

NO. 69.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

Week ending
Sept. 30, 1916.

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1^D



Nº 1 OF
NELSON LEE'S
TEN GREATEST
CASES.

THE
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OR, THE UNSEEN HAND.
BY THE AUTHOR OF 'THE BLACK WOLF' ETC ETC

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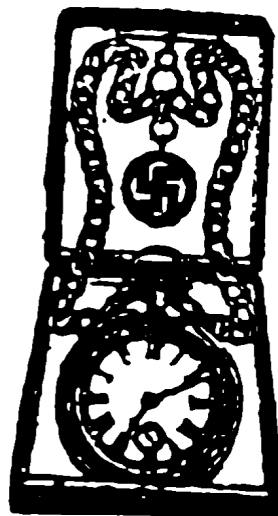
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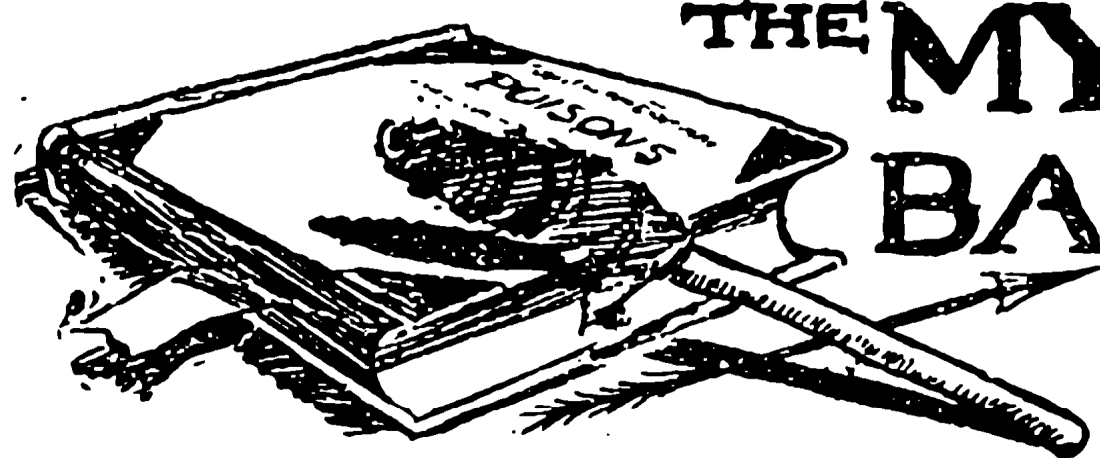
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THE MYSTERY OF BARRON HALL.

Being the First Story
of a Grand New Series:

“NELSON LEE’S GREATEST CASES.”

By the Author of “The Black Wolf,” etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Mystery of Barron Hall.

IT was on a morning in late September that Nelson Lee received an urgent wire, which, as it turned out, was the prelude to one of the most obstinate cases which had ever come his way—at least, he himself has so stated in his “Case Index,” meaning thereby that the application of the laws which govern his profession had proved more difficult than ordinarily.

The wire had been handed in at a small village in Devon, the sending hour being stated as eight twenty-one in the morning, and the hour of receipt in London eight forty-six.

Nelson Lee and his assistant, Nipper, were at breakfast, when, a little before nine, there came the rat-tat of the telegraph messenger at the front door. By nine o’clock the message was in Lee’s hands, and what he read ran as follows:

“Nelson Lee, Gray’s Inn Road, London.

“Can you arrange to come here on very grave matter? Police already have in hand, and Scotland Yard has been communicated with, but feel should like your presence as well. Will pay whatever fee you feel commensurate with time given. If you can come, please wire me at once to Barron Hall here, stating what train coming by, and will arrange to meet you. Impossible to give more details by wire.

“(Signed) GODFREY KINGSTON.”

Lee read the message for the second time, then, glancing across at Nipper, he said:

“My lad, would you go into the consulting-room and bring me the latest edition of ‘Moore’s County Families and Gentry’?”

Nipper sprang up at once, and returned in a few seconds bearing the green volume which Lee had asked for. It took Lee very few moments to find the name Kingston. There were a good many of that name, in fact, but only one branch of the family which seemed to be located at Tamarton, in Devon—Tamarton being the name of the village where the message had been handed in. The particulars were fairly comprehensive, and this is what Lee was able to gather from them:

“Kingston, Godfrey Hinchley Hesketh, Squire of Barron Manor, Tamarton, Devon. Residence: Barron Hall, Tamarton. Born on the 22nd of September, 1850; educated at Rugby and Cambridge. Author of ‘Coins of the Roman Empire,’ ‘Ancient Forms of Barter and Exchange,’ ‘What the Incas Left Us,’ ‘Gold Ornaments of the Aztecs,’ etc., etc. Has travelled widely, more particularly in Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Persia, and the East. Made two expeditions to Central and South America. Has contributed

largely to our knowledge of ancient forms of economics. A very keen collector of ancient gold coins and ornaments, which is his chief hobby. Favourite sports: hunting and fishing. Has never been married. Heir: his nephew, Robert Kingston, born in 1887. Clubs: Travellers' and International."

That was all, but it was sufficient to give Lee a fairly good grasp of the type of man he expected to meet. He finished his breakfast hurriedly, passed into the consulting-room in order to scrutinise his host of engagements, decided that he could manage to get away, and made out the following telegram:

"To Godfrey Kingston, Barron Hall, Tamarton.

"I shall leave London on the eleven from Waterloo. Arrive at Tamarton four forty-five.

"(Signed) NELSON LEE."

He gave this to Nipper to send, and while the lad was gone set to work to run through his morning mail. On Nipper's return the lad packed a couple of bags, and at exactly half-past ten they climbed into a taxi and drove to Waterloo.

Of the journey down to Tamarton it is not necessary to speak in detail. Sufficient is it to say that it was of an uneventful nature, and that they arrived at Tamarton only a few minutes late. Scarcely had Lee and Nipper stepped out on to the small country station platform when a rather well-built young man of medium height approached them and said to Lee:

"Are you Mr. Lee?"

"That is my name," replied Lee. "Have you come to meet me?"

"Yes. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Godfrey Kingston. It was I who sent you the wire this morning."

Lee's brows went up in surprise. Already he was beginning to find that he would have to readjust some of his ideas.

"Er—but I thought Mr. Godfrey Kingston was an elderly man," he said.

"It is my uncle of whom you are thinking," replied young Kingston. "It is on account of him that I wired you, Mr. Lee. A terrible thing has happened down here, but if you will allow the porter to place your bags in the trap I shall tell you about it as we drive out to the Hall."

Lee paused only long enough to introduce Nipper, then he followed the other out to the platform's edge, where a yokel was holding a spirited horse, which was hitched to a high dog-cart. Nipper climbed up behind with the bags, while Lee sat in front beside Kingston; then the yokel released his hold of the bridle, and the horse dashed away.

On the way through the village there was no time for conversation. Kingston's attention was wholly absorbed by the horse, but once they had left the village behind them, and were bowling along a sweet country lane, the horse settled down to a steady pace, and, without turning his head, young Kingston said:

"I have read and I have heard that criminologists like the facts of a case stated as briefly as possible, Mr. Lee, and that then they like to ask what questions occur to them. Am I right?"

Lee smiled slightly.

"You are not far wrong, Mr. Kingston," he responded. "I should surmise that you are a student of fiction dealing with the matter."

"I am," admitted Kingston. "It is my favourite form of literature, but I never thought I should be one of the principals myself. But I shall tell you what has occurred, Mr. Lee. My uncle, Godfrey Kingston, has been murdered. I shall tell you nothing about the arrangement of Barron Hall, for you will see all that for yourself when you get there."

"But—pardon me a moment," said Lee quickly. "I had no idea the case was as serious as this. When did the murder occur?"

"Last night."

"That was your uncle's birthday, was it not?"

Kingston nodded, and looked surprised.

"How did you know that, Mr. Lee?"

"That was simple. Before coming down here I consulted 'Moore's Directory.' But go on, please."

"There were several of us at the house yesterday. I myself live there, for I have been acting as my uncle's steward and agent. Then there was my cousin, Dick Kingston, who came down from London, and another cousin, Molly Cheseworth. It was my uncle's custom to have us all down for his birthday, and yesterday passed off much the same as in former years."

"Were there no other guests?" asked Lee.

"There were no others staying in the house, but last evening several local friends came in for dinner and bridge. They left, however, about eleven, and my uncle retired soon after. It was his custom to go up to his room about ten, and to spend an hour reading or examining some of his treasures. I should tell you, Mr. Lee, that he was a very enthusiastic collector of gold coins and ancient gold ornaments."

"I already know that," remarked Lee.

Kingston paused for a moment as they turned into another lane, then he proceeded:

"My cousin Molly went up to retire about half-past eleven, and stepped in to say good-night to him. He was all right then. My cousin Dick and myself were the last to retire. We went up together, but parted at the top of the stairs, as I had to go along to the servants' wing in order to speak to the butler.

"When I came back, I passed my uncle's door, and beneath it could see the light still burning. I stopped and was going to enter, but I heard his voice as though he were speaking to someone. I went on to my room, and found my cousin Dick waiting there. We talked for a few minutes and then he left.

"This morning, about half-past seven, my uncle's valet rushed into my room and woke me. I went with him to my uncle's room, and there discovered what had happened. My uncle was sitting in his favourite easy chair before the fireplace—the night before had been chilly, and there had been a fire there.

"He was fully dressed, and on the floor at his feet was a little gold frog which another cousin—Robert—who is in South America at present, had sent him. He was quite dead, and it was not difficult to discover what had been used to murder him, for under one of the cases containing some of his collection was found what I think is called a life-preserver.

"My uncle had been struck from behind. It was a terrible blow, for it had broken in part of the skull. My first act was to send for the local constable and to have Scotland Yard and the County Police notified. Then I wired you.

"I have left my cousin Dick in full charge of things, and have given strict orders that nothing in the room is to be disturbed, not even by the local constable. The servants know, of course, but I do not know if my cousin Molly has been informed yet, as she is a late riser, and I told Dick not to disturb her until I returned.

"Those are the bare facts, Mr. Lee, and as we have arrived at the gates to the Hall, you will soon be able to see things for yourself."

Nelson Lee gazed with interest upon the place which had suddenly become

the home of tragedy. That it was a large estate he could see by the wide-spreading park lands on each side. A high stone wall ran in each direction as far as the eye could see, and big, noble gates gave entrance to the driveway.

From the road the Hall was not visible, but when the lodge-keeper had opened the gates and the horse had dashed up between a fine row of elms, the Hall suddenly appeared. It was a fine architectural effort, with traces here and there of almost every period from the Elizabethan. The general idea outside was a wide, pillared entrance in the centre, with two towered wings, one on each side.

There were two floors above the ground floor, and off beyond the left wing another square portion of two floors only. This, Lee discovered later, was the servants' wing, of which Godfrey Kingston had spoken. The house itself was nearly covered with ivy, and in front there was a lovely lawn, in the midst of which had been placed a triple fountain.

To the right were the gardens, a medley of Dutch and Italian effect, while beyond lay the deer park, stretching away through a vista of lovely trees and soft greens into a deep, brooding perspective. It was one of the loveliest homes in a land of lovely homes, and it seemed doubly shocking that tragedy should have come to visit in such surroundings.

Godfrey Kingston brought the dog-cart to a stand before the pillared entrance, and a groom suddenly appeared to take charge of it. Lee's eyes were missing no single detail as he descended, and when the figure of a young man appeared in the doorway he scrutinised him carefully.

He was introduced to Lee and Nipper as Dick Kingston, the other cousin, and showed strong traces of the family in his looks. He had the same well-built figure as Godfrey, was of medium height; but where Godfrey Kingston was fair, the other was dark.

He was, Lee judged, somewhat younger than Godfrey, and, as a matter of fact, this surmise was correct, for Dick Kingston was just twenty-six. Godfrey led the way through a darkened hall to a large library at the far end. There, waiting for them, were wine and sandwiches, which Lee frankly attacked.

While Lee and Nipper ate, the two cousins talked in low tones, and now and then Lee caught the name of the girl cousin, Molly.

"I had to tell her," Dick was protesting. "She heard something going on and got up. Almost the first person she saw was the village constable, and, of course, I had to tell her the truth. She is in her room now, and the housekeeper is sitting with her."

"It couldn't be helped," said Godfrey Kingston, with a shrug. "If you are finished, Mr. Lee, perhaps you would like to go up to my uncle's room?"

"I should like to do so at once, if I may," replied Lee, rising.

"Shall I come, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Yes, my lad, by all means. Have you your camera in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

"I shall remain down here," remarked Dick Kingston. "You go up with Mr. Lee, Godfrey."

Godfrey Kingston led the way along the wide, hushed hall and up a noble staircase to the floor above. There he turned to the right, and went on past several doors, until he came to a door just at the corner, where the corridor branched once more. He knocked gently, and the door was opened by a man in the uniform of a constable.

He stood aside to permit them to enter, and in a whisper Godfrey Kingston informed him who Lee was. The constable glanced with some awe at the famous criminologist, much as a small country doctor would have gazed

upon the great London specialist who had been called in for a consultation. Then Godfrey Kingston closed the door gently, and Nelson Lee turned to gaze at the huddled something in the easy chair before the dead fireplace.

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery Deepens.

“**H**AVE you disturbed anything?” Nelson Lee spoke in a whisper to the constable.

“No, sir, not a thing. I have made what examination I could, but I have touched nothing.”

“That is well,” responded Lee. “Get your camera ready, Nipper. We may need to use it. We shall begin first on the body.”

Carefully, and watching the floor closely as he walked, Nelson Lee crossed the room until he was standing beside the easy chair. Gazing down, he saw a form, a bent and relaxed form, still garbed in dinner jacket and the sombre black of a serious function. The head was drooping, and Lee had to kneel before he could see the features with any success.

