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Week ending
November 13, 1915

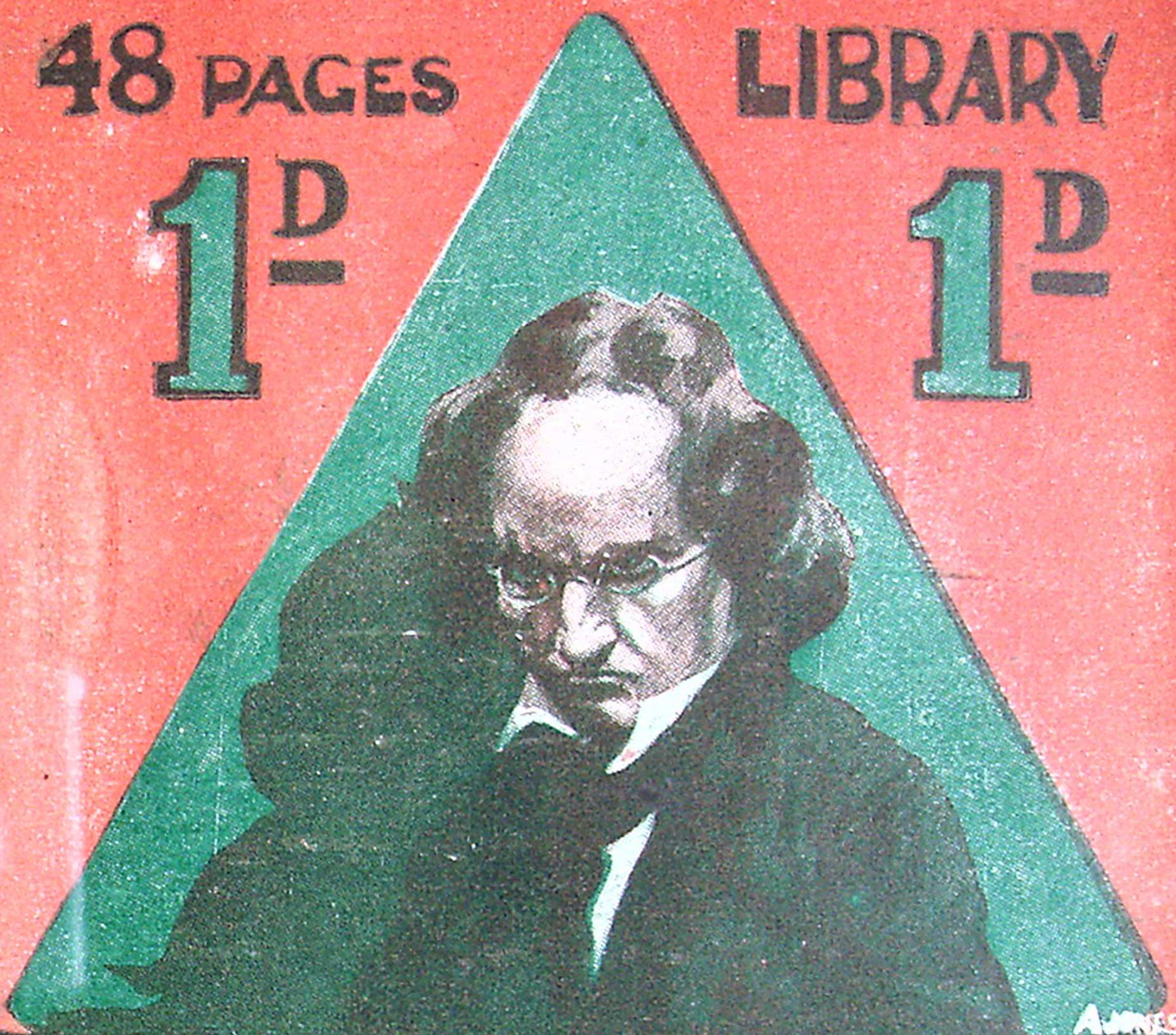
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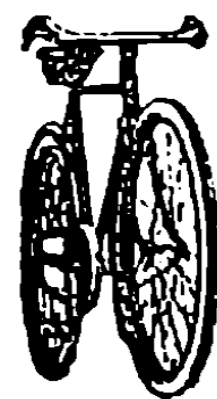
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PROLOGUE

I.

DOUGLAS CLIFFORD paced the room with frowning brow, chewing a cigarette savagely. After several minutes of restlessness he finally came to a halt before the fire, and flung his cigarette into the glowing coals.

"By Jove, what a fool I was!" he muttered fiercely. "What an arrant, utter fool! I'm in the clutches of those hounds now, and I shall be infernally lucky if I manage to scrape out with a whole skin."

He rested his elbow on the mantelpiece and fell into deep thought. Presently, however, as he extracted another cigarette from his gold case, a grim smile appeared upon his strong, resolute face.

"I think I've floored them, though," he murmured with satisfaction. "It's been the very déuce of a task, but I'm glad I took the precaution. My cheerful friends won't get a single farthing of my fortune if it's humanly possible to prevent it."

Douglas Clifford was a young man, and he was very well provided with this world's goods. His fortune, indeed, was close upon half a million sterling, and was not represented by property. Every penny of it was invested in safe hands, and he was in the fortunate position of being able to command huge sums of money at a few hours' notice.

Yet he was by no means extravagant. He dressed well, of course, and lived in an exceedingly luxurious flat in Kensington—but that was only befitting to a man of wealth. He owed his fortune to his father, who had died but a year before. Clifford, in fact, was an orphan, and had no relatives whatever—at least, none in England. Some distant half-cousins lived in America, but he had never seen them in his life, and certainly had no wish to.

His friends, too, were very few; and even then they were not friends in the real sense of the word—just acquaintances who sought Clifford's company for the sake of what they could get.

For a young man, and such a rich young man, Douglas Clifford lived very quietly and very unobtrusively. He was exceedingly level-headed, and very rarely partook of intoxicating liquors to such an extent that the evenness of his mind became, for the moment, unbalanced.

Yet on one occasion he had blundered badly—had been lifted out of him-

self so far as to get hopelessly mixed up in an affair which was repulsively distasteful to his refined, gentlemanly, and honourable feelings.

And now, this evening, he was reviewing the happenings of the last few weeks. And the process of so doing was not very palatable. He was furious with himself, but he realised that heaping condemnations upon himself would not help him in any way whatever.

"The folly of it!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Heavens, what mad things a fellow can do when under the influence of drink! It's taught me a lesson I'm not likely to forget in a hurry!"

He threw himself into an easy-chair, drew it before the fire, and settled down once more to consider things.

And, frankly, Douglas Clifford had much to think over. The whole trouble had started about a month previously, when he had made the acquaintance of Mr. Dudley Foxcroft, a rich and influential financier. Foxcroft's name was one to conjure with in the City, and Clifford had thought it rather a wise thing to become on friendly terms, with a view to doing a mild deal with Foxcroft in stocks and shares.

One evening the financier had suggested a theatre, with a choice little supper afterwards at an extra specially select restaurant. Clifford had enjoyed himself immensely that evening, and no real harm was done until supper-time, after the play. Then, feeling lighthearted and rather careless, he had allowed the genial Foxcroft to persuade him into taking rather more champagne than was good for him. It was not the quantity of champagne he drunk, but the quality of it.

Clifford by no means became intoxicated, but he was lifted out of himself, as it were. For the time being he was quite another man—reckless, light-headed, and weak-willed. He fell in with everything Foxcroft suggested without demurring in the least. The financier was rather mysterious, and declared that he was going to introduce Clifford to some friends of his and put him on to a "real good thing."

They left the restaurant at about midnight, and took a taxi to a magnificent house in Grosvenor Square. There Clifford was introduced to the owner, Professor Cyrus Zingrave, a well-known and highly respected scientist. There were four other gentlemen present, all of them esteemed members of society.

They made rather a fuss of the new-comer, and some more champagne found its way down Clifford's throat, thereby dulling his normally acute brain even more. The party repaired from Professor Zingrave's library to a superbly fitted laboratory which had been built out from the mansion itself, and was entirely secluded and private.

Clifford was informed that he was in the council chamber of the League of the Green Triangle—a statement which astonished him more than a little. He laughed rather inanely, and wanted to know what the deuce the League of the Green Triangle happened to be.

Professor Zingrave himself took up the task of explaining. The league, so he informed Clifford, was composed entirely of the gentlemen he saw around him. But it was a fast-growing concern, and he, the president, was on the look-out for new members—men with commonsense, and with a desire to increase their worldly belongings.

In short, the league was a society which had decided advantages for men with brains who could use them properly to the mutual benefit of their owner and to the other members of the league. Clifford was not intoxicated, was not even "rocky," but in his present state of mind he was easily influenced, and Zingrave's eloquent tongue soon won him over.

In a remarkable, mysterious ceremony, Douglas Clifford was made a member of the League of the Green Triangle, and undertook to attend all

the meetings, and to take his part, whenever required, in the doings of the league. The affair rather amused him, and he decided that it would be good fun to belong to such a quaint society. Of course, everything was quite all right, for all the other members were prominent men—one of them even being a peer of the realm.

He took the oath of allegiance, and gave his solemn word of honour as an English gentleman that the secrets of the league would remain locked in his heart for all time—although what those secrets were Clifford had not the faintest notion.

But he had taken his oath, and he had been perfectly sober at the time—merry, no doubt, but nevertheless sober. That was the crux of the whole thing. Had he been intoxicated his oath would have been useless, and he would not have felt the least responsibility for it.

The following morning Clifford felt rather ashamed of himself. He remembered every little incident that had occurred the night before, but now his customary level-headedness had returned. He was really amazed with himself for becoming a member of the League of the Green Triangle. He had sworn to be faithful to the league, no matter what might befall, and he knew perfectly well that as a gentleman he would have to abide by his oath.

It worried him more than a little for a time, but then he decided that there could be nothing in the affair, and it was certainly not worth troubling over.

But day by day, by a very gradual process, he gained a clearer understanding of the thing he had done. After ten days had elapsed he could think of nothing else but the folly of that night. Amazing, astounding, incredulous as it seemed, he found that the League of the Green Triangle was, in cold reality, a criminal society!

For some time he simply could not believe it. But then the evidence which confronted him was too obvious to be thrust aside. Professor Zingrave, the famous scientist, Dudley Foxcroft, the influential City magnate, and four other celebrated men, whose names were almost household words, were, in stark truth, criminals!

At the second meeting of the league Clifford protested strongly that he had not been responsible for his actions on that never-to-be-forgotten night. But Zingrave, now cold and cutting, informed him that that excuse was worthless. He had Clifford's oath—in writing—that he was a staunch member of the league, and that he would be true and faithful to all its undertakings and all its secrets. Zingrave pointed out that having gone so far it was impossible to retract.

Clifford became indignant—furious. He even talked of going to the police. But Zingrave laughed at the threat, saying that Clifford's word of honour prevented that, and also suavely pointed out the fact that if the league were exposed Clifford himself would share the same penalty as the others. His own writing bore out the fact that he belonged to the society.

The young man realised that he was trapped. There was nothing else to do but resign himself to the unkind fate which had led him into such a maze of disaster. Yet, at the same time, Clifford was absolutely unable to resign himself. The matter worried him day in and day out.

And then, like a thunderbolt, he made a startling discovery. Zingrave and his associates were scheming, quietly and secretly, to fleece their victim. Machinery was being set in motion which would ultimately force Clifford to part with the bulk of his fortune. And it was being engineered with such remarkable cleverness that he would be unable to put a stop to it without bringing himself into the hands of the police.

The situation was appalling. Quite inversed in such intricate villainy.

Clifford felt that he was like a rat in a trap. If he allowed things to go on he would either be a ruined man or else would bring himself within reach of the law—or, rather, his precious associates would cause events to take that turn.

Desperate, Clifford set his brains to work. One thing was certain, the present intolerable state of affairs could not go on. And being keen-witted and clever by nature he hit upon a scheme.

He turned his entire fortune into hard cash and gilt-edged securities—securities, moreover, which could not be traced. Clifford saw to that. Then he deposited his fortune in a dozen different banks in a dozen different parts of the country. And each deposit was made in a false name. When he had finished—the transfer took him eight days to bring about—his own fortune had vanished into thin air. It was impossible to trace where it had gone to, or what had become of it. And in twelve different parts of the country securities and sums of varying amounts had been deposited.

Clifford himself was just as rich as before, but he hadn't a penny to his name. He had acted in the nick of time. By a wonderful piece of cleverness he had slipped out of the clutches of the league. At least, he had made his money safe. It now remained for him to free himself. On this very night a meeting of the league was arranged, and he would then inform Zingrave of what he had done—or hint at it. Clifford felt that once the scoundrels knew that their schemes had fallen to the ground they would release him from his oath.

Aroused from his reverie by the chiming of the clock on the mantelpiece, he rose from his easy-chair and lit a cigarette. His handsome, strong face was grim and set. He knew that an ordeal was awaiting him, but he felt prepared for it. The success of his precautionary measures gave him a confidence which had been utterly lacking hitherto.

"I'm hanged if I can see what the brutes can do," he murmured. "I don't believe they'd even stick at murder; but to convert me into a lump of cold meat wouldn't help them in any way. They want my money, and I'll make it perfectly clear that it's beyond their reach. Perhaps they'll realise then that their lamb isn't so innocent as he first looked!"

Ten minutes later, Douglas Clifford stood on the pavement outside his flat, hailing a taxi. The night was raw and chill, and the air was thick and somewhat foggy. Clifford stepped aboard the taxi when it drove up, and gave Professor Zingrave's number in Grosvenor Square.

As he was being whizzed along the young man had much to think about. Even now, after all the absolute proof which was in his hands, he found it hard to believe that the League of the Green Triangle really existed, and that he, of all people, was a member. The whole thing seemed like some awful nightmare—some fantasy of an over-worked brain.

The journey was short, and he soon found himself standing before the imposing hall door of Professor Zingrave's mansion. It was opened by a respectful manservant, who informed him that the professor was waiting in the laboratory with several other gentlemen.

Clifford nodded grimly, and handed the man his overcoat and hat. The strong electric lights shone fully upon his tall, well-built form. His dress-suit fitted him perfectly, and Clifford made a fine picture of a man as he stood there straightening his tie before one of the huge mirrors which lined the hall.

Suddenly an expression of pleasure illuminated his face, but it quickly changed to a frown of perplexity. He turned, and faced the staircase.

"Good-evening, Miss Zingrave!" he exclaimed coldly.

Upon the stairs stood a young girl of about seventeen. She had paused upon seeing Clifford standing in the hall, and her face became just a little

flushed. In spite of himself Clifford could not help a feeling of admiration thrill through his frame. Vera Zingrave was a remarkably pretty girl, and her beauty was intensified by the fact that her smile was strangely winning, and that her dark brown eyes—magnificent, liquid, expressive eyes, Clifford thought—were absolutely frank and fearless.

"Why, Mr. Clifford, I didn't expect to see you to-night!" she cried gaily. "What is it this time? Have you come for another horrid scientific talk with dad?"

Douglas Clifford nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed quietly. "My business is exceedingly urgent, Miss Zingrave!"

He spoke distantly, as though he cared not one jot for the girl before him. And yet, in some unaccountable way, he was curiously attracted. This girl—this innocent-looking, delightful girl of seventeen—was Zingrave's daughter! The daughter of one of the biggest scoundrels in Great Britain!

Did she share her father's secrets? Was she aware of the object which had brought Clifford to her father's house in the first place? Was the existence of the League of the Green Triangle known to her?

The young man was sorely perplexed. If, indeed, Vera Zingrave did know all these things, then, of course, she was just as bad as all the rest. But the very idea of it seemed horrible—repulsive. This sweet girl was entirely ignorant of the villainy which flourished all around her. It must be so. She was too young, too innocent, to be mixed up in her father's affairs—to even dream of their nature.

And somehow Clifford was strangely attracted towards her. In spite of himself, in spite of his resolve to cut himself adrift from Zingrave and all his associates, a wave of pleasure took possession of him as she stood before him. He felt ashamed of himself for having spoken so brusquely.

"Forgive me if I seem—er—a little—er—rough," he stammered. "I—I am very worried, Miss Zingrave, and—and——"

He broke off, and was conscious that his face flushed very red. For the life of him he couldn't understand why. Usually he was the most self-possessed of young men. Yet the frank openness of her wonderful deep-brown eyes seemed to take all the confidence out of him. There was an expression of pleasure in those eyes which instinctively told Clifford that the girl was pleased to see him. And that little fact alone set his speech all a-stutter.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said sincerely. "Dad's worried sometimes, and then he's like a bear about the house, growling at everybody. But that's not often; he's an old dear usually. Perhaps, after you've had your chat with him, you'll be feeling more comfortable. Shall I see you afterwards?"

"I—I hope so," said Clifford nervously.

"How fine!" Vera exclaimed, with a flash of her eyes. "Au revoir!"

And she tripped gracefully into the drawing-room, leaving Clifford staring at the door with a feeling of keen disappointment in his heart. Then he shook himself sharply, and his jaw grew firm.

What on earth was the matter with him? Why, she was only a school-girl! Besides, he had come here on grim business, and it was no time to act the fool. So, without more ado, he walked briskly down the superbly carpeted corridor until at last he reached the laboratory.

Had he been in ignorance of the amazing facts, he would have thought that an innocent little smoking-party was being held. The laboratory was brilliantly lighted, and six men were either taking their ease in luxurious chairs or standing chatting before the great fireplace, in which a cheerful blaze sent out a radiant heat.

