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*Week ending
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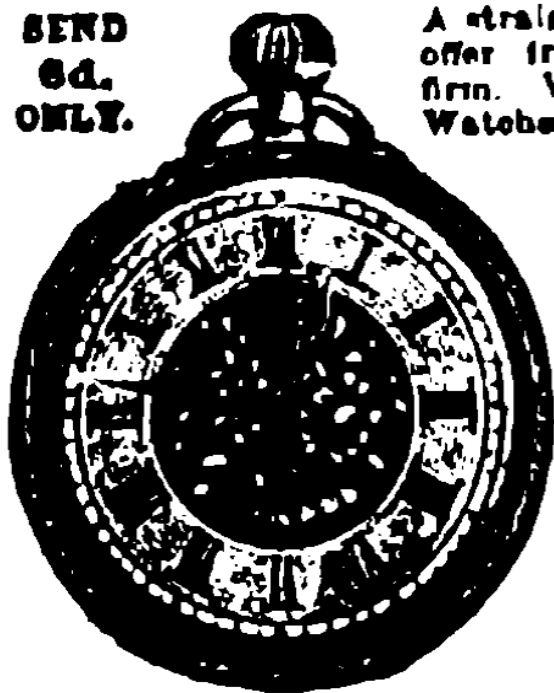
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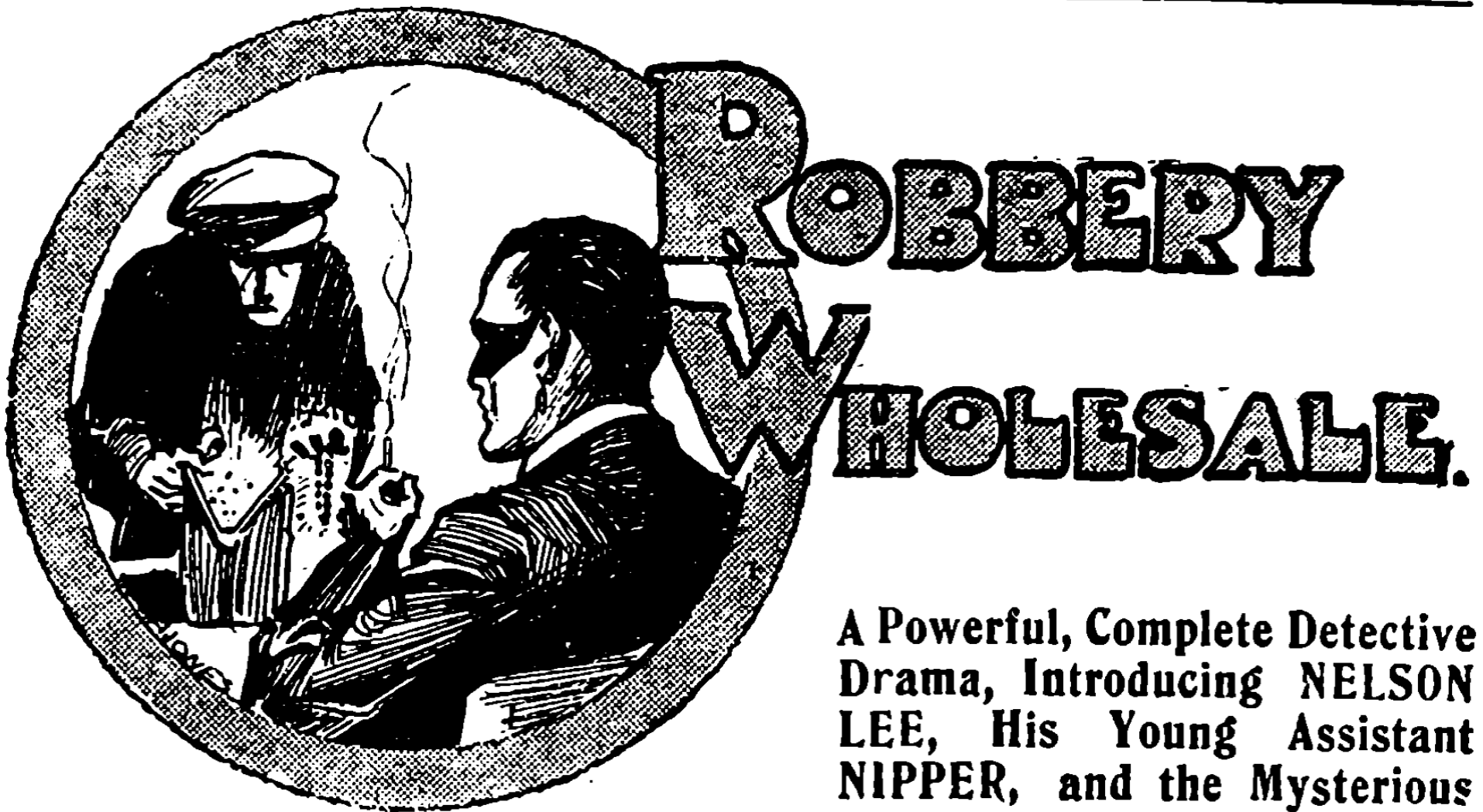
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CHAPTER I.

At the Prince Hotel—A Distinguished Arrival—A Strange Proceeding.

THE Prince Hotel had gone through a slow, but steady, metamorphosis. Originally one of the finest specimens of early Tudor architecture to be found in all England, it had been the county seat of an ancient and proud family.

With three generations of wasters to uphold the honour of the ancient family, the estate had gone to rack and ruin, and then, in common with a good many other county seats in England, it had fallen into the hands of an American family whose escutcheon should have been a barrel of pork with two hogs rampant.

They, the Americans in question, not finding that delight and surcease which they had sought to find in England, and discovering the "county" to be strangely unresponsive to their somewhat effusive overtures, had decamped, bag and baggage, and the old place had lain untenanted and in disrepair for several years.

Then an optimistic, if somewhat needy, medical practitioner had leased the old place for a sanatorium. In truth, it might have served a worse purpose.

Standing as it did on a high bluff, overlooking the whole stretch of the English Channel which washes the south coast of Devon, it lay in the direct path of the warm sea breeze from the south and the bracing air from the north. The salty tang of the sea rose upwards from the face of the sea, while the surf beat unceasingly against the cliffs which formed at once the rampart and the foundation of the place.

It was ideally situated for the purpose, but somehow the patients did not come in sufficient numbers to make it pay, and, after a short and inglorious career, it once more rested under closed doors and shutters.

Then Devon and Cornwall rose up to make battle against the other seaside resorts of Europe. There came a boom in the West of England, and a shrewd hotel man in London—Varden, of the great Hotel Venetia—leased the old manor house and converted it into a summer hotel. In conjunction with

the great London caravansary, he managed it, and, by diligent work in town, many guests at the Venetia were sent on to the Prince Hotel who would otherwise have gone elsewhere. By judicious and careful advertising Varden had so raised the tone of the place, and interested the right people, that after a short two years the Prince showed a handsome profit on the season's turnover, and large additions and improvements to the building resulted.

Varden was not the type of business man to let the thing rest there. Always there must be something new to interest his guests, and with the laying down of a splendid golf course he "caught" another element which came, saw, played, and remained. More than that, they sent enthusiastic reports to their friends, and now, on the third year of its life as an hotel, the Prince showed distinct signs of having a record season. Ordinarily the real season's rush did not start until the first of January.

Varden, the manager, had made it a point to boom the Prince against the Continental winter resorts, and he had therefore laid himself out to cater for winter trade rather than for summer trade. In the summer, or, at least, the better part of it, all his energies were given to the affairs of the great Venetia in London—the Mecca for tourists to the world's capital.

But even though it was the first of the year which usually brought the big rush to the Prince, there were, in the third year of its life as an hotel, a good many pre-Christmas guests, most of whom had been there the year before and had come down early to be certain of getting the rooms they required. With the genial Varden to direct matters, Christmas at the hotel was made a gay affair.

All were agreed that the dinner was everything to be desired, and the charming individual favours which the management of the hotel had provided for each guest were admired and gushed over. Then Varden delighted the children by a magnificent Christmas tree, and, with the festivities continuing well into the small hours of the morning, everyone voted it all a huge success. Varden, it was remarked before, was a shrewd hotel man, and on this occasion he proved his right to that title.

The pleasant atmosphere hung over the place during all the week between Christmas and New Year, and then all the women of the hotel became pleasantly agog with a thrilling bit of news which Varden had allowed to leak out.

The Prince was to have a very distinguished guest—none other than the Ranee of Bojwok, one of the richest native states in Java. The ranee, it was rumoured, was one of the most beautiful Eastern princesses one could wish to see, and when one spoke of her jewels it was with bated breath.

It seemed that she was to arrive on New Year's Day with a retinue of servants, and had reserved several rooms en suite on the first floor. In a general way the report was correct. Varden had received a telegram from the acting manager of the Venetia, in London, reserving a suite for the Ranee of Bojwok.

The ranee, it appeared, was a guest at the Venetia, and had inquired of Willis, the acting manager, if he could recommend a quiet seaside place for herself and her attendants. Willis, acting in the interests of the company for which he worked, had at once recommended the Prince, in South Devon, and his wire to Varden had followed. The main details of the affair were sent on to Varden in a covering letter, and Varden had at once set about getting the suite ready for its distinguished visitor.

And on New Year's Day the greater proportion of the guests found reason to loiter about the great front balcony of the hotel.

The ranee was to arrive just before lunch, and a full hour before that function the balcony was crowded. The whistle of the train a good mile

away set the watchers agog, and then the great hotel motor, which had been sent specially to meet it, was seen coming up the drive which led to the hotel. It drew into the steps with a flourish, and from it emerged a dusky, turbanned man who looked more like an Indian than a Javanese. Still, the guests of the Prince were not critical. They were looking for the ranee.

A middle-aged woman, of equally dusky hue, descended next; then came two more turbanned men, and finally the ranee herself. With one accord the watchers craned their necks to get a better view; nor were they disappointed in what they saw. They saw a petite, dark-skinned woman descend, and, as she threw back the great sable which enwrapped her, the curious saw that the rumours of her beauty had not been exaggerated.

Her hair was raven black, her eyes like twin coals of fire set in a sable frame, her skin brown as the husk of a walnut, her features small and perfectly formed. She carried herself with a regal air, and as two of her turbanned attendants assisted her up the steps she allowed her dark eyes to sweep the assembled guests of the hotel. The briefest of smiles flitted across her face, revealing two rows of pearly teeth. Then Varden, who had come to the porch to receive her, had ushered her into the hotel, and with the disappearance of the middle-aged ayah the tongues of the watchers became loosed.

The sum and substance of it all was that the ranee was delightful, and, anxious to be on hand in case she should elect to lunch in the hotel dining-room, there was a simultaneous rush for the tables.

Yet in some mysterious way it became known that the ranee was not strong, that she had found the journey down fatiguing, and that she would not appear in the public rooms for the present.

That afternoon the ranee, heavily veiled, entered in an invalid chair, and with a turbanned servant on either side of her she disappeared towards the winding road which led down to the beach. The rest of the guests, having recovered a little from the excitement of the arrival, drifted away to the links or the boats, as their fancy willed, and those who remained behind sought their rooms for the usual siesta. The Prince settled down to its ordinary afternoon somnolence, and peace prevailed.

But at four o'clock the invalid chair bearing the ranee returned to the hotel, and at the same moment a magnificent white yacht came into the bay at the foot of the cliff and cast anchor. Certainly there seemed no connection between the visit of that white yacht and the presence of the Ranee of Bojwok.

The ranee chose to dine in her rooms that night, and those who had occasion to pass along the corridors on the first floor reported that always a turbanned servant stood without the room of his mistress. Yet, as ten o'clock struck that evening, had any of the guests of the Prince been enabled to look into the sitting-room of the ranee's suite he would have found cause for intense wonder. At ten o'clock precisely the ranee, who had been lounging in a deep chair before the fire, rang the bell. The door leading to the adjoining room was opened, and the middle-aged servant entered.

"It is time to make a move, Ninette," said the ranee, in faultless French. "The yacht has come into the bay, and Captain de Frayne will be punctual. You will bring the things I need."

"At once, mademoiselle," replied the maid. "I go to get them."

As she waddled away, the girl in the chair raised her arms above her head and yawned. Then she gave a little shrug.

"It should be easy," she mused, as her white teeth showed in a smile of amusement. "These stodgy folk, they are so droll. It was well planned, I flatter myself. The foolish young man at the Venetia, in his anxiety to gain guests for this hotel, little dreamed that I had gone to the Venetia so the

suggestion would come from him. Little did he think that it was Mademoiselle Miton, the Black Wolf, whom he was sending to the Prince. Marcel, Andre, Jacques, and Ninette have all risen to the occasion nobly. The yacht is here, prompt to the hour. It promises well.

"Ah! Here is Ninette!"

She looked round as the maid entered, bearing some masculine garments on her arm. Then the Black Wolf rose. Deftly she slipped off the trailing garments she was wearing, and, with the agility of long practice, got into those which Ninette had brought. Then she stood up and regarded herself in a full-length pier-glass which stood near at hand.

"I will do," she remarked, as she turned slowly about. "I shall scarcely meet anyone on the way, and if I do they will never recognise me in the dark. Now, then, Ninette, you know what you have to do?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. I shall do it all just as you said."

"That is well," replied the Black Wolf. "Just to be on the safe side, however, I shall run over the details with you. To-morrow morning you will inform the manager of the hotel that the Rane of Bojwok is indisposed, and will keep to her rooms for a day or two. You will also arrange that Jacques, Marcel, and Andre are on guard outside the door of my room all the time. They can relieve each other at intervals. The housemaid for this floor can enter this room freely, and bring the meals here; but only you will have access to the bedroom. You will continue that until you get orders from me to do otherwise. Is that all clear?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, it is all clear."

"Very well, Ninette, I shall get along now."

Stepping across to a table by the window, the Black Wolf took up a folded silk ladder which had lain there ready for use. She signed to the maid to switch out the lights, and when the room was in darkness she softly lifted the window. Leaning out, she gazed downwards into the thick tangle of the garden below.

From a room on the ground floor the strains of the orchestra rose. They were dancing in the ball-room, and most of the guests would be in there.

When the Black Wolf saw that the shadows in the garden were fixtures, she dropped the end of the silken ladder from the window. She hooked it on to the sill of the window by two iron hooks, then waited for two minutes. Satisfied that the garden was unoccupied, she threw one leg over the sill and placed her foot on a rung of the ladder. Then, when she had whispered a final injunction to Ninette, she began to descend.

Slowly and cautiously she went down, rung by rung, until the garden was a few feet beneath her. As her course took her past one of the lighted windows on the ground floor, she pressed her hands against the wall of the building, swinging clear of the light. Then she reached the ground, and a gentle tug at the ladder signalled to Ninette to draw it up. The Black Wolf stood pressed against the wall until the ladder went up, twisting and writhing like a snake, and not until she heard the window close softly did she move.

Taking advantage of every bit of cover afforded by the shrubbery, the Black Wolf made her way through the garden to the edge of the main terrace which flanked the driveway.

Two dark forms, coming up towards the entrance of the hotel, caused her to dodge into the shelter of a large bush; but when she saw their figures silhouetted against the light of the entrance, she slipped forth again and stole down the drive. It was a good half-mile to the main road, and all the way the Black Wolf kept well in the shadow.

Once she reached the main gates, she slipped through and set off boldly down the road, taking the direction which led to the beach.

It has been already mentioned that the Prince Hotel stood on the high bluff formed by the cliffs, but in years gone past a winding road had been cut down in a cutway of the cliffs, and this road Varden had made into an easy descent to the beach.

At the top of the road the Black Wolf paused and gazed out to sea. There in the bay, close at her feet it seemed, there appeared the lights of the yacht which had dropped anchor that afternoon. Farther out was the light of a fishing-boat homing slowly through the night. And away out at sea, rising like a monster pillar of light, was Eddystone, its great lantern beaconing the night in every direction.

Here and there was the distant gleam of a steamer passing up or down Channel, and in a lip of the curving shore, far to the east, the lights of a small hamlet. Overhead the stars blazed like clustered gems, their ever-changing hues filling one with the fancy that an invisible hand turned over the cosmic jewels.

The Black Wolf took in the whole beauty of the night, punctuating her enjoyment of it with little sighs; then, with a characteristic shrug, she started down the winding road which led to the beach. By the clock in the hotel lobby it was exactly a quarter to eleven as the Black Wolf reached the beach. In the great ball-room, which had once been graced by half the famous beauties of a county, the hotel guests danced and made merry.

There would have been an added glamour to the dance had it been honoured by the presence of the beautiful ranee who had come to stay at the Prince, and on many sides one heard a regret expressed that she was not there.

Little did they dream, poor stodgy souls—to use the phrase employed by the Black Wolf—that the “indisposed ranee” had only a short time before slunk out of her room by the aid of a silken ladder, and was even now standing at the edge of the beach clad in masculine garments.

For fifteen minutes the Black Wolf stood motionless at the edge of the beach gazing out to sea, then from out of the night came the sound of muffled oars, and a few moments later a small boat ran its nose on to the sand. Two sailors sprang out and drew the boat up, while an officer in blue coat and gold lace picked his way over the seats and leaped to the sand. He saluted the straight figure of the Black Wolf.

“You are prompt, Captain de Frayne,” said the Black Wolf, in low tones “I am ready to go aboard.”

