

NO. 31.—GRAND DETECTIVE NOVEL.—1^D.

*Week ending
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NELSON LEE

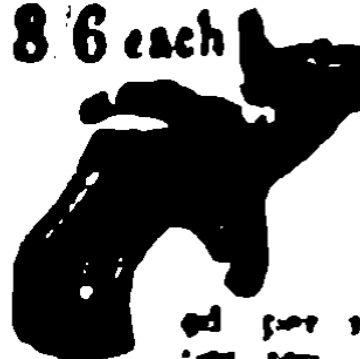
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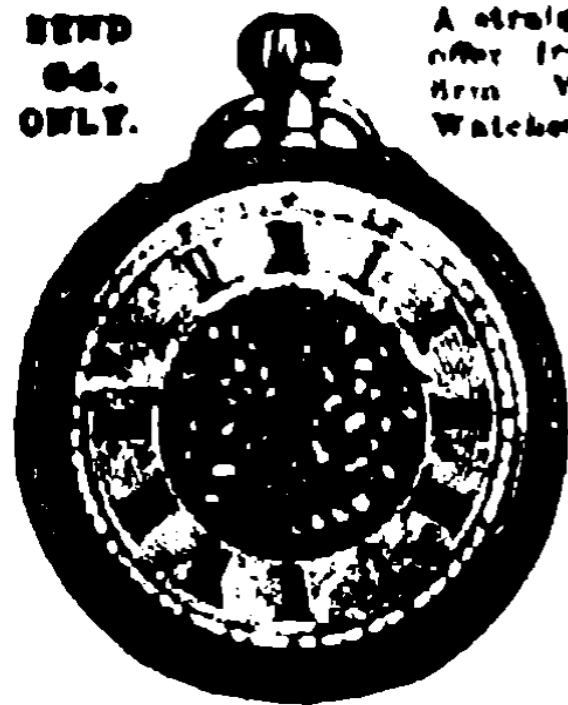
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CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee Has a Weird Experience—The Frozen Spell—A Strange Tale—A Voice from the Past—Sudden Death.

NELSON LEE had been at the House of Commons most of the evening. A promising young man from the North who had just taken his seat, and in whom Lee was more than ordinarily interested, had made his maiden speech on this evening, and Lee had been down to hear him.

Though the House had not yet adjourned, Lee had left, for the somewhat boring details of a long-winded financial debate, led by one of the members of the home counties, had little interest for him.

He had just come out from the great gates which lead to the famous House, and was standing at the end of Whitehall lighting a cigar, when it occurred to him that he would stroll down the Embankment as far as the Savoy, and drop in there for a bit of supper before going on to Gray's Inn Road.

Puffing at his cigar, and in a pleasantly introspective mood, he retraced his steps, and made towards Westminster Bridge. At the end he turned, passed St. Stephen's Club into the Embankment, and, keeping to the river side, strode on at a good pace.

It was getting late, and there were few pedestrians about, though several taxis flashed past him on their way up and down the Embankment. It was cloudy overhead, and a feeling of dampness in the air gave promise of a drizzle before the night was over.

Lee drew his Inverness closer about him so that the white front of his evening shirt was fully concealed, and, pondering on the promising career of his young friend from the North, smiled to himself.

"A good fellow, Jimmie!" he murmured. "He should make his mark. His father was a good man before him, and the boy is shaping well. His speech to-night, while a trifle raw in points, was clear and well delivered; and, moreover, it dealt with things which need legislation.

"I noticed some of the big guns of his party taking notice of him. The first thing I know—that lad will be an under-secretary. Well, I hope so. It is encouraging to be the trustee of a boy like that, and his father would have been pleased."

So communing with himself Lee strode on until he passed the bridge end at the bottom of Northumberland Avenue, and came upon the two sphinxes and Cleopatra's Needle. Just opposite him now was the great bulk of the Hotel Cecil, with, a little further on, the square expanse of the Savoy Hotel.

Lee was just about to cross the road and enter the Savoy by the rear when, as he glanced along the high wall of the Embankment, he noticed a figure standing gazing upon the deserted pier which stretches along at that point.

Something in the rigid attitude of the man who stood there caused Lee to hesitate, then change his mind about crossing the road, and make his way on to the spot where the man stood.

He had seen a good many queer things along that Embankment in his time, had Nelson Lee, and his experienced eyes detected something in the tense pose of the man which was not that of a man idly interested in the night life of the river.

Lee strolled up to him, and carelessly took up a position a few feet away. From the corners of his eyes he was watching the man closely, though, truth to tell, the other seemed absolutely oblivious of the presence of Lee.

Now that he had the man in profile, Lee could see that there was a space of several inches between him and the stone parapet in front of him. He was standing straight as a ramrod, his arms hanging rigidly by his side, his head peculiarly erect, his legs tensed as though braced for a shock, his eyes fixed and staring straight ahead of him.

It was an uncanny position. It was a creepy attitude, which repelled by what it concealed rather than by what it exhibited. It was like a man who has been frozen stiff by shock. Frozen! That was the word which fitted it. It was like the people of old who were turned into pillars of salt and stone by the wand of the magician. It was like something which had died and yet lived, like something which lived and yet had died. It was unnatural; it was not human, that attitude.

Lee moved a step nearer. Still the man gazed straight ahead of him, his open eyes as unblinking as those of an albino, his pupils as round and staring as those of a lidless snake.

It sent a cold shiver down Lee's back to watch the man thus. It suggested a hand which was not human, a hand which had dealt a blow of loathsome power at a human.

Another step and he could almost reach out and touch the man. Still the other stood rigidly gazing out at the river. Lee leaned his weight on the parapet, and turned full upon the other.

"The night life of the river is always a fascinating study," he ventured genially. "Myself, I often come here to study it."

No reply, only that same set gaze straight ahead.

"Pardon me," went on Lee. "You seem to be in trouble. Will you smoke a cigar with me, and perhaps——"

His words broke off suddenly as the figure of the man toppled forward like a plaster form which has been toppled over by an invisible hand. Just like that—a plaster form. And in the toppling the limbs bent not an atom. Straight, rigid, stark, as indurate as marble, he toppled forward until the inflexible body struck the parapet, and there it remained, looking like some grotesque dummy which has been but frailly balanced and had tipped.

Lee uttered a startled exclamation, and sprang forward. For the moment the thought crossed his mind that he had been the sport of some practical joker who had stuck a life-like dummy close to the parapet to fool the first passer-by.

He glanced quickly round, half expecting to hear a chortle of amusement from somewhere in the shadows. But none came, and now, as he laid his hand on the figure, he felt the flesh of a human being.

There was no hay and straw stuffing there; nor was it of cold marble, though, to be sure, the touch of the flesh was icy enough. So shadowy had it been that Lee had not been able to see exactly how the man was dressed, but now, as he bent over him, he saw that he was undoubtedly a seafaring man.

He was dressed in a thick pea-jacket, which was buttoned closely round him revealing only a rough stock, which had been clumsily put on. His face was dark even in that place of shadow, and Lee knew that it had been tanned by the suns of a climate far different from that of England.

If there had been something uncanny in the pose of the man before he toppled over, there was something still more uncanny in his present attitude, for as he leaned against the parapet his eyes were still fixed in his head, and his neck did not bend.

Lee got him back to an upright position, and spoke sharply to him. But he might as well have spoken to one of the sphinxes near at hand for all the notice the other took of his voice.

"Something radically wrong here," muttered Lee, gazing round to see if there was a constable in sight. "The man is as stiff and dead in appearance as a corpse, yet somehow he doesn't seem dead. What on earth shall I do with him?"

He gazed about him again; then, as a taxi hove in sight, he whistled. The cab drew into the kerb, and Lee called to the man to come to him. With many grunts and rumblings of protest the driver climbed out, and came across the footpath.

"Wot is it, guv'nor?" he grunted. "Yer friend a bit over, is he?"

"Look here, my man, my name is Nelson Lee," said Lee quietly. "I tell you that so you may know there is nothing wrong about me. I have just discovered this fellow here by the parapet, and he seems in a bad way. I have decided to take him home and see what I can do for him. Will you give me a hand into the taxi with him? You will not lose anything for your trouble."

"He certainly seems stiff," muttered the cabby, who seemed disinclined to touch the man whom Lee now held firmly. "Still, I know abaht you, guv'nor, orlright, and I guess I'll risk it."

Between them they managed to get the corpse-like figure into the cab, though it might as well have been a marble figure for all the body yielded to the bend of the seat. It lay back stiffly against the edge, and Lee had to put both hands on it to keep it from toppling over upon him.

So with that uncanny thing beside him he was driven to Gray's Inn Road.

Arriving there he rang the bell, and when Nipper appeared he had the lad assist him into the house with the body. Then he dismissed the taxi, and, closing the consulting-room door on the thing he had brought home, he signed to Nipper to approach.

"Get some hot water, my lad—boiling hot," he said curtly. "Bring it as quickly as possible. I am going to fetch some things from the lab."

As Nipper hurried away to do as he was bid Lee left the room, and made his way to the laboratory. There he busied himself with several bottles and phials in a large drug cabinet over the experimenting table until he found three different ones which he sought. With these in his hand he returned to the consulting-room, arriving there just as Nipper came from below with a kettle of boiling water.

"What is wrong with him, guv'nor?" asked the lad, as he set the water down. Lee shook his head.

"I can't tell you, Nipper," he replied. "I never came up against anything like it before. He seems dead, and yet not dead. It strikes me as a sort of coma, though I cannot classify it. We will see if we can revive him, and, if not, then we will send for a doctor."

"He is, as you can see, a seafaring man, and some of those fellows who dip into little known parts of the globe sometimes pick up queer ailments. This fellow seems in an acute state of something. Now then, unbutton his coat, and loosen his stock."

"That is the idea. Yes, it will be all right to open his shirt. Let us give the body as much freedom as possible. Now, while I prepare a hypodermic dose to try and revive him, I want you to bathe his wrists and throat with that hot water. Do not blister the skin, but give it to him hot.

"I imagine his nerves are quite paralysed, and he will not feel it. I want to loosen up the blood in the arteries, and permit the body to relax. In that way we may get the organs working more normally and the brain out of its coma. Steady, now! That's it. There you are! Give him a good going over."

While Nipper set to work on the patient, sponging his wrists and throat with the hot water, Lee crossed to his desk, and, taking a hypodermic from a drawer, thrust the needle-point through the composition cork of one of the bottles, and drew back the plunger.

About half an inch of a yellowish liquid was drawn into the syringe, and now, withdrawing the needle-point, Lee walked back to the couch on which they had laid the patient.

"I shall try this strychnine preparation," he remarked, as he attempted to lift the man's right arm. "Scott!" he muttered. "It is as stiff as iron! I hadn't realised that before. I shall have to make the injection as it is."

Bending down, he thrust the needle point of the hypodermic into the flesh, and pressed home the plunger. Now he withdrew the point and laid the hypodermic down. Next he took a small instrument-case from the drawer in the desk, and opening it, selected a small surgeon's knife.

With this he once more approached the man on the couch, and, bending over his wrist, thrust the point full into one of the veins which showed like a ridge up the arm. Deep went the razor-like edge of that knife, yet, when Nelson Lee withdrew it, the blood did not come. It was as though the veins themselves had been frozen.

Nipper, who had paused in his sponging, gazed at Lee with a queer look in his eyes.

"He is dead, gov'nor," he said thickly. "A dead body never bleeds."

"I know that, my lad," responded Lee, "yet—yet there is something about this body which seems not dead. If he had been dead he could not have been in the rigid position in which I saw him—standing upright without support. He would have collapsed to the ground. The body would have stiffened then, but not as he stood. I can't understand it. Go on with the massage, my lad. I shall open a vein higher up."

Turning up the sleeve, Nelson Lee opened a vein in the hollow of the elbow, but when he had withdrawn the blade, he gazed stupidly at the cut which would not bleed.

"It is unreal—it is preter-human," he muttered. "I do not—I cannot understand it. Go on, my lad. Let me try another injection."

Taking up another phial from the desk, he held it up to the light.

"I hate trying this," he said half aloud. "It is potent, but in some conditions it is most risky. I should, I suppose, send first for a doctor. But I will risk it, I think."

Into the hypodermic he drew the veriest portion of the liquid, which was a brilliant green in colour. Then, with the instrument in his hand, he once more approached the stiff figure on the couch.

Into the flesh of the wrist he plunged the needle point of the hypodermic and drove the plunger home. Now he laid the instrument down and dropped to his knees, watching Nipper at his work.

A minute passed—two went by, and three were ticked off. Lee was just about to open his lips to say something to the lad, when the vocal cords which had been preparing to distend for the words to come, closed again, and with them the lips grew tight.

A single drop of crimson had oozed out from the cut in the wrist. Another came after a few moments, then another and another, until a thin stream was trickling

forth. Quickly Lee thrust up the sleeve again, and as he saw a like stream of crimson staining the dead-looking flesh of the arm, he gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"The polynine did it, my lad," he said tensely. "Keep up your massage."

Nipper was working away like mad, rubbing the muscles of the throat with water so hot that his hands could hardly bear it.

Now Lee made to lift the arm again, and this time he found that it yielded slowly to the pressure he was exerting. Up and down he worked it for several minutes, then, grasping the other—the left—he gave it the same treatment.

From the arms to the lower limbs he went, bending, raising, lowering, and massaging energetically. Slowly but surely the body relaxed from the dead tension which had gripped it, and then, as he straightened up, Nelson Lee saw dawning intelligence in the eyes, which all this time had been wide open.

"That will do, my lad," he said quickly. "Sponge off the two places where I made the incision and bind them up. We have him coming round now all right, and perhaps in a little while he will be able to tell us what happened."

For ten minutes or more, Lee and Nipper sat waiting for the slowly thawing brain of the man to control the body and the spirit, which had been lurking in its frozen temple. Then when Lee poured a stiff dose of brandy down the patient's throat, the vocal cords became loosed, and a husky voice rumbled through between the swollen lips.

"Where am I? And who are you?" asked the man.

"You are in safe hands," replied Lee quickly. "You have been in a bad way, but I hope you will be all right now."

The man made an attempt to sit up, but fell back.

"Don't get up yet," urged Lee. "Take your time. You must be very weak still."

"I am all right now," came the reply in that same throaty voice. "I was like this once before, but the doc.—a man who knew all about it, brought me round. I don't know how you managed to do so, mister."

As the thought occurred to him, he glanced with odd suspicion at Lee.

"What do you know about this, anyway, mister?"

Lee smiled good-humouredly.

"I never saw a case like it before," he replied. "Nor am I a doctor. I am a bit of a scientist though, and I tried some potent means to revive you. It was risky, but you were in such a condition I deemed it better to take the risk."

"If I stayed that way for an hour I would be dead," responded the other solemnly. "One hour and you die—just like that," and as he spoke he held his arm rigid. "Once before I was that way, and—but say, mister, where am I? Where did you find me?"

"On the Embankment," replied Lee. "You were standing by the parapet near Cleopatra's Needle, staring out at the river. You looked queer to me. I spoke to you, and getting no answer, I went up to you. You fell forward stiffly against the parapet, and then I saw something was very wrong. I got a taxi and brought you on here to my house. My name is Nelson Lee, and this house is situated in Gray's Inn Road."

"If you have never heard of me, I may add that I am a criminologist—a detector of crime. So you may rest assured you are in safe hands."

"Nelson Lee!" breathed the man, staring at Lee. "Why, I have heard my master speak of you."

"Your master!" echoed Lee in a puzzled way. "Would you tell me his name?"

"It was Challoner—Dr. Challoner," replied the other.

"Challoner—Dr. Challoner!" cried Lee, starting to his feet. "Are you joking, man? Dr. Challoner has been dead for some little time now. He died shortly after his return from Morocco."

The other nodded his head silently.

"I know that," he said after a pause. "I only found it out to-day. I only reached England to-day."

"Were you with him in Morocco?" asked Lee quickly.

"I was with him there close on eighteen years," replied the man.

Lee was now pacing up and down the room, the excitement he felt flying its flag on his features.

"Listen, my man," he said at last, as he came to a pause before the other. "You say you arrived in England only to-day. You say further, that you only knew to-day that Dr. Challoner had died. Do you know how he died?"

"No! I don't, mister," responded the man. "But I can guess. Dr. Challoner was a marked man. If I had been with him he wouldn't have died. I'd have given my life for him. He saved mine more than once. He was a *man* was Dr. Challoner."

"Then I can tell you how he died," said Lee. "He was murdered—foully murdered, and by persons from Morocco. Listen! If you were in Morocco, you will know of a rare poisonous lizard which is only found in the Atlas Mountains. That was how Dr. Challoner died. One of those lizards, a living lizard, was enclosed in a stone representation of the creature which had been made hollow inside. But the head of the stone image was not of that material. It was the head of the living creature.

"Dr. Challoner had on his desk a stone representation of the lizard which he used as a paper weight. That was removed and the fiendish thing put in its place. He did not notice the difference. Even as he sat at his desk his hand strayed towards what he thought was his own paper weight.

"It was then the thing bit him, and he died soon after. For a long time I have been trying to run down his murderers, but so far I have not succeeded. Fate has played a hand this night in sending me down the Embankment to the spot where you stood. The gods have relented at last. With what I know and what you can tell me, we may yet succeed in our purpose."

The man was sitting on the edge of the couch staring at Lee with a sort of stupor filling his eyes.

"The devils!" he cried at last. "They used the lizard! I know what you mean. But I can tell you nothing until I see Professor Mostyn. He was the man the doctor always spoke of, and I must get to him without delay."

"You will never see Professor Mostyn in this life," replied Lee quietly. "He, too, met his death in this affair. It was while he was working with me to run down the fiends who killed Dr. Challoner. Only I have been left to carry on the work, and if you mean what you said about the doctor, the best work you can do for him is to confide completely in me."

The man on the couch staggered to his feet and lurched drunkenly across to Lee.

"Let me look you eye to eye" he cried.

Lee walked across to the desk and swung the light round so that a stream of brightness flowed full into his eyes.

The man took another step forward and bent a searching gaze on the great criminologist. Then suddenly he shot out his hand.

