

NO. 109.—BE SURE TO ORDER EARLY.

1^D. THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1^D.



THE CASE OF THE CRIMSON FEATHERS

ANOTHER ADVENTUROUS EPISODE FROM THE PAGES OF
"NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK," PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION BY THE
AUTHOR OF "THE IVORY SEEKERS," ETC.

The Merry Pranks of Pete

in his Adventures in
the United States
amuse every reader.

ONE
PENNY
Every
Tuesday.

Thrilling Adventure

is always to be found
in the Stories of
Tom Sayers, the
Boxing Airman.

THE MARVEL

The Great Boxing Story Paper.

Two Grand
Long Com-
plete Tales

and a
SERIAL STORY
in Every Issue.

Tommy's
and
Jack's
Favourite.

Tom
Sayers, &
Jack, Sam
and Pete,

have made
"THE MARVEL."
famous everywhere.



THE CASE OF THE GRIMSON FEATHERS

Another Stirring Episode taken from "NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK," and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Ivory Seekers," etc.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I LISTEN TO A STRANGE STORY FROM HAYTI—WE ARE DULY IMPRESSED, AND NELSON LEE, UPON THE WHOLE, CONSIDERS THAT A HOLIDAY IN "SILLY SUFFOLK" WILL BENEFIT OUR HEALTH—I AGREE, WITH MUCH HEARTINESS.

VOODOOISM!

I've been sitting at the guv'nor's desk for about half an hour, trying to think of a good way to start this yarn, and I've practically chewed the end off my fountain-pen.

So, in desperation, I've shoved down the first thing in my mind.

Voodooism! That's it! That's what this adventure is about. The whole remarkable affair happened just before the Great War convulsed Europe. Not bad, that, is it? Europe has been convulsed for quite a long time, and now and again it's been precious near a paralytic fit.

But the "Strange Case of Cecil Heathcote" (as the guv'nor's got it in his record-book) happened in the summer of 1914, when everything was peaceful and quiet.

On a particular day in June I was dozing, too. The weather was hot, and everything else was hot. I was lying full-length on the big bench in the guv'nor's laboratory. Fortunately, Nelson Lee was in the consulting-room, writing, or I should probably have been lying full-length on the floor. He's got queer notions about the laboratory bench. He says it isn't intended for sleeping purposes.

But it was cool in that room, and I

was hot. There were a few test-tubes and things near my feet, but I was jolly careful not to shoot them off. Test-tubes don't bounce.

Nelson Lee had sent me into the laboratory to clear up a lot of messy chemical stuff he had been experimenting with. But I didn't see the fun of it, so I was considering things. While engaged in that process, I dozed.

Of course, I meant to do the work later. I'm not a slacker. But my doze didn't last long. In about five minutes I heard the guv'nor talking to Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper. I didn't catch the words at first, so I sat up.

"Yes. Show them up, Mrs. Jones," came Nelson Lee's voice. "Do you know where Nipper is?"

"I ain't seen him this last hour, sir," said Mrs. Jones.

I grinned, and passed from the laboratory into the consulting-room. Nelson Lee was setting a couple of chairs in position, and then fetched a cigar-box from the mantelshelf, and placed it handy.

"Whc's coming, sir?" I yawned.

"Oh, there you are, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee. "Upon my soul, have you been asleep, you young rascal? Make yourself tidy at once! I may want you to take some shorthand notes presently. It all depends."

I brisked up.

"Oh, if there's work to do, I'm on," I said. "Who's the client, guv'nor?"

"There may possibly be two, Nipper. Lord Wynsidney and Mr. Cecil Heathcote are even now on their way up—"

"Oh, my hat!" I ejaculated.

It didn't take me long to make myself

tidy. I didn't want Lord Wynsidney to see me with my hair ruffled and my tie crooked. A few months before, Nelson Lee had recovered the famous Wynsidney jewels, and his lordship had proved himself to be a splendid old chap. I'd never heard of Mr. Cecil Heathcote.

The pair were ushered in a minute later. Lord Wynsidney was attired in a light grey flannel suit and a panama was in his hand. He was big and bluff; a hearty old fellow of sixty-five, with a red, genial face. Strictly speaking, he looked more like a butcher than a member of the peerage; but he was one of the very best, and a gentleman to his finger-tips.

His companion was no older than thirty, I judged. Very possibly he was three or four years younger. There were worried lines about his eyes, telling of trouble, and his face was very pale. There was a stamp about him which told me at once that he was a University man—a member of the "upper ten," probably.

"Hullo, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Lord Wynsidney heartily. "Hope you don't mind this surprise visit! I ought to have sent you a wire, I know, but I didn't decide to approach you until we got to London. By gad, sir, London is baking!"

"You have come from Suffolk?" smiled Nelson Lee, as he shook hands.

"Yes. Oh, this is Mr. Heathcote, my excellent young friend," said his lordship, by way of introduction. "We're in trouble, Mr. Lee, and we want you to get us out of it. Heathcote is rather pessimistic."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Lee," said the younger visitor. "To tell you the truth, I fear that you will be able to do nothing for me. Those accursed devil-worshippers will have me——"

"Dear me!" smiled Lee. "You mustn't talk like that!"

Cecil Heathcote sat down, and looked across at me. The gov'nor saw the glance, and condescended to introduce me, with a wave of his hand. Lord Wynsidney, of course, had met me before, and he grinned cheerfully at me.

Then, quite suddenly, he became grave.

"I suppose I'm rather heartless," he exclaimed, "Really, Mr. Lee, there's

an infernally uncanny matter for you to look into! At Wynsidney Hall, too! Gad, I never thought that Suffolk would see Voodooism——"

"Voodooism!" ejaculated Nelson Lee sharply.

"Great Scott!" I put in.

We both stared at the visitors. Voodoo! The gov'nor and I were not totally unacquainted with that horrible word. To anybody ignorant of its true significance, I dare say the word's all right; but to me it conjured up all sorts of weird, uncanny pictures.

I never had any experience of the Voodoo worship myself, but Nelson Lee had sometimes spoken to me of it. Once, while on the West Coast of Africa, the gov'nor had had actual experience of Voodooism.

It is a particularly awful kind of devil-worship, and the blacks take very good care to keep their secrets. But there are many stories told about the Voodoo worshippers—and those stories are generally whispered.

"Are you suggesting that Voodooism has been imported into England?" asked Nelson Lee, half-amusedly. "My dear Lord Wynsidney, you are surely mistaken. In Africa, perhaps, or in Hayti, or even the Southern States of America, but not in England. You cannot make me believe——"

"I was sure that you would discredit my story, Mr. Lee," put in Cecil Heathcote, almost bitterly. "I don't blame you. It is—wildly improbable, I know. But, Heaven above, the thing has actually happened! It has happened in Suffolk. I should have laughed myself a week ago."

Nelson Lee lay back in his chair.

"I have heard no story yet, Mr. Heathcote," he said quietly.

"Perhaps you do not care to listen——"

"Stuff!" interjected Lord Wynsidney bluntly. "Fiddlesticks, sir! Mr. Lee is only too anxious to hear the yarn. Aren't you, Mr. Lee? It was my idea to bring Heathcote to you."

"I shall be extremely interested," said the gov'nor, with a smile.

"Rather!" I struck in impulsively. "Voodooism in Suffolk! Oh, rot! Er—ahem—I—I mean——"

"You weren't far wrong, my young

friend," said Cecil Heathcote, looking at me. "I am prepared—fully prepared—to hear my story characterised as insufferable rot. At least, the latter part of my story."

I looked rather red in the face.

"I—I didn't mean to say 'rot,' sir," I exclaimed; "but it's a bit thick—"

"Judge for yourself, Nipper, after you have heard what I have to say," went on Heathcote quietly. "I will begin at the very beginning, Mr. Lee. You shall hear the whole history."

"I will listen attentively," said Nelson Lee.

"Thank you."

Heathcote lit a cigar, and leaned back in his chair. Lord Wynsidney was smoking, too, and he was now wearing a very serious expression. The gov'nor and I waited, wondering what was coming.

"Just over six months ago," began Cecil Heathcote, "I went out to Hayti. I bought a banana plantation from a man named Hartley, an American. I'd heard a good deal of the 'black republic' of Hayti, and what I had heard had been decidedly alluring. I arrived at Santo Gianco—a really beautiful city—and met Hartley there. The final details of the transaction were completed, and I became the sole owner of the El Dominica banana plantation.

"This was situated about fifteen miles from the city, and I was completely charmed with everything I saw as I was driven out to my plantation. The banana groves, I may say, were some of the finest in the island, and I was sure that I had transacted a splendid bargain.

"Well, I was even more pleased after I had been in possession for a couple of weeks. My hacienda was one of the finest in the republic—a splendid estate. Not far from me there were cocoa plantations, mostly owned by Spaniards. Sitting in my flower-filled patio of an evening, I could see the delicate green of the cocoa-trees in the distance, their leaves swaying in the gentle wind of the tropics. I hope I am not wearying you with these rather unnecessary details?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"On the contrary, Mr. Heathcote, I am deeply absorbed," he replied.

"Same here, sir," I put in.

"I am glad of that. All the same, I intend to come straight to the point at

once," continued our visitor. "One evening, about three weeks after I had arrived in Hayti, I crossed the boveda, or courtyard, with the intention of looking for one of my employees, whom I wished to consult about some work for the following day. When I arrived at the gate, however, I decided to wait until the morning.

"I turned, and was for a moment enchanted with the peaceful scene which lay before me. The white walls of the hacienda gleamed in the silvery light of a nearly full moon, and the building looked like some fairy palace. The whole world seemed at peace, and I decided that Hayti was a glorious corner of the globe. It was a veritable island paradise, so far as I had seen.

"And then, as I stood quite still, I faintly heard the sound of drum-beats. They seemed to come from a good distance, as though the beater of the drum was quite a couple of miles off. I was at once curious. What could that drum be?

"I remembered hearing tales of Voodoo worship," went on Heathcote quietly. "I must admit that I had scoffed at most of the stories which came to my ears. The terrible rites of Voodooism seemed utterly incongruous in this delightful spot. Surely there could be no truth whatever in those half-whispered legends?

"I was aware, too, that the cult dabbled in black magic—so it was said. Voodooism, of course, was an African importation, first brought to the New World, I believe, by African slaves. The deity of this lawless cult is known—unless I have been misinformed—as Danh-Gbi, the python."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is quite right," he agreed. "The believers in Voodooism generally hold their meetings at night, and, as a rule, the various rites are performed in out-of-the-way places. It has been said that human sacrifices are made, but I am doubtful of that. The sacrifices consist mainly of fowls and goats, and such-like."

Cecil Heathcote looked somewhat surprised.

"You seem to know all about it, Mr. Lee!" he observed.

"I have had a few experiences," was the gov'nor's easy reply. "They were no idle stories you heard, Mr. Heathcote—as, I am sure, you soon found out for

yourself. The degraded form of religion known as Voodooism is prevalent among the negroes of Hayti. It is popularly supposed to be a relic of the fetishistic religion of equatorial Africa. The word voodoo is probably derived from vaudoux, which means 'negro sorcerer.' But pray continue your story."

Heathcote leaned forward in his chair. "I was talking about the drum-beats I heard, wasn't I?" he said.

"That's it, sir," I answered, with a nod.

"The beat was incessant and monotonous, and so regular that it seemed to be caused by mechanical means," said the younger of our two visitors. "As I said, I was very curious, and at once decided to investigate. If I had known then as much as I do now, I should have gone straight into my house, and buried myself in a book. I should have allowed the Voodoo fiends to practise their devilish rites without any interference from me. Mind you, I had no intention of interfering. I was just interested. I regarded the whole thing as something rather amusing. I even decided that I would find out the truth of the matter, and then discredit the stories I had heard. No doubt you will call me a fool, and you will not be insulting me. I was a fool. But I was foolish only because of my ignorance."

"I quite understand that," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Well, to be brief, I made my way through the banana groves, and the drum-beats grew louder. I dare say some of my neighbours heard that grim sound, but they knew better than to take any notice. I was a greenhorn—that was the difference. Well, after a considerable time, I located the sound. For a good half-hour I had been wandering about hopelessly, and had almost decided to return to the hacienda. But, quite suddenly, I caught a glimpse of firelight through a dense patch of trees. I was clear of the banana groves by this time.

"The Voodoo meeting was taking place in a little hollow. The firelight flickered through the forest in strange flashes, and I became, for the first time, almost nervous. What was I about to see? I wondered if it was a wise move on my part to press my investigation. My better judgment warned me to return home, but my curiosity got the better of me, and I pressed on."

"That's where you were foolish, Heathcote," grunted Lord Wynsidney.

"I was not only foolish—I was mad," said Heathcote quietly. "The 'dumdum' of the drum was quite loud now, and I felt that I could not go back to the comfortable hacienda until I had seen this Voodoo meeting with my own eyes. Well, Mr. Lee, I satisfied my curiosity—Heaven help me! Crouching among the trees, I parted a couple of branches, and gazed down into the hollow."

"What did you see, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"The scene was a weird one, Nipper," replied Heathcote, looking at me for a second. "A fire was blazing merrily in the middle of the clearing. All round about it were seated scores of blacks—men and women. They were chanting, and swaying to and fro. I smiled at first. There seemed nothing particularly sinister in this nigger concert.

"The fellow with the drum sat with his back to me, and he was banging away like a machine. I couldn't see his drum, but on the other side of the fire there were about four other negroes with drums—and these chaps suddenly joined in the chorus, so to speak. They made quite a respectable din between the lot of them. I grinned then. Why, it was just a harmless— But then I saw something else; something which changed my view a little. From among the trees two figures emerged; they were negresses, attired in some mouldy old clothes, that looked as though they'd been fished out of the nearest dust-bin."

Heathcote paused for a moment to light a fresh cigar. He was feeling more at home now, and his narrative was becoming easier. His language had been rather stiff to start with; but now it was getting free-and-easy in style. Heathcote could see that the gov'nor and I were genuinely interested, and he was encouraged.

"You're not bored yet!" he asked.

"I am anxious to hear the rest," smiled Nelson Lee.

"That's good," said Heathcote, puffing away. "Well, those two negresses were about the queerest specimens I'd ever set eyes on. They both wore quaint headdresses, and there were metal bands, with coins and things jingling down. They both had gourd-rattles, and their movements were sinuous and strange. They seemed to be dancing, and yet they

weren't dancing. And, somehow, I shivered. The dance-like motion was infernally sinister."

