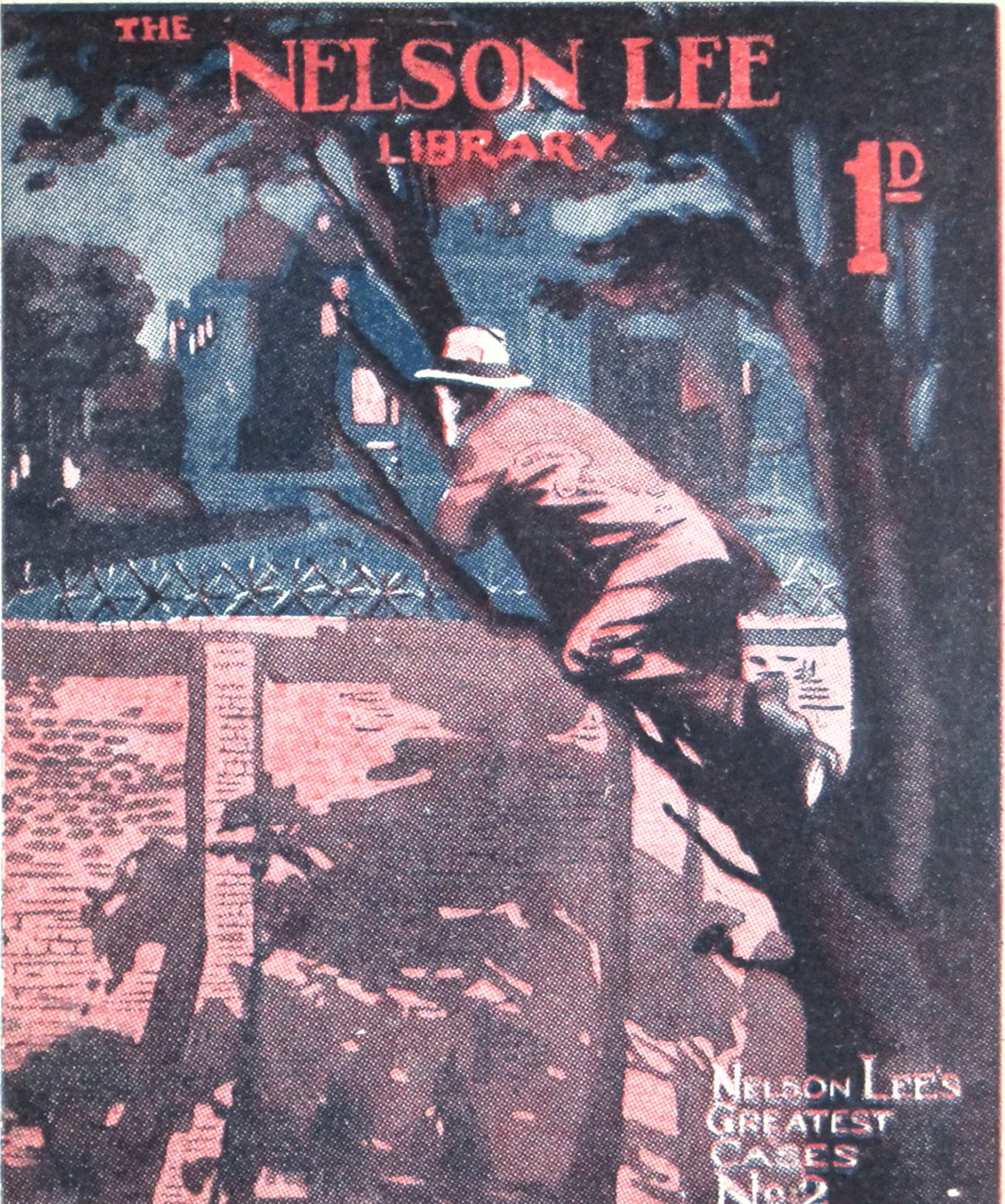


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GREATEST
CASES
No. 2.

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CLUE OF THE RAINCOAT.**

OR, THE HOUSE OF MADNESS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE BLACK WOLF, YVONNE ETC ETC.

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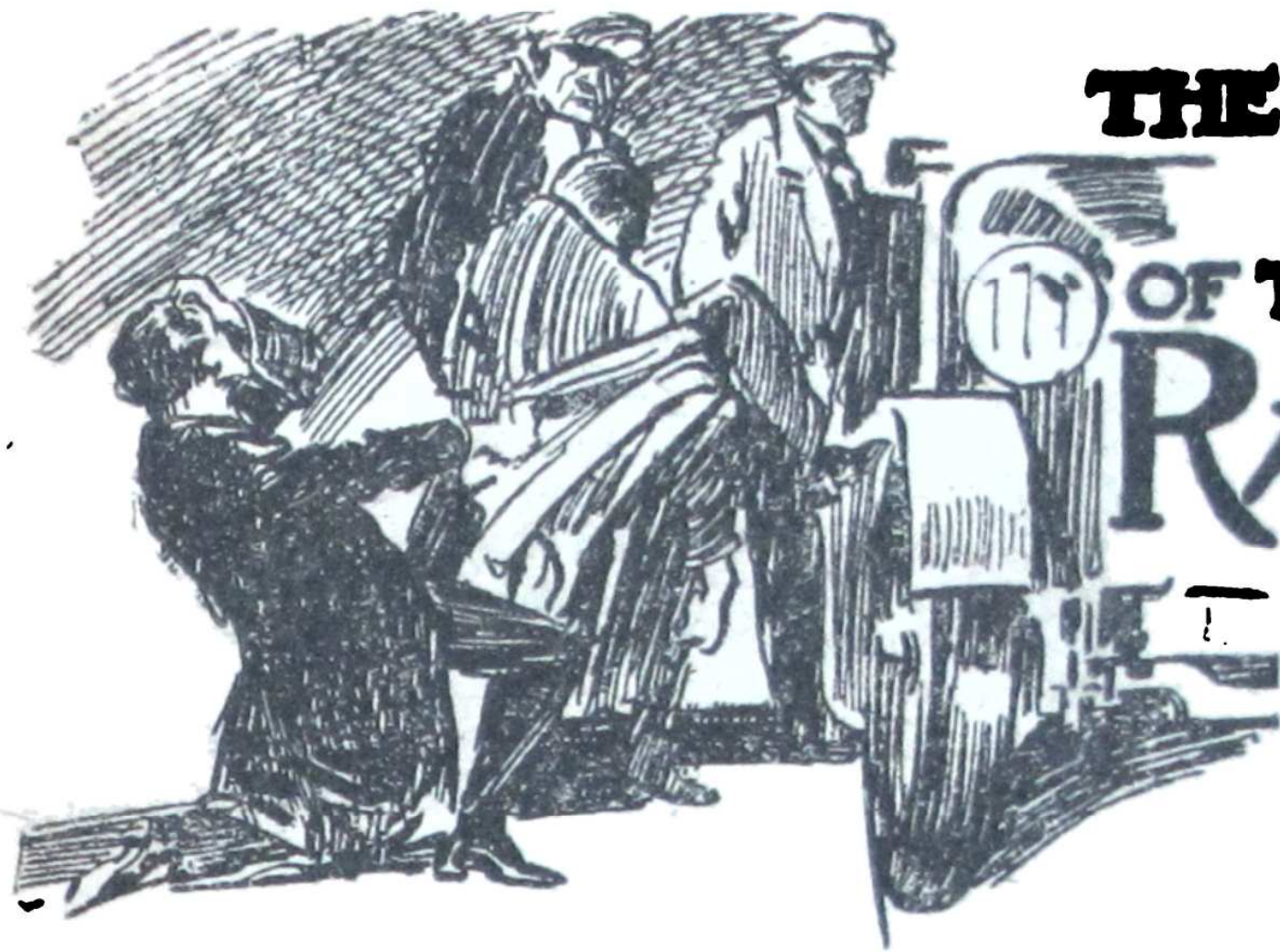
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THE CLUE OF THE RAINCOAT

NELSON LEE'S
GREATEST CASES.

No. 2.

A Tale of NELSON LEE in New York, and of Dr. MORTIMER CRANE, The Man with Four Identities.

By the Author of "Yvonne," "The Black Wolf," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Mr. Nelson Lee Stumbles upon a Queer Scene, and Incidentally a Mystery.

MR. NELSON LEE strolled out of the dining-room of the magnificent Hotel Belmont, and made his way leisurely along to the cigar-counter. He had dined with the easy conscience of a man who has worked hard and achieved something during the day, and now, like all wise men, he had determined on a little relaxation in the evening.

New York was particularly gay at the moment. The share market in Wall Street had been going through a tremendous boom. The whole list had climbed to prices unheard of before. Steel Common led the list with a figure very close to a hundred, and Coppers came next. Industrials, too, had felt the general buoyancy of the market, and, with excellent crop reports coming in from the West, the bull market was making a record for itself.

The immediate effect of such prices was to be seen, as is always the case, in the Tenderloin, where the hundred or so theatres are congregated, and where the famous lobster palaces and cabarets of New York are scattered. Broadway was a blaze of light. From Forty-seventh Street down past Times Square and along to Twenty-third Street, there was concentrated a mass of lights and flaring sky signs, the like of which no other city in the world could show.

Over the Times Square building, and so high that it seemed to be high in the night sky itself, was the famous flashing sign, which could be seen from far over the city. Then the well-known Motor Tyre sign gave it a close second, while the famous Dutch Cleanser flare flashed out regularly the quaint figure which is its trade-mark.

Luxurious motors, limousines, and touring cars, silent electrics, taxis,

'buses, street cars, and the whole conglomeration of traffic purred, or hummed, or hooted, or banged along the great thoroughfare, as was the peculiarity of each.

From the vehicles, from the side streets, from the great roaring Elevated overhead, and from the entrances to the subways, there was vomited forth a continual stream of people—some who had come to spend, as only the Tenderloin demands, and some to watch the procession of wealth and beauty and joy and sorrow which the district draws to it like some great magnet.

Along the street the crowds jostled and pushed, and one could hear the tongue of every country in the world—the harsh, throaty gutturals of the atrocious Teuton, the smooth, liquid accents of the Latin races, the weird and strange tongues of the Slav races, the reserved accent of the Briton, the gesticulated conversation of the Latin-American, the brogue of the Irish, the broad note of the Scotch, the nasal twang of the New Englander, the soft drawl of the Southerner, the attractive slur of the Westerner, the individual pitch of the Canadian, and, above all, the metallic, dominating accent of the New Yorker proper.

It was a grand march of the nations, a grand march not limited to any one class, but composed of all the component parts which spell that one word—"country." And into this stream, with so many eddies and side-currents, with so many flashing spots upon its surface and so many shadowy pools along it, Nelson Lee was to cast himself that evening.

Back in the beautiful marble-pillared lobby of the Hotel Belmont he purchased half a dozen cigars with the fragrance of Havana and Porto Rico in them, and after accepting a light from the pretty girl who served him, he placed the other five cigars in his case.

That done, he signalled to a bell-boy to get his coat, explaining which one he desired, for he was in full evening dress. The boy returned, bearing a black silk-lined Chesterfield coat, which was not too light and not too heavy for early autumn. Slipping into it, Lee took from the lad the opera hat which he had also brought, and, tossing him a quarter of a dollar, made his way towards the street.

He stood for a moment on the broad steps which lead out into Forty-second Street, waved aside the offer of the commissionaire to whistle up a taxi, then, puffing slowly at his cigar, he descended the steps and started towards Broadway. From the Belmont across to the Grand Central Station there was a crush of cabs, and across the street, before the Manhattan Hotel, there was another long line waiting. Lee, however, chose to walk.

He made his way leisurely towards Fifth Avenue, crossed it, and continued on until he came to the Knickerbocker corner, and plunged into the stream on Broadway. He was just a little undecided what he should do.

He had come to New York on private business—business connected with the directors' meeting of an American company in which he had become rather heavily interested. He had been at the offices of this company all day, but now was free, for his business was finished to his satisfaction, and he had a little over a day to wait before the ship he had chosen to sail by would leave for England.

Here and there a wide, flaring sign announced some new musical comedy or play in which a well-known star was to be seen, but Lee negatived the idea of a play on such a night. He felt too strongly the desire simply to let himself drift with the colossal tide of humanity about him.

It was amusing just to loiter along, listening to the catches of conversation which reached him out of the general roar.

"A tip worth while," he heard. "I wasn't going to take it—thought

the market had gone as high as it could, but, believe me, Steve, I was the little wise guy all right. Sold out to-day, and cleaned up thirty-five thousand. Some little boy for the Street, eh?"

And then from another source:

"They say old Angus P. is in deep, and that his crowd is bulling Amalgamated Tin for all they are worth. Got it as a dead cinch, so take my advice and load up. It's bound to——"

And again:

"Let's try the Grape Vine to-night. They say it is one of the best cabarets in town. No, it's useless, the highway robber who holds the cord at the door won't let you past unless to tip him a five-spot, and you can't get out under fifty. Let's go to Lupano's instead."

And from two girls, obviously typists or clerks in one of the big stores, he heard:

"Well, Jen, as I was sayin', I call it the limit. He got my goat all right, but I betcha I fix him yet. To think that he should promise to meet me and then never turn up—oh! he may think he's the little smart kid from Smartville, but Mamie G. knows how to ring in the fares on him, and you just watch the kid go to it when she starts. Why, say, kid, if I was to tell yu——"

Lee smiled whimsically as he heard the snatches of talk about him. It was so typical of the place and the mixture. It was the whisper of the city night, each chip in the stream endowed with a voice, and each voice emitting the things nearest the heart of the owner. Some of it was boastful, some happy, some elated, some bitter, some sorrowful, some angry, some tearful.

Almost before he knew it, Lee found himself at Twenty-ninth Street, by the towering Breslin Hotel. The crowd here had thinned a little, for it is up by Herald and Times Squares that the biggest crush is to be seen. Almost unconsciously Lee crossed Broadway, and instead of retracing his steps on the other side, kept on past the old Bal Tabarin—at its best but a sordid copy of the real Bal Tabarin of Paris.

The side street was quiet as compared with the brilliant way he had just left. There were a few shops lighted up, and at one end a brilliantly lighted restaurant blazed out; but, nevertheless, when he had passed under the Sixth Avenue elevated railway he found himself in quite another world—a world of shadow, a backwater of the greater stream beyond.

