

The GREY BAT!



CHAPTER 1.

A Midnight Terror!

ABOUT three miles from the Dorset village of Hasset St. Giles, on the main London road, stands a fine mansion surrounded by a stretch of parklands, guarded by stately trees. The villagers call it the "Big House," but its postal name is Ludford Grange. By standing on the bridge that crossed the canal outside Hasset St. Giles, one could get a full view of the house, with its turrets and gabled roof, and of late it had been the custom of the village folk to saunter as far as the bridge at night-time, to look southwards towards Ludford Grange.

For something out of the common happened there. At dusk, as regular as clock-work, window after window of the great house leaped into light. When the darkness settled down, Ludford Grange became like a huge fairy palace, blazing on the hillside. From ground level to roof the clear white beams poured out of every window, until

the house shone like a star in the distance.

It was known that the house was lighted by electricity, having its own generating plant. It was also known that Sir Edmund Vanderley, the owner of the Grange, was a wealthy man and could afford to indulge in any extravagance that appealed to him. Sir Edmund himself was a mystery to his neighbours. They knew that he had been born at Ludford Grange—the Vanderleys had lived in that part of the world from the time of the Normans—but he might as well have been a stranger, for he had not set foot inside Dorset for forty years, until three years ago, when he came to live at the Grange.

Even then he had not mixed much with those about him. Now and again he had come down to the station to go to London, and the tall, gaunt figure, with the tanned, studious face had made a good impression on the village. But for the past six months Sir Edmund had been more of a recluse than ever, and all that time the mystery of the lighted windows had exercised the minds of the villagers.

—Startling Incidents and Eerie Mystery in this Complete 'Tec Thriller!

A great flapping of wings, an eerie call, and the black shape swoops across the countryside—it is the Grey Bat, and death is on the wing when the Grey Bat flies!

Read how Nelson Lee, Nipper and Wolf, when faced with the task of solving the amazing appearance of the death bat, are involved in a series of perilous adventures!



Nor were they the only ones who wondered at the strange affair. One night, about eleven o'clock, a girl was seated at the window of her bed-room on the second floor of Ludford Grange. Margaret Brierton was Sir Edmund's private secretary, and had been at the big house for over a year. She was a beautiful girl of twenty—the daughter of a major in the Marines, who had been an old friend of the baronet's. Sir Edmund had written to her when her father died, offering her a good home and a good salary, and Margaret had gratefully accepted. Her work was light and interesting, and she had found the baronet the kindest of employers.

There was a big staff of servants in the house, and Margaret had gradually found herself taking charge of the domestic arrangements. It was a very happy time for the girl until a certain incident had happened that had altered Sir Edmund. She recalled that incident now. It had happened at the breakfast table, at which Sir Edmund insisted she should be present. Among the letters on his plate was a postcard, and the

tall man had lifted it and had stared at the crude drawing on the back of it; then, without a word to Margaret, he had turned and left the table, locking himself in his study for the rest of the day. That same night the order was issued that all lights should be kept going all night in any rooms that Sir Edmund might select. And gradually it became the custom to leave the lights burning in every room in the front part of the house—dining-room, study, drawing-room, library, and the suite on the first floor that the baronet occupied. Margaret had not ventured to make any inquiry concerning the order. Sir Edmund never mentioned it, and the girl also decided not to do so.

Three months later she had another sure proof that something was wrong. Vincent Storey, the young Harley Street specialist, who had made a study of mental diseases and was already looked upon as one of the leaders of his profession, visited Sir Edmund, and apparently examined him, for which purpose he had been asked to come. Margaret heard his parting words to the baronet quite by accident.

"I have profited to the extent of fifty guineas," he said. "And as I warned you, the money has been thrown away, for you are as sane as I am!"

This was extremely unsettling, if not alarming. Sir Edmund had sent for Storey believing that there was something wrong with himself. Sir Edmund's own doubts, coupled with all the peculiar things that went on at the Grange, began to prey on the girl's mind. Margaret Brierton was only a young girl, and was scarcely to be blamed for the growing fears that came to her. Night after night she found herself unable to sleep. Her bed-room was exactly above the study, and she could hear the restless pacing to and fro of her employer—to and fro, to and fro, long into the night. Often and often had she crept into her bed and dropped off to sleep with the steady footfalls sounding in her ears. It was small wonder that her nerves began to suffer from the constant strain.

"I feel that something is going to happen, that I am waiting for something to happen," she murmured to herself now, as she drew away from the dark window.

She made her way across the room and slipped into her bed. A wind had risen and she could hear its restless voice in the trees and round the turrets of the house. Gradually she dropped off to sleep. Then, suddenly, she was awakened again, to find herself sitting up, listening intently, her heart drumming in her throat. She knew that something had startled her.

She listened again. What was that? Thud! Thud! Thud! The sound was coming from below. Something heavy was beating against the walls of the study.

Crash! There came to her ears the quick rending sound of broken wood, and with a leap she was out of her bed, and had wrapped herself in her dressing-gown. Frightened though she was, the natural courage in her heart revealed itself then. Something terrible was happening in the study below—a struggle of some sort was taking place.

In another moment Margaret was out of her room and hurrying downstairs. She knew that all the servants lived in the other part of the house—at the back, with the wide galleries between them and the main part of the mansion. She had often felt that there was danger in that isolation.

Thud! As she reached the foot of the staircase some heavy body crashed against the door of the study, and she heard a scraping sound as it slid down the panels. With a quick catch of her breath the plucky girl leapt towards the door and turned the knob. It was locked and resisted her frantic efforts.

"Sir Edmund! Sir Edmund!" she called, her voice sounding high and clear in the silence.

She saw now that there was no light shining from beneath the doorway, and she

stooped and peered through the keyhole. The study was in darkness, but presently she saw that the long French windows that opened out on to the balcony were wide, and through them she caught a glimpse of the sky, with its white stars blinking.

"Sir Edmund! What's happening? Are you there?"

Margaret drummed on the solid door with her tiny fists for a moment, then the futility of that attack came to her.

"I must get in! The window on the landing leads to the balcony! That will be the best way."

She flew along the wide-carpeted landing, reaching the tall window, with its panels of stained glass. In a moment she had opened the lower half, and she slipped out to drop on to the narrow iron balcony that ran along the front of the house. Turning to her right, Margaret sped forward and reached the windows of the study. They were flung wide, and the curtains were swaying in the wind. She leapt inside the room, gripping at the curtains.

"Sir Edmund!" she called.

She took another pace and the curtain in her right hand was suddenly jerked away from her. With a strangled scream Margaret leapt aside. She tripped over the trailing end of the other curtain and fell on her knees, dragging the curtain down with her. As she did so she felt a surging current of air strike her cheek—air that seemed to have a hot, fetid tang in it. She had a dim idea that some great shadow passed between her and the opened window, then the folds of the curtain enveloped her, and she fought for a moment to extricate herself from them.

As she drew herself clear she touched the thin leg of the table set in one corner of the study. She recognised it at once. It was the little typing table at which she worked. She knew that there was a shaded electric lamp on the table, and, kneeling there, Margaret felt for the switch. The bulb leaped into light, dispelling the gloom, and the girl rose to her feet and turned the lamp round so that it shone full on the room.

A heap of splintered glass in the centre indicated the fact that the electric chandelier in the ceiling had been shattered. And indeed, the whole room was an absolute wreck. Pictures, ornaments, were smashed to pieces, and the heavy wallpaper bore marks of blows here and there. A chair had been smashed, and the desk beside the fireplace was split in two. And lying in a heap against the closed door was the figure of Sir Edmund. In one hand he was gripping the heavy poker that he must have picked up from the fireplace. Margaret, who had rushed across to him, at once saw a dull, black bruise on the temple from which the blood was oozing slowly.

For a moment she thought that he was dead, but as she raised his head his lips moved and a low groan came from them.

The slender girl managed to drag the tall man to one side, then, turning the key in the door, she leapt out on to the landing, and a moment later the bell in the butler's room set up its whirring clamour.

As the butler came stumbling out of his room he collided with another hurrying figure.

"What is wrong, Tempest?"

Tempest, Sir Edmund's valet, shook his head. He was a middle-aged man, clean-shaven, and had the sleek, dapper look of his type.

"Don't know. Heard the bell go just now. Got dressed and came along," he replied in his jerky voice.

Martin, the butler, began to hurry down the long passage, buttoning his coat as he went.

"Wish I could get dressed as quickly as you seem able to do," he said with a chuckle, for Tempest had managed to pull on his boots and was completely attired.

They found Margaret waiting for them in the wide hall, her eyes full of fear. In a few words she told them what she had discovered, and Martin turned to Tempest.

"Better get your bike and go for the doctor," he said, a command that Tempest obeyed at once, hurrying off to his own rooms, and emerging presently with his bicycle. Margaret saw him wheel off down the long avenue, his wiry figure bowed over the machine, pedalling for dear life.

CHAPTER 2.

Mysterious!

It was an hour before the doctor appeared, and by that time Sir Edmund had been carried into his own room and was lying on the bed. The doctor met Margaret in the hall when he descended. It seemed to the girl that there was a perplexed look on the medico's face.

"There is a superficial wound on the temple," he said. "Probably it stunned him for the moment, but it is not very obvious. He is conscious now." He hesitated for a moment. "Sir Edmund says he fell against the door—tripped over a rug. But I—I looked into the study and—and—" The truth came out with a jerk. "I think he has been the victim of a murderous assault. Yet he tells me that it was all an accident, and refuses to say anything more about it."

Margaret stifled an exclamation. She had heard that terrible struggle, that grim fight in the darkness; yet Sir Edmund was trying to make it appear that he had not been attacked, that his wound was self-inflicted.

"Of course, it has nothing to do with me," the doctor went on. "But—well, frankly, Miss Brierton, there is something very suspicious about the whole matter, and I honestly think that it is a case for the police."

A figure came down the stairs at that moment, and Tempest came forward. He

had an envelope in his hand which he handed to the doctor.

"Sir Edmund sends his compliments, sir," the valet said respectfully, "and hopes that you will keep this matter a secret. He wants you to convince yourself that the whole affair was an accident."

The valet looked at Margaret.

"Miss Brierton knows that Sir Edmund has been rather troubled of late," he went. "To-night, he says, he fell asleep in his chair in the study, and when he came to himself again he found that he had snatched up the poker and had been smashing up everything in the room in the darkness. He says that he tried to reach the door and tripped over something, and that is all he can remember." He stood aside and pointed to the staircase. "He wants you, doctor, to be thoroughly satisfied. He has asked me to show you the study, and perhaps Miss Brierton will go with you and explain."

The doctor went up into the study with Margaret, Tempest following at their heels. To Margaret it was fairly evident that the valet was carrying out orders of his master, and he certainly did so in a very able manner. They halted in the wrecked room and the valet looked at Margaret.

"Miss Brierton found the door locked, with the key inside," he said. "That is right, is it not?"

Margaret nodded.

"The door was locked and the key was on the inside," she said. "And I know that no one came out by the balcony way. They would have had to pass me. It is over a forty-feet drop from the balcony to the ground—too much for anyone to risk."

The doctor peered over the balcony down to the ground, glanced over his shoulder again, then nodded his head.

"I am much more satisfied now," he admitted. "And, under the circumstances, you can inform Sir Edmund that the affair will not be alluded to further by me."

To Margaret, Tempest's relief indicated how deeply interested he was on his master's behalf. It showed itself in the sleek face in a quick smile, then the valet turned and hurried away out of the room. The doctor looked at Margaret for a moment.

"You look as though she had had a severe shock," he went on. "If you take my advice you will go and lie down for an hour. It must have been a terrible experience for you."

