean."

"Charge?" demanded the inspector, not wasting time with any argument.

The charge was "obstructing the police," of course. Whereupon Nelson Lee was pulled out of the dock again, and whirled along to a cell. Here a blanket was flung in after him, and he was ordered to undress.

"I'll give you 49, East Sou'west Street!" snarled the plain-clothes 'tec, looking as if he had not finished yet with his quarry.

Nelson Lee looked at him quietly.

"Well, if you wouldn't mind making it 'East 200' instead I should be obliged," he said, dropping the Cockney lingo and speaking in his usual cultured voice.

"East 200! That is the telephone number of the Limehouse police-station."

"Quite so. That is why I want you to get on to it for me," drawled the prisoner. "Kindly tell Detective-Superintendent Scales, will you, that you have a man here who is urgently desirous of speaking with him?"

"Tell Superintendent Scales!" gulped the 'tec, struggling between bewilderment and rage. "What in Hexham do you mean? Do you mean to say you're a Scotland Yard man, and you slipped into us like that to-night? Yes, and cost me a capture, too!"

"Oh, don't you worry about that," was the casual answer. "You just do as I ask, please. You will find it quite all right. I'm not a Scotland Yard man as it happens, and I'm sorry I had to plug you all as hard as I did. But it couldn't be helped, as I will explain later."

"Oh, couldn't it?" choked the 'tec, bursting with rage.

He called in the station-inspector then, but their mysterious prisoner merely repeated the same cool request.

"And look here," added Nelson Lee, "I don't want you fellows to go blabbing about this to everybody. If once it leaks outside this station that I am not really Bill Muggridge, all these black eyes will have gone for nothing, and I shall never be able to show my nose among that scum again."

CHAPTER V.

In the Police Station.

THE inspector gave it up then. It was beyond him. But he telephoned as Nelson Lee requested, and a few minutes later saw Superintendent Scales arriving, as completely mystified as the rest—until he set eyes on Nelson Lee, of course!

"Great Cæsar! So it's you, is it?" he gasped then. "Why, what have you been up to? I hear you've been slaughtering half my division. What is the meaning of it?"

"Now, look here," said Nelson Lee. "It's all right. A black eye never hurt a policeman, nor a thick lip either. And as for the chap they were chasing, I know where he vanished to, and they don't. So that's one up to me!"

"Oh, is it?" demanded the superintendent, still ruffled. "Well, why didn't you help our fellows to collar him?"

"Ah, that's my business!" answered Nelson Lee coolly. "Still, I'll tell you, since I know you will realise how everything absolutely depends on my identity being kept quiet."

He related then his visit to the Blackboy Inn, his endeavour to pass himself off as a sailor fresh home from sea, and his success until Blind Dick the Fiddler turned up.

"Do you know him?" asked Nelson Lee.

"What, a poor wretch who plays round public house doorways? Yes, I know of him."

"But you've never had him through your hands yet, eh?"

"No. Why should I?" was the astonished reply.

"Oh, nothing! You will very soon, that's all," yawned Nelson Lee, for, wrapped in his blankets now after his swim, he began to feel sleepy. "Anyway, you see now what I'm driving at, don't you?"

"See! Good man alive, I see nothing," answered the bewildered officer. "Here you are arrested in the name of Bill Muggins, or whatever it is, charged with aiding a prisoner to escape, and half killing four policemen into the bargain, and now you want me to calmly let you slide off, I suppose, with never a word. Is that it?"

"Not at all," drawled Nelson Lee. "You're going to charge me to-morrow at Thames Police Court. You can lay it in for me just as thick as ever you can, what's more."

"Then the magistrate is to know nothing about it either?"

"No. He can afterwards—after I've broken from custody, vaulting the dock perhaps, and getting clean away through the crowded court."

"Great scissors!" ejaculated the bewildered superintendent. "Oh, come, that's drawing it a bit too thick to expect that! Why should you? What's the advantage?"

"My dear Scales," said Nelson Lee severely, "do you mean to say you've put in all those years—in the K Division too—without knowing that among the criminal classes any man who has ever broken out of 'jug' is a far bigger hero than Lord Kitchener, General French, and Joffre rolled into one? Surely you know that?"

Of course the officer did.

"Well, can't you see my game?" proceeded Nelson Lee. "To-night in the Blackboy they had me set for a 'split.' In two ticks, if your fellows had not happened along, I should have had to drink down a mug of doped ale, and then I don't know where I'd have been now. Knocked on the head like poor Enwright and Brassard most likely.

"But now, you see, after mopping into your chaps as I did, even Blind Dick won't dare to call me spy after that. While if I cap it by a clean break away from the police court to-morrow, they'll simply look on me as a second Dick Turpin. I'll be able to twist them round my finger as I like."

Superintendent Scales saw the drift of it all then. But he insisted on Nelson Lee setting the whole scheme down in writing, to show to the indignant magistrate after his escape.

"Right you are. Certainly," said Nelson Lee. "And while I am about it I'll make my apologies also for the other prisoner who is going to escape with me at the same time."

"Another one! And who's that?" demanded the scandalised officer.

"Nipper, my youthful assistant," was the cool reply. "I can do with him on this job, I see. So if you'll just 'phone him up to rig himself out in a sort of 'Artful Dodger' disguise, and then come down to your division and pinch some old gentleman's watch and get run in for it——"

Superintendent Scales nearly had a fit. He had tumbled against some nimble-witted customers in his time—criminal and otherwise—but for sheer audacity Nelson Lee beat them all.

"Well, perhaps it would be rather a funny sort of a message for a policeman to send over a telephone wire," allowed Nelson Lee. So he made him get paper and pen, and spent the next few minutes writing his instructions in the form of a note.

Handing this to the superintendent with express injunctions to see that it was delivered to his assistant immediately, Nelson Lee yawned and proceeded to

make himself as comfortable as possible on his plank bed. Scales would have had him smuggled into more comfortable quarters, but the detective would not hear of it.

"I shall be all right," he said. "It isn't the first night I've spent in a station cell, and it certainly won't be the last. You ring me up when you have my young man collared, won't you? That's right. Good-night, old chap."

The superintendent went out; and a few seconds later the Blackboy Inn and its blackguard customers, the scrap with the police, the swim and chase out over the inky tide had all been blotted out as by a veil, and Nelson Lee was sleeping like a tired child.

When it was exactly that he was roused up by the mystified gaoler to be told that his "friend" had been arrested all right and was now at Limehouse Police Station, he did not know. He merely grunted and went to sleep again.

Next morning he ate the usual prisoner's breakfast of a roll of bread and a pint of tea. For he still wanted his identity kept secret, except from the few senior officers who had to be in the know. Then earlier than usual the prison van came to collect him and take him to the famous police court in Arbour Square.

There he was pushed into a cell; and a minute later Superintendent Scales appeared, ushering in the dirtiest and most disreputable young scaramouch that ever raked crust out of the gutter.

This was none other than Nipper, Nelson Lee's famous boy assistant, and almost as celebrated a personage as his master himself.

Pert as a magpie, keen as a weasel, and clever as a cartload of monkeys, Nelson Lee would not have swopped him for the ten best detective officers in the C.I.D.

"Well, there you are. Found him, sir," announced Superintendent Scales, pushing the grimy little scarecrow before him into the cell. "The young demon didn't make any pretence about pinching a watch either. Nearly butted his victim through a shop window, then ran our constables over a mile with half Limehouse yelling at his heels before he had finished."

"He did? Bravo, youngster!" laughed Nelson Lee.

"Well, that's what you told me to do in your note, wasn't it, guv'nor?" demanded Nipper. "No pretence about it, you said. But all the same I hope you're going to see me out of it, now I am here. For the old gent whose ticker I boned is vowing he'll get me ten years."

His governor laughed again.

"Oh, yes!" he said. "I'll see you out of it, young un. I'll probably get six months myself before the morning is through, but I sha'n't serve them. You'd better hear what it's all about first, though."

Nelson Lee related his last night's adventures afresh for Nipper's benefit. Unlike Superintendent Scales, the youngster had grasped his boss's scheme almost before the words were out of his mouth.

"Why, yes, I see it," he cried. "We're going to escape from custody, and go back and live amongst these beauties. And the police will pretend to look for us, but, of course, won't find us."

"Hope not. I shall kick up considerable trouble if they do," said Nelson Lee dryly. "The question is, which would be the most dramatic moment for doing our break away? We want a regular cinema scene, if we can manage it. I did think of felling the gaoler and jumping the rail of the dock. But I had forgotten that you and I would not be tried together, and you certainly must escape as well."

"Why, yer bet, guv'nor," answered the youngster fervently. "What about when they're shoving us into the old Black Maria? Then would be our chance. Get them to handcuff us with irons too big, so that we can wriggle our hands through."

The wheeze sounded all right. The next thing was to ensure a large and sympathetic crowd of lookers-on. For that was the whole "why and wherefore" of the scheme.

"All right, guvnor, you leave that to me," laughed Nipper, casting loose one shoe lace significantly as he spoke. "I'll keep 'em lively. There won't be one in the court who won't wait to give me a send-off when I take my seat in the old Hinsteu bus.'"

Poor Superintendent Scales looked doubtful about the whole performance. His position was an awkward one. On no account was he to let it leak out that the prisoners Bill Muggridge and Dodger Green—as Nipper had called himself—were not all that they appeared to be on the charge sheet. One or two knew their true identity, of course, and it would be their job to cover them when they made their break for liberty. Otherwise some well-intentioned constable would be collaring them and upsetting the whole bag of tricks.

"But no blacking our eyes for us, if you do get within punching distance," stipulated the superintendent dolefully.

Nelson Lee laughed, but he would not promise.

The court had already begun to fill. News of "Bill Muggridge's" noble self-sacrifice in the cause of crime ensured a "full house."

Indeed, not only were the public seats packed with frowsy humanity, but an overflow crowd was gathered outside to welcome the hero on his arrival.

When these found out how the "rozzers" had stolen a march on them by already smuggling the prisoner into court, they were furious. They groaned and boo'ed until mounted constables had to be sent for at last to move the mob along.

The usual list of overnight "drunks and disorderlies" was dealt with first. Then the name of "William Muggridge" was called. Nelson Lee appeared from the cells below into the dock. To the glee of the riff-raff at the back of the court, four great, hulking officers entered the witness-stand to parade their black eyes and swollen jaws as evidence of the prisoner's ferocity.

Meantime, Nelson Lee lounged in the dock leering at the unsavoury ranks behind him.

"Hullo! My friend Tallow-face has turned up, I see!" he exclaimed under his breath. "That's pally of him, I'm sure. Yes, by George! and he's not the only one of the gang in the Blackboy last night. They're giving me a wave, too! Come, that's mighty promising."

However, the gaoler's hand on Nelson Lee's shoulder intimated that even thus early his case had been temporarily disposed of. "Bill Muggridge" was remanded for inquiry.

It was Nipper's turn then. The two exchanged winks as they met in the corridor at the bottom of the stairs.

"Cheer O, peoples!" Nelson Lee heard the youngster shout as he bobbed up into the dock. "'Ere we are—'ere we are—'ere we are again, eh? And now where's the old geezer that's goin' to run the rule over me this time? Oh, there you are, Beakie! So that's you, is it? 'Ow's your pore feet?"

Nipper was waving a grimy paw to the indignant magistrate, to the huge delight of the "gallery" behind.

Their roars of laughter and the shouts of the usher for silence, could be heard even in the cells below. Nor did these demonstrations subside as the case went on.

"The young demon is drawing it a bit too thick, you know!" deplored Superintendent Scales, popping his head in for a moment into Nelson Lee's cell. "He's mucing the magistrate in a way that'll get him a dozen with the birch if he isn't careful."

At that moment, though, a regular howl of delight was heard from the court-room above, and, next, sounds of a violent struggle in the dock, punctuated by shrill, defiant cries from the irrepressible Nipper.

The young rascal had been remanded too, and this was him being carried down kicking and shouting like a fiend.

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee's Escape.

AFTER that, of course, it was the Black Maria and away to Brixton Gaol. News of the trouble in court spread to the overflow crowd outside. Every slum in the neighbourhood got wind of it, and poured out its denizens to see what was left of the fun. It took all three mounted constables could do to keep a way clear for the passage of the prison van.

Nelson Lee eyed these horsemen uneasily as he and Nipper were led out, handcuffed, and hustled towards the vehicle. However, the tallow-faced man and his pals were foremost in the crowd at the yard gate, waiting to give them a parting cheer.

"Bravo, Bill! Good on yer, matey. We shan't forget yer!" they heard them shout.

Now was the time for the grand bolt for their liberty. Superintendent Scales was hovering about, waiting to cover them.

So Nelson Lee lashed out. Next to him was a burly young constable who was not one of those in the know. Lee had his heel crooked round his ankle and the officer diving on his head, all in a twinkling.

With the same movement he swung his manacled wrists into Superintendent Scales's ribs, catching him even before he was ready. The "super" uttered a frantic "whoosh," and folded up like a knife.

Meantime Nipper had not been idle, needless to say. A stout sergeant-gaoler was at the door of the van. The youngster simply rammed him amidships, cracking his skull against the jamb of the door, and bundling him clean under the axle.

It was all done in a twinkling.

Nor had the crowd time to pull its startled wits together before the fugitives were crashing through them, shouldering people right and left in headlong flight.

Then everybody realised what had happened, and such a hullabaloo went up as might have been heard a mile off. Police-whistles blowing, shouts of "Stop them! Stop thief!" Equally vociferous counter-yells of "No, don't! Let 'em through!" "Keep 'em off! Down with the 'rozzers'!"

