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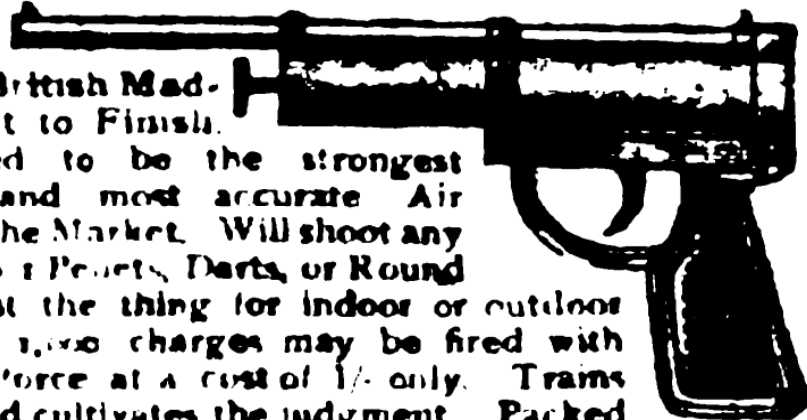
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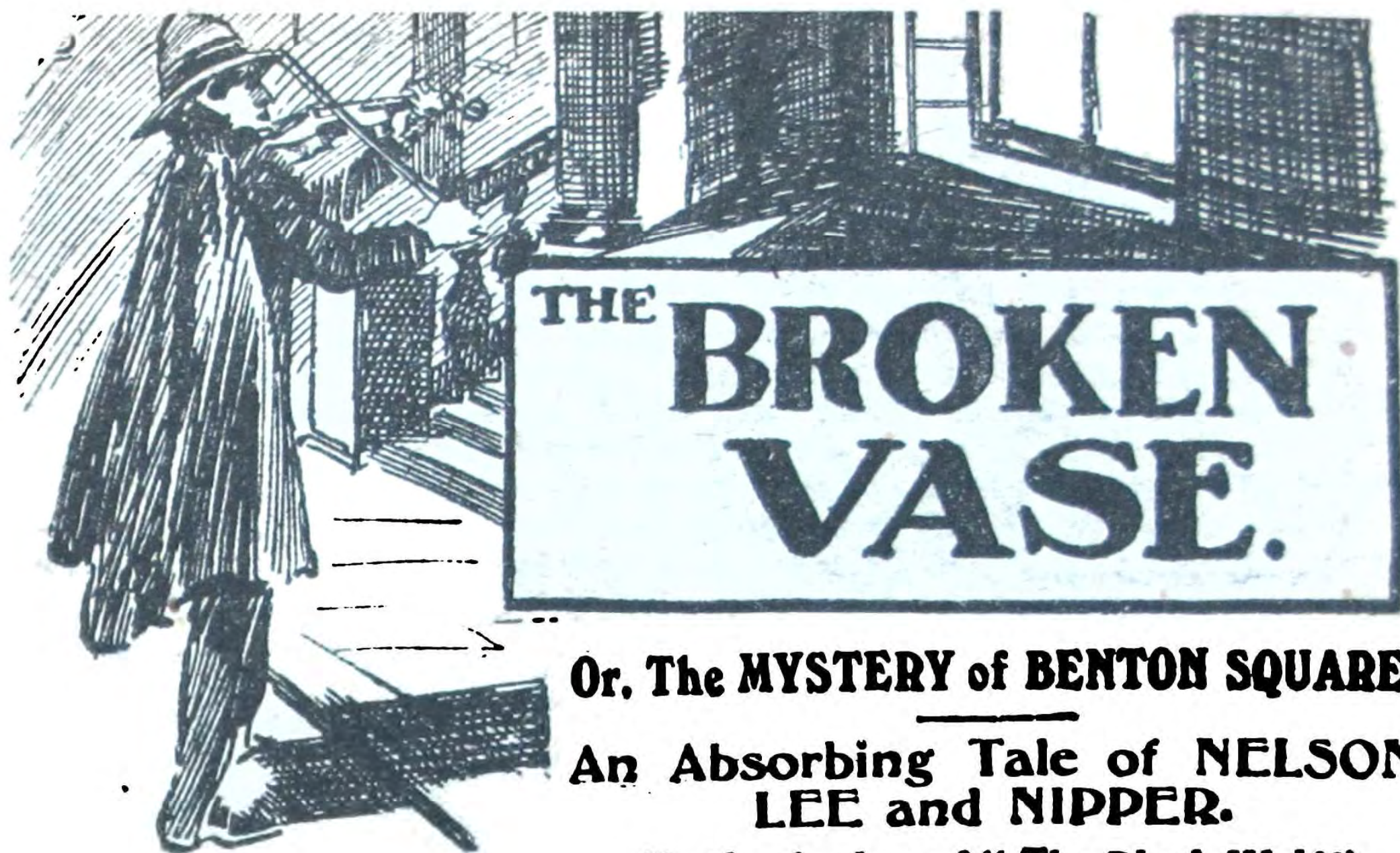
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CHAPTER I.

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM BARTLETT leaned back in his chair, and, pressing the tips of his fingers together, gazed thoughtfully at his stepson who sat opposite him.

"I dare say, Gerald," said the general, after a short pause, "that you are wondering why I sent for you?"

Gerald Weston, dark and swarthy as his stepfather was ruddy, smiled slightly.

"Well, sir, to tell the truth, I have been wondering a little," he replied, in a voice which had the cultivated accent of the public school. "It seemed a little—er—unusual, may I say, sir?"

The general nodded.

"It is unusual," he said slowly; "but considering the fact that you are my stepson, and that you have until now been the sole beneficiary under my will, I think it my duty to tell you that I propose making a change in that will."

For a single instant a flash of something, which was almost fear, appeared in Gerald Weston's eyes, but the next moment it was gone; and the general, who was not looking at his stepson, did not see it.

"Yes, Gerald," he went on, after a short pause, "I have been thinking things over lately, and I have come to the conclusion that it would be better to dispose of my estate in a different manner. Not that I intend to cut you off with nothing. Ever since I married your mother, and no children came to us, you have been given to understand that the whole of the estate would be yours. But conscientiously, Gerald, I cannot allow it to go that way."

"I am sorry, sir," said Gerald Weston, who, though outwardly calm, was within seething with anger. "I trust this decision of yours is not due to anything which I have done?"

"Not at all," responded the general. "I will be perfectly frank with

you, Gerald. I married late in life, as you know. When I entered the Army as a young man I was almost penniless. For the first few years it was extremely difficult for me to make ends meet, and, of course, quite out of the question for me to marry. I applied almost as soon as I was gazetted to be sent out to India, and a few months later I went.

"I only came home twice in twenty years. That whole period of time was spent on the Indian Frontier, and although advancement was slow it was steady, because I came through with only a few scratches, while other, and perhaps better men, went under. Owing to an affair at the Khyber Pass—an affair which the British Government was pleased to consider redounded to my credit—I was, as you know, made a general.

"Following that, I received my knighthood, and at the same time a special grant of a hundred thousand pounds from the Government. For the first time in my life I was free from financial worry, and when on coming home at the command of my King, I met your mother—then a widow—I was led to think seriously for the first time in my life of marriage. Your mother was a very attractive woman, and until she died we were very happy together.

"I will not deny, however, that it was a keen disappointment to me when the years passed without any children coming to us. I have always tried to be a good father to you, Gerald, and I do not think you will misunderstand me when I say that one of the greatest wishes of my life was to have a son to carry the name on through the annals of the British Army. When you were younger I hoped that you would show a desire to enter the Army, and had you done that, I should have watched your career with keen interest.

"But you chose to make your career along paths which I do not profess to understand, and, of course, that dream came to nothing. Not that I am endeavouring to belittle the career you have chosen for yourself. Your own father was, I understand, a musical genius, and it is only natural that you should have inherited that inclination from him.

"If you choose to make the profession of a violinist your career, it is not for me to say you nay. I loved your mother too much to do that. But I dwell on these things in order that you may understand and perhaps appreciate the reasons which have caused me to come to this decision. When I married your mother she had a small income—a matter of a few hundred—which, as you know, has been applied to your account ever since her death. The capital value of this income is a matter of about six thousand pounds, which of course will go to you.

"In addition to that, I am setting aside out of my estate a capital of ten thousand pounds, which will go to you on my death. Since my country gave me practically the whole of my estate, and since I have no son or other blood relative to hand it on to, I feel that I owe it to my country to have that money handed back to them on my death.

"With your mother's money and the ten thousand I shall give you, you will not want. In fact, with your profession you should be very comfortable, and I hope and trust sincerely that you will see eye to eye with me in this matter. That you will be disappointed is natural, but when you think it over I hope you will agree with me, that what came from my country should go back to it. Do you not agree with me, Gerald?"

Gerald Weston smiled and lifted a tapering hand on which several rings glittered. The very sight of such effeminacy was galling to the old general, but he gave no sign as his stepson said suavely:

"It is, of course, for you to do as you wish with your own, sir. I will not conceal the fact that what you say comes as a great disappointment to me. I have been given to understand for so long that everything was com-

ing to me, that I have perhaps, unconsciously, got into the habit of thinking in amounts which I shall never realise.

"As you know I have not and never did have any desire to enter the Army. My music is my life—my career. As you say I inherit my love of music from my own father, and like him, it is my ambition to make a name through it. I am fully conscious of what I owe you, sir, and if you have made a new will on the lines you state, then there remains nothing more for me to say. I am only sorry that I allowed myself to think that one day I should be in a position which now is out of the question."

"I am truly sorry, Gerald," said the general, resting his head on his hand. "I have given the matter a good deal of thought, however, and feel that it is my duty to carry it out as I have stated. The will is not made yet—I would not make the change until I had seen you and explained why I had decided to alter the terms. I am glad, though, that you take it as you do, and you may rest assured that I shall always follow your career with the deepest interest. Now that is finished let us talk of something else. You will stay to dinner, of course?"

Gerald Weston rose and shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir, but I have an important engagement which I cannot break. I shall get back to my rooms if you don't mind."

"As you will, of course, Gerald," replied the general, rising also. "By the way, how are your rooms?—comfortable, I hope."

"I like them much better than the others, sir," responded the younger man. "They are more convenient and much more comfortable."

"You won't come back here and keep an old man from getting too lonely?" asked the general rather pathetically.

Gerald Weston shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir, but you know you never did like my practising, and I doubt if I should ever be real company for you."

"Perhaps you are right, Gerald," said the general, as he thought of the times when the wailing of the violin used to annoy him before Gerald had suggested that he take bachelor rooms in Half Moon Street.

They shook hands then, and Gerald Weston departed, outwardly calm enough over the unpleasant news he had just received, but inwardly boiling with rage and hatred against the old man. He controlled himself, however, until a footman had summoned a taxi for him and he was on his way back to Half Moon Street.

Then and only then did he let himself go, and had anyone seen his face at that moment they would have witnessed the upheaval of the rotting black soul which was housed in Gerald Weston's body. All the way to Half Moon Street he mouthed curses at the trick Fate had played on him.

"A miserable ten thousand besides my mother's money!" he snarled to himself. "How on earth can I get along on that? Why, I owe nearly that much to the moneylenders alone, borrowed on my expectations under the old fool's will. Why should he cut me off now? What right has he to set himself up as a judge. If I had been a beef-eating, coarse-grained bully, who would follow the Army as a career, he would have patted me on the back. But because I desire to lead the life of an intellectual instead, he looks upon me as an outcast. All he can understand is blood and fighting. Curse him, and double curse him! I hate him!"

He was silent for a few moments, then he went on in a more controlled tone:

"He hasn't made the change yet, but nothing I could say would alter his decision. A hundred thousand going, and I don't see how I can prevent

it. The only thing to do was to act as though it didn't matter to me. But what am I going to do about those cursed moneylenders? Once they get wind of what he has done they will be down on me like a pack of wolves. What can I do? What can I do? I don't see—yet the changing of that will must be stopped! It must be stopped even if I have to——” And, with his dark eyes full of cunning, Gerald Weston leaned back in deep thought.

On arriving at Half Moon Street he dismissed the taxi, and opening the door of his rooms stepped into a small hallway. They were the typical, comfortable bachelor rooms which one may find in Half Moon and Jermyn Streets, and owing to the generosity of the general when his stepson had set up his own establishment, they were furnished with every luxury.

Along with his passion for music, Gerald Weston had inherited a love of the bizarre from his father, and this had found expression in a collection of weird and grotesque curios from India, Burmah, the Dutch East, Cambodia, and China, although he favoured, as did his father, those which had come from the mystery realms of India.

The sitting-room and the bedroom both revealed the Sybarite, and if ever there was man born to go through the world without “coarsening” his nature or his hands by actual work, Gerald Weston was that man. His valet appeared as he entered the flat, and taking his master's coat, inquired if he wished anything.

“No,” growled Weston curtly. “Leave the decanter and siphon in the sitting-room, then you can go for the night. I shall be going out later.”

He flung himself into a chair while the man brought a tray and placed it close to his elbow; then when he was alone he lay back thinking of the problem he had to face.

For nearly an hour Gerald Weston sat there drinking brandy and allowing his intensely imaginative mind to run riot in a mad race of hatred and anger against General Bartlett, then suddenly he leaped from his chair, and crossing the room took up a violin-case which lay on the couch.

Although the night was cold outside Gerald Weston was in a bath of perspiration, and regardless of the risk he ran of catching cold, he flung open the window. He next opened the violin-case and took out the beautiful instrument which it contained. He fondled it lovingly for a few moments, and at the same time all the evil which had been rampant in his countenance disappeared.

He had told no lie when he said that music was his passion, and the beautiful violin which was his greatest treasure, was the medium by which he gave expression to it. Perhaps after all he was not to be blamed for the nature which had been handed down to him from an artistic but worthless father.