And there, although he did not then know it, Nelson Lee was to come upon Adventure and Mystery and Dire Peril. An elevated train had just thundered past, the roar shutting out all other sound for the time being. Then it was gone, the sound sinking beneath the symphony of the great city.

Just ahead of Lee was the corner of Seventh Avenue, and even, as he approached it, he saw a big touring car swing round into Twenty-ninth Street. The next moment the figure of a man sprang out into the road, with both hands uplifted.

Lee was a good thirty yards from the spot, and, while he could not hear what was said, he could see perfectly well. He saw the great car come to a sudden stop, and saw a man rise up from the tonneau.

The man who had run into the street paused beside the tonneau, and said something to the man who had risen. Lee saw the second man gesticulate for a moment, then the man in the street sprang towards the footboard of the car. The other touched the chauffeur on the shoulder, and as the car sprang forward with a lurch, Lee saw him drive his clenched fist square to the jaw of the man who had approached him.

The blow reached its mark, for the man reeled back, then a part of the car caught him, and the next instant he had been flung aside with a force which must have been terrific. Now a remarkable thing happened. The man in the car, who before had seemed so anxious to get away, suddenly signalled the chauffeur to stop, and, leaping out, ran back to the huddled heap in the middle of the road.

Lee quickened his steps, and was only a score of yards from the spot, when he saw the man whom he thought must have been knocked unconscious half rise and fight off the other, who appeared to be trying to lift him up. The struggle continued until the first man got the second under the arms and began dragging him towards the car.

"This is a queer business," muttered Lee, as he broke into a run. "I think it is about time I took a hand. Not a policeman in sight, and I never saw a more villainous assault than that."

The man who had been in the car turned with a snarl as Lee ran up, and, with but the slightest hesitation, dropped the other, and drove a hard right to Lee's jaw. But if he thought he was to have as easy a victory as before, he was mistaken. Lee dodged the blow, and sent in a hard left jab which shook the other through and through. As he rocked back on his heels, Lee grunted:

"I don't know what your game is, but you have injured this other man badly, and if he doesn't wish to go in the car he is not to do so, if I can prevent it."

"Is that so?" snarled the other, as he came on again.

He struck hard for the body, and Lee took almost the full force of the blow. He came back, though, with a straight left to the jaw, following with a half hook to the side of the head. They clinched and reeled back against the car, each one fighting for the mastery. Then, without the slightest warning, something struck Lee on the back of the head, and his arms dropped as he went down to his knees with swimming senses.

He had not taken the chauffeur into account, which had been a mistake. While he crouched there, fighting to drive away the mist which was swimming before him, he was vaguely aware that his antagonist and the chauffeur had turned and picked up the other man.

Even on the edge of unconsciousness, Lee held his determination to keep the other man out of the car if possible, and, to that end, he made a grasp at them as they went past. His hands encountered cloth, and he held on with all the strength he could muster.

He felt a sharp tug, followed by a brutal kick, then, still gripping what he had clutched, he fell forward unconscious.

When Lee came to, he found himself in a strange position. He was lying on the edge of the kerb, and a small knot of persons was gathered round him.

A big New York Irish policeman was holding a glass of spirit to his lips, and the shirt-sleeved bartender, from a saloon near by, was standing over the constable, offering advice. Lee remembered almost instantly what had occurred, but he had no intention of telling all the details for the mere enlightenment of the crowd.

"Feel better now?" asked the constable, as he saw Lee's eyes open.

Lee nodded, and struggled into a sitting posture.

"I shall be all right in a few moments, thanks," he said. "Scott! That is strong brandy."

"You are from across the pond, aren't you?" went on the constable, as he noted Lee's accent.

"Yes. I shall explain, as far as I know, what happened, and how I came to be where you found me, as soon as I can speak privately."

"We can go into the saloon over the road," remarked the officer, as he assisted Lee to his feet. "Now, you rubbernecks, beat it!" he snarled at the crowd as only a New York policeman can snarl, and as the courteous London bobby rarely snarls. "Beat it, I say!" he went on, as some of the bolder spirits lingered, "unless you want your heads staved in."

And realising that it was no idle threat, the crowd "beat it" as he had commanded. Assisted by the policeman and the bartender, Lee managed to cross the road to the saloon, and by a side door was taken into a private room.

He sat down in a low chair, and, drawing out some money, ordered drinks. Then, when the bartender had gone to fill the order, he looked at the constable.

"I should like, if possible, to keep this quiet, officer," he said. "Will it be absolutely necessary for you to report it at your station?"

"Well, sir, I ought to. And, besides, I don't know what has happened. I don't know whether I ought to arrest you for something, or look for the guy that beat you up."

Lee smiled.

"I fancy you should look for the other man," he said. "And I fancy that will be a difficult job. But I will tell you about what happened."

Then Lee very briefly related what he had seen, and why he had taken a hand in what really did not concern him. When he finished, he drew out a ten dollar bill and slipped it into the constable's hand.

"There, officer," he said, "perhaps that will persuade you not to mention the affair. There are several reasons why I do not wish my name dragged in, and, besides, it is my intention to sail for England the day after to-morrow."

"That's all right, sir," replied the policeman. "I guess we can fix it all right so nothing will be said. And, by the way, don't forget to take this other coat of yours with you when you go."

"My other coat," exclaimed Lee quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Why, this raincoat that you had," explained the constable.

As he spoke, he lifted up a long fawn raincoat, which Lee had not noticed before. Lee was on the point of denying the ownership of the coat, when suddenly he checked himself, and stretched out his hand for it.

"Oh—er—of course," he said.

Nor did he mention that he had never seen the coat before that night, and that it must belong to the man who had been dragged into the car. He remembered dimly that, before he collapsed, he had been clutching cloth of some sort, and now he knew that the coat must have come away from the man as they dragged him into the tonneau.

At that moment the drinks arrived, and, after tossing off a small brandy, Lee rose, handing the bartender a dollar as he did so.

"I am much obliged to you, and to you, officer," he said, as he turned to go.

"I shall come with you, sir, and find a taxi," remarked the constable, remembering the tip Lee had given him. But Lee shook his head.

"Don't trouble. I shall find one in Broadway; and, besides, I should like to walk a little way."

Strangely enough, his opera hat had suffered scarcely at all when it had fallen from his head, and in the saloon he had brushed off the worst of the dirt on his garments. Nevertheless, he wanted to get back to the Belmont and freshen himself up.

He walked briskly along to Broadway, carrying the raincoat which the constable had given him, and at the Breslin corner found a taxi. It made the Belmont by Fifth Avenue, thus avoiding the traffic on Broadway, and a few minutes later Lee was once more in his own room.

"Now to see if the man's name happens to be inside the coat," he murmured, as he took the garment across to the centre table.

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery Deepens.

THE coat which Lee held in his hand was an ordinary long greenish-fawn raincoat, such as may be seen on seven out of ten men during inclement weather. It was of exceptionally good quality, however, and, from the cut of it, Lee opined it had been made to order, and not bought ready-made—a more uncommon thing in America than England, for in the States the ready-made clothing manufacturers flourish.

He opened it up, and glanced inside the collar to see if there might be a label. There was none, but inside the inner breast-pocket he came upon a small linen tab, which bore the name "Weber and Jones, Tailors, 58, Lafayette Street, Buffalo, N.Y.," and underneath, written in ink, "R. J. Mountjoy."

Therefore, it seemed that the man to whose assistance Lee had gone must be one "R. J. Mountjoy"—a name which was utterly unfamiliar to Lee. There was nothing inside the inner pocket, but, on searching the outer pockets Lee came upon several articles—to be exact, a white silk handkerchief, a pipe, a couple of broken cigarettes of a popular brand, the key of a hotel bedroom bearing the brass tag, with the name of the hotel and the number of the room on one side, while on the other was the familiar inscription:

"If this key should be taken away by mistake, please put a two-cent stamp upon it and drop into the nearest letter-box."

There was just one more thing—a letter. It was addressed to "R. J. Mountjoy, care of Mountjoy & Co., Buffalo," and the date on the Rochester stamp was one of two days before, while the posting office had been New York City, of the same date. Lee handled the letter for a few moments, then he murmured:

"As far as I can make out, Mr. R. J. Mountjoy, of Buffalo, is in a rather nasty position. It seems that he has come to New York within the last day or two, and to-night he was first knocked down, then dragged against his will into the car which did it.

"He didn't want to go, that is a certainty, and under the circumstances I think I am justified in finding out as much as I can about Mr. Mountjoy. Yes, I shall read the letter."

With those words, Lee drew out the folded sheets which the envelope contained, and, spreading them out, began to read. As he proceeded with his task he grew more and more engrossed, and when, finally, he finished the strange letter which it was his fate to read that night, he went back to the beginning, and started all over again. For this is how it ran:

"Enclosed you will find a luggage check for luggage left at the Grand Central Station, New York. You will, on receipt of this, proceed at once to New York, and go to the Breslin Hotel, at the corner of Broadway and Twenty-ninth Street. As soon as you have taken a room there, you will go

to the Grand Central Station and present the luggage check at the luggage office there.

“ In return you will receive a leather suit-case. It will be locked, but if you will look carefully along under the flap of the top cover, you will find a small space which has been specially made there. In this space you will find the key. Open the suit-case, and you will find that it contains a full outfit of garments suitable for a book agent to wear.

“ In addition, there will be found sample covers of a book, entitled, ‘ The Full History of the Negro Races of the World,’ with a quantity of written material which will post you regarding the book.

“ Next, you will come upon the uniform of a chauffeur, and in the pocket you will discover a licence made out in the name of Arthur Williams—the name you will bear as a chauffeur.

“ Next, there will be found the disguise of an elderly man. This will not be used by you, but you will be informed of its use later. Lastly, you will discover a wallet containing one thousand dollars in notes of small denomination.

“ These you will keep only for emergency. You will be supplied with other money after your arrival in New York.

“ Now note carefully what you have to do:

“ You will go to the Breslin and register there under the name of R. J. Mountjoy. As soon as you have arrived, you will, as ordered, get the suit-case from Grand Central Station. When you have opened it and examined the contents, you will drill yourself thoroughly in the part of a book agent, dressing in the garments provided for the purpose.

“ Make yourself letter-perfect, for you may be employed in that role for several days. You will, of course, keep the suit-case locked at all times when you are not in the room.

“ On Thursday morning at ten o'clock you will call at No. 258, West Fifty-eighth Street, and ask for Mr. Langley, when you will receive instructions as to what you are to do next. On no account fail to keep the appointment promptly, as much, very much, depends on everything going without a hitch.

“ Above all, say nothing to anyone—keep clear of strangers, and beware for your own safety. The enemy has a long arm, and is not afraid to strike.”

That was the composition of the extraordinary letter which Nelson Lee had found in the pocket of the raincoat. What did it all mean? What could it mean? Never in his life had he read a more extraordinary communication.

When he had started out from the Belmont that evening he had been seeking diversion, but he had never expected to be handed out such an adventure as this. Just to get the different points together, let us regard what he had found.

To begin with, he had seen a man leap into the street and hail a big touring car, which he had possibly been waiting for. A short colloquy had taken place between him and a man in the car, then the motor had leaped forward, and the man in the car had struck hard and sure.

Following that, the motor had drawn up, and the man who had been knocked away from it was now, for some reason or other, seized and dragged towards it. Then Nelson Lee had taken a hand in the game, but his efforts had come to an untimely end, due to a blow on the back of the head from a heavy wrench wielded by the chauffeur.

Next came his explanations to the policeman, and the sudden acquisition

of a coat he had never seen in his life before. The coat had enlightened him to one extent only—it had told him that all the chances were in favour of the owner—the man who had been knocked down and, later, abducted in the car—was one R. J. Mountjoy, of Buffalo, and that he had been in the city only a day or so at most, this being proven by the post-marks on the letter.

But there enlightenment ended, and Lee's puzzlement increased. Why should R. J. Mountjoy receive such a mysteriously worded letter—a letter which had a ring of imperiousness in it? Why should he come to New York and take a room at the Breslin? Why should he then go to the Grand Central Station and collect a suit-case which had been left there?

Actions simple enough in the ordinary course of events, but not when there was a letter such as that behind them! Then there was the strange conglomeration of articles which he was supposed to find in the suit-case—the outfit of a book agent's clothes, and sample book covers and literature; the uniform of a chauffeur, with licence made out in the name of Arthur Williams?

Was Mountjoy to use this name or his own when posing as a book agent? And look how carefully he was to make himself letter-perfect in the role of agent! Then the disguise of an elderly man, which was not for him, but for someone else.

Finally, the wallet containing a thousand dollars, which was only for emergencies. It was a most mysterious procedure which had brought Mr. Mountjoy to New York, and one fraught with great danger, as the letter had warned him. The affair in Twenty-ninth Street that night was proof enough of that.

Why had Mountjoy gone into the road to hail that car? And why had he been attacked? Who was the man Langley, whom he was ordered to call upon on Thursday morning at ten o'clock?

The address, Lee knew, was in one of the best residential parts of the city, and from the presence of that well-filled wallet, "for emergencies only," he knew that, whatever the business which had brought Mr. Mountjoy to New York, it had been no small affair. A thousand dollars—two hundred pounds—for emergencies only! Lee was deeply intrigued, and he made no bones about acknowledging as much to himself.

"It would be interesting to know when Mr. Mountjoy arrived in New York, and how he expects to keep that appointment to-morrow morning," he mused, as he stood by the table. "This is Wednesday evening, and the appointment is early to-morrow morning. Scott! I have an idea. I'll put it into effect!"

Laying the letter on the table, he strode to the small room 'phone on the wall, and, lifting the receiver, waited until the office exchange had answered him. Then he said:

"I want you to call the Breslin Hotel, please. I wish to speak to the clerk at the desk."

The clear voice of the operator assured him that he would be called as soon as the connection was made, so, rehangng the receiver, he lit a cigarette and paced about the room until the buzzer sounded. He took down the receiver once more, and, following the assurance that he was through, there followed a slight click, and after that a male voice demanding to know what was wanted.

"Are you the desk clerk at the Breslin?" asked Lee.

"Yes," came back the reply.

"Can you tell me if Mr. Mountjoy, of Buffalo, is staying there?"

"Hold the line and I'll see." A few moments, then: "Yes, he is staying here. Shall I connect you with his room?"

