

NO. 19.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

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The Secret of the Swamp

A Magnificent, Long, Complete Tale of
NELSON LEE AND NIPPER,
 INTRODUCING "THE BLACK WOLF!"

PRÓLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

The Wreck of the Good Ship Rio Toro—In the Grip of the Sea—Senor Jose Sanchez Finds Death where He Sought Succour—The Outfitter of Balata Expeditions—The Arrival of a Stranger—A Queer Conference—The Plot—Events Move Swiftly—Nemesis.

OFF the north-eastern coast of Venezuela, where the waters of the great Orinoco sweep far out into the Atlantic, the good ship Rio Toro, bound from Liverpool to Rio Janeiro, met her fate. Sweeping on through the summer night, with the great curtain of stars hanging above her and the purple bowl of the southern sea beneath her, with the brilliant Southern Cross guiding her way, and the flashing phosphorescence streaking out from her like showers of diamonds in a pool of light, she struck a treacherous derelict.

It may have been the hulk of that which bore men over the seas of a previous generation, it may have been the wreck of a ship which only a short month before had sailed proudly under her bellying canvas. No man could tell.

But there it lay, slopping low in the wash which tossed up from the spew of the Orinoco, right in the path of the Rio Toro, and into the low black line of treachery crashed the good ship, with a rending and splintering of honest timbers, the meaning of which the ears of the seaman knows only too well.

There was no time for boats that night. There was no time for aught but to spring into the sea before the ship plunged to her death, taking with her the treacherous derelict which had stabbed her to the heart, and sweeping down in the whirlpool many of those who a few moments before had been happy with the anticipation of an early port.

Yet from the chaotic swirling of the waters there emerged one man, who, gripping on to life with all his will and strength, fought against the overpowering demand of the sea, and, struggling valiantly, gradually drew away from the scene of death and desolation.

Nor is it part of this story to deal with the awful suffering of that solitary survivor of the Rio Toro as he fought his way against the outward drift of the Orinoco—fought his way against current and wave, against the dangers of sharks, and the torturing thirst of the day, which rose and found him feebly struggling along, half delirious, and almost wholly exhausted.

All through the intense, burning heat of a cloudless tropical day he toiled, not wotting what he did; and then, with the violet wing of evening sweeping

up from the east, an inshore current caught the man to its breast, and bore him shorewards, to toss him on the beach just where the stinking spew of the Boca Mariusa empties into the sea.

There he lay in a delirium of fever until another pink day surged up from the east, and there, too, did a wretched fate pursue him in the form of a renegade of a white man, who came creeping forth from the mangroves to gaze upon the form which lay wedged between two rocks on the beach.

No coco-nut shell of cooling water did the renegade bring to the tortured man on the beach. No fresh bananas from the groves beyond did he prepare. Nay!

Slowly, and with the stealth which had made him hated and yet successful as a beach-comber from the Orinoco to the Mosquito Coast, Pedro Montero, renegade Spaniard and murderer of Indians, stalked the man on the beach with the same care he would have used in stalking a puma.

Across the white beach he crept, like a snake and a reptile did he raise himself beside the man who lay jammed in between the rocks.

Slowly and methodically Montero examined that which the sea had thrown up, and he found it the greatest prize the beach had ever yielded unto him.

It took only a few minutes for his expert fingers to discover and bring to light the contents of the man's pockets.

A wide belt of waterproof material, and well stuffed, was the most tempting of the assortment which rewarded his search, and, letting the head of the victim fall back, Pedro Montero unfastened the five different pouches of which the belt was composed.

Then, as he squatted there beneath that tropical sky, with the glow of day dying in the west and the hot, fetid stink of the mangroves stealing across on the night breeze, Pedro Montero found that which made him gasp.

One hundred thick, folded papers—one hundred beautifully engraved and gilt-edged bonds of the Republic of Costa Blanca, and for the sum of one hundred thousand pounds!

One hundred thousand pounds, backed by the guarantee of the whole Republic of Costa Blanca, and in notes and gold the sum of two thousand pounds!

What a haul Pedro Montero had made!

With the thick packet of this new-found wealth clutched in his hand, he scorned the more trivial of the articles, and, recklessly kicking them into the sea, turned his attention to the huddled heap on the ground before him.

From the money belt which had yielded such wealth, Pedro Montero had also come upon papers which told him all he wished to know.

Before him was a man whose name from those papers he knew to be Sanchez, representative of the Republic of Costa Blanca, and bound for his native State by the steamer Rio Toro.

How he had come there upon that beach Pedro Montero did not know, nor did he care beyond the extent that it might affect his own affairs. But of one thing he was determined. The man whom fate had so opportunely thrown across his path would not live to discover who had relieved him of his belongings, for that he and he only should benefit by what he had found. Pedro Montero was determined.

Tying the belt about his own waist, Montero grasped the unconscious man by the shoulders, and dragged him across to the shadow of the mangroves. Used as he was to the stench of those swamp-born trees, he minded them little, and, plunging into a morass of mud and slime, he dragged his victim in after him.

At the edge of a dark, stinking pool, black with mud and slime, and giving off the odours of evil life which lurked in its depths, Pedro Montero

smiled an evil smile, and, getting behind his victim, pushed him into the heart of the awful hole.

There was a sudden swish and splash of slime as something hurtled up from the depths below, the flash of an arm as the arm of the victim swept across the face of the pool, then what had once been a man disappeared into the vile maw of a reptilian monster below!

Hugging the belt closely to him, Pedro Montero wormed his way back to the bench. With a silver moon floating up from the east, he started out that evening to put as much distance behind him as possible.

By morning the scene of his vile crime was three leagues away, and, sleeping in the shade of a plantain grove during the hot hours of the day, he travelled thus for a fortnight.

At the end of that time, he had reached the little Indian fishing village of Cabita, and from Cabita a boat set him across to Port of Spain, Trinidad.

It was easy, then. From Port of Spain he took the first schooner along the coast, disembarking at Caracas, and not until he reached Caracas did he discover that the ship *Rio Toro* was supposed to have been lost at sea.

Then he drifted along the coast, guarding greedily the thick bonds which in his ignorant way he knew to be worth a fortune—if he could only realise on them!

The two thousand pounds he had changed at Port of Spain, and with this as a capital he finally took up the outfitting of balata expeditions into the Bolivar district of Venezuela.

From that on, he led an adventurous and profitable career; but still he clung to those bonds, gloating over what they represented, and yet afraid to make the attempt to realise on them. He could only hold them, hoping that some day he would be able to change them for the money for which he had sold his soul.

CHAPTER II.

FOUR years after the wreck of the good ship *Rio Toro*, up in the Goajira Peninsula, which juts out into the Caribbean between Venezuela and Colombia, sheer in the jungle of the guardian of Maracaibo, stood a low-flung shack, built of rough mud and thatched with palm-leaves.

It was long and low and ungainly, was that shack; but to the surrounding country it was a Mecca of wealth. For was it not the only place within a hundred miles where one could get supplies for the interior, where the great balata forests of wild rubber-trees grow, and where the adventurous white man penetrated after the wealth of the savage land?

In the heart of the tangled jungle it stood, swept by the near-by forest, and haunted by the hidden jungle life which swarmed about it. There did the great boa creep forth to seek and to kill. There did the puma and the beautiful, though deadly, ocelot creep stealthily along in search of prey. There did the wild pig go snorting and dashing along, sweeping all before it, for might in the jungle is right, and the wild pigs always travel in herds.

Overhead, the screaming parrots and parakeets made their presence known, the humming-bird and the crimson macaw. The sloth made its slow and toilsome way along, while the active monkey raced past it with a chatter and a scream of derision.

And deep in the most impenetrable morasses the treacherous snake lurked, while deeper still the slimy and stinking alligator basked in the sun.

In no part of the world will one come upon more of the mystery life of the jungle than in that water-spread stretch which runs from the delta of the Magdalena to the mouth of the Gulf of Maracaibo.

In the heart of this land sat the palm-thatched shack of Pedro Montero, the outfitter of balata expeditions, for not yet had that murderous renegade succeeded in realising on the wealth which he had snatched from the body of an unconscious man four years ago on the beach by Boca Mariusa.

Four years of thieving and cheating and killing it had been, and yet from a point of view of material profit Pedro Montero had done well.

Robbing from the white men who organised the expeditions for balata, stealing from the Indians who, though treacherous and daring, yet feared this man, who held the keys of the wonderful things which came from a strange world outside, he had done well.

Nor was there much apparent change in the man himself. On the particular day which brings him again into this story, he was sitting in a shadowy corner of the great shack, a loose pair of dirty pyjamas covering his brown legs, his chest bare, and a loose handkerchief knotted about his throat. Outside, even the thick jungle growth failed to keep at bay the heat which streamed down into the little clearing where the shack stood, and a casual stranger, coming to the shack, would have thought human life non-existent, so deathly still was everything.

Yet even while Pedro Montero sat in the shack, drinking whisky and going over an account-book, was Nemesis fast approaching him through the jungle.

In a small apartment, partitioned off from the main part of the trading shack by thin saplings such as the Arawakans use for the purpose, the Indian wife of the renegade sat in a dark corner, her knees hunched up to her chin, and her eyes brooding into the darkness with heavy sorrow.

To the Indian mind, the man who had chosen her from all the other women of her tribe had been a sort of demi-god. That had been at first. But now—heavens, how her Arawakan mind surged with hatred of the man who had beaten her and kicked her like a savage animal.

She had been slave and plaything for the renegade, and better had she been as the wife of the poorest hunter of her tribe. Yet, with the passive nature of the Arawaken, she remained mute under all abuse, and performed the meagre household duties of the shack as her life had taught her to do.

It was just three o'clock in the afternoon, and the day's heat had reached its maximum of oppression, when from the jungle surrounding the clearing where the trading shack stood there emerged a figure clad in what for that part of the world was immaculate garments.

Though tanned, it was evident at first glance that the new-comer was the product of birth and breeding, and in the well-fitting riding-breeches and leggings, topped by a flannel shirt of khaki, with a wide sun-helmet, bound by a puggaree, he looked negligent and cool even under the awful heat of the day.

Under his arm he carried a rifle, while supported by one shoulder was a well-filled cartridge-belt. Hanging from a belt at his waist were two revolver-holsters, both with the flaps caught back and indicating by their size a calibre which would meet any emergency.

Strange to say, the new-comer wore no coat, and not until he had stumbled into the shack of Pedro Montero, the trader, was the explanation forthcoming.

Straight across to the entrance to the shack the new-comer made his way, and, kicking aside the grass mat which covered the doorway, entered.

After the bright glare outside it was impossible for him to see at first, but guided by the voice of Pedro Montero, raised in oily greeting, the man made his way down the length of the shack, and, after the fashion of men who greet each other in the heart of the jungle, shook hands.

Pedro Montero, renegade, saw before him a visitor such as seldom came

that way. At first glance he set him down as not balata man, but as one of a far different order.

Young, slim, and keen-looking was this stranger, and unconsciously Pedro Montero added a "sir" when he spoke.

In a few brief words the new-comer told his tale. His name was the Comte de Monte Bello. He was a member of the exploring expedition which had been sent out by the Colombian Government to cross the Peninsula of Guajira.

While his companions had rested that afternoon, he had wandered out from the camp in order to try and find some rare specimens of fauna for the collection, and had lost his way. It was now two hours since he had been wandering about, and by pure chance had he wandered into the clearing where stood the trader's shack.

So ran the tenor of the tale which the new-comer told in a low, well-modulated voice.

"The senor is welcome to my poor abode," purred Montero, in Spanish.

With the prospect of disposing of supplies to the expedition of which he had heard from the Indians, but which he had not known was so near, it would pay him to be courteous to one who was evidently no unimportant member of it.

"Will the senor sit down?" he went on. "I will have my servant bring a cooling drink."

Murmuring his thanks, the slim stranger sat down, and, setting aside his rifle, drew out a crested cigarette-case from which he took a small Russian cigarette.

He could hear the low, curt tones of the trader in the adjoining apartment while he smoked, and a few moments later, looking up, saw the Spaniard emerge, followed by a slim and fine-looking Indian girl.

She bore an earthenware bottle of water, fresh from the cooler, from which she poured a glass for the traveller.

He thanked her courteously, and drank off the water slowly, refusing the spirit which the trader proffered as an adjunct; then, in a spirit of graciousness, the stranger condescended to talk to the Spaniard of the work of his expedition.

"We are making a thorough survey of the country as we go across," he said slowly. "We will survey through to the Gulf of Maracaibo, and return to Santa Marta by sea. We expect also to make a fairly large collection of flora and fauna of the peninsula. Then, if possible, we shall work our way through to Costa Blanca, and come down into Puerta Blanca overland from the border. I do not think anyone has ever done that."

At the mention of Costa Blanca, Pedro Montero, whose mind was always on the great fortune which rested night and day in the belt at his waist, pricked up his ears.

"The senor knows Costa Blanca?" he asked smoothly.

The new-comer nodded.

"Quite well, senor."

"I was there once, senor," lied Montero glibly. "I had bad luck—bad seasons and a revolution made me a poor man. Here I struggle to get back a little, but it is a hard life. Only one thing did I save from the wreck in Costa Blanca, and—carramba!—I know not if it is worth anything. Perhaps the senor has a knowledge of money and the Government bonds, as they are called?"

"Government bonds!" echoed the stranger. "Why, yes, I know a good deal of such things. Are you thinking of buying some Government bonds? If you are, be very careful of what country you buy them."

The trader shook his head with a lugubrious expression.

"I have nothing with which to buy bonds now, senor," he replied. "But once, in Costa Blanca, I bought a bond—one bond, senor, for ten thousand pesos, senor, which is equal to a thousand of the English pounds. I could not sell it in Costa Blanca before I left, senor, and I know not now if it be worth anything. Perhaps the senor could tell me?"

"Have you it here?" asked the other.

"But, yes, senor; I can get it in a moment. It is all I have in the world but my little stock here, and I am losing money. With the senor's permission I will get it."

Rising, the trader made his way into the adjoining apartment, and slinking across to the Indian girl, who was again squatting in the corner, drove her through a rear entrance to the sun-beaten ground outside.

Then, when he was alone, he stripped off the belt, and, taking out one of the hundred bonds which was concealed there, fastened the belt again.

With the bond in his hand he went back to the outer room of the shack. Approaching the place where the stranger sat, he held out the bond with a smirk.

"That is my worldly wealth, senor. I shall for ever pray to the saints for the senor if he will tell me if it has now a value."

The stranger took the bond, and, walking to the door with it, unfolded it. By the light there he read that it was a bond issued by the Government of Costa Blanca for one thousand pounds for a term of twenty-five years, bearing interest at the rate of five per cent. per annum, and that the coupons could be collected semi-annually at any office of Messrs. Castro & Sons, of London, Paris, New York, Rio Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Cartagena, Caracas, and a score of other cities.

The name of the bankers alone was sufficient to tell the stranger that the bond was worth the money which it represented. He walked back along the floor and handed it to the trader.

"Senor," he said, "you have there something which will realise you almost, if not all, the sum which it has upon it."

"The senor is very kind," responded the trader; "but I am ignorant of such things. I know only how to trade. How would I realise as you say, senor?"

The man who had called himself the Comte de Monte Bello shrugged.

"It is easy, senor. Take it to any branch of the banking firm whose name is written there. They have one in Cartagena, and that is the nearest one to you unless you should go to Caracas. They will soon sell it for you, or, if you wish to borrow on it, they will loan you probably two-thirds of its value. And now, if you will be so good as to put me on the right trail, I shall be getting along. We shall pass this way to-morrow, and shall probably be able to do some business with you since we are needing some supplies."

"The senor is very good," said Montero, almost grovelling before the other. "I shall be honoured to show the senor the way back to the encampment."

As they crossed the compound the stranger saw the Indian girl crouching in the shadow of the shack, with the stinging flies and mosquitoes about her, and this caused him to ponder as he went; while the only thought which filled the mind of Pedro Montero was the throbbing recollection of what the stranger had just said about his bond.

It was worth the money which it represented, and he had a hundred of them!

"Senor," he purred, as they plunged into the jungle, "the poor trader would crave a favour."

