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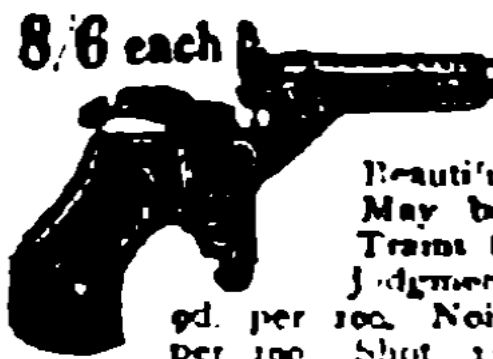
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A MYSTERY OF VENICE

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and The Black Wolf.

CHAPTER I.

Venice the Lovely—Night on the Grand Canal—The Face in the Gondola

“IF you will take my advice, sir, you will guard it with the greatest care. Were it mine, I would lock it away so securely, not even bolts and bars would be its only safeguard. Even then I would live in constant fear that it would be stolen. It is priceless—it is a connecting-link with a past which is older even than mythology. It is the past in which mythology had its birth.”

Two men sat on a small balcony overlooking the Grand Canal in Venice. One of them, the speaker, held out his hand as he completed his admonition, and for a moment the light which came through the room behind them fell upon something which glittered balefully.

Then, as the other took it and withdrew it from the penumbra of light, it melted away into the darkness of the Venetian night. There was the snap of a metal catch, as he who held the thing which had excited his companion's remarks, put it into a leather case and secured it—after that, a silence lasting for a minute or more.

The balcony was one which served a private suite in the big Hotel de Paris on the Grand Canal. In days gone by, when Venice had risen proudly as mistress of the seas, and when her art was at once the inspiration and envy of Europe, the hotel had been a palace of the nobility.

Its sheer, discoloured and somewhat dilapidated walls rose straight from the dark waters of the Grand Canal, the severity of their lines mitigated to a certain degree by the little balconies which stuck out all over it, as though placed there haphazard by the long-dead hand which had designed them.

Across the canal, and to right and left of them, running close to the main artery of the city, were other ancient and dilapidated buildings, which reared themselves above the water, even as they had done in those days when the ships of Venice swept the seas, when Lombardy and the mountainous mainland came under the sway of the lagoon city, when Genoa had not yet dared to raise her head in defiant rivalry of the Queen of the Adriatic, when the Palace of the Doges was the palace of the doges, and when the lion-mouth still received the mysterious communications from the people denouncing to the famous Council of Ten those whom it was desired to stab.

Gloomy and forbidding they had been then, and not even the light laughter of the modern tourist had changed the frown of past taciturnity.

The Rialto might seem with the costumes of the moderns—the gondolas of pleasure might pass along those same canals whence the great ships had once proudly sailed laden with their rich cargoes of silks, spices and jewels from every port in the known world, but the slumbering spirit of the buildings was steeped in the past; was dreaming of the golden days which were gone.

It was still early in the evening. Dinner in the hotel was over, only a few laggards still remaining in the great room which had once been the banqueting hall of princes.

The two men who sat on the small balcony overlooking the Grand Canal had dined together—had dined together because, both being globe-trotters, they had affinity of interests and pleasures. One—who had just been speaking—was British, and while probably better known as Nelson Lee, the great British criminologist, he at the same time held no mean position in the world of science.

The other one easily judged to be an American, for, although his voice and words were those of the cultured man, still there was the accent which proclaimed him as of the great republic across the Atlantic.

On first sight one would have thought this an oddly contrasted pair. Lee, tall and almost gaunt, with the face of a thinker and an ascetic; Gilmore—Peter Gilmore, the famous American explorer and archaeologist—short, stout and rubicund of countenance.

Yet, Lee knew, and many others who really counted knew, that no keener investigator of the remains of the past lived than the same Peter Gilmore, whom one might have taken for a prosperous American business man.

They had sauntered to the balcony which adjoined Lee's private suite, and there the coffee and liqueurs had been brought to them. While they had sipped the fragrant "bottled sunshine," as Lee termed the excellent old cognac, they had gazed idly down upon the black waters of the canal which flowed sluggishly beneath them.

From somewhere in the hotel the strains of the dinner orchestra still reached them, while far, far up the canal they caught the faint tinkle of a guitar, interspersed with the clear baritone of a gondolier singing that soft and appealing love song which is peculiarly suited to the gondoliers and to the City of Canals.

Now and then a laughing, chattering, singing party went past in a gaily-bedecked gondola, and as the blazing light from the water steps of the hotel fell upon their faces, they would be revealed for one brief moment to the watchers on the little balcony above.

Then Peter Gilmore had taken something from his pocket, which he had passed across to Lee.

"What do you think of it?" he had asked, and with the interest of the collector, Nelson Lee had examined it.

To his inquiry there had followed a short bitten-off tale of the great Yucatan country in Mexico, of steaming, sweating jungles and black, hidden streams of slimy morass, and slimier animals of tortuous rivers, and sheer mountains of jungle, with all the sodden, steaming volutes which rise from the heavy mulch of a jungle-ridden country.

Then there had followed a leap into the past. No man living knew more about the ancient civilisation of Mexico than did Peter Gilmore. He it was who had connected up the arts and culture of the Aztecs with the earlier Mayan races, and from that dead-and-gone race he had followed back even to the time when the Incas and the peoples of the western side of America had had traffic with still earlier races, which he claimed had had their home on the lost continent of the Pacific.

So far Peter Gilmore had held little faith in the supposed existence of a continent in the Atlantic. He had been of the school which put down the fabled Atlantis to mythology, but now, while he leaned back in his chair smoking, Nelson Lee listened to one of the most interesting dissertations it had ever been his good fortune to hear.

"I have found in Yucatan that which has never been found before," said Peter Gilmore, in conclusion. "I have uncovered from the jungle which has buried it for countless centuries, the remains of a race which lived and died before the ancient Malays had even come to the shores of America.

"It must go back to a period of time far earlier than the earliest records of Egypt. Yet, in the terraced mounds and the frescoed temples which I have come upon, I have found a strange affinity between their form of architecture and that of Ancient Egypt.

"For instance, I have come upon a great stone sphinx there, but it is not the sphinx of Egypt which, as you know, is the body of a lion with the head of a human. It has the head of a woman, but its body is the body of a serpent. It is cut from the solid rock, and the stony scales of its long, twisting body, are a triumph of art and beauty.

"It is gigantic—longer than a Dreadnought—and the head stands sixty feet above the ground. It must have been a marvellous race which carved that snake sphinx, a race whose work has lived throughout the ages, hidden, it is true, by a jungle, but still, it has lived.

"I shall return to Yucatan to prosecute my investigations, and I feel sure that I shall yet uncover even more startling things. But in the small priests' temple which I discovered in the body of the sphinx, I came upon things which gave me to think, which have caused me to come to Europe.

"To you, Lee, I propose telling the secret. So far, no other person knows it, but I want your advice."

"I assure you I consider it a great honour to be the recipient of your confidence in this matter," said Lee, quietly. "Peculiarly enough, it happens to touch on something in which I am at present more than ordinarily interested. But pray go on, Mr. Gilmore."

The American lit a fresh cigar, then, settling in his seat, he tapped the pocket which held the article he had been exhibiting to Lee.

"You saw that," he said in a low tone. "Well, Lee, what did you think it was?"

"I took it for some sort of a crystal cover," replied Lee.

"And you did right," responded Gilmore. "Let me tell you something. In the temple which I discovered in the body of the snake sphinx, I found a small holy of holies. This room was set off the main temples, and was reached by a small sloping passage, along which one had to creep on hands and knees. When we came to it it was filled with dirt and snakes, but after a good deal of labour we cleared the stuff away, and with a couple of Indians to accompany me, I made the journey through the tunnel. I found what I expected to find—a holy of holies.

"The scheme was not unlike some of the plans adopted in the old monuments of Egypt, although the form of architecture was by no means contemporaneous with that period of time. In this small holy of holies I came upon the skeletons of four men. Heaven alone know how long they had been dead—I place it at not less than twenty thousand years.

"They lay on the floor at the foot of a small altar and, judging from the way in which the skeletons lay, I should say that they had been confined there while at their priestly duties.

"The probabilities are that there was a severe earthquake which closed up the means of egress, and when they discovered that they must die, they knelt before the altar and awaited death with fortitude. The altar itself was hewn from solid rock which had been polished to a nicety.

"On it were carved a great variety of hieroglyphics which, when I examined them closely, I found to be in ordered array, and set about the carving of a great coiled snake. On the face of the altar itself there stood a small ivory shield, on which reposed this very jewelled cover which I have shown you to-night.

"You have seen it—you have seen the great diamond which is set in the centre. That stone is no imitation, but one of the finest gems ever dragged by man from the bowels of the earth, and its intrinsic value alone runs into thousands.

"Now, then; to proceed. On the face of the altar, beneath the ivory shield on which this crystal lid reposed, there was carved something which at first puzzled

me. It was only after I had scrutinised it carefully that I finally deciphered it. Then I saw that it was intended to represent a great vase. The base of it was triple terraced, while the stem was long and slender. The bowl of the vase was of a most graceful shape, and the lid, which had been carved, was a representation of the one you yourself have seen to-night.

"I had found the cover which was represented there, but I had found no vase. Yet, from the carving itself, I knew there must have been a vase. Then I began to think. I knew that glass-making had only been discovered by the moderns, or what we ourselves term the ancients of Syria. Yet here was a piece of crystal which was finer than anything which had ever been made during the period of time of which we have any historical records.

"This very city in which we are to-night—Venice—turned out during the fifteenth century the finest examples of glass, of which there are still some fine specimens extant, but compared to this bit I have in my pocket, they are but dross.

"I pondered. I re-examined the carving. I saw winding up the stem the representation of a snake such as was carved on the front of the altar. Its mouth was at the very lip of the bowl of the vase. I knew then that the snake and the vase must be some sacred symbol of a dead-and-gone race of which we had not even heard vague rumours.

"It was not Aztecs; it was not Mayan. I went over the hieroglyphics very carefully. While you know that we have so far found it impossible to solve the glyphs of the Aztecs and the Mayans, we have still managed to trace a certain vague similarity between them and the glyphs of old Egypt, Crete, and even China.

"Yet in these glyphs which I discovered in the temple in the snake sphinx, I found a surprising similarity to some of the crude drawings which have at different times been found on the Azores Islands in the Atlantic. That they were of a much earlier date than the oldest of the Egyptian glyphs, I am certain."

"Now I come to the tale which I read in the frieze which ran round the top part of the wall in that holy of holies.

"It was difficult to decipher, but I applied all the known rules, and in the absence of any Rosetta stone which enabled us to read the glyphs of old Egypt, I had to make my own basis on which to work. But, firstly, I came to what I set down as the representation of ships.

"They were peculiarly formed, seeming to have both oars and sails, and in every case two of them were bound together, which led me to think that in the days of that lost civilisation, the mariners sailed in pairs as a safeguard.

"There was a long zig-zag line which I put down to represent land, and on either side of this, fine, wavy lines, which I judged to represent the sea. At any rate, the ships were on these lines. Now, taking the position of the temple, I found that the head of the serpent faced east. The temple and holy of holies both faced in the same direction, and, of course, the altar did so as well.

"That made the position of the frieze on the wall easier to judge, for that it had been carved with the points of the compass in mind was evident. On the left of the line, which I took to represent the land, the ships were heading due east, and on the right they were heading due west.

"Then followed a ribbon of carved frieze which seemed to tell a tale of some sort. I saw the zig-zag line once more, then it was effaced, and only the wavy lines of water were left. After that there appeared a new zig-zag line with trees near it.

"I put that down as new land, and when some of the ships were seen in the next picture close against the line, I took it to mean the landing of the crews after a long voyage of sorts.

"Then followed several carvings which I could not even guess at, and then the temple itself was represented with the snake sphinx in perfect outline. After that

followed pictures of men carrying sticks which I took to be spears. There were battles represented, then came pictures of fetes and victories.

"It was a pictured history of some peoples from the earliest thing they knew of their race, and in a way I could follow it.

"Now I put a good deal of thought on that, and although it seems that I have had to withdraw from a position I took up some time ago—I mean that I never believed in the existence of the continent of Atlantis—I have formed a theory which I am working on.

"It may be all wrong, but something else which I discovered made me go ahead with it. I found when I searched more closely, that in the bow of one of the ships which were sailing east, there was carved a representation of the same urn which was carved on the altar. But it had no lid.

"On looking still more carefully, I saw that on one of the ships which were sailing west, there was carved the representation of the lid, but not of the vase. What could such a thing mean? I will tell you the theory I have formed.

"I have thought the zig-zag line of land might be intended to represent the ancient continent of Atlantis, which I now feel certain did exist in the Atlantic. Then I have gone a step further. Supposing the peoples of ancient Atlantis received warning by earthquakes, and such-like natural phenomena, that the land on which they lived might be destroyed. They would take council. Some might elect to go east, some west. They were a seafaring people, that we know from the ships which they carved.

"It is then possible that they, as a cultured race of Atlantis, had colonies in Mexico, and also in Africa. Some might elect to go to Africa, some to Mexico. Then would come the question of their sacred belongings. That all the old races were priest-ridden we know. What would they do? They might agree to divide them. That is what I think. From the fact that this urn is carved on the altar, it is certain that it was the most sacred symbol of the race.

"In my opinion it was divided, the urn itself being taken east by those who sailed to Africa, and the lid by those who went to Mexico. In that case, it is always possible that the urn may have been carried on intact in some ancient colony in Africa by those who went there.

"Is that land still above the ocean? Is it possible that in some ancient ruins we might come upon this sacred urn, and at last bring lid and urn together again? I have come to Europe to try to probe that mystery, Mr. Lee.

"I have made exhaustive inquiries in Paris and London. And will you believe me, I have in one or two instances come upon rumours—of the vaguest nature, it is true—but still rumours of a mysterious crystal urn which was known and spoken of by the ancient priests of Egypt.

"I have also come upon tales of a mysterious vase which exercised the rulers of old. It is mentioned in connection with Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Caesar Augustus, and even Hannibal. It seems to have been endowed with magic powers, and all attempts to find it seem to have met with disaster.

"I found further that it is spoken of in connection with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba is supposed to have actually possessed it among her other great treasures. Yet we know that the peoples of that time could not have made such a crystal.

"From Paris my inquiries led me here to Venice, for I came upon definite rumours that Lucrezia Borgia, the royal poisoner of hated memory, had actually come upon the urn, which in some way had fallen into the hands of the Pope, who was also her father—Rodrigo de Borgia. That Lucrezia Borgia possessed some piece of mysterious crystal which she prized above everything, is certain.

"But in an old Italian manuscript which I came upon in Paris, and which is written in cipher, I came upon another reference to the mysterious crystal of Lucrezia Borgia.

"It claimed that on this crystal which she possessed there was written in strange symbols many things, which she, the poison woman, had deciphered. It even said that from the crystal she got the rules for making the potent and baffling poisons which she used on her victims. Be that as it may, there was certainly a reference as you see.

"Now the crystal referred to may have been but the work of a Venetian glass-maker, but it seemed peculiar, as I think you will agree with me. Since then, there seems to be no reference at all to this vase, but if that Borgia crystal should be the ancient one spoken of by the priests of Egypt, what—what would it mean?

"I have come on here to Venice to make a definite attempt to trace some more documents relating to Lucrezia Borgia. If one could but come upon some of her own papers, what might they not tell one?

"Later on I shall go back to Mexico to study the mysterious glyphs in the old temple of the snake sphinx, but for the present I shall devote my whole time to a search for the Borgia papers."

Through all the talk Nelson Lee had sat listening tensely. How it impressed him Peter Gilmore could not tell, for Lee's face was in the shadow, and the glow from his cigar failed to light up his features to any appreciable extent.

"To say that you astound me would be to put it mildly," said Lee, after a few minutes' silence. "It seems—it seems more than the most wonderful coincidence that I should meet you here at the Hotel de Paris in Venice, for I, too, have come to the city of canals on a mysterious mission. You have given me your confidence, Mr. Gilmore. I will give you mine.

"You have related to me the story you hypothetically constructed from the frieze in the temple of the snake sphinx. It shows a remarkable capacity for applying the rules which we learned from the Rosetta stone of Egypt. For"—and here Nelson Lee bent forward until his lips were but a few inches from the other—"for, Mr. Gilmore, I can tell you that your theory is founded on what really happened."

"What do you mean?" gasped the other with a sharp intake of breath. "What do you mean, Lee? Are you joking? Man, do you understand what this means to me? Do you know that I have already spent a fortune on it?"

Lee nodded, and laid one hand on the rail of the little balcony.

Down the canal at that moment there came a large gondola which loomed up mysterious and graceful beneath them. Just as Lee was about to speak again, a voice broke out—a clear, young voice which rose and fell in sweet, clear cadence. It was the voice of a boy—a boy whom Lee could imagine as working in the sunny vineyards of Lombardy, singing his way through the vines as he clipped and clipped at the hanging fruit.

Had he been discovered, as so many are discovered in sunny Italy? Had he been brought to Italy to be trained by some maestro? Or was he but in the city of canals for a holiday. In the voice Lee knew there was a fortune.

