

NO. 24.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

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THE OF THE CASE OF THE TUBE OF RADIUM. A JONES
A TALE OF THE BLACK WOLF.

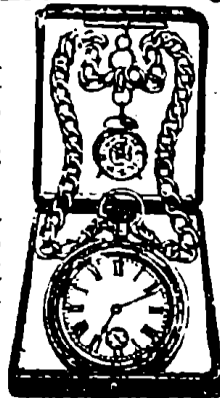
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The Case of the Tube of Radium.

Another Magnificent Story Dealing with Nelson Lee's Adventures with the Mysterious "Black Wolf."

By the Author of "Yvonne," "Wu-Ling," "The Spendthrift,"
"Edges of Steel," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Heard in a London Club—The Black Wolf Makes a Call

THE Black Wolf, looking very dapper and very like a son of Italy, lounged into the International Club off Piccadilly, and handing his coat, hat, and stick to a boy, strolled into the big smoking-room which lay to the right of the lobby.

He had been in London less than a week, but it had taken him less than that time to make himself quite at home at the International Club.

Being the bearer of a letter of introduction from the president of the International Club in Paris, the hospitality of the London club of the same name had been extended to him without question.

The letter of the well known Parisian clubman had been sufficient for that. Truth to tell, the Black Wolf had found the atmosphere of Paris a little too warm for him.

The last affair when he had got mixed up in what was popularly known as the Jure Diamond Case had been disastrous in more ways than one, for him.

For the first time he—or she, to be more correct—had been really unmasked, and, through the agency of Nelson Lee of London, handed over to Monsieur Jules Fabert, Chief of the Criminal Department of the Paris Police, at the Quaix des Orfevres.

True, she had escaped from the clutches of the police almost before they had finished congratulating themselves on her capture, but she had realised that her career in Paris as Mademoiselle Miton and the Comte de Monte Bello was at an end for the time being, at any rate.

Where then to go? To Berlin, Vienna, Petrograd, Madrid, or Rome? For certain reasons, the Black Wolf did not wish to return to either North or South America—not for the present, at least.

Perhaps it was the germ of a desire to get even with Nelson Lee which had caused her to come to London. At any rate, she had come, and under the name of Signor Paulini, had taken a house in Hampstead, whither had also been installed Jacques, Marcel, and the faithful Ninette.

Then to the International Club with the letter of introduction gained

from the president of the International Club of Paris, by means which only the Black Wolf herself knew.

So on this afternoon, in the guise of an Italian gentleman, she had wandered into the club as had been her custom during the past week to indulge in one of her favourite Povorovsky cigarettes and to plan for the future.

In the smoking-room the Black Wolf made for a certain easy chair over in the corner. It was a suitable chair from which to watch the room without being too much in evidence oneself, and for that reason the Black Wolf had chosen.

She seated herself languidly, and, calling the waiter, ordered a small glass of Dubonnet. When that had been brought, "Signor Paulini," as the Black Wolf chose to be known, lit a Povorovsky and leant back.

She had been sitting there for the better part of half an hour, smoking and thinking, when there was the sound of voices by the door, and three men entered. They were chatting and laughing as they came, and beyond a casual glance in the direction of the Black Wolf, took no notice of the figure lying back in the chair. Indeed, only the right arm of the Black Wolf was visible to them.

They seated themselves in big easy chairs and rang for a waiter. Drinks were ordered, and when they had been brought, tossed off with the appreciation of thirsty men.

Then they fell to talking again until the door opened and a young man entered. He looked worried and anxious, as even the Black Wolf could see from where he sat, and it was plain that he was on intimate terms with the others, for they greeted him pleasantly.

"Have a drink, Phillip?" cried one of them.

The young fellow shook his head.

"Sorry, old man, but I haven't time," he said, as he approached the place where they sat. "I have been looking for you—was just going to write you a note. I can't go down to the country with you to-morrow. Afraid I shall have to put it off for some time."

"Why, what is the matter?" asked the one whom he addressed.

"The gov'nor is worse," replied the young fellow whom they had addressed as Phillip.

"What, has that old trouble come back?"

"Yes—worse luck, and this time it seems to have him down badly. Creswick is going down to-morrow afternoon to give him radium treatment, but——" And the young fellow finished with a shrug.

"But I thought the medicos had failed to identify the disease, Phillip?" said the first speaker, getting to his feet, and walking away a little with his hand on Phillip's arm.

"They can't, old man. All they seem to be able to say is that it must be some mysterious disease contracted by the gov'nor in India. As a sort of experiment they are going to try radium. Creswick, who is, as you know, the great radium specialist, is coming down to-morrow night with ten thousand pounds worth of the stuff, and they are going to apply it to the gov'nor's shoulder. I don't fancy it will do any good, but naturally, we are only too ready to try everything that might help. For that reason, I must be on hand. What with the gov'nor being worse, and ten thousand pounds worth of radium in the house, I want to be on the job. Sha'n't feel easy in my mind until it is back in London."

"Creswick won't stay with you then?"

"No. He is coming down to put it on, and I am to bring the tube back to London the next day. I'll try to get down to the country with you soon, old man, but you will understand why I can't go now, won't you?"

"Of course, Phillip, I quite understand. I am only too sorry that it is such a reason for your not coming. Give my regards to the guv'nor, and tell him to buck up!"

"I'll do that, Bob. So long! I have a lot to do now, and will be going until I leave town with Creswick to-morrow."

The two young men shook hands, the one making for the door, and the other returning to his friends by the table.

"Poor, Phil!" the Black Wolf heard him say.

"I am afraid his father is pretty bad. Can't understand what is the matter with him, either. The medicos think it is something he picked up in India when he was there years ago."

"How does it affect him?" asked one.

"Why, I don't exactly know. He has a large brown spot on his shoulder which gives him intense pain, and which seems to be the root of the trouble. It is accompanied by very high fever, and while he is ordinarily a most genial sort of man, he becomes highly irritable when the trouble is acute. They evidently think radium may do it some good, for Phil tells me that they are going to try it."

The conversation drifted off now to other subjects, and when another ten minutes or so had passed, the Black Wolf rose and strolled out of the smoke-room to the lobby.

Just as he drew near the hall porter's office, he saw again the young fellow who had been in the smoke-room. He paused at the hall porter's office on his way out to leave some instructions, and then, as he turned towards the door, the Black Wolf heard the hall porter say:

"Very good, Mr. Thornton. I shall attend to it. Good-night, sir!"

"So his name is Thornton," mused the Black Wolf, as he strolled over to the desk and engaged the hall porter in conversation. "I must find out which Thornton."

Then, with a genial manner, which put him down in the hall porter's somewhat orthodox mind as a 'remarkable nice gentleman for a furrinner,' the Black Wolf proceeded to pump that club servant with a skill and nicety which brought him all the information he needed.

Mr. Phillip Thornton was one of the nicest gentlemen one could meet according to the hall porter. He was the son of Sir John Thornton, who was also a member of the club, but who was, so the hall porter was very sorry to hear, very ill. Oh, yes, they had a place in town, but they lived mostly down in the country—in Surrey, near the village of Dorcomb.

And so on, with the Black Wolf pumping skilfully, and the hall porter innocently biting to every cast of the bait.

When the Black Wolf had gained all the information she sought, she nodded to the hall porter and strolled towards the telephone booth.

To the page on duty there she said: "I wish to have a look at the telephone-book."

The page handed it up, and taking it across beneath a light, the Black Wolf opened it at the letter C.

Running her fingers down the pages she finally paused at the name Creswick, and scanning these one by one came finally to the name of "Dr. Hilton Creswick, 161X Wimpole Street."

It was the only name under the list which seemed to apply to a great radium expert, so memorising it with the address, the Black Wolf returned the book to the page and walking along to the cloak-room, got the hat, coat and stick which had been left there.

Ten minutes later a taxi was taking the Black Wolf along to 161X Wimpole Street. Dr. Hilton Creswick was, as the Black Wolf had been led to think, one of the greatest radium experts of the day

He lived in a large and perfectly equipped house in Wimpole Street, which could only be the abode of a very successful physician.

The Black Wolf could see that as soon as he was ushered into the waiting-room—a room which had been decorated with a combination of old Japanese armour and Eastern curies, which alone must have cost several thousands.

A white-aproned maid ushered him in and took in his card to the doctor. The Black Wolf had had the forethought to scribble on the card a few lines which urged the doctor to see the one whose name was on the card on a matter of urgency which had brought Signor Paulini all the way from Italy.

Busy as he was, Dr. Hilton Creswick could scarcely refuse such a plea, and at the end of ten minutes or so the maid returned to say that the doctor would see him.

The Black Wolf rose and followed the maid through a long corridor to the consulting-room, where the great man sat waiting. He was short, bearded and brisk in manner, and glanced keenly into the eyes of his visitor as he shook hands.

"Signor Paulini," he said in Italian of faultless accent, "I am pleased to see you, sir. And may I ask what has caused you to come to me?"

The Black Wolf leaned back gracefully in her chair.

"It is your name, signor, which has brought me to London," she said, adopting the Italian language since the doctor had used it. "It is about my sister, signor. She is ill, signor, and at the advice of the doctors in Rome I lost no time in bringing her to London for your advice. She looks well, signor—she eats well and she sleeps well. But, signor, she does not feel well. The doctors of Rome cannot tell us what is wrong. She is languid and depressed. They have tried, oh! so many different things, but alas! all to no good. They have suggested, signor, that perhaps the radium treatment of which you are a maistro will succeed. So I have brought her to London. Can I arrange for a consultation for her, signor?"

Dr. Hilton Creswick pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"I cannot give you any advice about the case, signor, without seeing the patient. From what you tell me it seems that your sister must be suffering from a species of decline. However, that must wait until I see her."

"Then you will give us your advice?" cried the Black Wolf.

"Certainly, signor," replied the doctor.

The Black Wolf leaned forward a little.

"She will be overjoyed to hear that, signor. I shall rush home to tell her that our wish will be gratified. And may I tell her, signor, that I may bring her to-morrow afternoon?"

Dr. Hilton Creswick shook his head with a smile of regret.

"I am sorry, Signor Paulini, but that will be impossible," he said. "Unfortunately, I am compelled to go to the country to-morrow afternoon on a case of some importance. I shall, however, be returning late to-morrow night, and you may, if you wish, bring your sister to see me the next morning. Shall we say about eleven?"

"And is it impossible to bring her to-morrow morning?" asked the Black Wolf.

"That, too, is out of the question," said the doctor. "I have consultations here for the first part of the morning, and later on my engagements at one of the hospitals will keep me some time. I am afraid that the first appointment will be for the morning of the day after to-morrow."

The Black Wolf made a fine show of regret, then with a smile of resignation, accepted the ruling of the other.

"Then, signor, we shall be here on the stroke of eleven," he said. "Er—may one ask, signor, the possible cost of the radium treatment? I am

prepared to pay all we possess that my sister may recover, signor, but we are not wealthy, and it would be a relief to know what it would mean."

"It all depends, signor, on the number of applications which your sister may require," replied the doctor. "That is, always presuming that we consider the radium treatment may be of benefit to her. Then, too, a great deal will depend on the condition of health in which I find her. You see, signor, it may be necessary to give her frequent applications of the radium of only short duration each time, and then again I may decide that one long application will fit the case. But, in any event, signor, you may count that it will not come to more than two hundred guineas for the treatment, and perhaps I shall be able to make it a little less."

"It is a marvellous thing, signor, the radium," said the Black Wolf musingly. "Myself, I am so ignorant of such things. I have understood that it is applied in little tubes and sometimes discs, signor. Is it possible that such a tiny thing has the power claimed for it?"

Dr. Hilton Creswick laughed genially. After a somewhat trying day he was not averse to dwelling for a little on the subject which had become meat and drink to him.

He was a master of his subject, as far as it is possible for anyone to master the mysteries of radium, and it always gratified him a little to explain the marvels of his pet to those who expressed the ignorance and wonder of the layman.

He rose from his chair, and crossing to a steel cabinet which stood against the wall, drew a key from his pocket.

He opened a panel in the cabinet and took out what looked at first sight like a length of indiarubber.

Carrying it carefully, he went back to his desk and sat down. Then he held up the article which he had taken from the cabinet.

"There, signor," he said, "is the radium in the tube form. You see, it is scarcely eight inches long and less than half an inch in diameter. Yet, in that little tube, signor, there is ten thousand pounds' worth of radium. Scarcely believable, eh? But look!"

Taking hold of the tube low down, he pressed his fingers against the rubber at the other end, and rolled it back.

It revealed a nickelled silver tube inside the rubber, on the end of which had been screwed a little cap with two tiny holes in it.

Dr. Creswick now unscrewed this cap and held the open end of the tube under the light, so the Black Wolf could see into it.

"There is not much to be seen, signor," he said, smiling, "but if you look closely, you can just discern what appears to be a small tab of lead. In that, signor, is the radium. We are compelled to keep it so because of the power of the rays which emanate constantly from the radium. You can see nothing—you can feel nothing, signor, but yet the rays from this tube are at this moment coming through lead, silver, and rubber. Those rays, signor, will pierce several inches of steel. That is why we keep it so. Sometimes we apply it in the form of a disc, and then we enamel the disc back, and cover it with silk. But ordinarily, I use such a tube as this."

"And there is all that value in that little tube?" said the Black Wolf, in a tone of awe. "I can scarcely believe it, signor."

The doctor laughed again as he screwed on the little cap.

"All the same, it is true, signor. Ten thousand pounds! It is very rare and very valuable, signor. Therefore, we must use it with care."

"And if you treat my sister is that what she will have?" asked the Black Wolf.

"This very tube, signor," responded the doctor as he rose. "It is the most powerful one I use."

He crossed over to the steel cabinet as he spoke, and returning the tube to its little bed of cotton wool, closed and locked the panel.

The Black Wolf rose.

"Then, signor, we shall say the morning of the day after to-morrow?"

"I shall note it down," said the doctor.

With that the Black Wolf took his leave, and no sooner did he reach Wimpole Street than he hailed a taxi.

"The International Club as quickly as possible," he said in perfect English.

The driver started off, and ten minutes later the Black Wolf was once more at the club making for his favourite seat in the smoke-room.

But this time she did not lounge and sip a drink as was her habit. Instead, she drew from her pocket a small notebook and pencil. Then, bending forward, the Black Wolf began to make a series of sketches which proclaimed the fact that she was more than an ordinarily clever draughtsman.

First there was the drawing of a tube in full scale, then came the detailed sketch of a small cap to fit the tube, likewise in full scale. After that, a cross-section of each, and, finally, the drawing of a hollow tube which even the veriest novice could have seen would cover the tube if drawn over it.

Not until she had rubbed out and corrected and shaded to her satisfaction did the Black Wolf desist, but when she did she had a detailed set of drawings of the radium tube, the cap and the indiarubber covering which would have formed working drawings for almost any competent metal turner. That done, the Black Wolf thrust the notebook and pencil back into her pocket, and rising, made her way out of the smoke-room.

Ten minutes later she was being whirled along to Hampstead in a taxi, murmuring as she puffed at one of her favourite Plovovskys:

"The first step is accomplished. But there is yet much to do, not the least of which is the preparing of an ailing sister to be examined by the good doctor."

Then, with a soft smile playing over her lips, this remarkable adventuress lolled gracefully in her seat until they passed Jack Straw's Castle, on Hampstead Heath.

CHAPTER II.

A Delicate Operation—Ten Thousand Pounds' Worth of Radium— Off to London.

SIR JOHN THORNTON was a very sick man. For several years, in fact, ever since his return from the Indian Service, he had suffered from the same type of mysterious attacks which had put him on his back this time.

Every noted specialist and a good many mediocre ones had at one time or another endeavoured to diagnose the case, but each and every one of them had been compelled to give it up as hopeless.

There was so little to put one's hand on. A peculiar brown discolouration on the right shoulder was all that was visible of the disease, and the condition of the pulse and temperature of the patient were little to go upon.