She sprang lightly over the gunwale, and made her way back to the stern-sheets followed by Captain de Frayne.

The two sailors pushed off and jumped aboard; then, at a word from the captain, the oars slipped into the water as one, and the boat slewed round.

It danced softly across the water, heading always towards the lights of the distant yacht, and there was held, swaying gently, at the foot of a companion, while the Black Wolf and the captain ascended.

Arriving on deck, the Black Wolf made her way down the main companion to the saloon, and from there on into her own private saloon which opened from her cabin.

A white-clad steward, with the black insignia of the owner on his sleeve, had just laid the table in the private saloon, and now, at a gesture from his mistress, he served a dainty little supper.

The Black Wolf consumed it slowly, and when she was finished lighted a Russian cigarette. Captain de Frayne entered a few moments later, and the Black Wolf motioned him to be seated.

“Well, mon capitaine, how do things progress?” she asked with a smile.

Captain de Frayne, a thin, nautical-looking Frenchman, with the inevitable pointed beard of his race, smiled and shrugged.

"Excellently, mademoiselle!" he replied, accepting her permission to smoke. "They go well. We got out of Havre early this morning, as you ordered, and cruised about the Channel until it was time to come in here to anchor. Everything is provisioned as you wished, and the La Rose is ready to go to sea at a moment's notice.

"You have changed the name as I directed?" the Black Wolf asked.

The captain nodded.

"But yes, mademoiselle," he replied. "For the purposes of this voyage the name of the yacht has been changed to L'Ile d'Orleans, and her port as Montreal, in Canada. In case of any examination by the authorities here the papers are all correct. There is nothing to worry about on that score."

"That is most excellent," murmured the Black Wolf. "One never can tell, mon capitaine, but it is just possible that I shall desire to get to sea very quickly. I should complete my work here in two or three days, and then we shall see. It is all very droll. The good stupids at the hotel are quite excited about the presence of a rance in their midst. What they may say later one can scarcely imagine. It will be colossal. And now, mon cher capitaine, I would retire!"

Captain de Frayne rose, and bent low over the tips of his mistress's fingers, after which he retired. The Black Wolf puffed her cigarette slowly to a finish; then, tossing it into a tray, she made her way to her own cabin.

An hour later she was asleep, while the dancers at the hotel still danced on, thinking that the little rance who had honoured the hotel with her presence was in her rooms above.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee and Nipper Receive a Shock—The First Robbery.

IN the early afternoon of the day after the New Year's ball at the Prince Hotel, a big grey car thundered along the road from the east, and drew up at the crest of the hill overlooking the bay.

The man at the wheel let his hands slip down, and, levering with his elbows, rose to his feet. The lad who had been slouched down beside him also rose, and jumped from the car to stretch his legs.

"My word, gov'nor, but it is certainly a fine view!" he cried, as he walked stiffly up and down. "This is a little better than town."

Nelson Lee smiled as his eyes swept over the bay.

"Varden was right," he said. "It is a perfect spot, Nipper. If it hadn't been that I promised Varden at the Venetia we would run down during this winter, I think I should have gone to Bude. But now I am glad we listened to him. I think we shall enjoy our few days here. By the way, what time did we make from London?"

Nipper drew out his watch and made a swift calculation.

"A little under ten hours, gov'nor. We should have done it in nine if it hadn't been for that stop at Taunton."

"It wasn't bad," remarked Lee. "Climb in, my lad, and let us have a look for this wonderful hotel of Varden's. He has bragged so about it that we must expect to find something really fine."

Nipper climbed into the car, and Lee, slouching down into his seat, laid his hands on the driving wheel.

"A fine cut of a yacht," he said, as the car started again. "I suppose the owner must be at the hotel."

Nipper cast a critical eye at the graceful white yacht which rode at anchor in the bay.

"She looks familiar, guv'nor," he said, after a few moments.

Lee cast another glance at her.

"There is something familiar about her lines, my lad," he said. "I have always thought you had a better eye for the lines of a boat than I, but even I see something which reminds me of a yacht I have seen somewhere. But a good many yachts are somewhat similar in build these days. Perhaps we shall see the owner at the hotel, then we shall know."

It was indeed a lovely view which swept before them as they slipped down the big hill towards the bluff on which the hotel was situated. Below them the panorama of the bay stretched away east and west in a great bow, with the tips jutting out into tree-clad points. The water danced in blues and opals and greys beneath the sun, with great indigo patches of colour where a scudding cloud shuttered the sun's rays.

Far out in the Channel the smoke of ocean liners and tramps could be seen, while nearer still the great bulk of other steamers passed up and down Channel.

Near one of the jutting points of the great bow of the bay was a small fleet of trawlers, and dotted about the bay itself a scattered boat or two which had drifted away from the main fleet. Then in the heart of the bay rode the lovely white yacht which had attracted their attention. Behind them reared the wooded hill which they had just crossed, and before them, in immediate perspective, the thickly-grown bluff where the hotel lay.

As they drew even nearer they could see the gaily-coloured coats and blazers of the golfers, for one of the greens lay close to the road down which the car was travelling. Lee glanced with satisfaction at the smooth green.

"The course looks all right, anyway," he said.

"It certainly does, guv'nor," responded the lad, "and from here the hotel seems top-hole. At that moment they swept round a curve in the road, bringing the hotel into view, and then, as they reached the main gates, Lee swung the car through them. They raced up the approach at a sharp pace, drawing into the steps with a jerk. Nipper jumped out of the car, ran up the steps, ignored the glances of the few who loitered on the balcony, and sought Varden himself in the office.

Varden, whom Lee knew intimately as the manager of the Hotel Venetia, in London, and through whose keen solicitation Lee had promised to run down during the season to the Prince, came out hot-foot when he heard from Nipper that Lee was at the door.

"My dear fellow," he cried, coming down the steps with extended hand, "this is a pleasure. I really thought that, after all, you would not find time to come down."

Lee laughed as he shook hands.

"You seemed so positive that you had the one and only hotel that I felt I really must," he said. "How about rooms? Are you full up? I didn't wire, as perhaps I should have done."

"We are fairly full up, but there is always room for you," replied Varden. "I shall give you a small suite on the second floor. Will that do?"

"Perfectly!" responded Lee. "And where is the garage?"

Varden indicated the way to the garage, and, refusing his offer to send for a man, Lee drove the car round himself. He walked back to find Nipper and Varden still standing on the steps where he had left them. They all walked into the hotel together, and when a boy had been sent out to the garage to bring in the luggage from the car, Lee and Nipper strolled into the tea-room to seek some refreshment.

Now, in order to have a clear understanding of the surprising thing which happened in that tea-room a few minutes later it will be necessary to give a brief description of its arrangement.

The lobby of the hotel was what had once been the grand hall of the great mansion. The public office formed a part of that lobby lounge, running back into what had been an inner hall, and off this inner hall was Varden's private office.

To the right of the lobby was a moderate sized room, which in the old days had been a small drawing-room. This room Varden had turned into a tea-room, and next to it again was the great dining-room, the panelling and ceiling the same as they had been when the old mansion was the scene of many a brilliant county affair.

Then came the huge ball-room across from the dining-room, and beyond the dining-room the kitchens and domestic offices. A door leading from the tea-room gave on to a corridor which led to the kitchens and still-room, and through this door the tea-room waitresses brought tea.

The tea-room had four long windows which looked out on the bay, though the balcony opened from them all. There were two other doors—one a wide double affair which opened into the adjoining dining-room, and the other an ordinary portal which led to the lobby.

The room was in the old Adams style—the ceiling vaulted and the walls chaste. The fireplace was wide and deep, with a high mirror over it reaching almost to the ceiling. The room was thickly carpeted, and the furniture was chosen in good taste.

Altogether it was a very handsome room, and Varden had allowed the needs of the hotel to fit into the old scheme of decoration as far as possible. It had perhaps thirty tables in it scattered about, and at the moment when Nelson Lee and Nipper entered there were just three people in the room.

By a table near the window sat an elderly lady and young girl. They were having tea and chatting in low tones. At a table against the wall, about halfway down on the side nearest the lobby, sat a young man, and as Lee and Nipper dropped into seats not far removed from him, they noticed that he was of somewhat striking appearance.

Lee was facing him, while Nipper was sitting sideways to him; but even so they both took in the details of the young man's appearance.

In the first place, they noticed that he was evidently from the East. His skin was dark, almost black, in the dim light of the room. His hair was shiny black, and a small, thinly-grown moustache decorated his upper lip. His eyes gleamed black as coal, and the heavy lids drooped as the lids of the Easterner.

He was dressed in the height of fashion, and from the way in which the garments hung about his slim, almost girlish, form, Lee knew that they had been cut by a master hand.

He had carried out a scheme of brown, with foppish regard for detail. A well-cut brown suit sat easily on him. His shirt was a delicate silk of a champagne shade. A brown tie, in perfect taste, was knotted about a double, brown collar of the same shade as the shirt. A single great pearl was thrust carelessly into the tie, and as he stirred his tea from time to time Lee saw the flash of a diamond on his finger.

One foot projected from beneath the table, and, glancing downwards at it, Lee saw that the sock was a brown silk, while the shoe was a low-brown Oxford.

Correct to the last detail of his appearance was that young man, and Lee would have put him down for some wealthy young Indian had it not been that his nostril widened the least trifle more than those of an Indian would have done.

"From one of the East Indies," he said to himself, "or else he has a strain of Chinese in him."

With that, he turned to give his order to the girl who stood waiting beside his chair. When she had gone he gazed idly about the room, disregarding Nipper's look as the lad took in the gorgeous youth so close to them. They chatted indifferently until the girl had brought them tea and cakes, with thick Devonshire cream, then they laid-to with a will, for they were hungry, and their lunch at Taunton, on their way down, had been of the briefest.

Lee, bending over his plate, paid no further attention to the young man near them, and it was only when he raised his head to speak to the lad that he noticed to his surprise that the dark-skinned one was gone. He glanced round in puzzlement for a moment, wondering how he had managed to rise and move away so quietly.

He half expected him to be up by the window, but there were no signs of him there, and, more puzzled than ever, Lee twisted in his seat and swept the whole room with his gaze. Not a sign of the young man did he see. What had become of him? Then it was that he noticed at a table next but one to that at which the Easterner had been sitting there was another man who had somehow managed to reach his place as quietly as the Easterner had vacated his.

Lee took in the details of his appearance, and since he was facing Lee that was not difficult. He appeared to be either French or Belgian. His hair was short, and bristled like wire. It was brown in hue, as were his eyes, and the fierce, upcurling moustache which he wore.

His suit was a loose, hanging affair of grey, while his socks and shoes were black. A glimpse at his shirt-front showed it to be white, while he wore a double white collar and black tie, with a gold-headed pin of sorts in it. In appearance he was the utter antithesis of the dark-skinned young man who had been sitting at the table a few minutes before.

Lee turned, and, leaning forward, whispered to Nipper:

"Did you see the young Easterner go out?"

Nipper looked at his master in surprise, but a warning glance from Lee stopped him. He shook his head.

"No, I didn't, guv'nor," he replied. "He was there a minute ago. Is he gone?"

Lee nodded, and gazed round the room again. The more he thought of that apparently trivial circumstance the more irritated he became. It mattered little enough, surely, yet it was puzzling, and things which puzzled him irritated Nelson Lee. Where had that dark-skinned young man gone? And how had he gone?

Now, the table at which Lee and Nipper sat was directly between the door and the table where the brown young man had sat. If he had risen and gone out into the lobby he must have passed Lee and Nipper. Even though one of them might not have been paying much attention, the other must have noticed the departure. Yet neither of them had done so.

It was, of course, possible that he might have gone up the other way towards the windows which opened on to the balcony, but then the windows were closed, and the slight interruption in the quiet atmosphere, caused by him opening and closing a window, would have attracted their attention at once. Nor could he have gone out by the big doors leading to the adjoining dining-room, for they were closed tight.

That left only the door leading to the service corridor, which the waitresses used, and Lee was quite certain he had not gone that way.

To add to that, there was the sudden appearance of this moustached Frenchman close at hand. How had he come in? Lee glanced at him again, and saw that the waitress was just taking his order.

When the girl had finished, Lee caught her eye, and signed to her to approach. When she stood beside him, he said in a low tone:

"Do you remember the dark young man who sat there just by the wall?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, promptly enough. "He had tea just before you came in."

"Did you see him go out?" went on Lee.

"No, sir. He must have gone while I was out of the room. He paid his cheque when his tea was served."

"And this other man?" pursued Lee. "Did you see him come in?"

"No, sir," replied the girl, glancing at Lee curiously. "I didn't see when he came in."

"Thank you," said Lee, seeing that he was beginning to make the girl wonder why he was so interested.

She passed out to get the order she had just taken, and Lee devoted himself to a cake. Nipper saw by the expression on his master's face that he was puzzled, though until then the lad had thought little of the occurrence.

Yet to a man like Nelson Lee, trained to take note of the smallest details, it was extremely irritating, and not a little puzzling to explain how one man could pass him and another repeat the thing without noticing either of them.

One moment it had seemed the young man in brown had been sitting at the table by the wall; the next he was gone, and at a table near at hand was another man.

Then how had he gone, and how had the other come? Lee couldn't figure it out. He finished his tea before Nipper, and, lighting a cigarette, strolled up the room to the windows.

Glancing out through one, as though idly interested in the view, he cast a sharp glance at the catch.

It was thrust home on the inside!

No man could have gone out that way. He moved along to the next and the next window. They were exactly the same—locked on the inside. There only remained the window close to which sat the elderly lady and the girl. Their table was too close to it to permit of anyone going on to the balcony by way of the window while they were there, and, more puzzled than ever, Lee strolled back to his table.

The room was beginning to fill now, so, calling the waitress, he initialled his cheque and rose.

As he and Nipper reached the lobby Lee paused beside the boy who was on duty at the door of the tea-room.

"Do you remember a young man with a very dark skin, and dressed in brown, going into the tea-room?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy promptly.

"Did you see him come out?" went on Lee.

"No, sir. He hasn't come out yet."

"Have you been here all the time?"

"Yes, sir; since three o'clock."

Lee took the boy's arm, and edged him towards the door of the room.

"Take a look into the room," he said, as he slipped a shilling into the lad's hand. "Do you see that man up there with the big moustache—the man in the grey suit?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see him come into the tea-room?"

"No, sir; I never saw him before in my life. He must have come in from the balcony."

"Possibly," replied Lee, though he knew that had not been the case. "That will do, my lad."

While Nipper went out to the garage, Lee made his way through the office to Varden's private room. The genial manager was busy dictating to a typist, but when Lee came in he dismissed the girl, and pushed a box of cigars across the desk.

"Well? Been having a look round?" he asked. "By the way, there are some keen golfers down here, Lee. You should be able to get a good bit of play while you are down."

Lee nodded absently.

"I think you said you were pretty full up," he said.

Varden nodded with satisfaction.

"Doing splendidly," he replied. "This hotel has its feet on the ground now, Lee. Give us decent weather, and we shall have a record-breaking season. Every room is booked up. A big bunch of people will arrive on the evening train, and I must say, Willis, my acting manager in London, played a master-stroke this week."

"How's that?" asked Lee, mildly interested.

Varden chuckled.

"He had a distinguished guest at the Venetia—a real simon pure ranee from the East. She asked Willis if he could recommend a good seaside hotel in a quiet place, never dreaming, of course, that the Venetia owned this place. Willis sent her down here, and she arrived yesterday with her attendants—four of them.

"She has five rooms on the first floor, and, believe me, the whole place is agog over the event. I have had five guests in here already to-day asking how long the ranee is going to stay, and, when I told them she hadn't informed me, they immediately renewed their rooms for another week. And the best of it is they have only caught one glimpse of her since she arrived. She is indisposed and is keeping her room. As long as she does that, the better for me, for those people will hang on here until they meet her. It's a funny thing, is human nature."

"The Ranee of Bojwok," mused Lee. "Is she an Indian princess, do you know?"

"I believe not," replied Varden. "She comes, I think, from Sumatra or Java."

"By the way, Varden," went on Lee, "you have another Easterner staying here, haven't you—a young, dark-skinned man? I saw him in the tea-room a few minutes ago."

The manager inclined his head absently.

"He came to-day," he said. "He is off the yacht in the harbour. He— Wait a minute, Lee, until I answer the 'phone."

He had broken off his conversation as the desk telephone rang shrilly. Lifting the receiver, Varden placed it to his ear, and while he idled about waiting, Nelson Lee lighted a cigarette. But the hotel manager had said only a few words when a sharp exclamation on his part caused Lee to glance at him quickly.

"You what?" Varden was exclaiming. "Oh, impossible, madam! Are you quite sure? Have you searched thoroughly? Yes, I shall come up at once!"

Varden hung up the receiver and turned round to Lee, a look of consternation on his face.

"I must tell you what has happened, Lee," he said, rubbing his chin. "It must not get out, though. One of our guests—a Mrs. Peterson—has telephoned down from her room to say that her jewel-case has been rifled, and all her valuable rings and brooches taken. I can scarcely believe it."

"Good heavens! That is serious!" responded Lee. "If it gets out to the other guests, it will cause a panic. You are going up to the room?"

"At once! Will you come?"

"Certainly, if you wish!"

Varden rose and made for the door. He stood aside for Lee to precede him, and they walked through the inner lobby towards the lift. As they passed the great doorway which opened into the outer lobby, Lee glanced towards it, and there, lounging by the door of the tea-room, was the moustached and grey-suited individual whom he had seen in the tea-room, and about whose entry there had been such puzzlement in his own mind.