He was a man well past middle age—a man with white hair and white, neatly trimmed beard and moustache—a kindly man, he judged—a typical English gentleman. On the floor beside the chair was the end of a cigar, with little drifts of ashes about it, showing where the ash had broken when the cigar struck the carpet.

To the right was a tiny thing of gold squatting in a grotesque manner, as though interested in the ash beyond. Bending carefully in order to disturb nothing, Nelson Lee picked it up. It was a tiny golden frog, with, he judged, about a sovereign's worth of gold in it. It was perfectly fashioned, and the posture was exact in every way.

He knew what it was at once, for he had more than a passing knowledge of South America. He himself had been on the fringe of the Motillones country, in Colombia, when a lost Indian village had been discovered, and there, deep down in the stone-lined chambers, which it was the custom of these Indians to build, his party had come upon many strange things, stone jars, and pottery; stone idols, such as are to be found through all Central and South America; stone implements for domestic use, and, finally, in the very lowest chamber of all—there were ten, one upon the other—and about forty feet from the surface of the ground, they had come upon several little gold frogs, exactly similar to the one he now held in his hand.

With them had been the little green stone cylinder and tiny hammer used by the ancient Indian goldsmith. The thing was perhaps a thousand years old, perhaps only five hundred years old.

It all depended on where it had been found. It had been proven that those found by Lee's party had been buried by the Indians at the time of the Spanish conquest, when the Spaniards drove the tribes inland. This, it seemed, the dead man had been examining when he had been struck down. It and the cigar had been the last things he had held.

They lay just where they must have dropped from nerveless hands. Death must have been very sudden, for the attitude was not that of a man who had risen against it—rather was it that of a man whom death had overtaken almost before the brain could signal the fact to the many nerve centres of the body.

Nelson Lee thrust the gold frog in his pocket, and on a clean piece of paper collected the cigar end and the ash which lay about it. Placing these

on the table near at hand, he next turned his attention to the wound which it was thought had been the cause of death.

At this very moment there came a knock at the door, and the constable opened it once more to admit a stout, bespectacled man, whom Godfrey Kingston addressed as "Doctor McDonald." He was introduced to Lee, and, bending over the chair with him, whispered:

"I have already made a certain examination. Here, let me show you the head. It was the blow there which, in my opinion, caused his death."

Lee examined the spot just at the crown of the head where the blow had been struck. It was a terrible blow, to be sure, for the skin gaped wide, and, placing his fingers on the spot, he could feel that the bone had been smashed in.

"Paralysed the brain instantly," murmured the doctor. "He never knew what struck him."

"It has not bled," said Lee, in a low tone.

"No," replied the other quickly, "and that has puzzled me a little; but at the same time there may have been some physical condition which would prevent that."

Lee nodded and said nothing. He was examining the wound still more closely.

"You will state this as the cause of death when you give evidence at the inquest, I suppose?" he asked.

The doctor nodded.

"Of course."

"I should like to see the life-preserver which it is thought was used," went on Lee.

The constable crossed to a table, and picked up the article in question. It proved to be a short length of lead pipe, covered with dark flannel. It was a little over a foot in length, and could easily have been carried up the sleeve. Placing it against the wound, Lee saw that without doubt it had been used for the blow, for it fitted the broken part of the skull easily, and, besides, there were several white hairs adhering to the flannel.

"Where was this found?" he asked, turning to Dick Kingston.

"My uncle's valet," said he, "found it in that corner, under the case where my uncle kept some of his collection."

Lee glanced in the direction indicated; then he said:

"I should like you to send for the valet. I may wish to ask him some questions."

Godfrey Kingston nodded, and made for the door. During his absence Lee made a survey of the room, and certainly it was a strange apartment. Firstly intended as a bedroom, it had undoubtedly been used by its owner as a sitting-room as well.

A huge apartment, it stretched for a good distance along the main part of the building, at the back two high and wide French windows giving on to a stone balcony, which overlooked the gardens and the deer park. In the corner, to the right of the door, was a big mahogany bedstead of the Georgian period.

The centre of the room contained a large, round table of the same period, and the other end of the room where the fireplace was had been fitted up with several glass cases containing gems from Godfrey Kingston's collection of gold coins and ornaments—a sort of overflow of the main collection downstairs.

At that end, too, there was a door, and it was by this way that young Godfrey Kingston appeared with the valet.

Now, since a man's valet knows his master more intimately than, perhaps,

any other man—it is said that no man is a hero to his own valet—and since he is in closer contact than any other, Nelson Lee shot a keen glance in the direction of the man.

He saw a man well past middle age, a man of smooth lip and funereal side-whiskers—a black-garbed product of a day gone by. He was the quintessence of servant respectability, and it seemed grotesque even to think that he might have had anything to do with the crime.

Yet the more he examined into the case, the more did Nelson Lee begin to realise that he was up against a big thing. So far only one or two tiny points had indicated this, but it had been sufficient. On the face of it, Godfrey Kingston had simply been black-jacked as he sat in his chair. What the motive might have been was, of course, unknown then. That is what the case showed on the face of it, but Lee was only at the beginning—and very much at the beginning, as he was soon to discover.

The valet advanced and stood before him respectfully.

“What is your name?” asked Lee.

“Robert Dunn, sir,” replied the valet, in a toneless voice.

“How long were you employed by your late master?”

“I have been with him for nearly twenty years, sir.”

“When did you last see him alive?”

“About eleven last night, sir.”

“Tell me as well as you can remember what happened.”

“I was in this room, sir, when he came up. He was a little later than usual, but always on his birthday he remained below for an hour or so extra. I had just finished preparing his bed for the night—you can see, sir, that it is still turned down, and that his pyjamas and dressing-gown are on the chair beside it.

“He dismissed me for the night shortly after he came in. We talked for a few minutes then before I went. It was always my custom, sir, and my master always honours me, by permitting me to give him some slight token of my respect on the occasion of his birthday. At these times he was good enough to talk to me about my own affairs, sir, and we stood chatting then until I said good-night to him. I went out through this door, sir”—here the valet indicated the door by which he had entered—“remained in the dressing-room for a few minutes, then went on to the next room, which is mine.”

“Was Mr. Kingston seated in the easy chair when you left?”

“Yes, sir. The little gift which he was kind enough to accept from me was always a box of his favourite cigars. I opened them for him, sir, and he lit one while I was here. The box is there on the table, sir. He then sat down and was in the chair when I left.”

“Did you hear anything afterwards?”

For the barest fraction of a minute the valet hesitated, then he said:

“No, sir, I do not think so.”

“What do you mean by saying you do not think so?”

“Well, sir, I was busy in the dressing-room getting out his clothes for the next day, and thought I heard voices, but can’t be sure.”

“That must have been my cousin Molly come in to say good-night,” put in Godfrey.

“Do you think that was it?” asked Lee.

Again the valet hesitated, then he said:

“It could not have been that, sir, for Miss Molly came in while I was in the room.”

“Did you hear only Mr. Kingston’s voice or another as well?”

“I cannot be sure, sir. Mr. Kingston had received a small gold object from Master Robert, who is in South America, and he was admiring it when

I said good-night. It may have been that he was remarking to himself upon it. I did not attempt to ascertain, however, for I went on into my own room almost at once."

"Go on," said Lee.

"I got up as usual at six this morning, sir. I went down to the servants' hall, and had my tea, after which I smoked a pipe. Then I came up to awaken my master, and—and it was then I discovered what had happened. I ran at once for Master Godfrey, and that is all, sir."

"Not all," said Lee, "for it was you who found this black-jack, was it not?"

"Yes, sir. I had forgotten about that for the moment. I found it on the floor under that case in the corner."

"That will do, Dunn," said Lee. "I wish, though, that you would remain near at hand, for I may wish to speak with you again."

The valet bowed, and retired the way he had come. Then Nelson Lee went back to the body again. He and the doctor, with the assistance of the constable, got it on to the bed, and some time was spent in a detailed examination, which had been put off until Lee's arrival. In the meantime Nipper got busy with his camera and photographed every detail of the room.

It is not necessary to go into the details of the examination Lee and the doctor made of the body. Sufficient is it to say that Nelson Lee watched the other's efforts with every care, and when, at the end of it, he straightened up, he was in possession of one more fact which he was certain the doctor had missed, and which but added to the mystery of the affair.

At the base of the skull, just where the hair ended and the neck began, there was a very small red spot, which may have been nothing but a slight irritation of the skin. Lee called the doctor's attention to it, but the latter evidently considered it of no importance, for he passed it over almost at once.

Lee, not so easily satisfied, opened the lids of the eyes and gazed at the pupils. They revealed little, except that the iris seemed strangely lacking in colour, leaving them a pale grey.

When the examination was finished and the doctor had betaken himself from the room in order to attend to details for the inquest, Lee turned to Godfrey Kingston and said:

"What was the colour of your uncle's eyes?"

"Deep blue," responded the other promptly.

"You are quite certain of that?"

"Absolutely. They were of a very deep blue indeed."

"And now they are a pale grey," muttered Lee to himself. "Very well, Mr. Kingston. Now I should like to make an examination of the windows."

Lee crossed at once to the nearest window, and glanced at it. It was closed, and the catch fastened. Once more he found it necessary to send for the valet. When Dunn had appeared he said:

"Was this window open last night?"

The valet shook his head.

"No, sir. It is very seldom opened. The other window was open, though. Mr. Kingston had it open at nights, as a rule, unless it were very stormy."

Lee nodded, and moved along to the other window. Standing just in front of it, he discovered that it was in a dead line with the easy chair, which had been occupied by Godfrey Kingston. He saw, too, that the man's head would come just above the back of the chair.

If a man had been able to gain the balcony and to enter the room by the

window—if he were pussy-footed enough—he could easily cross the room and strike the man in the chair before he was heard.

With this thought in his mind, Nelson Lee stepped out on to the balcony, and gazed about him. It was still light enough for him to see the full beauty of the scene before him, for the gardens and the deer park stretched away in a mass of lovely colour.

The balcony itself was of stone, and stone-paved. It was as long as the room itself, and about five feet wide, with a stone balustrade around it. Stepping to the edge, Lee saw that the ivy grew thickly about the house at that point, and that for an active man it would not be very difficult to get on to the balcony by using the ivy stems as a ladder.

The curtains were now thrown back, but a question to the valet elicited the fact that when he had left the room on the previous night they had been drawn almost together, but not quite—had been left apart a little for the air to enter. He had thrown them back in the morning before he noticed his master in his chair.

Then Lee came up with a sudden question:

“Was the light still on when you entered the room?” he asked.

The valet shook his head.

“No, sir. The room was in darkness, and that is why I failed to see my master in the chair.”

Lee stood on the balcony thinking. It was certainly growing more mysterious every minute. Baldly, there was, so far, little to build a theory upon, but in a tentative way he went over what he himself had seen, what he had been told, and what seemed to suggest itself to him.

Godfrey Kingston had been sitting in that easy chair the night before when the valet had said good-night to him. So far, it appeared that the valet was the last one to have seen him alive. The girl cousin, Molly Chesworth, had come in to say good-night, but that had been while the valet was in the room.

Some time after that young Godfrey Kingston had passed the room on his way to bed. He had been about to enter, when he had heard voices. That might have been the valet and the old man talking.

Lee decided to endeavour to settle that point, then.

“What time did you leave the room?” he asked, turning again to Dunn.

“As nearly as possible, half-past eleven, sir.”

“And you, Mr. Kingston, what time was it when you passed the door of the room?”

“Nearly ten minutes to twelve, Mr. Lee.”

“Thank you.”

Once more Lee sank into thought. If the valet had left the room at half-past eleven, and Molly Chesworth had come in while he was there, then she must have come in between twenty minutes after and half-past. Now Godfrey Kingston said it was about ten minutes to midnight when he passed the door of the room, and, hearing voices, had not entered.

It could not have been the valet and his master talking if the valet were telling the truth.

Lee was not altogether satisfied with the whole of the answers he had received from the valet, for twice the man had distinctly hesitated before replying.

There was, of course, the theory advanced by the valet himself that Mr. Kingston had been talking aloud in his admiration of the gold frog. He had been in the dressing-room at the time, and had heard the murmur of voices.

That time would about coincide with what Godfrey Kingston had said, and

thus it would seem that he in the corridor outside and the valet in the dressing-room adjoining had both heard the same voice or voices.

Molly Cheseworth had gone to bed, and Godfrey Kingston said that, on arriving at his room, he had found his cousin Dick Kingston waiting for him. Therefore, if he had been told the truth, it would seem that, whoever had been talking with the old man—always supposing that he had not been talking to himself—it could not have been either of the four.

Then who could it have been at that time of night? And if it was someone else, then how had that person gained entrance to the room. There was no one staying as a guest in the house but the cousins, and had anyone come to the room by the usual way that person must have been seen.

Then how could he have come? By the window? It would not be difficult. Yet it was hard to suppose that a man would enter the room with the intention of black-jacking the old man, and converse with his victim before carrying out his intention.

There was something wrong somewhere, and for the moment Nelson Lee could not put his finger on it.

Yet, nevertheless, he was certain of one thing in his own mind—a thing which he kept locked up in the inner recesses of his soul. He was certain that the old man was already dead when he had been struck with the black-jack!

For that tiny red spot on the back of the neck and the faded colour of the eyes told him a thing which very few men knew—and that was a writing as clear as print—that Godfrey Kingston had died by poisoning before he had been black-jacked!

Had the man who struck that blow known he was dead when he struck?

Was it the same hand which had administered the poison? Both wounds were in the back of the head. Was the blow with the black-jack struck in order to convey the impression that it, and it alone, had caused death?

A dead man doesn't bleed. There was no blood on the wound caused by the black-jack, and that fact had been the first to suggest to Lee that he should look deeper still for the real cause of death. And it told him, too, that there was a far bigger mystery on hand than there had at first appeared. It was in a state of deep thought that he finally came in from the balcony and said to Godfrey Kingston:

"I am sorry to put your cousin, Miss Cheseworth, under a strain, but I must question her as soon as possible. Also I should like to question your other cousin, and then I shall ask you to put me in possession of some facts relating to your late uncle's affairs."

