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*Week ending
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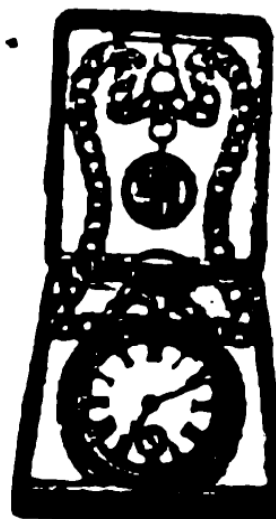
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CHAPTER

**The Shots in the Night—Nelson Lee is Puzzled—The Girl Who Fled—
The Hunchback—The Crimson Disc.**

It was only the beauty of the soft June evening which impelled Nelson Lee to stroll somewhat out of his way in order to breathe in the fragrant air which was being stirred by a gentle breeze over the heath.

He had been to dine with friends in Redington Road, and, bidding them good-night at an early hour—it was a few minutes before eleven—he struck along Redington Road towards Hampstead Heath, and, reaching the edge of that broad expanse of high land, turned off to his left, his intention being to walk on perhaps as far as Jack Straw's, there to get a taxi.

It was a perfect night. There was no moon, but overhead the brilliant summer stars gleamed like scattered jewels, flung with apparent chaos, yet strangely enough with a perfect conception of the gravitational effect, one upon the other, from the dimming constellations far in the South to the more brilliant bodies in the North—far, far away through the unplumbed depths of the cosmos, until the Milky Way was but a filmy cloud, like the floating veil a lady might wear.

Up there, on the edge of the heath, the roar of the great metropolis was almost imperceptible. With the houses behind him, and only the dim stretch of the heath before him, Lee could almost imagine that he was far, far away from the hurly-burly, yet beneath him pulsed the congested arteries of the greatest city in the world—the city of joys and sorrows, the city of righteousness and sin, the city of laughter and tears.

Not a soul was in sight as he swung along at a leisurely pace, puffing away at a choice Havana, its wrapper the colour of honey, and its soft fragrance conjuring up the warm suns of Cuba. On his right, a few houses loomed darkly; on all other sides was the heath.

Then, suddenly, while in the very midst of an idle reverie, Nelson Lee was brought back to the present and his immediate surroundings with a jerk. Off over the heath, not very far away, there had rung out the sharp crack of a pistol-shot. Just that one shot, splitting the still night, and crashing

in upon his consciousness with hundredfold force, accentuated by the calm which lay over everything.

Lee drew up sharply, and, standing rigid, listened. He had not long to wait. Perhaps twenty seconds, perhaps thirty, after the first discharge there sounded two more in rapid succession. Now, with his senses attuned and at attention, Lee decided that the shot had been fired off to the left, where the scrub and trees of the heath blurred into the night.

In the very brevity of the shots he seemed to sense a vicious determination of purpose, which spelled to him a desperation of purpose. And, as though in answer to his conjecture, there followed the sound of someone running.

Bending forward and straining to listen, Lee waited while the footsteps came closer and closer. They were coming from the direction in which he had heard the firing. Was it the person who had fired that pistol who was running? Had there been a crime committed, and was the perpetrator making his escape? As the thought was borne in upon him, Lee tossed away the end of his cigar and tensed himself to meet the runner.

Suddenly, from the gloom of the trees, there broke a figure, running—running hard—and heading straight for Lee. Only when it was almost upon him, and when he had lifted his arms to force the fugitive to a stop, did Lee see that the runner was a woman. Straight down upon him she bore, as though she had expected him to be just where he was.

Mechanically Lee threw up his arms to arrest her, his hands stretched out, he was on the very point of calling to her to stop when her tones, panting, sobbing with the effort of running, reached him.

"Quick!" she gasped. "Take it!"

With that, she thrust out one hand towards him. Nelson Lee felt something small and hard slip into his palm; then, even before he could grasp the girl's arm, she was off again, running hard towards the dark street which ran past the houses.

For a moment, Lee hesitated. His natural inclination was to follow the girl and see where she went. Her approach right after the sound of the firing, her words, her actions, had all been distinctly suspicious. It looked as though she had an intimate connection with the cause of those pistol-shots he had heard; and pistol-shots are seldom a joke—particularly when fired at night on a dark heath.

But before he could set off after her, he once more heard footsteps approaching him. He swung round quickly, and peered through the gloom. He could see a queer-looking figure coming towards him, and a few minutes later a small, shadowy form shuffled past him—or, rather, attempted to shuffle past him.

But Lee was now aroused to action. True, the girl had been in a desperate hurry, while this odd-looking figure seemed neither in a hurry nor in the least interested in the shooting. Lee stretched out his arm with an imperative gesture. The man, who was now close to him, drew up, and beneath a lowered, soft-brimmed hat glared up at Lee.

"Did you hear those pistol-shots?" asked Lee sharply.

The other—he could now see that he was a hunchback—nodded his head curtly.

"Over there somewhere!" he jerked surlily, and made to shuffle on.

But Lee's fingers closed on his sleeve.

"Were you near the spot?" he asked tersely.

The hunchback pulled himself free, with an exclamation of annoyance.

"How dare you!" he snarled. "Is it that one cannot return from the house of a friend without being stopped in this fashion? I heard the shots,

as I said—over there! Who fired them, or what they mean, is of no interest to me. I will thank you to permit me to pass!”

Really there was nothing else for Lee to do. After all, he could not stop every person who came past and question them about the matter. The man might know more than he acknowledged about the shots; and then, again, he, like Lee, might be returning from the house of a friend.

After all, there might be nothing serious behind the affair. The pistol might have been fired by someone out of sheer bravado. In his heart, Lee did not think so. There had been a peculiarly sinister timbre to those shots which had split the quiet of the night. But no matter how strong his suspicions might be, he certainly had no right to stop any citizens who might pass.

He stepped back and, with a curt bow, permitted the hunchback to go on. He stood watching until the other had disappeared in the gloom; then he looked sharply up and down the street. Not a constable was in sight. It was his first wish to report what he had heard, and his second to follow the hunchback and see just where he went.

Since there was no constable, he could not put the first into effect; so, when the hunchback was out of sight, Lee stole along silently after him. All thought of the thing the girl had thrust into his hand had passed from his mind.

From Hampstead the trail led along several streets, until the hunchback turned into a broad but silent thoroughfare. He kept on along it until he came to a cab rank, and there Lee saw him enter a taxi. If he had become aware that Lee was shadowing him, he gave no sign. The door of the taxi slammed, and as it drove off Lee quickened his footsteps and hurried to the one remaining cab on the rank.

“Do you know where the other cab has gone?” he asked the driver, as he stood with his fingers on the handle of the door.

“Well, guv’nor, I heard the fare tell my pal to drive to Shaftesbury Avenue.”

“Then the same order goes with you,” responded Lee quickly. “See if you can keep your pal in sight. If you don’t lose him, there is half a sovereign in it for you.”

“I’ll pick him up all right, sir, never fear!” said the driver; and, with a nod, Lee opened the door.

They were off after the other taxi at once, and by the time they were half-way to Oxford Street, the driver signalled that he had picked it up. They kept behind it until they turned into Oxford Street, and then from there the chase led along the Regent Street quadrant and round the corner at Piccadilly Circus into Shaftesbury Avenue.

The leading taxi kept on until it reached the corner by the Queen’s Theatre, where it drew up. A moment later, Lee saw the hunchback descend, and, after paying off the driver, turn up towards Soho.

Lee himself jumped out a few seconds later, and, tossing his man the fare plus the promised tip, set off after the quarry. As he turned into Old Compton Street, he looked keenly up and down for the man he sought. There were one or two persons about, but none of them was a hunchback, and for a moment Lee was baffled.

Had his man stepped into one of the numerous restaurants along the street, or had he slipped into an alley? Just by the Petit Riche, he paused and looked back. There were two men and one woman ahead of him, while coming behind him was a solitary figure. But it was not the hunchback.

Under the swinging red sign of the restaurant, Lee waited for the other to pass him; but as the new-comer drew abreast, he glanced towards Lee, then, with a slight exclamation, paused.

"It is Mr. Nelson Lee, is it not?" he asked, peering at Lee.

Lee, who had not looked very closely at the man, gave a start; then, as he glanced beneath the brim of the other's hat, he replied:

"You are right. And you are Dr. Mortimer Crane."

The man laughed, and held out his hand.

"I thought I recognised you, Mr. Lee," he said. "I met you, if you will remember, at the time my friend and patient, Mr. Stuyvesant Roper, of New York, was in London."

"Quite right!" responded Lee, as he shook hands. "It was at the time of the robbery of the Roper diamonds. You are out late, doctor," he went on. "I hardly expected to see a Harley Street man in Soho at this time of night."

Dr. Mortimer Crane took out a soft leather cigar-case, and, opening it, presented it to Lee.

"Oh, we fellows in Harley Street are not as bad as we are painted!" he said. "I have had quite a few patients in Soho, as well as other even more odorous districts. It is not exactly profitable from a financial point of view, but the experience is always valuable."

"We endeavour to make our more fortunately placed patients pay for what the poor cannot. A thing, I have heard, you do in your own profession, Mr. Lee."

Lee had lit his cigar, and now fell into step beside the other.

"One must do that," he replied slowly. "It is the only way under the present condition of things which will establish an equitable justice."

They were walking towards Shaftesbury Avenue now, and, while Lee was still looking for any signs of the hunchback, he had given up all idea of continuing the chase. It would be a little difficult to leave the famous Harley Street specialist, who had shown a desire for his company, and to go off without any explanation.

Besides, he had nothing definite against the hunchback. And so they chatted idly until the wider thoroughfare was reached. There Dr. Mortimer Crane came to a pause, and said politely:

"Are you travelling up West, Mr. Lee? I am driving to my club before going home, and should be pleased to give you a lift."

"Thank you, but I shall return home, I think," responded Lee.

The other nodded slightly, and, hailing a passing taxi, gave Lee his hand. After a few more words, the doctor entered the cab, and gave the address of his club; then, as it drove off towards Piccadilly Circus, Lee walked along, looking for another cab.

And, as he hailed it, he never for a single moment dreamed that the man he had trailed all the way from Hampstead—the hunchback who had given him the slip in Soho, had but that moment left him—that the hunchback and Dr. Mortimer Crane, the eminent Harley Street brain and nerve specialist, was the hunchback!

He drove through at once to Gray's Inn Road, and, dismissing the taxi there, entered the house, walking along softly to the consulting-room. Nipper was, he knew, in bed, so, switching on the lights, Lee laid his hat and evening-coat aside, and, lighting a cigarette, sat down at the desk to read the letters which had come by the last post.

It was half an hour or so before he had finished the last one; then, as he lit a cigarette, his thoughts went back to the shots he had heard on the heath.

"I suppose I had better report it," he said, as he sat with wrinkled brows studying the smoke which curled upwards. "It may be nothing, yet, on the other hand, it may be of some importance. And then—— By thunder!"

he broke off to exclaim, "I had clean forgotten about the girl and the article she thrust into my hand."

He rose at once and, striding across to where he had thrown down his overcoat, lifted it up, thrusting his hand into the side-pocket as he did so. The next instant he had taken out something hard, and was holding it up to the light, and as he saw what it was he gave a low whistle of wonder.

It was a small crimson disc of ivory, about a quarter of an inch thick and about two inches in diameter, without a mark of any description upon it. What could it mean?

CHAPTER II.

Lee Investigates the Crimson Disc—The Cryptogram—A Strange Order.

NELSON LEE stared long and hard at the curious object which he held in his hand. He had never seen anything exactly like it before. It was like an exaggerated form of poker-chip, or "counter," more than anything else he could recall to mind. Yet what could be its meaning? That it was a concrete sign was, he knew, a fact, else why had the girl thrust it into his hand?

It was not a hoax. Of that he was sure. He was sorry now that he had not detained the girl.

She had come upon him so suddenly, and had passed on so rapidly, he had not had a chance to see her features even dimly. He could not tell whether she was fair or dark.

He did know she was young. He had judged that more by the youthful and sweet timbre of her voice than anything else. Besides, her clothes were cut for youth, and, while Lee did not profess to be a judge of the curious contraptions which Fashion decrees women shall wear, he did know that the girl was dressed in the height of fashion prevailing at the moment.

Had that crimson disc any connection with the pistol-shots which he had heard on the heath? That the girl had made a mistake, he strongly suspected. She had, he reckoned, taken him for someone else. Some person had been expected to be standing near the spot where Lee had been, and in her haste the girl had not recognised the difference.

Nor could the expected person have been the hunchback, who had passed Lee a few seconds after the girl. While it had been dark, it had not been so gloomy that she could have made a mistake like that. No; it seemed that this crimson ivory disc which he held in his hand had been meant for another.

But what could its meaning be? What message was it intended to convey? Slowly Lee walked back to the desk, and, sitting down, held the disc under the light.

He examined it obverse and reverse, if the faces could be so termed. He scrutinised the edge most carefully, and weighed it in his hand. As far as appearances went, it seemed to be nothing more nor less than a plain crimson ivory disc. That was all. Yet he did not desist in his examination at that point.

Instead, he laid it on the white blotter, where it gleamed like a huge splotch of blood. Then, taking out his powerful pocket-glass, he focussed the lens on the surface of the disc. On neither side could he detect the slightest scratch or mark.

Next he made another examination of the edge, and there, by the aid of the glass, he made out a very faint line running round the disc, and exactly

midway between each edge. He laid down the glass now, and, taking the disc in his two hands, turned one half outwards with the left hand and the other half inwards with the right.

He exerted a gentle pressure at first, increasing it gradually until his hands showed white across the knuckles with the strain. Then suddenly there was a quick yielding, and the disc came into halves in his hands.

Eagerly Lee bent over it. The disc had been most cleverly divided in halves, and the interior scooped out. A very fine thread had been cut, and the halves arranged to fit so perfectly that the line of meeting could not be detected by the naked eye.

Inside at the moment lay a circular piece of paper, which exactly fitted the interior of the disc. This piece of paper lay in the half which Lee had held in his left hand. In the other half was nothing at all.