"What is it?" asked the other shortly, for he was beginning to have a strong dislike for this slimy individual who slunk along beside him.

"I am a poor man, senor and this place is full of danger. I would crave that the senor say nothing about what I asked him back in the shack."

"My dear man," replied the other, "your financial affairs are of not the slightest interest to me. It is forgotten already."

And Pedro Montero, who would not have trusted one of his own kind had he sworn ever so vehemently on the virgin, accepted the word of breeding and knew it would be kept.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN the Comte de Monte Bello informed Pedro Montero, the Spanish trader, that the exploring expedition of which he was a member would return to Santa Marta by sea, he made his statement without taking into account that ruling power of the tropics—King Fever.

He could not, or, at least, did not, take into account the great ravage which the worst demon of the fever tribe—black water fever—would do to his party.

From the time they passed the trader's post until they stood on the sheer edge of the great Gonjira bluff, overlooking the blue waters of the Gulf of Maracaibo, which vomits forth into the Caribbean, they were dogged by this sable member of the fever family; and by the time they reached the coast they were almost decimated.

Before them lay the unknown terrors of the Costa Blanca trip—a journey which they could hardly essay under present conditions. The alternative of the return by sea had to be placed against returning by the way they had come, and, when it was put to the remaining members of the party, all elected to go back by sea with the exception of the Comte de Monte Bello, who decided to make his way back across the peninsula in the company of the few surviving Indians.

So it came about that a month after he had passed the trader's post he was once more on his way back. And as he fought his way through the tangled jungle of the Gonjira Peninsula he little dreamed that what to him had been but an insignificant Spanish trader, of more than usual slinness, was to have a strong bearing on his future.

They came upon the trader's post a little over three weeks later, and while the Indians who were with him prepared the camp for the night, the comte went on alone to visit the trader and make arrangements for supplies.

The jungle day had closed by the time he reached the clearing, and the golden orb of day had dropped from view behind the steaming bush.

Already in the east the swift tropical night was advancing, and through the openings between the trees the lone traveller could catch an occasional glimpse of a star.

Soon it would be but a great purple mantle, diamond studded and beautiful. From all about him came the first voices of the jungle night—predatory, crooning, plaintive, and fear-laden, as the mingled voices of the wild always are.

As compared with the jungle through which he had just come, the clearing where stood the trader's shack was light. At the very edge of the trees the comte paused in order to light a cigarette, but even in the act of striking the match he paused and listened.

From the shadow of the shack had come the sound of a voice, railing curses in mixed Indian and Spanish, and in the harsh tones the comte

recognised the voice of the trader—the voice which could be so sulky and cringing at need.

Then from the rear of the shack there reeled the figure of the Indian girl whom he had seen on his previous visit. Close behind her was the trader, drunk, as the traveller could see.

He was pushing the girl along, striking her at frequent intervals and cursing in a way which caused the eyes of the comte to harden like twin points of steel.

"The end of you," cursed the trader. "Out with you, and back to the dogs from whom you came. To-night I leave here for good, and when I am gone you can come back and have the pickings. But now get out of my sight. I'll teach you to interfere in my business. So you think I will sweat out my life here with you, do you? You'll dare ask me to do my duty by you, will you, you—— Take that, and that! Now clear out, and don't let me see you again!"

With a final kick and a curse the trader pushed the girl towards the jungle, and, turning on his heel, reeled back towards the shack.

With movements stealthy as those of a panther the Comte de Monte Bello tossed away the cigarette which he had not lit, and, bending low, made his way through the trees towards the spot where the girl had entered the jungle.

He came upon her crouching at the foot of a great balata tree, her body shaken with convulsions of suffering, and her face buried in the deep tangle of grass at the foot of the tree.

Bending down, the comte laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. She was on her feet like a frightened deer, but a strong wrist gripped her and held her.

"Be not afraid," said the comte, in the Arawakan dialect—"be not afraid. I am one who will help you. I am going across to the shack now. Wait here until I come back, and then I will take you on to my people, who are of your tribe. Will you obey?"

The Indian girl bowed her head submissively, and, turning, the comte broke through into the open, and with soft footsteps made his way across to the shack.

It was his intention to enter by the main door of the shack, and settle with the trader as his natural indignation bade him do; but just as he reached the corner of the building a light broke out at the rear, and something inspired the comte to move quietly along by the side of the building until through two saplings at the end he could peer into the apartment which adjoined the main part of the shack.

There he saw something which caused him to bend forward suddenly, and, scarcely breathing, to watch intently the man who sat at the rude table within.

It was Pedro Montero, the trader. He was sitting side-face to the one who stood outside the building, and, in a frenzy of drunken glee, was quite unaware that he was being watched.

On the table before him was a large pile of gold, notes, emeralds, and beside them a huge batch of folded papers.

As he gazed upon this latter array, the eyes of the comte suddenly widened, and he bent even closer, for his keen gaze had detected not one of the bonds which he had examined when there before, but dozens upon dozens of them.

And then the gold-drunk voice of the trader reached him.

"At last—at last!" he was muttering. "So the young fool of a comte thought I had only one of these bonds, did he? Pedro Montero, you waited patiently to find out what these papers were worth, and now you know.

One hundred of them, and worth the amount they say on them. A hundred thousand pounds! Ah, it will be worth sacrificing some, if necessary. And nearly all my accounts collected. Five thousand pounds' worth of emeralds, three thousand in notes, and five hundred in gold. Pedro Montero, you leave here a rich man. Ho, for Europe, where I will live the life of a gentleman, and forget this accursed hole!

"The girl and her tribe will be welcome to anything they can find when I am gone. There is little enough. Heaven knows. Only to realise on the bonds, then for Europe. At daybreak I will start. And now, my little beauties, you must be put away in a safe place."

With that he swept the whole mass of wealth into a huge leather bag, which he dropped into a hole in the mud floor beneath a pile of blankets.

It was then that the comte slipped away from where he had been standing, and, slipping along by the side of the building, made for the main entrance of the shack with no attempt at concealment.

"So that is the kind of beauty he is," he muttered to himself. "He thinks the young comte a fool, does he? And he will kick that girl out without a penny or even a blanket into the jungle after what she has been to him? I'll settle with you before I leave here, Mr. Slimy Trader, or my name isn't—well, isn't the Comte de Monte Bello."

As the new-comer entered the shack the trader was just coming forward. He started back with a sharp exclamation as he saw someone come in, but a moment later the voice of the traveller was reassuring him.

"It is you, is it, Montero?" he said, peering towards the guttering candle which the trader carried. "I am the Comte de Monte Bello. After all, I am returning by the way I went, and my Indians are making camp in the old spot. I came on to see you about some supplies. We shall need them to-morrow."

The trader gathered himself together with an effort, and bowed limply.

"It is an honour, senor," he managed to say. "Will you sit down. I will see if I can get you some refreshment. My pig of a servant has left me."

The Comte de Monte Bello, knowing the truth of how the "servant" had left him, said nothing, but sat down. It was his intention to play with the brute before him as a puma would play with a young wild pig before striking the deadly blow, but he did not take into consideration one thing—that was the fact that he had mentioned the Indians who were with him.

For the trader knew from the previous passage of the expedition that they were of the same tribe as the Indian girl.

And while the comte was planning a torturing punishment for the trader, the latter was thinking feverishly:

"This man has returned. He has not yet seen the girl, but she is bound to find her way to his camp, and she will tell the Indians there the truth. They will tell this young fool, and he—what will he do? He is dangerous to me, and he must be got rid of."

"Then, at the point of the gun, I can make those pigs of Indians carry my packs across to within touch of the Santa Marta trail, and then they can go to the devil. But this young fool must die. If he is only alone it will be easy. If not, then the other members of his party must think he has got lost and perished in the jungle. I can hide the body, and deny that I have seen him."

So Pedro Montero planned yet another step of crime in his lust for gold. One minute it took for him to find out that the young comte was returning alone, and then, with a muttered remark about seeking refreshment for his visitor, the trader rose and made his way into the rear room of the shack.

But something in the man's preoccupation caused the comte to be on his guard. He strained his ears to listen while he waited for the other to return, and when a soft click came from the other room he knew that his suspicions were only too well founded. He had spent too much time in the South American jungle not to know the click of a rifle when he heard one.

He wanted the barest fraction of a second, then with a rapid motion he plunged forward on his face just as there was a sharp explosion behind him.

The comte lay just as he had fallen, and, following the report, the trader rushed out from the place of concealment.

Laying down the rifle, he bent over the huddled-up figure of the young comte, but no sooner had he done so than a pair of fingers closed on his, and with a bound the comte was on his feet.

Now physically the trader was far bigger than the comte, and in a trial of brute strength the latter was no match for the other. But the slim young comte had no need of strength in dealing with his antagonist, for with a quick twist of his arm he put into effect one of the most subtle of the ju-jitsu movements, and in a moment the trader was squirming helplessly under an agonising hold.

"Now, you dog, into the next room!" snapped the comte.

Perforce the trader went, and, halting him beside the rugs on the floor, the comte forced him to bend down and take out the leathern bag which held his ill-gotten wealth.

"Clutch it, you dog!" snapped the comte. "Clutch it, as you love to clutch it, and march! I'll attend to you later on."

With that he forced him from the shack and across the patch of open ground to the jungle. There a soft whistle brought the young Indian girl running up, and with a curt order to her the comte forced his prisoner on ahead until in a small clearing they came upon the camp.

The comte called up the few Arawakans who were accompanying him, and who, one and all, would have cheerfully given their lives for him.

In a few stilted phrases of Arawakan he told them the truth of the trader and his Indian wife, and then, snatching the bag from the hands of the grovelling Spaniard, hurled him into the midst of the Indians.

Jerking a heavy revolver from his belt he tossed it after Montero and said:

"Take that to defend yourself, you hound! If you can escape them, you are welcome to your freedom."

Scarcely had he finished when, snatching at the revolver, the Spaniard turned and fled into the jungle with the Arawakans in full cry after him.

Forward he went, twisting and turning like a hare, and yet he knew that sooner or later he must make his stand against those bloodhounds of the jungle.

But as Fate had intervened in his favour while he was climbing the staircase of crime and greed, so it now intervened again, and if it were or were not in his favour you shall be the judge.

How seldom it is that in reality "He who kills by the sword perishes by the sword!" Yet it seems fitting that he who kills wantonly should perish in the same way as his victim, and Fate, which had befriended Pedro Montero for so long, had now decreed that he die as he had killed the most helpless of his victims—Sanchez, the man who four years before had lain battered and unconscious on the beach by the Boca Mariusa.

Plunging through a dense thicket of undergrowth and water creepers, with the Arawakans in full cry close behind, Pedro Montero plunged full into a hidden pool of slime and stinking ooze.

Before he could save himself he was into the armpits, and even before the ghastly scream of the doomed murderer could burst from his lips there was a sudden swish and boiling of the slime.

Into the awful depths he was dragged by a gaping, slobbering-mouthed something, as Sanchez, his victim, had been dragged four years before; and standing on the bank of the hidden pool the Arawakans shivered and gazed round in fear of the spirits of the forest. Then, with a last look at the settling surface of the pool, they turned and made their way back to the camp.

That night, by the light of an amber moon, the little party started on its way again, and with them went the Indian girl who had been so cruelly used by Montero, and with the Comte de Monte Bello went all the illgotten wealth which Pedro Montero had sold his soul to gain.

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CHAPTER I.

Stephen Castro, the Great London Banker, Relates a Curious Tale to Nelson Lee—After Five Years—Nelson Lee Does Some Thinking

MR. NELSON LEE entered the great London office building known as the Castro building, and, turning to the right, opened the great glass doors which opened into the main lobby of the offices of the firm of Castro & Sons, foreign bankers.

He was not there in the ordinary way of business, for, although he had at various times had transactions with Castro & Sons, he kept his own account at another institution.

It was at the request of Stephen Castro, the senior member of the famous firm, that he was there, and no sooner had he given in his name than a boy hurried away at once to inform the banker that Lee had arrived.

He was not kept waiting long, for less than a minute later the boy returned to say that Mr. Castro would see him at once.

Nelson Lee was led along the passage which served the private room of the great banker, and when he had passed through a doorway at the far end, he found himself in the presence of the man who had sent for him.

Stephen Castro was a young man as bankers of influence go. Nor had he entirely built up the firm himself. It was a big power in the world of finance when his father had died, leaving it to him, and with a rapid increase in their foreign business, the firm had built its own building and moved in.

Under the guidance of Stephen Castro and his brother, it was growing more and more important as a medium for foreign banking, its operations being chiefly with the more stable of the South American Republics.

Short, squat, with dark hair and black, close-cropped moustache, Stephen Castro did not look unlike the higher type of South American himself, and it was true that, through his father, he inherited Spanish blood.

He greeted Nelson Lee warmly as the great detective entered, and, shaking hands with him, indicated a low easy-chair close to his own desk.

When he had pushed a box of cigars across the desk towards Lee, he leaned back in his chair, and, placing the tips of his fingers together, gazed levelly at Lee's non-committal features.

Not until Lee was puffing away at his cigar, however, did the banker speak.

"I asked you to come and see me, Mr. Lee, because I am greatly puzzled over a certain matter. I shall not mention isolated facts to you, but with your permission will relate all the details of the matter as I myself know them. When I have done so, you can give the matter some thought, and then tell me if you can help me."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That will be the best plan, Mr. Castro. I am listening."

"To begin with," said the banker, "I must ask you to cast your memory back for five years or so. It is just five years ago this month that the steamer *Rio Toro* sailed from Liverpool for South America. She was an old ship which had been bought by a small, private firm of shipowners from one of the larger lines. She was of seven thousand tons odd, and had accommodation for only twenty or so first-class passengers.

"She was not equipped with wireless, but after leaving Liverpool was spoken by several ships which reported her right along to the Azores. She put in there and left on schedule time, but from the time she left the Azores until the present nothing whatsoever has been heard of her.

"She was first posted at Lloyd's as overdue; then, after a time, as missing; and finally the insurance was paid. It is presumed that she ran into a derelict, for all the available reports of weather conditions existing in the South Atlantic at that time gave only clear weather.

"Therefore it could not have been a storm which caused her to go down. It must have been a very sudden affair, and it is presumed that no boats were got out from her. At any rate, she disappeared, and it has been written down as one of the unexplained tragedies of the sea. Do you recall the affair?"

Nelson Lee was silent for a little; then he nodded slowly.

"I seem to recall the affair," he said finally. "Wasn't there a rumour about that she had always been top-heavy?"

"Yes, that is right," replied Castro. "But it was not true. The only thing which can be supposed is that she struck a derelict. Anyway, that is what I wished to recall to your memory, for it has no little bearing on the reason for my asking you to call here to-day.

"Now on the *Rio Toro*, when she left Liverpool, there was, among other passengers, the representative of one of the South American Republics. It was, as you remember, during my father's lifetime, and you will also recollect that my father was one of the most important of the South American financiers.

"It was due to him that many of the republics there were able to float several loans. This man of whom I speak had been in England to see my father, and while here had arranged for a bond issue for the republic which he represented.

"Well, to make a long story short, the issue was arranged, and through my father's influence most of the bonds underwritten here in London and Paris. The total issue was for a million pounds, and of that amount something like three-quarters of a million were taken up here.

"Another hundred and fifty thousand were retained by my father for disposal a little later, when the market conditions should be favourable, and the balance, a hundred thousand, was handed over to the representative to take to South America with him, for that amount was to be absorbed in the republic itself.

"I have had a list made of the bonds which formed that amount, and later on will hand it over to you. For the present, however, it will suffice to tell you that it consisted of one hundred bonds of a value of one thousand pounds each.

"These bonds were like the rest of the amount, due in twenty-five years, and were to bear interest at the rate of five per cent. per annum, payable half-yearly at any of our offices throughout the world.

"They were numbered in three series, one series being of a value of one hundred pounds each, and running from No. A 1 to No. A 2500, the second series being of the value of five hundred pounds each, and running from No. B 1 to No. B 1000; and the third series, of a value of one thousand pounds each, running from No. C 1 to No. C 250.