"Certainly, Mr. Lee," responded Godfrey Kingston. "I shall send for my cousin at once. Will you see her in the library?"

And with a sign to Nipper that he should remain in the room for the present, Lee inclined his head, and followed Godfrey Kingston to the door.

CHAPTER III.

A Glimmer of Light.

MISS CHESEWORTH was a young woman who, shortly after her birth, had been saddled with a Christian name which fitted in with her nature and appearance about as harmoniously as the name "Charlie" would have suited Napoleon.

"Molly" is a name eminently suited to the softly rounded, feminine type—the type which delights in tennis and golf and swimming, and is beloved as a good pal by all and sundry. But not so Miss Cheseworth.

True, she swam and tennised and golfed, but she did these things in a way quite her own. Those whom she knew most intimately had never on any occasion dubbed her by a nickname, and usually it was simply Miss Cheseworth.

She was neither tall nor short—she did not affect the masculine, nor had she any of the fluffy feminine about her. She was intensely colourful, nevertheless. The unobserving thought she was just a little negative in character, and that, simply because she did not think it worth while to convince them to the contrary.

But the observant found her a good deal of an enigma. Hair and eyes dark as night, with straight, level, almost Egyptian brows, she had a look of the mystic East about her.

Her nose, small and straight and thinly nostrilled, but added to the effect, and her lips were the red bows which the ancient endeavoured vainly to portray. Her figure was slim and lithe as the body of a tiger, her hands long and supple.

Long lashes usually hid the mystic dreaminess of the eyes, falling in an almost startling contrast upon a creamy, pale skin. And her name was "Molly"! It was, indeed, incongruous, and Nelson Lee being of the observing class, received something of a shock when she was ushered into the library by Godfrey Kingston.

He took her hand when she was introduced, and as her long, slim fingers rested in his, he felt subconsciously that here, if ever in his life, he had met a woman worth studying. Perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four, she carried herself with the assurance which only a thorough knowledge of the world, known as Society, could have given her.

She responded to Lee's conventional remark in a low, singularly melodious voice, and then, releasing her hand, sat down in a low chair near the great mahogany desk. Nelson Lee did not sit down. In truth, he was entirely reconstructing his whole form of procedure.

When he had sent for Molly Cheseworth he had, for some reason or other, expected to find her a young, unsophisticated, brown-haired little body, who would be, if not in tears, at least on the verge of them. Instead, a most remarkable creature had appeared, and the form of interrogation suitable for the other type would certainly not apply in her case.

She was neither tearful or hysterical. On the contrary, she was cool and almost impersonal. Of all the inmates of the house she was easily the most interesting and puzzling.

Finally Lee spoke.

"Miss Cheseworth," he said, "I am sorry to have been compelled to send for you this evening, but I am sure you will understand the necessity, and forgive me."

"Certainly, Mr. Lee," she replied. "I am entirely at your service."

"Thank you," rejoined Lee. "I should like, Miss Cheseworth, to ask you to tell me in detail exactly what you did last evening when you went upstairs. There are one or two points which I am striving to clear up, and I think that can only be done by the combined evidence of all those who were in the house last night."

"I am quite willing to tell you all I can, Mr. Lee. Yesterday was, as you probably know, my uncle's birthday. For some years now, in fact, ever since we were children, it has been his custom to have us all down for a stay at that time. During the last three or four years one of us, Robert, has not joined in these visits, because he is in South America; but my other two cousins and myself have always come.

"Perhaps you do not know that my uncle has never married, and that we

are the children of his brothers and sisters--my mother was his only sister, Robert is the son of his elder brother, Dick the son of his youngest brother, and Godfrey the son of his second brother.

"As usual, there was a small dinner party, composed of local friends. After dinner we had bridge, and about eleven they departed. My uncle came up first, and I followed. I went to his room to say good-night, and stayed there for perhaps five minutes or so. I might mention that Dnnn, his valet, was there at the time. Then I left him, and went straight to my own room. That was the last time I saw my uncle alive."

As her rich voice trailed off, Nelson Lee took a step or two up and down the room, then he said suddenly:

"May I ask you one or two questions, Miss Cheseworth?"

She bowed her head without speaking.

"Did you remain in your room after you said good-night to your uncle?"

He was rather surprised to see her hesitate before answering. It was as though she replied reluctantly, when she finally said slowly:

"N-o, I did not remain there."

"Do you mind telling me what you did?"

Once more she paused, then:

"I came out of my room again in order to go back to my uncle. There was something I had forgotten to say to him. It was trivial. But when I was coming along the corridor I saw my cousin Dick just going into my uncle's room, and hesitated. I decided to wait, and returned to my room."

"Was that the last time you left it?"

"No."

"When did you leave it again?"

"About midnight."

"For what reason?"

"For the same reason as before."

"In order to see your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him?"

"No."

"Are you willing to tell me why?"

"I would rather not."

"But, Miss Cheseworth, you must see that it is important that I be told all that you know of the matter. It is especially important that you tell us all you can of the time between ten minutes to midnight and midnight, and you say it was just about twelve when you went along the second time."

Miss Cheseworth looked first at Godfrey Kingston, then at the floor. It was Godfrey Kingston who added his word to Lee's.

"Tell him all you know, Molly," he said quietly. "It is important."

The girl shot him a queer look, then, gazing at Lee with her level brows straight as a dark line, she said:

"I went along the corridor the second time, but did not enter my uncle's room, because there was someone else in the act of either entering or leaving—I could not be sure which. So I returned to my own room and stayed there."

"Did you recognise the person at the door of your uncle's room?" asked Lee quickly.

"Yes."

"Will you tell me whom you think it was?"

"I prefer not to do so."

"But—" began Lee, when again Godfrey Kingston spoke.

"You are referring to me, are you not, Molly?"

The girl bowed her head, as though with reluctant consent.

"Yes," she said, in a low tone. "When I saw you I went back."

Nelson Lee transferred his attention from the girl to Godfrey Kingston.

"But, Mr. Kingston," he said, "I do not understand this. You told me that you had not seen your uncle after he went upstairs. You said you had passed his door about ten minutes to midnight, but, hearing voices inside, did not enter."

"And that was the truth, Mr. Lee," replied the young man, flushing, though his eyes did not falter. "It is so. I passed his door about ten minutes to midnight, and did not enter. I then went on to my room, as I told you, where I found my cousin Dick waiting for me. He—he had just been in to see my uncle, and it was owing to something he told me which caused me to go back to my uncle's room."

"But when I got there, and was about to open the door, I heard my uncle's voice raised to someone, and, after all, decided to wait until the morning. Miss Cheseworth says she saw me either entering or leaving the room. That is not so; but she could easily have been mistaken. I had my fingers on the handle, but I did not go in. I turned and went straight back to my own room and to bed."

"But what was it about your cousin Dick that caused you to go back?" asked Lee curtly. "Remember, Mr. Kingston, these half-truths won't do. You have sent for me to untangle the mystery of your uncle's death, and you or anyone else must not endeavour to handicap me by not being perfectly frank. Again I ask you the reason for your going back to your uncle's room?"

"Well, Mr. Lee, I did not tell you about that second visit for the simple reason that I did not wish to tell you the reason. My cousin Dick was in trouble about money matters, and yesterday asked my uncle to help him out. My uncle refused, and after he went to his room last evening Dick went to him to beg him to reconsider his decision. My uncle refused again, and when I found Dick waiting for me in my room he was greatly upset."

"It was with a twofold purpose that I started for my uncle's room. I wanted to smooth over matters between him and Dick, and also to try to persuade him to lend Dick the money he needed. It was a fairly large amount, and I could not raise it myself, otherwise I should have let him have it. But, as I have told you, I heard my uncle's voice raised, and I thought it an inauspicious time."

"Your cousin Dick had gone to his room when he left you?"

"He said that was where he was going."

"Do you think by any chance he returned once again to his uncle?"

"I do not know," answered Godfrey Kingston hesitatingly.

Nelson Lee leaned against the desk, and laid the forefinger of the right hand in the palm of the left.

"Now let us get all this straight," he said. "Your uncle went upstairs at eleven o'clock. Miss Cheseworth followed him soon after, and went into his room to say good-night. The valet was in there at the time, and was also there when she left."

"Then you and your cousin Dick came up, parting at the top of the stairs, since it appears you had to go to the servants' wing. In the meantime, it seems that your cousin Dick visited your uncle, and an unpleasant interview followed. It must have been of a brief nature, for he was in your room waiting for you when you got there."

"In the meantime, also, Miss Cheseworth left her room to go to your uncle, but did not do so when she saw Dick Kingston at the door. That was while you were in the servants' wing. Miss Cheseworth had returned to her

own room before you got back from the servants' wing, and apparently, when she emerged again, it was at the moment when you were once more at your uncle's door.

"That leaves an appreciable time, say, five to ten minutes, during which someone else may have entered the room. The question is, who was that person? It seems reasonable to suppose that it must have been someone in the house. For instance, when you passed the room the first time after returning from the servants' room, you say you heard voices in there. Were you able to distinguish anything whatsoever?"

Godfrey Kingston was silent for a moment, then he answered slowly:

"I cannot be sure, Mr. Lee, but it occurred to me that it might be the valet, because I thought I heard my uncle use his name."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, curiously enough, I thought I heard my uncle say 'Rob,' yet he never called the valet by that name. The valet and my cousin in South America both have the same Christian name—Robert. My uncle always spoke to my cousin and of my cousin as Rob, while he nearly always addressed the valet as Robert. Therefore, I concluded that he was speaking to Dunn—had called him Robert—and that I had only heard the first syllable of the word."

"Then you think it may have been the valet in the room?"

"That is all I could infer, because my cousin Dick was already in my room waiting for me when I got there."

"And the second time—when you went back to see your uncle?"

Godfrey shook his head.

"There I am at a loss, Mr. Lee. Dick said he was going to his room, and I can only think he did so. But why not send for him and ask him?"

"I shall do so presently," said Lee curtly. "I wish to get these facts lined up as well as possible before I confuse the issue with too many bits of evidence. The valet says that when he left the room, at half-past eleven or thereabouts, he did not return to it. If he is telling the truth, then it could not have been he whom you heard your uncle speaking to on either of the occasions when you were at the door. This man Dunn—what is your opinion about him?"

"He has been in my uncle's service for about twenty years," replied Godfrey Kingston. "He was most devoted to him, and I cannot think that he would tell an untruth about what happened last night."

"And you, Miss Cheseworth," said Lee, turning to Molly Cheseworth, who was sitting with a most detached air, "what is your opinion of Dunn, the valet?"

Miss Cheseworth shrugged.

"I really do not feel competent to pass an opinion," she said languidly.

Nelson Lee felt as though he would like to take her by the shoulders and shake her. Her attitude was either but the reflex of a naturally cold and indifferent nature, or else studiously exhibited for the present occasion—he could not be sure which.

At any rate, he saw that beyond the bare statement of what she herself had done the previous evening, and what she had seen, she was not prepared to help him any further. Therefore, she was as well out of the way, for by her assumed or genuine indifference she but irritated him.

"I shall not trouble you any further for the present, Miss Cheseworth," he said coldly. "When you go, would it be too much trouble to ask your cousin Dick to come here?"

"Not at all," she replied, rising. "I shall tell him on the way to my room."

With that, she bowed slightly to Lee, nodded to Godfrey, and passed out through the door which Lee held open. When he had closed it, he turned to Godfrey Kingston, and said:

"Mr. Kingston, do you know anything about your uncle's will?"

"Unless he has altered it lately, I know all the clauses, Mr. Lee," replied the other.

"Would you be so good as to give me a rough idea what these clauses are—how he has disposed of his estate?"

"Certainly."

As he spoke, Godfrey Kingston went to the desk and sat down. Opening a drawer, he took out a box of cigarettes, which he offered to Lee. Lee accepted one, and, lighting it, drew up a chair to the desk.

"Now then, Mr. Lee," said Godfrey Kingston, when he also was puffing at a weed, "I shall tell you all I know. Roughly speaking, my uncle was worth two hundred thousand pounds, not counting the Barron Hall estate. My cousin Robert was my uncle's favourite nephew, and he was the chief heir of the estate.

"On his birthday preceding the departure of my cousin for South America, my uncle called us all in here, and told us what he proposed doing. It was his intention to leave the Barron Hall estate and one hundred thousand pounds to my cousin Robert. I was to receive twenty-five thousand pounds, Miss Cheseworth twenty-five thousand, my cousin Dick twenty-five thousand, and the balance was to be divided among old servants and charity.

"For instance, Dunn, the valet, was to receive five thousand pounds, and after a few smaller legacies had been paid to servants the residue was to go to charities. On that day my cousin Robert was formally betrothed to Miss Cheseworth—that was a condition of my uncle making him his heir. If anything happened to Robert before he was married, or before my uncle died, then I was to become the heir, and, in any event, I was to retain the position as agent of the Barron Hall estate for as long as I might desire to keep it."

"Then you all stood to benefit by the will?"

Godfrey Kingston nodded, and smiled slightly.

"If you mean, did any of us have a motive for killing my uncle, then we all had that," he said.

"I had not suggested such a thing," said Lee slowly, "but in a case of this sort everyone comes under suspicion. By the way, have you cabled to your cousin in South America yet?"

"Yes, but I shall not be surprised if it does not reach him for some time. In a letter which my uncle received, together with a birthday present from Bob, he said he was about to leave for a long expedition up the Orinoco, and that he might be away for some months. He was the only one who had my uncle's passion for archæology, and naturally my uncle followed his work with the keenest zest."

"Pardon me for asking a somewhat leading question, Mr. Kingston, but—er—were the two principals in the betrothal satisfied with the arrangement?"

