

DETECTIVE ADVENTURE IN THE MYSTIC EAST!

THE NELSON LEE

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THE PRISONER
OF THE TEMPLE!

THE PRISONER



CHAPTER 1.

The Silent Watcher!

THE morning had broken dull and leaden, and all day long the snow had been flaking down in large white specks.

Around the base of the hill where the Taoist temples stood there hung a veil of mist through which the monasteries and temples appeared dimly against the background of white snow.

The Changsha Valley is perhaps one of the most interesting spots in all Manchuria, not only because of the beauty of its surroundings, but also because of the enormous num-

ber of Taoist and Buddhist monasteries that are located there.

To the left ran the railway line, and at midday there came echoing through the gorge the high-pitched shriek of an engine whistle, and with its crazy carriages clanking at its heels, there came round the bend the puffing, panting locomotive. At the roadside station there is a little waiting-room, and as the train came to a halt and began to discharge its tired, benumbed travellers, a hooded cart that had been sheltering from the storm under the lee of the waiting-room was driven slowly forward by its robed driver.

—Starring Nelson Lee, Nipper, And Lord Dorrimore, The Millionaire Rover!

OF THE TEMPLE



High above the snow-clad peaks of the mountains, away in a secret temple, lies a white man, prisoner of merciless foes. Countless spies and enemies lurk in every shadow round the foot of the mountain—yet Nelson Lee, the famous detective, dares all in a plucky attempt to rescue his fellow-countryman !

The two shaggy Manchurian ponies between the shafts seemed quite unperturbed, although their thick coats were covered with snow. The driver, a broad-faced Mongolian, halted his cart at the exit of the station and turned a blank, expressionless face over his shoulder to watch.

Most of the passengers were natives, although there was a sprinkling of Japanese and also one or two Europeans among them. It was not until the station was almost cleared that there came through the exit a covered litter, carried by a couple of men in nondescript uniform. Beside the litter

strode a broad-shouldered, shaven-headed monk, a Buddhist, and at a word of command from him the railway employees carried the litter round to the back of the covered cart. Then, lifting the flaps, they thrust the litter bodily inside, raising the tilt and tightening the flaps into place again.

The priest stood aside while this was going on, but as soon as the railway employees had completed their task he gave them a grave, curt nod, then, stepping round to the front of the cart, he clambered up to the side of the driver. Without saying a word, the man called to his ponies, and the cart, swinging round from the station, began to trundle away across the snow-covered ground until it swung into the main track.

Presently the cart was winding its way through the lower slopes of the hills, then it passed through a group of small temples. With the ponies straining at the traces, it went up higher and stiffer slopes, finally halting on a small plateau that seemed to hang precariously on the verge of a deep declivity.

On the hillside of this plateau there arose a long flight of steps fashioned in the hill itself. The steps ran upward, tier after tier, and halted at last on another plateau on which arose the shadowy bulk of the monastery. At the foot of the steps stood four hooded figures.

As the cart stopped they went round to the back of it; then presently the covered litter was drawn out and the four men began their burdensome journey back to the monastery.

The monk followed the party, keeping about three steps beneath; and the driver, having turned his ponies round, cantered away.

The procession reached the monastery at the top of the steps and passed under the high-arched doorway of the temple into the dimly-lit interior, and the four stretcher-bearers threaded their way through the cedar-wood pillars. The sandals on their feet, clinging with snow, thudded hollowly on the mosaic paving. A huge leather curtain at the end of the pillared passage was reached and again the stretcher-bearers paused.

The curtains moved, and there emerged from them another shaven-headed priest. He was a very old, wrinkled man, and on one of his long, yellow fingers there gleamed a dull ruby ring.

He had only given one swift glance at the stretcher-bearers, then his look was transferred to the thick-set priest pacing quietly along behind. The priest nodded his head, and the old monk in front of the curtain spoke a single word to the stretcher-bearers. They were obviously the underlings of that monastery, for at his word they laid the stretcher down, bowed deeply, crossed their hands over their breasts, then, turning round, hurried off along the pillared passage again, moving with the swift celerity of men glad to be gone.

Not until the sound of their flopping foot-falls had died away did the older priest move. He bent his lean body, lifted the outer flaps of the covered stretcher, and glanced inside. Whatever emotion he may have felt, there was no sign of it on his features as he raised his head again and nodded to the thick-set figure on the other side of the stretcher. Yet there was appreciation and even congratulation in that curt acknowledgment.

The monkey-like priest stepped back and clapped his hands twice. Two other monks appeared, and presently from the hooded litter there was lifted a silk-swathed figure, obviously that of a man, and a tall man, for, as the other priests moved off bearing him in their arms, it was easy to see that the burden was almost as much as they could manage.

Beyond the curtains there was a circular staircase, and it was up there that the two priests carried their burden. They emerged on to the gallery with stone filigree work that ran round the east side of the temple, the side which faced the hill. They moved noiselessly along this gallery, and finally vanished into an octagonal-shaped room, the panels of which were formed of exquisitely carved, scented cedar wood.

Against one of the walls was a low couch on which were a quantity of silken rugs and dressed skins. The figure swathed in white silk was placed on this couch, then the two priests retired.

THE wrinkled head priest went on to the arched doorway, and waited there until the two subordinates had vanished, then he swept aside the silken curtain which hung across the doorway and entered the room. For fully a minute there was utter silence, then suddenly, from one of the small embrasures of the gallery, there came a faint sound. A lean figure appeared in the half dusk.

It was clinging to the carved stonework that ran from arch to arch. There was a dark silk loin-cloth swathed around the middle of the figure, but apart from that it was quite naked—a lean, slender, supple shape of a bronze tint.

The face was young and the wide brown eyes were looking furtively to right and left as their owner clung to his precarious support. With feet and hands he was clinging there, and his attitude suggested the monkey rather than a human being.

He craned his neck forward and peered down the gallery, then, satisfied that the place was clear, he began to move forward, splayed out on the carved stonework for all the world like a fly moving along the face of a wall, until he presently found himself standing on a narrow ledge of cedar wood that ran above the curtained doorway of the room into which the head priest had vanished.

Above the ledge, the outer walls of the room were panelled in smooth light wood, and, set in the centre of this panelling, was

a narrow opening, obviously placed there for ventilation purposes. It was for this narrow opening that the slender, bronzed figure was aiming, and, after a short pause on the ledge, he began to slip forward, inch by inch, keeping his body flat against the smooth paneling, until at last he was immediately beneath the narrow gap.

His hands reached up, caught at the gap, and with a graceful, easy pull the slim shape rose noiselessly and vanished head-first into the black opening. He found himself standing on dust-covered rafters that sloped to a point, following the octagonal shape of the chamber. From the apex where the rafters met a light was shining, and, creeping noiselessly up one of the huge beams, the dusty figure knelt down cautiously and peered through an aperture into the room below.

He saw the couch with the silk-robed shape lying prone upon it, and the warped, stunted figure of the priest seated at the foot of the couch, one hand supporting his pointed chin. A part of the silk robe of the unconscious figure on the couch had been removed, and the watcher from the roof above saw a head and shoulders lying exposed. The face was drawn and white, and the eyes were closed. But there was no mistaking the race.

The man on the couch was a European, and it seemed as though the young figure peering at it recognised the face, for a silent breath was drawn through the parted teeth.

FOR a long time there was no movement below; then presently the figure on the couch moved uneasily, and the head swayed from side to side; then it was raised and the eyes opened. The dull, lifeless glaze in the orbs gradually changed, the wandering expression on the face altered, and, with an effort, the tall, swathed figure tried to rise to a sitting position.

It was evident that the man was very weak, for his effort was fruitless, and he dropped back again with a half moan.

The wizened priest arose to his feet and came up beside the couch, then, bending forward, he stared long and grimly into the eyes looking up into his.

"We have waited long for thee, but thou seest as I promised. The Brotherhood of Liao Yang has taken thee at last. Thou has refused to speak those things we wish to hear, therefore we have decided that thou shalt not speak them to anyone else. The drug which has robbed thee of thy power to move has also placed a hold on thy tongue. Thou wilt neither have speech nor movement until we decide. Thou canst hear but cannot reply; thou wilt understand, but wilt not be able to reason. And the time shall surely come when those secrets which you have discovered will be told the Brotherhood of Liao Yang, for then thou wilt be glad to speak and to go free."

He raised his head, and the slim figure kneeling on the apex of the roof caught a fleeting glimpse of the countenance of the

priest. It was twisted into a look of fanatical resolve, and the sight of the terrible, frowning face sent a wave of horror through the young watcher.

With a curt nod the old priest turned, and, his silken robes rustling as he moved, he crossed the room, and the watcher heard the heavy leather curtain drop into place behind him.

For a few moments the slim figure knelt on the rafters, looking down with unseeing eyes into the interior of the room; then he slipped his hand into his loin-cloth and drew out from it a little cylinder, the hollowed section of a slender bamboo wand.

Poising for a second over the small aperture in the roof, the youngster, taking the bamboo wand between his slender fingers, lowered one hand down to its full extent; then, judging the distance as well as he could, he cast the little fragment of hollowed wood into the room. It fell on the chest of the man on the couch, and as the watcher peered down again, he saw the eyes open and the head lift slightly.

The strip of bamboo lay on the man's chest, and, as he looked at it, he reached up one hand and very slowly took the tube. It seemed to be all he could do to close his fingers round it and hold it up level with his eyes.

Another second passed, then the watcher in the roof saw the face below change suddenly. The eyes widened and there came into them something of dawning intelligence and, perhaps, hope.

A few moments later the hand fell away to the side of the couch, groping in among the rugs and skins, hiding the slender cylinder. Then the hand was withdrawn again and placed across the chest.

"He understands. I can do no more now. But he knows that I have been here."

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CHAPTER 2.

A Perilous Errand!

THE slim figure rose to a half-crouching position, then commenced to make its way down the sloping rafters, finally reaching the gap in the panelled wall again. Here it halted and peered out into the gallery before venturing to slip through and tackle the narrow ledge once more.

As soon as it reached the carved stonework it began to claw its way downward, and presently let itself go, to drop noiselessly on to the floor of the gallery. Then, taking to its heels, the slim, half-naked shape fled swiftly away, to vanish behind the wider curtains that hung across the top of the stairs.

The slim youngster stood at the top of the stairs for a few seconds, his head craned forward, listening intently; then, satisfied that there was no one moving, he began to

descend the circular staircase and reached the long gallery below.

Through the carved cedar-wood pillars he had a vision of the interior of the temple, with its great black Buddha and tall incense burners. A solitary figure was kneeling in devout attitude at the foot of the steps that led up to the Buddha, and after watching it for a moment the slender youth commenced to tiptoe behind the pillars heading for the door.

He had just gained the end of the corridor, and was within a few feet of the door, when there came to his ears the rustling of silk, and a short, squat figure emerged from the shadows, holding out a long-sleeved arm to bar his way.

The youngster halted immediately, and, looking at the face of the priest, he smiled and gave a quick bow.

"Go back, Toigan," the priest said. "You know the orders here. No one is allowed to leave the temple until our High and Holy One desires."

Under the faint light that was filtering through the doorway the youngster's face revealed a well-assumed petulance. He knew well enough these orders existed, but he had hoped to slip out unobserved. But with such a guardian at the door it was impossible, and after a little burst of protest Toigan swung round and his slim figure vanished in the shadows of the cedar pillars.

Toigan was troubled with a trouble that would not allow him to rest. In his heart the young Burmese boy—for he was really a native of Burma, brought to that lonely temple in Manchuria for the sake of imbibing the extraordinary stores of knowledge that Chang Lo, the aged head of the temple, was supposed to possess—had a definite project; and as he sped along through the pillars and under the arches, gaining the other side of the temple, his desire to get out of that gloomy pile increased.

He had something to do, something that had to be done at once. He had been on watch, had kept faithful look-out, for many days, until the coming of this tall Englishman had brought with it the moment when his orders would have to be obeyed.

In some way Toigan would have to get away from the temple, and it was in fretful, uneasy spirit that he moved now through the dark spaces. He reached another staircase and ran noiselessly up it, finding himself in one of the open galleries that looked out on to the valley below.

It was really a small balcony set in the walls of the temple, and, resting his elbows on the stone parapet, Toigan peered down. There was no possible chance of his getting away from there; the fall was a sheer one of forty or fifty feet, and below him the ground, covered with snow, seemed to mock his designs.

He noticed, however, that the snow was beginning to stop now, and presently, after a last wild flurry, the flakes vanished, and

he watched the clouds racing swiftly across the face of the sun. The position of the sun warned him that it was getting on towards dusk, and again his firm young lips tightened. He had to get away. There were people waiting anxiously on the other side of the valley for news—news that only he could bring them.

A half-smothered sigh broke from his lips, and he straightened up, staring again at the leaden sky. As he did so an object familiar enough to him, but fraught now with a new significance, caught his eye.

From the stone parapet that ran round the dome of the temple there stretched a thick wire. It ran straight across the valley and was attached to a stone tower on the other side.

The wire had always been there as far as Toigan could remember, and was used for banners, balloons and kites to flutter in the air on certain Buddhist festivals. No doubt this form of gay decoration was the result of the Japanese influence, so strong in Manchuria, but Toigan didn't trouble to think that out.

Toigan was a faithful soul, and had given his solemn promise, and now, as he saw the copper wire gleaming there, into his fertile brain leaped a great plan.

In another moment he had darted away from the parapet, and a few minutes later his slim figure appeared against the rounded dome of the temple. It passed along close to the stone parapet, then vanished for a moment.

Toigan had found the curved opening into the dome of the temple, and now he was standing in the great space, examining it intently. He knew that the dome had been used as a store-house, and it was here that the great gaudy dragons and banners and kites had been packed away.

It was getting dusk by this time, and Toigan had to move very cautiously, for he was afraid of being seen or overheard. But his search was rewarded at last, and he came across a great pile of flattened box-kites in one corner of the dome chamber.

They were made of stout, flexible bamboo, and Toigan commenced to carry his treasure trove out on to the space between the dome and the stone arch. He knew how to rig up the kites, and presently he had fixed the supports in their places, and had five or six of the monster things ready.

Dusk found him still hard at work, and now there had risen, as usual, the steady, surging night breeze from the west. It blew straight across the valley. Presently he picked up the first of the box kites.

THERE is an art in launching a box-kite, and it was one that Toigan knew, and after some deft manipulation, the first great square was floating some twenty or thirty yards above the dome of the temple, held rigid by the thin, strong cord that Toigan held in his hand.

Another and yet another kite was fixed to the cord and allowed to rise upward, being checked by the knot at the end of it, until at last, with an ever-growing length of cord, Toigan had seven of the immense kites floating high in the air, drawing on the cord.

It was pitch dark by now, and the racing clouds made it impossible for anyone to mark the presence of those objects against the sky. Toigan added yet another two of the things, and now, as he paid out the cord, he found that the drag of the powerful kites was almost sufficient to pull him off his feet.

He had to fight hard to carry the cord down to the parapet and attach it to the slender, humming wire that ran out across the valley. Then he turned and went back to the store-room, returning this time with a length of webbing of some thick, strong material, a stout brass block and wheel, and a sheep-skin cloak, a hood, and top boots. The latter he donned for protection.

The former was a rude form of travelling cradle that had been used once or twice by the masons who had worked on the walls of the temple.

Toigan reached the wire, slipping the block over it, then fastened down the catch again and adjusted the wheel on to the thin, powerful strand. There was an eye above the block, and, sitting on the parapet, Toigan removed the kite cord from the copper wire and fastened it through the eye of the block.

As soon as he did so he felt the strain of the kites and adjusted himself in the thick, webbed seat. Another tug almost saw the youngster overbalanced, then there came a fiercer gust of wind, and before he knew where he was, Toigan was dragged bodily from the stone parapet and went swaying to and fro in his webbed seat. His amazing journey had begun.

Freed from their anchorage on the parapet, the great box-kites drew that travelling cradle along the wire at a pace that grew swifter and swifter as they cleared the shelter of the temple, and the full force of the gale caught them.

His heart in his mouth, Toigan clung desperately to that swaying, rocking strip of webbing with eyes closed and lips parted. He felt the rush of the wind and knew that he was travelling at a tremendous pace.

He could feel the wire rocking and swaying with his weight, and for a moment terror struck his soul.

Yet, as the moments sped swiftly and the faint, chattering wheeze of the wheel, as it ran along the wire, continued, Toigan's youthful spirits revived somewhat. He found himself able to straighten up in his seat, and he cast a quick glance down below.

It seemed to him as though he were posted between heaven and earth without any visible means of support. Far down he saw the glimmer of lights in the huts of the villages, and here and there a larger glow indicating the site of some big temple.

How long it took him to cross the valley Toigan never knew, but suddenly he was aware of the fact that the poise of the swaying cradle was beginning to check, and as it grew slower he realised what it meant.

He had reached over half-way, and his weight had caused the wire to bend downward, so that the latter part of his journey was, in a measure, up-hill.

It was a result that Toigan, in his recklessness, had never calculated upon, yet all unwittingly it served him well. For the pull of the upward tilt of the wire checked the steady drawing power of the kites, so that the last few yards were covered at a slower pace.

In front of him Toigan saw looming the great stone walls of the tower. It was a water tower of a primitive type, used by the officials to supply irrigation water to the terraced gardens in the valley. Toigan knew now that the dangerous part of his journey was approaching, and he prepared himself for it.

He managed to steady himself, and so, as the stone walls seemed to rush at him, he stretched out his hands and feet, and, as a fly lands on a ceiling, so did Toigan land plumb against the wall.

Despite the fact that the pace had slackened, it was a very heavy shock, and the lad's bare hands were bruised and cut, and his body was badly jarred. Yet he was quick-witted enough to fight for a hold, and he managed to accomplish that task, for the stones of the wall were of rough, unhewn material.

Toigan gave one quick breath, then, with an effort, he managed to wriggle himself out of his webbed support, and clawed at the top of the tower, to drop on his hands and knees on the flat roof.

THERE is always a reaction after great physical strain, and the slim youngster found himself very weak and nervous, so that for a few moments he had to crouch on the flagstones of the flat roof, waiting until the tingling, numbing sensation died out of his limbs.

When he had recovered slightly he rose to his feet and turned towards the parapet over which the wire ran. The great box-kites, forty yards away, were tugging and straining at the end of the cord, and Toigan whipped out a knife from his loin-cloth under the cloak, and, with a single sweep of the sharp blade, the tough cord was severed.

There was a snap and a whisk, and the box-kites from the temple of Liao Yang went soaring up into the cloudy sky, to vanish in the darkness.

After he had released the kites Toigan set to work on the block, removing it, together with the strip of webbing; then he crossed the flat roof of the tower and found the circular staircase which ran down the building to the ground below.

Two or three moments later the young Burmese boy had dropped noiselessly into the snow at the foot of the tower; then, striking across to the left, he gained the side of one of the deep wells from whence the simple mechanism of the tower pumped the water.

Toigan dropped the webbing and block into the well, knowing that in its deep recesses his secret would be preserved.

Ahead of him, through the mantle of snow, he could see the low wall that guarded the tower. Heading for this, he vaulted over it; then, taking to his heels, the slim figure began to run steadily forward through the four-inch carpet of snow.

He struck the roadway, turning to the left and going on down it; passed through the village and continued until he came to a small shed standing close to the station. Here he halted and his movements became more cautious.

He approached the shed, making a complete circle of it; then, satisfied that all was safe, he slipped one hand under his cloak and took out a folded paper.

Scraping aside the snow, Toigan found a stone, which he wrapped in the centre of the paper; then, stepping back a pace, he took careful aim at the closed window of the shed, and, with the swift, unerring aim of a youngster, sent the stone crashing through the glass.

He heard a cry, a low sound; then a light appeared in the window, and Toigan had a brief vision of a man in shirt-sleeves, a bronzed, tanned European of a distinctly military type.

The young Burmese laughed softly to himself in the darkness as he saw the figure stoop, then he turned and commenced to run back up the narrow road along which he had come.

It was perhaps just as well for Toigan that the snow had been falling heavily and there was a touch of cold in the wind, for he was able to slip through the village again unnoticed.

At last he found himself on the plateau with the long flight of steps that led up to the temple.

He climbed the steps boldly enough and reached the dark gateway. Here he halted, and, after a moment's pause, slipped like a flash of lightning past the deep alcove in which he knew the keeper sat. In a moment he was speeding noiselessly down the dark gallery. He had carried out the desires that a man, a friend of his in the old Burmese days, had asked, and, so far as Toigan was concerned, that ended the matter.

But Toigan's grim enterprise was by no means to end with Toigan's part in it. Before he went to his bed that night the telegraph wires were humming, and a message was speeding half round the world, from sea to sea, across a Continent, to be finally picked out under the eyes of a tired telegraphist in the heart of London.

CHAPTER 3.

The Packet from the East!

IT was almost dusk, and Nelson Lee and Nipper, accompanied by their friend, Lord Dorrimore, were returning from a shooting expedition in the woods belonging to Dorrimore's friend, Mr. Peter Hemmage. The owner of the lodge, a bluff, ruddy-cheeked man in the fifties, was standing on the porch as the trio appeared.

He had not joined the shoot because of the twinge of rheumatism that had overtaken him that morning, and after the bag had been inspected and duly commented upon, the party retired into a comfortable study, where Mr. Peter Hemmage ordered tea to be brought.

Midway through the meal Mrs. Hemmage appeared, and was introduced to the visitors. It seemed to Nelson Lee as though the lady cast a rather inquiring glance in his direction, and he noted that the stout host shook his head, as if disapproving of something that was in his wife's mind.

Presently, however, the lady would not be denied, for she seated herself next to Nelson Lee and leaned forward.

"Lord Dorrimore has often spoken about you, Mr. Lee," she said, "and he has told me what a wonderful man you are in your profession. I have often wished to meet you, and, strange to say, something happened this morning which looks to me as though it might be a case for you."