"This, as a mental computation will show you, makes the amount of one million pounds. It was the first two of these series which were placed over here. That is to say, the whole amount of the hundred-pound bonds, reaching a total of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and all the five-hundred-pound bonds, reaching a total of five hundred thousand pounds, were placed over here.

"Then one-hundred-and-fifty of the thousand-pound bonds were kept here by my father in order to be placed later on, while one hundred of these bonds, or one hundred of the C series, were handed over to the representative of the republic to take back with him.

"Now, if you will cast your mind back to the figures I have just given you, you will see that this third or C series of bonds, for a thousand pounds each, was numbered from C 1 to C 250. Nos. C 1 to C 150 were retained here by my father, while from No. C 151 to No. C 250 inclusive were the bonds given to the representative of the republic.

"As I said before, he was on board the Rio Toro when she disappeared, and when, after several months, all hope of discovering anything about her fate was abandoned, and when nothing whatsoever had come to light to explain the mystery, we, with the consent of the republic, and, in fact, at its request, issued a new lot of the C series of bonds, numbered from C 151 to C 250.

"In a word, we simply replaced those bonds, which had evidently gone down in the Rio Toro, with the man who was taking them back to South America.

"Bear in mind that was five years ago, Mr. Lee. Now, listen carefully! This new lot of bonds, amounting, as did those which were lost, to one hundred thousand pounds, were sent in due course, and by registered foreign post, to the president of the republic, for whom they had been issued.

"Later on, we were advised that they had been completely absorbed in the republic itself, and on those bonds, as well as all the others of the issue, our banks have regularly paid the coupon when presented each half-year.

"As far as we were concerned, the affair of the Rio Toro was done with, and, while upsetting our arrangement regarding the issue for a little, it was not really serious. Now comes the remarkable part of the whole affair, and which caused me to send for you.

"About three months ago we received a cable from our branch in Cartagena, in the Republic of Colombia, asking us what we would loan on Costa Blanca twenty-five-year bonds of our own issue. Thinking that some of the hundred-and-fifty bonds which had been reissued in place of those which went down in the Rio Toro had come into the bank as collateral, I cabled back that we would make a short-time loan on any amount presented at the rate of seven hundred pounds against each thousand.

"As you may know, the issue is a good one, and the conditions in Costa Blanca are now so sound that the price hangs very steady round ninety.

"I heard no more until, in due course, there came along the notice that our branch in Cartagena had loaned seventy-thousand pounds against a hundred-thousand pounds' worth of the bonds.

"I immediately saw that there was something wrong. It was inconceivable that the whole amount of a hundred-thousand, which had been allotted to Costa Blanca, and which I knew was taken up by several different interests, should have been gathered together and presented in one lot in Colombia.

"Still, there was always the chance that the Government of Costa Blanca itself might be responsible for it, and, before communicating with our branch in Cartagena, I cabled to the Government of Costa Blanca.

"I received a reply from the president of the republic, saying that, as far as he knew, none of the bonds taken up in Costa Blanca had been disposed of

to any extent, and that, as for himself, he still held those which he had bought.

"I looked up the records, and I find that the president holds ten thousand pounds' worth, and that his ten-thousand were taken from the first of the lot which was reissued in place of those which were lost when the Rio Toro went down.

"In other words, he holds ten-thousand pounds' worth of Series C, Nos. C 151 to C 160 inclusive. And yet, Mr. Lee, in the list of numbers and particulars which were sent on from our branch in Cartagena, the numbers of the bonds put up as security against the loan of seventy thousand pounds run from C 151 to C 250 inclusive, or the whole of the amount which was reissued after the Rio Toro went down, and which was taken up in Costa Blanca.

"There was something seriously wrong, and I knew it. Naturally the first thing which leaped to my mind was that someone had got hold of some of the bonds in Costa Blanca, and had forged the whole issue; but, beyond cabling to the branch in Cartagena to keep a close watch on the man to whom they had loaned the money, and ordering them to send on the bonds at once, I could do nothing until it was possible to make an examination of the bonds themselves.

"Only this morning, Mr. Lee, those bonds arrived, and, together with the note experts of this firm, I examined them one by one.

"Now, you must prepare yourself for a startling thing. Every one of those bonds were the originals of the hundred-thousand pounds' worth which we thought had gone down in the Rio Toro, and against which we had issued a hundred thousand pounds more!

"They had never been under water at all. There was no sign of water-stains upon them, and neither were they forgeries. We compared them with the balance of the same issue, and from watermark to signatures they were genuine. Therefore it all filters down to this one point. For five solid years that hundred thousand pounds of bonds has lain somewhere, and now the whole amount has been put up as security for a loan of seventy thousand pounds at our branch in Cartagena. Do you see what it means?

"It means that there is two hundred thousands pounds-out where we should only have one hundred thousand pounds. Someone has done us out of seventy thousand pounds, Lee, and unless we can run him to earth and get it back the firm of Castro will have to meet it.

"That is the story, and that is why I asked you to call here this morning. I want you to take up the case. I want you to run down this schemer, who has managed so cleverly to get such an amount from us. Will you do so?"

Nelson Lee did not reply at once to the question. Instead, he puffed on thoughtfully for a time. At last he raised his head.

"You said, Mr. Castro, that you had cabled your branch in Cartagena to keep a close watch on the man who presented the bonds as security against the loan. Have they been able to do so?"

The banker shook his head.

"They have not. By a cable I received from them this morning, I find that the man has suddenly disappeared. They used the banking code, and sent me all the particulars which they themselves possess. If you will listen, I will read it to you."

Picking up a long sheet of paper which lay on the desk close to his elbow, Castro began to read aloud.

"It is, of course, addressed to our London cable address, and runs as follows: 'Man who borrowed on Costa Blanca bonds was one, Pedro

Montero of Santa Marta. Montero has been for four years or more a general agent and banker in the Santa Marta district. Has acted as outfitter for balata expeditions into the interior of the country. The request for the loan came from him direct, and the reason given was that he was financing several large expeditions, and needed money. Inquiries on our part in Santa Marta proved this to be so, and we then cabled you. The loan was made after receiving your reply, and when your cable came a watch was immediately set on Montero. Unfortunately he must have been warned, for three days after our agent arrived in Santa Marta, Montero disappeared. Since then nothing has been seen of him, although inquiries show that he had long been prepared for just such a sudden departure. His stock was all disposed of, and, with the exception of a very few small accounts, he had collected everything due to him. It can only be assumed that he took everything of value with him. Rumour has it that he got away with a substantial amount, although seventy thousand he received from us must have formed the bulk of that amount. Will cable at once if any further news of him. Shall be anxious to hear result of your examinations of bonds."

When he had finished reading the message, Stephen Castro laid it down on the desk and gazed over the top of his pince-nez at Lee.

"That is what our Cartagena manager has to say, Lee," he said. "You can see from that message that the fellow Montero who landed us for the loan was ready for flight. He would probably have cleared out sooner, but I expect he hung on to collect in as many of his accounts as possible, and it looks as if he had succeeded in doing so. Now we have proved these bonds to be part of the original issue, and the full lot which we thought had gone down on the Rio Toro. Where have they been for the last five years?"

"How did thy come into the hands of Pedro Montero? Why, if they were in the possession of someone who knew their value, were they not presented before? And if they were not in the possession of someone who knew their value, then how did they come into the hands of Montero? How did he know their value? How did he know that he would be able to bring off such a coup? An ordinary outfitter of balata expeditions is not usually the sort of man who can bring off such a delicate bit of financial trickery as this. It took nerve and daring to do it, for at any moment it might have come out that they were but duplicates of the bonds held in Costa Blanca. Why, had our Cartagena bank inquired in Costa Blanca, that fact must have come out at once. It is a strange muddle, and I am afraid will be difficult to unravel. But at the same time, I cannot sit down and let this fellow Montero walk off with seventy thousand pounds of this firm's money."

Nelson Lee knocked the ash from his cigar.

"It does not appear, on the face of it, to be an easy matter," he said slowly. "At present it looks as if Montero had succeeded in rooking you of seventy thousand, and, moreover, had had a successful get-away. He has had a good start, and if—if, I say—it is his brain which has conceived and carried out this scheme, then it is safe to say that his flight will be equally well carried out. But, of course, as you yourself have already said, we do not yet know how the bonds came into his possession. All we seem to know regarding him is that he has been an outfitter for balata expeditions for the last four years or so. If the bonds have been in his possession all that time, we have at present no means of knowing. How he came to have them neither do we know."

"Was he a member of the ship's company which composed the assembly of human beings on board the ill-fated Rio Toro? We do not know yet."

But before making any definite plan of campaign, Mr. Castro, it will be necessary for me to devote some time to going over the known particulars of the loss of the Rio Toro. I will have those particulars somewhere at home, and will devote a good deal of time this afternoon to them. When I have done so I shall think up some plan, and then will let you know what I propose doing. Until then, I should advise you to say nothing about the matter."

After a few more words on the subject Nelson Lee rose to take his departure, little thinking as he passed out to the street that he was embarking on one of the most sensational cases it had ever been his fate to take up.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee and Nipper in South America—The Puzzle Grows More Obstinate—Nipper has an Idea—Startling Events and Complications.

ON the balcony overlooking the patio of the Pension Inglesa, in the old Spanish-American town of Cartagena, sat two white-clad figures, getting the benefit of the faint evening breeze which was just starting up as night fell.

They were sitting close together were those two figures, and it was still light enough for one who might have known them to recognise them as Nelson Lee and Nipper.

It was only two days since they had arrived in Cartagena on the case which had had its inception with the issuing of the Costa Blancan bonds some five years before, and on this the second evening Nelson Lee was confessing to his youthful assistant that so far they had made very little headway.

It seemed odd as the day died over that white-walled and white-buildinged city of the old Spanish Main, to be sitting there pondering on such a very modern problem as missing bonds when everything about them still spelled the romance of the old buccaneers.

How very short a time it seemed to Lee, as he gazed at the enclosed whiteness of the old town, since Drake and his men had stormed the place and carried it at the point of the sword.

How short a time it seemed since the mail-clad adventurers of old Spain had come pouring into the new world to siphon from it by every means of a corrupt people the wealth which so far had been the heritage of the Incas.

The very breath of the old buccaneering past seemed to linger over the city in that tropical twilight, and as the fresh smell of the Caribbean reached them, borne along on the breast of the night breeze, the breast of Nipper filled with vague yearnings and longings for the golden past which was gone to come no more.

Yes, it was a far cry from those days of Drake and Hawkins and Morgan and Kidd to the present—a present of bonds and stock exchanges and high-powered weapons, and a sadly depleted Spanish empire.

Two days since they had arrived and little had been accomplished.

They had been sitting for some time in silence, but as the last flicker of daylight died away and a solitary star glittered from the purpling heavens, Nelson Lee withdrew the cigar he had been smoking from his lips, and, in a low tone, said:

"I have been going over the details of our interview with Burton, the manager of Castro's branch out here, my lad. I must confess that we are very little ahead of where we were when we left London."

"It seems that way, guv'nor," replied the lad. "Burton didn't seem able to tell us much."

"He doesn't know, my lad. Let us just run over what we have been able to discover. We knew in London that the branch out here had loaned the sum of seventy thousand pounds against a hundred thousand pounds of Costa Blancan bonds. We have confirmed that here. We know, too, that those bonds were the original bonds issued five years ago. And in a way that is all we really do know. We know that the loan was issued to one, Pedro Montero, through a banking firm in Santa Marta, but to complicate matters in that direction the manager of the bank in Santa Marta, who wrote to Burton about the loan, has died, and Burton says there is no one else at that bank in Santa Marta who can give any information on the matter."

"It seems that it is only a small Spanish affair, and that the man who has died was the only member of the firm who carried on transaction with this man Montero. So we seem to get up against a brick wall there. But let us not despair. There is much yet which we can do. We know that this coup was brought off, and the man who brought it off had brains above the ordinary, my lad. I think it will be necessary for us to go over to Santa Marta in order to see what we can discover at the bank there."

"It strikes me, guv'nor," put in the lad, "that we ought to get on the track of this man Montero. I mean to get some information of his past. If he was an outfitter for the balata expeditions to the interior, he must be known well enough by some of the balata men, and we might pick up more than one valuable hint about him."

"That is a suggestion worth following up, my lad," replied Nelson Lee quickly. "Undoubtedly some of the balata men who come into Santa Marta would know Montero, or at least know of him, and if we could but glean some idea of the past he led before he came to the Santa Marta district, it might give us a line to follow his flight. At any rate, we have discovered all we can here, and our next move is Santa Marta. To that end I have arranged that we sail on the Maria Theresa, which leaves here to-morrow morning at six. So, my lad, let us stroll down to the plaza to hear the band, and then to bed early."

Nipper jumped up with alacrity, and, descending from the balcony to the patio, they made their way out to the street through the great doors of ancient Spanish design and sauntered along the Calle Bolivar to the plaza.

They strolled leisurely about the plaza, jostling the good-natured crowds of the South American senores and senoras, with their attendant señoritas wedged in between, until after nine, then pausing long enough to drink a native drink of corn and cacao at a small cafe, they returned to the pension and retired.

Early the next morning, while the sun was still crimson in the east, they went on board the Maria Theresa, and, after arranging their things in the cabin which had been allotted to them, went on deck to view the coast of Colombia as they forged along the northern line of the great southern continent towards Santa Marta.

Past the vast and tortuous delta of the Magdalena they went, past the treacherous sandbanks at the mouth, where only a short time ago the Darien grounded, and where she laboured in the moving sands for more than a year before they finally brought her out to deep water again. Past the narrow sand bar which shuts off the shallow Cienega from the Caribbean.

past the fishing village of Cienega, where the Indians live in rough shacks reared on poles, and from the platforms of which they fish, past the low, sun-bleached coast, leaving behind the long narrow iron pier of Puerta Colombia and the Cienega, until at last the great rock which stands sentinel at the mouth of the harbour of Santa Marta appeared; and with the brown undergrowth on their starboard quarter—that same undergrowth where one can shoot the lovely deer at will—they made port at the banana wharf the next morning after leaving Cartagena.

And here in Santa Marta were Nelson Lee and Nipper, to find that indeed was the next step in a case which was growing more curious each hour that passed.

CHAPTER III.

On the Trail of Pedro Montero—Jungle Proof—Nelson Lee Discovers a Strange Bit of News—The Clue of the Photograph.

ON the way from Cartagena to Santa Marta, Nelson Lee had mapped out the immediate plan of campaign. First and foremost it was to be his endeavour to discover all that was possible of the man Pedro Montero, in an effort to trace through the record of his past, his movements of the present.

The first step in this programme was to get into touch with the banking agents in Santa Marta who had acted for Montero when the loan with Castro and Sons, of Cartagena was arranged.

In order that the reader may understand exactly what is meant by the use here of the words "banker" and "banking agents," a word of explanation is necessary.

It must be remembered that in a country like Colombia, where there is an almost infinitesimal mileage of railway, and where financial conditions are still very primitive, all money transactions throughout the country are carried on by "agents." That is to say, if one were in business in Barranquilla, he would have a corresponding firm of agents in every other part of the country where he had business connections, so that when he wished to pay out or receive money in that part, this firm would do so for him.

A banking agent might also be, and usually is, a general business house, and they might do business with a man in the bush for many years without even seeing him.

Therefore, when Nelson Lee made his way to the firm of banking agents in Santa Marta who had acted for Pedro Montero in the matter of the Costa Blanca bond loan, he was not surprised to discover it to be a general commercial firm with a German name over the door.

If the Germans have not succeeded in gaining any actual territory in South America, they have at least managed to gain a large control of the commercial end of that great continent.

Into the offices of the firm of Binoff and Co. went Nelson Lee and Nipper almost as soon as they landed, and after a certain amount of inquiry, discovered that since the death of the German manager a few weeks back through black-water fever, the place was being managed by a Spaniard who had previously been chief clerk. Later on a new manager would be sent out by the head office in Hamburg.

The Spaniard proved to be an obliging individual, and readily granted Nelson Lee's request for a private interview. When he had read Lee's

letters of introduction from Castro and Sons, he placed himself completely at the disposal of the detective, and answered Lee's rapid questions to the best of his ability.