"If you mean were they in love with each other, then I must confess that the arrangement came as a slight surprise to me," responded Godfrey Kingston. "I do know that my cousin Bob was very fond of Molly, but, as far as that goes, so was Dick, and I always thought Dick and Molly would have made a go of it. My uncle, however, desired it the other way, and Molly seemed quite satisfied with it."

"How did your cousin Dick take it?"

"He was a bit broken up, I think, though he has never said anything about it, and perhaps I was in error in what I thought. But, unless I am greatly mistaken, here he comes now."

There was a knock at the door, and the next moment it opened to admit Dick Kingston.

"Molly said you wished to speak to me, Mr. Lee," he said, as he closed the door after him.

Lee nodded.

"Please sit down, Mr. Kingston," he said. "There are one or two questions I should like to ask you."

Dick Kingston rather sulkily threw himself into a chair and lit a cigarette. Lee, before speaking, scrutinized him slowly and carefully. He saw in the face of the young man before him an explanation of the reason why he had been compelled to appeal to his uncle for funds.

Beneath his eyes were the dark circles which are the flags of dissipation, and in the nervously trembling hand which held the cigarette the indication of too much artificial stimulant. In other words, Lee guessed shrewdly that when in town Dick Kingston went the pace far too much for a young man of his age.

Gazing at the end of his own cigarette Lee said:

"I have been questioning Miss Cheseworth and your cousin Godfrey about their movements and the movements of their uncle last evening, Mr. Kingston. In their replies your name has arisen, and, since it seems you saw your uncle alive later than either of them, I should like you, please, to tell me as much as you can about it. You will realise, of course, that every tiny point will be of value."

"I am willing to tell you all I can, Mr. Lee," said Dick Kingston readily enough; "though I say frankly that I am not in sympathy with your presence here. I think the matter should have been left to the police."

Godfrey Kingston turned sharply to his cousin.

"Such a remark is entirely unnecessary, Dick," he said roughly. "I told both you and Molly this morning that in the absence of Bob I am in charge of affairs, and, moreover, I am still my uncle's man of business—or, at least, the man of business of the estate. While I hold that position I shall take such moves as may seem necessary to me. Kindly drop this question and give Mr. Lee the information he needs."

But Lee confined his attention to Godfrey Kingston. The cousins, forgetting his presence, had unwittingly given him a hint that they were not in accord with the idea of his presence there.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Kingston," he said, addressing Godfrey, "that Mr. Richard Kingston and Miss Cheseworth were not in favour of calling me in?"

"Something like that, Mr. Lee," replied Godfrey. "But it really did not amount to anything."

Lee gave a couple of puffs at his cigarette, then, turning swiftly to Dick Kingston, he said:

"I understand that you went upstairs last evening with your cousin Godfrey?"

Dick Kingston nodded.

"I did," he replied.

"Will you kindly relate your movements from that moment until you retired?"

"I left Godfrey at the head of the stairs—he was going on to the servant's wing to see the butler, I think. I went on down the corridor, and on the way stepped in to see my uncle about a certain matter."

"Will you tell me what that was?"

"Er—well, I suppose it doesn't make any difference. I was up against it for some money, and I wanted him to make me an advance. I had already asked Godfrey, but he couldn't manage it, and during the day my uncle had also refused. I thought I might persuade him to my way of thinking."

"And he refused?"

"Yes. I didn't stay long after that. He said some hard things to me, and I didn't care for any further wiggling, so I bade him good-night. I went along to Godfrey's room and waited until he came back. Then I told him about the interview, and he promised to do what he could with my uncle the next morning. Then I went along to my own room and to bed. That is all. I knew nothing about what happened afterwards until this morning, when Godfrey came to my room."

"You did not return to your uncle's room after leaving your cousin Godfrey?" asked Lee carelessly.

"I did not," replied Dick Kingston shortly. "I have told you exactly what I did—no more, no less."

"When you were with your uncle, did the interview develop into a quarrel?"

Dick Kingston was silent for a moment, then he said:

"Not exactly a quarrel, but my uncle did say some hard things to me, and I answered him back; but if you are intimating that it was sufficient quarrel for me to return to his room and kill him, you are mistaken. I did not do so."

He smiled sarcastically as he spoke, and Nelson Lee's lips compressed with anger that the young man should attempt to take that tone with him.

"That will do, thank you, Mr. Kingston," he said curtly. "Until I suggest such a possibility it is not necessary for you to deny it."

Dick Kingston rose, and, tossing his cigarette into a tray, nodded.

"All right. Anything I can do I shall be only too pleased, Mr. Lee. See you later, Godfrey."

With that he left the room, and Lee was just turning to speak again to Godfrey Kingston when there came another tap at the door, and, in answer to Godfrey's summons, Nipper entered.

"May I speak to you alone for a moment, sir?" he asked, speaking to Lee.

"Certainly, my lad. Will you excuse me for a moment, Mr. Kingston?"

He rose and followed Nipper out into the hall. There the lad drew him close, and, as Lee bent his head, he whispered:

"Guv'nor, someone has destroyed not only all the pictures I took of the room where Mr. Kingston was murdered, but they have ruined my camera as well!"

CHAPTER IV.

The Hidden Hand Still at Work.

NELSON LEE drew Nipper still farther away from the door and whispered:

"Does anyone else know this?"

"Not a soul, guv'nor, except, of course, the person or persons who did it."

"Then on your life say nothing about it. Now, tell me, my lad, all you know about it."

"As soon as I had finished photographing the room, sir, I took the films and the camera along to the room which has been given to me. I laid the

film rolls on the table, intending to develop them as soon as I could. The camera was beside them. I went back to the room where the murder occurred, to stay on guard as you had ordered, but while I was there, sir, I got a hunch that I had been a little careless with the camera and films.

"I decided to go back to my room and lock them away. When I got there they were nowhere to be seen. Thinking perhaps a maid had been in the room, and, seeing them, had put them in a drawer, I opened every one in each table and bureau. They were not to be found.

"Then, sir, I instituted a search of the room. In the waste-paper basket I found the films all unrolled and ruined utterly by the light which had got to them. The camera I could not find at all, so I came down here at once to inform you. That is all, sir."

Lee nodded slowly.

"Nipper, go back to the room and keep guard. Say nothing of this. I shall think it over. It proves what I have felt for some time now—that there is someone in the house whom we must watch. I shall be upstairs again in a few minutes."

Nipper nodded, and made his way along the hall to the foot of the stairs. Lee returned to the library, and, after a few unimportant remarks to Godfrey Kingston, said:

"I think that is all I wish to ask you for the moment, Mr. Kingston. I wish to consider a few of the points which have come up, and this evening after dinner I may desire to talk things over with you again. But, first, there is one other question which I should like to ask of you."

"What is it, Mr. Lee?"

"You have seen your uncle's body, you have had time to consider all phases of the matter. Do you—and I want you to speak frankly, Mr. Kingston—do you suspect anyone in particular?"

Godfrey Kingston shook his head.

"No, Mr. Lee, I do not. If you mean was anyone under this roof responsible for the murder, then I say 'no' with all conviction. I think—and I consider it the only possible theory—that my uncle was murdered by a common burglar who entered his room by way of the window. Why, there is the flannel-covered black-jack to prove it."

Nelson Lee said nothing more on that point just then, but he was thinking of his own discovery—that Godfrey Kingston was already dead before he had been struck with that black-jack! Yet the more he probed into the affair the more complicated did it become, and he wanted more than anything just then to get away alone and to place in clear array the facts and suggestions which had arisen.

Therefore, he left Godfrey Kingston in the library and made his way to his room on the floor above. Closing and locking the door, Lee threw himself into a deep chair before the window, and, with the deep dusk of evening curtaining the lovely parkland beyond, he gave himself up to a keen mental analysis of the strange affair.

What had he to go upon so far? Firstly, he must place his facts side by side, then surround them with the suggestions which had arisen, and finally encircle the whole with every personality with whom he had come in contact or whom the case in any way included.

From the inner group, which, too, would include the deed and the motive, he must reach into the mass of suggestions and endeavour to fit them together much as the bricklayer fits his bricks; then to step ahead to the association of the persons in the circle and try to find either a concrete or abstract suggestion which would connect up the next stage of the fine web he must weave.

Then to the crossroads of the individual and general, and to decide which road he must pursue to find that one, single, germane fact which would support the thread of theory—the silken shred of hypothesis which he might follow along until somewhere in the maze he could come upon the real thread which was connected up with the truth.

It was never an easy matter, and in the present instance it looked almost hopeless. Yet, with all its uncertainty, it was the type of case which delighted Lee more than any other. It was a real problem; it was a great test for the science which he had done more to develop than almost any other man living. Very well, then, where had he to begin?

He had as his first and chief fact the murdered body of Godfrey Kingston, and from that there must radiate lines of connection with many, many suggestions. For instance, briefly and in concrete form, Lee placed the known facts beneath that chief fact. Godfrey Kingston was a wealthy bachelor with three nephews and one niece, all of whom would benefit by his death. In addition, there was his valet, Dunn, who would benefit to the tune of five thousand pounds.

Beneath that again came the several old servants who had also been mentioned in the will. Therefore, if one were to apply motive to all those who were concerned in the will, then one must begin with Robert Kingston, then in South America, place next Godfrey Kingston, Dick Kingston, and Miss Cheseworth; followed by Dunn, the valet, and the servants.

On the other hand, a first view of the crime seemed to suggest that it had been committed by a burglar. There was the open window, the balcony easy of access, the flannel-covered black-jack, and the wicked wound in the back of the head.

Were any of the more educated and cultured persons suggested concerned in the crime, it seemed scarcely probable that any one of them would use the black-jack, but, on the contrary, would have carried out his or her work in a more subtle manner.

Subtlety! That was the first step in the problem, for it was just subtlety which had been used. To Nelson Lee the use of that black-jack meant one of two things—it meant either that the one who had sent Godfrey Kingston to his death had afterwards applied the black-jack for the sole purpose of causing it to be thought that was the cause of death, and to cover up the real cause; or else it had been struck by a real burglar before he knew that his victim was already dead.

Supposing the first? Then what would have followed? The black-jack would certainly have been left in the room in order that the suggestion might be still more obvious.

And the second? There was a wide range of theory possible there. For instance, if a burglar had entered—a burglar who would kill (and such a thing is certainly much more rare than popular belief supposes), then he might in a panic fling the black-jack to one side, and flee from the room, or, on the other hand, he might take it with him.

Now came the next two points. In his examination of the balcony and the ivy, Nelson Lee had become convinced of one thing, and that was—that someone had certainly climbed the ivy recently! Here and there a broken bit—a few leaves stripped and crushed—had been sufficient to tell him that. But, to destroy the theory that it might have been a burglar, there arose one very strong point which must not be overlooked.

The valet had said that when he left the room the light was still on. All the other evidence had gone to show the same thing. Yet in the morning, when the valet had come into the room, the light was out! It did not seem

likely that Godfrey Kingston had risen from his chair, turned out the light, and sat down again.

The fact that on the floor by the chair where they had fallen were the gold frog and the cigar end was sufficient to negative that. A man doesn't sit in the dark smoking and admiring a golden curio. Therefore, the light had been turned out by someone *after the murder*.

Another thing—the light was on when the murder was committed, for no man could have seen in the dark to strike so perfectly as the blow with the black-jack had been struck. The more Lee looked at it, the more convinced he became that the murder was no haphazard or sudden crime, but one well planned and thoroughly executed.

Then who could have sufficient motive to do it? Take the "possibilities" one by one, beginning with the chief heir to the estate, Robert Kingston. His presence in South America seemed to eliminate him from the case immediately. Supposing he were left out for the nonce, then who came next? Godfrey Kingston, the nephew?

What was there for and against that theory? For it, there was exactly what there was for the others. He was to benefit by the death of his uncle to the extent of twenty-five thousand and a position as agent of the estate for as long as he wished. From what he could see, Lee reckoned the job of agent under his uncle paid him excellently—possibly a thousand a year and his living.

While Robert Kingston appeared to have been his uncle's favourite and heir, Lee had detected no jealousy in Godfrey Kingston, and certainly it had been Godfrey Kingston who had insisted on Lee being called in, apparently against the opposition of both Miss Cheseworth and Dick Kingston.

His present position would not be benefited by the death of his uncle, though his capital possessions would. Was he capable of devising such a crime as that, and of carrying it out? Lee had not seen sufficient of him to feel absolutely positive in his own mind, though the young man struck him as being perfectly frank in most things. Yet it was a fact that he had deceived Lee in his first statement of his movements on the night of the tragedy.

He had deliberately withheld the fact that he had gone back to his uncle's room a second time. That had only come out in Lee's questioning of Miss Cheseworth, and, when faced with it, Godfrey Kingston had acknowledged it, though he had insisted that he had gone back on his cousin's account, and that he had not entered the room at all.

Had he done so, or was he lying? Then, again, he had said—in fact, the valet had said also—that he had heard voices in the room. At the time, Godfrey Kingston had allowed it to be thought that it might have been his cousin Dick in the room—that Dick Kingston had returned to his uncle's room instead of going to bed.

Supposing Godfrey Kingston had committed the crime, would he have been subtle enough to call in the most distinguished criminologist of the day, trusting to that very action to eliminate him from suspicion? That question couldn't be answered yet, and neither could Godfrey Kingston be placed outside the line of suspicion. Nor could suspicion be directed only at him. For how about Dick Kingston?

Dick Kingston, it appeared, had had more than one disagreement with his uncle. Given a fair running, it was possible that he might have been the betrothed of Miss Cheseworth instead of his cousin Robert. That he had not won her was due to his uncle, and while he had apparently said little about it, was it possible that, ever since, he had been nursing a deep anger against his uncle?



Lee had heard a scraping and rustling just beneath the balcony—he had caught a single glimpse of a black shadow appearing over the edge of the railing. —(See p. 32.)