Early in life Harold Weston, Gerald's father, had met the beautiful and wealthy girl who was to fall under the spell of her music, and later to believe that her happiness in life depended on Harold Weston. It was not until after she was married that she found how bitter was the fruit she had plucked, and after their first year of wedded life the true nature of Harold Weston came to the surface.

His days were spent saturating his system with brandy, and his nights in a wild orgy of strange music which he caressed and cajoled and dragged out of the instrument until the early hours of the morning. Only when he lay sleeping from exhaustion was there any peace in the Weston household, and gradually the large fortune which had been his wife's, was dissipated in the drunken life he led.

Brandy had killed him at last, and when finally the earth had been shovelled over him, Margaret Weston could not be hypocritical enough to mourn. It was not long after this that she met General Bartlett, and for the first time knew what happiness was, yet even then her days and nights were tinged with constant worry about Gerald.

His every action was so much like his father that sometimes she grew frightened; but Fate did not intend that she should witness a second prostitution of the gifts which Nature gave, and mercifully carried her off before the weaknesses of the father found expression in the son. Gerald Weston was Harold Weston living over again. Already was the love of the fire of brandy growing on him, and already was he plunging into the wild orgies of drink and music in which his father had indulged.

On this night, after his interview with the general, his mind was seething with hate, which had been inflamed to the highest pitch by the brandy he had drunk. And now, as did his father before him, he sought expression in music.

Snatching up the bow, he drew it across the strings, then he began to play. At first he caressed the strings slowly, almost languorously, until gradually, imperceptibly, the cadences rose and rose to a high, almost hysterical pitch, reaching a point of screeching melody, which he held and accentuated on a few almost impossible notes, which had in them all the wild abandon and the sense-stealing madness of the crazed music of the Dervishes.

On and on he played, ever holding the expression of his weird musical soul to the same mad pitch, until suddenly there broke in upon the melody—if it could be called melody—a clear, tinkling sound, which might have been the ringing of a bell of pure crystal.

So utterly engrossed was Gerald Weston in the mad rhapsody he was playing that he neither heard nor noticed the sound, which made a distinct though agreeable discord. He was facing the centre of the room, otherwise he must have seen a quaintly fashioned Indian vase—one of a pair—which stood on an antique tallboy near the door, smash to atoms and fall tinkling to the floor.

But his mind was saturated with the hypnotic power of the melody of his own conception, and, oblivious to what had happened, he played on and on and on, ever dwelling on the same mad high notes, until suddenly there swept into his nostrils an odour which would not be denied—an odour which had in it a heavy suggestion of the East, an odour which was pregnant with all the mystery and all the subterfuge of the bazaars.

It swept in upon Gerald Weston, creeping, creeping into his senses until it filtered through the hysteria which controlled him and clouded even the exaltation which the music had sent surging through him.

It reached his brain, and enfolded it in a heavy blanket of oppression, it coursed onwards through his arteries to reach the very fount of his life, the heart; it caught him in a subtle, gradual pressure which filtered through to the very soul of the man, and, arresting his muscular action in the very midst of a wild crescendo, caused him to stagger back drunkenly as one suddenly overcome.

For one brief moment Weston stood holding the violin and bow, gazing stupidly about him, then, without the slightest warning, he collapsed in a heap on the floor, and, as he measured his length on the thick carpet which was the product of the looms of the East, the violin went crashing against the fender of the fireplace and smashed into half a dozen pieces.

Then all was silent in the room, except for the ticking of the little silver

clock on the mantelpiece, and all the time the heavy odour which had followed the smashing of the Indian vase battled for the man's life against the pure night air which swept in through the open window.

CHAPTER II.

Gerald Weston is Puzzled—Understanding—The Great Plot.

PETERS, Gerald Weston's man, was not sorry when his master dismissed him for the night. A man of intensely artistic temperament, Gerald Weston was never a master one could count on, so to speak. His erratic nature caused him to be a quantity of doubt to all who knew him, and particularly to those who worked for him.

Peters was a stolid, unimaginative valet, but even so, his phlegmatic nature rebelled against the petty tyranny which Weston inflicted upon him, and were it not for the frequent absences of his master as well as the excellent wages he paid, Peters would long before have sought a new position.

But he had reached that milestone in life when the weight of his years was heavy upon him and his movements were perforce slow. Under those conditions a new post would not be easy to find, and, with an anxious eye towards the winter of his life, Peters preferred to put up with the idiosyncrasies of his master.

On this night though, as has been said, Peters was indeed glad to get away. It had been some weeks since he had seen his daughter—in service in Hampstead—and once he was away from duty, the rigid demeanour of the servant was submerged in the father.

After leaving Half Moon Street, he made his way to Down Street, where he took the tube for Leicester Square. There he changed into the Hampstead tube, and, on emerging into the open air once more, proceeded to the house where his daughter was in service. In the servant's hall there Peters spent a quiet but enjoyable evening, and after a pleasant supper of bread and cheese, washed down with good old English ale, he sallied forth once more to return to Half Moon Street.

Now in the building which housed his master it was the custom for the servants to sleep on the top floor, somewhat after the fashion of the apartment houses in Paris, and since Peters had been definitely dismissed for the night he did not enter his master's flat on his return. Instead, he took the lift to the top floor, where he stood talking with the liftman for some minutes.

When a summons on the bell sent the lift attendant down to the ground floor again Peters shuffled along to his own tiny room, filled with pleasant memories of the evening he had spent with his daughter, and absolutely unconscious that at that very moment his master was lying on the floor of his sitting-room in a swoon that was very near the borderland of death.

He arose the next morning at six, as was his custom, and, making his way down to his master's flat, entered by the service door at the back. His first duty was to light the gas stove and prepare his own modest breakfast. While the kettle was boiling he went along softly to the sitting-room in order to put it to rights before the hour of calling his master should arrive.

As he opened the door and stepped into the room, he noticed with a start of surprise that the electric lights were still on, and while he was still blinking under their glare his gaze took in the huddled figure on the floor.

Peters stood staring stupidly at the sight for a few moments, then, as his slowly acting mind grasped the fact that it was his master there and that he must have been lying on the floor most of the night, he started forward with a sharp cry of fear. Staggering across the room he got painfully to his knees, and endeavoured to roll the unconscious body of his master over.

He experienced a further stab of fear as the body fell back limply from his grasp. With trembling hands the old man felt his master's pulse, but at first, so shaken with the palsy of fear was he, that he could distinguish nothing. He pulled himself together with an effort, and then, on the second attempt, he felt the faintest beating of the pulse.

"He lives—he lives," he whispered hoarsely to the silent room. "It is the cursed brandy."

Oddly enough, even in that moment some fugitive deductive faculty of Peters asserted itself, and his glance went to the decanter, which he had placed beside Gerald Weston the night before.

"It can't be the brandy," he muttered. "He has not drunk even as much as usual. I'll—I'll give him some. Perhaps it will bring him round."

Allowing Gerald Weston's head to drop back to the door, Peters got stiffly to his feet and shuffled across to the small tabourette which held the decanter and siphon. He poured out a generous portion, and, carrying the glass back to where his master lay, lifted his head and allowed some of the raw spirit to trickle between his lips.

At first the brandy simply sloshed about in the unconscious man's mouth, then as its potency caused a natural contraction of the throat muscles, some of the spirit went down his throat, and after a minute Gerald Weston stirred slightly. Peters poured more of the brandy between his lips, and when some more of the raw spirit had coursed down his throat, he turned over, and with a deep sigh opened his eyes.

"Whash matter?" he asked thickly. "'Ssh you, Peters? Whash happened?"

"It's all right, sir," replied Peters, vastly relieved that his master was growing conscious again. "I fancy, sir, you must have fainted. I'll help you to bed, sir."

Gerald Weston was still too close to the swamp of unconsciousness to protest, and, catching him beneath the arms, Peters exerted all his strength, and managed to get Weston to his feet. He supported him into the bedroom, where Weston fell like a log on the bed.

It was no easy task for Peters to undress the half-unconscious man, but he finally managed it, and then, drawing back the bed covers, he pushed his master beneath the clothes. Gathering up his master's garments, he took them out to brush and fold them as was his wont, and not until he had reached the kitchen again did it occur to him that the obvious thing to do was to call a doctor.

He laid the garments on the back of a chair, and, making his way into the hall, took up the telephone book. He knew that once, when Gerald Weston had been ill with influenza, he had summoned a certain Dr. Green, and after a brief search in the telephone book Peters came upon the name.

He got through to the doctor without much difficulty, and received the assurance that he would come to Half Moon Street without delay. Peters took one more look at his master, who seemed to be sleeping heavily, then he returned to the kitchen to take up his duties where they had been interrupted.

It was about fifteen minutes later that a summons on the bell sent Peters to the front door of the flat, where Dr. Green stood holding a small black bag. He stepped into the tiny hallway, and when Peters had assisted him off with his coat he ushered him into the sitting-room.

"Now then, what is the trouble here?" asked the doctor curtly.

Peters stood respectfully just inside the door.

"Please, doctor, I sent for you because the master seems queer. When I came into the flat this morning, sir, I found him lying on the floor just there"—and Peters pointed towards the spot where Gerald Weston had been lying.

"He was unconscious, sir, and at first I thought—I thought——"

"Well, what did you think?" asked the doctor sharply, as the man paused. "You thought he had taken too much to drink—is that it?"

Peters' manner was his answer, and Dr. Green went on:

"Well, and wasn't it?"

"No, sir—leastwise I don't think so, doctor. When I left last evening he was sitting in that chair there. I had brought the decanter and siphon, and you can see from both, sir, that not a great deal has been taken out of them. Nor has the master been out, for when I found him this morning he had on the same clothes he was wearing yesterday, and he never goes out without changing. I think it must have been a faint of some sort, sir. I gave him some brandy, and he recovered a little. Now he is in bed."

"All right. I'll go in and see him," said the doctor.

He crossed to the door of the bedroom, and after a curt knock opened it. To his surprise Gerald Weston was sitting up in bed, gazing straight ahead of him, with a puzzled frown on his face.

"What the dence!" he exclaimed, as the door opened. "Oh, it is you, Doctor Green! What are you doing here? Have I been ill?"

"I don't know, Mr. Weston," replied the doctor. "Your man found you in a faint on the floor of the sitting-room when he came in this morning, and, being alarmed, he telephoned for me after he had got you into bed. How do you feel? And have you any recollection of what happened?"

"I feel a little better, doctor, but have a sensation of pressure in the region of my heart. I have no idea what can have happened to me. All I remember is that I was playing my violin last evening, when suddenly a terrible feeling of suffocation swept over me. I do not remember anything after that until a little while ago, when Peters helped me into bed. I cannot understand it."

"Excuse me for being blunt, Mr. Weston, but—er—had you been drinking much?"

Gerald Weston flushed, but shook his head.

"No, I hadn't. I had had three or four brandies and sodas—no more than usual. Then I got my violin and began to play."

Dr. Green caught hold of his wrist, and counted the beats of the pulse. Then he got out a stethoscope and listened to the action of the heart.

"Something has certainly affected the heart," he said, after a few moments. "Its action is most irregular."

He laid the stethoscope down as he spoke and lifted Weston's lids. He studied the pupils for a little, then curtly he bade the patient open his mouth. After the first glance Dr. Green caught hold of Weston's shoulders and turned him round so that the light fell straight into the open cavity, and from the expression on his face Weston knew that the doctor had seen something of a startling nature. Dr. Green sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Think carefully, man," he said. "Have you been drinking anything at all besides the brandy? What did you have before then?"

Weston shook his head rather irritably.

"I tell you I had nothing," he said. "Why? What have you seen in my mouth?"

"The membrane of the mouth and throat has undoubtedly been affected by some powerful liquid or vapour," said the doctor. "From the gums to the throat it is distinctly grey. It looks as though a powerful acid had come in contact with it. I cannot understand it at all, Weston. There was no one else in the flat, was there?"

"No. I had dismissed Peters, and was alone."

"Well, all I can do is to give you some strychnine pills, and advise you to remain in bed a day or two. Your heart action is certainly very much upset, but I think the crisis, whatever caused it, is past. If something has happened which you do not care to tell me about, that is, of course, your business; but I will tell you this, that from all I can see you have been very close to death."

"I have told you all I know about it," responded Weston crossly. "Leave me your pills, doctor, and if I get worse I shall 'phone for you."

The doctor took a small phial of strychnine from his bag, and laid them on the table by the bed. Then he wrote out a prescription.

"That is for a lotion which I want you to use as a mouth wash," he said. "It will tend to ease any irritation which may arise later from the condition of the membrane. Ring me up if you feel worse."

He picked up his bag as he spoke, and took leave of his patient, yet, as Peters ushered him out, he felt thoroughly satisfied that something had happened which Weston was determined to keep to himself. It was irritating to find a patient in that frame of mind, but Dr. Green could not afford to quarrel with his bread and butter, and, after all, he was not Weston's confessor.

Nevertheless, his professional interest was keenly aroused by the unusual elements in the case, and when he reached home, a quarter of an hour later, Dr. Green entered the details in his case-book with more attention to detail than usual. Strangely enough, those notes were destined to prove of greater value than he then dreamed.

As for Gerald Weston, he was quite as intrigued over his condition as was the doctor. As soon as the medico had taken his departure Weston took a couple of the strychnine pills, and dozed lightly until Peters appeared with a tray bearing some tea and buttered toast.

When he had consumed the food and drunk the hot tea, Gerald Weston felt better, and, in defiance of the doctor's orders, he ordered Peters to bring his dressing-gown and slippers. He was feeling decidedly better, as Peters knew by the irritable manner in which he refused the man's assistance out to the sitting-room.

Opening the door, Gerald Weston stood on the threshold gazing about him. Peters had closed the window, and, picking up the pieces of the broken violin, had laid them on the couch. Otherwise the room was much as it had been the night before.

Almost the first thing Gerald Weston espied was the broken violin. For one moment he stood stricken with horror, then with a cry of pain which came from the depths of his soul, he tottered across the room to the couch, and, dropping to his knees, threw his arms about the pieces.

