

NO. 26.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

*Week ending
December 4, 1915*

NELSON LEE

1^D

LIBRARY



THE CRYSTAL URN

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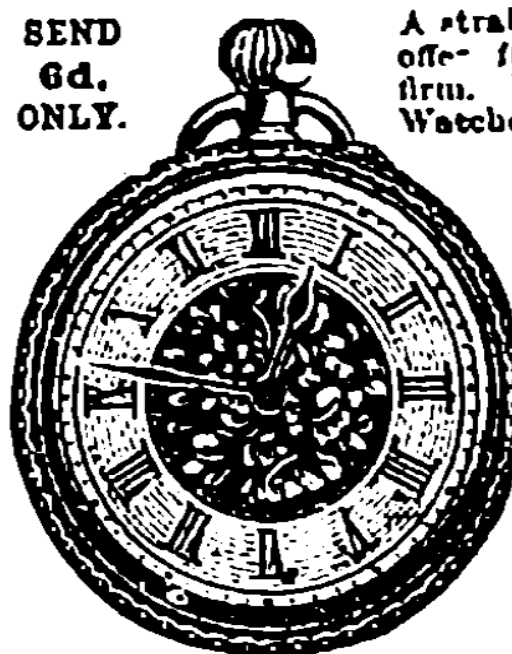
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The Crystal Urn.

A Magnificent Complete Detective Drama Introducing Nelson Lee, The Black Wolf, and the Mysterious Priests of Wady Pera.

CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee Reads a Strange Document—Professor Moslyn Explains—Who Killed Dr. Challoner?—A Profound Mystery.

“THE Crystal Urn, a thin crystal vase or urn, measuring one half an Egyptian cubit (10 inches). The legend runs that this urn, standing almost a foot in height, was the sacred urn of the Inner Circle of Priests of the submerged continent of Atlantis, the great continent which is supposed to have lain in the Atlantic, stretching from what is now the westerly coast of Morocco across to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

“In comparatively modern times the manufacture of crystal and glass had its inception in old Syria, being brought to some degree of utility by the early Egyptians and the Romans of the Golden Age. Yet it was not until Venice rose in all her splendour that the finest examples of the art were evolved, and not even to-day is it possible to excel the art of that period.

“Legend: This urn of the ancient priests of misty antiquity was a mystery vase, having a lid of pure crystal and gold with, in the apex of the lid, a single great diamond. The vase or urn proper was a masterpiece of delicate tracery and exquisite outline. The ‘bowl,’ which gave forth a singularly clear tone, and which had a diameter of one-seventh of a cubit, or nearly three inches, was of flawless crystal, rimmed with gold. The stem, a graduated slender pillar a quarter of a cubit in height, was of three distinct sections, representing the Trinity of Perfection. The first section, that which was immediately beneath the ‘bowl’ and connected with it, was of deep emerald green, flawless and mystery laden, as the depths of the unplumbed cosmos. The second portion of the stem, the connecting link of triple perfection, was blood-red—symbol of the blood of sacrifice. The third and lower section, that which rose from the base, was of the same almost unreal transparency of the ‘bowl’—symbol of Purity. The base itself, a circular triple-terraced base, was a combination of the three sacred colours—green, ruby, and white. Beginning at the base and twisting upwards round the stem was a golden serpent, whose coils, minute in their scaly perfection, entwined and clasped the stem in graceful symmetry, while the head of the golden reptile reared upwards round the swelling curve of the ‘bowl’ with the open jaws almost touching the lip, the tongue of gold thrust out as though reaching for the Water of Life. If the modern attempts at glass and crystal making were born with the peoples of old Syria, then how was it the legend of this sacred urn was known in ancient Thebes, in seven-aged Troy, in golden Memphis, in neolithic Crete?

"If that were so, why is it the unread hieroglyphics of mysterious Mexico reveal rough but faithful representations of this sacred serpent-entwined urn?"

"The Egyptian priests of Ra and Amen-Ra, whose mystic creed of worship of Isis and Osiris flowed to all upper and lower Egypt from the fountain-head at Heliopolis, knew of this urn—this sacred vase, which, if legend be true, was never equalled in beauty, not even by the finest artisans of opulent Venice. Yet the priests of Ra and Amen-Ra held sway before the discovery of glass in old Syria.

"It is said that in the prehistoric long ago the children of Atlantis spread east and west. It is said that the pyramids of Egypt and the pyramids of Mexico were creations of the same civilisation. It is said that in this same Atlantis a golden civilisation existed, which recked of things we know not of. And it is also said, through that mysterious way by which a few things have filtered from antiquity, that in the last great cataclysmic upheaval, when, like a mammoth monster of the cosmos, Atlantis plunged to her watery doom, the sacred urn of the Inner Circle of Priests was saved, though it became divided—the lid going to Mexico and the vase proper to Morocco.

"The first definite attempt to find the urn was made, so far as we know, by King Solomon. Rumour had it in his time that the urn rested among the priceless treasures of the Queen of Sheba.

"King Solomon sent ambassadors to the kingdom of this great queen—the kingdom which we know to-day as Abyssinia—and, with great caravans of gifts, they started out across the Syrian desert. They reached the Red Sea, but they never traversed it. They disappeared absolutely and completely from the ken of man, and to this day their fate is a profound mystery.

"The next attempt of which we have record was made by Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. In the third year of her reign she organised a systematic search, but although it was prosecuted vigorously for seven years, it, too, failed, and of the twenty priests who took part in the search, each and every one met with a violent, horrible, and mysterious death.

"Antony, the Roman, who squandered an empire for Cleopatra, swore to find the vase and to give it to his royal mistress. Lucullus, his faithful lieutenant, went in search of it. At Philea, on the Nile, they found him with his head severed from his body.

"Alexander the Great, Pompey, Hannibal, Cæsar, Cæsar Augustus, all tried to discover this mystery vase, and all failed. In more modern times little was heard of it, and during the Dark Ages it dropped almost completely from the memory of man. Then once more it leapt into the ken of the antiquarians.

"Whisperings went about that the Borgias—the hated and dreaded Borgias—had sought and found it. An old Italian manuscript, found years ago but now lost again and only partially translated, claimed that Lucrezia Borgia possessed the urn, but not the lid. This manuscript, though written in the secret code of the Borgias, claimed, it is said, that the scales of the serpent's body which entwined the vase formed a secret set of glyphs used by the priests of old Atlantis.

"If that is so, then they would form the sole written or pictorial record which has come from that lost continent.

"Is it but lying legend that the secret and terrible poison used by Lucrezia Borgia was made from the directions given by those glyphs? Is it but lying legend that the lid of the urn would, if found, reveal secrets we have not yet been able to probe?

"A vague rumour emanates from Yucatan, in Mexico, that a marvellous and mysterious crystal 'eye' has been unearthed from beneath the ruins of an old temple—a temple of the Sun God, long hidden beneath chaotic jungle.

"This 'eye,' so elusive rumour has it, is of crystal and gold, with a great white diamond in the centre. Has the lost lid of the sacred urn of Atlantis been found? From those who took it from Atlantis, did it pass into the worship of the Sun God of Mexico? Is it possible that this marvellous and fragile object, made in the morning of the world, still exists? It is to solve this mystery of a dead and gone civilisation—a civilisation which long preceded the most ancient peoples of which we have record—a civilisation which grew and ruled and died—that I have dedicated my life, and in this manuscript I intend giving the few actual facts which——"

There the curious manuscript ended, and as he finished reading it, Nelson Lee heaved a deep sigh.

"It is one of the most interesting documents I have ever come upon," he said, as he laid the manuscript down on his desk and glanced up at the broad-shouldered, deep-chested man who sat across from him. "It is a pity that it breaks off just at the point where one hopes to read the definite facts which the—er—writer claims to have come upon. But what about it, Professor Mostyn? Why have you brought this document to me?"

The man across from Lee was stroking a heavy black beard. At first glance one would have known that he was a man of more than ordinary intellect. His head was magnificent, and while he was no more than medium height, his body was perfectly proportioned, and developed superbly, the body and limbs were of a man who had lived his life far, far from the cities.

Lee had never met him before, but to him, as well as to everyone who followed the doings of the super school of scientists and antiquarians, the name of Professor Mostyn stood for all that was brilliant in that school. He had come to Lee on this morning, and with an abrupt self-introduction had passed a manuscript across to the famous criminologist, asking him curtly to be good enough to read it. Lee had at once done so, with the result just noted. It was a curious and puzzling record, and already his interest was keenly aroused.

Before replying to Lee's question, Professor Mostyn took up the manuscript and thrust it carefully into an inner pocket. Then he leaned forward.

"You may well remark on what you have just read, Mr. Lee," he said, in a deep, pleasant tone. "What you have seen this morning is but the introduction of what would have been one of the greatest revelations of history. Had it been possible for the writer to complete it, it would have created a furor among the antiquarians of the world. Have you heard of Dr. Challoner, Mr. Lee?"

Lee smiled.

"Have I ever heard of you, Professor Mostyn?" he countered.

The professor's eyes twinkled with pleasure at the neat compliment.

"Then you will realise that this manuscript is not the work of a madman or a charlatan, Mr. Lee," he responded. "It was Dr. Challoner, probably the doyen of present antiquarians, who wrote what you have read this morning. He, and he only, knew what he intended to reveal in that manuscript.

"Listen, Mr. Lee. Twenty years ago I joined Dr. Challoner in an expedition to Morocco. The orthodox antiquarian makes his pilgrimage to Egypt or Syria, or Greece or Crete. But Challoner had ideas of his own. He had made an exhaustive study of the geological and geographical formation of the earth, combining this research work with a deep study of oceanography.

"With these three basic studies he worked out a sane and reasonable hypothesis as to the legendary continent of Atlantis, and finally came to the conclusion that not only had this continent existed, but that it had been the cradle of a marvellous civilisation. It was his theory that while Atlantis was above the ocean, the great desert of Sahara and Lower Egypt were

beneath the sea. It was also his theory that from Atlantis peoples spread to Mexico and across Morocco to Crete and Egypt.

"Therefore, he claimed that if one could but come upon the ancient site of the settlement made by these peoples in Morocco or Mexico, one would discover remains of a civilisation, compared with which the most ancient Egyptian records would be ultra modern. Therefore, as I have told you, he went to Morocco. We landed at Tangier, and worked our way south to the Atlas Mountains. It was there—the legendary birthplace of the god Mercury—that we took up our investigations.

"We toiled amidst the greatest hardships and difficulties for two years, but without any apparent success. The first year was little more than a series of surveys, based on the material Dr. Challoner had worked out from the three sciences, and then, following a definite theory, we began to excavate.

"I shall not go into details about those two years. It is sufficient to say that we were handicapped severely by the raids of the wild hillmen, and that it was necessary at all times to keep a large force of men at hand. Challoner spent money like water, and in this way managed to purchase a certain amount of safety.

"At the end of two years, I received a call to take the chair in archæology at ——— University, and at Challoner's advice did so. I returned to England, while he remained in Morocco.

"For five years I did not see him, and then I received a wire that he was in London. I came to town to meet him, and never received such a shock in my life. Bear in mind that at that time he was only forty years of age. I had left him in good health, with a frame which was magnificent. When I saw him in London his hair was white as snow, and his frame emaciated. He had aged twenty years, but the spirit I had known still lurked in the eyes.

"He was glad to see me, and we had two days together. He did not mention Morocco until just before he left London; then he told me that he had come to England to realise on certain securities, and that he was using his whole fortune in the work he had undertaken. He told me further that he was on the verge of a great discovery, and that he hoped another five years would see his work in Morocco finished.

"I saw him off at Tilbury, and returned to my work. I had one letter written from him at Tangier, just before he went south. The five years dragged by and five more with them, without any word coming from him. I began to fear that he had gone to his death in Morocco, and was seriously considering getting up an investigation of the matter when I received a letter from him which had been written at a small place on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and posted in the Canary Islands.

"That was three years ago. In this letter he said that his work in Morocco was finished, and that he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He said he would be another twelve months arranging certain matters down there, and that then he would come on to England.

"He begged me to make arrangements to give up my chair, and to devote all my time to assisting him in the compilation of the matter he had gained. I at once decided to do so, and went ahead on it. But his twelve months dragged on to two years, and then I received a feebly written note telling me that he had been very ill.

"To make a long story short, he reached England about six months ago, bringing with him several cases of material which he had gathered in Morocco. I met him the day after his arrival, and, believe me, Mr. Lee, I was never so shocked in my life. The change in him was terrible. He was gaunt and thin and stooped. His face was tanned to the colour of old mahogany. His eyes had sunk into his head, and his hair was shaven

in a peculiar fashion. He looked no more like Dr. Challoner than some wastrel of the desert.

"How he had used those twenty years of his life only he himself could tell, but he promised me that I should assist him to put on paper the greatest revelation in the history of the world. That manuscript you have just read was to be the written revelation. That was but the introduction. It was to cover more than five thousand such pages, dealing in detail with all that he had discovered in Morocco, and I implicitly believe that he had come upon definite records of ancient Atlantis. Yet from the very first I noticed that he seemed in a constant state of fear. He was afraid of being left alone, and would start up at the slightest sound.

"We took a large house in St. John's Wood, and furnished it without delay. In the cellar he had built a strong room in which he placed the cases he had brought back from Morocco. Three months ago we started to work, but so much detail was there to get into shape that even to-day I only dimly suspect the colossal nature of his discoveries. He would tell me nothing. He said I should see them revealed as we went along.

"Up to yesterday we worked well, and were getting at the point where we could begin the first rough draft of the manuscript which you have just read. By it you will see that the prime point made in the introduction is the sacred vase or urn of the Inner Circle of Priests of lost Atlantis.

"That last word was written yesterday morning before breakfast. It is my writing. Challoner was dictating to me when we were called to breakfast. He broke off at once, for he was most punctual in his habits, and we breakfasted as usual. After breakfast we returned to the library, and were just sitting down to resume our work when Challoner was seized with the most violent convulsions. I helped him on to a couch, rang the bell for hot water, made an emetic, and 'phoned for a doctor.

"But these measures, prompt as they were, were of no avail, and last evening Challoner passed away during a very severe convulsion. He tried to speak to me several times during the day, but each time the terrible pain which he was under prevented him, and he died without making his wishes known.

"The doctor diagnosed it as an acute attack of dyspepsia, but, knowing what I know, I am certain that it was no such thing. I am as certain as I sit here that Dr. Challoner was murdered. I have kept these suspicions to myself. I have said nothing to the police. There is so little to go on. But, after thinking the matter over in all its bearings, I decided to come to you, Mr. Lee. You are a man of the world; you are a man whose studies have led you into matters of scientific import.

"If I remember, you yourself have written a monograph on the monuments of Upper Egypt, and, therefore, you will feel an interest in this case which is not attached to the ordinary case. Now, sir, will you take up the matter and work with me to discover what may have been the cause of Dr. Challoner's death?"

Nelson Lee had listened with the closest attention to what Professor Mostyn had to say, and when the latter had finished, he spoke.

"The manuscript which I read interested me keenly, professor," he said. "But what you have told me interests me far more. I shall gladly join with you in trying to discover the truth about Dr. Challoner's death. But first I should like to ask you one or two questions."

"I am quite at your disposal, Mr. Lee," responded the other. "Pray ask me what you will."

"Firstly, professor, may I ask what you yourself think of this sacred urn? Do you consider it possible that it still exists?"

The professor nodded vigorously.

"Not only do I think it—I believe it implicitly. And, Mr. Lee, I feel certain that Dr. Challoner has either seen it with his own eyes, or he has read a minute and faithful description of it. As I told you, the last twenty years of his life are more or less wrapt up in the deepest mystery."

"To revert to his death," said Lee, after a short pause. "You say you think Dr. Challoner was murdered. How do you mean?"

"That I can't say, Mr. Lee. But remember that for six months he lived as a man who was in constant fear of someone or something. Before breakfast he felt quite himself. After breakfast he was seized with the convulsions which caused his death."

"Do you think it possible that some of his food was poisoned?" asked Lee.

"That is the only way I can figure that the thing was done. But, on the other hand, the cook at the house is a most trustworthy man, and the rest of the servants are beyond reproach. I, myself, eat little. I had only an egg, a slice of toast, and a cup of coffee. On the other hand, Dr. Challoner ate a good deal. He began with porridge, then had some bacon and eggs, toast, marmalade, and coffee. Yet there seems little enough there that would be the medium for a poison."

"I suppose the food was afterwards consumed in the kitchen?" remarked Lee. "Did none of the servants suffer from any ill-effects?"

