

NO. 25.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

Week ending
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NELSON LEE

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A. JONES

THE SPECIALIST'S LAST CASE.

A TALE OF NELSON LEE V THE GREEN TRIANGLE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TWENTY FATHOMS DEEP," "THE TERROR OF TROONE TOWERS," ETC.



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The Specialist's Last Case

A Tale of Nelson Lee *v.* The Green Triangle.

By the Author of "*Twenty Fathoms Deep*," "*The Terror of Troone Towers*," "*The Coffee Stall Mystery*," *e.c., etc.*

CHAPTER I.

The Smash in Oxford Street—Dr. Sims Jameson—Nelson Lee's Compact.

THE day was cold, damp, and altogether unpleasant. London was looking drab and chill in its murky winter coat. Oxford Street was no exception. Taxis and motor-buses crawled along cautiously over the sticky mass of churned-up mud which covered the road like a film of grease.

Two cheerful individuals who were striding briskly along, however, seemed in no way depressed by the dismal weather conditions. One of them, a tall, lithe man, with a strong face and a grim, yet indescribably pleasant, pair of grey eyes, was Nelson Lee, the famous detective. The other, an active, sturdy lad, was Nipper, the detective's equally famous assistant.

"We've got to get busy, my lad," Nelson Lee was saying, as he jerked the ash from his cigar. "It's no good hanging about waiting for an opportunity. We've got to make an opportunity ourselves."

"That's all very well, sir," remarked Nipper. "I don't want to be a wet blanket, and I don't want to suggest that we've taken on more than we can chew, but, to put it mildly, this Triangle business will want a terrific lot of tackling. We're up against the smartest collection of rogues in Great Britain!"

"Admitted, Nipper, but that only gives us a zest——"

Nelson Lee paused abruptly.

"That 'bus is going at an infernal speed!" he exclaimed, coming to a halt. "In this treacherous grease—— By Jove, there'll be a smash!"

"Sure as a gun, sir!" gasped Nipper. "Oh! That taxi! Oh!"

There was ample cause for Nipper's startled ejaculations. A motor-bus coming from the direction of Oxford Circus, had taken advantage of a clear stretch of road, and the driver recklessly put on speed. As Nelson Lee came to a sudden halt, his keen, quick eyes saw that an accident was practically inevitable.

For, with a recklessness far more foolhardy than that of the motor-bus driver, a taxi came shooting out of Newman Street. What happened next was all over in less than five seconds.

The 'bus driver gave a yell, and jammed on his brakes. Had the roads been dry no mishap would have occurred, for the 'bus had ample space in which to pull up. But the wheels simply locked, and the cumbersome

vehicle commenced a long, half-sideways skid towards the off-side of the road.

The taxi, by this time, had turned the corner. The driver, seeing his danger, pulled up with really wonderful alacrity, and the taxi bumped against the kerb and came to a jerky standstill.

But it was dead in the way of the skidding 'bus!

There was no time for any further action. The taxi-driver, pale-faced and thoroughly scared, hurled himself from the driving-seat on to the pavement. Had he waited on his cab a second longer he would have been killed instantly.

Crash!

The motor-'bus smashed into the front of the taxi with terrible force. The smaller vehicle crumpled up like so much cardboard, and lay a mangled mass upon the pavement. Several pedestrians only escaped in the nick of time.

The collision effectually put a stop to the 'bus's headlong skid. With one of its front wheels on the pavement it stopped dead, nearly all the glass shattered and broken. The driver was unhurt, and he jumped down with a pallid face and pointed angrily to the chauffeur of the wrecked taxi.

"Your bloomin' fault!" he roared furiously. "What the thunder d'you mean by cutting across me——"

"Stow it!" snapped the taxi man. "What about my fare? He was inside the keb, and I reckon he's copped out fair and proper! Dead, most likely!"

"Lumme! I thought your old box was empty!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper had been standing quite close. They dashed forward and arrived upon the spot before the two drivers had finished their altercation. A crowd had collected with amazing rapidity, and several policemen were soon upon the spot.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were not interfered with. The detective was by the wrecked taxi's side before anybody else could reach it. Gazing into the shattered mass he saw the figure of a man—a young man—still and silent. At first there was no sign of injury upon him, but then Nelson Lee saw that his head was bleeding seriously at the rear.

"Come, Nipper," said the detective sharply, "let's get the poor fellow out!"

With some little difficulty the victim of the accident was brought into the open. As he appeared a murmur of sympathy went up from the crowd. A tall man, well dressed and wearing a silk hat, pushed his way forcibly through the morbid sightseers, and was confronted by a burly constable.

"Keep back, sir!" ordered the police-officer gruffly.

"On the contrary, I intend to make a brief examination of the injured man!" said the tall stranger, in cold, cutting tones. "Let me pass, my man! I am Dr. Sims Jameson, of Harley Street!"

"Oh, beg pardon, sir!"

And the constable, a little flustered, allowed the great man to pass. For Dr. Sims Jameson was one of the most famous, one of the most clever, brain specialists in the West End.

Nelson Lee gave the doctor a sharp look as he came up. But the brain specialist was too intent upon the injured man to even notice Nelson Lee's existence. The examination was short, and Sims Jameson looked up with a grim face to a policeman beside him.

"Fractured skull," he said sharply. "Rather serious case. Do you know who the man is?"

"No, sir."

"Then you'd better let me take him away, and make your inquiries

afterwards," said the specialist. "An operation must be performed at once, and I do not think it would be wise to send him to a hospital. Call a taxi, constable, and I will take him straight to my surgery and perform the operation myself."

"Very good, sir!"

Another motor-cab was rapidly procured, and then the unfortunate young man was carefully carried through the inquisitive crowd and deposited on the cushions, his head roughly bandaged. The doctor took his seat beside him, a constable scrambled next to the driver, and then the taxi started off with all speed for Harley Street.

"That was prompt, anyway, sir," said Nipper approvingly. "If the poor chap's seriously injured he stands a pretty decent chance of being pulled through. There's not a man in London who can patch up injured heads so well as Dr. Sims Jameson!"

Nelson Lee nodded absent-mindedly. He was listening to the taxi-cab driver being questioned by a constable. The man was able to give no useful information. He had simply picked up his fare halfway up Newman Street and had been instructed to drive to Piccadilly Circus.

"Come along, Nipper," the detective exclaimed, taking the lad's arm. "There's no reason why we should remain here any longer. If a search of the young man's clothes is fruitless, and if he dies without becoming conscious again, then I'm afraid his identity will remain a mystery."

"Oh, he'll have papers, or something on him," said Nipper confidently. "But, I say, guv'nor, what made you give the doctor such a queer look when he came up?"

Nelson Lee waited until they were striding along a fairly clear piece of pavement before answering.

"Have you no memory, my lad?" he asked quietly. "Wasn't the name of Dr. Sims Jameson mentioned in my consulting-room only a short time back?"

"Jameson," said Nipper thoughtfully—"Sims Jameson? Of course, I've heard the name scores of times— Why, great jumping kangaroos! He's—he's a member—"

"Don't stand gaping, my boy," said Nelson Lee, tugging at Nipper's sleeve. "Yes, you have at last remembered what should have been foremost in your usual active mind. Dr. Sims Jameson, the celebrated brain specialist, is a member of the Governing Circle of the infamous League of the Green Triangle."

Nipper, his face flushed with excitement, looked up into that of his master. But Nelson Lee's countenance was perfectly immobile and calm.

"A member of the league," said Nipper breathlessly. "Of course, sir! What's been confusing my brain? But so many famous men are members of the Governing Circle that I'm not much to blame, am I? Oh, guv'nor, when do we start the campaign?"

Nelson Lee's jaw looked formidable.

"At once, young 'un!" he answered curtly. "Professor Zingrave, Chief of the League, will begin to feel a little uneasy before many days have passed. The Green Triangle has held sway over fair Britain far too long! The day of reckoning is near at hand!"

Nelson Lee relapsed into deep thought, and Nipper knew better than to ask any further questions. They walked on in silence through New Oxford Street, along High Holborn, and so to Gray's Inn Road.

When they arrived at the detective's rooms, they found a visitor in the consulting-room. He jumped up nimbly as Nelson Lee walked in. Yet he did not seem a very young man. His well-clipped beard was iron-grey, and his hair was streaked with grey also. Heavy gold-rimmed pince-nez rested

upon the bridge of his nose, but a very close observer would have made the remarkable discovery that the glass had precisely the same amount of magnifying qualities as a window pane.

"Hallo, Merrick!" greeted Nelson Lee. "Been here long?"

"About ten minutes," replied the other. "But is there any necessity, Mr. Lee, to keep up this pretence even in your own consulting-room?"

"Every necessity," replied the detective grimly. "Douglas Clifford is dead, so far as the outside world is concerned. Until the time comes for you to return to life—and that is a long way hence—your name is John Merrick, and you are a harmless, middle-aged Colonial."

The other nodded silently, and lit a cigarette. Remarkable as it seemed, his age was no more than twenty-seven. His hair and beard were his own, but Nelson Lee was responsible for their greyness. The disguise, in fact, was perfect; nobody who had known him in the former days would have recognised in the sedate Mr. John Merrick the careless, wealthy young Douglas Clifford.

Douglas Clifford's story was an amazing one.

Just over five years had elapsed since he fell into the hands of Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the renowned scientist. Zingrave was the chief of the League of the Green Triangle. For five years Clifford had been a prisoner in the hands of the league, and during those five years the league had grown and grown until it was now a deadly menace to the country.

Its chief members—the Governing Circle—were composed entirely of famous public men—men who had not the faintest breath of suspicion against their illustrious names. Dudley Foxcroft, financier; Lord Sylvester; Sir Roger Hogarth, shipowner; Sir Gordon Hyde, Cabinet Minister; Edmund Grosswell, the famous K.C., Superintendent Valling, of Scotland Yard; Dr. Sims-Jameson—and many others equally as prominent.

After five years' confinement, Douglas Clifford had made his escape, and Nelson Lee formed a compact with the young man to fight the league tooth and nail, until it no longer existed. Nelson Lee was in a favourable position, for the league were satisfied that Douglas Clifford was dead. Whereas, in plain truth, he was hidden in the person of John Merrick, his very soul burning to wipe out the years of misery he had suffered.

Another point was in the detective's favour. He had a valuable ally in Martin Caine, a controlling agent of the league, who had sworn to serve Nelson Lee and Clifford. So far, the man had had no opportunity of proving his faith, but Nelson Lee had no doubts.

One memory had caused Clifford many an uneasy hour during this last week or two. It was the memory of a brief meeting with a delightful, innocent girl—whose beauty and daintiness had set all Clifford's emotions thrilling. He knew that another meeting with her was practically impossible, much as he desired to look into her sweet face and soft, brown eyes again. For she was Vera Zingrave, the daughter of the prime mover of the Governing Circle of the league.

Yet, although this was a terrible fact, the girl was totally ignorant of her father's disgraceful double life; she only knew him to be the famous scientist he was reputed to be. One day perhaps she would be told all—the blow would have to fall sooner or later. But at present there was work to do—grim, determined work.

Unseen, unsuspected, Nelson Lee meant to attack the league. One by one its infamous members would be dealt with. For many days past Nelson Lee had been seeking an opportunity to strike a blow at the heart of the villainous organisation.

"This inactivity cannot continue," said the great detective, standing before the fire and lighting a cigar. "Possibly a line to work upon will

present itself very shortly now. I have an idea that something will come out of the incident which Nipper and myself witnessed this morning."

"And what was that?" asked Clifford.

Nelson Lee related how Dr. Sims Jameson had carried the unknown injured man away to his surgery.

"There is nothing much in the actual happening itself," the detective remarked, "but there is no telling what it will lead to. I shall make it my business to keep a very keen eye upon our friend of Harley Street."

But although Nelson Lee was hopeful of taking up a definite line of action in the immediate future, he had not the slightest conception of the startling events which were to follow as a direct consequence of that unfortunate motor accident in Oxford Street.

It was, in fact, to be the starting point in the great campaign against the all-powerful League of the Green Triangle.

CHAPTER II.

The Operation—A Strange Story Strangely Told.

DR. SIMS JAMESON softly entered the operating-chamber behind his surgery in Harley Street. His eyes, dark and piercing, were alight with keenness and interest. Rogue in a kind of way though he undoubtedly was, he nevertheless took a consummate interest in his own peculiar work. He looked round the apartment swiftly and saw that the patient was lying upon the operating table.

"Everything ready?" he asked shortly. "Is the patient prepared?"

Two nurses were in the room, and one of them stepped forward.

"But I'm afraid there is not much hope, doctor," she said gravely. "The fracture is serious, and the brain is almost certainly——"

The specialist waved his hand.

"Tut-tut!" he said sharply. "Let us make a thorough examination before we form any opinions. I think I could make a successful job of it. We will see—we will see!"

The operation was indeed a gravely serious one. Silence reigned in the apartment while Dr. Sims Jameson set about his work with as much coolness and methodical exactness as though he had been merely making up a prescription.

The two nurses hovered about the grim table, where a human life hung on a thread, and attended to all the brain specialist's wants. Half an hour slowly ticked away, and then Dr. Sims Jameson looked up with a triumphant gleam in his dark eyes.

"I think our young friend is not quite so near to death's door now," he murmured softly. "It's been one of the most ticklish operations I have ever undertaken, but success has rewarded my efforts."

"He will live?" asked one of the nurses in a whisper.

"Assuredly. And he will recover consciousness within the next hour if I am not mistaken," replied Dr. Jameson. "See, a little colour is already returning to the poor fellow's pallid cheeks."

The patient was propped up now a little, his head swathed in snowy-white bandages. The doctor crossed the room and busied himself for some little time. When he came back his sleeves were turned down and his coat was on.

"Queer case," he remarked thoughtfully. "I haven't the slightest idea who the man is, where he came from, or where he was going to. The

unusual nature of the wound, however, aroused my professional interests. I am glad now that I brought him here. Had he been taken to a hospital, I feel sure that he would have succumbed."

"Are the police in ignorance as to his identity?" asked the nurse.

"Completely, so far as I know," replied Jameson. "They are perfectly satisfied to leave the patient here, however. His clothes have told us nothing; there is not a letter or card upon him. At this stage his identity is a mystery. Perhaps later on he will be able to speak for himself. We can then let his relatives know."

The specialist drew a chair close against the unconscious man, and sat watching him intently, waiting for the first sign of returning animation. He was very anxious to know the result of the delicate operation he had just performed.

Would the man recover, or would he die without speaking?

One of the nurses passed to and fro once or twice. She made practically no noise, but her presence annoyed the doctor, and he waved his hand in the air.

"Go!" he murmured testily. "Leave this clearing-up business until afterwards. Sit down and keep quiet!"

The nurse nodded silently; she was accustomed to Jameson's queer moods. And she softly went to the far end of the room, and joined her companion. The pair then seated themselves and talked together in low voices. The apartment was a long one, so they did not disturb the specialist in the least.

Dr. Sims Jameson had not the slightest interest in his patient's identity. That detail did not trouble him at all. But, having operated, he was keenly desirous of knowing the result at the earliest possible moment. He prided himself that he could save a man's life when every hospital in London would fail.

This case had been a particularly difficult one. If it proved successful, Dr. Jameson would metaphorically pat himself upon the back. So he watched the patient anxiously, expectantly.

The minutes passed slowly until fully a couple of hours had elapsed. Still the doctor sat at his post, scarcely having moved an inch during the whole hour. The nurses, however, had busied themselves again, and were now softly passing to and fro in a little ante-room.

Suddenly Dr. Jameson became rigid, and he bent forward, his keen eyes watching the lips of the patient.

"Ha!" murmured the specialist. "Sign of life—at last!"

The young man's lips had twitched a little, and a few moments later his eyelids lifted heavily, and he stared in a glazed, dull kind of way at the opposite wall. For several minutes Jameson did not move. Then, as the patient still continued to stare, he rose silently and bent over the young man.

"Can you see me?" he asked softly. "Can you hear me?"

The patient's lips moved, and a tiny gurgle came from them. Simultaneously his eyes lost their glazed expression and became almost intense. But there was no sign of comprehension in them. They looked like the eyes of a man in a trance.

"You are quite safe," said the physician quietly. "All danger has——"

"I've brought the most wonderful news, Travers!" said the patient, in a voice no louder than a mere whisper. "You will be amazed when I tell you. It's splendid news, old chap!"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Dr. Jameson.

"I thought you would be surprised, Travers," went on the young man, looking straight through Dr. Jameson as though the latter had no existence.

"I didn't say a word about my arrival in England, or let you know of my journey across, because I wanted to take the wind out of your sails-----"

"Wait!" interposed the specialist softly. "Who are you? What is your name?"