Peters stood at the door, thinking his master had gone mad. To Peters the violin was but a "fiddle," to be easily replaced, and he could not understand Gerald Weston's emotion on finding it broken. He made a tentative

advance towards his master, who was now moaning in an agony of sorrow, but, as Peters touched him on the shoulder, he turned with a face full of fury, and shrieked out a wild command for the man to be gone.

Peters, thoroughly frightened, stole from the room, and, crouching in the hall outside, listened to the sounds which went on in the sitting-room. While having no great love for his master, he was, after all, a typical servant of the old school—full of loyalty for the man whose wages he took, and sensitive to a degree that outsiders might mouth the private affairs of the house. For that reason he did not seek assistance, as a less efficient servant might have done, but waited until his master should need him.

After a time the sound of sorrow grew fainter and fainter, and then silence reigned on the other side of the door. Even then Peters did not dare enter, but, tiptoeing along to the kitchen, waited there in hopes that the bell would ring. And what was happening in the sitting-room?

After his first paroxysm of grief had passed, Gerald Weston tenderly lifted up the pieces of the broken violin and examined them to see if the instrument could be mended in such a way as to preserve its old tonal purity. Like Peters, it may be difficult to understand why he was so affected by grief over the affair, but it must be remembered that the man's soul was steeped in the worship of music.

He had only told the truth when he stated to General Bartlett that music was his life. It was more than that—it was the whole controlling factor of his existence. He was one of the most strangely balanced beings possible to find. Outside of his love for music his mentality was small and wizened. His thoughts were ordinarily mean and lopsided. He had a good deal of the snake in him, had Gerald Weston, and, like the snake, he could and would strike blindly when cornered.

Rising from his knees, he poured himself a stiff brandy, which he drank neat, then, slumping down in the big armchair, he endeavoured to puzzle out the mystery. He went over every action of his the previous evening, but nowhere could he put his finger on a single thing to account for what had happened to him. He had told the truth when he said that he had drunk only the brandy. He had had nothing at the general's, nor had he stopped at any place on the way back to Half Moon Street. Yet, while he played, something of a most subtle nature had struck him down, and if Dr. Green were right, had almost been the cause of his death.

As he sat there thinking and pondering, his gaze swept mechanically about the room. For perhaps half a dozen times it passed the tallboy near the door without noticing anything amiss, then suddenly there became impinged upon his consciousness that one of the vases which usually stood there was missing—one of the pair of Indian vases which he had picked up in Burmah, and which were almost priceless.

He rose quickly to his feet, and crossed to the tallboy. But there was no sign of the vase, and, with a frown of irritation, he moved to the bell and pressed it. Peters came promptly, and as soon as he had opened the door Weston said:

"What has become of the vase which stood on this end of the tallboy?"

"I forgot to tell you, sir," replied the man nervously. "When I was putting the room to rights after getting you to bed, sir, I found it smashed to pieces."

"Found it smashed, or did you smash it?" cried Weston, with rising anger.

"I did not break it, sir," answered Peters quietly. "You know, sir, that if I had, I would tell the truth about it."

And Gerald knew that to be so.

"Then how did it become broken?" he grumbled.

"I cannot account for it, sir," responded Peters. "I found it in pieces when I was cleaning up. I noticed, sir, that it still stood on its base, which seems to point to the fact that it was not knocked over. It was as though something had struck it, smashing the top part, sir."

Peters undoubtedly had the makings of a detective in him, judging by this remark and his observations to Dr. Green.

"What have you done with the pieces?" inquired Weston.

"They are in the kitchen, sir."

"Bring them here. I wish to examine them."

Peters left the room, and returned a few moments later, bearing a paper in which he had placed the broken pieces of the vase. Gerald Weston took them and dismissed him. Then, when the door had closed, he sat down to study them.

The vase in question was a strange Indian affair, the date of which was uncertain, but was contemporary with some of the finest Chinese porcelain of the Ming Dynasty, or, rather, it was similar so far as the scheme of decoration was concerned. It was not of porcelain, however, but of pure crystal, and when whole had stood nearly nine inches in height. It was not of the "reed type" of some of the old Venetian glass, but instead was of that rare variety which at one time was manufactured to a limited extent from Egypt to China.

The shape undoubtedly showed the influence of Persia, but the vase itself was enamelled from top to bottom, beginning at the base with a deep magenta enamel, and grading upwards through a rich crimson to scarlet and then to a brilliant yellow at the neck. It was almost identical with the Chinese "Sang de Boeuf" porcelain vases of K'ang-hsi period, and while it was unlikely that it could have dated back to the time of Pliny, as one Indian authority had suggested, there could be no doubt that it was very ancient.

The process of enamelling glass was a very complicated one, and the manufacture of a pair of such vases must have taken the artisan of long ago a very protracted time. Gerald Weston had picked up the pair of vases in Burmah. At the time he had been told some old legend connected with them, but had never given it any particular attention.

But now, as he made a tentative effort to place the pieces together, he suddenly discovered one thing—the neck of the vase was not of a single thickness, as he had thought, but was composed of a double thickness of glass, with a space of nearly an eighth of an inch between.

It took him nearly an hour to arrange the pieces sufficiently to see that this space between the outer and inner glass of the vase was confined only to the neck, and that consequently it had formed a space which in capacity was about equal to a square inch. Then suddenly, as he pondered over it, the old legend which he had heard suddenly returned to him. What was it?

For a little he strove to recall it, then, as his mind probed into the past, it came to him. The vases had been called the "Vases of Poison," and in some mysterious way they were supposed to carry with them the menace of death. If he remembered rightly, the legend was that "he who held them and guarded them would live to pass them on, but he who despised them and grew careless of them would die by their power."

How the truth ever dawned upon him Gerald Weston never knew, but like a flash of light in a pit of darkness the explanation of it all came to him, and, as it did so, his eyes went to the other vase, which still stood on the nailbox, and which at the moment contained a couple of cigars which Weston had carelessly thrust into it. He wrapped the pieces of the broken vase

up in the paper; then he rang again for Peters. When the man entered he said:

"Peters, there were a few flowers in this vase last evening, were there not?"

"Yes, sir," replied Peters. "There were a few roses, sir."

"And the vase, was it full of water or only partially full?" went on Weston.

"It must have been nearly full, sir. I filled it in the morning, and there was still some in the bottom when I picked up the pieces. The rest had run out on the tallboy, sir."

"Very well, Peters, that will do. This was a very valuable vase, so I shall keep the pieces and see if I can get them stuck together again. You may go."

And as the door closed behind the man, Gerald Weston leaned back in his chair and gave himself up to the planning of as deep a plot as ever filled the mind of man.

It was a plot which, when he had elaborated it, he felt certain could be carried out without leaving a single trace behind—which would give him the fortune of General Bartlett, and would rid him of that menace of his future as nothing else could.

That evening Gerald Weston went once again to Benton Square. General Bartlett was in the library on the first floor writing when his stepson arrived, but sent down word that he would receive him at once. Gerald Weston went up to the library carrying a small package in his hands, and, after shaking hands with the general, he said:

"I picked up rather a fine pair of Indian vases some time back, sir, which I intended asking you to accept, knowing how interested you were in Indian art. I am sorry to tell you, though, that owing to the clumsiness of my man Peters, one of the vases has been broken. I have brought the other one with me, and it will make me happy if you will keep it on your desk."

"That is very kind indeed of you, Gerald," replied the old man warmly. "Very kind indeed. I shall be most pleased to accept it."

Gerald Weston smiled, and undid the package he carried. As he revealed the beautiful vase, the general uttered an exclamation of delight, and reached a trembling hand for it.

"Why, Gerald, it is a gem I have always desired. This pleases me very much indeed. Ah! How beautiful! The real 'Sang de Boeuf.' Where did you pick it up, my boy?"

Gerald Weston laughed.

"I got the pair some time ago, sir," he said. "I hoped they would please you, and I can't tell you how sorry I am that one has been broken. But I want you to keep this one on your desk if you will."

He now took out a small box from his pocket, and, tearing off the wrapper, opened it, revealing half a dozen exquisite red and yellow roses.

"I got these on the way, sir," he said. "They seemed just what the vase needed. Perhaps you will have the vase filled, and the roses put in it."

"Of course I will, and without delay," replied the general. "It is lovely—simply lovely. I must look up the history of this vase. Thank you, my boy. I am quite delighted with it."

"I am glad, sir, that you are pleased," rejoined Gerald Weston, rising.

"And now, sir, I must run along. I am playing at a private rehearsal to-night."

The general thanked him again, then added: "Run round one night later in the week, Gerald, and have dinner with me."

"I shall do so with pleasure, sir," responded his stepson; and then, shaking hands, he took his departure.

He paused at the door for a brief moment to glance back at his stepfather. A strange look came into his eyes; then he softly closed the door after him.

It was the last time he was to see his stepfather alive.

CHAPTER III.

The Mystery of Benton Square.

MR. NELSON LEE was just going through his morning mail and dictating the replies to Nipper as he went along, when the desk telephone rang shrilly; and, lifting the receiver, he heard the familiar voice of Inspector Brooks, of Scotland Yard, on the line.

"Is that you, Lee?" asked the inspector, as Lee replied.

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

"Are you very busy?" came back the inspector's voice.

"We—ell," responded Lee, "I am going through my letters. But what is the trouble?"

"Listen, Lee!" said the inspector. "I am speaking from Number 19, Benton Square. I was called here on a case. I want you to come out and tell me what you think of it. There are several points which are certainly mysterious."

"What is it—robbery?" asked Lee.

"No," came back the voice of the inspector. "It is either suicide or murder—I can't tell which. But it is impossible to tell you the details over the telephone. Will you come out?"

"All right," replied Lee. "I'll get a taxi, and be there as soon as possible."

"Right," answered the inspector in a relieved tone. "I'll see that nothing is touched until you come. Good-bye!"

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

"Call a taxi, my lad. We are going on to Benton Square. Inspector Brooks seems to have a pretty knotty case out there."

Nipper jumped up at once, and, hastening to the street door, whistled for a taxi. As it pulled into the kerb he told the man to wait; then, running back into the house, got his coat and hat just as Lee emerged ready to leave. They were soon speeding along Gray's Inn Road towards Holborn, and, continuing on to Oxford Street, finally reached Oxford Circus. From there they drove to the Marble Arch, and thence down Park Lane to Hyde Park Corner.

At Hyde Park Corner they turned down past St. George's Hospital into Knightsbridge, and thence on to Brompton Road, off which lay Benton Square—a quiet residential backwater. There was no sign as they approached number 19 that there was anything unusual about the place, but when they ran up the steps the door was opened by a constable, indicating that something must be very much wrong.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, as he recognised Lee. "Will you please go upstairs to the library, Mr. Lee. Inspector Brooks is waiting there for you."

Lee nodded, and, signing to Nipper to follow, made for the stairs. As

he reached the top, he turned, and saw Inspector Brooks himself walking along the hall.

"Hallo, Lee," he said, shaking hands. "I heard your taxi, and was coming to meet you. I am glad you have turned up," he went on in a lower tone. "There is something queer about this case."

"Just what has happened?" asked Lee, his professional instincts at once on the alert.

"I'll tell you before you make any sort of an examination," responded the inspector. "Just step in here, will you?"

He opened a door as he spoke, and ushered Lee into a large, though simply furnished, bedroom. When he had closed the door, he turned to Lee and said:

"Did you ever hear of a General William Bartlett?"

Lee nodded.

"Of course," he replied. "He did some mighty good work out in India."

"Quite right," said the inspector. "Well, this is—or was—his house. We received a telephone call at the Yard early this morning, asking us to send someone here at once. After a few questions, I decided to come myself. On arriving here, I was told a strange tale. It was the butler who had summoned me. Here is what he told me.

"He said that last evening General Bartlett went to the library to write, as was his custom. That was about nine o'clock—just after he had finished his dinner. It was his habit to write or read there until about eleven, and then the butler would take him in a nightcap. Last night, when the butler went to the room at the usual hour, he found the door locked, and thinking the general did not wish to be disturbed, he knocked again, and called out that he would leave the tray on the floor outside the door. It appears that he had done that once or twice before.

"Then he went to lock up, and finally retired about half-past eleven. He was up this morning about six, and on coming downstairs, caught sight of the tray still on the floor outside the library door. He went along and tried the door. It was still locked. Then he went into the general's bedroom—it is this one in which we are talking—and, to his surprise, found that the bed had not been slept in.

"Thinking that the general had fallen asleep in the library, he went along there, and pounded on the door for some time, but could get no answer. At last he became worried, and after consulting with the footman, decided to break in the door. They did so together, and they discovered the general lying back in his desk chair in a strange attitude.

"They ran across to him, but it not take them long to discover that he was dead. It was then that they rang up the Yard, and at the same time sent for the general's private physician. He is in the library now, but so far has not passed any opinion as to the cause of death."

"What do you think yourself?" asked Lee.

The inspector shrugged.

"I don't see how it can be anything else but suicide," he said. "And I'll tell you why I think so. General Bartlett was sitting in that room last evening, and the door was locked on the inside. There is only one door to the room, and that is the one which opens on to the hall here. It was locked on the inside, and the key is still in the lock, though the lock itself was smashed when the butler and the footman burst in the door.

"Then there is one large window which looks out on the street. This window was closed and locked, and the curtains drawn. There is absolutely no place in the room where a man could remain concealed. Therefore, we may take it for granted, I think, that there was no one in the room but the

general, and that no one entered until the door was burst open this morning. The doctor hasn't passed a definite opinion yet, except to say that it wasn't heart failure. He appears to be puzzled by a peculiar discolouration of the membrane of the mouth and nostrils, and I expect by now he has arrived at some decision. Shall we go in?"

Lee nodded, and followed the inspector into the library. As was usual with him, he stood on the threshold taking in the details of the room, for he always found it valuable to get a first definite mental photograph of the scene of any tragedy. It was quite as valuable in the subsequent investigation as an actual photograph.