Now it trailed away in the last sweet bars of the gondoliers' song, then, as the gondola drew still nearer, it broke out in the joyous strains of "Funiculi," and as the chorus was reached, a medley of voices joined in. Then the gondola drew abreast of the water-steps of the hotel, and as the light from the landing shone across the gondola, Nelson Lee caught a glimpse of the face of the singer.

It was dark and young and full of the beauty of the sunny vineyards. It was the face of a boy—a lad.

Then something drew Lee's eyes to a white face which stood forth from the shadow of the silken hangings of the gondola. He looked, and in that moment his fingers grasped the edge of the balcony in a tense grip. The next moment the gondola passed on, but not before Lee had recognised the face which was gazing at the boy in rapt attention. It was the Black Wolf—Mademoiselle Miton.

CHAPTER II.

In the Wake of the Gondola—The Palazzo Alino—What the Old Curiosity Dealer Told.

NELSON LEE turned back from his startled contemplation of the gondola which had just drifted on into the darkness, and laid a hand on the arm of his companion.

"There is much that I would say to you," he whispered, "but now is not the time. I, too, have come to Venice to seek. Our separate quests have led us to the same crossroads. If you would follow up your desire to learn, then come with me. Ask no questions, for there is not time to enlighten you. We must hurry."

In a moment the American was on his feet.

"Something you saw beneath has given you a lead," he remarked, as he tossed his cigar over the balcony. "Lead on, Lee. I am willing to follow and ask nothing until you are ready to tell me."

Lee led the way through the long, open window into the sitting-room of his suite. Taking up a long tweed overcoat and cap he made a motion for Gilmore to follow. The American hurried to his room for coat and cap, while Lee continued his way below.

On the landing he found the boatman, and there from one of the gondolas moored to the hotel steps, he chose a small slim-looking craft, the gondolier of which was young and lithe. He had just stepped over the side when Gilmore appeared. Even yet they could hear the distant sound of the young voice which was singing the "Funiculi," and with a gesture to the gondolier, Lee ordered him curtly to follow the voice.

The man was just about to pole off when a figure rushed out of the hotel and hurried towards the gondola. It was already over a yard from the steps when the figure took the gap at a leap, landing close to Lee.

"Hallo, Nipper," he remarked, as the lad straightened up. "I didn't know you had returned."

"Just got back, guy'nor," panted Nipper. "You had left the dining-room when I went in for dinner. I just finished. Heard you were going out in a gondola, and made a run for it. I was just in time."

Lee nodded.

"Well, settle yourself, my lad," responded Lee. "This is Mr. Gilmore, Nipper. We are going on a little expedition, and it is just as well you returned in time. You might yet be useful."

Nipper shook hands with the American, and settled himself close to Lee.

The gondolier was standing on his "poppa" in the stern, working with wide, graceful sweeps of his single oar, and they were now moving along the canal at a good pace. Once they drove into a blaze of light, where on a wide foot promenade the Venetians were taking an airing.

From the middle of the embankment came the strains of a band, and then, after passing beneath a bridge, they came to the wide piazza where stands St. Marks, one of the finest bits of architecture extant.

It was wrapped in night now, and through the gloom they could not make out the details of the magnificent mosaic work which surmounts the door, but still they could distinguish the noble proportions of the four great bronze horses which are mounted above, and which, as it happens, are the only horses ever seen in Venice.

The church itself towered up into the night, then they went on into the darkness again. Away ahead of them still sounded the voice of the singer, but now, even as they turned into a branching canal, it became drowned by the gay chorus of another party, and they were compelled to trust to the acuteness of their gondolier to follow it.

Sitting in the "feizo" or cabin of the gondola, Nelson Lee smoked in silence. He was thinking over the strange story which Peter Gilmore, the American archaeologist, had just told him. He was thinking, too, of the mystery of the sacred urn of the old priests of lost Atlantis—the same sacred urn which had formed the basis for one of the most puzzling cases of his career.

He knew that such an urn did exist. He knew that some mysterious person from Morocco had set out to get possession. He knew, too, that poor Dr. Challoner, the great scientist, had spent twenty years in Morocco, searching out for the secret of lost Atlantis. The doctor had lost his life through the sacred urn.

Professor Mostyn, the doctor's friend and helper, and the man who knew a little about the sacred urn, had also lost his life. Death had followed in the trail of the sacred urn, even as it had clung to the vase in the days of the ancients.

Nipper had even caught one fleeting glimpse of the vase, and then Lee had proved that Mademoiselle Miton, the Black Wolf, had got away with the urn. What was she doing in Venice? Lee himself had come to Venice to seek for the very thing which had brought Peter Gilmore there. He had come to search for records of the famous poisoner, Lucrezia Borgia.

And now he had stumbled upon Peter Gilmore, who sought for the same thing. Life was indeed a strange thing. He remembered now what Professor Mostyn had read from the manuscript started by Dr. Challoner just before he had been murdered, that there was a vague rumour that the lid of the sacred urn—that beautiful creation of gold and crystal with a single diamond set in the apex, had been found in Mexico. Now he knew that to be true. Gilmore had found it in the temple of some mysterious and dead race.

What was that race? Was it part of the great race which had fled from Atlantis before that vast island had dipped to its watery grave? He, Lee, had not only seen the lid, but he had handled it. It had not been a disappointment to him. It had been one of the loveliest things he had ever handled. Then how much lovelier must it be when it should rest on the vase to which it belonged?

It seemed incredible that now in the twentieth century there appeared a possibility of joining those two parts, which, if these men believe their senses, had been parted before the most primitive of the Egyptians had ever been heard of—before King Solomon reigned, before Cleopatra.

It was gigantic. What a fabulous price they would be worth. Truly it was prize enough to tempt the Black Wolf. But yet there still remained the puzzle of the strange persons from Morocco who were so set on getting possession of the sacred urn.

Who could they be? That question must be settled later, and in the meantime, as far as Lee knew, the Black Wolf had possession of the sacred urn.

But what was she doing in Venice? That was the puzzle. That it had been she in the gondola Lee was certain. He never made mistakes in the faces of people. Yet to look at her as she lounged back in the "feizo" of the big gondola, gazing raptly at the face of the boy who sang, it was hard to think that she was the Black Wolf—the dreaded and elusive Black Wolf, who had set the police of every great city of the world by the ears.

The gondolier whom Lee had engaged proved his worth as they turned into canal after canal, for just as they drifted past the Accademia, they heard once more the clear tones of the boy singer, as he trilled out the Buena Nota which Nevin had given to the world.

Into another branching canal they swept, then ahead of them they caught a fleeting glimpse of the gondola which they were following. Even as they bore down upon it, they saw it touch against the water steps of a high building, and a moment later three figures emerged from it.

Up the steps they went, and as they came abreast of the building, Lee saw a great door thrown open. Against the square of light he saw the silhouette of the Black Wolf, the boy who had sung, and another woman. Then the big, iron-studded

door was slammed, and they drifted on, passed the gondolier standing gracefully on his "poppa," resting on the long shaft of his oar, and waiting for further orders from his employer.

Lee said nothing for a few moments. He was gazing at the building into which the Black Wolf had disappeared. It was tall and stately, and crowned with the dignity of great age. He knew, even as he gazed upon it, that it was one of the old palaces of the city's golden age, and knew that the wealth of the Black Wolf was more than sufficient to support such a palace.

Then a little farther on they came to a tiny promenade on which were set several small shops. A flash of memory came to Lee as his eye caught the sign over one of the shops, and he signed for the gondolier to pull into the steps. When the gondolier bumped against them, Lee made a motion to his companions, and they stepped out after him.

"I want to go to the shop there on the corner," he said briefly. "It is the shop of an old curiosity dealer whom I knew well. A couple of years ago he was in possession of an old masterpiece—an example of the work of Titian, who was, as you know, Venetian. It was stolen from him by a gang who came here from Paris for the express purpose of getting it.

"I was fortunate enough to trace the picture to Berlin. A German collector had bought it from the thieves, knowing it had been stolen. I secured it and brought it back to the old man. I think he will not have forgotten that episode: He will, therefore, not refuse to give me the information I shall seek from him. And if anyone knows his Venice, old Rodrigo does."

By this time they had crossed the narrow foot promenade and were at the door of the old curiosity shop. At first the place seemed to be in darkness, but Lee lifted the latch and the door yielded easily enough. A small brass lamp burned at the back of the shop, and from the dark recesses behind a pile of old furniture appeared a bent and wizened old man.

He shuffled up the shop towards them, and as soon as he saw they were apparently tourists, he commenced to rub his hands. Ordinarily the old fellow was as much of a villain as most of his class, and could wheedle the shekels out of the ignorant tourist with the best of them. But Lee cut short what the old man would have said, and, bending forward, looked into his face.

"Well, Rodrigo," he said, "do you not remember me?"

The old man peered into the eyes of the man before him, and then, as the light of recognition filled them, his whole attitude changed.

"By the shado of the doges, it is the great signor!" he stuttered. "It is milor who did me the one big favour. The saints be praised, but they have been indeed good to bring you back to Venice.

"All I have is yours, signor. Come into my poor room at the back. I have a bottle of choice wine which came but this day from the bins of the Palazzo Ferri on the Twisting Canal. And your friends—they are your friends, signor? Then they too must taste of my hospitality, and I shall tell them of what you did for me, signor."

Lee smiled and shook the old man's hand.

"I am glad that you remember me, Rodrigo," he said. "I should have come to see you before I left Venice, but in truth I did not expect to call on you to-night. We were coming down this canal though, when I saw your shop. We shall join you with pleasure in the room at the back."

The old man shuffled to the door and turned the key.

"Now we shall not be disturbed," he said.

Then he led the way past heaps and heaps of old furniture, and round through a medley of antiques, until he came to a heavy curtain. Thrusting this aside, he stood by for his guests to enter, and they found themselves in a room which, though small, was a treasure-house of pictures and choice antiques.

There were old brasses and bronzes—specimens of the finest old Venetian glass, gold and silver filagree, and what not. A hodgepodge of treasures which would have excited the envy of the veriest tyro of collectors.

Lee had been in the room on another occasion, but Gilmore had never seen it, and he and Nipper stood lost in admiration at the array of beauty about them.

The old man chuckled with pleasure as he saw their appreciation of it all, and drawing out great seats, such as the doges themselves might have sat in, he bade them be comfortable. Then from an old-fashioned cellaret which stood in the corner, he took out a long, slim bottle and several thin, beautifully-chased goblets. "Wine from the bins of the Palazzo Ferri," he said mumblingly. "Ah! It is the sun of the old vineyards, as you shall see. And these"—holding up one of the goblets—"these are the work of the greatest glass-maker of Venice—Renzi. In fifteen hundred and twelve they were made, signores. They are priceless."

Setting the goblets down on an old table which had undoubtedly been the loot of some old palace, he decanted the wine, and poured a little in each goblet. He passed it round, then pledged their health. They sipped the rich, fruity wine which had lain for so long in the bins of the Palazzo Ferri, and then, when the old man would have related to Gilmore and Nipper the tale of how Lee had got back the masterpiece which was stolen, Lee held up his hand.

"That for another time," he said. "I want some information from you, Rodrigo."

"Signor," and the old man spread out his hands, "ask me what you will. If I can answer it, rest assured I shall do so. If not, I shall try to find out."

"The next building but two along the canal is a great place, Rodrigo, which must have been a palace in the old days. We passed it on our way here. I wish to know what you can tell me about it."

The old man glanced at Lee curiously for a moment, then spread out his hands.

"You speak of the Palazzo Alino, signor. It was a palace—it is a palace, for is it not occupied by one who has furnished it regardless of cost. Many of my choicest treasures have gone to make it beautiful, signor. But what do you wish to know?"

"Who lives in it?"

"It is occupied by a beautiful woman. She is young, and she has the wealth of Midas. Her name, signor? It is Paulinus—the Signorina Paulinus, and she is of noble Italian birth."

Lee held himself tense. The Black Wolf had gone by the name of Paulinus in London at the time of the great radium robbery, when she had so mysteriously gained possession of the ten thousand pounds' worth of radium which had been used on Sir John Thornton. And now it seemed that she was living in the Palazzo Alino in Venice under the same name.

It appeared, too, that she had taken over the old palace and had spent unlimited money upon it. Lee knew how much money it would take to buy the treasures of old Rodrigo, yet the Black Wolf had spent that money. "Can you tell me more of the Palazzo Alino?" he asked.

The old curiosity dealer sipped the deep red wine, then set down the goblet with great care.

"Signor," he said, "you did much for me, and I am not ungrateful, but I would you had asked me for something else. But so be it. I shall reply. The Palazzo Alino has been the object of my own interest for sixty years. It is not generally known, signor, that it was supposed to have been the residence of the great poisoner, Lucrezia Borgia. I, who have had access to records which the ordinary man does not come upon, have known that for sixty years. Lucrezia Borgia used to come to the Palazzo Alino to meet her unfortunate and unhappy son Gennaro.

"He, who knew not that he was the son of the hated Lucrezia, but thought only that he was of noble birth, used to meet his mother at the Palazzo which stands so

close to us. And you, who know the history of the Borgias, will recall the fatal banquet when the guests were poisoned, and when Gennaro the son of Lucrezia was poisoned, too. That was a mistake, and before he died, he knew, alas, that he was the son of the hated one.

"Yet history, signor, gives the place where that banquet took place, as far from here. Yet I say to you it took place in Venice, and not only in Venice, but at the Palace Alino. Is not Alino part of the name of the woman Giovanni Cantanci, who was the mother of the same Lucrezia Borgia?"

Nelson Lee was on his feet pacing up and down the room.

"Go on—go on, Rodrigo!" he urged. "You interest me more than you think."

"There is little else to tell, signor. For sixty years I have studied the Palazzo Alino. For twenty years it has lain empty, and during that time I have wandered over every part of it. I have thought, signor, that if Lucrezia Borgia died so soon, after the death of her wronged son, that here, where she was wont to come secretly, she might have hidden some records of her life. Could one but come across the genuine records which it was said she had always kept, one would have priceless documents of a past age. Yet for sixty years I have sought in vain, and now that the beautiful young signorina has gone to live there, I can do nothing more. That, signor, is all I can tell you of the Palazzo Alino, but it is more than any other man knows."

Lee came to a pause before the old man.

"There is another big building close beside it," he said. "It appeared to be deserted, Rodrigo. Is that so?"

"It is true, signor. Many buildings on this canal are now empty. It hurts the business. They are all very old, signor, and in some of them the water has seeped through."

Lee turned to Peter Gilmore.

"Gilmore," he said hurriedly. "I have told you that our paths have crossed here in Venice. I have also said that I am prepared to go ahead with you. Now, I say that for certain reasons I wish to make an attempt to lease the empty place next to the Palazzo Alino. Are you game to go in on it with me?"

Gilmore nodded vigorously.

"Lee, whatever you do, I shall stand in with. You can call on me for any amount necessary."

"We shall halve all the expenses," replied Lee. "If we do succeed in our purpose, then we shall be more than repaid for our trouble. If not—well, I think we can both afford it."

"Then you are working on your own this time?" asked Gilmore in surprise.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Originally, I was employed by Professor Mostyn, of whom you have doubtless heard. But since he met his death beneath my very eyes, then I have vowed to continue the work as I had started."

Once more Lee turned to Rodrigo.

"Rodrigo," he said, "I want your assistance."

The old man shrugged.

"If I can do anything, signor——"

"You can," interrupted Lee. "If you do so, you may rest assured that I shall use you generously. And, perchance, you may yet realise your ambition of gaining possession of some of the private documents which it was said Lucrezia Borgia had kept during her lifetime. I want you, Rodrigo, to take immediate steps to lease the old house next to the Palazzo Alino. Get it as reasonably as you can, and see that some furniture is put in it. I shall leave all that to you. Then get hold of a few reliable servants. How long will it take you?"

The old man's eyes gleamed with interest.

"Two days—two days at most, signor, and you can dine in the place."

"Good, Rodrigo!" exclaimed Lee. "In the meantime, we shall be attending to other matters. Communicate with me at the Hotel de Paris as soon as the place will be ready for us."

Shortly after, Lee, Gilmore, and Nipper took their departure, re-entering the gondola, which still bumped against the steps leading down from the small promenade.

On the way back to the Grand Canal, Lee motioned to Nipper to draw close to him, and when the lad had done so, he said in a low tone:

"My lad, more than once you have played the part of an Italian boy. In London it has been easy, and even though your accent is faultless, it will be far more difficult here. But I want you to do so. I want you to get yourself up to night, and come back to the Palazzo Alino. Get hold of a gondolier—old Rodrigo will attend to that for you. Then you can pose as a helper. In that way it will be possible for you to move up and down the canal without suspicion.

"I would suggest that you get as good a gondola as possible—one with rich silk curtains over the 'feize.' That sort of thing will appeal to Mademoiselle Miton. Then, it is just possible, that if you are hanging about, she may on occasion employ you, though I should imagine she will have a gondola of her own. At any rate, you will be able to follow her wherever she goes. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, guv'nor. I'll do my very best. I fancy I can play the part all right."

Lee nodded, and dropped into silence.

So they slipped along over the black waters of the canal until, by divers turnings, they were once more on the Grand Canal where stood the Hotel de Paris.

And when the lad had gone to make the change, Lee took Peter Gilmore back to the small balcony which overlooked his room, and there told him some things about the Black Wolf and the sacred urn of the ancient priests of lost Atlantis, which caused that famous archaeologist to gaze at his companion in dumbfounded amazement.