Was it really a fact, or did he only imagine that a faint, mocking light appeared in the eyes of the man by the door?

As he entered the lift, he whispered to Varden:

"Take a look at that man by the door of the tea-room. Is he a guest here?"

Varden shot a surreptitious glance in the direction indicated, and, as the lift shot upwards to the floor where was situated the room from which the valuables had been taken, he replied:

"Never saw him before. He may be a guest, or he may have come from one of the hungalows in the village below."

Lee nodded, and said nothing more on the subject. They emerged from the lift at the second floor, and, walking along the corridor, paused before a door at which Varden knocked.

It was opened almost at once by the floor chambermaid, and over her shoulder they caught sight of a woman in dishabille, sitting in a state of collapse in a low chair by the window. She drew her gown about her as the two men entered, and, on recognising Varden, broke into a stream of lamentations.

Varden listened to her patiently, for such is the duty of the hotel manager whose guest has been robbed. Then, when she stopped for breath, he said quietly:

"I quite sympathise with you, madam, in your loss, and I assure you that I shall lose no time in doing all in my power to recover your valuables. Permit me to introduce Mr. Nelson"—he purposely refrained from giving Lee's last name—"a gentleman who is experienced in such matters. I have brought him with me to hear all you have to say. Will you please endeavour to tell him all you know of the matter."

The lady turned to Lee, and began once more to lament; but the detective held up his hand.

"I take it that you have discovered the loss of things which you value," he said curtly. "In a case of this kind, immediate action is essential. Will you please try to collect yourself, madam, and tell me exactly what has happened?"

With a strong effort the woman controlled the hysteria which had seized her, and, gulping two or three times, began to speak.

"I discovered my loss less than half an hour ago," she said. "I had had tea in my room here. You can see the tray there on the table. Then I started to get out my things for dinner this evening. Oh, dear, I intended to leave here yesterday. I wish now that I had done so."

"Please keep to the subject of your valuables," said Lee.

She glanced at his stern face resentfully, for she was of the type which finds its only relief in a tirade, but there was no compromise in the features of the man, and though he felt full sympathy for her, he knew that the only way to get a satisfactory understanding of the affair was to keep her to the subject.

"I intended wearing my diamonds to-night," she went on. "I went to the dressing-table, and, unlocking the drawer in which I kept my jewel-case, took out the case. On opening it I discovered, to my horror, that it had been completely stripped of everything. Not a single brooch-pin or ring had been left.

"I at once rang for the maid, and asked her if she knew anything about it. She denied all knowledge of it, so I rang up the office. That is all I know about it. Certainly I did not think this was the type of hotel where thieves were permitted."

Varden, realising only too well what a serious blow it would be to the hotel if a rumour of the affair got out, started to speak, but was silenced by a gesture from Lee. Turning to the woman, he said:

"Will you please search your memory, and answer my questions as carefully as possible?"

When she had indicated that she would endeavour to do so, Lee went on:

"When did you last have occasion to go to your jewel-case?"

"Last night—just before retiring. I had worn my pearls and put them away, as is my custom."

"As far as you know, everything was all right then?"

"Yes. I am certain nothing had been taken."

"You keep the key of the case yourself?"

"Always."

"Where do you keep it when you are out of the room?"

"I keep it on my own person."

"It was there last evening?"

"Yes."

"And the key of the drawer—where do you keep that?"

"On my person as well."

"And you had that with you last evening?"

"Yes, with the other."

"Pardon me, but are you staying here alone, Mrs. Peterson? Is your—er—husband here, or have you any friends here?"

"Mr. Varden can tell you that I was here last year. My husband and daughter were here then as well. My husband was unable to come down this year, and my daughter is on a visit in America. Therefore, I came alone, but I have several friends staying here."

A nod from Varden confirmed this statement, and Lee went on:

"Now, about the drawer in the dressing-table, and the jewel-case, Mrs. Peterson. May I have a look at the keys?"

"I have them here," she replied. Bending over, she took from the top of the dressing-table two small keys, and handed them to Lee. He gave them but a single glance, and handed them back.

"Of the most simple order," he remarked. "The veriest novice could open either of the locks they fit. Now, madam, you say that the jewels were all right when you retired last night. Are you a light or a heavy sleeper?"

"I am a very light sleeper. I am a victim of insomnia. I slept very little last night, and the door of my room was locked on the inside."

Lee strolled to the window and glanced out. He saw that it overlooked the bay, but there was no balcony outside by which anyone might have gained access to the room. The wall of the building went down sheer for three floors, and, lifting the sash, he bent outwards.

There was not even a vane or water-spout by which one could climb. Turning back to the woman, he said:

"You were out of your room to-day?"

She nodded.

"I went out this morning for my usual walk. That was about half-past ten. I returned to the hotel for lunch, and came up here before going into the dining-room. I sat on the front balcony after lunch for an hour or so, then I came up to lie down. I have been in the room ever since."

"Did you lock your door each time you went out?" asked Lee.

"Yes, I locked it and took the key with me. I asked the maid if she had been in here, and she said she had."

"The maids of each floor have master keys for all the rooms on that particular floor," put in Varden.

Lee turned to the maid—a frightened-looking girl who stood by the door twisting her hands together.

"You have that key?" he asked kindly.

"Yes, sir," she faltered.

She took from the waistband of her housemaid's costume a bunch of keys, and handed them across to Lee.

The detective took them and spread them out. There were four in all, and, with an upraising of the eyebrows, he inquired of the maid to what each one belonged. She indicated them one by one—the key of the linen-room, the key of the housemaids' pantry, the key of the box-room for that floor, and the master key which fitted the locks of every apartment door in the hotel.

This latter key Lee gave close attention to.

"Are these keys ever out of your possession?" he asked.

The maid shook her head.

"No, sir, except when I hand them over to my relief. There are only two of us."

"Have you been on all day?"

"Yes, sir. I came on at six this morning, and I will be until until six to-night. Then my relief takes it over."

Lee nodded, and walked towards the window. Standing there, he examined the master-key more closely. He had no reason to doubt the maid's statements, and his first glance at her had assured him that she could know nothing of the robbery. Her face was frank and open, and could be the shield of no such duplicity.

The other girl—the one who would relieve at six that evening—must also be questioned, but somehow Lee hardly expected to gain any information from her. A dishonest maid might steal a few trinkets off a dressing-table, but one who would deliberately rifle a jewel-case containing hundreds of pounds' worth of jewels would be an extreme rarity.

There was always the possibility, of course, that one of the maids might have been the tool of a keen and more daring person, and that was a channel which must be followed up.

The main facts of the case, so far, showed little to go upon. Mrs. Peterson had placed her jewels in the jewel-case the night before, when she had retired. She had seen to this herself, locking them away and keeping the key on her own person.

Moreover, she had confessed that she was a victim of insomnia, and that no one could enter the room without her hearing them. Had it not been that the door of the room had been locked on the inside with the key left in the keyhole, and that there was a sheer drop from the window to the ground below, affording no foothold for the most daring climber, Lee would have felt a little inclined to follow up that point more carefully. But he was content, for the time being, to accept her suggestion that the robbery could not have taken place during the night.

Then when had it been pulled off?

Obviously, during the day. Mrs. Peterson had gone for a walk during the forenoon. She had returned at lunch-time, and had come up to her room before going into the meal. She had not examined her jewel-case on that occasion, so could not say if the jewels were in it then or not.

She had then gone down to lunch, taking the key of the room with her—a thing which she had also done in the morning. Then she had returned to her room after lunch, and had been there ever since. Eliminating the supposition that the robbery had taken place during the night, there remained two occasions to consider.

The first one was the morning when she had been out walking, and the second one was while she had been at lunch. By her own words the housemaid, it appeared, had been in the room during the morning. That would be on the occasion when she would come in to make up the room for the day. She would gain access to the room by her master-key, and would be in it perhaps half an hour or so.

But then she would be up and down the corridor most of the morning, and it would be extremely difficult for anyone to have entered the room and left it again without being seen. There would always be the risk that the housemaid would return to the room for some purpose, and also the danger of the intruder being seen on entering or leaving the room.

But during lunch the corridors would be more quiet. One who was on the watch, one who possessed a master-key which would open the door, would find it not too difficult to slip into the room then, and to lock the door after him.

It would not take more than twenty minutes, at the outside, to force the drawer of the dressing-table, then the jewel-case, abstract the jewels, lock the case, then the drawer, and, finally, to slip out of the room again, relocking the door by means of the master-key which had been used.

Supposing, for the sake of argument—and in the solution of any such problem one must use some supposition as a base of analogy—supposing this was what had occurred, then it would be a hypothetical suggestion that the robbery had taken place during the luncheon hour, or, roughly, some three hours before the discovery.

In that event, the mind of the detective must grapple with one other very important fact. Presuming that a master-key had been used, then how had it been secured by the thief?

Lee knew, without asking, that every floor maid in the hotel would have a master key, and that there would be one in the office. With that number in existence it would be by no means impossible for a cool and cunning person to gain temporary possession of one long enough to make an impression.

But which one had been used for that purpose, and how had it been secured? If he could but ferret out that point he would have something of a concrete nature to build upon.

The detection of crime hinges upon the little things, and this, while small enough in itself, was an essential part to any plan for the robbery of a room in the hotel, just as it was an essential part of the solution of the theft. If he saw anything about that master key which he was examining to indicate a line of supposition, Lee gave no sign.

He handed it back, and, turning to Varden, said:

“Is this floor pretty well filled up with guests?”

Varden nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “The Ranee of Bojwok has five rooms here, and the others are all occupied.”

Lee nodded absently, and dismissed the girl with a gesture. When she had gone he turned to Mrs. Peterson.

"It is a very unfortunate happening, madam," he said quietly. "It is but natural that you should be greatly upset by it, and that you should wish no time to be lost in getting back your property. I can assure you that no efforts shall be spared to do so, but if we are to work unhampered I would ask you to do one thing to help us?"

"What is that, Mr. Nelson?" she asked.

"It is this—that you, for the time being, keep to yourself all knowledge of the theft. I know that will be hard, but, don't you see, if the thief thinks it has not yet been discovered he may grow bolder and attempt another theft. This time we shall be on the watch, and it may enable us to apprehend him more quickly. We shall work all the evening on the case, and it is just possible that by the morning we may have achieved some measure of success."

"It is very difficult to sit still under such a loss," replied the woman tearfully; "but if it will help you I promise to do so. But I certainly look to you to give me some satisfaction."

"I shall hold myself personally responsible for that," put in Varden quickly. "But I beg of you, madam, for the sake of the name of the hotel, to say nothing until we have had a chance to do something."

When she had promised them to say nothing, Varden and Lee made to return below, little dreaming of the shock which they were to receive when they did so.

CHAPTER III.

An Avalanche of Mystery—Nelson Lee Has a Curious Experience— The Elusive Man in Brown.

A WHITE-FACED clerk met Varden and Lee as they entered the former's private office on the ground floor, and from the first moment, when he faltered out a confused story, things began to hum.

When Varden gathered the import of what the clerk was saying, he grasped him by the arm, jerked him into the office, and closed the door.

"Now then, stop stuttering, and say what you have to say," he ordered sternly.

"It is Colonel Bigwood, on the first floor, sir," replied the clerk. "He has just telephoned down from his room to say that his luggage has been rifled, and several things of value taken. He says, too, that his wife's luggage has also been rifled. He is on his way down."

At that very moment the door burst open, and an elderly, choleric-looking gentleman entered. His moustache, fierce enough at any time, fairly bristled with anger and excitement, and there was blood in his eye.

"What are you going to do about it?" he bellowed, before the door had closed after him. "All my luggage rifled and my wife's trunk absolutely stripped. What does it mean, sir? What kind of an hotel do you call this, anyway? By heavens, sir, it is an outrage! I have lost things money couldn't buy—medals and decorations—to say nothing of my wife's jewels! Answer me, sir! What do you mean to do about it?"

"When you have finished, and permit me to speak, I shall tell you," replied Varden quietly, though it must have been difficult for him to control himself. "Kindly explain what you mean?"

"I mean this, sir!" yelled the colonel, in no whit quietened by Varden's soft tone. "Two of my trunks and three of my wife's have been opened, and everything of value taken from them! That is what I mean, sir!"

Lee, who was standing by the desk, took out his cigarette-case and selected a cigarette. As he did so he shot a look at Varden, who, interpreting it, said:

"I will ask you to permit Mr. Nelson to hear what you have to say, Colonel Bigwood. If anything has been lost, he will do all he can to secure the return of the missing articles."

The colonel swung round and glared at Lee, who was coolly lighting his cigarette.

"And who may you be, sir?" he asked.

"I—I am the man who handles such matters for Mr. Varden," replied Lee succinctly. "Now then, Colonel Bigwood, you say that things of value have been taken from the trunks in your room. They were in your room, I suppose?"

"Yes!" snapped the colonel.

"How long ago did you discover the loss?" went on Lee.

"Just now," answered the colonel. "My wife and I had been on the golf links since lunch. We had tea there, and walked back here. It was when my wife went to get some of her things out for this evening that she discovered the loss. Her discovery caused me to examine my own trunks, and it was then I found that they, too, had been rifled."

Lee nodded.

"And when did you last see them?" he inquired.

"I haven't been at my trunks to-day until then," responded the colonel. "My wife, however, was at both of hers this morning, and everything was all right then."

Just as Lee was about to speak, the desk-telephone rang shrilly, and, sitting down, Varden took up the receiver. From the look of consternation on his face as well as from his words, Lee knew that still another theft had been discovered. Then, even as the manager hung up the receiver, the door again burst open and two women entered, with hysterics written all over them.

They both tried to tell their story at one and the same time, and while they still poured forth the vials of their hysteria upon the head of Varden, the office door swung open to admit three more guests.

Varden was standing by the desk, a look of utter bewilderment on his face. He glanced to where Lee had been standing to beg his assistance in handling this avalanche of mystery, but, strange to say, Lee was not there. He had slipped out of the office while the row was on, and was already half-way along towards the front lobby.

As he came into it, he saw that the news of the thefts was already abroad, for several of the guests were coming in hastily from the front balcony. They were crowding and pushing along, and as he came to them, Lee saw in the very centre of the throng the small, dark-skinned man who favoured the scheme of brown in his dress. He was pushing along with the others, and with a wish to get closer to him, Lee allowed the crowd to sweep down upon him. The small man in brown passed close to him, even brushed against him; then he had passed on with the others.

The crowd poured along to the lifts, anxious to get up to their respective rooms and examine their luggage. He watched them as they fought for an entry to the lifts, then, with a shrug, passed out on to the front balcony. As he did so he heard a step behind him, and, swinging round, saw the brown-skinned one coming towards him. He had evidently given

up the attempt to get into the lift, and was intending to take things more coolly.

At the same moment a dozen or more golf enthusiasts appeared coming up the drive. It was getting dusk now, and the inability to see had driven them towards home. But it was evident from their light-hearted laughter that they knew nothing as yet of the mysterious thefts in the hotel.

Casually, Lee felt in his pocket with a half intention of seeing if his own valuables were all right. They consisted mostly of the money he had brought down with him; though there were several papers of import as well. His hand had scarcely touched his pocket when his mind leaped to attention like a deer at the first scent of danger. His pocket felt strangely flat, and a moment later, when he had thrust in his hand to withdraw it empty, he knew that he, too, had been a victim.

From the inside pocket of his coat had his wallet been abstracted. For a single moment Lee stood there thinking rapidly. The brown-skinned one was already well down the drive, and as Lee's eyes lit on him there entered into his mind the definite suspicion that the other had had no small part in the abstraction of his wallet.

He knew that it was safe when he was in the tea-room. He knew that it had been there when he first talked with Varden in the office, for he had had occasion to thrust his hand into that same inner pocket. His movements after that were simple enough to remember. He had gone up in the lift with Varden to Mrs. Peterson's room. From there he had returned to the office, and then had come out into the lobby. The only occasion on which he had rubbed closely against anyone was when the crowd had swept past him on its way to the lifts. And the individual against whom he had brushed was that same dark-skinned person who was hurrying down the driveway.

Without a second thought, Lee ran down the steps and set off after him. He passed the returning golfers a few moments later; then a bend in the drive hid the quarry from view, and Lee broke into a dog-trot. He must have presented a queer spectacle running down the driveway in that fashion, but he cared not at all. He had now a definite suspicion as to how his own property had been taken, and he was determined to follow it up. On turning the bend in the path, he saw the figure of the quarry far ahead. He saw him stop and turn round, and then break into a run. He sped away fleet as a deer, with Lee increasing his speed each moment. It was almost dark now, and Lee realised he stood a good chance of being given the slip unless he managed to overtake his man before he reached the road.

A second bend in the driveway once more hid the quarry from view, and Lee knew that just beyond lay the main road. He increased his speed still more, then, as he rounded the bend, he half drew up in consternation. The whole length of the driveway to the main road was empty!

Had the quarry dodged off into the trees?

Lee kept on at a slower pace until he was only thirty yards or so from the main gates; then he drew up and stared about him. Off to the right the trees of the park stretched thickly, and there would be plenty of chance for the fugitive to dodge out of sight amongst them. Towards the left, on the other hand, it was all very open, and gazing off in that direction, Lee could see no signs of a moving figure.

