

No. 86. —DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

Week ending
Jan. 27, 1917.

THE NELSON LEE

LIBRARY

1^D



THE GREATAIRMYSTERY.

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THE GREAT AIR MYSTERY.

An Enthralling, Long Complete Story of NELSON LEE & NIPPER, in the Desert Lands of Morocco.

By the Author of "The Black Wolf," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Mystery of the Air—Nelson Lee Goes Up—Another Mystery.

IT was certainly a curious affair, and while the public in general was utterly ignorant of it all, every man at Hendon—every aviator, every student and every mechanic, was not only aware of it, but was racking his brains to try to fathom the mystery of it.

It had first happened three days before, and then it had appeared perfectly natural. Cameron, a hardened and experienced man, had gone up in a new type of biplane and had not returned. There had been several machines in the air at the time, and more than one man had seen Cameron rise to the thousand foot level, then strike off south. That was the last seen of him.

Time had gone by, and those at the Palmer hangar had begun to feel a little nervous. Of course, Cameron might have had engine trouble and been forced to descend. Then again, it was always possible that he had come down at Brooklands. But evening had brought no sign or word of him, and a telephone message to Brooklands had elicited the information that Cameron had not been seen there that day.

A general message was sent throughout the country for news of an airman who had come down, but at the end of the second day there was nothing to go upon. All that could be imagined was, that Cameron had flown beyond the coast at some point and had dropped into the sea.

The evening papers of the second day contained a brief paragraph saying that the aviator was missing, and the wireless carried the request to every ship similarly equipped, leaving or entering port, to be on the lookout for him. It was the only theory tenable.

There was a gloom about the place the second day—for Cameron had been popular—a gloom which increased to a feeling of vague nervousness, when on the second day, Pritchard, from the Tyson-Wright hangar, went up in the morning and failed to return.

In every respect it was a similar mystery to Cameron's disappearance. Pritchard went up in a biplane, and other men in the air at the same time, saw him turn his machine and fly south. He was at the two thousand foot level. From that moment nothing more was heard of him.

The same procedure of search was followed. Brooklands was called up on

the 'phone, the news was sent broadcast through the country, and all the ships arriving and leaving were notified.

Coastguards everywhere were on the lookout. Yet on the third day nothing had been heard from or about either Cameron or Pritchard. It was as though each man had gone up and disappeared absolutely, machine and all in the blue void above. It began to grow uncanny.

Like the sailor, the airman has his own little superstitions, and the feeling at Hendon on the third day might be described as one of sheer nerves. Men advanced the opinion that both Cameron and Pritchard had gone too far out to sea and had come down, but at the same time while their lips uttered the words, their minds were busy with other thoughts.

If there had been a single thing to prove that the theory was so, if a broken machine had been seen in any place, then the feeling of nerves would have subsided. But there was nothing. Both men had gone up into the blue, and both men had vanished from the ken of man.

But the feeling of nerves did not prevent other men from going up as usual, and one of them—Wills by name—struck the two thousand foot level, flying off south in a vague attempt to probe the mystery.

Now Wills was one of the cleverest airman going. He had been in the game from the early days when a flight of a few miles was looked upon as wonderful. He had been in the great race round Britain, and he had followed all the great meetings on the Continent. He held the height record for two years, and he was an adept at looping the loop.

He was cool and calculating so far as the machine was concerned, and on more than one occasion this coolness had saved him from a nasty accident. So much for the man. As for his machine, it was his own, the same monoplane which he had used in the races in France. He knew every stay and strut and bar in her.

The engine was a hundred horse-power Phillips, and every tone of her hum and purr was as familiar music to Wills. Once in the air, man and machine were almost one, and to watch him in difficult evolutions, was something never to be forgotten.

Well, on the third morning Wills went up. It was about eleven, and before rising he had told the two mechanics in his own hangar, that he might fly on to Brooklands and perhaps farther. He and Pritchard had been very intimate, and it was but natural that Wills should be worried over the mysterious disappearance of his friend.

Noon passed, and afternoon went slow by. Still Wills did not return, nor had any word been heard of the other two who were missing. By five o'clock Wills's two mechanics began to feel worried, and by six they had called up Brooklands. Not a sign had been seen of Wills. He had apparently altered his mind and had not come down there after all.

By nightfall there was a strong fear abroad that Wills had gone the same way as the other two, whatever that way might be. Ordinarily, a natural explanation would have been found for it, but now—well, Hendon was abuzz with theories. Three airmen could not crash to earth and nothing be known of it.

England is not a wide and little travelled desert where such a thing is possible. Even supposing that one of the missing men had fallen in a lonely part, it was not conceivable that the other two should come down likewise. Then again, to consider the theory of dropping into the sea. With one man, even with two, that was possible, of course, but it did seem a little far fetched to suppose that all three had flown over the sea, and had had an accident serious enough to cause them to fall into the water.

A North London agent agreed that there was something else to it, but when asked

to pin down this something else, they could not do so. So far, for a wonder, the Press had guessed nothing of the mystery. On three days running the papers had contained a brief paragraph regretting that a well-known airman, etc., etc., and adding a few particulars of his biography.

A certain esprit de corps had kept the thing quiet, and so it had gone until the fourth and the fifth day were past. Still, not a single sign had come from out of the blue about the three missing men, and where there had been little flying on the fourth and fifth days, on the sixth day the machines went up much as usual.

It was on the morning of the sixth day, that a small group of men sat in the Palmer hangar talking. There was Palmer himself, a good airman, but a better teacher; Williamson, the man who won the Paris to Petrograd race; two mechanics who had been with Palmer from the earliest days and both of them good airmen as well; Palissier, the noted French aviator; Darwin, a new, but exceptionally clever man on a monoplane; Dunne, the American airman, and the man who was the first to fly across Siberia; and finally Nelson Lee, a cool and steady man in the air, with his assistant, Nipper.

Lee kept his new racing monoplane in the Palmer hangar, and on his arrival at Hendon that morning, he had heard for the first time the story of the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the three airmen. He had read what the papers had to say, of course, and thought it odd that three men should meet with an accident three days running, but he knew the hazards of the air only too well to wonder for long, and in the stress of work he had put it from him.

He had known all three men well, and he keenly regretted such a loss to the flying world as those three would be. Then on the morning of the sixth day after Cameron had disappeared, Lee and Nipper had motored out to Hendon, and in the Palmer hanger Lee had heard the talk going forward.

His own mechanic put him in possession of the facts first, then Palmer, wandering in, had confirmed the story. Gradually by twos and threes the others had assembled, and now they all sat about Lee's smart monoplane, discussing the affair over and over in all its bearings.

Palmer had just finished relating the affair in detail to Lee, and Lee was sitting with a puzzled frown puckering his forehead, when Palissier, the Frenchman, said:

"This mystery ought to interest you, Monsieur Lee. It is what you might say a ripping chance to pit your brains against the puzzle and to tell us what has become of our good friends."

"Poor old Wills started out to trace Pritchard,—so his mechanics says—and see what has happened to him," said Darwin thoughtfully.

"They never went into the sea, not all three," put in Dunne with his strong American accent.

"Then where did they go?" asked Williamson quickly. "All three couldn't have fallen. Just look at it. Where could they fall in England like that and not be seen? I am not saying that one couldn't, but all three—no."

"It is possible too," said Palmer speaking again, "that one might have crashed to earth and one in the sea. I won't say it is probable, but it is possible. But there we have still another to account for. In all my experience of flying I have never come upon anything like it. What do you think, Lee?"

Lee nodded his head slowly.

"I can't say, Palmer," he replied. "It certainly is a queer thing. I agree with you though, that while one machine might have come down in a

lonely part and remain unseen for a few days, and another might have come down at sea with a like fate, it is hardly reasonable to suppose that all three suffered the same fate. England is not the Sahara, shall we say."

"Then what could have happened?" said Palissier, as he turned towards the door.

Lee did not reply just then, for Palissier's mechanic had entered and was handing his employer some letters. With a murmured word of apology, Palissier slit the flaps of the letters and glanced hurriedly at the contents. All but one he thrust into his pocket, but this one he opened and read closely.

The others went on discussing the affair, until a sudden exclamation from the Frenchman caused them to look up. There was a very odd expression in his face as he caught their gaze.

"Messieurs—messieurs," he exclaimed, reverting to his own tongue in his excitement, "listen to this. It is from my brother at Buc, and he tells me a very strange thing. I will translate roughly as I go along. He speaks of personal matters first, then he says:

"And now what think you, my dear Gaston? We at Buc are in the throes of a mystery, and we suffer with the nerves. The day before yesterday Pierre Gagnon went up in his machine and has not come down. We are very grieved, dear Gaston, for he was, as you know, one of our best men. What can have happened we do not know. It is possible that he flew too far to the north and fell into the Channel. We have notified every ship to watch for him, and the Eiffel Tower wireless has sent the word abroad. Then last night we were again cast into gloom. Paulus, our own cousin, went up in his racing monoplane, and nothing has been heard of him since. We are going to make a thorough search to-day, and several of us are going up to try to follow the course Paulus and Gagnon took. I will write again, dear brother, as soon as I hear anything. Until then——"

Palissier's voice trailed off, and he lifted his eyes.

"Gagnon was a good man," he muttered, as though he were alone, "and Paulus was my cousin, a cool man and an experienced airman."

Dead silence reigned for several minutes. Not a man there but was thinking the same thing—that from Buc, the great aerodrome outside Paris, there had been two disappearances as mysterious as those from Hendon. What could it mean?

The French mystery but added to the Hendon mystery, for now, not only had they to account for three mysterious disappearances, but for five. Which made it all the more improbable that five machines could crash down, leaving not a sign.

Lee walked to the open front of the hangar, and stood gazing up into the sky. It was a glorious morning in October, almost as warm as August, and not even a tiny fleecy cloud stained the deep blue above.

It was the same sky which was to be seen from Buc; it was the same depths which had swallowed up five men and five machines. What was the mystery of it all?

Lee walked back into the hangar and sat down on an upturned box. There didn't seem to be so much inclination on the part of anyone now to talk.

The news from Buc had set every man thinking, and into the minds of each crept the thought that no material explanation which they could find, would fit the case which fronted them. Five of the most experienced air-men in Europe had gone up and had disappeared as though literally

absorbed into the ether. What did it mean? What could it mean? Lee was the first to speak.

"There is one thing certain," he said slowly. "If Cameron, Pritchard, Wills, Gagnon, and Paulus, have gone up into the air—as we know they did go up into the air—then there are only two things possible as a theory—one is, that they came down by forced descent, or else that they came down by their own free will and accord. It is untenable to think that they have not come down at all, unless—unless, of course, they were caught up in the grip of some strange meteorological disturbance and swept upwards and away. But even then, they must come down eventually. Let me see, Palmer, you have been here every day this week, haven't you?"

Palmer nodded.

"Yes, every day for a month."

"Then tell me, what was the flying weather like each day? My memory tells me that each day for a week has been perfect, but I might be mistaken."

"You are not mistaken, Lee. This spell has lasted for over ten days."

"Then if there was any sort of meteorological disturbance, it certainly was not visible from the earth," mused Lee.

"Another thing," broke in Darwin, "they did not disappear on the same day, but one man each day. This is the second day since Wills went up, and no more men have disappeared from here; but, in the meantime, two have gone from Buc. It is funny."

"I wonder if they have come down," said Dunne, pulling at his Charlie Chaplin moustache. "Mr. Lee says they either came down of their own free will or by forced descent. Well, it strikes me if they came down by their own free will they would take pains to communicate with some of us at once. They would know how worried we would be. Then, again, if they came down by forced descent and were not killed, they would do the same. But I don't believe they came down by an accident. I could have believed it if one or two were missing, but five—no, I can't believe that."

"There is something in what Dunne says," remarked Palissier. "Three from Hendon and two from Buc—I can't understand it. It is what you call almost supernatural."

"You seem busy thinking, Lee," said Williamson. "What is your opinion?"

Lee lit a cigarette, and allowed his hand to run along one of the staves of the monoplane.

"On the face of it, it would seem that the steps already taken ought by now to have brought news of at least one of them. Everything possible has been done. The police and coastguards have been notified, every newspaper in the kingdom knows they are missing, people all over the British Isles are on the look-out for a smashed machine, and every ship carrying wireless knows that one or more machines may have been blown out to sea.

"There is one possibility, and that is that they may have dropped into the sea and been picked up by a sailing ship or a tramp which is not equipped with wireless. That might answer for one or even two of them; but for five—no, it is not possible. Therefore, it strikes me that, since all earthly means have been tried, there remains only one thing to do?"

"What is that, Lee?" asked Palmer.

"Why," responded Lee, as he knocked the ash from his cigarette, "to go up and try to follow the trail in the air."

"Wills tried that, and see what happened?" said Darwin.

"Besides, the boys are suffering with nerves," put in Williamson.

"I'll wager every man in the place would go up if he thought it would solve the mystery," said Dunne. "I'm game, for one."

"And I!" "And I!" "And I!" "And I!" put in man after man.

"There is one thing about Wills's trip which we have not considered," said Lee. "Wills went up with the firm conviction in his mind that Cameron and Pritchard had fallen to earth or into the sea. We know a little more now than he did about it. For instance, he, too, is gone, and we know that two more men have disappeared from Buc. We have discussed it as far as we are able. We know that not a word or a sign has come from one of the missing men. We are able to suspect at least that something of a very mysterious nature has happened—that perhaps these disappearances are due to some powerful outside agency—what, of course, we don't know.

"But, as I remarked before, we are better armed than was Wills, and I think there is only one thing to do, and that is to go up. I came out here this morning to go up in my monoplane. And my plans will not be altered materially by what I have heard since my arrival. The only alteration will be that, where I intended to go up for a short flight, I shall go up with the definite intention of trying to fathom the mystery.

"I shall fly south, and I shall leave myself open to any impressions which may come. You will all know that I am on the look-out, and you may all expect to hear from me—if nothing happens to me. I think one machine to go is wiser than several. But I would suggest that several machines be kept ready here, in case I send word of any kind to you. On the other hand, I shall probably fly for several hours and come back as wise as when I left."