After that Nelson Lee and Nipper found a path opening before them as by magic. The pursuing police, on the other hand, were hustled, tripped, and jostled in every possible way.

"That's it. Go it! We'll see you through, mateys! Stick it, young 'un!" Nelson Lee heard the voice of Bill Wragg bawling. He and the others of the Blackboy's customers were loyally covering their flight.

So far as the police on foot were concerned they would have succeeded, too. The mounted constables, though, were hot after them. They came forcing their horses through the mob, regardless of people's toes. A backward glance told Nelson Lee that unless they could reach some narrow entry into which they could dive, they must be retaken.

Bill Wragg, though, was their pilot and pal.

"Down 'ere. It's all right. We'll do 'em yet!" he panted, heading for a narrow passage flanked by a ginshop on one side. There, in the doorway of the latter, his fiddle under his bony old chin, stood Blind Dick, scraping away as if deaf to the hullabaloo descending on him.

Sight of the villainous old face and that dead eye, cocked unwinking at the sky, gave Nelson Lee confidence. It looked as if the gang must have planned a rescue already, only Nipper and he had forestalled it.

A moment later, though, he saw that there was no such luck. The blind old ruffian stopped his fiddling as the avalanche of hobnails came thundering down on him. He cocked his ears as if he even knew their steps.

"Who's that? Who's that?" he screeched sharply in a voice like a parrot. "Bill Wragg, it's you!" he called to the tallow-faced man. "What's all the shimozzle, now? And who's that with you, you blundering fool?"

He came stumbling from the doorway as he spoke, right into the path of the fugitives.

"You old owl, out of the way!" cursed Bill Wragg, nearly knocking him flying. "It's our sailor-pal done a guy, with the splits arter him. Stand clear if you don't want 'im nabbed again. Get out of the road!"

Nipper had darted past with a wriggle like an eel. Nor was he any too soon. The mounted bobbies, reckless of people's ribs and toes, were clattering into the narrow alley.

Nelson Lee made to pass the other side of the fiddler. But the face of the latter had flown purple with fury at the mention of his name.

With a cry like a wild beast he made a straight spring at Nelson Lee as he plunged past him. His old fiddle was crushed to matchwood in the collision. The detective found himself pinned in a grip of steel. He was tripped and dragged to the ground.

And now, of course, his whole beautifully laid plan was ruined. The police were already on top of them. In vain Bill Wragg turned and flung himself on the traitor to try and drag his new friend free.

"You rotten nark!" he foamed, kicking at the blind man as he rolled on the ground.

"Nark yourself, you double-dyed fool!" screeched the fiddler. "It's this man that's the nark—this split, as calls hisself 'Bill Muggridge.' Split, I say! Split!" he yelled. "I know him; I smell him! Mizzle out of this, and thank your stars you've got Blind Dick to look arter you. Go on!"

The old reprobate was fighting like a tom-cat all the time. Nelson Lee was as strong as most two men, but he could not break the vice-like grip which pinned him. Nor could Bill Wragg help him, nor Nipper.

And here the mounted bobbies were, at last. Nelson Lee saw he was done. He could have wrung the fiddler's neck for thwarting all his plans. Now he would have to surrender, and let the police take him back. He could never work the "escape" wheeze again. He did not know how he was going to get out of the muddle now, in fact.

Still, there was no reason why Nipper should not go on and see what he could do by himself. So he shouted to the youngster to save himself.

"Don't mind me! Cut for it!" he called out.

Nipper saw his boss meant it. He twisted away like a weasel, just as a big hand was grabbing for his collar. The tallow-faced man caught his arm and whirled him along after him, full pelt.

"We got you, anyway! The coppers sha'n't pinch you!" he said. "But that sneakin' 'ound, Blind Dick! We'll put 'im through it for this. 'Tain't the fust time he's ratted. But, by Jinks, it's going to be the last!"

Nipper and his strange escort were now threading tortuous alleys which led them finally into Jamaica Street and so across Commercial Road. Love Lane brought them to Broad Street, Ratcliff.

There was breathless excitement during all this, as if the "rozzers" were still actually at their heels. Nipper, though, knew, of course, that Superintendent Scales would have called off the chase long ago.

Unfortunately it was too late. The damage was done, and their whole plan ruined. They had captured his guv'nor, and now would have to pretend to hold him. They could not let him escape again.

"So what I am going to do by myself among this scum, goodness only knows," said Nipper, under his breath. Nor was he given much time to think. His hang-dog escort were hustling him into still another network of alleys. Everyone seemed to know them as they slunk along. Yet none offered to stay them with a word.

"In 'ere, young 'un!" commanded Bill Wragg at last, pushing Nipper into a black and filthy doorway at the end of one particularly noisome slum, filled with loafers and squalling brats.

Where the place was the youngster had not the remotest notion. But the hooting

of a tug's syren close at hand suggested that it could not be far from the river's bank.

"Down 'ere. Mind them broken stairs. Keep close to the wall. I've got yer all right!" Bill Wragg assured him, as Nipper's unaccustomed feet trod suddenly into empty space. He quite thought that he had been spotted as a spy, after all, and that this was some murder hole he was being thrust into.

But it was only the ruinous condition of the staircase. Or else the broken treads had been left intentionally as a booby trap for unwary and unwelcome visitors.

For this was the entrance to "Dinkoy Day's," it proved. Nipper had never heard of the place before, but then neither had the police. It was necessary to be a respected member of the Ancient and Unsavoury Order of River Rats before you could gain entry to its hoary portals.

Dinkoy Day's was probably the last of the old London "thieves' kitchens" so often depicted in melodrama.

But the front door did not lead into the "kitchen" by many a score of yards. Else the police must soon have got wind of it.

The flight of broken steps which led down and down, ended at last, and Nipper found himself butting into what appeared to be a solid wall. There was an evil-smelling cellar to the right. But it was at the wall that his guides halted, kicking on the solid masonry with their heavy boots.

What the exact signal was the youngster had not time to notice. It was returned by a series of muffled thuds, however. And then, to Nipper's alarm, a trapdoor yawned away suddenly right at his very toes, revealing still another cellar beneath.

"That's all right. Don't be nervis!" Bill Wragg assured him laughingly. "I'm lookin' arter you. I'm your pal!"

So down a rickety ladder they went, this time for a dozen feet or so. Next they groped their way along a subterranean passage, at the end of which a dim light showed. A nigger, big as a house, awaited them, rolling his eyes menacingly as they drew into the light. But he no sooner recognised the tallow-faced man than he drew back at once, reserving his glares for the ragged figure slouching at his heels.

"All right, Jumbo, stow that!" said Bill Wragg, shortly. And it was plain that he was a power in the place. So a door was thrown open for them then, and still another narrow passage confronted them. This twisted and turned even more than the first, now dipping, now rising precipitately, suggesting that here were deep foundations of houses overhead that they were burrowing beneath.

At last, just when Nipper was beginning to think he was never to see daylight again, they came blundering into still another dead wall.

Nothing daunted, nevertheless, the tallow-faced man smote lustily on this, blowing curiously through a crevice in the masonry the while. Whereupon again it was not in the wall before them that a hidden door appeared, but several feet back in the passage, where the rest of their party had halted.

Nipper stood quite dazed. For he was on the threshold of a great room which, by its vaulted roof, might have been some merchant's wine-cellar, once. At one end a huge fireplace yawned and glowed.

It had a rusty range in it big enough to cook for a hundred, and littered with greasy pots and pans. Round it about a dozen evil-looking ruffians were gathered now, toasting "two-eyed steaks" and less-straightforward delicacies before the bars.

The fumes of fat, fried fish, and shag, reinforced by the reek of badly trimmed lamps, set up an atmosphere which came rolling out over the new-comers like a wave.

Lounging at a long table in the middle were about a score more toughs, all smoking like chimneys; some at the dice-box, some playing cards.

Never had Nipper, even, seen such a collection of crime-sodden faces in his life before, all under one roof. There were broken-nosed men, and men with

patches over one eye; men with half their proper number of fingers only, and one minus both his ears. And that quick, hunted look—the look of a beast at bay—that each and every one darted at the door as it opened, was enough to make the blood of the bravest run cold.

However, Bill Wragg led the way in. They hailed him with cheery shouts even while they devoured Nipper behind him with questioning eyes.

"Cheer-o, Bill!" sang out a dozen raucous voices. "Been down to see your sailor-friend swung off? Well, oo's the brat you've brought 'ome with you? Wot's 'e in 'ere for?"

The tallow-faced man met the challenge with a quick, fighting glare.

"The kid's in 'ere because 'e's a friend of mine. Is that enough for yer?" he demanded threateningly. "Anybody got anythink to say to that?"

Nobody had, it seemed. Bill Wragg's bony jaw was pushed out like a lump of blue granite. He was evidently accustomed to rule things with a high hand at Dinkey Day's.

"Huh, well, that's all right," he sneered at last. "So now I'll tell yer." And he took Nipper by the ragged sleeve and shoved him forward where all could get a clear view of him.

"'Ere's a kid that's been up before the beak at Thames yonder, for pinchin' 'clocks.' And when they were shovin' 'im into the ol' Black Mariar, 'e butted the rozzers in the stummick, slipped 'is darbies, and jest slung 'is 'ook; that's all.

"It ain't much, is it?" he went on cuttingly. "But all the same it's showin' more pluck than 'arf of you 'ave got, that fancies Dinkey Day's belongs to yer.

"But that ain't all," he went on, his voice growing harsher and harsher. "I've got a story to tell you, mates. This kid 'ere wasn't the only one that made a break for freedom. You asked me about my pal the sailor jest now. Well, 'e was another of 'em. It was 'im give this kid the lead arter all. 'E'd never 'ave 'ad the pluck, p'r'aps, but for 'im."

"Wot, that cove Bill Muggridge, as you call 'im? Well, where's 'e now, then?" demanded half a dozen at once.

"Where is 'e now?" echoed the tallow-faced man. "Ask Blind Dick the Fiddler. Arsk 'im 'ow 'e narked 'im; flew at 'im just as we were gettin' clear of the coppers, and 'eld 'im till they ketched 'im again.

"Yes, arsk Blind Dick——" He was raving on, foaming at the lips with fury, when again the door opened, and in walked the fiddler himself, tapping his way along with a stick.

There was dead silence at first. Even Bill Wragg was tongue-tied. Then first a growl and next a howl broke from the company.

"Is that true, Blind Dick?" demanded several at once. "Bill Wragg 'ere says you narked 'is pal the sailor, that saved the chief last night."

"Chief!" echoed Nipper under his breath. "Hallo, now we're hearing something. That must be the beggar the guv'nor said came dodging into that pub of his—the Blackboy. But chief of what?"

His thoughts flew to these dock robberies that Nelson Lee had set out to fathom.

Whoever this chief was, he was a big enough man among these ruffians, evidently, to set them all instinctively on Bill Wragg's side. They shouted to the fiddler to speak up.

But he only faced them with a wolfish snarl, leaving it to the tallow-faced man to relate the full story of his treachery. Before he had finished every man in the room was on his feet, baring his teeth at the blind man as if to fly at his throat.

For your true criminal knows only one crime, and that is the betrayal of a pal. And such Bill Muggridge had proved himself to be, as everyone had to allow.

CHAPTER VII.

In Dangerous Quarters.

"Ho, indeed, is that so?" sneered Blind Dick at last, though Nipper had seen signs of flinching in his scarred, evil face. "A pal, eh? So that's what you still think 'im, spite of all my warning yer?

"Oh, you fools!" he raved, spluttering in his contempt. "That man Bill Muggridge is no more a sailor than Dinkey Day 'ere." And he pointed to the proprietor of the "thieves' ken," who had just come forward to see what all the rumpus was about. The blind man's quick ears had detected his footsteps. "I say 'e ain't no more a sailor than the man in the moon," he protested shrilly. "'E's a split, 'e is; like that last one the chief came and copped. The one you outed, yet who, even then, nearly give you away, when them yachtin' coves 'ooked 'im up in the river las' week—bust 'em!"

Nipper's face was a picture, as he listened to this. His boss had told him, of course, how he had come to identify the drowned man as Detective-Sergeant Enwright, one of the two police officers engaged on these dock robberies who had mysteriously disappeared.

And these ruffians around him were the very gang into whose clutches he had fallen.

Nipper never felt so utterly lost and done for in his life. Fortunately for him, all eyes were bent on Blind Dick.

There was something repulsive and toad-like about the old villain as he crouched against the wall to which he had backed. That single, dead, clay-coloured eye of his frightened them. They hated the old wretch, but they feared him.

Then Bill Wragg found his voice at last. The picture had flashed back to him how this sailor Blind Dick was reviling had leapt to their aid that night, fighting back the police at the cost of his own liberty.

Was that the thing a "split" was likely to do, when he had himself seen the hunted man come dashing into the Blackboy Inn and knew where he had vanished to?

"No, of course it ain't," declared Bill Wragg. "The chap's 'true blue' right through; and now Blind Dick 'ere 'as gone and narked 'im—sent 'im back to the jug again——"

His voice was drowned in the angry roar rising from every throat now. Some began to close on the cowering wretch to wreak vengeance on him. The fiddler, though, for all he lacked sight, was a match for them.

A hand thrust out he beat aside; fingers clutching at his greasy collar, he dodged as nimbly as a boxer. Some of the men began to laugh at this. It suggested a game.

A poker had been left in the fire and one brute drew it out and advanced with it, thrusting the glowing end close to the cheek of their prey.