With his back to the fire was Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the renowned

scientist, and talking with him were Dudley Foxcroft, financier and millionaire, and Lord Sylvester, the famous racehorse owner. Reading a paper, and reclining in an easy-chair, was Sir Roger Hogarth, one of the biggest ship-owners in Great Britain. Edmund Gresswell, K.C., was having a little friendly argument with Prince Yoni-Saka, a Japanese nobleman, whose knowledge of the mysteries of the East was vast and wonderful.

"Good-evening!" said Clifford bluntly.

The six men looked up at the new-comer, and Dudley Foxcroft hurried across the room and grasped Clifford's hand.

"My dear chap——"

But the young man jerked his hand out of Foxcroft's grip.

"I'm not a hypocrite!" he interjected curtly. "You know my views with regard to this business, and I'll thank you to drop all pretence of friendliness. I've come here to-night to make one fact perfectly clear to you all, and that is that I want you to release me from my oath!"

There was a moment's silence, and there were many grim looks.

"Our young friend appears to be somewhat upset," said Professor Zingrave softly. "Perhaps a little chat will alter things."

The professor's voice was wonderfully musical, and it had a silky, gentle tone about it that was almost irresistible. Zingrave's personality, in fact, was a remarkable one, and Clifford knew that he would have to steel himself to the utmost to avoid being won over. The professor seemed to possess uncanny powers over his fellow-beings, and could, without in the least appearing to, convince them against their own judgment and inclinations.

He was a small man, but an imposing one, nevertheless. His shoulders drooped a little, and upon them was set one of the most remarkable heads Clifford had ever seen. Clean-shaven, his skin was almost dead white. Not a spot of colour relieved his cheeks, and his brow was high and massive—the brow of a genius. But it was the eyes which held Clifford's attention—which seemed to grip the young man in a grasp of fascination. They were large and absolutely black, piercing, and commanding.

Zingrave rubbed his white, delicate hands together.

"A little chat," he repeated gently. "Now, Mr. Clifford, why can't you be sensible? You have been admitted into the most exclusive society in existence—a society which offers illimitable advantages——"

"Precisely!" cut in Clifford sharply. "Advantages which appeal to rogues, thieves, and vagabonds! As an honest man, I protest against being a member of this infernal League of the Green Triangle! I took the oath when I was under the influence of drink. I admit I was sober, but the champagne had got into my head, and I was reckless, foolish, and irresponsible."

"Nonsense!" said Lord Sylvester. "Be reasonable, boy! With your abilities and fortune you have a wonderful future before you. By sticking to us you will double your fortune within a year——"

Clifford laughed strainedly.

"If I had trusted to you," he answered, "my fortune would have vanished into thin air. Oh, I'm not a fool! Do you think, Professor Zingrave, that I'm unaware of what has been going on? The whole wretched thing was a plot—a foul plot to entrap me. Foxcroft succeeded, and now I'm in the maze. You knew that I was rich, and you have been planning, this last week or two, to fleece me of my fortune."

He laughed again, mockingly now.

"You've failed miserably," he said fiercely. "You've failed utterly and completely. With all your cleverness I've slipped through your fingers. My fortune is beyond your reach. Ask any banker, ask any stockbroker, and he'll tell you that Douglas Clifford hasn't a penny to his name!"

Zingrave smiled imperturbably.

"You are rather late, my friend," he said. "I have already asked, and that interesting fact is known to me. Yes, your fortune has vanished. You have proved yourself to be smarter even than the league. I admire you—I respect you highly. And, to be perfectly frank, I will admit that our object in cultivating your acquaintanceship was to relieve you of your source of income. Well, as we have failed, I have decided upon which course to take."

"And what is that?" asked Clifford eagerly.

Zingrave took from his pocket a piece of paper, and Clifford saw that it was his signed statement, swearing to be faithful to the League of the Green Triangle. Zingrave held it out, and Clifford took it.

"It is yours," said the professor evenly. "Place it in the fire if you wish!"

"You—you mean to release me?" he stammered huskily.

"Exactly!"

There was a chorus of angry protest, but Zingrave bent forward and his strange eyes glittered upon every man in the room for a second. As though by magic, the protests subsided.

Clifford examined the paper to see that it was the genuine document, and then screwed it up and flung it into the heart of the fire.

"And now," said Zingrave smoothly, "our hold on you is destroyed. You asked to be released, and you are released. In return, before you leave this apartment, you must give me your solemn word of honour that this affair is closed, that you will forget everything which has passed, and that our secrets are locked in your heart for ever."

"And suppose I refuse?"

"I do not suppose anything so absurd," said Zingrave, his dark eyes resting on Clifford's face. "You are a gentleman, and I have treated you as such. You know that your safety—your life, perhaps—depends upon your decision. Give me your word of honour, and you are free to go, and so long as you ignore the league and its doings, the league will ignore you. At the first sign of treachery——"

"Stop!" interrupted Clifford. "You are right, Professor Zingrave. As a man of honour, I am compelled to give my word. I assure you solemnly and sincerely that this episode will remain my secret for all time. I take my oath that I will never say a single word which will jeopardise your safety or the safety of these other gentlemen. I make one stipulation, however. If the league interferes with me in any way in the future, I shall consider my oath null and void, and shall take what steps I deem advisable. I wish to make that clear."

"Have no fear, the league will never trouble you," said Zingrave. "I accept your oath, Mr. Clifford, and you are now no longer a member of the Green Triangle. You have proved yourself to be smarter than we anticipated, and we are not afraid to acknowledge it. Good-evening!"

The young man, his heart beating swiftly with relief, took his departure. He was free! The League of the Green Triangle no longer worried him. Zingrave realised that his victim had safeguarded himself, and had therefore flung him aside as of no use.

Clifford was lighthearted as he walked into the hall of the mansion again, and was so engrossed in his thoughts that he forgot Vera Zingrave entirely. It was only when he was walking briskly along Grosvenor Square that he remembered the girl. He hesitated a moment, wondering whether he should go back.

But no! He had shaken the dust of Zingrave's house from his feet for ever, and it would be sheer madness to become better acquainted with Vera.

So, with a feeling of regret that he could hardly define, he walked on. His step was light, and his cheeks a little flushed. The folly of that fateful night had been robbed of its evil consequences.

But, even while Clifford was congratulating himself, Professor Zingrave was just finishing a little speech in his laboratory—a speech which met with the approval of every other member of the League of the Green Triangle.

"That is my plan, gentlemen," concluded Zingrave softly. "The young fool is off his guard now; he thinks we will take no further notice of him. Therefore our task will prove simplicity itself."

The others nodded.

"You have relieved me, professor," said Sir Roger Hogarth. "I was amazed when you handed that document to Clifford, but I understand, now, that it was merely a part of your scheme."

"Good heavens! You didn't really think I should allow Clifford to walk about this earth free, knowing all that he does know about us?" exclaimed Zingrave grimly. "Clifford is dangerous—I know it. He is a young man with a really remarkable brain. The way in which he has disposed of his fortune proves that. When the league has increased, when it has become a great organisation, it would be fatal to have this youngster a continual source of anxiety to us. His fortune must be placed in our keeping, and used to build up a greater and more powerful league. In three or four years, gentlemen, the Green Triangle will be famous throughout the land—it will be a sign which Scotland Yard will stare aghast at. I mean to make our organisation the most wonderful thing of its kind the world has ever seen. And Clifford? Well, he will have to go—at once. Having obtained his money he will be no further use to us, and he must go. I have already told you my plans for bringing about the transfer of his wealth, and causing him to disappear for all time will prove a simple task."

Zingrave chuckled—a quiet, silky chuckle, which held a world of meaning. The other men were all grave and a little uneasy, and they looked at their chief with faces which were rather more pallid than usual. But Zingrave himself was as cool and genial as ever. The ghastly, murderous subject on which he had been discoursing had no effect upon him whatever. The man was a mystery—a weird mixture of devilish cunning and child-like geniality. His voice was musical and fascinating, and yet it was commanding to such a degree that not one single man present in that room would have dared to argue. His personality was something uncanny.

And then, in cold, clear, business-like tones, certain plans were made. Amid the smoke of fragrant cigars the doom of Douglas Clifford was decided upon. Within the short space of twenty-four hours he would disappear from London, from the trodden paths of mankind, as though the very earth had opened and swallowed him up.

— — —

II.

STRATHRIE CASTLE was situated in one of the remotest corners of Sutherland, at the very north of Scotland. The castle was old and uninhabited, and was more or less of a ruin. Fully eighteen miles from the nearest habitation, the gaunt, grim old castle raised its storm scarred walls to the heavens in silent solitude. It stood no more than five hundred yards inland; the rocky cliffs leading down to the beach being almost within a stone's throw of the crumbling battlements.

The place had been a ruin for so long that it had been almost forgotten by man. There being no other building of any sort within miles, no human

being was seen there month in and month out. On rare occasions in the summer-time, a holiday party would possibly picnic among the ruins—but of late years even these visits had ceased, for the road-way for ten miles at least, was nothing more than a track—in places being almost impassable.

During the winter—ay, all the year round—it was possible to stand on the battlements and never see a sign of human life, except, away on the horizon, a stray ship or two. None ever came in shore, and Strathrie might have been an island in mid-Pacific. An army could have landed there, and none would have been the wiser.

It was the property of Sir Roger Hogarth, Bart., the famous shipowner—although that fact was known to very few. For years the place had been absolutely worthless, so must waste ground. But now, at last, it was being put to a use.

Two days after that fateful meeting in Professor Zingrave's laboratory, a small steam yacht anchored under the cliffs at the foot of Strathrie. It was late evening, and the darkness was intense. Fortunately, the sea was calm, and the boat which put off from the yacht had no difficulty in reaching the shore.

That boat contained six men—Professor Zingrave, Sir Roger Hogarth, Douglas Clifford, two members of the yacht's crew, and Silas Vizard, a small, skinny man with excessively long, deformed arms, which gave him the appearance of having terrific strength.

The kidnapping of Douglas Clifford had been a simple affair. A breathless messenger had arrived at his flat the night before, and had gasped out a plausible story of an injured man a mile away who was asking urgently to see Clifford. The young man, unsuspecting, had fallen into the trap headlong. No sooner had he stepped into the waiting motor-car than he was rendered unconscious by unknown assailants. When he came to himself he found that he was in the cabin of a small yacht, bound, gagged, and helpless. To his stupefied amazement he soon discovered that he was in the hands of the League of the Green Triangle.

The rest was merely a matter of time. Half-an-hour after the beaching of the boat, the party were standing in a low, grim-walled dungeon, far beneath the ruins of Strathrie Castle. The dungeon was perfectly dry, and the passages leading to it were quite dusty. Two lanterns stood upon a rotten tub, and cast a fitful light upon the scene.

Douglas Clifford had been released now, but there was no fear of his escaping. He knew, indeed, that any attempt to escape would be futile. Professor Zingrave and Sir Roger Hogarth were facing him, and both were looking grim.

"You scoundrels!"

"We have no time for the exchange of compliments," said Zingrave suavely, in his soft, musical voice. "Our business with you, Mr. Clifford, is quite simple, and we have brought you to this spot merely for the sake of absolute privacy."

Clifford's eyes blazed.

"What do you want?" he demanded hoarsely. "You're going to murder me, I suppose?"

"Pray, do not jump to conclusions," replied Zingrave evenly. "We have no desire to take your life. But you have thwarted the league, and that is a state of affairs which we can, under no circumstances, allow. I admire you, young man, for the way in which you transferred your fortune to a safe plan before our own intricate plans could materialize. You have merely to answer one question!"

Clifford laughed harshly.

"I can guess what it is," he said. "You want me to tell you what I've

done with my fortune. What do you take me for? A fool—an imbecile? I swear before Heaven that I will never disclose my secret to such an infernal scoundrel as you!" he added, passionately. "That is your answer, Professor Zingrave!"

"Come, come, there is really no necessity to get excited," said the professor mildly. "I will just state my terms in brief, clear language. You have two choices. The first is, if you refuse our demands, instant death—I will not explain how. We are miles from the nearest habitation, and every man aboard Sir Roger's yacht is faithful to the league. Your second choice is by far the better. You have merely to tell us exactly what you have done with your money, and give us written authority to claim it. In those circumstances, we will then leave you and obtain possession of your fortune. Immediately the transactions are completed the yacht will return, and you will be given fifty thousand pounds in American money. The yacht will then sail for the United States and land you there. If you attempt to return to Great Britain your life will not be worth a second's purchase. Now, Mr. Clifford, what are you going to do? Leave this earth for ever to-night, or sail for America with a small fortune in your pocket?"

Douglas Clifford nearly choked with rage.

"You pitiful fool!" he cried. "Do you think I believe your lying statements? Suppose I gave you the written authority you require? You would get my money into your foul hands, and then, instead of going to the United States, I should be brutally murdered. If you mean to kill me, you'll kill me with my secret locked in my own heart. That is final!"

Zingrave sighed.

"A great pity!" he murmured softly. "I fear you are going to give us a considerable amount of trouble. I shall not repeat my proposals. Instead, I will come back here in six months time, and see if you have changed your mind. Six months confinement in this dungeon will probably make a great difference!"

Clifford went deathly pale.

"You mean to keep me a prisoner?" he gasped huskily.

"Precisely. It is my intention to be merciful," replied Zingrave musically—but with a ring in his voice that was like a stab of a cold dagger. "I shall not have you executed at once, but will give you a chance to bring that strong will of yours into submission. If six months is of no avail, then the time will be extended to a year—two years—until you have changed your mind."

"That will be never!" panted Clifford hotly. "As long as you let me live I will live. My fortune is untraceable, and safe from your thieving hands!"

"One day you will see the line!" put in Sir Roger harshly; "one day very soon. And the longer you delay, so will your fortune increase. It matters not to us how long it takes to drive you into submission; in the end we shall win, even if we have to wait ten years! I think there is no doubt as to who will give in first!"

Without another word Professor Zingrave and Sir Roger picked up the lanterns and passed out into the passage. The heavy door clanged to with a thud that sounded like a death-knell.

Douglas Clifford was left in pitchy darkness. He fell on his knees, and raised his arms aloft.

"Heaven help me!" he creaked. "Heaven help me!"

In a dull kind of way the awful horror of his dreadful position was thrust upon him. He was to be kept a prisoner in this vile cell for months—years—until he agreed to the terms of the League of the Green Triangle!

It was appalling, horrible.

His surcharged brain was incapable of realising the full ghastliness of the fate that had befallen him, and, strong man though he was, his head sunk upon his breast, and he sobbed like a frightened child.

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

The Ship Explosion—An Apparition from the Sea.

NIPPER stood at the window of Nelson Lee's consulting-room, and looked down upon the busy morning traffic of Gray's Inn Road. The street was clean and dry, and a gusty wind caused the pedestrians to pull their wraps tighter, and to button their gloves. Upon the window sash were some little icicles—a reminder of a shower during the night, and of the keen frost which had London in its grip.

"Makes you feel quite lively, sir!" exclaimed Nipper, turning round and looking at his master, who was sitting before the fire reading the morning newspaper, and enjoying a pipe. "With a frost in the air like this I feel fit for any old thing."

Nelson Lee lowered his newspaper and smiled.

"My dear Nipper," said the famous detective, "are you so anxious to be at work again? Are you on the look out for fresh worlds to conquer? Only yesterday we brought to a successful conclusion the case of Colonel Addison's missing emeralds—a case which, although intricate and dangerous, brought considerable grist to the mill at the finish. It was one of the most difficult affairs we ever touched, Nipper, and I think we ought to feel a little pleased with ourselves."

Nipper grinned.

"Oh, I'm feeling that all right," he replied. "Still, the case is over, isn't it? and we're both as fit as fiddles—at least, I am. You're looking a bit run-down, sir. I expect that three-day chase, without hardly any sleep, knocked you up."

"Probably, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "Even the strongest men are apt to crumple up for lack of sleep—although I'm not crumpled up by any means. Jove! There goes the bell!"

"Another client, I expect, sir!" said Nipper cheerfully.

"Good gracious, I hope not!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "I'm not feeling inclined to take up a fresh case so promptly. I want to be lazy for a week."

"No rest for the wicked, you know, sir!" grinned Nipper.

"You young rascal!" ejaculated the detective wrathfully.

Exactly what would have happened to Nipper the lad never knew, for as Nelson Lee was rising the door opened, and Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, announced Colonel Addison. A second later the colonel himself, a big bluff soldier, walked breezily into the room.

"Surprised to see me again so soon, Mr. Lee?" he exclaimed cheerily, wringing the detective's hand. "I was here only yesterday, begad! No, I haven't come to consult you in a professional capacity to-day."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"That's a relief, anyway, colonel." He smiled. "To tell you the truth, I'm not feeling quite up to the mark——"

"And I don't wonder at it, Mr. Lee—I don't wonder at it in the least."

exclaimed the colonel briskly. "You went through the very deuce of a time to get my emeralds back for me, and I'm astonished to see you so well as you are—I am, begad! Well, what do you say to a trip?"

"A trip?" repeated Nelson Lee vaguely.

"Yes, that's the idea," went on the detective's late client. "My yacht, the Iris, sets sail this afternoon from Southampton for a cruise round the British Isles—just a week's trip, you know."

"By gum, that's all right!" commented Nipper eagerly.

Colonel Addison chuckled.

"My invitation includes you, youngster," he said. "Well, Mr. Lee, will you come? I can promise you a good time, even though the weather is cold. And the sea air will make a new man of you. When the pair of you return you'll be fit for anything!"

"This is very kind of you, colonel——"

"Rubbish! Remember what you've done for me, begad!"

Nelson Lee didn't waste much time in deciding. As a matter of fact, the prospect of a sea-trip appealed to him, and he wasted no further time.

"We'll come with pleasure, colonel," he said. "I think the strenuous nature of our work during the past few weeks warrants our taking a short holiday. What do you say, Nipper?"