After some discussion Lee's suggestion was agreed to, and both mechanics and airmen set to, to go over every inch of the monoplane. Every strut and stay was examined and adjusted, the planes were gone over by the most experienced hands in the flying world.

The engine was inspected by the eyes of experience, and the tank and spare were filled as well. Oil was attended to, and tuning was done by Lee and Palmer. The locker was examined to see if all the maps were there, and the grub-locker filled with concentrated but nourishing food, which would last for several hours. Two huge Thermos flasks with hot tea were placed in the grub-locker, and then, when half a dozen voices pronounced everything as right as it could be, Nelson Lee and Nipper began to don their flying clothes.

The monoplane was wheeled out from the hangar, and when Nipper had settled into his seat Lee climbed into the cockpit. Nipper was to act as observer, Lee as pilot. Then the engine was started, and for five minutes Lee let it run smoothly. It could not have run more sweetly—not a kick, not a backfire, not a whimper.

Then, with a wave of his hand, Lee jerked his helmet lower, and sent the monoplane running down the ground until she had gathered sufficient speed for the lift. As he circled above the aerodrome, climbing higher and higher each moment, he caught fleeting glimpses of the upturned faces below him. Then when he was at the thousand-feet level, he shot away to the south, and his last vision of Hendon was a score of waving hands bidding him good luck.

He did not remain at the thousand-foot level for long. He climbed first to the two thousand-foot level, then he made the three, and left it. Nipper had the glass-covered map-case swung round in front of him, and was studying the course as they went. Lee was heading first for Brooklands.

Fifteen minutes flying had left Hendon far, far behind. Beneath them

towns and villages and hamlets went by in a succession of browns and greys and greens, with the high hills and the shaded valleys showing up in high lights and half-tones.

Here and there the sun sparkled on a river as it trickled along lazily, and as they crossed a main road they could see the wheeled traffic on it looking like toys in a toy world. Once more Lee began to climb, and when the barograph showed four thousand feet he let it remain there.

Nearly half an hour had passed since they had left Hendon, and he was getting ready to watch out for Brooklands, when suddenly his attention was caught by a sharp sign from Nipper.

The lad was not looking down, nor to either side, but up. Lee pushed back the front of his helmet with one hand, and gazed in the direction indicated. For a moment he could see nothing, then suddenly he caught sight of a shape several hundred feet above them.

It appeared to be flying in the same direction as they, but such a machine Lee had never seen before. His own racing monoplane was not a large machine. In fact, she was one of the smallest to be found, but what she lacked in size she made up in power and spread of wing.

She was in reality almost a pure scouting machine, with small body, powerful engine, and graceful wings. As a slow-moving machine she would not do. She had to go at a great speed.

But this other machine which had suddenly appeared from out the ether was smaller even than Lee's. She appeared to be almost a toy as she sped swiftly on ahead of them, but no toy, as Lee could see. The strangest thing about her, however, was her colour, if colour it could be called.

She appeared to be of a pale silvery blue shade, a shade which at a very short distance would fade into the ether and become a part of it. Lee reckoned that at a thousand feet, or perhaps even less, she would be absolutely invisible from the earth, and even if it were cloudy the colour would have the same property.

What machine it could be, or where from, he could not imagine. That it wasn't from Hendon he was certain. Such a monoplane would have caused no little talk about the hangars, and Lee had heard nothing. She might be from Brooklands or from one of the flying schools elsewhere.

Also there was a possibility that she was privately owned. Lee watched her while she sped on ahead of them, and then, in a desire to see which was the faster machine, he let his own racing monoplane out a little.

For a while they seemed to run about the same pace, then the other machine gradually drew ahead, and Lee increased the speed once again. He was now going over ninety miles an hour; but the other appeared to have little difficulty in keeping ahead. Lee was chagrined.

He jammed on more speed still, until the indicator crept up slowly to the hundred mark, passed it, and did not stop until it showed a hundred and sixteen miles. At this Lee began to overhaul the other a little, and he was just congratulating himself that he had her measure, when she went through a sudden change of level which caused him to utter an exclamation of anger.

To understand just what it was the other machine did, it is necessary to remember that Lee was travelling on the four thousand-foot level, and that the other machine was about four hundred feet above him, as well as a third of a mile ahead of him. On those levels things were all right, but now the silvery blue machine suddenly dived to Lee's level, and as Lee's monoplane swept on it appeared that they must crash.

In fact, as the other machine righted itself on the four thousand-foot level, Lee shifted his own lever and made to dive for safety. The monoplane tilted ever so slightly, and they were already beginning to slide down, when suddenly at the rear of the other machine ~~there~~ appeared a small puff of smoke, and the next instant Lee's monoplane side-slipped slightly as something struck it.

Lee was aware of a faint jar, which had been sufficient to cause the side-slip, then something about as large as a cricket-ball, though soft and of a white colour, fell into the cockpit.

It rolled on the bottom just between him and Nipper, and, following that, the machine was filled with a strong, sweet, sickly odour, which crept into their nostrils and filled their senses.

So occupied had Lee been, first with the race, then with anger at the reckless move of the other machine, that for the time being he had forgotten all about the real object of his flight. But now, with the thudding of that odd-looking white ball in the cockpit of the monoplane, his thoughts went back sharply to the men who were missing, and instinctively he knew that this other machine had something to do with their disappearance.

Realising that danger lay in the presence of that white ball in the cockpit, he signed quickly to Nipper to pick it up and throw it away. It was much nearer to Nipper than to Lee. But to Lee's astonishment Nipper only replied by a fatuous smile.

Angry with the lad for his non-understanding, Lee bent himself to pick up the ball, but, even as he bent over, the sweet, sickly odour drove deeper into his senses, and the next moment he had straightened up, wearing as fatuous a smile as Nipper wore, and suddenly not at all anxious to throw the ball out.

What had happened to the pair of them? No one could have tried harder to probe that than Lee. Moreover, he was absolutely conscious of all that was transpiring about him.

He knew that he and Nipper were in the monoplane, and he knew that there was another machine just ahead of them. He remembered perfectly why he had come out that day, and in his conscious thought his determination to solve the mysterious disappearances of the airmen was clear as ever.

He knew that he had never before seen such a type of machine as the silver blue one ahead, and he knew, further, that it must have had something to do with the mystery of the air. Yet with all this conscious understanding and determination, he was as a ship without a rudder.

He was provided with all the accoutrements necessary for navigation, but he could not navigate himself. One thing was missing, which to the human being is like the rudder to the ship—the will to do. That was what was gone, and not only was it gone in Lee, but it was gone in Nipper as well.

Being nearer to the ball which had been hurled into the machine, and also being less mentally mature than Lee, Nipper had succumbed more quickly than his master. Hence the lad's fatuous smile when Lee had signed to him to pick up the ball and throw it out. Consciously, Lee was as two personalities.

One was a helmeted figure bending over the steering-wheel of the machine with a fatuous smile on his face, guiding the monoplane in the wake of the strange machine ahead, utterly at the mercy of the weird stuff which had crept into and overpowered his senses.

The other was the cool, calculating brain of Nelson Lee, watching himself with anger, seeing his own actions with chagrin, yet utterly powerless

to stop himself. The scientists tell us that the brain of man is divided into two layers, so to speak, the outer layer being the one susceptible to all direct sensation to feeling, to memory, to *volition*, the inner being the sub-conscious area or thought area, either conscious or sub-conscious.

It was as though the outer brain, the brain of *volition*, were helpless to function, while the inner was aware of the paralysis of the other, yet was helpless to alter the condition. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what was wrong.

Lee knew, Lee could see, Lee could feel, but to save his life he could not dominate his own actions. They were being controlled by the sweet, sickly-smelling drug which had been expressed from the ball. Of one thing only was his *volition* capable—and that was to send the message to his nerves that the monoplane must be driven in the wake of the other.

Nipper was equally helpless. He sat in the observer's seat smiling foolishly and staring straight ahead of him like one in a trance. So they tore on and on and on through the air, the monoplane registering nearly a hundred and twenty miles an hour, yet neither of them aware of the fact.

Ahead of them at the same distance always, was the silvery-blue machine which had dropped out of the ether, and which in such strange fashion was dominating their movements—or, it would be more correct to say, carried the being who did.

What part of the country they were travelling over, Lee could not tell. How fast or how far they were going he did not know. His functioning brain was filled with but one idea, and that to follow the other machine. He was conscious, though, some time later, of the gleam of water showing ahead, and then, as the machine in front dived downwards, Lee did likewise.

At the three thousand foot level they travelled for some time longer, then another dive followed, and finally the machine in front began to volplane. Lee did not attempt to do otherwise. As though he had been commanded and was obeying, he volplaned with the monoplane and dropped lower, and lower, until he was able to make out a wide sandy beach beneath.

With mechanical care he picked out a possible landing-place, noticing as he did so, that the other machine had already come to earth. The last five hundred feet took a few seconds, then shutting off his engine at the psychological moment, Lee brought the monoplane to the sand in masterly fashion.

It ran ahead for a little way, carried on by its own *volition*, then it stopped. Lee stirred himself and made to get out. Nipper had already risen and was clambering over the side with the foolish smile still on his face.

It angered Lee, for he knew that his own lips were parted as satuously. Yet he could not chide the lad for doing what he himself was doing, and the fact that he could not control his own facial expression made him more angry than ever—made that part of him angry which understood, and yet which was powerless to assert itself.

Nipper had dropped to the sand, and Lee was just lowering himself, when, from the other machine two men ran towards them. Lee dropped beside Nipper and stood waiting. Inwardly he was telling himself that he would have an understanding with them, and demand to know what they had done.

Inwardly he was seething with anger, but outwardly—outwardly he was smiling inanely. He and Nipper, as they stood there, must have presented a strange spectacle, yet if they noticed it, the two men who ran up, gave no sign. Instead, they moved in close to the two.

Lee was fighting with all his power to stop his facial contortion and to speak. But try as he would, he could not do so. A straight fight of the thing and in some minutes he would have conquered, but now he was still too far under the influence of the strange drug to overcome it, and before he could do so, he felt a stunning blow on the back of the head. He dropped to the sand without a sound, and down beside him went Nipper, the fatuous smile still frozen on his face.

Hendon was to have still another mystery that night.

CHAPTER II.

Strange Surroundings—Nelson Lee Wonders if He is Mad—"Where am I?"

NIGHT. Overhead the great inky dome of the sky spangled with a million constellations and gleaming superbly clear. Deep, deep black on the horizon. The night wind of the desert blew gently down from the hinterland, bringing with it the age-old smell of the camels and the desert, and the children of the desert.

In one direction, stretching into the mystery country from which the night breeze came, was a dim brooding perspective, deep and strange and impenetrable. To right and left in a great sweep it went until it fringed the wide roll of another desert—the sea.

No light but the stars—no voice but the voice of the sea and the wind. Yet it was full of the voice of the desert—the soul of the past, the brooding sphinx of memory.

It was the spot where the desert thrusts one dusty foot into the sea—where the sea laps greedily at the sand. It was the meeting of waste and waste. It was like the first parting of land and water.

Was there no other voice? Over to the right in a tiny oasis there suddenly came the grunt of an animal. It was symbolic of the desert, the grunt of a camel. Then followed the protesting grunts of another and another, and then the low sibilant voice of a man.

Beneath the shelter of the oasis, a small caravan was resting. Camels there were and curtained litters and a few horses. The caravan had been drawn up in a semi-circle, with the rampart towards the desert and the open bow towards the sea. The pinched, scraggy palms, with their leaves wind blown, painted a ragged tracery against the starlit sky.

A night bird, not to be driven away, suddenly hooted from one of the trees. The horses stirred nervously as the sand ticks got to work. A man coughed—the faint voice of a woman rose gently, only to drop into silence as a man spoke harshly.

Through the gloom, a white-robed figure—a figure in a long white burnous, strode among the litter of animals and sleeping men, and with a curt foot stirred the sleepers into wakefulness. Above two figures lying prone and cramped beneath the outer fringe of palms, the man in the white burnous paused and stared down in silence.

Had it been light enough, one might have seen a smile—a strange, inscrutable smile, yet a smile that held a medley of hatred and contempt and impatience in it, upon his thin lips. His face was indistinct—it was as one with the night. Only the white of the burnous permitted any shade of contrast at all, and by it, one could just make out that it was the face of an Arab, dark and aquiline, with strong hooked nose and deeply cleft chin.

The eyes were the eyes which Omar might have written of—they were the eyes of the desert, with all the spirit of the inscrutable desert in them.

They were the eyes the Sphinx might have had before it became the statue of the dead past. Suddenly, with a vicious motion, he lifted one foot and drove it into the ribs of one of the sleeping figures.

"Arise, dog!" he snarled in Arabic. Then in English he added: "Get up, dog, the night is here."

The figure stirred and sat up. It was a figure strangely incongruous to its surroundings. No burnous did it wear—no turban with the green of the pilgrim showed upon the head. And yet there was a turban of sorts—a turban strange to the land of turbans.

It was a close-fitting helmet such as an airman might wear, and the garments which draped the figure were the garments of an airman. The figure got stiffly to its feet and watched indifferently while the other was kicked into wakefulness. When they were both standing up the Arab walked away muttering something which, if the pair heard it, they did not comprehend.

The taller of the two passed a hand across his brow and gazed stupidly at the sea and the sand. Slowly, dazedly, he tried to orient himself. He knew that he had been asleep, and he knew that he had dreamed. His dreams had been a strange panorama of thoughts and impressions, all a gigantic hotch-potch of madness.

He retained but a vague notion of them, yet one idea was even then pounding through his brain. His every dream had been one of movement, of colour. His last conscious impression had been one of sand and sea, and now, when his dreams were over, he found the sand and the sea again.

That much he understood, but what had happened. Who was he? And where was he? Why was he there? Slowly and with mental stress he gradually decided that he was Nelson Lee. There he stopped until his groping mind was able to connect up the threads of what had happened. Then it came to him.