True enough the poor wretch dashed it aside with his naked hand, as they hoped he would. The hot iron scarred the grimy skin, making him screech with agony and rage.

He made a spring, then, to close with his tormentors. It was done so swiftly that before he knew where he was the brute with the poker found himself half-strangled in the blind man's clutch.

In two shakes the red-hot weapon was wrested from his grip. Blind Dick leapt clear; the other ducked. But not in time. Down came the heavy iron with a thud across his neck, dropping him to the floor with a leaden thud.

"Now!" foamed the fiddler, whirling his weapon round and sending the rest scattering. "Now, you scum, who's afraid of you now? Not Blind Dick! Come on, you mongrels; come on, and he'll show you."

With crazy howls he darted this way and that, wherever he heard their shuffling feet, lunging out with the glowing iron. His instinct for locating a particular enemy was fiendish.

"Bill Wragg! Bill Wragg!" he taunted shrilly. "Where are yer? Nark, am I? I'll nark yer, you mouthing bully."

He chased Nipper's guide into a corner then, and, before his quarry could dodge, ran the red-hot iron into his cheek. That finished the chase.

The tallow-faced man was on him like a bulldog. Blind Dick was hurled to earth and a rope noosed round his ankles and hitched over the iron crane above the fireplace from which the heavier stew-pots hung.

A heave on this hoisted the victim's legs in the air and left him helpless except to clutch and claw like a cat in a trap.

The wretch on the floor was lifted up, and seemed to be either dead or dying. Bill Wragg, meantime, was storming up and down, clutching his burned jowl in agony. Suddenly in his rage he rushed at the rope, and, hauling on it with all his might, lifted his enemy clear off the floor. Then with a swing of the crane he sent him butting against the very bars of the fire itself.

And there, without a doubt, Blind Dick would have hung for all any of the others would have stirred to save him. His screams for mercy, however, were too much for Nipper. He caught up someone's knife from the table and made a dash to rescue him.

"Here, hands off, you young whelp. Wot are you doin'?" roared Bill Wragg with an oath.

"Going to cut him down, of course," declared Nipper. "You fiend to treat a blind man so! Let me get to him."

"What, to a nark? A nark who split on a man who if it hadn't been for 'im you'd 'ave been in quod still? You let 'im alone, you little fool. 'E'll be narking us next. We know the old scut," laughed Bill Wragg fiercely.

However, Nipper was not to be denied. Blind Dick's appeals would have cut a heart of stone. Wrenching himself out of the other's grip, he gained the rope and slashed it through.

Their victim tumbled to the hearth and went writhing and rolling over the floor in vain endeavour to extinguish his already smouldering rags.

And then the door opened. All eyes flashed instantly to a new-comer who had entered the room. Promptly dead silence fell.

"The chief!" Nipper heard those about him gasp in fright under their breath.

The youngster stared. So this was the arch-thief whose wholesale robberies from dock warehouses had utterly baffled the East End police.

He was no petty pilferer by any means. He stole in tons, not in ounces, yet how he managed it, and where he hid his ill-gotten gains, no one could say. But it must require a warehouse as big as a barn.

Two tons of finest Para rubber was one small item to his credit. His latest most valuable haul had been twenty-five hundred-weight bags of saccharine, the duty on which alone would run into a small fortune.

Nipper noted every line and curve of the villain's face and figure with a practised eye. Of more than medium height, and powerful build, he looked to the youngster like a man who had been a soldier.

Certainly he was a born leader among men. His deep-set, flashing eyes and iron jaw denoted that. He was glaring at the figure of Blind Dick still rolling on the ground in agony.

"What, Dick the Fiddler!" he exclaimed, striding forward. "And his clothes burning on his back, too! What hog did this to him? Eh, Dick? Out with it."

The blind man was on his feet at the first sound of his voice. He pointed straight to where Bill Wragg stood, sullen and trembling. The story of the escape, in which Nipper had shared, came tumbling out then.

Blind Dick hid nothing. He gloried over the way in which he had pinned the pseudo sailor until the police had recaptured him.

"For I tell you the man's a split—a rotten spy!" he raved. "That night when he came into the Blackboy was all a blind. And so was the way he went for the coppers when they was arter you, chief. He knew I'd got him sot. 'E knew I know 'e was a sham."

"And that's a lie, as any fool can see!" protested Bill Wragg, in his turn. But the chief, as they all dubbed him, cut him short with an oath.

"Silence, you fool!" he thundered. "Every word that Blind Dick has said is gospel truth, as I have discovered."

"What!" gasped the rest in dismay.

As for Nipper, he thought his last hour had come. Nor were his fears unjustified.

"That fellow you had in the Blackboy that night was a split, just as the fiddler says," repeated the chief. "His attack on the police was only a ruse to get himself out of a tight fix, and there Blind Dick was absolutely right again. And now this morning he had it all fixed up with that fool, Scales, to break away and come down here and spoof you all afresh.

"Only Blind Dick here—the only one with the brains of a rabbit among you—was too fly for him and upset his little game. If it hadn't been for him, you'd have had him here now, I reckon, slathering him to the eyes and making a prince of him."

"Would we, by thunder!" cried Bill Wragg. "Tell us who the swab is, and where 'e comes from, and we'll soon show 'im if 'e can spoof us."

"Will you?" sneered his leader. "Then, by George, I'll back him against the whole mob of you any day. For the man you were all cheering at the court this morning, saying what a fine fellow he was, is none other than Nelson Lee!"

"Nelson Lee!"

The ruffians might well gasp and shake in their shoes. Had it been any ordinary police detective from the "Yard," it would not have mattered so much. But the name of Nelson Lee was one to strike terror into the hearts of the toughest.

As for poor Nipper, he had nearly melted through the floor in dismay. He could see that the whole "gaff had been blown," to use a thieves' expression. The next thing he would be spotted shivering there, and denounced, too.

Yes, and not denounced merely, but murdered out of hand, as like as not.

The chief had not singled him out yet. His fierce flashing eyes were ranging in his direction. Then suddenly they fixed on him like a hawk's.

"Hallo! Who's this young brat? What is he doing here?" he demanded. "He's not the one that slipped the police this morning outside the court, is he?"

He was glaring at Bill Wragg. The latter's guilty scowl was answer enough. The chief strode across to where Nipper stood, and gripped his arm and swung him round.

"Look at me, you young mongrel!" he grated. "Who are you? What's your name, and where do you come from?"

Nipper had steadied himself all in a twinkling.

"My name is Dodger Green—least, that's wot they calls me," he answered. "I got lagged last night for trying to pinch an old geezer's ticker, and this morning, when they were shoving us all in the Black Mariar, I heard the cove behind start lashing out, so I lashed out, too. That's all I knows about it, guv'nor. I bufted the nearest copper in the stummick and runned for my life, an' this gentleman"—pointing to Bill Wragg—"brought me 'ere. You don't blime me, do yer?"

"Blame you, you ragamuffin! Not I—not if you're speaking the truth," said the chief, still fixing him with eyes that bored clean through to his backbone like gimlets. "But this fiend, Nelson Lee, has tried to work one plant on us. How am I to know that you're not a spy of his? Eh, you young—— Ouch! Curse you! Let go, you little demon, or I'll smash you! Let go!"

For Nipper, as if stung to white-hot fury at the mere notion that he was anything of the sort, had suddenly turned and fastened his teeth in the hand that clutched him.

It was a thing he had never done in his life before, and hopes never to have to do again. But he knew it was that or exposure. And it saved him.

"Me a nark! Me a spy!" he raged, as the chief flung him off at last, and sent him staggering across the room. "Say that again, and oever you are, I'll mark yer for it. Heh? Spy, am I?" he yelled, apparently beside himself with indignant fury. He made a dart to possess himself of the poker which had proved such a formidable weapon in Blind Dick's hands.

Bill Wragg, however, wrested it from him. And then the fiddler, remembering how the youngster had stood up for him, came to his rescue. The chief, already seemingly half convinced by Nipper's outburst, listened to him. If Blind Dick made himself answerable for the youngster, he was prepared to say no more about it.

"But, remember, I shall keep my eye on you," he threatened. "Let me catch you so much as lifting your little finger to give us away, and I'll flay you alive. Yes, by thunder, and I mean it, too!"

Nipper only laughed.

"All right, guv'nor. That's a bargain, then," he said. "If I'm a nark, you skin me like a rabbit. I can't say no fairer than that, can I?"

He cocked his battered hat over one eye and thrust his thumbs into his ragged armholes as he spoke, eyeing all around him with an impudent leer. The chief glared at him, then turned away, saying something to Blind Dick as he vanished through the door again.

After that the fiddler's orders were that Nipper was to keep beside him from that time forth, and never to move beyond arm's-reach, unless he had his permission.

"You're a smart lad, I can see that," he said. "Just show the chief 'e can trust yer, and you'd be useful to 'im on some of 'is jobs. That is, if there are going to be any more jobs," he growled dubiously. "It all depends on this fiend, Nelson Lee, that they've put on our tracks. It all depends whether the chief can out 'im fust before he outs us."

"Well, why don't 'e?" demanded Nipper jauntily. "'E don't seem the sort to stick at much. Wot was this other split you talk about, whose lights you put out? Why don't you catch this one and serve 'im the same way?"

Blind Dick laughed and said he was a lad of spirit, sending him to ask Dinkey Day for some lard to put on his blistered hands. The boss of the "thieves' ken" was not in the room, so, with characteristic assurance, Nipper went in search of him.

"It's a rum place, and I might as well find out all about it while I can," he decided. "But all that rigmarole of secret doors and passages can't be the only way in and out of it. There must be another, surely."

Nipper was right. There was one other way, at least, leading down to this subterranean warren, for such the youngster's swift and stealthy investigations showed it to be.

At first there looked to be only the one crooked passage confronting him. Hurrying along this, though guided by a tin wall lamp glimmering ahead, he came suddenly to what he took to be a yawning crack in the brick wall. It was still another secret door he saw, and opening into a cellar even larger than the one used as a kitchen.

To slip through and peer round was the work of an instant only. The place was literally packed to the ceiling with bales and boxes of every possible sort.

"Phew! Loot, I bet!" whistled Nipper under his breath. "'Tons of it. Dinkey Day's is more than a thieves' kitchen then; it's a receiver's ken as well. And, my word, here's another of them! Would you ever believe it?"

A second cellar opened out of the first and a third out of the second, and every one was filled with wares obviously stolen.

Nipper wondered how such a labyrinth ever came to exist. The brickwork was obviously of great age. No doubt some great merchant prince's house had stood on the site in bygone days, days when a man had his mansion, offices, and warehouse all under one roof.

However, the most welcome sight of all was a faint grey shaft of daylight shining beyond an angle of a far recess. Anyone would have thought the youngster had not seen blue sky for years, from the way he darted towards it.

It was a tiny window—a ventilator, really—six feet up in the cellar wall, and heavily grated at that. Seizing the bars, he pulled himself up, and as promptly dropped back again with a gasp of astonishment.

For there, under his nose, was the river outside, almost lapping the walls. Empty barges jostled each other just beneath. A big freight steamer, like the one that had nearly run them down that other night, was forging majestically by.

A police launch, even, had just gone pottering leisurely past, all unconscious of the den of iniquity secreted within biscuit-throw of them.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Nipper, who had not the remotest notion that the river could be so near. Risky as it was, he had to take another peep to make sure that he was not dreaming.

He pulled himself up again and took a longer look this time. And then once again he collapsed with a gasp. For, creeping down the river against the tide, with sails scarcely drawing to the expiring breeze, was Nelson Lee's little four-ton yacht!

There, at the tiller, too, sat Nipper's boss himself. He was disguised, certainly, with eyeglass and big cigar, but there was never a doubt that it was he.

Nelson Lee must have secured his release at once from Brixton Gaol, and hurried back and changed. And here he was, in Limehouse Reach, on the point of casting anchor, evidently, a natural thing for any sailorman to do, since now the wind had died, the strong flood tide was slowly bearing him back upstream again.

"Yes, by George; and the next thing is he'll be coming ashore on the off-chance of catching sight of me! And all these jackals will be waiting for him. He will never get off again alive.

"I must manage to warn him somehow," decided Nipper anxiously. "But how? I can't get out of this horrible hole in time, and it would take a weasel to squeeze through these bars."

There was one thing he could do, though—he could signal. This wharf, or whatever it was in which the window slit was pierced, must be quite close, Nipper saw, to this Blackboy Inn his guv'nor had spoken about.

In fact, looking up at a queer timber projection overshadowing where he stood, it struck Nipper that these cellars might be partly under the inn itself.

The more certain, then, that Nelson Lee's attention would be centred in his direction. He had no handkerchief to wave, but there was plenty of canvas about.

Tearing a strip from the nearest bale, he dragged a box beneath the ventilator and scrambled on to it. Pushing his hand through the rusty bars, he waved the rag of cloth to and fro.

The signal was seen, he was sure of that. The figure on the yacht remained rigid, but the eyes were staring hard his way.

"Thank goodness! That'll be some warning to him, anyhow!" gasped the youngster, with relief.

He had just jumped down from the box again, when suddenly he found a figure towering over him, and a pair of iron arms pinioning his own to his sides.

It was the chief. Never had Nipper seen a blacker look of hate and fury than his. His lips were drawn back in a wolfish snarl.