"They were witch-doctresses, of course?" asked the gov'nor.

"That's what I reckoned," said Heathcote. "High-priestesses, or something. They're called mamalois, I believe. A witch-doctor is known as a papaloi, isn't he? Anyhow, there's some heathen name for the rotters. These two beauties were so fascinating that I watched intently. I wasn't fascinated by their beauty, let me add. I was just quivering with an uncanny feeling of creepiness. But I didn't shift. And the mamalois went on with their double-shuffle for about five minutes. Then, quite suddenly, one of them gave a blood-curdling scream. Up to now they'd been swinging the rattles and muttering some gibberish or other.

"That scream fairly made my hair stand, and I nearly fell forward in my agitation. I'm not nervous, but I was startled. And the mamaloi who was responsible commenced whirling round and round the fire in a mad, horrible caper. The chanting of the blacks had stopped, and they watched eagerly.

"This dance went on for another five minutes, and then the witch-doctresses retired. But the other beauty now appeared, followed by a couple of men. They were carrying a curious crate-like arrangement. After a bit I saw that it was a large, clumsily-made cage. There were holes all over it.

"As soon as it was set down all the blacks started yelling like demons. They were shouting 'Voodoo! Voodoo!' and something that sounded like 'Rongda! Rongda! Rongda!' Then the whole precious crowd prostrated themselves on the ground—just as though their tummies had started aching!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That crate contained their god, I imagine," he remarked.

"That's it—a confounded python!" declared Heathcote. "Danh-Gbi—the Voodoo deity. At least, I suspect that the cage contained the gentleman. I couldn't see, of course; but the inference was pretty obvious. The mamaloi walked round the cage several times, and then proceeded to cover it with her number fourteen sized feet. While she was standing there a nigger appeared in the firelight, carrying some sort of fowl. The bird was as frightened as the deuce,

but he soon met his fate. The mamaloi calmly proceeded to slit its throat, and then the disgusting creature drank some of the blood. It fairly made me sick."

"I should say it did!" I ejaculated, with a grimace.

"But that wasn't all, Nipper," went on the young man. "They sacrificed a goat next, and the whole crowd of blacks produced cups of some sort and — But it's too horrible, Mr. Lee! I simply can't tell you the rest. After the goat had been finished with there came—"

Heathcote threw his cigar into the fireplace.

"I can't tell you what I saw next!" he exclaimed huskily. "Perhaps you wouldn't believe me, Mr. Lee. Yet I swear that I saw something that night which turned me ill—so ill that I turned dizzy. It was—ghastly! No, I shall say no more, except that the whispered tales of human sacrifices are absolutely true! Great Heaven! My eyes were opened with a vengeance! Those foul reptiles—those Voodoo people—ought to be stamped off the earth. After—the worst had happened—you know what I mean—the blacks simply let themselves go. They were mad. They had worked themselves to such a pitch that they became screaming maniacs. They danced round the fire like imps of Hades, and, cursing myself for coming to the spot, I turned to go.

"But my foot caught in a root. I stumbled, twisted round, and fell with a crash of breaking branches. It was only by a terrific effort that I succeeded in saving myself from falling headlong into the hollow.

"The wild orgy stopped as though by magic, and I found myself staring into scores of wild, startled faces. My own face was clearly illuminated by the firelight, and, of course, the blacks recognised me. It was possible—probable, even—that some of them were my own employees. They set up a wild shouting, and I thought that my last moment had come."

"You fled?" asked the gov'nor.

"Just as fast as my feet would carry me over the ground!" was Heathcote's grim reply. "I fled precipitately. I expected every moment to feel myself clutched and dragged down. But, somehow or other, I reached the hacienda. I paused as I was crossing the patio, and looked back.

"The night was perfect. The moon shone like a great globe of molten silver. And not a sound did I hear. I was quite alone. The Voodoo devils had given up the chase, and I breathed freely. I entered the house, locked myself in, and took a glass of brandy."

"And that's the whole yarn, sir?" I asked interestedly.

Heathcote shook his head.

"Oh, no!" he said grimly. "That's only the beginning!"

"The—the beginning?" I gasped.

"Yes. But the rest can be told in a very few words," said our visitor. "The next morning I was inclined to be light-hearted. Somehow, the awful adventure wasn't half so fearsome when I thought it over in the full sunlight. I even wondered if I had been suffering from a particularly violent attack of nightmare. My black servants were as cheerful as ever, and there wasn't a sign that anything was wrong."

"Didn't you fear—death?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I had heard that the Voodoo is sometimes declared against man—sometimes against a whole hacienda—but I was inclined to doubt the story. Even after what I had seen, too! By Jove, what an idiot I was! If I'd had an ounce of sense I should have cleared out of the place on the second!"

"What did actually happen?" asked the gov'nor.

"I thought over the thing, and decided to forget it," Heathcote replied. "It never even entered my head to flee from Hayti. My property was there—everything I had in the world, in fact. I'd invested every penny in that banana plantation. So I decided to say nothing, and go about my business as usual."

"You soon had your eyes opened, I suspect?" remarked the gov'nor.

"That very morning!" replied Heathcote. "I sat down to breakfast, and noticed that my plate was rather rocky. Lifting it up, I found—three crimson feathers! Of course, nobody knew anything about them. I questioned the servants, but they professed the utmost ignorance—and even fear."

"Not much to be frightened at in three feathers!" I said wonderingly.

I was a bit surprised to see that Nelson Lee was now looking very grave. His lips were pursed, and he gazed at Heathcote and Lord Wyncsidney in turn.

"The sign of death!" he said quietly.

"You know, then?"

"Happily, I have never had any personal experience," replied the gov'nor. "But I am certainly aware that the discovery of these crimson feathers is the Voodoo sign of impending death. Did you know it at the time?"

"Oh, yes," said Cecil Heathcote. "And it gave me a turn, I can tell you. Some of my servants were Voodooists, of course. It was impossible to tell which—perhaps the whole job lot. I was stunned for the time. The Voodoo had been declared against me! Yet, even then, I was not capable of realising that I should be forced to clear out of the republic."

"What did you do?"

"Well, as a start, I sent into Santo Gianco, and persuaded the authorities to send a body of soldiers to El Dominico. They were negroes, of course, and I wondered if any of them were Voodooists. It is quite possible. I was guarded night and day, but as nothing happened, I suspected that my fears had been idle. Then, one morning, I found ground ivory-root in my shoes!"

"By James!" said Nelson Lee. "It was lucky you found it!"

"You know its nature, then?"

"I know that ground ivory-root comes from Africa," replied the gov'nor. "Dum-kane it is called, and it is poisonous even to the touch."

Heathcote was surprised.

"You seem to know everything, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "Well, to cut it short—I've been appallingly long-winded I know—my life became a perfect nightmare after that. Nothing was done openly. A bullet cut through my hat as I crossed the boveda—that nearly polished me off. My food was poisoned, and I only escaped death by starving myself. Even the water wasn't safe to drink. Of course, it couldn't go on. I grew ill and pale and haggard, and at last came to the conclusion that I'd better clear out. So I cleared out. I arrived at Santo Gianco after two further attempts had been made to shoot me. It happened that a steamer was leaving for the United States that afternoon, and I succeeded in booking a passage."

"What about your property?" I asked.

"I didn't have time to think of it," replied Heathcote. "Afterwards, I placed

the facts before the United States authorities, and they got into communication with the American consul in Santo Gianco. Eventually the plantation was sold—but I lost an enormous amount of money over the transaction."

"And that's all?" asked Lee.

"Not all. Even while the steamer was leaving Hayti—I ought to have told you this before, really—a member of the crew, a huge negro, attacked me with a wicked-looking knife. It was evening, and dim. That negro was a Voodooist, of course. He would have got me but for the prompt intervention of one of the ship's officers. He ran up in the nick of time, and twisted the knife out of the black's hand. I was furious, and sent my fist crashing into the Voodooist's face. He staggered, fell back, and went overboard."

"He was rescued——?"

"No, Mr. Lee. The fellow got caught in the propeller. We didn't see him any more," said Heathcote quietly. "The foam was stained perceptibly. That was the end of my nightmare. I landed in America, and a month later I was home in England. Since then I've been loafing about doing nothing."

"Nelson Lee rose, and stretched himself."

"Your story has interested me exceedingly, Mr. Heathcote," he said.

"I knew it would!" declared Lord Wynsidney—"I knew it would, by gad!"

"But I must admit," went on the gov'nor, "that I cannot see why you have come to me. How can I serve you? I cannot go out to Hayti and fight this Voodoo curse. I have been informed by reliable people that Voodoo practically controls the lives of the inhabitants of the republic of Hayti—that Voodoo plays an active part in the affairs of the State itself. I cannot fight such a scourge——"

"No, no, Mr. Lee," interrupted Heathcote. "I have more to tell you—most dreadful of all!"

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee, sitting down again. "You astonish me!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" I added.

Cecil Heathcote passed a hand over his brow.

"The curse of the Voodoo is on me!" he said brokenly. "It has followed me to England—to Suffolk! That is why I have come, Mr. Lee. Something hap-

pened yesterday at Wynsidney Hall, where I am staying. The Voodoo is at my heels even now. I want you to come to Suffolk—to investigate."

"You'll come, won't you, Mr. Lee?" asked Lord Wynsidney.

Nelson Lee looked at me, and I nodded without hesitation.

"I have not heard what had been happening at Wynsidney Hall," said the gov'nor quietly. "I cannot even guess. But I am quite ready to undertake an investigation here, in England. If the Voodooists have dared to carry their vile practices into this island I am only too eager to fight them, tooth and nail!"

"Then you will return with us to Suffolk?" asked Heathcote eagerly.

"Just as soon as you please," was Nelson Lee's reply.

And I grinned with satisfaction.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH WE GO TO WYNSIDNEY HALL, AND MEET ALL SORTS OF SWELL PEOPLE—THE GUV'NOR AND I MEET WITH AN ADVENTURE BY MOONLIGHT, AND DISTURB TWO PEOPLE WHO OUGHT CERTAINLY TO HAVE BEEN LEFT ALONE—LATER ON WE HEAR A DRUM.

I SUPPOSE it was rather heartless of me to grin. But I was selfish at that particular moment. I had visions of Lord Wynsidney's splendid park; of bathes in the river; of a good time in general. Yet, at the same time—and I must put this in justice to my little self—I was tremendously keen to investigate the grim mystery which Cecil Heathcote had hinted at.

Lord Wynsidney sat up in his chair.

"Look here, Heathcote, you've been talking long enough," he said. "I think I'll tell the rest—I know it all, as well as you."

"Thanks," said Heathcote. "I've been listening to my own voice quite long enough."

"I've got a house-party down at Wynsidney Hall," went on his lordship, in his bluff way. "You know, Mr. Lee—a gay crowd of young men and women, mostly. It is one of the most successful house-parties Lady Wynsidney has ever held, as a matter of fact. Until yesterday there wasn't a cloud to mar the gaiety of the party, and we were all enjoying ourselves tremendously."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Lady Wynsidney's house-parties are famous," he remarked.

I had heard of them, even. Lady Wynsidney was ten years younger than her lord and master, and was one of the most renowned hostesses in the kingdom. Her house-parties were absolutely "the thing." All the best people were invited, and it was something of a distinction to be at the Hall on such an occasion.

"My wife is rather good at managing a crowd of young people," smiled Lord Wynsidney. "Of course, Heathcote had told me all about that Voodoo business. Everybody knows of it, in fact. Heathcote has been rather bothered by the number of questions he's been asked. But his attentions have been attracted in a certain feminine direction since he's been——"

"Oh, I say!" protested Heathcote, flushing and grinning feebly.

"Well, perhaps I'm wandering from the subject," chuckled Lord Wynsidney. "By gad, I nearly let the cat out of the bag, Heathcote! I only wish to Heaven that everything was as cheerful now as it was a week ago. But, to get to the point. Yesterday morning, Mr. Lee, Heathcote made a stunning discovery. He was going to put his cricketing 'blazer' on, when he found three crimson feathers sticking in the sleeve of it—three crimson feathers!"

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated, aghast. "The sign of——"

"An extraordinary discovery," interrupted the gov'nor thoughtfully. "The Voodoo death-sign in England! I think you said that a number of your guests were fully acquainted with the disastrous Hayti story?"

"That's so, Mr. Lee."

"And your party includes a number of young men?"

"A dozen, at least."

"Then don't you think it possible that you have been alarming yourself needlessly?" asked Nelson Lee. "I suspect that two or three of your young guests have perpetrated a somewhat ill-natured practical joke——"

Lord Wynsidney shook his head promptly.

"Why, bless your soul, I thought of that as soon as ever Heathcote showed me the feathers," he said. "In fact, Mr. Lee, we decided to take no notice of the thing—just to make the joke go

flat. For, to tell the truth, I didn't care for that kind of humour. Heathcote had only told me, and we kept it a secret."

"And then?"

"Well, I thought no more of it. And Heathcote, I believe, was equally indifferent. You see, he had other matters to think about, and he didn't take those feathers seriously. Heathcote was thinking of a certain young lady——"

"I was sure that some of the young fellows had been up to a lark, Mr. Lee," put in Heathcote hastily. "It was the most obvious solution. Voodooism in England! Why, I simply grinned. I'd done with Voodooism, I told myself."

"The day passed off without anything happening," went on Lord Wynsidney. "Then, during the evening, another strange incident occurred, and this time there was no room for doubt. It happened that Heathcote and I were walking across the park from the golf-links. Just as we drew opposite a dense plantation—my park is well wooded, you know—we heard a kind of droning noise. Then Heathcote uttered a gasp. By gad, a bullet had passed clean through his left sleeve!"

"Didn't you hear any report?" asked the gov'nor.

"Not a sound! The bullet must have been fired from an air-rifle," replied his lordship. "I was furious; I simply foamed. Somebody had dared to attempt murder on my property! By gad, I was speechless!"

"It wasn't any good searching the wood," added Heathcote. "It was growing dusk, and the unknown assailant could easily have slipped off. I was thoroughly startled by that incident. It meant that those three feathers were genuine. The accursed Voodooists have found me, Mr. Lee! They may be waiting for me outside at this very moment——"

"Nonsense!" interjected the great detective sharply. "You must not get into a panic. You have excellent cause to feel uneasy, I will admit, but remain calm. Did anything else happen?"