"Now, now, my dear Martha, I thought I asked you not to do this?" Peter Hemmage said, shaking his head at his wife. "You forget that Mr. Lee is only here for a day's holiday, and I don't know what he'll think of you if you start burdening him with this business. Hang it all, every man is entitled to a spell now and again."

Mrs. Hemmage looked at Lee searchingly, and under the eager glance from the rather faded eyes the detective could do nothing else but smile.

"It's all right, Mrs. Hemmage," he said. "My holiday is practically over now. We've had a splendid day, thanks to the hospitality of your husband. If there is anything troubling you, and I can assist you at all, I shall be only too pleased to do so."

The woman turned and gave a quick nod to her husband.

"There, what did I tell you, Peter?" she said. "I was quite sure Mr. Lee would listen."

She rose to her feet.

"I won't be a moment, Mr. Lee," she went on. "It has really to do with a letter which I have upstairs."

As soon as she had left the room the bluff host rose to his feet and shrugged his shoulders.

"You've no idea what a job I had to prevent my wife from going out into the field and tackling you there and then, Mr. Lee," he said, with a rueful laugh. "I think it's a shame, myself, although I'm free to



Judging the distance correctly, Nelson Lee leaped down from the wall and landed full on the would-be assassin's shoulders. The man crumpled up and a howl broke from his lips as he fell.

admit that I shall be extremely grateful to you if you do help us to solve this problem. But how you're going to do it I can't quite make out."

The door opened again and Mrs. Hemmage returned. She was carrying a small package in her hand and she unfolded it, revealing the fact that it contained a little ivory box.

On opening the box, a scrap of yellow parchment, together with a seal of green agate, was revealed in the interior. The hostess' fingers trembled slightly as she lifted the seal and handed it over to Nelson Lee.

"This seal belongs to my daughter's husband," she said. "He is out in Manchuria just now. He went out about six months ago, representing a very big trading company. His name is Bernard Steele, and he has spent most of his life in the East—Burma, India, China, and those places."

Nelson Lee was examining the seal quietly. Mrs. Hemmage had lifted the strip of parchment and was holding it out to him.

"Neither my husband nor I can make head or tail of this," she said. "I suppose it is a message of some sort, but I don't understand it. I wonder if you can?"

The strip of parchment was straightened out, and Nelson Lee studied it. Obviously it was a crude representation of some sort of seal. There were one or two lines to suggest clouds, and under them was a number of

V-shaped marks in the form of a reversed "V."

Below these marks was a crude design which, after careful study, Lee made out to be a form of yoke, and a figure was represented as being in that yoke, the head through the centre and the hands held out on each end of it.

Down one side of the parchment ran a line of Chinese characters, and although Nelson Lee studied them intently, he could not quite read the whole of the message. It was an abbreviated form of writing, and it required an expert to read it correctly. But so far as he could gather, it was a warning of some disaster.

"If my daughter were here she might have been able to read it," Mrs. Hemmage went on, "for she was many years in Manchuria—a missionary. But unfortunately she left for the East only a week ago to join her husband."

Mr. Hemmage leaned forward and stared at the scrap of parchment over Lee's shoulder.

"I don't like the look of it, Mr. Lee," he said. "But I really can't understand what it's all about. The only sinister point in it so far as I'm concerned is the fact that Bernard's seal has been enclosed with the message. It was always a joke of his that if anything ever did happen to him he would send that seal home to Miriam—my daughter."

"He did say that, did he?" Nelson Lee put in.

"Oh, yes! We often joked about it," said the hostess. "But now that it has come to us I feel that there is—is something in it. Something has happened to him."

She looked helpless and troubled as she sat there with her eyes on Nelson Lee's face. It seemed as though she expected the detective to have some sort of supernatural power by which he would be able to elucidate the secret of that message, if, indeed, it contained a secret.

Dorrimore and Nipper had risen to their feet now, and they were studying the strip of yellow parchment.

"I never did think much of the Chinese drawings," Lord Dorrimore commented, "but this thing is the limit. What on earth do they mean by all these V-shaped marks, anyhow? I suppose the things above represent clouds, and that figure is a prisoner all right, for the Manchurians and the Chinese have a trick of putting their unfortunate victims into the yoke. But it is that zig-zag stuff under the clouds that beats me."

Nipper smiled. At least two-thirds of the drawing was taken up by the "V-shaped marks, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, there must be thousands of them," he said.

borders of Manchuria, and is one of the principal stations on the railway."

"Did it look as if it had been examined in any way?" Nelson Lee asked. "I know that it is very seldom that a packet comes from the East without the authorities there taking very good care to see what is inside it."

Mr. Hemmage shook his head.

"No, that's a point I noticed," he commented. "So far as I could see, the packet appeared to have come through untampered with, and, as you say, that fact in itself is rather extraordinary, for it would make it appear that the people who sent it were sufficiently powerful to get it through without any difficulty."

"I feel sure that Bernard is in trouble, Mr. Lee," the lady put in. "My daughter, just before she left England, had a foreboding that all was not well with him, and, as a matter of fact, she hadn't heard from Bernard for several mails. We knew that he had intended going into Russia, but even then he always made it a point of writing to my daughter every week, and he has been in some of the wildest parts of the world, yet letters have always been received from him."

She looked at Nelson Lee for a moment.

"In fact, it was really anxiety about not

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Starring Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Wolf, the Alsatian. IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

Nelson Lee was looking at the line of Chinese characters that ran down the side of the paper, and he turned suddenly to his assistant with a quick smile.

"Jove, young 'un!" he said, placing his finger on one of the marks. "You've given me a hint. I couldn't make out what this was, but I see now that it has something to do with the Hill of a Thousand Peaks."

"The Hill of a Thousand Peaks!" echoed Mrs. Hemmage. "Whatever does that mean?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"That's more than I can tell you, Mrs. Hemmage," he returned. "In fact, I am not even sure that this sign does represent that, but I know that there is the Chinese representation for a thousand in it, and there is also the sign for a hill. I think that the best thing we can do would be to take the message along to the Chinese Embassy in London and get one of their experts there to try and decipher it for us."

"That's all right, Lee. But what on earth is it all about?" Hemmage asked, with just that touch of bad temper that a man suffering from rheumatism is allowed to display at times. "The letter was delivered here to-day, and, as you will see, it was posted at Kharbin, which, as you know, is just on the

receiving any letters that made Miriam go off rather earlier than she would have done under ordinary circumstances. For she hadn't intended sailing for the East for another two months yet, when Bernard expected to be back again in Hong-Kong."

"Miriam could have translated the letter," said Mr. Hemmage. "But as she has sailed we cannot hope for that. I don't see what you can do, really, Lee. However, as you've agreed to help us in the matter, I am quite prepared to leave it in your hands. I intended to go to London myself on Monday, and should have called on the Chinese Embassy. But if you will be good enough to undertake the job, you might be able to call there to-night, on your return to town."

The upshot of it was that when Nelson Lee, Nipper and Lord Dorrimore left the hospitable house, the detective was carrying with him the little ivory box and its message.

THEY reached London somewhere about eight-thirty, and late though the hour was, Nelson Lee telephoned the Chinese Embassy, and went on there with Nipper, while Lord Dorrimore went to his own flat.

One of the under-secretaries for the embassy was waiting for the detective. His name was Piau. Nelson Lee knew Mr. Piau very well, and the Oriental nodded and shook hands warmly when the detective entered.

Piau was a very well educated man, and had been at one of our universities. He was also a keen student of conditions in the East, and Nelson Lee was satisfied that the dapper little yellow-skinned man was just exactly the one to help him.

He explained the whole matter, and the little Oriental adjusted a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles over his eyes, then studied the sheet of parchment. It seemed to Nelson Lee that the texture of the sheet caused the keen-eyed Chinaman to scrutinise it carefully; and then he turned to Lee and smiled.

"Had one of my superstitious countrymen received this message, Mr. Lee, he would have considered it in the nature of a holy one," he said. "This parchment is used exclusively by the priests in the Buddhist temples, more particularly in Manchuria. It is made from the skin of sheep, as you can see, and it is practically a lost art now."

The little Chinaman was quite interested in the parchment, for he turned it over and over again, rubbing it between his fingers; then presently he smoothed it out once more and set to work to examine the design.

Nipper, too, was interested. He was sitting on the other side of the table, very intent, and he caught the first words as they came from Piau's lips:

"The Hill of a Thousand Peaks!"

"Then there is such a place?" exclaimed Nipper.

"Oh, yes!" replied the embassy official. "There is such a place, and this crude design suggests that the artist made a very praiseworthy effort to reproduce the scene. It is a very famous place in Manchuria, not very far from the border. As a matter of fact, it is an absolute hotbed of Buddhist and Taoist temples and monasteries."

There was a moment's silence, Piau studying the characters and writing a few words in English now and again. When the message was completed, he read it, then shook his head.

"It doesn't sound very sensible, Mr. Lee," he said, "but that may be my fault. As a matter of fact, these characters are very crude, and they are not modern Chinese."

"What do they mean?" Lee asked.

Mr. Piau began to read the message out.

"From the hands of Toigan, a stranger in an unfriendly country, comes this message, in obedience to the wishes of the man who saved his father's life on the Irrawaddy:

"In the Temple of Liao Yang, the Hill of a Thousand Peaks, lies Toigan's friend, a prisoner by the orders of the shaggy men who rule at Hulan."

Mr. Piau looked up from the message.

"I really can't make a great deal out of it," he commented. "In the first place, I

don't know who the writer is, but I'm sure he isn't Chinese, for he has made several mistakes in the forming of the characters. I should think he is probably someone being taught the language."

He indicated the crude design of the figure of the man in the yoke.

"That, of course, suggests someone is a prisoner," he said; "and it is certainly a Chinese way of keeping a man in confinement. But I must say that I cannot quite understand why the message should refer to the shaggy men, for, of course, you know what that means?"

"Russians?" said Lee, and Piau nodded.

"Yes. My people, when they first met the Russians, applied the name of 'shaggy' to them on account of the fact that their hair was worn so loose and long," Piau said dryly. "Hulan, which lies up the river, is a Russian town, but at present there are a great number of Chinese in it, and, indeed, the whole of Manchuria is rapidly becoming populated with Chinese, while both the Japanese and the Russians are anxious to get control over that wealthy area. This prisoner may have been dabbling with politics, of which, of course, I cannot form any opinion."

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Piau," said Lee. "As a matter of fact, that box and message were sent to a Mr. Hemmage and the seal in it belongs to his son-in-law, a representative of a big British combine, with extensive dealings in the East. Mr. Bernard Steele, the owner of the seal, went out to Manchuria this last time, about six months ago, and up to within two or three weeks has corresponded regularly with his wife. He was a man who always kept in touch with his people at home, and the fact that he had ceased to write was considered by Mrs. Steele as a dubious sign. Mrs. Steele has already sailed to the East to try and find her husband, and this message was only received after her departure."

Piau was silent for a moment, tapping the table.

"Of course, we cannot interfere, so far as the embassy is concerned, Mr. Lee," he said, "but my personal opinion is that it is quite a genuine message and one that ought to be regarded as serious."

He rose to his feet and crossed to the wall, where a big map of Manchuria hung. Nelson Lee and Nipper followed him, and with a long, slender finger-nail Mr. Piau picked out the track that ran through Manchuria.

"This is Liao Yang," he said. "It is the ancient capital of the Liao Yang Province, of Southern Manchuria, and from it is possible to reach the mountains of Chang Shan—which means a thousand peaks."

He came back to the table and picked up the box in which the parchment had been sent. He studied it carefully, turning it

over and over in his hands, then his lined face lighted up suddenly.

"I don't suppose you noticed this," he said, indicating a mark on one corner of the box, and Lee shook his head.

"No, I didn't examine the box itself very closely," the detective returned.

"Well, this is a box which has been actually made by someone called Li Piu of the Changsha Valley, and the Changsha Valley is where the thousand peaks rise from."

He tapped the box.

"It is rather important, this little discovery," he added, "and I think you will agree with me, for it means that this message was actually sent from the Changsha Valley."

Nelson Lee had carried the package with him in its brown paper wrappings, and he smoothed the paper out now, and the two men examined the address and various postal marks.

"One point I did notice, Mr Piau," said the detective, "and that was that the address was written by an Englishman, I think. The characters are quite clearly formed, and they are those of a man educated in a Public school. You know, of course, that there is a great deal of difference between the handwriting of a Public school-boy and any other?"

Piau nodded.

"It is interesting," he said, "for it means that it must have been someone else who addressed the package. And yet, here is another proof that it was posted from Changsha, for that is the name that is on the postmark, and it has been counter-stamped by some railway official there."

He looked at Nelson Lee.

"As a matter of fact, there are one or two Britishers working on the Manchurian railway in the higher administrative posts, and unless I am very much mistaken, I think it is probable that one of these Englishmen must have addressed the package, and seen to it that it got safely through without it being examined, for this official mark is one that would guarantee it going straight through without any query."

They chatted together for another few moments, then Nelson Lee wrapped up the box and parchment again and left the embassy. As he and Nipper paced along the street the youngster turned to the detective.

"What d'you make of it, guv'nor?" he asked. "It all seems higgledy-piggledy to me. A bit complicated, isn't it?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I don't think so, young 'un. It's not nearly so complex as you might imagine. Indulging in a little more theorising, we can at least reach the following conclusions."

He began to enumerate them, one by one.

"First, it is certain that it was someone who was under a deep obligation to Steele who sent the message. You see, he mentions the fact that his father's life was saved by

the prisoner on the Irrawaddy. Now, the Irrawaddy is in Burma, and, as you know, there are a great many followers of Buddha in that country. Mr. Piau said that the individual who had formed these characters was not a Chinese, so we can regard it that it was someone probably from Burma who is now a priest, or at least in a position to get hold of the special parchment only used by the priests in the temple, who sent the message.

"The second point is that the prisoner is in some temple known as the Liao Yang Brotherhood. That fact is very clearly stated, and I have no doubt if we made inquiries that we would discover there is a temple so-called somewhere in the Changsha district."

He turned to his assistant and smiled.

"It doesn't take a very great stretch of imagination to reach another conclusion, young 'un," he went on. "This strip of parchment was probably delivered in some way or other to the Englishman who sent it, along with the seal, to England. There might even have been some arrangement between the writer of the message and the sender, but that, of course, we cannot say yet. In any case, it was not until the sender received that message that he decided to send that agate seal in the box, for I am sure that the seal was in his possession for some time before he had to send it."

"I think I'm beginning to follow you, guv'nor," Nipper remarked. "You mean that Mr. Steele felt that he was going on some dangerous mission, and during that period he was not able to communicate with his wife. Before he started he left his seal with a pal, asking him to keep it until he returned, or to send it off if anything happened to him."

"Yes, that's just about how I read the riddle, young 'un," he said. "Steele, together with his trading business, might also have been in the employ of our Government, but that is a point which I will find out tomorrow. In any case, I am satisfied that Mrs. Hemmage's fears are by no means groundless. Somewhere in Manchuria her son-in-law is a prisoner, and the fact that we have not heard anything about it and no comment has been made over here or in the East suggests that the secret is being well kept."

They reached Grays Inn Road and had a light meal, then chatted together for another hour before retiring for the night.

It was significant that when Nipper went into his own bed-room he spent another twenty minutes or so looking over his very travel-stained and battered suitcase.

"I can feel it in my bones," he muttered to himself. "We're going to make a move. I haven't seen the guv'nor so serious over anything for a long time. He has made that promise to the old lady, and if it takes him half across the world he'll go."

CHAPTER 4.

A Commission for Lee!

IF Nipper had wanted any proof of this theory of his, he was supplied with it on the following morning; for immediately after breakfast Nelson Lee rang up a certain number, then turned to his assistant and nodded.

"I'm going to run round and see Sir Ervin Mandell," he said. "I've fixed up an appointment with him, and I may not be back until after lunch. In the meantime, you get into touch with Dorrimore and suggest that if he is bored with civilised life we might be glad of help very shortly—in the East."

Nipper knew that Sir Ervin Mandell was one of the higher officials of the Foreign Office, and a man who dealt with the Eastern side of affairs, and in the Intelligence branch of that intricate service.

"More travel," said Nipper, with a sigh. "Well, I don't have to join the Army to see the world, that's one thing."

Sir Ervin Mandell lived in a small house off Berkeley Square, and he was waiting in his study when Nelson Lee was ushered in. The detective, in his characteristic manner, went to the point at once.

"I want to trace the whereabouts and movements of a certain man called Bernard Steele, Sir Ervin," Lee said. "I understand that he is a representative of a large English manufacturing concern, and has been travelling in the East for some years. He is now, or was, in Manchuria, and I want to get in touch with him if I can."

Sir Ervin leaned back in his chair and looked at Lee, a smile crossing his long, clever face.

"You're a most extraordinary man, Lee," he said. "You seem to have the knack of hitting on points that just rise. Now, how on earth did you get to know anything about this chap Steele?"

"I'll explain that to you later, Sir Ervin," Lee said, smiling back at his host, and the baronet shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, to tell you the truth, old chap, on Friday we had a report from one of our branches advising us that Bernard Steele had not been heard of for three weeks."

"Then he is in your service?" Lee interrupted. And the Intelligence official nodded.

"Of course. He has been on our Secret Service for the past five years. I thought you knew."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, I didn't. My inquiries come from quite a different source."

Sir Ervin was silent for a moment.

"Well, I know that I am quite safe in confiding in you, Lee, and I can tell you that Mr. Steele was, perhaps, one of the best men we have in that quarter of the world. He has a fine command of Russian and Chinese, and he has been of great service to us. So far as I know, he was able to keep his association with us a secret, thanks to the fact

that he was really a genuine traveller for a big British firm."

"What was your last report concerning him?"

"Our last report was to the effect that he had come across a rather clever Bolshevik plan," Sir Ervin went on, "and he was starting off into Russia through Manchuria to get into touch with the leaders of it. All I can say now is that we were expecting great results from Steele, for he is a man who never makes a statement unless he can back it up. The trouble is we know nothing about the plan, nor even who was implicated in it, and as I tell you, the report I received Friday last rather troubled me."

"It came direct from the East, from one of our heads out there, and it stated that uneasiness was felt concerning Steele. I have communicated with his firm, and they advise me that they have received no word from their representative for three or four weeks, but Steele warned them that he might not be able to do much business for them during that period, so they were not particularly worrying."

"Did his firm know that he had any connection with you?"

"I don't think so. We don't care to allow these things to become known, and Steele himself preferred that it should be kept a secret."

Sir Ervin leaned forward.

"And now, Mr. Lee, perhaps you will tell me how you got to know about the matter?"

It was Nelson Lee's turn then to speak, and he displayed the box, and also the parchment message, with the translation which Mr. Piau had made.

The grave look that came into Sir Ervin's face indicated to the detective that the Intelligence official regarded the matter as highly important.

"Look here, Lee," the baronet said. "You will have to go into this. As a matter of fact, I was trying to decide on whom I should send out there to investigate. All our agents in Manchuria, so far as the department is concerned, are well known, and I didn't care to send any of our regular staff. But if you will look into this thing for us you can accept the commission now, and you will travel under full Government authority. I shall give you a list of names, and, as you know, I can facilitate your travelling considerably."

It was just the sort of offer that Sir Ervin might be expected to make, and it settled the detective's decision. Travelling in the East, especially in Manchuria, never was an easy matter. One is constantly troubled by having to produce passports, and special arrangements often have to be made.

But travelling as Lee and his companions would, under the ægis of the British Government, passports, customs, and the usual delays of petty officials would vanish, and they would reach their destination as fast as a courier.

"That's a bargain, Sir Ervin," the detective said, rising to his feet. "I am ready to start now."

Sir Ervin indicated the "V"-shaped marks on the parchment.

"And your destination, I might as well suggest, will be Chang Shan—the Hill of the Thousand Peaks."

CHAPTER 5.

In the Heart of Manchuria!

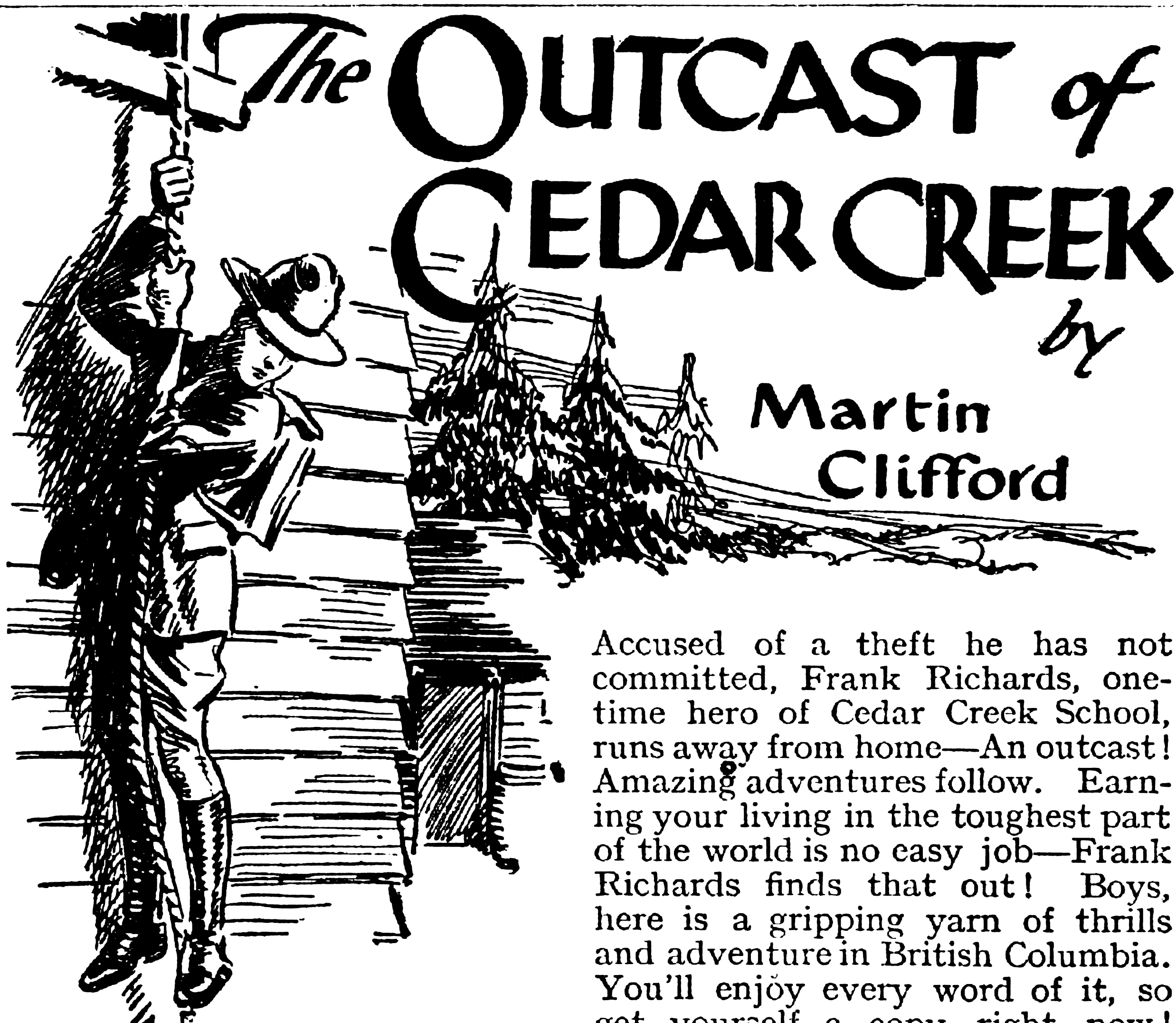
"**W**HAT a show, guv'nor! What a horrible, slushy muddy show!" Standing at the entrance to the railway-station of the Japanese line which runs from Mukden out through Manchuria, Nipper and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were regarding the roadway, little more than an ocean of mud, over which they had travelled for two days. Lord Dorrimore had intended bringing his Chinese servant, Wung Foo, but at the last minute

poor old Wung had caught the 'flu, and Nelson Lee's expedition couldn't afford to wait for his recovery, so he was left behind bemoaning his fate.