"So, you little mongrel, I was right, eh?" he hissed at last. "I thought I was, though I pretended to take Blind Dick's word for it. But I still had my eye on you, as I swore I would. I told the fiddler to let you wander off on some message, and I left this cellar door open just to see whether you wouldn't come poking your nose in. And you did, and gave yourself away up to the hilt!" he finished, squeezing the youngster still tighter in his bear-like grip, until his back was nearly broken.

"How gave myself away?" demanded Nipper, trying to bluff.

"Why, yonder sailing-boat coming down the river belongs to that fiend Nelson

Lee, that I was talking about, who has been put on our tracks by Scotland Yard. And you, you little scut, were signalling to it! I caught you at it. You're that brat of his he calls Nipper, that's who you are. Deny it, if you can!"

The youngster kept silent. He did not know how to answer. He was fairly trapped.

"Well, supposing I am what you say? Supposing I did signal?" he said at last, to gain time.

"Oh, I wanted you to signal!" taunted his captor. "That was why I let you. I want your cursed master to see it, too, in the hopes that he will come ashore to hunt for you. Nothing could suit me better, for I swear if he does it'll be the end of him!"

"You mean you would murder him?"

"Kill him like a stoat!" was the vicious reply.

"As you killed Enwright and that other policeman—Brassard?"

"Brassard! Ho, ho! that's rich," laughed the chief instantly. "You've been all these hours in Dinkey Day's and haven't heard the truth of that, haven't you? Well, come, that's saying something for the way my gang can keep its mouth shut."

"You mean Brassard wasn't killed—he is still alive?"

"Still very much alive, my weasel!" sneered the other. "As you can see for yourself, since it's Brassard that's got you in his clutches now. Eh? That rather startles you, doesn't it, you young dog?"

It certainly did; it left Nipper speechless. So the chief of this daring gang of dock thieves and warehouse burglars was none other than the detective-sergeant who had been put on their tracks to run them down!

No wonder that the gang was supposed to have baffled every effort to trace them. Small wonder, too, that the luckless detective who had followed Brassard when the latter disappeared was promptly unmasked, in spite of his disguise, and as promptly murdered.

Brassard knew every officer in the division, of course, and all the Scotland Yard men besides. As for knowing Nelson Lee, that goes without saying.

Why on earth the renegade had chosen to vanish when he did, was a matter he did not enlighten Nipper upon just then, for Brassard still had the case entirely in his charge. There was not a breath of suspicion against him, even to that day. Everyone thought him murdered, and honoured him as a brave man who had laid down his life at the call of duty.

Nipper was thunderstruck, and no wonder. His very silence must have shown his captor that he had blabbed too much. The youngster's fate was sealed.

Nipper realised that; it came upon him like a flash. With a swift and furious effort, he tried to break from Brassard's clutches, to make one blind bolt for liberty and life.

He lunged and kicked and fought. Before his captor could prevent him, he was nearly out of his grasp.

"Dick! Blind Dick! Dick the Fiddler!" bellowed the renegade. For they could hear the blind man close at hand coming in search of Nipper, cursing him and calling him all the foul names under the sun. "This way, you fool! I've got the whelp here! Help me hold him, quick!"

The blind man came tapping swiftly forward then, and, once his talons were fixed on their victim, he had not a dog's chance. They buffeted him until they had him half senseless; then gagged him and pinned him down, and Brassard fetched cords to bind him hand and heel.

However, he had a better notion than that.

"We'll do him up all ready in his coffin, while we are about it!" he gloated, after he had related to the fiddler the full tale of Nipper's treachery.

"Coffin—what coffin? You mean it ain't to be the river this time?" demanded the blind man.

"Of course, the river!" said Brassard. "But there's going to be no chance of his body being hooked up, if I know it. Just lug over that roll of sheet lead just behind your heel, will you? If a few yards of that for a shroud don't hold him down till Judgment Day, I don't know what will!"

Nipper's heart froze with terror; they were unrolling the lead. And then they stretched him on it, clamping it round him and rolling him up in it until he was more helpless than a mummy.

For the soft lead, dented and moulded by their boots, compressed him like a glove. He could not stir a limb.

"And now let the young hog lie till dark," growled the chief; "then we'll take him out and drop him overboard just as he is! And if we can get hold of his boss, too, meantime, why, we'll serve him the same.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Bogus River Police.

It was just as Nipper said. Nelson Lee, after being recaptured, had been bundled into the police-van and carried off to Brixton Gaol.

Superintendent Scales, of course, was there quicker than he was. He could have torn his hair with rage at the fiasco; so could Nelson Lee, but he did not waste time showing it.

"What I'm thinking about is Nipper," he said. "I let the kid go off with all those murdering hooligans; I had to. But supposing anything happens to him? Supposing they get wind that this was all a plant? That fiend, Blind Dick, spotted something, anyway! I wish to goodness your fat-headed policemen had collared him, too, instead of letting him go!"

But they hadn't; so what was the good of wasting breath? The thing was to get in touch again with Nipper as soon as possible. How to do it, though.

He thought of getting himself up as a sailor again, or a tramp. But what was the use? The brutes would all be on the qui vive for him.

And then he thought of his little yacht, still lying below Temple Stairs. He would drop down to Limehouse, and bring up off the Blackboy Inn. Then, if the tallow-faced man had taken Nipper there, he would note the yacht and perhaps be able to steal off to him.

To see a small yacht come slipping down under London Bridge and through the crowded Pool, and so on through reach on reach to Tilbury and the sea, is not such an uncommon sight as people might imagine.

There are plenty of Corinthians who make the voyage week-end after week-end; and when wind fails and the tide sets against them, they just have to bring up anywhere they can, like any other sailing craft.

So Nelson Lee calculated that, with a little disguise, he might pass without attracting undue notice, even in Limehouse Reach. He was not so sure if the spirit moved him that he would not venture ashore, even to the Blackboy Inn, and just have another look at Host Grimes and his taproom customers.

In his yachting cap, blue jacket, and buckskin shoes, they would never recognise him as that morning's hero and martyr, Bill Muggridge. And, besides, "Bill" was supposed to be safe in Brixton Prison, awaiting remand.

But that was in case, after waiting quiet for an hour or two, there was no sign of Nipper from the shore.

Nelson Lee was keeping watchful eyes on the Blackboy Inn, then, all the time he was tacking down Limehouse Reach, in case by chance a ragamuffin figure did appear on the steps beside it.

The place looked more sinister than ever, he thought, looming black amid the twilight shadows, with one window in its crazy gable flashing crimson fire from the setting sun.

He pictured again its low-ceilinged bar, reeking of beer and tobacco-smoke, and the evil crew gathered there.

"I'd like to raid that place," he thought to himself. "There's something mighty fishy about it, as I know from my own experience.

"Who was that beggar, for instance, that came shooting in with the police after him? And where did he disappear to when he dodged away behind the bar?

"He didn't go upstairs; he went down. And the steps were stone, too, or brick, as if it were the cellar he was bound for.

"Yet what publican would let a lodger come dashing in from the street like that, flinging chairs and furniture flying, to say nothing of jeopardising his licence for him for harbouring a man wanted by the police?

"Yet there was never a thought of that, you notice," soliloquised Nelson Lee. "If Host Grimes was startled to see the fellow come barging in in that fashion, he very promptly skipped out of his way to let him by, and as promptly popped after him to put things straight again. That could only be to bluff the police, supposing they had come in after him."

It was all a big puzzle, without a doubt; and Nelson Lee was hard at work knitting his brains over it when suddenly he started, stared, and then uttered a loud gasp of amazement and relief.

"Why, what's that something white I see—under the gable there—something waving?" he exclaimed aloud.

He had almost jumped to his feet in his astonishment. But his training checked him in time. He sat motionless at the tiller, never turning his head, but with his eyes fixed on the fluttering mark.

He could see there was no other craft at hand for which the signal was more likely to be intended. It must be Nipper waving to him. He was at the Blackboy Inn, after all, though down beneath it somewhere, as far as Nelson Lee could judge.

It might be from that same cellar where the fugitive had disappeared into last night. In that case, it looked as if the youngster was a prisoner.

Nelson Lee frowned.

"Still, I'll wait a bit and see," he decided, as the flutter of white vanished at last.

The breeze had vanished, too. His little craft was beginning to drift backwards, so he carried on in-shore a few more yards, and then dropped anchor.

In a few minutes he had his sails stowed, and was down in the cabin, watching through an open bull's-eye for any further sign of his assistant.

But the darkness had closed down. Lights glimmered in the bar windows of the old tavern. The red reflections they struck in the swinging tide made Nelson Lee shudder involuntarily, for it was just about that very spot, he calculated, where Nipper had hooked up the body of poor Enwright from its muddy grave.

He recalled Nipper's panic and his own feeling of horror; his relief, too, when the boat had come alongside offering to take charge of the corpse and convey it to Wapping.

But the Wapping police had never heard of it from that day to this. Who the ghouls were who had made away with it again only Nelson Lee had an inkling, and his solitary clue was the mere sound of a voice out of the darkness.

The voice, though, belonged to Bill Wragg, the tallow-faced man. Of that he was confident. He must make a mark of him. Yes, and also that bald-headed vulture, Mr. Grimes, and Blind Dick.

If they had not murdered the poor chap between them, they, at any rate, had good reason evidently for helping to shield the brutes who had.

"And Brassard, too," murmured Nelson Lee. "I recollect him well. He was on a case once where I was called in, and I remember I didn't like the fellow. A bully and a bad 'un I set him down as; the sort that would not hesitate to strike a bargain with any fence to turn his head the other way where he was concerned as long as his palm was kept well greased."

However, this was speaking ill of the dead—that is, if Brassard really was dead. Nelson Lee sometimes wondered. He sat silent, lounging on the bunk cushions until he had finished his cigar. Then he began suddenly to feel hungry. He had not made up his mind yet whether to go ashore and tempt Fate at the Blackboy Inn or stay where he was. He decided to sup first, and see what he felt like afterwards.

So he got out his stove and frying-pan, and resurrected a mutton chop from its shroud of newspaper. He fried some chip potatoes, too. Finally he brewed a big mug of tea, and set it down on the cockpit seat while he spread the cloth on the cabin table.

Bump! It was the merest, gentlest thud against the side of his craft, but to a yachtsman's practised ears it denoted that here was another boat come alongside. And he was right. Looking out he saw a wherry with three men in it hanging on to his rail.

It was too dark to distinguish their faces, but by their caps and pea-jackets they were plainly Water Police.

"Evenin', sir," said the senior at the tiller. "Afraid we've disturbed you at your supper. Very sorry, I'm sure. But we just wanted to warn you that if you thought of bringing up here all night, low water would see you high and dry on the mud."

"Oh, no! I wasn't meaning to stop as long as that, thanks," answered Nelson Lee, though wondering all the time where he had heard the fellow's voice before. For those were the two things he never did forget—a man's face and his voice. Still, for the moment he could not place him.

"That's all right, then," said the coxswain. "Excuse my mentionin' it. Can't put you ashore, I suppose? For I see you haven't got a dinghy of your own."

Now, this was an error. Nelson Lee had got a dinghy, but it was a collapsible one of the Berthon type, and it was stowed down in the cabin. However, he did not correct the fellow.

His voice was still puzzling him. The more he heard it the less he liked it, it seemed to him. And Nelson Lee's first impressions were generally his best.

So he wanted to know what there was to see in these parts if he did go ashore.

"Oh, there's a very good pub yonder—the Blackboy Inn," said the other. "Bit of a curiosity, that. You see some rum types there that you don't want to meet down a lone street on a dark night." And the constable laughed.

"Still, of course you'd be all right with us," he added, "if you were so minded as you'd like to spend an hour inside. They've got a 'free-and-easy' on to-night, too, didn't the guv'nor say, Jack?" he broke off, addressing his stroke oar.

The man confirmed this.

Nelson Lee did not know what to answer. For one thing, it was hardly like the Water Police to spend an hour ashore in a low tavern like he knew the Blackboy to be, for by the hour of their patrol he knew that these men were on duty, and would be so until eleven at night.

So he thanked them, and told them he'd think about it. He wanted his supper first. He offered them a drink. They accepted, and brought their boat closer, while he dived in the cabin for the rum bottle.

He was after his electric torch as well, as a matter of fact. That voice of the coxswain's worried him. He reckoned he knew pretty well all the senior men of the river constabulary to talk to, and he could not think who this fellow could be.

Moreover, the boat had oars, and was not a motor-launch, as the modern police craft were. He got the bottle and tumblers, and the torch.

"Now," he said, popping his head out again, the torch held ready in his hand, "say when."

He pressed the button. But the infernal thing suddenly took it into its head not to work, so he was left holding it like a fool and cursing his ill-luck.

To pour out a generous three fingers apiece was the only thing to save the situation. The rowers picked up their drinks, and Nelson Lee was preparing to quaff their healths out of his mug of tea when suddenly the coxswain interrupted him sharply.

"Here, half a moment, sir!" he said. "Isn't that bit of a curtain you've got over the lamp in there catching fire at the corner? I can see it smouldering surely."

Never thinking, Nelson Lee ducked his head to look back inside the cabin. Yet as he did it instinct told him that this was merely a ruse.

He actually saw out of the corner of his eye, in fact, a hand glimmer out of the darkness and hover over the mug on the cockpit seat. It was as if a powder were being poured into it.

A life's experience of tight corners warned him to say nothing, but to lie low. He pretended that the fears concerning the curtain were justified. He made it safe, then emerged again.

"Your very good health, sir," said the coxswain, a toast in which his mates joined in.

"Same to you," said Nelson Lee, raising the mug to his lips. "And many of them," he added, after a deep, hearty swig, as it looked.