He had left Hendon that day to seek the missing airmen. Now he recalled the strange machine which had dropped out of the ether above, and which he had followed. He remembered the puff of white smoke at the tail of the other machine, and recollected the ball which had hit his own monoplane and dropped into the cockpit.

Then this figure beside him must be Nipper. Slowly Lee turned and laid a hand across the lad's shoulder. Nipper was still deep in confused mental wanderings, and while he waited for the lad's mind to clear, Lee continued his own mental exertions.

Bit by bit, step by step, he recalled that mad race through the air while he was helpless to stop himself. Then he remembered the point where he had landed on the beach and had been struck down. That was early in the afternoon, and now it was night.

He must have been lying unconscious for several hours. Yet the influence of the drug had now gone, and he was master of his own actions. As he realised this, a great anger surged through him, and he moved as though to seek the man who had woke him. But then he paused and sniffed. What was that odour?

He had come to the beach in some part of England, yet never in England had he ever come upon that odour. He sniffed again and again. Then turning slowly, he surveyed the sea and the great desert. He had come down on sand and at the edge of the sea. Here was sand and here was the edge of the sea. But that odour? What was it? What did it remind him of?

On his consciousness broke the grunt of the camels, and he turned with

puzzled brow. Well he knew the sound—often had he heard it in Egypt, in Tripoli, in the desert and Morocco. Yet never had he heard it in England. Then was he mad, or did he hear the grunt of a camel here on the coast of England?

A moment later the tall figure of the Arab in the white burnous approached again, and, bending forward, Lee studied him as well as the dim light would permit.

"Come!" ordered the Arab curtly, and, more with a desire to understand this utterly strange position than anything else, Lee touched Nipper's arm and obeyed. Nipper had been doing some mental gymnastics on his own, for as they moved across the sands towards the shadowy line of the caravan, the lad whispered:

"What does it mean, sir? That was an Arab who spoke to us, and there are camels. I—I don't understand it, guv'nor."

"Steady, my lad," said Lee softly. "I don't understand it myself yet, but we may soon. Say nothing, but keep your eyes open."

Lee could now see the line of litters which had been set on the ground near to the end of the caravan, and beyond them again, a small fire had been lit. On the night air there rose the undoubted odour of "kous-kous," the ubiquitous Arab dish, and then Lee knew that he was not mad.

Arabs and litters, horsed and burnoused men, suddenly became deadly real to him. For a little while he had thought he must be dreaming a very vivid dream—that eventually he would wake to find himself on the beach where he had come to earth. He had almost forced himself to believe that this dream was one a little more vivid than the others—that the beach and sand were real enough in the dream, because he had seen them, but that the Arab, the camels and the horses, were but a figment of the imagination.

It was the smell of the "kous-kous" that cleared his sanity and understanding. Whatever had happened—however it had happened, it was fact, and not dream. He was in the midst of a small oasis, and apparently, part of an Arab caravan.

Yet reason told him it could not be. That he had been influenced by some strange drug while flying he knew to be so. And that he had been knocked unconscious on the beach where he had come to earth, he knew to be so. But what part had that with his presence in a small oasis at the edge of the desert, where camels and litters and Arabs and horses moved and had their being?

Was that so? Or was he mad? For a moment Lee went cold at the thought that perhaps the drug had stolen away his reason. Yet once again he chided himself for his foolishness. He could not be mad. No madman could connect up the threads of things as he had just done.

And the odour of that "kous-kous" which was cooking—the smell of the desert brought down with the night wind—the shadowy forms of the camels, they were all real, and at last he knew it. Had it needed anything else to place his sanity upon its proper basis, it came a moment later when Nipper whispered once more:

"Guv'nor, is it all real? Do I see these things in reality? Or am I mad?"

Lee squeezed Nipper's arm reassuringly.

"They are real enough, my lad," he whispered. "But I myself do not understand yet. Do as I told you."

There was time for no more then, for the Arab in the white burnous had turned, and with a grunt, he indicated places on the ground where they should sit. Nipper followed Lee's example and sat down without protest.

Then another Arab in ragged garments placed an earthenware bowl in front of him. It was nearly full of "kous-kous," and to his surprise, Lee

found that not only was he hungry and could eat the mess, but that he actually enjoyed it. A small earthenware bowl of water was placed beside them next, and they drank greedily.

Then at a command from the Arab, who seemed to be the one in sole charge of the caravan, they rose to their feet and walked across to where the horses stood.

"Get up!" the Arab commanded.

Lee and Nipper did so. They sat in their strange saddles watching the preparations for departure. Lee counted the number of camels, the number of horses, and the number of litters. He tried as best he could to make out the number of men, but that was difficult.

He nor Nipper made no attempt to escape. What good would it have done? Lee did not even know in what part of the world they were. He saw sand before him, and knew it was a desert. He saw Arabs, and camels, and horses, and had eaten "kous-kous." That was sufficient to tell him that he was probably in some part of northern Africa. But was it Egypt, was it Tripoli, was it Algiers, was it Morocco, or was it the Rio de Oro? Lee could not even guess.

By the stars he could find the north, and discovered it to be seawards, not directly seawards, but at an angle. That, however, enlightened him not at all, for they might conceivably be on the shore of the bay of which the line was curved. Was that heaving sea beyond the Mediterranean, or perchance was it the Red Sea? Could it be the Atlantic or was it the Indian Ocean?

If it were the Red Sea, then he must be upon some part of the coast of Arabia or the eastern shore of the Libyan Desert. If it were the Indian Ocean, then he must be on the coast of Somaliland. If it were the Mediterranean, then he must be on the north coast of Africa, and if the Atlantic, it would follow that he was on some part of the coast of Morocco or Rio de Oro. But how could he tell? How could he even guess? And if he were in any of those places, how did he get there?

Wisely he determined to wait before fatiguing his mind further with vain conjecture. He would watch every movement of the caravan and deduce what he could. Yet what worried him even more than the manner of his getting there, was the why of it all.

Lee had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of Arabic. He had travelled extensively in the near east, and had journeyed the whole north coast of Africa. More than one case had taken him to savage spots in the Arab world, and in the course of years he had got to know something of the different accents and idioms of the North African.

Therefore, while using his eyes closely while the caravan prepared to move, he kept his ears open as well. What talk there was was brief and in low tones. Of the man who was the undoubted leader, Lee could make little. He might have learned his Arabic in Constantinople, or Cairo, or Algiers. It was cultured and not indicative of any particular locality. It was not through him that Lee would get a clue.

But as the camels were prepared for the move, and the litters shifted into line, the Arabs of necessity drew nearer to where Lee sat astride the sturdy little Arab horse, and now and then he caught snatches of conversation. At first he was puzzled. Vaguely he thought the accent sounded like that of Tangier, but then there was a burr in it, which he had seldom heard in Tangier. There was less of the Moorish influence in it, and the difference in timbre he could only put down to the influence of a locality which he did not know.

Yet there was something tantalisingly familiar in the tones and gestures, and into the multi-coloured past Lee delved patiently. From Damascus to

the Canaries he roamed in mind, and from Cairo to Khartum, from Mombasa to the Nile, and from Tangier to Fez, and even on to Timbuctu, and then suddenly the truth flashed upon him.

Years back he found the key, found it in the remembrance of a once daring and hazardous trip he had made up the Gambia through the fever-haunted swamps of Gambia, and out through that mystery country to the Senegal, coming down the Senegal and once more reaching the coast. It was there he had heard this same coarser timbre of Arabic.

More closely than ever Lee listened now, and at the end of another half hour he had decided one point of the riddle. He would have staked his life that he was somewhere on the west coast of Morocco, or Rio de Oro, or Senegal, but where in all those leagues of little known coastline, he could not even guess.

Nevertheless, it helped him more than a little to have this much definite. Before, he had been as one landed on a new planet. He knew he was there, but in what part he had not been able to fathom. The next step was to figure out why he was there. All idea of brainstorm had departed. He knew that his present situation was no dream to be dispelled by the sun of awakening.

In some way, which he could not understand, he had been overwhelmed by a drug while in mid air, and had been brought to earth somewhere on the seashore of England. From that moment, until he awoke to find himself on another seashore in a strange land, everything was a blank.

But Lee shrewdly guessed now that he and Nipper had been kept drugged for probably many days. They had been forcibly transported to the west coast of Northern Africa. Puny indeed did these facts seem in comparison with the greater mystery surrounding them, but Lee saw nothing therein to discourage him.

If his surmise was right, then he was getting on. He knew, too, that no purpose would be served by making any reckless dash for liberty. If they were where he thought they were, then such an act would be madness. Even if he and Nipper did succeed in getting away from their present captors, they would either fall into the hands of worse people, or die of thirst and starvation in the desert.

Seawards there was no hope. And since such care had been taken to bring them safely such a distance, then it seemed a sensible deduction that for the present, at least, their lives were not in danger. Reason told Lee to acquiesce to the orders of the tall Arab who seemed in command, and to trust to the future. Since reason was backed up by necessity, Lee yielded.

He took the first opportunity to whisper his decision to Nipper, and then, with the raucous cry of the night bird still ringing in their ears, the long line of the caravan drew out from the tiny oasis where it had rested.

If they had been travelling by caravan long, Lee did not know. As a matter of fact, they had not. He and Nipper had been landed on the beach within a hundred yards of the oasis, and this was but the start of the long caravan journey which they were to make.

Half of the camels were driven on ahead, and then came the litters. Now Lee was sufficiently conversant with conditions in that part of the world to know that the litters either contained personages of high rank, old men, or women. But in the present instance he did not know what the litters might contain—not yet.

Next to the litters came the rest of the camels. In the main line of the caravan were none of the horses. On the right hand side of the leading camels went three mounted Arabs, then came Lee—it was the seaward side—and then three more mounted Arabs.

On the other side of the caravan the order was the same, only there Nipper occupied a place equivalent to Lee's. Such a formation meant that for the present, at least, Lee and Nipper would have no opportunity for conversation.

The Arab in command was mounted on a superb horse, and seemed to be here, there, and everywhere, though his official position in the caravan was in the lead. Thus they started, and in a few minutes, with the camels lumbering slowly along, the little oasis was but a purple blur against the desert and sea behind. Ahead of them was nothing but waste, and again more waste.

They travelled all night, and at daybreak came to another oasis, as like the first one as one pea is like another. If there was any particular reason for travelling at night and resting by day, Lee didn't know it. Certainly there appeared no danger of being seen, if that was the fear of the Arab, for it seemed that neither man nor beast could be roaming anywhere in that sandy expanse.

Now that the sun was up, Lee used his eyes to still better advantage. He could see distinctly the features of the Arabs, and his scrutiny confirmed him in his surmises of the night before. At sea not a sail showed, and out in the Atlantic—if it were the Atlantic—the weather must have been beautifully calm, for scarcely any ground swell was coming in.

For miles and miles and miles, clear to the horizon of his view, and on three sides of the outlook, there was nothing but rolling brown sand stretching away like some petrified ocean of the past. But to the east, seeming a part of the distant haze, he caught sight of higher billows of purple, which he shrewdly guessed were mountains, or at least, the foothills of mountains.

A more deserted, a more desolate spot it would be almost impossible to find, but judging from the oasis which they struck, it seemed that a caravan route at least must run there.

After a meal of the inevitable "kous-kous," Lee and Nipper were ordered into a small hide tent—one of several which had been put up. They obeyed, and after a few minutes' whispered conversation, in which Lee cheered the lad up, they rolled over on their blankets and dozed off.

The sun was just past the zenith, when Lee awoke to find an Arab standing in the opening to the tent. He made signs that they were to get up, and on emerging, they found preparations were being made to move once more. Another meal followed, but this time they were each given a handful of dates as well as the "kous-kous." They found, too, that they were not to leave as soon as they thought, for it was, Lee judged, well past four before the caravan once more lumbered on its way.

Evening found them at another small oasis, where they paused to water the horses and to have another brief meal. It was here, too, that Lee had an experience which gave him a little further insight into the human composition—an experience which ended disastrously, so far as he was concerned.

He and Nipper, in common with the Arabs, had gathered round the fire, and had received their portions of "kous-kous." No objection was offered when they took the food away to eat by themselves, and the spot Lee chose was just beneath a ragged palm, close to the spot where their horses were tethered.

The swift tropic night had fallen, and already the brilliant stars were a-gleam, being reflected in long shimmering lines of light from the glistening sands of the desert. A small hide tent had been erected for the Arab in command, and from it a light shone. The others were all gathered about the fire talking in low tones and waiting for the word to move on.

Lee and Nipper had finished their food, and Lee was sampling the qualities of a very rough looking cigar which the Arab in command had given him, when suddenly a waving bit of white caught his eye, and looking more closely, he discovered it to be a white-clad arm waving from between the curtains which hung over one of the litters.

"Look, sir," whispered Nipper, "there is someone waving from that litter. And I believe it is meant for us."

Lee did not reply, but laying down the cigar in the sand, he peered forward silently. The arm had been withdrawn now, and a moment later he saw the reason. The Arab in command had emerged from his tent and was walking towards the fire. He spoke to one of the men there for a few moments, then returned to the hide tent and dropped the flap behind him.

Lee still watching the litter, saw the white-clad arm appear once more, and saw it wave slowly up and down. The fact that it had been withdrawn while the Arab was near, was proof that it was surreptitious, and with a word of caution to Nipper, he rose and began to make his way across the little patch of sand which separated him from the litter.

Though the distance was scarcely more than twenty feet, he had to use every caution, for the men around the fire might see him at any moment. But he found as he got closer to the litter, that a small clump of palms intervened between him and the fire, and with two long strides he was close to the litter. There was no sign of the arm now, but bending down to the curtains, he whispered:

"What is it? Did you motion to me?"

The curtains parted a trifle, and Lee got one fleeting glimpse of a white face framed by a heavy veil, which had been thrown back.

"Oh! monsieur, do you speak French?" came the whispered reply.