It is true that Sir John suffered from intense pain when under the influence of the attacks, but oddly enough, the pain was in the left shoulder, while the brown spot was on the right.

It was, so one great specialist said, a reflex pain which was hard to explain. Be that as it may, it is a fact that the attacks had been growing more frequent and more serious as time proceeded.

It was now less than two months since the last attack, and on that occasion it had been feared that Sir John would succumb to it, so violent was it. But he had rallied, and as usual, the spot had disappeared while the pain had steadily declined until it had vanished altogether.

Now he was down again, and this time worse than ever. As a desperate resort, and with little real faith that it would do any good, the local doctor had suggested the use of radium.

Lady Thornton had grasped at the straw held out, and a telegram had been sent to the "Radium Wizard," as Dr. Hilton Creswick was known.

The specialist had wired back that he would come down for a consultation, and if he thought it advisable would administer radium to the patient.

On receiving this Lady Thornton had at once telegraphed to her son Phil, who was in town, telling him his father's condition, advising him what had been decided upon, and requesting him to bring Dr. Creswick down in his car.

It was shortly after the receipt of this wire that Phillip Creswick walked into the International Club to express his regret to a man who was to have been his host at a shoot in the Midlands.

It was the next evening just before tea that he drove his big Berliet through the gates of Thorn Lodge, and sent it thundering up the driveway to the house.

Beside him sat Dr. Hilton Creswick, who had certainly enjoyed the drive down, and who had found in the young fellow an interesting companion.

Beneath the doctor's feet was a black bag containing several instruments, and in its own little case, a tube of radium, containing ten thousand pounds' worth of that valuable element.

Thorn Lodge was a rambling old country place, which was a survival of Tudor days. Part of it was distinctly early Tudor, while one of the wings—the west—showed distinct traces of the later Tudor period. The front was pure Elizabethan, and sitting as it did in a fine old park, it formed a noble sight as one came up the drive.

As they drew near the porch, Phil Thornton turned to the doctor and said jerkily:

"The dad's in the west wing, Dr. Creswick. He has his own apartments there. The mater will be waiting tea for us, I expect. You will have some before you go up, won't you?"

"Will the local doctor be there at tea?" asked Dr. Creswick.

"I expect so," replied Thornton.

"Then I shall have a cup of tea before we go up to the patient. After tea your own doctor can outline the case to me. Then, after I have made an examination of your father, we can hold our consultation and decide whether we shall try radium or not."

Phil Thornton nodded, and the next moment the car was brought to a standstill before a fine old porch. Scarcely had they drawn up when the door was opened and a small white-haired woman ran out.

She kissed Phil Thornton, and turning from him, held out her hand to the doctor.

"It was good of you to come at such an early date, Dr. Creswick," she said. "You must be cold after your drive. Do come in at once and have some tea. Dr. Morrison, our local doctor, is already here."

Dr. Creswick shook hands with Lady Thornton, for it was she, and followed her into the house. Phil remained outside long enough to speak a few words to his father's chauffeur, who came up, then he followed the others.

Tea had been laid in the great square lounge hall which was panelled in

old oak, and which had been hung with a medley of hunting and shooting trophies.

Big game heads from India and Africa, shot by Sir John Thornton in his younger days, spears and shields from savage African tribes, horns, skulls, and skins, all gave the place a barbaric air of fascination which seemed to waft one at once to the far off tropics.

A huge fire was blazing in the big brick fireplace, and as the flames licked their way upwards they revealed the blackened outlines of a magnificent old fire-back.

On the far side of the fire was an elderly man who rose as the others entered. Lady Thornton introduced him to the specialist as Dr. Morrison, and when the two medicos had shaken hands, Morrison turned to Phil Thornton and gripped his hand warmly.

Then they all sat down, and though the hearts of mother and son were heavy, and though Morrison, the local doctor, was also sad, for he was friend as well as physician to Sir John, they tried to be as cheerful as possible.

But towards the end the conversation lagged. Lady Thornton stared more and more into the fire, and Dr. Morrison, with a meaning look at the London specialist, rose softly.

Dr. Creswick followed him, and they moved quietly down the hall, followed by Phil.

"I will show you along to the study," he said, "then you can take Dr. Creswick up yourself, can't you, Dr. Morrison."

"Right you are, my boy. We will let you know as soon as we have finished the consultation, and in the meantime you had better stay with your mother."

They entered the study, which led off the inner hall, and when the door had closed after them, Phil Thornton went back to his mother. So did mother and son sit staring into the fire waiting, waiting, waiting for the verdict which would be passed on the one who was so dear to them.

It was nearly an hour later when the door of the hall opened and Dr. Morrison came in. He walked across to the pair and laid a hand on each of them.

"I have explained the case as I understand it to Dr. Creswick," he said quietly. "You have requested me to be perfectly frank with you and I will be. He has made a thorough examination of Sir John and is as much puzzled as I am over the trouble. But he is quite prepared to administer the radium if you wish him to do so, Lady Thornton, though he can promise nothing definite. One thing he does say, and that is that it cannot do him any harm. It might do some good. What do you say?"

Both Lady Thornton and Phil arose.

"There is only one thing to say," she replied, with a voice that shook under the effort to control it. "If Dr. Creswick will administer the radium, let him do so by all means."

"Then will you come up?" asked Morrison.

"Can I come, too?" inquired Phil. "I haven't seen the dad yet."

"Certainly, my boy, come along," replied Morrison.

They turned, and Lady Thornton led the way through the hall to the main staircase which led to the first floor.

At the top she turned to the right and passed down a long corridor which took them to the west wing of the house, which Phil had pointed out to Dr. Creswick on the way up the drive. Another short corridor brought them to a door which stood ajar.

Lady Thornton pushed it open, revealing a large and comfortably fur-

nished sitting-room, the walls of which were lined with books topped by more trophies of the chase.

Another door opposite them led them into Sir John's bedroom, which was dimly lit by a shaded light. His face was just visible beneath the penumbra of the light, and as they came in, Dr. Creswick was standing by the bed talking to the patient.

Now, to fully understand the mysterious events which followed, it is necessary to give a brief description of the arrangement of the room and its relation to the rest of the building.

It has already been said that Sir John Thornton's own rooms were situated in the west wing of the house. It is known also that the sitting-room of the suite gave off the corridor which led to the wing.

Then came the bed-room in which the patient was lying, and beyond that a large bath-room, the bath of which was a modern Roman type, installed by Sir John when he had returned from India for good.

The bed-room was a very large apartment furnished in luxurious fashion.

The bed was a huge wooden affair, and the great wardrobe and dressing-table were of the same material.

There were two couches in the room, thick rugs in which the feet made no sound, half a dozen very fine paintings, and all the appurtenances which would be chosen by a man of taste and the wealth to gratify it.

Looking out upon a large garden, which broke away in a triple terrace to a wide stream, were two French windows. They gave immediately on to a balcony which protruded over the windows of the room below and which was at present used as a billiard-room.

This balcony had a wrought-iron guard rail which extended round both ends, for this room alone did the balcony serve.

From the balcony to the garden below was a matter of twenty feet or so before the turf of the terrace. Beyond the stream which ran at a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, the park proper extended, then came rough woods and finally the boundaries of the estate.

At the moment when Dr. Hilton Creswick, Dr. Morrison, Mrs. Thornton, and Phil Thornton entered the bed-room it was exactly six o'clock in the evening.

Outside it was already dark, and a slight mist was hanging over the stream. One of the French windows was partially open with the heavy green blind half drawn down.

The other window was closed and the blind of it drawn down the full distance. Both windows were provided with thick curtains, but they had not yet been drawn.

The window of the bath-room was an ordinary casement window, and did not open on to the balcony. Nor did the windows of the sitting-room.

The bed on which Sir John lay extended from one wall of the room out into the room with a space of perhaps six feet between the side and the windows.

Against the wall between the two windows was a small table on which had been placed the different bottles of medicine which were being used. Then, on the other side of the bed, was a small night table on which stood a shaded electric light and a few other articles for the sick man's use.

Several easy chairs were placed about the room and a tabourette or two completed the arrangement.

Such was the room when the great specialist entered it.

The disposition of the occupants was as follows. Sir John was, of course, in the bed. Mrs. Thornton and Phil were standing beside the bed on the side farthest away from the window. Dr. Creswick and Dr. Morrison were on the other side of the bed—the side nearest the window.

It will be recalled that Dr. Creswick had kept by him the small black bag which contained the tube of radium, and now while he stood beside the bed he laid it on the floor close to his feet.

He placed a thermometer beneath the arm of the patient and methodically took the pulse. He mentioned the temperature to Dr. Morrison, who jotted down the figures, then taking up the black bag, the specialist opened it.

From its bed of cotton wool he took out the tube of radium—the same tube which he had exhibited to the Black Wolf at Wimpole Street.

Laying the black bag on the floor again he handed the tube to Dr. Morrison, who examined it with professional interest.

Then he handed it across to Phil and his mother to examine—for it is not every day that one has the opportunity of seeing so much wealth in such small compass—and they in turn passed it back to Dr. Creswick.

The specialist laid it on the table behind him—the table which stood against the wall between the two windows until he had prepared the patient for the application.

The preparations were of the simplest order. First Sir John's shoulder was bared and thoroughly sponged with a solution which Creswick had brought with him.

This consumed some five or six minutes of time—and mark this carefully—though when he had finished the job and turned to replace the bottle of solution on the table from which he had taken it he noticed somewhat to his surprise that he had spilled a little of the liquid on the jacket of the patient's pyjamas and this he had not remembered doing.

When the bottle of solution had been recorked he took up the tube of radium, which it will be remembered was covered with a jacket of india-rubber.

While he laid this on the shoulder of the sick man close against the patch, which was the only visible sign of the disease which Sir John had, Dr. Morrison took up a reel of wide adhesive tape and cut off about eight inches.

When the tube was in position, Dr. Creswick placed the adhesive tape over it in order to hold it in position, then he drew the pyjama jacket back into place and fixed the coverlet beneath the sick man's chin.

It was a very simple process after all.

When this had been completed he picked up the black bag, and, turning to Dr. Morrison, said:

"Now, Dr. Morrison, as I told you, I should advise the tube being kept on until ten o'clock to-morrow morning. You might then remove it and have it returned to me at once, since I shall need to use it at the hospital to-morrow afternoon. I needn't remind you of the value of the radium in that tube and the necessity for guarding it closely while returning it to London. By the way, what arrangements have you made for returning it?"

Dr. Morrison looked across at Lady Thornton and Phil.

"We have talked that over," he said. "If it is quite impossible for you to stay the night and take it back to London yourself, we thought the best plan would be for Phil to take it up in the morning to you. I myself will sit up with the patient to-night and will be here until the moment when I take the tube off. Phil will, of course, motor you back to London to-night if you must return."

"I should like to stay," replied Dr. Creswick, "but I have a consultation in London to-morrow morning at eleven, and must be there for it. I think if you—and he looked at Phil—bring the tube up in the morning it will be all right. And it will be as well for you to remain here as you suggest. Dr. Morrison. I am departing somewhat from the usual course when I

leave the tube of radium in this way, but Sir John is certainly too ill to come to London for the treatment."

Here Lady Thornton spoke. She had been standing beside the bed holding her husband's hand. At first he had been somewhat restless and wandering in his mind, but he had dropped into a doze under the soothing influence of her touch.

"If—if the radium should do him good, Dr. Creswick, how long will it be before we may expect to see the results?" she faltered.

Creswick crossed to where she stood and laid his hand on her arm.

"Do not look for results beyond what I have said may be within the realm of possibility, Lady Thornton," he said gently. "Radium is a wonderful thing, and some of the cures I have made with it are little short of marvellous. Yet it is not the universal panacea some people think it is. If it does Sir John any good you may look for the effects in from five to six weeks. That is all I can say at present."

"Thank you, Dr. Creswick," she responded quietly. "I shall not make the mistake of building too much on it. And now will you remain to dinner before you return to town?"

Dr. Creswick shook his head.

"If you will excuse me, and Phil is ready, I should like to get back to London at once, Lady Thornton," he said.

Phil stepped forward.

"I will go down and order the car round at once, doctor," he remarked.

He held his father's hand for a moment or two, then kissed his mother, promising to be back late in the evening, and, with a nod to Dr. Morrison, departed.

The two physicians gathered together their instruments and appliances, and, accompanied by Lady Thornton, made for the door.

There Dr. Morrison shook hands with his distinguished colleague, and, making arrangements with Lady Thornton to have his dinner served in the patient's room, went back to the bed.

Lady Thornton accompanied Dr. Creswick to the lower hall, and when the car had come round to the front door bade him good-bye.

Five minutes later the car was rolling down the driveway on its way to London, and neither the two men in it nor those who had remained at the house dreamed for a single moment what a baffling mystery was rising to becloud the atmosphere of that great house.

CHAPTER III.

Nelson Lee Hears a Strange Tale—The Work of a Master Mind.

NELSON LEE glanced with some slight surprise at the card which Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, had brought into the consulting-room. "Dr. Hilton Creswick" it said.

Like all London, Nelson Lee knew the name of the great radium specialist though he had never met him personally.

"Dr. Hilton Creswick," he read, half aloud. "Now I wonder what he wants. Show him in please, Mrs. Jones."

The housekeeper departed to do so, while Nipper, who had been at work at a desk in the corner, pushed some papers away from him, and rose.

The next moment the door opened again to admit two men—one whom Nelson Lee knew at once to be the specialist; the other, a younger man, he did not know.

Creswick came forward and shook hands with Lee.

"I am glad I have found you in, Mr. Lee," he said. "I trust you will be able to give me a little of your time. I quite realise the value of a specialist's time, but I shall keep you not a moment longer than is absolutely necessary."

"I am at your disposal for half an hour," replied Lee.

"Then will you permit me to introduce Mr. Phillip Thornton?" said Creswick, indicating the young man who had come into the room with him.

Lee bowed to the young man, and Nipper drew up a couple of chairs for them. When they had seated themselves, Lee resumed his seat at the desk, and leaning forward slightly, said:

"Well, Dr. Creswick, what has brought you to see me?"

The specialist came to the point at once.

"When my patients come to consult me, Mr. Lee, I always ask them to be as brief as possible. I shall endeavour to practise what I myself preach. To begin with, let me say that Sir John Thornton, the father of Mr. Phillip Thornton, is suffering from a serious illness. It is, as far as is known, an obscure trouble, picked up while he was in the Service in India. I was called in for a consultation with the local doctor who was attending him, and decided to try an application of radium. I went down to Dorcomb, in Surrey, yesterday afternoon in order to administer the radium. My young friend here motored me down. With me I took a tube containing ten thousand pounds worth of radium. We arrived there about tea-time, and after tea I held a consultation with Dr. Morrison, the local doctor. We decided to try the radium, and the application was completed a little after six. By half-past six I got away again, and was motored to London.

"Now, Mr. Lee, I come to the part of the affair which caused me to come to you. This tube, as I have already told you, contained ten thousand pounds worth of radium. It is a little out of the ordinary for me to leave a tube of that value in the house of a patient, but Sir John was too ill to come to London for treatment, and of course I thought it would be all right. The arrangement was that Dr. Morrison was to sit up all night with the patient and keep guard on the radium. This, I am assured, was done. The tube was to be taken off at ten o'clock this morning, and Mr. Phillip Thornton was to motor up to town with it immediately afterwards.

"All this was adhered to, and a little after eleven o'clock this morning the tube was handed to me. I took it and locked it up the steel cabinet in my office where I always keep it, and I will confess that, although I did not examine it closely then, I saw nothing suspicious about it.

"This afternoon I had occasion to use the tube on a patient, and, with my usual care, examined it before making the application. It was then I discovered, Mr. Lee, that the tube was not the one which I had taken down to Surrey with me. It was an exact copy, but inside the tube, instead of there being radium, there was but a strip of lead. It was a worthless tube, while ten thousand pounds worth of radium has disappeared.

"The whole thing is surrounded by such a cloud of mystery that I felt the only man to come to was yourself. As far as I can see there is not a single person whom I can suspect. That, sir, is the story. If you wish to ask us any questions I shall be very pleased to answer them to the best of my ability."