He drank again, or seemed to.

As a matter of fact, though, not a drop was allowed to pass his lips. The stuff had been hocussed. Moreover, it was the same sickly smelling drug which he remembered scenting in the doped beer at the Blackboy Inn the previous night.

These men were no more Water Police than he was. It was another trap simply. Some crafty witted customer had penetrated his identity without a doubt, and was ready for him at every turn. It was not all the blind fiddler's work either, he would swear.

And then suddenly it dawned upon Nelson Lee who this coxswain of the supposed police boat might be. It was the very man he had been turning over in his memory only a few minutes ago—Detective-Sergeant Brassard, the officer of the local division who was supposed to have been murdered and done away with.

He had just said to himself that he sometimes wondered whether the fellow were dead at all. And here he was! That was Brassard's voice talking, he would swear, and it was Brassard's hand that he had seen hovering over his mug of tea after he had induced him to turn his back by an obvious lie.

"And now his game is to drug me," thought Nelson Lee. "He has spotted me—he wants to get me out of this. Very well. We'll just see how he proposes to do it, and why."

The boat, with the three sham constables in it, was still alongside. Yawning drowsily, as if the drug was already beginning to get to work, Nelson Lee pleaded that his supper was getting cold, and wished them good-night.

"I don't think I'll come ashore, after all," he said. "I'll just lie down and snatch a nap, for I must be getting under way again as soon as it's tide-turn."

"Ay, ay, sir; please yourself," answered their spokesman readily enough.

Then, with a parting salute, away they pulled, not to the steps by the Blackboy Inn, but in along the shore against the tide to West India Dock.

Nelson Lee watched them well out of sight. It had not taken him five seconds to make up his mind what he was going to do. He bolted his meal where he sat, then dived down below.

He lugged out the collapsible Berthon dinghy, and laid it on the deck ready to open and launch. It was quite flat when folded up, but when extended, and the thwart, stretcher, and rowlocks fitted, made a canvas shallop capable of carrying one man, and even two.

But first Nelson Lee made up a dummy to represent himself lying stretched on the bunk with a rug over him. A kit-bag made up the body, a pair of shoes peeped out at the foot, a coir fender, with a cap over it, made an excellent head.

This completed, he turned the cabin lamp low, then slipped on deck again. To extend the collapsible skiff, launch it, slip in the thwart, and seize the tiny sculls was the work of a moment only. Nelson Lee stepped aboard, and with a shove-off sent his frail craft spinning up the tide.

The sham police boat had gone downstream. Some lighters were anchored inshore at the mouth of the unsavoury inlet known as Deadman's Creek. He made for these, and laid hold under the shadow of the stern.

All was dark and still save for the swish and gurgle of the tide, the creak of mooring ropes, the sluggish rolling of the buoy at which the lighters tugged and strained.

The Blackboy Tavern was blotted from view in the darkness from where the watcher crouched, but the crimson blind of the taproom window glowed like smouldering fire, flickering as restless shadows crossed and recrossed it. Several times Nelson Lee saw figures emerge, and stand loafing at the head of the water stairs as if watching the yacht furtively.

But an hour passed, and nothing happened.

And then suddenly Nelson Lee's keen eyes did catch a glimpse of something tiny moving out athwart the tide. It was the merest speck. He thought it was floating rubbish at first, but he knew now it was a man's head. Someone was swimming from the shore to the yacht—some assassin!

Yes, that would be the game. They were reckoning they had him drugged and senseless. This brute was to creep aboard and fling him over the side. Then the coroner's jury would bring in death by misadventure.

Nelson Lee watched and waited breathlessly. For the swimmer was not finding the trip quite so easy as it looked. Midway he was in difficulties, in fact. The swift tide was getting the master of him. Nelson Lee expected him to turn and make for the shore again.

But he didn't. With all his might he was trying to fight his way on, as if all life depended on his gaining the boat. His strength was flagging fast, his strokes grew more and more feeble. The tide was sweeping him abreast of where Nelson Lee lay hid. It was bearing him straight in towards the barges, in fact.

"You fiend! Whoever you are, how I'd like to take you by the neck and hold your villainous head under till you drown!" he grated under his breath.

"But go on," he added: "you haven't had enough yet. I'll see you go down a couple of times before I lift a finger to save you. Screech for help—ah, I thought you would! I——"

Nelson Lee broke off with a great gasp of horror and dismay. Loosing his hold of the barge's stern, he gave a shove which shot the dinghy out with a rush across the intervening water, and very nearly capsized it.

"Great Scott! Why, it's Nipper!" he exclaimed, shipping the sculls in the rowlocks and pulling like a madman.

For that was the drowning swimmer's piteous cry, just the two words:

"Guv'nor! Help!"

Then his hands had gone up above his head, and down he had sunk like a stone.

CHAPTER IX.

How Nipper Escaped.

When Brassard, the renegade, and Blind Dick had rolled Nipper up in his leaden shroud they left him where he lay, locking the door of the store-cellar behind them.

The youngster lay dazed and terrified. For as soon as it was dark his executioners had announced their intention of rowing him out into mid-river, and throwing him overboard. The weight of the lead would send him to the bottom like a bullet, there to lie till crack of doom.

Small wonder the prospect utterly unnerved him for a time. Then fierce frenzy seized him. He wrestled and fought to loosen the coat of lead clamped about his limbs, but without avail. All he could do was to roll over and over, and that only by superhuman effort. Nor could it do any good. Still, he threw himself this way and that.

Then a piece of luck befell him, making his heart stop beating, in case his good fortune suddenly failed, and left him hopeless as before.

The outer edge of his wrapping of lead had caught under a projecting lintel of brickwork. Thus as he rolled it began to unwind, for it had not been fastened in any way.

Already a foot of it was unbent. Nipper scarcely dared to move any more, in case it broke loose and he could not manœuvre it back into position again. But he had to risk it, of course, and in a few minutes reaped his reward—for he was free of the lead at least.

Now he had to rid himself of the cords which bound his wrists and ankles. His captors, however, had made but a hasty job of these. Ten minutes' strenuous tugging and straining saw his hands wrenched free. The rest was only the work of seconds.

"And now that window! It's my only chance!" he panted. "I must smash those bars somehow. Let's just have another look at them."

Perhaps they were not so formidable as they had seemed. He jumped at them, and pulled himself up. It was pitch dark now outside, but he could just make out the shapely outline of his governor's little craft anchored a hundred yards perhaps from the shore.

The bars were stout, but they were only cemented into the brickwork, and this was wet and rotten.

"I'll soon settle those," declared Nipper, dropping back again, and laying hold of a coil of tarred rope which Brassard had fetched to bind him with, but had abandoned as too stiff and thick.

Threading the end of the rope through and round the bars, he passed it next through a giant staple in the opposite wall. He strained the rope tight, and made the ends fast. Then through the loop thus formed he slipped a stout bar of wood, and began to wind this round and round.

The rope tautened, strained, and cracked under the ever-increasing tension, but the brickwork round the bars was beginning to crack, too. Round and round Nipper twisted the stave. At last—bang, clatter, thud!—the first bar had been torn from its socket. The rest were also fast collapsing. Another couple of turns saw them rooted out and tumbling to the floor.

Another couple of seconds after that saw Nipper fighting his way through the narrow aperture, as if all the fiends of the nether regions were behind him.

He never waited to think where he was diving to. Once he was through to his waist, he simply let go, and plunged headlong, like a seal off a rock.

Phew! It was mud which the tide had barely covered—stinking, awful, river mud, fit to poison a sewer rat even. And Nipper was in it up to his middle, with his heels kicking wildly in the air.

How it was he ever pulled himself out of it alive it is impossible to say. But he did. He fought his way out, and just managed to get the filthy muck out of his mouth and nose and eyes before he burst.

Then, still reckless who heard him, he floundered down to deeper water until at last he was able to swim.

But he was already more than half-spent then. Fifty strokes, and he was completely done. Yet the yacht was still a long way off, as it looked. And there was no sign of his governor on board.

He could have let rip a yell for help, but that might spoil everything. By then Nipper had begun to realise that there was still no sound of any alarm.

So he must "stick it" in silence if he could. He struggled gamely on. Then

all of a sudden, his strength began really to fail him. He was sinking. The tide was sweeping him away. He was done.

And this was when he ripped out that despairing cry for help which sent Nelson Lee pulling madly to his rescue. Now the latter was right over the very spot where the youngster had disappeared. Terrible seconds passed, and still no sign of him.

"My stars, he is drowned—done for! And I sat and watched him go!" groaned Nelson Lee.

However, a drowning man, no matter how far spent, generally rises at least once. Nipper was no exception to the rule. Suddenly his boss saw his head and hands break the surface some twenty yards from him. Half a dozen mighty strokes and Nelson Lee had gripped him by the hair. He kept his head above the surface, but that was all he dared to do. Nor did Nipper ask for more. He had fainted.

And so up the fast swinging tide the frail skiff drifted, Nelson Lee not venturing to move scarcely in case it capsized. They must have drifted in this fashion for at least half a mile. Then out of the darkness the detective saw a boat coming nosing suspiciously at them.

An electric torch flashed on them, and this time it was the real Water Police he had tumbled in with.

They knew Nelson Lee well, of course. They soon had Nipper aboard, pumping the water out of him. Meantime, Nelson Lee was telling the inspector in charge about his adventure on the yacht.

"As soon as I know this kid is all right, I want to go back there and keep watch," he announced. "I know they're going to try and murder what they believe is me lying under that rug on the bunk!

"And can you guess who the beggar is at the bottom of it?" he ran on. "And not only it, but all those dock robberies besides that have been puzzling your people so long?"

"Why, no! Do you mean you've found out?" demanded the inspector.

"Yes. The brute is none other than——"

"Brassard—Detective-Sergeant Brassard!" chipped in a weak voice just then, taking the words out of Nelson Lee's mouth.

It was young Nipper, of course, who had just come back to his senses in time to hear the question.

"The deuce! So you know that, too, do you?" demanded his boss. "Who on earth told you, then?"

"Brassard told me so himself," answered the youngster.

And with that he proceeded to impart a good deal more information of a most startling nature about Dinkey Day's and the loot they would find there if they took him on as guide.

"Why, of course we'll take you on as guide, you young rascal!" laughed Nelson Lee. "But, I say, it sounds like a big job, doesn't it? We'll need not only the Water Police, but half K Division as well. We must get back to Wapping at once."

The sudden grounding of their craft's keel showed him that they were already at famous Wapping Old Stairs, where the headquarters of the River Police are situated.

At once the telephone was set to work. Superintendent Scales came dashing over in his car. Maps were got out, the probable whereabouts of the enemy's stronghold was located, and dispositions made by land and water for surrounding it.

But Nelson Lee left most of this to the regular police. He was eager to be back, keeping vigil over his gallant little yacht again. A silent electric launch, filled with constables lying low beneath the gunwale, carried him this time. Behind manœuvred a tug, also filled with men.

The launch crept in under the shadow of the shore. Now, under the lee of

the same lighters again, it brought up and waited. Nor was it a minute too soon.

For scarcely had it taken cover than a wherry was seen rowing with muffled oars towards the little yacht. It drew alongside. They watched the three men in it peering through the porthole at the supposed figure stretched insensible in the cabin.

There was a long pause then. What the three were doing the watchers could not discern. But so far they had not set foot on the yacht's deck.

Then one did. But he merely pulled, shut the door, and slide on the cabin roof. That was all. After that the boat pulled back to the shore again.

"That's funny!" muttered Nelson Lee. "Now, ought we to tackle them, or wait still a little longer? They don't seem to have done any damage."

Hadn't they just! For before the words were off his lips a flash of flame had shot up within the yacht's cabin. In a second it was a raging furnace from which no human being wide awake even could have fought his way out alive. The ruffians had been deliberately pumping petrol into the interior of the cabin during that mysterious pause. At any rate, Nelson Lee's little craft was now ablaze from stem to stern, making a torch which lit the river for a mile.

It revealed the presence of the police launch too, to the would-be murderers. The constables heard their wild yelp of alarm as they drove the boat forward at furious speed to try and gain the landing-place first. Evidently their incendiary bomb had exploded too soon for their calculations.

The launch, though, was already darting to intercept them.

"That's Brassard in the stern," called out Nelson Lee warningly. "Look out for bullets. He's got a pistol, I see."

Promptly there came back a yell of baffled fury from the runaways. They saw how completely their plot had failed. But they were desperate men.

Brassard had a pistol of the heavy magazine type. He opened fire. Crack—crack—crack—crack! The shots came whizzing past the pursuers' ears just as fast as the firer could pull trigger. Splinters flew, lamps were riddled, two constables, taking cover behind the gunwale, were hit.

The inspector at the tiller, too, got a bullet through the shoulder. Nelson Lee saw that when the launch suddenly took charge at top speed and started yawing away towards the middle of the river.

Promptly he leapt to the helm, swerving the speedy craft back on to its course. This had given Brassard time to clap a fresh magazine into his weapon. He sprang to his feet as the launch was charging full at him. For Nelson Lee knew that his only chance was to cut the wherry down and sink it.

Brassard laughed. He was holding his fire until he was absolutely sure of his mark. He covered Nelson Lee as the boats came rushing together.

"So, you cursed meddler," he grated, harshly, "you knew me, then? That wasn't you lying in your yacht after all. Well—all right. That's one up to you, and here is the payment for it."

He fired as he spoke. But Nelson Lee was just too quick for him. He had flung himself forward on the floor of the boat, leaving the bullet to shatter the tiller he had been hugging. Then—bang! His own revolver had rung out.