He saw that the room was large, and the ceiling lofty. It was exceedingly well furnished, the carpet and rugs being of a very fine Eastern type, and the curtains of heavy Indian silk. The pictures were not numerous, but there were a couple of fine Turner's on the walls, and several valuable prints.

The desk, which stood on the left just as one entered the door, was of massive mahogany, and the desk chair, a deep leather-seated affair, which was complementary to the desk. The other chairs in the room were nearly all wide and deep and leather-seated.

The book-cases were numerous, and well filled. The whole atmosphere of the room was quiet and restful—an ideal place in which to read or write or think.

After taking in these details, Nelson Lee glanced over to the corner on the right of the window where the couch had been placed. On it lay the fully dressed body of an elderly man, which he knew was that of General Bartlett.

Kneeling beside the couch was a white-haired gentleman, whom Lee knew must be the doctor. Moving about quietly, and taking notes, were a couple of plain clothes detectives, who frequently consulted the inspector in whispers. By the window, and just folding up his camera, was the official photographer from the Yard, who had been photographing the room for future reference as to its exact appearance when the affair happened.

Lee stepped into the room now, but before crossing to the couch he drew out his powerful pocket glass, and began to make an examination of the door. It was a heavy affair, and must have taken about all the strength the butler and footman possessed in order to break it in. If the lock had not been out of proportion to the strength of the door, it is doubtful if they would have succeeded.

As the inspector had stated, the key was still in the lock, and although Lee examined it with the greatest care, he could find nothing of a suspicious nature about it. As it stood he could but accept the statement that it had been locked on the inside, and had remained locked throughout the night.

Next Lee crossed the room to the window, and, standing there, looked down into the street. It was a large window, high and wide, and composed of the ordinary double sash. There was no balcony outside, and from the sill to the area railings was so smooth that not even a cat could have found foothold there.

The window was locked on the inside by a catch, which was of a popular pattern, and which, Lee knew, could not easily be forced from the outside. Nevertheless, he brought his pocket glass to bear once more, and made a minute examination of it. Yet on its surface there was not a scratch which could possibly arouse suspicion, and after another survey of the room, in order to assure himself that there really was no place where a man might have lain concealed, he turned and walked over to the couch a good deal puzzled.

The doctor rose at that moment, and the inspector presented him to Lee.

"I am indeed pleased to meet you, Mr. Lee," he said, as he shook hands. "I have heard a great deal about you and your work. I am glad the inspector has called you on this case. There are a good many puzzling features about the death of my old friend."

"You knew the general intimately, then?" asked Lee.

"Yes, indeed. I was in India with him for many years. We retired from the service at about the same time."

Now that the doctor was standing, Lee could see that he had an unmistakable military bearing.

"Then you will know if the general suffered from any organic trouble, which might have been the cause of his death, doctor," remarked Lee.

"He suffered from nothing of that sort," responded the doctor quickly. "It is only a month since I gave him a thorough overhauling. His constitution was magnificent, and, with the exception of an occasional touch of malaria, he never suffered physically in any way."

"His heart was as sound as a bell—every organ was working as smoothly as possible. His blood was clean and healthy. He was one of the finest specimens of physical fitness for his age that I have ever come across. There is no reason in the world why he shouldn't have lived another twenty years."

"Then you cannot entertain the theory of heart failure?" asked Lee.

"Impossible, Mr. Lee. Medical knowledge is sufficient for me to pronounce on that without the slightest hesitation. Besides, there are other indications, Mr. Lee, which point strangely to an outside agency as the cause of death; but I regret to say that at the moment I am utterly at a loss to account for it. Kindly draw closer, Mr. Lee, and I will show you what I mean."

Nelson Lee bent over the couch with the doctor and gazed closely while the other gently opened the general's mouth and flashed a powerful electric torch upon the membranous tissue.

"See that, Mr. Lee," he said curtly. "Do you see how the membrane of the mouth and throat is discoloured with that greyish tinge? Do you notice how it has even affected the gums? And see here. Look at the membrane of the nostrils. They are in exactly the same condition. A post-mortem may show that this same discoloration goes right down the throat and into the lungs as well. In my opinion, it was caused by some liquid coming into contact with the membrane. But in all my experience I have never seen any acids or poisons leave traces of that nature. It is not the burn of carbolic. It is not the stain of any liquid I can place."

"Whatever it was, do you consider it the cause of death?" asked Lee in a low tone.

The doctor was silent for a few moments.

"I do not know what reason my old friend could have had to take such a step as suicide," he said slowly, "and I hate to think that after the fine life he led he would do such a thing, but—but, Mr. Lee, I do not see what else it could have been. Mind you, this is quite between ourselves. I shall not pass a definite opinion until after the post-mortem."

"I understand, doctor," responded Lee. "By the way, has any search been made for a bottle or other vessel which might have held the liquid?"

"Yes, I have looked in every place," put in the inspector. "I have even gone through the general's clothes, but cannot find a solitary thing."

"I think you said he was sitting in that chair by the desk?" inquired Lee as he straightened up.

The inspector nodded.

"Yes, that was where the butler found him. He had been writing."

Lee walked across to the desk, and, sitting down in the chair, rested his elbows on the edge. Item by item he checked over the articles on the desk. Immediately in front of him was a large blotting-pad framed with a narrow band of ebony, touched here and there with points of silver. Beyond it was a heavy ebony and silver inkstand, with several pens and pencils in the tray.

At the side of the blotter were some sheets of paper filled with writing, and which a brief glance showed Lee were notes on military life in India. On the blotting-pad itself was a single sheet of paper nearly half filled with writing. Bending closer, Lee saw that when the pen had stopped writing it had not stopped at the end of a sentence or even a word, but had broken off in the middle of a word. It was the third of a new sentence, and reading it Lee made it out to be:

"The chief trou——"

Then followed a spattering of ink and a faint line of black, as though the pen had dropped from the writer's hand and rolled across the blotter. The writing stopped at the letter "u," and mentally finishing the word Lee decided that the general had intended writing the word "trouble."

The context immediately preceding, and dealing with the handling of the native question in India, lent colour to this deduction, and, bearing in mind these points, Lee proceeded to a further examination of the articles on the desk.

There was a couple of silver trays, one containing a few spare nibs and the other a collection of pins and paper clips. At the back of the desk was a small book-rack containing several reference-books, and to the left an atlas and gazetteer.

Then just by one corner of the blotter was something which Lee had seen almost the moment he had sat down at the desk, but which he had passed over until the last. This was a broken glass vase, which had been standing on a small velvet pad, and which had apparently been smashed in some way.

There had been yellow and red roses in it, for they had fallen out on to the mahogany, and the wood was still wet from the water which had spilled upon it. The water had run, too, on to the blotting-pad, and that corner was still damp from the moisture which it had absorbed. Not only the fact that the vase was broken, but also the unique type of it attracted Lee's attention.

A student of old Venetian glass—it had been his exhaustive knowledge of this which had enabled him to solve a very baffling case dealing with an ancient crystal urn some time back—he also had a very fair knowledge of the glass of other countries.

It was not difficult for him to see that the vase was one evidently manufactured in the East, for while its shape showed a distinctly Persian influence, the "Sang de Bœuf" shading from the base to the scattered pieces of the top was after the old Chinese school of porcelain decorators.

Somewhat curiously, Lee bent forward and studied the broken pieces of the vase, then after a few moments' scrutiny he turned and signed for Inspector Brooks to approach. When the inspector was standing beside him, Lee said in a low tone:

"Have you examined this broken vase, inspector?"

"Yes, of course, but I don't think it means much. The general must have broken it accidentally—probably knocked it over while he was writing, and did not take the trouble to pick up the pieces."

"Do you know if it has been touched by your men?" went on Lee,

"I don't think so, but I'll ask them."

Inspector Brooks crossed to where the two plain-clothes detectives were making notes, and spoke to them for a few moments in low tones. Lee, who was watching, saw them both shake their heads in the most emphatic manner, and a second later the inspector returned to Lee.

"Neither of them has touched it," he said. "They are quite positive."

Lee nodded his head slowly.

"Inspector, I wonder if you would mind asking the butler and footman if they have moved it at all. I shall be most awfully obliged."

"Certainly, I shall go and ask them at once, Lee."

He turned and left the room, and while he was gone Lee questioned the doctor. The latter, however, had not even seen the broken vase, and when the inspector returned it was to inform Lee that neither the butler nor the footman had seen the vase at all. They had been too full of horror over the discovery they had made.

"Then I think we may take it as fairly certain that, since this vase was broken, it has not been touched, unless, of course, the general himself did so. Now is that likely? Supposing while he was writing the blotting-pad should have slid forward and upset it. A man who was intensely engrossed in his work might have disregarded it and kept right on. That may have been the case, but I fail to see how the general could hardly do that, for the water spilled on the blotting-pad itself, and that would be almost sure to upset the thread of his thoughts.

"Yet if the vase had been knocked over by accident and broken, the base, instead of standing upright as it is at present, would be lying on its side unless it were picked up and set right again. In that case, would the general pick up only the base and leave the roses lying there and the pieces of glass scattered about the table—always supposing that he did pick it up? I hardly think so. It would need an odd type of mentality to do that, and from all I can hear of the general he was decidedly normal in every way.

"Then if the vase were knocked over, how on earth did the base get upright again. I wonder if it is so heavily weighted that it would spring back into position of its own volition—pulled there by the natural force of gravity.

Reaching over very carefully, Lee started to tip the base over on its side, but as he did so some water splashed out on the desk and he set it back quickly.

"Scott!" he muttered to himself, "It has never been over on its side at all! If it had been then this water must have splashed out, and it is nearly full, so much so that I could not see that it contained water at all until I started to tip it up.

"Now what the deuce does that mean? If I am to believe the laws of physics at all, then the only deduction possible is that this vase was smashed by something striking the top—something which broke the upper part of the crystal but did not break the bottom. As the top smashed, the water above the unbroken line splashed out and the flowers fell to the desk by their own weight. But the base is standing just where it stood when the upper part broke. Now what could have hit it?

"Had the general anything in his hand with which he might have struck it? If so, what was it? His elbow could not have done it. Nor could an accidental wave of his hand. Either would have simply knocked the vase over. It needed something hard and possibly metallic. Yet I see nothing on the desk which could have been the medium. I wonder if it might be on the floor? Now a bullet would act in just about that way. I'll have a look."

Rising from the chair, Lee beckoned to Nipper, and said:

"My lad, I want you to start near the door and work your way along the wall, making a very careful examination of the floor as you go. I myself will begin at the fireplace and work along to meet you. The thing you are to look for is something hard—possibly a bullet or possibly something metallic. I do not know exactly what, but it will be an object which could have smashed that glass vase on the desk by striking it sharply."

Nipper nodded comprehendingly, and dropping to his knees began to make a close scrutiny of the carpet. Lee started at the fireplace, and after a methodical examination of the grate itself, he began to crawl long on his hands and knees towards the desk.

Inspector Brooks and his men glanced at the pair in amazement, but, having a fairly good knowledge of Lee's methods by now, the inspector said nothing, but merely watched in silence. Like his master, Nipper blocked out the area to be examined in a series of small imaginary squares which he examined minutely in rotation. When he had satisfied himself about one square he moved on to the next, and so they worked along towards each other until they finally met just behind the desk.

"Find anything, my lad?" asked Lee.

"Not a single thing, guv'nor," replied the lad. "How did you make out?"

"I found nothing, Nipper. Take a look at the wall and see if there is any sign of a bullet having become embedded in it."

They rose to their feet, and while Nipper pursued his examination along the wall, Lee returned to the desk and sat down. He fixed his gaze on the vase again. Then a sudden idea struck him, for he pulled the chair closer and, bending forward, picked up one of the pens. Then assuming an attitude as nearly as possible like that the general must have assumed, he placed the point of the pen just over the writing on the paper. While sitting thus, he glanced keenly about the room, twisting his eyes this way and that but not moving his head. After a few seconds he laid the pen down again, and, leaning back, murmured:

"If the general were sitting in an attitude even only nearly approaching that, then nothing could fly across the room and strike the vase without first hitting him, except from three points—from the fireplace, the door, and from the wall straight ahead. It could not have come from the other side of the room at all. Now I wonder how close to the time the general died that vase was broken."

At that moment the doctor approached and held out his hand.

"I am going now, Mr. Lee," he said as Lee rose. "I shall notify the coroner and arrange for the inquest. I rather fancy, though, that a post-mortem will be necessary."

"Will you let me know if it is?" asked Lee.

"Certainly—as soon as I know."

"By the way," went on Lee, "can you tell me the approximate hour of the general's death?"

"I should say, Mr. Lee, that the general died somewhere between the hours of eight and nine last evening. I cannot fix it more closely than that, but it is certain that he has been dead a good many hours."

"Thank you," said Lee.

After the doctor had taken leave of the inspector he passed out, and, turning to the inspector, Lee said:

"Inspector, there is one thing here I should like to take along with me for a further examination, if you don't mind."

"What is it, Lee?"

"I should like to take the pieces of this broken vase. I have a fancy to try to fit them together again."

"Why, of course, take them along with you, but it will be necessary to keep them safely in case we should need them at all."

"I shall take good care of them," answered Lee. "I shall also take these roses, if you have no objection. They will soon be faded anyway."

The inspector nodded absently, and, leaning over the desk, Lee collected the pieces of the broken vase and the roses with the utmost care. Wrapping them in a piece of paper, he handed it to Nipper to take care of, but the base of the vase he left for the moment where it was.

"Go downstairs, Nipper, and find the butler," he said. "Ask him to give you a small, clean, empty bottle if he has one."

Nipper hastened away on his errand, and returned a few minutes later carrying a small white glass bottle in his hand. With a steady hand Lee poured the water still remaining in the base of the vase into the bottle and carefully corked it. Then he wrapped up the base and slipped it into his pocket. By that time the inspector's men had finished their notes and were preparing to leave.

"Well, Lee," queried the inspector, coming across to the desk, "have you found any clues of anything suspicious?"