"Yes—yes," answered Lee in French.

"Then tell me, monsieur, I beseech you, what does it all mean? Where are we going? Why am I—why are you a prisoner, for I can see that you are."

"I cannot answer that," said Lee hurriedly, "for I do not know myself. But tell me, who are you?"

"My name is Marinier, monsieur. I am the daughter of a French planter outside Algiers. I was seized there, monsieur, and drugged. I remember nothing more until I awoke in this curtained litter and found myself in an Arab caravan. Tell me, monsieur, are we far from Algiers? Is there no hope of escape? Can we not get word to my father?"

Lee shook his head.

"Listen, mademoiselle," he said quickly. "I cannot tell you much, for I know so little myself. I and the young man with me were captured in England, but how we were brought here I do not know. I have been trying to fathom what it means, but so far, I must confess, mademoiselle, it is all a mystery to me. But rest assured, as soon as I know I will seek a chance to speak to you and tell you."

"Then—then you will try to escape, monsieur?"

"Of course," answered Lee. "To try while we are moving would be madness. If we did get away we would not know which way to go."

"Monsieur, I beseech you, if you do try to escape, will you promise me you will, if possible, take me too?"

Lee bent down and took hold of a soft little hand.

"Mademoiselle, I pledge you my word as a Briton that, unless we can take you with us when we go, we shall not go at all. As far as lies in my power I shall watch over you, and communicate with you whenever possible."

"Oh, monsieur, you are good. I shall feel so much safer now. I have been living in a torture of fear."

"Then, mademoiselle, let me assure you——"

But Lee got no further. A heavy hand suddenly fell on his shoulder, whirling him round, and a hand caught him on the side of the head, which sent him reeling.

Lee did not pause to weigh matters. Through the gloom he saw the anger-distorted face of the Arab in command, and who must have slipped along quietly from his tent.

Recovering himself, Lee drove a hard left straight to the point of the jaw, and the Arab went down to stay down. But the scuffle had attracted the attention of the men by the fire, and even as Nipper started to his master's assistance a dozen men were piling upon Lee.

Lee fought hard, and with Nipper's assistance sent man after man down. The noble art of fisticuffs is not known to the Arab. He prefers to fight either with the knife, the gun, or the spear, and, truth to tell, he is no coward. Why some such weapon wasn't used at present Lee didn't know, unless it were because of what he had already surmised—they were not to be harmed physically.

With the Arabs clawing and scratching at them, and endeavouring to bear them down by sheer weight, Lee and Nipper, back to back, struck out time and again. Half their opponents were on the ground, and they bade fair to put the other half there, when suddenly into the circle leaped a big, dirty-looking Arab, wielding a heavy cudgel of wood.

He burst through the clawing mass of men, and brought the wood down with terrific force on Lee's head. Lee went down as though he had been poleaxed, and Nipper, turning to see what had happened, was just in time to take the second blow on his own head. He followed his master, and together they lay unconscious, while inside the litter the terrified French girl shivered and shook with fear.

Lee came to with water being sluiced over him. He sat up, and felt his head painfully, waving away the water, and then, as the Arabs turned their attention to Nipper, Lee looked up and saw the tall Arab he had knocked out bending over him.

There was nothing in the Arab's face to indicate any personal animosity against Lee, but Lee knew enough of the race to realise that underneath that mask there was a burning hatred for him. It must, indeed, have been a strong order which would cause the Arab to submerge the personal element as he had done.

"Can you grasp what I say?" he asked curtly.

Lee nodded painfully.

"Then, listen," went on the Arab, speaking in English. "I am going to give you your choice of two things. If you give me your parole that you will not again try to speak to anyone in the litters—if you will give me your parole that you will not again try to do anything such as you did to-night, I shall let you travel as you have been travelling. If you refuse, then I shall chain you and the lad together, and make you walk at the rear of the caravan. Take your choice. There is no other way."

Lee thought swiftly. To give his parole would mean that not until they had reached their destination would he be able to try to communicate with the girl in the litter. On the other hand, he would be equally as badly off chained to Nipper at the end of the caravan, and that would serve no good. Commonsense bade him give his parole, and he decided to do so.

"I will give you my parole that not until we are at our destination

"Will I make any further attempt to do what I did to-night," he said slowly.

"Very well. Then get up, for we must move on."

Nipper was now on his feet, but Lee had no further chance to speak to the lad, and five minutes later they were on their way once more.

CHAPTER III.

The Arrival—The Chief—Lee's Surprise—The Chief's Proposals—Lee Refuses—Another Surprise—A Second Refusal—The Last Chance.

A WEEK of terrible monotony passed by. Day after day was the same. On one side of them the illimitable stretch of water, on the other the terrible waste of brown rolling sandhills. Day after day the sun rose like a brazen globe, and night after night it went down at the edge of the water like a molten globe dropping into a grey infinitude.

The heat and the flies were terrible. The sand by midday grew as hot as a frying-pan. The whole universe seemed a vast oven, into which they had been hurled. Things tangible, things real, seemed of another world. Lee lost all sense of time, and civilisation seemed but a dream.

He grew to loathe the sight of the camels, and the constant smell of the caravan nauseated him. Nipper was listless, and took little interest in anything. He ate his food as one in a trance, and slept as one who has been drugged. Even the horses were visibly affected by the atmospheric conditions, but the camels and the Arabs seemed impervious to it all.

How the girl in the curtained litter might be Lee did not know. He had not seen a sign of her since the fatal night when he had been discovered. What the other litters might contain he could not even guess.

To a white man, to a man of action, it was a living death. Even at night there was little relief. Lee began to get grotesque notions in his head, and later, when comparing notes with Nipper, he found that the lad had been similarly affected.

He would lie on his back in the meagre shade of a small oasis, his eyes closed and smarting from the effect of the sand. Then his thoughts would go back to London, and to that fatal day when he had left Hendon to seek some clue of the missing aviators.

He wondered in these moments if Cameron and Pritchard and Wills had shared a similar fate. Then he would feel that there was nothing real about the past—that London, that Hendon, were but a figment of the mind, and that he was a conscious being condemned to wander for ever into wastes of sand.

It was proof that he was feeling a strong reaction from the strain, and that, sooner or later, his nerves must break. But then he would exert all his will to control his sanity of thought, and thus he kept on.

It was on the morning of the eighth day that a welcome change occurred. The sun had just risen in the east, and was casting its brazen rays slantingly over the desert, when, as they topped a small sandhill, they suddenly saw before them a group of buildings. So suddenly did they come upon it, so far from reality did buildings of man seem, that for a moment Lee and Nipper could only gape in amazement.

But then, as the fact burned itself in upon them that here, perhaps, was their destination, they felt a thrill of joy. Even were it a prison to which they were going, it would prove a welcome change to the desert, for while in a prison there might lie suffering, in the desert there lay madness.

With this realisation, Lee began to study that which lay before him. On surmounting the small sandhill they had reached what appeared to be the highest point in the immediate neighbourhood. Before them the land dropped away gradually until it reached a small, almost land-locked harbour, the outlines of which they could see distinctly from where they were.

To right and left of them the land dropped like a saucer, and, indeed, the whole buildings beneath seemed at the veritable bottom of a great sandy bowl. The town, if town it could be called, was not very large, nor did it look like the average Arab town to which Lee was accustomed.

In the very centre there was a huge white building much larger than the others, and this was surmounted by a square tower, having four domed points. Close to it they could see the dome of a small mosque, and surrounding these buildings were the others.

They were squat and square, with flat roofs guarded with high enclosures, much after the style of the ordinary Moorish building which one sees south of Tangier. Though fully a quarter of a mile distant, Lee could see what appeared to be the main road, running like an artery from one end of the place to the other, beginning at the desert and ending at the seashore, and he could see, too, that it appeared to be smooth and well-paved—very unlike the average Moorish road.

A number of other streets radiated out from the central plaza, where the largest building and mosque stood, and in the morning sunshine the town looked clean and wholesome.

The harbour was almost a perfect natural circle, with the land sloping gradually upwards on three sides, and guarded by a miniature Pillar of Hercules at the sea entrance. The opening, Lee reckoned, would be not over a hundred yards wide, and at the summit of each point he saw a circular stone erection, which for the moment puzzled him, but which he discovered were look-out towers as well as protection to certain machinery.

In the distance he could see several white-clad figures near the entrance to the mosque, but then he had time for no further survey, for the caravan moved on once more, and started to descend the hill towards the main artery of the town. As they drew nearer, Lee saw that the town was entered by means of high gateways, at the moment closed, and surmounted by two silent Arab sentinels.

As they drew nearer, however, the gates swung open, and as the first camel thrust its nose within a bugle sounded somewhere in the distance. Just inside the gate there was a narrow street, leading off to the right, and down this the camels were guided. Following them went the litter and the rearmost camels, but a sign from the Arab in command caused Lee and Nipper to draw up their horses and wait until the cavalcade passed them.

The last Lee saw of the litter bearing the French girl was the flapping of the curtains as the bearers followed in the wake of the camels. As the last camel disappeared from view the Arab in command spoke again, and with the others Lee moved along the main street. They passed many Arabs and Moors as they rode along, but scarcely a glance was thrown in their direction.

Passing many houses and then a large market, which was a mass of colour and movement, they came out into the main square of the town, and at last Lee and Nipper got a close view of the mosque and the largest building of all. This latter building was facing on the square—a vast, low, square building, constructed after the fashion of the old Moorish palaces.

The entrance to the courtyard was guarded by heavy gates, after the Moorish style, and before them now stood two armed Moors of gigantic proportions. With the same mysterious promptitude as before these gates swung open at their approach, and they rode into a courtyard which was almost blinding in its glare. There, at a sign from the Arab in command, Lee and Nipper dismounted, and for the first time for four days Lee felt glad that he had been provided with the long burnous of the Arab.

In fact, they did not look unlike their companions, so brown were their faces by now. The horsemen moved out of the courtyard again, but the leader remained, and at a gesture from him Lee and Nipper followed.

They approached another gate, topped by the inevitable Moorish arch, and, passing through, they came upon a marvellous scene—marvellous in its utter contrast to that which their eyes had fed on for days.

It was a veritable fairyland into which they had plunged. It was like the magic of the old tales in the Thousand and One Nights. On their left stretched a wide, pillared loggia, up which a profusion of vines climbed. Immediately before them was a vast terraced garden, dropping away in a medley of greens of all shades until the eye could not see the end.

To the right was a green-clad pergola, stretching along one side of the garden, and dotted about in the main terraces were splashing fountains, the water falling into deep octagonal basins. Through the trees Lee could just glimpse the cool waters of a stream, which wound through the garden. It was almost unbelievable.

One minute they had been in the blinding glare of the desert, and the next moment they were in fairyland. Lee drew a long breath of keen enjoyment, and turned to Nipper:

"What do you think of it, my lad?" he asked.

Nipper was ecstatic.

"It's just heaven, guv'nor,," he replied feelingly.

Their guide, for all his imperturbability, had stood in silent appreciation too, but now, as his prisoners spoke, he turned and ordered gruffly:

"Follow me."

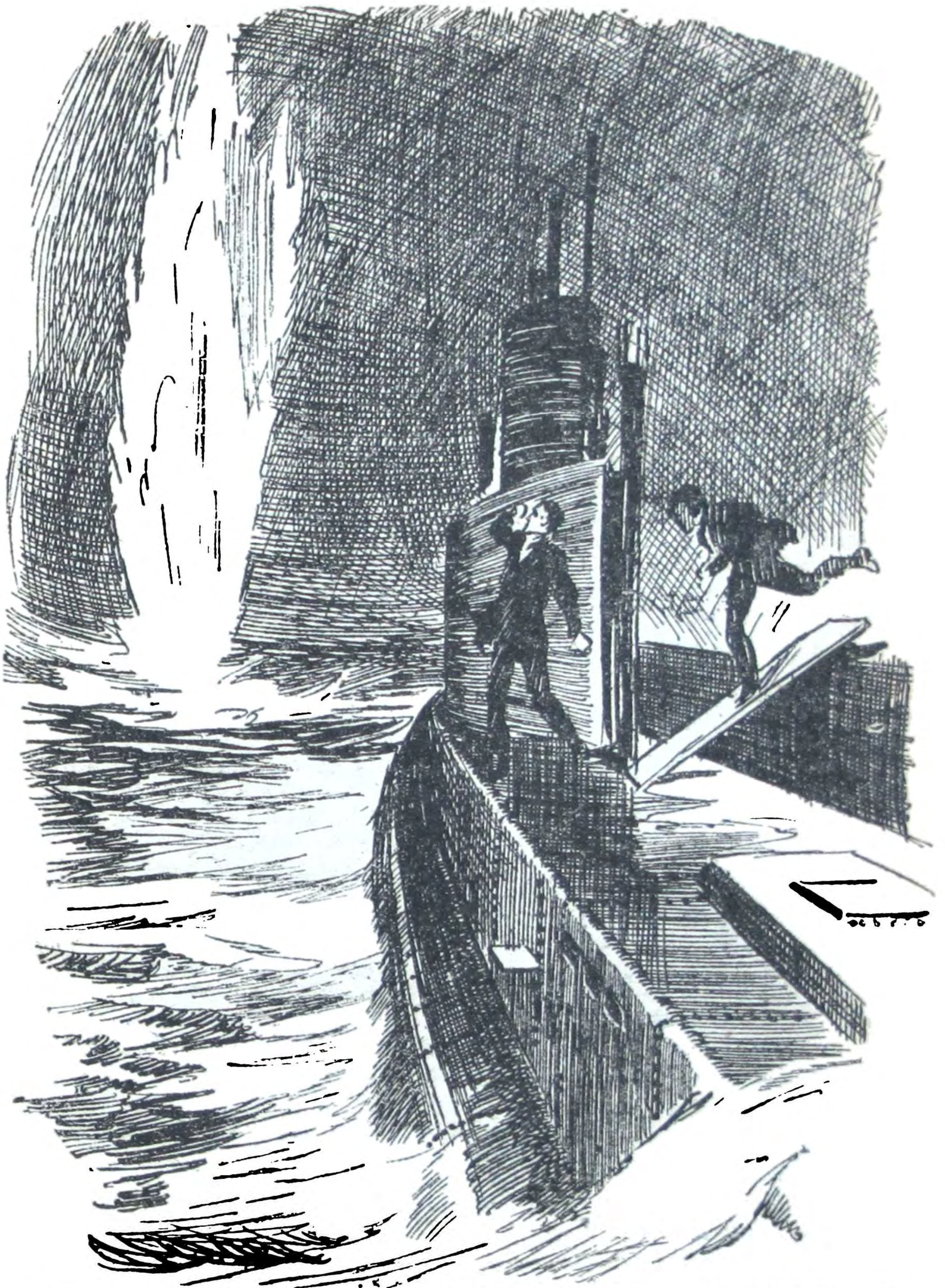
They dived into the cool shadow of the pergola, advancing along the dim perspective for what seemed an interminable length of time. Then suddenly their guide passed through a small opening on the left, and took a path bordering the stream. Along this they went for some time, until they came to a small avenue of palms, at the end of which they glimpsed a cool and shady-looking summer-house.