The shot struck home, though where there was not time to see. For just then the two craft met with a crash which must have been heard a mile off.

It was only a glancing blow though unluckily, for Nelson Lee had been aiming to ram his enemy amidships. The crippling of the rudder, however, had sent the launch sheering away just at the last second. The result was that she went grazing along the wherry's side, starting a plank or two, but otherwise doing no great damage.

"Lay hold!" roared Nelson Lee, making a snatch at the enemy's gunwale to lock the craft together and board.

Nipper had picked up an oar for a smite at the enemy. But unfortunately, at the first blow, Brassard caught the blade of it, and he had the strength of an ox.

A quick, vicious jerk, and Nipper was plucked clean off his feet to fall aboard the wherry, smiting his skull against the thwart with a terrible crack.

"Great Cæsar! Help here! The brutes have got him!" cried Nelson Lee, loosing his hold of the gunwale to grab at the youngster's foot and haul him back.

The move was fatal. He missed his clutch. What was more, the flash of Brassard's pistol exploded almost in his eyes, half-blinding him. Before he or the others could catch at the craft again a stroke of the oars had yanked it out of reach.

And that was the end of that. For with her rudder wrecked the launch was unmanageable. When they started up her engine again she only went charging away further from their quarry, who were now making for shore as fast as the rowers could drive.

They could hear Brassard shouting with savage glee. He was hit they could swear to, but he could still use his pistol. Shot after shot came whizzing over the helpless launch. And each shot was accompanied by a gibe.

"Ho, ho, Nelson Lee; you thought you'd got me fair, didn't you? But you hadn't. And we've got your cub now; don't forget that. Try to follow us and we'll kill him dead as mutton. We will—by thunder we will! So sheer off. I mean every word I say," Brassard threatened angrily.

But there was one, at any rate, who was not dismayed. And this was Nipper himself. His voice came sounding over the water defiantly.

"That's all right, guv'nor," he shouted. "Don't you bother about me. You go for the brutes and stick to them. I'll take my chance."

"Plucky kid!" said Nelson Lee admiringly. "He means it, too; every word of it. But, all the same, we couldn't follow them yet, if we wished.

"And the tug is making a hopeless mucker of it, too," he growled, watching the futile efforts of their escorting craft to head off the fugitives. The latter, of course, were making hot foot for Blackboy Stairs. The tug went full tilt after them, and in fifty yards had hit the mud and there stuck fast.

More jeering howls from Brassard, a few futile shots from the policemen's revolvers; and then, dragging Nipper ashore after them, the three desperadoes stumbled up the stairs, darted into the alley beside the tavern and vanished from view.

"Well, we're a lot of thumbheaded landlubbers, I must say," was Nelson Lee's comment as they disappeared. "Haven't we got another oar aboard that we can steer by?"

They hadn't. Nipper had lost one for them and the other had gone adrift, too, in the tussle. So the detective had to rig up a steering oar out of the floor-boards. With that, after about half an hour's manœuvring, they managed to work alongside the stranded tug.

A council of war was the next thing. They had Brassard's threat to remember. He owed Nipper one already for hoaxing them as he had done. As for any hope that he would never be mad enough to wreak his promised vengeance, they had only to recall poor Enwright's undoubted fate to show what the ruffian was capable of when cornered.

"Still, there you are; we must go for them," decided Nelson Lee. "We simply couldn't slink off now, and leave them; not even for Nipper's sake."

"You mean he meant it, when he said not to bother about him?" asked Superintendent Scales incredulously.

"Meant it! Of course he did! I know the kid. He's the gamest bantam that ever was bred. He'd never forgive me if I hung back now for him. Duty's duty, and we've just got to go through with it, come what may."

"Well, it'll give us a chance to make a sure job of it this time," was the superintendent's comment. For, from the first, he had warned Nelson Lee that he was rushing things too much. As it turned out, he was right.

Still, there was no use saying anything about that now. They took off as many police from the tug as their launch could hold and crawled back to Wapping Old Stairs again.

Yet even now an attack on the Limehouse pirates' lair would have to be made from the river as well as the land. From the latter side every possible approach to Dinkey Day's subterranean stronghold was by now strongly guarded.

Thanks to Nipper's expert description of the place and the probable route by which they had arrived at it, the same doorway where Bill Wragg and he had entered it had been identified and secured. Police already occupied the cellar, in fact, where was the first secret trapdoor he had described. If less violent methods failed they were ready to dynamite this.

"Then dynamite it," was Nelson Lee's order. "Blow the scum out of it. Meantime, I'm going to start on them from the Blackboy end; for I swear there's another entrance, and probably an easier one, to be found there."

He was thinking of that window slit where Nipper had first waved to him. It was that he meant to make for.

"You've got dynamite, you say? Well, let me have a stick of it. Yes, and a long scaffold-pole, too, as long as you can get it," he ordered, ordering the River Police about as if he were in command of the force.

Still they did not seem to mind that. They knew Nelson Lee. They only wanted to know what he proposed to do with these things.

"You get them, and I'll show you," was his quick retort. So they got them, and he had the pole taken on to a fresh and bigger motor-launch and lashed fast, so that the greater length of it projected twenty feet at least over her bows. The butt end, of course, had to be heavily ballasted or it would have sunk her by the head. Still, that was soon adjusted.

"And now for the dynamite," said the detective, and he made fast a portion of the cartridge on the extreme end of the pole and fixed a detonator to explode it.

"Oh, now I see!" said the chief. "A boom torpedo. So that's the notion!"

"You've got it. A boom torpedo. And if that don't blow a hole in the Blackboy's ribs big enough to drive a cart through, I shall be astonished. But we've got no time to lose. It's past high water already. Who is game to volunteer to come with me and perhaps get himself blown to pieces in the process? Or I could do the job alone, now I come to think of it," he added.

However, the Water Police were not the sort to watch him set out singlehanded on such an errand, no matter how dangerous it might prove. He had a dozen fine fellows to pick from the moment he opened his mouth.

He took four at last. Somebody, meantime, had appeared with a heavy section of old-iron casting, which, when fixed up amidships, made an admirable shield behind which they could crouch.

Other launches filled with men were to follow, and this time everyone was armed.

"For the beggars mean to fight, you bet," Nelson Lee told them. "They'll fight if only out of fear of Brassard putting a bullet into them if they refuse. That man's a fiend. If he lets us take him alive, I'm a Dutchman."

Word was now sent to the K Division besiegers that the river force was ready for action. The torpedo launch pushed off with Lee at the tiller, and was soon buzzing merrily down the now ebbing tide. The supporting flotilla followed hot foot.

The lopsided gable of the Blackboy Inn soon loomed up out of the darkness. Nelson Lee steered straight at it. But, at last, he told his motorman to "stop her."

A dim light had shown in the narrow window slit as they approached. A man's head was seen peering out at them. Then Brassard's voice was heard, rapping out something sharply to others behind him.

He was plainly perplexed to make out what this weird object was that was bearing down on them.

"All right, Brassard, we hear you," sung out Nelson Lee. "We've got you set this time. You'd best give up quietly, or it'll be the worse for you."

"Oh, so it's you again, is it, Nelson Lee?" called back the renegade savagely. "Well, whatever you think you're going to do with that thing, don't forget what I've threatened about your brat we've got prisoner here. We'll kill him. I swear by all you ever knew or saw. I mean it."

"All right. Swear away, my son!" taunted Nelson Lee. "You know what will happen to you if you dare to touch a single hair of the youngster's head!"

"Nothing worse than is likely to happen to me already!" retorted Brassard. "So stand off, do you hear? We're all armed. Touch us, and the Sidney Street affair will be a picnic to what we'll give you before we're finished! Ah, you don't believe it, you fool, don't you?" he raged, as Nelson Lee with a touch of the propeller sent his craft nosing nearer.

A bullet backed the ruffian's threat, and it was followed by another and another. They merely flattened harmlessly, however, on the extemporised iron shield. The detective and his gallant crew were safe and snug as in a battleship turret.

"Now look here, Brassard," sung out Nelson Lee severely, "I'm giving you your last chance. You're done for, and you know it, so don't be an absolute, utter fool. You see this pole here on the stem of our launch?" he went on. "Well, there's enough dynamite on the end of that to blow you and your precious ratholo to blazes. So stand clear, or, by hookey, I'm going to ram you! I'll give you till I count five, and that's all. One—two—three——"

The launch's propeller began to thump again, and the craft forged forward. A last yell of hate, a last furious fusillade of bullets, but even then Nelson Lee was merciful.

He meant what he said, though. He did not know whether the explosion might not blow them all to atoms as well, yet he never flinched. Now he sent the launch forward with a rush. There was water enough for the launch right up to the foot of the wall. His men crouched low, holding their breaths for the crash which would follow.

It did. The explosion seemed to split the very skies asunder. The heavy lump of iron which was to have sheltered them was caught by the blast and simply whirled aft over the stern, nearly decapitating them.

It didn't, though, and the next second they were struggling in the water, the shattered launch sinking under them. For the stem had been blown clean out of it.

Fortunately they were in the shallows here. They sank no higher than their waists And now they could see the damage that had been wrought in the wall confronting them.

The wonder was that the whole gable of the inn above had not been brought tumbling down about their ears. For a gap was torn in the base through which the launch itself might have passed. Into this the tide was lipping in a miniature cascade.

Nelson Lee realised that unless they were quick the cellar would be full before they could follow up their advantage.

He rallied his dazed senses. Fortunately his men were no more hurt than he was. Seeing him flounder forward, they started, too Their weapons were dry.

"Come on! Follow! After the dogs!" he shouted. His men floundered forward to back him. They knew there was a deep cellar within. It might have been as deep as a well for all the trouble Nelson Lee took to see where he was jumping to.

And lucky for him he had not hesitated. For Brassard was waiting for him. Scarcely had he appeared black against the night sky in the breach, than a regular volley was discharged at him. The renegade was not the only one ready to shoot to kill.

However, the detective was just too quick. He had already jumped, and, having

jumped, he had scarcely allowed his feet time to touch the floor within, than he sprang forward to get to grips with the gang.

Bang! bang! bang! His heavy revolver made a report like a Zeppelin bomb compared with the sharp, snapping crack of Brassard's magazine pistol. But the bullets were "man-stoppers." One missed the renegade, but took the man behind him square in the shoulder, and down he went as if kicked by a horse.

His fusillade gave the men behind him time to storm the breach, too. They leapt down at Nelson Lee's side, opening fire at random. It was all too dark to see anything save by the light of the revolver flashes.

Down behind the bales of loot each side took cover. It was trench warfare, just as at the Front. But Nelson Lee could be a fiend incarnate when his blood was up. He meant to dislodge the ruffians out of that. He could hear them stumbling about, and so charged with a yell.

It was answered by another—Brassard's own. The latter, though, was yelling at his own men. Cellar fighting was too hot for their stomachs. The rapidly rising water, too, scared them. They meant to get out of it.

The secret door, which Nipper had found left ajar to trap him, was flung open. They were through, unfortunately, before Nelson Lee could get round to cut them off. Brassard, seeing himself deserted, darted after. In another second the door would have been slammed and the advance of the attackers barred until more dynamite could be brought up.

Nelson Lee, though, was on the alert against this. He made a rush and just wedged his revolver-barrel in the door as it slammed, preventing it closing completely.

The concussion exploded the cartridge in the breech, and for the next second or two the detective believed that his whole hand had been blown off at the wrist. For the weapon had burst under the discharge.

However, it had foiled the renegade's plan. Before Brassard could prevent it, the police had wrenched the door open again, and gone charging into the passage beyond.

They were now in the heart of the enemy's stronghold. Reinforcements were pouring in behind. Moreover, dull, reverberating explosions showed that their comrades of the K Division were proving as good as their threat.

Where their advance was barred by solid walls, seemingly, they used dynamite to force a path.

It was now for the thieves' kitchen itself. This Nipper had described as lying some twenty yards along the passage to the left. Brassard and his villains had already retreated that way. Nelson Lee sprang after to pursue.

Thoughts how the brutes held his young assistant prisoner made him furious to keep at grips with them. He wondered where they had hidden him. Yes, he must stick tight to Brassard.

CHAPTER X.

The Raid of the River Police.

NIPPER had made the trip back to Blackboy Stairs pinned down on the floor of the wherry, with Brassard's boot jammed cruelly across his nook.

He was more dead than alive when at last they jerked him on to his feet, and dragged him into the alley after them.

"Now, you little mongrel! You didn't reckon you were coming back here again—not like this!" snarled the renegade. "Well, you can make up your mind that your number's up, my son, though all the police in London are after you to rescue you."

Now, it was characteristic of Nipper that the tighter the corner and more hopeless, the cheekier he became.

"Indeed? You seem pretty cocksure," was all his reply. "Why won't I see daylight again, do you think?"

"Because, you saucy young hound, I'm keeping two cartridges for the last, whatever betides—one to blow your brains out with and one my own."

They had gained the cellar-door of the tavern by now. Seth Grimes was there, looking white and scared, for all his reputation as an unflinching fighter. Poor fool, he wanted to hedge! The police were all round the place, he told the chief.

"All round it!" choked Brassard. "Well, what do I care if they are? You want to rat on us now, I suppose, making out that you didn't know anything about these goings on underneath your crazy old ginshop? Stand out of my light, do you hear, or, by Jimmy, I'll drop you!"

He shoved the muzzle of his pistol against the landlord's ribs as he spoke the threat. For a moment Nipper thought Mr. Grimes was going to stand up to them, in spite of it. But he stood aside. They seized the youngster again then, dragging him along as if he were a sack. They hurled and kicked him along in front of them.