"I am sorry to bother you," said Lee, opening the conversation, "but I wish to know a few things about a certain man, and I have been given to understand by Castro's that this firm ought to be able to tell me something. I speak of one, Pedro Montero, senior, whom I understand was for some time a customer of yours."

"That is true, senior," replied the Spaniard. "We have already had inquiries from Castro and Sons about the man, and have given them all the information we possess. Our former manager, Mr. Arnbaum, however, did all the business with Montero, and for a period of four years or so we did not even see him. Mr. Arnbaum met him once or twice at Seville, but that is all, and since Mr. Arnbaum has died, there is no one here who can give any definite information about him."

"But I will tell you all I myself know about the man. Some three months or so ago Mr. Arnbaum said that Montero had arrived in Santa Marta, and that he was going round to the hotel to call upon him. The next morning he informed me that he had seen Montero, and that he had been asked to put through a loan of a large size on gilt-edged security."

"He told me then that the security was a hundred thousand pounds in Costa Blancan five per cent. bonds. Through Mr. Arnbaum, the loan was arranged, as you know, through Messrs. Castro and Sons, and the amount was seventy thousand pounds."

"Not on that we had inquiries from Castro's, and in compliance with their request, set a watch on the man, Montero. But already Mr. Arnbaum was down with fever and died very suddenly."

"Through the upset conditions of affairs then we lost track of Montero, but our inquiries show us that he was seen going down the coast in a small boat. That is the last we know of him, but there must be balata men in Santa Marta at the present time, senior, who could tell you something about the man."

"In fact, at the hotel now there is one, Senor Bourke, from your own country. He, I know, is a big operator in balata, and since he has sent his gangs through the Goajira Peninsula, where Montero had his trading station, he must know him well."

Nelson Lee rose.

"I thank you, senior, for your information. It is, as you say, rather vague, but it has given me an idea. I will see this Senor Bourke without delay."

From the offices of Binoff and Co. Nelson Lee and Nipper went along to the hotel where they had sent their luggage, and calling a servant, Lee asked him to point out Senor Bourke.

The man indicated a big man in white, who was sitting at a table facing on the patio of the hotel, and with a word to Nipper, Nelson Lee walked towards him.

The man looked up sharply as Lee approached, and when he saw that Lee was about to speak to him, got to his feet.

"You will pardon my intruding upon you," said Lee. "but I understand you are Mr. Bourke?"

"That is so," replied the balata man. "What can I do for you?"

Nelson Lee drew out a chair.

"I wish to have a few words with you, Mr. Bourke. My name is Lee and I hail from London. I am in Santa Marta in order to discover what I can about a certain individual known as Pedro Montero. The manager of Binoff and Co. informed me that, as you were operating in the Goajira

Peninsula; you might be able to tell me something about him. If you can do so I shall certainly be very grateful to you, as it will save me an expedition into the peninsula."

The big balata man sat down and stared at Lee.

"I suppose you have your own reasons for making inquiries about Pedro Montero," he said slowly, "but I can assure you, stranger, it is a mystery to me why that creature should be of interest to you, unless he stands a chance of getting his just deserts. You are quite right in understanding that I know something about Montero. I do. I know too much. I have operated in the Goajira Peninsula for twelve years now. I was there when this fellow, Montero, first came. That was about four years ago. At first I and my Indians did some business with him, but he is one of the worst liars, one of the biggest thieves, and one of the most unprincipled blackguards who ever came to South America, and believe me, Mr. Lee, that is saying a lot."

"Your indictment is certainly severe," said Lee, with a smile, as he offered his cigar case. "What else can you tell me about him. By the way, from his name, I suppose he is either of Portuguese or Spanish stock?"

"He calls himself Spanish," said Bourke shortly. "But he is pure const mongrel. He is known, and known unfavourably, from the Orinoco to the Mosquito Coast—known as a beach-comber, thief, and everything that is crooked. That is Pedro Montero. Now I hear in Santa Marta that he has cleared out, lock, stock, and barrel. I heard rumours through my Indians that he was realising on everything he could back in the jungle, but, even so, I can't figure out how he had enough to retire on. He has stolen a lot in four years, but not enough for that. I guess something must have happened to cause him to clear out. Perhaps"—this with a shrewd look at Lee—"perhaps he got wind that someone like you would be about here looking for him?"

Lee shook his head.

"I am sorry I cannot tell you the reason for my inquiries, Mr. Bourke, but at the present time I am bound not to do so. But I can tell you this. My inquiries for Montero were inspired by his departure, and he couldn't have got wind of that before he left."

"Then I can't figure out why he left," said the balata man.

Nelson Lee drew out a pocket notebook, and opening it, said:

"Can you give me a description of this man, Montero, Mr. Bourke?"

The other nodded.

"Yes; easily. About five feet eight in height he was. Very dark-skinned, and had black, greasy hair, which grew low on his forehead. His nose was broad and almost negroid in the nostrils. His eyes were dark brown, and the whites like those of a nigger. His mouth was thick-lipped, and on the upper lip he wore a thin black moustache. His body was well-built, and he carried himself with a lithe movement. He had holes pierced in his ears for earrings, but I never saw him wear any. That is all I can tell you."

Nelson Lee rapidly wrote down the particulars as the other gave them to him, and, putting the book back in his pocket, rose.

"I am more than obliged to you, Mr. Bourke," he said, holding out his hand. "I hope I shall have the pleasure of your company at dinner before I leave Santa Marta."

"I shall be pleased to join you," replied the balata man, rising also. "I shall be here for a few days yet, and will probably see you again."

With that Lee went along to the office of the pension. He remembered that the manager of Binoff's had told him that the manager who had died

and visited Montero at the hotel, and since it was almost the only one in the place, it was safe to think that this had been the one.

At any rate he was determined to find out all he could about the fellow. To his surprise, he found that the proprietress of the hotel was the widow of an Englishman who had at one time been a coffee-planter, and after whose death things had gone badly, compelling the widow to cast about her for some other means of support. The hotel had been her idea, and thanks to her capable management, it was doing splendidly.

She received Lee courteously, and in response to his inquiries about Pedro Montero, nodded her head quickly.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Lee," she said. "We had a man of that name staying here not long ago. I remember him quite well, for Mr. Arnbaum, who died shortly after, came here on two occasions to see him."

"Can you describe the man to me?" asked Lee.

The Englishwoman knit her brows for a few moments, then looked up.

"He was rather short, and very slim, Mr. Lee. I should say he was about my own height, which is five feet six and a half. He was rather dark-skinned, but with features somewhat refined for a bush trader. He spoke in excellent Spanish, though I have heard him use French on occasion. He was most reserved in his manner."

Nelson Lee gazed at the proprietress with a puzzled expression. Then with a quick movement he drew out his pocket notebook.

"Will you listen to this, please?" he said.

Forthwith he began to read the description of Pedro Montero as Bourko the balata man, had given it to him.

"Now," he said, when he had finished, "would that description at all fit the man whom you know as Pedro Montero?"

The woman shook her head violently.

"Not in the least, Mr. Lee. Why, it is different in every way—the description of the height, the features, and all! It cannot be the same."

Nelson Lee thrust the book back in his pocket, and was just turning to leave the office when suddenly his attention was arrested by a large group photograph on the desk.

It consisted of several white men with a crowd of Indians about them and to a man of Lee's experience it was easy to recognise it as the photograph of an expedition of some sort.

But it was not the group in general which arrested his attention, but rather one slim young man who stood behind the central figure in the group.

Bending closer, Lee studied the features of the young man for a moment; then straightening up, he turned to the proprietress.

"Would you mind telling me if that photograph was taken in this district?" he asked.

She nodded her head.

"Yes; it is of the expedition which left here some few months ago to cross the Goajira Peninsula. They stayed here while they were fitting out for it."

"At what time was that?" went on Lee.

The woman thought for a moment, then replied:

"About three months ago. Do you recognise any of the members of it?"

"Isn't this young man behind the central figure the Comte de Monte Bello?" asked Lee carelessly.

"Yes—yes," answered the woman quickly. "A very charming young man. He was the life of the party. But he did not return with the main

expedition. They came back by sea, while he returned across the peninsula, and going on to Cienaga made his way to Barranquilla. At least, that is what I heard."

Nelson Lee thanked her, and after a few more words passed out, but all the time the one thought was throbbing in his mind—that was the Comte de Monte Bello, and if the time the woman had mentioned was correct, then he must have been in the Goajira Peninsula just before Castro and Sons loaned the seventy thousand pounds to "Pedro Montero."

What did it mean?

Nelson Lee was too cautious to jump to a rash conclusion, but still, to say the least, it gave one to think. He had not forgotten for a single moment what had happened in Paris when he had been sent for by Monsieur Jules Fabert, the Paris chief of police; to assist in running down the mysterious "Black Wolf."

He had not forgotten how the same Black Wolf had stolen the Martigny pearls under his very nose, and how both he and Nipper had been bested in that struggle.

Then, for a time, the Black Wolf had disappeared from the scene, but still Nelson Lee remembered how, after the ball given by the Baronne Martigny, when the Martigny pearls had been stolen, he had come upon the strange web of connection between the charming and somewhat mysterious Mademoiselle Miton and one Comte de Monte Bello—the former a popular member of the most exclusive Parisian social set, and the latter a wealthy and fashionable member of the smart Bohemian set of the French capital.

It had caused him no little thought at the time, and now to come upon a photograph of the Comte de Monte Bello under such strange circumstances, and in such an out-of-the-way part of the world, was indeed strange.

If the woman's tale were true, then the Comte de Monte Bello must have been in the Goajira Peninsula at the time the fraud was practised on Castro and Sons.

Walking along the stone-flagged passage which led from the office to the patio in search of Nipper, Nelson Lee did not at first notice a slim, white-clad girl who came tripping along towards him.

Only when he had almost collided with her did he lift his head to speak an apology.

But the phrase died on his lips as he gazed into the girl's eyes, for there before him, in the hotel in far-off Santa Marta, was none other than the very girl of whom he had been thinking—Mademoiselle Miton of Paris!

CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Does Some Quick Thinking—Mademoiselle Miton Plays the Part of a Sphinx—An Escape in the Night—The Fight on the Yacht.

FOR once in his life Nelson Lee was nonplussed. It was no mere coincidence that he had run into Mademoiselle Miton in Santa Marta, and he knew it.

From the first day when he had talked over the fraud with Stephen Castro, Nelson Lee had been convinced that brains of more than ordinary cunning were behind the affair.

He had said as much to Castro, and on his arrival in South America, what he had heard about Pedro Montero had only made him feel all the more

positive that if Montero had brought off the coup, it was not his own inspiration, but at the direction of another.

Then had come the discovery of the group photograph, when he had recognised the Comte de Monte Bello. And now he was face to face with Mademoiselle Miton, who had given him so to think in Paris.

Those who read the record of the first passage at arms between Nelson Lee and the Black Wolf might think perhaps that Lee had been bested.

On the face of it, he had. That is to say, he had failed on that occasion to put his hands on the Black Wolf.

But if one would count that a failure one would be neglecting to take into account what Nelson Lee really accomplished in Paris.

In that brief time he had done what no man before him had done. He had gained a definite suspicion regarding the Black Wolf—a suspicion which, by the way, he had kept to himself so far. In Paris he had made a strong connection in his deductions between the personalities of the Comte de Monte Bello and Mademoiselle Miton, and further, when he had considered the numerous written notes of warning which he had received from the Black Wolf, he had been able on nearly every occasion to connect them up with a parallel presence of either the comte or Mademoiselle Miton.

Yet, though he had advanced so far and had theorised much farther, he had had no proof, and without proof Nelson Lee did not permit himself to go too far. He preferred to wait, and when the moment came to pounce.

The wide discrepancy between the descriptions of Pedro Montero, furnished him by the manager of Binoff and Co. and the proprietress of the hotel, had in the first place been sufficient to cause him to "smell a rat," as the saying goes.

Then the discovery that the Comte de Monte Bello had been in the district at the time of the fraud had given him more to think.

He recalled what the proprietress had said about the main expedition returning by sea, but that the comte had come back across the peninsula alone, and Pedro Montero was an outfitter on that same wild peninsula!

The great question which, after his first passage with the Black Wolf, had whispered itself to Nelson Lee had been: What was the true relationship existing between the Comte de Monte Bello and Mademoiselle Miton? Were they sister and brother? Were they cousins?

Certainly there was a strong similarity in their features, which caused Nelson Lee to scout the idea that they might be husband and wife.

But now a startling thought, which in the past had only taken vague form in his mind, rose up and confronted him. Even in the first confusion of meeting, Nelson Lee was asking himself: Is Mademoiselle Miton the same individual as the so-called Comte de Monte Bello?

It seemed a wild fancy for a sober-thinking man to dwell upon, and yet—and yet there was something strange in the whole affair.

As Nelson Lee bowed to the girl there was no hint of this in his manner. He was a pastmaster in concealing his emotions.

"It is a great surprise to meet you here, Mademoiselle Miton," he said coolly. "The last time I saw you was—er—under rather painful conditions. If I remember rightly, I went to your house in Chantilly to have tea with you, but unfortunately I remember nothing of what happened from the time I began to sip my tea until I found myself in a coffin in my own rooms in London. I have been promising myself an explanation of that strange phenomenon, mademoiselle."

The girl flushed, but when she replied her tones were cool enough.

"You seem to have had rather an extraordinary time of it in Paris, Monsieur Lee," she said. "If my memory serves me rightly, you did

come out to Chantilly to have tea with me, and after that affair I promised myself that I should forget I ever met you. You did a great service for me, monsieur, when you rescued me from the waters of the English Channel, and for that reason I said nothing about the horrible insult which you put upon me."

"Horrible insult!" echoed Nelson Lee, in blank amazement. "What are you speaking of, mademoiselle?"

"Monsieur," she replied stiffly, "by your own words just now you acknowledge that you remember little of what happened when you came to have tea with me. You also tell some extraordinary story of finding yourself in a coffin—a coffin, monsieur, in your own rooms in London? That is a very extraordinary tale, monsieur, and does you credit."

"Am I not to consider it an insult," she continued, "when a gentleman comes to tea, and in the midst of it collapses in my house through over-indulgence in spirits, monsieur? It was very terrible, monsieur! I never had such a thing happen. And you must indeed have continued your remarkable actions if you chose to return to England in a coffin. I am glad, though, monsieur, that I have had the opportunity of this meeting, for I did not wish to cross you off from my list of acquaintances without telling you the reason and giving you an opportunity of apologising. I am not narrow-minded, monsieur, but really it was rather a startling thing to happen."

Nelson Lee smiled a grim smile. He had more than once wondered what Mademoiselle Miton would say when he met her and accused her of having dragged him at tea, and then having been the means of sending him across to England in a coffin.

But in his thoughts of that meeting he had always pictured himself as the interrogator and the one to give pardon, if pardon were given. He had not for a moment anticipated such a denouement as this.

But if he could believe his ears, here was Mademoiselle Miton coolly accusing him of having been the worse for liquor when he called, and of having collapsed during tea.

She followed that up by boldly accusing him of manufacturing the story of having arrived in England in a coffin.

To say the least, it was enough to take one's breath away, but its very brazenness told Nelson Lee more than anything else exactly how clever and daring was the girl with whom he was dealing.

He knew, as a man of the world, that nothing was to be gained by accusing her of what he knew in his heart to be the truth. It was true that there were no witnesses of the affair, and if he were to make the accusation publicly without any real evidence to support it he would but be laughed at.

So he swallowed his chagrin and smiled.

"If you think an apology is in order from me to you, mademoiselle," he said slowly, "pray permit me to make one. I——"

Mademoiselle Miton held up her hand.

"Enough, monsieur!" she said. "On account of what you did for me, your apology is accepted; but I trust you will be gentleman enough not to force your company upon me when you know it is unwelcome. With your permission, monsieur."

With that she inclined her head, and swept past Lee, before he could make any reply.

Nelson Lee went along to the patio in a very thoughtful mood. He met Nipper just as he reached the lovely palm-filled square, round which the hotel was built.

The lad had been waiting for his master, and as he saw him he came

forward. From the lack of any particular expression on his face, Nelson Lee knew that the lad had not yet seen Mademoiselle Miton.