"Give me your hand, mister" he said slowly. "Give me your hand. You have the eye of a man. I can trust you. So sit you down and I will tell you all I know about the doctor and those devils in the Atlas Mountains."

Lee seated himself and the other sat down close to him.

"Now listen," he said. "I will tell you all. Eighteen years ago I sailed before the mast on a brig out of Portland Mains. We were bound for Odessa, and all across the Atlantic we had a fair trip. We were tacking in for Gibraltar when the storm came and drove us south.

"We pounded on for days before the gale, then in the night we crashed on the rocks. I didn't know where it was then, but I know now that it was on Capo Bojandor—that is in Rio de Oro, just south of Morocco, as you know.

"It was every man for himself, and I fought my way through the seas until one threw me on to the shore. I lay there till morning, and then when day broke I started to walk inland. It was a steep, mountainous country, and I went on for miles and miles without meeting anyone.

"Then, in the afternoon of that same day, I saw a small band of horsemen, who came down upon me with all sail set. They surrounded me and questioned me in a tongue I didn't know. I know now it was Arabic, and that they were wild hillmen.

"I pointed towards the sea, and they seemed to understand, for they took me up and carried me further into the mountains. I was fed there, and then the next day I was taken before a chief of some sort.

"I don't know what they said, but I soon found out what they meant to do with me. I was to be slave to the old chief. There was no use in bucking against fate, so I did what I was made to do.

"Well, about six months passed that way, and all the time I was trying to figure out a way of escape. At last I decided to make a bolt for it, and trust to luck. I did so, and managed to get to the seashore.

"I worked my way up the coast for several miles, and came to a boat drawn up. I pushed it off, and before the owners—two men, who rushed down the beach after me—could overtake me I was well out from the shore.

"I worked my way still more along the coast, and at last I came to Agadir at the south of Morocco. There I fell in with Dr. Challoner and Professor Mostyn. The doctor gave me a job, and I went with him into the mountains. He was on some excavating work, and I was his general handy man.

"Well, after a year or so, Professor Mostyn left us, and only I was there with the doctor. He paid me well, and treated me white. I can't say anything better than that for him.

"Several years passed, and I never knew exactly what the doctor was looking for. I only knew that we kept digging and digging and digging in different parts of the Atlas Mountains, and that the doctor spent money like water with the hill tribes to get permission to do so.

"We gradually worked along the main backbone of the range they call the High Atlas, until we were almost out to the coast, just where what we call Cape Ghir, and the Moors call Ras Uferni, sticks out into the ocean.

"And then the doctor came on something which excited him terribly. There had been a big landslide there at some past date which he reckoned was some two or three hundred years ago. He could tell those things by the earth and the geological layers, as he called them, though how he did it, don't ask me.

"Well, this landslide had uncovered some remains which he said were thousands and thousands of years old. He said they had probably been buried in the same way—by a landslide. He said, too, that they had probably been preserved by that same slide during all the time when Egypt was a great nation.

"I didn't know much about those things when I first met the doctor, but working for him eighteen years as I did I picked up a good deal of knowledge.

"Well, sir, we worked away at those remains, and he claimed to have uncovered the definite foundations of some sort of huge building, which he said must have been bigger than any building of to-day.

"I can tell you myself that the foundation stones were as big as a ship, and how they got them laid, I can't tell you. Just about that time we had a good deal of trouble with the hill tribes, and the doctor said he suspected someone was driving them on to the game, for they refused to be bribed, and when a Moor refuses to be bribed you may know there is something wrong somewhere.

"We got up crew after crew from the coast, but it didn't do no good. They fought the hill tribes once, then they would desert one by one and disappear. Then one day the doctor, he came to me and said :

"'Jim,' he said—Jim is my name—Jim Maxwell, 'I am going to leave you in charge of the camp. I have found out many things here, Jim—things which

you would not understand, but I can tell you it is a discovery such as men of our knowledge have never dreamed. You see that great ocean out there, Jim—and he pointed towards the Atlantic, which was beating against Ras Uferni. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘where you now see that ocean there was once a continent.’

‘That continent had been sinking for a million years, but only twenty to forty thousand years ago did it entirely disappear. The whole of the great Sahara Desert, even to the Nile, was under water. It was all sea. There was no Nile; there was no Egypt.’ That is what the doctor told me. Then he said: ‘You have been faithful to me for eighteen years, Jim. I am going to tell you what only I know. It is this:

‘I have studied these great remains here, and I have discovered that this building was a great temple, built at least twenty thousand years ago. Where you now see but barren hills there were fertile valleys. Here, where you stand, was at that time one of the few spots where man was cultured.

‘When the ape-man roamed about Europe cultured people lived here. Then another great upheaval took place, and man rose elsewhere. That may have taken hundreds of thousands of years, but up to twenty thousand years ago this temple was standing, and was used by a people of whom we know nothing.

‘They came from that same great continent in the Atlantic. They died, many of them, when the great landslide came. Others fled from here, and they, too, undoubtedly met death as they fled. A people was almost annihilated, Jim. But a few men remained—those men were the priests, who were all powerful.

‘In those days the priests held all the secrets in their hands. To them the people looked for guidance. They remained, and they set up their worship again as near the old spot as possible.

‘Recall you, Jim, many strange things which have happened here. Recall you the strange lights we have seen, and the deep rumblings we have heard in the nights. Recall you the hostility of the hill tribes here who refuse backsheesh. I have discovered these things, Jim, to have come from one fountain head.

‘You may not believe it—the world of science will scarcely believe it—that from those old days the priestly sect of Atlantis has still lived. They have remained here hidden all those centuries. They have carried on their priestly craft through all the history we know. They have been here fifteen thousand years, when Moses rose up as a prophet in Israel.

‘They had been here thousands of years when Solomon was King in Judea, and when the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon with great gifts of gold and precious stone, frankincense and myrrh. They were here when Cleopatra reigned in Egypt. They were here when Babylon was an empire, before Carthage was built, before ancient Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, the legendary descendants of the good Aeneas of Troy.

‘They worshipped their gods while Hannibal warred, while Caesar rose, while Rome lived, reached her zenith, declined and fell. They have seen the passage of history from the earliest times we know to the very present.

‘They had been here twenty thousand years before the white man, as we know him, was an intelligent being. Even the oldest Chinese history is but the record of yesterday compared to the ancient scrolls they must possess.

‘There are few of them left here. They have bred their children among them, they have kept the women for priestesses, and the boys for priests. They have lived here generation after generation, and I have discovered that they still retain the gift which Nature gave the olden peoples, they lived, some of them for a span of years, far outlasting any human life we know.

‘They have erected another temple. See you that noble peak to the East, Jim? In the bowels of that mountain they make their worship and live their life. The hillmen reverence them and fear them. To these hillmen they are preter-human.

“ ‘They are as men from another world. Their secret existence has never been discovered, for they have never been betrayed. I am the first man since the days of Solomon to suspect their existence. And I go to probe their secret.

“ ‘For twenty years have I worked to reach this goal, and I go now to achieve my purpose. You will remain here, Jim, until you hear from me.’

“ So, sir, he went, the good doctor; and for three months I watched that peak to the East. I thought he had gone to his death, and would never return. But at the end of three months I heard from him.

“ He rode into the camp one night, and I did not know him. His head had been shaved, and his beard had grown long. It was white as driven snow. He was an old man. He had gone away a young man. The sap of life had been dried up in his veins. The spring of his muscles had bent and grown weak. His body was the body of age, but his spirit was still young.

“ He was driving two pack horses ahead of them, and they were loaded heavily. He got down from them and staggered towards me.

“ ‘Jim, Jim,’ he gasped. ‘we must get away at once. Every hillman for fifty miles around will be on my track. I got into the temple, Jim. They discovered me, and would have killed me, but I was spared because I became one of them. I joined their priesthood, I learned their secrets.

“ ‘It was a ghastly business, but the prize was worth the price. I have escaped with scrolls worth untold wealth. I have the true history of ancient Atlantis. I have even the sacred urn of ancient Atlantis, like which there is nothing else in all the world. It is colossal—it is magnificent! It is their symbol of worship—it is their worship!’

“ Well, sir, we tied the scrolls—they were most of them on leather—into skin packages, and raced for the coast that night. We finally reached Mogador, and there, by spending his money like water, the doctor managed to get a boat to take him across to Las Palmas, in the Canaries.

“ But the night before we got away we were attacked by a great crowd, and I was taken prisoner. The doctor escaped—I was able to do that for him. I was taken inland many days’ journey, but later on I, too, escaped. I disguised myself as a hill Arab.

“ It was easy. I was tanned, and I could speak as they spoke. I managed to get across into Rio de Oro, and there I worked my way to the coast. It took months to do it, but finally I reached it, and after a long, long wait, got across to Tenerife.

“ From there I made my way to England, hoping to find the good doctor when I got here. I discovered to-day that he was dead, and I knew he had been killed by the agents of the priests of Wady Pera.

“ I walked to the city and tried to find out where Professor Mostyn lived. I was going to see him to-morrow. I went to the Embankment this evening, for I was depressed over the news I had learned.

“ While I stood there an old man came up from the pier, which is close to the parapet. He approached me, and not until he got close to me did I see that his was the old age such as the men we know never reach.

“ He must have seen two hundred years. He came close to me, and then I knew he was one of the priests of Wady Pera. I gave a cry, and tried to run, but he held me frozen with his eyes. He said not a word, but lifting his hands he pointed his fingers at me.

“ Instantly I felt a great shock, and then an icy wave swept over me, and I remember nothing else until I woke up here in this room. The doctor had seen that done before; it had been done to me in one of the fights we had had with the hill tribes.

“ One of the priests must have been abroad that night. The doctor said that the priests of old had a knowledge of certain natural laws such as electricity, such as we had not yet learned of. He said they had so controlled the electrical force,

that they could wield it and bend it to their will in a way which would seem to us magical.

"But he said it was all natural law, and not sorcery. At any rate, the other time I was stricken, by what the doctor called the frozen spell, he brought me out of it by some drug he used.

"That, sir, is the story I have to tell. It is the truth. It means that the priests of Wady Pera have come to England for some great purpose. Only a supreme need would make them leave that spot and come into what they consider barbarism. The doctor said they had never been out of their mountain temple for thousands of years. But that would matter not to them. They know all things.

"The doctor said they had developed a sixth sense, whatever he meant by that. There, sir, what can you do knowing that?"

Nelson Lee had listened to the long story of Jim Maxwell, with an interest he had rarely felt in all his life. Rough though the man was, and uneducated though he might be, he had, in the inspiration of his love for Dr. Challoner, risen to heights of eloquence, which came from the very soul of the man.

He had delivered his tale with a finish which it would be impossible for him to apply to his ordinary conversation. He was speaking with the spirit of the doctor; he was revealing some of the vast knowledge he had picked up in nearly twenty years of association with the doctor.

With the great knowledge he himself possessed, Nelson Lee could reach much through what had been said. Now in possession of the information furnished him by Jim Maxwell, he could understand much that had been a sealed book to him.

His mind went back to the time when Dr. Challoner, the great archæologist, had been foully murdered in his house in London. He had but returned from Morocco, where for twenty years he had been investigating some great thing, the details of which no man knew.

Lee recalled the time when Professor Mostyn, the man who was assisting the doctor, had rushed into his room carrying with him the beginning of a manuscript which the doctor had been writing when he met his death.

Then the investigation of that case had come. Lee had discovered that, instead of the doctor dying of heart-failure as the local physician thought, he had been murdered, and in as fiendish a manner as one could well imagine.

Then came the examination of the strong room which Dr. Challoner had had built to hold the twelve great cases of material which he had brought from Morocco. The manuscript had spoken of some strange sacred urn, and had in the doctor's opinion been handed down from the priests of ancient Atlantis.

Now Lee knew that the doctor had actually found the hidden lair of those same priests—the lair in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, where they had existed for untold centuries, plying their worship, and keeping alive the altar fires against the day when they should again come into their own.

He could see to what lengths the doctor had gone to probe their secret. He had ventured into the lair, had been caught, and had been forced to join the priesthood. Then after three months he had escaped, getting away with many valuable leather scrolls, and the very vase itself which they worshipped.

Then he had been struck down by agents of the priests. Lee did not think for a moment that any of the priests themselves had come. They had been Arab agents of the priests who had killed the doctor.

Then, while he investigated the affair, Professor Mostyn had been killed. He alone was left to carry on the work, and he had vowed to do so. It was then he discovered the Arabs who killed Dr. Challoner had not, after all, succeeded in getting possession of the sacred vase and the scrolls which the doctor had brought to England to decipher.

The Black Wolf, that subtle and elusive girl who had befooled the police of every great city of the world, had in some manner got to know what it was Dr.

Challoner had brought to England. Under the very noses of the Arabs, she had managed to get possession of them, and had fled with them.

Then had come the second phase in the affair, when Nelson Lee had gone to Venice to probe deeper into the mystery of the sacred urn.

Following up a hint which he had received from the manuscript Dr. Challoner had been writing, he had gone to Venice to seek for any secret papers which might have come down from Lucrezia Borgia, the famous woman poisoner of the Middle Ages.

How she had ever got possession of the sacred urn he could not tell, but certainly Lucrezia Borgia had possessed a mysterious urn, from which men said she brewed the poisons she used.

Lee knew from the manuscript that the sacred urn was covered with strange hieroglyphics which, he imagined, might contain much weird secret knowledge of the priests of old Atlantis.

In Venice he had met Peter Gilmore, the wealthy American archaeologist, who had come to the City of Canals on the same mission as Lee. In Mexico, Gilmore had come upon an old snake sphinx, in which he had found a temple which he attributed to the people of Atlantis.

On the altar there he had seen a carved representation of the ancient urn, and had himself found the beautiful crystal lid of the urn. From the glyphs which he had managed to decipher after a fashion, he came to the conclusion that the urn itself had never been taken to Mexico, but had been taken to Africa.

In Europe he, too, had come upon the Borgia legend, and hence his arrival in Venice. He and Lee had joined forces.

After stirring events in which Nipper had taken a leading part, they had come upon the secret of Lucrezia Borgia, and had escaped with their lives.

On this very night when, as Nelson Lee listened to the strange tale of Jim Maxwell, Peter Gilmore and old Rodrigo, the curiosity dealer of Venice, whom Lee had brought to London, were sitting in the house Gilmore had taken in Clarges Street, working away in an attempt to decipher the Borgia papers which Lee had found in Venice.

For three weeks now they had been toiling at them, and any day might bring news that they had succeeded in their purpose. What had become of the Black Wolf after that brush in the City of Canals? Lee did not know, but he did know that she still possessed the sacred urn.

And now had come on the scene in tragic manner Jim Maxwell, the faithful henchman of Dr. Challoner. What did it all portend? Did it mean that once more Nelson Lee was to thrust aside other matters and plunge into the cauldron of circumstance?

Did it mean that once again he was to come to grips with the mysterious priests of Wady Pera?

If so, it would be shoulder against shoulder with the priests themselves this time. No Arab agents would he be pitted against, to judge from the tale Jim Maxwell had told him.

And the Black Wolf? Would he find her within the great circle of the plot? Who could tell?

Jim Maxwell had dropped into a despondent silence.

Lee was sitting at the desk, his head resting on his cupped hands.

Nipper was curled up on the edge of the couch, eyeing his master.

Thus they were, when suddenly there came a furious ringing at the street door.

Nelson Lee lifted his head and listened. Jim Maxwell gave no heed to the sound. Nipper strained his ears to hear if Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, was answering the door.

There came a slam, then the rush of feet along the hall, and a few moments later the consulting-room door burst open to admit a maniacal figure.

In the first glance at the wild apparition, Nelson Lee and Nipper saw that it was old Rodrigo, the curiosity dealer of Venice, whom Lee had brought to London to assist Peter Gilmore.

"Signor! Signor! For the love of the saints come quickly! The devils are afoot! Terrible things have happened!"

Nelson Lee sprang to his feet, and grabbed the old Italian in a grip which brought him to his senses.

"What is it, Rodrigo?" he asked curtly. "Calm yourself and tell me what has occurred."

"Signor, I know not!" cried the old man. "The Signor Gilmore, the servants, all, all—they are as statues! And the house, it is overrun by the children of Methuselah. Come quickly, I beg of you, signor!"

Lee tried to make sense of the crazy words of the old man, but it was Nipper's quick wit which furnished the key.

"He means the priests of Wady Pera, gov'nor!" he cried, and at the word, Jim Maxwell sat up.

"The children of Methuselah?" he exclaimed. "The priests of Wady Pera are the children of Methuselah all right!"

Realising that something terrible had happened at Clarges Street, Nelson Lee did not waste precious time in attempting to get sense out of the panic-stricken old Italian.

Instead, he thrust him to one side, and with a word to Nipper, made for the dressing-room. He emerged a moment later, jamming a soft hat on his head. He had already slipped his Inverness over his shoulders.

"Come on!" he said. "Something has developed! Take charge of Rodrigo, Nipper. Come with me, Maxwell."

So he led the way out of the rooms in Gray's Inn Road, and a few moments later a taxi was bearing the quartette towards Clarges Street, where Lee knew not what he would find.

CHAPTER II.

What the House in Clarges Street Revealed—The Frozen Spell—Strenuous Measures—A Race With Death.

WHAT he expected to find in the house in Clarges Street, Nelson Lee could not have told. If Nipper's idea was correct, then it could only be inferred that the priests of Wady Pera, whom Jim Maxwell claimed had come to England, had lost no time in tracing down most of those connected with the theft of the mysterious sacred urn which they, the priests, had guarded through the centuries.

Even in the stress of the moment, Nelson Lee could not help but wonder how the sacred vase had ever fallen into the hands of Lucrezia Borgia in the Middle Ages, and he wondered further how the priests had managed to get it back again.

What list of weird and strange murders had attended that recovery some four hundred and fifty years ago? No man could tell. And now, after all that period of time, the sacred urn had again fallen into the hands of what the priests considered the barbarians.

Dr. Challoner had told Jim Maxwell that he was the first person to probe the secrets of the priests, but when he made that statement, he had not known of the part Lucrezia Borgia had played over four hundred years before he uttered the words.