But stay! What was that? He bent forward and peered through the darkness as a shadow seemed to detach itself from the surrounding dusk patch by a small clump of shrubbery, and soon resolved itself into a figure approaching the driveway.

Lee could make out the glow of a cigarette; then the figure sauntered towards him, and he saw—not the brown-skinned figure he had been chasing, but the grey-suited, moustached individual whom he had seen in the tea-

room that same afternoon, and whose entry there had been heralded by the mysterious disappearance of the dark-skinned one.

Now, for the second time, the disappearance of the one had been marked by the appearance of the other, and Nelson Lee was too shrewd a man in his profession not to tumble to the fact that there was some very strong connection between the two.

Yet, to save his life, he could not put his finger on the answer to the riddle. What connection was there between the two? To go back to the incident in the tea-room that afternoon. How had Brownclothes disappeared, and how had Greyclothes come into being? The question of a disguise had naturally occurred to Lee, but there seemed little chance of that; at least, there had seemed little chance in the afternoon.

It will be remembered how radically different the two enigmas were in appearance. In frame they were not unlike, but in clothes, in manners, in facial appearance, in every outward way, they were direct opposites. Lee knew the art of disguise well enough to know that much could be done to alter one's appearance. He did not hold with the wild tales that find credence in certain quarters, but he did know that under clever fingers one's appearance could be materially changed.

At the same time he did not see how such a thing could have been worked under his very eyes in a public tea-room, and he had based little upon that assumption. It had come to him, but to be dismissed. Now he was up against another "incident," which was almost as puzzling as the first in its suddenness, and much more so in the coincidence it indicated.

Or was it a coincidence? Greysuit seemed in no wise alarmed at seeing him standing there, for he did not alter his course. Rather did he change it a little so as to bring him close to Lee. He sauntered past, glancing at Lee as he went, and Lee, making a sudden decision, spoke.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I wonder if you saw a man running down the driveway a few moments ago? From where you were standing you must have seen him if he came this far."

The other paused, and languidly took his cigarette from his lips.

"I saw you running down the driveway, and wondered what was up," he drawled, in tones slightly accented. "Have you lost someone?"

Lee made some inconsequent reply, and the other, with a short nod, strolled up the driveway towards the hotel.

Lee stood watching him as he went.

"I feel almost certain," he muttered, "but not sufficiently so to make a move just yet! If you haven't some very strong and very intimate connection with my friend of the brown suit, then I am greatly mistaken! Now, I wonder just what your game is? And I wonder which way Brownclothes went? I wonder—I do wonder if you are by any chance Brownclothes? If so, then how in the name of fortune did you manage it? At any rate, I shall just keep you in view."

Lee himself lighted a cigarette and started up the driveway after the disappearing figure of the other. He was more chagrined than he cared to say. It was most annoying and disconcerting to be given the slip in that manner, and all the time to feel that he was being laughed at. He prided himself, did Nelson Lee, on being a sticker when once on the trail, but certainly he had to confess that so far the game was decidedly against him.

He was close enough to the quarry when the hotel drew near to see him run up the steps and pass into the building. Then another figure broke across the path, and he recognised Nipper's voice.

"Is that you, guv'nor?"

"Yes, my lad," replied Lee. "Where have you been?"

"Looking everywhere for you," replied the lad. "I say, gov'nor, there are high jinks in the hotel! Some light-fingered gentry have made a clean-up. The women are all in hysterics, and the men ready for a riot. Mr. Varden is nearly off his head. I tried to get to him to ask where I could find you, but I couldn't get near him."

"I have heard all about it, my lad. I take it from what you say that there have been other discoveries?"

"Scott, gov'nor!" exclaimed the lad, as he fell into step beside his master. "I guess every room in the place has been rifled! It must have been a slick hand."

"I fancy you are right, my lad," remarked Lee, as they mounted the steps. "But keep your own counsel. I wish to have a word with Varden; then I am going up to our rooms. You had better slip along first and have a look at our luggage. We, too, may have suffered."

"I have already been up," said Nipper, and Lee did not see his face break into a grin. "The thieves paid us some attention all right, but thanks to the patent locks on our luggage they didn't have much success. I suppose they were in too much of a hurry to take the necessary time to negotiate locks such as we have."

Lee smiled to himself. He was not ready yet to confess to the lad that he himself had been a victim.

The next moment they were in the main lobby of the hotel, and from the agitated buzz on all sides it was plain to see that something serious had taken place. Being strangers to most of the guests, Lee and Nipper were favoured with suspicious looks on all sides, and Mrs. Peterson, catching sight of Lee, sailed majestically across towards them. But Lee whispered a word in Nipper's ears and then, breaking away, made for the inner lobby and Varden's office.

He found the manager in a state bordering on collapse. He sprang up as Lee entered and pushed aside half a dozen men who stood there evidently expecting Varden to conjure their lost property out of his pockets.

"Well, any luck?" he asked eagerly.

Lee shook his head.

"Not yet," he replied shortly. "But I want a few words in private with you."

Varden turned to the assembled men.

"Gentlemen," he said desperately, "give me a chance to recover your property. I can do nothing while you stand in here as you do. Give me a chance to go to work on the matter."

Most of the men, now that their first anger had cooled a little, saw the reason in the manager's request and passed out of the office without complaint. The two or three who remained were curtly ordered by Varden to follow, for they were those who had lost the least yet had made the biggest noise.

When they had all gone Varden closed and locked the door, then he turned to Lee.

"Well?" he asked.

Lee pushed him down into a chair.

"Keep your nerve, Varden," he said cheerfully.

"But, my dear fellow, this affair means utter ruin to me," protested Varden.

"It isn't that yet," responded Lee. "When it is, it will be time enough for you to complain. But we have got to move swiftly. Come, tell me what has happened since I have been gone."

Varden threw up his hands with an expressive gesture.

"Lee, every room in the hotel has been broken into. The news got about, and every guest who hadn't been to his or her room made for it. When they all discovered that they had been visited by the thieves there was the biggest row you ever heard in your life. They rushed the office here and nearly put me under. I wouldn't go through it again for any money."

"Well, and have you discovered nothing here?" asked Lee.

"Not a thing."

"By the way, has the Ranee of Bojwok made any complaint yet?" asked Lee.

Varden shook his head.

"The thieves couldn't get into her rooms," he said. "She is in them all the time, and her own servants are about. I fancy the women are more wild about the loss of their jewels to-night than they would have been ordinarily, for the ranee is coming down to the public dining-room this evening."

"Ah!" remarked Lee. "By the way, Varden, I want another conversation with the housemaid on the second floor as well as the girl who relieved her. Can you arrange for this to be done without delay?"

Varden nodded wearily.

"I will have them down here at once, Lee."

He rang as he finished speaking, and to the page who answered gave the order. Lee smoked in silence until there came a knock at the door and the two maids entered. He shot a keen glance at the second girl—the one he had not yet seen—then made a quick sign to Varden. The latter spoke curtly.

"This gentleman wishes to ask you two girls a few questions. I want you to answer him fully and frankly."

Lee tossed his cigarette into the fire and turned first to the girl with whom he had already spoken.

"My girl," he said, "I want you to think very carefully before you reply to my questions. Now, I want you to go back in your mind over the past few days and recall if there was any one occasion when your keys were out of your possession—excepting, of course, when you handed them over to your relief."

The girl gave him a frightened look, then bent her head in thought.

"Think carefully," warned Lee. "Think of the most trivial circumstances."

The girl took a good five minutes to do so, but finally lifted her head and said:

"I can think of no time, sir."

Lee nodded, and turned to the other.

"And you," he said; "can you think of any time when your keys were out of your possession? This is very serious, and I want you to try your best to remember. Think of the different guests on your floor. Was there any occasion when any one of them might have had access to your keys? Think of your own friends. Was there any moment when you might have been careless with the keys then?"

The girl shook her head.

"I can't think of any time when they were not in my possession, sir," she replied. "The only time a guest could possibly be near my keys is when I help ladies to unpack, sir."

"Oh! You do that, do you?" asked Lee quickly.

"Yes, sir, when they don't bring their own maids with them."

"And you have done that lately?"

"Yes, sir, in several cases."

"For instance?" pursued Lee.

"With Mrs. Peterson, sir, with Lady Mortley, and with the eastern lady on my floor, sir."

"You mean the Ranee of Bojwok?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir."

"But she has servants with her, has she not?"

"Oh, yes, sir—four of them, but she had a lot of luggage, and asked me to help her maid unpack."

"And were your keys in your possession on all these occasions?"

"Yes, sir—except, sir, for one moment."

"One moment! And when was that, pray?"

"It was when I was unpacking with the maid of the eastern lady. We were both bending over a trunk, when the keys dropped from my waistband into the trunk. The lady's-maid picked them up and laid them on the table at one side, but I took them and put them back on the band. That was all, sir."

"Were you and the maid alone?"

"No, sir. The lady was standing by us."

Lee thought hard for a moment, then he made a gesture of dismissal.

"You girls may go now," he said.

They appeared only too glad to escape, and lost no time in doing so.

Then Lee turned to Varden.

"There is a good deal more in this affair than meets the eye," he said.

"These robberies are the result of a well thought out and clever scheme. It is going to be a difficult thing to put our hands on the culprits, Varden, but I shall do my best. There are one or two phases of the matter which I wish to think over, and I am going to my room now to do so.

"By dinner time, which will be within another hour, I may have hit on some solution. If I have not been able to think of anything by then, I think it would be best for you to send and notify the local police."

"For Heaven's sake, Lee, do what you can for me," said Varden desperately. "You know what this means to me."

"I shall do my best—you may depend on that," responded Lee.

He opened the door as he spoke and stepped out into the passage leading to the lobby. As he went along it he became immediately aware that there was an appreciable lull in the excitement which had been rife a few minutes before.

The chattering and hysterical conversation of the women had completely died away. At first Lee thought this was because they had gone to their rooms to dress for dinner, but a moment later as he came into the lobby he saw that such was not the case.

The lobby was crowded with guests, most of whom were already dressed for dinner. Lee saw them all looking expectantly in the direction of the lifts. Somewhat puzzled as to their attitude he started towards one of the lifts in order to ascend to his room.

Then, even as he lifted his hand to press the bell, the door of the lift opened, and a radiant vision of beauty stepped out into the lobby.

It was the Ranee of Bojwok.

Lee stepped aside to permit her to pass him, but even as he did so his eyes met hers and held them. She stared at him coolly as she swept past, and Lee was vaguely aware that she was gowned from head to foot in deep saffron.

Her hair was done high in the western fashion, and crowning it was a magnificent diamond coronet. About her throat was a beautiful diamond collar, and on her hands sparkled an assortment of lovely gems.

If the guests of the hotel had hoped to see a sight worth while waiting for they were not disappointed. As she walked across the lobby Lee stepped into the lift and gave the boy the number of the floor at which he desired to emerge. Then the door slammed, and the vision was cut off. But all the way up in the lift Lee's thoughts were pounding out the startling suggestion:

Her eyes are the eyes of the man in brown! Her eyes are the eyes of the man in brown!

CHAPTER IV.

Lee Moves—Strategy—Fire!—The Fight on the Roof.

NELSON LEE rushed along to his room and threw open the door. He found Nipper seated at the table with his head on his hands—an attitude the lad almost invariably adopted when in deep thought.

“Quick, my lad!” snapped Lee. “I have things for you to do.”

Nipper was on his feet in a second.

“What is it, guv'nor?” he asked eagerly.

“I want you to go down to the office. See Varden—be sure you speak to him alone. Tell him we want some empty tins or galvanised buckets. If you get tins be sure they are a good size. Get half a dozen or so. Then bring them up here at once. After that go to my trunk which I left downstairs. Here are the keys. In the bottom you will find a burlap bag filled with powder. It is a powder I brought along to perform an experiment while down here, and that is what has given me my idea. Bring it up here with the buckets and tins. Then I will tell you what else to do. Make haste!”

Nipper, though surprised at the orders, gave no sign. He dashed out of the room to obey, and when the door had closed after him, Lee sank down into a chair.

“It is the only avenue which offers,” he muttered. “From the moment I examined the key of the housemaid I have known that someone took a wax impression of it. There is still a little wax adhering to the key, proving that it was done hurriedly. Who did it? That is the question to settle.

“Then the man in brown obtrudes himself into the affair. He aroused my suspicions this afternoon in the tea-room, but I gave little thought to it then. It simply made me curious. But I feel certain that it was during the crush in the lobby I lost my wallet, and I am equally certain it was Brownclothes who took it. Then came the repetition of the curious incident in the tea-room. I gave chase to Brownclothes. He vanished as though he had dissolved into thin air.

“What happens? Greyclothes appears as mysteriously as he did in the tea-room. That was the second occasion on which the disappearance of Brownclothes was heralded by the appearance of Greyclothes. By all the laws of deduction I am compelled to think that Brownclothes and Greyclothes have a very strong connection, if indeed they are not one and the same person.

“How the change in appearance was made, I cannot yet say. It has been managed by some new trick with which I am not yet conversant. Then I question the housemaids again and discover that on one occasion within the past few days the keys have been out of the possession of one of them for a few moments.

"They were dropped into the trunk which she was unpacking. If she were bending over the trunk in company with the other maid it would not be difficult for a clever person to jerk them off the waistband of her dress and allow them to drop into the trunk. Then it appears that they were picked up and laid on a table near at hand, and by which the Rance of Bojwok was standing at the time.

"On top of that I come out into the lobby of the hotel to meet the rance face to face, and her eyes are the eyes of the man in brown. Ergo, the Rance of Bojwok, the man in brown and the man in grey seemed connected one with the other. If the man in brown is open to suspicion, then it follows by sequence that the man in grey is likewise open to suspicion. That leads on at once to the point where the rance must be suspected.

"Suspected of what? Heaven only knows yet."

"Of all the guests in the hotel she is the one on whom suspicion of theft would fall last. She has been apparently confined to her room the past day or so. It has been given out that she is indisposed. Was she? That remains to be seen. Her rooms have been too well guarded by her own servants for one to know if this is so or not.

"Yet get into those rooms I must, and will. But how? That is the question. The only method is to do what has suggested itself to me, and to make that a success Nipper and I shall have to carry it out ourselves. We must not tell even Varden.

"There will probably be a panic, but it can't be helped."

Lee rose and walked to the window. On the way he switched out the light, and arriving at the window thrust aside the curtains which had been drawn. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the night outside he saw far out at sea the great gleam of Eddystone.

Then, as the flashing beams swept round in their tireless course, leaving the bay in darkness for the moment, he saw the twinkle of other lights nearer the shore.

They were the lights of the yacht which lay moored in the bay.

And with the sight a startling thought came to Lee.

"Great Scott!" he muttered, "I had forgotten about that. Varden said that Brownclotches was off that yacht. Nipper said the lines of the yacht were familiar to him, and then I discovered that they were familiar to me. I——"

At that instant the door opened, and there came the sound of tins knocking together.

"You here, gov'nor?" came Nipper's voice. "I've got them all right."

"Ssh!" warned Lee.

"Shut the door, my lad, and come here at once."

He heard the soft tinkle of the tins as Nipper set them on the floor and closed the door. Then he came across to Lee.

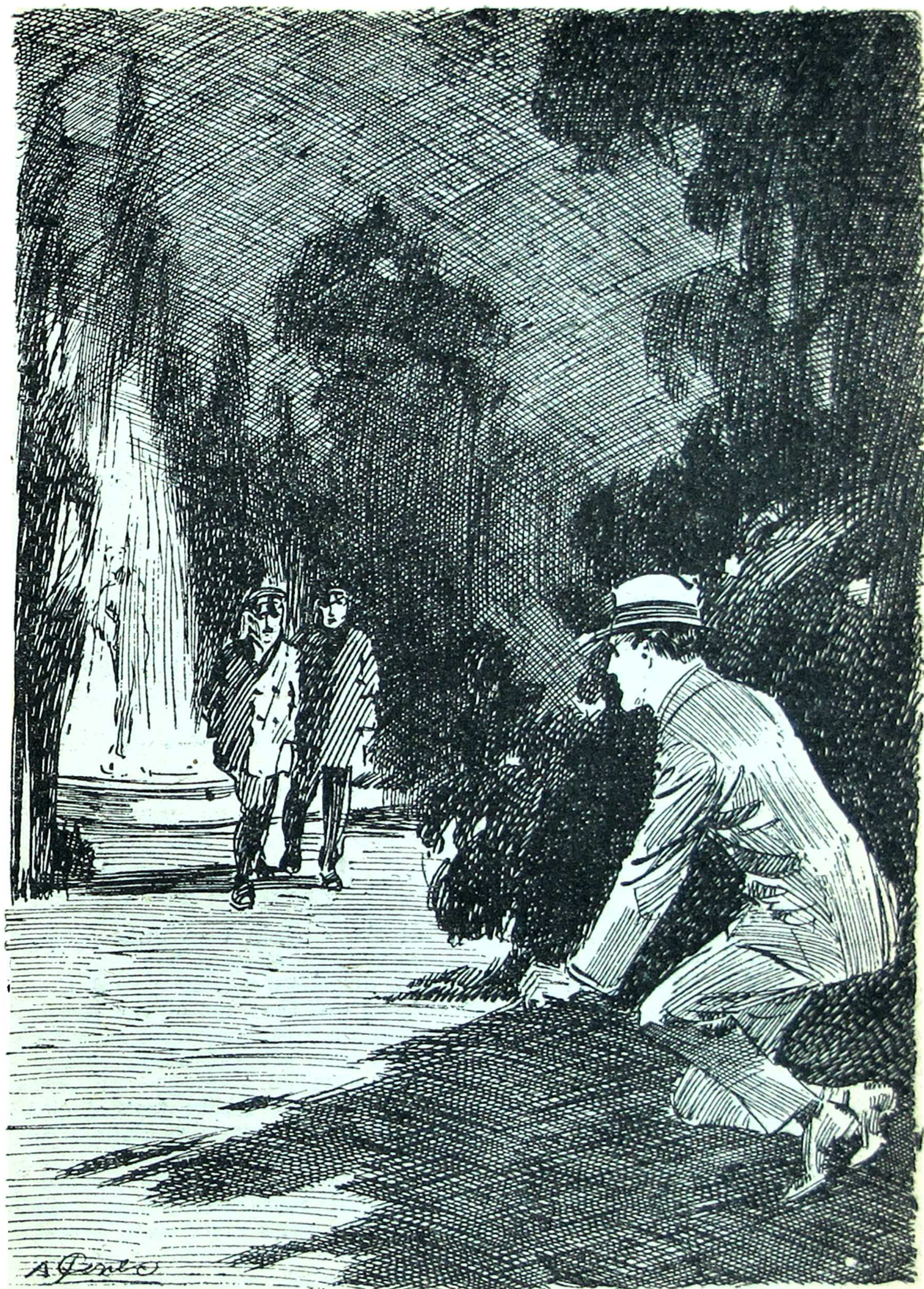
"What is it, gov'nor?" he asked in a whisper.