Nelson Lee was silent for a little. To say the least of it, this was a strange tale which the great radium specialist had just unfolded. Ten thousand pounds worth of radium had disappeared! That was serious enough; but to complicate matters, it had apparently been abstracted by someone who had managed the affair with more than ordinary cunning.

With only the bald facts before him, it was out of the question to attempt

to form any theory. But with a careful cross-examination of Creswick and Thornton, he might light upon something which to his trained mind would mean a lot, much as obscure physical occurrence would mean much to Creswick.

Placing the tips of his fingers together—a favourite attitude with Lee when he was concentrating—he began his cross-examination.

"Let us begin at the beginning," he said quietly. "Your father, Mr. Thornton, is, I understand, suffering from an obscure disease, which it is supposed he contracted in India. How long has he been ill?"

Phil Thornton shifted slightly.

"Well, Mr. Lee, for a good many years—off and on. In fact, he has had this trouble ever since his return from India, although it has only been intermittent."

"What form does it take?" asked Lee.

"He has been suffering from attacks of more or less severity at intervals of several weeks. The form it takes is a high fever and some pain. Lately the attacks have been steadily getting worse, and Dr. Morrison is very anxious about him. If he does not get some benefit from the radium, I am afraid he will not survive this attack."

"I see," said Lee. "Now then, Dr. Creswick, perhaps you will reply to a few of my questions. I understand that you went down to Dorcomb yesterday afternoon."

"I did," replied the specialist. "As I said, Mr. Thornton motored me down."

"And with you, you took the tube of radium which it was your intention to apply to the sick man?"

"That is quite right, Mr. Lee."

"Are you quite positive, Dr. Creswick, that the tube was all right when you went down?"

"Positive!" responded the specialist promptly. "It is my invariable custom to examine the tube of radium before each application. This I do on taking it from the steel cabinet where I keep it. I followed my usual course yesterday afternoon, and can affirm without hesitation that everything was as it should be. I myself placed it in the black bag in which I always carry it, and that bag was not out of my possession from the time I left Wimpole Street until I reached Thorn Lodge."

"And then?"

"Then it was beside me all the time I was there."

"You personally applied it to the patient?"

"I did."

"Who was in the room besides yourself?"

"Dr. Morrison, the local doctor, Lady Thornton, Mr. Phillip Thornton, and, of course, the patient himself."

"You carried the black bag into the room with you?"

"Yes, and laid it on the floor close to the bed."

"There was a nurse?"

"No. Only those of whom I have told you were present."

"What happened then?"

"I prepared the patient for the application of radium. First, however, I took the tube from the bag and laid it on the table behind me."

"How long did it take to prepare the patient?"

"Five or six minutes."

"Then you made the application?"

"Yes—with the assistance of Dr. Morrison."

"What followed?"

"We arranged that Mr. Phillip Thornton was to take me back to London

at once. Dr. Morrison arranged to sit up with the patient, and was even to have all his meals served in the room."

"Did he accompany you to the front door?"

"No. We left him at the door of the bedroom. Phillip had already gone down to see about the car. Lady Thornton and I descended together."

"Did Dr. Morrison leave the room during the night?"

"No. As soon as I discovered my loss this afternoon I immediately called up Thorn Lodge on the telephone. I spoke to Phillip, telling him what had occurred, and as Dr. Morrison was there he got him to speak to me. Dr. Morrison assured me that from the moment I had left the bedroom last night until this morning at ten o'clock he had not been out of the room. He himself removed the tube of radium at ten o'clock, and gave it to Phillip to bring on to London to me. Phillip assures me that he did so without delay. I can vouch for the fact that he arrived in Wimpole Street a little after eleven. I received the tube from him, glanced at it, and put it away in the steel cabinet where I always keep it. This afternoon when I was to use it again I discovered that it was a fake tube, and not the genuine one."

"And Dr. Morrison noticed nothing?"

"Nothing whatsoever. I asked him if he had seen any change in the dressing, and he is prepared to swear that the adhesive tape which he removed this morning was the same which we put on last night. The tube could not have been taken from the patient's body without removing at least one side of the tape."

"Rather mysterious, I must say," mused Lee. "Now, Dr. Creswick, a few more questions, if you please. You say you kept this tube of radium in a steel cabinet. What sort of a cabinet? Will you kindly give me a brief description of it?"

"Certainly! It is a heavy steel cabinet, five feet high and eighteen inches wide. It runs about twelve inches in depth. I had it constructed specially by a well-known firm of safe-makers, in order to protect my more valuable instruments, and it locks by means of a modern combination lock. Therefore, I considered it a perfectly safe place for the radium."

"Did you examine it to see if it had been tampered with?"

"Naturally; but as I tell you, there is hardly any chance of the tube having been taken from it. If you will remember, the tube was all right when I took it out, and only this afternoon, when I took it out again, did I discover that there was something wrong. Besides, I have in the cabinet other tubes of varying values, and they are all right."

"Then you think that the tube was lost—when?"

"Between the time when I took it from the steel cabinet yesterday afternoon and ten o'clock this morning. In other words, Mr. Lee, I think that the tube I placed back in the cabinet this morning was the fake tube, for I am sure, as I am that I am here, the steel cabinet has not been tampered with!"

"That, of course, must be proven," remarked Lee thoughtfully. "Then, from what you say, it would appear that we are to consider the tube as having been replaced by a fake tube between six o'clock last evening and ten this morning. That theory is somewhat complicated by the fact that for a large portion of the time it was out of the cabinet it was under your own care, and for the balance of the time it was under the direct care of only two other persons—Dr. Morrison and Mr. Phillip Thornton."

"That is so, Mr. Lee, and it is for that very reason I have come to you. Dr. Morrison is beyond suspicion, and I am sure you will agree with me that we can hardly suspect Phillip here."

At his words, Phil Thornton, who had been listening quietly to what was said, looked up.

"I assure you, Mr. Lee, that I am willing to be questioned as closely as possible. I am nearly off my head with the worry of it. I feel a great responsibility in the matter, and I simply cannot imagine how it could have happened!"

Looking into the eyes of the young man, Nelson Lee knew that, whoever was guilty, Phil Thornton was not. Yet, unconsciously, he might have been the cause of the tube being lost—if he had relaxed his vigilance for even a few moments, such a thing might have been brought off. It would certainly do to question him.

"Will you, please, give me in a few words the details of your trip to London?" he said quietly. "Tell me anything you can think of."

"There is little to tell you," said Phil Thornton promptly. "I received the tube of radium from Dr. Morrison himself. I carried it straight to the car and put it on the floor at my feet. Then I drove through to London and straight through to Wimpole Street. I handed the tube direct to Dr. Creswick, and that is all."

"Did you drive up alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you stop at any place?"

"Not once—I mean with the exception of the traffic stops. I really didn't even speak to anyone from the time I left Thorn Lodge until I got to Wimpole Street."

Nelson Lee sank into deep thought. For five minutes the little silver clock on the desk ticked away the passage of time, then he roused himself.

"Can you give me a rough plan of the room where Sir John was when you gave him the radium treatment?" he asked, turning to Dr. Creswick.

"I can, but I think Phillip could do so in a more intelligent manner," he replied. "You see that was the first time I was at Thorn Lodge."

Phillip Thornton drew up his chair at once, and taking the piece of paper with which Nelson Lee provided him, began to make a rough plan of the west wing of Thorn Lodge.

When he had finished, he had produced a very fair drawing of that portion of the house, and Nelson Lee studied it critically.

In a few words Phil described the meaning of each portion, and as he proceeded, there gradually formed in Nelson Lee's mind a picture of what the rooms must be like.

He studied the plan of the bedroom, and the adjoining bathroom very carefully, asking numberless questions about the disposition of each.

He remained for some time bent in thought over the representation of the balcony which Phil had drawn, and then asked further questions about the grounds.

When he had saturated his mind with details of the place, he pushed the paper from him and lit a cigarette.

"It is certainly a very puzzling affair," he said at last. "The tube seems to have been under close and reliable guard, from the moment you took it from the steel cabinet yesterday, until it was replaced there this morning," he said. "Yet, even so, it seems to have been replaced by a fake tube, and the genuine one has disappeared. Can you think of nothing—absolutely nothing, Dr. Creswick, which struck you as out of the ordinary?"

The great specialist knitted his brows. He appeared to be trying desperately to recall any small incident which was out of the ordinary, for being what he was, he could understand how important Lee might find such a thing.

But try as he would, he could recall nothing, and at the end of some minutes said as much.

"Then what do you wish me to do?" asked Lee.

"I want you to take up the case, and endeavour to discover what has happened," replied Creswick promptly. "I, myself, would have asked you to do so, but Lady Thornton insists on taking the responsibility of the investigation, and I yielded to her request."

"It is a case which interests me exceedingly," responded Nelson Lee. "I feel disposed to take it up, but before confining myself to any definite arrangements, I should like to visit Thorn Lodge, and spend some time in the room where Sir John is lying."

"That is exactly why we came to see you," said Phil Thornton impulsively. "I have the car outside, and can drive you down at once."

"Will you come also?" asked Lee, turning to Creswick.

The specialist nodded.

"I really ought not take the time, but I am greatly worried over this affair, Mr. Lee; and, after all, it amounts to a large figure. If you can arrange to go down this evening, I shall also go."

Nelson Lee rose at once.

"Nipper," he said, "get our coats and hats. We shall go down at once."

Nipper, who had been making shorthand notes of the case as the conversation proceeded, thrust his notebook into his pocket, and rose with alacrity.

Hurrying through to the dressing-room, which adjoined the consulting-room, he got a coat for Lee and one for himself, and then, snatching up a couple of hats, went back to the consulting-room.

The others were standing by the door waiting for him, and when they had donned their coats, Phil Thornton opened the door.

The last thing Nelson Lee did was to thrust into his pocket the rough plan of the west wing, which Phil Thornton had drawn, then he followed the others, and took his place in the big Berliet.

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CHAPTER IV.

An Attack in the Dark—The Mystery Deepens—Where is Nipper?

THERE was little said on the journey down to Dorcomb. Nipper was in front with Phil Thornton, who was driving, while Nelson Lee and Dr. Creswick occupied the back of the car.

Phil drove slowly until he got out of the crush of the London traffic, but when Wimbledon had been left behind, he let the car out, and they thundered along at a great pace.

Lee himself was occupied with thoughts on the case which he had just taken up, and Dr. Creswick seemed little disposed for conversation.

They had covered nearly the full distance to the little village of Dorcomb, and Phil had just turned round in his place to say that another five minutes would bring them within sight of the Lodge, when the car swerved and almost precipitated them into the gutter, as another car flashed past them.

"That was a close shave," muttered Lee, as he settled back into his place. "Another couple of inches, and we would all have been in the gutter with the car on top of us."

"It was unpleasantly close," responded Creswick. "I can't imagine what Phil was about."

At that same moment Phil again turned in his seat.

"Sorry to have given you such a shock," he said, "but it really wasn't my fault. It was the fault of the other driver. If he didn't deliberately force me into the gutter, I'll eat my hat."

"That's right," put in Nipper, also turning round. "They forced us right out of the road. If Mr. Thornton hadn't taken a big chance, they would have had us over."

"Well, I hope it won't happen again," said Lee. "I don't fancy those kind of close shaves."

Driving at a slower pace, Phil now brought the car well over to the side of the road, for they were approaching a thick wood.

Although it was almost dark, he did not pause to light up, for another five minutes would see them at the Lodge, and it was scarcely worth while.

They drove into the gloomy aisle between the woods, and with the hooter going constantly, covered what Lee judged to be half a mile or so.

Then, as far ahead, they caught a glimpse of the last of the dying light in the west, there was an ominous bump, bump, beneath them, and Phil brought the car to a stop with a jerk.

"Tyre gone," he said, in a tone of irritation. "Just a minute until I see what has happened."

He leaped out, and bending down, made a brief examination of the wheels.

"Here's a pretty mess," he said, looking up. "Not one tyre but all four gone. Look here, Mr. Lee. Did you ever see anything like that? Every tyre simply perforated with tacks."

Lee and Nipper jumped out, followed by Creswick. Bending over one wheel after another, Nelson Lee saw that what Phil had said was true.

Every tyre had gone, and sticking in the rubber were several large tacks. Over a dozen he counted in one tyre alone, then he looked up.

"This is no accident," he said curtly. "It has been done deliberately. Look here, every tyre has picked them up, and only a tremendous number scattered about the road would cause such a result."

"By thunder, you are right," cried Phil, as he bent again over the tyres.

"It is a put up job. Now, who can have done such a thing as this. It is a deliberate act of hooliganism. Every car which goes along here to-night will be punctured."

Nelson Lee was standing gazing back along the road they had just come.

"In that case, the car we passed as we entered the wood should also be punctured," he muttered to himself. "I wonder if it is. If so, then it should be only a mile or so away."

Suddenly he turned to the others.

"How far is it from here to the house, Mr. Thornton?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, less than a mile," replied Phil. "I am afraid we shall have to walk it, too," he said ruefully. "I have a couple of spare wheels, but that won't do for four. I shall have to send a man with a pair of horses to pull the car to the house."

Lee nodded, and turned to Nipper.

"My lad," he said, "I think you had better go back along the road, and search for the spot where the tacks were spilled. Kick them into the gutter, otherwise every car which comes past here to-night will be punctured."

"Right you are, guv'nor," replied Nipper promptly. "I'll do it at a dog trot, and come on to the house after you."

"Very well, my lad."

Nipper started off at a trot, and in a few moments a turn in the road hid him from the view of the others.

Putting their shoulders against the car, Lee, the doctor, and Phil pushed it into the side of the road, and then Phil proceeded to affix a light as a warning to traffic.

While he was so occupied, Dr. Creswick leant against the car smoking.

while Nelson Lee paced up and down the road pondering on what had just happened.

Suddenly, while they were so occupied, Nelson Lee felt something whizz close past his face, and at the same moment there was a sharp plunk into the body of the car as something struck it.

Scarcely had Lee turned, with an exclamation of surprise, when the cigarette he was smoking was sent flying from his mouth, and there followed a sharp cry of pain from Dr. Creswick.

He started forward, and though the dusk was heavy, Lee could see a dark stream pouring from his hand.

"What has happened?" he asked quickly.

"I have been struck," exclaimed the doctor, "struck in the hand by a bullet. Look here where it is buried in the car, Lee."

Nelson Lee hurried towards the car, and bent over the spot indicated by the doctor. True enough there was a hole in the side of the car, and he could just see the blunt end of a bullet which was almost buried in the wood.

A foot or so from it was another mark, and examining that he saw that it had been caused in a similar manner.

Where had they come from? Was it an accident? They had heard no sound of explosion.

Even as he was debating the point, another bullet flew between them, and struck the side of the car, ricochetting off and striking the ground close to Phil's feet.

Like a flash Nelson Lee turned, drawing his own automatic as he did so.

"It is a deliberate attack," he cried. "Take cover."

They dodged behind the car, and levelling his automatic, Nelson Lee got a straight line from the car past where he had been standing when the cigarette had been knocked from his mouth, and so on into the wood.

Following this line, he pulled the trigger of the automatic, and as the gun spat viciously, sending a hail of bullets into the wood, they felt the impact of bullet after bullet against the car.

"Using a Maxim silencer," said Lee, as he fired. "A deliberate attack on us, as I said. Down behind the car until I put in a fresh clip, then I am going to rush them. Better get a spanner or something and follow me."

He hurriedly slipped in a fresh clip, then holding his weapon ready for instant use, dashed round the end of the car.

Phil Thornton had caught up two heavy wrenches from beneath the front seat of the car, and handing one to Creswick, dashed after Lee.

Nelson Lee kept straight on towards the wood, firing as he went, then, leaping the gutter, he climbed a fence and broke into the cover of the trees. As he did so he paused for a moment, and became aware of a crashing sound just ahead of him.