"This morning," said Heathcote, "I was foolish enough to stroll in the park before breakfast—alone. I was thinking of my troubles. It was a glorious morning, as you know. I didn't dream of danger so near the house. But a second shot was fired at me. You see the result."

He held his left ear, and the gov'nor and I saw that it was grazed.

"By all the laws of chance, I ought to have been dead long ago," went on Heathcote. "I feel helpless. My horrible enemies are hidden. They do not show themselves. At any moment I may receive my death-blow. It is ghastly, Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee was very grave.

"There can be no shadow of doubt that the situation is serious," he said, "but I am amazed. I never believed that these things could happen in England."

"I really brought Heathcote to London with the intention of taking him to Scotland Yard," said Lord Wynsidney; "but I realised, before arriving at Liverpool Street, that the police would scoff at the whole affair. They would not believe in Voodooism. Besides, there would have been detectives—infernal official detectives, I mean—nosing about the Hall. So I thought of you, Mr. Lee, and advised Heathcote to lay the whole matter before you."

"I am glad you came to that decision," remarked the gov'nor. "I am more than interested; I am filled with amazement and indignation. Voodooism may hold sway in Hayti, but it must never be allowed to exist in England. I can only think of one explanation for this singular affair."

"What is that?" asked Heathcote eagerly.

"The man who went to his death by falling from the steamer was evidently a Voodooist of some importance," replied Lee. "I suspect that he was a witch-doctor—a papaloi. His loss enraged the other members of the cult, and it was decided that you should be tracked down and killed. You have therefore been dogged to England, and, unless something is done immediately, you will fall a victim."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Heathcote gloomily.

"But your peril now is slight compared to what it was in Hayti," went on Lee. "There you were surrounded by enemies. They were on every side of you. Here there can be only a handful of the devils, at most. They are negroes. Have you seen any sign of black men round Wynsidney Hall?"

"There's not one in all Suffolk that I know of," said his lordship.

"A travelling circus, perhaps?"

"By Jove, there was a circus pitched in a village a few miles away from the Hall!" said Heathcote, with a start. "Good heavens, Mr. Lee, can it be possible that these Voodooists are connected with that circus?"

"It is not only possible, but very probable," said Lee grimly. "It is no uncommon thing for circus proprietors to engage niggers. They work hard, and are satisfied with little money. Supposing these Haytians learned that the circus was to visit a spot near the Hall? Their task would be simple. They obtained jobs, offering themselves at low wages, and then watched their opportunity. It is only a suggestion, of course. We must look into things very thoroughly."

"Would you advise Heathcote to remain in London?" asked the old peer.

The gov'nor shook his head, and I saw a look of relief come into Heathcote's eyes. He didn't want to stay in London, and I guessed the reason. Lord Wynsidney had already given a couple of strong hints. There was an attraction at the Hall—a feminine attraction. Heathcote didn't cotton to the idea of remaining in London.

"No, I think it will be better for Mr. Heathcote to return to the Hall with us," said Nelson Lee. "But he will have to be very cautious. I shall take care to watch over him thoroughly. You see, Mr. Heathcote, if you stayed away your enemies would stay away, too. My presence at the Hall would be useless."

After a little further talk, it was arranged that we should all journey to Suffolk by the four-fifty train from Liverpool Street. There was only about an hour to prepare, and so we had to look lively.

Of course, I was going. There might be all sorts of perilous work—we didn't know—and the gov'nor would want me. I was tremendously elated, to tell the truth. Nelson Lee and I had been stewing in London for weeks, and the prospect of spending a few days in "Silly Suffolk" was alluring. I don't know why Suffolk is called silly. It's an insult, because Suffolk is one of the finest counties in England. You can't beat East Anglia for a ripping holiday, or for scenery. And the countryfolk of Suffolk are kindly, hospitable, and shrewd. Anyhow, they're not silly.

We arrived at the little village railway-station, and found a big motor-car wait-

ing to convey us to the Hall, three miles away. It was a glorious evening, and the sweet country air was delightful after the stuffiness of London.

Wynsidney Hall was soon reached.

It was a magnificent old place, surrounded by a glorious park. As I sat in the car, looking at the scenery, I wondered if there could be any truth in Cecil Heathcote's statement.

Up in the gov'nor's consulting-room it hadn't seemed so preposterous, but it seemed farcical now.

Why, it was idiotic to suggest that danger lurked in this glorious park. Wynsidney Park was indeed a splendid place in every way, and the Hall could just be seen now and again through the stately old trees.

The building was of white stone, and it gleamed in the evening sunlight almost like pure marble. Away to the left of us I spotted the golf links, with tiny figures dotted here and there.

Farther on, and more ahead of us, lay a gleaming river. I promised myself that the river would make very close acquaintanceship with me the following morning, before breakfast.

Lord Wynsidney's place was situated right in the heart of Suffolk, about nine miles from Stowmarket. I'd never been there before, although I'd heard a lot about it. I was thundering glad to have the opportunity of staying at Wynsidney Hall. Besides, there was a house party being held at the present time, and that promised a good deal of jollity and good fun.

Of course, Nelson Lee and I would be introduced as ourselves. There wasn't going to be any deception. Why should there be? There may have been one or two snobs among that crowd, but they could go to the deuce. Those kind of people regarded Nelson Lee with a certain aloofness. They said that he was a detective, and therefore no good.

But the genuine aristocracy—the "nobs," so to speak—were quite delighted to meet the gov'nor. I have known lords and dukes, in fact, to say that they are highly honoured to possess the friendship of Mr. Nelson Lee. And the gov'nor didn't care a snap for the snobbish rotters! Perhaps they had certain secret reasons for disliking detectives!

Well, when we arrived at the Hall we were soon transported out of comparative silence into a world of bustling noise

and laughter. Coming along in the car we had all been rather quiet.

But we couldn't be quiet now, and I thought still more how incongruous it was that there should be a possibility of the Voodoo curse following Heathcote to Wynsidney Hall. Yet he had told us the actual truth, and we had to believe it. We did believe it, and I knew that it was a bad policy to judge by appearances.

In nine cases out of ten, a hidden danger lurks where it is least suspected. And there was a grave, horrible danger for Cecil Heathcote in this laughing crowd of gay people—the majority of them young men and pretty girls.

Of course, the war hadn't started then, and all the young fellows hadn't rushed into khaki.

Lady Wynsidney's house-party was a tremendous affair.

There were famous people there of all sorts and sizes, and there was a superabundance of good cheer and laughter. Only Lord Wynsidney knew of Heathcote's grim peril—and this was just as well.

If the whole party had known, there would have been a mild sensation, and that wouldn't have improved matters in the least. Later on, perhaps, the truth would come out, but the gov'nor decided to keep it dark as long as possible. He and I were ostensibly down at the Hall merely as a couple of guests.

There's no need for me to go into all the introduction business and that sort of thing. Nearly everybody was jolly pleased to see the gov'nor, and to make his acquaintance. In fact, he was terrifically popular—especially with the young ladies. The girls swarmed round him like flies, asking him to relate some of his adventures, and to sign their autograph-books, and that sort of rot.

As for me, I was indignant. Nobody seemed to take any notice of me at all! Of course, I was younger then, and I suppose I was rather insignificant—not that I thought so at the time.

No fear! I considered that there were two very important people at Wynsidney Hall. One of them was the gov'nor, and the other was— But I blush as I write, so I'll let it rest at that.

But, now I come to think of it, I was rather glad that people didn't bother me much. I was able to go about and see things and enjoy myself, and generally have a ripping time.

But this sounds as though Nelson Lee and I merely spent a kind of glorified holiday. Not a bit like it! Before we left the Hall we were destined to go through all sorts of strange adventures—weird adventures, in fact.

It's simply impossible for me to give the names of everybody of the house-party. Well, not impossible, because it wouldn't take me long to look up the names; but they'd fill about two pages of my notebook—and this isn't a directory.

So I'll just mention the people who loomed most prominently. There was Lady Wyncsidney, of course! She was a stately lady, with a charm of manner which was as famous as her cleverness as hostess. Everybody liked her tremendously, which wasn't surprising.

Then there was the Dowager Countess of Recke—a kindly old lady, who was responsible for a great deal of match-making among the young people. She was of very comfortable build. Rude people said she was stout, but I wouldn't dream of making that statement. I'll just say that she weighed about eighteen stone!

The Earl of Recke was there, too, and Sir Edgar Warde, and hosts of other titled folk. Among the mere commoners, Mr. Unwin Mellford was, perhaps, the most distinguished. (Always excepting the gov'nor, of course.) Unwin Mellford was the brilliant young tenor, and he had already delighted the whole party with his superb singing. He was a genial chap altogether, and everybody liked him.

Oh, I've got to mention that old Lady Brownwood was there, too. She chaperoned Miss Frances Hardinge, a really ripping girl of twenty. I think of all the girls at Wyncsidney Hall—and there were plenty of 'em—Miss Hardinge was the pick of the bunch.

Well, we had dinner, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

The gov'nor hadn't forgotten that we were in Suffolk on business, and he took care that he and I should be placed at the dinner-table so that we were quite near by Cecil Heathcote. As Nelson Lee said, there was no telling what might happen, and it was better to take every precaution.

After dinner, some of the guests got up a card-party; others adjourned to the billiard-room. But those who had most

sense went outside upon the lawns, in the glorious summer moonlight.

It's quite unnecessary for me to add that these were the young people. It sounds as though I were an old fogey, but when I'm writing a yarn I've got to talk as though I were a full-blown author. And, after all, they were young people. The lawns were dotted with little clumps of laughing, joking young men and girls.

The girls were all attired in evening-dress, of course—soft, silky things, and all that stuff. It's no good! When it comes to feminine attire, I'm floored. But I jolly well know when a girl looks nice.

Frances Hardinge looked the nicest of anybody. She was slim and dainty, with beautiful brown eyes and chestnut hair. When she smiled, the whole world seemed joyful, and I was terrifically pleased when I made the momentous discovery that Frances was claiming a very considerable amount of Cecil Heathcote's attention.

So she was the "attraction"!

I was very pleased, for Heathcote couldn't have made a better choice. In my opinion, he showed a remarkable judgment. It didn't take me long to find out how the wind was blowing, so to speak.

Nelson Lee and I were strolling on the wide terrace. Sir Edgar Warde had just come out of the house with Frances. They were chatting and laughing. Heathcote was quite near us, and I saw him glaring at Sir Edgar almost ferociously.

Two minutes later, Sir Edgar was called by somebody or other, and he apologised to Miss Hardinge, and went off across the lawn. Heathcote started towards the girl with eager strides, and I grinned a bit. But before he could reach her, somebody else was there first. It was Mr. Mellford, the famous singer, I believe.

"Confound him!"

The words were muttered by Cecil Heathcote, and I distinctly heard them. I looked up at the gov'nor, and saw that he was smiling.

"Mr. Heathcote doesn't seem to like anybody talking to that ripping girl—does he, gov'nor?" I remarked. "Looks a bit rummy, eh?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I fail to see anything particularly

"running" in it, Nipper," he replied easily. "Lord Wynsidney hinted to us that there was a certain young lady who was claiming the greater part of Mr. Heathcote's time. Apparently that young lady is Miss Frances Hardinge."

"Well, he's got sense!" I exclaimed. "She's about the best girl I've seen for months. What do you say, guv'nor? You're a first-rate judge of feminine beauty and character, aren't you?"

"My dear Nipper, I certainly do not profess to possess that quality," protested Nelson Lee. "Nevertheless, I agree heartily with you that Miss Hardinge is a very nice girl, indeed. But, to change the subject, I am not altogether satisfied with the way Heathcote is walking about here. Look here, Nipper, we must keep him company the whole time he is out."

"Perhaps it would be as well, sir," I observed.

After all, Heathcote had been shot at twice, and he might be shot at again—although this wasn't likely. Both the previous attempts upon his life had been made while he was practically alone; whereas now there were scores of people dotted about the lawn.

And, as it happened, the guv'nor's plan wasn't put into execution. For as we were approaching Heathcote we saw Miss Hardinge bow slightly to Unwin Mellford, and then run lightly across to Heathcote. He was obviously delighted, and off they went together, towards the gardens. Mr. Mellford lit a cigarette, and sauntered away in a different direction.

"H'm! That's rather awkward, Nipper," remarked Lee.

"We can't go and force our company on Mr. Heathcote now, can we, sir?" I said, with a grin. "I don't think we should be at all welcome—in fact, I'm jolly sure we wouldn't. There are times when it isn't quite the thing to butt in."

Now that Cecil Heathcote had carried off the girl in triumph it was only sporting to allow him a little length of rope. We certainly couldn't shadow him under the present circumstances. In fact, we shouldn't have shadowed him, in any case.

"Oh, let 'em enjoy themselves for a bit, guv'nor," I chuckled. "Heathcote won't come to any harm now. Hallo, that's his lordship's laugh, I'll bet a quid!"

We turned round, and saw Lord Wyn-

sidney strolling down with one or two other men. But Nelson Lee moved off across the lawn in the direction of the big plantations which edged the park. The moonlight was glorious, and the air was delightfully mild. It wasn't at all surprising that so many of the guests were out in the open. But, although the moonlight was so bright, there were plenty of dark, shadowy spots—and these were fully utilised. To tell the absolute truth, there was a good bit of mild flirtation going on. But that was only to be expected.

Nelson Lee and I wandered about, but there wasn't a sign of anything fishy until we arrived near the plantation. We passed through a portion of the gardens, and then cut off across a stretch of grass which skirted the dark belt of woodland. And, just for a moment, we spotted a crouching figure against the trees.

Quite suddenly it shifted along in the shadows very rapidly. We had appeared from behind a clump of bushes without a sound, and it was evident that we had surprised the fellow, whoever he was.

In any case, he shifted along the trees at a fast trot, and then disappeared into a portion of the gardens, pelting across a narrow strip of moonlight to get there. The guv'nor and I stood stock still.

"That's queer, sir!" I exclaimed quickly.

"Yea. We had better give chase, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "At first I thought he was just one of the guests, but his movements are very suspicious. Come, we must not waste a second!"

We shot round the trees at full speed, but there wasn't a sign of anybody now. Two splendid weeping-willow trees were just to our left, and, quite suddenly, I saw the branches part, and a face looked out.