It was the season of the thaw, when the first warmth of spring had commenced to loosen the icy grip of winter, and the snow on that roadway was literally indescribable.

Of all primitive places in the world Manchuria is perhaps the worst. When one realises that for the greater part of the year the only means of conveyance lies in trusting one's bones to a form of sleigh which is hauled over the frozen ground by a couple of tough ponies, and the road over which one travels is not much better than a ploughed field, the lot of a traveller may be appreciated.

Yet here on the station there were certain little comforts which Nelson Lee and his two companions were glad to use. They had covered the first portion of their journey swiftly and easily, and now they were within sight of their goal. Ahead of them lay



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Liao Yang, from whence they would be able to start for the Hill of a Thousand Peaks.

There was very little appearance of the travelling European about the trio. Nipper was wearing one of those huge sheepskin coats and a cap with long earflaps to it which the men in that part of the world wisely consider to be a suitable garment for the severe winters there.

Nelson Lee had a thick woollen coat with a deep astrakhan collar, and Lord Dorrimore was wearing another coat similar to the one which Nipper had adopted.

Their progress had been swift enough, and at every halt on the road indications had been given to them that the power of the British Foreign Office was at work to facilitate their journey.

Now and again an official, Japanese or Chinese, would appear and give them certain hints on which they acted, and occasionally a message would be slipped into Lee's hand by some grubby messenger who vanished as soon as his mission was fulfilled.

Most of these messages were merely directions to assist them on their next stage, and the last one they had received notified them of the time the train would start from the station for Liao Yang.

They had arrived there a good hour before the train was due, and it was a little Japanese official who came to them presently and beckoned them to follow him. He led the way into the waiting-room, where he supplied the trio with fragrant tea and a substantial meal.

When the train arrived at last, and they had taken their seats in the carriage, it was pleasant to discover that the coaches were distinctly cleaner than those they had previously travelled in.

Nipper wedged himself in a corner of the carriage, with Nelson Lee and Dorrimore by the other door.

Just as the train was about to move off the door of the compartment opened, and an enormous figure came clambering inside, with much puffing and wheezing, to seat himself in the corner facing Nipper.

The man was wearing a robe round which was wrapped many coils of a thick woollen scarf. One fold of the scarf had been brought round the throat, and the end of it up over the head, but when the train had started, the wheezing figure allowed the end of the scarf to drop back, revealing a shaven head.

From under the robes the man removed a long string of beads, and without paying the slightest attention to the other inmates of the carriage, he began to finger his beads with fat, podgy hands, murmuring some indistinct words as he did so.

Nipper was highly amused at this extraordinary-looking individual. He glanced across at Nelson Lee and he saw that the detective's face was rather keen and alert.

Every now and again the detective would throw a glance at the stout figure in the corner, but despite this steady observation, the stranger gave no sign of being at all perturbed or even interested in his travelling companions.

The journey from the station to Liao Yang was not much over thirty miles, but the train in which the travellers were seated took very nearly three hours to cover the distance.

It was very slow and monotonous, and although Nipper did his best to interest himself in the dreary landscape, there was really nothing much to be said about it, beyond the fact that it was a sea of mud, with here and there groups of huts and the bulkier outlines of native towns.

It was rather awkward to have that impassive figure in the corner, for it prevented the three from speaking to each other. They were pretending to be natives, and as far as their appearance was concerned they certainly carried out that suggestion.

It is quite a mistake to imagine that all races in that part of the world are slant-eyed. It is true that the Chinese and the Manchurians are of the yellow-skinned type, but Manchuria now is more or less a mixture of races and nations, and one finds many different castes and sects and races rubbing shoulders with each other in every village.

It had been Lee's custom to discuss their movements in detail with his companions, and the opportunity which the train journey afforded was one which he did not care to miss.

Yet it was impossible for him to do so while that burly, robed figure of the Buddhist priest sat in the corner of the carriage.

Nipper and Dorrimore, fed up at last, settled themselves in their seats, and the youngster's head dropped on to his breast, while his quiet breathing soon told that he was fast asleep. Dorrimore also stretched himself out, and as the long, dreary journey went on his head began to nod.

NELSON LEE, wrapped in his warm coat, with the sheepskin cap well down over his eyes, might also have been taken to be asleep. But he was not the type that sleeps when on a job of that kind.

And so presently he heard the low monotone of the priest falter, and, without raising his head, the detective lifted his eyes. He saw that the priest had changed his position slightly, and although his hands were still running over the beads, he was now leaning forward. The heavy, fat face had lost its placid smile, and there was a curious sinister expression around the lips.

The eyes, small as pinheads now, were intent and searching as they turned slowly and regarded each of the three figures in the corners of the compartment.

"Hallo!" Lee thought to himself. "That man seems to be up to something."

He knew that they were getting near to Liao Yang now, and it struck him then that perhaps the fat priest was also aware of the fact and was preparing for it.

Nelson Lee did not move a muscle, and presently the priest slipped one hand into his robe and drew out from it a metal disc. It was of polished brass, about the size of a breakfast plate.

Leaning forward slightly, the priest fixed the disc on to the outside of the carriage door, the window of which was open. The disc was held in position by a hook, and when the priest withdrew his hand, the ledge of the window hid the plaque from the view of the occupants inside the carriage.

But Nelson Lee realised swiftly that the brass disc would be very easily observed by anyone outside.

When this manœuvre was completed, the train began to slacken speed, and presently its whistle sounded, indicating that it was drawing near to the station. Lee judged that it was Liao Yang they were approaching and he puzzled his brains to try to discover just what that manœuvre on the part of the priest meant.

The train slowed down until at last it was only moving at a crawl. It passed a primitive signal box, then clattered on over the points. The priest, rising to his feet, came up the compartment, and stepping gingerly between Nelson Lee and Dorrimore, reached for the door and turned the knob, allowing the door to swing outwards.

Nelson Lee saw that the carriages were then passing a side platform, no doubt used for the unloading of goods. The priest had judged his movements very swiftly and accurately, for the door opened just as they reached this narrow platform, and with a bound that displayed extraordinary agility considering the man's bulk and weight, the fat figure vanished.

As he leaped out the priest caught at the door and pushed it inward. It closed, and as it banged into place Dorrimore and Nipper awoke with a start.

"Hallo! What the dickens—— Jove, our fat friend has gone!"

Nipper stared for a moment towards the opposite corner, then looked round to find Nelson Lee on his feet.

"When did he go, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee was moving across the carriage now, and he leaned over his young assistant.

"He vanished a moment ago, young 'un," he said. "But he left something behind him, and I'm going to see what it is."

His head and shoulders were out of the compartment now, and he saw that the engine of the train was just drawing level with the main platform. A quick grab saw Nelson Lee lift the brass disc from its place; then he dropped into the seat vacated by the fat priest.

"What the dickens is that?"

"I don't know, but we'll soon find out. Keep still for a bit."

Nelson Lee thrust the brass disc into a fold of his cloak then presently the carriage was running along beside the platform, and as he studied the faces of the waiting throng a quick idea came to him.

"Come on; let's get out before it stops," he said, rising quickly to his feet.

There are no officious porters in that part of the world to prevent a passenger from jumping out of a train and breaking his neck if he wants to. Nipper was the first to leap on to the platform, with Nelson Lee and Dorrimore behind him. Then, as the youngster turned, he saw Nelson Lee do an extraordinary thing.

As another closed compartment passed them Nelson Lee's hand leaped from the folds of his robe and reached out for the door. When the carriage passed on, the brass disc was hanging on the hook below the ledge of the door.

"But, guv'nor——"

"Wait a bit," Lee returned quickly. "We'll soon find out what that disc is for."

THEY had stepped back now, and, taking up a position in the centre of the platform, waited for the train to come to a halt. It ran on for another three or four yards, then stopped with a jarring of wheels and a clanking of connections.

The doors of the carriages began to open, and Nelson Lee and his companions, watching the one with the metal disc on it, saw a sudden movement take place in one deep wedge of people on the platform. Five or six tall figures in short sheepskin cloaks and wearing waistbelts and swords, stalked across the platform, and their leader, who had a coloured strip of silk round one arm, flung the door with the disc on it open and bawled out a command to the inmates.

"Jove! That's it, is it?"

There came out of the compartment a couple of frightened-looking natives, and the officials promptly fell on them. They were grabbed by collar and wrist, two armed figures to each passenger, and in a rough, hustling way they were ushered across the platform and into one of the dingy waiting-rooms.

"I suppose they've been arrested in our place," Dorrimore put in below his breath.

"Yes," replied Lee, "and we'd better get out of this as quickly as we can."

His opinion concerning that fat priest's move had been thoroughly justified, and Lee realised that he would have been mad not to have taken advantage of the opportunity.

He and Dorrimore and Nipper promptly joined the group of passengers who were wedging themselves through the exits, and a few moments later they were out of the

station entrance and trudging through the muddy streets of Liao Yang.

Liao Yang is, without doubt, one of the most beautiful of Manchurian cities, and orchards of plum, apricot and pear within the walls of the capital make brilliant pictures against the sombre background.

Nelson Lee and his companions were heading for the river, and in order to reach it they had to pass through the Korean gate, an arched, impressive opening in the high walls through which, in the old days, the Korean envoys had to pass when conveying messages to the mighty Manchu emperors.

Beyond the gate there is a lovely view of the river, with the low-lying hills in the distance, and as Lee and his companions came to a halt in the gateway, out of a waste place at the foot of the wall, in which a mob of mangy curs were squabbling over some gruesome morsel, there slipped a lean, robed figure.

It halted in front of Lee and made a quick movement, raising a hand level with his shoulder and folding the two inner fingers down to his palm. It was the signal that had been arranged in the last message Lee had received, and without a word he nodded to the lean, grimy figure, and the Chinaman, turning, moved out through the gateway and on down towards the river, where they waited for the quaint old ferryboat to carry them from one bank to the other.

The ferryboat was laden with carts, mules, cows, donkeys and a mixture of goods amongst which the passengers had to stow themselves as best they could. Nelson Lee and his party were the first to meet the ferryboat, and they walked up to the squat, flat bow. Presently there came a hail from the bank and a hooded cart swung down from the slope and into the flat, pontoon-like boat. Lee felt a pressure on his arm, and, looking round, noticed the guide by his side.

The man indicated the cart with a little significant nod of his head, and, watching closely, the detective saw the hanging flap of the cart drawn aside, and through it, for a moment, he had a glimpse of a fat, heavy face—the face of the huge priest who had made use of the brass disc.

At first the detective was afraid that the small, bead-like eyes had picked him out, but the tilt was dropped again and there was no other sign given from the vehicle. The journey across the river was completed, and, thanks to the position of the boat, Lee and his companions, with their guide, were the first to land.

They made their way up the muddy slope and turned on down the road, finally coming to a halt at a little wayside hut which was not unlike a Japanese house, although of heavier build. There was a small garden and a veranda, and their guide led them straight inside the place, then came to a halt and bowed again.

From his robe he drew out a slip of paper, banded it to Nelson Lee, and took himself

off, hurrying away out of the little hut and on down the road. Lee glanced at the paper and saw it was covered with Chinese characters, then, slipping it into his pocket for the time being, he turned to his companions.

"Keep a look-out for that cart," he said. "I rather fancy that fat priest is more interesting to us than anything else at the moment."

The medley of animals and vehicles were now unloading themselves from the ferryboat, and presently there appeared through the throng the hooded cart. The driver, a morose-looking fellow, was barking out commands now and again, and Lee noticed that the other drivers had made haste to get out of his way, a significant fact, indicating that the majority of them realised what manner of man it was who was inside the cart.

It came in past the little hut, and Lee watched it as it creaked its way up the road, then he saw it halt at another building on the right, and, after the driver had opened the gate, the cart vanished inside the high walls. Ten minutes later the vehicle reappeared and came jogging on down towards the ferry. Nelson Lee turned to his young assistant.

"Look here, young 'un," he said. "I want you to slip down there to the ferry and try to get a squint inside the cart. I rather fancy that it's empty now, but I want to be sure."

The youngster slipped out of the back door of the hut and shuffled off along the road, reaching the slope that led to the ferry a few seconds before the cart arrived.

He waited until the vehicle had come creaking down the slope, then, stepping to the back of it, he calmly lifted the flapping canvas and peered inside. There was a heap of straw in one corner, but no sign of the fat passenger, and, satisfied that the priest had been left in the second hut, Nipper returned to his gov'nor and made his report.

"What do you gather from it, Lee?" Dormore asked.

"I am inclined to think that the fat priest is one of our enemies," Lee returned, "but just what his attitude is I don't know. The trick of marking our carriage was certainly a very clever one, and it was only by a stroke of luck we managed to escape arrest. I don't know what will happen to the unfortunate couple they did collar, but I don't suppose they'll get into very much trouble, after all. In any case, my suggestion is that I should go back to Liao Yang and try to find out why they were arrested. I want you and Nipper to keep an eye on that house up there. One of you must keep in touch with the fat priest if he should come out before I return."

He smiled at his companions grimly.

"This is the first real indication we have had since we left London that our movements are being observed," the detective pointed out, "and I am rather glad it has happened just now. For, after all, the

known enemy is much better than the unknown one."

Dorrimore nodded.

"There's something in that," he agreed.

"We've got to make the most of this incident," Lee went on. "That fat priest has revealed his hand, and we must not lose touch with him. We are very close to the mountains of Chang Shan, a thousand peaks, and I am inclined to think that this Buddhist priest has probably come from there. In all probability he has been on guard at Mukden—waiting for us."

He looked at Nipper and nodded.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if the news of our interference in this case hasn't been sent here from London. In any case, it is very obvious that they have been on the look-out for us, and although we have come through safely enough so far, I am not at all sure that the latter part of our enterprise will be so uneventful."

Nipper smiled.

"I don't suppose it will be, guv'nor," he said. "Besides, I could do with a little bit of excitement. This slushing through mud and grime isn't at all a nice job."

It was arranged then that Lee should go back to the city of Liao Yang, while Nipper and Dorrimore undertook to watch the house up the road.

In order to carry this out Nipper left the hut, and, making his way through the patches of cultivated ground lying along the side of the river, worked round until he gained the slope of the hill behind the walled-in house into which the fat priest had vanished.

He found a mound of earth, obviously one of the old types of graves, and the flat stone jutting out from the mound made a fairly comfortable hiding-place. The niche in the mound, in which a small Buddha had once stood, had been robbed of its occupant, and it was Nipper who folded himself up in a squatting position and took his seat on the flat pedestal that had once borne the carved idol. He made a rather grotesque figure sitting there in place of the heathen god, and he grinned to himself as he settled back comfortably.

"If anyone comes along here to make an offering to me," he thought, with a grin, "I hope it'll be something sweet and warm. I could do with a decent meal."

CHAPTER 6.

At the Japanese Consulate!

FROM where Nipper sat he could see the back portion of the house, and noted that the wall ran all round it.

He could only just see the roof of the building beyond the wall, and although he watched for a long hour there was no sign of any movement in the place. He knew that Dorrimore was watching from the other side, and he was quite content to sit there, keeping a sharp look-out.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had started across the river, and, following the wall of the city, entered Liao Yang by way of the East gate. He found himself in the streets, which were, as usual, thronged with people. Presently he was in a street lined with stalls, and the gay, bustling scene held him spell-bound for a moment.

There were all sorts and conditions of merchandise exposed for sale, and the crowd of people seemed to spend most of their time going from stall to stall examining the contents and moving on again without apparently completing any purchases.

Presently Nelson Lee picked out a tall, stalwart figure, whose head and shoulders were above the rest of the people, and, as the man drew nearer to him, Lee recognised the face under the sheepskin cap. It was the leader of the armed officials who had descended on that disc-marked carriage and had made prisoners of the two unlucky passengers.

The detective stood aside, watching the man as he came on; then, presently, when the fellow had passed him, the detective turned and began to follow.

He was led through the town into a quiet square, and the tall figure vanished into what was obviously an official building. The detective saw that there was a flagstaff outside the building, from which hung lazily the rising-sun flag of Japan.

After a moment's hesitation Lee made up his mind. He crossed the square and entered the low building, to find himself in a wide waiting-room. A little Japanese in semi-European attire came across to him. Lee asked to see the Consul, realising that this was the Japanese Consulate; and presently he was led into an inner room, where a smart, dapper little Japanese sat at a desk.

The Consul stared rather dubiously at the detective as he entered, on account of the grimed attire he was wearing; but when Nelson Lee spoke in English, desiring to make a few inquiries about something that happened at the railway-station that day, he was amazed to hear the Consul address him by name, knowing all about him and his companions.

"News travels, Mr. Lee," he explained, "and we have been warned of your coming. There were two thieves on that train, and one of our spies had been told to track the man and mark the compartment in which they were travelling. Our spy was later found unconscious, and the brass disc which is used for marking a compartment of the train was stolen from him. In short, we have been used in an attempt to delay you. I congratulate you on the clever way you escaped. The two men mistakenly arrested have already been released. But it is plain that your presence here is resented by someone, and I should advise you to transact your business and leave the country as soon as possible. Life is cheap here, and law and order not easy to maintain. While we know you have British Foreign Office cre-

dentials, and have been asked to give you any reasonable assistance you may require, we cannot meddle in your affairs, nor actually help you in any difficulty you may have with the native authorities. I hope I make myself clear?"

Nelson Lee felt he could trust the Japanese Consul, and now he turned to the little official and put his question bluntly, knowing that Bernard Steele's wife had travelled from England ahead of him and ought to be somewhere in Manchuria.

"I want to try and trace an English woman," he said. "Do you know if any English woman has arrived at Liao Yang during the past fortnight or so?"

The Consul shook his head.

"I haven't heard of anyone," he commented. "There was a small party of tourists arrived, but they were American, and they only stayed here a couple of days. There is a church mission in Liao Yang, as you know, and nearly all the European ladies go there to stay, so if you were to go up to the mission they will be able to give you more information than I can."

"That's a good idea," Lee agreed, with a nod of his head. "I'll make use of it."

Another point occurred to him, and he turned to the Consul again.

"I wonder if you could identify a certain priest that has cropped up?" he asked. "He was the man who travelled with us from Mukden, and he was the one who placed that brass disc on the carriage door."

He described the fellow minutely, and at the end of the description the Consul leaned back in his chair and a thoughtful expression crossed his face.

"I don't think I can be mistaken, Mr. Lee," he said. "You have fallen foul of a very influential man. His name is Chal Shan, and, to put it frankly, my Government consider him to be one of the most dangerous schemers that this country of schemers possess. He is practically head of a fanatical religious order. There is one other man above him, but this other never moves from his temple. But Chal Shan is a very active individual, despite his heavy, cumbersome build. He is constantly travelling up and down the line, and we hear reports of his being seen in all parts of the country."

He nodded his small head.

"If I were you, Mr. Lee, I should be very careful," he added. "If Chal Shan was the man who tried to have you arrested it means that you are in grave danger. I don't ask your business, but whatever it is, I should advise you to carry it out as quickly as you can and get out of Manchuria."

He opened his desk and drew out a small ivory square, on which was stamped the emblem of his country.

"This may be of service to you," he went on, handing it across to Nelson Lee. "If you should get into a hot corner at any time and want something to support you, this may help."

The Japanese Consul smiled.

"Some of the European nations do not altogether agree with the Japanese being here in Manchuria, but I can tell you we are the only power that has any sort of influence over these people. They are afraid of us—and in a primitive land like this, fear is always the best weapon." He pressed the ivory tablet into Lee's hand. "I don't tell you to use it, if you can help," he said, "but you may find yourself in a tight corner some time, then it will come in handy."

Nelson Lee thanked the friendly little fellow, then, after receiving instructions as to how to find the Church mission, he left the house and started off through the town once more.

He realised now that his escape had been even more providential than he had supposed. Had he not noticed the trick of that brass disc there was every possibility of himself and his companions having been thrust into that Manchurian gaol and either murdered on the spot or else removed in such a way as to leave no trace of their going behind them.

"I suppose that Chal Shan will have discovered his little plot has failed by now," Lee thought, as he walked along, "and it means we shall have to go more carefully than ever."