He made a gesture for the lad to follow him to a quiet corner of the patio, and when they had seated themselves in low wicker-chairs, he said in a low tone:

"There have been some developments in the case, my lad. Can you guess whom I have just met?"

Nipper knit his brows in thought. He was silent for a few moments, then said

"Not Montero, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, my lad. I have met someone whose name you would scarcely guess in a dozen guesses. I have met Mademoiselle Miton, whom I think you well remember."

"Mademoiselle Miton!" exclaimed the lad, with a low whistle. "Scott, guv'nor! What is she doing out here?"

"Listen, my lad. I will tell you what I know."

With that Nelson Lee began, and relating the result of his conversation with the proprietress of the hotel, went on to the part where he had come suddenly upon the group photograph.

"You can imagine, my lad, what a shock it was to me to find that the Comte de Monte Bello had been out here at just the time the fraud had been practised upon the Castro firm. But, I assure you, it was a far greater shock to run into Mademoiselle Miton as I was leaving the office to find you.

"Now, my lad," he continued, "it is plain to me that, for her own reasons Mademoiselle Miton is determined to bluff out the line she has taken. That she chooses to say that I was under the influence of liquor when I had tea at her place in Chantilly worries me not at all. I can stand anything of that nature which she or anyone else may say.

"You know, and I know, that I was drugged in her house, and we both know as well that it was through the agency of the Black Wolf himself that we both reached London in coffins. They played a strong hand in Paris, my lad, and a strong hand is being played out here in South America. The Black Wolf played the hands in Paris, Nipper, and as sure as I sit here with you, I believe that it is the Black Wolf, and only the Black Wolf, who is behind this coup out here.

"What Pedro Montero had to do with it may have been much or little, but whatever it was, it was at the instigation of the Black Wolf and none other. Of that I feel convinced. And, Nipper, to you I say now, what has been but a tentative hypothesis in my mind heretofore. It is this: I believe that the Comte de Monte Bello and Mademoiselle Miton are one and the same person.

"I believe that the Comte de Monte Bello is non-existent. I believe that Mademoiselle Miton is the so-called Comte de Monte Bello. And, Nipper, I believe that Mademoiselle Miton is none other than the mysterious 'Black Wolf.'

"But, my lad, that is only theory. We must prove it, and before we have finished with the Black Wolf, we will prove it."

"Scott, guv'nor! Can it be possible?" asked the lad, in a whisper.

"I do believe it is possible, and I do believe it to be so," replied Nelson Lee curtly. "Now, my lad, Mademoiselle Miton is here—for what purpose we do not know. But we suspect enough about that young woman to know that if she is the one whom we think, she is not here for any idle purpose. Where she has come from, and why we must discover. Therefore, we must not lose sight of her for a moment.

"You will get on her trail, my lad, and watch. It is now almost dinner-time, and it is fairly safe to assume that she will dine here at the hotel. After dinner, I have some writing which must be done, and while I am so engaged you will keep constant watch upon her. It will not make very much difference if she does suspect that you are watching her. If she is the Black Wolf, then she must know why we are here, and in that case she will know that we shall be watching her, for I am certain she knows I suspect her.

"The chief point is not to lose sight of her, my lad, and if you see anything which rouses your suspicions call me at once. I am going to change now, and will leave you to begin your task."

With that Nelson Lee rose, and crossing the patio, made his way up the staircase to his room. As he walked along the upper balcony, he saw Mademoiselle Milton on the other side, but she kept her gaze averted from him, and Lee, with a little smile, turned into his own room.

"If it is true," he muttered, as he began to change into a fresh white suit.

But what he meant only he himself knew. Now, ordinarily speaking, it was only natural that Nelson Lee should think Mademoiselle Milton would dine at the hotel, for unless she were invited to one of the private houses in the place, there was no other place even approaching the hotel in the matter of cleanliness and quality of food.

But, as it happened, Mademoiselle Milton was not dining at the hotel, and neither was she dining at any private house in the town.

She had made other arrangements, of which Lee could know nothing, for he could not foresee that a beautiful white yacht would steal into the harbour and anchor just opposite the great guardian yacht just before the sunset gun went.

Yet it was so, and Nipper, who was anticipating a very easy job of it until after dinner, at least, was somewhat surprised when he saw his quarry set out from the hotel just as the dinner-gong went, and just as dusk deepened to darkness.

The hurrying people who passed on their way to the tables made him cast a wistful glance towards the outside balcony, where the tables were placed, but, snatching up the white helmet which he had laid aside, he started off after his quarry. Mademoiselle Milton turned her footsteps towards the plaza, and walking at a brisk pace, crossed that sun-bleached square, and headed towards the harbour.

By now full darkness had descended, and once away from the plaza there was little light to guide her on her way. Here and there the open door of a peon hut revealed a rudely-furnished interior, where by the light of a guttering candle, the native and his family took their evening meal.

From the open doorways of dingy-looking shops, given over to the sale of native liquors, came the raucous tones of Indians and coast mongrels with the monotonous twang of a guitar.

The street itself, sloping down from each side of a sort of gutter in the middle—for in those poorly-drained towns, the centre and not the sides of the road act as gutter—there were few people about. Yet, vacant as the street was, Nipper had little difficulty in following his quarry under cover of the friendly darkness.

Mademoiselle Milton avoided the distant piers where the banana boats berth, and, keeping along by the beach close by the town, she walked out to a small jutting point.

Nipper, who was dogging her closely, worked his way up close to the spot where she stood, and crouching behind a small scraggy bush, watched her.

For the first time he saw that there was riding in the harbour a craft of some sort, and he knew that as he had come along the beach that same afternoon there had been no boat at anchor out there.

Although it was dark, the sky was studded with stars, and against the sky he could clearly see the silhouette of the girl who stood on the spit of sand.

She was gazing out across the harbour towards the ship whose shadowy outline he could make out, and she had not been standing there long before the lad's sharp ears caught the sound of oars working in rowlocks.

The sound grew more distinct each moment, until after what he judged to be a couple of minutes or so, he saw a small boat approach the spot where the girl stood.

Craning his head forward, Nipper could now see the girl run down to the edge of the water, and a moment later there came to him low, hurried words in French:

"Is all ready?" he heard the girl say, and a deep voice answer: "But, yes, mademoiselle. We were watching for you."

"Then row out to the yacht at once," said the girl. "We shall slip away to-night. Things have happened here to-day, and I shall go away without waiting for the instruments."

With that she stepped into the boat, and the next second the oars had been set to work again. The boat drew rapidly away from the shore, and as it gradually became lost in the mist which clung close to the water, Nipper leaped up from his hiding-place and ran down to the water's edge.

"Now what on earth does that mean?" he muttered, gazing out across the harbour. "I am sure the gov'nor knows nothing of that boat. And from what I have just heard, it seems that this Mademoiselle Miton is going to get away to-night. Now what had I better do? Shall I go back to the gov'nor and report what I have heard? Or shall I try to get out to the yacht and try to learn more?"

While the sound of the oars died away across the harbour, the lad stood pondering on the beach, figuring out the time it would take him to get back to the hotel and warn his master of what he had discovered.

Finally, after debating the matter thoroughly, he decided to try to get out to the yacht, and moving along the beach, cast about him for signs of a boat which he could use.

Search as he might, however, there was nothing which would serve his purpose, and returning to the sand spit, he started to disrobe.

Slipping off his white coat and trousers, the lad stood clad only in shirt and knee knickers, which spread out from his legs like running knickers. Then, carefully hiding his clothes behind the bush which had sheltered him before, he stepped down to the edge of the water, and, risking the presence of sharks, slipped softly into the water.

Wading out to the armpits, he bent forward, and as his feet left the sand on the bottom he spread out his arms, and with an easy overhand stroke, began to swim out to the yacht.

He had not gone very far before he began to realise that the yacht was much farther away than she had looked when he had stood on the shore. She had loomed up black and huge through the night, and he had thought her anchored fairly close to the shore.

He stuck doggedly to his task, however, and at last had the satisfaction of making out the details of her lines.

Swimming even more cautiously than he had been, he worked his way through the water until straight ahead of him he saw the long line of the cable which stretched from the bow to the surface of the water, and at which the drift of the current was making her pull.

Nipper swam along until he reached the chain, and grasping it, rested while he scrutinised the yacht which now loomed almost overhead. He could see enough to tell him that she was a big yacht of fine lines, and from her size evidently of more than ordinary power.

From the fact that there were no long funnels arising amidships, he knew she must be one of the new oil burners of which he had heard so much since the British Navy had achieved such success with oil fuel. That she was the property of a very wealthy person was plain, too, and for the first time since he had come into contact with the Black Wolf, Nipper began to realise to the full exactly what a powerful and influential individual they had to deal with.

For by now he completely shared his master's opinion that Mademoiselle Milton, the Comte de Monte Bello, and the Black Wolf were one and the same person. And if he could believe what he had seen that very evening, he must accept the fact that the Black Wolf, for whom the police of every city in the world had sought at some time or other, was at that very moment aboard his or her yacht not a dozen yards away from him.

Because he and Nelson Lee, however, believed Mademoiselle Milton, the Comte de Monte Bello, and the Black Wolf to be one and the same person, did not make it follow that anyone else would share their view, and to make their case weak they had not an atom of actual proof to go upon. It was all a theory of his master's.

Something like this was passing through the mind of the lad as he clung to the anchor-chain of the yacht, but when he was breathing more regularly, he cast about him for some means of getting on board the yacht.

He knew exactly how much risk he ran in making an attempt to scale the side—how likely it was he would be caught if he tried the plan. It was gazing along the great chain which held the yacht at anchor, that gave him a daring idea, and no sooner had it come to him than he had slipped back into the water and was swimming softly along close beside the yacht.

He kept on until he reached the stern, and there a thrill of satisfaction went through him as he saw what he had hoped to find. That was another chain cable holding the yacht at the stern.

Swimming along to it, Nipper clambered upon it, and, resting against it, dragged off his socks, which until then he had worn. That done, he turned his face to the chain, and using each of the broad links as a toe hold, began to make his way up it towards the yacht much as the black boys in the island climb a coconut-tree.

The chain was at an angle of at least forty-five degrees, and to grip only by the toes and hands on that precarious angle was both difficult and dangerous. No matter how gently he tried to move, the chain would persist in swinging, almost precipitating him into the water each time he moved.

But he stuck to it, gritting his teeth with determination, and foot by foot he climbed up until the round stern of the yacht loomed close above him. The lad was almost exhausted by now, and it seemed that he must let go before he reached the top, but still he stuck to it, and after what seemed an hour of torture, he finally reached the great hole through which the chain came.

There he braced himself and paused for a little to recover his breath and examine the means for getting on board.

When he had started up the chain he did not know whether or not he would be able to get through the chain hole or not. He knew that on a good-sized ship these chain holes are quite large enough for a lad to climb through, but in the yacht he had feared they might be too small with the chain blocking the passage.

But to his joy he found that by squirming and squeezing and not minding the jamming of the great links very much, he could just make it, and a minute later he was lying flat on the deck panting heavily.

When he had somewhat recovered, he raised his head cautiously and gazed along the length of the yacht. He was lying close to the scuppers on the deck over the fo'castle, and through a skylight just ahead of him, could see the gleam of a light.

There was no lookout in the bow, and as far as he could make out, none of the crew were hanging about the fo'castle entrance.

One thing which both served and hindered his purpose was some of the crew's washing which hung on a line just overhead. It blocked some of the view of the deck, but at the same time served to conceal him from the view of anyone on the bridge.

Determined to go ahead now that he had achieved so much, Nipper crept along on hands and knees until he was close to the skylight, and, peering down into the fo'castle, saw the crew at supper.

He counted them as they sat there, making twenty in all, and noticed that they were clad in spotless white, with a black diamond worked on the right arm of each jacket.

Through an opening in the skylight he could hear snatches of their conversation, and made out English, French, Spanish, and a strong American accent.

It was evident that the crew of the yacht was a polyglot lot. It was not however the crew of the yacht in which the lad was interested. He wanted to keep up his surveillance on Mademoiselle Miton, and to do that he must work his way aft.

Lying in the shadow just beyond the skylight, he pondered on the matter. It was the washing overhead which finally gave him an idea, and he acted without hesitation.

On the lines above he could see several pairs of white trousers and jackets, and, rising cautiously, he felt about until he had found a suit which was quite dry.

Unfastening the pins which held it to the line, Nipper worked his way into the shadow and there donned the outfit. It was considerably on the large size, but by turning up the bottoms of the trousers, it fitted well enough to pass muster for the purpose he had in mind.

When this part of the plan was completed, he rose to his feet, and walking boldly along, ran down the ladder which led from the fo'castle-deck to the main deck, and then, with a truly seamanlike swagger, started along towards the waist of the ship.

As he went, he could see an officer in white pacing up and down the bridge, and half way along the waist he met one of the anchor-watch making towards the fo'castle. He grunted to the lad, who replied in the same way, then Nipper came to the ladder leading to the promenade-deck aft, and, watching his chance, boldly ran up it.

On the promenade-deck he made for the shadow, and stood for a few moments getting his bearings. Half way along towards a wide-mouthed companionway, he could see a large skylight, from which poured a flood of light. Something told Nipper that this skylight served the main saloon, and that it was just possible that Mademoiselle Miton would be there.

The deck seemed clear for the moment, so, slipping along softly, Nipper worked his way close to the skylight. One look down he permitted himself, and in that single glance took in many of the details of what proved to be the main saloon.

It was richly furnished in black Russian oak, which is a most rare and beautiful wood. Along the full length of the saloon was a long table, white with snowy linen and gleaming with silver and glass.

Two white-clad stewards were in the act of serving dinner, and while at one end sat Mademoiselle Miton, the lad saw at the other end of the table a bearded officer garbed in white drill set off with gold braid and buttons whom he knew instinctively to be the captain.

On mademoiselle's right was a middle-aged woman whom Nelson Lee would have recognised as the companion who once admitted him to the house in Chantilly. It was Ninette.

On the captain's right was a clean-shaven man with the stamp of the better-class naval man about him, and this one Nipper took to be the first officer.

The more he saw of the yacht the more he realised the financial resources of the Black Wolf. The skylight itself was composed of six large sashes, three on each side, and on the windward side three had been lifted in order to allow the soft night breeze to enter the saloon.

Two large electric fans were also buzzing within the saloon, but even above their soft purr, Nipper could hear snatches of the conversation which was going on below. And it was mademoiselle who appeared to be doing most of the talking.

"Most unfortunate!" he heard her say in French. "I knew he was in South America, but I was confident I could get the exploring instruments I left in Santa Marta before he could get over that far.

"How he has managed to trace Pedro Montero to Santa Marta I have not yet discovered. But, my friends, I have an uneasy feeling that this man Nelson Lee is just a little suspicious of me. I do not know for certain, but it is undoubtedly a fact that he has not accepted my version of what happened to him in Paris. Since everything is settled here but the matter of the instruments, and since they can easily be forwarded on to me elsewhere, I see no reason why we should delay.

"We shall therefore get away from here to-night, and, instead of taking in supplies here as we intended, we shall take them in at Port au Prince. Then we shall go on to——"

But just then, when Nipper was straining his ears to catch what was the intended destination of the yacht, a heavy hand descended on his shoulder, and, wheeling sharply, he gazed up into the face of a bearded seaman.

The next moment he was at the throat of his captor, and the two of them were rolling over and over on the deck in a wild struggle for the mastery.

CHAPTER V.

Nipper in a Tight Place—A Wild Struggle and Chase—The Race for Freedom—A Daring Swim.

HOW the seaman had managed to creep up upon him so stealthily, Nipper had not time to think then. As a matter of fact, he had been so intently absorbed in listening to the conversation in the saloon beneath that he had heard nothing of that which was going on on deck.

It had been pure accident that he had been discovered, for the seaman, in passing from the bridge forward to relieve on the anchor watch, would not in the ordinary way have passed the spot where Nipper lay.

But a minor duty had taken the man aft before going forward, and as he

passed along on the windward side he had noticed the white form lying close to the open skylight.

He thought then, and he thought now, that it was one of the crew eaves-dropping, and, seeing how absorbed the man appeared to be, he had crept up silently from behind.