"Come on, guv'nor!" I exclaimed.

We rushed up to the willow tree, but just as we got there the branches parted again, and Cecil Heathcote and Miss Hardinge appeared. They were both looking a bit confused; the girl, in fact, was blushing beautifully.

And if they were confused, the guv'nor and I were even more so. Like a couple of silly chumps we blundered right into the way; we disturbed the couple just as Heathcote had been "telling the tale." At least, that's what I suspected, and I felt pretty rotten.

We were all tremendously embarrassed for the first few seconds.

Then Miss Hardinge laughed, and we all laughed. That seemed to break the tension, and Nelson Lee hastened to explain.

"You must allow me to apologise sincerely," he exclaimed, with real feeling. "Nipper and I were chasing some man who apparently has no right upon the property. When we saw you, Heathcote, we made a rather foolish blunder—"

"Oh, it wasn't your fault at all, Mr. Lee," interjected Heathcote nervously. "Frankie—er—that is—Miss Hardinge—and I were just strolling through the gardens, 'you know! We heard you coming, and—wondered!'"

"Exactly—exactly," said the gov'nor. "I quite understand, Heathcote."

"Oh, I feel so ridiculous!" murmured Miss Hardinge, with another series of blushes. "I—I hope you'll catch the man you were speaking of, Mr. Lee."

This sounded like a very polite hint for us to clear off, but I'm pretty sure she didn't mean it that way. She just said anything to conceal her maidenly confusion. It certainly was a bit off-side for us to come blundering in on two young people who were obviously in love with one another.

Nelson Lee had no intention of staying another second, but Heathcote stopped us as we were about to retire.

"Er—the fact is, Mr. Lee—er—I've got something to tell you—"

"Oh!" said the girl softly.

"Now that you're here it would be silly to keep it secret," went on Heathcote, recovering his composure rapidly. "But, you see, I—I—that is—I should say that Miss Harding has—er—"

"Yes?" said the gov'nor gently, as Heathcote began floundering again.

"Oh, hang it all!" stammered Heathcote. "I suppose I'm a bit of an ass at this sort of thing—announcements, and all that! But I thought I'd better tell you the splendid news first, Mr. Lee. Miss Hardinge has just made me the happiest man alive. She's promised to be my wife, and we're—we're engaged!" he ended up all in a rush, and with a sigh of tremendous relief at having got it out.

Nelson Lee thrust out his hand at once

"My dear fellow, I congratulate you heartily," he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "I am really delighted to hear this wonderful piece of news."

The ice was broken properly now, and in another minute we were all laughing and chatting. So Heathcote had "been and gone and done it." He'd proposed, and had been accepted. Therefore all other matters of life seemed to be utterly insignificant—at least, that's how I understand it effects people. I may feel like that myself one day—but that's a long way ahead!

Of course, the gov'nor and I slipped off almost at once. Lee remarked to me that he didn't think Heathcote was in much danger so long as he was with Frankie. Besides, they were both off to the house.

After we'd got out of ear-shot I chuckled hugely.

"Rather good, that, eh?" I grinned.

"I am certainly pleased to hear that Heathcote is engaged," said Nelson Lee. "Yet, at the same time, I feel that it is up to us to protect him even more strenuously. I am worried about that strange figure we saw; it is evident, now, that it dodged off by this other pathway."

We were standing quite close to the plantation again; the high trees cast a black shadow, and the moon was blotted out. And then, as we stood there, we heard something strange.

The sound seemed to come from the very heart of the wood. It was like the beating of a small drum—faint and far away. Somehow, I felt my hair tingling. The sound was mysterious and uncanny.

"Can you hear anything, gov'nor?" I breathed.

"Yes," he answered. "Hush, Nipper! Stand still and listen."

We did so. On the still night air the soft, throbbing drum-beats sounded clearly and distinctly. What could it mean?

The Voodoo!

I caught my breath in, and clenched my fists; and all the while the drum kept on beating insistently. It was a sound which filled me with vague horror, and I know that Nelson Lee was similarly affected.

We stood there like statues—listening with strained ears.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I COME UPON A WEIRD SCENE, AND ARE DULY IMPRESSED—DISASTER OVERTAKES US WHEN WE LEAST EXPECT IT—IN CONSEQUENCE NELSON LEE IS WILD WITH HIMSELF AND EVERYTHING IN GENERAL—WE GUESS THE TRUTH.

NELSON LEE was the first to break the silence.

"Yes, Nipper, the sound is certainly proceeding from the heart of this belt of woodland," he said evenly. "I feel inclined to investigate. The sound is very much like that caused by a small tom-tom."

"What's it caused by, sir?" I asked huskily.

"I will not venture to form an opinion—just yet," said the guv'nor.

"Great Scott! Do you think those horrible Voodoo worshippers are—are here?" I went on. "Mr. Heathcote, when he was out in Hayti, heard the sound of a tom-tom, or a drum! I—I wonder——"

"Then don't!" said Lee sharply. "Don't wonder at all, Nipper! It would be the height of absurdity to conjecture all manner of wild explanations. This drumming sound may be merely an everyday noise. A water-wheel, perhaps, hidden by the trees; or a windmill. There is a windmill within a mile from this spot, I believe. In fact, this sound which resembles that of an African tom-tom may have an absurdly simple explanation. Therefore, we must refrain from allowing our imagination to run away with us."

"You're right, guv'nor," I said. "You always are right, come to that." Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to point out how wrong that statement is," he said calmly. "If I were always right, as you say, Nipper, I should be a wonderful person, indeed. As it is, I am a very ordinary mortal. But come. Enough of this idle chatter. We will look into this little mystery."

So we marched into the plantation.

Acting upon the guv'nor's advice, I had set aside all silly thoughts, although I must admit that those thoughts lingered jolly near by, all ready to be brought to the fore at the slightest provocation. And perhaps they weren't silly, after all.

The wood was rather dense, judged from an English standpoint. Compared

to an African forest it was, of course, as easy as pie to get through—and I've been in tropical forests more than once.

We went carefully, making no sounds. And every now and again we paused to listen. That steady, monotonous drumming continued unceasingly. It certainly sounded like a tom-tom; but I know from experience how deceptive sounds can be. And as we progressed deeper and deeper into the wood, the "dum-dum-dum" grew louder.

"I'm a bit anxious about Mr. Heathcote, sir," I remarked, after a bit.

"If we were contemplating staying away all night I should be anxious, too," said Lee easily. "As it is, I am quite easy of mind. No harm will come to Heathcote at this hour of the evening—it is not late, Nipper. And the gardens are filled with young couples."

"I s'pose he's safe enough," I admitted. "If any of those Voodoo blighters were about they wouldn't be able to act, would they? They'd stand a chance of potting the wrong man."

"Exactly," said the guv'nor. "Moonlight is all very well—but it is impossible to recognise a man at a distance, even in bright moonlight. Moreover, I had a word with Heathcote just after dinner."

"Why, you didn't tell me that!" I said.

"Didn't I, young 'un? That was very remiss of me——"

"Oh, come off it, guv'nor!" I grinned. "What did you tell him, anyhow?"

"I gave him strict injunctions not to stray away from the other people—that is, not to get beyond earshot," replied Nelson Lee. "I also advised him to get indoors as soon as possible, and to mix with the guests. On no account was he to remain alone anywhere. Oh, Heathcote will come to no harm at present."

"That's all right then," I remarked. "I say, it's pretty near now, sir!"

I was referring to the sound of the drum. We had halted again, and very distinctly we heard the steady "dum-dum-dum" of the phantom drum. Of course, it wasn't a phantom at all, but it sounds well to put it like that.

We were in the heart of the wood, and the trees were dense. Tangled masses of undergrowth grew everywhere, and the going was rather slow. The moonlight didn't penetrate to here, for the foliage overhead was thick, and overhanging from tree to tree.

We pressed on steadily, altering our course slightly to starboard—I mean to the right. And, quite suddenly, the guv'nor halted and gripped my arm.

"Do you see, Nipper?" he breathed. "Ssssh! Not a sound!"

I gazed ahead, my heart beating rapidly. There, through the trees, a glimmer of flickering yellow light was showing. And the beat of the tom-tom was very close. By this time both the guv'nor and I had practically convinced ourselves, in our own minds, that our original vague suspicions had been correct.

"It's a fire, sir!" I murmured.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Let me go first," he breathed. "Very carefully now, Nipper; we must not even cause a twig to crack. There is no vital hurry."

We went forward with tremendous care. Although I could picture the scene which would soon be before our eyes, I felt strangely uneasy, all the same. After all, we were in a Suffolk wood, where everything was peaceful. It was simply preposterous to suppose that any horrible Voodoo business could be going on in England—in Suffolk.

Voodooism was reserved for such heathen places as West Africa, or Hayti. Oh, of course, we should find some natural explanation. Yet, while these thoughts were passing through my mind, I told myself I was a silly ass to have any doubts. There was absolutely no mistaking the sinister beat of the tom-tom.

Although we could see the flickering reflection of the firelight upon the trees, the sources of that light were some little distance ahead. And, acting upon the guv'nor's instructions, I exercised all my powers of woodcraft. I don't think either of us made a sound as we moved. We had had a good deal of experience in tropical forests, and this was easy in comparison.

The trees commenced thinning, and we saw that we were coming upon a small clearing. This was probably situated in the very heart of the wood. Therefore the fire was totally invisible to anybody outside. Had the night been a pitch black one, the glare would probably have been reflected in the sky above the clearing. But, as the moon was shining brilliantly, the firelight made no impression. We could see it, of course, because we were near by, and the thick foliage over-

head did not allow any moonbeams to filter down.

The beat of the drum was now distinctly loud. And, as we paused for a moment, we heard a low, chanting song. It sounded indescribably uncanny, and there could be no doubt that it was caused by human voices.

The devil-worshippers!

A queer kind of creepy sensation went down my back. I was thinking of the yarn which Cecil Heathcote had told us. His adventure had seemed very distant and far away then; but it seemed to my excited imagination that Nelson Lee and I had been transported to the banana groves of Hayti.

The guv'nor placed his mouth quite close to my ear.

"Whatever you see, make no noise!" he whispered.

"Do you think it's the—the Voodoo?" I breathed hoarsely.

Nelson Lee looked at me steadily.

"We shall soon know for certain," was all he said.

And then we slowly pressed on again. Dead ahead of us thick bushes grew. Lee proceeded to push past these with great care. But, quite suddenly, he stopped dead, and allowed the bush to swing into place again. He did this so slowly that the operation took well over a minute.

I waited behind, wondering.

Then the guv'nor laid down full length upon his stomach, and beckoned to me to follow suit, placing a finger upon his mouth at the same time. But he needn't have troubled; it wasn't likely that I'd kick up a row just then. But I soon saw why he had been so jolly careful.

Once down on our tummies, we edged forward, and squinted between some of the thick leaves. And we gazed right down into a deep hollow. It was a kind of crater right in the middle of the wood, with high trees growing right to the edge all the way round.

The hollow itself was cup-like, and only a few bushes were dotted about. The rest was grass and sand. Of course, it wasn't a crater at all; very probably a lot of the sand had been excavated for building purposes years ago. On the other side, between the trees, there was a tiny cart track leading away into the open country. But we didn't know this until afterwards.

The spot was, of course, completely de-

serted at this time of night—at least, deserted by honest people. We were there, of course, and I don't mean to suggest that we weren't honest.

Within a foot of our faces there was a cliff—a sheer drop of fifteen feet. Not much, of course, but it was a good thing we had gone cautiously. We should have been betrayed properly if we had blundered through those bushes. I don't suppose the fall would have done us any harm, because there was nothing but sand beneath.

"Good heavens!" I murmured, aghast.

"Quiet—quiet, lad!"

But I simply couldn't help that startled exclamation of amazement.

For, down in the hollow, an extraordinary scene was being enacted. And, in that second, I knew that our worst fears were realised. The Voodoo worshippers had traced poor old Cecil Heathcote to England, and were evidently intent upon doing him to death. They were within a mile of Wynsidney Hall—now holding one of their horrible meetings!

Although I had been expecting it, I was shocked.

And Nelson Lee, too, was decidedly taken aback. I believe he had regarded Heathcote's yarn as somewhat exaggerated—the latter part of it, I mean; the gov'nor fully credited every incident of the Hayti story.

But now the truth was obvious.

A party of Haytians were in Suffolk—and, moreover, they were murderous Voodooists, and their only object in being here could be the murdering of Cecil Heathcote. Down in the hollow a rather small fire was blazing.

It was in the centre, and round it were three strange figures. They were all negroes, but they were attired in a most fantastic fashion, and painted hideously.

One of them had a small tom-tom upon his knees, and he was beating away at this solemnly and steadily. The other swayed to and fro as they sat—just as Heathcote had said—gabbling out some queer chant of their own.

"It's a Voodoo meeting, gov'nor!" I murmured.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"No doubt about that at all, Nipper," he replied grimly. "If we talk in the merest whispers we are safe. Those three devils down there cannot possibly

hear or see us. I am very glad that we investigated, young 'un."

"Why, what do you think they're up to?" I asked.

"There can be only one explanation to this meeting," declared Nelson Lee. "The Voodooists are going through some scheme for the killing of their victim. Then they will go their separate ways, and attempt to perform their vile work. I have no doubt that this gathering together of the trio is because of the two failures."

"They'll fail the next time, too!" I declared.

"We shall certainly do our best, Nipper," was the gov'nor's reply. "The very first thing to be done is to get Heathcote away from this spot. The first thing in the morning—after we have guarded Heathcote all night—we will take him with us to London. There we will disguise him, and pack him off to some secure rural retreat."

"And what about these blighters?" I asked.

"They will have to be captured by the police," said Lee. "If it is not possible to charge them with attempted murder we can, at least, cause them to be deported. Voodooism in England must be stamped out at once!"