He remembered then that in all probability Chal Shan would circulate a description of the three detectives, and in a quiet side-street Lee found a shop, which he entered and purchased a native sheep-skin cloak, paying for it by handing over his own coat and a few Japanese coins.

He also changed his headgear. Instead of the astrakhan cap he had worn he adopted a knitted woollen affair which was something like the stockinette caps worn by the British troops during the Great War.

Satisfied then that he had made sufficient alteration in his costume to avoid any chance of being recognised, Lee went on again through the city and presently found himself outside the neat, quiet mission house.

But the lady superintendent of the mission could not help him. Mrs. Steele had not arrived there, although Nelson Lee knew that she had been seen at Mukden. All he could do was to leave a message in case Bernard Steele's wife did turn up, advising her to get into touch with the Japanese Consul and ask for protection.

When he left the mission house and walked down the slightly sloping lane he saw a man, who had been lounging against a wall at the end of the lane, straighten himself up and slouch off round the angle of the wall.

When a man has attuned himself to danger and is moving in a place where he is pretty well convinced that nine out of every ten individuals whom he meets is a possible enemy, the smallest sign of suspicious conduct is swiftly accepted.

"I wonder if that fellow was watching for me?" Lee thought.

He had gained the wall now, which was about five feet high, and served to form a barrier for an orchard of pear-trees, the slender, naked branches of which could be seen above the wall. There was no one else in the lane, and a quick decision came to the detective. He reached the wall, and with a quick, easy spring, leaped up and managed to grip at the top of it.

His powerful arms pulled him over the wall, and he dropped on to the muddy ground beyond; then, slipping in between the slender trunks, Lee approached the wall at the bottom, which ran parallel with the road for which he had been heading. He was keeping along the side of the lane wall, and when he reached the corner he halted and listened.

A man may be as cautious as possible, yet he cannot remain for long in one position without betraying some signs of his presence, more particularly if there are alert ears listening for those signs. A moment passed, then Lee heard quite distinctly the metallic scrape of some implement against the end wall. It was only a slight sound, such as might be given by a weapon attached to the waist of anyone lurking against the wall.

"All right, my friend!"

Nelson Lee straightened, took a couple of paces down by the wall, then, finding a projecting piece of stone, he placed his toe into it and, with a noiseless movement, drew himself up until his head and shoulders were above the top of the wall. Then, very cautiously, he bent his head forward.

To his right, close to the angle of the wall, was the lanky figure in sheepskins whom he had seen slouch off round the corner. The whole attitude of the man was that of grim alertness. He was pressing himself flat against the stones, his hands outstretched, and Lee noticed that in the right hand was a long, vicious-looking dagger.

It did not require any great imagination to make out just what that man was lurking there for, and his whole attitude and the eager expectancy in the poise of the figure indicated that he was ready to pounce out and make a sudden and murderous attack, and Lee knew for whom that attack was intended.

Despite the grimness of the incident, there was also a touch of humour in it. Lee had chosen his spot very well, and now, taking care that his movements made no sound, he drew himself up until he was crouching on top of the wall. The man below had his attention riveted on the entrance to the lane, and he was so obviously centred on that point that he became an easy victim.

Nelson Lee, judging the distance correctly, leaped from the wall and landed full on the fellow's shoulders. The man crumpled up like a clasp-knife, and a howl broke from his lips as he fell. Lee's feet had landed on the rascal's shoulders, and the numbing jar had knocked the dagger out of the grimed fingers. They fell in a heap together,

Lee uppermost, and the man made a quick grab at his attacker.

But Lee, knocking the fist aside, jerked the fellow's head forward, then, knowing that he had no time to waste, he sent one honest English uppercut hard into the grimed features. The knuckles of his fist landed fair on the point of the jaw, and with a gasping moan the head went back, the cap falling from it. In another moment Lee was kneeling beside the groaning figure, and he made a quick search through the pockets.

In one fold of the robe he found a few sheets of parchment wrapped together and fastened by a piece of tape. These he transferred to his own pocket, then, rising to his feet, picked up the dagger and examined it.

It was a native affair, and the handle was of wrought brass, with certain Chinese characters on it.

He had only just time to notice this when he heard a door creak and a guttural shout came to his ears. Across the street stood an empty house, and it was from this that the sound came.

Two burly-looking men had leaped out from a low doorway, and they were now bolting across towards the detective.

CHAPTER 7.

Shadowed!

TO Nelson Lee the whole affair now took on a different aspect. He had thought at first that this man who had been lurking in the lane was merely one of those footpad rascals who still haunt the Eastern cities and are always on the lookout for a chance at robbery, even if life has to be taken in order to attain their desires.

But these other two men rushing towards him suggested that there was a deeper conspiracy behind it, and it was no part of Nelson Lee's intention then to face trouble if he could avoid it.

He swung round, and, leaping over the heavily breathing figure of the man he had knocked out, the detective took to his heels, springing off up the road as hard as he could pelt.

He heard a shout behind him, and as he swung round the corner he looked back over his shoulder. The two men were sprinting along behind him, bellowing as they came.

Now an Eastern city is very much like a Western city in one respect, and that is, when anyone sees a man being chased, the onlookers invariably do their best to stop that man, be he honest or otherwise.

Nelson Lee knew that he was heading for the more densely populated part of the city, and he felt that at every moment someone might rush out from a side-street and try to stop him.

His only safety lay in putting as great a distance between himself and his pursuers as possible before they reached the thickly populated parts of the town.

It was a rather winding street he found himself in at last, and he dashed up it at a rare speed. It is no easy matter to run in those heavy sheepskin cloaks, and it certainly hampered him, but at least he knew his pursuers were in the same box, for they were also dressed in the thick winter garments.

By the time he had reached the end of the tortuous street Lee had put the best part of four or five hundred yards between himself and the two burly rogues, and, swinging round a corner, he found himself in another narrow thoroughfare leading into a square.

He dropped into a walk, and, crossing the street, headed through the square, which he saw was some sort of cattle market, for although it was almost dusk, there were still four or five groups of sheep and goats and lean cows standing tethered to the various stalls.

Nelson Lee took care to plunge into the first group of men he came across, and found himself presently standing in front of a stall on which were small wooden plates with cold rice and little squares of flesh.

There were several men hard at work eating the contents of the plates, and Lee joined this circle, paying for the stuff and commencing to eat it with his fingers as the others were doing.

He was keeping a sharp look-out, and presently he saw one of the men who were following him. He was the shorter of the two, and his perspiring face and parted lips indicated that the sprint had been almost too much for him.

He was crossing the square some fifteen or twenty yards from where Lee was standing, eyeing each group as he passed.

The detective was thankful then that he had started off on his sprint at once, before the fellow had had a chance of observing his features, and although the short, thick-set man did glance across in his direction, he did not make any signs of recognition.

Lee hurriedly rammed the rest of the rice into his mouth, and, replacing the plate, he took up another rôle. For instead of being pursued, he was now turning into pursuer.

It was vital to Lee's plans that he should get into touch with the people who were behind all these various shifts and subterfuges that had been practised on him. It was always his theory that a known enemy is far less dangerous than an unknown enemy.

Picking out the short, burly figure from among the mass of moving humans and animals, Lee paced steadily along, keeping always some ten or fifteen yards behind his quarry.

The man had evidently given up all hope of finding the swift-footed individual for whom he was searching, for he stopped at one or two stalls and made small purchases, then presently he turned away from the square, and, passing down through a better-

class thoroughfare, reached the centre of the town.

It was with a grim smile on his lips that Lee saw the fellow halt outside the gaol and speak for a few moments with a uniformed figure on sentry there.

"I don't think I need bother to find out what you are inquiring about," Lee decided. "I'll take it for granted that you are asking about those fellows who were arrested in my place this morning."

Having satisfied his curiosity, the man went on, and any doubts that Lee might have felt concerning the fellow's identity were dispelled when eventually he found himself being led through the Korean gate and down towards the ferry.

He had halted at the gate, watching the man as he descended towards the river, and he noted that another individual on the left of the road made a quick signal as the thick-set figure approached. They drew together and spoke for a moment.

"It strikes me it was rather fortunate that I changed my garb," Lee thought. "I don't mind betting that that fellow has been on the look-out for us ever since we crossed the river, and, by Jove, that rather suggests that Nipper and Dorrimore are in danger!"

But a moment's further thought rather removed that particular alarm. In all probability Nelson Lee had been recognised in the city, and this man at the ferry was one of a score or so sentries who were watching for him should he leave that way.

The detective felt convinced that the quick movements that had been carried out by himself and his companions in heading immediately for the ferry had rather baffled their pursuers.

He discovered later that this conjecture of his was correct. The subtle organisation that was against him was under the impression that Lee and his companions had not left Liao Yang, but were still inside the city walls.

A curious-looking vehicle came through the gateway, and Lee presently recognised what it was. It was a local bus, but it was unlike anything that a European might conjure up as a bus. It looked like a little wooden house on runners, with a tall chimney, and any European seeing it for the first time might well have believed that it was simply someone's home which was on the move to a more satisfactory position.

Yet the truth of the matter was that it was the native omnibus which ran between Liao Yang and the suburbs on the other side of the river. So far as Lee could see, there were nine or ten passengers inside it, and also a stove, the smoke of which was drifting lazily through the tall chimney.

Outside, on the top, was a heap of bedding, and in there there squatted three brown-faced, solemn-eyed little Chinese children. It occurred to Nelson Lee that in this bus was to be found, perhaps, the safest way of running the gauntlet of those sentries on the river bank. He had noted that the

man he had been following had gone on down towards the ferry, and was now on guard there.

As the bus creaked past him Lee made a quick dive, leaping into the vehicle and playing the rough, uncouth native to the life, elbowing his way through the group of fat Chinese who broke out into angry protest.

Lee simply thrust his head deeper into his big turned-up collar and did not reply. The perilous descent into the ferry began, the bus slithering to and fro as it swayed downwards.

The ponies in the shafts were mettlesome little animals, and they seemed to be in the worst of tempers, for as they slid down the slope they snapped at the foot passengers and created a general stampede. Finally, with a great amount of shouting and din, the bus was worked aboard the ferry-boat and the journey across the stream began.

Nelson Lee was keeping his eyes open for his quarry, and picked up the fellow at last. The man was standing beside a small native cart, chatting with the driver, who sat cross-legged on the cart, for all the world like some gigantic frog.

The ferry-boat seemed to be working overtime, for it was absolutely packed with vehicles, beasts and men. Lee felt assured that there was no possible chance of the fellow whom he was following recognising him, and the journey across the river was accomplished in safety.

As soon as the ferry-boat touched the shelving bank on the other side, Nelson Lee's quarry was among the first to land, and he started to climb the muddy slope before the vehicles could be disembarked.

CHAPTER 8.

Lee Makes a Capture!

THE detective watched his opportunity, and after slipping a few coins into the hand of the man in charge of the bus, he dropped off the lumbering vehicle. Passing along behind a hooded cart drawn by a couple of tough oxen, he reached the roadway in time to see his quarry in conversation with a lanky Chinaman who was standing beside a crude native barrow laden with vegetables.

There were five or six natives plodding along round the cart, and Lee decided that it would be safe for him to pass. He moved on along the deeply-rutted road, and eventually left the protection of the hooded cart, and, crossing the road, moved on down through a patch of cultivated ground.

Ahead of him, three or four hundred yards away, stood the hut in which he and Dorri-more and Nipper had found shelter. Lee knew that neither of his companions would be in the place then, for he had asked them to watch the other building, into which the fat priest had vanished.

Nelson Lee was moving through a heavy patch of ground some distance from the road now, but he was keeping his eye on the road, and at last he saw the man he had been following coming along the muddy track.

The lanky Chinaman with the barrow was pacing along by the fellow's side, and there were also two other men in the group. It



Nelson Lee locked his arms round the thick figure of Chal Shan into the air and sent him hurtling.

was evident that Lee's late pursuer had picked up several of his companions and was out on some new task.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised to find that fact that he was well away from the road, plodding through the water-logged ground, he was unobserved. It was with a grim smile of satisfaction that he saw the group of men halt close to the little hut and confer together again.

"I shouldn't at all surprised to find that you have located our headquarters," he decided.

A moment later that conjecture was fully

borne out, for he saw his late pursuer turn into the narrow track that led to the hut, while the other men plodded steadily along the muddy road through the wide valley.

"This grows interesting," Lee told himself. "I'm beginning to realise that there are many more spies here in Liao Yang than I thought."

It was certainly rather alarming to dis-

And so began a rather humorous interlude in the grim game. Lee saw his quarry vanish into a ditch. Keeping well below the high bank of the ditch, the man worked his way round to the back of the hut; then Lee, kneeling behind a thin growth of canes, saw the fellow's thick-set body worm its way up over the bank and creep on its hands and knees to the low mud wall that ran round the hut.

The cautious way in which the fellow moved indicated that he was quite aware of the danger he was running. A grim smile crossed the face of the detective as he watched the operation.

It was fairly evident that this adversary of his had been told by the others that there were occupants of that hut, and the cautious manner of his approach showed that the fellow was quite prepared for a rough reception.

But a man cannot watch both ways at once. The thick-set spy had all his attention concentrated on the hut. He did not think it worth while to glance behind him, or he might have seen the sheepskin-coated figure as it commenced to move up through the paddy-field, heading towards the low wall.

Thanks to the irrigation canals and channels, Lee was able to make his way without exposing himself very much, but it was by no means a pleasant process, for the channels and ditches were half-filled with ice-cold water, and his legs, up to his knees, were wet and numbed.

By the time he had reached the ditch and commenced to work his way along it, Lee was plastered with mud from head to foot and half numbed with cold. But he succeeded at last in reaching a point immediately behind where the thick-set figure had knelt. Raising his head cautiously, the detective glanced towards the wall.

The man had vanished, and with a quick movement Lee pulled himself out of the ditch and crawled to the wall. He was just in time to see the figure of his enemy draw itself in through one of the square openings in the wall of the hut which was the nearest approach to a window that the native builder could make.

Nelson Lee saw the fat legs wriggle and vanish as the fellow went head-first into the building. A moment later the detective was over the wall and had slipped round the hut until he gained the narrow doorway. It was fastened by a wooden bolt and a piece of hide—a rough, primitive lock that gave to his touch. Then he entered the hut, closing the door behind him.

He knew just where his quarry would be, and, on tiptoe, Nelson Lee crossed the beaten earth floor, halting as he gained the entrance to the back room. He flattened himself against the wall and listened; then, quite clearly, to his ears there came the deep breathing of his man, and he heard the soft footfalls as the fellow moved about the chamber.



the giant priest. Then with all his strength he lifted him over his shoulders across the temple.

cover that their enemy had already found out where Lee and his companions had found shelter. Although the detective was assured that neither Dorrimore nor Nipper would be in the hut at the time, that didn't take away the menace of the position.

Something had to be done, and done quickly, and Lee made up his mind at once. He had been content to follow this spy, but he realised that stronger measures were now needed. By hook or by crook he had to get into touch with this circle of enemies of his, and he could only do so by capturing one of them and getting information.

The footfalls came nearer and nearer, and Lee, waiting his opportunity, saw at last the thick-set shape appear in the gap of the doorway. The detective was a yard away, but his panther-like leap carried him across the space, and as the man fell back and opened his lips to shout, Lee's unerring fingers gripped on the thick throat.

Then, when he had closed with his man, the detective slipped one foot behind the burly figure and gave the fellow a quick cross-buttock. It was an attack which few men could have withstood, and it certainly brought disaster to this particular individual. His feet shot up and he described a half-circle over Lee's taut body. The detective still clung to his hold, and the fellow went down on his back on the floor with a thud.

A half-snarled cry broke from the fellow's lips, and Lee felt one of his arms reach for the waist-belt. There was only one thing to do then, and the detective did it. The man was feeling for a weapon, and as Lee was on top it would be an easy enough matter for the man to draw that weapon and send it through the detective's body.

Releasing his grip on the throat, Nelson Lee clenched his fist and brought it round sharply, sending a half-arm swing at the broad, grimed face beneath him.

The accurately aimed blow went home on the bluff chin, and there was heard in the quiet chamber a distinct, clear snap as the man's jaw jarred to the impact of the hard knuckles. The groping arm fell away, and the writhing, struggling body lay still.

"I had to do it, my friend," Lee said, drawing himself up to his knees, and looking down at the limp, heavily breathing figure. "It was either that or a knife in the ribs for me. I'm not taking any chances like that!"

He glanced round the room and saw in one corner of it a heap of grass matting with a few coils of native grass rope round them. Crossing to the pile, Lee unravelled one or two lengths of the tough cord, and, returning to his man, he set to work to tie him up, hands and feet. Then, drawing him into one corner of the room, the detective tore off a piece of the fellow's thick woollen garment and fastened it between the man's lips to form a gag.

"I've got to have a word with you," Lee decided. "I want information, and I think you are the man to give it to me."

He crossed to the square-shaped window and looked over the space in front. He could see the road, with its line of traffic, and he noted that the dusk was now beginning to fall.

By leaning out of the window and turning to the left, Lee could see the more pretentious building, with the high wall round it, into which the fat priest had vanished, and as he watched the building for a moment another question formed in his mind.

"I wonder if anything interesting has happened to Dorrimore and Nipper?" he murmured.

CHAPTER 9.

The Blind Nun!

LORD DORRIMORE had agreed to watch the high-walled building into which the fat priest had passed from the roadside, and in order to do that, the tall aristocrat had to take certain precautions. It was fairly obvious that the priest was bound to recognise Dorrimore if he caught sight of him, and so when the happy-go-lucky adventurer started off to carry out his allotted task, he was inspired to make alteration in his dress.

As luck would have it, he found a small orchard on the far side of the roadway, and, suspended between two trees, was a line on which several grotesque, badly washed garments hung. Among them was a long strip of dark native material.

Dorrimore took this cloth from the line and wrapped it round his heavy coat, bringing one end over his shoulders and tucking it in there. In its way it was a rather rough disguise, but it served its purpose, and when he left the orchard again he was fairly assured that it would take more than a casual glance to identify him.

He rounded his back, and making use of a short stick he had found in the orchard, he hobbled along the road until he came opposite the high wall that guarded the building.

He noticed now that the doorway was a steel-studded affair, and above it on the arch were a certain number of Chinese characters, on top of which, carved in the stonework, were the crude outlines of a lotus blossom.

It was only then that Dorrimore realised that the building behind those walls was in all probability a monastery of some sort, and the lotus suggested that it was of Tibetan origin.

Twenty or thirty yards up the road was a low-roofed shed, evidently used for keeping cattle in, and there was a small walled space behind the shed into which Dorrimore turned. The space was ankle deep in litter, and on one corner of it was a heap of half-rotted fodder which served to make a fairly comfortable seat.

Here Dorrimore flattened himself out and took up a position from which he could watch the wall and the doorway of the building. He knew that Nipper was on the other side, and it occurred to him that it might have been worth his while to have got into touch with the youngster so that Nipper might know where he was.

But it was too late to carry out that enterprise now, for along the road there was coming another group of pedestrians, obviously new arrivals on that side of the river, and Dorrimore, whose object then was to keep himself as much out of the public as possible, kept well down in his shelter.

The creaking carts and the plodding natives went on, then there was another lull, and again the road was filled with stragglers.

This continued for practically the greater part of the afternoon, and if Dorrimore had not been accustomed to the native life there it might have seemed as though the whole of Liao Yang were leaving those parts.

But, as a matter of fact, this was just the ordinary traffic, the coming and going of natives living in the outlying villages, into the great city. Liao Yang was still under certain laws by which the city gates were closed shortly after sunset, and these people hurrying to and fro were doing so on account of that law.

For the ferry ceased to run as soon as it was sunset, and an unfortunate belated traveller would be forced to spend the night on the opposite slope until dawn the following morning.

Dorrimore kept a quiet watch on the big building, but he saw no sign of any movement there, and it was not until the pale shadows of the sun began to droop over the pinnacled mountains westward that the first sign of life was given from that lonely, austere place.

A movement from the doorway caught Dorrimore's eye, and he saw that a man with a wheelbarrow had halted there. The man was accompanied by two other men, and when the door was opened the trio passed through the dark archway and vanished.

But when the door was closed again the robed figure of the doorkeeper was revealed standing outside. It was dressed in shapeless garments of a bright yellow hue, and on the head was perched a black cap.

It stood for a moment outside the doorway, then, with faltering steps came on down into the road and began to cross. Dorrimore watched the figure intently. There was something curious about its progress. It moved with small, hesitating steps, and he noted that there was a long staff carried in the wrinkled hand.

Every now and again the figure would halt and stretch out the staff in front, right and left. This manœuvre puzzled Dorrimore until at last he realised what it meant. For the figure coming on down the road finally found a little plank bridge which spanned the ditch on the left, over which it passed, and turned on down through a muddy stretch that led to the very orchard from whence Dorrimore had taken the garment he was now wearing.

The figure passed within twenty or thirty yards of Dorrimore, and as he caught sight of the intent face a sudden inspiration came to him. The head was held erect, and the features were set and grave. The sockets of the eyes were hollowed and dark, and Dorrimore realised the truth.

"Blind," he muttered to himself.

He saw the head, close-shaven, under the black cap, and watched the movements of the figure. Then, another truth dawned in upon him. Until then he had taken it for granted that it was the figure of a man, but he knew now that it was a woman who was pacing quietly along towards the little

orchard, and the shaven head told Dorrimore that she was a nun.

The robed figure passed on, found the broken-down gateway leading into the orchard, and entered in, moving up between the thin trunks of the trees.

Dorrimore resumed his old position to watch the monastery again, when suddenly he heard a voice—a low, feeble voice—calling.

He paid no attention to it at first, then presently he heard a faint whizzing sound, and something struck him sharply on the shoulder, and bounced over the space between himself and the low cattle shed. He turned and looked back across the space.

The figure of the nun was standing at the end of the orchard, and was facing in his direction. Dorrimore knew well enough how quick is the hearing of those who are blind, yet he could hardly repress a start of surprise when, as he moved from his seat and the rotted hay rustled, he saw the figure raise the long stick and beckon in his direction.