"Not one," replied the professor promptly. "Sometimes men who have lived for years abroad adopt customs there which they bring home with them," went on Lee. "Did Dr. Challoner do this? Was he accustomed to have any special dishes which the rest of the household did not have?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes, he had. He had several stone jars filled with what he called 'kumiss.' This is made from fermented mare's milk, and when he prepared it, which he did with his own hands, he was accustomed to mix a little corn with it. It is a drink not uncommon among the Arabs."

Lee nodded.

"Oh, I know it quite well. I have had it in Algiers. Can you tell me if Dr. Challoner had any 'kumiss' on the morning he was seized with the convulsions?"

"I know that he did not. He was accustomed to take it at midday."

"I see. Well, Professor Mostyn, there seems little of a definite nature to go upon, but I think the best plan will be for me to go to the house in St. John's Wood and have a look at things. I am ready to go now if that will suit you."

"It will suit me splendidly," responded the professor.

Lee pressed a button on his desk, and when Nipper appeared he curtly ordered the lad to 'phone for the car. While they were waiting, Lee asked if he might again read the curious manuscript, and he had just finished doing so when the car was brought round.

With Nipper at the wheel they started for St. John's Wood, and as they thundered along on their way Nelson Lee little dreamed what a chaos of mystery and danger he was plunging into.

CHAPTER II.

The House in St John's Wood—Nelson Lee Makes a Discovery—A Startling Complication—A Master Hand.

THE house in St. John's Wood was a medium sized affair which sat well back from the road in a quiet street not far from Lord's cricket ground. As the car drew up in front of it, Nelson Lee noticed that the blinds had been drawn in the front rooms, and with that same keen

scrutiny he noted that the blinds of the two adjoining houses had also been drawn.

Professor Mostyn possessed a latchkey, and, on entering, led the way along the hall to a large room at the rear which had been turned into a work-room.

It was in a very untidy condition, papers and books of reference being piled in disorder in every available spot. Almost in the centre of the room stood a large double-sized knee-hole desk, which, like the floor, was littered with papers. The blinds here were drawn, too; but Professor Mostyn threw them up, and, with a word of excuse, hurried from the room.

When he had gone, Lee walked to the window and gazed out into an unkempt garden at the rear of the house. He tried the sash, and found that it lifted easily. He stood thinking for a few moments, then signed to Nipper to approach.

"Look, here, my lad," he said, in a low tone, "I want you to slip out of this window and scout about the garden there. Search round and find the garbage-tin if you can, and make a note of any waste food there may be in it. I told you sufficient of the case as we came along for you to understand some of my reasons for asking you to do this. In the meantime, I shall be busy in the house. When you have finished, come back in here as quietly as possible. I shall close the window after you, but I shall not lock it. Make notes of the whole lay-out of the garden, and size up the house from the rear. Now, get along with you."

As he finished speaking Nelson Lee raised the sash, and Nipper slipped over the sill. He dropped lightly to the turf outside, and as he disappeared round the corner of the house Lee drew down the sash again.

He was standing by the window, taking in the contents of the room, when Professor Mostyn entered the room.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, "but the undertaker's man has just been here. Would you care to see Dr. Challoner?"

Leo nodded.

"I should like to see him very much," he replied.

"Then please come with me," responded the professor.

They passed out of the study and along the hall to the main staircase. On the way to the floor above, the professor bent towards Lee, and, in a low tone, said:

"On this floor there is a suite of rooms which Challoner and I had for our own use. I will show them to you when we get up. There was my bedroom, and then a common sitting-room. Adjoining that was a bathroom, and then came Challoner's bedroom. Ah, here we are! Now you can see what I mean."

He pointed out the location of the room to Lee as they went along the upper hall; then he paused before the last door on that floor and turned the handle.

The blinds of the windows were drawn, but there was still sufficient light in the room for Lee to see the bulging outlines of something on the bed. A sheet had been drawn up over the body, and, walking over to it, he drew it down gently. He started back in amazement as he saw the features of the dead man, for if he had not known before he would have been positive that he was looking not at the remains of a white man, but at the mahogany-skinned body of an Arab.

The black hair, the rather prominent cheek-bones, the aquiline nose and thin lips all accentuated this impression. It was difficult to believe, even though he knew that before him was the eminent archæologist—Dr. Challoner, the man of mystery.

Slowly, and with a methodical care which surprised even Professor Mostyn.

who knew something of Lee's methods, Nelson Lee made a minute examination of the dead man. It is not necessary to dwell on the details of that examination, but sufficient is it to say that when he had finished Nelson Lee had discovered but one thing which at all led him to think that Challoner may have met his death by foul play.

That one thing was a tiny pair of spots on the side of the right hand—a pair of spots which he quite realised might have been caused by the prick of a pin.

When he had drawn the sheet up over the body again, he signed to Mostyn that he was finished, and they descended to the study. There Lee stood by the fireplace, and, turning to the professor, said:

"I presume this is the room where the doctor was seized with convulsions?"

Mostyn nodded.

"That is right. He was sitting at the desk just there. I was sitting at the other side of it. We had just come in from breakfast, as I told you. The doctor had picked up some notes, and was preparing to dictate to me when he was seized with the convulsions."

Nelson Lee walked across to the desk and sat down in the chair which had been occupied by the dead man just previous to his death. Sitting there, he cast his gaze about the desk, noting as he did so that almost everything on it breathed of the south land where the doctor had spent so many years.

The inkstand was a heavy and cumbersome wooden affair which had undoubtedly been picked up in Morocco; the desk fittings were of old Moorish silver, and the design pure Arabic. A huge leather purse, such as is used by the desert Arabs, hung against the side of the desk, and had been used by the doctor as a place for thrusting in papers.

There were several paper-weights, all of Arabic design, and two or three of them were carved to represent reptiles and beetles. Lee cast his glance at these, picking up one or two casually and examining them. He had just set down a large crimson affair, representing some sort of beetle, and was in the act of picking up another when suddenly he held his hand and stared with amazed fascination at what he saw.

The paper-weight which he had been about to pick up was the representation of a curious sort of lizard, the like of which Lee had never seen. The body and tail were of green-stone, mottled, and carved by a master-hand. It was set on a flat stone base of the same colour, and as a piece of workmanship was very fine. But though it appeared to be lifeless stone, and though he was certainly in the full possession of all his faculties, Nelson Lee could have sworn that he had seen the head of the thing move.

Bending forward still more, he thrust out his hand, gingerly touching the tail of the thing. There could be no question about it. It was cold and hard and undoubtedly of stone. The base, too, was stone, and, thinking that his eyes had played him a trick, Lee made again to pick it up.

But even as he did so he saw the blunt, repulsive head of the thing turn slowly and two wicked eyes regard him. The next moment a red tongue shot out, and from the neck of the thing to the tip of the blunt snout he saw the whole skin quiver.

Nauseated by what he saw, Nelson Lee turned towards Professor Mostyn. The professor was standing at the window gazing out at the garden, and Lee, with a shrug, turned back to the thing which had startled him so. Again he thrust out his hand, and catching the thing by the tail drew it towards him. It was then he saw the explanation of the mystery. The body, the tail, and the base of the thing was of stone, but the head was the head of a living creature.

Holding it so that the twisting snout could not reach him, Lee examined

it still more closely. And then the whole truth dawned upon him. A living creature had been imprisoned in that stone receptacle, a living creature which the stone had been carved and mottled to represent.

Turning it over while he guarded the same caution, he saw a fine, almost imperceptible, line running the full length of the stone body. He knew that in some way there must be a secret spring which would cause the stone receptacle to open and release the creature which was imprisoned there.

With a chill of disgust running through him, Lee laid the thing back on the desk and studied its position there. He was sitting where Dr. Challoner had sat. If he reached out his right hand to take up some of the papers it would come close beside the spot where the paper-weight stood. If Dr. Challoner had done that, then the creature could just reach the side of his right hand.

With a lightning-like motion, Nelson Lee gripped the twisting neck of the thing and lifted it up. Its eyes glistened wickedly and its mouth opened. In that instant Nelson Lee saw the repulsive, poisonous mouth and the two teeth, which were, as well as he could judge, about the same distance apart as the two tiny marks he had seen on the hand of the dead man.

He knew if he but tried, those two teeth would just fit those marks, and he knew that in his hand he held the thing which had caused Dr. Challoner's death.

But how had the thing got there?

Laying it down again, Lee turned to Professor Mostyn, who was just swinging round.

"Professor," he said, "I have been examining the desk here. I notice there are a good many Arabic and Moorish ornaments on it. I suppose Dr. Challoner brought them back with him?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes. He brought back a good many curious things."

"Have they been on the desk long?" continued Lee.

"Oh, yes; ever since we moved in here!"

"You yourself are interested in such things? Have you ever examined them closely?"

"Certainly! They are most of them very familiar to me. I myself brought back a good many curious things from Morocco years ago, but, of course, my collection is nothing compared to Challoner's."

"Exactly. What do you call this curious sort of lizard?" asked Lee.

Professor Mostyn took a couple of steps nearer the desk.

"That—oh, that is a lizard which is found nowhere else but in the Atlas Mountains! I have seen one or two alive, but even there they are very rare. Challoner says they are among the very oldest of living things on earth, and claims that they belong to the age of the mammoths and the great flying reptiles. The living animal is deadly poisonous. That paper-weight which is on the desk is one of the finest bits of work I have ever seen. I have often admired it exceedingly, but I do not know just where Challoner got it."

"You have had it in your hand?" asked Lee.

"Many times. But why do you ask?"

"Will you do me the favour to examine it again, professor? No, no! Please do not pick it up. Just bend over it and examine it closely."

A good deal puzzled by Lee's request, the professor bent over the desk and scrutinised the object carefully, the while Lee watched him closely.

Suddenly Lee saw the professor's brows knit and a look of almost comic amazement appear in his eyes.

"G-good heavens!" he gasped. "Am I dreaming or mad? I—I—Man alive, there it is again! The head is moving!"

His hand went out towards it, but Lee had grasped it in a moment and restrained him.

"Don't do it, professor," he warned. "By your own words the thing is deadly poisonous. You are neither dreaming nor mad. The head did move. I shall pick it up and show you."

Grasping it carefully, Lee rose and walked to the window. Standing there the two men examined the object minutely, but though they could see the thin line on the bottom, they could not discover how the reptile had been placed within its stony receptacle.

There was a queer look on the professor's face as he turned to Lee.

"I don't understand it," he said, in vibrant tones. "I have had that thing in my hand dozens of times. Dr. Challoner has used it for a paper-weight for months. Yet I am willing to swear it was all of stone. It is not possible that the lizard might have been in a state of torpor all that time."

"Nor do I think so," responded Lee. "But I will tell you what I do think, professor. It is this little animal which was the cause of Dr. Challoner's death. If you will closely examine the doctor's right hand you will see two tiny punctures, which were made by these."

As he spoke Lee grasped the lizard by the neck, causing it to open its jaws, and there were the two teeth exposed for the professor to see.

"That is how he died," went on Lee. "But I do not think for a moment that this thing has been on the desk all those months. Don't you see what I have been driving at? The murder of Dr. Challoner was prepared for with the greatest care and the most fiendish cleverness. Plan after plan was probably laid, but for some reason or other the doctor was able to stave off the fate for a long time. You yourself said he lived in a constant fear. Then this plan was conceived. The paper-weight on his desk was copied in every detail, but instead of it being merely solid stone it was made hollow. When we have killed this lizard we shall be able to examine the affair, and will probably discover how it opens. This creature was placed within, and when the original weight was taken from the desk this was put in its place. Such a thing argues a full and comprehensive knowledge of the habits of both the doctor and yourself. How it succeeded we have seen, but for pure, unadulterated devilishness I have never seen it exceeded!"

Professor Mostyn passed a hand across his brow.

"I can scarcely believe that I am not dreaming," he muttered. "Why, I would have sworn that the thing was all stone. It is more than devilish—it is uncanny! Yet, from one or two things the doctor let drop I am not surprised at the perfection of detail with which it has all been worked out. When we know the truth—if we ever do—we shall find that Dr. Challoner came upon something very, very startling down in the Atlas Mountains. Shall we kill the thing now?"

"It can wait," replied Lee, as he carried it back to the desk. "I shall lock it in this drawer and keep the key."

He placed it in a drawer as he spoke, and turning the key in the lock, put the key in his own pocket.

"Now, professor," he continued, "we know that Dr. Challoner has been murdered. From what we have discovered, it argues that there was a very powerful motive. In the motive of a crime do we often discover the clue which will lead us to the perpetrator of the deed. Can you think of any motive for this crime? Is there anything missing?"

The professor shook his head.

"Challoner only kept his notes and a few unimportant papers up here," he said. "The valuable materials he placed in the strong-room, which he had built into the cellar. He kept the key of that himself, and not even I have been in it."

"Then you have made no examination of it since his death?"

"No."

"Do you know where the key is?"

"I took all the keys from poor Challoner's clothes and locked them away. I know that he made a will leaving everything to me, and I know that if anything happened to him it was his wish that I should carry on the work. But I have not felt like going into things yet."

Lee nodded in understanding.

"I quite understand how you must feel, professor," he said; "but now that we know a crime has been committed, it is up to us to make every effort we can to discover some clue. There is not time to waste. Those who could think up such a fiendishly clever plan to murder a man will waste no time in wiping away all traces of the crime. We must move quickly if we move at all. I think we should make an examination of the strong-room in the cellar, in order to see if everything there is all right."

"I will get the keys at once," said Mostyn. "But no one could get through the door which guards it. Only Challoner had a key, and it was in his pocket."

"We will make the examination just the same," said Lee.

The professor departed to get the keys, and while he waited, Lee raised the sash of the library window and whistled for Nipper.

But though he whistled thrice there came no reply, and thinking the lad had wandered out of earshot, Lee closed the window again.

A few moments later Professor Mostyn returned with the keys, and announced his readiness to go down to the strong-room.

They descended at once, and when the professor had turned on an electric light, Lee saw before him a great steel door guarding a very modern cement and steel built strong-room.

"I don't think anyone could get into that," remarked the professor, with pride, as he started for the door.

"I much prefer a combination lock myself," was Lee's only remark.

When the professor had fitted the key into the lock and turned it, Nelson Lee gave him a hand at opening the great door. Then, when it had been swung back, the professor turned a switch just within the strong-room.

Immediately it became flooded with light, but in that strong-room there was nothing else but light and those two men. Of the dozen or so great cases which the professor had said were there, there was not the slightest sign. They had vanished as though into thin air.

Professor Mostyn gave one gasp of startled unbelief, and turned with a helpless gesture to Lee. The professor might have been brilliant enough at deciphering some puzzling glyph of antiquity, but on the present occasion he was at a complete loss. Things had marched too swiftly for the brain which revelled in the solid and stolid monuments of the past.

Nelson Lee pushed his way past the professor and walked round the strong-room. Walls, ceiling and floor were one and all of good steel and cement construction, with the exception of the rear wall. This was part of the wall of the cellar itself, and was of solid stone, cemented together in great blocks.

It had been such a particularly solid wall that the makers of the vault had considered it sufficient for a wall of the strong-room, and even the most critical could scarcely criticise their acceptance of it as such.

The room itself was about eight feet square, and the main door being the only means of entrance, it was natural that Lee should seek there for an explanation of the mystery.

If he was to believe what the evidence in hand showed, he must start with the theory that in some way a dozen heavy packing-cases had been spirited

out of that strong-room, through the cellar, up the stairs, through part of the house, and away.

It was difficult, and even the recollection of the fiendish cleverness of those who had murdered Dr. Challoner did not make it any the easier to credit. But he had sought for motive, and now he had found it with a vengeance.

Suddenly he turned to the professor.

"Can you tell me when Dr. Challoner last visited this room?" he asked abruptly.

The professor gazed at him in a dazed fashion.

"When—— Oh, yes: I can tell you! Challoner was down here the night before he died. That would be the night before last. He had to consult some papers in one of the cases. He was here about an hour, and everything must have been all right then. If it had been otherwise he would have said so."

"Then we must start on the theory that the cases were here the night before last. Since then they have disappeared, and since then Dr. Challoner has been murdered. That seems part and parcel of the same thing. Now then, professor, I know this has been a severe shock to you, but please collect yourself and answer a few questions!"

"But—but, Lee," stuttered the professor, "do you realise that those cases contained all the discoveries of Challoner during the last twenty years? Do you realise that they may contain the very secret of lost Atlantis?"

"I am quite aware of that!" rasped Lee. "It is for that reason you must gather yourself together, professor. We must get on the track of them at once. Now then, listen! Starting with the night before last—tell me what you did. Were you and the professor out that evening?"

"No. We were working in the study until after one o'clock."

"The servants—how about them?"

"None of them were out."

"What time were you up the next morning?"