With those ancient priests, full of the mysterious lore that the ancients possessed of a weird and wonderful knowledge of the secrets of natural law, which had been lost with the crash of Egyptian civilisation, almost anything was possible.

The frozen spell which had been cast upon Jim Maxwell on the Embankment, in London, seemed more like the fantasy from some tale of the Arabian Nights, yet Lee knew it to be but some rendering of the knowledge they had of Nature's supreme law.

It is a fact that we moderns possess far less of that knowledge than the ancients, and its exhibition fills us with awe. The Frozen Spell! Jim Maxwell had called it that, and old Rodrigo had referred to the conditions at the house in Clarges Street in almost the same terms.

Would Lee find something of a like nature there? Now the taxi was racing up Piccadilly, the driver urged on by Nipper, who leaned recklessly out of the window. They swung into Clarges Street almost on two wheels, and as the cab skidded into the kerb in front of the house Lee and Nipper had grown to know so well during the past three weeks, Nipper was out of the cab, dragging Rodrigo with him.

Lee and Jim Maxwell followed, and telling the man to wait, Lee raced up the steps after Nipper. With all his attention to the driver of the taxi, Nipper had managed to get from Rodrigo the latchkey of the house, and even as his master reached the topmost step, the lad had got the door open.

All four rushed into the hall, where a single light burned, and beckoned by the wild gestures of Rodrigo, they rushed down the hall towards the great study at the far end.

The door was partly ajar. As they approached it, they could catch a glimpse of rich curtains gleaming softly under the flare of shaded lights. On the face of it the scene seemed peaceful enough. Yet that was just it. It seemed too peaceful. It was too much like the peace which follows death to be comfortable. It was tomb-like—it was uncanny.

Lee was the first to reach the door, and thrusting it open the full way, he started to dash in; then, at what he saw, he drew up on the threshold with a gasp.

Standing close to the desk, in an attitude of strained rigidity, was his friend, Peter Gilmore, the American archaeologist, then an who had wrenched from the heart of a Mexican jungle one portion of the secret of lost Atlantis. But he was standing in such a way as Lee had never seen him stand.

One hand was resting on the edge of the desk in a perfectly natural manner, just as though he were listening to what was being said by an invisible visitor. The body was rigid, indurate and inflexible, just as Maxwell's had been when Lee saw him on the Embankment.

The head was held stiffly on the shoulders, and the eyes—ah, the eyes! They were fixed and staring, with an expression of nameless horror in them, a cloud of repugnance and aversion which Lee had never seen there.

Even the look had frozen with the attitude. As he looked upon it, Lee knew it was the frozen spell of which Jim Maxwell had been the victim.

He rushed forward to his friend and laid his hand upon him. Instantly Gilmore toppled forward like a waxen doll which had been left to stand by itself, and now had been overbalanced.

Lee threw his arms around the body and eased it down to the couch. Old Rodrigo had broken into a fresh storm of hysteria, but was silenced imperatively by Nipper.

Jim Maxwell, who had experienced the horror of that frozen spell twice, but had never seen another under it, watched Gilmore with a look of fascinated horror.

Lee dragged Gilmore to the couch and laid him on it, then turned swiftly to Nipper.

"My lad, take the taxi and get back to Gray's Inn Road as quickly as possible. Bring me the full supply of strychnine which is in the large cupboard in the

laboratory, also the large phial of polynino which stands next but one to it. Fetch also the hypodermic, and the case of surgeon's instruments from the drawer in my desk. Make haste! Every second is precious."

Almost before Lee had finished speaking, Nipper was out of the room and racing along the hall at top speed. They heard the front door jerked open, and slammed, as he left the house; then Lee turned to Rodrigo.

"Come, old man," he said sharply, "you must collect yourself! There is need of you this night, and you must bottle up that hysteria. I want you to stay beside Mr. Gilmore. Watch him carefully. You are too nervous to use a revolver, but you can use a knife all right. Here, take this. If anyone enters the door whom you do not know, throw the knife at them without delay—without delay, do you hear? Do not wait to challenge them.

"Come on, Maxwell, you must assist me to explore the rest of the house. Here is a spare revolver which I have with me. If it becomes necessary to use it, do not hesitate to do so. Remember, the men who have done this were undoubtedly those who planned the death of Dr. Challoner."

With a grim look on his face, Jim Maxwell stretched out his hand for the weapon, and followed Lee through the door to the hall.

Straight towards the stairs leading to the floor above, went Lee, then, with his automatic held straight before him, he began to mount. One step—two steps—three, he mounted. Then, at the head of the stairs there appeared something white.

Lee glanced up at it, his revolver ready for action. He was trying to discern whether or not it was one of the servants. In the half gloom of the upper landing it was difficult to see distinctly.

Then the figure in white seemed to swell and swell and swell, until it was twice the proportions it had been when he first looked at it.

He could hear Maxwell breathing heavily like a man who has run a great distance. His heart must have been leaping with terrific force in his deep chest to cause such an upheaval of his equilibrium.

Lee was cool enough, but fighting hard to sweep from his sight the mist which seemed to act as a tenuous magnifying medium for the white something. In a desperate attempt to drive himself forward to the truth, Lee sprang up a couple more steps.

Then the figure in white grew more distinct. It seemed to float downwards towards him. He caught a glimpse of a long white flowing beard. He saw deep into eyes which were old, old, old as man can never fathom age. He saw wisdom unmeasurable.

He saw a terrible meaning in those deep orbs which lifted him from the mundane sphere, and sent his soul hurtling down, down, down through the ages of the past, then through a colossal abyss of nothingness, to a blinding momentary realisation of the Great Something which he had never realised.

He was in the grip of a mentality which was greater than his own. He was battling with what men speak of, and have never realised—the sixth sense—the sense of subconscious understanding.

He felt that his innermost thoughts were a printed page for those terrific orbs above him. He was a child floating on a sea of awful understanding. It hurt him acutely, violently; it scared him, and tossed him, and beat upon him in a rhythmic series of waves, which shattered his natural conception and left it wounded and shivering in naked chaos on a beach of shimmering blackness.

Then every light in the house went out, and he was left panting and clutching at nothing, reeling back upon another shattered creature behind him, trying with all the energy of his shaken soul to get a grip on himself.

Then silence, silence which was more tremendous than the reverberations of a thousand cannons. It was a rising and falling of measured beats of Stygian terror. It was pitiless and soul scorching.

Above him, Lee knew was that something, towering as it had towered to his sight. Behind him crouched Jim Maxwell, now prone beneath that silence which engulfed them.

Lee made a supreme effort, and curled his finger about the trigger of his weapon. He pulled. A terrific blazing wound was rent in that thick jelly-like darkness, which quivered and beat like blancmange in the mould.

A long splitting gash tore its way through and upwards, a rhythmic cadence of roaring sound avalanched about them, then the gash closed even as it opened, and the pungent smell of powder filled the air. Again silence—that awful menacing silence, then another terrific uproar of sound, as the noise of the explosion rose and fell and beat upon their tortured ear-drums, then died away.

Silence! Five senses could not tolerate the pitiless beat of those menacing waves. Five senses could not withstand the shock of that awful Nothingness. Five senses reeled under the behemothian strain of it. Five senses flung back upon themselves and collapsed into a pitiful array of futile endeavour.

Then from the depths of the stillness there came a laugh. Not a laugh that man may utter, not a laugh even of the gurgling maniac. It was a laugh of something preter-human; it was a lilting titter, changing to a deep satanic rumble, and then to a harsh and screaming vocalisation which ripped through the silence with a vivid soul-searching force, which left Lee staggering with nausea.

And running through it all was a sardonic twitter of mockery, which seemed to hurl back upon Lee the full worthlessness of his feeble attempt to grapple with the unknown.

As suddenly as it had arisen did that laugh break off, quick as though a knife had cut something soft and yielding, just like that.

Then, down through the darkness came a streak of fine, wire-like light, which stabbed the velvet blackness uncertainly for a moment, then shot straight toward where Lee stood.

He felt a sudden quivering of his whole fleshly being; he felt a searing, singing, burning sensation from head to foot, then his five senses dropped into the bottomless pit of oblivion, and he knew no more.

Jim Maxwell saw the stabbing light which gashed the darkness; he saw the uncertain feeling of the point for a target. He rose somehow to his feet, and with a yell of utter and supreme terror, he dashed for the door.

Wrenching it open, he dashed down the steps and raced along Clarges Street towards Piccadilly. Across that thoroughfare he staggered until he came to a gateway into the park. He managed to reach a seat, where he collapsed in a dead faint.

And back in the house in Clarges Street, the rhythmic silence rose and fell and beat in unending cadence against the rigid figure of Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER III

Nipper to the Rescue—Like Master Like Lad—Lee at the Helm Again.

IT can easily be understood that Nipper allowed the taxi-driver to lose no time on the way back to Gray's Inn Road. He had seen enough of the condition in which Jim Maxwell had been to realise that only the most strenuous measures could save Peter Gilmore from sinking into death.

He supposed that by now Lee had come upon the servants whom old Rodrigo had said were in a similar condition. He knew that Lee would do all that was possible to bring them round, though Nipper knew as well as Lee must have known, that what worked an apparent miracle with Jim Maxwell, might not at all affect other and differently constituted systems.

Nevertheless, they could but try it. At the house in Gray's Inn Road, he bade the driver wait, and dashing into the consulting-room, jerked open the door which opened to the passage leading to the laboratory.

Past his own room he raced, then his hand was on the handle of the laboratory door, and the next instant the light was on, with Nipper jumping for the large glass cabinet where Lee kept his most valuable drugs.

He knew well enough where the strychnine was kept, and Lee had said that the polynine was next but one. He took down the bottle, holding the strychnine, noting as he did so that it was over half full.

Then he came upon the polynine, and held it to the light to see what quantity there was in it, for the glass was of a dark colour through which the liquid polynine did not show. He saw that there was perilously little in it, but remembering that Lee had used but a drop in the hypodermic, and recalling his own knowledge of the potency, he reckoned there would be enough for the work in hand.

Back to the consulting-room he tore, and there from the drawer on Lee's desk he took the hypodermic, and the case of surgeon's instruments.

How little did he realise, as he thrust them in his pocket, that at that very moment Nelson Lee was standing rigid, in the grip of the frozen spell!

From the consulting-room Nipper raced out to the street and leaped into the cab.

"Back to Charges Street as quick as you can make it!" he cried. "A sovereign over your fare for a record!"

The driver, who some time before had quite entered into the urgent spirit of the affair, was away from the kerb before Nipper finished speaking, and was driving his cab at a rate which caused more than one constable to jot down the number of the cab as it tore past, rocking and skidding dangerously.

Once in Piccadilly, the man was able to drive still faster; and then, even as they turned into Charges Street, Nipper had the door of the taxi open, ready to spring out.

As the cab skidded into the kerb, he leaped, to collide full-tilt against a bulky figure which was just about to ascend the steps of the house which was the lad's objective. Nipper reeled back, then, as he recognised the stricken face which was turned in his direction, he gave a gasp.

"Jim Maxwell!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? What has happened?"

The other shook his head.

"I don't know," he muttered, as one in a dream. "I don't know. It's devils' work—devils' work!"

Nipper, seeing that something had happened during his absence, raced up the steps and jerked open the front-door. Maxwell came after him, but stood on the threshold just behind the lad who had pulled up.

"The lights!" cried Nipper. "What has happened to them? For Heaven's sake, man, say something!"

The urgency in Nipper's tone recalled Maxwell to the need of the moment, and, getting a grip on himself, he blurted:

"I can't tell you what has happened. Mr. Lee and I were going up the stairs when we saw—we saw it! The flame struck Mr. Lee, and I ran. I reached the park, and I guess I must have fainted, for a constable pulled me round—thought I was drunk. I don't know how long ago it was, but it was just after you left. The lights all went out—short-circuited, I suppose."

Nipper, who was jerking a dead switch up and down, left off and drew out his pocket torch. Pressing the switch, he started forward; then, as the circle of light struck the stairs, he gave a great cry of horror.

Standing with one foot on the fourth step, and the other on the fifth, was Nelson Lee. His right hand, which was half-raised, grasped an automatic pistol. His left hand was raised to his face, as though to ward off something which was about to strike him.

His body was rigid, with the same rigidness which Nipper had seen in the pose of Peter Gilmore. He grasped what had happened and ran forward.

Grasping his master by the shoulders, he eased him down the steps to the floor of the hall, where Lee lay stiff as a wooden log. Then, tearing the pistol from his master's tense hand, Nipper levelled it at Jim Maxwell.

"Maxwell," he said, in tones which quivered with passion, "I will give you just ten seconds to make up your mind to conquer that panic of yours and lend me a hand! If you don't do so by the time I count ten, I will drill you with a bullet, as sure as my name is Nipper! Now then, which is it?"

Maxwell glanced at the stiff form on the floor, then at the black gap of the staircase landing. He was seeing again the white something which had stood there.

"Well?" queried Nipper curtly. "Remember, Maxwell, it was from the same source Dr. Challoner met his fate."

The name of his beloved master seemed to recall Maxwell to his senses as nothing else could have done.

It was a stroke of genius on the part of Nipper. With a mighty curse, he started forward.

"Tell me what you want, and I'll do it, and be cursed to all those white-whiskered devils!" he cried.

"That is the way to talk," responded Nipper, lowering his weapon. "Find the kitchen of this house, and bring me hot water—boiling hot—as quickly as you can. It is terribly urgent!"

Maxwell took the torch which Nipper had jerked from Lee's pocket and started along the hall.

Nipper heard a door open and close, then he sat in a terrible suspense for what seemed an eternity, until he again heard the sound of footsteps. Looking up, he saw Maxwell coming along the hall, his haggard countenance gleaming gargoyle-like behind the circle of the light. In one hand he carried a great kettle of water from the spout of which steam was gushing.

"Found a kettle on the stove in the kitchen," he grunted, as he dropped to his knees beside Nipper. "What's the next move?"

Nipper drew out his handkerchief, then dragged out Lee's. Thrusting them into the hand of Maxwell, he said:

"Dip these in the water and bathe the gov'nor's wrists as hard as you can. He and I did it for you, now it is your turn to do it for him."

While he had been waiting for Maxwell to return, Nipper had opened Lee's shirt at the throat, and while Maxwell set to work, the lad opened the bottle of strychnine mixture.

Into the hypodermic he drew a small portion, such as he had seen Lee do earlier in the evening, and then, jabbing the needle-point into Lee's arm, he pressed the plunger home.

That done, he placed a little of the polynine in the hypodermic, and sent that sousing into his master's arm. Then, taking up the surgeon's case, he took out the sharp knife which Lee had used on Maxwell.

Opening the vein at the wrist, Nipper watched to see if the blood would come. Not a drop! Then he opened the vein at the arm, with the same result.

Electrical paralysis of the arteries, Lee had called it. All the time Jim Maxwell was rubbing away like mad with the hot water; then, at the end of several minutes, Nipper gave a cry of joy as Lee slowly opened his eyes.

With a quick motion, Nipper drew out a flask of brandy, and, unscrewing the cap with his teeth, poured a generous portion between Lee's lips.

The strong spirit, added to the potent effect of the polynine, revived him as nothing else could have done, and he sat up.

As his eyes took in the details of the place intelligence returned to him, and, with the assistance of Jim Maxwell and Nipper, he got slowly to his feet.

"Thanks, my lad!" he said, in queer, husky tones. "You got back just in time, I imagine. I remember now what happened up to the moment when I felt the force of the electrical power which sent me into the frozen spell. But I must gather my strength together; there is so much to do."

Summoning all his will-power to meet the urgency of the case, Lee led the way along to the study, where Peter Gilmore still lay on the couch. Of old Rodrigo there was no sign.

It was only when Lee, Nipper, and Jim Maxwell were working over Gilmore that a head appeared cautiously from behind a large bookcase, and they saw the old Italian looking at them. His eyes were popping from his head with fear.

Lee beckoned to him.

"Come out, Rodrigo," he ordered. "The danger has passed."

Slowly the old man advanced into the room.

"Let me get back to Venice!" he moaned, as he tottered towards them. "Only let me get back! Lucrezia Borgia was an unholy woman, and these deeds are the deeds of devils! Let me get back to Venice!"

"Come, old man, collect yourself!" said Lee, as he straightened up to watch the effect of the inoculation on Gilmore. "You must not give way like this. Why are you hiding? Didn't I tell you to watch Mr. Gilmore?"

"I couldn't, signor; I couldn't! I heard a great cry; I heard the shots. It was too much. I got behind the bookcase!"

"You are a silly old coward!" responded Lee, though privily he felt that what had happened had been enough to shake the strongest nerve. "You know we need you badly. Ah!"—this as Peter Gilmore slowly opened his eyes, and the rich red blood gushed forth from the incisions in the wrist and arm.

Five minutes later, Gilmore was able to sit up; and then, leaving Jim Maxwell to look after him, Lee took old Rodrigo by the shoulder.

"Come, now, I need you!" he said curtly. "You said some of the servants had dropped into the same condition in which we found Mr. Gilmore. Take me to them; there is no time to lose."

Urged on by Lee's hand and voice, Rodrigo tottered towards the door and led the way upstairs. Lee and Nipper went with revolvers ready for business, but they saw nothing—they heard nothing. The whole of the upper part was wrapped in silence.

Through a long corridor which led to another staircase Rodrigo led them, then he stopped before a door. It was a bedroom, and, as Lee shot the light of his electric torch about the room, he saw a housemaid standing in the strained rigidity of pose peculiar to the frozen spell.

She had been in the very act of throwing down the coverlet of the bed, and her face was turned inquiringly towards the door. It was hard to believe that she was not pulsing with the warm blood of action, yet the moment Lee touched her she toppled on to the bed as stiff as a doll.

Lee applied himself to her recovery, and ten minutes later she opened her eyes. Then to the floor above they went, where they found two more maidservants in the same condition.

Lee was busy that night in the house in Clarges Street, but when he once more returned to the study on the ground floor, he had succeeded in offsetting to a marvellous degree the work of the mysterious priests of Wady Pora—work which would have meant wholesale death in that house before morning.

He noted, with some surprise, that it was past two o'clock in the morning. Gilmore was now sitting at the desk in the study, sipping a brandy-and-soda and smoking. He looked haggard round the eyes, and his face was drawn at the mouth; but otherwise he appeared little the worse for his adventure.