CHAPTER III.

Nipper Has a Stroke of Luck—A Sudden Attack—Into the Depths—A Surprising Denouement.

NIPPER lost no time in putting into practise the suggestion Lee had made to him. That he could play the part of an Italian boy he had little doubt. One of Nipper's chief assets was a perfect command of the Italian language, picked up firstly in parts of Soho, before he had gone to Nelson Lee, and afterward—at Lee's suggestion—perfected by diligent study.

More than once the knowledge he possessed of the language had come in extremely useful, and he knew from experience that ordinarily he could pass as an Italian lad. It is true he had never put his capacity in that direction to a severe test in Italy itself, but he was game to do so.

Leaving Lee and Gilmore, he went to his room in the Hotel de Paris, and removed the dinner-jacket he had been wearing. He donned a rough tweed suit, and taking with him a few articles he thought might be useful in the campaign on which he was starting, he returned to the water steps.

There he engaged a gondola, and telling the gondolier to make the Twisting Canal by the shortest route, entered the feize and leaned back.

He was busy planning out his disguise on the way, and so absorbed was he in his thoughts, that it was with some surprise he felt the gondola bump against the water steps of the small promenade where the shop of the old curiosity dealer was situated.

When he entered the shop, old Rodrigo came out from his room at the back, and listened attentively to what the lad had to say. Then he nodded his head. "You can stay here with me," he replied. "You can pass as my assistant. I will give you clothes such as the lads of Venice wear, and will see at once about a worthy fellow who will act as your gondolier. You can, when with him, pretend that you are learning to wield the oar."

Nipper thanked him, and followed the old fellow to the room at the back. While Rodrigo went to see about the necessary garments, Nipper got busy with a dark stain which would give his skin the deep hue of the lads of Sunny Italy.

When the stain had been applied to his satisfaction, Nipper took from his pocket a small black leather case which he laid on the table in front of him. Opened, it revealed a peculiar array of tiny objects which would have puzzled the layman to understand their use.

From them, Nipper selected two tiny black rubber rings, carefully thrusting one into each nostril. The result was immediate and radical. The aquiline, somewhat thin nose of the lad was at once spread out in the nostrils, entirely changing the whole appearance of that organ.

Before, it had been utterly Anglo-Saxon; now, it was decidedly of the South. Some time before, when passing as an Italian boy in Soho, Nipper had had both the lobes of his ears pierced, and now, with a grin, he fitted a pair of ear-rings into them—two old bits of gold which hung against his dark skin in vivid contrast.

At that moment old Rodrigo returned, bearing some garments, and as he saw the change which had been effected in the lad's appearance, he uttered a mild oath.

"You will do—you will do!" he muttered, as he stood surveying the lad. "Verily, the man Lee is as wise as he is clever!"

Nipper flushed under the praise, and donned the garments hurriedly. He left his feet bare, taking care to stain them with a dark stain which would defy the soakings he knew he must get from the canal. Then, when he had stuffed into the pockets of his ragged, but picturesque, clothes, one or two items which he needed, he stood up and surveyed himself.

"Yes, I will do," he said, echoing the old man's words. "Now, Rodrigo, what is the next step?"

"It will be best for you to stay here for the night, my lad," replied the old man. "I have already sent for a trusty gondolier. He has one of the finest gondolas in all Venice. He will be here in an hour or two, and then you can get away. There will be no one stirring outside the Palazzo Alino before morning. You can take up your post before daybreak."

Nipper nodded, and followed the old man to a room, where he lay down on an old couch which had supported the tired limbs of nobility in days gone by. He dropped into dreamless slumber almost at once, and did not waken until old Rodrigo shook him by the shoulder, at the same time conveying the information that the gondolier had arrived.

Nipper sprang to his feet at once, and, going out to the room adjoining the shop, he found waiting for him a picturesque-looking rascal who had all the ear-marks of his profession.

Sturdy, dark-eyed, dark-skinned, with a vivid hotch-potch of clothes which were a marvellous combination of colour, he might have posed as he was for the "gondolier" of an oil-painting.

He knew nothing of the truth. He only knew that old Rodrigo wished him to place himself entirely at the bidding of the young fellow whom he saw before him; and while he couldn't imagine the ragged youth having sufficient money to engage the finest gondola in Venice, he would implicitly obey Rodrigo—for reasons best known to himself.

Nipper followed him almost at once to the small promenade outside the shop where, at the steps, he saw a lovely gondola floating. She was long, fully twenty feet, with both ends rising gracefully in a sweeping curving lip, which had been cut

with the hands of an artist. The "poppa," where the gondolier stood, was high and dry, overlooking the richly curtained feize, or cabin.

Old Rodrigo waved a good-bye from the door of the shop, then Nipper leaped aboard, and made his way to the poppa.

Standing there, he grasped the long oar, and a moment later Luicci, the gondolier, joined him. Grasping the oar while Luicci began to pull it back and forth in graceful sweeps, Nipper soon got the hang of the stroke, and so they drifted up the canal, while the eastern sky began to grow crimson with the coming dawn.

Dawn! As they swept into the Grand Canal, they caught a glimpse of the crimson and pink and coral of the sky across the Adriatic. In the shadow of the great gloomy-looking buildings lining the canals, night still clung, but over the water the mist was already rising and spreading in thin volumes, until catching the rays of the sun it spread into undulating filaments which spiralled and floated into the rays of day.

They came to St. Mark's just as the sun struck the great bronze horses which surmount the door, scintillating and flashing like burnished gold. The pigeons which haunt the niches of the great church were already awake, cooing and pruning themselves for another day.

Here and there a yawning gondolier poled his craft along, the curtains of some of them looking dingy indeed in the fresh glow of a new day.

The water, which had gleamed with the light of romance the night before, now took on a grey hue, while the buildings steamed close to the water as though to make for themselves misty garments to hide their naked unloveliness.

Nipper and Luicci let the gondola drift slowly past St. Mark's; then, by way of several smaller canals, they worked their way back to the Rialto, which was now alive with an early morning throng of shrieking market-women.

It was like watching a mechanical procession of figures cross a toy stage to lean back on the oar of the gondola and gaze at the variegated crowd which poured each way across the famous bridge.

Then they drifted slowly on, and, caring little which way they went, Nipper began to work his way back towards the Palazzo Alino.

He glanced up at the small balcony on the Hotel de Paris, which he knew to be outside Lee's rooms, but the shutters were closed, and he fancied his master was asleep.

The house gondola of the Palazzo Alino was just leaving the water-steps as they approached, on its way, so Nipper concluded, to one of the numerous market places of the city.

There were gondolas in plenty about now, and little thought would be taken of the one in which Nipper and Luicci were, even though they might pass up and down that particular canal many times.

Yet, even as they drifted past the water steps of the Palazzo Alino, the lower gate was thrown open, and a servant made a sign to them.

With a single sweep of the great oar, Luicci sent the gondola into the steps, and the servant, advancing, said:

"My mistress wishes to employ you. Wait you here!"

Luicci glanced at Nipper, who nodded almost imperceptibly, and they slouched over the oar until, through the water-gate, there suddenly appeared the Black Wolf.

Nipper's pulses raced as he gazed upon her, but he made no sign. She was dressed in pure white—a filmy, cool affair, which hung about her in charming folds.

A thin veil protected her features from the sun, but through it Nipper could plainly see the pink glow of her skin and the deep red of her lips, which seemed half parted to draw in the joy of life which the sun was showering down upon them.

She gave a single glance at the two in the stern, then entered the feize and sank back.

"The Church of Santa Maria della Salute," she said curtly. And as the rich curtains of the feize fell, Nipper and Luicci drove the gondola away from the steps.

Through canal after canal, all of which were now alive with life, they went, until they drew up at the promenade before the beautiful church of Santa Maria della Salute.

Here the Black Wolf got out, and, with a word to them to wait, she made her way across the promenade to the church.

For nearly an hour Nipper and Luicci waited, then Mademoiselle Miton returned, and, re-entering the gondola, ordered them to go on to the Rialto.

From there onwards it was a steady round of canals and shops. It was evidently a busy day with the Black Wolf, for she made purchases in almost every section of the city.

They finally arrived back at the Palazzo Alino, and when she had stepped out, the Black Wolf turned to them.

"I am pleased with your gondola and your work," she said. "I shall keep you the rest of the day, and perhaps for several days. If you desire that, I shall see that you receive food as well. What have you to say?"

Nipper slipped his hand along the oar, pressing Luicci's fingers slightly, and Luicci, interpreting the sign, thanked the gracious lady for her generosity and accepted the offer.

So it was that they tied up the gondola to the water steps of the Palazzo Alino and followed the Black Wolf through the great gateway which opened on to the water steps.

Nipper grinned to himself as he thought of what Lee would say if he could but see him then. He was hungry, and made a good meal in the lower cellar-room, where he and Luicci had been sent.

Then they lay down on the benches, talking in low tones of Venice and Naples—for Nipper soon found that Luicci knew Naples as well as he did Venice.

All the afternoon the Black Wolf kept them waiting, but when evening fell they received word from an old woman, whom Nipper at once recognised as Ninette, the Black Wolf's French maid, that her mistress wished to use them.

They rose at once, and, making their way out to the water steps, climbed into the gondola. Scarcely had they done so when the Black Wolf appeared, and though night had already fallen, Nipper could see that she was dressed in a rich evening gown, while her bodice was a blaze of jewels.

She paused by the gondola for a moment and peered through the gloom at the two who stood on the "poppa." Satisfied that it was the pair whom she had engaged—the Black Wolf was nothing if not cautious—she said:

"You will go to the Hotel de Paris."

Luicci grunted something in reply, and the Black Wolf stepped daintily over the gunwale. Then she signed to them to wait while a slim figure appeared framed in the doorway behind.

It advanced towards them, and as it drew near Nipper saw that it was an Italian youth, not unlike himself. Nelson Lee could have told him that it was the boy who had sung the night before, but he could not have told why he should be with the Black Wolf.

That, however, was to come out later, and when it did it was to hold even Nelson Lee dumb with amazement.

The boy followed the Black Wolf into the gondola, and then, at a sign, Luicci let the gondola drift away from the steps. Slowly the beautifully shaped prow of the craft swung round, then, with both Luicci and Nipper working at the great oar, it took its way down the dark canal towards the wider and lighter one where the hotel stood.

As it slipped past the Palazzo Alino and drew into the shadowed water before another great building of a past day, there suddenly appeared a large gondola ahead bearing straight down upon them.

Luicci leaned back on his oar and shouted a string of Italian at the oncoming craft, but it seemed not to heed them, for it came straight on.

Almost before they knew it it had bumped against them, and, as the two craft rode beside each other, Nipper saw three men spring over the side towards the feize where the Black Wolf sat.

In one brief instant he saw a dark, swarthy countenance, which was not that of an Italian, then a little streak of light from somewhere revealed the features more plainly, and he saw the black-faced Arab whom he had once before seen in London.

It was the man who had lain concealed in the garden adjoining the house of Dr. Challoner—the man who had well-nigh murdered the lad with the silver-nobbed bolus which he had thrown.

The thought flashed into Nipper's mind that even yet those mysterious ones from Morocco were still on the track of the sacred urn.

Then he spoke to Luicci, and as a cry came from the boy who was with the Black Wolf, Nipper sprang to her assistance.

He was on her track; she was his quarry, and, while it was with no definite desire to take her part, he did not propose to stand by while others—equally guilty as far as he knew, and terribly guilty, in so far as Lee said they were the murderers of Dr. Challoner—spoiled his game.

So Luicci, nothing loth, followed, and as they crept round the corner of the feize it was to come full upon an Arab who was slashing the curtains of the feize with a long knife.

Nipper drew his automatic and levelled it, but at the same moment there was a flash from the inside of the feize, and the Arab rolled over with a stream of blood flowing from his shoulder.

Two others were in his place in a moment, however, and from the feize of the attacking gondola Nipper saw two more suddenly appear.

From that on he was only conscious of the whirl of knives, the pop-pop of automatics, and the grunts of struggling men.

The Black Wolf remained ambushed behind the curtains of the feize, but she was firing steadily, and from time to time Nipper could hear her voice encouraging him and Luicci.

Of the boy he saw nothing. One of the Arabs got past Luicci and made for the feize, but a moment later he reeled across the deck and went headlong into the water of the canal.

What the Black Wolf had done Nipper could not tell, but whatever it was had been terribly effective.

Then he himself became engaged with another Arab, who twined his legs about the lad, and, in a frenzy of hatred, forced the point of a blade down, down, down towards Nipper's throat.

Nipper watched the thing descending, and, struggle though he might, he could not free himself from the deadly grasp of the Arab.

Then from behind him he was conscious of a sharp report, and the next moment the Arab lurched heavily against him.

"Stand clear!" he heard the Black Wolf cry in Italian, but so sudden had been the intervention of her shot, and with such violence did the Arab plunge into the water, that Nipper could not disengage himself in time to escape.

Into the canal he went, still clinging to the Arab, then when they struck the water he fought and kicked madly to free himself.

But the Arab had been badly wounded, and evidently determined that, if he must die, Nipper should die with him. He clung like grim death to the lad.

Down still more they went, the dirty water of the canal sweeping into nostrils and throat.

Nipper's lungs felt as if they must burst. He had not had time to take a deep breath before going down, and the strain of the fight had left him short of breath.

But he fought against the inclination to open his mouth, and concentrating all his remaining strength on one supreme effort, finally drove free from the Arab.

He felt the sweep of the other's arms as they sought through the water for him, but Nipper kicked out, and, fighting hard, swam with all his strength.

Suddenly, just as he thought he surely must be near the surface, his head crashed into something which almost stunned him.

It must be the bottom of one of the gondolas, he thought, and he made a frantic side-stroke to get clear.

He was conscious then of something hard overhead; he could feel a rush of water close to him. Then he shot upwards, and, as the blessed air rushed into his tortured lungs, he opened his eyes to gaze into utter and profound darkness.

It was as though he had dropped completely into another and a Stygian world. Not an inch could he see ahead of him. No sign of canal lights, no sound of gondolas, nothing, blank and absolute nothing.

What did it mean? What could it mean? Where had he got to?

He had gone over the side of the gondola; he had, as he thought, managed to fight his way back to the surface, but here he was in a dark place which seemed far indeed from the well-lighted canal he had left.

What had become of the gondola? What had become of Luicci and the Black Wolf and the Arabs? What had become of the canal itself?

Ay, what had become of Venice? Where was he? Was he dead, and was this a halting place in the spirit world?

Mechanically he felt himself, and resolved that he was at least in the world of men. But what had happened?

Slowly and cautiously he paddled about until his outreaching hands touched a ledge of stone. Cautiously he felt along it, and then, as something flew over his wrist, he drew back sharply.

"Rats," he muttered, and started at the sound of his own voice. "Rats, and plenty of them!"—this as there was a scurrying sound close to him. "Now, where on earth can I be? This is beyond me, but I might as well see what it is. If I can get up on this ledge, then my pocket torch may still be all right."

He laid his hands once more on the stone ledge, and, sweeping his arm round quickly, sent some of the rats leaping away.

Their squeals filled the place with hollow echoes, and Nipper was even more puzzled, for that told him it was at least partially enclosed.

He drew himself up on the ledge now, and, feeling in his pocket for the torch, took it out.

When he pressed the switch the light shone out clear and bright, and he knew that it had been unharmed by its immersion in the water. There was a wild scampering of rats as the light struck that place, which, although Nipper did not know it, had not seen the light for hundreds of years.

By the rays he could gain some idea of his surroundings. Imagine, if you can, a narrow stone ledge some three feet in width, and stretching away into tunnels of darkness at either end. Then overhead, at a height of six feet or so, an arched roof of stone, from which the water dripped slowly and regularly.

A bare three inches below the ledge the black water, and opposite the ledge a blank stone wall.

Look as he might Nipper could not see by what means he had got into the place. He had certainly not come along by either of the tunnels. He had come to the surface just at the ledge. Then how had he got into the place?

He stood there—a weird picture with the light falling in ghostly circles about him and pondering on the matter.

Then suddenly an explanation came to him. The wall opposite him might be sheer and blank above the water, but down beneath the surface there would be an opening which led out into the waters of the canal.

That opening would be below low-water mark in the canal, and would be invisible at all times: but, all the same, it provided a secret means for getting from the ledge on which he stood to the canal outside.

The house he knew must be hundreds of years old. The secret way into the canal had probably been made by some old nobleman of Venice as a means of escape should it ever be required.

By standing on the ledge and diving diagonally towards the stone wall opposite one would drive down to the opening, and by swimming straight ahead reach the water of the canal outside; then upwards to the surface, and one would be clear of the place.

In inverse manner Nipper had done just that thing. When he had kicked free from the Arab and had dived straight ahead he had been even deeper than he thought, and the strength of his dive had carried him to the opening in the wall.

When he had struck something hard which he had taken for the bottom of one of the gondolas it had been the top of the open arch, which permitted ingress and egress through the water-wall of the building.

Then, when he had come to the surface, it had been in the chamber where he now stood instead of the surface of the canal.

That explained the absence of the lights of the canal and of the gondolas.

What should he do? Should he dive back under the water, and attempt to work his way up to the surface of the canal? Or, now that he had reached this secret chamber, should he go along the dark tunnels at either end of the ledge and see whither they led?