"At five o'clock, as usual. I told you we had been at work before breakfast."

"Yes, I remember."

"Then, immediately after breakfast, the doctor was seized with the convulsions which caused his death."

"You were about the house all day, but you have not been down here? We may safely take it that no one in the house has been near the strong-room since Dr. Challoner himself was down here the night before last. Yet it seems to me very puzzling how, even supposing the strong-room door had been opened, a dozen heavy packing-cases could be got out of the cellars and then out of the house. A dray would have been necessary to take them away."

The professor nodded.

"That is true," he said. "Some of them were very heavy."

Nelson Lee leant against the wall of the strong-room and pondered. He had never been up against a more puzzling thing in his life. Was it possible that those cases had been taken out as it seemed they must have been?

He walked to the door, and, twisting the electric light so that the rays fell full upon the door, he drew out his pocket-glass and made a careful examination of the lock. Over and over it he went, seeking for the very slightest sign that it had been tampered with; but, search though he would, there was nothing.

Thrusting the glass back into his pocket he turned his attention to the walls. Round again he went, examining them up and down as he went, until he reached the rear wall, which, it will be recalled, was also the wall of the cellar.

Here he scrutinised the stones carefully, but they looked solid and immovable, and certainly the cement between them showed no signs of decay. He was just turning to examine the next side wall when at his feet he saw something which caused him to pause.

Kneeling down, he drew out his pocket-glass and focussed it on what he saw. Here and there he could make out little patches of dirt which seemed to have fallen from the stones above.

He picked up a little between his thumb and forefinger and examined it closely. It appeared to be composed of a mixture of stone and cement, and, following the general run of the material, Lee could trace it over close to the wall.

Then he came upon something else which caused him to drop flat to the floor. With extreme care, he picked up several tiny objects which would have been quite invisible to the naked eye. He laid them on the sleeve of his coat, and, when he had collected several of them, he focussed the glass on them.

After studying them for a little he turned to Professor Mostyn.

"Can you tell me if Dr. Challoner ever swept out or brushed out this strong-room?" he asked.

The puzzled professor, who had been watching Lee's movements, shook his head.

"I have never known him to do so," he replied.

"You do not know if he ever had occasion to use a brush made of camel's hair?" Lee asked.

"No; I have never known him to use such a thing down here."

Nelson Lee took a small leather book from his pocket and carefully placed the few tiny bristles he had picked up between the leaves. Closing it, he thrust it back into his pocket and started for the door of the strong-room.

"I shall come down here again," he said abruptly. "I wish now to make an examination of the rear of the premises. I want to see what chance there was to get a dozen big packing-cases out of the house."

They locked the door of the strong-room after them, and passed up the stairs to the floor above. From there the professor led the way to the rear of the house.

They reached the garden, and after a brief glance about him Nelson Lee started along a small path which led to the lane at the rear. He had gone along perhaps twenty yards or so when, on turning a corner, he suddenly stopped and gave vent to a sharp exclamation.

The professor, who was close behind him, hurried up; but Lee was already running down the path at top speed.

He paused beside something which lay on the ground, and, bending over it, uttered another exclamation. Then, with a quick movement, he drew a knife from his pocket, and, opening the blade, reached down again. A second later he was rolling Nipper's unconscious body over, while a severed black cord lay on the ground close beside the lad's neck.

CHAPTER III.

Nipper's Tale—The Face in the Tree—Lee, Nipper, and the Professor
Draw a Blank—The Discovery in the Strong-room.

"I 'LL tell you what happened, guv'nor."

The voice, woefully weak, was Nipper's. He was sitting up now with one of Lee's arms passed about his shoulders. Twenty minutes had Lee and the professor worked to revive the lad, and now, with a hand

pressed to his throat to ease the pain there, he was determined to relate what had happened.

"Better wait a bit, my lad," said Lee kindly. "I am naturally anxious to know what has occurred, but your throat is still very painful, and you had better not overdo it."

"I am all right now, guv'nor," said the lad pluckily. "I want to tell you."

Nelson Lee glanced at the black cord which he had cut from the lad's throat. It was like nothing so much as a bolo. About two feet in length, it had at each end a heavy ball of silver, and when Lee had come upon Nipper lying unconscious in the path it had been wound round and round the lad's throat with a murderous intensity which had almost proved fatal.

Now it was severed in several places, but the sinister suggestion of the thing had not yet departed. Lee turned back to the lad.

"Very well, Nipper," he said; "go ahead. Tell me what occurred."

Hanging on to his master's arm for support, Nipper began to speak.

"When I came out through the library window, guv'nor, I came on round to the back of house, as you suggested. I knew you wanted to make a thorough examination of any waste food which may have been thrown out, so I went first in search of the garbage tin. I couldn't find it, so thought I would go all over the garden. I worked down one side of it, and opened the gate leading into the lane outside.

"There didn't seem to be much out there to look at, so I came back into the garden again. I was just working up towards the house when I thought I saw the branches in that tree move."

As he spoke, Nipper pointed to the thick branches of a tree which grew in the garden adjoining, and which hung over the dividing wall.

"I stopped and watched it, guv'nor, and then I saw the branches pushed aside and a face look out. It was a ghastly face," went on the lad, after a moment's pause. "It—it was not the face of a white man. At least, it was as black as ebony, but the features were not negroid. The man was watching the back of this house, and at first didn't see me. I dropped down to see what he was up to, but I must have made a noise, for he turned and saw me. I jumped up then, guv'nor, and made for him to ask what he wanted, but he dodged back into the branches again, and then, before I knew what was coming, something swished through the air and caught me at the throat. It wrapped itself round my neck so quickly I could not stop it, and when I tried to unwind it I couldn't do so. I struggled as hard as I could, for I knew I couldn't last long under the pressure of it, but it was no use, and I guess I must have lost my senses soon after. That's all, guv'nor, but if ever I see that face again I shall know it all right."

Lee nodded, and, turning, gazed at the tree from which the silver-nobbed bolas had come whizzing. It was all silent and innocent-looking enough now, but there was the bolas to prove the lad's words—and had not Lee himself found Nipper lying unconscious on the path?

Yet it was difficult to believe that such a daring attack had been made in that district in mid-forenoon. But was it more daring than the fiendish murder of Dr. Challoner?

Lee shot a glance in the direction of the rear windows of the adjoining house. All the blinds were drawn there, and for all one could see of life the house might have been deserted. He turned to Mostyn.

"Will you come back to the house?" he said curtly. "I wish to continue my examinations there."

The mystified professor walked along beside Lee and Nipper until they reached the door. There Lee took the lad's arm and made a gesture.

"Better go along to the study and wait there, Nipper," he said. "I

am going back to the cellar, but I sha'n't be long. You had better get one of the servants to give you a little stimulant."

"I'm all right now, guv'nor," replied Nipper quickly. "Please let me go down to the cellar with you."

Lee seemed not to wish it, but, seeing how eager the lad was to go, he consented, and the three of them returned to the strong-room, the empty condition of which had so given Lee to think.

Professor Mostyn opened the door of the strong-room when they reached the cellar again, and Lee, drawing out his pocket-glass, strode across to the rear wall. He stood just over the little crumbs which had first excited his interest, and sank into deep thought, while the others remained by the door.

"Curious," he muttered to himself. "A most curious thing. From the examination I have already made of these crumbs I know them to be from the wall itself. They are composed of a mixture of stone and mortar. What is the meaning of it? And those few camels'-hair bristles—they certainly came from a brush of some sort. If those crumbs came from the wall itself, then why the bristles? It is almost as if someone had endeavoured to brush them up. In that case, then, there must have been an attempt to conceal the fact that the crumbs were there. I wonder——"

Bending swiftly, Nelson Lee dropped on his knees and began to tap the stone wall. Up and down it he worked, then across and back again, until he had covered most of it. Finally, he got to his feet, and, focussing his pocket-glass on the stone, began to closely scrutinise every portion.

At the end of twenty minutes or so he turned round to Mostyn, a gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

"Can you tell me who lives next door, professor?" he asked.

The professor shook his head.

"The house is empty, I think," he replied. "That is, the one on the right. The house on the left is occupied by a City man—a stockbroker, I think."

"I am not interested in that one—at present," responded Lee.

He turned back to his examination of the wall; then, as Nipper and the professor watched him, they saw him move the pocket-glass up, up, up the wall in a straight line until his hand was on a level with his eyes. It hovered over one spot there for a moment, then Lee began to move it towards the right in a horizontal line.

When he had covered a distance of three feet or so he again paused, and then began to move it downwards in a vertical line parallel with the first.

Once more he paused, this time close to the floor, and then he moved it to the left until he arrived at his point of starting. In this way he had followed a course which had covered a space about five feet high and three feet wide.

What had been his guide neither Nipper nor the professor could see, but had they examined the wall through the glass they might have been able to distinguish the faintest of lines enclosing the space which Lee had examined.

He turned to them now.

"I think I saw a crowbar and some heavy hammers and chisels as I came through the cellar," he said. "Will you get some of them, my lad?"

Nipper left the strong-room, and returned a few minutes later bearing a large crowbar, a heavy iron stone-chisel, and a huge mallet.

He laid these at Lee's feet, and the detective, stripping off his coat, took up the chisel. Placing the edge of it close to the line he had examined, he instructed the lad how to hold it; then, taking up the mallet, he began to wield it in a slow, but powerful fashion which would have excited the admiration of the strongest stonemason.

Blow after blow he struck, while Nipper kept the chisel turning slowly. Bit by bit the stone began to crumble away, and then Nipper saw what Lee had already noticed—the stone was not the original stone of which the cellar wall had been made, but a soft sandstone which crumbled away quickly under the blows from the mallet and the sharp cutting of the chisel.

Professor Mostyn had approached close to the wall, and now stood in a fever of amazed mystification. He had the sense not to interrupt Lee in his work, however, and as the soft sandstone crumbled rapidly away he took up a handful and examined it.

Lee still kept up his work, and inch by inch the chisel ate its way through the sandstone until suddenly, as he brought the mallet down, the chisel drove inwards and almost disappeared, only being saved by the grip which Nipper had upon it.

Then Lee laid down the mallet, and, taking up the crowbar, began to send it in with blow after blow against the edge of the opening he had made.

Larger and larger grew the hole until one could thrust in one's arm. Only then did Lee desist in his work, and, laying down the crowbar, drew out his pocket-torch. Pressing the switch, he thrust the end of the torch into the hole and placed his eye close to the top of the barrel of the torch. He peered into the hole for a few moments, then, with a gesture, motioned for the professor to look.

Mostyn dropped to his knees, and, with wide eyes, did as he was bid. When he straightened up again his eyes were clouded with non-understanding.

"What—what does it mean, Mr. Lee?" he said hoarsely.

Lee shrugged.

"It means, professor, that we have discovered how the dozen cases disappeared. It is little wonder that the door of the strong-room showed no signs of having been tampered with. Those who took the cases did not need to come that way. Instead, they came through this way. And if you regard this work closely you will see how masterly it is. There has been a tunnel made, as you can see by the light. It runs in the direction of the adjoining house, and when this part of the wall is chipped out we shall probably be able to follow it through without difficulty. But just examine the work itself. Do you see what a master hand it reveals? The actual stone which formed this portion of the wall was cut out probably a little at a time while you and Dr. Challoner were working in the study just overhead. Then it was carefully blocked up with this sandstone in order to cover up the marks of the work until the necessary space was cut.

"When that was done the cases were dragged through the opening, and, by means of the tunnel, taken to the cellar of the adjoining house. Then the hole was blocked up by sandstone, and the work done so perfectly—the stone lined and made to look so much like the original wall—that only a glass could detect it. And see how it was made to fit! I should say at a guess that the work was done by an expert Italian, though, of course, that is only a surmise. But what does it tell us? It tells us that the cases which Dr. Challoner brought here were known of, and that it was planned to steal them. Someone knew of them, and knew what they contained? Did one of them hold the sacred urn, of which the doctor spoke in his manuscript?"

Professor Mostyn shook his head.

"That I cannot say, Mr. Lee. I do know that Dr. Challoner made some startling discoveries in Morocco—discoveries which bore on the days when the world was young, and when the continent of Atlantis stretched from Morocco to Mexico. But whether he came upon the sacred urn there, I do not know. Certainly he described it most minutely in his manuscript, and unless he had at least seen it, I do not know how he could have described it

as he did. Then again, you remember, he spoke of the lid as having been separated from the vase proper. That, he thought, had been found in Mexico, but whether he knew where it was or not, I cannot say."

"I remember all that," muttered Lee. "And I recollect, too, that you said Dr. Challoner seemed to be in constant fear of something. The way he died proves only too well that his fear was founded on something definite. He was tracked down, and paid the penalty he was trying to avoid."

"Trying to avoid until he had accomplished his life work," put in the professor quickly. "I think that is the only reason he lived in fear."

"I am quite prepared to believe that," responded Lee. "A man who went through what he must have gone through in Morocco could not have known purely physical fear. What light would be thrown on this mystery if we could but know what happened during those twenty years in Morocco? That his death came from out the wilds of the Atlas Mountains, I feel sure. The fiendish ingenuity of it, the rare and almost unknown lizard which was used as the instrument of death, the face which Nipper saw amongst the branches of the tree, the silver-nobbed bolo—all those things point to the truth of my theory. I have no doubt that could we but lay our hands on the man who attacked Nipper, we should be a long way towards finding one of those who murdered the doctor. But there are other things to consider. If they succeeded in murdering the doctor, and if they succeeded in getting possession of the cases which the doctor brought with him from Morocco, then why did that one return to the scene of the crime? What was he doing in the adjoining garden this morning? Why did he assault Nipper as he did? One would think that, having killed the doctor and having got possession of the cases, they would make themselves scarce without delay. But it seems they have not done so."

"Do you think it possible that he might still be lurking about the garden?" asked the professor.

Lee shook his head as he again picked up the crowbar.

"Not likely," he replied. "After his assault on Nipper he would clear out. I think it is best for us to clear away this sandstone, and force a way through to the cellar of the adjoining house, for that we shall find a passage running through, I am certain."

He struck the edge of the sandstone a sharp blow as he spoke, and was just raising the crowbar to give it a second blow when suddenly the whole wall seemed to lift up and strike him in the face.

There was a terrific explosion as the wall flew out, sending Lee and Nipper flying through the doorway of the strong-room to fall in an unconscious heap outside. The crowbar was wrenched from Lee's hand, and went hurtling across the strong-room, while the professor was knocked senseless where he stood.

Then, amid a hail of flying debris, the three humans lay in queer, curled-up attitudes. Slowly the dust and debris settled again, revealing a great gaping hole where the sandstone had been.

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CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee on His Mettle--What the Adjoining House Revealed--Nipper on Guard--The Mystery Deepens.

NELSON LEE came to himself groaning with pain. As his senses cleared, he became aware that someone was dousing his head with water, and, sitting up, he made out the features of one of the servants.

He felt himself gingerly to take stock of his injuries, and found that he was badly bruised from head to foot. As near as he could discover there

were no bones broken, though the blood on his clothes revealed more than one deep gash cut by the flying debris.

He got to his feet painfully and slowly; then, making a gesture to the servant, walked across to where Nipper lay. The lad had been struck on the forehead by a flying fragment of stone which had bruised him badly but under the ministrations of Lee and the servant the lad came round.

"No bones broken, I think," said Lee, as he made a hurried examination of the lad. "How do you feel?"

"As though I had been hit with a brick, guv'nor," grinned the lad feebly. "But what on earth was it?"

Lee pointed towards the strong-room, which was now a wreck.

"We failed to take into account exactly how ingenious our unknown friends were. They had counted on the possibility that someone would discover the faked wall of the strong-room, and had placed a powerful explosive behind it. No doubt that was done before the cases were removed. They were determined that anyone who discovered the work and attempted to investigate it would meet with a sudden and severe check. But they were not discovered before they had a chance to remove the cases, and probably decided to leave the explosive there in any case. It is well for us that the full force of the explosion went back through the tunnel, otherwise we should have been blown out of existence. But come, my lad, if you are able. Let us see what has become of the professor."

They made their way into the strong-room, climbing over the scattered debris as they went, and there against the wrecked wall, just as he had been struck down, lay the professor, with his head twisted in an uncanny manner.

Lee gave an exclamation, and dropped to his knees. Quickly he turned the professor over and examined him. Then he looked up gravely.

"This is terrible, my lad," he said. "The force of the explosion has broken the professor's neck. He is dead. The fiends—they succeeded in their purpose after all!"

The servant who had followed them into the strong-room was bending forward with eyes dilated by horror, and now, as he heard Lee's word, he gave a startled cry and fled from the strong-room.