"By James! She must be calling to me," he thought. "And she threw the stone in my direction!"

He hesitated for a moment, watching the figure, and again the head was thrown back and the quiet call came.

Without a doubt the woman was signalling to him to come to her, and without another moment's pause, Dorrimore obeyed that summons. As he slipped from the shed, he found that the ground shelved slightly, and in another moment he was out of sight of the monastery.

He headed straight across the space towards the black wall of the orchard, and as he drew near, the gaunt figure of the blind nun beckoned to him again.

"I have a message for you," she said, in slow sing-song English; "but be careful. There are many enemies on the watch."

As Dorrimore confessed afterwards, the sound of his own native tongue coming from those calm ashen lips was something of a shock, and he came to a halt and stared at the speaker.

Her quick ears seemed to detect that check in his progress, for the pale lips lifted into a ghost of a smile.

"You need fear nothing," she said. "I am a friend."

He came on then, climbing the wall and halting by her side. He saw that from where they stood the slender growth of cherry trees hid them from the sight of anyone in the monastery beyond the road.

"You say you're a friend?" he said, in English. "But how am I to know that?"

The nun had placed her stick against the wall, and now she held towards Dorrimore two long slim hands, hands that touched his sleeve, then ran up over his shoulders, and with very soft light tips passed across his face.

There was something eerie in that experience. He knew that the woman was trying to visualise his features; that the small tips

of her fingers were as eyes to her, and at last, over her pale face, there broke another soft smile.

"Yes, you are English," she said. "You must be a brave man."

Her hands had dropped now, and were clasped together. She stood in front of him, a shapeless, quaint creature, yet there was something in her face and manner that gave her a dignity which Lord Dorrimore felt at once.

"You are quite right," he said. "I am English."

"I have a message for you," the nun began. "There is someone in my House of the Holy Lotus. She is a woman, as I am, although not of my race. I have sheltered her for several days, and while she is there she is safe. But she wants to get away now, for she knew of your coming, and has been waiting for you."

"A woman—in there?"

CHAPTER 10.

Nipper is Caught Napping!

DORRIMORE thrilled to the news. Both he and Nelson Lee, to say nothing of Nipper, had, perhaps, been more troubled regarding the uncertain fate of Mrs. Steele than they had about anything else. It was the thought of

that plucky young British wife possibly being the prisoner in the hands of those evil, brutal natives that had haunted the three Englishmen right through their long journey.

"An Englishwoman?" Dorrimore repeated. "Is her name Miriam Steele?"

The blind nun bowed.

"That is her name," she said. "She is in my house as a servant, and no one knows the truth except myself. She is a brave woman, and knows my language; but there is come to the house her bitterest enemy, and she is afraid. She urges me to try and save her—to get her away."

"We'll do that all right," said Dorrimore quickly. "That's what we've come here for."

The nun smiled.

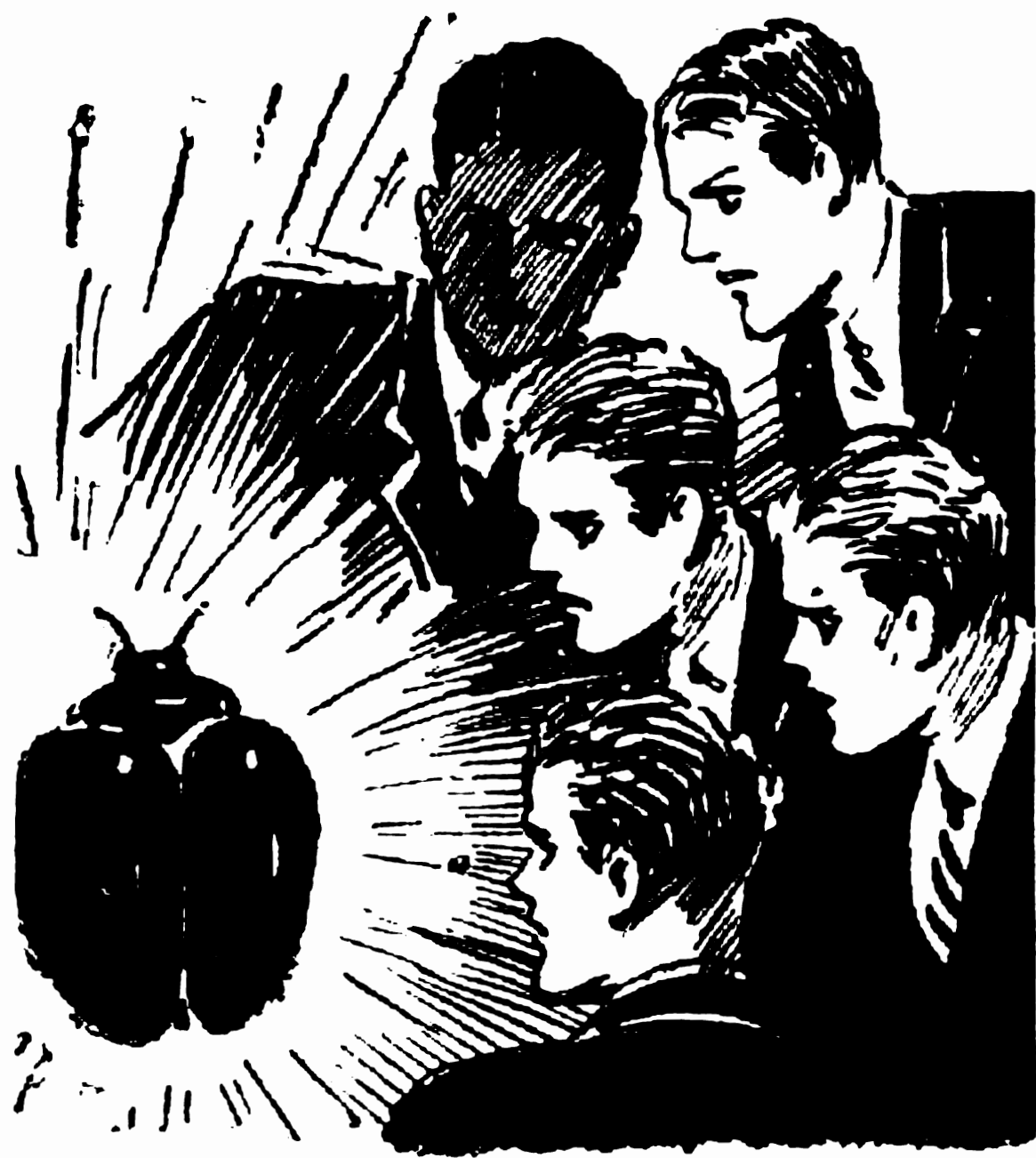
"You will not find it such an easy task, Englishman," she said. "All round my place and all round this valley there are countless spies, and the master of them is now living in my house."

The grave, austere face twitched.

"I am his servant and must do as he bids," she went on. "Yet it is not right that I should hand over to him someone who sought my protection. To-night she must leave my roof, and it is to you that she will have to trust herself."

It was great news. Dorrimore realised that, and his first desire was to get into touch with Nelson Lee and let him know

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what had happened. But his curiosity was not yet satisfied, and he turned to his companion again.

"How did you know that I was English, and who told you I was hiding there by the shed?"

Again the smile flickered across the nun's face.

"The Englishwoman and I were up in the room under the roof of the house," she said. "We went there when the priest came. From that room we can see the whole of the valley, and we, or at least, the Englishwoman, told me that someone had stolen—my robe."

Dorrimore's long fingers closed round the garment that he had donned, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Nice sort of thing to do," he thought to himself. "Robbing a blind nun!"

The placid face of the nun was turned towards him, and she nodded.

"Your countrywoman told me all that happened," she said. "She saw you kneel behind the wall and swathe yourself in my garment, then cross towards the cattle-shed and hide there. It was then that she realised who you were. We had heard that there were three men who had come to this country to search for her and for—for someone dear to her. Your description had already reached us. They said there was a tall man and a shorter man and a youth, and it was the shorter man who was the master of the three."

Dorrimore nodded his head.

"That's quite true," he agreed. "I never mind playing second fiddle to Nelson Lee."

"We didn't know the names, only the descriptions," the nun continued. "But the Englishwoman felt sure that you were one of the three, and so, being afraid that you might be caught, she asked me to bring a message to you. It is not safe for you to remain in that shed for very long. At night the owner of it will bring his cattle there, and you will be discovered. You must leave it, but you will not go far away."

"To-night, when the moon rises, the Englishwoman is going to try to escape. At the other side of the wall there is a small doorway, and it will be guarded by one man. He might be on the inside of the wall or the outside, we do not know. But he will have to be removed before the Englishwoman can get away. If you can remove that man the rest will be easy, and the Englishwoman will be able to join you."

She reached into the folds of her robe and drew out a round object which she handed to Dorrimore. It was an ivory ball, beautifully carved.

"To-night you will try to get rid of the man guarding the doorway," the nun went on. "When you have done so, cast this ball up on to the roof of my house. It will be the signal for your countrywoman to join you, and she will then come down."

Dorrimore took the ball and slipped it into the folds of his garment; then he turned and glanced again at the speaker. He knew that,

as a nun, her duty was implicit obedience to the fat, small-eyed head priest of her faith. It came to him then that perhaps this woman was risking a great deal in what she was doing.

"And you?" he queried. "What will become of you?"

The austere face twitched, then a meek expression crossed the lips.

"There is a sister in danger," she said. "I must help her."

And with that Dorrimore had to be content, for she turned away from him, casting one ghost-like smile back over her shoulder; then, with the long staff in her hand, she passed through the orchard between the trees until her shapeless figure vanished through the gap in the wall.

It was time then for Dorrimore to think of getting in touch with Nipper. Turning, he vaulted the low wall, then commenced to make his way through the cultivated ground, describing a wide detour. Finally he gained the road some three or four hundred yards below the high-walled house.

It was getting dusk now, and he struck across the rougher ground on the other side of the road, working his way along the slope. He knew that Nipper would be somewhere in the vicinity, and as he moved forward he kept a sharp look-out.

The slope was covered with boulders, interspaced here and there with a clump of tough bushes, and, moving very quietly, Dorrimore came suddenly upon an unexpected scene. Nipper, squatting in the little burrow-like recess, had watched that house and wall until sheer fatigue had made him close his eyes.

The young detective was always prepared to take his solemn oath that he hadn't slept, but the facts of the case went to prove otherwise. For Dorrimore, rising from behind the boulder, caught sight of Nipper's doubled-up figure, and, five paces away from it, moving stealthily forward, a lanky, evil-looking ruffian.

As Dorrimore was to learn afterwards, the fellow was the Chinaman whom Nelson Lee had seen wheeling the barrow, and now the Mongolian was carrying in one clenched hand a thick, steel-studded club. There was no mistaking the fellow's intention. He was tiptoeing over the rough ground, heading directly for the little hollowed niche into which Nipper had curled himself, and if ever murder and grim, evil intent shone on a face, they certainly did on that rapt, yellow countenance.

In fact, so utterly engrossed was the man on making a stealthy and noiseless approach that he didn't even see the shadowy figure of Dorrimore as it rose behind the boulder. Dorrimore was twenty yards away, much too far off to gain the ruffian before he could strike Nipper. The man was already raising his club, and in another couple of paces would have reached his dozing victim.

It is in moments such as these that a man is put to the test. A quick brain is one

of the greatest assets that anyone can possess, and Dorrimore, thanks to his rough training, had certainly developed that. Even as the man poised himself, Dorrimore cast a quick glance round, and with one swoop lifted a huge, jagged piece of flint that lay close to the boulder. Then, with that round-arm swing which had made Dorrimore the demon bowler of his year, he sent that chunk of flint whizzing through the air.

There was a certain element of luck about the shot, but it was aimed straight enough. In any case, the jagged edge thudded hard against the Mongolian's clean-shaven poll with a force that was sufficient to send the man staggering. His loose-knit figure wavered for a moment, then collapsed like a jointed doll.

Dorrimore was already following up that throw of his, and the first thing Nipper was really aware of was when a shadowy figure passed his burrow, and hurled himself on some soft, inanimate bundle beyond, a bundle that gave vent to a half-stifled squeak.

"What the dickens——"

Rubbing his eyes, Nipper drew himself out of his hiding-place. He was just in time to see Dorrimore holding the Mongolian with one hand, while the other swung round and down again. It was a full-blooded punch, straight between the eyes, and the club-wielder was flattened out for keeps.

"What the dickens—hang it! It's Dorrimore!"

"Who did you think it was, young 'un?" Dorrimore asked.

Nipper pointed to the shapless garment that his tall companion wore over his coat.

"I thought at first that you were a new sort of spook," the young detective returned. "What did that unlucky chap do that you had to lay him out like that?"

CHAPTER 11.

A Tight Corner!

DORRIMORE had been careful to keep himself in a sitting position, and he made a signal to Nipper now.

"Don't show yourself, young 'un," he said. "I'm very much afraid you've been spotted. This fellow has come out of the house, and if you hadn't been sound asleep you would have spotted him, too!"

He indicated the ugly-looking club that lay a few feet away from where the youngster was hiding.

"That's the thing he was going to use on you," Dorrimore ended, dryly. "And it looked to me as if he were going to score a bull's-eye, too. If that had come down on your napper, young fellow-me-lad, you would have known all about it."

Nipper looked at the club, then at the prostrate figure, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I suppose you're right," he said; "but I'll swear I wasn't asleep. I—I might

perhaps have been nodding a little, and, after all, you can't blame me for that. I seem to have been stuck in that beastly rabbit warren for about ten years, and nothing has happened."

Dorrimore had risen to his knees now, and was looking across the space towards the house. It was quite dusk, and he could only just make out the outlines of the roof of the building beyond the wall.

"They spotted you, anyhow, young 'un," was his dry comment. "And that means that someone else may be on the way out here. The best thing we can do is to beat it, young 'un, for although you haven't seen anything happening, I have. It's rather a long story, and before I tell it I think we ought to try and find your guv'nor. There's work for him to do as well as for us."

He stretched out his hands and grabbed the Chinaman by the ankles. The prostrate figure was already giving signs that he was returning to consciousness again, and for obvious reasons Dorrimore didn't want the fellow to get away.

"I think we ought to attend to this gentleman before we make a start," he said. "Is there room in that burrow for a large-sized Mongolian?"

Nipper chuckled.

"We can find room all right," he said. "We might have to fold him up a bit but that won't do him any harm."

Dorrimore dragged the Chinaman along into the folds of the ground, and slipping out of the loose garment that he had taken from the line of washing in the orchard, he began to tear several strips from it, and set to work to bind the man's hands.

But before he had barely commenced that operation, Nipper touched him on the shoulder and indicated the ruffian's garment. It was a long, loose robe of soft hide, and its colour was a deep tint of blue. On the front of it was worked a pattern in red pigment.

"Look here, old chap," the youngster said. "This fellow's just about your size, and if there are any others on the watch at that place it might be worth your while to swop garments with this beggar. It strikes me he's wearing a sort of uniform that would help us to get through this spy-ridden place."

"That's a thundering good idea, young 'un," Dorrimore put in, "and I'll adopt it, if you don't mind. Help me to skin this fellow."

In a few moments the transferring of his clothes was complete. Dorrimore slipped his own woollen garment on to the half-dazed Chinaman, and in his turn dressed himself in the warm, comfortable hide robe.

Thanks to the fact that the Chinaman, although not so broad as Dorrimore, was almost the same height, the robe was a pretty good fit. When the tall aristocrat had adjusted the round astrakhan hat on his head and turned up the collar of the robe, he made a very fair double of their prisoner.

After the change of garments had taken place, Dorrimore and Nipper tied the man up hand and foot, and in order to make sure of him, thrust another fold of the torn cloth into his mouth, then he was bundled unceremoniously into the burrow and left there. He began to struggle as they turned away, but Dorrimore only shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll give you all night to work yourself out of those knots," he said; "and, in any case, the exercise will keep you warm."

It was getting dark now, and as Nipper

have brought the whole gang of the ruffians pouring out to overwhelm the two strangers.

There are moments when cunning is the best weapon to use, and neither Dorrimore nor Nipper were so foolish as to disdain the use of that weapon, and so the grim little comedy began, Dorrimore twisting his hand into Nipper's collar and beginning to drag the youngster down the slope towards the two men.

Fortunately, Dorrimore knew a fair amount of Chinese, and he commenced to fire off in great style as he snarled and tugged



The creeping spy drew nearer to the unsuspecting Nipper, but as the man raised his club, Dorrimore hurled the piece of rock with all his force.

and Dorrimore began to move down the slope, they heard in front of them the clink of some metal object against a boulder. Dorrimore's hand fell on his companion's shoulder, and he gave it a quick squeeze.

"I think we are only just in the nick of time, young 'un," he said. "Unless I'm much mistaken, these are some of the other men from the house."

Already they could pick out the grotesque muffled shapes of two men who were clambering over the boulders towards them.

"This is where we're going to do a bit of bluffing, old chap," Nipper whispered. "You grab me and make out that I'm your prisoner, but for goodness' sake turn up that collar of your coat, and don't speak unless you've got to."

It was not that Nipper and Dorrimore were afraid of these two men clambering towards them, but there was always the possibility of there being others in that house. The slightest sound of a fracas or fight might

at his supposed prisoner. Nipper, on his side, was fighting every inch of the way, apparently, and it was quite a realistic struggle that was carried on all down the slope.

The two men had come to a halt and Dorrimore barged straight between them, his hand still tight on Nipper's collar. One of the men, a leering, heavy-built lout, drew back his fist and sent it hard in between Nipper's shoulder-blades as the youngster passed him. Nipper shot forward, almost on to his face, and for a moment the lad's fighting blood was roused.

"Here, let me go—let me get at him! I'll——"

It was not by any means a fake struggle Nipper put up then, but Dorrimore's hand was like a vice, and he yanked the youngster almost off his feet, while he let out a bellow of mirth, guffawing at the top of his voice, as though that vicious punch delivered to his prisoner was quite to his liking.

But under his breath the tall aristocrat managed to whisper a warning to his young companion.

"Pack it up, you young idiot!" he said. "You'll get your own back on them presently!"

Thanks to that driving punch Dorrimore and Nipper had staggered through the pair of ruffians, and were now three or four yards ahead. Pretending to be still rejoicing over that punch, Dorrimore stretched his long legs out, and went down the slope at full tilt, Nipper slipping and stumbling by his side.

The rate at which they travelled soon put a gap of thirty or forty yards between them and the two Mongolians, who now turned and began to follow them. They were heading straight for the high wall, and Dorrimore saw now that the narrow doorway at the back of the wall was open, and a mammoth thick shape was standing in the half darkness. There was a light behind, and it was shining on the doorway, revealing the enormous bulky figure.

There was no need for a second glance at it. It was the fat priest, and he was shading his eyes with his hands as he peered at the slope. Presently he caught sight of the two figures coming towards him, and with a grunt of satisfaction, the figure came waddling forward.

"That's done it!" said Nipper. "We're between two fires now."

It certainly seemed as though their ruse had been of no avail. Dorrimore had hoped to put a fair gap between himself and the other two, so that when they reached the wall he and Nipper could sprint off and so save themselves, but the sudden appearance of this fat priest had put a check on that plan.

"There's only one thing to do, young 'un," said Dorrimore, "and we've got to do it. When I give you the signal drop your head and give that fellow the butt of a lifetime. Don't forget! Right in the bread-basket!"

Instantly Nipper saw what Dorrimore's idea was, and he had hard work to repress a chuckle. They were still barging down the slope at full speed, Dorrimore apparently pulling his companion forward by his grip on the collar.

The fat priest waddling towards them came nearer and nearer, until at last he was only three or four yards away. Then, suddenly, Dorrimore, pretending to miss his step, slid over the edge of a boulder at the same time giving Nipper a fierce thrust forward.

The impetus from that powerful arm and Nipper's own urge, sent the youngster headlong into the fat figure. As he shot through the air the young detective doubled up his body and, head-first, smote that massive mountain of flesh midway.

Not even a professional footballer could have resisted that charge. Nipper's bullet head went straight into the great fat "tummy" of the grinning priest, and a wild

wailing gulp came through the thick lips. Then the priest collapsed like a pricked balloon, to roll over and over, howling with pain.

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CHAPTER 12.

A Narrow Escape!

NIPPER himself had been sent back a pace or two by the concussion, and had fallen on to his back. But he was up in a moment, and turning to the left, he started off like a rabbit, sprinting on down beside the high wall.

Dorrimore, pretending to recover his balance, gave vent to a yell, and brandishing his arms, gave chase. Behind the tall aristocrat went up a howl of anger from the two Mongolians, and they came stumbling down the slope.

But, by this time Nipper was a good sixty yards away, with Dorrimore half that distance behind him. Yet it seemed to the two Mongolians that the tall, lanky figure was bound to catch that shorter, slimmer one, and so, when they reached the spot where the fat priest lay groaning, it was only natural that they should halt there and help their august leader to his feet.

To the superstitious Chinamen the fall of a head priest is something like the fall of a monarch, and while they tugged and strained to lift the heavy carcase, Nipper and Dorrimore had vanished round the bend of the high wall, and were sprinting on towards the road.

Dorrimore, quickening his pace, reached to within two or three yards of Nipper, then his voice came to the ears of the youngster.

"Go on! Stick it! Head straight for the hut!" he gasped. "It'll look as though I'm giving you the chase of a lifetime. Keep it up, young 'un!"

And so it was in this order that first Nipper and then Dorrimore barged into that quiet hut on the right of the road.

Nelson Lee heard the quick patter of feet, and had leapt to the front door in time to see the slim figure of his young assistant flash across the threshold.

Nelson Lee was not to be blamed for imagining that Nipper was hard pressed, and was being pursued by somebody, but as he leaped to the door and caught sight of the strangely-garbed shape, Nipper whipped round, and sent a gasping word of warning to his guv'nor.

"It—it's all right, guv'nor! It's—it's Dorrimore!"