He tried to figure out which house it would be where he stood. He remembered they had just swung round from the water steps of the Palazzo Alino, and had started on their way when the attack had been made upon them.

He could not be sure, but he suspected strongly that the attacking gondola had been driven out from the water-steps of the dark house adjoining the Palazzo Alino.

Then it was entirely possible that he was in the secret chamber of that very house—the one adjoining the Palazzo Alino!

Presuming that to be so, then as he now stood on the ledge the tunnel to his right must run in the direction of the Palazzo Alino, and the one to his left must serve the house adjoining.

But was it possible that the tunnel would be connected with the Palazzo Alino? Was it by any chance possible that those two houses had, in centuries gone by, been connected? Had all this secret means of exit been forgotten with the passage of the years?

Nipper gazed at the blank wall which spelled freedom and the wider perspective of the canal outside. He gazed at the tunnels which spelled mystery of the ages and, perchance, danger. What should he do?

Setting his jaw he swung the light in the direction of the tunnel to his right, and, shivering slightly from the chill of his wet garments, started gingerly along the ledge.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the vaulted entrance to that tunnel, and as he drew still closer he saw that, while the ledge continued on, the water stopped.

He was right, then, in his assumption that it was but an alcove for the water of the canal.

At the mouth of the tunnel he paused, and looked back. The rats had grown bold again, and were playing about on the ledge, quite indifferent to the strange being who had invaded their haunt.

Then, with a little tightening of the lips, Nipper started along that narrow tunnel through which man had perhaps not passed for untold ages.

He had advanced a distance of twenty yards or more when he became aware that the floor of the tunnel was rising gradually. The rocks underfoot were

drier here, and from the sides there seeped none of the water which had trickled forth farther back.

He glanced back again. Dimly he could see the place he had just left; then a turn of the tunnel hid it from him, and with the circle of the electric light playing on the floor of the tunnel ahead of him he continued his way.

Another twenty yards or so, and always rising, he came to an old door which hung slackly on rusty hinges. It was half open, as though some hand, long dust, had slammed it in haste.

Nipper made no effort to swing it back, but squeezing gingerly through found himself in a square sort of chamber.

Then as the light swept the confines of the room he saw many strange and weird things. The walls revealed but the tatters of once rich brocades which had made the apartment a place of richness. Still standing in the corners were weapons of every description, each and all of a bygone pattern.

In the centre of the apartment was a long table, still littered with the dishes of a feast, and, stepping a little closer, Nipper saw that the dishes were of gold and silver.

About the table were twelve great chairs, as well preserved as they had been four hundred years before, and a shiver went through the lad as he saw that every chair but one held its occupant—a grim, collapsed, grinning skeleton which had once been the richly bedecked form of a courtier.

Nipper took another step forward, and gazed at the twelve skeletons which reclined in the chairs.

What sort of a death feast had he happened upon? What party was this which had died even as it lived and sipped the richness of life?

What long-forgotten tragedy had he stumbled upon here in this hidden cellar. Twelve chairs in all, and eleven corpses!

He moved close to the table, and only then saw that the twelfth chair, too, had been occupied, for on the floor, close to the empty chair, at the head of the table, he saw something which made him gasp with the suddenness of the vision.

He saw a form clad in the richest of brocade—brocade which had defied the ravages of time and the rats, and still hung about the bones of what had once been a woman.

He flashed the light upon the gruesome sight, and bent over it. Then he saw with a thrill that the richly coiled hair was red—red as the red of Titian.

Who was this woman who had supped with these eleven men, and who, like them, had gone to her death?

On the bony hands which had once been flesh and blood there gleamed a ring. Nipper bent, and gently disengaged it from the skeleton of the finger.

He held it up to the light, and then, as his eyes fell on the arms which had been engraved on it, a deep throb of wonder went through him. *He knew it for the arms of the Borgias.*

Had he stumbled on Lucrezia Borgia herself? The very thought of such a thing made him stagger back. Well he knew the history of that hated family. Well he knew of the first Borgia who had come into any real prominence.

He knew he had been a Pope, and that another Borgia had followed him, making but an instrument of that holy office. Then had followed the children by the Roman girl Guissepe Cantanei, two of whom had spread hatred and terror about them.

Lucrezia Borgia, the hated and dreaded poisoner of old! How carefully Lee had explained the history of that family to the lad during the time when Nipper was first studying "poisons!"

And now he had stumbled on a woman with red hair lying as a skeleton, dressed in the garments of centuries past, wearing a ring on which was engraved the arms of the Borgias; and, more than that, as near as the lad could judge, beneath

the same Palazzo Alino which old Rodrigo, the curiosity dealer, had said was once the secret rendezvous of Lucrezia Borgia and her son.

That the place had never been disturbed was plain. The rich dishes of silver and gold still lay on the table in the disorder of the meal. The rats had consumed the food which had been in them, and then as Nipper saw a score of small heaps of bones lying on the floor the truth came to him.

The rats, like the guests, had been poisoned by the food. It had been the last poison orgy of Lucrezia Borgia. Her own son must be one of those crumpled skeletons grinning over the empty board.

Her own son had tasted the poisoned dish by mistake. And here, on the floor, lay Lucrezia herself, who had killed herself when she found that her son, too, had met the fate intended for others.

It was the discovery of a fearful tragedy long ago lost in the mists of the past.

Nipper stepped round the body of the woman, and made for a door which was just opposite. It was a great oaken affair, and a glance showed Nipper that it was heavily barred and bolted.

The bars, of oak also, still hung strong in the wrought-iron holds which had been let into the stone. It had been well secured before Lucrezia Borgia set about her terrible work.

He lifted the three bars, and, after some trouble, got the bolts back. Then he took hold of the handle of the door with both hands, and pulled with all his might.

It was only by the exercise of the greatest strength that he was able to drag it open even a foot, nor as he did so did he see the creeping figure which appeared in the opening of the door which led to the tunnel along which he had come.

The shadow lay heavy there, but had he glanced back he must have seen the black, sinister, blood-stained countenance which gazed after him with terrible hatred.

All unconscious that he was being dogged, Nipper slipped through into the passage through the room. A few feet only and he came to a flight of stairs which led upwards steeply.

Climbing them slowly he reached the top, and then found himself in a semi-circular chamber which ran like a periphery about some part of the building.

It was wide and lofty, and Nipper had no doubt but that in centuries gone by it had been used often.

He followed it round for a bit, then came to another door, which, after a few minutes examination, he found had been effectually sealed up for all time.

The mortar which held it was as strong as that which held the stones of the building itself. Therein, he judged, lay the explanation of why the room below—that ghastly banqueting-room of death—had lain undiscovered for so long.

He continued on his way. Then, as his eyes fell on a peculiar-looking steel bar in the wall, he paused. What could be the meaning of that rusty bit of metal stuck in the wall?

It had not been put there without some definite purpose. He approached it closely, and laid his hand upon it. He pressed upwards on it; he pressed downwards upon it; he pushed to the right and the left. Still it remained as it had been, and nothing happened.

Then clinching down the switch of the electric torch and fixing it beneath one arm he took hold of the steel bar with both hands, and gave it a twist.

It turned under the pressure, and Nipper kept on twisting until it would turn no more.

Now he tried pressing upwards, downwards, and to right and left again. This time the bar moved to the right, and as it reached the limit of its movement there was a slight grinding noise as the great square block of stone in which it had been fixed swung slowly outwards on a corner pivot.

Nipper's eyes flashed with satisfaction as he noted the success of his efforts. He waited until the stone had come the full distance, then he bent forward and cast the light through the opening.

He found himself gazing into a wide sort of corridor which led away to the left, and, making up his mind to prosecute the search, he climbed through the hole in the wall.

He stood on the other side listening for a little, then tiptoed ahead, following the course of the passage. It swung sharply a short distance on, then ended almost as abruptly as it had turned.

Before him was a blank wall, or what appeared to be a blank wall; but Nipper was now sufficiently au fait with the intricacies of that strange house of a bygone day to seek for further means of getting along.

Nor did he fail to find it, for just over his head was a similar type—though smaller in size—bar such as he had met with outside.

He twisted this as he had the other, then pressed it, and lo! another stone swung back. But here Nipper sprang quickly back into the passage again, for two bars of light struck him full in the face.

They were almost on a level with his eyes. He found that, by rising on his toes, he could peer through them, and that they were just the same distance apart as his own eyes.

He moved forward and gazed through. What he saw made him fairly hold his breath with amazement. Before him was a large room, sumptuously furnished as a boudoir of sorts.

It was brilliantly lighted, and, even as he gazed upon it, he saw a great door at the far-end swing open and the Black Wolf herself enter.

How she had got there from the gondola, he could not imagine. She was dressed exactly as she had been when she had started for the Hotel de Paris, though, to be sure, her lovely dress was wet and bedraggled.

The Italian boy followed her, and close on his heels came Ninette, the maid. The Black Wolf motioned the boy to a seat, then disappeared through another door.

Nipper watched for ten minutes or so, until the door re-opened to admit the Black Wolf again. This time she was dressed in a soft house-gown of sorts.

Ninette, the maid, was still busying herself about the room, but at a sign from her mistress she departed.

By now Nipper had managed to take in his own position regarding the arrangement of the walls and room. He could see that he was standing much higher than the floor of the room, for he was looking down upon it.

The floor of the passage, therefore, was higher than the floor of the room. But what could those two holes be through which he was gazing? How could they be there without rousing the suspicion of anyone within the room.

He pressed his hands gently against the "wall" in front of him, and found it to be not wall at all, but comparatively flimsy.

Then suddenly the explanation dawned upon him. From floor to ceiling a great painting must have been placed there ages ago.

The eyes of the portrait which composed the painting had been cunningly arranged by the painter to permit one to peer through. That was what Nipper was doing at this moment. He was gazing through the eyes of the painting into the room beneath.

Now he saw the Black Wolf walk towards the opposite wall and press a button in the panel there. Immediately another panel to the right of the one she had pressed swung open, and there in the compartment revealed Nipper saw something which made him gasp.

Standing on a small pedestal was what he took to be the Sacred Urn of the Priests of Atlantis.

CHAPTER IV.

What Happened in the House of the Black Wolf—Nipper Sees a Wondrous Thing—A Risky Proceeding—The Struggle in the Secret Passage—The Chase—A Terrible Tragedy.

NIPPER gazed in unbounded amazement at the startling sight which had just been revealed. The sacred urn which had brought his master to Venice! Could it really be that for the second time in his life he had stumbled upon that priceless vase?

He watched while the Black Wolf, moving with sinuous grace, approached the Italian boy and spoke a few words to him. The boy rose at once, and Nipper saw him walk across to the niche where the urn stood.

He glanced at it carelessly for a little, then stood easily, as though waiting for another command from the Black Wolf. Certainly he could know nothing of the sacred urn of Atlantis, so Nipper concluded.

The Black Wolf now pressed an electric button, and almost at once the door of the room opened. Into it came a strange party. In the first glance Nipper recognised Marcel and Andre and Jaques, the three French henchmen of the Black Wolf.

Between Marcel and Jaques was a man, while Andre walked behind with a drawn revolver; and the man who was being led, Nipper saw with a start, was the very Arab who had bolded him in London—the man who had tried to knife him on the gondola that very evening, the man who was of the mysterious party from Morocco who had murdered without compunction, in their determined efforts to get possession of the sacred urn.

The Black Wolf allowed her eyes to rest for a moment on the Arab, then she spoke to him in French.

"So," she sneered, "you thought to play your childish tricks on me, did you? You thought to get the better of Le Loup Noir? What children you are, after all! In London you blundered and bungled. You did all the work at the Challoner place, but when it suited the Black Wolf to step in and take the prize, she did so. Then you followed me here, thinking to outwit me in your clumsy manner.

"Faugh! Think you you are dealing with a stupid child? Your companions are even now nursing their wounds. Take my advice and leave Venice at once; there is nothing for you here. But before you go I will show you something. You can go back to your companions and tell them what you have seen!"

A peculiar little smile hovered round the red lips of the Black Wolf for a moment, then she stepped back so that the Arab could see for the first time the beautiful crystal urn which stood in the niche in the wall.

It was a sight to make the eyes of the veriest tyro gleam with avarice. The lovely crystal bowl shone clear as spring water beneath the light—the stem of the triple emerald and ruby and crystal—the trinity of perfection.

Then the lovely triple-terraced base of the three sacred colours, ruby and green and white, with the golden serpent twining from the base round the stem to the bowl of the vase, its golden fangs reaching towards the lip of the bowl.

Yet, in the cry which broke from the lips of the black as he saw it, there was more than mere admiration of a beautiful creation.

There was love and reverence and even worship in that cry. It was laden with something which breathed of things Nipper knew not of.

But he could feel it, and so could the Black Wolf, for she turned and gazed long and earnestly at the black before she spoke again. Then she spoke to Marcel and Jaques.

"Hold him securely!" she said curtly. "Now!"

She made a sign to the Italian boy, who straightened up and opened his lips. The next moment the room was filled with a volume of clear sound which, though he professed to be no judge, Nipper knew could scarcely be equalled.

In the throat of that boy there lurked the clear tones of something preterhuman. He was gifted as Nature rarely gifts humans.

It was the voice of a generation. He was singing some wild song of the hills, which rose and fell with a lilting cadence of sound which surged through upon one, and sent one's thoughts leaping up, up, up into realms of almost unbelievable exaltation, until—and then the thing happened.

As the boy's voice reached a certain high note in his song, as his voice hung strong and clear on the note, as his lungs breathed forth the air which caused his tonal notes to vibrate and to ring out in startling clarity of sound, there came a sudden, shivering crash, and, dragging his eyes away from the boy's face, Nipper looked towards the pedestal which had held the crystal urn, but which now held but the shattered fragments of what had once been that beautiful vase.

How had it happened? No one had moved, no one had been within a yard of the vase, and then it had only been the boy who had been singing.

The Black Wolf was ten feet, or more, away from the niche in the wall, and the others a good fifteen feet. Yet there, apparently of its own accord, the crystal vase had shattered into fragments.

The voice of the boy broke off suddenly on the high note, though it still rang in Nipper's ears, and would, he thought, ring for ever in his memory.

Then, shrill and quivering with the agonised terror of a lost soul, there rang out in the room another voice—the voice of the black. He had dropped to his knees, stronger even than the two men who held him, and was straining and struggling to reach that niche in the wall.

How could anyone there—how could even the Black Wolf know what the vase had meant to him? There was a mystery locked up in the purpose of those Moorish ones who had come to Europe which not even Nelson Lee and Peter Gilmore had yet fathomed.

When they did, if ever that came about, it would hold them rigid with the sheer, stupendous wonder of it all. To think—but that was for the future.

Nipper watched eagerly while Marcel and Jaques struggled with the Arab, finally overpowering him and dragging him to his feet.

His eyes were wide and staring now, as he gazed at what had once been the crystal vase.

Then his lips opened, and from them flowed a volume of words in some strange tongue which Nipper had never heard, nor had the Black Wolf, to judge from the puzzled expression of her face.

It was a wild, incoherent tirade of which the Arab delivered himself; then the Black Wolf made a quick gesture.

"He has seen what I wished him to see," she said, raising her voice above that of the Arab. "Take him away and throw him into the canal! Let him swim for his life; he needs the lesson!"

But even then there was another surprise, for at that moment the Arab paused in his tirade and stiffened. His eyes closed and opened thrice, then his whole body became convulsed.

Marcel and Jaques looked at him in surprise, then at their mistress. The Black Wolf was watching the Arab closely, but as a second severe convulsion racked him she signed to the two who held him to ease him down.

But a third and worse convulsion caught the Arab, and the next instant he had dropped loosely to the floor. He had died as mysteriously as the crystal urn had been shattered.

The Black Wolf bent over him, then gave a shrug.
 "Take him out!" she commanded. "Throw him into the canal just the same! He is dead!"

Marcel and Jaques picked up the Arab gingerly and carried him from the room.

The Black Wolf turned with a sudden parting of the lips to the Italian, who had been gazing in wonder at the scene.

"You did splendidly!" she murmured, as she approached him. "I shall see that you get the training I promised you. In three years you will be the greatest singer in Europe. I prophesy that, and I, the Black Wolf, will make you that. Now leave me, for I am tired."

"But—but, signorina," cried the boy, "I do not understand! That vase—the black man!"

"It is not for you to understand!" cut in the Black Wolf curtly. "Leave me, please, for I would rest."

The boy bent over and kissed her hand, then obeyed; and when he had gone, the Black Wolf beckoned to Ninette and departed through the other door.

Once more the room was vacant, only the brilliant light revealing the place where such a tragedy had just taken place.

Nipper gazed at the cold brilliancy for some minutes, then he came out of his absorbed contemplation of the place.

"If I could only get into the room and get those fragments of the vase!" he muttered to himself. "If I could only take them back to the gov'nor! By thunder, I will try it, anyway! If I can only find out how this blessed portrait swings back!"

Feverishly he sought for the secret of the mechanism, all unaware that a pair of dark, sinister eyes were still watching his every move. Up and down the sides of the frame went the lad's hands, until at last he came to that which he sought—the lever-snap which would release the picture.

He pressed the catch gingerly, and then put his shoulder to the frame of the picture. How many centuries had it been since that portrait had swung back? Who could tell?

Yet it worked almost as easily as it had in those days of the past. It swung open inch by inch, until there was a good couple of feet between the edge of the frame and the wall.