"No, don't bother, please; but I should like you to tell me what time he arrived if you can."

"Wait a moment." Another space of waiting, then: "Are you there? He arrived at six o'clock this evening. Will you leave any message for him?"

And on the spur of the moment Lee said:

"If he comes in, tell him that Mr. Langley called up, please. Good-bye!"

He hung up the receiver, and, strolling back to the table, once more picked up the letter.

"This thing has gripped me strongly," he muttered, toying with the paper. "Why Mountjoy's affairs should interest me, I don't know, unless it is that I should like to pay somebody back for the mauling I got this evening. He may be straight, or he may be a crook. I can't tell that. I wonder what has become of him?"

"Judging from the treatment he received in the space of a few minutes he is not likely to be used gently wherever he is. But I should like to know more about this business. I wonder if much notice was taken of him at the Breslin. It is hardly likely. If he only arrived this evening his personality would not be sufficiently stamped upon any of the staff for them to remember much about him.

"I caught only a fleeting glimpse of his features, but sufficient to show that he was clean-shaven, as I am. And he was about my height. I wonder if his coat would fit me?"

Lee slipped off his own silk-lined overcoat and tried on the raincoat. He gazed upon his reflection in the glass with amazement. The coat might have been made for him. Lee took it off again, and after standing for a few minutes in deep thought he suddenly began to move swiftly.

First, he laid aside his opera-hat, and, opening his hatbox, took out a soft grey. This he put on, turning the brim right down in front so that it shaded his eyes. Next he once more assumed the raincoat, buttoning it up closely and turning the collar up to hide his evening tie. That done, he thrust the letter in his pocket and sent the room key of the Breslin after it.

He moved with certainty now, as though he had a definite plan in view—and he had. Turning out the lights in his own luxurious room, he walked along the softly carpeted hall to the elevator, and was whisked down to the lobby. There he had the commissionaire get a taxi, and a few moments later he was riding towards the Breslin.

He descended at the Twenty-ninth Street entrance of that hotel, and, paying off his driver, walked boldly into the lobby. It was no time to be nervous. He had taken a bold step, and only a stiff upper lip would carry him through. At the wide semi-circular desk in the office he paused, and rapped on the desk with his key. A clerk appeared from behind a ground glass screen and glanced at him inquiringly.

"Any letters for R. J. Mountjoy?" asked Lee curtly.

"I'll see, sir," replied the clerk.

He fumbled about in the rack for a few seconds, then turned back to Lee with a slip of yellow paper in his hand.

"There are no letters, Mr. Mountjoy," he said: "but there was a 'phone message for you a few minutes ago. A Mr. Langley called you up."

"Ah!" said Lee casually, as he took the slip. "If he calls up again connect him with my room, will you?"

The clerk nodded, and turned away. He had never for a single moment suspected that the man before him was not Mountjoy. Breathing easier now that he had successfully passed the deliberate test he had set himself, Lee

walked across to the elevator and gave the operator the number of his room. He knew enough about the Breslin to know that it was ten storeys high, and that, beginning with the first floor, the numbers were of the hundreds for each floor—that is to say, the first floor began with Number 200, the second with Number 300, and so on.

The number on the tag of the key he had found in the coat was 320, so he knew that the room was on the third floor. Numbers in the one hundred were, of course, reserved for the ground floor.

He emerged at the third floor, and straight before him were two arrows painted on the wall, one pointing to the right, and having underneath Rooms 340 to 382, and the other pointing to the left with the information that in that direction lay Rooms 300 to 339.

Lee went to the left, and glancing at the numbers of the doors as he went along, found, on turning into a corridor on the right, that he came to the room he sought—320.

For a moment he paused before the door. Now came the really critical part of the test. Supposing that in some way R. J. Mountjoy had returned and was in his room? Suppose he had passed straight up without going to the desk?

But he could not do that, Lee reflected, for in the absence of his raincoat he would have no key and would have to apply at the desk for a duplicate. So with a steady hand Nelson Lee placed the key in the lock and turned.

The next moment the door was open, his hand had found the switch, and as a deep crimson light flooded the room he closed the door after him and stood looking about.

CHAPTER III.

What the Room Revealed—The Man at the Cabaret.

GRASP the full significance of this thing Nelson Lee had done!—Here he was in the city of New York, having come over on private business. His business finished, he had started out for an evening's enjoyment; and had stepped into one of the strangest adventures of his life—or, at least, so it was to prove.

From the very moment when he had taken a hand in the struggle in the street the thing had gripped him, and, to tell the truth, it was not improbable that the blow he himself had received had filled him with a grim desire to get his own back. But getting his own back was a very different matter than assuming another man's name and his coat along with it, to boldly enter that man's hotel and use his name over the desk, to take that man's key and enter his room.

Even Lee felt a something difficult to name as he stood there by the door surveying his surroundings. On a stand at the foot of the bed was a trunk with the cover thrown up. In great disarray were to be seen the belongings of Mr. R. J. Mountjoy—shirts and ties and linen and clothes thrown about the top of the open trunk with a fine disregard for neatness and creases. It was obvious that Mr. Mountjoy had dressed in a hurry.

On the dressing-table which stood between the two windows of the room, the green curtains of which had been closely drawn, was a very fine toilet set, proving that whoever Mr. Mountjoy might be he was at least a man of means, and the taste to spend his money as a gentleman should.

The set was quiet, but of the finest ebony, with, as Lee could see, the very softest of bristles in the brushes. The photograph of a young and pretty woman on one side of the dressing-table, with a companion photograph of a

child on the other side, gave a domestic touch to the scene which filled Lee with a strange feeling of guilt for thus entering another man's room.

But while his first survey of the room took in these details, he was searching all the time for the suit-case spoken of in the mysterious letter. And at last he saw it where it had been pushed under the bed. It took him something like twenty seconds to traverse the space between the door and the bed and to jerk out the suit-case.

It was a large sole-leather affair, of an expensive make, and almost new. It was locked, but with the instructions of the letter to go by it did not take him long to discover the key, where it had been placed in a cunningly concealed space under the flap of the cover, and about three inches to the right of the lock. One, not knowing the secret, would probably have never discovered it.

He inserted it in the lock, and then for a moment he paused. It was a moment full of anticipation and some little hesitation. Why he should take it upon himself to pry into a stranger's luggage it is hard to say. It was no idle curiosity in another's affairs. It was instinct more than anything else.

Nevertheless, it was a bold step, and it is only natural that Lee hesitated. But then he made his final decision; he crossed the rubicon of that affair, and with a steady hand he turned the key.

The nicked catch of the case flew up, and the next moment Lee was gazing at the contents of the case. At first glance it seemed to be packed with nothing but clothes, but then he remembered a line of the letter—"the complete outfit of a book agent."

He took out the top garment, which proved to be that once-popular-and-now-scarcely-to-be-seen-except-in-America article—a frock coat. It was of a grey shade and quite new.

Lee held it up, smiling faintly as he did so; then, laying it aside, he took up a flamboyant white waistcoat, and next a pair of grey trousers to match the coat. Beside the trousers was a wide-brimmed, grey Stetson hat, and with the full regalia on a man would be a typical American book agent or purveyor of fake medicines.

True to the inventory outlined in the letter, he next came to a full chauffeur's uniform—a blue tunic with plain brass buttons, blue breeches with black cord stripes, black leather puttees, black boots, and a blue cap. With them was a light grey duster.

After that he came upon a small cardboard box which, on being opened, revealed a neat black suit, such as an elderly man might wear, a false moustache and beard which was iron-grey in shade, neat boots with drab spats, a folded soft black hat, and drab gloves to match the spats.

It was then he saw a small pocket in the side of the case, and lifting the flap he took out a soft leather wallet. One glance only it needed to show a thick packet of banknotes inside it. There was not a thing missing. Everything that R. J. Mountjoy had been informed would be found in the case was there.

And if R. J. Mountjoy had not fallen into such an unexpected and painful dilemma, his next step would have been to call at West Fifty-eighth Street the following morning at ten o'clock. But as things looked now, it did not seem likely that he would be able to keep the appointment.

In that case the whole affair might fall to the ground; something long planned and perhaps of the very greatest importance might end in a fizzle. There might even be a great danger to life, someone might suffer acutely, or even perhaps a great scheme of crooks might come to nought unless—unless that appointment were kept.

Under a risk that Mr. Mountjoy might enter his room any moment and

find a stranger in possession, Nelson Lee sat down on the edge of the bed and, lighting a cigarette, gave himself up to thought. For the matter of a quarter of an hour or so he smoked in silence, then suddenly he tossed the end of his cigarette into the cold fireplace, and, bending down to repack the garments into the suit-case, he muttered:

"Hang it, I owe it to myself as well as Mountjoy to dig deeper into this mystery. The whole thing attracts me exceedingly. At least, I shall think it over still further before I decide to drop it, and simply report what I know to the police. To-morrow morning I shall decide what to do."

He closed and locked the suit-case, placing the key under the flap where he had found it, and kicking the case back under the bed. Then he made a careful examination of the open trunk. But, beyond the usual assortment of clothes which a man of some means and no little taste would carry with him, Lee found nothing which would throw any further light on the personality of Mr. R. J. Mountjoy.

A search of the different drawers in the room also gave a blank, but Lee did not desist until he had carried his examination into the white-tiled bathroom adjoining.

Now he returned to the bedroom, and, throwing off the raincoat, opened the door of a cupboard, where he found a couple of overcoats hanging. One was a silk-lined affair, not unlike his own, and fitted him as well as the raincoat had. He discovered, too, that the absent Mr. Mountjoy's opera hat was exactly his size, and thus, ready in his borrowed plumes, he switched off the light, opened the door, and stepped out into the hall.

Locking the door after him, he made his way to the lift, and was soon back in the lobby. He had nothing definite in view. Almost mechanically he had assumed some of Mountjoy's garments—almost mechanically he had decided to retain for the present that man's personality. What he wished, more than anything, was to think to try to fit in the strangely cut pieces of this mystery upon which he had stumbled.

If, by the morning, the absent Mountjoy should return, then Lee could but explain matters to him. After all, he had risked his own skin to help the other, and certainly that alone allowed him some little leeway.

He climbed into a taxi at the door, and told the man to drive to the Grape Vine Cabaret. Mountjoy or no Mountjoy, he did not intend that his evening should be quite barren of frivolity.

It was just at the hour when the theatres were pouring forth their crowds when he arrived in front of the Grape Vine, and the lobby of the cabaret was literally jammed with humanity. Across the entrance to the cabaret itself there had been stretched a thick silken rope, behind which stood two gorgeously uniformed flunkeys, while between them was a maitre d'hotel.

The waiting crowd was mobbing him, all trying to speak at once, some loudly demanding to pass, and giving their names and the numbers of the tables they had reserved as they did so; others, who had neglected to order a table in advance, begging and pleading and attempting to bribe their way in. It was pandemonium, and while every one of the crowd, both men and women, was in full evening dress, it was more like a bear garden than a gathering of supposedly cultured human beings.

The Grape Vine was the rage at the moment, and, like all New York establishments which hold the centre of the stage for a while, it was making hay while the sun shone—in other words, bleeding the public for all it would stand, and with a fine disregard of the past or the future.

Lee was about to turn back at the door, feeling that, since he had not reserved a table, it would be useless to hope to get in, and then, just as

he started to leave, he caught a full glance at the maitre d'hotel, who was granting or refusing permission to enter with the lordly air of a king handing out favours to his subjects.

And in him Lee recognised Daniel—Daniel whom he had known for years as the maitre d'hotel of Le Grand Vatel in Paris. Even as he saw Daniel the man saw Lee, and, after a moment's look of astonishment, he bowed and smiled, giving Lee a slight nod as he did so. Lee, remembering many fat tips in the past, changed his mind, and, elbowing his way through the crowd, finally managed to get to the barrier.

"I thought you were not coming, sir," said Daniel, as Lee came up, "but I have reserved your table for you." Then in a lower tone he said: "I am very pleased indeed to see you, Mr. Lee. I shall give you a small table to yourself. Have you been in Paris lately?"

Lee nodded and smiled.

"I was there about a fortnight ago, Daniel. Come to my table later, and I will tell you how it looked."

"Step under the rope, Mr. Lee," went on the man. "This crew is enough to drive one mad. It is not like Paris."

Here he beckoned to an underling, and a moment later Lee found himself one of the favoured ones admitted to the cabaret, which was a mass of green and white on this particular night.

Evidently Daniel had told the waiter to look after Lee with care, for the man took his hat and coat with great deference, and conducted him past several tables, until he came to a small one almost hidden from the rest of the room by a heavy bower of green and white.

Lee sank into a chair, and ordered wine—that was always essential in the cabaret—then, lighting a cigarette, he leaned back and surveyed his surroundings. A year before the Grape Vine had been a very mediocre sort of place—the rendezvous of an undesirable class altogether. That was before the cabaret boom came to New York.

The proprietor, a shrewd man of business, immediately changed the name to that of the Grape Vine, had it redecorated and a mass of brilliant lights put in, erected a small stage at one end and a fountain in the middle of the main room, while at the same time he discouraged the type of customer who used to come there—discouraged them by raising the prices to a limit they could not reach.

Then he hired some singers and dancers, and at last the tide turned. Society of a sort came to see, and, seeing, stayed. A certain clique made it fashionable, and now the Grape Vine was not a grape vine, but a gold mine.

New York rushed it, and New York grumbled when it couldn't get in. In a few weeks or months the tide would probably turn again, but while he could get the real thing the proprietor pulled in the shekels, and, even after the real thing went elsewhere, a certain element would continue to come, not knowing that the real thing was gone.

Lee ordered a few sandwiches to eat while he sipped his wine, and, peering out between the heavy bank of green and white which almost concealed him from the view of the room, he listened while a very much beplanned lady in an abbreviated costume sang "At the Devil's Ball," accompanied by the orchestra.

When she had retired from the scene the orchestra struck up a fox trot, and the crowd rose en masse to do it justice. Lee smiled to himself as he watched elderly fat men with bald heads lumbering around in that undignified dance—a dance meant only for young people, and on more than one occasion he almost laughed outright.

Wine was in every place. If a customer thought to patronise the Grape Vine and not buy wine he was very soon enlightened on the point, and one bottle allowed him to lounge at his table a certain time and no longer.