He laid the empty side down, and, taking up a small penknife, inserted the blade under the piece of paper until it came loose, and fluttered out on the blotter in front of him. Beneath it there was nothing—just that circular piece of paper had been inside the disc. Nothing else.

Now Lee scanned it front and back. Not a mark did there appear to be upon it. Well, he knew an invisible ink might have been employed, such as plain milk or lemon juice, and if this were the case, the orthodox manner of heating the paper would at once reveal it. But, though he lighted a small desk lamp and held the paper over the chimney until it grew hot, nothing appeared on the surface.

Once more Lee brought to bear the powerful pocket-glass, and, bending over the paper, peered keenly through the lens. At first he could make out nothing upon it, unless it might be that a few very faint marks—or, rather, tiny portions of the paper which seemed to have a slight gloss on them, and which might easily be part of the watermark—could indicate something. A ten minutes' study of these marks convinced him that they were too regular to be part of the watermark or to be an accidental gloss on the paper. He examined them for some time longer; then he rose abruptly and entered the dressing-room, which was situated between the consulting-room and his own bedroom.

When he emerged, he carried in his hand a white porcelain photographic tray, into which he had poured eight or ten ounces of water. Setting this on the desk, Lee once more took up the circular piece of paper, and carefully placed it in the water so that it all became submerged at the same moment.

Then, taking hold of the tray at each end, he began to rock it back and forth, much as one washes a film or print. What was he doing? Why had he plunged this apparently plain sheet of paper in water?

Nelson Lee, in his long and deep study of criminology, had tucked away in that keen mind of his more concrete information about the subtle schemes of criminals than any man in Europe bar, perhaps, some of the men higher up in the Austrian police system.

Ordinarily it is known that milk or lemon juice can be used as an "ink," and that when dry it is not revealed on the paper. There are also numerous invisible "inks" sold which serve the same purpose, but it is only in novels and plays that the prisoner or the hero is conveniently supplied with some such substance with which to carry on a secret correspondence.

But in real life it more usually happens that the criminal has no such means of writing at hand, and it was a repetition of such conditions that inspired one shrewd brain to invent a means of secret correspondence which required only two sheets of paper, a small piece of wood—a match would serve in a pinch—and some water.

One of the sheets of paper was then submerged in water, and, when thoroughly wet, was withdrawn. Over it, while it was still wet, was placed the dry sheet of paper; then, on the surface of the dry paper, the message was written with the stick or match. On the dry sheet nothing showed, but the wet sheet took the impress of each letter. Then the wet sheet was allowed to dry, and when dry it showed no sign of what had been written! It looked exactly like a plain sheet of paper.

But if it were once more submerged in water, the message would appear. And it was this test which Nelson Lee was now applying to the circular piece of paper which he had taken from the crimson ivory disc. When the paper had been in the tray of water for a minute or so, Lee lifted it out with a pair of fine tweezers and laid it carefully on the blotting-pad. Then he took up the pocket-glass once more, and, bending over, focussed it upon the paper.

Immediately there became visible a multitude of fine white markings which he recognised as numbers, and, holding the glass in one hand, he began to jot down the numbers as he was able to read them. When he had finished the last one, he laid the glass down, and this is what he read:

“ 14341132123132353415143432414511424211141114453145344134322
14115131345411513114131324133251123414232351124244543153533452
335324115133132411114151513323433.”

Rather a bewildering mass of figures, Lee thought, as he read them over. And they had been written with a very fine point, too, for they were, and needed to be, very minute in order that the two-inch piece of paper should contain them all. Lee checked them over once, in order to make sure he had copied them correctly; then he rewrote them in even lines, and with puzzled brows bent over them. Puffing slowly at a fresh cigarette, he began to muse aloud.

“ It is undoubtedly a code of some sort,” he muttered. “ It has been carefully written on the piece of paper in the disc, and was done in a little known method to ensure greater secrecy. Now, the next question is to ferret out what sort of a cryptogram it is.

“ To begin with, the very means of writing proves that it was done by one well versed in all the subtlest ways of the criminal or secret orders. This method of writing on wet paper was, I know, evolved in Austria, and, that being so, it seems to me that the cryptogram may be one which has been invented in Eastern Europe. It may be a Russian or an Austrian code. At any rate, I shall begin on those.

“ Now, the best known Russian code is the system of rectangles. When adapted to the English language, it comprises a large rectangle, subdivided into twenty-five smaller rectangles. In our language that is arrived at by leaving out the letter ‘ Q,’ for it is little used, and where it is necessary to bring it in the letter ‘ K ’ suffices.

“ There is also the Italian ‘ circular ’ cipher. I shouldn’t be surprised if a cipher of that sort should have been used. The person or persons responsible for this seems fond of the circle, judging from the form of the disc and the paper.

“ But since there is a stronger suggestion of the Eastern Europe in it, I shall begin with the Russian system. To start with, I shall block out the twenty-five rectangles, and letter them as they should be.”

Here Lee picked up a pencil and made a large rectangle on a sheet of plain paper, after which he divided it into twenty-five smaller rectangles. That done, he began to fill in the divisions with a letter, beginning at the top left-hand corner and going down; then to the second column, and so on,

until he wrote the letter "Z" in the last space in the right-hand column. When he had finished, this is what he had completed:

A	F	K	P	V
B	G	L	R	W
C	H	M	S	X
D	I	N	T	Y
E	J	O	U	Z

Lee's next care was to count the number of figures which he had written down. After a check and a second recount, he put this number down at 154 in all.

Now, he knew that the Russian system of the cipher in question was worked out in the following manner:

To take as a sample the word "cipher" itself. The letter "C" is the first letter in the word. In the cryptogram we find that the letter "C" is the third letter in the first column. Therefore we write the figure "1" for the column and the figure "3" for the square.

Next follows "I," which is the fourth letter in the second column. We therefore write "2" for the column and "4" for the square. "P" is the first letter in the fourth column, hence it would be written "41." "H" is the third letter in the second column, "E" the fifth in the first column, and "R" the second in the fourth. Therefore, according to the Russian system, the word "cipher" would be written: 132441231542.

Now, as a matter of fact, Lee made a test with that same word "cipher." He wrote it down exactly as above, and when he had done so compared it with the mass of figures he had copied from the circular piece of paper. At first glance there seemed a strong resemblance between the two systems, for the run of the numbering was most similar.

Thinking that he had stumbled on the correct cryptogram at the very first attempt, Lee drew a fresh sheet of paper towards him, and, working on the Russian system, began to write down a letter for each pair of figures. For twenty minutes or so he wrote busily, and when he had finished, this is what he had written:

"Dnalbklonednlpuarradadukunpnlfpeccupecapklpmjahprloaiuseomuholp-
eolpadeeclnm."

If the figures had appeared confusing, the letters which he had written down as a translation appeared even more so. At first glance they seemed to yield little, but Lee went to work on them in an attempt to divide them into words. Nor did he confine himself to the English language.

He tried English first, then he went on to other languages. Yet in no single instance could he discover even a glimmering of sense.

It was with reluctance that he decided the Russian system proper was not applicable to the cryptogram; yet so easily had it answered to the system of numbers, that in his own mind he was convinced he was on the right track. He put that method by, however, and went at a different plan.

Three in all he tried, ending up with the Italian circular code, but in each case he registered a failure. Then, when it seemed that he must have stumbled on a private code, for which one must have the key in order to decipher it, he took up the Russian system once more, and, using the lettered squares, began to make a careful comparison with the series of numbers.

After half an hour's work, he had come to one conclusion—that in no

instance did the numbers which he had written down go out of the forties, whereas if the Russian system had been used there must have been some numbered in the fifties, for in that system the letters V, W, X, Y, and Z were all in the fifth column.

It would be tiresome to go over point by point the attempts which Lee made during the next hour or so to reconstruct the system to meet the demands of the numbers, but of one thing he felt assured—that if a system of rectangles had been used, then it had contained not more than four squares along the top.

How could he form such a system? He wrote out the English alphabet more than a dozen times in an attempt to cut down the letters, in order that some such cryptogram might be formed intelligently, and at the end of another half hour he had completed three more attempts, all of which were failures.

At last he deleted six letters from the alphabet, leaving only twenty in all; and then, drawing a large rectangle, he sub-divided it into twenty smaller rectangles, having five downwards and four across.

Then he filled in the places with the letters he had retained in the alphabet, and when he had finished it looked like this:

A	F	N	T
B	G	O	U
C	H	P	V
D	I	R	X
E	M	S	Y

It will be seen that Lee had deleted the letters J, K, Q, W, and Z. He decided that Y should serve for I, G for J, C for K, C for Q, double U for W, and S for Z.

Now, with this new system before him, he began once more to write down letters for the pairs of figures, and when he had finished, he had an arrangement as follows:

"Draobnoeredrotiawadadinirtroftekritkatnotpmahtnosallivespihoteetadecorp."

A preliminary study of this new arrangement gave little indeed, and Lee was about to try it in other languages when suddenly it occurred to him to reverse the letters, beginning at the end and winding up with the beginning as it stood then.

He did so with a brisk pencil, and got a result which certainly seemed more intelligent. They appeared in this fashion:

"Proceedatonce to ship sevilla southampton take ticket for trinidad await orders on board."

Now, for the first time, he saw light ahead and, starting at the first of the line, began to mark off the words as he came to them, getting this:

"Proceed at once to ship sevilla southampton take ticket for trinidad await orders on board."

With the capitals put in where his intelligence told him they should go, the finished sentence was not only intelligent but extremely terse.

"Proceed at once to ship Sevilla, Southampton. Take ticket for Trinidad. Await orders on board," was what he read; and, as he finally realised that

he had successfully solved the cryptogram, a grim smile of satisfaction played about his lips.

Now he knew that the girl who had rushed past him had mistaken him for someone else. The man who should have received the crimson disc would have known at once that it contained a message. He would have been able to decipher it with none of the trouble it had caused Lee, and it is to be supposed that, forthwith he would have betaken himself off to Southampton, there to seek a ship named the *Sevilla*, by which he would take ticket for Trinidad.

Nelson Lee knew that there was a steamer in the South American trade called the *Sevilla*, though if she were in port at the present time he did not know. However, a glance at the shipping page of the daily paper would tell him that.

But why should some man receive this mysterious secret message to join this ship at Southampton? What was the object in it all? Why should such secrecy be displayed? Was there some secret purpose afoot? There must be for such caution to be adopted.

What was to happen aboard the *Sevilla*? Had it any connection with the shots which Lee had heard? Had it any connection with the girl? Was the hunchback mixed up in it—the same hunchback who had given him the slip in Soho?

Nelson Lee couldn't tell, but it is indicative of his keen interest in the matter that before he retired that night he called up Scotland Yard and reported the shots which he had heard at Hampstead Heath, describing to the official who answered the 'phone the location of the spot, and after that he opened the "Times" of that date and searched the shipping columns until he found the name of the *Sevilla*.

She was at Southampton, and was booked to sail at three o'clock the following afternoon.

CHAPTER III.

The Murder at Hampstead Heath—Nelson Lee and Nipper Decide on an Ocean Voyage.

IT was still early the next morning when Nelson Lee woke up to the sound of a steady knocking on the door of his room.

"Hallo!" he called. "Is it you, Nipper?"

"Yes, sir," replied the lad from the other side of the door.

"You are wanted on the 'phone, guv'nor."

"Who is it?" asked Lee, sitting up in bed. "Can't you take the message, Nipper?"

"It is Inspector Brooks from the Yard, sir. I asked if he could give me the message, but he wants to speak to you—says it is something about a report you sent in last night."

"Oh, all right, my lad! Tell the inspector I shall be there in a few seconds."

As Nipper went away, Lee leaped out of bed and, thrusting his feet into a pair of slippers, pulled on a heavy dressing-gown. Then, opening the door, he passed through the dressing-room into the consulting-room. The receiver of the desk telephone was standing on the desk, and, taking it up, Lee called:

"Hallo!"

"Is that you, Mr. Lee?" came back the voice at the other end.

"Yes, inspector," replied Lee. "What is it?"

"I want to speak to you about the report you sent in last night, Lee."

said the inspector. "I found it on my desk this morning, and since you called up there has been a discovery at Hampstead Heath."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Lee. "What has been discovered?"

"Well, I can't tell you much about it on the 'phone except to say that the body of a man has been found just near the spot where you report having heard pistol-shots. After your report arrived last night, a man was sent out, and in the early hours of this morning he made the discovery. I am going out there now, and wish to know if you can come along with me?"

"Certainly, inspector!" responded Lee promptly. "I shall be ready by the time you call for me."

"Thank you. I shall be along inside half an hour."

"Very well!"

With this, Lee hung up the receiver and, turning to Nipper, said:

"Send down word for breakfast to be served at once, my lad. The inspector is calling here in about half an hour, and wants us to go to Hampstead Heath with him."

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked the lad.

"There seems to have been an accident, a suicide, or a murder on the heath," responded Lee. "I heard shots as I was coming home last night and reported them. The discovery followed. But we shall know more when we get to the heath."

Lee hurried through his shaving and bath, and about twenty-two minutes after he had hung up the receiver he was back in the consulting-room, fully dressed. He went along at once to the breakfast-room, where a hot breakfast was waiting, and by the time the street-door bell rang he had not only finished the meal but had digested the meat of the day's news as well.

Lee paused only long enough to light a cigarette; then he and Nipper followed the bluff inspector out to the waiting car. Nipper climbed in beside the driver, while Lee and the inspector sat in the tonneau; then, when the car was picking its way along towards Oxford Street, Lee turned to the inspector and said, in a low tone:

"What was found?"

"I haven't seen the body myself," replied the inspector; "but, from the report which I have received, I judge the man to have been a foreigner of sorts. There seems some doubt as to whether it is murder or suicide. The affair must have happened at the very moment when you came along that way last night, for the body was found not far from where your report says you were standing when you heard the shots."

Lee nodded.

"I should have waited and reported the matter to a constable, I suppose," he said slowly; "but as I stood there a man slouched along, and I thought it wiser to follow him. It was just possible that he had had something to do with the shots; but, unfortunately, I lost sight of him in Soho. I am sorry now that I didn't let him go and seek a constable instead. I can at least swear to the number of shots fired, though that may be of no use to us."