Nipper paused there, and, waiting for a moment to listen, sprang down into the room. He raced across to the niche in the wall and swept up the fragments of the shattered vaso.

Then back again towards the opening through which he had come, noting as he did so that the subject of the portrait was a full length of a woman dressed in heavy brocade.

And her hair was red.

Regardless of the danger he ran, Nipper paused and approached close to the picture. He wanted a glimpse of her right hand. There it hung slim and white against the folds of her dress, and even as he bent towards it Nipper saw that one of the fingers bore a ring, and that the arms upon the ring were the Borgia arms.

Could it be that the hideous and grotesque skeleton which lay in its rich brocades in the secret room below could have once been that swelling and voluptuous beauty who gazed down upon him with cruel, red lips?

Was it Lucrezia Borgia? He asked himself the question even as he slipped back through the opening, and drew the picture after him.

When it had closed to he stuffed the fragments of the vaso into his pocket, and then, after a last look through the eyes of the portrait into the room, he started back along the passage towards the secret tunnel.

He had gone scarcely half a dozen steps, and was just coming to the abrupt turn in the passage, when suddenly something came flying at him from round the turn.

He caught one fleeting glimpse of a dark face of hate; then the crash came, and with the shock the torch tumbled to the floor, though it did not go out.

Nipper knew in the first moment of violent contact that one of the Arabs had in some way followed him. He knew that there in that secret passage it would be a fight for his life.

If the Arab got the better of him, he would be left dead, perchance to lie and rot for another hundred years before someone stumbled upon him, even as he had stumbled upon that gruesome banquet of death in the room below.

Knowing that he fought like a tiger—but it was not long before he realised that his antagonist held the advantage in all but spirit.

Weapon he had none; only his bare hands. Even the torch was denied him, for it had rolled away out of reach, yet by its rays he could see the naked blade of a knife descending upon him.

If he could only break free for a single moment and make a dash for it! That, he knew, was his only chance.

As the point of the blade touched his throat he drew back in a frantic heave which threw both of them off their feet. As they went down Nipper sprang away, and was on his feet like lightning.

He made one wild grab at the torch, caught it, and dashed along the short passage towards the hole through which he had come.

He could hear the bare feet of the Arab paddling along behind him; then he reached the opening, and was scrambling through even as his pursuer clutched at his foot.

Nipper landed on his knees on the passage outside, and scrambling to his feet made a frantic effort to close the stone.

But he was too late, for the Arab's head was already through the opening. Then as Nipper turned to run on again a terrible thing happened. It was a sharp exclamation from his pursuer which caused him to turn back, and he gazed in fascination at the sight he saw.

In some way the great stone had started to close, and already had caught the Arab by the shoulder!

With a desperate heave, he tried to force his way through, but he was not strong enough against the powerful mechanism of the stone.

He tried next to draw back, and succeeded in getting his shoulders free. Then, even as he began to draw his head through the great stone came together with tremendous force, catching the Arab's skull full against its edge.

It crushed like an eggshell, and as the stone drove back into place, smashing the bones like pulp, Nipper turned away sick.

Truly the path of the sacred urn was a path of tragedy. He stumbled around the periphery of the place until he came to the top of the stone steps which led down to the secret tunnel.

Slowly and wearily he went down them and along the passage to the banquet-room of death. He kept his eyes straight ahead while he passed through that grim place, then on down the sloping tunnel he went, until he arrived once more at the narrow ledge which had meant safety for him.

He gave one look towards the tunnel at the other end of the ledge, then shook his head, and smiled wanly.

"Not to-night," he muttered. "I have had enough."

With that, he took his place on the edge of the ledge, and braced himself for the plunge.

"The opening will be down a good four or five feet," he murmured. "I had better dive low. And I'll have to dive in the dark."

He switched off the electric torch as he uttered the words, then placing it in his pocket he raised his hands above his head.

The next moment the rats in the place were startled by a loud splash as the lad's body cut the water. He had judged well, dark as it was, for it was only when he began to come up again that he felt the roof of the arched stone over his head.

He kept down, and swam strongly ahead for some distance, then raised his arms again. They came into contact with nothing, so swimming upwards hard he fought to control his bursting lungs, until suddenly he shot up into the open air, and all about him he saw the lights of the canal.

The next instant he was swimming for some water steps across the canal, where he would find a gondola to take him back to the Hotel de Paris.

CHAPTER V.

Lee's Surprise—Old Rodrigo Makes a Portentious Announcement—Lee Outlines a New Theory—Action.

NELSON LEE, Peter Gilmore, and old Rodrigo were foregathered in the sitting-room of Lee's rooms at the Hotel de Paris when, a little after midnight, Nipper staggered in, dripping wet and well-nigh exhausted.

With an understanding born of many dangers in his profession, Nelson Lee did not question the lad then, but sent him to his room at once to get into dry clothes. While Nipper was away Lee rang for a servant, and ordered a hot brew to be made at once.

It was ready for Nipper when he returned, and with the warmth of the liquid coursing through his veins he was soon feeling more his old self. Then, and only then, did Lee permit his brows to flick the very slightest bit—an invitation to Nipper to explain.

Truth to tell, the reason of Rodrigo being there was simple. The gondolier whom he had engaged for Nipper had managed to survive the attack of the Arabs, and when one of them had been taken prisoner at the point of the Black Wolf's weapon he had at her orders poled into the water steps of the Palazzo Alino.

She had ordered him to wait, but no sooner had the great gates closed after her than he had gone on at once to the water steps of the small promenade in front of the curiosity shop.

There he had related to old Rodrigo exactly what had occurred—how they had been attacked, and how Nipper had gone into the canal, not to reappear.

Exercised over this development in the matter which seemed so near to the heart of his patron, the old man had come on to the Hotel de Paris hot foot.

Lee and Peter Gilmore had not been in when Rodrigo called, but he had waited for them, and once within the privacy of Lee's rooms had poured forth his tale.

Lee had naturally been greatly worried over the affair. From appearances it looked as though Nipper had been dragged under by the Arab with whom he had gone over the side of the gondola, and when the lad staggered into the room it was not strange that the superstitious old man should have looked upon his dripping figure as the ghost of the lad that had been. But Lee knew differently, and he was content to wait until the lad could explain what had happened.

Nipper was nothing loth to begin. He had got up against as startling a situation as had ever come his way, and in some respects he deemed it beyond his powers of explanation. However, he began, and faithfully related every detail of the evening, from the moment when clinging in a life and death grip to the Arab he had gone over the side of the gondola into the canal, and ending only with his own appearance at the Hotel de Paris.

Lee, Gilmore, and old Rodrigo followed him with engrossed attention. Even Lee had seldom heard the relation of a more weird experience, and, being steeped as he was in the history of the hated Borgias, the tale held a degree of interest for him which he made no attempt to conceal.

When the lad had finished Leo looked first at Rodrigo, then at Gilmore. The American was chewing the end of a cold cigar, and exhibiting all the signs of excitement which a man does who has come upon that for which he has sought long and earnestly.

Old Rodrigo was for the moment past speech. He sat leaning forward, mouthing in an attempt to speak. Finally, the words came in a torrent.

"It is as I have always said!" he cried, gazing at Leo with burning eyes. "For sixty years I have dreamed of finding what this lad has stumbled upon. No man in Venice, no man in Europe had studied the records of the Borgias as I have studied them. In my own mind I was convinced beyond all doubt that the Palazzo Alino was the palace which had actually been used by Lucrezia Borgia. Yet, during all the years it lay empty, and while it was free to me I failed to find what I sought.

"Only the great oil painting in one of the rooms did I find to convince me I was right—a painting which is credited to Titian, the great Venetian painter. It is unsigned, but I and others who have studied the canvasses of the great painter have been convinced that it was his.

"More than once I have had offers for it from my many patrons, but the family which owns the Palazzo Alino, while very poor, have consistently refused to part with it. They tell me there is a superstition or legend that the painting must never be removed from the Palazzo Alino. But the subject of the painting—a woman in a fine brocade dress of the period—I have always thought to be Lucrezia Borgia herself. On her hand is a ring, as the lad says, and he is equally correct in saying that the arms are the Borgia arms.

"Others, however, think that Titan merely put the Borgia arms on the ring because during his lifetime he was on such intimate terms with the Emperor Charles V. and with the Pope of that reign. One of the Borgias, you know, was a Pope.

"At any rate, I have always felt that the Palazzo Alino concealed a secret of the Borgias, and now, in a most miraculous manner, this lad has probed it. From what you have told me of the young signorina who now occupies the Palazzo Alino I can quite believe that she, too, is on the track of the Borgia secret.

"You have opened up your heart and your mind to me, signor. I will do likewise with you. Let me help you in this quest. Let old Rodrigo be with you when you come upon the secret of the past. Ah, to be there when you enter that banqueting room of death!"

Nelson Leo held out his hand to the old man.

"You shall be with us in it, Rodrigo," he said warmly. "What we do you shall share in. And I could wish a poorer aid than yours. Now, Nipper, let us have a look at the ring and the pieces of the vase which you tell us you succeeded in bringing with you."

Nipper, who had been sitting in a fever of excitement, now took out the things he had brought, and laid them on the table.

Leo and Gilmore each took up some of the pieces of the vase, but old Rodrigo pounced upon the ring which Nipper had taken from the skeleton finger of the woman who lay on the floor wrapped in the folds of an old brocade dress.

He peered closely at it, then, after a few minutes, gave a sharp exclamation.

"It is—it is the ring!" he cried. "I will stake my whole reputation that it is genuine, that it is the ring worn by Lucrezia Borgia herself! The lad has found the remains of that most terrible of women."

Leo laid down the pieces of crystal he was examining, and took up the ring. Gilmore bent over it with him, and in a few excited words the old man showed them how he knew it to be genuine.

"And taken from her very finger!" he sighed. "Oh, to have been the one to do it! And now, signor, this crystal of which you speak. Let me examine it, I beg of you."

With a curious look in his eyes, Nelson Lee handed over some of the pieces to the old expert. Rodrigo took them up, and, taking a powerful collector's glass from his pocket, proceeded to examine them.

Piece after piece he went over, then he laid them down, and turned to Lee with a bewildered air.

"But, signor, these are not old Venetian!" he exclaimed. Lee had told him none of the particulars of the sacred vase for which they were searching. "It is a modern work, and I will wager I can lead you to the man who fashioned it. It is a secret, signor, but to you it will do no harm to tell it; there are many experts here in Venice who do nothing but fashion imitations of the old crystal which made the city famous centuries ago. This vase was made by one of them—a man who has done much work for me. I know the lines are his. I know his work, signor, as I know my own mind. It is modern."

Nelson Lee nodded with satisfaction.

"I was waiting to hear what you would say, Rodrigo," he said. "I, too, put it down as only an imitation."

"Then—then how about the sacred vase?" asked Nipper, in bewilderment.

"Before I answer you that, my lad, I should like Rodrigo to look at the crystal and gold lid which Mr. Gilmore has. Gilmore, would you mind getting the lid?"

The American rose at once, and, opening his waistcoat, drew out a large leather bag which he had suspended from round his neck.

"I took your advice," he grinned at Lee. "If anybody gets it, they will have to get me first."

Opening the mouth of the leather bag, he drew out something wrapped in tissue-paper.

When this was removed he held out his hand, and as he saw what lay thereon, old Rodrigo gave a gasp of admiration. Well he might, for the magnificent lid of pure crystal and gold was something to make a man stand and wonder if it were possible for human hands to fashion such a thing.

The crystal, clear and pure as virgin spring water, was but a gorgeous setting for the great stone which was set in the apex of gold. As a diamond it was beyond price, as the crowning glory of the work of an artist it was beyond compare.

Old Rodrigo took the lid in his hands with the loving care a mother would bestow on her child. He held it this way and that, he squinted at it, he closed his eyes over it. He mumbled phrases unintelligible to those who heard him, he crooned over it with the ardour of a lover.

Then he looked up, his eyes suffused with feeling.

"It is magnificent—superb, signor!" he breathed. "It is the most glorious work I have ever seen! But why do you show me this, signor? It is not Venetian, not the work of Venice in her palmyest days. It is of no period which I know, and yet, signor, I will stake my life it is not modern. The hands of to-day can do no such work as that. It is the very soul of an artist, and yet I do not know from whence it came."

"Some day you may," said Lee, as he stretched out his hand for it. "I cannot tell you its history now, Rodrigo; but you are right—it is not the work of moderns. Nor is it the work of old Venice. It is crystal work such as has never before been seen. Take it, Gilmore; guard it well."

"Now, Rodrigo, I shall proceed. I thought the pieces of the vase which my lad brought here were but the pieces of a clever forgery. For certain reasons, which I cannot explain, this young woman, whom you call the young signorina, has taken the Palazzo Alino, and it is true, as you say, that she is searching for certain things which will lead to a better knowledge of the understanding of Lucrezia Borgia.

"So far, it seems, she has not succeeded. But I can tell you that she is in possession of a superb vase or urn of which you have just seen the lid. The

urn is also being sought by certain mysterious persons from Morocco. They were the persons who attacked the gondola which bore the Black Wolf, as I prefer to call your young signorina.

"She, as I said, possesses the genuine urn, which she stole from a man whom you know of—the great archæologist, Dr. Challoner. She is determined to retain it, and, in my opinion, she had made here in Venice an exact copy of it. That copy she placed in the niche in the wall, and it was that copy which Nipper saw.

"Now, how can we find an explanation of the rest of that strange proceeding upon which he gazed. I will tell you what I think. I know that she has the vase which we seek, and which the mysterious persons from Morocco seek. I know, too, that on the body of the vase there are engraved certain symbols which, if they could be read, would doubtless reveal great secrets of a past age.

"But they cannot be read even by the Black Wolf. In some way she has learned a good deal of the history of the vase. When she stole it from Dr. Challoner, she also stole twelve great cases of valuable manuscript—the result of twenty years' labour in Morocco.

"It is just possible that from some of these manuscripts she learned what he knew of the history of the vase, and he knew more than any man living except it be these persons from Morocco. From those manuscripts she may have discovered what I myself have discovered—that in the past Lucrezia Borgia was in possession of a mystery vase, from which it is said she gained much of the knowledge which made her so powerful.

"The Black Wolf would then set about to discover if any of the secret papers of Lucrezia Borgia still existed. Her search would lead her to the Palazzo Alino. That explains why she took it.

"Then what? She would know that these persons from Morocco were still on the trail of the vase. From knowledge which I myself possess, and from deductions which I draw, though, truth to tell, it almost takes my breath away when I consider to what it all may lead, I know that these men who seek the vase will seek and seek until they find; and, when they do find, they will stop at nothing to gain possession of it.

"Powerful and cunning as the Black Wolf is, she is no match for such as they are. They are masters of cunning such as she dreams not of. Therefore, she would cast about for some means of keeping the vase, and of throwing them off the trail.

"How would she do it? In my opinion, I know how she did it. She had a duplicate made which she placed in the niche of the room in the Palazzo Alino. Now, all of us here know that fine crystal has one peculiar quality. We know that each crystal has a tone individual to itself, and we know further that, under certain favourable conditions, a similar note struck by any instrument—providing it is exactly similar in tone, will cause the crystal to shatter to pieces. (This is a fact.—Editor.)

"In the case of the Black Wolf, the instrument used was the human throat. She discovered this young singer whom you and I, Gilmore, heard only last night in the gondola as it went past the door.

"She discovered, further, that one of his most powerful notes was the same in tone as the tone of the crystal. Then, after the attack in the gondola when one of the individuals who seek the vase fell into her hands, she had him dragged into the room where she kept the fake vase. Her opportunity had come. She would, in a dramatic manner, cause the vase to shiver to pieces before him; then she would throw him out to allow him to go back to his fellows, and tell him the vase was no more.

"But even the Black Wolf would not deliberately destroy the real vase. She, too, knows how utterly priceless it is. But she miscalculated in one thing. She did not realise the extent of mental control possessed by these mysterious individuals from Morocco.

"She carried out her part, and the boy singer did his. According to schedule, when he reached a certain note, and by the acoustic properties of the niche it was directed full at the vase, the vase shattered under the impact of the note. But what then? The man from Morocco, thinking the vase—the urn which was more sacred to him than anything in this life—was destroyed, deliberately willed that he should die; and I tell you that, under the impact of his own will, he collapsed in death there and then.

"That may seem extraordinary—almost unbelievable to you, but before we have finished with these persons you will find I am right, or I will have made one of the biggest mistakes of my career. This is neither the time nor the place to go into details on that point.

"So we are at this phase of the investigation. The Black Wolf still possesses the vase which we seek. The persons from Morocco, who are driven on by some overpowering need for its possession, will still fight for it; for now we may take it they do not know the vase has even been shattered—much less that it was a faked vase which was used for the purpose.

"In that the plans of the Black Wolf have gone agley. Then, in our possession, is the lid which fits the vase. Do the mysterious individuals from Morocco guess we have it? If they do, we may rest assured they will leave no stone unturned to get it from us?

"Does Mademoiselle Miton—the Black Wolf—know it has been found, and that it is in the possession of Mr. Gilmore? If so, then she, too, will join the lists. She, too, is after the strange documents which it is thought Lucrezia Borgia kept secretly. We, too, are here in Venice for that same purpose.