Lee dropped wearily into a chair and lit a cigarette.

"Woll, old man, what about it?" he asked.

Gilmore knocked the ash from his own cigarette and looked across at his friend.

"You came just in time, Lee," he said. "It is useless for me to try to thank you for what you have done. While you have been upstairs, Jim Maxwell has been telling me a few things, and I understand fully the extent of the debt I owe you."

"Let that go," responded Lee. "Tell me what happened here? We found three servants in the same condition; they are all right now—or, at least, they will be all right by morning."

"The whole thing is a blank mystery to me," remarked Gilmore. "I was sitting here in the study this evening. Rodrigo and I had been at work on the Borgia papers, as usual. There came a ring at the front-door, and, as all the maids were upstairs, Rodrigo answered it. The next thing I know, the door of the study opened and an old man came in."

Gilmore shivered.

"An old man," he repeated. "I have seen age in my time. I have seen the wholesome age of health and right living. I have seen the shrivelled age of the libertine. I have seen the repulsive age of the negro, fat, gross, and repellant. But never have I seen age such as came into this room. It was an old man—an old man whose white beard dropped to his knees. His body was skinny as that of a mummy; his eyes were deep-sunken, yet bright with the fire of youth. The skin of his cheeks was wrinkled like yellow parchment; his hands were bony and his fingers hooked like the claws of a predatory bird.

"He might have been a Rip Van Winkle, whose sleep had lasted hundreds of years. It was an unreal, an uncanny picture of age, yet there was nothing senile about him. He stood upright, and his step was lithe and firm.

"He came into the room and looked at me. I rose and asked him what he wished. I noted then, for the first time, that he was dressed in a long robe of flowing white; before the strength of his own personality had dwarfed his garments. I asked him what he wished.

"He spoke, but in a tongue such as I had never heard. He pointed to the Borgia papers which lay on the desk. I understood his visit had something to do with them.

"Then the truth flashed upon me with such force as to leave me stunned and shaken. He was one of the priests of Wady Pera! My mind leaped back to all that you had told me; it recalled my own discoveries in Mexico. I remembered the things we had already deciphered from the Borgia papers, and I knew I was right.

"He was a priest of Wady Pera. Jim Maxwell has told me enough to convince me that I was not mistaken. Then he slowly raised his arms. His hands straightened out. The talonlike fingers grew rigid. A slight hissing sound came from between his lips, and, as they opened, I saw his teeth gleaming yellow as amber.

"Then, from the very tips of his fingers which pointed straight towards my eyes, there seemed to flash a wirlike line of blue light. I thought I was mad. I tried to convince myself that I was being hypnotised, but there was such an actuality to those lines of blue light, that I felt them singe my body as they passed through me.

"Then—then I remember no more until I revived on the couch here. That is the tale, but I can tell you that, whoever the old man was, he has taken with him the Borgia papers, and not only that, but come here, Lee. A terrible thing has happened."

Gilmore rose and walked across to a large Japanese screen which stood in one corner. Drawing aside one of the panels, he pointed to the safe.

"My first thought was for the crystal and gold lid of the sacred urn of ancient Atlantis, the lid which I found in the snake sphinx temple in Yucatan in Mexico. I examined the safe while you were upstairs. It seemed all right, but I would

not be satisfied until I had looked within it. I opened the door, and unlocked the drawer which has held it. It was empty, the lid was gone!"

Lee uttered an exclamation of regret.

"That is indeed unfortunate," he muttered. "The sacred lid gone! It is a disaster, Gilmore! Yet—yet I am not so sure that I am sorry. Somehow, I am beginning to realise something of the point of view of those priests of Wady Pera. Look at the work of Dr. Challoner. Dr. Challoner was driven on by sheer desire for scientific truth. His researches in Geography, Geology, Oceanography, Anthropology, Biology, and Ethnology had convinced him that the legendary continent of Atlantis had actually existed in the Atlantic.

"We ourselves are convinced that it did, and that it was there a million years ago. It was but natural that Dr. Challoner should strive to prove his theory, to endeavour to discover if there were any remaining marks of that great civilisation which preceded the present races which inhabit the earth.

"They of Atlantis would belong to the fourth great race of humans. Three others would have preceded them—three others which slowly evolved from the same fountainhead from which the apes devolved. He found even more than he had ever dreamed of finding. He found that a few remnants of that great race had actually come down from those ancient eras, never mixing with the fifth race which came after them.

"They are as a people apart. While we have evolved in a certain way which they could not understand, while we have dropped certain attributes which they possessed and taken on others which they did not possess, they—the priests of old Atlantis—have come down, generation after generation, faithfully guarding the sacred symbol of their old worship.

"Think of it! For anything from twenty to forty thousands years, during all the great passing of the history of the world as we know it, have they been faithful to their trust. It is to them what the church is to us.

"For our infidel hands to touch the sacred urn is terrible sacrilege in their eyes. Those who passed across to Africa when Atlantis began to sink took the urn. Those who went west to the land there took the lid. After all these untold centuries the two have come to light. The lid has been found.

"Think what it means. What rejoicing there would be amongst the priests of Wady Pera to have the urn and lid reunited! Yet we, who were nothing when they were old on the earth, are striving to take these symbols from them. For what purpose? For greed only. Look at it as you will it is greed.

"With Dr. Challoner it was the greed of the scientist seeking truth. With you, Gilmore, it is the same. With me it is the greed of desire to probe the mystery of the whole affair. With the Black Wolf it is the greed of possession—nothing more.

"But with the priests of Wady Pera it is a simple faith, a desire holy and sacred to guard the worship of their ancient race. Though I am lined up against them, I must confess that my sympathies go out to them. Though I have felt the force of the frozen spell, I bear them no malice. I understand what it is which drives them on. Only a supreme need could bring them from their hermit existence into what is an utterly strange world to them.

"Think of the great councils which must have been held in the temple in the heart of the Atlas Mountains before it was decided just what steps to take! Think of the prayers and heartburnings which follow those old men on their great mission!

"Never did church pray for its missionaries to savage lands as those who remain are praying for the old men who have braved a strange world of barbarians in order to take back to its appointed place the sacred symbol of their race! It is an epic in tragedy."

As Lee broke off, Gilmore smiled quizzically.

"One could almost imagine you held a brief for them," he said. "Considering the treatment they dealt out to you, I must confess your generosity of thought surprises me."

Lee shrugged.

"I bear them no malice. I think I understand their point of view. But we must consider what is our next step. They are still here in London. We seek, or have been seeking, the sacred urn. They sought the sacred urn, and are still seeking it. It was not they who came to London and murdered Dr. Challoner, but it was at their orders that it was done. Therefore they must pay a price for that.

As far as we know, the Black Wolf possesses the sacred urn. It follows naturally that they will find her out, and when they do I dread to think what will befall her. If they weave about her the frozen spell, then the chances are she will die while in it, never knowing how nor why she died."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Gilmore.

"I hardly know what to say," replied Lee. "Myself, I see no good purpose in continuing to fight for the possession of the sacred urn, unless it be that we hand it back to the priests. Honestly, I begin to feel that it would be impossible for me to have any hand in depriving them of what to them is so sacred. I should feel much as though I had desecrated a church. I felt differently while we were fighting the Arab crew who first came to England; but since I saw that old man, since I have understood the tragedy which rests behind it all, I do not think I can do it."

Gilmore got to his feet and walked across to Lee. He laid one hand on the other's shoulder.

"Lee, you are a man," he said earnestly. "Nor will you find me a quitter. I am with you. I found the sacred lid, and it meant a lot to me, but I here and now renounce all claim to it. If the priests of Wady Pera have it, then they may keep it. That part of my scientific investigations shall be plunged into the limbo of forgetfulness. Whatever you do, I stand or fall by."

Lee gripped his hand with a strong pressure.

"Thanks, old man," he said. "I thought you would see eye to eye with me. Now we must decide, and decide quickly, what must be done. The Black Wolf has the urn, we do not even know if she is in London. We do not know what the next move in the case will be. We only know that the priests will be on her trail. If we could only run her to earth."

Here old Rodrigo shuffled forward.

"The Black Wolf," he wheezed. "Signor, you mean the young signorina who occupied the Palazzo Alino in Venice when the signor was there?"

Lee nodded.

"Yes, Rodrigo, I mean the young signorina. Why do you ask?"

"Because, signor, I myself saw her in London to-day. I saw her driving in a beautiful black car. She has, signor, the same wealth which she had in Venice."

"The Black Wolf in London!" cried Lee. "Are you certain of that, Rodrigo?"

"I never make mistakes," replied the old man. "For sixty years I dealt in curiosities in Venice, signor. For sixty years I studied the faces of those who came to see me. I never forget a face."

"The Black Wolf in London!" murmured Lee again. "Did you make no attempt to follow her, Rodrigo?"

"There was no need, signor. It was when I went to the British Museum this morning on business relating to the Borgia papers. I was passing a house in the large square near there when I saw the great car drive into the kerb. Then the young signorina stepped out, and went up the steps. I walked more slowly until the door closed after her, and the car drove off. It is not as grand a house as the Palazzo Alino, but it is the house into which she entered.

"The large square," mused Lee. "He means Russell Square. I wonder—I wonder if the old man is right?"

"Supposing he is, what will you do?" asked Gilmore.

Lee shrugged.

"I do not know. The Black Wolf is an elusive bird. I might speak to Detective-Inspector Brooks at Scotland Yard, and have the house surrounded. I might go to see her if she has not already flown. There are many things I might do if the priests of Wady Pera have not already got to her. Little does she realise that she stands on the brink of a danger which all her cunning cannot combat. I — Good heavens! What is that?"

For a single moment Lee stood rigid, staring at the Japanese screen which hid the safe in the corner, then he strode forward.

All eyes turned to watch him while he approached the screen, and, bending down, picked up something which had fallen beneath the edge.

Had it not been disturbed when Gilmore showed the safe to Lee it might never have been seen, for it would have been swept up by the maidservant the next morning and thrown out.

As Lee came back to the desk they saw that he held in his hand a single white violet. Gilmore glanced at it in puzzled fashion.

"A white violet!" he exclaimed. "Where on earth did that come from?"

Lee was eagerly examining it beneath the light which they had now managed to turn on again.

"It is a white violet, as you say, and quite fresh," he remarked. "Why, man, this means a tremendous lot. It changes utterly the whole theory we have been forming. It means more than you at present dream. It means that the priests of Wady Pera did not take the lid of the urn as you thought. The old man got the Borgia papers, but the Black Wolf got the lid from your safe. I am as certain of that as though I had seen it taken."

"But how—why?" cried Gilmore, in bewilderment.

Lee thrust the white violet carefully into his pocket.

"The Black Wolf is a woman," he said succinctly. "The Black Wolf is Mademoiselle Miton, alias the Comte de Monte Bello, alias the Signorina Paulini. Like all women, she has one weakness. The weakness of the Black Wolf is for white violets. As Mademoiselle Miton she wears them on every possible occasion. As the Comte de Monte Bello her stationary is scented with it. As the Signorina Paulini, I have no doubt that she wears them, as does Mademoiselle Miton. She has been here to-night."

"She must have been here even as you and Rodrigo dined. It would not have been while you stood by the desk under the frozen spell. She would not know that you were unconscious of the passage of events. Therefore, it must have been earlier. When before the old priest of Wady Pera visited you had she been here, and taken the lid from the safe. It is a marvel to me that she did not take the Borgia papers."

"Rodrigo and I took them into the dining-room with us," murmured Gilmore.

"There was a most interesting point we wished to continue the discussion of."

"Then that explains why she did not get the papers, too," went on Lee, with the slightest edge of triumphant satisfaction in his voice.

"How could she enter? By the door? By the window?"

"Not by the door," remarked Gilmore. "The maids were about during dinner."

"Then how about the window?" asked Lee. "Let us examine it."

He strode to the window recess of the study, and threw aside the heavy curtains which hung across it. He found that the window was a long French affair which reached from the floor almost to the ceiling.

Outside, he could see the dim outlines of a balcony.

"It opens on to a balcony, I see," he remarked.

Gilmore nodded.

"Yes, you must remember the small garden at the rear."

Leo nodded absentmindedly.

"Yes," he murmured. "I was just trying to recall the details of it. I have only been here once in daylight, and I don't remember much about it. But let us make an examination of the lock. Fetch a torch, my lad."

Nipper drew out his pocket torch, which he had thrust into his pocket when they had got the light turned on, and, walking across to where Leo stood, pressed the switch.

Leo, in the meantime, had taken out his powerful pocket glass, and was now bending over the catch.

Over every particle of it he went until he had his head screwed round in an attempt to make an examination of the lower part of the catch. Then he straightened up and opened the window.

Stepping out on to the balcony, he stood close to the low, wrought-iron balcony rail, and gazed down at the garden.

"Garden less than six feet below the balcony," he muttered. "Garden easy enough to get into from the lane at the rear. It would not be a difficult job to force that catch. There is a distinct mark on both the lower and upper sides. The Black Wolf is nothing if not thorough. She came by way of this balcony. She forced the catch of the window by thrusting a small instrument through the place where the two windows meet. The window recess would give her plenty of chance to peer through between the curtains and see if the room was untenanted. It would be only a few steps across to the safe, and in her hands that combination would be child's play.

"Then the retreat could be managed, though she would have to arrange the catch before she passed out on to the balcony so she could press it back into place before leaving.

"It was cleverly managed, but by no means beyond the abilities of the Black Wolf. I never should have dreamed that she had been here, but for the discovery of that white violet. I should always have thought that the lid had been taken by the old priest of Wady Pera.

"That opens up a new avenue in the case. What is the ultimate goal at the end of that avenue. I have sworn to get justice for the murder of Dr. Challoner and the death of Professor Mostyn. I have at the same time resolved that, as far as I am concerned, the sacred urn shall go back to the priests of Wady Pera. Yet, if I am to believe the evidence in hand, the Black Wolf has now in her possession not only the sacred urn, but the lid as well.

"Do the priests of Wady Pera know that? Do they know that she is in London? Have they, perchance, already set about wresting them from her? If they have, then Heaven help the Black Wolf, for they will show her no mercy.

"What can I do? What is the best thing for me to do? Must I allow the Black Wolf to laugh at me? Must I permit the priests of Wady Pera, no matter how just their cause, to set at defiance all the laws of this country? I should not be justifying my position if I did that.

"No! I must make some move and make it quickly. I shall make that move by pitting my wits against those of the Black Wolf. In the past honours have been even. It is now for me to strike and strike hard, and at the same time to protect her from the fate which is marching to meet her."

He turned back into the room and closed the window after him. Gilmore looked up inquiringly as he approached the desk.

"Well, what have you found?" he asked.

"I have found sufficient to convince me that it was the Black Wolf and no other who took the lid from the safe," replied Leo grimly. "Look here, Gilmore," he said suddenly. "I intend making a radical move in this matter. You said you would stand by me. Will you do so?"

"I will," replied the American. "You can count on me in every way."

"Very well, then," replied Lee, "Let us prepare to go to Gray's Inn Road. I wish to make some arrangements before going on with the plan I have formed. Then I shall move."

"When will that be?" inquired Gilmore.

"This very night!" rejoined Lee.

CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Prepares for the Black Wolf—A Bold Move—Face to Face.

IT was an odd quartette which half an hour later sat in the consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road, waiting for Nelson Lee to emerge from his dressing-room.

There was Nipper sitting at the desk at work on some memoranda which Lee desired fixed up without delay. It was memoranda relating to the matter in hand.

There was Peter Gilmore, the American archæologist, sitting before the fire, smoking prodigiously.

There was old Rodrigo, the curiosity dealer of Venice, still apprehensive of what the night might yet hold. There was Jim Maxwell sitting on the couch, his face gloomy and his eyes sombre.

Thus they were when the dressing-room door opened and a startling figure emerged. From the bottoms of the straight hanging tweed trousers to the broad shoulders encased in a coat of the same material as that of the trousers, they could see that the figure was that of a man.

But there the resemblance ended. The head was more like the head of some monstrous gargoyle which had stepped alive from some corner frieze of an old cathedral.