The steps leading down to the cellar were stone. It was down these that Nelson Lee must have heard Brassard go bolting.

Nipper, however, was given no chance to descend them on his feet. They simply rolled him to the top and gave him a push. Down he went with a succession of bumps and thuds. Twice he struck his head, and when he reached the bottom at last his senses were spinning from him.

"Now, look out! Stand aside, you clumsy owls. That's right. In with him; sling him in!" he heard Brassard shouting, while still another secret door was being opened, by the sound of it.

That finished Nipper. He did not know what happened to him after that, except that he was still being dragged on by his heels now, when his senses left him.

When he awoke it was with the impression that he had got transported by some miracle to the battle front, and that a general engagement was going on all round him.

Not merely was the air filled with the reports of shots and reek of powder, but again, and still again, the earth shook to dull explosions which might have been bursting shells. Then he remembered.

"Dinkey Day's!" he gasped. The attack had started, and the police must have already got in. And now what price that hound Brassard and his threat to polish him off?

The price was about a hundred to one on his doing it, Nipper reckoned. For he was powerless to stop him. He had been too numbed and bruised to notice it at first, but when he came to try and roll over, he found his arms and legs were bound.

"Oh, well, I shall just have to trust in the guv'nor, that's all!" was his philosophic way of looking at it, as soon as he found that no amount of struggling would budge his cords one inch.

Besides, there was no time. The shooting was growing nearer and nearer. He could hear the Dinkey Dayites scurrying and squealing like rats in a sewer. Oaths, thuds, and groans filled the air, intermingled with the hoarse shouts and orders of the police.

It was plain that Brassard's gang were about driven to their last post. He could hear Nelson Lee's voice ringing out now, calling on the survivors to surrender.

"Hands up!" he was shouting. "You're only fighting for Brassard like a pack of fools, and he's done, and knows it. Knock him over the head, and chuck it! You're fairly cornered!"

And then the voice of one faint-hearted waster was heard backing this.

"Yes, what do we owe the skunk, arter all, that we should all swing with 'im? Where 'as the bullying thief got to, any way? Begosh, I believe 'e's given us the slip, to save 'is own mouldy skin. 'E 'as. Arter 'im, mates."

True enough, during that last wild melee the renegade had taken advantage of the scuffle and smoke to dodge away.

Nipper, who had heard this, breathed an explosive sigh of relief. He flattered himself that he was saved. However, no sooner had he opened his lips to utter a bellow for help than down a pair of knees came bouncing on his ribs, driving all the breath out of him.

It was Brassard. Where he had sprung from Nipper could not think. He must have had the eyes of a cat, as well as the tread, to find him in that pitchy darkness.

"Now, you little hound!" he hissed. "I'm ready for you. The game's up, but before I go out you're going too. I swore to your boss I'd do it. I've two more cartridges left just. I'm only going to wait now till he finds us, so that he can see me do the job. So that's right, shout!"

Nipper had already opened his mouth wide to utter a frenzied yell for aid. With the almost red-hot muzzle of that reeking pistol, though, clapped to his temple, he suddenly thought better of it.

For it would only be signing his own death warrant. The moment Nelson Lee came rushing in was to be his own last moment on earth.

"Go on, shout, you little waster! I want you to. Yell your hardest," taunted Brassard savagely.

"Yes, no doubt you jolly well do," retorted Nipper. "You just take that gun away and give me a fighting chance and you'll see I'll shout loud enough. Go on, you murderer——"

However, the shouts of the renegade's pursuers had suddenly sounded closer. The survivors of the gang, furious at their chief's desertion, were hotter on his trail even than the police.

Guided by them, Nelson Lee dived into all sorts of burrows and corners in the wild search for him. He remembered Brassard's threat only too well, for he knew it was no boast. The blackguard meant it.

"Nipper—Nipper! Where are you? It's all right We have routed the vermin. Give us a shout and let us see where you are, youngster!" Nipper heard him calling.

But Nipper knew better. He heard the renegade chuckling at his silence. The hot muzzle of the magazine pistol was pressed more mercilessly down on his temple, till it seemed to cut to the bone.

However, a few seconds now would see his torture over. A Cockney voice was shouting that he guessed where the skulker was hiding, and almost on the word a light glimmered, the door was kicked open, and in rushed Nelson Lee, a powerful electric torch in one hand, his revolver in the other.

And that was the tableau the blinding beam revealed; Nipper lying bound hand and foot, and their quarry kneeling on him ready to wreak vengeance on him, yet cool and impudent enough to watch the effect on his enemy first, before he pulled the fatal trigger.

"You dog!" blurted Nelson Lee, taking a stride forward, then as suddenly checking himself for Nipper's sake. For he saw what it meant, and how the renegade held them in the hollow of his hand.

And then his quick eye saw something that no one else's did. He made a dash to grapple with the renegade. Brassard was taken all aback.

"You fool, stand off!" he said. "You think I don't mean it, but I do. I'll blow this cub's brains out, and then my own. Ah, would you?" he raved, abandoning his victim in his hate and firing point-blank at the man who had tracked him down.

Everyone expected a flash and a report to follow, and to see the detective drop—dead as any doornail.

To their utter amazement, though, nothing of the sort happened. The trigger clicked and that was all. The next moment Nelson Lee had the ruffian by the

throat, dragging him from his victim and rolling over and over with him in one mad death grapple.

He had but to fight single-handed for ten seconds, of course. By that time the constables had pulled their wits together and sprung to his aid. Half a dozen of them were too many even for Brassard. They pinned him down and roped him up and dropped him in a foaming, writhing heap.

That was the end of the storming of Dinkey Day's. The police vowed that Nelson Lee ought to have the V.C. for tackling the ringleader as he did at the last.

"V.C.—you duffers? What for?" he demanded shortly.

"Why, how did you know the pistol was going to miss fire like that?"

"Miss fire! Well, you bet it did, since there wasn't a cartridge left in it to shoot with," laughed the detective. "If you didn't see how the slide of the magazine was open, I did. If it hadn't been, perhaps I wouldn't have been quite so coy about it."

"Oh, yes you would, guv'nor," said Nipper fervently. "I reckoned I was a goner, I don't mind confessing. But as long as I had you by me I know I could look out for miracles. And I was right, as usual.

"And now if any of you gentlemen have got a pocket-knife about you, and'll kindly cut me loose," he added drily, as they still stood gaping at him, "I'll be obliged to you, for I have had about enough of playing the part of a trussed chicken in this act, so I tell you straight."

. . . . . .

"Dinkey Day's" was a regular Aladdin's cave, it proved when all the loot came to be catalogued and sorted. Nor was the raid a day too soon. For by sundry papers it was seen that the whole cargo was to have been despatched to Holland by a "rogue" steamer already in the river waiting to load it up.

But, thanks to Nelson Lee and Nipper, it was saved now all right, to be claimed again by the small army of warehousemen to whom it belonged.

Dinkey Day's was the talk of London for the next week or so. Flashlight photos of its "thieves' kitchen," its secret doors and passages, and all its various ramifications filled the Press.

A wealthy "moving picture" firm offered Nelson Lee and Nipper a small fortune to act the whole series of adventures over again for a cinema drama to be entitled "The Mystery of Limehouse Reach."

But Nelson Lee, of course, refused. He was not that sort. He had solved the mystery of the Great Dock Robberies and brought the gang of perpetrators to book.

Most of them got heavy sentences of penal servitude, for they were all old lags.

This was for burglary merely. The murder of Detective-Sergeant Enwright was laid to Brassard's charge alone. For his treachery the gang turned King's evidence against him to a man.

Nelson Lee, as chief witness, had to stay, of course, to see the end of the trial. Nipper, who already had a new case waiting for his boss, happened into the court just as the jury returned with their verdict and the judge came solemnly in to resume his seat on the bench.

Nipper had never witnessed the last dread scene of all in a murder trial. His boss would never let him. But now he stood, caught in that terrible spell which gripped every living soul in the court, except the prisoner apparently, who still smiled callous defiance.

But the tense silence, the atmosphere grown suddenly stifling, as if a mighty clap of thunder was about to burst, the grey faces of the jury, the figure of the court usher coming smuggling something in on a cushion, which was nothing less than the terrible "black cap."

Now the question put by the judge to the jury, and the rigid figure of the foreman forcing himself to utter the fatal word.

It came at last. Someone in the gallery—someone who had known the wretched prisoner once, perhaps in better, cleaner days—uttered a stifled scream. Then only did the murderer blench.

Next the solemn donning of the black cap by the judge, and his brief, poignant words, delivered leaning forward on his desk. The lack of any hope he could hold out for any mercy that could possibly be shown to a man who could commit so horrible a crime against one who had been a comrade and even a friend.

Last of all, the sentence, and the broken "Amen" of the good chaplain standing at his lordship's side.

The gaolers closed in on the doomed man. Brassard cast one swift look round the court. His burning eyes lit on Nelson Lee. His lips parted to say something—to hurl some vicious threat, perhaps, even when the gates of life had already closed upon him and Death's grip was on his throat.

However, no words came. A mere strangled growl, and he was gone.

. . . . . .

"Well, you young scamp? So you *were* here to see that, were you?"

The great detective had caught sight of Nipper suddenly, and made his way toward him. But he could not be angry with him. The youngster looked white and sick.

Nelson Lee led him trembling from the court. He hailed a taxi, and in another minute they were bowling homewards. He said nothing more, but fell to examining the papers which Nipper had brought to the court. At last he spoke again.

"Well, Nipper," he said gravely, "shook you a bit, did it? Well, I'm not surprised. A death sentence, I always think, is the most terrible scene that ever human eyes can witness. Yet you have one consolation—but for one lucky fluke, the man you've just seen hurried to the condemned cell might have been there standing his charge not for poor Enwright's murder merely, but your own.

"So just remember that in your prayers to-night, young 'un," he added. "And remember, too, always to go straight in this world, if for no other reason than that it never pays to go crooked. Even a detective cannot turn thief for long without being nabbed at last. The wrongdoer, clever as he may think himself to be, will always be found out"

THE END.

NEXT WEEK! *NEXT WEEK!*

In next week's issue of THE NELSON LEE DETECTIVE LIBRARY a wonderful long complete detective story of NELSON LEE AND NIPPER will appear, entitled:

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The Boys of Ravenswood College;

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

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Trouble on the Journey Down.

MRS. CLARE was gazing at the oil painting of a handsome young officer in colonel's uniform, and there was an expression of sorrow in her eyes.

Her mind reverted to the terrible news that had reached her six long years ago. He had died fighting for his country, and left her a beautiful young widow of eight-and-twenty, the mother of one son, who was all the world to her.

That morning she had to part with him for a time. He was commencing his school life: his education, so far, having been under a tutor, who had found his office no sinecure.

Mrs. Clare brushed the tears from her eyes, and tried to smile. A footstep sounded in the hall, and the next moment her son Dick burst into the room.

He was a well-built lad, with steadfast grey eyes. There was a sorrowful expression in them now.

"Everything ready, Dick?" inquired his mother, smiling bravely, although her heart was very sad.

"Yes, mother," answered Dick, looking into her eyes. "I—I'm afraid I've been an awful trouble to you."

"I shall look forward to the time when you will be a trouble again, Dick."

"You won't be lonely, mother?"

"I can't make you such a promise as that. But I want you to be very happy at Ravenswood College, Dick. I want you to promise me that you will do nothing that you would be ashamed of your dear father knowing."

As she spoke she gazed at the portrait, and, despite her every effort, tears came into her eyes, while Dick heard a stifled sob. He did not care to speak for a moment, lest he should hear another one.

"You will promise me, dear, for his sake?" she murmured.

"And for yours, dear mother," answered Dick. "I will never bring disgrace to the name that he has honoured. Never!"

His mother clasped him to her breast, then he tore himself away, leapt through the open casement window, and fled down the carriage-drive, while the dogcart that was to take him to the station came rattling after him.

That was their first parting, and it went hard with Dick, but harder far with her. Jim, the groom, guessed, and drove slowly; but he had something up his sleeve, for Jim was a smart man, and Dick a great friend of his, despite the inequality of their stations in life.

He overtook the lad at the carriage gates.

"Now then, Master Dick!" he cried. "You will miss your train to a certainty. Here's your college cap. Shove it on. You are a boy of Ravenswood. Hurrah for the young master! One day he will be as good a man as his father. And mind you this, Master Dick, a better and a braver one never lived—or died for the honour of his country."

"Hurrah!" cried Dick, putting on the cap and springing into the dogcart. Then away they sped along the country lane, now sweet with the scent of wild flowers.

The mare was fresh, and Jim had all his work to hold her; besides, pace was necessary if they would catch the train.

"Here she comes, Jim!" cried Dick. "Let the mare go."

The hedges flew past. It was a race with the train; but the mare was equal to the occasion. Jim could not have held her now had he tried.

"Good-bye, Jim," cried Dick, grasping his hand. "I'll often think of you."

"Ay, lad, and I'll think of you more often, maybe. And see, Master Dick, there's another you will remember. Write often to her, for she will be lonely now, and listen for the postman's ring. Good-bye, and good luck!"

Jim grasped the reins with both hands now, and pulled the mare on her haunches; then Dick leapt out, darted across the line, and got in the wrong side of the train through one of the windows, for the door was locked, and the train had just started.