"And now I come to the crux of that matter in particular. Why are we here? Why should those secret documents which were written by the famous poisoner—Lucrezia Borgia—hundreds of years ago, attract us to this city of canals? I will tell you.

"It is because Dr. Challoner believed and I believe—and when I say I, I should also add the Black Wolf—that in those documents we shall find a code translation of the mysterious symbols which cover the whole of the urn which we seek.

"It is because Dr. Challoner thought Lucrezia Borgia had in some way deciphered the meaning of those signs which are of a written glyph language long dead. Shall we find them in the Palazzo Alino? Shall we find that they still exist? Or were they destroyed before Lucrezia Borgia gave that last banquet of death?

"I do not think she destroyed them. I will tell you why. Recall what Nipper has told us. He said that the door leading from that banqueting-room to the passage which ran on to the secret periphery of the place, was locked on the inside—that is, that it had been locked after the feast had been served.

"Nipper saw the skeletons of all those who had attended the feast. They had all been poisoned. They had all succumbed. Lucrezia Borgia never intended that her son should perish. He did so. That was a play wherein Fate held the winning hand.

"Stunned with the knowledge that her son had been her victim as well, Lucrezia Borgia, in a fit of remorse, decided to take her own life. Now, she may have unlocked that door, and gone by the secret passage to her rooms, returning, and locking the door after her. On the other hand, she may have taken the poison at once.

"Myself, I incline to this latter theory. And, moreover, I think if she did have any secret documents concealed in the Palazzo Alino, she would be most likely to keep them in some hidden compartment in that same underground banqueting-room which has laid undisturbed ever since that last ghastly and gruesome banquet.

"Therefore, I say that as a first step in the prime effort to get possession of the sacred vase, we should gain access to that same secret room before the Black Wolf discovers its existence. Once we find the documents which we think exist, then if things come to a show down, we shall at least have a strong card in our hands. What do you think, Gilmore?"

The American shifted his cold cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"It strikes me that you have about hit the nail on the head, Lee," he said. "I am with you in anything you do."

"And you, Rodrigo, what have you to say?" went on Lee, glancing at the old man.

Rodrigo, who was in a ferment of desire over the prospect of actually coming upon the secret papers of Lucrezia Borgia, nodded vigorously.

"I am agreed, signor," he said quickly. "But how shall we get into the chamber? Remember, we have not yet taken possession of the house next to the Palazzo Alino."

"Nor shall we do so now if things go as I hope," replied Lee. "We shall reach the secret room by the same way Nipper reached it—by the opening under the water of the canal. It will be a wet way and an uncomfortable way, but by assisting each other to negotiate it we should manage all right. I swim, Nipper swims, and I suppose you swim, Gilmore?"

The American smiled.

"Do I swim?" he exclaimed. "Does a nigger eat chicken?"

"And you, Rodrigo?" asked Lee, with a smile.

"Signor, when I was a boy in Naples I dived deep in the blue waters of the Mediterranean. I could stay down a good two minutes."

"Then that settles it," remarked Lee. "And, gentlemen, I think there could be no better time than this very night to test our scheme. What say you?"

A chorus of assent greeted this proposal, and Lee at once set about making the necessary arrangements for the attempt. Firstly, they all stripped off most of their heavier clothing, and covered themselves with long cloaks which effectually kept at bay the chill of the night air.

Then Lee got out several electric torches which would stand the submersion in water. Flasks were filled and revolvers placed in waterproof holsters.

That done they felt ready to proceed, and since the gondolier whom old Rodrigo vouched for was still at the water steps of the hotel, it was decided to take him.

They all descended together, and passed out on to the hotel landing. The gondolier Luicci was there as they thought, and it was apparent that he was quite accustomed to strange proceedings on the part of those who employed him, for he betrayed not the slightest interest when Rodrigo ordered him to proceed slowly and cautiously to the Palazzo Alino.

By devious turnings, through many small narrow and somewhat odorous canals, the gondola slipped along over the dark waters.

It was well past one now, and the canals were almost deserted, only the gondolas, which were tied up at the posts along each side of the canal, indicating how busy it would be in the hours of the coming day.

The tourist and the merry-maker had long ago retired. The singer and the guitar had grown silent. The great buildings lining the canals were dark and sombre and silent.

Venice was asleep. But not so that quartette which was sitting in the shadow of the feize of the gondola. They were silent but wide awake—cautious and on the alert. They were bent on serious business, and they knew it. They were equipped for whatever the night might bring. They were on the trail.

They were proceeding to definite coverts for definite and elusive game. They knew it might end in serious things before it was finished. They had had a taste of it. They were ready with the readiness of those who have known the edge of the steel.

Once the gondola came to the narrow and widening canal whereon was situated the Palazzo Alino. Old Rodrigo leaned forward, fixing his deep-toned, deep-coloured eyes on the waters ahead much after the fashion of a hawk that has wheeled and wheeled for hours and is now within measurable distance of its prey.

For sixty long years, by his own words, he had puzzled over the secret of the Palazzo Alino. Small wonder is it that the prospect of at last probing that secret should cause the blood in his aged body to course the faster.

It was when they finally reached the scene of the attack on the Black Wolf earlier in the evening, that Luicci, the gondolier, signed to Lee, and Nipper rose from his place.

"This is the spot, gov'nor," he whispered. "It was just here I went down, and just here I emerged."

Lee nodded and rose also.

"Very good, my lad," he whispered back. "We will lose no time in getting on with the work."

Luicci had brought the gondola to a full stop now, and had let it swing into the shadow of the building which stood next to the Palazzo Alino.

Nelson Lee stood at the side of the feize pondering for a few moments, then as his eyes suddenly lit on a long pole which lay along the full length of the gondola, he bent swiftly and caught hold of it.

Holding it upright in his hands he thrust one end of it down into the dark waters of the canal.

Gilmore, who was standing close to him, divined the purpose of the other, and chuckled softly.

"A good idea," he exclaimed. "It will be an admirable guide for the descent. By the way, who will go first?"

Lee glanced towards Nipper.

"How about it, lad?" he asked. "You know the way. Will you go first?"

"Certainly, gov'nor," replied the lad promptly. "I'll get inside and clear the rats out."

He moved to the side as he spoke, and tapped his pockets to see if all was right. Then he slipped off the big coat he had been wearing, and with a last glance round laid his hands on the side of the gondola.

The next moment there was a soft splash as his feet struck the water, and holding on to the side with one hand he got the other round the pole which Lee was holding against the gondola.

He gave them a smile as he slipped down the pole; his head disappeared beneath the water.

A few moments later Lee felt the pole jerk back in his hands as Nipper pushed away from it beneath the water.

A full minute he waited as he stood, then he said:

"If the lad has managed all right, he will be on the ledge of which he spoke by now. Who is next?"

Old Rodrigo, quivering with eagerness, was the next to offer. He slipped off his coat, and following the example of Nipper, dropped over the side.

Lee held the pole firm until he felt the quick jerk which signified that the old man had left it. Then he signed to Gilmore.

"You next, old man," he said with a smile.

"But how about you?" protested the archæologist. "There will be no one to hold the pole for you."

"I will get Luicci to put a hand on it," replied Lee.

After a few words of argument he persuaded Gilmore to go ahead, and then, when he had received his full minute, Lee spoke to Luicci.

"Can you manage to give the pole a hand while I go over?" he asked.

"But yes, signor," replied the gondolier. "And me, signor? shall I wait here?"

"Yes, and be ready for immediate action," responded Lee. "We may come quickly when we do come, Luicci."

The gondolier took hold of the pole, and Lee slipped off his heavy coat. Then, with a last look round to see that they had not been observed, he dropped over the side, and catching hold of the pole allowed himself to sink beneath the surface.

As the water of the canal rushed about his ears he opened his eyes, as was his habit under water, but could see nothing of his surroundings so dark was it.

A little of the water seeped in between his lips and tasted salty and unsavoury. He closed them firmer, then when he had sunk what he considered several feet, he thrust out his feet, feeling for the wall of the old house close to which Luicci was holding the gondola.

His foot failed to come into contact with anything, and figuring he was deep enough to be opposite the hole in the wall of which Nipper had spoken, he let go the pole.

He struck out with a dash towards where he knew the wall of the house to be, swimming downwards, and then as he felt a sweep of water catch him and pull him onwards he knew that he had struck the opening he sought.

He swam on and on until he could hold his breath no longer, then he struck upwards with a rush.

Up! up! up! he went until he felt the blessed air above, and as he shook the water from his eyes and blew the salty brine from his lips, he saw three bright flashes of light turned in his direction.

The next moment he had taken in the details of what seemed a small cavern, and three pairs of hands were dragging him to the safety of the narrow ledge.

Lee climbed out, and as he stood upright he was compelled to smile at the three dripping figures of his companions.

"That is what I call good work," he said, as he wrung the water from his clothes. "Every one of us seems to have made the trip successfully."

"I nearly dashed my brains out against the stone arch over the opening in the wall," grunted Gilmore. "I left the pole too soon—wasn't deep enough in the water. I managed to get through somehow though, and Nipper and Rodrigo pulled me out."

Lee now gazed about him, and for the first time took in the details of that secret cellar cave which had been built in the days when the doges ruled Venice.

"From any point of view this is interesting," he remarked as he took in the narrow ledge, the arched stone roof, and the open mouths of the mystery tunnels at either end of the ledge.

"Which tunnel did you follow, my lad?"

"This one to the right, guv'nor," replied the lad.

"Then you have no idea which way the other goes?"

"No, sir. When I got back here to the ledge I had had about enough."

"My idea of that tunnel is that it serves this house we are now beneath," put in old Rodrigo, who had evidently been improving his time while waiting. "You see, the tunnel to the right runs off towards the Palazzo Alino which adjoins this house. In the old days those who lived in the two houses were probably mixed up together, and they mutually built this means of escape in case they needed it."

"I fancy you are right, Rodrigo," remarked Lee, as he gazed about him. "However, that we may be able to decide later. Let us now go ahead to the secret banqueting-room which Nipper discovered. You lead the way, my lad. We follow."

Nipper turned, and with far different sensations than he had experienced on his first journey along that strange passage, he led the way along the edge until they came to the vaulted opening to the tunnel.

There he began to advance up the slightly rising floor of the tunnel, passing the dead Arab, until at last he reached the door of the banqueting-room wherein had been held that gruesome banquet of death. The others were close behind

him, and as they squeezed through the old doorway a score of rats scurried out between their legs.

On the threshold the whole party came to a halt, and casting the lights of their torches upon the scene gazed their fill. They saw what each of them had seen in his mind's eyes as Nipper had described it.

Still undisturbed sat those skeleton diners just as they had fallen forward at their places. On the board still reposed the magnificent silver and gold dishes, which, hundreds of years ago, had held food.

There, at the head of the table was the great empty chair which Nipper had told them of. And as they took a step forward they saw, lying beside it, the brocade-gowned skeleton of the mystery woman.

Nelson Lee and Gilmore took each a deep breath as they gazed upon that scene of a past age. Old Rodrigo was fairly trembling with excitement. Nipper was perhaps the least affected of the lot. He had seen it before.

Slowly and together they advanced. Then suddenly Rodrigo dashed forward and, dropping to his knees, turned his light full on the eyeless and lidless hollows where once had been the orbs of a woman.

His fingers caught up the long brazen tresses which fell all about the ghastly countenance, and as he sifted the strands between his eager hands he crooned aloud :

"It is—I will stake my reputation! It is Lucrezia Borgia herself!" he cried. "Look at these strands! Look at the brocade! It is the same hair, the same gown which Titian himself portrayed. It is—it is Lucrezia Borgia!"

Lee and Gilmore were on their knees beside him now, and their eyes confirmed what the old expert said.

It was a weird scene that. A tragedy—a secret and gruesome tragedy of hundreds of years gone—exposed in the present day, with one of the cleverest of modern criminologists probing it to find the clue to a present day mystery.

Truly, the present is built on the past. It was a harkening from the years ago. It was the spanning of a wide chasm of time. It was a flying leap into the abyss of old Venetian intriguing and mystery. It was the uncovering of a mystery which the world had never explained.

Suddenly Nelson Lee got to his feet and took up his stand by the door leading to the periphery which Nipper had come upon as he had proceeded deeper into the secret passages of that strange old palace.

Recalling the details of the lad's story, Lee went over every portion of the room with that searching gaze of his, trying to reconstruct conditions as they had been those hundreds of years past.

He could visualise the company sitting down to the banqueting table. He could see the servants passing about the dishes to the guests, and then, at the bidding of their mistress, retiring from the place.

He could see the hostess, with a smile on her lips and grim murder in her heart, closing and bolting the great door.

Then would come the feast, and he tried to picture to himself the alluring, inscrutable smile which would play about the red lips of the poisoner as she toyed with the golden cup which held her drink, and watched for the first effect of the poison.

Then would come the first blank look on the face of one of the guests. Another would soon discover that something was wrong; then the rest would quickly follow, and the smile would quiver afresh on the false and vile lips of the poisoner as she watched the poison take its toll.

Take its toll! It was the breath of life to her to watch. It was the *feast* which her perverted soul craved. It was life to her. It was the splash of the warm blood-lust that she desired to saturate herself with until her soul reeled drunkenly under the drug.

Then—then her eyes would wander to the place where sat her son. Ah! he would see them go down, one by one; but he would be safe. Had she not told the servants that his dish was to contain the food such as her's contained?

Had she herself not picked out the morsels for those two dishes? But, dear Heaven, what was this? His face, too, was twitching! His eyes, too, were popping from his head! His jaw, too, hung slack, like the bestial jaw of a gargoyle! Was it horror at what he saw?

Merciful heavens! What was this? Leo could see the evil eyes of the woman fill with the horror of disbelief; he could see them suffuse with understanding. He could see the smile on the lips twist to a spasm of horror and terror.

Then the confines of that terrible banqueting-hall would ring out with the scream of the woman, as she realised her son—her son that know not she was his mother—had eaten of the poisoned dish.

He could see her reel to her feet, her long brocade gown sweeping about her magnificent figure—that beautiful temple which housed a soul so evil!

He could see her crouching over the son whose eyes were already glazed; then, as the full impact of the truth struck her, he could hear her moan out to the son that she—she, the poisoner, was his mother.

Then the form would stiffen even as she held it. She would tear her beautiful coils of hair in her agony; then, with full realisation, she would leap for escape—the escape of the suicide.

Was it a true reconstruction of what had happened? Had Nelson Lee's mind travelled down into the abyss of time and found light? It was entirely possible.

Then what had become of the secret records of the woman, if she were Lucrezia Borgia, and if she had kept secret records as history seemed convinced she had?

Were they, by any chance, in this house—this Palazzo Alino, which she had made a secret rendezvous for her schemes? What safer place could she find? And, in all the house, what safer place than this very room where she was accustomed to hold her frightful orgies?

Nelson Lee took a step forward and laid his hand on the shoulder of the old curiosity dealer.

“Come, Rodrigo,” he said, “this is where I need your advice!”

The old man allowed the brazen tresses to drop from his fingers and got to his feet.

“Look about this room, Rodrigo,” said Lee, when he had the old man's attention. “You know the old Venetian palaces as no other man living knows them. Look about this room and tell me if you think it may have a secret compartment?”

Rodrigo turned slowly about, his professional mind now uppermost. Slowly he took in the details of the place, then, as his gaze lit on a swollen bastion of stone in one corner, he grew rigid.

“There, if anywhere, you will find a secret compartment,” he said, pointing to it. “I know the method by which those old secret places were worked. Let me try.”

They followed him to the corner and watched him closely while he stood against the bastion and ran his nimble hands over it. It was high up near a stone jointure that his hands came to rest, and then suddenly, before their very eyes, the bastion turned to one side, revealing the fact that it was completely hollow within.

Eagerly, ay, trembling with excitement, they bent over the opening disclosed, and there before them they saw a small iron box which lay in the hollow.

Nelson Lee had it out in a trice, and, as the light from the electric torches fell full upon it, Rodrigo snorted with the strain.

“It is old Venetian, every bit of it!” he cried. “I know that type of box well; it is genuine. Open it, signor; open it, if you must burst it!”

“Not here,” replied Leo, as he pushed the bastion back into place. “Not here! We shall open it when we get back to the hotel. I——”

"You will drop that box and hold up your hands!" came a cool voice behind them.

So engrossed had they all been in their contemplation of the iron box which they had discovered that they had not heard a single sound. Now they all swung round as one man, and there in the doorway leading to the periphery, which in turn held the secret entrance to the palazzo proper, stood a slim figure in white with a small, but exceedingly business-like-looking, automatic in each hand.

One of the weapons was levelled at Nelson Lee, the other at Peter Gilmore, but with the position in which they were standing the pair of pistols covered them all effectually, and their own weapons were still in the waterproof holsters where they had placed them before leaving the hotel.

"The Black Wolf!" exclaimed Leo and Nipper, in one breath; while Rodrigo cried: "It is the signorina!"

Mademoiselle Miton smiled coolly.

"It is the Black Wolf!" she said, challenging Lee with her dark eyes. "What, pray, are you doing in this cellar beneath my house? Who gave you authority to enter here? And, pray, what are you searching for?"

If she felt any repugnance at the sight about the table before her, she gave no sign. She was dressed in the same soft house-gown which she had worn when Nipper had seen her earlier in the evening, and as he gazed upon her, Nelson Lee could not suppress a thrill at the beauty of her.