Straight towards this the Arab went, and as they drew closer they saw that the entrance to the place was guarded by two Moors. They passed the Arab without question, and, entering through the arched doorway, Lee and Nipper found themselves in a small loggia, which fronted on a green courtyard, in the centre of which a fountain was playing.

Now the Arab turned to the right, and as he did so Lee and Nipper saw along the loggia a man sitting. He was seated in a low, white wicker chair, beside a wicker table covered with a snowy cloth. On the table were coffee and rolls and bacon, and the picture of civilised comfort, coupled with the fragrant odour of the coffee, made their nostrils twitch.

Straight towards the man the Arab led them, but, pausing about ten feet away, he made a low obeisance. As he did so Lee coolly studied the man in the chair. To his surprise, he was neither Moor nor Arab. He was a white man, and he was dressed in the cool white duck of the civilised tropics.

His face was strong and angular, his eyes deeply set and steady, his



Nipper had reached the plank and was dashing over. Man after man followed him and, without a word, tumbled down the conning tower.—(See p. 37).

nose big and capable, his mouth scarcely concealed by an iron-grey moustache, and his chin square and aggressive.

His hair, like his moustache, was iron grey, and in age, Lee reckoned, he might have been anything between forty-five and sixty. He made a careless gesture as the Arab bowed low, then in fluent Arabic he spoke. Lee listened carefully, and gathered that a brief report of the journey of the caravan was being made. Then, saying:

"I will hear the rest later. You may go," the man in the chair dismissed the Arab.

Not until he disappeared from view did the man turn to Lee and Nipper. Coolly and impersonally he studied them both, then finally he turned to Lee, and in the English of a cultured man he said:

"Mr. Nelson Lee, I regret that it was necessary to bring you here by such uncomfortable means. I trust that your journey along the coast has not been an undue strain upon you."

Lee bowed.

"If I understood the reason for my being brought here, and if I knew what your purpose is now that you have got me here, I might be in a better position to reply to you," he said. "As for the journey——" and he shrugged.

"Then you are Mr. Nelson Lee?" went on the other.

Lee shrugged again.

"It is useless to deny it. You seem to know that already."

"I had heard it—I had heard it," responded the other, "but, of course, one can never be sure. Well, Mr. Lee, now that you are here, there is no reason why I should not tell you why I have had you brought here, though. I assure you, when you first fell into the hands of my men they did not know your identity. You were simply an airman. Does that tell you anything?"

Lee nodded.

"It throws some light on the disappearance of other airmen," he said coolly.

"Ah! That was what I expected you to say. And you are right. Tell me, Mr. Lee, how many disappearances do you know of?"

"Five," replied Lee shortly, "three from Hendon and two from Buc. My own makes the sixth."

"Dear me! But your absence from civilisation has put you most lamentably out of touch with things," remarked his host. "There have been several since then, Mr. Lee. Two more from Hendon, two from Brooklands, two from Buc, and three from the United States."

"That makes fifteen altogether," said Lee quickly.

"Your mental arithmetic is quite correct," rejoined the other with a smile. "And I trust, Mr. Lee, that you will prove more amenable than some of the others."

"I can answer that better when I know why I have been brought in this fashion to the west coast of Northern Africa," said Lee curtly.

A flicker of surprise showed in the eyes of his host.

"Ah! What makes you think you are on the west coast?" he asked slowly.

"I prefer not to answer that," rejoined Lee.

"As you will, of course, Mr. Lee. But now"—and as he spoke all levity departed from him—"I will tell you why I have taken such trouble to bring you and the others here. You are a man of discernment—more so than the average man. It was only accident that you should have been

one of those to fall into my hands, but, as things have turned out, I am not sorry.

"You will have been struck with some wonderment on seeing this town this morning. And well you may be, for I may tell you that not one person in Europe or America knows of its existence. Only the Sultan of Morocco knows of it, and of course a few Moors as well as the people who live here. It is less than five years old.

"Five years ago, Mr. Lee, there was nothing here but sand. To-day you see a town, a prosperous town, a clean town. Here, before you, you see a wealth of green where five years ago it was desert. You must agree with me that such could only be achieved by organisation and money.

"And now you will be asking yourself why? Why has this town been reared here secretly? I will tell you. It is the nucleus of an empire. It is the heart of what will one day be the power of western Morocco, of what will one day be a power in the world—not by its extent of population or the vast acreage of its lands, but because it will hold its place by the fear it creates.

"There are those who would call it all a dream—a fantastic dream at that. Those persons would be fools. In five years much has been accomplished. I have built slowly. It has been necessary. The town had to be built—my people had to be gathered together. Now that has been accomplished it is time for the next step, and that step is the one which will make us a power in the world.

"You may well ask what all these details lead to. You may say to yourself that I am foolish to speak to you so frankly. But you will soon see why I run no risk. You see about you a town—a good town, a clean town. You see my people, well fed, happy, and prosperous. You see a harbour—one of the finest in the world. The embryo is good, Mr. Lee. The ultimate achievement will be good, too.

"Here on this lonely spot I have begun to build up an ideal. Myself, I am a man of no country. My home is the world. In England I am an Englishman, in France a Frenchman, in Russia a Russian. My contention is that, with proper organisation and the will and the brain behind it, a nation can be built up on a sound basis, not the hotch-potch conglomeration of governments which exist to-day.

"But it is plain, too, that if a nation must live and have a voice in the great affairs of the world, it must command respect and fear of other nations. You may laugh when you regard my little town and hear me speak of commanding the respect and fear of such nations as Britain, France, and Russia. But there are means, as you will soon see—means whereby I and a few of my men could hold up the commerce and the industrial life of the greatest empire in the world. And now we come to our 'muttons,' as the French say.

"In gazing upon those who make up the chief population of my town, you will have noticed that they are mostly Moors and Arabs. I chose this spot, and I chose those people for reasons which I shall keep to myself. As the backbone of the new race I shall build up, they will serve.

"But, unfortunately, now that I am ready to go ahead with the next step in the making of my nation, I find that I cannot do without the brains and the training of Europeans. I could teach my people myself, but that would take too long. I could have hired men for my purpose, but therein was a risk.

"I gave a good deal of thought to the matter, Mr. Lee, and I decided that the best thing to do was to pick on the class of man I desired, then to

act. After a good deal of consideration, I came to the conclusion that the modern airman was the ideal man for the purpose I had in view. He has nerve, education, training, and is young and vigorous. Then the question was how to get them here.

"If I went to any number of them, and offered to hire them, they would demand to know why, and how, and where, and a dozen other questions, probably declining when they understood the truth. Therefore, nothing remained but to bring them here, willy nilly. Hence the mysterious disappearance of so many airmen. How that was done you yourself know.

"Every man who has disappeared has been brought safely here, and while they show a disinclination at present to meet my wishes, I have no doubt that soon they will begin to see reason. That brings us to the next point, Mr. Lee. I have been a little more explanatory to you because I know something of your profession—I know something of you, and I counted it a good omen when I was advised by cable that the two persons we bagged on a certain date were yourself and your assistant."

"Needless to say, I have to make to you the same offer which has been made to the others. Whether you accept it or not lies, of course, with yourself. I told you I was at the point where the next step in development must be taken. That step has to do with certain secret inventions of mine, which include a submarine such as Europe has never dreamed of, and an air power which will make the most modern airships look like toys.

"With these two arms I can strike deep into the heart of the greatest nation on earth and bring it to its knees. But among my people there are few capable of directing this sort of technical work. You and the others are capable of that, and, frankly, that is why you are here.

"If you accept my proposals, if you are willing to enter my service, you will be well paid materially, and I shall do all in my power to make your life here happy. You shall have a house worthy of your desires, you will have servants and every comfort. And, if you wish it, you will have wives. What more can I offer?

"As to the work, it is the directing of the construction of my aerial and submarine service according to the plans which I have made. That, Mr. Lee, is why you have been brought here, and that is the offer I have to make. What do you think of it?"

Lee had stood calmly listening to the long explanation of his host. The man had a curiously pleasant voice, and whatever thoughts Lee was beginning to have on the matter, he had to confess to himself that the man was neither a dreamer nor a madman.

A menace to the world he might be, but he had not embarked on such a colossal scheme without plenty of thought and, incidentally, plenty of money.

"There is, of course, an alternative?" said Lee, after a short pause.

"I thought you would mention that," said his host, "though, I must say, I am sorry you even think of an alternative. Yes, there is an alternative."

"Pardon me, I do not wish to appear melodramatic, but—is it death?"

"I shall not answer you just yet, Mr. Lee. If you refuse my offer, then I shall give you ocular demonstration of the alternative."

"Then I think I am ready," said Lee, "for of course I cannot accept your terms."

The other sighed a little, and rose. Then his jaw set grimly.

"Come then, Mr. Lee. Let me show you the alternative," he said.

He strode away without another word, and perforce Lee and Nipper

followed close behind. Instead of going the way they had come, their host led them across the courtyard of the summer-house and through an arched doorway, which led to the lower garden. Through this they went, then, passing by way of a low door in the high boundary wall of the place, they found themselves out in a small cross street.

The few Arabs and Moors who were passing saluted reverently as the "king" of the place passed among them, and, as the way led through street after street, always mounting, Lee was shrewd enough to see that this strange man, whoever he might be, held his people in the hollow of his hand. Nor, judging by what he saw, did Lee think his rule was one of cruelty.

The attitude of the people was one of trust, and love, and respect. In fact, Lee himself felt strangely drawn to this strange being. They mounted upwards, until they came to a narrow lane, which led past the last line of buildings, and then suddenly debouched into a stone quarry.

Standing on the lip of the quarry, the man in white pointed down into the huge crater, where about two score men were toiling under the heat of the sun. Most of them were Arabs and Moors, but there were a few—five, Lee counted—who were white men.

"Most of these," said his guide softly, "are my own people, who had sinned against the laws. That is their punishment. It is but just. But there are five there, Mr. Lee—Ah! I see that you have recognised them. Three of them are Britons, and two are Frenchmen.

"Three of them are the airmen who disappeared from Hendon before you disappeared. The other two I captured at Buc—or, at least, my emissaries captured. It was all very simple. Unfortunately for them, Mr. Lee, they refused my proposals. They accepted the alternative. That is the alternative.

"I do not flatter myself that every man who first accepts the alternative will eventually yield, but I know human nature, and I know that I shall get a fair percentage of them. What man in his senses would continue in such suffering when he might have every comfort? Now, Mr. Lee, you know what acceptance has to give you, and you know what refusal means? Are you prepared to answer my question?"

Nelson Lee and Nipper stood looking down into the roasting pit of stone and gravel, where, stripped to the waist, they could see Cameron and Pritchard and Wills with the two Frenchmen toiling under that terrible sun.

It filled them with a thrill of pride to know that patriotism could so fill a man's breast that he would go through any suffering rather than do what he thought would bring menace to his own country. Not one of them had been weighed and found wanting, and each man found his reward simply in the knowing that he had played the game as a patriot should play it. Lee's voice was husky when he spoke.

"Sir," he said slowly, "it would hardly be fitting for me to follow any other course than my friends have chosen. I refuse."

The man beside him shrugged slightly.

"That is the curse of trying to bend men like you to my will," he said quietly. "If it were another type of man there would be no trouble. But I am sorry. I can only hope that the work in the quarry will cause you to change.

"To-night, Mr. Lee, you will spend in the cells. To-night you will have an opportunity of thinking things over. In the morning I shall give you one

more chance to reconsider. Then, if you still refuse, I must, to my regret, send you here. That is all. We will return, if you please."

And silently Lee and Nipper followed him back to the summer-house in the fairy garden.

CHAPTER IV.

Lee and Nipper Hold a Palaver—Lee Astonishes Nipper, and then Elucidates—The Acceptance—The Submarine—Disappointment.

AN hour later Lee and Nipper sat regarding each other from opposite sides of a small whitewashed cell. They had been dismissed in the garden of the "palace"—as Lee had christened the huge white building which dominated all other buildings of the town, and led by the Arab who had commanded the caravan, they had been conducted to a smaller building close by

It was a strongly built gaol, as they soon discovered, but the discomfort of their quarters was considerably allayed by the fact that they had been permitted to remain together. There was nothing of the melodramatic villain about the strange man who was, to use his own words, building up a nation.

He had coolly and quietly explained why Lee, in common with other airmen, had been seized and brought there, and following that, he had made to Lee the same proposition which had been made to the others—namely, that Lee and Nipper should enter his service. He had not stormed when Lee had refused. He had simply shrugged as though it had been what he regretfully expected.

Then he had revealed the alternative in a matter-of-fact way, which had nothing of threat or coercion. He had simply drawn the parallel, or rather the comparison between the two, and left it to Lee to decide. That he had not quite despaired of Lee changing his mind, was evinced by the fact that he had allowed Lee and Nipper to remain in the same cell together.