The girl tried to obey that suggestion, but she found it impossible to rest. Again and again she heard the heavy blows, the sounds of that grim fight. Sir Edmund had sent the doctor off, quite satisfied; but Margaret knew that it had been no dream; that her employer had fought with someone—a life-and-death struggle in the darkness.

"I must tell someone," she thought. "Someone who will be able to help me. But I know of no one at all!"

At lunch she had a chat with Martin. Sir Edmund was much better. Tempest had taken lunch up to him, and the baronet had been able to sit up in bed and write a few letters. Before the meal was over the valet appeared, and told Margaret that Sir Edmund wanted to see her.

Tempest's anxious face made Margaret smile faintly.

"I think you ought to have a rest," she said. "You look absolutely fagged out."

The clean-shaven man shook his head.

"I'm all right, miss," he returned, as he went out of the room.

It was about two o'clock when Margaret entered Sir Edmund's room. She found him sitting up in bed. His head was bandaged and there were dark circles under his eyes, but he smiled at the girl as she approached in his usual kindly way.

"I'm afraid I've given you a very severe shock, Miss Brierton," he said. "But it's all over now. I shall be quite myself in a day or so."

Margaret murmured something in reply, and then the baronet drew an envelope out from under his pillow.

"I thought that a change would do you good, and I want you to go to London, to Harley Street, and give this letter to Dr. Storey. You will be able to catch the three twenty-five. I don't suppose you'll be able to get back to-night. There is no immediate hurry. You can have a day or two in London, if you like. The change will do you good." He gave her a cheque. "You can stop at the bank on your way to the station," he added, then paused for a moment. "I don't suppose anyone will question you about what happened last night," he went on, "but if they do, you can assure them that it was only an accident—the result of a bad dream."

Margaret realised that the request was really in the nature of a command, and she nodded her head. Sir Edmund leaned forward.

"And I am very grateful to you for what you did for me, Miss Brierton," he went on. "You are very brave. It is not every girl who would have climbed out on to the balcony and have done what you did." He hesitated, his sombre eyes fixed on her face. "Of course, you can prove that I was quite alone in the room," he added.

A subtle instinct came to Margaret then, and she nodded her head.

"Yes, you were quite alone, Sir Edmund," she returned, and the baronet dropped back against the pillows with a faint sigh of relief.

As Margaret came out of the bed-room she met Tempest in the corridor, and the valet stood aside to let her pass.

"I have ordered the car for three o'clock," he said. "Sir Edmund told me you were going to London, miss."

"Yes. I am catching the three twenty-five, but as I have to call at the bank you had better arrange for the car to be here at half-

past two. The bank shuts at three, you know."

"Very good, miss."

The letter and cheque were in Margaret's hand, and the eyes of the valet rested on them for a moment before he turned and left her.

Margaret left Ludford Grange promptly at half-past two, cashed the cheque at the local bank and caught the train for London. She had to change at a junction, Belsdale, some ten miles from Hasset St. Giles. When she took her seat in the main line express she found that the opposite seat in her compartment was occupied by a slim youngster, and a small attache-case lay on the seat beside him.

It was rather stuffy in the train, and as she was tired out after all she had been through, Margaret leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes, and it was not surprising that she soon dropped off into a doze. The day, that had promised to be fine, now became overcast, and thick haze settled down over the valleys, and a brewing storm blotted out the sun and made visibility very poor indeed as the train approached the London suburbs. The train stopped once, then went on again for its last stretch into Waterloo. Margaret had only just opened her eyes at the halt, and as soon as the train started again she went off to sleep once more in real earnest.

She could have sworn that no one entered or left the compartment; the door leading into the corridor had not been opened. Yet she was roused from her sleep to find herself resting on one of the long couches in the first-class waiting-room of the big London station, with a group of men standing around her, and a woman in nurse's garb holding her head, while some strong aromatic stuff was held to her nostrils.

"WHAT—what has happened?" Margaret asked.

She struggled up into a sitting position and looked around. The group of watchers fell back and allowed the superintendent to come forward and explain matters. She had been found unconscious in the corner of her compartment when the train stopped at the platform. A porter had tried to rouse her, believing that she was asleep, and, failing to do so, had sent for the station-master.

"You feel better now?" he asked.

Margaret was conscious of a dull, sickly pain in her head, and when she tried to stand up she found herself swaying. The nurse supported her for a moment, and gradually the nausea passed.

"I think that you will find your property intact," the superintendent went on. "You had a suitcase and a handbag on the rack. They are here with your gloves and a small attache-case."

The articles were brought forward.

"The suitcase and the handbag are mine, but not the attache-case," she said.

"It was found in your compartment," the railway official remarked.

Margaret fumbled in her handbag, where she had placed the letter and her purse. The purse was there, but the letter had vanished.

"I have lost a letter," she said.

A hurried search was made, but there was no sign of the envelope or its contents.

"I had your carriage carefully examined," the superintendent assured her. "There was nothing else there."

A swift memory came to Margaret.

"But what happened to the other passenger?" she broke out. "There was a youngster—a youth about eighteen or nineteen, I should think. He sat opposite me."

A porter came forward, touching his cap.

"There weren't anyone else in your compartment, miss, when I opened the door," he said.

Margaret pointed to the attache-case.

"But that is his," she went on. "I remember it quite distinctly now."

It was evident that her information was news to them all. The superintendent shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish I had known that before," he said regretfully. "I would have had every passenger stopped and searched. Was the letter important or valuable?"

"I don't know," Margaret returned. "I had to deliver it to someone—to Dr. Storey, of Harley Street. It was handed to me by my employer, Sir Edmund Vanderley, of Ludford Grange. It must have been important, for he sent me to London to deliver it personally, and now the only thing I can do is to go to Harley Street right away."

She gave all particulars and the usual promises were made about finding the thief before long, but Margaret felt very doubtful about it as she took a taxi to Harley Street.

"My dear girl," exclaimed Doctor Storey, when he had heard her tale, "you were drugged. There is not the slightest doubt about that. And I should think that the mysterious youngster who left his attache-case behind was responsible. It is hardly your fault that the letter has been lost. In my opinion, Sir Edmund had no right to entrust an important letter to you. Don't you worry, though. I will look into this for you, and see what is best to be done. I shall have to get into touch with Sir Edmund and find out what the letter was all about. And, of course, the police will be busy trying to trace the owner of the attache-case."

CHAPTER 3.

Nelson Lee Gets a Job!

NELSON LEE sat in his study in his rooms at Grays Inn Road, discussing something with a Scotland Yard official, while on the table stood a small attache-case. Inside the lid were the initials N.L.

The door opened and Nipper entered.

"D'you want me, guv'nor?" he asked.

Nelson Lee had whipped the attache-case off the table and slipped it under his chair, and he sent a fleeting wink across to the plain-clothes man.

"Yes," he said. "What did you do with my attache-case?"

Nipper flushed, looked extraordinarily uncomfortable for a moment, then blurted out the truth.

"I—I forgot it, guv'nor—left it in the train. To tell you the truth, I—I got interested in something. I had a bit of an adventure."

"A bit of an adventure," Lee repeated. "Well, considering that Detective Thompson here is out to arrest you for drugging a young lady and robbing her——"

"Jiminy! You don't mean the young lady who was in my compartment?"

Nelson Lee turned to the Scotland Yard man and shrugged his shoulders.

"There you are, Thompson," he said. "Here is your man! Open confession! Take him away."

Thompson laughed as he turned to Nipper.

"I don't think I could persuade the Yard that I had found the real thief if I marched you up there, Nipper," he said. "So I don't think I'll risk it. But now, old chap, you'd better let us know just what happened that evening. What did you do when you got to Waterloo? Considering that the young lady who travelled with you was lifted out of the compartment unconscious, I'd like to know how you missed seeing all that?"

"I missed it because I wasn't there! When that train reached Waterloo I was chasing a man down the railway outside Earlsfield Station. That's what I was doing."

He looked at Nelson Lee.

"It was a fool's trick, guv'nor," he admitted, "but I did it on the spur of the moment. This is how it happened. I was half asleep and did not know where we were. The train pulled up, waiting for a signal, I suppose. Suddenly the corridor door opened and a man came into the compartment. He looked at me and then at the young lady opposite. I didn't move, and suddenly he crept forward and reached out to grab at the young lady's handbag that was lying on the seat. I was neither fully awake nor fully asleep, but I made a grab at him. He turned and jumped for the door, and I followed. I found that the outer door of the corridor was open, and the fellow shot through like a flash, with the train merely crawling along. I jumped after him, and landed on all fours in the middle of the lines. Lucky I didn't touch a live rail, too, seeing that there are electric trains along that stretch. I don't know why I didn't look where I was going, but the train was almost at a standstill and I didn't stop to think. When I scrambled to my feet I saw my man pelting down the line, and I went

after him. There was a thick storm haze and visibility was none too good. The train moved off at that moment, and I just got a glimpse of a man shutting the door I had left open."

"You think he was a confederate?"

"I didn't think anything at the time," said Nipper ruefully. "But it does seem like it now. The other fellow must have been keeping watch in the corridor, but my jump was a bit too quick for him."

"What happened to you afterwards?"

"I followed the beggar some way, then he went slithering down the embankment, over a wall, across a cemetery, along a road, to a main road, and I was just in time to see him jump on a tram that sped off before I had a chance to see what tram it was, where it was going—or anything. And, as usual, when you want a tram you have to wait. It was a solid twenty minutes before another tram came along."

"And that was all?"

"That was all, guv'nor."

It was certainly a very open confession, and both listeners fully realised why Nipper had kept it to himself. The best of us do foolish, impulsive things at times, and we do not care to shout them from the rooftops.

"It was that attache-case that worried me," the youngster went on. "I tried to get another like it, but I had a feeling in my bones that you'd find out sooner or later."

Thompson leaned forward.

"You would be able to recognise your man again, I take it?"

Nipper hesitated.

"I'm not sure, but I think so," he replied. "I only got a very indistinct view of his face. I fancy he had a short, black moustache, and was very tanned. But he certainly was nimble enough, for he could run like a deer. I'm not exactly slow on my pins, but he fairly left me standing in the first hundred yards."

"I'll have to make a report at headquarters," said Thompson. "But, of course, that won't worry you, Nipper. You claim the case, of course?"

"Oh, yes," said Nelson Lee. "It belongs to me, and if I disown it you will be following a false clue."

But later that evening, when Nipper and Nelson Lee were having dinner, the detective pointed out a probable development of the affair.

"Don't be surprised if we are dragged into this, my son," he said. "I could see a glint in Thompson's eye that meant much. But I can tell you that if they do ask me to take up the case you're in it as well. And there'll be no trip to Scotland for you until it's over."

"They won't ask us, guv'nor," said Nipper. "Why should they? It has nothing to do with us, really."

"I don't know so much. You certainly did travel with Miss Brierton, and from your

own account, was a witness to the first attempt made at robbing her. Mark my words, we shall be drawn into this somehow."

He was to prove himself a very sure prophet. At twelve noon on the following day, Nipper, seated in the dining-room, heard the old landlady usher a visitor into Nelson Lee's consulting-room.

"Dr. Vincent Storey," the old lady announced.

Nipper rose to his feet with a groan of dismay.

"Thompson mentioned that name yesterday," he thought. "He is the specialist who went down to Hasset St. Giles about the missing letter."

A moment later the bell whirled and Nipper went into the consulting-room and was introduced to the keen-looking young doctor. Storey looked hard at Nipper as he shook hands.

"So you're the bloodthirsty person we have all been hunting for?" he said, with a smile.

"Yes, he is the culprit, doctor," Lee put in.

Storey turned to the detective.

"Well," he said, "now your assistant is here I can get on with my business."

Nipper seated himself, and after a pause Storey went straight to the point.