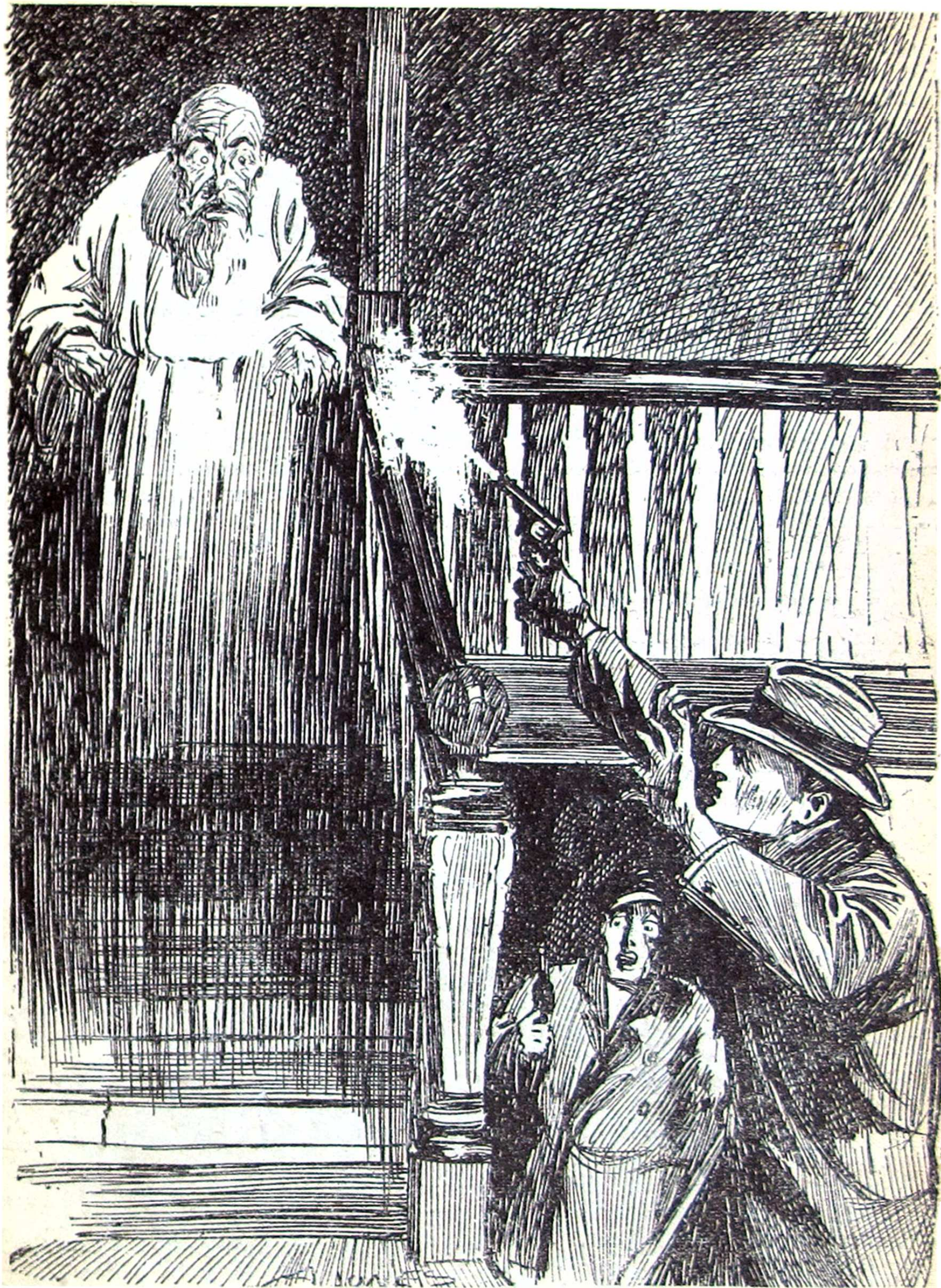
It was huge and goggling and voluminous. It was gigantic—the head of a satyr and a beast—the head of something monstrous, incredible. It was a criterion of the condition in which the nerves of at least three of them were when with one accord, Gilmore, Rodrigo, and Maxwell came to their feet, exclaiming after his own fashion.

Nipper, who had glanced up, grinned. He had seen that apparition before, and knew what it was. Then one arm went up to the gargoylish head and the whole thing came away, to reveal the features of Nelson Lee beneath.

"Sorry if I gave you a shock," he said. "It needn't have alarmed you. It is only a helmet of my own manufacture, which is proof against many things. For instance, if I had had this on at the house in Clarges Street I do not think the priest of Wady Pera would have succeeded in casting over me the frozen spell. I originally made it in case I should ever come into direct contact with the Black Wolf.

From what I have already told you of her, Gilmore, you will remember that almost invariably her coups have been carried out under extremely difficult circumstances—often under the very noses of her victims.

"It was only after my first brush with the Black Wolf in Paris at the time of the robbery of the Martigny pearls, and when Monsieur Fabert of the Paris police sent for me, that I discovered the truth—that she used a mysterious drug of sorts with which she caused all those about her to sink into a state of suspended animation or unconsciousness for a period of from four to eight minutes, depending on the constitutional opposition of the victim.



Lee made a supreme effort, and curled his finger about the trigger of his weapon. He pulled. A terrific blazing wound was rent in that thick jelly-like darkness, which quivered and beat like a blancmange in the mould.

(See page 15.)

It was the use of that drug—against which, by the way, she must herself be inoculated—that enabled the Black Wolf to bring off the great Jure affair in Paris. It was by the same means she managed to steal ten thousand pounds' worth of radium here in London; and I have always held that she must on occasion have used that drug on Dr. Challoner.

"Also my investigations of the past record of the Black Wolf in every great city of the world have uncovered the fact that a great many of her coups in those different places were in many cases accompanied by some similar condition of her victims. Oh, she is clever, is the Black Wolf. I myself felt the power of that drug in Paris, and she befooled me badly. But if she ever catches me again she will have to try some new trick.

"That was the original purpose of this helmet, and since I propose calling on the Black Wolf this very night I intend going well armed.

"But she will never receive you at this hour," protested Gilmore. "Even if she is at the house in Russell Square she will not answer to you. It is nearly three o'clock."

"All the better," said Lee coolly. "Perhaps she will be asleep. It is my hope that she will. I do not intend to ask whether she will receive me or not. I am going to enter that house by my own methods, and when I get inside—well, then I shall govern my actions as events warrant. Now then, gentlemen, let us get along. There is work for every one of you this night. Did you ring up the garage for the car, Nipper? I did not hear it come round."

"It is at the kerb, gov'nor," replied the lad. "I telephoned as soon as we got here."

"Good lad! Then we need lose no time."

Nelson Lee led the way to the street, followed by Gilmore, with the others tailing behind. Arriving at the kerb, Nipper got in and took the wheel, while Jim Maxwell sat beside him. Lee, Gilmore, and old Rodrigo sat in the tonneau.

When they were all settled Nipper started the engine, and a moment later the big car drew away from the kerb. It was not a long run from Gray's Inn Road to Russell Square, and at the corner of the square just in front of the big hotel which stands on the corner, Nipper pulled up.

"Now then, Rodrigo," said Lee as he descended from the car, "which is the house you spoke of?"

The Italian pointed to the opposite side of the square.

"It was over there, signor," he replied. "I can lead you to it."

"Very well," replied Lee. "We will leave the car here. Come along."

With the helmet under his arm, he started down the square, followed by the others. It was intensely dark, and the drizzle which had promised some hours before when Lee left the House of Commons, had already started.

Scarcely a light showed in any place, and all the way down the square they met not a soul—not even a constable, which suited Lee's book to a "T." At the other corner of the square he paused and waited until Rodrigo came up.

"Now then, which house?" he asked in a low tone.

The old man pointed to one about half way down the square.

"That is the one there, signor," he said in a whisper. "It was there I saw the young signorina enter.

"May Fate grant she was not going in there only to pay a visit," muttered Lee as he gathered his party about him. "Now then, listen to me," he went on. "You, Gilmore, and you, Rodrigo, will remain out here in front. Keep a sharp eye on the house, and if you see anyone leaving the place whistle as loudly as you can. If anyone does leave it will mean that the mask of secrecy has been thrown off. On the other hand, if no one leaves the house, and a constable should come along, get

out of the way until he passes. You, Maxwell, and you, Nipper, will come with me to the rear of the house. I shall want you on guard there. I want the whole house surrounded while I am in it."

With a final word to Gilmore and Rodrigo, Lee started off with Jim Maxwell and Nipper keeping close to him. They made their way down to the far corner of the square, where they turned down.

Straight on to a street which ran parallel to the side of the square where stood the house which was Lee's objective, they went.

There was no lane here running between the line of houses which faced on each street. The rear of each line was effectually covered by the houses on the other street. The only way Lee could hope to enter the house where he thought the Black Wolf to be lurking was either to enter the house by the front, or to go through one of the houses in the other street, the tiny garden or yard of which would adjoin the yard at the back of the Black Wolf's house.

Lee had hoped for a lane, and not finding one, he was puzzled what to do. He strolled along the other street which ran parallel to the first one, until suddenly his eyes lit on the sign in front of a small hotel—one of the many which abound in that district.

In a flash an inspiration, and signing to the others to follow him, he mounted the steps. He was compelled to keep his finger on the bell several minutes before finally the door was opened by a sleepy night porter.

"Wot do you want?" he growled ungraciously.

"Have you any rooms vacant!" asked Lee curtly. "I want two rooms at once if you have."

"I don't know," answered the other surlily. "This ain't no time to come into a respectable hotel. Come round in the morning if you want a room."

He made to close the door, but Lee shot his foot into the aperture.

"Not so fast, my friend," he said sharply. "Perhaps this will incline you to be more gracious."

As he spoke he drew out half a sovereign and handed it to the man. Now then, we are perfectly respectable persons. We want two rooms for the night, and are willing to pay in advance. I do not think the proprietor of the hotel will thank you for turning away guests."

The man took the money, and his manner thawed perceptibly.

"I am sorry, guv'nor," he said. "I was sleepy. Come in and I'll see what I can do for you."

"I want them at the back of the place if possible," said Lee, as he entered, followed by Nipper and Maxwell. "And I don't mind paying extra to have them on the first floor or even the ground floor."

The man nodded, and when he had closed the door, led the way to a small office, which was lit by a single electric bulb. He went behind a counter, and opening a book glanced down at it.

"I can give you two rooms on the first floor," he said. "They ain't neither of them large, but they are at the back, and are the only ones at the back with the exception of a little room on the second floor."

"They will do us," responded Lee. "How much are they?"

"One will cost you five shillings, and the other four," replied the porter.

Lee drew out another half a sovereign.

"You may keep the odd shilling," he said. "Now be good enough to show us to them."

The man pocketed the money, and coming out from behind the counter, led the way out to the hall, and up a flight of stairs. At the top he turned down a corridor and paused before a door.

"This is one of them," he said, as he threw the door open. "The other adjoins it."

Lee thanked him, and signed for Nipper and Maxwell to go into the adjoining room. He himself waited until the porter had gone downstairs, then he softly opened his door and crept along to the other room.

"This is lucky," he said in a low tone, as he closed the door after him. "Now to spot the house we are after."

He strode to the window as he spoke, and throwing up the lower sash, leaned out.

"It was the seventh house from the corner," he muttered to himself. "That one I can just make out is the corner house. Now then, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. That is house number seven there, and that is the house I must get into."

Nipper and Maxwell were leaning over his shoulder.

"How far is it to the ground, gov'nor?" asked Nipper, in a whisper.

"A matter of fifteen or sixteen feet, I should judge," replied Lee. "It isn't much of a drop. The ground is bound to be pretty soft. The difficulty will be in getting back to the room."

"We might make a rope out of the bedclothes, gov'nor," suggested the lad.

"Good idea!" rejoined Lee. "Let us get to work at it."

Drawing down the blind, he turned on the light, and taking from the bed a couple of blankets, they set to work to make a rope, which would serve the required purpose.

Herein Jim Maxwell proved his worth, for with a few deft sailor's knots, he soon had a very fair rope fashioned from the bulky blankets.

They used the coverlet to give them still more length, and this end they tied round the bed, after they had softly drawn that article of furniture close to the window.

Then Lee went first, and the other two followed after. As they dropped beside Lee in the little yard below, Lee pointed to the wall which divided that yard from the next one.

"There are two yards between us and the one at the back of the house I intend entering," he whispered. "Now, move cautiously, and follow me."

Over wall after wall they climbed, until they dropped into the little yard at the back of the house which was the seventh from the corner.

There Lee drew Nipper and Maxwell close to him.

"You will keep a strict watch out here," he said. "If I need you, I will either fire my automatic or whistle. If you hear me, come at once, for I shall not summon you unless I am in a bad hole."

Leaving them where they stood, Lee went ahead through the soft drizzle, until he stood close to the rear wall of the house. Not a light showed in it, but he knew that was nothing to judge by, for heavy curtains might be drawn over the windows, effectually shutting in any light there might be.

He scouted about close to the wall until he came to a window, which he judged must open on a kitchen, or some other of the rooms given over to the domestic service of the house.

Now he took from his pocket a small steel instrument, which he gently insinuated between the upper and lower sash, until he felt it strike against the catch.

He applied a steady but strong pressure, and at the end of a few seconds he felt the catch give.

When he had forced it back the full way, he withdrew the instrument and thrust it back in his pocket. That done, he prised up the lower sash an inch or so, until he could get his fingers under it, then with a slow, steady pressure, he raised it inch by inch, until it was up a good foot and a half.

At that he left it, and thrusting his head through the opening listened. Not a sound could he hear except his own gentle breathing. But still he waited a good three minutes, then ever so stealthily he lifted one leg, and threw it over the sill.

The other leg followed, and he slid down to a floor in a room which was a bottomless pit of blackness. Just by the window he stood listening again. A faint

drip, dripping sound reached his ears from outside, but inside the house no one seemed to be moving.

Cautiously he drew out his pocket torch and pressed the switch. As the circle of light lit up the room, he saw that his first surmise was correct—he was in a kitchen.

Just opposite him was a door, and towards that Lee directed his steps. He had put on shoes soled with thick rubber, and his feet made no perceptible sound on the floor as he moved.

Through years of experience Lee had grown to entirely eliminate the rustle of his garments when he moved stealthily, and had it not been for the light by which he guided himself, there would not have been a single item to indicate that anyone was crossing the room.

Arriving at the opposite door, Lee laid his fingers on the handle and turned.

It opened freely enough, and he found himself in a passage which led to a flight of stairs.

Towards these he moved noiselessly, and at the bottom paused. One flash he gave of the torch, then he took his finger from the switch, allowing it to go out.

He would mount the stairs in the dark. No man could tell what might meet him at the top.

Up he went, step by step, until by feeling the wall with his hand, he knew he had reached the top. Now he realised that he must be standing in the hall on the first floor—the hall which would lead in from the front door.

A step brought him round so he could look straight ahead, and there, at what seemed a great distance, he caught the gleam of a street lamp shining through the glass panels of the front door.

He had not miscalculated. Yet what lay about him? Silence profound and awful. He stood close to the wall for a full five minutes, not moving and scarcely breathing. His chest rose and fell with an absolute minimum of movement.

At the end of five minutes he deemed it safe to make another move. Placing his hand against the wall, he moved along inch by inch, until he felt the angle of the corner.

There he swung with the line of the wall, and kept on until he came to a door. Laying his fingers on the handle of this he turned, and slipped into the room. His fingers hovered about the wall near the door, until he found that which he sought—the electric-light switch.

He pressed it, and immediately a flood of light filled the room. He saw that he had come into the dining-room—a large beautifully furnished apartment. The table was gleaming softly polished under the light, and in a great silver bowl in the centre, was a huge bunch of white violets.

If there had been any doubt in Lee's mind as to the house into which he had broken, the sight of those white violets effectually settled it.

He glanced towards the buffet, which was loaded with rich silver, and towards the walls, where a few paintings hung. Then he backed out of the room and turned out the light.

"She would not have the sacred urn in this room," he breathed inwardly. "She would have it under lock and key. It might be in her own room, or in the room she would use as a study. In a house of this sort the study would be on the floor above this one. It ought to be over the dining-room. I shall risk the other flight of stairs, and see if I can come upon it without rousing anyone."

Tiptoeing along the hall, Lee came to the foot of the stairs. He paused there for a moment, then crept along to the front door. Softly he undid the chain and slipped back the bolt. Then he turned the key.

"Never can tell," he muttered. "I might want to make a quick getaway."

Knowing that his retreat was fairly well prepared, he turned back to the staircase and began to mount. It was carpeted with a luxurious thickness of carpet, and his rubber-soled shoes made not the slightest sound as he went up step by step.

But if he had only known that as he passed up the first step the pressure of his weight had caused a buzzer to ring close to the bed of the Black Wolf, he would not have advanced so confidently.

Nor did he know that immediately she woke to the sound of the buzzer, the Black Wolf pressed another button, which roused her servants on the floor above—Ninette, her maid, Jaques, Marcel, and Andre.

Even while Nelson Lee was half-way up the stairs were they rousing themselves, and preparing to meet the intruder in the house, while the Black Wolf was slipping into a soft fur-edged robe to investigate matters.

Half-way up the stairs Lee paused.

"Never can tell," he thought to himself. "She is tricky, and may play a card when I least expect it. I fancy I had better don this helmet now." He drew the helmet from under his coat and slipped it over his head. Had he not done that he must have heard a faint creak on the stairs which led to a floor still above him.

Then ever so softly a door opening on to the hall towards which Lee was climbing opened, and the Black Wolf slipped out. In the darkness the soft folds of her fur-edged robe could not be seen, nor could one have distinguished a tiny round bulb which she held in her right hand.

Three dark figures came along the hall, one by one, but as they reached the Black Wolf they drew up, and stood like statues against the wall.

Slowly the Black Wolf crept to the head of the stairs and listened. Lee, with his head covered in the helmet, could not hear the faint sound she made. Truth to tell he would have had difficulty in distinguishing it even had his ears been uncovered.

As the faint breath of his movements reached the Black Wolf, she lifted her hand and pressed the bulb she held. Instantly something went through the darkness in the direction of the man who was coming up the stairs, but had the light been on it would have revealed a deep pucker of amazement on the white forehead of the girl, as she found the cloud of drug vapour had not stopped him.

She did not know of the helmet which Lee wore, and which would have permitted him to pass through a veritable cloud of the stuff unharmed.

As he approached the top step the Black Wolf drew back, and a soft hiss sounded through the darkness. Instantly the three statuesque figures against the wall came forward, and with one accord hurled themselves upon the figure of the man who had come up the stairs.

The shock of the attack almost took Lee off his feet. It came to him as an utter surprise. He had had no idea of the figures moving in the hall above him, and not being prepared for any such denouement, it was difficult for him to brace against it.

He threw out one hand and grasped the banisters, even as he felt a pair of arms about his neck, then as the multiplicity of arms and limbs gave him some idea of the odds against him, he stiffened himself for the fight.

Now that he had recovered his balance he released his hand from the banisters, and drove his fist through the darkness.

It got home on something, as he could tell from the feel of his knuckles, and the grunt which followed the blow.

He drew it back and drove it out again, this time putting the whole strength of his shoulder behind it.

He felt his knuckles crash into a face, then one pair of arms slipped from about him, and he knew that he had one antagonist the less to deal with.

Now he ducked his head, and taking the blows which were aimed at him on the helmet, he drove forward with all his power.

By sheer weight and force he carried his antagonists from the top of the stairs, and that danger now removed, Lee let himself go.

He could not see—he could only feel. It was like a diver struggling with the monsters of the deep which he could not locate, but could only feel.

He used his arms like flails, whirling them round and round, and driving them forth mercilessly.

Once more he felt his fist get home on a jaw, and again the pressure of the attack was eased. He jerked off the helmet, and throw it to one side.

It was still dark, with a thick, inky darkness, but Lee felt freer with the helmet off, and, since the attack on him was tangible, he preferred to meet it with eyes free.

He could now feel someone coming for him. He doubled up his fist, and struck out with all his strength.