Lee turned sharply to Nipper.

"After him, my lad—stop him some way! If he reaches the street in that condition he will shout this thing to all the world!"

Nipper was scarcely in a condition to cope with a fear-maddened servant, for he could scarcely stand as yet; but catching up the broken handle of the mallet which Lee had been using, Nipper gathered together his remaining strength and dashed after the servant.

He caught up with him just at the foot of the stairs leading to the floor above.

"Here, you fool," he shouted—"come back! Are you crazy?"

As he spoke he thrust out a foot and tripped up the man. The servant went headlong to the floor, but was on his feet in a second, shrieking:

"You have killed him—you have killed him!"

Seeing that he had to do with a man who was for the time being a raving maniac, Nipper wasted no time in trying to pit his sadly diminished strength against the madman. Lifting the handle of the mallet he watched his chance, and as the other sprang for him, the lad brought the handle down with sound force. It caught the servant full on the top of the head, and with a last gurgling shriek he went down to stay.

Then Nipper staggered back to the strong-room, to find Lee trying to drag the body of the dead professor from the place where it lay. Together they managed to get it out of the strong-room and up the stairs to the floor above.

There they came upon two more servants, standing by the door of the music-room, half paralysed with fear.

Lee knew that it would take little to set them off as the manservant had been set off, and, signing to Nipper to lay the body down, he walked across to them.

"Go to your rooms, and stay there," he said curtly, eyeing them sternly. "There has been an accident in the cellar, and Professor Mostyn has been injured. You will remain in your rooms until I send for you. Take the other servant with you. He is not much hurt."

Cowed by Lee's eye, the two maidservants walked slowly up the stairs to the first floor, and not until they had disappeared did Lee walk back to where Nipper stood.

Picking up the body again, they carried it into the study, and there, where Dr. Challoner had met his tragic death, they laid the faithful friend who had followed so soon after.

Drawing a screen round the couch where the body lay, Lee turned to Nipper.

"The police will have to be informed, my lad," he said, in a low tone. "We will ring up Inspector Brooks in a few minutes; but first let us slip over the wall to the garden of the adjoining house. I want to make a few investigations before the police are called in."

Together they went out by way of the study window, and crossing the garden to the dividing wall, pulled themselves over by means of overhanging branches. They dropped softly to the turf on the other side of the wall, and stood in the shelter of a bush gazing out warily at their surroundings.

It was now high moon, but still the rear windows of the house showed no signs that the place was occupied. Somehow Nelson Lee did not very much expect to find it tenanted. Had he done so, it is doubtful if he would have taken the course he was taking. To say the least, he was contemplating burglary, and even his profession could not at all times justify that. But from what he had already come upon, Lee felt that he had full and just cause to prosecute matters by the quickest means in his power.

Challoner had been murdered, Mostyn had met a fate which, if it was not murder, verged very closely upon that. There was no doubt in Lee's mind that the explosive had been placed behind that dummy wall of sandstone in order that it might explode exactly as it had done. True it was more than likely that Dr. Challoner had been the intended victim of the scheme, but the fact that he had gone to his death before the dummy wall had been discovered and another man had died from the explosion, by no means relieved the unknown schemers of responsibility.

It was a dastardly thing, and the more Nelson Lee thought of the matter the more determined he was to probe to its lowest depths the sinister mystery surrounding that house in St. John's Wood.

At the end of five minutes, seeing no signs of movement about the place, Lee signed to Nipper, and the two slipped out from the shelter of the bush. They made their way across to the rear door of the house, which Lee tried.

It was locked, and to his knockings there was no response. He gave it up after a little, and taking a small steel instrument from his pocket, slipped it into the keyhole. Then he worked softly at the lock until there was a sudden click, and the bolt flew back. Now the door opened readily enough, and they passed into what was a sort of outer kitchen.

It showed plenty of signs of having been recently occupied, but Lee favoured it with scarcely a glance. He threw open a door leading to a room beyond, which they discovered to be the kitchen proper. It, too, revealed signs of recent human presence; but now the stove was cold, and household utensils of every description hung in glistening rows on the wall.

From the kitchen they passed through the butler's pantry along a corridor and into a dining-room. Here the signs were even more plain, for the dining table, a large mahogany affair, was laid as though for a dainty meal. Lee noted with some surprise that only one place was laid.

Leaving that room, they came to the main hall of the house. Working from here, they visited first the study, then the morning-room, a music-room, and a small boudoir on the ground floor.

On the first floor they went through a suite of rooms beautifully furnished, and on the second floor three more bedrooms, which, however, unlike the other apartments they had visited, seemed not to have been occupied for some time. On the next floor they came to the servants' quarters, four rooms, and two of which had undoubtedly been occupied. But on every hand there was sufficient evidence for Lee's keen, searching gaze to note that a hurried departure had evidently been made from the house.

With little to reward their search, they returned to the ground floor. There Lee paused at the foot of the stairs.

"There have been people in here recently, my lad," he said; "but they have cleared out—and hurriedly, I should judge. I have been unable to find a single thing which would give any indication as to the type of people they may have been. They seem to have effaced every atom of material which would give us a clue. But we may be able to discover more on inquiry. Before we do anything in that direction, though, we will have a look at the cellar. It may tell us more."

Nipper followed Nelson Lee down to the cellar, and, using their pocket-torches, they were able to pick their way through a heap of refuse which almost blocked the place.

Lee paused long enough to make a cursory examination of the material, then he went on again until suddenly he came to a pause before a great pile of earth which gave forth a peculiarly damp smell. Just beyond it there was a spot in deep shadow, and when Lee had cast the circle of light in that direction they could see a large hole in the wall of the cellar.

"I thought so," said Lee as he bent and peered along the tunnel which stretched away from the opening. "I was certain we would find the end of the tunnel in this cellar. Now we know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, how the cases were removed from the strong-room. But that does us little good, after all. Not only have they been removed from the strong-room, but they have been taken from this cellar as well, and may be goodness only knows where now. The house was taken for a purpose, and that purpose was carried out with signal success. This must now be our starting-point, and from here we must follow up any clue which presents itself."

"Then you will not drop the case now that Professor Mostyn is dead?" asked Nipper.

"Certainly not," replied Lee curtly. "Do you think after what happened—after the professor being struck down before us, that I would now turn up the case? You should know better than that, Nipper. But enough of this! I must think what our next move will be."

Lee sat down suddenly on the heap of damp earth, and, lighting a cigarette, gave himself up to thought.

"It is not a case where the motive is obscure," he muttered to himself. "The motive is, in fact the plainest part of the whole thing. That Challoner was struck down in order that his murderers might get possession of the cases which he brought from Morocco is evident. But that does not indicate who they are. If I only had some knowledge of his life in Morocco during the past twenty years, if I only knew what had happened to him there, I might be a long way towards a solution of the difficulty. That he was engaged in a search for some records of the lost continent of Atlantis, I

know. But how did he prosecute that search? It must have been in some way very much out of the ordinary. Challoner came upon something of a very startling nature in Morocco—of that I feel sure. But what was it? How did he investigate it?

“Is it possible that during his researches there he aroused the enmity of some of the people? Certainly the present-day inhabitants of Morocco could have very little interest in lost Atlantis. Challoner spent the years in the Atlas Mountains. Did he make enemies there, and did he get out of Morocco with material which these enemies were determined to get back at any price?

“I am willing to wager that he was killed by the agency of someone whom he had known in the Atlas Mountains. The instrument used was an instrument which would scarcely be known outside that district. And the very exceptional cunning of it indicates not a western brain, but the subtle touch of the Oriental nature.

“But there is one very puzzling point about that. On the face of it it would seem that to get possession of the dozen cases of material was the motive for the whole thing. Yet this tunnel proves that the removal of the cases from the strong-room was accomplished without Challoner dreaming that the thing had been done.

“Then why kill him? Why go to such lengths if the removal of the cases was the only motive? Was he killed because it was taken for granted he would be carrying certain information in his mind? In that case the possession of the material was not the only motive.

“There must have been a strong desire to prevent Challoner from giving to the world information on some subject. What could that information have been? Had it to do with lost Atlantis? Had it to do with the sacred urn? Then why should anyone wish this to be suppressed? I confess I cannot get round that puzzling point.

“Then, again, there is the attack upon Nipper to consider. If Challoner was killed—and he was killed—if the cases were successfully removed, then why did one of them return to the scene of the crime? Why—unless it be that they have not yet accomplished all they set out to do? What more do they wish to carry out? Is there yet something here which they are after? Might one of them have come back to try to get possession of the instrument which was used to compass Challoner's death? There seems little else, unless there be points which I have missed, and, of course, that is always possible.

“How long those who tunnelled this passage lived in this house it is hard to say. It should not be difficult to find out, though, and I shall do so without delay. Then, too, there must have been a strong motive why the black-skinned individual who made the attack on Nipper should return to the scene. He must have known what a risk he was running, yet even then he made a most daring attack. Will he return again? It is possible, and, in case he does, we shall be prepared. One of us must remain on guard here, and that one must be Nipper. I shall lose no time in going on to Scotland Yard, for now the case must pass to the police. Yet I swear by the blood of poor Professor Mostyn that I will not rest until I have run down the perpetrators of this deed and brought them to justice.”

Little did Nelson Lee dream, as he registered that vow, how difficult it would be to carry out his words. Lee got to his feet now and made a motion for Nipper to follow him upstairs. In the kitchen he paused, and turned to the lad.

“I want you to stay here, Nipper. I want you to keep yourself concealed about the place somewhere and watch for the return of the man who

attacked you this morning. This time be prepared for him, and, if possible, hold him. If another attack is made upon you do not hesitate to shoot. We are dealing with a desperate crowd, and only such measures as I suggest will cope with them.

"Myself, I shall go on to Scotland Yard and see Inspector Brooks. In view of what has occurred, I do not think we need worry about the technicality of taking possession of this house as we have done. I shall go in to see the servants next door, then send for the doctor and the police. You may expect me back here this afternoon, and by then I may have some definite plan of campaign outlined.

"Be on your guard each moment. It is just possible that some of them may return, for there seems to be something drawing them back here. If they do so we shall try to catch them. I shall have Inspector Brooks fix up warrants which may come in handy."

"Where had I better hide, guv'nor?" asked the lad.

Lee gazed out through the window for a moment, then replied:

"I shall leave that to you, my lad. I would suggest that you keep your eye over the whole place. Perhaps it would be as well if you moved about a good deal, though be sure and watch the garden closely. It is most likely that if they do return they will come by the lane at the rear of the house."

Lee took his departure now, and Nipper watched him while he crossed the garden to the dividing wall and hauled himself up over the fence. Then he disappeared from view, and before starting about his duties Nipper made a careful examination of his automatic.

"I'll be ready for him this time," he muttered, as he slipped the weapon back into his pocket. "If he wants to try any of his bolo business again, let him do so. He'll get a little bit of lead in him for his pains. Now, I fancy I had better slip out and have a look round the garden."

He opened the door leading to the outer kitchen, then passed out to the garden. It was a smaller garden than the one behind Dr. Challoner's house, but was filled by a thicker growth, which gave the lad plenty of cover as he dodged along towards the lane at the rear.

He worked the whole place methodically, but could find no traces of those for whom he was watching. When he was quite satisfied that the garden was empty of all human presence but his own, he made his way back to the house and decided on a tour of the upper rooms again.

"Might possibly come upon something which we missed in our other search," he muttered.

Suiting the action to the words, Nipper passed through the dining-room to the front hall and mounted the staircase to the first floor. There he turned down towards the suite which occupied most of that floor, and, opening the door of the sitting-room, entered the room.

It was a large, well-furnished apartment, the furniture being of mahogany and the decorations of a high order. There were some good prints on the walls, but the lad noted with a sharp eye that they were not of any particular value. In fact, they were of too little value to be in keeping with the quality of the furniture. He and Lee had already made a cursory examination of the room, though it had not been done with the fineness of detail Lee would devote to a room in which he hoped to find a definite clue. They had peered into the drawers of the desk which stood in one corner, they had scrutinised the furniture and ornaments, but that was all.

Now the lad set himself to go over the place with a care for detail which would have done credit to Lee himself. His first care was the heavier furniture, and after a careful examination of the several pieces in the room he turned his attention to the ornaments.

On the mantel over the fireplace there were several pieces of china and

some vases of a mediocre type which, like the pictures, somewhat surprised the lad. Carefully he went over them, peering into them with the aid of a powerful glass, and discovering on the bottom of each a tiny film of dust—proof that they had held no water and flowers for some time at least.

High up on the mantel, on the very top shelf in fact, he came upon a vase larger than the rest, which he knew in a moment was of a far different quality.

It was an old Chinese affair, and though Nipper was not deeply versed in Chinese porcelain, Nelson Lee was a keen critic of the stuff, and the lad had naturally picked up a smattering of information.

After a close examination of the vase he knew that he held in his hand a product of the Ming dynasty of China, and, though he could not be certain, he felt confident the piece was genuine and not a copy.

He subjected it to the same examination he had given the others, but look as he would he could discover not the slightest trace of dust in the bottom of it.

The shelf on which it had stood had been well out of easy reach, and if there had been flowers placed on the shelf it struck the lad as more probable that they would have been put on some of the vases more easy of access.

He laid the vase down with care, and, catching hold of a chair, placed it in front of the mantel. Standing up on it, he found his eyes just above the level of the shelf on which the old Chinese vase had stood, and the first thing he noticed was that the shelf was covered with a thick coating of dust.

He drew out his pocket-glass once more, and began to examine the shelf more closely. It was then he came upon a peculiar thing.

Although the shelf had been covered with a thick coating of dust, he could make out a distinct circle where the vase had rested, and it was plain to him that the circle, too, was dust-coated, meaning that the vase had been set on the shelf while it was thick with dust.

That indicated to the lad that the vase had not rested there long, and remembering how free the bottom of the vase had been from dust he was only confirmed in this opinion.

Getting down from the chair, he picked up the vase again and subjected it to a further examination. It was a large affair as vases go, being a good sixteen inches in height, not counting a high, lacquered base on which it stood.

The base was perhaps eight or nine inches in height, and now, as he made a more detailed examination of the affair, Nipper noticed that the bottom of the vase sloped very gradually in towards the centre, and, when measured carefully, the centre seemed to drop down below the level of the top of the base.

Yet, though he spent a good deal of time over the affair, he could find nothing about it which would suggest anything which might have a bearing on what he sought, and he was just about to place it back on the shelf again when suddenly he stood rigid—listening.

He had heard a noise somewhere in the house, and now, as he stood there, he heard it again. It was like nothing so much as a deep-drawn sigh.

Nipper set the vase back softly, and, putting the chair back where it had been, tiptoed towards the door. It was ajar a foot or so, and, pulling it open a little further, he crept out into the hall. He could see nothing there, so, making his way stealthily along, he dropped to his hands and knees at the head of the stairs and waited.

There is a something about an invisible human presence in the darkness of night which is eerie and nerve-racking to a degree, but with the sun of high noon blazing in the sky, with the silence which creeps over an empty

house at that hour, there is something uncanny which makes the flesh creep at no other time.

So it was with Nipper. That there was a human being close to him he felt certain. Yet who it was or what its purpose there he could not guess. Visions of the black face that had peered at him from the shelter of the trees that morning rose before him, and in the dim light of the hall he could almost picture the sinister hatred which had leaped out of the eyes at him.

Then he heard that sighing sound again, then followed the soft closing of a door somewhere below. A deep, awful silence now fell over the house. Five minutes passed, and not a sound broke the stillness. Nipper still crouched at the head of the stairs, and, as the strain of the waiting took hold of him, his heart pounded like a sledge-hammer. He knew that he was not the only one who was crouching, listening. He knew that there was at least one more presence, perhaps two, in that house of silence.

Then from below there rose a soft, rustling sound, and almost before the lad knew it there was a figure ascending the stairs. He dropped flat on his face, and rolled over softly. When he knew he must be out of the line of vision of anyone ascending the stairs, he got quickly to his feet and tiptoed back along the hall to the door of the sitting-room.

Slipping into the room, he looked for a place to conceal himself, and catching sight of a huge couch against the opposite wall, he made for it.

He had just squeezed in under it, and had allowed the leather fringe to drop back into place, when, peering out from beneath the strands of the fringe, he saw a foot and part of a trousered leg in the doorway. Then the other foot appeared, and the lad could see the owner tiptoeing across the room towards the mantelpiece.

With infinite caution Nipper craned his head to try and see the face of the man who had entered the room, but he dared not risk discovery, and was forced to be content with a view which extended up no farther than the other's knees.