His face showed all the lines of dissipation. He had also got into deep water financially, and had appealed first to his cousin Godfrey for assistance, then to his uncle. Even on his birthday, when he would be in a mellow mood, his uncle had refused him, and when approached again that evening, a quarrel of greater or less magnitude had followed.

That much had been surlily acknowledged by Dick Kingston. Yet he denied having gone back to his uncle's room the second time. Had he done so, or was he lying? If he had done so, then to whom could his uncle have been speaking?

The valet had denied that it was he. If Godfrey Kingston had told the truth, then it couldn't have been he. If Miss Cheseworth had not lied, then it couldn't have been she. And if it were none of the four, then whom could it have been?

Was it the unknown person who might have entered the room by way of the balcony? Someone had entered there, but if death had come to Godfrey Kingston from that source, it is hardly likely he would converse with his would-be murderer—unless, *unless that one was known to him as a friend.*

It seemed impossible that Miss Cheseworth could have carried out the crime, even if it were possible that she could conceive it. Very few women could have struck that blow with the black-jack. And the valet? Where did he enter into the scheme of the case?

He had been with Godfrey Kingston for a score of years. It had been said that he was very much attached to his master. True, he benefited to the tune of five thousand by the will, but, on the other hand, he had a comfortable home and all that he could possibly desire.

The five thousand was simply a guarantee against want when his master should die. Could he have so turned and bitten the hand which fed him? Judging by the man himself, Lee did not think it possible, yet nevertheless he had given his evidence badly. On two distinct occasions he had hesitated in his replies.

He had given Lee the impression, either rightly or wrongly, that he knew more than he would tell. Did the valet suspect in his own mind who might have committed the crime? And was he shielding the guilty person? It was a point which must be followed up.

And lastly to be considered came those other servants who would benefit by their master's death. Lee did not think there was much in that. The crime was not the crime of a servant—it was the crime of a man who had more than a smattering of certain knowledge, for now, to cap all, came the one point which Lee had deliberately avoided until the very last. That point was the means by which Godfrey Kingston had actually died.

It has already been stated why Lee thought this, and how he knew it. No man knew more of rare poisons than did Nelson Lee—no man had studied more deeply the poisoning methods of every country and every age than had he. And in the present instance he knew that, instead of dying by the blow from the black-jack, Godfrey Kingston had died by poison.

Once before Nelson Lee had come upon death by just such means. The whole thing had been so novel to him then that he had at once seized upon the opportunity to study it in all its phases, and he knew—he knew what poison had been used!

In South America some of the native tribes, particularly the Motillones and the Goajiras, make the poison for the tips of their arrows (their blow-pipe arrows) by first procuring the heart of a deer. When that has been done, they take the heart into a snake-infested swamp and secure it to a

peg. There they leave it for some time, and the snakes, attracted by the scent of the fresh heart, come in scores to it.

Time after time it is struck by them, until the whole mass is actually saturated with the poison from their fangs. The next step is to recover the heart, and this is done by a native, chosen specially for the purpose. Should he possess a wife and children, they are sent away for some days, and, after gathering certain herbs and roots, the man sets to work to make the poison.

Into a great pit the heart is put, and with it water, the herbs, and roots. For three days and nights he sits watching the conglomeration boil, adding water to the pot and wood to the fire as occasion demands. At the end of three days sufficient of the extracts have been boiled from the roots, herbs, and the heart, and now the liquor is poured into a large calabash.

When it has cooled and hardened it is ready for use, and when applied to the end of arrows or spears there is no more deadly poison known. It was this same poison which wrought such havoc with the Spanish Conquistadores of old; it was this poison which decimated the expedition once sent into the Motillones district from Venezuela.

Its action is swift and sure. Some animals are able to live seventeen or twenty seconds after it has entered the system, and man a little longer; but in every case it is fatal. Its signs are not many, but they are distinct, and it was the sign of this poison which Nelson Lee had seen upon the body of Godfrey Kingston. That poison had caused his death, and the black-jack blow had simply been struck upon the skull of a man already dead.

Taking that point or fact as the starting-place for a theory, then how did it apply to those human elements which Lee had already considered? Whoever had murdered Godfrey Kingston had had a more than passing knowledge of poisons, and had known, moreover, how to procure and use them.

Could Godfrey Kingston the younger have possessed this knowledge? Did Dick Kingston know the secret of such things? Was Miss Cheseworth able to discover and apply such facts? Was it within the mental scope of Dunn, the valet? If not, then who was there within the circle of "possibilities" possessing such knowledge?

There was Robert Kingston, who was in South America. On the face of it, it would seem most likely that, of all the cousins, he would be the one to know of such things. But he could not be in South America and at the same time in England.

Not even the most subtle plot could kill, with the poison at such a distance, without grave risk of miscarrying, and *this plot had not miscarried*. It had worked out absolutely to schedule.

Then, supposing, for the sake of argument, that Robert Kingston had conceived the plot, had it been carried out by an accomplice in England? Such a supposition would at once destroy the possibility that any one of the cousins or some unknown person had evolved the thing and carried it out alone.

It would open up the wide vista of an accomplice or accomplices, and, once Lee embarked upon that wide sea of conjecture, he might limit it to two persons or more. Good heavens! Was it possible that the whole thing was a deep-laid plot on the part of all the heirs?

Had the cunning brain of one of them conceived it? Had Robert Kingston's part been to secure the poison? Had it been, perhaps, the part of Molly Cheseworth to administer the poison? Had, then, either Dick Kingston or the younger Godfrey carried out the black-jacking? Was it all part and parcel of the same plot to call in Nelson Lee after notifying Scotland Yard? Did they feel so certain of the effectiveness of their subtlety that

They had dared do this? Could they step into wealth over the murdered body of their victim? Were they even then laughing together at the futility of anyone trying to discover the truth? Could people be so vile and yet wear so fair a countenance?

In support of such a theory there was the unsatisfactory evidence from all of them—even the valet. Was he, too, a party to the affair? He had hesitated twice during Lee's questioning; Godfrey Kingston had deceived Lee in his original statements; Molly Cheseworth had been a most unsatisfactory subject for interrogation.

She had adopted a most indifferent pose, and what she had told Lee had been practically cork-screwed out of her. She had seemed reluctant to state whom she had seen at the door of her uncle's room when she said she had gone along the corridor the second time. Then, and then only, had it come out that it was Godfrey Kingston.

On the other hand, suppose she bore Godfrey Kingston a grudge? Then she could not have adopted a more effective means of casting a certain suspicion in his direction. Following up such an idea as this, it could also be said that Godfrey Kingston may have been casting suspicion on Dick, for he had silently acquiesced in Lee's suggestion that instead of returning to his room when he said he was, Dick Kingston had gone back still again to his uncle's room.

As for Dick Kingston himself, he had given very little information, and that in a sulky manner. And the collective whole seemed not too deeply regretful over the death of their uncle. If there were any evidence of that, it had seemed mostly exhibited by Dunn, the valet, and Godfrey Kingston.

Each point opened up a new suggestion, which in turn led to an unsuspected maze of conjecture, until Lee himself grew confused. But one thing was clear to him—he had his work cut out to probe the mystery before him, and he vowed then and there that he would not rest until he had done so.

Let the guilty person or persons laugh at him if they would. Before he had finished it would be seen who might laugh. And with that grim resolve he was just rising from his chair—for the dressing-gong for dinner had just sounded—when there came a soft knock at the door.

He crossed to it silently, and, turning the key, drew it open. There slipped into the room a small brown-paper parcel which had been leaning against the door. Lee disregarded it for the moment, and stepped out into the corridor.

Not a sign was there of the person who must have knocked on the door, but since it was only a short distance from Lee's room to the bend in the corridor there had been plenty of time for one to get out of immediate sight, but perhaps not out of reach.

Swiftly, and treading almost noiselessly, Lee made for the turn in the corridor. Up and down it he glanced, but not a soul was to be seen. Then there came the sound of a distant door slamming, and, with a grunt of disappointment, Lee went back to his room.

He closed and locked the door again; then, picking up the brown-paper parcel, he carried it across to the table. It was almost dark outside now, so, before opening the parcel, he drew the blind and turned on the electric light.

As he untied it, the first thing to strike his gaze was a roll of dark-coloured material; then, as he picked it up, a small sheet of paper dropped out. A thrill went through him as he saw that the material was a dark flannel, exactly the same as had been wrapped about the lead pipe black-jack. What could it mean?

An unseen hand had destroyed the negatives which Nipper had laid on

his table, and had also taken away the camera. Had the same unseen hand deposited this bit of dark flannel outside his own door? He took up the slip of paper, and, holding it beneath the light, read:

"This should suggest a clue to you. Find where it came from."

That was all, and it had been printed in an obviously disguised hand. What could it mean? Who was there in the house taking such a keen interest in his doings and those of Nipper? Whoever it was, they seemed to have a deep knowledge of the crime.

Was it the same hand which had already been in evidence? Was it someone in the house trying to put him on the right track? Or was it an attempt to further bamboozle him? Yet there was no gainsaying the fact that the flannel was the same sort, and, as he unrolled it, he saw a jagged end where a piece had been roughly cut off.

Who owned that piece of flannel? And whose was the unseen hand?

CHAPTER V.

In Which a Book Mysteriously Disappears.

NO stretch of the imagination could have called dinner that evening a cheerful affair. Miss Cheseworth, who occupied the seat of the hostess at one end of the table, while presenting a vivid picture of beauty in a black evening-gown, cut low and revealing the white pallor of her skin in sharp contrast, might almost have been a beautiful statue for all she contributed to the conversation. At the most she contented herself with monosyllabic replies.

Dick Kingston ate moodily, saying nothing at all. Godfrey Kingston, who now took the seat formerly occupied by his uncle, made some attempt at conversation with Lee, and the latter, with that rare faculty which was his, put away for the time being all conjecture on the strange case which he was investigating.

Nipper seconded him loyally, and by the time the game had arrived they were deep in a discussion of English land laws. Not that Leo was not using his eyes to good purpose. All the time he was surreptitiously studying each one at the table, concentrating more particularly on Miss Cheseworth and Dick Kingston.

So far he had kept to himself the mysterious occurrence at the door of his room just as the dressing-gong had gone. But when Miss Cheseworth had risen to go, and the door had closed after her, Lee drew his chair nearer to that of Godfrey Kingston, and, lighting a cigar, said:

"Mr. Kingston, do you remember the black-jack which was found in your uncle's room?"

Godfrey Kingston nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, I remember it."

"Do you recall how it was covered?"

"Yes—with a piece of dark flannel."

"That is quite right. And now, will you tell me if you have ever seen this piece of flannel before?"

As he spoke, Lee thrust his hand into his pocket and took out the piece of flannel which had been left at his door. As it fell on the table he glanced sharply at both Godfrey Kingston and his cousin Dick. The latter was sipping a glass of port, and beyond a casual glance in the direction of the flannel paid no further attention. But Godfrey Kingston was gazing at it with a puzzled frown. Slowly he picked it up and examined it, and when he laid it down again his face had gone dead white.

"Yes," he whispered, "I have seen it before. It is a piece which I bought

some time ago from which to have flannel coverings made for some of the field instruments in use on the estate."

"How long ago was that?" asked Lee quickly.

"Three or four months ago."

"And when did you see it last?"

"I don't remember exactly, but I do not think I have seen it since the covers were made."

"That would be?"

"Say, two months ago."

"Do you know where it was then placed for keeping?"

"Yes; in a chest in the estate office."

"Where is that?"

"It is on this floor in the right wing."

"Who else but yourself had access to that room?"

"My uncle and the under steward."

"The under steward. Who is he?"

"A young fellow who has been here for about six months. He lives at the home farm."

"Was the chest in which this flannel was kept locked?"

"Always. There are some valuable instruments in it, and only my uncle and myself had a key of it. But where did you get this flannel, Mr. Lee?"

"I prefer not to tell you just yet," responded Lee curtly. "But undoubtedly it is from this piece which a portion was taken to cover the lead pipe black-jack."

Godfrey Kingston looked worried.

"I can see your point, Mr. Lee," he said, "and the finding of this casts a certain reflection upon me. But I swear to you I have not seen that piece of flannel for weeks. I do not know how it has been taken from the chest in the estate office; I have not the remotest idea how a portion of it could have been used to cover the black-jack. I swear I know nothing about it!"

"And yet someone in this house left it at the door of my room," thought Lee, as he folded it up again. "If I could only discover the unseen hand."

At this moment Dick Kingston rose.

"I am going into the library, Godfrey," he said. "If you want me later you will find me there."

Godfrey Kingston nodded, and Lee watched with relief while the cousin departed. When he had gone Lee, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, continued his interrogation.

"There is something else I should like to ask you, Mr. Kingston."

"I am entirely at your service, Mr. Lee."

"I wish to ask you about your uncle's hobby. From what you have already told me and what I myself know I gather that he was a very keen collector of ancient gold coins and ornaments."

"He was that," responded Godfrey Kingston. "He wrote several monographs, and his collection is, I believe, one of the finest ever gathered together."

"It must be worth a lot of money?"

"It is. He valued it at nearly twenty thousand pounds."

"How did he dispose of it in his will?"

"He left it to my cousin Robert. It gave him great pleasure that Robert followed the same line of science as he himself did. It was that, I think, which made him create Robert his chief heir—that, and the fact that Robert's father, my uncle's brother, married the woman whom my uncle also loved. Robert has always been his favourite. My uncle specified chiefly in the East, although he had made expeditions to Central and South

"America. Robert took the Western Continent, and that is why he is now in South America. He is investigating the old buried Indian villages on the Orinoco."

"South America is a curious country," remarked Lee slowly. "It is a country of vast remains and a dead history which may never be revived. I know it very well myself, although, while there, I was perhaps most keenly interested in the ethnological side of the question—that, and a study of the poisons of the Indian races."