And that evening, anyway, he did not stint them of food. A sumptuous meal was served to them in the cell, and later, half a dozen choice cigars were brought to Lee by the Moor, who was acting as their gaoler. Lee had spent the whole day in thought, but in the evening, when he had lit a cigar, he turned to the lad and said with a smile:

"Well, Nipper, what do you think of our present predicament?"

Nipper, who had not reached the age when he might have the consolation of tobacco, frowned. Secretly, he thought, Lee was altogether too cheerful over it all. But if his master could take things so philosophically, then the lad would take his cue from that.

"Well, sir, I must say it doesn't look very cheerful," he said in reply. "I am rather sorry we didn't risk a dash for it back in the desert. I don't fancy working in that stone quarry up there."

"Then you have quite made up your mind to that, have you?" asked Lee watching the lad curiously.

"Why, of course, sir," said Nipper in surprise. "There is nothing else to do."

Lee smiled again.

"Good boy," he said softly. "But draw closer, my lad. I wish to speak seriously to you. I want you to consider our present position without sentiment," he continued, when Nipper had sat down beside him. "Here we are somewhere on the west coast of Morocco. I do not know exactly what part, but I have a shrewd idea we are pretty well down towards the border of Rio de Oro.

"I am quite prepared to believe the statement that the existence of this

town is absolutely unknown to the outside world. In England and in France, the public knows that several airmen have disappeared. They will endeavour to trace them, of course, but it is most unlikely that anyone will drop on the truth.

Furthermore, we are here at the mercy of this strange man who has built up this town—built it up from some strange ideal he has formed. Now you must see, my lad, that if we refuse to do as he has asked us, then we shall at once join the others in the stone quarry.

"If every airman whom he captures refuses to yield, every one will be condemned to that. If our whereabouts were known to the outside world, then we could take our medicine with equanimity, knowing that everything possible to rescue us was being done. But no help can come to us from the outside. Don't you see that, my lad?"

Nipper nodded soberly.

"Yes, sir, I see that quite well, but I don't see what we can do."

"Then I will tell you, Nipper. I have been thinking things over very carefully to-day. To-morrow we are to be given another chance to accept his offer, and when that chance comes, we are going to accept."

"What!" gasped Nipper. "You are going to give in to him, guv'nor?"

Lee smiled at the lad's consternation.

"On the face of it, it looks rather treacherous to the others," he acknowledged. "But, my lad, unless we do so, then tell me, how can anything be done to escape from here—to get us all away from the place?"

"I'm stumped there, sir. But I wish there was some other way."

"There isn't," said Lee succinctly. "And let me tell you of another thing, Nipper. Do you remember the French girl who was in the litter—Mademoiselle Marinier?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was kidnapped outside Algiers. Can't you guess why she was brought here?"

"Why, guv'nor?"

"Do you recall this morning when we were talking in the loggia of the summer-house, that the offer included house, servants, and a wife, if necessary?"

"Yes; I do, sir."

"Well then, can't you see why she was brought here? She is intended for the wife of one of our 'host's' men. How many may have been brought here for the same purpose, we do not know. But in building up his nation, as he calls it, our 'host' realises that he cannot depend solely on Arabs and Moors. He must have white descendants, and he is planning to that effect. Therefore, Nipper, you can see that upon us rests a great responsibility."

"We must plan to rescue, not only the airmen who had been brought here, but the women as well. It would be a matter of shame to us if we permitted one of them to remain and be forced into a marriage which would be distasteful to them."

Nipper nodded his head slowly.

"I think I see what you intend now, guv'nor, and, as usual, you are right. You can count on me to follow your lead."

"I thought so, my lad, and now we had better turn in."

The next morning Lee and Nipper were brought once more before their host in the loggia of the summer-house. He appeared exactly as he had the previous day, and was breakfasting as he had been then. He did not beat about the bush, but went straight to the point.

"Well, Mr. Lee," he said, "you have had an opportunity to think things over. Have you changed your mind?"

Lee bowed.

"Yes," he answered. "We have decided, for the time being at least, to accept your offer, and to do as you wish."

The other took his "victory" as nonchalantly as he had taken defeat the day before.

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Lee," he said. "In that case you may consider yourselves prisoners no longer. And after breakfasting with me, I will take you to the harbour and show you what your work will be. While we breakfast we can discuss your technical knowledge."

He clapped his hands, and to the Arab who answered, he gave some brief orders. Two more chairs were brought, and soon two portions of sizzling bacon and eggs with cool juicy melons. Lee and Nipper breakfasted with enjoyment, and during the meal Lee satisfied his host that he had a comprehensive grasp of technical matters.

"By the way," he said, as he rose to go to the harbour, "what am I to call you?"

His host smiled.

"I think if you just call me 'Chief,' it will serve," he said.

Lee nodded, and they made their way through the beautiful garden to the main street outside. This led them straight down to the harbour, and there on the edge, to his astonishment, Lee saw in a small dry dock, the strangest submarine he had ever laid eyes on. The chief pointed to it.

"Your work for the time being lies there," he said. "It is finished and ready for sea, but I wish five more built. Across there," and he pointed to a tangle of buildings across the harbour, "is my shipyard. The plans are ready for the building of the other five, and the material is all at hand.

"But I wish you to make yourself thoroughly acquainted with the working of this one, in order that you may intelligently take over the direction of the construction of the others. I have no doubt that before long I shall have persuaded some of the others to join you, and then the work can go forward quickly."

"I know a little about submarines," said Lee, "but I must confess that this type is new to me. I presume from what you have already said, that she is quite a distinct type."

The chief smiled.

"The ordinary European submarine is a toy in comparison," he said scornfully. "This submarine is, as you can see, over two hundred feet long. She is built on special principles, and once submerged, can remain under the water for a month if necessary. There are special arrangements, as you will see later, by which fresh air can be pumped in at any depth. Moreover, there is another means by which a man in diving costume can leave and re-enter the submarine while she is under the water.

"She is provided with ninety torpedo tubes—not the cumbersome affairs of the European submarine, but tubes no larger than a barrel of a rifle. Yet the torpedo—the needle torpedo, as I call it—will wreck far more havoc than the large torpedoes ordinarily used.

"Then to come to her speed. She can, at a depth of sixty fathoms, and under the terrific pressure of that depth, move at a rate exceeding forty knots, so you can understand how very difficult it would be to ram her.

"By a special explosive tube in the stern, she can discharge an explosive which sets her under terrific way at once, and consequently, she accelerates into her full speed in the time it takes the ordinary ship to turn round. But come into her with me, Mr. Lee, and I will explain things in detail."

They crossed to the heavy metal deck of the submarine by a narrow plank, and descended into the interior by way of the broad conning tower. Once

inside Lee drew a breath of amazement. She was a maze of mechanism which at first bewildered him, but as the chief led him from part to part, and then into the different compartments of the vessel—of which there were eight—Lee gradually grasped the meaning of it all.

They were inside the submarine over two hours, and in that time, Lee was given an elementary lecture on the working of the submarine. Then they climbed out on to the deck once more, and standing there, the chief pointed towards the twin headlands guarding the narrow entrance to the harbour.

"To-morrow," he said, "we will travel round the harbour in her, and I will give you a practical demonstration of her working. Then I shall trust her to you, and with the plans I shall furnish, you will soon be in a position to handle the construction of the others."

"Do you mean that I am to run her about the harbour?" asked Lee carelessly.

The chief smiled.

"Yes; but Mr. Lee, if you will take my advice, you will not attempt to run her out to sea, for the entrance to the harbour is closed by two very heavy steel gates. You cannot see them from here, for the tops are just under the surface of the water, but they are there nevertheless, and can only be operated from the round stone towers on the tops of the head-towers, which are guarded night and day."

Lee flushed a little, for the chief had correctly read his thoughts. But he only shrugged and followed the others ashore. At the edge of the harbour the chief paused.

"I can give you no more time this morning, Mr. Lee, because I am due at an audience of my council. Until lunch time you are free to do as you will. I would suggest that you wander about the town and see what has been built here in five years."

"We will lunch, or rather breakfast, again in the palace, and if you will present yourselves there at midday, I shall be waiting for you. After lunch I shall arrange for your quarters to be prepared in the palace, and, of course, you will have your meals with me. This afternoon, after siesta, we can go over the plans of the submarine. Until then, au revoir."

The chief lifted his sun helmet courteously, and Lee and Nipper did likewise. When he had gone, Lee stood looking over the harbour towards the entrance which, now he knew, was closed with heavy gates.

"I thought for a moment things were playing into our hands, my lad," he said softly, "but our friend is no fool. What a pity, what a pity that such a man, such a cultured sane individual, with so much personal charm, should have given his life to the development of a false ideal. I feel sorry for him, and yet I cannot but respect him. Come, my lad, let us follow his advice and stroll through this town he has built up."

They turned and began to walk slowly up the main street towards the central square. But just before reaching it, they saw to the right a side street leading to some open gardens, and at Nipper's suggestion they turned down it.

They had gone about half way along to the gardens when suddenly there came a slight swishing sound overhead, and the next moment something struck Lee full in the face.

CHAPTER V.

The Message—A Risky Business—Plans—The Hour Strikes.

A FAINT perfume filled Lee's nostrils as he mechanically threw up his hand, and his first thought was that another attempt was being made to drug him. Then as he pulled the thing away from his face

he saw, to his amazement, that it was a crumpled piece of linen, not much larger than a good-sized handkerchief.

He glanced up quickly, and Nipper did likewise, but all they could see above them was a white balcony enclosed by green lattice work. Lee looked at the piece of linen. Then he said:

"Some woman has dropped this from the balcony, or it has slipped through the lattice work, Nipper."

He was just about to throw it away, when suddenly his eyes took in, in detail, that which he had at first thought was a red pattern upon it, and then, with a swift motion, he thrust it into his pocket.

"Come, my lad," he said curtly, and Nipper, wondering what was afoot, moved along beside him until they were beneath the trees of the garden ahead.

Here, in a secluded spot, Lee sat down, and, after a cautious look round, drew out the piece of linen.

"I thought this was accident, my lad," he said, "but now I don't know, Nipper. Let us examine this. Tell me, my lad, what do you make of it?"

Nipper bent over Lee's shoulder, then he uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Why, guv'nor," he said in an excited whisper, "that red pattern consists of nothing but words in French sewn into the linen with red thread."

"That is it exactly," said Lee. "And now let us see what it says."

Slowly and methodically they studied the pattern in red, beginning at one corner and following the line of the edge round all four sides. While Lee read it out, Nipper jotted down the translation, and when they had finished the lad had this written down:

"I am a prisoner here. If possible communicate, beseech you do so. Am permitted to sit behind lattice balcony and sew. Will be there each morning and afternoon. Am but one of four." Then the pattern tailed off into a scrawling "M."

Lee thrust the linen into his pocket.

"That is from Mademoiselle Marinier," he said in a low tone. "She has brains, that girl, and courage as well. She has lost no time in preparing a message in case her chance should come to deliver it, and luck led us that way this morning. We must get in touch with her some way and now we know, too, that there are four of them there. Our friend the chief is certainly thorough if nothing else, but we shall see."

"How will you communicate with her, guv'nor?" asked Nipper in a whisper.

"I can't tell yet, my lad. It needs a deal of thought. We shall walk back that way, and if she see us she will know we have received the message all right. But it will be too dangerous to make any sign."

They made their way back the way they had come; but of course saw no further signs of Mademoiselle Marinier. They strolled about leisurely for some time, watching the bustle and colour at the market. Then they walked back to the palace. They found the chief waiting for them in the summer-house, and forthwith lunch was served.

After lunch came siesta, and when they were alone Lee gave Nipper certain instructions. Then while he was engaged with the chief the lad left the palace and walked casually along towards the side street where they had been that morning. He had received instructions from Lee to make a thorough survey of the locality and to study the arrangement of the buildings in relation to the street.

When the lad returned it was past five o'clock, and he found Lee and the

chief drinking sherbet in the garden. Later, when he and Lee was alone, he made his report, and Lee nodded with satisfaction.

"I spoke to the chief," he said when Nipper had finished, "and told him that if I was to take up this work, I should like to be housed near the harbour. He immediately agreed, and has given up a house and servants. The house is, I fancy, not far away from the one where Mademoiselle Marinier is a prisoner. We shall see this evening."

About an hour before dinner, a Moor approached and signed to them to follow him. He led the way out of the garden and down the main street until they came to the side street in which Lee and Nipper were so keenly interested.

Lee and Nipper betrayed not the slightest emotion when they turned up this street, but inwardly they were all agog as to which house would be given them. They were disappointed, however, when the Moor led them past the house, nor did he stop until they reached the next narrow street on the left. But here, as soon as he turned the corner, he stopped and pounded on a high Moorish gate. A swift glance revealed to Lee that it was the corner house, and a hasty count of the buildings they had passed told him that the house where Mademoiselle Marinier was confined was about five doors down.

They entered a wide courtyard, and then the main hall of the house, which they found to be sumptuously furnished in Moorish style. The chief had certainly kept his word. Their guide left them now, and the servants whom the chief had appointed to wait on Lee and Nipper mustered in the hall for orders.

A splendid meal had been spread in the loggia, and after a few brief instructions in Arabic, Lee and Nipper sat down. They spoke of nothing which was near their hearts until they sat on the flat Moorish roof that evening, Nipper squatting on a rug, and Lee reclining on a divan, smoking. Then Lee said, in a low tone:

"From here, Nipper, we can only see the parapets of the different roofs, but from my count to-day I calculate the roof of the house where Mademoiselle Marinier is confined as a prisoner is the fifth one in a direct line from here. The houses are all joined together, and physically it would not be much of a job to get along the roofs to the fifth one. But the danger lies in the fact that every roof will probably be occupied during the day and evening, and in some cases, if not all, the inmates are almost bound to sleep there. Still, as far as I can see, it is the only thing to try, and I think I shall do so."

"It will be very risky, gov'nor," said Nipper. "I am smaller than you. Better let me go."