Once more his knuckles met bone, and then just as he was about to drive home the advantage something descended on the back of his head.

He reeled forward, then sideways. One foot slipped over the edge of the top step. He lurched quickly in an attempt to save himself, then his senses swam, and he went headlong down the stairs, bump, bumping the full way from top to bottom.

He came up against something with terrific force. For a bare second his consciousness hovered on the brink of a terrific crimson abyss, then he hurtled into a deeper chasm of blackness.

CHAPTER V.

In the Grip of the Black Wolf—Lee Tries Argument—Pride Refuseth.

NELSON LEE came to himself slowly and painfully. He had a hazy idea that he was floating about on a pink rose-tinted cloud which gradually changed to white. A subtle perfume was in his nostrils, a perfume which somehow he seemed to find familiar.

Above the cloud was a single light which he took to be a star. Then as his senses cleared still more the perfumed cloud resolved itself into the figure of Mademoiselle Miton, who was looking down at him with a peculiar expression in her eyes—an expression strangely soft for the Black Wolf, and which she quickly veiled as Lee looked up.

The light which he had taken for a star Lee discovered to be a crimson-shaded lamp on a great black desk.

He decided he was in the study of the Black Wolf, though when he had started for that room he had by no means intended to reach it in the way he seemed to have done.

As the mist cleared still more he struggled to sit up, even though he discovered his head to be aching painfully. The Black Wolf placed a small white hand against his chest, and pressed him back gently.

“Not yet,” she said softly. “The Black Wolf never strikes a foe when he is down. You are quite safe.”

Lee allowed himself to sink back.

“How—how long have I been unconscious?” he asked slowly and painfully.

“Not long,” replied Mademoiselle Miton cheerfully. “About ten minutes I should say. I am really awfully sorry to have struck you so heavily, but, you see, you had put two of my men hors de combat, and had almost dislocated the jaw of a third. I could not guess whom it might be creeping up my stairs. You were the last one I should have thought of!”

Lee smiled feebly.

“I didn’t know there was anyone waiting at the top for me. I thought I had guarded myself pretty well.”

"You managed to guard yourself against the first attack," she remarked, not without a tinge of malice in her tones. "You came prepared to be gassed, to judge by the helmet you wore."

"You see, I had had experience of your powers before," said Lee, with another smile. "So you found the helmet, did you?"

She nodded, and straightened up. He noticed then how softly rounded was the white arm as the fur-edged sleeve fell away from it.

"And now, Mr. Lee, perhaps you will enlighten me as to the purpose of your visit here. How did you know I was in London? How did you know I was in this house?"

This time Leo succeeded in sitting up.

"I only know to-night that you were in London, mademoiselle," he said. "I found it out accidentally. As to why I came—well, I will tell you. I came to try to get possession of the crystal urn which you have, and also to recover the crystal and gold lid which you took from the safe in a certain house in Clarges Street to-night whilst the occupants of the house were at dinner."

The Black Wolf gazed at Lee in dumbfounded amazement. Then she burst into a rippling laugh.

"I have heard a few things about you," she said finally. "I have also seen some proof of your powers. But how on earth did you know that I had been at the house in Clarges Street this evening?"

For answer Leo thrust his fingers into the pocket of his waistcoat and drew out a crumpled white violet.

"By that," he said quietly.

The Black Wolf's eyes narrowed.

"That was distinctly careless of me. I shall have to conquer my love of white violets," she said. "Once before they betrayed me to you—or, at least, the odour of the violets betrayed me."

Leo thrust the violet back into his pocket, and rose to his feet.

"Mademoiselle Miton," he said soberly, "will you listen carefully to what I am going to say to you?"

She dropped him a quaint little curtsey.

"Certainly, Monsieur Lee," she said. "I shall give all my attention."

Leo raised his eyebrows for permission to smoke, then lit a cigarette.

"Now, mademoiselle," he said, when he had exhaled a cloud of smoke, "I want you to listen well. It will pay you to do so. I want to speak to you about the crystal urn and lid which you have succeeded in getting possession of."

"I want to say, first, that I am fully au fait with all the part you have played in this affair. I know how you cut through the strong-room at Dr. Challoner's house in St. John's Wood and got the twelve cases of manuscripts which he brought home from Morocco."

"I know, too, that you got at the same time the crystal urn which he brought home. Then came the events in Venice, in which I think you will acknowledge I had rather the best of it."

"You didn't get the urn," murmured the Black Wolf.

"No, I did not," responded Leo. "But I got something equally as important. I got possession of the secret papers of Lucrezia Borgia, which revealed a good deal about the sacred urn and the priests of Wady Pera. Then you scored again to-night when you took the lid from the safe in the house in Clarges Street. But you have no longer to do only with me and the Arab crew from Morocco. There is a new element on the scene."

"And what may that be, pray?" asked the Black Wolf.

Leo was silent for a moment. Then he asked suddenly:

"Do you believe in the actual existence of the priests of Wady Pera?"

Mademoiselle Miton nodded gravely.

"I do," she replied.

"Then you will believe me when I tell you that some of them—I do not know how many—have come to England for the express purpose of getting back the sacred urn. I myself have already had terrible evidence of their power, and believe me, mademoiselle, when I tell you that they wield a power we wot not of. They have shown its force more than once.

"I myself fell under its power. Mr. Gilmore, from whom you stole the lid to-night, has also felt it. Once they find out your whereabouts—and they may already know that—they are bound to make a dead set for you; and I warn you most solemnly you cannot stand against their power.

"Myself, I have given up my desire for the possession of the vase. I have renounced all claim to it, and Mr. Gilmore has done likewise. It is not that we have been frightened off, but because we have tried in some measure to understand the point of view of the priests of Wady Pera; and I think we appreciate the strength of their claim.

"I came here to-night, as I told you, to try and get the urn and the lid. It was not in order that I might keep them for myself, but that I might in some way hand them back to the priests of Wady Pera.

"Now, I ask you, mademoiselle, to give them up. Give them to me and I pledge you my solemn word of honour that I shall give them to the priests of Wady Pera. If not, I tell you, you are bound to regret it. They will beat you, and you will suffer.

"No matter what you have done, I have no desire to see you fall into their power. I have no wish to see you a victim to the force of the mysterious spell they are able to weave. Will you listen to me, not as an enemy, but to-night as a friend? Will you trust me, and give them up before it is too late?"

The Black Wolf laughed when Lee had finished.

"You are droll, monsieur," she said. "I have no doubt that you mean all you say, and that you have felt the power of these priests of Wady Pera, as you say you have. But I assure you, sir, the Black Wolf has no fear of them. Let them come when they will, let them do what they may, let them exercise all the powers they possess, they will never frighten the Black Wolf.

"I, too, know a few tricks. I am not afraid of them. Nor can the law force me to give up the sacred urn. In the first place, it was originally stolen; and, in the second place, if you published the truth about it the public would laugh you out of London. They would not believe it.

"No, monsieur; I hold the most valuable article in existence, and I shall continue to hold it until I am enabled to sell it to some rich American or Brazilian collector. I have already set a price of two hundred thousand pounds on the urn and the lid. If anyone wishes to offer me that price they may have it. In fact, if the priests of Wady Pera care to pay that they may have it back."

"The priests of Wady Pera know nothing of money as we know it," said Lee curtly. "You know that as well as I do, mademoiselle."

The Black Wolf shrugged.

"Then they will have to acquire not only the knowledge, but the amount as well if they wish to regain the sacred urn," she said coolly.

Lee tossed his cigarette into the dying coals of the fire.

"I have spoken to you frankly, mademoiselle," he said slowly. "I have refrained from mentioning any of your former—er—escapades. You know that if I wished to do so I could whisper a few words at Scotland Yard, and you would be held here to await extradition to France.

"I do not profess to understand your motives in leading the life you lead. But, still, I have endeavoured to save you from the fate I know will be yours as surely as the priests of Wady Pera find where you are staying.

"For myself, I have four trusty men on guard outside the house at this moment. They know I am in here, and they know my purpose in coming. Won't you listen to reason, and give me the urn and the lid? If you will do that I will give you a full forty-eight hours to make a getaway."

The Black Wolf shook her head.

"It is useless to argue, Monsieur Lee," she said. "I shall not part with the sacred urn and lid unless I receive the price I have placed upon them. That is my final word."

Lee bowed.

"Very well, mademoiselle," he said coldly. "You have chosen to disregard my warning and offer. There remains nothing for me to do but to bid you good-night. I sincerely trust, however, that you will reconsider your decision, and I shall make it a point to call back here during the coming day to try again to persuade you."

With that he turned, and, opening the door, strode out into the hall. The lights had been turned on while he was in the study, and now he had no difficulty in seeing his way.

The Black Wolf followed him to the head of the stairs, and gazed after him as he went.

Had Lee turned at that moment he would have perceived a peculiarly tender and whimsical expression in her eyes.

The Black Wolf was beginning to have a strange regard for this stern Briton who could be at once so daring and so just. Yet she would not yield, and so she stood there still watching him while he opened the front door and closed it after him.

Scarcely did Lee reach the street when Peter Gilmore and old Rodrigo hurried across to him from the shadowy spot where they had been on guard.

"Well?" queried Gilmore eagerly. "Any luck? We saw the lights go on in the house, and thought you had been caught."

"So I was," replied Lee grimly. "I will tell you all about it later, old man. Walk round to the other street with me, will you? I want to get Nipper and Jim Maxwell."

Gilmore fell into step beside Lee, and, with Rodrigo shuffling along beside them, they made their way round to the street where stood the little hotel in which Lee had taken the two rooms.

The night porter's eyes almost popped out of his head as he saw Lee standing on the step, but the detective pushed by him, and asking Gilmore and Rodrigo to wait hurried up the stairs to the room from the window of which the blanket-ropes hung.

Leaning out he gave vent to a low whistle, which was answered through the mist. Then he whistled thrice, and waited.

Five minutes later two dark figures climbed over the wall to the right, and dropped to the ground.

"Is it you, gov'nor?" came up a whisper from below.

"Yes; all right," replied Lee. "Come along up both of you. The business is over for the present."

They came up hand over hand, and Lee helped them into the room. They untied the blankets, and laid them on the back of the bed; then they all descended to the floor below, where Gilmore and Rodrigo awaited them.

Lee said curtly that they would return to Gray's Inn Road. The car stood where they had left it, near the big hotel, in the square, and five minutes later Nipper was driving at a rapid pace for the consulting-room.

As Lee walked down the hall and opened the consulting-room door, his eyes suddenly grew puzzled as they rested on the desk.

"Someone has been here in our absence," he said curtly to Nipper. "That large box was not on the desk when we left."

"No, it wasn't, guv'nor," replied the lad. "But who could have been here at this hour of the night, or the morning, I should say?"

Lee shrugged.

"It is hard to say. Open the box, my lad."

Nipper approached the desk; then, as he took hold of the peculiar brown wood box which stood there, he gave a whistle.

"It's a queer sort of box, guv'nor," he said.

Lee strode over to the desk and examined the affair.

"It is, my lad," he said. "Let us see how it opens. Ah, here is the spring, I think!"

He pressed a little round knob in the front of the box, and immediately the lid flew up. No sooner had it done so, than Nelson Lee and Nipper both uttered an exclamation of amazement.

Inside was a heap of gems which shone and scintillated beneath the light overhead in a thousand facets of reflection which shot forth every hue in the rainbow.

When their eyes had grown accustomed to the sight, they could see that the heap contained diamonds, rubies, sapphires, aquamarines and rubies fit for the crown of an empress.

It was a magnificent array of stones, and as Gilmore, Maxwell, and old Rodrigo approached the Venetian gave a gasp of utter joy.

His collector's soul dipped and revelled in the array before him. Then it was that Lee discovered a small piece of paper lying just under the top stones.

He took it out and glanced at it curiously. Then his eyes narrowed with interest.

"Gilmore, look here!" he cried sharply.

Peter Gilmore came closer and gazed at the paper.

"Why, bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "those are the hieroglyphics which we saw on the lid I found in Mexico. They are similar to the glyphs I found on the walls of the Holy of Holies in the Snake Sphinx Temple!"

Jim Maxwell was now bending eagerly over the paper.

"They are the same drawings as Dr. Challoner found on the manuscripts he got in Morocco," he said excitedly. "He could read those signs, could the doctor?"

"And we can make them out to a certain degree," said Lee quickly. "Come here, Gilmore, and let's get to work on them. Lend us a hand here, Rodrigo! You can revel in those gems to your heart's content afterwards. Unless I am very much mistaken, we will find that one of the priests of Wady Pera has been in our absence."

Gilmore, Lee, and Rodrigo drew up chairs and sat down at the desk to attempt to decipher the glyphs.

It was a curious hotch-potch of drawings of figures and lines which they saw, and on the face of it, might have been but the vague drawings of a child. But they knew only too well that the figures were those used by the priests of Wady Pera.

It was slow work, indeed, and more often than not little better than guesswork. They could but take first those glyphs for which Gilmore and Rodrigo had worked out a meaning, and then to the best of their abilities fill in the gaps.

And when, after a solid hour's work, Gilmore finally thrust across to Nelson Lee the sheet of paper he had filled, Lee read something like the following:

"To the Man of Understanding—understanding had been rendered by Gilmore from the crude representation of an inverted bowl.

"The Priests of Wady Pera, Guardians of the Sacred Urn, bow down in Greeting. The Priests of Wady Pera have ears that hear all, the Priests of Wady Pera have eyes that see all.

"Through the interpretation of one they know what the Man of Understanding has said and done.

"They know that the Man of Understanding would return to them the sacred urn they repay. Accept, O Man of Understanding, the Gratitude of the Priests of Wady Pera.

"But the Woman who would befool the Priests of Wady Pera shall perish by the Frozen Spell even this night."

Then followed a crude symbol of the sacred urn.

Nelson Lee read the strange message through twice, then he jumped to his feet.

"My heavens, Gilmore!" he cried. "Don't you see what this means? It means that those priests of Wady Pera are shrewder even than we thought. It means that they know almost what we have been thinking. They know the decision we arrived at to get possession of the sacred urn and give it back to them."

"Therefore, they have sent this magnificent heap of jewels as a reward or payment. But they know, too, that the Black Wolf is determined to retain the sacred urn and lid, and they say here that she will fall a victim to the frozen spell this very night.

Even as we talk here they may be at the house in Russell Square. If we are to save her, we shall have to make haste. Heaven only knows what devilish trick they will play on her in the anger caused by their just—or so they think—indignation at her daring to desecrate the sacred urn."

Gilmore was on his feet, gazing at Lee with startled eyes.

"By thunder, you are right, Lee!" he cried. "What will you do?"

"Do!" echoed Lee. "There is just one thing to do. Whatever she may be, Mademoiselle Miton is a white woman. We cannot leave her at the mercy of those priests. Come! Let us get to Russell Square as quickly as the car will take us."

They raced out of the consulting room, Lee in the lead, and Nipper close at his heels. Arriving at the kerb, Nipper leaped for the wheel, and Lee took the place beside him. Old Rodrigo and Gilmore were in the tonneau.

"Make direct for the house!" said Lee curtly, as Nipper let the car out.

The lad nodded, and taking the corner almost on two wheels, he let the car rip along to Russell Square as she has seldom done before, and Nipper was no mean driver, either.

He skidded the car into the kerb in reckless fashion as they reached the house, and almost before it had jerked to a stop, Lee was out, drawing his automatic even as he went.

Up the steps he rushed, with the others behind him, noting as he did so that the lights in the house were still on.

Hoping that this meant nothing of a tragical nature had yet occurred, Lee rapped on the front door, then, without waiting for a response, turned the handle.

The door was unlocked, and opened easily enough. He strode into the hall and across to the foot of the stairs. The others joined him there, and stood close behind him listening. A peculiar, a sinister silence seemed to overhang the place, a silence which was all the more accentuated by those brilliant lights which blazed on every side.

Then, even as they stood there, the silence was broken by a blood-curdling scream which came from somewhere above.

For a moment the quartette at the foot of the stairs was petrified by the tragedy of the scream, by the utter and complex terror of it.

It was like the frenzied cry of a lost soul who but sees the fading glimmer of the gates of hope. Then silence, that awful brilliant silence again.

Nelson Lee shook himself from the hypnotic spell the scream had caused, and with a sharp exclamation he was up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

After him went Nipper and Gilmore, with old Rodrigo limping and mumbling after them.

At the top Lee made straight for the study where he had been only an hour or so before, and bursting in the door, stopped on the threshold.

Before him was a sight which told him all too plainly that the priests of Wady Pera had made no idle threat.

Standing by the table in the centre of the room, with one hand upraised as though to ward off an attack of some kind, and with a look of the most unutterable horror in her eyes, was the Black Wolf as rigid as a petrified figure.

One foot was thrust forward as though she were about to step, just as the something had struck her down.

Her red lips were parted where the scream had issued. She was under the frozen spell.

Lee turned to the others.

"Upstairs with all of you! Search the house! See if the others have fallen victims to the same thing. I will see what can be done here."

As the others turned to obey him, Lee strode across to the Black Wolf and threw his arms about her. She fell over stiffly into them, and picking her up he carried her across to the couch.

Laying her down, he drew out the phials of strychnine mixture and polynine which he had brought. From another pocket he took the hypodermic syringe, and after injecting a portion of the strychnine in the white arm of the Black Wolf, he sent a small amount of the polynine into her blood.

Then he began to chafe her wrists and throat, and even as the door opened to admit Nipper, the Black Wolf opened her eyes.

A word from Nipper was enough to send Lee to the floor above, where he found that Ninette, Jaques, Marcel, and Andre, had all fallen victims to the spell before their mistress had been struck down.

Lee worked like a madman, and three-quarters of an hour later had managed to bring them all round. Then he descended to the floor below, where the Black Wolf was sitting up, somewhat recovered from the effects of the spell.

Lee walked across to her, and took the hand which she held out.

"It is useless for me to try to thank you," she said, looking up at him. "I know full well what would have happened to me had you not come within the hour. I know something of the frozen spell, for the secret is on the sacred urn, and some of the glyphs there I had succeeded in deciphering. But they were too much for me—the priests of Wady Pera. I should have taken the advice you gave me to-night."