"How many was it? Three, I think the report said."

"Yes. One shot was fired first; then, after a few seconds, two more followed in rapid succession."

They said no more on the matter until they reached the heath, near where the body had been found. At a spot where the road turned past the heath, the big police car drew up, and the occupants descended. Scarcely had they touched foot to earth when a plain-clothes man appeared and, saluting, stood waiting for the inspector to speak.

"Is it far from here?" asked the inspector, in a low tone.

"No, sir," answered the man—"just beyond that ring of bushes."

"Any persons hanging about?"

"No, sir; it is a quiet spot, and no one has seen us yet."

"That is good!" responded the inspector. "It will give us a chance to make the examination before any curious persons gather. Now then, Mr. Lee, can you recognise from here the spot where you were standing last night when you heard the shots?"

Lee nodded and, turning, pointed towards the corner of the road.

"I was walking along just there, inspector, when I heard the first shot. I at once stopped, and immediately there followed two more shots. It was just there, too, that the individual of whom I spoke passed along, and I followed him."

"Would you be able to pick him out again if you saw him, do you think?"

"I could hardly fail to do so," answered Lee, "for he was a hunchback."

"Ah! That is a valuable bit of information, Lee. Well," added the inspector, turning to the plain-clothes man, "lead the way! We will have a look at the body and examine the place before the ambulance comes."

Saluting again, the plain-clothes man turned and led the way along through the bushes until he had come to a secluded spot, bounded on all sides by low scrub. While it was a spot well removed from the path of the casual passer-by, it was high up, and, gazing along to the north, they could see clear across the heath until it merged into a misty blue in the distance.

It was a beautiful morning, soft with all the softness of early summer. A thousand birds sang and twittered all about them. Overhead a skylark was bursting its little throat in song, and in the bush near at hand a thrush was singing, with a marvellous range of notes.

The sky was a deep, soft blue; the sun was ardently caressing. It was a morning when tragedy seemed indeed far away; and yet—and yet they knew that just beyond the next bush there lay the body of a dead man.

They skirted the last bush, and came upon the thing suddenly. The body lay on its face on the soft turf, the fingers of the left hand clutching into the grass, and the right hand holding a heavy-calibred revolver. The man had been a smallish man, and even at the first glance they could see that his hair was as black as coal.

While a cursory examination had been made, the body had not been disturbed and, treading carefully, Lee and the inspector bent over it. Near by were two constables keeping guard. Before turning the body over, the inspector made an examination of the ground round about, and while he seemed to be following the work of the inspector, Lee was in reality making a search on his own account.

In the immediate vicinity of the body the ground had been very little trampled, and in one spot, where the turf was bare, there appeared in the soft mud a distinct footprint. A very few moments sufficed to assure them that the print had been made by the left shoe of the dead man.

From all the appearances, it seemed safe to conclude that there had been no hand-to-hand struggle. Death had either reached the man from his own weapon or from some little distance. That remained to be discovered.

Now they moved over to the body, and, bending down, gently turned it over. Nelson Lee and Inspector Brooks—in fact, every man there—had gazed many times upon death. In the profession which Lee followed and in the work of the C.I.D. death was a common factor; and yet, hardened though they were to the sight, every man drew an involuntary breath, sharp and sudden, as his eyes fell upon the hate-distorted features which were revealed to them at that moment.

The man was a foreigner; that was certain. His hair they had already seen was black, and now that his face was revealed, it showed up the colour of coffee under the bright morning sun. His eyes were wide open, gazing

upwards with a malevolent expression which almost made the face live again.

The nose was short and broad at the nostrils. The upper lip was drawn back over yellow teeth in a savage snarl, as though the man had died still cursing. The upper lip itself bore a thin black moustache. In the lobe of each ear there was a hole for an ear-ring, but none was there at present. The man's clothes were good enough and of a foreign cut.

The coat was of black serge, while the waistcoat was white and the trousers grey. The boots were long and pointed, and even a casual glance told Lee and the inspector they had never been made in England. The man's linen was clean and new, while in his tie, as well as on one of the fingers of the left hand, there was a large diamond.

"Looks like a lower-class Italian or Portuguese," remarked the inspector, looking up at Lee.

"Possibly a Portuguese," replied Lee; "but I am inclined to think, inspector, that the man came from a greater distance. His type is the lower-class type of Central or South America."

"How do you make that out?" asked the inspector irritably.

Lee knelt down carefully, and, lifting the head of the dead man, passed his fingers about the skull.

"Look here!" he said. "If you will notice the shape of the skull, you will see that it is fairly straight behind, while the top is low and flat. Now notice the forehead—low and wide, with the hair growing well down. The nose is distinctly negroid in type. The eyes, too, show traces of negro blood. This man has, I should say, a good proportion of South or Central American blood in him—a strong proportion of the negro, some Portuguese, and a little Spanish. He is the mongrel type which abounds round the sea coast of South and Central America. He is, I should say, a 'mestizo.'"

The inspector scratched his chin.

"Well, maybe you are right," he said, after a moment's thought. "Anyway, perhaps we shall get a clue when we search his pockets."

Forthwith the inspector began to go through the pockets of the dead man one by one. As he brought forth each article, he laid it on the grass beside him, and, when he finally straightened up, every pocket and every place of concealment had been gone through. The inspector was an expert at "frisking," which is the slang for stripping a man's pockets.

Then, while Lee drew out a notebook and a pencil, the inspector began to call out the names of the articles one by one. When he had finished, this is the list Lee had written. It certainly was a heterogeneous collection of articles:

"One alligator-skin wallet, containing twelve five-pound bank-notes.

"Two pounds in gold, twenty-three shillings in silver, and eightpence in coppers.

"One small pearl-handled penknife, of Sheffield make.

"A small, carved, walnut key-ring, containing two ordinary-looking keys.

"A cheap nickel watch and silver chain.

"A closed long-bladed hunting-knife of American manufacture.

"A packet of yellow cigarette-papers.

"A cotton bag of cigarette tobacco, unlabelled.

"A common lead-pencil, of German manufacture.

"A small piece of cord, about two feet in length.

"Two wide, thin, hammered brass ear-rings.

"Eleven revolver cartridges, the calibre of which is .38.

"One large red poker-chip."

As the inspector called out this last article, Lee wrote it down without

betraying any sign of the curiosity which filled him; but when he had finished, he thrust the book back into his pocket, and, leaning over, picked up the poker-chip.

"One large red poker-chip!"

It reminded Lee of the ivory crimson disc which had been thrust into his hand the previous night. He glanced at it curiously, noting that, unlike the ivory disc which he had, it was not thick enough to be divided. It was about an inch and a quarter in diameter, and about the sixty-fourth part of an inch in thickness. It was exactly what the inspector had called it—a single red poker-chip.

It did not need a glass to tell Lee that there was no chance of it containing a means of opening. It was too thin for that. It was simply a thin red disc, yet it was the same shape and the same colour as the disc which he had received from the girl. It contained no written message, but it could easily serve as a sign of some sort, and Nelson Lee did not doubt for a single moment that it had some very strong connection with the disc which had been thrust at him the night before.

That meant that the girl who had fled past him must know the identity of the dead man. It meant that she must know something about the reason which had brought him to that lonely part of the heath at that hour of the night. She had been close to the spot when the shots had been fired. Had she had any hand in it? That Lee couldn't tell.

Then, again, there was the hunchback who had shuffled past him. Was it possible that he might have had a hand in the business?

Lee laid the poker-chip back with the other articles, and knelt down for the real part of the examination. The inspector had opened the man's waistcoat and shirt at the top, and had revealed a small hole just over the heart. The bullet which had caused death had entered clean, and, twisting the body round, they saw where it had come out under the shoulder-blade at the back.

The hole there was wide and torn, and the man had bled copiously. In passing through the body the bullet had spread, proving that it must have had a soft nose. Now they took the revolver from the fingers of the dead man, and, breaking open the chamber, allowed the cartridges to fall out on the grass. It was a six-chambered revolver, calibre .38, and at the moment the chambers had contained five loaded cartridges and one discharged cartridge.

One of the shots which Lee had heard had been fired by that weapon, and it was impossible to think that the case was one of suicide, for in the region where the bullet had entered, there was no sign of scorching by powder which would have been the case had the man fired the bullet which had caused his death.

While the inspector extended his examination to other parts of the torso, Nelson Lee signed to Nipper, and the two of them began working about the spot in circles. It was on the very fringe of the bushes that Lee came upon a spent bullet, and it was not of .38 calibre. It was a soft-nosed bullet of a larger size, and the nose had been spread and flattened by contact with something.

Turning round, Lee discovered that, from where he stood, a straight line drawn towards the spot where the body lay would, allowing for the height of a standing man, pass almost directly through the spot where the man had been shot. Allowing for the turn of the man before he dropped, there could be little doubt that the bullet he held in his hand was the one which had caused the man's death. Also, its calibre proved in addition that the case was not one of suicide.

A little further scrutiny of the bullet showed that it had been fired from a

revolver of .45 calibre, and Lee and Nipper extended their examination until they were well outside the screen of bushes. Nipper was the one to make the next discovery.

Beside a small clump of bushes, he came upon first one, then another empty brass cartridge. Both had been discharged, and from the position in which they lay Lee concluded they had been thrown out from an automatic-pistol. And both were of .45 calibre.

Lee and Nipper returned to the inspector now, and Lee handed the spent bullet, with the two discharged cartridges, to the inspector.

"There is the proof of the three shots I heard," he said quietly. "The spent bullet is from a .45 calibre pistol. These two shots are from the same calibre weapon. Those two shots must have been the last two I heard. They were fired in rapid succession. Therefore I should hazard that this man before us fired the first shot."

The inspector looked puzzled.

"I don't quite understand," he said slowly. "Just look at this man's face, Lee! Did you ever see such an expression on the face of a dead man?"

Lee once more gazed down at the hate-distorted features of the dead man.

"Well," he said finally, "I must say I have seldom seen such an expression of undying hatred on the face of any person. This man may be dead, but the hate he felt for the man who killed him still lives. If I were a spiritualist, I should say that his spirit is in torment with the hatred it feels. Have you discovered anything else, inspector?"

"No; not yet. But it strikes me as a simple case to reconstruct, Lee. In my opinion, this man before us—a foreigner—came here to the heath to meet someone. We do not know the reason he made the appointment, but when he arrived here a crisis arose and the attack followed.

"If, as you say, he fired first, then the other man may have fired in self-defence, though, to be sure, the very fact that he carried a loaded automatic proved that he came prepared for trouble."

Lee shook his head and slowly lit a cigarette.

"I don't agree with you, inspector," he said. "In the first place, I do not see how this dead man could have come here to meet the other man, for his footsteps are the only ones near this spot.

"The spot where Nipper found the two empty cases is a good twenty feet from here, proving that the other person stood there. They certainly would not carry on a conversation at that distance, particularly if they met to discuss something of a private nature.

"It seems to me that either this man before us followed someone else to this spot or he himself was followed. It is only my theory that this man fired the first shot, and, if that is so, then two hypotheses are possible.

"He may have tracked down the other person, and fired as soon as he located him. On the other hand, if he himself were tracked, he may have fired as soon as he discovered the fact. In either event, he missed, and his miss cost him his life.

"The other person, too, must have missed his first shot, for he fired twice. We must remember that it was quite dark, and the aim was bound to be uncertain. So we stand where we have the body of a man—I think we shall eventually prove him to have been a 'mestizo'—who has been shot dead by a heavy-calibre weapon. There is not a single letter or piece of paper to give any clue to his identity, and I presume you have found no marks on his clothes?"

The inspector shook his head.

"Not a mark," he said.

"The man's garments are typical of the local shops at any place along the Central or South American coast," went on Lee. "So are his boots."

He is well supplied with money, and the diamond in his scarf as well as the one on his finger is worth a considerable sum.

"That he was a man who travelled in some definite fear is proven by the fact that not only did he carry a fully loaded weapon, but he had an extra supply of cartridges. The big knife, too, adds to the strength of that supposition.

"It is not suicide; it could hardly be accident. The number of shots fired settles that point. Therefore, it must be murder or self-defence.

"The man's face registers a violent hatred which, to my mind, proves he knew who fired the shots at him. It was no casual encounter. It was a definite deed, planned carefully and executed boldly."

"I fancy you are right," muttered the inspector, as he got to his feet. "The only thing to do is to get the body along to the mortuary and to have it photographed. Then I shall start the machinery to work to get the man who did the job.

"It is just possible that the man who fired the shots was of the same breed. If that is so, then the search will be narrowed down to a definite clue."

Lee nodded.

"I think that is a strong point, inspector. It is worth following up, anyway. Hallo! What is that?"

Lee broke off, and asked the question as they heard voices near at hand. The next moment two constables appeared, followed by a small man of professional mein.

"The ambulance has arrived," remarked the inspector. "We shall get the body away at once."

When the ambulance attendants had carried the body away, and the inspector had picked up the collection of articles he had taken from the pockets of the dead man, Lee turned to him and said:

"I have a little idea in my mind, inspector. I should like to follow it up if you don't mind, and in order to do so I should like one of those articles which you have."

The inspector glanced at him in surprise.

"Which one?" he asked.

"The red poker-chip," replied Lee.

The inspector gazed at him in bewilderment for a moment, then nodded his head.

"I shall have it photographed at the Yard," he said. "Then you can have it."

Lee thanked him, and together they made their way back to the waiting car. The ambulance had already gone on, and only then had a few curious persons become aware that something unusual was going on. Two constables had been left to guard the spot where the body had been found, for a man would be sent out from the Yard to take detailed photographs of the place, and the inspector did not want anything disturbed until that had been done.

He dropped Lee and Nipper at Gray's Inn Road, with a promise to send the poker-chip on as soon as it had been photographed; and, once more in the consulting-room, Lee opened a drawer in his desk and took out the crimson ivory disc which had been handed to him so mysteriously the night before.

"What do you make of that, my lad?" he asked, handing it to Nipper.

Nipper took it, and glanced at it curiously.

"It looks like the grand-daddy of the one found on the dead man," he answered, after a few moments.

Lee smiled.

"I don't think you are very far wrong, Nipper," he remarked, stretching out his hand for it. "Look!"