The wine was not chilled enough, and the food was rotten; but that made no difference—it was the thing to go to the Grape Vine, and that was sufficient for most of them there. New York had to spend its share winnings some way, and that was the way it chose to do so.

About half an hour after he had sat down, Lee saw Daniel coming towards him. The crowd was just then beginning to throw little celluloid balls about, and from table to table went spinning long strings of coloured confetti. Lee got bombarded from more than one table, and, beckoning the waiter, he had him bring a supply of ammunition, which he delivered back with gusto.

He was still bombarding a party at an adjoining table, when suddenly, far down the room, he saw two men come in, ducking as they were met with a shower of confetti. Lee dropped into his seat quickly, and looked again.

And well he might, for he was as certain as he was that he lived, that not only had he seen one of those men that very evening, but that he knew the other. At the same moment Daniel reached his table.

"Daniel," said Lee swiftly and in a low tone, "tell me who those two men are if you can—the two just passing the end of the stage. They are going to that corner table."

Daniel turned obediently, and gazed in the direction Lee had indicated.

"Those two, Mr. Lee," he said, turning round. "They are both regular customers here. One is Dr. Malcolm Craddock, and the other is his friend—a Mr. Rufus Halsey."

Lee nodded thoughtfully, then he murmured to himself:

"Dr. Malcolm Craddock he calls himself, does he?—he has kept the initials, if not the name of Dr. Mortimer Crane. And the other is a Mr. Rufus Halsey—and he is none other than the man whom I saw in the tonneau of the car in Twenty-ninth Street this evening—the man who battered R. J. Mountjoy, and finally carried him off." Then aloud he said: "And who is Mr. Rufus Halsey, Daniel, do you know?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee. He is a member of a well-known New York family. I have known him for years. He used to come to Le Grand Vatel in Paris even as you came. He lives here at the Van Courtlandt bachelor apartments on Riverside Drive."

"I know them," said Lee slowly. "How about the other—Dr. Malcolm Craddock? Do you also know him?"

"I don't know much about him, sir. He is always with Mr. Halsey, but where he lives I can't say."

"Thank you, Daniel," remarked Lee; "and now tell me about yourself, and how you happened to come over to New York."

So he listened to what the maitre d'hotel had to say, the while he watched that table in the corner, and listened to the orchestra, until at last the waiter departed, and he saw the two men he had been watching pay their score and leave.

Lee did not make any attempt to follow them. He had found out where one at least could be located in case of need, and he was not yet sure that he wanted to know more. Yet before morning the very fact that Dr. Mortimer Crane, alias Dr. Malcolm Craddock, was a friend of the man who had knocked down Mountjoy, was to cause him to decide to dig into the mystery.

Nor could he even attempt to do so, unless it be that he posed as Mountjoy.

CHAPTER IV.

Lee Takes the Plunge—A Curious Interview—The Book Agent.

NELSON LEE awoke the next morning in strange surroundings. It had been well into the small hours of the morning before he left the Grape Vine, and when he had, it was with his mind made up to follow up the strange mystery upon which he had stumbled.

With Rufus Halsey a friend of Dr. Mortimer Crane, and with Crane passing under an alias, Lee was inclined to think that whatever strange game Mountjoy might be playing, Halsey at least was a crook. He had gone to the Breslin, and coolly occupied Mountjoy's room there. The real Mountjoy did not turn up, and no one questioned Lee's identity.

The truth of the matter was that Mountjoy had been in the hotel for too short a time for his personality to have become stamped on the minds of any of the staff. In the morning Lee sent a telegram to Buffalo to a detective there, who on occasion had acted as his correspondent. In this message he asked for full particulars of one R. J. Mountjoy, of R. J. Mountjoy & Co., of Buffalo.

Then he leisurely breakfasted in the grill-room of the Breslin, and afterwards taxied to the Belmont. He had donned a suit of the absent Mountjoy's—a double-breasted blue serge lounge suit, which fitted him perfectly. He had told the detective in Buffalo to wire his reply to the Belmont, and while he read the letters which had arrived that morning the answer came. It read as follows:

“Man inquired about is head of private firm of investigators whose business is solely with the wealthiest and most influential families of America. He is not at present in Buffalo. (Signed) TAYLOR.”

Lee tore the telegram into strips and dropped the pieces into a wastebasket.

“A private investigator, is he?” he muttered. “Well, that proves at least he is not a crook. It also seems that if his business in New York had anything to do with Dr. Mortimer Crane, that it has been brought to a sudden end. Since I have fallen upon the affair in such a way, it is—yes, I am sure it is my duty to carry on for him.

“If he is bucking Crane, then I certainly should like a hand in that game. At any rate, I shall cancel my passage for to-morrow and cable Nipper that I am sailing by a different boat. And then I think I shall call on Mr. Langley at West Fifty-eighth Street. Let me see, the hour was ten o'clock. There is no time to lose.”

Lee began to move then. First he wrote out a cable to Nipper in London and had it despatched, then he requested the clerk at the Belmont to cancel the passage he had booked for the next day, and after that he wrote one or two letters. Then he taxied to the Breslin, where he was already known to more than one of the staff as Mr. Mountjoy, and, ascending to Mountjoy's room, searched about in the latter's trunk until he came to a small packet of cards bearing Mountjoy's name.

Thrusting a few of these into his pocket, he descended to the lobby once more, and, entering a taxi, told the man to drive to West Fifty-eighth Street. He had the cab draw up at the number there, and, paying him off, walked up the steps leading to a fine old house. He smiled grimly as he thought of what his reception there might be.

Supposing this Mr. Langley knew Mountjoy personally? Supposing he should denounce Lee as an impostor? And if the words of the letter he had read could be depended on, then it was certain that Langley would be very

cautious. Still, he revealed no outward signs of the trepidation which filled him as the door swung open and a mournful-faced footman regarded him owlishly.

"Does Mr. Langley reside here?" asked Lee curtly.

"He does," replied the footman.

"Will you kindly give him this card, and tell him I should like to see him?"

The footman took the card and read the name upon it. Then he opened the door wide.

"Will you step in, sir? Mr. Langley is expecting you. He is waiting in the library."

Lee entered the house, and, handing his hat and coat to the footman, followed him down a dim, beautifully furnished hall to a door at the far end. There the footman knocked, and, in answer to a low voice, opened the door.

"Mr. Mountjoy, sir," Lee heard him say; then the footman stood aside, and the next moment Lee was in the room.

If he had given any conjecture to the sort of a man the mysterious Mr. Langley was, they were indeed far removed from the actuality. One glance at the man who sat in a deep leather armchair before a small fire—for though early autumn there was a chill in the air—and he knew that whoever and whatever Mr. Langley might be he was not a crook.

A fine, thin, ascetic face, with deep-set grey eyes and hair of silvery white, was what he saw—a face clean-shaven and with features full of character. His figure was long and lean, but symmetrical, and his clothes were those of good taste. Everything about the house and the man proclaimed the fact that he was a man of wealth, and though he did not rise to greet Lee he smiled at him in kindly fashion and held out his left hand.

"You will pardon me not rising, Mr. Mountjoy," he said, in a soft, cultured voice; "but I am a sufferer from the gout."

Lee bowed, and grasped the hand which the other held out. Then he seated himself opposite his host, and accepted the cigarette-case which the latter handed across.

"When did you reach the city?" continued Langley. "Last evening?"

Lee nodded.

"I reached the Breslin last evening," he replied, which was the exact truth.

"That was what I thought. You found the suit-case all right?"

"It was just as the letter said it would be."

"Then you consider, Mr. Mountjoy, that you are capable of carrying out what must be done? Remember, it will be a dangerous business at best. I was afraid you might have received some attention already from the enemy. You know it is always possible that they suspect."

Lee would have given something to know who the enemy was and what it was they might suspect, but he dared not ask any questions. He could only bow in acquiescence.

"You have read over your instructions carefully?" pursued Langley.

"Yes; I have given them the closest attention, and I have come here for further instructions which you said I should get."

"Quite right. I have them all ready for you. I shall give them to you in a few moments. But I wish to impress upon you, Mr. Mountjoy, how serious this affair is. It is very near my heart, and while the world says one thing I think and know another. Therefore, I do not bow to the law in this. We must—we simply must succeed in our efforts.

"Once that is done, then we can—— But that is for the future. I am trusting much to you, Mr. Mountjoy, when I give you this commission.

and I am glad that you are taking hold of the matter yourself. It is not a case for an underling. I have spent weeks in planning out the whole thing. I cannot see a hitch in it if orders are followed absolutely.

"There will, of course, be times when you must use your own initiative, and that is why I sent for you and no one else. Remember that you must not communicate with me at all. When the right moment comes you will be informed, and then the next act will take place.

"I keep the full details from even you, but you shall know them in good time. I think that is all, except to mention the matter of your expenses. In the packet which I shall hand you this morning you will find sufficient for the present.

"If you should run short you have the emergency fund which was placed in the suit-case, and before you will need all that I shall have communicated with you again. And now, Mr. Mountjoy, there remains but one other thing before you leave. It is to tell you that when I shall approach you it may be when you least expect it.

"I cannot yet say whether the medium will be through a man or woman. I can only tell you that when you are approached there will be made use of in some way a code word. That code word you will find written on a slip of paper in the packet you will receive this morning. As soon as you have memorised it I want you to destroy it. Do you understand?"

Lee bowed. From start to finish he could grasp scarcely anything of what the other meant. To play the part of Mountjoy had led him more deeply into the mystery instead of clearing up any part of it. He only knew that he was to receive still further instructions, with more money for expenses, and a mysterious code word which was to be used on occasion.

Where these new instructions might send him, what they might entail, he had not the faintest idea, nor dared he ask. For one fleeting moment he considered the idea of telling Langley the whole truth of the matter, but on reflection he decided not to. There was Mountjoy to consider, and out of professional consideration Lee would not reveal what had happened so soon after the other's arrival in the city.

If he could carry through successfully what Mountjoy was supposed to carry through, if he could bring things to the necessary climax and in the meantime find Mountjoy, he could then explain to him what he had done, and no one need be the wiser. Besides, he was keen to know why Mountjoy had not reappeared, and to know, too, where he had been taken.

He had an idea that Dr. Mortimer Crane or Rufus Halsey could answer that question if they wished. But if Mountjoy had fallen into their clutches, if they were the enemy whom Langley feared, then Mountjoy might well be in a tight place, for Lee knew only too well that Dr. Mortimer Crane would stop at little.

Therefore, he said nothing, and when Langley asked him to be good enough to go to the desk, open the top drawer on the right-hand side, and take out the envelope he would find there, Lee obeyed. It was a long, thick envelope of a blue shade, and bore on it the name, "R. J. Mountjoy."

"That is the packet of which I spoke, Mr. Mountjoy," said Langley. "You will find full instructions there. And now let me wish you every success. Remember, the successful conclusion of this matter means peace to an old man. Failure means—— I dare not say!"

Lee thrust the envelope inside his coat pocket and bowed.

"Mr. Langley," he said earnestly, "you can depend on my doing my very best."

"I am sure of that, Mr. Mountjoy," said the other—"I am sure of it."

And somehow I feel that you will succeed. You inspire me with hope, Mr. Mountjoy."

Lee bowed again; then, once more grasping Langley's hand, he said a brief good-bye and started for the door. The footman appeared in the hall as he opened the door, and a few minutes later Lee found himself once more in the street.

In a very thoughtful mood he walked along until he came to Broadway, and there he took a taxi down to the Belmont. In his own room there he opened the packet which he had received, and drew out the contents. The first thing was a folded sheet of typewritten paper which for the moment he laid aside.

Next came a thick bundle of banknotes which, on counting, he found to amount to a thousand dollars exactly. These he placed in his own wallet. Lastly he drew out a folded slip of paper, and, opening it up, he saw that a single word had been written upon it—"Northern." That was the code word.

True to his promise, Lee tore the slip into shreds, and then, lighting a match, touched the flame to the paper. Just before the fire reached his fingers he dropped the blazing mass into the cold grate and watched the last vestige of white yield to the flame.

When it was only a charred confusion he placed his foot upon it, then picking up the letter he set himself to see what further instructions he had received. It was without beginning, and went straight to the point. This is what he read:

"You will proceed by the afternoon train which leaves Grand Central Station at two-thirty in the afternoon to Pineville, Connecticut. You will leave the train at Pineville, and take up your quarters at the Pineville Inn. Before leaving New York you will attire yourself in the garments of the book agent which have been provided, and once in Pineville you will begin to make a thorough canvass of the village.

"It is of the utmost importance that you play the role of book agent without rousing suspicion. Any orders you may receive you will forward to Messrs. Jones and Decmer, the publishers of the book which you will sell. The orders will be filled and forwarded. All arrangements have been made in that direction. The name under which you will pass will be Henry J. Ferguson.

"You will follow these instructions until you receive further orders. During your work as a book agent in Pineville you will notice a large estate about a mile from the village. This you will examine whenever possible. You will also hear by local gossip that it is a private asylum, and that it is run by one Dr. Malcolm Craddock.

"It is unlikely that you will be permitted to offer your books for sale there, but the work will give you a plausible excuse for remaining in the village, and your own ingenuity must find out how to discover as much as possible about the place referred to. The chief points to bear in mind are these:

"Discover, if possible, how many patients are at present in the asylum. Find out the number of servants and attendants kept. Get a thorough idea of the arrangement of the grounds and house. Discover all the local gossip about the man and the place.

"Get the names of any patients you can, and then, if possible, find out in what part of the building any of them are kept. Be on hand whenever the patients are given outdoor exercise, and note carefully each one you see. Particularly notice if there is one male patient—a young man of

florid countenance and with close-cropped red hair. He will be of medium height and of slim figure. If you make any written notes about what you discover, be sure to keep them where they will not be found. Finally, destroy these instructions after you have memorised them."

That was all—a curt, yet comprehensive communication; and when he had thoroughly mastered the contents, Nelson Lee destroyed it, as he had destroyed the paper on which the code word was written. There was one thing more than another which gave him thought—that was the fact that the name of Dr. Malcolm Craddock was mentioned in the "instructions."

It was enough to prove that he had made no mistake when he thought the man Rufus Halsey to be the same whom he had seen strike down Mountjoy, and he knew, if Langley did not know, that Dr. Malcolm Craddock was none other than Dr. Mortimer Crane, the one time Harley Street Brain and Nerve Specialist, and the man with four identities—the man who had prostituted his great talent in order to lead a life of crime.