He could watch the movement of the feet, however, and took in every detail of their appearance. He noted that the shoes were of light tan leather, and very pointed. He saw, further, that they were blatantly new, and something in the cheap-looking cloth of which the trousers were made caused him to think that they, too, were new. He watched the man while he approached the fireplace, then he saw the heels lift until the man was balancing himself on his toes.

Nipper could imagine him straining up to one of the upper shelves of the mantelpiece, and then somehow he knew that the newcomer had entered the room to get the very vase at which he had been looking. The heels came down to the floor now, and as the toes turned away from him Nipper took a chance and spread the leather fringe of the couch apart still more. Peering out now he could see the whole figure of the other, and it did not need the black skin of the neck, nor the black, oily-looking hair, to tell him that he was looking at a man of Arab blood. He was standing just by the fireplace with the big Chinese vase in his hand, his head bent in an attitude of listening, both hands gripping the vase. Then so quickly did it happen that Nipper's heart pounded with the shock of it. The door flew open, and into the room appeared a hand—a white hand which stretched round the jamb of the door—a white hand which held a small but businesslike-looking revolver levelled straight at the man who stood by the fireplace. Then came a voice, low, clear, and menacing:

"Drop that vase!" it said curtly. "Drop it at once, or I fire!"

Nipper could see the man braced as though to meet a great shock; then, with a sudden twist, he bent almost double and made for the door. At the same instant the revolver cracked once, twice, thrice.



With a lightning-like motion, Nelson Lee gripped the twisting neck of the thing and lifted it up. Its eyes glistened wickedly and its mouth opened. In that instant the detective saw the repulsive, poisonous mouth and the two teeth, which were, as well as he could judge, about the same distance apart as the two tiny marks he had seen on the hand of the dead man.

He knew, if he but tried, that those two teeth would just fit those marks, and he knew that in his hand he held the thing which had caused Dr. Challoner's death.

(See page 9.)

Nipper saw the man stagger, recover himself, stagger again; then a great stream of blood leapt from his wrist as he went down to his knees. The great vase flew from his hand, struck the floor, bounced, and rolled along, then brought up against the wall with a crash, and the next moment the whole affair had gone to pieces, revealing to the lad's gaze the startling truth. It had been but a beautifully made shell for another and smaller vase. From the heap of debris there rolled out on to the carpet a dazzling crystal urn from which the light was thrown back in scintillating brilliancy.

It was the loveliest thing the lad had ever seen, and as he took in the details of it he knew he was gazing upon the sacred urn of the priests of the lost continent of Atlantis.

He could see the great crystal bowl of the vase, the golden snake which twined round the crystal and emerald stem, the triple-terraced base—all that lovely piece of work which, if rumour were true, had come down to the present uninjured from a dead and gone civilisation.

It had all happened so quickly Nipper had scarcely had time to realise it, and before he could make a move the white hand came still more into the room, a wrist and arm appeared—an arm clad with the sleeve of a woman's jacket. Then the revolver was caught by another hand which showed, the crystal urn was snatched up, the arm was withdrawn, and the next moment Nipper heard the swish, swish of garments and the pad of retreating footsteps. Now he shook the spell of the shock from him, and, crawling out from beneath the couch, got hastily to his feet.

One look he took at the prostrate and groaning man on the floor, recognising in him the same who had thrown the silver-nobbed bolas at him earlier in the day. Then he was off down the hall at top speed, reaching the staircase just as he heard a door slam below somewhere. He took the stairs three at a time, turning at the bottom and dashing along towards the dining-room. Through that he went at top speed, jerked open the door leading to the corridor, and thence to the kitchen. He reached the kitchen in time to hear the rear door of the house slam, then he was racing for it and out into the garden.

He chose a path leading straight down the garden towards the lane at the rear, but even as he ran he heard the sudden clatter of gears, and the next minute, as he jerked open the gate to the lane, he was just in time to see the rear wheels of a motor-car turn the corner of the lane. He ran up the lane at top speed, but he had gone less than fifty yards when he drew up. He knew how hopeless it was to continue as he was going, and, remembering the man back in the house, he turned to retrace his steps. He walked rapidly, closing the garden gate after him, and making straight for the house. Up the front stairs he went, and along to the sitting-room. Then, as he stood on the threshold of the room, he received his second shock, for the room was empty.

Of the man who had lain there, wounded and groaning, there was no sign, only a pool of blood marking the place where he had been. And even as he stood there Nipper heard the sharp grinding of gears out in front. He hurried to the window, and, jerking up the blind, saw a covered car driving down the street at top speed. Baulked twice, the lad gave an exclamation of annoyance, and, turning, began to gather together the pieces of the broken Chinese vase.

Things had been happening there which he knew only too well had a deep bearing on the case which was so puzzling his master, yet beyond knowing that the Chinese vase had been not the genuine object he had thought it, but merely a cleverly fashioned copy covering the priceless sacred urn, he had achieved nothing. It remained to be seen if Lee would be able to make

more out of it, and, realising how urgent it was that his master should know as soon as possible what had transpired, he made his way to the ground floor in order to think up some way of sending a message to Lee.

He finally decided to cross to the adjoining house and telephone to Scotland Yard, and was just opening the front door of the house to do so, when a big car swept up the street, and in the tonneau he recognised Nelson Lee and Inspector Brooks.

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee Sees Light—An Inspiration—Its Result.

NELSON LEE and Nipper were in the sitting-room of the deserted house discussing the startling events which had happened while Lee was at the Yard. Nipper had related all that had happened, producing the shattered fragments of the Chinese vase and showing Lee the bloodstain on the carpet to prove his words. Nelson Lee had listened without comment to all the lad had said; he had examined the stain, and had carefully scrutinised the fragments of the vase. Now he was standing by the window, pondering on what they might indicate. Inspector Brooks was below in the cellar, with one of his men, examining the tunnel which had been dug through to the Challoner house. He had already made an examination of the two bodies in the other house, and, with the information which Lee had given him, was applying the ordinary methods towards a solution of the matter. Lee, on his part, was working by his own system, and it must be confessed that what Nipper had told him had not tended to simplify matters.

Yet somewhere in that fog of mystery he knew there existed the one thread of circumstance which, if he could but grasp it, would lead him on through the maze to the goal of solution. His mind had been busy with the case ever since he had left Nipper, and now he was endeavouring to connect up these new facts with those he already knew. He had felt somehow that there would be a return to the house by one of the schemers who had been the cause of the death of Dr. Challoner. It had puzzled him to explain the cause of the presence of the man in the garden that morning.

On the face of it their scheme had been fully carried out, and there seemed no reason why any of them should return to the place. But return they had, and not only the man who had assaulted Nipper, but a woman as well. Nor did she seem to be an accomplice. On the contrary, she had come not as a friend but as an enemy. That which Nipper had witnessed had proved that. What did it mean?

Lee collected the facts which he knew, and laid them out in mental array. Firstly, he had the murder of Dr. Challoner to consider. That he knew to be a cold-blooded, fiendish crime premeditated and carried out by a master hand. What did it indicate?

The instrument which had been used bore all the earmarks of having been the brain-child of one who had known Challoner in Morocco. That seemed a really definite thing to go upon. What next was there? There was the removal of the cases from the strong-room. That, too, had been a piece of extraordinary ingenuity. Only a master hand could have cut out the wall of the strong-room as it had been cut out and place in it a false wall of such perfection.

It had taken Lee with a powerful glass to discover the truth, and then had followed what he could only class as a most disastrous occurrence—the death of Professor Mostyn. It was all too plain that the cases had been taken from the strong-room along the tunnel to the cellar of the house in which

they now were. From there it would have been a comparatively simple matter to remove them by van.

But what was the meaning of the Chinese vase? It had stood on the top shelf of the mantelpiece in that deserted house, and if Nipper was right in saying that it had concealed the sacred vase for which they sought—the vase which in the opinion of scientists and collectors would be a priceless affair—then it was hard to explain why it had been left there as it had. Following that, the black-skinned individual, who had so daringly attacked Nipper, had entered the empty house.

Now there arose a point which puzzled Lee. So far he had gone on the theory that the whole affair had been the work of one power—one brain. Was it, though? Was the hand which had struck down Dr. Challoner the same which had dug, or helped to dig, the tunnel? If so, what did the entry of an unknown woman into the case mean? She, too, had entered the empty house, and had shot down the Arab, taking from him the vase which had evidently been the cause of his presence in the house.

Nipper had told his story carefully and with every attention to detail. He had related how the Arab had crept up the stairs with the utmost caution. Would he have done that if he had been certain of what the house held?

If the house had been hired by those who had killed Dr. Challoner, and if the Arab were connected with that murderous crew, then why had he acted as he had? Wouldn't it have been more natural for him to walk boldly up the stairs and into the room? Then again, take his presence in the that morning. If—and it seemed this was a safe inference—if he had been hanging about the garden merely to watch his chance to get into the house and get possession of the vase, then why hadn't he taken it in the morning? Why had he been concealed in the branches of a tree near the dividing wall?

In his mind Lee could picture that tree, and now he realised that one concealed in its branches would be able to keep a surveillance of the deserted house. Had the Arab thought there was still someone in it? Had he, in fact, never been in the house until that day? Were there two forces at work?

Take a hypothesis. It might not work out to any solid result, but it could be tried. Supposing the Arab had been of those who had struck down Dr. Challoner? Suppose further that the doctor had been followed from Morocco by them, and that they had watched their chance to strike him down and then to get possession of that which they sought? Might it not serve as an explanation to suppose that not only did they wish to get possession of the material which the doctor had brought back from Morocco, but also to kill him on account of knowledge he might carry in his brain?

Then to go a step farther. Suppose that someone else who had no connection with the Arab crew had information about the priceless material which the doctor had brought back from Morocco? It might even be that the doctor had brought with him the sacred urn of lost Atlantis.

Certainly that was a prize to tempt the cleverest of thieves. Then to continue this second force in the case, why wasn't it reasonable to suppose that the house had been taken because it was so close to that of the doctor? To dig the tunnel proper would have been comparatively easy. The wall of the strong-room would be the ticklish part, but it had been done nevertheless. How, if the completion of the tunnel and the wall had coincided with the murder of the doctor, and while he fell the victim of the Arab crew the other force in the case cunningly managed to get possession of the dozen cases of material. If that were so, then the Arab crew would have accomplished but a portion of their purpose. They would have been

outwitted by still another schemer, and discovering that would not tend to please them.

They would move heaven and earth to discover what had become of the cases, and considering some of the points which already obtruded from the case, Lee could see that it would not take them long to realise that they had been fooled. On that basis he must consider that the murder of Dr. Challoner was the work of one lot, while the theft of the cases from the strong-room had been the work of another—meaning that one of the lot would be the hunter, the other the hunted, even as they both were fugitives from the police. Then who could have stolen the cases? Nipper had said it was a woman who shot down the Arab, and from the wreckage of the Chinese vase had snatched the sacred urn. It apparently had not broken. But of the woman's features Nipper had seen nothing. He had seen a white hand, a wrist and an arm. If he could but have caught a single glimpse of the features! Her voice, he had told Lee, was educated and refined. The digging of the tunnel and the construction of the false wall of the strong-room had been sufficient to tell Lee that no ordinary brain was behind the affair.

But if it were a woman who had got away with the cases and the sacred urn, then who could it be? What woman in the criminal world could bring off such a thing? And what was the sacred urn doing in that house quite unguarded?

Nelson Lee thought he could explain that. Working on the hypothesis he had chosen, he could imagine the cases being dragged along the tunnel from the strong-room to the cellar of the adjoining house. He could, in fancy, see them being opened one after the other until at last the Chinese vase which concealed the sacred urn was brought to light.

Then the natural question would come—how best to guard it. Presuming that the woman knew the Arab crew were after the cases and the urn, she would cast about her for some means of protecting it from them. She would risk getting the cases of material away, but in case the enemy raided the van and made a daring attempt to outwit her—in case they might even succeed—she would take good care that they did not get possession of the sacred urn.

Therefore she would place it boldly on the shelf in the sitting-room, leaving it there until she had got the cases safely away. She would then return for it, and take it to a place of safety. Was that really what had happened? It seemed a reasonable theory, and yet Nelson Lee little knew how close to the actual truth he was. In that case the woman would be in possession of all the material which had been stolen.

The Arab crew would still be after it, and Lee—Lee would be after both parties. So strongly did the theory appeal to Lee that he chose it above all others to work upon. There was so little he could put his finger on that he must choose something to use as a working basis, and this he would build on until it were proven either fact or useless hypothesis.

He turned away from the window with his jaw set grimly. Nipper, watching him, knew the meaning of that expression, and waited for what Lee might have to say, knowing that his master had reached a definite decision.

"Nipper," said Lee curtly, "I have figured out a theory based on what I myself have seen and what you have told me. There has occurred to me a thought and I have decided to follow it up. I want you to remain here for the present. See what Inspector Brooks finds out, and discover what line he proposes following. Myself, I am going along to see what I can discover. You will return to Gray's Inn Road not later than three this afternoon, and wait there for me. If I have not returned by four, then come along to the shop of Akbad, the Arab."

Nipper's eyes widened.

"Do you think you will find out anything from him, guv'nor?" he asked.

Lee shrugged.

"I can't say," he replied. "Akbad knows Morocco as few men know it; also, he is indebted to me for a little matter. It has just occurred to me that perhaps he may be able to tell me something about the Atlas Mountains. I shall stop on my way to have an inquiry put through about this house. I should reach the shop of the Arab not later than half-past two, and get back to Baker Street by three."

After a few more words to the lad, Nelson Lee took his departure. He walked as far as Lord's, where he took a taxi, telling the man to drive to Oxford Street, for the shop of Akbad, the Arab, was just off that busy artery.

Nor did he dream as he went along that a black-skinned man, with a bandaged wrist and looking strangely odd in ill-fitting European clothes, was close behind him in another taxi.

In Oxford Street, Lee dismissed the taxi and set out to walk to the shop of the Arab. In a narrow street in Soho he came to it, and opening the door, stepped into the midst of a collection of Moroccan, Egyptian and Syrian antiques which would have gladdened the soul of the Khedive himself.

A small Arab boy stood behind a sort of counter rubbing away at an old inlaid chair which had come from Damascus, though of customers there was no sign.

He looked up as Lee entered, and two sets of perfectly white teeth showed in a smile of recognition. He knew the man who had entered, for had he not more than once come to talk to his master, and had not his master treated the effendi with marked respect.

He laid down his work at once, and, coming forward, salaamed low.

"May Allah preserve you, effendi," he said, in a high, boyish tone. "Do you come to seek my master?"

Lee nodded.

"Yes. Is he in?"

"He takes coffee at present, effendi. I shall go and tell him you are here."

He drew aside a curious sort of string curtain which hung at the back of the shop, and Lee could hear the slosh, slosh of his slippers as he went along a passage.

There was silence for a little. A few minutes later he heard the lad coming back, and suddenly the string curtain was thrust aside to reveal him, bowing low.

"Effendi, my master will see you at once. He craves that you will honour him by taking coffee with him."

Lee thanked the lad, and made to follow him. It was quite true, as Lee had said, that Akbad, the Arab, owed him his gratitude. Some time before the Arab had got into difficulties with the law, more through ignorance than through any desire to do wrong. Lee, who had then been but a casual customer at the antique shop, had drawn his tale from him, and, as was his wont, kindly offered to take up the Arab's case.

He had settled matters in a very short time, and since then the gratitude of Akbad had known no bounds. Yet never before had he been invited into the private apartment of the Arab.

He stepped behind the string curtain and followed the boy along a passage, at the end of which was another heavy bead curtain. This the boy held aside, and Lee stepped within a dimly-lighted room.

It was furnished in pure Oriental style, and reclining on a low divan, smoking a hubble-bubble pipe, lay a loose-robed Arab. A brazier burned

close at hand, and by its fitful light Lee could see the shadows and hollows of the man's cast of countenance.

Of a notoriously handsome race of men, Akbad was himself handsome; his high forehead and thin, aquiline features giving an expression of fine intelligence to his face.

He laid down the tube of the hubble-bubble as Lee entered, and, rising, bowed low.

"Effendi, effendi," he said, in low, musical tones, "I am honoured. Will the effendi take coffee?"

He clapped his hands as he spoke, and another curtain at the rear of the room was thrust aside to admit a boy bearing a tray, on which reposed two tiny cups of coffee as the Arabs serve it.

At the invitation of the Arab, Lee sat down on the divan and took a cup of the coffee. From a great box on the floor he helped himself to an Egyptian cigarette, and not until he had drawn the first puff and sipped the coffee did he speak.

"Akbad," he said slowly, and holding the eye of the Arab, "you and I are friends, are we not?"

The Arab revealed no surprise at the strange question. Instead he bowed his head.