"I am afraid I have drawn a blank," replied Lee. "There doesn't seem to be much of a suspicious nature."

"I think it is all clear enough now," went on the inspector. "At first it looked bad, and I don't mind saying those stains which the doctor pointed out to me made me think there must be something mighty queer afoot. But what with the locked door and the locked window and all the other elements, I rather think the doctor is right in suggesting that it was suicide."

"But what puzzles me is, what has become of the receptacle in which he must have carried it? But before the inquest we shall have a satisfactory explanation of that. Anyway, Lee, I am sorry to have bothered you, and I'm awfully obliged to you."

"Oh, pray don't mention it, inspector. I am glad you invited me to come along. I have been quite interested. By the way, when do you think the inquest will be held?"

"I rather think to-morrow morning, here in the house," responded the other. "Are you coming?"

"Oh, yes. Now that I have got up an interest in the case, I should like to be at the inquest. Have you interrogated any of the servants yet?"

"I have questioned the butler and the footman who burst open the door, but have not spoken to the other servants yet. I am going to do that now. I shall allow none of them to leave the house until after the inquest."

"Had General Bartlett no relatives?" asked Lee.

The inspector nodded.

"Only one, and that is his stepson," he rejoined. "Doctor Farrow knows him, and is going now to break the news to him."

"Did he not live here then?" asked Lee, in some surprise.

"It seems not. Doctor Farrow said he was a violinist, and that the general did not take kindly to music. Therefore the stepson set up a bachelor establishment in Half Moon Street."

"He will be the sole heir, then, I take it?"

"I don't know that. The general's solicitor is being notified by Doctor Farrow, who will attend to all the details of burial. As well as being the general's physician, he was his most intimate friend, too."

"Yes, he told me," said Lee. "Well, inspector, I shall not remain until you have questioned the servants, but do telephone me and let me know the



Gerald Weston looked up with a startled expression as Nelson Lee entered—(See page 32.)

hour of the inquest. I have some work to do at Gray's Inn Road and must get along."

But Lee did not say that the work in view had to do with the vase and the flowers he was taking back with him, and somehow it did not occur to the inspector to ask him.

So as Lee and Nipper left the house, the inspector assumed his most imposing manner, and sent word to the butler to collect the servants together.

CHAPTER IV.

Lee and Nipper at Work at Gray's Inn Road—They Make a Strange Discovery.

IT was still only mid-morning when Lee and Nipper arrived back at Gray's Inn Road, and while he was anxious to make certain tests of the articles he had brought from Benton Square, it was necessary that they first dispose of the rest of the morning's letters.

Seating himself at the desk, Lee began to dictate, and in almost record time he had indicated to Nipper the form each reply was to take. Then, when the last letter had been attended to he lit a cigarette, and, glancing at the lad, said:

"If I remember rightly, Nipper, you were pretty strong last winter on jig-saw puzzles."

Nipper grinned, remembering the hours of tantalisation he had spent over the puzzles.

"Well, I did do a little at it, sir," he confessed.

"Apropos of them," went on Lee, "I have a job for you which, unless I am very much mistaken, will tax all your skill, but the practice you had with the jig-saw puzzles should come in useful to you. By the way, my lad, where have you put the fragments of that broken vase which I gave you to take care of?"

"I have them here, sir, wrapped up in the paper."

"Well, my lad, now is the time for you to put into serious practice what you have learned from your jig-saw puzzles. I want you to take the pieces of that vase, and, beginning at the base, endeavour to put them together. Work slowly, and use all the method you have. In the meantime, I have some work to do in the laboratory."

With a sparkle of interest in his eyes Nipper got the paper parcel of broken glass, and, unwrapping it, sat down at the desk. Lee watched him for a few moments while he began to sort the pieces, then, opening the door of the consulting-room, he went along the passage to the laboratory.

He closed the door after him, and, walking across to the big glass-topped experimenting table, laid a small parcel on it. From his pocket he took the bottle of water which he had brought with him from Benton Square, and then, removing his coat, he got into his white laboratory smock.

"Now let me see," he murmured, taking up the bottle of water and examining it against the light. "I think I will make a test of this water first, then I shall have a go at the roses."

Setting down the bottle, he reached out for a small earthenware bowl, and, uncorking the bottle, poured the contents into the bowl. Next he took up a piece of red litmus paper, and thrust it into the water. He held it there for some moments, but when the colour did not change—had there been any acid in the water it would have changed the litmus paper to blue—he muttered:

"No acid in it, anyway. Now to see exactly what it contains."

He drew towards him a large, powerful microscope, and, taking up a clean glass slide, placed a few drops of the water upon it. Next he adjusted the instrument, regulating the powerful hundred candle-power electric light which would be focussed on the slide.

When he was satisfied with the arrangement of the tube, he carefully placed the slide in the rack, and after a few more minor adjustments got the light full on it.

Now he placed his eye to the eye-piece, and, giving the side screw a twist, gazed down at the few drops of liquid, which now had assumed the proportions of a miniature lake. Here and there in its crystal clearness he discerned crowded colonies of tiny tadpole-like organisms, which caused him to mutter:

"Germs of some sort—probably from the flower stalks. There is the typhoid germ there, anyway. But there isn't much in that. I could easily see the same thing in a casual sample of water from the Thames."

Removing the slide from the instrument, Lee laid it to one side, then, lifting up the glass bottle once more, he drew out the cork, and, placing his nostrils close to the mouth, sniffed strongly. Once—twice—thrice he drew in a deep inhalation, then, shaking his head slowly, he set the bottle down again.

"Well, anyway," he muttered, "there isn't any acid or volatile poison about that. It is nothing but plain, ordinary, every-day water—perhaps not quite what one would call ideal water for drinking purposes, but certainly nothing in it which could have caused the sudden death of General Bartlett."

"Now for the flower-stalks. They may reveal something."

Lee's methods of chemical examination were changed now that he came to a solid instead of a liquid.

Handling the cluster of red and yellow roses with great care, he laid them on the experimenting table, and, slipping on a pair of rubber gloves, began to pull apart the petals of each flower, holding them well away from his face as he did so.

Flower after flower he examined, until he had carefully scrutinised every one of them, then, with a puzzled expression, he laid them to one side.

His next move was to take down from a shelf over his head a large glass bottle filled with a deep orange liquid. He poured a little of this liquid in a cup, then, taking up a small glass spray, with a rubber bulb at one end of it, he drew a little of the liquid into it.

When he had done that he took up one of the yellow roses, and squirted a few drops of the orange liquid inside the calyx. He laid this rose down, then took up a red one, following the same procedure until he had soured every one of the flowers.

Now he returned to the first rose which he had attended to, and, opening the petals, gazed earnestly at the interior. It appeared exactly as it had been before, except where the orange liquid had struck it, and there the yellow of the petals had turned to black.

Lee shook his head, and examined the rest of them. Each one showed the same negative result, and when he had laid down the last one, Lee took down another bottle, which contained small white tablets.

He drew out the cork, and popped one of the tablets into his mouth. He waited until it had begun to dissolve, then, lifting up one of the roses, he sniffed hard at the flower.

Nothing happened, so, stretching out his hand, he caught hold of the whole bunch and pressed them against his face. He drew in the scent in great deep breaths, but at the end of a minute or so he tossed the roses back on to the table, and grunted:

"Not a single clue there. The water is ordinary water, and the roses have not been 'doped.' General Bartlett was not poisoned by either the water or the flowers, and yet I believe he was poisoned. Now was it by his own hand or by an outside agency?"

"If General Bartlett committed suicide, then where is the receptacle he must have carried the poison in? It wasn't found on him, nor was it anywhere about the room. Besides, I do not believe he committed suicide.

"In the first place, he had nothing to cause him to do so, and, in the second place, he was not the type of man to take that way out of any troubles he might have. His past is as clean as a flame. His military record is beyond reproach. His retirement is full of quiet honour and dignity. Why should he want to kill himself?"

"Another thing, a man who intends making away with himself doesn't choose such a moment as that. Even if he planned to make it look like anything in the world but suicide, he would not think up such a series of conditions as are represented.

"To begin with, he was in the very act of writing a word in the manuscript of what was obviously a book on India which he intended bringing out. If he had written part of a page and left it there to create a false impression, he would not have broken off in the very middle of a word. Not one man in a million would do that, and the military mind is certainly not the sort of mind to fulfil the exception.

"Yet everything points to the fact that he was poisoned—poisoned by a most potent drug of some sort. Yet how could it have been applied by any outside agency? That is what puzzles me.

"The door was closed and locked. The window was in the same condition. There are absolutely no signs that the room was entered by anyone after he locked the door until the butler and footman burst it open in the morning. The whole place was in order. Nothing was out of line in the slightest, except the broken vase which lay on the desk, and somehow I can't get that broken vase out of my mind.

"If the vase as well as the broken bits were lying over on the surface of the desk, then I could understand that perhaps he had accidentally knocked it over while he was writing. But it wasn't, and it never had fallen over. Otherwise it wouldn't have been full to the brim with water.

"The upper part of the vase had been shattered—shattered, yes, that is the only word to describe it—shattered by something which struck it. But what could have struck it? It must have been something which had considerable force behind it. If it had been of some bulk, or was coming slowly, then it would have knocked the whole vase over. But, in order to shatter the upper part and leave the base intact, it must have been of an exceptionally forcible nature.

"The first thing of that description that jumps to the mind is a bullet; but not only was there no sign of such a thing about the room, but, moreover, a bullet could only have been fired at the vase from one side of, or in front of, where General Bartlett sat.

"Now both sides—the side in the direction of the door and that in the direction of the fireplace—may be ruled out. That leaves only the part of the room directly in front of him, and to consider that is, of course, ridiculous, for it is only blank wall.

"But even if that point were cleared, I should not be much farther ahead, for I do not know that the broken vase has any bearing on his death. It may be only one of those accidents which often arise in a case, and create complications where there is really no relation to the case at all. Even if it had, its consideration does not get me any place

"As far as I can discover, it contained nothing but very ordinary water and a few red and yellow roses. There was always the possibility that the water might have been poisoned or the flowers impregnated with something. If that had been so, then a volatile poison of sorts must have been chosen, so that as it evaporated after the general would get the fumes.

"But Nipper discovered that the flowers had been on the desk ever since the night before, and that they had been brought to the general with the vase by his stepson. Therefore, if either the flowers or the water had contained a volatile poison, it must have all evaporated long before last evening when the general was writing at the desk. So that seems to knock that theory on the head. I——"

Lee broke off in his musings as there came a rap at the door of the laboratory and Nipper entered.

"Sorry to disturb you, guv'nor," he said, "but can you spare a moment or two? I want you to come and have a look at the vase.

"What about it, Nipper?" asked Lee, as he started for the door.

"Well, sir," said the lad, "I have built up the upper portion all right and can see how it fits on the base, but even so, I seem to have several pieces left over. It looks to me as though there was the portion of another vase among the bits."

Lee said nothing until he had reached the consulting-room and had sat down at the desk.

Standing on the clean, white blotting-pad was the base of the vase, and beside it, the upper portion which Nipper had stuck together with some sort of quick-drying mucilage. Then just beyond this newly mended section were several other pieces which, as the lad had said, appeared to be superfluous to the vase which had his attention.

Lee inspected the newly mended part closely, nodding his head slowly as he did so.

"Good work, my lad," he muttered, "you have fitted the pieces perfectly, and the shading of the 'Sang de Bœuf' blends excellently. It certainly seems, as you say, that—— But hello! what is this?"

Lee had picked up the upper portion of the vase, and, gazing intently down inside it, had noticed a very tiny ridge which ran round the inside just above where the flare of the vase had broken from the base. He thrust his fingers down gingerly in case there should be any sharp splinters sticking up, then, setting down the mended portion, he took up the largest of the pieces which still remained.

With infinite care he worked this piece down inside the upper portion of the vase and twisted and fitted it to the small ridge until he had found the side which seemed to lie flush with the ridge. Then he withdrew it, and, painting a little of the mucilage on that edge, thrust it inside once more.

This time he held it against the ridge until the mucilage had dried sufficiently to hold the weight, then he withdrew his fingers and picked up another piece.

"Scott! Guv'nor, I never thought of that!" exclaimed the lad, as he saw what Lee was doing. "I'll bet all those pieces fit in there!"

Lee said nothing, but went on working in silence, his long slim fingers placing the pieces until they fitted with a nice precision. Finally he had managed to get all the larger fragments where they belonged, then he tackled the smaller bits.

This was by no means as easy as the other fitting together had been, for in many cases they consisted of long, narrow splinters of glass which were most confusing, and continually baffled Lee as to where they belonged.

It was then that Nipper's experience and patience with jig-saw puzzles once more came in useful, and, while Lee rose and lit a cigarette, Nipper went at the balance of the job, and in another three-quarters of an hour he had every fragment fitted where it belonged.

And only when the work was finished did they see that, from the tiny ridge which ran round the inside above the base to the top lip of the vase where the inside pieces fitted in tight to the outer part of the vase, there was formed a thin, hollow chamber stretching from the flaring-lip to the ridge.

Its space was not large—perhaps a tablespoonful of liquid would have filled it—but space it was of a very distinct nature, and Lee was student enough of glass to know that it had never been formed through any vagrant freak of the glass makers.

Vases fashioned in the Middle Ages and put through the long process necessary to enamel them, were worked from definite plans, and there would be nothing whatsoever about them which would add to the labour and not the beauty. It could not be said that the hollow space in the vase added to its beauty. The inner layer which formed one wall of it may have added to the beauty, but that could easily have been formed by just thickening the glass of the upper part, nor would this have added perceptibly to the weight of the vessel.

No; the chamber must have taken considerable pains and time to form, and Lee was certain it had been fashioned for a particular purpose. But what? And why? That was the puzzle.