"Don't you know me, Travers?" said the patient dully. "Don't you know your own brother—Charles Markham? I've just come from America-----"

"Of course—of course!" said Dr. Jameson quickly. "Well, let's hear the yarn, Charlie!"

Jameson grasped the situation in a moment, and was rather annoyed with himself. He knew exactly what had occurred—and with that knowledge came the realisation that the patient would have to undergo another operation.

Charles Markham's brain was still affected by the fracture he had sustained—possibly a tiny piece of bone was pressing upon the brain at some point. The case was exceedingly curious. The patient did not know where he was, and he had no knowledge of the accident which had occurred.

Obviously he had been about to visit his brother, Travers Markham, when the motor smash had taken place. And now, although gravely injured, his brain could not grasp the fact.

His mind was still running upon the subject which had filled it at the time of the accident. Charles Markham, in fact, was speaking aloud the things he had intended saying to his brother. He actually thought that he was speaking to his brother. His brain had stopped working at the second he had sustained his injury, and now, being conscious again, it had recommenced work as though nothing had happened.

"Well?" said the doctor. "Go on!"

"You'll have to chuck up this journalist business, Travers," said the young man, his voice getting a trifle stronger, and becoming a murmur instead of a whisper. "I've brought the most wonderful news from the States. Our fortunes are made."

"Nonsense!" said Jameson, wishing to encourage the patient to speak further. One of the nurses commenced walking quietly across the room, but the physician waved her back imperiously. He wanted no interruptions now.

"It's an absolute fact, Travers," said Charles Markham, his weak voice vibrating a little. "I'll get to the important part straight away. In a wild part of Nevada I've discovered one of the richest gold seams in the whole world. It's true, man—as true as I'm alive! Before leaving I made the most pains-taking examination, and I know that I'm a millionaire! We're both millionaires, Travers!"

Dr. Jameson's eyes gleamed.

"But you may be mistaken," he exclaimed quickly. "Gold is not so easily discovered——"

"I am not mistaken," the sick man interrupted. "I spent weeks making absolutely positive that the seam was not a mere surface affair. It will produce tons of gold—pure, virgin metal—and not another person in the world knows of it but myself. I have kept the secret locked in my heart. The locality is a wild one, far from habitation; the nearest settlement is twenty miles off. Prospectors never go near the spot because it is generally admitted that no gold exists."

"Then how did you make this wonderful discovery?"

"A tremendous land-slide occurred, exposing the rich gold deposit. I only made the discovery by sheer chance. But we are both millionaires, Travers! You can guess why I have come home. I'm absolutely broke, in spite of the fact that I'm the owner of one of the richest gold mines in the

world. I brought a small nugget away with me—fearing that other men would suspect the truth if I carried more. The nugget sold precisely the amount of my fare home—and here I am. You're rich, Travers. It's up to you to use every penny you own, if necessary, in exploiting the gold mine. You will never regret doing so to your dying day!"

"I will do it," said Dr. Jameson softly. "Rely on me, old man!"

"I knew you would, Travers," said Charles Markham, his voice getting a little weaker. "I'm not the man to come to you on a fool's errand. You know me too well for that; you know that I always go to almost absurd lengths to make certain of a thing before I act. I suppose you had no more idea of seeing me to-day than of seeing the Shah of Persia? You thought that I was still knocking about the States, like a rolling stone? Well, I rolled for a good while, but I took care to roll into a soft spot at the finish!"

The patient closed his eyes, breathing a little heavily. Dr. Jameson bent over him and murmured a few words, but Markham took no notice whatever. He had quietly lapsed into unconsciousness again, the strain of the long conversation having proved a little too much for his weakened brain.

The specialist's eyes wore a foxy, cunning expression—an expression which would have surprised his fashionable patients of the West End could they have seen him at that moment.

"By James!" he murmured. "What possibilities! What stupendous, amazing possibilities! The thing is almost too huge to grasp in one thought!"

He looked down at Charles Markham with a curious smile round his thin lips.

"This man is unknown—the police haven't the slightest idea who he is," his thoughts ran on. "He has just come from America, and his brother, Travers Markham, is in utter ignorance of his presence in this country. By Jove, what possibilities!"

Never for an instant did Dr. Sims Jameson doubt the truth of Markham's story. He knew that it was no hallucination of the injured brain; he knew that it was no wild talk of delirium. The man's peculiar injury was the cause of his unfolding this amazing story. He had been in a kind of trance, and had spoken thoughts which had been foremost in his mind at the time of the accident.

And the doctor, being far from an honourable man, realised that he was in a position to take full and absolute advantage of Markham's helplessness. Another operation would probably set him right again, without any remembrance of what had just happened. Markham's brain would work in its normal grooves once more. On the other hand, if no operation was performed, he would remain in the same condition as now—and would be ready and willing to give fuller details if necessary.

Fuller details!

"I must have advice before I proceed," Dr. Jameson murmured to himself. "The thing is too big for me to tackle single-handed. A gold mine worth millions! What a stupendous piece of luck my nurses were out of earshot all the time!"

Even at that moment one of the women came quietly across the apartment.

"I heard you speaking," she said softly. "Has the patient recovered?"

The specialist shook his head sadly.

"No," he answered, with a pained look in his eyes.

"But I heard——"

"You heard the young fellow uttering unintelligible nonsense,"

interjected Jameson. "He became conscious for a short period, but is far from being in his right senses."

"He did not give his name?"

"I have said that he only murmured nonsense," exclaimed the doctor curtly. "It is most annoying, nurse!"

"Indeed, it is," agreed the nurse. "If he had only given his name we might have traced his relatives. I suppose another operation will be necessary?"

"Probably. I did my utmost to bring him to reason, but he became insensible again without having given voice to a single intelligible remark."

And Dr. Sims Jameson, having lied thus glibly, dismissed the nurse from his side, and busied himself with the patient once more. When he had finished, Charles Markham was breathing evenly and quietly, and there was no danger of his becoming conscious again for at least six hours.

At the end of that time the doctor would know exactly how to act, for he immediately put machinery into motion to arrange a meeting of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle in precisely three hours time—which would be at eight-thirty.

CHAPTER III.

A Welcome Visitor—Nelson Lee Meets the Prison Governor.

NELSON LEE kicked the fire into a blaze, and switched on the electric-light in his consulting-room.

He and Nipper had just finished tea, and the detective was in a rather irritable mood. Just before tea a distracted would-be client had called, but Nelson Lee had been forced to decline the case, much as the facts interested him.

He had formed a compact with Douglas Clifford to combat the league, and, although he would attend to other matters from time to time, just at present he wanted to use all his energies and resources in a big initial effort against the great criminal organisation.

But an opening was wanted; he had to break through somewhere.

"To-night I intend to start work, Nipper," said the great detective grimly. "I have already formed a plan——"

"Hallo! That was the bell, sir!" interrupted Nipper.

Nelson Lee uttered an impatient ejaculation.

"Another client, I suppose," he snapped. "Hang it all, I won't see anybody! What on earth is the use?"

But a minute later Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, announced Mr. James Hale. Nipper and his master exchanged quick, meaning glances.

"Show Mr. Hale up at once, Mrs. Jones," said Nelson Lee crisply.

His eyes had gleamed a little, and he waited expectantly for the visitor to enter the room. For "James Hale" was merely the name which Nelson Lee had advised Martin Caine to assume when visiting Gray's Inn Road. Martin Caine was the controlling agent of the league who had sworn allegiance to the detective.

The visitor entered, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper were somewhat taken by surprise. For Martin Caine had donned a really clever disguise. He was naturally a man of gentlemanly appearance; but now he was decidedly "horsey," and wore aggressive side-whiskers which were extraordinarily life-like.

"Good-evening, Mr. Lee—evening, Nipper!" he remarked, as Mrs. Jones

showed him in. Then as the door closed, and the housekeeper's footsteps died away, he sat down in a chair and allowed himself to become somewhat excited.

"Your disguise is excellent——"

"Never mind the disguise, Mr. Lee," said Caine, interrupting the detective. "I was forced to go to a great deal of trouble, for my life would pay the penalty if it were known that I had visited you. I've come with news—news which might prove to be of great value."

"Good man!" said Nelson Lee approvingly.

"I am heart and soul with you, Mr. Lee, and with Mr. Clifford," went on Caine. "I am only hoping to live to the day when the Green Triangle will no longer be a menace to honest people. But I must hurry. I only wish to remain a few minutes. The league's accursed spies are everywhere, although I've slipped them this evening. Well, there's going to be a meeting of the Governing Circle at eight-thirty to-night. So far as I can gather, Dr. Sims Jameson has called it."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Dr. Sims Jameson!" he exclaimed sharply. "By Jove!"

The coincidence was certainly peculiar. Only that afternoon he had seen the Harley Street physician himself, and had wondered if the Oxford Street accident would lead to anything important.

"Will you be able to get to know what passes at the meeting?" he asked. "It might be of the utmost importance——"

But Caine shook his head vigorously.

"Impossible!" he declared. "I am only an agent of the league—an intermediary between the circle and the working members. I have never been inside the Orpheum Club, the headquarters of the league, and could never gain admission. As for attending a meeting of the circle—the idea is preposterous. Exactly what passes in the governing chamber only the circle know themselves."

Nipper grunted.

"Then your news is worthless," he said bluntly. "How can we make use of it?"

"That is for Mr. Lee to decide," answered Caine. "Taken in conjunction with another piece of news which I have brought there is a distinct possibility that something useful will result."

"The other news," said Nelson Lee. "What is it?"

Martin Caine bent forward with an air of importance.

"A train will arrive at Paddington at ten minutes to seven—fifty minutes from now," he said, with a glance at the clock. "Mr. Oscar Sillard, the governor of Portmoor Convict Prison, will step out of that train, and his first journey will be to the Orpheum Club to attend the meeting of the Governing Circle."

Nipper whistled.

"The governor of Portmoor!" he ejaculated. "A member of that rotten organisation of thieves and murderers! Well, I'm blown!"

"I already knew the fact," Nelson Lee said quietly. "Well, Caine, what of Mr. Sillard's visit to London? Perhaps you will think me dense, but I really fail to see——"

Caine bent a little closer still.

"Oscar Sillard is one of the Governing Circle who attends a meeting only on rare occasions," he said significantly. "He has not been inside the Orpheum Club for over six months, and his visits are usually separated by that amount of time. Therefore, although he is well known, he is not a man that Zingrave and the rest meet very often. His work at Portmoor does not permit him much time in London."

"But what the deuce——" began Nipper.

"Wait! Mr. Sillard is a man of just about your size, Mr. Lee," went on Martin Caine meaningly. "In addition, he wears a full beard and has bushy eyebrows. He also walks with decidedly stooping shoulders!"

Nelson Lee breathed hard.

"By James!" he exclaimed tensely. "I think I understand your meaning, Caine!"

The visitor jumped to his feet.

"I must go now; I have stayed too long already," he said quickly. "There, Mr. Lee, the news I have brought is only superficial, but it may be of some use. Actual, inside facts it is not within my power to obtain. I leave the rest to you, and I am sure that you will take advantage of the trivial help it has been my privilege to proffer. The train arrives at six-fifty, and Sillard will make straight for the Orpheum Club. He is expected; but, of course, he will not know of the circle meeting until he arrives, for he was in the train when Dr. Jameson arranged it."

The next moment, with a hasty farewell, Martin Caine had disappeared, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were still staring at one another silently when the street door banged. The sound aroused Nelson Lee to action.

"That man is a treasure!" he exclaimed with conviction. "He has brains, too, and he has suggested a plan of action which will probably lead to great things."

Nipper's shrewd brain had absorbed everything instantly.

"But the danger, guv'nor!" he gasped. "You'll be in terrible peril! Suppose you're spotted——"

"We will suppose nothing so ridiculous, young 'un," interjected the detective sharply. "So far as I can see the undertaking will not be fraught with much danger—at least, not when you consider the way in which I intend to carry it out."

"What's the wheeze, sir?" asked the lad eagerly.

"My good Nipper, glance at the clock!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "If we stop talking another minute the whole project will be ruined, and Caine's visit will have been for naught!"

The time was then ten minutes past six. The next twenty minutes were rushingly busy ones. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper worked their hardest, and at six-thirty precisely a jovial ship's officer hailed a taxi in Gray's Inn Road.

"Make for Paddington with your engines working under forced draught, skipper!" ordered the ship's officer genially. "I've got to be there by ten to seven, and there's double pay if you do it in a quarter of an hour."

"I'm your man, boss!" cried the taxi-driver.

And the vehicle whizzed away with all speed. Even Nipper, sharp-eyed though he was, would not have recognised his master beneath that clever disguise, had he not assisted Nelson Lee in the donning of it.

Nelson Lee sat in the taxi musing over his hastily formed plans. The opportunity he had long been waiting for had come at last, and although he had no clear idea of how things were to go in the immediate following half-hour, he intended to use all his powers to ensure the success of his bold move.

The thing had been sprung upon him so suddenly, that, had he hesitated, it would never have been carried out at all. Possibly he would have considered it a little too foolhardy, had he had much time at his disposal to think it over.

But, foolhardy or not, he had started out on the undertaking now, and it was not the great criminologist's way to back out once he was fairly on the

road. He had enough confidence in himself to be hopeful of carrying the venture through triumphantly.

As the taxi was speeding along he drew from his pocket a large newspaper cutting, and inspected it intently by the light of a match. It was a head-and-shoulder photograph of Mr. Oscar Sillard, which had been published a couple of years before, when a daring escape had been made from Portmoor.

"I shall make no mistake," murmured Nelson Lee. "Nipper's work in obtaining all the photographs of the known members of the Governing Circle has not been in vain. Sillard's type of countenance is a splendid one for my purpose. Fortune is certainly smiling upon me."

He arrived at Paddington well within the stipulated time, and the taxi-driver consequently went off rejoicing. The detective lounged into the great station with a swinging gait, a big cigar between his teeth.

He was in no way shabby. On the contrary, he looked like the first officer of a big Trans-Atlantic liner, and every inch a gentleman. But, apparently, he had been partaking of the cup that cheers just a little too liberally. Not that he behaved in an intoxicated way; but he had just that breezy carelessness which made him cheerful to all men.

He stationed himself against the gates where the passengers from the six-fifty express would emerge. Sure enough, Martin Caine's information was correct, for Nelson Lee observed the slightly bent figure of Mr. Oscar Sillard among the first batch of passengers to leave the platform.

"Good!" murmured the detective. "Now to start the real business."

He lounged forward, placed himself directly in Mr. Sillard's path, and assumed a smile, which few men could have resisted.

"Glad to welcome you, Gibson!" he cried jovially. "By the Blue Peter, you've altered a fair amount this last two years! How the deuce are you, old man?"

And he grabbed Oscar Sillard's hand, and wrung it warmly.

"Good gracious!" gasped Sillard, utterly taken aback.

"Didn't expect to see me—eh?" laughed Nelson Lee genially.

Sillard laughed, too. The stranger's merry tones were too infectious to resist. The prison governor was a companionable man, by nature, and he was in no way annoyed by the apparent mistake of this complete stranger.

"Pardon me, sir," said Sillard, "but I think you have the advantage of me. My name is Oscar Sillard, and I have never seen you before in my life."

"Got away! You're Jim Gibson——"

"Really, you are mistaken, sir."

Nelson Lee stared blankly at the prison governor.

"Well," he gasped, "now I come to look at you fair and square, I don't think you're Jim, after all! Yet I could have sworn—— By gum, I hope you're not cross, cap'n?"

Sillard laughed.

"Why, should I be cross?" he asked. "Mistakes are often occurring. I hope you will find your friend Mr. Gibson——"

"Say, you're not going in such a hurry!" cried Nelson Lee, catching hold of Sillard's arm. "I've got to apologise for making such a darned fool of myself. I gather you're going right out of the station now?"

"Yes; but——"

"Then do me the honour of being my guest for just five minutes," said the detective cheerfully. "No, it's not a bit of use, sir. I'm not the man to take refusals, and I want to make amends. Five minutes—no more. I guess you could do with a whisky-and-soda after a long rail journey."

Oscar Sillard shook his head smilingly.

"I'm afraid I have no time at my disposal——"

"Don't be hasty, cap'n," interrupted Nelson Lee compellingly. "There's

the clock, staring you in the face. You're not in such a mighty hurry that you can't give me the great pleasure of drinking with you—eh?"

Sillard began to thaw.

"If you're really bursting with anxiety to honour me, I suppose I'd better accept your generous invitation," he said, with a chuckle. "I think there's a decent refreshment-room somewhere in the station."

"Refreshment-room!" repeated Nelson Lee. "Perish the thought! There is a little inn two hundred yards along the road that'll be a glorious revelation to you."