"I want your help, Mr. Lee," he said. "In a way, that attache-case gives me a good excuse for coming to you. Yesterday, as no doubt Detective-inspector Thompson mentioned to you, I went down to Hasset St. Giles to see my patient, Sir Edmund Vanderley. I found out then what was in the letter. It was simply a request from Sir Edmund that I should go down to his place, Ludford Grange, and take charge of him as a special mental case."

"Does that mean he is mad?"

"Sir Edmund is as sane as you or I," the specialist went on. "I tested him again yesterday. He is absolutely normal."

"I don't quite understand," said Nelson Lee.

Vincent Storey gave him a full account of all that had happened at Ludford Grange, just as Margaret Brierton had told him—of the strange fear that Sir Edmund had displayed of darkness, of the strange attack upon him that was hushed up.

"When I told him that Miss Brierton had been attacked in the train he did not appear to be surprised," the specialist went on. "I am convinced that he really expected something of the kind to happen. It rather annoyed me, for I don't think he ought to have sent her on such an errand that might have proved dangerous to her, and I told him so. He only remarked that I must put it down to his failing mental powers, and suggested that in itself his act was enough reason for my keeping him in strict observation."

"He is afraid of going mad. Is that what you mean?"

STOREY was silent for a moment.

"I don't think so," he replied, with the air of a man who weighed his words very carefully. "If you were to meet him you would realise at once that his whole attitude is absurd. He is a typical specimen of a healthy English gentleman. But he is afraid of something. The fear is a very tangible one; yet he would not admit it to a soul. Why should he keep his house in

time on a normal man when there are so many unfortunates needing me up here in London. But it may be a case where your special training would be useful, Mr. Lee. As a matter of fact, I have everything cut and dried for you, guessing you wouldn't say no. Miss Brierton tells me that Sir Edmund requires a gardener and a boy to look after his orchid houses—keep the fires going and watch the various temperatures. I



The crook lunged forward with the oar and brought the blade hard against Nelson Lee. The detective was caught napping. In a moment he was sent headlong off his feet clean into the canal!

a blaze of light all night? He never goes outside his park gates now, and I learn to-day that he has bought a couple of huge boar-hounds, which he takes with him when he goes for a walk in his own grounds."

"It certainly suggests that he is afraid of some sudden attack."

"But he does not know a soul in the county, and he certainly has not had time to make an enemy there. I found out something else while I was examining him. I found marks on his skin which prove to me that he is wearing a shirt of mail beneath his clothes. I kept that discovery to myself; but it is very significant."

Then, abruptly, Vincent Storey jerked out his request.

"I can't go down and look after him," he said. "It wouldn't be right to waste my

had a chat with Thompson this morning, and he assured me that as you are an F.R.H.S. the job would not be beyond your powers."

Nipper suddenly chuckled.

"Considering that the gov'nor gave over fifty new orchids to the Botanical Society a couple of years ago, and found every one of them in a trip across South America, I rather think that an orchid house would suit him down to the ground. But with me, of course, it's quite different. I don't know an orchid from a cowslip. But perhaps you could get some kid from the village to——"

"That will be quite all right, doctor," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I think Nipper will be able to stoke fires without much training. But don't tell Sir Edmund who we are. I mean that Nipper and I could go there and start work without anyone

being in the secret. I can get one or two good men to give me suitable testimonials."

The specialist looked surprised for a moment, then a glimmer came into his eyes.

"I think I understand," he said, "and I fancy it will be better if Sir Edmund is kept in ignorance of your identity."

That same afternoon Margaret Brierton left for Hasset St. Giles, and the specialist, Nelson Lee, and Nipper were on the platform to see her off. It had been arranged that Nelson Lee and Nipper should go down to Dorset on the following Monday, and in the meanwhile Lee had to send on the testimonials.

"And you will be Mr. Brown and his nephew, Tom," said Margaret as she shook hands with them.

CHAPTER 4.

The House of Fear!

THAT evening Nelson Lee sent off the letters, and on Saturday morning received a letter from Ludford Grange.

Sir Edmund was quite satisfied with the testimonials, and would be glad if Mr. Brown and his nephew came to Hasset St. Giles to take charge of the orchid houses at once.

By Saturday evening Nelson Lee had made all arrangements for his journey to Dorset, and Monday saw him and Nipper in the train en route for Hasset St. Giles. Lee had not troubled very much about his disguise—a touch of grey in his hair and a slight tan on his cheeks was all that was necessary. In his rough tweeds, with his shabby suitcase, Nelson Lee looked the part of the typical professional gardener to the life. Nipper, in an old suit and with a tweed cap pulled down well over his brows, was also inconspicuous enough to pass muster.

They reached Ludford Grange about lunch-time, and Sir Edmund himself came out to speak to Nelson Lee. Lee had to admit that the baronet made a good impression on him at once. The clear grey eyes and the quick, kindly smile were proofs of a fine character. Sir Edmund had set apart a small cottage outside the grounds for Lee's use, and he handed the detective a key.

"That will allow you to get into the grounds at any time," he said. "Even at this time of the year the nights are often cold, and for the delicate orchids I possess the fires must be kept going. I have arranged for a woman to look after your place for you, and you can settle terms with her. Meanwhile, if you go round to the servants hall you will find a meal ready for you."

Nelson Lee and Nipper promptly went off round the great house, and presently found themselves seated at a big table along with the staff of the house. The detective enjoyed a good meal, and listened to the gossip that passed between the maids and footmen. Nipper noted that there was one individual whom they did not seem to like very much—the valet, Tempest.

"He's always sneaking about the place like a cat," was what one of the maids, a pert-looking girl, with flashing black eyes, declared. "I met him coming out of the library just now, and he fair made me jump, he did. I told him he ought to wear a bell, so's people could hear him coming."

After the meal, Nelson Lee and Nipper went down to their cottage, and found that it was an ideal little place.

"It strikes me that there are worse jobs than being a head orchid man," Nipper decided.

It was four o'clock when they first entered the range of hot-houses. Sir Edmund was waiting for Nelson Lee, and Nipper saw that the baronet was very keen on the wonderful flowers, for which men had given their lives. In a few moments he and Nelson Lee were deeply engrossed, and Nipper, after following them from house to house, finally had enough of it.

"If I listened to much more of that it would drive me dotty," he muttered. "With their odontoglossum and symbibiums and oncidiums and—and goodness-knows-what-iums! They'd have my head going round like a top. Give me the old stoking job—that's more my mark!"

He found his way into the little furnace-room that supplied the glasshouses with heat. There were various pipes and valves leading to the houses, and each of them had to show a certain unvarying temperature. It had all been explained to Nipper by Sir Edmund, and the youngster went over the pipes, checking the details from memory. He glanced at the fire, and saw that it was all right. It was anthracite coal that was used, and that meant long spells between the stoking.

Presently Nipper heard a footfall outside the boiler-room, and he glanced up in time to see a narrow-shouldered man pass along the gravel path towards the orchid house.

"Who are you, I wonder?" the lad muttered, rising to his feet.

He stepped to a small window and looked out. The thin figure had just halted at the door of the first house. He made no attempt to enter, but, shading his eyes with his hands, he was peering through the glass panels.

"H'm! Are you the great Tempest, then?" thought Nipper, his nimble wit giving him the identity of the man at once. "Still following your master, eh? Well, you needn't be scared. He won't take much harm in there."

Presently the valet seemed to catch sight of someone in the glasshouse, for he turned swiftly and began to hurry down the path again. The young detective looked at the clean-shaven face, then a stifled gasp broke from his lips.

"Jiminy! I—I do believe— Yes, it is!"

He withdrew his head from the window and waited. Tempest came on past the door, and his footfalls died away. A moment later Sir Edmund's voice sounded, and he and Nelson Lee entered the furnace-room.

"Have you mastered all those details now, Tom?" the baronet asked, with a smile.

Nipper touched his cap.

"Yes, Sir Edmund. I think I've got 'em right."

"Good! And if you are half as clever a man as your uncle here, I am sure that you and I will get on nicely. Good-night."

He nodded to them both, and went out of the warm little building. Nelson Lee crossed to the fire, and, lighting a spill, applied it to his pipe. Nelson eyed him slowly.

"Well, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee looked up.

"I like him," he said. "I was half inclined to think that he was acting a part—that all these mysterious happenings were the preliminaries to some big move. It would not be the first time that such a thing has happened, and that was why I wanted to come down here unknown."

"And now, guv'nor?"

"Sir Edmund is a white man," said Nelson Lee. "Whatever lies behind his methods, he is no criminal. That I am sure. And I know that he is troubled. As I spoke to him, his mind seemed to wander now and then. He is always on the look out for something; his eyes never seem to be still for a moment. He seems to be always watching for something to happen. It rather gets on your nerves if you are with him for any length of time."

Nipper leaned forward.

"He isn't the only one who's doing the watching stunt here," he said. "While you were in the house I watched a man come along and stare through the door up there. I reckoned he was the valet, Tempest. You can generally tell the type by the cut of their clothes and their faces. But I had a bit of a shock when he turned round and came back, just before you appeared. I didn't think I'd ever recognise that fellow I chased off the train that day, but, by James, guv'nor, I find I was mistaken. The man who I think is Tempest is the identical image of the fellow who jumped from the express with me at his heels."

Nelson Lee looked at the youngster.

"You are sure of this?"

Nipper hesitated.

"My man had a moustache, and this fellow was clean-shaven," he said slowly. "And my man looked brown and sunburnt, while this fellow was a sallow white. But in build and general appearance, guv'nor, they were absolutely identical."

"He didn't see you?"

"No; I took good care to bob down as soon as I caught sight of his face. I wasn't taking any chances."

Nelson Lee had seated himself on a box, and he was silent for a while.

"I KNOW how we will test your discovery," he said. "Miss Brierton can easily find out if Tempest was here that afternoon. A man can't be in two places at once, and if he didn't leave Ludford Grange, it is obvious that he could not have been on that train."

"Shall we see Miss Brierton to-night?"

"Yes. I have arranged that we meet at the cottage. She tells me that she usually takes a walk after dinner, and, as it was through her recommendation that you and I got this job, it is only natural that she should take an interest in us."

And at nine o'clock that evening Margaret arrived at the cottage, and was able to state definitely that Tempest had not left Ludford Grange that day when she had been drugged in the train.

"I am sure of that," she said, "because Sir Edmund mentioned to me how Tempest had waited on him all that day and night. Why do you ask?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I shall ask you many similar questions," he replied, with his quiet smile, "but I am afraid that I will not be able to give you many reasons for them."

"I don't mind," she said. "I was only thinking that perhaps you had heard something against Tempest. I know that he is not exactly popular. The maids hate him!"

"We have noticed that already," returned Nipper, laughing.

They chatted for half an hour or so, then Margaret rose to go.

"Sir Edmund seems very delighted with his new orchid man," she said, her wide eyes flashing a smile at Nelson Lee. "He little dreams who Mr. Brown really is, and he is amazed at your knowledge."

"He and the guv'nor went twice through the dictionary while I was listening to them," put in Nipper.

"He seemed ever so much more cheerful this evening," Margaret added. "I really think that your coming here has done him good. I only hope that it proves the turning point; and already one thing has happened."

"What is that?"

"Had you been here two nights ago you would have seen the whole of the house in a blaze of light—and now it is in darkness."

"You mean that Sir Edmund is no longer afraid of the dark?" Lee said.

His visitor nodded her shapely head.

"He has gone to the other extreme now," she returned. "He won't have any lights at all! But that, anyhow, proves that one weakness, or whatever you might term it, has been conquered."

She went away across the road, and they saw her vanish through the little white wicket gate. Nelson Lee, leaning against the doorpost, looked for a long moment at the black pile opposite. Not a light was visible where only a few nights ago every window blazed.