And even so, what had the settling of the vagaries of mind of an ancient glass-blower to do with the mysterious death of General William Bartlett? Apparently nothing. Yet that space between the side walls of that beautiful enamelled vase intrigued Lee more than a little, and after regarding it in silence for some time he suddenly rose, and crossing to one of the book-cases which stood against the wall, bent down.

He studied the rows of books for some minutes before he finally opened the glass doors and selected a volume. It was a copy of Balicci's "Ancient and Mediæval Glass."

Lee carried the volume back to the desk with him, and, opening at the index, began to run his eye down the list of contents. He passed over the first sections dealing with Phœnician, Syrian, and Persian glass, but coming to the section embracing Indian and Chinese glass, he ascertained the number of the page, and turned the leaves until he came to the beginning of the chapter.

Page after page dealt with the earliest attempts of the Chinese to make glass, and then went on to show how the influence of the art spread from there to India and Cambodia, which, however, had already begun to feel the Persian influence. Then followed several very fine plates, beginning with the most primitive form of vessels on which the decorations were only conventional scrolls or checkerboard pattern, and gradually showing a development in line and artistic effect which was a perfect indication of the growth of the art.

Some distance over in the article, Lee came to a section devoted to the glass of Ceylon, and there, in the plates devoted to that section, he suddenly drew a sharp breath as he saw a representation of a vase which might have been the fellow of the one which stood on the desk beside him.

"Either the book is in error, or modern knowledge is in error," he muttered to himself. "That vase seems to be the work of ancient Ceylon, and not India or Burmah. Now I wonder what it says about it."

After a few moments' search Lee found the paragraph relating to the vase in question. He read it slowly and carefully.

"So that is what the hollow space was for," he muttered, as he laid the book down. "Pleasant people the ancients were, my lad."

"What was it for?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Why, my lad, it seems that these vases were fashioned with the hollow upper flare, and before the glass-maker sealed them up he filled them with a very strong poison which caused almost immediate death on being inhaled. The custom, apparently, was to break the glass or cause it to be broken in front of the intended victim, then, as the poisonous fumes rose, they did their deadly work. They then—— Good heavens, Nipper!"

"What is it, guv'nor?" cried Nipper, in alarm, as Lee sprang to his feet.

Lee stood rigid, gazing straight ahead of him for some time, then slowly, almost unconsciously, his clenched fist came down on the table.

"It was that poison which killed General Bartlett!" he whispered. "But how was the vase broken at the psychological moment? And who caused it to break? If we can only discover those two things we will be able to place our hands on the guilty person."

"Then General Bartlett did not commit suicide?" exclaimed Nipper.

"Suicide!" snorted Lee. "General Bartlett was murdered—murdered, and by one whose mind is of a very high intellectual order. That will make it all the more difficult to run him down, but murdered the general was, and it is up to us to find the murderer, my lad."

At that moment the telephone rang, and Lee made a gesture for Nipper to answer it. The lad conversed over the wire for a few moments, then, re-hanging the receiver, he turned to Lee and said:

"It was Inspector Brooks, guv'nor. He said to tell you the inquest would be held at Benton Square to-morrow morning at ten o'clock."

Lee nodded absently.

"We will be there, my lad. But this afternoon I have something for you to do. I want you to go out and find out everything you can about General Bartlett's stepson. His name is Gerald Weston, and he lives at 6a, Half Moon Street. You know how to go about it. Return here when your report is ready. I want it before the inquest to-morrow."

CHAPTER V.

The Inquest—"Suicide Whilst of Unsound Mind."

THE inquest at Benton Square the next day was, on the face of it, abortive. The evidence was called, beginning with the butler, and the story he told was, in sum and substance, practically that of the other servants. After stating the length of time he had been in the general's service, the butler proceeded to relate practically the same story which he had told to Inspector Brooks. The germane facts of the story were as follows:

The butler had attended upon his master at dinner that evening, and afterwards the general had gone directly to the library on the first floor. It was not unusual for him to lock the door when he desired to remain undisturbed, and on knocking and receiving no reply later in the evening, the butler had thought nothing of it.

He had left the tray on the floor outside the door, as he had done on other occasions, then he had seen to the locking up of the house and had retired for the night.

In the morning when he had seen the tray still outside the door he had thought the general must have fallen asleep in the library, and when the general's bed proved to be empty, he was convinced of this. It was only when no answer came to his repeated knocking at the door that he began to feel worried, and summoned the footman. Then they had broken open the door with the result known.

In answer to a question from the coroner, asking if he had noted anything, whatsoever, out of the ordinary that evening, the butler had replied that he had not. When asked to think carefully and make sure, he had reiterated that he had not, unless he might mention a street musician who played in the square outside the house for some time just after dinner. He had taken note of this, because he was debating whether he should go out and warn the fellow away, knowing that the general did not care for music and that it would probably disturb him. But he had not done so, and after a little while the man moved off.

The butler was dismissed, and Gerald Weston called. This was the first time Lee had seen him, although he had received a full report from Nipper as to the character of the young man.

Gerald Weston was undoubtedly of the artistic temperament. His dark eyes were veiled with sadness, and although he was only the general's stepson, it seemed plain that he was suffering keenly over the loss of his stepfather.

He told a very simple tale, for he had not been at the house that day, and had only heard the sad news from the doctor the following morning. He had last seen the general the night before his death. He had called at the house for a few minutes, and had remained chatting in the library. They had parted affectionately, and he had gone to keep an appointment at a musical evening.

In answer to a question from the coroner, Gerald Weston stated that he knew of no reason why his stepfather should commit suicide. No; he had noticed nothing queer in his manner the night before; but, of course, the general had always been reserved and might have had some worry which he kept to himself.

The coroner was just about to thank him and dismiss him, when Inspector Brooks rose.

"With your permission, sir," he said, addressing the coroner, "I should like to ask Mr. Weston one or two questions."

"Certainly, inspector," replied the coroner, and, turning a bland countenance upon the young man, Inspector Brooks began to ask the questions which Nelson Lee had requested him to ask—questions of which the inspector knew the meaning as little as did the coroner.

"I should like to ask first, Mr. Weston, if you presented the general with a certain Eastern enamelled vase which was on his desk at the time of his death?"

Gerald Weston gazed frankly at the inspector.

"I did," he replied readily. "That was part of the purpose of my visit the night before he died. I had two of the vases, and, knowing how keen my stepfather was on anything Indian, I took him one of them. I should have given him both, but unfortunately the other was broken accidentally."

"And did you also present him with the roses which were in it?"

"Yes. I bought them on the way."

"Did you know that this second vase had been broken?" went on the inspector.

"I did not know until to-day, when I went up to the library. I noticed that it had been removed from the desk, and asked the butler what had

become of it. It was a very valuable vase. He said that it had been broken in some way, and the pieces removed."

"Thank you," said the inspector. "That is all, Mr. Weston."

The doctor was called next, and gave his evidence briefly. Reluctantly he intimated that the cause of death must be suicide, and when he had given his evidence the other servants were called. Their stories, as has already been said, were much similar to that of the butler, and, as he sat making notes, Lee found only one thing which really called for particular attention—that was the music which had been heard in the square after dinner.

The street player had remained so long in the neighbourhood that it had caused general remark, and two of the kitchen-maids had stood at the top of the area-way steps listening to him for some time. When asked what instrument had been used, they replied that it had been a violin. That ended the proceedings, and after a short deliberation the jury had returned a verdict that the general had "committed suicide whilst of unsound mind."

Shortly after that Lee and Nipper left Benton Square in company with Inspector Brooks. They walked towards Knightsbridge looking for a taxi.

"Well, that is finished," grunted the inspector, as they went along. "It was the only possible verdict. The old general must have got tired of living, I reckon. Not much room for your deductive science there, eh, Lee?"

Lee shrugged.

"I suppose the verdict was a natural one, under the circumstances," rejoined Lee carelessly.

"But don't you agree with it?" cried the inspector.

"Listen, inspector," said Lee, with a humorous twinkle in his eye, "you tell me and I'll tell you."

Just then a taxi hove in sight, and the inspector had no time to reply.

"Which way are you going?" he asked Lee.

"I am going on to a lecture at the Royal Colonial Institute," replied Lee.

"If it is not too much out of your way, perhaps you would be good enough to drop me and Nipper at Burlington Gardens."

"With pleasure."

The taxi sped down through Knightsbridge to Hyde Park Corner, then down Piccadilly until it came to Bond Street. Turning up Bond Street, it swung round into Burlington Gardens until it came to the Royal Colonial Institute, where Lee and Nipper descended.

A prominent scientist was lecturing that day, and Lee was anxious to hear him; therefore, as the hour of the lecture was drawing near, he and Nipper bade good-bye to the inspector and entered the place. They had decided to postpone lunch until later.

They dropped into their seats almost at the very moment when Sir Henry Winthrop, the noted scientist, rose to begin his address. The subject was "Elasticity," and the sub-subjects were "Elasticity, as dealing with Concussion and Vibration."

Lee, knowing Sir Henry Winthrop as a good speaker, settled himself to enjoy the lecture, and when the introductory part of the address was over the scientist plunged at once into his theme.

"Elasticity," he said, "is the property of recovery of an original shape or size. . . . All bodies are more or less elastic as regards size, and all solid bodies are more or less elastic as regards shape. . . . A simple example of the elasticity of air is to place a quantity of air in a cylinder, and then to compress it by means of forcing a tightly fitting piston down upon it. The

air is compressed, but when the pressure behind the piston is removed, the air swells back to the original volume.

"As an example of a solid, one may take a steel bar hanging vertically, and at the end of it hang a load of steel which in weight is equal to one ton for each square inch of the sectional area of the steel bar. This weight will cause the steel bar to stretch to the extent of seven one-hundred-thousandths of its own length, and the sectional area will diminish by about half that. But if the load of steel be gradually removed, then the steel bar will contract back to its original size. This is one of the most simple examples of the elasticity of a solid body.

"While it is impossible to measure the elasticity of all solids, there are some that readily answer to the tests we know, and of these piano wire shows the greatest range, while glass shows a very narrow range. . . . But, nevertheless, every body that we know anything about is not only under stress of some sort, but is also susceptible to the effect of sound waves of greater or less magnitude, or, in other words, vibration.

"When a solid body is struck it is thrown into a state of vibration. This vibration may be so fine as not to be visible, but delicate instruments will show that it does exist, and thus we may secure a definite record of an earthquake in a distant part of the globe by the record made by the seismograph in Scotland. . . . As an example of this——"

But Nelson Lee did not wait to hear the example stated by the learned professor. Instead he touched Nipper on the knee, and whispered:

"We are going out at once, my lad. Come along, and move as quietly as possible."

They slipped out of their seats, and stole up the aisle to the front of the hall, which led them out into Burlington Gardens. There Lee hailed a taxi, and, motioning to Nipper to get in, ordered the man to drive to 6a, Half Moon Street.

Arriving there, he asked for Gerald Weston, but was informed that the young man was out. This suited Lee perfectly, for had Gerald Weston been in, he would have been compelled to change the purpose of his visit. He spoke to the man Peters, however, and at the end of twenty minutes departed with the name and address of Dr. Green in his pocket.

Lee spent fully half an hour with the doctor, then re-entering the taxi once more, he drove through to the address of the doctor who had attended General Bartlett. From him Lee secured the name and address of the general's solicitors, and once more re-entering the taxi, he told the man to drive through to the City.

Lee's interview with the general's solicitors was of a protracted nature, and it was nearly five o'clock before he emerged from their offices, which were in Lombard Street.

Nipper, who had been waiting in the cab all the afternoon, was by now as hungry as a hunter, so on their way up West they stopped in the Strand and had a hurried tea. They continued on then to Scotland Yard, and, entering the great building, Lee sought Inspector Brooks. The inspector was drinking a cup of tea in his own private room. He glanced up with a smile as Lee entered.

"Anything on?" he mumbled, as he swallowed a large piece of cake.

Lee nodded, and dropped into a chair.

"Inspector," he said, "I want you to swear out a warrant for the arrest of a certain man."

"Why, certainly, Lee," responded the inspector. "I'll have it fixed at once. Who is it?"

"Gerald Weston."

"Gerald Weston!" exclaimed the inspector. "Why, that is General Bartlett's stepson. What on earth do you want to have him arrested for?"

"For the murder of the general," replied Lee briefly.

The inspector set down his cup of tea and gazed at Lee as though the famous detective had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"Arrested for the murder of the general?" he stammered. "Why, Lee—impossible. It was suicide. Didn't the coroner's jury say so?"

"I don't care two pins what the coroner's jury said," replied Lee curtly. "I say that General Bartlett was murdered, and that Gerald Weston murdered him. Will you make out the warrant if I make the charge?"

"Why—er—I'll have to," responded the bewildered inspector. "But, Lee, honestly, I don't see how you figure that out."

"You will know by to-night," rejoined Lee. "I have only a few more details to fix now before I shall be ready. If you care to be in on the job will you meet me at Gray's Inn Road at, say, seven o'clock? Come in a taxi, for there are going to be a few others there. I think you had better bring a couple of plain-clothes men with you to make the arrest."

"Lee, tell me," exclaimed the inspector, "how do you figure Gerald Weston murdered his stepfather when the general was alone in the room, and the door and windows were locked? Are you sure of the ground you are on?"

"I am sufficiently sure to ask for that warrant," said Lee. "I'll tell you no more now, but if you will come to Gray's Inn Road at the hour named, then you will understand why I act as I do."

The inspector grunted.

"I'll be there," he said; "but if you are on the wrong scent you'll make me look pretty foolish."

"If it comes off, you get the credit—if it fails, I take the blame," said Lee as he rose. "That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Before the inspector could reply, Lee was on his way to the door, and a moment later it closed behind him, leaving Inspector Brooks in a state of dumfounded amazement.

At seven o'clock that evening there was a queer gathering at Gray's Inn Road. Firstly, there were Lee and Nipper. Then, sharp on the stroke, little Dr. Green appeared, followed a few seconds later by the doctor who had attended the old general, and after that Inspector Brooks, with a couple of plain-clothes men.