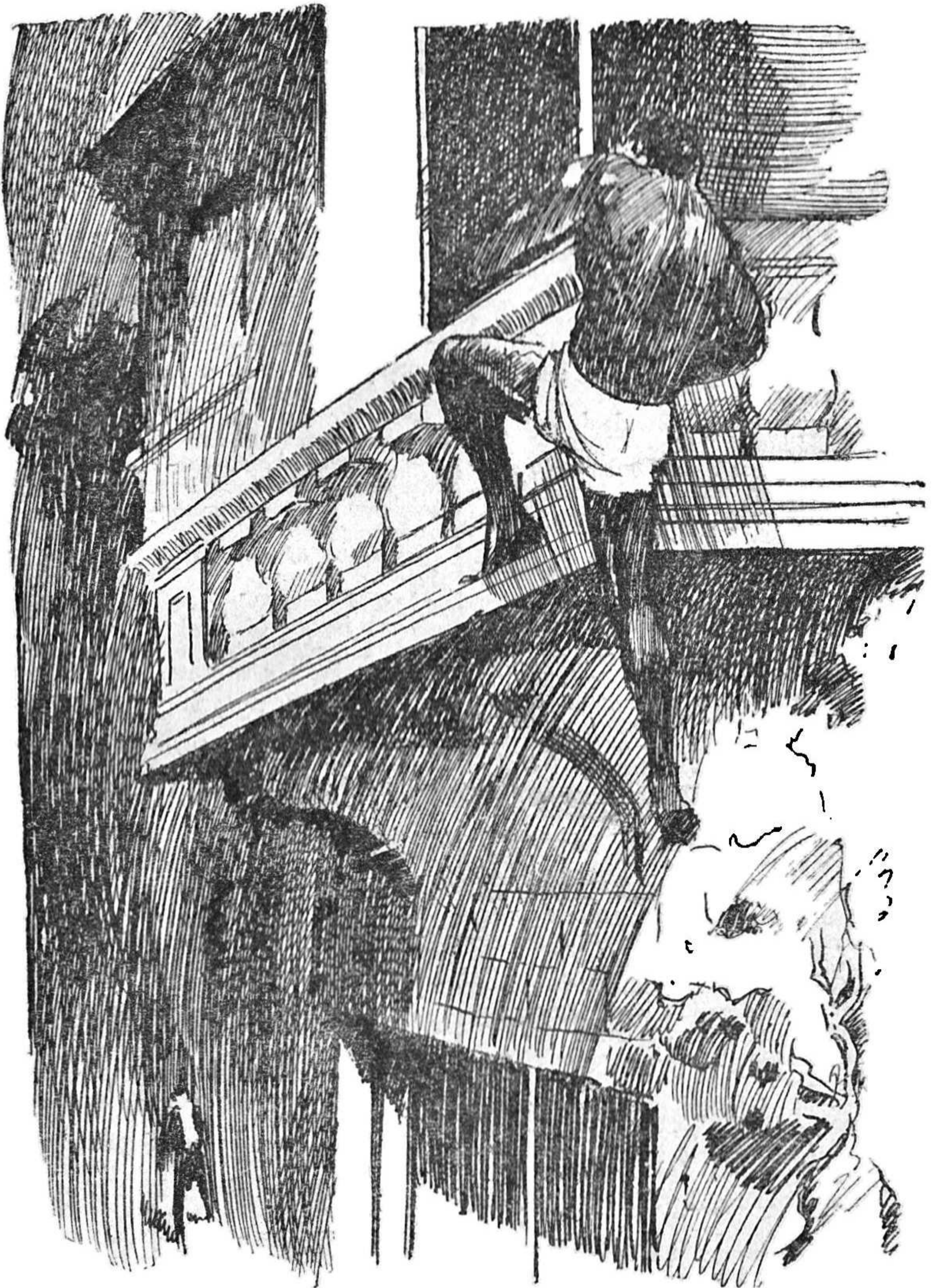
As we watched we both felt rather awed. We were accustomed to strange scenes and sights, but this affair was so utterly incongruous that it fairly took possession of us for the time being.

A Voodoo meeting in the heart of Suffolk!

It was almost unthinkable—but yet it was true. We had the evidence of it before our eyes. Afterwards, if we told people about it, we should probably be disbelieved. But we were satisfied enough ourselves!

And we soon had ample justification for being convinced. Further rites took place almost at once; and they were exactly as Heathcote had described. In Hayti, of course, there had been scores of niggers present. But here they were only three in number; for it wasn't possible for a whole crowd to come over to England. A number such as that, too, would have been unnecessary.

These three Haytians were, in all probability, three of the worst witch-doctors—the papaloi. They had come to England for the express purpose of killing Heathcote; and they would not leave



"I could see a black figure steadily and silently climbing——" (See page 21.)

until they had accomplished their purpose.

At least, that's what they fondly supposed. The gov'nor and I had quite different notions on the subject. This vile kind of religion was too horrible to think of seriously.

We watched the Voodoo messengers keenly. One of them suddenly jumped to his feet and commenced capering round the fire. He was only dressed in a ragged loin-cloth, and lots of beads and other jingling things. His skin was coppery brown, and shone and glistened in the firelight. It wasn't possible to see his face, for that was painted to such an extent that it looked like some ghastly demon.

Quite suddenly the Voodooist dodged behind a clump of bushes. When he returned he was dragging a small wicker basket. From this, with many low words of gibberish, he produced a live fowl.

"They're going to sacrifice the poor bird, gov'nor!" I breathed.

"Obviously, Nipper."

"Can't we save it, sir?"

"I'm afraid not. After all, we have our own safety to consider, young 'un. If we intervened now we should be marked down by the Voodoo fiends—and that is just what we wish to avoid. We shall need all our ingenuity for the protection of young Heathcote—not for the protection of ourselves."

"That's right enough," I admitted.

We watched grimly. I was feeling thundering wild, and wanted to hit something—the noses of those rotters below for choice. The papaloi who seemed to be in charge of the show waved the fowl to and fro with a pendulum-like movement. Was it possible that these horrible blacks were going to drink—

I wasn't able to think clearly any longer.

Quite suddenly a twig snapped behind me. Nelson Lee, who was lying full length, twisted round like an eel. I did the same. But we were too late. Disaster overtook us before we could defend ourselves.

Both the gov'nor and I received a violent shove from the rear. It was so unexpected that we were momentarily off our guard. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a dim figure—and then I was falling.

Being on the very edge of the cliff,

we were naturally in a bad position. But we had never dreamed of danger from behind. Even Lee, astute as he was, had not anticipated such a move.

Before we knew where we were we went plunging down the cliff. We fell together, like a couple of stones. Then—crash! I hit the ground with a thud that knocked every ounce of wind out of me.

Fortunately, we fell upon sand, and so were not seriously hurt. But the fall placed us entirely at the mercy of our enemies. I was winded, and unable to lift a finger. To tell the truth, I was in too much agony to struggle. When a chap's completely winded, he's not much good for a scrap.

And the gov'nor fell on his hands and knees; his face buried itself in the sand, and he was momentarily blinded. And while we were in this state, completely helpless, we were pounced upon by the Voodooists.

In spite of my pain, I was able to think.

And I expected, every second, to feel several inches of steel slicing into me. And I couldn't do a thing to defend myself. It was a pretty rotten feeling, I can tell you.

We were at the mercy of these devils. Yet, rather to my surprise, the slicing business didn't come off. Instead, I felt my hand roughly brought together, and my wrists bound. The same fate overtook my ankles.

Obviously, Nelson Lee was undergoing the same treatment, for I was conscious of much spluttering near by, accompanied by the sounds of a struggle. It was impossible to see anything, for the fire had disappeared somehow.

I suppose it had been stamped out all in a hurry. This was unexpected, and the result was that we were in utter darkness. I couldn't see the figures of our captors, even—although I heard them.

It wasn't long before I pulled myself together.

I lay still and listened. There wasn't a sound of any sort now. Had the Voodoo fiends cleared off? Or were they still lurking near in the darkness? Anyhow, I decided to chance it.

"Gov'nor!" I exclaimed hoarsely.

"Oh, so you're there, Nipper?" came Nelson Lee's voice. "I was just about to speak to you, my lad. I have nearly been choked with sand, and I cannot

open my eyes even now. We appear to have fallen into trouble, young 'un."

"I—I thought they were going to kill us, sir!"

"It is rather surprising that they have not," was the gov'nor's reply. "I must confess that I expected death. But our enemies, having rendered us helpless, have cleared off."

"No, Nipper. I distinctly heard them creeping through the bushes. They have gone, and I bitterly realise what this means," said Lee from the darkness. "We have been tricked—and tricked cleverly, too!"

I tried to scramble up, but couldn't do it. Nelson Lee was only about a couple of yards from me, as I could tell by his voice.

"What do you mean—tricked?" I asked.

"Precisely what I say, my lad," said the gov'nor. "That tom-tom was beaten for the express purpose of luring us into the wood. Then, as we watched the scene in this hollow, we were taken unawares from the rear. Being upon the edge of the cliff, it was easy for one assailant to hurl us both over. And here we are, bound and helpless. The situation is terrible, Nipper."

I grunted.

"Might have been worse, sir," I said philosophically.

"For ourselves—yes, it might have been far worse," was Lee's grim answer.

"But what of young Heathcote, Nipper? Have you thought of him? Why has this trick been perpetrated? Why are we here, bound and helpless, left in the heart of this wood—where nobody comes once in a month?"

"Hanged if I know!" I said.

"Unless it's because those Voodoo blighters mean us to lay here and starve; or perhaps they're coming back——"

"You don't seem to grasp the significance of this affair, Nipper."

jected Nelson Lee. "We have been trapped in this way for one definite reason. While we are lying here, unable to move, the devil-worshippers intend wreaking their vengeance upon poor Heathcote!"

"You—you think they'll make an attempt——"

"They will not only make an attempt; but they will succeed, unless we manage to get to the Hall in time to frustrate the Voodooists' evil designs. They mean to strike during the night—

and so we have been lured out of the way. By James! It is rather a compliment, Nipper!"

"I'm not keen on these sort of compliments!" I grunted. "It does seem to show that the niggers were quite aware of the fact that we were at the Hall to guard Mr. Heathcote. And now we're like a couple of trussed chickens!"

We were both feeling very bitter.

We did not blame ourselves for falling into the trap; that was just a piece of bad luck. But we were intensely worried. As the gov'nor had said, there could be only one explanation.

The Voodooists had deliberately trapped us. Being rather scared of killing us, perhaps, they had merely rendered us helpless. Then, in the darkness, they had slunk off to—kill Cecil Heathcote!

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH SEVERAL INCHES OF MY SKIN SUFFER CONSIDERABLY—BUT I AM WELL REPAID FOR THE AGONY—THE GUV'NOR AND I LEAVE THE HOLLOW, AND COME ACROSS A BLACK, SINOUS FORM—THINGS HAPPEN, AND THERE IS MUCH EXCITEMENT.

WHEN disaster overtook us the time had been about ten o'clock, as near as I can remember.

Well, I'm going to skip three hours.

I'm going to skip them completely—because I don't want to be reminded of them! Besides there wouldn't be any interest in sitting down and writing the things that happened during the time between ten p.m. and one a.m.—for the simple reason that nothing happened at all!

When one o'clock struck, the gov'nor and I were still in the hollow; we were still bound; and we were still wild.

I don't know where one o'clock struck, because we didn't hear anything, but I suppose it must have been striking somewhere. I only know that it was one o'clock by the fact that I looked at my watch five minutes afterwards.

That's queer, isn't it?

How could I look at my watch when my hands were bound? Of course, only magicians can do that sort of thing. I'm not a magician, and I don't magish! The simple fact was, I took my watch out in the ordinary way and squinted at the luminous dial.

"Five past one, guv'nor?" I panted hoarsely.

"Dear me! I'm afraid we shall be too late, Nipper," said Nelson Lee anxiously. "But you have been wonderful, my lad. For goodness' sake, get your knife and cut through my ropes. Those hounds must have tied me more securely, for I have not been able to shift an inch!"

The fact of the matter was, I had wriggled free.

That sounds easy, doesn't it? A chap's bound up, and he wriggles free. That sounds one of the simplest things imaginable. But, for three solid hours, I had been wriggling, and a chap gets a bit fed-up.

It was the most tedious job I had ever tackled in my life; and I dare say it would be just as tedious to make a long song about it in this record. The facts remain that I did get free—and I reckon that's enough.

My wrists were chafed terribly; several inches of skin had practically disappeared. At all events, my arms felt raw, and they throbbed agonisingly. But I was free, and that was the main thing.

Of course, those rotters hadn't paid much attention to me because they saw that I was a young 'un, and considered that any old way was good enough to rope me up. That's just where they made a terrific bloomer. I pride myself that I'm hot stuff when it comes to ropes and things. I've got out of some tight corners at different times—and when my very life depended upon it occasionally.

Here the thing was different.

There was no violent hurry. I shouldn't die a nasty death unless I got free in half-an-hour; I had the whole night before me. And I had just wriggled and twisted and turned, until something gave way.

Inch by inch I loosened the ropes, and after three solid hours, as I said, I got a hand free. Unless a chap's been bound up as tightly as I was, and had undergone the same ordeal, he can't possibly realise what a dreadful experience it is.

But what was the good of being free? That's what I asked myself. Three hours had passed, and it was no good trying to make it any less. It was now just past one, and Wynsidney Hall would be asleep.

Three hours!

Why, poor old Heathcote would be done in by this time. I didn't feel very enthusiastic as I fished out my clasp-knife and slashed through the ropes which bound my ankles. My elation at being free was completely overshadowed by the terrible worry at the back of my mind.

I soon ripped through the guv'nor's ropes, and then, for about five minutes, we stamped about in the most acute agony. When our circulation had been properly restored, and when the "pins and needles" had vanished, we felt better.

"I did my best, sir!" I exclaimed rather glumly.

Nelson Lee slapped me lightly on the back.

"My dear Nipper, I have nothing but praise for you," he exclaimed. "Don't despair, my lad. After all, there is a possibility that we may be in time to avert the disaster. We are free—and that is everything!"

"But Mr. Heathcote will be killed by this time——"

"I don't see why we should assume that, Nipper. One o'clock is not at all late, considering the circumstances," went on Lee. "It is even possible that some of the fellows at the Hall are still at the card-tables, or in the billiard-room. And it is not likely that the Voodooists will act until the whole house is asleep."

I felt distinctly better.

"Something in that, anyway," I observed. "The best thing we can do, guv'nor, is to cut the cackle and get to business! In other words we must stop jawing and hurry to the Hall as fast as our legs will carry us."

"That's the very idea, young 'un," said the guv'nor crisply.

And we set off without further ado. I'd bound my handkerchief and Lee's handkerchief round my two wrists, and they now felt a little easier. They had been bleeding a bit, and they were fearfully raw. That dash through the wood didn't improve them, either.