She was riotously, warmly lovely, her slim, graceful young body litho as that of a panther, and yet bursting with the richness of a bud unfolding.

The loose sleeves of the gown fell away from her arms, revealing them in almost startling whiteness against the blue of the material. Her throat was bare, the gown being cut low at the neck, and against the dark coils of her hair her face gleamed like tinted alabaster.

Her lips were like a crimson slash as she compressed them; her nostrils dilated slightly under the tenseness of her bearing. Her eyes, heavy-lidded and mocking, seemed to smile at them with the same inscrutable purpose as the eyes of the Mona Lisa hold.

There was a zest in this crossing of swords with the Black Wolf.

"I am waiting!" she said coolly, when none of them answered her.

Nelson Lee recovered from his surprise and smiled back at her.

"You came so silently, mademoiselle, that we must apologise for our rudeness!" he said suavely. "As to what we are doing here, need you ask? We are here for the same purpose which induced you to take the Palazzo Alino. You may say we are here without right. That may be so, but in this game we are playing it would be foolish to have scruples about such things. In the main purpose, in the ultimate endeavour, we follow the right. You, like others, seek but your own gain!"

"You speak brave words, monsieur!" she sneered back at him, driven to lose her temper as Lee hoped she would. "You speak brave words for a man who is within an ace of death! I will thank you to put down that box you are holding. I will thank you to put that hand up with the other. I will thank you all to fall into line, and to go ahead of me. I shall deal with you as you deserve!"

Peter Gilmore, Nipper, and Rodrigo, one and all, shot a quick look at Lee, to see what he would do. As for him, he was smiling oddly.

Then, before any of them guessed his purpose, he had thrown the iron box up in front of him, and, crying, "Come on, you fellows—quick! Rush her!" he dashed forward.

Mademoiselle Miton did not give an inch. Instead, she grasped her weapons a little more tightly and fired straight at Lee.

Lee, who had anticipated the shot, held the iron box high, and the bullet crashed against it, ricocheting off to the table, striking one of the golden plates, and then spending itself against the wall.

Still Lee kept on, and again the weapon spoke. But now the second weapon rang out, and Gilmore gave a cry as a bullet caught him in the shoulder.

Then Lee had reached her, but even as he reached out for her, the Black Wolf hurled the pair of weapons full at him, and, turning, sped into the darkness of the secret tunnel, crying as she went:

“Marcel! Jaques! Andre! A moi! A Le Loup Noir!”

Lee drew up and picked up one of the weapons from the floor, the while he rubbed his cheek where the butt of one had caught him. Nipper was on the other like a flash, and then Lee swung the door to and bolted it.

“She has the whole crew in there!” he panted. “They will be here in a second! If they shoot us down, we are done for! Quick, Nipper; get the bars up while I push in the bolts!”

They worked quickly, and just as the last bolt was thrust home there came a terrific crash on the other side, as the myrmidons of the Black Wolf rushed the door.

“It is a stout door, and will hold for a little!” panted Lee. “Now then, jerk off a cloak from one of those skeletons, my lad. That will do. Let us make a sack of sorts out of it. Now dump in all this silver and gold plate, and the goblets. That is the style!”

“How is the shoulder, Gilmore? Only a slight wound? Good! Will you be able to make the swim? It isn’t far; you will have to try. Now then, my lad, rip some strips off some more of those cloaks. Ah! that braid will do splendidly. Make a cord of it; I will show you later what I want of it. Now, are we ready? Good! All together—come on!”

All the time he had been whipping out his remarks, Nelson Lee had been working like mad, dumping in the gold and silver plates and goblets into the sack he and Nipper had formed from the cloak.

Gilmore had been dabbing at his shoulder, and now, with the assistance of Rodrigo, he made a rough pad of his handkerchief and closed his coat over it.

Lee led the way from the banqueting-room, even as there came a fresh assault on the door behind them.

They raced down the passage, and, as they turned the corner and dashed on to the ledge, they heard a tremendous crash which heralded the yielding of the door.

Lee dumped the sack of plate on the ledge, and, using the cord which Nipper had fashioned from the braid he had ripped from several of the coats, he tied one end to the sack, while the other he attached to himself.

There was a coil of twenty feet or more slack, and now, as it lay loose on the ledge, the others saw his purpose.

“You are the oldest; you go first, Rodrigo!” ordered Lee. “Come, no argument; there is no time to lose!”

The old man put his hands over his head, and a moment later the water parted as his body cut it in a clean dive. Lee gave him about ten seconds, then he signed to Gilmore.

“You next, old man!” he said; and Gilmore, stiff from his wounded shoulder, made a supreme and clumsy effort to dive.

He disappeared from view, and then Lee turned to Nipper.

“Take the iron box, my lad, and go next.”

Nipper, who knew it was no use to argue, picked up the iron box and prepared to go. At that same moment there came the sound of footsteps along the tunnel, and even as he balanced himself on the edge of the ledge he saw the Black Wolf sweep into view, followed by three men.

“I’ll stay with you, gov’nor,” he said quickly, drawing back.

Lee laid his hand on the lad’s shoulder and gave him a violent push.

“You will go now!” he snapped; and Nipper, unprepared for the shove, went headlong over the edge into the murky water below.

Lee had just laid his hand on the sack to hurl it over, when suddenly there came a noise from the other tunnel, that on the left as he now stood; and, turning swiftly, he saw three dark-skinned, turbaned figures appear.

"The Arabs from Morocco!" he exclaimed aloud. "Scott, there will be a fight on this ledge now! And we—we get away with some of the booty, at least!"

With that he threw the sack over, and as the heavy plate went down, with the cord whipping out at his feet, Nelson Lee turned to the Black Wolf with a mocking smile on his lips.

"Au revoir, mademoiselle!" he cried. "To our next meeting! I trust you and our dusky-skinned friends will enjoy your interview!"

With that he raised his hands above his head, and his body cleaved the water in a clean dive. It must have mystified the Black Wolf to know what had become of him, for then she knew nothing of that opening in the wall beneath the water.

Lee swam downwards as hard as he could, then straight ahead until he felt that he must be through the opening in the wall. He struck upwards with all his strength, and, with lungs bursting, came to the surface of the canal to find the gondola floating near and his three companions bending anxiously over the side. They drew him in, and as he lay panting Nipper caught hold of the cord round his waist and drew up the sack of plate which had sunk to the bottom of the canal.

"There will be the devil to pay in there!" panted Lee as his breath returned. The Arabs crew burst out of the other tunnel just as the Black Wolf and her men reached the ledge. But let us get out of here at once. We will leave them to it."

And that was the wisest thing which Lee could have done, for inside that strange and gruesome building the three Arabs who had discovered the tunnel, and who had rushed through it just as Lee had taken his dive, were being slowly driven back by the accurate shooting of the Black Wolf and her men.

With two of them wounded, they all three took to flight; and with her own victorious, but disappointed party, the Black Wolf was wending her way back to the gruesome banqueting hall of death even as Luicci, the gondolier, drove his big gondola towards the Hotel de Paris.

And what did Nelson Lee find in that iron box which he had taken from the Palazzo Alino? He found that which held all four of them breathless with interest the while they laboriously endeavoured to decipher what they knew to be the code record of Lucrezia Borgia herself.

They had found the secret documents of the greatest poisoner of history. And therein old Rodrigo was invaluable, for he it was who suggested the key method by which they finally probed the secret of the code.

One paper alone Nelson Lee insisted on deciphering in full that very night, and what he read caused him to sit rigid with an overmastering awe at what was revealed.

He had not gained possession of the sacred urn of the old priests of lost Atlantis, but he had gained the documents which were the only existing explanation of that sacred urn. And he knew beyond all doubt that it was what poor Dr. Challoner had said in his manuscript it was. He knew it was older than the oldest pyramid in Egypt, that it had dropped into oblivion before the great sphinx had been thought of. He knew that in the hands of the Black Wolf was a crystal urn which had been fashioned by a civilisation which in many respects was far, far greater than any the world had known since—by a people who had been born, evolved and annihilated before the first dynasty of the ancient Egyptians; before Solomon had risen up in Judea; before the empire of the Queen of Sheba had evolved from chaos.

And there in those documents, which he would decipher in London, was the explanation of the minute characters with which the urn was covered.

But that was for the future. The gold and silver plate and goblets which they had taken from the banqueting-room of death were worth a fortune as genuine relics of the ages of the doges—worth far, far more than their actual metal weight.

It was fitting that old Rodrigo should share equally with the others in this, and that he should arrange to go to London with Nelson Lee, there to decipher every portion of the documents which had been found. It would be the crowning work of his life. And with him would go Peter Gilmore, who, if he had not managed to get the sacred urn which his priceless lid fitted, had at least proved that it existed. And working with Nelson Lee, he felt somehow that it was the only chance he would ever have of touching that magnificent creation of a lost people.

The next morning, armed with an authority which would prevail against all the tricks of the Black Wolf, Nelson Lee visited the Palazzo Alino. But even as they drew into the water-steps of the palazzo a large gondola appeared, and they saw Luicci signalling to them. They waited until he came up, and when the gondolas had bumped he leaned across to Lee and said :

"If you go to call, signor, you will find no one there. From the Palazzo Alino two gondolas left this morning, bearing much luggage and several persons. I followed them. They went to the station at the end of the long bridge which comes from the mainland. By now they are far away. And from the next house, signor, a gondola went this morning to the outer canals. I saw the four men—men whose skins are darker than the skins of Italy's sons, signor—board a small boat, which spread its sails and sailed into the Adriatic."

Nelson Lee's jaws came together.

"Whatever the result of that meeting on the ledge last night, they had all taken to flight," he muttered to Gilmore, who sat beside him. "Well, they may do so; but"—and his face grew grim—"I have vowed not to rest until I run that sacred urn to earth, and I repeat that vow. Let us get back to the hotel at once, then for London."

The gondola turned and made its way slowly back to the Hotel de Paris. They departed for London by way of Paris that same night, taking with them the treasure they had found, and, what was to prove worth far more, the secret documents of Lucrezia Borgia, the infamous poisoner of the Middle Ages.

But soon, very soon, when he had deciphered the contents of those documents, Nelson Lee was to come to grips in a last struggle for the sacred urn of lost Atlantis, which would dwarf all other struggles which had arisen from that ill-fated vaso which carried death in its trail.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

the concluding story of the Sacred Urn—a tale of
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IN POLAR SEAS.

A Romance of Adventure in the Frozen North.

BY

FENTON ASH,

Author of "A Trip to Mars," "The Radium Seekers," etc.

HUGH ARNOLD, a young English lad, goes out to the far North with an expedition. He is joined by an Irish sailor—MIKE O'GRADY, and also VAL RUXTON.

The latter and Hugh become fast friends, but one day Val hints that Hugh joined the expedition under a false name, and says that Amaki, a neighbouring Eskimo, has been asking for tidings of a certain explorer whose name is well known in the scientific world. For some reason, Hugh turns pale.

The camp is raided by a neighbouring party, but Hugh and Ruxton, with two sailors, put up a stiff fight. The attackers are beaten off, and a trap is laid for them.

Having captured the strangers, the leader—GRIMSTOCK—comes upon the scene, and it seems that Hugh and Ruxton are in for a bad time.

Hugh and Val Ruxton are sent out by Grimstock to make observations, but return to find the camp deserted—they are left to die in the dreary white wilderness.

A short time afterwards, while the two chums are out together, Hugh thinks he sees some mountains and pastureland far out to sea. Val Ruxton, however, tells him that what he sees is only a mirage.

Hugh, however, is quite right, and after travelling many weary miles the chums enter the "Green Land."

The party meet some fierce animals, and, after beating them off, make their camp in a cave. They are not left long in peace, however, for the brutes return to the attack a few hours afterwards in large numbers.

One of the animals succeeds in getting into the cave, and Hugh, for pure devilment, begins to fight it single-handed, thereby affording great amusement to the others, who are looking on. (Now read on.)

Matters Become Serious.

ON the other hand, as the smoke grew thicker, it caused increased discomfort to those inside. Also, it presently began to interfere with the spectators' view of the struggle. The combatants became, at times, just barely visible, or grew shadowy and unreal, according as they happened to swerve a little nearer or a little farther away.

At last, just when Ruxton was beginning to think it time for someone else to take a hand, he heard his friend's voice singing out cheerily:

"Hi! Bob, or some of you fellows! Bring me a rope to tie this chap up with! Look sharp! I've got him on toast—but there's a lot of fight left in him yet, and he's a devil to struggle!"

Bob promptly produced a cord, and ran into the smoke in the direction of the voice. There, to his surprise, he found Hugh standing, looking with a puzzled air at his captive. The latter was not struggling at all. On the

contrary, it was standing glancing at its captor with eyes from which all ferocity or rage had completely vanished.

In place of the demoniacal frenzy which it had previously exhibited, there was now a look of dumb, patient submission, that had in it also a little surprise or perplexity, and the sort of shame a dog shows when detected by its master in some delinquency.

Hugh had released his iron grip, and was merely resting his hand on the creature's shoulder, as a precautionary against any treacherous surprise. But Bob, glancing at it cautiously, could see no cause for suspicion.

"Why, sir," said he, with an appreciative grin, "you've tamed him proper!"

"So it seems, Bob," returned Hugh, still with that puzzled look on his face. "But that has only come about during the last half-minute. At the time I called out to you it was still struggling and kicking, and trying to scratch, like a wild-cat. It was all I could do to hold it. I am as much surprised at this sudden change as I can see you are."

"Well, sir, I'd better tie the varmint up t' make sure like. Else p'r'aps he be waitin' fur a chance to' slip off—or fly at ye agen sudden."

"I—d—don't—think—so—Bob," Hugh answered slowly, still staring at his captive. One thing that puzzled him was that every time he spoke the creature glanced up and made as if to come nearer, just as a dog does that wishes to make friends but has some doubt how its overtures will be received.

As to Hugh himself, he carried on his person very clear evidence that the contest had been a hard-fought one in every sense of the word. His face and hands were covered with blood, which had also run over his clothes, and these in turn were practically in tatters. His formidable foe had, as Bob expressed it, "made a rag doll of him."

Yet little trace was there now left in the vanquished monster of the ungovernable, diabolic ferocity of a few minutes before. A flash of it came back, however, when Bob tried to put a cord round it. Then its rage returned with such sudden intensity as to make the sailor jump—and almost Hugh, too.

"Ugh! The spitfire! Ho baint tamed yet," quoth Bob.

"He doesn't like you to touch him, Bob. You see, you're a sort of stranger to him. Not an old acquaintance, like myself. Let me have the cord and see how he takes it."

With another grin, Bob handed over the rope, and Hugh passed it round his prisoner's body, fastening it so as to merely keep his arms close to its sides, and leave a long piece loose, like a leash. To this it submitted quite placidly.

"There!" said Hugh. "I think that will suffice. You see he's quiet enough with me, at any rate."

"I wouldn't trust the critter, sir, all the same, if I was you," remarked Bob suspiciously.

Hugh, however, took no notice, but led his captive over to where Ruxton stood at the entrance.

"Here's my capture, Val," he laughed. "A real missing-link! What do you think of it?"

"As ugly an imp as I ever set eyes on," was his chum's blunt comment.

"What are you going to do with it?"

That was a question Hugh could not answer off-hand. He was turning it over in his own mind.

"I think I'll keep it, at all events, for the present, as a sort of hostage," he answered. "Hallo! They're at it again! Going to begin all over again?"

This referred to the captive's friends outside, who were now showing signs of renewed activity.

"We'll have to decide what we're going to do," said Ruxton. "I can't stand this smoke much longer. Which is it to be—put some more on the fire and retreat to our second line, or put it out and continue our endeavour to keep the beasts out?"

There suddenly arose another threatening chorus of yells and screams, and a rush was made once more at the rock.

"All hands to keep 'em out!" shouted Val; and the others darted to the places they had temporarily left.

But it seemed as though they were to pay dearly for their lack of vigilance. Ere they could bring their strength to bear upon the big stone it was pushed partly on one side, and two of their hideous foes, roaring and hissing with savage frenzy, their eyes glowing with insensate hate and ferocity, pushed themselves almost inside.

Behind them came others, those behind pushing on their fellows in front with a determination that promised to carry all before it.

Ruxton saw that it was too late to hope to stay them any longer.

"Run, you chaps!" he shouted. "Run for it, sharp! Then turn on 'em with the burning wood!"

But at that moment, high above the fiendish yelling of the horrible rout, there rang out a strange and piercing cry. So different was it from all other sounds that it was heard, distinctly, by attackers and defenders alike.

And as it echoed back from the rocky roof and sides the rush was stayed, and a great and wonderful hush fell upon the scene.

Again that strange cry rang out, the effect this time being equally marked—in some respects it was more wonderful still.

The attackers turned and sullenly retreated!

The adventurers could hardly believe their eyes, as they saw their terrible enemies, who had been so near to overwhelming them, turn and begin to slink off like a pack of hounds at the crack of the huntsman's whip.

And what had caused this sudden change? Who had uttered the strange cry which this band of maddened, ruthless monsters had so instantly obeyed? Whom had the hard-pressed travellers to thank for their deliverance from the awful peril that had seemed so close?

It was Hugh's captive! The creature he had fought and mastered! The captive standing beside its vanquisher with the cord around it—indeed, of which Hugh still held one end—but making no sort of attempt to get away or to follow its friends!