Rushing forward he sent a shot in the direction of the sound, and the next instant a hail of bullets struck the trees and ground about him, though there was no sound of the explosion. Then another crashing followed, and he dashed in the direction, followed by his companions.

He struck a path a few moments later, and, following it some little distance, suddenly came upon a small open space.

Pausing here for a moment he turned and looked back. From where he stood he saw that there was an opening through the trees which looked straight through to the road, and he could distinctly see the light of the car. The crashing of branches sounded away to his right now, and Lee started in that direction.

It became more difficult each moment to make headway, for the under-

growth grew thicker and thicker. Lee knew there must be a path if he could only find it, but as each moment went past, and the sound he had been following died away entirely, he drew up and waited for the other two to come up with him.

"It is no use continuing on in this way," he said curtly. "They have got on to a path and are following it. We may as well work our way back to the road."

"But who could have made this attack on us?" exclaimed Creswick, as he floundered along after Lee. "It was, as you say, Lee, a deliberate thing. Why did they pick us out in that fashion? Scott! It was sheer luck that they did not drop one of us, and, even as it is, they have managed to smash up my hand."

Lee grunted something in reply, for he was thinking. As he came to the open space again he took the lights of the car as a beacon, and made the road in a direct line. Once there, he drew up, and looked up and down the road. An idea had suddenly come to him. He remembered those tacks which had brought them to a stop.

He went back in his mind a little, and recalled the vicious driving which had almost caused them to be precipitated into the gutter. Was there any connection between that and the punctures? And, if so, was there any connection between those two occurrences and the attack which had been made upon them?

Had someone deliberately brought them to a stop in the darkness of the wood in order to make the attack upon them? And were the tacks the method used?

He turned suddenly.

"Look here," he jerked, "I am going back along the road. There is more in this than meets the eye. Will you come or wait here?"

"We will come, of course," replied the other two in the same breath, and, breaking into a sharp double, Lee started back the way they had come.

"We shall probably meet Nipper coming back," he thought, as they went along. "If so, he may have something to tell us."

It did not take them long to cover the half-mile to the other end of the wood, and once they were out of the gloom they found that a little daylight still lingered. It wasn't enough to light up the road sufficiently for an examination of the ground, but it was enough to allow them to see any approaching traffic.

"It was a little over a quarter of a mile from here that we passed the other car," said Lee, as he drew up. "Let us begin here and make a search for the tacks."

"But where is Nipper?" asked Phil Thornton, in a tone of surprise.

Lee pointed along the road.

"He has probably gone on further to begin, and will be working back. We shall start here and work in that direction to meet him. In that way we will have covered the ground more quickly."

Drawing out his pocket-torch as he spoke, Nelson Lee pressed the switch and cast the bright circle of light on the road. There was no sign there of the tacks which they knew must have been scattered about, so walking very slowly they began to make their way along, keeping a sharp lookout for the little black imps which had caused the mischief.

Foot by foot they paced along until they had covered a good hundred yards. Then Creswick, who was on the right and close to the gutter, gave a sharp exclamation and bent close to the ground.

"Here is what we are after," he cried, as he picked up something and held it up. "Here is a tack exactly the same as those in the tyres."

"And here is another, and another, and another," said Lee, as he picked

up several. "This is the spot where we picked them up, and, as we thought, there have been a large quantity scattered about. But it is odd that Nipper did not come upon them. And that reminds me that we ought to have come upon him before now."

"Hallo! What is this?" cried Phil Thornton suddenly, as he picked up something and examined it. "My word, Mr. Lee, here is a pocket-torch similar to yours. I wonder who has dropped it."

Nelson Lee strode across to where Thornton stood, and stretched out his hand for the torch which Phil had just found. No sooner had he glanced at it than he uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Why, this is Nipper's torch," he said. "Look here, you can see his initials which he scratched on it some time ago. Now, what does this mean?"

Quickly he bent over the spot where Phil had found the torch. At first glance the ground revealed nothing to throw light on the mystery, but when he had looked more carefully he saw a confused array of footprints in the soft ground.

He studied them closely until he came upon one which caused him to frown.

"Nipper has been here," he said, in curiously cold tones. "Nipper has been here, and others have been here as well. There has been a struggle of some sort. Look here. Do you see this confusion of footprints? The lad has been attacked, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, it has been by those who fired upon us as we stood by the car. It is all part and parcel of the same attempt, gentlemen."

Lee was now working round and round in a circle, following the footprints as they went hither and thither. Finally, he paused and bent still closer.

"Odd," he muttered. "They should still be visible, for the ground is soft, and the others are quite distinct."

Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the lad was attacked just there where the torch was found. He put up a fight, as is proven by these footprints, but just here he was overpowered and picked up. His footprints are no longer to be distinguished here. He has been carried along the road, for the footprints go straight along by the side of the road. I imagine it is the same party which attacked us. They must have run through the woods to here, and have come upon the lad searching about the road. Come with me, gentlemen; we will see if we can overtake them."

Nelson Lee started along the road, running as hard as he could, and after him came Phil Thornton and Dr. Creswick.

Round a turn in the road they sped, then along a straight stretch of a hundred yards or more, and after that round another sharp turn.

As they came into view of a straight stretch of road again they suddenly saw in the distance the red light on the rear of a motor, and at the same instant there sounded the sudden grinding of gears as the vehicle got up speed. There followed the sudden plunk, plunk, of bullets on the road all about them, then the red light of the motor ahead swept from view, leaving them standing powerless to do aught but stare in futile rage along the road it had gone.

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee is Angry—A Theory—The Examination—What the Tube Revealed.

NELSON LEE thrust his revolver back into his pocket and turned to his companions.

"So much for that," he said grimly. "I think we may safely say that our murderous friends in the car were responsible for the tacks which

were scattered about the road. They also were the vicious devils who fired on us from the woods, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, they have at this very moment got my assistant, Nipper, in their power."

"But why? What is the object of it all?" asked Phil Thornton.

"When I have fathomed the mystery of the tube of radium, I may be able to answer that question," replied Lee grimly. "In the meantime, let us lose no time in getting on to the house. My every inclination is to follow that car, but without one of our own we are helpless. In half an hour they will have taken sufficient turnings to entirely break the trail. The only thing to do is to try at the house to pick up a clue which will serve as a working hypothesis. And as I am worried about the lad, gentlemen, let us lose no time, please."

He began to walk quickly as he finished speaking, and his two companions strode along beside him. They went back through the wood, and, coming upon the disabled car, paused for a moment beside it. Then they started on once more, and finally, coming out of the wood, reached the main gates which opened to the driveway of the Lodge.

Phil led the way through the pedestrians' gate, and, reaching the front door, he rang impatiently. A manservant opened to him, and glanced in some surprise at their dishevelled appearance.

Phil, however, brushed his way past, saying curtly:

"Where is Lady Thornton?"

"She is with the master, sir," replied the man.

Phil nodded.

"Will you come up there now, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"I should like to do so," replied Lee.

They went through the lounge hall to the rear hall, and then up the main staircase to the floor above. Phil led the way through to the west wing, and, on reaching the sitting-room of Sir John's suite, Nelson Lee had no difficulty in recognising it from the rough plan which had already been made for his benefit.

He and Dr. Creswick waited until Phil had gone into the bedroom to warn his mother of their coming. He came out a few moments later and beckoned to them, and, following him, they passed into the bedroom.

Sir John was tossing feverishly on his bed, while Lady Thornton stood close beside him holding one of his hands. On the far side of the bed sat Dr. Morrison, with one hand on the patient's pulse.

He glanced up as they entered, and, releasing Sir John's hand, rose. Phil introduced Lee to his mother and Dr. Morrison, then stood back for Lee to do the talking.

He addressed himself to Lady Thornton.

"I am sorry to worry you under such conditions, Lady Thornton," he said; "but you, of course, will understand my reasons for doing so."

"You mean the tube of radium," she said, in a low tone. "I quite understand, Mr. Lee. Do you wish to question me?"

Lee shook his head.

"Not at present, Lady Thornton," he said. "But I wish to try a small experiment, and should be glad of your assistance."

"Anything which will help to discover what has become of the radium," she murmured.

Lee now turned to Dr. Creswick.

"Dr. Creswick," he said, "I wish to reproduce, as far as possible, the exact conditions existing when you made the application of radium to Sir John. If I remember rightly, the same persons are now in the room, and it should not be difficult. Can you do that, do you think?"

Creswick grasped at once what Lee required, and with a nod he turned to Lady Thornton.

"Will you kindly take up the same position you occupied last evening?" he said.

Lady Thornton moved back to her husband's side, and Phil stood close to her. Dr. Morrison moved up closer to the bed, and Dr. Creswick hovered between the bed and the windows.

"We were distributed thus," he said to Lee. "Now, shall I go through the whole procedure?"

"Please do so," responded Lee. "As you go along, please do your very best to reproduce your actions in every detail. In that way we may come upon something which you have forgotten. It is, as you know, my endeavour to locate something which might have been a little out of the ordinary."

He leaned against the mantel as he spoke, and rested his eyes on the group before him. They one and all now understood what he wanted, and seemed about to make an endeavour to act the part.

First, Dr. Creswick bared the shoulder of the patient and sponged the affected part with a harmless liquid which did very well as a substitute for the solution he had used before. He consumed some minutes in this, then set the bottle on the table and took up a small bottle which was to do duty for the tube of radium.

In the meantime, Dr. Morrison prepared the strip of adhesive tape, and the bottle was applied. Then the pyjama jacket of the sick man was drawn up again, and the coverlet pulled up beneath his chin. That done, Dr. Creswick went through the dumb show of putting some instruments into a bag, and moved towards the door.

The whole thing took less than twelve minutes, and when he had reached the end of the bed he paused.

"As far as I can remember that is exactly what happened last evening," he said.

Lee drew away from the mantelpiece.

"And was there nothing recalled to your mind while you went through it?" he asked.

Creswick shook his head.

"I can remember nothing whatsoever unless I except one small incident which, of course, can have no bearing on the matter."

"What was that?" asked Lee quickly.

"It was a little thing that happened while I was sponging Sir John's shoulder. Last night I had just finished doing so when, as I turned to replace the bottle on the table, I noticed that I had spilled a little of the solution on his jacket. It was merely a little carelessness on my part."

Lee now turned to Dr. Morrison.

"And you, sir," he said, "did not notice nothing?"

The old physician shook his head.

"I saw nothing at all," he replied. "Dr. Creswick carried out the part exactly as it was done last evening. I did remember the spilling of the solution on Sir John's jacket."

"And you, Lady Thornton?" asked Lee.

Lady Thornton left her place by the side of the bed, and came across to where Lee stood.

"I noticed one thing," she said. "Last evening Dr. Creswick took much more time in sponging my husband's shoulder than he did to-night."

Creswick looked at her in surprise.

"But, madam," he expostulated, "that is impossible. I gave the same

washing to the shoulder in every way. It might have varied by a half-minute or so, but no more."

"Oh, it was much more than that," she rejoined. "To-night the whole process took only twelve minutes. Last night the washing of the shoulder alone consumed that time."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the two doctors in one breath.

Lady Thornton turned and pointed to a little silver clock which ticked on the night table.

"I happened to glance at that last night just as you drew down the jacket of my husband's pyjamas," she said. "It was exactly six o'clock. When you had finished sponging it I chanced to look at the clock again, and noticed that it was twelve minutes past six. I am certain of this."

"And I can endorse what mother says," put in Phil Thornton quickly. "I didn't look to-night, but I do know that she is right about the time it took last evening."

Creswick scratched his chin in a puzzled manner.

"I can't understand that," he said at last. "I can understand a difference of half a minute or so, but six minutes, no; I cannot credit such a thing."

Lee had said nothing all this time, but had glanced from one to the other. That each was thoroughly convinced of the correctness of the assertion made was evident to him, and it was slightly bewildering to hear such a categorical statement of the difference in time made by the two doctors on one side, and Phil and his mother on the other.

Suddenly they were all startled by a weak voice issuing from the bed.

"What is the matter, Julia?" came the tones of Sir John. "What are you all doing?"

Lady Thornton and Dr. Morrison made for the bed at once.

"It is all right, dear," Lee heard Lady Thornton say in a soothing tone. "Dr. Creswick of London is here to see you."

"But he was here last night protested the sick man feebly. Are you all going to stand like a lot of frozen mummies again?"

Nelson Lee shot a quick glance in the direction of the sick man, then he took Creswick by the arm.

"Is he quite rational?" he asked in a whisper.

Creswick nodded his head.

"I think so," he replied.

"But how about last evening?" went on Lee. "Was he rational then?"

"I don't know. To tell you the truth I didn't think he was, but it is evident that he was fully aware of what was going on."

Lee caught Lady Thornton's eye and beckoned to her. She came across to him at once.

"Lady Thornton," he said, "will you please ask your husband what he meant by saying that he hoped you would not all stand like frozen mummies to-night. Please draw him out as much as possible on that point. He must have been clear in his mind last evening, and may be able to settle the dispute about the time it took to make the application of the solution."

She nodded and went back to the bed. Lee heard her talking in low gentle tones to Sir John. Then came the answers of the sick man.

She remained there for a few minutes then returned to Lee.

"I asked him what you wished me to," she said. "He remembered everything that happened last night. He said that while Dr. Creswick was washing his shoulder with the solution, he suddenly stopped and seemed to be listening. He noticed that all of us were in the same attitude and that we persisted in it for five minutes or so. Then Dr. Creswick moved, spilling the solution on his jacket as he did so. He was too weak to speak, but he

seems quite clear on the point. If that is so, then it might explain the length of time. But surely, Mr. Lee, my husband must be imagining this. We could hardly stand there for five minutes in such an attitude without being aware we were doing so, and I am sure Dr. Creswick worked rapidly all the time."

Nelson Lee made no reply. He was standing in deep thought, gazing at the bed. Suddenly he moved across to the window.

From where he was he saw that if the two doctors were standing where they had stood while making the application of radium it would completely shut off the patient's view of the window, which, he had been assured, had been open the night before.

It was in the same condition now, and squeezing through the half-opened portion, Nelson Lee stepped out on to the iron-railed balcony.

Standing there he gazed out across the terraces to the silver stream which flowed a short distance away.

A crescent moon was riding low, lighting up the scene with a pale light which cast ghostly shadows where the trees spread their slender branches.

Blazing stars overhead added a touch of weird beauty to the scene, and through the distant park came the soft breath of the wood.

It was a very beautiful place, and Nelson Lee was not so enwrapped in his thoughts that he could not appreciate its loveliness.

Yet he was observing, too, and when he finally turned back into the room it was to ask an abrupt question.

"That stream," he said, turning to Phil Thornton; "how far is it along the bank to the bounds of the estate?"

"Going with the current it is about a mile before it crosses the main road," replied Phil promptly. "Do you remember a small bridge, Mr. Lee, which we crossed as we passed through the wood?"

Lee nodded.

"That was the stream," went on Phil. "If you go against the current you will come to the main road about half a mile up. It crosses just where our estate ends."

Lee nodded his thanks, and glanced in the direction of Dr. Creswick.

"If you are ready, Dr. Creswick, I think we should be getting back to London," he said.

"Have you finished down here?" asked the specialist in surprise.

"I have seen all there is to be seen here," responded Lee non-committally.

"Have you seen anything at all which provides a clue?" pursued the doctor.

Lee shrugged.

"I am not prepared to pass an opinion yet," he said.

A look of disappointment rested on the other's face, but he said nothing more, and a few moments later Lee took leave of Lady Thornton and Dr. Morrison.

At the front porch another car was waiting for them, for Phil had given orders that his father's car be got out of the garage, and climbing in, they were soon on their way to London.

Lee and Creswick sat in the back seat with Phil alone in front.

On reaching the wood they paused long enough to see that the other car was all right and to give a word to the Thornton chauffeur, who was busy fitting on four new tyres.

Then they drove on again, nor did they stop until they came to the spot where they had found the scattered tacks.

Phil drove very carefully here, for he was not anxious to pick up another puncture, and once over the spot they stopped to make a thorough examina-

tion of each tyre. Then they started on again, and driving at a hard pace made London early in the evening.