"What-ho!" agreed Nipper heartily.

"That's good enough for me," exclaimed the colonel. "I'm going down to Southampton by the 1.15 train. Suppose we arrange a meeting-place for one o'clock, at the station?"

"Excellent!" Nelson Lee agreed.

The appointment was made, and then Colonel Addison took his departure, leaving Nelson Lee and Nipper to pack. Nipper was highly delighted. He loved a sea trip, and knew that it would do both himself and his master a world of good. But neither he nor Nelson Lee had the slightest inkling that the trip was to be but the beginning of a series of adventures before which the detective's exploits would seem very insignificant.

Curiously enough, while Nelson Lee was packing, his thoughts were running in a direction which would have startled him could he have known what the projected sea trip was to lead to. He had paused, in fact, in the midst of filling his portmanteau, and Nipper, who came into the bedroom at the moment, looked at his master curiously.

"Why so thoughtful, sir?" he asked. "Anything worrying you?"

Nelson Lee looked up abstractedly.

"Well, my boy, I suppose I was rather troubled," he replied quietly. "There's another reference in this morning's paper to the Green Triangle. It appears that a stupendous robbery was undertaken last night, and the only clue left was a Green Triangle painted upon the strong-room door. A clue, I said! The police have seen that triangle scores of times, but no capture has ever been made. It's amazing, Nipper. Some powerful criminal organisation is at work in our midst, and yet Scotland Yard is helpless. The fellows at the head of this Green Triangle concern must be smart indeed. Gad, I should dearly love to have an opportunity of trying my luck against the beggars!"

Nipper sighed.

"Any more of it, sir?" he asked wearily. "Fancy you worrying your head about that rotten Green Triangle while we're packing to go for a holiday! Haven't we discussed the subject scores of times without any result? For goodness' sake, let's forget all criminals and robberies and mysteries for a week, at least!"

Nelson Lee smiled amusedly.

"I suppose you're right, my lad!" he said. "All the same, I should like to have a shot at the Green Triangle gang!"

Perhaps Nelson Lee would have the opportunity he so much desired long before he expected it.

The meeting with Colonel Addison, the journey to Southampton, and the subsequent cruise of the *Iris* is of no interest whatever in this history until a certain point was reached. That point, indeed, was to be one of the most momentous in Nelson Lee's existence.

One night, or, rather, evening, for the hour was only seven o'clock, the *Iris* dropped her anchor inshore at a certain bleak part of the coast off the north of Scotland. The evening was cold, but the sea was perfectly calm. Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Colonel Addison were dining in the yacht's luxurious saloon.

"We'll stay here until morning," the colonel was saying. "I sleep more comfortably if we're stationary at nights, and we're in no particular hurry. Begad, Lee, you're looking as robust as an Afghan already!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I'm feeling splendid," he agreed. "This trip is just what I wanted—plenty of refreshing ozone, excellent food, and delightful companionship. I don't think I have enjoyed a holiday so much as this for many a year."

The steward entered the saloon with a fresh array of dishes.

"There's a queer light away on the port bow, gentlemen," he announced. "Ship afire, by the look of it. First officer reports it's getting brighter every minute."

"Ship afire, begad!" said the colonel. "That's bad—deuced bad. After we've had our fill we'll adjourn on deck and see what's going on. You'd better tell the captain, Jevons," he added, turning to the steward, "that if he thinks he can be of any help he's to up anchor and go to the rescue immediately."

But as the yacht remained stationary the captain was evidently of the opinion that nothing could be done—or, possibly, that the fire was not serious.

Dinner over, however, Nelson Lee, Nipper, and the colonel sallied out on deck to see what was amiss. There could be no mistake in the nature of the catastrophe which was taking place no great distance off.

The whole sky, towards the north, was lit by a lurid, flickering glow. In ten minutes time the cause of it was clearly and fully in sight. She was apparently a small tramp steamer, and her stern was simply a mass of raging flames, rising fully twenty feet into the air and casting a blinding glare on the cold sea all around.

"By Jove, she's fairly alight, sir!" said Nipper rather excitedly. "Can't we do anything to help? We're simply sticking here and looking on."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"They're evidently in no danger, my boy," he replied. "The ship would not be steaming at full speed if the crew were in peril. Perhaps they are gaining the upper hand over the flames even while we watch. The forward and centre parts of the ship are still quite free from the fire, and there is no wind to fan it. At the first sign of real danger you may be sure the crew and officers will take the boats."

Swiftly the steamer came nearer and nearer. Very soon the shouts of the officers could be heard, and the roar of the flames was quite distinct. Nelson Lee and Nipper leaned over the rail, and watched interestedly. The glare lit up their faces, and the faces of the *Iris's* crew, who were also looking on.

"What's the idea?" asked Colonel Addison, puffing at his cigar. "What are the fools making straight for the shore for—at least, they appear to be doing so. Do they think they can beach her?"

"Well, beaching her would be better than letting her sink, if she carries a valuable cargo," said Nelson Lee. "Perhaps she has sprung a serious leak, owing to the heat, and there is a strong likelihood of getting the fire under control. If they can beach her and then put the fire out it would certainly be better than abandoning her to a watery grave."

The colonel nodded, and watched.

Nelson Lee's surmise was probably correct, for the course on which the steamer was set would carry her past the Iris's bows and hurl her upon the sandy shore at the foot of the rugged cliffs. It was seen now that the ill-fated ship had a pronounced list to starboard, and the fire seemed to be getting a little less fierce. If, indeed, she was in a sinking condition, then to beach her would be the wisest course.

Myriads of sparks were leaping skywards, and the smoke rose in clouds. Nipper could even see the steel plates aft white hot through. She had passed the Iris now, and was just a little ahead, half a mile distant. Then, quite abruptly, the sound of her engine-room telegraph came to the ears of the watchers.

"Begad!" ejaculated the colonel. "She's stopping her engines!"

The statement was quite true, for the steady throb died away even as the colonel spoke. But a moment later it started again, more furiously than ever. The engines, in fact, had been reversed.

"Your theory seems to be wrong, Lee," said the colonel. "She's coming to a standstill a good distance from the beach, and deuced suddenly, too!"

A few minutes later the unfortunate ship's boats swung out on their davits and one by one descended to the water. Then, with frantic haste, they rode away and made straight for the Iris. Their doomed parent-ship was left listing heavily, deserted, and with her stern now blazing with unabated fury.

"Abandoned!" said Nelson Lee. "I can't quite understand why——"

Boom! Bo-o-o-o-m-m-m!

The detective's sentence was interrupted by a deafening, shattering explosion. It was stupendous, appalling, in its intensity. Even as those on the Iris watched, the burning ship simply hurled itself skywards in a million particles.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were flung from the rail, and the whole yacht quivered and shook. Breaking glass sounded from a dozen quarters. And when Nelson Lee looked over the water again all was pitchy darkness. The burning steamer had vanished utterly, and her boats were lost in the gloom.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the detective. "What a fearful explosion. I can understand now why the crew left with such obvious haste. They evidently had warning of what was coming, and escaped only in the nick of time."

"Begad!" gasped the colonel, and then, finding nothing better to say, he made the same ejaculation again. Nipper was holding his ears, for they were ringing painfully. The crash of the explosion had been like the discharge of half a dozen 15-inch guns.

"By gum, that was a surprise!" exclaimed Nipper breathlessly. "I'll bet there's plenty of smashed crockery below. Why, there's not a sign of the ship left. She must have sunk like a stone!"

The colonel hurried away, and gave some brisk orders. Very soon the Iris's boats put out to render assistance if necessary. But it was soon found that the crew of the ill-fated tramp had escaped, every man of them. Several masses of wreckage had fallen into the sea round about the boats, but by wonderful luck they had escaped with nothing more serious than small bits of debris falling among the occupants and distributing slight cuts and grazes.

The crew were taken on board the *Iris*, and the skipper then informed his listeners that he had been carrying a fairly large consignment of high explosive. He had thought it possible to quell the fire in time; but at last, abandoning the attempt as hopeless, he had left his ship to its fate.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, fifteen minutes after the catastrophe, having heard all there was to be heard, went for'ard into the bows and leaned over the rail. They had the deck quite to themselves, for the rescued men were all below, and the crew of the *Iris* were busily attending to them.

"An exceedingly unfortunate affair, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee, lighting a cigar. "However, I am thankful it was nothing worse. Fires at sea are the most awful catastrophes imaginable, and the skipper of this boat is mighty pleased he was almost within hail of us. Why, what's the matter, my lad?" added the detective sharply. "Can you see anything in the water?"

Nipper pointed excitedly.

"There, sir—look!" he exclaimed. "Don't you see it? It's a man's head, or I'm blind in one eye! He's swimming straight towards us, and from the shore, too!"

Nelson Lee strained his eyes, and detected the head and shoulders of a man who was swimming with steady strokes towards the *Iris*. He was quite close, and the detective let out a soft hail.

"He can't be one of the survivors of that ship, sir," said Nipper. "Every man is aboard and accounted for!"

There was no time for further talk, for the swimmer was now right under the yacht's bows. Nelson Lee flung him a rope, and then the detective and Nipper rapidly hauled the stranger up. He grasped the rail, swung himself over, and panted for breath.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper, amazedly.

And there was ample cause for the lad's astonishment. The form they had just hauled aboard was truly an apparition from the sea. It was a man, but his beard had been uncut for years, and his hair was hanging over his face and shoulders in long, wet, matted masses. His clothes were mere rags, and his eyes gleamed with a strange light.

Then, before the two astonished on-lookers, the man knelt down on the deck, with rivulets pouring from his rags, and lifted his hands to the sky.

"I thank Heaven for my release!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice, that quivered with intensity. "Heaven be praised, I have been set free, by a miraculous stroke of Providence, from my living tomb!"

CHAPTER II.

Beneath Strathrie—The Growth of the League—After Five Years!

WHILE Nelson Lee and Nipper had been watching the approach of the burning ship, something had been occurring on shore which would have filled both with amazement, could they have seen through the darkness, and through the solid cliffs. For, almost opposite the *Iris*, Strathrie Castle lay, gaunt and drear, upon its bleak eminence, close to the restless sea.

Apparently it was utterly deserted; apparently no man had been near the desolate spot for countless months. But, beneath the ruins, in the old dungeons and passages, were three human beings.

One of them was Douglas Clifford, the young man who had been incarcerated there five years previously by the League of the Green Triangle.

For five years he had seen nobody but his jailers, and, occasionally, one of Professor Zingrave's emissaries. For five years he had lived in a dungeon like a victim of the Middle Ages.

The other two men beneath the ruins were Silas Vizard, his deformed keeper, and an assistant. Several dungeons had been converted into living apartments, and these were made fairly comfortable. Oil stoves had been provided, and there was plenty of warmth for all. The only dungeon which was not comfortable was that allotted to the prisoner.

Its furniture consisted of a rough table and chair, and a small camp bedstead. The only light which illuminated the cell came through the heavy iron bars in the upper part of the doorway, its origin being a lantern swung from the ceiling of the passage. Clifford had no oil stove, but as the passage was generously supplied with heat, his prison was never cold.

Sometimes Vizard, when in a good humour, gave his prisoner a cigarette, or a cigar. Clifford was never fool enough to reject these, for his opportunities of having a smoke were few and far between.

On this particular night Vizard had been good-tempered, and Clifford was now sitting on his hard chair enjoying a cigar as only a man can enjoy one who has not smoked for several weeks. And Clifford was thinking. He had reading matter on the table, but just now he preferred to abandon himself to thought.

His hair was long and thick, and his beard reached almost to the middle of his waistcoat. He had fallen into a habit of stroking this, and murmuring to himself. To-night, in spite of the luxury of a smoke, he was feeling strangely depressed.

"The beginning of the sixth year!" he muttered bitterly. "Oh, when is it going to end? Have I not suffered enough? The hopelessness of it all is driving me mad! I seem to have been here all my life. The memory of London, of the world, is like a vague, far-away dream!"

At first, when he had originally been imprisoned, Clifford had nursed the secret hope of being able to escape. But that hope was soon killed, for he found that his captors were scrupulously vigilant. Sometimes, when he was allowed to go for a walk in the open air, he was guarded in such a manner that any attempt to escape would be futile.

He knew perfectly well that as long as he remained obdurate, so would Zingrave hold him prisoner. His fortune was lying idle, perfectly safe, and waiting to be claimed. It was well worth the league's while to keep Clifford alive. Sooner or later he would give in—he would be forced to. Perhaps another five years would pass; but, in the end, Zingrave would be triumphant.

Clifford rose to his feet and paced the dungeon.

"They'll beat me!" he murmured passionately. "It is useless to think otherwise. If there was even one spark of hope I should be like a new man. But there is no hope. I will never take my own life, and the league will hold me prisoner until I agree to their demands. By heavens, to be walking the streets a beggar would be better than this. It is worse than death itself!"

Dozens of times he had decided to tell Zingrave all, just for the sake of being released—released by death! For he knew that he would be murdered once the league were in possession of the information they required. But, at the last moment, his iron will had always asserted itself, and he had remained silent.

He had sworn never to give in, and he would abide by his oath.

He wondered what Zingrave was doing now. He had been told that the league had grown, but he had not the slightest idea of the vast extent of

that growth. Had he known, he would have realised, more fully than ever, the hopeless nature of his position.

For the League of the Green Triangle, originally composed of six men, had now attained the proportions of which Professor Zingrave had always dreamed. It was a vast, all-powerful organization—a far-reaching criminal society which extended from north to south, and from east to west. The original six chief members were now increased by many other influential men, and they formed the Governing Circle, with Professor Zingrave at their head. They were the brains of the whole machine. The ordinary common members of the league, hundreds in numbers, were merely working tools. These common members were in every town in Great Britain, in every branch of trade, and in every profession.

The objects and aims of the league were varied and innumerable. Robbery, blackmail, forgery, fraud—and even murder were its chief means of revenue. Some of its undertakings were small and insignificant—others were simply stupendous, involving hundreds of thousands. The claws of the dreadful society stretched out over the fair land like some foul reptile.

And so perfect was the organization, so smooth did the wheels of the mighty machine run, that Scotland Yard, and the police of the entire country were utterly helpless. With grim regularity robberies were committed, and in every case the burglars got away without leaving a trace, and always a rough, green triangle was left—the trade-mark of the league.

And for every crime of this description, so did the league perpetrate other crimes, in ten times the number. Crimes that were secret and unsuspected until all danger of discovery was past. Forgery, fraud, and blackmail.

Who the chiefs of the society were, not a soul knew. Yet the Governing Circle were all powerful men; men who were constantly in the public eye; men who would never have been suspected of being connected with the league by the astutest detective. As for Professor Zingrave, the celebrated scientist, being the chief—well Scotland Yard would have detained the man who made the accusation as a lunatic.

One of the cleverest members of the Governing Circle, in fact, was a prominent official of the police. Another was the governor of his Majesty's Convict Prison at Portmoor. Sir Roger Hogarth, Dudley Foxcroft, Gresswell, K.C., and the other original members were still using their brains and influence in support of the league. And, in consequence, their fortunes were all doubled and trebled. Working behind their safe cloak of respectability, they organised, and discovery was practically impossible.

The Governing Circle were safe for two reasons. They never entered into a transaction unless the thing had been planned to the last detail, and their high positions rendered them immune from suspicion. And an ordinary working member of the league could not possibly turn King's evidence against them, for the simple reason that the ordinary members knew no more of their identity than did the general public. Every worker for the league knew that there was a Governing Circle—but there their knowledge ended. Their orders were handed down to them through the agency of controlling agents—men who dared not breath a word for fear of instant death. A controlling agent had once turned traitor. The next night he was found mysteriously killed. That was a lasting lesson to the others.

And, even supposing a member of the Governing Circle were suspected, nothing further would result. The suspicion would always remain a suspicion, and would soon be discarded as preposterous. For the circle was so guarded that not one iota of proof was ever to be had.

And who was mainly responsible for this marvellous structure? Professor Zingrave. It was his wonderful brain which was always controlling, always guiding. But for his watchful eye mistakes would have been made.

Zingrave was uncanny: never had he blundered, never had he made a false move. It was his mighty power which had made the League of the Green Triangle a masterpiece of business ability.

It was a modern mystery. Men had been suspected by the police—men who were almost known to belong to the league. But there had always been one stumbling-block. No actual proof was ever forthcoming. And as soon as ever a member was suspected, the Governing Circle had him shipped abroad, with a liberal pension. Under no circumstances would they allow a man to be under police observation.

The league was an unsolvable puzzle. It was all-powerful, complete, and impregnable. Since those early days, when Douglas Clifford had fallen a victim, the society had grown almost out of all recognition. Then it had been small—now it was immense, and at the height of its glory.

Had Clifford known all as he sat in his cell, he would have allowed the last tiny shred of hope to fade from his breast. As it was, he had remained obdurate, as strong-willed and as determined as ever.

And his wonderful patience was soon to reap its reward.

As he puffed away the last fragment of his precious cigar, a shadow fell upon the wall of his prison, and he saw Silas Vizard gazing in at him through the bars of the door. The deformed man nodded genially.

"You're a queer chap, you know, Clifford," he said. "Why don't you give in to the league and have done with it? You've no more chance of getting out of their hands than a mouse has of getting out of a trap. What's the good of being obstinate? One of the league's agent will be here on Monday for the usual half-yearly visit. If you take my advice——"

"I don't want your advice!" cut in Clifford curtly. "Why do you think I have held out for five years? Why do you think I have suffered myself to live in ghastly confinement in these ruins for what seems to be a lifetime?"

"Well, I'm hanged if I know!" replied Vizard. "You won't be in any better position if you remain here until you're old and grey!"

Clifford snapped his teeth.

