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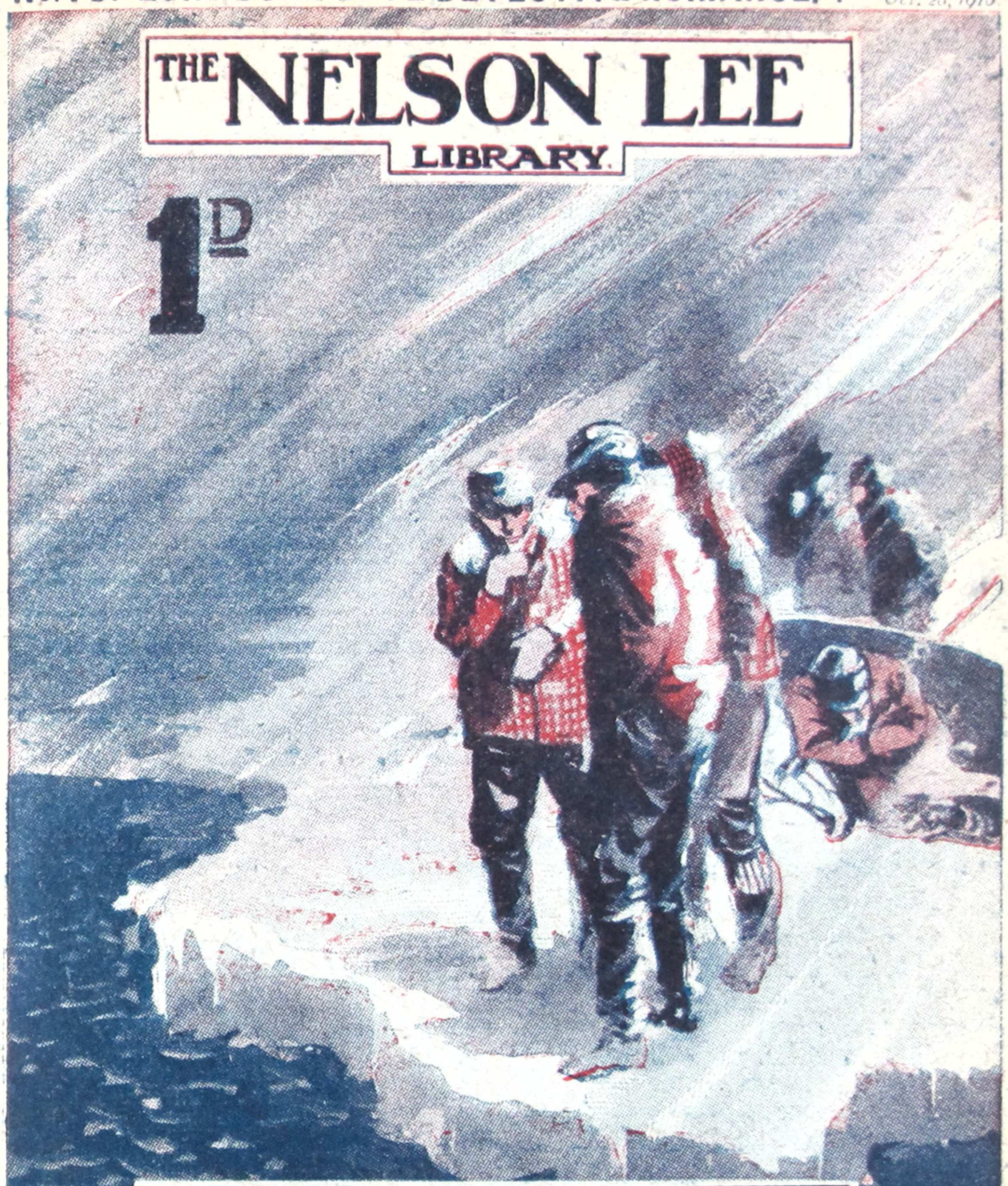

BLUE DIAMONDS.

A TALE OF DETECTIVE WORK AND ADVENTURE IN LONDON AND LABRADOR.

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

INCORPORATING THE "BOYS' REALM."

BLUE DIAMONDS

A Magnificent Story of NELSON LEE & NIPPER in London and Labrador.

Specially written for this issue by the well-known Author of "The Black Wolf," and other fine stories.

PROLOGUE.

IT would have been difficult to find over the whole face of the globe a more desolate spot than the bare, wind-swept tundra valley, unnamed to the world in general, but known to one man, and one man only, as Diamond Valley.

Situated some sixty miles from the coast of northern Labrador, and nearly one hundred and eighty miles from the nearest post of call on the coast, it was as far removed from man and the associations of man as it is possible to find. One might have gone north over the frozen wastes of sea and tundra for months, and one would have found only the same dreary Arctic solitudes.

One might have travelled west to the fringe of Hudson Bay, and across to the great bare territory beyond, and found little more. To the south lay the vast solitudes of Labrador, and beyond, Ungava, until it merged into Quebec and the St. Lawrence. East lay the Atlantic—three thousand miles of tossing grey—with the line well to the north of ocean traffic. Yet even then there was the passage of man, in a way.

Off the distant coast the sealing vessels and the whalers out of St. John's beat up the coast on their dangerous missions, putting in from time to time at the tiny settlements farther south. Once a year a ship brought letters and papers and supplies from St. John's, and once a year the lone man who lived in Diamond Valley hitched up his dogs and took the long "mush" of a hundred and eighty miles to the trading post south.

John Murchie was a mystery even to the white trader of Windward Inlet, and likewise to the missionary doctor, who worked three hundred miles of the Labrador coast from one year to another.

Out of the vast solitudes to the north the man appeared once a year, and, bringing in a few furs and a small quantity of gold dust, exchanged them for the supplies he needed. Two teams of dogs he brought, and when, after a three days' stay at the post, he departed, he took with him all the flour and sugar and tea the sleds would carry.

For five years he had appeared in this way, and in five years Ferguson, the Scotch trader, knew as much about him as he had when he came the

first time. Ferguson had a vague idea that Murchie was doing a little trapping and a little gold-washing somewhere in the interior, but the amount of each commodity which Murchie brought in each year was so small that it failed to arouse any particular interest in the spot from which it had come.

So five years had gone on, while in the wastes somewhere to the north John Murchie had battled with hunger and cold and illness. How little Ferguson the trader guessed that the silent man who appeared from the north had made a discovery that one day was to make the world rock with excitement, and fill the lonely stretches of Labrador with a rush such as the Klondike and South Africa had not seen even in their palmiest days!

It had taken five years for John Murchie to prove his theory that diamonds existed in northern Labrador, somewhere under the tundra of the country; but he had proven it, as one could have seen, had one been permitted to gaze upon Diamond Valley one spring day about six months before Murchie was due to make his annual trip to Windward Inlet.

Diamond Valley was not a valley, properly speaking. It was more of a basin-like depression cast between a circle of high tundra hills, grey and bleak and gale-swept.

High in the distant and unknown mountain range to the west the white mantle of winter still lingered, but down on the low ground, as in the Yukon and Alaska, summer was coming quickly, now the barriers of winter had been broken by spring.

It was not the soft green of England or Ireland; there was no sweet spring odour in the air, with the drowsy twittering of birds as they mated. It was wide and brown and bare and gaunt, half yielding only to the warmth of the climbing sun. In all that vast stretch only one habitation broke the monotony of the landscape. It was a small hut, set in the very bottom of the depression, and built of stones and moss.

Adjoining the hut was a small lean-to, which gave on to a stone enclosed yard, where over a dozen gaunt "huskies" growled and snarled and fought. Beyond the yard, again, was a small erection of stone and wood, almost concealed by a great heap of yellowish-looking clay. Near at hand was a small, clear, cold stream, which followed a vagrant course through the valley and disappeared somewhere to the east.

Diamond Creek, John Murchie called it. He seemed rather fond of the name "diamond," and to watch him at work was to glean an explanation of the mystery. On the day in question he was standing neck deep in a wide circular hole which he had dug. Around the edge lay the yellow clay which he had shovelled out during many days of weary labour.

Here and there along the valley could be seen other similar holes, each with its edging heap of clay, though not in every case was the clay yellow. When he had piled up a goodly-sized heap of the clay, he threw down his shovel, and, resting his hands on the edge of the trench, drew himself up. As he stood at the edge gazing off across the waste, he looked like some statue, typifying the unchanging north country.

Big and deep-chested, with thick, straight limbs and well-bearded face, he looked strong and clean and virile. His eyes had that far-away expression in them peculiar to men who live in the wide spaces and at sea. His rough flannel shirt was rolled up above the arms, exposing a sinewy forearm, muscular and brown.

His hat lay on the ground at the moment, and his hair was a tangled mass of red and grey. West he looked, then, turning slowly, he cast his gaze towards the south in the direction of tundra pile after tundra pile,

where they fell away in waves of brown and grey into the deep heart of Ungava.

Then, with a slow, weary movement of the body, he looked east, and finally his eyes swept the barrens to the north. One long look he gave, and he was just about to turn and pick up a bucket which lay on its side by the heap of yellow clay when he suddenly grew rigid, and, straightening up, fixed his eyes on something which moved black against the brown tundra.

It was towards the northwest, and, through some trick of the light, seemed to be magnified grotesquely as it moved and stopped, zig-zagged and paused, grew small, then large, and always with a steady progress towards the spot where John Murchie's shack stood.

No animal of the north ever crossed the tundra in that fashion. No wandering Indian or southern Esquimeau would have travelled in such a manner. Yet man it was—a man alone and without packs in that terrible waste of barren north country.

John Murchie watched with a deep frown while the black speck resolved itself into the definite outline of a man, and then, during one of the strange pauses it made, John Murchie read the riddle. The man who was coming towards him was either wounded or weak from want of food. He might make it, if his will would hold out.

He was about half a mile distant now, and, without relaxing the frown, John Murchie watched the battle against weakness. Not a move did he make to go to the rescue; but all the time he was thinking, and thinking hard.

For five long years he had lived there alone, dragging out a solitary and miserable existence. During the winters he had trapped, and during the spring and summer he had hand-washed the little stream for gold. By dint of the most gruelling labour he had managed to get together enough skins and gold each year to buy his supplies. But that was all.

Nor was it for the sake of the skins and the gold he had buried himself in such a spot. All that was but a side issue.

Seven years before John Murchie, mining engineer, had come to Labrador with a small hunting and prospecting party. Straight from the great diamond reef in South Africa, it is not unnatural that his thoughts should have dwelt on the possibility of the wastes of Labrador concealing in their grey and brown expanse the precious stones which, more than any other, excite the admiration and cupidity of man. It was but a theory, induced by the type of soil to be met with here and there.

He had dug and prospected during all that great trip, accompanying his work with a keen geological study of the land about him, and when, a year later, the expedition had returned to New York, John Murchie had gone back too, without having found any traces of diamonds, but with a firm conviction in his mind that they were to be found somewhere in Labrador.

For another year he had endeavoured vainly to interest American and Canadian capital in a venture which would enable him to put a proper expedition into the country and to search as he wished. But men were not keen to advance sums of money against nothing but a theory.

Financial matters were not too good at the time either, so John Murchie was forced to abandon his efforts. But he did not give up his idea. By dint of raking and scraping, he managed to get together sufficient to take him to St. John's, Newfoundland, and from there in a whaling ship to Windward Inlet.

The money still remaining he had invested in supplies, dogs, and tools, and, starting out across the north country, had worked his way steadily

northward, until he had finally come to the spot which he christened Diamond Valley. For there, if anywhere in Labrador, John Murchie reckoned he would find diamonds.

Now, diamond-bearing strata is a queer thing, and no man knows positively how diamonds eventuate. In South America and in Australia they are found on the surface in much the same manner as alluvial gold—in fact, in Brazil, the discovery of diamonds came while gold was being washed. But in South Africa the formation is unique, and it was for just such a formation John Murchie was searching in Labrador.

At some vastly remote date, when the surface of the earth was cool, but when the molten lava in the interior of the globe still surged and fought against its barriers, there was a terrific blow-out all over South Africa, ranging from the Cape clear up into Northern Rhodesia.

This great blow-out can be described no better than to liken it to the actual bursting forth of hundreds of lava lakes, the pressure of steam below breaking the crust of the earth.

The force, which must have been terrific, hurled lava and stone and what not up, up, up through the crust, and then, when the upheaval had settled, the ground solidified once more, leaving all over the country patches of soil different to the surrounding earth formation.

Originally this soil was all "blue ground," but the action of chemicals in the soil dissolved the top layers, and in its state of dissolution it turned a yellow. And in both the yellow clay on top, and the harder "blue ground" beneath, were found diamonds.

Not in every patch were the precious stones discovered, but in many of them, and to-day it is those patches of circular blow-outs which are the most famous diamond mines in the world to-day.

A study of the soil of Labrador convinced John Murchie that there had been a similar action of subterranean force there. If that were so, and if he could locate any of the patches where the blow-outs had taken place, then, why shouldn't he find diamonds even as they had been found in South Africa?

At any rate, that was the theory he had been working on; and for four years nothing but disappointment was his share. He found patches here and there, it is true, and in Diamond Valley not only had he found a large patch of yellow clay with "blue ground" beneath, but in the top soil he had found microscopic diamonds.

Then suddenly, about a year ago, he had come upon half a dozen diamonds of good size—nothing wonderful, but of perfect form and hardness. Months of disappointment had again followed, and during the long winter it was impossible for him to do anything except to go trapping.

But with the first melting of the snow and the exit of the frost from the ground he was back digging again, and, working methodically, he had at last come upon a steady yield of stones. As he went deeper they increased in size, until now he had collected what he knew would certainly amount to several thousand pounds' worth.