On coming to Hyde Park Corner, Dr. Creswick turned to Lee with a look of inquiry in his eyes. For some time Nelson Lee had been lying back in his seat with closed eyes, but now he opened them and sat up.

"I will go to Wimpole Street with you," he said quietly.

Creswick communicated this information to Phil, and the car sped down Piccadilly on its way to Wimpole Street.

When it drew up in front of the doctor's house, Phil jumped out, offering to wait until Lee should finish with the doctor and to drive him where he wished to go, but Nelson Lee vetoed this plan.

"If you care to drive on to the International Club and wait there, I will communicate with you in case you can be of assistance," he said. "I shall, however, telephone for my own car to be sent round. There may be word of Nipper at Gray's Inn Road, but in case there shouldn't be, then I must make an attempt to find him. The attack which was made on us as we passed through the wood proves the calibre of those with whom we have to deal. The lad will receive little mercy from them."

Phil Thornton looked disappointed, but obeyed instructions and drove off as Lee and Creswick entered the house.

The doctor led the way direct to his consulting-room, and closing the door after him, turned to Lee.

"What did you wish to ask me, Mr. Lee?" he inquired.

Lee shrugged.

"Nothing in particular," he replied. "I should like, though, to examine the steel cabinet where you kept the tube of radium, and then to have a look at the fake tube."

"This is the cabinet here," said Creswick as he walked across to the tall steel affair where he had kept the radium. "You can see the combination here. I will open the cabinet for you and show you the interior."

Lee waited until he had done so, then, bending down, he closely scrutinised both the combination and the interior.

When he had finished he requested to be shown the fake tube, and opening a small drawer in the cabinet, the specialist took out the tube, which, to his sorrow, he had found contained nothing but a strip of worthless lead.

Nelson Lee bent to his examination with no small degree of interest. The tube itself was uninteresting enough, but he realised that it had been a sufficiently well made duplicate to fool even the specialist himself, and that alone was enough to convince Lee that the theft was the work of a master mind.

Taking the tube across to the light, he rolled back the indiarubber jacket an inch or so and examined the tube proper.

Then he unscrewed the cap, nodding from time to time as the specialist made explanatory remarks.

When he had screwed on the cap again Lee rolled the rubber back into place, and then, taking out his pocket-glass, began to give a close scrutiny to the rubber itself.

Turning it round and round beneath the glass, he suddenly paused in his movements, and bending still closer, concentrated his attention on two small marks showed on the rubber.

They were about two inches apart and of exactly the same nature. Only something hard and fairly sharp could have left them there, and Nelson Lee wondered what it might have been.

Turning the tube round again he came upon two more marks similar to the first pair, and a further examination showed him that they were on the opposite side of the tube from the others.

They also were a couple of inches apart, and had apparently been made in the same way.

Holding the tube up, Lee allowed it to rest upon the first and second fingers of his right hand.

Held thus, with the fingers covering the marks, he could imagine something of metal gripping the tube between its jaws, for the marks were like nothing more than the imprint of steel jaws.

He puzzled over it for a little, then handed the tube back to the specialist.

"Thank you," he said briefly. "I shall not trouble you any further. I think now I shall get back to my own rooms. I wish to give some thought to this case, Dr. Creswick."

At that moment a bell attached to the doctor's desk rang, and he turned with a frown of annoyance on his face.

"That means there is someone in the outer consulting-room who wishes to see me. I shall go along to them for a few moments, Mr. Lee. Will you wait until I come back? I should like to ask you one or two things before you leave."

"I shall wait, certainly," replied Lee. "Don't let me keep you."

With a muttered word of thanks Dr. Creswick left the room, and Nelson Lee sat down in a big armchair before a pleasant fire.

He leaned back, thinking, and was so engaged when the telephone on the doctor's desk rang shrilly. Lee half started to rise, then sank back again.

"He has probably a connection in the outer room," he murmured.

But as the 'phone kept on ringing and ringing, he finally rose again, and crossing to the desk, took down the receiver.

"Hello!" he called.

"Is that Dr. Creswick speaking?" asked a clear voice, and as he heard it Nelson Lee stiffened.

"No," he replied, making a sudden change in his own voice. "Dr. Creswick is engaged for the moment. Can I give him any message?"

There was silence at the other end of the wire for a few moments, then the voice came again. "Will you please inform Dr. Creswick that Signorina Paulini finds it impossible to keep the appointment which she had with him to-morrow morning. Dr. Creswick will understand."

"I will tell him certainly," said Lee in the same disguised tones.

The next moment the 'phone clicked at the other end, and he hung up the receiver.

Returning to his chair he sat down and closed his eyes. That voice which he had just heard had roused a sudden flood of memories in his mind, and to make it all the more extraordinary, it had touched on something which only that evening he had been thinking of.

He was still pondering over the matter when Dr. Creswick entered the room.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long," he said, "but I had to make a brief examination."

"I didn't mind," responded Lee rising. "By the way, the telephone here kept ringing and I answered it for you. I have a message to give you."

"That is very good of you, Lee. I am sorry you were bothered. What is the message?"

"Signorina Paulini has just called up to say that she finds she cannot keep the appointment which she had with you for to-morrow morning."

"Ah! Did she ask for another appointment?"

"No, that was all she said. By the way, Dr. Creswick, do you mind telling me if this Signorina Paulini is a patient of yours?"

"Well, she is and she isn't," replied the doctor scratching his chin. "As

a matter of fact, Lee, it was she to whom I was about to administer radium this afternoon when I discovered that the tube was gone."

"Ah!" Nelson Lee uttered the single exclamation and reached carelessly for his cigarette-case. "She had not had the treatment before, I take it?" he remarked.

The specialist shook his head absently.

"No. Her brother came to me the night before last to seek my advice, and ask about the radium treatment. I made an appointment with him for his sister to come to me this morning for an examination. I decided then to give her the radium, and requested her to come back early this afternoon. She did so, and then I discovered my loss."

"They are Italian, I take it?" said Lee.

"Yes. The brother, whom I haven't seen since he first consulted me, is distinctly Italian. The sister might almost be an English girl, but for her dark colouring."

"The brother, you say, consulted you first," remarked Lee. "Tell me, doctor, just as a matter of curiosity, did you show him the radium tube while he was here?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," responded the specialist in a tone of surprise, for he was beginning to wonder at the persistence of Lee's questions. "In explaining what the treatment would be and the cost of it, I showed him the tube."

"That was the night before last, you say?"

"Yes. But I assure you, Lee, you have no cause to suspect him. He was recommended to come to me by his own physician in Rome, and he certainly did no sleight of hand work with the tube while he was here. It was after that you will remember that I went down to the Thorntons, and the tube was all right."

"When his sister was here this morning did she see the tube?"

"No. I did not take it out of the steel cabinet until this afternoon, when I was going to make the application. She wasn't even in the same room then. She was in an adjoining room under the care of one of my nurses. But, my dear fellow, do not begin to suspect them. It is impossible that they should have had anything to do with it."

Lee shrugged.

"I did not say I suspected them," he remarked. "I am merely trying to trace back all the movements of the tube from the time when you knew it was in the cabinet until the moment when you discovered the imposition of which you had been the victim. Would you mind giving me the address of the Paulinis? Oh, perhaps, you have not got it."

"Yes, I have it," responded Creswick. "I can't imagine what you want with it; but, in a professional way, I don't mind giving it to you."

He crossed to the desk as he spoke, and took up a large case-book which lay on it. He opened it at about the middle, and running his finger down the page stopped at an entry.

"They live at 15, Barrington Park Gardens, Hampstead," he said, as he closed the book with a snap.

"Thank you," said Lee. "I think that is all I wish to ask you to-night, Dr. Creswick."

"But I wish to ask you some things," rejoined the doctor, with a smile.

Lee shook his head.

"Not to-night, please," he said. "Let me think things over first. I shall endeavour to communicate with you some time to-morrow, and if there is anything to tell you I will do so then."

Creswick had to be satisfied with this, and a few minutes after Lee

took his departure. Once in Wimpole Street he walked along until he came to Cavendish Square, where he picked up a taxi.

Telling the man to drive to Gray's Inn Road, he climbed in and leaned back. For the first time since he had taken up the case that afternoon he had an opportunity to make some attempt to assemble the different points which he had mentally marked.

"A curious case—a very curious case," he mused, as the cab drove on. "Ten thousand pounds worth of radium is a prize worth scheming for, and to judge from the aspects of this case it has been plotted for by no novice in the criminal ranks.

"On the face of it there is little to go upon. Certainly, I cannot suspect any of those chiefly concerned in the affair. Sir John Thornton and Lady Thornton are beyond suspicion. So is Phillip the son, and so is old Dr. Morrison. Creswick is the loser, and he would scarcely stoop to such a procedure. That includes all those who were in the room while the application of the radium was being made, and, somehow, I am inclined to think that the tube was taken during that time.

"It seems definite enough that the genuine tube was in the steel cabinet just before Creswick went down to Thorn Lodge. He himself examined it before going, and endorses that. Then he himself had it in charge during the journey down, and also had it by him up to the moment when he entered the sick room.

"Now, what followed? If the reproduction of their movements was a faithful one, it seems that he took the tube of radium from the bag and laid it on the table behind him while he sponged the affected part with antiseptic solution. There I come to something which puzzles me.

"There appears to be a discrepancy of some six minutes in the time which it took to wash the shoulder with the solution. I know, by my own timing of the process, that it took just about six minutes this evening, and both Dr. Morrison and Dr. Creswick claim that it took no longer last night.

"But, on the other hand, both Philip and his mother claim that the process lasted from six o'clock until twelve minutes past six. That is peculiar. Surely Dr. Creswick and Dr. Morrison would not make such a mistake as that. A half-minute—yes, but six minutes is out of the question. Then what does it mean? It is the first thing which has arisen by which one can possibly make a start towards a hypothesis.

"Then, again, we come to the point where Dr. Creswick stopped the washing of the affected part. Both he and Lady Thornton agree that the doctor spilled some of the solution on the pyjama jacket of the patient. That is not much, but, still, it is worthy of notice.

"The third thing is the statement made by Sir John himself. He spoke of them as having stood like frozen mummies. What did he mean? On being questioned by his wife he said that all of them had stood about him last evening for something like five minutes without moving. That same period of time seems to be the discrepancy in the story told by the doctors and Lady Thornton. It was only by chance she happened to notice the time by the clock on the table.

"Yet, from all the evidence in hand, there appears to have been a full five minutes lost track of. What does it mean? The two doctors, Lady Thornton and Phil lost track of that amount of time while Sir John himself seems not to have done so. They were all in good health—he was ill and feverish. Is there any explanation there?

"When Dr. Creswick entered the room, Sir John was not only feverish but slightly delirious. Yet he appears to have been quite rational a little later. Is there any explanation in that point? Supposing I

presume that the genuine tube of radium disappeared while they were there in the room and that the fake tube was introduced in its place, then what must I consider?

"When could such a thing have been accomplished, if accomplished it was? Might it have been during that five or six minutes which seem to have been lost? If so, then how? And, again, if so, why was no attention attracted to it? Might this be answered by the fact that four of those in the room seem to have lost track of that time—seem to have taken no notice of things for a full five minutes?

"Then where would Sir John come in? He, it appears, became rational during those minutes. He noticed something peculiar in the attitude of those about him, though he was either too weak or too indifferent to speak of it then. But to-night he was feverish and irritable, and spoke of it. That was very natural in a man as ill as he is.

"But if the tube was taken during those minutes, then how was it accomplished? The tube was on the table. The table sits between the two French windows which open on to the balcony. The balcony looks out on to the terrace, which breaks into other terraces and then to the stream. The table is very close to the French window, and one side of the window on the left was open last evening.

"Yet it was not opened wide enough for a man to squeeze through and depart. Even if it had been, an intruder must have been seen by Sir John, who, being rational as he seems to have been, would have noticed the presence of a stranger in the room, and remarked upon it. Yet he saw nothing.

"It would not be difficult for a man to make his way from the terrace up to the balcony. An active man could accomplish it easily enough, for I noticed that the grill work of the balcony extended down some distance. From the terrace a man could get on to the window-sill of the room below, catch hold of the grill work, and, using it as a foothold, swing himself over to the balcony.

"Assuming that was done, then how could he have got possession of the tube of radium without being seen? It is certain that it was a well-planned theft. The exactness of detail in the fake tube shows that great care was taken to make it as much like the genuine tube as possible. That argues that the genuine tube was examined carefully by the thief before yesterday.

"Then the copy was made, and opportunity watched for when the substitution could be made. Since it was brought off at Thorn Lodge, it proves that the thief knew Dr. Creswick was going down there. But, even so, the thief could not know that the tube would be left on that table so close to the window. He would have to chance that.

"Naturally he would go prepared as far as possible for any chances which might arise. But how to get hold of the genuine tube and substitute the fake is where the point becomes most puzzling. Was there any other moment when it might have been done? After washing the affected shoulder with the antiseptic solution, Dr. Creswick placed the bottle of solution on the table and took up the tube.

"If it was the fake tube which he picked up, he certainly noticed nothing suspicious in its appearance. Of course, he would not be expecting there had been any change, and would scarcely glance at it. He then applied it, and, with the assistance of Dr. Morrison, affixed the adhesive tape.

"Next he departed for London, being driven up by Phil Thornton. Dr. Morrison was left in charge, and, by his own words, was in the room every moment of the time until ten o'clock the next morning, when he

removed it himself. He further says, categorically, that it could not have been taken during the night, for he was awake all the time, and, furthermore, the dressing had not been touched—that it was exactly the same as when he had affixed the adhesive tape. That seems proof enough of that.

“Next he handed the tube to Phil Thornton, who motored straight through to London, and personally handed it to Dr. Creswick. Creswick locked it immediately in the steel cabinet, and this afternoon when he took it out and examined it he discovered that it was not the genuine tube.

“No, the more I consider the matter in all its bearings the more positive am I that the tube could only have been taken during those few minutes when it lay on the table by the window. That is where the crux of the matter rests, and I am convinced that when I have solved that point I will be a long distance towards the solving of the mystery itself.

“Five minutes! What happened during those five minutes? Now to take up another point. I have already considered the perfection of detail in the fake tube. That takes me back again to the theory that the genuine tube must have been seen, must have been handled, must have been closely examined by the thief. He would need to do this in order to make an exact copy of it.

“That argues that the thief must have called personally on Dr. Creswick, and through some strategy have succeeded in getting the tube into his hands. Who did that? I cannot, of course, discover all those who called upon Dr. Creswick and were permitted a view of the tube, without gaining access to his case-books and questioning him at length.

“I intended doing that this evening until—until that telephone rang. That voice! Am I dreaming, or was it a voice I know? It was the tone of one who has been my *bête noir* for some time now. It was the voice of the Black Wolf. If it wasn't the Black Wolf herself then it was a voice which might be hers, so like was it. That, too, raises a point the importance of which cannot be ignored.

“This individual gave the name of the Signorina Paulini. The Signorina Paulini had a consultation with Dr. Hilton Creswick this morning, but a man posing as the brother of the Signorina Paulini interviewed Dr. Creswick the night before he went down to Thorn Lodge, and this same person not only saw the tube of radium but was permitted to handle it.

“If there had not been the suggestion of the tones of the Black Wolf in the voice over the 'phone, I would not have thought so much of this, but I know that the Black Wolf is quite capable of this theft—is capable of devising a scheme as thorough and as clever as this must have been. It has given me to think.

“Has the Black Wolf come to London at last? Has she drifted over here from Paris to prey upon London? It is strange in a way that she has never operated in London. Almost every city in the world has seen her but London. Yet I cannot help but feel that those tones which I heard over the wire were the tones of the Black Wolf and no other. Ten thousand pounds' worth of radium is a prize which even the Black Wolf would not disdain.