When they were all assembled, Lee, who had already donned his coat and hat, rose and said:

"Now that we are all here, gentlemen, I suggest that we go on to Half Moon Street at once. Have you brought the warrant, inspector?"

The inspector nodded.

"I have," he said. "But before we go I wish you would explain matters, Lee. I——"

"There is no time now," replied Lee curtly. "Good heavens, inspector! Do you know me so little that you think I would lead you into an affair of this sort without solid ground to stand on? Even if I did tell you why I swore out that warrant, you would still doubt. So let the explanation stand until after we get to Half Moon Street. It is Gerald Weston we want first."

The inspector was silenced by Lee's tone, and a few moments later they left the consulting-room for the street.

A couple of taxis stood at the kerb, and they filed in without any parti-

cular arrangement. Then the leading taxi set off for Half Moon Street, followed by the other.

Arriving there, Lee took the lead up the steps, and, on reaching the door of Gerald Weston's flat, knocked sharply. There was a short pause, then the door opened softly, and the face of Peters appeared.

Lee lifted his brows inquiringly, and in reply Peters nodded. Then Lee pushed his way into the tiny hall and made for the sitting-room door. He knocked sharply and threw it open.

Gerald Weston sat lounging in the big easy chair, a decanter of brandy and a siphon beside him. He looked up with a startled expression as Lee entered, but, as his eyes fell on the inspector, who was directly behind Lee, he sprang to his feet with a curse. Turning like lightning, he dashed for the bedroom, and, slamming the door, locked it.

Lee was after him like a flash, but the key turned even as he reached the door, and before he could burst it in, there came a sudden single explosion from the room beyond.

The inspector and Nipper pushed against the door with Lee, and the next instant it went in with a crash.

The room was full of smoke, and, standing on the threshold, they saw Gerald Weston lying on the floor in the middle of the room, a heavy automatic beside him, and a hole in his temple where the large bullet had ploughed through his skull.

Lee removed his hat.

"I was afraid of that," he murmured. "It is not a case for the police now, but for the doctors."

He backed into the sitting-room as he spoke, and while the two doctors busied themselves over the body in the inner room, Lee and the inspector smoked in silence. Then the two physicians returned, and as they entered the sitting-room the senior medico said:

"Death was instantaneous, gentlemen."

They sat down then, and, looking at Lee, the general's physician said:

"What we have seen seems to me proof that Gerald Weston was guilty, as you said, Mr. Lee. But I cannot understand how you guessed the truth. I am still all at sea."

Lee knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"Listen, gentlemen," he said. "I will tell you how Gerald Weston murdered his stepfather, and why he did so."

With that Lee began.

CHAPTER VI.

Enlightenment—The End.

I MUST confess that when I first went to Benton Square I thought as Inspector Brooks thought—that the death of General Bartlett was due to suicide. On the face of it there seemed no other theory possible. But when I had made a closer examination of the place, I began to think that suicide could not account for the death.

"In the first place, although the door and the windows were locked, and, as far as we knew, no one had been in the room but the general, there was one point which it was impossible to ignore. I speak of the fact that no receptacle of any description was found either on the person of the general or in the room in which poison might have been kept. Yet the doctor was convinced that his death was due to a potent poison. How, then, had it been administered? That was what I set myself to puzzle out.

"On the desk there were the usual articles which one finds on a well-equipped writing-table, but during my examination there, I noticed two things which bothered me. One was that the general's writing broke off in the very middle of a word, and a faint line across the paper convinced me that the pen had *fallen* from his hand and rolled across the blotting-pad. Secondly, a vase which had been standing near the blotting-pad had been broken and the flowers which it contained had fallen out.

"Now to deal first with the writing on the paper in its relation to the theory of suicide. To begin with, the general's physician told us that he was an intimate friend, and that, so far as he knew, there was no worry in the general's life which would impel him to take his own life.

"Now what was on that paper? What was on the other sheets of paper which lay at one side of the blotting-pad? They contained a portion of the manuscript of a book of military reminiscences on India which the general was writing. Now does it seem probable that a man would continue to apply his mind to such a subject as that up to the last moment if he were contemplating suicide? I think not. That is the deduction which I draw from the manuscript. Now to touch on the broken vase.

"I sat down in the chair at the desk, and endeavoured, as far as possible, to adopt the attitude which must have been that of the general's when writing—always allowing for individual idiosyncrasies of habit of position. When I had done that I gave my attention to the broken vase.

"Gentlemen, listen! That vase was never broken by being accidentally knocked over, and I will tell you why. If that had been the case, then when it fell and when the top portion smashed, all the water would have run out. But that was not the case. The base of the vase was not lying on its side, nor had it been lying on its side, because it was still full to the brim with water, proving that, while the top portion had been smashed by some force, the base had remained intact. And because it was upright, then the upper portion had not been broken by the vase being knocked over. Then how had the smash occurred? I asked myself that question many times.

"Now as I was sitting, and as the general must have sat, no object could have come from the direction of the window—no solid object—without first striking the general. Besides, the window was closed and locked and the curtains drawn. It was only possible for an object to come from three directions—from the line to the fireplace, from the direction of the door, or from the wall straight ahead. I was convinced that neither of these possibilities was a likely one, yet, nevertheless, I and Nipper made a comprehensive examination of the floor, the fireplace, and the walls in order to see if we could find anything which might have struck the base. There was nothing, and I am free to confess that by then I was deeply intrigued.

"Because I could not find a reasonable explanation as to the manner in which the vase had been broken, and because, while that was unsolved, I must perforce connect it with the general's death, I determined to make a chemical examination of the water which still remained in the base of the vase as well as the flowers. I shall not go into unnecessary details of the chemical test, gentlemen, but it is sufficient to say that neither in the water nor the flowers did I find a single thing of a suspicious nature.

"But while I was making this laboratory test my assistant, Nipper, was endeavouring to put together the pieces of the broken vase. He apparently succeeded, but, strangely enough, when he thought his work was done he found he had several pieces left over.

"He called me, and I examined, first, the remaining fragments, then the interior of the vase. I found there a tiny ridge, and after some tentative attempts succeeded in fitting one of the larger fragments to it.

"By degrees we built the remaining pieces inside the vase, until we found that at the top they curved into the outer lip of the receptacle, and fitted as part of it—or did before the vase was broken. It was then, gentlemen, I made a startling discovery. I found that this inside wall of crystal formed a space between itself and the outer wall, with a capacity of, roughly, a teaspoonful of liquid of the density and specific gravity of water.

"After studying the effect for some time, I managed to find a reference book in my bookcase—I have studied old glass a little—and after searching through it I found a reproduction of a vase almost similar to the one which Nipper and I had reconstructed. It was not Indian, as I had thought, but was the product of ancient Ceylon, with the influence of both Persia and China in it—Persia in the shape, and China in the 'Sang de Boeuf' enamelling. And there, gentlemen, I read why there was that space in the upper part of the vase.

"It seems that the ancients had a primitive wit, which found expression in the fashioning of vases after that pattern, and before they were sealed up the glass-blower would fill the cavity with a very powerful volatile poison. Then the glass would be in some way broken in front of the intended victim—probably a servant would knock it over with assumed carelessness—and, presto! the victim died promptly.

"Now it was quite possible that, if the vase before me was genuine, and had come down through the ages unbroken, that it might have contained the poison which had been sealed up in it hundreds of years ago. Supposing it had been knocked over by the general while he was writing; then it would follow that if the poison were still inside, the fumes would cause his death, and in a very short time the liquid would have completely evaporated, leaving no trace of its presence except the stains on the membranous tissue of the general's mouth, throat, and nasal cavities.

"But I have already said that I was thoroughly convinced that the vase had not been knocked over accidentally by the general, and I have explained why I considered that proven.

"Then the next thing to advance was the theory that it had been smashed deliberately by some outside agency. What would be the most probable agency? Who gave the vase to the general? Who brought it to him and set it on his desk, filling it with flowers? It was his stepson, Gerald Weston.

"Then I asked myself how Weston could have done it, with the door and the window locked? I could find no answer to my question, and I was still baffled when the inquest was held the next morning.

"I listened to the evidence there, and at my request Inspector Brooks asked Gerald Weston a few surprise questions. I wanted to see how he acted when they were sprung on him, but he had perfect control of himself. I went away from the inquest still strongly suspecting him, but unable to put my finger on any definite thread which would lead to the clue I needed.

"By sheer chance, Nipper and I went to the Royal Colonial Institute lecture this afternoon, which was given by the well-known scientist, Sir Henry Winthrop. The subject was 'Elasticity,' and you may ask yourselves what the subject of that lecture has to do with the death of General Bartlett. I will tell you.

"The auxiliary subjects were 'Concussion and Vibration in their Relation to Elasticity.' And it was while the scientist was speaking that light suddenly broke in upon me. Then something which had been said at the inquest had a distinct meaning, whereas before it had seemed to be of no importance whatsoever. This thing was what every one of the servants

mentioned in their evidence. Do you remember that they all spoke of the man who was playing a violin in the square, and that two of the maids listened at the top of the area-way steps? That was the thing.

"Now you all know, from your study of physics and dynamics, that the vibration of sound is one of the most important elements of the sciences to be studied. It bears upon so many classes of science; it is sound waves which make wireless telegraphy possible. It is because matter is subject to vibration that sound is impinged upon it and cause action and reaction.

"Gentlemen, look at that glass beside the brandy decanter. Though the naked eye cannot see it, the thin walls of glass are contracting and expanding regularly at so many beats per minute. If the ratio of the inward beats is equal to that of the outer beats, then the glass remains as it is. If it is struck sharply by something, then what does it do? It resounds like a bell—the vibrations create the sound. But supposing I were able to strike the exact vibrations which it is beating at. What would happen?

"The vibrations would blend with those of the glass, would contract the glass as its own vibrations would contract it, then, as the natural beat expanded it, so would the blended vibrations expand it. But this sudden access of extra vibration would cause the glass to contract more than its own beats would cause it to do, and the expansion would therefore be more than ordinary.

"Do you follow me? Picture a child's swing. If one adds to the motion of the swing a muscular push equal to the speed of the swing, one gradually sends it, without appreciable jerking, higher and higher, and so, as it goes higher, so does the rebound increase.

"That is exactly what would happen to that glass, and when the rebound, so to speak, became more than the stress of the glass could bear, what would happen? It would smash to pieces as though it had been struck by something hard. Do you follow me?"

No one spoke. The two physicians nodded and the inspector breathed heavily. Lee held their amazed interest, and after pausing to light a fresh cigarette he went on.

"I am now going to call Peters. I want you to hear what he has to say."

Stepping to the door, Lee called the man, who had evidently been waiting for the summons. When Peters had stepped into the room Lee said:

"Now, Peters, I want you to tell us exactly what happened the other morning when you came into this room and found Mr. Weston lying unconscious on the floor."

Slowly and haltingly Peters told the story of how he had spent the evening in Hampstead, and how the following morning he had found Gerald Weston lying on the floor. He spoke of the broken vase, and related how Weston had questioned him about it, afterwards making him bring back the fragments.

When he had finished Lee motioned him to step to one side.

"Now, Doctor Green," he said, looking at the little doctor, "will you please read us the notes you made after attending to Weston?"

Dr. Green rose, and, taking a small case-book from his pocket, read the notes he had written, and in the notes made before the death of General Bartlett Dr. Green stated that the membranous tissue of Gerald Weston's mouth, throat, and nasal passages was of a greyish colour, which puzzled him.

When he had finished Lee thanked him, and, turning once more to the assembled company, said:

"After leaving the lecture this afternoon I visited Half Moon Street and talked with Peters. Then I went to see Doctor Green, and afterwards to you, sir"—here he bowed to the general's physician.

"Then I called upon General Bartlett's solicitors, and there I discovered that, only a few days before his death, General Bartlett had indicated his intention of making a great alteration in his will. Until then his estate had been left to Gerald Weston, but he had decided to leave Weston only ten thousand and the balance to the British Government, since it was the nation which had presented him with his fortune.

"Now you have heard the evidence of Peters and Doctor Green. You know that the vase which was a mate to the one on the general's desk was smashed. It, too, contained the poison which had been sealed up in it for several centuries. It was only because he was some distance away from it and the window was open that Gerald Weston did not die.

"When he recovered he tried to puzzle out what had happened to him, and, gentlemen, he succeeded. He was helped by his deep knowledge of music. He knew all about vibrations and their effect, and finally he grasped the truth. The vibrations of sound of the piece he had been playing had blended with the vibrations of the vase, and had smashed it.

"Why the other wasn't smashed is because its vibrations were either of a different wave-length or else one of the vases had something in it. I am inclined to think the latter, and also that it was this fact which impelled Gerald Weston to take flowers along when he presented the vase to the general. He wanted water and flowers in it.

"By his knowledge of melody and vibrations he could so tune up to the vibrations of the glass that he could tell just what tone would blend with it. That was what his evil mind conceived. He knew the general was working on a book. He knew at what hour he would be at his desk. And at that hour, disguised as a street musician, Gerald Weston came to Benton Square and began to play.

"He played on and on and on, always the same piece, and always holding the same notes, until he felt sure that the volume of vibrations had blended with those on the general's desk, and that the rebound had been sufficient to cause the smash.

"Of course he could not be positive until the next day; but how well he did his work we have seen. And that, gentlemen, is how General Bartlett was murdered, and that is why the vase containing the poison was broken by an outside agency, even though the windows and the door were closed and locked, for sound can travel through matter, as we know.

"Therefore, on what I had discovered, and, certain that I was right, I asked Inspector Brooks for a warrant for the arrest of Gerald Weston, charging him with the murder of General Bartlett. That he was truly guilty we now know from what has happened since we arrived here. He is beyond any earthly judgment, but perhaps he will meet the general beyond, and then—well, we can only hope that his judgment there will be tempered with the mercy which we all pray for. That is all, gentlemen."