And Nelson Lee placed his arm round Sillard's, and the pair marched off. Inwardly the detective was singing a song of triumph. The most difficult part of his undertaking had been accomplished. Sillard had fallen into the trap with really less persuasion than Nelson Lee had thought would be necessary.

As a matter of fact, Sillard felt that whisky-and-soda would be rather palatable after his journey; and if this cheerful stranger chose to foot the bill, all well and good. There was certainly nothing whatever in Nelson Lee's manner or actions to cause Sillard a moment's suspicion. His companion was merely a jovial sailor, with a manner about him that was almost irresistible.

At first the governor of Portmoor had not had the slightest intention of accompanying the stranger; but now he was walking arm-in-arm with him with the utmost cheeriness. There are some men who seem to possess a magnetic personality, and Nelson Lee could conveniently assume that quality whenever he chose.

There was nothing extraordinary in Sillard accepting his invitation. Strangers drink together, at one another's expense, every minute of every hour of every day. And Sillard was a companionable man, and happened to have a strong partiality for Scotch.

He was led rapidly out of the station. The distance to the little hotel was a trifle further than Nelson Lee had stated, but Sillard did not notice this, for the detective kept him amused the whole time. The hotel was an old-fashioned one, and Nelson Lee led the way to a cosy back-parlour, which was empty when they entered.

They seated themselves before the fire, and two whiskies were soon placed before them. By this time Nelson Lee was in the middle of a long narrative concerning an adventure in the South Pacific. It was all made up on the spur of the moment, but Sillard found it extremely interesting.

Nelson Lee fumbled in his pockets, and finally produced a photograph of a large ship. He handed it to his companion, resting his arm on the table.

"That's the boat I'm talking about," he rattled on breezily. "A good craft—as good a craft as ever sailed the high seas. I don't think you can spot me on the bridge, although I'm there sure enough."

Sillard looked closely, and while he was thus intently engaged, Nelson Lee's hand carelessly hovered over his companion's glass, and a tiny transparent pellet dropped into the whisky, to dissolve with almost instantaneous action.

The thing was done in less than two seconds. The barmaid had her back towards the visitors at the time, but even had she been watching she would never have suspected the thing which had been done before her very eyes.

The effect of the drug which Nelson Lee had introduced into Sillard's whisky soon began to take effect, once a portion of that whisky was transferred to the prison governor's interior. He seemed to become thick-voiced and decidedly intoxicated.

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed with victory. The very instant Sillard finished

his drink, two more were ordered. And in ten minutes time Nelson Lee's companion was in that unfortunate state which is vulgarly described as being "blind to the world." The drug was a perfectly harmless one, but it had the same effect as a dozen stiff doses of spirits. Sillard, indeed, was quite unable to stand.

Nelson Lee beckoned the barmaid.

"My friend does not appear to have been able to stand much strong drink," he smiled, handing over a sovereign. "You've got private rooms here? Well, lead the way to a decent one, and I'll help the gentleman up. A couple of hours' sleep will set him on his feet again."

"Will you want the room for the night, sir?"

"Oh, no! Only until ten o'clock."

The barmaid left him, and soon returned with Nelson Lee's change and a key. She then led the way upstairs to a decently furnished bed-sitting-room, and smiled as Nelson Lee staggered in after her, assisting his apparently intoxicated companion. There was nothing whatever in the affair to make the girl think that the whole thing was a definite plan. A gentleman had come in, had partaken rather too liberally, and was in no fit state to leave. Therefore, he was going to have a short nap to sleep off the effects. How could there possibly be anything suspicious in that?

Once Nelson Lee was in the room alone with Sillard, his careless, free-and-easy manner vanished. He became brisk and active. He quietly locked the door, and then saw that the blind was fully down. The detective gazed down upon Sillard, as the latter sprawled upon the bed, and chuckled grimly to himself.

"For all your cleverness, for all your being a member of the wonderful Governing Circle, you've fallen into the very first trap that's been set for you," he murmured. "You were entirely off your guard, my friend, and I don't think you'll attend the circle meeting to-night. I shall kindly oblige by going in your place."

Working swiftly, Nelson Lee ripped off his own disguise. And then, from a bag which he had been carrying, he produced his make-up articles, and an assortment of false beards and other hair.

Nelson Lee was a past-master in the art of disguising himself. But on this occasion he took greater pains than he had ever done before. His very life might depend upon the life-like exactness of his make-up.

When he had finished, the result was truly remarkable. He was Oscar Sillard's double in every particular. For five minutes, while working, he had been talking to himself, mimicking Sillard's voice until he had mastered the intonation and style of speech.

A last searching look into the mirror, and then he switched the light off.

"And now for the great adventure," he murmured. "Will it succeed or fail? There may be many unknown difficulties, but I must take my chance. My keenest desire is to get within the walls of the Governing Chamber of the League; to see my enemies plotting and planning; to see them as they really are, with their false cloak of respectability cast off. By Jove, what a victory if I pull the venture through!"

He left the room, locked the door after him, and slipped downstairs. Sillard would not recover his right senses for two hours, at least.

With a muffler covering the lower part of his face—for it would never do for the supposedly intoxicated man to be seen leaving the hotel—he passed swiftly out by the quiet hotel entrance into the street.

Then, breathing freely, he walked sharply to Edgware Road, and hailed a taxi. A moment later Mr. Oscar Sillard No. 2 was being whirled rapidly through the West End streets to the Orpheum Club.

CHAPTER IV.

The Meeting of the Circle—Zingrave's Plot.

"WELL, bless my soul, it's Mr. Sillard!"

Sir Roger Hogarth came to a halt in the magnificent lobby of the Orpheum Club, and took the hand of a slightly bent man who had just entered. Sir Roger would have worn a very different expression from his present one of pleasant surprise had he known that he was shaking the hand of Mr. Nelson Lee.

"I heard you were coming up, Sillard," said Sir Roger. "Just arrived in town, I suppose?"

"Well, my train reached Paddington about seven," replied Nelson Lee coolly. "Come on into the reading-room; I should like a word in private."

In a few minutes the detective was talking to Sir Roger and to Superintendent Valling, of Scotland Yard. Dudley Foxcroft, the financier, joined them, and drinks were ordered. After fifteen minutes had expired Nelson Lee had partaken of several drinks, and he behaved very much as though he was partially bowled over, and gave voice to some inane remarks, which caused Foxcroft to take his arm rather tightly.

"This won't do, Sillard," said Foxcroft softly. "Pull yourself together, man! It's not like you to get into this fix. The meeting is in ten minutes, and——"

Nelson Lee smiled serenely.

"That's all right, old man!" he exclaimed. "I'm as steady as a rock!"

"I should advise you to take no more spirits, anyhow!"

And Foxcroft walked away, rather annoyed. Nelson Lee sank into an easy-chair, and lit a cigar. Then he sat puffing it, and watching the doings around him without appearing to take the slightest interest.

In reality the detective was jubilant. His disguise had stood the test of three of the best-known members of the Governing Circle. The others would certainly see nothing in his appearance to arouse their suspicions.

"Excellent!" Nelson Lee told himself. "By Jove, my plans are working on oiled wheels! I can see success already within sight."

But he knew that exposure would result in dire consequences. Therefore, having tested his disguise, he took care to avoid mixing with the other men as far as possible. His assumption of slight intoxication was done with a set, definite purpose.

It prevented men from bothering him with awkward questions, and, if such questions were actually asked, it gave him license to reply evasively and confusedly. Being somewhat the worse for drink, nobody would wonder at his seeming lack of knowledge.

Little details like these meant the success of the whole scheme, for, had he been perfectly sober, he would have had absolutely no excuse for giving vague replies to possible questions, and in that way he would probably have been bowled out at a critical moment.

As events turned out, nobody troubled him with a single question, but perhaps this was due to the fact that he appeared to be in no fit state for intelligent conversation.

The success of his bold venture hinged entirely upon trivial details, and Nelson Lee had taken care that not a single one was overlooked. He noticed presently that the men were drifting out of the reading-room. The last to go were Lord Sylvester and Edmund Gresswell, K.C.

The latter—a thin, keen-faced man—looked back when he reached the door, and then he swiftly stepped to Nelson Lee's chair.

"Come, Sillard!" he murmured. "You wish to attend, I suppose? I think Sims Jameson has something rather important on hand."

"Eh?" ejaculated the detective. "Oh, yes; of course! I'm coming, Gresswell!"

He rose, and followed the K.C. out of the room and up the palatial marble staircase. At one of the doors of the wide, well-lighted corridor, Gresswell paused. Upon the door was a brass plate, with the inscription:

"CHAIRMAN'S OFFICE.—PRIVATE."

The door stood ajar, and a sound of laughing men's voices floated out into the corridor. The pair entered, and Nelson Lee found himself in a spacious, lofty apartment, furnished with sumptuous luxury. A cheerful fire burned in the grate, and before it stood Professor Cyrus Zingrave, chairman of the Orpheum Club, and Chief of the Green Triangle.

After a few minutes, during which time Nelson Lee listened to the small talk of a group of four men, two others entered, and the door was closed. Then, in addition to this, a great baize-covered door was fastened with spring bolts, thus shutting out every particle of sound from the rest of the building.

"Am I in the Governing Chamber of the League?" Nelson Lee asked himself. "Surely not! I had imagined something very different."

Then Professor Zingrave's voice fell upon his ears.

"We are all here, gentlemen," he said shortly. "We will adjourn to the Chamber."

The detective looked round, but he failed to see how all these gentlemen were to adjourn anywhere, unless they left the room by the way they had come, for there was no other door, and the window was tightly shuttered.

Nelson Lee watched with apparent languor, but his eyes were keenly on the alert. He noted with a feeling of relief that nobody paid him much attention. Obviously the word had gone round that he was not quite himself.

Then the bold intruder received a stupefying surprise, for while he watched an astounding thing happened—a thing so unexpected, so utterly amazing, that Nelson Lee was almost betrayed into breathing a gasp. But he checked himself with a masterly effort of will.

The fireplace had moved back a full yard!

The whole projecting wall, in which the fire grate was built, had slid silently and slowly backwards—overmantel, blazing coal fire, and all! It was amazing in its ingenuity—a marvel of building construction.

The room could have been tapped and searched for months for a secret exit without this astonishing fact coming to light. The thick, solid walls had shifted, and at precisely the spot where the fire had been burning a moment before Nelson Lee could see a flight of narrow stairs leading downwards.

"Wonderful!" thought the detective. "How the chimney is constructed, I cannot imagine. But the fire is still burning brightly enough. By Jove, what a mighty brain must be at the head of affairs!"

He saw that his companions were filing down the stairs in quick succession, so he followed their example with careless ease, as though he had done the same thing dozens of times before. Professor Zingrave himself stood aside, waiting until the last.

Nelson Lee was third from the last; but, without looking round, he knew that the professor had closed the secret exit before descending himself.

The staircase was lit by little electric-lamps in the walls, flush with the brickwork. It led straight down for a considerable distance, and then Nelson Lee found himself in a wide passage. This was short, and at the end a great steel door stood wide open.

Even at such a tense moment as this, the great crime investigator could not help a feeling of almost dazed wonder finding a place in his breast. He could hardly convince himself that he was not in a dream.

Was this actually true?

Right in the West End, the Orpheum Club stood for all that was highly respectable and above-board. Its members were famous men all, with names that were honoured and titled; and yet, unsuspected, the club was really the headquarters of the greatest criminal organisation in the world, and its members were safe and secure from the slightest breath of suspicion.

"By Heaven, what villainy!" thought Nelson Lee grimly. "What marvellous brainwork has been exercised in the development of this great league of rogues!"

Yes, they were rogues—every one and all. But who would have believed the detective had he told all that he knew? The Governing Circle were perfectly safe, for they were all trusted and honoured men.

The Governing Chamber was a large, oblong apartment. The ceiling was rather low, but the walls were richly decorated, and the place was brilliantly illuminated. The air was warm and fresh, although Nelson Lee could not see how the apartment was ventilated. The heat was supplied by electricity.

All the lamps hanging from the ceiling were delicately shaded, casting their full radiance down upon the long table. The men took their seats at the table in luxurious padded arm-chairs, and Nelson Lee dropped into one and lay back with partially closed eyes. But he could see everything quite distinctly, nevertheless, and he noticed that, in addition to the chairs which were filled by the present Governing Members, there were many chairs which remained vacant. This seemed to point to the fact that this collection of men by no means represented the whole Governing Circle.

"Say, I hope this meeting ain't going to be a wash-out!" said a voice with a decidedly Yankee twang, which emanated from a lean, sharp-featured man two chairs away from Nelson Lee. "I guess——"

"Really, Mr. Dayton, we never guess things here," interrupted the soft, musical voice of Professor Zingrave. "We only deal with absolute facts."

Mr. Page T. Dayton grunted, and lit a fat cigar. Then Nelson Lee became aware of the fact that Zingrave's piercing eyes were upon him, and, strong-willed though he was, the detective almost felt an icy shiver run down his spine. Zingrave appeared to possess an uncanny power with those queer eyes of his, and for a moment Nelson Lee actually felt nervous.

"I think, Mr. Sillard, that it was rather unwise of you to attend this meeting!" said Zingrave, as gently as a purring cat. "I observe with regret that you are inclined to be sleepy and indifferent. I had intended going into the matter which has brought you to London, but under the circumstances I shall postpone it. Kindly remember, Mr. Sillard, that this Governing Chamber is only intended for men with clear heads and keen brains."

The words, though spoken softly enough, contained a grim threat, and Nelson Lee sat up rather hastily, and opened his mouth to speak. But Zingrave waved a curt hand, and turned to Dr. Sims Jameson.

"You have called us together, I have no doubt, for a very excellent reason, doctor," exclaimed the professor smoothly. "Kindly proceed with the matter at once."

As the Harley Street specialist arose, Nelson Lee realised how near the danger-mark he had hovered. If Zingrave had actually decided to discuss the matter which had brought Oscar Sillard to London, then the impostor would have been exposed. The detective thanked the impulse which had led him to affect slight intoxication.

He could understand now why it was the professor was Chief of the League. Nelson Lee had met many powerful and iron-willed men, but they were all mere children compared with this remarkable scientist.

Professor Zingrave's personality was absolutely unique. His voice was soft and infinitely musical, but it was commanding and compelling. His eyes, rather deep sunken beneath the massive forehead, were pitch-black. The very instant he turned them upon any one of his companions, it sent a kind of chilly thrill to their very marrows. By sheer will power he could compel men to obey his commands. He could convert an honest man into a black-hearted rogue. He was possessed of power—mysterious, uncanny influence.

Dr. Sims Jameson stood looking round at his fellow Governing Members for a few seconds in silence. Nelson Lee could see that the great physician was labouring under a certain stress of inward excitement.

"I have called this meeting, gentlemen, because I am sure that chance has placed into my hands a matter which will ultimately end in a great victory for the league," commenced the specialist quietly. "This afternoon, by sheer coincidence, I happened to be in Oxford Street when a rather serious accident occurred, involving the grave injury of a strange young man of unknown name and address."

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed beneath his lowered lids.

"As I thought!" he murmured silently. "I feel that that motor-bus accident is going to provide me with a starting-point in my great campaign."

"I took the young man to my surgery, for an operation was immediately necessary," went on Dr. Jameson. "A constable came with me, but there was utterly no evidence upon the stranger to show who he was. The police are quite ignorant of his identity, and that is a very important point. I found that he was suffering from a fractured skull, and performed a delicate operation. The result, from a surgical point of view, was disappointing."

"The fellow died, I suppose?" asked Sir Roger Hogarth.

"Oh, no; he did not die," said the specialist grimly. "But when he recovered his senses, I found him to be in an exceedingly curious state. At the time of the accident, his mind had been filled to the utmost with one set of thoughts, and when he came to himself those thoughts had to be released. In a semi-dazed way, he answered my questions, being under the impression that I was his brother. He had been about to visit his brother when the smash occurred, and his brain was not in a capable state of realising that he was talking to a complete stranger."

"Did he give you his name?" asked Zingrave softly.

"Yes. His name is Charles Markham," replied the doctor. "I do not intend to go fully into the details of the patient's remarkable state of mind. I could enter upon a long discourse which would be entirely convincing to a party of fellow medical men. But to the untrained mind, such as you all possess in surgical matters, my discourse would be incomprehensible. Let me assure you, however, that I am speaking on a subject which I understand to the tiniest detail. I positively know that the story which Charles Markham told me was perfectly true in every detail. It was no hallucination, no delusion. The story was intended for his brother, but Travers Markham will never hear it."

"Travers Markham," repeated Foxcroft. "I've heard the name before."