"Do you think I shall remain here another five years?" he asked, in a quivering voice. "Some day my opportunity will come, and then it will be either death or liberty. If Heaven is just, then I shall be given my freedom. Woe betide the League of the Green Triangle if I ever walk the earth again a free man! My fortune is untouched, and I shall use every penny of it, if necessary in a gigantic campaign to wreck and ruin this accursed blight of which Professor Zingrave is the headpiece. The police will be told nothing. I shall set about my work secretly, and, gradually and with terrible regularity, the league will diminish in size until it is broken, shattered, and cast from this earth!"

Vizard stared through the bars with a queer expression.

"I thought it would end in this!" he said, shaking his head. "Your brain's giving way, Clifford. In another year you'll be a raving madman. Why not accept the situation and give the league the information they require——"

"Never!" blazed Clifford fiercely.

The deformed man shook his head again, and then left the prisoner to himself without making further comment. When alone, Clifford often decided to end the insufferable torture; but the very instant an argument started he always reverted to his original statement—never would he throw up the sponge.

For perhaps ten minutes Clifford leaned against the rough table, breathing hard and thinking deeply. Then something happened which was as amazing as it was unexpected. It was extremely curious that Providence should

snow its hand at this particular moment, just when Clifford was dreaming of the things he would do if ever he became a free man.

It was as though an earthquake had suddenly convulsed the land. For a second Clifford heard a dull far-away boom. Then the ground beneath his feet shook and quivered, and a wild roaring confusion of sounds followed.

He was gazing through the bars into the passage at the time, and to his amazement the walls on the opposite side simply crumpled up and crashed down, plunging everything into utter darkness.

Amid the roar of the falling masonry a wild shriek rang in Clifford's ears, and even in the tense moment he guessed the cause—Silas Vizard had gone to his last account, perhaps buried beneath tons of stonework.

The thing happened so quickly that Clifford's brain was hardly capable of grasping it all in such a short space of time. Choking and gasping, he staggered back. The air was thick with dust, and his ears still rang and tingled.

But now everything was silent. Just fifteen seconds had elapsed since that first boom had come to Clifford's ears. He was confused, but at last his brain worked clearly and suggested an explanation.

"An explosion!" he told himself. "The force of it must have shaken these ruins to their foundations, and they were unable to stand the shock. Already tottering, they crashed down at the first quiver of the earth!"

He groped around him, feeling for the door. His object was to shout out through the bars to hear if Vizard or his assistant were still alive. But in the utter blackness Clifford had lost his bearings, and he stumbled headlong across the camp bedstead.

To his astonishment he found the bed smothered in brickwork, and he grazed his hand rather painfully. Feeling for the wall, to assist himself into a standing position, his hand merely smote the empty air.

"By Jove, that's queer!" he exclaimed. "The wall must be here—Ah!"

His sentence ended in a gasp—a gasp of amazement and scarcely born hopes. For his hand had suddenly gripped a jagged edge of brickwork. A moment's hasty examination told him the astounding truth. The explosion, in addition to wrecking the passage, had caused the wall of his dungeon to crack and crumble away. Probably some vital support had been shattered and this was the consequence.

Hardly daring to formulate his hopes, Clifford jerked the camp bedstead aside, and felt again. He now found that the hole was of considerable size, although not large enough to admit the passage of his body. Grasping the rough edge, he tugged at it, and instantly a crash of masonry sounded.

One minute later he had scrambled through the jagged hole, and groped before him. The darkness was still as intense as ever, but Clifford's heart was now beating with wild, half-formed hopes. Perhaps he would find himself buried alive—perhaps he would gain his freedom! The very uncertainty of his position made him tremendously eager to learn the actual truth.

His groping presently led him to a half-open door, and he guessed correctly that he had passed through an unused dungeon. Passing through the doorway he found himself in the passage, and at the far end a dim light emanated from an oil stove, which was burning as complacently as though nothing had happened.

In four strides Clifford reached it, tore out the smoking lamp, and held it aloft. The flickering light disclosed a scene of wild wreckage. The other portion of the passage had caved in, and now formed an impassable barrier. He guessed that his two keepers were now buried beneath the ruins, for their living quarters were upon the actual spot where most

damage had been done. Their punishment for their many past sins had been swift and sudden.

"By Heaven, is this to be the greatest moment of my life, or is it to be the blackest?" breathed Clifford hoarsely. "Shall I escape? Shall I gain my freedom?"

He was soon to know.

Hurrying along the passage with the vilely smoking lamp, he very soon arrived at the foot of a flight of circular, crumbling stairs. These were evidently as strong as ever, for the explosion had not effected them in the least. Clifford mounted them three at a time. Reaching the top, he was confronted by a huge door, made of one solid slab of stonework. It was bolted on the inside, and he thrust them back and swung the door open.

Instantly his light was extinguished as a draft of clear cold air rushed past him. He flung the lamp down and stepped through the doorway. Stumbling and feeling his way by inches, he mounted some more stairs—a straight flight this time. And then he beheld the most beautiful sight that had ever confronted his eyes—the cold, clear, starlit sky!

But even now Clifford could scarcely realise the fact that he was free. He did not dare to hope for it, and would not hope for it until all doubts were at rest. After the pitchy blackness of the dungeons, the starlight seemed almost brilliant to him. Running like a deer, he at last left the ruins of Strathrie Castle behind. Not a soul had barred his path, and the excitement which filled his breast almost made him dizzy.

He came to a halt at the top of the cliffs, and saw, lying placidly in the water before him, the dim shape of a large steam yacht. He knew, instinctively, that it did not belong to the League of the Green Triangle. The league's boat was not due until another five days had elapsed, and never once had it come before its time. Besides, he knew from what Vizard had once said, that the league's boat always anchored off shore with every light extinguished.

Clifford didn't hesitate a moment. A strange ship was there before him, and it meant a way to freedom. He scrambled down the sloping cliffs and arrived breathlessly upon the beach. Without pausing, he dashed down to the water, plunged in, and started swimming, with powerful strokes, through the icy-cold sea.



CHAPTER III.

Clifford Tells His Story—A Stupendous Offer.

NELSON LEE grasped Clifford's arm as he rose from the deck after sending up his prayer of thankfulness to Heaven.

But Clifford spoke first.

"What boat is this?" he asked feverishly. "Who is the owner? Why is it lying off Strathrie? Tell me!"

"This boat is the Iris," replied Nelson Lee quietly, although filled with amazement. "The owner is Colonel Addison, and we are lying at this spot for no particular reason. My own name, as you appear to be in need of information, is Nelson Lee!"

Clifford gave a great gasp.

"Nelson Lee!" he panted. "Nelson Lee, the detective?"

"Exactly!"

Clifford uttered a queer cry, and grasped Nelson Lee's hand with a grip that almost made the famous crime investigator wince. Indeed, both

Nelson Lee and Nipper were of the opinion that they were in the presence of a madman.

"Fate has been kind to me at last!" Clifford exclaimed huskily. "Not only has it freed me from a living death, but I have been delivered into the hands of the one man in the whole world I wanted to see! By Heaven, I can't believe it's true!"

"Oh, it's true right enough!" exclaimed Nipper. "But I should think you're jolly cold after swimming from the shore on a sharp winter's evening. You'd better come along into the cabin, and we'll set you up with some dry things."

Without a word, for his brain was now buzzing so much that speech was almost impossible, Clifford allowed himself to be led along the deck and into Nelson Lee's own cabin. They passed nobody on the way—in fact, Clifford's advent had not been seen by anybody aboard the yacht, apparently, with the exception of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

Shut up in Nelson Lee's cabin, quite private, Clifford stripped off his wet rags and was soon attired in a complete outfit of the detective's. The two men were of much the same build, and the warm tweed suit fitted Clifford as though it were his own. But his long beard and hair gave him an utterly bizarre appearance.

The plunge into the icy water had not affected him, and now, in the cosy cabin, he glowed with warmth, and thrilled with excitement and exultation. He was in the presence of Nelson Lee, of all men! Even before his imprisonment Clifford had heard of Nelson Lee as a remarkably clever and perfectly honourable detective. And of late years he knew that Nipper was the great detective's assistant.

For some time Clifford sat without speaking, being fully aware of the fact that both his companions were eyeing him curiously and with a certain degree of suspicion. He knew that they were amazed at his appearance, and he realised that he would have to explain his dramatic visit to the yacht.

"Well, why not tell everything?" he asked himself. "This man will help me—will probably prove an invaluable ally in my campaign against the league. He is experienced in the business, and will know exactly how to advise me. And if I evade telling him the truth and make up a story, he will not believe it. Nelson Lee is a remarkably astute fellow, and he already suspects me of being insane. I know it. Yes, I have nothing to lose by speaking the truth, and everything to gain. I will be perfectly frank."

But before saying a word about himself, Clifford made a request. He asked Nelson Lee to clip his hair short, and to remove his beard. The detective complied at once, for he was intensely curious to hear the stranger's story, and felt sure that it would be forthcoming in good time.

Accordingly, the next twenty minutes were occupied with the scissors and the razor. Nelson Lee was not exactly an expert barber, but he made a remarkably good job of Clifford's hair. Then the long beard was removed, and a shave followed. Clifford's full moustache was merely trimmed.

The startling change in Clifford's appearance was astonishing. Nelson Lee and Nipper could now see that he was a handsome man, well under thirty, although his sunken eyes and lined cheeks told of many privations and hardships. He sat back in his chair, and puffed at a cigar with keen enjoyment. Indeed, the happenings of the past hour seemed to him like a glorious dream, out of which he would soon awaken to find himself in the grim dungeon under Strathrie.

"You are waiting, I presume, Mr. Lee?" asked Clifford quietly. "You feel that it is incumbent upon me to give an explanation of my extraordinary and dramatic appearance? Possibly you think I am a madman——"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Indeed, no," he interjected. "I admit that when you first stepped aboard I held that opinion, but my views have since altered. I now see that you are perfectly sane, and that you are a well-educated gentleman. I feel that your story will be as startling as your original appearance."

"That you shall judge for yourself," said Douglas Clifford. "Just opposite this yacht a grim ruined castle lies a little back from the cliffs. For five years and two weeks I have been kept a prisoner there in a stone dungeon! For five years I have not seen a single soul except my persecutors. You can now understand my delirious joy when I stepped aboard this yacht and found myself in your presence. Five years ago I bade good-bye to the outside world—I now re-enter it, a changed, but terribly determined man."

Nipper whistled.

"Five years in a dungeon!" he exclaimed. "My hat, that was a bit rough!"

"Rough!" repeated Clifford tensely. "You merely call it rough? I tell you, Mr. Lee, I have spent years of the cruellest torture. I do not mean bodily torture, but anguish of mind. But for that Heaven-sent explosion I should be a prisoner still, with utterly no prospect before me but incarceration for the rest of my days, or instant death!"

"You amaze me," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"If you are amazed now, you will scarcely credit the remainder of my story," declared Clifford grimly. "I will begin at the beginning, and tell you everything in its proper sequence. I am being perfectly straightforward with you, Mr. Lee, because I have made up my mind to make you an offer—which I will set forth later on. First of all, you must hear what I have to relate.

"Five years ago," he proceeded, "I was a careless young man without a trouble in the world. Until I fell foul of the League of the Green Triangle——"

"What!" yelled Nipper, leaping to his feet.

Nelson Lee's cigar dropped to the floor. He did not often permit himself to give any display of astonishment; but Clifford's unconsciously dramatic reference to the League of the Green Triangle caused the detective to bend forward with his whole form simply tense with excitement.

"The Green Triangle!" he repeated sharply.

"That is what I said," replied Clifford. "Have you heard of it, Mr. Lee?"

The detective laughed curiously.

"The Green Triangle is the greatest thorn in the side of Scotland Yard that they have ever had to deal with," he replied grimly. "It is a thorn which the cleverest men in the kingdom cannot pluck out. Mr. Clifford, you have absolutely astounded me, and my interest in your case is intensified a thousandfold. If you have any information to give me concerning the Green Triangle, then I shall count this the luckiest day of my life!"

"That is excellent hearing," said Clifford, "for I have information that you will find almost incredible."

"Did—did the league imprison you in this old castle, then, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Who else?" asked Clifford. "But to continue my story. I was originally introduced by Mr. Dudley Foxcroft to Professor Zingrave——"

"One moment," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Have those two gentlemen anything to do with your story concerning the Green Triangle?"

Douglas Clifford stared.

"Apparently I am giving you a good many surprises, Mr. Lee," he answered calmly. "Perhaps you do not know who Professor Zingrave is?"

"Certainly. I know that he is a most distinguished scientist, and a man who is honoured and respected by the whole nation."

"Then my revelation will come as something of a shock," said Clifford with a chuckle. "Remember, Mr. Lee, I am not telling you mere suspicions. I have been persecuted by the league for five years, and I am only stating cold, absolute facts. Professor Zingrave is the chief, the very brains, of the League of the Green Triangle!"

"Good heavens!"

It was really all Nelson Lee could say at the moment. Nipper simply collapsed into his chair and looked rather pale. Then he suddenly sat up and frowned.

"Look here, Mr. Clifford," he said darkly, "I don't think it's fair to pull our legs in this way——"

Clifford sprang to his feet impulsively.

"How many more times must I say that I am only telling you positive facts?" he cried with impatient fierceness. "I repeat. Professor Zingrave is the founder and head of the league! Dudley Foxcroft is another member; Lord Sylvester, Sir Roger Hogarth, Edmund Gresswell, K.C., and many other distinguished men are all members! Well, why are you staring at me? Perhaps you have changed your mind again, and think that I am mad?"

Nipper nodded.

"Well, no sane man would expect us to believe——"

"Hush, Nipper!" interrupted Nelson Lee curtly. "Greatly as Mr. Clifford has amazed me—indeed, I am almost lost for words—I nevertheless believe the truth of his statements. Kindly proceed with your narrative, Mr. Clifford. I guarantee that there will be no interruptions again. After what you have told us we are past being surprised!"

Slowly pacing the cabin, Clifford thereupon related the whole of his adventures right up to the point when he had scrambled on to the Iris's deck. Nelson Lee and Nipper listened completely enthralled. They were simmering with excitement, for the detective realised, in some way, that he was on the eve of the greatest and most momentous period of his life.

When Clifford had finished he came to a halt before Nelson Lee's chair, and looked the detective straight in the eye.

"I think I have told everything lucidly, Mr. Lee," he said, his voice shaking a little. "You now know all that I have suffered at the hands of this accursed society! By a miracle I have escaped, and now matters will go very differently. I have money; I am a very rich man. If necessary I will spend every farthing I possess to crush Zingrave and his vile lieutenants as though they were deadly scorpions!"

"But how can we believe all this, guv'nor?" asked Nipper sceptically. "Mr. Clifford has provided no proof——"

Nelson Lee regarded the lad from beneath lowered eyelids.

"I need no proof, my boy!" he said quietly. "I have had enough experience of men to form my own opinion. I do not think—I positively know—that Mr. Clifford has not invented this narrative. I do not blame you, Nipper, for being doubtful. But think for a moment. Is proof absolutely lacking? Assuredly not. The very fact that Mr. Clifford came aboard half an hour after the explosion is ample evidence in support of his story. And his beard—his hair? Were they not proofs of long confinement?"

Clifford turned to Nipper.

"Do I look insane, my lad?" he asked quietly. "What possible reason could I have for coming aboard this ship and faking up a cock-and-bull story? No reason whatever, as your own commonsense will tell you."

Nipper looked rather shamefaced.

"I'm sorry, sir," he apologised. "Yes, I believe everything now. But, dash it all, your yarn was so absolutely incredible that I couldn't swallow it all in one gulp! I simply had to let it go down-by degrees. You must have had a terrible time, sir!"

"Terrible is not the word, Nipper," replied Clifford. "But I won't harp upon that which is dead for ever. The future lies before me. My whole energies are to be henceforth used in a grim fight to the death with the League of the Green Triangle! I have dreamed of such a time as this, and my plans are already hot in my brain. Mr. Lee, I want you to help me—I want your aid in the great combat which is to come!"

"I am only too eager to help you," Nelson Lee assured him. "But what do you propose? Will you inform Scotland Yard——"

Clifford laughed scornfully.

"Good heavens, no!" he replied quickly. "What could Scotland Yard do? Would they believe me? They would take the same view as Nipper did at first. Scotland Yard wants absolute proof before it moves an inch—and even if I had that proof I should not vouchsafe it. My plan is to bring the league to ruin secretly, surely, and silently. They shall not know from whence comes their peril. One by one we will strike the scoundrels down. It will be a fight—oh, a glorious, thrilling battle of wits—but I am eager to commence the fray. My long confinement has stored up within me the energy of years, and it is now bursting to be released!"

A fine fire blazed in Douglas Clifford's eyes as he made that statement. His whole being quivered with joy and enthusiasm. He was free! He could stretch himself, and he was at last in a position to bring the scoundrels who had persecuted him to book. And he had the able support and assistance of Nelson Lee and Nipper. At the eleventh hour, when events had been at their blackest, the light of a glorious future had dawned upon the horizon.

"Your escape will probably be unknown," commented Nelson Lee. "In any case, by the time it is known, if at all, you will be in a position to snap your fingers at the league. I, myself, will take steps to insure your safety. But I warn you this campaign you outline will be fraught with terrible dangers——"

"I am prepared for them, Mr. Lee," cut in Clifford quickly. "But I am forgetting myself: I have not made you the offer I spoke of earlier. As I said, I am a very rich man, and owing to my own shrewdness—I am a little conceited on that point—my fortune is still in my own grasp and far beyond the reach of the league. If you consent to enter into this great crusade with me, I will, at the outset, hand you fifty thousand pounds to be working with, and to compensate you for the risks you take."