What his present game might be Lee could not guess, but if he were connected with this private asylum to which Langley referred, then he was well fitted for the job. Nor could Lee guess what part Rufus Halsey might play in the affair. It was all a deep mystery to him, and the conversation with Langley had deepened it, if anything.

Yet it did not cause Lee to falter in his determination to see it through. He was in the game now for good or bad, and he smiled grimly as he thought how the sum of two thousand dollars had come into his possession. There was certainly no lack of expense money.

At any rate, now that he had a fair indication that Dr. Mortimer Crane and Rufus Halsey were the enemy to whom Langley had referred, he knew that by following the instructions he had received he stood as good a chance of locating the unfortunate Mountjoy as in any other way.

Halsey and Crane must know where he was, and, if they did, Lee was determined to wring the information from them at any cost. Yet there was something droll in his going off to a little Connecticut village dressed as an American book agent, and attempting to sell a book he had never even heard of before—a book on the history of the negro races in a northern state!

Yet he reflected that, in the north at least, such a book would be far more welcome than to the whites of the southern states. The north had always been prone to get its information about the negro from books—the southerner got his at first hand.

He informed the clerk at the Belmont that he might be absent for some days, but that he would keep his room on; then, packing a few personal belongings into a small bag, he took a taxi to the Breslin.

There he wrote a letter to R. J. Mountjoy, in case the latter should return to the Breslin. Now that Lee was known to the staff there as Mountjoy, the real Mountjoy stood in the position where he might be accused of being guilty of misrepresentation, should he present himself at the desk and demand the key of his room.

Lee wished to save him that trouble, and also to put him wise to what had occurred. Therefore it took several pages to explain what had happened, and why he had taken on the case.

When he had written a letter which he thought fitted the case, he sealed it and addressed it simply "Mr. Mountjoy." That done, he packed the famous suit-case and closed the trunk.

A bell boy took the suit-case and his own bag down for him, and, stopping at the office, Lee handed over the key of his room, forty dollars in notes, and the letter he had written.

"I am going away this afternoon," he said to the clerk. "I may be gone only a day or so, or it may be several days. I shall leave forty dollars against the charges on my room, as I wish to keep it on. That will be sufficient to cover the expense until I return. Now there may be a man come in and give his name as Mountjoy. It will be a brother of mine."

He did not add that he meant a brother professional of his.

"You might give him this letter if he does, and, since it is a matter of the utmost importance, I wish you would tell the different clerks who relieve you to watch out for him. Will you attend to this for me?"

"I shall—you can depend on me, Mr. Mountjoy," replied the clerk, as Lee slipped him a five dollar bill.

Lee lunched in the grill-room, then after he had taken coffee in the lounge he lit a cigar and called to the bell boy who had brought his luggage down.

He entered a taxi, and, after tipping the boy and the commissionaire, told the driver to go to the Grand Central Station. But once out of earshot of the commissionaire, he leaned out of the window and said:

"I want you to drive to a quiet hotel near the station first. What can you suggest?"

"How would the Grand Union do, sir?" asked the chauffeur.

"That is rather large and busy, but perhaps it will do for my purpose," said Lee. "Yes, drive there."

He descended in front of the Grand Union, which stands just across from the Belmont. He paid off the driver there, and surrendered his bags to a boy. In the office he approached the desk, and asked for a room for an hour or so.

"You can have one," said the clerk, "but you will have to pay the rate for a full day, and that in advance."

"That will do all right," replied Lee. "How much?"

"Three dollars."

Lee took out his wallet, and peeled off three one dollar bills, which he handed across. He received in turn a receipt and a key.

The boy who held his luggage conducted him by way of the lift to the third floor, and then along a maze of passages to a small and somewhat dingy room.

Lee gave the boy a quarter of a dollar, and closed and locked the door. Then he proceeded to remove the clothes he was wearing, and to put on the book agent's paraphernalia. First came the grey trousers, followed by the expansive white waistcoat, and then the grey frock coat, or Prince Albert, as it would be called there.

Topping that with the wide-brimmed soft grey hat, the same having a pearl grey band about it, Lee stood erect, and regarded himself in the glass. It certainly made a marvellous change in his looks—more than he would have thought possible with no alteration of his facial appearance. But there he deviated from the strict letter of the instructions.

While Dr. Malcolm Craddock might not know R. J. Mountjoy, he—or at least, Dr. Mortimer Crane—did know Nelson Lee. Therefore Lee took from his own private bag a small black pouch, from which he drew several articles of disguise.

He chose a heavy black moustache as best fitting the conditions, and, carefully affixing it, he was ready for what might come. Packing the other clothes in the suit-case, he closed it, and then, unlocking the door, carried both the bags down himself. He passed over the key of the room at the desk and hurried away, for since the room had been paid for in advance, there was nothing for him to wait for.



Although beginning to grow weak from the loss of blood, Lee gathered himself together, and staggered across to the bed, on which he had glimpsed a bound and bandaged figure.—(See p. 34.)

The Grand Central Station being on the opposite corner, diagonally across from the Belmont, he chose to walk there, and a little later, after purchasing his ticket for Pineville, he got a porter and made his way to the track where the Boston Express would leave. It was the Boston Express, he discovered, which would pass through Pineville.

While Lee would have liked a seat in the Pullman, and all the comforts to be had, he knew that Henry J. Ferguson, book agent, would scarcely run to that expense, so he contented himself with a place in the ordinary coach. He left his bags in his seat, and, making his way to the smoking compartment, managed to secure a corner seat at one end.

He lit a cigar then, and, leaning back, settled himself for the two hours' run to Pineville. There were in the smoking compartment with him three other men, whom he took to be commercial travellers, and another man whom he sized up as being a small country merchant of sorts. He did not, however, attempt to enter into conversation with any of them, but, buying a paper, scanned the news until, when he was beginning to get thoroughly weary of the trio, the conductor came through, calling:

"Pineville—Pineville!"

Lee got up at once, and, making his way back into the main part of the carriage—unlike the coaches on the English railways, the American and Canadian railway carriages have an entrance at each end, with all the passengers visible to each other, and a centre aisle running the full length of the carriage—and, getting his two bags moved along to the end of the carriage, and stood waiting there until, with a grinding and a whistling of the air brakes, the train came to a stop.

If Lee had expected Pineville to be a place of any size he was doomed to disappointment. It was a typical New England village, possessing as its chief architectural point of interest the wood-built railway station. From the platform of the station the village straggled off along a single main street, consisting of a heterogeneous collection of frame shops and wood-built houses.

The street was lined with old elms, now changing to yellow and gold, and to right and left of the village proper Lee could catch sight of saffron and magenta woods, gleaming softly beneath the mellow afternoon sunshine. Pineville was just such a village as one might find in any place in New England.

It had the railway station, a livery stable, with the usual half-dozen loafers lounging about the door, a general store, in which the post office was located, a Methodist church, and another church, which might have been Congregational or Baptist or Unitarian; a small hardware shop, a drug store, wooden sidewalks raised up on scantlings, a small building with the sign of the local attorney and justice of the peace upon it, a blacksmith shop, and a profusion of eye-shocking signs, advertising everything from chewing gum to lawn mowers.

Withal, it was quaint and set in a beautiful spot, and as he breathed in the pure pine-scented air, Lee was glad he had come. The Pineville Inn—the only hostelry—proved to be at the upper end of the village.

At the station platform there stood a single small buckboard, to which was hitched a weary-looking roan horse. The man who lounged on the front seat, clad in blue patched overalls and "cow breakfast" hat, was chewing a straw and looking at Lee in speculative manner.

Like all his tribe, he was a shrewd judge of the types which favoured Pineville with a visit, and on his part Lee knew that the other would be there for the Pineville Inn, in case any drummers—or commercial travellers—should arrive. Lee knew enough about the States to know the procedure.

"Well, Ed," he said, with a true nasal drawl—nine out of ten village hack-drivers in the States are named "Ed"—"jest take these bags, my son, and shoot them up to the hotel."

"Ed" unlimbered himself and climbed leisurely out of the waggon.

"All right, doc," he said, with a drawl that put Lee's in the shade, "I'll hev them in, in no time. Purty hefty, bain't they?"

"I guess not," replied Lee. "You're suffering from bird disease, Ed, that's what your trouble is!"

"What might that be, doc?" inquired the driver, setting down the bags, and growing interested.

"Don't you know what bird disease is?" asked Lee, as though in astonishment.

"I sure don't, doc," said the other. "I guess I'd like to know all right. Is it one of them new-fangled notions the enginics"—he meant eugenics—"hev got holt on?"

"Oh, no," drawled Lee slowly, "it means your arms are built too high in the air. That is why you find it difficult to lift those bags."

"Ho-ho-haw-haw!" snorted "Ed." "I bot all right, doc. You sure got my angora that time."

Still chuckling, he tossed the bags into the back of the buckboard, and, climbing in, picked up the reins. Lee stepped in beside him, and then, with a clucking sound, the driver started the weary animal up the street at a pace a little better than a walk, but not much.

Thus did Nelson Lee, alias R. J. Mountjoy, alias Henry J. Ferguson, book agent, arrive at the village of Pineville, Connecticut. The Pineville Inn proved to be a not unattractive sort of place. It was a wooden building, clapboarded on the outside and painted white.

Thrown back from each window were pleasant green shutters, and the roof was one of wide eaves, roofed with pine shingles. In front was a long verandah, where the occupants of the inn were wont to take their ease when occasion permitted, and even from there one could hear the distant drone of a sawmill somewhere at the back of the village.

Just before mounting the steps and entering the hotel, Lee caught a glimpse of a small stone bridge where the road led out of the village into the open country, and then the flash of the sun on the waters of the small stream which it spanned. He decided that he was going to enjoy the scenery about Pineville if nothing else.

The small, primitive office of the inn, so startling in contrast to the "marble halls" of New York, which he had left a little over two hours before, was untenanted when he entered. It was furnished plainly he noticed.

Several "Windsor" type of chairs, the seats of which had been cut and whittled by several generations of loungers, a table on which reposed the Boston and New York papers, four wooden boxes filled with sawdust to catch the expectorations of the tobacco chewers—for nearly everyone in that part of the country is a devotee of the plug—a rack containing railway time-tables, a big-drum iron stove for the winter, and a small circular counter or desk on which reposed a small glass case containing five and ten cent cigars—pronounced in the district "seegars"—a freak potato in which a couple of pens had been thrust, the hotel register in which guests write their names, a match-holder fashioned from the hoof of a horse, and a bell which, Lee took it, was supposed to ring when desiring attention.

Slowly he turned the register round, and, taking one of the pens from where it reposed point downwards in the freak potato, he wrote the name,

"Henry J. Ferguson," and the address New York. That done, he stuffed the point of the pen back into the potato and rang the bell.

No one answered the first summons, nor the second, but at the third a red-cheeked, buxom-looking girl appeared from a door which led from behind the desk and glanced at him inquiringly. Lee, with a very good imitation of his role, removed his wide-brimmed hat and bowed.

"I should like a room," he said.

"Well, I guess you kin hev one," replied the girl, with a smile. "Pop, he's out to the mill now and wunt be back till supper-time; but you kin hev number nine if you want it."

"I think that should suit me perfectly," responded Lee. "I have already registered. Shall I take up my bags myself?"

"Sure, stranger, that's the rule har. How long might you be reckoning to stop?"

"Waal, I kain't jest say for sartin," replied Lee, with a nasal drawl; "but I reckon it'll be a few days at least. I'm in the book line--selling the greatest book ever published, and at a price that'll simply make you want to hev one for the front table. Yes, sirree, believe me, it's the greatest book that ever hit this good old U. S. A. It's all to the mustard, and when you see it you'll think so."

"Well, stranger, if you kin sell pop one you'll be all-fired lucky, take it from me. But I ain't sayin' as you wunt find buyers in the village. Well, so-long! I got ter git back to my bakin', or there wunt be any supper to-night."

She disappeared through the door, and after a quiet laugh Lee picked up his two bags and made his way out into the hall. He climbed the stairs, and, pausing at the top long enough to read the numbers on the doors near him, he searched about until he came to a door marked "9."

Lee was agreeably surprised on entering the room. The bed was a big, old-fashioned four-poster, with a huge feather mattress on it. The floor was carpeted with a bright matting, the wall had a pretty grey paper on it, and fresh muslin curtains waved before the open window.

A wide mahogany washstand with a marble top held a huge basin and pitcher, and the high old tall-boy would have aroused envy in the heart of any collector. He set down his bags, and, walking to the window, sat down in the low, chintz-covered rocking-chair there.

Through the open sash he could get a wide view of the fields and hills beyond, and as his eyes took in the beauty of it all he drew a deep breath. In the immediate foreground was a wide field with the last stacks of the harvest still standing in it. A log "snake" fence enclosed it, and then beyond came a still wider field dotted with grazing cattle and wide-spreading shade trees.

The field was bounded by the same sparkling stream which he had glimpsed as he entered the inn, and along its edge were alders and willows and wild hazel nut, with a sprinkling of young birch here and there. Beyond that again came the woods—green where the firs and spruces stood, red and gold and purple and mauve where the birches and maples and oaks were grouped.

A dense mass of lovely colour it gave, and over all, like guardian sentinels of the lesser trees, were the giant pines from which the village had taken its name. Now the drone of the sawmills reached his ears more plainly than ever, and finally, at the very edge of the stream where the wood turned, he saw it—a low, squat, quaint-looking affair, mossed with age and somewhat askew from the stream-ice and the storms of many winters.

Above it, in the mill dam, he could glimpse the wet snouts of logs still

unsawn, boomed in with a chain and log-boom, and lying snout-wise to the mill slip, like rows and rows of alligators. An old corporation boat, long and pointed at both ends, finished the rural picture.

It was the heart of the New England country; it was almost as it had been a hundred and fifty years ago, when the inhabitants were British Colonists and before the blindness of a British Government caused us to lose them from our Colonial Empire.

The names, the habits, and religion were still those of the old Puritan settlers, and for a moment Lee almost felt as if he might be in a part of Devon or Somerset.

Then, as his gaze continued to sweep the broad panorama, he suddenly saw on the crest of a hill, and set in a tangle of gold and yellow and deep saffron, the roof of a large gabled house, and here and there between the trees which surrounded it a high brick wall.