“Another thing which gains weight in importance through considering the Black Wolf is the lost five minutes. That has more than once cropped up in the operations of the Black Wolf. I remember only too well the Martigny ball in Paris when the Martigny pearls were taken. There was a period of six minutes or so lost track of then even while I myself stood talking to the Baronne Martigny. And during those few minutes the pearls were taken.

“In my own case, and several of the others said the same, the period

of time was utterly lost. All I felt was a wave of faintness which swept over me. It seemed that only a second or two was consumed by the feeling, but there was the clock in the ballroom to prove that several minutes had elapsed.

"Again and again has this same thing cropped up. In Paris when I captured the Black Wolf at the time of the Jure Affaire, she escaped by using the same method. She was in the office of Monsieur Fabert, the Chief of the Criminal Department, and while several of them sat about she calmly walked out of the place. They, too, lost count of several minutes.

"Now I stumble on that same fact in connection with this case. I am beginning to think such an occurrence marks the passage of the Black Wolf. But even so, how could she have abstracted the genuine tube and substituted the fake one?

"Is there any explanation to be found in those marks which I discerned on the rubber jacket of the fake tube. They were about two inches apart, and were only made by something which gripped the tube tightly.

"If the Black Wolf were on the balcony outside the room where the patient lay, then through the open part of the French window a stick or some such implement could be thrust in to reach the table.

"Supposing that same stick had at one end a set of steel teeth, which could be worked in some way from the other end of the stick, it could be thrust in, the fake tube could be dropped on to the table, and the genuine one picked up by the same method.

"Then the stick could be withdrawn, and if those in the room were under the spell of the lost minutes, then they would not notice what had happened. That this spell is caused by some powerful drug which the Black Wolf is able to spray about I am convinced.

"That she herself is immune against its effect does not surprise me in the slightest. She might well have inoculated herself against it. But there remains the fact that Sir John, who had been delirious, was quite rational during those lost minutes.

"Is it possible that the drug's only effect on him was to soothe him and cause his mind to clear? It might act that way upon a man in his condition, and therein may lie the explanation of why he was conscious of what was going on in the room during those minutes when the others seem to have lost track of the passage of events. It is highly suspicious, and from every avenue of deduction I follow I come each time to one thing—seek out the Paulini's."

Nelson Lee had just arrived at this point in his thoughts, and was beginning to ponder on what could have happened to Nipper, when the cab drew up in front of his house.

He got out, and paying off the man, walked up the steps. As he did so, he saw a big motor-car draw up against the kerb on the opposite side of the street, but gave it no attention beyond a passing glance.

He did not dream for a moment that its presence there had a great bearing on his own affairs. Opening the front door with his latchkey, he closed it after him, and walked down the corridor towards the consulting-room. He opened the door, and crossing the threshold felt for the switch. As he did so there was a rustle behind the door, and the next moment something struck him on the back of the head with stunning force.

Nelson Lee staggered forward and dropped to his knees, lifting one arm above him as he did so. The next instant another blow struck him, and then a great weight descended upon him.

He felt powerful arms encircle his neck, he felt the pressure of a knee

in his back. He fought as well as he could, but his senses were reeling, and with the weight upon him he sank to the floor.

Another terrific blow on the back of the head and his reeling senses left him. He dropped flat on to his face, a limp, inert mass.

When Nelson Lee came to himself it was to become conscious that his head was throbbing painfully, and that he had great difficulty in breathing. His next thought was that he was being bumped about in an extraordinary manner, but since everything was black before him he could not at first decide what it was. Then slowly, as his senses cleared still more, he became aware that he was bound hand and foot, that he was gagged in a very effective way, and that he was blindfolded.

From that he worked to the point where he figured the bumping to be caused by a motor-car, and from the feel of his surroundings, where his body pressed against them, he concluded he was in the bottom of a motor-car tonneau.

He had reached this point when the bumping ceased suddenly, and as he heard a grinding of brakes he knew that one at least of his deductions was correct—he was in a motor-car.

A few moments later he felt himself dragged to his feet and lifted out of the place where he had been lying. He was carried for some distance, though he could form no idea of his surroundings.

Then he heard a key turn in a lock, and he was placed on his feet. With deft hands someone cut the bonds which encircled his wrists and ankles, then the gag was jerked from his mouth, and following that he was given a strong push. He stumbled forward into an Arctic atmosphere. He felt a wave of terrific cold strike on his face, then his feet came into contact with something, and he fell headlong.

While the stars still danced before his bandaged eyes, he heard a door slam behind him, and with the biting cold chilling him to the bone, he felt for the bandage over his eyes.

The next moment, as the bandage came away in his hand, a light struck him in the face, and as he took in the scene before him he staggered back with a cry of horror.

CHAPTER VI.

Nipper Receives a Surprise—A Tough Fight—Overpowered—Refined Cruelty—A Terrible Fate.

WHEN Nelson Lee sent Nipper along the road, after they had discovered all the tyres of Phil Thoraton's car to be punctured, the lad had little thought that he was going into a situation bristling with danger. His sole idea was to find the tacks which must be lying somewhere back along the road, to scrape them into the gutter, and then to make his way on to Thorn Lodge as quickly as possible.

He made no attempt to search for the tacks until he had got out of the wood, for he figured that they would have come some little distance after picking them up before the air would have all left the tyres.

Once out of the wood, however, he took out his pocket torch, and pressing the switch, cast the circle of light about him. Walking slowly along in this fashion he kept a sharp look-out for the tacks, and so absorbed was he in his search, that he did not notice the bushes at the side of the road being pushed stealthily aside.

Just at that moment Nipper caught sight of a number of tacks which lay near the edge of the road. With a little exclamation of satisfaction, he pounced upon them, and at that same instant, as he knelt before them, the bushes at the side of the road parted still more, and a man's head protruded.

It was a dark-skinned countenance which showed for a moment within the penumbra of the light, and by no means a pleasant face. The deep-set, crafty eyes peered out at Nipper for a little, then with a sinuous movement the man took a step forward. Two steps—three steps, and he was on the very edge of the gutter.

Now the stooping lad was little more than a couple of yards from him, and still unconscious of the sinister figure so close above him.

Nipper was rapidly picking up tack after tack, allowing them to fall into his hollowed palm as he did so, and then, just as he made to move to another little patch of tacks, the figure on the bank sprang. It came flying straight down at the lad, alighting full between his shoulders, and with a startled grunt Nipper fell forward, tacks going in all directions.

Nipper, braced on hands and knees, made a desperate effort to throw off his assailant. The other, however, clung close, and the lad felt two sinewy arms steal about his neck.

A terrific pressure followed as strong fingers closed on his throat; but Nipper, with a strong upward heave, succeeded in staggering to his feet, with the man clinging desperately to him. A few feet Nipper managed to stagger on, fighting each moment to throw the weight from his back to one side. If he could but get his assailant in a position where he could grapple with him, he might stand more of a chance, but as things were he could only fight to stand on his feet and gasp for breath.

As the pressure on his windpipe tightened he realised that, unless he managed something very quickly, he would soon be past all effort.

He had staggered some little distance now, and was reeling badly. The man on his back hung on like a leech, and all the lad's efforts to shake him off proved futile.

Then suddenly Nipper paused, and throwing up his hands made a desperate effort to grasp the man behind the head. He felt the other's head go back in anticipation of the move, but the lad was too quick for him, and as he managed to lock his fingers he bent forward with a jerk. The man on his back had to come with the move, and giving a violent heave at the same moment Nipper threw him clean over his head.

His antagonist fell with a heavy thud, releasing his grip on Nipper's throat, and as he felt the blessed air rush into his lungs Nipper jumped. He landed full on the other's chest, and, kneeling down, drove his clenched fist smashing between the man's eyes. Time after time he drove his fist to that mark, putting all his strength into each blow.

He was not the one to take a mean advantage of a helpless foe, but he was no fool, and he had had enough experience during his life with Nelson Leo to realise that the attack upon him had been of the most murderous nature, and that had he succumbed no quarter would have been given him. Therefore, unlike some chicken-hearted individuals who would have pleaded a foolish leniency, he took full advantage of the lead he had gained.

That he was making his foe suffer was evident from the groans which he emitted, and Nipper was just at the point where he considered it safe to rise, when there was a terrific crashing above him, and two men hurled themselves from the bushes upon him. One of them struck the lad between the shoulders, sending him down hard upon the prostrate man beneath him. The other landed short, but he, too, was soon at the lad, and driven down by the pair Nipper could do little.

He fought like a wild cat, using feet and hands with the same indiscrimina-

tion, but when one of them drew out a heavy revolver and drove the butt down upon the lad's head, Nipper gave a groan, and collapsed on to the man beneath him. Another vicious blow knocked him unconscious, and as he collapsed in a limp heap, his two new assailants caught hold of him and picked him up.

While one of them shouldered him, the other bent over the man whom Nipper had beaten, whom he had outgeneralled, and whom he had outfought. He dragged the groaning man to his feet, and, speaking in French, said curtly:

"We made the mistake of sending a boy on a man's errand. Get along to the car—if you can walk."

Moaning with the pain caused by Nipper's blows, the fellow betook himself along the road after the one who was carrying the unconscious body of the lad, and on rounding a turn in the road the red light of a motor-car showed up.

On coming up with it, the man who carried Nipper tossed him into the tonneau, and, turning, ordered his injured comrade to tumble in after.

The other man had disappeared; and now from the distance came the sound of shots fired in quick succession.

The man standing beside the car looked back in an anxious way.

"They are fighting back," he muttered, more to himself than to his companion. "I hope things are going all right."

The shots he had just heard were those from Nelson Lee's automatic, and when they broke out again the frown of anxiety increased.

Some little time passed now without anything else happening to reveal how the struggle might be going.

Ten—fifteen minutes went past, then at the side of the road the bushes suddenly parted, and two men broke cover. They dashed down from the bank and made for the car.

"Well, how did it go?" asked the man beside the car as they came up.

One of them—he who had helped in the assault on Nipper—shrugged his shoulders.

"We failed," he replied briefly. "They were too quick for us, Marcel. It was that pig, Lee."

"You should have brought him down, Jacques," rejoined the one who had been addressed as Marcel. "The Black Wolf will be angry."

"We did our best," responded Jacques, as he started to clamber into the car. "We had better get away from here at once. They came after us, and I think they have taken to the road."

"And you lost him, after all?" said Marcel. "I do not envy our interview with the Black Wolf. Well, get you into the car. There is no sense in remaining here any longer."

The two new arrivals tossed a couple of heavy revolvers, fitted with Maxim silencers, into the car and climbed in. Marcel took the wheel, and was about to start off, when an exclamation from Jacques caused him to pause.

"What is it?" he asked, without turning his head.

"They are close behind us," replied Jacques quickly. "Let us give them a volley before we go."

As he spoke he and his companion bent over and picked up the revolvers. Resting them on the back of the seat, they sent shot after shot at the three figures which they could see down the road. Then, as their magazines became emptied, Marcel threw in the clutch, and the big car started off.

They turned the bend in the road recklessly, dropping the three figures from view, and then, taking the turns at random, Marcel steered a course

for London, which would have baffled anything under sixty horse-power to follow.

In this way they finally reached Hyde Park Corner, and there by devious turnings came to Hampstead. Passing Jack Straw's Castle, it turned down by the side of the heath, until it came to a road marked "Barrington Park Gardens." Up this it turned, and then came to a pause in front of a big house on the right hand side.

Marcel and Jacques were the first to jump out of the car. They seemed to pay little attention to their comrade who had received the worst of the fight with Nipper. He scrambled out in a fashion and stood by although waiting to be told what to do.

The other two pushed him unceremoniously aside, and, leaning over the tonneau, picked up the unconscious form of Nipper.

Barrington Park Gardens is a quiet thoroughfare, and there was no one about to see them. It is one of the newer streets of Hampstead, and the houses sit well back from the road with a goodly space between them. Even early in the evening the street is almost deserted, and it had been well chosen in more ways than one.

With scarcely a glance about them, Marcel and Jacques carried Nipper through the main gateway of the place, and up a wide path to the front porch of the house.

As though they were expected, the front door opened as they approached, and they passed into a dark hall followed by the third man.

A whispered voice told them curtly to "go down at once," and groping their way along the hall, they passed through a doorway which opened to a flight of stairs.

There was a small light burning there, and they were able to negotiate the stairs with more certainty than they had come along the hall.

A long, narrow passage at the bottom took them to another door which was painted white. At first one might have thought that it was only an ordinary door, but when Marcel jerked it open it might have been seen that it was fully twelve inches thick, and of the type which is ordinarily used by the cold storage firms.

As it came open a rush of cold air struck them in the face, making them gasp. Just within the door was a switch which Marcel turned, lighting up the place and revealing the fact that it was a great cellar in a terrible state of confusion.

There were tools and implements of all sorts lying about, while round the stone walls of the cellar were several pipes which were white and frosted.

It was evident that the workman had not yet finished in the place, but it was already in operation—in operation as a great artificial freezing-room. A thermometer by the door showed the temperature to be at only two degrees above zero Fahrenheit, which means thirty degrees below freezing point. It was just arctic in its awful coldness was the room.

Just as Marcel and Jacques started to enter the room there was the sound of a footstep in the corridor behind them, and there appeared a vision in white. It was the Black Wolf herself, looking radiantly beautiful in a rich evening gown of some clinging white material.

Over her shoulders was thrown an opera cloak, and in her hair and at her throat glittered beautiful jewels.

Looking at her thus, one would have found it very difficult to believe that this slim, lovely-looking girl was the intrepid and daring Black Wolf. Yet so it was, and how daring she could be—how callously determined in her purpose—was to be revealed that very night.

Standing at the door of the icy cold cellar, she gazed down at the closed eyes of the lad.

"Is this all you have to show me?" she asked, turning to Marcel.

The man bowed his head.

"The man—he is the devil himself!" he replied. "Mademoiselle, we fired upon him time and again, but without avail. There were two others with him, and we had to retire. On our way we came upon this lad, and overpowered him."

"You had the man within your grasp and you let him go!" snapped the girl with scorn. "You are children. Must I attend to each little detail myself? Where is the man now?"

Marcel shrugged.

"He went on to the house I suppose?"

"He will discover little there," rejoined the Black Wolf, maliciously.

"Very well, I shall have to think up some other plan to get him. He must be stopped without delay, and stop him I will. I do not propose to have him interfering with my plans here in London. He did enough mischief in Paris. At least, we have the boy. Throw him down and close the door. If he comes to his senses before he freezes to death it will enable him to ponder on the folly of interfering with the Black Wolf."

In obedience to her orders, the two men cast Nipper down on the floor, and, closing the door, secured it. Back along the passage they went, and ascending to the floor above, the Black Wolf led the way out to the car.

Then, when Marcel had once more taken the wheel, she said curtly:

"The Hotel Venetia, Marcel, and drive quickly, for I am hungry."

So perfectly cool, and giving not a thought to the lad who lay unconscious on the floor of the freezing-room, the Black Wolf was driven towards the city of light and laughter.

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Back in the cellar, Nipper lay just as he had been thrown down. The cold of the room was intense, and slowly, but surely, it chilled him through to the bone.

Half an hour passed, and then, with a low moan of pain, he turned over. With exasperating slowness his senses returned, and as he sat up stiffly he gazed stupidly about him.

He was not sufficiently conscious of his surroundings to understand the reason for the awful cold which gripped him.

That he was in an arctic atmosphere was plain to him, but his clouded brain refused to fashion an explanation. Then, as it became born in upon him that he was being chilled to the marrow, he got to his feet and began mechanically to walk up and down, swinging his arms as he did so.

As the blood began to move through his veins more quickly, his brain grew clearer, and at the end of another ten minutes he began to take intelligent cognisance of his surroundings.

His eyes fell on the frosted pipes, and with an exclamation of amazement he hurried across to them.

Laying his hand on one of the pipes, he drew it away quickly. His brain was clear enough now. Only too well he saw the devilish ingenuity of the mind which had conceived such a fate. The light had been left on, and he could see each detail of the litter about him.