"A princely offer——"

"Wait!" interrupted Clifford. "When we have finally wrecked the league, in months to come, I will hand you another fifty thousand. No, don't say that it is too much, for your life will be in danger on many an occasion, and it is only fitting that you should be amply rewarded."

"A hundred thousand quid!" gasped Nipper. "Oh, fan me somebody!"

Nelson Lee took Douglas Clifford's hand.

"I accept your offer," he said quietly. "But I make one stipulation. For many years I have had grim experience of every class of criminal, and I shall insist upon taking complete command. In other words, I want you to place your case entirely in my hands, and be of assistance only when I require you."

"I should be a fool to object, Mr. Lee," said Clifford. "I agree heartily—indeed, I was about to suggest the very same thing myself. But I, too,

have a stipulation. Scotland Yard must know absolutely nothing of our campaign. I want it to be perfectly secret. I want the league to be in mortal fear of an unknown, intangible danger. They will not know whom to suspect, and will be utterly incapable of striking back. My five years of torture must be avenged. Just as the league secretly entraps its victims, so shall we secretly combat the league."

"Exactly. By so doing we shall wield a weapon of tremendous power," replied Nelson Lee. "There is nothing so terrifying as the unknown. Danger from a mysterious source is always to be feared. I think, however, that when police assistance is required, it would be wise to seek Scotland Yard's aid—without, of course, making any mention of the Green Triangle."

"All such details I will leave in your hands, Mr. Lee," said Clifford. "You may use your discretion in all matters."

Nipper's brain was so flustered that he hardly knew what to make of it. The extraordinary adventure was so strange that he could find room for only one connected thought. And that was that he and his master were already started on another case—and it was a case which promised to be the stiffest and most exciting of their careers.

Nelson Lee was exultant. For many a day he had longed for an opportunity to combat the mysterious Green Triangle. Now, without seeking it, that opportunity had arrived.

Very shortly afterwards there was a knock at the cabin door, and Colonel Addison entered. He was astonished to see the handsome young stranger with the careworn face. Nelson Lee took the colonel aside, and explained matters. He didn't go into any details, but merely said that Clifford was one of his clients, and that he had come aboard very unexpectedly. The colonel guessed a lot, but he didn't make any comment. He willingly agreed to keep silent as to how Clifford had reached the yacht—for Nelson Lee did not want that incident to be made an item of gossip.

"You see," explained the detective, "nobody but Nipper and I saw Mr. Clifford swimming from the shore. I'm not going into details, colonel, because I know you don't wish to be bothered with an affair which is quite private. I only ask your pardon, on Mr. Clifford's behalf, for making use of your yacht and your hospitality in such a fashion."

Colonel Addison didn't understand the affair in the least; but as he didn't want to, it was of no matter. He trusted Nelson Lee implicitly, and anything the detective liked to do had his approval.

But Nelson Lee was wrong in his surmise. He had told his host that nobody but he and Nipper had seen Clifford's arrival. As a matter of fact, somebody else had seen—somebody who mattered very much.

Events were not to run so smoothly as Douglas Clifford fondly imagined. Before his campaign against the League of the Green Triangle fairly started, he was yet to encounter many terrible and unforeseen difficulties.

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CHAPTER IV.

An Unseen Face—Tracked—The Sign of the League.

WILLIAM GARRATT was an under-steward, and he was one of the Iris's crew. He had signed on at Southampton, and had proved himself to be a very able servant.

Two years before he had been in the employ of Mr. Dudley Foxcroft, and had made the blunder of attempting to rob his master of a considerable amount. Foxcroft had immediately dismissed him, and the following day

one of the league's controlling agents had confronted Mr. Garratt, and quietly informed him that he knew all about his crime. The result was that William Garratt became a working member of the League of the Green Triangle, and had been one ever since.

Mr. Garratt, however, was rather prone to making mistakes. A fortnight ago he had made a rather serious one. In mortal fear of the league he had fled to Southampton, and obtained the first berth available—which happened to be aboard the *Iris*.

So his presence aboard the yacht was really accidental—a mere matter of chance. But it did not alter the unfortunate fact that he was a member of the League of the Green Triangle.

Nine months before he had done a "job" with a man who had once relieved Silas Vizard at Strathrie Castle during an unfortunate illness of the latter gentleman. Thus quaintly did Fate work. William Garratt knew all about the league's prisoner at the north of Scotland—at least, he knew that a man was kept hidden there and that he had been there for five years.

All these things combined made Garratt's presence aboard the *Iris* an exceedingly disastrous affair. And to make matters trebly worse, Garratt had been pacing up and down a dark portion of the deck, nursing a violent toothache, at the very moment Douglas Clifford had stepped aboard.

Garratt had conveniently kept out of the way of Nelson Lee and Nipper, for fear of being reported for work below among the survivors of the shattered steamer. He had no wish to be on duty, for his tooth was simply raging.

So he lurked in shadow, and had a clear view of Clifford as the latter clambered over the rail; he saw Clifford's rags, and he saw Clifford's strangely long hair and beard. Moreover, he had heard the apparition from the sea send up his prayer for having been freed from a living tomb. Then Nelson Lee had taken the weird-looking man away, and Garratt was left to himself.

"'Thundering queer!'" muttered the under-steward, almost forgetting his toothache. "Who the deuce could that merchant have been? Looked more like the Old Man of the Sea than anything else!"

He thought over the matter deeply, for the incident had been exceedingly strange. And his thoughts took a turn which led to a startling discovery.

"The fellow's hair reached past his shoulders," muttered Garratt, puzzling his brain. "I should say it would take a man four or five years to get a growth like that. Where on earth did he come from? Looks as if he might have been a hermit, or a prisoner, for a good many years."

Garratt caught his breath in sharply, and a gasp left his lips. A prisoner! Only nine months before he had heard that the league's prisoner in the north of Scotland had never had his hair cut since he had been made a captive.

With lightning-like swiftness one thought led to another.

Where was the *Iris* now? She was anchored off the north of Scotland—perhaps within a mile or two of Strathrie Castle itself. But, even so, how had the prisoner escaped—supposing that the strange man had been he?

Mr. Garratt was shrewd, and an explanation instantly presented itself.

"The explosion!" he ejaculated softly to himself. "The shock of it shook this yacht from stem to stern, and the blazing steamer was probably closer to the castle than we are. The place is a ruin, and it must have collapsed. The prisoner—Clifford, I think his name is—found a means of escape!"

Garratt was absolutely startled by his discovery.

"And his words upon stepping aboard?" the man's thoughts ran on. "He thanked Heaven for having been set free. By gosh, there's no doubt

about it at all! The league's prisoner has escaped, and he is on board this craft at the present moment."

The more Garratt thought of it, the more positive he became. He tried to find one flaw in his theory, but there was not one. The whole thing was simplicity itself. There could be no mistake—the strange man he had seen was certainly Clifford, the prisoner. And so, by a purely accidental train of circumstances, a member of the league knew of Clifford's escape half an hour after it had been effected.

Garratt was tremendously excited. What should he do? He knew that he was in the league's bad books, and that a severe punishment was awaiting him; every working member of the society had a wholesome dread of the Governing Circle. Well, here was an opportunity for him to win his way back into favour. If he could only give the Governing Circle warning of Clifford's escape he knew that matters would go very smoothly for him in future. But unless that warning was given before the *Iris* would reach port it would be too late and utterly useless.

What was to be done?

"There's only one thing," muttered Garratt grimly. "This yacht is provided with a wireless apparatus, and I must manage to send a message by hook or by crook. The league has got several receiving stations in all parts of the country, and one of them will be bound to pick the message up. It doesn't matter how many other stations receive the message, for it will be in the league's private code. I understand now why I was forced to learn that code. One never knows when it might come in useful. By gosh, it will come in useful to-night!"

But Garratt knew that he would have to go very warily. True, the *Iris* was a pleasure yacht and orders were somewhat lax. But if he were caught in the wireless-room he would certainly be instantly ejected and in an awkward position.

But the issues at stake were worth the risk.

His tooth was still aching, but it didn't trouble him now, for his thoughts were too busy on the project which had to be accomplished. One point was greatly in his favour. The usual routine of the yacht was entirely at sixes and sevens, owing to the presence of the wrecked tramp steamer's survivors. So it was probable that he would be able to steal into the wireless-room without being observed.

Garratt did not rush things. He bided his time. Presently he went below, and did a considerable amount of work, and acted precisely as usual. At ten o'clock he retired to his bunk, and then waited.

He waited with commendable patience for three hours, for he was sleepy after a hard day's work. But sleep was out of the question in the present circumstances. By one o'clock the yacht was quiet and still. Nelson Lee, Clifford, and nearly everybody else were fast asleep. The *Iris* being stationary practically no watch was necessary. Probably there would only be a couple of men on the bridge, and they would be in the navigation cabin, smoking and chatting.

The yacht itself was wrapped in slumber.

Garratt crept out of his bunk, and made his way slowly and cautiously to the corridor in which the wireless-room was situated. It was a tiny compartment, usually neglected, for the wireless was very seldom used.

Like a shadow Garratt stole up to the door and grasped the handle. He turned it, and the door swung silently open. A few seconds later he had closed the door and had groped his way across the little apartment to the electric light switch.

Light flooded the room, and Garratt quickly examined the wireless

apparatus. He was not an expert operator by any means, but he knew what to do, and he rapidly set about doing it.

Seated on the stool, he commenced operations, and in less than five minutes his code message was flashing across sea and land to its unknown destination. Promptly came his answer—in the same secret code—to say that the message had been received, and that it would be reported in the proper quarter.

Garratt glowed with triumph. He had acquitted himself well, and he knew that the Governing Circle would commend him, and reward him liberally.

"Good business!" he chuckled. "Clifford is about as safe now as that tramp was five minutes before she blew up!"

He quickly saw that everything was in order, and then he reached for the switch. But at that second the door of the wireless-room burst open, and Nipper appeared!

"By thunder!" grated Garratt, beneath his breath.

He just saw that Nipper was in his dressing-gown and slippers, and that the lad was somewhat dazzled by the bright light—and then he pressed the switch. Instantly the apartment was plunged into darkness.

"Turn the light up!" roared Nipper. "Who are you, you rotter?"

That sentence was a considerable relief to Garratt. Nipper had not had time to recognise the intruder. Therefore, if he could only rush the lad and bowl him over, he could be in his bunk before the alarm was given.

Like a panther he glided across the floor. But in the darkness he could not see Nipper, and Nipper was creeping forward at the same second.

Consequently, the two met with a crash.

"Haug you!" snarled Garratt furiously.

Nipper grabbed the man frantically.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "What are you doing in here? Hi! Help! Guv'nor—Mr. Lee! Help!"

Garratt swore viciously.

"You young whelp!" he growled. "Out of the way——"

But he could say no more, for Nipper was attacking him like a young tiger. Garratt felt a wave of panic sweep over him, and he exerted all his strength. Nipper was a strong, plucky young beggar, but the fight was unequal. He didn't wish to overpower the unknown man—he only wanted to detain him until help arrived.

But Garratt was desperate, and he gripped Nipper fiercely. With a terrific wrench the man tore Nipper's hands away, and sent the lad spinning giddily across the apartment. And before Nipper could recover Garratt had darted through the door, and pelted away up the corridor.

In ten seconds he was in his own bunk, breathing hard, and listening. He had passed nobody, and he was sure that nobody had seen him. By an extremely narrow shave he had escaped exposure.

He could hear shouts, and guessed what was going on.

Even as Nipper staggered to the door of the wireless-room, Nelson Lee hurried up, and grasped the lad's shoulder.

"Hallo, Nipper!" he cried. "What's the trouble?"

"Did you spot him?" gasped Nipper breathlessly.

"Eh? Spot whom?"

"Why, that confounded fellow who was in this room," replied Nipper. "He switched the light off, and bowled me over before I could see his face. I don't know who it was, and I expect he's safe from detection now."

The captain came up, with two officers, all partially dressed.

"Anything wrong?" asked the captain anxiously.

"Nothing much," replied Nelson Lee. "Some man—a member of your

crew, I expect—was discovered in the wireless-room. He escaped before Nipper could recognise him. Let's see what he was up to."

But an examination of the wireless-room was barren of result. Nothing had been touched, and nothing was out of order. Nipper, it appeared, slept in a cabin next to the wireless-room, and he had been awakened by slight noises coming through the wooden partition. Nipper had been trained to sleep lightly, and he awoke at the slightest sound. Suspecting something, he had investigated, and had found a man in the wireless-room, who was obviously startled at being discovered.

"Probably a case of mere curiosity," said Nelson Lee, having no suspicion of the startling truth. "The man feared being found out, and so acted rather drastically. Anyhow, the affair is obviously nothing serious."

And so everybody went back to sleep. And in the morning, although inquiries were made, no further information on the subject was forthcoming. Certainly neither Nelson Lee nor Douglas Clifford guessed the real gravity of that nocturnal incident. It was soon completely forgotten, and dismissed as of no consequence.

The morning was fine, and the *Iris* steamed along in splendid style, bound for Liverpool. There was no urgent hurry, and Nelson Lee considered that the sea-trip would do Clifford a lot of good, and straighten the lines in his face.

It was really the most enjoyable time Clifford had ever spent. He chafed a little at first, for he was intensely eager to begin the great campaign; but then he realised that Nelson Lee was right. A short rest was just what he wanted.

When he finally stepped upon the quay at Liverpool Clifford was looking fatter of face and quite bronzed. The sea air had worked wonders. His big, full moustache had altered his appearance so much that he could have come face to face with Dudley Foxcroft himself—and Foxcroft would not have recognised him. It was an ample disguise. And anyhow, it was five years since any member of the Governing Circle had seen him.

Yet Nelson Lee, astute as he was, had no suspicion that Clifford's movements were being watched. Very naturally, the detective was under the impression that Clifford's presence aboard the yacht was entirely unsuspected by the league. Consequently, Nelson Lee was not so vigilant as he would have been under other circumstances.

It was very early morning when the *Iris* had made fast at Liverpool docks, and Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Clifford, caught the first train to London. They arrived at the great terminus just before noon.

"Good old smoky London again!" said Nipper. "I'm not sorry to be back!"

"London!" exclaimed Clifford, gazing round him gladly. "Ah, your pleasure, Nipper, is simply nothing compared to mine. My whole being thrills with joy to see the dear, familiar sights once more! How glorious it all is!"

They got aboard a taxi, and were quite unaware that another taxi was following them. They halted outside the palatial Roye Hotel, in the Strand, and Douglas Clifford alighted.

"I'll visit you, Mr. Lee, some time during the day," he said, closing the cab door. "For the present I'm going to attend to my own requirements—clothes, outfit, etc. I want money, too, so my first visit must be to a certain banker in the City."

The taxi drove away, bound for Gray's Inn Road, and Clifford entered the hotel. He engaged a suite of rooms, and gave his name as "Richard

Penrose"; an introductory letter from Nelson Lee had made things perfectly smooth for him.

Then he went to the City, and when he returned his pocket-book was stuffed with banknotes and a cheque-book. It was under the name of Richard Penrose that he had deposited a large sum in the City.

As he was leisurely mounting the stairs to his suite an attendant ran after him and handed him a letter which had just arrived. Clifford presumed that it was from Nelson Lee, and when he was in his rooms, he tore open the envelope rather carelessly.

Then he uttered a startled cry, and his face went pale.

"Good heavens!" he gasped faintly.

For the envelope contained nothing but a small slip of paper. Upon it, clear and bright, was a neat design—a Green Triangle!

CHAPTER V.

A Strange Meeting—The Falling Scaffolding—A Valuable Ally.

CLIFFORD'S brain seemed to be whirling. He stared at the design of the triangle as though he could not believe the evidence of his eyes. The full purport of that silent, wordless message burst upon his senses like a thunder-clap.

"The league knows!" he murmured amazedly. "My movements, which I thought so secret, have been witnessed all along! Great Scott, what can it mean? How did the league obtain its information?"

It was a startling puzzle. He had thought that his escape from Strathrie was unknown to Zingrave. Yet here was terrible proof that he was under constant observation! His very pseudonym was a mere farce. With stunning force Clifford realised that the present organisation of the league must be marvellously complete. That silent warning was a grim reminder of the nearness of his foes.

Recovering his composure somewhat, he decided to go straight round to Nelson Lee, and seek the great detective's advice. And he told himself that he would take steps to frustrate any person who happened to be shadowing him.

Clifford stuffed the paper and envelope into his pocket, and then left his rooms. But, before he reached the street, another unexpected surprise was awaiting him. He was crossing the magnificent lounge, deep in thought, when he brushed rather roughly against a young lady who had just entered. Her handbag fell to the floor.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" said Clifford politely. "I am afraid——"

Then he paused, and his eyes widened. The girl before him was somebody he had met five years before. Her face had appeared before him many and many a time during his long captivity, and the sweet memory had cheered more than a dozen lonely hours. For the girl was none other than Vera Zingrave!

Without thinking, without considering, he took the hat from his head, and stepped forward. In that one moment he forgot everything—the league, the green triangle in his pocket, his visit to Nelson Lee. Unknown to himself, his eyes were alight with keen pleasure.

"Miss Zingrave!" he ejaculated eagerly. "By Jove, I—I——"

Vera gazed into his eyes a little frightenedly—then she gave a delightful little gasp.

"Why, it's Mr. Clifford!" she cried. "I didn't recognise you at all in

that moustache! It was your voice which rang familiar. Oh, dear, you gave me such a fright at first!"

"I'm really awfully sorry! I—I—— Hang it all——"

Clifford found himself at a loss for words. Somehow, her very presence made him thrill with a pleasure which he hardly understood. His eyes were alight with admiration, and his face was very flushed.