For we didn't trouble to go noiselessly this time. We just blundered through the trees for all we were worth. I allowed Nelson Lee to lead the way, so if there were any prickly brambles or things he hit them first. I'd had my share of pain. If there was any more skin to come off, it might as well be his!

"As it happened, my cruel little plan didn't work, for we didn't strike any brambles at all. And, at last, we emerged into the open. The night was rather black now, for the moon had decided to go to bed. At all events, he was lying down quite comfortable, and had already drawn the blankets over him. That is to say, he was quite near the horizon, and was partially obscured by clouds.

Therefore everything was now gloomy and dim.

The clouds were obscuring most of the stars, too, and Wynsidney Hall was practically invisible.

Nelson Lee and I passed through the gardens, and we didn't see a glimmer of light ahead. Evidently everybody had gone to by-by—and this struck me as being rather queer.

"Rather funny, isn't it, sir?" I murmured, as we walked. "Why should everybody have gone to bed so unconcernedly? Ain't we of any importance? Have we been left out in the cold, cruel night without anybody searching for us?"

Nelson Lee grinned.

"I strongly suspect, young 'un, that our excellent host, Lord Wynsidney, is peacefully sleeping in the sublime belief that we are quite safe," he replied. "In all probability a false message was sent to him, saying that we should be away—a telegram, probably."

"Must be something like that," I agreed. "His lordship knows the danger, and if we disappeared he'd at once suspect things, and send out search-parties to find our mangled remains. My hat! And we were lying in that beastly wood while everybody calmly went to bed. It's a bit thick, sir!"

Nelson Lee didn't make any reply to that remark. He walked on, and at last came to the lawns. The bulk of the Hall now loomed before us. There wasn't a light showing in the whole building. The whole blessed crowd of guests were in bed and asleep.

"What's the programme, sir?" I breathed.

"There is only one thing to be done, my lad. We must get indoors and find out whether Heathcote is still safe. From the appearance of things I should say that he is. If his enemies intend making any attempt to-night, they are apparently reserving it until later. Upon my soul,

Nipper, it will be excellent if we can catch the villains red-handed. The tables will be turned, indeed, then."

"Well, there's no harm in being optimistic, is there?" I remarked.

And, to tell the truth, I was optimistic. The house didn't look as though a tragedy had taken place within its walls. If Heathcote had been killed, then his remains must still be in his bedroom, undiscovered. And that wasn't likely.

It was just about half-past one now, and it was quite obvious that card-playing and billiards had been deserted. As a matter of fact, old Lady Wynsidney had rather severe notions regarding late hours. She believed in everybody being in bed by midnight at least.

We moved across the lawn noiselessly. The grass was superb, and felt like a velvet carpet beneath our feet. I was just about to speak to the guv'nor again, when he suddenly gripped my arm and pulled me to a stop.

"Not a sound, young 'un!" he hissed right into my ear.

I wondered what was the matter, but the next second I learned the truth. For Lee pointed.

His finger was directed towards the house. A clump of bushes growing near the terrace concealed a portion of it, but the guv'nor pointed just beyond. Then, in the gloom, I could see a black sinuous figure steadily and silently climbing up the thick ivy which clung to the wall.

My heart went into my mouth.

The Voodooists!

Or, at least, one of them. I don't suppose any more of the wretches were about. A job of this sort was essentially a one-man business. Left undisturbed, he would have accomplished his object as easily as winking.

For we saw Heathcote's window was wide open at the bottom, and the ivy did duty for an excellent ladder. The black murderer would easily be able to slip into Heathcote's bedroom, and then do his worst. Inject some deadly poison, as likely as not. That would be simple, and it wouldn't cause any commotion. Heathcote would be entirely at his mercy.

But these thoughts were cast aside for others.

We had come in time!

If we were quick, and acted in the right way, we should be able to defeat

the enemy, after all! It was a tense moment, and I don't think I should have known what to do if I'd been left to myself.

Then Nelson Lee whispered again.

"I must get into the house at once, Nipper," he exclaimed. "There is a window at the back, I noticed this evening. I shall be able to reach Heathcote's room just in time, I believe. You remain out here, and you must prevent the fellow from escaping by means of the ivy."

The gov'nor didn't wait another second. There was no time for making alternate plans. We just had to act—and act at once. Hesitation would have been fatal. I gazed at the ivy in a kind of dazed way. Scarcely ten seconds had passed since we first saw the black figure. I easily guessed why Nelson Lee had not rushed up to the wall and mounted in chase of the would-be murderer.

For one thing, the chap above would have all the advantage, and for another thing, he could climb up quickly, get into the room, and make his escape through the house. By this plan there could be no escape if Lee's idea could be worked. The fellow would be trapped completely.

But I very soon saw that I should have to act on my own if Heathcote was to be saved. For the sinuous figure reached the window-sill almost before Nelson Lee had left me, and he cautiously hauled himself into the bedroom.

Why, in less than a minute Heathcote would be killed!

The gov'nor hadn't foreseen that the Voodoo messenger would reach the window so quickly, and there was certainly not sufficient time for the detective to get round. I saw that I should have to use my own wits.

And there was only one thing to be done.

That was to climb up the ivy just as quickly as ever I could, and tackle the rotter single-handed. Heathcote would awaken, of course, and he'd lend a hand. The main thing was to prevent the attack.

Even as I came to a decision, I saw the figure disappear into the dark room. I streaked across the lawn like lightning, and fairly hurled myself at the ivy. It's easier to climb ivy than it is to descend

it, and I simply swarmed up with the agility of a monkey.

It wasn't necessary for me to keep quiet, so I just let myself go. It's a wonder I didn't fall to the ground, for the ivy swayed and tore away from the wall in several places as I climbed.

But none of these nasty things happened, and at last I gripped the window-ledge. As I did so something black loomed up before me against the window, and a gasp sounded—a frightened, choking gasp.

I caught a vision of something glittering.

It was a knife—a long, wicked-looking merchant, with a point like a needle. Evidently it had been sharpened up for the occasion. The sight of that knife fairly made me shift.

I was in a most awful position. I either had to drop sheer to the ground, or allow myself to be used as a target for five inches of steel. But I didn't see the fun of either. The knife wouldn't do me any good, and a fall to the ground would be rather uncomfortable. For, right beneath, there was nothing but gravel. And gravel is not to be compared to a feather bed.

Quick as a flash I jerked myself upwards. My head butted clean into the stomach of the chap at the window—just as he was raising his knife, I thought. Anyhow, the knife went clattering away, and the Voodoo man gave a louder gasp than ever. The next second we both tumbled on the floor of the bedroom.

"Great Scott! What in Heaven's name——?"

It was Heathcote's voice, and it was rather sleepy and dazed in tone. I suppose he was a bit surprised, waking up to find two dim figures struggling on the floor of his bedroom.

"Lend a hand, Mr. Heathcote!" I gasped. "I've got one of these Voodoo——"

I couldn't get any further. My assailant's fist caught me clean on the mouth, and before I could bring my own special upper-cut into use, the black wriggled away and dashed to the window.

By the time I scrambled up he was already descending the ivy with reckless speed. As I watched he jumped to the ground and landed with a thud. Then, without pausing a second, he pelted away round the terrace.

I pelted away, too, for I mopped down

the ivy with all speed. My blood was up, and it was a bit too thick to see the fellow escaping before my eyes. But when I reached the end of the terrace I could see nothing and could hear nothing.

All the same, I jerked out my revolver and ran on for a little way. It soon became evident to me that the rufian had escaped. And, rather reluctantly, I turned back to the house.

Lights were now appearing in almost every window, and as I hurried up the front door opened, and Nelson Lee appeared.

"Is that you, Nipper?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, sir."

"You are all right?"

"As right as rain, guv'nor," I replied. "But that chap has escaped completely. Did I do right in chasing him up the ivy?"

Nelson Lee gripped my arm.

"You have saved Heathcote's life, Nipper—that will show you whether you did right or not!" he replied quietly.

"I had a little difficulty in getting in, and I certainly could not have reached Heathcote's bedroom in time to avert the tragedy. It seems that you have proved yourself to be the better man on this occasion, Nipper."

"Oh, rot, sir!" I said modestly.

All the same, I was a bit flattered. And then we both turned back into the house, and found everything in uproar.

Excitement was general, and it was obviously impossible to keep the Voodoo business a secret any longer. This was rather unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped. And before another five minutes had passed everybody was talking about Heathcote's danger, and his narrow escape, with bated breath.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I EXAMINE THE KNIFE AND A CURIOUS SANDAL—A POT OF PAINT PLAYS QUITE AN IMPORTANT PART IN THE INVESTIGATION—NELSON LEE GOES TO LONDON, AND I KEEP WATCH ON HEATHCOTE—I AM HUGELY ASTONISHED OVER SOMETHING.

THE excitement was tremendous.

This wasn't at all surprising, for it must have been a bit of a shock to most of the guests to learn that one of their number had nearly been murdered in his bed.

The guests clustered about in all stages of dress and undress. It was really funny to see old Lord Wynsidney chatting with Nelson Lee in the hall. His lordship was attired only in a dressing gown and slippers, and his hair—what there was of it—closely resembled a mop. Clumps of girls were on the stairs, and they were all airily attired, and I saw more than one pair of dainty feet. Lady Wynsidney, when she appeared, was rather shocked, and sent some of the girls hustling back to their bedrooms. It certainly wasn't the thing to be on public view clad only in silky, lacy kimonos—or whatever the funny things are called. I must say they looked ripping, at any rate.

Heathcote, of course, wasn't touched.

Before the intruder had a chance to reach the bed I had intervened, and the little game was spoilt. Heathcote was extremely grateful, and expressed great surprise at the whole affair.

Lord Wynsidney himself was amazed. For, late in the evening, he had received a short note, presumably from the guv'nor, saying that Lee and I had gone off on the trail, and would not be back until the morning. The note added that all danger had passed. This was why Heathcote and his lordship were so astonished.

The note was not even cleverly forged. The writing resembled Nelson Lee's in a slight degree, but that was all. But, of course, Lord Wynsidney was not a handwriting expert, and he was not very closely acquainted with the guv'nor's fist. He admitted that he thought the writing was rather strange, but concluded that it had been written in a great hurry.

"I'm rather puzzled," Nelson Lee exclaimed thoughtfully, as he examined the letter. "How did these Haytians obtain a specimen of my handwriting? It is obviously an attempt at forgery, this letter, but crudely performed. It is quite evident that one member of the enemy, at least, is acquainted with English very thoroughly."

"That's nothing to be surprised at," remarked Heathcote. "A good few of the Haytians are splendid scholars. But it's certainly queer how your handwriting was copied, Mr. Lee."

"Well, we will dismiss the subject for the time being," said the guv'nor. "I think, Nipper, that we had better attend to your wrists."

"Oh, I'm all right, sir," I said.

"Let's go up to Mr. Heathcote's bedroom to look for clues."

"I'm afraid there will be none," replied Lee. "In any case, I do not think they will be much use to us. We know sufficient already to tell us that the Voodoo worshippers are really here, in Suffolk, and that they are a deadly menace."

"It's the most astounding thing I've ever heard of," exclaimed Unwin Mellford, who had just come into the library, where we were congregated. "If this had not actually happened under my nose I should have been decidedly loth to believe the story."

"You haven't been in Hayti, old man," said Heathcote quietly.

Mellford smiled.

"I am sure I have no wish to visit that delightful island," he said drily.

The famous tenor was very friendly with Heathcote, having known him for years, and he was intensely relieved to find that no damage had been done.

While we were talking Miss Hardinge appeared, accompanied by Lady Wynsidney and three or four others. Frankie was looking very pale and anxious, and I thought she'd never looked prettier.

Of course, she had reason to be anxious. She'd only been engaged a few hours, and it wasn't exactly stimulating to awaken in the middle of the night to learn that her fiancé had been very near to death's door.

For her benefit Nelson Lee retold the story of our adventures in the wood, and she and the others were tremendously interested. They knew that the danger had not passed, but were reassured when Nelson Lee explained that a further attempt would be unlikely.

The Voodooists must surely realise by this time that England was a bit too warm for them. In Hayti, perhaps, they were able to perform their dastardly work—but in England things were a bit different.

Well, I had my wrists bathed, and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I was rather glad that they were grazed. Because, don't you see, it was Frankie who attended to me, and I made her promise that she'd go through the whole operation again the next day. In fact, from that moment I made out that my injuries were much more serious than they really were.

It was getting dawn by the time everything quietened down. But Lee and I

went upstairs to Heathcote's bedroom and had a look round. The first thing we spotted was the long knife which I had jerked from the Voodooist's hand.

"This is interesting," exclaimed Lee, taking the weapon beneath the strong electric light. "This knife undoubtedly came from West Africa originally. The design is quite familiar to me."

"But West Africa isn't Hayti," I put in.

"Nevertheless, there is a distinct connection between the two places," replied the gov'nor. "Voodooism originated in West Africa, and therefore there is nothing remarkable in the fact that an African knife is used by a Voodooist. I will admit, however, that it is somewhat curious."

We searched the room thoroughly, but there wasn't anything else of interest. The bedroom was quite in order. The chap I had struggled with must have been actually on the point of stabbing Heathcote to the heart when he heard me climbing the ivy. All things considered, Heathcote and I had both had a lucky escape.

It was rough luck that the villain had managed to slip through our fingers; but nobody was to blame for that.

To be on the safe side, it was arranged that Heathcote should sleep with the gov'nor and I, in the big bedroom which had been set aside for us. There was an extra bed in there, and we all repaired to the room for the purpose of having our night's rest.

Everybody else toddled off to their own beds.

But, somehow, Nelson Lee did not seem inclined to tumble between the sheets. He stood by the window, gazing out over the lawns in the weak light of the summer dawn. Heathcote had commenced undressing again, and I was lugging off my waistcoat.

"Is this paint down here?" asked the gov'nor abruptly.

"Paint?" queried our companion. "Where?"

"If you come here you will see it."

Heathcote crossed over to the window. And I, being a curious sort of bounder, followed suit. The window was big, and we all three leaned out and looked down. Right below us there was a tiled pathway. Heathcote's room was on the north side of the house—ours was on the west, round the corner. And, a little to the left of us, we saw a pot of dark green

paint. At least it had been a pot at one time or other. Just now it was empty, and the paint was smeared all over the coloured tiles.