Lee took hold of the disc with both hands, and gave a sudden twist. Immediately it came apart, revealing the hollow interior, with the circular piece of paper, which he had replaced. Nipper was gazing at Lee wide-eyed.

"Where did that come from, sir?" he asked quickly.

"I had quite a little adventure last evening on my way home," smiled Lee. "You remember that the reason Inspector Brooks called me up on the 'phone this morning was because I had heard those shots last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, sit down, my lad, and I will tell you all about it. When I have finished, perhaps you will understand why I asked Inspector Brooks to allow me to keep the red poker-chip for a little."

So Lee began and related what had occurred the previous night, from the moment when he was sauntering along close to the heath and heard the three shots to the last working-out of the strange and puzzling cryptogram which he had found concealed in the crimson disc. When he had finished, he thrust a copy of the translation across to the lad.

"Read it!" he commanded.

Nipper obeyed wonderingly, reading aloud:

"Proceed at once to ship Sevilla, Southampton. Take ticket for Trinidad. Await orders on board." What on earth do you make of it, sir?"

Lee shook his head.

"I can't say yet, my lad. But consider two points. That crimson disc was thrust into my hand by the girl of whom I have already told you. In one of the pockets of the dead man there was found a red poker-chip—in other words, a crimson disc.

"It is too strong to be a mere coincidence, particularly when we take into account the fact that the girl was in flight a few moments after the man must have been killed. It is a direct message—or, rather, an order.

"It was certainly not meant for me. Then who was it meant for? Someone was supposed to be standing just about where I was at the moment. It may have been the man who was killed. It may have been the man who fired the shot which killed him. It may have been the hunchback who shuffled past me, or it may have been still another person who for some reason or other failed to turn up.

"In her haste the girl undoubtedly took me for the person for whom she sought, and, because I could not possibly be mistaken for a hunchback, it makes me think he can be eliminated from that part of the affair."

"He may have fired the shot which killed the other man," replied Nipper.

"Quite so, my lad. And I am very sorry that I lost him in Soho. It was very careless of me!"

"It certainly was not like you," rejoined the lad. "But what will you do, sir?"

"I have been thinking over that very point, my lad, and I have come to the decision that, since there has been a life lost over the affair, and since this crimson disc seems to have a strong bearing on the matter, it is our duty to follow up the case to the best of our ability."

"That means, sir?"

"That we shall take care to disguise ourselves thoroughly, and that we shall go to Southampton. There we shall board the ship Sevilla, and take tickets for Trinidad. After that, we shall see if anything develops. I think I am right in saying that our calendar of cases will permit our absence from London at the present time?"

"Yes, sir; it will. There is only that Glasgow case which needs to be attended to at once."

"I have already settled that, my lad. I will let you have the notes for entry later on. Therefore you will prepare at once to leave.

"I should suggest that you adopt the disguise of an American youth travelling for pleasure. Myself, I shall endeavour to make myself as much like a 'mestizo' as possible. On board we must not, of course, be seen together. I shall find an opportunity when necessary to speak to you.

"I have discovered that the *Sevilla* is due to sail this afternoon, so we have no time to lose. You had better get ready at once; and before we leave the poker-chip should arrive from Inspector Brooks."

With that, Lee rose and made his way into the adjoining dressing-room, while Nipper, with a smile of pleasure on his lips, hurried to his own room to carry out his master's orders.

CHAPTER IV.

On Board—Dr. Mortimer Crane Again—The Crimson Disc.

THE steamship *Sevilla*, of the Green Star Line, is by no means one of the newer boats which ply between Europe and South America. On the contrary, she was one of the first boats commissioned by the Green Star Line, and in the way of comfort there is much that is to be desired.

On the other hand, the captain is a genial soul, whom passengers invariably enjoy travelling with; and, while the cabins are not of the most modern type, the meals are good and the old ship stanch and seaworthy. She is also fast, and ordinarily the journey down the Atlantic to the Caribbean and on to the ports in South America is most enjoyable.

She is greatly favoured by returning planters and their families, as well as the natives of every South American republic. It has from time to time been rumoured that Captain Hardy, of the *Sevilla*, has been offered the command of one of the newer and bigger ships of the line, but that on every occasion he has refused it. Whether that is so or not, he is certainly the right man in the right place.

The *Sevilla* was fully loaded, and within two hours of sailing when a small crowd of passengers descended from the last boat-train from London, and, piloted by a string of porters wheeling their luggage, made their way along the wharf to where the *Sevilla* lay.

They were of all sorts and conditions. A few returning planters, some alone and some with their families; a couple of priests; three or four gaunt-looking men, with the stamp of the prospector upon them; a few ordinary tourist passengers; several dark-skinned South Americans, with their women folk and duennas for their children; two boys going to Trinidad in the captain's care; a single returning Government official; one or two stout South American cattle-men, whose fortunes would run into millions; a young woman going out to be married; and a further heterogeneous collection of humanity hard to place.

Among the first to board the ship was a young man whom even the most uninitiated would put down as from the States. Not only did his clothes proclaim the fact, but in speech and manner he appeared a true product of the great republic, the subjects of which do not believe in hiding their light under a bushel.

Another passenger who went up the gangway with the first lot was a tall, lean-limbed, brown-skinned man whom those who had been in South America would have put down as a "mestizo"—in other words, a native with white, Indian, and negro blood in him.

He was dressed, after the fashion of his kind, in a rather loud-checked suit, soft shirt of brilliant hue, a loosely knotted scarf in keeping with the shirt, a soft felt-hat tilted at the angle favoured by the cowboy of the pampas,

narrow-toed brown shoes with high heels, and between his lips the eternal yellow cigarette.

He was typical of the "mestizo" who ordinarily would have had about as much chance of an ocean journey as a peon to become planter, yet who, by the chance fortune of a revolution, had acquired some little authority and a hoard of money. This "mestizo," in particular, seemed to have inherited grey eyes from one of his white ancestors; yet his hair was black and straight enough, while his nose was distinctly negroid in appearance.

Nor would anyone suspect that the nostrils had been spread by the insertion of small rubber rings in them. It was Nelson Lee, but a very different Nelson Lee from the man whom London knew as the great criminologist, though on the passenger-list he was down as Pedro Gomez, bound for Caracas. Lee and Nipper had separated at Gray's Inn Road, and since the moment of parting had not seen each other until they came aboard the Sevilla in their disguises.

Nor did Lee notice the lad now. He first went to his cabin, piloted by a porter; and, when his luggage had been disposed about the place, he tipped the man and returned to the deck. Lunch was just over, and the bulk of the passengers were gathered about the deck, bidding good-bye to friends and relatives. Porters were hurrying past with the luggage of late-comers; deck hands were placing deck-chairs about, quick to spot the man who had travelled before, and was capable of picking out the most sheltered spot.

Others who had never been on a big, ocean-going ship, and who could not possibly know the little tricks so valuable to the man who has travelled, stood quietly by while their chairs were thrust into all sorts of odd corners, too diffident to protest even had they known they were being taken advantage of.

Down in his cabin, the purser was already busy receiving the valuables of the passengers, while outside the big main dining-saloon the chief steward was allotting the passengers to their tables. All was bustle and good-natured crowding until the deep siren gave a warning to those who still lingered on deck. Then came the cry: "All ashore who are going ashore!" followed by a rush for the gangway.

Now the gangway was drawn down; and then, as the sailors moved along to pull in the hawsers which bound the great ship to England, the passengers moved back, still waving to friends, and calling out a last admonition. With a final short bleat of her siren, the good ship Sevilla turned slowly, and, assisted by a tug, picked her way out of the harbour.

Then the tug was cast off, and slowly and majestically she took her way down Channel, the first stop Madeira and her final destination Buenos Ayres, which she would reach some four weeks later.

Nelson Lee utilised most of the afternoon in wandering about the deck, smoking and idly sizing up his fellow-passengers. Now and then he caught sight of Nipper, whom he knew was doing the same thing, and more than once he asked himself if he was not, after all, on a wild-goose chase. He and the lad were aboard ship, bound for South America, with little more as a reason than a crimson ivory disc containing a mysterious cryptogram.

On the face of it, it looked pretty flimsy; and yet, no matter how one regarded it, one could not get away from the fact of the dead man with the hate-distorted features who had lain behind the circle of bushes on Hampstead Heath. If the cryptogram were genuine, then on board the Sevilla there must be some person or persons with whom the bearer of the crimson disc must get in touch with.

A girl had thrust it into his hands, but it did not follow that a girl was what he must look for on board. She may have been but a cog in the whole machine, a messenger to do the bidding of the master. What might lie

behind it all, Lee could not even form a faint hazard. That it had to do with South American matters if it had to do with anything at all seemed a fair guess. Yet it might be political, criminal, or domestic. No one could tell.

How he was to get into touch with the person who would give orders to the man who carried the crimson disc was also a mystery. If the man who should rightfully have the disc was known to those who had the affair in hand, then it would follow at once that they would not recognise Lee as that man. He had taken a big chance on the bearer not being known personally to those on board who would deliver orders, and he reckoned he had one way of discovering whether that were or were not so.

If the man who should have come on board for orders was personally known, then those who would deliver orders to him would have approached him quietly after the ship got under way. On the other hand, if he were unknown, then some sign would be given—a sign which the man must have recognised, and hence Lee decided that each moment of the day and evening he must be on the watch for some such sign.

Now that he had taken the plunge, he was determined not to give up until he had ferreted out the meaning of the crimson ivory disc and the strange cryptogram which it held. He felt most strongly that when he understood that riddle he would be a long way towards a solution of the affair on Hampstead Heath.

It was that evening, while lounging in a sheltered spot on the promenade deck just outside the smoking-saloon, that Lee received his first shock. He had been in the saloon smoking, and watching the card games in progress, and had stepped out on deck for a breath of fresh air. There was scarcely anyone about at the moment. On the other side of the deck a few passengers lounged in their chairs, and in the main saloon there were others; but the majority of the passengers had retired early, many of them already in the grip of *mal de mer*.

Coming down the deck, Lee caught sight of one of the ship's officers, and as he drew nearer he recognised him as the ship's doctor. With him was another man, wearing a long, heavy travelling-ulster and smoking a cigar. Just beyond Lee there was a porthole in the smoking saloon, from which a bright light poured forth, and as the two men came abreast of it, the light fell full on their features. Lee transferred his gaze idly from the ship's doctor to his companion, and then suddenly his lips dropped to hide the surprise which swept over him. The man walking with the ship's doctor was Dr. Mortimer Crane, of Harley Street!

"What on earth was he doing on board the *Sevilla*?" Lee asked himself.

He was certain he had made no mistake, for a moment later the man's voice reached him, and while he was not intimately acquainted with Dr. Mortimer Crane, he had spoken with him often enough to know his voice.

It must be borne in mind that up to this time Nelson Lee had not a shred of suspicion against the doctor. To Lee he was simply the eminent brain and nerve specialist, of Harley Street. He had heard of him often, but had first met him only a short time ago when Stuyvesant Roper, the American millionaire, had been in England, and had purchased the famous Prideaux diamond collection. It was the mysterious theft of the collection from Roper that had brought Lee in touch with him, and he had met Dr. Mortimer Crane in the ordinary course of events, since the millionaire was at the time under Crane's care.

He had not seen the doctor from that time until the previous night, when, having tracked the hunchback from Hampstead Heath, he lost him somewhere in Soho. Then, oddly enough, he had run up against Dr. Mortimer Crane, and had walked along with him as far as Shaftesbury Avenue. That



"Quick!" she gasped. "Take it."
With that she thrust out one hand towards him. Nelson Lee felt something small and hard slip into his palm; then, even before he could grasp the girl's arm, she was off again, running hard towards the dark street which ran past the houses.—(See page 2.)

was only the night before, and at the time Crane had said nothing whatsoever of his intention to take a sea voyage.

Of course, it was none of Lee's business; but the conversation by chance had been of the strange cases a doctor and a criminologist at times have, and it would have been natural for the doctor to mention the fact that he was taking a long voyage. Perhaps he was accompanying a very wealthy patient; or, perhaps, he was taking the journey for his own health. At any rate, here he was on board the *Sevilla*, and Nelson Lee could not help but remark the coincidence.

Twice during this very case Nelson Lee had run up against Dr. Mortimer Crane. So far, it was a coincidence and nothing more; but when a coincidence became repeated more than twice, then Nelson Lee had a habit of digging in more deeply.

Naturally he was not recognised by Crane. It would have taken a clever man to see through the disguise which Nelson Lee had adopted. He stood smoking idly while Crane and the ship's doctor passed round to the other side of the deck, then in the wake of two more promenaders he caught sight of the American youth who had come aboard that day.

As he passed the man leaning against the smoking-saloon, he shot a quick glance in his direction, and as he passed the "mestizo," Pedro Gomez flicked the red ash from his cigarette. By it Nipper knew that under the mattress on his bunk he would find a note that night.

Nelson Lee stood in the shadow while Dr. Mortimer Crane and the ship's doctor passed half a dozen times; then, tossing away the end of his cigarette, he stretched his arms above his head and yawned prodigiously. Not even when alone and unobserved would he permit himself to relax the pose he had adopted. By so doing, even to the most minute actions, he made his disguise naturally perfect.

He was on deck early the next morning, and before breakfast had an opportunity for a word with Nipper. They met on deck as casual promenaders, and spoke a few words as one passenger to another. But, under cover of a strenuous attempt to speak English, Lee managed to convey a few private words to the lad. It was a fine, bright morning, and during the night the ship had left the English Channel behind. She was now ploughing along through the blue, tossing waves, her nose pointing towards the *Madeiras*, which was to be her first stop.

Most of the passengers had managed to come on deck, though, to be sure, a few of them looked somewhat yellow, and seemed disinclined to move from their chairs. Lee, who had been placed at the purser's table, ate a hearty breakfast, and, rolling one of his yellow cigarettes, made his way on deck once more.

He started out for a brisk walk, making round after round of the deck until he had covered his morning's "five miles." Then he lounged about in the smoking-saloon and forward, always on the alert for any sign which would suggest the meaning of the cryptogram in the crimson disc.