He had proved his theory—he had struck diamonds on a paying scale, and if he wished to toil there alone for some time longer he would be independent for life. But this was not the dream of John Murchie. His aims were higher, far higher than that.

At night, when he sat smoking alone in his little shack, he would picture the day when Diamond Valley would be a pit of industry, even as the De Beers and Kimberley mines in South Africa. He saw great derricks lining the sky edge, and houses and buildings forming a great city.

He saw himself as the directing genius of it all. He saw, in fact, life—life in that great barren waste which had never known life. He would work just a few months longer until the first snows of winter arrived. Then he would lay out his claims properly, and, that done, hitch up the huskies and mush for Windward Inlet.

He would file a claim for Ferguson the trader, for Ferguson had always been on the square. He would likewise file a claim in the name of the missionary doctor. And, after that, he would go to St. John's by the last boat of the season, and from St. John's to London.

In London, with the actual stones to show, he would find no difficulty in getting all the money he needed for development. That was the dream of John Murchie, and it was no unworthy one.

Nor was it any cruelty of nature which caused him to look upon the figure staggering towards him, and to make no effort to go out to meet him. It was simply that the sight of a man stumbling across that waste had given him a shock, and, following that, he had realised what it meant to have his solitude invaded at such a critical period.

But it was not for long that he stood thus. At last the man went down, and stayed down, and then, with a peculiar shifting of his shoulders, John Murchie leaped over the pile of yellow clay and strode out across the tundra to where the other lay.

He covered the distance in a very short time, and, as he drew close, he saw that the man was, as he had thought, not an Indian, but a white man. Everything about him bespoke the seaman, and in a flash John Murchie guessed the truth.

The man was unconscious now, but the thick, swollen lips and the protruding black tongue told their own story—had driven the man to his present state of collapse.

A hundred yards more, and he would have reached the little stream, to drink so greedily, perhaps, that he would have brought on suddenly that which he was trying to avoid—death.

He was a big man and heavy, but John Murchie bent over him without the slightest hesitation, and, placing his arms round him, lifted him up, not easily, but with no very perceptible effort. It was hard ground for walking, and a good distance to the shack, but John Murchie made it without once laying down his burden. Kicking open the door of the hut, he laid the unconscious man on his own bunk. Then he went to work on him.

Slowly and very gently, he soaked the swollen tongue in water, afterwards permitting a very, very little to trickle down the throat. At intervals of every few minutes he poured a few more drops between the swollen lips, until, at the end of half an hour, the man moved and opened his eyes.

He gazed without understanding at Murchie until he felt the heavenly coldness of the water, then he eagerly opened his lips for more, and weakly whispered the word over and over again.

"Water—water—water!"

But John Murchie knew when to desist, and, beyond a few drops at a time, would not give more. In one of the intervals he had placed a kettle on the fire, and had poured into it the contents of a tin of soup. When this was hot he poured a little between the patient's lips, and the man swallowed the hot liquid with a mad joy.

Then John Murchie left him to sleep, and went out to his pile of yellow clay to think and to plan.

CHAPTER II.

The "Gratitude" of the Swede—Looted!

"WELL, stranger, you have been here a week now, and I reckon you're well enough for me and you to have a little understanding. I don't want to pry into your private affairs, but at the same time, if we are going to live together until I go to Windward Inlet this winter, we'd better arrange some sort of an understanding."

John Murchie was sitting on an up-ended stone, which he used for a chair, and was gazing thoughtfully at the other man as he made these remarks.

The other man, who was sitting on the edge of the bunk, and looking far different than he had when, a week before, John Murchie had carried him into the shack, nodded his head and spoke with a strong American accent.

"That's fair enough," he said. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. My name is Olaf Anderson, and I am of Swedish birth, although I went to America when I was a baby. I am an able seaman, and I shipped aboard a whaler two months ago.

"We came out of St. John's and beat up the coast of Labrador. The skipper was a holy terror, and the mate was worse. One night I had a fight with the mate and laid him out. There was only one thing for me to do, and that was to beat it while I could.

"Well, I managed—never mind how—to get ashore, and, with a little food, started down the coast to try to work my way to Windward Inlet. I didn't know it was so far. My food ran out, and I couldn't find water. From that on, things got desperate.

"I must have lost all sense of direction, for I only vaguely remember spotting this shack. I guess you know more than I do about what happened from that on."

John Murchie nodded his head slowly.

"You seem to have been frank enough, stranger," he said, "and I will be frank with you. What do you think I am doing up here?—if you have thought about it at all."

The Swede shook his head.

"I haven't thought much about it. I reckoned you must be a trapper, and perhaps were doing a bit of prospecting as well."

"You've hit it on the head," responded Murchie. "Trapping and prospecting is what I have been doing here for five years. But it hasn't been all wasted time, for I have struck a paying proposition, and on certain conditions I am prepared to take you in on a partnership basis, if you are prepared to work hard from now until the first of the winter."

"What's your proposition?" asked the Swede lazily.

"It is this. I will take you in as a partner, and we will work equally. Since I have been here for five years, and have gone through all the hardships, you cannot expect me to give you a half share. But I really need another man during this summer, and I am prepared to give you a quarter interest in all we find from now until the day you leave me. How does that strike you?"

"Seems all right," said the Swede, after a moment. "I guess I'll have to work with you anyway, until I can get along to Windward Inlet and pick up another ship. I say yes; and, by the way, what is it you are digging gold?"

John Murchie gazed for some time into the eyes of the other before replying, then he bent forward and whispered slowly:

"Gold—no, not gold, but diamonds!"

The Swede laughed outright, then looked at Murchie as though he thought five years of the wilderness had turned his brain. But Murchie was ready for incredulity.

Without a word he thrust his hand into his pocket and took out a few stones. In silence he handed them across to the other.

The Swede, still incredulous, took them and gazed at them; then suddenly he stiffened and veiled his eyes, for they had filled with greed, and he knew it.

"Diamonds, and you are right," he said, after a few moments. "And I get a quarter interest?"

"You get a quarter interest," said John Murchie, reaching for the stones.

Then he rose.

"I have only one more thing to say, Anderson, and the time to say it is before we begin work. I shall play on the level with you. I shall give you a full quarter interest in all we find from now until the day you leave me; but, on the other hand, you will have to play square with me. If you don't, I will shoot you as I would a dog, for I haven't spent five years up here for nothing. Now, if you will come along, I will show you what I have done so far."

Olaf Anderson got up, and, with his mind visioning a great heap of diamonds which would one day be his, he followed Murchie out to the pile of yellow clay.

* * * * * * * * *

Five months passed away—five months during which John Murchie had proven to the hilt his theory that there were diamonds in Northern Labrador. Through the long, long days of the northern summer he and Anderson had toiled with marvellous industry, digging the clay and pulverising it.

He had no complaints to make about the conduct of his partner. The Swede was about early in the morning, and seemed literally to revel in hard work.

Steadily the pile of diamonds had grown and grown, until, when the end of their toil seemed but a week or two off, they had accumulated nearly two hundred diamonds—all of good size.

In addition, there were half a dozen very large stones, which they knew would run into a big sum, and, to crown all, one gigantic affair of over two hundred carats. Altogether, Murchie reckoned his own share of what he had already dug when Anderson turned up, and what he had dug since, ought to go over a hundred thousand pounds; and that would put him beyond all worry about capital for further development.

Anderson had no interest in the future. From a starving, thirst-mad, runaway sailor he had grown during the summer to be a man worth thirty or forty thousand pounds in diamonds, and he was all anxiety to get back to civilisation with his spoils.

As the autumn drew to a close, and the first frosts came, they began to plan for their trip to Windward Inlet, and now that the moment was in sight, so to speak, Anderson slacked off his work for the first time.

He developed a habit of dreaming in the clay pit, and in the evenings he would often go off alone over the tundra. Murchie, whose ideas were based on more substantial foundations, worked away as methodically as ever, nor did he upbraid his partner, for he was satisfied with what he had already accomplished.

Anderson also developed a habit of looking at Murchie in a surreptitious

way, which Murchie never saw, and in that look there was something queer—something speculative.

So the days passed on, until there came the first heavy fall of snow. Another week at the most, with the ground well set, and Murchie calculated they would be able to start for Windward Inlet. All work in the pit was over now, and during that last week Murchie made the division in as fair a manner as he could—three-quarters to himself and a quarter to the Swede.

And, finally, the eve of their departure drew on. That evening Murchie was busy putting things away in the hut, for he calculated it would be a long time before he would return—perhaps a year.

Anderson was busy tying up his pack for the journey, and outside the dogs were howling, as though they, too, had scented the intent to move. During the summer Murchie had built himself another bunk opposite the one he had given to the Swede, and when the little shack was all ship-shape for the months to come he smoked a final pipe, then grunted a good-night to his partner, who had already turned in, and sought his bunk.

In five minutes he was drowsy, in ten he was asleep, and in fifteen his breathing had deepened to the timbre of a man in a deep sleep. Anderson was also breathing deeply, but, as Murchie sank deeper and deeper into the spell of sleep, Anderson stirred slightly, and, raising himself on one elbow, gazed across at the other bunk lit up by the ruddy glow of the fire.

For a minute or so he watched thus, then, slippling out of the bunk, stealthily he tiptoed across to the corner of the shack. He picked up something there, and stole back across the room: but this time he went towards the bunk of his partner, and not towards his own.

Murchie stirred, and turned over with a grunt. Anderson dropped swiftly to the floor, and waited. The heavy breathing came again, and gradually he lifted his head until it was on a level with the edge of the bunk. He drew up his right hand until that which he carried could be seen. It was a long rawhide rope.

Anderson allowed the coils to slip to the floor, retaining only a single looped end, which he had apparently already arranged for his purpose. He rose higher and higher, until he was bending over Murchie. Murchie was still sleeping soundly, but, through the cloud of it, there must have crept to his subconsciousness some warning of danger, for he stirred again and muttered something.

Anderson stood as still as he could. Murchie grew quiet again, and then, with a swift motion, Anderson bent well forward. The looped end of the rope was thrown over the bunk and the end allowed to drop behind it.

One long arm Anderson shot under the bunk, grabbing the looped end. He dragged it out and upwards, twisting it around the main length of the rope. Murchie stirred again, but, even as his eyes opened, Anderson had drawn tight the rope, pinioning Murchie to the bunk and holding him as helpless as a trussed chicken.

"What's this?" grunted Murchie, suddenly wideawake. "Is this some silly joke of yours, Anderson? Cut it out, I tell you."

Anderson did not reply. The beads of perspiration were standing out on his forehead. Even though Murchie were helpless, Anderson was afraid of him. It must have taken a good deal of mental driving for him to get up his nerve to make the attack.

He brought the rawhide rope round and round the bunk, pinioning the arms still more, then the body, and finally the legs. He wound the rope from the throat to the ankles. Murchie, struggling to free himself, was speaking in short, quick gasps.

"You contemptible coyote!" he grunted, "what is your game? Cut this out, I tell you, and unwind this rope. If you are playing any treachery on me, I swear to you I will kill you when I get free."

With the last knot tied and his victim helpless, Anderson recovered some of his nerve. He stood up and eyed Murchie for the first time.

"What do I care for your threats?" he snarled. "You miserly old fool. You kept me here working all summer digging up your blessed diamonds for a quarter interest. You think I would be satisfied with that? Then you don't know Olaf Anderson. But I have worked, and I have bided my time. Now it has come, and your threats are useless. I will leave here to-morrow, but you will not; and it won't do you any good to threaten what you will do, for before I leave I am going to kill you. Do you understand? Kill you! Then it's me for the bright lights and little old New York, and, with this bag of stuff, I guess Olaf Anderson will be fixed for life."

Murchie listened to him in silence, but when he had finished Murchie spoke again.

"I said you were a coyote, but I insulted that animal," he said tensely "You came staggering across that waste of land six months ago nearly dead for want of food and water. I rescued you, and took you into my shack When you were well again, I was frank with you, and made you my partner

"I had spent five years here—five years of such work and suffering that you could not comprehend. When you came on the scene I had already struck diamonds, and you walked into a paying thing which has given you more wealth than a lifetime of sailoring would have given you. I have fed you and sheltered you and made you rich, and this is the way you repay me. You strike me in the dark when I am asleep; you are too cowardly to fight me in fair fight. Then you boast that you will take the result of all those years of toil and kill me. Well, if you have the nerve to kill me, then I am helpless; but I will wager you this, Anderson—I'll wager you haven't the nerve to kill me with your own hand. I shall be looking at you when you try to do it, and you will be afraid."

Anderson struck Murchie across the face with his open hand.

"Afraid," he shouted—"afraid? You just watch how afraid I am!"

With that he rushed across the room and took up Murchie's shot-gun. It was loaded; it was always loaded.

He rushed back to the bunk and cocked both barrels.

"Afraid?" he shouted again. "I'll show you how afraid I am, and I'll give you both barrels!"

He lifted the gun to his shoulder and took aim. The end of the barrel was less than six feet from Murchie's chest. The double charge would tear his body open in a great gaping hole. Yet he did not flinch. His eyes burned deeply with a fire which Anderson could not understand. He kept them fixed on Anderson.

Anderson, for all his wild bluster, seemed a long time in getting an aim at six feet. His eyes wavered along the barrel, then they met Murchie's. Anderson looked away, and, dropping his lids, tried to force himself to pull the trigger. He couldn't do it. Against his will he opened his eyes again, and saw Murchie watching him.

"You are afraid," sneered Murchie, still holding his gaze. "You are afraid. You are a coward, and a coward of the worst kind. You are even afraid to shoot a helpless man."

And it was the truth. With the sweat literally pouring off his face. Anderson lowered the gun with a oath and uncocked it.

"That's all right," he snarled. "I won't shoot you now. I'll save it up for something better."