Slowly and methodically he examined each portion of the cellar. He saw that it was a good thirty feet long, by ten or twelve wide. All round the walls ran the freezing pipes, and the tools and implements scattered about told him that the work was of the newest.

It was in full operation, however, as witness the intense cold, and pausing before the thermometer, he saw that if he remained there much longer he

would be frozen as stiff as any carcase of mutton which came from the freezing-room.

Dashing at the door, the lad tried desperately to tear it open. It was as solid as the wall itself, and his hands beat futilely upon it. He searched frantically about the heap of tools for some implement which would enable him to break a way through, but, though they were scattered about in plenty, they were too puny for such a job.

Despairingly he gazed at the mocking face of the door, then, as the cold crept over him again, he began frantically to walk up and down.

"As long as I can keep moving, I stand a chance," he muttered, "but the minute I stop I am done for. Two below Zero now and the thermometer still dropping."

He stopped to button his coat closer about his neck, then on around the cellar, walking briskly and swinging his arms as he went.

Each time he passed the thermometer he glanced at it, and as he saw that it was still dropping, a look of fear came into his eyes.

"I'll die like a rat in a trap," he muttered despairingly. "I am not afraid of death, but this— Oh, my heavens, where am I, and who has thrown me into this place? What fiend has done it?"

He stopped at the door once more, and catching up a steel implement, began to beat upon the heavy wood.

It sounded dully in his ears, but though he kept it up for twenty minutes there was no response, and casting the implement down he started on again, for the cold was gripping him viciously.

So it went while an hour ticked by. He drew out his watch to see the time, but found that it had stopped. He was losing count of the time now, for in the stress under which he was labouring, each minute seemed an eternity.

He thought of all the tales he had read of intrepid Polar explorers, and how they had tramped the frozen wastes. He pictured them as he had read of them, heavily wrapped in furs and flying along close to a speeding dog sledge.

Then he remembered tales of heroism where they had been caught in the blizzard, and where, with all food gone, they had resigned themselves to a terrible death. Such a death he was now facing—such a bitter ending would be his.

As this thought gained ground in his thoughts, the lad broke out into a sweat, cold as he was, and in a fever of desperation began to run round and round the cellar like some hunted animal.

But, with the return of reason, he slowed down to a brisk walk again, for he realised that he must husband his strength.

Yet walk as he would he could not keep at bay that awful cold. Now his ears were nipped, now his toes ached with the cold.

He stopped to scrape some of the pipe snow from the pipes and rubbed it on his ears and nose. It served for a moment, but so intensely cold was the cellar now that he dared not pause for more than a moment or two.

He started on again, beating himself as he went, but as he made each round of the cellar his pace grew gradually less and less until, though his brain urged him frantically and his reason told him that he must not give in, he could feel that most awful part of the cold death creeping over him—the overpowering desire to sleep.

He fought with all his strength against it. He jumped up and down, he beat himself frantically, he pinched his face, he started again to run.

It was all to no avail. The cold had got a firm grip of him now, and slowly but surely was stealing away his senses. Desperately the lad rallied, and made the circle of the cellar at a trot, but close by the door the cold

reached up and gripped him in its compelling grasp, and he went down to his knees.

Up again and on, down to his knees, with his body tingling with pain and cold—up again and on, to stagger against the pipes and to lurch away from them like a drunken man. Then, with a last final effort of will, he managed to get round to the door once more, and there, as his frosted eyelids were raised in an endeavour to get a glimpse of the thermometer, they dropped like lids of lead, and the lad fell face downwards to the floor in the sleep which the ice-god had cast.

CHAPTER VII.

Nelson Lee Fights with the Ice-God—Desperate Measures—Bonds Burst Asunder—Finis.

WHEN Nelson Lee was thrust into the freezing-room his first inclination was to turn and force his way out. But at the sight which met his gaze all thoughts of his personal safety departed, and, dropping to his knees, he bent over the stiffened figure which lay on the stone floor of the cellar.

In that first horrified glance he had seen that it was Nipper, and now, as he made a hurried examination of the lad, he saw that he was perilously near to the great abyss from which there is no return.

Lee chafed the lad's wrists and ankles frantically, but though he worked as he had never worked in his life to revive anyone, it was all to no avail. The grip of the ice-god kept the lad too firmly imprisoned.

With a look of desperation in his eyes Nelson Lee got to his feet and gazed about him.

"Something must be done, and done quickly!" he muttered, beating his arms about to keep his blood moving. "Is there any devilish ingenuity to which the Black Wolf will not descend? For that this is the work of the Black Wolf I am certain."

Like a panther he paced the full length of the cellar, ticking off each item methodically as he went.

"A freezing-room," he muttered—"a freezing-room of the most modern sort, and just completed, to judge from the litter lying about. It is at a very low temperature now."

He paused before the thermometer, and glanced at the mercury in the glass. It was eleven below zero, and as he noted it Lee's face grew even graver.

"It is all too plain," he muttered. "The lad has been in here some time, and it is the purpose of the Black Wolf that we shall both freeze to death."

Desperately he tried the door, even as Nipper had done before him, but a half-dozen attempts showed him that to move it was out of the question.

"It is bound to be very deep and heavy," he grunted, as he threw down the implement he had been using as a prise. "Yet there is no other way out of the place. There are no windows, and only this one door. If we are to get out we must get out that way. How can it be done?"

Once more he began pacing the cellar, taking note of each thing as he passed. In one corner were several more implements, but after a cursory inventory of them Lee turned away.

Next he came upon several great cylinders which contained either liquid or gas—he did not know which. Lying on their sides were two empty

cylinders of the same sort, and he came to the conclusion that they must be ammonia cylinders for use in the freezing process.

Against the wall lay a peculiar-looking pile of material which, on closer examination, proved to be a dozen or more thin rubber sacks holding some chemical. Lee turned and faced the pipes, a look of hopelessness appearing in his eyes.

"There seems nothing--nothing," he muttered. "What shall I do? What can I do? Another half-hour and the lad will be dead, and I shall be able to do nothing to save him. Before morning I, too, shall be frozen stiff. What is possible?"

Restlessly he paced the length of the cellar again; then, as he passed the pipes, his eye lit on something which caused him to stop and wrinkle his brow. It was an ordinary gaspipe which ran through the cellar, and which he could see had been bound with heavy burlap to keep it from freezing.

At the end of the cellar where it passed through the wall he noticed a small cock, and in half a dozen strides was beside it, turning it.

A rush of gas told him that so far the pipe was all right, and, turning off the cock, he swung towards the pile of rubber bags. An idea had come to him--an idea born of desperation, if you will, but the only chance which he could see.

As a last effort to free himself and Nipper from the terrible predicament in which they found themselves, he determined to try it. Going over to the pile of sacks he carefully undid the mouth of one of them and sifted the powder the sack contained out through the very narrow mouth.

When the bag was empty, he rolled it up in a small compass, and, carrying it in his hand, hurried on to where the cylinders lay.

He dragged out one of the empty cylinders, and, taking off the metal cap over its mouth, began to insinuate the rolled-up rubber sack into the opening. It was no easy task, and the bag being somewhat larger than the cylinder made the work even more difficult, yet he persisted in it until he had forced the whole of the rubber sack into the steel cylinder, leaving only the mouth projecting.

That done, he carried the whole outfit across to the corner of the cellar, and, lifting it up, placed the opening in the mouth of the rubber sack over the cock in the gaspipe. Then, holding the rubber round the pipe so there would be little, if any, leakage, he turned on the cock.

A rush of gas immediately took place, and the air which he could feel coming out of the cylinder as the bag filled and forced it to give way, told him that the sack was filling. Yet he did not relax his hold until he knew that every particle of air had been forced out of the cylinder, and that the sack, full now with gas, had occupied all the space.

He turned off the cock now, and bending the mouth of the sack in such fashion that none of the gas could escape, he picked up a piece of cord from the floor and tied it tightly. That done, he set the cylinder down on the floor and searched about until he found another length of string, which he reckoned would serve as a fuse.

This he arranged in the mouth of the sack, taking care that none of the gas escaped, and, that done, retied the mouth.

Now he had a most peculiar affair prepared. He had a rubber sack full of gas contained in a steel cylinder and fed by a string fuse. The cylinder itself was about five feet long by eighteen inches in diameter, and the gas contained in it was a considerable quantity.

Nelson Lee dragged the cylinder across the floor to the heavy door which barred their way to freedom; and, placing it close against the point where door and wall joined, he hurried back for all the heavy rubbish he could find.

Trip after trip he made, carrying pieces of plank, heavy bits of iron, and large packing-cases until he had made a great pile of material between the cellar and the gas cylinder.

That done, he dragged Nipper away to the right of the door, jamming him close against the wall. Then he dragged the big cylinders over to form a barricade in front of the lad. That finished, he drew out a box of matches, and, insinuating his hand between the barricade of boxes, touched the flame to the end of the fuse he had made.

It caught fire at once, and when he saw that it was burning well, Nelson Lee ran for safety. Leaping the barricade of cylinders, he dropped flat to the ground, shielding Nipper's body with his own, and there he lay waiting, waiting, waiting for the explosion which should follow.

It seemed that each moment dragged like eternity. He began to fear that the fuse had gone out. Should he get up to see? What if he did so just as the explosion took place?

He was in a fever of unrest, yet he knew that he had done all that was possible. He had no idea what the effects of the explosion might be. He figured that there was a sufficient amount of gas to wreck the door, but he knew also that it might wreck the whole cellar. It might mean death to both of them, yet even that would be preferable to the slow death of freezing, and there was no other way.

A full minute went past—a minute which seemed the child of eternity—then the air was rent by a deafening explosion.

Lee was stunned by the terrific force of it, and was forced flat to the floor. There was a great roaring in his ears, and the floor of the cellar seemed to heave upwards.

Then, as his senses cleared and he realised that he was unharmed, he heard the rending and tearing and dropping of things about him.

He waited a few seconds, then he dashed to his feet and leaped across the barricade of cylinders which had been bowled over like a row of ninepins.

He rushed across to the door and saw that his barricade had been blown all about the cellar. Heavy cases were lying wrecked at the other end, while some of the smaller things had entirely disappeared.

But greatest of all he saw that the big door, while still apparently intact, was hanging loosely back, and that it was burning fiercely. Some of the rubbish had also caught fire.

Lee raced along and found a long iron bar which he used to toss away some of the burning rubbish. Then he prised open the burning door, and as the sight of the corridor beyond met his gaze, he could have shouted with triumph.

But he still had the lad to look after. Was it too late?

He hurried back to where Nipper lay, and picking him up bodily, dashed through the burning doorway. Along the corridor he ran and up the stairs to the floor above.

He staggered into the hall, where the warmth was life-giving to his chilled limbs. There was a couch against the wall, and laying the lad on it, he searched for a telephone.

A door at the end of the hall opened into a study, and on the desk Lee saw a telephone. Rushing towards it, he gave the number of the International Club, and getting Phil Thornton on the line, asked him to drive up to Barrington Park Gardens as quickly as he could.

"It is desperate," he said; "come at once!"

He rang off then, and going back to Nipper, saw to his joy that the lad had opened his eyes. He was still in bad shape, and Lee did what was possible for him to do under the circumstances.

When he had made Nipper as comfortable as possible, he went back to the

study and began a thorough search of the room. He dragged out every drawer in the desk, smashing the locks to get at them, but of that for which he sought there was no sign.

He left the desk in a wrecked state, and started in on a large mahogany cabinet which stood against the wall.

There he met with more success, for in a small secret compartment he came upon what appeared to be the very tube of radium which he had examined that evening at Wimpole Street.

And on the indiarubber jacket were the same peculiar marks which he had noticed there. But he knew that it was not the same—he knew that it was the missing tube of radium—the genuine tube with ten thousand pounds' worth of the precious element inside it.

Thrusting it into his pocket, Nelson Lee made a further search, and in another drawer in the cabinet came upon a most extraordinary-looking implement.

It was like nothing so much as a jointed fishing-pole, only on the end of it there had been affixed a pair of steel jaws which could be worked along the pole by means of a thin wire.

Nelson Lee took it out and extended it. He found after a few minutes' experiment that it could be worked at any distance from a yard to twenty feet, depending on how many joints were used.

Taking the tube of radium from his pocket he laid it on the desk, and standing off about ten feet, stretched out the pole towards it. By pulling the wire he saw that he could open the steel jaws on the end, and allowing them to fall over the tube, he released the wire.

Immediately the jaws closed upon the tube, and drawing back the pole he took the tube from between the jaws. And on the indiarubber jacket was a new set of marks similar to the others.

His deductions as to how the tube of radium had been abstracted from the table in Sir John Thornton's bed-room were correct.

Just then he coughed as something irritated his throat, and glancing up he saw that the room was filling with smoke.

"Scott!" he muttered, "I had forgotten about the fire down below. I had better get the lad out of this."

He thrust the tube of radium back into his pocket, and folding up the pole, started for the hall. As he reached it a great wave of heat struck him and he saw that the smoke was pouring up from the cellar.

He ran along to the couch, and picking Nipper up in his arms, made for the front door. He was surprised that none of the occupants of the house were about, but reckoned that they must all be out.

He did not pause on reaching the porch, but carried the lad out to the road and allowed him to sink down to the ground there.

As he did so several people came along, for now the flames were spouting out from several of the lower windows.

One man had rung the fire alarm, and the brigade would soon be on the scene. But it would never quench that fire, for even as Lee gazed at the burning mass, the whole building seemed to be lifted into the air by some invisible power, and then with a terrific roar it burst asunder. The fire had reached some of the chemicals used by the Black Wolf.

In common with other spectators, Nelson Lee was hurled to the ground by the force of the explosion, and a flying bit of burning wood gave him a nasty bruise on the shoulder.

As he scrambled to his feet he saw a big car turn the corner and recognised Phil Thornton. Almost at the same instant the clanging gong of the fire-engine sounded, and picking up Nipper, Nelson Lee slipped out of the crowd without being noticed.

"Drive to Dr. Creswick's as quickly as possible, please," he said. "The lad is in bad shape and needs medical attention at once."

Phil Thornton asked no questions, but threw in the clutch, and with the warning signal going continually, worked his way out of the crowd. When he got a free run he let the car out for all it was worth.

It was past one o'clock in the morning when they finally drew up in front of Dr. Creswick's house, but the doctor came down at the summons, and making a hurried examination of Nipper, rang for a nurse and had the lad taken to a room.

"I shall go up to him as soon as he is in bed," he said. "Don't worry, Lee, he will be all right in a day or two. And now come into the consulting-room and tell me what it all means."

Nelson Lee watched while Nipper was taken away, then he followed the doctor into the consulting-room. As he went in he thrust his hand into his pocket, and walking over to the desk said:

"Allow me to hand you the missing tube of radium, Dr. Creswick."

Creswick started forward with an exclamation of amazement and took the tube. Carrying it across beneath the light, he unscrewed the cap and gazed down into the interior.

"It is the tube—it is the radium!" he cried excitedly. "How did you get it, Lee?"

Nelson Lee sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I will tell you," he said quietly.

Then he began, and speaking in quiet tones, told his hearers a tale which caused them to sit tense with interest.

When he had finished he rose.

"Now I shall go to Scotland Yard," he said. "It will be necessary for me to give them a confidential explanation of the events which have taken place at Barrington Park Gardens, and to get the police net spread for the Black Wolf."

Though Nelson Lee fulfilled his part, however, the Black Wolf was not to be found, and no claimant appeared for the few items which were saved from the fire in Barrington Park Gardens.

The Black Wolf had slipped through the meshes of the net.

THE END.

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HUGH ARNOLD, a young English lad, goes out to the far North with an expedition. He is joined by an Irish sailor—MIKE O'GRADY, and also VAL RUXTON.

The latter and Hugh become fast friends, but one day Val hints that Hugh joined the expedition under a false name, and says that Amaki, a neighbouring Eskimo, has been asking for tidings of a certain explorer whose name is well known in the scientific world. For some reason, Hugh turns pale.

The camp is raided by a neighbouring party, but Hugh and Ruxton, with two sailors, put up a stiff fight. The attackers are beaten off, and a trap is laid for them.