By three o'clock that afternoon he had seen nothing whatsoever, and was beginning to ask himself if, after all, he had been the victim of a hoax, when, as he happened to pass round the promenade deck, he caught sight of a girl sitting behind the shelter of a huge ventilator. She was wrapped from head to foot in a long, loose plaid travelling-coat, and had a brown veil wrapped about her head.

She was sitting on a low, folding canvas-seat, and before her stood an easel, propped against the ventilator. She was doing a water-colour, and, in common with others passing round the deck, Lee paused and gazed over her shoulder, though, truth to tell, the girl was the first object of his scrutiny.

She was young, and in profile very pretty. Her hair was a coffee-brown, while her eyes were of the same soft colour. Her cheeks had been whipped into a bright colour by the wind and salt spray, yet her natural colour was, Lee could see, almost that of olive.

Her hands were long and slender and artistic, and as his eyes turned from the girl to the board on which she was doing a water-colour of part of the deck and the sea beyond, Lee saw that her work was superior to that of the ordinary amateur. Something about her made him think she was of the Latin races rather than of the North, and a moment later, when she uttered a soft little imprecation in Spanish, he knew that he was correct.

He idled behind her chair for some few minutes, then he passed on, though each time he circled the deck he glanced towards the place where she sat in order to note how the work was progressing. Slowly, but with remarkable clearness, the water colour developed, until the starboard side of the promenade deck of the *Sevilla* stood out with startling naturalness.

The tossing sea beyond had been done in masterly manner, and with a purity of colouring which made it almost lifelike. The western horizon beyond met the line of sea in a splash of vivid crimson and pink, and then, as he walked round the deck just before the girl closed up her box of paints, he saw that she had painted in the setting sun. It stood out at the very edge of the horizon like a ball of fire. She had really done it well, and the more he gazed at it the more impressed did Lee become with the manner in which she had done her sketch.

The great globe of the sun was gleaming like a ball of fire—like a crimson disc. Like a crimson disc! Like a crim—

As the play of the words impinged themselves upon his brain, as he realised that here before him was a reproduction of a crimson disc, Nelson Lee drew a sharp breath and, turning, gazed out across the tumult of the sea.

A crimson disc! Was there some meaning in that red sun which the girl had portrayed? Was it the sign for which he had been looking?

CHAPTER V.

Who is the Girl?—Don Venustiano Obregon—A Mysterious Packet—A Sudden Attack—Mystery Upon Mystery—Nipper on the Job.

THAT evening, at dinner in the main saloon, Nelson Lee slowly and methodically studied every one of his fellow-passengers who had the temerity to appear at the meal. As it happened, the purser's table was ideally situated, being at the far end of the saloon on the port side. Lee's seat faced the saloon, and from where he sat he could, with scarcely turning his head, see almost everyone at the different tables.

It was at the captain's table that he finally located the girl he had seen on deck. Now she was dressed in some sort of soft, filmy blue, cut modestly low in the throat. Her hair was done high, after the fashion of the moment, and when Lee saw her she was chatting easily with a stout, dark woman on her left.

On her right was an elderly man, whose white hair showed up in strong contrast against his coffee-coloured skin. He was a man whose somewhat coarse features showed the signs of easy living, and whose restless dark eyes darted constantly here and there, with the nervousness born of an uneasy mind.

He paid little attention to the girl, though Lee could see that she was of his party. He confined himself to the matter of eating, wolfing each course as it came along in a manner which was just a little disgusting. That

he was a native of South or Central America was plain at first glance, and it did not need much deduction on Lee's part to tell him that the dark woman on the girl's left was the man's wife, while the girl herself—well, there was just a little difficulty in placing her.

While she was undoubtedly Spanish, she had a refinement of feature lacking in both of her companions. She may have been the daughter, but, on the other hand, Lee inclined to the theory that she was either a niece or ward, or, perhaps, a secretary. That afternoon on deck was the first time he had seen the girl since coming aboard, and this evening was the first appearance the other woman had made.

He had, however, seen the man in the smoking-saloon in the morning, and had heard another passenger address him as Don Venustiano. Recalling this, Lee determined to look the man up on the list immediately after dinner, and if possible to place him. His glance strayed now to the table presided over by the ship's doctor, and there, on that officer's right, was Dr. Mortimer Crane. That the great specialist was in fine fettle was plain, for from time to time a burst of laughter rose from that table, caused by some witty sally of Crane's.

Away at the other end of the saloon, Nipper was seated at the chief's table, and as far as Lee could make out the lad seemed to be getting on swimmingly. At moments when there was a lull in the hum of conversation and the rattle of crockery, he could hear Nipper's voice, high-pitched and strongly nasal, holding forth on some feature of "little old Noo Yawk," after the wont of the inhabitants of that great city. Electing to take his coffee in the smoking-saloon, Lee left the table as soon as the last course had been served, but on his way he stopped in his cabin in order to get his passenger-list.

In a corner of the smoking-saloon he opened the folder and, beginning at the first page, ran his eyes down column after column of names until, under the letter "O," he came across what he sought. There it was plainly, as follows: "Don Venustiano Obregon, Senora Obregon, and maid."

"Don Venustiano Obregon!" Lee repeated the name over mechanically.

There was a familiar sound to the name. He was certain he had heard it before. But where? And how?

"Don Venustiano Obregon!"

He repeated the name over and over again, all the time making a swift mental review of all the South and Central American republics. He was almost certain he had heard it in connection with one of them, and if that were so then he should be able to recall the particulars of it, for there was no finer student of Latin-American affairs in all Europe than Nelson Lee. And then suddenly it came to him.

"Don Venustiano Obregon! Of course!" he murmured softly. "I remember now! He was president of the republic of Santa Rosa about four or five years ago. There was something happened at the end of his term of office. Now, what was it?"

Back into the realms of memory he probed, flinging a mental girder across the canon of time until he found that which he sought.

"I know now," he muttered. "When his office as president of Santa Rosa was finished, he presented himself again as a candidate and a revolution followed.

"Don Venustiano Obregon! I remember it all now. He was in office for about four years, and during that time, if rumour is true, then he and his crew looted the country right and left. It was rumoured, too, that Don Venustiano had deposited all his booty in London and Paris against just such a crisis as followed. If I remember rightly, at the time of the revolution he was badly beaten, and only just managed to escape across the border

into Venezuela. Then he made for Europe, and has been, I think, in France and Spain ever since.

"Don Venustiano Obregon! That is the man all right. Now, I wonder what he is going back to South America for? It is probable that he is going to have another shot for the control of Santa Rosa. Perhaps he thinks the time is ripe to strike. If that is so, then he will most likely go on to Caracas and try to get over the border from Venezuela. But financing a revolution is an expensive as well as a risky matter, and I did hear that Don Venustiano had lost most of his illgotten gains at the gaming tables at Monte Carlo. But that places him all right.

"Now for the girl. The list says Senora Obregon and maid. Well, that girl is certainly not her maid, and her name is not Obregon, otherwise it would be here in the list with theirs. Yet I feel certain she is Spanish—Spanish with a London and Paris education. Now, what can her connection with Don Venustiano be? She may be a ward or a secretary. Perhaps a search of the book may reveal something."

But, after all, it was chance which at that moment stepped in to solve the riddle for Lee. It employed as its agents two young caballeros from Rio Janeiro, who had been to London and Paris to extend their education—a curriculum which had consisted of an endeavour to take in the night clubs of London and the night cafes of Paris with a regularity worthy of a better cause.

They had apparently graduated, for now, at the end of a few months, their sallow faces were muddier than the coffee-hue with which Nature had originally endowed them; their eyes were sunken and lacked lustre, their hands were nervous and shaky, and they sought stimulant from the bottle far, far too often for young men of their years.

They were dressed in an exaggerated form of the latest fashion, and wherever a flashing diamond could be placed they had placed one. They were the type which was a pet aversion of Lee's. He loathed the breed, and had seen much of it. It was the type which has never done a man's work and never would; the type which is but a parasite on society, producing nothing and consuming much; the type which is evolved in every country in the world where indulgent parents permit their offspring to grow up wastrels and to become little else than a butt for wine.

After a single supercilious glance in the direction of the flashily dressed "mestizo" they ignored his presence entirely, and, speaking in Spanish, began to review the last night they had spent in town. From a highly illuminating conversation they drifted to discussing their fellow-passengers, and when Lee heard them begin to mention names he pricked up his ears.

Name after name they sued with unblushing effrontery, dwelling on the possibilities of a flirtation in order to liven up the journey. And then suddenly one of them let drop the name of Don Venustiano Obregon.

"The senor grows fat in his old age," simpered one of them, as he rolled a fresh cigarette.

"And bad-tempered as well," responded the other, in an effeminate lisp. "I recalled myself to his memory on deck this afternoon, but the pig scarcely replied to me. He evidently did not wish to have me recall the night we met him at Le Rat Mort, in Paris."

"The Senorita Reyes, who travels with them, is a likely little filly," remarked the first. "I shall amuse myself with her on the voyage."

"If you get the chance," grinned his fellow. "Don Venustiano watches his secretary very closely, my Ricardo."

"Pah!" sniffed the other. "Leave it to me, my dear Castro. I shall

outwit Don Venustiano and his fat wife with ease. Come, 'amigo,' let us stroll the deck and see what is abroad."

For the first time since coming on board Nelson Lee found it difficult to play the part of a flash "mestizo." To sit and listen to such sickening talk roused every antagonism in his British nature, and he was compelled to hold himself in with a strong grip to keep from dashing the contents of his coffee cup into the faces of the two gilded fools who passed out at that moment.

"Sanaille!" he snarled inwardly. "If I get the chance just to save someone else the trouble I shall get one home on those two dogs. Yet I have discovered one thing, though I would it had been from a cleaner source—that is, the name and rank of the girl who was sketching on deck this afternoon—Senorita Reyes! And she is Don Venustiano's secretary.

"Now, is it possible that Senorita Reyes had some meaning in her mind when she painted in that setting sun this afternoon. It may have been mere coincidence, but, at the same time, there is no getting away from the fact that it was a perfect representation of a crimson disc. And it was a crimson disc handed to me by a girl which brought me aboard the Sevilla.

"The next step is to discover if it did mean anything, and to do that I must get close to the Senorita Reyes. But first I must have a word with Nipper. Since she is Don Venustiano's secretary, and since she is a suspect, as it were, then I think it would be as well to keep Don Venustiano under surveillance. That job I shall delegate to the lad."

Tossing away his cigarette Lee rose, and, passing out on deck, sauntered along towards the music saloon, where, from the strains of music which floated down the deck, he judged there was dancing. He was right. At the upper end of the promenade deck a few couples were waltzing, and on the edge of the crowd, ogling every girl and woman who passed, were the two caballeros whom he had heard conversing in the smoking-saloon. Lee elbowed them aside rudely, calmly oblivious to their muttered imprecations, and made his way along until he was standing almost beside the Senorita Reyes.

She was standing with Senora Obregon watching the dancers, and as the ship-born breeze softly wafted her filmy blue wrap about her Lee could not help but admire her. Certainly she looked the direct antithesis of a criminal. Gradually he worked his way along until he was almost beside her; then, apparently oblivious of her presence, he thrust his hand into his pocket. When it came out again he was clutching something between his fingers—something which he took good care no one should see.

Then, watching his chance and choosing a moment when all eyes were turned upon the dancers, he brushed against the girl. He apologised instantly, and perforce the girl looked at him, nodding a curt little acknowledgment. But before she had turned her eyes away Lee managed to open his hand and reveal for one brief instant the crimson ivory disc which he was clutching. The next instant his hand had closed and he had thrust it back into his pocket. Then he turned his attention back to the dancers, and, after a few more minutes, pushed his way out of the crowd.

Along the deck he paused, and, leaning over the rail, gazed out across the dark face of the sea. Up forward, where the sharp bow of the Sevilla cut into the tossing waves, the salt foam flaked off in great curving lips like the scattered froth of some vast cauldron, which tossed and boiled and foamed as though stirred by one of Neptune's court, condemned to the task for all eternity.

Out beyond the white-lined edge where the foam stopped, conquered by the black, the sea rose and fell in a vast concourse of limitless expanse,

impressive, mighty, and forever dominant. So had it heaved its mighty breast in the dim past, when the primitive ships of the Phœnicians first braved its wrath. So had it thundered forth its mighty tones down through all the ages until ploughed by the knife-like prows of the great modern liner. Yet always it seemed to be saying:

"I will get you—I will get you—I will get you! You may escape for a little, but one day I will get you—I will get you—I will get you!"

So it seemed to Lee as he hung over the rail watching the swishing foam beneath him and dreaming of the mystery of it all.

Suddenly a footstep beside him recalled him to the present, and a strongly nasal tone told him that Nipper was there. In an apparently desperate attempt to put forth his views of the beauty of the night Lee managed to murder the English language, but under cover of his remarks he gave Nipper his orders.

"Seek out Don Venustiano Obregon," he said swiftly. "You will have no difficulty in spotting him. Watch him closely. That is all for the present."

"Very good, sir," whispered the lad; then, continuing his remarks as a good American should, he finally strolled off up the deck to seek for his man.

It was only a few moments after Nipper's departure when, happening to glance up the deck, Lee caught sight of the Senorita Reyes coming towards him. She paused just before she reached the spot where he was standing, but did not glance towards him. Slowly and with an apparent obliviousness to his presence she moved gradually along the rail until she was only a few feet away from him. Still she ignored his presence, continuing to gaze out at the black night sea.

Lee was pondering what he should do when two more figures appeared coming towards him. It was with a little moue of distaste that he recognised the two caballeros. That they were tracking down the girl was evident, and Lee's blood boiled when a few moments later they paused at the rail beside the girl.

"A charming night, senorita," simpered one of them, twirling a misplaced eyebrow, which he flattered himself was a moustache.

"And made more charming by your presence, senorita," added his friend boldly.

The girl stiffened, and gazed at them with scorn in her eyes.

"Senores, you annoy me," she said curtly. "Permit me to pass, please."