Vera, too, was blushing a little. But that only added to her unmistakable beauty. Clifford had recognised her instantly, but he could not help noticing the change which the years had brought about.

The girl was prettier than ever now; her eyes were just deep brown wells of laughing gaiety. From a pretty school-miss she had grown into a wonderfully beautiful girl. Of course, she would be about twenty-two by now. Clifford found himself staring at her with fast-beating heart, and her eyes dropped under his eager gaze.

"Where have you been all these years, Mr. Clifford?" she asked, looking up again. "I had begun to think that I should never see you again. But I'm really very pleased to find that you're as much alive as ever."

Her words brought Clifford to himself with a start.

Could it be possible? Was this glorious girl the daughter of Professor Zingrave, the chief of the infamous League of the Green Triangle? Oh, it was horrible to think such a thing?

Yet there was no doubt about the matter—not a shred of doubt.

"Dad will be delighted when I tell him that I've met you again," Vera went on. "He often wonders what has become of you."

"In—indeed!" ejaculated Clifford.

The full realisation of the actual facts were filling Clifford's mind now. He found it difficult to follow their proper sequence. One thing struck him as being positive, and he felt a sense of pleasure at the thought. Vera Zingrave was very evidently totally unconscious of the fact that her father led a double life. She had spoken frankly and freely, and Clifford knew that she was entirely innocent of deception.

Oh, what a shame it was! Zingrave might be a good father to Vera, but nothing altered the fact that he was a villainous scoundrel. The girl knew absolutely nothing, but, sooner or later, Zingrave's influence must surely wreak some evil consequences. Clifford found himself becoming furious. It was monstrous that this girl should live in the same house with such a rogue as the chief of the league—even though he was her own father.

Then Clifford's thoughts took another turn. It would never do to let Zingrave know that he and Vera had met—and had met on friendly terms. Vera would probably have to suffer, and for her to suffer on his account was simply not to be thought of.

"I have been away," said Clifford vaguely. "For five years, Miss Zingrave, I left civilisation completely behind, and have only just returned to London. Will you do me a little favour?"

Vera laughed gaily.

"It all depends what it is, Mr. Clifford," she exclaimed.

"Well, I don't want you to tell your father of this meeting. In fact, I don't want you to let him know that you have ever seen me."

Vera's delightful eyes widened a little.

"But why, Mr. Clifford?" she asked naively.

"Please don't ask me that," said Clifford in a grave voice. "One day I will, perhaps, explain to you, but at present it is impossible. Will you please do as I ask you, Miss Zingrave? Please be entirely ignorant of my return to London."

Vera looked a little troubled.

"I will certainly respect your wishes," she replied simply.

"Thank you!" Clifford said. "I sincerely hope I shall have the keen pleasure of meeting you again before long."

She did not reply, but there was a certain something in her eyes which told Clifford that she, too, would not regard another meeting as a bore. A few minutes later they parted, and as Clifford hailed a taxi he found his thoughts running in an exceedingly curious direction. He was feeling very glad upon one particular point. Almost at the moment of parting he had noticed that Vera's third finger of the left hand was innocent of any ring.

That little fact seemed to send a thrill through the young man. Exactly why, he did not know, for he would not allow his thoughts to run too far away with him. As he was whizzing along in the taxi he suddenly remembered his resolve to shake off any shadower who happened to be on his trail. Accordingly, he altered his destination to Holborn, and then sank back into the cushions, and allowed his thoughts to revert to the girl he had just left.

The whole thing seemed terrible to Clifford. He knew, as surely as though he had certain proof, that Vera was in utter ignorance of her father's true position. She was free from wrong-doing, and was just such a girl as attracted all Clifford's noblest emotions. In spite of himself, he felt that Vera was to play an important part in his life before so very long. He wanted to help her, to rescue her from the prospect of being contaminated by crime.

He was still thinking deeply when the taxi drew up, and he alighted. He walked down Holborn and then turned into a huge outfitting house—one which had several entrances. He bought a new hat, of a totally different colour to the one he was wearing, and a thick muffler. Wearing these he passed out of the building by a rear exit, and hurried away. At the end of five minutes he was perfectly positive that nobody was shadowing him. If there had been a shadow, the fellow was effectively shaken off.

Ten minutes later Clifford entered Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. The detective was sitting at the table surrounded by piles of correspondence which had accumulated during his absence. Clifford wasted no time and told Nelson Lee exactly what had happened.

"I'm not altogether surprised," said the detective calmly. "The league is a terrible organisation, and they have spies in the most unsuspected quarters. I begin to understand, now, the reason for that man's visit to the wireless-room aboard the *Iris*. We were not so safe on that ship as we imagined!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Clifford. "All our plans are completely wrecked, Mr. Lee. It is impossible for me to walk about openly, for Zingrave apparently knows all my movements. What do you propose?"

Nelson Lee jumped to his feet.

"Well, to begin with," he said briskly, "we'll go for a short stroll. I want to satisfy myself upon one point. I have an idea that you are being closely watched, and when we leave this house we'll keep our eyes well open."

Very soon they were strolling down Gray's Inn Road, both of them chatting and laughing. But Nelson Lee was strictly on the alert. Try as he would he could find absolutely no evidence that he and Clifford were being shadowed. It was possible that they were; but, if so, the shadower was an exceedingly astute man.

Nelson Lee's brain was very busy. He was forming a plan of action, and it was already nearing completion in every detail. On the morrow he would

disguise Clifford in such a manner that the league would never be able to locate him.

The pair were walking down a busy thoroughfare, and the detective saw that a large building was being erected a short distance ahead. It was smothered in scaffolding, and men crawled about it like flies.

Then a shout of warning came to Nelson Lee's ears. At the moment he and Clifford were on the opposite side of the road. They both paused, and stared upwards. Three men were scrambling for their lives off a heavy piece of scaffolding, and an ominous sound of creaking wood filled the air.

"Great Scott!" Clifford gasped. "That woodwork is giving way!"

Nelson Lee needed no telling. One glance was sufficient. He saw that a considerable portion of the scaffolding, high in the air, had broken loose, and was even then tottering.

And, below, a bearded gentleman in a top-hat had paused with one foot on the curb to write something down in a pocket-book. He was directly under the tottering structure, and in terrible peril.

There was scarcely a second in which to act.

But Nelson Lee acted, nevertheless.

Fearless of danger, only thinking that a human life hung in the balance, he dashed across the road with a roar of warning.

"Stand back, man!" he thundered. "Do you hear me? By——"

Nelson Lee got no further. The man in the top-hat stared at him dazedly for a moment, unable to grasp the fact that the tall gentleman with the roaring voice was warning him of danger.

Overhead the scaffolding had commenced falling with a crashing of timbers.

Nelson Lee's life, too, was now in jeopardy!

Without ceremony the detective grabbed the stranger, and pulled with all his strength. The man plunged forward, cannoned into his rescuer with a dull thud, and the two went sprawling in the road.

Crash! Crash!

Precisely at the same second as they measured their lengths upon the wooden paving, the mass of falling scaffolding struck the road at the exact spot where the stranger had been standing. The mass weighed fully three tons, and death would have been instantaneous for anyone caught beneath it.

Even as it was, a piece of flying woodwork came hurtling across and struck the bearded man upon the side of his head, inflicting a nasty gash, and partially stunning him. Nelson Lee escaped without a graze. Clifford dashed across the road, and wrung the detective's hand.

"By Jove, that was magnificent!" he cried. "You've saved the man's life without the slightest doubt. I've never seen such a plucky exhibition in all my days!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Nelson Lee. "If you want to make yourself useful, call a taxi. This chap is grazed, and we'd better take him straight to my rooms and have him attended to. If we stay here an infernal crowd will collect!"

A crowd was already collecting, in fact. Nelson Lee's daring rescue, at the risk of his own life, had been witnessed by many people. And now, to the detective's keen embarrassment, a rousing cheer went up in his honour. Men wanted to push through and shake his hand.

Fortunately—from Nelson Lee's point of view—a taxi was obtained in a few minutes. The dazed stranger was bundled in, and the detective and Clifford followed. They got away from the spot before a policeman was even in sight, and so no official delay was caused. Nelson Lee's action in taking the stranger to his rooms was one of pure good-natured kindness.

Once--more than once--Nelson Lee had received injury in the streets, and he knew precisely what it was like to be pestered, hampered, and bothered by the inquisitive, crushing crowd.

So he always had a kind spot in his heart for any other unfortunate being who happened to meet with a street accident. Had he only known it, this particular act of kindness on his part was to lead to vast and amazing issues.

Once in Nelson Lee's rooms the man's head was bound, and he began to recover somewhat from the effects of his mishap. He rose from his chair rather unsteadily, grasped Nelson Lee's hand, and looked the detective straight in the eye.

"You are Mr. Nelson Lee!" he said quietly. "Up till now I hardly realised that fact. You've saved my life, Mr. Lee! But for your amazingly plucky action I should now be lying a mangled corpse, beneath that mass of scaffolding!"

"Exactly!" put in Clifford. "Mr. Lee saved your life at the risk of his own. He was within an ace of sharing the fate which threatened you!"

The stranger shook with emotion.

"And to think that Nelson Lee, of all men, should render me the greatest service possible in this world!" he murmured shakily. "I swear before Heaven that I will serve you, Mr. Lee, to my dying breath! You saved my life--therefore it is yours to command as you wish!"

The stranger's voice rang true with deep sincerity, and Nelson Lee was strangely moved. There was a look of animal-like devotion in the other's eyes, and the detective was too keen a judge of men to be mistaken. As long as life existed in this man's body, so would he continue to be grateful for the service Nelson Lee had done him.

Then, suddenly, the detective started. Impulsively his hand shot forth, and grabbed at a portion of the stranger's ample beard. One tug, and it came off in the detective's grip!

"Good lor'!" gasped Clifford amazedly.

Nelson Lee looked grim, but before he could utter a word, Clifford leapt out of his chair and thrust his face close to that of the startled stranger.

"By Heaven, Martin Caine!" cried Clifford excitedly. "I know you at once, you scoundrel! Mr. Lee, this man is the valet of Dudley Foxcroft! He is a member of the League of the Green Triangle!"

The stranger started back as though struck a violent blow.

"I--I--" he gasped. "You have recognised me, and now I recognise you! You are Douglas Clifford, who used to visit Foxcroft's house five years ago. You are the unfortunate man who fell a victim to Zingrave's vile plot!"

Nelson Lee had remained perfectly calm.

"Quite a dramatic interlude!" he said evenly, carelessly lighting a cigar. "Well, Mr. Caine, as your name appears to be, what have you to say for yourself? So you are a member of the Green Triangle, eh? That is singularly interesting!"

Martin Caine uttered a strange cry.

"You suspect me of treachery, Mr. Lee!" he panted. "Don't--for Heaven's sake don't! I am more grateful to you than I can possibly express with mere words. Yes, I admit it--I am a member of the accursed league! It was the blackest day of my life when I fell into Zingrave's venomous clutches!"

Caine's voice quivered with intense sincerity. Nelson Lee found it impossible to think that the man was acting. Never in all the detective's existence had he seen a man so consumed with emotion.

"You speak of the league, and of Zingrave, as though you are not happy to be serving them," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I warn you, Mr. Caine, to be perfectly frank with me. I don't wish to remind you of the service I rendered, but I think, at least, that it is your duty to be straightforward with me!"

Martin Caine thrust his hands forward impulsively.

"I would give my life for you, Mr. Lee, after what has happened this afternoon!" he cried huskily. "Can't you see that I'm not acting a part? Can't you understand that my whole heart is in my words? For pity's sake don't suspect me of such a vile thing as treachery to a man who risked his life to save mine!"

"I will tell you everything," he went on quickly. "I fell into the hands of the league four years ago; when I saw Mr. Clifford last I had no idea that Foxcroft was connected with the dreaded Green Triangle. Well, the league captured me body and soul, and I was forced to work for them—I was forced to become a scoundrel. I'm not one, Mr. Lee! At heart I am as honest as yourself, and I wish to Heaven that the league could be crushed as such a vile plague should be crushed. I am one of the controlling agents of the league; it is my duty to receive orders from the Governing Circle and to distribute them among the working members. My position is a terrible one, for should I be suspected of double dealing, my death would follow instantaneously. I loathe my work, and I have sometimes thought of turning a deliberate traitor just so it should all be ended. Death itself is better than being a part of a machine which crushes honest men in its deadly cogs! I adhere to my former statement—if there is any way in which I can serve you I will willingly do so at the risk of my life!"

Caine paused, and fought for breath, for his emotion was almost too much for him. And Nelson Lee and Clifford sat still with curious expressions upon their faces. Nipper had entered the room, and the lad was open-mouthed.

Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and grasped Martin Caine's hand.

"I believe you!" he said simply. "No man on earth could act such a part. You have behaved nobly in being so open with me, and I thank you!"

"God bless you, Mr. Lee!" whispered Caine hoarsely, but with the light of great gladness in his eyes. "How can I serve you? Tell me—tell me!"

"Ay, and I will tell you!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

And he thereupon told Martin Caine of Clifford's escape, and of the campaign which was about to start. The man listened with an eagerness and delight which was a pleasure to witness. His enthusiasm was something to wonder at, and when Nelson Lee had finished, his face was flushed, and his eyes glowed.

"At last I am to be of some use in the world!" he said intensely. "Mr. Lee, Mr. Clifford, I swear that I will serve you both to the utmost capacity of my energy and wit. I can be of wonderful service to you in this glorious campaign against the deadly league. I can bring you news which you could not possibly obtain from any other source. And what does it matter if I give my life in the cause of justice? But for you, Mr. Lee, I should be dead even now, and the remainder of my days will be spent in serving you as your loyal servant!"

Nelson Lee turned quietly to Clifford.

"Fortune has smiled upon us," he said smoothly. "Caine will prove to be an invaluable ally. He will work for us, and yet pretend to work for the league. An intricate state of affairs, but one which has limitless advantages. Our crusade could not begin under better conditions!"

CHAPTER VI.

The Headquarters of the League—The Sentence—Left for Dead.

THE Orpheum Club was considered to be one of the smartest and most select clubs in the West End. Its members were not very numerous, but it was most exclusive. Nobody could gain admittance to membership without the consent of the club's director—the famous Professor Cyrus Zingrave.

Every member, to be perfectly straightforward, was a member of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle. The Orpheum Club was, in short, the headquarters of the league.

Yet who could suspect such an amazing thing?

Every member of the Orpheum Club was high above suspicion. Baronets, public men of all description, a Cabinet Minister, a peer, a K.C.—were all members. Had the fact been published that those men were the brains of the Green Triangle, the police and public alike would have considered it the best joke of the year.

Yet, because the Governing Circle were so secure behind their cloak of respectability, their tremendous power was greatly added to. Their movements were never suspected—they could go where they willed without the slightest fear.

Outwardly the Orpheum Club was very similar to other clubs. There were reading-rooms, smoking-rooms, billiard-rooms, and every luxury appertaining to a modern club in the West End. Even if the club had been raided, nothing whatever would have been discovered. For the headquarters of the league were far beneath the earth. The governing chamber was reached by a secret entrance which would have defied the police of the whole world. It was amazing in its ingenuity—a masterpiece of building construction. Had the place been razed to the ground, the entrance, of course, would have been discovered. But no other means would have been satisfactory.

Even the servants of the club had not the slightest suspicion of what went on right beneath their feet. The secret entrance was situated in the private room of Professor Zingrave—the chairman's room at the club. Now and again meetings were called to discuss the club's business, and who would suspect anything wrong in a crowd of gentlemen holding a meeting in the chairman's private sanctum?

But once within that apartment, the Governing Circle made their way down a flight of stairs into a luxuriously appointed chamber. It was resplendant with magnificent furniture, and soft electric lights gleamed down from the ceiling.

On the evening of the day that Nelson Lee had rescued Martin Caine from death, Professor Zingrave stood at the head of the table in the governing chamber, and addressed his fellow league members.

All were in evening-dress, and Zingrave was an imposing figure as he stood up with the light gleaming on his massive forehead, and with his strange eyes filled with a deadly purpose. He had changed hardly at all during the five years, except perhaps in his eyes. They were a little more sunken, and had the appearance of little pools of pitch-black fire.

"You all know the reason for this meeting, gentlemen," said Zingrave, his soft, musical voice being quite gentle and low. "Two days ago I told you that Douglas Clifford had escaped from Strathrie Castle by an unfortunate mishap. Well, he is now in London, under our constant observation. He is a danger to us!"

Sir Roger Hogarth shifted uneasily.

"It was foolish not to have killed him years ago!" he growled. "Something must be done, professor—and done quickly!"

Zingrave fastened his eyes upon Sir Roger.

"My plans are already made," he replied smoothly. "To-night Clifford dies. We could, of course, capture him and make him a prisoner once more. But after what has happened I do not think that would be advisable. Our only safe course is to finish the matter once and for all. To-night Clifford leaves this world for all time. Have any of you any objection to make?"

Nobody answered. The Governing Circle knew that their very safety depended upon the utmost secrecy being maintained. Clifford was a menace, therefore he would have to be silenced. Not one of these men would know anything about the affair—they would have no hand in it—and so it troubled them not one whit.

"And what of Nelson Lee?" asked Foxcroft bluntly.

Professor Zingrave chuckled.

"Nelson Lee need not worry you in the least," he replied. "I admit that the man is clever—only a fool would dispute that—but he can do us no harm. Possibly Clifford has told Lee a good deal. But what can Lee do without the slightest shred of proof? After Clifford's disappearance Nelson Lee will be puzzled for a time, and will then probably conclude that Clifford was insane, and had told him a tissue of fairy-tales. Remember, gentlemen, there is not, and never has been, a single item of evidence to show that we are connected with the Green Triangle. Without evidence Nelson Lee is bound hand and foot. He will certainly abandon any plans he has made to-day and content himself with profitable work."