Anderson replaced the gun in the corner, and, keeping his gaze averted from Murchie, he began moving about the shack. First he got his own bag of diamonds, then he went to the corner where he knew Murchie's to be buried, and dug them up. He placed both bags inside a small pelt and tied them firmly. He put the filled pelt beside his own pack, and then went outside.

Murchie lay watching the door. He didn't know exactly what Anderson was up to, but he could guess. He could hear Anderson swearing and growling at the dogs in the yards. Then came the sharp, metallic crash of stone upon stone. Anderson was tearing down part of the stone wall of the yard. That meant he intended turning some of the dogs loose.

The noise kept up for half an hour or more, during which John Murchie struggled and tore at the rawhide which bound him so securely. But Anderson had not been a sailor for nothing.

The door opened presently, and Anderson came in again. His eyes were bright with the light of excitement. He walked over to his own side of the shack, ignoring Murchie. He picked up his own pack, and the roll of hide in which he had placed the diamonds. He carried them outside, and Muchie could, in fancy, see him stowing them away on one of the sledges.

He was gone nearly an hour this time, yet not for a moment did Murchie pause in his efforts to free himself. Anderson came back into the hut several times during the night. At last, towards daybreak, Murchie could hear him cursing the dogs volubly. That meant he was harnessing up the eager huskies.

Now Murchie could read plainly the plan of the other. He would take one sledge and sufficient huskies to pull it to Windward Inlet. He would smash down the stone wall of the yard, and turn the others loose. They could follow the sledge or wander over the tundra as they felt inclined. So far Murchie was right, but he was far indeed from guessing the full intent of the Swede.

Olaf Anderson was typical of a certain nature which abounds among all races and in every clime. If he had had the nerve, he would have shot Murchie as he lay bound in the bunk. But it was sheer cowardice which had prevented him from doing so. It was not the actual fear of pulling the trigger, but it was a certain ingrained awe of what might follow.

To be the actual instrument of death was what he could not face. To plunge into a fight, and in the heat of it to strike his man down, as he had struck down the mate of the whaling ship, was not beyond him. That was the natural brutality of brute courage. But while he was as evil and as vile as man might be, there was still in him, as there is in most men, a fear of the unknown

He was too coarse, too brutal, too lacking in fineness to conquer that fear by understanding. He only knew that in him was the great dread, and it was the rousing of that, by the quiet challenge of Murchie's gaze, which had made him falter in his direct purpose.

But it did not alter his decision to carry out his intent indirectly. He was determined to make a clean sweep before he left, and he would employ an agent in the deed, much as the man who sits behind the altar of money directs his paid minions to carry out his plans. His may not be the hand which strikes, but his is the mind which conceives, and, fool that he is, he thinks his is not the guilt. That was the case of Olaf Anderson.

He took a smug credit to himself that he could wreak his purpose upon John Murchie, and yet by a sort of primitive self-hypnosis—though he

wouldn't have called it that—he could escape what he thought would be all moral fear of what would happen.

Only when Murchie saw him clearing the shack of everything movable did he guess his purpose. Light articles—articles which would not burn—were left where they were. But all other matter which was of a combustible nature he piled in a heap by the wide, open stone fireplace, and made a trail of seal oil straight across to the bunk where Murchie lay bound.

The wood of the bunk he saturated with the oil, even carrying the trail across to his own bunk. Then his preparations were finished; he was ready to depart.

Now, for the first time since he had wilted in his determination to shoot John Murchie, he walked across to the bunk and stared down at his victim. Excitement had given him courage, and it still upheld him. He sneered coarsely, then he said thickly:

"Good-bye, my friend. When I am in New York I shall think of you. I have made all arrangements for you to be nice and warm here. You will think of my thoughtfulness when I am on my way to Windward Inlet. Good-bye!"

With that he turned and lurched to the door. Murchie said not a word. He would not plead for mercy. He knew such a course would not have moved the other, and would only have fed his mind with pleasure. The Swede was wrapped up in a melodrama of his own creating. He had staged a situation out of which John Murchie saw no hope of winning.

He was carrying himself with the swagger of one playing the deed to the end, and words from Murchie would have but given him the chance to indulge his enjoyment still more.

Murchie saw him step to the fireplace and bend down. He saw him kick the combustible material straight into the fire. He saw a blaze leap up as the oil caught fire, then Anderson ran for the door and slammed it after him.

John Murchie's eyes were upon the flaring line of oil which was racing towards him, but his ears were centred on what was happening outside. He heard Anderson's voice raised, he heard the crunch of his feet on the snow, he heard the creak of the sledge and the barking of the dogs; then the sounds grew more faint, and he knew that Anderson had started on the long trail for Windward Inlet, leaving him bound and gagged in a hut which was soon to become a blazing inferno—a holacaust of flame and smoke.

Murchie grimly watched the flame as it caught a wider and wider course and swept on to the bunk where he lay. Anderson's bunk was already blazing, and now he was forced to twist his face away from the blaze. He heard a sharp crackling beneath him. His own bunk was ablaze.

He could feel the increasing heat beneath him, and knew that very soon his own flesh would begin to sizzle in the blaze. Over by the fireplace the fire was spreading rapidly. It would have been much worse had the walls of the shack not been made of stone; but, on the other hand, while they would not burn they would absorb and retain the heat, forming finally a sort of huge oven in which the body of John Murchie would roast if the flames did not get him.

But the flames were going to get him. They were creeping up the side of the bunk now, and were licking greedily towards him as he frantically strained away from them. Through the cracks in the bottom of the bunk the flame was bursting upon the rough skin which formed the mattress. The calves of his legs and his feet were experiencing an almost unendurable heat. The smoke was creeping into his lungs and his eyeballs were smarting painfully.

Cloud after cloud of black smoke from the burning oil obscured his vision.

and now and then a greater burst of flame would reach him. His only prayer now was a desire that the smoke would make him unconscious before the baked flame got him fully.

A wider band of flame now burst through the bottom of the bunk, and, stoical though he had been, a hoarse cry was ripped from John Murchie's throat as the fire caught his legs.

He made one last struggle to break free, given strength by a frenzy of despair. He kicked and twisted and squirmed, and fought as he had never fought in his life. And then, just when he was on the point of yielding, something happened.

He felt the whole bottom of the bunk drop from beneath him. He felt a momentary smothering of the flame as the fresh material smashed in upon it. He felt the sharp loosening of his bonds. Then, in a whirl of flame and smoke, half blinded with the holacaust, staggering with the pain of his burned legs and feet, he wrenched himself clear of the wreckage and managed somehow to reach the door.

How he managed to open it he never could tell. He felt the cold air of night upon his face, and the exquisite pain of the snow on his feet; then he staggered forward a few paces, wheeled dizzily, and at last dropped prone to the ground.

Six shaggy huskies stood in a ring out in the snow, and gazed with puzzled wonder at the burning hut and at the thing which had whirled out of that chaos of flame to circle like a dervish, then to fall prone.

THE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

A Visitor with a Strange Story.

MR. NELSON LEE glanced with some curiosity at the man who had just been ushered into his consulting-room. It was not often that Gray's Inn Road saw just such an individual as he.

Lee's first impression, as indeed that of most observing people, was of a pair of deep, deep blue eyes, lit up by a fire which meant a remarkable intensity of nature. So fierce was it, so much a window of the soul, that it quite subordinated the rest of the man's features. It was only after an interval that one saw the rest of the man.

He was big and brawny, with the depth of chest peculiar to men who live the "hard life." He wore a heavy beard, which straggled down over his chin in a thick bush of unkempt carelessness. His clothes breathed of the sea; his hands were brown and gnarled with hard manual work.

He might have been a seaman from his clothes, captain from the intellect displayed by his brow, and yet there was a something else about him which made Lee guess that he had known a still different profession.

He had removed his hat as he entered, and, gazing at him thus, Lee reckoned his age to be anything between thirty-five and forty-five. As a matter of fact, it was midway between the two figures. He returned Lee's gaze with interest tinged by the slightest trace of diffidence, but when Lee indicated a chair, he sat down readily enough.

"You wished to see me, Mr.—er—Murchie?"

"John Murchie," said his visitor. "Yes, Mr. Lee, I do wish to see you. I don't know really why I have come to you. Like a good many other people, I suppose you will smile at what I have to say. And, besides, I

reckon my case is a little out of your line. It is peculiar in more ways than one."

"As for instance——" encouraged Lee, as the other stopped.

John Murchie gave a slight laugh.

"When people usually come to see you they usually ask your help, don't they, Mr. Lee?"

"That is quite correct," responded Lee. "Have you not come to seek my help?"

"Yes, I have; but your usual clients usually pay you a fee for what you do for them, I take it?"

"Unless they are too poor to do so," said Lee. "If the case is worthy of my time, I never insist upon a charge if my client is unable to pay. Like the ordinary specialist, I charge in proportion those who can afford to pay. That makes it more equitable."

"Quite so, Mr. Lee. But I reckon you don't have many clients seek your help and at the same time ask you to put up some of your own money in order to help them."

Nelson Lee frowned slightly.

"You are quite right in that inference, Mr. Murchie. But suppose you come to the point. Then perhaps we shall know on what basis we stand."

John Murchie did not reply for a moment. He was gazing out through the window which looked on to Gray's Inn Road, his mind evidently far away. Lee's impatient tapping on the desk recalled him to his surroundings.

"I am sorry, Mr. Lee," he said. "I was just thinking that perhaps, after all, I had made a mistake in coming to you. Still it has taken me a good many weeks to do so, and I will not go away without telling you why I came. Are you willing to listen to me, sir?"

"I have already told you that I am willing to hear what you have to say," rejoined Lee.

And all the time he was speaking, Lee was wondering why a man who, when he wished, could speak in an educated manner should be so grim and gnarled with the battering of hardship—why those intense blue eyes should shine with such a terrific purpose.

John Murchie spoke with great deliberation, choosing his words carefully. He spoke as a man who is playing his last card and wishes to make quite sure that it will capture the trick.

"Mr. Lee," he said, "I may say, as a way of beginning, that I am a mining engineer by profession. It is needless for me to go into the early part of my career, for it was uneventful, and has no bearing on the real purpose of my visit to you. It is now nearly seven years since I joined an expedition which was to go to Labrador. I had had some mining experience in Brazil and in South Africa. While I was on that expedition as the engineer of the outfit, I noticed certain indications of the soil of Labrador which caused me to think parts of it might have been formed in the same way South Africa was formed. I do not know if you are acquainted with what I mean, but——"

Lee raised his hand.

"I take it you mean the patches of blue ground in South Africa which geologists think were caused by a violent upheaval of the crust of the earth long after it had cooled."

"I mean just that, Mr. Lee."

"Then you may proceed. I am familiar with the phenomena of which you speak."

"That makes it much easier for me to explain then," went on Murchie, evidently pleased that he was talking to a man of understanding. "As I

was saying. Mr. Lee, I came upon certain indications which made me think of South Africa. I investigated as far as possible, and at last came upon definite proof that parts of the soil of Labrador had been thrown up in the same way. On the top I found the yellow soil, which, as you know, is but the precipitated blue ground. Then beneath I discovered the hard blue ground.

"It occurred in patches of several acres each, just as one finds all over South Africa, even up to Rhodesia. You will know, too, that it is in such ground that the diamonds of South Africa are found. The de Beers mine and the Kimberley mine are such formations.

"But in the patches I found on that occasion in Labrador I did not come upon diamonds. Nevertheless, I persisted in my theory that diamonds would be found in Labrador, and when the expedition returned to New York I endeavoured to enlist capital in order to make a proper expedition and search.

"Without something definite, capital was shy. I tried Canada, and failed there as well. Then I realised what I could on my own few possessions, and started off alone. I landed on the coast of Labrador at a small post known as Windward Inlet. I need not dwell on what followed immediately after that. Sufficient is it to say that I worked my way steadily to the interior and to the north, and for five years I searched for the type of diamond-bearing ground I sought. I found it.

"I found it after over four years of the most lonely and gruelling life a man can lead. I trapped in the winter and washed gold in the summer as a means of keeping myself alive, while between times I dug and dug and dug for what I sought. I found it. Yes, I found it, and, in finding it, I came upon diamonds—not small, isolated patches, but definite pockets of them.

"I had proved my theory. It was for me then to get together sufficient to make the world of finance believe that I had really struck something big. It was not my idea to dig out only enough to make myself a rich man, and then to give out the news. I had other dreams. It was to make Diamond Valley, as I had christened it, a second Kimberley, and the making of a second Kimberley. Well, let me get on.

"I worked morning, noon, and night. I dug up the yellow soil, and in it I found diamonds of every shape and size. I got down to the blue ground, and the diamonds were there, too. I had collected a good few by early summer, and ahead of me I could see success. I figured I would have sufficient by the beginning of winter to serve my purpose, perhaps even enough to enable me to finance a parent company myself.

"Then upon my loneliness there appeared a man, the first to come near my camp in five years. He was a sailor who had deserted from a whaling ship. What the truth of the matter is, I don't know. It had something to do with a quarrel he had with the mate. He reached land somehow, and when he came stumbling across the tundra towards my shack he was about all in.

"I went out to him where he had collapsed, and carried him to the shack. I tended him, and nursed him, and fed him back to strength. When he was better, I told him that unless he walked it there was no way for him to get to Windward Inlet before the winter, but I offered him an opening as partner with me. I told him if he would work with me until the snow came, and we got to Windward Inlet with the dogs, I would give him a quarter share in all we found—an offer which I considered eminently fair, considering that I had spent five years there and had gone through all the hardship before I finally struck diamonds.