"Oh!" exclaimed Heathcote, with a laugh. "I know what that is."

"Paint!" I grinned.

"No. Last night one of the fellows came into the billiard-room and said that he'd ruined his shoes," laughed Heathcote. "It appears that he'd blundered into this paint-pot in the darkness, and had overturned it. That's all."

"Jolly silly thing to leave paint in such a place," I observed.

"Yes, I can see somebody getting into a row to-morrow," said our companion, with a chuckle. "It's those painters, you know. They're doing up a summer-house or something just round the corner. One of the men laid the paint-pot there, and forgot all about it, I suppose."

I yawned, but the gov'nor still continued to look down upon the pathway. Then he turned to us again and rebuttoned his coat.

"I sha'n't be long," he said. "I'm going down."

"Going down!" I echoed. "What the dickens for?"

"If you care to come, you'll see, my dear Nipper," replied Nelson Lee smoothly.

I was sleepy and tired, and for a second I determined to jump into bed. But there was something about the gov'nor's tone which told me that he had made a discovery.

And so, grumbling a bit, I went with him downstairs, leaving Heathcote to follow or not, as he wished. As it happened, he came after us.

On the stairs we met Unwin Mellford. He was going down, and he looked at us in some surprise, and nodded cheerily.

"Still investigating?" He smiled.

"That's it," said the gov'nor. "What are you doing out at this unearthly hour, Mr. Mellford? I thought everybody had gone back to bed."

The singer chuckled.

"Oh, I've been plotting," he replied. "Sir Edgar Warde and I put our heads together and decided that it wouldn't be healthy to go back to bed again. So we're off on a long tramp, to give us an appetite for breakfast. I expect Sir Edgar will be down in a minute or two."

We left Mellford in the hall, finding

his hat, and went through the French windows of the library. In a minute we came to the spot where the paint was upset over the tiled pathway.

And Nelson Lee at once bent forward.

"That is what I saw from upstairs," he exclaimed eagerly. "I could not be quite sure, and so I came down. Do you see, Nipper?"

I saw right enough.

In the middle of the splash of paint there was a distinct footprint. I had seen it from above, and had concluded that it had been caused by the man who had knocked the pot over the night before.

But, when I came to think of it, this wasn't likely. The man wouldn't have knocked the pot over, and then tramped into the paint. And there was something else.

The footprint was that of—a naked foot!

"My hat! The fellow didn't climb the ivy with his bare feet, did he?" I asked, in astonishment.

"No, Nipper. His shoe came off as he hurriedly descended," replied Nelson Lee.

"How do you know his shoe came off?" I asked.

"Because I found it beneath the ivy some little time ago," replied the gov'nor. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No, you jolly well didn't!" I growled. "Let's have a look at it."

Lee smiled, and produced a small article from his coat pocket. It wasn't a shoe at all, really. It was a very curiously designed sandal, and the gov'nor said that it was of African make. It looked old and dry, and the leather was cracked in scores of places.

"This shoe, or sandal, and the dagger, are two important clues," said Lee quietly. "I fully believe that we shall succeed in freeing you, Heathcote, from this 'Voodoo curse' before another twenty-four hours have passed."

I shook my head.

"I don't see where the importance comes in," I objected. "These things can't be called clues! We can't trace them, can we? We know, as a matter of fact, that they come from Hayti!"

"Do we?" said Nelson Lee easily.

"Why, yes, of course—"

I paused, for the gov'nor was looking at me strangely. And I dropped the subject then and there. Had Lee formed some theory of his own—some theory

which was to flood fresh light on the whole matter?

I didn't trouble to puzzle over the affair just then. Together with Nelson Lee I bent down and closely examined the footprint. The paint had dried somewhat. There was only a thin film on the tiles, and this film had dried over in a partial degree.

Therefore the footprint was as neatly outlined as though it had been made in soft wax. It was a perfect impression; even the lines of the skin could be seen.

"Will it be of any use to you, Mr. Lee?" asked Heathcote.

"Very possibly—very possibly," replied Lee absently.

He took out his pocket-book and then sharpened his pencil. After that he made an exact copy of the footmark. The guv'nor is clever with the pencil, and that sketch was perfect. On the little toe—it was the left foot—there was a kind of kink—a deformity. This stood out clearly, and couldn't be mistaken.

"I have made this sketch just for the sake of precaution," Nelson Lee remarked. "Of course, this paint must not be disturbed, Heathcote. We had better cover it over before we retire to bed."

We found an old pail, and placed this over the footprint. Then we went upstairs and tumbled between the sheets.

It was eight o'clock by the time we rose. The sun was shining brilliantly, and the birds were singing. Several of the guests were away on the golf-links, enjoying a before-breakfast game.

And when the guv'nor and I went down we made a remarkable discovery. The pail had been removed from the footprint, and the latter was completely obliterated! It had been scratched about and destroyed.

Who had done it?

The painters knew nothing, whatever of the matter at all; they did not even know that the paint had been overturned. And certainly no member of the house-party had deliberately performed that objectless act.

The Voodooist must have returned—in daylight!—to deface the clue.

"It is rather a good thing I took a copy, Nipper," said Nelson Lee drily.

"By jingo! I should think so!" I said. "But I can't make it out, sir. Surely that rotter didn't come back——"

"Don't trouble your head about it,

young 'un," put in Lee. "I fancy the mystery will be cleared to-day."

"Why, what's going to happen to-day?" I asked.

"I am going to London, for one thing."

"Going to London?" I echoed. "What the dickens for? Look here, guv'nor, you might be open with me, you know! Have you kept anything back from me? Because if you have I call it——"

"Never mind what you call it," smiled Nelson Lee. "I am off to town immediately after breakfast. I shall be back before this evening, and I leave Heathcote in your charge. You must look after him very thoroughly."

And after breakfast the guv'nor went off. I felt rather slighted, for I knew that he had got some wheeze or other in his head. That's just like him, though. He won't tell me things until he's certain of himself.

During the morning Heathcote and I and several other fellows went down to the river for a bathe. There were proper sheds and everything, a ripping diving-board, and all sorts of luxuries. Lord Wynsidney didn't bathe himself, but he had an eye for the pleasure of his guests.

That bathe was glorious. A whole crowd of us splashed about and generally let ourselves go. There was one particular rough-and-tumble which I shall remember to my dying day. Because I made a discovery during that rough-and-tumble—a discovery which made me gasp with amazement.

I won't say what that discovery was—yet.

Anyhow, I dressed myself, and then sat down and had a good think. I didn't tell Heathcote of what I'd seen; I suspected that he'd laugh at me. But I was tremendously impressed myself, and longed for Nelson Lee to return.

And then, just before tea, something happened.

I was walking with Heathcote towards the Hall. We had been on the links for a couple of hours, and were passing a dense spinney. The sun was shining gloriously, and the air quivered with heat.

Suddenly there was a low cry from Heathcote.

He threw up his hands and fell to the ground in a heap!

There was blood on his forehead!

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH I ADOPT A RUSE, AND FIND THAT IT WASN'T NECESSARY—FOR THE GUV'NOR PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE, AND CAUSES GENERAL AMAZEMENT—THE TRUTH COMES OUT, AND CECIL HEATHCOTE IS FREED FROM THE DREAD CURSE OF THE VODOO!

JUST for one second I felt sick.

A dozen thoughts crowded through my mind. I had failed! Nelson Lee had left me in charge of Heathcote, and I had failed to protect him! What would the guv'nor say to me? And who had fired the shot? Where had the bullet come from? I had heard no report!

Then my wits returned, and I dropped to Heathcote's side.

Next second I heaved a sigh of relief. For I saw at once that the bullet had merely grazed his temple. The skin was only torn for about an inch. But it had been a very narrow escape. The third attempt by shooting! I didn't think much of the Voodooist's marksmanship, anyhow. But it's not so easy as it seems to pot a fellow as he is walking.

I looked round, and saw that there was a summer-house near by. It was shady there, and I managed to drag Heathcote into it. He was beginning to come to then, and in a few minutes he was sitting up, blinking at me.

"It's all right," I said. "You were shot, Mr. Heathcote."

"Shot!" he echoed dazedly. "Good heavens!"

A wild idea was taking shape in my mind, and I decided to put it into practice right away. You see, I had made discoveries, and I was pretty certain that the shot had been fired by—well, somebody.

In another ten minutes Heathcote was practically himself, except for a bad headache and a huge bump. The grazed skin didn't bleed much. I talked to him seriously for quite a long while, and he agreed to what I said. He was thinking of his own safety. The next time his enemy wouldn't miss, perhaps!

I left the summer-house and ran towards the Hall.

On one of the lawns I met Lord Wynsidney and Miss Frankie, and one or two other ladies. Very quickly I explained what had occurred. Frankie turned pale, but was plucky. She had been asking Lord Wynsidney where Heathcote was, it turned out. Of course,

he'd told her that he and I were going on to the links, but she was naturally anxious to be with him.

I positively assured her that Heathcote was not really hurt; and then I explained my idea. This, in short, was to announce to the bulk of the guests—the men in particular—that Cecil Heathcote had been shot dead! It was a whopper, of course; but it was a pardonable one, under the circumstances.

I had a good reason for this step, of course—a very excellent reason.

But, as it happened, my ruse wasn't really necessary. For the denouement of the whole business came almost at once. And I was very glad of this, for it wasn't exactly nice to say that Heathcote was dead. Besides, there would have been tremendous difficulties in the idea which I did not see at the time. All I thought of was affording Heathcote protection. For, if his enemy thought him dead, another attempt at murder would not be made. That was logic.

I spotted a group of men over on the terrace. They were chatting in the shade, nearly all of them attired in white flannels and blazers. Sir Edgar Warde had just joined them.

With a rush, I was upon them.

"Mr. Heathcote has been shot!" I gasped out. "Shot in the head——"

"Great heavens!" gasped Sir Edgar Warde, with a start.

He turned very pale. And the others stared at me in horror. My announcement had come like a bombshell.

"You must be mad, Nipper!" said Unwin Mellford hoarsely. "Is—is Heathcote dead?"

I nodded, feeling that I wasn't telling a lie by doing that. If these chaps liked to take my nod the wrong way, that was their fault.

"Dear old Heathcote dead!" muttered Mellford brokenly. "Oh, how awful!"

And then, at that precise moment, Nelson Lee appeared. I was hugely relieved to see him, for I was beginning to feel that this affair was too much for me. And with the guv'nor I saw our old friend Detective-Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard.

The two detectives—official and unofficial—came briskly along the terrace.

They were looking grim, and I rushed up to them. In a few quick sentences I told them of my discovery of the morning, and of what had happened since.

Nelson Lee, to my disgust, didn't seem a bit surprised at my discovery.

"You have done well, Nipper," he exclaimed crisply. "What you found out just puts the finishing-touch to my own discoveries. Your scheme for the protection of Heathcote is rather drastic, perhaps, but quite sound. Fortunately, there is no necessity to adopt it. In five minutes' time everybody can know that Heathcote is very much alive. Thank Heaven, he was not killed by that shot. I think, Morley, that you had better make your arrest straight away."

Detective-Inspector Morley nodded.

We all walked forward. The group of men in flannels were still talking together, gravely, and with pale faces. Morley strode straight up to Mr. Unwin Mellford. I just saw a flash of steel, and then Mellford's wrists were tightly encircled. The bracelets were on him!

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he panted wildly.

"The meaning, Mr. Mellford, is that I have a warrant here for your arrest," said the inspector coldly. "Acting upon information from Mr. Nelson Lee—"

"You're mad—mad," cried Mellford, white with fury.

"Perhaps I had better warn you that anything you now say may be used in evidence against you," said Morley formally. "I'm sorry to cause this commotion here, gentlemen," he added to the others, "but this man is rather a desperate character."

The others were simply staggered. But that was the truth of it—and I was jolly glad that I had made the discovery quite independently. While the gov'nor had been making discoveries in London, I had done my share at Wyncsidney Hall.

The truth of the whole matter was there weren't any Voodooists at all, and the whole murder scheme had been evolved in the cunning brain of Unwin Mellford, the famous tenor!

It was an amazing revelation—but it was the truth.

Mellford nearly went mad in his passionate fury, and we easily discovered the truth of the whole affair. I don't know much about love, but it was love which had caused Mellford to plot so fiendishly against the man he had called his friend.

Nelson Lee had been very interested

in the sandal and the dagger. Both, he had declared, had come from West Africa. But he had been struck by the fact that the sandals, in particular, were dried up and old, as though they had not been used for years and years.

At the same time, Nelson Lee had noted the fact that Unwin Mellford had not appeared from his bedroom at the time of the alarm until a full half-hour afterwards. Then he had quietly slipped into the library. He was pale and agitated—and the gov'nor had guessed things. He couldn't be sure, of course, but he had formed a theory.

This theory was strengthened when he found that Mellford was going for a long walk before breakfast with Sir Edgar Warde. Mellford had got down first, so that he could slip round the house and obliterate that tell-tale footprint. He had done so later, as I have described; but he didn't know that Nelson Lee had taken a copy of that footprint.

The gov'nor had gone to London and had made a thorough investigation. He had visited many antique dealers, and had established the fact that the curious shoes, the dagger, and other things had been purchased by Mr. Unwin Mellford two or three weeks before.

This proved that the whole plot had been premeditated. There was amply sufficient evidence to warrant an immediate arrest. I, for my part, had accidentally grabbed hold of Mellford's foot as he and I and a lot of other men were bathing. It was Mellford's left foot, and I had immediately seen a curious deformity of the left toe. This corresponded exactly with the footprint in the paint! I thus knew that Mellford was the man who had climbed the ivy.

Mellford, of course, had trodden in the paint as he fled round the house.

But what of the motive?

That was made quite clear by Mellford himself.

He had attempted to kill Cecil Heathcote because the latter was his rival. The singer possessed a passionate nature, capable of intense love and intense hatred. He was passionately in love with Frances Hardinge—which was rather an insult to such a sweet girl, I thought.

But there it was. Three months before this record of events, Mellford had proposed to her, and she had frankly told him that she liked him, but could not give him her hand. Mellford had con-

veiled his real vile character very cleverly. For it afterwards turned out that he was a scoundrel to his finger-tips—a brute and a beast.