Dorrimore leaped through the doorway, then Nelson Lee slammed the door into position, and, turning round, looked quietly at the two gasping figures in the room. He had lighted a small lamp, and under the yellow gleams he studied the faces of his companions.

"And what the deuce does this mean?" he asked.

Dorrimore was about to explain, but sud-

denly his eyes fell on Nipper, and unable to check himself, he slipped limply to the floor, and went off into a roar of laughter, a laugh which, after a moment's pause, Nipper duly joined in, and that quiet hut fairly shook to the sound of honest English mirth.

Dorrimore was the first to recover himself from that burst of mirth, and he came forward to Nelson Lee's side, followed by Nipper; then they started to tell the extraordinary chapter of events that had occurred to them from the moment Lee had left them.

On his side, Nelson Lee gave a brief account of the grim experience he had gone through at Liao Yang, and the three companions thus comparing notes, realised that the moment for swift action had come.

"We're inside a net," Lee pointed out, "and although it hasn't closed on us yet, it may do so at any moment. This combination against us, whoever they are, are much stronger than I imagined, and we've walked into what is little else than a hot-bed of intrigue. I should think that within the next twenty-four hours we shall have to make our move, and fate will decide whether we are going to win through or not."

"Well, we mustn't give them the chance to close in on us," Dorrimore said. "We'll have to make a move pretty soon, for we know that Mrs. Steele is in danger, and our first job must be to help her."

"Yes; that's about it," Lee agreed. "I think we would do well to make a start on that job right now. In any case, it is dangerous for us to remain here in this hut; the sooner we leave it the better."

He began to work on his plan then, and presently he had made it a fairly sound one. Thanks to the various chapters of circumstances, Dorrimore, garbed in that semi-uniform, which the fanky Chinaman had been forced to relinquish, was a valuable asset to the trio.

At Nipper's suggestion, Lee went across to the gagged figure in the corner of the room, and helped by his young assistant, stripped the fellow of his rough clothes, and donned them, giving the man the grubby garments he had purchased in Liao Yang.

In the man's clothes Nelson Lee found a short, carved, ivory staff that was obviously a badge of office of some sort, for it bore the insignia of some person of high rank. Lee was only able to make out a few of the characters on the staff, but it served to indicate that the man, whoever he was, happened to be an official of some capacity in the household of a fairly influential person.

"It may come in handy, guv'nor," Nipper said, "and every little thing helps."

In order to make sure that their prisoner should not be found, Nelson Lee and Dorrimore carted the fellow out and deposited him in the corner of the low-walled garden behind a heap of garbage. They made him as comfortable as possible, and from his steady breathing and the angry way in which the rascal tried to release himself, the fellow was sound enough in wind and limb, and would take no hurt for that night.

It must have been close on eleven o'clock when the final departure from the hut took place, and as proof that their luck had not quite deserted them, Lee and his two companions had only just slipped away into the cultivated patch of ground beyond the building, when they heard footfalls on the road.

Peering through the darkness, they saw five or six shaggy-coated figures spread out in the form of a fan, searching steadily along the road. Nelson Lee, Nipper and Dorrimore were kneeling in a ditch, and they watched the approach of the figures.

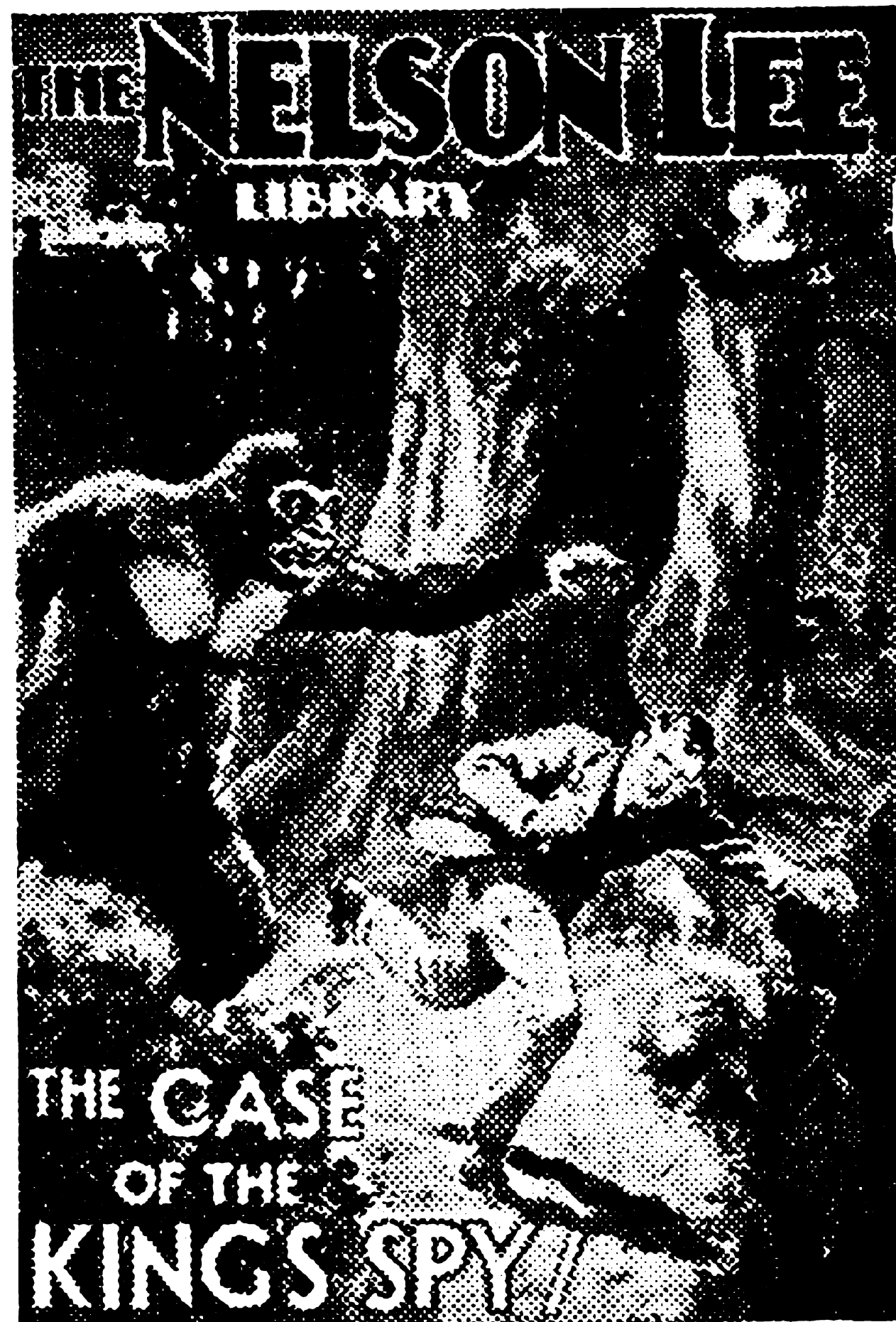
As soon as the oncomers got level with the hut, a hoarse command sounded, and the whole line wheeled and made a rush for the little building.

"Thank goodness we stowed that beggar away behind the heap of garbage," Nipper whispered. "They're making a very thorough search."

Lights were flashing in the hut now and they could hear the voices of the men and the tramping of feet on the hard earth floor. A torch appeared in the small garden in front of the hut, and under it they saw the squat yellow countenance of a Mongolian.

The search, of course, was fruitless, and presently the whole line formed up again in the road, standing in a circle, discussing some question which apparently seemed to

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cause a certain amount of friction, for at last the voices arose to a hoarse shout and something like a scuffle took place.

Then three or four of the men detached themselves and went on down the road towards the ferry, while the remainder turned and went back along the road, and Lee and his companions saw them vanish into the wide doorway in the high wall of the nun's house.

"They think we've gone back to Liao Yang," was Lee's shrewd guess. "And I suppose they're going down to the ferry to make inquiries. At any rate, they'll keep a close watch on the city now, and I'm inclined to think we were fortunate in getting out of the town when we did."

The roadway was absolutely deserted now, and presently the three started off across it and over the rough ground until they reached the slope beyond the high wall. Here, while Nelson Lee and Dorrimore waited, Nipper scrambled up to his little burrow, and the youngster's face widened into a grin as he discovered that the lanky Chinaman was still lying in the deep recess.

The man made a movement, and a muttered word came through his gagged lips. But Nipper, stooping, saw that the bonds were quite tight, and he arose, and moved noiselessly down the slope again, joining Lee and Dorrimore.

"It's all right, guv'nor," he said. "Our bird's still up there, and I think we can make a start on the other little job, now."

Dorrimore had repeated the instructions which the nun had given him to Nelson Lee, and after waiting for another ten minutes or so, the detective made up his mind to start.

CHAPTER 13.

A Daring Venture!

AS far as he could see there was no one on guard outside the gate, but the nun had said that the man might be either outside or inside, and so, knowing that he would have to match cunning with cunning, Nelson Lee relied on Dorrimore to get at the sentry.

"The best thing you can do, old chap, is to make out that you're that lanky Chinaman you captured," he said. "And I would suggest that you pretend to be just about beat. Make it appear as though you've had a darned rough time of it, and get the fellow to let you inside. We'll keep a sharp lookout, and see that you get through all right."

They strode towards the high wall, and while Nelson Lee and Nipper pressed themselves flat against it, some two or three yards away from the door, Dorrimore, stepping up to the barrier, leaned against it and began to beat on it with his clenched fists, a muffled thudding sound, which was presently answered, for the three listeners heard the creak of a heavy wooden bolt, and the door gave a couple of inches, so that Dorrimore,

leaning against it, saw an indistinct head, covered with a round fur cap, appear in the gap.

"Who are you?"

The man spoke in Chinese, and Dorrimore had sufficient grasp of the language to understand it. He pretended to be in the last stage of exhaustion and, leaning against the door, with his hands outstretched on it, the tall aristocrat mumbled a few broken, gasping words.

His body seemed to be limp and almost lifeless, and he certainly played his part extremely well, for presently there was a flash, and a tiny yellow flame appeared.

The guard had lit a match—a European contrivance that even Manchuria had found to be worth adopting. Under the flickering flame of the match Dorrimore's tall figure in the Chinaman's hide robes was plainly revealed. He had lowered his head so that the man could only see the cap and the high collar. To the custodian of the door it looked as though Dorrimore was just about at his last gasp, and the man recognised that hide uniform as belonging to one of their number.

He was not to be blamed, therefore, when he slipped aside the steel chain, which had prevented the door from being opened more than a few inches. As the barrier swung forward, Dorrimore, still keeping up his trick, pretended to reel in through the gap.

The stocky, thick-set doorkeeper stretched out one podgy hand to balance the tall figure as it fell inward. As he did so the match dropped from his fingers and went out. It was the moment that Dorrimore had been waiting for, and suddenly and swiftly his hands, that had been clawing so limply at the door, became strong and potent.

They fell round the bull-like throat of the doorkeeper, and throwing all his weight on the man, Dorrimore crushed the fellow to the earth, stifling the yell that came to his lips. He made only a slight scuffling sound, but it was quite enough for Nelson Lee and Nipper, and, leaping from the wall, they darted into the doorway, Lee diving to the assistance of his tall companion.

No word was spoken, and, as a matter of fact, Dorrimore did not require any commands. He had wedged his man down on the hard earth, and now, lifting the fellow's head and shoulders, the powerful adventurer drove the tough, bullet-like skull down again until it thudded against the hard ground.

Already, Nelson Lee had snatched a piece of cloth from his robes, and once again the gag came into operation. They discovered that the man was wearing a thin leather belt round his waist, and this belt served as an effective bond. He was soon strapped up, and they pulled him into the angle of the wall, leaving him there.

"Now, then, for that ivory ball, Dorrimore," Lee said, in a low whisper.

They found they were within twenty yards of the dark, square-shaped building, and, moving forward cautiously, pace by pace,

they halted about four or five yards from it. Then Dorrimore took the ivory ball from his robes and swung his hand upward, sending the little missile up into the air and over the edge of the roof.

They listened, but could not hear it drop, and it dawned on Dorrimore that in all probability the roof, a flat one, was covered with rushes, or perhaps a carpet. They could see no sign of any light, and it struck Dorrimore that perhaps his signal might have missed altogether. But a moment later there came to their ears a soft whisper, and glancing upwards, they saw a slim head and shoulders silhouetted against the sky.

In the east the first quarter of a pale moon was just commencing to gleam in the dark sky, and slight though the glow was, it enabled the three watchers below to pick out the slender shoulders and the small head.

"That you, Mrs. Steele?"

It was Dorrimore who spoke, a quiet whisper, and he saw a hand reach out and wave to him, then the figure vanished, but presently there was a slithering sound from the roof, and they saw a rope commence to pay out over the edge of the parapet.

Nipper stepped forward and caught the end of the rope as it came down, then he gave it a slight jerk to indicate what he had done. The figure appeared over the edge of the roof, and swinging round, started to descend, while Nipper balanced the thin coil.

"Jove, she's got some pluck!" Dorrimore told himself, as he watched the slender shape dropping through the darkness.

As soon as the figure was near to the ground the tall aristocrat stepped forward, and putting his hands under the shoulders, lifted the woman clear. He could hear the quick panting breath, and just for a moment the small hand clung to him, then the figure straightened up and turned its head towards the tall adventurer.

"You're all right, now, Mrs. Steele," Dorrimore said. "Come along; we'll get away from here at once."

But to the utter amazement of the three, the woman shook her head.

"No, no, I can't go! Something terrible has happened. I'm sure of it. I think they have—have killed poor Nuan. I'm afraid they found out that she had—had helped me, and I—I can't go until I know what has happened to her."

She turned and looked through the dusk at the trio of figures.

"It is that brute, Chal Shan, I know. He suspected I was here, but Nuan would not betray me. To-night she said she would come to the roof and join me, she told me about you and left me, and she—she has not returned. We must go in and try to find out what has happened to her. I—I couldn't leave here knowing that she was at the mercy of that brute!"

It was obvious that nothing would move the woman from her purpose, and to Nelson

Lee there was something fine about her courage. On the very eve of escape she was content to take another risk in order to try and help the woman who had helped her.

He came forward then, and for a moment they spoke together, then Nelson Lee nodded to Miriam Steele.

"There's only one thing to do," he remarked. "Dorrimore and I will have to get into the house, and the best way to do it is up that rope. But there's no need for you to wait here and take unnecessary risks. The gate is open, and you and Nipper had better go and wait on the hillside until we join you."

He turned to his young assistant.

"Go up to that burrow of yours, Nipper," he said, "and wait there until we join you."

Under other circumstances Nipper might have been inclined to grumble, for this arrangement was not to his liking. But he knew what it meant. Nelson Lee was anxious to get Mrs. Steele out of any further danger, and Nipper's job now was to see to that. And so, with Miriam Steele by his side, he finally slipped across the dark grounds and vanished through the gateway. He led the way up the slope and finally reached the burrow where he and his companion came to a halt.

"Perhaps—I have sent them—to their deaths!" Mrs. Steele faltered. "Yet what else could I have done? Poor Nuan has done so much for me, and I feel that—that she has paid the price. If those two perish —"

"Don't you worry about them," said Nipper reassuringly. "Lord Dorrimore and the gov'nor are pretty tough, and can look after themselves. Besides, they've got to come out of this alive in order to find your husband."

She nodded her head thoughtfully.

"Yes," she agreed. "If we can only get away from here to-night I know we can save my husband. I have found out where he is, and I have a friend waiting for me farther on. If we can only get through we can save him."

They strained their eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of the building into which Lee and Dorrimore had ventured, but there was no sign of any figures there, nor could they hear the slightest sound.

CHAPTER 14.

The Last of Nuan!

"SO far, so good," said Lord Dorrimore, with a quiet shrug of his shoulders. "But the question is—what's the next move?"

It is not by any means an easy matter to climb a thin rope, especially when that rope is practically flat against the wall. But the task that might have proved itself impossible to most men was easily and successfully

accomplished by Nelson Lee and his athletic companion.

They had swarmed up the rope and now found themselves on the rush-matted floor of the flat roof. To the left they saw a narrow opening into which the silver beams of the moon shed its faint rays. After listening intently for a moment Lee turned to his companion.

"Not much doubt about what the next move is," he suggested. "We must try and find out what has happened to that unlucky blind nun."

"Jove, yes!" agreed Dorrimore, clenching his fists. "If that fat scoundrel, Chal Shan, has injured her, I'll make him smart for it!"

They made no noise as they crossed the thick matting of the roof, and when they gained the gap they found a wooden ladder resting against one side of it. The ladder ran down into a chamber, and after making sure that the room was in darkness, first Lee, then Dorrimore, went down the ladder and halted at the bottom.

In common with the majority of native houses, there were one or two square gaps in the walls, quite innocent of any glass, but capable of lighting the interior, and now, thanks to the pale moonbeams shining through the gaps on the eastern side, Lee and Dorrimore were able to pick their way across the apartment. It was obviously used as a bed-room, and they made out the low arched doorway at the end of it.

Passing through the doorway they found themselves on a stone-flagged passage with a circular staircase in front of them. From somewhere below a light was shining, for its reflection came filtering up round the hollow shaft of the staircase, and Lee and Dorrimore began to descend, very quietly, halting at every two or three paces to listen.

Eventually, when they had reached about half-way down the stairs, there came to their ears a sound that brought them to a quick halt—a low, moaning sound. Nelson Lee felt Dorrimore's lean, virile body go tense, and the tall aristocrat caught his companion by the arm.

"I—I believe—that's Nuan, Lee," Dorrimore said, with a quick indrawn breath. "Jove, I'm going down there to see what is happening to her. I can't stay here!"

Before Nelson Lee could check him, the tall fellow was off down the stairs, and when the detective started to follow him Dorrimore was already on the last flight. Lee had a vision of his companion as he halted for a moment and stared, then the tall, athletic figure leaped forward, and Lee, rushing down the last flight, found himself looking into a high-roofed chamber, lit by a great brass hanging lamp.

He had no time to study the scene minutely, but it seemed to him that it was in the form of a small temple, for at one end of it there stood a niche in which was placed a black carved Buddha. The walls were hung with tapestry, and there was a thick, heavy carpet on the floor. But it

was not the carpet nor the tapestry that caught and held the detective's eyes.

Something was lying prone in front of the Buddha, and Lee saw that the arms were outstretched and pinioned to rings fastened in the floor. Dorrimore was already halfway across the dimly-lighted space, and Lee saw him drop on his knees beside the outstretched form, and as he did so, the adventurer raised his head. Lee saw the look of utter horror and rage that had transformed the strong, handsome features.

"Lee—quickly! Help me—it's Nuan!"

The blind nun lay outstretched on the floor of her little temple, and only the faint low moaning from the thin white lips indicated that life still remained in her emaciated body. Dorrimore started to hack at the hide ropes that held her small slender wrists to the rings, and now Lee, reaching the spot, helped him until at last the unfortunate creature was free from the bonds.

Dorrimore stopped and lifted Nuan in his arms.

"Why, she's as light as a feather," he said. "And she's been whipped and tortured!"

Beyond the Buddha there lay a heap of rugs and cushions, and it was on these that Dorrimore, very gently and tenderly laid his burden. Nelson Lee and his companion stood for a moment beside the moaning woman, and a look of utter helplessness came into the tall aristocrat's face.

"What can we do, Lee?" he asked. "What the dickens can we do for this poor thing?"

Lee was studying the set, haggard face, and he shook his head.

"I'm afraid we can't do anything for her, old chap," he returned. "She is beyond our aid. Any moment may see the end."

Dorrimore clenched his fists and took a turn up and down the apartment, halting again beside Lee.

"I don't know what you think about it," he said. "But I'm going to find that black-guard, Chal Shan. I don't care if he's surrounded by a score of his ruffians, I'm going to make him pay for this."

There was a quiet glimmer in Lee's eyes as he nodded towards the angry Dorrimore.

"Chal Shan shall pay!" he said.

Another moan came from the heap of rugs, and the two friends turned. Nuan had stirred slightly, and now, with a painful effort, she raised herself on her elbow. Nelson Lee dropped on his knees beside the rugs and passed one arm beneath the lean, slender, bruised shoulder.

"It's all right, Nuan," he said, speaking in Chinese. "We are friends—friends of the Englishwoman. Mrs. Steele is safe, but—we are not in time to save you."

Despite her pain, a look of wondrous content crossed Nuan's face.

"No, you could not save me," she said; "but that does not matter. I betrayed my order—the head priest. It was only right I should suffer. I have paid the price. I—I knew I would have to pay the price."

"Get the truth out of her!" whispered Dorrimore. "Make sure that it was that brute, Chal Shan!"

A few questions from Nelson Lee elicited the fact that it was the fat priest who had brought Nuan to her death. She had been seen going to Dorrimore in the orchard, and had been dragged before Chal Shan, who had suspected that Nuan was hiding Mrs. Steele. He tried to force her to reveal the hiding-place of the Englishwoman, but even the whip could not drag it from her. But the strange part of it was that Nuan maintained that she had sinned, and that Chal Shan had been in the right to punish her.

"And now I must tell you more," the thin, wavering voice went on. "In the temple of Liao Yang there is a white man whom your countrywoman seeks. He is in the private apartment of the head priest of the temple. I have known of it for many days, and it was I who first warned a friend of his that he might come there. His friend sent the message that was received by you, but he was removed from the railway station immediately afterwards, and hasn't dared to tell the authorities. But at the temple of Liao Yang there is another friend, one Toigan, a Burmese boy, who is waiting ready to help anyone who comes to save Bernard Steele, for Toigan loves this Englishman."

Her voice died away in a whisper, her head drooped, and the fragile body was suddenly strangely limp. Nuan had passed from mortal ken.

Nelson Lee laid the fragile creature very gently back on the rugs. Dorrimore was standing close by with his cap in his hand, and for a long moment there was silence. Then, as though awakening from a sleep, the tall figure caught Lee by the arm.

"Come," he said. "I'm going to find Chal Shan."