Having captured the strangers, the leader—GRIMSTOCK—comes upon the scene, and it seems that Hugh and Ruxton are in for a bad time.

Grimstock eventually apologises for the behaviour of the men, and feigns friendliness. The mystery round Hugh thickens. (Now read on.)

The Assassin—Who was he?

HUGH knew that the tusk was the sort of curio that some people would pay a good deal of money for, and therefore scarcely liked to accept it as a present. But Amaki refused to take anything in exchange except a little tobacco; and so persistent was he that, rather than offend the old fellow, Hugh at last gave in.

As the whole party were about worn out with their day's arduous work they turned in early. The Eskimo found a place to bestow himself in one of the tents amongst the men, and ere long the camp became silent and slept peacefully in the moonlight.

In due time the moon went down, and then it was, in the darkness which followed, that a dim shadow appeared on the terrace, and sought out the tent under which the two leaders lay.

Creeping noiselessly beside it, the figure raised the canvas, and his head and shoulders disappeared beneath it.

Now, as there had been no reason to suspect the presence of enemies in the neighbourhood, it had not been thought worth while to arrange for anyone to remain on watch. Yet someone must have been on the look-out, for as the first shadow had crept up to the tent, another shadow left one of the tents, farther along and stealthily followed it.

This second creeping figure reached the other one just as the head and shoulders had disappeared beneath the canvas, and seizing the man's legs, drew him suddenly backwards.

The intruder sprang to his feet with a savage snarl. In his hand he carried a naked knife. There were fierce cries, and curses, as the two

grappled, and the stranger, finding that the camp was being roused, and that he could not get away, struck fiercely and brutally at the one who held him. Then he turned and vanished in the darkness.

Hugh and Val, rushing out a moment or two later, saw nothing but a still figure lying on the ground with a crimson stream flowing from it, and staining the white snow around.

Ruxton turned the figure over and peered at it while his friend fetched a lamp from the tent.

"Why!" exclaimed Hugh, as his light fell on an upturned face, "it's Amaki! What is he doing here?"

"He's been wounded, badly hurt, I fear," said Ruxton in a low tone. "Someone's been here on some low-down game, and the poor old chap must have twigged it. Lend me a hand. We'd better take him into our tent."

Their followers had meantime turned out, and some aided to lift the injured man and carry him tenderly inside, while others went off on a chase after the cowardly assailant.

Half an hour later the two friends came out again, carrying a lantern.

"I think he'll do," said Ruxton. "He's had a near squeak of getting his death-wound; but thanks to his tough skin clothing the knife didn't go deep enough. Now let's look round. Ah! There you are, see!"

He pointed to the side of the tent.

"Someone has loosened the canvas, and was trying to creep underneath. You can see that. Here are the marks of his body in the snow. It's on the side you were lying, too. Curious that, eh?"

"Why—what on earth does it mean?" cried Hugh in horrified tones.

"It means, my friend, that but for that Eskimo you would now have been a dead man, and I, too, I suppose, for that matter. Very likely it was intended to murder us both."

"But why? What for? Why in the name of all that's horrible should anyone wish to do such a thing?"

"I cannot tell you. But perhaps now you will begin to believe in the warning I gave you. All the same, I must confess I did not expect this sort of thing exactly. Query, had Amaki any reason to suspect it? Was that the reason of his strange request to be allowed to sleep here to-night? 'These natives,' Ruxton went on, in a dreamy way, "sometimes have strange insights into things that escape us wiser folk, as we think ourselves. Can it be possible that he had some premonition that danger threatened you, and came here to-night, to try to protect the man who had saved his son's life?"

But to this question there was no answer—neither then, nor for some time after. For though, in the course of the next few days, the old Eskimo recovered sufficiently to get about again, he never opened his lips on the subject. As to the scoundrelly assailant, he had made good his escape in the darkness, and remained undiscovered. If Amaki could have pointed him out—and somehow Ruxton had a notion he could have done so if he had pleased—he did not do it. He resolutely kept his own counsel, and gave no sign.

— —

Left to Die in the White Wilderness.

IT'S no good going farther. We've come upon a fool's errand. I thought so all along."

It was Val Ruxton who spoke. The date was some weeks after the events recorded in the last chapter. During that time the expedition had

moved out from its base, and travelled far into the great white wilderness which lay between it and the object of its search.

For a while all had gone well, save as to two or three minor matters. Game had at first been plentiful, and the hunting parties sent out from time to time had had fine sport.

Hugh and Ruxton had shown themselves to be "mighty hunters." The "bags" they had brought into camp, as the result of little excursions off the main route, included reindeer, musk-ox, white hares, and also a number of birds—for some of the open water they had skirted had been alive with guillemots, eider-ducks, little auks, and other feathered game, all of which made good eating for the white men of the party. In addition, there had been seals, walrus, foxes, and other creatures, which, whatever the white men's opinion of them might be as food, were certainly not despised by their Eskimo allies.

Lastly, there had been bears and wolves, the pursuit of which had led to some highly exciting adventures and hair-breadth escapes.

The musk-ox, too, is a determined fighter; and some of those brought in had only been secured after contests which would have delighted the audience at a Spanish bull-fight.

In these encounters the two who had been thrown together under such curious circumstances, had played a foremost part, and shone conspicuously. And as was to be expected, they had become very firm friends and close chums in consequence. There were very good reasons for this. Both of them had been in the very pink of condition when they came out. Each had been specially fitted by previous experience and training for the part he had to play. Both could boast of frames far above the average in strength and muscle; and they had both revelled in the opportunities which had been afforded of putting their prowess to the test.

So far, the experiences they had gone through had left them very little the worse. Some men of the party, men who were supposed to be thoroughly inured to the terrible hardships of the climate, had broken down and been sent back. Others had become enfeebled and dispirited. One or two were showing signs of disease. But Hugh Arnold and Val Ruxton had thus far borne the awful cold, the exhausting labour and exertion, the searching blizzards, in a manner that amazed the older members of the party. They seemed to be invulnerable, so far as physical dangers were concerned.

There had, however, been "flies in the ointment." For one thing, there had been accidents—a good many of them—certainly more than might have been expected. And it was curious—this also was probably one of the accidents—that more than their fair share had fallen to the two chums and those who were most closely associated with them.

More than one of the narrow escapes referred to had been in connection with such accidents—some of them of a very odd character, due, as it seemed, to stupid carelessness on the part of other members of the expedition. Nor had the two escaped altogether scathless. Each had something to show in the shape of healed-up wounds and scars, not to mention injuries that had gone and left no trace.

Another of the flies in the ointment consisted of the character of the men Grimstock had engaged to serve him.

Those originally brought out from England had been quite bad enough. It has been related how that by the time they had begun to land the stores, Ruxton—who had had some experience of that kind of thing—was disgusted with the lot.

Amongst the whole of the crew there had been only two men whom he and Hugh felt they could really trust—the two, namely, who have been already known as Mike, the Irishman, and Bob Cable. They had taken to

these men, and the men, in turn, had become devoted to them, quite as a natural thing—as being, so to speak, “birds of a feather.”

Since then matters had been rendered worse by the fact that Grimstock had enrolled the services of McClinter and his crew—the men who had raided the camp, and fought with such ruffianism the very first night of their arrival.

Between the two friends and these people there was naturally “no love lost.” There had been constant friction, and a smouldering animosity, which only awaited some chance spark to make it burst into a flame.

However, there had been no actual outburst. The party, as a whole, had managed to rub along one with another. Grimstock and McClinter were both rigid disciplinarians, and between them they kept their crowd well in hand.

Thus all had gone fairly well, and good progress had been made, so long as there had been game to be had for the hunting. When, however, they had passed beyond the region of living things, matters altered. With the cessation of hunting, the men had less to occupy their minds, less to take their attention off the hardships they had to undergo.

Notwithstanding that the weeks that had gone by had brought them so much the nearer to summer, and the days had grown so much longer that they had not to endure the old long, cheerless nights, things were noticeably less cheerful than before. Gloomy looks, and a greater tendency to quarrelsomeness about trifles took the place of former cheerfulness.

Then men grumbled, too, at what they considered unnecessary work which Grimstock put upon them. Often, on the plea that he wished to make geographical observations, parties were sent out to the right and to the left to “spy out the land,” and bring in reports of what they saw.

Sometimes Grimstock took these parties out himself, sometimes he sent them under the charge of the chums, sometimes under McClinter.

Frequently they would be away for a night or two. But such trips nearly always ended in the same thing. Nothing to report, no life or vegetation seen, no mountains or other notable features discovered, the only net result being a great deal of extra grumbling, and additional discontent, on the part of the men detailed for this special service.

Now, two days before, Grimstock had called a general halt. He was going, he said, to make a big cache, and place in it a great part of his stores. This would take three or four days to construct, and would give the men a bit of a rest.

After that McClinter and his men were going to return, in order to continue their whale fishing. Also, they would take back with them one or two who had fallen in bad health.

He desired to take advantage of the halt to discover whether there were mountains some distance to the west of him, and Hugh and Ruxton were deputed to make an excursion in that direction.

Though Ruxton was evidently strongly averse to going, there was no valid excuse which could be given for refusing. He and Hugh had made similar trips before—found nothing—and returned.

No doubt it would be the same thing over again. Still, Grimstock was the chief; and the two chums had no choice but to obey orders.

So they started out, travelling in a motor-sledge, towing a couple of the other sledges behind containing spare stores. The little party that went out with them consisted of the two sailors, Mike and Bob, and four Eskimos, including Amaki and Lybendo—for these two natives had accompanied the expedition, and had somehow—like the two sailors—managed to attach themselves more particularly to the two friends.

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The weather had been threatening when they had started, and had afterwards turned so bad that their task had been carried out under very trying conditions. And now, after being away a day and a night, they were returning with absolutely nothing to show for what they had gone through.

No sign had they seen of life in any form, not so much as a bush, a blade of grass, or a dead tree. Nor was there anything to be seen of the mountains Grimstock had sent them out to discover.

So there was nothing for it but to retrace their steps, and make their way back as quickly as they could to the place where they had left the rest of the expedition.

This of itself was not an easy thing to do. It had snowed frequently and heavily since they set out, and now, on the way back, it snowed worse than before. The track they had made on their way out was obliterated, and as a consequence their progress was slow.

Ruxton, who had seemed unusually depressed from the time of their quitting the main body, now showed himself moody and abstracted.

It was all in vain that Hugh, whose good spirits were hard to repress, joked and rallied him. He paid but slight attention to anything that was said, but went along like one with some weighty apprehension on his mind.

His glance seemed ever to be cast ahead, as though he expected to see something, which, however, never appeared. And by his looks one would have said it was something he dreaded rather than hoped for.

At last the time came when, after an absence of two days and nights, they drew near the spot they had started from—the halting place where Grimstock was going to build his big cache.

There was nothing to be seen there. There was no cache, no sign of the party themselves! And what was worst of all, absolutely no tracks—no indication to show which way they had gone. The snow that had fallen had covered everything. So completely was this the case that Hugh at first refused to believe they had reached the right place.

“It must be farther on,” he declared, bewildered. “Or we’ve got too far to the north, or to the south!”

But Ruxton shook his head and laughed. It was a hard, harsh, grating laugh, horrible to hear. So unlike was it to his own kindly usual laugh that Hugh began to fear his brain had given way and he was going mad.

“I knew it!” said Ruxton, in a voice that sounded as strange and hollow as his laugh. “I have known it all along! I suspected it when Grimstock gave us his orders, and told that plausible lie about building a cache here to put a lot of his stores in. And when he went on to tell that other infernal lie about sending McClinter and his hounds back with the sick men, I felt sure of it. I saw it in the man’s eye, and I am sorry now I didn’t fly at him and choke the lie in his throat!”

“You knew?” exclaimed Hugh aghast. “How could that be? If you knew, why did you allow us—?”

“Tut, tut! I only felt it in my own mind. What proof had I? What reason could we have given for refusing to obey orders? You yourself would not have believed me. You would have laughed—as you have laughed before when I warned you to be on your guard! I have warned you not once, nor twice, nor three times; but half a dozen at least. And what good has it done? Can you say that you ever paid the slightest attention to my warnings, or really believed I had ground for them?”

“Well—but—Val—”

(To be continued.)

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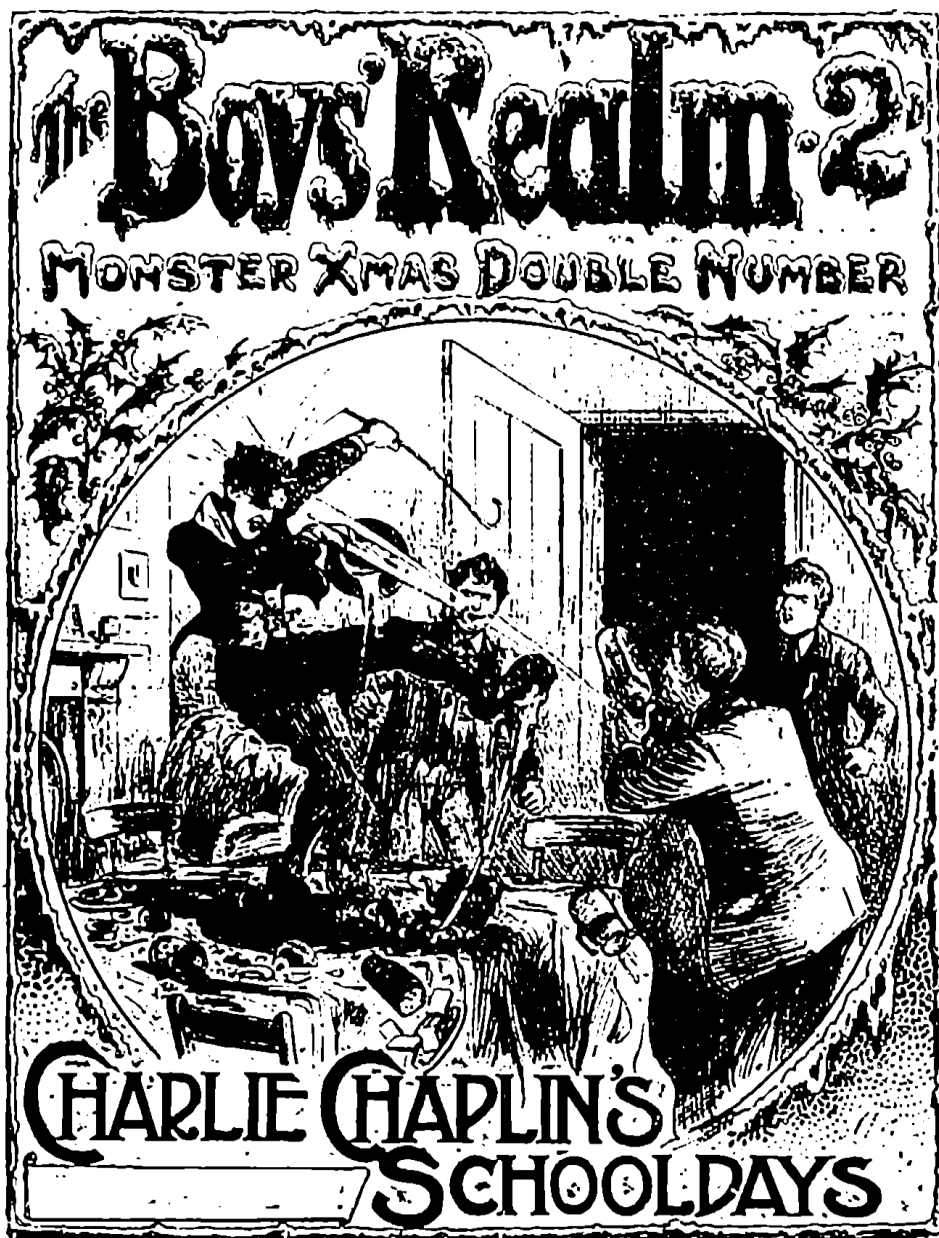
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