"From light to darkness," the detective muttered. "From one extreme to the other."

He turned away at last, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"I wonder why Sir Edmund has changed his fears?" he said, half to himself.

CHAPTER 5.

The Dead Hound!

ON the Wednesday morning, Nelson Lee, seated at breakfast in the little cottage, heard hurrying feet sound on the little path outside, and a moment later Nipper burst into the room. The youngster was in his shirtsleeves, and there was subdued excitement in his eyes as he came up to Lee. The door of the room was open and the village woman was in the kitchen, within earshot. Nipper had to be careful.

"Something has happened up at the big house, uncle," he said, loud enough for the woman to hear. "One of Sir Edmund's dogs—the big boarhounds—has been found dead on the terrace. Sir Edmund seems very upset."

Nelson Lee pushed his chair aside and rose to his feet.

"All right, Tom," he returned. "Don't you trouble about dead dogs. It's a dead fire you've got to guard against. Have you seen to the boilers?"

"Yes, the fires are all right, uncle," he said, following Nelson Lee out of the cottage.

As soon as they were out of earshot the detective fired off a quick question.

"You say the dog is dead?"

"Yes, guv'nor—poisoned, it seems to me."

"Where was it found?"

"On the steps of the terrace, close to the orchid house. I was at work in the furnace-room when I heard voices, and saw Sir Edmund and some of the servants standing round the dog."

"You could see them from the furnace-room?"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"And the dog?"

"Yes, guv'nor. It was lying at the top of the steps."

"And it wasn't there when you went in to look after the fires?"

The question seemed to perplex Nipper. He scratched his head for a moment.

"That's just the sort of awkward question that you do fire off at people," he said, with a grin. "Coming to think of it, now, I'll swear that the dog was not there when I went into the furnace-room. The steps of the terrace are right in front of the door, and I could not have missed seeing the animal."

"That's what I'm driving at," Lee returned. "However, you can keep that information to yourself. I know that you were the first to make a move in the house; it could not have been much after six o'clock this morning when you went to look after the fires. It struck me that if the dog had been there you were bound to see it."

"Of course I would," Nipper returned. "But I reckoned that the dog was found somewhere else was just carried to the steps."

"That strikes me as being a very useless sort of thing to do," Nelson Lee remarked dryly.

They were inside the grounds by now, and presently they reached the long line of orchid houses. Lee saw the tall figure of the baronet standing on the edge of the terrace looking down at a black heap at his feet. The detective came forward and raised his cap. Sir Edmund looked up, and Lee was struck by the look of utter agony in the fine eyes.

"Good-morning, Brown," said Sir Edmund. "I suppose you can shed no light on this?"

Margaret Brierton was standing beside her employer, and she cast a swift glance at Lee. Her hands were clasped tightly in each other, and there were tears in her eyes.

"It's too dreadful!" she said. "Poor Hector. He was really as gentle as a lamb."

Lee mounted the steps and stooped over the dog. The blackened tongue, protruding from the drawn muzzle, the fleck of dried foam, told only too plainly what had happened. The huge boarhound had been poisoned.

"Where did you find him, Sir Edmund?" Lee asked.

"Here, on the edge of the terrace," the baronet said in a hoarse voice. "It was one of the maids who noticed him first. She did so when she went to draw the blinds of the library there."

He pointed to the wide French windows that stood open just opposite where they stood.

"The maid saw him?" said Lee.

"Yes. Hector always waited by the window to be let in in the morning. It was his duty to look after the terrace at night, and he seems to have done it well."

Sir Edmund stopped and patted the inert body that would answer his caresses no more.

"Poor old man," Nelson Lee heard the baronet whisper. "You have paid the penalty of being loyal."

Margaret ventured to give a quick, appealing look at Lee.

"Have you anything to suggest, Brown?" she said. "It is so terrible. How did the poor thing meet its death?"

"It has been poisoned, miss," Lee replied.

"Not much doubt about that."

Sir Edmund nodded his head.

"Yes, that is pretty obvious," he agreed. "Yet I cannot understand how it could have happened. I know that Hector has been trained only to eat at a certain time. You know that, Miss Brierton. You often tried to get him and Victor to eat something."

"That is quite true," said Margaret. "They would not take a thing—not even a bit of sugar."

Nelson Lee was still kneeling beside the animal, and presently he turned the great body over. He stooped lower for a moment, then he placed his hand on the hound's collar. Just above the great brass collar was a small clot of blood. The blood was discoloured, and Nelson Lee removed it very

carefully with the edge of his pocket-knife. Below the clot was a tiny wound, a half-arc of small punctures, deep in the flesh.

"I think this is how Hector came by his death," he said. "The poison entered the body through this wound."

Sir Edmund knelt down and looked at the wound. Nelson Lee heard him draw a deep breath—the breath of a man to whom light had suddenly come.

"By heavens—if— But you're right, Brown!"

Nelson Lee had taken a piece of paper from his pocket and had carefully placed the dried clot in it, folding it up.

"You could send this to London to be tested, Sir Edmund," he went on. "They would soon find out what type of poison it was."

The baronet did not seem to hear him. He was staring down at the thick throat with the little half-arc punctures, as though they fascinated him.

Nelson Lee leaned forward.

"I cannot quite make out what sort of instrument was used to make that wound," he went on. "A single puncture would have been easily explained, but that almost looks like a—like—a bite—"

Sir Edmund leaped to his feet, and his attitude changed like a flash. A cold reserve seemed to come down on him.

"I have sent for the police," he said slowly, "and they will take up the matter. I am much obliged to you, Brown, for your suggestions."

He moved back a pace, and cast a significant glance in the direction of the orchid houses. Very bluntly and plainly he was letting Nelson Lee know that he wanted him to go and attend to his duties. Nelson Lee took the hint at once, and there was a thoughtful expression on the detective's face as he descended the steps and headed for the orchid house. What did it mean? Why had Sir Edmund changed so suddenly?

That question troubled him all day, and he could find no real solution to it, while the mystery was deepened that evening, when Margaret Brierton came to the cottage to tell him that the police were baffled, that Sir Edmund had had the dog cremated, as if to destroy all trace of the strange wound, and that the other dog, Victor, was from that moment to spend every night inside Sir Edmund's room, instead of outside, as formerly had been the case.

When she had gone Nelson Lee left the cottage and made his way to the stables,

where he found the groom who not only looked after the horses on the estate, but also had the care of the two dogs.

"Good-evening, Mr. Brown," the groom said.

Nelson Lee chatted for a few moments, then turned the conversation round to the point he had in view.

"Can't make out about Hector," he said. "I think it was you who used to look after him and Victor, wasn't it?"

The groom—a very young man—straightened up sharply.

"There are others beside you who can't make it out, Mr. Brown," he said. "Both of them dogs were properly trained, they were. You couldn't get 'em to snatch a bit of raw meat, although you put it under their noses. They want me to believe that some poacher, with a grudge against the master, did for Hector. But I don't believe it. Old Hector wouldn't have shifted away from that window for anything. I told the master so myself."

So the wound in the neck had been kept a secret by Sir Edmund!

A GRAND TALE OF FAR-OFF MANCHURIA...

"THE PRISONER OF THE TEMPLE!"

Starring Nelson Lee, Nipper and Lord Dorrimore, the millionaire rover.

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE!

A BELL whirled in the shed and the groom jumped to his feet. It was then getting on for ten o'clock.

"That's the signal for me to fetch Victor," he said. "The master always rings about this time."

He and Nelson Lee crossed the stable yard to a splendid kennel. The groom halted at the door of the kennel, and, stretching out his hand, lifted a lamp from a small locker fixed in the wall.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Empty! And I filled it last night!"

He struck a match and examined the lantern, which was of the usual storm type. The glass was blackened and an examination revealed that the wick had burned to an ash.

"Now, who the dickens has done this?" the groom asked wrathfully. "This is my lamp, and no one is supposed to use it except me."

"Did you put it back here last night?"

"Of course I did. I do the same thing every night. It was filled and there was a new wick in it yesterday morning. That ought to have been enough to have lasted me five or six days."

He went off, grumbling, across the yard to replenish the lamp. Nelson Lee waited beside the kennel until the groom returned. As soon as the lamp, lighted now, appeared

at the door of the kennel there was a scrambling of heavy paws, followed by a low whimpering bark.

"Right-ho, Victor!" the groom said, as he undid the lock. "The old boy knows me and my lamp, don't you, son?"

A great body came bounding out, halting as soon as it saw Lee.

"All right, Victor," the groom said. "He's a friend."

Beneath the light of the lamp Nelson Lee saw the great head, with its wide, fearless eyes. Victor was a splendid animal of its type, clean-limbed and powerful.

"He won't touch you, Mr. Brown," said the groom.

Nelson Lee laughed suddenly. He had been thinking of something else. To the horror of the groom, the detective walked straight up to the hound.

"Good old boy, Victor," the deep voice said. "I think we could be friends, you and I——"

"For goodness' sake, be careful!" the groom cried, starting forward.

Nelson Lee held out his hand. Man and dog looked at each other for a moment; then, because of that wonderful sagacity that all dogs have, a sure instinct that tells them who is friend and who is foe, Victor, the massive boarhound, went up to Nelson Lee and rubbed his great jowl against the extended hand.

"I wouldn't have believed it," the groom gasped, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

Again the bell whirred, and the groom slipped his hand under the thick collar of the boarhound.

"I must be going now," he said. "Good-night, Mr. Brown."

Nelson Lee took a pace forward.

"Good-night," he said. "And, by the way, I shouldn't mention what happened just now to Sir Edmund. I have always had a way with dogs, and that was why Victor made friends with me. Sir Edmund might not like it if he knew that his hound was capable of making friends with a stranger, you see."

"I won't say a word about it," the groom promised, as he moved off.

CHAPTER 6.

Vanished!

NELSON LEE watched the figure of the man and the great dog go across the yard with the light in front of them, to vanish round the angle of the great house.

"I think I will satisfy my curiosity," the detective muttered to himself. "It may be only a theory, but it is worth while putting it to the test."

He went off across the ground and entered the spinney between the stables and the gates by his cottage, finally reaching the cot-

tage. Nipper was just emerging as Lee entered.

"Going to have a last squint at the fires, guv'nor," the youngster said.

Nelson Lee nodded. Nipper was taking his task very seriously. One might have thought that the orchid houses were a great liner, so conscientiously did he do his stoking.

"Right-ho, my son," said Lee. "And, by the way, you might have a look into house No. 3. The thermometer ought to show about eighty, but I think it has dropped a bit. You could let it have a little more heat from the furnace-room, if it has. It's been on the chilly side to-day."

"I'll see to that, guv'nor," said Nipper. "It wouldn't do for any of your odonto-what-you-call-'ems to get toothachê, or a touch of the 'flu, would it?"

He sauntered out of the cottage and Lee sat down lighting his pipe. He knew that Nipper would be busy for the best part of an hour at least. The stoking up at night was the most important operation, and Nipper usually had to clean the clinkers out and tidy up generally before he returned.

It was after eleven o'clock before Lee rose and left the cottage again. He had waited for that time, so that the coast might be clear for his work. When he entered the grounds this time he headed straight across the paddock and reached the drive that led up to the house, passing through the trees and emerging on the wide lawn. Ludford Grange was in darkness, but Nelson Lee could make out the tall white columns of marble that marked the graceful sweep of the terrace in front of the house.

A tall hedge of laurels hid the orchid house from view, and Lee headed across the lawn, gaining the terrace from the other end. He climbed on to it, and, keeping close to the wall, worked his way along, passing the windows of the drawing-room and dining-room until he reached the library. The terrace was about twenty yards wide, and he could see the top of the steps from where he stood. He was standing in the centre of the high French window, on the exact spot where the dead hound had usually slept, guarding his master's home.