Lee took the lad's arm and pointed out towards the bay. Eddystone had swung round again, and was shining full upon them, so he waited until the great reflector had swung still more. Then he said:

"The yacht we saw is still in the bay, Nipper. You have a true eye for the lines of a boat, you said the lines of the yacht were familiar to you.

"Now let me make a suggestion. If I suggested the name of the yacht La Rose—the yacht which belongs to Mademoiselle Miton, the Black Wolf, would it mean anything to you?"

Nipper did not reply at once. His head was bent and he was thinking rapidly. He was picturing the slim lines of the white yacht which belonged to the Black Wolf and comparing them with the mental photograph he had of the yacht which lay in the bay.



Two dark forms, coming up towards the entrance of the hotel, caused the Black Wolf to dodge into the shelter of a large bush. (See page 4.)

Suddenly he lifted his head with a jerk.

"By thunder, guv'nor!" he said softly, "you have hit the nail on the head. I knew the minute I spotted that yacht in the bay that her lines were familiar to me, but I didn't try very hard to place her. But now, guv'nor, I know as sure as guns.

"It is the La Rose!"

Lee was silent. He was staring out across the night gulf of the bay pondering deeply. With the endorsement of his thoughts by Nipper a new idea had come to him, and things which had greatly puzzled him before were gradually growing clearer and clearer. He was visualising the man in brown—he was picturing the man in grey—he was recalling the dark eyes of the Ranee of Bojwok.

The Ranee of Bojwok! He smiled as he thought of her. He knew now the identity of the so-called Ranee of Bojwok.

He knew that she was none other than the Black Wolf.

But he had to confess to himself that her disguise had been a masterpiece. The dark stain of her skin would prove no mean disguise in itself, but he knew that the Black Wolf must have utilised still further means. Those same means had been applied to the man in brown, but even yet he could see no explanation of the mysterious disappearance of the man in brown.

But that the Ranee of Bojwok, the man in brown, and the man in grey were one and the same he felt certain.

And knowing that, it was not difficult to imagine the source responsible for the numerous robberies in the hotel. Moreover, the very proximity of the yacht in the bay told Lee that he must move swiftly if at all, and now that things had grown clearer he was more determined than ever to gain access to the rooms of the ranee.

Finally he turned to Nipper.

"When you went downstairs," he said, "were the guests still about the lobby?"

"There were very few there, guv'nor," whispered back the lad. "They had nearly all gone into dinner."

"Good!" muttered Lee. "We will now get to work. Did you bring the bag of powder out of my trunk?"

"Yes, guv'nor. I brought it with the tins. I got four empty petrol tins and three galvanised pails."

"That will do," said Lee, as he dropped the curtain back into place.

"Turn on the lights, my lad. We will get to work at once."

Nipper turned on the lights, and by Lee's direction set the petrol tins and pails out in line. Then while the lad cut out the tops of the petrol tins, Lee opened the mouth of the bag containing the chemical powder. It contained about ten pounds of stuff, and had been brought along by Lee for an experiment he had intended making with seaweed.

It had been his idea to subject crude seaweed to a smoke test of the chemical powder, and the properties of the powder had given him the idea he was now putting into effect.

Into each pail and tin he poured a moderate quantity of the powder, adding a little here and there until he had an equal amount in each receptacle. That done, he stood up, and, with Nipper's assistance, placed the pails about the room.

Then he drew a box of matches from his pocket, and lighting one, touched the flame to the powder in each receptacle. Immediately there arose a dense cloud of smoke, which had a strong pungent odour like that of burning rags.

When each lot was smouldering Lee leaped for the window.

"It will smoke for hours," he said as he motioned for Nipper to turn out the lights. "It will drive us out of the room in a minute. But we will open the window and the door. There is a breeze off the water, and with the window and door open it will drive the smoke all over the hotel. Now, my lad, here is what you have to do. When I give the word, dash out and make for the stairs. When you reach the top give the cry of 'Fire!' as loudly as you can, then make down the stairs at top speed. Do all you can to create a panic.

"I want to get every guest out of the hotel, if possible. I shall be behind you, and if my plan works I shall soon be busy. When you have done that, you can keep an eye out for me, as I shall probably need you. But no! on second thoughts, I wish you would make your way round to the garden. Get under the window of the first floor there, and keep an eye upwards. I may appear at one of the windows and may need to make a hurried descent. Do you understand perfectly?"

"Per-perfectly, gov'nor," coughed Nipper, for the smoke was already filling the room. "When you give the word, I will go."

Lee thrust the blind up and opened the sash of the window. Then he made for the door and drew it open. Immediately a rush of air caught the smoke in the room and drove it out into the passage.

It lingered low for a moment or so, eddying and curling about as though deciding what it would do. Then when a second rush of air struck it, it drove down the passage towards the main staircase.

Lee and Nipper stood just within the door watching it. Lee wanted it to permeate the whole passage before giving the alarm, since it was not part of his plan that the source of the smoke should be discovered.

The pails and tins were giving off great clouds of smoke now, and as it mounted upwards the steady draught from the window drove it outwards into the passage.

The smell of burning was already strong, and in another few minutes there would be all the signs of a first-class fire about the place.

Five minutes they waited, then when they were both gasping for air Lee gave the word.

Nipper was away like an arrow, and the last Lee saw of him was his figure plunging into the bank of smoke. A few seconds longer Lee waited, until he heard a shout down near the main staircase.

"Fire! Fire!" he heard Nipper yell.

Lee stood listening while the lad's voice echoed and re-echoed about the hotel, then from above he heard screams and sounds of running feet.

He plunged through the smoke towards the staircase and arrived there just in time to see two frightened chambermaids dash down towards the ground-floor. He, himself, went down one flight, noticing as he did so that the smoke was driving up to the floors above as well as those below.

Down the stairs now the servants who were on the upper floors came, one after another, screaming and sobbing with fear. Lee had taken strenuous measures, and he was sorry to create such a panic, but he was dealing with one of the shrewdest criminals in all Europe, and he knew only too well that ordinary measures would achieve little.

Behind a turn in the corridor on the second floor he waited. A few guests had dashed madly down the stairs, and somewhere on the floor below Nipper was doing his work well.

Lee could still hear the lad's voice, and as far as he could judge it had roused everyone in the hotel. But he had not yet seen any fugitives come from the direction of the rooms of the Ranees of Bojwok, and if they failed to do so his whole scheme would come to nought.

Still he waited, and still the smoke poured down the stairs, eddying and curling viciously.

If he had not known from whence it came Lee would have thought there was a very fierce fire up above. He could see only a few feet along the corridor now, and was on the point of going along towards the rooms which were occupied by the ranee, when suddenly a flying figure broke through the smoke gasping and spluttering.

As it flew past him Lee drew back, recognising a dark-skinned woman servant.

"That will be Ninette," he muttered to himself. "The Black Wolf certainly carried out her plan in a very complete manner."

Then another flying figure appeared, racing for the staircase, and as he went past Lee heard him cursing in good, plain French.

"Rather fluent for a Sumatrese or a Javanese," chuckled Lee to himself. "That will be Marcel, I think." Then came another and still another figure.

"Andre and Jacques," ticked off Lee, as they clattered down the stairs. "Now for the rooms. That will be the lot of them." He turned up his collar and dashed through the smoke, but just as he did so there came a cry behind him, and he pulled up.

It was Varden who had braved what he thought was a fire, and had come up. With a muttered imprecation Lee went back to him, and as he saw something white on the stairs he drew Varden back behind the wall of smoke. The next minute a white-clad figure raced past him.

In one glance he saw that it was the Black Wolf.

No longer was the coronet on her head, no longer were the diamonds about her throat, no longer was her dress of the saffron hue which it had been. The diamonds had been removed, and the dress was now white.

How had it happened? She looked like an entirely different woman, but Lee, whose eyes were acute, saw that it was the Black Wolf and no other. Yet little did she look like the ranee of the dark skin, for the skin of the woman who flew past them was softly white.

The change was as mysterious as the change of Brownclothes. She had disappeared into the smoke a moment later, and Lee turned quickly to Varden.

"It is all right, Varden," he said. "Go back below and get your guests out on to the terrace. There isn't really a fire. But I want them all out. It will be all over in a few minutes."

"But——" began Varden, who was utterly bewildered.

"Go, man—go!" cried Lee. "You will spoil the whole thing if you stop to argue now."

He pushed Varden towards the staircase, then plunged back through the smoke. So thick was it that he could see not a foot ahead of him. He found himself all at once staggering along a branch passage, and when he had felt his way back to the main passage he stopped to tie his handkerchief about his mouth.

As he did so he thought he caught the sound of running feet near him; then he turned to the right and made his way once again.

His course was arrested by the wall at the very end of the corridor, and, feeling his way to the door on his left, Lee turned the handle. It yielded easily enough, and he stepped into the room, closing the door after him to keep the smoke at bay. There was a good deal of smoke in the room as it was, but compared to the air in the passage, he could breathe easily.

He removed the handkerchief from his mouth and gazed about him. He had scarcely taken a step towards the table—the light was full on—when the door burst open, and in dashed a man. Lee swung sharply and saw a dark-skinned individual enter.

It was Marcel, one of the Black Wolf's henchmen, and as he saw Lee he gave a cry. Lee braced for the shock of the collision, and they crashed

together with terrific force. Marcel, who must have been through a good deal by now, fought like a wild man. He could see wherein they had been befooled, and the Black Wolf had a summary manner of dealing with those who left their posts.

Lee got one hand on Marcel's throat and closed his fingers with all his force. Marcel was fighting for a hold, and Lee yielded only so much as to give his body a relaxed position, against which Marcel could do little.

And he, seeing that Lee held the mastery, made a great heave and jerked himself free. As he did so his hand went to his pocket, and he drew out a knife.

Then he came at Lee with knife upraised, and murder in his eye. Lee drew back, stiffened himself, then lunged forward, and as the blade of the knife drove downwards towards his heart he shot out his left hand like lightning.

His fingers closed round the wrist of the other, and, thrusting upwards, Lee forced Marcel's hand back and back and back. Suddenly he released his pressure, developing it swiftly into a downward jerk.

Marcel came forward like an automaton, and as his chin came down Lee drove his right upwards with all his force. It caught Marcel full on the point of the chin, and his head went back with a snap. At the identical moment Lee released his hold on the other's wrist, and Marcel, after rocking foolishly back and forth on his heels, collapsed in a heap on the floor.

The knife dropped from his hands, and he lay still.

"A clean knock-out," muttered Lee, panting. "I had better make haste. The others may be here at any moment. He dashed across the room towards a door on the right. It was a sitting-room where he and Marcel had fought, but the adjoining room he saw was a bedroom.

The moment he came into it and turned on the lights Lee saw that it had been occupied by the Black Wolf. Still lying on the back of a chair was a grey suit, and on the dressing-table was a large black box, which he had seen once before.

Towards the latter article he ran, and taking up a silver paper-cutter, which lay on the dressing-table, he prised up the top. Inside lay one of the choicest collections of disguise appurtenances he had ever seen. On the very top was the upturned moustache, which Greyclothes had worn, and beneath it a collection of bottles and tubes, which he knew would contain a variety of stains and pigments.

But these Lee thrust aside until he had come to the bottom of the box. There he came upon a large bottle filled with a thin liquid. Taking out the cork, Lee sniffed it. It gave forth a familiar odour, and as he stood there trying to remember where he had smelled such an odour before the whole truth suddenly dawned upon him.

With an exclamation he jerked one of the grey garments from the chair and poured a little of the stain on it. Immediately it turned to a rich brown, which spread and spread until a good square foot of the material was coloured.

Then Lee recorked the bottle, and thrust it back into the box. Next he made for the window and opened the lower sash. He peered into the garden, but if Nipper was there he could not see him. Tossing the garment out of the window, he closed the sash and drew the curtain.

The room was now filling with smoke, and he knew he had little time to lose. He dashed across to the wardrobe, but the moment he jerked open the door he saw that it had been hurriedly emptied.

He opened the door to the next room, but that was empty. He stood just on the threshold, pondering. He had seen the Black Wolf come down the passage, but he had not seen her since.

What had become of her?

Suddenly he remembered when he had turned down a branch passage by mistake, and on his way back had paused to tie his handkerchief over his mouth. He had thought then that he had heard the sound of running feet.

Could it have been the Black Wolf? It must have been. She had returned to her room for the loot. She had secured it and had made her way back again. Already she might be well on her way to the beach with it.

At the thought Lee raced back to the sitting-room, and dragged Marcel over towards the window. Then he jerked up the sash and started for the door.

"That will keep him from suffocating," he muttered.

Jerking open the door, he took a long breath and plunged into the smoke-filled passage. Down it he raced at top speed until he came to the top of the staircase.

Just as he reached it another figure dashed up the stairs, continuing on to the floor above.

Leo caught a fleeting glimpse of Andre, and, changing his course, made after him. He could hear him pounding up the stairs to the floor above, then on towards the next floor.

At first Lee thought he must have made a mistake in the floor he desired, but when the footsteps of the fugitive led to the topmost floor of the hotel, then he knew that there was some deeper purpose behind it all. Up he went to the top and down the passage after the quarry. At the very end he came to a ladder, and looking up he could just see a dark figure clambering through on to the roof.

Lee dodged down for a moment, then, when the shadow of the other had disappeared, he ran lightly up the ladder. Thrusting up the skylight with a quick motion he sprang out on to the roof, and as he did so became almost blinded by a brilliant streak of light which flashed across before his vision.

The next moment he was wrapped in deadly embrace with Andre, who had turned on him like a wolf.

Just as Leo and Andre crashed together, Lee caught a fleeting glimpse of the Black Wolf. She was standing close to one of the chimneys of the building, wrapping what appeared to be a rope round and round it. She was standing close to where the streak of light had been, and the whole thing puzzled Lee exceedingly.

What she could be doing on the roof he couldn't guess. What Andre had dashed up there for was equally obscure. Yet he had no time now for cogitation.

The criminal was fighting for a throat grip, and Lee knew that if he went down it would be to roll over the edge of the roof to the ground below. He fought warily, saving his strength for when he should most need it. Andre was observing none of the ordinary ethics of the ring.

While his mistress worked feverishly he was attempting to get the better of Lee, and he cared not what methods he used in doing so.

Lee, on his part, was equally determined to bring the thing to a quick finish. But Andre was much more formidable than Marcel had been, and he was compelled to bring into play every atom of strength and science to combat the vicious attack of the other.

Even though they were clenched together, Lee found opportunity to bring his right up in several lightning-like upper-cuts, and the grunt which the

other emitted each time told him he was shaking him. Andre, meantime, was trying to get a strangle-hold on Lee, but steadily the detective blocked his every move.

With a slow, twisting motion he was boring his left into Andre's ribs, and slowly but surely the other was flinching from the pressure. Then Lee broke the clinch, and as Andre came at him again, Lee struck out straight and sure. It caught Andre on the shoulder, sending him reeling back, and before he could recover Lee was at him again, hammering in right and left like lightning.

One, two, three—one, two three. Hard and wickedly they crashed into the other, catching him on the body, the face, and over the heart. Then they clinched again, and Andre heaving himself round, Lee brought his clenched fist full into the small of the other's back.

Andre grunted hard, and his hold relaxed momentarily; then he had recovered, and, with the movement, he drew out a heavy automatic. Leaping forward, he brought the butt of the weapon crashing down into Lee's face. Lee felt a terrific shock of pain in his forehead, then, with the very force of it, he dropped his hands.

Andre leaped again, and struck hard. Lee reeled backwards; his foot struck something, tripping him up, and the next moment he was rolling over and over down the roof to the edge.

One terrible moment there was while he balanced on the very edge, one awful eternity whilst he struggled to stop himself, then came a sudden swishing over his head, and, as he made one last wild clutch, his body went over.

CHAPTER V.