"My uncle was also a student of those," put in Godfrey Kingston quickly. "He intended, I think, to write a monograph on the poisons of primitive races."

"Then I suppose he would have a considerable library on the subject?"

"Yes; he has several technical works dealing with it."

"It would interest me to glance at them while I am here. I, too, have written a modest monograph on the matter."

"Certainly, Mr. Lee, whenever you wish. And now can you tell me if you have discovered anything of importance?"

"Not yet," replied Lee—"not yet, Mr. Kingston. By the way, when does the Scotland Yard man arrive?"

"I have heard this evening that he will arrive some time to-morrow. My uncle has been moved to another room, and his own room locked by the village constable. The funeral will be in three days, though I do not know the exact time of the inquest."

Godfrey Kingston rose as he finished speaking, and, followed by Lee and Nipper, led the way along to the library. Dick Kingston, contrary to his statement, was not there when they entered, and when Godfrey had gone in search of him Lee approached the great line of bookcases and began running his eye over the titles.

In one corner by themselves he found the series on poisons. The key was in the door of the case, so there was nothing to prevent him from examining the volumes. He opened the door, and, bending low, scrutinised the titles more closely. It was in one corner that he came upon the volume for which he was searching. It was labelled, "Poisons of the South American Indians, with a description of the method of manufacture," and was the work of a well-known scientist.

Lee removed the volume from the shelf, and, crossing to the light, opened it. As he did so he noticed that a slip of paper was protruding cornerwise from between the pages, and, turning to it, he spread the book wide. The slip of paper had been torn from a piece of blank writing-paper, and had undoubtedly been used as a bookmark. And almost the first words which met Lee's gaze at the pages it marked were:

"The Poisoned Arrow-tips of the Motillones and the Arawakans."

Lee glanced hastily down the page, grasping the chief details of the article as he went along. It was a detailed description of the means of making the poison which he, and he only, knew had been the true cause of Godfrey Kingston's death. Slipping the bit of paper in his pocket, he closed the volume and returned it to the shelf. Scarcely had he closed the door and locked it when Godfrey Kingston and Dick Kingston entered.

"Miss Cheseworth wishes to be excused for the rest of the evening, Mr. Lee," said Godfrey Kingston, as he closed the door. "She is tired, and has gone to bed."

"Quite the wisest thing she could have done," murmured Lee conventionally, "and what I myself shall do in a few minutes, I think."

"By the way, would you care to glance at any of the volumes now?" went on Godfrey.

Lee shook his head.

"Not now, Mr. Kingston. I shall have a browse through them before I leave. I think, with your permission, I shall retire. I have a little writing to do before I go to bed, and also I wish to have a chat with my assistant."

"Certainly, Mr. Lee. You will find your room quite ready."

"Then what do you think, my lad?" asked Lee, turning to Nipper.

"I am ready when you are, sir," responded Nipper, rising.

They bade good-night to Godfrey Kingston, then to his cousin Dick, and, making their way to the floor above, stopped at Lee's room. Once the door was closed and locked behind them, Lee crossed swiftly to the table, and, taking out the slip of paper, began to examine it closely.

The line where one corner had been exposed above the pages could be distinctly seen, for the exposed part had a yellowish tinge which the other portion had not, proving that the slip had been in the book for some considerable time.

"It would take several months, at least, for the air to cause that discolouration," muttered Lee, as he drew out his pocket-glass and focussed it upon the line of demarkation between yellow and white. "Even longer, I think. I shouldn't be surprised if that slip had been placed in the book a year or more ago."

"I wonder how long ago it was published? It must be a fairly recent work. I should have noticed that. It is important. I think I shall just run down to the library again and have a look at it."

Turning to Nipper, he said:

"Wait here, my lad. I am going downstairs again, and will be back in a few minutes."

He left the room abruptly, and, making his way along the corridor, came to the head of the wide staircase. The hall below was now almost in darkness, a single light only having been left. Its rays were swallowed up in the vast shadows of the great apartment, and so dim was the light of the staircase itself that, as he began to descend, Lee did not at first notice someone else was coming up. He drew back as he heard the swish of clothing, and then the black-gowned figure of Miss Cheseworth swept past him. She murmured an almost inaudible "Good-night!" as she passed, to which Lee replied perfunctorily, then she was gone, leaving only a faint scent of some sort behind her—a scent which crept with subtle persistence into the nostrils and conjured up pictures of the vivid East.

"I thought she had already gone to bed," murmured Lee, as he kept on his way. "She is a strange being, is Miss Cheseworth."

He found the library in darkness, but located the switch by the door, and, turning on the light, crossed at once to the bookcase in the corner. He unlocked the door, and, opening it, bent down to get the book he required. His hand went up to the shelf, but suddenly he paused and gazed in sheer amazement at the spot where the book had been.

It was no longer there! Someone had removed it during the last hour!

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CHAPTER VI.

What Happened in the Night.

NELSON LEE returned to his room in a very thoughtful mood. If he had needed any further proof of the reality of the unseen hand he had certainly received it with a vengeance. But the thing which puzzled him was how his every move seemed to be anticipated.

It was as though there were not only an unseen hand, but an unseen eye

as well. Someone in that house was watching his very act—someone who either wished to put him on the wrong scent or to baffle him altogether. He had quite discarded the idea that this same unseen person might be wishing to help him surreptitiously. First the negatives which Nipper had taken had been destroyed, and the camera—a very fine affair for indoor work—had been stolen.

Next came the leaving of the parcel containing the flannel outside the door of his room. This he had traced as the property of Godfrey Kingston. Kingston had not even attempted to deny it, but the pallor of his face had told Lee that he, too, saw where such a find on Lee's part was intended to point.

Then followed that conversation about poisons. Lee had expressed a desire to examine the late Mr. Kingston's books on the subject, and to his knowledge only Nipper and Godfrey Kingston knew of that desire.

He had deliberately led up to the subject after Dick Kingston had left the room in an attempt to discover if there was anyone then resident in the house who might have a knowledge of such things. With the technical books there they were easy of access, and that the particular book dealing with South American poisons had been of interest to someone was evident from the fact of the slip of paper between the pages dealing with the very poison which Lee knew to have been the cause of Godfrey Kingston's death.

In that he felt there was a definite clue, although it did not bear the earmarks of being a recent consultation of the book. It would have taken a considerable time for the exposed part of that slip of paper to turn yellow. That meant that perhaps a year or two years had passed since it had been studied.

Was it possible that the plot to kill Godfrey Kingston had had its inception that long ago? That it was a very carefully laid plot Lee felt certain, and if he could prove that it really had been initiated a year, or even two years before, he would then be on a fairly hot scent. If he only knew the age of that slip of paper; if he could only pin down to a definite date the time when it was left in the book. Someone had consulted that book and that particular article with a definite purpose in view.

Now it seemed that the purpose was to gain a thorough technical knowledge of strange poisons in general, and one deadly poison in particular. Was Dick Kingston the sort of man who could initiate such a plot and carry it in his heart for two years before putting it into effect? He was certainly not of the intellectual sort, and on that basis it did not seem possible that he could.

Could Godfrey Kingston have done it? He was strictly a practical man of affairs; he was not at all the learned, bookish type. Would it be beyond Miss Cheseworth? She certainly had the brain for it, and the ability to keep her own counsel for any length of time.

The more he saw of her the more did Lee become puzzled with her personality. She was unlike a woman of the present. She was more like an incarnation of the past. A strange girl, with a deep, unfathomable nature, was how he sized her up. Certainly Godfrey Kingston had said she was tired, and had gone to her room, yet an hour later, when Lee had descended to the library, he had met her on the stairs—a black shadow which he had scarcely heard in movement. What was she doing about the house at that hour?

Was it possible that she had been to the library and had taken the book from the shelf? Was she perhaps the unseen hand and the unseen eye? If so, then how could she have known that Lee was interested in that particular book? That she had more brains than both of her cousins

combined he felt sure, yet she was not clairvoyant and she could not read his mind.

Could she have overheard them at the table after dinner? Had someone else overheard them and told her the subject of their conversation? Who had entered the room? The butler had come in once for a few moments, but while he was in the room Lee had paused in his talk. Then Dunn, the valet, had come into the room to speak to Godfrey Kingston, but they had also refrained from conversation then.

Now that he thought of it, Lee recollected that Dunn had appeared in the room almost before he was aware that the door had opened and closed. Was he the medium who had carried the hint to Miss Cheseworth? Was the valet, after all, mixed up in the whole ghastly business? Such a supposition would at once point the finger of suspicion at Miss Cheseworth, and she did not seem the type of woman who would join forces in plotting with a valet.

Something like the above passed through Lee's mind on his way back to his room, and continued for some minutes after he had closed and locked the door. He did not at once notice that Nipper was bending over the table studying the slip of paper under a powerful pocket-glass. It was the lad's voice that called his attention to the fact.

"I say, gov'nor, this bit of paper was not torn from a perfectly blank sheet," said the lad, in a low tone. "I have been able to make out two or three marks at the very top, where it was torn, that seem to be the lower ends of letters."

Lee was on his feet like a flash. Crossing to the table, he took the sheet of paper and the glass. Then he bent low, studying the faint marks which Nipper had indicated. There seemed little indeed to make of them, and from the loops which were visible Lee could not connect them up with any particulars. But an idea came to him.

Laying the slip of paper down, he got a larger piece from the table and laid it beneath the other. Then, taking a pencil, he continued the sidelines by pencil marking until he had sketched in what he reckoned would be about the size of the missing portion of the sheet. Instead of being torn from the bottom of a sheet of writing-paper, as he had suspected, he found by this process that it must have been torn from the top.

This brought the faint marks on the right and high up on the theoretical piece of paper, just about the spot where one would write in a date if one were about to begin a letter. Was it possible, then, that the faint marks Nipper had discovered were part of a date which had been written there—the date of a letter started and never finished?

Once more Lee studied the paper closely, striving to make out what figures they might have been. Now he thought he had it, then he saw that his surmise must prove incorrect, until he tried all the numerals from one to nine, and at last, from a tiny little loop in the last mark, he felt sure he was safe in placing the last figure at least.

And the figure he fixed on was one which would have made the date two years before. It was hypothetical, to be sure, but at the same time it gave a basis for conjecture. Two years before!

Two years before Robert Kingston had been at home in England. Two years before he had become engaged to Molly Cheseworth. Two years before Dick Kingston had been keenly disappointed in his hopes. And, above all, the discolouration of the corner of the slip of paper proved that it had been in the book for some considerable time. Lee placed the piece of paper carefully inside his wallet, then, turning to Nipper, he said:

"My lad, I want you to keep your eyes and ears open for the slightest

sign of anything out of the ordinary. There is someone at work against us in this house. It began with the destruction of your negatives and the theft of your camera. It has been in evidence on two occasions since then. And, because she will suspect you less quickly than she will me, I want you to make Miss Cheseworth your especial care."

Nipper nodded wisely.

"That won't be hard, guv'nor. She has tried to talk to me several times to-day, but I did not give her an opportunity. I didn't want to be asked questions as to how things were going. Her room is right near mine, too, so I can listen for her to go out, then follow her, and get into conversation if she wishes."

"That is the game, my lad. Begin it the first thing in the morning. And now you had better get along to bed."

When the door had closed after Nipper, Nelson Lee stood for a few minutes in deep thought, then murmuring:

"One never can tell—each action has its reaction. There might be an aftermath."

He unlocked his bag, and took out a small steel instrument, which looked not unlike a metal spider.

This instrument was of Lee's own designing, and as a means of opening locks of which he had not the key it was a masterpiece. Slipping this into his pocket, he next took off his dinner shoes and put on a pair of rubber-soled shoes. That done, he removed his dinner-jacket, and put on a dark lounge suit, turning up the collar and buttoning it to the neck in order to completely hide the white of his soft dinner shirt.

A small automatic in the hip pocket completed his arrangements, and then, turning out his light, he opened the door very quietly. He stood in the corridor listening intently for some time, but not a sound broke the night stillness of the house. Somewhere in the far distance a dog was howling—at the home farm, he judged.

When he felt secure, he began to creep along in his rubber-soled shoes until he had turned the angle of the corridor and was in the main corridor, leading to the head of the grand staircase. He reached that spot in safety, but did not continue until he had paused once more to listen.

It must be understood that Lee's room, Nipper's room, and Miss Cheseworth's room were along the corridor to the *right* as one reached the top of the stairs, while the room of the late Mr. Kingston, Godfrey Kingston's room, and that of Dick Kingston were to the left, from the top of the stairs.

Therefore Lee, in continuing his course, was drawing always nearer to the room where the elder Kingston had been murdered. He reached it in safety, and, pausing just outside the locked door, listened again.

Still the house seemed quiet, so, taking out the little metal "spider," he inserted the flexible "claws" in the lock. That done, he began to twist ever so gently, insinuating a claw first in this break of the lock, then a claw in that break of the lock, until he felt the instrument slip home. Even the most modern and most intricate locks were child's play to Lee with that instrument, so it was nothing to open the lock of a bedroom door which made no pretence of being difficult.

Withdrawing the "spider," Lee turned the handle and slipped into the room. It was in total, utter darkness—black as the Stygian valleys. The curtains had been left drawn after the body of the dead man had been moved to another room, and there was a strange, heavy odour about, which had a depressing effect upon Lee. He closed the door after him, and crept across to the window, which was the one in a direct line with the chair where Godfrey Kingston had been sitting when death had overtaken him.

As he neared it, a cold shiver ran down his spine as something swept across his face, but the next moment he was arraigning himself, for it proved to be nothing more than one of the heavy curtains moving gently from the night breeze which came through the open window.

If the curtains had been drawn, at least the window had been left open. Lee drew the curtain aside a little, and stepped out upon the stone balcony outside. Or, it would be more correct to say, that he started to step out upon the balcony, for the next moment he had drawn back into the room, allowing the curtain to fall back into place.