Lee shook his head.

"No, my lad. I will go. I speak Arabic and shall dress as a Moor. If I am caught, I stand a better chance of squeezing out of it than you. Your part will be to stand guard here and be ready for any eventuality. The prisoners may sleep on the roof, but if not, I shall have to try to get into the house and communicate with them in some way."

"But what will you say to them, gov'nor?"

"I will tell them to be ready for a sign I shall give them, my lad. I have the embryo of a plan in my mind, and to-morrow after I have made a trip in the submarine, I shall be able to judge better whether it will develop into a workable scheme. Now everyone seems to have retired, let us start to work."

"To-night, sir?" asked Nipper in a whisper.

"Of course, my lad. There is no time to be lost."

Lee had no difficulty in finding a heavy burnous, which he donned. His face was well tanned, and in the darkness it would not be difficult for him to pass as an Arab or a Moor. Their own servants were sleeping in quarters off the courtyard, and from there the roof was not visible.

Lee thrust a heavy knife under his burnous in case of emergency. Naturally he had no revolver. Then, creeping along softly, they made their way to the breast high wall which separated their roof from the next one. Surmounting this wall was a high lattice work which effectually screened the other roof from the view of curious eyes, and it was at the very rear corner of the roof that Lee chose to go to work.

It was when he had drawn himself up by the lattice work that he found he could just get a grip with his toes on the stone wall, and by hanging on to the topmost edge of the lattice work, he reckoned he could work himself along. It was a risky business, for if he slipped he would drop a sheer forty feet on to the paved courtyard beneath. But nothing would deter him from trying, and after gripping Nipper's hand he swung himself up and started on his perilous journey.

Nipper watched tensely while the white burnous flitted along into the gloom. Then he could see it no longer, and he stood rigid, listening for the first sound of either success or disaster. In a way the lad's job was the hardest—it was the waiting job.

As for Lee, he worked himself along as quietly as was possible, placing his advancing foot firmly before dragging his body along after it. It seemed an eternity before he came to the next wall, but at least he had not been challenged, and that was encouraging. Here, however, he was forced to pause, for he could hear low voices on the other side of the lattice work.

He knew exactly how serious would be his position if he were caught, for in Arabic and Moorish countries nothing is a greater crime than for a man to invade the privacy of the household where the women are kept. The voices moved away after a little, however, and Lee continued his progress.

He reached the third wall in safety, and there found to his satisfaction that the foothold was a little wider. It took him less than five minutes to traverse the next distance, and now, clinging to the lattice, he gazed into the gloom ahead. One more roof to pass, and he would be at the roof of the house where Mademoiselle Marinier was a prisoner.

Even then, only half his work might be accomplished, for if they were not sleeping on the roof, then he would have to gain access to the house in some way. He drew a long breath and started on again. Foot by foot, yard by yard, he worked his way along, until with a gasp of relief he found himself at the next wall. He had reached the fifth roof.

Lee hung there listening. At first not a sound broke the stillness, and he was just making up his mind that he must climb over the lattice and try to get into the house by way of the roof door, when suddenly he grew rigid and listened. Voices low and confidential in tone sounded, it seemed, not two yards away from him, and, straining with every sense, Lee listened.

A thrill shot through him when born on the night, he heard a whispered phrase in French. It was more a mild expletive than anything else, but it was enough for Lee. Placing his lips to one of the openings in the lattice, he gave a soft sibilant: *Sst!*

Dead silence followed. Then a few moments later there was a rustling sound, and from the other side of the lattice he heard:

"*Qui vive?*" ("who goes there?").

"A friend," whispered back Lee. "Can you come to the lattice?"

There was another period of silence. Then, so close to his ear that it startled him, there was a whisper.

"Who are you?" was asked in French.

"Is it Mademoiselle Marinier?" asked Lee.

"Yes, yes, monsieur. For the love of Heaven, who are you?"

"The man who travelled in the caravan with you," whispered back Lee. "I got your message this morning. Listen, and when I have finished, tell me if you understand. I cannot hang on here very long. I got your message, and I am planning an escape which will include all of us. It may be some days before I can put the plan into effect, but I want you and your friends to be ready each day. Can you manage to drop a cord each night between nine and ten from the balcony in front of the house?"

"One of us will manage to do so, monsieur."

"Good, then each night I will tie a note to it and you can pull it up. As soon as possible I will tell you what you must do. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, monsieur. And may Heaven bless you. I—but, ssh! Someone is coming!"

There was a soft rustle as the girl sped away, and, without waiting longer, Lee began his homeward journey. It took him over half an hour to cover the distance, and by the time he had reached his own roof he was almost exhausted. A glass of wine refreshed him, and then, lighting a cigarette, he cast himself down on the divan to think.

It was well past midnight when he finally sought his couch, but then his spirit was lighter, for he had figured out what he hoped would be a workable plan. It needed colossal nerve to carry it out, but with the responsibility which he felt was his, Lee did not quail from it.

The next morning, while he accompanied the chief to the harbour, Nipper went off by himself, presumably to wander about the town, but in reality to make a thorough study of the stone quarry. His work was to find out the hours at which the prisoners went to work and knocked off, where they slept, and how many guards were in charge of them—work which could not be done in a single day.

In fact, nearly a week passed, during which Nipper was getting his facts together, and during which Lee was working valiantly at the job of mastering the submarine. Each night between nine and ten one of them stole along the street and tied a note of cheer to the cord which hung from the balcony, but so far Lee had not set the date.

His plans, however, were going forward, and at last, one afternoon, about a week after he had accepted the chief's offer, Lee and Nipper boarded the submarine, and, closing the conning-tower, prepared for a trip round the harbour.

Only themselves were aboard, and as the magnificent piece of mechanism made its way gracefully round the harbour, submerging and rising as easily as a fish, Lee told Nipper what he had decided on. Nipper listened wide eyed to his master's plans, and then asked one very obvious question:

"But the explosive, gov'nor? How will you get that?"

For answer Lee thrust his hand into his pocket and took out a small key. Open that steel locker there, my lad. Nipper took the key and did as he was bid. The locker revealed nearly a score of steel tubes, which only puzzled the lad more.

"What are they, sir?" he asked.

"Inside those tubes, my lad, there are sticks of a very powerful explosive—gelignite, to be exact. The tubes are really the torpedo tubes belonging to the submarine, but the chief is not quite so trusting as to leave any live torpedoes aboard. But in the shipyard across the harbour, which I have had to visit every day, I discovered several tubes of gelignite, and, taking a tube at a time, I have managed to bring eighteen in all. They just fitted

the torpedo tubes, and besides acting as a place of concealment, they will also prove water-tight."

Nipper nodded slowly.

"When will you place them, sir?"

"To-night, my lad. The wires are all ready for attaching."

And with this mysterious phrase, Lee turned the submarine towards the dock.

CHAPTER VI.

The Great Swim—Ready!—The Hour Strikes—A Terrific Explosion—In the Nick of Time—A Dash for Freedom—The Outer Sea.

THAT night was a busy one for Lee and Nipper. Nor was their work made any easier by the fact that they had to work with such stealth. While the chief seemed to suspect nothing so far, they realised that their movements were watched by a thousand eyes.

At first their evening plans were somewhat complicated by an invitation to dinner from the chief. There was no way of refusal, so perforce they went. But as matters turned out, it was an aid rather than a drawback to their plans. The chief chose to discuss matters relating to the submarine most of the evening, and when he had been satisfied by Lee's report, he made an appointment to visit the harbour for ten the following morning.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Lee and Nipper finally got away. They lost no time in hastening to the side street where Mademoiselle Marinier was imprisoned, and arrived there in a fever of fear, lest she should have given them up and withdrawn the cord. Had that been so, then their plans must have waited.

But the cord was still dangling from the balcony, and it took Lee only a few seconds to attach the note which he had written that afternoon. It was a note which would create a profound impression upon being read, and as part of the success hinged on the way Mademoiselle Marinier would obey his instructions, he had written at length.

Instead of going home now, they turned their steps towards the harbour. Down on the water front there was no one about, and even if there had been, there would have been little remark in Lee's presence there.

Lee led the way across the narrow plank to the submarine, which was now lying floating beside one of the ordinary docks. The conning tower was open, and Nipper followed his master into the interior of the ship. Lee did not risk a light. Instead, he whispered to Nipper to remain by the tower while he himself crossed to the steel locker and opened it.

Carefully he took out the eighteen steel jacketed sticks of gelignite, dividing them into two lots of nine each. He gave Nipper one lot, and kept the other himself. Lee had also prepared two small bags which would fit on the back, and into each of these he carefully placed his lot of sticks. Next, they hurriedly undressed, and when they were stripped, hung each a bag over his shoulders. Now Lee handed to Nipper a small coil of insulated wire, then he bent close to the lad and whispered:

"You understand perfectly what you have to do, Nipper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just to make sure, tell me."

"Well, sir, we are to swim out to the harbour to the points at the opening. I am to take the left hand side, and you are to take the right. I am to begin at the shore, and by means of the clips on the steel jackets, attach the torpedoes to the top of the left hand gate, at distances as nearly equal

as possible. As I do so, I am to connect up the wire to each one, and finally bring the free end to where the gates meet and where I shall meet you."

"That is right, my lad. Now, are you ready?"

"Quite, sir."

"Then come, and on your life, no noise."

They slipped on to the deck by way of the conning tower, and after a stealthy look round, Lee slipped over into the water, followed by Nipper. They struck out side by side, swimming silently and heading straight for the gates, which, while they could not see them, they knew closed the entrance to the harbour.

They were guided by the twin points which loomed up in dim silhouette against the starlit sky. On and on they went, expecting each moment to hear a loud hail from some part of the shore, but not a sound greeted their ears, and at last the point came where they must branch out.

The opening, as has already been said, was less than a hundred yards wide, making each steel gate nearly fifty yards in extent. Just how they were worked, Lee did not know. He only knew that the machinery for swinging them open, when occasion required, was placed in the two round stone towers which stood on the high points at the entrance.

He calculated that the system must be somewhat like that by which railway gates are swung open and closed, and in this surmise he was not far wrong. While Nipper swam to the left hand shore, he took to the right, and there, as he felt about carefully for the gate, he suddenly struck hard against something which was a bare foot under water.

He felt down quickly and grasped a narrow barrier of metal, which he knew was the gate. He worked himself along until he was about a couple of yards from the shore. Clinging to the submerged top of the gate he affixed one of the tubes by the clip he had attached to it, and then joined up one end of the wire to it.

Pulling himself along another couple of yards, he affixed another, and then proceeded in this fashion until he had attached all nine sticks to the top of the gate and had joined the lot up with wire. He had only to wait a few moments for Nipper, and in the centre where the two gates joined, they met.

"How did you make out?" whispered Lee.

"Top hole, guv'nor," came back Nipper's reply. "I have done the lot, and here is the end of the wire."

Lee reached out and grasped the end of wire which Nipper held out to him. He attached this end to the wire he held in his hand, then he unwound length after length from the ample coil still remaining, until a good thirty yards or more had sunk into the water.

He gripped the coil firmly, and with a whispered caution to Nipper, they left the top of the gate where they had been clinging, and struck out for the submarine. For Lee it was a tiring swim back, for he had all the weight of the dragging wire behind him, but they managed it in a little over ten minutes, and when Nipper had drawn himself up to the deck of the submarine, he helped his master over the side.

Now Lee gave the remaining bit of wire a couple of turns round a small cleat on the side of the submarine, and allowed the loose part to sink into the water. That done, they slipped down through the conning tower and got into their clothes.

They made their way home silently, and retired at once, for they were to be astir very early the next morning. It was still dark when Lee roused Nipper and bade him make haste. When he saw that the lad was fully awake, Lee stole out of the house and made his way along the street until he

came to the house opposite the one where Mademoiselle Marinier was imprisoned.

He slipped into a doorway there, and waited. It was just a few minutes before five, and had he looked at his watch, he would have seen that it was exactly five o'clock when the door across from him opened stealthily, and a white robed figure slipped out.

Another, and another, and another followed, until there were four in all. Not until he heard the door close, did Lee stir. Then he stole across the street, and with a whispered:

"Follow me," hastened along the street.

Down the main street he went until he came to the harbour, and so swiftly did the dawn come that the four white-clad figures just managed to slip through the conning tower into the interior of the submarine, when the east became tinged with pink.

There was little time then for talk, but when they were safe inside the submarine, one of the figures reached out and grasped Lee by the arm.

"Oh, monsieur!" she whispered brokenly, "you have saved us."

"Not yet Mademoiselle Marinier," said Lee softly. "We are not out of the wood, yet. Tell me, did you have much trouble?"

"No, no, monsieur. We did exactly what you told us, too. When the evening meal was brought, we overpowered the woman servants one by one. There was only one old man-servant, and we had more trouble with him. But they are all safely bound and gagged. We waited until the hour you said, then we left the house."

"Good," said Lee. "Your companions, are they French also?"

"Oh! A thousand pardons, monsieur. No. Two of them are English, and one is an American. They were captured in Tangier and brought overland by caravan, as I was."

"Ah!" Lee acknowledged the introductions, then he whispered: "I want you all to remain here, and whatever you hear or see, do not get alarmed. Soon you will hear a loud explosion. Just sit tight and wait."

With that he climbed up through the conning tower, and creeping across the deck, reached down for the end of the wire which he had tied to a cleat. This he drew back into the interior of the submarine, connecting it up with the electrical apparatus. Then he thrust his head up through the conning tower and turned his gaze shorewards.

Nipper had gone off on a difficult mission, and Lee was in a fever of anxiety. During the week the lad had discovered everything there was to be discovered about the white prisoners who worked in the stone quarry, and he had discovered that they slept in a sort of barracks from which they were marched to the quarry each morning at daybreak.

They were conducted by two armed guards, and consequently, Lee had figured out that only a bold stroke would serve. Nipper was to be on the road leading to the quarry soon after they left the barracks, and was to jump in among them, conveying to them the information in as few words as possible, that they must make for the harbour at top speed.