"I am the effendi's servant to command," he replied. "The effendi has made me his debtor for life. He saved me when I knew not what to do; he made it possible for me to remain here. What the effendi wishes, I will do."

"Then you think I want you to do something?" asked Lee, with a little smile.

"Certainly—and may Allah give me strength to do it!" responded the Arab—"else why did the effendi ask if I were his servant?"

Lee, who followed the workings of the Oriental mind and appreciated the shrewd insight which had made the race the secretive one it was, smiled again.

"You are quite right, Akbad," he said slowly. "I have come to you to ask you one or two questions. Tell me first, though—you are very intimate with Morocco, are you not?"

"Effendi, I know Morocco as few men know it. I know the coast of Africa from Jaffa to Tangier. I know Morocco from Tangier to Fez, and on to Timbuktu."

"How long is it since you were there?" asked Lee.

The Arab was silent for a little; then he replied:

"It is now three years, effendi. I went back there three years ago. Before that I spent many years there."

"Did you get up into the Atlas Mountains at all?" asked Lee.

The Arab shot a sudden quick look at Lee, though his tone was level as he answered.

"I have been there, effendi," he said. "It is a place to avoid. Allah preserve us!"

Nelson Lee set down his cup of coffee, and leaned forward. Gazing straight into the other's eyes, he said:

"Tell me, Akbad, did you ever hear out there of a Dr. Challoner?"

The Arab, for the first time, seemed to lose some of his composure. He gave a quick look about him, then, in a low, rapid tone, he spoke.

"Effendi, may Allah protect you. I owe you more than I can ever repay, but I beg you will not ask me that. If I have ever heard of this man, let me forget it."

Lee glanced at the Arab curiously. His face had gone a sickly purple, and he was fairly quivering with fear. What could it be that had so affected him?

"Look here, Akbad, that won't do, you know," he said curtly. "What is the matter?"

"Effendi, you have done much for me, or I would not even speak of the matter to you. If you seek to know anything of this man, do not do so any longer."

"But this is not Morocco, my friend," responded Lee. "This is England. Do you know that Dr. Challoner has returned to England, and do you know that he has been murdered?"

"He was a marked man," muttered the Arab.

Suddenly he bent forward until his face was close to Lee's.

"Listen, effendi," he whispered; "I will tell you what I dare. I trust you, and I know you will never betray me. Dr. Challoner went to Morocco years ago. He went into the Atlas Mountains, of which you spoke, seeking for many things. He discovered some things, effendi, and many others he guessed.

"But there are those in the Atlas Mountains, effendi, who know all. They watched this white doctor while he worked, and they were angry. They have been there since time was, effendi. Who they are, how they got there, we Arabs know not. They are of us, and yet not of us. Their skin is like ours, and their features almost the same, but they are not Arabs, nor do they follow the teachings of the prophets.

"They live in the Atlas Mountains, effendi, and there they do many things. They were there before the Arabs knew Morocco. They were there before the Moors swept into Europe. They were there before Rome ruled the world. They were there before the building of Carthage.

"You have read of Æneas, the hero of Troy, effendi—the Trojan hero who left burning Troy when the Greeks sacked it, and sailed away across the sea looking for a new land for himself and his followers?

"You have heard how he stopped at Carthage while it was still building. You have heard how he lingered there with Queen Dido. Effendi, the legend has it in Morocco that these strange people—there is only a handful of them, effendi—who live in the Atlas Mountains in their great stronghold, are descended from the followers of Æneas.

"But then, again, effendi, we have it that they were there long, long before that. Some whisper that they have always been there. And, effendi, they know all. Though they seek not to exhibit the marvels which abound in this country, they know of them—they knew of them before they were even dreamed of here, and they know many things of which you and I do not even suspect. It was their secrets which Dr. Challoner stumbled upon. Therefore I beg you not to ask me of them, effendi, for I am your debtor. I must do as you ask me, but I fear them."

Lee's brows were wrinkled with thought. It was difficult for him to catch just what the Arab was driving at. Allowing for the long-winded way in which he told his tale, Lee could get only a vague idea of what he meant.

He spoke of some people who lived in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. He spoke definitely of Dr. Challoner, and he appeared to know quite well about the doctor being in Morocco.

Of this people he spoke with awe. That they were a tribe descended from very ancient inhabitants of Morocco seemed evident, but why should Akbad hold them in such fear?

Although they were not followers of the Prophet, he did not speak of them as infidels. Rather did he confess that they were all wise.

Was there, by any chance, truth in what he said?

Was it possible that Challoner had roused the deadly enmity of some tribe in the Atlas Mountains? Certainly the means by which Challoner

had died proved conclusively that the instrument of death had come from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco.

And it had been an instrument conceived by no ignorant Arab. On the contrary. It had been the work of a subtle and intelligent mind.

So far it seemed that the evidence which Lee had come upon would fit in with what Akbad said. But what did he mean? What could he mean?

"You speak strangely, Akbad," he said slowly. "You speak of a strange people which lives in the Atlas Mountains, and you show fear of them. Who are these people? What are these people, Akbad?"

The Arab gave a shiver; then, bending forward still more, he opened his lips to speak. But that was all. No sooner did they part than there came a sudden swishing sound through the air, something hurtled over Lee's head, and the next moment he saw a long, black, snake-like thing strike the Arab full in the throat, and a series of bright flashes followed as a twin pair of silver balls flew madly round and round.

Lee was still gaping in amazement at them when they stopped; then, as the Arab fell forward, clawing at his throat and making ghastly noises in his throat, Lee saw what had happened.

A silver nobbed bolas had come through the air, and had entwined him in a deadly grip, even as Nipper had been struck earlier in the day.

At the moment this dawned on Lee, there came another swishing sound. Like lightning, Lee threw himself backwards just as another long, snaky cord flashed over his head. It struck the divan close to him, falling to the carpeted floor with a little tinkle of the silver knobs, as they struck each other.

The next instant Lee was on his feet, his automatic drawn ready for business. Turning swiftly, he was just in time to catch a glimpse of a dark face framed between the meshes of the bead curtain.

A pair of deep-set eyes, full of hatred, were gazing at him venomously. Then the curtain parted, and there came a flash as a long-bladed knife was hurled straight at Lee's throat.

Lee fired on the instant. The automatic roared out even as he dodged the flying knife, then the bead curtain dropped, and he heard the sound of flying feet as his assailant fled down the passage.

Lee was after him as quickly as possible, and, thrusting aside the bead strings of the curtain, he tore along the passage.

He saw the string curtain at the other end jerked aside, and saw the figure of the fugitive dash through, then the curtain dropped again, and Lee lost sight of him.

But only for a moment, for, running hard, he burst through into the shop, and, leaping over a medley of old furniture, came up with his man just as the quarry was opening the street door.

Lee did not wait to argue. Instead, he clubbed his weapon, and as the other turned on him with a snarl, Lee brought the butt down with all his strength.

The fellow went down as though he had been pole-axed, and only then, as he bent over him did Lee see that it was the same man whom Nipper had described to him.

On his feet were very new and very pointed light tan shoes; his limbs were clad with new and cheaply fashioned trousers.

Seeing that the man was safe for the time being, Lee straightened up and raced back along the passage. He burst into the room where he had been taking coffee, and there, squirming and twisting on the floor in the last throes of strangulation, was Akbad, the Arab.

Lee thrust his hand into his pocket, and taking out his clasp-knife opened the blade. The next moment the twisted black cord fell from the Arab's

neck in a dozen pieces, and Lee was supporting the gasping and choking man.

"You'll be all right in a few minutes," he said soothingly. "Take it easy. I have settled with our friend all right."

Akbad shivered and groaned.

"It matters not now, effendi," he gasped. "I am a marked man. You, too, do they know. They will kill us as certain as Allah watches us. The days of the effendi are numbered; the days of Akbad the Arab draw short."

"But listen, effendi. It can matter little now, and you have done much for me. He who was here just now is of the people of which I spoke. I know why you have sought me. They, too, sought me when they first came to England, and I was forced to do their bidding. Yet, powerful as they are, they have not yet succeeded in that which they set out to accomplish."

"They have killed Dr. Challoner for what he knew. In Morocco the doctor joined their brotherhood. He learned all the secrets of their craft. Then, when he discovered what he sought, he escaped from the stronghold, and with him went certain things which these people value more than all the world."

"They have killed Challoner, but not yet have they succeeded in getting the things he took with him. Another has been at work, and while they plotted to kill the things were stolen. But I—I, Akbad, know who has them. Listen, effendi! Bend low. Have you ever heard of the Black Wolf?"

"Good heavens! The woman of whom Nipper told me!" exclaimed Lee. "Yes—yes, Akbad, go on!" he said quickly. "What about the Black Wolf?"

"The Black Wolf, effendi, has the precious thing which is sought. You have just a chance, for they, too, know where the Black Wolf is. Go to the C—— Hotel. It is not far. There the Black Wolf is to be found."

"But you must move quickly. They have marked you down and have marked me down. I will seek my own safety, you must seek yours; but if they kill me this night, effendi, I will yet tell you what I know. Akbad will not die in your debt. Now go. I shall be all right."

Lee would have wished to stay with the Arab, but he realised full well how precious the minutes were, so murmuring his thanks he allowed Akbad to sink back on the divan, and hurrying along the passage, came into the shop.

There he met with a surprise, for the man he had left on the floor by the door was no longer there.

Lee ran forward, and as he did so he saw a heap lying behind one of the pieces of furniture. He bent over it and saw that it was the Arab boy, bound and gagged.

A few strokes of Lee's knife liberated him, and as he got to his feet, murmuring thanks to Lee and Allah all in the same breath, Lee caught him by the shoulder.

"The man who was by the door," he said; "did you see him?"

"Yes—yes, effendi," whispered the boy with a look of fear in his eyes. "He is there."

He pointed towards the counter, and Lee, hurrying to it, bent over. There he saw the black-skinned man whom he had knocked senseless, struggling about on his hands and knees.

He was in an attitude which caused Lee to spring over the counter, but even as he did so the Arab turned round and gazed at him with sightless

eyes. At the same moment he thrust something into his mouth, and the next instant he was squirming on the floor in the throes of violent death.

"Suicide!" muttered Lee, as he caught hold of the man and turned him over. "My heavens! What a price this sacred urn is exacting."

The man's struggles stopped now, and as he fell back Nelson Lee drew away.

"Later—later," he muttered. "There is no time to stop now. I will tell the police and let them take charge of him."

He made for the door as he spoke, but scarcely had he laid his hand on it when it opened from the other side, and Nipper appeared.

Lee caught him by the shoulder and whirled him about.

"Just in time, Nipper!" he exclaimed. "Come with me."

He took the astonished lad by the arm and started off down the street at a quick pace.

"We are going to the C—— Hotel," he said as they hurried along. "It is not far. Be ready for anything, my lad. Things have been moving since I left you. I know a good deal about the sacred urn now. It has already cost another life. And I know the woman whose arm you saw come in the door at the deserted house."

"Whose was it, guv'nor?" asked the lad eagerly.

"The arm of the Black Wolf," replied Lee curtly. "I will tell you all about it later. Here we are at our street. Quickened your pace, my lad. The Black Wolf should be at the C—— Hotel."

Before the little hotel Lee drew up. It was a very quiet hostelry in a backwater of Soho, and Lee knew it as the rendezvous for many foreigners. Why the Black Wolf had chosen it he could not guess, nor did he care. The thing which interested him was that he had found her lair, and with luck he would yet put his hands on the sacred urn.

Hurrying into the hotel followed by Nipper, he stopped in the tiny office which was presided over by a stout Frenchwoman.

Lee's sharp eyes noted that she seemed upset over something, but paying no attention to her manner, he said curtly:

"Madame, I seek one who stays here—a woman. She is young, and her name—I cannot say. Perhaps it is Miton—Mademoiselle Miton. Is she here?"

The Frenchwoman gazed at Lee in terror.

"Anozzer—anozzer!" she cried. "La! la! la! What iss it all? Anozzer. Mademoiselle was here zis morning, but now, alas! she is gone I know not where."

"What do you mean?" asked Lee, catching her by the arm.

"Monsieur, it is awful. Not one hour ago, two men—oh! black like zias"—and she pointed to her skirt—"zey come here and zey go upstairs to ze room where mademoiselle pack her box. Five minutes—ten minutes pass, zen mademoiselle she rush down ze stairs and throw me some gold. She carry one little bag only, she rush out of ze hotel like ziss"—and here the stout Frenchwoman gave a little run towards the door—"zen ze two men wiz ze skins of ebony zey rush down and out of ze hotel. I see zem no more, but I go up to ze room of mademoiselle, and find it all—oh! such a terrible state. You are of ze police perhaps, monsieur?"

"I am here in their interests," replied Lee curtly. "I wish to examine this room of which you speak."

"Sairtainly, monsieur," replied the woman promptly. "Will monsieur come wis me?"

She came out of the little office as she spoke, and Lee and Nipper followed her up a narrow flight of stairs to the floor above.

She paused in front of a door, then threw it open, and Lee stepped into a room which was in the greatest state of disorder.

He dashed in and quickly turned over some of the articles. Here and there he came upon something which told him beyond all doubt that the articles were the property of the Black Wolf, but of anything of real value there was not a sign.

"A hurried get away," he muttered, turning to Nipper. "She was attacked here by two of the Arab crew. That seems certain. I suppose she met them with that drug of hers, which would hold them paralysed for five or six minutes. That would give her time to pack the few things of value which she had with her and to get out. They came, too, a few minutes later, and, of course, followed her. We are, it seems, too late. But we shall not give up. I shall have Inspector Brooks throw out the police net, and we shall try to make a haul of some sort, though the Black Wolf will be well on her way already, I suppose. But come, my lad. We will go back to Akbad. He may be able to tell us something."

Lee turned, and telling the woman to leave the room untouched until the police should arrive, led the way downstairs. Back to the shop of Akbad the Arab they went, and opening the door, passed in, closing it after them.

But even as they stood there they sensed something amiss about the place. With a quick premonition that something was wrong, Lee hurried forward to the counter, and bending over it, looked for the body of the Arab who had committed suicide.

He called aloud for Akbad, but no reply came, and with a word to Nipper, he dashed along the passage. Into the coffee-room he went, then drew back with a sharp exclamation.

It was in a state of the wildest disorder, and from one end to the other showed signs that Akbad had made a hurried flight.

"Driven out by his fear of the murderers of Dr. Challoner," muttered Lee as he stood in the midst of the disordered furniture. "That settles that. We shall have to work on our own then, my lad. The Arab crew has escaped us, though one of them has paid the price. The Black Wolf has stepped in and taken the booty. Akbad, the one man who might have helped us, has fled in fear. Challoner is dead—murdered. Mostyn is dead. We are marked down. Yet as I stand here I swear that I will not rest until I have brought to book the murderers of Challoner—until I have wrenched from the hands which hold them the things which he brought with him from Morocco. That is my vow, and you, my lad, are witness to it. Come, let us go back to St. John's Wood. I must see Inspector Brooks without delay."

So, turning, they passed slowly from the shop. Much water was to run under the bridges before Nelson Lee fulfilled the words of that vow made in the old antique shop in Soho, but he was not the man to give up in the face of difficulties, nor was he the man to flinch because he was threatened.

He had achieved more than any other man could have achieved. He knew how Challoner had been murdered, and how it had been done.

He knew, too, who was responsible for the dastardly crime.

He knew who had the sacred urn of the priests of lost Atlantis, and he knew that he would have to cross swords with the Black Wolf before he got possession of it.

But he was determined to run it to earth, and even as he drove towards St. John's Wood his mind was busy thinking out some plan to bring his attempts to some sort of satisfactory basis.

If he had only known.

THE END.

IN POLAR SEAS.

A Romance of Adventure in the Frozen North.

BY

FENTON ASH,

Author of "A Trip to Mars," "The Radium Seekers," etc.

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

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

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

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

Grimstock eventually apologises for the behaviour of the men, and feigns friendliness. The mystery round Hugh thickens.

Hugh and Val Ruxton are sent out by Grimstock to make observations, but return to find the camp deserted—they are left to die in the dreary white wilderness.

A short time afterwards, while the two chums were out together, Hugh thinks he sees some mountains and pasturage far out to sea. Val Ruxton, however, tells him that what he sees is only a mirage. (Now read on.)

"Is it a Mirage?"

"MY poor Hugh, you've gone barmy," exclaimed Val, real concern in his tones. "And," he added, as though to himself, "who can wonder at it in our awful situation?"