Which Deals With the Doings of Nipper.

WHEN Lee had given Nipper his instructions, the lad had done his best to carry them out. Once Lee gave the word to go, he had, as it will be remembered, dashed down the corridor shouting "Fire!" at the top of his voice.

He had paused at the head of the stairs for a little in order to shout again, then down he had gone to the next floor. Here he had raised his voice, racing up and down the corridor as he did so, and by the time he had come back to the staircase he had set afoot what was to develop into a first-class panic.

Already some of the servants from the upper floors were dashing down the stairs, and Nipper went down with them. While they continued on to the ground floor—he knew that they would do his work only too well for him down there—he raced up and down the corridors of the first floor, giving vent to his cry every few seconds. The few guests who were in their rooms dashed out into the passage with frightened expressions on their faces, and, with the pungent smoke already reaching that floor, it did not take them long to decide to clear out.

A few paused to collect what the Black Wolf had left of their valuables, then they joined the panic-stricken servants in their dash for safety.

By the time Nipper reached the ground floor the place was in a hubbub. Pandemonium reigned supreme. The nerves of the guests were on edge, anyway, from the wholesale robberies which had taken place that day, and with the fire following hot-foot—at least, they thought it was a fire—they were ready for the finest exhibition of panic one could wish.

Varden, who had heard the cry of "Fire!" was in the lobby trying to pacify his guests, but they were not in the mood to listen to him, and with one accord they made for the main entrance.

All interest they had felt in the Rance of Bojwok had now departed in their intense desire to seek safety, and so wrapped up were they in their own fear that none saw her come out of the dining-room.

Nipper was up near the entrance at the time, and consequently missed seeing something which would have been somewhat enlightening to him.

When the Rance of Bojwok emerged from the dining-room she appeared exactly as she had when Lee had passed her on his way to the lift. She still wore the trailing yellow gown, and the diamonds sparkled in her hair and at her throat. But once in the lobby, and in possession of the news, she hurried along the short passage leading to the office of the manager, and after a surreptitious look about her quickly removed the coronet of diamonds from her hair. She thrust this inside her bodice, and tore the collar from her throat. That followed the coronet, and, slipping the rings off her fingers, she put them away.

Had one been standing close to her, one would have seen that already the saffron of the gown was somewhat paler than it had been, and even as she stood there the yellow faded to a cream, and then into a pure white.

It was a marvellous change, with no apparent cause, yet it seemed exactly what the Black Wolf expected, for she glanced down at it with satisfaction. Then a few deft touches at her hair entirely altered its appearance, and, turning, she started back towards the lobby.

A long mirror in the wall caused her to pause and gaze into it. Strangely enough, the face which had been of a deep cinnamon colour was now white—white and soft as the face of any Englishwoman. Certainly the white-gowned, white-skinned woman who walked into the lobby looked little like the yellow-gowned, cinnamon-hued, oriental-looking woman who had left it but a few minutes before.

It was a triumph in the changing of a disguise. Nipper, standing by the main door, saw the white-gowned woman enter the lobby, but he did not for a moment connect her with the Rance of Bojwok.

Just as she reached the foot of the stairs there dashed down the first of the rance's servants, and Nipper saw the woman in the white dress stop the elderly maid with a sharp gesture.

Thinking that she was but asking some question about the fire up above, he paid little attention to it, nor did he think anything when the three men-servants followed the woman in white to the terrace outside, while a few minutes later he saw the woman return and run up the stairs.

Fearing that she might get confused by the smoke, and thinking she was attempting to reach her room in order to secure some of her valuables, Nipper started towards her in order to call her back, but just then the crush of the crowd caught him and forced him through the entrance to the balcony outside.

He caught a glimpse of two of the rance's servants dashing back into the building, then he turned round and saw the third servant, with the elderly maid, slipping away from the crowd and making towards the trees in the park.

Something in the sly manner of their going caused the lad to grow suspicious of them, and he recalled what Lee had said about the yacht in the bay.

Nipper thought rapidly for a few moments; then, with a backward glance in the direction of the hotel, he started off after them.

If he had only known the identity of the woman in white he would have followed her up the stairs instead of going in the opposite direction, and he was to regret keenly that he had not done so.

Once free of the crowd, he quickened his footsteps in order to keep the quarry in sight before they should be swallowed up entirely by the gloom of the surrounding trees.

He broke away from the terrace to the left, and, passing down a natural avenue of elms, took his way across a small patch of open ground, on the other side of which he could see the pair he was following.

Halfway across that, and while he was still silhouetted against the faint light from the stars, the pair ahead entered the denser growth of the park, and, though the lad did not know it, they paused and turned back.

The man—Jacques it was—saw the lad at once, and a low word from him sent the woman on still further. He dropped down into the shadow of a thick bush and waited.

Steadily the lad approached, walking straight for the spot where he had seen the quarry disappear. Little thinking that he had been seen, he made no attempt to approach stealthily, and on reaching the edge of the trees he thrust his hand ahead of him to press aside the branches.

A foot, two feet, three feet he advanced into the shadow of the trees, then, like a shadow detaching itself from the surrounding gloom, there rose up something behind him.

Nipper paused to listen, uncertain which way to go, and, even as he strained forward to hear, the figure behind him sprang. Nipper was caught full in the back, and under the weight of his assailant went down hard.

He braced on his hands and knees, striving to rise against the weight of the man on his back, but Jacques was holding him down with knees and thighs while he sought for the lad's throat with his hands.

Just as his long fingers crept round under the lad's collar, Nipper dropped flat to the ground, bringing the crushing weight of his assailant down with him, but so disconcerting him that his hands dropped away.

Then, with a heave, Nipper rose upwards again, rolling quickly to one side as he did so, and the next moment they were locked in each other's arms, rolling over and over on the sward in a fight for the mastery.

What Nipper lacked in size and strength he made up in agility of movement, and when it came to real out-and-out fighting Jacques was not the exponent of the art Nipper was.

Yet the man used every ounce of his brute strength to drive the lad under, and Nipper began to realise that unless he rolled free, and made a bolt for it soon, he would be done for.

He squirmed down under his opponent, relaxing his whole body as he did so, and then when Jacques, thinking the lad had given in, bent to choke him. Nipper suddenly stiffened, and, before Jacques could prevent him, he had rolled free.

Scrambling to his feet, he made to run, when there came a crash behind him, and he turned just in time to receive the full force of some heavy weapon in his face. It caught him fair between the eyes, and he went down as though he had been pole-axed.

He had a vague sensation of millions of stars dancing before his eyes, then he seemed drawn into a great rushing torrent of sound which dragged him down, down, down, into the impenetrable darkness of oblivion.

When Nipper came to himself he was conscious of a violent pain in his head. Slowly, as his senses crept back to him, he became aware that he was

lying in a heap in the centre of a clump of bushes which opened out on to a small open patch of ground.

Where he was, or how long he had been unconscious, he had no idea. As a matter of fact, he had been unconscious for little more than a quarter of an hour, and he was less than thirty yards from the spot where he had been struck down.

The blow which had been dealt him had been struck with a heavy marlin-spike, and, wielded by a brawny arm, it had gone home with nothing of uncertainty behind it.

Had it, as undoubtedly intended, caught the lad on the back of the head, he would have gone out to stay for an hour or more—if, indeed, it had not killed him. As it was, he had turned at the psychological moment, and his forehead had borne the brunt of the blow.

Slowly he became aware that there were human beings near him. Now and then he caught sight of the fugitive flash of an electric torch, which seemed to be moving about close at hand.

As he became more and more clear in his mind, he could make out four or five figures moving about the little patch of open ground near at hand. Over them loomed the thick trunk of a tall tree, and about the base of this they seemed to be busy.

Nipper, interested in the proceedings, rolled cautiously over on his side, and, in spite of the throbbing in his head, crept along to the edge of the bush, where he could see better.

Now, under the flash of the light, he could make out a great coil of what seemed rope at the base of the tree, and from the upturned heads of the party there he imagined one of their number must be up in the tree.

A moment later he was certain that the coil was rope, for one of the men stooped, and, picking up an end, began to coil it round and round in his hands. When he had coiled up thirty or forty feet of the rope he took it in one hand, and holding the main part of the rope in the other he drew his right arm back.

The next moment there was a swishing sound as the rope flew upwards, uncoiling as it rose like a giant boa-constrictor which had cast itself into the air.

The end went up, up, up, but it did not come down again, and Nipper knew that the one in the tree had caught it.

He could see coil after coil come off the main pile of the rope as it was drawn up into the tree. Then, when nearly all of it had disappeared above, it suddenly stopped. The small portion left two of the men caught hold of, and, with it dragging behind them, disappeared round the trunk of the tree. What they intended doing there Nipper was not to know until later.

Still he watched closely, and then from the very midst of the branches in the trees a long vivid flash streaked out, rising, rising, rising as it went, until it disappeared entirely from view. It was accompanied by a muffled explosion, and the pungent smell of powder filled the lad's nostrils as the breeze swept the smoke towards him.

At first Nipper's eyes were so confused by the flash that he could see nothing; then as his pupils became normal again, he made out against the starlit sky a long, swaying line. In a flash he knew it was the rope which had been drawn up into the tree.

"Scott!" he whispered to himself. "The end of that rope has been shot away by a rocket! It was done exactly as they shoot a line from a wreck to a lifeboat, or from a lifeboat to a wreck. Now, what the dickens does it mean?"

In the intensity of his desire to see more he doubled behind the bush, and with infinite caution made his way round towards the tree.

So absorbed were the men at the base of the tree in watching the direction of the flight of the rope that they seemed not to hear him, and at the end of what to the lad was an almost interminable length of time, he gained a point of vantage on the other side of the tree.

Then he saw what puzzled him still more. He saw that on that side of the tree some of the branches had been hurriedly cut away, and that stretching away from the trunk of the tree, high up overhead, was a taut line, which disappeared in an ever-sloping direction towards the left.

More puzzled than ever, he lay still watching. A minute passed, two dragged out their course, three went by; then a sharp exclamation on the part of one of the men on the other side of the tree caused him to look up expectantly.

There came a strange humming sound from overhead, and, gazing along the rope towards the direction in which he had seen it sent by the rocket, he saw something black loom up overhead. It was travelling rapidly towards him, and a moment later it swept down towards the tree at a swift pace. He heard the brushing of some of the longer branches as it reached the tree, then it appeared directly over his head, sweeping swiftly along that ever-sloping line which disappeared towards the left.

What was it?

Reckless of discovery, Nipper twisted to watch it, and then, as for a single brief instant it became plainly silhouetted against the stars, he saw what it was. It was nothing more nor less than a sort of breeches-buoy, such as is used to bring men across the chasm of death from a wrecked vessel.

From somewhere—from the place to which the rope had been rocketed—it had come, and even as it disappeared from view, he thought he could discern a long, dangling form beneath it.

The sudden crashing of the branches near at hand caused him to turn swiftly, and twisting his head to the other side, he saw the whole party which had been at work near the base of the tree start off through the trees.

A soft pad on the ground close to him sent a chill down his spine. Someone had dropped out of the tree; but so still did the lad lie that he was unseen, and the man who had swung himself down set off after the others. Only then did Nipper get a close view of any one of them, and as the man went past him he saw that he was dressed as a seaman.

In a flash he connected up the loose threads of the puzzle. The long rope and the rocket. What more likely than that seamen would be the ones to use such a device? Then the breeches-buoy which had flashed past him? It was a typical seaman's idea.

How or why it had been used Nipper could not guess, but he did know that it had some vital bearing on the matter which was exercising his master, and, jumping to his feet, he set off through the trees in the direction which he hoped would bring him out to the hotel.

Nor was he wrong. He came out near the end of the terrace, and as he raced across towards the front entrance he saw that the crowd was still standing outside. The lad pushed his way through them, searching for Lee. He thought to find his master in the house, but just as he began to mount the steps he met Varden, wild-eyed and nearly frantic. He gave one look at Nipper, then caught him by the arm.

"Come with me!" he cried. "There is the deuce to pay! Lee is gone!"

CHAPTER VI.

The Breeches-Buoy—Nelson Lee Takes An Involuntary Trip Through Space—The Fight On the Beach—Finis.

WHEN Nelson Lee rolled down the roof towards the edge he had, at the prompting of his own instinct of self-preservation, made a frantic effort to save himself.

Considering the profession he followed, Lee was a man who carried his life in his hands on many occasions, but he had no fancy for going to his death by rolling over the edge of a roof. He himself would have termed it both undignified and extremely inartistic. But on this occasion Fate seemed to decree that he should so meet his end, for even as his body overbalanced and went over the edge, his clutching hands met nothing.

But stay! What was that? On the very verge of falling, something whizzed overhead, and his hand was struck a violent blow.

Still clutching, Lee felt a solid body sweep past him, and with a desperate effort his fingers closed on a rough edge. The next moment his neck was almost dislocated as he was jerked from the edge of the roof, and, clinging on with all his strength, he was swept through space, down, down, down, at an ever-increasing speed.

Once he found that he could cling on, Lee lifted his other hand and made his hold firmer; then he endeavoured to see what it was which had jerked him off the edge of the roof like a monster bird come to his rescue.

He could see little, but as he was swept onwards at an ever-increasing pace, he gradually divined what had happened to him. He remembered the flash of light which had struck upon his eyes as he gained the roof. He recalled the brief sight he had had of the Black Wolf working frantically by one of the chimneys. He remembered now that the place where he had rolled down the roof would be just about in a line with that chimney, and with that came the explanation.

A breeches-buoy!

At this point his thoughts were cut off by the sweep of branches against his body. Only for a brief moment did it last, then they swept on again at an ever-growing speed.

It seemed to Lee that they had travelled a considerable distance when the speed of the breeches-buoy began to lessen until they were travelling at a fairly moderate speed. Then it was he became aware of a boom, boom, booming in his ears, and there followed a sensation of wideness and openness about him.

He glanced down, and, iron-nerved though he was, he gasped at what he saw. The ground beneath him had suddenly disappeared; he seemed to be swinging above a great void. Then he caught sight of the gleam of lights, and the flash of Eddystone struck full in his eyes.

"We have gone over the edge of the cliff," he thought. "This line must run down to some point on the beach, and there is a brake arrangement which has been put on to lessen the speed. If I let go here or anything breaks, I shall drop a hundred feet, and never know what I strike."

He gripped the rough edge to which he was clinging with all his strength, praying that the affair would bear his weight, and so down the sagging line went the breeches-buoy. Then the booming of the surf grew plainer and plainer, until Lee could begin to make out the black line of the beach below.

It seemed to rise up suddenly then to meet him, and almost before he could prepare for what might follow the end of that mad swinging journey, there was a great downward rush, and his feet came into contact with something that gave before the force of the blow. The next moment Lee was rolling

over and over on the sand, until he finally came to a stop at the very edge of the surf.

He scrambled to his feet, surprised that he had come out of it without injury, and now could see more clearly what had happened.

About ten yards away from him there rose up a pole, which had been placed deep in the ground. From the top of this the line by which the breeches-buoy had travelled stretched away into the night in the direction of the cliff.

Against the pole the breeches-buoy was now swaying, and even as he gazed upon it, Lee saw a figure climb out over the edge. A short distance away another figure picked itself up from the sand, and now he knew what it was he had struck. The man who had been on guard at the pole, waiting for the appearance of the breeches-buoy, had caught the full benefit of his driving heels. The blow had driven him headlong over the sand, and Lee by no means envied him the feeling he must have in the pit of his stomach.

The figure which was clambering out of the buoy gradually resolved itself into a woman's form, and as Lee went forward, he could make out the slim whiteness of the Black Wolf.

She had turned, and was about to speak to the man who had just picked himself up from the sand when she heard Lee's step, and swung towards him.

"Is it you, captain?" she asked, in a low tone.

Lee did not reply at once, but kept on until he was close to her. Then he went forward.

"It is I, mademoiselle, at your service," he said softly.

Now the Black Wolf prided herself on the fact that the success of her career was due as much to the iron nerves she possessed as to the capacity of her brain to plan out the coups which she brought off with, it must be confessed, a singular amount of profit to herself. But for once in her life she was dumbfounded with amazement. The last she had seen of Nelson Lee he had been struggling with Andre on the roof of the hotel over the cliff. Now, if she was to believe her eyes and his voice, he was here on the beach beside her.

She had come to the beach as swift as the flight of a swallow. There was no other means of getting there so quickly, and she had thought as she started that Andre had sent Lee headlong down the roof of the hotel. All during that flight to the beach she had not known that Lee was clinging on to the bottom of the buoy. Had she known, it is safe to say that Lee would not have arrived as he did.

"You—you!" she cried, in low, vibrant tones. "How did you come here?"

Lee smiled.

"As you came, mademoiselle," he said slowly. "And now, if you please, I will trouble you to hand over the booty you have gained at the hotel."

The man whom Lee had knocked over as he landed sprang forward without waiting for a sign from his mistress. He was anxious to get satisfaction for the blow he had received.

Lee, who had been watching the fellow out of the corner of his eye, sprang lightly to one side, and as the man lunged at him, he drove his fist into the other's face. He followed up the blow by a hard jab to the jaw, and, upper cutting with his right, sent the fellow whirling and tumbling to the sand.

He swung round just in time to see the Black Wolf making for him, and a peculiar little movement of her hand towards her bodice gave Leo a sudden warning. He remembered only too well how effective was the drug

which the Black Wolf used as a spray on occasion, and how utterly helpless it rendered her victims.