"But suppose he tries to ferret things out?" asked Lord Sylvester.

"Then Nelson Lee's fate will be tragic and sudden," replied Zingrave, with a grim note in his gentle voice. "If he acts so foolishly we shall very soon know of it, and shall then take prompt steps. But have no fear. Nelson Lee is not the kind of man to ram his head against a brick wall. You may dismiss him from your minds as a harmless factor in the case."

Half an hour later the Governing Circle were distributed about the club building, smoking, reading, or chatting. It seemed hardly credible that so shortly before they had all agreed to the murder of an innocent man.

The league's undertakings were always carefully planned, and this affair to-night was no exception to the rule. Clifford was, in fact, to be kidnapped in a manner very similar to the way in which he had been kidnapped five years previously.

At ten o'clock a large landaulette drew up in front of the Royce Hotel, and a tall, clean-shaven man, in evening-dress, stepped out and entered the lounge hall. Yes, Mr. Penrose was in the hotel at the moment—in his own suite.

An attendant went up in the lift, knocked at Clifford's door, and handed the young man a card when the door was opened. Upon the card was the name of a West End tailor whom Clifford had visited that morning.

"You'd better show Mr. Julian up here," said Clifford to the attendant. "I wonder what the deuce the fellow wants with me at this time of the night?" he added to himself rather impatiently.

He lit a cigarette and waited, and in two minutes "Mr. Julian" stepped into Clifford's rooms and closed the door.

"Good-evening, Mr. Penrose," he said quietly. "I have called in connection with the clothing you ordered this morning at my employer's establishment."

"Anything wrong?" asked Clifford. "It's not usual, is it, for tailors to

come to their customers at ten o'clock at night? I'm sorry, but I can't attend to the matter just now. If you will call to-morrow——"

"I shall only keep you a moment," said the other smoothly.

Then, with lightning-like swiftness, he whipped something out of his pocket and held it close to Clifford's face. There was a slight hiss, and Clifford had a momentary vision of a reddish vapour hanging in the air.

His limbs, his very flesh, seemed to grow icy cold and perfectly numb. He tried to speak, but only succeeded in opening his mouth and laughing inanely. In spite of himself he could hardly restrain the inclination to giggle. The sensations he experienced were many, but the most pronounced was a feeling of utter helplessness.

Yet the whole time he was perfectly conscious, and knew exactly what was going on about him. But nothing seemed to be of any interest. His brain was numbed, and the power of initiative on his part was completely lacking.

The cause of his unfortunate plight was simple. The visitor had used a certain drug—a drug which Professor Zingrave had invented for the especial benefit of the league's workers. It had never failed, and was superior in every way to chloroform. It dazed without rendering the victim senseless.

The scoundrel had clapped a pad over his own mouth and nostrils immediately after administering the drug, and he grasped Clifford's arm, and led him out into the corridor. Although Clifford didn't want to go, he had no power to restrain himself. And he didn't seem to care what happened.

"Come on, Penrose," said the visitor briskly. "We'll go downstairs."

And down they went, their arms linked together. They crossed the lounge, and Clifford laughed light-headedly. His brain was only capable of wondering what would happen next. He stepped into the waiting landaulette obediently, and it drove away rapidly.

Through London and the suburbs the car went steadily on. The night was cold and windy, and a keen frost was in the air. At last the dark, frozen country road lay ahead, and the automobile put on speed.

And as the miles were covered, Douglas Clifford gradually recovered his normal wits. After what seemed hours to him, he was able to think clearly, to fully understand the dreadful position into which he had fallen.

He was bound hand and foot; he had seen the work being performed, but he had been unable to prevent it. That was the galling part of it all, now that he realised the truth. Two strange men were with him, one on either side. The blinds of the car were drawn, and an electric light shed a soft radiance down. Both Clifford's captors were unconcernedly smoking and taking it easy.

"Who are you?" he asked, in a mere whisper of his ordinary voice.

"Hallo! The fellow is getting over it," said the man who had visited Clifford's rooms. "Well, it doesn't matter—he's helpless."

"Why have I been kidnapped?" asked Clifford huskily.

"Why? Well, your own sense ought to tell you that!" said the man grimly. "You're in the hands of the league, and you'll very soon be somewhere else. This'll be your last journey in a motor-car, Mr. Douglas Clifford. I don't exactly relish the job which has to be done, but orders are orders!"

Clifford felt a cold sensation within him.

"You are going to kill me?" he said bitterly. "You murderers——"

One of the men swore.

"None of that!" he snarled. "Keep quiet, or we'll give you another dose of medicine!"

Clifford's eyes blazed, but he said no more. One application of that terrible numbing drug was enough for him. He began to think, and it

dawned upon him that he had never fully grasped the true danger which had threatened him during the brief time he had been at liberty.

After all the plans--after the compact with Nelson Lee--the end was to be death! Death at the hands of the league! It was a bitter, stinging thought. And how was the league going to kill him? It mattered not, for he was quite incapable of offering the feeblest resistance.

Still the car whizzed on through the dark night. The journey seemed interminable. But at last, in the chill, early hours of the morning, the steady motion ceased, and the car came to a standstill.

Without ceremony, Clifford was bundled out.

"If you yell with all the strength of your lungs not a soul will hear!" said one of the men curtly. "We're on the seashore, miles from the nearest fisherman's cottage. Keep quiet, and prove yourself to be a man. I don't like fellows who whine for mercy!"

Clifford went hot.

"I have not whined for mercy," he retorted. "You foul blackguards, Heaven will surely punish you for this night's work!"

No word was spoken by the men. Apparently they had come to an agreement to do the "job" in silence. Clifford was lifted off his feet, and carried along in the darkness. He guessed that drowning was to be his fate. But it was not so merciful as drowning, as he was soon to learn.

Clifford tried to see where he was, but the gloom was too thick to make out anything beyond the fact that the ground was marshy and that there was no light in any direction. In front of him the sea lay, cold and restless.

The tide was evidently out, for after scrambling down a long, sloping cliff-path, the sands stretched out for a considerable distance.

For some unknown reason Clifford was laid on the sands, and while one of the men stayed with him the other walked on towards the sea and disappeared into the darkness.

He was gone for perhaps five minutes, and then he loomed up again.

"A little to the left," he said briefly. "I'll lead the way."

Clifford was once more picked up, and carried slowly and laboriously onward. Try as he would he could not guess what fate awaited him. Surely these murderous scoundrels were not going to throw him into the sea? His bound body would be found and-- Oh, no; it was not the league's way to leave evidence of its crimes.

In a few minutes both Clifford's captors were walking with some difficulty, their feet plunging deep into soft, muddy sand. But still they went on, until one of them called a sharp halt.

"Dangerous to go further," he growled. "This is the limit of safety."

Without another word he and his companion bent down and took a firm hold upon their victim. The whole thing was done so calmly and as a matter of business that its grim horror was intensified.

With a tremendous effort Clifford was swung to and fro like a pendulum. Then the whole of him was released, and he shot forward and plunged into icy-cold, sticky sand. He fell upon his knees, but in an instant he jerked himself to his feet by a superhuman effort--for he was securely bound. But no sooner had he got into an upright position than his feet plunged into the sand, and he felt himself being drawn down--down.

Then at last ghastly realisation dawned upon him.

He had been flung into a quicksand!

The terrible quagmire was dragging him relentlessly down to an awful death. With his feet pinioned he could not even make the smallest effort to save himself. The position was appalling in its horror.

"A quicksand!" burst out Clifford, in a voice that shook with terrible anger. "Oh, you fiendish scoundrels! You——"

Then he checked himself and snapped his teeth together resolutely. He was doomed to die—there was no doubt about that. Well, he would die like a man, like a Briton. His last breath of life would not be used in a display of terror.

Now twenty yards away, watching in silence like two shadowy sentinals, his murderers stood motionless.

It felt as though unseen hands were dragging at Clifford's feet—dragging him swiftly and silently into the great unknown. He struggled once, in sheer despair, but the quicksand only took a firmer hold on him.

Was this to be the end? It must be, for it was impossible that help could arrive in time. He had sunk to his waist now, amid soft bubblings and gurglings from the dreadful mire around him.

Down—down!

The icy grip grasped at his shoulders, and then the wet sands closed round his throat. A great sob rose in Clifford's throat, and a last despairing shriek burst from his bloodless lips.

They uttered no other sound, for they were beneath the surface now. He had disappeared completely, utterly, leaving not the shadow of a trace to tell of the dire tragedy. And the relentless sands closed over the spot with a sort of triumphant gurgle.

CHAPTER VII.

Nelson Lee on the Trail—Through the Night—The Compact!

"STEP it out lively, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee crisply. "We don't want to find Clifford in bed."

"Oh, it's early yet, sir," exclaimed Nipper. "Only just ten o'clock."

Nelson Lee and Nipper were walking sharply along the Strand on their way to the Roke Hotel. At that precise moment Clifford was even then being led down the hotel stairs in a dazed condition by his kidnapper.

Nelson Lee had decided, under the circumstances, that it would not be wise to let Clifford sleep unguarded. He was, therefore, on his way to make arrangements to be by the young man's side during the night.

The league, he felt sure, would waste no time in showing its hand. But Nelson Lee was certainly not prepared for such prompt action on Zingrave's part, as was made amply evident a few moments later.

As Nelson and Nipper turned into the hotel, a large landaulette started off from the kerb, but the detective had not the slightest suspicion that he had missed rescuing Clifford by about fifteen seconds only.

He paused as he and Nipper were passing the commissionaire.

"Mr. Penrose is in his rooms, I suppose?" he asked.

"Why, no, sir; you've just missed him by about half a minute," replied the man. "Mr. Penrose went out with another gentleman, and he was rather—ahem!--rather merry, sir, so far as I could judge. They both went off in a motor-car."

"Crikey!" ejaculated Nipper blankly.

Nelson Lee snapped his teeth.

"We're too late, Nipper!" he exclaimed hoarsely, dragging the lad out into the Strand. "Those infernal rogues have got Clifford after all! What a fool I was to even leave him unguarded for a minute! Nipper, I think I'd better retire from this detective business—my brain seems to be softening!" he added bitterly.

Nipper pointed up the busy Strand excitedly.

"We may be in time yet, sir!" he ejaculated. "See! That's the car which started out from here as we were coming up. It's the car which contains Clifford! They're held up by a block in the traffic."

"You're right, Nipper," the detective said grimly. "That's the car. But, hang it, there's not a single taxi in sight—and the traffic is moving on again. If we don't act within five seconds we shall lose sight of Clifford, and he'll vanish for all time!"

He looked round him desperately, and his eyes rested upon a small two-seater car which was drawn up close to the hotel entrance. The engine was running, but it was deserted—its owner evidently having gone into the hotel.

"In you jump, Nipper!" rapped out Nelson Lee.

"Great Scott! We can't pinch that car, sir!"

"Can't never did anything, young 'un!" snapped the detective. "Hop in, I tell you!"

And Nipper obediently hopped in. As Nelson Lee was about to thrust the clutch home, a man came rushing wildly out of the hotel.

"What the thundering deuce are you doing with my car?" he roared furiously.

"Can't stop—explain later—my card!" jerked out Nelson Lee rapidly.

And before the startled owner could take breath, his automobile whizzed off, and all he had in exchange was a neat slip of pasteboard! But one glance at it, and the name inscribed thereupon relieved his mind to a considerable degree, and he refrained from setting up a hue and cry.

"A wonderful stroke of luck, Nipper," commented Nelson Lee, as the little car whizzed along. "I know this make of car, and it's first-class. The lighting, too, is electric; a feature which will be handy later on."

By skilful driving the detective soon got into a position almost immediately behind the landaulette. He was feeling relieved now, for there was a very strong chance of effecting Clifford's rescue after all.

Right through London the chase continued, but when the country roads were reached Nelson Lee touched a couple of switches and extinguished the little car's lights. There was now almost no possibility of the pursuit being observed. The night was dark, and the commandeered car was wonderfully silent.

The time slipped by slowly, but there was no halt. The miles were covered steadily and rapidly.

"Wonder where the beggars are making for, sir?" asked Nipper.

"The sea, probably," replied the detective. "Perhaps they intend to ship Clifford abroad; or have made plans to incarcerate him once more. I don't think the chase will continue much longer now."

The country through which they were passing was dreary and flat. Misty marshes stretched out on both sides—a sure sign that the sea was at no great distance. The rear-light of the league's landaulette disappeared round a bend which happened to be in the centre of a little spinney, the trees growing on either side of the road.

Just as the pursuers were approaching the trees, the little car's engine gave a sort of weak cough, and then started missing fire badly. Another few seconds, and the engine hadn't an explosion left in it.

"Confound it!" rapped out Nelson Lee furiously.

"We—we've stopped, sir!" gasped Nipper. "Oh, jumping Moses!"

The detective leapt out of the car, and a quick examination revealed the fact that the petrol-tank was dry! Nelson Lee had been dreading making such a discovery for some time past.

He looked at Nipper with his mouth set in a straight, grim line.

"We've failed, my lad!" he said quietly. "We've had all our trouble for nothing. It's no good blinking the fact; Clifford has gone now, probably for good. We're stranded on these marshes, miles from anywhere, with a useless motor-car!"

Nipper grunted disgustedly.

"What luck!" he said, clenching his hands. "What rotten, diabolical luck!"

For some moments they remained silent, busy with their chagrined thoughts. It was a terribly hard blow to fail after having kept up the chase for so long.

But it was no use wringing their hands. So Nelson Lee briskly told his young companion to lend a hand in pushing the car off the road, and into a meadow, through a wide gateway which fortunately happened to be handy.

A thick hedge then concealed the car from the road. For Nelson Lee intended leaving it there while he and Nipper walked on in search of a village. It was rather a long job pushing the car into the meadow, for there was a deep rut against the gateway which required a good deal of negotiating. At last, however, the task was completed, and Nipper blew on his hands.

"My hat, it's freezing——"

"Hush, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee sharply.

The hum of a motor-car could be heard, and it was rapidly coming nearer. Instantly it struck Nelson Lee that the car was probably the league's landaulette on its way back. He clutched Nipper as the lad was about to run into the road.

"Hi, leggo, guv'nor!" gasped Nipper. "This chap may have some spare juice——"

"Have you no wits, young 'un?" muttered Nelson Lee. "It is the landaulette on the way back!"

"By gum!"

They waited breathlessly, and a few moments later the car shot by—without its occupants having the slightest notion that their passage had been witnessed. And, sure enough, it was the landaulette. It curved round, and disappeared.

Nelson Lee felt his heart beating fast again.

"What is the meaning of this quick return, Nipper?" he asked grimly. "If the league has put Clifford to death, then the deadly work must have been going on within a very short distance of this spot. Come, we will investigate the mystery!"

And the pair started running along the road with all the speed of which they were capable. On they went, for some little distance. Then, quite abruptly, they saw the sea on their left. The cliff-edge was only twenty yards from the road.

Leaping over a low fence, they reached it, and paused. Below them stretched the sands, dimly visible. But not a sign of life met their gaze. The aspect was cold, silent, and unutterably lonely.

"Nothing here, sir," said Nipper pantingly. "I think—— Oh! Did you hear that?"

For answer Nelson Lee let out a wild, roaring hail.

"Help!" came the reply faintly. "Bring a rope! Help!"

The detective gave an exultant whoop.

"We're in time, Nipper!" he cried joyfully. "The league have failed after all!"

Scrambling, tumbling, they pelted down the cliffs, and at last arrived

upon the sands. Then they dashed down towards the sea and the incoming tide. Presently they paused.

"Is that you, Clifford?" shouted Nelson Lee.

"Mr. Lee! Thank Heaven! I'm here—right in front of you!"

The detective and Nipper started forward again.

"Don't come too close!" warned Clifford's voice. "I'm in a deadly quicksand—up to my confounded neck! For goodness' sake get me out! I'm nearly done!"

"A quicksand!" cried Nelson Lee. "Oh, the devils—the fiends!"

He took a length of stout cord from an inner pocket, and then the work of extricating Douglas Clifford commenced. It was a difficult, slow task, and one fraught with risks. But, at last, the treacherous quagmire was robbed of its victim, and Clifford lay on the hard sand.

His bonds were cut through, and he staggered to his feet, and stamped about. For the last ten minutes Nipper had been collecting wood and twigs, and in a short time a roaring fire was burning at the extremity of a narrow cave at the base of the cliff. The flickering light lit up the scene weirdly. It was impossible that the light could be observed except from the sea itself.

"You came in the very nick of time, Mr. Lee," said Clifford weakly. "Oh, it was awful! I thought it was the end—I was sure of it! I no more expected to be rescued——"

"But you are rescued," interjected Nelson Lee briskly. "Look here, your clothes are simply soaking. I should advise you to rip them off, and we'll dry them in front of this cheerful fire. Meanwhile, you can don my overcoat."

This plan was carried out, and while Clifford's clothes dried, he sat on a boulder, clad in nothing else whatever but an overcoat, and told his rescuers what had happened to him.

"I gave up hope," he said, shivering a little. "When I felt the awful sands dragging me down I sent up a prayer. Then, when the sands had reached my neck, I suddenly got the greatest surprise of my life. I felt something solid beneath my feet!"

"Something solid?" asked Nipper. "In a quicksand?"

"That was the astonishing part of it," went on Clifford. "The only explanation I can suggest is that a large piece of wreckage has been driven into the sand by the recent high gales. Anyhow, the solid thing was there, and my feet were upon it. My descent into the quagmire was stopped.