Nelson Lee stood still for a moment, listening, then, drawing a pocket torch out, he began a careful examination of the window and the grey granite walls. On the left of the window, at about the height of his head, he found something that riveted his attention. A long, steel nail had been thrust into the woodwork, and the nail was covered with a thick, black, greasy substance which smeared Lee's fingers as he touched the nail. He leaned forward and smelt at the wooden surface. There is no mistaking the smell of paraffin.

"I was right!"

There was a note of quiet satisfaction in his voice.

Someone borrowed that lantern last night, and hung it up here, allowing it to burn until it smoked itself out. As it was filled

with oil, that must have taken two or three hours at least."

His quick brain had hit on the solution of the groom's discovery, but it could not fathom the riddle that that discovery put forward. Why should anyone hang a lighted lamp above the window where the hound lay asleep? What object could there be in doing such a thing? It was obvious that the man who had done so had come there later on and removed the lamp, and that before daybreak, for Nipper had not mentioned that a lamp hung there.

Later, when the detective questioned Nipper, he was emphatic on the point.

"There was no lamp there, guv'nor," he declared. "It beats me, guv'nor. I could understand someone using the light to get at the dog, but why should they leave it there burning all night? For, coming to think of it now, I did notice that there was a rotten smell of burning paraffin hanging round when I went into the furnace-room this morning. It must have been the smoke from the lamp. You know how that smell hangs round a place. But the lamp had been removed by then."

"It was moved while you were at work," said Nelson Lee. "And I think that the man who moved the lamp also moved the dead body of the hound from the window to the edge of the terrace. He did so in order to make it appear that Hector had been tempted away from his post and had then been poisoned, whereas I believe that the dog died under the window, where his master had left him."

The future was to prove that Nelson Lee had been perfectly accurate in his deductions and theories. But the mystery of the hound was swept completely away from the minds of everyone concerned through the greater mystery that took its place.

Early on the following morning Nelson Lee was roused from his sleep by the sound of frantic knocking on the door of the cottage, and, leaning out of the window, the detective saw the slender figure of Margaret Brierton standing in the porch. The girl's face was a picture of dismay, and she beckoned to him.

"Come down at once!" she cried. "Sir Edmund has vanished, and I think he's been murdered. Please come at once!"

The crisis had indeed developed.

CHAPTER 7.

The Secret Sign!

"**N**OTHING has been touched," Margaret Brierton said as she came to a halt on the threshold of Sir Edmund's bed-room. "I thought it best to leave everything until you had time to examine the room."

Nelson Lee gave a quick, appreciative nod.

"That was thoughtful of you, Miss Brierton," he remarked.

He and Nipper entered the room and Margaret stood in the doorway watching them.

The room was beautifully furnished, and everything seemed to be in perfect order. The bed had been slept in, and the blankets were tossed down to the foot as though the baronet had been roused suddenly, and had leaped out of his bed.

Nelson Lee and Nipper began a minute examination. Lee noted that the baronet's clothes had been laid ready for donning in the morning. They had not been touched. A huge wardrobe stood on one side of the room, and Nelson Lee found that it was locked. The key was in the lock, and he opened the door, casually glancing at the various suits of clothes on their hangers. It seemed to him that they had not been tampered with.

"You might send Tempest up, Miss Brierton," he said. "There are one or two questions I'd like to ask him."

Margaret hurried away, and presently the clean-shaven valet came into the room. He halted abruptly, and stared at Nelson Lee and Nipper.

"Miss Brierton told me that London detectives were here," he said, a slight colour on his pallid cheeks. "Where have they gone to, Mr. Brown?"

Nelson Lee had made up his mind now that it was necessary for him to relinquish the rôle he had been playing.

"Miss Brierton meant myself," he said. "My name is Nelson Lee. I am a private detective."

Tempest drew back a pace.

"And you were here as gardener?"

"Exactly."

The valet's dismay seemed to increase.

"Did—did Sir Edmund know about you?"

Nelson Lee could not see the necessity of entering into any elaborate explanation to the servant.

"I don't think we need discuss that now," he said quietly. "I want you to answer a few questions, if you will."

A curious look came into the valet's eyes, and he withdrew towards the door.

"I don't know that I'll answer your questions," he said surlily. "You have no authority—"

Nelson Lee revealed a certain badge that he always carried. Tempest seemed to recognise it.

"I think you will find that I have sufficient authority," the detective returned. "This is a case for the police. You understand?"

Tempest nodded.

"Yes, I understand that," he said. "I cannot make it out. I came here this morning, as usual, to rouse Sir Edmund, and found the door locked with the key on the inside. I had to force the door open at last, and found the room empty."

He pointed to a blanket lying on the rug.

"Not only Sir Edmund, but Victor had also vanished," he went on, alluding to the second hound. "Yet there is no other way of getting out of this room, and, as I tell you, the door was locked on the inside."

Nelson Lee had noted that the door had been forced. He went up to it now and examined it carefully. He caught at the key

and withdrew it. It came away quite easily, and he slipped it into his pocket.

"Sir Edmund slept in pyjamas, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"We cannot find the suit he was using which looks as though he had been taken away, or had left in them."

The valet searched the bed and blankets, then nodded his head.

"It does look like that," he admitted.

Nelson Lee pointed to the suit of clothes laid out on the small table.

"These were for your master this morning, I take it?" he went on. "I want you to search the wardrobe and let me know whether there are any suits of clothes missing."

Tempest made a search through the big wardrobe.

"Yes, there is a suit gone," he said at last.

"A grey tweed. An old suit of Sir Edmund's."

He indicated the vacant place in the wardrobe.

Nelson Lee stepped across to the window and looked out. On his right he could see the end of the balcony that communicated with the study, which was on the same floor as the bed-room, with a corridor between them.

"Sir Edmund could not have reached the balcony from here," he said. "It is too far away."

There was a clear twelve feet between the window and the end of the small balcony, and there was no ledge on which anyone could work their way along to it.

"The window was closed," said Tempest, "just as it is now. Besides, there is the dog."

The apple-pie condition of the room did not suggest that there had been any struggle there. On the face of it, it looked as though Sir Edmund had been attacked as he slept, or there had been no attack, and he had left the room of his own free will.

"When did you find out about this?" Nelson Lee asked, turning to the valet again.



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"About six o'clock," said Tempest. "My master asked me to call him at that time. I know that he has been worried of late, and he thought it best to go to bed earlier."

"Were you with him when he retired?"

"Yes. I laid out his clothes before I left."

"What did you do after that?"

"I went down to the kitchen to get Victor's supper. I had to heat it up, and it was about twelve before I had it ready. I came back to Sir Edmund's room, and found him lying in bed, reading. I gave Victor his supper, then went down to the butler's pantry and had a cup of coffee with Martin. That would be about midnight, I should think."

"You sleep at the back of the house?"

"Yes, sir."

Tempest's attitude had gradually changed, and there was a deference in his manner now that made Nipper smile secretly. The quiet, keen questions put to him by the supposed gardener were making their impression.

"Now, if Sir Edmund did leave this room, he would have to go down the stairs, and either leave by the back premises or by the front door?"

"He would leave by the front, sir," said Tempest. "Martin, the butler, always locks the door that communicates with the servant's quarters at night."

Nelson Lee changed the trend of his questions.

"You say that Sir Edmund was afraid of something," he went on. "Have you any knowledge of what that fear was?"

Tempest hesitated.

"I think he feared—that his life was in danger," he said slowly. "I was looking through his desk once—he sent me for his cheque-book—and I found a card—a postcard."

"Do you think it's in his desk now?"

"It might be, sir."

"Go and get it."

Tempest hurried out of the room, and Nelson Lee turned round and looked at Nipper. Something in the youngster's attitude made the detective smile.

"You don't like the voluble Tempest?" he said dryly.

"I don't, guv'nor," Nipper agreed.

"Yet I don't mind wagering that every word he says can be proved up to the hilt. I am inclined to think that Tempest is either a very honest man, or——"

He left the latter part of his sentence unfinished. Margaret had come into the room again, followed by one of the gamekeepers.

"Victor has been found—dead!" she said. "In the spinney, beside the canal. Jackson here found him."

CHAPTER 8.

On the Trail!

THE gamekeeper touched his cap to Nelson Lee.

"Just inside the spinney, sir," he said. "Lying right in the centre of the footpath. Dead as a doornail, poor thing!"

"It's too dreadful," Margaret broke out. "They were both such splendid animals, and Sir Edmund was so fond of them."

"I'll look at the dog later on," said Lee. "There is nothing more to be found here."

He followed Margaret out of the room and halted in the corridor.

"That is the study, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes," said Margaret.

The big stained-glass window at the bottom of the corridor was reached, and Nelson Lee opened it. The end of the little balcony was close to the ledge of the window, and by leaning out Lee could see the ledge of Sir Edmund's bed-room window. It seemed to Nipper that the detective took rather a long time to make his observations, but when he withdrew his head and closed the window again, Lee did not make any remark.

The gamekeeper had gone by now, and a few moments later Tempest came up the stairs. He hesitated when he saw Margaret, but Lee held out his hand.

"Have you found the card?"

"Yes, sir."

Tempest held the square of cardboard out and Lee looked at it. It was an ordinary postcard addressed to Sir Edmund, but on the back of the card, instead of a message, there was a crude drawing in black ink.

"What's it supposed to be, guv'nor?" Nipper asked.

Margaret leaned forward and a faint cry came from her lips.

"Why, that is the postcard that Sir Edmund received some time ago," she broke out, turning to Tempest. "Where did you find it?"

"I mentioned to this gentleman that I had seen it in the master's desk, miss," said the valet. "He asked me to try and find it for him."

"In Sir Edmund's desk? Are you sure it was in there?"

Nipper was watching the valet's face closely and saw it change colour.

"Why should I tell a lie about it?" protested Tempest.

It seemed a very trivial thing for the man to get annoyed about, yet he was annoyed.

"I didn't mean it like that," Margaret said swiftly. "Only, you know that I often use Sir Edmund's desk, and I have never seen it there."

"It was in the bottom drawer, under a heap of papers," Tempest said, drawing back a pace. "I found it by accident once, when looking for Sir Edmund's cheque-book, for which he had sent me."

Nelson Lee, apparently, had taken no notice of the little argument. He looked up from the card.

"I should think that this is just a crude sort of joke on the part of someone," he said. "The design might represent a butterfly, or a moth, or anything like that."

"And the skull above it, guv'nor?"

The skull had been fairly well drawn, and below it was another design—a crescent and a broad-handled sword.

"I think it is quite meaningless," said Lee. "But I'll keep it."

He turned to Margaret and shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can give you no explanation of what has happened," he said. "And, candidly, I think you ought to send for the local police. To me there appears to be no clue left by which anyone can hope to trace what did occur last night."

Tempest had turned away and was moving towards the stairs now.

"Sir Edmund appears to have vanished into thin air," said Lee, raising his voice slightly.

Nipper was watching the shoulders of the valet as they vanished below the level of the stairs. There are occasions when a man's back is as eloquent as his face.

"That seems to please you, old man," the youngster thought.

He dared not look at Margaret. He knew that her face would be full of dismay and doubt. That a famous detective like Nelson Lee should openly admit failure seemed unthinkable.

"I felt sorry for her, guv'nor," Nipper said later, when he and Lee were crossing the park together, "but I suppose it couldn't be helped."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"I am still working on Tempest," he said. "That man knows a great deal more than he cares to tell. I have worked several small points out of him already; but he is very cunning."

"I didn't think you'd got anything out of him at all."

Nelson Lee took out the postcard and handed it to Nipper.

"Smell it," he said.