"I'm nothing of the sort," insisted Hugh irritably. "I was expecting this—or something like it. At some other time I'll tell you about it. I'll show you some papers, too, which, you will find, go far to prove what I say. But I won't tell you here. Come with me! Let us climb that rock, and go as high as possible to get the best outlook we can. The view may vanish at any moment—a mist may come up, and we may not see it again for days or weeks. We'll get the field-glasses from the sledge and hurry up there."

"Very well, if you're so bent on it," Ruxton assented, but evidently unconvinced. "In that case we'd better let the other chaps come, too, so as to have their opinion. If you mean that we are to try to reach that delectable land, they'd better see for themselves what it is we're going in for."

It was more than half an hour's stiff climb to the top of the rock Hugh had indicated. All the way, as they mounted higher, the mysterious scene grew continually more vivid, more real—wonderful, incredible, as such an idea had at first sight seemed.

It is a fact that in the Arctic regions travellers continually meet with the most extraordinary mirages. Nowhere else in the world, perhaps—not even in the hot, sandy desert—are these strange effects seen so frequently. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that in the present instance the dispirited wanderers hardly dared to trust the evidence of their own eyes.

Yet, there, seemingly not so very far away, lay a land with smiling woods, and green slopes, and towering cliffs, bathed in the sunshine. The sun's rays glistened, too, upon some silvery threads which, seen through the field-glasses, looked like cascades of falling water.

Such was the wondrous view that the amazed adventurers gazed upon, such the heavenly vision that opened out before their despairing eyes. What wonder that they knew not what to think—that they talked, and argued, and differed one from another. They were utterly unable to make up their minds whether they were gazing on actual land, or only at another mirage more wonderful than any they had yet seen?

But as time passed—an hour or more slipped away almost without their knowing it, so enraptured were they by the sight—they could detect no change. The magic scene did not alter, or become blurred, or melt away, as mirages do. And so at last, even against their own judgment, so to speak, a conviction slowly grew up in their minds that what they saw was really some undreamed-of oasis, in that vast region of eternal ice and snow. A smiling land which offered to their hungry, wondering eyes the chance of saving their lives if they could but reach it!

"Whoy," cried Mike, "sure it's roight enough, it is. It's as rale as plum puddin' on Christmas Day! An' doan't ye see, Misther Ruxton, darlint, as this must be the green land afther all as they said was the way t' the North Pole?"

"Jupiter! I begin to thiuk you're right, Mike," returned Ruxton laughingly. And this conclusion acted like magic upon the whole party. Hope entered once more into their breasts, their spirits rose, and they set to work without more ado to make such little preparations as were needed for a start.

After a short conference it was decided to travel onwards just as they had been doing while their supply of petrol held out. When that was gone they must abandon the motor-sledge, and drag the other two themselves as long as human endurance, and their small stock of food, held out. If by that time they had reached the desired haven, well and good. If not, they could but starve and die there, as they certainly would do if they remained where they were.

They carefully took the exact bearings of this wonderful Land of Promise, and set out on the march that was to decide whether they were to live or die.

A Night in a Snow-Drift—The Motor-sledge Abandoned—The Last of the Food—A Surprise.

WELL it was for the castaways that they had caught sight of the mysterious mountain range when they did, for two days passed ere they set eyes on it again.

They were long, miserable days, which not only taxed their physical endurance to the utmost, but put a heart-breaking strain on their hopefulness and determination as well. Weary days of gloom and mist and snow-storms, through which they had to make their way as best they could, with nothing to guide them save the bearings they had taken.

The motor-sledge ploughed along slowly and heavily, and their limited store of petrol grew ominously smaller and smaller. In order to economise

with it as much as possible, they constructed a cache, in which they deposited one of the dog-sledges, and all such items of their store as they thought they could dispense with.

They also constructed a rope harness, and equipped in their skis, formed themselves into a team, by which means they were able to assist their progress over difficult places. As a result they lay down to rest each night dog-tired, and there was little time or inclination for discussion.

The third night—that is to say at the end of the second day—was the worst time of all, for there came a blizzard. The wind threatened to carry their tents bodily away, and when the two leaders tried to crawl out in the morning, they found themselves buried in snow, and had to force a way out. Looking round they saw that the tent in which the two sailors lay was still standing, though snowed up as their own had been. But of the one in which their four native followers had gone to sleep no trace was to be seen.

Hugh looked blankly at his chum, who, however, laughed cheerily.

"Oh, I expect they're all right—down below there somewhere!" he said. "We'll rouse up the sailors and set 'em to work to find the others and dig 'em out. Look over yonder; what do you say to that?"

Hugh gazed in the direction indicated, and then the reason for Val's good spirits became apparent.

The weather had changed again. Once more the sky was cloudless, and the sun was shining brightly. Once more its rays felt warm and pleasant, and the air was clear—and there, ahead of them, was again the welcome, heartening sight of the mountains.

There they were, looking soft and inviting in the morning sunlight, seeming to smile a welcome and beckon them on.

They were still many long, dreary, white leagues away, that was obvious. But they were far nearer than when last seen, and there was no longer the smallest room for doubt that they were an actual, positive, wonderful reality.

There were the green slopes, the woods, the streams of falling water, and the massive, rugged cliffs of grey and brown. Only the peaks above, the soaring mountain tops, were snow-covered.

It was truly an extraordinary scene to witness in that wilderness of ice and snow, and the two gazed upon it fascinated.

But they regarded it with different expressions; Hugh's face was beaming, delighted, triumphant, while Ruxton was puzzled and perplexed, and he shook his head.

"It seems impossible," he muttered. "I don't understand it."

"I do," exclaimed Hugh, his eyes glistening with an unusual light. "And so will you when I explain. This confirms my ill-fated father's theories. This is the land which he believed to exist, and which he and Grimstock set out to find years ago. There were those who knew of his theories who deemed him a bit mad. But now, I know that he was right after all!"

Ruxton stared at him in no little astonishment.

"This is the first I have ever heard of such an idea," he said. "I wish you would explain."

"So I will—by-and-by. You shall know all—at least, all I can tell you. But it's too long a story to tell just now."

"Ay, and we've something else to do, too," observed Val. "We've got to dig out our friends here, and then we had better take stock of our resources, and consider what can be done. Our petrol is near its end, and our stock of food ditto. How are we going to reach yonder delectable

land? How we are going to live till we get there--and afterwards if ever we do? These are problems to which I can see at present no answer."

"We must solve them nevertheless, and we shall, too; you will see," cried Hugh, with enthusiasm.

"Well, there's breakfast to be got ready first. You and I can see to that, while our sleepy friends are being dug out. Here, Mike! Bob! Set to work and rouse up the natives."

"Yes, sorr. Certainly, sorr," said Mike cheerily. "An' wheer will they be?"

"Oh, they're snoring away somewhere under the snow. Hurry up, and tell 'em we're getting breakfast ready."

Mike looked blankly around.

"Divil a bit 'av a tint can I see, begorrah!" he murmured. "It's a strange lot they are iv they're slapin' sound an' peaceful under all that."

"Whales an' periwinkles, man!" exclaimed Cable. "Don't ye understand? The snow's only a nice, white sheet t' them galoots! It comes natural to 'em."

They both set to work with a will, and after a while came upon the wrecked tent. But the men were certainly not there.

Hugh, called upon to advise, hunted around in his turn, but with no more success.

"I expect," he pondered, "that when the tent was blown down they must have crept into the sledges. They would naturally say—as I should—'anywhere for a quiet night.' Now, where are the sledges?"

There was no sign of the sledges any more than there had been of the tent. Ruxton came up to assist, but the search was vain till he suddenly pointed out some holes in the snow.

"See that? Those are their blow-holes. You'll find them under there somewhere."

Once more the sailors set to work, and after considerable burrowing, sure enough, they discovered the sledges with the four natives in them, packed away in their sleeping bags. They were still sound asleep, and seemingly as snug and comfortable as though they were lying in the depths of a big, soft feather bed. So sound was their slumber that the searchers had some difficulty in waking them up.

"Now thin, gints, wake up!" cried Mike, as he shook first one and then the other. "Yer shavin' wather's gittin' cold, an' the toast an' kidneys 'll be burnt to a cinder. Wake up, Misther Lie-a-bed-o!"

Three of them began to show signs of consciousness, but Lybendo, the one Mike had specially taken in hand, still made no sign.

"Phwat will I do now," muttered the Irishman, scratching his head, or rather, the outside of his fur cap. "It's very bad, he is, I'm thinkin', Bob! Phwat will we do?"

"Here, give him a pull at this," returned Cable, producing a flask from a pocket.

Mike took the flask and looked at it meditatively.

"Sure now, Bob darlint," he remonstrated, "can't we find some other manes than wastin' a dhrink 'av the crayther on the gint, whin we've got so little 'av it, too?"

"Crayther? What are you talkin' about, ye galoot? D'ye think this be whisky? D'ye think I'd waste good whisky on the likes o' them?"

"Faith, that's me idea, an', thinks Oi—"

"No fear! It's whale an' seal oil--a partic'lar old blend wot I keeps special for 'em. Just you sprinkle a little about Lie-a-bed-o's chops, an' see how he'll lick it in!"

Mike shook the wicker-covered flask, uncorked it, and smelt it. Then he gave such a jump that he nearly let go of it.

"Saints deliver us!" he gasped. "As ye say, Bob, that's not a drop o' the crayther, for sure! Faith! Did iver mortal man sniff sich a unholy smell! Take it, take it, Bob darlint, or it's afther drappin' it I'll be. It's feelin' a bit bad, I am, meself. I'd loike to go an' lay down."

"Poor! Ye're too mighty 'tickler, ye be! A fine Arctic traveller yo make! Let me 'andle it! I'll show ye!"

Bob's treatment, as carried out by that experienced sailor, proved marvellously effective. Lybendo opened his eyes at once, and they said as plainly and expressively as eyes could speak, "More! More!" His lips said nothing, being otherwise engaged.

"Its wonnerful!" Mike declared, as he saw the result. "But, be jabers, how it do hum!"

Bob sniggered.

"Ye'll get used to it, Mike, if ever ye're redooed t' living on it, as I've 'ad t' do," he laughed.

"Hiven defend us from that same!" ejaculated Mike piously.

After a spare meal—for rations were already running short—the leaders took stock of their meagre stores. One of their greatest troubles lay in the fact that they had very little ammunition. Ruxton and Hugh had each his own rifle and revolver and a few cartridges, and that was all. The reason of this was that when they had started on their "wild goose chase" to the west, they were, as has been already stated, beyond the regions where animal life existed. As they knew that there would be nothing for them to shoot at, therefore, it had seemed useless to encumber themselves with firearms and the like.

"And," said Ruxton, as Hugh dwelt regretfully on the fact, "we shouldn't have had what we have if I hadn't insisted upon bringing them at the last moment. You know you were going to leave them behind. I must say it's a pretty poor outlook!"

It certainly was. For even supposing, as he said, they could exist on their slender supply of food till they reached the "green mountains," and supposing again they had found any living animals there, how were they to capture them without firearms?

"We'll have to bring our hunting instincts into play, and turn trappers," said Hugh hopefully. "Surely, if we find any wild animals there we shall be able to circumvent the beggars somehow?"

"It doesn't sound very hopeful," muttered his friend. "Eight hungry men to provide for, and nothing to go out hunting with—not so much as a primitive bow and arrow amongst the lot of us! As to the few cartridges we've got, we'll have to hang on to 'em as if they were diamonds—we must guard them carefully as a reserve against emergencies."

This, indeed, summed up the situation, and there was nothing to be gained by discussing it further. So they packed up, and once more moved forward.

About noon, the petrol gave out, and as the motor-sledge was too heavy to think of attempting to drag it themselves, they constructed another cache and left it behind, together with one of their tents.

They had now but the one dog-sledge, in which were stowed two tents and their stock of food, and the rest of their now slender outfit.

To add to their troubles the route became more and more difficult. They were entering the confines of a mountainous country, and it was very different from the ice-plains they had been traversing.

The track became hilly, and in places resembled a switchback on a large scale. They climbed one ascent with infinite toil, hauling their sledge with

them, and descended the other side, only to find another and perhaps still longer ascent before them.

The ascents were, in fact, always steeper and longer than the descents, so that they were ever mounting upwards. Their view of the "Green Land" was shut up by steep, intervening, rocky ridges; their way was strewn with boulders and masses of ice which had fallen from precipitous cliffs to right and to left. That night, they were fortunate enough to find a cave, in which they took shelter and divided up their dwindling rations.

The next day was the same as regards the travelling. They struggled on blindly, steering as well as they could by the sun, and still mounting higher.

Then three of their natives began to show signs of breakdown. They were not gifted with the splendid stamina of their leaders, and the strain was becoming too much for them. One only was still in fair condition, and he was, in reality, an Icelandic, though he had lived for some years, it seemed, with his Eskimo friends.

When the declining sun warned them that the day was drawing to its close, they were still some distance from the top of the ridge which they knew they must surmount ere they could hope to attain another view of those green slopes which will-o'-the-wisp like seemed ever to elude them.

Finally, at this point, as if to crown their miseries, old man Amaki, slipped and hurt his ankle so badly that he could no longer walk.

A halt was called in the midst of a wild ravine shut in by rocky walls which rose on each side of them. Here, the leaders, worn out with their day of toil, during which they had acted the part of dray horses, and done nearly as much work, sat disconsolately down on the side of the sledge and stared at each other.

"I think we're done for," muttered Ruxton. "We can't do it! We've tried our best, but we shall never be able to hold out!"

Hugh gloomily took stock of their food supply, ere serving out their supper, and found that they had only enough left for two more meals—one that night, and one next morning. Then he sent the two sailors to see if they could find a cave in which to sleep. Since discovering the cave in which they had slept the night before, they had seen many more as they came along. Caves and caverns seemed indeed to be a peculiar characteristic of the rocky regions in which they now found themselves, and the sailors were not long before they returned and reported that they had come upon quite a large cavern on the slope to the left.

The dispirited travellers dragged themselves and the disabled Eskimo into it, and were glad to throw themselves down on the stony floor within its hospitable shelter.

Fagged out, they crept into their sleeping bags and were soon all fast asleep, save Hugh, who, dead tired though he was, found it impossible to rest.

Presently, he became aware that it was unusually light outside. This had, indeed, been the case for the past two or three nights, but it had not been so noticeable as now.

The light even came in at the open mouth of the cave, and looking out, he could see the snow and rocks on the other side of the ravine as well as if it had been bright moonlight, but he knew there was no moon.

At last, restless and somewhat puzzled, he rose, crept out of his sleeping bag, and went quietly out into the ravine.

"Evidently a very fine display of aurora," he muttered. "It's almost as light as day! I've a mind to go on a bit further and find out what there is to be seen over the ridge just beyond. It seems to me as though one ought to be able to get a good view from there."

He acted on the impulse, and after a quarter of an hour's sharp climbing, reached the top of the dividing ridge. Here he came suddenly in sight of a view beyond, which filled him with wonder and astonishment.

A Land of Fire—A Sail Across the Ice—Shot Off a Glacier.

IT was, indeed, a marvellous scene upon which Hugh looked out.

The ridge he had gained stood on the edge of what had the appearance of a vast frozen lake.

On the other side of it lay the "Green Land," and a very extraordinary land it now looked. At first view, it seemed to have turned to a land of fire, for, not only was the sky above it lit up with the most glorious display of the aurora borealis he had ever seen, but the very mountains themselves seemed to be on fire.

Great streams of light—for the most part red and lurid, but mingled with all the other colours of the rainbow—were rising from their heights, and ascending into the air high above, where they mingled with the aurora. Not only that, but the waterfalls which he had seen from a distance, looking like silver threads in the sunlight, had now the likeness of tumbling cascades of fire, sparkling, glowing, iridescent. These fell into streams, which, in their turn, ran winding through fertile valleys like rivers of molten gold.

Most wonderful of all was the snow, which was confined to the upper parts of the mountains. Not only did it catch and reflect the various tints surrounding it, but the fiery streamers seemed to rise from its very surface, as though passing through it from beneath.

The whole landscape seemed unearthly, fantastic, unreal, more like the imaginings of a fevered dream than solid fact. Hugh gazed as one entranced. Not merely was he lost in admiration at the transcendent beauty of the scene, but his mind became once more filled with emotions of relief and hope.

"Surely we are saved!" he murmured. "Surely there is life yonder! There must be fish in those streams, even if there is nothing else. But I can see trees—heaps of 'em—and grassy meadows, and there must be game to be snared, even if we can't shoot it! Yes! I think we ought to be able to pick up a living there somehow. We have but to get across this stretch of flat ice; surely we shall be able to manage that, and then our immediate troubles ought to be over!

"I must go back and tell Ruxton and bring him here. It's a sight that will do his heart good and compensate him for waking him out of his dreams. I'll wager he's not dreaming anything so glorious as this!"