Lee had no intention of falling under its spell. He had tasted its effect once before, and then he had been as helpless as a baby. So though he had no very keen desire to use physical force against the Black Wolf, he dodged as she approached him, and, bending swiftly, picked her up in his arms, crushing her hand against her side as he did so. She was utterly helpless this way, and though she fought hard, Lee held her easily. He turned, and, judging the distance to the water, started deliberately for it.

Yard by yard he drew closer to it, and then, as he got close to the edge, he heard the sound of oars out over the water. One quick glance he gave towards the black bulk of a boat, which was rapidly approaching the shore, then his feet were in the water, and, regardless of the deadly protests of the Black Wolf, he strode in to his waist.

"I am sorry to do it," he said jerkily, as he bent over, "but I know what a potent little weapon you have within your bodice, mademoiselle, and I know that water renders it harmless. Therefore"—and as he got the word out, he bent swiftly and submerged the Black Wolf until only her head was above water.

Never in all the course of her life had the Black Wolf been in such an undignified position. Helpless as a baby in Lee's arms—firmly but surely plunged into the sea—all the strength of her nature rose up in violent resistance.

When Lee, satisfied that the drug would have been ruined by the action of the water, finally straightened up with her, and carried her back to the beach, she was struggling no longer. Rather was she ominously quiet, and Lee knowing something of her nature knew full well that it boded him no good.

Yet he had no time to give to her then, for the boat he had seen approaching the shore was now grounding, and on to the beach there leaped half a dozen sturdy seaman. Alone as he was, it was, on the face of it, time for Lee to make himself scarce, but the doggedness of the man's nature would not permit him to run away while the booty was there.

If he yielded now to superior numbers it would mean the loss of the stuff, for he knew that the boat had come from the yacht, and once the loot was there it would be gone for ever.

He stood on guard close to the pillar which supported the rope, waiting to see what would happen.

The Black Wolf, all dripping, had run down to meet the boat, and now Lee could hear her low, tense tones talking to the men who had landed. He did not need to hear her words; he knew they referred to him. And the next moment, as the whole gang rushed him, he prepared for the shock.

There he stood on that strip of beach all alone, firm as a rock, and with unflinching eye, ready to receive overwhelming odds.

He was a fine, sturdy figure of fearlessness was Lee, as he stood there, his wet garments clinging about him, his shirt thrown open at the neck—he had long since lost his coat—his shirt-sleeves flapping in rags about his arms, his head bare, and his forehead glistening wet under the faint light of the stars.

Then they came, and like a steel piston his fist shot out. A seaman went down before his fellows, and backing against the pole, Lee laid about him with a will.

They were a tough lot, those sailors, and they could take punishment, as any man of the sea can take it. On any occasion they would fight for their mistress, for whatever her faults as society may look at things, the Black Wolf was beloved by those who served her. From the captain of the yacht

down to the oiler in the engine-room, they would one and all go the full length for her, and now that Lee had actually laid hands upon her, they were like wild beasts let loose.

Nor were they dealing with a man of straw.

Lee was no romantic and impossible hero, who could do impossible things. Rather was he a keen, sturdy, clean-living, clean-fighting man, who had roughed it about the world, and could on occasion give and take perhaps a little more than the average man.

He had gone down to the fist of another more than once in his time, and he probably would again.

If he hadn't, then he would have been the one and only White Hope. But Nelson Lee was human, and he had a punch like the kick of a mule.

Also, it took a good deal to rouse him to the cold fury that made him nought but a calculating fighting machine. He was not swinging wildly.

He was fighting coldly and methodically, saving a blow when possible, and trying to make every one bite flesh. He knew his only hope lay in fighting warily, for he had a tough nut to crack, and once his guard was beaten down he would be swamped by the overflow of the tide against him.

A big fellow, with a low-set forehead and a fighting jaw, lunged in at Lee over the body of his prostrate companion. Lee drew back his head with a jerk, and the blow passed harmlessly by his cheek.

With the same motion he used his foot to push the body of the prostrate man forward a few inches, and as the big fellow lunged again he was compelled to lurch over the body of his companion. This time Lee did not draw back, but instead he ducked and bent forward. Then up went his right in a clean hook, which caught the big fellow on the point of the jaw and sent him rocking.

Lee whipped in his left like lightning, and, planting one foot on the body of the man who lay on the beach, he drove his right again straight for the jaw.

That blow would have felled a bullock if it had caught it in such a vulnerable spot. The big fellow grunted hard, swayed, lurched forward full into Lee's left, then with a queer little sound he went down in a heap on top of his mate.

Panting, but still on guard, Lee sprang back as two more rushed him. One aimed a kick at him Continental fashion, and Lee throwing out his hand caught the fellow's ankle. With a quick heave he had the fellow over, and, turning, met the onslaught of the other.

He was just a trifle late in his swing, and the next instant a terrific blow caught him on the side of the head, sending him reeling back.

Lee recovered, but was groggy, and fighting for time lowered his head and bared in. Blow after blow he took on the top of his cranium until his head was cleared again, then he sprang back, guarding.

The sailor, filled with confidence at the success of his attack, made to follow it up. Lee waited for him, and occupied as he was he did not notice that the man whom he had just heaved over had got to his feet, and was creeping round the pole in order to get behind him.

There were still two other sailors, and they were crowding hard against their mate in an effort to get at Lee.

Then the attack came. Lee met it with a swift counter, ducking and driving his right for the jaw. It got home with a sharp impact of fist on flesh, then from behind a stunning blow caught him on the back of the head, and he went down to his knees.

Before he could rise the whole crew were upon him, beating him down, down, down to the sand, fight as he might. It was a cowardly blow, and to do the Black Wolf justice she sprang forward with uplifted hand, as though

she herself would strike down the one who had come upon Lee from behind. In the moments of that fight the whole nature of the woman had been forced up into admiration for the gallant fight Lee had made against such overwhelming odds, and keenly though she might desire to get him into her power, she would never lend herself to cowardly actions.

But Lee was down, and her crew, like a pack of wild beast, were beating him into the sand. Then, even as they tried to drag him to the boat, there came the swift rush of feet, and Nipper, heading half a dozen men, dashed down the beach to the rescue of his master.

He hurled himself into the fray almost before the others knew he was there, and, like a young whirlwind, he fought his way to Lee's assistance.

Behind him came Varden, two hotel porters, and two guests—the latter pair broad-shouldered and brawny-looking men, who seemed only too anxious to take a hand. With these reinforcements the battle took a sudden turn, and while the men from the yacht were being driven back foot by foot, the Black Wolf, who had made for the boat, now gave vent to a sharp whistle.

Like mechanical toys worked by an electric motor, the seamen dropped their hands and scuttled for the boat.

While still on the run they pushed it into the water and sprang in. Nipper, Varden and the others tore after them, but with a giant heave the seamen had the boat in deep water and their oars raised in defence.

The pursuers, thinking discretion the better part of valour, retired, content with the three captives on the beach. Lee had managed to get to his feet, and was leaning against the pole which supported the rope, trying to gather himself together, and at the same time to answer the questions which were being thrown at him from all sides.

“Look in the breeches-buoy,” was all he could say; and Varden and Nipper, looking there, brought out a large sack, which bulged on all sides.

“It's th'—the loot!” stuttered Lee feebly. “Take it up t' hotel.”

Varden gave the sack—though scarcely believing what he heard—into the hands of the porters, and gave Nipper a hand at assisting Lee. The lad had jerked out a flask, and with the raw spirit coursing down his throat he recovered. They walked him along the beach and stopped beside a motor-car.

Nipper, to save time, had driven the big car down the steep road which wound down the cliff. They assisted Lee in and placed the sack beside him. Then Varden ordered the two porters to walk, and with the two guests, half-sitting, half-standing in the tonneau Nipper took the wheel.

He turned the car and drove along the beach to where the three prisoners lay. Already they had been securely trussed up, and would remain where they were for the present.

There was little fear that the boat would dare to return for them. Starting from this point Nipper threw in the clutch, and with the car on the big gear he put it for the steep road leading up from the beach. It rose nobly to the occasion, though, truth to tell, when the lad sent it round some of the turns, it took them on two wheels, swaying dangerously as it did so.

Yet not until he was over half-way up was he compelled to change gears, and then, with cones grinding, they made the top.

It took only a few minutes to run along to the hotel, and by the time they reached it Lee was almost himself again.

The guests had re-entered the lobby, and as they climbed out of the car Lee said to Varden:

“Go on in ahead, Varden, and tell them their valuables have been recovered. Have them all collected in the lobby. I wish to speak to them, and when I get through I think you will find that the hotel will have suffered

nothing by this affair. On the contrary, I expect it will provide some valuable advertising."

Varden obeyed in silence; and Lee, with Nipper and the two guests beside him, went in, with Nipper carrying the sack of valuables.

They were met by curious stares, but Lee paid no attention. He signed to Nipper to put down the sack, then he turned to the assembled guests and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, there is no particular reason why I should address you, except it be that I know you are one and all anxious to be enlightened as to what has occurred here to-day. I myself arrived here expecting and hoping to have a quiet holiday, but Fate was against it. Yet I am not sorry that I came.

"Firstly, permit me to tell you my name. It is Nelson Lee, and those of you who may have heard it before will realise at once why I took such a keen interest in what happened to-day. Now let me inform you before I go any further that your valuables are safe. In fact, they are all in that sack there, and when I have finished we will return them to the owners.

"I should like to say, that in all my career as a criminologist, I have never come up against a more daring or more cleverly planned robbery than this. You were all, no doubt, pleased when the so-called Rancee of Bojwok arrived at the hotel.

"There is a Rancee of Bojwok; but the lady who came here under that name had no right to use it. The real Rancee of Bojwok is an elderly coloured lady who has never been in Europe in her life. She is at least seventy years of age. The lady who posed here as the rancee was the notorious Black Wolf, one of the cleverest adventuresses in the world."

A gasp went up as Lee made this statement, and all heads bent a little more to miss nothing that he might say.

"She came here with a plan to make a wholesale clean-up," went on Lee, "and she very nearly succeeded. With her servants disguised like herself, as an Easterner, she took up her quarters, yet they were but her creatures. On the first day she arrived she lost no time in getting possession of a powerful weapon which would serve her purpose.

"She sent for the housemaid of the floor on which her rooms were, requesting her to assist in unpacking her trunks. By a clever trick, she caused the keys which this housemaid carried to fall into the trunk. They were picked up by her own maid, and laid on the table, and the Black Wolf herself handed them back.

"Before she did so, however, she managed to take a wax impression of the master-key of the floor—a key easy enough to distinguish, since it was much smaller than the others. She then had a similar key made from the impression, and she was ready for work.

"But she could not work as the rancee. Then what would she do? I will tell you. You saw a yacht come into the bay yesterday afternoon? That yacht belonged to the Black Wolf. She allowed it to be known that she felt indisposed, yet all the time you thought her in her rooms she was, in reality, about the hotel watching her chance to bring off the coup.

"She disguised herself, and set out to the yacht. From there, in the disguise of a young man of the East—you all must have seen the dark-skinned young man in brown clothes who was about the hotel—she came ashore ostensibly as the owner of the yacht. In this guise she watched her chance.

"Yet still it would not do to get compromised, so she went a step further. She arranged for still another personality to be seen about. I speak of the

foreign-looking individual in the grey suit and fiercely-curved moustache who was about occasionally, but never at the same time. And why?

"Because they were one and the same person. That may sound like a romance to you, but I will shortly prove to you that it is hard fact. I will explain myself, though I shall not go into technical details. You all know the action of alcohol and petrol when exposed to the air. It evaporates and disappears.

"Well, the Black Wolf contrived to find a liquid—and I may say that she is one of the most advanced chemists in the world—a liquid which would act as a dye, but which would evaporate on contact with cool air, leaving whatever it had dyed the original colour.

"Did you notice the garb of the young man in brown? Brown clothes, brown shirt, brown tie, brown collar, brown boots, brown socks—everything brown! Why? Because they had all been saturated with the brown stain which would evaporate after a certain amount of contact with the air. On two occasions, which I cannot go into in detail, I myself was baffled by the apparent mysterious disappearance of the young man in brown, and the equally mysterious appearance of the young man in grey.

"Now I know how it happened. The brown simply faded away, allowing the articles of clothing to resume their original colour, and the addition of a moustache completed the change. Bear in mind that the face and hands were also stained with this brown liquid, and they, too, would fade to the original white, causing a more distinct change in the appearance than the clothes. That was how it was done.

"Then, as the young man in brown, the Black Wolf went upstairs to-day, and, watching her chance, rifled every room. She operated as the young man in brown, but she returned as the man in grey. Do you see how well she covered her tracks? Then they both disappeared, and while the excitement of the robberies was at its height she appeared as the rance—a move to cover her tracks still more.

"I suspected that rance, and I was determined to get into her rooms and make a secret search there. But how to manage it? That was the riddle. And here I come to an explanation—an apology, too, where I must ask your indulgence and forgiveness.

"There was no fire in this hotel to-night. It was all smoke—smoke from a chemical powder which I set fire to, and by a draught drove out into the corridors of the hotel. Then I sent my assistant here to cry "Fire!" and the plan worked perfectly. It brought everyone from their rooms, and it brought the servants of the Black Wolf as well.

"During the excitement I managed to get into those rooms. What happened there is of no consequence, but I was able to confirm my suspicions. In the meantime, the Black Wolf had seen the necessity for action and had moved.

"If you will remember, she came down as the rance—dark-skinned and gowned in deep yellow. That was another stain. It faded away, and by the removal of her jewels and a rearrangement of her hair she appeared white—white skin and white dress, an entirely different-looking woman from the rance.

"Then she managed to reach her rooms, and, with the loot, got on to the roof. She was evidently ready for flight this very night, for she had sailors off the yacht in the park by the terrace. A good many of you must have seen the flash of light which went over the roof of the hotel. That was a rocket, and it carried with it a large rope. This rope the Black Wolf affixed to one of the chimneys of the house, and to the rope she hung a folding breeches-buoy, which she had brought with her.

"You can see that she was prepared against every emergency. That is why the Black Wolf has been so successful—she figures out every possible complication.

"Well, before I could reach her she had got away by the breeches buoy, taking with her the loot. I managed to reach her on the beach, and—well, we got possession of the loot, though I am sorry to say that the Black Wolf has escaped.

"That, I think, is all, ladies and gentlemen, but I wish to add this—Mr. Varden, your manager, could not possibly guard against the plan of such a clever adventuress as the Black Wolf. It is a lesson to us all not to take everyone we meet at the face value they place upon themselves. I think, when you have slept on it, you will see the justice of my appeal, and I hope none of you will allow the name of the hotel to suffer by it.

"Besides, your property has all been recovered, and if you will step into line and appoint a committee of yourselves, we shall sort it out. I think that is all."

"Not quite, Mr. Lee," came a man's voice from the crowd. "There is one question I should like to ask you."

"Certainly," said Lee, with a smile. "I shall answer it if it is in my power to do so."

"I should like to know, Mr. Lee, how you managed to get down to the beach in time to meet this Black Wolf."

Leo blushed.

"Oh—er—er" he stammered—"well—er—you see, there was only one way, and I took it. I went by the aerial tramway, so to speak—by the breeches buoy."

THE END.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!

Readers will be pleased to know that NEXT WEEK, under the title of

"The Mummy Mystery"

I will publish an extra long, complete tale of NELSON LEE, and his thrilling adventures with "THE GREEN TRIANGLE" amongst the Pyramids of Egypt.

When you have finished reading your copy, please pass it on to a friend, and help to swell the circulation of our little paper.

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. Suddenly they come upon a party of fierce looking men dressed in armour of the ancient Norsemen. The strangers appear hostile, and Hugh, losing his temper, challenges one of the leaders to a duel. Val does likewise, but the Englishmen are by far the stronger, and succeed in breaking the axes of their opponents. Hugh and Val take no mean advantage, however, and offer to fight with swords. (Now read on.)

Preparing for the Battle—The Spell of the "Berserkers."

FOR a moment or two the Viking seemed suspicious that this offer was a trick and hesitated. Then as Ruxton threw his shield away, the other did the same with his axe, Ruxton then followed suit with his and drew his sword, and thus were they placed on equal terms once more.

By this time it had become clear to the spectators that Hertseg was weakening. Hugh's splendid strength, and his seemingly tireless right arm, were wearing him down, even as they had worn down Kern.

Presently, after each had received another slight wound or two, the end came quite suddenly. Hugh, with a mighty cut, sent the Viking's sword flying out of his hand.

"Now yield thee, insolent jarl!" cried Hugh, holding his sword's point at the Viking's throat. "Yield, and beg my pardon for the insults thou hast put upon me, or, by the gods thou believest in, thou hast fought thy last fight!"

"I yield thee best, stranger," said the jarl, in tones so low that they were only just audible amidst the shouting and tumult that this unexpected ending of the fight had aroused.

Hugh lowered his sword and turned his head to see how his chum was faring. As he did so, Berdrok rushed at him, and got within his guard and grappled with him. In one hand he swung aloft a naked dagger, though it had been agreed that no daggers were to be used, and Hugh's had been taken from him.

Another moment and the treacherous "jarl" would have struck home, but just then a pistol shot rang out, the dagger was struck from the hand which held it, and which fell to the man's side covered with blood.

It was Cable who had fired the shot. As instructed by Ruxton, he had watched every phase of the double duel, and well had he now carried out his trust.