"He accepted my offer, and I must say he worked well until a week before

we were to leave. Then he slacked off; but I never suspected that he was plotting any treachery until the night before we were to leave. We were all ready. Our packs had been made up, and the dogs prepared. We were to start at daybreak.

"I turned in early and was soon asleep, but I was awakened soon after. I found him bending over me, and, on attempting to rise, found that he had bound me to the bunk with a rawhide rope. He secured me firmly. I was helpless to move. He jeered at me and reviled me, and revealed his purpose. I said little. There was little to say.

"He got my shotgun and cocked both barrels. I told him he was too cowardly to shoot me, and I was right. He hadn't the nerve. But he had the deviltry to do something worse. He made all preparations to start for Windward Inlet. Then he poured seal-oil over the floor and on the bunks. After that, he took everything in the cabin which was combustible and placed it near the fire. When the moment came he set the mass alight, then he rushed out of the shack and left me to my fate."

John Murchie's voice trailed off just here, and the light in his eyes grew deeper. He had reached the point where he had gone through an agony which few men have endured. He had lain helpless while flaming death stretched out a greedy tongue for him. He had gone to the very edge of the mysterious valley, and he had looked into it. It had placed its mark upon him, and the mark was the illumination in his eyes.

Lee saw it, and guessed enough by now to know the reason. He said nothing. He silently handed across a box of cigars, from which John Murchie mechanically took one. Nipper, at his desk in the corner, was keeping a tense silence. Suddenly John Murchie began again.

"I shall not go into unnecessary details of what happened after that," he said, in a curiously metallic voice. "The fire blazed up, and the shack itself would have been afire but for the fact that it was mostly of stone. But it reacted in another way, for the stone absorbed the heat and became a sort of great stone oven, in which I, the bird, was trussed and roasting.

"But Olaf Anderson, the treacherous Swede who had betrayed me, had been too clever. The fire which was intended to destroy me was the thing which delivered me. It burned across the floor and caught the bunks. It licked up about my face and my body. It came through the bottom of the bunk and burned my legs and feet. I can show you the marks when you wish. But in burning me it also burned the wooden bottom of the bunk and the rawhide rope which bound me. Even as the bottom of the bunk collapsed into the fire beneath, the rawhide parted, and just in time I managed to get free.

"I got out of that holacaust of flame and smoke some way. I do not know how; I cannot remember. I only know that some time the next day I came to my senses lying on the ground by the door of the shack. There again the fire saved me from death. I have already told you how it acted as a great oven. There was sufficient heat radiating from the stone walls to warm the ground close by to melt the snow and to keep me from freezing.

"Anderson had taken half the dogs, and turned the others loose to follow or run wild as they wished. They did neither. He was a seaman, and did not know the huskie of the north. They hung about the shack, and when I lay on the ground two of them—one, the leader—came to me and lay beside me. It was the warmth they gave me, as much as the heat which radiated from the shack, which saved me.

"I was in a terrible state when I woke up. My limbs were burned terribly, and the hair had been singed off my face and head. I managed to crawl to a cache of venison and seal-oil I had made, and which Anderson

knew nothing of. I rubbed the oil on my wounds, and cooked some of the venison in the remains of the fire in the shack. I fed the dogs, and then sat down to think.

"The shack was in ruins, although the walls were standing. Thanks to the cache of meat and oil, I had something to exist on, for had it not been for that I must have starved. What Anderson could not take with him he had destroyed.

"My first inclination, naturally, was to go after him. I had the dogs and one sledge which he had not thought it worth while to destroy. But I was too badly burned to attempt the journey of a hundred and eighty miles then. There was nothing for it but to devise another plan. With the help of some skins, which lay in a corner of the dog-shed, I managed to make a sort of roof over one corner of the shack. I lay there for a week doctoring my burns until I could get about again.

"The dogs did not attempt to leave. They never do leave a master and food. When a week had gone by, I had figured out the only plan possible. It was too late to go after Anderson. I knew that there was to be a ship from St. John's call at Windward Inlet about that time. He would be away in her before I could catch him. Besides, he had looted me of everything. I was penniless. I could not follow him to the outside world without the means to pay my way. So I did the only thing there was to do.

"I dug back the snow and softened the ground with burning oil. I had to do this every morning, but it enabled me to work. I toiled as I had never toiled, and for a couple of weeks I sought for diamonds. Luck was with me. I did not find many, but I did come upon some of good size. Anderson had taken from me sufficient, I reckoned, to realise over a hundred thousand pounds, while his own share would bring thirty or forty thousand.

"At the end of two weeks a severe cold snap came on, and the frost was too much for my methods. It was impossible to work longer. Then a heavy blizzard came and drifted up the hole and the surrounding land, so that I could not get through it any longer. I took what diamonds I had, and, harnessing up the dogs, started for Windward Inlet. I made it a week later.

"Ferguson, the trader there, was something of a friend of mine—if you can call a man a friend whom you see once a year. He told me that Anderson had come in three weeks before and had stayed with him a couple of days. Ferguson recognised my dogs and my sledge, of course, but Anderson had his story ready.

"He told Ferguson that he was a seaman who had deserted from a whale ship, and that he had found my shack. He told how he had been with me all the summer, and that he was keen to catch the first ship to St. John's. He said that I had found it inconvenient to come through just then, but would probably be along in a month or so.

"He added that I had insisted that he take my dogs and one sledge and come through. On the face of that, Ferguson took him in and did all he could for him. He got away safely in the St. John's boat, and that was the last Ferguson thought of the matter until I turned up. You can imagine what he felt when I told him the truth.

"Ferguson is a straight man, and when I staked out the claims on the diamond discovery I staked one out for him. I took him into my confidence, and told him all. He sent some Indians up the coast to a small Indian settlement. From there they managed to get into touch with a sealing ship from Newfoundland.

"For the promise of a price guaranteed by Ferguson—every sealer from Newfoundland knew Ferguson—they agreed to put into Windward Inlet

for me. A week later they picked me up. We scudded across the straits to Newfoundland with a ship full of seals and the bow full of frozen corpses.

"The sealer had hit one of those bad times on the floes, which all sealers must meet at some time, and which, as well as the cod-fishing off the Grand Banks, has kept the male population of Newfoundland down a little, if not much. Anyway, to make a long story short, Mr. Lee, I was picked up at Windward Inlet.

"I left Ferguson promising to look after Diamond Valley as well as he could, until he heard from me. I went to St. John's. There was no place else to go. But there I caught a boat for Boston, and from Boston I went on to New York. You can guess why I went to New York.

"On leaving Windward Inlet, Ferguson had supplied me with enough money to carry me on for a while. New York I had to reach first. Anderson had always talked of New York. He was the child of Swedish parents who had emigrated to the States when he was a baby. From his talk you would have thought he was an American.—And I knew, as sure as Nature ever made little apples, that Olaf Anderson would strike for New York the first place he went to.

"I knew that, in his heart, the man was nothing but a coarse voluptuary. What he made when he was with me, what he stole from me, he wanted for just one purpose—to realise those things he had always dreamed of and looked at as beyond his reach. He wanted to revel in the fleshpots—to sink himself in the dregs of dissipation. And on what he stole from me he would do it.

"Well, I went to New York. The money Ferguson had advanced me just got me there. I realised on some of the diamonds I had brought with me. For the first time I learned how I had miscalculated. Where I had figured the stones would be worth hundreds, they were worth thousands. I reckoned the stones Anderson got away with would be worth something over a hundred thousand pounds. Now I know how wrong I was. They were worth nearer half a million.

"You see, when I reckoned their value it was when looking at the rough stones. I had not seen them cut and polished. I had far under-estimated their value. I sold some of the stones for five thousand dollars—that is, a thousand pounds. That gave me enough to go on with. Then I began my search for Anderson.

"I shall not lead you through the months that followed, Mr. Lee. Sufficient is it to say that I searched New York for him without any success. I went on to Chicago. A slight clue led me there. From there the trail led me to 'Frisco, and there I lost all trace of him.

"I bottled up my plan of vengeance. I had sold all the stones but two. My money had run out. I realised that, if I would be avenged upon Olaf Anderson, I must wait. And then my thoughts turned to the development of the diamond discovery I had made.

"I went back to New York. The money I had left in 'Frisco just got me there. With the two stones in my possession I began to lay my plans. Once more I determined to interest big capital in the scheme. I went about New York. I interviewed genuine capital and fake capital, as every man must who would promote a scheme.

"It was during that time I met a big promoter, who, when I placed my proposition before him, laughed at me at first, then accused me of being a thief. He said that a similar proposition had already been placed before him. I said it was impossible. He took a map, and on that map, Mr. Lee, he pointed out a spot in Labrador which was exactly where Diamond

Valley was situated. He was already, so he said, organising an expedition to go there.

"I did manage to get out of him the name of the man who had brought the proposition to him. I discovered it was the name of Olaf Anderson. Anderson must have spent most of the money he got from the diamonds, and, as a last resort, had followed the same plan which was mine. He thought he was playing a safe game. He thought I was dead.

"Then I did a very foolish thing. I realised on one of the two diamonds I had left. More in desperation than anything else I went to a gaming place that night. I played heavily. I lost all the ready money I had. It was a mad thing to do. But the thing I have done, I have done.

"I swore that I would not part with my remaining diamond. I tried to think what I should do. It was by mere chance that I picked up a New York paper, in which I read of a case which you had brought to a completion, Mr. Lee. It was an important case. It first made me think that I should try London instead of New York. I went to the docks there, and after some effort I managed to ship aboard a brig for Liverpool. I worked my way down from there, and arrived here last night.

"This morning I discovered your address, and came to you. Why, I can't tell you, except that I felt if there was any man living who would listen to my story—if there was anyone who would believe me, and who had the nerve to back his opinion and help me, that man was you. Now, I have told you a good deal which you may not credit. I do not blame you.

"But, to a great extent, I am prepared with the proof, and, above all, I have with me, Mr. Lee, the diamond which I have not disposed of. Are you interested enough to test my story? And supposing you then believe me, would you be interested enough to back me up in the proposal I have to make? If not, then I have only to thank you, Mr. Lee, for your courtesy in listening to me so patiently, and to bid you good day. I await your decision, sir, and I know it will be a fair one."

Nelson Lee did not reply at once. Nor did he even look at Murchie. His eyes were staring out of the window, and his whole expression was one of abstraction. But those who knew Nelson Lee best would have told you that when he looked so he was thinking hardest. It was after nearly five full minutes of silence that he turned his gaze back to John Murchie.

"You have told me a remarkable tale, Mr. Murchie," he said slowly, "a tale remarkable in more ways than one. It is a phantasmagoria of toil and suffering, of hope and despair, of charity and treachery, of trials and mistakes. It interests me—you interest me; but, while there are several questions waiting to be answered, I cannot ask them until you have stated definitely what you wish me to do. Can you tell me?"

"I can," responded John Murchie promptly.

"Then let me hear it."

"I want a man or a company to finance me. I want to go back to Labrador and to Diamond Valley with the guarantee of sufficient funds to develop the place."

"You have certainly put it concretely enough," smiled Lee. "And now I shall ask you my questions. Firstly, what do you think this man Anderson is proposing to do?"

"He has probably lost all the money he realised on the diamonds he stole from me, but retained sufficient stones to impress capital in New York. I imagine, from what I was able to find out in New York, that he represented himself as the discoverer of Diamond Valley. You see, he knows the locality as well as I do."

"That is true," remarked Lee thoughtfully. "You did not mention the name of this New York capitalist. Can you recall it?"

"Yes. The name is Cyrus K. Hornblower."

"Ah, I have heard of him," said Lee. "If Hornblower has taken it up, then there will be plenty of capital provided, for he is mixed up with an influential clique—a clique, by the way, that would have little regard for any claims you might make, Mr. Murchie."

"Well I know that, Mr. Lee. In New York, when I began to lay claim to Diamond Valley, and accused Anderson of having robbed me, Hornblower just laughed at me."

"I can quite understand that. Then you think he is fitting out an expedition to go to Labrador?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was that?"

"It was in the winter. They would hardly attempt to go north until this month—March."

"How much money do you think it would take to finance you?"

"Well, Mr. Lee, I am in a different position than I was when I had plenty of diamonds to show. They would have realised over a hundred thousand, and that would have been sufficient to float a good-sized development company. But now I am just where I must take what I can get. My plans have naturally changed."

"I want enough to take me out to Diamond Valley and to finance a moderate development. Then, when I have more stuff to show, it ought to be easy enough to get what money is needed. I should think about ten thousand pounds would cover what I need now. And myself, I have only one stone left—worth probably eight hundred."

"Let me see the stone you have," said Lee.

Murchie opened his coat, and, thrusting his hand deep into an inner pocket, took out a small washleather bag. Untying the mouth, he allowed a smallish, rounded, dirty white pebble to roll out on to his hand. It looked more like a common pebble than a diamond worth seven or eight hundred pounds; but when Lee turned it over in his hand, he saw that one end had been cut roughly, revealing the pure lustre of the stone within. He knew that Murchie had not over-estimated its value. It might, when cut and polished, realise a thousand. He laid it on the desk and looked at the other.

"You must acknowledge, Mr. Murchie, that your request is rather an extraordinary one," he said slowly. "I have never even heard of you before. You come to me and tell me a strange tale about Labrador. I might suggest that you have twisted the story to suit your own purpose—that the man Anderson, whom you accuse, is in reality the rightful owner of Diamond Valley.

"I do not say I think this—I merely suggest the suspicions which would naturally arise. Then you suggest that I finance an expedition to this place, and put up ten thousand pounds to do it with. It is a case where business judgment would never serve. It is a wide chance, purely and simply. Then, again, if it is true that Cyrus K. Hornblower is organising an expedition to go there, one might drop the whole ten thousand by arriving too late. Do you follow me?"

John Murchie reached for his hat.