There was a strong tang of tobacco on the card, and it was stained here and there with the marks such as the covers of a pocket-book would make.

"That card did not come out of Sir Edmund's desk this morning, but out of Tempest's pocket," said Lee. "It was quite warm when he handed it to me, which indicated that he had been carrying it about with him. Then, again, if it had been in a drawer among papers it would not be stained, nor would it smell of tobacco-smoke."

"That was one for you, certainly, guv'nor."

"And another point, Nipper. Tempest lied when he said that he found the key in the inside of the lock this morning. It is true that he had to force the lock, but he did so to suit his own purpose, and he put the key in afterwards."

Nelson Lee took the key out of his pocket and held it out.

"The lock was almost bent in two by the force used," he said. "If you like to have a look at it you will see what I mean. Had the key been in it when it was forced it would have been jammed in its place. As it was, it came out just as easily as it went

in, for it was put in after the lock was smashed."

"Then you think that Tempest is at the bottom——"

"I don't know, my son, and I never jump at conclusions. But I do know that it was quite possible for a man to get out of that bed-room window and reach the balcony. And I also know that it was done last night."

He slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out a fragment of grey tweed.

"This was sticking to the granite just above the balcony, where it meets the corridor window," he said. "In the wall, midway between the balcony and Sir Edmund's room, there is a very solid water-pipe. And that pipe has a mark on it where a rope was used to swing a heavy body from the window to the edge of the balcony."

"But, guv'nor, if Sir Edmund did get out that way, he may have left the key in the lock, just as Tempest said."

"If Sir Edmund did that! But we're not going to do any 'iffing' in this case. Besides, you forget about Victor!"

They had been heading for the spinney, and they reached it at last to find the gamekeeper and another man waiting for them. The body of the second boarhound had been drawn out and Nelson Lee began to examine the animal. A glance told Nipper that the dog had met the same fate as its companion. It had been poisoned. Lee had to search for some time before he found the punctured wound. It was on the right flank of the animal, almost hidden under the smooth hair—a half-circle of deep, sharp incisions.

"You might as well take it up to the house now," Lee said to the gamekeeper, and the animal was lifted and carried away.

Nelson Lee entered the spinney and began to move along the path with Nipper by his side. They kept on straight through the wood until they gained the canal bank, but they found no trace of feet. The ground had been baked hard by the sun, and there had been very little dew that night.

"I had hoped to find some traces of the man who brought Victor here," said Lee, "but the hard ground has beaten me, I'm afraid."

Nipper leaned forward and touched Lee's arm.

"I know someone who'd make short work of this little job," he put in. "It's an ideal morning for a good scent. My hat! Wouldn't old Wolf get his tail up in quick time!"

"A sound idea, my son," said Nelson Lee, "and you can set off at once and bring the old fellow back with you. Are you game?"

"I'm game enough, guv'nor, but I haven't a bean on me."

Fortunately Nelson Lee had a few pounds in his pocket, and he handed them over to his young assistant.

"I think that the best way you could take would be by the footpath along the canal," said the detective. "It ought to bring you out by the bridge, and the station is only a few hundred yards away from there."

It was a quick departure, but Nipper was used to that kind of thing. In a few moments he was hurrying off along the canal bank, while Nelson Lee turned and went back through the spinney again.

It was exactly half-past eight that evening when Nipper arrived back at the cottage with Wolf.

"You're well up to time," said Lee.

"I've got to know the lay of the land," said Nipper. "And I think I can open your eyes on one or two small points, guv'nor. As you know, I went across to Bedsdale Station instead of going to Hasset St. Giles. I got talking with the fellow in the booking office, and he was saying all the folk at Ludford Grange ought to go to Bedsdale when travelling to London, and it seems that only one ever does, and that one is Tempest. And what's more, he travelled up to London on the same train as Miss Brierton when she was drugged. And he followed me to the station this morning, and he'd have spotted me coming back, only I gave him the slip. It looks as if he's been playing the traitor right through, guv'nor. I believe he's at the bottom of all this business. He knows where Sir Edmund is now, I'll bet."

NELSON LEE leaned back in his chair. "Things have been happenings since you've been away," he said. "You know, of course, that the police-sergeant came here?"

"I met him outside the village," said Nipper.

"Well, this afternoon the news came that Sir Edmund's clothes had been found beside a mill-pond about three miles away. They are dragging the pond now for the body."

"Great Scott, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee's keen face seemed to be amused over something.

"Yes; the grey tweed suit was found—at least, the coat and waistcoat were," he went on. "It was the police-sergeant who made the discovery. He found that a gate on the east of the grounds had been left open, and he found footprints in the long grass there. He followed them up and finally reached the mill, where he discovered the clothes."

Nipper leaned against the wall.

"That settles it, I suppose," he said. "I was half hoping that Wolf might pick up Sir Edmund's scent and follow it; but it seems that that has been done already."

"I'm not so sure," replied Lee. "There is an air of the cut-and-dried about it that somehow or other doesn't appeal to me. It is too well staged, too thoroughly obvious. It did not leave anything to chance of accident; it did not even allow for a little thing like this."

He was unfolding a piece of paper as he spoke. Nipper bent forward. It was half of a sleeve link, a plain gold oval, with the initials E. V. engraved on them.

"I found that this afternoon," said Lee; "not at the mill pond, nor in the spinney beside the canal. Presently I am going to

put a little test to Wolf, and I will leave him to decide whether I am right or not."

"But what is it that you've got in your mind, guv'nor?"

The detective shook his head.

"This is where I let you swing for a moment, my son," he said. "I have my theory, a rather far-fetched one—so far-fetched that I won't mention it to a soul till I have more proof to go with it. But before to-night is out you'll have a chance of finding all about it yourself."

And with that, for the moment, Nipper had to be content.

CHAPTER 9.

Dr. Storey Helps!

AS soon as he heard of the amazing disappearance of Sir Edmund Vanderley, Dr. Vincent Storey, the young mental specialist, came down to Hasset St. Giles at once. He found Nelson Lee very thoughtful, and Nipper almost in despair.

Wolf, it seemed, had proved an utter failure. At least, Nipper said so. They had tried the dog on several scents, but he seemed to have led them round the grounds and back to the wall of the Grange every time, close to a huge buttress. Even when Nelson Lee started him off from the garage, where, in fact, he had found Sir Edmund's cuff-link, he had gone back to the Grange again.

"We strolled around for two mortal hours, and ended with our noses against a blank wall," said Nipper. "That is what the guv'nor calls not altogether unsatisfactory!"

The great detective chuckled.

"Nipper fails to see that these very blind alleys that we ran into have their satisfactory side," he explained. "We have proved conclusively that Sir Edmund did not leave by the front door of the Grange, did not go to the spinney where the boarhound was found, and did not go out of the other gate towards the mill pond, where his clothes were found. In short, we don't know where he has gone, but we are sure of several places where we know he did not go. On the other hand, take the clothes by the mill pond, and the body of Victor, the hound. Both of these clues were left in rather conspicuous places and yet far apart. Either of them might be taken as a hint that Sir Edmund had passed that way, but Wolf refused to be hoodwinked. So, you see, we know that Sir Edmund did not go near the canal, nor did he go to the mill pond. That is quite enough for one day's work."

"It is my turn now," said the specialist. "I have something to tell you regarding Sir Edmund which may be of interest, although I don't suppose it will be of much use."

"What is it?"

"I belong to the Colonial Club," Storey explained, "and yesterday I chanced to meet a man whom I had not seen for years. He has spent years in Borneo; has a plantation

close to the Dutch possessions there. We talked of various people and I mentioned Sir Edmund. My friend knew him intimately. It appears that Sir Edmund was the British representative there for a number of years. He has left behind him, I believe, a splendid record of work—hence the baronetcy."

He was silent for a moment.

"I was rather interested," he resumed, "and I asked a lot of questions. My friend told me several things concerning Sir Edmund. It appears that he had a hard task to restore law and order in the interior. There used to be a lot of head-hunting going on there in his time. His big job, however, was the crushing of a rebellious chief in the interior, a half-caste Arab, a Mahomedan, who had set up a small kingdom and was in a fair way to becoming the terror of his district when Sir Edmund chipped in. He led a small company of soldiers with a couple of machine-guns right into the heart of the rebel territory, raided the chief village and took Hasan Benaga prisoner. They collared a great collection of booty, worth thousand and thousands of pounds, I believe, and took the whole lot down country. The Dutch were furious about it at first, because Hasan Benaga's village was actually in their territory, although the chief raided the British plantations. Our Government were inclined to climb down, but Sir Edmund is a very strong man, and he instituted a drum-head court martial, had dozens of Hasan's poor victims brought to testify against him, and the rebel chief was shot as a murderer—a fate that every man in Borneo agreed was the least he deserved."

"What happened afterwards?" asked Nelson Lee.

"All this took place about three years ago," Vincent Storey explained. "Our Government were forced to back up their man, especially as he had really done wonders in ridding the country of such a pest, but they were wild about the high-handed way he had dealt with the situation, and mainly to keep the Dutch quiet, Sir Edmund was pensioned off. He left Borneo and came straight to England, but it seems they still talk about him. The treasure that he collected is still, for the greater part, unclaimed. It is in custody of the government out there, in one of the strong rooms of the governor's house, and the seal still bears Sir Edmund's initials."

He looked at Nelson Lee.

"My informant told me that many of the natives believe that Sir Edmund stuck to the treasure himself, and that the sealed room is only a blind," he went on. "Of course, that story is absolutely absurd, but you know what these ignorant natives are. The present governor does not feel inclined to do anything to disprove these malevolent tales. He will not allow any native to see the stuff, for the simple reason that by doing so he might allow a rogue the chance of describing some of it, and so proving his claim. There have

been hundreds of false claims made. The truth is that Hassan usually saw to it that the man he robbed died—and all his family with him. Two-thirds of the treasure will never be claimed by its rightful owners. I dare say it will probably revert to the Crown."

There was a long pause. Nelson Lee was puffing at his briar pipe and his eyes were set and thoughtful.

"I should like to meet that friend of yours," he said. "Is he still in town?"

"Yes. He'll be there for another month. He is living at the club."

"Well, Nipper has had a trip to town, so why shouldn't I?" said Nelson Lee. "Tomorrow, doctor, you and I will make an early start for London."

The following morning, as soon as they reached London, Storey telephoned to the club and was lucky enough to find his friend there. He and Nelson Lee jumped into a taxi, and half an hour later they were seated in the smoke-room of the comfortable club. Captain Chase seemed to know the name of his famous guest.

"Even in Borneo we have heard of Nelson Lee," he said when matters were explained to him. "So poor Vanderley has not been allowed to enjoy his hours of ease after a very strenuous life. But I'm not surprised. Many of us in Borneo half expected something of the kind to happen. Sir Edmund was a strong man, but in many ways he was a hard one. He made many friends, but he also made many enemies, especially among the non-British natives."

"You refer to the Hasan case, I suppose," said Nelson Lee.

"I told Mr. Lee about that," said Storey. "It might have some connection with his disappearance. On the other hand, it is a far cry from England to Borneo, and Hasan is dead, and——"

The captain interrupted him with a gesture.

"Borneo is not so far away, old chap," he returned quickly, "and although Hasan Benaga is very much dead, there are plenty of his relations left alive. A Mohammedan believes in having a large family, and Hasan must have scores of sons and nephews scattered over Borneo. Indeed, I know for a fact that two at least were in England two years ago. They were being educated in this country, I believe, at one of our universities. That sort of thing is growing in the East. The wealthy native sends his sons and nephews to acquire Western polish and education, to return and snap up all the best jobs out there. I'll try and find out for you if they are still here."