He had three stops, and then ran express to Paddington, and paid his fare on the train. His luggage had gone ahead, so that there was no difficulty about that. Nor was there the slightest difficulty in finding the boys with whom he was to travel. He could hear them on the departure platform, although it was on the other side of the station, and, making his way to that part, he received his first disappointment.

They did not take the slightest heed of him, despite his college cap. About a score of youngsters were all talking together, and telling of their holiday experiences. They were far too busy to heed a new boy. Dick stood watching them, and wondering whether it would be the correct thing to go and introduce himself.

At last he decided on doing so. His introduction was brief, but it was to the point.

"I am the new boy," he said, and all eyes were fixed on him.

"He is the new boy!" exclaimed a slimly built, intelligent-looking lad. "Do you hear, fellows?"

"Certainly, Melby," answered another. "It would be almost impossible not to hear your penny-whistle of a voice."

"You dry up, Tom Hart! Remember that you are in my dormitory, and are, therefore, expected to conduct yourself as a gentleman. He's the new boy, you chaps. Not *a* new boy—but *the* new boy! What is your name, *The New Boy?*"

"Dick Clare!"

"Are you any relation to Cœur de Lion? I believe his name was Richard."

"Shouldn't say so."

"Oh, you wouldn't say so, Richard! Well, if you don't mind, we would be obliged if you will deign to travel in our carriage, because we think that you are likely to afford us a good deal of amusement. Did you leave papa and mamma quite well, thank you?"

"I say, Melby," exclaimed the youngster whom he had addressed as Tom Hart, "you ought to let new boys down lightly. Don't you recollect how you snivelled the first term you came to Ravenswood? You were always sobbing into your handkerchief, and you used to go about with eyes something like a little ferret! You were a horrid little boy, you know, and you haven't improved a bit since. Here, youngster, have you got your ticket?"

They were much the same age, and Dick did not quite appreciate being patronised in that matter; however, he said he had not.

"Then hurry up and get it!"

"I'll show you the way," exclaimed the obliging Melby. And when Dick returned he had three large luggage-labels on his back, which greatly amused the other youngsters.

It was a corridor train, and a good many crowded into one carriage, while others stood in the corridor, much to the inconvenience of the other passengers.

The train started off, and Melby became facetious at Dick's expense. The boys were shouting with laughter at one of Melby's witticisms, when a big, heavily-built young fellow came along the corridor.

"Here, stop this blatant bawling!" he cried. "I am trying to read, and it isn't possible while you are making all this row."

"Sorry, Gowl!" exclaimed Melby. "But, you see, this is *the* new boy, and he's rather amusing."

"It's more than you are when you make this abominable row. If there's any more of it, bear in mind that I have got a cane in the next carriage. I think some of you are aware that I know how to use it."

"Who is he?" inquired Dick, as the young fellow strode away.

"Gowl is his name," answered Tom, "and——"

"Gowl!" exclaimed Dick. "Well, of all the extraordinary things! Do you know if—if——"

"If what?" inquired Melby, fixing his keen eyes on Dick, whose agitation was obvious to all.

"Nothing!" exclaimed Dick. "It doesn't matter. What sort of fellow is Gowl?"

"The worst bully in Ravenswood College, or any other college either," answered Tom, glancing at Dick in surprise. "You will notice that before you have been here long, unless you are a chap like Melby."

Tom said this in a voice that was perfectly audible to all.

"Look here, Hart," exclaimed Melby, flushing, "I don't want any of your cheek!"

"No; you have got enough of your own."

"You were always keen on chumming in with new boys—for value received!" sneered Melby.

"I should be sorry to chum in with you, Melby. Still, I will admit that you were of benefit when you first came. You laid all the dust in the Close. You were as good as a watercart; and when you got over your snuffling you took to sneaking, and have kept it up ever since."

Tom's words caused a shout of laughter, then the youngsters became remarkably silent, for they remembered Gowl's threat, and fully expected a second visit—with the cane.

Dick did not enjoy that journey down at all. He tried to get friendly with Tom Hart, but his overtures were not very successful. There was not a word of truth in Melby's insinuation; all the same, Tom had no intention of giving any colour to it, and by that reason Dick suffered.

"I say, Tom!" exclaimed one of the youngsters as they neared their destination. "There's a regular gang of Fifth Form fellows on the train. Let's race them to the college!"

"Can't be done!" declared Tom. "They will collar the 'bus with four horses. We shall only have two."

"We could if we went without our tea at the hotel," said Melby.

"What a brilliant idea!" exclaimed Tom. "You are a jolly smart kid, Melby; you are, really. We might also pitch all our grub-hampers into the duckpond so as to lighten the coach. I don't think it would matter much if we pitched you on the top of them."

"Don't try to be funny, Hart," said Melby. "You will never succeed."

"Rummy thing that. You succeed without the trying. All the same, I'd like to race the beauties, especially as Gowl is amongst their number. I'm not going to miss my tea, but if it can be done any other road I'm game."

"I know a way!" exclaimed Dick. "Look here, Tom, if you will give me a hand we——"

"We will consider the matter," interposed Tom. And then he added in a whisper: "Be careful what you say before Melby. It will all go back to Gowl, and you will have a rough time of it at Ravenswood if that bully once gets his knife into you. You can give us your idea when we land, and if it's workable I'll work it with you. The Fifth fellows fooled us last term. Took the six horses, and we had to wait till the coach came back, while they went on in grand style."

"Well, I know a dodge that will stop them," declared Dick. "It will only take us about five minutes."

"We can easily catch them up with the tea, because Fifth Formers always pretend to despise food; but they won't let us start first."

"It doesn't matter a bit," declared Dick. "We shall catch them up. How far is it to Ravenswood?"

"About five miles. The college is right on the seashore."

"All right," exclaimed Dick. "You can bet they won't go so jolly fast."

"They are up to every move," said Tom dubiously.

"They won't be up to this move, and they will find it a stationary one."

"Ever tried it before?"

"Only once. It was a ghastly failure that time, but it won't be this. If we get there with two horses quicker than they do with four, it will be a feather in our caps."

"And a cane on our backs, if Gowl twigs the plot. But we will chance that, Dick."

Those two worthies were the first out of the train, and the first to leave the station.

"We want an ironmonger's shop, Tom," observed Dick. "Is there one here?"

There was, and Dick purchased a big spanner and some large washers. Tom was rather surprised at the reckless way he spent his pocket-money; but as Dick could get just as much as he wanted, he did not stop at trifles.

They succeeded in entering the place where the two coaches were kept. One was nearly new, the other very old, and Dick at once guessed which one the Fifth Form fellows would ride in.

"Now, you see, Tom," he exclaimed. "All you have got to do is to unscrew this cap, shove on some of these washers, then screw it up tight. It's best to take a front wheel, because it has more effect."

"Ha, ha! It would have. But I say, Dick, how was it the little dodge didn't answer before?"

"Because the old chap caught me in the act. He was a hunting man, and he hunted me that day—right across his park. You must mind we don't get caught, because it hurts. The great thing is to screw it up jolly tight, and I don't think you will get it much tighter than that. If that wheel turns I shall be surprised."

"And if it doesn't turn the Fifth Form fellows will be surprised!" laughed Tom. "Now, let's scoot back, else we shall miss our tea, and that would be a pity."

The tea was excellent, and the youngsters enjoyed it to their hearts' content. so did the Fifth Formers, only in a more dignified manner.

"There they go!" exclaimed Melby, referring to the big boys. "They will be bound to get there first."

"I don't know that," said Dick.

"That's not the only thing you don't know, kid," retorted Melby. "Do you know the difference between a turnip and a worm?"

"The former resembles your head, and the latter your body," answered Dick, looking serious.

"What's that, you say?" cried Melby, clenching his fists, and striding up to the new boy.

"Isn't that the correct answer?" inquired Dick, innocently.

"Of course it isn't, you stupid chump."

"Sorry!"

"You will be sorrier if I have any more of your cheek. I suppose you don't know that I'm a boxer?"

"No. I didn't know that."

"Well, you will jolly soon learn it, if you are not careful. You will either have to be a little more careful, else you'll get your head punched."

"I'd rather be a little more careful, if it's all the same to you. Suppose we come out and see the big fellows start?"

"What's the sense in that?" inquired Melby. "They have got four horses, and they are good ones. We shall have two, and spavined brutes they are."

"Can't see that," exclaimed Dick, glancing at the disparaged steeds.

"Because you don't understand horses. Just look at their backs."

"What for?"

"Spavins, of course. They are all over spavins, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Dick.

"What are you making that row for? If you don't understand horses I do," declared Melby. "My father keeps two."

"Well, they haven't got spavins in the back," laughed Dick. "I don't doubt they have it in the hocks, but——"

Melby turned away, not caring to argue the point, and at that moment a youngster behind Dick tried the efficacy of his peashooter at Dick's ear, but he missed his objective, and gave Melby a shower of peas at the back of the neck. He had sent a mouthful of them, and they hurt at that short range. Melby turned, and gave Dick a sounding slap across the cheek.

"Well, that's all right," exclaimed Dick, making no attempt to return the blow. "I didn't shoot those peas at you; but that makes no difference, Melby. We will talk about it later on. I'm glad you are a boxer."

"He's a funk," cried one of the youngsters.

"I'm not so jolly sure about that," answered another. "Did you see his eyes? It's my belief Melby will hear more of that little matter. I hope Clare gives the sneak a jolly good hiding."

But now the coach was off, and the second driver told the boys to get on his vehicle. Dick wanted a front seat to watch the fun, and so did Melby. Dick got the seat on the coach, and Melby got one on the ground. Vowing vengeance against the new boy, he caught hold of the step to help himself up, and at that moment Tom took a flying leap over his prostrate form, and landed on the step, and on Melby's fingers.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Tom, clambering up beside the new boy, while Melby uttered a wild howl, "but it's a beastly careless thing to put your fingers on the step. You might have caused me to fall. Why, what's the matter with the leading coach?"

The question was quite superfluous, for he knew the answer to it. The front wheel refused to turn, but the coach did not.

Dick had doctored the off-wheel, and as the four horses went on, the coach ran towards the off side, and looked very much like going into the ditch.

The driver gave the reins to Gowl to hold, and descended to see what was the matter, for the fault was not visible. The wheel looked all right, but it simply would not turn.

"Do you think it wants oil?" inquired Tom.

The driver did not deign to reply. He was angry, and muttered things beneath his breath at that wheel. The other driver handed the reins to Dick, and got down to lend his aid. Had he known the new boy a little better, he would never have done anything so stupid as to entrust him with the reins.

The First Scrape

Gowl prided himself on all appertaining to horses, and he gave the driver some instructions.

"Get a 'jack,'" he suggested.

"A Dick has put it wrong, so a 'jack' should put it right," murmured Tom.

"But look here, old chap, they will keep us waiting here till they have put that wheel right, and lick us after all."

"I don't know that," said Dick. "Think there is room for us to pass?"

"Don't know. But the driver won't go on till he has put that wheel right."

"I can drive," mused Dick.

"My eye! There would be a row if we went on without the driver."

"Think so?" inquired Dick. "You see, our object is to get there first. Now, if we don't go on we can't do it. Besides, I'm the only one who can get into the row. It won't be the fault of you fellows. Our driver has gone for the 'jack.' Now is our time to make the start. The only thing that worries me is that I don't believe there is room. However, I don't suppose I shall take much off. Here goes!"

Dick took the driver's seat, and seizing the whip gave the horses a cut, then away they went.

"No! There wasn't room," exclaimed Dick, as the boss of his front wheel caught the other one with a crash.

"Ha, ha!" roared Tom. "That axle will want some straightening, Dick."

"It does look a bit rocky, doesn't it?" exclaimed Dick, glancing back.

The two drivers howled themselves hoarse. Gowl sprang down, and rushed after the coach, shouting for them to stop at the top of his voice.

"Don't get excited, old chap!" bawled the daring Dick. "We are not going to stop. You will make yourself tired if you run like that."

"I'll thrash you—oh, won't I thrash you if you don't stop!" hooted Gowl.

But Dick took no further notice and continued on his journey.

"Look here, Dick," exclaimed Tom, as they neared the college. "I don't know how you are going to get out of this; but if you drive through Dr. Stanley's carriage-gates there will be trouble."

"No matter! It's a thing that can't be concealed," answered Dick. "You see, if we did not tell, Gowl would, and if he did not, Melby would, so I may as well have the benefit of owning up."

"There's the sea, and that's the college," said Tom.

"So that's Ravenswood," exclaimed Dick, looking at the great building. "Well, it's a fine old place, and I believe I shall like it. I hope you fellows will like me, too, when you know me. If I had my way I'd be friends with all; but that's impossible I expect—at any rate, for the start. Now, let's give them a gentle bleat on the horn. We will drive up in style. I hope the gates are open."

"They are!" said Tom.

"Good! We will go at a gallop down the drive, then rein in our prancing steeds—and never mind their spavined backs. How's this for sweet music?"

Dick gave some vigorous blasts on the horn, and he really did it very well, having had considerable practice with that charming instrument.

Dr. Stanley, in cap and gown, came to his front door, and then he gazed in blank amazement at the youthful driver, who dashed along the carriage drive at a furious gallop, blowing the horn for all he was worth.

Dick reined his horses in, then raising his college cap, bowed to the doctor with a gravity that nearly convulsed Tom.

"If you please, sir," exclaimed Dick, "I am a new boy. I have formed the opinion that there are other new boys, and I am one of them. My name is Richard Clare."

(A Long and Laughable Instalment of this School Story will appear in next Wednesday's Issue of the "Nelson Lee Detective Library." Order In Advance.)

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