He had not anticipated such a furious assault when he laid his hand on Nipper's shoulder, it being merely his intention to drag the supposed sailor away, and settle with him on the lower deck. But Nipper had turned on him like a wild-cat, and the two had gone down, fighting wildly.

Nipper was much smaller and far less powerful than his antagonist, but the surprise of his attack had given him a momentary advantage, of which he made the most.

As they rolled towards the scuppers, he caught his foot on a projecting cleat, and stopped their impetus, leaving the seaman underneath. Then, raising his arm, he drove his clenched fist full into the face of the seaman. The latter had shouted several times as they rolled down the deck, and now he cried out again.

The sound of rushing feet and a hoarse voice overhead told Nipper that the cries had been heard, so, jamming his fist once more into the face of the man underneath, he leaped to his feet and made for the stern, intending to take to the water.

Just as he was in the act of passing the companionway, a man appeared, whom he at once recognised as the man at the saloon table, whom he had put down as the first officer.

He made a wild clutch at Nipper as the lad flew past, and managed to get a momentary grip on Nipper's jacket. Nipper strained forward sharply, and in that moment he thanked his stars that he had picked a suit much too large for him, for the blouse came off clean over his head, and he was free.

Leaving the chief holding the empty blouse, the lad sped ahead again; but now the captain himself appeared, and, with the mate at his heels, set off after the lad.

Up the deck were a dozen or more seamen coming on the run, and Nipper, seeing that two of them must cut him off before he could reach either the side or the stern, suddenly changed his course, and made forward.

Now the suit, which had twice befriended him, caused a complication, for the trousers, which, it will be remembered, had proved so large for him, had become loosened during his struggles, and began to drop down his legs, hampering his movements.

Willy-nilly the lad had to pull up and kick them off, thus losing valuable seconds, and just as three of the oncoming seamen dashed forward with cries of triumph, he again doubled and dashed aft again, clad only in his knee under-knickers and shirt.

He ran swiftly, dodging the captain and mate on the way, and sending one seaman bowling over into the scuppers; but the other blocked his way fairly, and as he doubled once more the lad saw that the main body of seamen were closing in upon him.

A marline-spike came whistling through the air, just skimming his shoulder as it went past, and following that he saw the captain draw his revolver and order him to stop.

By this time the man whom he had first fought with was on his feet, relating what had occurred to the mate and captain, and by now it was plain to all that the lightly-clad youth who was dashing round the deck was no member of the crew.

The captain raised the revolver, and, as Nipper made forward again, he called out in French:

"Halt!"

Nipper kept straight on, and just as the revolver blazed out he ducked. He could hear the zip of the bullet as it passed over his head, and the next moment he had run full-tilt into two seamen who were just coming up the ladder from the waist.

They caught him as he rushed them, and all three went into the waist with terrific force. Nipper managed to land on one of the others, and before the second fellow could get to his feet, the lad was up and racing on like a hare.

Down the other companion came the crew, pell-mell, with the captain shouting after them and firing at Nipper's fleeing figure. Then the lad reached the front of the forecastle, where he saw the cook standing, brandishing a huge knife in his hand.

Instead of trying to dodge this latter missile, Nipper rushed straight for the cook; then, just as the latter was about to bring the knife down, the lad bent almost double, butted his head full into the stomach of the cook, snatched the great knife as it flew from the man's hands, and, hurling it into the very thick of the pursuing seamen, raced up the short ladder leading to the bows.

There he thrust the washing aside, and, with that between him and his pursuers, looked for a place to go over the side. He sprang to the side just by the spot where the anchor chain went out, and, raising his hands above his head, dived into the purple waters beneath.

He cut them like an arrow, sending a shower of phosphorescence in every direction. He swam as far as possible under water, and when he finally came to the surface the yacht was a score of yards behind him.

He rested for a bare second in order to get his breath, but, as he heard hoarse commands to let go a boat, he turned over on his side, and, swimming with a strong crawl, made for the shore.

It was a good quarter of a mile as he had judged on the way out, and he knew that, unless he got a considerable lead at the start, he would never be able to outdistance the boat.

But he fought on doggedly, and the fact that more than one bullet came zipping after him only made him the more determined to win out if possible.

Yard by yard he covered the water, swimming strongly and evenly, but not yet making any attempt at a spurt, which would be of little avail at that stage of the chase, and would only tire him early.

Once he looked back, and could see something on the water behind. He knew it was the boat which had been lowered, and that it was after him with the best oarsmen the crew could produce.

On again he went, trying to master his desire not to spurt, and hoping that he would not receive the attention of any wandering shark.

As the minutes went by, he could hear the voice of the man at the tiller ropes of the boat, urging on the men, and as the voice grew more distinct each moment, he knew the boat was gaining rapidly on him.

Then to his left he heard a rush, and something black loomed up. It seemed to be coming straight down upon him, and perforce he had to turn to try to get clear of it.

He saw that it was the small coast patrol-boat which he had seen in the harbour on more than one occasion, and judged that it had probably come across the harbour to see what the commotion was about.

When in harbour the tiny gunboats of the South American and Central American republics often act as a sort of harbour police. That it had been attracted by the chase for him was soon evident to Nipper, for it was holding a course which must bring it very close to him.

But at the distance it would be impossible for those on the gunboat to see him, and therefore he reasoned that its true objective was probably the boat which was pursuing him.

As a matter of fact, the gunboat had not yet seen either the boat or the fugitive. Its objective was the yacht from which the sound of shots had appeared to come, and it was bound there to hail those on board and demand an explanation.

In countries where revolutions are the order of the day, the officials get nervous when they hear the sound of firing after nightfall.

Nipper struggled to avoid the boat as it bore down upon him, and for one awful moment he thought it must crash full into him: but, by using a desperate spurt, he managed to avoid it by inches, and as it swept on something struck him in the face with terrific force.

Instinctively he put up his hand to ward off whatever it might be, and as he did so a wet rope rushed through his fingers.

In a second he had grasped what it meant. A trailing rope at the stern of the gunboat had struck him, and as he realised that, he made a desperate attempt to hold it.

It raced past for some distance, searing the skin off his hands as it did so, but finally he managed to get a grip on it, and as it took up the burden of his weight he was suddenly jerked round at right angles to the way he had been going and dragged through the water at great speed.

As he swung about he caught sight of the boat which had been pursuing him, and saw that by now they had attracted the attention of those on board the gunboat. He could hear them hailing the officials on board, and when he saw the gunboat suddenly swing to the starboard he knew that they intended coming about to speak the small boat.

But they had been so close to the boat and were going at such a speed that of necessity they were carried on a considerable distance before they could come about, and when by the time the shouts of those in the small boat had died away, Nipper had been dragged a good quarter of a mile from the spot where the small boat rocked on the waves.

He noticed that the distance from the shore was about the same as it had been when the rope struck him, but by coming about the gunboat would drag him back out into the harbour again.

Therefore, risking discovery, for until now he was certain those in the small boat had not seen him—they must think he had been struck by the gunboat—he let go the rope, and as the gunboat dashed on he turned on his side and made for the shore at top speed.

Fully an eighth of a mile he had covered, and was just beginning to congratulate himself that he stood a sporting chance of getting free, when the rumble of the gunboat behind told him he had been discovered.

He then used the spurt which he had been saving up, knowing that the gunboat dare come only so close to the shore, and that unless they opened fire upon him he still stood a chance of winning out.

Half the remaining distance he covered at top speed, then he eased up in his stroke, and using the same steady crawl he had first adopted, swam the balance of the distance.

When his feet at last touched bottom he desisted, and straightening up, waded for the shore as hard as he could go.

He took one look at the gunboat which had been forced by shallow water to turn, saw another small patch which he rightly opined was the small boat making for the beach, then, breaking into a run, he made along the beach towards the sand-pit where he had concealed his clothes, and just as he reached that pit of sand he ran full into Nelson Lee himself.

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee Grows Suspicious—His Suspicions are Confirmed—He Grows Uneasy—A Surprise from the Sea—Nipper's Tale—Strategy and Action—The Stern Light of the Yacht.

IT was the fact that neither Mademoiselle Milton nor Nipper appeared at dinner at the hotel which first aroused Nelson Lee's suspicions that all was not right. He had felt so sure in his own mind that mademoiselle would dine there, that when half through the dinner hour she had not appeared, and there were no signs of Nipper, he first began to feel uneasy.

After what had happened in Paris he did not make the mistake of under-
standing the strength of the enemy. Now that he was assured in his own mind that Mademoiselle Milton, the Comte de Monte Bello, and the mysterious Black Wolf were one and the same, he was ready to believe the charming mademoiselle equal to almost any strategy.

Therefore, when the full dinner-hour dragged past and still she did not appear, he was so convinced that developments unexpected by both himself and the lad had taken place, that he finished his coffee hurriedly, and made his way to the office.

He found the proprietress busy at the account books, but she received him with a smile, and Nelson Lee went straight to the point.

"I am sorry to have to trouble you again," he said, with one of his rare smiles, "but I am really anxious to get a little information, if you can give it to me."

"I shall be pleased to tell you anything I can, Mr. Lee," replied the Englishwoman. "What is it you wish to know?"

"This afternoon, when I left you, I met a young lady whom I knew in Paris. It was somewhat of a surprise to me to meet her here, for she did not strike me as exactly the type of girl who would find interest in such a country as this. I have been wondering if you could tell me how long she is likely to stay. I hoped to see her at dinner, but she has not appeared."

The proprietress smiled.

"Of course you mean Mademoiselle Milton, Mr. Lee?" she said. "I really know very little about her, as this is the first time she has stayed here. I only know that she arrived some days ago in her own yacht, and that the yacht sailed away again. But it returned this afternoon, and Mademoiselle Milton has already gone aboard. She said the yacht would sail at daybreak, so I am afraid you have missed her."

Nelson Lee bit his lip with chagrin.

So the little mademoiselle had been too clever for him once again. But no! He would go after her if he had to charter a boat to do it. And as that thought occurred to him little did Nelson Lee dream how very true it would prove.

"Have you any idea what is to be her destination?" he asked quickly.

The proprietress shook her head.

"I do not know, Mr. Lee. She said nothing about forwarding on any letters which might come, so I suppose she does not expect any."

Nelson Lee thanked her, and making his way from the office, walked slowly until he reached the patio. But once there he quickened his pace perceptibly, and hurrying along to where he had left his hat got it and reached the street. Once there he was practically free from observation, and striking out in the direction of the plaza, walked briskly until he had crossed the square and reached the road leading down to the beach.

It was all new to him this talk about a yacht having come into the harbour that afternoon, but Nipper's absence was enough to tell him that the lad had undoubtedly followed his quarry to the beach. If that were so, then the lad must have seen the yacht and guessed what it meant. If so, then why hadn't he returned to the hotel to report at once.

Lee was in a savage mood by the time he reached the beach, and the red and green lights which he could see on some vessel at anchor in the harbour did not make him in a better humour.

Chance had led him to almost the same spot where Nipper had disrobed to take his long swim, and he was standing there gazing out at the yacht with a puzzled frown, when suddenly from over the water there came the sharp sound of a gunshot.

Nelson Lee pricked up his ears at once, and, bending forward, peered through the night. A few moments later the sound of another shot came across the water, and hard on that the faint echo of raucous voices shouting in what to Lee sounded like tones of anger.

With the instinct of the bloodhound, he braced himself and bent forward still more. Now he could hear every sound of uproar from across the water, and it did not take much to tell him that it came from the yacht. Shot after shot snapped out, and somehow Lee knew that they must be connected with Nipper.

Straightening up he raced along the beach in search of a boat. If the lad were in a mix-up then it was up to his master to do what he could to help him. And since the mask was off in his relations with Mademoiselle Miton, it did not much matter.

Though he went this way and that, however, he could find not a single boat—not even a rough dug-out or coracle. In a perturbed state of mind he came back to the spit of sand, and then for the first time caught sight of another boat in the harbour.

By the movements of her lights he could see that she was travelling swiftly, and as near as he could make out was heading in the direction of the yacht.

"So she has heard the shots, too," he muttered. "Must be the little gunboat I saw this morning. She is going over to see what is up. I do hope the lad hasn't got himself into a mess."

Just then the gunboat turned sharply, and for a time Nelson Lee could not make out what she was about. Then she went on again and once more changed her course, finally swinging round and heading for the shore.

It was then that Lee saw there was some definite purpose in her actions, and in his puzzlement he walked down close to the edge of the water. But though he gazed out across the harbour ever so keenly, he did not see the head of the swimmer who was approaching the shore.

Not until some time later, when the gunboat had turned and made out into the harbour again and Nipper came racing along the beach to rush full into him, did he begin to understand. Then he listened to the lad's story and what he had discovered by risking so much on board the yacht.

When the lad had finished, Nelson Lee told him to get into his clothes, and while he was waiting, walked up and down the beach in a quandary.

"So they are going out to-night," he muttered. "That does complicate matters. It will only be a waste of time for me to attempt to get the commandante of the port to hold them up. They will have slipped their anchor, and made off before I can make a definite move in that direction."

"From what the lad says, it seems they will put into Port au Prince for the supplies they intended taking in here. But that doesn't help much. It is true that there is a fruit steamer down at the pier and that she stops in at Port au Prince on her way to New York, but the yacht could give her a day's start and then beat her to Hayti."

"What on earth can I do? Once the Black Wolf gets to Europe all hope of getting back any of that seventy thousand is gone. If I am to win out on this case I simply must catch her now—now, while she has the goods about her and while I hold the cards I do.

"They are poor enough, Heaven knows, but with a well-sustained bluff—who knows what I might bring off. But how to reach her—that is the question. The fruit boat is the only boat in the harbour, and that way is hopeless. I—— Good heavens!"

Nelson Lee suddenly broke off, and, uttering the ejaculation, turned and raced for the spot where he had left Nipper.

"Come, my lad!" he rapped, as he saw that Nipper had just finished dressing. "Come at once. There is much to do, and unless we are to have the Black Wolf laughing at us again, we shall have to move swiftly. I have an idea. It remains to be seen if it is worth anything."

Nelson Lee sped up the beach, with Nipper racing along at his heels. At the crest of the beach he paused for a single moment and gazed back across the harbour.

Even as he did so, he saw the lights of the yacht move, and, as he resumed his course townwards, he caught one fleeting glimpse of the stern lights of the yacht as she slipped out of the harbour.

CHAPTER VII.

A Wild Chase to Hayti—The Meeting—Nelson Lee Plays a Strong Bluff—The Black Wolf Meets her Match—Finis.

NIPPER had not the slightest idea what idea his master had got. Nor could he even attempt to guess. As a matter of fact, it was something he had seen at the fruit wharf that morning while strolling along the beach that had given Nelson Lee his idea. That something was a large forty-foot motor-boat which he had seen lying at the wharf, and the beautiful lines of which had caused him to ask the stevedore of the fruit boat what she was.

He had been informed that she was the speedy and specially-built motor-boat which had brought the exploring party which had crossed the Goujira Peninsula back by sea from the Gulf of Maracaibo. He had been further informed that she had been left there until some disposition should be made of her, and the general idea was that she would be eventually sold in Barranquilla.

An expert on such craft, it had not taken Nelson Lee long to discover that she was an exceptionally fine sea-going boat, and with the permission of the man in charge he had gone over her.

While he had stood on the beach pondering on how he might overtake the yacht which had just slipped out of the harbour, it had come to him that if he could only get hold of that motor-boat, stock her with fuel and provisions, get a crew without delay, and send her up through the blue Carribean at full speed, he stood just a fighting chance of overtaking the yacht, at least, before she got away from Port au Prince. But to do that he would have to move and make those "mauana" South Americans move as they had never moved before.

Three hours later Nelson Lee stood over the engines of that same motor-boat wondering how he had done it. There was petrol enough in the tanks to last him to Hayti, and further if necessary. There was food—poor, it is true, but still food to last—and best of all a hard-bitten crew of coast mongrels, who, for the money he had promised them, and the free return

to Santa Marta, would fight, would steal, would do almost anything for their new master as long as their price was paid.

There was the inevitable delay in getting out of the clutches of the harbour authorities, but at last, just as the crimson dawn was coming in the east, Nelson Lee himself took the tiller, and with Nipper at the engines, the great chase began.