Half an hour later, he stood on the same spot again with his chum beside him, enjoying his amazement and delight.

"It's a wonderful, awe-inspiring scene," was Ruxton's comment, as he stood drinking it all in. "The most wonderful sight I ever saw in my life!"

"I confess I scarcely understand it," said Hugh. "What is the meaning of all those flames going up from the mountains and rocks into the sky?"

"I can only guess that they are magnetic streamers—not actual flames."

Val returned thoughtfully. "Can it be that we have arrived at the real Magnetic Pole? The actual part of the top of the world, where all the Northern Lights—as we call them—spring from?"

"Why," said Hugh, "if that be so, it confirms another of my father's scientific theories. He has recorded it in his writings."

"Then you have more reason than ever to feel proud of your father," Ruxton rejoined.

"Yes; he has put it on record as his conviction that if ever we should be able to reach the source of those lights, we should find that they furnished an example of what scientists have been seeking for for ages—a means of obtaining light without heat."

"Well, evidently, he was right. Here you have proof of it upon a grand scale. Hitherto, the only examples known have been on a small scale, such as small phosphorescent creatures and substances—the firefly and glow-worm and so on. Here you have the incredible marvel—the wonderful paradox—or light and flames apparently rising right up out of the snow, and yet, not melting it! Did ever mortal man dream of such a thing?"

"I believe my father did. Would that he were here to witness it with us," said Hugh, with a sigh. "However, we must think about our own plight. How are we going to travel to that wonderful land? We are still leagues and leagues away from it. There is this frozen desert between us; how are we going to cross it?"

Ruxton, the practical engineer, reflected.

"I think," he said, after a pause, "that if the wind will only hold in its present direction we might sail there."

"Sail!" cried Hugh. "What are you talking about?"

"Why not? Nansen, in his records of his journey across Greenland, tells how he and his little party sailed across places like this with a sledge. We have no proper sail, certainly, but we can rig up part of a tent so as to make it answer the purpose. But it has to be arranged in rather a peculiar manner. A sledge is not an ice-boat, you know. You can't sit in the sledge and sail along, because you can't guide it that way."

"How do you manage, then?"

"He states that they fastened tent rods or poles to the side of the sledge, so as to project fore and aft. Then one of the party, wearing his skis, took his station in front, between the poles, and was pushed along by the sledge, guiding it by means of his iron-pointed alpenstock. Another man took his station behind, and was dragged along, assisting the steering in the same way."

"It sounds a funny way!"

"It does, but it seems to have answered all right; he declares they went along before a good wind at a tremendous speed."

"That's the ticket for us, then! Just what we want! If we can only do the same we shall be across in a few hours."

"Well, we'll have a try, anyway. The chief difficulty at present is how we are going to drag the sledge and its load, including our injured man, up this last steep bit from the cave to where we now stand?"

"Yes; it'll be a stiff piece of work," Hugh agreed. "But we'll manage it somehow!"

They started before sunrise, having first eaten their last bit of food, and, after almost superhuman exertions, succeeded in their task. Hugh, himself, carried Amaki up the last and worst part; or, rather, climbed it with him in his arms, while the others hauled up the sledge, almost carrying that, too, in places.

Only men of extraordinary strength and determination could have done it. The sun was hot, and the toil tremendous, but they ended by at last

placing the sledge on the ice, and putting the injured Eskimo comfortably into it.

Then they set to work to prepare the sledge for the new kind of journey it had to accomplish.

Some considerable time was thus spent in preparation, and a little more in false starts, for the guiding business was one that could not be learned in a moment, and then, at last, a start was made in real earnest.

At first, the progress was rather slow, for not only was there the sledge with its load, but the rest of the party were hauled along in the rear, holding on by the rope that, before-time, had been used for hauling.

As soon, however, as they got away from the shelter of the ridge they were leaving, the wind came with more force, and it increased as they reached the more open part of the ice.

Soon they were flying along at a fine pace. Val, in front, had all his work cut out to steer a way clear of occasional hummocks, while Hugh found it as much as he could do to watch his chum and keep his end going properly. In this he was considerably hampered by the trail of men behind him, whose swaying weight swung the sledge now this way and now that.

The wind freshened yet more, and they raced over the ice faster and faster. And as they flew along their spirits rose in proportion, for were they not nearing, more rapidly than they had dared to hope, the Land of Green on the other side?

Still the wind increased, and with it their speed, and then came a curious development. The ice began to slope downwards, gently at first, but more steeply as they proceeded. Rocks rose up on each side and seemed to approach them. Soon they were gliding down what looked like a river of ice, at present broad and straight, and sloping at a moderate angle. But as they proceeded it gradually narrowed, and presently began to wind, becoming, too, not only less smooth, but less free from dangerous obstructions.

Then the truth suddenly dawned upon the leaders. What they had taken for a frozen lake had been the head of a glacier! And it was down that glacier they were now flying at a rate that became every moment more terrific!

To turn aside in their course would only be to dash into the rugged, jagged rocks which bordered the ice. They could only keep on down the frozen channel which, every few hundred yards, became more narrow and more tortuous.

Ruxton could, perhaps, if he had been so minded, have freed himself from the sledge and left it to its fate. But that meant sending the poor old crippled Eskimo to certain death, and not for a moment did any thought of it enter his head.

Down, ever down, they tore, now at mad, headlong speed. Great ugly crags appeared before them, were avoided by a hair's breadth, and passed astern so quickly that they seemed as though they were themselves flying the other way.

Cracks and fissures, too, there were, and these Ruxton leaped with a warning shout to those behind him, who did the same in their turn. The first of these they met were not wide, and the sledge was long enough to pass over them. But the cracks became wider as they descended, and none knew better than the travellers themselves that lower down yawning gulfs were awaiting them, wide enough to swallow the whole party, sledge as well.

Ruxton, looking ahead with wild, despairing eyes, and teeth hard set, suddenly perceived a gap in the cruel, craggy walls which hemmed them in, and he realised that this offered a desperate chance,

He saw, indeed, only the edge of the ice, and knew nothing of what lay beyond it. It might be the edge of a precipice, but he must risk it. He gave another warning cry for those behind—he dared not look round—and then, with great difficulty, turned the sledge, and headed it for the gap.

What happened next neither he nor any there could ever afterwards exactly remember. All they knew at the time was that they suddenly left the ice at the edge of the gap, and shot out into space.



In a New Land—A Gruesome Find—Illuminated Caverns—Attacked by Strange Monsters.

HUGH was the first to come to himself. When he opened his eyes, and, dazed and shaken, tried to sit up, he found himself lying in a shallow depression some distance down a green slope.

Near him was the sledge, completely wrecked, and scattered about were several motionless figures. He attempted to get on his feet, but one of his legs hurt him so much that he sat down again and looked helplessly about him.

Behind, and above him, was the gap from which they had been launched into the empty air. Below, the slope went down into a green valley lying hundreds of feet beneath.

So steep was it, that only the fact that just at that place there happened to be a hollowed spur or knoll, had saved them from being hurled down into the rocky bed of a rushing torrent at the foot of the slope.

Hugh heard his name called, and, glancing to one side, saw Ruxton sitting up, much as he himself was.

"Thank Heaven, you're alive, Val!" he cried fervently. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. Are you, old chap?" came back the answer.

"I—I scarcely know. My right leg seemed pretty bad when I tried to get up just now."

"Let me have a look at it."

"No, no. I'm all right except for that, and it can wait. If you're really not hurt, see to the others. I'm afraid they may have come off worse than I have."

Ruxton scrambled to his feet and complied. One by one he roused their companions, one by one they recovered consciousness and counted up their injuries. When all had been accounted for it was found that, while they had received some pretty hard knocks, no bones were broken. Even old man Amaki, though he had been shot out of the damaged sledge, seemed no worse off than before.

And this, as it turned out, applied also to Hugh's leg.

"It was a narrow escape," Ruxton commented, when he had looked at it. "It's bruised and cut, too, but nothing worse. You must have caught the edge of a sharp rock which cut clean through the clothes. The best thing is to bathe it, then I'll put something on it." At this Hugh laughed.

"You think it sounds sarcastic," Ruxton remarked, "but I'm quite serious. There is a stream over there—a bee-u-ti-ful, clear, ice-cold stream. Just the very thing you want, and, for the matter of that, what we all want, to get a delicious drink from. Come along! I'll help you to reach it."

Hugh looked in the direction indicated, and there, sure enough, was a small stream of water rushing down the slope in a little bed of its own. It was fed by melting ice and snow from the glacier above.

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The other members of the party were already hurrying towards it, eager for a draught of the tempting-looking liquid. It was many a day since they had had a drink from a running stream!

Hugh drank his fill and then acted on Ruxton's advice, and felt all the better for it. He was soon able to walk without assistance.

Then they were faced with the question what they were to do for food. Having satisfied their thirst, they became the more conscious that they were all terribly hungry. A preliminary hunt through the debris of the wrecked sledge, in the hope that some scraps of food might have been overlooked, produced nothing more than a few small pieces of biscuit.

Incidentally, they came upon the two rifles and revolvers, which had only been saved from injury by the care with which they had been packed in the canvas of one of the tents.

"We'd better take these with us," said Ruxton, thoughtfully. "We're in a strange land, and goodness only knows what we may meet with. It is understood, though, that they are only to be used in case of extreme emergency?"

"I quite agree with you," Hugh returned. "Surely, there ought to be some fish in the river below us? Let's get down there and see."

"We will, and you and I can go prospecting a bit, while our friends try their hands at fishing. They'll get some if there are any to be had, you may always trust an Eskimo for that. We will look out for a cave, and if we find a likely one, we will make it our habitation, remove our few belongings to it, and set up housekeeping."

This programme was followed out, and a little later the whole party assembled on the bank of the river, which the Eskimos at once declared looked a likely place for fish. They set to work in their own fashion to put the question to a practical test, while the others strolled off to look about.

It was a very wild, picturesque valley they found themselves in. They could see, high above them, the glacier down which they had made their terrific voyage. It was not by any means the highest point. Behind, it rose a great mountain mass covered with snow and ice. But below it, there was no snow, but slopes thickly covered, in places, with dark pine woods and diversified with open grass land.

Below these again, were woods of other trees, and at the bottom, near the river, everything was green and fertile. Numerous streams and cascades rushed down the slopes and joined the main river. In other directions more mountains were seen, shutting in the valley on all sides, some of them rising sheer from it in the form of perpendicular cliffs.

Of life, however, they could see, so far, no indications.

"It doesn't look much as if there were any inhabitants here," muttered Ruxton. "But, of course, we have only arrived at what one may term the outskirts. From the look of these mountains I reckon the country is a pretty extensive one. This is but one of its valleys, and I should judge, probably one of the smallest."

Suddenly, there came an outcry from their natives. Looking round, the two saw them running hastily towards them, as though they were being pursued, and Ruxton and Hugh pulled out their revolvers.

Behind the runners a white mass rose up high in the air, with a loud, vicious hissing noise, while from it a large white cloud drifted away in the slight breeze.

The two chums were at first almost as much startled as the natives. But a second glance showed them what it was.

"It is a geyser—a hot spring," said Ruxton. "Ho, ho! That, then, may explain the mystery a little! If there are many of that sort here, it may account for the mild climate, especially in summer time, as it is now."

A number of hot springs flowing into the streams, and sending rivers of warm water flowing through the land, would have the effect, of course, of making the climate milder."

"Just what my father said!" cried Hugh, with enthusiasm. "That was his theory! And now we've found it to be actual fact!"

Ruxton looked at him in surprise.

"You've never told me that story of yours yet," he said.

"No, but I will, when we get a bit settled you shall know all about it. And then you will have to admit—as others shall, if ever we live to get back to England again—what a wonderfully clever scientist he was."

The natives having, like their leaders, now recognised the true nature of the phenomenon that had at first so alarmed them, went back to their fishing, taking up, this time, a position farther up the stream.

The friends strolled on, looking for a likely cave in which to take up their abode. They found so many that Ruxton was surprised.

"Why," he said, "there seems to be no end to them! These rocks and cliffs must be honeycombed with them!"

They were mostly, however, small, and Hugh showed himself fastidious. They entered several, but he objected to each in turn, either on the ground that they were not large enough, or because he detected an "ancient and fish-like smell."

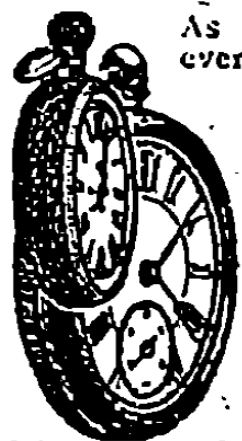
"I should almost be inclined to think, if there are or have been inhabitants here," he muttered, "that they lived in these caves and were fish-eaters. Perhaps, if we were to make a search in some of the caves we should find they have left traces behind 'em."

(To be continued.)

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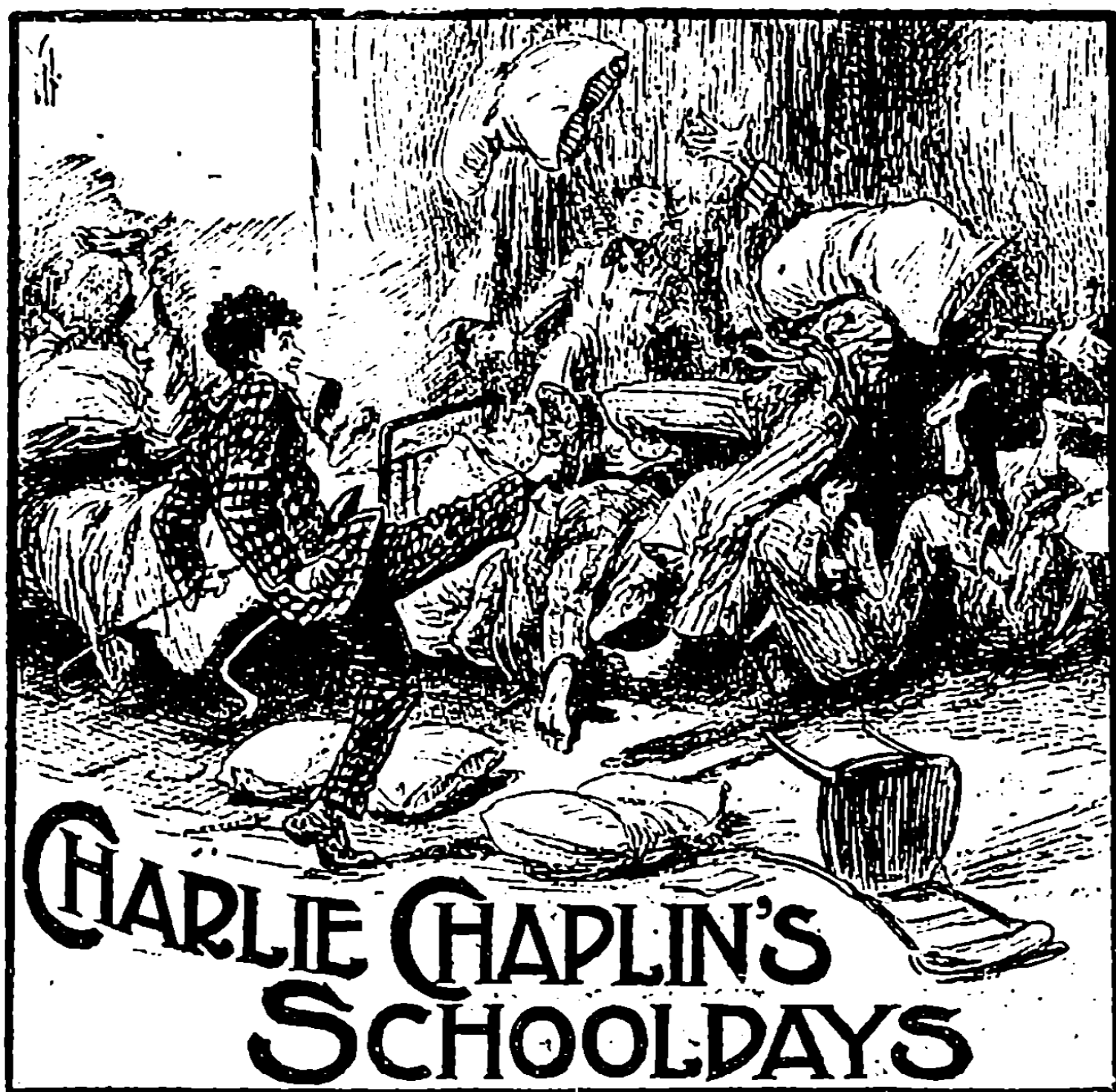
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