Lee had heard a scraping and rustling just beneath the balcony—he had caught a single glimpse of a black shadow appearing over the edge of the railing. It had been enough. Someone was climbing up the ivy. Silently and with catlike stealth, he backed across the room until he was close against the chair in which Godfrey Kingston had been sitting when he had been murdered.

Around the chair he slithered, and, sinking into it ever so gently, worked his hand into the pocket which held the automatic. For a full minute nothing happened, then a direct influx of breeze struck his neck, and he knew that the curtains over the window had been thrust aside. Not a muscle did Lee move. He might have been a corpse himself, so rigidly stiff did he sit.

He was trying to follow the movements of the person who had climbed up the ivy. Who could it be? What purpose could anyone have in making stealthy entry to that room where death had been so recently? Now a soft footfall sounded near the window, and the draught against the back of his neck was cut off.

The other had entered the room, and the curtain had once more been dropped. Then silence—dead, utter silence, pregnant with a thousand sinister suggestions. It needed all Lee's power of control to abstain from movement during the next few minutes—minutes that dragged through their weary course as hours.

Was the man who had entered the room creeping across towards the chair in which he sat? Was Death once more being breathed into that room of tragedy? A soft sigh answered the question, and, by the sound of it, Lee knew the other was still by the window.

Then upon the silence of the room there broke a sound—a sound which, though scarcely audible under ordinary conditions, split asunder the blanket of stillness like a pistol shot, and it did not come from the direction of the window. It came from the door!

With every nerve keyed up, Nelson Lee strained his hearing to catch the meaning of it. Click—click—click; scrape—scrape—scrape! Someone was trying to fit a key into the door. Then a soft slush, slush, as the curtains came inwards and returned against the open French window. A soft, a very soft, sound as the door closed, and a continuing rustle as someone came across the room towards the window.

“'Ssh! Are you there?”

The soft, sibillant hiss and the whispered question spread throughout the room with the startling revelation the human voice always seeks for its accompaniment in silence. Then there came:

“Yes—be silent!”

Another soft swish, swishing, and once more silence. Nelson Lee was like a graven image. That two persons were in that room with him, he knew; but no more. One had come by the ivy on to the balcony, and so into the room; the other had come by the door. One had come from the grounds outside—the other had come from within the house!

For perhaps a minute deep silence reigned once more, then borne across that chasm of blackness Lee heard a whispered sentence:

"This is reckless. I feel that danger is abroad. I don't like the man Lee being here. He is no fool, and I fear for you."

It was only a whisper—a whisper which might have come from man or woman; but somehow Nelson Lee knew that it had only emanated from one person—Miss Cheseworth. Abruptly, almost brutally, came the answer:

"There is nothing to fear—don't get hysterical. This man Lee is like all his tribe. My plans have been laid too carefully. But I had to see you once more before I went. I shall not remain to watch the progress of things as I intended. I shall go at once. It is for you to keep up your nerve and play the game out here."

Silence for a moment; then:

"Do you remember the book in the library—the book which you consulted?"

"Yes—what of it?"

"Only this. The man Lee must suspect something, for this evening he spoke of poisons, and after dinner he went to the library. I do not know if he has seen the book or not, but there was a danger. I have removed it from the shelf."

"Fool!"

Brutally the epithet was flung out, and for the first time Lee caught the full masculine timbre of the voice.

"Fool!" came the repetition. "It may be the one thing to make him suspicious. Why did you do that?"

"Don't be angry," came the pleading whisper in return. "I did it to protect you. And I cannot stand the strain much longer. I must go away, too."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the whispers had been drawing closer and closer to Lee. The last words seemed to be close behind him. Then from out of the darkness he felt a soft thud against his chair. They had come close enough to touch it. His fingers tightened around his revolver. He had heard more than he had dared to hope.

He felt sure of the identity of one. But it was the other—the man—whose identity he did not know. Perhaps a few more whispered sentences would reveal the truth; perhaps another few moments would rip asunder the veil of mystery, and lead him swiftly to the wall of truth. Perhaps—and at that very moment something touched the crown of his head.

So sheer—so utter, was the terror of the person who felt the human in that chair, that the very silence seemed to vibrate with it, then, like the sharp crack of a pistol, the silence was torn apart by a scream of the most poignant terror which it had ever been Lee's fate to hear.

Scream upon scream went up, and up, and up, until he thought the human voice had surpassed its limits.

Terror—horror—what not, had inspired that scream, and now that the crisis was reached, Nelson Lee knew the time for action had arrived.

Even as he came to his feet, his automatic jerked free for action, he heard a deep curse, and, lunging forth, he grasped something—a something which he knew to be a man.

With the screams of terror ringing in his ears, Lee fought for the mastery, trying to club his weapon and strike hard. But with a frantic jerk the other broke free, and before Lee could reach through the darkness to grasp him again, there sounded the rush of feet, the curtains were torn aside, and he caught one fleeting glimpse against the silhouette of night of a figure hurtling over the balcony.

Lee made after, but even, as he reached the edge, there came the spurt of flame and a sharp crack, as a revolver bullet tore past him and ricocheted from the side of the house. Lee laid his automatic on the railing of the balcony, and pulled the trigger as quickly as he could, answering two shots for one; but, when the clip had emptied, only a single mocking jeer answered him, and then the sound of running footsteps that died away in the night.

On the verge of attempting to climb over the railing and make chase, he was arrested by the flare of light in the room behind him, and, turning, he saw, through the opening between the curtains, the figure of Dunn, the valet, shuffling towards him. The next moment the door was burst open, and Godfrey Kingston appeared, followed by his cousin Dick.

Lee pocketed his weapon, and pushed his way back into the room, and, as he entered it, he noticed that of Miss Cheseworth there was not the faintest sign. Dunn, the valet, was there, with a dressing-gown thrown over his night attire. Godfrey Kingston and Dick Kingston were there—*both fully dressed.*

Nelson Lee scrutinised them both keenly. Was either of them out of breath? Was either of them the man whom he had struggled with in the dark? They seemed composed enough, yet in either case it may have been but good acting.

But of one thing he was dead sure—in some way, in some definite way, the silent Miss Cheseworth was in league with the murderer of Godfrey Kingston!

CHAPTER VII.

Nelson Lee Rips the Veil Asunder.

THINGS had come to a head, and no one realised that any more clearly than did Nelson Lee. He might secrete in the inner recesses of his own soul the facts about the destruction of the negatives, the leaving of the parcel of flannel at his door, and the mysterious disappearance of the book from the library, but he could not cover up those wild, terror-stricken screams which had rung out a few minutes before.

Nor could he easily explain the shooting which had taken place. As he faced the others in the room his mind was working swiftly. He was determined that, whatever might be thought, he would give no explanation of any sort until he had had an opportunity of scrutinising the footgear which each wore.

Dunn, the valet, wore slippers, which were dry and clean. Both Dick Kingston and Godfrey Kingston wore boots, and in neither case could Lee see that they showed signs of recent contact with gravel or grass, as must have been the case had they been out of the house.

On the face of it, it seemed that neither of them could be the man whom Lee had fought with. Then who could that one be? Lee had a theory, but he had not yet an opportunity of working it out to a definite point.

As for Miss Cheseworth, she had managed in some way to get away before the others had entered the room. Which way she had gone—why she had not met them in the corridor—Lee did not yet know. Yet he saw that he must say something if he were to forestall awkward questions. He addressed himself to Godfrey Kingston.

“Mr. Kingston,” he said, “I know that you are waiting for an explanation of the remarkable scene which has just been enacted here, but I must ask you to allow it to stand over until the morning. There are some things upon which I myself am not yet clear, and I wish to think them

over. I promise you that I shall lay before you several matters early in the morning."

Godfrey Kingston bowed.

"That is as you will, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "I heard loud screams. I thought they were the screams of a woman, and I feared for my cousin. Then the sound of firing followed, and I did not know what was afoot. I feared another tragedy was being enacted."

"Nothing of that sort has happened," responded Lee. "I fired to wound, not to kill, but none of my shots took effect. All I can say now is, that I came upon an intruder in this room. We struggled, and he got away. As to the screams, I am afraid I have no explanation ready. But I think we need fear no repetition of the disturbance to-night, so, with your permission, I shall return to my room."

They could do nothing but acquiesce, though Godfrey Kingston at least must have noticed Lee's rubber-soled shoes and the lounge jacket turned up and buttoned close about the neck. At the door of his own room Lee met Nipper.

"What is it all about, guv'nor?" asked the lad in a whisper.

Lee took his arm and pointed along the corridor.

"Return to your room, my lad. I shall explain matters in the morning. In the meantime, your work is to watch Miss Cheseworth in the closest manner. Let no move of hers escape you."

"I'll be on the job, guv'nor, never fear," replied the lad, and, turning, he sped silently along towards his own room.

Nelson Lee opened the door, and, closing it, locked it after him. Then, lighting a cigarette, he sat down in the easy chair, and gave himself up to thought. He sat there smoking until the early hours of the morning, but when he finally rose he had threshed out the entire case, had sifted through every tittle of evidence—had brought to bear his powers of analysis and deduction as he had never brought them to bear before. And the net result, so far as it was visible, was only a dry glitter in the eyes, which a few could have told foreboded ill for someone.

He slept lightly, for it was only a few minutes past six when he was dressed and downstairs. But there were others who slept lightly, too, for as he reached the lower hall he encountered Godfrey Kingston just emerging from the library. The young man looked worn and haggard, as though, indeed, he had not even retired during the night, and when he gazed at Lee there was a look of weariness and anxiety in his eyes. Lee's first question took him somewhat by surprise.

"Mr. Kingston," he said curtly, "have you yesterday's 'Times' about?"

"Why—er—yes, I think so, Mr. Lee. It should be in the library."

"Then I should like to have a look at it, please."

Without replying, Godfrey Kingston led the way back into the library, and searched about until he found the copy of the paper which Lee desired. Spreading it out on the table, Lee turned the pages until he came to the shipping sheet, and there he ran his eyes down the column of shipping dates until he came to the name of a ship about half way down the column. Suddenly he crunched up the paper, and, turning once more to the other, demanded:

"Have you a photograph of your cousin, Robert Kingston?"

"Yes, there are several about the place," replied Godfrey. "One moment, and I will find one."

He picked up a small portfolio from a tabourette near the bookcase, and, opening it, revealed the fact that it contained several photographs. These he thumbed over until finally he came to that of a young man taken in

tropical clothing. He handed it silently to Nelson Lee, and the latter studied it carefully for several moments.

"Had your cousin any particular mark upon him?" he asked; "say, a scar or tattoo mark of any sort?"

"He has a coiled snake tattooed upon his right forearm," answered Godfrey Kingston. "But why these questions, Mr. Lee?"

"I shall tell you later," said Lee shortly. "Now, Mr. Kingston, I want you to arrange, please, to drive me to the village at once. I wish to send an important telegram as soon as the office opens."

Godfrey Kingston bowed his acquiescence, and, twenty minutes later, the dog-cart dashed down the drive with him at the reins and Nelson Lee beside him. It was half-past eight by the time they once more reached Barron Hall, to find breakfast waiting on the table. Dick Kingston was there, but neither Miss Cheseworth nor Nipper had yet put in an appearance.

Immediately after breakfast Lee made his way to Nipper's room, but found it empty. He could only conclude that the lad was off on the trail of Miss Cheseworth, but, in order to assure himself, he requested Godfrey Kingston to send a maid to Miss Cheseworth's room. The answer was as he expected—her room was empty. Then Lee, turning to Godfrey Kingston, said:

"Mr. Kingston, I wish to postpone my explanation until I receive a reply to the wire I sent. It should not take long. Let us arrange to meet here in the library at half-past ten, and I should like present yourself, Mr. Dick Kingston, Dunn, the valet, and, if she has returned, Miss Cheseworth."

He strode from the room, and passed out to the grounds, where he paced restlessly up and down until the appointed time. Lee had come to what deduction told him was the only possible conclusion. He might be on the wrong trail absolutely, but he was backing science to win, and had cast all his wagers upon it.

By half-past ten he should know, one way or the other. And at twenty-five minutes past ten he caught sight of a telegraph boy from the village, making his way up the drive. Not one telegram did he have for Lee, but two, and, tearing them open, Lee read the contents. His face betrayed nothing as he thrust them into his pocket and made for the house.

In the library he found gathered those whom he had sent for. The big chair before the desk had been left for him. Godfrey Kingston occupied one beside it. Dick Kingston sat across from his cousin, and Dunn, the valet, stood near the door. Of Miss Cheseworth and Nipper there was no sign.

Lee closed and locked the door after him. He strode leisurely to the seat at the desk, and sat down. Every move was calm and methodical, until—until he suddenly lifted his head and fixed the valet's eyes with his. One long, slim finger pointed straight at the valet.

"Robert Dunn," he said sternly, "why have you attempted to conceal the truth? Why have you lied to me as you have? Answer me, man, and if you are wise, tell the truth."

Godfrey Kingston gave a gasp of amazement as he heard Lee's condemnatory words. Even Dick Kingston sat up and gazed in round-eyed amazement at the valet. Lee never removed his eyes from the terror-filled orbs of the man.

"Answer me," he repeated, "and be careful how you speak. *I know all.*"

No more fatal phrase is there in all the world than that—I know all! It broke down the last barrier of the valet's reserve, and, with shaking knees, he cried:

"I did not do it—I swear I did not! I was forced to keep silent! I was in fear! I did not do it—I did not do it—I did not do it!"

His words degenerated into a whimper, and with a shrug Nelson Leo lowered his arm.

"The last link is forged, Mr. Kingston," he said, turning to Godfrey Kingston. "I will now tell you how your uncle met his death."

"But—but Dunn did not kill him, surely?" stammered Godfrey Kingston. Lee shook his head.

"No," he said. "The man who killed your uncle was your cousin, Robert Kingston, and he was aided and abetted by Miss Cheseworth. Listen, while I tell you the facts. Afterwards I shall explain how I know they are facts. And as I proceed you can confirm what I say by the valet, who, to do him justice, was an unwilling accessory after the fact.