"But the senorita is too cruel," protested the first, ogling her. "If the senorita will but permit me——"

What he wished to be permitted to do was never to be known, for at that moment something descended upon him from behind. He was clutched by the collar and the nether region of the trousers in a grip against which it was futile to struggle, and, with an astonished exclamation still hovering on his lips, found himself hurled clear across the promenade deck to fall with a crash into some empty deck-chairs.

It was the despised "mestizo" who had appeared as the girl's champion, and before the second ogling caballero could recover from the trance of surprise into which he had fallen he found himself clutched, and, willy-nilly, joined his cursing companion. Then, laying his hand over his heart in the true style of the pampas, Pedro Gomez; the "mestizo," bowed low, murmuring:

"Pass on in peace, senorita. These curs shall trouble you no more."

The girl bowed gravely, and thanked him in soft Spanish; then, with a little impulsive gesture of gratitude, she turned to go. As she passed him her hand came down from where it had been holding her wrap and brushed

against Lee's for the barest fraction of a second. But it was not withdrawn before he felt the contact of crisp paper, and as the girl passed on his long supple fingers had received the note which her hand held. He had just time to conceal it when the two caballeros approached him.

That they were out for trouble was plain, and that they had gathered courage from superior numbers was also evident. Lee watched them with a little smile of amusement, and waited for them to speak.

"What do you mean by it, you low-bred spawn of the gutters?" snarled one of them. "Me, I shall slit your heart out for this insult!"

"Ho, ho, my little brown bantam!" scoffed the "mestizo." "And is it a low-born city rat such as you will threaten Pedro Gomez, the cowboy? Run away, little chicken, or I shall pluck out your feathers!"

"Dog!" exclaimed the second caballero, with a desperate attempt to frown fearfully. "For this you shall pay! I, Ricardo Moneles, say it."

Nelson Lee laughed aloud, with all the bravado of the South American cowboy; then, with a swift movement, he had grasped them each by the neck. Once, twice, thrice he banged their heads together, and the cracking of empty skull against empty skull echoed down the deck. Then he threw them from him, and with a clicking sound of disgust turned his back and left them.

He made straight for his cabin, and there, when he had carefully locked his door, he took out the note which the girl had handed him, and, spreading it out, read it. That it had been written hastily was plain, for a pencil had been used and the paper was the blank fly-leaf torn from a book.

"I have received the sign"—the note ran. "To night it will be done. Be in the shadow of the promenade deck by the smoking-saloon at midnight to receive it. All goes well.—The Crimson Disc."

That was all. Lee read the short note over again, then tearing it into tiny pieces he allowed them to be carried away through the porthole by the wind.

"So I was right, after all," he mused, as he stood there pondering on the strange note. "She did paint in that crimson sun for a purpose. It was a clever way of giving the sign of the crimson disc, I must confess. But what can she mean? 'To-night it will be done. All goes well. Be in the shadow by the smoking-saloon to receive it.' I seem to have stumbled on to some mystery all right, but by following the instructions in the cryptogram I seem to have taken the right path towards an understanding of it, so I think I shall continue to obey in order to see what happens.

"This girl—this Senorita Reyes—must be the same girl who ran past me at Hampstead Heath. That means she was close to the spot when the shots were fired, and when a man went to his death. It means, further, that she had some definite connection with the murdered man, for I cannot disregard the crimson disc which was found in his pocket. Yet I cannot bring myself to believe that this girl had any hand in that crime.

"She is undoubtedly a cog in the mystery upon which I have stumbled. She is, as was the murdered man, under the orders of someone. She may know who killed the man. She may even have witnessed the deed. But her eyes are too clear, too candid, for me to believe that she had any part in it. On the other hand, she may have been in danger herself. When she passed me, she was fleeing from something.

"She and the dead man may have been working together. It is all pure conjecture so far, but of one thing I am now assured—she is mixed up with this business of the crimson disc, and I shall certainly be in the shadow by the smoking-saloon at midnight. Of course, since Don Venustiano is her employer, she may be working in this matter for him. I wouldn't put

any rascality past that old villain. He is cunning and shrewd and unscrupulous.

"If he is the moving spirit in the affair, then I think it will be up to me to nip in the bud any little scheme he may be trying to forward, and at the same time I may discover who fired that shot on Hampstead Heath, for such is the chief objective which I have in mind. Now that I am in the business, I shall stick to it and see where it leads."

With that, Nelson Lee left his cabin and made his way back on deck. It was now just past ten o'clock. The dancing had stopped, and a good many of the passengers had already gone below. Of Don Venustiano Lee at first saw no sign. Nor did he see the Senorita Reyes. He had no doubt that the Senora Obregon had gone below, and perhaps the girl had accompanied her. At any rate, there was nothing to do until midnight; so, lighting a fresh cigarette, he entered the smoking saloon.

Almost the first person he saw there was Don Venustiano, who was sitting alone at a table in the corner, sipping a brandy-and-soda. Near at hand was Nipper, with a glass of lemonade in front of him. Over a score of men were sitting about, most of them playing bridge, though at a table at one side Lee saw the two caballeros sitting and talking cheap, frothy nonsense as usual. They scowled at him as he came in, but Lee took no notice of them, and, seeking a table in the corner, he ordered a drink.

He did not glance in Nipper's direction for some time, but when he did the lad signalled to him that so far he had discovered nothing. In reply, Lee signed to the lad with both hands indicating the hour of midnight, which meant that Nipper should be somewhere about at that hour. So he idled away the time until, one by one, those in the saloon drifted out to retire. Lee was almost the last one there when finally the steward closed the bar and called the time.

Rising leisurely, Lee strolled out on deck, and, after leaning over the rail for a little, waited until there was no one about. Then cautiously he slipped along until he stood in the deep shadow, just abaft the smoking-saloon. He did not smoke, for he did not wish the glow of his cigarette to attract any casual promenader towards him. Up forward he heard eight bells struck, followed by the droning cry of the look-out in the bow. Scarcely had the man's tones died away when round the deckhouse there came a shadowy figure.

It paused for a moment, peering into the shadow; then, seeing Lee's bulk against the side of the deck-house, it came towards him swiftly, with scarcely a sound. A moment later Lee detected the soft perfume of the girl to whom he had spoken that evening, and the next instant he felt a thick packet thrust into his hands.

"Guard it well!" she whispered. "You know to whom you have to deliver it. See that you do not fail! Au revoir until we meet in Santa Rosa."

Before Lee had time to reply, she had left him, and, still clutching the packet, he stood watching her as she passed up the deck.

"Guard it well! You know to whom you have to deliver it," he muttered to himself. "Now, what does she mean?"

Scarcely had he asked himself the question when there came a slight sound behind him. Lee turned sharply to see what it was; but, even as his body swung, something struck him with terrific force, and the next instant he found himself fighting in the grip of a man of more than ordinary strength. So suddenly had the attack come that for a few seconds Lee was forced to yield. In one hand he still clutched the packet of papers, and, not wishing to let them drop, he had only the use of the other.

He very soon discovered, however, that there was a viciousness behind the

mysterious assault that boded him no good. It was no time for feinting with one hand. If he were to protect himself, he must use two. Perforce he dropped the packet, and, bringing up his left hand, jammed it hard into the body of his assailant. It had the momentary effect of driving the other back, but he was upon Lee the next moment with more fury than ever, and as they crashed together the second time, Lee threw his arms about him in a quick wrestling hold. In that moment he discovered a strange thing. His assailant was a hunchback!

Yet even in the whirl of the fight Lee had time to think that he had not to his knowledge seen any hunchback on board the *Sevilla*. And he also recollected the hunchback whom he had followed from Hampstead Heath after he had heard the shots. There was no further time for conjecture. His assailant was fighting in silence, putting every ounce of strength into his attack, with the intent to bring Lee to the deck. His every action proved that he knew he had only a short time in which to accomplish his purpose, and that he intended to complete it if possible.

Nearer and nearer he managed to press Lee to the side of the ship, until the top rail was touching Lee's back; then, confining himself entirely to the matter in hand, Nelson Lee stiffened every muscle in his body. His right arm came up and jammed in hard; his left began to worm itself upwards—upwards under the other's guard—until he was almost ready for a sharp upper-cut. It was out of all reason that the fight could continue much longer without the noise being heard by someone, and, now that his fighting blood was up, Lee was as anxious to bring it to a finish as was his opponent.

Of course, Lee could have called for help, but there were several reasons why he would not do so. He would not entertain the thought for a single moment that a hunchback, no matter how strong he might be, could overcome him. And then, too, this mysterious hunchback had obtruded himself more than once into the mystery, and for obvious reasons Lee wished to follow up the matter. But, just as he was on the point of driving home his upper-cut, the hunchback suddenly grew limp and, slipping out from the grip of Lee's right arm, he twisted suddenly.

One hand flew to his pocket; the next instant it was held high up in the air, to descend with swift and unerring precision towards Lee's arm. All too late, Lee saw what was afoot. Frantically he drew back, but not before he felt the sharp stab of a needle in his arm.

He fell back, his lips opened to cry out; but even as his vocal chords composed themselves for the effort they were held paralysed in the grip of the potent drug which had been injected into his arm, and the last thing Lee remembered was a low, fiendish chuckle as he dropped unconscious to the deck.

CHAPTER VI.

Nipper on the Job—The Officer of the Watch to the Rescue.

NELSON LEE was lying huddled up in the scuppers, and the hunchback was in the very act of picking up the packet of papers which Lee had dropped, when out of the darkness behind there suddenly shot a bunch of steel springs and coiled wires in the shape of Nipper.

Like a thunderbolt, he hurled himself at the hunchback, catching him as he bent, and with the crash the two of them rolled over and over on the deck. With a snarl of savage rage, the hunchback twisted and tried to get his fingers about the lad's throat; but Nipper was as slippery as an eel, and, while fighting hard, took good care to keep free of the clutches of those long arms.

He recognised in the first few moments that he had no chance against the superior strength of the other. Like Lee, he was astonished to find himself fighting with a hunchback, but, unlike his master, he knew nothing of the hunchback's association with the affair on Hampstead Heath. He was hanging on and jabbing hard for the solar plexus when there came a rush of feet along the deck, and the officer of the watch appeared, followed by a couple of sailors.

"Here! Here! What is all this?" he cried out, as he came upon the struggling figures.

Both Nipper and the hunchback were too occupied to reply, and the next instant the officer of the watch acted with the characteristic promptitude of the sailor. He rushed in and, with a splendid impartiality, began to deal out his blows on the two combatants. The two seamen with him followed suit, and it was not long before Nipper and the hunchback were dragged apart.

Nipper, once he was free of his antagonist, stood—or, rather, lay—quiescent enough; but the hunchback fought like a wild-cat, and, throwing the two seamen to one side, turned and sped off up the deck at top speed. They were after him in a moment, and the last Nipper saw of them was all three making for the entrance to the main saloon. Several other seamen and another officer came up just then, and there naturally followed the discovery of Lee's unconscious body in the scuppers.

Nipper managed to impress the officer of the watch with the fact that he would not make an attempt to get away, and, seeing that he could not go far in any event, the officer released him. During the confusion of dragging Lee to his feet and examining him, Nipper managed to pick up the packet of papers without being seen, and once they were concealed in his pocket he felt safer. But his chief worry was for Lee. There was something in the hang of his master's head which struck him like a cold chill. Had the hunchback stabbed him?

He pushed his way forward as the door of the smoking-saloon was opened and the light turned on. Lee was laid on one of the long seats, and an officer, whom Nipper recognised as the ship's doctor, bent over him. He made the examination swiftly, but nevertheless with care, and when he looked up Nipper felt a thrill of hope.

"He is not dead," said the doctor. "He has been knocked out with a drug of some sort. Who is he, and where is his cabin?"

Nipper stepped forward and, reckless of discovery, said:

"His name is Pedro Gómez. He is a South American, and his cabin is No. 187. I know him slightly."

"And what do you know of this condition in which he has been found?" asked the doctor suspiciously.

"Nothing!" answered Nipper promptly. "I was coming along the deck and saw a struggle. I rushed up just as the guy—as this man fell to the deck. I attacked his assailant, and was fighting with him when the officer of the watch came up."

"Who was his assailant?"

"I don't know. I have never seen him before, but I can give you a description which will enable you to trace him easily enough."

"What is that?"

"He is a hunchback."

"A hunchback!" ejaculated the officer of the watch and the doctor in chorus.

"There isn't a hunchback on board," added the officer of the watch. "I am certain I have not seen one."

Just at that moment the two seamen who had pursued the hunchback appeared to report that he had given them the slip.

"Did you get a good look at him?" asked the officer curtly.

"Yes, sir," replied one of the men.

"Did you notice anything peculiar about him?"

"Well, sir, he was a hunchback, I think. He had a lump on his back."

The officer of the watch was plainly puzzled. His own men had confirmed the lad's statement. Yet, as a matter of course, he had a passing knowledge of almost every passenger on board; but certainly he had not seen a hunchback since the ship had left port, and had there been such an individual he would have been almost certain to have seen him.

As officer at present in charge of the ship, it was, of course, his duty to ferret out at once this strange affair, and in the absence of the "old man"—in other words, the captain—in his cabin, all the responsibility devolved on him. Nor did he show any vacillation in the course he took. Curtly he beckoned the two seamen to him.

"Find the boatswain at once!" he ordered. "Have the ship searched from end to end for this hunchback!"

Saluting, the two men sped away on their errand, and when they were gone the officer turned to Nipper with a frown.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Philip Carter," replied Nipper promptly.

"The number of your cabin?"

"One hundred and sixty-eight."

"You will go there at once. Until to-morrow morning you will not leave it. You will consider yourself under arrest. When I know more about this affair, then I shall know whether to release you or not. I place you on parole. Will you pass your word of honour not to attempt to leave your cabin until sent for?"

Nipper bowed.

"Certainly!" he said. "You may trust me."

"Very well," responded the officer, with a curt nod. "You will go down at once, please."

Though he would fain have stayed with Lee, Nipper saw that there was nothing to be gained by antagonising the officer of the watch. He was but doing his duty, and Nipper was the last one in the world to interfere with a man doing that. He was too good a soldier himself not to understand. And besides, now that he knew Lee was not seriously injured, but only under the influence of a drug, and since, after all, the packet of papers reposed safely in his own inner pocket, he did not mind so much. So with a last look at the unconscious form of his master he turned and passed from the smoking-saloon.