Those who may know the blue Caribbean will already have a very fair idea of the chase which Nelson Lee and Nipper were undertaking. They will know that a line drawn from Santa Marta due north would almost run through New York, and they will also know that the same line would come very close to Hayti.

Over to the east lay the North and South Caribbees, to the west was the Spanish Main and the Mosquito Coast; behind them the whole continent of South America, and straight ahead Hayti, their objective, San Domingo, Jamaica, and Cuba, with only the Caribbean between.

Full on the wings of dawn the high-powered motor-boat tore out of the harbour, past the sentinel rock at the mouth, and with the white foam lipping off from the bows, took its way almost due north.

Nelson Lee at the tiller crouched low beneath a rough piece of tarpaulin which had been spread overhead to keep at bay the heat of the sun. Nipper, down in the cockpit, was sheltered by the overhanging edge of the cabin entrance. The crew, under a wide piece of tarpaulin, lay on the deck forward, nursing machetes, knives and pistols.

Some of them had bound coloured handkerchiefs round their heads, and had it not been for the modernity of the boat and the clothes of Nelson Lee and Nipper, they would have looked for all the world like a party of buccaneers of old out to board and carry by storm.

Hour after hour of that blazing day went by, the monotony broken only by the occasional ditties of the crew and the necessary break for meals. Mile after mile was ticked off, and with the motor-boat dashing along over a calm sea at the rate of twenty-two knots, Lee figured that by four in the afternoon they would have covered almost half the distance to the lower end of the island of Hayti.

The engines were working beautifully, and with a faint breeze springing up behind them just at four bells in the afternoon, Lee calculated they had the benefit of another knot at least.

Evening came and found them still tearing along at a terrific pace. It was a race such as a Morgan or a Kidd might have envied. Then, just when the banner of night was being unfurled, and there was some relief from the intense heat of the day, the look-out in the bow suddenly reported the smoke of a steamer ahead.

Nelson Lee raised a pair of glasses and gazed over the starboard bow. He called Nipper up, and the lad, taking the glasses, trained them on the distant object. In a moment he was fairly dancing with excitement.

"It is the yacht, gov'nor, I am sure!" he cried excitedly. "I could recognise those lines anywhere!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Very well, my lad!" he said quietly. "Go back to your engines and give them every ounce they will stand."

The motor-boat leaped ahead even faster than before, and it was plain to all on board that they were rapidly overhauling the boat ahead. It was just when the stars were gleaming overhead and the black bulk of Tiburon and Dame Marie could be seen rising from the sea, that they raced up behind the yacht, and by a quick shift of the helm came in close.

As he drew up alongside Nelson Lee for the first time saw the name of the yacht. It was *La Rosa*.

Waiting until he was close alongside, he looked up at the faces of the crew whom he could see gazing over the side, then he called out:

"Ahoy, La Rose! Heave to! I wish to come aboard!"

Almost at once a silvery voice came down to him.

"And who might you be to demand that we heave to?" it asked.

"Ah, it is you, Mademoiselle Miton!" called Lee. "I wish you to heave to! If you do not do so then I shall be compelled to board you!"

A soft laugh sounded through the velvety darkness.

"Then, monsieur, I am afraid you will have to board us—if you can," she said.

Nelson Lee gave an exclamation of anger, then, turning to his crew, he shouted:

"Prepare to board! Cutlasses and guns ready! Nipper, shut off the engines! Ropes ready! Now!"

As he gave the shout he brought the motor-boat in close to the yacht, and hard on that the whole crew of coast mongrels gave a loud cheer, and leaping to the side caught hold of anything and everything which would assist them to board.

But those on the yacht were by no means idle. Seeing that Lee and his crew meant business, they stood ready to receive boarders, and as Lee and Nipper swarmed up the side with the whole crew of cutthroats after them a withering fire came down upon them.

Two or three of Lee's men fell back into the motor-boat, but under the spur of his voice the rest clung on and followed him.

By one thing and another, Lee managed to reach the side, and as two men came for him with drawn pistols, he raised his revolver and fired full at them.

Down they went, and in that moment he gained the deck, with Nipper close on his heels. Then over the side poured the whole crew, and there began on the deck a hand-to-hand conflict which would have made Bully Hayes green with envy.

Back and forth they went, fighting, cutting, shooting, rushing. All through the fight Lee could hear Mademoiselle Miton on the bridge encouraging her men, while in the very thick of the struggle he could see the captain and mate leading the crew.

Lee made effort after effort to get to the captain, and finally, when in a lull in the fighting the gang drew aside, he saw his chance.

Like an arrow he sped along, and, raising his cutlass, engaged the captain. The latter seemed nothing loth, and with white teeth showing through the line of his beard and moustache, he came at Lee viciously.

It did not take Nelson Lee long to discover that he was up against an expert swordsman, and a few minutes later he saw that the captain was fighting after the style of the Italian school.

Now Nelson Lee had spent many weary hours learning the methods of the best European school, and a man who does that also learns all the known counters to each stroke.

Had he been possessed of a rapier he would have been in a much better position, but with only a heavy cutlass he had to discard style and use sheer driving force.

With a vicious rush he drove the captain steadily back under the very shadow of the bridge. There the captain stood at bay, and Lee, with a sharp drive down, had forced him back to where he could deliver the coup d'état, when suddenly from overhead there was a sharp crack, and the next instant he felt a burning sensation in his shoulder.

Mademoiselle had fired at him and had got home.

Shifting his cutlass to the other hand, Leo kept on however, and crashing a blow through the captain's guard, drove the blade full on to the shoulder.

As the captain staggered back, Nelson Lee dropped his cutlass, and, drawing his revolver, clubbed it. Rushing in before his antagonist could recover, he drove the butt full into the face of the captain.

The captain dropped as though he had been pole-axed, and fighting against the weakness which assailed him, Nelson Lee managed somehow to get the unconscious man on his shoulder. Using the body as a shield against any further attacks from the bridge, he staggered to the side, and, calling one of the Indians to help him, lowered the body of the captain into the motor-boat.

Then he turned to see how the main fight was progressing. He saw Nipper in the very thick of it cheering on his crew, and from all appearances it seemed that the lad and his men were getting the best of it, though already there were a good many on both sides down.

Leo watched his chance, and when both sides paused for a moment, he rushed through to Nipper.

"Get them back into the boat, my lad," he said sharply. "I have a hostage which will make any more fighting unnecessary."

Nipper looked puzzled, but shouting to his men to retire, managed to get them back to the side of the yacht. It would have been a risky business getting them back into the boat without considerable loss, but Nelson Lee had counted on Mademoiselle Miton having seen the fate of the captain; and a moment later, when a shrill whistle rang out, he knew that she had done so.

The sailors of the yacht stopped fighting like magic, and Nipper, gathering his men together, worked them back to the side. All hands stood quiet as from the bridge overhead there came a clear voice.

"What is it you want, Nelson Lee?" it asked. "Why have you boarded me at sea in this fashion? It is rank piracy!"

"It may be," replied Lee grimly, as he pressed a handkerchief against his shoulder. "It may be, Mademoiselle Miton; but I will risk that! You know perfectly well why I have boarded you at sea. I want from you what you defrauded Castro and Sons of, and I want the truth about one Pedro Montero. When you give me that I will go, but not before. And I already have your captain as a hostage. I will trade him back to you for what I demand, but if you refuse he goes with me."

There was silence for a little, then came mademoiselle's voice:

"Will you please come up to the bridge, Mr. Lee?"

"Certainly; providing you guarantee me against treachery!" replied Lee grimly.

"I give you my word that there will be none of that," came back the reply. "I never strike in the dark, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee made no reply. He was thinking of the time in Paris when he had been drugged. But he was willing to forget that for the time being, and with a word to Nipper to be ready for immediate action, he made his way up the ladder to the bridge.

There he found Mademoiselle Miton waiting for him. She was dressed in pure white, with a black diamond worked in silk on her arm, and under the light which came from the binnacle Lee could see the fine lines of her beauty.

He had to confess to himself that if she were the Black Wolf then she must be a girl far out of the ordinary.

She smiled inscrutably into his eyes as he came up and touched his arm lightly.

"I am sorry if it is bad," she said softly. "I was compelled to try to save my captain."

Lee smiled grimly. "We will say nothing about that, if you please, mademoiselle," he said. "I am here to listen to your reply to my demands."

She did not answer for a moment but stood gazing down at the scene on the main deck. Finally, however, she lifted her head and said:

"In this I yield, Mr. Lee. I will give you what you have demanded. But first let me tell you the truth of Pedro Montero."

Standing there with the tropic night all about them, and the purple waters of the Caribbean reflecting the myriad stars above, the Black Wolf told Nelson Lee all that had happened in the jungle on the Gonjira Peninsula.

When she had finished she looked him in the eye.

"Would you have done differently yourself?" she asked.

Lee leaned against the rail.

"As far as Pedro Montero is concerned I do not think I would have done so," he said slowly. "But that was no reason why you should have defrauded Castro and Sons of seventy thousand pounds, mademoiselle."

She shrugged.

"They can spare it and I desired it," she replied coolly. "But for the first time in my life, monsieur, you have forced me to acknowledge defeat. I should hate you for it but somehow I don't. If you will wait here I will give you a cheque for the amount. I haven't the money with me."

"The cheque will be?" asked Lee.

"On London," she replied. "You are not afraid to take it?"

Lee looked into her eyes for a moment, then he said: "If you pass your word that there is no trickery about it I am prepared to accept it, mademoiselle."

"It will be all right, I promise you," she responded.

Lee bowed.

"Then, mademoiselle, I shall be pleased to receive your cheque for seventy thousand pounds, and as soon as it is in my hands I will return to you the person of the captain."

She gave an odd little smile and, turning, sped away. Lee stood leaning against the rail for some minutes until he heard her returning. She placed in his hands a cheque for seventy thousand pounds, drawn on Castro and Sons, of London, and signed by the Comte de Monte Bello.

It was the most daring thing Lee had seen for a long time—to deposit with the very firm she had defrauded the money which she had received.

Lee made no remark, but, folding up the cheque, thrust it into his pocket.

"There is one thing I would ask, monsieur," said Mademoiselle Miton slowly, as Lee made to depart, and for the first time he saw that she seemed embarrassed.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

"It is, monsieur, that whatever—whatever you may suspect about me, you will for the present keep those suspicions to yourself. It will do no good to spread them broadcast, and one day you may understand."

Lee turned swiftly and took her soft warm hand.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly, "you can trust me to keep my own counsel until it is necessary for me to speak. I have accomplished my

purpose. That is sufficient for me. As far as I am concerned the world will not know yet that I have really found Le Loup Noir."

With that he turned, and running down the ladder to the deck gave orders for the captain to be brought back on board. Then he ordered his crew aboard the motor boat, and when Nipper had assisted him down gave the word to cast off.

Just as they were about to do so Lee looked up and saw a white figure leaning over the rail of the bridge. It stood posed so for a moment, then, just as the purple patch of water appeared between the motor-boat and the yacht, something came hurtling through the air to strike Lee full in the face.

He was conscious of a perfumed softness at his throat, then his fingers closed on a bunch of white violets—the favourite flowers of the Black Wolf.

Then the space between the two boats grew wider and wider, the white figure disappeared, and a moment later the motor boat was riding gently on the swell, while the yacht raced off through the night with only her stern lights showing.

Leo gave her a quarter of an hour's start, then, running at half-speed, he resumed his course. Instead of running into Port au Prince he headed due west for Kingston, Jamaica, and the next morning, when another red sun was coming up from the east they chug-chugged into Port Royal.

There the crew were patched up and sent back to Santa Marta by fruit steamer, while Lee and Nipper booked by Royal Mail for England.

So ended Nelson Lee's second meeting with the Black Wolf, and when a little over two weeks later he walked into the offices of Castro and Sons, and handed Stephen Castro a cheque for seventy thousand pounds, he had to confess that the result had been far more satisfactory than his first encounter with that strange and mysterious girl.

THE END.

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On Greenland's Icy Shore—Suspicious Neighbours—A Raid on the Camp

"**N**OW I wonder who those fellows are down yonder, and what their little game is in pitching their camp so close to ours? By the noise they're making they seem to be a pretty rowdy lot! We must keep an eye on 'em. I don't like either their looks—what I've been able to see of them—or their voices. Mike, lad, wake up! Put some more wood on those fires! What are you pulling such a long face about?"

The scene was a desolate strip of snow-covered shore in the far North. The wide stretch of ice in front of it was a part of the great frozen sea; while the frowning crags, and giant, snowy peaks, which formed a forbidding background, were offshoots of "Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Upon that dreary shore, which looked more dreary than ever in the cold moonlight—the short Arctic day had closed in a couple of hours before—there was an unusual sight—no less than three separate encampments.

For most of the year this snowy waste, known by the native name of Ammanstok, is the undisturbed playground of seals and walruses, of bears and blue foxes, and of myriads of Arctic birds.

Once or twice a year a wandering band of Eskimos choose it as their halting-place on their way to or from the great hunting grounds beyond.

This, again, is what had happened now; for Hugh Arnold, the young fellow who had uttered the words which have just been quoted, belonged to a band of Arctic explorers just out from England; and their ship, the *Petrel*, lay at anchor some half dozen miles away. This, then, accounts for camp No. 2.

But the people at No. 3 camp were what mathematicians would designate by the letter X, being, at present, an unknown quantity.

The most likely supposition would be that they were a hunting party sent out to forage for fresh food from some whaling ship not in sight. The crews of such vessels are frequently a lot of desperadoes, the maritime scourings of many nations. They are not usually, therefore, much to be desired as close neighbours, especially when, as was evidently the case here, they are out by themselves, and so are beyond the reach of the iron discipline which alone keeps them on their good behaviour while on board ship.

These particular men, to judge by their proceedings, were of this kidney. They had been for some time yelling out ribald songs and choruses; and just lately sounds had been heard suggestive of drunken brawls.

The No. 2 camp—situated mid-way between the others—consisted of half

a dozen tents, two or three sledges, and a number of packages, which had been brought over the ice from the ship and hastily dumped down just before nightfall.

Then most of the landing party had gone off to No. 3 camp to foregather with the natives, leaving at first only Hugh in charge. He, however, had been joined, just before, by an Irish sailor, one Mike O'Grady, who, tiring of the native style of entertaining guests, had returned to camp alone. There he had seated himself in silence, smoking stolidly at his pipe, and looking particularly glum and unhappy.

As to Hugh himself, he was a very tall young fellow, far above the ordinary height, and even the thick clothing in which he was enveloped could not conceal the fact that he owned a frame that was massive and muscular beyond the average.

This fact was revealed less by the outline and general shape of his figure, than by the peculiar, easy grace of his movements as he strode to and fro, the light springiness of his step, and his general carriage. He bore himself as does the lion, with that indescribable swing of the limbs which betokens so unerringly a store of conscious strength and latent energy. In fact, he was known amongst his fellow travellers by the sobriquet of "Strong Hugh."

"I've been wonderin', Mither Hugh," answered Mike, as he stretched his great figure—for he, too, was a big man—and made a move, towards some piles of wood, "whin we moight be goin' to get t' this green land as I've heerd so much talk about."

"Why, you great nincompoop, this is Greenland. I thought you knew that."

Mike stopped suddenly in the act of picking up his wood, and appeared so startled that he nearly dropped it again.

"Whoy—whoy!" he exclaimed, with a look around of comical dismay. "Wheer be the green? It's meself as can see nuthin' but white. I thought for sure as Greenland must be further on."

Hugh laughed.

"No, my friend, you'll meet with no greener land than this. There will be some green here later on—when the season is a bit further advanced—but we sha'n't get much of that."

"Begorra! Divil a bit, thin, wad I 'av come on this precious thrip, sorr, iv I'd bin tould that same before. They said t' me, 'Will ye come on a thrip to find the North Pole?' an' I said, 'Which way d'de go?' an' they said, 'By way av green land.' 'If theer's a way through a noice green land,' sez Oi, 'thin, bedad, Oi'm the bhoys for ye! I always thought it was oice an' snow ye had to go through out theer.' Thin the bhoys laughed an' said, 'Oh, no; we're goin' to a green land roight enough.' An' now I sees that it's decavin' me they was—the merry divils! Oi'll be even wid some 'av thin over this!'"