Just how he meant to do that he didn't know, but chance took a hand in the game, for, at that moment, there came to their ears a measured, heavy footfall. It was coming from the entrance to the temple, and the sounds indicated that the individual was climbing a flight of steps below, heading for the apartment.

CHAPTER 15.

Chal Shan!

DORRIMORE shot across the room with Lee at his heels. Across the arched doorway were hanging two heavy curtains, drawn back into thick folds, and while Dorrimore vanished behind the folds of the curtain on the left, Lee slipped into place on the right.

A long moment passed, then the footfalls sounded under the arched doorway, and they heard the heavy breathing of a man who had little breath to spare. Moving one corner of the curtain aside, Lee looked out and saw the massive form of Chal Shan entering the temple. The detective knew

that the attack would have to be made instantly, for the priest was bound to see that Nuan had been removed from her bonds.

It seemed as though a similar thought flashed into Dorrimore's mind at the same time, for the leap which he gave was exactly timed with that of Lee. They fell on that mass of flesh like two wolves, and Dorrimore's punch that went home under the priest's ear was sufficient to send the gross, heavy-jowled rascal reeling into Lee's arms.

The detective took the shock of that staggering body, then, with a strength that only a few knew him capable of, Lee twisted himself into position, putting a lock on one of the thick arms, and Chal Shan, who weighed eighteen stone, if he weighed an ounce, was tilted up into the air and thrown clean over the detective's shoulder, to come down on that thick carpet with a thud that knocked all the fight out of him.

When the fat priest came back to gasping life again he found a cold round object being pressed into his neck and a pair of hard blue eyes glaring into his own.

"Get up, Chal Shan," a voice commanded. "Quick!"

There are some voices the very sound of which demanded instant obedience. In his way Chal San was a small god in that neighbourhood, but he recognised the threat behind those cool, curt tones, and he scrambled to his feet, helped up by Dorrimore's boot.

"Who are you? What does this mean?"

In cold, incisive words Lee made his explanation, and as he listened the fat priest revealed the chagrin in his heart.

"We are going to the Temple of the Brotherhood of Liao Yang," Lee said, "and you are going to take us there. You know the head priest of that brotherhood, and you will tell him that he has to release and hand over to us a certain Englishman, Bernard Steele, who is now a prisoner in his temple."

"You hear that?" said Dorrimore harshly. "We're going to march you there just as we are now. The slightest move and you'll go to follow Nuan."

"Follow Nuan? What do you mean? Is she dead?"

The fat priest turned his head and cast a glance into the corner of the chamber.

"She is dead, and you are her murderer!" said Nelson Lee coldly.

"Dead! Nuan dead!" he gasped. "If—if anyone finds out—that I—did it—they'd kill me! They loved her—the people did, and if they find out——"

"I think it would be a just punishment for you if we told the people," said Dorrimore harshly. "And let them get at you."

"No—mercy!" cried Chal Shan.

"Unless we take you to the Brotherhood of Liao Yang," suggested Nelson Lee.

"But I had no right to punish Nuan," faltered the fat priest. "Only the head priest of Liao Yang has that right. If he finds out——"

"There is a very strict code in Buddhist monasteries, and your punishment at the

hands of the brotherhood might be worse than if the populace lynched you," said Nelson Lee. "Yet why should we shield you from either?"

"Spare me!" wailed Chal Shan. "Don't give me away, and I'll take you to the Temple of Liao Yang and release the Englishman. I swear to that."

Nelson Lee knew very well that he could never hope to penetrate into that temple without some help, but he doubted whether the fat priest would keep his word. He decided, however, to take the risk.

"Very well, we three will go to the temple," he said. "But don't forget that we have friends at Liao Yang, and also in the Changsha Valley, who will be waiting for us, and will know quite well if you try to play the part of traitor."

"I will keep faith," said Chal Shan hoarsely. "Come!"

It was westward that Chal Shan turned on leaving the building, and here Lee realised that he would have to get into touch with Nipper before going farther. So, while Dorrimore kept guard over the fat prisoner, Nelson Lee hurried off up the slope and arranged for Nipper to take Mrs. Steele into Liao Yang and place her under the protection of the Japanese consul.

On his return Chal Shan was ordered to march again, and a long walk over the undulating roadway began; then presently the priest turned into a cluster of huts and thundered on the door of one of them, from whence a moment or two later there emerged a yawning, sleepy-headed Mongolian.

Dorrimore had linked his arm into that of the priest's now, so that he might be able to keep the revolver pressed close to the fat side without being observed. But all that precaution was unnecessary. Chal Shan ordered the villager to prepare a vehicle and twenty minutes later there was wheeled into the roadway a hooded cart drawn by a couple of tough Manchurian ponies.

A pile of cushions was placed in the cart, then Dorrimore and his prisoner climbed inside, while Lee took up his position on the front with the driver, and the journey to the temple began. When the morning broke they found themselves winding along the road which ran through a boulder-clad valley, and at the head of the valley they halted at a wayside inn, where the ponies were changed and a meal of rice and butter and chicken was provided for them.

This meal they had in the cart, for the journey began immediately, and so, in three stages and three changes of beasts, they found themselves at last moving along beside the railway which ran into the Changsha Valley, and here they had the first view of the Thousand Peaks. It was just growing dusk, and the scene held Nelson Lee spellbound. Peak after peak, looming smokily in the distance, and the terraces rising one on top of the other, each with their monastery or temple, seemed to be the figment of a dream rather than actuality.

When they reached the Valley of Changsha the cart was halted on the outskirts of the village, and Nelson Lee and Dorrimore alighted from it. The fat priest obviously had no desire to escape from them, and it was he who suggested that they should keep away from the village and take one of the roads that ran along the slope of the hill on the left, thus avoiding any chances of being seen.

Dorrimore was still keeping his eye on the priest, but as the huge figure waddled in front of him he turned and smiled grimly at Nelson Lee.

"He's friendly enough, now," he said. "Why not make him tell us just why these monks have been holding Bernard Steele a prisoner?"

"It will not be long before Steele will be telling us all we want to know," replied Lee. "There is nothing to be gained by letting Chal Shan know just how ignorant we are on that point. We have got him into a position in which he is only too glad to help us, and I am content with that for the present."

They found themselves presently moving along a ledge over which the road ran, then they reached the first flight of steps, up which they climbed, passing through another shorter terrace. It was dark on the slope of the hill, for it would be some time before the moon would rise, and they kept as close as they could to their guide. Dorrimore could hear the fat, wheezy breaths coming from the man as he went on and on, climbing steadily, until at last he came to a halt and turned to them:

"THIS is the Temple of the Brotherhood of Liao Yang," he said, pointing up the slope. "But if I may give you a word of warning, you will go carefully now. Chan Lo, the head priest of the temple, is a man of rare wickedness, and if he knew that we came to save the Englishman, he would kill him first."

That speech coming from the lips of a man who had caused the death of Nuan, the blind nun, sounded rather grotesque, but Lee knew just how to retort.

"If they harm a hair of his head, they shall suffer for it, and so shall you, Chal Shan. You understand?"

"Perfectly," replied the fat priest, with fear in his eyes. "I go to do my best, for my own sake. You wait at the bottom of the steps, and the Englishman will come to you, clad in robes. I will tell him that you are waiting."

"We shall not wait over long," said Nelson Lee. "When our patience has gone we shall come and fetch him ourselves, and that will mean death for you."

But Chal Shan kept his word, for a few minutes later two figures appeared, the bigger man being supported by the smaller. They came down the steps slowly, and Lee and Dorrimore climbed to meet them.

"Are you Bernard Steele?" asked Lee.

The bent figure in the robes turned and nodded to him.

"Yes," the steady voice returned, "that is my name."

He was obviously very weak, and the figure on whom he was leaning began to speak in a quick, nervous tone.

"Hurry, masters!" the boyish voice of Toigan said. "We have no time to waste. Even now I cannot understand how it happened."

Dorrimore, with the evidence of the fat priest's honesty in front of him, stepped forward and put one hand under Steele's arm.

"All right, old chap," he said in English. "You're safe now, and we'll beat it. Come on!"

THEY began to move off down the ledge, heading for the higher road, and Nelson Lee found the slim figure of Toigan walking by his side.

"What happened?" the detective asked, turning to the youngster.

Toigan began with a quick, voluble explanation. He had been keeping watch on that octagonal chamber ever since the time he had sent the message, and every day brought to him a fresh fear. Bernard Steele had discovered a Bolshevik plot, and many papers concerning it he had obtained and concealed. Some time previously Steele had offended Chan Lo by smashing up a conspiracy against law and order, and the priest had sworn to be revenged on the Englishman, and now the Russians had promised to pay handsomely if Chan Lo could capture Steele and force him to tell where the papers had been concealed. But Steele had refused to speak, in spite of torture and starvation. That very day the head priest had sworn that the Englishman should die.

"To-night I was watching in the gallery," Toigan informed Lee, "and I had vowed that if Chan Lo tried to kill my benefactor I would—would kill him in turn. But as I waited in the shadows I saw Chan Lo and another man—a fat pig of a priest whom I had seen there before. They came along the gallery and went into the room where my benefactor was; then, after a time, the door of the chamber opened, and, lo, I saw my benefactor dressed in Chan Lo's robes!"

The youngster looked up at Nelson Lee.

"I thought it was a miracle," he said. "I could not believe my eyes. He came through the doorway, and I crept from my hiding-place and ran to him and took his hand. Even as he passed through the doorway of that chamber the door closed behind him—surely that was a miracle? I do not understand it."

"The fat priest stunned old Chan Lo to get the robe," said Lee. "That was how it was done. The fat priest is anxious to live. But what will Chan Lo say when he finds out?"

They had gained a point where the road sloped sharply, and Dorrimore, who had been ahead a few paces, waited for Nelson Lee

and the young Burmese boy to join them. As the tall aristocrat came to a halt he chanced to look back up the slope where the shadowy bulk of the temple loomed, and Lee heard a gasp of surprise come from Dorrimore's lips.

"Look, Lee! Look!"

The detective halted, and turned his head over his shoulder. A light had appeared on the dome of the temple, and as Nelson Lee and his companions watched, they saw two figures loom on the edge of the parapet, just where the slender wire ran across the valley to the water-tower opposite. Toigan clutched at Lee's sleeve.

"It is Chan Lo, and the fat priest!" he gasped.

Chal Shan had thrown his arms round his superior, and was trying to force him back against the dome. But suddenly, with a power that seemed amazing for such a frail creature, the head priest made one violent effort, and Chal Shan's heavy body was thrust against the edge of the parapet.

It swayed for a moment, then with a quick clutch it drew the head priest into its arms, and the two figures, in a grim lock, rolled over the top of the parapet and vanished into the darkness, and there came to the ears of the watchers a faint crashing sound as the two bodies fell into the growth of trees below the temple.

"Quick, masters!" Toigan said, breaking the silence at last. "They will find out what has happened, and all Changsha Valley will be out to seek for us."

A half-hour later Nelson Lee and Dorrimore were back at the spot where they had left the cart, and they aroused the driver and insisted on him harnessing up his ponies at once; then through the darkness the journey to the railway-station began.

They passed the station at Changsha, but halted at another one five miles farther up the valley, and there they found shelter in the little waiting-room, where a Japanese porter attended to them.

NEXT morning, when the train from Changsha reached the station, Nelson Lee and his companions entered it, and arrived at Liao Yang early that afternoon.

Bernard Steele was taken straight to the Japanese Consulate, where he was greeted by a slim woman who rushed into his arms.

Then Miriam Steele turned and held out her hand to the quiet, smiling man who stood behind her husband.

"I was foolish not to have waited for you, Mr. Lee," she said. "But I was anxious to get in touch with Bernard if I could, and I was made a prisoner as I stepped out of the train at Liao Yang."

"But Chal Shan lost you," said Lee. "And poor Nuan was hiding you from him."

"I was imprisoned in Nuan's house," said Miriam. "You understand, of course, that Nuan had to obey the head priest of the

(Continued on page 44.)

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE ST. FRANK'S HEADMASTER'S STRANGE ACTION? That's What Handforth Wants To Know!

DETECTIVE HANDY

★ Until Fighting James Kingswood took up his post as new headmaster of St. Frank's, the Fourth Form was considered a nonentity. Now they are a force to be reckoned with, for the Fighting Head has imbued them with a new spirit of keenness. The result is war between the Fourth Form and Remove. ★

No Satisfaction!

"JUST in time!" murmured Reggie Pitt, with relief.

He and the other Remove conspirators had just dodged out of the Modern House—enemy territory. And they were only just over on their own side of the Triangle when numbers of juniors came crowding out of the gymnasium. John Busterfield Boots and his Modern House chums were on their way to their own quarters.

As they reached the Modern House doorway and entered the lobby, they were just in time to hear a most remarkable commotion; and Pitt & Co., watching from the other side of the Triangle, hugged themselves in anticipation.

"Now for it!" breathed Reggie. "This is where Boots & Co. get it in the neck!"

But Boots & Co., in the lobby, had halted. A fiendish shriek had come to their ears, accompanied by a strange swishing, roaring sound.

"What on earth's that?" asked Bob Christine, staring. "Sounds like water!"

"It is water!" said Talmadge, pointing.

A flood was beginning to surge into the lobby from the Junior passage—and in that direction, too, the air itself was filled with a mysterious, watery spray.

Then, before the juniors could get over their first amazement, a figure came dashing out.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" gurgled Boots. "Old Pycraft!"

They recognised him at the first glance—Mr. Horace Pycraft, looking, however, more like a drowned rat than a Form-master. He was soaked to the skin, and as he staggered into the lobby he left a long, long trail of wetness behind him.

"Help! Help!" he shrieked wildly.

The Fourth-Formers dashed up.

"What's wrong, sir?" asked Boots. "By thump, you seem to be a bit wet, sir!"

Mr. Pycraft gulped and gasped and made other hideous noises.

"Wet!" he hooted. "Don't be a fool, Boots! I'm soaked—I shall catch my death of cold! By heaven, I'll make those rascals pay for this!"

"Has somebody turned the hose on you, sir?" asked Bob Christine politely.

All the Fourth-Formers, to be quite truthful, were inwardly delighted. To see Mr. Pycraft in this plight was very, very edifying. Not that the Fourth-Formers were naturally vindictive;

but it was certainly gratifying to see that, for once in a way, Mr. Pycraft had "caught a packet."

"Good heavens, yes!" yelped the Form-master. "The hose! Go and turn it off, somebody! Quick! The whole House will be flooded out!"

"Leave it to us, sir," said Boots briskly. "We'll attend to the hose."

They dashed for the Junior passage—with a full understanding of what had happened. Some enterprising Removites had been here, and they had fixed up a special trap—and Pycraft, spying as usual, had walked into it.

"Poetic justice, my bonny lads!" grinned Boots happily. "I've sometimes read about it in books—Great jumping grasshoppers! Look at our passage!"

The others were looking—and their hilarity was not quite so marked. The Fourth-Form passage was well on the way to be flooded. Water was surging about, swirling into the studies, eddying here, and foaming there. And the gushing torrent from the ingeniously fixed nozzle at the other end of the passage was making a noise like a burst main.

"Better dash outside again, and get in by the back door!" gasped Bob Christine. "We can reach the turncock like that—without getting wet."

"Come on!" yelled Boots. "And don't forget, my sons, that this was meant for us!"

As they came tearing out into the open, loud laughs sounded from the other side of the Triangle. But the Fourth-Formers took no notice; they were far too concerned about their studies. The jape had not been quite as successful as Pitt & Co. would have wished; but they didn't grumble.

"Something must have gone wrong!" said Tommy Watson, in a startled voice. "Did you spot Pycraft just now? Did you see him dashing off to the Head's House?"

"Pycraft got the dose instead of Boots & Co.," said Reggie Pitt, nodding. "Well, accidents will happen, even with the best-regulated japes."

"But he must have seen us, and he's going to tell the Head!" ejaculated Jimmy Potts.

"I wonder if he's wise in doing that?" murmured Pitt thoughtfully. "The Head has a way of upsetting people's calculations."

Reggie was a true prophet; for when Mr. Horace Pycraft reached the Head's House, he

ON THE TRAIL!



By
Edwy Searles Brooks

found Mr. Kingswood in the doorway. The Head, in fact, had just been going indoors, and, hearing strange sounds in the dusk, he had waited.

"Mr. Kingswood! Sir," gasped Mr. Pycraft frantically, "I—I have come to lay a complaint before you! Look at me, sir!"

Mr. Kingswood, towering high above the weedy Mr. Pycraft, looked.

"You appear to be in a bit of a mess, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head, nodding.

"I am soaked to the skin, sir!"

"Yes, I see."

"I wanted you to see me just as I am, Mr. Kingswood!" panted Mr. Pycraft.

"I cannot truthfully say that I am very charmed," said the Head gravely.

"Good heavens, sir, you don't seem to understand!" yelled Mr. Pycraft. "The boys did this to me! The Remove boys!"

"Never mind that—now," said Mr. Kingswood crisply. "Come with me, Mr. Pycraft."

He fairly rushed the agitated Form-master back across the Inner Court; he rushed him

indoors and he whirled him upstairs. He refused to listen to another word until Mr. Pycraft had got out of his wet things, had had a rub down, and was changed.

By this time Mr. Pycraft had cooled down somewhat, but he was no less furious. In the privacy of his bedroom he poured out his tale of woe, and Mr. Kingswood listened appreciatively.

"As I understand it, Mr. Pycraft, the boys had no intention of entrapping you personally," said the Head, at length. "That string was placed there so that the Fourth Form boys would see it, and——"

"But does that make any difference?" broke in Mr. Pycraft excitedly. "Those young rascals of the Remove deliberately set the trap! Surely, sir, you cannot allow such a thing to pass?"

"Mr. Pycraft, I cannot help saying that you asked for that drenching," continued Mr. Kingswood coolly. "You might have known that there was something tricky about that string. Don't you think it would have been more

discreet on your part to have walked in the other direction when you saw the Remove boys stealing into the Modern House ? ”

“ But, good gracious,” ejaculated Mr. Pycraft, staring, “ I suspected they were bent upon some ill-natured, practical joke ! ”

“ I cannot agree with you that it was ill-natured,” said the Head. “ Fixing the hose in that way, and attaching a string, was rather smart.”

“ Sus-sus-smart ! ” stuttered the amazed Form-master.

“ The boys intended no real harm,” proceeded Mr. Kingswood. “ And I will warrant that there is now no trace left of what happened. You must know perfectly well, Mr. Pycraft, that the Fourth Form boys have recently indulged in one or two enterprising japes on the Remove boys. This evening’s incident was merely a harmless reprisal. In other words, the two Forms are full of boisterous, healthy spirits, and I really see no harm in such keen rivalry.”

“ And—and you’re not going to punish these young scamps ? ” asked Mr. Pycraft angrily. “ Do you realise, sir, that you are setting all the discipline of the school at defiance ? ”

“ I realise that it will be far better for your own peace of mind, Mr. Pycraft, if we remain blind to the incident,” replied the Head. “ You must be well aware of the fact that you did not cut a particularly dignified figure. Don’t you think it would be far better to drop the whole matter ? ”

Mr. Horace Pycraft could find no words for an adequate reply.

Mr. Kingswood Looks Round !

“ **W**HILE we’re alone like this, Mr. Pycraft, I should like to take the opportunity of saying a word to you on the subject of your Form,” continued the Head gently. “ Now, you must admit that the Fourth, until recently, has been—well, exceedingly slack.”

Mr. Pycraft bristled.

“ Slack, sir ? ” he repeated, with annoyance. “ Really, I see no reason why you should turn on me——”

“ I am not turning on you,” interrupted Mr. Kingswood. “ I am merely stating a fact. When I came to this school, Mr. Pycraft, the Fourth Form was stagnant. It was drifting along without ambition, without spirit. Certain things have recently happened to change the Fourth Form, and, quite frankly, I am very glad to see that the boys are now so alive. As for this affair of the hose-pipe—well, it was wrong of the Remove boys, perhaps, but we can forgive youngsters for their high spirits. I cannot help feeling, Mr. Pycraft, that your conduct of the Fourth Form has been unsatisfactory. When you find slackness in a Form, it is not difficult to trace the source of that slackness. And a Form-master should regard it as his duty to see that his Form is keen.”

Mr. Pycraft was quite pale. He had come to the Head to complain—and here was the Head advocating that the young scamps should go scot-free ! Worse than that, the Head was giving him—Mr. Pycraft—a lecture !

“ I am sorry, sir,” said Mr. Pycraft stiffly,

“ that you should see fit to blame me for the good behaviour of my boys. Before you came there were none of these wild and outrageous practical jokes. The boys now appear to think that they have licence to go to any extremes.”

Having said that, Mr. Pycraft came to a sudden halt, fearful lest he should have expressed himself too bluntly. But Fighting Jim Kingswood was smiling. Perhaps Mr. Pycraft did not notice the grim light in his eyes behind that smile.

“ We are, I fear, at cross purposes,” said the Head very gently. “ What you regard as one thing, Mr. Pycraft, I regard as another. You say that your boys are well-mannered. I say that they were spineless ! ”

“ Really, sir ! Upon my word ! ”

“ Yet I was quite convinced that the boys needed only a jolt or two to awaken them,” continued Mr. Kingswood. “ They have had those jolts, and now the Fourth Form is every bit as spirited as the Remove. Remember this, Mr. Pycraft, you are the master of the Fourth Form, and I am looking to you to see that the boys retain this new energy. You won’t go far in that direction if you go out of your way to ‘ drop ’ on the boys when they are engaged upon harmless jokes. Try to get that same spirit—try to understand the schoolboy’s own viewpoint. That’s very important, Mr. Pycraft.”

As Mr. Pycraft listened, resenting every word, his manner changed. And he even succeeded in deceiving Mr. Kingswood. His face cleared, and soon there was an eager, interested look on his face.

“ I am very grateful, indeed, to you, sir, for putting things to me so clearly,” said Mr. Pycraft, at length, with oily deference. “ I must confess that I had not looked at things in quite this same light earlier. I will profit by your generous counsel, you may be sure. I will do my utmost to get, as you say, the schoolboy’s own viewpoint.”