"He's a journalist of some little repute," went on Dr. Jameson. "This Charles Markham is his only brother, and he arrived in England from the United States without allowing Travers to know of his coming. Therefore, Travers Markham thinks that his brother is still in America, and is in blissful ignorance of the fact that he really lies in my surgery a nameless victim of a London street accident."

"But his name is known——"

"My dear Gresswell, the nurses who assisted me in the operation heard not one word of Markham's story," said the specialist quietly. "They think his identity is still a mystery. The police are still making inquiries, but those inquiries will draw blank. Charles Markham is in my power, utterly and completely."

Professor Zingrave tapped the table very gently.

"The story, Jameson," he exclaimed silkily—"the story!"

"The story is an amazing one," said the doctor, his eyes gleaming a little. "Charles Markham came over to England to bring his brother some startling news. In short, Charles Markham has discovered, in a wild part of Nevada, a stupendously rich seam of pure, virgin gold. He alone knows its whereabouts, and he wants his brother to go to America with him to work the mine. Travers is rich, and Charles wants a big sum of money to exploit the gold-seam. He declared to me that they would both become millionaires, and—mark this deeply—I know his narrative to be true."

The Governing Circle were looking eager and excited now, and Nelson Lee himself felt his heart beating in a rather undignified manner. His visit to the governing chamber was proving to be of sterling worth, with a vengeance!

Mr. Page T. Dayton rose in his chair, and faced the specialist.

"You're dead sure of this?" he asked quickly.

Dr. Jameson nodded.

"I know, at least, that the story is no effort of the imagination," he replied. "Of course, it is not within my power to say whether this gold exists in such quantities as Markham stated. But he was so positive, so completely consumed with his revelation, that I am convinced the thing is worth following up to the bitter end. Looking at it in the very worst light, the league will at least benefit to the extent of hundreds of thousands. And this gold seam, if we get it into our hands, will be a means of incomputable revenue."

"I guess I'm the man to take the affair in hand," said Dayton briskly. "As you all know, I'm the president of the Long Creek Consolidated Silver Mine Company, and this game is just in my line. If there's gold knocking about Nevada in mighty chunks, and you can put me in a position to locate it—waal, I'm right there."

"Be assured, Dayton, if this thing comes to anything, you will be entrusted with the carrying out of the league's plans," exclaimed Professor Zingrave evenly. "I am certainly struck by your information, Jameson. But you have given no details."

The specialist related to his listeners exactly what had occurred in his surgery. He had a good memory, and he repeated his conversation with Charles Markham almost word for word. Nelson Lee, listening intently—though apparently indifferent—knew that he had found a starting point for his crusade.

"Markham, then, did not say where this wonderful gold-seam is located?" asked Page T. Dayton. "I guess it'll be some treasure if there's a whole seam of virgin metal. Gold don't usually lie around in seams!"

"That is what makes me so positive that it will be well worth the league's while to carry the thing right through," answered Dr. Sims Jameson. "No, Markham gave no exact details. But remember he is still in the same semi-dazed state as before."

Professor Zingrave chuckled delightfully—it was a keen pleasure to listen to his soft, silvery voice. Already his mighty brain had been busy.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking round, "I have a plan."

"Already?" queried Jameson in surprise.

"Exactly. And it is a plan which will admit of no failure," replied Zingrave, his dark, luminous eyes twinkling with keenness. "Dr. Jameson has told this story to no one but ourselves; therefore we have no fear of any hitch. We can carry our plans out easily and with the utmost safety."

"You're not often wrong, professor," murmured Nelson Lee under his breath; "but you're wrong this time!"

"To-morrow morning," went on Zingrave, "you must transfer Charles Markham down to your country house in Surrey, Jameson. You can take a nurse with you in the private ambulance, so everything will be above-board. The police will offer no objection." And Zingrave fastened his curious eyes on to Superintendent Valling.

"No objection whatever," said the Scotland Yard traitor. "I will see to that. The unknown young man who met with an accident is in capable hands, and the police will be only too willing to let Dr. Jameson perform another operation in the hope of making the identity of the stranger known."

The professor nodded.

"Precisely!" he agreed. "Well, to-morrow evening you will go to the patient's bedside, Dr. Jameson. You can be absolutely alone, and safe from eavesdropping. Indeed, who would think of spying upon an honourable West End specialist? Having satisfied yourself that you are alone with Markham, you will question him again. I am assuming, of course, that Markham will be still labouring under the idea that he is talking to his brother."

"Have no fear on that score," said the physician. "Markham will remain precisely as he is until another operation is performed. To-night I will administer a harmless drug which will render him insensible until to-morrow evening."

"That, of course, I will leave to you," said Zingrave. "Well, you will question him, and obtain the precise locality of the gold deposit, and the precise way in which to reach it. You will also get other details which are necessary. As Markham gives them you will put them into writing. Having obtained the necessary information, you will then proceed to the next step."

"And that is?"

Zingrave laughed musically.

"My dear fellow, surely you can guess?" He smiled. "Charles Markham cannot possibly live if we are to carry this scheme through. You will accordingly arrange with the village doctor to attend your house at eight-thirty precisely. At that time—after you have extracted the required information—and in the presence of the worthy local medico, you will perform an operation on the patient."

"Yes, but——"

"There are no 'buts,' my dear Jameson," said Zingrave smoothly. "The unknown patient will unfortunately expire while being operated upon! The brain is a delicate organism, and men die more often than not during such an operation. You understand?"

The specialist's eyes glittered strangely.

"It will be simplicity itself," he said. "I grasp your meaning, professor. By Jove, what a perfect scheme! Markham will die naturally, and in the presence of another medical man—who, of course, will be absolutely unsuspecting. It will be an unfortunate affair, of course, but such things happen almost daily. The unknown young man will be given over to the authorities, and placed in the local mortuary. My worthy contemporary

will give a certificate of death, and Markham will be buried by the parish. Not in one single detail can there be a hitch."

"And it will not matter a toss if his identity is discovered—once he is dead," exclaimed Zingrave. "Travers Markham has not the slightest knowledge of this great discovery, and will therefore make no inquiries. But I think we may as well dismiss the possibility of the patient's identity being found out. He will die a perfectly natural death, as a result of the fractured skull, and will be decently buried. Those little items being over, Mr. Dayton will proceed with the league's plans."

"I guess we'll discuss those same plans later," said Page T. Dayton. "It's your way to do one thing at a time, professor. Markham being disposed of, then we'll get down to the rock-bottom business."

Professor Zingrave rose.

"There is really no necessity for us to stay longer," he said easily. "Dr. Jameson has his work before him, and he has nothing to do but execute the very simple plan I have suggested. Do you wish to make any alteration, Jameson?"

"None whatever," replied the doctor. "I could not possibly improve the scheme."

"Does any gentleman wish to make a comment?" asked Zingrave.

But the Governing Circle rose to their feet thoroughly satisfied. The lights were switched off, and the party mounted the stairs to the chairman's office. And in five minutes time Zingrave, Foxcroft, Gresswell, K.C., and the rest of the "honourable" gentlemen, were distributed about the Orpheum Club, carelessly chattering about every-day subjects. Their hardened, crime-stained hearts were in no way affected by the ghastly, diabolical plot which had just been formulated.

But one man was almost crying aloud with pent-up fury and indignation. And that man was not a member of the Governing Circle at all. He was Nelson Lee, the impostor, the man who had sworn to wreck the League of the Green Triangle—the man who had sat silent and indifferent during the whole unfolding of the scoundrelly plot in the governing chamber.

And Nelson Lee's soul cried out with passion that such cold-blooded murderers should be at liberty to wreak their deadly will upon a people who trusted and honoured them; who innocently harboured the League of the Green Triangle as a child innocently fondled a poisonous rattlesnake!

CHAPTER V.

Sillard is Convinced—Nelson Lee Calls Upon Travers Markham.

THERE was one point which caused Nelson Lee a little anxiety.

If Oscar Sillard stated positively that he had not been present at the meeting, that he had remained at an inn near Paddington the whole time, then Zingrave would know that an impostor had been present in Sillard's place. And the whole of Nelson Lee's plans would be ruined.

So the detective set about a little ingenious scheme which would insure everything being right.

Still apparently more or less affected by drink, he caught hold of Dudley Foxcroft as the latter was about to enter the billiard-room. They were both in the sumptuous lobby, and Nelson Lee had his—or, rather, Sillard's—overcoat on.

"Good-night, Foxcroft," he said somewhat thickly. "I've got to get back."

Foxcroft smiled.

"You'll be better to-morrow, Sillard," he said, wondering a little why Sillard had his hat so low over his eyes, and why the muffler was almost covering his chin. "But where have you got to get back to? You're not going to Portmoor——"

"No. I'm going to Paddington," said Nelson Lee vaguely. "Met a man there this evening at an hotel—officer off a liner, y'know. Told him I'd go back."

"Don't let me stop you, then," said Foxcroft bluntly. "Good-night!"

Nelson Lee walked out of the club, and hailed a taxi. Once inside the vehicle his rather inane expression vanished, and he removed—with some difficulty—the false beard and eyebrows.

"By Heaven!" he muttered grimly. "The devils! The heartless murderers! Thank heavens I was present at that meeting. My work is clear before me now: the campaign against the league starts to-night. The first member of the Governing Circle to be struck down will be Dr. Sims Jameson!"

He mused over the plot which was even then being carried out. But for his bold move that plot would have been entirely successful. But Nelson Lee knew all, and the league's plans would go mysteriously crooked. Exactly how he was going to frustrate the plot he did not know; but he had the whole night in which to make his plans.

The detective understood now why the league's undertakings always succeeded. Carried out openly, under many eyes, villainy was never suspected. This particular undertaking was complete to the last detail. A hitch was absolutely impossible.

And yet, in spite of this impossibility, there would be many hitches. And the sole and only reason was because Nelson Lee had heard the plans instead of Oscar Sillard. It now remained for the detective to hoodwink Sillard into believing that he himself had attended the meeting.

It was not such a difficult task as it first seemed.

When Nelson Lee arrived at the old-fashioned hotel, the time was still twenty minutes to ten, and he walked in and marched upstairs without passing anybody save a page-boy, who did not trouble to look up at him even.

Nelson Lee unlocked the door of the private room silently, slipped in, and switched on the light. Oscar Sillard was sleeping heavily on the bed, being still somewhat under the influence of the drug.

"Splendid!" murmured the detective. "I think the rest is simple."

He rapidly divested himself of Sillard's overcoat, and proceeded to don the "ship's officer" disguise again. In ten minutes he looked exactly as he had looked earlier in the evening. All traces of the other make-up were locked in his handbag.

After a moment's thought, he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, thus giving himself the appearance of having been indoors for some little time. Then he placed Sillard's hat upon its owner's head and the overcoat across his arm.

"What's the matter with you, man?" he said loudly.

He yanked Sillard into a sitting posture on the bed, and the highly respectable prison governor blinked open his eyes and stared at his companion.

"Eh! Why, who on earth—— Upon my soul, my head feels like lead!" stammered Sillard dazedly.

"I should think it would!" laughed Nelson Lee. "But why the Blue Peter have you come back?"

"Come back?" Sillard ejaculated, becoming wider awake.

"Yes. You've been out for the best part of two hours," said Nelson Lee,

with a note of curiosity in his voice. "And now you turn up again, three-parts drunk——"

Sillard stood up shakily.

"Good heavens, I must be drunk!" he exclaimed thickly. "I—I remember you somehow. Didn't we drink together in some hotel?"

"We're in it now," said Nelson Lee. "You became a little rocky, and then went off to the Orpheum Club, or somewhere, saying you'd come back here. And, sure enough, here you are, more drunk than ever! You're having a good night, cap'n!"

Oscar Sillard passed a hand across his brow.

"I don't remember anything," he muttered, looking down at the overcoat across his arm, and taking the hat from his head. "Have—have I just come in?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Two minutes ago," he said, tapping a cigarette on his thumb-nail.

The detective hadn't the slightest compunction about telling a few harmless untruths. He was erring in a very good cause—the cause of justice against sound-realism.

"But I don't remember!" repeated Sillard heavily. "I don't remember coming here just now. I've no recollection of going to the Orpheum Club. You fool—you're lying to me! You made me drunk, and I've been here for hours!"

Nelson Lee laughed merrily.

"I'm not surprised," he chuckled. "You were a whole heap confused. I reckon you've been walking about with your mind a blank, old man. When a fellow's in your condition, he does all sorts of things without knowing it."

While the detective was talking, Sillard had noticed a card sticking out of his overcoat pocket. Taking it out, he looked at it dully, and then started. It was a wine-list in a familiar design, and headed by the words:

"ORPHEUM CLUB."

"The man's right!" Sillard muttered huskily. "I've certainly been to the club to-night. And yet I don't remember the least thing! Oh, my head's splitting!"

Nelson Lee watched, openly amused, but secretly elated. Sillard had been hoodwinked. He would go straight to the club, of course. Once there, he would receive ample proof that he had already paid the Orpheum Club a visit. The scheme had worked splendidly.

The prison governor glowered at his companion.

"You infernal meddler!" he grated. "It was you who caused me to get into this state! Good gracious! To think that I went to the club, and then returned here! Bah! I was a fool to listen to your cheerful invitations!"

And Sillard jammed his hat on, and staggered out of the room. The drug's effects were working off, but he still behaved as though he were intoxicated. In the street he boarded a motor-cab, and drove straight to the Orpheum Club, his head throbbing and singing to the beat of the engine and aching agonisingly.

Almost the first person he saw on alighting outside the palatial entrance of the club was Dudley Foxcroft.

"Hallo, Sillard! Back again?" he said amusedly. "I'll take your taxi——"

"Back again!" said Sillard. "Have I already been here, Foxcroft?"

The financier stared.

"Oh, you've forgotten all about it, eh?" he exclaimed. "Well, considering your condition—"

"Did I come here intoxicated?" asked Sillard hoarsely.

"My dear man, you were in a shocking state!" said Foxcroft genially. "You were here for a considerable time, attended the meeting, and then went off to Paddington somewhere, to meet some captain or ship's officer. Take my advice, and go straight to bed. In the morning, you'll be more like yourself."

And Foxcroft walked down the pavement and boarded the taxi which Sillard had just vacated. Sillard himself passed into the club, and sank down into a big chair in the reading-room.

"Bah, what a fool I was!" he told himself savagely. "It's the first time I've been the worse for drink for ten years! And I came here and made a laughing-stock of myself, and attended a meeting without knowing it! I shall have to apologise all round to-morrow!"

Thus Nelson Lee's wonderfully clever trick had succeeded. He had been present at the meeting of the Governing Circle, and had learned all; and yet Sillard himself was quite convinced that it was he who had attended! The subtle deepness of the little plan was remarkable.

For the detective's victory was no half-triumph. It was complete and absolute. A less clever man would have failed to carry it through so neatly. He had gained admittance into the secret Governing Chamber, had heard more than he had dared to hope for, and not a single soul was the wiser! In cold truth, it was a sheer master-stroke!

And when, at eleven o'clock, the Governing Members were easily enjoying their pleasures, Nelson Lee was standing before the fire in his consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road, relating his adventures to two extremely excited and highly elated individuals—Nipper and Douglas Clifford, to be exact.

"You're a wonder, gov'nor!" gasped Nipper admiringly. "You've got to know the whole rotten plot, and Zingrave and the others are totally in the dark about it. By gum, wouldn't they look blue if they knew!"

"But they don't know, young 'un," interjected Nelson Lee grimly. "That is where we have a tremendous advantage over them. Somehow we are going to frustrate the plot, and expose Dr. Sims Jameson as the vile murderer he actually is."

Clifford's eyes seemed afire.

"He will be the first member of the league to feel our avenging teeth!" he said, his voice tense with emotion. "Oh, Mr. Lee, you cannot understand the joy I experience at this news—the news of something actually accomplished in the great battle."

"I understand thoroughly," the detective said quietly. "You suffered five years of torture, five years of imprisonment in an underground dungeon, at the hands of the league. Well, it is your turn now! Previously you have feared the Green Triangle; now the Green Triangle will fear an unknown, intangible foe."

"But how are you going to save Charles Markham's life, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"I have been turning over many schemes in my mind, Nipper, and I think I can see my way clear," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "To begin with, I shall take Travers Markham, the patient's brother, into my confidence."

Clifford stared.

"Surely you will not tell him of the league?" he asked.

"I did not say that."

"Then what will you tell him?"

"Just the facts of the case as they stand," replied Nelson Lee. "Travers Markham will know nothing of the Green Triangle whatever. This affair is

in the hands of Dr. Sims Jameson, therefore Travers will be told of the specialist's connection with the case, and nothing further. It will suit my purpose better to have Travers Markham take the lead after to-day. I do not want to appear publicly at all."