"It would help greatly," returned Lee. He drew out his pocket-book and produced the stained postcard. "I want you to examine this, captain," he said. "It was received by Sir Edmund some few months ago, and his change of manner dated from its receipt."

Chase looked at the card. Nelson Lee, watching the tanned face, saw the lines about the well-shaped mouth suddenly tighten.

"Any idea where it came from?" he asked.

Nelson Lee turned the card over and indicated the post-mark.

"From London, the South-West district," he pointed out.

"H'm, that doesn't help much," Chase returned.

He indicated the winged creature which neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper had been able to identify.

"I don't know what that means," he said, "but the rest is easily explained. The crescent and crossed swords was old Hasan Benega's sign. He adopted it as a tribe mark, and there is a tattered flag bearing that identical sign in the governor's ante-room. It was taken by the troops under Sir Edmund, and had floated above the mud palace where old Hasan had stored the treasure."

Storey drew a swift breath.

"Then there is a connection!" he muttered.

"The skull, of course, means death," said Nelson Lee grimly.

"Death or vengeance," Chase added.

"It might be vengeance," agreed the detective. "So we have a threat of death or vengeance, then the weird flying thing, and lastly the sign of Hasan Benega."

"It's that treasure cropping up again," Chase vowed excitedly. "The natives swear that Sir Edmund collared the lot, making himself a rich man. Recently we had stories of how he was living in England like a little king, with a broad estate and a castle. I suppose they referred to Ludford Grange."

"But Ludford Grange was his when his uncle died," said Storey. "It had nothing to do with Borneo. Sir Edmund was a poor man before he succeeded to the estate."

They discussed the probable nature of the flying creature that had been drawn on the card, but arrived at no definite conclusion. Eventually Nelson Lee replaced the card in his pocket and rose to go. The interview with Captain Chase had been well worth while, although it had only opened up a fresh field for research.

CHAPTER 10.

In Dire Peril!

NELSON LEE and Storey left the club, and the detective, after a visit to Grays Inn Road, started for Hasset St. Giles again. It was not a very fast train that he caught, and it was ten o'clock before it reached the junction. As there was an hour to wait before the little local train started for Hasset St. Giles, Lee made up his mind to do what Nipper had done—wait to Ludford. The porter who took his ticket suggested a short cut.

"You can follow the canal, sir," he said. "The towpath will take you right to the Grange. There is a spinney on the edge—"

"Yes, that's right; I know it."

The detective found the bridge and descended on to the towpath, following it

along the quiet reach. A heavily laden barge came sagging up the stream, drawn by a patient horse, and the driver nodded to the detective as he passed.

"How far is it to Ludford Spinney?" Lee asked.

"'Bout two moiles, sir," the man returned. "But if I were you I'd cross at Taller's Bridge, which is about half-moile along, and take the main road then until you reach the lock, just below the spinney. This danged towpath be rather cut up lower down."

It was the sort of advice that Nelson Lee always took, and on reaching Taller's Bridge he acted on it, crossing the bridge, and finding himself on a broad, white road that ran along behind a high hedge. It suddenly dawned on him that this was the road on which Nipper had seen a cyclist whom he believed to be Tempest, when he had gone to London to fetch Wolf.

Nelson Lee swung along through the darkness. The night was very clear and still, and the hedges glimmered under the light of the stars. Sound travels far on such a night, and presently Lee was brought to a halt by a thin, sweet sound. It was high and shrill and flute-like, and it lasted for a long moment, while the echoes of it ran over the hills, to die slowly in little mocking whispers.

"There's no English night-bird that makes a sound like that," the detective muttered.

He hurried on, rounded a bend, and saw a small house standing back on the left of the road, surrounded by trees. Passing the house, Lee reached a gateway about fifty yards lower down on the right. Halting beside that gate, Nelson Lee looked across the canal. He was almost opposite the spinney. He recognised the long, slender trees and the irregular conformation of the wood.

"The cry seemed to come from just about there," he thought, eyeing the spinney.

He stood still and silent, listening, and at last he thought he heard a dry twig crack on the other side of the canal. Peering through the darkness, Lee saw a shadow cross from one tree to another. With a quick bound the detective had cleared the gate, and, moving forward cautiously, he began to descend the high, sloping bank towards the edge of the canal. He wanted to work his way towards the spinney, so that he might get a closer view of the unknown figure. He moved slowly and very carefully, and the slight noise he made could not have reached the ears of anyone on the opposite bank.

But the unexpected happened. Just as Nelson Lee reached the end of the sloping bank beneath which the sluggish waters of the canal ran, he heard a crash from behind him. A light flashed for a moment from a pocket torch and fell full on him. At the same time there came a hoarse shout from below him. There was a small dinghy tied up under the bank, and a figure leaped up

in it, brandishing an oar. The light from the torch was full on Lee's figure, picking it out clearly, and suddenly, swiftly, the man with the oar lunged forward, driving the blade hard at Nelson Lee.

In the half-sitting posture that he had to use to negotiate the bank, the detective was fairly caught napping. The heavy oar smote him full on the side, and he was sent headlong from his precarious seat, to vanish into the icy-cold waters of the dark canal. It had all happened so swiftly that Nelson Lee hardly realised where he was until the chill water closed over his head. The icy touch of it aroused him at once, and instantly he realised the danger he was in.

He had heard a shout from behind him as he went down, and he knew that the person who had flashed the torch on him had leaped to the edge of the bank. It meant that he had now two dangers to face. If he tried to climb the bank again, he would simply place himself in their hands again.

He felt his feet touch the muddy bottom for a moment, then, with a powerful stroke of his arms, he began to swim away under water as fast as he could go. It was fortunate for him that the canal was fairly free from weeds. He found himself in a sluggish channel, and came to the surface for a moment. He had a swift view of the starry sky, of the dark waters of the canal and the banks on either side.

The rattle of oars made him turn his head for a moment. He saw the squat-shaped dinghy being pushed out from the overhanging banks. In the bows a figure poised with a light gleaming in one hand, which it flashed to and fro across the surface. The click of the oars in the rowlocks told him that they were coming on at full speed, searching for him as they came. Nelson Lee filled his lungs, and, dropping below the surface, put in another long swim. It was ice-cold down there, but the swing of his arms and legs kept the blood circulating.

Once, as he swam, he heard a muffled report, and knew what it meant. The rascals in the boat had fired at some object, believing it to be him. He smiled grimly as he thrashed his way onward. Again to the surface, rising with a quick turn of head and body that allowed him to break the surface with only the tiniest of ripples, filling his lungs, then down again. He had marked a shimmering clump of reeds on his left in that brief moment. He was heading back towards the junction now, moving with the current, and he knew on his left was the safe side, for the towpath was there, and Ludford Grange lay just beyond it. He had cleared the spinney completely now, for there were no signs of the tall trees.

The irregular sound of the oars told him that the man using them was pulling frantically, with less skill than strength. Nelson Lee, heading for the reeds, reached them at last, inch by inch worked his way through them until he reached the edge of the towpath. Here he knelt for a moment, listen-

ing. Suddenly a light flashed on to the reeds, and hung there for a moment, like a white eye, searching through their slender screen. Waist deep Nelson Lee knelt, watching that slow-moving light. Would it find him?

A harsh voice sounded, and the oars took up their burden again. The dinghy moved off, and the light sagged away along the bank. Nelson Lee waited for a moment,



Suddenly the section of the bookcase swung round and revealed rolled the blackened figure of a

then noiselessly drew himself up on to the towpath, and, keeping well down, he crept back along the path heading for the spinney. He reached the trees, and swung into them, working his way through the long, slender trunks until he struck the narrow track which led through into the park. He knew that it would be useless to attempt to follow the boat, and he would be risking catching a chill that might lay him up for days.

"We have to call it a draw," he muttered to himself. "And I am quite content with that."

He dropped into a trot and swung along across the park, heading for Ludford Grange. He struck across the gravelled drive, and

followed it, then crossed the paddock, to finally emerge from the little wicket gate opposite his cottage. There was no light visible, and Nelson Lee found the door locked. Both he and Nipper had keys, and in a moment he had entered the cottage and lighted the lamp in the kitchen. No Wolf, and no Nipper—and the fire a heap of grey ashes.

"Nice sort of welcome," Lee thought.



gl round and out of the dark cavity that was boy. "Nipper!" gasped Nelson Lee, darting rward.

He went upstairs and made a swift change, then returned to the kitchen and set to work to light the fire. He soon had a kettle boiling, and he made himself a strong cup of cocoa. A glance at the clock on the wall told him that it was past midnight.

"He ought to be here by now," Lee thought. "I wonder what has happened to him?"

He went to the door of the cottage and stood there for a moment glancing up and down the road. Beyond the high hedge he could see the sombre pile of the Grange standing out against the dark heavens.

"You begin to get on one's nerves," Nelson Lee muttered, addressing the silent

house. "You have the real uncanny spell about you to-night. Something has happened to that youngster, and I fancy you know all about it."

He waited until he felt the chill air have its effect again, and then, giving it up as a bad job, Nelson Lee went back into the cottage and up into his room. When he lay down he did a thing that was rather unusual as far as he was concerned. He took his revolver out of its case and tucked it under his pillow before he dropped off to sleep. In its way, that action was eloquent. It indicated that the master tracker was fully aware now that there was danger all round him—that Sir Edmund Vanderley's disappearance had not brought the mystery to an end, but only intensified it. These unknown enemies, whoever they were, had not given up their grim work. They had now turned their attention to Nelson Lee, or, at least, his actions had focussed their attentions on him.

CHAPTER 11.

Nipper Is Missing!

NELSON LEE awakened to find the grey morning shining through the blinds. Someone was knocking on the door of his room.

"Mr. Brown!"

It was the voice of the village woman, and Lee answered her.

"Mr. Martin be downstairs, and would like to see you," came the message.

Nelson Lee hurriedly dressed himself and went down into the little sitting-room. The butler was waiting for him there. Martin knew who Mr. Brown was now, and he stood up as the detective entered.

"Miss Brierton would like to see you, sir," he said. "We've had a bit of trouble across at the big house this morning."

"More trouble?" Lee put in.

The butler smiled.

"Nothing very bad this time," he explained. "Only that big dog of yours has taken possession of Sir Edmund's room, and no one can make him budge."

"Wolf in Sir Edmund's room?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Brierton has tried to tempt him with all sorts of things—chocolates, sugar, beef—but the old fellow isn't having any?" He laughed. "Goodness only knows how he got in there—but there he is," he added.

Nelson Lee and the servant left the cottage and headed for the big mansion. On their way Lee asked a few questions. The police had dragged the deep mill pond from top to bottom, but had not found the body of the baronet. The pond was rather deep in places, and very muddy. There was always a chance of the body having got tangled up in the weeds.

"Mr. Nipper was along there yesterday afternoon," Martin went on. "He had a bit of an argument with the police-sergeant.

He seemed to think that they were only wasting their time, and that made the sergeant rather cross. He told your youngster to mind his own business, and that 'Boys should be seen, and not heard.' I had to laugh at that, sir."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I don't suppose Nipper was very pleased," he put in.

The butler shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, he didn't seem to mind much," he replied. "It would take a lot to upset that young man, I'm thinking. He and I came back to the house together, and I showed him all over the place. He's a rare shrewd lad, is that, sir."

So Nipper had been displaying a new interest in the house. Nelson Lee was silent for a moment.

"When did he leave you, Martin?" he asked.

"About dinner-time," said the butler. "Miss Brierton asked him to stop and have dinner with her, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said he was responsible for the orchid houses, and would have to look after the fires. I saw him go into the furnace shed along with his dog."

"He hasn't been to the cottage," said Nelson Lee. "I was wondering what had happened to him."

Martin opened his eyes at this information.