“ Well, that’s fine ! ” said the Head, with real pleasure. “ That’s splendid, Mr. Pycraft. Now that we understand one another so well, I will leave you to complete your dressing.” And, with a genial nod, Mr. Kingswood departed.

As soon as Mr. Pycraft was alone, however, his expression changed. A scowl came into his face, and his eyes glowered with resentment.

“ So you think you can come here and lecture me ! ” he muttered viciously. “ By Heaven ! You may be the Headmaster of this great school, and I a mere nobody—an insignificant under-master—but before I have done with you, Kingswood, I’ll humble you into the dust ! ”

Fighting Jim Kingswood had made many friends in St. Frank’s—but this evening he had made a bitter enemy.

“ H’m ! Most interesting,” murmured Mr. Kingswood musingly.

It was the next morning, and the Head was seated at his breakfast-table with the newspaper propped against the cruet. And having read a certain item of news, he decided to stroll to the Ancient House to have a casual look round.

He found Handforth & Co. sunning them-

selves on the steps, and Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, of the West House, were standing near by, chatting with Vivian Travers and Sir Jimmy Potts. The Removites respectfully doffed their caps as the Head approached.

"Morning, boys—glorious weather," said Mr. Kingswood crisply. "You'll forgive my ignorance, I am sure, but I am still comparatively new to the school. You have, I think, a redoubtable boxer in the school?"

"You've come to the wrong side of the Triangle, sir, I'm afraid," said Reggie Pitt sadly. "We'd like to claim the best Junior boxer as our very own, but, by some silly mistake, the poor chap got into the Fourth."

"Indeed!" said Fighting Jim. "But I understood that Glenthorne was a Remove boy?"

"Glenthorne, sir?" repeated all the juniors, in one breath.

"Isn't he the champion boxer of the Junior School?"

"Ha, ha, ha!—ahem!"

"Archie Glenthorne isn't your man, sir," explained Travers. "Lawrence, of the Fourth, is the Big Noise when it comes to boxing."

The headmaster looked round wonderingly.

"You surprise me," he said, with deliberate slowness. "You are all Remove boys, and you calmly tell me that Lawrence, of the Fourth, is the champion boxer of the Junior School!"

"But, wait a minute, sir," said Reggie quickly. "There's an exception to every rule, you know—and Lawrence is the Fourth's exception. You don't know him—you haven't

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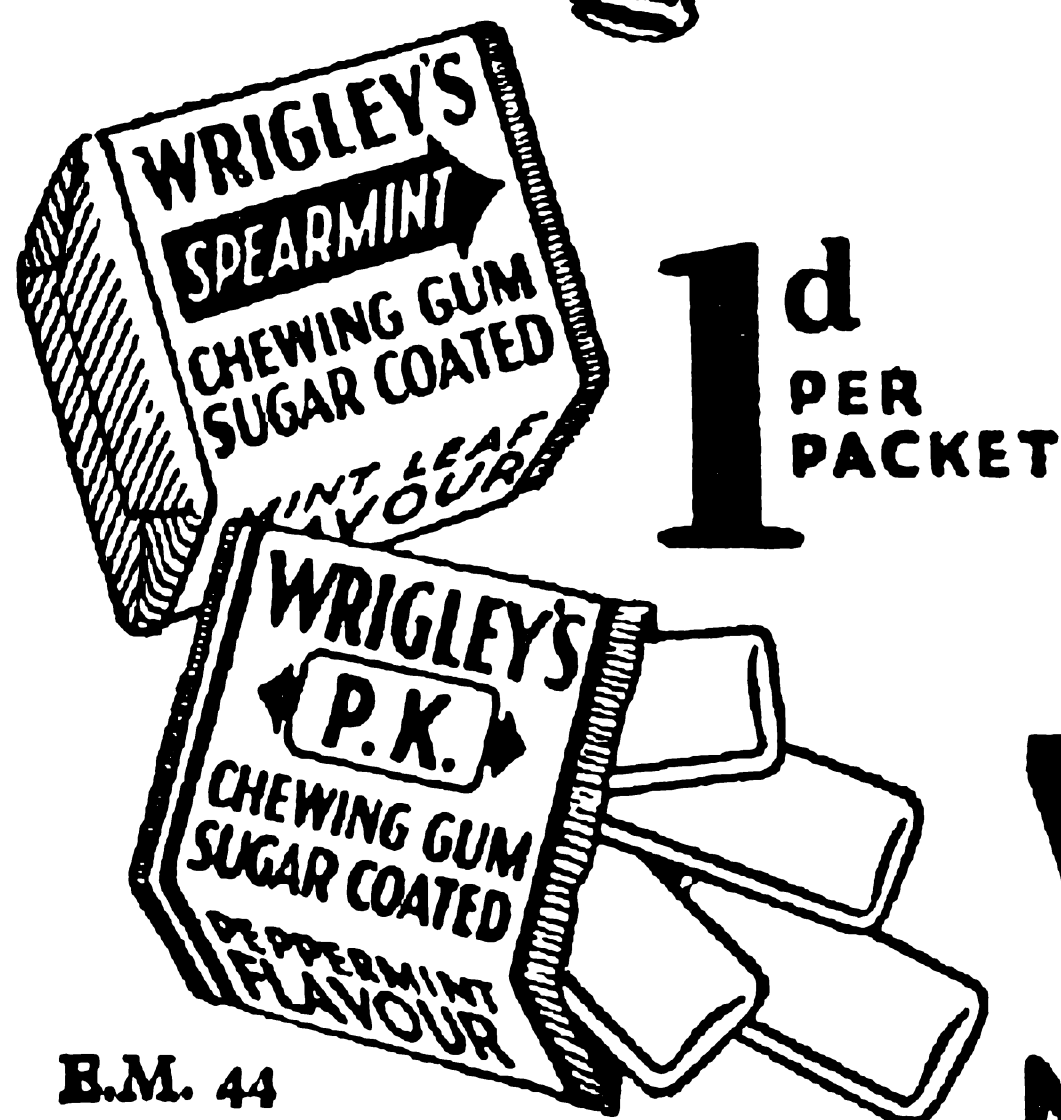
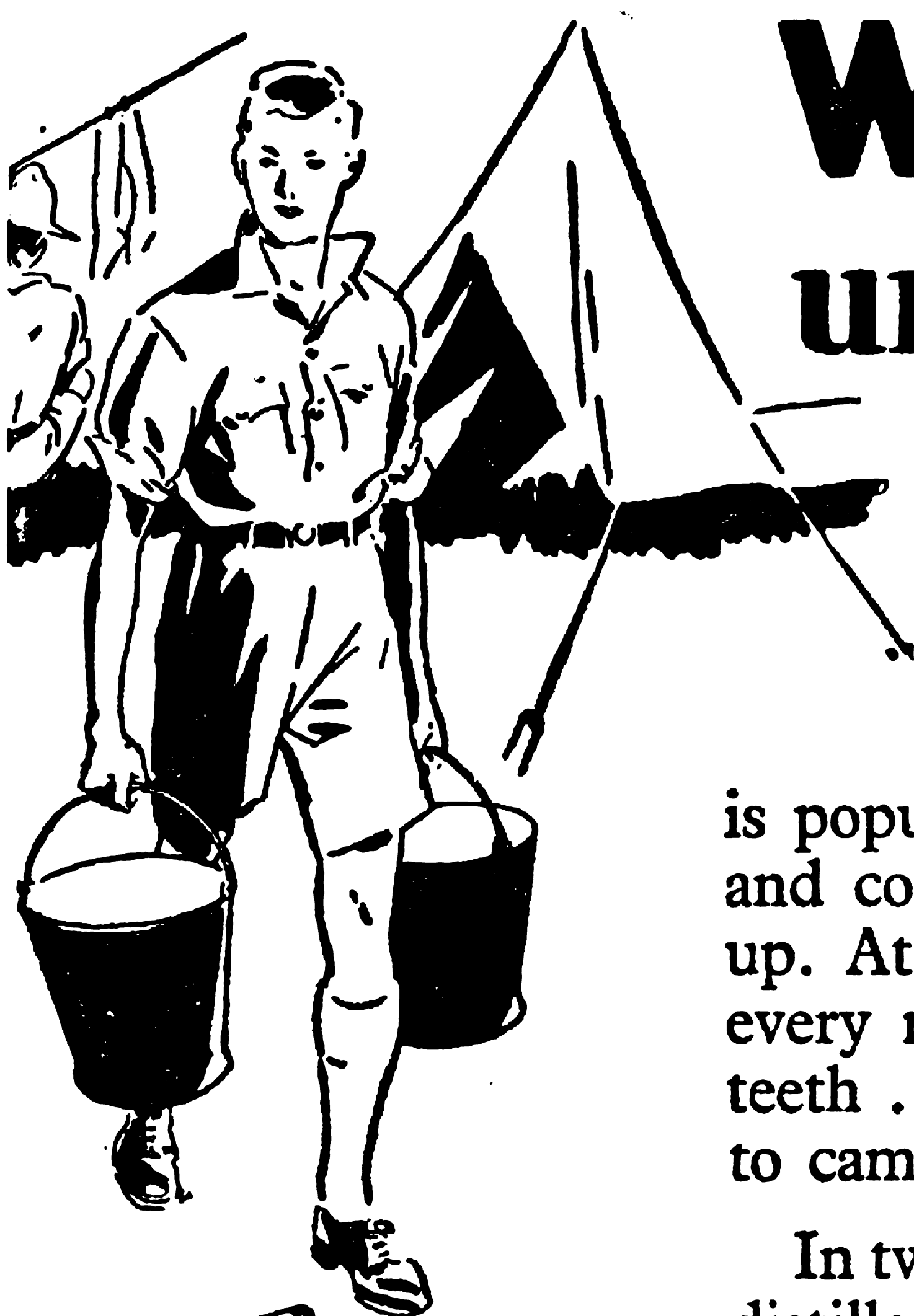
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seen him. He's a genius. He's beaten men twice his age—professionals."

"And you boys are content to admit that you can't produce a boxer to wrest the honours from him?"

"No, sir, we don't admit that," said Reggie comfortably. "But it's a fact that Lawrence is as hot as mustard."

"Well, about this boy, Glenthorne," said the Head, going off at a tangent. "What's wrong with him? Why did you laugh so much when I mentioned his name?"

"Archie's all right, sir—one of the best—but he's not very energetic," said Tommy Watson, who had joined the group. "He's the champion slacker of the Remove."

"It's hard work trying to put pep into Archie."

"Where is he now?"

"In his study, I expect, sir, having his usual forty winks before lessons."

"So he takes a nap before lessons, does he?" said Mr. Kingswood, his voice becoming grim. "Which is Glenthorne's study?"

"Study E, sir, in this House," said Watson. "But, I say, I hope you won't drop on him. We hadn't any idea of sneaking—"

"That's all right. I understand," said the Head, striding up the steps.

He went straight to Study E, opened the door, and found the one and only Archibald Winston Derek Glenthorne sprawling full length on the lounge, indulging in what Archie himself would have described as a spot of the dreamless.

The Head advanced and took a closer look.

"Oh!" said the Head thoughtfully. "Oh!"

His eyes narrowed for a moment, and then, with unexpected abruptness he swung on his heel and strode away.

An Important Announcement!

IN the privacy of his study, Mr. Kingswood again picked up the newspaper. The report which had particularly interested him was an account of an amateur boxing championship match—which had been won by Captain Bertram Glenthorne, D.S.O., the famous airman.

"And that slacking boy in the Remove, is the brother of this man," muttered the Head. "I cannot believe that young Glenthorne is wholly lost—he comes of a fine fighting breed."

Mr. Kingswood was intrigued. He had a great admiration for Archie's elder brothers. They were both fine sportsmen; they had flown the Atlantic, they had won great honours at football, boxing, polo, and other sports. It was incredible that Archie should be a useless waster. Somewhere within him, lying dormant, was that same fighting spirit.

"Here is a task after my own heart," murmured the Head happily.

During the day he made the startling discovery that Archie, of all boys in the school, boasted of a personal servant. Archie had a valet! And Phipps, the imperturbable, was always rallying round with cushions, and cups of tea, and so forth.

"No wonder the boy is indolent!" muttered the Head grimly.

"An interesting little problem," Mr. Kingswood told himself. "This youngster is made of the right stuff. I am convinced of it. But he has allowed himself to run to seed—and the other boys are so accustomed to seeing it that they now take no notice."

Next day, the Junior School was agog with a most sensational notice which had suddenly appeared on the boards of the various Houses.

It was headed "The Kingswood Belt," and it announced that, in order to encourage boxing in the Junior School, a new contest was to be organised. There would be a belt for the winner, to be known as the Kingswood Belt, and the boys of the Remove and Fourth were invited to enter. It was suggested that the two Forms should go in for a series of eliminating contests, the final battle for the honours to be between the champion Removite and the champion Fourth Former.

The effect upon the two Forms was immediate—and vastly different.

Utter consternation spread throughout the Remove—whilst the Fourth chuckled with glee.

"Lawrence is our man, of course," said Buster Boots happily. "This is where we can put it across the Remove properly, my sons!"

"Rather!" said Bob Christine. "There isn't a man in the Remove who can hold a candle to you, Lawrence."

Ernest Lawrence, of Study No. 2, was a modest youngster, but he was confident, too.

"I think I shall be able to pull it off for the Fourth," he said. "But I shall have to get into training straight away. I'm a bit stale these days."

"You can lick any of those Remove chaps just as you are—without any training at all," said Boots confidently. "Who is there over there, anyhow? Handy's no good. A first-class slogger, of course, but he can't box. Pitt's the best man they have, and he can't hold a candle to you."

And over in the Remove quarters, the juniors were gloomy.

"No good blinding ourselves to the truth, unhappy wretches that we are!" said Reggie Pitt dolefully. "The Belt is a cert for the Fourth. We can't hope to find a man who can lick Lawrence."

"Why not?" demanded Handforth aggressively. "I'll fight Lawrence if you like—and I'll lick him, too!"

"I admire your optimism, Handy, old chap—but don't fool yourself," replied Reggie. "You wouldn't last three rounds!"

"After what's happened, this is pretty awful!" said Tommy Watson. "I mean, just imagine how the Fourth will crow!"

"Begad! Like a lot of proud turkey-cocks," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head.

"Turkey-cocks don't crow—they gobble!" said Tommy.

"Remember how the Head was asking us about boxing?" said Reggie. "Cause and effect, my children! It was that chat with us which put this idea into his head—and now, unless we're jolly careful, the Fourth will seize this chance and claim itself as top Form of the Junior School. The dazzling light of the Remove is losing some of its candle-power!"

"That's no way to talk!" growled Handforth, glaring round. "What are we—weaklings? We're the Remove! We're going to win the Kingswood Belt for ourselves—and we're going to find a man who can outbox Lawrence!"

Reggie Pitt looked at him with admiration.

"Handy, I stand reprov'd!" he said crisply. "I'm the Remove skipper, and I ought to be jolly well ashamed of myself! Lads all, listen! There's got to be no doubt about this business—get that into your heads, lock it up, and bolt it in! We'll find a man who can do the trick—we'll show the Fourth, once and for all, that we're top dogs!"

"That's the spirit!" said Travers heartily. "Good old Handy! He talks a lot, but now and again real words of wisdom mingle with his usual words of rot!"

Handforth, of course, insisted upon getting into action at once. Patience was not one of his virtues.

"I'm not boasting, but you fellows had better thoroughly understand, at once, that I'm going to win the Kingswood Belt for the Remove!" he said calmly. "Yes, you can grin! You can say that I'm only a slogger and a fighter, but I can box, too! And I'm going into training straight away!"

A Mysterious Message!

HANDFORTH went on the run by himself; and before he had been out half an hour, he was rather sorry for himself. He even admitted—grudgingly—that it might have been more sensible to have waited until the morrow.

The evening was dull and chilly and rainy. Very few people were about. The landscape, usually looking so fair and bright at this time of the year, was now drab and forlorn.

As Handforth trotted along one of the by-lanes, the trees on either side dripped miserably. The rain, setting in steadily, was driving down coldly. However, if patience was not one of Handforth's virtues, doggedness was. Other people sometimes called it pig-headed obstinacy. He had made up his mind to run round on a previously settled circuit, and wild horses would not have dragged him from his purpose.

In fact, Handforth was not half so certain now that he would be able to whack Ernest Lawrence. No doubt the rain depressed him. And after the first mile or two he felt fagged. His legs ached, his wind was failing.

"By George! It's about time I went into training!" he muttered. "I'm in an awful condition!"

And then he suddenly forgot Lawrence, he forgot his own valiant intentions, he forgot the rain and his own misery. For, reaching a rising knoll of ground, he happened to see a figure crossing a little clearing in a wooded hollow. There could be no mistaking it. Mr. Kingswood!

"Off on another of his mysterious jaunts!" muttered Handforth, his eyes glowing. "By George! I'm glad I came out! He doesn't dream that there's anybody else walking about on a wet evening like this—and it's a chance for me to do a bit of 'tailing'!"

It was perfectly true that the energetic headmaster of St. Frank's had no notion that his movements were observed. He plunged into a belt of woodland without once glancing behind him. And Handforth, breaking into a run, followed.

He was startled again, after passing through the trees, to see a half-demolished, tumble-down cottage just beyond. Then he spotted the Head as he walked towards the derelict building. Handforth took cover behind an old garden fence as Mr. Kingswood entered the crazy doorway and waited expectantly. But nothing happened.

The junior was about to approach closer, then he dodged back. For Mr. Kingswood emerged from the crazy doorway. He plunged through a bed of nettles, vaulted over a low hedge, and went off towards a neighbouring lane—a mere farm track. Handforth, watching, waited until all sound of Mr. Kingswood had died away.

For the amateur detective of the Remove was in doubt. He did not know whether to follow Mr. Kingswood, or to explore the cottage. Finally, he decided upon the latter course. It was clear that Mr. Kingswood had come to the cottage with some object. Perhaps it was a rendezvous.

Yet he could not have met with any of his confederates there, for he had not been under that leaky roof for a sufficient length of time. Handforth still clung to the sensational theory that Mr. Kingswood was somehow mixed up with a desperate gang.

Stealing into the cottage, he looked about him cautiously. And his eyes opened wide as he saw, in the very middle of the tumble-down room, an old upturned box. And on this box stood a small metal dispatch case!

"My only sainted aunt!" breathed Handforth, thrilled.

He recalled that other dispatch case he had seen, the one Mr. Kingswood had buried in the cave on Bannington Moor. And at that time Handforth had evolved the startling theory that the Head had several such boxes, hidden in various parts of the countryside.

Handforth approached the metal box, and cautiously he raised the lid. And within he saw a sheet of paper, with a torn edge—a page wrenched from a notebook. There were pencilled words upon it.

"All right—will come again late to-night—and shall expect to find the stuff here.—J. K."

Handforth read those words with bated breath. It was true, then! Mr. Kingswood was engaged in some unlawful enterprise—and this old cottage was an agreed-upon meeting place.

Carefully, Handforth closed the dispatch case, and once again he went out into the rain and trotted straight back towards the school.

"To-night!" he muttered tensely. "All right! I shall be out to-night, too—and I'll get in some hot detective work!"

(Handy seems to have struck a baffling mystery. What is the motive of the Head's nocturnal visits? Make sure you read the next grand chapters of this popular story. Order your copy now!)

The PRISONER OF THE TEMPLE!

(Continued from page 37)

order, whose commands were brought to her by Chal Shan. She thought it was a religious matter, but then Chal Shan told Nuān he meant to take me to the temple at Changsha, to torture me in the presence of my husband in order to force him to speak the secrets they wished to learn. Then Nuān rebelled against such wickedness and, while hiding me in the room under the roof, made it "appear," by smashing a door, that I had escaped. But from the first Chal Shan suspected her. Poor Nuān!"

That same evening the travellers started back for the seaport and arrived there in safety.

I was about a month later that Nelson Lee had the pleasure of going down again to Peter Hemmage's house, and proving to the old gentleman that Mrs. Hemmage's desire to show someone else that mysterious box and message had been perfectly justified.

By that time Toigan, who had had all he desired of life in Manchuria, had been restored to the home of his parents in Burma, and had vowed never to leave their warm shores again.

Bernard Steele had explained how the message came to be sent. He had known that Toigan was at the temple, having been in the Changsha Valley on a previous occasion, when he had ruined the hopes of

Chan Lo, by preventing a conspiracy that would have brought bloodshed and chaos to Manchuria. On that occasion Chan Lo had vowed vengeance, and, knowing the power of the old priest, Steele had made his plans accordingly, asking Toigan, should he know of any reason, if he knew that Steele was in danger, that he should take the news to the European superintendent at the railway station.

In the meantime, before he set out for Russia, Steele gave this superintendent his seal and the carved box, asking him that if ever Toigan delivered a message—even if he couldn't understand it—he was to send the seal, the message, and the box to the address which he wrote down—the address of Mr. Peter Hemmage, in England. In that way he guessed that his employers, and the Foreign Office would soon find out what had become of him.

Even then Bernard Steele himself admitted it was very doubtful if he would ever have got away from the Temple of the Brotherhood of Liao Yang had it not been for the prompt and decisive action of Nelson Lee and his two plucky companions.

THE END.

"THE CASE OF THE KING'S SPY!"
is the title of next Wednesday's thrill-packed long complete yarn of Nelson Lee. Don't miss it—it's a winner all the way!

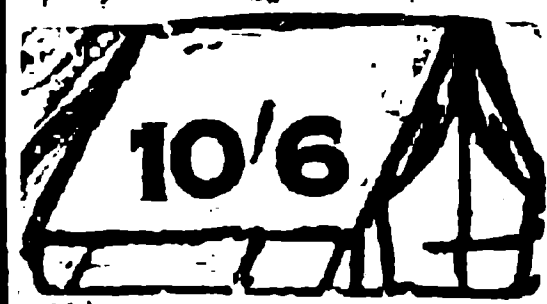
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