In the midst of the confusion that ensued a messenger came rushing in with news:

"My lord, our enemies are coming!" he cried. "Their war galleys are even now drawing nigh to the shore!"

This put an end to all thoughts of proceeding further with the duel still in progress. Berdrok hastened to his master's side to confer with him, while Hertseg hurried off to bind up his wounded hand.

Hugh sought out Rudlaff and Kern.

"Let us join with you," he said. "We offer you the services of ourselves and our followers!"

Rudlaff did not accept Hugh's offer at once.

"I must first consult the chief," was his answer.

"Tarry ye here while I try to get speech with him."

With which he went away and became lost to view in the crowd of notables by whom Osth was surrounded, and who seemed to be all talking at once.

When he returned he seemed uneasy and unsettled in his mind, and he glanced doubtfully at the strangers as he addressed them.

"My orders are that ye may come with me," he said, "but our lord Osth will make no promise as to what your ultimate fate shall be. If ye show yourselves to be good fighters against our enemies that may count for much, but he promises nothing. On the other hand, if ye should attempt to desert us, or to act the part of spies or cowards, I am to order my men to put ye to death at once on the spot. So now ye have fair warning."

"We are not likely to act any such part as thou hast hinted," returned Hugh, disdainfully. "We are honourable men."

"All the same, ye would have done better to have kept away from our land," Rudlaff declared, darkly. "Remember, I promise you nothing. Moreover, there is another matter——"

"What may that be, jarl?" Ruxton put in, as the jarl hesitated.

"Why, news has just reached us that other strangers have arrived in our land—a more numerous band than ye have with you—and that they are taking part with our enemies against us. Very likely they are your friends, and ye may strive to join yourselves with them. Now, therefore, I warn you that should you attempt to do so, my men will fall upon you at once."

The two chums looked at each other.

"Grimstock and his gang!" muttered Hugh. "So, then, they have

arrived here! And they have taken sides with the other party! This is a queer outcome of it all!"

"It's Fate!" Val declared. "Let's hope we shall come across them—it may give us a chance to pay back a little of what we owe them—the murdering hounds!"

"I cry ditto to that!" Hugh returned, with enthusiasm. Then a smile crossed his face. "But it's rather a funny suggestion that of our friend here. He is afraid we may look for an opportunity of rushing over to these countrymen of ours, in order, I suppose, to fall upon their necks and greet them as long-lost brothers!"

This idea struck them as so comical that they both laughed aloud.

"It is no matter for laughter," growled Rudlaff, frowning.

"We laugh, jarl," Hugh explained, "at the idea of our wishing to join ourselves to these other strangers of whom thou hast made mention. Be it known then to thee that they are our bitter enemies. They desired to murder us, to which end they deserted us in brutal and cowardly fashion and left us to die in the great White Wilderness. They went off, carrying with them even our stores of food and clothes and weapons. That is how it came about that we arrived here in the sad plight in which thou didst find us—without food or arms, and clad in rags, like common churls. Judge, then, for thyself, whether we are likely to desire to go over to them. So far from that, nothing will please us better than to fight them alongside thee and thy people. We have a score against them which we shall be only too glad to pay off."

"I hope thou wilt help us to do so, jarl," said Ruxton, very earnestly. "'Twas a base trick these men played us—a most shameful, scurvy trick. 'Twas what thou would'st call, in thy language, a nithing deed, and they deserve no mercy either at thy hands or ours."

"So, so! I am glad to know this," answered the jarl. "We may be able to assist thee in paying off thy score!"

A little later, when the friends were able to get a word together, Ruxton said:

"This is rather serious news, though, about Grimstock and his band! They have plenty of firearms and ammunition——"

"Yes, thanks to what they stole from me; they were paid for with my money!" exclaimed Hugh bitterly.

"It's a wicked business—but I'm very much afraid they've got the whip hand of us. They'll probably be able to drive our side before them like so many sheep. As soon as Osth's men hear the rifles popping, find the bullets singing about their ears, and see men falling mysteriously, there will be a panic, they'll turn tail—and the tremendous civil war will be over."

"I don't know," returned Hugh thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure they'll have it so much their own way as all that. The armour these people wear will turn many a bullet, and if we can put heart into them and stay the panic, and we can get to close quarters, we may still have a chance. At any rate, I mean to try."

"Right-ho! I'm with you there. If we can get some of our own back it will be better than nothing. Otherwise—so far as gratitude from Osth and his crowd is concerned—I am very much afraid——"

"Ah! that reminds me," exclaimed Hugh. "While I was in that cage—just after the yellow-haired beauty gave in so unexpectedly—some one behind me breathed into my ears a warning against Osth."

And he told Ruxton what had been said.

"And you have no idea who it was?" Val commented.

"Haven't the slightest notion. By the time I looked about, several people had crowded round the cage, and though I searched their faces for some sign which would indicate which one had spoken, I could make nothing of it."

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Coliseum,
London, W.C.

October 27, 1915.

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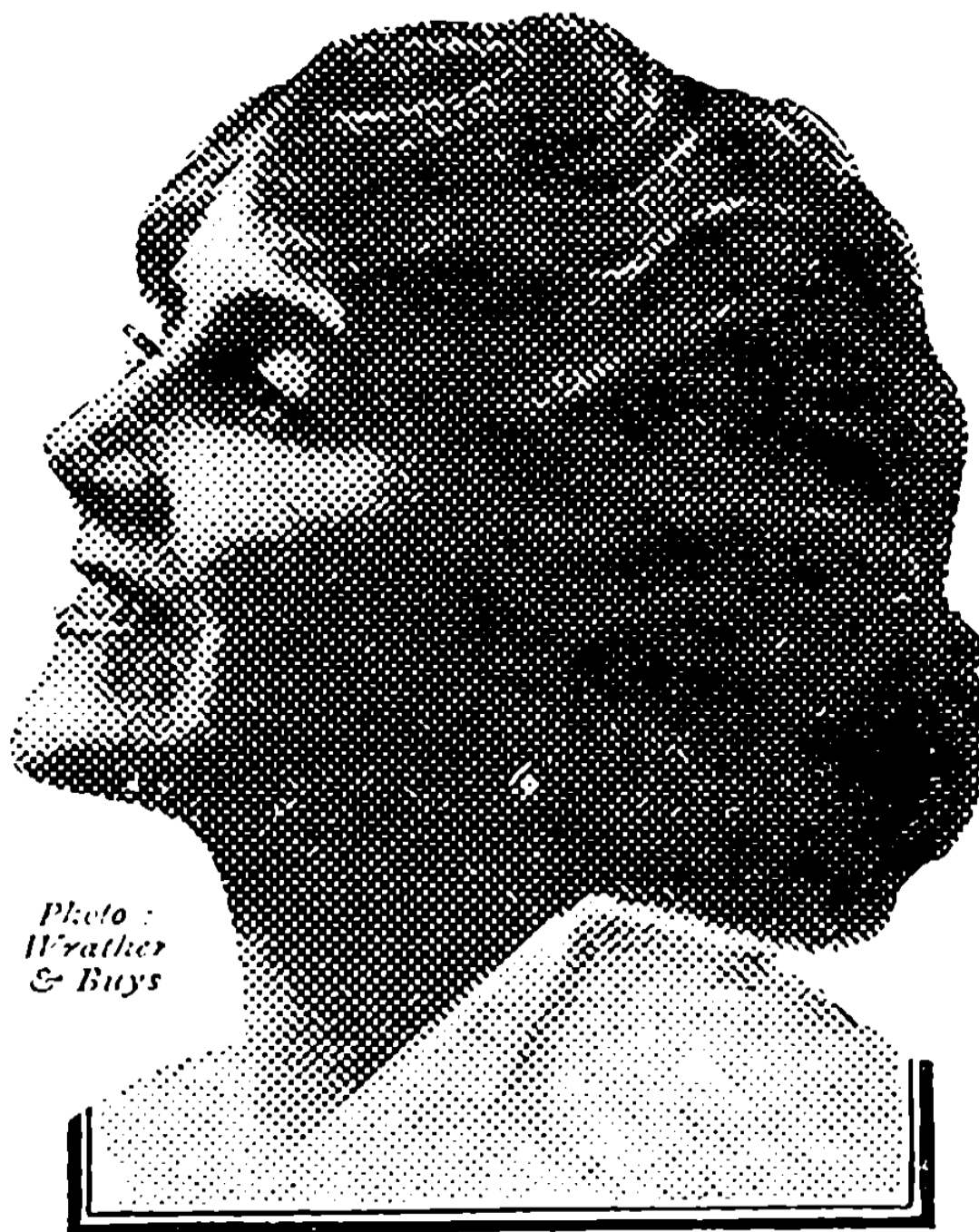


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"It must have been some one who has cause to love Osth," muttered Ruxton. "And I dare say," he went on gloomily, "he knew what he was talking about. I fear he was about right—if so, it is of little use for us to hope for anything from that johnny. It's a bright outlook, certainly. On the one hand, if Osth's people are victorious, we have nothing to hope for in the way of gratitude for helping him. On the other hand, if his enemies gain the day, we run a good chance of falling into the clutches of Grimstock and his gang as prisoners of war, and I don't think we can look for much gratitude—or mercy either—there!

"Well, we must do our best," cried Hugh cheerily, "and leave the rest to Providence. After all, we shall have some fun—fancy taking part in an old-world fight between these Viking chaps, rigged out just as their ancestors were a thousand years ago, and in their sunny old galleys, too—a Viking sea-fight! Jupiter! I know some chaps at home who would give almost all they have in the world to have such an experience."

"That's true enough," rejoined Ruxton, laughing. "Yes, you're right—it will be a wonderful experience, and we are certain to get some fun out of it if nothing else."

And then their talk ceased, for they had reached the landing-place, where they saw a crowd of armed men scrambling on board their vessels. A few minutes later they found themselves on board the galley again, where they noticed several sails ready for hoisting, and sailors standing beside them waiting for the signal to start.

Looking out across the lake the friends were surprised to see that a great change had taken place. A stiff breeze had sprung up, and water, which had before been so placid, was now broken, and appeared to be momentarily becoming rougher.

There, in the extreme distance, a number of galleys could be seen coming on under both sails and oars. These were the vessels of the rival chief, Gerwulf, and they were advancing in three lines.

Meantime, amongst Osth's men, there was a good deal of confusion. They were getting their galleys out and hoisting their sails, in eager haste, the result being, in many cases, an illustration of the old proverb "the more haste the less speed."

However, though Osth seemed to have been taken by surprise to some extent—or he would not have been amusing himself with jousts and duels at the very time his enemies were sailing against him—he had evidently made all due preparation for an attack. After the first burst of excitement had passed things settled down, something like order was restored, and the vessels got under way.

The "Cedric," as the galley in which the strangers sailed was called, was one of the first to be put off. As a consequence, she had to lie off-and-on, in order to give others time to come into line, and this afforded the chums an opportunity of seeing how Rudlaff and his men managed their sails in the wind that was blowing.

"I think I could teach 'em a wrinkle or two," Ruxton commented, "if this is a specimen of their seamanship."

"I agree with you," laughed Hugh. "Here, again, I think one can see that they are a bit out of practice."

"But only as regards these old war-galleys, Hugh," Ruxton added. "Look over yonder at those smaller craft! They are being handled in really clever style."

Gradually, but far more quickly than had at one time seemed possible, the whole fleet ranged up in the same formation as that of their adversaries—in three lines—and then went forward, amid much shouting and singing of war-songs.

And now, once again, Hugh and Ruxton found themselves strangely influenced by the stirring strains of the melodies that were chanted forth in ringing, sonorous notes by the men around them.

They began to feel the same curious sensations as they had been conscious of the previous night, when they had first heard these songs. The blood was again sent surging and dancing through their veins as though they had drunk some fiery elixir, but now, the vague images and undefined longings which were awakening seemed to take definite form, and they knew the feeling for what it really was.

It was the lust of battle. The first beginnings of that old-world "berserker" rage, by which, if we are to believe the ancient records, the old-world Vikings were possessed when they went forth to battle. According to the old historians, it accounted, in many cases, for the unexpected victories which these sea-rovers so often gained over vastly superior numbers.

In each vessel was a "scald"—or, as we should call him, a minstrel—with a curious kind of harp, which would send forth the weirdest and most extraordinary sounds as his practised hand swept the strings. He led the singing, and the eerie music his instrument sent forth was reinforced by other instruments scarcely less weird. These joined in at intervals with great clashes that sounded discordant enough, judged by our ideas of music, and yet, had a wild, fantastic harmony of their own.

These "scalds" and their assistants exhibited great skill in their art. At first, the soldiers and crews of the vessels, who joined in with their deep, hoarse voices, sang on in what was for them a comparatively quiet manner. There was a dreamy, swinging rhythm that kept time with the rise and fall of the oars. After a while, it began to grow in volume and intensity; the time quickening again and again, and so it rose and fell till it at last swelled out into grand cadences such as no written description can possibly do justice to.

By the time the two fleets drew near to each other, the songs, so melodiously begun, had developed into fierce, frenzied outbursts that carried with them once again the scream of the gale and the tempest's roar, and told, as with a savage glee, of deadly strife and ferocious combat, of "battle, murder, and sudden death."

Hugh and Ruxton were both conscious of these things as they gazed at the men round them, listened to their singing, and noted the change in their appearance as they roared out the chorus—noted the sombre fire lighting up their flashing eyes, and the strained, eager look on their flushed faces.

And then, it was borne in upon the two friends that they were themselves falling under the influence of this "berserker" spell. Somehow—almost before they knew what they were doing—they found themselves joining their own voices to those of the singers.

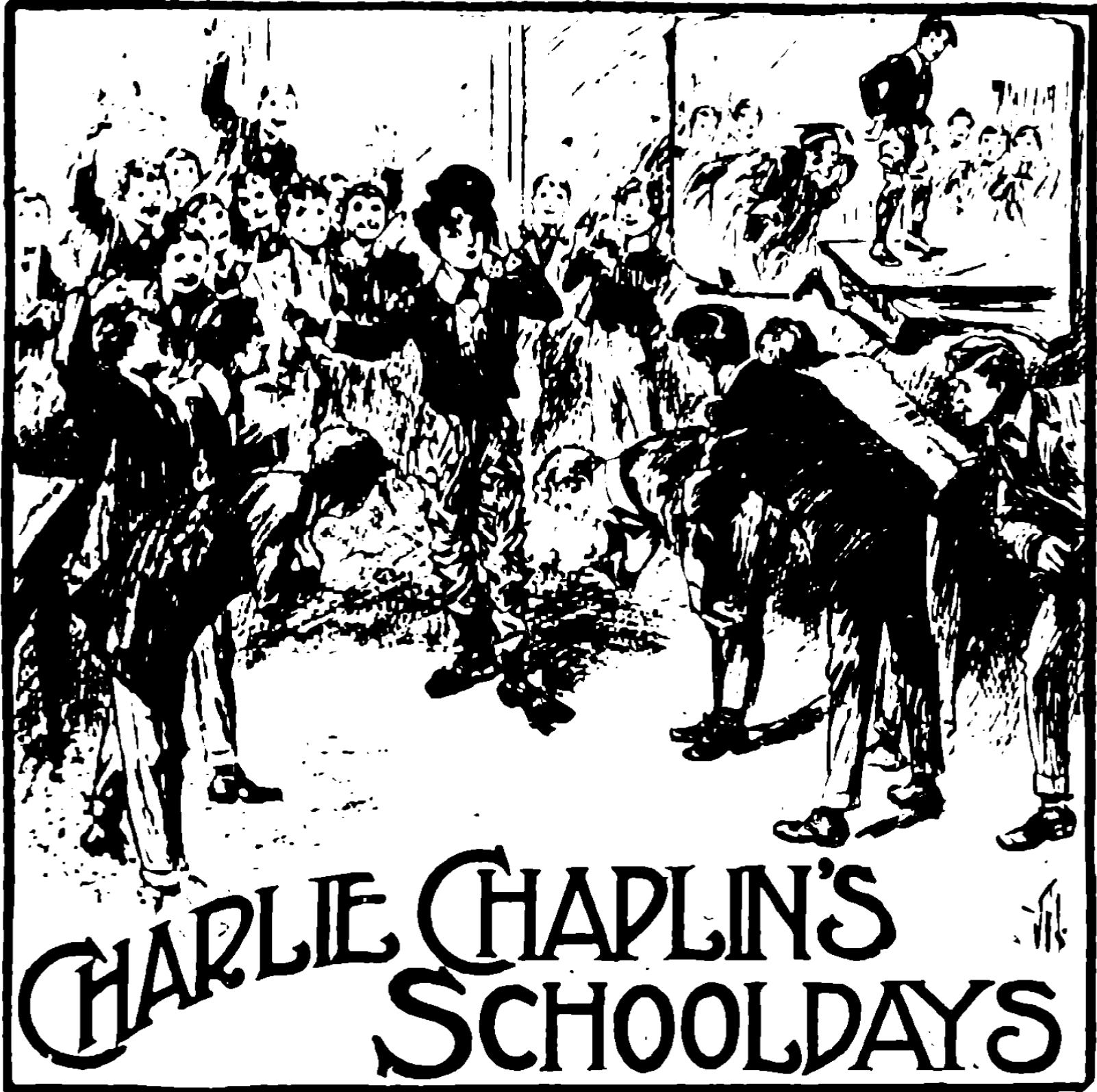
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