"I follow you, Mr. Lee," he said. "I don't blame you either. It is only natural that you should think what you do. What I have told you is on the level. I have no proof of my story other than the pebble on the desk, the burns on my body, and, if you go to Labrador, the word of Ferguson, the

trader at Windward Inlet. Anyway, I thank you for listening to me so patiently, and I'll say good day."

He rose as he finished speaking, and began to put his hat on.

Lee smiled.

"Not so fast, Mr. Murchie," he said. "I merely outlined some of the difficulties and doubts in the matter. I did not say that I would not support you. But now I will tell you what I will do. For a one-quarter interest in whatever may eventuate at Diamond Valley, I am willing to put up ten thousand pounds spot cash to finance an expedition to Labrador—on conditions."

"What are the conditions, Mr. Lee?" asked Murchie, his voice quivering with eagerness.

"That, so far as the business end of it is concerned, you leave the management of things to me, and, so far as the mining end of it is concerned, you handle that. Moreover, we should have to reckon with the probability that we should find rivals on the ground—the Hornblower party. That might mean more than just talk. It might mean fight. Are you game for that?"

"You just give me the chance," said Murchie. "I have put by my vengeance on Olaf Anderson until I have floated the mine, but I will never rest until I have 'got him.' I am willing to agree to all your conditions, and I have only one to advance myself."

"What is it?"

"It is, that if we do come upon the New York party there, and a fight should eventuate, as it is bound to, Olaf Anderson, if he is there, is my man."

Lee nodded.

"I fancy you are entitled to that, Mr. Murchie," he said. "And now, since every day, every hour, is precious, I think we had better get to work and draw up an agreement, then we can go into details of supplies and finance."

"Do you mean that, Mr. Lee?" asked Murchie tensely, as he advanced to the desk.

"I rarely give a wrong impression of what I mean," answered Lee quietly.

"You, having never seen me before, are willing to advance me ten thousand pounds on my bare word?"

"It may be impossible to limit the expenditure to that sum," responded Lee coolly.

"Then—then," stammered John Murchie, "all I can say, Mr. Lee, is that you are a real white man, and I swear to you that you will never regret having trusted John Murchie. Shake!"

Silently they shook, and, a few moments later, with Nipper in a fever of excitement, all three were bending over maps and charts, figuring on the expedition to Labrador.

CHAPTER II.

In Newfoundland—The Other Ship—The Great Race on the Twelfth.

ALTHOUGH it is less than two thousand miles from the most westerly point of Ireland, and one of the earliest British colonies in America, there is far less known about Newfoundland than about other more distant and less important colonies. There are several reasons for this.

In the first place, the traveller to the United States or Canada passes it by on account of its somewhat isolated position; and, secondly, what vague ideas he has of the island are not such as would attract him there. He has

"You are afraid," sneered Mu-chie. "You are even afraid to shoot a helpless man."—*(See p. 9.)*

a hazy notion that it is very cold and bleak there, that great herds of caribou migrate across the island with the seasons, that the entire population are engaged in fishing on the famous Grand Banks, and that the interior is an almost unknown desert.

Such a combination does not attract the modern traveller, who likes to stick to the beaten tracks. But, to the neighbouring inhabitants of the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island—those maritime provinces which border on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the name Newfoundland spells a great deal more.

It means a good deal, too, to the big game hunter from Canada and the United States, and there are, of course, many men in the British Isles who know it intimately. But to the rank and file of the British it is scarcely more than a name. It were well if its rugged beauty, its timbered resources, and its magnificent waterways were better known. One day that will eventuate, and then the truth about the ancient colony will be known.

A little larger than Ireland, it has a population of something less than a quarter of a million, and only holds as many souls in its great expanse as a certain well-known manufacturing city of the Midlands. It is true, too, that its chief industry is the fishing off the Grand Banks, but there is also another industry which means much to the colony, and that is the sealing.

More than that, the timber resources are colossal, and it is a point of no little interest that the paper on which this book is printed is manufactured from pulp made in Newfoundland. It has few railways so far, and a limited number of roads, but one day that will be remedied, and the colony developed as it should be.

Nevertheless, the harbour of St. John's, the capital and the metropolis in every way of Newfoundland, presents a vivid scene of activity at certain times, and so thought a little party of three, as a small steamer from Quebec nosed in through The Narrows, looking very small and very fragile as it met the frowns of Signal Hill and South Side Hill.

It regained a little of its dignity as it met the less imposing fronts of Pancake and Chain Rocks, and then, with the iron-bound cliffs sweeping suddenly to the west, the steamer was into the main inner harbour—deep enough and sheltered enough to receive a vast fleet.

Along the water front there was a vast and confusing array of fishing boats. It was very early in March, and only the initiated could have known why this great gathering of ships had every appearance of being ready for a sudden departure from harbour. It was not the first time Nelson Lee had been to Newfoundland, but it was Nipper's first visit, and, as they leaned over the rail of the Harbour Grace, the lad drank in the wonder of the scene with all his eyes.

"I fancy we will have some trouble finding a wharf to dock at, sir," he said to Lee, as his gaze swept over the line of ships.

Lee smiled.

"There will be plenty of room for us, my lad. St. John's is able to accommodate many more than are here."

"But why is it, sir, that they are all in now? It is fair weather outside."

It was John Murchie who answered the lad's question.

"Swiles," he said succinctly.

"What is that?" asked Nipper in puzzlement.

Lee laughed quietly.

"The colloquialisms of our friend are a little obscure, my lad. 'Swiles' is a word used by the seal-catchers, and refers to the seals. It is early in March, and by a great chance you have come to Newfoundland at a time

when you may witness a great sight. Most of the ships you see there, Nipper, are fitted and ready for a sudden dash to sea. To-day is the tenth. No ship may leave harbour in order to search for seals before the twelfth of March. That is why they are all straining at their cables, if I may use the phrase.

"On the twelfth you will see them slip out one by one, and head to the north. Then the greatest race in the world will begin. It is the effort of every captain to find the ice floes containing the seals first. Seals, my lad, as you probably know, take to the floes early in the year. The cows bring forth their young during the latter half of the month of February, and by the middle of March the young are in excellent condition.

"They occupy the floes in great herds of thousands, and it is the pride of every captain to strike the herd, make his killing, and race back to port as first man in with his load. It is a fascinating run, my lad, and it is just possible that you may see something of it."

How little did Lee dream, as he uttered those words, that not only the lad, but all three of them, were to see and to be part of one of the great sealing tragedies which looms forever over the head of the Newfoundlander.

They had no time for further conversation just then, for in through the maze of ships the Harbour Grace was nosing her way, and now they were slipping in beside a small wharf. It had been a rushed trip, and not one of the three were sorry to land.

Once Nelson Lee had made up his mind to back Murchie for the amount he desired, he lost no time in pushing things forward. Murchie said, if they moved at once, they ought to be able to reach St. John's, and to arrange to get through to Windward Inlet before the snows of Labrador melted. In some parts the snow would linger until the middle of June, and then summer would come with a rush; but, on the other hand, if the ice in the north broke up early, and the southerly drift began ahead of time, they might find themselves delayed for the long run of a hundred and eighty miles to Diamond Valley.

Therefore they had sailed for Quebec from Liverpool, and on the way out Lee had gone into every conceivable detail of their prospected journey. In Quebec Lee had wired to his New York agent, and just before they sailed on the Harbour Grace for St. John's he had received a reply informing him that Cyrus K. Hornblower had sailed for St. John's about three weeks before.

They knew then that the American financier was seriously going into the Diamond Valley proposition, and that, if they would checkmate him, they would need all their wits about them. It was just possible that he had been delayed at St. John's, but Lee had a strong notion that he would have started already for Windward Inlet.

St. John's was full of men from the outer harbours, as they made their way up the wharf towards the Windsor Hotel. There were men there from Black Head and Chance Cove, from Spaniards Bay and Skip Harbour, from Friendly Inlet and Grace Bay, from Grand Harbour and White Head, from Seal Cove and Northern Head, from every conceivable place along the coast where are born and bred the sturdy men who go forth to the sealing grounds and the cod banks.

They were lounging about the wharves and along the streets, clad in heavy reefers and double caps and mittens. There were boys of seventeen ready for their first go at the seals, there were men in the full prime of life, and men who had seen many, many years of the game.

There were fathers and sons and brothers, all sticking together in little

cliques the men from a certain place always in a party by itself, for the Newfoundlander is clannish. And they, too, seemed straining at the leash, in their anxiety to get away.

The Windsor Hotel proved to be a small wooden structure, built after no definite architectural design. Its patrons seemed to be chiefly a few commercial travellers, several captains of the ships in harbour, two or three timber and sawmill contractors from up Grand Falls way.

They were given rooms overlooking the harbour, and while Lee and Nipper attended to the arrangement of their stuff, John Murchie went out to find what plans could be made for getting to Windward Inlet. It had been late afternoon when they had made harbour, and it was well into the evening before Murchie was back.

Lee and Nipper were sitting in the small office of the hotel talking idly, and listening to the remarks about them—remarks which in each and every case circled about the twelfth of March—when Murchie came back. Lee could see at once that something had happened. He signed for Lee and Nipper to follow him. They went up the wooden staircase to the first floor, and foregathered in Lee's room.

"I have been along the wharves, Mr. Lee," whispered Murchie, when the door was closed after them. "I have found out several things."

"What are they?" asked Lee quickly.

"Well, in the first place, Cyrus K. Hornblower is on the job all right."

"How do you know?"

"I met a captain I used to know. I was arranging with him to take us up to Windward Inlet, but he said it couldn't be done until he consulted his other passengers. I asked him what he meant, and he said he was already engaged to put off a party at Windward Inlet. I pumped him about it, and he told me that he had been engaged by a man named Hornblower. It seems there is quite a party—about twenty in all.

"They have all sorts of stuff with them, and, from what the captain said, it appears they are going into the deal seriously. I asked him if he knew anyone in the party by the name of Anderson. He said he did, and that it was Anderson who had made most of the arrangements. So, you see that we are already up against it."

Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"Anderson has not let the grass grow under his feet," he said. "Do you know when they leave?"

"Yes—on the twelfth. The ship is a sealer, and cannot leave harbour before. They must be paying a pretty good price to persuade the captain to run on to Windward Inlet, and sacrifice valuable time, as he will have to do."

"What else did you say to him?"

"I told him that I had reconsidered, and asked him not to say anything to his party about me. I thought it was best to arrange elsewhere."

"That is right," responded Lee. "If we are going to have trouble with the Hornblower party, it is best that we should not travel together. Judging from Mr. Olaf Anderson's latest performance, he is capable of any treachery."

"Do you reckon you'd like to pull out altogether, Mr. Lee?" asked Murchie. "Now that we know definitely what the other crowd is doing, you can see how risky it is."

Lee gave the other one look, then he continued calmly:

"You say there is about a score in the party?"

"Yes."

"That means they anticipate trouble. Probably Hornblower mentioned to Anderson what happened in New York. Anderson won't be quite sure it

was you, but he will be nervous. It looks as if they had got together a band of rough necks, to do the prospecting and any fighting there may be. Now that we know so much, we can lay our plans with better certainty. I will tell you what you have to do, Murchie, and you have only a little over a day in which to do it.

"You must see at once about getting hold of a ship to take us to Windward Inlet. We could run out on a sealer with a rush on the twelfth, and pay the captain to land us at Windward Inlet. Tell him he can kill seals on the way, and perhaps he will come to reasonable terms, though he must put us through as quickly as possible. Next hustle round and get together fifteen or twenty men—get good men—men we can trust, and men who, if necessary, will fight.

"Then see about stores. We will get what we can at Windward Inlet, but we want tools and blasting powder and what not here. Make the best deal you can for the whole job, and offer your men good wages. I will place two thousand pounds at your disposal to-morrow morning, and when you need more you can draw on me.

"When we get to Windward Inlet we can find out if the other party has landed, and, if so, then we must govern ourselves accordingly. If we get there first, it will give us an opportunity of entrenching at Diamond Valley, and I imagine we can hold the place against them. Do you understand fully what you have to do?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Lee, and I'd like to say that it is a pleasure to work with a man who knows what he wants and sets about getting it."

Lee smiled.

"You manage the details I have outlined," he said, "and then, when the next difficulty arises, we will tackle it all right. And now I am very hungry. Let us go down to supper."

CHAPTER III.

The Twelfth of March—The Rush to the Ice Floes—"Swiles": The Kill—Disaster

THE morning of the twelfth of March dawned crisp and cold, with a hazy sun in the east. Along the harbour front of St. John's everything was a-bustle. Here and there floated flags and bunting, for the great race to the floes would begin that day, and the vast flotilla would be led out of harbour by Captain Joe Brown, from Chance Cove—Captain Joe being the record-holder for the previous year.

Every ship was provisioned and made ship-shape long before dawn arrived Fires were going and steam was up. During the night the last man had come aboard, and now, with the first flush of dawn, the Curlew, under Captain Joe Brown, slipped her moorings, and, to the accompaniment of loud cheers, which swept along the whole face of the harbour, and re-echoed back from Signal Hill and South Side Hill, the sturdy Curlew slid out from the wharf and pointed her nose to The Narrows.

Ship after ship followed, some small, some large, some new, some battered and old, but each one lined with the blue jersey-clad Newfoundlanders, and each one off on the great race to the floes. During the previous day Lee and his party had lain low. Murchie, working quietly, had managed to hire eighteen men at a fair wage.

They were hired for a period of at least twelve months, and, on looking them over, Lee reckoned Murchie had done well. They were all Newfoundlanders, and all hardy fishermen and timber men. Most of them knew the

Labrador coast, and knew exactly what they were going to. Each man gave a satisfactory answer to Lee's questions, and he opined that, if a fight did come, he could count on every man.