"But Travers will not actually take the lead, sir?" asked Nipper blankly. Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear Nipper, you fail to understand," he explained. "To the outside world Travers Markham will cause Scotland Yard to institute inquiries into the strange case of the young man who met with an accident in Oxford Street. In strict reality, Travers will be merely carrying out my precise instructions."

"And what of Superintendent Valling?" asked Clifford keenly.

"Valling will be helpless," replied the detective. "Of course, if he got wind of the plan Travers will adopt, he would at once warn Dr. Jameson, and the whole thing would fall to the ground. But I shall interview the Commissioner himself to-morrow morning, and shall borrow my old friend Detective-Inspector Lennard, the whole affair to be a strict secret. Oh, have no qualms, my dear fellow! I will not overlook the details."

And the trio discussed ways and means until long past midnight. These three—just two men and a youngster—had set themselves the gigantic task of wrecking and ruining the League of the Green Triangle! The odds were terribly against them, but they had right on their side. It was a unique case of right against might, for the league was truly mighty and all-powerful.

Yet, in spite of its great power, Nelson Lee had scored the first trick. It remained to be seen whether he would win the game.

In the morning, at ten-thirty, a visitor was announced at the comfortable flat owned and occupied by Mr. Travers Markham, journalist. Markham was in his study, and he looked rather curiously at Nelson Lee as the latter entered.

"This is a keen pleasure, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed, taking the detective's hand. "I have many times wished to meet you. Take a seat! You will find cigars by your elbow."

Nelson Lee quietly lighted a cigar, giving his host one or two keen glances as he did so. Travers Markham was a small man, of the wiry, active type. He was about thirty-five years of age, and had a pair of unusually kindly eyes.

"I have called on grave business, Mr. Markham," commenced the visitor. "I will state at the outset that you will be advised to steel yourself for a painful shock."

Travers Markham stared.

"Good gracious! You startle me, Mr. Lee," he said.

"I will get straight to my subject," went on Nelson Lee gravely. "You have a brother, younger than yourself—Charles Markham."

"That's true! The young ass went over to the States some time ago, and has been having a pretty rough time, I believe," said Markham. "Great Scott! Is this visit in connection with Charlie, Mr. Lee? Has anything happened to him?"

"Something very serious!"

"Not—not dead?" asked the other huskily.

"Dear me—no!" Nelson Lee hastened to say. "But I will give you a surprise. Your brother is in London, Mr. Markham, at present lying seriously ill with a fractured skull in the surgery of Dr. Sims Jameson, at Harley Street."

Travers jumped to his feet.

"Charlie in London!" he exclaimed. "I knew nothing of it. I thought

he was in the United States! Oh, there must be a mistake. Mr. Lee! If my brother had arrived in London, he would have visited me at once. He has nowhere else to go! Our parents are long dead——"

"But there is no mistake," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Your brother was even on his way to this flat when the accident occurred. I witnessed it myself, and I saw Dr. Sims Jameson take your brother away to his surgery for an operation."

Travers had gone rather pale.

"I must go to Harley Street at once!" he said. "Poor Charlie! He's in splendid hands, though—the best in London!"

"On the contrary, your brother is in the hands of a murderous rogue!" said the detective, quietly examining the ash of his cigar.

"But—but you said that Dr. Sims Jameson——"

"Precisely!"

Travers Markham looked bewildered.

"I wish you would be perfectly frank, Mr. Lee!" he complained plaintively. "I can't make head or tail of all this!"

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"I will be frank, Mr. Markham," he said crisply. "I am going to tell you something which will startle you. Before doing so, however, I want you to give me your word that you will follow any instructions I choose to suggest, and that my confidence will be respected. Remember, your brother's life is in terrible peril."

"I pledge my word willingly," said Markham. "Anything you confide to me will go into my head and stay there. I do not think I am rotter enough to betray a confidence—especially from such a man as you, Mr. Lee."

"Well, then, listen carefully. I am going to relate the chief facts of the case," said the visitor. "I shall not tell you how I obtained my information, because that is really beside the point."

And, without further hesitation, Nelson Lee unfolded Dr. Sims Jameson's murderous plot. Travers Markham listened eagerly and with ever-growing fury and indignation. When at last he knew all he drew a deep breath, and threw the cigar—which had gone out between his fingers—into the fireplace.

"If any other man had told me this astounding story, Mr. Lee, I should have doubted his sanity," he exclaimed frankly. "But I know you to be amazingly level-headed and astute. Good heavens above! Is it possible that the famous Dr. Jameson—the idol of the West End—is such a black-hearted rogue?"

"I have already given you proofs of that."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Markham distractedly. "And poor Charlie! Even now he is being conveyed to Jameson's country home—and to-night the scoundrel will wrench the secret of the gold mine from him. Oh, the cold-bloodedness of it all!"

"You will help me to frustrate this murder-plot? You will help me in my efforts to save your brother's life?" asked Nelson Lee.

"To my last breath, Mr. Lee!" declared Travers stoutly.

"Then listen carefully," went on the great detective. "I want you to carry out my instructions to the smallest detail. At present we have not one iota of proof against Dr. Sims Jameson—and without proof we are helpless. At the slightest suspicion of danger the doctor will drop everything, and thus keep beyond our reach. It is proof we need, and I am going to trust you with a dangerous and delicate task. If my plans turn out successfully, I shall have the infamous doctor within the grasp of the law before another twelve hours have passed!"

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee's Ruse—Charles Markham Speaks—A Terrible Misfortune.

"SEVEN o'clock, Nipper. It is time for us to act."

It was Nelson Lee's voice that spoke. But neither the detective nor Nipper could be seen, for the night was gloomy and dark. Masses of black clouds scudded across the sky, driven by a fairly stiff wind. The pair were standing on the lee-side of a thick privet hedge, and the road stretched out on either side.

Behind the hedge, separated by well-kept lawns from the road, stood the dark bulk of Harley Lodge—Dr. Sims Jameson's big country residence. Several lights gleamed out from the windows.

"I'm ready, sir," murmured Nipper. "Hallo, who—— Oh, it's O.K."

Two dim figures came out of the gloom and joined Nelson Lee and Nipper. One of them was Travers Markham, and the other Detective-inspector Lennard, an old acquaintance of the detective's.

"This is a queer business, Lee!" said Lennard uneasily. "I'm hanged if I half like breaking into the house of Dr. Sims Jameson! If you've made a bloomer——"

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers.

"Is it my way to act before I am certain of my facts?" he said sharply. "Have no fear, inspector; you'll be highly commended at the Yard for your share in this night's work. But we have no time to waste. Are you prepared?"

"Yes," replied Travers Markham. "We came to see if everything is ready."

"Quite ready. Hold yourself prepared to enter the house the very instant you hear the commotion," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Now, my good chaps, hurry round to the back of the house again. The whole success of my scheme rests upon the result of the ruse I am now going to adopt."

Within the house Dr. Jameson was finishing a cigar in his library. He was alone, for the local medico, Dr. Ryder, was not due to arrive until eight-twenty. And the nurse who was in attendance on the unconscious patient was taking a few hours well-earned sleep. Jameson had taken care to keep her hard at work since five that morning, so there was no fear of her appearing until a few minutes before the appointed time for the operation—eight-thirty.

The specialist glanced at the clock.

"Five past seven," he murmured. "The patient will be awakening very shortly. And as soon as he does I shall have the apartment quite to myself, with no fear of interruption until well past eight. Before the clock chimes the hour I shall have obtained the information I require, and Markham will be unconscious again. The operation will then take place; and with simple-minded Ryder and the nurse by my side I do not think there will be much risk. It is unfortunate that the patient must die, but the operation is a dangerous one, and I shall not be blamed in any way whatever."

He threw his cigar into the fire, turned the big lamp down, and left the room. He intended going straight to the patient's apartment. But as he walked across the wide hall there was a sudden interruption.

Nelson Lee's judgment was really remarkable. The affair could not possibly have been timed at a more opportune moment.

"Boom! Boo-o-oom!"

Two explosions, loud and long, sounded from somewhere in front of the house. The whole building quivered, and Dr. Jameson twisted round amazedly. What on earth could be happening?

Crash!

Another loud report rang out, and two or three servants came hurrying from the rear quarters. But they hesitated when they saw their master.

"What is this noise?" demanded Jameson sharply.

"J—I don't know, sir!" ejaculated the butler nervously. "Sounded——"

"Quiet, man! Listen!"

A wild confusion of sounds entered the house, and then, shrill and clear, a yell for help was heard.

Dr. Jameson strode forward and flung open the front door. A lurid glare lit up the trees behind the privet hedge.

"Help!" roared a voice agonisingly. "Fire! Help!"

With one accord Jameson and the servants dashed down the drive and burst out into the roadway. The explosions and yells had reached the ears of every soul in the large house—with the exception of the unconscious patient. Being unconscious, the disturbance would not affect him in the least.

And in two minutes everybody in the building was either in the road, the front garden, or collected in the big porch. The nurse who had been sleeping lost no time in reaching the road. She guessed that an accident had occurred, and that her help would be required.

The house itself, the rear part especially, was quite deserted.

And what was the cause of all the commotion?

The first thing Dr. Sims Jameson saw on emerging into the road was a motor-car, ten yards off, blazing furiously. Flames were roaring twelve feet high, and two figures were dancing about the conflagration like fire-demons.

"Upon my soul!" gasped the specialist.

"A motor-car afire!" cried the butler. "I always did say they was dangerous things to meddle with! Lor', what a blaze!"

Jameson walked a little closer, and two overalled figures met him. One was a man with a beard, and the other a mere youth. Both were looking thoroughly scared.

"Afraid it's too late to do anything," said the motorist dismally. "We yelled for help, but the fire got too quick a hold. In ten minutes that car will be a mere cinder!"

"How did it happen?" asked Jameson.

"Ah, that's where I'm puzzled," said the stranger. "The car stopped, and I was trying to discover the trouble when there were two terrific explosions. The petrol-tank got afire—and this is the result. My car's doomed!"

"That's an assured fact, anyway," agreed the physician drily. "But I am a doctor, and there is a nurse here. Are you hurt at all?"

The motorist shook his head.

"Oh, no. We're not even scorched," he replied. "Sorry if we've disturbed you. But we thought assistance might come in time to save the car. As it didn't, we'll wait until the fire's burnt out, and then shift the ruins into the ditch. It's not far to an hotel, is it?"

"About a mile towards London."

"Oh, thanks!" said the motorist. "You're not hurt, are you, Jim?"

"No. But look at the car!" wailed the youth. "Oh, what a shame!"

Jameson turned to the servants.

"It is nothing," he said sharply. "You can get indoors again."

The stranger stepped forward.

"Don't trouble to remain here, sir," he said considerately. "There's really nothing to do now but wait. Please allow me to thank you for your kind offer of help."

Two minutes later Dr. Sims Jameson was indoors again, rather annoyed at the interruption, but thankful that it was only trivial. And out in the road, some distance from the burning car, the two motorists were gazing at one another triumphantly. Nobody else was near, for Harley Lodge was somewhat isolated, and no other houses had seen the fire.

"By gum, it worked like a charm, guv'nor!" murmured the youth.

"Splendidly, Nipper," said the other softly. "Lennard and Travers had ample time to perform their part of the business. This old car played its part nobly. The success achieved is well worth ten times the value of the ancient vehicle."

"My hat! Rather!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper stood watching the automobile as the fire grew dim. It was an old car which Nelson Lee had purchased dirt-cheap at the nearest town that evening. It had wanted a lot of coaxing to this spot, but it served its purpose well.

For Nelson Lee's ruse was a smart one.

While Dr. Jameson and his entire household had been attracted to the roadway by the commotion, the house had been left deserted to take care of itself. For three minutes only was the building left to itself. But those three minutes were quite sufficient for the execution of Nelson Lee's scheme.

For even as Jameson was questioning the disguised detective, two shadowy figures had stolen silently up to the rear door of the house. They were Travers Markham and Detective-inspector Lennard.

"Now's our time," breathed Lennard swiftly.

"I'm ready!"

They slipped along a dim passage, and ten seconds later were hastily mounting the richly carpeted stairs. Lennard was a shrewd man, with a splendid sense of direction. He walked quickly down a corridor, and then opened a door. One glance inside was sufficient to show him that it was the patient's apartment.

"Here we are," he whispered. "By thunder, Lee's plan has succeeded!"

The pair were in Charles Markham's bedroom, alone with the unconscious man. They had known which window was the patient's, by a little careful investigation, and Lennard had walked straight to the room without hesitation.

Travers looked at the bed with gleaming eyes, and softly stepped across to it.

One glance at his brother's pale face was sufficient for him. The light of the turned-down lamp made the patient's face look almost death-like.

"Yes, it's Charlie right enough!" murmured Travers huskily. "Good heavens! He looks simply ghast—"

Detective-inspector Lennard grabbed Travers's arm.

"There is no time to waste!" he hissed urgently. "We must hide ourselves at once. This is the cupboard I saw when I looked in at the window from that ladder. Ah, excellent! It is big enough to contain the two of us, and the keyhole is fairly large. In with you, sir!"

The cupboard, on the opposite side of the room to the bed, was indeed a roomy one, and it was empty save for some bottles up one corner and a shelf containing other stray bottles. Obviously the cupboard was very little used.

Lennard silently removed the key, and followed Travers into the confined space, for, large as the cupboard was, it provided very scant accommodation for two men. They were somewhat squashed together.

The Yard man closed the door, inserted the key on the inside, and turned it in the lock. It was impossible now for the cupboard to be opened from the room. Lennard breathed rather heavily, and pressed Travers's arm.

"Not a sound remember, sir!" he warned. "Luck's clean with us, and we don't want to ruin all Lee's plans by betraying our presence in this cupboard."

"Don't worry, inspector!" said Travers Markham quietly. "It's my ears I want to use—not my mouth. If Nelson Lee is right, we shall soon hear something which will prove Jameson's guilt completely."

And utter silence reigned in the injured man's bedroom. It had the same aspect as before; but now, unknown to a soul in the house, two hidden witnesses were there, waiting for the murderous specialist to betray himself.

Dr. Jameson did not enter until ten minutes had elapsed. When he did come in, he moved quietly about the room for a few moments, and then a chair creaked, and silence reigned again. The hidden listeners guessed that the doctor had taken a seat by the bedside.

Minute after minute passed, and no change occurred.

Then, at twenty minutes to eight—as Lennard saw by a glance at his watch, which was one with a luminous dial—Dr. Jameson's voice made itself heard.

"Ah, that's better!" he murmured. "No; don't sit up! Lay perfectly still!"

"There's gold in tons there, Travers!" said the patient weakly. "I'm not exaggerating at all. But the seam is in such an isolated place that thousands will be required before we can produce the stuff!"

Travers Markham pressed against Lennard.

"His mind's still running in the same channel," he breathed. "Lee was right when he described Charlie's uncanny state of mind to me. Now that he's awakened, he's going on talking just the same as before—as though no time had elapsed."

"Yes, yes; but we must not make a sound!"

They listened intently.

The room was utterly silent for a moment; then Jameson spoke again.

"Of course, you took steps to make this piece of land your own, Charlie?" he asked softly. "You staked your claim—or whatever you call it?"

"No; I did nothing at all," replied Charles Markham, in a dull, unemotional voice.

"Oh, you young ass!" Travers breathed, in spite of himself.

"You did nothing!" repeated Jameson, secretly elated. "Then somebody else might forestall you. When we get to Nevada, we shall find that somebody else has got hold of the gold seam!"

"Oh, no! The place where my gold exists is in one of the wildest parts of the country, and there are no settlements for many miles. No prospectors go there now, for the region is supposed to be worthless. Had I gone about the business in the ordinary way, it would soon have become known that gold existed there, and my discovery would have been stolen from me in less than no time. Don't you worry, Travers! Mine was by far the safest course to pursue. We shall find everything as I left it. You don't know the country as I do. I think I was the first man to walk those unbeaten tracks for two years."

"It must be very rough country indeed," said Jameson suggestively.

"It is some of the wildest in the whole of America."

"I suppose you will be able to find your way back when we both go?"

"Easily!" answered the injured man, in trance-like tones. "I have not got it written down, but when the way is described even you could find the spot after hearing my directions."

The physician laughed triumphantly.

"Let me hear those directions," he suggested. "It will serve to refresh your memory, and it is better, in any case, that I should know all."

"Well, if anybody followed the instructions I'm now going to give, he could walk straight to the gold seam without difficulty," said Charles Markham, in a level voice.

The hidden men heard Jameson utter a sharp sigh.