And as he finished speaking, Lee started for the bedroom where the body of Gerald Weston lay—the body of him who had sold his soul for greed and whose gain had been but ashes.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY!

"TRACKED to the TRENCHES."

A Magnificent, Extra Long Complete Story
of Nelson Lee v. "Jim the Penman."

MAKE A POINT OF ORDERING EARLY.

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By FENTON ASH

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, Dr. Campbell, 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. 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 coated with gold—one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN, who warn the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—PEDRO DIEGO, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition. And that same day a fight takes place, but the treasure hunters are victorious. The next day Alec and Clive make an effort to recover a launch which they had abandoned some time previously, having lost themselves amongst the intricate waterways in the caverns.

A Terrible Fight.

SUDDENLY there came a bump, which reminded the two young fellows of what had occurred before—when they had seemed to glide over the body of some creature just beneath the surface.

Alec was looking over the sides, intent on trying to make out the nature of the obstruction, when there was a heavy swirl in the water, and a great head reared itself above the surface with open jaws, in which rows of sharp teeth were plainly visible.

For a moment it looked as though it were about to dart at the boat and seize one of the occupants, but instead it drew back into the water, leaving a broad eddy to show where it had been.

Nothing more occurred of note in the tunnel. In due time they saw the end of it in the distance, and came out upon the broad, placid waters of the lake.

There the motor was stopped, and the launch rested quietly on the greenish-hued surface, whilst the doctor and all those who were visiting the place for the first time looked round with great interest and curiosity.

"Hullo!" cried Alec, staring about in search of the craft they had come to rescue, "where's the boat? We left her lying on the strand yonder; but I don't see anything of her now."

"Nor I," muttered Clive. "What the dickens can have become of her?"

The boat had certainly disappeared. She was neither on the shore nor floating on the water of the lake.

"By Jove! The captain won't like this," said Alec. "He said he doubted if we should find her, and he would only believe in it when he— Eh, what's the matter?"

Clive had gripped him by the shoulder, and was pointing towards the rocks, where their encounter with the apes had taken place.

Alec looked, but at first could make out nothing clearly.

Then he saw what looked like a large serpent in slow motion.

"Another big snake, eh?" he murmured in surprise.

At that moment a terrifying scream rang out from the direction of the rocks and was taken up by the thousand echoes. Slowly there came into view not merely one serpent, but several, as it seemed. And one of them, swinging down in the air, was holding a living form that wriggled and writhed and screamed again and again in notes of agony and terror.

What is it? What on earth's going on over there?" Alec asked of his chum in awed tones.

Everyone in the launch was probably just then asking the same question. The searchlight, which had guided them through the tunnel, had been turned off when they had emerged from it on to the lake.

But the dim twilight which illuminated the water and the strand around it became more feeble as it spread beyond these limits, and left much of the sides and roof in sombre shadow.

It was this shadow which the eyes of the explorers were now straining to pierce.

Among the rocks which Clive and Alec had climbed, at some height above the strand, yet below the point where the dome of the roof began, something or things could be seen in motion, giving the idea, as already stated, of several serpents. Long, snake-like forms could be vaguely made out in the shadow, writhing and curling, reaching out and retiring, twisting and turning, and one of these had shown for a moment or two swinging in mid-air and grasping a living, struggling, screaming form.

But now that form had gone out of sight; it had been drawn up again into the shadow, and its blood-curdling cries were hushed.

The flood of echoes died down, and silence ensued—a strange, brooding silence, which seemed to have in it something sinister and threatening.

Clive and Alec looked about again in search of the boat, but with the same result—nothing could be seen of it. Then it suddenly occurred to them that the body of the big serpent they had killed had also disappeared. And up amongst the rocks in the caves and shadows where the apes had lurked their places seemed to have been taken by something else, which could not be seen plainly enough for its real character to be divined.

Neither Clive nor Alec could make out any definite form. There was a great blurr of shadow deeper than the rest, and this, too, seemed to be in some kind of motion, yet here, again, it was difficult to say what kind of motion it was. There was, in fact, a double kind of motion. There was the twisting and writhing, snake-like movement, and there was also a billowy or wavy action, with a trembling, uncertain, throbbing effect, very difficult to define. Finally, somewhere in the middle of the shadows were two patches of half-lights like luminous discs, just barely visible, which looked not unlike two monstrous eyes; but they were so dim and vague that this idea might have been merely a weird fancy.

And now, in the stillness certain sounds became audible which had not previously been noticed. They were like the scraping of some rough, leathery substance over the surf of the rock; they were a curious combination of sounds—~~th~~rush, heavy, rasping, yet low and stealthy, and mingled at times with a subdued crunching noise.

The doctor's voice was heard at this juncture for the first time. Like the rest, he had been gazing with great curiosity and intentness at the restless, formless shadow; but if he had drawn any inference from his scrutiny he did not say what it was.

It should be explained that the motor-launch had been fitted with movable steel side shutters, or shields, which could be quickly raised above the gunwale when required. They were very strong, and had been provided specially as a shield against the bullets or arrows of hostile natives. They were provided with slits and small orifices, which could be used either for observation holes or for firing through.

These the doctor now ordered to be raised into position. And it was noticeable that while he gave his orders in a voice which, while quite free from haste or excitement, there was that in its low tones—apart from the unexpected nature of the orders themselves—which indicated that in his opinion they were threatened by some great danger, and that there was no time to be lost in preparing to meet it.

The next order was scarcely less surprising. Ever since the fight with the filibusters, Captain Barron had armed the trusted men of his crew not only with rifles, but with cutlasses. And it was these that the doctor now called for, telling the men to draw them and keep the naked blades beside them ready for use, with a supply of spare cartridges for their rifles.

Finally the doctor turned to Ben Grove.

"Hand those axes you spoke of a little while ago to Mr. Clive and Mr. Alec," he said. "Both Read and myself will be too busy looking after the boat to be able to make use of them, and, I am sure," he added, looking at the young fellows' athletic figures with approval, "you two will handle them to as much advantage as anyone else could."

Clive and Alec obediently put aside their rifles, and took possession of the axes, their minds in a state of wondering perplexity as to the meaning of all these strange, ominous preparations.

"Now, Read, are you ready? Are your men's weapons ready, their rifles loaded, and with plenty of extra cartridges handy?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" the mate and his men replied together in a deep chorus, wondering more than ever what the threatened danger could be.

"Then listen to me—all of you," said the doctor, still in subdued, but rapid tones. "I don't want you to fire—whatever you may see—till I give the word. But if I do give the word, then fire not only once, but again and again, as fast as you can. Pump in as many bullets as possible, and be ready to put down your rifles and snatch up your cutlasses at a moment's notice. Do you hear me?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came again in a low chorus. And the doctor's voice followed it at once.

"Read, stand by! Astern easy!"

"Ay, ay, sir! Astern it is."

"Steer astern for the tunnel."

"Ay, ay, sir."

The engine commenced to whirr, and the launch, which by that time had drifted to within a score of yards of the strand, backed slowly away from it.

Almost immediately there was a change in the vague movements going on in the shadows above.

The wondering observers, peering through the slits in the metal shields, could see that, whereas those movements had been so slow and heavy as to be at times only just perceptible, they now grew quicker. It was

much as if some creature or creatures lying half asleep were waking into more active life. And the gazers became suddenly aware that the two round, luminous discs had become much plainer to view. They certainly now looked like two great eyes staring at the launch with a queer, unwinking intentness which was anything but pleasant to look upon.

"Stand by to turn the searchlight on," said the doctor, in the same low tones.

"Ay, ay, sir!" came the ready answer.

What was going to happen? None of them—save, it might be, the doctor knew what kind of enemy they had to fear. And as to the latter, he was asking himself the question—would they be allowed to make good their retreat without a fight, or would the enemy follow and attack them?

It began to look as though they were to be allowed to withdraw without being molested. The motor throbbed quickly, the launch moved further back from the strand, and—

Suddenly there was a change. Some great mass had become detached from the rocks above, and thrown itself with a tremendous spring on to the shore.

There it halted now, a horrible, hideous, piled-up mass, a grisly, loathsome-looking monster, with an immense leather sack, as it seemed, for a body, and a number of wriggling, writhing "arms" twisting and contorting like a nest of great, thick-set serpents.

In short, all now could plainly see their enemy, and all knew it for what it was— a giant octopus or squid.

It looked like the creation of some dreadful nightmare. There was something indescribably gruesome and terrifying in its appearance. The restless, twisting arms, studded with great hooks, the continuous shivering, throbbing movement of the skin of the body, with its changing of shades of colour, and, finally, the immense, saucer-like eyes. These were now fixed with a frightful, unwinking stare upon the launch, glaring at it with an expression of concentrated hate, rage, and ferocity that was simply blood-curdling to look upon.

How long it remained thus no one on board could afterwards say. It seemed a long time, though it was probably not more than a few seconds.

The doctor watched it with a keen, alert, anxious eye. If the creature was really going to attack them, he wanted to get farther away from the shore first, so that it should not be able to obtain the leverage and extra power which it would gain by holding on to something solid with one or two of its arms while grasping at the boat with the others.

The question which acutely interested him just then was—how deep was the water of the lake, and what was the character of the bottom. If it were shallow, and the bottom was rocky, then the prospect before them was serious indeed. For this creature was so large and evidently so powerful that if it should get a purchase on a rocky bottom in compara-

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

If you are not getting your right PENSION

tively shallow water, he knew it would be able to turn the launch clean over almost with ease.

He had realised all this from the first moment he had recognised the creature for what it was, clinging to the rocks within the shadows. Owing to its peculiar chameleon-like power of altering its skin-tints to harmonise with its surroundings, it had been almost invisible to most of those in the boat. But the doctor had perceived the true state of the case. He had seen the creature stealthily seize an ape, and from that moment had devoted his thoughts and energies to trying to get away in the "breathing time" afforded them while the monster was devouring the victim.

Afraid to back away suddenly and quickly, or to turn the searchlight on to it, lest doing so might precipitate what he was so anxious to avoid, he had determined to move backwards slowly and cautiously, at the same time taking such measures as he deemed necessary to guard against any sudden rush on the part of their terrible enemy.

Dr. Campbell had never seen such a huge specimen as this, which was now watching their every movement; but he had studied the habits and ways of smaller species, and knew how they could leap, and the power and ferocity with which they would deliver their attack. One had, for instance—as he afterwards told his young assistants—once sprung up at him from off the ground and fixed itself on his arm.

If a small octopus could leap like that, what might not such a creature as this be able to do?

Well, they had seen it leap down from the rocks above right on to the shore. Another leap like that would bring it close to the boat, and if the water were not very deep—!

There the scientist's speculations ended. His queries and theories were about to be put to the test of practical, horrifying experience, for just then the great octopus gathered itself up for its spring, and launched its great mass through the air towards the boat.

The doctor had seen it preparing for the leap, and called out "Full speed astern!" and immediately on top of it, "Fire!"

As a consequence, half a dozen rifles rang out together, and the bullets met the monster in mid-air—and a second lot, too—ere it came down on to the surface of the lake with a crash that sent a great wave of water leaping up over the gunwale and tossing the boat itself in the air.

Fortunate was it for all there that their watchful leader had taken advantage of that "breathing time" to back quietly away. For if the great squid had attacked in this way when they had been close to the shore it would have either fallen right on top of the craft or at least so near to it as to have been able at once to take it bodily into its deadly embrace.

As it was, however, it fell short; and it seemed for a moment or two as though the launch—having now gathered speed—would be out of reach in time.

But that was unhappily not the case. Ere the occupants had settled themselves after the great wave that had washed on board and tossed their boat about like a cork, something came shooting across the boat, falling with a flop—not, fortunately, on the bulwarks—but on the metal shields which had been raised above them.

Another followed with lightning-like quickness. It was as though two heavy hawsers of great thickness and weight had been thrown across the launch and were dragging at her with terrific force.

(Continued overleaf.)

She rocked and swayed dangerously from side to side, and it was clear there was no time to be lost. If she were not freed she must go over.

Clive and Alec, however, were fully alive to the danger. They had been watching through the orifices in the shields, had seen the great "arms" reaching out towards them, and were already on their feet when their weight fell across the boat.

The two young fellows knew what the doctor expected of them, and were not going to disappoint him. With great swings of their muscular arms the axes whistled through the air, and cut with a sickening thud deep into the living cables. In an instant they were raised again, and came whistling down again—and lo! the horrible things parted, and, falling, one piece on either side slipped back into the water.

But another one had now fallen across the boat forward where Read was. And it seemed to have got a good hold. It was pulling and tugging, and the boat was slowly heeling over.

The propeller, which should, one would have thought, been able to pull the boat astern, was racing uselessly in the water, powerless to move the craft against the force with which it was being dragged back.

Two or three sailors were hacking at the "arm," which was lying across the boat above their heads, but with little real effect. The thick, leathery skin was too tough for the cutlasses to cut into to any depth.

At that moment there rose a shriek, and then another—for a second "arm" had appeared. It was not taut across as the other was, but had come wriggling in, searching about for a victim to lay hold of, and had curled itself round one of the sailors, and was actually lifting him up when Clive and Alec reached his side.

Whirling their axes like men possessed, they delivered lightning blows at the serpentine foe, and had the satisfaction of seeing it uncoil and retreat, crippled and useless—all but, in fact, cut in two.

But meantime there was the other arm stretched over the shields, pulling the boat slowly over.

This the sturdy young axemen now vigorously attacked in its turn, and a second or two later the tension was relieved. The horrible creature disappeared, and the boat righted and began sensibly to move through the water astern.

But it only went slowly. Evidently the monster, maimed and injured though it was, was still far from being conquered. It was, in fact, still holding on to the boat, and preparing for fresh attempts to get at the occupants.

Four of its "arms" had been rendered practically useless; but it still had four more, and it was impossible to say what use the brute might yet put them to.

Clive and Alec, taking a moment's rest, peeped through the screens to see what was going on, and the sight that met their gaze was one that, if they had not been blessed with strong nerves, might well have unmanned them.

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