"Then they have succeeded in getting the sacred urn and lid?" asked Lee, with a trace of eagerness in his tones.

The Black Wolf smiled wanly.

"They have," she responded. "They have taken them both. Witness."

As she spoke, she rose and crossed the room to where a screen stood. She drew this aside, disclosing an open panel in the wall.

"They were in there," she said simply. "It is empty now."

"And I am thankful that is so," rejoined Lee. "If you will but try to get their point of view, mademoiselle, you will, I am sure, agree with me that they were justified in thinking they might go to any lengths to recover what to them was the most sacred thing in existence."

The Black Wolf shrugged.

"That did not worry me," she replied. "I looked upon them as something priceless, but from a different point of view. Yet they are gone, so let them go. The Black Wolf acknowledges defeat at the hands of the priests of Wady Pera."

Lee lit a cigarette and made as though he would go. Then he paused for a moment.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly, "I offered you some advice earlier in the night. You did not take it. I am going to offer you some more. I hope, for your own sake, you will take it."

"And what might that be, monsieur?" she asked coolly.

"It is this, mademoiselle," rejoined Lee. "I think the climate of London would prove a little unhealthy for you. If Scotland Yard was aware of your presence here, they might—er—take note of the honour you do them in a way which would not appeal to your ideas of hospitality. For instance, Monsieur Fabert, of the Paris police, would be delighted to know that you were here."

"Then what would you suggest?" asked the Black Wolf, with a slow smile.

"I would suggest that before four o'clock to-morrow—or I should say to-day—London knew you no more. In fact, I am quite certain that after four o'clock this afternoon, Scotland Yard will know that you have been honouring the city with your presence."

"Monsieur, I thank you for your suggestion," replied the Black Wolf, with a flash of malice in her dark eyes. "It is given so graciously, I can do nought but accept it. I think you may rest assured that by four o'clock this afternoon the Black Wolf will no longer be in London."

Lee bowed and turned to the door. He swung round just before he passed out, and the eyes of the two met in a long, searching gaze.

Then he opened the door and went down the stairs, a grim smile playing about his lips.

As for the Black Wolf, she stole to the door and watched his retreating back until she could see it no longer. Then she lit a Russian cigarette, and, curling up before the fire, murmured:

"Eh bien! What a man! I would that he were——" But there she paused, and finished the thought with a very charming, very expressive, and very French shrug of her white shoulders.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

I shall publish another extra long story dealing with the further experiences of NELSON LEE, in connection with his great fight against THE LEAGUE OF THE GREEN TRIANGLE. This story will be published under the title of:

"The Prison Breakers"

Will readers kindly order their copies in advance, and if they are interested in the "Nelson Lee Library," assist to spread the fame of our little book by recommending it to their friends?

Another story of Nelson Lee and the Black Wolf will appear shortly. THE EDITOR.

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."

After a good meal the two chums go for a stroll. Nearing the sea-shore they are surprised to hear voices in the distance. A little later they make out the figure of an old war vessel.

Then a weird chant broke across the water, and Hugh tells Ruxton that what they hear is the song of the old Vikings.

The Vikings of Old.

"I DON'T suppose those people were really ghosts," said Ruxton. "But they'd have to be, if they are the ancient Norsemen you talk of, with their banner of Odin, and all that."

"Not at all," replied Hugh. "You don't understand! My father was very learned in languages and ancient manuscripts. He searched all the old archives and relics he could get hold of in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and so on, and he found frequent references to some colony which had been established near the 'Top of the World,' as the ancient astronomers used to call it—that is, in the far north, near the North Pole—somewhere about the place we are in now."

"Oho! I begin to smell a—h'm—mouse. It is a very little one, though, at present—a shrew, perhaps."

"Then, it is a fact that some of the wild legends which are current amongst the hardy fisher folk of those countries, even at the present day, refer to the existence, once upon a time, of such a colony."

"I see. My shrew is growing. It is now as big as a harvest mouse."

"Don't be absurd! Be serious, or I won't go on! Further, as I have briefly mentioned to you before, my father studied the geography of Iceland, and formed a theory that there might be a great cluster of geysers and hot springs in some district in the far north. These, he thought, might so mitigate the Arctic climate of that region as to make it habitable. Do you understand?"

"Certainly. The mouse has become a full-sized one."

"So his theory amounted to this, that at some former time—fifteen hundred or two thousand years ago—the Norsemen discovered such a tract and founded a colony there."

"Yes; I follow you. Mousey is growing still—I almost fancy I smell a rat."

"Then, as you also know, my father was a great Arctic traveller. He has visited places and mixed with Eskimos and other tribes of the northern latitudes, as no other man has ever done before or since. From some of these people he heard, again and again, rumours of a mysterious country declared to exist 'at the top of the world,' whose inhabitants can manufacture metal work—swords and spears, and so on—a thing, as you know, which Eskimos certainly cannot do. There were also stories of the existence, in the same region, of a race of hidden monsters, very savage and ferocious, neither exactly men nor monkeys—a sort of missing-link. Well, to continue, my father found these Eskimo tales so circumstantial, and so persistent, that at last he came to the conclusion there must be some foundation for them. He connected them with the legends I have spoken of, and, finally, came to the conclusion that, somewhere in the far north, there existed, at the present day, unsuspected by the rest of the world, a country with a comparatively mild climate, whose inhabitants are descendants of the Vikings of old. And you now see that he was right all through. Right as to the existence of a race of the 'missing-link,' and right as to the survival of people probably descended from the Norsemen. There! Now, do you understand?"

"I do." And I must say it was a very wonderful idea. So, then, I suppose, your father set off to try to find this mysterious land?"

"Ay—to his sorrow—and to ours. And he took Grimstock with him—who alone returned."

Ruxton was silent for a space. Then he said thoughtfully:

"But tell me—was it generally known that they went out to seek for this country?"

"Why, no. The fact is that amongst the few intimate friends to whom my father mentioned his theory, he was looked upon as a bit cracked. Naturally, that hurt him, and he dropped talking about it. When he eventually started, he let it be understood that his object was to get as near to the Pole as he could, in the ordinary way. Only Grimstock and two or three others knew anything more."

"I see. And I suppose, then, that Grimstock's hope was to discover this country himself, and claim the whole credit of it?"

"So I suspected. My idea was this; Grimstock had all the information my father had got together, and he would be able to set out to find this place on his own account, with an up-to-date equipment such as my father never had the chance of getting together. If Grimstock made the discovery, he would, as you say, claim it entirely as his own, and declare that my father had nothing to do with it—that the place he had been looking for lay in quite a different direction—or something of that sort. So I managed

to join him, under the name of Arnold, in order, firstly, to see if I could find out what had really befallen my father; secondly, whether, if Grimstock discovered any strange country, it was the same as that believed in by my father; and thirdly, to take care, in that case, that Grimstock did not keep all the glory of it to himself when he returned, but told the truth, and ascribed to my father whatever share in it he was justly entitled to."

"Yes. I've got the hang of it all now. It's all clear enough. Dr. Fenwick, your father, must have been a wonderfully shrewd and clever man to have been able to deduce all this from evidence which other men laughed at. For that's what it amounts to. It is a pity you did not go to work differently. You ought to have had someone you could rely on with you—not have trusted yourself with Grimstock alone.

"However, to come to the practical question of the moment—what's going to happen to us when we come in contact with these ancient Norse johnnies—if that's what they are? Will they receive us with open arms as friends, or will they look upon us as intruders—as I believe is usually the fashion with these very exclusive communities—and punish us for venturing here?"

"Why—surely—they will be glad to see us? Think how much we shall have to tell that will amaze and interest them about the great world outside!"

"Humph! That remains to be seen," muttered Ruxton dubiously. "If we were only well armed, and had plenty of ammunition, we might be all right, but as things are, 'I hae ma doots,' as the Scotch say."

The question was to be put to the test much sooner than either of them thought.

The next morning, shortly after dawn, they had begun the construction of a raft to enable them to cross the river, when an exclamation from Cable drew their attention to something he had caught sight of far out on the lake.

"Whales an' periwinkles!" he cried. "If there baint a boat on the water yonder! An' she be comin' this way, too!"

Hugh and Ruxton turned and gazed in the direction indicated. Then their eyes met. Though the boat was as yet but a dark speck in the distance, they knew it for the galley they had seen the previous night. They had said no word about it to their followers, thinking that to do so might only arouse unnecessary fears.

"Now comes the critical moment," said Hugh, in a low aside to his chum. "It's best to stay here and face it out—besides, I expect they will be friendly, and pleased to see us. Don't you?"

"I wish to goodness I knew, Hugh. If they're not, we shall be in precious sorry case. But we can't defend ourselves—that's certain. Nor is it much use running away; there is nothing for it but, as you say, to face the music."

There was naturally great excitement among their followers, and as the strange craft came nearer, and they saw that she was filled with armed men, they were more than half inclined to run away. But Hugh pointed out the uselessness of such a course and advised them to remain, and they obeyed him—with, however, very dubious reluctance.

Meantime, the galley had drawn close in shore, so close that the people on board could be clearly distinguished.

Hard-visaged, wild-eyed, bearded men were they, and they made a strange picture indeed with their curious "winged" helmets and old-worn armour, their swords, and spears, and shields, and their great banner floating out proudly over their heads.

There was nothing; however, unfortunately, in their bearing or manner to raise hopes of friendly intercourse, no shouts of greeting, scarcely, indeed, any look of interest other than slight curiosity.

They evidently knew the place well, for they made for a ledge of rock nearly level with the lake, where there must have been deep water alongside, for they ran their large craft beside it without hesitation, and some of them stepped ashore.

A fine-looking lot of men they certainly were. Not tall exactly, but well-built, and of a war-like carriage. One man, evidently the officer in command, who was dressed in a fine suit of armour, marched first, followed by another officer and a dozen or so of rank and file, and as they drew near to the travellers, the leader addressed them:

"Who are ye, and what are ye doing here in our land?" he demanded gruffly.

Most of those he addressed understood him without difficulty, for the language in which he spoke was, as Hugh had forecasted, very similar to that spoken in Iceland to-day.

"We are travellers from afar," Hugh answered. "We lost our way in the great white wilderness, and wandered here by chance. We come in peace and trust that you will so receive us."

The man gave a harsh laugh.

"We want no strangers here," he returned, "and since ye have thrust yourselves upon us, ye must abide the consequences."

"And what may they be, sir?" Hugh inquired.

"That is not for me to say. It will be decided by our chief, before whom I shall take ye. Meantime, ye are my prisoners."

Then, turning to his followers, he said curtly:

"Bind these men and put them on board! Then search round for what they have with them, and bring it hither, that we may take it back with us!"

Hugh's Defiance—A Duel With a Viking.

ONE of the men in armour, carrying a spear in one hand and a coil of some kind of rope in the other, advanced towards Hugh, who sprang back, his face aflame with indignation.

"What is this?" he cried. "What do you mean by ordering us to be bound like common malefactors? I have told you that we come in peace. We have done no harm, either to you or to your property! We are willing to go before your chief—whoever he may be—as free visitors. But as bound prisoners—no!"

The officer gave another harsh laugh:

"Thou art my prisoner," he said, rudely. "And thou wilt come with me as I choose, not as thou chooseth. Bind him!"

Hugh was armed with nothing but his iron-shod alpenstock, and truly, in his ragged furs, hanging about him almost in shreds, and with his unkempt hair and face, he did not look a particularly imposing figure, or one calculated, at first sight, to inspire admiration.

But if the strangers thought that on that account they had a weak, easily-managed subject to deal with, they were quickly undeceived.

As the man in armour advanced towards him, Hugh, with his staff knocked the spear aside, and rushing suddenly upon the astonished soldier, wrested it from him, at the same time, striking him a blow that sent him down like a ninepin.

Swinging the spear round as another soldier came up, sword in hand, he knocked that weapon from his grasp, and pouncing upon it, sprang back and handed the spear to Ruxton.

"Good!" exclaimed Val, seizing it and poising it in his hand. "We'll show 'em whether we're going to submit tamely to be led with ropes like a lot of cattle."

His words were a signal for a rush on the part of the other soldiers, but the two sailors and a couple of the natives came to the aid of their leaders. Though they had nothing but their alpenstocks, they made such good play with them that the astonished men in armour actually drew back.

"Seize upon that man!" ordered their leader, pointing to Hugh. Then, to his own officer, he said sneeringly: "Art thou afraid, Kern, of a band of ragged thralls like these?"

"We are not thralls!" cried Hugh. "We are free men and mean to remain so! It is easy to order thy men to seize me, O, valiant one," he added tauntingly to the leader. "But I notice thou hast not offered to take me thyself—though thou hast armour and I have none."

"Thou art an insolent churl!" exclaimed the leader. "Dost think I would soil my sword with such as thou? Thou shouldst be well pleased that I paid thee so high a compliment as to tell one of my officers to take thee. Now, wilt thou yield?"

"Never, except thou promise us a safe pass to come and go free."

"That I have already told thee I cannot do. It rests with our chief. And I shall take thee to him how I choose."

"No, thou wilt not. We will fight you all first. I warn thee that we can kill thee if we choose, boaster, though thou and thy men are as two or three to one. I thought you were a band of brave men, descendants of a race renowned in history for deeds of daring and valour—men who would have scorned to make war on a band of harmless travellers. I doubt if thy chief will hear thee out in this. I have not seen him—but unless you are all degenerates from your ancestors, I have a better opinion of him!"

"What knowest thou about our history or our ancestors?" the man asked, evidently somewhat impressed. "Who are thou to talk thus?"

"One who is thy equal in rank, at any rate. One who is not to be roped, and bound, and led before thy chief like a common thrall."

"Well, see here, O stranger," said the other, after a moment's thought. "I will give thee this chance. If thou are not a thrall or a landless man, but a man of the sword, let us see thee prove it by defending thyself against my officer. Thou shalt have fair play."

"But 'tis scarce fair; he has no armour," the one called Kern pointed out.

"I want none!" cried Hugh, whose blood was now thoroughly up. "I can fight without it; let us see if thou canst fight us well with it! Only put down thy shield—or lend me one."

"Then the consequences be on thy own head, foolish one," answered Kern. And so saying, he tossed his shield to a soldier, and advanced, sword in hand.

Hugh wasted no more breath over useless words, but with the sword he had gained possession of, attacked the other so fiercely that he had to stand on the defensive, and thus began one of the strangest fights ever seen.

True to his promise, the leader of the armed band restrained his followers from any interference. Ruxton, on his part, did the same with his own people. Each side formed a line, with a space of twenty or thirty yards between, and stood and watched the conflict, though with very different feelings.

The strangers seemed no more than indolently interested. They evidently considered their man was bound to win, and they, therefore, regarded the whole affair as rather a waste of time than anything else. They did not even expect to get any excitement or amusement out of so one-sided a duel.

Hugh's companions, on the other hand, looked on with bated breath. They knew that to them the issue meant much—everything, perhaps. At the same time, it must be confessed that their hopes did not run very high. For, so far as they knew, Hugh had no special knowledge of this kind of fighting—and pitted, as he was, against one who was supposed to be a trained fighter, one clad in armour to boot, his—Hugh's—chance seemed but a very poor one.

But Hugh surprised his foes, and electrified his friends by quickly showing both sides that they were altogether wrong. To their utter astonishment he simply played round the man in armour and did as he liked with him. His opponent never had a chance—never got in so much as a stroke, save once, when Hugh, through over-confidence perhaps, or, it may be, to purposely lead his foe on, laid himself open. The other seized the chance, and aimed a blow, which, had it got home, might well have loped Hugh's arm off at the shoulder—only he was not there when it fell—he had leaped aside.

It soon became obvious that he was merely tiring his man out. In fact the leader of the strangers saw it so plainly that he at last decided to put an end to what had become, from his point of view, so sorry an exhibition. Hugh perceived this, and resolved to end it first himself. He made a feint, and again seemed to lay himself open; his adversary aimed a quick, slashing cut, only to find himself standing, with outstretched arm and hand extended, with nothing in it. Hugh had struck the sword from his grasp, and it fell clattering to the ground.

Hugh stooped, picked it up, and with a courteous bow offered it back to his crestfallen opponent.

“Try again, sir,” he said laughingly. “But hold thy weapon more tightly next time.”

“No, no,” the leader interposed. “We have had enough of this. We have no more time to waste thus. Thou hast proved sufficient for my purpose, O stranger. I can see that thy manner of fighting is different from ours, and I think that that gave to thee an advantage.”

“Ay!” growled Kern. “I will fight with him again another time, and then I promise him the result shall be different.”

“Whenever it pleases thee,” returned Hugh, easily. “Anything for a quiet life.”

“Thou needst not look for a quiet life with us,” warned his foe. “They will put thee to work in the mines, as they do with all who venture here.”

This certainly did not sound cheerful, and Hugh glanced at Val.

“Say,” he said in English, “shall we go with 'em and chance it, or shall we fight 'em? I believe we could lick the lot! I don't think much of their fighting powers. They seem to me to be out of practice.”

Ruxton laughed, and his laugh brought scowls to the faces of the strangers.

“I expect we'll have to go,” he advised. “They would only send stronger parties and hunt us out of the country.”

“Very well; so be it.” Then, turning to the leader of the strangers, he said in their tongue: “We are ready, most honourable sir, to accompany thee to thy chief, provided we go, as I at first claimed, as free men, not as thralls.”

“It shall be so; thou hast proved thyself worthy in thine own cause, and I accept thy word on behalf of thy companions,” was the reply. “And now tell me what property have you brought with you?”

“Precious little good, sir—hardly more than what thou now seest. We lost everything else on the way. Come with me and I will show thee.”

Hugh led them to the cave in which they had passed the night, where he pointed to their cooking pans and other little odds and ends—all they now had left beyond their rifles. As to the latter, the stranger looked curiously

at them, and appeared puzzled and interested. But he evidently did not understand the use of them, and to the delight of the chums, he did not attempt to take them away.

Then they embarked on board the galley, which was pushed off, the rowers dipped their great oars, and the travellers started on their voyage, wondering not a little what new adventures awaited them upon the other side of the lake.

The Vikings' Home—Osth the Hard and Hertseg the Fighter—Hugh Loses His Temper Again.