But there was something in that sigh which meant victory. All along Dr. Sims Jameson had been confident of success, but not until this moment did he realise the stupendous nature of the game he was playing.

"This is the best way to reach the place of which I have spoken," said the patient calmly—"after reaching Carson City, you make for a small settlement named Crooked Gulch. It is only a tiny place, for its sole industry is represented by a very poor silver mine, which is fast exhausting itself. Crooked Gulch lies in a valley, and right to the southward two rugged mountains can be seen. Well, you must make for these mountains—or, rather, for the pass between them."

"How far are they from Crooked Gulch?" asked Jameson, who had been busily writing.

"Roughly about thirty-five miles," replied Markham, his voice getting a little weaker. "Make straight for the valley between the mountains. There is no roadway there—no track. Men practically never pass that way. You will find yourself, when directly between the two summits, at the foot of a deep canyon. You can't mistake the spot, for there is a great pillar of rocks sticking straight up from the ground, exactly like a factory chimney. But it seems to be top-heavy, for its summit widens out into a kind of ball."

"An unmistakable landmark," commented Jameson.

"It is impossible to miss it! Well, the very second after passing this quaint pillar, you turn sharply to the right, and there, facing you, is a great black cleft in the canyon. You go into this—right into the bowels of the earth. The place is really a large cavern. At the very end, practically unnoticeable—for it is six feet from the ground—there is a small opening in the rocks. Not one man in a thousand would even notice it. After entering this opening, you find yourself in a narrow tunnel, which widens into a large cavern as you proceed. And there, Travers, is my wonderful discovery of gold!"

"By Jove!" breathed the physician.

"You are surprised, eh?" asked the sick man. "You will understand now why I am so confident that not another soul will discover my secret. This inner cavern leads nowhere at all, so you cannot possibly make a mistake. I spent days examining, testing, and making sure that the whole thing was no trivial find. There are tons of gold there, Travers! It is the most wonderful seam of the precious metal in the world!"

There were a few moments of silence, and the two listeners in the cupboard could hear the injured man breathing rather heavily after his long talk, for strictly he was in no fit state for such exertion. But the specialist was utterly callous. His victim had to die almost immediately, so what did it matter?

Travers Markham had had difficulty in recognising his brother's voice, for it was so altered, so utterly toneless. In his strange, trance-like condition, he said everything mechanically, with no emotion or no expressions of the voice. But what he had said was absolutely convincing, and both Dr. Sims Jameson and Travers Markham were satisfied as to the truth of the narrative.

"You need a little rest," said the physician, after a short while, during which he had been making notes. "Don't be alarmed, old man. Let me press this pad over your face."

After that there was another deep silence, except for the quiet movements

of the doctor; and then the hidden men heard Jameson utter a short, hard chuckle.

"By Jove!" he murmured, evidently addressing the now unconscious man. "How extremely simple it was, to be sure! I've got your secret, and nobody else in this world knows it but myself. You will not live to tell another man, nor within the hour, my unfortunate young friend, you will be dead. It is a pity, but there is no other way for it!"

Detective-Inspector Lennard's teeth gave a little click.

"Got him!" he breathed exultantly. "After what we've heard just now, Dr. Jameson will not live to gain possession of that gold! He will probably be sentenced to ten years' penal servitude."

Travers grasped hold of his companion's arm, and the Scotland Yard man could feel that Travers was simply quivering from head to foot. And even at that moment they heard the door open and then close. Apparently Jameson had gone out for a minute—to make ready for the operation, in all probability.

"The fiend!" gasped Travers Markham wildly. "Let me get at him, Lennard! By Heaven, I'll choke the life out of his murderous body!"

Lennard became somewhat alarmed.

"Calm yourself, man!" he said sharply. "The doctor may be back in a second, and we may be discovered!"

"I want to get at him! I don't care if we are discovered!" panted Travers. "I want to take the hound by the throat! Oh, my poor brother is to be done to death——"

"Nonsense!" snapped the other, as Travers began to struggle. "Can't you control yourself, Mr. Markham? In a few minutes we will make our presence known, and I shall formally arrest Dr. Jameson. As long as you behave in this wild way, we will remain in this cupboard."

Lennard was in no way surprised at this exhibition of fury on his companion's part. To hear the death of his own brother being talked of so lightly was enough to drive some men into a mad frenzy. But it would never do to allow Travers to be free until he had calmed down. The law of England does not permit a man to take matters into his own hands. Dr. Jameson would have to stand his trial in a criminal court. Besides, the time was not quite ripe for the hidden listeners to make their presence known.

So the detective-inspector grasped Travers by the shoulders and endeavoured to calm him by sheer physical force. The pressure seemed to enrage Travers Markham all the more.

"Let me go!" he panted hoarsely.

He gave Lennard a tremendous lunge on the chest. In those confined quarters the official detective slid back, and flung up his hand to save himself. It was a perfectly instinctive movement, although unnecessary.

But that little movement was to alter everything, for Lennard's hand touched a small bottle which was standing on the edge of the shelf above. It fell, rolled on Travers's shoulder, and then dropped with a thud to the floor. It did not smash, but the stopper evidently became dislodged, for the next second both men felt a kind of choking sensation in their throats and a numbing of their brains. Their nostrils were filled with a pungent, though not unpleasant smell of some curious drug.

Travers Markham became limp in a moment.

"Something fell!" gasped the journalist. "Good heavens, I'm choking, Lennard! You've upset a bottle of some narcotic, and it's making us both insensible! Quick—the key! Unlock the door!"

Realisation dawned upon Lennard the same second. With his senses fast fading from him, he made a valiant effort to keep control of himself until he

could fling the door open. But he seemed to possess not an ounce of strength. His legs collapsed beneath him, and he sank down to the floor of the cupboard with a soft sigh.

Markham held out only five seconds longer, and then he, too, lapsed into insensibility. Their stupor was absolute. The narcotic had wrought its alarming work rapidly.

And the whole thing had been a sheer accident—a stroke of ill-luck!

Three or four minutes later the Harley Street physician entered, followed by Dr. Ryder and a nurse. The time for the operation had arrived—the operation which was to be, in reality, the cold-blooded murder of a helpless man!

The irony of the situation was remarkable.

Within ten feet of the patient lay the two men who had come there expressly to stop the fatal operation from being performed. And yet they could do nothing. They were helpless, and their presence was not even suspected.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, outside, would not act until they received an agreed-upon signal. But that signal would now never be given.

The terrible crime was to be committed in spite of all.



CHAPTER VII.

Douglas Clifford Meets an Old Acquaintance, with Surprising Results.

IT is extremely curious how, on rare occasions, a tragedy is averted by an incident which, at the time, appears to have absolutely no bearing upon the case. On this particular night, while Nelson Lee and Nipper were down at Harley Lodge, Douglas Clifford was left in London.

The great detective had declared that Clifford could do nothing in this particular affair. And Clifford, having promised to follow Nelson Lee's lead in all things, had complied with a rather bad grace.

He badly wanted to have a big share in the campaign against the league—and he certainly would have plenty of work to do in the future. But in the case of Dr. Sims Jameson Clifford's services were superfluous.

So in the evening he sat in his flat—a cosy, well-appointed set of rooms off Holborn—and mused over the events which had taken place since he had gained his freedom from Strathrie Castle—since he had been looked upon by the league as dead.

"This won't do at all!" he murmured disgustedly, giving the fire a vicious kick. "When I entered into the compact with Lee I understood that I should take a hand in the work against Zingrave and his fellow-scoundrels."

Zingrave's name seemed to alter Clifford's trend of thought altogether. For the firelight suddenly played upon a face no longer frowning, but one with a smile of pleasure upon it. But Clifford was not smiling at Professor Zingrave.

His thoughts had suddenly gone back to a little incident which had occurred in the sumptuous lobby of the Roye Hotel in the Strand.

Soon after his escape from the league's clutches, Clifford had stayed at the Roye Hotel. And then, one morning, he had suddenly come face to face with a delightful, exquisitely pretty girl. And that girl was none other than Vera Zingrave, the daughter of the Chief of the League.

Clifford had a very tender spot in his heart for Vera. Much as he hated Zingrave and the other men who had tortured him for five years, he knew

that Vera was innocent of wrong-doing. She knew absolutely nothing of her father's villainies.

She was just a pure, sweet girl; gentle, kind, and altogether lovable. Her very smile had confused Clifford to an alarming degree, and had aroused an emotion which the young man—for Clifford was well under thirty—dared not suspect.

Time and again he had determined to thrust her from his thoughts; but that sweet face would always return to his vision, and sometimes he had an almost overwhelming longing to see her, to be with her, again.

He wanted to tell her all, to confide in her, and warn her of the danger which threatened her every day. For Clifford felt that, sooner or later, Vera would be affected by her scoundrelly father. One day his evil influence would contaminate the girl.

But it was impossible for him to tell her yet. One day perhaps, in the dim future, he would—— But Clifford pulled himself up short, and refused to allow his thoughts to run away with him. He stared into the fire moodily, and there, smiling at him from out of the glowing embers, he could see the face of Vera.

"She's a ripping girl!" he muttered. "Hang it all, what's the good of playing the fool with myself? I've simply got to admit the fact. And, after all, why shouldn't I admit it? She's innocent of wrong-doing, and knows absolutely nothing about the League of the Green Triangle. While I was a prisoner she thought I had been abroad. Now, I suppose, she thinks I've cleared out of England again!"

He rose to his feet and paced up and down.

"Why the deuce couldn't Lee have given me work to do?" he growled. "If I had something to occupy my mind I shouldn't get dreaming like this. Oh, I'll go for a walk and drop in to dinner somewhere, with a theatre or a music-hall afterwards. Perhaps that'll calm my fanciful mind."

And, without more ado, he went into his bedroom and changed into evening-dress. Then, overcoated and as neat and spruce as a new pin, he ventured out into the blustery evening air.

Although he wouldn't admit it, he had one thought in his mind which was utterly preposterous. Somehow he wanted to see Vera Zingrave—how, he hadn't the slightest idea. But he felt prepared to wait hours if, at the end, he caught a glimpse of her dainty form and her delightful face.

To call at Zingrave's house was impossible. Clifford was dead, for the league thought that they had put him out of the way for all time. He was now John Merriek, a middle-aged, wealthy Colonial, and his disguise—natural, for the most part—was such that the league were totally unaware of his real identity.

Almost without knowing it, he found his steps leading him into Grosvenor Square. Zingrave's house was situated there, and Clifford walked along the opposite side of the square and gazed at the great house. An irresistible desire was within him to see Vera; he felt insanely reckless at that moment.

And then he started, and stood stock-still.

By all that was wonderful, Vera Zingrave herself had just stepped into the street from the front garden of her father's house. Yes, there was no doubt about it—Clifford would know that neat, graceful figure among a thousand.

"By Jove!" muttered the young man. "What an amazing thing!"

Yet it wasn't amazing in the least. It was perfectly natural that Vera should go out in the evening, and she was well accustomed to going un-courted. For she was a strong-willed girl, with plenty of assurance and pluck.

She stood on the pavement for a moment, pulling on a glove. Then she

tightened her furs a little, and walked briskly away. Clifford's head was whirling. He didn't know what to do. Vera was there—within sight of him. What should he do?

He found himself following her, his mind still unable to come to a decision. Soon Grosvenor Square was left behind, and almost before Clifford knew it, Vera had turned into the bright entrance of a well-known fashionable restaurant.

Without hesitation Clifford followed.

Having divested himself of his coat and wraps, he entered the brilliantly lit dining-room, and scarcely heard the strains of a captivating waltz played by the unseen orchestra. He was looking round eagerly, his heart beating rather thumpingly for some idiotic reason.

And then he saw her, sitting quite alone, carefully studying a menu. How bewilderingly pretty she was! In that moment Clifford forgot everything. He forgot that she was Zingrave's daughter, that he was disguised, that it would be a mad thing to make known his identity to her. He forgot everything, and only knew that Vera was sitting alone in a secluded corner of the room.

Without having the strength of will to prevent himself, he strode forward until he was standing beside her table. His face was flushed, and his eyes were filled with a soft, eager light.

"Miss Zingrave!" he exclaimed impulsively. "Please forgive me——"

Then he stopped short, the words drying in his throat. He realised, in a flash, that he ought not to have revealed himself. Too late, he knew that it had been a reckless piece of folly.

Vera looked at him rather suspiciously.

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me, sir," she said coldly, her soft brown eyes flashing in a manner which made Clifford nervous.

For a second Clifford thought of apologising and withdrawing. That, of course, would be the sensible thing to do. But Clifford was not exactly in a sensible state of mind just at the moment. Vera was within a yard of him—facing him! He couldn't take himself off yet.

He sat down opposite to her.

"And yet we have met before, Miss Zingrave," he said eagerly. "Don't you recognise my voice? We met, on the last occasion, in the hall of the Rove Hotel."

Vera's wonderful eyes widened.

"Why, you—you are Mr. Clifford!" she exclaimed, in amazement, looking straight into his eyes with a steady gaze. "Yet although I recognise your voice and your eyes, I don't understand—— You are grey, Mr. Clifford!"

Clifford didn't answer for a moment. He was staring at her captivating beauty, and behaving really rather ungentlemanly. For Vera suddenly blushed, and her eyes were instantly lowered.

"Oh, I—I'm awfully sorry!" stammered Clifford hastily. "I—I was thinking, Miss Zingrave!"

As a matter of fact, he was thinking of the unmistakable expression of pleasure which had revealed itself upon his pretty companion's face when she learned the identity of this stranger.

"I hadn't the faintest idea who you were, Mr. Clifford!" laughed Vera. "Oh, you do look curious in that grey beard! Do tell me if you have been seriously ill——"

"No, I have been in splendid health," said Clifford quietly. "This beard and hair is not my own—but it is faked. I am no more grey now than I was ten years ago. I am disguised!"

"Oh, how amazing!" exclaimed the girl, open-eyed.

Clifford bent forward.

"Miss Zingrave," he said tensely. "I want you to listen for a few moments. I will explain why I am forced to wear this beard and hair--why I cannot even use my own name. But before I tell you, will you promise me that you will not breathe a word to a soul? Don't tell anybody--not even your own father--that you have met me. To all intents and purposes I am dead; and I shall remain dead until it suits me to come to life."

Vera looked puzzled, but she was greatly interested.

"If you wish it, Mr. Clifford, I will willingly pledge my word," she said simply. "I will keep the whole affair a secret of my own."

"Thank you. I know that I can trust you implicitly."

"How do you know that?" she asked, smiling.

"I can't explain how," he replied. "I only know that I can, and do, trust you with my secret without the slightest fear. I will not go into details at all, Miss Zingrave, for I fear they would weary you. To be brief, I was fool enough, some time ago, to fall into the hands of a clever criminal organisation."

"Oh, how awful!"

"It was hardly pleasant, anyway," said Clifford quietly. "These men--a band of desperate criminals--are responsible for half the crime of London, and they agreed among themselves that I was a danger to them. So one night they murdered me!"

Vera gasped a little.

"Oh, Mr. Clifford, how terrible that sounds!" she protested.

"They killed me," went on Clifford. "That, at least, is what they thought they had done. To them I am dead and gone. But I managed to escape, and--once free--I knew that if I appeared again in my old personality, I should lay myself open to other murderous attacks."

"So you grew your beard and dyed it?" laughed Vera. "But it is cruel of me to laugh. What you have told me, Mr. Clifford, is terrible. You are yourself and yet not yourself. But how long will it last? Cannot you get Scotland Yard to protect you?"

Clifford smiled grimly.

"Scotland Yard could no more protect me from this organisation than could a child," he replied. "I do not mean by that to belittle the wonderful efficiency of our official detective force; but, rather, to convince you of this criminal band's terrible power. I am combating it myself, and sooner or later I shall succeed in blotting it out for all time. When that is accomplished I shall become my own self again."

Clifford was rather pleased with himself. The story he had told Vera was perfectly true in every particular. Yet it revealed nothing to her. And he knew that he could positively rely upon her word to keep his identity a secret.

For some little time after they sat and chatted. Indeed, Clifford was venturesome enough to ask Vera to dine with him, and, under the circumstances, the girl could hardly refuse. Whereat Clifford was in the seventh heaven.

He did not deceive himself. He knew quite well that the company of Vera was the keenest pleasure to him, and now that the ice was broken he realised that he might be able to arrange another meeting no great time hence. Upon the whole, Clifford was immensely pleased with the turn events had taken.

But a chance remark of Vera's brought back to his mind the project which Nelson Lee was undertaking at Harley Lodge, and which galvanised Clifford into instant action.

"I wonder how Dr. Sims-Jameson got on this evening with his patient,"

remarked Vera. "Oh, but, of course, you don't know of the operation, do you?"