"Two years ago your cousin, Robert Kingston, conceived the idea of killing your uncle, in order that he might the quicker enter into his inheritance. Two years ago he made his plot, and that plot he has elaborated, until finally the opportunity he sought arrived. It is said that like attracts like. There could be few men more evil than your cousin, Robert Kingston. And in Miss Cheseworth there was a deep design which found its mate in him.

"Together they planned this crime, together they carried it out. They became betrothed—two terrible natures entering into complete cohesion. And at last the day came when their plans were to be put into execution. Robert Kingston sent a letter and a gift to your uncle, which would arrive either on or very near his birthday.

"In this letter he said that he would be out of reach of news for some time, as he was about to start on an expedition into the interior. But instead of doing that, he came to England under another name, and when you thought he was up the Orinoco, he was here close to Barron Hall.

"He knew who would be staying in the house for the birthday festivities. He knew that this would enable him to cover up his tracks. He knew your uncle's customs in detail. Therefore he knew at what time to creep into the grounds and to climb the ivy to the balcony. He was probably there when Miss Cheseworth was with your uncle.

"Even as she kissed him good-night, she knew that his would-be murderer—her lover—was waiting, waiting to strike him down. Then the valet left, and, parting the window curtains, Robert Kingston prepared to carry out the deed. How did he do it, you ask? I will tell you.

"From up his sleeve or from beneath his coat he took a blowpipe, such as is used by the Indians of South America. In this blowpipe he inserted a poisoned arrow, and then, placing it to his lips, he blew the arrow straight at your uncle's head. The tip of the arrow entered just at the back of the neck, and within thirty seconds your uncle was dead.

"Then came the second step in the plot. How to cover up the traces of the deed? He had prepared for that. A length of lead pipe covered with flannel taken from the chest in the estate office—flannel which could be identified as the property of you, Godfrey Kingston—was next brought into play. He struck a terrible blow on the back of the head, smashing in the skull and covering up the mark of the arrow.

"But there he was clumsy, for that blow was struck upon a man already dead, and a dead body does not bleed. The black-jack was then thrown aside to be left as evidence—to start the investigation upon a wrong clue; and as he turned to depart after his fearful work was finished, Dunn, the valet, entered the room. He lied when he said he had not returned to the room. Then he made his mistake. Long habit played him false, for *he unthinkingly turned out the light.*

"When I discovered that fact, I knew that Dunn was lying to me. Then came the destruction of the negatives of the room, and the theft of Nipper's

camera. Who did that? Miss Cheseworth. At the door of my room there was a mysterious parcel left. On opening it, I found it contained a length of dark flannel, similar to that which had been wrapped about the black-jack. Who left it there? Miss Cheseworth; and in order to throw suspicion on you, Godfrey Kingston.

"You spoke of hearing voices in your uncle's room, when you stood at the door. You thought he might have been speaking to your cousin Dick. He was not speaking at all—he was for ever past speaking. The voices you heard were those of Robert Kingston, his murderer, and Dunn, the valet.

"Do you remember last evening after dinner, when I led the conversation round to the subject of poisons, and you told me that your uncle had a considerable library on the subject?"

Godfrey Kingston bowed his head.

"While we were speaking, Dunn came into the room, very quietly. He must have overheard something of what we said. It was enough. He repeated it to Miss Cheseworth. She knew what to do, and had the nerve to do it. As soon as she could, she abstracted that volume from the library, but not before I had examined it; and she did not know that between two pages dealing with the exact poison which was used to kill your uncle I found a small slip of paper torn from a sheet of writing-paper.

"My assistant, Nipper, discerned small marks upon it, and, by the aid of a pocket glass, I discovered those marks to be part of a date which had been written upon it. I placed that date two years ago, and this surmise was strengthened by the discolouration on the part of the paper which had been exposed to the air.

"Then I knew that the plot was laid months ago—that it was no haphazard affair. And I remembered, too, that two years ago your uncle told you all for the first time how he had made his will. It was then, too, that Robert Kingston became betrothed to his cousin.

"Last night I went to your uncle's room in order to place myself in the very atmosphere of the crime. I hoped that it might aid me to a reconstruction of at least part of the affair. I had no sooner got there than a man came up the ivy and entered the room. He waited by the window, and soon the door of the room was opened, and someone else came in.

"It was an assignation, I soon found out, for when they met they spoke, and, speaking, they knew not that I was in the room. I heard several things. I heard enough to tell me that one at least was Miss Cheseworth, and I heard her confess that she had taken the book from the library. But as they talked they unconsciously moved across the room, until they stood by the chair where your uncle sat when he was killed. I was there then, and as her hand rested on the back it came in contact with my head.

"It was the fear of the dead—it was the vivid realisation of what had been done—it was the terror of a guilty conscience—which caused her to scream out—and then I sought to hold the man. But he escaped, and during the scuffle she managed to get away. She could not have gone by the door which you entered by, and I can only conclude that she escaped through the dressing-room and the valet's room. Is that correct, Dunn?"

The valet nodded his head dumbly. He could not speak.

"When I examined your boots and those of your cousin, I knew that neither of you was the man who had gone over the balcony. Then I knew, beyond all doubt, that Robert Kingston was in England—that he was the murderer. This morning I looked up the steamship sailing in the paper. I found that a ship was sailing from Plymouth this morning. I sent a long wire to the captain, and now I have received two replies. You will notice

that neither Miss Cheseworth nor my assistant, Nipper, is here. You will understand why in a moment. I shall first read the captain's message."

Nelson Lee drew out the two messages, and, opening one of them, began to read:

"Nelson Lee, Barron Hall, Tamarton, Devon.

"Party described in your message on board. Serious results. Young man claiming to be your assistant arrived also. Have turned the reply over to him. (Signed) BROUNE, Captain."

"That is the first telegram," said Lee. "Now listen to this one from my assistant":

"To Nelson Lee, Barron Hall, Tamarton, Devon.

"Miss C. left hall at five this morning. I after her. She caught early morning train for Plymouth. Followed. Traced her to ship Santa Barbara, bound for South America. She met man on deck and they went below. Was about to wire you for instructions when captain of ship came down from bridge. Saw him having consultation with officers, and three of them went below. Know now that he had received wire from you; but he was too late. The man and woman had signed on as Mr. and Mrs. King; but were ready for emergencies, for managed to lock cabin door, and by time was broken in they were both dead. Poison of very powerful nature. Shall I remain here? (Signed) NIPPER."

"That, gentleman, is the story," said Lee, laying down the two messages. "Nemesis overtook the guilty one swiftly. And now, if there is anything you care to ask, I shall do my best to answer it."

Godfrey Kingston was silent for a moment, then, lifting his head, he said:

"I should like to ask a question, but not of you, Mr. Lee. I should like to ask Dunn why he has deceived us so?"

The valet gazed imploringly at the man who was now his master, and, after a supreme effort, whispered huskily:

"Mr. Godfrey, I did it because I loved her as my own child, though Heaven knows, I always knew her soul was black as night. And, sir, I should like to say that they were man and wife. They had been married this two years, for I was a witness of it."

There the old man wavered and broke down, collapsing in a heap on the floor.

"I knew that, too," said Dick Kingston, as he rose to his feet. "And she was black—black as night. But she is gone now, and I shall say no more, though, with it all, I loved her."

He stumbled to the door as he spoke, and as Lee and Godfrey Kingston bent over the unconscious figure of the old valet, Lee had a fleeting glimpse of the tortured face of Dick Kingston as he passed from the room. Thus did Godfrey Kingston, the whitest and cleanest of the Kingstons, come into his own, and thus did Nelson Lee begin one of his rare, warm friendships, which was to last until death.

It had been one of the greatest cases of Lee's career, yet, through all the tortuous maze of mystery, he had come through to his goal borne along by that remorseless wave called Science.

THE END.

**NEXT WEEK!—"The House in the Hollow."—A
Magnificent Extra Long Story of Nelson Lee and
Eileen Dare, the Girl Detective.**

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the Southern Seas

By FENTON ASH

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless until, one day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching! On their way back to the camp the chums espy two white men—strangers both—in chase of some blacks, at whom they are shooting. Alec and Clive follow.

(Now read on.)

Rescuing the Captives.

"BY the way, we ought to take our bearings as well as we can," Alec observed. "How are we going to get back to our camp at night?"

"It must be round on the other side of this mountain," said Clive. "I suppose that really we ought to be making our way there now as fast as we can go. The doctor will be getting anxious. Perhaps he'll say we ought to have gone straight back and not waited to try to do anything here. But—well, I don't like the idea of letting those wretches down there work their vile will on those poor darkies."

"Nor do I," Alec agreed. "As to finding our way through, I believe I can see, over to the left, the very place where I had my little adventure the first night we arrived. I found my way back then all right, you remember, so I dare say we can manage to do so again. It will be lighter, too, to-night, for the moon is older. Ah! See that? I was right. Those beauties are starting off again. They're going on a fresh hunt, and it will take them much farther afield. So now's our time. We'll just watch them well away from the place and then start—eh?"

"Right you are! There they go, the wretches! And by the way they're swinging along I fancy they know they've got a long jaunt before them and won't be back just yet. So now, as you say, will be our time."

They watched a little longer to make quite sure, and saw the two men



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•marching along at a good pace in a straight line—or as near straight as the nature of the ground would allow. In and out among the rocks they went now hidden by trees, bushes, or clumps of tall reeds, then emerging again on to open ground. Finally they disappeared round a rocky hill in the direction the four natives had taken.

Then the two chums started downwards in the direction of the strangers' camp. At first the descent was very steep, pretty dangerous, in fact, in places, and even when they finally reached the lower ground they still found the travelling anything but easy on account of the rocks and pools that lay in their way.

Thus it took them longer than they had expected to reach the low hill for which they were bound. By the time they approached it the sun had set and—as is the case in the tropics—night seemed to have fallen quite suddenly.

The moon was rising, but it had not yet risen high enough to give much light, and for a little while the two found themselves at fault.

Then Alec suddenly caught the gleam of a light between the trees on rising ground almost close at hand.

"We've come right, after all," he whispered to Clive. "Yonder's their camp-fire."

Proceeding now with increasing caution, they soon reached the foot of the hill, and then began the tedious process of wriggling in and out between the trees and bushes which clothed its sides.

With infinite patience and no small amount of skill the two managed to manœuvre without making the slightest sound which might give the alarm or raise the suspicions of whoever had been left in charge.

At last they found themselves looking into a clearing where a fire was burning, with a man beside it smoking a pipe. He was a beetle-browed, villainous-looking fellow, probably a sailor to judge by his dress and general appearance, and evidently a foreigner of some kind. Beside him lay a rifle, while scattered about on the ground were various articles which suggested that the two whom the watchers had seen leave the camp were not the only absent members of the party.

If so, some of the others might return at any moment, and it would evidently be wise, therefore, to act with promptitude.

As to the task which lay before them, that was now clear enough. On one side, in the shadows, at some little distance from the fire, there was a dark, huddled mass which the young fellows could see consisted of natives lying about in different attitudes. They were, in fact, tied together in pairs, and so tightly and brutally that they were perforce compelled to lie just and where they had been thrown down.

Just then the man got up and went across to a store of cut wood which had been placed in a pile ready for use when required. He left his rifle where it was lying, and, stooping down, filled his arms with the fuel.

Clive and Alec glanced at each other.

"Now is the time."

The man had let his load of wood fall, and had been on the point of making a dash for his rifle, when Clive's stern "Hands up!" had arrested his movements.

He stood for a moment or two irresolute. But the two rifles pointed straight at him, with the firelight gleaming on their polished barrels, made him finally decide that discretion was his best course.

"Who are you, and what d'yer want?" he growled sullenly, after first relieving his feelings by a frightful oath. "What er ye goin' t' do to me?"

(Continued overleaf.)

"Who we are doesn't matter," Clive replied, quietly but firmly. "As to what we do to you, that depends on how you behave. If you take the matter quietly, we shall not harm you; but if you make any attempt at resistance I shall shoot you without further warning. Get some rope and bind him," he added to Alec. "But first put his rifle further away—well out of his reach."

"Take care!" he warned the man again, as he saw his eyes following Alec's movements. "My finger is on the trigger, and if you do anything to startle me, the gun might go off even before I intended it to."

The fellow frowned, and his dark, scowling eyes turned from Alec back to Clive. Then he stood with his hands up, indeed, but with the look of a cat watching a mouse.

Alec meanwhile had placed both his own rifle and that of the man on the ground behind Clive, and taking up a piece of rope—there was plenty lying about—he advanced towards the fellow to bind him, making a slip-noose as he went.

"Turn round," he said coolly. "I prefer to have your back to look at, since we must come to close quarters."

For an instant the man seemed as if he meant to risk a rush. He clenched his hands, his eyes seemed as if they would start from his head, and an ugly contortion passed over his face.

Seeing this, Alec stopped and eyed him warily, while Clive advanced a step, holding the rifle steadily in a line with his head.

"Quick!" he cried sharply:—"Turn round, or I fire!"

And the man, smothering down an oath, slowly and sulkily obeyed.

"Now drop your arms," said Alec, and as they dropped, he threw the loop over his head and drew it tight.

A minute or two later the fellow was bound, hand and foot, and was lying on the ground like one of his own luckless captives.

"That's done!" murmured Alec, as he went and picked up his rifle. "And now to look at those poor beggars over yonder."

The two stepped across to where the blacks were lying, and they were filled with anger and indignation at what they saw. Eight natives were lying bound in couples in such a manner that they looked more like tied-up lay figures than living human beings. Only the sighs and low moans which broke forth every now and then told that they were really alive. And even these the poor creatures suppressed as much as possible, knowing only too well that groans and cries of pain were likely to bring them blows from the man in charge of them.

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

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