Frankie had not let him down too heavily. She had told him to wait six months, and at the end of that time she would give him her final answer. She, of course, had been rather unwise, but had never dreamed that Mellford would take her words seriously. She had thought that he would give in at once.

But, in a strange kind of way, Mellford had loved her with all the intensity of his passionate temperament. Heathcote had come along, and Mellford had seen that Heathcote had won the girl's affections. He had seen his chances slipping away, and he conceived a bitter, dangerous hatred for the other man.

I really believe that, scoundrel though Mellford was, he had no idea of violence until he heard the Voodoo story. That, of course, was real enough. And Mellford had decided to kill his rival by means of a trick—by making it appear that Heathcote had been murdered by the Voodoo blacks.

Thus, when Heathcote was dead, no suspicion would attach itself to him. He had made his plans cunningly. He had placed the three crimson feathers upon Heathcote's coat, and had then attempted the crime. Learning that Lord Wyncsidney meant to fetch the gov'nor on the scene Mellford grew desperate—and made fresh arrangements.

He planned with some shady Italian acquaintances from Soho to motor to

Suffolk, and then dress themselves according to arrangement. We never knew the actual truth of the matter, but it was clear that Mellford had lured Nelson Lee and I to the edge of the wood—it was his first move we had seen slinking along—and then, of course, we had heard the drum, and had witnessed the "Voodoo" meeting. It had been very cleverly done.

The Italians had merely played their part, and had rendered the gov'nor and I helpless. Then they had gone back to London under the impression that the whole thing was a practical joke. And Mellford had dressed up and had entered Heathcote's window. Once his rival was out of the way, Mellford hoped—vainly, of course—that the girl would look upon him with favour. The whole thing was a case of love and hatred.

That was before the war. Things have changed since then. Less than a month after the house-party the war broke out. Unwilling Mellford, by a trick, escaped from his captors on the way to London, and it was later learned that he joined the army under another name. He was killed at the battle of Mons, and died an honourable man's death, with Frankie's name upon his lips. And so, upon the battlefield, he had redeemed his character.

Cecil Heathcote joined up as well, was wounded, and invalided out of the army. At the present time he and his bride live in the West Indies, on a magnificent banana plantation.

But it isn't in Hayti!

THE END.

Another Magnificent Story from "NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK"

Will Appear in NEXT WEEK'S

NELSON LEE LIBRARY,

Entitled:

"The Affair of the Duplicate Door."

Tell Your Friends about "NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK!"

GRAND NEW SERIAL—JUST STARTING!

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

Read this first!

TOM CRAWLEY, champion light-weight boxer, is a boy stoker on board H.M.S. *Flyer*. Whilst on leave he learns that his father's fishing smack has been torpedoed. It promises to go hard with Fisherman Crawley, until

DAN SIMMONS, an old friend of the lad, and proprietor of a well-known boxing hall, shows a way out of the difficulty by offering Tom a fight with Jimmy Yowl, famous bantam-weight. The offer is accepted. Leave for the contest being refused, Tom takes "French leave." He wins the fight, and on leaving the hall is arrested as a deserter. Eventually he is pardoned.

(Now read on.)

THE PURCHASE OF THE DORA GREY.

TOM CRAWLEY could not get ashore that day, but the following morning he dropped into a ship's boat, and was pulled to the landing-stage.

And then, swinging onward with a broad smile on his face, he made for home. His father was there, and the meeting between them and Tom's mother was almost pathetic in its intensity.

There were tears in all their eyes.

His first emotion over, Tom sat himself down and told his father everything.

"I thought I'd get it hot and strong, dad," he laughed. "But, bless you, the captain is a man. The way he talked to me, and the look he gave me when the talking was over—my word, I'll never forget it!"

"I'll never forget it," he went on. "And I can't help thinking now that he was sorry he didn't give me leave. At any rate, I got the money to buy the *Dora Grey* for you, dad. All we've got to do now is to see the bank-manager, and to buy the boat, and get her insured. Then you can go to sea and make your fortune while your son Tom, aboard the

Flyer, will help to protect you from the U boats."

Thomas Crawley, his face beaming with joy, his eyes shining with the light of pride as he gazed affectionately at his son, and Tom set out at once to round up Fisherman Thwaites. They found him down at the harbour, and the meeting between Thwaites, Bill Riley, the first hand, and others who knew Tom well, and the sailor-boy, and were aware of what he'd done, was worth going a long way to see.

They next adjourned together to the Boxing Hall, where they found Dan Simmons struggling with the difficulties of war-time promoting.

After his arrest Tom Crawley had given Dan his money to mind for him. Dan surrendered it now, and also agreed to accompany them to the bank.

"I'll put in a word with the manager, if it's wanted," said he.

It was not wanted. Thomas Crawley's reputation for honesty and fair dealing was well known, and upon the description and conditions of sale of the *Dora Grey* having been examined by the bank manager, and the money the sailor-boy boxer had won in his fight with Jimmy Yowl having been paid in, he willingly agreed to lend the rest of the purchase-money upon the understanding that the fishing-boat should be properly covered by insurance.

Three days later a representative of the bank at Weathersea, accompanied Fisherman Thwaites, Thomas Crawley, Tom Crawley, Billy Riley, first hand, Sam, the boy, Dan Simmons, and Mary Thwaites, second hand, to Borrowmouth, where the purchase-money was paid over, and the bargain solemnly concluded.

The day was cold and fine, with a fresh sou'-westerly breeze blowing, and white-caps showing out at sea.

The whole party made their way down to the harbour at Borrowmouth, where the *Dora Grey* lay at anchor. Thomas

Crawley's face lit up at sight of her. Many a time and oft had he admired the fishing-smack when he had run across her at sea, or when she had come into harbour at Weathersea in pursuit of herrings.

The Elsie Jane had been a handier boat, perhaps, but certainly not a better craft, and as he realised that he owed the possession of this new fishing-boat to his son, Tom, the sturdy, weather-beaten old fisherman broke down.

"Tommy, lad," he said, with the tears falling from his eyes, "God bless you and guard you. I don't think any father ever had a braver or more dutiful son."

Tom had a lump in his throat, and was near to crying, too. Mary Thwaites stood close to them with her face turned seaward. Her lips were trembling and her bosom was heaving.

She felt that she was very near to the pugnacious and aggressive companion of her girlhood, Tom Crawley, just then.

Nor were the others free from emotion. John Thwaites broke the silence with a ringing laugh.

"Here, skipper," he cried, "there's a fair following wind, and plenty of daylight left. Let's sail the Dora Grey round home."

"The U boats are pretty active," remarked Joe Lee, her late owner, warningly; "and they say a lot of mines have been sown on this part of the coast. Why not wait a day or two till it's dead calm, and then hug the shore?"

Round swung Thwaites, with a roaring laugh.

"Bust the U boats!" he cried. "Who cares a fig for them? He's a poor sort of seaman who'd skulk in harbour when it's the duty of every Britisher to command the sea. Here, Thomas, we leave the decision to you. Are you going to leave the Dora Grey here, or shall you sail her back to Weathersea?"

"I'm going to sail her back," said Tom's father.

"And the lot of us are going with you—"

"Mary— Mary had better go back train—"

Mary curled scornfully.

"By train?" she cried. "No, Mr. Crawley. I'm second hand in this ship, and I'm going to sail with it."

And she flashed a beaming smile at Tom.

Tom smiled back.

"Mary," he said, going up to her,

and looking up into her pretty face with a roguish twinkle in his eyes, "we're pals, aren't we?"

Mary impulsively threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Tom," she cried, "I think it's wonderful what you have done. And I could love you for it."

Whereupon she kissed him once, twice upon the cheek.

The sailor-boy drew back, half-pleased, half-annoyed. Mary had never done that before, excepting at Christmas-time and on her or his Birthday.

A sort of thrill ran through him. He laughed, but his eyebrows came together, and, like a flash, he remembered Bob Randle, remembered that Mary Thwaites had been out walking with him many times of late.

For the first time in his life, perhaps, he was really jealous; but as yet he could not understand why.

And so the party went aboard the Dora Grey, where they found everything ship-shape and ready for the voyage.

Joe Lee was an honest man. His ship was a good one. They shook hands on the bargain, and Joe wished the Weathersea fisherman the best of luck.

"If only you get as much out of her," said he, patting the bulwark of the ship affectionately. "as I have done, and I reckon you will, Thomas Crawley, being a first-class fisherman, you'll get all you paid for her back soon, and a great deal more besides; and you carry my best wishes with you, mate."

An hour later they set sail, and as the dusk of evening was creeping over land and sea, and the lowering clouds came up, the Dora Grey, after a steady and uneventful voyage, came safely into harbour, to the ringing cheers of the Weathersea fishermen, who had gathered on the quay to watch her in.

And so Fisherman Crawley brought a new boat home.

During the days that followed Thomas Crawley devoted the best of his time to fishing, and the Dora Grey being a rare good sea boat, and her tackle of the best, and in order, his luck was in.

Such fish as he brought into market sold at high rates, and everything pointed to a speedy repayment of the bank loan.

As for Tom Crawley, what with his work aboard the Flyer, and his leave

ashore, his meetings, his quarrels with Mary Thwaites, his joy at his father's success, he was as happy as the day was long.

The Flyer was soon patched up, and her sea trials at once began.

She answered them well, but did not speed up with her old celerity.

Her engines laboured a bit, in spite of all the engineers could do. However, there she was, a fast boat still, ready to go out and meet the German raiders, if any of them dared to show their noses on that part of the coast.

Her crew came ashore in the day-time, and went aboard in the evening. She lay with steam up, and always ready.

Captain Walsh, having completely forgiven Tom Crawley, now ignored him altogether. Did Tom stand in his way and salute with ceremony, the commander looked through him or past him. If they met ashore, Tom might not have been on the earth for all the notice the skipper of the Flyer took of him.

Tom felt hurt. He'd got to like the skipper. He'd have laid down his life for him any day, and it would have given him untold happiness if only Captain Walsh had thrown him a nod or made a sign.

One night Tom was lying in his hammock, listening to the ripple of the water as it ran along the thin iron side of the ship.

He had a letter in his hand. The letter was from Bob Randle.

Tom's face was grim as he read it through. It was a reply to a letter he had sent Bob warning him that he'd find a peck of trouble if he continued to pay attentions to Mary Thwaites.

"She's not for the likes of you," Tom had written. "You, an exempted man, single, and of a fine fighting age, ought to be out with the army in France. Instead of which you're at home helping in your father's grocery business. You are making money while better men are dying for King and country, and it's not fair. Anyway, you don't play any tricks with Mary. She belongs to me."

Tom had written in temper, because Mary had defended Bob Randle.

Here was Bob's reply. It was couched in the mildest of terms. It pleaded for fair play.

"You ought to know me better, Tom," wrote Bob. "I am only helping my father because we have by degrees got rid of every able-bodied man in our

employment. As it is, there are three girls, dad, myself, and one assistant, a soldier discharged from the army, who saw nearly two years' fighting at the front. The tribunal exempted me, because they thought it a fair thing to do. And I allow no man to judge me. As for Mary, she and I are pals, and I shall never break with her until she says she wishes it. I owe you no grudge. We had a merry little set-to at Dan Simmons's, and all I ask is that you treat me with the same fairness that I shall extend to you."

In his heart of hearts Tom felt shamed by Randle's letter. Bob Randle had proved again and again that he was no coward.

But there was his friendship for Mary to annoy Tom, and so, with a scowl, he crunched the letter up, and flung it from him.

Bob Randle was a slacker. Bob shouldn't walk out with Mary. Next time he went ashore he'd see to all that, and if Bob wouldn't listen to reason, why——"

Just then there was a hurry-scurry, a blowing of whistles, and the ring of commands.

Even before Tom could get out of his hammock the Flyer was on the move, making for the open sea.

The crew were piped to quarters, guns and torpedo-tubes were manned.

Tom flung himself up out of the close confinement of the hold on to the wind-swept deck to see the black shadow of the lighthouse at the harbour's mouth drifting by.

The nose of the Flyer dipped into the swell. From her smoke stacks sparks and great tails of smoke were flung.

"Ere," cried Tom, looking round him blankly, "what's the game?"

"Why, kid," laughed Able Seaman Tomkins, "we're out after the Germans. They've raided the coast. There—do yer 'ear the guns?" as a dull, booming reverberating echo came to them across the heaving waters. "Listen to that now. We're going into action, Tom, my lad, and good luck to us, and bad luck to the enemy, say I——"

Tom looked forward, tried to pierce the darkness. He fancied he saw a flash, and he certainly heard the distant guns.

And the Flyer, gathering speed, leapt wildly onward at over forty miles an hour.

(To be continued.)

NOW ON SALE!

IN THE

"BOYS' FRIEND" LIBRARY.

No. 385.—TREASURES OF THE DEEP.

A Fine Tale of Adventure.

By MAURICE EVERARD.

No. 386.—TOM GARTH OF HOLLOWFIELD.

A Splendid School Story. By the Author of "The Airship's Quest."

No. 387.—PRINCE OF THE CIRCUS.

A Laughable Yarn of the Circus.

By SIDNEY DREW.

No. 388.—FIREMAN JACK.

A Grand Story of the Railway.

By REGINALD WRAY.

IN THE

"SEXTON BLAKE" LIBRARY.

No. 35.—THE HALF-CASTE.

Introducing Sexton Blake, the Inker, and the Hon. John Lawless. By the Author of "The Cat-paw," etc., etc.

No. 36.—THE PERILS OF PETROGRAD.

A Dramatic Story of the Russian Revolution. By the Author of "In Triple Disguise," "The Embassy Detective," etc., etc.

On Sale Everywhere.—Price 3d. Each.

"Twice Charged."

A Powerful Long Complete Tale
of Detective Work and Adventure,

Introducing

SEXTON BLAKE, Detective;

TINKER, His Boy Assistant; and

PEDRO, The King of Bloodhounds.

APPEARS IN THIS WEEK'S

UNION JACK.

1d. WEEKLY.

ORDER NOW!

Owing to the Shortage of Paper we shall, in future, be able to supply only a limited number of copies of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" every week. To ensure getting your copy, fill in the form below and hand it in to your newsagent. Failure to do so may mean that you will be unable to get your favourite weekly.

ORDER FORM.

To Mr....., Newsagent.

(Address)

Please reserve me each Week till further noticecop..... of
the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

(Name and Address)

.....

.....