"The—the operation?" stammered Clifford, rather startled.

"Yes. Dr. Jameson has been operating to-night upon a poor fellow who met with an accident in Oxford Street," replied Vera, with a note of sympathy in her voice. "Of course, it'll be nearly all over by now, for it's twenty-to-eight."

Remembering that Nelson Lee had said the time for the operation was to be eight-thirty, Clifford was rather puzzled.

"What time did the operation start, then?" he asked.

"Well, father told me that it was timed for half-past-six exactly," replied Vera, wondering why her companion was so obviously startled.

Half past six!

Clifford set his teeth, and did a few moments' quick thinking. Surely Vera ought to know the precise time, he told himself shrewdly. Probably Jameson had altered the arrangements a trifle, and had naturally told Zingrave. And Zingrave, just as naturally, had, as a mere everyday topic, mentioned the proposed operation to Vera.

And Nelson Lee was waiting until long past the actual time of the operation! His whole plan would be ruined. Charles Markham, in fact, would be done to death in spite of all precautions. The League of the Green Triangle would score! Douglas Clifford awoke into brisk activity.

He glanced at his watch, and saw that the time was actually only half-past-seven. He knew that Harley Lodge was only about thirty-five miles from where he was now sitting. A swift motor-car would do it within the hour easily, and if Markham's life could be saved, the risks of such a swift journey would be well worth taking.

Clifford jumped to his feet, called a waiter, and paid the expenses.

Vera watched him, rather dismayed, and with a little disappointment in her eyes. Clifford was overjoyed to see that expression, although, at the same time, it pained him. But it showed that Vera was not anxious for him to go.

"Please forgive me, Miss Zingrave," he said seriously. "Your words have reminded me of something which must be attended to without the slightest delay! I cannot stop to explain, for every second is of value. To-morrow, perhaps, the newspapers will enlighten you upon the subject."

He bade her a hasty good-night. But he found time, nevertheless, to hold her sweet, little hand in his for an appreciable time, and to give it a warm pressure which caused Vera to colour slightly.

"Good-bye, Mr. Clifford," she said warmly. "I am so sorry that you are forced to rush off in this abrupt manner! I hope we shall see one another again before so very long!"

A few seconds later, Clifford was hastening out of the restaurant, inwardly singing a song of victory. Vera's last words were as music to his ears, for she had expressed a wish to see him again. It had been a wrench to part from her so suddenly, but there was probably a life to be saved.

But Clifford need not have been so exercised in mind, for the time of the operation had not been altered at all. It was solely a little mistake of Vera's. But that little mistake was to have vast consequences. Solely owing to Vera's naming the earlier hour, Charles Markham's life would be saved! Chance plays queer tricks now and again, and to-night Chance was in one of her most capricious moods.

Ten minutes after leaving the restaurant, Douglas Clifford was seated at the driving-wheel of a powerful racing motor-car, which he had just hired at a great expense from a big garage. Without the slightest delay, he turned his face southwards, and sent the big car whirling through London.

CHAPTER VIII.

Clifford Arrives—A Dramatic Interruption—A Bid for Liberty.

ROARING along, with not a single stop, Douglas Clifford sent the hired racing-car hurtling southwards at an appalling speed. His blood was coursing through his veins excitedly, and he felt fit for anything. He was taking a hand in the game now, and his only thoughts were to reach Harley Lodge before eight-thirty. Exactly why he wanted to do this, Clifford did not know, but he had resolved to do it.

Had he thought the matter over, he would have realised that he would certainly arrive too late to be of any use if the operation had actually taken place at the earlier hour. But Clifford badly wanted to do something, and now that he had started out, he determined to reach Dr. Jameson's country home in record time. As events were to turn out, it was extremely fortunate that Clifford did not give too much thought to what he was doing.

He knew that Harley Lodge was situated several miles the other side of a large town, and by only stopping once to inquire—after passing the town—he located the physician's house without the slightest difficulty.

As he climbed out of the car, which had come to a standstill a hundred yards from the house, he pulled his watch out of his pocket, and walked round to the front of the big automobile. As he looked at his watch, the electric headlight played upon his features distinctly.

"Twenty-five-past-eight!" he muttered. "By Jingo, I've been travelling, and no mistake! I wonder where the deuce Mr. Lee is? This place is all in darkness, and is as quiet as a church!"

He walked towards Harley Lodge a few yards, and was then suddenly confronted by two dim figures. They were, as a matter of fact, Nelson Lee and Nipper. The pair had seen the car arrive, and had been somewhat puzzled. When Clifford had walked in front of the headlight, revealing his face, they were more surprised than ever.

"My dear fellow, what on earth are you doing down here?" asked Nelson Lee. "Has anything happened that you have come to tell me of——"

"Wait a minute, Lee!" interjected Clifford. "I want to know what's going on here! Where are Lennard and Travers Markham?"

"I am puzzled. Extremely worried, in fact," admitted Nelson Lee uneasily. "It is long past the time when our friends should have acted; but since they went in the house, an hour and a-half ago, we have seen nothing of them! I cannot help believing that something has gone amiss. As you came up I was, indeed, arranging with Nipper to force an entry immediately."

Clifford nodded approvingly.

"Do so, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, with urgent earnestness. "I, too, believe that everything is not right. Travers and Lennard have met with disaster, I feel sure, and Charles Markham has already been murdered!"

"Good gracious! What makes you take such a black view?"

"Because I have learned, Mr. Lee, that the operation was performed two hours before the time you mentioned—at six-thirty, to be exact!"

Nipper whistled.

"Oh, crikey! Then everything's properly messed up!" he exclaimed in dismay. "The patient must be dead, and I expect Lennard and Travers have copped out in some way or other. I say, guv'nor, hadn't we better investigate?"

Nelson Lee set his teeth.

"We will do so without a moment's delay, my lad," he said crisply. "I'm not absolutely convinced of your information, Clifford, but I think it will be

wise to act upon it without a second's delay. Dr. Ryder, the local medico, did not arrive until a few minutes after eight, and that does not look as if the operation took place at six-thirty. However, Detective-Inspector Lennard should certainly have acted before this! I am convinced that something has gone wrong."

"And what do you intend to do?"

"We will all force an entry this very minute!" replied Nelson Lee determinedly. "Desperate measures are the only course now! If our friends inside have really met with a mishap—and Dr. Jameson is a cunning man—then the operation will be performed at the later hour just the same. I don't know what to think. The whole thing seems to be in a muddle. We must know what is happening without delay."

The famous detective was decidedly worried. Somehow the affair was not going so smoothly as he would have wished. By this time Dr. Jameson ought to have been under arrest!

Silently as shadows, the trio crept to the building. Two minutes scouting resulted in nothing being discovered, and so Nelson Lee walked boldly up to the front door, and thrust it open. Being a country house, it was not provided with a latch-lock, and so the three quickly gained admittance. But as they were crossing the hall, with the intention of going upstairs, the butler appeared from the servants' quarters and stared at them in amazement.

"What's the meanin' of this?" he demanded sharply. "Who are you?"

Nelson Lee did not intend to waste many words upon the man.

"I am a representative of the law!" he said curtly. "I warn you not to cause any commotion or make any outcry!"

The butler gasped.

"The law!" he exclaimed, becoming red in the face with fast-gathering fury. "Get out of this house, all three of you! Dr. Sims-Jameson, the famous specialist, lives here, and at this very moment he's performing an operation——"

"Good heavens!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "Shall we be too late, after all? Come, Nipper! You remain down here, and attend to this fellow!" he added, flashing a glance at Clifford.

But the butler stepped to the foot of the stairs, and barred the way.

"You're not going upstairs while the doctor's on an urgent and dangerous case!" he exclaimed hotly. "You must be mad! If you cause a disturbance now, you'll probably kill the poor gentleman!"

"This way, my lad!"

Clifford's tones cut through the air sharply. He grasped the butler's shoulders, and with one wrench sent the man spinning across the hall.

Nelson Lee and Nipper dashed up the staircase, and paused for a moment upon the landing. There were several doors to be seen, but from beneath one a bright streak of light gleamed.

Nelson Lee strode up to it and wrenched it open. The next second he and Nipper were gazing upon a scene which might have been taking place in a big London hospital.

The room was brightly lighted, and right in the centre of it was a grim operating-table of the usual type. Upon it lay Charles Markham, unconscious, and made ready for the dreadful ordeal—an ordeal which was to have ended in death.

And round the table, now staring with amazement and anger at the intruders, were Dr. Sims-Jameson, Dr. Ryder, and the nurse.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" snarled the specialist, in a terrible voice. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Nelson Lee's eyes glittered.

"Has this operation started?" he asked, turning to the local doctor.

"Dr. Jameson was just about to commence," replied the bewildered medico, hardly able to believe his eyes. "How dare you enter in this unwarrantable fashion? A disturbance of this kind will probably cause the patient——"

"Thank Heaven we are in time!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "Dr. Ryder, this man you respect so highly—this celebrated Harley Street specialist—is a black-hearted murderer! He was about to cause the death of the patient while performing a seemingly humane operation!"

Dr. Sims Jameson staggered back.

"The man is mad, Ryder!" he gasped hoarsely.

"I can well believe it," exclaimed Dr. Ryder, pale with indignation. "Leave this room at once, or suffer the consequences, the pair of you. Never in the whole of my experience have I witnessed such a disgraceful scene as this!"

Nelson Lee did not blame Dr. Ryder for being so furiously scandalised. He took no notice of the medico's words, but swept his gaze round the room until it rested upon the cupboard doors.

"Lennard!" he said sharply. "Are you here, man?"

There was no answer.

Dr. Jameson stood looking on almost speechless with an unknown fear, and with a sensation as of a cold hand gripping his heart. The perspiration stood cold and wet upon his forehead, and his face was deathly. And this was before he fully realised the actual extent of the fate which had befallen him.

"Did you hear what I said, you scoundrels?" began Dr. Ryder.

But Nelson Lee stepped swiftly to the cupboard doors, grasped the big knob firmly, and pulled at it. The door resisted his efforts, thus proving that it was locked upon the inside. Instantly the detective's mind was filled with terrible suspicions, and he took a strong steel instrument from his pocket and inserted it in the crack of the door.

Two strong heaves, and the lock gave way. The door flew open, and the unconscious forms of Detective-inspector Lennard and Travers Markham fell out upon the carpet.

"I thought something was up!" gasped Nipper, horrified.

"Great goodness!" ejaculated Dr. Ryder, his eyes nearly starting from his head.

A queer sound emanated from the specialist's throat, and he stood staring at the two unconscious men as though utterly dazed. Then, like a flash, full realisation dawned upon him.

Those men must have been there the whole time. He guessed at once the reason for their unconsciousness, and knew that, in all probability, the bottle of narcotic had not been upset until the hidden men had heard enough to satisfy themselves upon the physician's guilt.

The game was up—there was no doubt about that whatever. His long years of invulnerability from detection were ended at last.

And Dr. Sims Jameson suddenly flew into a mad frenzy of desperation. In one moment his whole attitude changed, and he uttered a husky, defiant laugh—a laugh which made the blood of those who heard it almost run cold.

"You've foiled me, you infernal meddler, whoever you are!" he snarled savagely. "But I'm not going to be taken away like a common criminal!"

And with one bound the specialist dashed to the window, flung up the sash in a single movement, and leapt out into the blackness of the night. The drop to the ground was comparatively slight, and soft flower-beds were immediately below. Dr. Jameson was in the act of scrambling to his feet, unhurt, when Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived at the window.

Even as they watched, the exposed rogue dashed round the building, and Nelson Lee turned a flushed and excited face back into the lamplight. "Attend to those two unconscious men—they are probably seriously in danger!" rapped out the great crime investigator. "Come, my lad, there's not a second to lose!"

And with one accord Nelson Lee and Nipper leapt from the window. The ground floor was sunken a little, so the flower-beds were consequently only quite a slight drop from the upper window.

The pair arrived in safety upon terra-firma, and dashed off round the corner of the house in pursuit of Jameson. Across the lawns they pelted, and a dim figure was in the act of picking itself up against the drive.

Nelson Lee and Nipper hurled themselves at him.

"Hold on!" gasped Clifford's voice. "It's only me!"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Nipper.

"Jameson buzzed round here like a steam-roller a few seconds ago," ejaculated Clifford. "I spotted him from the front door, and tried to effect a capture. But he's in a mad frenzy, and bowled me over like a ninepin!"

"Hallo! What's that?" panted Nipper suddenly.

The roar of an engine made itself heard.

"My car!" yelled Clifford furiously. "Jameson is escaping in the motor-car!"

Nelson Lee gripped Clifford's shoulder.

"Rush to the gate and see which way the fugitive is going!" he directed sharply. "Nipper and I will dash round to the garage and fetch Jameson's own car. By Jove, there's going to be a chase!"

It was all a wild rush. Nelson Lee and Nipper soon wrenched the doors of the garage open, and within two minutes the detective had started the engine of Jameson's magnificent car, and had switched the lights on. It was less than a minute's work to drive the automobile into the road.

"To the left!" roared Clifford. "Yes, that's right! By jingo, you've been smart in getting this old 'bus round here!"

He leapt aboard, and Nelson Lee crouched low behind the wheel and sent the car shooting along the road at an amazing speed. It was a splendid modern car, and in perfect fettle.

The road ahead was dark and deserted. Dr. Jameson had not gained much of a start, but he had made good use of the time which had been at his disposal. Already he had got clear out of sight. The lights of Clifford's hired car had been turned on—Clifford had seen that. But the tail lamp of the fugitive car was nowhere to be seen. Probably Jameson was driving like a demon, heedless of all risks.

But Nelson Lee was a magnificent driver. He knew just how fast he could go without causing disaster. And he sent the automobile along with almost every ounce of speed of which it was capable.

The road was a trifle muddy, for there had been rain that day, and the brilliant headlights clearly revealed the tell-tale tracks made by the other car. They were so fresh that they stretched out like two long lines in the distance. There could be no mistake—Jameson could not possibly outwit his pursuers by dodging up a side turning.

But apparently he meant to stick to the main road, for by-lanes were passed continuously; but the tracks always led straight ahead.

"My hat! He must be sending Mr. Clifford's car along like an express train!" gasped Nipper. "It can't last, though. I should think he'll realise that the game's absolutely and completely up. There's no escape for him!"

Nelson Lee did not answer. His eyes were gazing ahead intently, for the car wanted careful handling at such an appalling speed. Round a bend the

vehicle swept the loose stones and grit flying into the hedges from the straining wheels.

A red light gleamed ahead, far in the distance.

"Within sight at last!" growled Douglas Clifford. "I think it's only a matter of minutes now!"

There was no doubt about the light in the distance belonging to the escaping criminal's car, for it was keeping its distance ahead, thus proving that it was moving at the same terrific speed as its pursuer.

Up till now Nelson Lee had been gaining, but he soon discovered that Jameson was putting on extra speed in order to keep his distance. With the frenzy of despair in his heart, the specialist scarcely knew what he was doing. But he wanted to get away—to get free of his pursuers—to completely shake them off.

For Sims Jameson knew that if he could only reach London he would be safe from capture in a short while. For the league was magnificently organised, and in a very short while Jameson would be provided with a disguise which would render him absolutely secure. Then he would be smuggled out of the country, and given a small fortune to live in luxury in some foreign clime.

It was a mad, wild hope. Had the specialist been calm he would have known that escape was out of the question. For the start he had obtained was altogether too short for him to outwit his pursuers.

He glanced behind him quickly, and saw the gleaming lights of his own car less than half a mile in the rear. His own car! It was the irony of fate that such a state of affairs should come about.

"There's a chance!" he grated madly. "This car will do more speed yet, and, by heavens, I'll wrench every ounce out of it that it's capable of!"

And then the doctor caught his breath in sharply. In one second he knew that he was doomed.

For in the distance he could see a red light gleaming like a twinkling star; and he remembered that at this point the railway crossed the road. The train was even then due! The closed gate from which the red light was gleaming proved this to be the case.

Jameson had a choice of two things—to come to a standstill and surrender, or to dash on and end everything in one swift smash.

There was hardly a second in which to decide. Although he pretended to consider, Jameson had already come to decision. It would be death! To surrender would mean a trial, a heavy sentence—penal servitude! He shuddered at the very thought, and opened the throttle of the motor to its widest extent.

The car went hurtling along to its doom. There was no escape. The road was straight, without a single side-turning, and the hedges and banks were high.

And as Jameson arrived within a hundred yards of the level crossing he became aware of a roar which was not caused by the car beneath him. He then saw that the train would arrive at the gates at exactly the same second as himself. The smash-up would be a terrible one, and death would be instantaneous. That, at least, was one comfort.