In that picture of peace and loveliness it had a touch of the sombre, almost of the sinister, and then suddenly he wondered if by any chance that house were the one in which Langley, of New York, was particularly interested.

He was still thinking of this when he rose, and, with the long tails of his grey frock coat flapping about his legs, made his way downstairs and so out into the village street.

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee Sells Books—Night Scouting—A Terrible Fight.

NELSON LEE worked hard during the next two days—as hard in a way as he had ever worked in his life. If there is any line of work more depressing than selling books from door to door to people who don't want to buy them, or attempting to persuade a busy housewife that some new-fangled kitchen utensil is just what she needs, it is yet to be discovered. And it was that way with Lee.

His part of the game was to sell books in Pineville with all the verve of the genuine book agent, and he did so. Primed with all the selling points contained in the printed literature which had been provided, armed with the crimson and gold sample cover, and with his long grey coat-tails flapping about his legs, he went forth and launched himself upon the good people of Pineville in an attempt to interest them in the attractions of the "History of the Negro Races of the World."

Lee knew something about the negroid races, or thought he did until he read the selling points outlined for his benefit in the circulars provided. Then he discovered that there was a whole lot he had never even guessed at about the woolly and kinky-headed races—and, incidentally, which he was sure no one else but the author of the book had guessed at.

The Pineville citizens seemed coldly indifferent to the startling facts about the black races which the book contained, but they were not indifferent to the line of talk which Nelson Lee, alias Henry J. Ferguson, threw them.

Pineville had seen book agents and patent medicine fakers and canvassers of all sorts and conditions during her existence as a recognised village community, but never before had such a rapid fire-talker hit them as Lee. If he hadn't been the leading criminologist of the world, if he weren't making thousands a year instead of hundreds, and if he were thrown upon his own resources, he would have made an ideal book agent.

There was something about his silvery tongue—mouthing his words with the twang which all New Englanders use—which beguiled the good women of Pineville into listening to him; there was something about the frank gaze

of his eye and the winning smile, which even the big moustache did not conceal, that literally hypnotised them, and there was that in the set of his jaw and the width of his shoulders which inspired respect among the male folk.

In two days he became a familiar figure about the place, and all Pineville, for some reason or other, referred to him as "Doc." Even despite the discouragement of the young woman at the inn, he tackled old man Chadwick, the innkeeper and miller of the village, as his first customer.

He began with the name of the book, he dilated upon the antiquity of the negro races, he painted the conditions existing upon this planet of ours during the age when man was still clinging to trees as an ape, until he got his subject interested. Then he dwelt at length upon the great evolution of the human race in the jungle fastnesses of the tropics, bringing down that evolution until he reached the time of the great civilisation which existed on the now submerged continent of Atlantis.

He painted the glory of the marvellous courts of the ancients, he spoke earnestly of the sunken continent in the great Pacific, and brought down his tale to the old civilisations of Babylon and Egypt and Greece. And always he kept impressing upon his listener the fact that bound up with it all—still existing, while other races and peoples had disappeared from the face of the earth, leaving little or no trace behind them, the negro still was with us and still would be with us.

He jumped to the psychology of the negroid races; he explained how, though they had lived since man was on the world, they were not, and never had been, of the creative nature, but purely imitative. He drew a parallel showing how through untold æons the negro had scarcely even invented a shred of clothing for himself, nor fashioned an ocean-going boat; whereas the white man had created in the arts, in textiles, in shipbuilding, in architecture—in everything that goes to make up what we call, in lieu of a better name, civilisation.

He had begun with only old man Chadwick as a listener, but before he had gone very far the loungers on the verandah had come in, and others had appeared from all points. When he was half way through he had an audience of about a score, and at the end of half an hour he could see that his assaults were causing the old man's defences to weaken.

It was when Lee brought his subject down to the negro of the United States, dwelling on the Civil War of 1860-65, and recalling how it was the Northern States which had demanded the freeing of the Southern slaves, that the old man capitulated. He held up a hand in surrender.

"Stranger," he said solemnly, "you are a marvel. Gosh all hemlock! I never heard any man spill it that way before. You've told me more about this little old planet of ours than I ever dreamed of before. The only nigger I've ever had any interest in has been old Joe Brown, who works at the mill, and he's the laziest cuss out of jail.

"If old Joe only knew what a long line of distinguished ancestors he had, he'd never work any more. But now, stranger, you have got me feeling that every nigger ever born, every nigger living, and every nigger that will be born, is a long lost brother of mine. I feel guilty every time I think I haven't realised this before.

"It's all been a mistake that the nigger is shiftless and lazy and flash. He has been maligned terribly. And to think I have had a hand in it. Stranger, I bow to you. You get my goat, and also my money. How much is that there book of yours?"

Lee smiled. The old man's raillery made the crowd laugh, but, nevertheless, Lee had won him.

"Five dollars," he replied promptly, "and you pay one dollar down and the balance when the book arrives."

"That seems fair enough," conceded old man Chadwick. "Here's your dollar, stranger."

He peeled a dollar bill off a fat wad as he spoke, and handed it across to Lee. Lee took it soberly, and, discovering his pad of receipts on the stamped form which Jones & Deemer had provided, he wrote out a receipt for the dollar.

Then, turning like a flash, he started in the loungers about him, and it is a fact that, before another hour had passed, he had sold eight of the books, and had received promises to buy from all the others but one—that one being the village miser, who would have had his teeth drawn more easily than a dollar from his pocket.

The next day Lee had sallied forth to approach those whom he had not already sold. Everybody had evidently spoken of his great lecture at the inn the previous evening, for men he had never seen before hailed him familiarly as "Doc," and Lee replied genially.

In two days he had received orders for forty volumes, and more were coming in. The whole village had followed old man Chadwick's lead, and if Lee had really been a book agent he would have found nothing to complain of in Pineville.

But there was a more serious side to his being there, and during the day he could do little. But on every possible occasion he joined in the gossip about him, and it was not long before he knew every item there was to know.

He discovered, for one thing, that the big house he had noticed from his window was the private asylum which was his objective. He found out that it was run by a Dr. Malcolm Craddock, though little was known in the village about the doctor, for he had only been there a couple of months or so.

Lee also discovered that there were very few patients so far. He never heard the name of Rufus Halsey mentioned once, and, altogether, there seemed to be a feeling of antipathy in the village against the asylum.

The first night of his stay in Pineville he had utilised, as had been seen, to sell his books. The next day he was canvassing the houses, and until after nine o'clock he was sitting on the verandah in front of the inn talking to the loungers there. But folks retire early in Pineville, and by half-past nine nearly everyone in the village was abed.

Lee had gone to his room shortly after nine, and had removed his boots. Then he sat down at the window, and, lighting a cigarette, gazed off across the night-blanketed fields to where, high up, a single light flashed. It was the asylum.

He sat there until after ten, then, having studied the lay of the land perfectly during the day, he rose softly, and, drawing aside the curtain, slipped out over the sill until his feet touched the shingled roof of a small outhouse. He slid down that noiselessly, and dropped softly to the turf beneath.

There he paused to put on his shoes, after which he struck straight across for the snake fence and the field of harvested corn. He found the fence easily enough, and now that his eyes were quite accustomed to the light, he could make out the stooks of corn lined out before him, like the tents of a miniature encampment.

He kept close to the fence, and made his way to the left, keeping the light of the asylum always before him. He crossed two more snake fences before he came to a field of stubble, which gradually rose up and up until,

when he finally reached still another fence, the light of the asylum was just ahead of him. He next encountered the trees surrounding the building, and now he began to tread very cautiously.

Foot by foot he picked his way along with the caution of a Red Indian, until in front of him there suddenly loomed the bulk of the surrounding wall. Lee paused there for a breather. He could see quite distinctly now, for it was a beautifully clear night, and the stars were as bright as clustered jewels in their vast setting.

Scarcely a light showed in the village below, and only the distant baying of a dog broke the stillness which hung over everything. When he turned his attention back to the wall he found that it was nearly twelve feet in height, and he could make out the vague silhouette of long iron spikes along the top.

To attempt to scale it from where he stood was hopeless, but the surrounding trees offered a solution of the difficulty, if he could but find one to suit his purpose. Then he began his search, but it was not until he had worked his way along a good forty yards or so that he found what he sought.

It was a big pine tree which he chose—a tall red pine, heavy with fragrant odour. There were no limbs close to the ground, but by reaching up he was able to grasp a stout branch, by which he was enabled to pull himself up. Shinning against the trunk and pulling at the same time, he was soon safely up, and, climbing to another branch, he found that he could look over the wall into the grounds.

He could see little, except to make out that, at the point from which he gazed, the house was very close to the wall—he reckoned only forty or fifty feet distant. The light, he could now see, was shining from a room on the upper floor, but of sound or sign of the occupants there was none.

Still Lee persisted in his vigil, until over an hour had passed, and he was beginning to feel cramped and sore. Then the light he could see was suddenly extinguished, and after the interval of another five minutes or so he dropped to the ground and began making his way cautiously back to the inn.

He regained his room in safety, and seating himself once more in the rocking chair by the window, he lit a cigarette and gave himself up to thought. What did it all mean? Why was Mountjoy supposed to come to Pineville and pose as a book agent?

That the asylum was the real objective was plain. But why—why—why? That was what Lee could not puzzle out. The fact that the asylum was the property of Dr. Mortimer Crane, alias Dr. Malcolm Craddock, told him a little, but not much. Was Langley interested in someone who was a patient in the asylum?

Was there a plot of some sort afoot regarding such an inmate? Was it directed against Dr. Mortimer Crane? If so, then even if it were illegal, it must be more honest than the business upon which Crane was engaged, judging by what Lee knew of him. Yet Langley did not strike him as a law-breaker. He impressed him more as a man of culture and refinement, and a man who, now that he was approaching the winter of his life, desired nothing but peace and quiet.

His eyes were not the eyes of a man who had anything to conceal. They were remarkably frank and open; yet there it was—he had plotted, and Lee was carrying out a well-laid scheme of some sort. As far as he could make out, the direct object of it all was a young man of frail figure and red hair, who was at the asylum. But if he were being detained there illegally, why didn't Langley have recourse to the law of the land?

Lee knew a little about the peculiar laws in the States relating to

asylums, and he knew, too, that there were occasions when a person might be held as an inmate when they were really sane. Was this the secret of Langley's plot? That remained to be seen.

And then there was the question of Mountjoy. Langley believed him to be Mountjoy, but Lee knew that Mountjoy had fallen into the clutches of Rufus Halsey, which meant Dr. Mortimer Crane. Was he still held a prisoner by them?—had he escaped or been released, or had he met a still more terrible fate than imprisonment?

That phase of the matter worried Lee as much as any, and while he was endeavouring to carry out orders as Langley would have had Mountjoy carry them out, still he was figuring all the time how he could take steps to ascertain Mountjoy's fate.

This much, however, was plain—Dr. Mortimer Crane and Rufus Halsey must be working a big thing of some sort, to go to the expense of acquiring a place as large as the one at Pineville. And at this point in his reflections Lee gave it up and went to bed.

Yet it was to develop that, before many hours had passed, his own desire to find out the fate of Mountjoy was to cause the complete wrecking of Langley's well-laid plans, and it was to devolve on Nelson Lee to pull the coals out of the fire.

The next morning he went at his book-canvassing again. He worked methodically and conscientiously, and by noon had managed to sell another ten volumes.

He had worked the village pretty well by now, but there still remained the farms about the surrounding country and a few more houses in the village. He devoted the rest of the afternoon to finishing the village, determining that, on the morrow, if no messenger came from Langley, he would strike out into the country. He kept his eyes and ears open all day, but of the asylum on the hill he heard nothing he did not already know.

He was a little depressed and disappointed that evening as he joined the others at supper, but under the satisfying influence of Mrs. Chadwick's griddle cakes and maple syrup, new venison steak served with mashed potatoes and corn, and home-made jelly, golden brown "johnny cake" steaming fresh from the oven and thick with new butter, new milk, and pumpkin pie, he began to feel more cheerful, and by the time he was once more seated in his favourite chair on the verandah, he was beginning to look at things more hopefully.

He talked to the loungers about him until after nine, he and old man Chadwick arguing politics mostly, while the others listened; then, bidding them good-night, he ascended to his room.

He paused in the small office to light a cigarette, but as he turned round he suddenly discovered that old man Chadwick had followed him. The old man was chewing a bit of shaving and looking as non-committal as ever. He glanced at Lee quizzically for a moment, then he said:

"Which way be you a-goin' from here, doc? Do you think you'll take a northern direction?"

For one single instant Lee stood rigid, then he replied carelessly:

"I don't know yet—haven't quite decided. Do you think the book business would be good north?"

"If I was a-goin' to move at all, I reckon as how I'd try a northern direction; but then I'd get some information on the subject first."

"Perhaps you could give me that information?" said Lee cautiously.

It seemed impossible that old man Chadwick could be a messenger from Langley, yet he had used that word "Northern"—the code word—with what

seemed a definite meaning, and he had deliberately repeated it. Still, Lee was taking no chances.

"Reckon as how I might," went on the old man, after a short pause. "Reckon as how, if you be still awake when I go up, I might tell you a little about the northern route."

Lee exhaled a puff of smoke, and nodded.

"I imagine I shall be awake all right when you come up," he said. "In fact, I do not think I shall even be in bed."

The old man scratched his chin, and, still chewing the bit of shaving, made his way back to the verandah without another word. Then, as Lee mounted the stairs to his own room, he heard Chadwick packing the loungers off for the night. It was just on ten o'clock, and Lee was sitting by the window, when the door of his room opened softly and the old man came in.

There was no light in the room, but he carried a candle, and, setting it carefully on the mantel, he closed and locked the door behind him. Lee at the same time drew the curtain and rose. The deep-set, weather-drifted eyes of the old innkeeper twinkled as they regarded Lee.

"I must say, stranger," he said softly, "that you are a rare one for bluff. If I hadn't known who you were I never would have guessed you were not what you seemed."

Lee was still cautious. He remembered that the enemy had caught Mountjoy napping.

"What do you mean?" he said slowly.

"Northern," replied the old man succinctly. "I've got a message for you from you know who," he went on.

"Is he here?" asked Lee, taking a risk.

Chadwick shook his head.

"Not as I knows on," he replied.

Then he stepped closer to Lee.

"He wants you to be ready for a possible move to-morrow night. He says there will be a car here to-morrow. It will be driven here to the inn by a man who will leave it in my care. He will go away immediately after, and you will then take it over."