Murchie had arranged with the captain of a small sealer to take them through to Windward Inlet. The arrangement was that if they sighted seals on the way the ship could stop and kill, but that the captain was not to go out of his way to find them—a fair enough arrangement all round.

Of the Hornblower crowd little more was known than Murchie had already discovered. He did find out that they would go out definitely with the rush on the twelfth, and, in fact, from where they stood on the deck of the First Chance they saw the ship in question race for The Narrows, and Lee could see Murchie's hands work nervously as the face of Olaf Anderson peered over the side.

But Anderson did not not see Murchie, and the latter had taken good care that he shouldn't. So far, Lee's party had one advantage. They knew the strength of the other party, and they knew its purpose; but the other party did not dream of their existence.

With the cheers ringing in their ears, flags flying about them, and the bite of the frosty morning air tingling their ears, they watched the wharf slip away, as the First Chance steamed into line, then they were plunging and dipping along to the Narrows in the wake of the ship ahead.

Once outside the harbour the line split up. Now it was every man for himself, and sheer chance who hit the seals first. Some there were who took the initiative to themselves and headed north or north-east, as the fancy seized them. The Curlew, the record holder for the previous year, bore towards the north-west, leaving Black Head on her port, and heading straight for the barren, rugged cliffs at Gates Point.

There was no shrewder captain sailed out of St. John's than Captain Joe Brown. The previous years he had brought in over thirty thousand seals, and every man of his crew safe. It was not the first time he had held the record. Luck, as his rivals said, was always with him, and now, remembering how Captain Joe always came in with a full ship, there were many who steamed off in his wake, thinking that to follow him was to find the herd.

That course suited Captain Matt Stevens, the captain of the First Chance, for a north-west course was what he must take for Labrador and Windward Inlet, and if Captain Joe Brown found the herd, then he would be able to do some killing on the way.

Lee and Murchie and Nipper got a glimpse of the Aurora—the ship bearing the Hornblower party—steaming straight towards the north. They could see the smudge of her smoke almost till noon, then a heavy haze hid her from view, and they were fated to see her no more until they were well off the northern point of the island.

Lee, Murchie, and Nipper berthed aft with Captain Matt Stevens and his mate. The men of Lee's party were forward in the fo'castle with the crew, and as the day wore on the whole ship's company settled down. In the fo'castle, and aft as well, the talk was all of what they hoped to get, what they had got in previous years, what ship had held the record, what crews had been marooned on the floes, and how, three years before, one ship had come into harbour with no seals aboard, but eighty-seven frozen corpses piled like logs of wood on her deck.

That was a never-ending subject of conversation in the fo'castle when night had set in, when the spume of the Atlantic was crashing over the bow, and when the grind, grind, grind of the propeller was driving them on and on and on into the North Sea. It had been a terrible affair, and was simply told.

Captain Bert Green, from Blackhead Cove, had gone out with the rush and had headed north-west. For two days the ship had run hard seeking the herd, for, in any event, no killing could be done before the fourteenth of the month—such is the law. He had been the first man out to sight the herd, and early in the morning had set his crew on the floes to kill.

He had divided them into two companies, and had set them some three miles apart. Then, in the late afternoon, a howling blizzard had come down fram Labrador way, and in the twinkling of an eye had blotted out everything. Captain Green had searched for his men all night. Some he found, but the greater number he could not locate until daylight. And, when he had, it was only to come upon their frozen bodies where they had succumbed to the cold.

Eighty-seven frozen bodies he had sailed back to harbour with, and eighty-seven names had been added to the long toll which the Newfoundlanders pay to the sea. That was the talk on the First Chance as she ripped up through the grey sea towards the ice.

Nipper, vastly interested, wandered forward to the fo'castle, and, finding a seat there, listened to the tales of the men from Chance Cove and Grace Inlet, from Seal Cove and Northern Head—from all the coves and inlets of the island.

So they ploughed on their way until the morning of the fourteenth. They were well to the north now. Hare Bay and Cape Bauld had been left behind, and they were already feeling the sweep of the Straits of Belle Isle. Off to port loomed dimly and mistily Misery Point, with beyond the low-lying iron-bound coast of Labrador.

Only one other ship was in sight, and she appeared to be heading for Battle Harbour. Not a seal had they seen, and now they were getting into the thick ice. Captain Matt Stevens was of the opinion that the herd was on a floe farther out, and was regretting that he had not held a more northerly direction.

During the early afternoon they sighted another ship bearing in from the east, and apparently making towards the coast of Labrador. Captain Matt picked her out as the Curlew, and from the way she was running he knew that she, too, had not found the herd yet.

They ran along about two miles away from her until evening, and when night shut down they could just make out the bold headland by Battle Harbour. All hands turned in early, and it seemed to Lee that he had scarcely dropped off to sleep when he was aroused by the rush of feet on deck and the cry:

"Swiles, swiles, swiles!"

He leaped out of his bunk, and to his amazement found that it was already dawn. Dressing himself hurriedly in the heavy serge clothes and blue sweater he had brought for the voyage, he ran up to the deck, and there came upon a great sight. Four ships were in sight now, and off to the left, stretching, it seemed, north as far as the eye could reach, were the wide floes, covered with thousands of little black dots, looking like men more than anything else.

During the night they had come upon the herd; nor were they the only ones, for off to starboard was the Curlew, and beyond her again three others. Lee saw Murchie gazing through a pair of glasses, and went along to where he stood.

"What can you make out?" he asked.

"Ah, good-morning, Mr. Lee! Swiles—thousands of them! And just take these glasses, Mr. Lee. Look at that second ship out there. Tell me if you see anything familiar about her."

. . .

Lee took the glasses, and focussed them on the ship Murchie had indicated. One look was enough.

"The ship with the Horublower party," he said, lowering the glasses.

"Dead right!" responded Murchie. "It will be rather interesting if we run up against them."

On deck everything was a-bustle. Captain Stevens was mustering his men, and the course of the First Chance was being laid in close to the ice floe. The crew was being mustered in three parties—two main bodies who would be set on to the floes at different points, and one small party of about a dozen men who would take the long-boat and pull round the floe about a mile distant. Lee hurried across to the captain.

"Captain," he said, "with your consent I should like to take a hand to-day. Moreover, I think all my party would. I see you are telling off a small body of men to take the long-boat. How about my party making up that number, and handling the lower end of the floe. I myself don't know much about this game, but you can send one of you best men along with us."

Captain Matt Stevens nodded with satisfaction.

"Fine, sir—fine!" he said. "With the other ships here, we will need every man. My crew will be the first on the ice, for we are nearest, but it will need every man available for the killing. I shall be very grateful indeed to you, Mr. Lee, and I will send my wife's brother along with you. He is the best man I have. And I shall be glad to give your men their share of the kill, just the same as if they belonged to my crew."

"Thanks, captain!" said Lee. "I will tell them."

The small number of men who had been told off for the long-boat were now sent into the two main ones, and Lee's men jumped at the chance of the excitement. The captain's brother-in-law, a hard-bitten fisherman from Chance Cove, joined Lee, and together they mustered Lee's party.

Before getting into the whale boat, Lee and Nipper and Murchie went below and put on heavy reefers; then they took their places, and, as one of the main parties tumbled over the side on to the ice, Braund, the captain's brother-in-law, took the tiller and the whale boat shot away.

They were a quarter of a mile down the edge of the floe when they saw the First Chance steam on with the second party, then they circled a turn in the floe and laid to with a will. They pulled for about a mile and a quarter before Hall gave the signal to stop. He guided the boat into the edge of the floe, and, grasping the clubs they had brought with them, Lee's men sprang on to the ice.

Before them lay one wind of the great herd of seals. There were old bulls there and aged cows, young bulls, and young cows bearing their first calves. There were a few late calves, but most of the youngsters were of good size and lively, and the crew, breaking out into a thin line of blue, set to work to make the kill.

The killing of seals has grown until it has become a necessity of civilisation. On the face of it, to watch the slaughter of the beasts—for slaughter it must be called—one is filled with pity that man is as he is. Yet one pauses to think of the vast need of the beasts—hides for warm clothing, and blubber and fat for oil.

In the old days, when the slaughter went ahead without reason, but merely with a deadly greed to kill all in sight, the numbers which were slaughtered and wasted was appalling. But now, under a properly regulated system of Governmental supervision, only those seals are killed which are primes, the others being left with the herd.

At first to approach one of the beasts and to strike it down with a club, the while its pitiful eyes gaze upon one, makes one feel the guilt of a

murderer for a moment; then, with the second blow, the feeling passes, and soon the veriest novice is running with the line and making his kill with all the virility of the old hand.

So it was with Lee and Nipper, as they raced over the ice making their first kill. Behind them the grey Atlantic tossed and heaved, shooting into sight great bits of ice-floe, then allowing them to slip down in the hollow of the long rolls. Here and there one could make out the gigantic peak of an iceberg, and to the west the floe stretched in a rough line clear to the shores of Labrador.

Although it was still early morning it was impossible to tell what the day would bring. A heavy, leaden-grey hung over everything, though it was strangely warm and close for that time of the year. Before leaving the ship Lee had glanced at the barometer, and had found the glass well up. It seemed that they would have a good day for the kill, and each man went at it with a will.

It was terribly hot after the first half-hour. Even though they had ice all about them, every man was wringing wet with perspiration before the first twenty minutes had gone. At Lee's suggestion they took off their reefers and laid them in a pile in the boat. Then they went at it again, and killed until noon, laying the carcases of the dead seals in piles, where they could be picked up easily by the First Chance at the end of the day.

Away in the distance they could see the ships steaming, and about a mile away they caught a glimpse of part of the crew of the First Chance racing along over the floe, bent on the same mission as themselves. A wide channel of water in the floe divided them from that part of the crew, however, and since no other ship had set any men on their floe they were, to all intents and purposes, all by themselves.

At noon they knocked off for food. A fire was built on the ice by the boat, and soon the appetising smell of seal flesh was rising in the frosty air. Now that they were finished their hard exercise they were glad enough of their coats, for their wet underclothing grew chill and threatened to freeze.

After the meal and a smoke they ripped off their reefers and started in again, and so it went on all the afternoon until nearly five o'clock. At five o'clock Lee, who was well to the south of the party, and about a hundred yards from Nipper, paused in his work and studied the sky. He called to the lad to come along to him.

"I don't like the look of it, my lad," he said quietly. "The sky looks threatening in the north-west."

Nipper turned and gazed towards Labrador.

"I don't see much, guv'nor," he said. "It is a little black there."

Just then they heard the distant call of a siren, and Lee gazed out to sea.

"Captain Matt Stevens doesn't like the look of it either, my lad. That is the recall signal to his crew. Ah, you can see the First Chance going in now to pick up the more distant men. They will come along and pick up the second lot next, then steam round to us. I sha'n't be sorry. I shouldn't like to get caught here in a blizzard."

"How about beginning to pull back, sir?" asked the boy.

"Not yet, Nipper. We must wait for a bit until the First Chance comes along for the carcases. Then she will take us aboard. You can see her in at the ice now. She is taking the first lot on. I fancy we had better work back towards the boat, Nipper. It is just as well to be handy in case it does storm."

They turned, and, keeping close together, began to walk back towards the

spot where the boat lay. They picked up a man from time to time as they went along, and, when they had got about half way, Hall joined them.

"I don't like the look of the weather, sir," he said to Lee. "I shall be glad when we are picked up."

Lee was just about to agree with him, when suddenly he paused. The air was filled with a low, moaning sound, coming from the north-west. It rose gradually, until it sounded like the distant wail of wind, then suddenly a sharp, cold wind struck them. They stood and gazed towards the First Chance.

They could see her ploughing along towards the edge of the floe, where the second lot of men had been landed. The other four ships were racing for the floe in like manner, and as a second blast of cold wind struck them, Lee and his men bent low and began to run for the boat.

It was almost unbelievable how swiftly the whole face of the universe became blotted out by the terrible sweep of snow, which tore down upon them in the twinkling of an eye. One moment they were bending almost double fighting against the wind, and with the boat in sight—the next, a solid wall of flying snow and ice particles was curtaining everything from their view.

Luckily they were close enough to the boat not to lose direction, and it was with no little anxiety that Lee took tally of his men. Murchie was one of the last to arrive, but when he finally showed up, like a dim wraith fighting through the storm, the total was complete.

To look for rescue by the First Chance just then was hopeless. Every man realised that. All they could do was to hope that the rest of the crew had been picked up safely. The first thing was to get into reefers and extra sweaters. Then, at Hall's suggestion, all hands laid hold of the whale-boat and dragged it up on the ice. When it was turned over on its side, with the keel to the wind, it made a slight shelter for them. That done, they took turns in dancing and jumping about, Lee and Hall and Nipper and Murchie taking turns to keep the men at it.

Well they knew what lassitude on that ice meant. The day, which had been warm enough, had now turned bitterly cold. The blizzard brought with it all the chill of the frozen north, and those who allowed themselves to sink down for any length of time soon found that terrible drowsiness stealing over them—the drowsiness which means the long sleep of death.

They knew that Captain Matt Stevens must stand off from the floe while the blizzard was on. No man dare risk his ship in the ice with such a gale howling. But they knew, too, that at the very first opportunity he would seek them. The great danger was in the shifting of the floe they were on.

Lee remembered now that a wide channel of water had shut them off from the main floe. If their floe should begin to move, it might twist and drift and grind about until it moved several miles. The driving storm was certain to start a movement in the ice, and that danger they must risk.

They kept up the running and jumping and pummelling of each other until they were dog-tired. Two men were lying in the lee of the whale-boat, and all Lee's efforts failed to rouse them. Nipper, so far, was cheery enough, and the majority of the crowd were well inured to hardship. It was not for the present Lee was worrying.