"I hope he hasn't got into trouble," he said.

"Nipper has a knack of doing that," said Lee quietly. "Fortunately he also has a knack of getting out of it. I am not worrying about him."

They had reached the terrace by now, and presently Lee found himself climbing the broad staircase with Margaret. They halted at the door of Sir Edmund's room, and Margaret opened it.

"There he is!" she said, pointing to a tawny body that lay at full length on the mat in front of the fire. "He hasn't moved since this morning."

Nelson Lee stepped into the room.

"Wolf!" he said, and the Alsatian, turning his head, leaped up and came bounding towards his master. Margaret shook her tiny fist at the great animal.

"Obstinate old thing!" she said. "You wouldn't even look at me; but you seem ready enough to do so now."

She stooped and patted the broad head. Wolf wagged his tail. He was quite friendly now.

"How on earth did he get in here?" Nelson Lee asked, looking round the room.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Margaret returned. "The front door was locked and bolted as usual, and Martin tells me that he closed up the back premises before going to bed. I looked into this room before going up to my room, and there was no one in it then."

Nelson Lee looked down at Wolf and shook his head.

"I have often regretted that you can't speak," he said.

The room was neat and tidy; nothing had been misplaced. The door had not yet been repaired, although the damaged lock was removed.

"There would be no difficulty in getting in here, provided one first got into the house," Margaret said. "Only I don't know how he managed to get in."

"He may have had a companion," Lee said quietly. "Nipper is missing. He didn't turn up at the cottage at all last night. Did you examine all the windows on the ground floor?"

Margaret shook her head.

"No, I never thought of that," she admitted.

They went downstairs and presently Lee found that one of the wide French windows of the drawing-room had been tampered with. He indicated to Margaret the tell-tale marks that a thin file had made as it was pressed between the two windows just below the catch.

"The catch was forced open from the outside," he said. "I should think that the person who did it knew exactly where the catch was. It's a very clean job, as you can see. There's a certain expert touch about it that makes me very suspicious. I fancy I know the hand that operated that thin bit of steel."

"You think it was Nipper?"

"Very likely. Ah, look!"

On the polished woodwork inside the room was the clean imprint of a broad paw. Wolf had not come near the window now, and yet there was no mistaking that print.

"That settles it," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head at the dog. "You've been house-breaking, you old criminal. You and Nipper came in here, very carefully closed the window after you were in, and—and, well, what happened afterwards has still to be discovered."

"But if Nipper came in here, where is he now?" Margaret asked.

"That is what we have to find out," said Lee, with a quiet smile.

They left the room, and went across to the furnace shed, where Lee examined the fire. It was almost out and was choked with ashes. He had to set to work on it at once.

"Nipper would not have neglected this if he could help it," he said. "That seems to indicate that he has been held up somewhere or by someone."

Margaret was standing at the door of the little shed, and she caught sight of Tempest coming up the long avenue. The valet saw her, stopped, hesitated for a moment, then went on towards the house.

"Where has he been?" Lee asked.

"I don't know," the girl returned. "It looks to me as though he had been away all night. Of course, he is allowed to do so if he likes."

Tempest was carrying a small handbag and was wearing a light lounge suit. As a rule he wore blue serge. Nelson Lee eyed the thin figure until it had vanished across the terrace.

"If Tempest was away last night it rather establishes an alibi for him," he pointed out. "I mean, that he could not have anything to do with Nipper's affair."

"I could find out when he went away, if you like," Margaret offered.

"Do!" Lee returned.

The girl went off, and Nelson Lee crossed to the orchid houses. He had been forced to neglect his charges rather, but he made a rapid tour of the glass houses and found them all correct. The heat had evidently been steadily maintained, proving that Nipper had not neglected his side of the bargain. Nelson Lee was just emerging from the houses again when he heard the quick patter of feet on the gravel, and Margaret Brierton came running towards him. There was dismay and fear in her eyes, and she caught at Lee's arm as she came to a halt.

"Come with me, quickly!" she gasped. "There's something wrong—in the study—I'm afraid——"

They began to hurry along the path.

"Did you speak to Tempest?"

"No. But I asked Martin, and he says that Tempest left the house at eight o'clock last night. He has a relative living in the village, I believe, and he was going there to spend the night. But I didn't have much time to make further inquiries. I went into the study, and—and—— But you will hear for yourself."

They climbed to the first floor, and Lee and the girl entered the study, which stood on the opposite side of the corridor where Sir Edmund's bed-room was situated. Margaret closed the door after her and came to a halt.

"Listen," she whispered, holding up a slender finger.

THERE was a long silence, then suddenly Lee heard a muffled sound—a groan, it seemed to him to be.

"There, that's what I heard!"

Margaret's wide eyes were round with fear, and she leaned against the wall, staring at Lee. The detective glanced round the well-furnished room, with its lines of bookshelves and dark oak panelling.

"Hark!"

Again the girl broke the silent. A dull booming sound came to them, and this time Lee located it. It was coming from the left corner of the room, near the window, close to the great fireplace. A shuffling, scraping sound, as though something heavy was being drawn along beside the wainscoting.

With a bound Nelson Lee reached the corner and knelt down. Raising his fist, he struck it against the oak panel—once—twice——

There was a brief interval. Then——

Tap!—tap! the answer came.

There was something alive behind that panel.

Nelson Lee leaned back and looked at the wall for a moment. Close to the fireplace stood a tall bookcase. It was about three feet broad and five feet high, made out of solid oak, carved with a design that was also followed out all round the panelling of the wall.

The detective went up to the bookcase, and Margaret saw him running his fingers along the smooth, dark wood, now and again pressing his weight against the solid piece of furniture. Then, suddenly, to the girl's amazement, a part of the bookcase swung round until it was resting against the tiled fireplace, and where it had stood in the wall was a black gap.

Out of that gap there came rolling a grimed, breathless figure, covered from head to foot with dust and cobwebs—a figure that presently straightened itself out, and turned a keen, shrewd face towards the two silent spectators.

"Phew! That's that, guv'nor!" said the voice of Nipper.

CHAPTER 12.

In Hiding!

"NOW, young 'un, I'm ready!"

Margaret, Nipper and Nelson Lee were seated in the little cottage, to which they had gone as soon as Nipper had made himself sufficiently presentable to pass out of the big house. There was always the chance of someone playing the part of eavesdropper; and apart from that, it was always a safer policy to get Nipper away without any of the servants knowing the extraordinary discovery that had been made in the study. The bookcase had been slipped back into its place to await a future inspection.

Nipper had bolted for his room as soon as he had entered the cottage, and now, in another suit, and with a shining, well-cleaned face, he seemed little the worse for his adventure. He had slipped into the kitchen and had cut a huge sandwich for himself, which he was putting away steadily when he rejoined Lee and Margaret in the sitting-room.

They waited until the last fragment of crust had vanished, then Nelson Lee nodded to his young assistant.

"Go ahead," he said.

"I suppose I'd better begin at the beginning," Nipper returned. "After you and Dr. Storey went to town I mooned about the orchid house for a bit, had lunch, and then thought I'd take a stroll as far as the mill pond with Martin. I had a bit of an argument with the sergeant, but I was only pulling his leg, and that doesn't count. I came back with Martin and he showed me over the house. I had never been right through it before. I found out that the

north turret is really an addition to the big gallery where Sir Edmund's ancestors are hung."

"You mean their portraits, young 'un," Nelson Lee put in.

Nipper ignored the dry remark.

"There is a glass roof to the gallery, a flat one," he went on. "I asked Martin about it, but he didn't know very much. No one had ever been up on the roof. The glass is very thick and frosted, held in place by a framework of steel. It is a good forty feet high, and there are no windows to the north side of the gallery. I thought that might explain the blank wall that you and I were led to by old Wolf there."

"Go on," urged Lee.

"I saw that the roof could be reached by an iron ladder set against the walls of the gallery, guv'nor, and it dawned on me that it might be worth while coming back there and having a look round later on. I did not say anything to Martin about that, however, and as it was about dinner-time I left the house and went to have a look at the furnaces."

"I met you," Margaret reminded him, "and you wouldn't stay to dinner with me."

Nipper nodded.

"That is so, Miss Brierton," he said. "I just popped into the furnace-room, saw everything right for the night, then went back to the cottage. I didn't leave there until about ten o'clock, and Wolf insisted on coming with me. I tried to get the old boy to stay where he was, but it was no good. He simply wouldn't do it, so I let him come at last. We went into the grounds, and I began to make for the north tower, when I suddenly heard a very familiar sound."

"A bicycle?"

"Yes, guv'nor. It was coming from the direction of the stables, and I stepped across to try and catch sight of it, but it got past me before I could reach the trees. I doubled back and came out on to the terrace in front of the house. I had followed the sound as well as I could, but it stopped suddenly, and I knew that the man must have dismounted somewhere. Wolf was as good as gold. He kept close to me and never made a sound. I searched along the terrace and worked my way back to the orchid house without seeing a sign of anyone. I was standing beside the furnace shed, and when I saw a flash of light from the house I looked up, guv'nor, and the light was shining from Sir Edmund's bed-room."

"What time would that be?"

"Must have been after eleven by then—might have been twelve, for that matter."

"Go on!"

"I stood still watching the light for a long time. I thought at first that it might be Martin or Tempest at work in the room, although I knew it was very late for anyone to be there. Then I saw someone appear on the balcony of the study, which, as you know, is on a line with the bed-room window. The figure had slipped out through the cor-

ridor window, and it was leaning forward, trying to look into the other room."

He glanced across at Nelson Lee.

"I was very anxious to get a look at the fellow, guv'nor," Nipper went on. "From where I was standing I could just make out that he was a thin, narrow-shouldered type, something like the man who rode the bike, in fact. I crept along beside the orchid house until I was as close as I could get. I was watching the man all the time, and I saw him reach out his hand. It had a long rod in it, and there was a weight at the end of it. It just reached the length of Sir Edmund's window, and swung the weight forward so that it tapped sharply against the window-pane. I could hear the sound quite distinctly."

Margaret was listening, with her red lips slightly apart, her eyes wide with interest.

"As soon as the tap-tap sounded the man on the balcony withdrew the rod, and, whipping round, leaped through the window into the corridor. I could not understand the meaning of the move at first, but it was soon explained to me. I saw a shadow appear on the blinds of Sir Edmund's room. The blind was withdrawn, and in the light I saw a man's face appear, staring for a moment out of the window."

Nipper leaned forward.

"It was only a glimpse, guv'nor," he said earnestly. "But I recognised it. The man in the bed-room was Sir Edmund Vanderley!"

"You're quite sure?"

"I'd stake anything on it," said Nipper, "and I can tell you it gave me a bit of a shock. While I stood there the head and shoulders were withdrawn, and a moment after the light vanished. I came out from the side of the orchid house, and ran to the wall below the balcony. Wolf was at my heels, and suddenly he gave a warning growl. I whipped round, and goodness only knows what it was, guv'nor, but some great big flying thing came surging past me and circled above my head. I lashed out at it, hardly knowing why, and my fist landed against something warm and soft and furry. Wolf made a leap into the air, and I heard his jaws snap; then I tripped over the edge of the path, and when I stood up again the beastly thing had gone. A moment later I heard a curious sort of call—a long, thin note. It came from across the park—somewhere near the spinney, I should think."

"Jove, youngster, this is getting interesting! You were not the only one who heard that call last night," said Nelson Lee, leaning forward eagerly.

"I only heard it once," said Nipper, "and I don't know what it meant exactly. I stood there for the best part of ten minutes, but it was not repeated, nor did I see another sign of the thing that had attacked me."

"And you have no idea what it was?" Margaret put in.

Nipper shook his head.

"Not the remotest," he returned. "I didn't get much chance, you know. But I