Lee nodded.

"Anything else?"

The old man scratched his head.

"Stranger," he said, "I don't know rightly what the game is, but I do know that whatever Mr. Langley does is all right."

"Who is Mr. Langley?" asked Lee quickly.

"Don't you know?" came the surprised question of the other. "Mr. Langley? Why, stranger, I thought all America knew him. He is one of the greatest of living American lawyers. But as I was a-sayin', I don't know rightly what the game is. Mr. Langley is an old friend of mine. We have been fishing and shooting together over a good many years. And when he asked me to do certain things for him, I done them. Now, I've told you what I was ordered to tell you, and that's done. But there's something else, stranger."

"And what is that?" inquired Lee.

"Well, I'll tell you. When Mr. Langley slipped down here to Pineville to see me, and asked me to help him, he told me that it had to do with this asylum up on the hill. That's about all he said; but when he had gone I got to thinking, and thinks I to myself, thinks I, surely I can do a little more off my own bat, so to speak.

"So thinks I to myself, thinks I, how can I do that? They was just movin' into the house on the hill then, and word went round that they

wanted one or two local girls as maids. So I says to myself, says I, why couldn't my own darter Bessie go as a maid for a little while? Bessie didn't like it at all, bein' reared, so to speak, right to home; but I told her I wanted her to do it bad, and explained why.

"Now, says I to you, says I, there ain't no smarter girl in Connecticut than Bessie. She's as clever as her ma—and that's saying something, believe me. Well, the upshot is we gets Bessie into the house as a maid, and, incidentally, a spy. Now, this afternoon word came through from Mr. Langley to tell you to be ready for action to-morrow night. I can't tell you now exactly what that means, for I don't know myself. But since hearing from him Bessie has managed to get home this evening, and she gives me a piece of news that may mean a lot to Mr. Langley's plans."

"What is that?" asked Lee tensely, bending forward.

"She says," drawled the old man, "that that there young feller with the red hair, the one what Mr. Langley mentioned, is goin' to be moved from the place this very night. She don't know how nor where, but she heard Dr. Craddock tell another man—she couldn't catch his name—that the move must be made sooner than intended, and there was no better time than this very night.

"I've been a-tryin' to git Mr. Langley on the telephone half the evenin', but I can't reach him nohow. And there is still something else that Bessie told me, stranger. She says that two nights ago another man was brought to the place, and that she thinks he must be either ill or wounded, for there is a special man told off to look after him.

"He is in a certain room by himself, and the door is always kept locked. The doctor said, for the benefit of the servants, that it was a violent case and that he had to be kept under guard, but my Bessie says he come in with bandages on his head."

"Can you tell me which room he is in?" asked Lee.

The old man nodded.

"Bessie says it is the room in the north-west corner of the house, and added that it would be the third door on the right after you got up the stairs."

"Has she gone back there?"

"Yes; she had to be in by nine."

Lee ripped off the heavy black moustache he had been wearing, and while the other looked on, divested himself of the garments of the book agent. Then he opened his own private bag and took out a dark-blue lounge suit. Slipping into this, he felt about in the bag until he found a soft grey felt hat which he put on and pulled well down over his eyes.

"Where be you a-goin'?" asked the old man mildly.

Lee dragged out his automatic and stuffed it into his pocket before replying. Then, pausing by the window, he said curtly:

"I am going to the asylum. I am getting an inkling now as to what this business means. I am going to try first to stop the removal of that young fellow to-night, and, secondly, to discover the identity of the man in the north-west room."

"That looks like the right tack, stranger," rejoined the old man. "And, by heck, I guess my deal is to try again to get Mr. Langley on the telephone and tell him what's doin'."

"I should," said Lee. "Tell him what I have done."

With that he jerked up the window curtain, and simultaneously the old man doused the glim.

The next moment Lee was slithering softly down the roof of the outhouse to the ground.

CHAPTER VI.

A Terrible Fight.

LEE, now familiar with the course he must traverse to reach the asylum, made far quicker progress than he had the night before. In less than ten minutes he had reached the hill ascending to the asylum, and with the light there to guide him he took it almost at a run. Once within the shelter of the trees, however, he trod more warily, and worked his way along until he came to the pine which had proved so friendly the night previous.

Even as he reached it, a soft purring sound broke upon his ears, and the next instant twin bars of light shot over the wall, gradually turning inwards towards the house. He knew what that meant as well as though he were on the other side of the wall.

A powerful motor-car had driven up to the house, and had turned. The purring sound continued, and he knew from that the engine had not been shut off. There was no time to lose, and, risking discovery, he sprang at the branch and pulled himself up.

When he reached the spot where he had crouched the night before, he saw that the yard in front of the house was lighted by a bright flare of light. It came from the open door; but the next moment it was blurred, as figures came through the opening and began to descend the steps.

Lee took one look, saw that there were three in all, that the one in the centre was being led by those on the outside, then, abandoning all caution, he crawled along the branch until he was over the wall, and with a shout dropped to the ground inside.

With a crashing leap and a swishing of branches it must have sounded as though half a dozen were coming over the wall, and so must those by the car have thought, for they raced to the car, flung open the door, and bundled the central figure inside.

The other two sprang in after, and even as Lee raced towards them, drawing his automatic, the car gave a leap and dashed down the drive. Lee ran after it for a little distance; then, realising how hopeless it all was, turned back to the house. The door was still open, but a figure which, until then, had stood in the shadow of the door now crossed the patch of light, and Lee saw the door begin to close.

He took the steps three at a time, reaching the door just as it was about to slam. He jammed his foot against it and heaved. There was a heavy pressure from inside, but Lee proved the more weighty, for after a short struggle it gave, and he staggered into the hall. But he was not to win entry too easily, for from behind the door there sprang a man with knife upraised ready to strike.

Lee leaped aside just in time to avoid a swishing blow for the shoulder, then he raised his automatic to fire. The report rang out with a crash in the enclosed space of the hall, but at the psychological moment the other sprang again, and the bullet went wide.

The next instant Lee felt his wrist gripped as in a vice, the while he fought to reach his opponent's right wrist as well, and a fight began such as he had not experienced for a long time.

His antagonist was scarcely as tall as Lee, but more than ordinarily deep-chested and sinewy, as though made of steel springs.

One glimpse at him was sufficient to tell Lee that he was a hardy native lumberjack whom Crane had in some way hired for his purpose, and, knowing something about the type, Lee knew that he had his hands full.

There is no more terrible fighter in the world than the lumberjack of

Canada and New England. He refuses to know when he is beaten; with a broken head and wounds in a dozen places he will still carry on, and only when actual consciousness deserts him is he really down and out. And this man was fighting with the will to kill and the sheer lust of blood.

Holding Lee's wrist with his left hand, he began to slash downwards with the knife, and only by almost superhuman efforts did Lee escape the point.

Lee remained on the defensive until by a swift move he managed to get a firm grip on the other's wrist, then they began to circle and strain and wrench in a long grueling struggle for the mastery.

Round and round the hall they worked until they were close to the front door. Neither man was giving an atom yet. If Lee was being held, he was also holding. With the effort of the strain each man was breathing heavily, and the beads of perspiration were standing out on them.

In strength and cunning they were well matched, although in guesse Lee was undoubtedly the superior, while in sheer brute strength the other had perhaps a slight advantage.

But this tense straining could not last long. Something had to break soon. Human bone and muscle was not made for a prolonged outrage against it of that sort. And it was at the open door the break came—not through a collapse of either man, but by a sudden body heave of the lumberjack which sent Lee backwards through the open door.

He made a terrific effort to regain his balance, but failed to do so, and the next moment he went crashing down the steps to the gravel, dragging the other with him. In the fall each man lost his hold, and a violent blow on the shoulder caused Lee to drop his automatic.

From that on he had only his bare hands. There was no time to seek the weapon. On the gravel he managed to get the fingers of one hand into his antagonist's throat, and by a quick move he once more caught the other's wrist, for he still held the knife. Then the straining fight began once again.

Over and over they rolled, Lee digging his fingers deeper and deeper into the lumberjack's thick neck, and the lumberjack striving mightily to slash Lee with the knife. Why they had not roused others in the house Lee could not fathom, nor had he time to conjecture. For the moment he had a mind for just one thing—the fight.

They fetched up against the turf edge of the gravel drive with a bump, and once more Lee was top dog. Here he strove to brace his man against the low bank and to keep him from rolling again, and for a little he succeeded.

The lumberjack, seeing Lee's strategy, lay quietly straining for a bit, then suddenly, with one gigantic heave, he threw every atom of remaining strength into a downward blow of the hand which held the knife. It jammed Lee's arm past the pivotal point of balance, and, ripping through his clothes, the point went deep into his side.

Lee felt a sudden rush of warm blood, then, with a savage anger filling him, he threw the other's arm back, withdrew his right hand from the lumberjack's neck, and, reckless of result, twisted his antagonist's right arm back—back—back until the bone threatened to snap.

Pluckily the lumberjack fought to hold out, but there was more than mere strength behind Lee's effort, and the next moment, with a sharp exclamation, the lumberjack opened his fingers, and the knife dropped to the gravel.

Then away they went once more, rolling over and over in a fierce fight, until they had almost reached the steps again, and here, when for a moment he was top man, the lumberjack crashed both fists into Lee's face, and with

a violent effort tore himself free. He was on his feet like a flash, and running up the steps.

Lee, half dazed from the effect of the blow, staggered to his feet, caught one glimpse of the speeding figure of the other, then threw himself up the steps. He reached the door just as the other slammed it, but managed to get his foot against it.

He smashed it open, to see the lumberjack taking the stairs two at a time. Lee paused just long enough to reach his automatic where it had fallen, then he went after, and, gaining the top of the stairs, was just in time to hear a door slam to the right.

He ran down the hall, and drew up before the third and last door. A movement inside told him it was the room into which the lumberjack had dashed. Lee pulled back, and threw himself against the door with all his remaining strength. At the first attempt it crashed inwards.

He staggered into a large bedroom lit by a single oil lamp, to see the lumberjack taking careful aim at him. They fired at almost the same moment, but Lee's shot must have been a fraction of a second sooner than the other, for he saw the lumberjack swing round sharply and drop while a bullet whistled past his head and embedded itself in the wall.

Although beginning to grow weak from the loss of blood, Lee gathered himself together, and staggered across to the bed, on which he had glimpsed a bound and bandaged figure.

With shaking hands he drew out his knife and cut the gag away, then he said hoarsely:

"Who are you?"

"Mountjoy!" came back the reply in a dry whisper.

"Then I have come to rescue you," said Lee, "and there is no time to lose."

With that he began to slash the bonds which bound the other, and a few moments later Mountjoy got stiffly to his feet. Weak as he was Lee still assisted the other, and together they managed to get to the lower hall.

Then they passed boldly out into the night, and down the drive to the main gates.

CHAPTER VII.

A Wild Chase—Outside the Three-Mile Limit—Finis.

HOW Lee managed to hold up Mountjoy until they reached the inn he could not tell. He had lost a good deal of blood himself, although the bleeding had now stopped, as he could tell from the fact that his undershirt had clotted against the wound and was sticking to it.

Mountjoy must have been through a gruelling time, for he seemed as weak as a kitten. But make the inn they did, and as they staggered up the steps Lee saw that there was a light in the office.

Old man Chadwick was waiting for them, and he got to his feet in lively fashion as the pair staggered in. He said nothing. He was wise in his generation. Instead of useless questions, he passed out of the room, returning in a few moments with a flask of brandy. Both Lee and Mountjoy drank deeply of it while Chadwick disappeared once more.

There next appeared the daughter, whom Lee had spoken to on his first arrival at the inn, old Mrs. Chadwick, and another buxom lass, whom Lee knew must be the other sister Bessie.

Old Mrs. Chadwick took charge of Lee, and soon had the knife wound bathed and bandaged. When she had finished Lee leaned back in his chair

and sighed with relief. Then, when the door had closed after the women, old man Chadwick came over to Lee and said in a low tone:

"I managed to get Mr. Langley on the telephone. But who is this other feller? Can you trust him?"

Lee smiled wanly.

"You can trust him as well as myself," he said. "What did you tell Langley?"

"I told him everything I knew about the matter. He was very excited. He is sending the motor down here at once. It ought to be here inside the next hour. He says to tell you to use your own judgment as to the next step.

"And about an hour ago my Bessie came running in. She was listening behind a bush when the motor left the asylum. She says they have taken the red-headed young man away in it, that Dr. Craddock and his friend both went with it, and that she heard the doctor tell the chauffeur to drive to Bridgeport."

"Bridgeport!" echoed Lee. "What does that mean?"

"I reckon it means they be a-going to sea," replied the old man shrewdly. Lee closed his eyes.

"In that case we shall have to go after them hot-foot. But we can do nothing until the motor turns up. I shall doze until then. Call me, please, when it arrives."

With that, worn out as he was with the strain and the loss of blood, he dropped off almost at once, and the old man, realising that Lee would need all the rest he could get, smoked silently, watching Lee and Mountjoy, who had followed Lee's example.

It seemed to Lee he had just closed his eyes, when he felt the old man shaking him.

"The car has come," he said, as Lee opened his eyes.

In a moment Lee was wideawake, and getting to his feet, shook Mountjoy. While he got the latter awake old man Chadwick dug out a couple of heavy coats, and carried them out to the car, which proved to be a big twelve-cylinder touring machine.

The chauffeur saluted.

"I am at your orders, sir," he said to Lee. "Where shall I go?"

"Drive to Bridgeport, and drive like the devil," said Lee curtly.

With that he climbed into the tonneau, and assisted Mountjoy into the car. Almost as the old man slammed the door after them the motor began to turn, and, with a steady, low, purring sound, went out of Pineville with quick acceleration.

Pineville lies about midway between Ansonia and New Haven, and about twenty-five miles from Bridgeport—the busy seaport on Long Island Sound. Old man Chadwick had made a shrewd guess that the fugitives were trying to get to sea, for had they been attempting to get away by train they would not have gone so far, but would have made for Ansonia or New Haven.

Mountjoy, who was recovering more and more each moment as they flew ahead into the night, turned to Lee at last and said:

"I haven't the remotest notion who you are, or why you are in this affair. I do know, though, that you rescued me at the risk of your life, and for that I thank you. Do you feel like enlightening me further?"