If the blizzard blew over, then they would get out of it with nothing more than a nasty experience. But suppose the storm blew all night? What then? He shuddered when he thought of it.

It was now almost dark. The storm, instead of abating, seemed to increase, if anything, and they could feel, by the sudden pitching and

slanting of the floe, that it had begun to move. By the aid of a match held inside Nipper's coat Lee saw that the hour was seven.

They had been there two hours, and, so far, they were hanging out. Another hour went by, during which Lee and Hall and Murchie and Nipper worked as they had never worked to keep the two men who had given in warm and moving.

By bodily force they lifted them up, and, despite their savage anger, forced them to keep on the move. Anything else meant death. By ten, three more men were about all in, and by eleven the lee of the boat was full of the huddled figures of those who could hang out no longer. Things began to look serious.

They could hope for no rescue now before daylight, and that meant they still had seven or eight hours at least on the ice—perhaps ten or eleven. To expect to survive all that time without food and heat was out of the question. Their wet underclothes were chill against them, and only their constant movement prevented them from freezing.

Murchie's beard was a mass of icicles, and was frozen to his coat. Hall's eyes were almost obscured by the frozen mist which had gathered on them. All the men, more or less, were bearded, and those who were suffered the same torture that Murchie was undergoing.

Lee and Nipper, being smooth-shaven, escaped that part of it. By midnight Lee knew that something desperate must be done. One of the men who was the first to collapse was now but a frozen corpse, and the other man was swiftly sinking into a condition of coma. Lee called Murchie and Hall to one side and spoke to them alone.

He put forth his plan, and they nodded assent. Then all three approached the boat, and, while Hall searched about for the hatchet, Lee and Murchie forced the men to get to their feet.

Nipper and Murchie kept them on the move while Lee and Hall went to work on the boat. First they cut out the seats and the inner wood bracings, shaving the bracings up finely. Joining hands, they formed a line stretching out into the storm until the far man came upon the first line of carcasses. He grabbed one and dragged it into the space by the boat. They all gathered round, and held their bodies close while Hall lit a lucifer.

He touched it to the pile of shavings, and soon a little flame was crackling. While Hall carefully fed the fire, Lee directed the cutting up of the carcase. The steak was propped over the flame, and pieces of blubber and oil-saturated fat were thrown into it.

As Hall kept adding wood, the flames rose higher and higher, until even through the storm they could feel the heat of the blaze and smell the seal steak as it cooked. In one stroke they were getting fire and food.

But, with the hours to go, they would have to nurse every atom of the wood. Not until the case was indeed desperate would Lee consent to the boat proper being cut up. It might be the only means they would have of getting away from the floe when the storm had subsided.

With a larger crowd there would have been mutiny, but, with the party made up of his own men, Lee managed to keep them in hand, and slowly, very slowly, the time wore away. When the steak was finished and served it raised the spirits of all. Even the blizzard could not take away from them the enjoyment of that fragrant meat, and when each man had eaten his fill there was a general search for pipes and tobacco.

Two o'clock came, and still the blizzard raged, while slowly, very slowly, they were beginning to cut away the top of the boat's gunwale. One pair of oars was sacrificed next, and then another pair went. By three o'clock the cutting away of the sides of the boat had lowered the gunwale edge to a

dangerous level, and still that demon of the north howled around them, and still the little party crouched over the life-giving fire.

By four o'clock Lee saw that the boat must all go into the flames. He consulted with Hall and Murchie before giving the word, then he consented, and once more the fire, which had been getting dangerously low, flared up. It seemed an interminable time before five o'clock came, but its arrival was signalled by a terrible disaster.

All during the night the floe had been pitching and shifting badly, but now, as a louder blast than ever came along, it suddenly seemed to heave up and slant straight for the water. Every man made a wild grab for something to hold on to. The boat, the fire, and the men threatened to slide into the water, but just when it seemed that they could hold on no longer, the floe grew level again.

But with its straightening, there came a huge wave from the sea. It swept across them, dousing the fire, and wetting every man to the skin. Gasping and spluttering, they managed to crawl back to the remains of the boat, and there, once more, the old game of running and pummelling had to be recommenced.

The body of the man who had succumbed had been swept away with the wave. To relight the fire was out of the question, but there was consolation in the fact that the hours it had warmed them had given them strength to fight this new disaster.

Lee took the lead, and, ably seconded by Murchie and Hall and Nipper, he literally forced his men to keep on the move. The only reason they did not freeze to death in their wet clothes was because the cold was so intense that their outer garments froze into an icy coat before the cold could reach their inner clothes.

Six o'clock found the little party almost exhausted, but still alive. They agreed that the storm had eased a little, though, truth to tell, the blizzard seemed to howl as hard as ever. Seven o'clock finally came round, and then, with the first greying of the air, they gazed eagerly about them for signs of the First Chance. But they gazed in vain.

By eight o'clock the snow had grown much lighter, and they could see a waste of tossing ice and water—nothing else. Their floe had gone adrift in the night, and they were heading—Heaven only knew where.

Nine o'clock was heralded by the death of two more men, and by ten, three more were huddled in the lee of what remained of the boat, ready to sink into the stupor. It was Hall who first sighted a smudge of smoke far to the north. The cry he gave brought every man to his feet, and with the access of hope came more strength.

They jumped and danced about for another half-hour, while the smoke resolved itself into a ship, and they could see that it was heading towards the floe. In another hour they could make it out plainly, and each man was jumping wildly and waving his hands to attract attention.

There was no danger of their not being seen. Captain Matt Stevens had kept as close to the floe as he dared, and with the first grey of dawn he had begun steaming along in search of the missing ones.

It was just on eleven o'clock when the little party was taken aboard, and, as willing hands took care of the living and the dead, the main part of the crew scoured the floe for the killed seals.

It was one of the dangers which hang for ever over the heads of the Newfoundlanders, and that the little party came through it as well as they did was due, strangely enough, not to a Newfoundlander, but to another—to Nelson Lee.

With the rescued men tucked up warmly in their berths, the seals were got aboard, and the First Chance turned her nose towards Windward Inlet.

CHAPTER IV.

At Windward Inlet—News—The Race for Diamond Valley—The Fight.

"THE party you mention went through two days ago."

Ferguson, the trader at Windward Inlet, was the speaker, and he had made the remark in reply to a question put to him by John Murchie. Murchie, Nelson Lee, and Nipper were sitting in the big, plainly furnished sitting-room attached to the trading post, and where Ferguson was wont to spend his time when not in the store. They had been landed at Windward Inlet less than an hour, and already the First Chance was on her way back to the floes.

"I didn't know what to do," said Ferguson. "I wanted to go for Anderson, but I knew that, to buck that crew of twenty all alone, would be madness. I cut them down on supplies though, but they got round that easy enough, and they bought dogs from some Indians up the coast. They will be well on their way by now."

"Can you manage to fit us up with provisions and dogs, Ferguson?" asked Murchie thoughtfully.

"I can," replied the trader promptly, "and, what's more, I can arrange to go along with you, if you wish."

"Every man will be of value," murmured Lee.

"Then you can count on me, Mr. Lee," said Ferguson. "That man Anderson handed out the most treacherous deal I have ever known to Murchie. If I can do anything to block his game, I will."

"Then I think no time had better be lost," said Lee. "We will want a couple of teams of dogs at least—three, if we can get them. Then we had better start as soon as we can."

"I think I can manage to have things ready to leave at daybreak to-morrow morning," remarked Ferguson. "How will that do?"

"Fine," said Lee. "We will leave all the details to you; but there is one thing I should like to ask you."

"What is it, Mr. Lee?"

"Can you supply us with any weapons? I brought half a dozen rifles from St. John's, but I think we had better take along more."

"I can dig up four or five Savage rifles, and as many shotguns and revolvers," replied the trader.

"Then please do so, and put in all the ammunition you have. I will leave you to arrange other details, Murchie. Come with me, Nipper. We will go and tell the men what we propose doing, and then have a look at Windward Inlet."

They passed out of the post, and down the little plank sidewalk to the edge of the wharf. The men of the party were gathered there, smoking and talking, and looking none the worse for their terrible experience on the ice. Those of them who had survived remembered now how they owed their lives to Lee's constant insistence that they keep on the move. As a leader he had already proved himself, and there wasn't a man in the crowd who wouldn't have followed him to any place.

In a few words he told them they would leave the next morning, then, plunging into the snow, he and Nipper walked along to the few shacks of the Indians which stood outside the post. Ferguson was as good as his word. That night he had his dogs and sledges together, and they were ready to move at daybreak.

Guns had been dug out and cleaned. Ammunition was piled ready. Tools and supplies of all sorts were on the sledges ready, and outside the post the huskies snarled and growled, as is their wont.

Every man turned in early, and by daybreak each man was up and at his post. Ferguson's Indian woman cooked them a piping hot breakfast of seabirds' eggs and venison, which they washed down with steaming hot coffee. And, just as the sun was hanging like a golden ball in the misty east, Ferguson shrieked out the first "mucka—mucka" of the day, and the front sledge went singing away over the trail.

The second followed it closely, with Lee on the side, and behind came the third, with Murchie and Nipper running close. Then followed the men, their snowshoes crunching regularly as they took the deep trail.

It was a hundred and eighty miles to Diamond Valley. Ferguson reckoned on making thirty miles a day, and, with the loads they carried, that was excellent going. It would mean six days to the Valley, and, if the other party was not travelling so quickly, they stood a bare chance of overtaking it.

They made fifteen miles before noon of the first day, and stopped for a meal. By one o'clock they were off again, and when they pitched camp for that night they had covered the necessary distance.

To relate the journey day by day would be but to repeat the details of the first day. Under the guidance of Ferguson and Murchie, they kept pretty well to schedule, and the weather favoured them greatly.

On the morning of the sixth day every man was on the trail at daybreak. Guns were hung ready for action, and everyone was keyed up in anticipation. As they had come along the trail they had seen many signs that another party was ahead of them, but they, too, must have been travelling swiftly, for they had not been able to overtake it.

At noon the stop was by one accord made very brief, and Murchie calculated they should raise Diamond Valley by four o'clock. Nor was he wrong. It was just on the hour when they topped a small rise, and, gazing down into the valley which was their objective, saw that their worst fears were to be realised.

Lee looked with no little interest on the spot. He was standing on the crest of one of the tundra hills, which looked down upon the hollow which Murchie had christened Diamond Valley. Now a great mantle of white lay over everything, and would continue to cover the ground for another couple of months or so.

He could just make out a little stone shack, which he knew instinctively was the one where Murchie had spent his lonely five years. But the spot was by no means lonely now. Smoke was rising from the single chimney of the shack, and they could see several men moving about in the bottom of the valley. Now that they had reached the spot they must decide what was to be done.

In that out-of-the-way and uncivilised spot, where the law of man did not reach, it was unlikely that the other party would give way without a struggle. Nor did Lee intend for a single moment to come all that distance, and then yield to those who had no right there. Yet he could not open hostilities without delivering an ultimatum, and it is indicative of the man's nature that he chose to go himself with that ultimatum.

Murchie protested that he should go—that Anderson was treacherous, and might shoot. But Lee would not listen. Giving orders for camp to be made, he unslung his rifle, handed it to Nipper, and struck off down the slope of the hill. The shack was half a mile or so distant, and he had not gone far before he knew he had been seen.

He could make out several men running for the hut, and then he saw two men emerge and stand by themselves.

"That will be Hornblower and Anderson," he muttered. "Well, here goes!"

He increased his speed, and with long strides covered the remaining distance. As he approached, he saw the man whom he knew must be Anderson raise his rifle, but Hornblower struck down his arm. He smiled grimly to himself, and kept on. He did not pause until he was about thirty yards from the shack, then, after a swift glance around, he addressed Hornblower.

"Am I correct in assuming that you are Mr. Hornblower?" he asked. Hornblower, a stocky, bearded man, clad in a heavy coat, nodded.

"That is my name," he called. "Who are you, and what do you want of me?"

"My name is Lee—Nelson Lee, of London," said Lee in reply. "I am the partner of one John Murchie, who owns this claim here. Through the treachery of the man who stands beside you, Mr. Hornblower, my partner, John Murchie, was defrauded of the stones he dug from this ground. No doubt you are to some extent aware of what line that treachery took, and it is not Anderson's fault that Murchie is not a charred corpse in that very hut beside which you now stand. But he is not, and he is with me at present. I have come to warn you that you are trespassing, and to give you a chance to withdraw."

"And if we refuse?" asked Hornblower curtly.

"Then I am sorry, but we must endeavour to dislodge you."

"Then the sooner you begin the better we will like it," called Hornblower. "That is my answer."

Lee bowed slightly, and turned to go. Even as he swung he saw Anderson jerk up his rifle and fire, but at the same time there came an oath from Hornblower, as he struck up Anderson's arm.

"Quit that, you fool!" he snarled. "We'll fight, but, by thunder, we'll fight clean. No more murders from you!"

Lee paused, and called clearly:

"Thank you, Mr. Hornblower. I shall remember that if we ever meet again."

Then he turned, and, without once looking back, walked up the hill to where his party stood.

"It means fight," he said, in reply to their eager questions, "and the best move, in my opinion, is to strike at once. They are bound to think that we will not attack to-night. They will think that we will make camp and begin to-morrow. I suggest that we drop everything and rush them now while they are to some extent unprepared."

The plan appealed to the others, and, slipping down over the crest of the hill, as though to make camp, they made their preparations out of sight of those at the shack. When each man was armed and ready, Lee called them together.

"There is no cover between here and the shack, boys," he said. "It will mean open fighting and quick work. The objective is the shack. Every man will spread out and keep that in mind. The swifter we work the better chance we have. If we give them time to entrench, it may mean a long siege. Are you all ready?"