"Never mind, Mike. It'll be a fresh experience for you. You've been pretty well all over the world, I've been told—"

"Thru for you, sorr. I have indade!"

"Except in the Arctic. Now you'll be able to say you've been there, too; and to the very Pole itself, if we get there, as I hope we shall, and then you'll share in all our honour and glory."

"Will we iver get back, sorr? That's the question as concerns me most. Sure, Oi'd go back be the next ship, now, iv there was one goin', an' Oi'd be afther lavin' ye me share av the honour an' glory, free an' for nothin'."

Hugh laughed again, a free, easy, good-humoured laugh, and turned his glance in the direction of the Eskimo camp, from which also came sounds as of singing, and a rough kind of music.

"Ah!" he said, in a tone of satisfaction. "Here are some of our chans

coming at last! I wonder why they've been staying all this time, and what's going on there? Humph! It's only Mr. Ruxton and Bob Cable after all. What are the others waiting there for?"

"It's a bit of faystin' an' merry-makin' goin' on theer to-night. The pure haythins don't offten get our sort here. U' giv' thim little prisents; an' they're returnin' the compliment by givin' a fayste."

"Yes, I understand that. You didn't stay there long, by the way, Mike. You seem to have grown tired of it sooner than these others have."

"Toired? No, it wasn't so much toired I was, as sick, sorr. Sure, the haythin's idea 'av a fayste is a good fat, taller-candle, wi' a drink 'av train oil t' wash it down. It's meself as couldn't stand anny more 'ave it!"

"You'll get used to that sort of thing out here, Mike. Hallo, Val! Here you are at last! What's kept you so long? Where are the others?"

This query was addressed to the one the speaker had spoken of as Mr. Ruxton. He had now come within earshot.

"Left 'em down there with the oil-bibbers," said the new-comer, crossly.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Couldn't get 'em away. They're in a frolicsome mood—effect of getting ashore and feasting on too much whale blubber, I suppose, after being cooped up so long on board ship. They're making friends with some of the Eskimo beauties, and having a dance now; and the fun seemed to be getting fast and furious. So Bob and I—Bob's the only sensible one among the lot—cleared out and left 'em to it."

"I say! You should have made 'em come with you! There'll be trouble over this in the morning. Grimstock will fume and rave nicely about it if he hears of it—and he's pretty sure to."

"Can't help it—he'll have to fume. They simply won't listen to me."

"We'll have to go back there together and make 'em listen."

"Wouldn't go if I were you, old chap. They've got some drink into 'em, and are in a nasty humour. Best let 'em have their sling and come back their own way. Besides——"

"Besides—what?"

"Well," said Ruxton, in a low tone. "I've come back here now partly because I wanted to have a word or two privately with you while Grimstock's out of the way. We don't often have a chance for a quiet chat without any fear of being overheard. Certainly, there wasn't one so long as we were on board ship."

"If that's the case, of course it's another matter," replied Hugh wonderingly, and evidently impressed by the grave tone in which the other spoke. "Only, I'm afraid trouble will come of it."

"Trouble will come of it—it's sure to—either way, so it may just as well come one way as another," was the answer, delivered with an indifferent air. "Come for a short stroll with me. Hallo! What's that row?"

"Those fellows yonder suddenly appeared from nowhere, just after you had gone, swarmed along here, and plumped themselves down where you see them. They seem a rough lot. They started on a carouse, and now comes the usual sequel—quarrelling—with fighting, I expect, to follow. Just listen to 'em now! But who are they? White men, do you think?"

"White men? M'm! Pretty low-class whites, I guess, if there are any; and as for the others, they're likely to be of all colours—brown, black, red, and yellow—and there would be blue and green, if such people existed. Some whaler's crew, I reckon, with a skipper who's drunk one half his time, and a raging, bullying maniac the other half. The farther we can keep away from 'em the better."

"Just my view, and I'm glad you've come back, because there's no knowing what a drunken lot like that might take it into their heads to do. They

might take a fancy to divide up some of our stores, and, if so, there are only two of us here to deal with the crowd. By the way, what was it you wanted to say?"

Ruxton did not reply at once, but putting a hand on the other's arm led him away a hundred yards or so. No. 2 camp had been pitched upon an elevation forming a sort of terrace, which extended for some distance. Ruxton walked nearly to the end of it, and then stood looking thoughtfully down at the sealskin tents of the Eskimos, which could now be seen more plainly on the shore below.

He was a fine-looking man this Val Ruxton, not quite so tall as his companion, but sturdily and heavily-built, with keen eyes, and a firm, determined face. He was evidently the older of the two by a few years. He was the darker, too, and his face was more tanned, the face of one who had travelled far and often, and seen much of the world.

"Look here," he said, at last, with sudden decision, as though he had been pondering what to say. "I don't think much of this Grimstock crowd we've come out with. I never did think much of 'em, but something's happened which has sent my opinion down lower still. You and I are strangers to one another, except that we've cottoned together a bit on the voyage out, and, frankly, I like you, and feel a sort of interest in you. See?"

Hugh laughed quizzically.

"Shure, an' it's a noice, iligant gintleman ye are, Mистер Ruxton," he said, imitating Mike's familiar brogue. "Shure, it's meself——"

"No, no; I'm not joking," Ruxton interrupted, with a seriousness that had an instant effect on his companion. "I'm going to ask you a straight question. What made you join this show?"

"I might ask you the same question."

"You might—and you may—and I would answer at once. I do answer at once. It was a question of money with me—money, pure and simple. I was just about stony when Grimstock came across me. He wanted another man; we had a talk; he soon learned that I had been out here before and knew the ropes, could speak the native lingo, and so on. So he made me an offer; I closed with it, and here I am. And I'm beginning to wish I wasn't."

"Why? What's upset you?"

"Never mind that for the moment. You haven't replied to my question, though I've answered yours."

"Well," said Hugh slowly. "I can only give you a somewhat similar reason."

"No! I don't think it was a matter of money with you," Ruxton declared, with quiet insistence. "I heard that you sought Grimstock out and brought letters of introduction."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind that just now. It is true, isn't it?"

"Why, yes; that's right enough. The fact is, I've long had a wish to come out here. It's been a—well, a sort of passion with me, ever since I was a kid. I made up my mind I would get out here some day by hook or by crook, and I prepared myself for it in every way I could think of—by travelling in Norway, and Lapland, and Ireland, and so on. But I hadn't money enough to fit out a regular expedition of my own to come so far north, so I had to join in with some one else. I heard that Grimstock was preparing one, and I offered myself. As you say, I brought letters of introduction to him, though how you knew of that, or what it has to do with——"

"It has a good deal to do with what I wish to speak about, as you will see directly. You are known to us as Hugh Arnold——"

"Well? Don't you like the name?" Hugh asked, chaffingly.

"My dear fellow, I don't care a brass dollar what your name may be. As I've told you, I like what I've seen of you since we first met, and I should like you just as much under any other name—John Smith, or Clifford Vero de Vere, or Obadiah Macandlestick. I just wish to give you a hint that if Hugh Arnold is not your true name, and you are hugging to yourself the idea that you have concealed the fact from Grimstock, I fancy you will find one day that he knows more than you think for."

Here, the listener started, and seemed about to utter a protest, but the speaker waved his hand and went on rapidly.

"Don't say anything! Don't tell me! I don't want to know! I'm not the sort of chap to want to pry into any man's private affairs. I only give you the hint for what it may be worth, and, of course, it may be worth nothing at all. Well, then, there is another thing. To-day, talking to old man, Amaki, one of the Eskimos, down at their camp yonder, he asked me if any tidings had ever been heard of a certain traveller, an Arctic explorer, whose name is pretty well known in the scientific world. He went north a good many years ago, and neither he nor any of those with him was ever heard of again. Well, old Amaki knew him, it seems—and so indeed did all his tribe—or those of them who are old enough to remember him, and they spoke of him with feelings of evident affection and devotion. I declare that tears were in the old beggar's eyes. Ha! What's up now?"

Hugh had started again at the latter part of Ruxton's speech, and looked hard at him, but now he had turned, and was gazing back at the camp they had just quitted. It was but a hundred yards or so away, but the tents on one side hid the men they had left in charge from view.

"There's something going on there," said Hugh, quickly. "I expect it's some of those scalliwags come up to make a row. I half expected this! Why aren't our chaps here to guard the stores, instead of fooling down yonder?"

While speaking, he had been walking sharply back to camp, and Ruxton walked beside him.

Turning round by the end tent they came suddenly upon a strange scene.

Half a dozen men from No. 3 camp had come up to the terrace on which the No. 2 camp stood, and two of them were engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the two sailors who had been left in charge, thus keeping them at bay, whilst their four companions were coolly walking off with some of the packages.

One glance was enough for the two who had returned, and who saw the goods of which they were in charge being thus impudently carried off. Taking in the situation, they made a rush for the thieves. A blow for each in turn was sufficient to knock them over. Loaded as they were, taken by surprise, half-drunk into the bargain, they were not in a position favourable for preserving an upright position.

So down they went, and there they lay for a space, wondering where the earthquake had come from, by what time those who had brought them low were busy carrying back the stolen property. After a minute or two, however, the snow into which the raiders had fallen, exercised a reviving effect upon their beclouded brains. They began to see and understand a little more clearly. Then they rose up, wrathful and revengeful, and swearing in various languages, they went for the two who had so roughly toppled them over, and caused their mouths and nostrils to be filled with disagreeably icy snow.

Meantime, Hugh and Ruxton, having put down their rescued goods, had gone to the assistance of the sailors, who were still struggling manfully with two burly assailants.

Just then it was that the other four marauders, having recovered them-

selves, came on at a run, and for the next two or three minutes, the space in front of the tents was peopled with a tussling crowd, a mix-up of whirling arms and legs and panting bodies.

Blows were freely given and received, and a good many kicks, too; there were gasps and growls, snarls and guttural roars that sounded more like a wild-beast fight than a trial of strength between human beings.

It did not last very long. Neither Hugh nor Ruxton were in a mood to stand any nonsense, and one by one all the intruders were expelled. This time they had the misfortune to be hurled off the terrace into a snowdrift just below, which, as it turned out, was so deep that they disappeared completely from sight.

Then the victors were able to enjoy a hard-earned breathing time. But it was not likely, they knew, to last long. The noise of the conflict had been heard at No. 3 camp, and from it a reinforcement quickly started forth to the aid of their discomfited comrades.

The Raid Renewed—How it was Met—Three to One—A Startling Collapse.

END of first round! 'Vantage to us!' said Hugh, with a short laugh. "Yes," Ruxton assented. "But that was a pretty soft job. The real tug is yet to come. We shall have double the number on to us next time!"

"And our men are down yonder philandering with those native beauties!" exclaimed Hugh bitterly. "We'll have to talk to those gentlemen in the morning."

"Grinstock will talk to 'em, you may be sure, and to us as well. That's the worst of it. We're likely to get all the hard knocks to-night and more than our share of hard words afterwards, or I'm no prophet."

"Oh, well, hard words don't break bones," returned Hugh cheerfully. "And as to hard knocks—why, I felt just in the humour for a jolly good rough-and-tumble to-night. So let 'em all come! It'll help to circulate the blood and keep you warm."

"H'm, I've no objection! But now, while we've got a minute or two, we'd better move those packages to a place where they'll be more out of the way; and safer, too, than lying out here."

"Right you are. Where shall we put 'em?"

"I'll show you," and picking one up, Ruxton led the way towards the tents.

Of these there were six, which had been pitched in two rows, a little distance apart, and Ruxton soberly deposited his burden in the midst of them—that is to say, behind the first row, but in front of the second. His companion brought further loads, which Ruxton then arranged in what struck Hugh as rather an eccentric fashion.

"What's the good of putting them down there?" he asked. "For my part, I should have thought it would have been better to put everything inside the tents out of sight."

"Not at all," Ruxton declared coolly. "You'll see, by-and-by, that it's best not to put 'em out of sight."

Hugh could not at all understand his friend's reasoning, but he said no more, and all the moving having been accomplished, he went back to join the sailors who had been left on the watch.

Ruxton remained for two or three minutes more, apparently shifting packages here and there to get them exactly to his satisfaction. When he finally rejoined his companions, he was carrying a brace of revolvers and offered one to Hugh, who, however, at first declined it.

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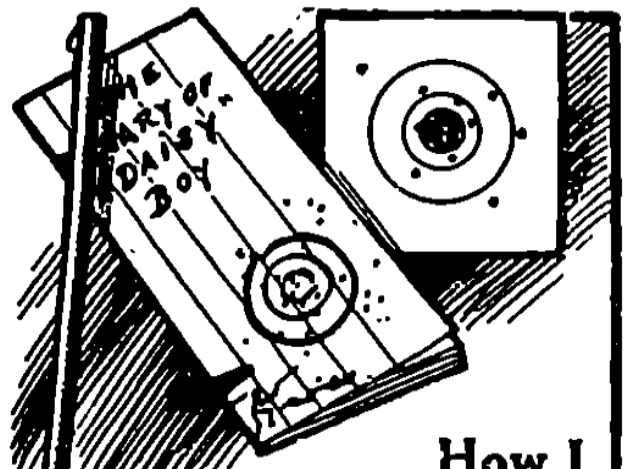
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"Thanks, but I'd rather trust to my fists," he remarked. "Besides, I hope it won't come to shooting, whatever happens."

"Quite right, and I hope so, too. In fact, I don't think these chaps would be foolish enough to begin it, as they must know that any shooting would be heard on board our ship, and would bring a party about their ears pretty sharp. It's their knives you'll have to look out for. These beggars are apt to get murderous when their blood is up. So it's as well to keep the barkers handy, in case we're hard pressed."

"Oh, very well," said Hugh, nonchalantly slipping a "barker" into a side-pocket. "Anything for a quiet life."

There was a quiet chuckling from the two sailors. The last words were rather a favourite expression with the speaker, and he sometimes used them under odd circumstances. More than once, on the voyage out, "Strong Hugh" had brought his fists into play in a very pretty fashion in the interests of discipline. It had sounded a little quaint on such occasions to hear him, while giving some brawny, mutinous ruffian a hammering which made him sore all over for the next four weeks; calmly remark:

"I hate to do this, you know, but still, anything for a quiet life."

Just then, Mike who had been routing about amongst the wood pile, turned up with his arms full.

"Shure," said he, "if anny av you gints wants a shillelah, it's some handy bits av rods I've found."

As a matter of fact the "bits av rods" were whacking great chunks of wood.

"To be sure! The very thing!" cried Hugh, pouncing on one of the biggest—a heavy, massive affair that would have made a likely club for Hercules himself. "Mike, lad, ye're abroth av a bhoys! I'll recommend ye for promotion. Ye shall have an extra ration av train oil for breakfast."

Mike grinned appreciatively, and their preparations being completed, they all turned their attention to watching the movements of their enemies.

As to these, the new men—six in number—who had sallied forth to the assistance of their pals, had been compelled to restrain their martial ardour, and delay the intended assault, in order to dig the latter out of the snow-drift into which they had vanished.

Four or five great white masses had by now been routed out from its icy depths, and propped up on their somewhat shaky legs. At first they looked like big, roughly-manufactured snow men, but after undergoing a sufficient amount of shaking and brushing down they had gradually resolved themselves into dark, skin-clad human beings, who spluttered out mouthfuls of snow and curses, mingled together in about equal parts.

This preliminary accomplished, they held a short conference in low muttered tones, and were then on the point of arranging themselves in military order—or something as near thereto as their obfuscated intellects could figure out—when some stifled cries and groans, mingled, of course, with the proper seasoning, from out another part of the snowdrift, once more interrupted operations. A rush in the direction of the sounds, and some wild scrambling and burrowing in the snow, resulted in the recovery of another snow-man. This was, as a matter of fact, none other than their redoubtable leader himself, though it was some minutes before his identity was established, for the reason that he was hauled out legs first. These, his rescuers, with well-meaning wrongheadedness, persisted in holding up in the air, evidently under the impression that they were thus supporting his head.

*(Another Stirring Instalment of this Magnificent Yarn
will appear on Wednesday Next.)*

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