"I did some quick thinking. Those two villains meant to kill me; if they saw that I did not disappear under the surface they would probably take other steps to ensure my death. So I kindly obliged them by giving a most realistic death-shriek, and then ducking my head beneath the sand. Ugh! It was horrible!"

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"Splendid!" he said enthusiastically. "What a wonderfully clever and brave idea of yours, Clifford! Of course, it succeeded?"

"Yes. I remained below the surface for what seemed an age," replied Clifford. "At all events, I did not come up until I was absolutely forced to. And then the scoundrels who thought they had killed me were scrambling up the cliffs. Even now, they have not the slightest suspicion that I am alive."

"Why should they doubt an established fact?" asked Nelson Lee. "My dear man, they saw you plunge beneath the surface, and that was perfectly conclusive evidence of your demise. They witnessed your death! Think of it, Clifford—think what it means to us!"

"What does it mean?" asked Clifford, turning his coat over by the fire.

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"It means that we have an immense advantage over Zingrave and the League of the Green Triangle!" he replied exultantly. "Those two agents of the league will report to the Governing Circle that you are dead, and that your body can never be recovered. The league will cease to trouble you, for you have disappeared for ever. Everything is in our favour, man. Our campaign starts under the most favourable conditions."

The detective's face was flushed.

"This night's work has been absolutely in our favour, as it turns out," he went on. "I thought otherwise at first, but now I am glad. We have not only one advantage over the league, but three. Firstly, you are dead, so Zingrave will not fear you. You will remain dead, for when you leave here you will be disguised, and will have another name. Secondly, your fortune is in your own hands whatever identity you assume, and the league cannot trace you. Thirdly, we have the extraordinary good fortune to have a clever ally who is an important member of the Green Triangle himself! Martin Caine will serve us well, I am confident. Our great crusade starts magnificently."

Douglas Clifford thrust out his hand enthusiastically.

"Shake hands, Mr. Lee!" he cried. "The battle starts from this moment. Episode one had ended dramatically, but in our favour. I have got five years of torture to wipe out, and I go into this business heart and soul in earnest!"

And there, in that little rock cave, in the ruddy light of a wood fire, Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford shook hands, and sealed their solemn compact. From henceforward it was to be war to the knife with Professor Cyrus Zingrave, and the League of the Green Triangle.

THE END.

*Next week's magnificent Detective Drama will
deal with the further adventures of*

NELSON LEE

and the notorious

BLACK WOLF.

The story will be entitled—

**"THE CASE OF THE TUBE
OF RADIUM."**

IN POLAR SEAS.

A Romance of Adventure in the Frozen North.

BY

FENTON ASH.

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

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

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

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

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

Grimstock eventually apologises for the behaviour of the men, and feigns friendliness. The mystery round Hugh thickens. (Now read on.)

Ruxton's Warning—Amaki's Strange Request—A Midnight Assassin.

WHEN the motor-sledge reached the camp, those in charge of it found, to their satisfaction, that their rowdy neighbours of the previous night had cleared off, bag and baggage.

"That's a good riddance," cried Hugh. "Let's hope we've seen the last of 'em."

His friend Val did not share the agreeable expectation which this wish implied, and later on they found that he was right.

During the rest of the day many more journeys were made, all being successfully and quickly carried out. The motor-sledges were on their best behaviour, and accomplished even more than had been hoped from them.

"Ah!" said Hugh, "you did well, Val, in advising Grimstock to bring them. As they cost a lot of money, it's jolly satisfactory to think that it's been so well laid out. With such an equipment as we've now got, and our splendid lot of stores, what is there—bar accidents—to prevent our reaching the Pole?"

"Yes; our outfit's all right enough. It's the human element which is the doubtful part," returned Ruxton. With which somewhat dark saying he turned from the subject in a way which showed he did not wish to pursue it further.

After one of these trips they returned to the Petrel to find a surprise awaiting them.

A strange vessel was seen in the distance heading in their direction. In due time she ran in and lay-to a short distance off, and it became known that she was a whaler called the "Hawk."

A boat was lowered and rowed towards the Petrel. In the stern sat McClinter, and the men rowing were recognised by the two friends as some of the gang who had attacked the camp the night before.

Val looked at Hugh, and as their eyes met he gave a low whistle.

"What did I tell you?" he muttered.

McClinter climbed on board and was taken by Grimstock down into his cabin, where the two remained in close talk.

Hugh, meantime, started off with a motor load by himself to the camp, where he remained sorting and arranging the stores. Thus it happened that it was not until the evening, when the day's work was at an end, that the two had another chance to compare notes.

"Well! Let's hope we shall have a quieter time than we had last night," Hugh observed, as he lighted his pipe after their supper. "What's your idea of things now? Have you learned anything fresh?"

"I've kept my eyes and ears open," was the answer. "Also I had a few words with Grimstock, and with that precious beauty the skipper of the Hawk."

"A few words!" repeated Hugh. "Do you mean that there was another row?"

"Oh, no. They were both as civil as sand-boys. Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, bless you! McClinter actually apologised, after a fashion of his own, for the behaviour of his men. Said we'd given 'em something to remember us by, and he was glad of it. They deserved it—and so on. And Grimstock cried ditto. But I'm not to be taken in that way. I saw through their blarney—as I did last night."

Hugh laughed; but on this occasion there was evidently not much mirth in his laughter. He had rather the air of one trying to appear more indifferent than he really felt.

"What a suspicious, unbelieving beggar you are, Ruxton," he said.

The other glanced keenly at him, but remained silent for a space, as though turning something over in his mind. Then he spoke again.

"I told you last night that I had no wish to seem to pry into your affairs; and I haven't now. But you said something to Grimstock which surprised me pretty considerably."

Hugh gave another uneasy laugh.

"I think I can guess what it is you're driving at," he replied. "I suppose it's what I said about the stores being partly mine?"

"You've hit it. You said they were as much yours as Grimstock's—or words to that effect. I needn't ask you if it is true. You wouldn't have said it if it hadn't been, and most certainly Grimstock would not have let it pass without denial. But he did not deny it—I noticed that. Also, your blurting it out didn't at all please him, for he shot a most evil glance at you—I noticed that, too. Yet the next moment he threw off his insolent, bullying tone, and cooed as gently as any sucking dove. I noticed that, too. Now, what does it all mean?"

"Well, what I said was true enough, Ruxton, though I felt sorry directly after that I had—as you put it—blurted it out. You've used just the right word, though—it was blurted out on the impulse of the moment, because I felt savage and indignant at his manner. I paid a large share of the cost of fitting out this expedition."

"Humph! Are you then a millionaire in disguise?"

Hugh shook his head.

"No more than yourself," he declared gravely. "The amount I paid represents practically all I and my mother—who is a widow with only myself to support her—had to live on. Unless this journey turns out a success in one way or another, I and she will be practically beggars."

"But— Whatever then made you— No, old chap; I beg your pardon! I said I didn't want to pry into your affairs; and here, hang me! if I'm not doing it! I don't want to know any more until—if ever that time should come—you wish to tell me of your own accord. I couldn't help seeing, however, that Grimstock was pretty riled at your saying it."

"Why, yes; and he has some reason to be, because it was expressly arranged that that part of the affair was to be regarded as private and confidential. And now—confound it!—I've referred to it before you, and in doing so have broken the promise I made him."

"Humph! I don't see, all the same, that he need have looked so evilly at you over it. For the matter of that, he's only himself to thank for it. Besides—what harm have you done? It won't go any farther; I shall regard it as 'private and confidential' as you call it."

"Thank you. Yes; I felt I could rely on you as to that, or else I should have felt more concerned about it than I have done."

"I wish that were all there is to trouble about," muttered Ruxton, rather as though to himself than to his companion.

"Why—what other burden have you lying heavily on your soul?"

Ruxton looked very straight at his friend, and said slowly:

"I am not going to tell you all that is in my mind. I think perhaps it is better not to—at present. But I'm going to give you a warning—you can pay attention to it or not, as you think proper. It is this: Don't trust Grimstock, or that skipper fellow. They're a good pair to run in double harness, these two—and don't you forget it! Keep your eyes skinned, and keep on the safe side with those johnnies. There, now! I've got it out! And if you don't profit by what I've said it will be your own fault, not mine. Hullo! Here comes one of the— Why, it's the old Eskimo, Amaki, himself. I wonder what he wants? By the way, you haven't seen him yet, have you?"

"No; I remember hearing the name. You spoke of him last night."

"Yes; well, he's a most interesting old joker, once you get used to the atmosphere of cart-wheel grease and stale fish-glue which he carries about with him."

Turning to the one he had been talking of, who had now come within speaking distance, Ruxton said something in the Eskimo tongue.

The new-comer replied, and there was some talk between the two, which Ruxton interpreted.

"Amaki has made a rather funny request," he explained. "He says, so far as I can make out, that some more people have come to his camp, and there is not much room. Will we allow him to sleep here to-night? That's the gist of what he says; but I confess I don't quite understand it. They must be precious crowded if they can't find room for the old chap, especially as he is a sort of chief, or patriarch, or whatever it is amongst them. However, his reasons don't concern us. I think the old joker is all right. So I guess we can let him squeeze in amongst our people, eh?"

"Oh, yes; if he wants to, I suppose. Well, my dainty, tallow-eating friend, what the dickens are you staring at me like that for?"

This polite inquiry was addressed to the Eskimo, who had fixed his eager glance on the speaker, as though he were trying to read his very thoughts.

"You—you—English—English man?" he said, in curious broken English.

"I suppose so—some animal of that species," returned Hugh, highly amused. "What's up, old greaser?"

The Eskimo seemed somehow greatly moved. He worked his arms about, shook his head, muttered to himself, and ended by producing something from under his clothes, gabbling volubly to Ruxton the while.

"Hullo! Now this is very curious—and interesting," exclaimed Val.

"It seems that Lybendo, the chap you fished out of the water to-day, is this old joker's son. I told you I thought he was someone of importance among his own folk. Amaki is very, very grateful to you, he says; and as a slight mark of his gratitude he has brought you a little present which he begs you will accept."

As he spoke Ruxton put out a hand to take the proffered present, but the Eskimo snatched it back, and offered it again politely to Hugh.

The latter, on his part, started, and seemed scarcely less moved than the Eskimo himself.

"Why—what—I mean—how the dickens did you come by that?"

It was an ivory narwhal tusk, not a very large one, but very thick for the length. The curious thing about it was that it was carved in a really clever manner with figures of animals—the reindeer, seal, bears, musk-ox, and other creatures which the Eskimos hunt.

"Hallo! Do you recognise it, Hugh? And yet—how can that be?" Ruxton asked in great surprise.

"Yes — no — that is—" said Hugh, very much confused, "I've seen one so much like it that I thought at first sight it must be the same. But of course that can't be, for the one I am thinking of is in England. Ask him how he came by this, Val."

Val began to question the man in his own language, and then interpreted:

"From what he says I gather that there is a history attaching to it. He carved one like this years ago and sold it to a white man, who took it away with him. Afterwards, the white man paid another visit here, and asked him to let him have another like it to make a pair. The white man in question is the one I have already told you of who went away and never returned, and whom these simple-minded people hold in such affectionate remembrance. Now, as that man never came back to claim it, Amaki wants to give it to you."

(Another thrilling instalment of this great adventure yarn will appear on Wednesday next.)



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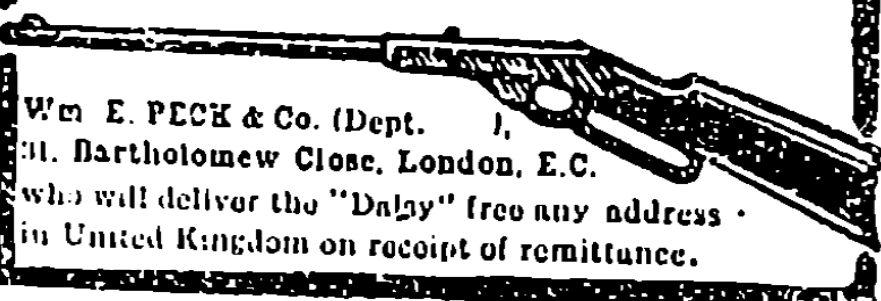
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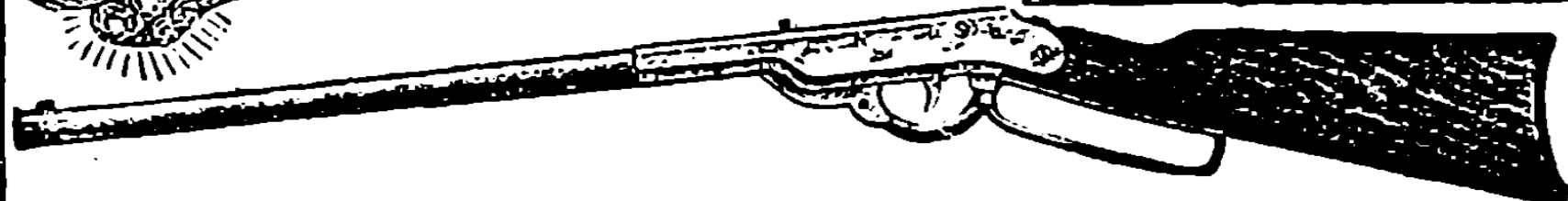
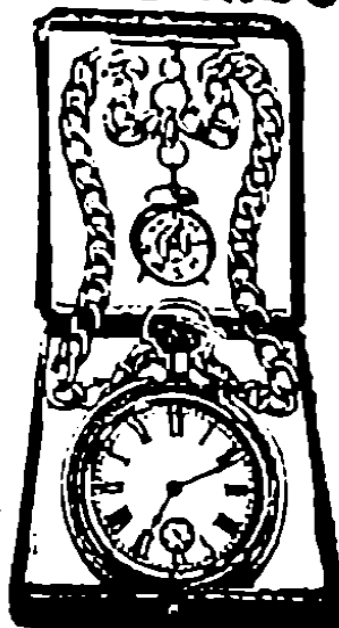
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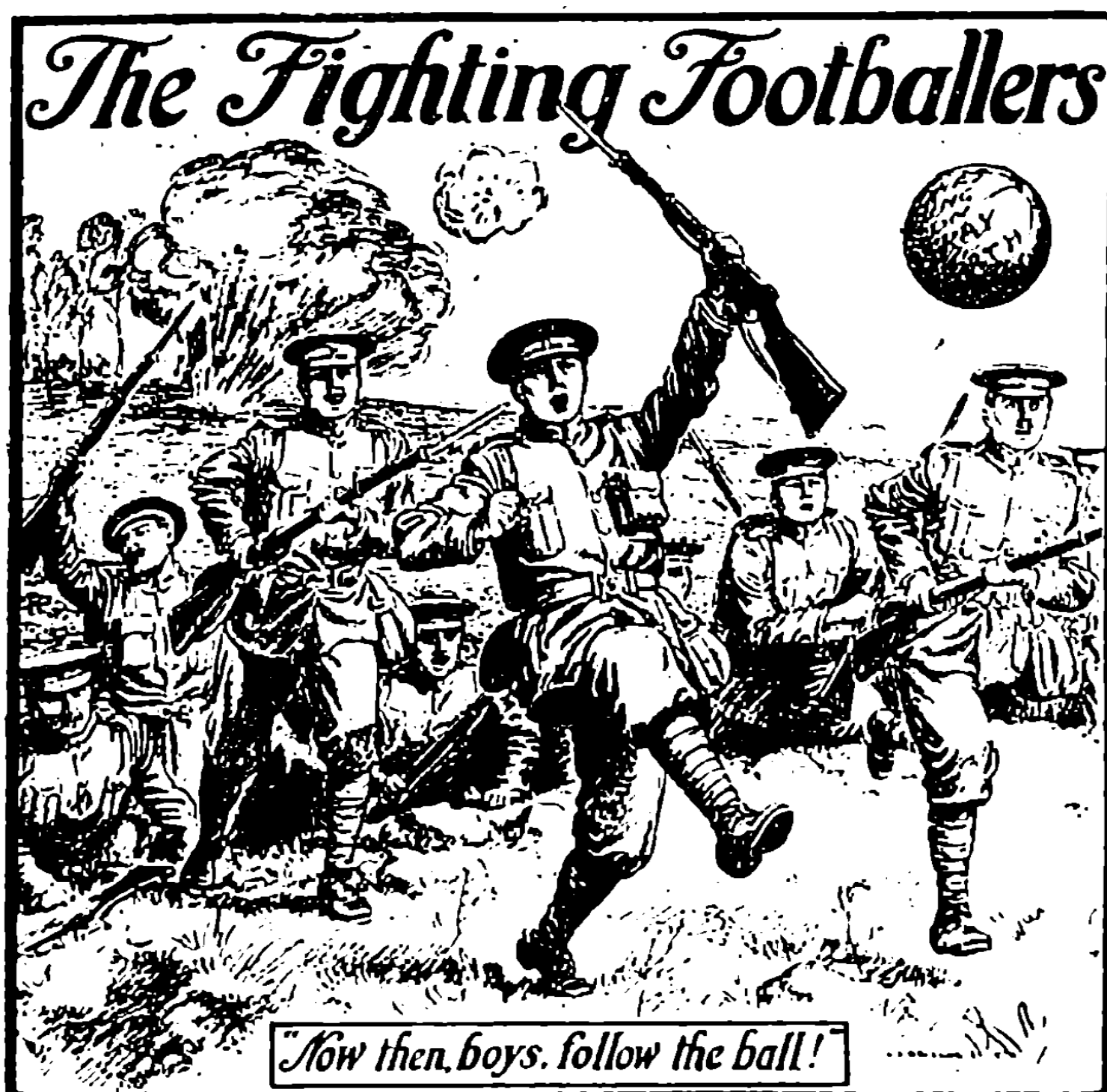
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