"Aye—aye—aye!" came from every man.

"Then spread out," snapped Lee. "Murchie, take the left flank, and keep your line up. Ferguson, take the right flank. Nipper, come with me in the centre. The rest of you spread out between the centre and the flanks."

They leaped to obey orders, and then, at a given signal from Lee, the whole line swept over the crest of the hill, and, shouting like wild Indians, tore down the slope towards the shack. That Lee's move was unexpected was

evident as they went forward, for they could see men running about near the shack, as though uncertain what to do.

As they drew nearer, Lee made out Hornblower shepherding his men into the shack, but they were not all in when the first shot rang out, and the whole line began to shoot. On they went in an irresistible run, and not until they got to within a couple of hundred yards of the shack did the first shot come from the enemy.

Then a volley rang out, and one of Lee's men went sprawling into the snow. But the line kept on in its grim purpose, and up to the very edge of the shack they rushed, closing in as they ran. A temporary door had been erected, but it was only of hide, and the treachery of Olaf Anderson was at the last to prove his own undoing.

Murchie, with a grim look in his eyes, had been shooting steadily, but always looking for just one man, and as they reached the hut he saw him. Those in the hut realised that a hand-to-hand melee must come, and, headed by Hornblower, who, to do him justice, was a clean fighter, they rushed through the door, and in a moment the place was a pandemonium of shrieks and curses.

But one man there was who did not come forth. He had caught a glimpse of the strange look in John Murchie's eyes, and Anderson was crouching in one corner of the hut, filled with an awful terror. Murchie, seeing that he had not come out, worked his way round the fighting mob, and tore aside the hide curtain. He saw Anderson crouching in the corner, then he slid inside.

"At last!" he said, in a tone that made Anderson shrink back. "At last, Anderson, and right where I wanted you!"

He advanced slowly, his eyes fixed on those of the other, but, as he

approached nearer, Anderson, with a cry of sheer terror, bounded to his feet and started to run. He made for the door, but Murchie headed him off. He dashed back towards the fireplace, but Murchie was there before him. Then, with a bound, Murchie was on him, and as his fingers sank into Anderson's throat the other gave a gurgling cry of fear.

Back, back, back, John Murchie pushed his man, until he had him just over the charred remains of the bunk where he himself had lain bound and helpless. Back into that bunk he would push his man and there kill him. But it was not fated to be so.

Even as he forced Anderson downwards, a stray bullet tore through the hide over the door and plunged full into Anderson's heart. He collapsed in a heap among the charred ruins of the bunk, and, panting heavily with emotion, John Murchie straightened up. One long look he took at the dead man, then, snatching up his rifle, he dashed out of the door and plunged into the fight like a madman.

Lee, having clubbed his rifle, was leading a heavy attack just as Murchie came forth, and the latter, fighting like a dozen men at the rear of the enemy, demoralised them.

In ten minutes more Hornblower had surrendered, and, with a cheer, Lee and his men swept into the shack—victors!

. . . . . * * *

It was a hang-dog party which Hornblower headed back towards Windward Inlet the next day. Lee, remembering how Hornblower had fought fairly and gamely, treated him courteously, and the members of Hornblower's party, once they had surrendered, soon fraternised with the other Newfoundlanders.

Then, when the last "mucka—mucka" had sounded over the hill, Lee and his party set to work to make the hut more serviceable than it was. With blasting powder they opened up the snow over the hole John Murchie had dug, and with burning oil they drew out the frost from the ground.

At the end of two weeks they had taken from the hole sufficient stones to prove to Lee that Murchie had struck it rich, and then, bidding farewell to his partner, who was to remain on the spot, he and Nipper and Ferguson "mushed" back to Windward Inlet.

Ferguson was to send out more supplies and men and tools, and on his return to England Lee was to organise a proper company, and provide suitable machinery for working the mine on a large scale.

That is some time ago, and now, what was once desolate and bleak tundra land, is a thriving city—Diamond City; and the company which Nelson Lee formed to work the mine is one of the most profitable investments he has. Curiously enough, one of the biggest shareholders in it is Cyrus K. Hornblower, of New York. He was game even to the last.

As for Murchie, his dream has been realised, and to-day he is the "King of Diamond City."

THE END.

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

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!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN. *They appear friendly, and Storbin tells Clive and Alec that Pedro Diego, a rascally "blackbirder," has got an eye on the chums' expedition, for what reason he does not know.*

Apparently the object of the expedition has become known to him.

(*Now read this week's thrilling instalment.*)

Beseiged by Filibusters.

"A DEPOT, where he keeps his stores. There's a few huts an' so on, an' some av his gang's always at home there whin he's away on his buccaneering business. He's not wan to allow anyone t' threspass on what he calls his ground, an' he'll be afther havin' a bone t' pick wi' yez. So keep a sharp look-out! An'," Storbin added confidentially, "if ye're not prepared fur foightin' ye'd best clear out afore he comes home. He's away now, but I guess it won't be long afore he's back. Then ye'll hear from him if so be ye're still here."

"I'll give Dr. Campbell your warning," said Clive. "I don't think it will frighten him so much as to drive him away. But thank you for telling us. It will prevent our being taken by surprise, as we might have been, anyway."

"Yes. Well, as t' the rest, ye know yer own business best. But if ye do foight him, I hope ye'll get the best av it, an' kill the villain. That's phwat I hope.

"Well, now thin, ye must know as this scoundrel came wan noight t' our oiland an' carried off some av our people. They're the wans ye've been good to, an' me an' me masther won't be afther forgettin' it. We came over t' thry t' rescue thim, but his den is too strong fur us to attack. But these fellows knew we should be here on the look-out for thim, an' while Diego was away they broke out an' run for it. Some got clear away an' joined us, but some got caught agin. Now, thim ye've got free agin, an' our work's done whin we get back to our canoes, thanks be to you. And may the saints presarve ye and reward ye fur phwat ye've done!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Clive. "We're jolly glad to know what you've told us. And now that we can leave the poor fellows in your care, we'd like to be getting back to our camp. We've been away since the early morning, and our boss doesn't know a bit where we are, and there's no doubt he's alarmed and worried about us. So, if you think you can manage without our help, we'd like to be off."

"Sure, an' it's free ye are t' go, an' Heaven's blessin' go wid ye! Can we help yez at all at all? Ye've got a box yonder, I see. Shall we carry it for yez?"

"Why, as to that," said Cive, a little embarrassed, "I hardly know ——"

And then he stopped—or, rather, Storbin stopped him by putting a hand on his arm with a low-breathed "Hist!"

A sudden silence fell upon them all. The blacks had been talking together in low tones, but they had ceased and all were listening.

The strange, wailing cry had been heard again, and now it was repeated. It came floating through the night like the cry of some bird sailing along overhead.

"The divils is comin'," said Storbin. "Whist, now! Take yer places, an' kape yer heads out av soight!"

Just as he spoke there was the sound of a shot, then another, and yet another.

Clive and Alec lay down at full length, resting their rifles on the top of a log.

Storbin was busy giving orders in the language his black allies understood, and placing them here and there with remarkable decision and shrewdness.

Then there came more shots, a rush of feet, and the six scouts appeared within a few seconds of one another, leaping over the logs like flying deer.

Storbin spoke a few words sharply in their language; he was asking if any of them were hurt, and was told that one had been hit in the shoulder. He was given in charge of some of the others.

The fighting men of the party—those who were armed with rifles or bows and arrows—were placed at intervals round the top of the hill, and then Storbin came and placed himself alongside Clive.

He stalked across and placed him-

self with such deliberation that he made a good target for the enemy, and some bullets whistled around him, but none touched him.

He sank down with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"It's bad marksmin the murtherin' sons o' mischief be," he remarked coolly to Clive. "It's ashamed Oi'd be t' miss a man loike that!"

Now bullets began to come pretty frequently, some striking with a vicious thud against a log, others whistling harmlessly overhead.

"Blaze away, ye blighters!" muttered Storbin. "The more ye shoot, the sooner ye'll empty yer bandoliers."

"How many are there? Do you know?" Clive asked.

"A dozen or two, Oi should say, more or less," was the answer.

"A dozen or two!" exclaimed Clive. "My stars!" He turned to Alec, on the other side of him. "Where should we have been if they'd followed us up and attacked us—with only our two rifles to stop 'em?"

"Ye'd have bin dead men, or roped an' tied up like trussed chickens, afore now," said Storbin, who overheard the words. "But they worn't afther you. It wor us they wor afther. They bin a-huntin' fur us in parties all day. Then to-night we picked up three av our frinds, an' they tould us the rest av our frinds was at the villains' camp an' nobody much theer. So we doubled back theer, an' whin we got theer, divil a wan was there! We was moighty surprised."

"No one?" said Clive. "We left a man tied up there."

"Well, thin, he'd got free an' made off t' foind his pals. Thin we found your thracks an' followed yez, an', of coorse, they picked up our thracks an' followed us. An' now the Lord Harry only knows how it will end!"

"But what did you mean by saying you had heard we were here on a treasure-hunt?"

"We heard it from one av our men as made his escape before, two or three days ago. One av our canoes passin' near saw him an' took him off. He tould us as he heard the villains talkin' about some news two men had brought in about some people as had come to the oiland huntin' for treasure. An', thinks Oi, if we comes across any av that party Oi'll warn thim, whoiver they may be, if it's only t' do that divil Diego a bad turn an' kape these sthrangers out av his clutches."

It must not be supposed that this talk took place exactly as here related. The above is a statement of the most important points put into a few sentences for the sake of clearness. As a matter of actual fact, there were many interruptions, for firing was going on on both sides all the time, and the speakers had to keep their eye on the alert to catch a sight of their foes all the time, and talk at intervals as best they could.

The hill the young explorers had chosen happened to be an extremely good one for the purpose, and Storbin remarked upon the fact approvingly. Clive frankly told him that they had not had much choice.

"We had to take almost the first place that was at hand. We had no chance to go searching about, so it is providential that the one we pitched upon is so suitable," he said.

Just then there came a sharp cry from their right, and Clive turned to look anxiously at Alec. The cry had come, however, he found, from one of the blacks farther along. It reminded him of the dangerous business in which they were engaged.

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

GREAT PICTURE COMPETITION!

The Artist's Original Water-Colour Painting

Of the Front Cover of

The Nelson Lee Library,

minus the title lettering, and signed by Mr. Arthur Jones himself; suitable for framing, will be presented to the reader who sends in, not later than November 15, the largest number of New Readers enlisted by himself. Each of these new recruits must sign the form below and give it to the prospective competitor.

Thus, for instance, if one reader enlisted a certain number of new recruits, he would be required to send in the corresponding number of signed coupons, not later than the given date, to: The Editor, "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.

Everyone will, I am sure, make an attempt to win such a prize. As to the picture itself, it suffices to give the measurements—15 in. by 11 in.

No matter how many readers you get, send their names and addresses in, accompanied, of course, by your own. No one boy or girl stands any better chance than another.

I (Name) .....

Of (Address) .....

.....

Have read No. of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," introduced to me by my fellow reader, whose name and address are written below:

.....

.....

No. 73.—*October 28th, 1916.*

The Editor's Decision is Final.

He began to feel a sense of responsibility, and a wish that the affair could be brought to an end in some way, so that he and his friend could get back to their camp.

"If the doctor were only here it would be another matter," he explained to Storbin. "Then I shouldn't mind; the harder the fighting the better I should like it. But I don't like this sort of thing, just on our own, as it were. If anything bad happens, goodness only knows what the doctor will say or think."

Both he and Alec had fired a good many shots, and they had reason to believe they had done some execution, for their foes had begun now to keep more carefully to cover.

Storbin had fired only once; but Clive had seen the man he had aimed at, and had seen that he had fallen and had been dragged into the bushes by his friends. And the young fellow began to feel a certain amount of liking and respect for this strange character who, with all his eccentricity of dress and manner, was, at all events, evidently brave and a good fighter.

And now their adversaries began to try other tactics. They were evidently tired of firing away their ammunition with no apparent result, and they began to circle round the foot of the hill, as though looking for a weak point in the defences where they could try a rush.

As a result the defenders were compelled to shift their places, working round as the besiegers altered their ground, and there were more casualties. Two or three of their native allies were hit, one being badly wounded. And again Clive began to wish the business could be ended. He was not anxious for himself, however, be it here said, but for his friend.

And now came a fresh movement on the part of the besiegers. The wind, which had been very light, began to increase, and, noting this, the slavers commenced cutting wood and piling it in a great heap on the windward side of the hill.

"What are they up to now?" Clive asked of Storbin, who, after a brief absence, was again beside him.

"Oi can soon tell ye that," he answered promptly. "The oidea is t' make a great smoke, an' rush us in the middle av it."

"Then that will mean a hand-to-hand fight," said Clive gravely.

"Yes, sorr," Storbin said, in a low tone; "an' it's myself as must own Oi don't loike the chance av it. These black chaps are all right at foightin' as long as it manes pottin' at a distance, but whin it comes t' close foightin' they filibusters is such perfect demons that my men be afraid av 'em, an' ye can't say but what they may turn an' run loike a lot av rabbits."

"Can't we make any counter move?" Clive queried. "Surely we ought to be able to prevent them from making a stack big enough to be of any real use? I notice," he went on, "that your people are getting rather slack in their firing——"

"It's because we're runnin' short av cartridges," said Storbin, in a worried tone. Oi've had to go round an' warn 'em——"

"Cartridges? Short of em, did you say?" exclaimed Clive. "Why, we've got plenty—that is, if they will fit your rifles. Why didn't you say so before? That case over there is full of 'em. Go and see if they're what you want."

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

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