Ruxton stared at Hugh, Mike stared at Bob, and the rest stared at one another, in mute amazement. They were too much astonished to speak—or, may be, they had a dim idea that it might be wiser not to do so. It was just possible that the sound of their voices might be mistaken by these queer, incomprehensible creatures for a fresh challenge, and bring them trooping back in madder rage than ever.

And that was a possibility which it were certainly better to keep clear of; so all there held their peace, and waited, in wondering silence, to see what was to happen next.

"Caliban's" Peace Offering—Mike's Discomforture—A Startling Apparition.

It was some time before anyone spoke, and, meanwhile, the boulder that had blocked the entrance had been standing where it had been pushed aside by the assailants. Through the open space thus left a slight breeze entered, which cleared away the smoke.

All were listening keenly, doubtful whether the besiegers had really gone off for good, half suspecting that their seeming departure might be but a cunning ruse to draw the defenders out into the open.

But such sounds as the retreating foe still made, gradually died away into the distance; and at last Ruxton drew a long breath.

"I'm blessed if I can understand it! What does it mean?" he muttered helplessly.

"It's all as strange and unreal as the events in a nightmarish dream," muttered Hugh. "I confess I can't explain it any more than you can."

"Well, I suppose we can now do without this fire, at any rate," said Ruxton. "Here, you chaps, clear it away! I want to get the smoke out of my eyes!" Then, turning again to his chum, he asked: "What are you going to do with this missing-link? Do you propose to let your precious pet go—or what?"

"The beggar's no pet of mine," laughed Hugh. "It's a jolly sight too hideous to make a pet of. And yet," he added, as his glance fell again on the queer-looking creature, and noted the curious look in its eyes—half submissive and cringing, half puzzled and wondering—"I suppose we ought not to speak disrespectfully of it. The beast has certainly, in some strange way, done us a very good turn."

"It's the queerest go I ever saw or heard of," Val declared. "Why not turn it loose and let it follow its friends?"

"I certainly propose to do so—presently. But, don't you think it may be safer to keep it here with us for a while—say, till daylight—in case the others might alter their minds and return?"

"All right; just as you please," answered Val, laughing. "If I were you I should go and have a swill. You look pretty gruesome."

"H'm, yes; I guess you're right. I forgot all about that. I want some new clothes, too; though I don't see where they are to come from."

"We all want a new rig-out. We can't wear furs in this place. We'll have to be like your pet, I reckon—go without any."

Hugh went off to the little stream in the inside caverns, where he washed and bathed his face and hands. His captive followed him about like a dog, and showed that it felt at home by drinking at the stream. This gave Hugh an idea; he offered it some fish, which it ate ravenously in its raw state, to the great amusement of the party.

As it was then within an hour of sunrise, and the dawn was already appearing outside, Hugh finally untied the cord and set it free; and it went out through the entrance and disappeared.

"Well, let's hope we've done now with your 'Caliban,' and all his tribe," said Ruxton. "We'll quit this place when it gets light, and go on a voyage of discovery. We must try to find some part of the country where we can sleep in peace at nights, without fear of any more attacks of this sort."

"Somehow, I don't think we should be attacked again, even if we stayed here," returned Hugh. "But I agree with you that we must explore the country, and find out what sort of a place it is we've come to live in."

They had quite a merry time at their breakfast that morning. The events of the night took on a different appearance now that all cause for immediate anxiety was removed.

"We had better go fishing for a bit before we make a start," Ruxton advised. "Then we shall have something to carry with us, and we shall be sure of our next meal."

A little later there came a fresh surprise. Going outside to take a look round, Val ran hastily in again, crying:

"Why, here's your 'Caliban' coming back, bringing two of his kind

with him—oven uglier than himself! And I'm blest if they're not carrying something! They're regularly loaded up! What's their game now?"

It was, in fact, "game" that these extraordinary creatures had brought. The "something" with which they were loaded turned out to be dead animals freshly killed—a number of hares, with a few lemmings, and a blue fox. These they solemnly laid down at Hugh's feet, then at once went off, and vanished into the nearest wood.

"Well, I'm sugared!" exclaimed Ruxton, who had followed him out. "If this don't beat cock-fighting!"

The others had come out, too, and they were no less astonished.

Mike was particularly impressed.

"Sure, an' the craythers isn't sich a bad lot, afther all," was his verdict. "It's a fcine, sportin' sperrit they have. Mither Hugh bate that one fair and square, an' they all 'spects him for it."

As to the two leaders, they discussed this new development, and, indeed, the whole affair, over and over again, till they had exhausted every phase of it, without arriving at any explanation which satisfied them. So in the end they gave it up, and philosophically took possession of the "game," which was really a very useful acquisition just then, since it saved them from the necessity of going a-fishing.

Then they packed up such of their belongings as they could conveniently carry, and sallied forth on their travels.

During that and two or three days following, they wandered on, from one valley to another, without seeing any sign of human inhabitants, sleeping at night in caves—of which there were everywhere plenty.

Their progress was slow, on account of the necessity of adapting their pace to that of Amaki, who, though able to walk, could not go fast, or travel far.

They saw everywhere numbers of geysers and hot springs, and even the river they were following, though it gradually grew broader and deeper, was quite warm. They had indeed, more than one welcome bath in its tepid waters. Fish, too, was plentiful, and the Eskimos found no difficulty in catching a good supply.

During these days they grew accustomed to their new surroundings, and met with some minor adventures; but their most curious experience consisted in the fact that "Caliban"—as Ruxton persisted in calling the creature Hugh had captured and set free—still followed them about, and brought presents of "game."

Every day, at early morning or late evening, no matter where they had wandered to, the creature would find them out, and bring some freshly killed animals. Sometimes it came alone, at others, as before, it was attended by some of its kind.

In return, Hugh offered them fish, which they gladly accepted, devouring some of it on the spot, and carrying the rest away with them. Evidently they were not able to catch fish for themselves. This odd kind of "exchange and barter" exactly suited the travellers' requirements, for having no suitable weapons, they found animals very difficult to capture; whereas capturing fish was easy work for the Eskimos.

Though, however, the travellers themselves became quite used to these strange visits, it cannot be said that their queer visitors became any the more friendly, save as regards Hugh himself. With him, "Caliban" was docility itself; but with the rest of the party he and his fellows remained on terms of latent hostility.

They always laid their offerings at Hugh's feet; and would allow no one else to touch them. Nor would they suffer the slightest approach at familiarity on the part of the other travellers. They were in fact, quite as

savage and uncouth as ever in their behaviour towards them, just as ready as ever to fly out on the smallest excuse. But they were no longer aggressive, and only showed fight if touched or interfered with. Even then a command from Hugh—the mere sound of his voice, even—would reduce them to instant submission, just as though they had been well-trained dogs.

All this naturally was a standing riddle to the adventurers themselves. Hugh was not less puzzled than he had been at first, for the days went by without bringing any explanation of the wonder.

Miko thought it over, and finally decided that there could be no other reason than the one he had first thought of—that Hugh had vanquished one of them in fair fight, and thus won its "respect and obedience."

"An' so iv ye wants t' make the funny divils obey ye, same as Mистер Hugh," he said confidentially to Bob, "all ye've got to do is t' foight wan an' give him a batin,' same as he did. Thry it, Bob darlint, an' ye'll see it's roight I am."

"Not me," Cable returned. "Why doan't ye try it yerself, if ye're so anxious t' know?"

"I know Oi'm roight," Mike went on meditatively. "An' it's a grand thing t' know. A soine, aisy koind av animal-taming, it is."

"Ye'll get a tannin' yerself if ye doan't take care," jeered Cable. "I'd as soon tackle a tiger, meself, as one o' them demons."

Now, it so happened that the very next morning Mike went forth very early ostensibly to try his hand at catching some fish for breakfast. Shortly after, Hugh, strolling about to breathe the morning air, heard a terrible racket going on in a thicket close by. He ran up, pistol in hand, under the impression that one of the party had been attacked by some new enemy, and was only just in time to save Mike from what threatened to be a terrible fate at "Caliban's" hands—or, rather, claws.

The Irishman was in a very sorry state when rescued; and complained bitterly that the monster had set upon him without cause. As "Caliban" could not give his version of the affair, it remained a mystery. Cable had his own doubts about the matter; but said nothing. So whether it was that Mike had really attempted to put his theory to the test of practical experience, or whether the encounter had been a mere coincidence, was never revealed.

Val Ruxton was another who felt greatly puzzled as to what could be the reason of Hugh's strange influence with these savage creatures. He, however, shrewdly concluded that the secret lay in some peculiarity of voice. He recalled all the circumstances of the desperate conflict in the cavern, followed as it was by the sudden and seemingly inexplicable submission of the erstwhile demon-like being. And he remembered that this unexpected submission happened directly after Hugh had made his voice heard in its natural cheery tones, calling upon Cable to bring him a rope.

"It seems a very wonderful thing, but I reckon that it was your voice which tamed that fiend," he finally declared to his chum, "not the pounding you gave it. Is it not the case that the very moment it heard you call out to Cable it ceased its struggles?"

"Yes; that's so. But I don't see that it explains anything," Hugh made answer. "It merely suggests a fresh riddle. Why should my voice have that effect any more than yours, for instance, or anybody else's?"

"True; yet, that's not quite all. I've noticed in the eyes, both of 'Caliban,' and the others who come with him to us, an odd, questioning sort of look, as though you were almost as much of a puzzle to them as they are to us. Funny, isn't it?"

"Oh, that's carrying it too far," Hugh returned lightly. "But what's

the good of bothering about it? There is the fact—it's been a useful chance to us and I don't see the use of worrying further about it."

And, indeed, as it turned out, they had very little time to "bother" or "worry" further about it. Though they little thought it just then, they were on the eve of events which speedily threw their previous adventures into the shade, and made them appear tame and commonplace by comparison.

Later on, that same day when this talk had taken place, they met with a disagreeable surprise. They reached, in the course of their wanderings, a place where the river they had been following emptied itself into an extensive lake. So large was this sheet of water that the mountains on the farther side appeared quite a long way off. One of those near at hand, however, came sheer down into the water, and barred their further progress.

If, therefore, they wished to continue their exploration in that direction, it would be necessary for them to get to the other side of the river. This, in turn, presented difficulties, since the stream had become too deep and broad to cross without something to float them over.

"H'm! This seems a poser," muttered Ruxton. "I see only three things we can do. First, we might scale this mountain to the left, which looks a toughish job; secondly, we might build a raft or a canoe, and trust ourselves on the water, or thirdly, we can retrace our steps to where we started from, cross by the ford there, and come back along the other side of the river. Now, which shall we do?"

"We'll think about it," said Hugh, with a cheery laugh. "We're in no hurry. Let's find one of our usual caves and make ourselves as comfortable as we can for the night. Then we shall have time to consider which will be the least of those three evils."

Ruxton had nothing better to recommend, so the suggestion was duly carried out. A cave was chosen, and after supper, that night, the two friends strolled out to have a quiet chat by themselves.

The twilight had gone, but the landscape was illuminated by the strange light to which they had by this time become used. In addition, to-night, there was a half-moon which peeped out now and again between slow-moving clouds. But over the waters of the lake, and some of the lower cliffs, there was a drifting mist which obscured the view in that direction, and made the scene appear, in places, weird and ghostly. Suddenly, Ruxton stopped and laid a hand on his companion's arm, as a warning to be silent.

"I heard something!" he whispered. "I declare it sounded to me uncommonly like oars—and voices, too, I thought!"

Hugh listened, and sure enough, sounds came across the lake as of the stroke of long, heavy oars, and of the swish made as they took the water.

"Come this way—quick! We'd better hide ourselves," Val whispered.

They moved softly into the shadow of a dense thicket of pine-trees behind them, and there, concealed amongst some bushes, they waited and watched.

The sounds grew gradually louder, and then, upon the slight breeze, there came to their ears the sound of song, accompanied by the notes of some unknown instrument.

There were more voices than one—hoarse, deep voices raised in a wild, chanting chorus, unlike anything the listeners had ever heard before.

"Snakes alive!" muttered Ruxton. "I thought it must be Grimstock and his gang, and that they must have built themselves a canoe and were coming round here on an exploring jaunt. But they wouldn't be singing like that! What on earth's in the wind now?"

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Hugh, in low, awe-struck tones. "See what's coming out of the mist!"

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Scarcely could they believe their senses! There, looming, at first dimly, like a mere shadow, but every moment growing more defined, was an ancient looking vessel of such extraordinary form that they involuntarily rubbed their eyes, thinking, surely, it must be some fantastic freak of the imagination.

—

The Banner of Odin and the War-song of the Vikings—Dr. Fenwick's Theory—Prisoners!

THE wonderful apparition at which the two astonished friends were gazing might have stepped out bodily, so to speak, from some large picture of a war-galley of the Vikings of other days.

The strange craft was dark and sombre-looking, as though its solid timbers were blackened with extreme age. Its solid, heavy frame, and quaint design, suggested that it must have been built long ages ago, and had somehow lived through the centuries, defying not only the "battle and the breeze," but even the mighty, destroying hand of Time itself.

The prow rose high in the air, in the fashion with which prints and pictures of the ships of the old sea kings have made most of us familiar, and was finished off with a figure-head representing some fantastic monster with open jaws.

There was a mast, but in place of a sail, it carried a huge banner, and the craft depended, as a means of progression, upon heavy sweeps of oars, of which there were a dozen each side.

This vessel appeared to be crowded with men, whose voices, as already stated, were raised in a sonorous chorus. But their figures could at first be only dimly seen. Between the mist and the curious light illuminating the scene, everything about the mysterious craft had an unearthly, uncanny appearance. Only the regular splash of the oars and the ringing voices seemed to be real.

As to the song they chanted, that, too, appeared to exercise some weird, occult influence on those who heard it. As the concealed spectators listened to it they felt that it was utterly unlike anything they had ever heard before.

The words could not be distinguished, yet the listeners could tell what it was about almost as well if they had understood them. It was a song which set the pulse bounding, and the blood surging through the veins, a lay that fired the imagination, and filled the thoughts with vague longings and new ambitions.

No one who heard that stirring melody could doubt that he was listening to some wild war-song of the Sea Rovers. It told, without words, of the battle and the storm, of the howling wind, the raging sea, and the strife of armed men; one heard in it alike the shriek of the gale, the rush of the foaming waves, the clash of steel, and shout of the battle-cry.

Suddenly, the moon came out between the passing clouds, and its cold light played upon the gliding craft. Then, what had at first been mere dim shadows stood out more plainly. The moon's silvery rays fell upon shining helmets with curious wing-like appendages; they glinted upon swords and spears and burnished armour, and were flashed back from shields that shone like mirrors.

They lighted up the device emblazoned upon the banner, which could now be seen to be in the form of some black, bird-like creature, and revealed the bearded faces of the stern-looking warriors whose hoarse, sonorous voices had so thrilled the wondering spectators.

Then, as the clouds above drifted on and the moon again became hidden, the glittering swords and armour and those who bore them, faded once more into shadows. The vessel swept slowly round and passed back into the mist, and so vanished from sight. But the sound of the singing, and the weird wail of the unknown instrument that accompanied it, were still heard for a while, till they died away in the distance.

It was some time before either of the witnesses of this scene ventured to break the silence that ensued.

At last Ruxton spoke:

"Well!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "We've met with some novel experiences this trip, but this last business beats everything that's gone before. Was it real? Did we actually see something, or was it a—er—a sort of vision? To that, I'm afraid, there's no answer. 'Tis something, I reckon, that neither you nor I can explain!"

To his surprise, his chum burst out with:

"There you're wrong! I can explain it!"

Ruxton stared at him as though he thought he must be a bit mad—and this idea was almost confirmed as he saw that Hugh's face was glowing with excitement, and his eyes were sparkling as with a new light.

"Explain it, then, O Wise One."

"This," returned Hugh, speaking evidently under the influence of strong emotion, "this shows that my father was no foolish dreamer, as some people thought! Oh, that he were here with us, now, to see this wonderful confirmation of his theory!"

"What theory was that?"

"Tell me first—did you hear what they were singing?"

"I couldn't make out the words——"

"Nor could I—yet, I heard enough to tell me that it was some war-song of the ancient Norsemen——"

"How on earth can that be?"

"——also, did you see the banner, and what was worked upon it?"

"Some big black bird—a crow, may be——"

"No, no! A raven."

"Well, say a raven. There's not much difference."

"Oh, yes, there is. That is the banner of Odin, the Scandinavian deity. The raven is his emblem."

"You seem to be pretty well up in all this ancient lore."

"Yes, and for a very good reason; it is all connected with my father's theory."

"Listen! You like myself, have travelled in Iceland and have picked up the language!"

"You've evidently learned a great deal more of it than I ever did. I only picked up enough to be able to talk to people. You seem to have made a study of it. I have several times noticed that, and wondered why."

"I will now tell you why. In the opinion of the best authorities the Icelandic language of to-day is believed to be almost exactly the language of the Norsemen, as spoken by them nearly two thousand years ago."

"I don't see that that fact—if fact it be—helps us at all."

"It means a lot. For one thing, though I could not properly catch the words of the song just now, so as to follow it, I heard a word here and there which I understood. I am nearly certain that if those people were to talk to us, both you and I would understand them."

"They? Who? The ghosts?"

"They are not ghosts."

(To be continued.)

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