After him came two sailors bearing the form of Pedro Gomez, followed by the ship's doctor, and thus did that eventful evening end with honours divided.

CHAPTER VII.

Don Venustiano Creates a Scene—A Private Confab of Three—Nelson Lee Plays a New Hand—The Truth at Last.

NIPPER was summoned from his cabin very early the next morning. To tell the truth, he had slept little during the night, for he was more than a little worried over Lee.

He could not help wondering how his master was faring, and when, a little after eight, the ship's doctor appeared to request him to attend in the chart-room at once, he welcomed the summons. He followed the doctor up to

the promenade deck, and then up the companionway leading to the bridge deck. The chart-room was situated just abaft the bridge, and, on entering, Nipper saw at once that something serious must be afoot.

The grizzled captain was seated at the table presiding over the deliberations. On his left was the officer who had been officer of the watch the previous night. Standing at attention just behind the captain were the two seamen who had taken a hand in searching for the hunchback. Sitting in a chair facing the captain was Don Venustiano Obregon, wearing a heavy frown and glaring balefully at all and sundry. Finally, seated in a low chair, and looking somewhat white, was the "mestizo," Pedro Gomez.

They had evidently sent for Nipper last, for as soon as he had entered the chart-room the doctor locked the door after him. The captain curtly indicated a seat, and, with a swift glance in the direction of his master, Nipper slid into it. The captain wasted no time in coming to the point. Glancing slowly at each one in turn, he began:

"You have been all summoned here this morning owing to the fact that there have been some most mysterious doings aboard this ship. It is my duty, as captain, to probe into the matter, and I can assure you that it is my intention to do so without fear or favour.

"I shall first inform you that one of my passengers now present, Don Venustiano Obregon, has made a very serious complaint to me. A very valuable packet of papers has been stolen from his cabin, and owing to certain happenings after eight bells last night there seems to be some connection between them and the theft of the papers. I am assured that just before dinner last night the packet of papers was safe. Don Venustiano himself assures me of that. Therefore, we know that some time between eight o'clock and midnight they were stolen.

"I come now to the happenings which took place abaft the smoking-saloon. I have gone carefully over the report which has been furnished by Mr. Graham, the officer in charge at the time, and since most of you had a hand in the affair it is only necessary for me to dwell briefly on the particulars."

Now the captain turned with a frown to Pedro Gomez, the "mestizo."

"You speak English?" he asked sharply.

Pedro Gomez bowed slightly.

"Surely, captain," he replied.

"You are down on the passenger list as Pedro Gomez, and you are bound for Trinidad," went on the captain curtly. "Last night, about eight bells, midnight, you were standing near the smoking-saloon and took part in a scuffle. The noise was heard on the bridge, and the officer of the watch called two men and went down at once. When he arrived at the spot you were lying unconscious in the scuppers and another fight was in progress between you"—here he glared at Nipper—"and another individual whom I have heard described as a hunchback.

"During the subsequent efforts of the officer of the watch to separate you the other man disappeared, and, so far, has not been apprehended. I will add that the ship has been searched from top to bottom, but he has not been found. Also every passenger on the list has been checked up, and no one is missing. Moreover, it has been ascertained that there is no hunchback on board. Therein lies a mystery.

"It is my hope to solve that mystery before very long. Were it not for the evidence of two of my own crew I should be forced to believe that this tale of the hunchback was a myth. But it is certain that some man not here at present was in the scuffle last night, and that he has managed to elude my men. Now, then, I shall deal with you first, Pedro Gomez. Stand up!"

Obediently Nelson Lee rose and stood negligently enough.

"I will hear what you have to say," said the captain sternly, "and I warn you, as you value your liberty, to tell the truth."

Pedro Gomez smiled slightly and bowed.

"Capitaine," he said, "I shall tell you what happen by ze smoking-saloon. I, Pedro Gomez, stand by ze smoking-saloon. I, Pedro Gomez, hate not one leetle child. Suddenly—pouf!—just like zat, capitaine. somesing come upon me from behind. I, Pedro Gomez, fight, and soon I see zat it is ze hunchback who attack me. Ze hunchback zat ees ver' bad lock for Pedro Gomez, capitaine. But Pedro Gomez, me, I am no coward. I fight back. Ver' soon, capitaine—pouf!—in ze arm zere comes ze sharp point. Me, I know nozzings until zis morning. Zat ees all, capitaine."

"What do you know about the packet which was stolen from Don Venustiano Obregon?" asked the captain sternly. "There is reason to believe it had something to do with the fight."

"Ze packet of ze senor I haf eet not, capitaine," replied Pedro Gomez, with a well-simulated air of utter innocence.

The captain gazed at him closely, but Pedro Gomez did not lower his eyes, and then, with a swift gesture, the captain signed for the two seamen to search him. They did so quickly and easily, for the "mestizo" offered no opposition. Yet when they had finished there was no sign of the packet. The captain signed for Pedro Gomez to sit down, and then he turned to Nipper.

"I will hear what you have to say," he ordered.

Nipper stood up, and after a quick glance towards Pedro Gomez, who was gazing at the floor, he said:

"There is little to tell, captain. I was coming along the deck when I heard sounds of a struggle. I ran along and saw this man"—here he indicated Lee—"lying in the scuppers. I at once tackled the other man—a hunchback—and was struggling with him when the officer of the watch and two seamen approached. That is all, captain."

"You—do you know anything of the packet which has been stolen?" asked the captain.

Nipper hesitated for the barest fraction of a second, then replied:

"I have not got any such packet as you speak of, captain, and I stole nothing from this gentleman."

"Search him!" ordered the captain briefly.

The two seamen did their duty swiftly, but though they searched carefully no trace of the missing packet was found upon the lad. He had told but the truth. He did not have the packet, nor had he stolen it. But he took good care not to say that he did not know where the packet might be found.

"I may as well inform you that while you are up here a thorough search is being made in your cabins," went on the captain, addressing Pedro Gomez and Nipper.

Neither of them betrayed the slightest sign of confusion, and a moment later, when there came a knock at the door, the doctor opened it and held a short colloquy with someone outside. Then he closed the door, and, turning to the captain, said:

"Nothing has been found, sir."

"Very well," remarked the captain briefly. "You may all go for the present, but let me warn you that this investigation is not yet completed. I can assure you, Don Venustiano, that everything possible will be done to discover the thief, and when he is found he shall be punished. That is all."

Slowly the little crowd filed out of the chart-room, Pedro Gomez hurrying.

on ahead and Nipper coming last. Pedro Gomez disappeared suddenly from view, and, not knowing what step to take next, Nipper thought it best to return to his own cabin. Once there, with the door safely locked behind him, he crossed to the big glass port, and, grasping hold of the screw handle, began to turn. Soon he had it loosened sufficiently to drag the port open, and, as he did so, he drew back very slowly.

Inch by inch the heavy, brass-rimmed circle of glass swung inwards, and then along the upper edge, just where the rim fitted the main jamb, there was revealed a bit of white paper. Taking hold of it, Nipper held on while he dragged the port wide open, and the next moment the missing packet, crumpled but safe, was in his hand. It was a very simple hiding-place, but it had proved a safe one.

He thrust it back into his pocket, and, sitting down on the edge of the bunk, gave himself up to thought. He was all at sea. He did not know what game Lee had been playing, but he had taken his cue from his master and had said as little as possible. All he could do now was to wait until he heard from Lee.

Lee had chosen to continue acting the part of Pedro Gomez, and Nipper knew that he must have had some very good reason for doing so. His answer came in about twenty minutes, when there was a knock at the door, and, turning the key, the lad found a steward standing outside.

"The captain's compliments, sir, and will you kindly attend in the chart-room at once?"

Nipper nodded an assent, and, passing out, made at once for the deck. In the chart-room he was not surprised to find Pedro Gomez once more, but this time there was present besides Lee only the captain and Senorita Reyes. Lee smiled at the lad as he entered, and motioned to him to close the door. The frown had disappeared from the captain's face, and now he was gazing at Pedro Gomez in a far different manner than he had regarded him at the first interview.

"I am afraid I owe you an apology, my lad," said the captain, as Nipper sat down. "It seems I have been running blindly. But Mr. Nelson Lee has an explanation to give me, and I have sent for you to be present."

He turned to Lee as he spoke, and, after lighting a cigarette, Lee, with a smile at the girl, told his story.

"It is when we come to the matter of the hunchback who attacked me that we strike the real keynote of the mystery," he said. "I chose to continue to play the part I had adopted, captain, when here before, because I did not wish Don Venustiano Obregon to guess the truth. I have had, however, the opportunity of a talk with Senorita Reyes, and while I accidentally came into the possession of the crimson disc—while it seems that the man who was killed on Hampstead Heath was the man who should have joined the Sevilla instead of me—I think she and I understand one another.

"For certain reasons I cannot go into all the details, but I can say that Senorita Reyes secured the position of secretary to Don Venustiano for a certain reason. Senorita Reyes is the niece of the President of the Republic of Santa Rosa, and is also his secretary. It was known in Santa Rosa that Don Venustiano was contemplating heading a revolution in Santa Rosa, and that in return for great concessions to certain parties in London—commercial buccaneers—he had received sufficient financial support to undertake the affair.

"President Reyes desired to get possession of the exact copies of the agreement which Don Venustiano had with these men. With that information in his possession he would have been able to go to the British Government and at once have the thing stopped. Therefore, Senorita Reyes was

deputed to try and get possession of the papers. A crimson ivory disc was adopted as the means of communication, and a cryptogram was also used.

"There was to come to England to help her a trusted agent of the president, and he, no doubt, was the man killed at Hampstead Heath. The senorita had never seen him, but she was to communicate with him by means of the crimson disc. It seems that Don Venustiano had taken a house near the heath. On the night I heard the shots, and during the bustle of getting the luggage ready for departure, Senorita Reyes managed to slip out of the house in order to hand to her assistant the crimson disc which would order him to go aboard the Sevilla, by which Don Venustiano intended sailing for South America.

"She came out of the house just as the shots were fired, and, being alarmed, ran on to the appointed meeting-spot. I happened to be standing there, and she mistook me for the other. She thrust the disc into my hand and by a roundabout route made her way back to the house.

"I may say that it was she who took the packet of papers from Don Venustiano, and she assures me that the information they contain will cause the British Government to nip in the bud at once the little game which Don Venustiano is trying to play.

"But to return to the matter of the murder. Owing to one or two strange things which happened while they were in London, Senorita Reyes feels sure that there was still another party after the packet of papers. I have already told you of the hunchback who appeared just after the shots were fired, and whom I tracked to Soho, where, unfortunately, I lost him. At the time there was little to connect him with the affair, but since last night he has entered into the case in a startling manner.

"No matter what the evidence seems to show, it was a hunchback and nothing else who attacked me last night. His objective was the packet. It is owing only to Nipper that he did not get them. His appearance is no more mysterious than his disappearance. And while I am at a loss to account for it, I am prepared to state that when we have found that hunchback we shall have found the murderer of the man on Hampstead Heath.

"Mr. Lee, I shall go over the packet with you," said the captain slowly, "and if your words are borne out, then I can assure you of my entire co-operation."

"Thank you," murmured Lee. "Nipper, will you kindly give me the packet?"

With a fugitive smile, Nipper drew out the precious packet, and a few moments later Nelson Lee, Senorita Reyes, the captain, and Nipper were bending over the papers which, as they read them, betrayed one of the nicest little plots for despoiling the republic of Santa Rosa that the brain of man could cook up. At the end of the examination, the captain held out his hand to Lee and said:

"I am satisfied, Mr. Lee. I shall send for Don Venustiano, and I think we can persuade him that he had better break his journey at Trinidad."

Lee took the packet and, with a bow, handed it to Senorita Reyes.

"Permit me to give you the papers for which you have worked so hard, senorita," he said, with a smile. "You certainly have earned them."

The girl blushed with pleasure at Lee's words, and, taking the packet, thrust it inside her dress.

Then, with a few words of thanks, she left, and the captain at once sent his compliments to Don Venustiano, requesting his presence in the chart-room.

That evening Nelson Lee and Nipper, no longer disguised, were pacing the deck of the Sevilla. It was a soft, balmy evening, and they were wait-

ing for Senorita Reyes, who had promised to join them after dinner. As they strolled along the deck, Nipper turned to Lee and said in a low tone:

"I say, guv'nor, do you think they will succeed in finding the hunchback?"

Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"They will not, my lad," he said guardedly, "for the simple reason that he does not at present exist."

"I—I don't understand, guv'nor," said the lad, in a puzzled tone.

"Listen, Nipper!" went on Lee, after a cautious look round. "I want you to cast your mind back to the time when Stuyvesant Roper, the American millionaire, was in London, and when the Prideaux diamond collection was stolen from him. Do you remember that we traced to Whitechapel a man known as 'Two-Gun Ike,' a Yankee crook?"

"Of course, sir."

"And do you remember when the loft where we surrounded him was burnt down we failed to find any trace of him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, you will recall that at the time the police reported that the only person to pass through the cordon was a little old hunchback."

"My heavens! I remember, guv'nor," breathed Nipper.

"Let me continue, my lad. Do you remember that, in my effort to unravel the mystery of that case, I fixed on six men as having had an opportunity to steal the Prideaux diamonds from Roper, but that, owing to the undoubted standing of each and every one of them, we had to eliminate them all; and, while we succeeded in recovering the diamonds, we never did track down the actual thief?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you will also recollect that in those six names was the name of Dr. Mortimer Crane, the eminent Harley Street specialist, who was at the time treating Roper for nerve trouble. All right! Now, Nipper, listen to this. When I lost the hunchback in Soho, I was just on the point of giving up the chase when I heard my name spoken, and, turning round, I saw none other than this same Dr. Mortimer Crane.

"Again, Dr. Mortimer Crane is at present on board the Sevilla. It seems too preposterous to suspect such a man of crime; and yet, Nipper, there is more than pure coincidence in it all. I said that when we found the hunchback we should find the man who killed the fellow on Hampstead Heath. I will go a step further, and add to you that in my opinion Dr. Mortimer Crane, of Harley Street, is suspect as far as we are concerned. And let me add, my-lad, that you are to lock this information in the deepest recesses of your soul! We shall make no move until we are sure. But I feel that yet we shall put our hands on the man we seek. And now, here comes Senorita Reyes! Let us furbish up our conversation, for she is worthy of our best efforts."