Lee laughed softly, and then, beginning with his own name, he made a clean breast of the whole thing. He had scarcely finished his recital to the astounded Mountjoy when they made the outskirts of Bridgeport, and

soon they were running along by the docks, where lines and lines of yachts were already being laid up for the winter.

It took a precious twenty minutes to find a policeman who had seen a big limousine car drive into Bridgeport not long before, and another half hour to trace the fact that, shortly after, a large motor-cruiser had put to sea. The trail seemed hot to that point, and it was Lee who said:

"They have gone to sea—we must go to sea after them. It was there Mountjoy came in useful, for inside another half-hour he had managed to get hold of a big, rakish-looking two hundred horse-power racing motor-boat, and, piling in, they were soon dashing out of the harbour.

As they nosed the outside rollers of the Sound, they caught a glimpse of light far out, and bearing to the right. The captain of the motor-boat—a youngish man of the new school—pointed over the side towards the distant light.

"That will be the light of the boat you want," he drawled.

"Which way do you think she is making?" asked Lee.

"I reckon she is heading south," replied the captain. "Perhaps she is making for New York, but she might be bound for any southern port or the West Indies."

"Do you think you can overtake her?"

The captain shrugged.

"I guess we can give them a hustle," he said.

"Then let her rip," ordered Lee, and, pressing an electric button, the captain called out to them to brace themselves, and, like a gigantic thing of life and reason, the racing motor-boat leaped forward, throwing the water from her bows in great cascades of foam.

Straight out to sea they went until they were well outside the three-mile limit, then in a wide sweep the boat was brought round, and along she went after the ever-growing lights of the other boat.

They were gaining—that was a certainty; but they could not discuss their chances, so great was the roar of the engines. Like a demon of the night they shot along, the engines and the wind and the sea combining into a mad symphony of movement which drowned out every other sound.

Mile after mile and mile after mile they covered, ever drawing nearer to the lights ahead, until they could see the dim outline of the other boat only about a gun-shot ahead of them.

The captain eased off his engines a little, and, bending close to him, Lee shouted:

"Can you go in close to her?"

The other nodded.

"Then we will board her. Can your men hold us in?"

For reply the captain beckoned to two men who lounged in the cockpit. They came forward and bent close to him.

". . . Going to board," Lee caught. ". . . Grappling irons . . . lively."

Then they drew in more and more towards the other boat, until they were running almost neck and neck with her.

Lee drew out his revolver, and, with a look of comprehension, Mountjoy followed suit. They stood ready at the side until the boat was brought in close, then, in the face of a hail of lead which began to reach them from the other craft, they leaped across at the very moment when the two boats touched.

Now the captain of the motor-boat had been hired to run her, and nothing else, but as soon as he saw that his men had the grappling iron secure, he caught up a heavy iron wrench from beside the engines, and followed Lee and Mountjoy. Not to be outdone, two of the crew came over after him, and on the deck of the little motor-cruiser a merry battle ensued.

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Lee fired low, but fired to hit, and steadily they drove back the half-dozen men who were opposing them. It was so dark that he could only vaguely make out their forms, but he was sure he could distinguish Crane and Halsey, and at them he fired.

He saw the man he thought was Crane go down from one of his bullets, and shortly after a bullet from Mountjoy's pistol sent Halsey down. In the meantime, the captain and his two men were rushing the crew of the other boat, and, clubbing their revolvers, Lee and Mountjoy followed suit.

The action which followed was sharp and effective. They battered the captain and crew of the cruiser back into the waist, and drove them down the companion-way into the little saloon.

While the captain of the racing boat secured the door of the companion-way, Lee and Mountjoy ran back to where Crane and Halsey had fallen. Crane lay on his face, groaning from a wound in the side, and Halsey was quite unconscious.

Lee, knowing the calibre of the men he had to deal with, insisted that they be secured, and when that was done he and Mountjoy went down the after-companion. He was looking for the red-headed youth who had been spirited away from the asylum, but little did he dream that he was to bag not only the boy, but a girl—a girl who gazed at them with the frightened eyes of a fawn.

Lee knew not who she was or why she was there, but when they had released the boy, and he had discovered he was in the hands of friends, he broke down, crying:

“My sister—my sister!”

Then they knew, and, while he soothed the young fellow, Lee sent Mountjoy to bring the girl. It was a pathetic scene which followed, both brother and sister breaking down. Lee gave them a certain time together, then he said:

“We must go now. It is necessary to make port before dawn.”

Once they were all back aboard the racing boat Lee unlocked the door of the middle companion and sprang across the side. They sheered off as the captain and crew of the other boat dashed up on deck, but the few shots which followed them did no harm, and with a roar of the engines they were off again.

“Where to?” asked the captain, framing the words with his lips.

“New York!” shouted Lee, and the other nodded.

It was just on the grey of dawn when they made a wharf in the East River, and after settling with the captain of the motor-boat Lee got his charges on to the wharf. Mountjoy got a taxi, and, bundling in Lee, told the driver to go at once to Fifty-eighth Street.

An hour later, with the brother and sister safe abed, Nelson Lee for the first time heard the story of the strange affair in which he had been mixed up. Langley related it as follows:

“It was truly magnificent of you, Mr. Lee, to interest yourself in this matter as you did,” he said; “but I shall take care to thank you properly

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for that afterwards. First, however, I wish to tell you about the boy and girl whom you have rescued this night.

"Their name is Allison, and they are orphans. Their father was a very close friend of mine. You saw the man Rufus Halsey. He is a member of one of the oldest families of New York, but he is a decadent. Why John Allison left him the guardian of his two children has always been a mystery to me, but he did so, and there is nothing more to be said about it.

"About six months ago the girl Betty came to me secretly, and told me she was afraid of Rufus Halsey. I questioned her, and she finally confessed that she had overheard him talking one night to another man—a Dr. Malcolm Craddock, and that she had heard them say they would have Dick, her brother, put away as insane.

"Betty was afraid, and she grew still more in fear when Halsey asked her to marry him.

"You can now see his plot—he wanted the boy put away as insane, and to marry Betty, so he could have the full handling of the estate. It was worth a risk, I suppose, for it runs into three or four millions."

"I promised Betty that I would do what I could. I am a lawyer myself, and I knew that the law would assist me to no extent whatsoever. It was some time before I could bring myself to break the law, but at last I did so.

"I sent men to Halsey's place in Riverside Drive, and they attempted to kidnap the boy. They failed, and Halsey, taking fright, had the boy moved.

"It took me a long time to trace him again, but at last I located him at Pineville. I went down there myself, and took an old acquaintance into my confidence—to a certain extent. I decided that it would need a very clever scheme to rescue the boy, for after the first attempt they would be on their guard.

"I laid my plans carefully, and sent for Mr. Mountjoy. In some way they must have discovered this, for, as we have seen, they 'got him' his first evening in New York, and if it hadn't been for you my plans would have fallen to the ground a second time.

"However, we succeeded, and by the morning I shall have both Betty and Dick Allison on a train bound for Montreal, where they shall remain until I have started a case of investigation, claiming that Rufus Halsey is an unfit guardian for them.

"Now that he has lost them out of his power, I do not think he will put up much of a defence, and once I can get his guardianship annulled they will be safe. That is the story briefly, Mr. Lee, and you can see exactly what a service you did me when you broke into this affair as you did.

"And now it is morning. We shall have some coffee, and discuss matters in detail. I think I must owe you and Mr. Mountjoy a substantial fee."

With that the old lawyer rang the bell, and, reaching into his desk, took out a box of cigarettes. But Lee was not thinking of the fee of which the other had spoken. His mind was lingering on the memory of the frightened girl whom he had rescued from the motor-boat, for he had seen enough then to tell him that Halsey and Crane were bound, not for New York or a port on the coast of the United States, but probably for one of the out-of-the-way ports in South America, where they could work their will in peace.

Then his thoughts broke off to consider just how soon he could get passage for England. And so ended Lee's "quiet little business trip" to New York City.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—"The Mystery of The Martello Tower."—A Tale of "JIM THE PENMAN."

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A Story of Treasure Hunting in the Southern Seas

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with **CLIVE LOWTHER**, an old chum, and **BEN GROVE**, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless until, one day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching! On their way back to the camp the chums espy two white men—strangers both—in chase of some blacks, at whom they are shooting. Alec and Clive follow and arrive at a strange camp, where they find numbers of black prisoners bound together in couples. The chums first bind and gag their gaoler, then make off towards their own camp with the unhappy blacks. Once the chums think they have reached the camp, but are mistaken, and resume their weary march.

(Now read on.)

A Surprise.

"**H**ALLO! Another halt! This is getting serious. I'm beginning to feel precious anxious!"

It was Clive who spoke. The party had managed with some difficulty to get, as nearly as the young leaders could guess, about half-way on their journey. There had been much trouble with the two wounded blacks; again and again the poor fellows had broken down completely. Then their friends had bravely carried them on again for a while, swung to a pole after a fashion of their own.

But there were only four really sound men among the natives, and they were so weak from want of food or other causes that it was more than they could manage—willing enough though they indeed were—to carry the two between them for any great distance at a time.

Indeed, the ground was so rough, there were so many difficulties in the way—so many obstacles to be surmounted—that it was a wonder they had managed to get as far as they had.

There were big boulders, pools, and fallen trees, which it was necessary to go round; there were rocky hillocks and low hills, too big to go round, which they had to climb over; and there were swampy places to be crossed,



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where they sank up to their knees in water or compounds of water and mud.

To make matters worse, Alec was by no means sure of the way. Looking down from a height just before sunset, he had felt confident that he recognised the place to which he had followed the Dago that night. But now, in the dim moonlight, what with dark shadows here, and light mists there, he felt uncertain and bewildered.

And now they were brought to a halt altogether on account of the difficulty of travelling with the wounded natives.

"I suppose," muttered Alec, "some people in our position would say it was their duty to leave the wounded men behind and trust to coming back for them by daylight. But I couldn't leave these poor beggars here to take their chance in the dark."

"Nor could I, Alec," Clive replied despondently. "That's where the difficulty comes in. If we were as stony-hearted as the filibusters who captured them and brought 'em here, we should simply leave 'em behind and go our way. But neither I nor you could do such a thing."

"And yet what are we to do?" Alec queried gloomily. "It seems useless to try to struggle on—apart from the fact that I feel it is cruelty to these injured fellows. They must be suffering terribly while they're being swung about and jolted by bearers who are really too weak themselves to carry them properly. But if we can't proceed, that is as much as to say we must stay where we are till daylight."

"And that, in turn, means being followed and attacked by the man we left behind and his pals, as soon as they return and discover what's happened. And it means a fight between we two and certainly three—most likely half a dozen or more—of these desperadoes."

"Nevertheless, we'll have to risk it," Alec declared with conviction. "That first night, you know, when I was in trouble out here alone, you came out from the camp to look for me. But there's no chance of that happening to-night, because they have no idea we are out in this direction. Very likely they're out now hunting for us in a different direction altogether."

"Well," said Clive with decision, "if we've got to halt here for the night, we may as well choose the best place we can find handy, with a view to defending ourselves if attacked. Perhaps, as you say our people are out looking for us, and if we were to fire off our rifles, they might hear, and it might bring them to our aid."

"It might, of course; but, on the other hand," Alec pointed out, "it would certainly guide our enemies to us, if they're looking for us—so I'm afraid it would do more harm than good."

After a little more discussion, they decided to halt for the night on the top of a small rocky hillock, which seemed the best spot at hand on which to defend themselves if attacked.

Aided by some of the blacks, they pulled some fallen logs round in such a way as to form fairly good cover, and, having made the wounded men as comfortable as they could on beds of cut grass, they sat down, tired and dispirited, to await developments.

They had just arranged that one should try to get a short sleep while the other watched, when the signs of suppressed excitement among the natives put them on the qui vive.

One now came forward, and, pointing back the way they had come, began making excited signs and gestures, which this time, at any rate, the chums were able to understand.

(Continued overleaf.)

"It means," said Alec, "that they've heard something we haven't, and they know that their enemies have tracked us down."

And, as though to confirm his words, there came to their ears the sound of a rifle shot, followed almost immediately by another.

Clive noticed that the shots sounded some distance away, which surprised him not a little. It seemed strange that the enemy should thus give them timely notice of their approach.

For a moment or two the idea came to him that the shots might have been fired by their own friends, come out to look for them; but he discarded this thought at once as untenable. The sounds had come from the wrong direction; it would mean that the two parties had passed each other without knowing it, which was scarcely possible.

Following upon the sound of shots there had been heard a peculiar cry, like the call of some night-bird. Clive had heard it once or twice before the shots, though then it had sounded much farther away. Thinking it was only some creature of the night, he had taken no notice of it.

Now, however, he saw that it produced a very obvious effect upon the blacks. They became more alert; even the wounded men roused up and spoke to their companions.

Again the cry wailed out, this time evidently close at hand—so close that Clive started and looked keenly about him. It seemed as though the creature which uttered it were now actually almost beside him.

"What's that?" Alec exclaimed, in low tones. He, too, was peering about on every side. "I heard it two or three times before."

"Hanged if I know," muttered Clive. "It seemed to me——"

"Why, it's that Johnny there!" cried Alec, pointing to the black who had warned them. "He's making the row himself, and—— Why, what the dickens are they up to now?"

To the surprise of the two chums the natives had suddenly run off—all, that is, who were able to run. They had darted over the logs which helped to defend their temporary camp, and were rushing down the slope of the hill as hard as they could run.

"Jiminy! They've deserted us—gone off and left us to fight our battle alone!" Alec exclaimed wrathfully. "The cowardly, ungrateful beggars!"

"But," Clive pointed out, in perplexed tones, "they've gone the wrong way if they wanted to bolt. They've gone to meet our enemies, not to avoid 'em!"

"What does it mean?" Alec asked, bewildered. "They've surely not gone to try to carry favour with their former masters by offering to betray us?"

"Can't believe it possible," said Clive. He was staring after the blacks just as they vanished into a thicket. "They've left their wounded fellows——"

"Yes, for us to look after," Alec grumbled. "As if we haven't enough to do to defend—— Hallo! What's all this mean?"

The blacks had reappeared from the thicket as suddenly as they had vanished into it. But now they were not alone. They had several companions with them, all as dark as themselves save one, who looked an extraordinary individual.

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand yarn next week.)