Train and automobile met at the gates at precisely the same moment.

Crash! Crash!

The racing motor-car simply hurled itself at the gates like a thing alive, and there was a wild confusion of sounds. Dr. Sims Jameson shot out of his seat like a stone from a catapult. Up he went, describing a kind of arc, and his body struck the roof-edge of one of the railway carriages. The

shock sent him flying back, and he fell, a crumpled heap, upon the grass embankment just beyond the wrecked gate.

The train disappeared, being hardly touched by the flying debris. The full shock of the smash had affected the car and the gates. Nelson Lee, Clifford, and Nipper came pelting up and bent over the injured man—for he was not dead.

"I am dying!" creaked Dr. Sims Jameson, blood streaming down his face. "But not a word shall I tell you except that I should have been successful in my plot against Markham's life had I been given another hour of time. Yes, I meant to kill him—you may as well know that—and I meant——"

A choking kind of sob rose in his throat, and he sank back into Nelson Lee's arm inert and motionless.

.

But Dr. Sims Jameson was not dead. As a matter of fact, he was only seriously—but not fatally—injured. Three hours after his confession of guilt he was in the hands of the police, and would be nursed back to health in order to stand his trial for attempted murder. The evidence of Detective-inspector Lennard and Travers Markham, who soon recovered from their stupor when attended by Dr. Ryder, would be positive proof of Jameson's guilt. His sentence would be nothing less than ten years penal servitude.

And so the first member of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle had met his deserts. Nelson Lee's great campaign had started well, for he had saved Charles Markham's life and had brought the specialist to book. Another famous physician—this time an honourable gentleman—performed an operation upon Charles Markham that very night, and brought the young man to his right senses, and out of danger.

But the notes which Dr. Jameson had made concerning the gold cavern were nowhere to be found. The truth was, he had placed them in a secret receptacle which was also known to Zingrave. And before daylight came again a working member of the league had visited Harley Lodge and had obtained the papers.

And what of that amazing discovery of gold in wild Nevada? Well, that is another episode altogether—an episode which was simply packed with dangers and excitement for Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Douglas Clifford. It was the case in which Mr. Page T. Dayton was dealt with, and— But, as already stated, it is quite another story.

THE END.

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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. The attackers 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.

Hugh and Val Ruxton are sent out by Grimstock to make observations, but return to find the camp deserted—they are left to die in the dreary white wilderness. (Now read on.)

Val Tells Hugh Some Plain Facts.

"**W**OULD you have believed me in this case, if I had come to you and advised you not to start on this fool's errand, if I had given as a reason merely that I believed these fiends in human form intended to desert us and leave us to die in the snow? Now, would you have believed me, I say?"

Hugh stared at his friend in dismay. He was as much surprised at his sudden vehemence and bitter words as he was horrified at the diabolical things he was suggesting. For as yet Hugh could not bring himself to believe in the reality of the other's seemingly wild assertions.

"If," he answered, "I should not have believed you it would have been for the same reason that I believe even now that you are wrong. There is some mistake somewhere. We've come wrong! I could not have believed then—I positively refuse to believe now—that any man or men could plan to carry out anything so infamous——"

Hugh glanced at the faces of their followers and read only too easily what was written there. They were ghastly and terrible to see. In the stern, hard-set expression of the sailors, in the frightened, helpless looks of the natives, there was one look in common—a dumb, hopeless despair; the awful conviction that they were doomed.

"But still," cried Hugh, "we can follow them."

"Follow?" repeated his chum scornfully. "How far are you going to follow? And how? On foot? Because you know well enough that our supply of petrol won't last more than a day or two at the outside, and

they have got two days' start of us. What are you going to live on when what we have with us is gone? We can neither follow—supposing that we knew he has gone forward—nor return.”

Hugh gave a groan.

“Ah, of course! I forgot! That petrol!” he murmured.

“Grimstock didn't forget it! When he sent us out with the motor-sledge he knew well enough what he was doing. Do you remember I asked to have a dog-sledge this time, instead?”

“I do,” said Hugh. “And I wondered—because——”

“I knew—I knew—that if we'd taken a team of dogs there was a chance—just a bare possibility—that with the aid of our Eskimos we might have got back. We might have lived on the dogs till we came to the places where there is game to be got. I say we might. Heaven knows the chance would have been meagre enough! But no! Grimstock was not going to give us even that little hope of escape. For some reason he had doomed you to death long ago.”

“Doomed me to death? Long ago? Why, Val, you're mad!”

“Not I. Long ago, I say—and later on he doomed us, too—we others—because we stuck to you—and for fear, if he spared us, that we should ask awkward questions, and set inconvenient inquiries on foot when we got back to England.”

Hugh seemed overwhelmed at Ruxton's words. For a while he said nothing. Then suddenly asked, in a different tone:

“Tell me, Val! Speak out! Tell me what is in your mind, for I confess I am in a miserable fog.”

“I will. Come this way.”

Ruxton put a hand on the other's arm, and led him away a little distance. Then turned and faced him:

“I warned you,” he said, as he looked him hard in the face, “and you would not be warned. I gave you hints, and you would not take them. I invited your confidence, and you would not give it. And now see what has come of it!”

“Still, I can't see——”

“Can't you? This is not time for beating about the bush! Is it not the case that you are Hugh Fenwick, son of the Dr. Fenwick who came out here with Grimstock years ago?”

Hugh started and hesitated. Then replied slowly:

“That is true. My reason——”

“Your reason is plain enough! Fenwick and Grimstock, and a party, started out together into the white wilderness, and Grimstock alone returned. No one came back with him save a couple of Eskimos—who don't count. As to what really became of Dr. Fenwick, no one knows. People only had Grimstock's version, and that was not looked upon as satisfactory. Ugly rumours somehow got about; but they died down.

“I infer that in time, you, Dr. Fenwick's son, grew up, possessed with the idea that you would try to find out the truth about those rumours, and as to what your father's fate actually was. Is that right?”

“Y-yes. Except that——”

“I don't blame you, so far. Your desire was right enough—praiseworthy and all that—but you went the wrong way to work. You suspected Grimstock, yet you trusted him sufficiently to place yourself in his power. You——”

“He did not know who I was.”

“Pooh! What nonsense! He has known—well, I was going to say, all along. I knew it—discovered it just when we began landing the stores.

You suspect Grimstock, yet, with childish innocence, you place yourself at his mercy."

"I've been a fool," muttered Hugh gloomily. "I see it now."

"Well, you gained your end in one way," his chum went on, with the same bitter, sarcastic note in his voice. "You suspected Grimstock of having murdered your father."

Again Hugh started.

"Scarcely that," he objected.

"Oh, yes, you did. Let us call things by their right names, and have no more false sentiment. I say you suspected Grimstock of having murdered your father, or done away with him—deserted him, and left him to die in some base way."

"That is more like what was in my mind."

"Well, now you have the satisfaction of having proved it."

"How do you mean?"

"Can't you see? He determined to murder you, the son. Why should he do that except that he is guilty, and was afraid you would somehow find it out? In leaving us here to die he has shown that he has been a murderer before."

"Yes," said Hugh sadly. "I see that, too. I have, as you say, gained my end. I've made him declare himself guilty. I now know that he must have done away with my father. But it comes too late!"

Ruxton laughed bitterly.

"Too late, or too soon, it matters little now. The knowledge will never be of any use, so far as punishing your father's murderer is concerned."



An Unexpected Sight—Mirage or Reality—Hope for the Castaways.

HUGH knew not what reply to make to his chum's assertions. He could not say that his reasoning was false, and there was no resisting the conclusion to which it pointed.

He gazed gloomily around at the landscape. It was terrible to think that there was no living thing besides themselves in all that white desert.

They had left the region where game was to be found hundreds of miles behind them; and grim starvation stared them in the face. As Ruxton had said, if they had only had a dog-team instead of that unlucky motor-sledge—so it seemed to them just then—they might have had a chance—just a chance, and no more. As things were, they had not even that.

Meanwhile, the clouds had lifted and almost passed away. A few only were left, sailing across a sky in which the sun was now shining brilliantly, and it had grown quite hot.

The air had become so clear that one could see for an immense distance in every direction, and as Hugh gazed across the expanse of ice and snow, the sunlight and the clouds played fantastic tricks. The clouds threw wandering shadows, that came and went, and as they and the sunbeams alternately fell on the scene, the ice took on wonderful hues. Now it would be a deep purple, then a dark green, anon a dazzling gold, and yet again a medley of opalescent tints.

The whole landscape had suddenly become a veritable fairyland of gorgeous colouring. It was hard indeed just then to realise the truth—to grasp the fact that that scene, now glittering in such unearthly splendour, was the white shroud that would shortly cover them over and hide them for ever!

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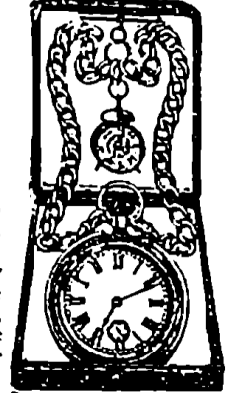
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"Is there, then, no hope for us?" Hugh murmured.

"What hope can there be, Hugh?" returned Val, in gentler tones. The strange beauty that had fallen over the landscape had evidently had a softening effect upon his thoughts. "You know very well that Grimstock has not built the series of caches for stores which explorers in these regions usually take care to provide. The reason he gave was that he intended to return by another route. But we can see that that was a mere excuse; we now know only too well what his real reason was. Had he done so, we might have been able to find our way back."

"But it's a risky game for him to play, anyhow—leaving us here like this. What about his people? Are they all in it? I can scarcely believe that."

"I dare say he has some tale ready. It may be that some of McClinter's men have really gone back with the sick men. If so, it's easy to make up a yarn about our having gone with them. They, on the other hand, will naturally suppose that we've gone on with the rest. All the same it is, as you say, a bit risky. I can quite believe that he would have preferred the other way, had it only come off."

"What other way?"

"The 'accident' business."

"I'm blessed if I understand you."

"And I'm blessed if I can understand anyone being such an innocent-headed chunk! Why, hasn't your life—and mine, too, for the matter of that—been attempted half a dozen times at least? First, what about that night when Amaki saved us from a midnight murderer?"

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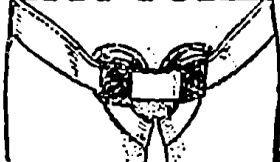
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"No; it was intended murder, pure and simple. But perhaps they afterwards saw that it was a mistake—or, maybe, someone had got out of hand, and tried it on his own. Next time, it was a clumsy shot—the bullet that went through your sleeve instead of hitting the bear that was charging somebody else. A pretty bad shot that, seeing where the man stood who fired it."

"I remember that, and I fancied —"

"Ah, you had a dim suspicion? And what about that time when you and I were lifting the sledge across the crevasse, and the rope broke and sent us both down into it? Was that accident? I looked at that rope afterwards, and I'll swear it had been cut—it did not break of itself. And how about that petrol-tank that exploded—at the wrong moment, if is true, for, as luck would have it, we had both gone away for a minute. You and I know that if it had happened a minute sooner—or later—we should have been dead men, or next door to it. Pish! What's the use of continuing the list?"

Hugh could only nod his head as his chum recalled these things. Looked at by the light of what had now happened, they had an ugly significance. Yet, at the time, they had seemed to him to be pure accidents.

"Yes," continued Val, in a musing tone, "I can quite understand that Grimstock would have preferred to get rid of you—and of me, also, since we cottoned together—by some plausible 'accident.' But as, somehow, these mishaps refused to come off, he has been driven to fall back upon the one thing that was sure. What I am wondering about is, why he should decide to do it here, now, instead of later on. I can think of twenty ways in which he might have managed it later, far easier and more safely—so why this hurry?"

Then, to Ruxton's surprise, Hugh answered:

"I believe I can tell you. And if I am right, the fact offers us just a chance of escaping the fate this fiend had, as you say, doomed us to. Look over yonder, into the far distance—towards the east. Do you notice what an immense way you can see—how much farther than we could before we set out from here? I can see something we did not see then. What is over yonder? Are they not distant mountains?"

Ruxton turned and gazed, then shook his head.

"It may be so," he observed, "though I think it most likely it is only one of those deceptive mirages of which we have seen so many."

"I do not believe it is a mirage," exclaimed Hugh, almost fiercely. "I believe they are mountains; and that is where Grimstock has gone. He knew they were there—to the east—and purposely sent us on a wild-goose chase to the west. He had intended to turn aside to the east here; and it did not suit his purpose that we should go with him any further."

Ruxton opened his eyes more than ever at this.

"You are speaking in riddles," he said curtly. "I don't see how you could know all this. If it's a guess, it doesn't seem to me a very likely one. Please explain."

"See here, Val," cried Hugh. He had been looking fixedly at the distant view, and as he continued to gaze upon it he had grown more and more excited. "I tell you that is no mirage! They are mountains! Not only that, but there is green upon them. I can discern it quite plainly, even with the naked eye. And I can tell you what it means—it is an oasis! A land with a milder climate, where life exists—perhaps people—shut off from the rest of the world for ages by these frozen wastes."

(To be continued.)

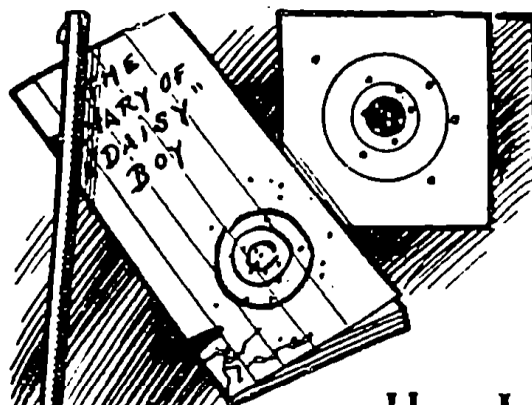


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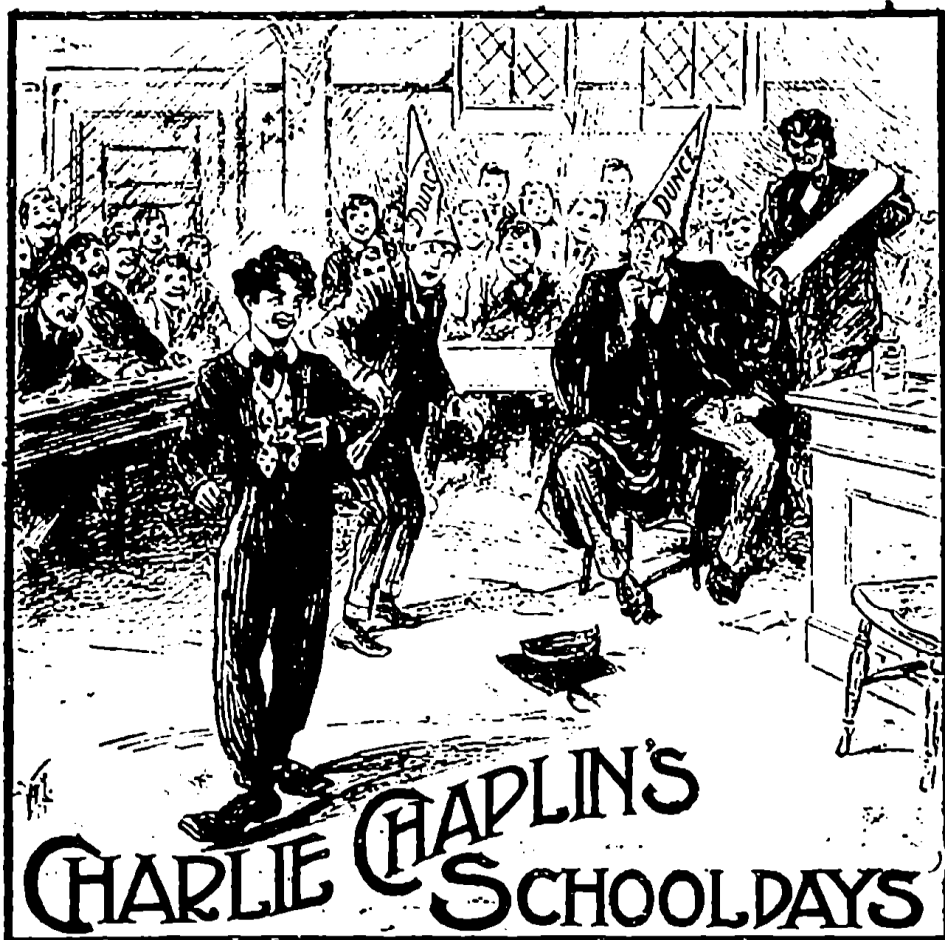
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