And with smiles they went forward to meet the lovely girl who was coming towards them.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

**"THE RIBBON OF LIGHT." An Amazing Tale
of Nelson Lee and Nipper v. "Jim the Penman."**

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

*A thrilling story of Adventure and
Treasure Hunting in the Southern Seas*

By FENTON ASH

Begin the Story here!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, listens to the yarn of an old sea-dog, BEN GROVE, about a supposed far-away treasure island. Alec is so excited at the idea of gold hunting, that he asks old Ben to join him and his chum CLIVE LOWTHER, in an expedition to the far South. Ben agrees. They set sail, and, after a time, sight the island. Ben, however, has doubts about it being the right one.

(Continue this grand story from this point.)

D R. CAMPBELL told Captain Barron of Ben's doubts, and asked him if he were sure he had come to the right island.

"As sure as I am that Ben keeps his store of loose gold there," returned the captain, slyly; for he had been confidentially told their object in wishing to visit that particular place.

Ben sniffed indignantly.

"I tell ye, sir," he cried, "as this be double the size, and double as high as the island I landed on!"

"The skipper shook his head reprovingly.

"Sees everything double—so early in the morning, too," he murmured.

"Ben, my friend, I must reduce your grog allowance."

"And theer be too much smoke," Ben added, ignoring the insinuation.

"There'll be more still by and by, you'll see," returned Barron, with a wink. "I've a pretty shrewd idea that this business will end in smoke. You wait and see if I'm not right."

However, the doctor begged the skipper to go down into the cabin with him to consult the charts, and the smiling officer invited Alec and Clive to join them.

"It will give you a little insight into the mysteries of navigation, my lads," he said.

It did. He showed the three a selected collection of maps and charts, and, with compasses, he set off various distances, which he resolved into figures, and these he worked out in algebra and logarithms, with some excursions into trigonometry and conic sections thrown in.

At the end of less than ten minutes their eyes ached and their heads reeled with pouring over the dizzy array of figures, and they were reduced to a state of mind in which they would have believed the skipper's assurances if he had declared they had arrived at the moon itself.

The two chums escaped from the cabin gasping. They found Ben waiting for their report.

"It's all right, Ben," said Alec. "The captain's proved it to us with figures."

"What figures?" demanded the sceptical sailor.

"Oh, every pretty figure you can think of—triangles, cosines, tangents, and—and—heaps more. No end of 'em—on sixteen slates."

Ben was evidently impressed, but not convinced. He shook his head gloomily, and went for'ard amongst his friends of the fo'castle.

Meantime, the Valda had approached close enough to the strange island to afford a better view of its shores. The wind carried the smoke away above, too, so that it could now be seen that the upper portion was green and bright, while the lower part was sombre and bare-looking.

Suddenly Ben Grove came rushing aft to the two chums. His eyes were distended with astonishment, and his whole manner betrayed the utmost amazement.

"Mr. Alec! Mr. Clive!" he gasped. "Look yonder. Theer be my island, up top! I couldn't see it afore! Blame me, if it ain't shifted its anchorage an' got shoved right on top of another one!"

As Dr. Campbell had suggested, the island must have risen much higher out of the sea since Ben had last seen it.

Unlike so many of the islands of the Pacific, there was no outer coral reef with the usual snug lagoon within. This, of itself, the doctor pointed out, was a further proof of its volcanic origin. There was, moreover, no anchorage to be found outside, consequently there was nothing to be done but—the weather being fine—to bring up in one of the numerous inlets.

Within a few hours tents and stores sufficient for a temporary sojourn had been landed, and the doctor and his two young companions, with Ben Grove and a couple of sailors, went ashore.

It was getting rather late in the afternoon when, their preparations for the night having been completed, Alec and Clive loaded their rifles, and set off for a ramble. They met with little, however, to encourage their exploring ardour.

From some foothills they ascended they obtained views of the inhospitable shore and parts of the country inland, and the more they saw of it the less they liked it.

The fertile, wooded uplands and grassy slopes they had seen from the sea were completely hidden from them by gloomy, overhanging precipices. All they could see was a wilderness of rocks strewn about in endless confusion, with, here and there, dark gullies and caverns, and lakes and pools of stagnant water. These reminded them of something Ben Grove said the madmen had told him about the island being the haunt of strange monsters, and indeed, the whole region seemed well-fitted for the dwelling place of uncanny creatures.

"Let's go back to the camp, Clive," said Alec, with a shiver. "I don't like the look of this place. It gives me a dismal, creeping, eerie sort of feeling. I hope, to-morrow, we shall be able to get to the upper regions. A night or two down will be enough to give a fellow the horrors! Great Scot, what's that?"

A shriek suddenly rang out on the heavy air. It echoed from rock to rock, and was multiplied a hundred times ere it finally died away in muttering moans.

The two started, and loosened their rifles, which, in the belief that the

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place was uninhabited, and that there was nothing to shoot at, they had slung at their backs.

"Heavens! What could that have been?" Alec cried out again, in dismay. "Was it human? Yet—how could it be?"

They stared and peered about on all sides, but could see nothing to account for what they had heard.

"Let's go back," muttered Clive. "I don't like this!"

"But it must have been someone in distress——" Alec began, then broke off as the sound suddenly rose again.

This time it was unmistakably the long, despairing cry of someone in mortal dread, in awful, deadly danger.

Clive pointed to the edge of a hollow fifty or sixty yards from where they were standing.

"Seemed to me it came from below the brink there," he said. And with one accord they ran towards it and looked over.

A strange and terrible sight met their gaze.

Immediately below them they saw the dark waters of a large pool, with steep, rocky sides, upon which, here and there, were a few small, stunted trees and low bushes.

Clinging desperately to one of these bushes, was a man—a stranger, who held on with one hand, whilst he held off, as best he could with the other, the head of a large serpent, which had already one coil round its victim's body.

So startled was Alec by the sight that he slipped upon the treacherous edge of the pool, and rolled down its rocky side.

He thus came plump upon the two—the man and the reptile, and the force of the impact caused the man to let go his hold on the bush. The next moment there was a great splash, and all three were thrown, fighting and struggling wildly together, into the murky water of the pool.

Fortunately for all concerned, Clive retained his presence of mind in the sudden emergency in which he was placed.

Before coming ashore he had, while gathering together his arms, cartridge-belt, and so on, taken up a lariat and, half laughingly, wound it round his waist, remarking that one never knew what might not come in handy in a strange land. And it certainly came in handy now.

Even as he scrambled down, rifle in hand, to the water's edge, he began to loosen and unwind it. In a trice he had it free; then, quickly coiling it, he flung the coil deftly in the direction in which his chum had disappeared.

Thus it came about that when Alec rose to the surface the line came whizzing over his head, and fell so near that he was able to grasp it.

And well it was that he got a good hold upon it, for a moment or so later, to Clive's dismay, he again sank from sight. And it was evident, from the manner of his disappearance, that he had been dragged under—probably either by the strange man or by the serpent.

Hoping it might be the former rather than the latter, Clive pulled frantically at the lariat, and, to make sure that he should not be dragged in himself, he passed the end round the bush the man had been clinging to.

Just as he had done this he saw the snake crawling ashore some distance to his right. Startled no doubt by the unexpected immersion, it had let go its hold and made for the shore.

Clive, his anxiety somewhat relieved as he saw the reptile creep away amongst the bushes and loose rocks, applied all his strength to pulling at the

line. And now he had the satisfaction of seeing his chum's face appear once more above the surface.

But he was evidently in difficulties, and the reason revealed itself a few seconds later. He was struggling to save the stranger, who was making the task harder by clinging to him with the desperation of a drowning man.

Where the two were the water was deep, for the bottom sloped steeply, and it seemed an age ere Clive could drag them near enough for his chum to touch the bottom with his feet. Then he still had all his work cut out, even with Clive's assistance, to haul his burden ashore.

This done, he sank down exhausted, and, for a space, seemed almost as inanimate as the man he had rescued, who was quite unconscious.

Just then Clive heard voices. Someone from the yacht was evidently coming that way, though from where he was he could not see who it was.

He called out, and a cheery hail came in answer. Then three men appeared on the top of the slope. They were Ben Grove and two other sailors, and they came hurrying down to Clive's assistance.

"Why, what be the matter?" cried Ben, looking in surprise, first at Alec and then at the stranger lying beside him. "Be Mr. Alec hurt? Who's this galoot? A dago, b' the look on him. Has he done anything t' Mr. Alec?"

Clive answered as briefly as he could, the while that they tended the two. Alec very soon revived, sat up, and then got to his feet. But the stranger remained unconscious for some little time.

When finally he had recovered sufficiently to talk, it turned out that Grove's blunt reference to him as a "dago" had been a pretty shrewd guess, for he said he was a Portuguese. Then he gave the following account of himself, and of the reason of his being there alone:

His name, he said, was Miguel. He had been engaged, at Valparaiso, as a member of the crew of a vessel supposed to be employed in ordinary trading business among the Pacific Islands. But he had not been long on board before he had found out that this was not the case. The crew were "black-birders"—in other words, slave traders. Their leader was a man notorious in those latitudes for the merciless manner in which he carried out his vile pursuits and the outrages he had committed.

Miguel, finding himself in such company, could not, he said, conceal his disgust and dislike. This led to a quarrel with the rascally leader, who, after trying first persuasion and then threats, had finally put him ashore on this inhospitable, uninhabited island, and left him there to his fate.

And there, according to Miguel's statement, he had remained for over a month, helpless, hopeless, and half starved. His one occupation, apart from hunting about for food, had been keeping a look-out for a passing ship. But the island lay out of the usual track of vessels, and he had seen no sign of one till that morning, when, to his great joy, he had descried the yacht evidently approaching the place. Thereupon he had hastened down to the shore. But in his hurry he had passed too near to the crater-like edge of one of the large pools, had slipped, rolled down the slope, but brought up against a bush, only to be seized upon by a big serpent, as the two chums had seen.

"There are lots of serpents here," he remarked. "And some are very large—much larger than the one that got hold of me. That fact has made my stay here very hard to bear. I had no firearms, and I never felt safe from them day or night—especially at night."

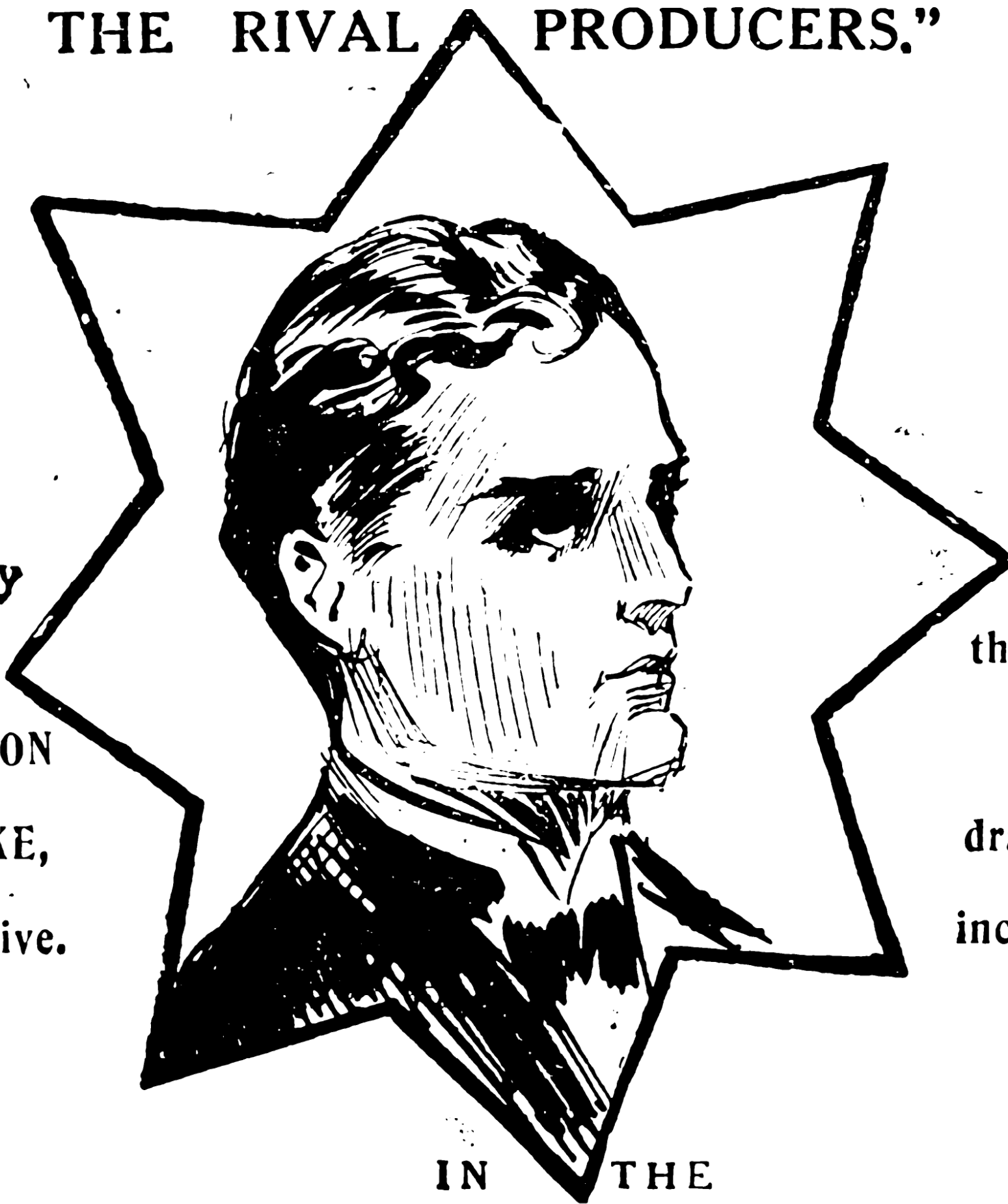
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