“**W**HY, Hugh!” said Ruxton, as the two friends talked apart in their own language. “I had no idea you could show such pretty play with the sword. Where did you pick it up? You must have had some jolly good instructors!”

Hugh smiled, and coloured at his friend's praise.

“I've picked it up in many schools,” he said modestly. “The fact is, Val, I seized every opportunity that offered, wherever I have travelled, of learning all I could that might fit one for this sort of thing.”

“This sort of thing! You couldn't possibly have foreseen——”

“No-no; I didn't exactly foresee it—yet I had some idea of it in my mind. I was always a bit of a dreamer, I think, as I suppose my father was before me. His ideas—for he believed thoroughly in all that has here come to pass—fired my imagination also, while I was still a youngster. Something seemed to whisper to me that, some day, all that he had dreamed about would turn out to be true, and that I should be in the midst of it. So I tried to fit myself for it. My mother, too, let me have my way in this, and did the best she could to help. She provided me with instructors in every kind of athletic exercise. As for sword-play, I have studied and practised it not only in England, but in France and Germany. I was at Heidelberg for two years as a student, and fought in many a students' duel there.”

Val whistled.

“Oho! That explains the milk in the cocoanut! Bravo! It will come in jolly handy here, or I'm a Dutchman. By the way, do you notice what a sharp lookout these people keep? They seem quite nervous—as though they were fearing an attack from some quarter. And, for the matter of that, what means this 'panoply of war'—this sailing to and fro of men armed to the teeth, in an isolated country like this? One would think if there's any country in the whole world where the inhabitants ought to feel themselves safe from attack, this would surely be the place!”

It was one of their own party who presently explained this riddle. It has been stated that amongst their four “native” followers was one who was really an Iclander, though he had lived with the Eskimos for so many years that he had become almost like one of their tribe.

His name was Melka, and he had now been busy doing his best to ingratiate himself with the rank and file amongst their captors. As he could, of course, speak their language even better than his leaders, he quickly made himself at home. He asked all manner of questions, and now came up with a fund of information to impart.

The country—he told them—was called Thorbergen. Its people were actually descended from the Vikings of old, and had preserved not only their language but their manners, customs, and traditions.

For many long years there had been peace in the land; but just lately a feud had broken out, and they were now divided into two hostile camps,

under rival chiefs, named, respectively, Osth and Gerwulf. The party into whose hands they had fallen were some of Osth's adherents; and the leader of it was a "jarl" named Rudlaff.

"So, sirs," concluded Melka, "you perceive that there is now civil war in the land, and all the 'jarls' and 'holdas' and the common people are doing their best to make themselves into soldiers, and taking part on one side or the other."

"Oho! I see!" laughed Ruxton. "So, then, I suppose that they have brought out all the old, rusty armour, and swords and shields, and the rest of it, that had been stacked away in museums? They've been furbishing them up, and are bringing them into use, eh?"

"I doubt not, sir, that something of that sort has happened."

At this Hugh laughed heartily.

"Didn't I say that that chap I fenced with seemed to be out of practice?" And Val joined in the laugh.

In fact, this view of the matter struck them both as so amusing, and they laughed so merrily over it, that the leader of the party came over to them, and with a scowl demanded to know what they had found to laugh at in that way.

"I do not think ye will be so merry when ye stand before Osth, our chief," he muttered. "Ye will find that he is not one to be played with. Ye will not laugh, either, when he sends ye off to the mines to get our black fuel."

"That's why we laugh, O jarl," Hugh answered.

The man stared at this.

"How so?" he demanded gruffly.

"Why," rejoined Hugh, "it seems such a funny idea to be talking of sending men like we are to work in your mines, at a time when you want the help of every man of thew and muscle that knows how to handle a sword."

"It sounds too absurd," Ruxton joined in. "Now I will have a wager with thee, O jarl, that the chief will instead find my friend here a post as instructor in swordsmanship."

But Rudlaff did not respond to the offer of a wager. He looked the two up and down in some perplexity, as though unable to decide whether they were serious or were only making fun of him.

Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Hark ye, sirrah," he said, in a rather more friendly tone. "I like your spirit! I always admire good fighters, and men, as ye say, of thew and muscle. We all do here. So I will offer ye a word of advice. Be not overbold. It might be as you suggest that ye might be more useful to us where there is fighting to be done than picking out the black fuel and dragging it from the mines. But our chief is a hard man—he is known as 'Osth the Hard.' Ye would have to prove yourselves fully ere he would listen to any such offer from strangers. And the tests are hard. Few can pass them."

And with that he turned on his heel and left them.

"So," said Hugh, "they have mines of 'black fuel' here, eh? He means coal, I suppose?"

"Markham and other explorers have recorded that they found coal in the extreme north," observed Ruxton; "lots of it, they said."

"Ay, I know. I don't want to be set to work as a coalminer, though—as it seems is their playful and hospitable way with strangers who visit them."

They had now passed far out on the waters of the lake, and could see before them on the left shore, some precipitous cliffs which rose abruptly almost from the water's edge.

Here Melka's gossip came in again:

"Yonder is the dwelling-place of these people," he stated. "There is a great labyrinth of immense caverns in those rocks, and they live in them entirely through the winter, and only come out in summer time. Gerwulf, the other chief, and his people, live in another place of a similar kind amongst these mountains you can see on the opposite side of the lake."

Presently, as they drew nearer to their destination, one or two other vessels came out to meet them. Others, again, were lying at anchor. A few of those they saw were ancient-looking craft like the one they were in, though not so large; but most of them had evidently been built much more recently. They were, too, of different construction, being altogether lighter, and had the appearance of having been designed for pleasure vessels rather than for war purposes.

"It looks to me," commented Ruxton thoughtfully, "as though these very odd-looking galleys are really the original ships in which these people's tough old ancestors fought their way here through the ice floes of the Arctic seas, and that they've been laid up here ever since. And now they've been brought out again for use in the old fashion."

"Can such a thing be possible?" exclaimed Hugh, looking at them with a new interest.

"I think it may be just barely possible—having regard to the peculiar climate of these regions."

Soon afterwards they ran alongside a landing-place, and then were marched through lines of wondering spectators to the place where Osth, the chief, was holding a sort of open-air court, surrounded by his officers and nobles.

There was a certain amount of barbaric pomp and show in their dresses and general arrangements. "Osth the Hard," himself a man of moderate height and somewhat heavy figure, sat upon a quaintly-fashioned chair or throne, with arms and back carved in the shape of heads of some non-descript, but decidedly hideous animals.

His hair and beard were iron-grey, and he had beetling, bushy eyebrows, and a fierce-looking moustache, which gave him a scowling and semi-savage appearance.

He looked at Rudlaff and then at the new arrivals, and then back at Rudlaff.

"How now, Rudlaff," he said, in a loud, sonorous voice. "What have we here—strangers?"

"'Tis so, O chief. We found them on the shore of the lake. I have brought them here that thou mightest deal with them."

"Ay, ay! A poor, sorry lot of churls they seem to be. Thralls escaped from their liege lords, doubtless. Yet some of them look like men of muscle and bone. None the worse for that"—with a loud, mocking laugh. "They will be all the better for the work we shall put them to."

He looked at Hugh with a critical eye, very much as though he were "sizing" up the good and bad points of some animal offered for sale. Then, turning to an officer in a rich suit of armour beside him, he said:

"Go thou, Hartseg, whom men call the Fighter, and tell me what thou thinkest of you churl. Is he as strong and sinewy as he looks from here?"

The one addressed was perhaps the tallest man there—one evidently in the prime of life. By his swaggering air, and his title of "Fighter," it was easy to guess that he was looked upon as a kind of champion.

He had a hard, impressive face, and heavy jaw, with dark, steely eyes. He sauntered superciliously towards Hugh, and looked him over with a

cool, insolent air. Then he began to feel his arms, and punch his chest—again, much as a farmer might feel the “points” of a steer offered for sale.

Now Hugh had intended to be very cautious and discreet. He had remembered Rudlaff’s advice—which, though roughly given, had, he believed, been well meant—and had made a bargain with himself that he would keep his temper.

But he had not then expected this sort of treatment, and under it his temper quickly rose. As Hartseg pushed him, so he pushed back at Hartseg, whereupon that lordly person laughed, and dealt him a light box on the ear. It was not exactly a blow, so much as an insult.

The next moment the insolent “jarl” went down under one of the sledge-hammer strokes for which Hugh was famous amongst those who knew him. And then arose a terrible uproar, “jarls” and “holdas,” and Osth himself, springing to their feet, amid a thunder of execration and threats.

During the continuance of the uproar, and before the chief could intervene, “Hartseg the Fighter” sprang to his feet and rushed at Hugh; only, however, to be again knocked down.

As he was scrambling up for the second time, one, whom they afterwards knew as “Berdrok the Fierce,” drew his sword, and made for Hugh, evidently intending to cut him down. And as the young fellow could not look two ways at once, that would have been his fate if Ruxton had not intercepted the new assailant.

Val here repeated the tactics which Hugh had adopted with the officer Kern. He beat up the fellow’s sword with his alpenstock, struck it from his hand, took possession of it, and finally, with a mighty blow of his fist, rolled its owner over.

Others came to the help of the two Vikings; whereupon Mike and Cable joined in the fray. Like their leaders they had only their alpenstocks, but these they used like quarter-staves, and to such purpose that they quickly cleared a space round their leaders.

Mike, in particular, greatly distinguished himself on this occasion. To him it was just the kind of free fight in which he and his countrymen delight; and he entered into it with great gusto. Whirling his staff about till it looked like a windmill in full swing, he skipped, and hopped, and shouted, and hurrahed in such a wild fashion that he seemed to be in two or three places at once. He certainly continued to make noise enough for half a dozen; and enjoyed himself immensely.

In the confusion which ensued, even Osth’s thunderous tones—and it was commonly said that he had a voice like a bull—were scarcely heard. By the time he succeeded in restoring order three of his people were rolling on the ground; while the four daring strangers were seen to be all armed with either swords or spears captured from their assailants.

At last there came a pause, Osth commanding his people to restrain their rage while he questioned the strangers. Then he addressed himself to Hugh:

“By Thor’s hammer!” said he, “thou art a smart youth, but a trifle quick-tempered, methinks! I wanted to know——”

“Yonder man treated me like a dog!” exclaimed Hugh. “He insulted me—he pinched me and nipped me as though I were a bull he was thinking of buying! Why should I endure his insults? Let him fight me if he will; I have not yet punished him as he deserves!”

(This grand story will be concluded next week.)

REMEMBER!

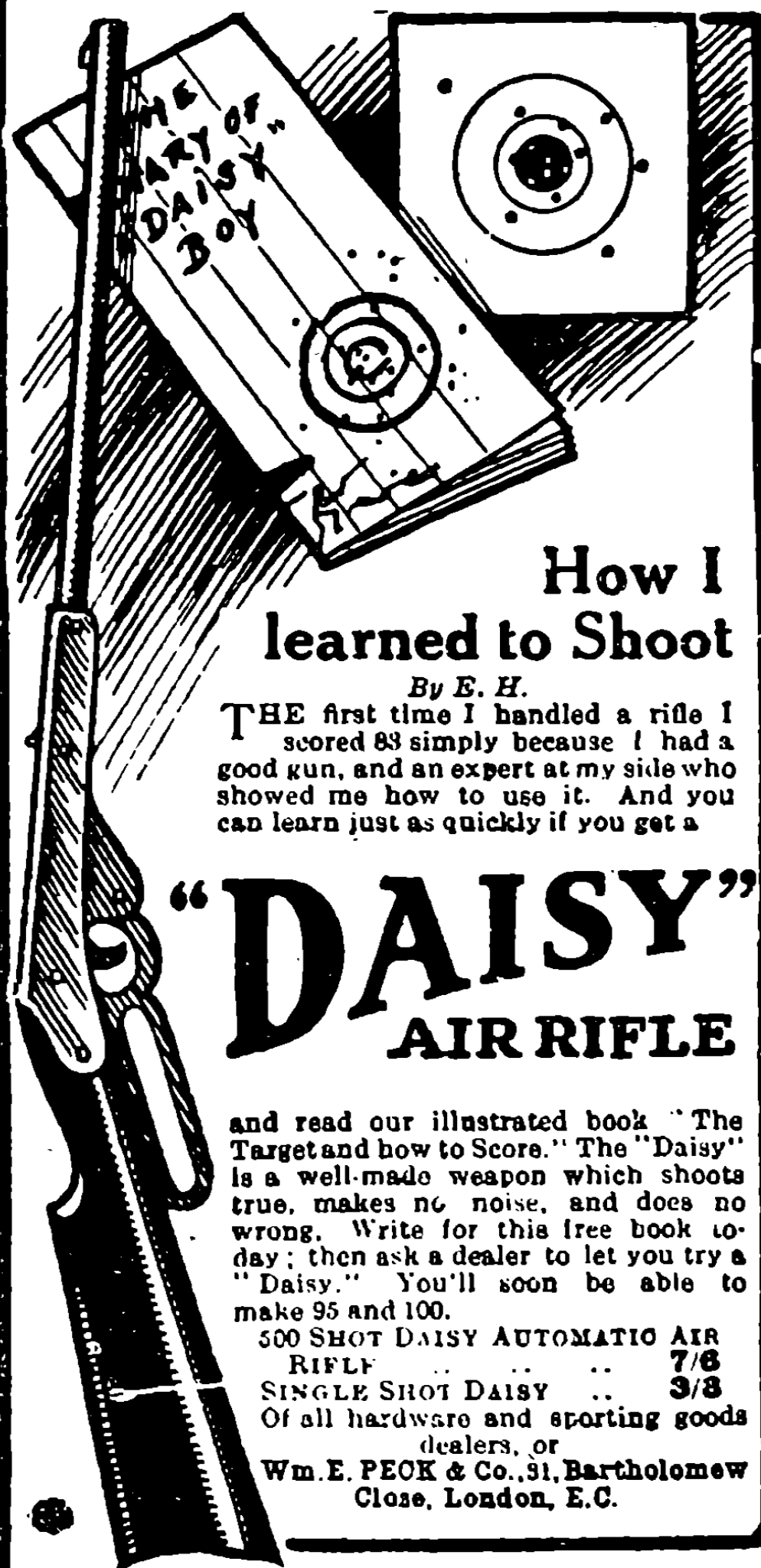
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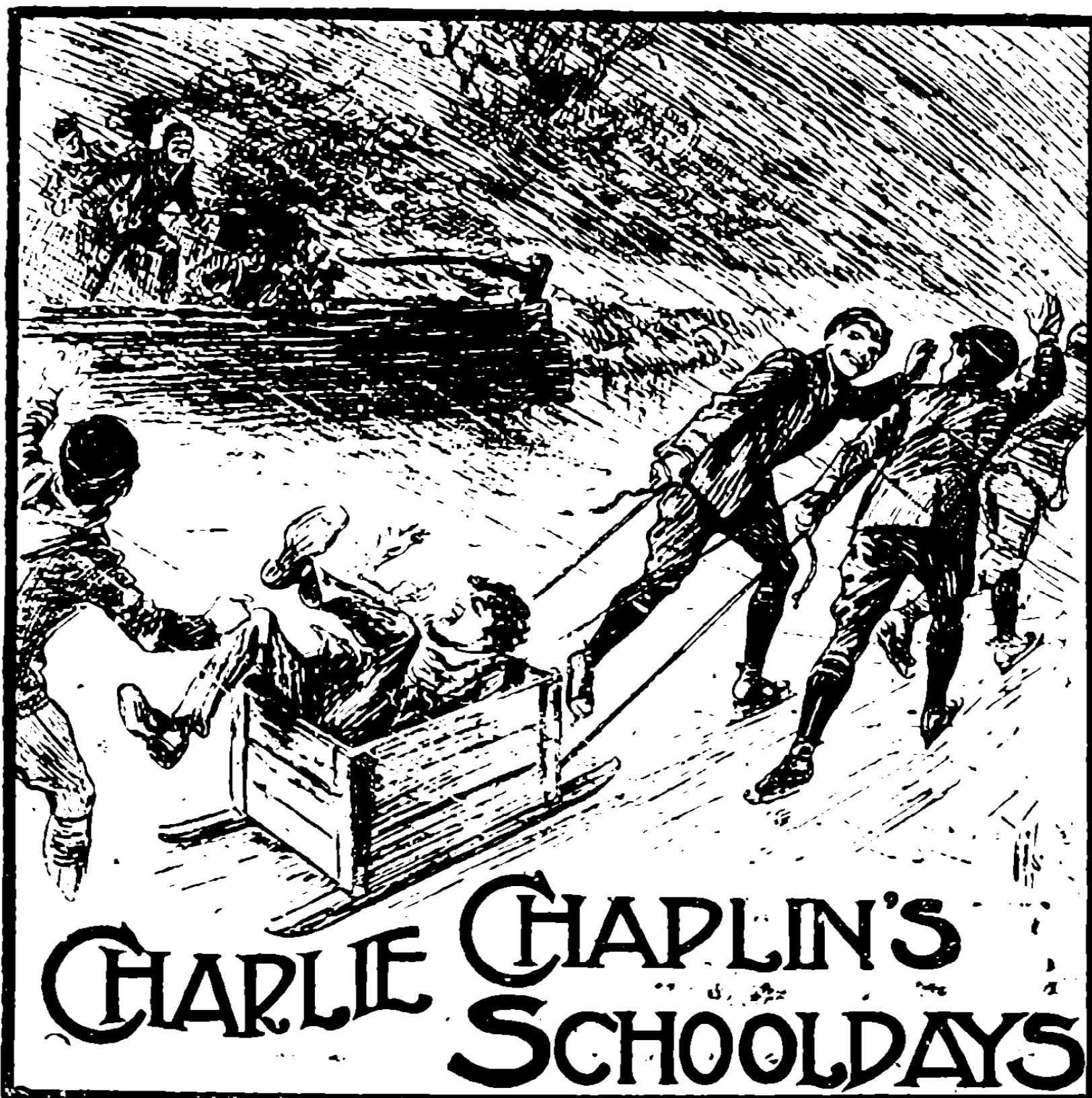
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