He also carried several knives to give them as weapons. It had been impossible to procure revolvers. And now Lee was waiting for the sound of a gunshot which he felt sure would herald the attempt to escape. Nor had he long to wait.

While he squatted on the edge of the conning tower there suddenly sounded a couple of shots up in the town, and then silence. But not for long. Soon distant shouts could be heard, and then a few moments later he saw Nipper tearing down the main street to the harbour, followed by five racing figures. Not till then did Lee act.

He dropped back into the submarine, and with a sharp cry of "Hold hard!" he jammed down the electrical connection, and the next moment it seemed that the whole universe had blown up. The shock of the explosion sent the girls reeling to the floor, and the submarine listed as though a tidal wave had struck her.

But she righted herself the next moment, and, springing to the deck, Lee cast off ready for a dash. The fugitives were now racing down the dock with a mob of pursuers behind them. Glancing seawards, Lee could see a tossing of the water by the entrance, but that was all that remained of the terrific explosion.

Now Nipper had reached the narrow plank and was dashing over. Man after man followed him, and without a word tumbled down the conning tower. Lee cast off the iast hawser and jerked the plank into the water. Then he, too, sprang for the conning tower, and as the submarine gave a lurch, he drew the top down.

Nipper had already been instructed, and had jumped for the starting lever. From the stern shot a great spurt of water as the explosive starter was fired, and the next second the submarine was shooting over the surface of the harbour, heading straight as an arrow for the opening.

Now came the moment which Lee dreaded. Supposing the explosive had not blown the steel gates away sufficiently to allow the submarine to pass. The sweat stood out on his forehead as the thought came to him, and when he knew he was beyond reach of the guns on the shore he opened the conning-tower and strode forward to watch their course.

Nearer and nearer they drew to the dread spot, and then, with jaws set grimly, Lee watched the bow of the submarine cross the line of danger. The body followed, and they were fully half way over, when suddenly a shiver ran through the boat. She hesitated, scraped, then shot ahead again, and, as the curve of the keel rose, she slid into deep water—safe!

Lee turned and faced the shore. Standing on the edge of the dock he saw a tall, white-clad figure gazing out towards the entrance through a pair of marine glasses. He knew instinctively that it was the chief, and, with nothing of mockery in his action, Lee saluted. The next moment the rising sun struck him full in the face, and the point hid the town from view.

Giving himself a little shake, Lee made his way to the conning-tower, and, dropping down amongst the bewildered airmen, said:

"Well, fellows, I must apologise for giving you so little notice as this, and I fancy a little word of explanation will not be amiss. But first let us make the introductions. Since we are to be shipmates for a few days at least, we may as well start comfortably."

They were all there—Cameron, Pritchard, Wills, Paulus, and his fellow-aviator from Buc.

And when the introductions had been made, Lee relieved Nipper at the steering lever, and, sending the lad into the conning-tower to keep a look-

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

out, he lit a cigarette and set himself to satisfy their curiosity and wonder.

Just four days later a strange-looking submarine slipped into Plymouth Harbour. None of those aboard her attempted to land until the naval commandant had boarded her, and had been closeted with Nelson Lee for nearly an hour. Then the commandant's launch took the whole party ashore, while a British submarine crew was told off to the strange submarine. Nelson Lee had turned her over to the British Admiralty.

That same night, when a special train was speeding towards London, telegrams and cables were flying broadcast to relatives and friends, and a grey, businesslike-looking British destroyer was steaming southwards to the west coast of Morocco, guided by the latitude and longitude furnished by Nelson Lee.

In London a guard of honour from Hendon turned up, and nothing would do but the travel-worn fugitives must attend a banquet in their honour. They say in London that it was a banquet which would remain famous for years, and in one way at least that claim is not open to question, for didn't Nelson Lee have the pleasure of announcing four betrothals, and indicating Cameron, Pritchard, Wills, and Paulus as the lucky men?

And wasn't Nelson Lee the recipient of a rousing reception such as any man would feel proud of? Later, too, the gratitude of those he had rescued found tangible evidence in a beautiful model submarine of pure gold, and Nipper prizes an exquisitely fashioned miniature torpedo tube of beaten silver.

There remains only one thing to add about this strange experience of Nelson Lee's. The British destroyer found the harbour all right, but, before reaching there, she came upon a small launch, in which were the other airmen captured by that strange man with a mistaken ideal.

They had arrived by caravan after Lee's escape, and, realising that now the outside world must know the truth, he had turned them free in a well-provisioned launch. A man of less calibre would have killed them in his anger.

But of the town there only remained deserted houses. The chief and his people had faded away into the mystery from which they had come. Lee often thought with regret of this strange man, and wondered if their paths would ever cross in the future—wondered if the future would ever reveal his name and his nationality.

Quien sabe?

THE END.

SPECIAL—NEXT WEEK!

**A Magnificent, Complete Story of NELSON LEE
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Order Early and Avoid Disappointment!

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.

While searching among the caverns for a boat which had, unavoidably, been abandoned by the chums, Dr. Campbell and his party are attacked by a gigantic octopus. They come out of the conflict victorious, and eventually find their boat floating upturned in the water. (Now read on.)

Captain Barron Gets a Shock.

"I EXPECT there were several apes on board," continued Dr. Campbell. "The octopus came along, attacked the boat and overturned it, flinging them into the water, where it seized them one by one. But one had got entangled under the boat, and was hidden away so that it failed to get hold of it. That's how I read it!"

"Jupiter! Yes, sir! There's no doubt you're right," said Alec. "But when, I wonder, did it happen?"

"It must have happened," Doctor Campbell replied thoughtfully, "not so very long after you were here. The apes would have put the boat off as soon as they returned, and whilst the remembrance of what they had seen you do was fresh in their minds, that is pretty certain. A day or two later they would have forgotten about it. Also the time that dead ape must have been in the water points to the same conclusion."

"Which means," muttered Alec slowly, "that if we had tried to make our way back through the tunnel instead of the way we did, we might quite likely have encountered the octopus and met the fate which befell those wretched apes!"

He stared at Clive, horror in his eyes.

"What a ghastly idea! What an escape!" he murmured.

"Yes, that is the way it struck me," the doctor commented feelingly. "However, my lads, let us be thankful that you did escape such a terrible

death. I shall keep this hook as a memento of our adventure. It's all that is left to us."

"Why, so it is!" Clive returned. "We ought to have kept those pieces we lopped off which fell in the boat. But they stank so and were so repulsive that we threw 'em overboard."

"You couldn't do anything else," the doctor declared. "They would not keep, you know, and as these creatures have no skeleton, there are no bones to gather up as relics. The only way to preserve such specimens is to plunge them into a big bottle or jar filled with spirits, and we have nothing of that kind large enough on board the yacht."

"No, of course not," Clive agreed. "So there is an end of any idea of keeping a trophy in commemoration of our adventure and of our narrow escape."

After some further talk and another and yet more careful examination of all that had been recovered from the water, they cleaned out the boat as well as they could, and tried their best to put it in order, as it were, and when the launch started it was taken in tow. But no one got into it, nor was it suggested that anyone should do so. As Alec remarked, it did not look particularly wholesome—much less inviting.

The doctor made a round of the lake, and made many notes in his notebook. He also rooted up a few plants which were shown to him, and took them away for specimens. But he did not find very much to interest him in the place, and did not prolong his visit beyond another hour or so. Then they started back for the camp.

"Of course," he observed, "if there were no other way of getting into that underground waterway where the gold-coated pebbles are, we should be compelled to come to it by this route. But I think the other way—the way you came out from it—will suit us just as well. So I shall make preparations to pay it a visit that way as soon as we can arrange it."

"Yes, I think that's the best plan," said Clive. "It's true we've got enemies on that side—Diego and his crowd—to beware of, but I really think I'd rather risk facing them than come into this horrible uncanny hole again. Besides, there's nothing more to attract us here. We've found out all that is worth knowing."

"I'm not so sure as to that. The tunnel is continued on the other side of the lake, you know," the doctor reminded him. "I should have liked to explore that, and see where it goes to. However, I think the other is probably more in our line. I agree with you that there is the risk of meeting Diego's people on that side; but I'm going to take some precautions, which I hope will prevent our being surprised or molested by them."

The journey back through the tunnel was made without any incident of note, and very glad most of the party were, no doubt, to find themselves once more on the other side of it.

Clive and Alec certainly were.

"Ah, this is better! I begin to feel I can breathe better!" exclaimed Alec, drawing a long breath. "That place gave me the horrors! Upon my word, I began to feel as though I couldn't breathe properly in there!"

Clive laughed, but there was not much cheeriness in his laugh.

"Well, there's one consolation," he remarked. "We haven't had our trip and our little adventure altogether in vain. There's the boat. We've got that to show for our trouble. We shall have the laugh of the captain there."

"I'm not so sure that we shall," Alec replied doubtfully. "He'll see the state it's in, and he'll want to know what the dickens has happened

to it. And if we tell him he'll say, 'There! I told you I expected you would lose my boat, and it's only by a fluke that you didn't.'

Clive laughed again.

"He can say what he likes, but, considering everything, I think we ought to be jolly thankful to get her back at all. Hullo! here he is—coming to look for us. I expect that means that he's got some news."

Sure enough a boat just then hove in sight, with the worthy captain on board, and a few minutes later the two parties met.

"Ha, ha! Here you are!" he roared out, as soon as he could make his voice heard. "The hobgoblins of the lower regions haven't eaten you up, then! I'm glad to see you back all safe. But what about my boat? Hullo! What do you call that thing?"

He had only just caught sight of the poor derelict, which, as though ashamed to meet its master in its present shabby, sodden condition, had seemed to be hiding itself as long as possible behind the launch.

"Great snakes!" cried its master, eyeing it with strong disfavour. "Where did you get that rotten old tub? And where's my boat?"

He addressed himself direct to Clive and Alec, whom he evidently regarded as responsible, they being the two who had taken it away and left it behind.

"This is your boat, captain," said Alec meekly. "It's a bit dusty, perhaps. We've had no time to brush it up yet, although it's had a good wash out—and——"

"That scurvy old crock my boat!" the skipper broke in. "Why, mine was brand new—not merely new paint, but a new boat. While this—— Why, I should think you'd recovered it from an ancient wreck. It looks as if it's been lying under water from the time of the Spanish Armada!"

"It—er—has been lying in rather a damp place, I fear, captain," said Clive apologetically. "But you put it in the sun to dry——"

"Damp place? That be hanged for a tale!" cried the captain. "I tell you, it's been lying under water for perhaps——"

"Well, yes—er—perhaps you're right to some extent, captain," Clive admitted. "Yes, it has—er—been lying under water; but not for so long as you thought about. Of course it couldn't have been, you know, because it's only a week or so ago we lost it."

"A week or so ago! It looks as if it might have been a century or so ago," snorted the skipper. "As to drying it in the sun, you don't know what you're talking about! All the seams would open——"

"Why, aren't they nailed?" Clive queried, with an innocent look. He turned to Alec, and said with affected concern, "Fancy! She was only glued together, and we trusted our precious lives to a thing like that!"

"I'll glue your two precious heads together!" cried the captain laughing, "if you insult my boat any further. And you're making me forget my news. Two more canoes full of the black beggars have arrived from Kanaka, doctor. They have brought a letter, which I expect is from the high and mighty king thereof and his swaggering head butler. I guess it begins with Greeting in very big letters."

The doctor smiled good-humouredly, and took the letter.

"It only says," he remarked, after reading it, "that they are delayed a little, and won't be able to come to us as soon as they had hoped. So Storbin has sent these men on first, thinking they may be of use to me. He says they are their best scouting men. He's right; that's just what I do want."

"H'm! That's all O K then," returned the captain. "And now I'm,

(Continued overleaf.)

ready to hear all about the adventures and the scrimmages ye've been in. For," the shrewd seaman added, looking keenly at the torn clothes of some of the party. "I see ye've had a dust-up of some sort with somebody. Is it Diego's people again?"

"Come on board, captain," said the doctor. "Then we can tell you all about it on our way."

"A good idea," returned Barron. "And that will give me a chance to keep an eye on that poor thing ye call my boat. It may save ye from losing what's left of her again anyway."

He listened with attention to the accounts the doctor gave him of their experiences, and shook his head gravely at the end.

"Well, you've had a pretty warm time of it," he commented. "And I don't wonder. I'm a seaman, and I'm not very particular where I go; but I must say I prefer the open air. I don't care to venture into these underground territories. I wouldn't go back there again if I were you, doctor. I wouldn't go—no, not for tons of gold."

There's no need to. We're going to try the other place, Dr. Campbell explained. "The only thing is, we must take precautions, and see that the way is open. And these native scouts Storbin has sent are just the very chaps to do that, for he declares they have been over here many times, and know the island fairly well. He says, too, that their leaders can speak a little English."

Acting upon the plan thus indicated, the doctor sent out his new scouts in company with some of his own people, and in the course of a day or two they returned with the news that Pedro Diego appeared to have gone away. At any rate, his vessel and nearly all his people were away, and there were only a few left now at his depot on the other side of the island.

"H'm," commented the captain, when he heard this. "A good time to attack his den and clear him out for good. That's what I should do if it were me."

But the doctor would not listen to any such idea. He was well satisfied to know that the man and most of his gang were out of his way, and that he need not fear another attack from them. And he could so place his scouts as to receive timely notice if they returned.

Then one morning he set out with Clive and Alee, Grove, and a small party, well equipped with lanterns and other necessities; and paid a visit to the place where the two had emerged from the underground waterway on to the side of the mountain.

It was quite free—for the time, at any rate—from the troublesome apes, and, leaving a guard outside, the party entered the passage, and followed its course with the aid of their lanterns.

They soon came to the place where it forked—one branch going on to the underground lake, the other seeming to lead up into the mountain.

Following the latter, they ascended rather steeply for some distance, when they came on to level ground, and found themselves in what was either an immense natural grotto or a vast hall or chamber cut out of the rock.

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